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## **Book Review Essay: “Lacan, Kris, and the Psychoanalytic Legacy: The Brain Eater” by Sergio Benvenuto**

**Review of Lacan, *Kris, and the Psychoanalytic Legacy: The Brain Eater* by Sergio Benvenuto, Routledge, 2023, pp. 136**

Clear thinking is rare in the field of psychoanalytic theory and clinical analysis. Sergio Benvenuto’s *Lacan, Kris, and the Psychoanalytic Legacy: The Brain Eater* (Routledge, 2023) takes the analytic case of “Professor Brain” as a through line, and provides a compelling history of the social and political dimensions of the psychoanalytic scene in which Jacques Lacan was embroiled with Ernst Kris, Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, and other key figures. And from this cauldron emerges a series of compelling questions pertaining to psychoanalytic theory, praxis and transmission: how do we conceptualize the fundamental, yet exceedingly complex terms of psychoanalytic theory? How do analysts translate these terms in their work with analysands? And can there be a transmission of the answers to these questions?

The result of thoughts long decanted, Benvenuto’s dialectal approach is animated by his relentless iconoclasm through which the terms of psychoanalysis are problematized in an effort to reestablish “conflicts between psychoanalytic trends in their proper dimension” (2023, p.117). This book opens the possibility of re-thinking psychoanalysis, its history, and many of its fundamental tenets. Though the text will appeal to seasoned scholars and clinicians alike, it would be tempting to recommend it as an introductory reading for its sheer lucidity and agile treatment of so many key concepts (far too many to adequately address in a review of this kind). This is to say that the text covers a wide scope of both Lacan’s corpus as well as the work of contemporary psychoanalysts. The book can be read on many levels, but perhaps the most striking is the manner in which Benvenuto ties together so many points drawing from politics, philosophy, social theory (as well as other domains). This wide-scope lens on such a broad cross-section of psychoanalytic thought from which Benvenuto writes, is what enables his work to lay bare numerous problems that are essential to the theoretical and clinical dimensions of psychoanalysis.

This book investigates claims that underpin Lacan’s interpretations of “Professor Brain” and is an original work in Lacanian research given that most Lacan accolades take his insights to be unquestionable. A meticulous monograph of the case of “Professor Brain”, the author explores its recurring motifs providing indispensable clarifications of what proves to be a series of factually erroneous depictions of the clinical material reconstructed by Lacan on seven occasions between 1954-1967. The case of “Brain” was originally published by his first analyst Melitta Schmideberg (daughter of Melanie Klein) in 1935, and presented later by his second analyst Ernst Kris in 1948. Lacan did not actually treat the analysand, and so makes his remarks on the basis of the case material presented by Schmideberg and Kris. Benvenuto’s intervention is timely because it reveals errors that until the publication of this book were basically unrecognized in the psychoanalytic literature.<sup>[1]</sup> Nevertheless, these unnoticed inconsistencies have left their mark on how

Lacanian theory has been taught and understood, so much so that Lacan's clinical theorizations based on the various formulations of "Professor Brain" are by this point crystalized in the canon (including his critiques of ego-psychology and conception of certain foundational terms such as interpretation and acting out). But Benvenuto does not expose these inaccuracies simply for the purpose of dispelling misconceptions, rather, he is concerned with the cause of Lacan's peculiar and at times perplexing deformations of the analytic case (to be clear the author does not launch an *ad hominem* attack against Lacan nor is the aim to discredit him). Instead, Benvenuto examines the particular ways in which Lacan distorts, embellishes, and omits elements of the case precisely as a mode of exploring a variety of other broader concerns.

To this end, Benvenuto's transversal reading of Lacan is an investigation of how he spoke *in spite* of himself:

A statement is the totality of words spoken that form an explicit proposition and which lends itself to syntactic and formal analysis. An enunciation is the act that gives the background sense – mainly intersubjective – of a statement that can never be ignored in concrete life. Stopping at statements – at the 'letter' – could mean not understanding anything about the living, active, signification of discourse. Enunciations are the *acting* of speech. (Benvenuto, 2023, p. 41)

A speculative-interpretive approach is needed if any kind of sense is to be made of Lacan's jags and convoluted commentaries on "Professor Brain", or as Benvenuto aptly puts it, his "systematic misunderstanding" (2023, p. 22). Accordingly, with the enunciation always in mind, Benvenuto forges ahead, picking up shards of the real in order to produce new possibilities of understanding. The text reveals surprising elements of this history, ultimately showing how Lacan's texts were produced on the basis of striving for theoretical innovation, but driven by many other forces besides.

Benvenuto convincingly argues that what was essentially at stake for Lacan was to establish his ascendancy as the *true* heir of the Freudian legacy (2023, p. 46). It then follows that Lacan's assaults on Kris and Anna Freud (among several other analysts) were in effect battles for symbolic legitimacy. If Kris or Anna Freud stood as the potential heir to Sigmund Freud's throne, then these figures represented a threat to Lacan and it stands to reason that they could become targets of aggression (which does not preclude the possibility that important theoretical disagreements were at issue, a point to which I will later return). Ironically, a friendship between Lacan and someone like Kris might well have transpired, given their mutual interests (e.g. art history) and respective positions within the field. But even if we presume the presence of irreconcilable theoretical disagreements with Kris, Lacan's need to turn his "symbolic twin" (Benvenuto, 2023, p. 84) into an adversary was clearly predicated on stakes that exceeded whatever theoretical differences existed. For it is certain that Lacan's disparagement of Ernst Kris and Anna Freud is not reducible simply to a narcissistic triumphalism, being that these personal clashes took place amidst a larger struggle tied to his intellectual commitments.

Indeed, one of the central themes developed in the book is Benvenuto's idea that Lacan's difficulties with accomplishing the task of transmitting his ideas were bound up with rivalries with other prominent psychoanalysts of his time. In addition to the aforementioned personal conflicts with Kris and Anna Freud, another major battlefield in the more than decade long war involved the Paris Psychoanalytic Society, a component member of the International Psychoanalytic Association. This institution exerted a coercive force on Lacan, attempting to dictate how psychoanalysis should be conceived and practiced (Turkle, 1992, pp. 97-138). Touching on many aspects of Lacan's vexed position within these socio-political battles, Benvenuto provides intriguing reasons for what may have fueled vitriol toward enemies as well as what motivated his formation of seemingly tactical alliances during the period of 1953-1963, a time during which he was under intense scrutiny by and in fierce combat with the IPA. Though the antagonisms with Kris and others certainly had a rivalrous imaginary dimension, both of these personal conflicts as well as broader institutional tensions must be considered in light of a concern for the symbolic transmission of his ideas. To this end, Benvenuto's reading of the history illuminates Lacan's fight to represent *the* Freudian line<sup>[2]</sup> as a function of his being a practicing analyst and theoretician with a keen interest in the formation of other analysts.

This intricate history constitutes the backdrop of a host of theoretical and clinical problems that are far from resolved or obsolete, and that remain eminently relevant today. Although Benvenuto (2023) notes that the “Lacan—Anna Freud—Kris conflict has the flavour of a retro world and era,” he proposes that it “is important to understand this little ancient world in order to also understand the conflicts and squabbles of the not much bigger modern world” (p. 97). Benvenuto therefore brings alive the importance of these issues marking their present day relevance for the field of psychoanalysis and punctuates the text with reflections from his own extensive clinical experience. It is uncommon to find a work that properly sustains the subtle relation between the theory and the actual work of analyst with analysands, given the tendency to either get lost in abstractions or to substantialize clinical cases. In this regard, Benvenuto’s work is exemplary, maintaining this tension without falling into either extreme. At least two important ingredients are at work here: first, a clinical sensibility that comes only with decades of analytic practice, and second, a disciplined philosophical perspective that makes possible clear formulations. This combination of elements allows Benvenuto to dismantle inherited assumptions, and to pose critical questions while maintaining an uncompromising position toward any attempts to prematurely suture theoretical and technical difficulties.

To briefly take just one example of the many problems taken up in this fashion, in “Reformatory Analysis” (chapter 23), Benvenuto simply asks, “what is a symptom in psychoanalysis?” (p. 92). A nuanced response to the seemingly basic question requires an appreciation for the ways in which “the symptom is one of the most elusive” (p. 93) clinical terms. This articulation of this problem in its historical resonances allows Benvenuto to skillfully critique the pathologizing, adaptive, and coercive usages of the term and to show the debasement of its properly psychoanalytic dimension in how it is applied today. As is true in many moments throughout the book, Benvenuto captures the essence of the problem summarily and in the form of aphorism: “psychoanalysis seems to have fallen from the medical frying pan into the re-educational furnace” (p.94).

In many ways, the author’s dialectical approach and gestures are akin to those made in an actual analysis, an instructive demonstration of how to navigate conceptual complexities. Benvenuto introduces the enigmatic dimension of his work as a psychoanalyst and applies it to theory, deconstructing quasi-solutions that are either too rigidly pinned down or that leave things ambiguously open ended. The author’s subversive tone is quite refreshing at this time when, as he rightly points out, concepts tend to be absorbed by an “...extremely smooth and cool pluralism” (Benvenuto, 2023, p. 97). Though the conflicts of previous psychoanalytic wars may be outmoded, this text shows how some of the issues of a bygone era are actually still present, and importantly, how we might revisit them up in a nonsectarian way. But such an endeavor is made difficult by how things stand today in the psychoanalytic scene, where, as Benvenuto (2023) describes:

Each school of thought pursues its work within its paradigm and rarely attacks the other schools. Some schools ignore each other, some mutually take cues and adopt elements from each other, but on the whole the struggle for analytical legitimacy is over. (p.97)

At present, psychoanalytic schools exist mostly in siloes pursuing their objectives but without need for debate. By and large, the question of legitimacy and of taking a symbolic place within the psychoanalytic genealogy seems no longer current or even important. This fundamental question of lineage and authority is supplanted by the quest for success in the marketplace with the proliferation of “newer and better” clinical modalities. Benvenuto (2023) explains it this way:

Today, the various psychoanalytic approaches –not to mention all the other psychotherapies that generally refer to psychoanalysis – do not pose themselves as excelling the others on the basis of a criterion of correctness. The question is not conducting the most correct analysis, one closer to the spirit, if not to the letter, of what Freud performed or wrote. It seems to me that today the various approaches compete in the broader market of “psycho-treatments” by appealing either to greater therapeutic effectiveness or to greater perspicuity. (p. 97)

The notion of a “contemporary psychoanalysis” is pleonasm. If psychoanalysis as a theory and praxis is unable to adequately respond to transformations in the social field, and if it therefore fails to address the unconscious subject in a modern context, then it is not relevant. To remain current, psychoanalysis must indeed pass through transformations and be continually reinvented, but how can this be accomplished authentically?

Though the impasses of previous psychoanalytic wars might be considered outmoded, the fact is that many of the theoretical difficulties of the past remain unsettled and should not be put to rest, if only for the reason that it would keep alive certain important questions. If the possibility of meaningful exchange in wartime is lost to destructive drives, the peacetime analogue consists of obstacles in the form of imaginary inertia. A tacit truce now prevails, where the possibility of debate is displaced by the demands of the marketplace. As Benvenuto suggests, marketplace concerns replace the search for truth in a properly psychoanalytic sense. The siloing of psychoanalysis leads to the destruction of rigor and debate. These conditions make it difficult to grapple with problems that call for sustained inquiry, and this text points out why such an engagement is so important. Accordingly, Benvenuto (2023) describes the stagnation produced by fidelities to institutions and doctrine in this manner:

Great authors move us by putting us in contact with shreds of the real. But the simplifying and ego-centralizing machine soon comes into action: it makes sure that any path of the real is gradually absorbed by simplification and the familiar. This absorption is the task of schools, universities, academies, encyclopaedias, academic curricula and so on. They all ensure that the hurricanes of the real are extinguished in the lake of common sense. (p. 56)

But this is not solely an institutional problem, for even Lacan himself “fails to transmit correctly to himself” (Benvenuto, 2023, p. 56). Now then, what hope can there be for transmission? Benvenuto formulates an interesting hypothesis here, namely, that Lacan believes that “nothing” of his thought can be transmitted (p. 57). Why? Benvenuto (2023) responds as follows:

transmit is to simplify and to trivialize, while Lacan wants to tell us . . . *what he is*. But how can we teach what we are? Each one of us is a pure unrepeatable event, and it is against this background of unrepeatability that the endless web of meaning unravels...for Lacan, meaning – transmission – misses the subject as event. (p. 57)

As such, transmission is a mode of conveying meanings, one that ultimately misses the particularity of the subject. Lacan, well aware of this inevitable problem, increasingly moved toward a topological formalization of psychoanalysis. This mode of transmission could maintain a logic and rigor in its very writing, in principle, safeguarding against the collapse of its terms by ideology. But near the end of his life Lacan himself admits that he failed to transmit (Lacan, 1979). Stating the problem of transmission more forcefully, Benvenuto (2023) writes:

Where to place the mark of subjectivity? When certain Lacanians mechanically repeat the formulas and statements of Lacan, or of those who instructed them, *who* is doing the thinking?...Subjects very often believe that they are thinking simply because they are convinced that the words they use are doing the thinking for them. (p. 56)

We might then ask, *who* thinks? Or to put it differently, *what* thinks?<sup>[3]</sup> And said another way, by *who* or *what* are the most basic premises of the clinic constituted? Thus, in light of these questions, it is natural to wonder what (if anything) of this “machinic” Lacanian apparatus is truly original.

After giving consideration to numerous enduring theoretical problems, in chapter 25 (“Analytic Idealities”), Benvenuto wonders to what extent the theories of Lacan and of ego psychology may be perhaps more similar than imagined. If the historical tensions among the schools were predicated on ideological differences, simultaneously, were there any congruences in their respective positions vis-à-vis these

theoretical issues? Taking a page from Lacan's Seminar VII ("The Ethics of Psychoanalysis"), Benvenuto examines three themes: human love, authenticity, and non-dependence; Benvenuto (2023) concludes that "when we look at these ideals summarized by Lacan more closely, we realize that ego psychology has merely said the same things, albeit in a language which is by no means philosophically correct" (p. 107). If such a convergence existed, it would certainly be noteworthy and important, but this assertion is not sufficiently elaborated and the rather strong conclusion is hasty. A claim of this order warrants a thorough study and comparison of how ideals are articulated within each theoretical model, an endeavor that is beyond the scope of this brief text dedicated to a multitude of other matters. Moreover, the author implies that Lacan maintained a kind of philosophical accuracy while ego psychology did not; but does this distinction with regards to the precision of language not amount to a meaningful difference in its own right? And while it is certainly possible that variances between psychoanalytic schools may be less significant than generally assumed, Benvenuto's facile gloss here runs counter to the character of his text. Benvenuto's reasoning is compelling if not convincing throughout, but there are instances (such as the aforementioned example and a few others) in which conclusions seem to be reached too quickly. This, I think, is in part a product of the tempo and time signature of this oeuvre, consisting as it does of concise chapters presented in rapid succession with accents in unexpected places. While at times the text moves rapidly from one topic to the next, these shifts work well within the overall architecture of the text, and are put in the service of decisive motion. If occasionally the reader is quickly ushered toward the next point (left wanting more on the initial topic), this is contrasted by a predominance of carefully sustained, satisfying discussions free from unnecessary belaboring.

It is impossible to capture the breadth of this text being limited as I am to just a few of its salient points, but a few more words on style are warranted. Benvenuto always seems to be pointing at the impossible to grasp, to what constantly slips away in theoretical and clinical analysis. His magnanimity shines through the text in personal anecdotes shared with humor and a thick sense of irony, setting all pretenses aside in order to address the questions at hand. Though the psychoanalytic wars have ceased, the author reignites important discussions linked to the genealogy of Freud, Lacan, and others who participated in these struggles. The issues brought forth in this exploration of the psychoanalytic legacy are actually at the heart of psychoanalytic practice, and they remain unresolved, but they are often obfuscated by the unifying and also fragmenting effects of psychoanalytic establishments. Benvenuto takes flames to any hardened magma and problematizes the coagulation of supposed knowledge. He repeatedly shows the inner contradictions of dogmatic positions and the faulty conclusions to which they lead. Accordingly, he pursues novel ways to confront theoretical deadlocks by dispensing with fidelities to institutions and doctrine, encouraging us to elevate the questions that really matter.

In June of 1979 Lacan expressed in no uncertain terms, the impossibility of psychoanalytic transmission: "As I now come to think, psychoanalysis is intransmissible. It's very annoying. It's very annoying that each psychoanalyst is forced – since he must be forced to do so – to reinvent psychoanalysis [my translation]" (Lacan, 1979, p.2).<sup>[4]</sup> He emphasized that "each psychoanalyst reinvents, according to what he managed to take from the fact of having been for a time a psychoanalyst, that each analyst reinvents the way in which psychoanalysis can endure" (Lacan, 1979, p.2).<sup>[5]</sup> The commitment to reinvent psychoanalysis speaks to an ethical position. For if the continuity of psychoanalysis depends on it being produced via reinvention, it is a commitment to which those interested in its survival are necessarily bound. As to the question of how to reinvent, Benvenuto (2023) perhaps leaves us with a clue: "to be ethical is to not give up on one's emptiness. The thing that's most precious to us is . . . nothing. A thing on the borders of being" (p. 67).

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## Notes:

[1] Though other authors have taken up a few of these discrepancies (e.g. Orellana, 1999; Fink, 2004), they have not examined these issues comprehensively as is done in Benvenuto’s *Lacan, Kris, and the Psychoanalytic Legacy: The Brain Eater*.

[2] This is not to suggest as many would have it, that Lacan is Freudian, nor that there is a continuity *sensu stricto*, between Freud and Lacan. In point of fact, Lacan’s theory can more properly be considered as consisting of an epistemological discontinuity vis-à-vis Freud (Eidelsztein, 2020). For example, the radical difference between Freud’s tripartite model and his own is named by Lacan for example in 1980 in Caracas, in one of the final seminars (1980, p. 22).

[3] The question of “what thinks?” is derived from Lacan’s (1964) notion that “it thinks [ça pense]” (p. 19).

[4] Tel que j'en arrive maintenant à le penser, la psychanalyse est intransmissible. C'est bien ennuyeux. C'est bien ennuyeux que chaque psychanalyste soit forcé – puisqu'il faut bien qu'il y soit forcé – de réinventer la psychanalyse.

[5] ...chaque psychanalyste réinvente, d'après ce qu'il a réussi à retirer du fait d'avoir été un temps psychanalysant, que chaque analyste réinvente la façon dont la psychanalyse peut durer.

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