

Ken Park – The helplessness, beyond castration anxiety¹

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Abstract: The tough narrative and crude images in the film *Ken Park*, by Larry Clark and Ed Lachman are the working material chosen by Elisa Alvarenga to invite us to learn a few lessons on how to read the world we live in. The movie shows the effect of the decadence of father's function and decline of the phallic function. It drives our attention to a world in which disoriented parents breed helpless children.

Keywords: Helplessness; castration anxiety; father's function.

Resumo: Partiendo de la narrativa dura y de las imágenes crudas de la película *Ken Park*, de Larry Clark y Ed Lachman, Elisa Alvarenga nos invita a sacar algunas lecciones para la lectura del mundo en que vivimos. Esta película muestra el efecto, en el mundo contemporáneo, del declinio de la función paterna y de la degradación de la función fálica y convoca nuestra mirada sobre un mundo donde la desorientación de los padres produce hijos desamparados.

Palabras-llave: Desamparo; angustia de castración; función paterna.

Not so amusing to see, the film *Ken Park*, by Larry Clark and Ed Lachman, as stated in a Brazilian newspaper review, is painfully didactic. Invited to share comments about the film with a movie critic, I was surprised by the opposing points of view about it: for the so-called critic, the film deserved a below zero rating; it was esthetically nule. For a university professor who had come to see it with his students for the second time, the film was great. The film made me rather uncomfortable the first time I saw it, but then I was ready to see it again and make some remarks about it. I think it had to do with the subject of our local Seminar: Youth and Psychoanalysis.

As in a masterpiece, the rough narrative presented by one of the characters and the cruelty of the images show and make us speak, inviting us to extract from it some lessons to read the world we live in. Exhibiting a cut made in the United States – *The United Symptoms*, as a French psychoanalyst would say – the film depicts clearly and shockingly the effect of the decline of the father's function and the degradation of the phallic function in the contemporary world. Reading Jacques-Alain Miller's comments about Lacan's Seminar *The Anxiety*, recently established by him, I couldn't avoid thinking about the film, which shows a mortified phallus, reduced to its organ function, and puts in evidence a body that enjoys itself as a machine in operation, with its objects and organs that are much more than an image.

The characters, starting with the elderly grandparents, alienated in their love, to the little girl, who watches an erotic video while her mother makes love to her older daughter's boyfriend, show the decline of this function which, in the words of Jacques Lacan, binds desire and law.

Let's begin with the most dramatic and cruel example of the absence of the phallic function, which should compensate an excess of love, incarnated in the grandmother who does and allows her grandson to do everything, apologizing his aggressions and impoliteness. The delirious boy incarnates an example of the adolescent invaded by *jouissance*, without any limit established by the Other. The *jouissance* of the Other, represented in the senile grandfather who cheats in the crossword puzzle, is unbearable to him. The boy has to kill his grandfather, because he cheats, and his grandmother, because she is over concerned about him. In the film, Tate personalizes the figure of the delirious character, the protagonist who does not have any instrument to limit the invasive *jouissance* of the Other.

Two boys and a girl, their friend, are the adolescent characters who, making use of the phallic function to localize the *jouissance* as sexual, need, nevertheless, to make use of perverse artifices to escape the lack of orientation of their parents.

Celeste is presented as a girl subdued to a religiously crazy father who perversely mourns her mother. The girl herself becomes a sexual partner to her boyfriend, playing the agent role in a sadomasochistic scene: she satisfies her boyfriend while her father talks to her dead mother in the cemetery. Caught in the act, because she does everything under her father's nose, she's forced to marry him in a bizarre incestuous ceremony, prepared by the father. Everything is arranged for her to continue performing, with her friends, her fantasies of unlimited *jouissance*. Being a partner of her father shows that the arbitrary law of a fanatic father is not the law that allows *jouissance* to give in to desire.

One of the boys, Claude, is the feminine son of an alcoholic, unemployed and violent father who despises him. That attitude barely hides an incestuous desire. Claude tries to escape through drugs, running away from this father who engages in action by trying to approach his son, either through violence, or through eroticism. Claude ends up, as his friend, in the final *ménage-à-trois*, acting out the fantasy of sex without limits and without end.

The other boy, Shawn, is the story narrator. Violent with his own brother, he becomes an instrument of *jouissance* to his girlfriend's mother. Shawn is the docile protagonist who is also a cheater, but always a slave of *jouissance*. He wants, at any rate, to satisfy the Other and, in face of the lack of limits, he tries to add up: "how many times did you come?", he asks his girlfriend's mother, who takes him to her bed, indifferent, in her silicone beauty. That doesn't stop her from inviting him for Sunday dinner, when he sits at the table between his girlfriend and her father, the husband of his lover.

Finally, let us talk about Ken Park, the protagonist who gives the film a name. In the initial scene, he kills himself in the middle of the skating rink, filmed by a camera prepared by himself, who demands in this way the look of the Other. This scene is re-signified by the final scene, in which we learn that Ken's girlfriend got pregnant. Refusing an abortion, she asks him: "Would you like to have been aborted by your mother?" His answer, in act, is suicide, under the look of the Other: an abortion of himself as a father. Having no resources to play the father's part, when this role is imposed on him, Ken makes a decision: "It's he or I".

The film, a metonymy of Ken Park's suicide, demands our look over a world where parents' lack of orientation produces helpless children. In the moment of facing sex, there is no castration anxiety, because there is no one to incarnate its menace. Contrarily, that which menaces and demands a treatment is the excess of *jouissance* that presents itself in its most various forms. The degraded phallic function appears in the figure of the phallus reduced to an organ, either in Tate's frenetic masturbation or in the alcoholic father's excretory function. It's a film in which the demand of *jouissance* of the superego is everywhere, and the only way to treat it for, the phallically oriented youth, is to try to make the sexual relation exist. This is a beautiful scene, where they make love and talk to each other, with the fantasy that life could be summarized to an endless sexual relationship.

The relief for the characters' helplessness is the narrative and the offer, to the Other, that happens to be ourselves, of the scenes that show death and the body as a machine for *jouissance*. Comparable to Sade's need to write, Shawn had to tell the story of Ken Park. Due to the absence of a law that would regulate and guarantee one's *jouissance*, the only solution is each one becomes responsible for one's own *jouissance*, so that each one will consent to desire and to life. Nevertheless, different from the solution found by the character in the film *God's City*, who records the tragedy and is therefore able to remain outside, Shawn is, at the same time, the story narrator and the protagonist. He makes us pose a final question: what solution will there be for these youth who are beyond castration anxiety?

Through Shawn, the directors of the film address their ideas to us. We are, somehow, responsible for consequent conclusions about what we have witnessed. If the hypermodern civilization, as proposes Jacques-Alain Miller, is that in which the object *a* is in the top position, we observe in *Ken park* that the youth are reduced to the status of incestuous objects for their parents, invaded by the imperative of *jouissance*. The theme of the incest is repeated in sequence for Shawn, Claude and Celeste, all of them objects of an incestuous desire of a deregulated father or mother. Would that be the danger that the youth have to face in the world today? The danger of becoming body-machines, body-objects of *jouissance* for the Other?

That concerns Psychoanalysis as long as it is viewed as a possibility, for the youth to come across another kind of desire, the analyst's desire, and another kind of love, the love of transference.

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