Introduction

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Introduction

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An image moves through your social media feed. It catches your attention, and you pause to consider it. The image comes with a now familiar description: *no filter*. The poster of the image invites us to scrutinize his or her picture with an appeal to honesty. The image wants us to believe it has not been manipulated. Its attractiveness is based on something missing. We live in a time when this scenario happens all the time. Combinations of images and appeals flow constantly past our eyes every day. From photos posted by friends and family to clickbait advertisements placed below the article you just read on your favorite news site, we have become accustomed to thinking about the honesty of images and the persuasiveness of their appeals. The images provoke responses. We imagine all the ways we are manipulated by these images. The friend's photo tells you all the ways their lives are better than yours. The clickbait beckons you with promises of inside information about an actress's decadent lifestyle. We ask ourselves whether we should click on them. Should we *like* them. Should we give the click baiters the attention they are asking for. We feel the persistent pressure of being asked for something that we do not want to give. We feel anxious. This scenario is familiar to all of us. Whether the anxiety we feel is low-key or unbearable, the flow of images across our screens—and our questions about their authenticity—is a problem unique to the early twenty-first century. It is not the first time people have been lied to or deceived. Rather, it is the staggering scope of these appeals and the pace with which we must deal with them. It is a deluge.

The articles in this edition of *Intertexts* all deal with the paradoxes of being a subject in the twenty-first century. More specifically, the authors of these articles all approach these paradoxes using the insights of Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst. Lacan's conception of the mirror-stage is well known to many, and this special edition of *Intertexts* is not rehashing the poststructural Lacan with which many film, literary, and cultural critics are already familiar. Instead, the writers in this collection take their cues from new Lacanians, like Slavoj Žižek, Joan Copjec, and Todd McGowan, whose work emphasizes the later Lacan of the Real. The groundbreaking work of these three theorists has pushed Lacanian theory in a new direction, opening up ways for us to consider the Real, the often overlooked third order, which along with the Imaginary and the Symbolic, governs our subjectivity. The Lacanian Real operates as a barrier to the smooth functioning of the Symbolic order. The Real is the point at which, as Žižek, Copjec, and McGowan have argued in many different publications, the Symbolic order fails, leading to a gap in meaning, a point of non-sense, which Lacan calls the *objet petit a*, or the object-cause of desire. The writers in this collection are primarily interested in the key points of failure that make up their objects of fascination, reminding us throughout that failure is not a hindrance to a text's functioning. Failure is the reason it functions at all. It is because of Lacan's fundamental belief in failure's significance, I contend, that his insights are the most crucial to understanding the paradoxes of our current situation. We all know the clickbait image is fake. We all know the *no filter* photo posted by our friend is staged. But this knowledge does not make us feel more sure of ourselves or give us firm psychological footing. It is as if the more we know, the less confident we feel.

The writers in this collection address the conundrum of failure and the role it plays in the process of interpretation. Each writer ultimately follows what McGowan describes as a failure-driven interpretive mode: "As it is clear from Lacan's account, psychoanalytic interpretation involves isolating the traumatic Real through its effects within the text. It pays attention to the movements of the text and finds the point of the traumatic Real around which these movements circulate. As a consequence, interpretation discovers meaning through the isolation and identification of the point at which meaning fails."[1] In a series of articles

on a range of texts—movies, television shows, literature, and a hand of poker—the writers in this collection strive to find the gaps in the texts under scrutiny. They look for the failures, the fakes, and the frauds. They pick at the seams that hold texts together. Each writer fulfills, in a variety of ways, McGowan's dictum to find the point at which the meaning of texts fails and interpret why.

Two writers directly address the question of deception and failure. Hugh Manon's "A Field Guide to Idiocy" seeks to explain the difference between how subjects deceive via the Imaginary and Symbolic orders. More specifically, he focuses on how an idiot deceives and how difficult it is to tell whether someone is truly an idiot or faking it. Through a re-reading of Lacan's seminar on Poe's "The Purloined Letter," Manon interprets a series of pop-culture examples to help us understand the idiotic deceptions that surround us. Similarly, David Wittenberg examines one hand of poker from a televised Texas Hold'em tournament. In his essay, Wittenberg looks at the interaction between two players, Phil Laak and Tom Dwan. Using various Lacanian conceptions, game theory, and the three prisoners puzzle, he shows how one player, Laak, talks himself into doing something against his self-interest, while the other player, Dwan, sits still, saying very little. Based on the relationship between Laak and Dwan as the hand develops, Wittenberg develops a theory of poker as an allegory for the political subject.

Scott Krzych and David Denny analyze recent films in order to ask questions about the relationship between lying and subjectivity. In a deft analysis of the film *The Homesman* (2014), a Western directed by and starring Tommy Lee Jones, Krzych explores the ways in which deception does not inhibit the truth from emerging. Instead, deception and lies can be vehicles for truth becoming possible. Discussing a range of concepts—fantasy, transference, and object-relations theory—Krzych argues that the lead characters in *The Homesman*, Mary Bee and George, develop a transreferential relationship that allows George to change. In another article about film, David Denny examines *The Act of Killing* (2012), Joshua Oppenhiemer's documentary about genocide in Indonesia in the mid-1960s. In the film, Oppenheimer is able to convince soldiers who killed people on behalf of the government to recreate their acts of killing. The now-older soldiers happily go along, until they cannot. Citing

Lacanian concepts such as the discourse of the analyst, enjoyment, and transference, Denny analyzes the key re-enactments with particular interest in the important moment when these scenes fail. Both writers draw on similar concepts but discuss wildly different films, arriving at similar moments in which these films reach points of revelatory ambiguity.

Finally, Hilary Neroni and I address two recent television shows, *Top of the Lake* and *Stranger Things*, respectively. Neroni examines Jane Campion's *Top of the Lake* as an example of how women disrupt the smooth functioning of the patriarchy. Focusing specifically on lead character Robin Griffin (Elizabeth Moss), Neroni connects her depiction to the other women in Campion's oeuvre, arguing that the Campion heroine is a heroine of the drive. Griffin is a police detective, a woman working in a male-dominated profession, and her job is twofold: solve a murder and discover why men sexually harass, abuse, and kill women. In my essay, I link *Stranger Things* to traditional Gothic storytelling and aesthetics while attempting to define how Gothic texts work in the digital era. Using Lacan's conception of the gaze and fantasy, I argue Matt and Ross Duffer, *Stranger Things*'s showrunners, digitally create an analog-looking mise-en-scène in order to tell a story of missing children and monsters. In doing so, they paradoxically romanticize the potential for loss in the past and haunt audiences with the way we live now.

The contributors to this collection are committed to Lacan's belief in failure as a beginning to interpretation rather than an end. Discussing the sexual relationship in *Seminar XX*, Lacan demands that we rethink our definitions of success and failure: "It's not a matter of analyzing how it succeeds. It's a matter of repeating until you're blue in the face why it fails."[2] Each article in this issue of *Intertexts* seeks, in its own way, to advance Lacan's belief in the significance of failure. Our hope is to unlock for readers the potential for understanding our anxious times using new Lacanian concepts.

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NOTES

1. Todd McGowan, *Lacan and Contemporary Film*, eds. Todd McGowan and Sheila Kunkle (New York: Other Press, 2004), xxii.

2. Jacques Lacan, *Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, vol. 20, ed. Jacques Allain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 55.