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THE DEMON OF THE UNVEILED PHALLUS:

Jacques Lacan's

“Signification of
the Phallus”

and the Photography
of Robert Mapplethorpe

D. MICHAEL JONES

The recent exhibit of Robert Mapplethorpe's work, "Implicit Tension" (January 25–July 10, 2019), at the Guggenheim, explores the artist's obsession with the magical, the demonic, and the unveiled phallus. It is Mapplethorpe's artistic obsessions, personified in the photographs of the X, Y, and Z Portfolios, as well as the deeply homophobic response his photography, even his name, evoke twenty years after his death, that make this recent exhibit an ideal space to reencounter key concepts from Jacques Lacan's "Signification of the Phallus" in *Écrits*. For as Lacan (2002) points out "the phallus is the signifier of this very *Aufhebung* [sublation], which it inaugurates (initiates) by its disappearance. That is why the demon... springs forth at the very moment the phallus is unveiled in the ancient mysteries (see the famous painting in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii)" (p. 277). This paper argues that the historically hysterical response to Mapplethorpe's work, which culminated in the 1990 Cincinnati obscenity trial, is created in part by the reenactment of this *Aufhebung* between signified and signifier, the splitting [Spaltung] that exiles us into the symbolic and initiates "the paradoxical, deviant, erratic, eccentric, and even scandalous nature of desire" (Lacan, 2002, p. 276).

Keywords: Lacan, Mapplethorpe, symbolic phallus, male hysteria, homophobia

The Demon of the Unveiled Phallus: Jacques Lacan's "Signification of the Phallus" and the Photography of Robert Mapplethorpe

D. MICHAEL JONES

Image and reflection are central to Jacques Lacan's project. From the mirror stage to the graph of desire, the subject is revealed and nullified in reflection. With that in mind, it is no great surprise that the most interesting philosophical reflections on photography overtly or obliquely speak to the Lacanian project of the subject as refracted reflections of the Other. As Roland Barthes (1981) puts it in *Camera Lucida*:

In the Photography, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: The Photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the This (this photography and not Photography), in short, what Lacan calls the *Tuché*, the occasion, the encounter; the Real, in its indefatigable expression (p.4)

Or as Susan Sontag (2001) writes in *On Photography*:

The contingency of photographs confirms that everything is perishable; the arbitrariness of photographic evidence indicates that reality is fundamentally unclassifiable. Reality is summed up in array of causal fragments—an endlessly alluring pointedly reductive way of dealing with the world. (p.80)

Both of these quotes suggest how the photography interconnects with the multilayers of splitting, fragment, and the always already of absence: what escapes the frame and makes the frame possible, pointing to a "Reality [that] is fundamentally unclassifiable," or "what Lacan calls the *Tuché*, the occasion, the encounter, the Real" (Barthes, 1981, p. 4). The image and reflection of causal fragments, the disordering

of the everyday, and the mechanical reproduction of memory as presence make photography an ideal space to consider a Lacanian psychology of aesthetics.

The recent exhibit of the late-twentieth century, American Robert Mapplethorpe's work, "Implicit Tension" (January 25–July 10, 2019), at the Guggenheim is just such a space. Exploring the artist's obsession with the magical, the demonic, and the unveiled phallus personified in the photographs of Mapplethorpe's X, Y, and Z Portfolios as well as the deeply homophobic response his photography, even his name, evokes twenty years after his death, are an opportunity to reencounter key concepts from Jacques Lacan's "Signification of the Phallus" in a museum setting.

I visited "Implicit Tensions" on a rainy Wednesday in March of 2019. The Guggenheim was busy, and after following the rest of the crowd up the Frank Lloyd Wright staircase to the special exhibit floor, I entered, for a moment or two, Mapplethorpe's obsessive, contradictory, and beautifully lit world, which Richard Howard (1988) described as Mapplethorpe's "congestion of fantasy and obsession" (p.152). My first impressions on seeing such a beautifully curated exhibit of his work was the "implicit tension" between the brutal and the fragile: leather and lilies, chains and roses. In my first walk through I was also struck by the sighs, grunts of disgust, and quick glances, at Mapplethorpe's more challenging works from the infamous X, Y, and Z Portfolio. So I went through the exhibit a second time, watching the watchers. Many were scandalized; even the ones that tried not to show it.

On closer inspection, I found it was those pictures that refracted symbolic organization of desire—specifically when they refracted Jacques Lacan's "Signification of the Phallus," which elicited those no-saying responses

(Fink, 1997). Images of the phallus, such as *Mark Stevens* (1976), *Bill* (1976-77), and *Bob Love* (1979), or Mapplethorpe's S&M pieces like *Joe* (1978) and *Self-Portrait* (1978), where a whip inserted in his anus troubled the museumgoers most. It makes sense, of course, in the context of a still puritanical America, but the uncomfortable aesthetic response to Mapplethorpe's work also points to deeper refraction of the reality of the Real.

For as Lacan (2002) points out "the phallus is the signifier of this very *Aufhebung* [sublation], which it inaugurates (initiates) by its disappearance" (p. 277). This substitution and sublation of the symbolic Law of the Father with all its concomitant gendering, mutilation, and verticalization of desire is potentially refracted (one literally cannot see it clearly) to us through Mapplethorpe's unveiling of the phallus. The museumgoers' response to Mapplethorpe's unveiled phallus speaks to that image's unique symbolic position in the splitting of the subject, the ordering of desire, and barring of the subject by language. With his photographic representation of the phallus, Mapplethorpe puts pressure on the imaginary and refracts deeper into the veiled ordering of the symbolic phallus, the signifier without a signified, through unsettling absences, blank spaces, and dark magic.

In *Mark Stevens, or Mr. 10 ½* (1976), for example, the phallus is placed on a display dais with a man wearing chaps, his neck and face out of the frame. The entire composition: the arched back, the skin tight leather chaps, the sucked in stomach, and the tiny devil tattoo under the hardly visible vaccination scar work to unveil the semi-flaccid phallus as refracted, part of the symbolic chain of signifiers (everyone recognizes as the biology of a penis) and yet carrying in it this blank space of its own absence. It is clearly presented as part of the body and yet resting on a platform it is split from the body, as if

the faceless human to which it is attached is merely a frame for the image of the phallus, “privileged signifier” (Lacan, 2002, p. 277). The refraction of the absence is unmistakable in the photographs that make up *Bill* (1976-1977) from the same year.

For in *Bill* (1976-1977), three photographs of the phallus and symbolic phallus are framed one beside the other. The first photograph is of a male hand holding a semi-erect phallus, again disconnected from any body of pleasure, or any face or form to give it context; the second photo is absolute black: a void where nothing can be signified but absence; the third photograph returns to the hand holding the semi-erect phallus at a slightly higher angle. The three photographs—image, blank, image—narrate the disappearance of phallic presence and illustrates what I have called refraction: the broken glimpse of the *Aufhebung* between signified and signifier, the splitting [Spaltung] (the sublation and splitting being a double motion of the same act) that exiles us into the symbolic and initiates “the paradoxical, deviant, erratic, eccentric, and even scandalous nature of desire” (Lacan, 2002, p. 276). “Deviant, erratic, eccentric, and even scandalous” are an excellent discretion of the S&M photoplays from the X, Y, and Z Portfolio (Lacan, 2002, p. 276).

For Lacan and Mapplethorpe, the moment of absence is also a moment of diabolical creation. “That is why the demon,” as Lacan (2002) writes, “springs forth at the very moment the phallus is unveiled in the ancient mysteries (see the famous painting in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii)” (p. 277). Indeed, from a Lacanian position, the Mapplethorpe exhibit at the Guggenheim functions like a twenty-first century American Villa of Mysteries, for at its center is the unveiled phallus and the demonic trespass that its unveiling conjures. The infamous photographs suggest the magical and demonic

forces that emerge when the “privileged signifier” is split from “the Logos [it] is wedded to” (Lacan, 2002, p. 277). In Mapplethorpe’s S&M pieces, like *Joe* (1978) and *Self-Portrait* (1978), where a whip inserted in his anus unmistakably suggests the centaur, along with the demonic self-portraits—*With gun and star* (1982) and *Self-Portrait* (1985) with devil horns—the artist reveals images of the magical, transgressive, and demonic that haunt the fissures of the “privileged signifier” (Lacan, 2002, p. 277).

In the S&M photographs, the privileged signifier as cancelled, voided and re-initiated outside of its own self-enclosing privileged status. The phallus in *Self-Portrait* (1978) with whip is an image of power (a whip) but it is also flaccid, limp and connected to the anus, which creates a centaur: by scrambling the signifying coordinates, a phallus becomes a meaningless tail. In *Joe* (1978) the phallus of oral sex is literally turned upside down, disconnected from vertical authority, and turned into a stiletto-sharp leather tongue.

This repositioning of phallic power—with all its deep symbolic meanings—refracts power and desire backward through signifying chains that situate authority and pleasure outside of the homonormative phallic law. As Judith Butler (2006) writes, “men are said to ‘have’ the Phallus, yet never to ‘be’ it, in the sense that the penis is not equivalent to the Law;” and yet men “are compelled to articulate enact these repeated impossibilities” (p. 46) of masculine wholeness. Mapplethorpe’s work undoes that: by unpacking the mechanics of its making, associating power with the anus, the mouth, and horizontal positions, the vertical and phallic are magically reduced to what they are: props in the masquerade. It is this refraction of phallic power and authority that accounts for the deeply hysterical response to Mapplethorpe’s photography.

Lacan helps us understand the grunts of disgust as more than lingering homophobia, but a deeper mechanics of homophobia and the trauma that is the brutal organization and signification of our desire. The absence of connection between the signified and the signification of bodies, opens up the lack between “the appetite for satisfaction” and the “demand for love” from which “the power of pure loss emerges from the residue of an obliteration,” (Lacan, 2002, p. 276). Part of the hysterical, homophobic response to touch that “residue of obliteration” at the heart of our coming into the language: the cancellation of the signified and creation of the symbolic that can never reclaim it (Lacan, 2002, p. 276). This is not simply a theoretical observation but a historical one.

For Mapplethorpe’s photography became the space for a national debate on art, freedom of expression; or quite literally, for people like late Senator from North Carolina, Jesse Helms: freedom from expression. This flash-point of the culture war is well documented: the uproar around Mapplethorpe’s X, Y, and Z Portfolio, the protests for and against, the Corcoran’s cancelation of the exhibit, and the famous protest, where the Mapplethorpe’s iconic photography of the tattered American flag and his own ironical self-portrait were projected on the wall of the museum. This key moment in the cultural wars and the LGBTQ+ movement is also a “Perfect Moment” (1989-90)—ironically the name of the touring Mapplethorpe exhibit at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati prop that lead to the most publicized obscenity trail since Ginsberg’s reading of *Howl* in 1956—to look at the Lacanian mechanics of homophobia, which the reaction to Mapplethorpe’s photography patently reveals (Tannenbaum, 1991).

In fact, Jesse Helms, one of the most openly homophobic and vitriolic figures in

late twentieth-century American political history reveals it best. On July 25, 1990, Helms’s attack on the National Endowment of the Arts, the nebulous, liberal news media, and the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, who died from AIDS only a year before, perfectly elucidates the hysterical response to any challenge to the phallic systematization of desire:

I have tried without success to establish in my own mind when if ever the liberal news media have engaged in more distortions of the truth than in the public prop discussion of the National Endowment for the Arts. The media have in fact been obsessed for at least 5 years to my knowledge with trying to prove that black is white and that disgusting, insulting, and revolting garbage produced by obviously sick minds is somehow art (Helms, 1994).

Like many hysterical subjects, Helms’s attack on the object of his ego’s discomfort, his no-saying, is more revealing about him than it is about the merits of the object; and in this case, is most revealing about how Mapplethorpe’s photography engenders homophobia. The problem, he admits, is in “my own mind”—and it is a signification problem—one where the coordinates will not cohere, which he calls: “distortions.” (Helms, 1994) These distortions—created by a symbol for the symbolic other: the media—is turning “black to white” (in Helms’ the anti-miscegenation implication of the metaphor is duly noted) speaks to a painful confusion of the phallic law, built on binaries, and thus is a refraction, an angular mixing of light and dark, becoming a mirror for the unstable subject. This “... power of pure loss emerges from the residue of an obliteration,” and engenders, in Helms’s case, a cascade of hysterical and bodily rejections: “disgusting,

insulting, and revolting garbage” all of which speak to ideological homophobia as a manifest recognition of the phallus itself as demonically dangerous to the Phallic law (Lacan, 2002, p. 276; Helms, 1994).

Helms’s no-saying also suggests Barthes’s and Sontag’s interpretation of the unique potential of photography to speak to the trauma that fantasy and binary ideologies work hand in hand to hide. “Implicit Tension,” the retrospective of Robert Mapplethorpe’s work at the Guggenheim, read through Lacan’s “Signification of the Phallus” unveils the mutilating mechanics at work in aesthetic no-saying, historical homophobia while suggesting deeper patterns in masculine hysteria. The Mapplethorpe retrospective also celebrated—in floral still-life photographs like *Easter lilies with mirror* (1979) and *Poppy* (1988), alongside nudes such as *Joe* (1978) and *Mark Stevens* (1976)—an unspeakably fragile life, one that just escapes: the all-consuming, symbolizing lens. In the photograph *Poppy* (1988), with the almost impossible delicacy of the interconnected steams bursting into the silk of the bloom, one can glimpse a logic based on fragility and care as opposed to illusion and subjugation, but one can only glimpse it.

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