



Groundings Undergraduate Academic Journal
University of Glasgow | Glasgow University Union

“You paid 200,000 francs for this shit?”: The Art of Friendship

Author(s): James Murdoch

Source: Groundings Undergraduate, April 2023, Vol. 14, pp. 73-82

Published by: University of Glasgow, Glasgow University Union Publications.

ISSNs: 1754-7474 (Print) | 1755-2702 (Online)

Licensing: This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

The CC BY 4.0 license is a Creative Commons license. This is a non-copyleft free license that is good for art and entertainment works, and educational works. It is compatible with all versions of the GNU GPL; however, like all CC licenses, it should not be used on software. People are free to: Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format; Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. But they must conform to the following terms: Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

“You paid 200,000 francs for this shit?” The Art of Friendship

James Murdoch

This article considers the application of Lacanian psycho-semiotics to Yasmina Reza’s, Art, as a means of understanding the influence that aesthetic judgements wield as markers of social class: the defining actor in the balance of the play’s interpersonal relationships. In viewing the focus of their dispute, a recently acquired artwork, as a metaphor for the unconscious (as defined under the Lacanian psychological model), it becomes apparent the play’s structure strongly reflects that of Lacan’s analysis of Edgar Allan Poe’s The Purloined Letter. This understanding grounds a potentially lofty discussion of ‘high’ art as one that carries real-world, non-literary ramifications, contextualising the differing socio-economic power held by each of the characters and exposing the internal pressures that that imbalance exerts.

Reza’s globally celebrated Art (1994) critiques the notion of what is, and is not, discerning taste, and the social clout it allows its arbiters to wield. In considering the moralisation of aesthetic values through the explosive relationship of two friends, Marc and Serge, and the pacifying neutrality of their mutual friend, Yvan it considers “opinion” in all its forms: entrenched and reformed, weaponised and conciliatory. The play is centred around a dispute, prompted by Serge’s acquisition of, what is deemed to be, a completely monochromatic white painting. The perception of what purchasing this minimalist painting represents in Serge, affronts Marc’s notion of what friendship, and specifically, their friendship, is – a distaste which he voices

through the guise of opposing cultural sensibilities. This article will consider the trio’s relationships through the lens of Lacan’s post-structuralist psychoanalysis, exploring the recognition of the *i* (or self) and how it is opposed by the other – as portrayed in the veiled discussions that ensue over the Antrios – and the repetitive cycles of dependence, rejection, and reconciliatory renewal it brings about. Through a Lacanian lens, the manner in which an inanimate object can act as such a psychological driver of the characters’ behaviour will be considered.

Lacan’s definition of consciousness, as per his mirror-phase theory, is split into the imaginary and symbolic orders:

the imaginary (to be understood as the adverbial of "image") is the recognition of self-image, the moment that enunciates our intrinsic understanding of self upon first seeing our reflection; the symbolic is the secondary imposition of linguistic and cultural influences upon the imaginary through our perception of others' actions. The initially idealised recognition of the self as an image is, however, interrupted by the identification of the secondary other's image:

C'est ce moment qui décisivement fait basculer tout le savoir humain dans la médiatisation par le désir de l'autre, constitue ses objets dans une équivalence abstraite par la concurrence d'autrui, en fait du je cet appareil pour lequel toute poussée des instincts sera un danger...

It is in the understanding of the split between the imaginary, whether that be self-image - literal, metaphorical - or another's (henceforth to be referred to as the image), the active external influence of the symbolic, and the recognition of how that ties us to our reality, that reveals our unconscious thoughts and desires, and thus our behavioural motivations. In his eyes, this could, << accompagner le patient jusqu'à limite extatique du <<Tu

es cela>>, ou se révèle à lui le chiffre de sa destinée mortelle >>. In theory, it potentially offers to exalt the human condition from an ever-searching fallibility towards a self-realised certainty and directionality.

Lacan's method of unpicking a subject's psychology rests on Freud's notion of repetition compulsion; the behavioural tendency to unconsciously re-enact past experiences, either as situational reoccurrences or as an underlying experiential lens that guides other conduct. This repetition occurs involuntarily as the unconscious is unaffected by the ultimate human motivator - desire for pleasure, or the avoidance of displeasure: the pleasure/unpleasure principle. The Lacanian model diverges from that of the Freudian, in not considering the ego (to be understood in a Lacanian sense as the image) as the combination of our base desires (the id) and competing moral inhibitors (the superego), and our thoughts (the unconscious), to be a confluent entity. Lacan models this structure semiotically: our *i* acts as the signifier; the ego forms the signified. Consequently, Lacan purports that the unmoderated thought processes of our *i* (unconscious) come

1: Jacques Lacan, 'Le Stade Du Miroir Comme Formateur de La Fonction Du Je,' in *Écrits* (Paris, France: Editions du Seuil, 1966), 94.

2: Ibid, 98. *It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence by the co-operation of others, and turns the I into that apparatus for which every instinctual thrust constitutes a danger.

3: Ibid, 99.

4: Ibid, 100. *may accompany the patient to the ecstatic limit of 'Thou art that,' in which is revealed to him the cipher of his moral destiny.'

to the fore when the conscious being (ego) is at rest, the causality (or repetition compulsion) linking one unconscious thought to another, forming the chain of signification. This chain of signification reveals our unadulterated being.

Lacan famously exemplifies this chain of signification in analysing the psychologically reflective characters and scenarios found throughout Poe's *The Purloined Letter*. The short story charts the manner in which (previously elusive) stolen correspondence is unearthed thanks to the detective's consideration of the thief's psyche. In this instance, the thief had referentially mirrored the owner's own method of concealment: leaving it in plain sight. Just as Lacan considered Poe to have 'used a written letter as a metaphor of the signifier,' which 'determines the acts and destiny of the subjects', Reza employs the Antrios painting as the signifier in *Art*, an inanimate object from which the behaviour of the on-stage characters stems. The Antrios, as an imaginary

metaphor for the characters' individual psyches, acts as the unconscious - the signifier - and the behaviour (as a product of the ego) that this metaphor inspires is representative of the symbolic order - the signified. Jaccomard agrees with this reading in considering the Antrios, << un écran vide sur lequel projeter nos désirs, écran qui signale la vacuité du désir, tout en étant un objet palpable qui fait écran >>. Therefore, the judgements they make in their descriptions of the Antrios are tantamount to their judgements of each other's images, and what they learn from these judgements in relation to their self-image is tantamount to a chain of signification. The differences exposed in this chain of signification serve to heighten the friction within the plot, prompting vehement outbursts from the characters. The realisations they have about their own, and other's identities, are painful, and are therefore punitively weaponised against one another in order to prompt reassurances of their own self-images and reassessments of the other's opinions of them – the projection of the

5: Bice Benvenuto, Roger Kennedy, "The Purloined Letter" (1956), in *The Works of Jacques Lacan: An Introduction* (London, England: Free Association Books, 1986), 91-92.

6: Bruce Fink, 'Reading "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious," in *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 102.

7: Ibid.

8: Benvenuto and Kennedy, 'The Purloined', 92-93.

9: Ibid, 102.

10: Ibid, 99.

11 : Helene Jaccomard, "Art," in *Les Fruits de La Passion: Le Théâtre de Yasmina Reza* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, 2013), 122.

*An empty screen on to which we can project our desires, a screen that signifies the emptiness of desires, all whilst being a palpable object that acts as a screen.'

12: Benvenuto and Kennedy, 'The Purloined', 95.

other's image. Just as in *The Purloined Letter*, '[...] the ascendancy which [a character] derives from the situation is not so much a function of the use of the letter but of the role it constitutes for him.' They equally utilise relational fault lines within the group to this end. Due to the imbalanced numbering of the cast in *Art*, dominant or submissive behavioural stances are conferred by the ever-changing majority's opinion on the painting. Thus, the shifting power structures allow each of the characters in turn to display their dissatisfaction with the friendship, as moderated by the Antrios. Whomever holds the greater sway within the politics of the group at the time of each revelation uses it as a triumphant prop to their own original (pre-argument) image; whomever does not, has theirs retributively diminished, by consequence. It is through this dramaturgical chain of signification that they come to garner a true understanding of themselves and one another, and of their own and of each other's identities and values.

As per the model set by Lacan in his analysis of Poe's plot structure, *Art* can be viewed as having a composition of several behaviourally separate 'basic scenes' - although in this case, three not two. These scenarios can also be categorised in this way as the action of the plot is based on the degrees of "blindness" which the characters have towards one another - that "blindness" being borne from another character's deceptive behaviour; and the degree to which the deceived character is "blinded"

being relative to how psychologically attune they are in observing the deceiver's actions. The first behavioural pattern (which encompasses the majority of the play's action) we can refer to as the dishonest escalation; the second, the truthful revelation (the point of greatest relational clarity); and the third, the dishonest mediation (a lapse back towards blindness in order to save the friendship).

The dishonest escalation centres around Serge and Marc disputing the Antrios' cultural and financial worth, and in doing so, attributes moral or immoral qualities to its aesthetic - yet another element of the painting the pair cannot agree on. Serge is perhaps the only character whose ekphrastic (visually descriptive) assessments we can trust. Yvan does not have the cultural understanding to descriptively do the work justice, whilst Marc "colours" its true appearance in his hatred of it as a visual marker for Serge's cultural progression. They are both blind to it, and therefore, each other. This descriptive flux of visual reality (of the imaginary metaphor) is reflective of their volatile states as their i's, their unconscious, and their self-images come under attack. For instance, Marc's perception of himself is changed when he realises the true meaning of Serge considering him the perfect pair to his partner, Paula, << [...] << condescendant >> , << ferme au monde >> ... << fossilisé >>...>>. It is the friction between his i and self-image, and the change that the other's image renders to his self-image

that hurts him. Only in understanding the parallel nature of what Antrios represents to the bachelor, Serge, and what his partner, Paula, represents to him, can Marc finally see the true literal and false figurative visual nature of the work as a projection of both Serge and his own unconscious in the argument. However, this revelation is told through the lens of his own field of comprehension, and therefore explains his superimposition of a non-existent figurality on the subject of the work (this being the only way for him to understand it as a traditionalist).

The dishonest escalation, while principally founded on a disagreement surrounding the positive or negative aesthetic value of the work (and its subtext), is further inflamed by the placating dishonesty of Yvan. Yvan does not let the guard of his ego down in order to express the true feelings he has that stem from his unconscious. Serge is convinced by Yvan's mirrored responses, << Ces couleurs me touchent >>, and that he therefore must resonate with the painting. Serge is consequently blind to the situation, and consequently, to Serge's psyche. This blindness, caused by a misunderstanding of Yvan's true character and motivations, enables Serge to continue his argument with Marc. Serge believes he holds the

cards in this argument (not only in light of his own self-accredited greater cultural expertise, but in having an ardent supporter in tow) and as such, believes that his shared view of the Antrios' aesthetic value must be correct.

Marc is fully aware of Yvan's true lacklustre opinion – in how he, from a mere description of the work values it as being worth, << zéro centimes >>, and in the compounding response of << Non >> to << Tu es ému par le tableau de Serge? >> when he has viewed it. In asking, << Tu reçois en cadeau de mariage ce tableau. Tu es content? Tu es content...? >> Marc demonstrates a telling understanding that Yvan would, in fact, not be happy, despite his non-responsive silence to the question, and later his dishonesty in saying that he had come to appreciate the painting. This reality is confirmed to us, the audience, in the dramatic irony of Yvan's soliloquy, that, << Je ne suis pas content mais d'une manière générale, je ne suis pas un garçon qui peut dire, je ne suis content >>. Marc can understand, by way of Yvan's non-committal symbolic response to the imaginary metaphor, his greater psychology at large: Yvan is unsure of his own self-image (as exemplified by his reliance on his psychiatrist, Finkelzohn) and is thus unable to give a consistent opinion. It is this inconsistency that initially

13: Benvenuto and Kennedy, 'The Purloined', 94.

14: Ibid, 97.

15: Yasmina Reza, *Art* (Paris, France: Gallimard, 2009), 98. *'Condescending,' 'narrow-minded,' 'fossilised.'

16: Ibid, 72 *'I find these colours touching.'

riles Marc and results in the casting aside of his conciliatory false affirmation of the work to Serge, that exacerbates every other argumentative social interaction the trio have. Marc moralises this non-response to the artwork, considering it to be worse to have no opinion than an opposing one, as eventually, does Serge. This, by extension, submits Yvan's psyche to moral scrutiny, due to the painting's role in the play as the signifier; a metaphor for the character's individual psychologies, as told through their visual analyses of it. Under this rubric, having a decisive outlook asserts the presence and parameters of one's being. As noted by Jacomard, Marc (misogynistically) feels that this non-opinion towards the artwork is, by extension, representative of Yvan having lost his vitality, his eccentricity, to the women in his life. Just as he has lost Serge to the << Gotha des grands amateurs d'art >> that would appreciate the Antrios, he has lost Yvan to a self-centred hysteria brought on by his submissive relationships to women. He is not really an <<hybride>> because of his indecisiveness towards the Antrios, but for what that indecisiveness

represents: a passiveness in his personal and professional lives, and by extension, an underlying effeminacy. Marc, in opposing the values that underlie Serge's acquisition (and positive opinion) of the Antrios, must therefore also question Yvan's moral state in wanting to continue his friendship with Serge (given what these values represent), presuming that, << si Yvan tolère que Serge ait pu acheter une merde blanche vingt briques, c'est qu'il fout de Serge >>. It is both his lack of gumption and his willingness to straddle a moral quandary that marks Yvan as lost to him. Marc, at this stage, has full sight of Yvan, yet a false sight of Serge in believing that his views and interests are maliciously contrived (which they are not). He feels justified in his attack on Yvan in light of his own contrary decisive stance, and consequent dominant social position. This behaviour could arguably be seen as relationally weak as it results in the distancing of himself socially, whereas Yvan performs a balancing act in order to maintain a level of social cachet. In the cultural environment of the play, however, he is rich in the primary social currency: integrity to one's own outlook.

17: Reza, Art, 26. *'Bugger all.'

18: Ibid, 44. *'You felt a resonance?...'

19: Ibid.*'You get this painting as a wedding present. Does it make you happy?... Does it make you happy?...'

20: Ibid. *'I'm not the sort of person who can say I'm happy, just like that.'

21: Ibid, 81.

22: Jacomard, 'Art', 133.

23: Reza, Art, 28 *'one of the great connoisseurs.'

24: Ibid, 76 *'amoeba.'

25: Reza, Art, 20. *'If Yvan tolerates the fact that Serge has spent two hundred grand on some pieces of white shit, it's because he couldn't care less about Serge.'

At the height of the trio's division, Serge similarly reaches this evaluation of Yvan in saying, << Tu as remarqué que tu ne parles que de toi >>. Serge's judgement of this behavioural motivation demonstrates a new understanding of Yvan's psyche that has been exemplified to him through Yvan's contradictory discussions of the painting to both Marc and he - the painting acting once again as an imaginary metaphor. His friends provide him with the social role of being << le farfadet >> from which he garners pleasure and self-worth. They are <<les deux seules personnes dont la présence me procurait un embryon de satisfaction >>. Serge has come to understand Yvan wants to be << le grand réconciliateur du genre humain >> for his own gain, to make his dissatisfying life bearable in moderating the lives of others – the only dominant position he has in life. Thus, he has gained partial sight of the situation, and of his friend's psychological outlook and motivational drivers.

The truthful revelation is prompted by Serge's discovery of Yvan's true opinion, that they had been arguing over << une merde blanche >>, that he has agreed

with Marc all along. In this discovery, Serge achieves the same clarity that Marc has been in possession of since the first act. It is only in Yvan shedding his neutral stance, in adopting an opinion instead of a non-opinion, that the dishonest mediation can take place. Yvan's neutrality, having gained a sense of honesty, and shed its aggravating quality, materialises itself (in what could be considered a secondary imaginary metaphor for the unconscious) as the felt-tip pen Serge requests from him to propose a truce with Marc. Serge's acquisition of the painting had been tantamount to a rejection of Marc's tutelage. Marc had felt that he no longer held a cultural superiority over Serge and that the type of fondness he had for him would have to be re-evaluated in light of that shift: from storge to philia. The Antrios' blankness was representative of cultural theories that Marc had no comprehension of, nor appreciation for, as a traditionalist who favoured academic painting. Peacock considers this stance to be, 'mimeticism' - as evidenced by the, '[...] repeated ironic taunts with regard to deconstruction [which] give evidence of unreflective nominalism

26: Ibid, 110. *'Are you aware that you've talked about nothing other than yourself?'

27: Ibid, 113. *'the joker.'

28: Ibid, 112. *'The only two people whose presence guaranteed some spark of satisfaction.'

29: Ibid, 38. *'the great reconciler of the human race.'

30: Ibid, 114. *'A white piece of shit.'

31: Noel Peacock, 'Unmaking Mimesis: Yasmina Reza's 'Art,'" in *Reverberations: Staging Relations in French since 1500*, ed. by Michael Brophy Phyllis Gaffney Gallagher (Dublin, Ireland: University College Dublin Press, 2008), 150.

32: Peacock, 'Unmaking Mimesis,' 150.

rather than any grasp of aesthetic theory, which contradicts his self-image as an archetypal mimeticist.'

In essence, Marc subscribed to the notion that art can only copy nature or other artworks, as typified by the easily palatable painting, *A View of Carcassonne* that he hangs in his own home, in the Flemish style. This belief meant that he could not grasp the concepts behind the Antrios' minimalism.

The work, therefore, not only offended his artistic tastes, but the falsehood of his own self-image as a highly cultivated figure. Serge's ability to appreciate the work exposed the reality of this inferiority not only within himself, but within the balance of friendship: the self-image transformed by the secondary influence of the other. To strike a truce with Marc, Serge lets him draw on the painting, making it mimetic, figurative; he transforms the offensively elusive object into a work that will sit within Marc's frame of comprehension. However, in order to rekindle the friendship, he must blind Marc in concealing the fact that he was aware of the felt-tip being washable – that the damage to the Antrios will be repairable. Similarly, Yvan maintains his role as the group's moderator in hiding the same key detail from Marc, it being his pen. Thus, the snow which Marc considers the now

figurative blankness to represent, << [...] est devenue une métaphore de l'amitié entre les trois hommes. En apparence, innocente et rationnelle, au fond, impure et mensongère >>. The characters' dominant and submissive stances still exist, but are inverted: Marc is now the submissive party through his ignorance to the situation; the Antrios still stands in as a conduit for their psyches, and the behaviour which stems from it represents their altered egos.

Reza fully illustrates the potential for an artistic work to be a catalyst of seismic change, whether that be political or personal, through her comedic tragedy; the Antrios being transformed into a silent partner in the exchange, a near fourth character. It aptly evaluates not just the aesthetic debate of what is beauty, but the magnetism that lies beneath. In arguing over an expressionless form, the characters speak for it, imbuing a meaning and symbolism outwith the standard art criticism of minimalist works. It is a self-critical review. Given the art world's patron and market-led business model, issues of class, and consequently, exclusionary discernments of taste are inseparable from the production of art itself. The cycle of rejection, retribution, and rebirth throughout this play exposes the rot beneath this reality at a human level.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arthur, P. and Cowell-Meyers, Kimberly. "Irish Republican Army." Encyclopedia Britannica, August 22, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Irish-Republican-Army>.
- Author(s) C C O'Brien (1983) Terrorism under Democratic conditions - the case of the IRA (Irish Republican Army) (from terrorism, legitimacy, and power, P 91-104, 1983, Martha Crenshaw, ed. - see NCJ-91507), Terrorism Under Democratic Conditions - The Case of the IRA (Irish Republican Army) (From Terrorism, Legitimacy, and Power, P 91-104, 1983, Martha Crenshaw, ed. - See NCJ-91507) | Office of Justice Programs. Available at: [https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/terrorism-under-democratic-conditions-case-ira-irish-republican#:~:text=Within%20the%20framework%20of%20such,is%20unmistakably%20a%20terrorist%20organization](https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/terrorism-under-democratic-conditions-case-ira-irish-republican#:~:text=Within%20the%20framework%20of%20such,is%20unmistakably%20a%20terrorist%20organization.). (Accessed: October 21, 2022).
- Bradley, J.M. (2004) "Orangeism in Scotland: Unionism, politics, identity, and football," *Éire-Ireland*, 39(1), pp. 237–261. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2004.0001>.
- Bradley, J.M. (2007) "Football in Scotland: A history of political and ethnic identity," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 12(1), pp. 81–98. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523369508713884>.
- Bradley, J.M. (2014) "Sectarianism, anti-sectarianism and Scottish football," *Sport in Society*, 18(5), pp. 588–603. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2014.976008>.
- Bradley, Joseph M. "Orangeism in Scotland: Unionism, Politics, Identity, and Football." *Éire-Ireland* 39, no. 1 (2004): 237-261. doi:10.1353/eir.2004.0001.
- Celtic FC (2022) Celtic Football Club 1880 to 1889 | Celtic FC History by Decade, celticfc.com. Available at: <https://www.celticfc.com/history/history-timeline/1880-to-1889/> (Accessed: 2022).
- FIFA (2015) "Laws of the Game." FIFA Publications.
- FIFA (2020) The football landscape – the vision 2020-2023, FIFA Publications. Available at: <https://publications.fifa.com/en/vision-report-2021/the-football-landscape/> (Accessed: October 20, 2022).
- Jarvie, G. (2021) The value of Scottish football. Available at: <https://www.scottishfa.co.uk/media/6435/briefing-paper-the-value-of-scottish-football.pdf> (Accessed: October 19, 2022).
- John Reid (2022) europeanleadershipnetwork.org. Available at: <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/person/john-reid/> (Accessed: 2022).
- Kelly, J. (2011). 'Sectarianism' and Scottish football: Critical reflections on dominant discourse and press commentary. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 46(4), 418–435. <https://doi.org.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/10.1177/1012690210383787>
- Merriam-Webster (n.d.) "Identity Politics", Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary. Merriam-Webster. Available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/identity%20politics> (Accessed: 2022).
- Nygård, H.M. and Gates, S. (2013) "Soft Power at home and abroad: Sport diplomacy, politics and peace-building," *International Area Studies Review*, 16(3), pp. 235–243. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2233865913502971.2457660b8>
- Orwell, G. (2021) The sporting spirit: George Orwell, The Orwell Foundation. Available at: <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/the-sporting-spirit/> (Accessed: October 20, 2022).

Our History (2022) Nil By Mouth. Available at: <https://nilbymouth.org/aboutus/our-history/> (Accessed: October 22, 2022).

Scott, K. (2001) "A Game of Two Halves." The Guardian, 15 May.

The Scottish Parliament (2018) Offensive behaviour at football and threatening communications (repeal) (Scotland) bill: Financial memorandum.

Turner, C., Begg, P. and McTague, M. (2022) The Scottish electorate and football fandom post-Brexit - UK in a changing Europe, UK in a changing Europe. Available at: <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/scottish-electorate-football-fandom-brexit/> (Accessed: 2022).

Whigham, S., Kelly, J. and Bairner, A. (2021) The Scottish electorate and football fandom post-Brexit, UK in a changing Europe. Available at: <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/scottish-electorate-football-fandom-brexit/> (Accessed: October 17, 2022).