

imagistic accomplishment constitute the basis for judging the quality of a work. Objective criticism has flourished since its various beginnings with T. S. Eliot, the NEW CRITICS, and the RUSSIAN FORMALISTS. While objective criticism has in recent times suffered greatly in theoretical circles, it remains the most practiced criticism in academia, particularly by those who deny adherence to any theory. See also CHICAGO SCHOOL, EXPRESSIVE CRITICISM.

OBJET PETIT A. In the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, the term *objet petit a* (obZHAY peTEET AH) is given no formal definition; and Lacan insisted that it should be left untranslated as well, so that it remains a kind of algebraic variable. Nevertheless, it is possible to say in a general way what he intended by the term and what the logic is behind his refusal to define it. The French word *objet* means “object,” and the *petit a* is the “small a” in the word *autre* (other), which is distinguished from *autre* written with a capital A. This lesser other refers to the objects of desire or, more precisely, to representations of those primordial forms (see PART-OBJECT) that offer the subject an image inseparable from his or her desire. Thus, the *objet petit a* is not the object itself (such as the breast) but an image of that object detached from the whole form of the mother’s body, which had fully occupied the infant’s world in the earliest stages of life. After the MIRROR STAGE, however, these SIGNIFIERS are repressed (see REPRESSION) and become unconscious fantasies that seem to promise a return to that lost world of wholeness and union. Yet in analysis they turn out to refer only to other signifiers in an endless chain. Therefore, since the *objet petit a* is a signifier without a signified, Lacan claimed that it should be given no fixed definition. Instead, like any other signifier, it must be understood by its context, where it functions as an emblem of the absence that desire seeks perpetually to fill.

Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977.

OEDIPUS COMPLEX. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the Oedipus complex is a group of feelings—both of desire and hostility—that the child experiences toward his or her parents, and that Freud described as conforming to the Greek legend of Oedipus Rex, as it is related in Sophocles’ play of the same name. Thus, the child feels sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex and desires the death of the parent of the same sex, while

simultaneously experiencing the anxieties attendant on these wishes (see CASTRATION COMPLEX). It first appears between the ages of three and five years, and returns at puberty, at which point it is resolved to a greater or lesser extent through the choice of an appropriate object outside the family. For Freud and later adherents to Freudian doctrine, this triangular structure is fundamental in determining the formation of the personality and the trajectory of adult desire, as well as a point of reference for the most varied pathologies; moreover, it is to be found universally.

The absoluteness of the Freudian position has been disputed by a range of other theorists. Psychoanalysts like Melanie Klein and the OBJECT RELATIONS school argue that a greater importance should be attached to the PREOEDIPAL phase, when the child is engaged more exclusively in a relationship with the mother. Adherents of this school seek to trace many forms of pathological behavior back to this two-part structure, rather than to the Oedipal triangle. This position has had a major influence on feminist theorists like Nancy Chodorow, whose work on mothering has gained considerable influence. In this group, too, can be placed the adherents of “anti-psychiatry,” notably Félix Guattari, who with the philosopher Gilles Deleuze celebrated the preoedipal world of the schizophrenic as an alternative to the dominance of the Oedipus complex, which they saw as allied to the repressive structures of capitalist society (see DETERRITORIALIZATION, RHIZOME, SCHIZOANALYSIS). Finally, anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski and, more recently, Marie Cécile and Edmond Ortigues have questioned the universality of the Oedipus complex and sought to describe the different structures that appear in societies in which the nuclear family is not dominant or the father does not perform a disciplinary or repressive function.

Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. New York: Viking, 1977.

Freud, Sigmund. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1962.

Freud, Sigmund. “The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex.” In *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 19. Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1974.

Ortigues, Marie Cécile, and Edmond Ortigues. *Oedipe Africain*. Paris: Librairie Plon, 1966.

ONTOLOGY. Literally translated as “the science of being,” ontology refers to that branch of METAPHYSICS that deals with the study of existence

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