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# LADSO

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# LAI SU

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# Being a sign



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## SIGNS OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID LE BRETON \*

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Lic. Eugenia Destéfanis, Lic. Marco Alfieri, Mgter. Juan Pablo Duarte

Changing the body, taking ownership of it and equipping it with prostheses are some of the practices that David Le Breton approaches with the aim of analyzing the emergence of a new ideology. In the absence of projects capable of transforming the world, the illusion of changing one's own life found refuge in the body. Tattoos, body piercing, supplements and different forms of asceticism that regimes and generalized athletic practices pose, are some of the forms of marking the body. But the meaning of these practices is not reduced to the family matrix or the social configuration within which they are produced. For this reason, we consider that David Le Breton's approach to the body intersects the question on the notion of sign raised by Jacques Lacan in the last stage of its elaboration. If the sign operates as a last possibility of grappling between the real and the sense without appealing to the truth and its fictions, it is possible – and even necessary – to question its presence in today's world. The signs of the contemporary world are the syntagma that articulates the conversation with David Le Breton which we present below.

**Marking the body with signs seems to be a constant in the history of culture. Jacques Lacan put it at the end of the fifties in the seminar *Formations of the Unconscious* (1957-58 [2010]) in relation to the function that tattooing and circumcision fulfill within the framework of certain rituals, and even extended this consideration to the particular ways of marking the body present in fashion. So, how do we read these practices today? Is it the same phenomenon that crosses the different eras changing shape, or is it possible to establish some kind of cut between different moments?**

The origin of skin signs is linked to human condition, to the fact that human inscription in the world is connected to the symbolic dimension, that of meaning. It takes data from the environment, but also from the body, always transformed in one way or another. The main difference between traditional societies and ours lies in the fact that in the former, body marks incorporate the group, while in ours they tend more to individualize, to differentiate the individual. In traditional societies, the person is more or less diluted in the group, while in our societies the person becomes an individual, only authorizing himself, while in traditional societies the legacy of ancestors under the protection of the gods is essential.

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\* Professor of Sociology at the University of Strasbourg. Member of the University of Strasbourg Institute for Advanced Study (USAIAS)

**In the fifties, Lacan associated the notion of sign to desire. In this context, the mark refers to, commemorates or brings the access to what it calls a certain stage of desire and experiencing the castration this implies. Somehow, through the marks, the collective, the tradition, the world is inscribed in the body making it meaningful. But today we find the proliferation of tattooing, something that for many is an indication of the weakening of ideals and great stories that sustained the traditional symbolic order. So, what happens today about the sense of the marks imprinted in the body?**

At present, tattooing is invested as a sign of body embellishment, and it is no longer associated to marginalization (unless there is a deliberate will to show aggressive or obscene figures, which is much more rare nowadays). The metamorphosis of appearance is inscribed in the flesh once and for all, it contributes to the feeling of oneself. Today, tattooing becomes culture and not a temporary enthusiasm. This passion for tattooing is inscribed in a social environment where the body is perceived as an element of the construction of self. Perceived as incomplete and imperfect, the individual is devoted to taking it with his hands and “improving” it with his particular style. Tattooing is today a planetary phenomenon which does not stop gaining ground. In our contemporary societies, the skin moves waiting to make a presence in the world, in a society where the appearance, the need for the look prevails. A surface of bond inscription, it encloses the subject in a lively way, because it is also openness, a place of passage of the sense in the relation with the world. A screen on which a dreamed identity is projected, resorting to the innumerable ways of staging of the appearance that govern our societies, roots the feeling of oneself in a flesh that individualizes. The assignment to identity, which an intangible body would like, is erased before the skin sign that reformulates existence in a more or less sensible manner, depending on the circumstances and intentions of the individual. In the absence of great stories to find one’s way around existence, body marks eventually suggest small stories to exist as a subject despite of everything. And, in fact, our contemporaries are inexhaustible in their tattoos, as I have verified through several investigations. Experimentation replaces the old identities based on habit and identification. The feeling of self is then worked relentlessly by an actor whose body is the raw material of self-affirmation according to the environment of the moment, the first source of an identity that has become narrative.

**At a later phase of Lacan elaboration, the notion of sign begins to articulate to an order of experience that transcends the language structure and the order of the signifier. You have analyzed silence as a current way of accessing this order of experience for which language does not suffice. This topic questions us, since silence occupies a place in the experience of an analysis. Silence can have a meaning, can be related to the ineffable, and also to drive. But it can also be related to the knowledge an analyst is supposed to have, a position in which silence would fulfill an operative function. How do you understand silence in our current social context?**

Resorting to silence makes the analyst more willing to listen a patient’s word, following the meanders of his march through the unconscious. The analyst silence is neither mutism nor emptiness, since his presence does not cease to contain the meanings that the patient provides. It is not about the analyst not making noise, but remaining silent, that is, witnessing an active silent, loaded with a tension that keeps the patient in a state of alert. The analyst may speak, but chooses to abstain in order to hear better and to make his word sound more when he takes it. Freud recommends the analyst unconscious be implanted on that of his patient through a “floating” attention, avoiding too rigid a fixation on the word enunciated, for fear of influencing too personally in the development of the cure. In analysis, even when the patient is silent he

speaks through his posture, his gestures, his mimics without being aware of it. The silenced voice is overflowing with the loquacity of the body. To me, silence is always an equivalent of a word, of a presence. In the cure, it is not a gap of meaning, it is full of an active presence, an openness to the other, it is an availability to meaning. Silence is not only a resistance, a way of avoiding, a negative value to be overcome or a symptom to be dismissed, the cure does not develop only through the sovereignty of the word enunciated. Everything makes sense. In some patients, silence is a guarantee of the sovereignty of a necessary pace that protects the psychic economy of a patient who fears being pushed without profit or with the risk of losing his roots in the world. Faced with a precipitation that frightens him, because he does not know yet if he is sufficiently armed to advance, he opposes his moderation, which only unleashes the time and work of the unconscious under the protection of his analyst. Advancing at his own pace, the patient invokes his fear of collapse, and for him silence is also a tool, a pendulum for keeping his fear away of what he perceives in himself of abyss. The silence of the analyst or of the patient, does not have the same meaning throughout the development of the cure, and what is more, it depends on its inner resonance for one and the other.

**There is a historical event of resonance when it comes to thinking about that area of experience for which language is not enough. It was approached by Walter Benjamin from the experience of those who survived the World Wars. Silence, as the impossibility of narrating what happened, gave birth to the twentieth century, however, you see in silence a possibility of facing the noisy twenty first century. Could you expand on this idea?**

The tyranny of communication, typical of our societies, is an accusation of silent, just as it is an eradication of all interiority. It leaves no time for reflection or leisure because the duty of communication prevails. Thought demands patience, deliberation; communication is always done with urgency. It transforms the individual into an interface or removes him of the attributes that do not fully refer to his demands. It is a permanent interruption of the silence of life, its noise takes the place of old conversations. This endless word has no answer. It is not of the order of the conversation, rather, it occupies the ground without worrying about the answers, and thanks to the mobile phone it chases the individual and even evicts him from his most secret and intimate places. Although it is not necessarily a monologue, it sometimes tends to be a loquacious form of autism. The contemporary tragedy would be silence, a generalized blackout of computers and mobile phones, in short, a world free of the word of those closest to personal appreciation. Today, it would be the height of desolation. The contemporary world transforms man into a place of transit destined to gather an infinite message. To turn man upside down like a glove because he is totally present in himself on its surface. The signifying force of the word is discredited or vanishes in an endless talk of essentially phatic vocation, but which forgets the living world of those closest. I have just passed through a restaurant and saw a family behind the window. Both parents were hypnotized by their cell phones and the three children were totally abandoned, left to their fate. The technical proliferation of the word makes it inaudible, interchangeable, it disqualifies its message or demands particular attention in order to listen to it in the bustle that surrounds it or in the interference of the senses of our societies. The media dissolution of the world leads to a deafening noise, to a generalized equivalence of the banal and the horror that anesthetizes the senses and blinds the sensibilities. The hemorrhage of discourse is born from the impossible suture of silence. The communication, weaving endlessly with his threads in the meshes of the social fabric, is presented in the mode of saturation, it does not know how to be silent in order to be heard, it lacks the silence that would give it a weight, a strength. And the paradox of this endless flow is that it perceives silence as its sworn enemy: no blank on television or radio, for example, impossible to let a moment of silence pass by, there always reigns an uninterrupted flow of words or music so as to conjure up the threat of being finally heard,



impossible not to respond to SMS or e-mails. In communication, in the modern sense of the term, there is no longer room for silence, there is a coercion of word to make a throat of a flawless availability. We no longer need Big Brother. The unforgivable sin, in this context, is to be silent. The ideology of communication assimilates silence into emptiness, to an abyss in discourse, it does not understand that sometimes, it is the word that is the lagoon of the silence. Silence is the sworn enemy of communication, its mission land. Indeed, it implies privacy, meditation, a distance taken from the turbulence of things, the time of thought. The only silence of communication is that of the malfunction, breakdown, machine failure, of ceasing the transmission. It is ceasing a technicality more than the emergence of interiority. Silence today becomes an archaeological vestige, a remnant that has not yet been eradicated. Anachronistic in its manifestation, it produces discomfort, the immediate attempt to eliminate it as an intruder. But at the same time, it resounds as nostalgia. The drunkenness of the word makes rest enviable, jouissance of finally thinking the event and talking about it, taking time in the rhythm of a conversation that advances at a man's pace, finally stopping in the face of the other. And repressed as it was, silence then acquires an infinite value. Today, silence is one of the most acute forms of resistance to the symbolic violences of the world of obligatory communication and availability.

**In the class of 20 January, 1971, Lacan uttered the following phrase: “Underdevelopment is not archaic, it is produced, as everybody knows, by extension of capitalist power. I will say even more, we perceive and will perceive more and more, that underdevelopment is precisely the condition of capitalist progress.” Do you think it is possible to identify signs of this Lacanian prediction in today’s world? If so, how does this phenomenon influence the bodies?**

In a society where flexibility, urgency, speed, competition, effectiveness, availability, etc. are imposed, being oneself does not seem natural in so far as one has to adapt at all times to circumstances, assume one's autonomy, be available for one's company, family and friends. The value associated with meaning, with the symbolic is impoverished. Being oneself becomes difficult and demands and effort that never ends. Existence does not take place in evidence any longer, in fact, it is often a fatigue, a reason for falseness, the feeling that meaning is erased. The pleasure of living sometimes becomes difficult to sustain. Temptation to disappear from self responds to the feeling of saturation, of excessive plenitude experienced by the individual. The search for a relation compensated in others, it is a resistance to the imperatives of building an identity in the context of the individualism of our societies and above all, of the cynical neoliberalism that impregnates not only the economy but also social relations. Many of our contemporaries long for the pressure on their shoulders to be softened, for this effort that must be made constantly in order to continue being oneself with the passage of time and circumstances to be suspended, always up to the demands towards oneself and towards others. Disappearing from oneself is equivalent to freeing oneself from the identity restrictions which permanently impose assuming one's responsibilities towards one's family, business, friends, etc. without being able to catch one's breath. Sometimes depression, collapse, the burn out of the significant bond with others and with one's own life, break all narcissism, and the individual fails to cling to his body and is painfully carried away. A hard way of disappearing for a moment.

**It is possible to think that one of the consequences of this underdevelopment has to do with the decline of the symbolic and is linked to what, in the framework of psychoanalytic discussion, has been interpreted as an aversion to language. Do you think it is possible to find signs of this aversion to language in bodies or in fields such as art or politics?**

Indeed, we are in a world in which the symbolic dimension loses much of its power to connect people with each other. Meaning is always present, of course, it is inherent to human condition, but it is no longer connected, on the contrary it becomes individualized. The digital planet is, for example, an uncontrolled universe insofar as anyone can publish anything, which tragically feeds fake news. It is not a democratization of information that has been present in the plurality of the press or television channels for decades, but rather a flattening, the transformation of information into a mirror of itself, the concern to live in a world that strictly conforms to its ideas, without any verification being possible, a world without other. This virtual universe is favorable to ghosts, the least information is immediately disproved and always apt to feed the rumors of conspiracies. It is a world of the omnipotence of thought, where narcissism finds little limit of the other. In this respect, the Internet is not an instrument of knowledge but an instrument for consolidating the unformulated beliefs that presided over the consultation. Everyone finds what they were looking for and is proud to have been able to confirm their opinion despite the obstacles, even though few people share it around them. The growth of the Internet goes hand in hand with the decline of individual general culture and an amnesia of history. What matters now is not what happened, but what people think happened.