

La manera méssalvatge, / selvàtica i salvadora / de moure el cos, la manera /
més subtil imuscular, / més a prop de la Matèria / Feta Font Perquè Font És, /
el moviment del cosmés / insultant de tots i, sí, / si vol, el més amorós /
és la paraula i parlar.



The wildest way, wild and saving, of moving the body, the subtlest and
most muscular way, closest to matter made source because it is the source,
the most insulting of all movements of the body and, yes, if you want,
the most loving,
is speech and speaking.

SCRIOBH

Editorial - *Monumental Archies*

Now I will tell you the answer to my question. It is this. The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power, pure power. What pure power means you will understand presently. We are different from the oligarchies of the past in that we know what we are doing. All the others, even those who resembled ourselves, were cowards and hypocrites. The German Nazis and the Russian Communists came very close to us in their methods, but they never had the courage to recognize their own motives. They pretended, perhaps they even believed, that they had seized power unwillingly and for a limited time, and that just around the corner there lay a paradise where human beings would be free and equal. We are not like that. We know that no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means; it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power. Now you begin to understand me.

— George Orwell, 1984

Miquel Bassols in referencing the The Panopticon in the digital age introduces an important response to the latest machine, master signifier: “social distance”, that of “subjective approximation”. But before going there, let’s be clear about one thing, as reluctant as I am to admit it, Jeremy Bentham was proved to be a man of his time and in a certain way from his time of writing his authoritarian version of utilitarian philosophy set the pace and method for the governance of populations, both slave, prison and so-called free, long into the historicised future; if you will allow me the linear-time analogy. The Panopticon is a marvellous device, merely in that the theory of it recognizes that social control can be absolutely predicated on the Other which does not exist, plus or minus the semblable, the physical body of the watcher. One sees then, in relation to what Orwell had to say, that jouissance is its own end and via the signifier it is enacted.

Rousseau, on the other hand was not at all a man of his time, an outlier genius one might say, both social and political animal, classically informed, he offered a far reaching secular version of Democracy, unrivalled since the Athenian polis, circa 500 BC, minus the body of God. A quasi-peaceful version of real-politick which above all set out to value the right and matter of the physical body of each citizen in a moment of collected free assembly, a truly democratic act in itself, which as he understood it can produce the only sovereign determining body in a true democracy: the collection of bodies as assembled *en-masse* in the plaza, thus becoming the symbolic body of the people, a quasi-collective subject of the people, an *en-masse* speaking-body to be heard as one voice beyond the physical body; the only real sovereign body in a democracy, according to Rousseau, to which elected (and/or paid) governors, chosen servants of the democratic body-politic, must inevitably bow. So you see where Bentham chooses to make use of the Other as a construct for social-control, Rousseau dispenses with it, preferring the subject of speech and language as *parlêtre* of the speaking-body independent of any other sovereign, than that of

the passions – let’s say symptom written on the body through the incidence of the letter – a proclamation, for psychoanalysis of the One body as a contingency predicated on the real of necessary impossibility.



Let me illustrate with a short quotation from *On the Social Contract*:

“Every political society is composed of other smaller societies of various kinds, each of which has its interest and rules of conduct; but those societies which everybody perceives, because they have an external or authorised form, are not the only ones that actually exist in the State: all individuals who are united by a common interest compose as many others, either temporary or permanent, whose influence is none the less real because it is less apparent. [...] The influence of all these tacit or formal associations causes by the influence of their will as many modifications of the public will. The will of these particular societies has always two relations; for the members of the association, it is a general will; for the great society, it is a particular will; and it is often right with regard to the first object and wrong as to the second. The most general will is always the most just, and the voice of the people is, in fact, the voice of God.”¹

One can equate this to the analytic situation where the gathering of the body of the analyst and that of analysand in the room can come, via the transference (the mistaking of the subject-supposed to know of speech and language, of the unconscious), to constitute the symbolic body in regard to the symptom, one

¹Cf. Rousseau, J.J., *On the Social Contract*, Citation in the Introduction, London & Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1923, p. xxxii.

can say then that the symbolic of the symptom is the governance in situ in the beginning of an analysis, that is to say in relation to the real of the suffering; a governance due then to be modified? But not without question of guarantee... As with the call in the Assembly, with respect to a change in governance, an idealised outcome is never assured. Perhaps a de-idealised, de-collectivised subject, but not without others, in an elaboration in discourse into a singular voice concerning the space for the subject in the politics of the social link, would be my polite response to Rousseau...

Of course this idea of free assembly has been maintained throughout subsequent centuries at great corporal, economic and social cost, through blood sacrifices essentially. Take for example, the constitution of the United States and our constitution here in the Republic of Ireland. The right to free assembly, one of those rights removed in the unconstitutionally established military and police enforcement of “social distance”, during the response to the coronavirus in the creation of “pandemic”, a pandemic being a symbolic, not real construct. “Subjective approximation” refers to a contingent distance which is not measured in metres, or indeed with respect to *jouissance*, measurable at all. That which science fails to contain, the body-politic seeks to control.

We in psychoanalysis oppose the desire for the object of pure power and in the enactment of that opposition propose a well-saying of a loving speech and a love of speech, with voice that may gently move the innumerable One of the child in an equivocation that touches the very body that makes politics out of the subject of speech, and so displace social distance in a subjective approximation, such that the object can fall away.

Raphael Montague, Editor

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Social Distance and Subjective Approximation¹

Miquel Bassols²

Panopticon

It's a strange feeling: speaking in front of a screen, in front of this little flat two-dimensional surface, knowing that I am addressing in virtual space a beyond where – as I am told – more than 700 people are found who are watching me and listening to me. I am going to speak, then, without doubt a little blindly. Moreover, these 700 people are not all together in the same place in reality, but each one is in a different place, more or less intimate but different for each and every one of them. There is not, then, just a distance between you and me, but also a distance of you from yourselves, a distance with a virtual point of flight, a point that is in turn invisible, from which each person can feel observed. If we can feel ourselves observed from this virtual point this is because it keeps us distanced from one another and at the same time linked to an invisible observer. In such a way that this device has something in common with Jeremy Bentham's famous panopticon, which in the 18th century formed the principle of prison architecture, and which Michel Foucault studied as a model of authoritarian and disciplinary society, a model that would guarantee the automatic functioning of power. It is a device constructed according to the principle of "invisible omniscience", with the figure of a place of the Other that observes and controls everybody without the final necessity of this place being concretely occupied by someone. This is also the principle that we are seeing put to work these days in different countries, in China in the first place, in order to spread out the State's surveillance over each of its citizens, in the name of the welfare of these citizens, without doubt, in order to control and prevent the contagion of coronavirus. We already know, however, that the same device will continue to be used in one way or another beyond this pandemic, to pursue the end of the social control of citizens, and always in the name of their welfare before the threat of the new pandemics that, as we also already know, will keep arriving.

This principle of the panopticon, let us not forget, is also the principle of the society of the spectacle, in which everyone can be an invisible omnivoyeur – someone who can see everything from the intimacy of their screen – and can, at the same time, let what is most intimate to themselves be seen by all the world. The invisible omnivoyeur is also, then, an exhibitionist, blind before the power of the virtual Other. In fact, these are then the principles of the structure that governs these days, so-called social distance. And this is something that I propose to you for interrogation.

On the other hand, if we interrogate this from the discourse of psychoanalysis, there is another distance at play, a distance even more important than those to

¹ The Conference "Social Distancing and Subjective Approximation", organised by The Seminar of the Freudian Field in Valencia, took place online on the 15th May 2020 with 700 participants. A video recording is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCs3DITYjjY>

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which I have referred. From the perspective of the subject of speech and language, of the subject affected by what we call the “unconscious”, we must also consider the distance that exists of each subject from itself, the distance of each one of you from your own unconscious. The greatest distance is that which each subject keeps from its unconscious, even if this is a paradoxical distance as we will see, because the unconscious is also what is closest, most intimate to oneself. The unconscious, which determines the meaning of what we say and listen to, marks in fact a subjective distance, a distance that becomes more present to us, for example, in the case of a dream. If the meaning of the images and words of a dream can be so strange to us, so close and yet so far away at the same time, this is because the unconscious imposes on us a subjective distance from what is most intimate to ourselves. I don’t know, in reality, who is the author, who is the scriptwriter of the dream I had last night, a scriptwriter who is simultaneously so close and far away from me, both intimate and familiar and strange and distant.

You can already see then that the notions of distance and closeness become very relative when we are dealing with the subject of the unconscious that psychoanalysis deals with. They are distances that even become inconsistent as regards the explanation of what is happening to us in these days, in this experience and this time of pandemics and confinements. Where are you? Where am I? From where am I speaking to you? To take up the expression of a Catalan poet, Víctor Sunyol, from the title of a recently published book of poems, I can ask myself, I can ask you: “*Des de quin on?*” – from which where? From which where do I speak to you? From which where does each one of you listen to me?

The Uncanny and Extimacy

These circumstances become more patent these days with the necessity of resorting to the virtual space of the Internet in order to maintain social and work links. They are the always a little unreal conditions of the virtual, although in fact reality itself is also very unreal to us these days. Someone put it to me like this: “it is as if you were to wake up from a nightmare only to realise that the nightmare continues in reality. And you keep feeling the same anxiety”. And somebody else told me: “I have a strange feeling of unreality, of living in a film, in the original version but without being able to read the subtitles of the translation or the credits that appear at the beginning and end, without being able to know – I add this *know* – the text that allows the framing of this unreal reality that is the film’s plot or script”. These are two paradigmatic testimonies of the experience that we are living these days on a global scale. Anxiety and the feeling of unreality are the two affects that we hear of the most in the confrontation with an experience that is radically new but at the same time contains something that is strangely familiar, even if this is only its precise evocation of some film that we have seen. This is what Freud defined in his famous text that has the title, in German, *Das Unheimliche*, the uncanny, the strangest in what is best known, the closest in what is most strange. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan invented a neologism, a new word, in order to designate this uncanny point that dwells in each one of us, a place so distant and so close at the same time, so simultaneously intimate and strange, as

unknown and exterior for each person to the same extent that it is as interior and intimate as the scriptwriter of our dreams. This concept, stressed by Jacques-Alain Miller to the degree of having used it as the title for one of his Courses, has found its way beyond psychoanalysis and will perhaps one day form part of the lexicon of the dictionary of language. It is “extimacy”. It is the very place of the unconscious, and we define it as what is so close and intimate, so interior to myself, that it ends up becoming so absolutely strange and distant that I can only find myself in this place with a certain anxiety and feeling of unreality.

This is really the place that we can feel that we are living in these days. Or, better, it is the place that we feel living in each one of us, the place of a confinement that is not only physical, but fully subjective. When we find ourselves confronted by something that makes a sign of this “extimacy”, we lack the words to be able to say what appears to us as so completely unreal about what is so real, as if it had come from a dystopian novel – another image that we hear mentioned these days – and a pretty bad novel at that! And there comes to each of us the image of a tunnel, and of how we will exit it and what we will encounter when we leave.

First verification: when you listen to the most expert epidemiologists saying that “this epidemic is not the big one”, that it is not the most important one that awaits us, and that others will doubtlessly come, you start to think that what they call today in such a contradictory, and even cynical, manner the “new normal” will perhaps not be the exit from the tunnel, but instead the very outer universe where we will have to live from now on. The supposed exit to the exterior would then be an entrance into what is most interior about the tunnel in which we find ourselves. “Welcome to permanent extimacy!”, if you allow me to put it this way. It is better to know it, and not let ourselves be hypnotised anymore by siren songs in the name of progress. Everybody already seems to agree about this: nothing will be like before, even if, as others say, this is because everything will remain the same, equally bad, but without any possible return.

Second verification: for the first time, it is the whole of Humanity – with a capital H – that recognises itself as if it were a single subject confronted by a real event, confronted by a danger from which it does not know how to defend itself, if not on a global scale. In fact, it should have already known this with the arrival of the climate crisis. This real event is not only the coronavirus, but everything that the epidemic implies as a social and political crisis, and a putting in question of our ways of living. As our colleague from Madrid, Gustavo Dessal, said, “the infection is biological, the pandemic is political”³. The biological infection is produced at a local level, from organism to organism. The pandemic is an effect of discourse that is transmitted on a global scale. This is how Jacques Lacan understood what an epidemic is in the symbolic world of speech and language; in a curious dialogue with North American psychoanalysts, he could maintain that “what we call history is the history of epidemics. The

³ Dessal, G., “Virtual Reality”, in *The Lacanian Review Online*, here: <https://www.thelacanianreviews.com/virtual-reality/>

Roman Empire, for example, is an epidemic; Christianity is an epidemic”⁴. An American colleague asked him here a little sarcastically: “Psychoanalysis too? And Lacan confirmed this: “Psychoanalysis too”, remembering a famous phrase of Freud’s to Jung – “they don’t realize that we’re bringing them the plague”⁵ – when they were travelling by boat to the U.S. in order to give some conferences on psychoanalysis. And, we can also add now, capitalism too is an epidemic, perhaps the one that is best propagated in order to promise a satisfactory jouissance to the contemporary subject, to promise a satisfaction without loss that paradoxically, however, might now carry it to a general and irreversible loss. And exiting from the infernal wheel of this capitalist discourse doesn’t seem any less difficult today.

From the infection as such then, we can make a more or less good, more or less bad exit; but it does not seem as easy to make an exit from the pandemic that feeds on it, from this event of discourse that has such politically important consequences. We are told that we can leave our homes, step by step, not so much because the virus has disappeared, but because, with luck, we can have at our disposal a hospital bed without the saturation that would suppose us all being infected at the same time. We will leave our homes, without doubt, and we will go to the beach – even if the virus stays here – while we wait to find an efficient vaccine or an antiviral treatment that mitigates the symptoms. But this is not the same as exiting from the discourse of the pandemic; in the same way that it is not the same as exiting from the discourse of capitalism that is going to keep taking its share from the pandemic that it feeds and that also feeds on it. We will make an exit, but it seems that this will be in order to feel that we are entering in an irreversible way into this “new normal” that is announced, and in which most probably we will encounter a reinforcing of the most authoritarian policies of social control, with a reduction of the civil liberties and freedom of expression that seemed to us so clearly won by social movements after the Second World War. We are perhaps in a homologous moment, a similarly unprecedented moment that gives us a unique opportunity to change some things, not a lot, but certainly some important things. For example, Humanity – written with a capital H, like a single subject – realises today that it has to make a collective calculation in order to be able to move forward, realises that there are no individual exits. This collective calculation is a political calculation that should lead to strategies and tactics that display a greater solidarity between subjects and peoples that are very distant, but at the same time equally close in this pandemic experience. Humanity comes to ask itself, then, rightly, if it is not itself an epidemic with regard to a natural law with which deals can no longer be made. As a man from the countryside said to me: “Everything that you take from nature, it demands back – and more”.

With respect to this point, there is bad news and good – or at least not that bad – news. The bad news: what might be waiting for us at the end of the tunnel is, in effect, something similar to China, that is, the entrance into another tunnel that will be subtler because [it will be] more accepted by parts of the population confronted by the fear of an “external” danger. What might be waiting for us is a

⁴ Lacan, J., “Yale University, Kanzer Seminar: *Universités nord-américaines*”. In *Scilicet* n° 6/7, 1975, p. 20.

⁵ Lacan, J., *Écrits, The First Complete Edition in English*, Transl. with notes, B. Fink, London & New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006, p. 336.

social control at the service of the most ferocious and insidious authoritarianism; and certainly very efficient in its alliance with capitalism and with the neoliberal policies that have been developed during the last decades. This new alliance, to put it this way, will sell to us at an ever-increasing price the masks that we need, as much as the air that we breathe. But things will only be this way to the extent that they are permitted by what Étienne de la Boétie called “voluntary servitude”⁶, that is, the assumption of the loss of liberties and fundamental rights in the name of a security that the Other must guarantee to us in a stable and continuous manner. In fact, before entering the tunnel of the coronavirus epidemic, we were already experiencing the general assumption of the loss of liberties and rights on a local, national and also global, international scale. It seems difficult then to exit the tunnel of the coronavirus contagion without knowing that we are entering another tunnel, that of the pandemic of a growing authoritarianism exercised in the name of security. On this point, I always remember a cartoon by the humourist El Roto (The Broken One) that remains relevant. On a sign hung on a security fence, very close to a video surveillance camera, we read the following message: “For reasons of security, there is no security”. This is the announcement of the “new normal” that we are asked to accept in an inevitable way.

The good news: we can choose. If this is what we have to find at the end of the tunnel, perhaps it is better to stay there a little while longer and invent something else before we leave. We can do this. This is what I will later indicate with the expression “subjective approximation”, in order to oppose it to another of the operations that govern us these days, that which carries the name “social distance”.

Social Distance

We are living an experience of the confinement of our bodies that is also an experience that fully occurs in a world of language, in the “field of language”, as Jacques Lacan said. Our bodies are, in the first place, speaking bodies, bodies affected by language, and the experience of confinement cannot be understood in each case without making reference to an experience of language that is also an experience of confinement induced by the power of words. One of the expressions, the signifiers, that is most powerful these days is that of “social distance”. In just a couple of months it has become the habitual expression to designate the necessary response, recommended with good sense by the public health authorities confronted by the coronavirus pandemic. “Social distance” is today what we Lacanian psychoanalysts call a “master signifier”, an order that already governs the different registers of our relations: family, work and profession, education, sports, health and holidays... The term has experienced in this way what we can also call a pandemical spreading as a response to the coronavirus contagion. And it is certainly the first and most efficacious measure to avoid its propagation. At the same time, this master signifier has introduced into the social fabric itself a kind of epidemic of meaning in order to attempt to confront the contagion.

⁶ de la Boétie, É., (1530-1563) *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, Transl. H. Kurz, New York: Free Life Editions, 1975, p. 60.

We should remember that “social distance” was in fact a notion used in the sociological study of languages, of their function and learning, of the link that is established in order that a language becomes “contagious” from one speaker to another. More so than with learning in a strict sense, what is at stake in the acquisition of a language is a kind of contagion, a contagion of the virus of meaning through the immersion in the breeding ground of language. The term “social distance” is understood in this way as the perception of proximity or remoteness with respect to a certain group of people who speak the same language. Language produces, in effect, a very special group feeling, it constitutes a kind of collective subject that recognises itself in a “we” that shares the same meaning of words. It is always a feeling that is a little false, because when listened to up close, every speaker gives a singular and different meaning to each word of language. But it is by means of language that we feel more or less close or distant from one another. The valuation that each person makes of this “social distance” that separates it from “others” is typically made on the basis of prejudices or stereotyped visions induced by the linguistic community to which it belongs. There is, from this perspective, a certain linguistic racism that interprets the speaker of another language as a “barbarian”. In fact, this is the etymology of the word itself. The “barbarian” was he who spoke an incomprehensible language, made up of strange sounds: bar-bar-bar...

Language is without doubt one of the best measures of “social distance”. When I encounter the language of the Other unknown to me, I encounter a high degree of “social distance”, up to the point of designating it as “barbarous”. The barbarian is the name that was given to social distance carried to the highest degree of segregation, the segregation of what is strangest and most incomprehensible for each person. Curiously, in some uses of the Spanish language – as occurs in Argentina, for instance – the barbarous has come to designate the opposite, what is most valuable and appealing, closest and familiar. One says “*¡Está bárbaro!*” (It’s barbarous) there in order to speak of something especially good and pleasant. We are dealing with our different forms of jouissance and their transference to the particular uses of language. When what is at stake is the jouissance of the other -the other’s form of enjoyment - we always feel this jouissance to be something “barbarous”. Our response can either be rejection and segregation, or instead, love and the attraction to what is strange.

The expression “social distance” has also been understood as the “distance between classes”, another form of social segregation. This is a form of segregation that is included, from the perspective of psychoanalysis, within the logic of reciprocal segregation that is produced between different forms of jouissance, with the distance that we need to keep from the other’s forms of enjoyment when they are strange to us. And this is a problem that cannot be resolved by any regulation concerning the measured metres of distance that it would be necessary to keep from one another. The right distance from the other’s and one’s own jouissance cannot be decided by defining it in terms of metrical distance. The excellent Argentinean humorist Tute, illustrates this very well in a cartoon about a couple’s impossible dialogue. A woman says to a man: “I feel that you are distant, Rubén”. And he replies: “One and a half metres,

Susana, one and a half metres.” Mentioning this was also, to shift the focus slightly, to the hygienicist ideal of some post-Freudian psychoanalysts as criticised by Lacan: finding the right distance from the object, from the social other, from the partner, from the phobic object, from the fetish object or from any other object of *jouissance*. But it is impossible to find the right distance when we are dealing with *jouissance*, especially when a loss is produced in this register of life. It is not a distance that can be measured in metres, because what appears to us when we are dealing with the loss of *jouissance* is a hole. We are no longer dealing with a supposedly measurable social distance. Instead, there is something that is lost in an irreversible way, something that appears to us as a hole that is the result of a loss of everything that we will not recover and for which we must mourn: a mourning in the first place for the loved ones that we lose, but also a mourning for the lost objects of relationships, ideal places that we hoped to find, activities that we can no longer carry out. At the same time, the impossible right distance in the field of *jouissance* also appears to us in the difficult relation that we have with the other’s – the more or less close neighbour’s – forms of enjoyment, forms that at times become intolerable, and regardless of how unhealthy they might seem; as when our neighbour has a party or takes the dog out for a walk thirty times.

Until now, then, the phenomenon called “social distance” referred to the feeling of linguistic community, and also to inequality between the social classes, to the different degrees of access to social and economic goods, to the marginalisation of social strata, to the ever more widespread phenomenon of segregation, for various economic, religious, ethnic or even linguistic reasons. There was a “social distance” proportional to the different phenomena of segregation that we experience as an effect of the alliance between the discourse of capitalism, with its neoliberal policies, and the most advanced techno-sciences that follow their own law, already independent of the course of science proper. But now the term “social distance” has slid from the symbolic field of intersubjective relations towards the supposedly more real and objective field of the relations between bodies or, better, between organisms that can infect each other with the virus at any place or time. It is a master signifier that now imposes on us, obliges us to a distance. But what distance is at stake?

I think that the subtle language of authoritarianism has scored a goal against us by passing into common use the expression “social distance” in order to designate that which is the necessity of a “physical distance”, the necessity purely and simply of a response to the fear of contagion, to the fear of death, of the contagion of the “malady of death” – if you will allow me to pick up on the title of a story by Marguerite Duras that devastates the link between the sexes. And this invisible authoritarianism of language has scored a goal against us, as usually happens, in an indistinct manner, on both the left and the right.

We should really hear in the expression “social distance” a subtle euphemism and not give in to its supposed obviousness. As Freud indicated, one starts by giving in to words and ends up by giving in to facts. In reality, it is very strange that what we call “social distance” is in fact a physical distance between bodies, the distance that is advised as necessary in order to avoid the propagation of the coronavirus. There is a whole ideology implicit in this expression of “social distance”, a physicalist and even biologicistic ideology of the social link. In the

last instance, it contains an ideology of social control in the name of the security of non-contagiousness, an ideology that is grounded in the reduction of the subject of speech and jouissance to its body or, to put it better, in its reduction to an organism.

I should say that I am referring here to a brief discussion that emerged out of an exchange of tweets that I have participated in these days with some colleagues, and also with a professor of humanities and researcher in audio-visual media, Ingrid Guardiola, the author of an interesting book entitled *The Eye and the Razor*, published by Arcadia Press. Confronted by the protective public health measures set out under the epigraph of “social distance”, and by the appearance of technical devices to detect this distance, I wrote the following tweets:

“Social distance” is a euphemism that serves not to speak of the unsustainable, unbearable proximity of bodies, especially when the other’s body can infect me with the “malady of death”.

“Subjective approximation” (an expression that I oppose to social distance) is the psychoanalytical position that serves to listen to and sustain the anxiety of each subject before death, and also its irreducible desire for life.”

The euphemism “social distance” should then be modulated, analysed with a magnifying glass, because it can be as insidious in the symbolic register as the coronavirus itself is in the register of the real. It is certain that there is a “social” sphere that has been impeded by this system of distancing, which has to do with the freedom to meet, group and socially relate; as Ingrid Guardiola herself indicated to me. This dimension has to do with what is called the “social body”, in the way that Rousseau spoke of the *corpus physicum* – the physical body – of the assembly⁷. But this is precisely where the symbolic body is distinguished from the physical organism, where the body becomes a metaphor, the symbol of the absence of the physical body. The problem then becomes a problem of biopolitics: what is called “social distance” can impose on me a subjective distancing to the extent that I find myself reduced, as a subject, to an organism, to the extent that my body, the body I have, becomes reduced to a physical organism that can be infected by the virus through its contact with another physical organism. And this biopolitics of bodies is not imposed without imposing at the same time, necessarily, a link with the other subject that leads me to automatically distrust it. It is the principle of a logic of the segregation of the other, of the Other, of what is different from my ego, of what is different from the image that I have of myself. But this distancing is in the first place a distancing from my own being, my own intimacy, from what we have defined as my own extimacy.

Cabin Fever

Following on from this, we encounter these days a clinical phenomenon, observed in different spheres, that might appear curious and that we should

⁷ Cf. Rousseau, J.J., *On the Social Contract, Book III, Chapter XIV*, London & Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1923, p. 81.

read in the light of this notion of “extimacy”. I am speaking about what has been called “cabin fever”. This is a response to confinement and the imposition of “social distance” that has also been detected in people who have spent periods of enclosure in hospitals, prisons, or been kidnapped for a long time. At the end of this period, when confronted by the idea of having to leave the place of confinement, they present symptoms of anxiety and intensely depressive and insecure ideas. They then make the choice of a voluntary enclosure; of a permanent and self-imposed “Stay at home!” that follows the logic of La Boétie’s voluntary servitude. This is not something that happens only to people who feel socially rejected. What is at stake is not so much enclosure to defend oneself from others, but instead to defend oneself from oneself. We are in reality dealing with an enclosure in oneself in order to enclose oneself outside, to distance oneself, from what is most intimate to oneself. What is at stake is enclosing oneself to distance oneself from what is most extimate. The Other – the “barbarous” – seems then to begin beyond the border of the door, beyond the frontier established by the cabin door. This is the “security perimeter” before the uncanny, before what is strange and familiar at the same time. What is at stake is avoiding the “exterior” that appears as dangerous but which leaves the subject defenceless before the most interior danger, before what we psychoanalysts call the drive, the demand for immediate satisfaction. In fact, we should read the position of “avoiding the exterior” as a symptomatic attempt to avoid what is most “extimate” in the interior; to avoid what is most intimate to oneself, what is most Other about oneself, that zone of my subjective sphere that is most remote from myself because of the fact of its being, simultaneously, as intimate as it is ignored. It is not so much a “fear of what is outside” – as conceived by a certain psychological ideology of behaviour, cognition and the environment – but instead a fear of what is inside, most interior to the subject, a fear of the extimate.

We all experience in some way this cabin fever, even when we long to go out in the street. In fact, even when we go out, we remain at times within the same subjective limits of confinement, without being able to address the inside of the inside, without being able to approach what is extimate to ourselves. Paradoxically, to enclose oneself can be, then, a way of attempting to distance oneself from the extimate. It is the attempt to confine oneself from oneself, to put it like this.

It must moreover be pointed out that this “cabin fever” can be produced not only individually, but also in a group, in the style of the Luis Buñuel film *The Exterminating Angel*, where it was a whole social group that found itself, suddenly and because of a strange force of will, confined in a room – its members thus being introduced into the most unbearable social conflicts. In fact, this film is today a good example of the situation in which we find ourselves with respect to what is called “social distance”. We are living, and we will live, a strange and great paradox. On the one hand, we must confine ourselves, and we will perhaps have to do this periodically. We will encounter different phenomena of subjective response, from voluntary confinements to the most inopportune exits into an exterior that is impossible to measure with “social distance” understood as “physical distance”. On the other hand, we must confine ourselves, but not too much. The discourse of capitalism needs everything to keep going, at whatever price, including the innumerable price of human lives.

What are already and what will be the effects of this paradox, following the policies oriented by this euphemism of “social distancing”? I will only indicate some of the ones that have seemed to me most powerful.

All kinds of images related to this have been circling through the Internet these days. Some of them pose to us questions of principle concerning civil rights and rights of expression. The image of the mask itself has evoked for some the image of a mouth covered by the imperative of shutting up: “shut your mouth!”; evoking that well-known image of a mask with a red stroke crossing out the mouth that in the 1970s served in demand of freedom of expression and that has recently been updated. But there are some even more disturbing images – images of nursery schools in France – in which we see spaces delimited and marked with spray paint on the patio floor, little parcels in which each child must remain without being able to leave. It might seem like a game, but they immediately evoke other images that are also circulating – these are from the US – in which the same procedure, exactly the same, is used in order to park the homeless and undocumented in the car parks of the great commercial spaces, following the measures against the coronavirus contagion. This is something more than an analogy: it is the powerful image of the assumption of a politics of radical restrictions on the rights of free movement in the name of a security that we all on the other hand demand from the authorities. And we demand it without being able to see the consequences of a progressive, subtle – and the subtler it is, the more insidious – assumption of the restriction of rights. It is a restriction that supposes a use of norms that evokes the most classic authoritarianism.

The debate between the request for security and the reduction of freedoms and rights is inevitable here. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, we should take into account at least three things:

1. It is not certain that the subject always wants its own good. The subject can be disposed to renounce this good in the name of security or of a jouissance promised as a well-being superior to its own good.
2. It is also not certain that the subject is as free in its speech as the thinking inherited from the Enlightenment wanted when it demanded, to some extent so justly, the rights of expression and freedom of speech. We psychoanalysts know very well how the subject frequently stops before the truth that can appear in what it says out loud to the other.
3. In this knot, always difficult, between the demand for security and the defence of fundamental freedoms, it is important to know that the recourse to juridical law will never resolve the conflict, that the law will never be able to fully regulate the compromise between both parties. And that, in every case, the juridical will never be able to regulate what is most important: the ethical decision at work in each subject in its act, a decision that always needs to be listened to in its singularity, without possible comparison with that of another subject.

Subjective Approximation

It is here that we should oppose another term to this pandemic of meaning induced by the signifier “social distance”, with all the effects of segregation that accompany it. From the psychoanalytic position, we should set out for ourselves the strategy of a “subjective approximation”. This is the expression that I want to stress in order to indicate an approximation to the subject of speech and language, to the subject of the unconscious, in order to listen to and sustain the anxiety of each subject before death, and in order to sustain as well the irreducible desire for life.



How are we to produce subjective approximation in this age of pandemics and different segregations that we have to live in? This is the question that I ask myself these days as a psychoanalyst. And I am going to refer here to my own subjective experience as an analyst during this period of confinement. It is the experience of an impossibility, the impossibility of sustaining the real presence of the analyst as we understand this in the Lacanian Orientation, the real presence in the analytical dispositif of the speaking bodies of the analyst and analysand – this is how we describe what others reduce to the position of a “patient” – a presence that is inevitably subtracted in confinement. They [analysands] have asked me the question in different places and in different ways and it is a question that fully touches the problem of what is called “social distance”. Is it possible to keep up the psychoanalytical experience on the Internet, without the real presence of the bodies of the analysts and analysand, making use only of the image and the voice transmitted by the Internet and separated from the real body? My first reply is no. There is a necessity in analytical experience of the real presence of bodies, of a presence that cannot be produced or reproduced through the technical means that we know. At the same time, there is another question, apparently similar. Is it possible to apply

psychoanalysis at distance? My reply is yes. And it is possible because of the subjective approximation that only speech makes possible. Although, there is a limit: at distance; the speaking body, the body of jouissance, remains inevitably in the margin, it doesn't disappear, but it is "offside" to put it in footballing terms.

The analytical experience is in fact an experience of the estrangement of the most intimate and familiar space, it is the possibility of turning things around to the Other side, the "extimate" side of the space of our familiarity, in order to read what is written on its reverse, in order to read the text of our unconscious. And the relation with the unconscious and with jouissance cannot be measured here in the terms of either physical or social distance; it implies a singular metrics for each subject. For example, an analysand told me these days that he felt incapable of explaining to me on the telephone the dream that he had had, and not because there was not enough intimacy at home – something that happens at times and makes it difficult to speak without limitations to the analyst. No, the reason was that he missed the intimate space of the analytical session, the space and time proper to the analytical dispositif that requires the real presence of the bodies of the analyst and analysand. Another analysand told me, however, that he could very well carry on his sessions by speaking to me on the phone lying down on his sofa, as if he was lying on the divan. Things work, then, one by one, case by case, without any standard that we can defend as a professional protocol.

But overall, the pure analytical experience – what Lacan called "pure psychoanalysis" – cannot do without the real presence of bodies in the reality of the analytical dispositif. The whole question resides, in effect, in situating in the best way possible, this real that is proper to the analytical experience. There are those who think that this can be transferred to what is called the "virtual" space with the current technical resources and without any difficulty. On my part, I do not think that technology can ever substitute or make present this real that implies the speaking body in the act of speaking and listening. Here, what is called "social distance" is, as I said at the beginning, a euphemism that serves not to speak of the distance of bodies, of the relation of each subject with what is most real concerning jouissance and death. This distance should be reduced to the minimum in order to produce a real "subjective approximation", an approximation to the subject of the unconscious. We can only resort to technology in an episodic and exceptional manner, knowing that the real presence of the speaking body has in each case multiple consequences in the analytical dispositif and that there is something that can never be transferred to the virtual space. For example, at times and depending on the subject, being able and deciding to shake hands at the beginning and end of the session is the most important thing that occurs in it. And I still haven't learned how to shake hands on the Internet!

Let us say that pure psychoanalysis – as Jacques Lacan situated it – requires this real presence in the reality of the analytical experience. At the same time, we know that what is called applied psychoanalysis – as Lacan also defined it – has invented, invents and will invent different forms of applying what psychoanalysis teaches us. And this in the most varied conditions, limited by very different factors. There is, then, no standard analytical dispositif. On the

one hand there are principles that cannot be given up, and on the other there is also a great flexibility and space for possible inventions.

As regards both aspects, however, we avail of a single instrument for the approximation to the subject of the unconscious. This is speech: only through speech can we approximate to the subject of the speaking body. But we can only do this in a really analytical way in the presence of the speaking body.

In Conclusion

In these times that we have to live in we will need, without doubt, a great degree of social and subjective approximation in order to confront the devastating effects that this pandemic has and will have in different registers, especially with respect to what we typically call “the most vulnerable layers of society”. We are still in the eye of the hurricane, without being able to see the effects that its passage will have. In this task, it will finally be speech, discourse – or “the story” as is usually said nowadays – that will allow us to treat the holes, the tears that are produced and made present to us in the fabric of our experience, and to which each subject responds with its symptoms, with more or less discontent, but always from the singular place of its own text, its own fabric of language that we call the unconscious. With the unconscious there is no possible right distance, we always carry it with us wherever we go. Instead of this “right distance” that is impossible to find, the only dignified path to follow is that of “subjective approximation”, the subject’s approximation to the zone of itself that is most ignored; to the undeciphered text that it carries written in itself and that we call the unconscious, the approximation to the unconscious by means of speech.

I will finish then with a kind of eulogy of speech in these pandemic times, a eulogy I take from the poet Enric Casasses, who has recently been awarded the *Honorary Prize in Catalan Letters* (I will read it first in Catalan in order to transmit to you the enjoyment of the sound of the language, and then in English):

“La manera més salvatge, / selvàtica i salvadora / de moure el cos, la manera / més subtil i muscular, / més a prop de la Matèria / Feta Font Perquè Font És, / el moviment del cos més / insultant de tots i, sí, / si vol, el més amorós / és la paraula i parlar.”⁸

“The wildest way, / wild and saving, / of moving the body, / the subtlest and most muscular / way, / closest to matter, / made source because it is the source, / the most insulting of all movements of the body and, yes, / if you want, the most loving, / is speech and speaking”.

I conclude, then, with this speech, but also with all that speech evokes of jouissance and the presence of speaking bodies.

Translation by *Howard Rouse*

⁸ Enric Cassases, “La manera més salvatge”, Audio CD format, can be found here: <https://www.amazon.com/Manera-Salvatge-Casasses>

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