

Das Ding as object of melancholia

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Abstract: While Freud's account of melancholia stresses the role of a lost object, a Lacanian approach draws attention to the role of an intruding and excessive 'real' object and the inability of the psychotic subject to adequately shield themselves from the traumatic *jouissance* associated with it. While initially these approaches see to contradict one another, this short commentary argues that the loss of an imaginary (ego-supporting) object (as per Freud's conceptualization of psychosis) may be coterminous with the invasive presence of an object of a different order – that of the Lacanian *real*. We are able to better appreciate the particularity of this invasive object by reference to Lacan's notion – itself derived from Freud – of *das Ding*. *Das Ding* is that 'object' of amassed primal *jouissance* which – like a black hole - corresponds to its own absence, and which, in its terrifying and sublime materializations, brings together the three crucial Freudian concepts of libidinal over-proximity, unmodulated *jouissance*, and the death drive.

Keywords: *das Ding*, *jouissance*, melancholia, the object, psychosis.

In reading the responses to my paper 'Melancholic psychosis – a Lacanian approach', I was heartened to note that both respondents were in agreement with me that a Lacanian account of melancholic psychosis can be said to be compatible with Freud's original account (even though, as both respondents note, crucial and fascinating differences exist between these two conceptualizations). More crucially, both respondents were in agreement with me that the (real) object that comes traumatically *too close* in a Lacanian conceptualization of melancholic psychosis can in fact be seen as commensurable with the idea of *the loss* of an (imaginary/symbolic) object prioritized in Freud's account of melancholia. I tried to foreground this idea, albeit somewhat tentatively, in the original paper when I noted that "the loss of an imaginary (ego-supporting) object may....be coterminous with the invasive presence of an object of a different order – that of the Lacanian *real*".

While this conceptualization apparently runs counter to Russell Grigg's (2015) critique of Freud's model of melancholia, this idea that an object may simultaneously exist in two different forms, or more pertinently yet, at two different registers, is a familiar conceptual move within Lacanian theory. The fact that desire and lack are, in a sense, one and the same phenomena, just seen from different perspectives, is a case in point. The same holds within Lacanian social theory, where we encounter the idea that the master signifier is simultaneously the impossibility of saying everything *and* the elevated signifier that appears to embody all that is of value ('God', 'home', 'love', 'America'). Hence the idea that the master signifier enables - as Dolar (1999) memorably puts it - a *positivization of the void*.

We know from Freudian theory that the phallus is forever shadowed by its potential loss - such is the lesson of castration anxiety. Lacan's relatively late theoretical innovation, the idea of *object petit a*, relies on a similar reversal of substance and absence wherein the most crucial psychical component of the 'object' in question is its own absence. Indeed, the *object petit a*

can be understood as the *convexity* of the subject's lack, as the correspondence of an object with its own *consummating* inexistence.

Perhaps the most powerful example of an object that is one and the same as its own absence is Lacan's notion (offered in his Seminar VII, and derived from Freud) of '*das Ding*' (aptly, 'the Thing'). Once again, we have a type of paradoxical absence. In describing the notion of *das Ding*, Lacan draws on Heidegger, for whom, famously, the hallowness of a vase defines its function. "If the vase may be filled", says Lacan (1992), "it is because...in its essence it is empty" (p. 120) *Das Ding* is not an object so much as such a voracious absence, a kind of swallowing abyss - a roaring void, as we might put it - which makes certain sublime and yet simultaneously terrifying objects possible. It is the 'object from inner space' (Zizek, 1999), the engulfing Thing of amassed primal *jouissance* that gives sudden material substance to the constitutive emptiness of the subject's desire.

Lacan's concept of *das Ding* thus seeks to supplement Freudian theory: in response to Freud's notion of the lost primordial object that we continually seek to find again, Lacan offers us a place, a *power of emptiness*, which is in effect, the site of such an object. *Das Ding* is, in effect, nothingness turned inside out; "...the Thing is not nothing, but literally is not" says Lacan (1992, p. 63). And like the black hole to which it is frequently compared, *das Ding* exerts a fearsome gravitational pull; it evokes sublime passions, induces deathly compulsions.

My intention, upon reading Wolff Bernstein's commentary, was to emphasize this reoccurring motif within Lacan's teaching (that of 'the positivization of the void') so as to agree with her assertion that - contrary to Grigg's (2015) account - there is indeed a type of object loss in melancholia. I wanted to agree, moreover, that this loss corresponds to the over-presence of something voracious and all-consuming. I was delighted then to see that Straker had, as it were, beaten me to it, by quite brilliantly centralizing the notion of *das Ding* in her own response to my paper.

Before turning to that, allow me a moment to respond to Wolff Bernstein's thoughts of McCandless's self re-naming - or, more in line with my argument, McCandless's self *de-naming*, that is, his adoption of the signifier Supertramp. Wolff Bernstein helpfully suggests that taking up this 'name' may be important not so much in terms of McCandless's incorporation of a well-worn popular signifier (*Supertramp*, the name of a rock band) as a kind of non-name, than in terms of the broader, and particularly sexual signification of 'tramp'. In many ways such a reading fits with the argument I developed. How so? Well, McCandless did enjoy what we might call a series of libidinal encounters - or, more appropriately perhaps, inter-personal intimacies, (clearly not always of an overtly sexual kind) with a variety of unlikely candidates. The crucial point of emphasis in my agreement with Wolff Bernstein, is that these encounters - which, certainly in Sean Penn's (2007) screenplay, were very touching for the people concerned - would have to end, to be dissolved in anonymity. The 'tramp-like' nature of these encounters was not that they were explicitly sexual, but rather that they were short and transient, without follow-through, not to be extended by any lasting commitment.

Back though to '*das Ding*' and its clinical pertinence in the case of McCandless. It helps here to consult Wine's (2014) schematic overview of the notion of the object in Lacan. Doing so is useful, not only insofar as it enables us to differentiate between the concepts of *objet petit a* and *das Ding*, but also because it suggests that the notion of *das Ding* has - as Straker suggests

and hopes - a continuing analytical value for psychoanalytic thinking and practice. Here then is Wine's (2014) précis of Lacan's successive theorizations of the object and lack:

In Lacan's first formulation, the analytic experience was conceived in terms of the logic...signifiers. The signifier was the cause of the subject and these signifiers depended on the exclusion of *das Ding*, which was totally exterior, something which experience could not assimilate....[Subsequently] Lacan introduced the concept of object *a*.... The unconscious was no longer [thought to be] governed by an unassimilated exterior, since the exterior was experienced by the subject and caused effects. The remainder left over from the agency of the signifier did not refer to something transcendent but to something which returned as the cause of experience.

The object now has lack as its very substance. Lacan started by emphasizing the lack of the object, then moved to *das Ding*, and subsequently arrived at the object of lack. Object *a* is not conceived as an empirical object which could be assimilated by experience. However, contrary to *das Ding*, it does not designate a pure negativity in experience: on the contrary, the subject of desire experiences object *a* as a cause of desire (pp. 50-51).

For those less familiar with the abstraction and jargon of Lacanian theory, the concept of *das Ding* might best be approached via reference to Freudian theory. In fact, we might take Wolff Bernstein's commentary as a way of presaging the notion of *das Ding* in Straker's response. Wolff Bernstein astutely gathers a series of strands in Freudian theory so as to emphasize the idea of the '*jouissance* of primordial masochism'. Although she doesn't actually cite the following Freudian remark, it no doubt informs her thinking in this respect, just as it so pertinently links the themes of *jouissance*, object-intimacy and death: "[E]ven the subject's destruction of himself cannot take place without libidinal satisfaction" (Freud, 1924, p. 426).

This may, at first, seem a little oblique. What does the conjoining of *jouissance*, object-intimacy and self-destruction have to do either with clinical issues, or indeed, with *McCandless*? Straker helps us here, referring to Lars Van Trier's *Melancholia* as providing an illustration of "the destruction and annihilation provoked by an inability to moderate the proximity of the object". This is a perspicacious remark. The opening scene of *Melancholia* is that of a wedding between a doomed couple whose relationship has been consumed by an excessive *jouissance*. The materialization of *das Ding* in this film is presumably the planet that hurtles - catastrophically, yet majestically - on its deathly trajectory towards earth. And here we come to the point: *das Ding* is precisely the coming together of these three vital components: a primal and consuming *jouissance*, an intense and potentially consuming libidinal bond, and annihilation.

One can only thus only agree with Straker when she notes that *das Ding* "is more clearly and unequivocally [than Lacan's related notion of *object a*] an object which devours in passion...and is imbricated in the culture of the death drive". She is absolutely right: *das Ding* indeed "implies a greater impossibility in regard to a survivable distance from absolute *jouissance* than does 'Object a'....[it] connotes less connection to desire and more connection to unmodulated *jouissance*". This chimes with Wine's comments cited above. The notion of *das*

Ding refers to something that is strictly inassimilable, totally exterior, a pure negativity that lies outside the parameters of the subject's desire. *Object a*, by contrast, is not inassimilable or radically exterior; it is rather a remainder of the agency of the signifier in the subject, precisely the object-cause of the subject's desire. It piques the subject's desire rather than threatening them with the black hole of unmediated primal *jouissance*.

The conceptualization of *das Ding* brings several benefits with it, and not only by virtue of the fact that the themes of the libidinal over-proximity, unmodulated *jouissance*, and the death drive are so neatly triangulated. The first of these is, perhaps surprisingly, both pragmatic and clinical in nature. Straker asks how the foregoing Lacanian theorizations of psychotic melancholia might be operationalized diagnostically, in differentiating schizophrenia, for example, from melancholia. The answer is perhaps to be found in Freud's (1923) remark that in melancholia we see, more clearly than anywhere else, "a pure culture of the death instinct" (p. 53).

In *Ordinary Psychosis and the Body*, Redmond (2014) offers several important characterizations of the nature of *jouissance* in psychosis. He emphasizes that castration, social identification and procedures of naming – all of which are consequences of the operation of the Name-of-the-Father, and which *do not function in psychosis* - add enormously to the tempering of anxiety and *jouissance*, at least in neurotic subjects. The installation of the Name-of-the-Father is thus associated with the pacification of intruding objects of *jouissance*. "Anxiety" says Redmond,

is tempered via the effects of the signifier... the Name-of-the-Father in particular is associated with pacification ...In neurosis, castration is associated with repression and limits the subject's access to *jouissance*... [We thus see] in Lacan's theory of the paternal metaphor...[how] the father who say 'No' metaphorises the mother's desire by substituting it with a signifier, the Name-of-the-Father... The mother's desire, synonymous with the presence of a potential invasive and overwhelming *jouissance* is limited by the cut of castration (2014, p. 120).

If then psychosis always presents us with a problem of some or other unmoderated *jouissance*, with a type of excessive object, perhaps what is definitive of melancholia – certainly in the two cases I examine in the original paper – is that the excessive object in question takes on the distinctive parameter of *das Ding*. *Das Ding*, in other words, is the object *par excellence* of melancholic psychosis. It is both, simultaneously, a terrible loss or subtraction (Freud's lost object), and the invasive object of overwhelming *jouissance* (as described) in Lacanian theory. A prospective differential diagnostic distinction between melancholia and other forms of psychosis might then be: does the intruding, excessive object take on the dimensions of *das Ding*?

A further benefit of the notion of *das Ding* as Lacan articulates it is that it incurs the sublime. Like all of the mythical proto-objects we may cite as examples of *das Ding* – the monolith in Kubrick's *2001 A Space Odyssey*, the great white whale in Melville's *Moby Dick*, Moses's burning bush, etc. - this Thing brings with it a lethal aspect even as it represents an opening onto the divine, the transcendent. In the original paper I had, if somewhat rhetorically,

wondered what “into the wild” might have meant for McCandless. Perhaps now we can offer a speculative answer: “the wild” was, perhaps, McCandless’s Thing.

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