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Further texts by Éric Laurent [here](#) www.LacanianWorks.net/?cat=237

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The Black Hole of Vanities Eric Laurent

French morale is down, they say. The French are pessimistic and their confidence has not been reestablished. This depressive affect makes people sensitive to the presence of multiple threats in spheres of diverse importance. The “natural” catastrophes at the beginning of September brought us face to face with thousands of deaths that might have been avoided. The new literary season has been dominated by the fantasy of the end of the human species thanks to infinite cloning. Finally, a magazine cover has announced the wish to see a limited class of human beings disappear: the psychoanalysts. We will not amalgamate the relative

importance of these three spheres, even though they are related well beyond their contingency.

To begin with, the catastrophes. All summer long, typhoons in China and Japan and the monsoon in India wrought considerable damage. Europe spoke little about these; we were greatly preoccupied with our fires and floods. Then came the catastrophe of New Orleans, which a good many of those involved had difficulty taking the measure of. The director of the Agency in charge of managing civil catastrophes in the USA (FEMA), declared they had learned of the existence of refugees in the New Orleans Convention Center three days after the hurricane had passed. And yet the television had shown images to the rest of the world of the refugees in this Center. The President declared that no one could foresee that the levees might give way, although the reports very precisely announcing this danger had been accumulating for some time. The receding of the black waters of the culture medium that New Orleans has become will soon disembody new and unfathomed horrors.

The fantasies of immortality through cloning entertained by those who lack nothing are going to intersect the amputated lives of a radically deprived population. Already there is talk about what will happen during the evacuation of a megalopolis in case of a natural or provoked catastrophe. The pandemic of avian flu, should it break out, could furnish an occasion of this type.

Turning to books, Michel Houellebecq gives us a world in which cloning has become common practice. He anticipates what life might be like if man were not assured of dying. Houellebecq is neither the only one, nor the first, to take up

this theme at the beginning of this season. Michael Bay's vain attempt at a blockbuster, "The Island", fantasizes about a world of clones and makes an effort to emulate "Gattaca". The strange synchronization of popular narrative fictions on cloning, on both sides of the Atlantic, is an effect of the globalization of fantasies engendered by the exploits of biology. The titles themselves turn out to be practically cloned. "The Island" for the film and "The possibility of an Island" for the novel that the author wishes to make a film of. True, with Michel Houellebecq a logical modality is involved: the possible.

In the black line of this season, we also have a little book^[1] whose contents are meager, but which is nevertheless bloated, puffed up. Not much can be said of this collection of anti-psychoanalytical articles. It is a cloned book. It reproduces articles published some time ago by disparate authors. The arguments presented have already been put forward and they have already been rebutted. The editorial enterprise attempts to disguise the book in new attire, although it is made up of nothing but re-heated scraps. Elizabeth Roudinesco says this very clearly in *L'Express*. Jean Birnbaum, in the heading of an article in *Le Monde*, dated September 9, speaks of a "catalogue of anti-Freudian hatred" and of "grave accusations, rarely backed up". The other newspapers talk about other things. This "editorial scoop" will not last long; no catastrophe is in sight.

Here we are, confronted with three modalities of disappearance: the disappearance of what constitutes humanity in the species, the scandal of the deaths anticipated, the wish for the death of the subject's relation to his enunciation. They are knotted together by the silence they echo, each in its own manner. The rhetoric of compassion had to confront the

realities of the selective abandonment of populations. The power that turns a deaf ear to misery unveils its determination, not only to ignore, but to silence a humanity that is suffering, that is suffering too much. The fantasy of cloning authorizes the hope of replacing humanity by something else. Outside moments of catastrophe, complaints and demands can be ignored by reducing them to “objectively” defined needs. The rhetoric of evaluation is convoked at this point in order to obtain the transmutation of the demand into silence. Jacques-Alain Miller and Jean-Claude Milner have already brilliantly established this. Once silence is obtained, things are left to converse with each other. The management of the world is reduced to the “politics of things” to take up the title of Jean-Claude Milner’s latest book, the only book of “reality-politics” this season.

The editorial enterprise that opposes authoritarian therapies of suggestion that “work” and psychoanalysis whose results have neither been demonstrated nor evaluated, does not simply compare the incomparable. It aims to use intimidation to discourage subjects from taking their bearings from the substance of their speech. It is significant that one of those presented as the authors of the book is one of the experts who have contributed to the collective expertise of INSERM on psychotherapies. This exposure of the partisan, excessive character of a will to harm says much more about this expertise than the best debates. Another author evokes the epistemological virtues of hatred. The mask of scientific objectivity fallen, the true face of those we are up against appears. This is a more effective unmasking than the unmasking of evaluation.

The ideology of evaluation consists in a will to render every social activity transparent to itself. It consists in a permanent, parasitic, time-consuming self-observation. Things have gotten to the point, in the most evaluated system in the world, the USA, that the administrative costs of evaluation absorb almost a third (31%) of the costs of health care, according to a recent study of the Harvard Medical School. This activity is justified by the so-called pragmatic utilitarianism of a new panopticon. But this warped pragmatism, is as deadly as the mirror of Narcissus.

The paradoxical effect obtained by the *jouissance* of the transparency of an omnipresent gaze is to push towards the excessive production of images of the public space and of the intimate. They can be security-oriented, or statistical, reveal the functioning of the brain or of sexuality. From the neuro-image to pornography, from virtual reality to the uses of video games in order to treat post-traumatic syndromes, from questionnaires concerning the evaluation of the morale of the French to surveillance cameras, there is always something more to be done, a step further to go. The subject must deliver all his secrets. The other side of this extraction is the constantly increasing temptation for the powerful to avoid the legitimate questions they are confronted with. Why, despite the multiple evaluations in the USA, were the necessary decisions not taken? The act remained in suspense.

A catastrophe whose causes are all human gives us a reason for this. The Cypriot plane crashed even though it had just been equipped with an entirely new system for registering flight data. The subsequent evaluation permitted us to discover in great detail the accumulation of human errors that led to the catastrophe. What is striking is precisely to what extent the

best protocols of evaluation are useless to prevent these catastrophes. How can maintenance workers forget to put back in place a valve regulating the pressurization? How could the pilots confuse alarms in such a way? The decisive factor, we are told, is that the pilots spoke no language in common except the technical English necessary for the routine procedures. In the situation of anxiety produced by contradictory and incomprehensible signals, not being able to speak together prevented them from acting. The act requires being able to speak. Perhaps government decisions are not taken when there is no common language spoken by the governing and the governed. They no longer share anything but a silence interrupted only by the hackneyed language that passes for communication in the media.

The advocates of authoritarian therapies advertise the confirmations they obtain of the efficacy of their treatments. This confirmation is in itself troubling. Nothing ever comes up to question it. Everything must be confirmed, and failing this confirmation, procedures become more restrictive. The frequency of the authoritarian confrontation with the object of the phobia is increased, or sanctions are intensified if someone continues to smoke. All this is accompanied by the encouragements or the threats of the technical language of the protocols. The therapies of authoritarian suggestion, which use the term “cognitive” in a purely homonymic sense, have no content as such. Their only existence is as a movement of inductive confirmation. The method consists in confirming that by constantly keeping a close watch on my behavior, I am encouraged to treat myself as my own clone. The repeated confirmations brought to these protocols will be as effective for preventing subjective catastrophes as the measures of surveillance disjoined from any act have been to prevent the

catastrophes we have known this season. We do not want a world that produces such catastrophes, which are in no way natural. We do not want a world that chants the efficacy of general surveillance. We do not want a witless world where clones prevail.

The California composer, Randy Newman, showed foresight in composing a song, recorded in 1974, on the floods of 1927 that ravaged Louisiana. The levees that recently gave way from lack of maintenance had been constructed following these floods. Those who have heard the moving interpretation given by the imposing Aaron Neville, with his superb *falsetto* voice, remember the message of triumph over abandonment that is contained in the refrain: “They’re trying to wash us away”. Aaron Neville embodied one of the voices of hope during a benefit concert recently organized for the refugees. The psychoanalysts will also resist the miserable attempts to bring them down by these ignominious methods. The book that was meant to provoke a scandal has already been washed away in the sewer. The real questions that this year brings remain.

Eric Laurent

September 9, 2005

[1] NDT : *Le Livre noir de la psychanalyse*

Translated by Thelma Sowley with the participation of Anne Lecroart

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