Gaps in transmission: Reading Lacan’s *Télévision*

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This article offers a close reading of Jacques Lacan’s *Télévision* (1974), which is both a text and a filmed artefact. It takes as its starting point Lacan’s claim that *Télévision* was a failure. It argues that Lacan called attention to this failure in order to reflect on it as a productive force in psychoanalysis, but also in his own performance, thus making *Télévision* a meditation on failure that enacts the thing that it anatomizes. The article traces the contours of this “failure”, paying close attention to the paradoxes and equivocations of the text and of the film. It considers Lacan’s failure in light of his own avowed clownishness in *Télévision* and relates this to his theoretical reflections on the comic in the text. To understand what a rupture *Télévision* constituted from televisual conventions of the time, we then situate it in relation to the traditions of televised philosophy in France, a context that has been largely disregarded in accounts of *Télévision*. The final two sections then bring this together under the rubric of the failure in meaning. Noting that Lacan in the early 1970s was interested in what was not working out, most notably in the sexual relation, it argues that these failures or gaps were not reasons for despair, but instead openings for invention and innovation, including of the creation of neologisms such as *linguisterie* and *jouis-sens*, and the reworking of concepts such as *gay sçavoir*, which we demonstrate at work in the enigmatic final words of *Télévision*.

In his commentary on Jacques Lacan’s seminar, Charles Melman emphasises a feature of *Seminar 22: RSI* (1974-75) of which he insists we can never sufficiently account: namely a procedure which breaks with our habitual procedures of thought. Melman’s concern is with distinctive aspects of *RSI* which mark a departure from the seminar’s immediate predecessors, *Encore* (1972-73) and *Les non-dupes errent* (1973-74). But his point has a much wider application. In the (inevitable) attempt to comprehend Lacan’s teaching it is all too easy to lose sight of the ways in which his modes of thinking constitute, in Melman’s phrase, “a radical rupture with our spontaneous mode of thought.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Lacan’s *Télévision* (1974) is one such rupture. Not just because it is a patently unique moment in Lacan’s teaching — the only crafted televised presentation of his teaching and the only (largely) scripted exchange with an interlocutor, which can be more easily abstracted than many other texts — but because it must have been, for the overwhelming majority of the viewers, what Deleuze terms “a shock to thought”.[[2]](#endnote-2) Instead of talking heads’ elucidatory expositions of philosophical or psychoanalytic propositions, they encountered a bizarre figure declaiming a baffling series of apparently disconnected pronouncements. Rather than rendering comprehensible, he confounded his audience by confronting them with the incomprehensible.

In 2024 it will be fifty years since the publication of *Télévision* and of Lacan’s appearance on television. At the time, *Télévision* was one of the few published texts of Lacan’s late teaching and a rare video recording of the psychoanalyst speaking. Now it is mainly ignored amongst the posthumous abundance of Lacan’s still-emerging seminar. A singular artefact that comes in two parts, this bi-medial oddity has still only received a partial reckoning. In the small but significant flurry of anglophone critical engagement with *Télévision* in the wake of its translation in 1990, the main points of orientation wereLacan’s comments on the gaze in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* and his interventions on feminine jouissance in *Encore*. Beyond this narrow horizon of reference, *Télévision* has remained basically opaque, although it has enjoyed frequent, if selective, citation and interpretation, especially of its opening words — “I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there’s no way to say it all.”[[3]](#endnote-3) The literature in French is similarly sparse, and even Jacques-Alain Miller, who participated in the making of *Télévision*, gives only sporadic and partial commentary. His “Microscopia,” introducing the English translation, is illuminating, but barely progresses beyond the second page of the text in its analysis.

By any habitual mode of thinking, *Télévision* was a failure. Lacan anticipated this failure and called attention to it, not by way of apology or excuse, but instead by reflecting on it as a productive force. *Télévision* is (among other things) a meditation on failure that enacts the thing that it anatomizes. In this article we do not claim to solve once and for all the riddle of *Télévision*,or pretend it rescue it from failure, but by adopting a philological approach, we trace the contours of this failure, paying close attention to the paradoxes, contradictions, and equivocations of the text and of the filmed event. We do not claim to read *Télévision* in its entirety, as if such a thing were possible, but we move beyond the well-known passages and read it for its complexity rather than raiding it for fragments of the master’s voice, or reducing it to doctrines. We begin by asking what it is exactly that we are reading when we read *Télévision*, which is a printed text, but also a pair of films now easily accessible online. Our consideration of Lacan’s “failure” begins with his avowal of his clownishness in the programme. What might it mean to view *Télévision* as at least in part a comic performance, taking into account the centrality of errors and mistakes to both comedy and psychoanalysis, and in light of Lacan’s own glosses on the comic in the text and film? To understand what a rupture this constituted from televisual conventions of the time, we then situate *Télévision* in relation to the traditions of televised philosophy in France, a context that has been largely disregarded in accounts of *Télévision*. If in the films Lacan is anything but a masterful explicator of Lacanian theory, this is in deliberate contrast with fellow French intellectuals who took to the air to expound on fundamental questions in a mode that was accessible to an educated audience. This leads us in our final two sections to what we might broadly call failures in meaning. Lacan in the early 1970s was interested in what was not working or what was not working out, most notably the sexual relation. These failures or gaps were not reasons for despair, but instead openings for invention and innovation, including of the creation of neologisms such as *linguisterie* and *jouis-sens*, and the reworking of concepts such as *gay sçavoir*, which we gloss and demonstrate at work in the enigmatic final words of *Télévision*. Our wager is that a philology of *Télévision* will shed light on its workings, without imposing on it a meaning.

ÉCRIT, SEMINAR, TELEVISION

It is not immediately obvious how one should place Jacques Lacan’s *Télévision*. If we wanted to keep things simple, we would say that there are two types of text that bear Lacan’s name: *écrits* and *séminaires*. The former are the essays and other writings assembled in *Écrits* and *Autres écrits*, but also miscellaneous other texts written up by Lacan for what he called *poubellication*. The latter are transcriptions of Lacan’s seminars, his teaching over three decades, a spoken performance that has been edited and curated by his son-in-law Jacques-Alain Miller and is still not complete. It would be wrong to oppose *écrit* and *séminaire* as written versus spoken, since most of the *écrits* had their origins as lectures or reports at conferences or colloquia before they appeared in journals, and, as anyone will observe who cares to compare audio recordings of Lacan’s teaching with Miller’s texts, the published seminars are far from direct transcriptions. Nevertheless, there are palpable differences between the two types of text that make them easy to tell apart. The *séminaires* contain regular marks of a spoken event with an audience present, an audience whose questions and responses are recorded in many of the published texts, in which Lacan frequently notes that he is addressing analysts-in-training. Equally, the *séminaires* contain many more references or allusions to contemporary events and even to popular culture than are found in the *écrits*, a tendency that extends to Lacan’s engagement with contemporaneous psychoanalytic literature, which is usually relegated to footnotes in the *écrits* if it is present at all. In addition, the *séminaires* have their own rhythm and temporality, a function of a weekly or fortnightly schedule, and of the limitations imposed on Lacan by an allotted time, a constraint that regularly gives him the opportunity to note that time is pressing, and that he must move on. And while it would not exactly be true to say that the *écrits* are denser or more tangled than the *séminaires*, which are opaque in their own way, Lacan’s teaching is infused with a demotic register – jokes, profanity, garrulity – less frequently found in an *écrit.* An *écrit* is an open text in which the lack of a final signified can frustrate, fascinate, or agitate its reader, but there is something even more provisional about a *séminaire*, in which we see Lacan auditioning concepts, neologisms and formulae that reappear later, further worked over, in an *écrit*. For the relation between the two is intimate: many of the essays in the *Écrits* can be traced back directly or indirectly to one of Lacan’s seminars from between 1953 and 1965.

Almost uniquely among Lacan’s works, *Télévision* does not fit comfortably in either category. On the one hand, it is plainly an *écrit*, since it was published as a short book in 1974, and then subsequently anthologised in 2001 in *Autres écrits*. On the other hand, prior to that, Lacan read, performed and extemporised a text for camera, the recording resulting in two short films that went under the title *Psychanalyse*, films which were broadcast in March 1974 on French television. Near the start of the first film, Lacan says that there is no difference for him between the audience watching him on television and the audience of his seminar.[[4]](#endnote-4) This suggests that what we see in the film, and then read in *Télévision*,is an approximation or simulation of the experience of a Lacanian *séminaire* and that *Télévision* is a transcription of the words spoken by Lacan in the film, minus the *mise-en-scène*. The “Avertissement” signed by Jacques-Alain Miller at the beginning of the printed text suggests as much, stating that French television planned “Une émission sur Jacques Lacan,” (a broadcast on Jacques Lacan) but instead “Seul fut émis le texte ici publié” – that all that was broadcast was the text published as *Télévision*.[[5]](#endnote-5) The back cover of the English translation concurs, stating that the text “is a transcript of a provocative filmed interview … that was aired on French television.” But this is not true. The text of *Télévision* is not a direct transcription of Lacan’s words in *Psychanalyse*, nor is it even a tidied-up version in the manner of the *séminaire*, although some of Lacan’s speech has been rewritten in the same way that it is in the published seminars. *Télévision* is much longer than *Psychanalyse*, containing numerous passages that do not appear in the films, as well as following in some parts a different order. The film and the text share in common the interview format, with Miller asking the questions, or prompting Lacan on particular topics, but there are questions Miller asks in the film that do not appear in the printed text, and questions in the text that do not appear in the film. The many inter-titles of the film are reduced in the text to seven numbered sections, and numerous interpolations from Lacan, many short, but some long, disappear from the printed text. This composite film-and-text is both *séminaire* and *écrit* and neither *séminaire* nor *écrit*. It is, as is made clear from the title, some other sort of Lacanian product: *Télévision*. If there were more than one, we might even refer to it as “a *television*,” just as we call, for example, “The Mirror Stage” “an *écrit.*” Perhaps the closest counterpart to *Télévision* in Lacan’s oeuvre is *Radiophonie*, which also takes an interview format, exists as both text and recorded speech, and was in theory destined for a mass audience.

HISTOIRE DE FAIRE RIRE A LA TÉLÉ

Benoît Jacquot, the director of *Psychanalyse*, claims that the idea for the film came from a popular television programme called the *Psy Show*, which featured Serge Leclaire as “the analyst” with Sacha Pitoeff representing the unconscious. Jacquot approached Lacan through Miller, and at his appointment with the analyst he described the *Psy Show*. Lacan was amazed that his former colleague Leclaire was involved in such a thing and agreed there and then to take part in the film.[[6]](#endnote-6) The film suffered false starts and its making was prolonged. At first, Jacquot, Miller and Lacan attempted to engage in conversation in the manner of an impromptu intellectual roundtable, a well-established format on French television, but the results were not satisfactory. The second attempt involved Miller providing Lacan with questions in advance, on the basis of which Lacan prepared a script that he followed when Miller read out the questions to him.[[7]](#endnote-7) In this way, Jacquot says, the film was “staged”, with Lacan playing himself, interpreting his own words.[[8]](#endnote-8) Miller explains the method: “I gave him in writing a list of questions; and he wrote this play, *Television*, in about two weeks’ time; I saw him every evening and he gave me the day’s manuscript pages; then he read or acted out – with a few improvised variations – the written text you have before you. He made a springboard of this false state.”[[9]](#endnote-9) The French broadcaster ORTF had commissioned the film to be a part of its series *Un certain regard*, which had already included episodes on Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jorge Luis Borges and would later feature Hannah Arendt and Indira Gandhi. When the broadcasters discovered that Jacquot had instead produced *Psychanalyse*, they declined to broadcast the two long films that did not align with their “public service mission.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Miller and Jacquot arranged a screening attended by Michel Leiris, Jacques Derrida, Andre Masson, and Phillipe Sollers, among others, who all advocated for it, and Lacan himself enlisted his contacts, including in government, to ensure the broadcast went ahead. Lacan was exacting in his expectations, including about the timing of the broadcasts on Saturdays, demands to which the broadcaster ultimately conceded.[[11]](#endnote-11) As Miller relates it, “Lacan’s final position was to ask for an unconditional surrender of the network: if the network did not take the program as such, the whole two hours, without cutting anything, we would withhold our approval and just tell everybody.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

In the accounts of the witnesses and participants, then, *Psychanalyse / Télévision* was a stage play and Lacan an actor playing an analyst, or even playing “Jacques Lacan.” Jacquot recounts that Lacan’s wife Sylvia Bataille, an actor herself, was present throughout, “coaching” Lacan in his performance and checking his hair and costume.[[13]](#endnote-13) Miller notes the theatricality, even “spectacularity” of the affair, and insists that like all interviews it has something of the comic about it.[[14]](#endnote-14) Near the start of the text of *Télévision*, in a passage that does not appear in *Psychanalyse*, Lacan avows that he has “tenté de répondre à la présente comédie” (tried to respond to the present comedy).[[15]](#endnote-15) *Comédie* in French can mean the dramatic arts more generally, as well as the specifically comical, but Lacan makes clear what sort he means, referring later to his efforts as an “histoire de faire rire à la télé” (just to make people laugh on telly).[[16]](#endnote-16) This passage does not appear in *Psychanalyse* either, and its inclusion suggests it was necessary in the transition from film to *écrit* to disabuse readers of any notions that the text was entirely serious. To drive the point home even further, Lacan reflected afterwards on his public persona that “You only have to watch my *Télévision*: I am a clown. Take that as an example and don’t imitate me!”[[17]](#endnote-17) The broadcast received wide coverage in the French press and ranged from bafflement to admiration. *Le nouvel observateur* hailed Lacan as “the most celebrated dandy in French psychoanalysis” and *Le Figaro* declared that “Lacan beats Jerry Lewis on his own ground.”[[18]](#endnote-18)

In what do the comedy, the clowning, and the theatricality consist? All things are relative, but Lacan’s performance notwithstanding, the whole business would not unduly trouble the *Comédie-Française*. *Psychanalyse* was filmed entirely in the study of Lacan’s apartment at Rue de Lille in Paris, with Lacan mainly seated or standing behind his desk. Behind him there is a large painting (possibly by Andre Masson) of fierce human or animal eyes, which is also used for the opening credits of both films. Arrayed in front of him on the desk, a lamp, a microphone, an ashtray containing one of the psychoanalyst’s twisted Davidoff cigars, and a series of stapled sheets from which Lacan reads directly or improvises. Heavy curtains on either side frame Lacan and block out all light from the outside, adding to the theatricality of the setting and to a general sense of enclosure. The outside nevertheless finds its way in, in the form of sounds from the street, cars passing, horns honking. In front of one set of curtains there is a vase of flowers that appears to float in the air, the pedestal on which it sits blending into the dark curtain and enabling the optical illusion. The illusory vase then vanishes entirely, only to reappear later, and then vanish again, a reminder of the flowers that appear in Lacan’s writing and seminar from the early 1950s onward, flowers which are not actually in a vase, but appear to be, if the subject’s eye is situated at a particular point in a structure. The camera is largely static, taking up three positions, straight on or at an angle to the left or right of the protagonist, and the film is cut between close ups and medium and long shots of Lacan. The focus is exclusively on Lacan and his speech, apart from inter-titles and the brief inter-cutting of a still image of Freud and of *The terrified woman*, a fresco in Pompeii that also serves as the cover image of *Télévision*. On occasion Lacan appears amused by Miller’s questions or by one of his own puns or neologisms, and twice he breaks into laughter, when talking of suicide, and of hope. With much apparent relish, but with bad timing, he delivers a prepared joke about the International Psychoanalytic Association and breaks into a falsetto when describing men as “ingrates” in their attitude towards women. When quoting poet and critic Nicolas Boileau he adopts a mocking tone and gives an ostentatious and grinning quarter pirouette. In the two films his voice is on some occasions strident, emphatic, almost hectoring, at others reduced to a near whisper. Miller seems to detect correctly that Lacan is amused by the line of questioning, but in places the psychoanalyst seems fatigued, even melancholy. At the end of the first film he sets aside his script and mutters barely audibly “Alors, qu’est que vous voulez?” (So, what is it that you want?). Does all of this amount to clownishness and comedy? At times in *Psychanalyse* Lacan is eccentric, portentous, even silly, but for the most part he seems perfectly in earnest. Earnestness, of course, does not exclude clownishness.[[19]](#endnote-19)

SAINTLINESS AND IGNORANCE

According to Joan Copjec, “Through his appearance in *Television*, Lacan parodies the image of himself – of his teaching – that we have to a large extent received and accepted.”[[20]](#endnote-20) This implies that the clowning in *Télévision* is an exception and assumes that there is some teaching by Lacan which is non-parodic, and so can be parodied. Leaving aside for a moment Lacan’s surprising claim that there is no difference between the television audience and the audience of his seminar, there are at least two occasions in the text when Lacan asserts the theoretical and practical value of the comic or of laughter and thereby indicates that his clowning was part of what Dany Nobus describes as Lacan’s “consistent attempts at presenting himself as a risible figure.”[[21]](#endnote-21) The first is when he discusses two types of “sense,” one of which is “good sense,” or “common sense,” about which he is derisory, saying that those who lay claim to good or common sense represent the very “summit of the comic.” Except that, he goes on, in the comic there is a comprehension of the non-rapport in sex, which in common sense is comprehensively missed.[[22]](#endnote-22) Comedy, he says, ends in “le rire” (laughter), while psychotherapies that purport to be common-sensical return only “au pire” (to the worse).[[23]](#endnote-23) The second reflection bearing on the comic comes in a comparison that Lacan makes between psychoanalysts and saints. Lacan does not mean by the comparison that analysts are in any way virtuous. An analyst is not saintly through piety or good works or other common notions of sanctity, but rather through taking up the place of trash in an analysis, by becoming “déchet” (waste) and practicing “décharité” rather than *charité*.[[24]](#endnote-24) As a consequence, the disposition of a saint involves not some moral virtue but a sense of humor and a capacity for perverse enjoyment. “Plus on est de saints, plus on rit, c’est mon principe” Lacan concludes. This is rendered by the translators as “the more saintly one is, the more one laughs, that is my principle”, but could also be given as “the more saints there are, the more to laugh at”, since Lacan plays on the French expression “plus on est de fous plus on rit,” meaning “the more mad people, the merrier.”[[25]](#endnote-25) The clowning and comedy, then, cannot be dismissed as some temporary televisual quirk, but contribute to a style that is critical in some way to the operations of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

The final question that Miller asks Lacan in *Psychanalyse / Télévision* is in fact about style. And it is not clowning but clarity that is at stake. Miller cites Boileau who says that “What is well conceived can be clearly stated,” implicitly inviting Lacan to answer those who complain that he is incapable of stating anything clearly. As he does with many of Miller’s questions, Lacan turns this one on its head, replying: “ce qui s’énonce bien, l’on le conçoit clairement - clairement veut dire que ça fait son chemin” (what is well-spoken, one conceives clearly - clearly means that it makes its way).[[26]](#endnote-26) He follows this up shortly afterwards with two of the most opaque and enigmatic sentences in the whole performance, and with that he finishes. We will come in due course to those two sentences, but it is worth reflecting for a moment on what Lacan and Miller said retrospectively about this inability or refusal to be clear in *Télévision*, even if, in Lacan’s terms, the things he said were “said well” (*bien dit*).

For his part, when asked about the film, Lacan said that “under the pretense that I was being questioned for television, I was asked the stupidest questions, which I responded to in like manner, as one rises to a challenge.”[[27]](#endnote-27) Nothing about this statement is straightforward. Lacan says that he was asked questions “under the pretense” that he was going to be on television, which implies that being on television was not the plan at all. Or it might mean that television was just a pretense to ask stupid questions, or indeed, that being on television is itself a pretense, a sort of semblance. The questions were stupid, he seems to suggest, because of the demands of television, and yet they were asked by a friend, and on the face of it, are not stupid at all, but often apparently pertinent or urgent ones about Kant, or about affects, or capitalism, or racism. He says that he “responded in like manner” to the stupid questions, but does this mean that he gave stupid, even comical, answers, or does it mean that his response was proportionate to the “challenge” of stupidity offered by both television and his questioner? In *Télévision* itself Lacan says that he is addressing the “non-idiots” in the audience, which is to say the “supposed analysts,” but he also recognises that his discourse “engages many more people than analysts,” leaving open the question of whether he considers the rest of the television audience to be “idiots.”[[28]](#endnote-28)

In his introduction to the English translation, Miller attempts to shed some light on these problems. The introduction, “Microscopia,” is written as a dialogue in which Miller’s fictional interlocutor expresses her irritation at what she sees as Lacan’s obscurantism. She says that by going on television, “where he could reach the most people,” Lacan should have spoken “to those not in the know,” but instead he insults them by calling them idiots.[[29]](#endnote-29) But Miller corrects her and says that when Lacan speaks of idiots the reference is aimed at Miller himself, who is the one who “would have liked” the psychoanalyst “to lay out his doctrine in a popular form.”[[30]](#endnote-30) Lacan’s future son-in-law had been attending the analyst’s seminar since 1964, but was trained in philosophy and did not become an analyst himself until much later. Nevertheless, he was entrusted, where other disciples had not been, with producing a printed version of the seminar, beginning with Seminar XI, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, which was published in 1973, the same year as the filming of *Psychanalyse*. This was followed by Seminar I, *Les écrits techniques de Freud* and Seminar XX, *Encore*, in 1975. Miller had also in the late 1960s been an editor and the “driving force behind” *Cahiers pour l’analyse*,the journal led by a group of Louis Althusser’s students at the Ecole Normale Supérieure that aimed, among other things, to put philosophy into dialogue with Lacanian psychoanalysis.[[31]](#endnote-31) Miller then, if not exactly a populariser of Lacan, was instrumental in the wider dissemination of Lacanian ideas, and his involvement in *Télévision* coincided directly with the first printed emergence of Lacan’s seminar.

Miller’s claim to be the primary “idiot” seems to have a basis in the text, for at the start of *Télévision* (but not *Psychanalyse*), Lacan says it is an “aberration,” “this idea of speaking so as to be understood by idiots,” going on to say that it would never have occurred to him, but that it was suggested to him “through friendship,” and that danger lies that way.[[32]](#endnote-32) Being understood is dangerous because what one understands is only what one (thinks one) already knows, or as Shoshana Felman puts it in relation to *Television*, Lacan’s teaching “*does not address itself to understanding*, since its thrust is, on the contrary, to put understanding into question.”[[33]](#endnote-33) In another paper on *Télévision*, Miller then turns Lacan’s not being understood into an article of faith to be defended at all costs: “In *Television* Lacan spoke without compromise, he spoke in his own style, refusing to give way to the demands of the network …. Lacan gave *Television* in this obscure style out of his refusal to surrender.”[[34]](#endnote-34) This then is what Lacan means when he says there is no difference between the audience of his seminar and the audience on television: what he has to say cannot be said any other way, and there is no simplified or popular version that he can offer. But the issue is not so readily solved with a narrative about Lacan’s heroic resistance to the demands of television. We are still left with a paradox: Lacan refuses to compromise in his style, refuses to be easily understood, and yet provides a prefatory note to *Télévision* that states “He [Miller] who interrogates me also knows how to read me.”[[35]](#endnote-35) One possible reading of this enigmatic note is that in order to be televised, Lacan requires the ignorant one to interrogate him with his stupid questions, and yet it is this same one who knows how to read Lacan, knows how to do the impossible and simplify and make him intelligible.

FAULTWORK

All this did not take place in a vacuum. Watching the offbeat theatre of *Psychanalyse* on YouTube a half century after it was made, one could easily conclude that Jacquot’s two films are *sui generis*, a never-to-be-repeated experiment in bringing together high theory and mass media. But consider the following account of a French television documentary: “[We were] inspired by the structure of Platonic dialogue. That is to say, a dialogue between an important, respected master and a young person who argues with him and ultimately serves as the mediator between the spectators and the master’s discourse.”[[36]](#endnote-36) It could almost be a description of Lacan’s relation with Miller in *Psychanalyse*. It is actually the philosopher Alain Badiou explaining the idea behind *L’enseignement de la philosophie* (The Teaching of Philosophy), a television programme that Badiou – like Miller, an editor of *Cahiers pour l’analyse* – initially hosted and which ran between 1964 and 1970 in over forty editions. Produced by the educational wing of French public television, and destined for classrooms, it was also available on open circuit broadcast. The format was as Badiou states: a dialogue between himself and an eminent thinker, he probing and questioning on a particular theme, the philosophers responding, showing themselves “in the process of thinking … in the exchange of language, which seemed ... to be the very origin of philosophy,” as the show’s director Dina Dreyfus put it.[[37]](#endnote-37) On *L’enseignement de la philosophie* Badiou conversed with, among others, Michel Foucault, Raymond Aron, Georges Canguilhem, Jean Hyppolite, Michel Serres and Paul Ricoeur. In her history of French intellectuals on television, Tamara Chaplin shows that the programme was by no means an isolated case. For a range of reasons, including the centrality of philosophy to French education, but also the perceived value of philosophy as a cultural product after World War II, France has “televised” philosophy far more than any other country.[[38]](#endnote-38) From the 1950s the dominant model was book review programmes such as *Lectures pour tous*, whose title conveys its ambition to present difficult ideas *for all*. The hosts, Pierre Dumayet and Pierre Desgraupes, would ensure that complex ideas were discussed in a manner comprehensible to a general, if well-educated audience.

*Un certain regard*, the series in which Jacquot’s film appeared, was also part of this trend for popularization. More or less concurrent with *L’enseignement de la philosophie*, the series was produced by the Service de la recherche, an experimental division of ORTF run by Pierre Schaeffer, who commissioned *Psychanalyse*. *Un certain regard* specialized in documentaries about contemporary thinkers, starting with Gaston Bachelard, and focused on the life and work of philosophers in equal measure, often explored through interviews, but not on the model of Platonic dialogues orchestrated by Badiou. This is what Miller alludes to in his prefatory note to *Télévision*. The ORTF wanted “a broadcast on Lacan,” by which they meant, an excursus of the key ideas of the master punctuated by biographical details, a pattern established in the documentary on Bachelard. They got neither, but instead a subversion of the *dispositif* established by Badiou in his programme.

To understand the stakes of this subversion, we could turn to an early anglophone response to *Psychanalyse / Télévision*, one that draws theoretical and feminist conclusions about Lacan’s performance style: “in 1974 … Lacan starred in a strange and frustrating television programme. The format pretended to be an interview, but Lacan arrogantly eluded the very questions he himself had commanded. Not that there was no correspondence between question and answer, but Lacan coquettishly avoided any man-to-man confrontation.”[[39]](#endnote-39) Jane Gallop makes no mention of the established conventions of televised French philosophy, but her extolling-critiquing of Lacan allows us to recognise that the format of *L’enseignement de la philosophie* was anything but neutral, with its masterful male philosophers sagely responding to a younger male counterpart, or strenuously matching their wits with the would-be master, all the while leading him, and the general audience of “accessible” televised philosophy out of ignorance and towards some greater understanding. As Gallop notes, Lacan declines to reproduce this gendered *dispositif*, even if his reasons are far from feminist. Instead of the clarity of the master’s discourse, Lacan gives us, Gallop implies, the playful evasions of a (stereotypical) feminine discourse. For Lacan is not a philosopher and psychoanalysis is not in the business of philosophising, but of saying (and listening). The discourse of the analyst achieves its effects not by advancing philosophical theses but through a form of saying the efficacy of whose effects depend on the singular forms created for each singular occasion, and which follow insistent metonymic paths rather than the rules of reasoned discourse. Lacan is not interested in winning the argument, and in general finds failure more fertile territory.

From the very opening of *Télévision*, when he admits that the first attempt at filming “was good only for the wastebasket,”[[40]](#endnote-40) Lacan emphasises the connection between failure (*ratage*) and success (*réussite*), which in his terms are not necessarily opposed. In fact, the way in which a failure can also be a success is a key refrain of *Télévision*. His first failure in filming, he says, was a success because it meant that he avoided the *erreur* (error) or *errement* (aberration) of being accessible. Later he cites Freud’s failure in the case of the Wolf Man, but says that is “relatively unimportant when compared with his success: that of establishing the real within the facts.”[[41]](#endnote-41) Further on, he humorously refers to “ce ratage en quoi consiste la réussite de l’acte sexuel”[[42]](#endnote-42) – that failure in which consists the success (or completion) of the sexual act. This is not just a dry dismissal of the bathos of sex in which reciprocity is illusory, for there is still success, and the “actors” in the sexual act are “capable of the most lofty deeds …. the noble, the tragic, the comic, the farcical.”[[43]](#endnote-43) It is a variation and important nuance on his constant refrain in the 1970s that “there is no sexual relation”. In his Seminar 19 he puts it like this: “the absence of sexual relation clearly doesn’t prevent liaisons, far from it, but rather provides them with their conditions”, going on to note “the engaging relationships, the enthralling acts, and even the creative upheavals, that are necessitated by the absence of relation.”[[44]](#endnote-44) In other words, speaking beings are capable of making something of it, of this fault that “works.” Finally, near the end of *Television*, Lacan gnomically pronounces that “Suicide is the only act that can succeed without misfiring” (*puisse réussir sans ratage*).[[45]](#endnote-45) Taken in isolation, this could be interpreted as advocacy for suicide, for the purity of the act, but it is quite the opposite. That suicide succeeds without failure is precisely a recommendation against it. For failure is a condition of the speaking subject, and it is only eliminated with the extinguishing of that subject.

The model of a failure that succeeds is of course taken from Freud, for whom slips of the tongue, bungled actions, forgotten names, and all other manner of quotidian errors achieve, in a roundabout and disguised way, the fulfilment of a wish. Although they fail to meet common criteria of meaningfulness, these parapraxes succeed in satisfying otherwise unacceptable desires. Lacan does not adopt the theory of wish-fulfilment, instead defining desire as constitutively deferred, but he does pick up on what seems to follow from Freud’s insight in *Civilization and its Discontents* that there is a basic fault in human experience, that the human subject is fundamentally maladapted to the world.[[46]](#endnote-46) For Lacan, psychoanalysis must proceed by the way of what he called in *Encore* the *ça ne va pas*, the “it does not work”: “Psychoanalysis is not a faith, and I don’t like calling it a science. Let’s say it’s a practice, and that it’s concerned with what’s not working out (*ce qui ne va pas*).”[[47]](#endnote-47) For Lacan, this fundamental failure is in the sexual relation, where the possibility of rapport or reciprocity is excluded. And yet, something works, in this “ratage en quoi consiste la réussite de l’acte sexuelle.” Things can work out tragically, but it is a matter of disposition or style: they can also be comical. Of Aristophanes’ claim in the *Symposium* that all humans are seeking the half from which they have been severed, the other half that will make them whole, Lacan says it “irresistibly brings to mind what we might even see nowadays in a circus arena, if the clowns entered, as they sometimes do, hugging attached two by two, coupled stomach to stomach, and took a few turns around the arena in a great twirling of four arms, four legs and two heads.”[[48]](#endnote-48)

Clowning, as its manuals make clear, is the art of failure, but a failure that *succeeds*, and so it is for failure in *Television*.[[49]](#endnote-49) Lacan’s teaching does not merely record the workings of *la faille*, but enacts it as well, and in doing so, keeps things moving. As Darian Leader says

In the Lacanian way of working, the analyst is more of a clownish figure, perhaps desperately trying to make sense of things and usually getting it wrong. You’re not an authority figure for the patient – only maybe for the first few meetings. After a while they realise that you are probably just as foolish as most people, as insensitive, showing the lacks that any other people will do.[[50]](#endnote-50)

Psychoanalysis is a failing that works, that has a certain efficacy, by at first establishing the analyst as a master or a guru, only for him or her then to become clownish, a *déchet*. It is, however, a style that is rarely tenable, if ever, for a philosopher. While their appearances on television cannot be reduced entirely to the posture of mastery that Gallop sends up, it is certainly unimaginable to find Foucault, Canguilhem, or Ricoeur acting the buffoon on French television.

Badiou’s *L’enseignement de la philosophie* takes the task of enlightenment very seriously, but for Lacan’s purposes the comic is a fitter mode. This is not to say that Lacan, and with him the comic, has any less interest in the ignorant than do televised philosophy programmes. For the latter, the aim is to make philosophy accessible, to bring spectators out of their ignorance, if they are willing. Comedy and psychoanalysis have a different understanding of ignorance. For Lacan, ignorance is one of the three passions, along with love and hate. It is a not-wanting-to-know that the subject is very reluctant to abandon in exchange for the meagre satisfactions of enlightenment. This is also true of comic characters, whose ignorance (of a situation, of the rules of language, of their own failings, of what others think of them, of correct norms of behavior, of sexual relations, of shame...) is virtually indestructible, and indeed serves them well, paving the path, if not to pleasure, then certainly to many modes of *jouissance*. Perhaps this is what Gallop detects in Lacan’s performance: a fundamental ignorance of television.

THE ASTRONAUT’S *JOUIS-SENS*

Lacan is not a philosopher, but he never stops speaking of philosophical texts, and in *Psychanalyse / Télévision*, Miller asks him philosophical questions, and he answers. To be specific, and very much as if they were together on *L’enseignement de la philosophie*, Miller prompts Lacan to reply to the three questions Kant asks himself in the *Critique of Pure Reason* under the rubric of “the interest of our reason”: What can I know?, What ought I to do?, and What may I hope for? Lacan’s responses are long, but there are short versions as well. Taking the three questions together, he says simply that “my discourse doesn’t reply to them.”[[51]](#endnote-51) Taking them in turn, Lacan says to the first, “my discourse doesn’t allow the question”; of the second “It is what I am doing”; and of the third, “I’m turning this question back on you.”[[52]](#endnote-52) There is a logic here, with each question reframed and each answer leading to the next. Lacan does not admit the first question because it emanates from a scientific discourse that knows many things, but that does not take into account the unconscious. For this reason, he says, the question “gets translated in my context,” from What can I know?, to What can be said?[[53]](#endnote-53) The answer to the second question is determined by this contextual necessity. Responding to “What ought I do to” with “What I am already doing” is not an evasion, but again, a translation of the question, for what he is doing is an ethics of “Bien-dire,” an ethics of saying. In psychoanalysis, in other words, saying is a form of *doing*. But the psychoanalyst equally is not in the business of giving out advice, telling the analysand what he or she ought to do, because this would be precisely to pretend to answer the demand of the neurotic, which is made as a way to avoid desire. And it is from this perspective of an ethics of saying that Lacan returns the third question to Miller, for he detects that it is not a question for him, but one that Miller seeks to answer for himself, a “saying” in its own right that resonates with unconscious desire that it is up to Miller to explore or not. For this reason, Lacan translates the final question from “What may I hope for?” into “From where do you hope?” What one hopes for, or desires, is singular and contingent, and cannot be prescribed like a pill or a philosophical maxim.

Psychoanalysis, then, is not a scientific discourse, with clear applications of knowledge objectively arrived at, since the analyst does not “know” anything in the traditional sense, except perhaps knowing how to listen. This is not to say that Lacan dismisses scientific discourse outright, nor does he dispute that it has its own efficacy. As he says in *Télévision*, it was scientific knowledge that put men on the moon. No doubt it was of great comfort to Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong that they were relying on engineers, physicists and computer scientists to get them there, and not psychoanalysts. The moon landing (*l’alunissage*) receives special attention in *Télévision*, and not just because, like suicide, it succeeds (*réussisse*) without also failing.[[54]](#endnote-54) The *alunissage* may operate as a triumphant “performance of the real,” but for all that it cannot elude the net of fantasy and the defiles of the signifier.[[55]](#endnote-55) Put crudely, the instrumental knowledge that takes the astronauts into space only ex-ists through the imaginary and symbolic dimensions of the newspapers covering the story, and of course its televisual transmission. Lacan then ensures that even on the moon, language has its say with his invention “L’homme aluné” to designate not just those who planted the American flag, but any subject who is *coincer* (stuck or cornered) between scientific and political discourses.[[56]](#endnote-56) The English translators give “Man-the-moon-lander” for this coinage, but this loses the past participle in Lacan’s version, as well as, inevitably, the puns, allusions, and homophony. One might try instead Man-moon-landed, or even Man-a-mooned. In any case, who is this figure in 1974? Is it Man who has mastered nature and conquered space with his *techne* and gadgets? The French hints at the English “Man alone,” but also to Man hallucinating and to another coinage of Lacan’s from this period, the paradoxical *Y a d’ l’Un*. It is paradoxical because it combines in a single utterance the “One” and the “some.” One rendering might be “there is some of the One.”

What is the point of all this lunar-tic wordplay? Part of it no doubt is the old story that Man is not *all that*, he is not the One, not the master, subject as he is to the vicissitudes of the signifier, and the signifier One is always “one-among-others,” as Lacan puts it in *Encore*.[[57]](#endnote-57) But language for Lacan at this time was not a prison-house, not simply mortifying. The ludic dimension of the moon’s signifying is a demonstration of what Lacan spoke of around this time as his *linguisterie*, a term that resonates with *menuiserie* (carpentry), with implications of invention and of language as workshop, but also, as Jean-Claude Milner says, with *piraterie* (piracy) and *filouterie* (trickery), in the sense of “taking from others without seeking their consent.”[[58]](#endnote-58) Rose-Paule Vinciguerra says that *linguisterie* is the “arborescent, swarming, rustling of sense, or again the ritornello, deposit, alluvium of language, that which makes assonant with each other *vœu* and *veut*, *non* and *nom*, *d’eux* and *deux.*”[[59]](#endnote-59)It is language anything but grounded or landed, on the moon or otherwise. If we struggle to understand what Lacan means by “L’homme aluné” it is because, as he says early on in *Télévision*, the “chains of the signifying material” do not always provide “sense,” but *jouis-sens* (enjoy-meant).[[60]](#endnote-60) It is a term that the philologist Barbara Cassin says Lacan introduced in *Télévision*, and it appears in his seminar of the same year, *Les non-dupes errent*.[[61]](#endnote-61) We might say that it is a counterpart to the notorious symbolic castration: instead of the submission to the law of the father, *jouis-sens* is a getting off on and in language, an ecstatic delight in the equivocations between sense and non-sense.

Is it possible to *know* anything about such things, about the equivocations, arborescence, swarming and rustling of signifying material? One is in it, one speaks it, but does its non-sensicality rule out any knowledge of it? In *Télévision* Lacan proposes *gay sçavoir* as the answer to this question. The term is not Lacan’s coinage. It alludes of course to Nietszche’s *The* *Gay Science* (*Le gai savoir* in French), devoted to joyful philosophising, and possibly also to Jean-Luc Godard’s *Le gai savoir* (1969), devoted to the joy of learning. But Lacan’s knowledge is *gay* not *gai*, and *sçavoir* not *savoir*. *Sçavoir* interpolates into knowledge the *ça*, the “it” of the unconscious, of the “it speaks.” Pierrette Malgouyres traces “gay” back to the early 14th century and the *langue d’oc* word *goia*, which was *joie* (joy), but also *jeu* (play) and *jubilation*, while *gay sçavoir* originates in an exchange between Gargantua and his father Grangousier in Rabelais’ *The Very Horrific Life of Great Gargantua, Father of Pantagruel* (1534).[[62]](#endnote-62) After an illuminating discussion of the order in which one should shit and wipe one’s ass, Grangousier declares himself delighted in Gargantua’s good sense and aptitude for learning and proclaims that his son will be a fine “*docteur en Gay Sçavoir.*” Like Grangousier, Lacan considers *gay sçavoir* to be a great “virtue” and contrasts it with *tristesse* (sadness).[[63]](#endnote-63) Its gayness consists in *not* understanding, in *not* “diving at the meaning, but a flying over it as low as possible without the meaning’s gumming up this virtue.”[[64]](#endnote-64) On the one hand, then, landing on the moon, *alunissage*, and on the other hand, skimming along the surface, never quite alighting, never coming to a stop.

THE END OF TELEVISION

Not landing on the moon is a failure of meaning and a failure to transmit or operationalize a body of knowledge, but it has its own efficacy, opening up new vectors for the reader or viewer. The asymptotic vectors of *gay sçavoir* and the acrobatics of *linguisterie* are most evident in the final two sentences of *Psychanalyse / Télévision*:

*L’interprétation doit être preste pour satisfaire à l’entreprêt.*

*De ce qui perdure de perte pure à ce qui ne parie que du père au pire.[[65]](#endnote-65)*

One-time Lacanian Jacques Van Rillaer says that these closing words were what led him to conclude that Lacan was a charlatan. He explains that he knew a group of Flemish analysts who spent two evenings on the sentences, “Like believers in front of a sacred sybilline text, never considering the possibility that that the utterance could be false or could be surrealist poetry.”[[66]](#endnote-66) Van Rillaer is not right, but not all wrong. Two evenings is probably not enough; asking *linguisterie* to respond to true-false tests is besides the point; but to fail to recognise the affinities with poetry would miss something critical. Consider the challenge the sentences pose for a translator, who faces a problem similar to translating poetry, but only if the poetry also carried the precision of psychoanalytic discourse. The insuperable difficulty is that the translator must by convention seek to convey a meaning, even though Lacan does not aim at meaning or sense, but at *jouis-sens*. Here is the valiant attempt into English by Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, including the parts of the original text they feel obliged to include, which is to say, more than half of it:

The interpretation must be prompt in order to meet the terms of the interloan [*l’entreprêt*]–

– between that which perdures through pure dross, and the hand that draws only from Dad to worse. [*De ce qui perdure de perte pure à ce qui ne parie que du père au pire.*][[67]](#endnote-67)

One basic challenge in translating the sentences is in finding the relation between the two, when the first ends with an obscure neologism derived from an archaism,[[68]](#endnote-68) and the second has no main verb, but is a subordinate clause in search of an anchor. The translators provide that anchor by keeping the two sentences on separate lines, but substituting not one, but two, dashes for a full stop and a capital letter. They have thus not quite turned the two sentences into one, but in effect have done so, making the second sentence subordinate to the first. It is a necessary compromise, because otherwise it might be lost on a reader that the second sentence is a gloss on the neologism *l’entreprêt*, with an interplay between *l’interprétation* and *l’entreprêt*, and an allusion to the analyst’s interventions often “borrowing” from the speech of the analysand, citing an enunciation back to him or her so that it would be heard differently.

There are three subtleties in particular that are present in the French and almost impossible to transmit in English:

1. In the first sentence, the first word, *L’interprétation*, returns in the last word, but modified and shortened as *l’entreprêt.* The verb *prêter* refers to lending, or exchange, but *prêt* on its own more typically signifies readiness or willingness, as in *je suis* *prêt* (I am ready). *Prêt* therefore resonates more closely with *preste*, which is what Lacan says that interpretation must be “pour satisfaire” (to satisfy) the *entreprêt*. As well as “prompt,” given by the translators, *preste* could also be rendered as “deft,” “nimble,” or “shrewd.” The point seems to be that in the clinic, interpretation needs to be *well timed* in order to be efficacious, most obviously when the analytic intervention takes the form of a punctuation and/or an ending of the session. Such moments have to be timed precisely, but as the Other does not exist the analyst can only wager (*parier*) that this is the moment.

2. The second sentence enacts a movement or gap between *perte pure* and *père au pire*. Whatever we are to make of these two sides of the second sentence, their relation is surely the nub of the issue, for there is, as Michel Bousseyroux says, a “path” or “trajectory” “between loss and worse.”[[69]](#endnote-69) In marking out this trajectory, there is repetition with a difference in Lacan’s text, that can be seen here:

***De ce qui*** *perdure de perte pure* ***à ce qui*** *ne parie que du père au pire*

From that which…to that which: the rhythm of *l’entreprêt*, whatever that might be – exchange, lending, readiness-between – is marked visually and syntactically, punctuating this final sentence of *Television*, that is in fact not a sentence, but a fragment.

3. Together the sentences, and especially the final fragment on its own, have the quality of a “Joycean tongue-twister”[[70]](#endnote-70) with its heaping up of assonance and alliteration:

*L’inter****pré****tation doit être* ***pre****ste pour satisfaire à l’entre****prêt****.*

*De ce qui* ***per****dure de* ***per****te* ***pur****e à ce qui ne* ***par****ie que du* ***pèr****e au* ***pir****e.*

Lacan does the full round of the vowels, on his road from “that which” to “that which”: *pré – pre – prê – per – per – pur – par – pèr – pir*. The tongue-twister has many psychoanalytic echoes: *perte* is loss, *perdure* contains a *père dure* (a hard [or even priapic?] father), *pire* is the springboard term of Lacan’s Seminar 19, the year previous to *Television*, and *parie* (wager), could be a reference to Pascal’s wager on the existence of God – who in this context is related to God the father.

None of this directly *means* anything, it doesn’t have a signified, and it cannot be summarised or paraphrased, and yet it is in some way absolutely essential to what the two sentences are doing. For language here is a *doing*, a *making* even, but not a making sense. And this is why very little to almost none of this is in the English. *Perdure de perte pure* is *gay sçavoir* in practice, with no prospect of any *alunissage* or *atterrisage*, and Malcolm Bowie’s old observation still applies: “Wherever words collide and fuse in this way an atmosphere of play prevails. But an insistent doctrinal point may be heard in the background on each occasion: if the signifier plays and the signified ‘slips beneath,’ then the unconscious is speaking in its native tongue.”[[71]](#endnote-71) The quibble might be with Bowie’s “but,” which suggests that the “doctrinal point” is somehow in spite of, or at odds with the “atmosphere of play,” when the gaiety, the comic disposition of Lacan’s performance is integral to the double work that Bowie describes. In this context, let’s not forget those Flemish analysts, staying up late into the night, poring over the two sentences, doing the work that Lacan’s *linguisterie* exacts from the curious and the desirous, perhaps even willingly making themselves the butt of the joke. Van Rillaer explains that their interpretations of the final sentences of *Television* diverged, so the one among them who had the privilege of being analysed by Lacan was charged with asking the Master himself for an explanation of the words. Lacan gaily replied, “I said it for the assonances.”[[72]](#endnote-72)

The difficulty of Lacan’s discourse can lead to a rush to comprehend it, producing all too often mere doctrinal explication (if not outright rejection). Philology, as long as it is not brought to a conclusion, can put the brakes on this rush, and leave comprehension suspended. With its twin focus on history and language, our approach to reading *Télévision* has been broadly philological, while recognising that any philology of this text is necessarily interminable.[[73]](#endnote-73) Working our way through the knots of Lacan’s *linguisterie*, we have unfolded a televisual history and a dense linguistic network, but without, we hope, coming to an end, an origin, or a meaning.

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**Endnotes**

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2. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: the time-image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone 1989), 157. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment,* ed. Joan Copjec, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson (New York: Norton, 1990), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Jacques Lacan, *Télévision* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974), 9-10; and Lacan, *Television*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Lacan, *Télévision*, 5 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Benoît Jacquot, “Comment Lacan,” *Le Diable Probablement* no.9 (2011): 117-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jacques-Alain Miller, “Microscopia: An Introduction to the Reading of Television,” in Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment,* ed. Joan Copjec, xxvii. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Jacquot, “Comment Lacan,” 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 121-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Jacques-Alain Miller, “A Reading of Some Details in Television in Dialogue with the Audience,” *Newsletter of the Freudian Field* 4: no. 1&2 (1990): 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Jacquot, “Comment Lacan,” 119 & 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Miller, “Microscopia,” xx & xxvi. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Lacan, *Television*, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Jacques Lacan, “The Third,” trans. Philip Dravers, *The Lacanian Review* no. 7 (Spring 2019), 88. Also cited in Catherine Millot, *Life with Lacan*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2018) 87-88. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Cited in Tamara Chaplin, *Turning on the Mind: French Philosophers on Television* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See, for example, Louise Peacock, *Serious Play: Modern Clown Performance* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Joan Copjec, “The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan,” *October* no. 49 (Summer, 1989): 53. Writing in the same journal, Shoshana Felman says that *Television* is a “satirical pastiche of his own pedagogy.” Felman, “Lacan’s Psychoanalysis, or The Figure in the Screen,” *October* no. 45 (Summer, 1988): 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Dany Nobus, “Psychoanalysis as *gai saber*: Towards a new episteme of laughter,” in *Lacan, Psychoanalysis and Comedy*, ed. Patricia Gherovici and Manya Steinkoler (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Lacan, *Télévision*, 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid.,19. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 29. We are grateful to the anonymous reader for this precision. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Lacan, *Television*, 45; andLacan, *Télévision*, 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Jacques Lacan, “The Lacanian Phenomenon,” trans. Dan Collins, *The Lacanian Review* no. 9 (Spring 2020): 19. For more on the uses of ***bêtises*, or “stupidity” in Lacanian analysis, see Peter Buse, “The Dog and the Parakeet: Lacan among the animals,” *Angelaki* 22, no.4 (2017), 135-36.** [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Lacan, *Television*, 3-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Miller, “Microscopia,” xxv. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. “Jacques-Alain Miller,” *Cahiers pour l’analyse: an electronic edition*. cahiers.kingston.ac.uk/names/miller.html. Consulted 26 August, 2022. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Lacan, *Television*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Felman, “Lacan’s Psychoanalysis”: 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Miller, “A Reading”: 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Lacan, *Television*, 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Chaplin, *Turning on the Mind*, 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Cited in Chaplin, *Turning on the Mind*, 102. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Chaplin, *Turning on the Mind*, 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Jane Gallop, *The Daughter’s Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 41-42. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Lacan, *Television*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Lacan, *Télévision*, 60-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Lacan, *Television*, 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Jacques Lacan, *…or Worse: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIX*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. See, for example, section V of Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Dover, 1994). [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Jacques Lacan, “Freud Forever: An interview with Panorama,” trans. Philip Dravers, *Hurly-Burly: The International Lacanian Journal of Psychoanalysis* no. 12 (January 2015): 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Jacques Lacan, *Transference: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 88. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. See, for example, John H. Towsen, *Clowns* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1976), 348; or Eli Simon, *The Art of Clowning*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. “Interview with Darian Leader,” *The White Review*, May 2013. http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-darian-leader/. Consulted November 8, 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Lacan, *Television*, 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid., 36, 41 & 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid., 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Lacan, *Télévision*, 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Lacan, *Television*, 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Lacan, *Télévision*, 64-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Jacques Lacan*, Encore: On Feminine Sexuality and the Limits of Love and Knowledge, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XX*, ed. Jacques Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton 1998), 143. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Danièle Lévy and Serge Reznick, “Wo Es war…la langue: Entretien avec Jean-Claude Milner,” *Che vuoi?* no. 21 (2004): 12. Our translation. Elsewhere Milner claims that Lacan’s invention of *linguisterie* coincides with his gradual abandonment of linguistics as a science and with it, the possibility that we can know anything about language. The suffix “erie”, he goes on, is reserved for groups whose members are “dispersed, despised, rivalrous with each other.” Jean-Claude Milner, “De la linguistique à la linguisterie,” *La cause freudienne: Revue de la psychanalyse* no. 42 (May 1999): 90. Our translation. See also Jean-Claude Milner, *Le périple structural. Figures et paradigme* (Paris: Verdier, 2008), 198. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Rose-Paul Vinciguerra, “Lacan, la linguistique et la *linguisterie*,” *La cause freudienne* no. 79 (2011): 284. Our translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Lacan, *Television*, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Barbara Cassin, *Jacques the Sophist: Lacan, Logos, and Psychoanalysis*, trans. Michael Syrotinski (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 112. See also Moustafa Safouan, *Lacaniana: Les séminaires de Jacques Lacan 1964-1979* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), 321. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Pierrette Malgouyres, “Rabelais et le gay sçavoir ou le second antidépresseur de Lacan,” *L’en-je Lacanien* no. 13 (2009), 29-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Lacan, *Télévision*, 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Lacan, *Television*, 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Lacan, *Télévision*, 72. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Jacques Van Rillaer, “De Freud et Lacan aux TCC,” *Mediapart*, 28 April, 2018. https://blogs.mediapart.fr/jacques-van-rillaer/blog/280418/jacques-van-rillaer-de-freud-et-lacan-aux-tcc Consulted November 9, 2021. Our translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Lacan, *Television*, 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. See Pierre Bruno, *Qu’est ce que rêver?* (Paris: Érès, 2017), 281-82. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Michel Bousseyroux, *Figures du Pire: Logique d’un choix, éthique d’un pari (Dante, Hölderlin, Beckett, Blanchot etc.)* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2000), 238. Our translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Jacques Lacan: Psychoanalysis and the Subject of Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 206 [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Malcolm Bowie, *Freud, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Van Rillaer, “De Freud et Lacan.” [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Lacan was also a philologist, of sorts. Although he is usually associated with synchronically-minded linguists such as Benveniste, de Saussure and Jakobson, he also took an interest in the diachronic. In his seminars, he would often undertake etymological detours, bringing out the *Littré* or Ernout and Meillet’s *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine* in order to pursue a claim for the resonance of one word or another. He swore above all by Bloch and von Wartburg’s *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française*, the book he said he would take with him on a desert island. (Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre XVI. D’un Autre à l’autre*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 179.) For Lacan the main lesson of Bloch and von Wartburg seemed to be that words are protean, and language unstable over time.

On some occasions Lacan seems to draw on etymology in order to validate a term he is using, for example, when he goes to Bloch and von Wartburg to explain the sixteenth-century sources of the word *sinthome* that is central to *Seminar XXIV: Le Sinthome*; or when he declares himself delighted that “pot,” a word that comes and goes in his discourse over decades, has neolithic origins by way of the Dutch or German. (Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre XXIII. Le sinthome*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris : Seuil, 2005), 162; *D’un Autre à l’autre*, 89-90.) At other times, his etymological investigations seem more arbitrary, even eccentric, as in *Seminar X: Anxiety*, when he says, in relation to the word *émoi*, that “Etymology is favouring me here in the most fabulous way” and that he is going to “take advantage” of “everything that it’s furnished me with,” while intimating that he is playing fast and loose with Bloch and von Wartburg: “I borrow things wherever I find them, whether that upsets anyone or not.” (Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Price (Cambridge: Polity: 2014), 12.) On another occasion he joked that he never allowed himself to be restricted by etymology when there was a good pun or play on words to be had. (Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre XVIII. D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2007), 113.)

Lacan’s etymologizing, then, was inconsistent and incautious, and apparently deliberately so. Without seeking to endorse such “wild” philology, we can briefly note three possible psychoanalytic reasons for this apparent lack of scruple. First, Lacan pillages archaic and obsolete meanings of words as if they were still in currency, using them to justify his contemporary usages and inventions. While such anachronism is anathema to the scholar, it is entirely consistent with unconscious temporality as found in psychoanalytic experience. As Freud noted in the *Traumdeutung*, dreams condense the recent and the distant, making “*logical connection* by *simultaneity in time*.” (Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1976), 424.) Second, as we have seen in *Télévision*, error can be felicitous, and things get moving when transmission fails, when there is a gap, which is our chance to invent something new. For this reason, a play on words will always take precedence over meticulous philology, just as *ratage* can also be *réussite*. And finally, we might observe that in Lacan’s hands, and counter to its reputation, philology, like psychoanalysis, can also sometimes be ludic. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)