

“This is truly me”: A Lacanian approach to *The Danish Girl* (2015)

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Abstract

This article aims at offering a Lacanian interpretation of the latest released film the major topic of which is about transsexuality: *The Danish Girl* (2015). The story of Einar/Lili will be pursued in order to assert that the film reproduces a stereotyped representation of transsexuality as a symptomatic expression of psychosis, the main enunciation of which is to be a woman trapped in a man's body, which places the subject in the modality of the *pousse-à-la-femme* in order to become The Woman.

Keywords: Transsexuality, Lacanian psychoanalysis, symptom, *sinthome*, sexual difference.

1. Transsexuality and what incessantly returns

In the last decades, the fascination to and diverse study of transsexuality¹ has notoriously increased. While the first discourses on transsexual subjects were primarily based on a psychiatric background, since the 1970's-1980's there has been a different perspective that does not reduce such a subjective experience to pathologization. Thus, the impact of feminism and queer theory has been remarkably important to allow a new perspective, mostly based on a discursive account of the production of the subject by means of different devices in the processes of subjection.

As far as I am concerned, my aim is to offer a different perspective on this phenomenon, which will neither be anchored in a psychiatric focus, nor in a purely constructivist/nominalist one that reduces the subject to a discursive monism. Hence, I will elaborate a Lacanian analysis of the latest film whose major topic is about transsexuality: Tom Hooper's *The Danish Girl*, which was released at the end of 2015. In addition, my purpose will be focused on offering a detailed analysis of the transition process lived and embodied by the main character, Einar/Lili. According to the interpretation that I will provide, the film reproduces a too much taken for granted liaison: transsexuality as a psychotic symptom, a remark that has been lately discussed in Lacanian psychosis by means of a further analysis of contemporary hysteric symptoms.

Before beginning my analysis about the film, I would like to clarify some key notions regarding the Lacanian corpus. In aiming to elaborate a psychoanalytic

approach to the film, what is crucial to outline is the fact that Einar/Lili tries to find a solution in front of an impasse to which each subject, independently of its anatomic sex and its insertion into a social discourse, is confronted: sexual difference. For psychoanalysis, sex is neither a mere biologic reality nor a pure cultural one, but it is rather placed in a frontier between these two domains, which refers to the specificity of one of the major Freudian concepts: the drive. In his *Three Essays on a Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud defines this concept in these terms: “The *drive* refers to the representative psychic agency of intra-somatic stimuli, which is in a process of fluidity, whereas a stimulus is merely produced by singular excitations that come from the exterior world” (Freud, 1905: 153. Italics in the original). As a result, the drive is not an automatic response to an outer agent, but it is a *representation* of something attached to the body, this is to say, it involves the primordial role of the signifier and its effect on the subject, a remark that clearly differentiates the drive from instincts². Furthermore, the difference between the drive and the instinct entails that human sexuality is not linked in advance to a concrete object, but the drive is rather in the pursuit of it.

In relation to the link between the drive and its object, Jacques Lacan, following Freud's remarks on the frontier status of sex, pushed the reflection forward. Concerning the circuit proper to the drive, Lacan referred to its partial structure, which entails that the drive does not exhaust the object at once, but it rather surrounds it³. The drive, then, operates as a deviated line whose goal is never assured, which means that the elected object could be nearly anyone, diminishing any prerogative that might be attributed to a heterosexual choice: “Si la pulsion peut être satisfaite sans avoir atteint ce qui, au regard d'une totalisation biologique de la fonction, serait la satisfaction à sa fin de reproduction, c'est qu'elle est pulsion partielle, et que son but n'est point autre chose que ce retour en circuit” (Lacan, 1973: 163). In other words, the drive as the interstice between biology and culture is deprived of any teleology, which implies that human sexuality, due to the effect of language on the subject, suffers a de-naturalisation.

Sex, then, despite its initial imbrication with the organism and reproduction, becomes a parcel for which there is no signifier able to represent it as a function, placed in a domain that, in Lacanian terms, refers to the Real. By “Real” Lacan does not mean to give an account of “reality”, which is linguistically structured by means of the regions of the Imaginary (the primordial dimension of the signifier in its oppositional logic), and the Symbolic (which must be understood as a signifying chain deprived of a totality and governed by a lack that, indeed, points to what is *realest*), yet what escapes from an attempt to construct a totality. Therefore, sex is placed on the side of the Real because it is neither graspable by the imaginary representations of the signifier, which mainly refers to the identifications attributed to masculinity and femininity, nor by the Symbolic, which regulates the assumption of the sexed status of the body through the operation of castration in neurosis and perversion, while in psychosis the relation towards it is a rejection, expressed by the notion of “foreclosure”. In other words, sex is neither simply the anatomy nor the identifications that are said to be proper to men and women, but it mainly appeals to a crucial Lacanian concept: *jouissance* and its two modalities in relation to the master signifier of the unconscious, this is to say, the phallus⁴.

Besides, what Lacan signals – and this is crucial in order to offer an accurate interpretation of Einar/Lili – is the failure that sex is in relation to the signifying chain. Such a claim entails that, diverging from the discursive strategies proper to domains such as gender studies, queer theory, and Foucault’s legacy concerning sex, psychoanalysis does not offer a normative or prescriptive account of human sexuality, but it points to its negative structure, this is to say, the antinomy that sex is in relation to discourse. Sex is not an attribute or predicate, but a gap made of pure negativity, a feature proper to the domain of the Real as a modality of what is impossible to represent. As a result, sexual difference offers the two possible positions in which such a failure happens: the modalities of *jouissance* indicate the location of each subject in relation to the single available signifier for sex, the phallus or phallic function. Being a man or a woman, then, is not primarily a matter of attributes or identifications, but of enjoyment. This is what the psychoanalyst Patricia Gherovici clarifies:

Sexual identity for both males and females is always precarious because the human infant *becomes sexed* without fully symbolizing unconsciously a normal, finished sexual positioning. Psychoanalysis attempts to throw light on the ways in which sexuality fails to conform to the social norms by which it is regulated and on the various fantasies that are constructed to veil the structural failure (Gherovici, 2010: 5. Italics on the original).

Consequently, my analysis of Einar/Lili transition will be mainly focused on his/her efforts to articulate a suitable “solution” for such an impasse, which is based on the relation that each subject elaborates in relation to the signifier of the unconscious, and the *jouissance* as a *real* surplus from the effect of the signifier that structurally appeals to the body. Furthermore, the fact that there is only the phallus as the single available signifier for the unconscious in order to deal with the Real-impossible of sex implies that the sexual relationship between the sexes is impossible to be written, this is to say, there is no way to articulate a symmetry between each sexed pole. Hence, identifications, both imaginary and symbolic, are contingent and precarious strategies to organize what escapes from sense and its production, returning incessantly in traumatic terms. Language, then, works as a tool to give an account of the region lacked of a proper category, surrounding the subject through unconscious fantasies: “(...) prendre le langage comme ce qui fonctionne pour suppléer l’absence de la seule part du réel qui ne puisse pas venir à se former de l’être, à savoir le rapport sexuel” (Lacan, 1975b: 47).

2. The Imaginary and the fascination towards the body: Painting, the symptom and the *sinthome*

The opening of *The Danish Girl* is revelatory of what is to come: a lake that works as a mirror where the image of three trees is reflected. Indeed, the whole photographic texture of the film works as a reflex, a projection of a bodily and extended image. From a Lacanian perspective, what is quite interesting is the enormous presence of the register of the Imaginary. It is the fascinating domain of images that provides the identifications of what Lacan called the *moi*, the French term for the Freudian *ego*, which refers to the Freudian analysis of narcissism as the psychic operation that

enables the subject to elaborate an image of its own body. Indeed, the couple formed by Einar and Gerda Wegener are specifically bound to this question: they are both painters.

In a Lacanian sense, it would be licit to assert that painting has a singular dimension for Einar, especially *before* the beginning of his transition towards Lily, which is firstly a fantasy of her wife. Most of the paintings that Einar makes are portraits of women, figures to which the character seems to profess an extreme devotion, which reminds of the operation of sublimation⁵. As far as sublimation is concerned, it is a mechanism thanks to which the drive obtains a satisfaction by means of a deviation from its usual object of enjoyment. In his *Introduction to narcissism* (1914), Freud remarks that “the sublimation is a process that takes place in the domain of the objectified libido, which consists of the orientation of the drive towards a different goal from sexual satisfaction” (Freud, 1914: 29). Hence, what Einar elaborates in his portraits and paintings is tied to an operation that refers to the object of *jouissance*, which Lacan called the *objet petit a*:

C’est ici que j’avance que l’intérêt que le sujet prend à sa propre schize est lié à ce qui la détermine – à savoir, un objet privilégié, surgi de quelque séparation primitive, de quelque automutilation induite par l’approche même du réel, dont le nom, en notre algèbre, est objet *a* (Lacan, 1973: 78).

Thus, painting is the recourse that Einar uses in order to produce a fantasy in response to the lack imposed by the operation of castration, which results in the loss of a mythical *jouissance* previous to the insertion into the Symbolic. The pursuit of the object-cause of desire and *jouissance* refers to the void imposed by the signifier on the living organism. Hence, it is structurally tied to the body as some sort of cut experienced on it, a remark that can also be made in relation to Einar’s portraits: each one of them operates as a metaphor of what is irrecoverably lost, leaving partial traces that the subject pursues. In this sense, Lacan uses the algebraic *a* to refer to what inserts the subject into the dialectic of desire and *jouissance* in order to stress the negativity that recovers the lost object, which is foreclosed in the register of the Real, being the element that no concrete symbolisation can absorb.

In Einar’s case, what has a privileged status is the scopical drive, this is to say, the drive whose object of *jouissance* is placed in the gaze, being a detachment between the painting as such and what he attempts to represent through a signifying practice. To use a Lacanian expression, painting performs the *littoral* proper to writing, which shapes the borders proper to the body inasmuch as the signifier, thanks to its imaginary dimension, allows the creation of the form of a bodily totality: “La lettre n’est-elle pas... littorale plus proprement, soit figurant qu’un domaine tout entier fait pour l’autre frontière, de ce qu’ils sont étrangers, jusqu’à n’être pas réciproques?” (Lacan, 2001: 14). His paintings elaborate a liaison between the feminine figure and his modality of *jouissance*, which provisionally offers a solution for the impasse to which the unconscious is confronted: how to handle sex and sexual difference when there is only one available signifier? What it means to have a sexed body? It is the enigma in front of which each subject elaborates a symptom⁶, this is to say, a subjective response in front of the Real-impossible of sexual difference. Geneviève Morel, in her essay *Sexual*

Ambiguities. Sexuation and Psychosis (2011) signals the always problematic relation towards the body because the subject *is not* its body, but it *has it*, being a negative separation that bans any immediate fusion. Thus, language is needed in order to deal with our bodily dimension:

Our relation to the body is complicated by the fact that we are subjects of language. Our body is marked by signifiers; it only has a form because we are capable of recognizing ourselves in the mirror; and the *jouissance* of the body goes well beyond its biological needs. Language subverts the “natural” body (Morel, 2011: 156).

Unfortunately, the story narrated by the film does not tell any subjective experience before his success as a painter, which deprives of a further information concerning his story. The spectator is only confronted to Einar just before the Real bursts into his symptomatic reality, undoing the strategy he had invented in order to join the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary through a *sinthome* that painting was meant to be. The *sinthome*⁷ is a Lacanian expression that describes the subjective union of the three registers thanks to the phallic signifier, which puts a limit to *jouissance* and the demand of the Other – at least in neurosis and perversion –. Thanks to the *sinthome*, the subject might assume a position concerning the real dimension of its *jouissance*, being either masculine or all phallic, or feminine or not-all phallic, regardless of its anatomy: “The Name-of-the-Father was thus defined as a key signifier granting access to phallic signification: it was the factor that allowed the subject to bestow meaning to signifiers and adopt a position as male or female in the basic sexual division” (Gherovici, 2010: 159).

Hence, Einar seems to have achieved a more or less stable configuration of the *sinthome* thanks to being a painter, which allows him to bond the Imaginary and the Real, and a husband, an identification proper to a symbolic level regulated by the Law. In this subjective construction, his wife, Gerda, plays a crucial role, which reminds of the Lacanian assertion of the importance that a partner can have in order to sustain the *sinthome*. Or, at least, this is what the film seems to suggest, mainly in a scene previous to the emergence of Lili in terms of the fantasmatic projection of Gerda on Einar. The scene in question offers a scenario where they are both going to bed. Einar, lying in bed, watches Gerda’s body, merely covered by a nightdress. In her body, he finds something irresistibly attractive, which in a certain sense might be a fetishist *jouissance*, this is to say, a denial of the lack imposed by the signifier through the libidinal recourse to an object of enjoyment. The moonlight that impregnates their room creates a visual atmosphere similar to a painting. Just before Gerda puts her nightdress off, Einar requests her to keep it, enjoying the vision of her wife. I would like to suggest, in order to continue with my analysis in the next section, that his *sinthome* begins to experience a progressive disintegration with the encounter of what, in Lacanian terms, is The Woman, this is to say, a recreation of feminine *jouissance* in terms of completeness and totality, a feature proper to perversion.

However, as I will argue for, according to what the film recreates, Einar is not a pervert, this is to say, he does not disavow castration, but he rather forecloses the phallic signifier that inflicts a structural separation between the subject and all its

identifications. Hence, Einar sees in Gerda what he had been sublimating through painting, which had prevented a trigger of a psychotic structure: The Woman in terms of the signifier that he will aim to incarnate. In other words, the symptomatic reaction of Einar in front of the Real-impossible of sexual difference is the *pousse-à-la-femme*⁸, a feminization that attempts to synthesize the feminine position under a whole signifier: “The *pousse-à-la-femme* results from the subject’s delusional interpretation of the *jouissance* that invades him/her, and is not localized by the phallic signifier: in other words, it is foreclosed. *Jouissance* is now interpreted as being feminine” (Morel, 2011: 60).

3. Desire as the desire of the Other and the emergence of Lili

According to my point of view, the appearance of Lili that the film offers is too abrupt, being a void between Einar’s dissolution of its *sinthome* through the emergence of a *real* dimension of what was repressed concerning sex through the vision of Gerda’s bodily figure, mainly its nightdress, interpreted by him as the lacking element for the acquisition of a full *jouissance*, and the “creation” of Lili as a new (failed) *sinthome*. He lacks of The Woman, which he will constantly pursue until his death, provoked by a non-successful attempt of transplanting a womb within his/her body. In other words, experiencing lack in these terms involves a rejection of the phallic signifier, which explains why Einar’s *sinthome* becomes dissolved.

Despite this important narrative absence, which deprives of interpreting his symptomatic reaction in front of the Real-impossible of sexual difference by means of his infantile memoirs, I would like to go back to the scene where Gerda’s nightdress becomes a fetish for Einar. This moment, crucial for the symptomatic response that Einar will give in front of the real of sex through Lili, allows a further exploration of the relevance that Einar confers to Gerda. Indeed, in the next relevant scene after this moment, Gerda attempts to finish a portrait of a ballet-dancer. It is a huge portrait of a good friend of the couple, who will rename Einar as Lili. In a moment of distress and of impotence in front of the impossibility to achieve her goal, Gerda asks Einar to be her model to finish the portrait. Sitting in a bank, with the same dress that the ballet-dancer had worn in front of Gerda, and with a pair of tights, Einar watches his body dressed with feminine clothes. Besides, he watches his body in front of the Other that has become a metonymical incarnation of the object-cause of desire, which permits to stress the structural liaison with alterity in the dialectic of desire.

Indeed, Lacan, in his sixth seminar, devoted to desire and the insertion of the subject into language as a symbolic structure, elaborated an explanation of the desiring circuit⁹. Desire is always the desire of the Other because the satisfaction that the subject pursues must be interpreted in linguistic terms, this is to say, it must be expressed through a demand. As a result, the previous need that searched for its satisfaction, once it becomes a linguistic interpellation, experiences a fundamental transformation. Desire, then, will be the negative rest that constantly remains between what the subject expected and what it finally obtained through the Other, being a void that remains empty. Hence, as Lacan stressed, “il s’ensuit que le besoin du sujet est profondément modifié par le fait de devoir passer par la demande, donc par les défilés

du signifiant” (Lacan, 2013: 41). In addition, the bond between desire and language involves a further consequence: once the word is uttered, there is a split at the core of the subject, being a separation between that subject of the enunciation and what is uttered, which implies that, strictly speaking, the subject does not what he/she desires. The dynamic proper to desire, thus, is proper to the unconscious, the discourse of the Other inasmuch as it is caused by the asymmetry between the subject and the Other:

A partir du moment où la structure de la chaîne signifiante a réalisé l’appel de l’Autre, c’est-à-dire où le procès de l’énonciation se distingue de la formule de l’énoncé et s’y superpose, la prise du sujet dans l’articulation de la parole, prise qui était d’abord innocente, devient inconsciente (Lacan, *op. cit.* : 26).

Therefore, the desiring bond that takes place between Gerda and Einar involves an attempt realised by Einar in order to introduce himself into the fantasmatic dimension displayed by Gerda through painting. Einar tries to identify with the Other that demands him to incarnate an imaginary position symbolically regulated. What becomes even more interesting is the abrupt entrance of the real model. Such interruption has two further consequences : it reminds Einar that he occupies the symbolic position of a man, blushing in front of someone that has seen him transvestite, and, at the same time, offers him a chance to reconfigure his *sinthome* through a new name : Lili. A name that cannot be separated from the desiring instance in which Gerda and Einar are both implied. In relation to the peculiar bond between the name given to a subject by the Other and desire, the psychoanalyst Colette Soler signals what follows:

Le prénom qui s’ajoute au patronyme est tout autre chose: il n’est pas transmis automatiquement mais il inscrit un choix. Aussi est-il toujours le stigmate du désir de l’Autre à l’endroit du nouveau venu, un signifié de l’Autre (s(A)) qui porte la trace de ses rêves, de ses attentes (Soler, 2009: 93).

Thus, the name conferred by the Other, which projects in the subject its expectations and dreams, becomes the occasion for the emergence of what had been repressed, being an irruption of the Real that installs Einar in a new position that becomes an impossible one. While Lili is seen by Gerda as an imaginary fantasy with no *real* existence, for Einar it will be interpreted as his/her actual self. Lili is the occasion to achieve what could not be expressed under the name of “Einar”.

In the following scenes, the couple enters into a game of cross-dressing and make-up fetishism. Lili becomes a model for a series of portraits made by Gerda. Each portrait is a repetition in which Einar tries to incarnate this fantasy, experiencing a *jouissance* in this performance of passing as a woman. Such a performance will lead them to enlarge this sort of fantasied identifications into a different symbolic scenario, represented by the party where Gerda and Einar/Lili go.

However, an unexpected event takes place in the party: the fantasy that Lili is said to be attracts the curiosity of a young man, who approaches him/her. At first, Einar/Lili doubts in relation to responding to the demand of this new Other. He is being addressed as a woman, but he *is not* a woman, or at least that is what his first reaction seems to suggest. Nonetheless, he/she decides to enter into the game of seduction. In

order to be read as a woman, he/she performs the cultural codes attributed to a woman in the Danish society in the middle of the 1920’s: showing some shyness in front of a man, being receptive to the requirements of his partner, and so on. What will break the performance is the reaction of the young man: he kisses Lili, which places Einar/Lili in an impossible situation of sustaining the fantasy. The symptomatic reaction is an extremely bodily one: his/her nose begins to bleed when Einar/Lili sees a third character that breaks the previous atmosphere, Gerda.

Once they are back at their home, Gerda assumes the incarnation of the symbolic law, reminding him that Lili does not exist, but it rather is a pure fantasy between them. He is Einar, his husband. In an effort to assume this symbolic position, Einar goes back to painting. But something has changed: the *jouissance* that he obtained thanks to this artistic activity has vanished, and Lili incessantly returns to him. In other words, the *sinthome* whose structure was painting-Einar-husband-Gerda is no longer operative, which means that he must reinvent himself. Nevertheless, an interrogation emerges for Einar: can Lili work as a *sinthome* if he has a penis? From a psychoanalytic point of view, one can be on the feminine side (of *jouissance*) and have a penis, a question explicitly outlined by Lacan: “on n’est pas forcé quand on est mâle, de se mettre du côté tout-phallique. Il y a des hommes qui sont aussi bien que les femmes” (Lacan, 1975b: 70)¹⁰.

His answer, though, will be a negative one, illustrated by a scene where Einar goes back to the store where he and Gerda had obtained the dresses and wig in order to perform as Lili. There, Einar gets undressed and, naked, looks at a mirror his bodily image, evoking the looking-glass phase elaborated by Lacan to give an account of the construction of the subject’s bodily image in terms of an extended projection. For Einar, there is an element that distorts his aim to become the impossible position of The Woman: his penis. Hiding it between his legs, he touches and admires his body, feeling an incredibly joy in front of what he reads as a feminine body. The phallic signifier, hence, has been reduced to the image of the penis, which is the common error made by the male transsexual through foreclosure and rejection of castration. To become Lily, he must have his penis removed, attributing an error to nature, which has not been able to provide the body he is convinced to have. As Lacan remarks:

Dans ces conditions, pour accéder à l’autre sexe, il faut réellement payer le prix, justement celui de la petite différence qui passe trompeusement au Réel par l’intermédiaire de l’organe, justement, à ce qu’il cesse d’être pris pour tel et, du même coup, révèle ce que veut dire d’être organe, un organe n’est instrument que par le truchement de ceci dont tout instrument se fonde, c’est un signifiant. Eh bien ! C’est en tant que signifiant que le transsexualiste n’en veut plus et pas en tant qu’organe (Lacan, 2011 : 15).

To understand the foreclosure proper to psychosis, and, in this case, to Einar’s transsexualist symptom, it is important to outline two issues: the confusion of the Imaginary and the Real, and the three moments of the assumption of a sexed position. As far as foreclosure is concerned, the confusion often made by transsexuals is to put on the same level the phallus as an organ (the image of the penis) to its dimension as

a signifier without a signified (the Real). It involves a failed attempt to subtract oneself from the phallic function through recourse to a surgical intervention, which would presumably allow the subject to incarnate The Woman as a universal. The error that Einar makes is to presume that once the penis is removed, the phallus as a signifier will no longer be operative. What Einar denies is the fact that the Real cannot be grasped by any symbolic operation, which entails that sexual difference is not pure anatomy, but a modality of *jouissance* that challenges any identification. As a result, the sexual discourse is always based on a mistake: taking the phallus as the penis, which works on the Imaginary through the most elemental operation of differentiation, this is to say, being a man is having the phallus, while being a woman is lacking of it.

This imaginary separation, notwithstanding with that, hides a fundamental void at the core of sexuation, which defies any attempt to write the sexual relationship. As Geneviève Morel asserts: “For example, because one says, “I am a woman” or “I am a man”, one believes oneself to be sexuated, but these attributes only support imaginary identifications beneath which the subject hides a fundamental void” (Morel, 2011: 20).

As a result, language forces the subject to interpret a mythical anatomy under the influence of one and single signifier, rejected in the case of psychosis, which means that castration is not working. In psychosis, the subject becomes fused with imaginary and symbolic identifications, rejecting the void of the Real. The consequence of foreclosure is barring the assumption of a sexual position. In Lacanian terms, as he enunciated it in *...ou pire* (2011).

Sa passion, au transsexualiste, est la folie de vouloir se libérer de cette erreur, l’erreur commune qui ne voit pas que le signifiant c’est la jouissance, et que le phallus n’en est que le signifié (Lacan, 2011: 15).

The rest of the story is a delusional^{xi} relation towards a body that does not show the *certainty* that Einar/Lili has concerning his/her “truly” self: he/she is a woman trapped in a man’s body. This contradiction felt by Einar/Lili is perfectly illustrated when he/she meets again the man who had flirted with him/her at the party. In a moment of intimacy, he kisses him/her, willing to have sex with Einar/Lili. At the precise moment that his/her genitals are touched and the name of “Einar” is uttered, Einar/Lili rushes to his/her home. His/her passing has failed, which makes his/her *sinthome* crash. From this moment on, Lili will be his/her main character, feeling a huge disgust in being called “Einar” and talking of him in a third person.

4. The Other of science and writing as the last attempt to find a “solution”

After this failed attempt of passing as Lili, Gerda finds who she still conceives as her husband, Einar, performing as Lili and crying at home. Gerda, worried about him/her, asks what is wrong. The answer is clear: Einar/Lili finds him/herself trapped in a body that he/she cannot feel as his/her own. Therefore, she suggests that it would be good for him/her to see a doctor. This will be the first encounter with the discourse of science, governed by what Lacan named the discourse of the university¹², this is to say, a social construction of knowledge in terms of the truth concerning the subject. In Copenhagen, Einar/Lili sees a psychiatrist that reduces his/her symptom to a disorder from a normative conception of human sexuality, referring to the historical cultural

ideals on masculinity and manhood that any normal subject is said to embody. The diagnosis is what could be expected from psychiatry: Einar is insane, being Lili a depersonalization suffered from a syndrome that, in order to be treated, would require his/her hospitalisation. At this point, Gerda’s reaction is to defy the conception concerning what a man – from the perspective of scientific knowledge – ought to be. Einar is not insane, but he rather suffers from the impossibility of incarnating a fantasy that he would like to be.

Some months later, the couple moves to Paris, where Gerda’s portraits of Lili have had a huge success. In this period of their life, Gerda is confronted to a situation that requires an ethical response: how to sustain Einar’s desire to become Lili, which implies to leave behind “Einar”, the name that is attached to those moments and affects shared with his husband? Such an anxious dilemma is powerfully captured by the camera in a scene where Gerda requests Lili if she can have her husband back. Unfortunately, “Einar” does not exist any longer, but it is only “Lili”. Gerda’s reaction, all along this fundamental moment and beyond, is to accept Lili’s decision by an act of love: she submits herself to Einar/Lili’s desire, displacing her own desire in order to remain with him/her. Indeed, Gerda shows the dimension of love as such: love is not based on an exchange of empirical and concrete goods, but it is a disposition towards alterity, taking in the Other in its singular *jouissance*. In other words, love is giving one’s lack-of-being, though it finds an impasse: the Real of sexual difference and the impossibility to become One:

L’amour prétend être don; aimer, c’est en effet “donner ce que l’on n’a pas”, son marque à être, mais il ment, car en fait il est demande: “Aimer, c’est vouloir être aimé”. L’amour est demande d’être, il cherche son complément dans le manque de l’autre avec l’espoir de faire Un. Illusion par conséquent qui ne veut rien savoir du destin que nous fait le langage (Soler, 2011: 85).

In spite of the obstacle of the Real to which love is confronted, Gerda remains with Einar/Lili, which adds a further ethical element in her decision of sustaining his/her desire: assuming the lack of the impossibility to obtain what has disappeared, his husband. Indeed, in the moment where they meet a pioneer surgeon that has begun to perform sex changes, Gerda *believes in* Lili’s self-narration: she is a woman trapped into a man’s body.

However, fear emerges: there is a risk of dying owing to the fact that, in the 1920’s, such a surgery was a rudimentary one. Despite this possibility, Lili does not hesitate: her demand is to become The Woman and, to achieve this goal, his/her penis must be removed in order to supposedly fill in her imaginary notion of “woman means not having a penis”. Due to the fact his/her request is directed to science, his/her demand is interpreted in nearly literal terms, a question often reproduced still nowadays, which might have lethal consequences once the surgery is done. In the transsexual’s demand, there is a request to fulfil an infinite expectation that no change could guarantee, which means that surgery, despite the psychiatric reduction of transsexuality to a mental disorder that requires a sex change, is never the final solution. This is why Geneviève Morel affirms that

“to respond to these subjects by acceding to their demand for surgery raises an ethical problem because in such cases the medical discourse makes itself, in some sense, the instrument of psychosis” (Morel, 2011: 187).

Fortunately, the first surgical intervention goes well and Lili *seems* to feel complete thanks to the removal of the male organ. Back in Copenhagen, Lili decides to work in what she identifies as a really feminine profession: a perfume saleswoman. All customers are delighted with her delicacy in selling perfumes, while all her colleagues at the store like Lili. Finally, she does not have to *pass as* a woman, but she has become one. In this sense, it is quite curious that the film suggests that Lili is at ease performing an extremely stereotyped version of womanhood, what seems to reinforce Catherine Millot’s assertion in relation to certain female transsexuals:

“En effet, l’idée de la femme dont se réclament les transsexuels est d’un conformisme total. Hors de la star et de la popote, qui sont les deux pôles de l’identification féminine des transsexuels, pas de salut” (Millot, 1983: 12).

Nevertheless, to support her *sinthome* as Lili, writing reveals itself as an operation that helps her to join the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary, providing a certain and precarious consistency to the sum of identifications of her performance as a woman. Despite this, the *real* lack persists: Lili wants to achieve what she considers as a typical feminine trait, this is to say, being a mother. Thus, she demands the doctor for a transplant of a womb. The Woman, then, is reduced to the symbolic position of the mother, radically different from the feminine *jouissance* inasmuch as it is beyond the phallus, this is to say, the Law and its aim to produce a totality. Assuming the risk of this operation, Lili persists, captured by an invading Other that knows no limits, which reminds of the Freudian notion of the death drive, which was re-elaborated by Lacan in reference to the persisting dimension of *jouissance*, which exceeds the limits imposed by castration. As a matter of fact, the lack of any restriction, of any limitation in the domain of a fantasied omnipotent *jouissance*, is the same as death, the zero point in which life consumes itself².

This time, Lili’s fate is condemned: the surgery does not go well and, eventually, she dies. Just before dying, she utters a final enunciation that is revelatory of all her transition: she had dreamt the night before that her mother was hugging her not as Einar, but as Lili. This is why, from a psychoanalytic perspective, emerges a final interrogation: was Lili trying to fit in her mother’s desire, though the film does not narrate anything concerning this bond? Was the pursuing of the interpretation of her mother’s desire what pushed Lili to a death drive that knew no restriction? The answer, maybe, should be searched for in her diary.

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