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DRUGS, PLAGUES, AND SOME INTERPRETATIONS

MARÍA PÍA MARCHESE *

ABSTRACT

Different literary and cinema productions can help us interpret phenomena in the history of humankind, such as segregation and drug addiction. In this article, reference is made to Kafka characters and to a film by David Cronenberg which reinterprets the novel *The Naked Lunch* and the life of its author, the American writer William Burroughs. Articulated with the developments of Lacanian psychoanalysis, these works shed light on the internal mainsprings which support such phenomena and make it possible to elucidate their specificities in the present context.

KEYWORDS

Segregation | Drug addiction | Law | Franz Kafka | Obscure gods | *Jouissance*

“Joan Lee: –It’s a Kafka high. You feel like a bug..”
Joan Lee in the film *Naked Lunch*. David Cronenberg, 1991.

THE IMPOSSIBLE JOUISSANCE

In *The Reverse of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan (1969-1970 [2010]) posits the structural condition of segregation, since segregation explains *jouissance* as impossible in speaking beings:

The energy that we have from all being brothers very clearly proves that we are not so. Even with our blood brother nothing proves that we are his brother, (...) This passion for fraternity, not to mind the rest, liberty and equality, is something that is outrageous and we would do well to see what it is covering over. (Lacan, J. 1969-1970 [2010], pp. 120-121).

And he adds:

I know of only a single origin for fraternity—I mean human, always *humus*—it is segregation.

Only in society (...) I note everything that exists, and in the first place fraternity, is founded on segregation. No fraternity is even conceivable (...) except through the fact that people are isolated together, isolated from the rest by something. (Lacan, J. (1969-1970 [2010], p. 121)

*Student in the Master’s Program in Lacanian Psychoanalytic Theory. National University of Córdoba. Adherent Member of the Research and Clinical Study Center (CIEC). Drug Addiction and Alcoholism Department.
piamarchese@gmail.com

In the same chapter of this seminar, Lacan takes up the murder of the father of the primal horde from *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 1913-1914 [2012]), the murder of Moses, and the murder committed by Oedipus in order to account for the fictional character of these myths, whose function is to become ways of localizing the impossible *jouissance* through symbolic castration.

A SENSELESS LAW

From Freud's developments in *Totem and Taboo* (op. cit.) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939-1934, 1938 [2012]), we learn that the consequences of the murder of the father are the birth of the fraternal pact and the emergence of the law. The dead father has to do with the impossible of *jouissance*.

These myths show the coordination of *jouissance* with the signifier and the emergence of desire from the Law of the Father, which establishes that which is forbidden and allowed, implying by itself the phallic exception and normativization. But the law plays the game differently according to the context.

The *superego* is structural and pushes to *jouir*. But *jouissance* was different in the times of the primacy of the Name-of-the-Father—when transgression was enjoyed (*joui*)—than in the times of the non-existence of the Other, when the prevailing modality of *jouissance* goes beyond the phallus.

As Jacques-Alain Miller (1986) states: “the superego is certainly the law, but not the pacifying and socializing law; it is rather a senseless law in that it entails a hole, an absence of justification. (...) It is the Other in that there is no Other of the Other” (p. 143).

It is a crazy and whimsical law that brings us closer to a *jouissance* without limits. It encourages the search for an absolute *jouissance* by promising to name the unmentionable, but without offering a sense that will allow a subject to identify and orient him/herself; it demands the sheer experience of *jouissance* without providing any knowledge about it. In the face of the fall of the Name-of-the-Father and ideals, the *superego* is empowered and it is all about *jouissance*, leaving the subjects to the mercy of sheer death drive.

In *Encore*, Lacan (1972-1973[2011]) states that “nothing forces anyone to enjoy (*jouir*), except the *superego*. The superego is the imperative of *jouissance*. Enjoy (*Jouis!*)” (p. 11). The Name-of-the-Father is a function that links *jouissance* with desire; in contrast, the law of the *superego* only knows about *jouissance*. Therefore, it can be posited that the epoch leaves us more exposed to *jouissance* than to desire.

HATING OUR FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS

As stated earlier, psychoanalysis contributes a new interpretation in relation to other discourses: segregation is structural in speaking beings. No social bond can be thought of without reference to it.

The Freudian developments posit that human beings are inhabited by a constitutive tendency to hatred and to the destruction of others. There is a need in subjects to differentiate themselves from others. The more similar the other becomes, the more imperative it is to raise a trait to an absolute difference that will create a separation. This is explained in what Freud called *the narcissism of small differences*. (1929-1930 [2012], p.110).

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud (1929-1930 [2012]) states that the commandment *you*

shall love your neighbor as yourself, which is supposed to be the ideal claim of a cultured society, is an irrational precept, since there is nothing to assume such constitutive goodness in human beings. With the Lacanian term *extimacy* (Lacan, 1968-1969[2011]), which is based on the Freudian concept of *the uncanny* (Freud, 1919 [2012]), we can take a step forward in the elaboration, since it allows us to elucidate what that fundamental evil we are inhabited by is all about, showing the most intimate root of what is at play in segregation processes. Subjects recognize neither their *jouissance* nor themselves in their mode of *jouissance*; therefore, they localize it from the *jouissance* of the other. In this line, the neologism coined by Lacan allows another interpretation, suggesting that it is all about hating the *jouissance* of the other, which we will always find foreign, because one's own *jouissance* is foreign. Hating the *jouissance* of the other seems to be the only way of localizing it when faced with the impossibility of symbolizing it (Miller, 2010). In the absence of knowledge about *jouissance*, rejection appears.

By encouraging to erase particularities in pursuit of *the same jouissance for everyone*, the discourse of today's civilization reinforces the return of foreclosed segregation, promoting not only the structural narcissism of small differences, but also intolerance to what appears as Other. Then let us remember Lacan's postulate that we will witness an extension of the process of segregation:

... what we have seen emerge from this, to our horror, represents the reaction of precursors in relation to what will unfold as a consequence of the rearranging of social groupings by science and, notably, of the universalization science introduces into them. Our future as common markets will be balanced by an increasingly hard-line extension of the process of segregation. (Lacan, J. 1967 [2014], p. 276)

HYPERMODERN METAMORPHOSIS: GREGOR SAMSA, A CONTEMPORARY SUBJECT?

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were armor-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his domelike brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly stay in place and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes.

What has happened to me? he thought. It was no dream. (Kafka, 1915[2011], p. 9)

The Metamorphosis (*Die Verwandlung*, 1915 [2011]) tells the story of Gregor Samsa, a twenty-three-year-old salesman that lives with his family—who live off his income—until one day he wakes up to find himself transformed into a horrible insect. From that moment on, he is unable to work and keeps hiding from the rejection he causes around him, which creates all kinds of complications. He stays in his room and only goes around the house when everybody else is asleep. He experiences first hand the family's increasing aversion to him. Revulsion, aggressiveness, fear, rejection in the face of a disgusting infected insect that not even his sister—who is the only one that has taken pity on him—can stand any longer. Everybody wants to get rid of Gregor, until he eventually understands and stops eating. He ends up dying all alone. The cleaning woman pokes him with a broom and realizes that only his corpse is left. Relieved, the family can finally spend their time going to places outside the city and taking care of new family dreams.

From what has been developed above, if we consider the epoch and structural segregation as a condition of the social bond, we can posit that Gregor's metamorphosis was not a cause but an effect of segregation. People, human beings like everyone else who have a normal life can quickly become despicable filthy creatures that must be swept or gotten rid of by anyone, ranging from the more intimate and familiar other to law courts that seem to be illegal, such as the one who convicted Josef K.—another Kafkan character—but have society's approval. As a result, somebody may decide that someone else must *die like a dog* (Kafka, F. 1925 [2005], p. 249).

From his own relationship with the law, Kafka described in advance how the Nazi regime would treat the Jews, among others, just as contemporary men and women—in the globalized era—suffer exclusion, segregation, and the ravages of the death drive. It could be said that he caught a glimpse of the shape that rejection would take not only years later in Europe, but also in the present day, when political campaigns are won with the promise to build walls and protect citizens from those who are different, or when other human beings are eliminated because of their gender, nationality, race, religion, or social status.

KAFKA AND THE LAW

The Trial is a novel published posthumously in German as *Der Prozess* by Max Brod for the first time in 1925, based on Kafka's messy manuscripts. It starts by announcing that "Someone must have been telling tales about Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested" (Kafka, 1925 [2005], p. 3), and then goes on to narrate the process whose motives K. ignores and how K. gets into a tangle by desperately and unsuccessfully trying to find out what those motives are. Josef K. gets trapped in a bureaucratic maze, with unhelpful clerks, endless levels, and incomprehensible rules, and he can never have access to the judge in charge of his trial or to the court where it will be conducted. The law and justice appear incomprehensible, which eventually makes him hopeless and leads him to plead guilty, give himself up, and die *like a dog*.

As we can read about Kafka—from the introduction to his novel written by Miguel Vedda—he himself could show, through a special sensitivity, the experience of *jouissance* as something that is not recognized as one's own and is felt as foreign.

As a Jew, he was not himself in the Christian world. As an indifferent Jew, (...) he was not himself among the Jews. As one who spoke German, he was not himself among Czechs. As a Jew speaking German, he was not himself among Germans. As a Bohemian, he was not quite Austrian. As an employee of the workman's insurance office, he did not fully belong to the bourgeoisie; as the son of a solid burgher, not fully to the workers. And he was not at home at work, because he felt himself to be a writer. But he was not a writer, because he devoted all his strength to the family. "I live in this family stranger than the strangest foreigner." (Vedda, 2005, p. 89)

Kafka, as they say, was an *outsider* (Vedda, 2005, p. 21), not to social bonds, but an exile in his relationship with the law that structures *jouissance*, which allowed him to become a thinker who was sensitive to the state of emergency in the face of the law. "... Kafka's discovery is that the law is not regulated by the Name-of-the-Father. That's the superego, in addition, a law that is not regulated by the Name-of-the-Father" (Alemán, 2008).

Just like Freud (1939-1934, 1938 [2012]) in *Totem and Taboo*, Kafka elucidates that the law is founded by its exception, and that without its visage of sense, it can lead to the worst. If *jouissance* is *extimate* for the neurotic clinical structure, it becomes definitely foreign for psychosis. Josef K. becomes the subject who takes going off track in relation to his *jouissance* to the utmost expression and finds himself lost in the face of the tyrannical and terrifying law that makes use of his body. "Where was the judge he had never seen? Where was the high court he had never reached?" (Kafka, F. 1925[2005], p.249). He is so off track that he ends up giving in to the law, exhausted, hoping that some shame, some trait of his humanity will outlive him, since the segregative operation crushes humanity.

Gregor Samsa and Josef K., like other characters created by Kafka, end up reduced, segregated, marginalized, excluded, and are eventually annihilated physically. In his novels, Kafka was able to interpret that there is a structural mainspring that makes us prone to segregation, in our own individual relationship with the law and, therefore, with *jouissance*, and this may come to ravage.

CONSUMPTION AND SEGREGATION

In the era of the ascent of the object to the zenith, with the subsequent decline of the symbolic that gave privilege to the treatment of impossibility via the castration, a treatment of the real by the real is promoted. This results in the pathologies of the body, of the act, and of consumption. Family bonds are also affected by this change; as Miller (2004) states, “the dictatorship of the plus-de-jour devastates nature, breaks up marriage, disperses families and revises the body” (p. 47). The symbolic bonds based on exclusion do not prevail but, on the basis of an object or modality of jouissance, identifications give up their place to consumption, where it is all about everyone with their own autoerotic jouissance, the One-all-alone as a post-human standard (Miller, 2004). Rejection is reinforced on the one hand, and the tendency of subjects to offer themselves as objects of sacrifice to obscure gods on the other. Consumption and segregation seem to be two inherent traits of the post-human subject.

Two modes of segregation can be pointed out here: subjects segregate what appears to them as other, but they also self-segregate trying to symbolize a particular and specific modality of jouissance at the expense of others, in a yearning to name the impossibility of inscription of the relationship between the sexes (or, fully aware of that impossibility, to escape its complication by favoring autoerotic jouissance).

POST-HUMAN OR BEETLES?

David Cronenberg’s *Naked Lunch* (1991), based on the novel of the same name written by William S. Burroughs (1959), is a film about an exterminator called Bill Lee who is questioned about and accused of inhaling the insecticide he uses at work, as he tends to run out of it very quickly. The company refuses to supply him with the insecticide because they think he is using it to get high. One day Bill goes home to find out that his wife, Joan, is injecting herself with it. When he questions her about it, she says, “It’s a literary high,” since “It’s a Kafka high. You feel like a bug.”¹.

Bill Lee starts hallucinating about giant beetles because of exposure to the insecticide and he cannot tell reality from fantasy. He is then assigned the mission of killing Joan and agrees to carry it out. However, he later dismisses the mission instructions and returns home, where he accidentally kills Joan. Consequently, he decides to run away to *Interzone*, a place considered to be a shelter for the scum of the earth. Before that, he visits Dr. Benway, who prescribes him a powder called *black meat* as a medication for withdrawal purposes. Bill Lee eventually finds out that the drug (made from centipedes) causes the hallucinations. The final scenes show enslaved subjects consuming the thick substance scattered by the giant beetles. Thus, the viewer cannot tell who is a consumer and who is consumed. As the novel says, “the junk merchant doesn’t sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to his product. He does not improve and simplify his merchandise. He degrades and simplifies the client” (Burroughs, 1959, p. 4). This logic invites the following question: Is it about post-humans or insects offered in sacrifice under the law of the superego to please the obscure God?

¹ Joan Lee’s answer in *Naked Lunch*. Cronenberg, 1991.

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