



Volume 3 | Issue 2: Thinking Sin
189-205 | ISSN: 2463-333X

Dossier

***Anthropie*: Beside the Pleasure Principle**

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1. Discourse: Structure, Subject, Object

According to Lacan the notion of discourse should both be associated with and distinguished from those of speech and language. By way of approximation, we could suggest that discourse lies in between the virtuality of language as a differential system of oppositions among signifiers and the actuality of speech as expressed by an individual subject. On the one hand, discourse is primarily a discourse without speech, or actual utterances, and their “thirst for meaning”.¹ It is supported and maintained by language as a virtual signifying structure fundamentally unconcerned with meaning. Yet, on the other hand, discourse cannot be reduced to the virtual signifying structure. In fact, speech lodges itself within discourse and not simply language tout-court. Discourse can thus overall be defined as a linguistic structure that “goes well beyond speech”, where speech “is always more or less occasional”.² However, at the same time, it is as a particular operation of language – which, for Lacan, is not the only possible outcome of the linguistic structure – that discourse “governs anything that at any given moment is capable of emerging as speech”.³

At its simplest, the linguistic structure amounts to a battery of signifiers (S2) that are as such articulated with one another and can be considered from the outset as a network paving the way for every kind of knowledge. As Lacan puts it, “we have no right, ever, to take [the signifying battery] as dispersed, as not already forming a network of what is called knowledge”.⁴ We should importantly specify that this basic signifying articulation is not an underlying essence but, following Deleuze who here well captures Lacan's *sui generis* structuralism, a combinatory system of signifiers, which taken individually have no form, signification, or content.⁵ We should also add that the battery of signifiers thus rests just on differential relations that both determine it and leave it as

such – as differential – undetermined with regard to its properties. Following Milner, structure is difference but, by the same token, “structure in general does not have any property”.⁶

What happens on the level of discourse – or, better, at its point of origin – is that the linguistic structure as the battery of signifiers (S2) is further articulated by the intervention of a so-called master signifier (S1). The master signifier, which is somehow external to the battery yet does not transcend it, intervenes on a signifier (any signifier) of the battery by representing for this signifier the subject as linguistically split (\$). Lacan argues that this operation, or representation, makes the linguistic structure revolve around “certain fundamental relations”, which render it more “stable”.⁷ Yet such a discursive stabilisation immediately turns out to be rather precarious. While through discourse language manages to lay the ground for the idea of wholeness, whereby structure could be totalised and difference transformed into sameness, it also concomitantly shows that “even in the world of discourse nothing is all [*tout*]” and that “all’ as such is self-refuting”.⁸ As Lacan explains in Seminar XVIII, discourse is therefore always a semblance.⁹

We should develop this pivotal point concerning the oscillation between discursive stabilisation and its inherent precariousness from three perspectives. First, it is only with discourse that *knowledge* in the strict sense of symbolic *savoir* emerges, that is, as distinct from both the proto-symbolic (and pre-subjective) networks it presupposes on the level of the virtual signifying structure and the imaginary knowledge (*connaissance*) it gives rise to on the level of the “thirst for meaning” and the idea of wholeness.¹⁰ The master signifier (S1) as the anchoring point of an otherwise purely differential linguistic structure ensures that, given the nature of structure where there are no autonomous signifiers, the split subject is not only represented for one of the signifiers of the battery but, by extension, for the battery itself. This consolidates structure especially if we consider that through the same process any signifier of the battery also represents the split subject for any other signifier in it.¹¹

Yet, for Lacan, the resulting discursive knowledge (the battery of signifiers in which the subject is being represented), which he also closely links with the so-called big Other, can never be a meta-language or ultimate Logos. Put simply, it cannot contain itself as a One-All. Discursive knowledge “unfolds of its own accord”.¹² It even actually speaks all by itself as the unconscious of the subject – and *this* is the empirical starting point of psychoanalysis. But it does *not* know itself. Or, which is the same, it does not know that *it* knows.

Second, it is only with discourse that the *subject* arises as distinguished from what Lacan calls the pre-subjective “living individual”,¹³ or human animal. In this sense, “there is something that becomes *present* by virtue of the fact that all determination of the subject, and therefore of thought, depends on discourse”.¹⁴ That is to say that the master signifier’s representation of the subject for the signifying battery as discursive knowledge succeeds in founding the subject as the “supposition” or “*hypokeimenon*” of that knowledge. The same operation in turn retroactively marks the living individual and its physiological predisposition for language as the material locus of the subject. In short, the virtual linguistic structure – however already transiently embodied in the human animal’s concrete utterances – now *exists* through the subject.

Yet, at the same time, it is precisely the subject's status of speaking being that confines him to being nothing more than an "effect of language",¹⁵ an interval or gap between the signifiers, whose emergence and disappearance eventually coincide. The subject's actual speech is fundamentally *spoken* by language. In other words, while the subject becomes the necessary and sufficient property of the linguistic structure – which, as a differentiability devoid of properties, does otherwise continuously run the risk of voiding itself – he is nonetheless just "externally included" in discourse as different from it.¹⁶

This very predicament initiates the subject's desire for a totally transparent knowledge (*connaissance*) that would know *itself*. The subject first projects this *connaissance* onto discursive knowledge as the supposed "place where everything that has happened, *that is known*"¹⁷ – in this sense, the big Other that symbolically knows *without* knowing itself is the place where imaginary knowledge is *illusorily* articulated as One. But, eventually, it is the subject as self-conscious ego and his allegedly self-sufficient speech that aims at becoming the "little master"¹⁸ of *connaissance*.

Third, it is only with discourse that *jouissance* as inextricable from language in general – from the linguistic structure as devoid of properties – is circumscribed as an *object*, the so-called object *a*. But the object *a* is never truly "nameable".¹⁹ As Deleuze puts it, we are here dealing with an "object = *x*" that as such "is always displaced in relation to itself", an empty square or zero.²⁰ In Lacan's not too dissimilar terms, the object *a* therefore constitutes the inevitable "loss" that effectively "comes out" [*sort*] of the trajectory of discourse as a linguistic operation.²¹

More to the point, on the one hand, the object *a* becomes the affective source and support of the linguistically split subject (\$). It stands as the object-cause of his desire – which as the desire for a knowledge that would know itself is always also a desire for a sexual knowledge that, by retrieving the object, would grant access to an absolute *jouissance* imagined as perfect satisfaction and happiness. Yet, on the other hand, the speaking subject that is being represented by a signifier for another signifier can in this way map himself onto the object *a* only as an elusive want-to-be [*manque-à-être*]. Indeed, the subject in turn represents his fleeting emergence as vanishing in the object *a* he posits as *lost*. He identifies with the missing object that thus causes him as nothing other than the desire to recuperate it. A semblance of subjective identity, which Lacan refers to as "fantasy", can therefore be paradoxically achieved only by staging the loss of a mythical identity that was never there to begin with. It is this *divided* identity – soon repressed since it reveals a structural non-autonomy – that lies at the basis of the subject's misrecognition of himself as a self-conscious ego that could master knowledge.

In other words, discourse does not simply "go around in circles" in a smooth way.²² Again, in spite of the fact that it stabilises the linguistic structure, discourse cannot be totalised, and this is more specifically exposed by the object *a* as the discursive production of a delimited loss. At the same time and for the same reason the object *a* also works as an exit that indicates the discursive apparatus's "point of insertion"²³ on the biological materiality of *Homo sapiens*.

2. *Jouissance* and the Entropy of the *Anthropos*

We now need to consider how this exit does not transgressively open onto a primordial field of perfect satisfaction – although discourse retrospectively creates this

structural mirage through the object *a* – but instead on an *already* entropic dimension of jouissance that is pre-discursive yet not pre-linguistic.

This highly speculative excursus into what, in Seminar XVII, Lacan names *anthropie*²⁴ – the entropy of the *anthropos* – is required if we want to correctly assess the significance of his notion of discourse for politics.²⁵ In fact we are told that, on a first level, psychoanalysis can and should contribute to politics insofar as every discourse necessarily amounts to a discourse of jouissance.²⁶ Different discourses are in the end different ways of dealing socially and politically with the constant of jouissance as a loss. But, on a second and more precise level, psychoanalysis is also and especially involved with politics because “the idea that knowledge can make a whole [*totalité*]”, which is “immanent to the political as such” (and exacerbated by a discourse that places knowledge in its dominant position), ultimately rests on nothing other than the imaginary idea of the body as grounded on a self-contained “good form of satisfaction”.²⁷

Let us summarise what we have acquired so far with regard to the notion of discourse:

- a) There is no discourse prior to the cleavage between the master signifier (S1) and the battery of signifiers (S2), which is thereby instituted as a knowledge that does not know itself.
- b) The subject (\$) as that which S1 represents for S2 amounts to an effect of the stabilisation of language into discourse, of which he constitutes an integral function.
- c) The object *a* – without which the subject’s appearance as \$ would coincide with his disappearance – should itself be seen as a concomitant discursive product that is both “essential” to discourse and “most opaque” to the extent that it circumscribes jouissance as supposedly lost.²⁸

Throughout his treatment of discourse in Seminar XVII, Lacan assumes that the relation between language and jouissance nonetheless *precedes* the emergence of discourse. On the one hand, jouissance always goes together with language. They are the two sides of the same coin. There is no language without jouissance and vice versa. Any conjecture about extra- or pre-linguistic jouissance remains as unwarranted as any inference on the origins of language. On the other hand, and for the same reason, there is *pre-discursive* jouissance precisely insofar as there is pre-discursive language. Psychoanalysis can venture into this territory thanks to the “gap” or “hole” of discourse provided by the object *a*.²⁹ Here Lacan also evokes a “jouissance of the body itself”.³⁰ This must not be confused with the discursively constructed and retroactive mirage of an absolute jouissance as a perfect corporeal self-satisfaction untainted by language, since it solely concerns the sheer impact that the as yet non-discursive signifying articulation has upon the organism of the human animal. As stated elsewhere in Seminar XVII, “it is well and truly as bound to the very origin of the signifier’s coming into play that it is possible to speak of jouissance” – an origin about which Lacan controversially vetoes any enquiry³¹ and of which the assured basic consequence is the inextricability of language and jouissance.³²

More to the point, the impact of signifiers on the body of *Homo sapiens* primarily involves that sexual reproduction and the preservation of the species is problematic and far from guaranteed. In short, language cannot straightforwardly represent sex, or, in Lacanian jargon, “there is no sexual relationship” as a representable ratio between the

two sexes – or also, sex remains meaningless. At bottom, *jouissance* thus amounts to a species-specific, that is, linguistic, kind of *enhanced entropy* revolving around the fortuitous biological maladjustment of the sexuality of a specific primate (*jouissance* “only comes into play by chance, an initial contingency, an accident”; “it is only through [an] effect of entropy, through [a] wasting, that *jouissance* acquires a status”³³). Or, from a simplified and more phenomenological perspective, the *jouissance* of the body itself corresponds to a basic psychosomatic “suffering” that characterises the sexuality of the human animal as the *absence* of the sexual relationship. This pre-discursive absence is sublated, but also maintained as such, through discourse thanks to convoluted symbolic detours (Freud’s Oedipus and castration complexes and Lacan’s formalisation of them as a “phallic function”). In other words, while object *a* is an affective-psychic construct that discursively delimits *jouissance* as a loss and thus as a potentially retrievable full presence, non-delimited *jouissance* was never at any stage a primordial libidinal Thing subsequently obliterated by language. Instead it should be understood as a random dispersive “irruption” or “falling”³⁴ that, running parallel to the contingency of language as such, complicated non-linguistic life as an already volatile homeostatic equilibrium.

Few commentators have dwelt on the manifest fact that long passages of Seminar XVII are devoted to an enlightening – albeit intricate and fragmentary – updating of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Here Lacan seems to be assuming that a careful consideration of the role of the object *a* in discourse in general, and of the different economies of *jouissance* instantiated socio-politically by particular discourses, cannot do without the meta-psychological framework of *anthropie*. Indeed, his main argument about the now hegemonic capitalist co-optation of science and of the bureaucratic “all-knowledge”³⁵ of the university discourse – that it somehow manages to pretend to stop the circulation of *jouissance* as entropic by means of the accumulation of surplus-value and the imposition of a “shameless” ideology of compulsory and homogenising fake happiness (the “myth” of “knowing how to live”)³⁶ – makes little or no sense if we leave aside these presuppositions.

3. Undeanness and the Death Drive

As early as his first two Seminars (1953–55) Lacan insists on the close link between life, entropy, and language in the context of what, for lack of a better word and following the materialist Darwinism of Stephen Jay Gould, we could call the “natural history” of the sexually disadapted animal. As I argued elsewhere,³⁷ Lacan moves from the Freudian assumption that life is a “blister” characterised by its aptitude for death, or better, a homeostatic “swelling” or “bubble” that at the same time has a tendency to disaggregate itself and reach an inorganic state.³⁸ However, against Freud’s positivist essentialism, for which this process nonetheless presupposes quanta of vital energy, or specifically of sexual libido, as a substratum, Lacan postulates that the phenomenon of life as an accidental emergence remains utterly impenetrable to us. All we can retroactively know about it is by means of metabolism, “the balance sheet, what goes in and what comes out”, whereby the accumulation, conservation, and consumption of energy can be posited only as a symbolic notion.³⁹

Given this framework, *non*-human life stands for nothing more than a precarious homeostat that in conserving energy nonetheless moves towards entropy, a progressive degradation or loss of energy. On a first level, any increase in excitation – however

needed to maintain an energetic balance – is associated by the organism with unpleasure and any return to homeostasis that removes excitation with pleasure (Freud's pleasure principle). But, on a second level, individual non-human forms of life are for the same reason in a more comprehensive sense always "already dead", or better undead, since the species – the replication of the homeostat – is "the only thing to be perpetuated" through them.⁴⁰ That is to say, the pleasure principle as aiming at the removal of excitation in order to sustain homeostasis (life) ultimately corresponds or at least is from the outset fully subsumed under a death *instinct* as entropy (Freud's "beyond the pleasure principle") – which will in turn be entirely unfolded with the extinction of the species at stake and the eventual disappearance of life as such but is already operative within the individual organism. Bluntly put, as soon as we dispose of presumed quanta of vital energy present in life as a substantial substratum, or Thing, *life is not really alive*, that is to say, there is an indifferentiation between life and death at the level of individual forms of life.⁴¹ As Jean Hyppolite has it in one of his brilliant interventions in Seminar I, "the animal is bound by death when he makes love, but he doesn't know anything about it".⁴²

Lacan's basic hypothesis here is that *human* life as sexually problematic contingently disrupts such a pattern and renders it even more paradoxical. In his work of the 1950s, the main focus in this regard is on the perturbed imaginary of the human animal. On the one hand, the non-human animal as undead would be hardwired to smoothly recognise the image of the body of another member of the same species as a whole form, or *Gestalt*, and the sexual partner would thus be sought and found as a "key" seeks and finds a "keyhole".⁴³ On the other, the human animal first and foremost libidinally identifies with its own specular image – which it also projects onto the counterpart – that is, it alienates itself into an ideal image of completeness that it cannot attain. According to Lacan, this state of affairs originates from an attempt to compensate for a biological "lack of adaptation"⁴⁴ of the organism of *Homo sapiens*, which he evolutionarily links with a prematurity of birth (our "foetalised traits"⁴⁵) and an ensuing libidinal prematurity subsequently retained as sexual neoteny. For our present purposes, the crucial point at stake is that the specular/ideal image the human animal narcissistically loves and (self-)aggressively vies with is also instituted as an "image of death".⁴⁶ This is the case precisely because the unattainable specular/ideal image – which as unattainable already marks our finitude – concomitantly offers an image of, so to speak, adapted homeostasis or equilibrium that in the end coincides with the always already dead life of animals. The animal's death instinct – the individual organism's utterly unselfish submission to the perpetuation of the life of the species – turns into the human animal's death *drive* as an insistent search for an unobtainable ideal of perfection mistakenly derived from what is actually nothing other than undeadness.

In other words, in his early Seminars Lacan already understands the field of human sexuality as both irreparably flawed and as such nonetheless sustained by a death drive that complicates the animal death instinct. More importantly, the gap that is produced by the evolutionarily contingent "deviation" of the human animal's relation to the species-specific *Gestalt* is both the place where "death makes itself felt"⁴⁷ imaginarily and the originating cause of symbolic repetition. In Seminar II, Lacan sketches an account of this oscillation in terms of entropy. In nature energy always tends in the direction of entropy as "an equalisation of levels of difference",⁴⁸ or, we may say, indifferentiation. If

left alone, the perturbed imaginary of *Homo sapiens* would immediately lead to a maximisation of entropy – or, in more colourful terms, the collective suicide of the species by means of a mutual extermination of its members carried out in the name of a quest for an imagined perfection. But insofar as the same predicament (the perturbed imaginary) gives rise to a symbolic order established by language as a field of knowledge, “to the extent that the information increases, the difference in levels becomes more differentiated”.⁴⁹ Now, if we take the symbolic order as the pseudo-environment of the human animal and its manipulations of nature, this very increase in information can be seen as itself inserted into the natural degradation of energy – that is, entropy as the equalisation of levels of energetic difference. In this way, it “will cause the general level of the energy to rise again”.⁵⁰

Lacan does not develop this daring argument any further. However, it seems to me unequivocal that what he has in mind at this stage is that the human death drive somehow *counterbalances* entropy, if not slows it down, thereby prolonging or at least entangling the always-already terminal trajectory of the animal death instinct. In other words, the death drive as the linguistically repetitive search for the animal undead imagined as perfection ends up resisting its own goal. As I suggested on other occasions,⁵¹ against doxastic readings, the death drive therefore primarily amounts to a conservation principle. It temporarily suspends the indiscernibility of animal life from the undead precisely by *turning (the potential maximisation of) entropy itself into a symbolically lived experience*.⁵² All this is paradigmatically evidenced by one of the most seminal empirical discoveries of the psychoanalytic clinic, the human-all-too-human compulsion to undergo or stage *unpleasurable* – that is, *anti-entropic* – situations again and again, and *thus* enjoy them. Outside psychoanalysis, it can also be intuitively grasped through the cross-cultural inclination to liken the pleasure of sexual orgasm to a “little death”. We do indeed know we are bound by death when we make love.

In his early Seminars, Lacan never loses sight of the fact that *Homo sapiens* nonetheless still remains an essentially self-destructive primate. The perturbed imaginary and the possibility of almost instantaneous extinction that goes with it always loom in the background. He is also well aware that the symbolic containment of entropy is itself inherently fragile. It does not simply ensue from language as such but necessitates intricate intersubjective “pacts” that regulate the death drive through the mutual recognition of desire – which he will conceptualise in the 1960s-’70s in terms of discourse. After all, the death drive as a conservation principle cannot but preserve itself at the same time as a *death* drive entwined with our distinctive aggressiveness aimed at obtaining an illusory ideal.

However, Lacan here fails to elucidate two crucial related issues. We can begin to unravel them through his later treatment of discursive *jouissance* and knowledge in Seminar XVII. To put it very simply, first, language is from the outset part of the human animal’s impasse and not only of its tentative solution. The biological-imaginary “primitive impotence”⁵³ of *Homo sapiens* should always be thought together with language *as* the absence of the sexual relationship. Second, the tentative solution provided by language also *as such* contributes to the problem. Language both enhances entropy, because of the absence of the sexual relationship as the impossibility of the effortless replication of the animal homeostat, and slows it down, thanks to the increasing differentiation of information as knowledge and its basic sedimentation in the death drive. But, in addition

to that, the very slowing down of entropy – the separation of linguistic life from animal undeadness – itself participates in if not enhances the initial enhancement of entropy.

In other words, there is a structural entropic feature of discourse itself that attempts to *totalise* knowledge – or differentiation – as ultimately a *sexual* knowledge of the sexual relationship that does not exist (where, again, such an absence as the original cause of the human enhancement of entropy also at the same time lies at the basis of knowledge as what slows it down). This sexual knowledge is meant to achieve the ideal perfection we imagine in the animal, which is actually nothing other than undeadness, and which, moreover, would in our case decree the extinction of the species, or maximisation of entropy. And yet, with another dialectical turn of the screw, the attempted totalisation of knowledge – epitomised by the capitalist-university capture of it and its contradictory brandishing of “happiness”⁵⁴ as an elimination of loss – is itself unviable. There is no meta-language and the enhancement of entropy (indifferentiation) through its slowing down (differentiation) concomitantly promotes a supplementary slowing down of entropy (further differentiation). Loosely following Marx, let us tentatively define this acephalic knowledge as a “general intellect” as yet unabsorbed by capital and identify it with a quintessential domain for thinking a *de*-totalising politics of incompleteness from this speculative perspective. Let us also bear in mind that, while the enhancement of entropy *through* knowledge *may* turn out to be truly irreversible, today, it first and foremost coalesces in a composite, widespread, and – only at first sight – oddly titillating *phantasmatic* scenario of nuclear holocaust, environmental point of no return, extinction-level pandemic, super-intelligent AI takeover, and so on.

4. Knowledge and *Plus-de-Jouir*

In Seminar XVII, Lacan cautiously suspends any final deliberation on the in-itself of the undeadness of non-human life and its sexuality (the key and keyhole scheme). After all, more agnostically, there could hypothetically exist a *jouissance* of the plant, or of the oyster and the beaver, as “perhaps infinitely painful”, although in all cases – “the oyster and the beaver are at the same level of the plant” – we will never know anything about this “formless” level of *jouissance* and we can speak of *jouissance* in the strict sense only with regard to the coming into play of language.⁵⁵

On the other hand, Lacan still firmly moves from the assumption that symbolically – that is, retroactively – life is a “bubble” waning “toward a return to the inanimate”.⁵⁶ In this context, linguistic life as the absence of the sexual relationship should first and foremost be thought of as a *jouissance* that is actually nothing other than “the loss of *sexual* *jouissance*”⁵⁷ – which is to say, an enhancement and potential maximisation of the entropy already characterising what appears to be, to the best of our knowledge, the smooth replication of the non-human homeostat. On this initial human level, “the path toward death is nothing other than what is called *jouissance*”.⁵⁸

Yet, at the same time and with the very same movement, a “primitive” relationship between *jouissance* as the absence of the sexual relationship and knowledge is already established.⁵⁹ Language goes together with the absence of the sexual relationship but, conversely, the absence of the sexual relationship cannot ever be separated from what we earlier referred to as proto-symbolic networks of knowledge, or an as yet pre-discursive signifying articulation. The human return to the inanimate always “implies knowledge”.⁶⁰ However, concomitantly, “knowledge is what makes [human] life stop at a

certain limit in the direction of *jouissance*” as the path toward death.⁶¹ Knowledge manages to achieve this to the extent that the primitive relationship between *jouissance* and knowledge can also stabilise itself into discourse as the “*representation* of the lack of *jouissance*”.⁶² In other words, *jouissance* as the purely entropic loss of sexual *jouissance* – *jouissance* as the absence of the sexual relationship – is represented as the “loss of the *object*”,⁶³ the object *a*, instituted as a discursive gap or hole.

We need to dwell on this dialectically complex but central issue. The key point about discourse as revolving around the lost object is that it turns primitive and purely entropic *jouissance* into what Lacan calls *plus-de-jouir*. Given the evident polysemy of this neologism we should avoid hastily translating it as “surplus” *jouissance*, which more often than not evokes something additional. First and foremost, through the object *a*, *jouissance* is instead given as a *jouissance* that is “no more” (*plus de*). Here the linguistic free fall of *jouissance* as the purely entropic absence of the sexual relationship is contained – yet not eliminated – as the *absence* of *jouissance*.⁶⁴ But by the very same token the absence of *jouissance* retroactively converts primitive and purely entropic *jouissance* into the ideal of an absolute *presence* that was *lost* and could be recuperated. We can thus understand *plus-de-jouir* as a surplus, or extra, in terms of a “more” (*plus de*) only in relation to this mythical albeit structural horizon. Or, alternatively, provided that the surplus or extra is thought of as nothing more than a *waste*, *plus-de-jouir* also denotes the really existing *jouissance* of the drive that is nonetheless actualised as a useless by-product of discursiveness in and through the very absence of *jouissance*; this waste product is the absence of *jouissance* as the actualisation of the lost *object*.

Lacan’s threefold *plus-de-jouir* as a discursive “no more” *jouissance*, “more” *jouissance*, and *jouissance* qua object-waste elaborates on the pleasure principle and its beyond – that is, the ultimate inclusion of pleasure as the removal of unpleasure into the death instinct – to the point of profoundly contesting the “Freudian fable”.⁶⁵ We could say that what really matters here, at least with regard to the speaking animal, happens *beside* the pleasure principle and its beyond. First, pre-discursive yet linguistic *jouissance* amounts to an unmediated suffering for the absence of the sexual relationship that precedes Freud’s dialectic of pleasure and unpleasure. In other words, such a suffering as an enhancement and potential maximisation of entropy cannot correspond to a non-human unpleasure as excitation (and thus an increase of energy), since in the absence of the sexual relationship there is no human homeostat on this level. Second, the suffering of primitive *jouissance* as language’s uncontrolled “falling” or dispersion can nonetheless be delimited discursively as an unpleasurable excitation (which slows down entropy) thanks to the staging of the loss of the object. Yet to the extent that this fabricated absence of *jouissance* concomitantly evokes and maintains the ideal of an absolute *jouissance* as perfect satisfaction – of a pleasure that would go beyond the removal of unpleasure, but which would actually amount to maximum entropy – it is not disposed of but *repeated* in the drive. The by now subjectivised human animal therefore concretely lives really existing *jouissance* as a contradictory *pleasure-in-pain*, which cannot just be reduced to Freud’s hypothesis of an all-encompassing “primary masochism”.

Undoubtedly, a certain homeostatic equilibrium emerges at this stage with regard to the human animal’s basic physiological functions, but the latter are in turn subsumed under *plus-de-jouir*. Even orgasm as a pleasurable discharge of unpleasurable excitation

is thoroughly overdetermined by the not-so-disagreeable quest for a partner, the enjoyable awkwardness of foreplay, and the doubts as to why one did not like it “that much” and as to whether it was really “worth” the effort or a useless waste of time.

Now, it is crucial to stress that such an economy of *plus-de-jouir* duly corresponds to an economy of knowledge. In Seminar XVII, Lacan indeed defines knowledge as “a means of jouissance”.⁶⁶ The absence of the sexual relationship is mitigated discursively thanks to the loss of the object as a containment of entropy. More precisely, unbound primitive – and already linguistic – jouissance turns into *plus-de-jouir* (as “no more” jouissance, “more” jouissance, and jouissance as an object-waste) *through* the emergence of a symbolic *savoir* (S2) for which the master signifier (S1) represents the subject as split (\$). That is to say, “the [object] *a*, as such, is strictly speaking what follows from the fact that, at its origin, knowledge is reduced to an articulation of signifiers. This knowledge is a means of jouissance. And, I repeat, when it is at work, what it produces is [circumscribed] entropy”.⁶⁷ Concomitantly, “there is not only the dimension of entropy in what takes place on the side of *plus-de-jouir*”, but also knowledge, and knowledge itself “implies an equivalence between this [circumscribed] entropy and information”.⁶⁸

Yet, again, inasmuch as there is an attempt to totalise information – information that as such increases differentiation – and eradicate the loss that structurally goes with it, the very slowing down of entropy carried out by discursive knowledge does also enhance entropy – or indifferentiation – discursively. The means of jouissance as a subjectivisation of entropy into symbolically lived experience are contradictorily also the means *towards* jouissance as the ideal of an absolute presence to be retrieved, which in point of fact would coincide with maximal entropy. In Lacan’s caustic formulation, it is precisely insofar as “we have ended up considering to be natural the mollycoddling that a society that is more or less orderly maintains us in” – and there is no society outside discourse⁶⁹ – that “everyone is *dying to know* what would happen if things went really bad”.⁷⁰

In other words, discourse does not only constantly “touch on” jouissance since it itself “originates” from a delimitation of unbound jouissance into *plus-de-jouir*⁷¹ – in this sense, really existing jouissance cannot but be a *jouis-sens*, an enjoy-meant. Discourse also “arouses [jouissance] again” (qua the purely entropic absence of the sexual relationship) to the extent that it endeavours to “return to this origin”, which it mistakes for a perfect satisfaction still achievable by means of absolute knowledge.⁷²

In Seminar XVII, Lacan is very clear on this pivotal point and on the fact that it must lie at the basis of any possible intervention of psychoanalysis in the field of politics (“the intrusion into the political can only be made by recognizing that the only discourse there is [...] is the discourse of jouissance”⁷³). On the one hand, the conservational circuit of the *drive* – which is far from necessarily conservative in a political sense, quite the contrary – repeats a return of jouissance in the guise of a loss of jouissance, or *plus-de-jouir*. Lacan contends that the reiteration of this flaw or failure is as such productive. As seen, it coincides with the production of information. More comprehensively, the repetition of the production of the loss of jouissance is at the same time what produces an increase of knowledge as an anti-entropic increase of levels of differentiation. But, on the other hand, this very “search for jouissance as repetition” also “goes against life” insofar as it encompasses a totalising – if not totalitarian – *desire* to “return to the

inanimate”, where the latter is confused with the full presence of an “ideal point”.⁷⁴ Throughout Seminar XVII, Lacan unequivocally presents the desire at stake as an indifferentiating desire to *know*, to know it *all*, and thus at bottom to know what would happen if things went really bad, as still manifestly witnessed by our current fascination with virological, ecological, and technological figures of the Apocalypse. Adopting the terminology of Seminar XX, we could also call it a desire to be One in order to absolutely enjoy through and in (sexual) knowledge, a desire which instead leads to maximal entropy. Lacan also graphically warns us that it does not take long for knowledge as a means of *jouissance* to turn a tickle – a vividly emblematic example of the pleasure-in-pain of *plus-de-jouir* – into a blaze of petrol: “Knowledge is also that. In principle, nobody wants to overuse it, and yet it’s tempting to”.⁷⁵

Notes

¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. R. Grigg (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), p. 15.

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵ See Gilles Deleuze, “How Do We Recognize Structuralism?”, in *Desert Islands and Other Texts*, ed. D. Lapoujade, trans. M. Taormina (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), p. 173.

⁶ Jean-Claude Milner, *Le périple structural. Figures et paradigme* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2008), p. 343. See also Lorenzo Chiesa, “Author, Subject, Structure: Lacan contra Foucault”, in *Lacan contra Foucault. Subjectivity, Sex and Politics*, eds. N. Bou Ali and R. Goel (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 71–72.

⁷ Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, p. 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54 (transl. modified)

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire. Livre XVIII. D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* (Paris: Seuil, 2007).

¹⁰ Clearly, we can distinguish these three levels only if we adopt a *genetic* approach to discourse.

¹¹ We can thus read the formula “a subject is that which is represented by a signifier for another signifier” in three increasingly broader ways: a) the master signifier (S1) represents the subject (\$) for a signifier in the battery of signifiers (S2); b) the master signifier represents the subject for the battery of signifiers; c) any signifier in the battery of signifiers represents the subject for any other signifier in the battery – and, by extension, for the battery itself as *anchored* by the master signifier.

¹² Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, p. 70.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 152 (my emphasis).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See Chiesa, “Author, Subject, Structure: Lacan contra Foucault”, pp. 71–73.

¹⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire. Livre XVI. D'un Autre à l'autre* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), p. 329.

¹⁸ Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, p. 30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

²⁰ G. Deleuze, “How Do We Recognize Structuralism?”, p. 185.

²¹ Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, p. 15 (transl. modified).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²⁵ Not to mention his more specific claim that “all-knowledge” [*tout-savoir*] as bureaucracy (*ibid.*, p. 31, transl. modified) constitutes today’s hegemonic power.

²⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 78.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 42–43.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 49.

³¹ See Lorenzo Chiesa, *The Not-Two. Logic and God in Lacan* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2016), p. xvi, p. 72, pp. 89ff, pp. 141-142, p. 154.

³² See Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, p. 177.

³³ Ibid., p. 50.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 31(transl. modified).

³⁶ Ibid., p. 82, p. 73, pp. 182-83, p. 190 (transl. modified).

³⁷ See especially, Lorenzo Chiesa, "The World of Desire: Lacan Between Psychoanalytic Theory and Evolutionary Biology", in *Filozofski Vestnik*, international edition (2009), pp. 83-112.

³⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II, The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. S. Tomaselli (New York: Norton, 1991), pp. 232-233.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 95. See also Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, p. 80: "Energy itself is nothing other than what is counted".

⁴⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I, Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. J. Forrester (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 121, p. 145.

⁴¹ Lacan's idea of undeadness could more intuitively be grasped in terms of the *anti*-zombie. What is at stake is not the living-dead but the dead-living, not the reanimation of a corpse but the terminal status of the body precisely in the very flourishing of its life. Or also, homeo-stasis is always-already just a specification of meta-stasis.

⁴² Ibid., p. 149.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 145.

⁴⁴ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II*, p. 169.

⁴⁵ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I*, p. 210.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 149.

⁴⁷ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II*, p. 210.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 305.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 83. For an introductory yet fascinating and cutting-edge treatment of entropy as "missing information", that is, information with a minus sign" in contemporary physics, see Carlo Rovelli, *Reality Is Not What It Seems* (London: Penguin, 2017), pp. 209-219.

⁵¹ See Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness. A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 143-147.

⁵² If you wish, we *live* our continuous dying.

⁵³ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I*, p. 140.

⁵⁴ Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, p. 73.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 77, p. 177.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 19 (my emphasis).

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 19.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

⁶¹ Ibid. (transl. modified).

⁶² Ibid. (my emphasis).

⁶³ Ibid. (my emphasis), p. 19.

⁶⁴ In the same context, Lacan does not fail to notice that in this sense *plus-de-jouir* needs to be associated with *frustration* and not "with forcing anything or committing any transgression" (ibid.).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ See *ibid.*, especially pp. 39-53.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 82 (transl. modified).

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 239.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp.176-177 (my emphasis).

⁷¹ See *ibid.*, p. 70.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72.