A Lacanian Psychoanalysis of *Catch Me if You Can*

Jacque Lacan is a psychoanalyst that has developed psychoanalytical study in such a way that it can be applied to forms of communication. Lacan’s work has parallels to Sigmund Freud’s, but instead of focusing on how sexuality influences psycho development Lacan focuses on how language and ideology propel psycho development. Lacan proposes three registers (Flitterman-Lewis 208) that people develop through on their way to becoming a part of society: the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic. This paper will summarize Lacan’s theory of psychoanalysis, give an example of his theory in the movie *Catch Me if You Can*, and explain why his theory is pertinent to communication theory.

The real is the underlying structure in a person’s psyche that is pure need. It is experienced outside of any form of structural code, so a person is closest to the absolute form of the real as a newborn child. The longer a child is immersed in a world structured by linguistics, ideologies, and other sign based codes, the more cut off from the real register the child becomes. The influence of the real is never completely erased, though, from a person’s life. Rather, it is built upon by the imaginary and symbolic registers.

The basis of the imaginary register happens through what Lacan calls the mirror stage. During this stage the child will develop a sense of self, an “ideal ego,” and becomes aware of the sense of lack that Lacan says defines human existence (Felluga). In the mirror stage, a child “perceives itself as a mass of disconnected fragmentary movements” (Flitterman-Lewis 208), but when is takes in a mirror image it perceives that
image to be better than the literal self because the image is seen as controlled, whole, and organized; and the child develops a longing to be like that complete image.

The mirror image doesn’t necessarily have to be the child’s reflection. It could also be another person, such as the mother, that the child identifies as being complete and thus superior — either way the mirrored image becomes the “ideal ego” for the child and a narcissistic relationship between the image and the child is formed. Dino Felluga, on his Web site Introductory Guide to Critical Theory, defines the ideal ego as “the ideal image of perfection that the ego strives to emulate.” The ideal ego is inherently unattainable, however, so this concept sets the child up for always having an underlying sense of lack, which Lacan calls a demand (Felluga, Structure). The creation of the ideal ego acts as the pattern through which the child will create other narcissistic fantasies to work towards the rest of its life.

The development of the imaginary register is prompted by the child encountering its mirror image. What prompts the child to start functioning in the symbolic register is encountering a third image — or a father figure. There is a correlation here to Freud’s Oedipus complex. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis explains in her essay Psychoanalysis, Film, and Television that for Lacan the child’s psycho development isn’t propelled by fear of castration though, but rather “the figure of the father represents the fact that a wider familial and social network exists and that the child must seek a position in that context. The child must… take a position as someone who can designate himself or herself as an ‘I’ in a world of adult third persons (‘he’, ‘she’ and ‘it’)” (208-209).

The symbolic register represents the learning of and the living by way of linguistics and other codes. The appearance of the symbolic register allows the child to go from the binary relationship between itself and its ideal ego to being able to interact (appropriately) with the other people within the society of whose codes the child has been immersed. These dictating codes are what Lacan refers to as the Name-of-the-
Felluga defines the Name-of-the-Father as “the laws and restrictions that control both your desire and the rules of communication.”

*Catch Me if You Can* provides a good example of how even after a person has learned to submit to the Name-of-the-Father and to function within the symbolic register, the person is still affected by the imaginary register. In the imaginary, a child develops a narcissistic fantasy relationship between itself and its mirrored image which becomes the ideal ego. This pattern is projected onto other relationships the child will have as it grows. In *Catch Me if You Can* the pattern is seen in Frank William Abagnale, Jr.’s relationship of himself to his family.

In the beginning of the movie, Abagnale sees his family as an idealized image. His parents are together; they love each other; and there is reciprocated love between him and his parents. The three of them have a nice home, nice things, and live comfortably.

When his father is convicted of tax fraud, however, the family has to sell their house and many of their belongings. Soon after, Abagnale’s mother divorces his father. Thus, what Abagnale had perceived as a whole, complete image, which he was a part of is now fragmented. He then experiences a feeling of loss or lack very much like what he experienced as a child when he went through the mirror stage.

The rest of the movie is Abagnale trying to restore the unity that he felt in the idealized image of a family. He first tries to reunite his original family. He makes fraudulent checks and poses as an airline pilot and uses the money he gets to try and bring his parents back together. When he realizes that isn’t going to work, he tries to start a new family. He poses as a doctor and falls in love with a nurse. Then to impress her family he also poses as a law practitioner.

Abagnale’s efforts throughout all this to reach his ideal image of family have been illegal according to United States federal laws and even some international laws. The
FBI catches and arrests Abagnale and essentially ends the movie. The FBI arrest though doesn’t just serve as a way to end the movie. It also acts as a parallel to the Name-of-the-Father.

As in the psycho development of a child, the Name-of-the-Father shapes the child’s actions and thoughts in such a way that enables the child to function in society, so the FBI enforcing the laws does to Abagnale. The arrest forces Abagnale to kick out of the imaginary pursuit he had engaged in and then find a way that is socially acceptable to pursue a unified family.

Lacan’s work is important because it is what enables things like movies to be interpreted in terms of psychoanalysis. He takes the unconscious (the real) and the conscious (the imaginary and the symbolic) and relates them to structural codes. Because humans communicate through codes, Lacan’s work is vital to the use of psychoanalysis as a part of communication theory.

Using psychoanalysis with communication studies, particularly films, allows one to examine an audience from the inside out, or backwards, from other methods. Speaking specifically of film studies, Flitterman-Lewis says, “Differing from the models of mass audience offered by empirical or sociological approaches to the cinema… [psychoanalysis] considers both the viewing state and the film text alike as in some way mobilizing the structures of unconscious fantasy” (211). This idea is what allows us to take the movie Catch Me if You Can and know viewers will easily be able to “read” the movie.

The development of the psyche that Lacan’s psychoanalysis identifies occurs in all people; and when a psychoanalytical examination of Catch Me if You Can is done, elements of Lacan’s psycho development are able to be identified. Thus it follows that every person who would see this movie (or any other movie with psycho developmental
elements) is going to be able to recognize and understand patterns that they themselves are experiencing even if the recognition is only on an unconscious level.

Lacan’s reshaping of psychoanalysis is different from Freud’s in that it examines the effects of codes on the psyche of humans instead of sexuality. He refers to registers called the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic by which humans’ lives are structured. Because Lacan’s theory focuses on the effects of codes, elements of his theory can be seen in media such as the movie *Catch Me if You Can*, and it is able to form the foundation for psychoanalysis to be used as a communication theory.

