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Psychology and Psychopathology of the Mask

Adolescent phobia as a “mask object”

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Abstract

As suggested by the title, this dissertation is based on the term "object" as a bridge between the experience of phobia and the use of the mask. The choice of the phobia as a theme, is part of our project with adolescents, which highlighted the massive presence of this experience. This evidence did not fully satisfy the study for the following reasons. The knowledge about the presence of such phenomenon, can give an account of the presence of phobic experience and can also provide an opportunity to place the subject within a clinical reference group. It allows us to observe the subject's proximity or distance from the beloved "normativity". In our case, our purpose is represented by the comprehension of the attribution of meaning. The clinical observation allows us to evoke the psychological and phenomenological dynamics and also the modalities of the subject to reach knowledge, without which the objects would remain threatening in themselves and without a certain specification.

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1. Introduction

In the relationship with the threatening objects, the fulcrum of the discourse about the “mask object”, may tend towards a more diagnostic and clinical attitude or to a hermeneutic one. This allows the clinician to proceed through the perspectives proposed below, through a guide. As for any clinical relation, after the identification of the underlying theme of the object it is always proper to get closer to the specific dynamics related to the phenomenon. The advantage of starting from the object can be found in its continuity between perception and representation, so that we need an interpretation adherent to a specific method.

The psychodiagnostic expressions are clear, in the expressive antithesis of the *banal* and *original* contents we obtain with the Rorschach method, which expresses the closeness and distance of the subject's experience to reality.

The fundamental question proposed here is: What information do we get studying the phobic object coming from a rigid and proto-emotional response?

The perspectives proposed below refer to a phenomenological study, in order to highlight and to analyse possible typical features, together with a psychodynamic perspective. The specific phobic theme is a relevant part of data found in our clinical experience with adolescents: the main identified figure is loneliness, as a "phobic experience". This contribution intends through various nodal points, to exemplify the importance of a phenomenological and psychological analysis about the use of the mask. We reach the emergence of the content thanks to a semiotic of the objects hidden by the mask, decreased due to the lack of attribution of meaning from those who experience the phenomena. The articulation of the interior and the exterior, the semiotic-objectual difference, the possibilities of existential opening intrinsic to the psychopathological experience will mark the process of the discourse.

2. Phenomenological Perspective

The ambivalence in the relationship between "subject and object" must be taken into account. It is important to immediately understand the role of the object, which drives the meanings expressed below. Taking into account the body-mind problem (Motofei & Rowland., 2018), or the tendency to separate the body from the mind (or psyche) we acknowledge the fact that much of the psychological, psychopathological and cognitive productions have been filtered through this perspective (Binswanger, 1946).

The occasion arisen recently, in a certain sense as a principle of integration, has placed representation at the centre of its articulation. This fact highlights the centrality of the phenomenon and its fundamental role. Regarding the splitting tendency (which in a certain sense recalls the perspective of the defence mechanisms against anxiety), it is not surprising that the phenomenology has highlighted for more than a century how separating the *res "cogitans"* from "*extensa*" would not only fragment the human experience, but also the integrity of knowledge itself. We have concrete examples of fragmentation and splitting in the everyday clinic. The two examples that can easily be reported are the theme of the *spaltung* in the psychotic experience and the studies of Rausch de Traubenberg (1984; 1990) proposed below in relation to the psychodynamics of the mask (images).

The choice of the term “*mask object*” refers to an expressed difference between anguish (angst) and anxious experiences. The incipit of this event, refers to the mask and its mediation function between the inside and the outside that easily recalls the psychodiagnostic images Rorschach and the *Erlebnis*. We have information of this concept, with regard to the parallelism that Dilthey (1894) proposes, which is not reported here for discussion, but because also in this expression we recall the themes of inside –outside and splitting. Precisely the way in which the phenomenon emerges (external-explanation) and the experience related to it (internal-comprehension) take us back to the mediating function of the mask. The word “experienced” (*Erlebt*) is the main key for comprehension: the typology of specific experience of the phobic subject informs us about the interruption of the fluidity of relations with the objects.

Can we afford to not study the specific representation when it is hidden?

The lived experience (*Erlebnis*) is not foreign to the object and the comprehensive act cannot be foreign to the experience, especially when it is driven by a representational structure that is not immediately accessible, except through its product (as for pareidolia and images in general). This is commonly known to phenomenology, to dynamic psychology and above all to projective methods. The Existential Analytic of Heidegger (1927), proposed in *Being and Time*, is a phenomenology that could coincide with the Jaspers’ meaning (1913) of feeling without an object. As indeed Jaspers frames anguish, disquiet and mystical feeling, feelings without an object, Heidegger continues in a distinctive analysis between anxiety and fear.

We have clear examples in the responses to the Rorschach Inkblots, with some examples of artistic production:

Cho- Chiaroscuro-Anguish Responses



Edward Hopper. *Night Shadows*. 1921, published December 1924

It is significant that Edward Hopper, who is framed within the current of American realism, in this case renounces the exercise of perceptive sharpness, to the advantage of chiaroscuro, to witness the experience of anguish.

Clob-Pure fear responses



The fresco whose name is Inferno, dated 1410 by Giovanni da Modena represents one of the most important works that survived from the late Gothic age.

To understand the relation between the (subjects') object and the function of the mask, it is important to suggest the distinction between fear and anxiety, starting from the analysis that in our case (phobia) can be considered as the result of a defensive approach involving the mask.

The questions to ask in the presence of a plausible object concerns 3 components, as suggested in Being and Time (Heidegger) and reported by Imbriano (2010) and Dahlstrom, Elpidorou & Hopp (2015):

- that in the face of which we have fear, *das Wovor*;
- fearing as such, *das Fürchten*;
- that about we fear, *das Worum*

The common factor concerns the threatening object and the urgent need for an unintentional avoidance-hiding. The detection of the threatening object, is typical of a preserved cognitive functioning, or usually not specifically invalidated by the phobic experience.

It is important to note, as the relevance of the phenomenon is expressed through an affectivity typical of the proto-emotional experiences.

We find a specificity, in the attempt to make sense of the threatening object, a condition typical of the human being getting closer to a *shared world* with a subsequent and emotional tone (*Stimmung*).

We are referring with fear, always to an entity that is possible to meet in the world, a simple-presence or a coexistence.

It is important to clarify immediately a phenomenological affinity with anguish. The affinity does not coincide with the case of anguish, starting from its absent *object relationship*. The object of anguish is not specific, it outlines a lived experience as we have evidence in rorschach (es Cho), apperceptive, graphic and in artistic production.

"If the *Wovor* is this or that determined entity, the *Wovor* of anguish is not an *wordly entity*" (p. 227), anguish is not determined by this or that object;

Rather:

"The *Wovor* of anguish is completely undetermined" (p 227), as smoke is indeterminate, as is the cloud and so on. As in the art example above mentioned, in the Rorschach, in the Thematic apperception test ecc.. It is certainly not the form that prevails over the object, as the expression of the experience of anguish in the tactile Cho, the *Estonpage*.

The fact that the object of anguish is nowhere, means that anguish does not arise from a determined entity, but from the world itself. Psychopathology has always made clear that we speak of pathology depending on the maladjustment, that we observe in the arrest of the signification process (psychodynamics), the arrest of the performativity and in a phenomenological perspective what is intended as *facticity*. At this point the question we will try to answer in the discussion is: in the specific case of the fear (phobia) of loneliness, how is it comprehensible between anguish and anxiety? Is it possible to identify an object in solitude, which is the absence of the others?

The paradox of the object as the absence of an object would tend to suggest itself as an *aporia*, a contradiction useful to the extinction of the question due to inconsistency, already at the start.

And this could also be righteous, if not for the fact that ambivalence represents the foundational experience through which the subject reaches unification or *spaltung* (Jaspers, 1913). The others exist even if not reached from the subject's affectivity. Yet in the case of solitude the others are absent, what we know so far is that the absence is scary.

3. A psychodynamic perspective

This second discussion opens with a psychodynamic premise about the defensive theme of displacement. The phobic experience is identified in the transposition of psychological processes from an object considered impossible to face, to an apparently better manageable one. The relevance of the object has given rise to an entire theoretical framework known as *object relations* theory (M. Klein). The contributions proposed here refer to the general theme of the phobia, in the studies of Bellack (apperception), Rorschach (pareidolia) with reference to Nina Rusch de Traubenberg (1984, 1990), of André Green (2002) and Bergeret (1996) in their convergence with the mask object. The first, through apperceptive functioning, suggests to us how the unconscious sedimentation (Fuchs, 2012) tends to filter the subsequent experience. Fear and anguish are relevant phenomena and it could be necessary to mask adaptive desires and needs in everyday life.

The contribution clarifies how fear and anguish express themselves, so that the clinical methods useful to notice them, require the activation of the projection. The more the product obtained moves away from the perception, the more elements filtered from the spaces offered by the mask emerge. The hermeneutic process becomes fundamental.

In a more direct way to the *primary process* we obtain elements through pareidolia; Nina Raucsh de Traubenberg theorized a study of contents that explains the affectivity of the subject in relation to the Human, Animal and Object (as inanimate) categories. How is the theme of the mask expressed in this perspective? As clarified above, the case of solitude as a mask object, expresses the absence of the Human (Others). There are possible convergences with the study of contents. We are witnessing the expression of psychological maturity and adaptation, in the projection of affectivity towards human contents, gradually regressive towards Animal and Object contents expressed by responses to inkblots.

The mask object of solitude, although driven by the absence of human contents, lays the foundations for the object to be reached. Yet this does not happen, even if we assist to the expression of desires. The psychopathological experience arises from this dynamic, through a proto-emotion which is fear, through a feeling without an object which is anguish.

The mask object of solitude in this case, expresses its maladaptive role both in the affective expression and in the Representations of Self and Body, as can be seen from a previous contributions (Settineri et al., 2018; Merlo et al., 2018). The above-mentioned studies concerning the phobic experience refer to the work of Bergeret (1996), in which the psychoanalyst highlights the intrapsychic conflictual aspect and therefore the phobic neurosis.

This is experienced on a non-structural level, as a conflict expressed through displacements and avoidance, in our case the reference to the others is legitimate. A personality struggling with a depressive state. André Green (2002) proposes a position (phobic), which is not really a structure. This position provides for an amplified resonance towards the others, which would be close to what Blanche defined a *psychic desertification* and consequently in the specific of solitude, relational. We are aware of this fact, in the performative acts of body (Pennisi, 2017), in emotional dysregulation, in the masked structure that depression can take through depressive equivalents and the psychic aspects of autoimmune diseases. An interesting fact could come to us from a plausible psychoanalytic transposition, for which the fear of solitude would come to affirm a masked experience of desire for the Others.

As stated previously, the masked object of solitude could be understood through the example of the Rorschach method, where the absence and decreasing human contents highlight the absence of Others' representations and relations. The fundamental elements are fear and the absence of the other. The pictorial works presented before express the psychological *complex*. The fear of loneliness in this sense is configured as a fear of the absence. Some contributions from dynamic psychology highlight an interesting fact, above all perspective in therapeutic terms. Freud (1930) refers to subject's desire satisfaction, obviously not present and difficult to achieve. The lack of clarity and the lack of knowledge about the necessities departs the subject from the possibilities of realization. The clinical information in this perspective highlights the fundamental fact of absence, which reopens the doors of desire that is based precisely on *the void*, in the absence of the object (Lacan, 1958-1959).

In this perspective, the emotional core remains, what changes is the plot of a narrative that does not come out:

Fear of the solitude → Fear of the absence → Fear of the desire for (from) the Others

4. Discussion

One might be tempted to highlight the arrest, rather than the movement deriving from an affective tone of fear, if it were not for the fact that fear and anxiety open the cognitive horizon of a subject's modalities of *being in the world*.

Anguish is in fact suggested as an opening, although the risk is that its aggression towards the subject produces a collapse of signification, which if not evaluated may interfere with adaptation, knowledge and the realization of meanings.

In light of what has been expressed, we could suggest the phobia of solitude as a symbolic act (Settineri et al., 2017) of the subject referred to others. This is configured as a mask object in

those hidden complexes (phobia of the other absent). In the current state, it emerges through clinical reactions since the subject reports it in a phenomenological way, as in the case of the Rorschach pareidolia and the apperception of the TA T.

Loneliness is a theme that presents itself between the anguish of an absent object and fear for a present object that, corresponding to the other, can be a representation. It would be possible to talk about therapy, based on the elements emerged from a phenomenological movement and a dynamic one, so with an integrative purpose.

What is prevalent is the ambivalence or a theme that hardly finds a position between the extremes of a lived experience of fear and anguish.

As Kierkegaard suggested in *Stages on Life's Way*, 1845:

"Thus the contradiction in the name only makes the place more solitary, just as contradiction always makes for solitariness." (p.16)

This expresses the necessity of a defensive structure, which is relevant. A reference of particular impact concerns the mask object in front of the other. The modalities of management of this ambivalence, are similar to the approach to a damaged organ/tissue (Settineri et al., 2018).

In the above-mentioned psychosomatic work, the object is referred to the body, what Pier Marty called *pseudoparanoïd object*. The *pseudoparanoïa* for a damaged physical object (which in our case were the skin and the heart), is expressed through the fact that it is at the same time attractive (because it is able to generate pleasure) and repellent, because it is damaged.

A partial object therefore, lived with both attraction and repulsion, lays the foundations to produce fear and anguish. The common factor we see is the possibility of reopening produced by the different positions considered as relevant.

Another fundamental element is the analysis, is the reason suggested by Heidegger. We know from the therapeutic integration and signification of the image, that it is possible that what corresponds to the overall originality of the Orig - , can be transposed into a positive one.

It could be suggested that what really arises from the analysis of an "*ontological difference*", could emerge what I would suggest as an "*ontological diffidence*" for the others.

In this sense, the use of the mask should not be reduced to pathology, but should provide the adaptive aim of realizing how much of the experience has been lacking (Binswanger, 1954), through the adaptive senses of the ambivalence. The new processes of signification resulting from clinical contact would reduce the limitations of performativity, adaptation and integration of representations.

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