



## 1. Introduction

It was in the 1950s that Jacques Lacan developed his own triadic style of thinking – the imaginary, the symbolic and the real (Guy 2014) – and argued that these orders of human existence are able to describe all psychoanalytical phenomena (Evans 2006). For Lacan these three orders are constantly interacting with each other in the form of the Borromean Knot (Julien 1994) in which the imaginary-symbolic-real is a "force that traverses the individual and together they comprise a structure" (Guy, 2014):

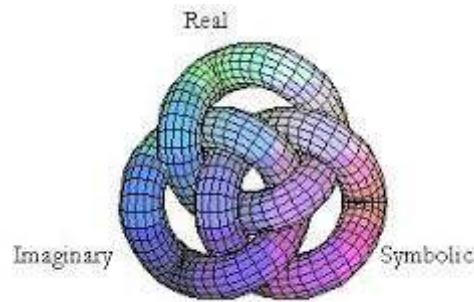


Fig. 1. Lacan's Borromean Knot

Lacan introduces the imaginary as the first order of the three in which the child experiences an illusion of "wholeness, synthesis, autonomy and above all similarity" (Evans, 2006). For Lacan the imaginary is a "maternal realm" with the dual relationship between the mother and her child (Guy, 2014). In this order the child cannot distinguish between itself and the other and thinks of the world as its own. The child experiences a fullness because of the maternal supplementation of its needs and because pleasure is not yet regulated by law, the child can have whatever it desires (Grosz, 1990). In Anthony Wilden's words the imaginary is "the order of identification with images. It is the order of dual narcissistic relation with others" (Wilden, 1981).

However, the imaginary, like all the other introduced orders, is not a permanent stage of life. At around six months old, the child can acknowledge its image in the mirror. The so-called mirror stage is conditioned on "the child's first recognition of a distinction between itself and the mirror-image (self as other)" which marks the child's earliest understanding of space, distance and position. It is in the mirror stage that the child reaches an acquisition of "an identity independent of the mother" (Grosz, 1990).

For months the child experiences its body as fragments; every organ is trying to satisfy its own needs and does not care for the satisfaction of other parts. In other words, there is no stable position in a child, yet, on seeing itself in the mirror or any other mirror-like surface the child perceives an image of wholeness, a total unity. The mirror stage is an effect of the "discord between the gestalt of the mother, a total, unified, complete image and the subjective dislocated positionless, perspectiveless turmoil the child experiences" (Grosz, 1990). The child is now entangled in a system of recognition/misrecognition: "it sees an image of itself that is both accurate as well as delusory" making him feel at the same time attracted to and alienated from the image (Grosz, 1990). It is because of this dual ambivalent relation to its image that the child recognises a lack for the first time. It desires the unity of its image which it still lacks. The child will no longer be in the happy place of satisfaction and from this time on "lack, gap, and splitting will be its mode of being, it will attempt to fill its (impossible) lack" (Grosz, 1990). Put in simpler words, the child's fascination with recognising its image in the mirror coincides with its separation of inside and outside, subject and object and self and other. The mirror stage is necessarily an alienating structure "because of the unmediated tension between the fragmented body of experience and the solidity and permanence of the body as seen in the mirror," however, to get over this aggressive tension the child identifies with its own specular image which results in the formation of the ego which maintains the illusion of wholeness for the child (Guy, 2014). This is why the mirror stage, as "his first official contribution to psychoanalytic theory", is central to Lacan's account of subjectivity (Grosz, 1990).

To pass through the imaginary order and its narcissistic, dual structure in which the mother and child define the other's identity in a closed circuit, and to move to a stage with a dyadic structure where social, linguistic, economic exchange can be possible, the narcissistic couple must submit to symbolic regulation (Grosz, 1990). This mediation or regulation must happen with the help of a third party which is known to all as the Father who possesses the symbolic world that offers little place for the unconscious and pleasure.

With the intervention of the father in the dual relation of mother and child, the subject moves on to the second order: the symbolic. For Lacan the symbolic is the "order of language and of the law" (Van Haute, 2002). Malcolm Bowie defines symbolic order as "the realm of movement rather than fixity, and of heterogeneity rather than similarity, it is the realm of language . . . and an otherness that remains other. This is the order in which the subject as distinct from the ego, comes into being" (Bowie, 1993). Here "a masterful consciousness represses the real unconscious" (Milbank, 2002).

If we take the imaginary as a realm of initial child-mother unity, the father "typically acts in such a way as to disrupt this unity, intervening there as a third term" (Fink, 1995). The father functions as the introducer of the law and states the symbolic order which distinguishes parent from child, mother from father and sister from brother. Here it is important to note that by father, Lacan does not mean the biological father of the child, rather he means the symbolic father – the Other – whose role is to impose the law – "the fundamental principles which underlie all social relations" (Guy, 2014).

In order to understand how a subject finds a position in the society one must go over two important concepts: Freud's Oedipus complex and the Name-of-the-Father introduced by Lacan. Freud describes the father's intervention into the mother-child relation as the Oedipus complex in which "the father regulates the child's demand and its access to the mother by prohibiting access to her." The child sees the father as an unbeatable rival, the "potential castrator" and so because of the fear of the organ's loss as well as the father's authority and power, he renounces his desire from the mother. From now on the child identifies with "the authority invested in the father" (Grosz, 1990). Elizabeth Grosz defines the Oedipus complex as the concept that "mediates the imaginary, pleasurable mother/child relation. It creates a sense of individual autonomy or identity, regulating and hierarchically organizing libidinal flow and energies into socially authorised adult outlets" (1990).

A reading of Freud's Oedipal model in terms of linguistic and socio-cultural studies led Lacan to his own model of the-Name-of-the-Father which he argued, marks the child's entry into 'the symbolic order' never mentioned by Freud (Grosz, 1990). The child becomes a subject only with reference to the Name-of-the-Father and the absent body of the mother (Grosz, 1990). In his *Ecrits*, Lacan defines the Name-of-the-Father as what "we must recognise as the support of the symbolic function, which from the dawn of history has identified his person with the figure of the Law" (Lacan, 2006). In introjecting the Name-of-the-Father the child is positioned with reference to the father's name, from now on he is in debt to his father and is bound to the law which in return gives him a name and a position in the society (Grosz, 1990). With that said one can define the symbolic order as also the realm of the Other, of absence, lack and death (Guy, 2014; Evans, 2006) with the Other being the representor of the law, society, hegemony, etc.

Although by accepting the Oedipal model or going through the process of the Name-of-the-Father the child gives in to the law of the society and renounces his desire for the unity it had with the mother, it cannot be said that his desire is gone. The desire of reunion will forever be repressed in his unconscious and for the rest of his life he is after the fulfilment of this lack (Braunstein, 2003; Grosz, 1990). Or as Lacan argues "desire, founded in loss, never closes on a final signified but presses on from sign to sign in pursuit of an impossible satiety" (Guy, 2014; Fink, 1997).

To find satisfaction and unity the subject might go beyond the symbolic and into the real. For Lacan the real is the "organization of the drives," it is a pure "plentitude or fullness," something that cannot be experienced easily, it is the "impossible," the "inassimilable," "the lack of a lack." The real has no borders, oppositions or boundaries; it is a continuum of "raw material" (Grosz, 1990). Lacan comes to see the whole experience of psychoanalysis as circling around the impossible traumatic encounter which is the real (Homer, 2005). Peter Guy defines the real as "the place from which the need originates . . . but we have no way of symbolizing it. We know that it is real because we experience it": no matter how much we try to describe our pain, suffering and misfortunes there is still a part of them which we are not able to put into words. This excess that cannot be transformed into language is called the real" (Guy, 2014; Homer, 2005) Sean Homer believes that "the difficulty of understanding the real is partly due to the fact that it is not a 'thing'" (2005). The real is not a material object that can be touched in reality. Lacan believes that reality is consisted of symbols and the process of signification; however, for him the real exists on the verge of this socio-symbolic reality and is in an ever ending tension with it (Guy, 2014).

The real is associated with the Death drive and jouissance as the ultimate, unspeakable limit of human existence. Any given prohibition brings about the desire to experience what is taken away and to fill in the gap. This is why when the child is prohibited by the father in the symbolic order, it finds a desire to transgress the prohibition in order to reach satisfaction. Death drive is the name given to this constant desire in the subject to break through the pleasure principle and to reach the "Thing" and a certain jouissance.



سَادِسُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ رَحْمًا بِالْغَيْبِ وَيَقُولُونَ سَبْعَةٌ وَثَامِنُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ قُلْ رَبِّي أَعْلَمُ بِعَدَّتِهِمْ مَا يَعْلَمُهُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ فَلَا تُمَارِ فِيهِمْ إِلَّا مِرَاءً  
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 (Quran 18: 22) the Quran ridicules the groups who say they were three or five by saying they guess at the unseen or without having the knowledge. However, after saying "they will say seven and their dog was the eighth of them" (Quran 18:22) God almighty does not abominate this group and this "suggests the accuracy of the group of people who say they have been seven" (Tabatabaie 1995). In *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, al-Mahallī and al-Suyūṭī too, point out that the part that a group says they were seven and the eighth was their dog seems to be acceptable and accurate because God has not put this group among the other two who had talked without knowing the truth (2006). The number seven in itself is a symbol of "the perfect order, complex unity, transformation, tends to bring all things into being; it is the dispenser of life and source of all change" (Cirlot, 2001). In Islam, too, the number seven enjoys great popularity: "there are seven heavens, seven seas, seven earths, pilgrims go around the temple of Mecca seven times and man is composed of seven substances" (Cirlot, 2001).

The cave, also, has a symbolic meaning. For Bagher Ghobari the cave is the symbol of "a collective unconscious," people take refuge in it when there is no logical way to put an end to their problems (Ghobari, 2008). Cave can also be the symbol of a mother's womb (Cirlot, 2001): a place where one is far away from the tension and stresses of the everyday life. The seven youths form a unity and go to the mountain to keep safe. They leave behind their symbolic world and turn to a place which represents a spiritual centre. In a world that everyone is serving a different god, the only way out of their miseries is to "take refuge in the Cave, and your Lord will unfold to you of His mercy وَإِذِ اعْتَرَضْتُمُوهُمْ وَمَا يَعْبدُونَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ فَأَوْوُوا إِلَى الْكَهْفِ يَنْشُرْ لَكُمْ رَبُّكُمْ مِنْ رَحْمَتِهِ" (Quran 18:16). There they will fall asleep for three centuries while being safe from whatever might happen outside: "Then We smote their ears many years in the Cave فَضَرَبْنَا عَلَى آذَانِهِمْ فِي الْكَهْفِ . . . Though wouldst have thought them awake as they lay sleeping while We turned them now to the right, now to the left and their dog stretching its paws on the threshold وَتَحْسَبُهُمْ آيَاطًا وَهُمْ رُقُودٌ وَنُقَلِّبُهُمْ ذَاتَ الْيَمِينِ وَذَاتَ الشَّمَالِ وَكَلْبُهُمْ بَاسِطٌ ذِرَاعَيْهِ بِالْوَصِيدِ لَوِ اطَّلَعْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ لَوَلَّيْتَ مِنْهُمْ فِرَارًا وَكَلِمَتْ مِنْهُمْ رُعبًا" (Quran 18:11 & 18). While asleep in the cave the men need no language, and seem to be in perfect union with the cave. The Lacanian misunderstanding happens when the men believe themselves to be in coincidence with an ideal they have anticipated for so long, and misperceive themselves and the society they inhabit.

## 2. 2. Decius and the Symbolic Order

The kingdom of Decius represents the symbolic order in the story of the Men of the Cave. As it was mentioned before, the symbolic is the realm of the Other and the Law. The Other sets the rules and the subject has to obey, however, here, the seven men are against Decius. In other words, there is a binary opposition between the individual and the society. To regulate the situation Decius threatens the seven men if they do not succumb to his orders. Nevertheless, the men stand up to him and say "Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and earth; we will not call upon any god apart from Him فَقَالُوا رَبُّنَا رَبُّ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَنْ نَدْعُو مِنْ دُونِهِ إِلَهًا لَقَدْ قُلْنَا إِذَا شَطَطًا" (Quran 18: 14). 'The law of the Father' dictates that they lose their religion and there is no way around it, hence the Men of the Cave seek shelter in a cave because they are in search of what might fill in the lack they suffer from – not being able to worship the God they want – and to find the unity they longed for. God here serves as a motherly image in which the men seek refuge from the fathering figure of Decius. As subjects, the men feel they have lost something. It is in the cave that they seek what they have missed in the society. Incomplete constitution in the symbolic order makes them take refuge in the cave where they cannot find the lost object or what they have missed. According to Lacan "there is always a gap between the enjoyment (in Lacanian terms the jouissance) obtained and the jouissance anticipated (Malpas & Wake 2006). "And they tarried in the Cave three hundred years, and to that they added nine more وَازْدَادُوا تِسْعًا" (Quran 18: 25) but as Lacan says the lack is impossible to fill and that is precisely why the seven men once again wake up into their symbolic world, the world of the reality: "And even so We raised them up again that they might question one another. One of them said how long have you tarried? They said we have tarried a day or part of a

day. Your Lord knows very well how long you have tarried. Now send one of you forth with this silver **وَكَذَلِكَ** **بَعَثْنَاهُمْ لِيَتَسَاءَلُوا بَيْنَهُمْ** قَالَ قَائِلٌ مِنْهُمْ **كَمْ لَبِثْتُمْ قَالُوا لَبِثْنَا يَوْمًا أَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ قَالُوا رَبُّكُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا لَبِثْتُمْ فَابْعَثُوا أَحَدَكُمْ بِوَرِقِكُمْ** **إِلَى الْمَدِينَةِ فَلْيُنْظِرْ أَهْلَهَا** أَرْكَى طَعَامًا فَلْيَأْتِكُمْ بِرِزْقٍ مِنْهُ وَلْيَتَلَطَّفْ وَلَا يُشْعِرَنَّ بِكُمْ أَحَدًا **إِنَّهُمْ** **إِنْ يَظْهَرُوا عَلَيْكُمْ يَرْحُمُوكُمْ أَوْ يُعِيدُوكُمْ فِي مِلَّتِهِمْ وَلَنْ تُفْلِحُوا إِذَا** **أَبَدًا** (Quran 18: 19). One of the men goes to the city with the fear that "if they should get knowledge of you, they will stone you, or restore you to their creed, then you will not prosper ever (Quran 18: 20). Yet, when he enters the city, the kingdom of Decius has vanished.

### 2. 3. The Real and the Death Wish

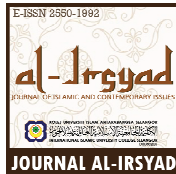
The world has changed; everyone is now a Christian and they worship the one and the only God. Living in this new world might have its own benefits; the new king might have celebrated this marvellous miracle. There might have been so many opportunities for the Men of the Cave, however, these men have already found out why God had bestowed such a fascinating adventure on them: "We made them stumble upon them, that they might know that God's Promise is true and that the Hour – there is no doubt in it **وَكَذَلِكَ** **أَعْرَضْنَا عَنْهُمْ لِيَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ** **وَعَدَ اللَّهُ حَقًّا** **وَأَنَّ السَّاعَةَ** **لَا رَيْبَ فِيهَا** **إِذْ يَتَنَزَّعُونَ** **بَيْنَهُمْ** **أَمْرَهُمْ** **فَقَالُوا** **ابْنُوا** **عَلَيْهِمْ** **بَنِيَانًا** **رَبُّهُمْ** **أَعْلَمُ** **بِهِمْ** **قَالَ** **الَّذِينَ** **غَلَبُوا** **عَلَى** **أَمْرِهِمْ** **لَنَتَّخِذَنَّ** **عَلَيْهِمْ** **مَسْجِدًا**" (Quran 18: 21). When asked to come back to the city and live among people, the seven men reject the idea and ask for death. It is at this point in the story that the Men of the Cave go through a mystical experience in which they willingly break through the pleasure principle and find their absolute jouissance in death.

Death seems to be the only ontological domain where Lacanian jouissance can be experienced by the men. Jouissance signifies extreme pleasure (not experienced in this world); it "transcends or even shatters one's everyday experience of the world" (Malpas & Wake, 2006). The regression from the symbolic (society) to the imaginary (cave) is possible, however, the men's death-wish implies the fact that the men want to be completely alienated from the society in order to experience jouissance which belongs to the realm of the real (death). God becomes the Other the men desire; the real and God seem to be the same thing behind the curtain (of ideology). Unless they die, the men cannot experience the jouissance that lies behind the curtain. The men do not know what exactly happens on the other side but they are eager to experience it and they are sure that jouissance is awaiting them. Having experienced a transitory moment of jouissance in the cave, the men wish to, through death, experience the everlasting moment of joy in perfect union with God.

### 3. Conclusion

The imaginary, the symbolic and the real are the three orders of any human existence. The imaginary is said to be the time in life when the subject thinks of itself as united with the mother; for the child there is still no distinction between the other and itself. The symbolic involves a third party, namely the Father, who imposes law, regulates the relationships and offers words for images. It is in this phase that a subject can differentiate between itself and Other, and will submit to the law. Nonetheless, this submission brings about a lack and the desire to fill in the lack. The real is beyond and over the symbolic order, it cannot be symbolized, and is the excess that cannot be easily put in language. The real seems to be beyond language and concerned with powerful experiences.

In the story of the Men of the Cave one sees all the three orders in progress. For them the imaginary sets in when they turn their back on their society and seek shelter in a cave; the symbolic is when they wake up only to see the opposition of individual/society has subsided and the Other is no more in a position to threaten them or cause them harm. Nevertheless, they enter the real phase when they again reject their symbolic order, give up the real world and wish for death in order to reach the real jouissance. It is when one breaks through the pleasure principle without calculating the pain it costs him or the gain he might achieve that one experiences a mystical moment, and the seven men in the story of *Al-Kahf* truly reach this moment when they ask their God to receive them and bless their souls. Meeting God after death as a religious and mystical experience brings jouissance to the men who had always believed that there must have been something better. Unable to experience the joyous completeness they wish, the men wish to die and experience the psychological and



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**Faculty of Islamic Civilization Studies,  
Selangor International Islamic University College (KUIS)**  
Bandar Seri Putra, 43600, Bangi, Selangor (Darul Ehsan) Malaysia.  
Tel: +603-8911 7167. Fax: +603-8925 4402  
Email: [alirsyad@kuis.edu.my](mailto:alirsyad@kuis.edu.my)  
Web: <http://al-irsyad.kuis.edu.my/>  
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mystical state of unity and enjoyment. They wish to pass through the illusory state of the symbolic and reach beyond language where jouissance seems likely to exist.

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