

## March Seminar 2021

### NIDA LACAN STUDY AND READING GROUP

*Due to Coronavirus restrictions, we will continue our seminars online until further notice. I will send members copies of the texts of the monthly seminars. New members, please contact us by the email: [Ehsan.Azari@nida.edu.au](mailto:Ehsan.Azari@nida.edu.au)*

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## The desire of the Obsessional

### *The Seminar V: Formations of the Unconscious. XVII*

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At the beginning of the session, Lacan's critical point is the constituting role of the unconscious formations in structuring different kinds of neurosis. The *névrose obsessionnelle*, obsessional neurosis, in this context, takes its constitution in fading of desire. As argued in the earlier session, the fading of desire implies the fading of the Other, for desire, is essentially the desire of the Other—the place where signifiers coordinate desire. Subject in this process, the subject attempts to show his own attitude to the signified. To prevent the possibility of diminishing the subject, the obsessional set up a fantasy around the object of desire. In hysteria, the subject supports its ability as the object of the Other desire by an unsatisfied desire. The obsessional, on the other hand stuck with an impossible desire.

Lacan draws on Freud's insight on neurosis to reformulate the structures of the various classes of neurosis. In Freud's symptomatology, the obsessional articulates his neurosis or mental conflict by compulsive-obsession with ideas that always end up with undesirable and disturbing acts, "struggle against these thoughts and tendencies, exorcistic rituals, etc.—and through a mode of thinking which is characterized in particular by rumination, doubt, and scruples, and which leads to inhibitions of thought and action," (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, 281). The enduring procrastination unfolds this inhibition of thought and action in the obsessional. The compulsive thoughts and urges write down a ceaseless battle between the ego and the super-ego that leads to a disturbing sadomasochistic self-flagellating. The degree of psychic destruction is varied on the gravity and dynamics of the neurosis.

Lacan refuses claims by Freud's critics that he superimposes a determining nature in human psychic structure. Far from it, Lacan names a pact that underpins the being of man and nature. This pact is not intrinsic and has its roots elsewhere. Man's being is seen in Freud's thinking as a subject constituted by speech. The signifiers coordinated the inordinate desire through which the subject expressed it. The man is "constituted as a subject of speech, as the *I* of speech act," (Lacan, 2017, 384). That is what the subject reveals himself in his discourse during the analytical experience. In addition, in this experience, the subject's status is often against nature and his "position that is different from that of being an immanent vehicle of life." (Ibid) The relationship of the subject is determined by the experience the subject internally finds in speech. The phallus epitomizes the relation of the subject with life as a signifier of the most privileged position. It is a signifier that stays as its own signified, its own index in the signifying chain. His desire is embedded in the discourse of the demand. This demand goes beyond what it demands—satisfaction for a need—in its margins. What is in this need that opens a conduit to the desire of the subject? Lacan emphatically says everywhere that demand for love beyond the

satisfaction of the need, and this is the Other that is targeted in demand for love. In this stage, desire organizes its place through the interplay between signifiers. The signifiers are found in the Other—as a site of speech, and therefore, the subject obtains access to his own desire. The demand is addressed to this Other in which the articulation of desire takes shape.

As such, desire always goes beyond every possible kind of response at the level of satisfaction, in itself calls for an absolute response and henceforth projects its essential characteristic of being an absolute condition onto everything that is organized in interval internal to the two planes of demand—the signified plane and the signifier plane. It's in this interval that desire has to find its place and be articulated. (384)

The Other, the signifier's locus, is enthralled by a desire alien to the subject. Thus the formation of desire is associated with numerous difficulties in which the subject falls and develops into a neurotic structure that analysis discovers their secrets. These structures vary based on the unsatisfaction of desire. That reveals a venue in which the hysteric is dependent on the Other to have access to his own desire. On the contrary, the obsessional finds his desire to formulate a barred subject and object petit *a*, [ $\$ \langle \rangle a$ ].

Lacan reiterates his formulation of the desire of a hysteric that it is not a desire for a person, nor an object but a desire for desire, and this latter desire is a point where the Other's desire finds its nestle. It is not exact and right that in analysis to interpret desire of a hysteric as this or that person is whom you desire as the cases of Dora and Elizabeth von R. bear evidence that a hysteric identifies with the object of other desire. Dora identifies with Herr K., and Elizabeth von R. identifies with someone close to her. These persons with whom they identify become their other egos. The hysterics recognize within those who choose to identify “with the same problem of desire as the other is, that identification arises—with all the forms of contagion, crisis, epidemic and symptomatic manifestations that are so typical of hysteria.” (386)

By contrast, the desire of the obsessional is different from that of a hysteric, for the Other's desire poses itself differently. Considering a wealth of clinical experiences focused on the puzzling fantasies of the analysands, Lacan reveals the differences in the constitution of an obsessional's desire. Such fantasies show their signification by the images (specular narcissistic) involved and so their imaginary relationship. The images are multivalent and dynamic that function on the ground of relations that are both aggressive and erotic. The above schema [ $\$ \langle \rangle a$ ] can help decipher the location and articulation of the functions of fantasies. In the original circuit of his demand, the subject addresses his question to the Other, wherein the subject builds its relationship with the other image (specular image), *i(a)* to satisfy its needs. Along with this circuit, transitivity (confusion of the ego and the other in the imaginary relationship). In the imaginary relation, the subject identifies with the image and recognizes his own himself in this image) takes shape.

It's therefore somewhere along this circuit that transitivity and the effect of one's 'presence' are accommodated, placing the subject in a certain relationship to his semblable as such. The relationship to the image is thus found at the level of experiences from the time at which the child enters into the game of speech, at the limit of the passage from the infant state to the speaking state. (386-387)

In this way, the subject realizes himself in the other field through access to the Other's desire. The function of fantasy places itself in the relation of the barred subject to object petit *a* as the schema [ $\$ \langle \rangle a$ ] suggests. Lacan defines a fantasy in a nutshell as “the imaginary captured in

particular use of signifiers. Moreover, it manifests itself and is observable in distinctive ways, even if it's only when we speak of sadistic fantasies, for example, which play such an important role in the economy of an obsessional," (387). Lacan clarifies the sadistic nature of the visible revelation in fantasies in terms of scenes and scenarios (conveyed deeply by signifiers) concerning the works of Sade, even though he does not name the author. Sade's works are not examining instinct but reveal by employing signifiers in a game. Since his works are literary, calling that game an imaginary game would not be enough to express the whole picture—the scenario and scenery of the fantasy that the subject articulates and makes its presence in them under various masks. In such scenarios, one always finds the presence of another semblable as its reflection. Freud, for example, examines whipping fantasies among his patients in which the phallus signifier plays a distinct role. The phallus signifier also plays a role in obsessional neurosis and sadistic fantasies. Connected to this function of this ubiquitous signifier is far from being biological but to a "signifying multivalence that does rather tilt the balance towards the signified than towards anything of any kind that could be deduced from the order or biological needs, or from anything else," (388). Such a fantasy description that takes its root from the imaginary order conveys its message through signifying function. That is the only way to postulate the unconscious fantasy. The unconscious fantasy exists in terms of a signifying chain in a latent form—the signifying chains in the unconscious impact the organism and shape what seems like symptoms. In these chains, it is difficult to conceptualize the unconscious effect on the imaginary. But it is possible to find out the fantasy in the unconscious in terms of the signifiers. In this way, "fantasy is essentially an imaginary embedded in a particular signifying function," (Ibid). Lacan is trying to show us a relationship that his formula, [ $\$ \langle \rangle a$ ] suggests about fantasy. This relation is a scenario in which the fantasy like a dream remains latent in the unconscious and can be conceptualized if the signifier function "gives its structure, consistency and, thereby, its insistence." (Ibid)

The obsessional subject recognizes himself in this in his relation to his desire. During analysis, the subject will resist revealing his fantasy life in simple terms by taking advantage of therapeutic intervention by the analyst. In this situation, the subject tries to find an independent solution for his obsession problem. However, the subject reveals the captivating nature of his psychic life by way of fantasy. The obsessional fantasies are sadistic, but the analysts see a problem when they explain the subject's tendency, but they find a revealing formation that signifies the relation of the subject with the Other. The obsessional fantasy always sustains as fantasies, and its occasional actualization for the subject is always troubling.

In effect, we observe here the mechanics of the obsessional's relationship to desire—the more he strives to approach the object, by the means that have been proposed to him, the more his desire dies away to the point of extinction or disappearance. I would say the obsessional is a Tantalus, had Tantalus not been presented to us through what is quite a rich iconography as an image that is above all oral. (389)

Here Lacan reminds us that the obsessional is like Tantalus, the king of Sipylus in Greek mythology who was condemn by Zeus to thirst and hunger while he was forced to stand in a pool of water up to his chin with a nearby fruit tree. In the mythology, the subject is shown in the oral fantasy. French psychoanalyst Maurice Bouvet recorded such fantasies reflected in his three essays that Lacan brought into scrutiny in the earlier session. Many analysts get themselves drowned in fantasies to find a way for their analysands to realize their desire. That describes one side of the obsessional fantasy, and the other side can be revealed by observation into the obsessional symptoms—the demand of the superego. As such, an obsessional is always in the process of asking for approval. That is what the schema [ $\$ \langle \rangle D$ ] signifies. Here D stands for

demand and asking for permission on the subject's part opens a dialectic with the Other— "the Other as one who speaks—is called into question, challenged and even put in danger, is ultimately to apply oneself to restoring this Other and to place oneself in the most extreme dependence on him," (390). Such a place is for the obsessional who stands in an extreme state of dependence. That is what Freud examined under *Versagung*—refusal. The refusal is an answer for the subject asking for permission. This way of expressing the problem for Lacan was far valuable than talking about frustration. Freudian concepts of frustration refer to the impact of unsatisfied drive or demand in Lacanian parlance. Deprivation, on the other hand, denotes the lack of opportunity for the satisfaction of a drive. Lacan explains *Versagung* (frustration) as a situation in which a subject relates to demand. Such a relationship is also kept in fantasy between a subject and the Other. The subject develops this relation based on his *Umwelt* (surrounding) to the outside world. The *Umwelt* and *Innenwelt* (interior) describe the inner imaginary sphere of the subject with its surroundings that structure the subject's relation with the world. In the outside world, there is a plurality of objects, even a mirage of objects. Lacan criticizes and calls 'purely illusory' the notion that when a child encounters denial of the object, the breast, the child develops autism. For children, "the objects of the world are multiple as they are interesting and stimulating," (391). Thus deprivation of the object opens new venues such as "a certain style of demand in the subject," (Ibid). That means that the subject return to an imaginary stage as analytical experience bears evidence that the subject articulates a demand that ensures his oral and other fixation or relationship with a specific object—these relations in the childhood development changes into the function of signifiers in terms of the unconscious signifying articulation. The subject finds himself in a relationship to drive and demand that Lacan specifies by the matheme of drive [ $\$ \ll D$ ]. Such moments of demand show the subject's problem with the Other in the constitution of his desire. In analytical practice, this happens when the subject finds everything in his demands over. Lacan recommends to the analyst that they should refrain from granting the subject such a situation.

It's not completely impossible, precisely, owing to the intervention of fantasies, of this more or less substantial something supported by fantasy. But I believe that this is a mistake in the orientation of analysis, for at the end of an analysis it leaves the question of relations with the Other not settled. (392)

Lacan goes further in this direction by calling for keeping within the obsessional like hysteric an unsatisfied desire, a desire beyond the demand. The obsessional alters this unsatisfied desire by a 'forbidden' desire. He supports this forbidden desire with the Other by the Others' prohibition. Prohibition of the Other is necessary to sustain the desire in the obsessional. The obsessional does this in a complex manner because his intentions are not, as Lacan says, pure ones. That has been described "as the aggressiveness of the obsessional," (393). Every time desire bursts out in the obsessional, the fear of payback will hinder its manifestation. As such, the obsessional develops a conflict wherein the emergence of desire will pose a similar threat as the fear of reprisal of the Other produces. The fantasy of the obsessional takes its scenario from obtaining the approval of his desire from the Other. In the Other consent, the obsessional finds a solution by placing the frustration on his own self, not on others. This solution is elusive, and as Lacan terms, 'short-circuited.' Such a consequence recurrently happens during the analytical experience where the obsessional assumes the Other's place and gives in to his demand. In this way, the obsessional spares the other—the imaginary semblable other. Lacan correlates to a degree the moralizing consequence of the maxim in human culture, 'do not do the others what you would not like to be done to yourself' to such a scenario. But this is by no means a solution for the obsessional. It only replaces one problem with another problem for his desire.

As experience shows, this is only substituting one symptom for another, and a very serious symptom, because it doesn't fail to engender the re-emergence—in other more or less problematic forms—of the question of desire, which has never been and can in no way be resolved by going down this path. (395)

All the above pursuits, which Lacan calls the obsessional's tricks and exploits, cannot bring about satisfaction. The obsessional encircles himself by the cruel superego and its constant punishment, such as guilt that never leave him free. Lacan puts this humorously in terms of the dialectic of work and holiday.

For the obsessional, work is powerful, to be done so as to free up the time for sailing, which will be holiday time—and the holidays habitually turn out to be more or less wasted. Why? Because what it was about was obtaining the Other's permission. (396)

This relationship does not include the other, the existent other, which in the obsessional is ultimately no one else but the obsessional himself. However, the Other is different for the obsessional, which is the locus wherein the subject's history and tricks will engrave. As such, the obsessional keeps the Other, where everything finds its expression in signifiers. The obsessional does all this by keeping the Other in different guises to ask for his desire. The above exploits are the behavioural patterns of the obsessional subject that Lacan calls 'acting out. Lacan alludes to a remarkable article on this issue, "General Problems of Acting Out," published in 1950 by an American psychoanalyst, Phillis Greenacre. In this article, Phillis defines the notion of acting out, a series of unpredictable behaviour by the analysand disrupting the course of analysis. He sees acting out as a re-enactment of old memories that stay outside the subject's conscious awareness. The memories are in distorted forms that Freud in his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* as an unconscious action.

It would seem that in acting out, there may be special problems in accepting and understanding current reality wither because of (1) specific problems in the immediate real situation, (2) special persistence for memories of earlier disturbing experiences, or (3) an inadequate sense of reality. (Greenacre. 1998, 20)

Following Freud and Greenacre, Lacan finds the notion of acting out as a symptom, active repetition, and compulsion to repeat an unconscious impulse in a subject's normal behaviour, especially the obsessional that happens in the course of analytical experience. That is an act that is an attempt to solve the problem of demand and desire. Acting out always happens as a tendency on the part of an analysand that cannot be assimilated in discourse or a culturally accepted normal action. Because the tendency is latent and unconscious, and an object always plays a role in it.

Acting out always comprises an element that is highly significant, and precisely because it's enigmatic. We will only ever acting out an act that presents with a particularly unmotivated character. That doesn't mean that it doesn't have a cause, but that psychologically it lacks motivation, for it's an act that is always signified... There is almost an equivalence between fantasy and acting out. Acting out is in general structured in a way that comes very close to that of a scenario. In its own way, it's at the same level as fantasy. (Lacan, 2017, 398)

The acting out is also different from the exploit that we have just discussed above. The exploit is aimed at giving pleasure to the Other. But the former is a message that is addressed to the analyst, which is why it is interesting in the analytical experience. If this happens outside the analysis, it cannot be important because they will not help. The acting out does, first, bring

something to open in which “the subject to gain access to the effective reality of the effect signifiers have upon him, that is, for him to place himself at the level of the castration complex,” (Ibid). However, the subject finds an ‘illusory solution’ about the object. In *Seminar IV: The Object Relation*, Lacan defines acting out an unpredictable act of the subject where the real expresses itself in the imaginary level where it was symbolically concealed. During the analysis, a subject shows his acting out as a reactional and irrational response to the treatment. As such, acting out is part of a mechanism, “whereby what arises in the real as a surplus that cannot be symbolically assimilated tends to precipitate what lies at the bottom of the symbolic relationship.” (Lacan, 2020, 155-156)

In *Seminar VIII: Transference*, Lacan emphasizes the reactional aspect of acting out by the analysand in analysis. Acting out reveals what is repressed crudely and bizarrely.

Acting out is the type of action by which, at a certain moment of the treatment—undoubtedly inasmuch as it is especially promoted, perhaps by our stupidity, perhaps by the analysand’s, but that is secondary and of little importance—the subject demands a more accurate response from us. (Lacan, 2015, 336)

In Seminar X: Anxiety, Lacan discusses the notion of acting out in detail and distinguishes it from a *passage à l’acte*. Acting out as an unpredicted act during the analysis or otherwise that the subject is present at the scene. On the other hand, the passage to act is like suicide when the subject leaves the scene.

Unlike the symptom, acting-out [*sic*] is an inroad into transference. It’s wild transference. There doesn’t have to be analysis for there to be transference, and you suspected as much, but transference without analysis is acting-out. Acting-out without analysis is transference. (Lacan, 2014, 125)

Shakespeare shows both types of actions in *Hamlet*. The protagonist’s irrational actions, such as killing and dragging Polonius’ body and hiding it near the castle lobby wherein Hamlet is still in the scene, are examples of acting out. However, when Hamlet, in a fury, kills the usurper King Cladius at the end of the play and himself also dies, it is an example of passage to act wherein he makes his departure from the scene. Since the subject is in the scene, his acting out means demand from the Other for recognition. During acting out, discourse and the signifying chain break momentarily. Lacan dedicated the *Seminar XV: L’act Psychanalytique* (1967-1968) to discuss all types of acts and actions. Here act refers to an endeavour that seeks inscription in the field of the Other, and action is merely an action. For example, to love is an action, for there is no commitment involved, but to marry is an act for it will entail more than just action—walking down the aisle. Such a difference noted by Lacan, “between Saint John’s sentence, ‘In the beginning was the Word [*le Verbe*],’ and Goethe’s, ‘In the beginning was action,’” (Marini, 1982, 213). Both types of acts “fill a distressing hole, reproduce the past instead of remembering it in words,” (Ibid). Freud studied these acts under his umbrella terms, parapaxes. In analysis, when the analyst expresses his desire to the analysand, this intervention is called in Lacan’s vocabulary as a true psychoanalytic act. This mediation helps the analysand steps towards the end of the analysis. The lesson we get from Lacan here is that acting out and the deadly whirlpool of passage to act, the central issue is the pursuit of desire for as he once remarked about the essence of desire, “the puzzles which desire impose on any natural philosophy, its frenzy pursues the void, its intimate collusion of knowledge, power and pleasure.” (Lacan, cited in Olinier, 1998, 120-121)

In conclusion, Lacan discusses the formations of the unconscious that plant seeds of different types of neurotic desire. After a brief recap of his earlier session about desire in hysterics, he tries to outline the obsessional desire and its origin during the process of analysis and treatment. His primary argument arises from an endless unconscious conflict within the obsessional inhabiting his very thinking and action. The subject finds its horrible place in a perpetual war between a weak ego and a vicious and cruel superego. The obsessional desire is an eternal call for recognition from the Other. Central to the obsessional desire is the pattern of behaviours of the subject that Lacan calls acting out, passage to act. The ways of behaviour that Lacan dubs as tricks and exploits of the obsessional often appear during analysis and treatment. In broader areas of culture and literature, Lacan hints at the fantasies and bizarre performances of the obsessionals.

### **Notes:**

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