Becoming literate in desire with Alan Partridge

Paul Kingsbury
Simon Fraser University, Canada

Abstract
For many of us, doing psychoanalytic geography demands something akin to a leap of faith. Questioning this assumption, the main purpose of this paper is to shift the terms of discussion about doing psychoanalytic geography from the realm of faith to critique. Drawing on Joan Copjec’s, Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists (1994), I argue that much of the uncertainty surrounding the research practices of psychoanalytic geography results from inadequate understandings of two fundamental and interrelated psychoanalytic principles. First, causes and effects cannot occupy the same phenomenal terrain. Second, the taking place of society involves a split between appearance, that is, its observable positive facts and relations, and being, that is, its generative principle and the mode of its institution. According to Copjec, a syncopated relation between being and appearance is not only central to Jacques Lacan’s concept of desire; it is also a neglected axiom that distinguishes psychoanalytic from historicist accounts of the spatial and temporal configurations of society. But what is desire and how can we become, to use Copjec’s phrase, ‘literate in desire’? To answer this question, I explore the empirical example of the fictional comic character Alan Partridge (played by Steve Coogan) who exemplifies the taking place of desire as a self-hindering process in terms of the illusoriness, opacity, and duplicity of language.

Keywords
Alan Partridge, desire, Jacques Lacan, Joan Copjec, psychoanalysis, psychoanalytic geography

Introduction
For many of us, doing psychoanalytic geography demands something akin to a leap of faith.\(^1\) I recently observed this notion during a public examination wherein a psychoanalytic geographer’s work was heartily praised for its rigor and cogency yet skeptically questioned insofar as its use of a Freudian notion of the unconscious ultimately demanded a ‘leap of faith’. Particularly striking about this all-too-brief episode was the lack of response to the charge and subsequent dialogue on
the matter. An impasse had been reached and both parties were content to move on to other, more agreeable topics.

While this incident might be unsurprising given that psychoanalysis ‘presents a radically different ontology of the subject and space, demanding methodologies that can examine and explore realities not always evident and agential’, I think it is symptomatic of widespread methodological uncertainties about what connects the theorizing and doing of psychoanalysis in geography.2 That is to say, although many geographers are familiar with psychoanalytic ideas, many geographers are unsure about how and why its theories could further their research practices. A key premise of this paper is that a better understanding of key psychoanalytic principles, especially the philosophical ‘principle of sufficient reason’ (everything must have a reason or cause) and associated concepts such as negation that inform its radical theories, methods, and methodologies can be of considerable help in addressing these uncertainties. At stake is not converting geographers into believers of psychoanalysis, but rather changing the terms of debate about using psychoanalysis in geography from the realm of faith to critique. My approach in this paper, then, is cautious and modest: before forging new methods in psychoanalytic geography, it is important we become more familiar with its guiding theoretical principles.

To do this, I engage Joan Copjec’s work Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists (1994) (hereafter Read My Desire). Copjec’s book is particularly useful because it deftly explains two interrelated psychoanalytic principles. First, causes and effects cannot occupy the same phenomenal terrain. Second, the taking place of society involves a split between being (its generative principle and the mode of its institution) and appearance (its observable positive facts and relations). According to Copjec, a ‘syncopated relation’ between being and appearance is not only central to Jacques Lacan’s concept of desire; it is also a neglected axiom that distinguishes psychoanalytic from historicist and culturalist accounts of the spatial and temporal configurations of society.3

The split between being and appearance is central to Copjec’s formulation of the method of ‘reading desire’, which, to my knowledge, has never been discussed, let alone used before in human geography. One reason for this is because the focus on methods in psychoanalytic geography has mainly been on transference and the unconscious, but much less so on desire: a fundamental concept in Lacanian psychoanalysis. But what is desire and how can we become, to use Copjec’s phrase, ‘literate in desire’? To answer these questions, I explore the empirical example of the fictional comic character Alan Partridge (played by Steve Coogan) who exemplifies the taking place of desire as an awkward and self-hindering process that is propelled by the illusoriness, opacity, and duplicity of language. Because of space limitations, my goal in this paper is not to psychoanalyze or read Partridge’s desire.4 Rather, my goal is to use Partridge as a convenient vehicle to elaborate some of the main tenets of Copjec’s understanding of desire.

This paper, then, is an introduction rather than extension or critique of Copjec’s work. Thus the paper’s title is ‘becoming literate in desire’ rather than say, ‘how to read desire’. To read desire, we must first understand what Copjec means by desire. Let me also state from the outset that the paper’s acceptance of Copjec’s arguments is deliberate, if not unavoidable because as a ‘card-carrying’ Lacanian geographer, I mainly agree with her characterizations of psychoanalysis and what distinguishes it from other theoretical approaches such as historicism. To be sure, much of my interpretations of Lacan and psychoanalysis, more generally are directly informed by her work. Before turning to the paper’s two main sections – the first on Copjec’s delineation of the differences between psychoanalysis and Foucauldian historicism and the second on how Partridge illustrates Copjec’s Lacanian notion of desire – I first provide an overview of geographers’ uses of psychoanalysis.
Doing psychoanalytic geography

Psychoanalytic methodology in geography is paradoxical. On the one hand, psychoanalysis is influential in human geography insofar as psychoanalysis’s main method of interpretation, which is guided by ‘analytic listening’, directly and indirectly via, for example, feminism and post-structuralism informs geographers’ attentiveness to the details and uncertainties of language, the contextuality of knowledge production, the shifting and intense boundaries between the researcher and researched, as well as the emotion, affect, and power-ridden dynamics that subtend the Self and Other in ethnographic work. Furthermore, psychoanalytic geographers’ methods of ‘empathy’ and ‘identification’, ‘unconscious communication’, ‘mapping’, ‘tracking’, and ‘playing’ are comparable to, if not compatible with those used in other paradigms in geography. In addition, recent discussions of methods and methodologies in psychoanalytic geography have yielded research programs that could be adopted by non-psychoanalytic geographers. Focusing on the encounters between researchers and the researched, this work addresses unconscious processes in interviews; intimacy, distance, and appropriateness; fantasies that coordinate research engagements with communities; attempts to elicit extra-discursive data; and, the role of the drives and desire in social interactions.

On the other hand, psychoanalysis is, for the most part, incompatible with two of human geography’s most dominant discourses: historicism and social constructionism. This is because psychoanalysis affirms the principle of sufficient reason, that is, the controversial philosophical principle that states nothing happens without a specific reason or cause. Here, psychoanalysis makes three distinctive theoretical maneuvers: first, from a psychoanalytic perspective, psychical phenomena are always ‘overdetermined’ wherein affects, emotions, ideas, dreams, symptoms, fantasies, and so on derive from and are composed of many rather than one single cause. Second, psychoanalysis theorizes causality not in terms of exact, predictable, and linear determinations, but rather in terms of impossibility, failure, and contingency. From a psychoanalytic perspective, a cause takes place when something unexpectedly goes wrong such as a slip of the tongue or a sudden irruption of irrational anger. Third, and this is central to Copjec’s argument, psychoanalysis asserts that it is a theoretical mistake to think that causes and effects can occupy the same empirical or phenomenal terrain. Psychoanalysis insists that we focus on a person’s unconscious rather conscious life to understand and ameliorate his or her symptoms because the root causes of a person’s behavior are never wholly immanent to conscious life.

For many geographers, this third theoretical maneuver demands a leap of faith. And yet this theoretical maneuver is arguably central to why psychoanalysis continues to thrive in the academic disciplines of, for example, social theory, feminism, comparative literature, and cultural studies. I believe Copjec’s expositions of the principle of sufficient reason, which, is ‘absolutely central to the psychoanalytic project . . . the belief that the cause which must necessarily exist is never present in the field of consciousness that it effects [sic]’, can help inaugurate new theoretical and methodological possibilities in psychoanalytic geography.

Psychoanalysis contra historicism

Soon after the publication of her first major work, Read My Desire, Copjec was aligned with ‘a cadre of psychoanalytic critics of culture’ dubbed the ‘new Lacanians’. As such, Copjec’s oeuvre, which now includes her second monograph Imagine There’s No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation (2002), routinely emphasizes ‘Lacan’s late notions of drive, jouissance, and the real at the expense of his early concepts of desire, the imaginary, and the symbolic’ to explore art, architecture, psychoanalytic and social theories, film and film theory. Much of Copjec’s work challenges film
theory’s Althusserian and feminist theoretical interpretations of Lacan insofar as they neglect or misread Lacan’s later works. Specifically, Copjec asserts that ‘film theory operated a kind of “Foucauldization” of Lacanian theory’. For Copjec, this misreading not only meant that Lacan quickly became perceived as ‘a “spendthrift” Foucault . . . who wasted a bit too much theoretical energy on such notions as the antithetical meaning of words, or repression, or the unconscious’, it also meant that ‘the perceived frugality of Foucault . . . guaranteed Foucault’s ascendancy over Lacan in the academy’.

Read My Desire (to quote the back cover blurb) ‘stages a confrontation between the theories of Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault . . . psychoanalysis and historicism. Ordinarily, these discourses cross paths only long enough for historicists to charge psychoanalysis with an indifference to history, but here psychoanalysis via Lacan, goes on the offensive’. Notably, critiques of Read My Desire are rare. One useful line of critique, however, is that she over-emphasizes the differences between Lacan and Foucault, as well as mischaracterizes the latter thinker’s works. In the book’s introduction, Copjec defines Foucauldian historicism as ‘the reduction of society to its indwelling network of relations of power and knowledge’. According to Copjec, because of ‘this notion of immanence, this conception of a cause that is immanent in the field of its effects’, as well as the ‘disallowance of any reference to a principle or a subject that “transcends” the regime of power’, historicism ultimately reduces ‘social space to the relations that fill it’. As a result, Copjec argues that historicism’s theory of causation cannot adequately define the principle that installs a social regime nor adequately explain the emergence of new socio-historical subjects and practices that resist or negate existing social spaces.

The concept of negation, especially its relation to language, is important to Copjec’s assessment of the theoretical differences between Michel Foucault and Lacan. Copjec notes that while Foucault and Lacan both assert the impossibility of a metalanguage, that is, a positivistic and transcendent language capable of explaining all other linguistic and social phenomena, unlike Foucault, Lacan takes it as axiomatic that society is split ‘between its appearance – the positive relations and facts we observe in it and its being, that is to say, its generative principle . . . a place beyond the realm of positive appearances’. In Lacanian terms, this split approximates to a division between discursive ‘reality’, which is comprised of the symbolic and imaginary registers, and the register of the real. Very briefly, the real refers to menacing extra-discursive phenomena such as trauma, anxiety, and jouissance (libidinal enjoyment) that constantly threaten to dissolve from within the coherence of people’s symbolic and imaginary senses of ‘reality’. For Copjec, denying the split between appearance and being is tantamount to overlooking one particular inscription . . . which marks the very failure of metalanguage. Language speaks voluminously in positive statements, but it also copiously speaks of its own lack of self-sufficiency, its inability to speak the whole unvarnished truth directly and without recourse to further, exegetical speech. Some elision or negation of its powers writes itself as the lack of metalanguage. This negation is no less an inscription for its not being formulated in a statement, and the being it poses no less a claim for our consideration. Indeed, it is this writing that permits us to consider the mode of a society’s institution as, strictly speaking, unspeakable, to argue that the generative principle of a society is never statable as such, the way the contents of that society are. It is only a certain quashing of its force or blockage in its functioning that allows us to suppose a regime of power to be governed by a principle that cannot be absorbed by that regime.

In other words, language speaks volumes about its incompleteness and inconsistencies via, for example, the symbolic practices of hesitation, distortion, deviation, evasion, stumbling, and so on. Psychoanalysis suggests that these inscriptions of negation and quashing of force or functional blockages evince the repression of their generative principle. For Copjec, a psychoanalytic understanding
of negation, which is absent in Foucault’s writings, builds on the more basic psychoanalytic premise that a generative principle cannot be made visible in the power regime that it institutes. It does so in two interrelated ways: first, negation means ‘the principle of a regime’s institution always in some way negates the regime it institutes’. Such a theoretical maneuver is exemplified by Heidi Nast’s psychoanalytic interpretation of post-Reconstruction racism in the US South wherein she argues that the causes of ‘irrational’ racist violence such as lynching cannot be entirely caught up in the social spaces in which they take place and this violence threatens to dismantle these very same regimes.

For Nast, such violence emerges precisely because there are limits to the social: not everything can be socially articulated or collectively put into words and acknowledged. Furthermore, as Nast argues (following Sigmund Freud), the constitution and ostensibly normal functioning of socio-spatial relations – the appearance of Oedipal familial triad of Mother-Son-Father that is coded as white – actually requires certain things – the ‘bestial being’ (my emphasis) that is typically colored black – to be rendered unspeakable or unthinkable, that is to say, sociability (in Nast’s case racist/colonial/heterosexist sociability) demands the repression of specific dangers and threats into a socio-landscaped unconscious.

The second consequence of a psychoanalytic understanding of negation means that ‘while written in language, [it] is nonetheless without content . . . [and] cannot, by definition, be absorbed by the system is contests’. In other words, this type of negation, which is in language but also outside of language, exceeds and thus cannot be entirely caught up in the positivity of the social. Here, Copjec aligns negation with the real. For Copjec, Lacan’s social theory is radical because it insists that structures are not synonymous with language or the symbolic (and imaginary) registers that comprise everyday relations or reality. Rather, for Lacan, structures belong to the register of the real. As Copjec notes, for Lacan, “structures are real”, or “every phenomenal field occludes its cause”.

How can structures belong to the real? And how can a phenomenal field occlude its cause? Acknowledging the abstractness of her argument, Copjec uses two controversial examples from the works of Freud to ground her argument: the primal father and the death drive. Briefly, the former refers to Freud’s explanation of why irrational fear, guilt, and jealousy can be so pervasive in social regimes that espouse equality and freedom. Rather than look for the answer to this conundrum in the social relations themselves, Freud ‘insists on going beyond these relations to posit the existence of some preposterous being, a primal father who once possessed all the power the brothers now equally share and whose murder is supposed to have issued in the present regime’. Rather than dismiss Freud’s theory as crackpot amateurish Anthropology, Copjec suggests that if this primal father seems ‘preposterous, then he is objectively so. That is to say, he is unbelievable within the regime in which his existence must be unthinkable if relations of equality are to hold’. What Freud shows, then, is ‘the real structure, of a society of equals, which is thus shown to be irreducible to the labile relations of equality that never obtain absolutely’.

The second example, the death drive, is usually interpreted (and often dismissed) as Freud’s attempt to ‘counter the belief that humans are all too humanly ruled by pleasure’ wherein he posits the zany notion that humans are haunted by a principle of a ‘will to die’ or ‘death wish’ that opposes or is in conflict with the principle of pleasure. Rather, as Copjec reminds us, Freud posited the death drive to account for the centrality of the pleasure principle and ‘to state the principle by which the pleasure principle was installed’. In both examples, Freud posits a cause (the primal father and the death drive) in order to etiologically account for the disruptions in an empirical field (one ruled by equality, the other ruled by the pleasure principle). Importantly, Copjec argues that the split between on the one hand, society’s being, that is, the realm of causality and its generative principle and, on the other hand, its appearance, that is, its observable phenomena in an empirical field is fundamental to Lacan’s notion of desire. How so? Copjec notes that while Lacanian
psychoanalysis and Foucauldian historicism assert that it is ‘dangerous to assume that the surface is the level of the superficial’ these powerful modern discourses diverge beyond this shared premise. For Lacanian psychoanalysis, the exclusivity of the surface or of appearance must be interpreted to mean that appearance always routs or supplants being, that appearance and being never coincide. It is this syncopated relation that is the condition of desire. Historicism, on the other hand, wants to ground being in appearance and wants to have nothing to do with desire. To say that desire must be taken literally is to say that simultaneously that desire must be articulated, that we must refrain from imagining something that would not be registered on a single surface of speech, and that desire is inarticulable. For if it is desire rather than words that we are to take literally, this must mean that desire may register itself negatively in speech, that the relation between speech and desire, or social surface and desire, may be a negative one . . . This is a truth that cannot be tolerated by historicism, which refuses to believe in repression and proudly professes to be illiterate in desire . . . Disregarding desire, one constructs a reality that is realtight, that is no longer self-external.

I quote at length the above passage because it is fundamental to Copjec’s project: it defines desire’s relationship to the social, outlines the method of reading desire, as well as sets up the main distinctions between psychoanalytic and historicist approaches to social space. To unpack her argument let me first address the final sentence that is particularly relevant to a geographical understanding of society. The notion of a ‘realtight’ reality refers to a reality that is sealed off from the incursions of the real. Importantly – and this is the usual (historicist) line of critique of Copjec’s Lacanian argument – the real is not an a priori pre-social force that is external to society, but rather something that constitutes society via its exclusion from within society. By theorizing reality as ‘self-external’, Copjec anticipates the widely established insight in contemporary psychoanalytic geography: social practices, subjects, and events are topologically structured in terms of the twisting and bending of binaries such as near and far, inside and outside, familiar and strange, and so on. From this perspective, social spaces and subjects are constituted by including the negation of what they are not so that their limits, inconsistencies, and impossibilities are not situated on a far-flung external border, but rather in their very midst as a twisting ‘excentric’ folding of external intimacy and intimate externality.

I now turn to elaborate on Copjec’s understanding of desire. Again, my wager is that before we can consider adopting a Copjecian method of reading desire, it is important that we first become theoretically ‘literate in desire’. To be sure, few geographers are familiar with a Lacanian understanding of desire because in geography (to echo Copjec’s thesis) Lacan has long been considered a theoretical spendthrift compared to Foucault. To flesh out the basic theoretical contours of desire, I draw on the empirical example of the fictional comic character Alan Partridge. It is to contextualizing Partridge and explaining why he is a useful exemplar of desire that I now turn.

Ah-ha! Introducing Alan Partridge

Alan Gordon Partridge (born 2 April, 1955 in Kings Lynn, Norfolk, England) was created by Steve Coogan and Armando Iannucci and first appeared as an inept, egotistical ‘sports desk’ reporter in the BBC radio show *On the Hour* (1991–92) that parodied the conventions of journalism. Within a year, Partridge, whose personality is ridden with skin crawling insecurity, vulgar social insensitivity, and impulsive one-upmanship appeared in the BBC Radio 4 *Knowing Me Knowing You with Alan Partridge* (1992–93) wherein he portrayed an incompetent radio host and again as a sports correspondent in the surreal BBC2 television series *The Day Today* (1993–94) that parodied current affairs television shows. Partridge’s transition to television continued with the acclaimed series *Knowing Me, Knowing You with Alan Partridge* (1994) that parodied the format of televised
chat shows. Here, Partridge played an abjectly awkward and fame-hungry chat show host who was ‘far more interested in himself than his guests’ who were submitted to their host’s tactless remarks, annoying pedantry, and cheesy catchphrases such as ‘A-ha!’ (a refrain from the song ‘Knowing Me, Knowing You’ by ABBA – one of Partridge’s favorite pop bands). Partridge’s subsequent main appearances include the award winning two series of *I’m Alan Partridge* (1997 and 2002), which documented the decline of his career as an unpopular DJ for Radio Norwich, and the highly acclaimed action comedy film *Alan Partridge: Alpha Papa* (2013) that stages an on-off radio siege and parodies, amongst other things, the global-corporate rebranding of local radio stations.

Why use the comic character Alan Partridge to illustrate desire? The comic subjectivity of Partridge, ‘respected [radio] broadcaster . . . Son to a dead father, father to a living son, TV personality, businessman, brand, rambler, writer, thinker, sayer, doer’, is a useful way to consider a Copjecian notion of desire because much of his life consists of *spoken* observations, commentaries, and judgments that encounter the real. That is to say, Partridge’s speech abounds with (to use Copjec’s terms) articulating the inarticulable facets of life’s absurd limits, inconsistencies, and impossibilities. For Lacan, the human subject desires insofar as she or he is a speaking-being or a ‘parlêtre’ to use Lacan’s neologism that joins being (l’être) with speaking (parler). As Partridge tells us, ‘Chat is what I do’ and despite ‘being crushed by a dead cow . . . encountering “mental-ist” fans . . . [or] suffering a breakdown, Toblerone addiction and skewering his foot on a spike he always bounces back’. Furthermore, Partridge’s speech, specifically, his vocabulary, tonalities, facial expressions, mannerisms, and so on teem with uneasy confidence, nervousness, and volatility. In so doing, Partridge brings to the fore the ways in which language is menaced and littered by the inscriptions of negation.

According to Coogan, the character of Partridge allowed him to ‘explore things that are quite fringe-y and a bit dark, while still making it funny and accessible. You hint at something disturbing then pull back. It’s like a dance between the cerebral and the farcical’. Partridge exemplifies the taking place of desire because he personifies the syncopated dance or relation between speech (appearance) and the dark, fringe-y disturbances of the real (being). According to Iannucci, off-kilter relations are central to the strange allure of Partridge:

> Everything in Partridge-world is slightly off-kilter in a way that ramps up the awkwardness. When we were designing the set for *Knowing Me, Knowing You*, we asked the designer to make the steps the guests came down just slightly too long, so they couldn’t trot down them on alternate feet – they had to do this slightly ponderous one-two STEP one-two STEP thing. So immediately you create an edge.

Partridge’s awkwardness, like the genre of comedy more generally, excels at drawing our attention to ‘the fact – accessible in everyday experience – of the incongruity of the reality of desire . . . with all those (quite factual) outlines that determine our supposedly realistic reality’. Testing the elasticity of this incongruence, as well as the relation between appearance and being is central to how Partridge parodies the clichés and conventions of sports reporters, chat show hosts, and celebrity culture, more generally. Below, I further contextualize Partridge in terms of his Englishness and explore various scenes from the television series *I’m Alan Partridge* to illustrate how and why desire can be considered as a self-hindering process that is concomitant with the illusoriness, opacity, and duplicity of language.

**The illusoriness or trompe l’oeil of language**

Coogan once confessed, ‘every now and then these slightly Middle England, xenophobic, curtain-twitching Daily Mail thoughts will start creeping into my head. And the best way to exorcise those
views is to channel them into Alan’. A key reason, then, for Partridge’s popularity and funniness is the Englishness of his sardonic commentaries on (predominantly) white middle-class English culture. Partridge’s world of desire in I’m Alan Partridge, which mainly takes place in the East of England city of Norwich and the surrounding rural county of Norfolk, is permeated by his inspired and disarming musings on walnut gear knobs, groin injuries, lady boys, artificial turf in owl sanctuaries, pipes of Pringles crisps, fungal foot powder, impromptu cocktails of sparkling and still water, and, perished underpant liners in running shorts. Although this is a provincial setting, it is a profoundly uneasy world wherein staff members are fired from their jobs (by Partridge) via an intercom from an adjacent room and grown men (including Partridge) steal traffic cones, discuss suicide, and make car engine noises as they near lifts (elevators). As a result of the perished underpant liners of Partridge’s obviously too small shorts, which he bought in 1982, Lynn (Partridge’s Personal Assistant) exclaims: ‘You’ve . . . you’ve popped out again!’ Partridge nonchalantly replies: ‘Oh. [Adjusting himself again, with a sigh] Sorry, that wasn’t deliberate, I promise you. It’s not a cry for help’.54

Given its idiographic setting (many readers will have already noted the above British English words and idioms), using Partridge to explicate a Lacanian understanding of desire is fraught with danger. What if some readers do not find the ensuing examples funny and thus fail to grasp a Lacanian understanding of desire? To counter this risk, I have chosen examples that are not completely bound-up with Englishness and English idiomatic humor. Again, my goal is not to psychoanalyze or read Partridge’s desire, but rather to use Partridge as an empirical vehicle to elaborate the main theoretical contours of desire. Having said this, it is important to note that while desire is bound up with the particularities and the singularities of cultural contexts, it is also a trans-geographical and trans-historical phenomenon that cannot be reduced to cultural contexts. Although desire ‘causes the subject [and] has historical specificity (it is the product of a specific discursive order) . . . [it nonetheless] has no historical content’.55 This is because Lacan’s notion of desire is a formalist conceptualization of the limits and uncertainties that inhabit any language and any context. Moreover, according to Copjec, instead of

the Foucauldian and the film-theoretical positions [that] always tend to trap the subject in representation (an idealist failing), to conceive of language as constructing the prison wall’s of the subject’s being, Lacan argues that the subject sees these walls as trompe l’oeil, and is thus constructed by something beyond them. For beyond everything that is displayed to the subject, the question is asked, ‘What is being concealed from me? What in this graphic space does not show, does not stop not writing itself?’56

To illustrate how a subject is constructed by something beyond language, let us follow Partridge, Lynn, and an estate agent (realtor) during a tour of a show home (model home). The limits, instabilities, and possibilities of language are brought to fore when the group enters the living room as follows:

Alan: Oh, I like this. Certainly enough room to swing a cat in here, isn’t there!

Estate agent: Could swing a tiger in here, really!

Alan: You could, couldn’t you, yes. Wouldn’t want to, though. Not unless it had been stunned. Even then it’s going to weigh the best part of a ton.57

Later on, Partridge speculatively revels in the beyond of appearances of the show home’s décor and furniture. Having expressed his pleasure that the kitchen fixtures have been distressed, and announced his wish that the estate agent keep the lacquered cast iron egg tree but scornfully requested the removal of a little sink, Partridge and the estate agent enter the bathroom:

          

Alan: You know what this room says to me? Aqua. Which is French for water. It’s like being inside an enormous Fox’s Glacier Mint. Which again to me is a bonus.

In the dining room

Alan: (Pulling at the table) Yes, it’s an extender! Fantastic. That is the icing on the cake! Do you know, if King Arthur had had an extender on his table . . .

Estate agent: It’d have been a different story, really, wouldn’t it?

Alan: Well, it wouldn’t have been round!

Estate agent: No.

Alan: . . . for kick-off.

Alan and the estate agent walk upstairs.

Alan: It’s very Cluedo this house, isn’t it? Colonel Mustard in the en-suite bathroom with a lead pipe. Battered!58

What is noticeable in the above scene is the way Partridge simultaneously apprehends the banal appearance of the particular objects alongside their sublime being that lies beyond their positive appearance: a bathroom space becomes a giant translucent mint flavored sweet (candy), a table evokes medieval folklore, and a staircase evokes a murder-mystery board game. Desire or the ‘syncopated relation’59 between the appearances of the household items and their being as that which is beyond them is abruptly recast in the next scene. Partridge and the estate agent enter the bathroom and the former delights in the toilet because it’s ‘very, sort of, high-tech, space age’ and ‘can imagine Buck Rogers taking a dump on that. In the twenty-first century’.60 Partridge asks if we can try the toilet out. What follows is a brief moment of uneasy confusion:


Pause

Alan: Can I have a go on the loo?

Another short pause

Estate agent: Oh! Sorry!

Alan: I’d prefer to go alone.

Estate agent: Sure, sure. (Leaves)

Alan: Most times. Thanks. (Closes the door)61

The opacity and duplicity of language

The stuttering end to the above interchange is exemplary of desire because it alerts us to the opacity of language, that is, how ‘language exceeds the intentions of the subject’ and is never simply a ‘reflection of an external reality’.62 Alan’s final comment ‘most times’ elicits a moment of uneasy desire because it syncopates the gap between the appearance of his spoken words and a place beyond his words (a shared loo [toilet]). This scene is also typical of Partridge comedy because the audience and the estate agent are not entirely sure about the intentions behind Partridge’s words: is he or is he not being serious about sharing loos? The idea that Partridge’s comment
seems to hide, to put an arbored screen of signifiers in front of something hidden beneath, is not treated by Lacan as a simple error that the subject can undo; nor is the deceptiveness of language treated as something that undoes the subject, deconstructs its identity by menacing its boundaries. Rather, language’s opacity is taken as the very cause of the subject’s being, that is, its desire, or want-to-be. The fact that it is materially impossible to say the whole truth – that truth always backs away from language, that words always fall short of their goal – founds the subject. 63

Partridge is a desiring subject par excellence because he frequently exposes and gets caught up in the opacity of language. Much of the comedy of Partridge is staging the extent to which someone’s life can be propelled rather than bogged down by language’s opacity. For example, having finished his early morning ‘graveyard shift’ show (4 a.m. to 7 a.m.) called ‘Up with a Partridge’, Partridge enters the lobby of his temporary abode: the Lintern Travel Tavern, which is ‘equidistant between Norwich and London’.64 Walking swiftly, Alan greets a staff member in the hotel reception as follows:

Alan: Morning!
Ben: (Walking past Alan) All right.
Alan: Sorry?
Ben: Good morning.
Alan: That’s the one. (To Susan, behind reception desk) Susan, is he new?
Susan: (Cheerfully) Yes, he started yesterday.
Alan: Yeah, he just said ‘good morning’ with his back to me.
Susan: Oh, he’s OK.
Alan: No, it’s just I’ve never seen that done before.65

It is tempting to read the above dialogue as another instance of Partridge’s capacity for curmudgeonly self-centeredness. Partridge, however, routinely defies the neat reduction of the subject to his or her discursive constructions. That is to say, much of the comedy of Partridge is about staging the extent to which the subject’s desire emerges out of ‘the unformed (that which has no signified, no significant shape in the visual field) and the inquiry (the question posed to representation’s presumed reticence)’.66 Partridge’s desire emerges in the above scene wherein the unformed is Ben’s barely audible response ‘all right’ uttered beyond Partridge’s visual field and the inquiry is Partridge’s question ‘sorry?’ that challenges Ben’s curtness or presumed reticence. That the Lacanian subject’s desire is aroused by something beyond language means that it cannot be determined by language. As Copjec notes:

It is not the long arm of the law that determines the shape and reach of every subject, but rather something that escapes the law and its determination, something we can’t manage to put our finger on. One cannot argue that the subject is constructed by language and then overlook the essential fact of language’s duplicity, that is, the fact that whatever it says can be denied. This duplicity ensures that the subject will not come into being as language’s determinate meaning. An incitement to discourse is not an incitement to being. What is aroused instead is the desire for nonbeing, for an indeterminate something that is perceived as extradiscursive.67

How can language be duplicitous? How do its simulations arouse desire for something beyond discourse? A good example of language’s tricks, pretenses, and ability to arouse desire for something indeterminate is a scene when Partridge meets the BBC Chief Commissioning Editor, Tony
Kingsbury

Hayers for lunch in a BBC canteen. Having been asked by the waiter whether he would like a drink and thus having been forced to take the initiative, Alan slowly responds:

 Alan: I’ll have a pint of bitter.

Tony: Just a mineral water for me, please.

Alan: Actually, I’ll have a mineral water, too.

Waiter: Will you be having wine with your meal?

Tony: Not for me.

Alan: No, no. (Sighs) All this wine nonsense! You know, you get all these wine people, don’t you? Wine this, wine that. Let’s have a bit of red, let’s have a bit of white. Ooh, that’s a snazzy bouquet. Oh, this smells of, I don’t know, basil. Sometimes you just want to say, sod all this wine, just give me a pint of . . . mineral water.

Tony: I don’t think wine’s an elitist thing any more; you can get good wine in Tesco’s now. I’d love to make a genuinely popular wine programme.

Alan: Can I just shock you? I like wine. Despite what I just said earlier. At any one time I have nine bottles of wine in my house.

Tony: Really?

Alan: Interesting fact.

Tony: Well, it’s my weakness, I’m afraid. I’ve got a cellar.

Alan: So have I. There’s no wine in it, just a couple of bikes, some smokeless fuel, and an old bag of cement. Gone hard.

Waiter: Are you ready to order?

Tony: Yes. I think I’ll have the Fettuccine all’ Arrabbiata, please

Alan: And can I have the same please? But with different shaped pasta. What do you call those pasta bows? Like a bow-tie but, but miniature? Like an Action Man bow-tie.

Tony: Farfalle

Alan: Yea, that with Action Man bow-tie.

Desire as self-hindering

The above exchange brings to the fore the extent to which desire is a desire for something that we suppose the Other desires or the thing that the Other lacks. It is on this point that Lacan’s famous axiom is usually invoked: ‘desire is the desire of the Other’. Copjec, however, cautions against interpreting this aphorism to mean that subjects simply fashion their selves in the image of the Other. Instead, Copjec asserts Lacan’s main point is that ‘we have no image of the Other’s desire (it remains indeterminate), and it is this very lack that causes our desire. It is first of all an unsatisfied desire that initiates our own, one that is not filled up with meaning, or has no signified’. Thus from Lacanian perspective, desire is ultimately ‘unsatisfiable’. To say that desire is self-hindering is to say that desire is not committed to realizing its goals. Furthermore, from a psychoanalytic perspective (in contrast to a historicist perspective), the Other qua dominant social ideals, values, and the law does not construct a subject who simply and unequivocally has a desire, but one who rejects its desire, wants not to desire it. The subject is thus split from its desire, and desire itself is conceived as something
– precisely – unrealized; it does not actualize what the law makes possible. Nor is desire committed to realization, barring any external hindrance. For the internal dialectic that makes the being of the subject dependent on the negation of its desire turns desire into a self-hindering process.71

What does it mean to reject one’s desire or not to want to desire one’s desires? Much of the comedy of Partridge concerns the various portrayals of how he is split from his desire, that is, his near-constant struggle to live with his desire. Partridge is funny and cringe-worthy because his character is dependent on negating his desire so that he can secure his sad everyday existence. For example, in one scene Partridge turns on some music (‘Music for Chameleons’ by Gary Newman) whilst clearing away dinner plates in his static caravan and starts to play an air bass-guitar. Suddenly, there is a:

Knock at door. Alan kicks it open, still playing air guitar.

Monica: Mr. Partridge? We’re from the Inland Revenue.

Alan: No, you’re not.

Catherine: Yes, we are.

Alan: Oh! Er, come in then. Come in. Hello. Sit over there.72

Alan then mimes taking off his air guitar and then recoils from his actions by waving his hands in disgust. Another example of Partridge’s desire as self-hindering takes place during a meeting in his car with Lynn. Having failed to relax on his bed listening to the ‘Tape 2 of “Let Go”, with Alan Partridge’, and having failed to fight off ennui by going on a walk to a petrol station to buy 12 bottles of windscreen washer fluid, dismantling his Corby trouser press, and driving to B&Q (a hardware store) to buy a bag of tungsten-tipped screws, Partridge meets Lynn in a car park. We then witness the following scene:

Alan sighs deeply.

Alan: You know, these are inertia-reel seatbelts? They were developed in the sort of late sixties, early seventies basically to enable you to lean forward for things. (Alan leans forward to demonstrate. Lynn [his assistant] copies him). But in a crash, they do stop you because . . . (Alan yanks hard on the seatbelt) Impact! Bang! Lock! I mean, you get bruises, but . . . I’d love to feel an airbag go off in my face. It would be (leans forward again, sharply, then mimics an airbag going off) Brr, boosh! Boosh! A really cushioned effect on the face. Ohh. I’ll be honest, Lynn, I’m at a loose end, today. That’s that’s why I’m . . . talking . . . that’s why I’m talking . . . (He sighs)73

Unlike the earlier scene where Alan delights in the simultaneity of the appearance and the beyond of a bathroom, dining room table, and an en-suite bathroom, in this scene Alan is unable to conjure the syncopation of the appearance and being of the seatbelts and the airbags. Here, for once, Partridge is at a loss for words and his desire fades away and disappears along with the sense of his words. When Partridge encounters the senselessness of his speech he confronts the real of his desire, that is to say, the senseless beyond of desire: ‘what is made audible – and visible – is the void as such, contentless and nonsensical’.74 In this instance, appearance is routed by being.

Conclusion

This paper has not so much psychoanalyzed as used Partridge as an empirical vehicle to illustrate Copjec’s interpretations of a Lacanian understanding of desire. By not directly psychoanalyzing
Partridge’s desire this paper *stricto sensu* falls short of illustrating how geographers can use the method of reading of desire in their own work. One useful way of building on and going beyond this paper, then, would be to inquire into what accounts for the popularity of the strange cultural form that is Partridge. That is to say, we could ask why do so many people watch someone who is in so many ways quite awful? My wager, however, is that more thorough theoretical understandings of desire and related concepts associated with the philosophical ‘principle of sufficient reason’ such as appearance, being, and negation are necessary before we can usefully embark on such psychoanalytic projects, as well as usefully learn from the many already existing empirically-based psychoanalytic research projects in the humanities and social sciences that draw on Copjec’s method of reading desire.

Copjec’s arguments should give pause to those historicist geographers, or, better still, geographicists who believe that using psychoanalysis requires a leap of faith and ‘leaping off in search of some great “unsaid” beyond, behind or beneath’. Rather, Lacanian psychoanalysis contends that what is unsaid or, more accurately, repressed repeatedly leaves its signature and surfaces within and amidst the phenomenal fields of speech and cultural significations, more generally as a result of the negations of the real and the topological structure of the psyche and social that twists the binaries of said/unsaid, near/beyond, in front/behind, above/beneath, and so on. For Copjec, the syncopated, non-coincidental relation between signification *qua* appearance and the real *qua* being is the condition of desire. By acknowledging desire, Copjec argues that what we do, in essence, is install society’s generative principle, provide for it a place beyond the realm of positive appearances. Fitted out thus with a generative principle, society ceases to be conceived as a dead structure, mappable on some flat surface; society is finally by this means brought to life. And we are released from the constraints and the absurdity of a nominalist stance, which would necessitate our naming each moment of a society, each transformation of it, a different thing; it is now possible to posit the existence of a singular space, belonging to society, which various sets of relations come to fill.

Copjec asserts that analysts of culture should learn to become literate in desire, that is, able to read what is inarticulable in cultural statements because they will be better equipped than their historicist and culturalist colleagues to interpret and explain a society’s generative principle, that is, its singular spatial and temporal modes of institution. Throughout *Read My Desire*, Copjec affirms the psychoanalytic argument that the generative principle of a society is ‘strictly speaking, unspeakable . . . never statable as such, the way the contents of that society are’ and that ‘the principle of a regime’s institution always in some way negates the regime it institutes’. She grounds this argument by mapping the singular spaces of the French psychiatrist, C.G. Clérambault’s 40,000 photographs (taken between 1914 and 1918) of veiled Moroccan colonial subjects as evidence of an obscene ‘bloated presence’ of the neighbor’s jouissance and ‘a kind of objectified, sartorial form of the superego’ that threatened a utilitarian ideological fantasy; the ‘aura of anxiety’ that connects the 18th century ‘political advocacy of breast-feeding’ with its ‘precise equivalent of vampire fiction’ insofar as the latter warns against the interrelated drying up of fluids and desire, as well as the uncanny presence of the body; America’s peculiar televisual love for Ronald Reagan as a hysterical solution (‘one elects a master who is demonstrably fallible – even, in some cases, incompetent’) that sustains pluralistic democracy; and finally, the relationship between statistics, film noir, and the ‘space of detective fiction [which] is a deep space, an infinite space, not because it has trap doors or hidden passageways but precisely because it does not’. Copjec’s project, then, is a thoroughly geographical one and it ought to be central to our considerations of psychoanalytic methods in geography, as well as our critiques of psychoanalytic geography, more generally.
Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Steve Pile and an anonymous review for providing extremely helpful critiques and comments. I also thank Dydia Delyser, Wendy S. Shaw, and Tim Cresswell for their editorial support and guidance.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. For a recent and extensive example of psychoanalytic geography see, P. Kingsbury and Steve Pile (eds), _Psychoanalytic Geographies_ (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014).
4. In any case, Partridge is arguably unanalyzable because he is a fictional character.
26. It is important to note that Copjec does not focus on Foucault’s entire corpus, but rather his writings in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), *History of Sexuality* (1976), and the interviews and writings of the mid to late 1970s when he ‘reversed his position with respect to linguistic and psychoanalytic theory’ (Copjec, *Read My Desire*, p. 4.).
43. For example, see D. Bell and G. Valentine (eds), *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1995). Tellingly, Lacan is not mentioned once.
44. See, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006t8bp>.
49. Iannucci et al., *Every Ruddy Word*, p. 265.
52. Iannucci et al., *Every Ruddy Word*, p. 231.
 Author biography

Paul Kingsbury is Associate Professor in the Department of Geography at Simon Fraser University. His research uses the social theories of Jacques Lacan and Friedrich Nietzsche to explore cultural geographies of power and aesthetics. He is the co-editor (with Steve Pile) of Psychoanalytic Geographies (2014) and co-editor (with Gavin J. Andrews and Robin Kearns) of Soundscapes of Wellbeing in Popular Music (2014).