UNSPEAKABLE SECRETS AND THE
PSYCHOANALYSIS OF CULTURE

Esther Rashkin
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AND THE
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OF CULTURE

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INTRODUCTION

Vexed Encounters:
Psychoanalysis, Cultural Studies,
and the Politics of Close Reading

In sum, academic criticism is, paradoxically, prepared to accept . . .
the principle of interpretive criticism or, to use a different word
(which still causes fear), ideological critique; but it denies that this
interpretation and this ideology can function in a realm that is purely
internal to the work; in short, what is rejected is *immanent analysis*:
everything is acceptable as long as the work can be put in relation to
something *besides* itself, that is, something besides literature: history
. . ., psychology . . ., these *elsewheres* of the work will gradually be
allowed; what will not be allowed is criticism that establishes itself
*within* the work and posits the work's relation to the world only after
having entirely described it from the interior, in its functions or, as we
say today, in its structure . . .

—Roland Barthes, “The Two Criticisms”

The relationship between psychoanalysis and cultural studies is a
vexed one. It need not be. I want to argue in this study that psycho-
analysis galvanizes—in a way that no other discipline can—the contact
between texts and social, historical, and political contexts. It illuminates

For the reader’s convenience, page references to primary texts in each chapter appear
throughout in parentheses following quotations. All ellipses within quotations are my own,
unless stated otherwise. I most often use *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford
University Press, 1971), cited throughout as *OED*, and *Le Grand Robert de la langue
common usage and meaning of a word at the time it was used in a text because these reference
works provide dates and examples of usage. Other reference works are used for confirmation
and are cited where appropriate.
obscured ideology and exposes cultural connections that would otherwise remain unseen. It does this best when it is anchored in a focused practice of close reading, a practice that cultural studies has marginalized along with psychoanalysis itself. To retrace, psychoanalytically, the concealed lines of transmission between text and context thus also means to recast close textual analysis itself as an engaged political practice with formidable hermeneutic and heuristic powers.

This study springs from my investigations of literary and film narratives that conceal within themselves distressing, unspeakable, potentially psychopathogenic secrets. Uncovering these secrets and their vicissitudes, which psychoanalysis is well equipped to do, reveals powerful and too-often overlooked engagements between these works of literature and film and specific cultural and ideological constellations. This project is thus at odds with recent trends in cultural studies. Scholarship’s intensive exploration of all dimensions of cultural production during the last fifteen years has dealt with psychoanalysis in only two ways: either it has ignored it (as a glance at cultural studies journal contents, anthologies, and conference programs reveals); or it has understood psychoanalysis to mean Freudian and Lacanian theory. When cultural studies does deploy Freud and Lacan in the service of ideological critique, they are primarily confined to support status. Freud’s theory of “identification,” for example, may be called upon to bolster a sociopolitical analysis of how race, class, or gender constructs public space. Lacan’s concepts of the “phal- lus” and “the Other” may serve to reinforce a materialist critique of rap music marketing or gender inequities in public education. While these deployments have value, they barely touch the theoretical wealth that psychoanalysis has to offer the study of cultural practices.² It has not always been this way.

REREADING MYTHOLOGIES

Roland Barthes overtly appealed to psychoanalysis for help in reading certain cultural phenomena in Mythologies, a work that most regard as one of the founding texts of cultural studies. In the essay entitled “Soap- powders and Detergents” (“Saponides et Détectants”), first published in 1954 following a world conference on detergents held in Paris that year, Barthes turns his attention to the advertising of cleansing agents. In this, as in the other essays in Mythologies, Barthes elaborates “in detail” a semiologically based demystification of the discursive practices and soci-
ocultural representations that confuse the historical with the natural. To put it another way, he shows how these practices present as immanent and authentic what is symbolically and ideologically constructed in post–World War II French society. It is clear that *Mythologies* takes as its focus or “essential enemy” the “bourgeois norm.” What is striking about the essay on “Soap-powders and Detergents,” on which I want to focus, is its suggestion that psychoanalysis, a term Barthes uses “without reference to any specific school,” take a close look at the advertising campaigns being disseminated by the detergent manufacturers. These campaigns, Barthes argues, have been so massive that the laundry products now belong to a region of French daily life which the various types of psychoanalysis would do well to pay some attention to if they wish to keep up to date. One could then usefully contrast the psychoanalysis of purifying fluids (chlorinated, for example) with that of soap-powders . . . or that of detergents. . . . The relations between the illness and the cure, between dirt and a given product, are very different in each case. (36)

Barthes’s essay positions psychoanalysis as a valuable if not privileged heuristic instrument for deciphering the semantic and semiotic strategies employed in the marketing of soaps. We did not realize, until Barthes, that there were any such strategies. Barthes goes on to amplify his argument in the next paragraph, commenting that, “even in the category of powders, one must in addition oppose against advertisements based on psychology those based on psychoanalysis” (37). (It is worth noting, and I will come back to this, that Barthes distinguishes face creams from soap powders because the former, which he discusses in another *Mythology*, “have a very different psychoanalytic meaning” [37]). There is more to say about detergents, however: the essay reconfigures the discourse of detergents in terms of illness and cure, malady and
remedy. It thereby suggests not only that there is a psychopathological dimension to the French cultural practice of cleansing that justifies seeking consultation from psychoanalysis (as opposed to its presumably less sophisticated cousin, psychology) that would be sensitive to the workings of the unconscious. It also implies that the possibility of “cure” exists, and that there is some chance for relief or deliverance from the distress or pain embedded in the antagonisms between dirt and detergent, soil and soap.

Barthes’s analysis raises two questions. First, how might we explain this sudden onset of soap advertising in mid-1950s France? Second, what are we to make of his surprising invocation of psychoanalysis in the midst of a semiotically grounded demythifying of the bourgeois ideology that has been woven into the marketing of laundry products? The first question has already been asked, and to some degree answered, by another reader of Barthes, Kristin Ross, in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (1995). Ross’s thesis—that France’s rapid, postwar modernization was propelled not only by the forces of American technology and consumerism, but also by the decolonization of Algeria—illustrates the insights that strong cultural analysis can provide. It also reveals what cultural studies can miss, and what psychoanalysis can help us see.

Ross invokes Barthes to launch her examination of the cult-like status of hygiene in the postwar French domestic sphere. She is impatient with the clichéd narrative of wartime deprivation, which has long served to explain France’s postwar hunger for consumer goods as a natural outgrowth of the literal hunger France suffered during the Occupation. Ross claims that Barthes puts his finger on the real psychic need underlying this consumption at the end of his essay in *Mythologies* on skin cream, entitled “Depth Advertised” (“Publicité de la profondeur”), which she quotes: “Decay is being expelled (from the teeth, the skin, the blood, the breath): France is having a great yen for cleanliness.” If Barthes correctly identifies France’s deep need to be clean, however, Ross observes that neither he nor his contemporary chroniclers of the quotidian (Lefebvre, Baudrillard) ever explain why this is so, or how this hunger for hygiene is related to postwar modernization or France’s mutating concept of nationhood. This is Ross’s project.

Ross acknowledges briefly how metaphors of hygiene are woven through postwar discourses of anti-Pétainist political purges, campaigns for moral purification, and efforts by literary authors (notably of the “New Novel”) to clean up novelistic style. But she wants to focus on
even more immediate history. That is, she explains France's virtual obsession with cleanliness, which advertising campaigns and women's magazines stoke as they target (primarily) women, as an effect of the end of empire and the displacement of colonial administrative and disciplinary practices into the realm of everyday metropolitan domesticity. In soon-to-be postcolonial France, cleanliness is the means by which the French will maintain their difference from and superiority over the formerly colonized. France must become a modern nation, which means a technologically advanced and hygienic one, because Algeria is becoming an independent nation. "[S]ome distinction between the two must still prevail. France must, so to speak, clean house; reinventing the home is reinventing the nation" (Ross, 78).

Ross’s thesis is a highly suggestive, provocative contribution to current thinking about postwar French history and culture. She illustrates it with an eclectic array of cultural artifacts and social practices ranging from advertisements for kitchen appliances and laundry detergents to film representations of domesticity and autobiographical accounts of French techniques of “clean torture” in Algeria. Some have questioned the accuracy of her history and her use of metaphor and unexpected juxtaposition to argue her case. Others have accused her of going too far in linking what she calls France’s “modernization” and “culture of cleanliness” (Ross, 74) to decolonization and France’s changing concept of national identity. I would argue that she does not go far enough. At least not in her reading of France’s obsession with hygiene. Even as she seeks to provide an alternative “experience of the historicity” (Ross, 10) of France’s modernization, which postmodernist theories, steeped in “the dissolution of the event and of diachronic agency, seek to efface” (Ross, 10), she herself stops too soon, abandons her own diachronic counter-discourse. A close, psychoanalytic reading of Barthes’s essays on detergents and skin cream, to which Ross refers, will help illustrate my point. It will also suggest how psychoanalysis can expose ideology and unconscious political motives and dynamics, embedded within societal practices and discourses, that resist detection by materialist cultural analysis.

Ross has not paid close enough attention to the metaphoric dimension of Barthes’s language, which is crucial to his project and to mine. Barthes observes a key semiotic distinction in the marketing of soap-powders and detergents that hinges on what these products do to dirt. Ads for chlorinated fluids, he notes, portray them as “liquid fire” (36), which must be carefully dosed or “the object itself would be affected, ‘burnt’” (36). Such products alter matter in “violent, . . . chemical” (36)
ways: “the product ‘kills’ the dirt” (36). Powders, by contrast, have very different connotations. They are “separating agents” (36). They “liberate the object from its circumstantial imperfection: dirt is ‘forced out’ and no longer killed [since this] puny enemy, stunted and black, . . . takes to its heels from the fine pure linen at the sole threat” (36) of the detergent’s action. Barthes adds that advertisements for one very popular brand of detergent turn the consumer into an “accomplice of a liberation rather than the mere beneficiary of a result” (37) by explaining how the product cleans. The ads also invoke the semiotics of “foam”—connoting luxury, pleasure, lightness, and spirituality—to “disguise the abrasive function of the detergent” (37) and to reassure consumers that the fabric’s “molecular order” (38) will not be damaged by the harsh cleansing. Finally, Barthes suggests ethnographic correlatives for these hygienic behaviors. He sees chlorine and ammonia-based agents, which represent “a kind of absolute fire” (36), as extensions of the “washerwoman’s movements when she beats the clothes” (36). Powders, on the other hand, are “selective” (36). They have a “policing rather than a war-making function” (36) because they do not kill but “push, drive dirt out through the weave of the object” (36). As such, they correspond to “the housewife pressing and rolling the washing against a sloping board” (36).

Barthes’s unveiling of these advertisements—their rhetorical appeal to the liberating pleasures of housewifery, and the underlying bourgeois ideology that constructs gendered domesticity as natural and necessary—is powerful and convincing. Accurate as his analysis may be, there is an even more complex and surprising narrative concealed within these soap ads and highlighted, albeit inadvertently, by Barthes’s own attempt to demythologize them. It may be that Barthes was as uncomfortable as the reader may now be upon encountering this language in the context of selling soap. This discomfort comes from the strange familiarity of the language, from the disturbing, uncanny feeling that we have seen and heard these metaphors before. We have. Barthes’s annotated taxonomy of cleansing solutions and his anthropomorphizing of their cleaning functions are readable as a reinscription or second-degree writing of the saga of postwar France’s shameful and (at the time) largely unacknowledged participation in the Nazi’s Final Solution. I want to suggest, in other words, that Barthes’s essay on soap-powders and detergents is not just about the hidden ideologies and discursive strategies deployed to sell products that eliminate dirt from French fabrics. It is also about the practice of eliminating Jews from the fabric of French society and the rhetorical whitewash used to cover it up.
It is Barthes’s language itself that allows me to make this apparently outrageous argument. Just as dirt is “selected, separated, driven, and forced out” by the “policing” actions of soap-powders, so the Jews, portrayed in so much propaganda as a subhuman, “puny enemy, stunted and black,” were selected, separated, and forced out from the “pure linen” of Christian France by Vichy’s collaborationist police and driven to French internment camps like Drancy, Pithiviers, and Beaune-la-Rolande before being eliminated at Auschwitz. Expelled from the “teeth, skin, blood, and breath” of the French body politic to satisfy France’s desire to be an “accomplice . . . rather than [a] mere beneficiary” of the Nazis’ “great yen for cleanliness” and genetic, “molecular order,” the Jews were gassed and then burnt, via the subterfuge of delousing, which “disguised the abrasive” function of “purifying” agents that alter matter in “violent, chemical” ways, “kill’ dirt,” and burn “the object itself.” Barthes’s essay on skin cream ads amplifies this embedded narrative. While he codes as “scientism” (“Depth,” 47) advertisers’ emphasis on the “ultra-penetrating” (49; Barthes’s italics), “deep cleansing” (47), “regenerative” (47) qualities of substances like “bactericide agent R 51” (47; Barthes’s italics),19 these references to science, thorough cleaning, and mysteriously coded chemical agents evoke the notorious insecticide Zyklon B, which literally penetrated the “skin, blood, and breath” of its victims in order to (racially) purify and regenerate.20

The advertisements for soaps, detergents, and skin creams, and Barthes’s exposure of the semiotics of warfare, expulsion, and destruction inscribed within these odes to hygiene, can thus be read as telltale signs of the drama of the Holocaust, which permeated the social fiber, practices, and discourse of postwar France. This is where psychoanalysis comes in: the ads can be read as symptoms of the return of the repressed. They are ciphered signifiers of the nation’s struggle—and in large part failure—to come to terms, in the aftermath of the Second World War, with its eager collusion in rounding up and eliminating the Jews. It is not necessary to repeat here the compelling accounts by historians, such as Rousso, Paxton, and Birnbaum, who have described the various ways in which France tried to suppress or deny this moment of its history and transmute the events of anti-Semitic collaboration into a story of unified resistance to Nazi occupation.21 I want only to suggest that the highly charged and cohesive language of the soap and skin cream ads, if read closely through a psychoanalytic lens, emerges as the cryptic narrative of French complicity in the expulsion and extermination of the Jews which, in the mid-1950s, the nation of France had still not made part of its