

**Compromised, Valuable Freedom:**

**Flat Affect and Reserve as Psychosocial Strategie<sup>1</sup>s**

**ROBBIE DUSCHINSKY, DANIEL REISEL AND MORTEN NISSEN**

In contemporary scholarship in the social sciences and humanities, as in our lives when we are scared, we are often too quick to divide actions into compliance with or resistance to power. As Sedgwick (2003) has observed, there is a paranoid tendency in critical scholarship. But, in fact, the world is more subtle and compromised than such an account would suggest. There is something heroic and clear-cut about the way this divide between compliance and resistance operates, as what it implies is that when compliance ends the result must be resistance, freedom, agency. Yet this image is an unkind one: it is haughty about those still caught in the web – and manically, cruelly optimistic about everything else. And on which side do we who entertain it imagine ourselves to be? An alternative, more modest yet hopefully deeper perspective would be one which can encompass the unsteady, roiling encounter of subject and world, with its richness of strategies and possible resources out of which some freedom can be built, under conditions not of our own choosing, and in various forms of participation. When the binary between compliance and resistance fragments, specific and concrete strategies come into view, with their possibilities and limitations.

---

<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by the Wellcome Trust (Grant: WT103343MA)

This is not a new point. Others have likewise mined this space below the reified resistance/compliance binary, and indeed there has been growing interest in doing so among scholars drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (e.g. Holford et al, 2013), among those associated with the ‘reparative turn’ initiated by Sedgwick (see, for example, the April 2014 special issue of *Feminist Theory*; Berlant, 2011), and in the post-human deconstructions of agency (Haraway, 1987, Gomart and Hennion, 1999). One strand of analysis, for example, and one with a strong history, is work on forms of humour – ranging from wry irony to active ridicule. Humour has been conceptualized as a strategy for laminating additional meanings to a situation or puncturing its puff, whilst also perhaps defusing possible senses of revolt (Schlegel, 1971; Bakhtin, 1986; Goffman, 1986). Some have envisioned humour as perhaps even a creative cultural ‘micro-production’ in a genre of its own (Willis, 2001; Nissen, 2004). Despite such work, however, the resistance/compliance binary continues to obscure the picture presented in the social sciences and humanities of the range of practices through which power and subjectivity come to be negotiated. As a result, ‘agency’ and ‘freedom’ are left to mean a rather restricted and politically problematic image of compulsory choice-making, initiative, endurance, self-regulation, ‘resilience’, severed from their conditions of possibility. In particular, the assumption that agency and freedom are active, and compliance passive, is an afterimage of the resistance/compliance binary. This binary has obscured the significance of many important practices and strategies – such as patience – which negotiate the available terms of power and the formation of human subjectivity.

In attending to one such strategy here, we begin by turning to one of the great works of twentieth-century philosophical psychology: Laing and Esterson’s (1970) *Sanity, Madness and*

*the Family: Families of Schizophrenics*. In saying ‘great’, we do not mean to imply the work is not flawed. It is very flawed: in its undifferentiated polemics against biomedical epistemology, in its weak class and gender politics, in many of its implausible causal inferences, in the way that it so often frames both/and combinations as either/or oppositions in its interpretations. But something about the text resists erosion, remaining live into the present:

What is it in a ‘great’ work, let’s say of Plato, Shakespeare, Hugo, Mallarmé, James, Joyce, Kafka, Heidegger, Benjamin, Blanchot, Celan, that resists erosion? What is it that, far from being exhausted in amnesia, increases its reserve to the very extent to which one draws from it, as if expenditure augmented the capital? (Derrida, 1989, p. 845)

For us, the key to the greatness of Laing and Esterson’s book is that, on reading and re-reading, it grows in its capacity for making visible, outside of the compliance/resistance binary, the diversity of strategies and possible resources available to subjects in relation to a familial power. For all its tone of radical polemic, it is a book that knows a world which is subtle and compromised, and which does not settle for any image simpler or safer.

In *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, Laing and Esterson present their interviews with a group of young women and their families. These young women have been diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia. The premise for the book is that some of the symptoms shown by these women and understood as part of the disease, in fact have been constituted also or entirely by the dynamics of familial power. This question leads them to seek intelligibility, even strategy, in

actions that would be dismissed as meaningless by both psychiatry and conventional accounts of power. One such form of action is what was termed ‘flat affect’ or ‘lack of affect’. This concept was used within psychiatric discourse from the 1950s onwards. It refers to an expressionless presentation, in drawing a distinction between schizophrenia and depression (e.g. Arieti, 1955; Keefe & Harvey, 2010). Whereas a depressed patient might look sad, ‘flat affect’ is a kind of emotional opacity in which affective display, in the face in particular, has little range, intensity and mobility – and subjectively, it is not clear to the patient what the feelings they experience mean or what bearing they may have for them.

One instance of such flat affect amongst the patients in Laing and Esterson’s study was Maya Abbott, who ‘was described uniformly in psychiatric report after report as apathetic, withdrawn, lacking in affect’ (1970, p. 36). This was understood as the defining feature of her schizophrenia by her doctors. However, Laing and Esterson offer an alternative explanation. They observe that ‘Mr and Mrs Abbott regarded their daughter’s use of her own “mind” independently of them, as synonymous with “illness”, and as a rejection of them’ (1970, p. 34). Under such circumstances, they suggest, a certain withdrawal of affective display makes good sense as a reduction in emotional availability. Given the socio-historical context, such resistance could be conceived primarily as a striving for *independence* within and from the family. But independence has both social and psychological dimensions, and both must be realised for it to be meaningful (Mitchell, 1974; Butler, 2006). From what we learn of Maya’s life, seeking to achieve such resistance in this family would, in all likelihood, not have been effective in any case: breaking ties with family does not necessarily reduce the power of their internalized voices, especially where these voices are both inconsistent and persecutory. Nor does the case presentation give confidence that many

financial, social and existential resources were available to Maya for affording independence, even at this time of increased welfare provision and access to employment. For Maya Abbott, an underperformance and unavailability of affect, keeping investment in the world on reserve, offers a way of carving out some space in which to resource and hear the self, without the threats that would come from a more assertive display.

A second case Laing and Esterson describe is that of Lucie Blair, whose ‘affect is flattened’ (1970, p. 51). Once again, flat affect is framed by Lucie’s doctors as core to her schizophrenia; and once again, Laing and Esterson regard it as also constituted by the possibilities for bearable existence made available within the power relations that structure Lucie’s family. Flat affect could, under these circumstances, be regarded as the more inhabitable of available forms of subjectivity: ‘In so far as she gave up, she was supposed to suffer from “affective impoverishment”, and when she did not, she was described as “impulsive”’ (1970, p. 64). In a third case, Laing and Esterson document that June Field’s psychiatric notes report ‘affective flattening, incongruity of thought and affect, and bizarre delusions’ (1970, p. 144). They perceive June’s affective flattening as constituted by the same tributary as for Maya and Lucy; when a restrictive family environment interprets self-expression as pathology, then to hold back from affective availability to the world becomes a survival strategy. June, they observe, ‘has to keep a tight control on herself, however, because if she shouts, screams, cries, swears, eats too little, eats too much, eats too fast, or eats too slowly, reads too much, sleeps too much or too little, her mother tells her that she is ill’ (1970, p. 158). Aside from explicitly making the point, Laing and Esterton often render such ‘holding back’ as a perfectly reasonable course of action with

ordinary turns of phrase: thus, Claire Church, confronted with one of countless mystifying denials on the part of her mother, is said to be ‘at a loss for a reply to this’ (1970, p. 94).

Drawing on the cases of Maya, Lucie, June, Claire and others, Laing and Esterson generalize that:

Particular symptoms that are usually taken to be primary symptoms of an organic schizophrenic process – impoverishment of affect and incongruity of thought and affect – are here intelligible as social praxis (1970, p. 106).

This rearticulation of symptoms as intelligible praxis *could* lead from one dichotomy to the next – from ‘normal / schizophrenic’ on to ‘compliant / resistant’ – all the while maintaining an underlying ‘rational / irrational’ dichotomy by approaching patients’ utterances and actions in a way that polemically *assumes* intelligibility in order to claim it as a research *finding*. As Laing and Esterton state in the preface to the second edition:

No devices are employed here that do not help us to discover social intelligibility as such (1970, p. 13)

This could appear self-confirming, but it echoes Garfinkel (1984), whom they reference just before the cited passage. In his ethnomethodology, taking social intelligibility as an *a priori* is what we all do in everyday interaction, as our moral obligation to recognize each other. This is the ‘ethno-method’ which Garfinkel, and then Laing and Esterton, decide to follow. But when

the taken-for-granted, interactional order breaks down, the game of allocating moral accountability begins, and attributing pathology is one move in that game. This is where most readers of Laing and Esterton assume that they attribute moral faults to a medico-political culture, pathology to families, and reasonable resistance to patients.

A closer reading yields a more complex picture. The intelligibility Laing and Esterton reconstruct in understanding the patients is always derived from attending to the subject's deeply contradictory and volatile family life, permeated with mystifications, and rendered in ways that leave many questions open (including numerous hints at the psycho-dynamics they explicitly decline to explore). In this perspective, flat affect can be regarded as *potentially* meaningful and tactical response precisely through - rather than despite - being a somewhat indeterminate response. In the same manner as humour, for example, the indeterminacy of flat affect may be quite a responsive way of operating within indeterminate and contradictory situations. Such an interpretation resonates with recent work by Lauren Berlant (2015). Berlant proposes 'flat affect' as a mode of affective-behavioural performance in the work of a number of contemporary actors and genres. Flat affect in a cinematic context, for instance, occurs on the horizon of previous conventions for the display of feelings – such as deadpan, as a mode of rhetorical delivery that solidified in the late 1920s – but presents a distinctive formulation. One possibility which our genres of interpretation and imagination supply to make sense of this flat affect is that it is the consequence of trauma. Berlant accepts that this may also be true, but urges that we do not reduce flat affect to trauma. Not least, the human response to trauma can, over time, be elaborated as an adaptation to the available world, offering resources for living, not just disruption (trauma as a mine for artistic inspiration would be a familiar example). Berlant's is a

more sensitive formulation than the blunt opposition between *intelligible social praxis* and *individual medical pathology* which Laing and Esterson tend to draw. Berlant knows that a behaviour can be both, for instance beginning as one but over time becoming the other as well. Berlant's account of flat affect has resemblances, in this regard, with the work of Emily Martin (2007) on mania and depression, where expressive mood fluctuations are acknowledged as potentially debilitating but also culturally valued, depending upon circumstance and the degree of reflexive enactment and flexibility involved.

For Berlant (2015, p. 199), the underperformance of affect is curious and important because it breaks with 'the presumption that important emotions deserve expression'. This presumption is a strange one, perhaps. How can an emotion *deserve* an expression? What does it say about how we tend to imagine human authenticity and being that this strange presumption is part of our everyday culture? It suggests, for Berlant, that we generally find ourselves within a familiar arrowing series that moves us from what happens, to putting the feelings it generates into familiar terms, and then responding in conventional ways (see also Berlant, 2008; Carr, 2011). In disrupting this sequence, she suggests that flat affect makes us less or unevenly accessible to the environment, and the possibilities it has to hurt or deplete us. In Laing's (1961) terms, flat affect can be described as attenuating our interface with an untenable, crazy-making set of circumstances. For Berlant, in disrupting the sequence of familiar and conventional feeling, flat affect offers some room for manoeuvre in relation to situational injunctions experienced in relation to external or internal figures. For instance, reserve may permit space to apprehend what is happening to us in a different way, or dampen the phantasies that would otherwise fuel a

headlong dive into aspiration and disappointment, or consider how we should compose our actions in response to the array of present demands.

Viewed through the resistance/compliance binary, the passivity of flat affect might be regarded as a mark of its weightlessness and inconsequentiality. Where we feel unsafe, as in the paranoid tendency which organizes the resistance/compliance binary, what help can passivity offer?

However, Berlant makes a crucial point in reply, building on ideas from Sedgwick (2003). She emphasizes that there are things one cannot do, feel or experience, unless some minimal gap or space is carved out as freedom from the present and the directions in which this present readily hurls us (see also Berlant, 2011). Abstracting from the films her article considers, Berlant offers the more general argument that flat affect may appeal as a mode of navigating under two conditions, each of which is becoming more prevalent in contemporary society. First, it may appeal where someone or a set of people experience a crisis in their ability to make effective and consistent claims on the world. Berlant identifies that this is a condition which increasingly characterizes political citizenship, as a scene which evokes and forbids despair or anger. To this we would add that, though it was decades earlier, this ‘double bind’ psychosocial constellation equally was an integral part of the operation of the families in Laing and Esterson, where despair and anger were evoked by the available models of being a person in the families – and these affects are simultaneously forbidden as possible claims on how the families should operate.

Second, Berlant suggests that flat affect may appeal as a response to environments where compulsory expressive emotions are depleting. In the families Laing and Esterson describe, the families demand affection and docility from their daughters in a way which stabilizes the family

environment, but also continually saps it. The form and nature of the demand is one which is disconfirming and disfiguring. Others may have been able, perhaps, to comply, to find some sources of social and psychological integration or balance. But to varying degrees this is not feasible for the young women in the case studies, and it is in this context that flat affect may provide a means of holding off unbearable demands. Berlant identifies that flat affect may likewise appeal particularly in contemporary society as a form of quietly-hostile negotiation with the smiley-faceness of the service economy, with the personal cost of the inner distortions and bargains required by this emotional labour. It offers a means for negotiating with, qualifying and stamping, the compulsory choice-making, initiative, endurance, self-regulation, 'resilience', which are demanded by this service economy without making available the conditions that would lead to their achievement.

Berlant thus suggests two rising conditions in contemporary society which give appeal to flat affect, observing the rise of flat affect as a mode of behavioural comportment across film, music, humour and other forms of contemporary culture. To this, we would add that the conditions described by Berlant can be noted to have appeared earlier in Laing and Esterson's families. However, thinking about *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, we would add a third condition which calls out flat affect, and which meshes with Berlant's work on contemporary injunctions for the expression of authentic personal emotion. Something common between Maya, Lucie, June and other cases where Laing and Esterson describe affective flattening is that the young women present a sense of lacking possibilities for expressiveness felt as their own. For instance, it is not clear to them, at times in an intense and unpleasant way, who is controlling their voice. Laing

and Esterson observe that expressiveness, necessarily something emergent within the family context, has been made into a fundamentally contested object within these families.

It is tempting to view this observation as a precursor, not just to the struggle to recover a voice of one's own described in the later 'Recovery' movement (Topor, 2001), but also to some of the ways that voices have been understood as dialogically constituted in the Hearing Voices Network (Leudar and Thomas, 2000). Our voice and words are always elaborated out of available conventions and affectively invested images; it is out of this elaboration, its stability and its promises, that something comes to feel as internally and integrally our own (Laing, 1961; see also Erdinast-Vulcan, 2013). Rather than an inner essence to be dis-covered, such 'authenticity' should be regarded as reconquered and re-covered in processes of social recognition (Taylor, 1991) – and the misrecognition which opposes, yet sometimes blends with these, is equally social. With the sense of 'ownness' both scaffolded and scuppered by the dynamics of their families, ringing through the remarks of the young women is thus a tone of shame. Shame is the predictable product when the search for personal authenticity that our culture twists into demands for the expression of 'inner' emotions is combined with a sapping of the social, material and existential conditions for effective independence.

Flattened affect, emotional underperformance, can thus be conceptualized as an operation performed on the feelings which organize the self-world boundary, negotiating terms under quite adverse circumstances with few resources available and under circumstances of precarious or crippled social recognition. In Laing's (1960) language, it can be described as a kind of split

within the existential-phenomenological frame that organizes a self within and out of a world of experience and activity. Flattened affect may particularly appeal as a response to:

- a crisis in one's felt ability to make effective and consistent claims on the world;
- environments where compulsory expressive emotions are depleting;
- a sense of dissatisfaction with the possibilities for expressiveness that are felt as one's own.

For thinking about the nature of this manoeuvre and its use across different circumstances, the term flat affect, however, has the disadvantage of its emergence within a discourse of pathology, which limits how we may understand its scope. We prefer, instead, the term 'reserve' for typical forms of this strategy, and conceptualize psychiatrically-diagnosable 'flat affect' as the far end of a dimension, and as often occurring in the context of trauma.

The term 'reserve' can refer to a determinate amount of something unexploited. One may refer to something 'held in reserve', 'coal reserves', 'wine reserves'. Specifically, it may refer to something left unexploited *in order that the rest* may be. For instance, the USA have the formal institution of a 'Federal reserve'. Capitalism requires the circulation of funds, based on credit. As we know all too keenly in the context of the 2008 credit crunch, banks keep only a fraction of the deposits of their customers, and speculate with the rest. However, this then makes the banks vulnerable to fluctuations in withdrawals by consumers, as well as more major shocks. The function of the Federal Reserve is to be available to provide short-term liquidity as needed, and dampen the effect of shocks through loans. This allows banks to remain (over)extended, powering capitalism on stabilized credit. The idea of reserve can also refer to an exception to a contract, 'reserving the right' to something. And, elaborating this sense, reserve can indicate an

exception to the terms of a social contract. One may 'have reservations' about a frame for making meaning or assigning value. Reserve here indicates the capacity to accept subjection to the terms of contract or convention only on the condition that this subjection is not full or total.

Across its different senses, the concept of reserve captures the sense of something (whether meaning, value, land, capital) held back from the world in order to negotiate the terms and buffer the threats posed by its use and subjection. In this way the term 'reserve' captures a tectonic line of possible negotiation of power and subjectivity within ordinary life, of which flat affect can be regarded as a last resort and emergency form. The clinical situation illustrates the point well, as reserve is very much at stake. To illustrate the point: as well as sharp contrasts in function, a line of continuity can be observed linking the behaviour of the different agents in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. Whilst also perhaps the product of trauma and pathology, flat affect can be regarded as an intelligible psychosocial strategy to negotiate the terms and buffer the threats posed by their subjection to familial power, gender power, and psychiatric discourse. Their doctors accessed or enacted a professional reserve, which has the function of keeping the personal untrammelled by an impersonal tone even during medical interactions that would otherwise be intimate or violating. However, this professional reserve also perhaps functioned as a defence against the demands and difficulties of empathy with the mind of a patient who is suffering, a necessary step for understanding the meaning of behaviour and the world as they encounter it (Cassem, 2009). In addition, reserve can in fact be noted in the behaviour of Laing and Esterson, in their double capacity as psychiatrists and social scientists treating 'experience as evidence' (Laing, 1967, p. 16).

However, the case of the doctor demonstrates a fundamental ambiguity in reserve as a strategy for negotiating power and subjectivity. Reserve can, on the one hand, mean a determinate actuality held back for now from use, like the sportswoman who keeps some will and energy back for expending in the sprint to the finish line. This is the sense when we refer to a 'wine reserve' or 'coal reserves' or a 'federal reserve'. The wine is not out yet, but it exists as a determinate amount to be used later. Heidegger (2009, p. 271) offers the technical concept of a '*standing reserve*' to refer to such hidden, determinate actualities: a phenomenon such as a wine cellar 'endures as standing reserve and remains constant in the sense of an inventory'. Compared to the standing reserve, a contrast can be drawn with reserve as an *indeterminate holding*, which seeks to retain possibility until reality can be adequate. This is the sense when we refer to 'having reservations' about a situation, which can be intelligible even if we do not necessarily know exactly what our reservations are yet. We do not have an inventoried wine cellar of our objections, though we know that something is down there. Reserve as 'indeterminate holding' is also the sense when Ruskin writes of the reserve of the great painter, whose valuation of completeness and effective composition means that she or he does not sell potentiality short to actuality and its demands for compromise.

As we have seen, Berlant suggests that 'flat affect' can be regarded as a strategy which makes a subject less or unevenly accessible in response to an injurious or depleting environment.

However, an important distinction lies in whether emotional flattening, or its less extreme and more flexible form reserve, occurs on the basis of a standing reserve or an indeterminate holding. Both are versions of compromised freedom, which may nonetheless enable an individual to keep or gain their footing in the world. Where flat affect or reserve are adopted as a psychosocial

strategy on the basis of a standing reserve, the subject permits insertion into the expectations and demands of the present in a conditional way, on the basis of energy, ideas, capability or other potentiality held back to supply additional options. There is fuel left in the tank, money left in the bank, of a known identity for remaining in circulation, and for weighing or pushing for other or further developments. Some measure of freedom from the situation is facilitated by this excess. However, it is a freedom created from and compromised by not only the conditional acceptance of the present but more importantly by the limits of the inventory of available resources, and who or what has supplied them to us.

By contrast, where flat affect or reserve is adopted as a psychosocial strategy on the basis of an indeterminate holding, the subject has no stockpile of determinate other options. Rather, they hold back from full responsive interface with the present on the basis of a disidentification with what it offers. This disidentification is fuelled not by a known identity and its resources, but precisely by something more or less than that, perhaps felt as dissatisfaction or recklessness or hope (see Bloch and Adorno, 1988; Muñoz, 2009). In his *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* (2013), the artist John Koenig offers an illustration of such a feeling of indeterminate holding when he introduces the term ‘monachopsis’ (from *monachus*, ‘single, solitary’ + *opsis*, ‘vision’), and defines it as ‘the subtle but persistent feeling of being out of place, as maladapted to your surroundings as a seal on a beach – lumbering, clumsy, easily distracted, huddled in the company of other misfits, unable to recognize the ambient roar of your intended habitat, in which you’d be fluidly, brilliantly, effortlessly at home.’ Where, for instance, there is a significant disparity between gender identity and feasible forms of gender expression, monachopsis may be expected,

and flat affect offer itself as a strategy for negotiating the tightrope that will then need to be walked between personal and social requirements.

Reserve as indeterminate holding may open some measure of freedom through experiments in disidentification and transitioning. It is an uncomfortable form of freedom, and may turn out to be empty. And it may ‘time out’, as actuality encourages us to cut our losses and work fully within the terms made available to us – this is not necessarily a bad outcome if what times out is an unhelpfully hazy optimism. Cutting losses may be the condition for seriously and pragmatically engaging with what may be made from the present. But, like access to a standing reserve, indeterminate holding offers something real and significant in the differentiation it enacts within the interface between subject, power and environment. In a way, it might be said that indeterminate holding has *possibility itself* as its standing reserve, in the protective, productive differentiation it enacts in restraining the subject from full engagement with the given conventions for behaviour, apprehension and feeling, for making meaning and valuing things in the world. This is the conclusion arrived at by Derrida (1995, p. 147):

Differentiation is a protection, a strategy of the living. This is not a little calculation, it’s a strategy of desire which divides itself in order to keep something in reserve: I remain free, I am not just there, you will see that I am also elsewhere, and thus that I have resources, I still have a reserve, some life.

Derrida here emphasizes the importance of indeterminate holding as a resource for living. This is in line with his presentation of the concept of *l’avenir* as ‘what is to come’, a future which resists

domestication with prediction and rational planning (Derrida, 2005). However, in developing such a line of thinking, it is important to note that Derrida does not cancel agency through an emphasis on possibility and a derogation of actuality. Reserve is a strategy of the living, imminent to and alongside our world of pragmatic concerns and compromises, not an elevation outside of it. Indeterminate holdings are socially attributed and taken into account within the hurly-burly of everyday social practices, not as a bank reserve, but as an openness to a dialogical process that will both realize and revise our hopes and transform us in the process. This is the mutuality of recognition which readers may know from the experience of children growing up to be part of families, *and* changing their family in the process. It may also be familiar from the experience of hope as something intangible, yet utterly real, negotiated, contested, and alive; we may enact reserve in a context, holding back from capitulation to its terms, because of specific hopes for how these terms might be altered, or out of an indeterminate hope without an end.

Yet the tensions that sustain reserve, as well as permitting some compromised freedom, can also be dangerous, and indeterminate hope actually function in practice as a devastating despair with the world available to us. In *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard describes ‘reserve’ evocatively as ‘inwardness with a jammed lock’ (1983, p. 73). He urges that reserve ‘must be the particular object of attention’ because of its dual position, representing *either* or *both* liberation and loss in the encounter between subject and world. And in *Stages on Life’s Way* (1988), Kierkegaard also makes the subtle point, with which Berlant appears to agree, that whilst unbearable experiences may perhaps form a psychological impetus for reserve, this does not necessarily account for or explain the possible functions of reserve in the present. Nor will these functions necessarily be conscious or apparent to the subjects themselves. In Kierkegaard’s estimate, the significance of

reserve lies in the liberating potential it offers from the limits of the encountered world.

However, it can also cut the subject off from the sustenance that can only be gained through this encounter; reserve therefore is a trap, and best conceptualized as a kind of depression, if it becomes too permanent or intensively applied. As such, reserve risks unintelligibility with others, and this can be dangerous as it is in communication with others that we are recognized and sustained – where this communication is able to access some relation with authenticity as a perpetual and precarious process. Laing concurs with Kierkegaard on this point in *The Divided Self* (1960).

Laing and Esterson also raise a second danger attached to the kind of split in being-in-the-world that reserve or flat affect represent. The space carved out through this strategy can be deployed as some degree of freedom – but it can also and at the same time support the elaboration of an inner world based on persecutory phantasy reserved from reality-testing. An individual's psychosocial organisation will then miss the safety-valve that reality-testing provides. For Laing and Esterson, into the space made for freedom can come an invasion of phantasy which will be full of anger and fear especially where communication with the environment as anchor has been cut off. Laing and Esterson (1970, p. 216) identify this additional danger attached to operations performed on the feelings which organize the self-world boundary:

secondary consequences may ensue which were not intended. For instance, if you shut people off, and put things out of your mind, you may come to a stop, feel empty, and a necessarily fearful form of the inrush or implosion of reality in a persecuting form.

Laing and Esterson discuss this inrush as necessary in the context of flat affect. But the space opened up by reserve is not necessarily one which leads to persecutory phantasy, with freedom opening at the price of a painful and fearful inner world. This outcome is primarily the consequence of flat affect occurring as a response to something felt to be unbearable in the experienced environment, which inhibits communication. Where, by contrast, reserve operates as part of the *composition* of communication, it can form beautiful, helpful constellations – such as sensitive tact, trust between friends, a hanging silence to allow emergence and realization, confident modesty, patience for the future. The point is shown most vividly, perhaps, by the technical and integral role given to reserve by Freud at the very foundation of psychoanalysis. To create the psychoanalytic encounter, the patient must ‘give himself up to the thoughts that occur to him spontaneously and to say without any critical reserve whatever comes into his head’, whilst at the same time the analyst must enact a certain ‘reserve’ in order to become the smooth, opaque surface for the projections which spur the transference (Freud, 2001, p. 107; 1974, p. 479). Such reserve, as with all reserve, can help engage contact which is intense, full, clear and clean.

The reserve of the analyst and the lack of reserve of the patient bring about a specific social-psychological configuration, which intensifies processes that would in any case happen to some degree within everyday life. The configuration renews the interface between the patient and her possibilities for living and sources of libido, which had been renounced under some historical bargain between ego and world, and which had therefore been transformed into phantasy:

In the activity of phantasy human beings continue to enjoy the freedom from external compulsion which they have long since renounced in reality... The creation of the mental realm of phantasy finds a perfect parallel in the establishment of 'reservations' or 'nature reserves' in places where the requirements of agriculture, communications and industry threaten to bring about changes in the original face of the earth which will quickly make it unrecognizable. A nature reserve preserves its original state which everywhere else has to our regret been sacrificed to necessity.  
(Freud, 2001, p. 372)

Freud perceived the human mind as having such spaces of 'reservation'. Where the ego is unable to give up its interpersonal reserve as a tight hold on a determinate standing reserve of possible investments and ways of living, the intrapersonal reserve constituted by the id remains inaccessible except as phantasy or enacted symptom. However, in relaxing the ego's critical reserve within the clinical encounter and permitting uncontrolled forms of engagement and speech to occur, the patients open themselves to a repopulation of their forms of life from the options and energies that were, at some point in the past, quashed or sacrificed to the reality principle (Green, 2002). The reserve of the therapist opens up some space for renegotiating the terms of personal freedom, finding some new compromise with available reality.

Of course, history has shown the limitations to Freud's technical insertion of a therapeutic space as a gearbox to mediate social requirements with subjective desire, and even its transmutation into a mechanism for the cultural compulsion to express emotion. In the realities of Laing and Esterton's psychiatry users, patients maintain a reserve that is well-advised given not only

oppressive family interactions, but also that therapists' reserve is often compromised by their place in disciplinary institutions that systematically misrecognize their patients. But it is not at all fruitful to cast therapeutic practice within the compliance / resistance binary, with the therapist either disciplining or emancipating some inner, natural state for the subject. Just as nature reserves are now widely recognised to be feats of social and ecological engineering, the kinds of reserve performed or relaxed in therapy should be approached as a social and practical achievement. This acknowledges their embeddedness in power games and their dangers, along with their potential for engendering creative phantasy and authentic insight into ourselves, permitting some compromised, valuable freedom.

Such an approach suggests a way of grasping the paradox that, when we access great works of literature or social science, like Laing and Esterson's *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, they increase their reserve of insight to the very extent to which we draw from it. Reserve is not simply something we can use to hold back from the world, but something that can occur, or be cultivated to occur, within the world that we encounter, enlivening or shifting the organization of our self-world boundary. An illustration is Berlant, who encounters flat affect, and is brought to ask about her and our insertion into regimes of compulsory emotions, and the psychosocial price of these. Flat affect shows how a compromised, valuable freedom can be carved out from even profoundly depletory environments. Likewise reserve, a less extreme and emergency form of flat affect which is more differentiated and responsive to changing environments, represents a subtle strategy through which power and subjectivity may be negotiated. The potential strategic significance of flat affect and reserve would be overlooked by a lens focused on resistance and compliance. As the clinical setting illustrates, where it is not deployed in an undifferentiated way

as a barrier against the world, reserve thoughtfully used can engender other ways of seeking and perhaps finding a sufficiently-stable, richly-felt life.

## References

- Arieti, S. (1955) *Interpretation of Schizophrenia*, NY: Robert Brunner.
- Bakhtin, M. ([1965] 1986) *Rabelais and his World*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Berlant, L. (2008) *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. (2011) *Cruel Optimism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. (2015) 'Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*' *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 28(3): pp. 191-213.
- Bloch, E. & Adorno, T.W. ([1970] 1988) 'Something's missing' in Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes & Frank Mecklenburg, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp.1-17.
- Butler, J. (2006) 'Violence, Non-violence: Sartre on Fanon' *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 27(1): pp. 3-24.
- Carr, E. S. (2011) *Scripting Addiction. The Politics of Therapeutic Talk and American Sobriety*. Princeton. N.J., USA, Princeton University Press .
- Cassem, E.H. (2009) 'An Overview of Care and Management of the Patient at the End of Life' in Harvey Max Chochinov & William Breitbart eds. *Handbook of Psychiatry in Palliative Medicine*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 23-38.
- Derrida, J. (1989) 'Biodegradables', *Critical Inquiry* 15: pp. 812-873,

*Robbie Duschinsky, Daniel Reisel and Morten Nissen* Compromised, Valuable Freedom: Flat Affect and Reserve as Psychosocial Strategies

- Derrida, J. (1995) 'Dialanguages' in *Points*, ed. Elizabeth Weber, Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 132-55,
- Derrida, J. (2005) *The Politics of Friendship*. London: Verso,
- Erdinast-Vulcan, D. (2013) *Between Philosophy and Literature: Bakhtin and the Question of the Subject*, Stanford: Stanford University Press,
- Freud, S. ([1912] 1974) 'Letter from Sigmund Freud to C. G. Jung, January 10, 1912' in *The Freud/Jung Letters: The Correspondence Between Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 479-481.
- Freud, S. ([1917] 2001) 'General Theory of the Neuroses' *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVI, London: Vintage, pp. 243-463.
- Freud, S. ([1906] 2001) 'Psycho-Analysis and the Establishment of the Facts in Legal Proceedings', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume IX, London: Vintage, pp. 97-114.
- Garfinkel, H. (1984) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Goffman, E. (1986) *Frame Analysis*, Boston: North Eastern University Press.
- Gomart, E. & A. Hennion (1999) 'A sociology of attachment: music amateurs, drug users' in *Actor Network Theory and After*, eds. J. Law and Hassard. Oxford, Blackwell: pp. 220-247.
- Green, A. ([2001] 2002) *Time in Psychoanalysis: Some Contradictory Aspects*, trans. Andrew Weller, NY: Free Association Books
- Haraway, D. (1987). 'A manifesto for cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s', *Australian Feminist Studies* 2(4): pp. 1-42.

- Heidegger, M. ([1949] 2009) 'The Bremen Lectures' in *The Heidegger Reader*,  
Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Holford, N., Renold, E. & Huuki, T. (2013) 'What (else) can a kiss do? Theorizing the  
power plays in young children's sexual cultures' *Sexualities* 16(5-6): pp. 710-729.
- Keefe, R. & Harvey, P. (2010) *Understanding Schizophrenia*, NY: Free Press.
- Kierkegaard, S. ([1845] 1988) *Stages on Life's Way*, Kierkegaard's Writings XI, eds.  
Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kierkegaard, S. ([1849] 1983) *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard's Writings XIX, eds.  
Edna H. Hong & Howard V. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Koenig, J. (2013) 'Entry: Monachopsis' at <http://www.dictionarofobscuresorrows.com/>
- Laing, R.D. (1960) *The Divided Self*, London: Penguin.
- Laing, R.D. (1961) *Self & Others*, London: Tavistock.
- Laing, R.D. (1967) *The Politics of Experience and The Birds of Paradise*, London: Penguin.
- Laing, R.D. & Esterson, A. (1970) *Sanity, Madness and the Family: Families of Schizophrenics*,  
2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Penguin.
- Leudar, I. & Thomas, P. (2000) *Voices of Reason, Voices of Insanity: Studies of Verbal  
Hallucinations*, NY: Psychology Press.
- Martin, E. (2007) *Bipolar Expeditions: Mania and depression in American culture*, Princeton:  
Princeton University Press.
- Mitchell, J. (1974) *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, London: Allen Lane.
- Muñoz, J.E. (2009) *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, NY: New York  
University Press.

*Robbie Duschinsky, Daniel Reisel and Morten Nissen* Compromised, Valuable Freedom: Flat Affect and Reserve as Psychosocial Strategies

Schlegel, F. ([1800] 1971) 'On Incomprehensibility' in *Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, pp. 257-273.

Sedgwick, E.K. (2003) *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Topor, A. (2001) *Managing the contradictions: Recovery from severe mental disorders*, Stockholm: Stockholm Institute of Social Work.

Willis, P. (2001). 'Tekin' the Piss' in *History in Person. Enduring Struggles, Contentious Practice, Intimate Identities*. Eds. D. Holland and J. Lave. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, pp. 171-216.