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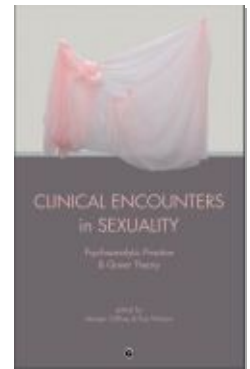
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Queer as a New Shelter from Castration

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Introduction

Somewhere in his diaries, Søren Kierkegaard (1998) wonders about how Jesus Christ would react when asked to prove that he is really the son of God. If he really is, Kierkegaard says, then he would *not* prove it, because his existence is the proof. If Jesus were to comply with the request to prove it, he would make himself appear not to be the son of God. Lacan (1986[1959–60]) says something similar about the perversion of Sade. In his seventh seminar on ethics he notes that the more Sade shouts not to be bound by any law, the more it becomes clear that the Law remains indestructible at its core (225–41).

Jesus Christ doesn't prove he is Jesus Christ because he is Jesus Christ: his existence is the proof. Sade, on the other hand, has to prove ceaselessly that he is not bound by any law, but in producing transgression after transgression, it becomes obvious that his pleasure is only possible because of the law. Without the law no transgression is possible. The silence of being contrasts sharply with the shrieking noise of discourse.

This train of thought is very instructive for queer theory and for psychoanalytical practice. If somebody were to *be* really queer, then he would have no reason to prove it. The fact that

1 We would like to thank Sue Feldman, who was our first reader.

some people try to prove to others they are queer, again and again, only reveals ever more sharply that they aren't. They only work their fingers to the bone for some obscure Other. They remain bound to some *queer* God.

To be or not to be, that's still the question. Different approaches are proposed through the different chapters in the first section of *Clinical Encounters*. Queer gives some people an identity. Queer is also a discourse that started as an underground movement, and that in the meantime has been recuperated by the university discourse. For others, queer is a name for their perversion. Other perspectives are possible. We put ours forward in a deliberately provocative way: queer is a new shelter from castration. Just as Lacan (1973[1964]) says on atheism in his eleventh seminar that the myth that *God is dead* is nothing but a shelter from castration (29; 45), queer also is a way to refuse castration, proving how speaking beings are bound to castration.

People who identify with the signifier queer can only love queer because it's a name for their *jouissance*. What else is queer, if it is not *jouissance*? It is the *jouissance* of the body that is considered to be queer. One can never fully identify with one's own body and can never totally control the *jouissance* that erupts from this body. One's body remains always to some extent strange to oneself, it remains *heteros*. Using the word queer for one's identity seems to be nothing more than a failing attempt to control one's *jouissance* (Lacan 1986[1959–60]; Declercq 2004; Verhaeghe 2001, 65–132).

Queer as One of the Names-of-the-Father

This is one of the most important aspects of queer: it's all about the act of naming. In this sense queer might be considered one of the Names-of-the-Father. It gives a name to one's *jouissance*. By saying this, we must realize that the act of naming in itself is not "good" or "bad." Sometimes it can have pernicious effects when naming pins one down to the signifier. Nevertheless, everybody (every body) needs to be named via the Other, or oth-

erwise no subjectivity is possible. Still, the radical split between the Symbolic and the Real remains. The act of naming always fails at a certain point. In the case of the signifier queer we must ask where the act of naming fails. While the ordinary signifiers of homosexuality and heterosexuality refer to an object choice, queer is a signifier used for another kind of identity, one that tries to escape being defined by this object choice. The signifier queer refers to a choice for an enjoyment; implicitly, queer is opposed to “the straights” who are often seen as people who do not enjoy.

Queer theory therefore seems to have enlarged Immanuel Kant’s three fundamental philosophical questions: What can I know? What do I have to do? What may I hope? Queer theory doesn’t answer Kant’s questions, but adds a fourth one: How can I enjoy? And more specifically: How can I reach *my* enjoyment?

The question is interesting, but by giving an answer to it we find ourselves immediately in a deadlock. There lies an important difference between queer theory and psychoanalytic practice. Queer theory tries to sell itself as a new answer to a question that is not explicit in Kant, although it is as old as humanity itself. Psychoanalysis for its part does not answer this question, but tries to make it conscious while accepting that absolute enjoyment is not attainable for any speaking being. Lacan (1966[1960]) insists a lot on this impossibility: “jouissance is forbidden for the one who speaks” (821).

Today, it becomes clear that people have abandoned the old ideals, seen as conservative. Ideals are normative, and thus they are bad. In the place of the ideal, the contemporary subject has the object *a* that steers his life, which is typical for a capitalistic era. This is a remark Lacan (2001[1970]) made in *Radiophonie*. He called this switch “the rise at the social zenith of the object called by me small *a*” (414). Jacques-Alain Miller (2002) formalized this as follows: $I < a$. With these remarks in mind, we can consider *Queer* as one of the Oedipal vicissitudes in an era during which the belief in the Other of the Other declines, and in which as a consequence the object *a* emerges.

Being born as a male or female is one of the most contingent factors in life, but no matter how obvious this contingency might be for some subjects, one still has to do something with it. Even more so: it is a necessity to do something with the contingencies of life. And one always clashes with the impossibility of a final answer. With this, we have introduced three terms Lacan (1975[1972–73]; 1991[1969–70]) places in mutual relation: contingency, necessity, and impossibility.

Necessity is, so to speak, the upper layer. Every speaking being is confronted with the Real of the drive and the question of how to handle the *jouissance* of the body. Gender is already an answer to this question, and thus a defense to the impossibility that lays beyond. Introducing gender as a solution is thus nothing but another formulation of the same problem (Verhaeghe 2004). Impossibility therefore can be considered as the lower layer and is much more difficult than necessity.

Some extreme representatives of the queer movement seem to refuse the classical distinction between man and woman. By doing this, they avoid not only the impossibility, but they also avoid the necessity to set about the task of doing something with the contingency of gender. Meanwhile they install, in their refusal of this classic dichotomy of man and woman, a new dichotomy, the one of straight and queer. In this way queer is nothing other than an illustration of its own failure. One difference between two categories is replaced by another difference between two categories. While in the first dichotomy the identification with one of the sexes is central, in the second dichotomy the identification with a way of enjoying is central. But both of them show the same deadlock of every binary dichotomy. To say it simply: the first element needs the second element to be placed in opposition to it.

Other binaries that have been made in psychoanalytical theory are the ones between passive and active, and between Eros and Thanatos. Both of these binaries introduce more problems than solutions. Lacan's critique of the active/passive opposition is that in identifying masculinity with activity and femininity with passivity, one tries to make man and woman a com-

plementary couple. Implicitly this distinction hides a belief in such things as a sexual relationship between man and woman. For Lacan (1966[1958]) femininity must not be thought of as complimentary to masculinity, but as a supplement, what is also referred to as the not-all (“*le pas tout*” of Lacan). As for the distinction between a life drive and a death drive, Lacan says the opposition is true as long as it is considered two aspects of the same drive. For Lacan (1966[1960]) there is only one drive and this drive is virtually a death drive. When pushed through, every drive is a death drive.

As several authors in the book note, the attempts to define what queer means conflicts with what queer would like to be. The attempts to define something undefinable show us how radically we are cut off from it. Queer is an impossible position. We can redefine it with Lacan’s terminology where he distinguishes subject and object. The subject is radically cut off from the object, i.e., from the *jouissance* of his body. Psychoanalysis now defines its position in the failure of the identification of the subject with his body, while queer theory attempts to identify the subject with his body, i.e., its *jouissance*.

Symbolic Castration and the Logic of the Not-All

By choosing *not* to identify with the symbolically determined difference between man and woman, one tries to hide from castration. Here one has to distinguish between real, imaginary and symbolic castration. Real castration is something Lacan focuses on in his tenth seminar. It points to the fact that the body has its limits, with the penis as paradigm, in which it’s clear that men can’t enjoy without limit because the orgasm is at the same time typically its limit. Imaginary castration is stressed by Lacan in his fourth seminar. It is the classic neurotic fantasy about the father frustrating the child by taking away his object of *jouissance*. This is a fantasy in which neurotics often believe in order to avoid a primordial symbolic castration. The latter is the effect of the Symbolic: the subject ex-sists outside the Real. As a result, every discourse is ultimately a semblance. To understand the

discussion about queer we must remember that the Symbolic order with its castrating effect is already there, before the entrance of any subject. By refusing the phallic distinction between man and woman, it's this symbolic castration that is whisked away. "Not choosing is not losing," might be their hidden motto. Identifying with one signifier within a binary reasoning automatically means the impossibility of identifying with the opposite signifier. Identifying as a man means you're not a woman. This interpretation of queer now creates the illusion of mending the not-all. At least that is the hope. But for queer subjects, *jouissance* is just as unreachable as it is for others. The fact that they have to affirm over and over again that they are queer shows us that they are not that queer after all and that *jouissance* slips through their fingers as it does for everyone.

In this line of reasoning, queer does not indicate the presence of a perverse structure. Queer is just a signifier that can be used by every subject, whatever its structure: neurosis, psychosis or perversion. Identifying with the signifier queer doesn't say anything about the structure of the subject.

In a certain sense the discourse about queer is both the opposite of and the same as the scientific discourse. Whereas the scientific discourse believes fully in biological determinacy, the queer discourse stresses that everything is socially constructed. In both cases there is a tendency to a logic of the "all." The scientific discourse tends to put all belief in a biological cause, while the queer discourse tends to place their bet fully on cultural constructions. This leads queer theorists to invent concepts like "determined indeterminacy," to recover the deadlock in their theory. But just because everything is socially constructed doesn't mean that there are no real limits that the sexed subject must recognize. Both these discourses can't be maintained. Not all is biological, not all is socially constructed.

Clinical Illustration: The Case of Michel H.

To illustrate our line of reasoning and its implication for psychoanalytic practice, it is interesting to refer to one of Lacan's

lesser known case studies, the case of Michel H., a psychotic transsexual man. Michel H. is presented in the same period as his seminar on the *sinthome*, in a clinical presentation at which Lacan (1996[1976]) assisted. Michel H. would not have called himself queer, nor would Lacan have done so, but we introduce this case study because it is clear that Michel H. is at odds with himself at the point of sexual identity and object choice, and because his solution is not a typical one.

Michel H. tells Lacan that from infancy he has been jealous of his sisters. He would have liked to have been in their shoes, or even more particularly, their clothes. Secretly he dressed up as a woman, and upon Lacan's questioning, he clarifies that the accent is on the underwear. "Having clothes on my body, gives me pleasure. Not a sexual pleasure, but a pleasure at the level of the heart, for my inner self" (313). He stresses that he has the character of a woman and enumerates some stereotypical characteristics, like "I am soft" and so on. According to his own account, he has botched up his school time, because he always had to think about "that problem there." Once he tried to castrate himself literally with a rusty knife, but he didn't dare to. "After all," he says, "I didn't have such a bad infancy because I could dress up secretly" (313).

On his sexual relations with men or women, he says he couldn't feel like a woman in the arms of a man, nor could he feel like a man in the arms of a woman. Finally he had to conclude that he didn't feel attracted to men or women. He describes sexual acts as pleasures he cannot refuse. Once he is driven into the arms of a woman, he gets in a spiral he can't get out of anymore and he must go on. It's a point of no return for him. "You don't get out of it anymore. I had to do it" (329). When asked by Lacan who primed this spiral, he answers: "both," but then he thinks for a moment and answers that she might be the one who started it. We can see illustrated here how in his sexual relations the initiative comes from the Other. It's the Other who starts an act that is experienced by the subject as pressing and difficult to stop. An intervention of the analyst could be at this point to say that he doesn't have to comply with the demand of

the Other. At first sight one could see a similarity here between psychoanalysis and queer theory. Queer theory is saying that subjects do not need to organize their sexuality around the demand of a contingent, socio-historical construction of sexuality by foregrounding different ways sexuality has been or could be conceived. The point we must stress here is that this intervention doesn't aim arbitrarily at a social construction, but at the *jouissance* of the Other. For this psychotic subject the *jouissance* of the Other is traumatic, and the intervention aims at emptying out the *jouissance* of the Other.

Masturbating is something he doesn't do in a typical male manner, but rather in a female way. He can only come to a climax by keeping his hand between his thighs and pushing on his penis. Twice in his life he tried to masturbate in a male way, but this had hurt him too much. For the same reason he doesn't slide the prepuce backwards. In this phenomenon we can see that there is no libidinal investment in the organ, but rather there is a radical foreclosure of the phallic function. Hence, *jouissance* remains all around the body, and is not regulated by its openings.

"I never felt as a male [...] I only live to be able to be a woman, I'm not interested in anything else" (317, 331). To be able to feel more like a woman, he takes all kinds of drugs. Being slightly doped helps him to better feel his character. "I forgot everything, except that I was a woman" (325).

His attempts to create a sexual identity are very unstable. The only options that remain after many years are an operation or suicide. He is quite radical in this. If he cannot become a woman, he chooses to stop his life. Earlier he had actually tried to commit suicide, and at the time of his interview with Lacan, he had stopped almost all social interaction. Because people jeered at him too much, he didn't come out anymore. Once he stayed in his room for a week, and as a consequence he didn't eat, even though there was a store nearby. One day, dressed as woman, he smashed a mirror to pieces.

Lacan seems to be pessimistic about a psychoanalytic treatment for this man, but that doesn't mean one can't do anything.

The analyst might function as a guarantor for castration, as a guarantee for what Lacan calls the “*pas-tout*,” the “not-all.” In this case, one can confirm that the body and gender identity is problematic for everyone, and that an operation will not solve everything, let alone provide a final solution. Other, less radical solutions might be invented, even though one doesn’t think about them immediately. The expectation that a surgical treatment at the level of the real of the body can solve everything is very pernicious for the subject. If this expectation is not fulfilled after the operation, nothing remains. An analyst shall therefore never subscribe to this hope, but places himself at the side of the “*pas-tout*” to help the subject to find other solutions, without the certainty or the finality.

Conclusion

What is really queer, is *jouissance*. In the last resort the whole discussion about gender and queer is nothing but a defense against the queerness of *jouissance* and the contingencies of life. Beyond gender and queer, a much more difficult problem hides. Lacan’s differentiation between the other *jouissance* and phallic *jouissance* permits us to rethink the classic mind/body deadlock in a larger topological structure. There is no binary opposition between body and soul, between being and Other, between man and woman, between phallic *jouissance* and the other *jouissance*. In each case there is a gap between the two that causes a further evolution to yet another binary, in which one of the terms tries to regain the other but never succeeds because of a structural incompatibility, thus forcing this attempt towards yet another level.

In this way, the gap between being and signifier is reproduced in the gap between woman and man. In our opinion, what we have here is the complete elaboration of the ontological structure announced by Lacan in 1949 in his paper on the mirror stage. Human beings are always divided between something that they are not or do not have, and something that they will never be or never have. The Lacanian subject lacks all substance

and its supposedly underlying “being” is always lost at the very moment it is supposed to appear. That is why it is condemned to a structurally-determined form of never-being-there. Hence the paradoxical fact that the essence of the Lacanian subject comes down to its lacking any kind of essence whatever, and that the whole accent has to be put on its divided character.

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