

# Lying on the Couch

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In what way can the conceptual framework of psychoanalysis help us understand the intimate link between culture and lying? More specifically, what can it say about certain modes of lying (“polite lies,” “white lies”) as constitutive of (our) culture?

Let us begin with a kind of “fundamental truth”: one cannot treat the question of the lie separately from the question of truth. And this is not because they always go in pair as antonyms, supporting each other as two facets of the same coin of speech. Their relationship is much more interesting than this, and it is in no way symmetrical. To a certain degree, the cultural “phenomenology of lying” originates in an inherent problem of truth. If truth were not problematical in itself, if it were possible to say “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth,” there would be no need to discuss the cultures of lying. I am not at all trying to play the old relativistic or sophistic game here: “How can we speak about lies if we don’t know what the truth is? What if, by uttering what we think to be a lie, we actually tell the truth? How can a physician, for example, tell the ‘whole truth’ to a patient about a set of symptoms, their causes and likely effects? He certainly does not know all there is to know himself. And even if he knew, etc., etc.” I am not suggesting that we meditate on this kind of questions to finally arrive at a skeptical wisdom: “But what is truth, and what lie?” It is a fact that this kind of “abyssal” reflection has but little bearing on our everyday practice of speech. What I am trying to point out is something else. First, truth and lie are not symmetrical. If the lie is the opposite of the truth, then this is the case in only

a very small segment of what is called lying, a segment which is precisely not of much relevance for the discussion of “cultures of lying.” The dimension of truth is more fundamental than that of the lie: not in any theological or moral sense, but simply by virtue of the very nature of speech. There can be no speech which is not situated in the dimension of truth. Let me quote Jacques-Alain Miller who formulates most concisely what is at stake here:

There is no doubt a truth which is but the opposite of falsehood, but there is another which stands over or grounds both of them, and which is related to the very fact of formulating, for I can say nothing without positing it as true. And even if I say ‘I am lying,’ I am saying nothing but ‘it is true that I am lying’—which is why truth is not the opposite of falsehood. Or again we could say that there are two truths: one that is the opposite of falsehood, and another that bears up both the true and the false indifferently. (Miller 1990, p. xx)

In other words, a dimension of truth is an indispensable background of lying, whereas *vice versa* is not the case. The dimension of truth thus has to be distinguished from exactitude. This redoubling of truth has an important consequence for lying since it introduces a split into lying itself: for one can also say that lying cannot be reduced to or identified with falsehood. Yet, and once again, this double dimension of lying is not symmetrical to that of truth. A lie, as different from falsehood, is nothing but the effect of truth that a falsehood can produce on the level of speech (that is, on the level of its formulation).

In order to demonstrate this (asymmetrical) intertwining of the truth and the lie in more detail, let us take the example of two strategies that one often encounters in psychoanalysis as well as in the everyday practice of speech, namely that of “lying with truth” and “telling the truth by means of a lie.” These two strategies would not be possible if lying and truth were simply symmetrical, and if truth were not simultaneously situated on

two levels. For “lying with truth” is nothing but “lying with exactitude,” i.e. lying by uttering something that in itself is correct. And “telling the truth by means of a lie” is nothing but “telling the truth by means of falsehood.”

Both strategies are also very explicit cases of yet another feature that we have to consider in this discussion: when we speak, and especially when there is a question of telling the truth or lying, we take into account the position (knowledge, expectations) of the other (our interlocutor).

It often happens, writes Freud, that an obsessional neurotic who has already been initiated into the meaning of his symptoms, says something like: “I’ve got a new obsessive idea, … and it occurred to me at once that it might mean so and so. But no; that can’t be true, or it couldn’t have occurred to me” (Freud 2001 [1925], p. 235). This is an interesting example of “lying with truth.” The knowledge about psychoanalysis is used here in a way that enables the patient to deny a certain content by admitting it immediately, counting on the fact that the analyst will be suspicious of what is offered to him on a plate, so to speak. The reasoning behind this: “If I can say it openly, it could not be repressed—at least, this is what my analyst will think.” The other strategy that takes into account the presupposed knowledge on the side of the analyst is the strategy of “telling the truth by the means of a lie.” A good example of this can be found in Freud’s analysis of “Dora” (Freud 2001 [1905a], p. 69). At a certain point, her dreams, as well as her reflections focused on a particular object, a *Schmuckkästchen* (“jewel-case”). When Freud suggested to her that “*Schmuckkästchen*” is a word often used to refer to woman’s genitals, she replied: “I knew you would say that.” Freud’s ingenious answer: “Yes, you did *know*, didn’t you?” (or, literally: “That is to say, you knew that it *was so.*”) In other words, and as it is often the case with hysterical subjects, Dora used her knowledge of psychoanalysis in order to say something (“true”) by saying something else (“false”).

An important thing that should not escape our notice in these examples is the following: If this kind of “lying with truth” and “telling the truth by means of a lie” clearly illustrates the mechanism of “taking the other into account,” this should not impel us to reduce the situation to a (purely) dual relationship between two subjects. In other words, there is more than one other involved here. Lying can in no way be reduced to a dual relationship between the subject who utters the (“untruthful”) message and the subject who receives it. The moment two subjects are addressing each other by means of signifiers, we are always dealing with an irreducible third dimension or instance. When I take the other (the hearer) into account (i.e., when I take into account his knowledge, beliefs, “vocabulary” ...), I am actually taking into account his position vis-à-vis this third instance. This is quite clear in the previous example of Dora using the word “*Schmuckkästchen*,” as well as in the case of the obsessional neurotic claiming that something cannot be true since it would contradict the “psychoanalytical knowledge.” In other words, when I lie to the other (my fellow-man, my imaginary counterpart), I am always doing so via the symbolic Other. And one could say that in order for a lie to “go down” with the other (i.e. in order for the other to “swallow” it), the lie has to produce an effect of truth in the Other. More precisely even, in order for my interlocutor to “swallow” my lie, she does not simply have to believe *me*; she has to believe that the Other believes it. Lying requires the structure (and the support) of the symbolic Other as the condition of its possibility. When Lacan insists that the locus of the Other is the locus of truth—the truth which has no opposite—he aims precisely at this.

Let us now turn to the other important feature that determines the relationship between lying and truth. In the dimension of speech, truth is not only more fundamental than the lie (in the sense described above), it is also problematic in itself, it is haunted by an inherent impossibility. Lacan formulates this impossibility with his famous statement that truth is “not whole” (or “not all,”

*pas-toute*), and that it is impossible to say “the whole truth and nothing but the truth” (Lacan 1990, p. 6). Now, this has nothing to do with the frequent pragmatic or empirical objection to this imperative to say the “whole truth.” It has nothing to do with the claim that we can never say the whole truth because we never know the *whole* truth, nor does it have to do with the claim that even to tell all that we know is a task impossible to be carried out entirely. The Lacanian thesis aims at something very different, and related to the previous discussion: what makes the truth not-whole is the fact that it is simultaneously a constitutive dimension of speech as such *and* something within speech. More precisely, what makes it not-whole is the fact that, in the realm of our spoken language, it is not possible to simply delimit these two levels on which truth operates and treat them separately. Quite independently of Lacan and psychoanalysis, logicians have arrived at the same conclusion. Tarski, for instance, demonstrated

that truth is undefinable within the language one speaks: To define it, one must step outside of that language, as is done in formalized languages which are numbered and hierarchized; at the  $n+1$  level, you establish the  $\eta$ -level truth; this uncoupling of levels, termed “metalanguage” by Carnap, cannot be carried out in the case of the language we speak, for it is not formalized. (Miller 1990, p. xxii)

“And that is,” Miller adds, “the meaning of Lacan’s aphorism that there is no such thing as a metalanguage,” as well as of his statement that the truth is “not whole.” Truth about  $\eta$ -level appears on  $\eta$ -level, truth about what we say is part of what we say, and this is what prevents it from being a closed, complete entity.

To say that truth is “not whole” does not imply that a statement cannot say all there is to say, that there is always something still lacking, something that cannot be said or fails to be said. The problem is rather the opposite: By saying the truth, we say more than the truth. What keeps getting in the way of the possibility of saying “the whole truth” is not a lack, but an excess, a surplus

that sticks to whatever we say. The level of enunciation cannot be separated from or eliminated from what is enunciated, but sticks to it. If truth were not a constitutive dimension of speech, that is to say, if it were not a dimension *inherent* to speech, if it were possible to locate it somewhere outside of speech, then there would be no problem to tell “the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” But since this is not the case (and since speech is not simply a tool we can use to express whatever we want to express), truth stumbles. And the problem of cultural “phenomenology of lying” should be considered on this level, as resulting from, or at least as partly finding its driving force in the inherent stumbling of truth. It often happens that a polite lie is a better way of telling the truth about what is really at stake in a given situation than the “blatant truth” would be. This is especially so because the level of enunciation is not simply an empty form of truth that accompanies every statement (“It is true that ...”), but also the very point of the enunciating subject’s inscription into the enunciated statement. This implies, for example, that it can be the vehicle of a considerable quantum of affect (emotions ...).

Freud refers to this problem in one of his rare polemical writings, “On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement”:

Experience shows that only very few people are capable of remaining polite, to say nothing of objective, in a scientific dispute, and the impression made on me by scientific squabbles has always been odious. Perhaps this attitude on my part has been misunderstood; perhaps I have been thought so good-natured or so easily intimidated that no further notice need be taken of me. This was a mistake; I can be as abusive and enraged as anyone; but I have not the art of expressing the underlying emotion in a form suitable for publication and I therefore prefer to abstain completely. (Freud 2001 [1914], p. 39)

What does it mean to “express the underlying emotion in a form suitable for publication”? It does not mean to conceal it. It

means to formulate it in such a way that it will not overshadow what is at stake on the level of the statement. So that the supposedly scientific argument would not go on like this: “You idiot!”—“You imbecile—“You moron!” Speaking of which, it springs to mind that in his analysis of the “Rat Man,” Freud gives a perfect example of a situation where the level of enunciation gets a complete upper-hand over the level of the statement. Statements like “Idiot!” or “Imbecile!” still contain a strong link between their “content” and the injury, which makes this reversal less obvious, since we might be induced to think that it is simply the meaning of these words that is offensive. Freud relates an episode from the “Rat Man’s” childhood (Freud 2001 [1909], p. 205): When he was a little boy, he did something naughty, for which his father decided to give him a beating. While he was beating him, the child became very enraged and started shouting abuse at his father. But since he knew no bad language, he called his father all the names of common objects that he could think of, and had screamed: “You lamp! You towel! You plate!” (*Du Lampe, du Handtuch, du Teller*). Here, we get the most literal example of what is involved in the expression “to call someone names.” It is also a good example of how rather “innocent” signifiers (“lamp,” “towel,” “plate”) can produce, on the level of enunciation, something like: “I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!”

In many situations, polite lies are used where there is a risk of considerable discrepancy between the level of the enunciation and the level of the statement. Take another example of “polite lies.” Say I gave a talk somewhere, and some people in the audience found it rather awful. Yet, if after the talk, I were to ask one of these individuals directly what she thought of my paper, she would probably say something like: “Well, it was very interesting.” One should not rush to qualify this kind of responses as “hypocritical.” Although there is often a thin line between hypocrisy and “polite lies,” there is a line nonetheless, and a difference. Suppose this person was to “speak her mind”

in this kind of situation, replying to me: “To tell you the truth, I thought your paper was utterly uninteresting, incoherent, and it isn’t worth the paper it is written on.” (By the way, I should probably reply: “If this is what you think, why didn’t you simply say ‘well, it was interesting’? I would have understood this perfectly well.”) In other words, and to borrow the punch-line of the famous joke that Freud quotes in his book on *Witz*: “Why do you say you are going to Cracow, if you are indeed going to Cracow?”)<sup>1</sup> The difference between the two replies, the polite one and the direct or “sincere” one, is that the latter obviously contains an injury. Yet, the injury at stake is not simply in the fact that “the truth hurts,” since in this case the polite reply (“Well, it was interesting.”) already indicates clearly enough that the other doesn’t think much of my paper. Usually, this kind of answer doesn’t dupe me into thinking that the other actually found my paper great and most inspiring. Which is to say that “the truth that hurts” is not necessarily absent from the polite reply. But even in those cases of polite lies where it is absent, we nevertheless have the feeling that a direct and brutal answer would *also* somehow miss the point, i.e. the truth. The reason for this is that what really hurts in these configurations is not simply the “truth” (i.e. the statement), but the fact that the other chooses to say it in this manner, thus willingly assuming the “hurting” dimension of the statement. In other words, what sticks to the statement “Your paper was worthless,” is—on the level of enunciation—something like “I am willing to hurt you.” Which has nothing to do with the quality of my paper, nor with the “truth” about what someone thinks of my paper.

There are situations in which we clearly feel that by being sincere and saying the truth we will be saying *more* than the

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<sup>1</sup> “If you say you’re going to Cracow, you want me to believe you’re going to Lemberg. But I know that in fact you’re going to Cracow. So why are you lying to me?” (Freud 2001 [1905b], p. 115)

truth. Moreover, we might actually feel that we are being more “sincere”—in our relationship with the person before us—when uttering a polite lie than when uttering a blatant truth. But what exactly does this “more than truth” consist of? In a rather approximate way of speaking one could say that the direct answer somehow fails to keep the discussion restricted to the level of what is being discussed. It easily crosses the line between the “object” related to me that is being discussed and “myself.” In other words, it can be taken as an attack not simply on my paper, but on my *being*. That is to say, it can be of utmost difficulty to say to the person in front of you, “Your paper was terribly bad,” without saying at the same time something like, “*You* are incompetent, stupid, boring ...,” or even “*You* are an impostor.” Moreover, it could be difficult to say it without at the same time saying, “You get on my nerves,” “I can’t stand you,” or even “I hate you.” This is to say that a line can also be easily crossed in the other direction, in the direction of the one who utters the statement and utters more about his own “state of being” than he intended to. In most of our everyday interactions it is impossible to completely separate the level of the enunciation from the level of the statement, and this is precisely where the above described troubles come from. It is also impossible to separate what is said from the effect it produces in the other. Polite lies are one of the established ways of dealing with this problem. But let us try to determine this problem more closely, or rather, what problems might be in relation to the question of truth-telling. I will try to isolate and conceptualize one of these problems or aspects that, although not the only one, is responsible for a considerable portion of polite lies and is particularly relevant for the discussion of the relationship between culture and lying.

There is something that one might best call the “obscenity of truth” or, more precisely, the obscenity of truth-telling. I am using the term “obscenity” in roughly the same sense as Aron Ronald Bodenheimer in his book, *Warum? Von der Obszönität*

*des Fragens* [Why? On the Obscenity of Asking Questions].<sup>2</sup> Bodenheimer shows that there is an obscenity that essentially pertains to questions, to the very act of asking a question, beyond the content of the question itself. (Some examples: “Why are you playing with your pen?”, “What do you mean by that?”, “Do you love me?”, “What are you thinking of?” ...) Bodenheimer’s definition of obscenity is that it takes place in the conditions where certain parts of my personality—parts that I normally hide from others or from myself—are revealed directly and without me being prepared for exposure. I am unable to prevent my exposure. In the situation of obscenity, we witness an act of exposure on the one side, and the effect of shame on the other. The additional characteristic of obscenity, Bodenheimer writes, is that the one committing it will not acknowledge what she has done. Rather, she will add to the already existing situation of shame another obscenity, asking, for example: “What is the matter with you? Is there something wrong?”

In respect to the question of polite lies, Bodenheimer’s argument is very illuminating in two points. First, it can make it easier for us to detect a similar dimension of obscenity in certain circumstances of “blatant truth-telling.” Second, a great number of polite lies are actually answers to questions. To return to the previously discussed example: If I asked someone (particularly someone I didn’t know well, or not at all) directly what she thought of my paper, I might very well be the one who creates the “impossible situation.” The question is far from being innocent. I might be in desperate need of some flattering words, I might be in agony since nobody “spontaneously” felt the need to show some appreciation for my work, and this silence is all too deafening. So, I pick on someone, I ask her this question in order to hear what I want to hear. In this case, I am literally asking to be exposed and at the same time pleading not to be. The other might accept

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<sup>2</sup> Bodenheimer 1984.

the game I am proposing and offer some polite flattering words, which will probably fail to satisfy me, but they will at least keep the imminent exposure at bay. They will also smooth away—at least to a certain degree—the exposure that has already taken place the moment I asked the question and thus revealed that I desperately needed some approval.

In supplementing Bodenheimer's argument, I would suggest that the obscenity of asking questions does not operate only on the level of exposing the other (the addressee of the question), but also on the level of exposing oneself. It can put the other in a rough spot (of feeling embarrassment or shame) because it reveals something of myself (some weakness or obsession) that would better remain hidden. We all know that shame and embarrassment can be “inter-passive” feelings, to deploy Robert Pfaller’s term (Pfaller 2014): we can feel shame and embarrassment on account of another person, especially—but not exclusively—if this other person doesn’t seem to notice that he or she is (publicly) making a fool of him- or herself. Take the stereotypical example of a couple attending some public occasion. The husband gets drunk and starts making a fool of himself. Everyone notices that, but continues smiling politely. Then the wife, who feels especially embarrassed because of her intimate tie with this person, decides to free herself of embarrassment by making clear to the others that her husband mightn’t know he is making a fool of himself, but she *does* and doesn’t approve of it one bit. So, she says (aloud) something like: “Just look at yourself! You are acting like a fool!” This is a clear example of truth-telling which inevitably creates an obscene situation. People can no longer politely pretend not to see or notice the best-remained-hidden part that the husband is publicly exposing. They have to turn their gazes toward something that they would “culturally” rather look away from. It often happens that polite lies, as well as polite silence, function as a cultural device that keeps this kind of exposure at bay. They occur when we try either to avoid pointing the finger to the lack in the other (when

this lack is already perceptible) or else to avoid saying something that would expose the other's lack. They also occur when there is a risk of an object appearing where there should be nothing or where this object should have remained concealed. In this respect, the manifestation of a lack and the uncalled-for appearance of an object are correlative: they are both states of exposure. Suffering, humiliation and similar "states," which are often evoked as excuses or reasons for white and polite lies, should also be considered on that level. It is not enough, or not precise enough, to say that polite lies are tolerated and even invited, if they allow us to avoid inflicting unnecessary pain and/or humiliation upon the other. Pain, suffering, humiliation are equally states of exposure. Even in cases when we decide to invent a lie to avoid telling the truth that would inevitably hurt the other, the conceptual frame of "suffering—compassion" is not enough to account for the mechanism of this kind of "culture of lying." It could be viewed as very important, for instance, that the compassion itself takes the form of a "lie." What I mean by this is that sometimes the best, if not the only way to show some compassion is precisely not to show it, or not to create a situation that would call for a manifestation of compassion. There are situations where compassion and pity themselves are humiliating, playing the role of the finger pointed at the distress of the other.

The thesis that could be inferred from this is that a large part of white and polite lies is bound, more than with anything else, with the notion of *decency*. I am leaving aside some other interesting occasions of cultural lie-telling such as hospitality-lies for one: their functioning follows a different, although not an entirely different logic. Then there are lies with which we try to avoid the effect of a "self-fulfilling prophecy" that could occur if we were to say openly what we think. (For example: our friend has a new lover and it is obvious to us that their story will never work. However, we won't say so if asked, since we know that our statement "This won't work" could itself bring about the catastrophe

it announces and which, because of some circumstance unknown to us, can perhaps be avoided). Then there is what I would call the founding-lies: they usually take the form of declarations. There are (at least) two kinds of declarations. One can be simply and more or less entirely identified with performative speech acts such as: “I declare this session opened.” Here, we are dealing with a kind of “creation *ex nihilo*,” a statement which, by virtue of declaring what it declares, creates a specific symbolic configuration where there is no causal chain leading to it. The other kind of declarations also has a certain performative dimension, but in terms of causality and temporality its functioning is more complex. Take, for instance, a declaration of love. It is supposed to follow from a subject’s feelings, yet it cannot be simply reduced to an *expression* of these feelings. There is no simple logical or causal connection between the state of my feelings and the statement “I love you.” Why say it now and not tomorrow? Why today and not already yesterday? There is no right time for this statement, it is always either too early or too late. There is always a *leap* involved in the passage from one’s feelings to the declaration of love. This passage is never linear. To suggest that there is a dimension of a “lie” in every declaration of love is not to suggest a lack of sincerity. It is to suggest that a declaration of love says more and does more than just to describe the state of my feelings. It could be said to be composed of a (more or less) accurate description of my feelings *plus* something else that corresponds to nothing in reality (not even in my subjective or “psychological” reality). With it, I say more than I am “justified” to say in the given circumstances. By declaring love to another person, I engage more than what I “have.” There exists a felicitous expression: “to give someone a token of one’s love.” A declaration of love could be considered as precisely such a token. This, of course, implies a certain circularity, which brings us to the following characteristic of such declarations: they are precipitated statements that (retroactively) create the conditions of their own enunciation. It can happen that

the addressee of our declaration reacts to it by asking: “Do you *really* mean it?” This inevitably creates a difficult situation, since neither one of the involved could be said to know exactly what the “it” (in “Do you really mean it”) refers to. “It” is something that remains to be seen. It is a “lie” that may or may not become true.

But let us return to the particular genre of polite lies closely connected with the notion of decency. Decency, of course, is itself a slippery notion. Not only does it vary from one culture to another (as well as within the history of the same culture), it also very much depends on our personal “sense of decency.” But these cultural and subjectively-cultural variations don’t change much in the basic logic of its functioning. There are things which should not be exposed, said, pointed at. If they are, they can cause embarrassment and shame. This is not to say that they necessarily have to remain materially hidden; rather, we must be able to act as if we don’t notice them. It is clear that, in spite of all the moral condemnation that lying has always been subjected to, it was also *morally* encouraged: first in the sense of not saying something (i.e. of “holding something back”), and then also in the sense of saying something else (something “polite”) instead. Of course, lying wasn’t morally encouraged under the heading of “lying,” but under the heading of “manners” and “respect,” this is, precisely under the heading of decency. When we teach children not to scream out loud on the street, “Look mommy, what an ugly man!”, when we teach them “manners,” we teach them to identify the situations in which certain things should not be said (out loud) or pointed at (pointing a finger is another practice that children are strongly discouraged from), and these two practices are far from being unrelated.

Thus, one might claim that the “culture of lying” has a great deal to do with the possible “obscenity of truth-telling.” The next question that needs to be addressed in this respect is whether the obscenity is in itself, and intrinsically, a sexual notion. Bodenheimer suggests that it is not. According to him, the link between

obscenity and sexuality is purely accidental and as such the product of certain historical-cultural circumstances that have confined sexuality to the sphere of intimacy. He claims that if obscenity is defined by the disclosure of something most personal and “our very own” (*das Eigenste*), it is clear that sexuality does not meet these requirements, since it is something most general or universal. This argument, however, has two weaknesses. It confuses sexuality with (the empirical activity of having) sex, as well as failing to account for the universality pertaining to the notion of obscenity. Why is it that regardless of *what* the most personal and intimate thing that is disclosed *is* (i.e. regardless of what constitutes, in each particular case, one’s innermost Being), this kind of disclosure inevitably produces an effect of obscenity? The answer to this is, I believe, that the very act of disclosure is in itself sexualized. The sexual component—which one cannot expel from the notion of obscenity—is not at all related to the content of the hidden thing that is suddenly exposed, but to this exposure itself. More precisely: the passage of an intimate or as yet hidden object (be it a thought, a feeling, a weakness) through this dispositive of disclosure results in its sexualization, whereby—and here one can agree with Bodenheimer—the object does not need to be “sexual” in itself. In other words, it is the property of speech (and therefore of culture and of certain symbolic configurations) to sexualize certain things, *including sexuality*. This last point might seem paradoxical, but if we consider the question what distinguishes human sexuality from, say, animal or vegetable sexuality, is it not precisely the fact that human sexuality is sexualized? And is this not precisely where most of our sexual difficulties (and pleasures) come from? This does not simply mean that all sexuality is culturally (or symbolically) mediated or “constructed.” It rather means that culture (or the symbolic order) is in itself already sexualized. Here we encounter a circularity which is responsible for what Freud calls “*das Unbehagen in der Kultur*.” Culture originates in a certain sexual impasse, it is a response to it—but by responding

to the sexual impasse, culture creates new impasses (that require a “cultural” response).

The structural mechanism of exposure or disclosure provides a very common figure of this kind of a sexualized/sexualizing frame or dispositif. This is why whatever is framed by it is endowed with a special feature that calls for a reaction. As witnesses of this kind of exposure (be it of the lack or of an unexpected object) due to a “blatant truth-telling,” we can look away in embarrassment; we can (“voyeuristically”) observe the scene from the corner of our eyes; we can openly (“sadistically”) enjoy the thus produced split in the other; we can pretend not to notice a thing. But none of these reactions are neutral or indifferent.

As said before, blatant “truth-telling” can produce the effect of exposure, and polite lies can produce the effect of avoiding it (or else of making it pass as if unnoticed). However, this is not to say that culture—and its polite lies—are some neutral or “spiritual” shield that we raise in defense against, say, obscenity. Culture works both ways: exposure (and its effect of obscenity) is as much a cultural (or symbolic) phenomenon as polite lies are. Which is to say that culture produces (more or less efficient) remedies for its own structural impasses—for impasses that spring from the fact that culture originates in the very sexual reality that it endeavors to regulate.

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