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The Problem of Objectivity and the Artistic Conception of the Participant Observer: thoughts on using Lacan's psychological model of representation in the documentation of creative arts practice as research

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Keywords: artists; Lacanian models of communication and representation; artists and self-evaluation; subjectivity/objectivity

Abstract

This paper discusses issues relating to suitability of the artist as a participant observer researcher. It considers the fitness of the artist as a dependable witness in the process of production of their work. The Lacanian concepts of Real/Imaginary /Symbolic (RIS) and the matrix of the four discourses are examined as a potential source of validation for the participant observer model. Comparisons between this approach and the 'gold standard' of scientific research are made.

Keywords:

Participant Observer, Arts Research, Lacan.

> *For it is still not enough to say that the concept is the thing itself, as any child can demonstrate against a pedant. It is the world of words that creates the world of things – the things originally confused in the* hic et nunc[1] *of the* all *in the process of coming-into-being - by giving its concrete being to their essence, and its ubiquity to what has always been.* [17]

1. Introduction

The role of the participant observer [29] in rendering and positioning creative arts practice as research is innately a problematical one. While the artist's own opinions of their work and the process of producing it are of course valuable, the slippery testimony of the artist is hardly the stuff of systematic, verifiable investigation and its evaluation. This line of thought leads inevitably to the question: can the subjective shortcomings of the creator be outweighed by other benefits – insights into the stimuli or motivations that underlie the work for example? And further, isn't it possible that information about the stimuli and motivations of the researcher might actually be crucial in the evaluation of the objective findings.

This paper proposes the use of Lacan's psychological model of Real/Imaginary/Symbolic representation, as a framework for the documentation and discussion of creative arts practice as research. It seeks to expand the understanding of participant observer studies through the application of Lacan's framework and to illustrate some potential pitfalls, lacunas and mirages.

2. Are artists really the best people to talk about their own work?

There is a range of problematical issues associated with the idea of the artist as witness. Scientific research has established a 'gold standard'[2] of objective systematic, verifiable and repeatable investigation, but can the arts (and artists) be subjected to the same rigour? Perhaps the most crucial issues in question here are: do artists actually know any deeper truth about their work than others; if they do know a deeper truth are they capable of expressing it in words; and if they do know a deeper truth and are capable of expressing it in words, would they be inclined to do so? These issues will be addressed in reverse order. The discussion will take the extreme position that if *any* case does not satisfy the gold standard the answer shall be given in the negative.

That most unreliable of narrators, French author, Alain Robbe-Grillet, confronts the participant observer's innate short comings as a 'faithful narrator' inclined to 'honesty' in the opening pages of his 'so-called'[3] autobiography. In

1. here and now

2. Gold Standard research is deemed to be that with irrefutable results (such as repeatable, compelling statistical evidence in comparison to a 'double-blind' control). Some examples of lesser standards are: Silver Standard (where the Control Group is non-random); Bronze Standard (Case Studies); and Lead Standard (Testimonial, opinion, Intuition, Small sample, Selective criteria). Typical Arts research relies on only the 'Bronze and Lead' standards [6].

3. *Ghosts in the Mirror* [27] contains (amongst other things) fantasy characters from Robbe-Grillet's

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this passage he lays out some of the rules of engagement for the reader.

> *Consequently no definitive, no merely truthful explanation of my work and films should be expected from these pages (a definitive explanation straight from the author's mouth!) - how they really work, their significance. I've said I'm not a truthful man, but nor do I tell lies, which would come to the same thing. I'm a sort of resolute, ill-equipped, imprudent explorer who doesn't believe in the previous existence or stability of the country in which he is mapping out a possible road, day by day. I'm not an intellectual guru but a companion on the path of discovery and hazardous research. And it is still a work of fiction that I venture here.* [27]

Robbe-Grillet trained in the sciences as an agronomist, but became the founder of the literary movement the *New Novel* that characteristically avoided "metaphor and simile in favour of precise physical descriptions" [32]. His descriptions are often *so* excessively precise that they make explicit the surface of the literary medium (and the voice of its 3rd person narrator), in that the extreme, detailed, often obsessive observations make us aware of the failure of language to represent the world of *Things.* Consider this passage, the end of a sentence already containing over 130 words of description, from his novel *Recollections of the Golden Triangle* (1978). The passage is one of many descriptions of the 'prisoner's' cell, a space that seems to increasingly reflect the protagonist's mind and state of mind:

> *… then the interrogations with their disconnected questions revolving – or not – round these same exhibits, some more, some less deformed with use, and thirdly the mirror-like screen taking up the whole of the rectangular wall opposite the door, which is pierced at eye level by its square judas through which, probably, the projections are beamed also, actual-size fragments of narrative that I afterwards have to give account of. Why afterwards? But three other, far more pressing questions arise with regard to these images. What is the mechanism organizing their constituent parts? Do they really give a complete illusion of reality? Why did I write mirror-like? Moreover it seems to me that, if I could answer just one of these question marks, the other two would then be spontaneously resolved-as is a glass, in fact.* [26]

Similarly Fred Madison the anti-hero of David Lynch's movie *Lost Highway* (1997) reflects a distinct disregard for 'the truth of things' as his response to police questioning shows: *"I like to remember things my own way. How* I *remembered them... Not necessarily the way they happened."* [10] This could indeed be a motto for the film itself, a work in which there is no attempt to privilege any of the three distinct retellings of its story, indeed they are presented as a kind of seamless nightmare of surreal non-sequiturs.

Both Robbe-Grillet and Lynch's many obsessive narrators give the impression that they do at least understand the 'Real world' – even if they choose to describe it 'their own way'. But what of those who, like Robbe-Grillet's narrator, become trapped in the abyss between the actual world and their internalised representation of the world: as Lacan would put it the Real and its Symbolisation? Fellini captures this despair in his multi-layered film *8 1/2* (1963)[4] where his protagonist, the autobiographical 'blocked' film director Guido Anselmi played by Marcello Mastroianni, expresses his doubts in a speech that becomes something of a credo for the film. (The 'launchpad' he refers to is not metaphorical, but an obscene and superfluous spaceship prop around which they are walking, that was created for the film[5].)

> *… I thought my ideas were so clear. I wanted to make an honest film, no lies whatsoever. I thought I had something so simple to say. Something useful to everybody. A film that could help to bury forever all those dead things we carry within ourselves. Instead I'm the one without the courage to bury anything at all. And now I'm utterly confused. This launchpad to deal with… I wonder why things turned out this way: when did I go wrong? I really have nothing to say, but I want to say it all the same.* [7]

8 1/2 belongs historically to a wave of self-reflective, self-referential narratives that marked the emergence of post-modernism in the late 1960s such as: the third movement of Luciano Berio's

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childhood, falsified history, multiple accounts of the same events and a continuous critique and re-evaluation sometimes fragmenting the recollections into meaninglessness.

4. The complexity of the experience that Fellini aspired to portray is perhaps reflected in the fact that he attached a note to himself below the camera's eyepiece which read, "*Remember, this is a comedy."* [31]

5. The Spaceship is a "real" metaphor for the giant sets created for the film *Mastorna* that was the source of Fellini's own "director's block" and a film that "although he worked on it almost ad infinitum until the end of his life" [16] was never completed.)

Sinfonia (1968)[6]; Peter Handke's 'speak-ins' (Sprechstücke) such as *Offending the Audience* (1966) [12] and (coming to an annoying climax in) Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller* (1979) [3] to name a few. In these works the artist's opinion (and often struggles) become part of the artwork itself[7]. It is a difficult path for an artwork to take, as can be seen by claims of 'self-indulgence' on the part of *8 1/2* as well as of the ideas in Woody Allen reworkings *Stardust Memories* (1980) [1] and *Deconstructing Harry* (1997) [2]. Such mixtures of 'Real' confession and 'Symbolic' narrative run the risk of alienating the audience who are uncomfortable about having to question whether to maintain the suspension of disbelief or to follow the author down the path of doubt.

Both the real (Fellini) and imaginary (Mastroianni) director/protagonists in *8 1/2* were clearly in crisis, however it will probably not surprise those with artistic pretensions to learn that some in the psychiatric discipline[8] (and presumably elsewhere) think that artists' psychological deficiencies render them very unreliable narrators in general. 'Artistic personality type' is sometimes even categorised as a non-pathological representation of 'Cyclothymic Personality Disorder' consisting of the 'symptoms' (all clearly at odds with scientific objectivity): "*High Neuroticism, Low Extraversion, Low Openness, High Agreeableness, Low Conscientiousness*" (but presumably high creativity) [5].

But even without paranoia inducing categorizations such as these, it is not hard to think of examples of great artists whose personal life or political views, at least on the surface, appear strongly at odds with their artistic work: the contrast between Mozart's sublime music and his documented dissolute egotistical juvenile personality, the epic consideration of human mythology of Wagner's operas in contrast to his infamous pseudonymous anti-Semetic article *Das Judenthum in der Musik* that "made Jew hatred culturally respectable" [18]. We might add to this very non-exclusive list of 'crazy artists' capable of creating great art but not necessarily one's first port of call for an objective summation of the work: Antonin Artaud, Jackson Pollock, Marlin Brando, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, Balzac, Ludwig van Beethoven, Lord Byron, T.S. Eliot, St. Francis of Assisi, Vincent van Gogh, Ernest Hemingway, Ted Hughes, Rembrandt van Rijn and many more (including some readers of this paper no doubt).

Such objections clearly present a negative case for the artist as participant observer. However these arguments may all be met with challenges – for example doesn't it still create a greater understanding of an artwork to have twisted rationales or even lies of its creator to reflect upon. Psychologist Steven Pinker in his indispensable book *The Blank Slate*, suggests even this might be too optimistic a stance. Consider this tale:

> … *Michael Gazzaniga and Roger Sperry, (sic) showed that when surgeons cut the corpus callosum joining the cerebral hemispheres, they literally cut the self in two, and (that) each hemisphere can exercise free will without the other one's advice or consent. Even more disconcertingly, the left hemisphere constantly weaves a coherent but false account of the behaviour chosen without its knowledge by the right. For example, if an experimenter flashes the command "WALK" to the right hemisphere, the person will comply with the request and begin to walk out of the room. But when the person is asked why he has just got up, he will say in all sincerity, "To get a Coke" – rather than "I don't really know" or "The urge just came over me" or "You've been testing me for years since I had the surgery and sometimes you get me to do things but I don't know exactly what you asked me to do". Similarly, if the patient's left hemisphere is shown a chicken and his right hemisphere is shown a snowfall, and both hemispheres have to select a picture that goes with what they see (each using a different hand), the left hand picks a claw (correctly) and the right picks a shovel (also correctly). But when the left hemisphere is asked why the whole person made those choices, it blithely says, "Oh, that's simple. The Chicken goes with the claw and you need a shovel to clean out the chicken shed. The spooky part is that we have no reason to think that the baloney-generator in the patient's left hemisphere is behaving any differently from* ours *as* we *make sense of the inclinations emanating from the rest of our brains*. [22]

This finding would seem to reinforce the anecdotal accounts of some artists who claim not to 'understand' why they used that colour or word, the 'discoveries' by researchers of hidden meanings or structures that are not claimed to exist by the

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[6] See the author's discussion of this work in [34].

[7.] Self-referential works have since of course become part of the mainstream through the director's commentary and 'behind-the-scenes' extras that are supplied with DVDs.

[8.] See references in: [5], [9], [14], [20], [19], [28], and [35].

authors[9] and perhaps even the claims of critics to have a more profound understanding of a work than its creator.

So if the answer to the multi-tiered question at the beginning of this section is a resounding No, No and No, what purpose might there be in seeking an artist's insights into their own work as a participant observer? The following section will attempt to mount a defence applying the psychoanalytical approach of Lacan, typically used to model human psychic structure.

3. Real/Imaginary/Symbolic and the matrix of the four discourses.

In this section two elements of Lacan's work[10] are discussed with reference to the artist as participant observer. The first is his conception of the psychic structure of human consciousness as consisting of three indivisible elements or forms of representation: the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic (RIS). The second is his analysis of the possible positions of artistic reflections in the intersubjective matrix of communication that he terms the 'matrix of the four discourses' [36] These two concepts are pertinent to artist/researchers, firstly, in relation to themselves as individuals and, secondly, as components of the 'matrix of communication' through which their work is understood by others.

> *One should focus on the way the three terms of the triad Real-Imaginary-Symbolic are inherently interwoven: the entire triad reflects itself within each of its three elements.* [38]

Lacan's model of the architecture of the human mind begins with the 'Real' which '*resists all symbolisation*' [36]. Zizek characterizes the 'Lacanian Real' as "*the horrifying, thing the primordial object*" [38] and "*the symbolic itself deprived of its externality*" [36]. In other words the unknowable 'Real' version of the representation of the world that we produce in our mind - illustrated so succinctly in Rene Magritte's *painting* of a pipe, titled *This is not a pipe*.

The *Symbolic* element describes the mind's signifiers for the 'Real' including speech, images and other forms of signification. It recognizes that between the symbolic and the real there is a gap represented by the failure of the symbolic to represent the true essence of the Thing. As a result of this failure, there is an excess or surplus of meaning which floods into the gap, causing the symbolic to be defined by a field of possible meanings.

The final element, the *Imaginary*, is characterized as "*fantasy which is precisely an imaginary scenario occupying the place of the real*" [36]. It recognizes the tendency of the symbolic to take on imaginary characteristics (to drift way from even being a true representation) *because* of the fact that it stands for and yet is not the 'Real'. The Imaginary is illustrated by Fred Madison's rejection in *Lost Highway* [37] of the 'truth' that it was he who brutally murdered his wife and invented a narrative in which her death was caused by a mysterious 'Other' - represented in the film by Robert Blake[11] and actually named in the screenplay as the 'Mystery Man'.

In an extension of the RIS triad model for an individual's psychic framework, Lacan's 'matrix of the four discourses' attempts to account for all of the possible positions that might be taken in communication between (inherently subjective) individuals.

> *What circulates between subjects in symbolic communication is ultimately lack – the constitutive absence itself – for it is this absence which opens up the space in which positive meaning can constitute itself.* [38]

Lacan identifies the matrix containing this 'absence' as consisting of four poles that he terms (rather idiosyncratically): *The Master*; *The University*; *The Hysteric* and *The Analyst*. If research in the arts is not just about creating things but also seeking to explain things to others, it is a crucial consideration.

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9. A possible example is Schenkerian analysis in music: an analysis technique that reduces large scale tonal works to simple progressions based on the tonic triad. This reduction to a motivic 'essence' reveals, for example, the motivic unity of some of Beethoven's Symphonies at all time scales (ie the epigrammatic theme is a microcosm of the harmonic development of all four movements). It seems quite probable that a composer of Beethoven's experience might subconsciously generate such a recursive structure, however the subconscious nature of his creative process does not make the analytical outcome (using techniques developed over 100 year later) any less informative and revealing.

10. It must be admitted that Lacan, who claims his *Ecrits* are hard even for he himself to understand (he claims that they were not to be understood, but would produce a meaning effect in the reader similar to some mystical texts [13]), is mostly seen here through the prism of the interpretations of Slovenian philosopher (and Lacan decoder), Slavoj Zizek.

11. In a strange case of life imitating art, four years after the making of *Lost Highway*, actor Robert Blake actually did murder his wife Bonney Lee Bakley in a Los Angeles car park [21].

Zizek explains that the point of departure for all four discourses is *The Master* in which *"a certain signifier represents the subject for another signifier, or more precisely for all other signifiers. The problem, of course, is that the tidy operation of signification never comes off without producing some annoying, messy, disturbing surplus, a piece of leftover of 'excrement' which Lacan designates as smell*" [35]. The *smell* then is of course the 'excess or surplus of meaning' between the signifier and the thing signified.

The second pole is *The University*, which "*takes the residue for its immediate object… and attempts to transform it… by applying to it a network of 'knowledge'*." Here we indeed recognize the academic approach of attempting to neutralise the surplus of meaning by contextualizing it in relation to the existing body of knowledge: ie "*it must be like these other things because it 'smells' like them.*"

The Hysteric, "*articulates the experience of a fissure … between the signifier which represents me and the non-symbolized surplus of my being-there. Her/his basic problem is how to justify and account for her/his existence in the eyes of the other*" [35]. Here is the situation anticipated (imagined) by the artist/researcher that: if one's work is going to be interpreted by the 'Other' (in this case spectator or even examiner) how does one pre-empt all of the possible misinterpretations that they might make. Clearly this is an impossible task and therefore 'Hysteric'. 'The Hysteric' also describes the inversion of this situation in which the Spectator attempts unsuccessfully to imagine all of the possible meanings that the artist/researcher *intended* them to find.

The final pole is that of *'The Analyst'*, according to Zizek it "*occupies the place of the surplus object and identifies directly with the residue of the discursive network. It attempts to knit together a discourse starting from the very element that escapes discursive articulation, its fall-out or excrement*" [35]. This is the inversion of *'The Master'* in which "*the Other decides post facto true meaning of what I have said*" and attempts to evaluate whether it has been communicated effectively.

Lacan's RIS triad and matrix of four discourses, provide a framework for discussing research both in terms of how it produced by the individual as well as how that product is understood by others.

4. Data gathering and documentation in arts research: turning lead into gold (and vice versa)

Unlike the pure sciences, artistic disciplines have favoured the submission of a range of research outcomes and documentation with varying degrees of objectivity. Presentation of a creative project – in the form of a performance, exhibition or musical score for example – is typically accompanied by documentation of the creative process by the artist as a participant observer and other observers.

Traditional processes for participant observer studies in artistic disciplines have followed the so-called 'lead standard' (as opposed to 'gold') data gathering procedures typical of qualitative methods such as ethnography and case study anthropology. These include documentation such as field notes, journal entries, work samples, interviews, reviews and responses to the work.

This 'grounded theory' based methodology seeks to reflect the case that research findings '*will be provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to* (the) *phenomenon*' [30]. Data collection (Objective) is generally complemented by a reflection written by the artist-participant observer (Subjective).

It is possible to see in this multi-dimensional approach to documentation a similarity to the Lacanian concept of the RIS triad. In a work of art we (usually) have both a *Thing*, a cultural product, and a symbolic representation of a *Thing* which is never 'fully' the concept and/or meaning it represents. (This gap between the artist's intention and spectator's apprehension should be familiar to all artists.) An 'Imaginary' representation, what the artist *believes* their work to represent, can be understood from artist/participant observer's own account of the process, production and concept behind the work. While the elusive 'Real' representation might be sought through, work plans and drafts and the consideration of external observers' accounts of the effectiveness and/or success of the creative work.

Arts research typically faces objections to the subjectivity of its findings, but what if it is, conversely, the *absence* of insight into the subjectivity of the author's position as a weakness, that makes pure scientific inquiry vulnerable to manipulation and even fraud. The veil of objectivity exuded by the pure sciences has itself been open to challenge of recent times. These challenges tend to point to the self-evident conclusion that pure science like all other kinds of human endeavour is exposed to the subjective interpretations of its human researchers.

As such the layers of evidence presented in typical arts research quite naturally fall into the categories outlined by Lacan as making up the indivisible modes of representation of the human psyche.

Some controversial examples of the shadow thrown over pure science by its subjective foundations are: the justification of racist and classist ideology through Social Darwinism, eugenics, and phrenology (see Gould [11]), the debate about 'research' undertaken on Jewish, Gypsy, Slavic and homosexual subjects by Hitler's Nazi regime [23], the fluoride debate [33] and more recently the fraud case against distinguished Medical Researcher William McBride[12]. In these cases, the lack of understanding of the ideological slant informing the 'pure' science involved, renders the objectivity of its findings illusory.

In the words of Scientist Dr. Edward Groth*: "In the routine practice of scientific research, there are many types of misrepresentation and bias which could be considered dubious"* (Quoted in [33]).

The Nazi science example is a particularly vexed one, for here, at least in retrospect, the ideology and ethical stance underpinning the science was understood and led to a justifiable suspicion of the objectivity of the research. However Robert Proctor has shown that the post-war reticence to acknowledge Nazi science led to a delay in the recognition of a link between smoking and cancer in the West, because it had originally been uncovered by the Nazis[13] [24].

Is it the case that a more robust culture of debate about the weight and value of subjective ideology versus objective 'pure' science might have led to a more measured consideration of (some) Nazi research? Is this not precisely the Wagner Master-composer/Anti-Semite debate in another guise?

Brian Martin cites the scientific paper as "the most insidious form of scientific misrepresentation". His terminology 'mythical reconstruction' clearly echoes the Lacanian concept of 'the Imaginary'.

> *One of the most common misrepresentations is the scientific paper itself. It presents a mythical reconstruction of what actually happened. All of what are in retrospect, mistaken ideas, badly designed experiments and incorrect calculations are omitted. The paper presents research as if it had been carefully thought out planned and executed according to a neat rigorous process, for example involving testing a hypothesis*. [19]

Consideration of the Lacanian 'matrix of the four discourses' suggests that the shortcomings of an approach to research that is founded on only one pole creates an imbalance distracting the reader from a consideration of other possibilities. Such an approach casts the other polarities into the shadows, allowing them to conceal hidden motives and agendas.

5. Conclusion

All human research includes elements of subjectivity. Clearly no one seriously wants to advocate a free-for-all of subjective opinion, but through a rigorous balance of documentation, observation and supposition that includes a consideration of the researcher's biases, it should be possible to create an open atmosphere of debate that would benefit both the arts and the sciences.

NOTE: The paper's title refers to Lacan's famous early article *The Problem of Style and the Psychiatric Conception of Paranoiac Forms of Experience and Motives of Paranoiac Crime* that first appeared in *Le Minotaure*. The themes of paranoia and criminality seemed very apt in a discussion of Artist's account of their own work. (Other close contenders were *The Neurotic's Individual Myth* and *Some Reflections on the Ego).*

[12] McBride was widely noted for his discovery of the link between thalidomide and deformed babies, but was discovered to have manufacturing data for two non-existent rabbits in later experiments with the drug scopolamine. See [19].

[13] Interestingly no such taboos or compunctions were exercised against Nazi rocket scientists [17].

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improvised or fully notated settings, ranging from solo pieces to opera. He is also a highly regarded performer on reed instruments and electronics, touring as a soloist and with ensembles throughout the world. Vickery has been commissioned by numerous groups described as 'truly an original voice and his work is one of sustained intensity that resonates in the mind long after the performance is over' and a 'master of technological wizardry' The Australian and 'always intriguing' The Wire. He was a founding member of important Australian New Music groups Alea (1987-92), Magnetic Pig (1992-2003), GRIT (2001-), HEDKIKR (2002-), as well as US-based multimedia group SQUINT (2002-). He has been a visiting artist at STEIM (NLD), HarvestWorks (NY), the MATA festival (NY), CEMI (U of NorthernTexas), University of Illinois, Kyoto Seika University, San Diego State University, the DC International Dance and Improv Festival and RPI (Troy). He is currently Programme Leader in Music at LASALLE-SIA college of the arts Singapore, holds an M.Mus degree from the University of Western Australia and is currently completing a PhD at the Queensland University of Technology. More Info: http://lindsayvickery.com