

## WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN

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United States: 21st century, a mother, a son, and an act. According to Jacques Alain Miller, “the symptoms of civilization are first of all to be deciphered in the United States of America”<sup>1</sup>. Freud refers to the irreducible of civilization as the death drive. However, the means and ways of *jouir* in the civilization change. The 21st century, the era of the Other that does not exist, is characterized by the predominance of the logic of Not-All, the feminization of the world<sup>2</sup>. The decline of the Name-of-the-Father<sup>3</sup> in hypermodernity is correlative not only with a push to *jouir*<sup>4</sup>, but also an exhibition of it. Is Kevin’s act a testimony of it? Is it an example of one of the ways that the “violences” in the epoch of the non-dupes may take<sup>5</sup>?

I. SCENE OF THE WHITE SCREEN (3 scenes: beginning; Kevin’s birth; end). The white screen evoked for me a vignette discussed by Miquel Bassol at the last World Association of Psychoanalysis Congress in Buenos Aires, in talking about the feminization of the hypermodern world. VIGNETTE: three members of a family look at a white space, an empty space. They look for a point of reference in order to localize their gaze. The father asks: “Do you remember when there was a horizon?” The mother remains silent. The son interrogates: “How was it, daddy?” The father does not respond. Bassol suggests that the father’s lack of response may be seen as a symptom, a sign of the decline of the paternal function. Playing with this idea, I may say that this white screen, this lack of a horizon line, may be thought of as the disappearance of the line of the Name-of-the-Father. In *Seminar XVII* (p.160) Lacan refers to the “horizon of the woman” as related to an “unformed *jouissance*, precisely without any form.” Then, there where the virtual line of the Name-of-the-Father is lacking, the unformed *jouissance* may be found.

What would come to occupy this unformed *jouissance*? I can refer to two scenes that caught my eye:

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<sup>1</sup> The Other who Does not Exist..., p, 24. Making reference to Civilization and its Discontent, Freud states that the United States sacrifices vertical identification to the leader to the benefit of horizontal identification between members of the society themselves. Miller explains that it is possible to see in this the foreshadowing of the Other which does not exist.

<sup>2</sup> El Otro..., p. 108. E. Laurent considers that women are more sensitive to the signifier of the Other that does not exist, which is associated with hypermodernity, and are less related to the ideal.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 16. “The reign of the Name-of-the-Father”—this is, the signifier of the Other that exist- corresponds in psychoanalysis to the epoch of Freud. The Lacanian epoch puts an end to it. In the teaching of Lacan the matheme of the signifier of the barred Other pluralizes the Name-of-the-Father. It also disintegrates, devastates it from within. Thus, Lacan refers to the equivocation between the Names-of-the-father [les Noms-du-Pere], and the errant non-dupes [les non-dupes-errent].

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 26. The Freudian superego makes the Other exist through prohibitions, duty, and guilt-being semblants of the Other. Instead the Lacanian superego, the superego of the current civilization, produces the imperative “Jouis” (Seminar XX).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 17. The equivocation between the Names-of-the-father [les Noms-du-Pere] and the errant non-dupes [les non-dupes-errent] is associated with the inexistence of the Other: epoch of errancy, of the non-dupes. This is not being duped of the Name-of-the-Father, non dupes of the existence of the Other. It implies knowing that the Other is only a semblant.

(1) SCENE OF FESTIVAL OF TOMATO. At the beginning of the movie the sequence is: The first shot of the movie is a window and a curtain that veils it, a cover that suggests. We do not know what is beyond the frame of the window. In looking at the veil, is there something else that may be guessed? Is there a barely perceptible eye looking at us or are we that gaze? It seems almost as a hallucinatory effect. The second shot, the white screen. Finally, a third shot, the tomato festival, tomatina. In contrast to the last scene of the film, with the white screen and silence, after the first white screen, the red emerges. We see the body of Eva as it appears in a scene of sensuality and death immersed in the red of tomatoes. Or is it blood? Is she experiencing a *jouissance* that is Other to her? Are we talking of feminine *jouissance*? Perhaps there where there is no line on the horizon, Eva makes a semblant exist. May the "red" be considered as a semblant? We see that it appears throughout the film with diverse but predominant objects: tomatoes, ball, Kevin's jacket, paint, etc. We may think of the tomato as a semblant that seems to crumble, turning out into real: from the red of tomato to the red of blood. In the scene of the tomatina, would Eva elevate a semblant to a horizon, but only to make it fall again? Is it related to a failing of a solution or is it precisely a solution on the side of the Not-All? This is the beginning of the film, Eva appears as having nothing else to lose. Would we be talking of a *jouissance* in privation? But maybe she did not lose everything: she keeps an object. Is Kevin her object elevated to a horizon?

(2) SCENE KEVIN WITH THE ARROW (like staging a play). In the first traversing of this veil, we find the tomato festival as an allusion to, and a duplication of, another scene we do not see: the blood and the people pushing each other covered in red blood, the massacre. In the center of the tomato festival is Eva and her *jouissance*, while in the center of the massacre is Kevin and his *jouissance*. For Eva, it is about the Other *jouissance*, for Kevin the *jouissance* of the Other.

At the moment Kevin is performing his massacre we see Eva, lead by the sound of the lawn sprinklers, going through the curtains/veil where she finds the dead bodies of Franklin and Celia murdered by Kevin. Then, crossing the veil: horror? Is Kevin's act a solution that he finds to draw a horizon line? Is it a way to treat *jouissance*, fix it, localize it? Is it about extracting an object? Is it this object that Kevin elevates to a horizon? Or does he keep it in his pocket?

II. The violent act has always existed, but does it assume other characteristics in hypermodernity. The feminization of the 21st century might have introduced another dimension to the act. The formula of sexuaction allows us to think not only the subjective position but also modalities of the social link. The violence from the male side has a limit given by the exception – it organizes the for All. This is a violence organized by an "ideal". While in the feminine side there is an open set without a limit to close it. It is related to a Not-All, a treatment of *jouissance* that escapes the law.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud makes reference to violence associated to an ideal that founded the social link, wherein there was a regulation of *jouissance*, which is related to the male logic. In the 20th century the violence would have been more associated with an ideal (i.e., wars) or as a means to achieve an aim (i.e., steal to obtain something). However, in the 21st century, violence seems to multiply, to be unlimited, without localization, without sense – as the violence of violence itself. Kevin's act may be thought of in this context. Kevin says: "the point is that there is no point". In *Totem and Taboo* the

murder of the father provides a foundation while in Kevin the murder of the father appears to be of another category.

In the book, Eva says about Kevin's act: "Leaving me alive was the best revenge." I may suppose that Eva found a solution to the inexistence of "The Woman" through motherhood. To be a mother is to choose to exist as Woman on the side of "having". Does Kevin confront her with the failure of this solution since pregnancy? Kevin is not duped by Eva's attempts to be a mother. Thus, he refers to the moment when Eva threw him across the room – letting him fall – which left a scar, saying: "It is the most honest thing you have ever done". Does Kevin's act dig a hole in Eva?

Might the lack of horizon line – associated with the feminization in the 21st century – for Kevin be translated as a lack of a vertical line, a stick in the crocodile's mouth (*Seminar XVII*)? This would have left Kevin trapped in his mother's mouth suffering ravaging effects. Within this labyrinth of the mirror, Eva is the one who appears to be ravaged by her relationship with Kevin. The film condenses around scenes that come to reflect their being trapped in the imaginary relation, one without the symbolic mediation. (PLAY SCENE.)

We know Kevin through Eva's gaze, and we can ask, which object is Kevin for Eva? The failure/lack of the Name-of-the-Father leaves the child exposed to the jouissance of the (m)Other. In *Two Notes On a Child*, Lacan states "The child becomes the object of the mother and does not have (an)other function than to reveal the truth of that object." The presence of what Jacques Lacan designates as object a in the fantasy is realized by the child.

If Eva showed that Kevin refused to give her what she demanded of him, towards the end of the book, she interprets that Kevin gave her what is his most precious object, his talisman – Celia's glass eye. One may ask, whose object is it? Is giving this object to Eva a way of giving it up? What Eva reads as a relinquishing of the object, may also be understood as an attempt to treat the object. It is when Eva looks at this object that she says, "It isn't often that when you look at an object, it looks back". (p.394). Which object is it? Celia's eye? Kevin's? How to interpret the preparation of Kevin's future room? Is it almost a copy of his previous one? Would she be keeping her talisman, her object condenser of jouissance, Kevin? Or would it be possible to think of other, alternative interpretations?

III. As I stated we know Kevin through Eva's gaze, but there is something else: his act. This act seems to speak for itself. Does Kevin escape from Eva through his act? Is it an attempt to separate from her?

How can we understand this act? If we see it through Eva's eyes it may be thought of Kevin's act, as an acting out by Kevin. But from Kevin's vantage, it may be considered as a *passage à l'acte*. The *passage à l'acte* is the point at which discourse fails to maintain the semblance, and as such the real appears behind it. This is in contrast to acting out, which involves elevating the semblance, putting it in the center. "At the limits of discourse, in so far as it strives to make the same semblance hold up, there is from time to time something real, this is what is called the *passage à l'acte*..." Instead the acting out implies "to bring the semblance onto the stage, to put it on the stage, to make an example of it, this is what in this order is called acting out" (*Seminar XVIII*, 20.01.71.).

Eva seems to interpret the act of Kevin as an acting out, as putting of himself at the center of the scene, performing a play with a message for her. Nevertheless in thinking about Kevin's act, in terms of his subjectivity, I would place it as a *passage à l'acte* with the semblance effaced and the real emerged. Kevin appears as identified with an object that falls from the scene – the scene of the Other. It implies a rejection of the Other. In the *passage à l'acte*, the address is to the *jouissance* of the Other; there is an attack aimed at the supposed *jouissance* localized in the Other.

Lacan reduced the weight of the "history" of the subject in psychosis and focuses on moment of triggering. Thus, in exploring what precipitated the act, I extracted two scenes:

1 – Previous to the act there is the following scene (PLAY SCENE): Kevin witnesses Eva and Franklin talking about their separation. After what one may guess to be a moment of perplexity through Kevin's expression, he utters a statement with certainty: "I AM the context..." In Kevin I may suppose a foreclosure of the phallic function. This might be a moment in which the equilibrium of the imaginary world of Kevin collapses. The imaginary crutches that would have enabled him to compensate for the absence of the phallic function might have crumbled. It is after this scene that Kevin performs his act. Eric Laurent explains that the act is the moment in which the subject unifies himself. He refers to an opposition between the infinitization and dispersion of the subject and the re-unification of the subject in his act.

2 – A scene after Kevin's act is elaborated further in the book (PLAY SCENE). In her visit to prison Eva demands: "Look me in the eye... look me in the eye, and tell me why". Kevin replies, "I used to think I knew... Now, I am not sure..." We may think that, without his knowing it, Kevin provides a response later when he gives "a present" to Eva: a coffin-shaped box containing Celia's glass eye. Eva says: "I thought this was one of your most precious possessions. Why ever would you give it up?" Kevin states, "It was like she was, sort of, looking at me all the time. It started to get spooky." (398). May the precipitation to the act be related to this "always-present spooky gaze"? In attempting to extract the invasive *jouissance*, there may be a *passage à l'acte*. It is a push to set a limit and regulate what emerges as a deadly excess: the always-present gaze might be thought as this deadly excess, *jouissance*.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

The act of Kevin may be seen as one of the many forms violence assumes in the 21st century. The diversity of the phenomena of violent acts is a testimony of hypermodernity. Violence has always existed, but the violent acts in hypermodernity seem to be infiltrated everywhere, unlimited, without localization, without sense. It seems to be a violence marked by the not-all.

Miller refers to the social in the symptoms as related to the inexistence of the Other. He states, "the inexistence of the Other implies and explains the promotion of the social bond in the emptiness which it opens up"(23). Irene Greiser explains that when there is a fracture or rupture between the link of the subject and the Other we are talking about a symptom of civilization. Violence is one of the more relevant symptoms of hypermodern civilization.

Silvia Ons talks of violent acts – or violences – in the plural referring to the various or multiple manifestations the phenomena of violence takes in the 21st century. According to Ons, the phenomena of violence may be considered as a symptom of civilization, as a means to treat the real. She proposes that, in a sense, it may be “a veil” to cover what is unbearable. However, Marcelo Marotta highlights the “real dimension” of the violent act. How to think the act of Kevin? May one think that the “real dimension” that violence assumes in the act of Kevin reflects the “failure in veiling that real”? Or would it be a real that comes to the place of another real? Would we be confronting a veil without distance from the real?

Miller explains that civilization is a system of the distribution of jouissance through the use of semblants. The film seems to be uncovering or destroying semblants with the emergence of the real. At one moment it seems that Eva believes in these semblants, but their inconsistency is revealed once and again. The “banality” of the semblants appears in different forms in the film – through some of the music, certain shots, various details (for example, before the murder the sign that reads “focus...”), etc.

Glaze considers that the book *We Need To Talk About Kevin* – though fiction – develops a hypothesis about the horror and the senselessness in the act of the “school killers”. I think that even though the film may also incline towards providing some sense to these kinds of acts, there is something in the film itself that reflects the fugue of sense, not all can be explained. There seem to be scenes, shots, that leave us perplexed – a perplexity that we try to cover up with explanations and interpretations, contributing more to the creation of the fiction.