

Petar Marković¹

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LACAN'S CONCEPT OF DESIRE AND ITS ARTICULATION IN ROMAN POLANSKI'S FILM *REPULSION* (1965)

ABSTRACT: In this paper, the author undertakes an analysis of the concept of desire (*désir*) within the theoretical framework set by the French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. The concept of desire is central to his theoretical thought. For Lacan desire is unconscious, not because there are no conscious desires, but because the unconscious is central to the psychoanalytical field. The author will also present the relation between demand and desire, as well as the concept of enjoyment (*jouissance*) related to both. Lacan defines man's desire as the desire of Other. The paper aims at an explication of the articulation of desire through a case study of the character of Carol Ledoux in the film *Repulsion* (1965) directed by Roman Polanski, and the concept of female desire and its articulation by the notion of the Other.

KEY WORDS: desire, Other, unconscious, film, *Repulsion*

1. Introduction

The concept of desire (*désir*) is, one may claim, at the very heart of Lacanian thought, and not only his, but of psychoanalysis in general (Lacan, 2003, p. 275). In this paper, we will, first, define this concept and

¹ MA Psychologist, PhD candidate at Singidunum University, e-mail: petarmarkovic05@gmail.com

then, present the problem the subject encounters in the symbolic order as he/she tries to translate 'his' desire into the field of consciousness in order to satisfy it. We shall, thus, problematize the relation/ symbiosis (struggle) between 'language and desire'.

In the psychoanalytic theory the unconscious determines the subject. Since the desire is in the unconscious, we can understand it as what sets in motion the subject to constitute himself within the symbolic order. Regardless of context, the subject is what constantly changes, and the desire is what sets him in motion, as the 'motive', as Freud's 'eros', which integrates and directs, as an unconscious center. It is the most persistent human phenomenon. Buddha, for example, thought that for feeling of happiness the best thing for a human being is not to have desire/s. Lacan, by contrast, claims that it is impossible not to have desire/s, since this would imply total alienation and deconstruction of the subject from the context that forms him, sets him in motion and makes him what he is. One who lives desires. A person could be compared to Sisyphus, but only from the point of view of wanting to end his desire; for Sisyphus it was the punishment of gods, which, nevertheless, brought content and sense to his existence. The punishment was Sisyphus' desire. The desire is punishment for a human being. A human being could not stand a chance against his/her desire/s. Both desire and punishment bring enjoyment, as both are formed by significant others in us.

According to Lacan the desire of man is the desire of the Other. The big Other, through what desire gets substituted, but never present to itself, is radical otherness, not the imaginary one which could be represented, but at the symbolic level, one that could not be assimilated to or be identified with. Rather, radical otherness is, for Lacan, the otherness of language and law/prohibition, or as one may say, the big Other is inscribed into the symbolic order (Evans, 2011). This symbolic order – the order of signifier and signified, of words, symbols, speech etc. – is like a cane the subject uses for groping through existence such that within it, for him, the desire still got a clear name, at least. Within this order the subject is able to assimilate otherness through the big Other, however helpless he/she may feel trying to resist in vain. "The Other, above all, must be understood as locus, the locus in which speech is constituted" (Evans, 2011, p. 89). "The Other can be understood as the

locus within which desire is formed. However, if someone's desire could be recognized at all, it must be articulated in speech. Precisely, through the subject desire is brought into existence" (Evans, 2011, p. 96). Once brought into existence, that is, by naming, by being articulated in language, desire is being articulated in speech, in spite of the fact that desire and language are incompatible. What remains is unconscious, which is unknown, which may be the desire itself, since the language is not able to articulate it without remainder. The desire remains in different forms and in different ways as phantasm, since the subject wants to articulate it, and by articulating it brings it into being. However, the desire, whether it be at the level of unconscious, or at the level of symbolic, cannot exist without its proper object – the cause of every desire – called *the object little a* (objet petit a) situated in the Real, for Lacan at the pre-symbolic level, which is, empirically, always realized as its own incomplete substitution. The object little a is the cause of the desire that always evades the subject, which means that the *a* is actually 'beyond' desire (Stojnić, 2016).

To understand the concept of desire it is necessary to make a clear distinction between desire and need, their origin and relationship to the extent the subject knows and realizes them. Moreover, clarification is needed of the relation of these with a third concept Lacan calls *demand*. Namely, in which situation the subject is the one who demands, and in which the subject responds to the demand of the other/Other? It is further necessary to explain whether it is possible to know the desire, satisfy the need, respond to the demand and what all these concepts have in common with the concept of enjoyment (*jouissance*).

The opinion the author will elaborate in this paper is that it is precisely the desire of the Other what constitutes the subject as a logocentric puzzle, justifying this idea by using the example of Roman Polanski's film *Repulsion* from 1965.

2. The desire of the Other in the film *Repulsion*

In the analysis of the film *Repulsion* in order to explicate the concept of desire, its articulation and realization via the representation of the protagonist, various sources are used to elucidate concepts such as *de-*

sire, Other, symbolic, real in Lacan's psychoanalysis, as well as some other sources dealing with film theory and cinematographic criticism.

2.1. On need, demand, desire and enjoyment

I need you to warm me up(I am freezing).

I need a warm up(I am freezing).

I demand that you warm me up.

I demand to be warmed up.

I am warming (myself).

I would not know what my need is if there were no words.

I would not trust words if I did not see myself in the mirror.

Others have thought me about words by using pictures and about pictures by using words.

Tortured, I receive pleasure.

A desire remains.

The desire remains

It remains.

She?

These examples show the dynamism of desire and its differentiation from need, demand, and enjoyment ; in other words, how need, demand, and enjoyment are related within the subject remaining always on the 'other side ' of desire. As a number of representations in the realm of art show, desire is something indicated to us and even if indicated, we can never be sure that we have understood it. Examples such as *desire is behind the rainbow; she wished to die, but also wished to live in Paris;*

the desire to kill the old usurer, etc. manifest desire, but we are unable to understand what it is because in order to hear it, it must be articulated in language, even if it is a desire we want to communicate to ourselves.

“A need is physiological, an instinct or craving in a living organism – a biological necessity – once satisfied, it completely vanishes (temporarily, of course)” (Evans, 2011, p. 96). We may thus conclude that need incessantly circulates, it is a process between ‘passing away’ (fulfilment, withdrawal) and ‘coming to be’ (occurrence) within the subject itself. ”Since born helpless, the human subject is incapable of satisfying its own needs and is totally dependent on the other. To get help from the other the infant must vocally express its needs” (Evans, 2011, p. 96). ”The need articulated in words is a *demand*. A primitive demand may be inarticulated screaming as well, whose purpose is to ask for help from the other” (Kovačević, 2010, p. 30). In the presence of the other, the demand gets this double function: as the Other represents love, the demand becomes simultaneously the articulation of need and the demand for love. “The Other may offer objects at disposal which the subject demands to satisfy its needs, but cannot give absolute love the subject wants. Once needs articulated in the demand are satisfied, there remains an unsatisfied (unsatisfiable) want, and this want (lack) is *desire* (Lacan, 2003, p. 297).

The mother – the first object of love – being not omnipotent, is not self-sufficient. She herself has the lack she wants to be satisfied at the symbolic level. Thus the Other wants the Other again in order to satisfy her desire. The desire is always being inscribed in the Other. This primary demand for love, which remains unsatisfied, the demand to get something that is evasive, in other words, the subject wants to be provided with something she lacks. “The nonsatisfaction of the demand for love is what ‘separates’ the subject from the Other, from whose desire his life depends; after fulfilling the needs articulated in the demand and nonsatisfaction of the want for love, there appears what remains when the former is subtracted from the latter - and that is the *desire*” (Lacan, 1986, p. 275).

The dialectic of desire is based on absence and is situated at the symbolic level. The symbolic system is not and cannot be a complete or closed system, because it is attached to the Other (the Other is always at work here) and every other has (another) Other. Situated between need and demand, the desire governs the subject; it may acquire different

forms, but it is never complete, it eludes every register – be it conscious or imaginary. To endure the impossibility of comprehending it, a person resorts to various projection mechanisms trying to get rid of his desire, for it is always present in some or other of its metonymic guises, never reducible to a simple object. The desire has only one object – *object little a* – or to express this differently by quoting the well-known Lacanian dictum: Man's desire is always the desire of the Other. "The first person to take the place of the Other is the mother, because the child is, at first, entirely dependent on her desire. Only when the father connects desire with law by castrating the mother, will the subject be freed of the arbitrariness of the mother" (Lacan, 1986, p.98).

2.2. The desire, pleasure principle, and enjoyment – *jouissance*

Lacan says that enjoyment (*jouissance*) is situated 'beyond' the pleasure principle in which pleasure is brought about through the impossibility of fulfilling the desire. If the drive of the subject is directed towards the unattainable satisfaction of the desire, enjoyment is generated through this inhibition. For, inhibited desire leads to enjoyment, not pleasure. Pleasure functions as the 'limit' of enjoyment. "The pleasure principle becomes the law that commands us to enjoy as little as possible. At the same time the subject tries to transgress prohibitions imposed on his enjoyment, to go beyond the pleasure principle" (Lacan, 1986, str. 86). However, the result of this transgression is not pleasure, but pain, because there is just a certain amount of pleasure the subject is able to endure. Beyond that limit pleasure becomes pain. This 'painful experience' is what Lacan calls *jouissance*. *Jouissance* – enjoyment is suffering.

2.3. The Desire of the Other

In order to understand Lacan's claim that desire is always the desire of the Other, we will present how a person is generated by his unconscious wish – otherness in us – through the relationship between mother, father, and child.

There are two types of otherness within which the subject is constituted. The one, the big Other is an anonymous abstract or concrete authority, for example, God, nature, any force majeure, power structures –state, society, parties, etc.- knowledge and science. The other one, is the symbolic order itself, language, as an ‘all-encompassing spirit’ that makes possible intersubjective relations and their fields (Stojnić, 2016).

The Other exists not only at the symbolic level which is constituted by it but also at the level of Real as something unknowable. The subject constitutes his wish within the symbolic order, that is, always mediated by the Other.

For the mother, a child is the object of wish fulfilment as well as the one who internalizes the desire of the Other. Lacan explains this with the sentence “I shall be what I already have been for the Other” used when explaining the phenomenon of identification.

On the other hand, the mother is the Real Other. For the infant, she is unknowable, uncontrollable, on whom its very life depends. She is the source of love, but a source obscure, mysterious, and incomprehensible. The infant tries to win her love and to know her in order to overcome its fear and secure its existence. Passing through the process of identification (which is determined by desire), the child tries to answer the question *what mother/the Other wants* (me to become). Here the subject is at a deadlock exposed to this inaccessible, unknowable (unconscious) wish. The way out is at the symbolic level with the appearance of the father. *Phallus* is the thing the father ‘has’ and the mother lacks, so it becomes the desire of the mother (Freud, 2014). Thus the phallus of the father (Freudian figure), the symbolic Other, can control the unpredictable wish of the mother. “The woman’s desire is submitted to its own image – an unhealing wound, it can exist only in relation to castration and is not able to transcend it (frustration, fear). From her infant, she makes the signifier of her own desire to have a penis (the condition, she imagines, for entering the Symbolic). She must either become open to the words of the name-of-the-father or struggle to keep her child and herself in the penumbra of Imaginary (Malvi, 2019, p. 8-9)

The Other is a woman. She is not only the mother of the subject (infant/human being), but also of the desire itself. The cause of the desire is

want (lack) since the desire itself is directed towards lack. It seems that only Man can satisfy this desire, for he is not a human being with a lack but a signifier, he is the one who assigns, predicts, and fulfils the female desire. However, the woman is the one who establishes the desire in every human being, for the desire is always the desire of the Other.

3. Case study: *Repulsion* from 1965.

This case study will show that the protagonist is presented both as an object of men's desire and as an object of her own internalized desires, whereas, in the end, she becomes the desire of the Other. For, although desire may be placed within us, we never know whether it is ours or not. It is in the register of Real that, for Lacan is inaccessible, and unknowable, because the Real is impossible and cannot be placed either in the imaginary or in the symbolic. The Real is unthinkable, it is the space of trauma, of absurd, of fear let loose, in which the incomprehensible desire is generated.

Roman Polanski's film may be viewed as a combination of drama and horror; it is a story about Carol Ledoux, a nice and attractive girl, who shares an apartment with her elder sister. Her sister – Helen - is often visited by her lover – Michael, and Carol feels a strong aversion towards her sister's lover and towards everything connected with men and sex. When the couple set out on a journey, Carol stays alone in the apartment, and her mental health deteriorates further.

3.1. Carol and her desire

The film starts with a black screen that turns out to be the pupil of Carol's eye. The female subject (Carol) is staring at something, or perhaps at nothing at all. Immediately, the spectator wants to know what the subject (camera) is looking at. This scene indicates that Carol is not integrated into the symbolic order. While the eye remains staring, the names of the actors and film-making personnel are gliding across the

details of the eye (the Other). Carol's relationship to other subjects is pathologically shy, avoiding, and suppressed, ushering her slowly into madness. Her infantilism can be understood as an impasse reached at the earliest stages of subject forming: between the infant and the language. "Carol's relation to the outside world is shut" (Kovačević, 2010, str. 35). When she walks the streets, she seems absent, as if devoid of self-consciousness. In spite of being physically attractive, she has difficulties defining what she wants and appears as a somnambulist ready to commit murder (Budenac, 2012). Carol's infantilism is manifest in her relationships with other characters in the movie. She is incapable of rejecting courtship and is incompetent in coming up with convincing reasons to explain her absence to the owner of the beauty parlour she works for. But, when she is alone, she becomes overcome by fear threatening to take her where she came to be as a subject. Fear is for her that absurd safe place/state (symptom) where her delirious phantasies begin. In her apartment, she is surrounded by dolls and figurines. When she is rambling in her apartment dressed in a white nightgown, she looks like a child. A child that cannot be integrated into the existing symbolic order. In order to be integrated law/prohibition is necessary, the Name-of-the-father as *No* to enjoyment, a master signifier holding together the symbolic order without which it would disintegrate. Carol's split is a psychotic flight from the neurosis in which she remained as compensation for her mother's phantasies. Her fixation on the desire of the Other – object *little a* – incapability to protect herself from primordial objects made it impossible for her to integrate into the symbolic order. She finds her way out of confining herself and silently moves towards a space in which enjoyment (*jouissance*) will not be a trauma, but a delusion, where there are no clear limits to prohibition, where her frustration persists to the limits of unbearable pain. The more these limits give way, the more her traumatic enjoyment turns to madness. Fissure is the leading metaphor of the *Repulsion*. This fissure is the signifier of powerlessness to stitch up (suture) this gap between reality and phantasy from which her delirious hallucinations sprang, the point of her retreat and alienation from the conscious world. This fissure (on the wall of the room, in the mind of the protagonist) represents two opposite ends of the constellation in which she found herself: murderous frenzy, on the

one hand, and catatonia, on the other. The psychotic decompensation of the heroine indicates that she has never passed successfully the stages of identification and has remained captive in her inability to articulate her desire. The only way she can find to 'articulate' is slipping into madness. Within this narrative Carol's position is the one of the male spectator; she *is* the object of desire. This is suggested by the position of the camera, namely, the camera gets closer and closer to her as if brutally wooing, as if some sort of phallic attacker stalking her while she is wandering through the streets of London, or zooming in on her eyes in moments of silent daydreaming and most painful torments (being raped by an imaginary man) (Bečanović, 2015).

3.2. Trauma

When, for the first time, we see Carol alone in her room, we become aware of her fixation on an age-old trauma. We notice that the camera at some point zooms in on a family photograph, the very same one that appears at the end of the film. The camera dwells on the picture, on little Carol's eyes in which we recognize fear and alienation. Note that the eye appears at the very beginning and at the end of the film.

I shall become what I already have been for the Other.

Lacan (Kovačević, 2010, str. 24)

Held up in the process of identification by this injury, unable to articulate her desire, Carol Ladoux finally finds her cathartic salvation in madness. She has been (the object of) the desire of her father (the Other) and she becomes it (object, victim, desire).

The desire of the Other constitutes the subject as a logocentric puzzle. However, in the case of Carol Ledoux it is unrestrained by language and becomes real. For those who can observe her only within the symbolic register, she remains incomprehensible to the very end. The heroine of this film, captured in her trauma, torn by her desire, represents

the closest the human being can be to freedom since words stop integrating/binding her being and she simply just *is*. For us others defined, integrated, substituted by words what seems like madness – a notion which like desire and death must remain unknowable – is this simple being.

The story of the film presents this dynamism of desire within language. We see a murder – an act leading to death, but death is itself only a word (notion) – we feel the desire of the heroine – represented as fear or hidden in that feeling – but this desire is incomprehensible, because it remains unarticulated, ending up in madness, which deconstructs logocentrism, because it becomes free from the constraints of the established order of language leading toward the unknowable Real.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we analyzed Lacan's concept of desire regarding, firstly, the difference between demand and need, and, secondly, the relation between enjoyment and pain. Moreover, we analyzed the significance of the process of identification in the development of the subject and the constitution of desire. The significance of the mother-figure and introduction of the father-figure and with it the concept of Law/Prohibition as well as the 'inscription' of the child into the symbolic order. The question to be answered here is whether madness (psychotic split) is a substitution for NO (to enjoyment), that is, for the prohibition in the symbolic order.

Erasing NO within the symbolic order, the psychotic becomes excluded from it and the Other, normally, constitutive to this order moves to another register. Madness, as well as desire, remain always incomprehensible for the subject; the question here is – how much madness is present in the desire, and, conversely, how much desire in madness?

Desire is the essence, motive power of life, and as such always unconscious, whereas madness is a reaction to an impasse in the development of the subject. However, since there is a fundamental incompatibility between language and desire, in other words, desire can never become a part of the symbolic order, and can never be articulated without remainder, desire, like madness brings along an indelible distinctiveness of the Real.

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