



Anxiety with women

Vienna at the turn of the 20th century can be seen as representative of the expression of anxiety with women, different from what it had been before. What do they want when they fight for their social and political rights? What happens to them when they present bodily disorders for which doctors can find no organic cause? Faced with this new symptom, Freud proposed psychoanalysis, a new treatment in which the symptom was alleviated by the uncovering of repressed childhood memories. However, by redefining the unconscious, he shocked his contemporaries with the idea that the symptom and all the other formations of the unconscious - dreams, slips of the tongue, bungled actions - have a sexual sense.

Artists at the turn of the century, probably influenced by Freud's discoveries, began to present the question of eroticism in a new way, like e.g. Klimt in his painting of *Judith with the head of Holofernes*, based on a motif taken from the Old Testament. The young widow Judith uses a ruse to go into the camp of the hostile Assyrian army and seduce its head. As Holofernes, won over by her beauty, is about to possess her, Judith kills him, causing his troops to flee in panic. Breaking with the ecclesiastical tradition of the 14th century, according to which Judith was represented as a type of Mary, the mother of Jesus, Klimt accentuated her face in a state of erotic satisfaction, provoking a scandal [1]. Dressed in negligee and standing with the head of Holofernes partially visible, Klimt's Judith is far from embodying the ideal of the mother of the fatherland, driven by the desire to defend the Hebrews from starvation.

What was so shocking in Klimt's painting? Was it the dual aspect of the mother discovered by Freud, as both saint and prostitute? Or the representation of a woman dominating a man, making him the object of her phallic enjoyment of power? Does Judith not triumph because she has succeeded in projecting onto Holofernes the anxiety linked to what Lacan has called "subjective destitution" [2], the moment when the subject feels reduced to the body as the instrument of the phallic conquests of the Other? According to Lacan, anxiety arises when speech cannot make sense of what is experienced in the body, and the subject feels that the Other's obscure desire is aimed at his own being. If we interpret her erotic satisfaction in this way, doesn't Klimt's Judith seem to avoid the anxiety of becoming an object of an unknown jouissance for Holofernes, as the Other of sex, by administering death to him as the ultimate castration?

While practising psychoanalysis, Freud discovered that women, from adolescence onwards, can unwillingly feel anxiety in the face of men's sexual

desire, perceiving it as aggression. Freud offers several explanations of this phenomenon. One of the first is that at the origin of the symptom there is a sexual emotion linked to a repressed childhood event, an encounter with the sexual desire of the Other or one's, as illustrated by Emma's case [3]. Carnal arousal is transformed into anxiety related to the subject's state of distress, the Freudian *Hilflosigkeit*, translated by Lacan as a lack of knowledge, one which would answer the subject's questions about what is happening to him and what the Other wants from him. Freud also noted the existence of infantile sexual theories in which coitus, which is unknown, is interpreted through the prism of aggression, which is known. He also developed the concept of the Oedipus complex and the imaginary castration associated with it.

By defining anxiety as "the typical symptom of any advent of the real" for any speaking being, Lacan went beyond the Freudian definitions that make anxiety, in men, the affect of the fear of castration as the loss of the organ of union with the mother and, in women, the affect of the fear of the loss of the man's love as the possessor of the organ. In the case of women, Lacan locates the cause of their anxiety in their specific encounter with the real of sex. On the one hand, this encounter places a woman in the position of being the object of the man's desire and jouissance; on the other, it may expose her to the experience of an additional, typically feminine jouissance, other than autoerotic and phallic. There is a visible contrast between Klimt's painting and Bernini's sculpture depicting the ecstasy of Saint Teresa in a jouissance beyond phallic possession.

From the point of view of women, the difficulty lies in recognising that for men, in love, the woman is the subject, and in sexual desire, the object. A woman's anxiety is therefore firstly aroused by the fact of being desired as a "*plus-de-jour*" object, a part of the body, as in the Freudian example of the "slice of posterior". Secondly, the typically feminine jouissance which, unlike phallic jouissance, is impossible to apprehend in the symbolic register, means that women feel "Other" for themselves.

According to Lacan, what enables men to respond to anxiety in the face of the desire of the sexual Other is that 'the object can be ceded'. In men, the role of this object *a* is played by the phallic organ, and the cession in question implies its detumescence after coitus. Its function is to separate the subject from the Other, and thus to relieve him. For a woman, this detumescence of the male organ may bring relief, but she has no power over it. For her, there is no object to give up other than herself [4]. What's more, her own jouissance is enigmatic, since it is not caused by any object, and no one knows anything about it except that she herself experiences it. It is therefore a disguise for the real, which is in no way reassuring [5]. Lacan's psychoanalysis, by emphasising the question of the difference between the sexes based on the difference in modes of jouissance, introduces a radical shift in relation to Freud's psychoanalysis.

Interpreted as a fantasy of women's power over men, isn't Klimt's painting even more significant at the beginning of the 21st century? Today, at a time when human relationships are partly reduced to relationships with objects of consumption, there are many examples. Firstly, those found in contemporary language, when, for example, a young woman will say of a man 'I've had him'.

Then there are those that can be observed clinically, when a woman feels that she has triumphed over her man thanks to her wallet, her intellect, her physical strength, or her libido, or when she seduces a man by taking on a sexually attractive appearance, and then denying him her body, in defiance of the real of the male sex.

Women who adhere to current feminist ideas cause anxiety in men, as demonstrated by social research [6] and clinical experience. The issue of gender dissymmetry in sexuality seems increasingly difficult to address. With the widespread demand for gender equality in all spheres of life, it has become politically incorrect. Among the most radical points of view, the idea of questioning gender difference appears explicitly. The problem is that women are paying the price for their attachment to phallic jouissance, which can result in difficulties in building relationships and starting a family, or even in the affirmation of loneliness (see the success of the song "Flowers" by Miley Cyrus, a feminist manifesto of the millennial generation).

The question arises as to whether this social pressure influences analytical discourse?

Anna Wojakowska-Skiba,
Warsaw, February 2024

Bibliography and sources of inspiration:

- [1] '*Klimt and Schiele. Eros et Psyché.*', Italian documentary film directed by Michele Mally, 2018.
- [2] Lacan, J., *Discourse delivered to the Paris Freudian School of 6 December 1967* [*Discours à l'EFP 6 décembre 1967*, in: *Autres Ecrits*, Ed. du Seuil, Paris 2001]
- [3] Freud, S., *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, 1940 [*Entwurf einer Psychologie*, 1895-1896].
- [4] Lacan, J., *Le Séminaire, Livre X, L'Angoisse* (1962-1963), leçon du 20 novembre 1963, Paris, Seuil, 2004 [*Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 10*, lesson of 20 November 1963, Translated by A. Price, Polity Press, Cambridge.]
- [5] cf. Soler, C., *Les affects lacaniens*, PUF, Presses Universitaires de France, 2011, p. 44-45. [*Lacanian Affects*, Translated by Bruce Fink, Routledge].
- [6] cf. The survey by *Ipsos and the Global Institute for Women's Leadership* at King's College London: <https://www.ipsos.com/en/international-womens-day-global-opinion-remains-committed-gender-equality-half-now-believe-it>

Programmes - Registrations - information > <https://if-epfcl-paris2024.champlacanianfrance.net/>

