Filozofski vestnik
ISSN 0353-4510 | Volume 46 | Number 2 | 2025 | 229–40
 | DOI: 10.3986/FV.46.2.10

Joan Copjec*, Nathan Gorelick**

Still Reading: An Interview with Joan Copjec

Joan Copjec, questions by Nathan Gorelick
Edited by Michelle Rada

Keywords
psychoanalysis, feminism, sexual difference, the uncanny, Abbas Kiarostami

Abstract
The following is a retrospective interview with Joan Copjec on her formative 1994 book, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. The interviewer asks Copjec to reflect on the political and academic context surrounding the book's initial publication, her personal inspiration for writing it as she did, and its enduring relevance after thirty years. Copjec also situates *Read My Desire* with respect to her recent work concerning the films of Abbas Kiarostami; the changed cultural and intellectual status of psychoanalysis today; the uncanny dimension of American electoral politics and the unthought fantasies that structure it; and the history of the relation between psychoanalysis and Islam. The interview concludes with some indication of where Copjec's research, teaching, and writing are headed now and into the future.

Branje (ni) zastalo: intervju z Joan Copjec

Spraševanje Nathan Gorelick
Uredila Michelle Rada

Ključne besede
psihoanaliza, feminizem, spolna razlika, grozljivo, Abbas Kiarostami

Povzetek
Pričujoči intervju z Joan Copjec je retrospektiva njene formativne knjige *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. Spraševalec je Copjec povabil k refleksiji političnega in

* Brown University, Providence, RI, USA
Joan_Copjec@brown.edu
** Barnard College, New York, NY, USA
ngorelick@barnard.edu | https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7536-6443

akademskega konteksta, v katerem je knjiga prvič izšla, njenega osebnega navdiha za to, da je knjigo napisala na takšen način, ter njene relevantnosti, ki traja že trideset let. Copjec knjigo *Read My Desire* umesti tudi v razmerje z njenim novejšim delom, ki zadeva filme Abbasa Kiarostamija; s spremenjenim kulturnim in intelektualnim statusom psihoanalize; z grozljivo razsežnostjo ameriške volilne politike ter nemišljenimi fantazmami, ki jo strukturirajo; ter z razmerjem med psihoanalizo in islamom. Intervju se zaključi z nekaterimi namigi, kam se Copjecino raziskovanje, poučevanje in pisanje usmerjajo sedaj in v prihodnosti.

∞

Nathan Gorelick: Thirty years ago, you took the historicists to task for failing or refusing to consider the work of the negative in cultural formations. Foucault is your central reference point, but you address your critique, from different angles, to later theorists, like Ian Hacking and Judith Butler. What compelled you to address your critique in this direction? What were your original inspirations? And who today do you see carrying on your indictment of historicism's allergy to the negative?

Joan Copjec: To put it bluntly, I was flummoxed by the reemergence of historicism in the mid-1980s; where it came from I hadn't a clue. My consternation, admittedly naïve, derived from an earlier naivety or simple indifference to feminism. I thought women should be paid properly and make their own decisions, but never considered these practical concerns, voiced mainly by feminists, as interesting. It was not until I began my study of film theory at the Slade School in London that I became interested—with the help of *Screen* and *Screen* readers' meetings, *m/f*, the Other Cinema, as well as conferences and festivals organized outside the university system—in questions of sexuality and sexual difference as they were formulated by Freud and Lacan, and appropriated by film theory.

This fresh, break-way approach to film and Marxist theory struck me as rigorous, convincing, and at the end of the day indispensable for thought in general. Yes, this work foregrounded the need for a concept of the negative and also required a rethinking of temporality, both of which were gapingly absent from the work of historicists. More: this novel theoretical approach produced readings of

films that justified our enchantment with them. Rather than tedious reductions to the linear unfolding of narratives, one damn thing after another, these often brilliant readings drew attention to lapses, stutterings, off-screen menaces, and perplexing stains, complexities—in brief, events that stopped audiences short, made them think. I remember watching *Young Mr. Lincoln* and suddenly gasping in unison with my classmates, not because someone had been shot or a secret revealed, but because we detected an eye-line mismatch. We had come to understand how morality might, indeed, lie in tracking shots and birds might rend the very image in which they appeared. It was through the psychoanalytic theory of sexuality that we learned to see more, to see clearly what was functionally unavailable without it. In the absence of the latter, the questions posed would not even have been formulated, let alone clarified.

Given my enthusiasm, I could only be startled to witness the theory of sexual difference being cast out the window, by figures such as Shulamith Firestone, who regarded "the end goal of the feminist revolution [as] not just the elimination of male privilege, *but of the sex distinction itself*."[1] Or Teresa de Lauretis, who insisted that "a feminist theory of gender [. . .] points to a conception of the subject as multiple rather than divided."[2] I would have thought the opposite: How can there be a multiple without division? Or Judith Butler's reversion to the sociological concept of *gender*, which struck me at the time as a tacit withdrawal from the messier concepts of sexuality and sexual difference. As if—as Ian Hacking dismissively put it—one could "make up people." Things do not work this way, for the subject does not come into the world unilaterally, from the outside only.

I was relieved to have my gaping mouth, full of surprise, shut by non-naïve observers—Lacan, for example, who stated more than once that the first thing capitalism does is get rid of sex; or Leo Bersani, whose stunning statement, written in the midst of the AIDS crisis, "There is a big secret about sex: most people don't like it." Bersani did not hold back from tainting even Foucault, whose work he greatly admired, with the prissiness of this very weak "like."

1 Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam, 1970), 11.

2 Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays in Theory, Film and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), x.

The psychoanalytic theorization of sexuality was left behind by some queer theorists in favor of promoting a different lifestyle. The "allergy of the negative" you mention is, in my estimation, an allergy to the real of *jouissance*. I was pleased to learn recently that Kirsten Hyldgaard, a Danish Lacanian theorist, will soon publish a book in the Palgrave Lacan series on precisely this allergy, which characterizes the relation between education and sexuality, a relation Lacan himself took up in *Seminar XVII* through his formulas of the four discourses.[3]

Gorelick: It will not be controversial to say that elements of *Read My Desire* have proved remarkably prescient. Your take on the Teflon President, for instance, immediately comes to mind. Does the book predict the future? Or does its currency today speak rather to the persistence of certain patterns and cultural susceptibilities that are integral to the structure of our political and social realities—and, if so, what are some of them? Amid the repetition, how can history still surprise us?

Copjec: Well, I suppose it stands to reason that Reagan's Teflon-clad immunity could not be expected to protect him from a Lacanian critique. But, in answer to your question, I did not foresee nor can I explain Trump's second coming! I am sure some cogent analyses of this event have been and will be written, but I have resisted reading them or offering any insights of my own. This is in part because I realize that some careful rethinking of psychoanalytic concepts would have to be undertaken to avoid glib applications of already existing formulas. But it occurred to me lately that this disinterest or preference to leave what is unthinkable unthinkable, is itself a problem. It is nothing less than an agnostic reflex and it needs to be paralyzed.

Let me explain. Shortly before the [2024] Presidential Election, I participated in a conversation about an Iranian film, Dariush Merjui's *The Cow*. Made in 1969, the film was permitted to be screened only on the condition that a caption was placed at the beginning of the film stating that the events depicted took place forty-years earlier, that is, *before* the Reza Shah's reforms were put in place, ostensibly to lift the nation out of poverty. This officially imposed anachronism

---

3 Kirsten Hyldgaard, *Sex Education and Other Pedagogical Impossibilities: Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Sexuality Education* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2026).

had the unfortunate effect of blinding audiences to the anachronism the film marvelously produced. For, it encouraged audiences to read the film in the very manner the Shah was attempting to thwart, that is: allegorically, as a depiction of the poverty the authoritarian regime's policies allowed to fester. A question hangs palpably over the film: in what time are these events taking place? The film's out-of-joint temporality defines its very appeal. This is not, however, the result of the Shah's mandated fiction. The film is anachronic on its own terms, for it belongs to the category Freud theorizes as the uncanny.

This is not the occasion to offer a full analysis of the film. I want merely to suggest that *The Cow* illustrates the way in which the uncanny deflects the agnostic, I-do-not-want-to-know-anything-about-it reflex. One must not fail to see that the utter poverty of the film's backward village stems not from government policies so much as from this very reflex. Among the objects in the village we find, for example, abandoned U.S. military equipment, which the villagers carry around as sepulchers to perform their ancient rituals. A kind of anachronism is exposed here, inasmuch as the equipment and the villagers inhabit different times, even though they do not seem to be aware of this. In order to understand the film, we must distinguish the villagers' temporal disjoint from the one that defines the strategy of the film itself. The events concern the death of a cow that dies while its owner is away. The villagers, afraid to give its owner the bad news, decide to bury the cow so as not to have to confront the loss or its effect on the owner. As the cow is lowered into the hole that was dug for its burial, a slow-motion, extreme close-up of its face seems briefly to animate it. How to describe this shot as anything other than uncanny? Indeed, in his essay on the subject, Freud reports that "the idea of being buried alive" is commonly regarded to epitomize the uncanny fantasy. He then goes on to assert that this fantasy has its roots in an earlier fantasy. This other, root-fantasy is characterized, he notes, by "a certain lasciviousness, the phantasy [. . .] of intra-uterine existence."[4]

When I discussed this film days before Trump's election, I noted this shot and its relation to the intra-uterine fantasy, but understood it incorrectly, as an image of "stuckness," of being stuck in the birth canal, unable to go forward, to emerge into the world. It seemed to me that this was the position in which we

4 Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 17:244.

find the villagers. *The Cow* is a film about infertility, the failure of the people in this isolated village to move forward, to give birth to the new. Out of step with the world, these villagers remain unequipped to alter their circumstances. It makes sense that the only step they can imagine taking to relieve their discontent is to bury the cow, the only fertile creature in this arid land. The uncanny shot of the cow, however, is created by a device of cinema, one that permits the audience to visualize something they cannot. They regard their problems as the fault of distant enemies, whom they believe are real, though they are most likely not. And this, too, disqualifies their experience from the category of the uncanny. For, as Freud keeps repeating throughout his essay, the uncanny requires our having surmounted certain beliefs—in ghosts, say, or telepathy—but without expelling them absolutely. The uncanny effect emerges precisely as an effacement of the distinction between imagination and reality.[5]

In her astute reading of Freud's essay, Hélène Cixous slightly rewords Freud's point, suggesting that the uncanny can be characterized as "the non-scientific [that is to say, the fictive or literary] clothed with the dignity of the scientific."[6] The fictional, in other words, performs a scientific service. Freud draws his definition of the uncanny partly from the work of E. Jentsch. But while the latter regarded the uncanny relation between the scientific and the fictive as indicative of uncertainty, Freud is adamant that the uncanny is accompanied by a sense of certainty. At the close of the essay his aim becomes clear: Freud is insisting on the fecundity of the fictive, its ability to open doors to thought, foreclosed to it in its merely rational form. Now is perhaps the time to mention that the screenplay for *The Cow* was written by Gholamhossein Sa'aedi, who studied psychoanalysis and had a clinic in Tehran. I assume he was familiar with Freud's essay, but the image speaks for itself.

It has often been observed that the opening of the essay on the uncanny alludes to Kant's theory of the sublime. It is also well-known that Kant insisted that we were unable to know things-in-themselves. Might it be said that the essay on the uncanny is Freud's attempt to direct modern thought away from seeking

5 Freud, 17:244.

6 Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The 'Uncanny')," trans. Robert Denommé, rev. Eric Prenowitz, in *Volleys of Humanity: Essays 1972–2009*, ed. Eric Prenowitz (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 19.

after what already is and toward the unleashing of what is not yet? The function of the uncanny would thus be a means of stunning or paralyzing the agnostic reflex. One last mark to conclude with our filmic example, *The Cow*: rather than an overlap of life and death, would it not be more accurate to describe this uncanny close-up as an overlap or emergence of the born out of the unborn?

Gorelick: Lacan often remarked that psychoanalysis was destined to disappear, not in spite but because of its success. At the moment, however, the Freudian field is enjoying something of a renaissance. Young people seem to have caught on that we've been sold a caricature of psychoanalysis, that alternatives refuse or fail to tread the field of the unconscious, and that the complexities of psychoanalytic treatment and thought still have much to offer—especially in these times of mass deprivation, alienation, and the contraction of life and psyche to utilitarian ends. Is this a fluke or a fad? Is psychoanalysis merely back in fashion? What do you see as the future for psychoanalytic critique?

Copjec: Georges Canguilhem coined a phrase that might be useful here. He wrote about "the vitality of vitalism," by which he meant to draw attention to the fact that some form of vitalism (whatever that might mean, beyond, as Bergson himself notes, to "attach a label to our ignorance") has kept appearing throughout history, each time in response to whatever new form of mechanism had taken over from the last. The same might be said of the recent history of psychoanalysis. It seems to have been gifted with a vitality that allows it to return, renewed and willing to confront each new backlash against it. I thought I detected a decline in the enthusiasm for psychoanalytic forms of argumentation a few years ago. But at the moment we are witnessing a renewed interest in Fanon and his clinic, a wider interest in defining the Black subject, as well as a flourishing of trans-sexuality—all of which has had the effect of enflaming renewed interest in psychoanalysis. To be sure, this interest is not without harsh criticisms of certain psychoanalytic positions, but it is evident that they are meant to prod the only discourse that might be able to offer some enlightenment into paying attention to their concerns.

Gorelick: When you published *Read My Desire*, you were the Director of the Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture at SUNY Buffalo. How has your writing been influenced, informed, or formed by your work with your students? How has that changed or continued since your move to Brown?

Copjec: I was recruited by the English Department at Buffalo to take over the Directorship of the Center for Study of Psychology and English Literature. The Center, founded in the mid-70s, was the first center of its kind in the U.S. Historically and effectively significant. I was approached because it had begun to run out of steam. Only a few of its founders remained and the English Department had taken to wondering why it had agreed to support it financially (even at the minimal level to which it had agreed) in the first place. It did not take me long to change its name to the Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture, nor to realize that I had no chance of keeping interest and money flowing into it if I did not make its importance known to a much wider world—and quickly! So, I decided to found a journal that would cost next to nothing because the graduate students would provide all the labor—unpaid, of course, other than by the experience, knowledge, and recognition they would gain from their intellectual endeavors. So, *Umbr(a)* was born and, as if in a fairytale, became a success not only in the U.S. It was read and its essays translated in various countries. The yearly issues were not numbered, each was named "One." Wit and humor were required in meetings and in the issues to salt the sophistication of theory. I could go on to recount the impact that this often hilarious and always intense intellectual adventure had on me and on the graduates who participated in it, but will leave this to another day.

I came to Brown under similar but less dramatic circumstances. Modern Culture and Media, formerly the Semiotics program, had lost several of the professors who understood and taught film and other media forms in the way I, too, understood it, although my work on film had in the interim lagged behind my work on psychoanalysis. My strategy in this case was not to attempt to retreat back into a cinematic cell but to design seminars on psychoanalysis that would serve as a magnet to draw students from other departments to my MCM seminars. I learned at Buffalo how difficult it is to provide students with an adequate background to grasp the importance of the science Freud invented. Seminars on psychoanalysis plus the experience of producing *Umbr(a)* would not have been enough by themselves to raise the graduates to the level they were able to attain. Students had to have a firm knowledge of the philosophical backgrounds in which Freud and Lacan intervened. Fortunately for me, the Comparative Literature department at Buffalo is very good and I was able to count on the fact that students in my seminars were well acquainted with Kant and Hegel, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Deleuze among other pertinent philosophers.

A similar situation exists at Brown. Students from other departments—Comparative Literature and German Studies, among others—can be counted on to take seminars that address the issues that interest them from the perspective of psychoanalysis. This past semester, a German Studies colleague offered a seminar on Heidegger and Lacan that ended with a symposium to which she and I invited experts from both sides. I felt strongly that significant work was produced out of this collaboration.

Gorelick: Some may see your turn to Islam, particularly through its refraction in the films of Abbas Kiarostami, as a drastic departure from the questions you raise in *Read My Desire*. Do you see it this way? What are the continuities or continuations? Has this work changed your mind about any of your earlier formulations?

Copjec: Nate, you know as well as anyone what a strange departure the decision to devote an issue of *Umbr(a)* to "Islam" (as simple as that!) seemed to be.[7] First, because the journal was founded on the premise that the students and I—and other professors who were later hired and joined the board—were all on the same level. There was no editorial hierarchy. Decisions, including the focus of each issue, were made together. This was the only time I played the "professor" card, surprising everyone by announcing the theme of the next year's issue at a meeting. The announcement was met with legitimate consternation. What do any of us know about this topic? How will we find authors to write about it from a psychoanalytic perspective? We do not have enough time to get such a complex issue out by next year! I admitted earlier that I can be naïve and that this is a weakness. But sometimes there is a stubbornness to this naivety that I count on to blind myself to obstacles. I also knew that among the graduates there were excellent translators, editors, and researchers and that they would donate their skills to get the issue done. And so we did.

The reason I proposed the topic of Islam is because I had just seen two films, Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us* and Mehrjui's *The Cow*, both of which struck me as so extraordinary that I barely knew what I was looking at. Now, this sense of not knowing what one is seeing is often aroused by great works

7 Copjec here is referencing the fact that Nathan Gorelick was Managing Editor of the issue in question.

of art even if they come from a culture with which one is familiar. In this case, however, I knew that part of my difficulty had to do with the fact that I knew nothing of Iranian culture or the Islamic world, even though the official wisdom in the U.S. was that it was evil and wished us harm. And yet here were these extraordinary films. I learned quickly that the modesty system in place in Islamic society dictated what could be shown on screen and what could not, that this system which effected relations between men and women also affected the art this culture produced. My deplorable naivety met its match in its stubborn form: I insisted on knowing as much as I could as quickly as I could about all of this.

What our work on the *Umbr(a)* issue and my subsequent researches showed was that one actually could "do psychoanalysis in Tehran." Gohar Homayounpour, an analyst who practices in Tehran, sits on the Board of the Freud Museum in Vienna, and gave her first book the title, *Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran*, was in fact a friend of Kiarostami, who also wrote the book's foreword. The main sources that led me to the conviction that Islamic philosophy and psychoanalysis are partially readable through each other are the works of Henry Corbin and Christian Jambet. Through their writings I was able not only to observe similarities between the two discourses but sometimes to rethink the way I understood some Lacanian concept in light of Islamic philosophical arguments. *Seminar XX*, for example, contains, unmistakably, Islamic phrases and arguments. One must be wary, as Lacan puts it somewhere, of "false friends," but one finds friends that are truly enlightening.

Gorelick: This may be from a footnote in "The Direction of the Treatment," which appears in French as *faux amis*. Bruce Fink translates this as "false cognates." Is this worth mentioning here?

This small and unavoidable glitch in translation is interesting in light of the questions you raise about cross- or inter-cultural legibility, since with Islam and psychoanalysis we are dealing in no small part with discrepant symbolic orders. For instance, moving from one monotheism to another, it is impossible not to notice the radically different meanings (plural) of "God" in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, and the ontological differences they present. Even "metaphysics" is ill-fitted to the Islamic conception of Allah, as *meta-* and *-physis* already presuppose a division between immanence and transcendence that

in Islam does not obtain, or certainly not in the same way. Could there be any more false friends (more false cognates) than those signifiers called God?

Copjec: I do not think that "cognates" and "friends" are false friends and understood why Bruce Fink translated the phrase as he did, colloquially; the phrase always stuck with me. Regarding the "false friends that may or may not exist" between Islam and the other two monotheisms . . . this is of course an important concern I had the entire time I was writing my *Cloud* book (and I always had Lacan's line / Fink's translation literally in mind). How could one not? I knew what I was getting into when I began the project. I dealt with some of the differences in "The Imaginal World and Modern Oblivion" and "From the Cloud to the Resistance" chapters. Islam, the last of the three monotheisms, borrowed ideas from the other two, and rejected others. The "question of the One" has a very long history and was not settled in the same way by all.

Gorelick: What interests you now?

Copjec: My current project is focused on the work of Georges Canguilhem. In the very early days of my study of film theory, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, I read Dominique Lecourt's book, *Marxism and Epistemology: Bachelard, Canguilhem and Foucault*. As strange as it may seem, and despite the fact that Lecourt is rather critical in this book of Canguilhem's stance, I have always since then seen myself as grounded in the Bachelardian-Canguilhemian tradition. Although it is Foucault's introduction to *The Normal and the Pathological* that drew many readers to Canguilhem's work, I observed more of a tension than a correspondence between Foucault and Canguilhem. The latter, a philosopher who turned to the science of biology as his "test case," rather than mathematics—as did his mentor, Gaston Bachelard, and one of his students, Alain Badiou—coined the now-famous phrase, "life is what errs." The question I am pursuing regards the relation between technology and life, which I was fated to take up having been introduced to the concepts of the cinematic apparatus and the psychic apparatus simultaneously. The title of my Ph.D. dissertation was "Apparatus and Umbra."

In the last few years, I offered a variety of seminars that dealt with the concept of the apparatus and included in each one or two essays by Canguilhem. It was his work that seemed each time to excite the imagination of the students. This

fall [2024] I devoted an entire seminar to his work. We began with Canguilhem's seemingly exhaustive study of the concept of the reflex, one of his most celebrated works. It was from this point that we were able to locate ramifying connections between Canguilhem's biology and Freud's "biology of the mind." To be continued . . .

Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

References

Cixous, Hélène. "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The 'Uncanny')." Translated by Robert Denommé, revised by Eric Prenowitz. In *Volleys of Humanity: Essays 1972–2009*, edited by Eric Prenowitz, 15–40. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Bantam, 1970.

Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny (1919)." In *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works (1917–1919)*, edited by James Strachey, 217–56. Vol. 17 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Horgarth Press, 1974.

Hyldgaard, Kirsten. *Sex Education and Other Pedagogical Impossibilities: Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Sexuality Education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2026.

Lauretis, Teresa de. *Technologies of Gender: Essays in Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.