

# The Anticipation of Enjoyment by the Body in the Case of Trauma: *A Case of Repetition Compulsion*

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## Abstract

In his article « *Le temps logique et l’assertion de certitude anticipée* » Lacan makes a distinction between three different instances of time : « *l’instant de voir, le temps de comprendre et le moment de conclure* ». The purpose of this paper is to explain how the body and its jouissance in the case of trauma may function as a kind of “moment the conclure” in such a way that the body acts without the subject’s understanding of what is happening. Based on a case of trauma we will show how the body anticipates on a kind of enjoyment, without the subject knowing it, let alone being able to speak about it. “Le temps pour comprendre” comes with the subject wanting to know because this wanting initiates “l’instant de voir”. If the subject comes to a real understanding via symbolization of what happens, this bodily inscribed knowledge may be transformed into symbolic knowledge. Ideally, this will provide the subject with the possibility of making a choice, instead of being subjected to the traumatic repetition compulsion.

**Keywords:** Anticipation, Enjoyment, Body, Trauma, Temps Logique

## 1. Introduction: “Something in his eyes.”

“Something in his eyes” are the words that unwillingly make us think about a romantic love story where one of the loved ones tries to explain what it exactly is that attracts him or her to the other. It is impossible to define what this ‘it’ exactly is. Of course we try to phrase it but we never seem to be able to find the correct words and so we stick to: “it is something in his eyes”. The fact that we cannot really put it in words makes it all the more romantic and above all: the more real.

The case we are referring to however, a woman named Victoria, who used the very same words, did not use them in relation to a romantic story, although on some level we could say it has something to do with love.

*“How is it, that when I go out and I bump into a group of guys I always seem to pick the aggressive one? The one that will hurt me?”*

*“I don’t know? What is it in that particular man that attracts you?”*

*“That’s a hard question, I don’t really know, but it’s something in his eyes”.*

In this case that “something in his eyes” announced the repetition of a history of violence and aggression. Victoria, who was a victim of a traumatic childhood, always seems to end up with the same kind of man; a man who would mistreat her and in one way of the other made her relive the things she’s trying so hard to forget.



In an attempt to understand what precisely is happening when Victoria “makes her choice” – and whether or not this is a right assumption will be discussed later on – we will use the three instances of time, as described in *Temps Logique* by Lacan. In a second part, we will rely on Lacan’s thinking about the primacy of the future and the idea of “what will have been“.

## **2. “L’instant de voir”, “le temps pour comprendre”, “le moment the conclure” and not necessarily in that order.**

In his article « Le temps logique et l’assertion de certitude anticipée » Lacan introduces three instances of time. L’instant de voir, le temps pour comprendre and le moment de conclure. To keep things simple, we speak about three instances of time, although it is obvious that Lacan uses three different indications for time to make a clear distinction between them. The first two « *l’instant de voir* » and « *le moment the conclure* » seem to have a more fleeting meaning than « *le temps pour comprendre* ». For a detailed description and Lacan’s application of the three instances of time on the prisoner experiment we refer to the original text. What we will hold in mind considering this article is one important thought: there is nothing linear about the presented instances of time, on the contrary this idea about time clearly does not fit into the traditional thinking where time has always been understood as a sequence of different moments that answer to what seems a perfect logical schema: from the past to the present to the future. Lacan’s thinking endorses Hegel’s theory where the essential thesis is that time moves from the future through the past into the present. This manner of thinking that we can summarize in the expression « primacy of the future » will be discussed later on. First of all we go back to the three instances of times, and their logical character, meaning that they are not determined by chronology. Although it seems obvious that we first have to see something, to grasp something, before we will be able to comprehend it and thus to understand something before we can consciously make a decision, this is not at all the case. And that is why we need to speak about the logical cross linking of the three times. There is no better way to illustrate this than with the source from where our knowledge rises: our clinical practice

First of all the case of Carl whose endless rationalizations seem to be an endless “temps pour comprendre” without ever really grasping something, so we can justly ask ourselves if we can speak of “comprendre” if this means that it has to lead to “un moment de conclure”. We could put it like this: it is always a kind of decision that in a second movement defines the time before as “a temps pour comprendre”.

Carl who is an obsessional, never seems to be able to leave the rational discourse, he is forever delivered to a metadiscourse without ever making a decision. During group therapy he tells us that he never seems to get rid of the feeling that he isn’t moving on, that he is forever standing still.

*“I avoid to make any decision at all because I always have the feeling that I will make the wrong choice. And if I do make a decision, I always regret it afterwards. I am so tired, tired of thinking, just incessantly thinking. It never stops. It sometimes leaves me paralyzed, not being able to do anything at all.”*



The case of Carl stands in strong contrast to the story of Henry who is trying to put in words that what can only be described as a “passage à l’acte. Our clinical experience learns us that a subject can produce an “act” without really understanding why. More than often we are presented by the patient with a confabulatory explanation, but it becomes obvious very soon that the subject in question really has no idea. Something in his being, more specifically in his body, made him or her do something. “Un moment de conclure”, seem to present itself without there having been “un temps pour comprendre”.

So Henry, a man who suffers from alcohol-addiction, tells us the following story.

*“Some time ago I went to a camping. I consciously filled up three bottles of wine and placed myself in between two trailers. That alone interfered with the personal space of the people camping there. Without any hesitation I removed my shirt and drunk the first bottle of wine. I continued drinking and undressing myself. When the bottles were empty I tossed them in the water, while standing there looking, naked. I am very ashamed for what happened, and to this very day, I still do not understand what happened there. “*

Henry tells the event like he is talking about somebody else, like he is looking at a scene, describing what the man in the scene is doing. There is clearly a kind of distance, precisely because there is no understanding. The subject is left alone, in shame, but foremost full of anxiety, fearing something in his own being, having done things without a conscious decision. The question is: who or what makes the decision, and can we speak of a decision, when an act like that is performed?

We can ask the same question concerning our case presented at the beginning of this paper. The fact that Victoria asks the question: “How is it that I always seem to attract the same kind of guys?”, shows us that there is something that she has seen. In talking and thinking about the observation she made, she enters into “le temps pour comprendre”. However, before she sought therapy, she wasn’t aware at all of this. Back then, she just made the same choice over and over again, without really understanding why. And again we should ask ourselves, who or what exactly is deciding? Or in other words: how can we explain that “un moment de conclure” realizes itself, without there being “un temps de comprendre”. In our opinion, we find a partial answer in Lacan’s thinking about time and its importance in both the construction and the representation of symptoms and how all this should be linked to the concept of repression.

Let us start with the latter and try to understand something valuable in relation to our case when Lacan learns us that “verdrängung” is in fact “nachdrängung”

### **3. Verdrängung is Nachdrängung**

It seems that the three instances of time have a particular temporal logic manifesting themselves depending on the narrative of the subject. If we want to understand how these temporal elements, conflict with what a subject sees, understands and decides on a particular moment in life, we firstly have to focus on what links those three instances of time together. The connecting factor is the primacy of the future, a concept we will illustrate via the mechanism of repression.



In the process of repression we can recognize an explicit temporal dimension, because of its inherent tendency to return. Implicit to the phenomenon of repression is the return of the repressed; if this would not be the case, we would never know about repression. Awareness of the repressed material means indeed that it has already returned.

The concept of the primacy of the future is useful to explain the return of the repressed, because it tells us that the repressed material is not coming from the past, as seems logical, but that it is coming from the future. The movement in time knows its starting point in the future and works its way up to the present via the past. This is based on the idea of retrospective meaning, namely that something gets its meaning through what still has to come. That is the core of both the psychoanalytic praxis and ethics: the fact that nobody's story is ever fully written, but that because of what still has to come, or what still has to be articulated, an entire history can be reread or rewritten.

In other words:

*"Ce qui se réalise dans mon histoire, n'est pas le passé défini de ce qui fut puisqu'il n'est plus, ni même le parfait de ce qui a été dans ce que je suis, mais le futur antérieur de ce que j'aurai été pour ce que je suis en train de devenir." (Lacan, 1966: p. 300)*

So, according to Lacan, the repressed is coming from the future, not from the past. What we see as the return of the repressed, the symptom, is merely the erased trace of something that will receive its meaning, its value in the future, through symbolic realization and integration of the history of the subject.

In that way *verdrängung* becomes *nachdrängung*.

*"Aussi on peut dire que, de même que la Verdrängung n'est jamais qu'une Nachdrängung, ce que nous voyons sous le retour du refoulé est le signal effacé de quelque chose qui ne prendra sa valeur que dans le futur, par sa réalisation symbolique, son intégration à l'histoire du sujet." (Lacan, 1966, p. 300)*

If we keep this in mind in trying to understand what is happening with Victoria when she ends up again and again with the same kind of man who always triggers something of her traumatic past, we may be able to solve a piece of the puzzle. We could define the fact that she is always attracted to the same type of man, men with that "something in their eyes" as a symptom or symptomatic behavior, although we have to admit that the symbolic character of this behavior is much less obvious. It would be more correct, to underline the enigmatic character of her choice, because of the traumatic nature of her history. When a woman chooses a type of man over and over again because, for instance, of the resemblance these men have with her father in terms of intelligence or preferences, this choice is far more obvious than in the case of Victoria, whose choices have an almost directly physical link to her traumatic past. Moreover it is clear that in case of traumatic repetition, the drive is at work in a dominant way. Anyhow, the previous theoretical notions allow us to say that a symptom in its very presence alone anticipates on something that receives its meaning in the future. Thus, in case we meet with a symptom, we can presume that there is already a truth at work within the



subject, otherwise a symptom wouldn't be constructed in the first place. Hence the symptom thus anticipates on a truth yet to come.

In our opinion, we can even go further in the case of trauma and expect that there is something more physical, on the level of the body that anticipates on what has yet to come, namely, the repetition of the traumatic event. We will refer to this physical aspect as the *enjoyment of the body*, in an attempt to translate an almost untranslatable lacanian notion, namely jouissance.

#### **4. The anticipation of enjoyment by the body**

Let us return to Victoria for a closer look. So the patient knows it is something in the eyes of the men that draws her to them. What follows is literally a familiar story for her, she is confronted with the aggression of the man she has, so it seems, freely chosen. In her first attempts to understand why she chose that kind of men, she might have wondered whether it had to do with their good looks, the fun they were making, or maybe because they were interesting, thereby expressing her astonishment on the relevance of her own question. However she very soon realized it was nothing like that at all. She was looking for something else, something far less attractive although irresistible in a strange way. Being in analysis, she questioned what motivated her choice of men, and this led her to a door which gave access to a whole new world of understanding. As a consequence "le temps pour comprendre" started. Once entering this other layer of associations, she gained access to another way of articulating things that made it possible to look at those same men in an entirely different way. That is the moment when she grasped the real meaning of "*it is something in his eyes.*" Because in that gaze she was able to find the thing something in her was looking for: aggression. Soon enough, it became obvious that this aggression in its turn was linked to her own traumatic history, her father. In analysis she discovered that all her failed relationships had one essential thing in common: every one of them was an attempt to regain control over her own life, her own body, her own being. The tragedy of her case, as in almost every traumatic patient, is that she had to repeat it time and again, without ever reaching the desired goal, on the contrary. Moreover, in spite of its repetitive character, she was consciously not aware of her subjective implication. It was something in their eyes that invited her to relive her painful past over and over again.

In the case of traumatic repetition compulsion there are, from our point of view, two important angles that must be kept in mind.

First of all, the repeating of a trauma almost always indicates an attempt of the victim to gain some form of control, meaning that in repeating the trauma, the subject is really trying to master something. This attempt at mastery comes down to trying to shift from a passive position to an active one. This is important to keep in mind, considering it is an effort to work through something painful. Taking full control as a therapist by for instance prohibiting the patient to see any more men might possibly do more harm, because in doing that, you take away the little control the subject had gained so far.



So we can read in Lacan:

*“Le trauma, en tant qu’il a une action refoulante, intervient après-coup, nachträglich. A ce moment là, quelque chose se détache du sujet dans le monde symbolique même qu’il est en train d’intégrer. ...Le sujet ne le parlera plus, ne l’intégrera plus. Néanmoins, ça restera là, quelque part, parlé, si l’on peut dire, par quelque chose dont le sujet n’a pas la maîtrise. Ce sera le premier noyau de ce qu’on appellera par la suite ses symptômes, les refoulements successifs. Il y a maintenant un point central autour duquel pourront s’organiser par la suite les symptômes, les refoulements successifs, et du même coup - puisque le refoulement et le retour du refoulé c’est la même chose - le retour du refoulé.” (Lacan, 1975: p. 215)*

In relation to the topic of our paper it is the second point that is important. Namely that there is also another mechanism at work in compulsive repetition. One that isn’t so easy to locate, or even to describe for that matter. When somebody becomes the victim of a traumatic experience, something is inscribed in the body. This very fact characterizes it as a traumatic event; the fact that there are no words, only an inscription in the body. The event engulfs the subject and leaves it behind, literally speechless. There is no symbolic integration of what has happened, only a somatic experience; for instance physiological changes (heart rate, respiration, sweating) or sensory memories (like a smell, or voice) or bodily sensations (like in the case of sexual assault: the pain, the assault on the body itself, the sexual arousal, the anxiety). That gives a traumatic event its very distinctive nature. Since there are no words, there is no symbolic representation, and without that, there is little or no mastering by the subject

In the case of physical, psychological and/or sexual abuse (meaning not an isolated and unpersonal traumatic event like for example a natural disaster), and especially in case of chronic abuse, we can observe that what makes the event traumatic – besides the absence of words - is the involvement of the drive – a real/bodily concept pre-eminently - and more specifically the emergence of what in Lacanian tradition is called “jouissance”. Often we can notice in the story of victims of sexual abuse that it is not only the abuse itself that makes it so hard to recover but the mixed feelings they have about what they might have felt in their body and the assumptions they make afterwards. More than once you hear a patient hesitantly admit that they experienced some kind of sexual arousal, and it is that sensation that makes it all the more complicated. In particular when the subject in question has been a victim of sexual assault several times. There was for example a woman who was raped three times in a short period of time. The fact that it happened three times suggested to the authorities that she provoked it herself and thus that it was her own fault. Besides the fact that such a verdict combines little humanity with an obvious lack of clinical insight, it labels the patient as “guilty”, thus depriving her on the same time of her status as a victim, an important signifier in the process of working through. On the other hand, for lack of a theoretical background to understand what might be at work, jumping to rejecting conclusions is to be expected.

So what is at work? Can we argue that a woman who was three times a victim of rape is in fact enjoying what overcomes her? Can we assume that she provoked the assault? Can we honestly stick to the idea that she likes being raped? Of course not.



On the other hand we must admit that it is at least suspicious becoming a victim of exactly the same crime in a very short period of time. The mechanism of repetition compulsion offers already a partial explanation, namely that she is trying via repetition to regain some control over her own body and over the event itself. On the other hand it is our conviction that during the rape she saw herself confronted with a body that wasn't her own, that she did not recognize any longer, a body that enjoyed beyond what she as a subject defines as pleasurable. The confrontation with that other body, the realization that for a short moment in time she disappeared into that body without being able to be anything else, the moment where she was no longer subject nor had she access to any symbolic or verbal means to defend herself, to regain her subjectivity by claiming herself as a subject in the symbolic order, that realization left her in complete confusion. Indeed, in everyday life, we are no body, we have one. Only during traumatic events we fully experience the structural lack in language, the structural impossibility of the symbolic to grasp the real.

It is our thesis that this is what happens in repetition compulsion: the enjoyment (*jouissance*) that has been inscribed in the body during the traumatic event anticipates – beyond the subject - on what will have been: a repetition of violent behavior. It is that violence, and the sort of enjoyment the body experiences, that is linked with the initial traumatic event. In the case of Victoria, this is consolidated in the present by what she meets in the other, “something in his eyes”. And it is because of the lack of symbolic anchor points, that she cannot do anything else but losing herself via the body in compulsively repeating the same scene over and over again in a painful attempt to acquire control over the event.

## **5. Conclusion: getting a grip through language**

Victoria was the eldest daughter in a family of 4 children. She grew up with a severely disturbed father who was very dominant and controlling. His aggression was not physical in the first place, although it more than often became physical, but mostly he was abusive in a psychological way. He chose her clothes, boyfriends were out of the question, and the whole family lived in constant fear. When she turned eighteen she left and got almost instantly pregnant. Her baby died before it was one year old. She got pregnant again very soon after the loss of her first child, and left her partner who had developed a serious drug problem. The new partners she chose were all psychologically, physically and sexually very aggressive. When the father of her child committed suicide, she very consciously made the decision to start therapy. You could say that that was her first “*moment de conclure*” and during clinical praxis we can often observe that the decision to start therapy is often linked to a fearful and painful event. In this case, the loss of someone she still cared about and thus the direct confrontation with death.

The moment Victoria realized during therapy that what she saw and looked for in the eyes of the men was in fact aggression, determined her first step towards change. That awareness made it possible to understand part of what was happening to her and announced “*un temps pour comprendre*”. Via the articulation and reconstruction of her own story – Freud's *Durcharbeitung* – she became more and more conscious of the

connection between her choice of men and her own childhood history and the dominant figure in that history, namely her father. It is not only a matter of insight or understanding, because at the same time she really lived her history while trying to regain control over her life in an attempt to dominate the aggression of the other. That reliving in combination with putting her traumatic history into words made it possible for her to make other choices, to experience another kind of “moment de conclure” in her choice of partners. Also in the case of Victoria we can presume that the enjoyment/jouissance by the body anticipated the violent nature in her choice of men. There was a bodily knowledge that went looking for that particular gaze/something in the eyes of the men she met. Before her analytic experience she wasn't able to understand what was happening to her. Her body that acted beyond her conscious choice and clamped on what is traumatic itself; the enjoyment or la jouissance. “*Le temps pour comprendre*” comes with the subject *wanting to know* because this wanting initiates “*l'instant de voir*”. If the subject comes to a real understanding via symbolization of what happened, this bodily inscribed knowledge may be transformed into symbolic knowledge. Ideally, this will provide the subject with the possibility of making a choice, instead of being subjected to the traumatic repetition compulsion.

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