

*The Culture of Hypermodern Civilisation and Contemporary Symptoms*¹

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"*The Symbolic Order in the 21st Century: It ain't what it used to be...*". This is the title of the next WAP Congress, which will take place in 2012 in Buenos Aires.

For our conversation today, I would like to emphasise one aspect of this theme and I intend to discuss some clinical consequences of the symbolic order in the 21st century. I have chosen to present this conversation under the following title: "*The Culture of Hypermodern Civilisation and Contemporary Symptoms*".

At the 2004 WAP Congress in Comandatuba in Brazil, Jacques-Alain Miller presented "a fantasy", a very daring thesis about the structure of what he called the hypermodern discourse of civilisation, namely the civilisation of the 21st century. Our current civilisation could be characterised by the promotion of consumer objects. These objects are offered to the contemporary subject's satisfaction. In these consumer objects, in these gadgets, Lacan recognised the function of what he called the object little *a*, to which he gave the value of a surplus *jouissance*, or surplus satisfaction.

Nowadays, in our century, these objects command the subject's life. These objects have replaced the ideals that ordered the subject's life in the civilisation that Freud knew.

Jacques-Alain Miller recognised in the position of the object that imposes itself on the subject, where it is the object little *a* that commands the analysand-subject, a homology with the structure of the analytic discourse. In Comandatuba, Jacques-Alain Miller extended that homology to the point where we recognise that the structure of the discourse of hypermodern civilisation is the same as the structure of the analytical discourse. We will take this thesis to analyse the consequences of this mutation in the discourse of civilisation in contemporary symptoms.

1. Freud and Monogamous Marriage

Psychoanalysis was invented as a response to the discontents in civilisation. On that side, civilisation has the function of giving an answer to the sexual deadlock that characterises human beings. For the speaking being there is no programme written in advance that would allow him to know how to act at the level of sexuality. It is what Lacan formulated by saying 'there is no sexual relation' in the real for the being who speaks. The function of civilisation, at least traditionally, is to make the sexual relation exist. In Freud's time, to repress, to inhibit, to suppress *jouissance*, was needed to make the sexual relation exist.

Today, civilisation fulfils the superego's programme/agenda. It exercises repression, which has taken the form of education (or pedagogy), to which it adds a push to *jouissance* in which it celebrates the wedding of the modern couple of the subject and his gadgets. Hypermodern civilisation has substituted the traditional couple of man and woman with the couple of the subject and his object. We have here a metaphor of the sexed couple of man and woman through the a-sexed couple of subject and object. It is as if hypermodern civilisation had accepted the sexual deadlock and the non-existence of the sexual relation, and replaced it with the relation between the subject and the object of surplus *jouissance*.

a. A hundred years ago Freud wondered about the effects of civilised sexual morality

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on the modern nervous illness, in a paper published in 1908.

He imputed the increase of modern nervous illnesses with the damaging effects of prohibition induced or brought about by civilised sexual morality.

b. At the end of this text, Freud credits the limitations of sexual activity within the boundaries of monogamous marriage, with being the unique aetiological factor of modern nervous illness. The cultural standard, requiring that everyone has the same sexual behaviour, can only generate symptoms. Thus, the subject tries to escape from those symptoms by moving away from the moral precepts imposed on him, and ends up in perversion.

c. What does monogamous marriage consist in? Monogamy is a way to ape, to feign or to fake the sexual relation. Freud identified the factor that induces neurosis: it is the effort to make the sexual relation exist in monogamous marriage, with the sacrifice of *jouissance* that this implies.

d. Freud described a certain state of society, that of the second half of the 19th century, which he posed as being characterised by prohibition and by the bar it put on sexuality. He held, what he called civilised sexual morality responsible for the subject's inhibition in relation to drive satisfaction. The symptoms of the subject in so called Victorian civilisation, were the effects of the suppression of the necessarily varied forms of sexuality. Indeed, in human beings sexuality has no unity, it responds to the call of the partial figures of the drive, and at that level there is no sexual relation, which means, there is no relation of one sex with the other one. Civilised sexual morality devoted itself to defining a normal form of sexuality, which it localised in monogamous marriage between a man and a woman. So, we can understand in what sense the prohibition of sexuality is a condition for making the sexual relation exist. At the same time as morality was hunting down the forms of sexuality that did not respond to the standard model, they were considered as sexual deviances, immediately qualified as perversions, morally reprehensible and likely to be taken to court.

During the 19th century, an army of scientists, medical doctors, psychiatrists and educationalists, inspired by social reformers, dedicated themselves to chasing every form of sexuality previously considered abnormal. These different forms of sexuality, including the most innocent child masturbation, were the object of encyclopaedic inventories, to which the accounts that Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis left for us for instance, bear witness. This summary table led to a repressive apparatus, an educational, medical and judicial apparatus, to eradicate the sexual expressions that did not match the norm of monogamous marriage. Educational discipline, hygiene, and coercive treatments, as well as some time in prison, were all employed in this crusade against the drive. That passion, that zeal, that exhilaration in suppression, culminating in an obsession, in cruelty and sadism, leads us to think that civilised sexual morality was already a reaction formation. It was a reaction to an evolution that had started long before. It responded to a crack, a flaw between the subject and sex, which had not ceased to increase throughout the development of civilisation. The signs of that cruelty were still visible in English legislation, which, until not long ago, used to bring the practice of homosexuality between adults before court. In 1952, the great scientist Alan Turing, inventor of the computer, was sentenced by a court in Manchester for acts of homosexuality with an adult.

The decision was to force him to take female hormones in order to modify his sexual behaviour. Turing could not bear the radical change in his body induced by chemistry. He put an end to his life some time later, by ingesting an apple poisoned with cyanide. It was only in 1967 that homosexuality was actually decriminalised in the United Kingdom.

2. The Disoriented Subject of Hypermodern Civilisation

In a lecture given in 1967 Lacan emphasised the transformation that had affected sexuality in the last part of the 20th century. Sexuality had begun to be something more public. Nowadays it is flaunted as a sexuality out in the open. Lacan proposed an interpretation: the so-called sexual freedom of the contemporary subject conceals a defence. Making use of the ambiguity of the French language he wrote: "*ça visse sexuel*", where he makes visible the "*ça visse*", "it bolts", which bolts the contemporary subject to the modes of *jouissance* (enjoyment, satisfaction) that civilisation stipulates. There was a French movie called: "How I argued or my sexual life", "*Comment je me suis disputé ou ma vie sexuelle*" in whose title we could hear "*ma visse sexuel*", "my sexual bolt". More recently, a book entitled "The sexual life of Catherine M.", in French "*La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*", "*la visse' sexuelle de CM*", "The sexual bolting of C.M." has been the talk of the town. The author, a woman, managing editor of a famous art journal, gave a public description of her sexual practices.

The modern subject appears to be bolted or glued to his blogs, his SMS or his screen, where the non-encounter is negotiated and planned. It is not the impossible encounter, but the indifference to the encounter as the modern form of the sexual non-relation. Talking about it, sometimes doing it, but it having no consequences. What is at stake here is the avoidance of any kind of acid test, any confrontation with truth, in order to defend oneself against the fact that sexuality makes a hole in truth. The contemporary subject's indifference in his relation with sexuality can be understood as a defence against the void.

To the fiction of a sexual act of no importance, comparable to, let's say, drinking a glass of water, Lacan opposed the anxiety and the embarrassment that could arise at any point. Later on, he emphasised the burn mark of the sexual, by writing that «sexuality makes a hole in the real». Sexuality is like a bullet in the real. In saying this, Lacan makes us aware of the embarrassment generated by the sexual for the subject, who is confronted, not with prohibition, but with the real of the trauma of the encounter, and with the non-relation that it reveals in any case.

It is not the sexual function that is *repressed*, but the well-saying about sex, which is *impossible*. The real is the impossibility of the encounter, not with the object, but with the partner who could be the complement of the subject.

That curse upon sex, despite or because of the multiplication of relations, generates two specific affects in the contemporary subject with regards to his relation to sexuality: boredom and gloom in light of pornography that has become generalised.

3. The Rise of the Object to the Social Zenith

The promotion of the object that Lacan heralded in 1970 is a fact today. All you have to do is to go out on the streets of our modern cities and you will be confronted with the diversity and profusion of objects that the modern economy offers to the subject of our time. When one goes to one of these commercial centres where the sale areas expand over thousands of square feet, one becomes intoxicated with the abundance of products that human industry delivers to the market.

All these increasingly sophisticated objects are the result of human invention that proceeds from the advances of scientific knowledge and from technological progress. It happens before our very eyes. We witness the rise of industrial objects to the zenith of the social heaven. Henceforth, they are the stars in the sky that the modern subject turns to in order to read his destiny.

Some months ago, for example, the launching of a new device by a computer firm mobilised a lot of people to rush to purchase the new object, which was regarded as a revolution in the communication between the subject and the other.

4. Classes of Industrial Objects

In contrast to the society described by Freud, what are the characteristics of our present society that we qualify as hypermodern? Today's civilisation is at the same time obscene and puritan. In the current state of civilisation the development of the market predominates, that is to say, the dissemination of goods to the whole planet, and its expansion to all the spheres of human activity. The market oversteps all limits, it steps over geographic borders and crosses the barriers between public and private spheres. All this leads to the break up of traditional sexual morality, and is the end of the inhibitions and prohibitions previously exerted onto sexuality. The market ignores intimacy and decency, and in this sense, it is obscene.

The drive has become the preferred field for the expansionist ambitions of the market. The contemporary state of civilisation is characterised by the industrial production of objects offered to the drive's satisfaction, in a cycle of accelerated renovations and frenzied innovations. These objects, produced at a mass scale, point to the different registers of the drive. There are five of them:

1. Firstly, with regard to the oral drive, the food production industry floods the market with products that are supposed to stimulate and renew our eating. The result is a profound change of dietary behaviours, whose most notable sign is the constant increase in obesity in industrialised countries. But at the same time there is a reaction that rejects this push-to-eating, and which results in the mounting number of cases of anorexia. More generally, sales strategies that urge people to always buy more, try to capture the oral drive and to satisfy the voracity that characterises it.

2. The overabundance of objects offered on the market pushes to accumulation, in which the anal drive of storing finds its satisfaction. The increase in the number of brand names, the diversification of the models and the development of applications push to collecting and delude the anal drive, which lists the inventories of the signifier.

3. The production of images brings wealth to a thriving industry, which intends to capture the subject in front of their television screens, their computers, their cameras and now their smartphones. This industry of images offers them a visual display that is constantly renewed, in order to fascinate the scopic drive, yet never totally satisfying it.

4. There is also an industry of the voice, and a sound industry, whose products, by way of different technologies, attempt to satisfy the register of the invocatory drive.

5. Lastly, in an ultimate register, the pursuit of phallic satisfaction that could escape the risk of desire, giving birth to the pharmaceutical industry in detumescence.

5. **The Deadlocks in the Contemporary Mode of *Jouissance***

Nowadays, the industrial object regulates the contemporary subject's *jouissance*. It has become his compass in his relation to sexuality. Sex toys have become the canonical object of contemporary industry. All industrial objects are sex toys. The *jouissance* (enjoyment) prescribed by the industrial proliferation of objects of surplus *jouissance* has notable features that explain the deadlock of the subject in hypermodern civilisation. There are four features that define these new modalities of *jouissance*. Four 'A's, in French and in English.

1. It is an *Anonymous jouissance*, dominated by a mass produced object, which regulates a standard mode of *jouissance* prescribed by the injunctions of the market.
2. It is an *Autistic jouissance*, which ignores the relation with the partner and with another body, and glues the subject to the screen of his computer for a solitary satisfaction in front of a virtual image. This satisfaction, which ignores the relation with the other, exempts the subject from the embarrassments of desire and love, and sends him back to his profound loneliness.

3. It is an *Addictive jouissance*, which fixes the subject in a mode of satisfaction that is stereotypical and repetitive. The market ensures a constant feeding of that *jouissance* through continuous renewing of marketing, so that the subject cannot get rid of that satisfaction.

The word addiction, which was introduced in order to characterise drug consumption, has been extended to alcohol, and then to eating. Nowadays, it is used for any kind of consumption of the object. Thus, there exists shopping addiction or sex addiction. In some hospitals there are departments for computer addiction and recently in France, people were hospitalised for online games addiction.

4. It is an *A-sexual jouissance*, in the sense that it abstains from the encounter with the other sex. It ignores the encounter with the body of the other as differently sexed than the subject's.

That *jouissance* that isolates the subject and fixes him to a solitary and anonymous drive satisfaction, in the end leaves him deeply unsatisfied.

The standard object proposed by the market neither responds to desire nor to the demand for love, and ignores the singularity of drive *jouissance*. These are the reasons why the subject who is deluded with the market's object, feels a sensation of lack and of void, which keeps the hyper-consumption and repetition going, which in turn digs the lack and the hole ever deeper.

6. Characteristic Symptoms of our Time

This profound dissatisfaction generates a series of symptoms, which reveal the discontent of the contemporary subject as he is submitted to the market's injunction of *jouissance* and to its superegoic command: enjoy! (*Jouis!*)

The dominant symptom of our time is depression, which responds to the fading of desire, and the too much of satisfaction. The depressed subject is a subject who does not desire or who desires badly, or in another sense, it is a subject who does not enjoy or enjoys badly. In other cases, the overabundance of goods crushes the subject and makes him anxious. Then, stress and panic attacks are at the forefront. Here, it is the lack that is failing and makes the subject anxious. Addiction is the other major symptom, which indicates a fixation to this standardised *jouissance* that the market promotes.

Contemporary symptoms, depression, stress, panic attacks, addiction, and maybe two or three more like OCD, could be set into a small number of anonymous and standard categories. Such a symptom is never the proper and singular symptom of the subject. It depends on a classification defined by the Other.

Generally, this Other who defines a symptomatic category is constituted by a committee of scientists, getting together alongside the Other of science, the Other of medicine and the Other of the pharmaceutical industry.

But from then on, and more and more, it is the Other of administration who manages health, and establishes the definition of a symptom, because he is the one who takes the political and financial decision for the creation of treatment centres that will take charge of these symptoms.

The definitions of such symptoms respond to the same principles as those which regulate the production of objects of surplus *jouissance* of the market; that is to say, anonymity and standardisation, derived from a statistical and 'objective' description of the external manifestations of the symptom. Such a conception of the symptom reduces it to a mental or a cognitive disorder. Its treatment depends on procedures that are themselves standardised and anonymous.

The analytical orientation consists in reintroducing subjective singularity, in what Lacan called the object little *a*, into the conception of the symptom. Here, it is the task of the analyst to get back to the truth value of the symptom, and its signification of protest and the subjective assertion of desire and the drive.

Civilisation has always tried to control the drive. The traditional civilisation described by Freud, used prohibition to reduce the effects of the drive in society. Current hypermodern civilisation, dominated by the laws of the market, takes quite a different route. It intends to control the drive by way of deluding it with objects designed for its satisfaction. For all that, the suppressed dimension has not totally disappeared. Contemporary society has not abandoned the temptation to fight the drive by means of prohibition. These last years we have seen the expansion of the prohibition to smoke, in many countries. Other prohibitions are being designed to combat bad eating behaviour and other deviant behaviours, mainly of sexual character, which are the object of pursuit, with the aim of prevention, at schools and starting from the most tender age in childhood.

In our societies, we witness the expansion of hygienic, disciplinary and control measures, which are put under the master word of education or pedagogy. Nothing could escape an education that is omnipresent. The attempt to reduce this worrying expansion of contemporary symptoms, the epidemics of depression, bulimia or stress, is carried out through the good practice of education. The new masters, not so different from Sade's immoral teachers, promise us happiness, on the condition that we know how to obey the educational norms that they have prepared for us.

Alongside its tendency to the push-to-jouissance, our time also maintains a puritan side. With the 21st century, led by a demand for security, we have entered a surveillance society.

Hypermodern civilisation tries to domesticate the drive by means of two strategies:

1. By deluding it with surplus jouissance objects, to capture it in a deceptive satisfaction.
2. By fighting it with prohibition and penalty.

Psychoanalysis, at least in the Lacanian orientation, within the Schools of the WAP, takes up the challenge of civilisation. It proposes a modality of intervention in which the subject is welcomed not to be educated but to say the singular way that his relation to the sexual deadlock has taken, and to discover the symptomatic forms, which an authentic satisfaction can take for him, in which the Other has its place.