

# No Unconscious Without Modernity<sup>1</sup>.

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Jean Charmoille (Insistance)

What is it exactly that is so harmful about today's modernity? The power of images, insofar as we are supposed to be the victims of their omnipresence.

But enough is enough. When faced with what he considered to be overwhelming evidence, Jean-Luc Godard leapt on the world stage and proclaimed what this idle chatter could not manage to say:

"...the image practically doesn't even exist today. However what does exist is lots of words about the image...today's law is not a law of images, they can be pasted on anything you like to make this or that impression: they are good little children, they are mindful, the cinema is not bad in itself...everywhere we look all we see is images, or so it is said, but what we don't see is an image that speaks to us."<sup>2</sup>

What is an image that speaks (to us)?

Julien, a five-year-old boy, answered this astounding question without even knowing it.

In the aftermath, he surprised even himself with his version of the story:

"Progress in medicine and surgery made it possible to treat the serious deformities I was born with, but, oddly enough, did not make it possible for me to exert ownership of my own sphincter muscles. So my mother took me to see a Psychoanalyst.

After having talked to him for over a year, I began to realize I no longer trusted what the doctors were telling me. Their only interest in me was to evaluate the thing I represented for them, to gauge measurable progress. They looked at funny images and said things about them using big words.

They thought I didn't understand what they were saying.

Of course it was true I couldn't follow everything, but the false notes I heard in their voices frightened me. So I retreated into a kind of insensitivity to whatever happened to me, and hid behind a body that didn't belong to me – their body.

Then suddenly my destiny changed. I'll never forget it.

My mother, as always, worshipped the knowledge and science that had healed me and I was looking for my own place, but couldn't stand still in the one she had prepared for me, even though I knew the refrain about scientific progress by heart.

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<sup>1</sup> Presentation made on May 27, 2006 at the Rome Convergencia Conference "Unconscious and Modernity," with the participation of the following associations: Après-Coup, Nodi Freudiani (organizer), Insistance, Dimension de la psychanalyse, Corpo Freudiano, Ecole de Psychanalyse Sigmund Freud.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Godard, René Vautier : "Au nom des larmes dans le noir". ("In the Name of Tears in the Dark"), a debate on history, commitment and censorship. See Jean-Luc Godard Papers, Centre Pompidou. May 2006, p.401.

And then out of nowhere I heard something utterly arresting in the voice of the man who immediately became my Psychoanalyst. I was dumbstruck, speechless.

He was talking to my mother, telling her that I wasn't hiding any secrets and that she didn't understand, as usual, and suddenly I heard, before even thinking, the presence of something in his voice that spoke of the existence of an Other world.

I looked at him, he looked at me – I smiled at him and he smiled back.

I shall never forget that image which silently spoke to me.”

Julien was taken aback. He had just understood that he had sought refuge in his hiding place in order to avoid the mammoth gaze science had trained on him. What he did not yet know at the time was that he was waiting for a moment when the right inflection in the voice of the Other would resonate, from within the words that talk about images, with the Real of the silence of “words that are not of this world.”<sup>3</sup>

The Psychoanalyst welcomes this “modulation”<sup>4</sup> with a smile – this *modo* which in Latin conveys the idea of a time when presence and absence accord with one another in an almost musical sense of the term.

Herein lies the origin of modernity (*modernus*)<sup>5</sup> – it is language itself that is telling us this – not in a moment in history, but as the name for this a-historical moment when the shudder that runs through us in the confrontation with the new is bound up with the Eternal.

“Modernity is what is transitory, fleeting, contingent, the one half of Art whose other half is the eternal and immutable,” Baudelaire protested in 1863.<sup>6</sup>

The psychoanalyst presupposes it as the moment when he whispers something in the form of a signifier in the subject's ear that *brings* together (*sinthome*) what had previously only “hung together” as if by chance (*symp-tom*).

It is ever-elusive,<sup>7</sup> this silence that constantly reappears in language, when the cloak of night has fallen on the façade of the world stage, and immaterial beings, suffering quietly as they await recognition as signifiers, meet and act out their scene, unseen and unheard:

“*Fiat lux.*”

Rome, May 28, 2006

Jean Charmoille

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<sup>3</sup> Hugo von Hofmannstahl. *Les mots ne sont pas de ce monde. Lettres à un officier de marine. (Words That Are Not of This World. Letters to an Officer in the Navy)*. Rivages poche. Petite bibliothèque. Payot.p.126

<sup>4</sup> Tr: The French word here is “mode,” however the English “mode” does not quite transmit the element of “something in the voice of the Other” that is being referred to here in its musical dimension, hence the translation as “modulation.”

<sup>5</sup> The term *modernus* first appears in the Sixth Century, in the works of Cassiodorus,

<sup>6</sup> *Le peintre de la vie moderne. (The Painter of Modern-Day Life)*. Baudelaire Critique d'art. folio Essais. 2005 p. 355

<sup>7</sup> Jean Charmoille. *Ariabellissima. Dialogue entre l'artiste et le psychanalyste (suite)*. (*Ariabellissima, A Dialogue Between the Artist and the Psychoanalyst*), in *Insistance 2* (forthcoming).