

*From the
image
to the
signifier
alone*



BRUNO DE HALLEUX

The LC EXPRESS delivers the Lacanian Compass in a new format. Its aim is to deliver relevant texts in a dynamic timeframe for use in the clinic and in advance of study days and conference meetings. The LC EXPRESS publishes works of theory and clinical practice and emphasizes both longstanding concepts of the Lacanian tradition as well as new cutting edge formulations.

PRÉCIS

In the clinic of autism images are privileged over signifiers, making it into what looks like a "clinic in reverse" compared to the analytic experience. The famous Temple Grandin describes how she "thinks in *pictures*". Popular intervention methods like TEACHH are based on visual supports.

What is the status of the image for the autist? Since the autistic child's image is neither constituted in the mirror, nor coordinated with signifiers, but rather with his or her *jouissance*, the image merges with the real. Hence, a clinical approach based on images has its limits, since they are an insufficient basis upon which to organize one's world. In this compelling text, Bruno de Halleux discusses how displacing the axis of psychoanalysis beyond the Other and towards the One in Lacan's late teachings opens up a new way for thinking about the autist's relationship to signifiers, giving a new orientation for working with the autistic child, one that goes beyond the image.

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An Bulkens

"FROM THE IMAGE TO THE SIGNIFIER ALONE"

The sovereign image

When I finished university, I was aware that my university training in psychology had not trained me in any way for a clinic with adults or children.

But luck smiled on me! I wanted to work with a psychoanalyst who had founded a small experimental center for autistic children. By insisting, I got the job! This center, Antenna 110, was a place where the psychoanalyst's desire could be unfolded in a desire to know.

The theoretical references on autism given by Lacan are rare, so it was necessary to extract knowledge from the clinic with these children. Thus, we discovered how much, in the work with autistic children, there is a prevalence given to the image over the signifier. What was important for these children was a certain relationship to the image.

In this center there was a small class where a speech therapist tried to teach reading and mathematics.

This woman, brilliant in her work, had developed a method of learning to read based on images. She had given each capital letter of the alphabet a picture. The *M* was represented by a mountain. The *S* was represented by a snake, the *O* was an open mouth. And so on.

It was a method, and it was her method! Besides, she had not bought a catalogue of pictures in a shop. She had made the catalogue herself. She had started from the interest she saw in each of the children in her care. In her own way, she had anticipated the premises of a method that was arriving in Europe, the TEACHH method.

We know how essential and central the visual support is in this method. It is from images, always the same

ones, that the autistic child learns to ask, to carry out basic tasks, to manage in his life.

This teacher, this speech therapist had achieved exceptional results with several children thanks to her tailor-made catalogue.

In 1997, when Temple Grandin's book *Thinking in pictures* was published in French, I rushed to buy it. I discovered that this autistic woman was able to cope with the symbolic order thanks to the classification of the images that she was scrolling through her brain at high speed.

Usually, for a subject, language refers to the concept, the idea, the notion that the signifier names. So the word dog refers to the concept dog in a general way and in a second time, this word can refer to a particular dog.

For Temple Grandin, it happens in the opposite way. She says: "Unlike most people, my thoughts move from particular images or video images to general concepts. For example, for me, the concept of a dog is inextricably linked to every dog I have ever known in my life. It's as if I have a file with a photograph of every dog I've ever seen, and that file keeps growing as I add new examples to my video library."

In other words, Temple Grandin does not have access to the generic idea of a dog. She has to scroll through all the dogs she has known to get an idea of what the dog is as a concept.

Thinking in images is not without its problems. For example, when it comes to falling in love, Temple Grandin tells us that she has given up. Her way of thinking does not allow her to find the key to what happens between two people in love. For a love relationship is made up of implicit meanings, equivocations, allusions.

For example, if a companion suggested that she go to his room to discover his collection of Japanese prints, she did not understand why, once in the room, this friend tried to kiss her.

The language of love is especially implied, equivocal and allusive. For Temple Grandin, the meanings to be grasped eluded her. And because the discourse of love is constituted by a language that she did not master, Temple Grandin had given up on facing this side of the shifting language and thus on any love relationship.

In the JAM article, *The Sovereign Image*, which supports the cycle of these Lacanian Compass lectures, Lacan questions what it would be like for a subject to live without the support of the symbolic. For he tells us that any image, however important, is only accessible to the mind through the signifier. For the human subject, understanding an image is achieved through the signifier. "The image can only really become an element of the imaginary register on condition of making it into a signifier."¹

Among the different categories of images that JAM cites, there are the images specific to phenomenology. There are also the images of art, produced and exhibited to release a satisfaction that is not easily situated. There are also, and especially in our field, the images that come under what we encounter in psychoanalysis under the name of fantasy.

JAM then makes a radical clarification! He reminds us that what is primary in analytic discourse is not the image. What is primary in the field of psychoanalysis is the signifier. "the analytic experience seems to rather prescribe a suspension, a toning down of the field of perception to the exclusive benefit of speech."²

In this work today, I will focus on the clinic of autistic children because they approach the human world through a prevalence given to images rather than to the signifier. It is therefore a clinic in reverse of the analytic experience! For in the analytic experience, what takes precedence is the word, the signifier.

And in the clinic with the autistic child, what is discov-

ered at first sight is the image!

When I started working with autistic children, I was surprised to see that the image sometimes merged with the real. I introduced a "Stories and Tales" workshop in the center. Surrounded by the children, I told the story, commented on it, and showed the drawings and illustrations in the storybooks. I remember showing a picture of a hedgehog! One child was afraid of the picture. He was frightened and he kept telling us, "Don't touch the hedgehog, don't touch, pick, pick..." and he hid his hands so as not to touch the image of the book. In other words, the image had too much real value for this child.

In an article by JAM, "Clinique ironique", (this text is a compass for those interested in psychosis and autism), JAM tells us that for the autistic subject all the symbolic is real. I think we can also say that for the autistic subject, all the imaginary is real. For the autistic child, there is nothing to separate the real, the symbolic and the imaginary.

This is therefore a difficulty that is worth considering for a moment. In JAM's article - The sovereign image - JAM explains that the image is usually founded on narcissism in Freud. Then it is founded in Lacan by the mirror stage.

Narcissus is desperately in love with himself, he looks at himself in a stream... This is fatal for him, because, in wanting to embrace his reflection, he falls into the water and drowns. He wanted to join his image, the image of his body, and he dies. In other words, there is what I am as a body and what I see in the mirror which is my image.

So there is the subject's body on the one hand and his image on the other. That makes two. In Lacanian terms, I refer to Lacan's schema L, it is on the imaginary axis that we find a and the image of a, i.e. a'. This axe is called imaginary and it is in tension with another axe, the symbolic axe. The imaginary axe is the mirror axe, the specular axe. I note in parenthesis that there is a type of speech that can be inscribed under the register of the imaginary. It is what Lacan calls empty speech, that is to say speech that is only inconsistent chatter.

¹ *The Lacanian Review* n° 5, p. 40.

² *Id.* p. 41.

On the symbolic axe, Lacan inscribes full speech, i.e. speech that counts, speech that institutes the subject.

The question then arises for the autistic subject. Is the autistic subject in this logic of the double? What is the image for him? Is it the reflection of himself? This is not certain. The autistic subject does not have a constituted body image. He has not constituted his first identification through the mirror.

We know that Lacan considers that the mirror stage is an obligatory passage for the first identification of the little man, a first identification that is, of course, in the imaginary register. However, the autistic child has not constituted an image of himself. The real and the imaginary merge.

Here, it is one, there is no *a* and *a'*, there is only *a* which merges with *a'*. Clinically, this can sometimes be seen in the drawings that autistic children make. When they are asked to draw themselves, the body can be found in the drawing, but this body is fragmented. The arms are not attached to the trunk, the eyes are outside the face. The body is dismembered. It can take a long time to work with an autistic child before the body comes together as a unit.

So I conclude this essential point here, it is a first question: what is an image for the autistic child? Now let's come to what distinguishes the signifier from an image. We find an answer from JAM to help us identify what makes the difference between a sovereign image and a master signifier. The sovereign image, he tells us, does not represent the subject. Only the signifier can represent the subject. This is even the definition of the signifier: a signifier represents a subject for another signifier.

But is this definition valid for the autistic child? Again, this is not certain! Let us say that for the autistic child, the image is coordinated not with the signifier but with what makes the child's *jouissance*. "the sovereign images, writes JAM, are the place where the imaginary moors itself to *jouissance*."³

That the image correlates with the real of the subject is

once again to say that the real and the imaginary are one, not two.

After this long preamble on the image and especially on the image for an autistic child, I will move into the register of the signifier.

The signifier alone

I move here because in the clinic with autistic children, we find in the signifier a certain similarity with the field of the image where the real is not separated from the imaginary.

For it is insufficient to rely only on the register of the image to organize one's world. Temple Grandin succeeded in doing so. For other autistic subjects, the question arises as to how to make up for the forclusion of the symbolic in order to find reference points in their world.

I said that the image for the autistic subject merges with the real of his body. Well, in the register of the signifier, we discover that the autistic subject is not represented by a signifier for another signifier. Big A, the big Other does not function for him as it does for the neurotic subject. However, the autistic subject can use the field of the symbolic, but he will use it in a particular way.

For the subject in neurosis, the concept of the Other, the big Other, is defined as the treasure of signifiers. It can be represented by a set whose elements are all the signifiers found in a dictionary.

In a classical conception of Lacan's teaching, what is primary is the signifier. The Other, the big A, is first. The subject, the subject of the unconscious, is second, it is an effect.

We can gather the Other in a signifying articulation, S1 articulated to S2. A subject is the product of this articulation. Lacan tells us that the subject is barred. Thus, we know these writings of S1, S2, barred S.

When Lacan elaborates in his seminar the construction of his graph, called the graph of desire, Lacan defines

3 *Id.* p. 45

the big A as the place of the Word, the witness of truth. Then he says of big A that it is the place of the code, in opposition to the message, and finally he will indicate that big A is the prior site of the pure subject of the signifier. And in a text from the *Écrits* where Lacan takes up the construction of his graph of desire, Lacan relates the subject of psychosis to the one who satisfies himself with this prior Other.⁴

What is the prior Other for Lacan? I would say, following Lacan to the letter, that it is the Other, the big A, that Lacan writes on the first floor of the graph. A complete Other, without holes, an Other that could say everything, signify everything.

The big A, Lacan tells us in this text, is the prior site of the pure subject of the signifier. But what is the pure subject of the signifier? To put it quickly, it is a subject without life, a subject without the *jouissance* of the body. The pure subject of the signifier would be the barred S as the effect of a signifying articulation of an S1 with an S2. The result of this operation is a first signifier, an S1, a second signifier, an S2 and a missing signifier, the barred S, which Lacan defines as the subject of the unconscious.

In this operation, the object is missing. The small *a*, the object is missing. *Exit* the object little *a*. *Exit* the dimension of *jouissance*, that of the living.

A first turning point in Lacan's research finds its starting point in his thesis, which he considers central. He even says - we find this in Seminar VI, *Desire and its Interpretation* - that this is the great secret of psychoanalysis: "There is no Other of the Other", or to put it in a different way, he tells us: The Other does not exist.

Lacan thus displaces the axis of psychoanalysis beyond the Other, he displaces it towards the One, that is, towards the body. The Other is no longer taken into account or at least it passes into the shadows.

This is a radically opposed apprehension to everything we used to think in Lacan's teaching. This inversion, this displacement towards the One without taking the Other into account, is a new path that we must explore, and which seems to me to be central to the relationship that

the autistic child has with the signifier.

Not to take into account the Other, big A, is to no longer be in a dialectical process.

It's like the image! The image is not dialectical! It is One. It is frozen. In his text, *The sovereign Image*, JAM identifies three essential sovereign images in psychoanalysis. One of these images is the body, the proper body, the body that belongs to me. The image correlates with *jouissance*.

In the clinic with an autistic child, the child does not have access to the symbolic order resulting from the Oedipal resolution. The symbolic order is what would bring order, what would organize the diffracted image that the autistic child has of his body.

Lacan notes in a difficult text, *L'étourdit*, that the schizophrenic subject (like the autistic subject) does not have an organization of his body, he has a body that is not gathered. This poses a problem for him. Lacan specifies in this text that "the so-called schizophrenic is specified by being taken without the help of any established discourse."⁵

That is to say, the subject does not have at his disposal this tool, this all-purpose key which is the phallus, and which organizes his organs and bodily functions.

I make a parenthesis here and I give an example. This is the case of an autistic child who could stay for long minutes on the toilet without knowing what to do with the excrement he had just evacuated. He had taken this excrement, which was in the shape of a ball, in his hand, he was staring at it and in his other hand he had an apple which he was holding firmly. His gaze went from the apple to the excrement as if he did not yet know what he was going to bite into.

Thus, the register of the image is not sufficiently helpful in replacing the symbolic.

The image by definition is not a signifier. There is no Other, big A, in the image. An image is a visual support, it is not a signifier that is articulated with another signifier and that gives a meaning.

4 Lacan, *Subversion of the Subject and Dialectics of Desire, Ecrits*, p. 807

5 Lacan, *L'étourdit, Autres écrits*, p. 474.

This is why, Temple Grandin, in order to grasp what a dog is, she has to scroll through a large number of images to obtain a symbolic concept.

So if the image is not enough, how will the autistic child manage to organize his world? His world, as I said, is not structured by a symbolic punctuated by the Oedipus and the phallic meaning. He does, however, have access to language, to a symbolic, but a symbolic without holes, a symbolic where access to the second signifier is problematic.

From here, it seems necessary to me to take up again what the signifier is all by itself, the One signifier.

I am moving towards this concept of the signifier all by itself. That is to say, a signifier that does not articulate with another, a signifier that, by not articulating, gives no meaning, no significance. It is an asemantic signifier.

I wondered if this signifier alone, this S1, is not the correlate in the symbolic of what the sovereign image is in the imaginary?

In his last lecture, Being and the One, JAM begins by recalling that to say that the Other does not exist is to say exactly that the One exists. "What is this One that exists when the Other does not exist? It is the One of the signifier.

Then, and as a consequence of the non-existence of the Other, JAM relates this "marvellous concept of the big A" to the essence, to being. The Other is a place of being.

It is a fine distinction, this distinction that he develops between being and existence.

A place of being is a place defined by what is said. The discourse is inscribed in this place of being. JAM takes the unicorn as an example. The unicorn is a being of language, which holds its being only by being said. As soon as something is said, it can be anything! A square circle is a being of language, but it does not exist for real.

This place of being is also the very operation of free association. Free association is ontology unleashed...

In the *Encore seminar*, Lacan declares that to speak is to determine a being, beings. Everything that is said belongs to being. Everything that is said is going to the locus of the Other, as the locus of discourse.

In these pages of the seminar, Lacan suggests to us that there must be a beyond and a beyond of language. That is to say, something else that we have to catch.

This something else, Lacan relates to the written word, to the letter.

Language for the autistic subject takes on a completely different dimension. It is a question of going to search in this beyond language specific to the autistic subject.

Lacan invites us to do so. The clinic with an autistic subject unfolds in a different way. Firstly, because the autistic subject does not associate freely for the simple reason that in autism - "it is a question," says Éric Laurent, "of the repetition of the same signifier, of a signifier One, of an S1, radically separated from any other signifier, thus not referring to any S2, but which nevertheless produces an effect of jouissance, manifested by this very repetition.

If for the autistic person, the first signifier is not articulated to a second signifier, then there is no signifying chain.

An important reference from Lacan is the comment he makes to Rosine Lefort on the case of *L'Enfant au loup*, the case of an autistic child she was following, Robert. This case of Rosine Lefort is reported in Lacan's 1954 seminar. There are only two words that little Robert screams, 'The wolf!'

In relation to these two words, Lacan tells us that here the status of speech escapes the laws of the symbolic. It is a question of "speech reduced to its core [...] you see there," Lacan tells us, "the nodal state of speech [...] speech (is) arrested." ⁶

Elsewhere he says that this stopped speech is a piece

⁶ Lacan, *Seminar 1*, p. 121.

of the real, only the root of this speech remains. Éric Laurent sees in the jaculation of this *Le loup*, an act of speech and as such, this act of speech is not articulated to the exchange. "It is the effect of the first jaculation on the body of the subject.

It is the first version of what will become S1, the signifier on its own, detached from the articulation with another signifier, S2. Thus, and I quote Lacan: "Here we touch with our finger, in its most reduced form, the fundamental relationship of man to language.

This is to say that the autistic subject is in language! But it is not in the discourse. It does not belong to discourse because discourse presupposes the articulation of a first signifier with a second.

It is then a question to understand how we can say that the autistic subject is in language.

In this way, I come to identify, little by little, what it might mean for the autistic subject to be separated from any S2, from any second signifier.

To say that the autistic subject is separated from any S2, to say that the autistic subject is in language, but not in discourse, is to advance in this strange and new clinic of the signifier alone.

A new clinic that throws out being, semblance, equivocation, discourse. A new clinic that focuses on existence, the real, the univocal, the letter.

This is what a clinician, if he has a keen ear, discovers day after day in his clinic with autistic subjects.

During a recent day in Brussels, an attentive clinician reported the sequence of a young boy of 8 years old, who just before having to urinate, exclaimed *pas pipi!* This 'pas pipi' is, it seems to me, an act of speech that announces the soiled trousers a few moments later.

In his lesson, *L'Un tout seul*, JAM offers us an enlightening distinction on the signifier. There are, he says, two statuses of the signifier. I quote: "There is the signifier that notes the word, and this one is second. It is the signifier of the analysand's speech, the one in which the

analysand strives to decipher the enigma, the cipher of his symptom.

The second status of the signifier is something else. Here, "the signifier as such, (it is) that which is read purely and simply, (it) is primary in relation to the signified. It can be called the letter [...] on condition that it is not confined to the 26 letters of the alphabet.

To advance in the distinction between these two statuses of the signifier, I take up a text by JAM, a text given on a congress of the NLS: *Reading a symptom*.

In this text published in *mental 26*, JAM presents the symptom as a Janus. The symptom has two faces, one face of truth and one face of real.

As a formation of the unconscious, the symptom is interpreted, it is interpreted like a dream, and it is the symptom with its face of truth. But Freud discovered in 1920 that beyond the interpretation of the dream, there is something that persists and that what persists has to do with *jouissance* - in Freudian terms, with the death drive.

There is a remainder, an *x* that remains beyond the Freudian interpretation. Freud stumbled on this real of the symptom, on what in the symptom cannot be interpreted, what of the symptom is beyond meaning.

And here I take up the definition of the symptom, the one taken from *Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety*. The symptom is not only a substitute for a drive satisfaction that has not taken place, it is also a sign of this satisfaction.

The sign is to be opposed to the substitute. The sign is fixed, it holds to the writing, it is permanent, it does not move. In order for us to understand this new conception of the symptom, we have to get used to this modality of the symptom which is separated from the acception of the symptom as truth.

In this new conception of the symptom, it is a symptom that is to be read. And to read a symptom in this new paradigm is to wean the symptom of meaning. This has effects in the very handling of the cure and of interpreta-

tion in particular. Interpretation itself changes, is transformed, it moves from listening to meaning to reading the non-sense. There is a need to lighten up on semantics, on listening to meaning.

For the clinician in his or her encounter with an autistic subject, there is a need to train himself or herself in the reading of the symptom insofar as it is an inscription, a trace, a letter on the body. In this field, the symptom becomes S1, a signifier alone, a mark.

This is what the clinic with autistic children teaches us. What we need to learn, what autistic children teach us, is to free ourselves from meaning, to lighten us from all understanding. The autistic subject presents himself as beyond meaning, as a signifier caught in the real, as an asemantic signifier.

The clinician must be able to read this signifier alone, to take note of it and to refrain from trying to give it a meaning.

For as long as we situate ourselves in a clinic of the word, we are led to a clinic where meaning dominates, where meaning blinds us as well.

Operating with the signifier alone goes against the speech clinic insofar as it aims at communication with the other.

The autistic child does not alienate himself from the Other. He, unlike the neurotic subject, does not alienate himself from a 2nd signifier. For him, there is only the continuous reiteration of this S1, all alone, this One of the body.

The clinic with the autistic subject is a clinic that is oriented by the symptom and not by the image as certain methods (TEACCH) promote.

It is a clinic known as *sinthomatisation*. This clinic only has a relationship with the signifier One, the S1. It is made of a repetitive *jouissance*, a *jouissance* that is outside of knowledge.

Jacques-Alain Miller defines it as the auto-*jouissance* of the body through the S1. We start with the signifier

alone, and we see how this S1 can multiply, enlarge, densify, amplify and develop.

To conclude, here is the case of Abdel, five years old, who arrived at Antenna 110 with a diagnosis of autism

He walks around the institution with a piece of paper that he taps all the time with his fingers. All caught up in this operation, he seems deaf, dumb and blind to those around him.

How, then, can something be tied up where the subject makes a vacuum around him, where he never stops protecting himself from the Other, from his word, his voice, his look? How can we become partners with this subject?

Abdel is interested in the geography of the different circuits of the house, their beginning, their course and their end: water, air, gas and electricity. Then he is interested in the circuits of the body: of blood, breathing and food; finally he is interested in the circuit of the houses, those of the clinicians, their location, the distance, the modality used for the journeys, the train, the car...

At the Antenna, he keeps asking questions in a tone that seems overrated: "Is that the gas pipe? Where does the water go? And the air from the tumble dryer? Abdel answers his questions himself. He knows.

Abdel, through his questions, checks whether we, the clinicians, can make room for his interrogative statements, he checks whether we can welcome this starting point, that is to say, his signifiers that keep repeating themselves, these points of origin of his subjective position. Welcoming his S1s alone gradually draws a topology in the space of the house. They are deposited in circuits, circuits that will allow Abdel to multiply them and expand them to new and new circuits.

As he inscribes his S1s, his incessant questions, initially about the material circuits, then move on to the circuits of the participants. He questions where they live, their possible link to a partner, their children, their car...

Abdel seems to open up to a pseudo-social link.

A subject emerges, a subject who imposes himself, who takes a stand, who says no, who has his tastes, his preferences, and his choices. Abdel enters as a subject of the Antenna's circuits. From this S1, from the circuit, from what makes sinthome for him, he was able to develop and widen his interests. He left the institution with an enrolment in a special education school.

This operation was carried out by taking into account his signifiers, which keep repeating themselves, in ways known only to him, through his signifiers, his objects, his movements in the institution.

Abdel did not find his way in the world through images.

I would say that he constituted a clinic of circuits, he developed it from the signifying One and he substituted it for the drive circuit which did not function for him as for a neurotic child.

There, I'll stop, a time for conversation now...

Bruno de Halleux

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