

# The Jargon of Inauthenticity

AN INTRODUCTION TO ACTING OUT IN GROUPS

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## In Theory

I am tempted to begin by relating how I came to have the unenviable task of “introducing” the following essays, but, in the end, it is not a terribly interesting story. More interesting, and perhaps even remarkable, is why someone in my position would begin by characterizing his task as “unenviable.” Setting aside, for the moment, what precisely my position is, I invite you to consider the resemblance (no doubt familial) between the vaguely diplomatic labor of introducing scholars and audiences to one another, and the exercise of commentary. As is well known, this last has been the object of academic derision and contempt at least since *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, if not well before. However, the general problem with commentary, namely, the delusion it promotes concerning its detachment from both the work and the world, is aggravated here by the simple fact that these essays—both individually and as a group—have anticipated, if not in fact solicited, my position. They are, in effect, lying in wait for the act of introduction, an act that Catherine Liu’s opening salvo associates—through the implicit chain “introduce,” “introject,” “incorporate”—with the practice of cannibalism. At the risk of seeming melodramatic, what then constitutes the unenviable character of this act is the fact that in carrying it out one confronts the possibility—nay, the likelihood—of being eaten alive.

In the “publish and perish” world in which contemporary academic intellectuals work, “being eaten alive” has lost its denotative link to the event of public, though rarely conscious, humiliation (one thinks here, I suppose, of the graduate seminar presided over by either the

novice or the incompetent). Connotatively, of course, this association endures, and for this reason it is important to emphasize that academia has reduced to nil the pragmatic value of fearing such humiliation. After all, is anyone other than your friends paying attention? This fact notwithstanding, the essays grouped together here render such humiliation virtually impossible by establishing, in advance, that one is destined to misread them. In short, they are not intended for popular consumption (emphasis on *consumption*). Thus, in the absence of even the possibility of “misrepresentation,” the discomfort of being eaten alive is, for all intents and purposes, eliminated. However, precisely to the degree that here the impossibility of misrepresentation is openly divorced from the delusions of exegetical voluntarism—in other words, from the belief that “anything goes”—these essays confront someone in my position with the more serious problem of compromise; that is, can they be introduced, can they be made public, without their either devouring—and thereby incorporating—the act of introduction (rendering it at once unnecessary and unhelpful), or their becoming, through that very act, what they are not, namely, just more examples of psychoanalytically inflected cultural criticism? Perhaps I *am* relating the story of this task after all . . .

My wager, obviously, is that they can be so introduced, but not without a certain tact. And, if I have begun by overemphasizing the problem of an introduction as such, it is because tact requires that one acknowledge that this very problem is an avatar of one of the persistent theoretical preoccupations of this volume, namely, the act of grouping. The detachment earlier associated with commentary allows one not only to group his or her forces, but to group that which constitutes their object. To the extent that this activity prompts reflection on the logic of compromise, it reminds one that grouping is never far removed from the polis and its politics, even when the groups involved are merely stables of authors. For this reason, *Acting Out in Groups* finds itself entangled in precisely the conundrum delineated by Adorno when he addressed himself to the etymological hybrid of “cultural criticism.” Though the contributors to this volume may not be in the habit of “thinking with their ears,” they are, in different ways, struggling with and against the crosscurrents Adorno channeled in the following formulation: “The culture critic is not happy with civilization, to which alone he owes his discontent.” And although none of the essays grouped here openly embraces the antiphilistinism that Adorno renders

synonymous with the twisted happiness of the cultural critic, several of them (notably, those of Laurence A. Rickels, the editor), both stylistically and thematically, address themselves to the distinctly Freudian resonance of Adorno's dialectical formulation. The theoretical constellation at stake here might be diagrammed this way: just as a certain irreducible and therefore constitutive guilt represents the price of admission to that "great get-together" we call civilization, a certain, equally constitutive, unhappiness bonds the critic to culture. However, because the latter is not simply a reiteration of the former, the constellation tells us something in particular about critique when articulated in the cultural realm, namely, that it effectively drafts the contract that groups together critics, culture, and the civilization that lets everyone down, but certainly not off.

The act of criticism, of course, is divided by the very divisions that it discerns, including of course the ambivalent, if not unlivable, division between the critic and culture. It is along this unstable front that precisely what separates this volume from garden-variety psychoanalytically inflected cultural criticism can be characterized. Although my insistence on the affinity between the concerns and the procedures of the critics grouped together here may well have already clarified the point for some, for others a bit of context might be useful. Where to begin? For the sake of argument, let us just say that this volume belongs to the "new world order," or at least to the version of that order that, at the international level, has declared that the end of history is at hand, that globalism (corporate multinationalism) is triumphant, and that in the precincts of academia, "excellence" has replaced "culture" as the tithe paid by the university to the state. Under such circumstances scholars, particularly in the humanities (where, after all, academic cultural criticism tends to be practiced), have been obliged to regroup, not only to defend their jobs, but, in rare yet telling instances, to reconstitute themselves as "public intellectuals." At the risk of adopting an "apocalyptic tone," this is a situation through which humanities educators may well now be glimpsing their own obsolescence. As books such as *Will Teach for Food* make abundantly clear, the most vicious, and perhaps therefore politically important, form that this illusion of a future has taken is in the organized attacks on graduate student training and professionalization, attacks that, in addition to rendering the lives of many talented individuals absolutely miserable (and yes, I recognize the "atypical" character of graduate students at Yale), also undermine

any regrouping of the faculty by restricting its temporal range to the generations currently protected by the obviously fragile provisions of the tenure code. Equally nefarious, of course, is the controversial but deplorable trend toward hiring more and more part-time or even full-time “adjuncts” — those who, even if not seeking tenure, will never have it to lose. Faced with such developments, that is, developments within professional institutions and organizations more typically inclined to regard, say, the North American Free Trade Agreement as someone else’s problem, “cultural criticism” has acquired a new urgency even as it remains ensnared within familiar double binds.

Again, for the sake of argument, one might reasonably claim that this revitalization of academic “cultural criticism” has prompted, among other things, a theoretical crisis. This is a crisis that has led to significant regroupings within and among academic partisans of various theoretical persuasions, but it has also instigated a full-scale attack on Theory regardless of persuasion. Psychoanalytic theory has figured centrally here — not because psychoanalysis has assumed the predictably phallic function of a lightning rod, but because its reputed “ahistoricism” uncannily coincides with the perceived deficiency of Theory — and certainly one of the things at stake in this volume is what its own prepositional preoccupations would urge one in my position to call in-crowd infighting.

Perhaps it would make sense here to point to the fairly recent establishment of the *Journal of the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* (JPCS), a journal inaugurated in 1996 with the expressed intention not simply of revitalizing psychoanalysis as a theoretical activity in the Anglophone world, but also of linking this revitalization to a resurgence of cultural criticism. This is a development that, for various reasons, ought to be seen in conjunction with Slavoj Žižek’s effort to “return to Lacan” through Hitchcock, or Teresa Brennan’s and Joan Copjec’s interventions on behalf of psychoanalysis within the discipline of history — all instances of regrouping that acknowledge some of the defeats of psychoanalysis while stubbornly insisting that Freud’s family romance may yet have the last word. I refer to this as “in-crowd infighting” because not only does it bear witness to the struggle among Theory partisans (that is, all those who insist that it has consequences and that one really cannot leave home without it) over the legacy of the posthumanist paradigm, but it underscores the fact that psychoanalysis itself has double-crossed (at the very least) its own path.

Those committed to the project of *JPCS* (here reduced to a symptom) believe that psychoanalysis has something vital to contribute to the contemporary practice of cultural criticism, because culture is incomprehensible without a theory of the human subject. From such a perspective, what much of contemporary cultural politics misses is the fact that the polis is an intersubjective field mediated by language and what Jacques Lacan once called “the dialectic of desire.” Against those who reduce psychoanalysis to the status of an ahistorical, class-specific theory of sexuality, the *JPCS* partisans insist that this is only the latest avatar of a long-standing social resistance to psychoanalysis, a resistance that is now putting the very practice of cultural criticism at risk. The in-crowd thus being rivalrously challenged here is what, for lack of a better term, I will call the cultural studies in-crowd, the new (?) discipline on the (historical) block. One aim of the *JPCS* partisans is to take up the gauntlet thrown down by cultural studies, and to reassert the importance of psychoanalytic theory, but to articulate a discursive practice of psychoanalysis that effectively realigns it with the traumatic preoccupations of the present.

The positions staked out in *Acting Out in Groups* represent an alternative articulation of the importance of psychoanalysis for cultural criticism—in fact, an articulation that challenges what its partisans might characterize as the “compromise” effected by Žižek and others. Virtually every piece contained here not only addresses itself to one of those characteristic offerings of the culture industry from which audiences are insatiably repelled—the *Jerry Springer Show*, the late Kathy Acker’s onanistic writing techniques, a fairy-tale precursor to *Carrie*, a made-for-television “documentary” on troubled children, the cacophonics of Cecil Taylor, the German national symbol after “reunification,” various queer and feminist advocacy groups, documentaries of comic book authors, etc., etc.—but does so in order to use Sigmund Freud (and typically the Freud of Jacques Derrida, *not* Lacan) as a way to establish what resists theorization in cultural-studies approaches to such material. The aim here—and the infighting is unmistakable—is not simply to establish how cultural “resistance” (a cultural-studies fetish if there ever was one) resists itself (whereby “progressive” projects collapse into their pre-Freudian, and therefore conservative, assumptions), but to insist, against those who place credence in the pedagogical rigors of First World cinemas, that cultural criticism must be both more and less faithful to psychoanalysis. At least, in theory.

## Inaction

Obviously, much hangs on how one unpacks this “more” and this “less.” Let’s take “more.” Throughout *Acting Out in Groups*, and perhaps most insistently in Rickels’s own contributions, effort is made to construct a genealogy of “deviation”; that is, how, when, and by whom “acting out” (Freud’s *Agieren*) was converted into authentic psychoanalytic jargon is something detailed with considerable patience. The price of this conversion is not simply a pop-psychological reduction of the concept (“acting out” as behaving—typically conspicuously—in response to the workings of some obscure, if not unconscious, motive), but a betrayal of Freud, who is valued, conversely, for the provocative irreducibility he folded into the concept. The aim is not, of course, to whine about the act of betrayal. This is understood to be inevitable. Rather, the aim is to resuscitate the Freudian corpus, to make its incommensurable discussions of acting out come to life inside our contemporary preoccupations with agency and action. Peter Canning, who—at least here—cleaves to the most Lacanian line of the collection, diagrams the uncanny character of this resuscitation by setting up a distinction between acting out (an act that remains readable as a symptom) and “passing to the act” (Lacan’s *passage à l’acte*, which passes through readability in order to antagonize the signifying chain as such). Precisely because he accepts that Lacan’s return is indeed simply a reading of the Freudian text, Canning is able to mobilize this distinction as a properly Freudian component of our relation to action itself. This represents, in the context of the in-crowd infighting I am addressing here, a commitment to psychoanalytic theory that strikes out both at cultural-studies partisans who want to “fight the power” by finding their way *back* into action, *and* at, for lack of a less reductive term, the partisans of *JPCS*, who are implicitly perceived as having gone too far in the direction of rethinking the agenda of psychoanalytic theory in light of the crisis of cultural criticism. In other words, if everything you wanted to know about Lacan is really *in* Hitchcock, then cultural criticism can indeed find its theoretical footing precisely where all matters of discernment become merely academic, that is, where academic criticism matters least. In this sense, the writers grouped together here (to varying degrees, to be sure) appear more faithful to psychoanalysis and would never indulge in the irritating apologetics that mar Stephen Crook’s otherwise probing introduction to *Adorno: The Stars Down to Earth*.

This matters, not because it allows contending in-groups to delineate the fronts of their infighting (though I am, of course, arguing that this is—at a certain institutional level—of capital importance), but because it confronts the contemporary activity of cultural criticism with a theoretical question, namely, how are we to link the conditions of such criticism to an account of the psychosociogenesis of subjects? Is cultural criticism viable in the absence of such an account, and do the dire straits within which such criticism currently finds itself legitimately warrant the bracketing of such a question? In the end, the issue is not about Freud or Lacan or Theodor Adorno. It is about criticism. What makes it possible and what makes it matter? The writers grouped here have the temerity to insist—in spite of everything theoretical, political, clinical, neurobiological, and so on, that has significantly called the Freudian breakthrough into question (and there can be no serious doubt about this)—that psychoanalysis is not only still pertinent, but of urgent importance precisely for those most committed, here and now, to “passing to the act,” to dispensing with theory and getting on with the proverbial business at hand.

The degree to which the positions sketched out here are, to the same degree, *less* faithful to psychoanalysis can be illuminated by returning briefly to my earlier evocation of the “prepositional preoccupations” of these texts. There, my aim was to stress the need for hearing both “in GROUPS” and “IN groups” in the title of this volume. Here, I want to expand this point to, among other things, provide some small justification for the title of these introductory remarks. Those familiar with the work of Rickels know the extent to which his style, the very texture of his writing, has developed as an exercise in the paronomastic baroque. Because of its proximity to the cryptographics of Derrida and others, it is characteristically perceived as an expression of a commitment to the deconstructive tangent of the so-called linguistic turn. It is certainly that, but it is also more. Specifically, what is so striking about Rickels’s style is the way he deploys it in order to, as it were, argue “in stereo,” that is, to write with a forked tongue. Just to take a small, but telling, example, consider his persistent use of the substantive “midlife criticism.” Premised or perched on Paul de Man’s hinging of crisis and criticism, this substantive loops the reader through an etymological convergence that reconstitutes it as “midlife crisis,” something we think we readily understand. However, once formed, this understanding gives way to the corrosive effects of the word *criticism* on “midlife

crisis." Although, ultimately, comprehension may depend here on an engagement with Rickels's notion of the Teen Age, it is clear that the substantive speaks at least twice: once about psychology and once about criticism. When placed in a theoretical formulation addressing critical practice, "midlife criticism" semantically reiterates the duplicity, the doubleness, it allows Rickels to discern in critical practice that envies the lawlessness it condemns in those who have displaced it within the scheme of intellectual generations.

At the risk of overstating the sway held by Rickels over the essays grouped here, a third statement performed by the substantive "midlife criticism" is nevertheless worth considering. It is the one that states directly in what sense these essays are less faithful to psychoanalysis. Thus, in addition to speaking about both psychology and criticism, "midlife criticism" also speaks about mass culture and the discourse of the jingle, the slogan, the pitch. Or better, it *speaks* mass culture (in the case at hand, the inauthentic jargon of *Psychology Today*). In fact, many of the writers grouped here, through recourse to precisely those linguistic elements that Ferdinand de Saussure originally denied the existence of, namely, willfully fashioned signs, let their arguments advance through the sound bites or discursive "ready-mades" of the culture industry. Against those who believed in the supreme agency of language, the contributors to *Acting Out in Groups* proceed according to the notion that cultural criticism forges the links in its signifying chain out of a discourse that, unlike language, no one (perhaps not even those paid to synthesize it) is inclined to claim responsibility for. Otherwise, cultural criticism's twisted raving against the anti-intellectualism of the masses is merely the tortuous exposition of a critique destined to miss its mark. If one of the hallmarks of the international emergence of psychoanalysis as a disciplinary and professional field was its elaboration of an authentic, Latinate jargon ("parapraxis" for *Fehlleistung*, or "ego" for *Ich*), then the strategy pursued by the contributors to this volume represents a betrayal. It is a turning away from the despotic core of the field, toward the same rich indecisiveness that Rickels teases out of Freud's *Agieren*, and toward the jolt of the jingle, that is, the current avatar of "the concept."

The aim here is not to discover psychoanalytic theory in the abbreviated rigor of a headline, nor to assume that Woody Allen has even the remotest familiarity with *Of Grammatology*, but rather to deploy the "ready-made" texture of mass cultural discourse on behalf



of theory, that is, on behalf of an approach to cultural criticism that refuses to abandon theory while nevertheless repudiating its metalinguistic pretensions. Although such a repudiation typically involves an epistemological modification wherein statements about other statements are stripped of any authority, technical or otherwise, here this repudiation produces not only the self-defeating phenomenon of an inauthentic jargon, but also—as suggested earlier—an alternative style of argumentation (if it can even be called that). Here is not the place to delineate this style in detail, but—to take the earlier example of “midlife criticism”—clearly one of its features is the stereophonic spreading that occurs when a point about criticism is run through two separate disciplinary channels. The reader is thus confronted with a prompt, a signal, that obliges him or her not just to finish the point, but to construct the logic implied by the associations twisted together within it. Not exactly “sillygisms,” but close, and Rickels may be right to suggest that this addictive ambivalence is a perfectly effective way to rearticulate the constitutive discontent of the cultural critic without lapsing into either self-loathing or cynical clowning.

Here, of course, we are confronted with perhaps the boldest aspect of the gamble taken by *Acting Out in Groups*. I say this because the “sillygism” is, among other things, a sorting device; it forms in-groups. It can't help it. There are those “in the know,” that is, those who recognize and respond (even if errantly) to the prompts, and those who can't, won't, or don't. By working so intimately with the discourse of “ready-mades” and “found thoughts,” many more people than usual are solicited by the prompts, and the potential for group formation is thus heightened. Because the matter of the group weighs heavily on every page—it is there in the poetics of the prose—as one proceeds from essay to essay, the group formations reread in light of Freud's *Agieren* (the horde, the audience, the nation, etc.) converge to underscore a strategic omission. Unlike the provocatively reflexive distinction between “acting out” and “passing to the act,” there is no similar formulation concerning a distinction between *Massenpsychologie* (group psychology) and something like “in-group” psychology. And one might reasonably argue that even establishing the self-defeating character of such a distinction would—as a reflexive gesture—nevertheless illuminate the shadows where this grouping of authors and the actions of those groups they analyze crowd against one another. By characterizing this as a strategic omission, I am of course signaling that the collection

puts an analytic value on placing such matters on the inactive list. Precisely how this places cultural criticism and psychoanalysis in action—that is, at the service of those acting in concert against those seeking to make the writing of such books impossible—will have to be teased out of the readings that follow. In theory, in action, indeed.