

Jouissance

Jouissance, or enjoyment, does not equate simply to pleasure. In the Freudian sense, enjoyment is located beyond the pleasure principle. In his clinical practice, Freud had already observed incidents of self-harm and the strange compulsion in certain patients to keep revisiting the very experiences that were so disturbing and traumatic for them. This paradoxical phenomenon of deriving a kind of satisfaction through suffering, or pleasure through pain is what Lacan designates as jouissance. If pleasure functions in terms of balance, achieving discrete objectives and so on, enjoyment is destabilizing and tends towards excess. Enjoyment can be characterized as a kind of existential electricity that not only animates the subject but which also threatens to destroy him/her. In this regard, enjoyment is always both before and beyond the symbolic field; it drives the symbolic but can never be fully captured by it. If the body of Frankenstein's monster is the intelligible symbolic structure, then lightning is the raw substance of enjoyment that reflects the primordial character of human drives and obsessions.

According to Lacan, Jouissance has a Real status and is the only 'substance' recognized in psychoanalysis. Indeed, a central goal of psychoanalysis is not so much to bring to light the 'guilt' of the analysand but rather to get at his/her 'perverse enjoyment' (Lacan, 1992: 4-5): the excessive forms of investment in guilt that are themselves symptomatic of a particular mode of jouissance rooted in the Real. This is why Lacan characterizes the superego – the inherent agency of guilt that constantly recycles feelings of inadequacy and makes impossible demands of the subject – in terms of a primary injunction: namely, enjoy! (Lacan, 1999: 3)

Although jouissance is viewed as a (non-discursive) 'substance', it is not one that possesses any independence or positivity of its own. Jouissance is something that can only be signposted in relation to a limit imposed by the pleasure principle (Lacan, 2007: 46). It emerges as a beyond *in relation* to this limit – as that which marks the domain of forbidden and/or obscene excesses. To approach this from a different angle, jouissance is produced as the excess of repression; without the repression, there can be no jouissance (Žižek, 2012: 308). This is why jouissance cannot be directly targeted or apprehended (despite the ambition of the 'politics of enjoyment' and its

various incarnations). At the same time, it cannot be directly eliminated. Jouissance is something that always sticks to the subject.

David Fincher's *Seven* is illustrative of the dynamics of jouissance. Two detectives, Mills and Somerset, set out to investigate a series of brutal murders committed as a 'sermon' on the seven deadly sins by John Doe. Doe's victims are chosen on the grounds that they embody a particular sinful excess and are subsequently dispatched in an elaborate sadistic manner. He seeks to punish-execute his victims not because of any legal transgression but because they do not conform to the imaginary unity, the homeostatic ego-ideal, of a God-fearing community. Here we might say that Doe becomes a superego manifestation who acts beyond the law on behalf of the law; filling in for its failures (something similar could be said about *Batman* and the various super(ego)-heroes).

There are two especially perceptive insights in this film. The first concerns the intrinsic character of jouissance: the more Doe renounces earthly pleasures in pursuit of his cause, the more his enjoyment-in-renunciation is revealed. What Doe attempts to conceal is precisely the surplus enjoyment he takes in personal sacrifice and in stoically carrying out his duty. His enjoyment is not so much an immediate gratification in violence, but rather an obscene satisfaction in carrying out complicated and ritualized killings/torture as part of a divine mission, as an instrument of the Other's will (in this case, God). Doe is a classic pervert who tries to hide his enjoyment behind his perceived ethical obligation. Put in other terms, he expresses the classic ideological alibi: 'I was not there as a being of enjoyment but as a functionary of duty'. This also reflects Žižek's point against Hannah Arendt and her conclusion regarding the routinized nature of the extermination of Jews as a 'banality of evil' (Arendt, 1963). That is to say, what Arendt misses is the way in which the bureaucratization itself became 'a source of an additional *jouissance*' (Žižek, 1997: 55); the obscene satisfaction gained from carrying out the daily torture and humiliations in the guise of Kantian sense of impersonal duty as an instrument of the Other's will (the law/state/universal mission etc.). The essence of the matter is not so much the 'banality of evil', but rather the evil/excessive jouissance contained and nurtured within the banality itself.

The second concerns the way in which Doe inscribes himself into his 'sermon'. At the denouement of the film, Mills learns of his wife's murder (her decapitated head is delivered in a package) and is consequently seized by the sin of wrath: he 'over-kills' Doe in an act of desperate rage. Prior to this, Doe confesses to a powerful envy of Mills and his married life. By declaring (and demonstrating) this excess, Doe stages his own execution and literally enjoys himself to death – thus completing the circle.

From a Lacanian perspective, what this reflects is the way in which jouissance functions in terms of its 'extimacy'. Extimacy is a hybrid word that combines the terms exteriority and intimacy. For Lacan it refers to 'something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me' (Lacan, 1992: 71). It is along these lines that Jacques-Alain Miller affirms that the hatred of the other's enjoyment is ultimately a hatred of our own enjoyment (Miller, 1985). The image of the other's enjoyment is so compelling precisely because it symbolizes the Lacanian 'in us more than ourselves'. In this sense, the other is always someone who gives body to the very excess of enjoyment that in our innermost being denies us homeostasis. What jouissance bears witness to is not the unbearable difference of the other but on the contrary, an unbearable *sameness* – i.e. the very fascination with (the projected sense of) the other's enjoyment draws the subject into too close a proximity with his/her own disturbing excesses.

In this context, we should read Doe's confession as fake. His real 'sin' is not envy but denial. What he denies is that his entire economy of righteous retribution is driven by enjoyment. His confession functions precisely as a way of sustaining this economy at a safe distance from any direct encounter with his traumatic excesses. By sacrificing himself, he is able to avoid any confrontation with his mode of private enjoyment – it is the opposite of what Lacan means by an act. We see a similar type of logic at play in the phenomenon of stalking. In their over-identification with their object of desire (often a celebrity), the stalker is drawn into an unbearable proximity with their excesses (the anxiety generated by their obsessional economy), which they then try to resolve through an act of severance – suicide, an assault on the target of their obsession etc.

Ideology derives its potency from its ability to manipulate economies of enjoyment. Through its repressive mechanisms, the social order relies upon a certain renunciation, or loss, of enjoyment. But as Lacan points out, this enjoyment is not something that was previously possessed; it is an epiphenomenal excess of social repression itself. Where ideology succeeds is in fantasmatically translating this sense of lost enjoyment into the theft of enjoyment (Miller, 1985). From a racist perspective, the immigrant is someone with perverse forms of excessive enjoyment (they are idlers living off ‘our’ state benefits *and* they work too hard, stealing ‘our’ jobs etc.) and who thereby steals and/or corrupts our enjoyment (our ‘way of life’). And thus what ‘we conceal by imputing to the Other the theft of enjoyment is the traumatic fact that we never possessed what was allegedly stolen from us’ (Žižek, 1993: 203).

At the same time, ideology ‘bribes’ the subject into accepting repression/renunciation by providing subliminal access to a surplus enjoyment – i.e. an extra enjoyment generated through the renunciation of enjoyment itself (Žižek, 2012: 308-309). What is manifest in fascism, for example, is the way in which the subject derives surplus enjoyment through acts of sacrifice (renouncing personal enjoyment) in the name of doing one’s duty to the Nation. With today’s (Western) ideology – basically a capitalist fatalism (‘the economy is what it is’) in support of private pleasures – the subject is bribed in a different way. Ideology no longer operates simply with a particular utopian vision or with definitive objectives. Contemporary ideology consists rather in assigning demands for change to the realm of ‘impossibility’ (as so much ‘ideological fantasy’). What ideology offers the subject is the fantasy of change (‘freedom of choice’, ‘opportunities’ etc.) precisely as a means of avoiding any real (or Real) change. Change is sustained as a fantasmatic abstraction in order to prevent (the fear of) any traumatic loss of enjoyment. We see this type of ideological operation in films like *Bruce Almighty* where the hero actually becomes God, capable of anything, but whose own world falls apart as a result - and so he returns to a more humble ‘mature’ existence.

One of the central lessons of psychoanalysis is that while enjoyment is experienced as Real it is ultimately an empty spectre, a kind of anamorphic effect generated through repression. Against its numerous ideological manipulations, we need to find ways of

accepting, and living with, this traumatic knowledge. Extemporizing on the old Marxist maxim: when it comes to jouissance, we have nothing to lose but the myth of loss itself.

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