



# Digging Freud

FROM CALIFORNIA TO GERMANY

*If postmodernity is postmarked (like the repressed according to Freud) "made in Germany" (SE 19:236), then California is its address and techno-future."*

—Laurence A. Rickels, *The Case of California*, 1991

Catherine Liu

talks with

Laurence A.

Rickels

Laurence A. Rickels is one of the few theorists today who is able to think technology through psychoanalysis and vice versa; this assignment is crucial, because both technology and psychoanalysis are everywhere. With California as the site of this encounter, Rickels takes Freud to the beach and California to the couch, picking up, in many ways, where the Frankfurt School left off—cut short (in Walter Benjamin's case) and stranded in America (in Theodor Adorno's) with the rise to power in Germany of National Socialism.

Taking on the Teen Age (the teen is the one who is always into technology and uncannily aware of all that falls "in" and "out" of group appreciation), Rickels offers us, at the same time, a rigorous set of arguments countering the essentialist undertow of much contemporary theorizing around the question of identity. Teen being reflects the unconscious desire of all beings and their parts: the teen always wants to fit in and know where s/he belongs. Assuming identities as an adventure in gadgets and accessories that offer temporary relief from all doubt, the teen leads the way to conversion experience via consumer experience.

Oedipus is the popular image of Freudian psychoanalysis and the site of the most intense academic turf wars waged against the psychoanalytic



model; the psychoanalytic take on the group, however, is almost ignored. What Rickels reads for us through California is not only psychoanalysis but, precisely, group psychology. He does so by theorizing California and its symptoms (perpetual adolescence, self-esteem problems, death cults, body building, group therapy, gadget love, etc.). Rickels reminds us that Freud's take on the group differed from that of his contemporaries in two crucial ways: 1) he didn't merely denigrate the masses and mass psychology, 2) he emphasized the crucial role that the leader plays in capturing and arranging the libidinal energies of many, disparate human beings. Freud showed us how the individual in a group, by putting the leader in the place of his/her ego-ideal, is able to overlook his/her own interests, operate at a lower level of intellectual activity, and expose him/herself to extremely dangerous situations, all in the interest of the group and its leader, or of an abstract concept that might stand in for a leader.

In the following interview and extensively in *The Case of California* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), Rickels shows how group psychology and the adolescent are intimately related. In doing so he establishes a crucial link between Germany and California, which, according to Rickels, is only Germany's other coast. Rickels offers a truly provocative reading of our century and sketches out a theoretical and historical study of how we got to post-Modernism, or how post-Modernism got to us. He is currently completing the third volume of the trilogy that began with *Aberrations of Mourning: Writing on German Crypts* (Wayne State University Press, 1988) (a reading of mourning and melancholia inside and outside psychoanalysis and 19th-century German literature, which includes a not-to-be-missed analysis of mummies and the undead), and picked up with *The Case of California*. The final volume, which promises to examine Nazi psychotherapy and is based on Rickels' study of the work of Nazi psychotherapists and psychoanalysts under the Reich, will no doubt disturb the convenient fantasy of a radical discontinuity between them and us, that is, between the Nazi's psychotherapeutic innovations and techniques of research and what is familiar to us as eclectic American psychotherapy. When, in Rickels' work, the theory and history of psychoanalysis meet under late capitalism, the unconscious turns up as the fourth party on this conceptual double date.

**CATHERINE LIU:** In your latest book, *The Case of California*, you take on the Californian symptom in relationship to a German past. Could you tell us how you came to this study? Was California referred to you or were you recommended to California?

**LAURENCE RICKELS:** As we theorists tour California,

we always think that we are finding, out there in the real, the symptoms that we're talking about, but in fact we project and hallucinate big time when it comes to California. In fact, California doesn't really exist except as a placeholder that invites hallucination, or, perhaps, as a concept that places a call to thinking.

To some extent, California was already a theoretical *objet trouvé* when I arrived here. Countless theorists had libidized California in a big way: the French tended to be affirmational and the Frankfurt School went for the downside. What I wanted to do, however, was to read California with ambivalence, and that meant, among other things, not just broadcasting the former readings in stereo, but also reading California in terms of what was both missing and yet, as in the case of missing children, still putting in ghost appearances. The Frankfurt School itinerary offered a trajectory I could follow—all the way to a place where no Frankfurt School theorist had gone before. Exile from Nazi Germany brought these social theorists to this coast where they

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What's more, California washes up out of the unconscious already saturated with psychoanalysis. What Hollywood, the Frankfurt School, and other coproducers of California suggested to me was that my ambivalent reading of California could also, at the same time, take place inside psychoanalysis. What was missing from psychoanalysis became clear through California: *adolescent psychology*. Most people give Freud credit for having missed that one, and yet I sensed that it was there just the same, frequenting some of the favorite haunts of Freud's work, like group psychology, female sexuality, and sadomasochism. So to get to the inside view of California as a concept or a philosopheme doing double duty within the psychoanalytic register, I

came up with an equation that sounds kind of instant, but actually takes a while to get to in my work, and that is that everything Freud put into group psychology comes out again as adolescent psychology.

**CL:** Could you be more specific about your reinterpretation of group psychology?

**LR:** I'll sketch out the composite picture that I assembled from Freud's take on it. The more usual notion of group psychology depends on a contrast between the individual and the group. But to my mind it's the tension between the couple and the group that constitutes group psychology. In *Fatal Attraction*, for example, the "Other woman" with the unisex name rides in on a group-psychological and matricentric current. It's the constant pull and attraction that's always there between the group and the couple that fatally detonates. The group is always the adolescent group, from which the teen receives his sexual license, because the parents have to be skipped for Oedipal reasons: the group (of friends) becomes the first way into sexuality. The group, however, cannot

reproduce itself, so some form of couple formation keeps recurring within the zone of ambivalence in which the group or group-of-one meets the couple, the parental one he cannot become or come like and the futural one that comes under group protection (projection!).

This tense ambivalence exists for women, too, of course, but in the case of men, husbands, the pull is more constant for all the usual Oedipal reasons. The body of the group is at the same time the maternal body. The problem for the husband is always how to maintain the connection with the father. In the same way, if the wife has problems with her husband it is because she still has problems with the mother, who stands, in my reading, for and behind the group. The wife, then, becomes the representative of the father and also the defender of the law of the couple. In *Fatal Attraction*, the other woman is the ghostly representative of the mother or of the mother encrypted in the group. She is always pulling the husband out of the couple and the wife is always



there to defend the law of the couple and bust the mother's ghost.

**CL:** You say in your book that the Californian culture of interiority is like the cult of the beautiful soul, which, it seems, Californians are always trying to reclaim.

**LR:** It's no longer in the mode of sickness but in the mode of health. But, as Adorno already taught us, same difference. I don't think Californians really know that they are part of a culture of interiority. They think they inhabit a sensual, coastal culture, which they, for reasons of self-esteem, have problems enjoying. They look to abuse in the past, they call on support groups for the present, but there's something in the register of self-esteem that keeps them from enjoying themselves. Symptomatically enough, they see enjoyment as synonymous with feeling good about themselves. But that means that enjoyment is at best secondary here. This is as completely a culture of interiority as was established in Germany at the

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Anyone could have made the comment that California beach culture is about as sexy as a German nudist colony, but I pulled a few more connections out of the secret relationship between the two to give us the bicoastal culture of body-*Bildung*. After all, it's the body of the group that is forever being built in California. It pumps up an interiority that is really a kind of underworld, a death cult. On the outside, happy face; on the inside, suicide. Body-building aims for the one interchangeable body in one-size-fits-all. It's the one exquisite corpse that's being built along the lines of one nation, one God, one race, one sex, a line-up that sacrificial stars like Michael Jackson embody.

**CL:** Perhaps at this point we could make a connection between these ideas about cultures of interiority and what you're working on now, namely a study of Nazi psychotherapy. Could you give us a preview?

**LR:** I'm digging a continuity within the history of modernism, one that has not been attended to. It is the continued existence in a big way of all the psychotherapies, including psychoanalysis, in the Third

Reich under the special protection of Hermann Göring, under the direction of Göring's cousin, Matthias Göring, who was an Alderian therapist, and, until the '40s, under the international leadership of Jung. Of course, Jung got his total revenge after the war by coming up with the thesis of collective guilt, whereby all the people, the persecutors and the victims alike, shared in the symptom of National Socialism. That got him out from under it.

This current work in progress will close off the trilogy that I began with *Aberrations of Mourning*, where I studied the outbreak of mourning and melancholia on the sliding scale of the one-on-one, from loving the dead to loving to death. In *The Case of California*, it's the same problem of mourning sickness, but in group format. Both books are major excavations of what otherwise goes without saying or commemoration within the Freudian corpus, all the way to Freud's dead baby brother Julius, who, it turns out, was one of the main ghost writers of psy-

choanalysis. The third book is, again, as much an internal reading of psychoanalysis as it is a history of Nazi psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. The focus this time around is on Freud's theory and therapy of war neurosis, which, with all factors accounted for, amounted at least to a double internalization of war. So the internal or, technically, intrapsychic view of conflict triumphed through Freud's successful interventions in war neurosis. This is the prehistory of the tension that is still going down between political and therapeutic correctness, between social studies together with all the other lip services to which we continue to pray and what I like to call greater psychoanalysis. At the time Freud scored his therapeutic victory, his *second system* was born out of the discoveries he made over the psychological casualty of World War I. Freud came across the entire narcissistic portfolio of our libidinal investments, a kind of war economy of what he now called ego libido (libido with no outside place to go). Freud's post-World War I introduction of the relationship between the ego and the superego was in fact modeled after relations between what Freud named in 1918 the

"peace ego" and its double, the "war ego." That's right—Freud's first mention of the uncanny double was in the context of analyzing war neurosis. Once Freud cracked open war neurosis, everything inside and out was opened up to psychoanalysis. When it came to the war, you could even say that psychoanalysis was the only winner in what was in effect a corridor war waged among different brands of psychological interventionism. That's why when in 1933 psychotherapeutic eclecticism was reunified at the so-called Göring institute in Berlin, psychoanalysis had to be included. The Nazis very quickly ran up against the limitations of their bio-destinal read of difference, because once the obvious others had been disposed of, how could the outbreak of neurosis and especially war neurosis and homosexuality (which they viewed as traumatic neurosis) be explained?

**CL:** What was this ideology of psychic wholeness about for the Nazis?

**LR:** Nazi psychotherapy was as modeled on psychoanalysis as is the eclectic psychotherapy current in California to this day. My decision to train locally as a psychotherapist was in large part influenced by this book's research agenda: my training here would be my field trip to the Nazi institute. What psychotherapeutic eclecticism in California today and in Nazi Germany back then share is the intrapsychic view, which gave the Nazis the big inside-out picture. Once you base everything on the intrapsychic dimension and no longer take everything interpersonally, you are toeing a certain line. The first time that psychotherapy was empowered or validated to draw this line society-wide was in Nazi Germany, under the pressure of competition with the neuropsychiatrists and other bio-destinal proponents. Incredible "victories" were scored. Insurance coverage was extended to include psychotherapy, even or especially for complete courses of therapeutic healing of homosexuals. In 1935, psychotherapists were praising this particular inclusion and were fervently hoping that bisexuals would soon qualify. Whereas the neuropsychiatrists felt that homosexuals needed to be sterilized, castrated, or eliminated, the psychotherapeutic view, which really triumphed for a long period, was that homosexuality could be healed. Now that's naive, but that also means that the Nazi psychotherapists and by extension the Nazi military establishment were the first in the military-psychological complex to accept the fact of homosexuality, and this was because they were also the first to face what were for them the interchangeable facts of neurosis and war neurosis. They could admit all three because they were able to subscribe to the upbeat belief that everything could be cured.

**CL:** In much the same way that Californians believe that everything can be cured.

**LR:** Exactly, everything is supposed to be curable



through the intrapsychic view master. Nazi Germany was the first pop-psychological culture of all-out healing. And it was Freud's sensational success with war neurotics, at least according to the press coverage, that got his model into the military, the psychological, and the military-psychological establishments. This success story is what the Nazi psychotherapists wanted to repeat over the body of the homosexual. It was felt, not only by Nazi proponents of the intrapsychic view, that unresolved homosexuality or a homosexual component or disposition inevitably contributed to the outbreak of war neurosis or, indeed, to the "perversion" of desertion, voluntary surrender, information leaking, and even outright espionage.

**CL:** We're sort of reliving all of this with the debate around Clinton and gays in the military, which is waged largely in psychological terms. Given what you've been saying about the Nazi drive for all-out healing, could you tell us what you think about the status of the Freudian cure?

**LR:** Therapy requires the notion of closure or cure, which, at the same time, it can't admit in theory. Here in California, the all-out emphasis on the cure gets acted out as the perpetualism of support-group psychology (with the discovery of codependency everyone qualifies for support). In other words, psychic vulnerability is also always admitted under the cover of curability. Recognition of such facts of life as the internal war of neurosis was seen first in Nazi Germany. And when it came to homosexuality Nazi military psychology cried "Heil!" You know the joke about two analysts on the street in Berlin after 1933. One greets the other "Heil Hitler," and the other says: "No, you go ahead, I haven't the time to Heal him." In my book I am trying to go all the way with this uncanny context or cohabitation of healing and hailing.

**CL:** Do you think California's self-esteem has suffered after the L.A. riots?

**LR:** Just as it was said back in the '60s that the Chicago riots brought home the Vietnam War, so the Gulf War was let out into the streets of America with the L.A. riots. I don't want to go into the obvious media angles on this war. I think they have been sufficiently addressed. I'm more interested in the mood swing or switch that was performed when the first casualties were listed. It looked like we were clearly going to drop back into Vietnam mourning, but suddenly we were out of the body bag simply because it was announced that these first losses were victims of friendly fire. It was as if we had switched the channels, left the funereal medium of the newsreel (which is really a graft of film onto TV), and had channel-surfed onto a sitcom. We were so efficient and so friendly that we were killing ourselves. No problem! This mix of friendliness and suicide makes

it to the beyond of mourning and melancholia, the same televisual beyond that group psychology occupies. Love and war have been replaced by friendship and suicide—that's California.

But the Gulf War was America's most successful war in terms of mobilization of group psychology for psychological-warfare purposes. The Nazis were way better at it than we would ever be. Already in 1941, U.S. military-psychologists were racing to catch up with Nazi advances in psychological warfare. They reconstructed the Nazi reading lists, which included references to Freud. It's as though psychoanalysis was enlisted on the Allied side following a trend that the Nazis had set.

**CL:** I wanted to go back for a moment to the casualties of friendly fire. Do you think that these ambivalent losses—after all they were caused by friendly as opposed to hostile fire—produced a media fantasy about bypassing mourning altogether?

**LR:** I knew that we were all relieved when the news was broadcast that these casualties were victims of

accident that this genre has grown up alongside the Gulf War. There is a dread of the transference as something so uncontrollable that it can only be replaced by remote control. The utter control of the transference, its replacement by live transmissions, was one of the prospects brought to us by the Gulf War. Freud himself thought, when he first discovered transference, that it was the way analysis had to go; one had to control the transference. He also said, after he entertained that thought for a moment, that, if one could really achieve remote control over the transference, it would be the most terrifying prospect of all—it would be the living end.

That also brings us back to the Nazi take on psychotherapy and psychoanalysis because it looks like it was the transference all along that the Nazis wanted to control by maintaining it in its unresolved state as the kind of pathogenic identification on which the psycho-war economy of total loyalty versus total betrayal must, after all, run. At the institute in Berlin, there were limits set to psychoanalytic ac-

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friendly fire and not individually disposable casualties of one-way or one-by-one violence. Melancholia or mourning go down in the one-on-one or the one-by-one. Once there's friendly fire, however, there is the prospect of suicide, which, by extension, gives us the assurance of everyone dying at the same time. This is the mode of catastrophe preparedness, which is one way of avoiding mourning altogether. And that's total war (which is psychological warfare which is group psychology).

**CL:** Our cultural resistance to letting psychoanalysis into the social keeps coming back as an over-valuation of the power of the analyst. For instance, in films like *Silence of the Lambs*, we find a superpowerful analyst embodied in the Hannibal Lecter character, who is actually able to produce a suicide in one of his jailmates. He is this Hollywood fantasy of the supereffacious analyst who is so powerful that he has to be physically restrained and constantly surveilled to keep from making trouble.

**LR:** *Silence of the Lambs* belongs to a whole new genre of transference transgression films like *Basic Instinct*, *Prince of Tides*, and *Final Analysis*. It's no

tivity. Your training analysis could not be with a psychoanalyst; only the second analysis could be Freudian. The Adlerian Göring's son, or the other Göring's nephew, trained as an analyst during World War II, but because of the transference proviso, his father had to fake the records and claim that he had already trained with an Adlerian so that he could in fact have a Freudian training analysis under cover, by pretending it was the second time around. Here we run up against the limit of the Nazi takeover of intrapsychic space. Being paranoids, the Nazis were real good at working identification, and that means all the inoculative aspects, even the politics of psychoanalysis. But infinite access to the other's unconscious via identification and without any transference knowledge about the dotted line along which the self and the other fold apart is another way of saying that there is no limit, no end in sight. Indeed it could be said the Nazis only lost because they didn't know when to stop winning. That's what can happen when the unresolved transference endlessly heads you off at the impasse. □