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# **Relationality in a Time of Surveillance: Narcissism, Melancholia, Paranoia**

**Stephen Frosh**

## **Abstract**

This paper explores apparent shifts in the cultural use of psychoanalytic concepts, from narcissism, through melancholia, to paranoia. It tries to track these shifts, very loosely, in relation to changes in sociocultural and political atmospheres, noting that none of the shifts are complete, that each one leaves previous states of being and of mind at least partially in place. Narcissism was perhaps the term of choice for examining the problem of forging relationships that feel meaningful in a context of rapid change and neoliberal expansion; then melancholia was (and is) drawn on to conceptualise the challenge of confronting loss and colonial 'theft'; and now the annexation of the polity – and of everyday life – by massively insidious surveillance produces a culture and subjecthood that is fundamentally, and understandably, paranoid.

## **Key words:**

Narcissism; melancholia; paranoia; surveillance; psychoanalysis.

## Narcissism, Melancholia, Paranoia: relationality in a time of surveillance

### What do they want? Living in a Surveillance Society

Here are two quotations to start with, the first in the obscure vocabulary of Lacanian psychoanalysis, in this case a pronouncement from the Master himself.

A lack is encountered by the subject in the Other, in the very intimation that the Other makes to him by his discourse. In the intervals of the discourse of the Other, there emerges in the experience of the child something...namely, *He is saying this to me, but what does he want?* The desire of the Other is apprehended by the subject...in the lacks of the discourse of the Other, and all the child's *whys* reveal not so much an avidity for the reason of things, as a testing of the adult, a *Why are you telling me this?* ever-resuscitated from its base, which is the enigma of the adult's desire. (Lacan, 1973, p. 214)

The second is from Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, a book which has become a cult text for the society of the spectacle, and for thinking about contemporary forms of resistance.

[Every] moment of everyday life is now an audition for citizenship, with every potential 'passer-by a culprit.' In the security state, no one knows when the citizen's audition for citizenship is happening, through what channels, and according to what standards. (Berlant, 2011, p.240)

There are some useful parallels and contrasts between these two evocative texts. For Lacan, the child becomes aware that there is something that is being spoken by the big Other – the social order, we are led to presume. Something speaks from the place of lack, something is expected of the child. Too much, indeed, is being said: *'Why are you telling me this?'* Lacan presents it as a moment of testing, an act of curiosity; but the language he uses suggests also something both tender ('the enigma of the adult's desire') and inappropriate (*'He is saying this to me, but what does he want?'*).

It disturbs the child, as if where there should be a secure, containing object there is instead a searching, desiring one, incomplete in itself. The home that ought to be a haven is instead one with a hole in it, demanding to be filled. The child then becomes aware of itself as suffering a *call* from an other that has its own lack and its own desire: it wants something (from me). As we know, this 'call' is read by Althusser (1971) as a moment of interpellation in which the Law comes and we answer to it, making ourselves accountable, becoming subject to its demands. But I see in this short Lacanian text something more than this figure of the Law. I think it is also an appeal for a kind of mercy: forgive me, forgive the social order, because it needs you, without you it cannot survive.

This is the Lacan of forty years ago, before he declined into what was by some accounts a sordid state (Roudinesco, 2011), still masterful, but aware of his position as big Other to many of his followers, and perhaps reminding them that he had needs and desires too. In any case, what he describes is a way in which the fact that a call is being made involves a demand and reflects some kind of need – otherwise why would anyone bother? And for Lacan the result of this, the residue of demand minus need, is desire (Lacan, 1958). The big Other desires the subject; the subject feels this and is surprised, and curious, and disturbed too: what does it want of me? Why me, what have I done, what can I do, why won't it leave me alone?

Lauren Berlant, alert to the resonance of contemporary anxieties, writes in a register in which the subject is constantly auditioning, but is uncertain of when and for what it is being appraised. The immediate context of the quotation from *Cruel Optimism* is a discussion of 'Security camera art' which nevertheless also focuses on speech – or rather, on a certain non-speech that is not exactly silence, but a parodic display of what it means to be 'caught on camera'. 'In this idiom,' she writes (p. 240), 'it is not just that ambient citizens of the contemporary public look back: they act back, take over the frame, and they perform this by a disruption in speech.' Further, the performers use 'the method of the voiceless speech, here in the genre of silent film intertitles. Its method is to flirt with, seduce, and take over the security camera's gaze.' So we have voice and voicelessness, gaze and the

blocking of gaze, for example with placards that obscure the camera's view. Berlant includes photographs of the group 'Surveillance Camera Players' with large signs up, saying things like 'On my way home' and 'Going shopping', a friendly, helpful set of slogans, ultra-cooperative with the authorities, in fact so excessively cooperative that they render them laughing stocks – unless, of course, they choose to strike back.<sup>1</sup> What the original quotation from Berlant communicates, I think, is just how pernicious it is, whatever jokes we might make, to be at the receiving end of the surveillance society. To be accepted as 'citizens', we have somehow to be constantly scrutinised and self-scrutinising, aware that we are being watched and so monitoring everything we do; exemplary in our behaviour but not too exemplary; aware that we leave traces behind us wherever we go, that there are few places to hide; and that at any moment we may be judged wanting. It seems crass to say that Kafka was here first, but clearly he was: there is something both totalising and absurd about the security state, but it is important not to laugh too much, for obvious reasons.

Let us take this a little more slowly. If (1) the big Other is always lacking and its desire is felt as an obscure call, and (2) we are potentially on trial at any time, yet never quite sure of how we are being judged, then (3) the different pulls on us will very likely produce a range of psychic responses: omnipotence ('the Other needs me, listen to how it continually calls out; there is a place for me; without me society is nothing!'), melancholia ('It used to want me; I had it once; now it has been taken away; the loss is too much to bear'); and of course, most evidently, paranoia ('I am being watched all the time, they are out to get me, they are recording my every move, it inhabits my brain, they want to take me over...'). I take this to be a normal state of affairs in a surveillance society; and it seems to me there is plenty of evidence that such a society is indeed the one in which we live.

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<sup>1</sup> Data from the British Security Industry Authority in 2013 showed that the UK had up to 5.9 million CCTV cameras, one for every 11 (or 14 at a more conservative estimate) people in the country (<http://www.surveillance-magazine.com/2013/07/12/uk-has-up-to-5-9-million-cctv-cameras/>).

## From Narcissism ...

Explorations of the manner in which affective states are interlaced with social phenomena have proliferated in recent years, partly as a consequence of the 'turn to affect' (Wetherell, 2012) but also of the development of queer and postcolonial studies, with their percipient analyses of the differential impact of power as it ranges over specific bodies, especially vulnerable ones (Ahmed, 2004). An element of this has been a critique of neoliberalism that for example addresses the management of the 'neurotic citizen', one that is positioned as a subject of anxiety, always dissatisfied and living in fear of catastrophe. For Isin (2004, p.225), this neurotic citizen is produced as such by governing practices that are not solely operating in the Foucauldian realm of biopower, nor with rational assumptions about risk, but rather treat the subject 'as someone who is anxious, under stress and increasingly insecure and is asked to manage its neurosis.' The neurotic subject, Isin claims (Ibid.), 'is one whose anxieties and insecurities are objects of government not in order to *cure* or *eliminate* such states but to *manage* them.' The apparatus of surveillance is part of this: it is not just imposed on the subject as an order of control, but is also welcomed by that subject as a way of dealing with anxiety – however unsuccessful this might turn out to be.

I have great sympathy with these approaches and an interest in the reflexivity of social and affective states as they co-construct one another. In this paper, however, I want to push for an understanding of the contemporary citizen of the surveillance society as less 'neurotic' than 'paranoid', even though the idea that we manage ourselves through anxiety is a compelling one and is shared by both these characterisations. The argument requires a slightly slow development as it is located in a history of the use of psychoanalytic terminology to describe cultural phenomena and experience – the famous 'culture of narcissism' (Lasch, 1979), but also 'melancholic culture' and various provocations on 'psychotic' postmodernism (Frosh 1991; Khanna, 2004; Walsh, 2014). In essence, the argument runs that the time of narcissism, if it ever existed in a pure form, has run its course. The experiential problematic facing people in western societies may well once have been of how, in

the face of insecurity of selves and a kind of thinness of relational capacity, it might feel impossible to form intimate and enduring links with others; and how a defence against this would be the surface-fixated, manipulative relationships underpinned by rage that constitute the category of narcissism. There is certainly some evidence for this, as Lasch but also the psychoanalysts on whom he drew (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1975, for example) showed; and as aficionados of *American Psycho* (2000) will know, there remains a big social pull towards, and enjoyment in, the sorts of hate-filled paranoia that active narcissism can induce.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, times change and with them the affective cultures that surround us. From the early 1990s onwards, fuelled in the West by the AIDs crisis and by 9/11 – but perhaps it was always lurking as a counterweight to the fantasy of omnipotence that surrounds narcissism – appreciation of the realities of loss came to the fore, and with it the shadows of sadness, coded for all time by Freud (1917) as ‘mourning and melancholia’.

### ...To Melancholia

Judith Butler’s (1997; 2005) trajectory is exemplary here, as it often is given that she is one of the most astute observers and theoreticians of contemporary social engagement. From the performativity work of the early 1990s, which in truth contained the seeds of much that was to come, she moved to thinking about what fixes the possibilities of performance, and thence rapidly to what has to be given up as identity structures cohere around invisible points of origin and meaning, which of course they slip away from all the time as well. I will not labour this here, but simply note how powerfully Butler’s use of the psychoanalytic frame of melancholia has allowed her to conjure the affects associated with loss, and also how it has enabled her to think about ways in which what appears to be past and formally ‘occluded’ (Butler, 2005) might also provide the tools for developing a quasi-messianic imaginary that can reach into the future. In this, her development of Walter Benjamin’s imagery of the voices of the past oppressed ‘flashing up’ in a revolutionary present is

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<sup>2</sup> The famous business-card scene in the film can be taken as a paradigmatic vision of narcissistic rage. A group of more or less identical business executives compare their new cards. Patrick, the lead character, becomes increasingly disturbed as the others’ cards (all of them white and embossed, indistinguishable in reality from each other) seem smarter than his own. By the end of the two-minute sequence, he is engulfed in rage, and almost in tears.

central (Butler, 2012): as with other invocations of the melancholic, it suggests that the preservation of the lost object as an unmourned traumatic psychic and political element has the effect of preserving its possibility for a kind of revolutionary 'return'. The lost object has never been worked through and grieved, hence never been broken down and incorporated into the psyche. It stands there, consequently, as something that threatens and promises from the margins of personal and social history, ready to reclaim its place as the unmourned and still raw underside of domination. Not surprisingly, this has been an attractive general myth for some postcolonial thinkers (Khanna, 2004); but it has also attracted criticism from those not slow to point out that the fantasy of return is always untenable. There is no return to the way things were, there is no pure lost object kept in wraps for when it will be needed again, everything happens in the now, and what we draw on from the past is always refracted through what has happened since. *After* colonialism is not the same as before, any more than 'after' slavery is the same as some pristine state of freedom. Melancholic histories are retained, even if the melancholic object is allowed into the light of day.

## Haunting

The narrative I have just given, abbreviated though it is, perhaps points to the presence of a haunted consciousness that runs through much cultural theory – and, I think, much contemporary psychosocial experience. For many writers, especially those drawing on psychoanalysis, there is something ghostly about the way the psyche is inhabited by its losses. Diana Fuss (1995), for instance, begins her book on identification with the comment that identification 'invokes phantoms... To be open to an identification is to be open to a death encounter, open to the very possibility of communing with the dead' (p.1). The question is, by what are we haunted? Elsewhere (Frosh, 2016), I have suggested that the list of traumatic sources of haunting, of unladen ghosts, includes 'unspoken tragedies, painful longings and losses, historical oppressions, secrets and lies, hidden loves and unsuspected desires.' These things are the everyday concern of psychoanalysis and have been theorised in various ways, including influentially through Abraham and Torok's (1976)



notion of the 'crypt' as that which both hides away secrets and attracts attention to them. What I mean here is simply that we are each run through with the unspoken histories that we have experienced and that are passed on to us – this is what makes them 'cultural' rather than just personal matters, which we do not necessarily directly experience, yet still share in. These kinds of hauntings have dual effects: they trouble us with shivers of feeling, so we know that we have an unmourned element to our psychic lives; but they also grant us depth. Without ghosts, we truly are narcissistic, living only in the present and manipulating it to protect ourselves against feeling; with them we may be melancholic, but at least it is in relation to a deep vein of affect. We may not know what has been loved and lost, but it leaves a trace that we become open to; otherwise the feelings of sadness and regret would have no substance.

These days I keep reworking things, accreting something new to them each time, I hope, but also noting the patterns that return. In the days of the culture of narcissism, an important theme was one of paternal failure. Indeed, this was a part of what turned out to be its conservative, nostalgic undercurrent. Julie Walsh (2014) has examined this under the heading of 'critical declinism', which in turn seems to me to be in a long tradition of critiquing social progress in terms of 'degeneration'. This has predecessors in religious thought, where the more one goes back the more 'pure' the vision, so the task of criticism is always to strip away the recent in order to find the authentic past at work.<sup>3</sup> Psychoanalysis is exemplary here. In what other 'science' do we keep going back to the beginning, to the work of the Founder, in order to uncover what is genuine, pure and 'true'? This is still very much the case within psychoanalytic practice, where Freud's work is taught as the foundation of psychoanalytic thinking – not just its history – to all trainees and students, and where

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<sup>3</sup> An example comes from orthodox Judaism, which holds that the entire Torah was revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai and then passed down through subsequent generations in written form but also as an oral elaboration, and that without the oral commentary the written narrative could not be made sense of. The problem is that the further away one gets from the source, the more confused the oral Torah might be, leading to all the loose and dead ends in Talmudic commentary, for example, when it was finally written down in the second to sixth centuries CE. This means that the task of true rabbinic scholarship – exemplified in Maimonides' twelfth century work *Mishneh Torah* – was often seen as to get rid of the modern speculations, to return to the true origin. The older the better; it is in the past that truth resides, and we decline from there. One of the most emotional prayers, which resonates with a good deal of postcolonial fantasy even though it actually dates from a thousand years ago or more, is 'return our days as of old.'

later work is presented as much as commentary *on* as it is development *of* Freud. We saw it too in the Controversial Discussions that forged modern British psychoanalysis: the big question to be settled between Anna Freud and Melanie Klein was that of who was the true follower of Freud? Whose approach was 'scientifically' supported, and whose was consistent with the real truth to be gleaned from the helpfully contradictory claims of Freud himself (King and Steiner, 1991)? And of course there was Lacan, with his 'return to Freud', dispensing with the 'oral, genital and phallic' stages of other psychoanalysts, as he suggests in his allusion to the sexual difference debates (Lacan, 1958), to read Freud as holy writ, albeit with his own rather mischievous twist. Each of these analysts used Freud to warrant her or his own claims, but this was done precisely because in the collective mind of psychoanalysts since Freud psychoanalysis has become a muddle, has declined in creativity and insight, has accumulated compromises and adaptations until it is at times unrecognisable as what it once was and was meant to be. Such is life, I guess: we start out with hope and reality gets in the way – but we should note that this is the opposite way of thinking about things from the narrative of progress to which Freud himself was very attached even if he also doubted it, and even if he located the source of unconscious meaning in the personal and phylogenetic past.

## Messianism

My point here is in danger of getting lost in whimsy, so let me return actively to it. The notion of narcissistic culture is a species of degeneration theory, in which the loss of a framework of tradition and authentic engagement with reality is lamented and tied theoretically, at least in certain places, to a regret for the loss of authority and hence a potent paternal function. Melancholic culture also has plenty of resonance with lost pasts, of course; indeed, this is really what defines it as melancholic. It is Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) that establishes the ground here: a melancholic object is one that is not recognised and therefore comes back to haunt, much as an unprocessed trauma might do; this is painful, self-defeating and self-damaging. On the other hand,

the fact that the melancholic object is left psychically untouched means that if it is capable of recovery it holds in its being the possibility of a kind of return of the repressed that is *not* damaging, though it might be deeply unsettling. It is, in fact, revolutionary in a double sense: revolution as a *return* (going round in circles) and revolution as a *radical break*. Writing about Walter Benjamin, who in turn was responding to Gershom Scholem's (1941) mobilisation of the Kabbalistic myth of the breaking of the 'sefirot', the destruction of the containers of the divine sparks that puts history into motion, Butler comments (2011, p.83), 'The Messiah is neither a person nor a historical event; it can be understood neither as anthropomorphism nor as teleology; rather, it is a memory of suffering from another time that interrupts and reorients the politics of this time.'

This secular messianism is potentially a powerfully political form of haunting, stopping linear time in its tracks and punctuating it with a different rhythm – it produces a new direction, a kind of syncopation that alters everything. We fall into the past in order to return different, with a new orientation. Butler (Ibid.) notes that the 'flashing up' of the lights of the *sefirot* is read by Benjamin not as a final gathering in of Jewish exiles, but as 'a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.' She wants this to allow a kind of breaking-apart of the 'surface of time' that then transposes 'the memory of suffering into the future of justice, not as revenge but as the figuring of a time in which the history that covers over the history of oppression might cease.' This means that there is no actual lost object simply to be recovered, a presence that will return to lead everything to its satisfactory, integrated conclusion – the traditional view of the reunification of the sparks, which sees the fragmentation of society (the 'breaking of the vessels') as a degraded system that needs to be put right, demanding a reparative response that is itself the marker of the messianic, and once again sharing in the framework of degeneration or critical decline. By contrast, Butler's use of Benjamin advances the cause of continuing 'flashing up' of the hidden sparks, in which those who have lost most and who are written out of humanity have the chance to return, to make their presence felt.

I read this as a very complex mode of temporality, albeit still within the framework of melancholia. There is a 'history of oppression' that still exists, hidden or repressed or at least 'covered over' by an ideological mode of history, what is commonly referred to as the history of the victors. Stripping away this ideological history allows the history of the oppressed to be heard, and it is this that creates the interruption and reorientation described earlier. Yet there is an ambiguity about these appeals to 'history': is it an actual 'this is how it was' that is being claimed, or a reconstructive process in which the past is read through the contemporary gaze – in which what has always been known but was, for example, once seen as 'enlightenment' (as in colonialism's self-justification) is now recast as oppression? The question here is, does the uncovering of past loss have the form of something new, a radical break, or does the idea that 'what has been hidden can reappear' mobilise a nostalgic fantasy for what is imagined to have been, which can still come to rescue us? Theologically, is the Messiah coming for a second time, or a first?<sup>4</sup>

### Melancholia as a Fantasy of Return

In my previous work on this, I have argued that some significant problems arise when melancholic attachments to imagined lost goods come to stand in for progressive attempts to respond to contemporary conditions of the actually existing symbolic (Frosh, 2013a). This is not to belittle the ways in which such modes of identity politics – for this is how I see them – can at times be a source of radical hope: they can be a way of re-imagining boundaries and challenging constraints, for

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<sup>4</sup> The correct way to resolve this question at the time of the coming of the Messiah is to greet him, when he appears in Jerusalem, with the words, 'Welcome Sir; have you been here before?'

example in relation to gender divisions under the order of patriarchy, or racialised ones under colonialism, that claim to be 'natural' and immutable. But I think there are at least two weak links. One is utopianism itself: it underestimates the power of the actually existing social order to take hold of its dissidents and either to crush them or, as Adorno (1967) noted in his account of the administered society, to appropriate them to its own tastes and concerns. The second weakness is that in imagining the existence of a lost object that can or must be 'recovered', a mythology is created which is, by definition, backward-looking to a supposed time when there was a pure culture of the now-oppressed, a kind of romance of origin that can be called on to establish the distinctiveness and perhaps purity to which the group can return. This has some disturbing associations, particularly in the context of ethnic and postcolonial challenge, in that it valorises the supposedly 'authentic' culture of the oppressed group – a fetish of the lost object, in psychoanalytic terms. It also neglects the simple fact that things change, that whatever was 'then' is not 'now' and that, for instance, one still lives with the effects of colonialism even after its apparent demise. The postcolonial world is not the same as the precolonial one; *Nachträglichkeit* applies here as well as in the individual psyche, because what might or might not have actually existed at one time can be recovered and read only from the specific position in which we now find ourselves. Allowing the lost object to 'flash up' as if it has not changed may disturb the present, but what is produced is something phantasmagoric, the lost object becoming a call back to an imagined time that threatens to be reconstructed as a myth of perfect origin.

The Lacanian idea that what passes as 'loss' might be better conceptualised as 'lack' is useful here, despite its apparently fanatical linguistic obsessionality. The difference is, what is lost must once have been owned, so it was probably stolen – an implicitly paranoid or aggressive idea; whereas, what is lacking is so from the start. Žižek (1993, p. 203) links the fantasy of loss persuasively to the racist trope of being robbed by the other: 'What we conceal by imputing to the Other the theft of enjoyment is the traumatic fact that *we never possessed what was allegedly stolen from us*: the lack ("castration") is originary, enjoyment constitutes itself as "stolen".' This critical rendering of

melancholia is a powerful way of conceptualising racist subjectivity: 'we' are lacking, but 'we' are also superior, so must have had something stolen from us; 'they' seem to have enjoyment – passionate sexuality, intelligence, secret wealth – so 'they' must be the thieves. Colonial theft enters in here, both as a systematised mode of racism ('our Empire was stolen from us' – see Gilroy, 2004) and as a lament on the part of post-colonised societies, haunted by what was taken from them yet not clear what that might have been. As it breaks through to postcolonial nationhood, the colonised culture fantasises the lost object that it cannot name, which has become somehow incorporated and kept alive yet is neither integrated nor acknowledged. The damage done by colonialism is perpetuated in this psychosocial structure, which continues to fuel new societies' hopes for themselves, their ideals of renewal and nation-statehood that are anchored in fantasies of the past (Khanna, 2004).

On the other hand, lack too can give rise to envy, so it has its own paranoid element: what we lack the other might have, and this can be fetishised, racialised or gendered in destructive ways. In any case, I want to make it clear that I do not think that extolling melancholia is Butler's version of things, as her attention is continually focused on using what we know in order to unsettle the present in the name of a more progressive future, and her drawing on Benjamin is always with an eye to the destruction of one kind of history in order to forge another. But when melancholia strikes, we should recall, it does not only preserve in aspic something that might have been lost; it also poisons what remains. Freud writes (1917, p.244), 'The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.' As ever, if we are to return to the past, we should keep his words in mind.

## Paranoia

There is an additional link that I want to suggest here, between the loss of the containing, traditional social structure imagined in the culture of narcissism, the stolen lost object of melancholic culture, and the failure of the big Other to protect its subjects under the conditions of surveillance. Here, psychoanalytic thinking of the Kleinian variety cries out for attention: where else can we find a theory so beautifully attuned to the conditions of a culture in which the frame that is meant to support us turns against us, in ways that we cannot even be sure of, so we end up mistrusting everything? Klein was an expert in paranoia, and the concepts of paranoid-schizoid position and projective identification can hardly be bettered if we are looking for leverage on a paranoia-inducing social world. Amongst others, Michael Rustin (1991) has worked this seam powerfully in his account of the dynamics of racism, and the general notion that the racist imaginary is characterised by projective identification in which hated elements of the psyche are inserted into objects made socially receptive to them, is quite a widespread one now. I think this is a persuasive account, particularly in conveying the permeability of 'inside' and 'out' as colonialist and racist social structures find their ways into the psychic lives of subjects and are in turn invested in as mechanisms of psychic as well as social stabilisation (Frosh, 2013b). The move from psychic investment to paranoia here is a short one: repudiated elements of the self are projected into awaiting social containers, which are then experienced as turning back on the subject – a mechanism that Klein (1946) portrays as universal both as a developmental 'phase' and as a mode of psychic functioning throughout life.

Where the Kleinian psychosocial vision focuses on the interaction between a mind that has its disowned elements and a society that has derogated 'containers' awaiting them, other psychoanalytic perspectives offer a way of thinking about how constitutive elements of sociality inform the structure of fantasy itself. Let me go back to the Lacanian notion that there is a lack in the big Other and that this presents the subject with an unanswerable question: 'what am I to you?' with

the 'you' here being that big Other, the system in which we find ourselves placed. Recall my two opening quotations, the one with this question at heart – '*He is saying this to me, but what does he want?*' (Lacan, 1973, p. 214) – and the other, from Berlant (2011), describing the constant 'audition for citizenship' that is a characteristic of surveillance society. 'What does it want? Am I good enough? Will I be judged a failure? Does it know everything already? Is there nowhere to hide?' These are the familiar inner queries about our position when we feel watched, and though they are not new (Kenneth Williams's 'Infamy, infamy, they've all got it in for me' comes from 1964), the pervasiveness and what one might call the 'visible invisibility' of surveillance (visible at least since the Edward Snowden revelations; invisible because we simply don't know how far it all goes) has made them ever more urgent. For this reason, perhaps, a cultural fantasy has come to overlay those of narcissism and melancholia with a new-old dimension (the idea of the *Altneu* is also an ancient trope) of a mode of alienation that has heavily paranoid echoes.

I will give two brief and familiar examples here, both of them of well-known and even 'old' work that has come very much into vogue. I don't think this is an accident: these theories gain purchase because they articulate an ultra-contemporary experience; this is part of what Said (2003) might have called their 'contrapuntal' efficiency – they speak in the present as well as in the past. First, Fanon's (1952) 'Look, a Negro!' episode from *Black Skin, White Masks*, elaborated by his footnote on the Lacanian mirror stage (p.161). As has often been noted, there is a radical difference between Fanon and Lacan, in which the racialised specificity of (in this instance) the black man's experience is contrasted with the universalising tendency to be found in the culturally undifferentiated Lacanian mirror phase. The generalised Lacanian subject looks in the mirror and sees its image reflected back to it, and then appropriates that image as a source of comfort and a way of making meaning out of what was previously fragmented experience. Fanon, however, describes a process whereby the black subject, *subjected to* the racist gaze, sees itself in the *white* mirror that removes the possibility of self-assertion and mastery and instead creates further fragmentation. The black subject is positioned as an *object* and does not appropriate the fantasy of integrated subjectivity, but instead



is fixed by an external gaze that comes arrow-like from the persecutory, colonial structure. For the white subject, the mirror phase is characterised by a presentation of visual wholeness (the image in the mirror) that reassures the subject and leads to a sense of agency in the world. For the black, colonised subject, the reflection is not of the image as seen by the subject her or himself (and directed by the gaze of the mother); it is a reflection of the coloniser's gaze, and as such is *doubly* alienating. Fanon, writes Kelly Oliver (2004, p.21), 'describes the effects of the white mirror as undermining any sense of unification and control, and returning the black body and psyche to a state of fragmentation and lack of control.' Put more broadly, the colonised subject is alienated from the possible space of meaning-making; what she or he sees is not a look of recognition coming from the other, but a look of disdain, fear or blank incomprehension.

One important aspect of the appeal to Fanon is that it emphasises the way the persecutory gaze is a specific one, operating differentially across different bodies. For Fanon, this is primarily the black man; for Butler (2004) it is a range of 'vulnerable' subjects made precarious by the particularity of their social positions. In all these situations, we might nevertheless say that when the surrounding *social* structure is one of threat and fear, combined with a refusal even to recognise the subject as such, then the *psychic* structure is likely to be infused with denigration.

The second example comes from the increasingly influential (non-Lacanian) work of Jean Laplanche, which has been championed and extended especially by John Fletcher in the UK (e.g. Fletcher, 2013) and which has been appearing in the work of some formidable social theorists, not least Butler (2005). To keep this brief and if possible clear, the key idea I want to draw on is that of the enigmatic message; put simply, the subject finds itself exposed from the start to an 'overwhelming' set of communications from the m/other around which its own psychic being takes shape. Some of these messages are, simply, untranslatable: they come from a place of desire in the other that the other itself cannot properly name, and are inserted into the subject in a form that excites and threatens and has to be managed, but cannot be fully mastered. It is, indeed, a lifetime project to do this.

There is a lot one can say about this idea, and how it relates to trauma and history, but I want simply to note it as an account of why the world might be thought of as paranoid in its structure: something comes at us from outside, we know it is important, but we do not know what it is asking of us or what its consequences might be.

Butler's version of this is coded by her interest in vulnerability, but it communicates powerfully the phenomenological structure – the states of feeling that could emerge. She writes,

To understand the unconscious... is to understand what *cannot* belong, properly speaking, to me, precisely because it defies the rhetoric of belonging, is a way of being dispossessed through the address of the other from the start. For Laplanche, I am animated by this call or demand, and I am at first overwhelmed by it. The other is, from the start, too much for me, enigmatic, inscrutable. The 'too-much-ness' must be handled and contained for something called an 'I' to emerge in its separateness. (Butler, 2005, p.54)

Butler emphasises the need to 'handle and contain' this inscrutable message from the other; but what if the place from which this message comes is *in fact* inscrutable, scrambling the message intentionally and spying on the subject 'from the inside' as it does so? For now the lack in the big Other is starting to appear as a kind of fullness, as a too-muchness that never leaves the subject alone. Indeed, this is one reason for the shift in terminology that has occurred in the past decade or so from a concern with the 'other' to the 'neighbour', the one who is close to us yet also contains a 'Thing' that will not let us be. Žižek (2006, p.43) describes the harmonics of the neighbour thus: 'One should hear in this term all the connotations of horror fiction: the neighbour is the (Evil) Thing that potentially lurks beneath every homely human face.' Now we have the 'evil' neighbour who stands right next to us, whose message, inscrutable but compelling, may be too hot to handle.

I am aware that the Lacanian version of paranoia is not formulated in quite the way I have been hinting at. For Lacan, paranoia is the model for all psychosis and is produced as a 'foreclosure' or

rejection of the signifier of the Name-of-the-Father that allows the subject to take up a position in the symbolic – which is to say, in culture. Many Lacanians advance this idea to see paranoia as a constitutive function of the subject *in* as well as outside society. For example, Vanier (2010, p.216) notes how Lacan observed that ‘in each of us there is a paranoid function: the ego. The ego, constituted by successive identifications enacted during the mirror stage (*stade du miroir*), is essentially narcissistic—this explains why paranoid reactions are so frequent in all people, even those who do not present a true psychotic structure.’ We are back both to the paternal function and to the idea that we are haunted by troubling identifications. However, I want to draw on another element implicit in the Lacanian scheme. This is that the paranoid is an absolute master – or rather, an absolute adherent of the Discourse of the Master, the one who knows for certain what is going on. Contrasting the paranoid with the hysteric, Verhaeghe (1997) claims that the paranoid subject, refusing the Oedipal Name-of-the-Father, has to take hold of a set of precarious, self-developed certainties that will anchor her or his subjecthood. ‘From a structural point of view,’ writes Verhaeghe (p.69), ‘the paranoid subject is not divided and shows no lack whatsoever: he knows.’ In the context of the surveillance society, this can easily become the paranoid assertion, ‘They are really out to get us; there is an evil conspiracy; they know what we think; they are opening our (e)mail; they are watching us.’ This is the kind of mode of knowing that is impervious to interpretation, argument or reason. Indeed, what characterises the paranoiac is a *lack of lack*, an inability to acknowledge the absent space within and instead the compulsion to cover it over with certainty.

Unfortunately, in a surveillance society there is plenty of opportunity for partial confirmation of this knowledge: just look at the cameras in the street and ask what they are recording, and why, and for whom. The paranoiac is perhaps the one who is perfectly adjusted to such a society, which makes all the more radical Lacan’s stringent recommendation to his clinical trainees not to know too much. In the service of what Nobus and Quinn (2005) call the ‘fall’ of knowledge, Lacan (1975, p.73) writes,

How many times have I said to those under my supervision, when they say to me – I had the impression he meant this or that – that one of the things we must guard most against is to understand too much, to understand more than what is in the discourse of the subject. To interpret and to imagine one understands are not the same things. It is precisely the opposite. I would go so far as to say that it is on the basis of a kind of refusal of understanding that we push open the door to analytic understanding.

The openness of psychoanalysis – the way the Discourse of the Analyst involves, precisely, vacating the position of mastery and knowledge – can perhaps be understood here as antagonistic to paranoia. But can it work, we might ask, in social conditions in which someone always seems to know about us, in which we are rightly aware that secrets are being kept, and an unaccountable bank of information is being stored up for possible future use?

## Excursus

Has melancholia given way to paranoia; is what we are now haunted by a persecutory image of the external world, too often confirmed in reality? I do not want to judge this or assert it too strongly – we are dealing with metaphors and models, which might or might not help us understand the position we find ourselves in. Nevertheless, I will wager something here. The pervasiveness of surveillance and the linked emergence of a culture of anxiety about security and terror, have crept into contemporary society through all sorts of quotidian means and are reflected in shifts in psychic states. These shifts are in various directions: narcissism and melancholia, for instance, are not outmoded concepts, but they are increasingly overlaid by paranoid states of mind that accurately reflect the problematics of people's lives. This is not to say that paranoia is a 'healthy' response to current realities, any more than are narcissism or melancholia; it is only to suggest that it makes sense, that it is a representation of the state of the psychosocial subject under conditions in which it is very hard to trust, or even to understand, what is going on around us.

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