

“OCEANIC FEELING” AND CONTROL OVER FIRE: AN ESSAY ON ART AND POLITICS

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ABSTRACT: This essay aims to investigate the relation between the notion of “oceanic feeling” and a type of social bond distinct from group formation and which would be made explicit singularly in the field of art, in which the boundaries between individuals are destabilized in favor of a kind of transmission of desire, under the discursive mode of the well-known dream in which the dead son appears to the father and asks him “Father, don’t you see that I’m burning?”. The paper also examines, inconclusively, the possibility that such a discursive strategy characterized by literality and indexicality could constitute a political force against group fascism.

Keywords: oceanic feeling; death-drive; dreams; social bond.

RESUMO: “Sentimento oceânico” e controle do fogo: ensaio sobre arte e política. O ensaio busca uma articulação entre a noção de “sentimento oceânico” e uma modalidade de laço social distinta da formação da massa e que se explicitaria privilegiadamente no campo da arte, na qual se desestabilizam as fronteiras entre indivíduos em prol de uma espécie de transmissão de desejo, sob o modo discursivo do conhecido sonho no qual o filho morto aparece ao pai e lhe pergunta “Pai, não vês que estou queimando?”. O texto examina ainda, de modo inconclusivo, a possibilidade de tal estratégia discursiva caracterizada pela literalidade e indicialidade poder se constituir em uma força política contra o fascismo da massa.

Palavras-chave: sentimento oceânico; pulsão de morte; sonhos; laço social.

DOI - <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1809-44142021003007>

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Ao nível do fogo
falo
e por muitos incêndios ao meu redor
no incêndio do mar às minhas costas
[...]
como a noite
ou a esperança
com suas hélices de hidrogênio
falo
por muitos incêndios.

Ferreira Gullar, *Ao nível do fogo* (1974)

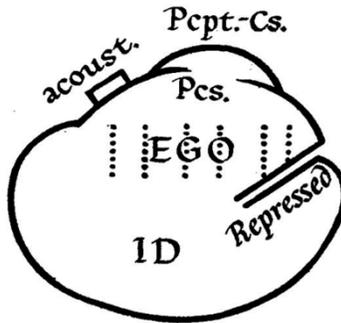
As is well known, Freud begins *Civilization and its discontents*, published in 1929, evoking a letter he received from a French friend, the important writer Romain Rolland, in reaction to the 1927 book *The future of an illusion*. For Rolland, the psychoanalyst left out something fundamental about religion, something genuinely religious, which he calls “oceanic feeling”. This peculiar feeling had never abandoned him and was confirmed to him by many other people, which leads the writer to presume the same feeling in millions of human beings. He characterizes it as

a sensation of ‘eternity’, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded – as it were, ‘oceanic’. This feeling, he adds, is a purely subjective fact, not an article of faith; it brings with it no assurance of personal immortality, but it is the source of the religious energy which is seized upon by the various Churches and religious systems, directed by them into particular channels, and doubtless also exhausted by them. One may, he thinks, rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion. (FREUD, 1929/1989, p. 11),

Freud says that he does not find such an oceanic feeling in himself, he has great difficulty in understanding it and that psychoanalysis would not be able to help the understanding of it either. He distrusts the term “feeling” and proposes that such an idea of indissoluble union, of belonging to the whole of the outside world, would be like an “intellectual perception, which is not, it is true, without an accompanying feeling-tone” (FREUD, 1929/1989, p. 12). The notion proposed by Rolland is criticized and even treated with a certain disdain by the author, who at one point quotes Schiller, the great romantic poet and philosopher, with the verse: “Let him rejoice who breathes up here in the roseate light!” (SCHILLER *apud* FREUD, 1929/1989, p. 21), as if to say: “I’m glad they can be so happy, let them be”. Freud is skeptical about the possibility of achieving such happiness, which could be pursued through practices of meditation and asceticism. But it is astonishing that he takes up dozens of pages discussing this oceanic sentiment if he despises it so, and also that he begins his most important book on culture with this topic. If the idea of oceanic feeling indeed seemed unusable and wrong, he would not spend so much time discussing it. By rejecting it, he nevertheless does not fail to bring this notion – or problem – as something fundamental in the reflection upon culture, even though initially this seems to go in the opposite direction of his arguments in defense of a *discomfort* in culture (using a more faithful translation of the German term *Unbehagen*), of a fundamental friction, of the impossibility to conceive a continuity between individual and civilization. Although it is less faithful to the original, we must consider, in passing, that the expression “mal-estar”, in Portuguese – which means indisposition, ailment, uneasiness –, used in the title of *Civilization and its discontents* [O mal-estar na cultura] brings to the signifier a relevant layer for discussion, conveying wisdom proper to a particular language: taking the meaning of the words separately – *mal* as an adverb meaning hardly, barely, and *estar* as a verb meaning “to be” but coming from the Latin *stare*, or “to be standing” –, it indicates that the subject *mal-está*, or *barely-is*, in Culture, i.e., the subject is in it, even if in a precarious or twisted way. In this line of thought, the dual opposition between the individual, on the one hand, and culture, group, or society, on the other, dissolves; and one can think that the subject of the unconscious *is* [está] invariably in Culture – not under the existential and more permanent mode of the verb “to be” [ser], but under the provisional and contingent key implied in the verb *estar*.

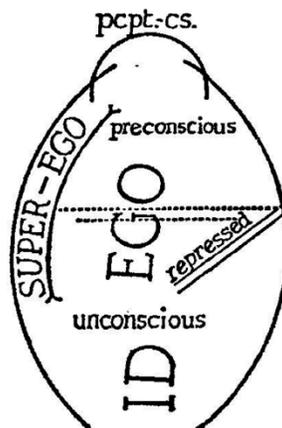
Annoyed with his friend’s proposal, Freud does not shy away from discussing it, and relates it to an important issue for psychoanalysis: the fact that the I (*Ich*) is not from the get-go well defined in relation to the external world, that one’s borders are not fixed and stable. The strange possibility indicated by the oceanic feeling of having a participation or even total dissolution between us and the world, in its elements and objects, accentuates

in extremis the position contrary to the opposition between Individual and society, which strictly follows the idea of a decentering of the subject, considering the fact that “the self (*Ich*) is no longer master in its own house”, as Freud remarked in 1917 (FREUD, 1917/1944, p. 295; our translation). The subject is from the get-go *out of oneself*, being constituted by the Other, as Lacan would propose decades later. In this line of thought, it is important to remember that the subject of the unconscious is not located within the individual (in the subjectivity that psychology intends to treat), but among us, in the world, or rather in the world inhabited by the speaking-being that is Culture. This, which must be considered as nothing less than the fundamental foundation of psychoanalysis, is what led Freud to propose *das Es*, in 1923, in the text *The Ego and the Id* [or *The I and the It (das Es)*], being the ego “that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world through the medium of the *Pcpt.-Cs.*; in a sense it is an extension of the surface-differentiation” (FREUD, 1923/1986, p. 25). Freud also insists on the idea that the ego (*Ich*) is nothing more than “the projection of a surface” (FREUD, 1923/1986, p. 24), thus underlining a change from a “supposed interiority” to an exteriority that the surface is in contact with and by which it defines itself. The drawing that accompanies these formulations has an ovoid shape with well-defined borders – especially at its upper side, where the *perception-conscious* would be located, in persistent contact with the stimuli that come from the world –, except for the curious straight tunnel with no closure that the psychoanalyst marks as the “repressed”:



Source: FREUD, S. *The Ego and the Id* (1923). London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1986. (The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: The Ego and the Id and Other Works, 19, p. 24)

A few years later – exactly the years when fascism was growing and coming to be in Europe –, in one of the 1932-1933 lectures, *The dissection of the psychological personality*, this diagram is resumed and modified in a very interesting way that converges with the passage from the notion of “Unconscious” to that of “It” (this neutral pronoun, as to confirm the idea of dissemination into the “inorganic”): a passageway opens between the It (*Id*) and the outer part, as can be seen in the diagram that accompanies the text, which we reproduce here from the original manuscript:



Source: FREUD, S. *The dissection of the psychological personality* (1933). New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989). (New introductory lectures on psycho-analysis, 21, p. 98)



Source: GAMWELL, Lynn (3d.). *From Neurology to Psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud's Neurological Drawings and Diagrams of the Mind*. New York: Binghamton University/State University of New York, 2006, p. 46.

Das Es is found in this drawing right on the threshold, on the wide-open border between the “mental apparatus” and its exterior, which is curiously inhabited by Freud’s own writing. When rereading the “oceanic feeling” under this key, it becomes striking that Freud did not relate it to the death-drive, repetition and his ultimate goal of returning to the inanimate, proposed years before, in *Beyond the pleasure principle* (1920). In this bewildering book, which is not our aim here to examine, the psychoanalyst even states that the death-drive, or “death instinct” in James Strachey’s translation, would have arisen “by the coming to life of inorganic substance” (FREUD, 1920/1955, p. 61). One might think that what prevents him is the fact that Rolland correlates the “oceanic feeling” to a kind of happiness, communion and eternity (the bliss of Schiller’s “roseate light”) that clashes with the Thanatos’ syntax. Nevertheless, the anguish, which is the other side of such bliss, still pulsates in the Freudian text. It is seen among the lines where Freud reflects upon this “feeling” as an extension or survival of the baby’s initial experience, which occurs before the boundaries of the ego are built, through the game of the drives and what would be “in” and “out” of oneself, in the self and in the other, under the aegis of the Pleasure Principle. Between the delimitation of borders and their “oceanic” dissolution, we can say that *jouissance* is modulated, domesticated or unleashed, according to the mixture or detachment of life-drive and death-drive.

It is, indeed, about *jouissance* in the *mal-estar* (in the sense of “barely to be” and discontentment), both in the discomfort inherent to our place in culture and in the substitutes brought to minimize it or to comfort us. Freud mentions, for example, the use of drugs as a way of freeing oneself from this suffering that cannot be completely overcome; or love as a possibility of suspending the boundary between self and other (which brings a lot of pleasure but also a lot of suffering – even more suffering, he says, than natural catastrophes or other negative contingencies in life). An idea that is of particular interest to us is one that sees in art a kind of “mild narcosis” that would protect us from the suffering of culture (FREUD, 1929/1989, p. 31). This seemingly banal formulation is actually quite surprising for someone who not only valued the Aristotelian catharsis theory, but had initially made it his model for treating neuroses. Freud is well aware, as an inheritor of German Romanticism, that it is about suffering in art. A certain *mal-estar*, and its modulations in/by culture. And an operation that calls into question and moves the boundaries of the self – “the barriers that rise between each single ego and the others” (FREUD, 1908/1995, p. 443) –, as he had already formulated in 1907 in *Creative writers and day-dreaming* (which would be better translated as *The poet (or artist, in general) and the phantasy, Der Dichter und das Phantasieren*), when he locates the *ars poetica* in the technique of seduction that makes us overcome repulsion and share the artist’s phantasies. In this sense, we can say that art implies the suspension of the strict delimitation of each “individual” – i.e., the one that is not divided – in favor of the emergence of subject-effects in Culture, among us. And also that experiences in the field of art presuppose a type of social bonding that would activate the dissemination of the subject, indicated by the “oceanic feeling”, within the world and objects.

The fact that Rolland is a writer perhaps might not be anodyne, after all, to the seduction (and irritation) exerted on Freud by this notion. If we pay less attention to the illusion of happiness that the notion seems to carry and highlight what appears as the dissolution of the self in the world, we can emphasize the indication of such a relationship between subject and culture in which it isn’t a matter of replicating the opposition individual/society, but rather having the subject of the unconscious (barely) *be* [(mal) *estar*] outside oneself, in culture – in what is transmitted between individuals as subject-effect, and which has in Art its chosen place

in society. Art objects are, in principle, objects that call us to participate, as if carrying something of ourselves that is radically unique, and yet happens between us (and *to us*). In them we can (barely) *be*, on the fringes of jouissance and the return to the inorganic.

In opposition to the oceanic feeling, Freud also mentions in *Civilization and its discontents*, quite occasionally, the control over fire, which stands out as one of the greatest cultural accomplishments, alongside the use of tools and the construction of habitation, as “as a quite extraordinary and unexampled achievement” (FREUD, 1929/1989, p. 42). As a footnote, the psychoanalyst unfolds a rather fanciful interpretation of this feat in terms of one’s self-control in order to give up the satisfaction of the “childish pleasure” of extinguishing fire with urine, which would correspond to a homosexual fantasy, or, more precisely, “an enjoyment of sexual potency in a homosexual competition”, insofar as the flames would be phallic symbols (FREUD, 1929/1989, p. 42). It is interesting and surprising that the control over fire is brought about in relation to the power to put it out and not as a containment of its destructive incendiary power. The pointing of the phallus in this fantasy is also curious, since penis possession in it could lead to the irresponsible destruction of the cultural conquest of the conquest of fire, by mere demonstration of “sexual potency”. In contrast, the “woman had been appointed guardian of the fire which was held captive on the domestic hearth, because her anatomy made it impossible for her to yield to the temptation of this desire” (FREUD, 1929/1989, p. 43).

Shortly after, in 1932, Freud publishes a text entirely dedicated to this issue, *The acquisition of fire*, evoking the myth of Prometheus, the semidivine hero who steals fire from the gods and gives it to men. The way in which Prometheus manages to transport fire is particularly interesting: he uses a fennel stalk, a “hollow stick” (FREUD, 1932/2017, p. 211), to store a flame in it and descend from Olympus. “Such an object appearing in a dream”, Freud comments, “would be interpreted as a symbol for the penis, although the unusual emphasis on hollowness would disturb us” (FREUD, 1932/2017, p. 211). Following the reverse transformation mechanism to confirm the 1929 hypothesis, he proposes that what is at stake is the water stream from the urine rather than fire. The way in which Freud’s argumentation brings the phallic register to the foreground is somewhat forced, insisting on the “penis-stalk” equivalence and leaving aside the “disturbance” brought about by the hollow character of the stick Prometheus used. When discussing the oceanic feeling in *Civilization and its discontents*, the emphasis on the role of the father with regard to “religious needs” is also somewhat swift, which Freud says is “incontrovertibly” derived “from the infant’s helplessness” (FREUD, 1929/1989, p. 20) and the yearning for a paternal presence awoken as the one capable of giving protection, as a substitute for a kind of divine providence.

The general scheme of this social bond here reaffirmed is that presented by the psychoanalyst a few years earlier in *Group psychology and the analysis of the Ego*, in which he shows that the relationship of each one of us with the one that occupies the place of the father, the leader – be it Jesus or, in the case of the army, for example, the commander, or even a teacher, an author etc. – would be a relationship of love and idealization (FREUD, 1921). As “children”, we would need leaders to guarantee the place of this great father, superior and capable of taking care of us. And being therefore placed in the position of the ego ideal, Freud says, in a type of relationship similar to that of a child to the father, this figure would sustain an identification between all those who also love and venerate this father, who belong to this group of “siblings”. This identification between the egos that relate to and devote themselves to this leader is what forms the group, a notion used in sociology at the time to discuss social formations in which phenomena such as lynching or large demonstrations occurred, leading to a contagion of society and becoming increasingly bigger, to the point of potentially extreme acts, of violence or renunciation, which the individual would not be able to carry out alone – but which, in this contagion of the group, one becomes capable of doing. Perhaps the best, most radical example is that of lynching; perhaps those people, each of them individually, are not capable of assassination, but the crowd, united, may give in to watchwords and, by contagion, commit the most atrocious acts.

A special chapter – or rather several chapters – in the history of humanity derives from such a force of contagion directed towards violent and destructive acts, without a doubt. Between the two World Wars, while fascism is emerging in Europe, Freud notes that “there are difficulties attaching to the nature of civilization which will not yield to any attempt at reform” (FREUD, 1929/1989, p. 74), pointing out a certain tragic quality inherent to culture, insofar as aggression, exploitation of others, in short, extreme violence is at its heart and is one of its pillars. And this is accentuated in the state of psychological poverty of groups, whose danger surrounds Culture permanently, “forcing itself on our notice”, as Freud writes:

[...] there forces itself on our notice the danger of a state of things which might be termed ‘the psychological poverty of groups’. This danger is most threatening where the bonds of a society are chiefly constituted by the identification of its members with one another, while individuals of the leader type do not acquire the importance that should fall to them in the formation of a group. (FREUD, 1929/1989, p. 74).

The lack of a substitute for the father who is an adequate match to their assigned position determines, therefore, a regrettable situation – and avoidable, in principle. But, in order to avoid fascism and the “poverty” of groups, would it be necessary to depend upon a leader’s supposed ethical “greatness”? Would the paternal/phallic structure be unavoidable as a pillar of the social bond? Wouldn’t it be possible to formulate other social bond logics, other constructive forces (even if they are destructive as well, following the complexity of the *mal-estar* in Culture)? A system that is distinct from the reference to the phallus as an attribute of the father which makes us idealize someone by placing them in a certain position and submitting ourselves to a certain discourse due to the devotion to that person and identification among those who also adore them? Is it possible to think in psychoanalytic terms of something like a politics of desire (distinct from the politics of groups)?

With the oceanic feeling I believe the Freudian text becomes entangled with this issue, even if it does not unfold the problem in terms of a previous link between us, as well as dissemination (fragmented, non-unitary or unary) of the subject in Culture. In an attempt to carry it forward, let us evoke another occasion, well before 1929, where the image of fire appears in the context of a traumatic eruption that, curiously, would imply a kind of transmission of desire. I am referring to the well-known dream of the dead son whose body burns, presented in the most important chapter of *The interpretation of dreams*, chapter 7, entitled *The psychology of the dream activities*. The section concerns an absolutely *sui generis* dream, and even strange, because on a closer reading it proves itself problematic in relation to the central thesis of the book, according to which the dream is the fulfillment of wishes, i.e., the dream would satisfy a desire by showing it, presenting it in images and words, and that would occur in a disguised way, as an enunciation that isn’t direct, but must be interpreted based on the dreamer’s free association. The dream is, therefore, as is well known, a narrative (the account of the oneiric experience, inapprehensible as such) that acts as a trigger for other narratives, among which desire is outlined, and such an intimate relationship between desire and dream is fundamental and founding in psychoanalysis. But the idea that the dream is a work of language, deformation, and narrative construction is equally important, which suggests a very interesting position in thinking about language itself – as well as the relationship between the unconscious and what happens in the world. By means of these intricate paths between culture and the formations of the unconscious, I was reminded of the extraordinary dream we are now going to address, when, in August 2019, I received an invitation to talk about fires at UFRGS (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul)¹. The colleagues who invited me had in mind the accident that had consumed the National Museum a few months earlier. But in the interval between the invitation and the conference, land grabbers began to burn large areas of the Amazon Forest in a concerted manner, in response to indications from the Federal government that they would go unpunished. The invitation to talk about fires troubled me; I didn’t quite know what to say in the face of such tragedy and the only thing that occurred to me, with strange insistence, was this dream told by Freud.

It is about a man who has just lost his child of whom he had taken care of during an illness. The corpse is being held for the wake. The father is very tired and asks an older man to take care of his son’s body, which is surrounded by large lighted candles, and leaves to take a nap. Here is Freud’s description of the dream:

After sleeping a few hours the father dreamed that the child stood near his bed clasping his arms and calling out reproachfully, “Father, don’t you see that I am burning?” The father woke and noticed a bright light coming from the adjoining room. Rushing in, he found the old man asleep, and the covers and one arm of the beloved body burned by the fallen candle. (FREUD, 1900/2021, p. 403-404).

The psychoanalyst says that this account was given to him by a patient, who for her part heard it at a conference about dreams. He writes:

This dream evidently made a deep impression upon the lady, as she went so far as to imitate it, *i.e.* to repeat the elements of this dream in a dream of her own in order to express by this transference her agreement with it in a certain point. (FREUD, 1900/2021, p. 403).

This is absolutely extraordinary: for someone to *imitate*, or *redream*, a dream they heard being told. But Freud mentions it as if it were not surprising, as if dreams were transmitted between us, or rather as if there was a kind of “transference” through dreams. In 1900 he had not yet clearly elaborated the theory of transference as what happens between the analysand and the analyst, but it is remarkable that Freud uses the same term here, *Übertragung*, which in current German has the meaning of transmission (of a disease) or contagion (by

¹ The lecture was to be presented in the “II Encontro da Rede de Pesquisa Graphias”, under the title *Fires*, promoted by the Graduate Program in Education and the Research Center in Psychoanalysis, Education and Culture (Nuppec) on August 15, 2019.

a pathogen such as a virus, for example).

It is very interesting and bewildering to think about the possibility of dreams being contagious. Once again, this distances us from the idea of a “profound” and individual psychology. What are these accounts that pass between us and that we can possibly dream, in turn? The dream of the son who burns is perhaps particularly ardent, perhaps it spreads among us with singular force. What characterizes it? Would it be a latent meaning to be unraveled? How to interpret it? After this passage, Freud quickly says that he agrees with the explanation that the lecturer gave, according to his patient: the flash of the flames in the next room would have reached the vision of the sleeping father and would have made him dream. It is important to note that, for Freud, in addition to the dream being a wish-fulfillment, it also has a very immediate function of maintaining the state of sleep, preventing the dreamer from waking up. This is part of our everyday experience, in fact: often the sound of the alarm clock enters the plot of a dream, making us buy some time before waking up – or at times triumphing and leading us to ignore the noise and continue sleeping. The dream narrative would incorporate external stimuli to try to neutralize them. So, Freud says, instead of the flash of fire waking the father up, it caused him to create this dream in which his son was alive – working therefore as a wish-fulfillment. But quickly the father wakes up to what is happening and the dream fails.

Lacan returns to this dream in his Seminar XI and disagrees with Freud rather sharply, arguing that, far from prolonging sleep, this dream wakes up the dreamer (LACAN, 1964/1998). It is a sort of opening of doors to the real that is happening. Lacan characterizes it as a failure to meet the real, as a “missed encounter”. He doesn’t connect the dream with the chimeras of unconscious phantasies, in their infinite and more or less typical narratives, but to the idea of the Real, which is very important in its syntax: it is something that is beyond reality, which is more real than reality itself, resisting both language and representation. Something unassimilable, that pulsates and touches us in a way perhaps comparable to the cry: “Fire!”. In the narrative of the dream, there is a line, a single line, spoken, which is a call upon the father: “Father, can’t you see I’m burning?”. Perhaps this dream shows that every dream consists of a summon – which neither Freud nor Lacan ever examine as a possibility, but this becomes explicit in the situation itself, in the narrative setting where the account of the dream appears, perhaps finding an echo in the idea of Freud’s patient dreaming again, redreaming the dream told to her, as if the fire took her too, and so the dream calls upon her, summons her; as if the flames drew her to the fire.

Perhaps every dream has a dimension of a call upon another, as does literature, potentially – and this calling may be, ultimately, a summon to the father: “Father, can’t you see I’m burning?”. This kind of transference that would be a part of the dream structure itself may seem strange to someone familiar with Freud’s theory of dream interpretation, but I think it is confirmed in some everyday experiences involved in our dream life, such as, for instance, the fact that several times, when we wake up after dreaming, we have an urgent need to share that dream with someone; at times, someone in particular, as is the case with the dreams we make in psychoanalysis, the dreams destined for the analyst, which are a part of a particular process taking place there.

As Lacan shows when commenting on the dream, what “burns” the son, and allows for desire, is precisely a deep mistrust of the “too ideal” father:

What is he burning with, if not with that which we see emerging at the other points designated by the Freudian topology, namely, the weight of the sins of the father, borne by the ghost in the myth of Hamlet, which Freud couples with the myth of Oedipus? The father, the Name-of-the-father, sustains the structure of desire with the structure of the law – but the inheritance of the father is that which Kierkegaard designates for us, namely, his sin.

Where does Hamlet’s ghost emerge from, if not from the place from which he denounces his brother for surprising him and cutting him off in the full flower of his sins? And far from providing Hamlet with the prohibitions of the Law that would allow his desire to survive, this too ideal father is constantly being doubted. (LACAN, 1964/1998, p. 34-35).

Instead of the father’s place as an agent and as guarantee of the law, from whom the son sustains, through his fault, the “sin”, what appears in this excerpt is the radical questioning of the ideal in itself. Would this formulation, albeit incipient, allow for the overturning of the group structure logic? Would it therefore indicate a possibility of *real transmission*, so to speak, of the sharing of desire – in the sense of being hooked as is the case with Freud’s patient in the account of this dream, which makes her “imitate it” or redream it? Could the mistrust regarding the ideal embodied by the father be a motor for social bond between us, in a different way from that of the “brothers” sharing the father’s idealization?

These conjectures deserve theoretical deepening and connection with social phenomena, which we must forego doing in this brief essay. Be that as it may, I would like to highlight that this dream of the burning child is

literal, it doesn't disguise anything. It is a dream that says exactly what happens: the child is burning, the child's body is burning, and the account of the dream consists of nothing more than this phrase: "Dad, can't you see I'm burning?". There is no possibility of interpretation. Freud passes by this very quickly, and it is surprising that such an important chapter on the psychology of dreams initiates with this one, because the dream contradicts Freudian theory; there is no symbolic denseness to be explored interpretively; everything is literal, as a kind of reality more real than the reality so well covered by narratives where we usually move through. Perhaps such literalness is how fire teaches us of the possible use of language for political purposes contrary to the "psychological poverty" of fascism, in this cultural moment when every interpretation seems possible and usable (as shown by fake news), thanks to the exploitation of a remarkable ambiguity, as Marcia Schuback proposes (SCHUBACK, 2021), to foster group fanaticism.

This is shown above all in the expression "Fire!", an interjection that functions as a sentence, used both as an urgent call to protect the people who are there and as a call for help to control the fire to those listening. It is a statement that aims to reach the other immediately. Its single word is at the same time information, a plea, a denunciation and a very powerful way of touching another, of spreading an urgency contagious to others. Such a grammatical use, a specific employment of language may perhaps help us to consider what to do with the fires around us – how to react to them, to the "sea in flames behind my back", or rather how to appropriate the way they shape me "like a system of suns/ alive or dead/ that break like lightning", as read in the verses of Ferreira Gullar's poem *Ao nível do fogo* – its excerpts presented as an epigraph to this essay (GULLAR, 1974/2018, p. 112).

We can think of a modulation of such a summon as an object in the artistic work of Frans Krajcberg, for instance, this Polish artist who lived in Brazil and used to collect charred wood from forest fires and present them as works of art. What are these trunks? It doesn't matter whether or not this is called a sculpture; the operation itself is literal: taking it and showing what the fire carved. But the artist's gesture makes it an artwork. Alive or dead? Ashes or laughter? ("that light up life again", also in Gullar's poem) – the important thing is to erupt, to be a lightning flash. There is a literalness in this that doesn't have to do with the way in which the symbol or sign works as something that names something else, rather it is as the signal, or index, in Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics. This early twentieth-century American semiotician includes three possible functions for the sign. One of them is the *symbol*, the modality of words in general: a word is arbitrarily assigned to something, so the table refers to this object in front of me – but one can also think of the cross symbolizing the passion of Christ and Christianity in general, and so on, in a chain of substitutions. Another is the *icon*, which has a more direct, mimetic relationship with the referent, the object represented; a portrait, for example, in its relationship to the portrayed person; a religious icon showing the figure of a saint etc. The third is the one that interests me the most, which is the *index*, meant to represent as an indexical relation – i.e., by referring to something undisputed –, and the classical example of this type of sign is precisely: where there's smoke, there's fire (PEIRCE, 1912/1974).

Where there's smoke, there's fire. When one shouts fire, somehow this term refers back to itself; there is no symbolic depth, no possibility of interpretation. It is a direct plea, calling upon language to act like a lightning flash, in the form of a transmission that levels with the Real (to paraphrase Gullar and his attempt to make words "level with fire", and with them summon us to "level" ourselves as well).

The effort here is to force our thinking to reverse the direction of the destructive fire in Culture, turning it into a spark. Perhaps converging with this is the fact that matches are a very present element in contemporary art, whether referring to the act of ignition, of producing a lightning strike where something is transmitted, or presenting the spark as minimum consumption that marks the ephemeral. Thus, the idea that, as Freud used to say, the acquisition and control of fire were great cultural achievements is perhaps explored and negotiated. Perhaps, each day, we can achieve this great cultural achievement by lighting a match and watching it burn to the end. The curious proximity between the noun *chama* [flame] and the verb *chamar* [to summon] in the Portuguese language, here lost in translation, remains to be investigated in detail. For now, let us keep the statement that the flame (*chama*) summons (in the sense of the action of calling upon), or the kindling *kindles within me* [a chama me chama], as no more than a play on words, but that doesn't fail to perform a literality and a repetition that seem to be a part of the very strategy we are trying to formulate.

A work like *Sermão da montanha: Fiat Lux* [The sermon of the mount: Fiat Lux], by Cildo Meireles, staged in 1979, puts into question this summon [*chamado*] in general. The artist piles up an immense quantity of packages of Fiat Lux matchsticks, making a sort of cube, in an ironic dialogue with American Minimalist Art, around which four or five men in sunglasses keep circling. These matches – inert – hint indexically at the possibility that something might catch fire at that final moment of the Brazilian dictatorship, of the decline of the military regime (still quite incendiary, as shown by the attack in Riocentro).

In a previous work, in the famous exhibition *Do Corpo À Terra* [From the Body to the Earth] organized by Frederico Morais in 1970 in Belo Horizonte, Cildo had already used flames to burn chickens in *Tiradentes: Totem-monumento ao Preso Político* [*Tiradentes: Totem-Monumento to the Political Prisoner*]. There were actual flames there; blazes, we could say, flying free. It was about burning and the presentation of fire as a way of bringing power to this revivification, the monument, the centenary, and colonial violence in Brazil, through Tiradentes’ image. This work shows the power of fire, its cultural force, which can rarely be presented so literally in the field of art. And it invites us to invent statements that will ignite others, constituting a possible political force to be invested against the violence of fire when this turns against Culture itself. Perhaps in this case, instead of getting entangled and seduced – even if in the mode of indignation – by the fascist watchwords, their fake news, and constant threats, we might manage to literally put other signifiers in circuit (or in counter-circuits capable of generating flames).

Received: August 15, 2021. **Accepted:** December 01, 2021.

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