

LACAN AND AUTISM

Lacan had a rather special conception of the ego. According to him, the psychological apparatus has not one center but two: the ego and the subject of the unconscious. These are two poles which are not superimposed. Lacan liked to say that the revolution that had made possible all modern thought was not the one brought about by Copernicus, which had replaced the earth with the sun as the center of the universe, but Kepler's discovery that the planets followed an elliptical orbit - in other words, an orbit ruled not from one center, but two.

I will not address Lacan's theory of the subject here, although it certainly is one of the most interesting parts of his work, for we can grasp it only if we first understand Lacan's conception of the ego. If the subject of the unconscious is profoundly articulated in the Symbolic order of language, the ego is, for Lacan, an Imaginary instance that he equates with the *specular image of one's own body*. Thus, the subject apprehends his ego for the first time outside himself. The ego is therefore a product of alienation in the image, alienation in the literal sense of the word.

Because of this the ego has a bad reputation among Lacanians. Every serious analyst figures the work of the classical analytical treatment as a process of taking apart this alienating ego for the benefit of the subject of the unconscious. But what do we do when confronted with a clinical case where the alienated ego of Lacanian theory has not even been constituted yet?

When confronted with the clinical treatment of autism I discovered just how precious and indispensable this ego was, however alienated in the specular image it may be.

THE NON-GAZE BETWEEN ADULT AND INFANT AS ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL SIGNS OF AUTISM.

The non-gaze between mother and infant, which extends itself to other persons and even to the psychoanalyst who treats the infant and its parents, constitutes one of the principal signs that enable us to state a hypothesis on autism during the first months of life (stereotyped movements and self-mutilation occurring only during the second year).

If this non-gaze does not necessarily lead to a characteristic autistic syndrome later on, it indicates, in any case, a major difficulty at the level of the specular relationship to the Other. Without intervention, these are infants for whom the *mirror stage* is in great danger of not being constituted, or at least of not being properly constituted. Lacan accorded a great importance to that particular time of the recognition, through the Other, of the *specular image*, that moment when the infant turns toward the adult who is carrying it and asks him to ratify, with his own gaze, the image that the infant perceives in the mirror. The establishment of this relationship with the mirror-image corresponds to a moment in both the logical and chronological sense. It is established around the sixth month of life, except in the case of autistic children, where it either cannot be established at all, or can be established only belatedly, within the framework of a therapeutic relationship. It is interesting to note that this is one of the very rare references to time found in the work of Lacan, who always vigorously resisted genetic conceptions of a

chronological and linear development of the psychical apparatus. The *mirror stage* is moreover one point of Lacan's theory that Winnicott took into account. This moment of jubilant relationship with one's *body-image* in the mirror is crucial because it is this image which will give the baby his sense of the unity of himself and of objects, and provide the basis for his relationship with others, his own peers. This is what Lacan called the function of the *specular image*.

There is a pre-history between the parent and the infant that makes this jubilation in front of the mirror possible: a pre-reform of the specular image that will permit the infant to recognize itself as having a body. To understand how this model comes into Lacan's thought, we must take a detour into his reading of Melanie Klein's little Dick, because it is there that the theoretical difficulties he encountered led him to produce this model. In fact, what poses a problem for him, is not Melanie Klein's clinic, which he admires, but rather the way different mechanisms of projection and introjection are placed on the same level: that of the imaginary and that of the symbolic. Let us follow him in his reading of little Dick.

THE INFLUENCE OF DICK'S CASE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LACAN'S CONCEPTS.

In 1954 Lacan's is to fight against Anna Freud's theory of the ego. Dick's case is an excellent clinical proof against the idea of the ego of the analysant as ally of the analyst.

The article in question is: *The importance of symbol-formation in the development of the ego* [Klein, M. (1930)]. In that article Melanie Klein's point of view is opposed to that of Anna Freud. He thus bases himself on this text by Melanie Klein, whom he reads in detail in several seminars [Lacan, J. (1975), pp. 68-85].

Lacan, reading Melanie Klein, is fascinated by the efficiency of her interventions. She verbalizes the oedipal myth, he says: "You are the little train; you want to fuck your mother." That is Lacan's way of "translating" it. It is not what Melanie Klein says to him. And she is probably right because Dick is not at that level.

What in Dick interest Lacan is the lack of contact, the profound indifference, the apathy, the absence. He is there as if she didn't exist, as if she were a piece of furniture. The boy is entirely in reality. He is not in human world, adds Lacan. Dick cannot even engage in the first sort of identification, in an essay of symbolism.

Melanie Klein speaks to him – a being that does not reply – she gives names to what up to that moment, for Dick, was reality pure and simple. Lacan will say further that it is not interpretation. It is giving names to things.

This point seems to me to be very important in the working techniques with small autistic children. All interpretation is displaced here because the psychic apparatus did not organize itself as with other child, and to want to reduce what happens in the oedipal myth is a useless

forcing of the issue. Lacan himself quickly realizes after his initial joke on the incestuous desires that are attributed to Dick.

Melanie Klein says “that the objects are constituted by the interplay of projections, introjections, expulsions, reintrojections of bad objects, and that the subject, having projected his sadism sees it coming back from these objects” [Lacan, J. (1975), p. 74]. This poses a problem for Lacan. For him, introjection is not the opposite of projection. Introjection is always the introjection of a speech: a symbolic denomination. Projection is imaginary. The question Lacan poses is that of the juncture of the symbolic and the imaginary in the constitution of the real.

He will use a little model [Lacan, J. (1975), pp. 77-80], which will become the pre-reform of his famous mirror-stage. He asserts that Freud also used models. But he adds: “remember, they are only scaffolding not the building”.

AN OPTICAL MODEL FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE *BODY-IMAGE*

He will present a trick of optical physics. It is a schema - which he has thanks to a M. Bouasse - which shows how to create the illusion that a bouquet of flowers hidden from the observer's field of vision is rising up out of a vase that is really there. Bouasse makes use of the optical qualities of the concave mirror. It links the *real object* - the vase - with something which also seems to be there, which seems to be one with that *real object*, but which, nevertheless, is merely an image. In his schema, Bouasse calls the flowers which are not there the *real image*. A subject can see the flowers above the neck of the vase and experience the illusion of seeing the two, the *real object* and the *real image*, forming a set, a unity.

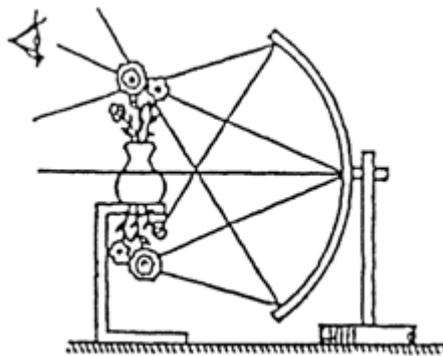


Fig. I

This would allow Lacan to organize Dick's reality in relation to the imaginary elements of the projections. We will see below where placed the symbolic.

The beauty of this optical schema is that it provides an excellent metaphor for the first foundations of the psychical apparatus. The illusory unity formed by the vase and the flowers allows us, by analogy, to grasp the constitution of one's *own body*. This schema is really a find, since it presents a *montage* of a *real object* and a *real image*, of something which is there and something which is not there: an illusion. The *own body* would be the fruit of the articulation between the baby's *real* - let's call it his organism, to put it simply- and something which, according to my hypothesis, would come to be incorporated into it; an image which, through the

effect of what I have called the Parent's gaze, would come to be united with the baby's *real*. Let us note that here is an image only for the psychical apparatus of the parent.



For this image to form there are required conditions and they are symbolic in order. They eye must situate itself appropriately in the cone formed by the intersection of rights coming from the concave mirror's borders. Let us take the example of Fran Angelico. Here is a painter who represented several "Annunciations", in particular that of Cortone, where we see the words promising to Mary the engendering of the son of God. The painter even draws the words on his painting. They surround the virgin.

Let's come back to figure I: I suggest imagining for a moment that the vase is a potty while the flowers are a crowned cherub. This paradoxical image enables us to grasp the particular bond between the *Real* of the infant - the organism whose filling up and emptying aspect is nicely figured by the potty - and that "something" which is still only an image, an anticipatory representation, the "His Majesty the Baby" Freud speaks of in *On Narcissism: An Introduction*. For years I did not credit the baby's with an active role; on the contrary, it seems to me that here we were only at the inaugural point of the rising up of the unconscious structure.

Let's see how in the gaze of the big Other (the mother and the father here), the Imaginary splendor will arise:



g

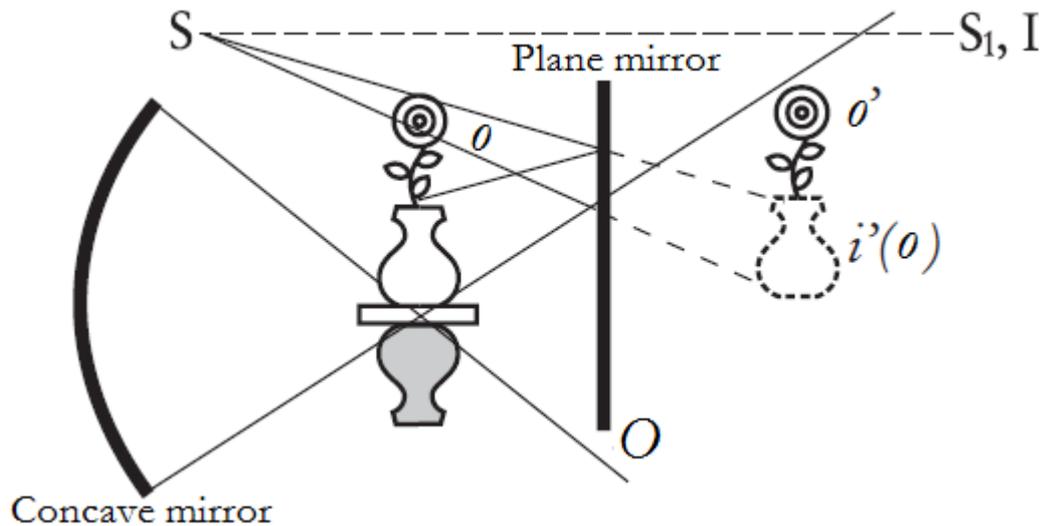
In practically all of the Nativities the fervent gazes of the parental figures envelope the little figure in such a way that they mask his pale reality. And, so that no doubt can remain as to his Majesty, the body of the infant is completely encircled by a halo. Here we are faced with a truly idealized image, center of what Lacan calls *phallic cathexis*, and love object.

Let us return to the optical schema. Lacan used it to study the complete specular relationship, the one of the already established *mirror stage*. In order to be able to do this, he introduces an additional element into the schema of Bouasse. Effectively, in the device such as we have seen it up till now, the subject of the gaze, the eye, cannot be the child himself - here figured by the vase with flowers- but must be an Other. For the child to be able to see himself, Lacan proposes some modifications to the original schema, notably the introduction of a flat mirror. Thus he will be able to introduce the moment where the subject, still infant, jubilantly recognizes himself in the image which is offered to him.

This is a fable. But it allows us to illustrate the strict intrication of the Imaginary world and the Real world in the psychic economy. If Dick is in the place of the vase, he needs a plane mirror to see himself.

It is only in the Seminar on Transference (7th June 1961)¹; that Lacan will take again this model and give a name to the plane mirror: the gaze of the big Other. We can see that it is before Winnicott's paper on the same matter. He takes up the interior debate with Melanie Klein on the difficulty, according to him, of not distinguishing between the introjections and projections as belonging to different registers. Let us listen to him:

¹ There is no standard translation of this Seminar. Translated by Cormac Gallagher from unedited French typescripts



“*Being in love and hypnosis* is the title of one of the articles that Freud wrote in which he analyzed *Massenpsychologie*. It is in so far as this Ego-Ideal, already constituted, introjected, can be reprojected onto an object - reprojected, let us underline here once again how the fact of not distinguishing, in the classical theory, the different registers of the symbolic, the Imaginary and Real ensures that these comings and goings of Introjection and Projection, which are after all, not obscure, but arbitrary (...) - it is in so far as this ego-ideal can be reprojected onto an object that, if this object happens to be favorable to you, to regard you propitiously, it will be for you this object of loving cathexis (...)”².

For 10 years, my experience with infants as psychoanalyst has shown me that this model has flaws because of the fact that it was static. What I had not seen, was that the infant also plays an important part in this scene. He watches, he moves toward the adult. This difficulty had been pointed out to me more than 15 years earlier by Dr. Jean Bergès who attempted to make me understand that the libidinal investment of the parent in the child was not directed at a static image but on what he calls the « functioning of the function , » a term that he had taken from his teacher Ajuriaguerra. For example, the libidinal investment on the infant is in its movement, in its motricity, and not on a static image. It is moreover what is taking place in this painting. In this painting the baby is active: he has a gesture with his arm in their direction.

² There is no standard translation of this Seminar. Translated by Cormac Gallagher from unedited French typescripts



In this painting the baby is active: He has a gesture with his arm in their direction.

Why, then, did that take me so long to understand? It seems that I needed an experience of clinical work with these little babies who were beginning to show signs of autism in order to give up the idea that everything stems from the parents' psychic life and that the baby was merely virgin wax on which parental phantasies were to be imprinted.

This clinic taught me that it is not enough for a parent to wish to libidinally invest in his baby, that the symbolic conditions for the parent to invest be present and that his phantasm be entirely favorable to him. The baby also must watch. This baby ought to also be able to perform a gesture, a look toward the parent so that he can feel his existence as parent. Unfortunately, my clinic with babies, at the beginning of autism, teaches me that they look at nobody [except in very particular conditions that we use to approach them but this takes me beyond the scope of this essayⁱ [see Laznik M. C. (2007)]. It is like that since the beginning of life for a vast majority of them. We are speaking here only of troubles that intervene in development and are specific to autism. We leave aside the autisms that emerge in connection with associated pathologies: "syndromic autism". There exists also, it is true, forms called « late onset » where the autistic signs do not seem to appear until the second year of life. But these forms are rarer.

Let's come back to Lacan reading Dick: Melanie Klein underlines the poverty of the imaginary. And Lacan adds: He does not call, even if he has a kind of language. The call is not the language, says Lacan, it is in fact beneath language." A pet, being deprived of language, is capable of making calls to draw your attention to something that lacks. To the human call a further, richer development is reserved, because it takes place precisely in a being who has already reached the level of language" [Lacan, J. (1975), p. 84].

This call will become in Lacan's theory *the invocatory drive*, a new drive that in 1964 he will add at the classical ones. It is the reversion of the scopical drive that could be the Invocatory drive:

It is necessary to explain that the translation of *Triebe* in the Standard Edition is *Instinct*. French schools of psychoanalysis generally do not use this translation and prefer that of « pulsion » in French. Moreover, German also possesses the term *Instinct* and Freud chose *Triebe*. It is precisely between these two terms that the importance of Lacan's lecture lies. In English we have the word *drive*. In 1964, Lacan would assert that he reserves the term *instinct* for all that concerns the organism's survival. Thus, everything that is associated with the instincts of the self, in the first theory of the drive, loses their drive character. We can say in English that he keeps the term drive only for sexual drives.

Lacan says: "The level of the drive³ it is purely grammatical. It is support, artifice, which Freud uses in order to enable us to understand the outward-return movement of the drive" [Lacan, J. (1973), p. 200]. Freud articulates the drive with 3 stages: active, reflexive and passive. The last one, passive, says Lacan, must be replaced by the formula of *making oneself seen, heard*, etc. "This implies fundamentally activity, in which respect I come close to what Freud himself articulates when he distinguishes between the two fields, the field of the drives on the one hand, and the narcissistic field of love on the other" [Lacan, J. (1973), p. 200].

Dick, like the babies with autism, which we can watch in home videos, does not voice any call. He absolutely does not make himself heard. Melanie Klein does not give Dick an interpretation, says Lacan. She just tells him: Dick little train, big train daddy-train. The child says the word "station". Melanie Klein answers: "the station is mummy, Dick is going into mummy."

Dick takes refuge in the dark between the two doors and call for his nurse. It is the first time he is calling. Melanie Klein says he is gaining access to his unconscious. And Lacan will say that there was no unconscious before. In 1964, Lacan will take up this link again between the apparition of the capacity to call and access to the unconscious. He will note that the scopical drive and the invocatory drive introduce the Other into the register of desire and that the invocatory drive is the closest to the experience of the unconscious [Lacan, J. (1973), p. 104].

Lacanian will assert this idea: no unconscious organized in child with autism. With that metaphor of the vase and the flowers, Lacan recognizes that Dick is in the level of the narcissism. He will have then to discuss Freud's paper: *On narcissism an Introduction*. In that discussion, he will assess that if the sexual libido is not isolated from the entire range of functions for the preservation of the individual, it loses all meaning.

That is why -he says - in this article *On Narcissism*, Freud harks back to the necessity of distinguishing egoistical libido and sexual libido. At that moment Freud was speaking of ego drives and sexual drives.

It's only in 1964 that Lacan will say clearly that he comes close to a distinction between two fields: "The field of the drives on one hand and the narcissistic field of love on the other" (29th May 1964).

3.

OPPOSITION BETWEEN SEXUAL DRIVES AND THE PHALLIC INVESTMENT OF NARCISSISM

This is a very instructive case on the interest that Lacan's opposition can have, notably between the narcissistic field of love and the properly speaking drive field, that is to say the field of partial sexual drives. This opposition becomes very useful for understanding family movies of babies who became autistic.

Mauricio is a small child from the cohort of films by the Stella Maris Foundation, in Pisa. Doctor Sandra Maestro and Professor Filippo Muratori had brought me a copy of the family film shortly after having met him. This child was presenting them with an enigma. Having arrived in their Center to be diagnosed at the age of three, he presented a recognized autistic condition and this did not coincide with what they were able to see in the family film that the parents had brought to them.

Indeed, in the scenes that had been filmed, this child seemed to communicate at several moments in an affectionate way with its parents. My colleagues were baffled. I was as well, I admit, at first.

Here is an example of a scene that is a priori baffling: Mauricio is approximately 10 months old and he is in his cradle. His father arrives and speaks to him warmly: "So! Are you going to show me?" The child begins to stand up while he hold the crib's sides. His father encourages him: "How strong you are, go! Go!" The father's full and affectionate voice has an appealing prosody. While his son stands up, the father's voice comments on the sporting event with enthusiasm "Go! Go! A "go Mauricio! Hurray!" greets the son's corporeal erection, who looks on with a satisfied expression. It seems evident that the compliments please him.

The father continues with an enthusiastic voice: "Mauricio! Mauricio!" He is his supporter in every sense of the word. In any case he retains the son's attention in this way, who in his enthusiasm releases one hand and extends it in the direction of the father who is filming. In the next instant, the baby looks down but the father's voice is already enveloping him: "Go Mauricio! Great Mauricio! Magnificent!" At this exclamation, the baby looks towards the father, blinks his eyes as if to show his satisfaction at being recognized in this way. "You are magnificent!" continues the father. The baby staggers a bit on his feet, the father takes him up again: "Ti, ti, ti, ti! Great Mauricio!" And he begins to hum: "Ti, ti, ti, ti, ti". As Mauricio looks elsewhere the father calls him "Eh Mauricio? You are very strong you know?" The baby looks at him immediately and says "té, té, té". The father then has a marvelous response: "What do you mean to say my love?"

This indicates that the father supposes the presence of a subject in his little boy because he thinks the child wants to say something. Parents of typical babies do the same thing beginning at their child's fifth and sixth months. Certain psychoanalysts have speculated that the parents of autistic children might not have done this and that this might be one of the causes of their problem. This is not the case. What we understand in the family films is that the mothers grow tired of questioning a baby that does not give any sign of hearing her. The fathers intervene more toward the end of the first and second age of life.

How could a child like Mauricio become autistic? My Italian colleagues decided to create a new category of classification to account for these children, which they called "late onset". In this view there would be children who would develop normally during the first year, but then present autistic signs in the second year of life.

It seems interesting to remark that Mauricio, who had been surrounded from birth by his parents' fervent look of admiration and love, presented from the very beginning of life a complete absence of interest in creating himself any link of a drive nature with them. To take up Freud's terms in his text *On Narcissism*, this baby presented a good competence for what he called an egotistical libido, but does not seem to be interested in what would be a sexual libido.

These parents had succeeded, by virtue of their conjoined efforts, to envelope this child with their looks and words of admiration but when it started walking and the child did not go toward them, nor called nor looked for them, everything collapsed.

REFERENCES

Klein, M. (1930). The importance of symbol-formation in the development of the ego in *The Writings of Melanie Klein, vol I.* (pp. 219-232). London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1975.

Lacan, J. (1973). In: Jacques-Alain Miller (Ed.) & Alan Sheridan (Trans.), *The Seminar Book XI: The four fundamental concepts on Psychoanalysis 1963-1964.* New York: Norton & Company, 1981.

Lacan, J. (1975). In: Jacques-Alain Miller (Ed.) & John Forrester (Trans.), *The Seminar Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954.* New York: Norton & Company, 1991.

Laznik M. C (2007). Joint mother-baby treatment with a baby of 3¹/₂ months who shows early warning signs of autism. In *Signs of autism in infants: Recognition and early intervention.* Stella Acquarone (Edited by), London, Karnac.

LAZNIK, M.C. (2009). « The lacanian theory of the drive: an examination of possible gains for research on autism » In: *JCFAR The Journal of the Centre for Freudian analysis and research.* Gillian Clayton (Edited by), n. 19, London