

TITLE: The challenges of the contemporary world for the subject and for psychoanalysis

ABSTRACT

We live in a society where *jouissance* has become a moral obligation, in which social ties are no longer structured around the impossible. What does psychoanalysis have to offer, given that it works in the opposite direction to this surplus *jouissance*? And what do psychoanalysts do? They apply the psychoanalytical method, as Lacan puts it. The aim of the present study is to promote reflection on treatment, cure, and the ethics of psychoanalysis in the context of such adversity.

TEXT:

In order to orchestrate the masses, in the modern world, both science and the laws of consumption increasingly operate in such a way as to exclude the singular circumstances within which each human being finds themselves—the pain and suffering unique to each speaking being—in a world in which one size fits all and the desire of one is the desire of all, most notably the desire of the Other. However, try as one might, there is no way of standardizing desire, each desire must be revealed one by one.

Colette Soler has worked on the question of the master and the slave and Marx's concept of surplus value, taken up by Lacan as "surplus *jouissance*." She describes the one who consumes as a "Narcynist", fusing Narcissism and cynicism, since capitalist discourse does not form social ties, because ties are established with surplus value and the objects of production. That which lies outside of the tie provokes dissatisfaction; it will never be enough. Consumption, acquisitiveness, working hard in order to acquire—the insanity of this whole process—produces only dissatisfaction, which, in turn, generates anxiety, and, since no ties are formed, subjects are tied together by the symptom. In other words, each

individual attempts to employ his or her fundamental symptom to stand in for mass despondency in a consumer society of spectacle.

There are no precedents in human history for this way of being and this has had the effect of 'irrealizing' Narcissistic ideals. It is worth remembering that Narcissus was told by the oracle that he would live a long life, so long as he did not gaze upon his own image. The Narcissism that, although banalized in common parlance nowadays, is an extremely important point in life through which every human being passes, its very basis, in fact.

When excessive consumption passes into the realm of the real, surplus *jouissance*, by extending it, devalues and distances subjects. We live in an age of spectacle, of masses preoccupied with a virtual reality, in which each individual seeks his or her own echo in a world of images. These images can, just as in the myth, be deadly, with dramatic and horrifying events treated with the utmost banality.

We also see nowadays the spectacle of success, as if successful people were exempt from anguish and from the real. Success has always been enchanting and this comparison of oneself with everything perfect seems to stand in these days for the ties that are lacking.

People who are hyperconnected, concerned with something that cannot touch their bodies—a daily intrusion of images and of other bodies—create for themselves all kinds of imaginary faraway companions, companions in dreams alone. As in the case of the violinist who goes unnoticed when seen close up, as if it were only possible for him to be recognized when performing on the most magnificent of stages (Soler, 2010).

Mere consumers of Narcissistic objects that nevertheless lack desire are thus alienated by capitalist discourse, which makes objects even more so of them, as they follow the mode of operation of the virtual world, on social networks, where relations and people can be blocked or deleted, at lightning speed. Like Narcissus, they hear only the echoes of their own voices. This is clearly a symbolic device that is used only infrequently, and, when it is, it confronts the other like a shield, perhaps denoting something that cannot be assimilated in relations and whose lack of meaning affects the subject at the profoundest level.

Nevertheless, the collective cannot escape the pull of the One, of unification. It tries to unify desire, thought, saying and doing, but cannot thereby sustain the social tie. It is impossible to unify desire, in so far as it is a hiatus in the unique subjective experience of each individual, which presents itself one piece at a time.

Recently, we have been hearing the discourse of the excess in which the world finds itself Narcissistically submerged. This is the culture of consumerism, which involves unbridled *jouissance*. What I keep hearing from families in my clinic is an excessive amount of shouting and swearing, too much complaining, too many activities, excessive demands on parents, and an excessive degree of disputation for power and space between parents and children. The youngest generations have not received the kind of upbringing that has furnished them with any consistent moorings or nominations, leaving their affiliations at the mercy of the drives. Lacking possible versions of the “name-of-the-father,” children are left rudderless and unmoored. The parents beg for assistance. There is suffering all round.

Listening as a psychoanalyst and providing sustenance for psychoanalysis through the manner in which one’s practice addresses the subject is one possible way in which psychoanalysis can sustain itself in the world, using a discourse that seeks to give a voice to those who are suffering and lack even faintest notion of where their own desire is going.

When Lacan remarks in “Variations on the Standard Treatment,” in *Écrits*, that “[p]sychoanalysis is not like any other form of therapeutics”, he notes that the term “‘variations’ implies neither the adapting of the treatment to a ‘variety’ of cases, in accordance with empirical or even clinical criteria, nor a reference to the ‘variables’¹”, but a concern for “a rigor that is in some sense ethical, without which any treatment, even if it is filled with psychoanalytic knowledge, can only amount to psychotherapy²”. In this same text, Lacan addresses the term cure, which he sees as something additional, “an added benefit of psychoanalytic treatment³”. It is not so much a matter of rigor as of an ethical stance, which,

¹ [Translator’s Note: Translation of title and quotation taken from Lacan, J. (2006) *Écrits*. Translated by Bruce Fink. W.W. Norton & Company. p. 269]

² *ibid.*

³ *op. cit.* p.270 [The original French has ‘*bénéfice de surcroît*’]

in the course of treatment administered by someone who assumes a place that may or may not be the result of their personal analysis, inserts the subject in the order of desire. An analyst is the fruit of a training that consists mainly of a personal analysis. Psychoanalysis is thus “the treatment one expects from a psychoanalyst⁴”, a practice that is, above all, based on an ethics of desire.

Ever since Freud, psychoanalysis has been a practice based on the word with the support of transference, making use of parapraxes, dreams, disturbances of the memory, and other such phenomena, which enable the subject to tell his or her own story, to historicize one’s own discourse and arrive at one’s own “hystoria” that paves the way towards the possibility of deciphering the symptom that covers the desire blocked by *jouissance*. In the psychoanalytical sense, the symptom is no more than the emergence of a “truth” concerning *jouissance*. The subject is in fact its own symptom.

Analysis is thus a practice of an essentially ethical order. From its very beginnings, analysis has been a peculiar kind of practice, whose recourse to the word under transference sets it apart from other kinds of therapy *prêt-à-porter*.

In this world of unbridled consumption, of virtual reality, of instantaneous and seemingly limitless communication in time and space, is there a place for psychoanalysis? If so, what is it?

Yes, there is a place. Increasingly so. Psychoanalysis, with its peculiar mode of intervention, in which the subject is always taken to be a desiring being, still today has a vast field of operation. What sets psychoanalysis apart from the various other resources offered by today’s culture—such as medication, drugs, cars, technological gadgets, having fun, acquiring knowledge and anything that money can buy, including the vast range of therapies that ‘promise’ salvation from a sense of helplessness and lack of well-being—is precisely the ethical manner with which it addresses the subject’s dilemmas. Psychoanalysis does not provide the subject with the illusion that life can be free of suffering, because that would be

⁴ op. cit. p.274

to remove something that is fundamental. It does not promise to do away with the emptiness—the “meaninglessness” and “absurdity”—that is an intrinsic part of what it means to be human. It seeks, rather, in so far as this is possible, to help subjects come to terms with this condition and with themselves, without thereby giving up on being a desiring being.

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