

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Feb 9, 2023

https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/not_all_jouissance/

Silvia Rossman

Not-All Jouissance

First and foremost, I would like to thank Fernando Castrillón and the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* for organizing this event commemorating the publication of Néstor's Braunstein's book into English, as well as his kind invitation. Although the French and Portuguese translations, as well as the original Spanish version of *Jouissance: A Lacanian Concept* have been available for many years now, the English translation of *Goce* was a long time coming and well overdue (despite Lacan's many apprehensions regarding English *lalangue*!). So, it is indeed a cause for celebration that Néstor Braunstein's many readers now have his book available in English.

For my remarks today, I will take up the question posed in the announcement for today's symposium: why does jouissance occupy such a central place in contemporary psychoanalytic discourse? The question comes from my "Introduction" to the translation of Néstor's book, where I wrote that *jouissance* has become either the diagnosis, response, or solution for a wide range of contemporary discontents. In different disciplines and fields of study, the concept of *jouissance* holds pride of place: it is at once able to explain the capitalist or neoliberal logic with its imperative to "enjoy," to function as a critique of all forms of heteronormativity; it is also presented as a liberating force in a positive reading of biopolitics, or the point of inflection in a so-called *jouissance* clinic, where *jouissance* becomes the end point in the direction of the cure.

Given the insistence on its centrality, one has to ask why *jouissance* should be considered the answer to present day forms of discontent in culture. That is, if *jouissance* is given such a prominent place in contemporary discourses, is it because the lack in being can be cured? Philosophers and writers such as Maurice Blanchot, Jean-Luc Nancy and Roberto Esposito write of a present marked by unavowable, inoperative forms of community. That is, communities in which the in-common cannot be thought as a being together as One. The writers mentioned speak of communities of those who have *nothing* in common. In other words, communities where what is common is no thing. In his book, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, Esposito traces the semantic disparity of the term *communitas* and focuses on the Latin *munus*, which points to an obligation or a debt. Esposito concludes that what defines community is not addition, but subtraction (*meno*), a lack. He adds "the common is not characterized by what is proper but by what is improper... by a voiding, by removing what is properly one's own that invests and decenters the proprietary subject, forcing him to take leave of himself, to alter himself..."[1]

When read through psychoanalytic discourse, the types of communities these writers speak of affirm a lack that is structural, a loss that is inevitable. Freud melancholically bemoans this loss in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, published in 1930 and first titled "Unhappiness in Civilization," according to James Strachey. In his study Freud affirms the inability to love the neighbor as himself and only finds respite in what Néstor, in *Jouissance*, terms the *jouissance* of being, the mythical place or Thing for a living being before he/she is subject to language and the event of speech. When in *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud speaks of the human ability to tame nature by devising tools at his disposal, he also adds:

Writing was at its origin the voice of an absent person, and the dwelling house was a substitute for the mother's womb, the first lodging, for which in all likelihood man still longs and in which he was safe

and felt at ease.[2]

While Freud acknowledges in this same essay that due to his cultural achievements man has become a “prosthetic God”, he still does not feel happy, he says, in his “Godlike character.”

Lacan frames Freud’s reflections differently. In the latter part of his teaching, especially in the formulas of sexuation and the Borromean knot, Lacan indicates there is no cure for the discontent in civilization or culture. *Jouissance* is not all, and even a *Jouissance* of the Other, that Néstor calls *jouissance of the other sex*, and for Lacan is *jouissance* of the woman that is not all, is not hegemonic or even the only modality for thinking a *jouissance* of the Other: there is also that of the mystic, the analyst, the buffoon, the saint, among others. While the *jouissance* of the Other can be characterized as not all localizable within a phallic logic, it cannot be reduced to a heterogenous series; that is, it cannot be read in isolation, as an in-itself.

What I wish to emphasize here is that by making *jouissance* a central concept for psychoanalysis, the concept itself begins to function as an in-itself, which has implications for clinical practice as well. For this reason, the centrality given to *jouissance* today is an epistemological problem for psychoanalysis.[3] By isolating *jouissance* from its covariance with other concepts, such as the unconscious, desire or the phantasm, the relational dimension of the concept is diminished, as is the function of all the other concepts crucial for reading and practicing Lacanian psychoanalysis. In Lacan’s seminars and written texts, truth is half said and not-all localizable within the classical definition of the concept. That is, *jouissance* as a concept cannot be delimited as a totality, as closed and apprehensible knowledge. Concepts in Lacan are so to speak “under construction,” subject to the movement of a discourse with its own temporality and therefore in permanent relational tension.

Néstor’s book is an important reference point for contemporary readers precisely because his study of *jouissance* constantly emphasizes and unfolds the relational dimension of the concept. *Jouissance* cannot be thought as an in-itself; it is not energy or force, so supposing *jouissance* to be a phenomenon or substance, are problematic. Instead, in Néstor’s book, *jouissance* functions as a limit concept and for this reason he systematically specifies the access and limits to *jouissance* by referring to it topologically, much as Lacan does with the topology of surfaces, such as the Möbius strip, but also and almost exclusively at the end of his teaching with the Borromean Knot.

What are some effects of raising *jouissance* to a central place in Lacan’s theory? One such effect is in how psychoanalytic discourse thinks the body. From his earliest formulation of the mirror stage to its formalization in the Borromean knot, the body for Lacan is read in the register of the imaginary and in relation to the other registers.[4] What is constant throughout his teachings is that the body deceives; the *infans*’ first encounter with the mirror, as you’ll recall, positions him or her as other, the other of the mirror in inverted form. In this way the *meconnaissance* of all human beings in relation to the truth of his existence is established, as well as his alienation in the image of himself. This is what is called primary narcissism in Freud. However, *meconnaissance* in Lacan cannot be translated with the dictionary definition of ignorance or not knowing, but rather as a “not wanting to know”. The I then essentially does not know itself.

The imaginary register does not only entail the logic of the image. The mirror stage demonstrates another function, linked to the symbolic. Lacan shows that the symbolic superimposes itself on the imaginary and determines it. Speech affects the body, so to be inscribed in the field of the signifier means that “from the beginning” a living being does not have a body in the biological sense of the term. There is nothing natural about the subject of the unconscious. For psychoanalysis the living being or subject-to-be, as Lacan notes, appears in the field of the Other and responds to its demand “from the beginning”. This subject-to-be thus pays a price for speaking, for being inscribed in the symbolic order. Referring to Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, Lacan calls that price the pound of flesh.

Yet in a certain psychoanalytic discourse, another type of body emerges, a naturalist notion of a body which comes first in relation to language, the latter being relegated to a second moment. Even though, as Lacan notes in Seminar 11, *The Four Fundamental Concepts in Psychoanalysis*, the subject is precipitated in the field of the other, that is, the Other is present from the start, there is for some theorists the notion that there is a body outside language, which posits primacy of a nature that comes to be known through a biological experience.

In J.A. Miller's *Lacanian Biology*, for example, the body referred to is the living body, no longer tied to the imaginary or the symbolic; it is a body that functions as a what he calls an "isolated entity", "on its own", a living body able to experience *jouissance* beyond words and image. From this perspective, the autonomous living body is inhabited by the drives which then become trapped in the web of signifiers. In this apparent sequence, discourse thereafter mortifies the living being. However, according to this formulation, the symbolic is not able to absorb all that concerns the living. The symptom, as an event of the body, gives evidence, for Miller, of a discourse without words, thus translating the silence of the death drive. *Jouissance* is only possible then, if life is considered in terms of the biological living body, one that precedes language, that is, is prior to the symbolic and imaginary.

In the scenario just described and with speech thus considered, what is the place of the analyst? To further emphasize the *langagiere* practice that is psychoanalysis, Néstor notes on page one of *Jouissance* that speech is there "from the beginning". Speech founds the thing and for this reason reality is created *ex-nihilo* by discourse. In the transference, the analyst intervenes in the temporality of analytic discourse, producing synchronic effects on the signifiers in diachronic unconscious repetition. In order to account for the sense that insists, it is necessary to introduce other concepts, such as demand, desire and of course *jouissance*. Lacan's theory of the function of the signifier thus makes *jouissance* a device articulated by the effects produced in its intrinsic relation to the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis. This is affirmed from the first to the last Lacan.

In his 1960 essay in *Ecrits* titled "The Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious", Lacan notes:

We must keep in mind that *jouissance* is prohibited to whoever speaks, as such, or to put it differently, it can only be said between the lines by whoever is a subject of the Law, since the Law is founded on that very prohibition... [5]

The subject's entry into the symbolic is conditioned by the initial loss of *jouissance*. This loss is understood as an *interdiction*, not the loss of an object that can later be recovered, but rather an inaugural and constitutive loss. The interdiction Lacan mentions is not only a prohibition, it is the effect of the structure of language that determines the *parlêtre*. From the Latin *interdictum* the term points to what is prohibited but also said between the lines; that is, it is made of the very language that acts as its barrier. The texture of *jouissance*, what can be called its "substance" is therefore between signifiers. And it can only be half said. No one can "say" his or her *jouissance*, no one can recognize one's *jouissance* as one's own, confront it or correct it; neither can it be delimited, as some analysts claim.

This same position is present throughout Lacan's teaching, even in the so-called later Lacan. In Seminar 20, *Encore*, Lacan notes: "One approaches reality with the devices of *jouissance*...there is no other device than language, that is how *jouissance* sets sail in the *parlêtre*..."[6] And in relation to the body, Lacan notes in Seminar 23, the *Sinthome*, "One has one's body, one is not it to any degree". Lacan then adds:

You must indeed have realized that what I told you of the relationships of man to his body and which depend entirely on what I have told you: in the fact that man says he has the body, his body, he has. Already to say his, is to say that he possesses it, of course, like a piece of furniture. And that this has nothing to do with anything whatsoever that allows the subject to be strictly defined. The subject is only defined in a correct way from what ensures the relationship, from what ensures that a signifier

represents a subject for another signifier.[7]

On the one hand, there is the illusion that the body is a possession, a thing or substance one has for oneself. But as Lacan notes, man is not his body; that is, a three-dimensional biological body we imagine in the mirror. Rather, the subject of the unconscious can only be strictly defined, Lacan states, by how one signifier represents the subject for another signifier. And again, this way of conceptualizing the subject of the unconscious is present from early to late Lacan.

In closing, I would say that precisely because of the debates, polemics, readings and mis-readings to which Lacan's texts have been subjected throughout his life and now some 40 years after his death, it is timely and fortunate for us that we can turn to Néstor's important work on *jouissance*, enabling us to think about psychoanalysis's present and helping us to imagine its possible futures.

March 20, 2021

Notes:

[1] Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 7.

[2] S. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*. Edited and translated by James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1953, (SE XXI, 91).

[3] See A. Eidelsztein, *Otro Lacan*. (Buenos Aires: Letra Viva, 2017).

[4] Although beyond the scope of this presentation, a detailed study of the body in Lacan would entail a consideration of its position in the three registers: Imaginary, Symbolic and Real.

[5] J. Lacan, *Ecrits*. Translated by B. Fink. (New York: Norton, 2006), 696.

[6] J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality. The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Encore 1972–1973*. Edited by J-A. Miller. Translated by B. Fink (New York: Norton, 1999), 55.

[7] J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XXIII: The Sinthome*. Edited by J-A. Miller. Translated by A. Price (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 147-151.