



LACANIAN VISIONS



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CLOTILDE LEGUIL

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 her conference Clotilde Leguil will develop Lacan's notion of 'vision', that contains both, the experience of 'seeing' and 'not seeing' at the same time, literally and metaphorically, and all its relevance for psychoanalysis and the clinic.

Clotilde adds that 'vision' gives rise to passions from which the subject suffers, illustrated by the example taken by Lacan from Saint Augustin. This imaginary modality of seeing oneself through the other, gives way in analysis to another experience, she remarks, "when the subject realizes that his being is situated elsewhere, at a point where a destiny he cannot decipher, determines his existence despite his efforts to escape it".

Liliana Kruszel

Clotilde Leguil

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LACANIAN VISIONS

by Clotilde Leguil

The impact of images

In order to talk to you about the power of images in civilization and in therapy, I have chosen to broach the subject of vision in Lacan's work.

The title of my conference "Lacanian visions" can be read in two ways: it refers to the Lacanian conception of vision, the experience of "seeing" and of "not seeing" both literally and metaphorically. But it also applies to the way Lacan imparts to us readers, an experience of vision which then becomes a means to access the real. I will therefore take these two dimensions into account: on the one hand I will deal with the theorization by Lacan of the experience of vision as related to the analytical experience. On the other hand, I will focus on a more personal dimension, the revelation by Lacan of a vision he had, as he was travelling back from Japan in 1971. I don't know if you have ever noticed that what you see from the porthole of a plane, whether you are above the clouds or below, can induce daydreaming and occasionally fuel psychoanalytical interpretation. Because the landscape you see, is not the kind of landscape where you could find yourself, take a walk or move about. It is a landscape evocative of a place which is different from the one you inhabit, and which may be conducive to a sort of visual reading. I have just had this experience as I was flying to Nice, a city in the South of France. The vision "from between the clouds" of the coastline separating the mainland from the Mediterranean Sea, traces a line which is, as Lacan phrased it, reminiscent of the boundary between the symbolic and the real, between knowledge and jouissance.

Seeing oneself and losing sight of oneself

Let us begin first with the way Lacan addressed the question of vision as part of psychoanalysis. Regarding this topic, it is customary to refer to Lacan's

Ecrit in 1949: "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience."¹ In this text Lacan highlights the fundamental importance of the moment when the child, who does not speak yet, recognizes his or her image in the mirror. Lacan has given a foundational value to this experience of vision. The activity of a child who can't walk yet but who nevertheless manages to move and to "take in an instantaneous view of the image in order to fix it" is interpreted by Lacan as "an identification, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image." So, what is the nature of this transformation? It is the first metamorphosis of the being through the imaginary. What takes place here, even before the child is part of a dialectics involving his or her identification with the other, is the first emergence of the "I".

Yet, the use Lacan makes of the Mirror-Stage goes far beyond the question of the child's development. His aim is to show that the experience of "seeing oneself" is also what has a strong impact on the imaginary relationship with the other, within which rivalry and aggressiveness prevail. Fixed to this mirror stage where the subject only sees in the other his imaginary double, his alter ego, his rival, leads to a misrecognition of the being, of lack and of desire. The Mirror Stage is therefore formative of the I function, but it also engenders an alienation to the image. Indeed, an aggressiveness emerges from this moment, creating thereby a stalemate in the relationship with the other. According to Lacan, imaginary passions teach us about suffering, "The sufferings of neurosis and psychosis provide us schooling in the passions of the soul" (p.80).

Lacan thus first considered vision as a modality of perception which fuels envy and jealousy. Vision gives rise to passions. The nursing who has just been fed observes his nursing brother with a bitter look. Lacan pays homage to the vignette extracted from the Confes-

¹ Lacan, J., *Ecrits The First Complete Edition in English*, Translation Bruce Fink, Norton.

sions of St. Augustine because it clearly shows *invidia* where seeing is at stake.

As it happens, *invidia* and seeing have the same Latin root *video*. I envy what I see, and I suffer to see the other completed by an object I feel deprived of.

This text written by Lacan in 1949 about the Mirror Stage is strikingly relevant today. The question to ask is whether our digital being has become the new figure of the Mirror Stage. Isn't it possible to assert that taking a picture of oneself, showing oneself, allowing people to see oneself, sharing one's intimacy with this faceless other represented by the Other of the digital world, isn't it a way to be recognized? The narcissism which materializes in this experience has become mass narcissism. I no longer see an individual in particular to whom I could compare and identify with, but instead I allow myself to be seen by a crowd of little others who are entitled to comment and write like or dislike. Such a submission to the digital crowd is not without provoking anxiety and aggressiveness. What Jacques-Alain Miller called "the prisons of *jouissance*" is materialized in this new addiction to one's own image on the web. Seeing oneself, gazing at one's reflection, admiring oneself, appealing to the others' constant gaze, also means giving up secret and privacy and being unable to access what cannot be shared with anyone, and can only be experienced behind the scenes. This addiction to see oneself repeatedly means to lose oneself. Lacan first saw the experience of analysis as crossing the boundaries of what Jacques-Alain Miller called the "enormous and inflated narcissism" (*L'énorme boursoufflure narcissique*) in "Lacanian biology and body event" (« *Biologie lacanienne et événement de corps* », p. 13). The experience of analysis can only start when the subject realizes that his being is situated elsewhere, at a point where a destiny he cannot decipher determines his existence despite all his efforts to escape it.

This imaginary modality is clearly what the subject in analysis lives through. The real journey begins when he or she no longer believes that they can "see themselves" in the other. The experience of the unconscious presents us with a new way of seeing. It is no more a question of letting oneself be captured by the image of the other and by one's own, but, through speech, to follow a new path which can lead the patient to discover "the cipher of his destiny".

Let's now enter the experience of analysis.

I would like to go back to the question of vision beyond the dimension of narcissism, in the treatment. To what extent has Lacan conferred a new dignity to vision in the experience itself? My point of view is that Lacanian vision does not confine itself to the imaginary register: it goes beyond narcissism and the imaginary.

The interpretation Lacan gave to the tale by Edgar Poe "The purloined letter" shows in what way vision is not limited to the imaginary. What is typical of each character in the tale, the Queen, the Minister, the King and the police, is that they don't see where the letter is hidden. They don't see it or, like the Queen, are unable to say anything about it. She indeed sees her letter being stolen under her eyes by the Minister but remains silent not to attract the King's attention. Nobody finds the letter even though it lies before everybody's eyes at the Minister's office. The minister who has stolen the letter has merely left it face turned down and crumpled, to give it the appearance of a valueless object. To explain the blindness of the characters, Edgar Poe uses a metaphor and compares what is happening with the purloined letter to an experience involving the impossibility to read something. If we look at a geographical map, we are able to read the names written on the same scale, but we can't read the names written in larger letters across the map which refer to the region. We can't read what is written in bold type as if we refused to see what was shown to us.

My thesis is that vision is not limited to the imaginary; there are in fact, three Lacanian conceptions of vision.

First of all, vision in psychoanalysis has a figurative meaning. It is the one given by Freud, based on his interpretation of the Oedipus myth, as the tragedy of "He did not know". This figurative sense brings to mind what Lacan called "the moment of seeing". To start an analysis is to start seeing and consenting to open one's eyes in order to see what repeats itself in one's existence and resembles a kind of destiny.

Secondly, vision takes a new status in psychoanalysis through dreams and nightmares, confronting us with the real.

Thirdly, the experience of seeing is that which opens onto the dimension of the letter.

Seeing also means being able to read. At the end of

an analysis, a new relationship to speech arises, involving a reading of *jouissance*. The experience of analysis therefore puts an end to blindness. It is an experience of vision marked by different stages, from vision as an interpretation of the truth of destiny to vision as a confrontation with the real.

Blindness and destiny

“Vision is not limited to the imaginary” : first meaning.

Let’s go back to the first meaning of vision, the figurative meaning.

We know that in the days of Freud, the patient lying on the couch did not see the analyst and couldn’t see his face. Whoever speaks doesn’t look at himself or herself in the other but feels listened to, beyond what is said. The analytical interpretation allows one to hear and to see, in the figurative sense, something of the unconscious destiny. It opens onto the symbolic. The question of the vision in the figurative sense has been present right from the beginning of psychoanalysis with Freud. We should bear in mind that what held Freud’s interest in the tragedy of Oedipus, is the question of blindness. It is the phrase: “He did not know” which has since become the paradigm of the experience of the unconscious. Not to know. One could even say that the experience of analysis is a consent to not know. Only on that condition can one gradually attain a truth about one’s being.

The interpretation one can make of the myth of Oedipus such as Freud extracted it from Sophocles’ tragedy, Oedipus Rex, is too often restricted to the question of ambivalent feelings towards the mother and the father. And this often produces a psychological interpretation of Oedipus’ journey. What Sophocles’ play and psychoanalysis have in common, according to Freud, is that Oedipus did not know. The whole tragedy which unfolds over one day, rests on the words: “he did not know”. He didn’t know that the man he came across at the crossroads was his father the king of Thebes. He didn’t know that by answering the Sphinx’s riddle, and by entering Thebes as a savior, he would then marry his mother Jocasta. He didn’t know that, by attempting to avoid the oracle’s prediction, he was fulfilling this prediction to the letter.

The question of blindness in the figurative sense lies at the heart of Sophocles’ play. What is tragic is that Oedipus did not know that he was fulfilling his destiny, while trying to avoid it. Now, “he didn’t know” which can be rephrased by “he couldn’t see” becomes the axiom of analytical interpretation. The experience of analysis leads the person who speaks to come near the zone where “he didn’t know”. It leads him to confront the horror of knowing. And this implies that the subject, who lived his life without seeing and without knowing, finally throwing himself into the abyss where he disappears, consents to opening his eyes.

Sophocles’ tragedy is a story of vision and blindness. The real blindness is the symbolical blindness, the one that concerns destiny. Oedipus is blind in the figurative sense when he fulfills his destiny, and he sees the truth about his destiny when he removes his eyes. Oedipus is blinded in the figurative sense when he attempts to flee from Corinth to escape the Oracle’s prophecy. “From the beginning to the end, the pace of the tragedy is set by the veiled reality, unbeknownst to him”. There lies the tragic aspect of the question “who am I?” for psychoanalysis. As Lacan puts it, “the subject always finds fulfilment elsewhere and his reality always remains veiled”. If one ignores one’s destiny and refuses to know who one is and where one comes from, then one takes the risk of fulfilling one’s destiny as Oedipus did while avoiding it. “We mustn’t forget that Oedipus’s unconscious is the fundamental discourse on Oedipus’s life, which we are familiar with, even though, he remains ignorant of it while being played by it since the beginning.” Something will be fulfilled above and beyond himself, exactly when he believes he can change his destiny by leaving his adoptive parents. Oedipus who can solve the riddles cannot solve the riddle he is for himself. He doesn’t know that he is Jocasta’s son and that by marrying the Queen of Thebes, he will have fulfilled the tragedy of his destiny and committed an irremediable act, incest.

In 1955 Lacan attributed the tragedy by Sophocles particular importance, reading not only Oedipus Rex but also Oedipus at Colonus. The second tragedy takes place after Oedipus has blinded himself. Oedipus leaves Thebes, the cursed city with his daughter Antigone. Something “beyond” the fulfillment of destiny occurs, and it is this “beyond” which draws Lacan’s attention. For him, Oedipus without eyes is a kind of “subject without ego”. The moment he loses his identity, he

becomes a subject. In other words, Lacan reverses the meaning of blindness. Only when he has removed his eyes and is no longer dazzled by the mirages of the imaginary, the charms of the being and the illusions of destiny, only then something begins. What begins is new: it is the progress into another zone, a place where you don't need your eyes to see, a place where in the darkness of vision, Oedipus can at last, confront his destiny which is already fulfilled. What does this have to do with the analysis? Well, whoever crosses the threshold of analysis, whoever dares experience the unconscious, this individual will move beyond the image and the power of images, beyond the visible, to confront what was impossible to see and what blinded him.

Seeing in the dream and the nightmare

“Vision is not limited to imaginary” : second meaning.

Secondly, seeing is not confined to the imaginary in the sense that “seeing” in analysis also means experiencing vision in dreams and nightmares. In the dream there is “something to see” (donné-à-voir) to which Lacan gave a particular status in his developments about the eye and the gaze in 1964. Dreaming is not only fulfilling a desire, but also experiencing vision. It is seeing images, as when you watch a painting without knowing what you are looking at or where exactly in the painting, we feel intimately concerned by what we see.

Lacan's demonstration is based on a paradigmatic dream taken from *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Freud. It is a dream about which Freud contradicts himself and to which he comes back a few times in Chapter 7: “The dreams-processes”. It is known as: “The Dream of the Burning Child”. This dream, which is in fact a nightmare, is not subject to the Freudian axiom according to which every dream is the fulfilment of a desire. Freud however tries to interpret the dream as such, but he sees that there is something else he can't interpret yet in 1908. Only in 1920 with the theory of repetition based on the nightmares from the traumatized war veterans, who had come back from the battlefield, will he give a status to the dream as trauma.

The Dream of the Burning Child is the following one: a father who has been sitting vigil over his dead child all night, goes into the next room to rest. He then has this dreadful dream, that his child gets up and

comes looking for him in the room while he was dozing off. Looking at his father reproachfully, the child says: “Father, don't you see I am burning?”. The grieving father wakes up with a start and notices that there is a fire in the child's bedroom, the lighted candle having fallen over the sheets covering the child's body. This dream was chosen by Lacan among the many dreams reported by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, because it relates a terrible coincidence. It seems as if the father had dreamt of the fire which was actually taking place in the next room. It seems that the nightmare warns the father of the fire. How can a nightmare merge with reality in such a tragic way? If I refer to this famous dream today, it is because Lacan, in Seminar XI gives a new status to vision based on the words: “Father, don't you see? » Lacan's interpretation goes beyond that of Freud. The dream doesn't merely fulfill the father's wish to see his child alive. The dream doesn't merely integrate elements from reality, the smell of the smoke, the light of the flames, so that the dreamer could go on sleeping for a few moments. The nightmare of the father confronts him with the son's reproach “Father, don't you see I am burning?”. This question is, for Lacan, the very axiom of the nightmare. Any nightmare is a way to ask the question: “Don't you see?”. The real which wakes up the father, is not the fire which accidentally breaks out in the next room. It is a more fundamental real, the real of the trauma itself. The nightmare pays tribute to the missed encounter with the real, the loss of the child. While the father is unable to save his son and can't come to his rescue, and his son is suffering from a fever, and death is encroaching upon his life, in the nightmare, the father finds himself again in front of his son who has come back from the dead, and once again he is confronted with his powerlessness. The real which the father encounters is this one. “The dream pursued is a tribute to the missed reality”, Lacan writes in Seminar XI. “And reality can only repeat itself “(XI, p.69). What repeats itself for the father and what he does not see, is this experience of loss. The reality of the death of his child repeats itself by means of the accident-the sheets that catch fire.

This dreadful vision – the vision of the child which the father finds again only to lose him a second time - becomes for Lacan the very place of the real. This terrible dream informs Lacan that vision has a very singular status in the experience of analysis. The dream shows and allows one to see, yet one cannot grasp what one sees. In the dream I see something but “I don't know

where it leads” Lacan writes. I am confronted to what I can’t see.

I would like to tell you about a dream I had during my analysis, when the question of the letter of the destiny could not be read yet. Vision was an important element in the dream. I dreamt that I was reading a letter, a letter in the sense of a missive, which was addressed to me. It was written in blue ink and the writing resembled that of a child. But I couldn’t read it because I had blurred vision. Two years later, the question of seeing and reading was reversed. In another crucial dream, I was able to read the letters on a map of Europe, letters which formed a word between two languages, two territories, two places and which made me cross the frontier between the symbolic and the real. I could now see and read what it had taken me so long to decipher. I could situate the letter of my destiny by means of the letter which brought me back to the place I come from, and forced me to face the misunderstanding I came from.

A Lacanian vision as a path to access the letter

“Vision is not limited to the imaginary” : third meaning.

This experience helped me read at last, something about my relationship to *jouissance*. And this allows me to present the third moment of Lacan’s development on “seeing”. Lacan gave vision the meaning of an apparition. Seeing an apparition in a dream is a strange experience which rips the screen. Almost like the ladies whom we see kneeling in Renaissance paintings, the subject has the feeling that he has been penetrated by what takes place before him. The apparition does not belong to the register of the imaginary. It completely upsets the field of vision and suddenly introduces an intense light which leaves no room for the shade. This is how Lacan defined the unconscious in his text “The mistaking of the Supposed to know Subject”: a light which leaves no room for the shade.

Now you can see why Lacan’s experience of vision, on his way back from Japan, moved and appealed to me. Here we are no longer in the field of the Lacanian conception of vision, of “seeing” and of “blindness” but very close to an experience of vision made by Lacan himself. This vision is a means to access the real. This

is my conclusion. While Lacan first considered vision as the place of narcissism and of the prison of the imaginary, seeing became in the end the experience of the real. Rather a Platonist at the beginning, Lacan then turned towards the ideas of another philosophical tradition, Merleau-Ponty’s but also the tradition of prominent painters and art critiques, who allow us to see the invisible in the vision. Such is the vision present, according to Eric Laurent, in *Lituraterre*. In this text about the letter, Lacan tells us about a vision in the proper sense of the term. It is by coming as closely as possible to the proper sense of the word vision, that Lacan approaches the literal aspect of vision. As Eric Laurent writes: “It is a matter of crossing an aesthetic experience in order to bring it back to the core of the real”. The aesthetic experience therefore is not only related to a feeling of satisfaction induced by the sight of beauty. The aesthetic experience in the proper sense of seeing, can become a means to access the real, which cannot be deciphered but is only shown. First, the moment of seeing. Eric Laurent writes: “During his journey home, flying over the Siberian plain, the streaming rivers over the deserted plains seem to emerge from “between the clouds”, like a great cursive handwriting. Lacan writes in *Lituraterre*: “As appeared to me invincibly, this circumstance is not nothing: the-between-the-clouds, the streaming, only trace to appear, only trace to operate, operating there to do more still than indicate relief in this latitude, in that which of Siberia makes a plain, a plain desolate of any vegetation but reflections, which push into the darkness what does not shimmer.” Lacan’s language here verges on poetry. Something appears to him as he is on the plane, from between the clouds, and this something, he calls it “streaming”, “only trace to appear”, because the Siberian plain is utterly bleak. It is a desolate landscape, nothing grows there. Éric Laurent highlights the word chosen by Lacan, “streaming” to describe the flow of the river. “Streaming” brings to mind an experience of vision and of a shimmering glow. This vision enables Lacan to write about the end of analysis. At the end of the experience, the speaking subject meets a kind of almost deserted place, where the power of the story has disappeared, where there is only one trace left, an indelible trace, the trace of the encounter between the subject’s body and the Other’s language. This trace is, according to Eric Laurent, “the memory of all that has been written and erased, in the experiences of *jouissance*, where the subject has met with what is impossible to say. I would argue that this trace, which can be glimpsed at the end of analysis, from between the signifiers, and which, like

the clouds clear away, this trace is itself unsayable. Yet, catching a glimpse of this trace urges us to try and read it and to reverberate in the language that we speak what emerged there, at the end.

Lacan's vision is also the vision the subject might have at the end of his or her analysis. What at last appears to them, pays tribute to the unspeakable experiences of jouissance which they will be able to convey through the letter as well as poetry and ambivalence. So in 1971, at the end of his teaching, Lacan uses vision as a way to read the unconscious; it is no longer the unconscious which has a meaning, but the unconscious, which, like the Siberian plain, becomes a place marked by the traces of jouissance.

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