

For “Acts and inhibitions” – Journées EPFCL 2016 - “The secret title”*

Colette Soler

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In common speech as well as in the discourse of psychopathology, our two terms: “inhibition” and “act” have an immediate negative semantic connotation. Regarding inhibition, which we are not taking in its strict biological or neuro-biological definition, someone who is inhibited is someone who is held back on the path of his or her own achievements. This is the general case of those who come to the analyst, even if they are also suffering from various addictions: they are all hindered [*empêchés*] – and this is a term used by Lacan to shed light on inhibition.¹ In regard to the act, it involves a hint of menace [*une nuance de menace*] for the subject or for others and is in fact a topical issue. However, the act itself, that we tend to confuse with the activity, has a rather positive connotation, perhaps more vague, but that is generally present, especially in the world of capitalist competition. Didn't Freud himself confuse activity and virility? This valuation is even more accentuated in the analytical field since Lacan raised the concept, spending a one-year seminar on the analytical act,² saying that it was the most important [*éminent*], against which all other acts are to be evaluated.

There is no better way to break with preconceptions and invert the perspective than to summon Freud, who applies the term “inhibition”, not to the individual but to his drives and who makes of the drives “inhibited in their goals” the only ones which contribute to civilisation, whether we are talking about sexual drives or aggressive drives. Nevertheless, in *Inhibition, Symptoms and Anxiety*,³ Freud places inhibition as part of a series that we try to treat in psychoanalysis or at least to modify. By way of correlation, for psychoanalysis from the very outset the *passage à l'acte* is an intrinsic problem due to the analytical procedure. In effect, the rule of free association that according to Freud should lead to the association of what he called “thoughts”, which we would call “signifiers”, well, this rule wards off the act which does not think, hence Freud's perplexity, when he discovered what he had been unable to name other than *agieren* in German, the transferential enactment [*la mise en acte transférentielle*].

From here we can understand that between the two terms of our title there is a third one, that, let us say of... drive, but also of desire in so far as it aims at a gain of jouissance. In this way, the chosen title implies another one, secret, latent and that in the present case is related to the domestication of the drives or more generally to the domestication of vital forces, let's say the “destiny of the drives”, to take the Freudian expression; I could also say regulation of the drives, but in the end I prefer “the fate of the drives” [*sort des pulsions*].⁴ Anyway, for each individual the question is always to know how to achieve a balance, between on the one hand, what prevents, contains and is an obstacle to the vital dynamism, and, on the other hand, what guides it and what leads to its implementation. The discovery of psychoanalysis is that this

regulation goes through the unconscious. Suddenly our theme which at the beginning seemed to be just a clinical one, now has an essential political significance, which is always the case.

The two terms, “inhibition” and “*passage à l’acte*” are common ones, they don’t come from psychoanalysis and are related to something very precise: the restraint of the drives – which is the appropriate term. Each of our terms designates a disorder at the level of the restraint of the drives: an excess of restraint for inhibition and a lack of restraint in the *passage à l’acte*. The idea of restraint or control, rests on an implicit postulate that is deeply rooted in our culture and which has been conveyed for centuries by a long philosophical tradition which postulates that the will is a power that can contain the drives, an autonomous power, autonomous from those other powers, the desires and the passions, autonomous therefore from the libido. As a matter of fact, this conception corresponds to a common experience, whenever, for example, we “hold ourselves back” from doing something or saying something. Or on the contrary, whenever we “can’t control ourselves”, when we say: I just couldn’t resist, it was too strong for me. This experience that I’m referring to is the experience that those who deal with addictions encounter every day and perhaps it does maintain the illusions of the will.

This postulate has been passed on to psychoanalysis with the theory of the ego as a principle of defence into which Freud himself fell. It is true that in Freud, the autonomous ego theory is subtle, complex and open-ended but it became simplistic in Anna Freud and ego psychology and elementary today with the cognitive-behavioural people. Thanks to Lacan, we no longer refer to the ego as the locus of an autonomous will, capable of controlling the drives; we have to measure to what extent the discovery of the unconscious obliges us to rethink these two concepts other than as a failure of the principle of mastery. This is also what Lacan tried to do when he referred to inhibition as a conflict between two desires, or later on when he said that it is linked to the imaginary. What happens in effect to this idea of restraint in our conception of the division of the subject as well as in that of the Borromean speaking being?

As I said, inhibition and act refer to the field of the drives, one is an excess of restraint, the other a lack of restraint, but the problem concerning psychoanalysis is that neither one nor the other pass through those mechanisms of the unconscious that Freud called “secondary processes” in which Lacan recognised the structure of a language. As a result why not try to project a lateral light on inhibition and act through the other treatments of the drives, those that do go through these mechanisms of the unconscious? Freud called them repression and sublimation. I would like to stop here briefly.

They are not on the same plane, and are not of interest in the same way to psychoanalysis, one plays upon the drifting of the drive’s vector, the other proceeds at the level of its object. According to Freud, the repressed representatives of the drives return in the form of neurotic symptoms which can be deciphered and analysed whereas sublimation offers new objects to the drive. Freud thought that sublimation did not need to be analysed because it didn’t go through repression and because sublimation was the main resource of subjects and of

civilisation. Lacan rethought both repression and sublimation. The first one acts by signifying substitution, by the drift of the drives in the metonymy and by their fixation in the symptom, mechanisms of language reign there and it can therefore be interpreted. The second one, sublimation, of which Lacan made a big thing in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, is of interest for us because it does not go through repression. Lacan rethought it on the basis of the language effect that is the “thing”, *Das Ding*, this locus of the drives, which cannot be expressed [*indicible*]. He gave a very succinct formula of it: sublimation elevates an object, which can be ordinary or a product of cultural creativity, “to the dignity of the thing”. Sublimation therefore seals the opacity of this “Freudian thing” through representable objects, be they imaginary or symbolic, ordinary or rare and which are not open to interpretation because they are “open skies” [*ciel ouvert*] *plus-de-jour*. Lacan then stopped referring to sublimation because he had retranslated it into other expressions and ultimately into the symptom. We know that he assigns to the symptom the function of the “step-ladder” [*escabeau*]. The step-ladder is sublimation plus the narcissism of individual promotion and the whole issue is to know whether, how far and under what conditions it too can benefit civilisation. However in both cases, repression and sublimation, despite the differences that I have just summarised, are formations which suppose the unconscious, therefore *lalangue* is the necessary material or the vector, and with this, we are far from our two notions.

I have not yet spoken of the act. I will put the act in the singular although there are various modes of the act, different ways of enacting the drive, but they have one common characteristic, which is that none of them think - for inhibition, the question remains open. It was Lacan who brought to light this distinction between act and activity. In the first case, a whole series of enactments emerge as unstoppable and unpredictable in what we call *passages à l'acte*, which is so worrying in our current social situation. Obviously the therapist would like to stop this *passage à l'acte* just as he would like to get the inhibited person moving again. We can understand the dead-end of the *passage à l'acte*, the enactment of the drive activity is the result of its double scope: on the one hand, the drive activity provides extra *jouissance* but it is just a small “bonus” which does not exhaust the quest and which merely “restores”⁵ the “original loss”, a loss from which the quest is re-engendered like the phoenix and becomes inexorable. Consequently one *passage à l'acte* often causes others. In the second case, the enactment can be demonstrative in what psychoanalysis calls “acting out”, it is an acting that “shows” for the Other, albeit one in the wings; the question is to find out whether this demonstration is an address because showing is not saying. This is a problem for psychoanalysis. Thirdly and finally, in its most eminent form, the analytical act, the act realises nothing less than the division of the subject. In the act it is “the object that is active”, and the subject “subverted”, the subject supposed to thought. It realises it with respect to its productive, positive aspect, as precisely the way out of the reiteration of drives in the *passage à l'acte*, because it establishes, we have emphasized it quite a bit, the temporal cut of a before and an after. From here it could be questioned and clarified as to what the act “wants to say” [*veut dire*]. Lacan formulated that the *passage à l'acte* “does not want to say” [*ne veut pas dire*].⁶ This implies that the act “wants to say” [*veut dire*]. But what does it want to say, one will ask,

since it does not say [*dit*] - the one which does not think. This expression is ambiguous, it can be synonymous with “to signify”, but it can also indicate, beyond the signified of the act, an aim of the act going towards a saying [*dire*], and saying is not thinking. That it does not think does not prevent it from aiming at the production of a saying. This is a point to be examined.

A question has been raised regarding the bungled action [*acte manqué*].⁷ This question is welcome and without doubt there could be much of a whole chapter to do on “act and bungled action”. I didn’t raise it however and this omission is not a bungled action, I did it wilfully because the bungled action like the dream is a formation of the unconscious. On a descriptive level it is a failure not of the act but of the action or rather of the actions intended by the subject, who for example forgets his keys, confuses the hour of his appointment and so on. Nothing to do with what an act stands for as Lacan has taught us to recognise. From the action to the act there is a *gap*. The bungled action, a formation of the unconscious, supposes or represents a subject said of the unconscious. It is a sign of a desire or a cipher of *jouissance*, and under transference, it has more affinity with “acting out”, albeit with a difference: the bungled action is to be interpreted and even asks only to be interpreted. This is not the sense of the act according to Lacan, it does not represent the subject, it is not to be interpreted, and we could almost go as far as saying that it is the act that interprets since it is the object that is active. In analysis it is striking that the bungled action is on the side of the subject who carries out his task of association, therefore on the side of the “path of the analysand”, whereas the analytical act is on the side of the analyst, and that between those two paths there is an alternative.⁸

You notice that these are analytical questions but also questions of civilisation and that we have a program ahead to conceive, without recourse to the illusions of the will, I mean without any appeal to the controlling ego, how those two clinical phenomena inhibition and act, related as they are to the idea of control and efficiency, need to be considered in the structure of the division of the subject or in the nodal structure of the speaking being.

Translated by Sabine Bauer, David Kirkman and Nestor Tamarin

* Introductory text delivered at the presentation of the topic of the *journées EPFCL* 26-27 November 2016 “Acts and inhibitions”, Sunday November 29th 2015. Original French version published in *Mensuel* 103 - Février 2016.

¹ J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre X, L’Angoisse*, Paris, Seuil, 2004, leçon du 14 novembre 1962.

² J. Lacan, *L’Acte analytique*, séminaire inédit.

³ S. Freud, *Inhibition, symptôme et angoisse*, Paris, PUF, 1988.

⁴ Lacan uses this expression in his letter of March 18th, 1980.

⁵ J. Lacan, « Position de l’inconscient », in *Écrits*, Paris, Seuil, 1966, p. 849.

⁶ J. Lacan, « L’acte analytique, Compte rendu du Séminaire 1967-1968 », in *Autres écrits*, Paris, Seuil, 2001.

⁷ Paragraph added following the discussion.

⁸ J. Lacan, « Discours à l’EFP », *Scilicet*, n° 2-3, Paris, Seuil, 1970, p. 23.