

AFFECT, EMOTION, PASSION: THE LACANIAN APPROACH

AFETO, EMOÇÃO, PAIXÃO: A ABORDAGEM LACANIANA

AFFECTO, EMOCIÓN, PASIÓN: EL PUNTO DE VISTA LACANIANO

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RESUMO

Este artigo introduz a leitura lacaniana do conjunto de afirmações de Freud sobre o afeto, articulando-a à experiência clínica psicanalítica. Três fenômenos subjetivos são descritos e distinguidos: emoção, afeto e paixão. A abordagem fisiológica é posta de lado e a abordagem retórica é enfatizada. Finalmente, o autor descreve de que maneira as observações de Lacan, acentuando o ponto de vista ético sobre a paixão, vão além das regras morais da própria sociedade e trazem um tipo de reflexão sobre a ação e o que é um acontecimento subjetivo que pode ser verificado no campo da poesia.

Palavras-chave: Lacan; Freud; afeto; emoção; paixão.

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the Lacanian reading of Freud's statements on affect, relating it to the clinical psychoanalytic experience. Three subjective phenomena are described and distinguished: emotion, affect and passion. The physiological approach is set aside and the rhetorical one is emphasized. Finally, the author describes in which ways Lacan's remarks, that stress the ethical view over the passion, go further than the moral rules of one's society, and brings the kind of reflection on action and on what is a subjective event that can be approached through poetry.

Keywords: Lacan; Freud; affect; emotion; passion.

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Este trabalho teve apoio e financiamento do Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq).

RESUMEN

Este artículo introduce la lectura lacaniana de las declaraciones de Freud sobre el afecto, vinculándola con la experiencia clínica psicoanalítica. Tres fenómenos subjetivos se describen y se distinguen: emoción, afecto e pasión. El paradigma fisiológico se pone en segundo plano con relación a el nivel de la retórica. Finalmente, el autor destaca las observaciones de Lacan que enfatizan el punto de vista ético sobre una pasión, más allá de las respuestas y valores de la sociedad, como una reflexión sobre el tema de la acción que se verifica por ejemplo en el campo de la poesía.

Palabras clave: Lacan; Freud; afecto; emoción; pasión.

From man to mouse

When it comes to affect, our mental habits, as well as what happens with each event refractory to objectification, usually follow a fundamental split. We can take the phenomenon in continuity with something already known. What was strange and unfathomable becomes accessible, for now it is possible, by analogy, to define what struck us. Our affects, being found on the monkeys' poor cousins, for example, can now be addressed by comparison, examined, reproduced and measured, explored under laboratory conditions. Differences are established, but the emphasis is in the similarity.

The other way is that of rupture. This path eschews the idea that man is an animal with a little bit more intelligence or sophistication and therefore assumes a qualitative gap between them. It is not difficult to liken this second approach to the religious view, in which man is an animal plus an immortal soul, breaking with its biological nature, just as it is not hard to recognize on the first statement one of the fundamental postulates of experimental psychology and even of the spirit of our time (Ferry, 2009, p. 25; Lacan, 1954-1955, p. 97).

In this latter context, even when the reasons for what ails us are out of reach, it will always be possible, by analogy, to determine causes. We just need to refer its secrets to what, in front of the mirror, we put before us. This "ecological" approach of the feeling becomes irresistible when it combines with the assumption of a universal energy, because it opens a way for decisive action, its *quantification*. We can submit any phenomenon to a measurement process, since they take these implicit assumptions and establish, by convention, a parameter. Gathering the information generated by the responses of an elementary questionnaire we have on hands an "objective" measure of vital energy, then taken as an index

and used to define a world of things, from the effectiveness of a new antidepressant to the popularity of a TV show.

This is the procedure we must describe and put aside in order to understand the Freudian approach. As for the religious version of our humanity, Freud undoubtedly denies it, and explicitly compares religion to a collective obsessive neurosis. Would he share then the experimental postulates? Although placing psychoanalysis in the scientific field, having worked with eels and used a number of anatomical and neurological metaphors, Freud did not establish psychoanalysis based on analogies. He invented a psychic apparatus that has no anatomical or cerebral correspondent and located his unconscious not in any clear-cut place, but “between the organs” (Freud, 1900, p. 649).

Decentering and passion

There is a third way: humanism. It presumes a qualitative leap between ape and man, not necessarily linked to a divine origin. The Freudian rupture, though, isn't this, firstly because it does not derive from a previous conception of what man would be. Repeatedly Freud insisted on keeping psychoanalysis apart from any worldly vision and on bringing it close to a practice, despite of the idea that “Freud can explain it”.

Secondly – and this is by far the most important reason –, rupture in an analysis is not that between man and ape, but between a man and himself. We cannot reconcile with our own flock of identities and characteristics that forms us, for we all are, each one of us, breaking with our own nature.

What Lacan called “decentering” of the ego is how he construed what Freud named splitting (“*Ichspaltung*”) as a radical cleavage between the self and a moat, a “hiatus” (Lacan, 1963-1964, p. 167). The famous quotation by Freud “The ego is not master in its own house” (Freud, 1917, p. 178) is to be understood in a much more radical way than usual. It is not because somebody else is living in it, a hidden lodger, a little primitive man representing the unconscious or the id, but because in the house of the ego there is a black hole. It cannot be illuminated, however much one may try. Implying a strange and undefined presence, it is a haunted house. The whole question is what will be made of this ghost-presence.

The need for explanation, to find meaning for what is lived intensely, mobilizes us and may be the first and strongest movement. That is why all horror movie heroines, hearing strange sounds in the basement, go naively downstairs,

in the middle of a storm, armed only with a candle. The neurochemical explanations respond to a similar need. We forget that in so doing, despite of acquiring palpable knowledge about our emotions, we lose ourselves from this uncontrolled strange thing that dwells within us, the most human in us.

Emotion

What Freud defined in relation to the identification, Lacan's reading unfolds in several aspects. One of them is called by Lacan "specular" and defined as imaginary identification, as mimesis and reproduction (Freud, 1906, p. 325; Vieira, 2008, p. 158). Such aspect is the founder and specifies much of what composes and mobilizes us. This countered proximity is highlighted in what connects me with my best friend, but also with my enemy, as with the immense universe of what in our lives works by analogy and comparison. That's what brings our feelings close to the feelings of apes. That's what is at work in the analogies established by our experimental psychology.

In the enormous continent of the affects, of all feelings described in our dictionary, we shall nominate *emotions* the ones that better fit this kind of approach (Lacan, 1962-1963, p. 20). Pity and Fear will be taken by Lacan as paradigmatic emotions, those more typically based on imaginary identification (Lacan, 1959-1960, p. 297). They will be defined on an Aristotelian basis that has survived the centuries and established themselves as "fear for itself" and "fear for the other". In both cases, I suffer. In the first, because I glimpse a threat; in the second, because I see it coming over the other, on whom I have mercy. A close relationship is established between me and him, made of proximity by analogy.

More than just classifying such feelings, we are turning them into true paradigms. They are the feelings that translate better than any other the way we are affected by resemblance, by what is our own kind. That shall be the general name of what, of all things caused in us by others, is more related with which of them affects us by empathy or compassion – everything that starts on my neighbor is exhausted. Wouldn't other emotions be more obviously "in the mirror"? No doubt. Envy for sure; also jealousy, adding another one to this equation, since it needs at least three to be unleashed, even if despite of that it remains centered in the rival duality. However more marked by rivalry and violence these emotions tend to give into an aggressive act, and with that to the rupture of the imaginary axis. In envy, it's me or him, never both; in jealousy too. If I break through, however, over my double and miss the minimum distance that separates and unites us, the emotions cease.

The essential is that regarding emotion, the cause is obvious. It is right in front of us, being something or somebody; that's why Lacan defines fear and pity as affects arisen from the "world of goods", the sphere of daily exchanges and demands, space of comparison and accounting, of all exchanges and negotiations involving the "soup to nuts" of the everyday life.

Passion

Thus, not everything can be described as emotion, because not every single component of the feelings is related to images: there is *passion*. This distinction is essential and pointed out by Jacques-Alain Miller in his commentary on Lacanian ideas named *Lacanian Orientation* that we follow through this whole text (Miller, 1998, p. 37; and also Vieira, 2001, p. 160; Lacan, 1957-1958, p. 84; Lacan, 1957-1958; Lacan, 1972-1973).

Freud rarely uses the term *Leidenschaft*, so familiar to philosophy. Most probably for this reason, it was neglected, because the important thing was to highlight something that seemed very concrete and distant from philosophical speculations. Lacan, on the contrary, explicitly rehabilitates it and operates a dramatic turnaround in the reading of the Freudian indications about the affection.

He reserves for the term *passion* the dimension of feeling not saturated by knowledge. Passion keeps away the physiological considerations and their objectivations by quantification, as well as the analog comparison. In connection with our ghosts, it emphasizes the vague "something more" of existence, the larger engine of analytic treatment.

Let's take love, for example. When we love, we are always involved with what we conventionally decided to call emotion. When we approach love at the zero point of imaginary passion, as "love at first sight", it is this: an image that captures us. However, when it comes to love it is rarely enough, forcing us to ask: What is it that takes me beyond everything that I could have imagined? Hormones? My genetic background? The full moon? There must be something else, something extremely singular that gives passion its root, but also keeps itself a secret. The passion of love is defined, thus, as a movement supported by the plan of the visible, the plan of images and bodies, but that cannot be exhausted by them (Lacan, 1953-1954, p. 218). We can understand why passion takes us beyond the "world of goods" – differently from the emotions, since it aims at something different from common sense, different from the predetermined forms. The passion

lives with the violence of a “losing myself from me”, impossible to grasp with the emotion always triggered and maintained by a guiding image.

Getting lost from oneself is breaking with the images from which one recognizes oneself and is oriented in life, all that gives identity. On the top of this list we find the image of our own body, and passion shows itself capable of making us forget about it. To passion we reserve the title of the limitless role of affect that moves us beyond – for better or worse, indeed. It constrains, therefore, in its extreme, with *jouissance*, not any pleasure, but of a pleasure in its mortal aspects, that is as much an encounter as it is a loss. No wonder psychoanalysis has gained the world and keeps strong. It is because its work is conducted from beginning to end by passion. Not so much in the common sense meaning, the violent loss of self, but in the one it goes beyond.

Divine details

In *passion*, by definition, there is a fundamental blind spot in the heart of the Other which animates the fascinating picture it captures of us. These opaque elements are not pure abstractions, but “divine details”, an expression used by J. A. Miller from Paul Valéry (Miller, 2010). They are concrete particles of uniqueness, which are not composed with the fascinating *gestalt*, but are still there in the picture.

The analyst is taken in the transference, not because he bears this or that quality, but because he is the support of those still unknown elements of consciousness. The divine details of the beloved one establish connections with the mysteries of passion, seemingly more concentrated on the event than on the images and leading us to want to offer everything and more. Even what is unknown to me, in love, will belong to my beloved; where Lacan’s formula, “love is to give what you do not have” can be read as: love is a deposit, in the encounter with the beloved, of the secret of the divine details that find the deepest of life in us (Lacan, 1957-1958, p. 397).

The way they are put to work will cause an analysis to be without the fate of the passional dissolution. In this case, it is not only love that has such power, as hatred can also drive one to subjective dissolution, and beyond this Lacan adds to the same list *ignorance*, and with the subtle dance of these three meanings he defines *transference*. It is through these paradigmatic forms that passion reveals itself in psychoanalysis. Thus, since we cannot demonstrate it here, let us assume that they all have limitless roles compared to their relationship with

reality – the opaque particularity pointed out by Lacan as follow: “Love (...) always looks beyond the imaginary capture the being of the beloved one (...) [in a] particularity and in what this particularity may have of more opaque, more unthinkable” (Lacan, 1953-1954, p. 315 e 316; and also Vieira, 2001, p. 161 e 232; Miller, 2010).

For Freud, the divine details are neither purely divine nor details, but taken as representations (*Vorstellung*). In the field of what he calls representations, some will be included in the self, made into self-knowledge, in a subjective manner, others will not. The last ones, the waste in the sieve, are the most important in an analysis. They have a special value for our uniqueness, because they are the record of the times when we were something beyond the personality we learned to have (Freud, 1914, p. 259 and 244).

These signals, in the words of Freud, “represent” drives, obviously not in the way of a reproduction on a smaller scale, like a map reproduces a country. There is nothing here of mimesis. They are, following another Lacanian metaphor, as diplomats representing their country, having nothing in common with it, but inextricably linked to it. The signifiers represent drives in Lacan’s word, like the diplomats represent their country, without any relation or resemblance to it. Not just representation, but also the affect is defined by Freud as representative of the drive. The natural tendency is to approach both as a revival of the classic opposition between body and soul, as if they were two distinct essences taken to live together as a rider and their mount. From this perspective, affect would be the true representative of the drives, being so close to their animal power, while the representation, understood as the knowledge, would represent the pilot of the vessel, the abstract in man, his soul. Freud’s definition of affect as discharge seems to bring together the psychoanalytic metapsychology to this vision, in which instinct and affection would keep a relationship of representation, not as in the case of the signifier, in the manner of the diplomats, but rather as an identity of essences (Lacan, 1963-1964, p. 167, for the diplomats, p. 209; Vieira, 2001, p. 91).

The danger here is to take the Freudian unconscious as a recovery of the dualism body vs. soul that would reduce analysis to an ethereal treatment of the soul that left out its bodily base. The Freudian assembly is something else, far from the dualism. It locates outside of the discourse a driving force, which invests certain representations, privileged fragments of the historical environment of an existence, and goes stitching it on the body image, making the poor assembly that we call an individual. Those of this allotment who could not compose the whole, unconscious significant, will be kept especially “charged”

so as not to interact directly with the Other as those of consciousness do. In this structure – Freud is emphatic – the affection represents the drive only secondarily to the signifier, because it is located exclusively in consciousness. “It is the essence of a feeling to be noticed, to be known by consciousness”, says Freud (1915, p. 203-206).

Words and catharsis

The role given to passion in an analysis is specific. Not only because in such circumstance it is at the same time love, hatred and ignorance, nor for the fact that the analyst often forgoes using or involving his own emotions during analysis. As a matter of fact, it is because during one session one will never leave with nothing. This “something else” that defines passion is replaced by what Lacan defines as the *signifier*. A signifier is not the meaning that often follows it. It has links to the contents of knowledge, but in its materiality, has no meaning by itself, it is just a phonic mass. However, it has the power to inscribe its traits in flesh. It is not a meaning, but just a *trace*. It is the trail left behind during the encounters with the *Other*, or the tool used by the signifier one to trace its own cattle – using a metaphor of Lacan’s taste (1958, p. 636). It distinguishes and defines me, even without saying anything about myself. It is knowledge simply because it is a letter, one that can be read without properly making sense. In case it is read, it turns out to be a *knowledge-wisdom* universal, embodying, but it can rest in the state of *trace*, merely a *knowledge-guide* way over which it can be drained out of its senses. This “over” of life, echoing in the lyrics of the body, out of sense, lends more uniqueness to a scar than to a face, more truth to the description of an object than to its photo, or to the telling of a dream than to its images, more life in the signifiers than in the significant.

One psychoanalysis mobilizes *jouissance* and the unconscious signifiers and accomplishes, as Lacan says, the catharsis in a very peculiar way, defined as an alternative translation to the aristotelian *Katharsis*: not “purge” but *purification* – a word that cannot be taken as an improvement, but rather as decanting (Lacan, 1959-1960, p. 297). In fact, in one analysis, much of the meanings we have merge in fundamental scenes and sayings – decantation of small elements of libido, while significant and concentration points of *jouissance*. Manuel Bandeira can help us with the following poem, in which he presents, clearly, this kind of depuration and its cathartic effects (Bandeira, 1986, p. 142).

My Great Tenderness

My great tenderness
 For the dead birds
 For the little spiders.

My great tenderness
 For the women who once were beautiful girls
 And became ugly women;
 For the women who once were desirable
 And just turned it off.
 For the women who loved me
 And that I couldn't love back.

My great tenderness
 For the poems I couldn't realize.

My great tenderness
 For the beloved ones who aged without malice.

My great tenderness
 For the drops of dew
 the only ornament of a tomb.

The intense emotional effect of the poem is undeniable, but what and where would be the great tenderness? These little things, Bandeira's drops of dew, on the top of it, "produce" the poem, as well as the affection that the poem engenders. I believe we can keep the analogy of Bandeira's operation with the analytical process, if we keep in mind that an analysis will go so far in the direction of the uniqueness of the signifiers' fragments to the point of those having value only for who takes them with himself. Such and such, in the confines of the shared meaning, will not serve any poetic or artistic creation.

Therefore, it is a double-edged process: on one hand the excess becomes trace, while on the other what was converted in affect glitters. This is what Lacan refers to as purification – it goes alongside what happens in the sphere of narrative, when romance becomes haiku. It is the fragment of libido that returns to us when we are freed from the meaning; when the trace changes its use, its function, marking the beginning of a "this is what really is" instead of a "maybe it's

not exactly like this” (about Aristotle and the catharsis, see Freud, 1906, p. 325; Regnault, 2001, p. 79-90; and Lacan, 1959-1960, p. 374).

Moral and Ethics

By privileging the signifier over the meaning and passion over emotion, Lacan introduces ethics as a new tool for the analyst, related to affect. It is a word that must be handled with care, since nowadays everyone tends to disregard whatever cannot be approached by comparisons or quantitative methods and to take it as some kind of obscurantism.

Ethics and morale will not be used here as synonyms, just as Lacan starts his seventh seminary pointing out this distinction between them – stating that morale is the set of prescribed conducts accepted in a specific space and time, whereas ethics stands as a reflection over the action, without necessarily having a predetermined set of values. Distinguishing and privileging ethics over morale is sustained, if we follow Lacan, by the psychoanalytical experience itself, that is, in many senses, a “return to the meaning of the action” – as Lacan states –, a return to the meaning of what the *Other* did to ourselves and what we have done with it, thus creating a new relationship with our own actions (Lacan, 1959-1960, p. 10 e p. 374).

It is important to change the emphasis from everyday morale to ethics for another – and much more important – reason: an analysis always progresses by dealing with amoral components, “out of the moral realm”, as Lacan states. Morale is always inextricably related to consciousness, the realm of the *ego*, since it aims what seems to be the best for the individual within a collectivity, while an analysis deals at first with a “very large group of things that comprises the set of sexual desires” in its most secret details. It is the kind of thing that, according to Lacan, Aristotle describes as “literally, out of moral realm” or “within the realm of monstrous anomalies” (Lacan, 1959-1960, p. 14).

Monstrous? In Victorian times it was much easier to recognize this psychoanalytic extremism. Because everything that transcended the so-called normal boundaries of sexual behavior – matrimony and reproduction, to be clear – was demonized. Times have changed, but the Freudian radicalism remains present, since there is always something monstrous on each and every individual desire. It can be either insignificant or terrible, but on either case it will always be the things that do not fit for being incompatible with the *ego* and that, for this exact reason, disturbed consciousness, through the unconscious, like a parasite.

It wasn't really new to assume that we all have our private ghosts and demons. What is, in fact, revolutionary in Freudian analysis is that our monsters always live in the realm of sexuality. This is what Freud states when distinguishing reproduction – serving the interests of the species –, on one side, from *jouissance*, on the other – the moment when the individual has a satisfaction that resists the pressure of simply channeling the seeds of his kind, thus reclaiming a place and moment for his singular pleasure in the world (Freud, 1920, p. 219). During sex, lips, legs and hands are mixed, confusing themselves – there is no relationship, no “holding hands”. Sex is a realm of absolute difference, always carrying a taste for violence and death – it runs against the common rules, forcing the self to its own dissolution. Thus, we are always one *ego*, bound to interact joyfully with the world surrounding him, and at the same time one “thing” that carries the most intense vibrations, that tends to lead this *ego* to its ruin.

Poetry and “Well-Saying”

Now we must add what has been called so far as singularity to this monstrous drive that arises, during psychoanalysis, deeply attached to the violence of a desire. Ethics is the name of a way of dealing with these monsters that cannot be domesticated by analogies or numbers. Lacan bets that they can be placed in the center of action without commanding destruction. But how can one give place to such a peculiar desire, the Freudian drive, as a parameter of our actions, since it is completely amoral? And since it is outside the realm of the ego and logical discourse, how can one nominate the irrational as a guide without truly embracing mysticism?

Lacan, at the closure of his seminar on ethics, places desire at the center of psychoanalytic ethics – but only at the expense of this paradox. Ten years later, however, in “Television”, he finds a solution to drive away the paradox, leaving desire in second place and defining psychoanalysis as the ethics of “well-saying” (Lacan, 1974, p. 508-543; and Vieira, 2001, p. 199).

The ethics of well-saying is not *saying the good*, which would be impossible, for there is not a cure to the irreparable incapacity of language to say what's real. It is also not *saying well*, making a perfect speech as our ideal. It is *to say*, because nothing can stand above it: we are what we say. And it is *well*, because it is the “saying” that gives a place for the monsters of desire, called “objects a” by Lacan – our devils full of life, always insisting without truly consisting.

An analysis is not the discovery of personal eroticism, however specific it may be. It does not define practices involving objects of desire, but, according to Lacan, an erotology, an exploration of how our objects “*a*” coordinate the possible and impossible for our *jouissance*. They draw for each subject a corner of their own, where they invariably came across (and will come across) with the unspeakable surprise of the *jouissance*. Let’s read the “guinea pig”, also by Manuel Bandeira (1986, p. 208).

Guinea Pig

When I was six years old
I got a guinea pig.

What a heartache it gave me
For the little animal would only want to remain under the stove!

I would take it to the sitting room
To the most beautiful and clean places.
It didn’t like that: It would only want to be under the stove.
It would not care at all about any of my little tenderness acts...

— My little guinea pig was my first sweetheart.

The poem shows how dealing with the libido, as an object, can produce unimaginable effects, far from those observed when it is reduced to an undifferentiated energy charge. It was a monster turned into a pet that, nevertheless, retains its power of rupture, causing surprise. The “guinea pig” is the libido made into an object thanks to this nomination, locating a *jouissance* that is not only danger and excess, but eventually a partner presence, even if only under the stove.

The prowess of the poet is the ability to convey to the reader the monstrosity of his uniqueness and to make it a part of his life. It is a very different “inclusion” from the morality enforced in the cultural studies, for example, but it is still inclusion, that may be distinguished from the Freudian concept of sublimation. We cannot do it here; let’s just assume that Manuel Bandeira’s guinea pig does not constitute any alternative erotism, but can be a solution for the impossible cohabitation of pleasure and *jouissance*. Its operation makes an object “*a*” foothold a place in the Other and rearranges the field of the desire.

The articulation between ethics and passion guides us to address affect in psychoanalysis, in how to deal with this excess. It is not the same everyday, but neither is it less real. Lacan shows us how in an analysis one separates oneself from the idea that we must balance our energies, or that we can only go as far as our partner's freedom goes. In an analysis I walk away from the middle path, the path of the fair measure and wisdom that guides my actions in the city, and I allow myself to move where violence and passion set the rules.

What I did of what others made of me will be the guideline of the analytical course that extracts from this true epic its essential coordinates. In this way, modeled moral values of family and community eclipse; there will remain only those re-appropriated from the rewriting of a unique history. This rewrite is not knowledge, it is just a new script. That, however, includes the brands of our uniqueness, always uncomfortable.

Making them fit in the life one leads is the main requirement of the analytical device. No wisdom can be inferred from them, but it opens up the possibility of a new responsibility, because our lives will always be inhabited by an excess that will never cease to amaze, to provoke laughter and scandal and to demand that in every corner of life we be up to what excites us.

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Recebido em 14 de maio de 2019

Aceito para publicação em 17 de outubro de 2019