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10th WAP congress : The Speaking Body: On the unconscious in the 21st Century :
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ORIENTATION TEXTS

The unconscious and the speaking body

Jacques-Alain Miller

[The unconscious and the speaking body - Jacques-Alain Miller.pdf](#)

The image body and the speaking body

Miquel Bassols

[The image body and the speaking body - Miquei bassols.pdf](#)

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Freudian references on the body

Serge Cottet

[Freudian references on the body - Serge Cottet.pdf](#)

•

The step ladder (escabeau) and the sinthome

Pierre-Gilles Guéguen

[The step ladder \(escabeau\) and the sinthome - Pierre-Gilles Gueguen.pdf](#)

•

The speaking being (parlêtre) and corporal consistency

Ram Avraham Mandil

[The speaking being \(parlêtre\) and corporal consistency - Ram Mandil.pdf](#)

•

From the repressed unconscious to the constellated sky

Elisa Alvarenga

[From the repressed unconscious to the constellated sky - Elisa Alvarenga.pdf](#)

•

Overtured stepladders (escabeaux)

[A short essay of decryption about music]

Guy Briole

[Overtuned stepladders - Guy Briole.pdf](#)



Congress 2016

Rio de Janeiro

Flory Kruger

<https://www.congressoamp2016.com/pagina.php?id=8#tex8>

From the compass to the GPS between the sexes

Fabián A. Naparstek

<https://www.congressoamp2016.com/uploads/75e14c5d4818bbf03a465f38184718d7d3cf45d.pdf>

The image body and the speaking body

Miquel Bassols

The words of a language bring in representations, which constitute an illusory world for us in the model of the body's unity. [Jacques-Alain Miller, The unconscious and the speaking body¹]

There is no body for the subject before the mirror image had offered him a unity, before it had given an imaginary consistency to the experience of self perception which is forever fragmented. The clinic of autism and of psychosis teaches us the difficulties that arise in the construction of this “unity of the body”, which appears, in many phenomena, as very precarious and at the mercy of the real of the fragmented body.

On the other hand, no unitary image of the world is possible, prior to the constitution of the body as a unity, which results from the experience that always takes place as tied to the symbolic register, as an experience of language.

These two questions, which can interchange, in an apparently vicious circle, are put forward in the quotation we have chosen from Jacques-Alain Miller's presentation of the theme for the forthcoming congress of the AMP. They have their place in the knotting of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic, in the construction of what we call a body. We frequently speak in the clinic of “body events”. We have to point out that the body itself is an event in this knotting, an event different from the functions of an organism. Starting with this point, it would be appropriate to question the terms at play in the quotation here referred to.

I

What is the imaginary body? It is not only a matter of the mirror image of the body, nor of its imaginary representation understood as a Gestalt, as a perceptive image in which are merged the phenomena linked to identification, called homeo-morphic, made of symmetries and of reversions. The question is also and above all that of the experience of having a body as a unity, where the drive's satisfaction is situated, an experience of jouissance. As a matter of fact, in the famous “Mirror Stage”, Lacan distinguishes this experience from the imaginary forms of identification, it is the first manner, in his teaching, which situates an experience of jouissance in the body taken as one, in this “flutter of jubilant activity” of the “playful experience”, when “the jubilant assumption of this specular image by the kind of being – still trapped in his motor impotence”² occurs. The imaginary body is a way to name this inaugural moment when jouissance is injected into the body.

In this moment of a crucial inflection, it is not only the image that gives the body a unity from the outside. Apart from this, it is necessary that the image itself is incorporated in this unity, by situating the experience of the jouissance of the drive. On the other hand, it will also divide, in another manner, this fragile unity. Thus the image of the body is synchronic, and we can use the expression of the poet Lezama Lima to call it, the body of the image. The image is not reduced here to a Gestalt, which in the animal world has the mere function of imaginary captivation. The image acquires, in the symbolic register of language, the function of signifying, and will subsequently produce semantic resonances in the body, in the body of the image inhabited by the drive, forever partial.

The poet approached this domain of the image in the following manner: “The sound of the water unifies the images, the image of the body and the body of the image

coincide in the unity of the mirror. The image in the river is the image of the mirror, the mirror substitutes the river, nevertheless we continue as errant phantoms behind the unity of the image.”³ The sound of the water is no longer a mere noise, it is a sound which produces semantic resonances in the body, like *Lalangue* in its most singular resonances for each speaking being, beyond its signification and the signified induced by the relations between their signifiers. In this interlace, the signifier “situates itself on the level of the substance of *jouissance*”.⁴ Here, the language, object of Linguistics, is transformed in *Lalangue* defined by the substance of *jouissance* conducted by the signifier, a substance which touches upon the real of the body. In this manner, the real of *Lalangue* gives body to the image which subsequently constitutes this illusory world, this unity forever vacillating which we call a world and also a universe, following the model of the unity of the body apprehended in the mirror.

It is the first manner to approach the knotting of the three registers: the real of *Lalangue* brings in representations” of the symbolic, of the signifier as a substance of *jouissance*, in the imaginary of the corporal unity”.

II

The body of the image is transformed in this way into a speaking body. But what is exactly a speaking body?

What makes a body human, is the fact that it is a speaking body. The term “speaking” does not function here

as an adjective which would complement a noun previously defined, the body, qualifying it with a property added by the fact that it speaks. Psychology’s common error is to think that speech is a cognitive function of the body, a learnt behaviour, albeit sustained in an innate manner in a profound structure of the organism (cf. Chomsky and generativism). There is no such thing. Neither speech, nor language are reducible to cognitive functions, because these functions, understood as organic functions, depend from the beginning on the subject’s previous relation with the signifier, with a structure of language that precedes him as a body and as a speaking being. In fact, one does not learn a language; one is contaminated by an experience of *jouissance*, which touches the body of the image.

“Speaking” functions in the expression “the speaking body” as an active participle of the present, equivalent in certain cases to the gerund. There is no prior being to which we add the property of speech. Lacan had pointed out, in various occasions, that this being is a being only as far as it speaks. Equally, we have to say that this being only attains having a body in so far as it speaks and in so far that it is being spoken.⁵

Up to this point, the speaking body is a mystery, thus the strange result is that at the end, speech itself substantiates this participle to make it equivalent to the specific subject of linguistic: speaking. However, speaking is an abstraction which has nothing to do with the strangeness of what we call “the speaking body”. The best would be to set out from the Heideggerian premise, though we might have to rectify it later: it is speech itself that speaks, it is the one that speaks in a body which is not of the category of being but of having. One does not attain having a speaking body through learning nor through an evolutionary process, but through an experience in which *jouissance* is involved, a satisfaction of the drive. The signifier, which decides the relation of the subject with speech, with *Lalangue*, is again a substance of *jouissance* which assumes a body also in the images of the world, since then, read with the body of the image. The subject reads the images of his “illusory world” with the letters that the diverse and successive experiences of *jouissance* had written in his body.

Thus, the empire of the images is the empire of the signifiers which assume a body for each subject in the letter of his experience of jouissance.

III

Is there a difference between saying that there is a speaking body and saying that there is a body that speaks? Could we really sustain that a body speaks, could we affirm that it is the body which speaks? It seems that this certainty is only reserved to certain subjects who had experienced the structure of language as a revelation, always through an experience of jouissance. We can cite again Ramon Llull, for whom, at the start of the fourteenth century, speech emerged as a sixth sense, in addition to the five classical ones, it was inaugurated with an experience of revelation of the structure of language. Curiously, a few centuries later, somebody like Kurt Gödel affirmed the same thing from a different perspective: “Suppose that somebody has a sixth sense (a language) which only gives him few perceptions of the other senses...”⁶ The consequences are well known, both the break we suppose happened in Gödel’s proper subjective experience, and also in the history of logic. What this experience perceives as a sixth sense in the body is, indeed, the apparition of the real of the signifier under the form of the body of the image.

In fact, it is necessary to reach the clinical and logical consequences of this point in order to capture the strangeness of the real of the speaking body, the mystery which Lacan equated to the mystery of the unconscious⁷. Actually, nobody knows very well what makes the human body a speaking body. Neurosciences try to situate it as a property in the organism, in some region of the brain, but in vain. Genetics try to reduce it to the information of a code, which depends on the Other of language in order to reveal its sense, however, a sense definitely irreducible to any code.

The speaking body already appears as a spoken body, between the mystery of the unconscious and the evidence of the body of the image, in all the varieties of today’s clinic. We have to investigate all of this in our work for the next Congress of AMP.

Translated by Noga Wine

NOTES

1 Miller, Jacques-Alain, “The Unconscious and the Speaking Body”, translated by Adrian Price, published online at <http://wapol.org/en>

Miller, Jacques-Alain, “The Unconscious and the Speaking Body”, translated by Adrian Price, published online at <http://wapol.org/en>

2 Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function”, ÉCRITS, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, p 76. See <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=303>

3 José Lezama Lima, “El reino de la imagen”, Biblioteca Ayacucho, Caracas 1981, p 535. 2 Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function”, ÉCRITS, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, p 76. 3 José Lezama Lima, “El reino de la imagen”, Biblioteca Ayacucho, Caracas 1981, p 535.

4 Jacques Lacan, Seminar XX, Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, the limits of love and knowledge. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, p. 24 “I will say that the signifier is situated at the level of the enjoying substance”. See <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=222>

5 “Lacan, when he uses the term speaking being and parlêtre never neglects to say that there is a being only due to the fact that it speaks.” Jacques-Alain Miller, Course “L’Un tout seul”, 16/03/2011, unpublished.

6 See our short text “Ramon Llull, Kurt Gödel: el sexto sentido”, in Tu Yo no es tuyo, Ed. Tres Haches, Buenos Aires 2011, p. 1475 “Lacan, when he uses the term speaking

being and parlêtre never neglects to say that there is a being only due to the fact that it speaks.” Jacques-Alain Miller, Course “L’Un tout seul”, 16/03/2011, unpublished. 6 See our short text “Ramon Llull, Kurt Gödel: el sexto sentido”, in Tu Yo no es tuyo, Ed. Tres Haches, Buenos Aires 2011, p. 147

7 “The real, I will say, is the mystery of the speaking body, the mystery of the unconscious.” Lacan, J., Seminar XX, Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, the limits of love and knowledge. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, p. 1317 “The real, I will say, is the mystery of the speaking body, the mystery of the unconscious.” Lacan, J., Seminar XX, Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, the limits of love and knowledge. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, p. 131 : See <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=222>