

## **When Lacan Met Dali: Lacan's "Paranoid" Reading of Saussure's Theory of the Sign\***

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The starting point of this paper, the extent to which Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is indebted to Saussurean semiotics, is a well-established field of study. In fact, most critics agree that it was Jacques Lacan's mis-reading of Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the sign that determined Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and its approach to cultural texts. The present paper offers a theoretical and historical reasoning behind Lacan's mis-reading of Saussure's views about the nature of the signifier within a semiotic system, arguing that his interaction with Salvador Dali in the 1930s played a decisive role in the use of structural semiotics for the proclaimed "return to Freud". The concept of paranoia, the delirium of systematic interpretation of reality, served not only as common ground between the interwar work of the young psychiatrist and the surrealist artist, but essentially informed Lacan's reading of Saussure. Thus, research into Lacan's early writings and Dali's 1930s art sheds new light on the origins of the "primacy of the signifier".

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There seems to be no doubt as to the reasons why the name of Ferdinand de Saussure would rightfully find its way into a journal about culture and semiotics, the science "which studies the role of signs as part of social life" (Saussure 15). Contrary to what one might expect, though, the main protagonists of the present study are Jacques Lacan and Salvador Dali, not Saussure. Accordingly, the question that this paper addresses is not how semiotics contributed to Lacan's understanding of culture, as it is widely acknowledged that the Saussurean theory of the sign determined Lacan's "return to Freud" and, in turn, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and its approach to cultural texts. This study will rather focus on Lacan's mis-reading of Saussure's theory of the sign, and especially of his views about the nature of the signifier within a semiotic system, arguing that Lacan's interaction with Salvador Dali in the 1930s played a decisive role in his reaching such an interpretation. The concept of paranoia, the delirium of systematic interpretation of reality, served not only as common ground between the interwar work of the young psychiatrist and the surrealist

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artist, but essentially informed Lacan's reading of Saussure. Taking into consideration the ways in which this reading strengthened French structuralism, the study of the encounter of the two men in the surrealist milieu of the 1930s forms part of a more general discussion about the contribution of this artistic movement in the evolution of the semiotic approach to cultural texts.

### Lacan and the Saussurean theory of the sign

The divergence between the Saussurean and the Lacanian theory of the sign is a well-documented area of study. The key text for researchers dealing with the topic is Lacan's 1957 talk entitled "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud," later included in his *Écrits*. Lacan had been introduced to the world of Saussurean linguistics by Claude Lévi-Strauss around 1946, while he was reportedly "in a process of rethinking the Freudian theory of the unconscious in the light of structural linguistics" (Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co* 144).<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging, thereafter, the *Cours de linguistique générale* "as a publication of prime importance for the transmission of a teaching worthy of the name", Lacan proceeded to dismantle the most fundamental principles Saussure had set in the section of his *Cours* entitled "Nature of the linguistic sign" (Lacan, *Écrits* 415).

Fascinated, as always, with mathematics, and crediting Saussure with the formalization, Lacan presented his famous algorithm S/s, where the signifier appears over the signified, attesting to the "primordial position of the signifier and the signified as distinct orders separated by a barrier resisting signification" (414-15). As is well known, in the original Saussurean drawing, the "concept", the abstract element of the sign, was placed above the "sound-pattern" which, according to Saussure, would become the object of our senses when materialised. Most importantly, though, Saussure's sketch was circumscribed by an ellipse attesting to his thesis that the sign is "a two-sided psychological entity" whose two constituent elements "are intimately linked" (Saussure 66-67). The "cutting-through-the-paper metaphor" has been cited many times in support of the Saussurean definition of the sign, and thus, as Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy point out, the fact that Saussure's horizontal line became in Lacan "a formula of separateness rather than reciprocity" implies "a change in the view of the signifier/signified relationship, and calls into question any view which unites language and thing" (110). Lacan would agree, "[f]or this primordial distinction goes well beyond the debate over the arbitrariness of the sign" (*Écrits* 415). The inversion of the Saussurean sign opened the way for the primacy of the signifier, which Lacan also accentuated graphically by assigning it a capital letter. Although Lacan admitted that his algorithm cannot be found in "this exact form" in the

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1. However, in *Jacques Lacan: An Outline of a Life and a History of a System of Thought* Roudinesco argues that Lacan had been initiated in the work of Saussure by Henri Delacroix's *Le langage et la pensée*, published in 1924 (27). Indeed, Lacan cites Delacroix's book in his "Écrits «inspirés»: Schizographie," but makes no reference to the work of the Swiss linguist (*De la psychose* 375n6).

*Cours*, Michel Arrivé – along with other linguists and semioticians, I believe – considers the word “exact” in this statement almost “provocative”, since Lacan departed from Saussure by “ascribing priority to [the signifier] in a way that would be quite unthinkable” for the Swiss linguist (133).

Once detached, the signifier assumed its privileged position in the Lacanian universe. The signifier was described as “anticipating meaning”, which essentially *insists* in the “chain of signifiers” without any of the elements of the chain *consisting* “in the signification it can provide at that very moment” (Lacan, *Écrits* 419).<sup>2</sup> Since, for Lacan, the incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier allowed only for a few “button ties [*points de capiton*]”,<sup>3</sup> he traced the search for signification only in “signifier-to-signifier correlations” (418-19). Thus, signification moved from the Saussurean sign to the Lacanian signifier, which, although homonymous to the one described in Saussure, has the privilege of partaking in the process of signification through its connection with its own kind. Within the framework of Lacan’s theory, the signified moved to the background, and the quest for meaning rested within the realm of the signifier.

Lacan gradually linked his views about the nature and role of the signifier to fundamental notions of his psychoanalytic theory. Primarily, the mixture of convergence and divergence between Saussure’s theory of the sign and Lacan’s theory of the signifier unfolded with reference to and affected the psychoanalyst’s approach to language and the unconscious. Thus, when in 1966 Lacan spoke “Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever”, he described language – which he termed the “Other” – as including “a collection of differential traits” on which he grounded his conclusion that “language is constituted by a set of signifiers” (193). This partly echoes Saussure’s argument that “[i]n the language itself, there are only differences”, a point that he makes, however, in a subchapter entitled “The sign as a whole”, which evidently comes in contrast with Lacan’s claims (118).<sup>4</sup> The influence of structural linguistics is also, of course, evident in the motto “the unconscious is structured like a language”, which Lacan took one step forward when proclaiming that “the material of the unconscious is a linguistic material” (“Of Structure” 188).

It is quite understandable why Lacan would feel obliged at this point to distinguish between the sign and the signifier. Within the framework of his psychoanalytic theory, the Lacanian conception of the subject was a key element for this. Lacan expounded that the only possible distinction between sign and signi-

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2. I have imitated here Lacan’s emphasis on the two verbs.

3. This is Lacan’s reading of the drawing of the two wavy elements running parallel to each other which appeared in Saussure’s chapter on linguistic value. According to Saussure, that drawing represented language “as a series of adjoining subdivisions simultaneously imprinted both on the plane of vague amorphous thought ... and on the equally featureless plane of sound” (110).

4. Roy Harris and Talbot J. Taylor observe that Saussure’s “emphasis on *differences*” is the “distinctive signature of Saussurean structuralism” (223).

fier is that “[t]he sign is something that represents something for somebody, but the signifier is something that represents a subject for another signifier” (194).<sup>5</sup> Such a definition runs counter, of course, to Saussurean linguistic theory, as, on the whole, its Lacanian interpretation shifts emphasis from the sign to the signifier. Arrivé succinctly remarks:

In Saussure there is, fundamentally, a theory of the sign, and the theory of the signifier is integrated into this theory of the sign ... With Lacan it is very different. He does have a theory of the sign although one can hardly say it is central. His theory of the sign is not, however, articulated with the theory of the signifier: the signifier (and the signified) on the one hand and the sign on the other are disconnected from each other. (124)

Interweaving structural linguistics and psychoanalytic theory, Lacan’s reading of Saussure became the cornerstone of the Lacanian “return to Freud”. For Lacan did not credit only himself with his psychoanalytic interpretation of Saussure. He specifically argued that Freud’s discovery of the laws of the unconscious “anticipated the laws that Ferdinand de Saussure was to bring to light several years later when he paved the way for modern linguistics” (*Écrits* 373). On many occasions Lacan had recourse to Freudian psychoanalytic theory in order to support his reading of Saussure, especially as regards the signifier.<sup>6</sup> “Starting with Freud, the unconscious becomes a chain of signifiers”, Lacan argued in the 1960s (676). Lacan would even suggest in *Écrits* that a more suitable translation of Freud’s *The Science of Dreams* is “Signifierness” (520). The pivotal position in psychoanalytic theory of the book that is most commonly known as *The Interpretation of Dreams* attests to the importance that Lacan attached to highlighting the link between Freudian psychoanalytic theory and his own reading of Saussure.

The present study, though, takes a different course. Without disregarding the aforementioned link or its legitimate significance for Lacan’s campaign for a “return to Freud”, this paper highlights the effect that Lacan’s meeting with Salvador Dali in the surrealist context of the 1930s had on the Lacanian reading of Saussure with regard to the nature of the signifier. Freud’s contribution is present here as well, since it was during Lacan’s first steps from psychiatry to psychoanalysis that he met the Catalan artist, also enmeshed in the highly “Freudian” movement of surrealism. Young Lacan’s 1932 doctoral thesis on psychiatry entitled *On Paranoid Psychosis and its Relation to Personality* employed the Freudian theory of paranoia, in order to approach paranoid delirium as a

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5. Demonstrating the clinical psychoanalytic significance of Lacan’s point, J.-D. Nasio identifies the Lacanian sign with the symptom and explicates: “a symptom represents something for the one who suffers and sometimes for the one who listens” (33; my translation). Nasio detects here the influence of Charles Sanders Peirce upon Lacan’s definition of the sign, but Maria Theodoropoulou argues that Lacan assigns the role of the Peircian “interpretant” to the signifier (33; 3).

6. See, for instance, his interpretation of the Freudian terms “condensation” and “displacement” with the help of structural linguistics.

hermeneutic discourse. And, although both Lacan and Dali primarily focused on the process through which a paranoid (patient) interprets or assigns meaning to reality, their conclusions regarding the paranoid mechanism shed light on signification in general. Most importantly, it was Dali's 1930s paintings and theory, namely his "paranoiac-critical method of interpretation" which he devised within the interwar cultural context that welcomed abnormal mental states in the field of art, which would specifically affect Lacan's conception of the signifier.

### **The paranoid simulacrum: Dali and paranoia in the 1930s**

"The enchanter is an artist of madness", Novalis has written (qtd. in Waldberg 27). Nothing could have been more true of Salvador Dali, who enchanted and eventually joined the Parisian surrealist group in the early 1930s with a bang. Despite his early ambivalence towards surrealism, Dali eventually found, as he confessed, in the group of artists surrounding André Breton the only "adequate outlet for [his] activity" (*The Secret Life* 250-51). Nonetheless, it seems that his main concern was to maintain his individual outlook on the questions posed by the Parisian group,<sup>7</sup> and not be assimilated by them or overshadowed by Breton. The "paranoiac-critical method of interpretation" was, therefore, a child of its time, as well as Dali's own individual project.

Discrediting conventional notions of reality was one of the objectives of Breton's group of artists, as well as the inception of Dali's bid for a place in the surrealist spotlight. The quest for a hitherto "unknown reality" which could merge with conventional reality to produce "surreality" had already led the surrealists to explore the Freudian unconscious, the dream-state and mental aberrations. In their hands, insanity was celebrated not just as an erroneously excluded state of mind, but essentially as a poetic means of representation that defied reason and aesthetic concerns.<sup>8</sup> In connection to this, Breton and Paul Eluard's simulation of specific nosological types of insanity in *The Immaculate Conception* was more than just an attempt to produce surrealist artifacts. Surrealism employed insanity not just as a means of social subversion, but as an essentially subversive discourse.

Within this framework, Dali discarded surrealist practices like automatic writing – which he criticised as "a genuinely passive state" – in order to launch an active method to produce surrealist art (*Collected Writings* 95).<sup>9</sup> This method was fashioned after paranoia, partly because this specific mental aberration was

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7. Obviously, the surrealist group was hardly a homogenous one, but this is the way Dali viewed them, at least just before joining them.

8. The reference here is to the 1928 "The Quinquagenary of Hysteria" where Louis Aragon and Breton claimed that "[h]ysteria is not a pathological phenomenon and can be considered in every respect a supreme means of expression" (qtd. in Waldberg 62).

9. Throughout this paper there are hints regarding the politics of the surrealist movement and of the Breton-Dali relation. The study of their interaction with Freud and Lacan is an enticing and fruitful topic, but lies beyond the purposes of this paper.

in vogue in the early-twentieth-century psychiatric and psychoanalytic literature, which focused on the paranoid patient's stable system of interpreting reality or "systematising" it, to use a common term of the time. French doctors Paul Sérieux and Joseph Capgras, for instance, had in 1909 concluded that "delirious interpretation" in cases of paranoid psychosis was, in fact, "false reasoning" having a real sensation or event as the point of departure (7).<sup>10</sup> Leaving aside, then, the possibility of sensory hallucination, psychiatry had already detected in paranoia a mechanism whereby the patient assigned "unreasonable" – or socially unacceptable – meaning to the object of the senses. Freud had also discussed paranoia along those lines, pointing at the ways in which the unconscious regulated the interpretation of objects of perception, after projecting on the external world unconscious undesirable phantasies. In his famous "Schreber case" Freud would employ linguistic terms to analyse the ways in which these phantasies became different paranoid themes,<sup>11</sup> adding that the paranoid delirium was not an illness *per se*, but in fact an "attempt at recovery", an assimilative fictional world created by the paranoid patient's ego in order to re-establish contact with reality ("Psychoanalytic Notes" 209).<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, neither psychiatry nor psychoanalysis had, until the 1930s, examined the implications their recent findings on paranoia had for representation. It would take the surrealist-modernist context of the 1930s for paranoia to defect from the field of medicine and become a cultural concept and a tool, in the hands of Dali and Lacan, for exploring the workings of representation.

In a way, Dali's "paranoiac-critical method of interpretation" began where Freud had left off. Freud's theoretical remarks concerning the formation of the paranoid delirium as a "protective fiction",<sup>13</sup> as well as the fact that these re-

10. This is close to the original meaning of the term "paranoia", which the ancient Greeks coined from two words meaning "beside" – *παρά* – and "mind" – *νοῦς* (*The Compact Oxford* 1271). The initial meaning of the word was "to think amiss". In non-medical contexts, it also referred to madness.

11. The full title of Freud's 1911 paper is "Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)". Interestingly, Freud employed syntactic terms to refer to the formation of the four variations of the delusional proposition "I (a man) love him". For instance, there is inversion of the verb when the basic proposition becomes "I do not love him – I hate him, because he persecutes me" ("Psychoanalytic Notes" 201-03). Freud held that, due to the mechanism of projection at work in paranoia, the affect of an undesirable idea is retained in a distorted form, whereas its image-content is projected onto and, eventually, perceived as the external world.

12. Freud considered repressed homosexuality as the cause of paranoid psychosis, which effected regression to the early libidinal stage of narcissism and consequently the withdrawal of the libido from the external world and its attachment to the narcissistic ego. See Freud, "Psychoanalytic Notes" 196-219.

13. Freud's comment dates from an 1897 letter to his close friend Wilhelm Fliess (*Complete Letters* 250). Freud had taken an interest in paranoia as early as the 1880s, but it was only when he read Schreber's *Memorabilia of a Nerve Patient* or *Memoirs* that he articulated a comprehensive theory of paranoia.



marks were founded on his reading of a paranoid patient's autobiography, Schreber's *Memoirs*, clearly pointed at the creative potential of paranoia. Dali, in his search for a purposeful artistic method which would discredit conventional reality by infusing it with unconscious material, placed the paranoid mechanism "at the service of an imminent crisis of consciousness, at the service of the Revolution", as he put it in a way that chimes with the avant-garde aims of the surrealist movement in the 1930s (*Collected Writings* 226). Thus, the paranoid mechanism was adopted as a creative mechanism that regulates the representation of the objects of perception.

In his 1930 essay "The Rotting Donkey" Dali gives the fullest account of the paranoiac-critical method of interpretation before his reading of Lacan's PhD thesis.<sup>14</sup> In Dali's theory, the paranoiac activity systematised the confusion of reality by having an unconscious obsessive idea bringing together and associating the objects of perception. In his own words, "[p]aranoia makes use of the external world in order to set off its obsessive idea", utilising it "to control an imaginative construction" (*Collected Writings* 223; *Oui* 112). It is in this sense that Dali presented the famous double/multiple-image technique as an equivalent to the formation of the paranoid delirium, explicating it by way of a step-by-step process so as to emphasise the methodical, scientific quality of his theory:

[t]he attainment of ... a double image has been made possible thanks to the violence of the paranoiac thought which has made use, with cunning and skill, of the required pretexts, coincidences, and so on, taking advantage of them so as to reveal the second image, which, in this case, supersedes the obsessive idea. (*Collected Writings* 224)

The example he offered in this explication of the paranoiac double/multiple image is that of the image of a woman, which is unconsciously associated with and accommodates the image of a lion, which in turn is unconsciously associated with and accommodates the image of a horse. This reference was not, of course, coincidental, as Dali had in early 1930 painted a number of versions of his famous painting "Invisible Sleeping Woman, Horse, Lion".

In theory, the paranoiac process of producing multiple images, that is accommodating more and more images, would be limitless, and solely dependent on the paranoiac capacity of each individual (Dali, *Collected Writings* 224). And this is of utmost importance for Dali's artistic vision, namely the possibility of producing essentially new images, "new simulacra" as he termed them, by simulating the mechanism at work in the formation of the paranoid delirium (225). For the Catalan painter, these new simulacra, pictorially presented as double or multiple images, were specifically conditioned by the fact that

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14. One needs to note that, in the early 1930s, Dali mostly employs the term "paranoiac-critical activity" or "delirium of interpretation" which was considered almost a synonym for paranoia in French psychiatry in the 1930s, especially because of the work of Sérieux and Capgras. The term "interpretation" is further highlighted towards the mid-1930s, that is, after Dali had read Lacan's thesis.

a representation of an object ... is also, without the slightest pictorial or anatomical modification, the representation of another entirely different object, this one being equally devoid of any deformation or abnormality disclosing some adjustment. (224)

Thus, in one of the first versions of “Invisible Sleeping Woman, Horse, Lion” (fig. 1),<sup>15</sup> the highlighted reclining body of a woman represents at the same time the body of a horse, whose head is the figure of the woman’s arm as that rests over her head, and whose tail forms the fierce mane of a lion. This is, in fact, a new image, constituting an image of multiple figurations set against the background of the famous Dalian landscape of barren vastness.<sup>16</sup>

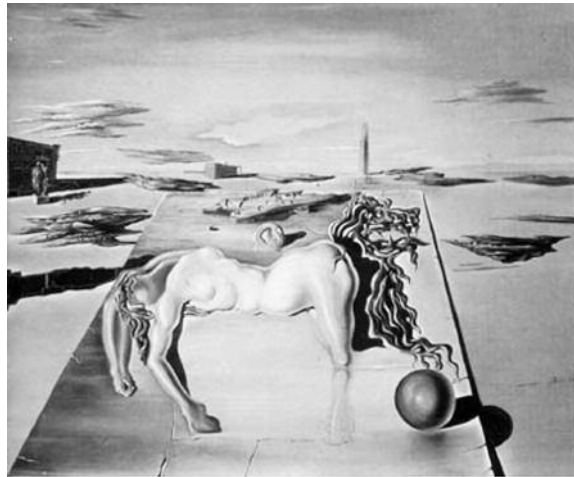


Fig. 1. Dali, Salvador. “Invisible Sleeping Woman, Horse, Lion” (1930). Oil on canvas. Private collection.

The argument that Dali put forward regarding the emphasis on the representational autonomy of the constituents of the double/multiple image was that the new image must be controllable and recognisable by all (*Collected Writings* 224). Dali related this to the nature of paranoia, which employs the reality of the external world “as illustration or proof” of the obsessive idea, “with the disturbing characteristic of

15. This is not, of course, the only painting where Dali applied his method. In the early 1930s, Dali produced a number of paintings and other artifacts, such as “The Great Paranoiac” or “Archaeological Reminiscence of Millet’s ‘Angelus’” and numerous works of art based on the application of his method to Jean François Millet’s famous painting “L’Angélus”.

16. In his discussion of this painting, Finkelstein has argued that the “isolation” or “differentiation” of the three objects from their surroundings results in a “closed system that must rely mostly on its internal constituents for the formation of its multiple figuration” (193). Although Finkelstein claims that this points at the “technical difficulties” and “virtual impossibility” of the application of Dali’s paranoiac method, I would argue that it is precisely this visualisation of a closed system whose signification relies on the interaction of its constituents that forms the common ground with Lacan’s theory of paranoia (193).



verifying the reality of this idea for others” (223). Eventually, this entails that the paranoid method strikes a fatal blow to reality, since the latter is “placed at the service of the reality of [one’s] mind”, which means that reality assumes a position subservient to the unconscious and the imaginative capacity of the artist (223).

Finally, it is also interesting to note how the paranoid simulacra in Dali’s work acquire the status of a visual language, as some of them, detached from the initial “paranoid” painting where they were created, re-appear in other works by the Catalan artist. This is not just a question of recurrent motifs. For in these later paintings the paranoid simulacrum is treated as a new signifying entity, and as such associated with other obsessive ideas, as if in a chain of formal associations. Thus, in another 1930 version of the “Invisible Sleeping Woman, Horse Lion” (fig. 2), where the aforementioned paranoid simulacrum appears in front of two boats sailing on a landscape of wooden planks, part of it is detached and reverberates in this later version of the prototype painting. But here this specific part of the paranoid simulacrum that appeared in the first version of “Invisible Sleeping Woman, Horse Lion” (fig. 1) is formally associated with the embrace of two “soft” bodies, the female head being pressed on the genital area of the standing male. What needs to be stressed is not only that this figuration appeared in other paintings of the 1930-1931 period,<sup>17</sup> but that the later version of the painting represents the genesis of a chain of paranoid simulacra.<sup>18</sup> The word “chain” with all its Lacanian overtones is not, of course, accidentally chosen here.

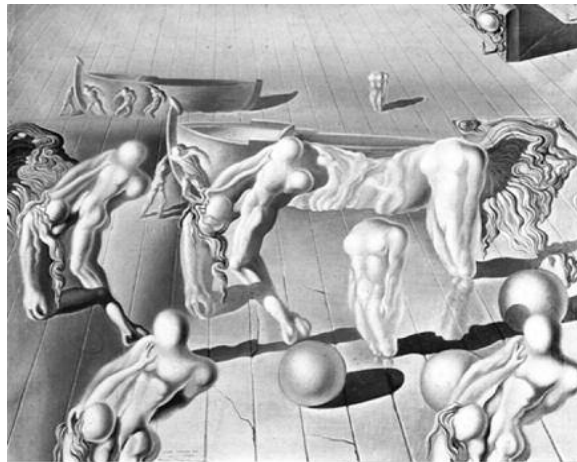


Fig. 2. Dali, Salvador: “Invisible Sleeping Woman, Horse, Lion” (1930).  
Oil on canvas. Private collection.

17. For instance, it is present in the 1930 “The Paranoiac Woman-Horse” and in “Vertigo”.

18. Although the term “simulacrum” is not used in Dali in the way Jean Baudrillard employed it in his 1981 *Simulacra and Simulation*, in both theories reality is under attack. Iversen holds that Dali anticipated the group of French thinkers, including Baudrillard, Deleuze and Derrida, who were interested in the way the notion of “simulacrum” challenges “the Platonic hierarchy of original and copy” (54).

Dali readily recognised that his theory addressed issues of representation. Produced by the simulation of the mechanism for the formation of the paranoid delirium, Dali's new simulacra did not just originate in the unconscious, he stressed, or merely accommodate and eventually make unconscious phantasies immediately apparent, or even conscious (*Collected Writings* 223). For one thing, following the psychoanalytic project, Dali opted for a dynamic unconscious that participates in the sphere of representation, and not an unexplored reservoir of obscure images. Nor was his artistic method confined to merely establishing the presence of a special discourse in an abnormal mental state. Instead, it aimed at illustrating the representational code that operates in that discourse:

the paranoiac mechanism giving birth to the image of multiple figuration endows our understanding with a key to the birth and origin of the essence of simulacra, whose furor dominates the aspect under which are hidden the multiple appearances of the concrete. (224-25)

The paranoiac-critical method of interpretation thus emerged as a theory of representation. With respect to the aim of this study, it is important that Dali's was a theory that asserted the presence and the workings of the unconscious in the field of representation. For in the case of the paranoiac method and because of the peculiar nature of the paranoid mechanism that it is fashioned upon, the formal affinities among images or objects of perception are pointed out by the unconscious obsessive idea, in such a way that the latter does not remain latent. Dali, thus, demonstrated how the unconscious uses reality, the sum of the objects of perception, in order to project and eventually represent its own "reality".

It is in this sense that the new paranoid simulacrum, the outcome of the simulation of the paranoid mechanism, represents the process of representation visually. For Dali's is essentially a theory of representation unfolding in the visual domain and through the formal associative chains among different images, which systematise the "confusion" of reality, and which are pictorially highlighted and, by definition, recognisable. And this is one of the greatest contributions of Salvador Dali to the twentieth century, namely the fact that his paranoid method, a theory of representation spawned in a cultural environment heavily imbued with psychoanalysis, foregrounded the image. This, as we shall see, had a vital effect on Lacan's reading of Saussure. Moreover, if one takes into account his interaction with Lacan at the time and the cardinal role that the (mirror) image played in launching Lacanian Freudianism, then the 1930s could be seen as the beginning of the dominance of the realm of the image in the theorisation of representation, at least within the psychoanalytic field.

### **The paranoid delirium and/or interpretation: Lacan and paranoia in the 1930s**

When in 1966 Jacques Lacan spoke of "his antecedents" and recalled the works that signalled his initiation into the field of psychoanalysis, he primarily pointed to his 1930s doctoral thesis on psychiatry (*Écrits* 51). What is of special interest for this study is that, seen in its own context, the 1932 thesis, entitled *De la psy-*

*chose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité*, raised questions about the workings of signification which, decades later, Lacan would claim to give definite answers to through his reading of Saussure.

Lacan had already taken an interest in paranoid psychosis from the very beginning of his career as a publishing psychiatrist. Nonetheless, it was his encounter with Marguerite Pantaine, a thirty-eight-year-old woman, which enabled him to demonstrate his views on paranoia, and on a specific clinical type, namely paranoia of self-punishment (Roudinesco *Jacques Lacan: An Outline* 34; Lacan, *De la psychose* 151). Another reason for his choice, I suspect, could have been the public interest that Marguerite's knife attack against the famous actress Huguette Duflos outside a Parisian theatre had attracted in April 1931. The incident was destined to create quite an impression in the French capital – on the surrealists as well – especially since Lacan's patient “unreasonably” accused the actress of persecuting her and of spreading scandalous rumours about her.

Nominating himself one of the “partisans of psychogeny”, young Lacan would adopt the Freudian theory of paranoia in order to approach his case study of Aimée – the nickname he used for his patient (*De la psychose* 107). Being a French psychiatrist of his time, though, he also employed Sérieux and Capgras' work on paranoia as the starting point for his diagnosis. Having thus diagnosed Aimée as suffering from “delirium of interpretation”, Lacan took a decisive step towards discussing “the psychical functions of representation” (291). As he engaged in detecting the paranoid themes which Freud, Sérieux and Capgras had outlined, namely persecution, grandeur and erotomania, young Lacan did not confine his analysis to the interviews with his patient. Instead, he analysed the writings of Aimée, citing long extracts from the two books she had written. Lacan, in fact, regarded these as literary writings and, in the first literary study of his career, analysed them side by side with Aimée's paranoid delirium.<sup>19</sup>

In considering the discursive products of paranoia alongside the delirium itself, Lacan acknowledged the discursive nature of the paranoid delirium. Both the delirium and Aimée's novels were treated as paranoid discourse, whose characteristics were studied further. Conjoining literary and medical analysis, the young psychiatrist was mostly struck by the “clarity of signification” in the paranoid delirium of his patient. In his discussion of Aimée's delirium as one of interpretation, Lacan asserted that its primary organising feature was the “personal signification” that was attached to all the objects of perception (211). And this signification was by definition determined, and not casual:

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19. Lacan analysed the two novels that his patient had sent to the Prince of Wales, in quest of the same themes that supported his diagnosis of the delirium of interpretation. The two novels, *Idyll*, *Romance* and *The Detractor*, revolve around the adventures, mainly in Paris, of Aimée, the protagonist (Lacan had actually named his patient after the main character and narrator of her novels).

Ce n'est pas, comme il apparaît tout d'abord, de façon purement fortuite qu'une *signification personnelle* vient transmuier la portée de telle phrase entendue, d'une image entrevue, du geste d'un passant, du "filet" auquel le regard s'accroche dans la lecture d'un journal. (211)

[It is not, as it appears at first, in a purely fortuitous way that a *personal signification* comes to transform the significance of an overheard phrase, of an image caught sight of, of a gesture of a passer-by, of the "net" which the gaze attaches itself to while reading a newspaper.]<sup>20</sup>

The term "personal signification" had already been used by German psychiatrists such as Karl Jaspers to refer to "the paranoid mode of experience", that is the subjective way in which paranoiacs experience reality (Kaplan and Sadock 2141). Lacan agreed with his colleagues that perception "is profoundly transformed" in paranoia, and specifically mediated by the unconscious.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, ruling out the possibility of sensory hallucination, Lacan placed emphasis on interpretation or, in other words, on the fact that the paranoid patient assigns "personal signification" to objects of perception. This is important in its own right, for Lacan attributed the "clarity of signification" that he detected in the paranoid delirium of his patient not to the presence, absence or falsity of the process of reasoning, which had been the main line of argumentation from the ancient definition of paranoia as "thinking amiss" up to the twentieth-century theories. Instead, signification in paranoia was founded upon the delirious themes detected:

c'est un premier trait caractéristique du délire, à savoir sa *clarté significative*. Mais nous avons montré que cette clarté est d'une tout autre nature que logique, et qu'elle s'attache seulement au sens parfaitement congruent qu'ont les thèmes délirants... Ce premier caractère du délire vaut d'être noté : l'évidence de la signification du délire. (293)

[this is a first trait typical of the delirium, namely its *clarity of signification*. But we have shown that this clarity is of a nature quite different from logic, and that it is attached solely to the meaning which is perfectly congruent with that of the delirious themes... This first characteristic of the delirium deserves to be noted: the evidence of the signification of the delirium.]

The meaning, thus, that the paranoiacs attached to the objects of perception was not, according to Lacan, "false meaning" but "personal meaning". Nor should signification in the paranoid delirium be confused with the "obscure symbolism of dreams" that needed to be interpreted by the expert, Lacan claimed (293). The "clarity of signification" in the paranoid delirium of Aimée was, according to Lacan, due to the correspondence to the themes of her paranoid delirium, a point he would examine further (293).

20. Since Lacan's doctoral thesis has never been officially translated into English, I cite both the French original and my own translation of each extract.

21. "La perception, tout d'abord, n'apparaît plus être exacte; elle est profondément transformée" (*De la psychose* 291).

For Lacan the primary characteristic, which he regarded as specific to the paranoid delirium, was the “evidence of the signification of the delirium” itself (293). This entailed that it was not the interpretation reached that was false, but that the paranoid mechanism of interpretation was different. Since perception was affected by paranoia, and significantly mediated by the unconscious, it was not the *a posteriori* interpretative process that deserved to be called paranoid or “pathological”. The evidence of signification in the paranoid delirium which Lacan detected proved that, in fact, there is no need for such a process, since interpretation is already present within the delirium itself. To be more specific, Lacan proclaimed that the paranoid delirium was not the outcome of interpretation, but *was itself already* an interpretation.

Lacan would employ the psychoanalytic findings that had enabled him to discuss the psychogenic determination of the paranoid delirium in order to take this postulate one step forward. For, in considering the role the dynamic unconscious played in the formation of the delirium, and of its personal signification, Lacan announced the paranoid delirium to be a mechanism that makes conscious, via projection, the unconscious delirious idea that interprets the object of perception. With the unconscious at play in the case of the paranoid delirium, the process of interpretation is thus not reduced to reasoning within the bounds of sane consciousness, but, as has been hinted above, acquires a broader definition. Significantly, the young Lacan would contribute to the study of paranoia by concluding that “the delirium is itself an *interpretive* activity of the unconscious” (293).<sup>22</sup>

### **The significance of form in Dali’s and Lacan’s work on paranoia in the 1930s**

Dali’s and Lacan’s interwar theories of paranoia employed the mechanism for the formation of the paranoid delirium in order to demonstrate the way in which the unconscious mediates the representation of reality. Thus, despite the fact that the two men worked in fields that traditionally occupy two opposite ends of a spectrum, namely art and science, the cultural context of the 1930s enabled them to access the same tool, the paranoid delirium, and explore a common ground, the workings of the unconscious in the field of representation. As important a task as this was within the surrealist, psychoanalytic and psychiatric framework of the 1930s, Dali’s and Lacan’s remarks on the role that *form* plays in the way the unconscious assigns meaning to the objects of perception would also prove crucial for the psychoanalyst’s reading of Saussure.

Writing within the field of surrealism and partly caught up in a debate with Breton, Dali employed Lacan’s views in order to support his paranoiac-critical method of interpretation as an active method of artistic creation. Thus, three years after “The Rotting Donkey”, Dali would comment on Lacan’s “admirable” thesis (*Collected Writings* 259). He agreed that

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22. “[L]e délire est par lui-même une activité *interprétative* de l’inconscient” (293).

[f]ar from constituting a passive element, as are [automatism and dream], propitious for interpretation and suitable for intervention, the paranoid delirium already constitutes in itself a form of interpretation. (260)

Apart from adopting Lacan's basic assumption, Dali added, by way of contrast with official surrealist tools, that the paranoid delirium/discourse defied interpretation, or, as he stated elsewhere, cannot be "reduced to ordinary and logical language" (266). Thus, the paranoid delirium appeared in Dali as an alternative to *a posteriori* interpretation, as a revolutionary hermeneutic discourse conditioned by the unconscious.

Dali may have reached the same conclusion with Lacan regarding the substantial nature of the paranoid delirium and interpretation, but it was via his pictorial work based on the paranoid-critical method that Dali managed to take the notion of paranoid discourse one step forward. The key lies in his analysis of the paranoid method where Dali described the way the paranoid simulacrum, the new simulacrum that makes manifest the hitherto hidden unconscious, is generated. If the new paranoid simulacrum is seen as already an interpretation of reality, then this entails that Dali approached paranoia not as a mental illness, but as a mechanism – in his hands, a method – which created new simulacra that already have a meaning that is recognisable for others, and, thus, have no need for interpretation to reach this meaning (or its latent content, to use the psychoanalytic vocabulary). This attests to the special quality of the paranoid simulacrum in Dali's theory, namely the fact that it is immediately comprehensible.

Thus, explicating the genesis of the paranoid simulacrum regarding "The Invisible Sleeping Woman, Horse, Lion" (fig.1), Dali insisted that it must accommodate all three images without the slightest deformation of the three components of the final paranoid simulacrum. The emphasis that Dali placed on the representational autonomy of the three images not only distances the multiple image from the process of fusion, but also points to the decisive role played by *form* in the genesis of the paranoid simulacrum. In the interwar theoretical texts of Dali, the paranoid-critical method of interpretation is presented as the simulation of a mechanism that not only creates new simulacra/signs, but also assigns meaning to seemingly disparate objects based on their *formal analogy*. The paranoid simulacrum foregrounds the formal affinity among the three images, which is dictated, as we have seen, by the unconscious obsessive idea (Dali, *Collected Writings* 224). It is this *formal* affinity that Dali insists should be retained, in order for the paranoid simulacrum to systematise reality, be recognisable by others, and immediately comprehensible. And, as both Dali and Lacan proclaimed, this new simulacrum already has meaning, already is an interpretation of reality, where manifest and latent content meet or, in other words, where signification resides within the form.

The above process becomes evident if one studies Dali's famous painting "Metamorphosis of Narcissus" (fig. 3) created between 1936 and 1937. The painting was accompanied by a poem, and together they were identified by Dali as "the first poem and the first painting obtained entirely through the integral application of the paranoid-critical method" (*Collected Writings* 324). If one takes



the paranoiac-critical method of interpretation as a theoretical point of departure, “Metamorphosis of Narcissus” sheds light on Dali’s theory of representation. What immediately strikes the viewer of this painting is the formal resemblance of the two prevalent forms. On the left-hand side of the painting there is the figure of a young man bent over the mirroring surface of a lake. His face is hidden among his limbs, parts of which are highlighted, due to a very careful positioning of the figure between light and shadow. The figure is painted in a skin-like shade, which blends with the earthy colour of the surrounding rocky landscape and the reflecting surface. The right-hand side of the painting is dominated by the form of a gigantic hand, the fingertips holding a white egg or bulb, from whose cracking surface a narcissus flower is emerging. The contrast of light gray and darker hues enhances the careful shading and positioning of the fingers, certain parts of which are highlighted so as to be formally analogous to the Narcissus figure. Even smaller details, like the crooked line on the surface of the white bulb and the line of the parting of Narcissus’s hair, endorse the analogy of the two forms.



*Fig. 3. Dali, Salvador. “Metamorphosis of Narcissus” (1937).  
Oil on canvas. Tate Gallery, London, UK.*

It is this formal analogy between the figure of Narcissus and the paranoid simulacrum placed next to it that is predominant in Dali’s painting. Although, in this case, the paranoid simulacrum is not a double image as such, the painting does bring to the surface the affinity of the two simulacra with respect to form. The representational autonomy of the two images is retained, without the slightest anatomical modification, just as Dali had described it in “The Rotting Donkey”.

What's more, the form of the paranoid simulacrum reverberates in the right-hand background area of the painting, hidden amidst the mountains of the landscape but clearly corresponding, both formally and in terms of its light gray colour, to the paranoid simulacrum in the foreground.

Thus, the form of the newly-created paranoid simulacrum mirrors that of the young Narcissus, making this painting exemplary in terms of illustrating how the new simulacrum comes to life, how important is its formal analogy with "reality" – or the simulacrum next to it – and, finally, how a new interpretation, a new sign, is born based on the unconscious obsessive idea of the artist, who has assigned meaning to it based on formal analogy. Thus, in view of Lacan's analysis of the paranoid delirium, and its assimilation by Dali, the paranoid simulacrum is already an interpretation of reality, its latent content being exposed on the canvas along with the manifest form. For in this painting, the clarity of signification of the hand form derives from the mirrored Narcissus figure. The paranoid simulacrum is then, in effect, a new sign, created by the unconscious desire that links together two signifiers, that is the form of two signs.

Writing within the field of psychiatry and yet with a penchant for issues of representation, the young Lacan had reached similar conclusions when discussing in his doctoral thesis the characteristics of the paranoid delirium. One of the fundamental conceptual structures that Lacan detected in the paranoid delirium/discourse was the "indication of a principle of *iterative identification*" (*De la psychose* 296). In the case of Aimée, this was evident in her constant identifications with successful women, who eventually appeared as her persecutors. In terms of Lacan's psychoanalytic reading, Aimée's identifications were, in fact, identifications with her ego-ideal, the ideal that the ego aspires to.<sup>23</sup> For what lay at the heart of paranoia of self-punishment – the object of Lacan's thesis – as well as of the paranoid delirium/discourse that it generates, was the fact that the paranoid patient engaged in attacking her mirror-images, the women she identified with, *realising*, in this way, her wish to punish herself.<sup>24</sup> Lacan invited his readers to observe the peculiar character of Aimée's female persecutors (her older sister, her female friends, the actress she had attacked), as well as their "purely symbolic significance" or "personal signification" that could only make sense due to the theme of persecution (252, 296). He would conclude that these women were "the double, triple and successive 'printings' of a *prototype*" (253).<sup>25</sup>

23. Lacan's analysis of the paranoia of self-punishment was based on *The Ego and the Id*, which was published 12 years after the Schreber case and where Freud had not yet distinguished between the super-ego, one of the three agencies in operation in the psyche, and the ego-ideal, the ideal that the ego aspires to. Instead, both terms alluded to an agency that combined the function of prohibition and ideal (Laplanche and Pontalis 144-45).

24. One year after the publication of his doctoral thesis, Lacan employed a similar argument when discussing the Papin sisters murder case in an article that appeared in the surrealist journal *Minotaure*.

25. "Elles sont... les doublets, triplets et successifs 'tirages' d'un prototype" (253).

Still confined within the discourse of psychiatry and psychoanalysis proper, Lacan was not to make the comments Dali made on form. Even when he mentioned that “the same image which represents [Aimée’s] ideal is also the object of her hatred”,<sup>26</sup> the word “image” is not employed in the way it would be in the original 1936 version of his mirror-essay (253). In that essay, Lacan would explore the role that the *unity of the form* and the *form of the unity* of the mirror image plays in the birth of the subject.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, Lacan in the 1930s did point at the fact that the paranoid mechanism assigns personal signification to elements of reality which are linked solely according to a characteristic that the unconscious dictates. Defying or rather “resisting” any other signification, these elements, forming a chain, participate in signification within the paranoid discourse, which is already an interpretation of reality, or a chain of signifiers that already have meaning.

Although not in accord with Saussurean semiotics, the above wording has been carefully chosen in order to highlight the “anchoring points” between the young Lacan’s work on paranoia and his later reading of Saussure’s work. It also points at the fact that, in the 1930s, Lacan did not have in his hands the knowledge that Saussure’s definition of the signifier or “sound-pattern” “is above all the natural representation of the word form as an abstract linguistic term” (Saussure 66n2). On the other hand, Dali, although unaware himself of Saussure’s *Cours*, worked in the visual domain, where form was a tangible tool for his paranoid-critical method of interpretation. For the paranoid method depicted the way in which the unconscious, by mediating the perception of reality in a special way, assigns meaning to form. In semiotic terms, and using Saussurean vocabulary – but not the true essence of the linguist’s theory – what Dali uncovered is that the signifier, the form of a sign, is endowed with meaning that arises from the projection of an obsessive idea. In terms of Lacan’s later theory, however, what Dali revealed and illustrated within the visual field is the reason why the form, the signifier, is of supreme *significance* in the realm of representation.

## Conclusion

The present study has attempted to trace the transition from the Dalian simulacrum which highlighted the form to the Lacanian primacy of the signifier, offering a theoretical and historical reasoning behind Lacan’s mis-reading of Saussure’s theory of the sign. It has also become evident that the starting point of Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory of representation is detected in his early work on

26. “La même image qui représente [*sic*] son idéal est aussi l’objet de sa haine” (253).

27. The mirror-essay forms a theoretical bridge between Lacan’s early work on paranoia, on the one hand, and his engagement with psychoanalysis proper and structural linguistics, on the other. Although this cannot be the object of study of a short paper, research into the views expressed in the 1936 lost version of the paper – as these also appeared in *Les complexes familiaux dans la formation d’individu*, Lacan’s 1938 article in the *Encyclopédie Française* – and the 1948 version of the *Écrits* would reveal not only the evident influence of surrealism, but of Lacan’s interaction with Dali as well.

paranoia. For as “paranoid” as Lacan of the 1950s may sound – to semioticians, linguists and others – when he claims that the signifier partakes of the realm of signification detached from the signified, it was essentially his early study of this particular mental state that introduced him to the field of representation, as well as to Dali’s endeavour to revolutionise (surrealist) discourse through the mechanism at work in this abnormal mental state.

In a way, Dali’s interwar work illustrated Lacan’s conclusions on paranoia in the 1930s, offering essentially a stepping stone for the latter’s future reading of Saussure. Yet, seen in perspective, one cannot assume that their meeting in person in Paris in 1932 or the mutual respect they expressed on various occasions is the only sound proof of their interaction. The surrealist-modernist context of the 1930s not only dictated their choice of an interdisciplinary approach to paranoia in terms that distanced it from the group of mental aberrations, but also nurtured Dali and Lacan’s approach to the paranoid mechanism and its implications for representation.<sup>28</sup> The present study has attempted to show that, even though after the 1930s, Dali as an artist and Lacan as a scientist – if we are to abide by this division – employed different “techniques” to explore the way the unconscious functions or “speaks”, the seeds of their interwar interaction survived in Lacan’s engagement with structural linguistics. Thus, unexpectedly perhaps in view of Dali’s Catalan origin, research into Lacan’s encounter with Dali in interwar Paris highlights the Gallic line of resources that Alexandros Lagopoulos finds strong in neostructuralism (249). If we regard Lacan’s reading of the Saussurean theory of the signifier as a subversive act of a most fundamental structuralist idea, then his interaction with Dali and the surrealist revolutionary context of the 1930s sheds light on Lacan’s shift from structuralism to the neostructuralist “contradictory mixture” of upholding and at the same time “annulling” structuralist thinking (195-96). For Lacan’s French “neostructuralist” return to Freud entailed a return to his own surrealist youth.

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28. The two men met for the first time at some point in 1932 – there is disagreement among scholars over the actual date – at Lacan’s request after he had read Dali’s views on the mechanism of paranoiac activity in the surrealist *Minotaure*. Dali related the circumstances of this meeting in the first pages of *The Secret Life* that he wrote in 1940-1941, describing Lacan as a “brilliant young psychiatrist” – which may be a retrospective assessment on Dali’s part or evidence of the fact that Lacan’s work had attracted serious attention even in the early 1930s, at least in surrealist circles, although he had not yet become famous worldwide (17).

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