

ISSN: 2525-0965

# LADSO

REVISTA ANUAL DE LA MAESTRÍA EN TEORÍA PSICOANALÍTICA LACANIANA

# LAI SU

FOURTH ISSUE

# Being a sign



# A CROOKED CIGAR

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## ABSTRACT

The sign is tackled on the basis of different moments in Jacques Lacan's teaching, placing a referential field where passages and accurate punctuations are assigned regarding the significant, the sign, the letter and the cypher. Therefore a tour is proposed where the articulation of these concepts, linked to Jacques Lacan's last teaching, can be read attempting to clarify the different turns that the problem of the real and the sense imply.

## KEY WORDS

sign | cipher | signifier | jouissance | sense

*Undeciphered and alone, I know  
in the vague night I can be a bronze  
prayer or a saying in which is encoded  
the flavor of a life or of an evening  
or Chuang Tzu's dream, which you know already  
or an insignificant date or a parable  
or a great emperor, now a few syllables  
or the universe or your secret name  
or that enigma you investigated in vain  
for so long a time though all your days.  
I can be anything. Leave me in the dark.*

Signs, Jorge L. Borges, 1976

The incentive to write about two phrases by Lacan, one from 1973 and the other from 1976, last years of his life, and thus, of his teaching, forced me to swim in an open sea with many currents, some contradictory, as if in this last period the main courses through which his teaching traveled disappeared and we found ourselves in an ocean with some scattered islands, loose, not able to form a continent. Writing about this ocean is like letting out to build a small island so as to feel that we step on some "solid land".

The emergence of the knots and their manipulation during the sessions in his seminar (even with his back towards the attendance), the oracular character in some affirmations and the overwhelming use of neologisms, of word games, are some samples of the puzzle in which this last period becomes. I take Miller's[1] words to describe this moment:

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I seek. I seek because I can find no entrance in Lacan's very later teaching. I cannot find it or I find too many. It is a maze with many entrances, a maze that leads to the Minotaur, which must be fought with that same thing to which he is opposed and that inspires proposals which seem contradictory if we think about them with the common logic that we possess, even when this logic is from the previous Lacan. What I bring here is then, what I have saved after eliminating many unsuccessful attempts. (Miller, 2012, p. 131)

Two quotations at hand: the first one belongs to what is known as "Self-commentary", it refers to an intervention that Lacan gave in VI Congress of Freudian School of Paris on November 2nd, 1973 and in which he discusses "Introduction to the German Edition of the First Volume of *Écrits*" written a month before, on October 7th:

What I would want is that psychoanalysts knew that everything must take them to the solid support they have in the sign and that it is necessary not to forget that the symptom is a knot of signs. As the sign makes knots; (...) it is precisely because of the knots – as I many times tried to put on the dock in my seminar – are absolutely capital. (Lacan, 1973c, p. 17)

The second quote places us four years later, in his Seminar XXIV, in the class of May 10th, 1977 where he says: "Everything that is mental, in the end, is what I write with the name *sinthome*, that is to say, sign" (Lacan, 1976-77 [2006], p. 37).

Following the Millerian orientation:

I speak of the first Lacan, thus, of his first ten years of teaching from 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in the Unconscious'. And I also speak of the later Lacan, thus, of the one that begins to develop from the twentieth seminar, *Encore*. There is then, in between, a second Lacan, who starts with *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. But I will add a supplementary participation in this sort of repartition. In the later Lacan, we should distinguish the very later Lacan (...) this chapter IX of *The sinthome* seminar sets a turn, as he had formerly pointed out when he spoke about the VII class of the seminar *Encore*. (Miller, 2006-07, p. 56)

Therefore the "Self-commentary" quotation would correspond with the "later teaching", and the quote from Seminar XXIV, in turn, corresponds with the "very later teaching". Both quotations indicate the value, place and use of the concept of sign, to which Lacan goes back at this point, in short, to the articulation Lacan with Charles S. Peirce.

## BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SIGN IN LACAN'S TEACHING

The articulation Lacan with Peirce hasn't been greatly tackled - there have been some attempts of a complex use of abduction to make it equivalent to interpretation - though a thesis by Mariana Gómez, published as *From the signifier to the letter: Peircean semiotic in the formulation process of the Lacanian discourse* (2007), really stands out and will be one of the foundations of this paper.

The first explicit reference from Lacan to Peirce may be found in “On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis” (Lacan, 1958 [2008]), when he performs the analogy between the Jakobsonian shifter and Peirce’s symbol-index: “Roman Jakobson takes this term from Jespersen to designate those words from the code that only make sense because of the coordinates (attribution, dating, emission date) of the message. In reference to Peirce’s classification they are symbol-indexes” (Lacan, 1958 [2008], pp. 512-513).

It must not be forgotten that Lacan had already used the sign to place “it” which makes up the certainty at stake in psychosis, the small fundamental phenomenon, which the German school of psychiatry mentioned as self-reference and the French school as personal signification and which Lacan names delusional intuition. He illustrates it with a case of his own:

One of our psychotics narrates the strange world he entered a while ago. Everything has become a sign to him. Not only is he spied, observed, guarded, but he is spoken to, indicated, looked at (...). If he finds a red car on the street -a car is not a natural object- not by chance, will he say, it happened at that time. (Lacan, 1955-56 [1985], p. 19)

This sign can be read as a “signifier in the real” (Lacan, 1955-56 [1985], p. 187), a loose S1, which doesn’t chain or make a hole and which leaves no doubt that the subject is concerned by it. This subject will be named 11 years ahead as: “subject of jouissance” (Lacan, 1966 [2012], p. 233).

The other great reference (although implicit this time) to Peirce is found in the popular Lacanian formula “a subject is what a signifier represents to another signifier” as “this formula is produced from Peirce’s when he defines the sign as “something that represents something to someone” (Gómez, 2007, p. 64).

## WE FIND THE SMOKER

The motives, reasons and the use Lacan makes of the sign are mentioned several times since Seminar XX by J.-A. Miller. In the class of January 16th, 1973 Lacan bursts in and shakes the whole auditorium and us, his readers, giving a new reading of the famous example of fire: “Smoke can too be a sign of the smoker. Even more, it always is, by essence. There is no smoke but as a sign of the smoker. (...) it is sign of an effect (...) that is of the subject” (Lacan, 1972-73 [1995], p. 64). In this seminar Lacan explores the version of the sign that accounts for a subject en-corpse and which is now a smoker! I don’t think there is a stronger example of a smoker as opposed to the subject as lack-of-being. He goes from emphasizing the fugacity and evanescence (Lacan, 1964 [1995]) of the subject to highlight something that leaves no doubt: the smoke of the smoker. Here the sign points at, indicates the way to jouissance and funnily one remembers that at the beginning of this class in Seminar XX Lacan speaks of the sign articulating it to love: “(...) the jouissance of the Other, which I said to be symbolized by the body, is not a sign of its love” (Lacan, 1972-73, [1995], p. 51).

In *The Escape of Sense* (2012), Miller performs a reading of “Introduction to the German Edition of the First Volume of *Écrits*”. One of the points he highlights is that:

“Lacan substitutes the term signifier by the term sign as the sign is evidently made to have the effect of significance, whereas what Lacan wants to designate, on the contrary, is a symbolic term which has an effect of jouissance by excellence. And it is at that point when he says sign. He tries to use this term differently from the term signifier. The signifier is symbolic as long as it has the effect of significance and the sign, on the contrary, is that new symbolic that has by excellence the effect of jouissance.” (pp. 316-317)

It is observed that Lacan goes from the use of the sign to designate, point at a subject (but with different characteristics of the barred subject, lack-of-being): the red car, the shifter, Ulises[2], the smoker, to using the sign to refer to the symptom.

## THE CIPHER OF THE SYMPTOM

The presentation of 1973 entitled “Self-commentary” provides a special occasion to get a glimpse on how Lacan comments on Lacan. It is framed in a very particular year, as he begins with the “Epilogue” to Seminar XXI, written on January 1st, 1973, year in which he starts the publication of his seminars. In addition, throughout that year he produces other important texts such as: “L’Étourdit”, “Television”, “Introduction to the German Edition of the First Volume of *Écrits*” and, of course, Seminars XX and XXI.

During that year, in several opportunities he comments on the question of the sign, the important thing is, on the one hand his disagreement with the sense, and on the other hand his approach to the cipher:

The sign of the sign (...) is that any sign can perform, as well as its own, the function of any other sign, precisely because it can substitute it. Since the sign has no significance but because it has to be deciphered. Without a doubt the succession of signs needs to make sense through decipherment. (...) It can look higher in the structure cipher than counting. The tangle is then, exactly what that is made for. It begins with the ambiguity of the Word cipher. The cipher founds the order of the sign. (Lacan, 1973a [2012], pp. 579-580)

So, the cipher founds the order of the sign and the sign can perform the function of any other sign, the so called substitution operation (which doesn’t exactly work as a metaphor). In effect, we know a habitual way of enciphering when we have to create keys in banks or the internet. To simply cipher a message we substitute letter A with letter E and we get the Mefelde [3] key. It is a ciphered message, and in addition, a written one.

Let us remember that “the unconscious, he himself, performs that job of cipherment (...) The cipher, on the one hand, establishes the order of the sign but, on the other hand, the case is given in which the cipher works to write numbers” (Lacan, 1973c [1996], pp. 13-14) and later on he adds: “What is that cipherment for? (...) it is useless, it is not in the order of what is useful, it is in the order of *jouissance*” (Lacan, 1973c [1996], p. 17), let us emphasize *jouissance*.

Now, let’s take this fragment from “Self-commentary” (Lacan, 1973c [1996]): “the symptom is a knot of signs. As the sign makes knots”; and let’s put it together with what he wrote a few months before for “Television”: “what the symptom is made of, that is to say, a knot of signifiers” (Lacan, 1973b [2012], p. 542) What do we get? The minotaur!

Then, does the symptom consist of a knot of signs or signifiers? This question is not properly asked as it suggests that one statement is true and another one is false due to the disjunction at stake.

Perhaps this has to do with the fact that the symptom is made of signifier chains and also of signs. Miller solves it this way:

“In R.S.I. (...) he defines the symptom as a form of *jouissance* of the unconscious and more precisely, a form of *jouissance* of the S1 (...) a *jouissance* of the signifier. It is clear that this *jouissance* of the signifier moves the whole perspective. Therefore, at one time –and I



found it obscure— Lacan substituted the reflection he was making about the signifier with a reflection about the sign. Hence, he was able to oppose sense and sign, whereas our ABC was that the sign had taken a backseat to the signifier articulation. Thus, if Lacan spoke of sign—in “Television”, for example— the same place where he spoke of the signifier, it was because he was in search of a term in which the signifier was complemented by jouissance (...) What makes insignia[4] to a subject is his symptom” (Miller [1998], p. 253)..

To speak of the jouissance of the symptom in Lacan is not new, let us remember that in Seminar X he already said: “The symptom, in its nature, is jouissance, do not forget it, undercover jouissance, without a doubt, untergebliebene befriedigung, it does not need you as the acting out, it is self-sufficient” (Lacan, 1962-63 [2007], p. 139). But at this point in his teaching he does not emphasise the covering, the formal wrapping of the symptom, its bone.

With the sign the operation is a different one: finding a term that accounts for the signifier and jouissance simultaneously. This operation allows Lacan to put a stress on an element that doesn't articulate or mean anything, thus, Lacan plays with the misunderstanding of the cipher. The unconscious as a ciphering device but as a counting device as well: “But the sign in turn produces jouissance by the cipher that signifiers allow: it is what drives the mathematician to cipher, beyond jouissance-sense” (Lacan, 1973d [2012], p. 577).

The symptom is made from the use and game that Lacan makes of the misunderstanding of the cipher, whether it is to decipher or as a number which doesn't summon any decipherment.

### **FIRE IN THE WOODS: A SIGN OF THE REAL**

Some years ahead, in his “very later teaching”, that one which for Miller starts in the class of April 13th, 1976, in his Seminar XXIII and which begins as follows:

I invented what is written as the real. Naturally, it is not enough to write the real as something real. A few many have before I did. But I write this real with the form of the borromean knot, which is not a knot but a chain, which has certain properties. In the minimum way in which I traced this chain, at least three elements are needed. The real consists of naming one of these three real. (Lacan, 1975-76 [2006], p. 127)

The Lacanian invention of the real is one of the three elements of the chain, but Lacan also plays with writing this real with the borromean knot. He adds:

These three elements, knotted, as it is said, chained in fact, form a metaphor. It isn't but, of course, a metaphor of the chain. How is it possible that there is a metaphor of something that is just a number? This is why this metaphor is called the cipher. There are many ways to trace the ciphers. The simplest way is the one I designed with the unary feature. (Lacan, 1975-76 [2006], p. 128)

Once again the cipher!

The use of misunderstanding by Lacan at this time becomes one of the transmission[1] methods by excellence and, at the same time, the core of the interpretation operation.

Let us recall that Lacan had already observed that each “circle is certainly the most eminent representation of the One” (Lacan, 1972-73 [2006], p. 173). Let us notice that “(...) in spite of these ternary and quaternary constructions, what runs Lacan’s teaching until Seminar XXII is constantly binary. This is fundamental in relation to this binary, as the ternary R.S.I. is inscribed as innovation” (Miller, 2012, p. 288). When Miller deals with “very later teaching” later on he states that:

To Lacan, there clearly is a push towards unarism, a search - even through word games - of saying signifier and jouissance, sense and object a at the same time. In this line, I even come to think that Lacan’s later teaching is presented as three-fold, that is to say, it is sustained in the trio of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, which he had emphasized long ago but never had he portrayed as such and prioritized its manipulations: that is in fact to prepare his push to unarism. (Miller, 2011, pp. 279-280)

This is the explicitly Peircean moment in Lacan:

A so-called Charles Sander Peirce has built his own logic on this matter, which, due to the stress he makes on the relation, leads him to make three-fold logic. I follow exactly the same path, only that I call things by their name - symbolic, imaginary and real, in the good order. (Lacan, 1975-76 [2006], p. 119)

Thus, jumping from one small island to another in this voyage we get to the second quotation: “(...) everything that is mental, in the end, is what I write with the name *sinthome*, that is, sign” (Lacan, 1976-77 [2006], p. 37).

Lacan gives a second turn to the “smoke”, if I may call it this way, our solid land from the beginning. It is not only about the sign of a smoker anymore: “The sign is immediately captured the following way: if there is a fire, it is because somebody made it. Although later on one may realize that the jungle is on fire without there being a culprit.” (Lacan, 1975 [1988], p. 135).

Something happens. Besides the smoker ex-ists the ray, which introduces the real in the sign, which brings the sign even closer to the real, as absolute sign, with no relative value, outside the system, “something which means no other thing” (Brodsky, 1999, p. 23).

The *sinthome* isn’t deciphered but it is about the knowing-how-to-do there with the singular form of jouissance, the there is of the one as an answer to the “there isn’t sexual relationship”.

The day of his birthday, in that particularly remarkable class of Seminar XXIII which Miller brands for life in his reading of “very later teaching”, ends with Lacan reading several questions handed to him in writing. The smoker Lacan says: “I thank you for sending me your questions, leaving this one aside: –¿Is your crooked cigar a symptom of your real? Certainly. My crooked cigar has the closest relation to the question I brought up about the equally crooked straight line” (Lacan, 1975-76 [2006], p. 137).

## NOTES

[1] Within Lacanian orientation we find four big moments where Miller mentions the use of the sign in Lacan's teaching, fundamentally, in *Los signos del goce* (1998), *La fuga del sentido* (2012), *The Experience of the Real in Psychoanalysis* (2011) y *Todo el mundo es loco* (2015).

[2] In 1970, in "Radiophonie" Lacan through "parables, that is, to mislead" plays with the sign and Ulises. The smoke from the fire in the island is to designate someone, Ulises: "It is dubious that Ulises, however, provides the someone, if we take into account, that he is also no one (n'est personne). He is, in any case, person (personne) in that he deceives himself a fatuous polyphemia. But the evidence that it's not to make sign to Ulises that the smokers camp, invite us to a higher rigor with the principle of the sign." (Lacan, 1970, p. 21). Lacan points in this text to object a and to do this, he makes use of witty Ulises, whose name means no-one in Greek, to highlight that it is not about a someone, about a subject divided amongst signifiers, but that he makes use of the sign to point to jouissance regarding object a.

[3] It is necessary to mention that the inventor of computer sciences, Alan Turing, managed to decipher the German encryption code used in World War II.

[4] In French *ce qui fait insigne*, an expression with "numerous homophonic word games, can be translated as: what makes insignia, what makes sign, what one does, even signs, what a swan does" (Miller, 1986-87, p. 8)

[5] The title of Seminar XXIV represents the hight of this exercise. de este ejercicio.

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[a] Corresponde a cuatro clases del Seminario 24 L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue s'aile à mourre.

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