

Toward a Sinthomatology of Organization?*

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abstract

In this paper I attempt to further the emerging Lacanian-inspired study of management and organization by introducing his notion of the *sinthome*. The *sinthome* must be understood as a necessary support of subjectivity rather than a pathological formation. In the Lacanian conceptualization of subjectivity, it enables the registers of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real to be knotted together in a specific way, and thereby regulates the distribution of *jouissance* that takes shape within their 'knot'. Therefore, the *sinthome* can be thought of as the specific constellation of the registers in a socio-historical context, by organizing *jouissance* and giving a superficial sheen of consistency to the subject. It reproduces itself in the registers and ensures the superficial coherence of an ideological discourse. I argue that the three functions by which the *sinthome* reproduces itself in the registers, namely consistency, hole and existence, provide a fruitful and novel theorization of how subjectivity, discourse and *jouissance* are entangled in organizational contexts.

Introduction

We can conceive of philosophy and art as involved in the reorganization of the elements of our everyday experience, in breaking away from the normalized categories that structure our experience and re-grouping it in such a way that it allows new insights to emerge. Deleuze (2004) has argued that in this sense, they operate akin to the symptomatologist, who re-orders the symptoms that he or she observes, thereby creating a new clinical picture. The new symptomatological totality, the freshly constructed 'illness', captures the reality of remedy better than before. If we view the philosopher or artist in this light, as a symptomatologist, we thereby accord their work with the possibility of transcending the normal, the unquestioned reproduction of reality. It embodies the possibility of reflexively addressing the processes by which our experience is constituted, by re-signifying the symptoms of our daily lives.

As a discipline focused on providing a 'talking cure' (Freud, 1993) to analysands, psychoanalysis has been traditionally concerned with symptoms and their effects within the human unconscious. In recent years, the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has stood out in particular, and has been instrumental in pointing out the

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complex interrelations between subjectivity, language, meaning and enjoyment. His work has been influential not only in psychoanalytic practice but also in many disciplines in the social sciences, in which it has served to point out the prevalent 'symptoms' of subjectivity enmeshed in capitalist society. Such use of psychoanalysis is not aimed at a pathological subject, but at the pathology of the system in which a subject comes into being.

In his 23rd seminar, Lacan introduces what he calls the 'sinthome', which he distinguishes from the notion of the symptom, which steers his focus further away from a pathological view of the subject in analysis. With the sinthome, Lacan points to the attachment of the subject to a particular form of being, which is tied up with their *jouissance*. He presents the sinthome on the basis of a detailed reading of the work of James Joyce. With its evident wordplay, Joyce's work provides very rich material for Lacan and he asks a question of it that is diametrically opposed to that of traditional literary analysis. Rather than looking at how the singularity of James Joyce is reflected in his work, he looks at how his work as a singularity has impacted upon his subjectivity. In his literary oeuvre, Lacan argues, we can find Joyce's sinthome, that which gives him consistency. The sinthome must be seen as that which gives support to him as a subject. By doing this, Lacan further builds on his notion of the subject as defined by a 'knot' between the different dimensions of language, only now extending this knot from a three-fold to a four-fold one. The sinthome comes to represent a regular feature of the Lacanian subject, rather than a pathological symptom that the analytic process must seek to cure. The sinthome becomes an indispensable part of the subject.

I will argue in this paper that management and organization studies have much to gain from this notion of the sinthome, particularly the study of managerial discourses and the role of enjoyment within them. The potential contribution of Lacan's work for organization studies has been considered in more detail elsewhere (Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007; Böhm, 2006; Jones and Spicer, 2005; Roberts, 2005;), but I will argue that the concept of the sinthome can usefully supplement the existing Lacanian-inspired research on organization by foregrounding the singularity by which particular forms of subjectivity relate to specific ideologies. As a concept, the sinthome aims to capture a distinctiveness that reproduces itself in the various dimensions of subjectivity in a discursive context. Therefore it provides an analytical starting point for understanding why subjects are caught in different trajectories of desire and enjoyment, and why they react differently to power. This paper therefore strives to add a new dimension to the understanding of subjectivity that is put forward by Lacanian work on organization, and other perspectives that engage with the interstices of being, discourse, desire and enjoyment at work.

In the following section (2), I will discuss the basic premises of Lacan's theory of the subject and the consequences that it has for understanding organizations. I will also expound how Lacan's work has been used in organization studies up to now, and how it connects to other critical approaches. In the subsequent section (3), I will outline the concept of the sinthome based on my reading of seminar XXIII. Here, I will also sketch Lacan's discussion of Joyce, paying specific attention to the distinction that Lacan makes between the sinthome and the symptom. After this (4), I will discuss how the concept of the sinthome affects the way in which the registers of the Real, the Symbolic

and the Imaginary may be used in organizational research. I will illustrate this with examples of organizational life that may be a starting point for such a *sinthomatic* reading.

Lacan and Organization Studies

Lacan's work has not been a major theoretical force in organization studies, but its influence has been growing rapidly over the last few years. In part, this is due to the groundbreaking work in political theory, philosophy and cultural analysis by writers such as Slavoj Žižek and Ernesto Laclau, who have both drawn substantially on Lacan's ideas to analyze contemporary forms of ideology. In the field of organization studies, the work of these writers has been taken up to analyze processes of determination, resistance and enjoyment (Böhm and De Cock, 2005; Contu, 2002; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Johnsen, Muhr and Pedersen, forthcoming; Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Willmott and Contu, 2007). Others have engaged more directly with the work of Lacan, thereby taking an approach that is focused more on the level of the subject rather than a field of ideology (Arnaud, 2002, 2003; Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007; Cederström and Bloom, forthcoming; Driver, 2005; Jones and Spicer, 2005; Roberts, 2005).

Considering the generally acknowledged difficulty of Lacan's writings and transcribed seminars, how can we conceive of this surge of interest in his work in organization studies? I suggest that there are four mutually related reasons for why the study of organizations and management may benefit from Lacan's insights. First, it offers a highly developed understanding of subjectivity without resorting to a transcendental, essentialist or humanist version of the self. It represents the subject as characterized rather by a lack of content, and the ways in which this lack is continually filled in brings into play a number of subjective processes. Lacan hereby presents us with a sophisticated and useful manner of approaching the study of subjectivity. Second, discourse is linked into subjectivity in a way that evades the inside/outside division, by means of the concept of the Other. As something alien and Other, language fills in the lack of content in the subject, and thereby also gives a place in the social order. However, this determination is not total in the sense that a part of the subject resists the codifying influences of language. So although the subject is dependent on the linguistic Other for its existence, there is always something missing from this relationship. This provides a rich conceptual framework for the analysis of complex relations between the subject and the organization. Third, for Lacan subjectivity fluctuates between processes of determination, identification and desire. This provides a basis for understanding these different processes alongside each other, endemic to subjectivity. In Lacanian theory, these processes are all related to the notion of lack. The core of subjectivity that remains unaffected by language is a reminder to the subject that it is devoid of substantive content, and this causes feelings of anxiety about its existence. It tries to alleviate this by fabricating narrative identities (identification) and by means of fascination with fictional objects that promise to remedy this fundamental shortcoming in itself (desire). The subject must therefore be seen as an entity that embraces its own subjection, but that continuously escapes this subjection at the same time. This is an appealing conceptualization with respect to the complex nature of resistance and determination in

organizations. And fourth, Lacan's conception of subjectivity is intimately linked to the notion of enjoyment or *jouissance*, which is separate from the ordering function of language. *Jouissance* must be thought of as a form of enjoyment that is simultaneously laced with pain, in the sense that it overwhelms the subject. It confronts it with something traumatic that it cannot put into words. As such, it commands a certain fascination from the subject, and compels it to 'enjoy'. With respect to this notion of *jouissance*, a Lacanian approach to organization may highlight the ways in which people invite particular forms of workplace exploitation that put into play trajectories of enjoyment (Cederström and Grassman, in this issue).

The Lacanian subject is a complex and multifarious concept, and it rests heavily on the conceptualization of the three registers that Lacan uses, namely the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. These three comprise the subject for Lacan, and each of these brings out different dimensions of subjectivity. I suggest that this threefold structure provides a prime starting point for linking much of the extant work in organization studies on power and resistance to Lacan's conception of the subject. Establishing this linkage will highlight not only how subjectivity becomes determined in organizational settings (control perspective), and how it resists or subverts these tendencies (resistance perspective), but will also include how it may re-signify, desire and enjoy them. In the following section, I will first examine each of the registers in turn, thereby drawing out the main insights into subjective processes that are brought to light. Second, I will describe the insights that each register brings out with respect to organization, and which specific concepts associated with that register can be fruitfully used in organizational analysis. Third, I will highlight the ways in which this has been achieved up to now in Lacanian studies of organization, and fourthly I will consider how other approaches have brought out sympathetic insights.

The Symbolic

The Symbolic register must be understood as the basic structure of language, consisting of the network of signifiers in which the subject finds itself. As that which provides the 'content' of subjectivity, the Symbolic register points to the signifying effects that language has on the subject's being. It represents the signifiers on which we rely as subjects to think, to act and to communicate. These processes are largely unconscious, and this idea provides the starting point for Lacanian psychoanalysis. In this respect, the notion of the Symbolic must be seen as largely similar to that of discourse, as it is used in the Foucauldian tradition. However, I suggest that there is one main difference. The Symbolic must be understood as incomplete, failing to account fully for the subject, and thereby differs from the subject of discourse in the poststructuralist sense (Alcorn, 1994). Discourse, in the Lacanian sense, is structured around a subversive core, which threatens to undermine its integrity. A set of signifiers in which a subject comes into being gives rise to certain significations, but these are not singular or even consistently meaningful. Alternative meanings may surface from time to time, and signifiers may play off each other to render entirely new meanings.

The main contribution of this analytic of the Symbolic is to point towards the ways in which language renders itself meaningful to the subject, and in what ways it enlists it into a social order. This must be seen as a fundamentally structuralist element in

Lacan's work. However, what makes the concept of the Symbolic unique, and what distinguishes it clearly from other traditions in critical organizational analysis such as ideology critique and Foucauldian discourse analysis, is the place that Lacan gives it in relation to the other registers. For Lacan, the Symbolic fails to totalize the subject, and this failure becomes a constitutive force for other subjective processes such as desire, identification and *jouissance*, all of which go beyond the signifiers of language in some way.

The Lacanian conceptualization of the Symbolic includes the concepts of metonymy and metaphor as the main operations of language (taken from Jakobson), and the notion of the quilting point as a signifier that ties a field of signification together. In the wake of Žižek (1989), this latter concept has proved fruitful in the analysis of organization, in the sense that management discourses can be seen to carry deep paradoxes at the heart of them. This can be seen for instance in the work of Jones and Spicer (2005), who show that the field of entrepreneurship relies heavily on the signifier of the entrepreneur, while at the same time struggling to give any kind of substantive content to it. Arnaud (2002) provides another reading of the Symbolic for organizations, in which he stresses the ways in which language provides a grid of authority relations in which employees come to exist in specific organizational contexts. The theme of the Symbolic field of discourse as structured around an impossibility also bears on the work in organization studies that draws from Laclau and Mouffe's work on discourse theory (Contu, 2002; Contu and Willmott, 2005; 2007). This work highlights the ways in which discursive fields in organization are characterized by competing discourses that attempt to hegemonize it. At the same time, at the heart of every discursive field a certain impossibility can be seen that prevents this hegemony from occurring fully. This impossibility is then at the same the impossibility of hegemonization and the possibility of radical change. As I already argued above, this discourse-theoretical intervention relies heavily on the Lacanian notion of the Symbolic and could be easily extended with an analysis of subjectivity based on Lacanian concepts.

The Imaginary

The Imaginary refers to the conscious dimension of subjectivity, and the plane on which a subject constructs its identities. This describes the process of identification, but Lacan's use of the term identification departs from what is commonly understood under this heading. The crucial difference here that most conceptualizations of identification center around modelling one's identity after perceived qualities or traits of another person. In Lacanian theory, identification refers to the modelling of the ego on the ego ideal, an introjected image of the Symbolic Other. Therefore, the Lacanian perspective on identification is concerned with discursive images rather than with physical 'others' or what the subject attributes to them. In this, the Lacanian concept of identification is characterized by a very specific function in relation to the other two registers. It fulfils the role of protecting the subject from the traumatic aspects of language (as constitutive of subjectivity, and as essentially devoid of meaning) and from the void of the Real.

The Imaginary and its potential for organization studies have been powerfully introduced in Roberts (2005), in which the author examines the way in which the Lacanian concept of the 'mirror stage' (Lacan, 2006a) can be used to understand

identity work and micro-interactions in the workplace, and how they relate to processes of control. Roberts argues that the Imaginary must be seen as that which gives rise to an effect of humanist selfhood, which paradoxically derives from discursive conditions and the subject's need for recognition. This illusion of identity is used in various ways in organizational settings to control the behaviour of employees.

There is much research in critical management studies on identity in relation to power, and I suggest that Lacanian studies of subjectivity and discourse can fruitfully connect to this. Conversely, many accounts of identity in organizations lack a detailed account of how identity relates to subjectivity and as such, Lacanian theory may provide a rich resource.

The Real

The Real is the register that describes the failure of discourse to totalize or to exhaust the subject's experience. By means of the concept of the Real, the breakdown of linguistic constructions can be understood as a driving force in the production and reproduction of discursivity. In this way, the Real can be thought of as the driving force of discourse to order and classify, and for new discourses to materialize. The continual breaking down of discourse drives its productivity. I suggest that the Real provides a theorization of the interruption of discursive consistency, and shows the working of *jouissance* and desire in upholding ideologies. It can therefore also serve as a useful concept in theorizing resistance and radical change.

The Real does not figure in analysis as anything tangible or empirically verifiable, but must rather be seen as a heuristic for tracing the internal structure of discourses. As Parker (2005) has suggested, discourse analysis may proceed by interpreting instances of overwording and excessive description as indications of discursive tensions and contradictions, or what in Lacanian parlance would be known as the Real.

In organizational studies, I would like to point to the work of Jones and Spicer (2005), Kosmala and Herrbach (2006) and Bicknell and Liefoghe (2007) as examples of how the concepts of interruptions of the Real may be used as a means of analyzing organization. Outside of directly Lacanian approaches, one can find affinity with the notion of the Real in Brewis *et al.* (2005), where desire is explored in relation to processes of organization. These processes have an extra-discursive status, but impact strongly upon all facets of organizational life.

I suggest that the Lacanian notion of the *sinthome* can extend this Lacanian approach to the study of management and organization in three ways. Firstly, it allows us to situate the different functions of language in a socio-historical context. For Lacan, the *sinthome* represents a singular 'knot' of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real, that keeps them in place in a particular constellation. The registers of language, as a network of signifiers, as meaning, and as a traumatic remainder of non-signification, can be understood as tied together in a particular way by the *sinthome*. Any attempt at understanding how subjectivity relates to particular ideological discourses, can therefore productively start at how the *sinthome* ties this 'knot' between the registers. Žižek (1991: 137) refers in this respect to "identification with the *sinthome*".

Secondly, it represents a way of understanding the organization of *jouissance* within subjectivity. In his later work, Lacan foregrounds the importance of *jouissance* as an important influence within the functioning of subjectivity, with effects on the way in which the subject relates to its determination. For example, Žižek (1997) has demonstrated the role of fantasy (and its promise of *jouissance*) is vital for the functioning of specific ideological discourses. Fantasy is concerned with a very specific relation to desire, in which the subject is enamoured with the image it is presented with. With the *sinthome*, Lacan introduces an ordering principle for the way in which the subject enjoys, which encompasses both the function of desire (and therefore fantasy) and that of the drive. As such, the concept of the *sinthome* provides a comprehensive and fruitful starting point for an exploration of *jouissance* in organizational discourses.

Thirdly, it provides a theorization of how discourses and modes of being can present themselves as consistent and stable for the subject. One of the questions that Lacan raises in his conceptualization of the *sinthome*, is how subjects come to identify their being with their bodies, and their relation to others in terms of individuality. Why do people conceive of themselves as owners of their minds and bodies, where psychoanalysis has repeatedly shown the opposite? Here, Lacan argues that the *sinthome* allows an Imaginary ‘consistency’ to take shape, which is no more than a temporary effect, to be thwarted by the excessive signification that emanates from speech.

The *Sinthome*

As stated, I will approach the *sinthome* by exploring Lacan’s 23rd seminar, given between 1975 and 1976. Lacan devoted this seminar entirely to the *sinthome* and he demonstrated the concept by an in-depth investigation of the work of James Joyce.

Lacan feels that James Joyce’s work (and *Finnegan’s Wake* in particular) has succeeded in going beyond the regular functioning of language, and has freed up a play of the signifier that has allowed *jouissance* to be interlaced with the text: “one feels the presence of the *jouissance* of he who has written this” (2005b: 165, my italics).¹ The text of *Finnegan’s Wake* overflows with a pure play of the signifier, which does not concentrate on conveying a particular meaning, but rather on producing certain phonemes, allusions and homophonies that make reference to other, unexpected signifying chains. Both the unusual character of this work, as well as the emphasis it places on the signifier over meaning, cause Lacan to ask what has allowed Joyce to produce this work. What drove him? And how can we conceive of his subjectivity? It is precisely this theme of the singularity of subjectivity that we see in the notion of the *sinthome*.

In seminar XXIII, Lacan starts to draw on terms that are unusual to his work as we know it, and that appear to address the discourse of other disciplines such as psychology

1 All translations from Lacan (2005a, 2005b) are my own.

and philosophy. Among these, we can find the spirit, man², the individual, the body, consistency, meaning and the idea. Lacan thus actively engages signifiers that are not his own and situates them within his thought. In this move, he simultaneously critiques the theorizations of subjectivity that he believes are strongly misguided, as well as re-inscribing the signifiers by placing them in a different context.

This places Lacan's notion of the *sinthome* at an intersection of subjectivity, discourse, and *jouissance*. Lacan states that Freud's conception of the unconscious has called into question a knowledge that is unknown to us, precisely in relation to a body that is strange to us (2005a: 149). He sets out to explore this relationship by means of his *sinthome*. How do people come to identify with a consistency, which they attribute both to their body and their mind?

Introducing the sinthome

The *sinthome* should be differentiated from the notion of the symptom, which also appears in Lacan's work. *Sinthome* is an antiquated way of writing the word symptom, and Lacan indicates that writing it in this way represents an "injection of Greek" into the French language, just as Joyce has injected many other languages into his English in *Finnegan's Wake* (Lacan, 2005a: 11). By means of this, Lacan perhaps seeks to demonstrate that the *sinthome* is already something that comes from the outside into language, from elsewhere than the Symbolic order.

By contrast, the symptom is to be found in the Symbolic. Lacan argues that "the symptom is in itself, through and through, signification" (1988: 320 II). In his earlier work, Lacan describes the symptom as something that impedes the subject to relate to its desire. The goal of analysis is then the interpretation of this symptom, causing it to be resolved. This is very much a Freudian approach to the symptom. In much the same way as Freud approaches the analysis of images in dreams, Lacan places emphasis on the signifiers in the analysand's discourse to look for anomalies, non-signifying elements, slips and so on. The symptom for Lacan is here a metaphor (2006b: 439), something that the subject has substituted for a traumatic occurrence and that has its place in the subject's unconscious. It is a signifier that has come to take the place of an occurrence whose meaning has been suppressed by the subject. In the analytic process, the symptom (as a signifier) can be given its proper signification, thereby dissolving its role as an impediment to the subject's relation to the signifying network.

This is not what is at stake in the case of the *sinthome*, which is radically different from the symptom. It is not presented in pathological terms or as something that should be cured or alleviated. Rather, Lacan presents it as something that supports the subject, giving it a consistency with regard to the different registers. It is a way of making sense of the ways in which particular subjectivities differ from others, what makes them singular (see also Butler, in this issue, on the distinction between therapeutical and

2 This concerns 'man' as in the exemplar of humanity, not in terms of the opposition man/woman. The former appears in the form 'l'homme' and punningly also as 'lom' in the text *Joyce le symptôme* (Lacan, 2005b), which represents an earlier engagement of Lacan's with many of the issues dealt with in seminar XXIII.

symptomatological aims in analysis). For Lacan, the big Symbolic Other represents the condition of possibility for the subject and as such, subjectivity always has a shared basis. It is always implicated within the social. The sinthome represents an effort to account for the 'single stroke' that sets particular subjectivities apart. It must not be sought in the identifications of the Imaginary, or even in the traumatic emptiness that the Real represents for the subject: it represents a singularity onto its own that grounds subjectivity. The sinthome is an act of writing that "comes from elsewhere than the signifier" (2005a: 145) and in this sense, it is "disinvested from the unconscious" (2005b: 164).

This is exemplary of Lacan's move away from his earlier focus on the Symbolic as the most important register of subjectivity, toward the function of the Real. This draws attention to the way in which something beyond language comes to organize our subjectivity. In order to approach this problematic of the Real for the subject, Lacan draws heavily on topology. By virtue of its three-dimensional space, topology is less caught in the binary categories of language and therefore helps to explore themes such as the relationship of inside to outside or logical (im)possibilities in various chains and knots. In seminar XXIII, he puts forward the Borromean knot as an example of how the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real relate to each other. The Borromean knot represents a construction of rings of string that ties all three rings together, but in which one of the rings is directly linked to the others. If one of the rings is cut, the other two are set free. The knot is therefore dependent on all three rings. Lacan describes this knot as that which supports the subject. This knot is pictured in figure 1.

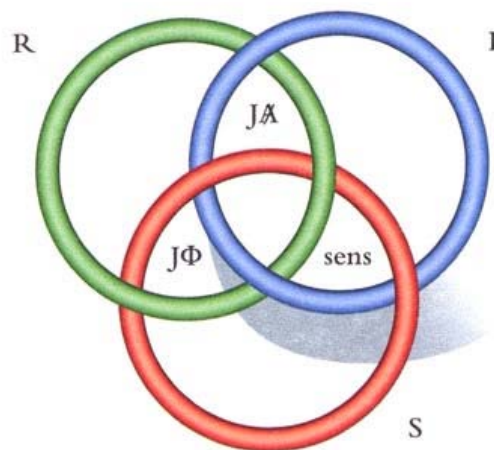


Figure 1. The Borromean Knot. Taken from Lacan (2005a: 48).

With the sinthome, Lacan introduces another support of the subject (2005a: 50-52), a fourth dimension alongside the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. Here, Lacan seeks to stress the lack of direct rapport between the registers of the Symbolic, the Real and the Imaginary. They have no bearing on each other, and can be more productively seen as linked up by an 'artifice' that knots them into a quadruple Borromean knot. The sinthome functions as such an artifice.

Lacan discusses this extensively by means of Joyce's literary work. I will draw out some of these points below, in order to demonstrate how the sinthome can come to function as a fourth element within subjectivity.

Joyce's Sinthome

When discussing Joyce's sinthome, Lacan picks up two themes that he believes have greatly affected his subjectivity and have found their expression in his work. These are the relationship he has towards his own body and the role of his father.

The role of Joyce's father is one that Lacan describes as 'failure'. Joyce's father has failed him. It is a recurring theme in his work, and there are many discussions of this in the correspondence that Joyce has left. But although Lacan deems the paternal function insufficient in Joyce's case, it has not left him psychotic. The paternal metaphor has been instated, but Joyce retains a trace of psychosis in the sense that language remains something 'imposed' and 'parasitical' for him (Lacan, 2005a: 96). This slip of the paternal function, caused by his father's failure, is what must be understood as Joyce's proper symptom (*ibid.*: 94, 96): "Joyce remains rooted in his father while at the same time disavowing him. It is this that is his symptom" (*ibid.*: 70). However, his sinthome is something quite different. Lacan argues here that the function of the proper name is crucial. The Name-of-the-Father has not fully failed, even though the role of Joyce's father has been insufficient. Joyce has sought to make his own name by means of his work, and it is in this place that we must look for Joyce *as* sinthome.

Concerning Joyce's relationship to his body, Lacan draws out a passage from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which the main character, Stephen Dedalus, gets into a fight with some of his friends about poetry. In a cruel turn of events, his friends tie him up and give him a beating. Stephen is understandably shaken up by this at first, but quickly explains it away as if nothing had happened. He pretends not to know anything about it, denying himself the meaning of the occurrence. Joyce's terminology here is that he "casts it off like a peel". Lacan reads this passage as an autobiographical story, and therefore one that is demonstrative of Joyce's relation to his own body. He argues that the phrase of the peel is metaphorical of the relationship to his body that is substituted and cast off here (*ibid.*: 148). Lacan argues that the body is linked to the ego: "The idea of the self as bodily has a weight. It is exactly that which we call the ego" (*ibid.*: 150). The ego supports the "body as image" (*ibid.*: 150). The beating has resulted in Joyce viewing this image of his own body with disgust, causing him to let go of it. The Imaginary relationship slips away for Joyce. Lacan represents this in his Borromean knot as shown in figure 2: the ring of the Imaginary is no longer linked by means of the knot, and threatens to slip out of the picture.

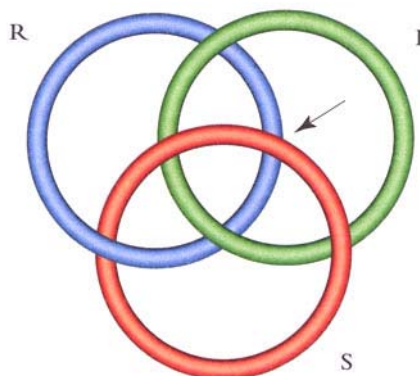


Figure 2. The Borromean Knot, with a severed relationship to the Imaginary. Taken from Lacan (*ibid.*: 151).

Lacan argues that the specifically Joycean literary figure of the ‘epiphany’ is the direct result of this inability of the Imaginary to connect with the other two registers, and therefore relies solely on the connection between the Symbolic and the Real (*ibid.*: 154). This inability of Joyce to exist within the Imaginary is then channeled in his writing, which occurs by means of these sudden, almost religious realizations that completely overwhelm him.

Lacan argues that an ‘artifice of writing’ comes to reconstitute the Imaginary rapport (*ibid.*: 152). This artifice of writing is what embodies the sinthome for Joyce. Lacan draws this out again in terms of his knot, as seen in figure 3.

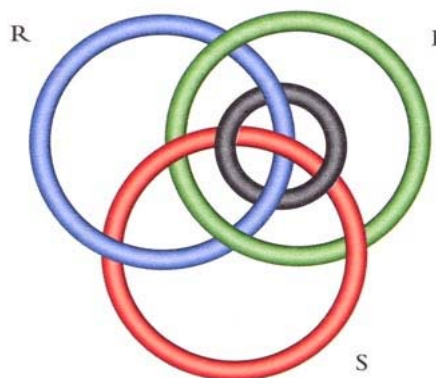


Figure 3. The Borromean knot for Joyce, with the sinthome as that which restores the knot (*ibid.*: 152).

Joyce’s body of literature comes to stand for the organizing principle of his *jouissance*. Deprived of an Imaginary identity, he comes to live out his identifications in his writings. It is through his writing that he seeks to make a name for himself, to inject his own name with new meaning. Lacan speaks in this respect about ‘*jouis-sens*’, fusing the words *jouissance* and meaning[*sens*] with each other.³ It is in this vein that Lacan states

3 Žižek (1991) has suggested the translation ‘enjoy-meant’.

that the *sinthome* “participates in an ambivalence between the [Real and the Imaginary]” (*ibid.*: 102). The normal working of the signifying chain is thus completely subverted by Joyce, and injected with a particular *jouissance*. The artifice of his work, functioning as *sinthome*, must therefore be understood as something which allows him to relate to the violent imposition of the Symbolic order upon his subjectivity. It supports his subjectivity as non-psychotic, and keeps the registers in relation to each other. Although there is much to say on Lacan’s discussion of Joyce, I now wish to turn to a more general discussion of the concept of the *sinthome*.

The Sinthome as Fourth

Lacan argues that in Joyce’s case, the *sinthome* is formed by his oeuvre. His literary work has sought to re-inscribe his name with something else, since it is his name that ineluctably ties him to his symptom, his failing father. His work embodies an ‘artifice’, a *sinthome* that re-signifies that name. At the same time, we have also seen that Joyce’s problematic relation to the Imaginary is repaired by means of this *sinthome*, which has caused him to regain contact with his body as image. This occurs through the radical play of meaning in his work, giving rise to an enjoyment-meaning that flows through the text.

Faced with Joyce’s particular *sinthome*, the question that should be addressed at this point is how we can conceive of a general *sinthome*. Lacan is clear about this, stating “what I propose here, is to consider Joyce’s case as corresponding to a way of supplementing the denouement⁴ [*dénouement*] of the knot”, because “for the most part the Symbolic, the Real and the Imaginary are entangled to the point of continuing one into the other, when lacking an operation that distinguishes them in the chain of the Borromean knot” (*ibid.*: 87). Joyce’s case is therefore drawn out as an exemplar of the way in which the Borromean knot of the Symbolic, Real and Imaginary must be supplemented by the *sinthome*, as a fourth ring. In this way, the Borromean knot (or chain⁵) can be formed by all four rings. Without the *sinthome*, there is no knot possible, nor are the rings connected to each other.

In the quotation above, Lacan highlights an important dimension of the *sinthome*; the registers run the risk of turning into one another, unless the *sinthome* allows them to be differentiated. In its capacity of repairing the Borromean knot, it creates a distinction between the registers, by keeping them in place within the knot. We saw that in Joyce’s case, the *sinthome* served to re-quilt the three registers by allowing the Imaginary to regain itself in an enjoyment-meaning within the artifice of his literary work. Lacan states that the registers, as circles in the Borromean knot, are all equivalent and “constituted by something that reproduces itself in all three” (*ibid.*: 50). Each of the registers is given a particular inflection by the *sinthome*, by virtue of the way in which they are knotted together. In seminar XXIII, Lacan attributes very specific functions to

4 Note that the French also has connotations of disentanglement of the knot. I have rendered it *denouement* to stress the narrative aspects of the word, i.e. that the adding of the *sinthome* represents the ‘final stage’ of the knot.

5 Lacan stresses that the Borromean knot can also be viewed as a chain of rings. With this, he evokes the metonymic character of the (Symbolic) signifying chain.

the three registers, putting a different spin on the RSI triad as we know it. Within the knot achieved by the sinthome, the Symbolic serves the function of the representation of holes, the Imaginary is that which gives rise to consistency, and the Real is that which makes ex-sistence possible (*ibid.*: 36). I will explain each of these functions in greater detail below, where I explore the potential contribution of the notion of the sinthome for organizational analysis.

The respective functions of the registers are thus upheld by the sinthome, and linked to each other in a singular constellation. By virtue of its demarcation of the registers and its support of the Borromean knot, the sinthome also produces a specific organization of *jouissance*,⁶ a ‘shortcircuit of pleasure’ (*ibid.*: 97). The sinthome makes the knot possible and thereby divides up the registers, allowing *jouissance* to take place within the folds of the knot. Lacan refers to this process as ‘suturing’ and ‘splitting’ (*ibid.*: 73). He distinguishes here between phallic *jouissance* and Imaginary *jouissance*. Lacan describes the latter as connected to the function of the mirror stage by means of the specular image, the mirror image of the subject’s ego. In this way, this *jouissance* is linked with the bodily image that the subject cultivates (*ibid.*: 56). It must therefore be seen as an essentially narcissistic form of enjoyment, linked to the self-image that the subject sustains. Phallic *jouissance*, on the other hand, is an enjoyment related to the signifier. It is linked to the Symbolic order, by which socio-cultural constraints become inculcated in the subject. It is in relation this Symbolic Law that a play of transgression gives rise to the phallic *jouissance* that Lacan describes. It is an enjoyment that is ‘stolen from the Other’, not condoned by the Other.

This relation of the sinthome to *jouissance* is further accentuated by Lacan in yet another topological excursion, in which he folds the circles of the sinthome and the Symbolic into one another, so that they form a circle together. However, in order to prevent the two from unraveling, a line should flow through the circle. This is why Lacan refers to it as a ‘false hole’. The point that Lacan seeks to stress with this example of the false hole, is that the sinthome is not linked directly to any one term in the Borromean knot, but that it is suspended in a relation of mutual dependency. It always depends on the totality of the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. In the figure of the false hole, the hole itself belongs neither to the Symbolic nor to the sinthome, and is held in place by a third term that stabilizes it (*ibid.*: 139, see also 25; 83). Lacan represents this third term as a straight line representing the body (which he identifies with the Imaginary) (*ibid.*: 139), as well as the phallus (*ibid.*: 118), the signifier of the Other’s desire.⁷ In this, we can read the two forms of *jouissance* that are made possible by the sinthome, by way of its function of both dividing up and tying

6 Lacan places the relation between the *sinthome* and *jouissance* at the heart of the analytic process in seminar XXIII, stating that “we teach the analysand to splice, to make a seam between his *sinthome* and the Real parasite of *jouissance*. What is characteristic of our operation, making this *jouissance* possible, is the same thing as that which I write I-hear-meaning [*j’ouï-sens*]” (*ibid.*: 73).

7 The phallus has been a concept in Lacan’s work that has been especially prone to misunderstanding. Here, I have referred to it as the signifier of the Other’s desire, but it might equally be termed the signifier of the lack in the Other. As a signifier, it marks the idea that the Other is not complete, not perfect. Phallic *jouissance*, then, represents the subject as enjoying this imperfection in the Other, of taking advantage of it.

together the different registers of subjectivity. Both forms of *jouissance* are rendered possible by the knotting function of the *sinthome*.

By means of this notion of the ‘hole’, Lacan references the fundamental lack at the heart of the subject. This lack assures its status as a desiring being. The *sinthome* enables *jouissance* to take shape within this hole, to fill it up temporarily. This is what constitutes the final Lacanian subject: the flow of *jouissance* through the Real as recurrent in images and signifiers, given consistency by means of something that is outside the subject. This something, the *sinthome*, is what Žižek refers to as “what is in the subject more than himself” (1991: 132). It is not subsumed by the Symbolic order, but must rather be seen as something that defies this symbolization. It is therefore psychotic in this sense, because it rejects the order of the unconscious. It exists the unconscious, as a point outside the subject that gives rise to its consistency. The notion of the ‘hole’ is also used by Lacan to shed light specifically on the relation of the subject to the Symbolic dimension of language. I will return to this at length below, when I discuss the *sinthome* in relation to organizational analysis.

Given the central position that Lacan accords to the *sinthome* with regard to subjectivity, language and *jouissance*, how are we to conceive of an ‘analysis’ structured around the *sinthome*? Žižek (1989, 1991) has asserted (following Jacques-Alain Miller’s influential yet unpublished seminars) that the goal of analysis, both clinical and socio-political, must be an identification with the *sinthome*. He envisages this in terms of a radical confrontation with that which stimulates and channels our *jouissance* in an ideological discourse, thereby reducing it to its bare minimum and stripping it of its evocative force. Such an analytic strategy must be sensitive to the dispersed flows of *jouissance* within through the different modalities of subjectivity.

In the next section, I will suggest that the impact that the *sinthome* has on the registers of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary provides a useful starting point for thinking through the particular ‘knotting’ of *jouissance* in a discursive context. Furthermore, I will propose examples of how we may begin to think through the *sinthome*’s impact on the registers in an organizational setting.

Discussion

We have seen that the *sinthome* functions as a support for the subject by allowing the three registers to be knotted together in a particular assemblage. More specifically, it supports the economy of *jouissance* to which the subject is privy. Here, we are reminded of Fink’s (2004) commentary that two versions of the subject may be recognized in Lacan’s work: the subject of the signifier and the subject of *jouissance*. These also correspond roughly to the earlier and later periods of Lacan’s teaching. It is clear that in his discussions of the *sinthome*, we are dealing with the latter. *Jouissance* restores Joyce’s damaged Imaginary rapport through a play of signifiers within the signifying chain, in a continuous flow of allusions and meaning effects. Here we see a *jouis-sens*, enjoyment-meaning, that is made possible by means of his artifice, his literary work. In it, all registers are linked up and *jouissance* is allowed to take shape.

What Lacan brings in with his introduction of the *sinthome*, is the idea that *jouissance*, images and signifiers are linked in a singular way in a particular setting. Just as Joyce's enjoyment-meaning supports his subjectivity and stops it from sliding into psychosis, an ideological discourse is supported by an unacknowledged assumption at its basis. This is the *sinthome*, which knots it together and thereby stabilizes it.

However, as central as it is to the functioning of the registers, the *sinthome* must nevertheless be thought of as outside the subject. It *ex-sists* the subject, in Lacan's terms. Although itself not elusive or unattainable, it is not part of the unconscious, nor does it figure as an object of desire. It forms an infrastructure in which the registers can take shape, along with their respective forms of *jouissance*. It 'makes a name' for the subject, as we saw in Joyce's case. Its function is the splitting and suturing of registers, thereby giving them a relation to one another.

The *sinthome*, as an unacknowledged assumption that underlies the subject's relation to discourse, can be seen in various ways in the registers of the Imaginary (perception and identity), the Symbolic (signifiers) and the Real (*jouissance*). He argues that it produces the functions of *consistency*, *the representation of the hole* and *ex-sistence* in the three registers.

The fundamental character of this use of the knot is to illustrate the trinity⁸ that results from a consistency that is only feigned by the Imaginary, a hole that follows from the Symbolic as if it were fundamental, and an *ex-sistence* that, belonging to the Real, forms its fundamental character. (Lacan, 2005a: 36)

The *sinthome* reproduces itself in the registers and thereby gives these special functions of consistency, hole and *ex-sistence*. The *sinthome* functions here as that which allows the registers to be distinguished from each other (*ibid.*: 53), and therefore as that which holds the ideological structure together. What would an analysis based on the registers look like, given the inflection that the *sinthome* gives them? This is the question that I will now turn to.

Imaginary Sinthomes

As a result of its knot with the *sinthome*, the Imaginary comes to function as that which provides consistency. Given support by the function of the knot, the Imaginary register manifests itself as uniform and whole, as "that which draws together" (*ibid.*: 64). As I have explained above, the Imaginary is the conscious realm of subjectivity, where sensory perceptions are received, where meaning is experienced and identifications are crafted. Lacan insists that the Imaginary obscures the way in which the constitutive function of language and its Real complement construct subjectivity, whereas the Imaginary provides the subject with a misleading sensation of Cartesian selfhood. It creates the impression of unity, harmony and control for the subject, which Lacan views

8 Lacan's French here, *triplicité*, similarly alludes to the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This theme pops up occasionally in seminar XXIII, where he uses it as a means of exploring Joyce's relation to his father (the father, the son) and something that goes beyond this relation (the Holy Spirit – the *sinthome*), as well as linking it back to the 'holy trinity' of his own three registers, which he subverts by adding a fourth (see also Harari, 2002).

as a way of ‘covering over’ the subject’s dependency of the function of language in the Symbolic and the Real. In seminar XXIII, Lacan links the Imaginary more strongly to the body, by means of the term ‘consistency’, and argues that the relation that the subject has to its body is primarily based on the *image* that it cultivates of this body, and that this bodily image gives it the false impression of being self-contained and autonomous (*ibid.*: 150). For Lacan, of course, the subject derives its being from the Other, and not from any consistency onto its own. While discussing the subject as a speaking being or ‘*parlêtre*’⁹, Lacan states that “the *parlêtre* adores his body, because he thinks he owns it. In reality, it is his only consistency – mental consistency, mind you, because his body leaves the scene all of the time” (*ibid.*: 66). Furthermore, this mental consistency that Lacan refers to is far from stable, open as it is to interruptions that come from the side of the Symbolic and the Real.¹⁰ Even though the subject attempts to present itself as coherent in its discourse, its speech cannot be limited to the meaning that it attempts to convey, or the image that it tries to present of itself. In short, it fails to control the discourse that constitutes it.

Where in his earlier work, Lacan would often emphasize the fragmented and illusory nature of Imaginary identification, in his later work he seems determined to show how perception and identity wed themselves to *jouissance* to give rise to a fantasmatic image of consistency and holism. If we use this Lacanian conceptualization of the Imaginary as a resource for analyzing organization, we can consider the way in which organizational images come to appear as coherent and consistent, and what makes them appealing as such to subjects. Themes that may be identified with the Imaginary *as consistency* are unity, intentionality and harmony, among others, and how they come to be represented within organizational images.

One example of an Imaginary analysis of organizational processes is how images of unitarism (Fox, 1973) come to function within a particular discursive context. In this way, a single purpose is attributed to organizational activity, as a shared and rational goal that is pursued by all involved. It is represented as wholly in the service of managerial interests, devoid of conflict or suppressed alternative interests. Such unitarist discourse is reproduced by means of organizational practices as diverse as accounting, financial reporting, organizational culture initiatives and performance appraisal. From a Lacanian perspective, it would be interesting to see how this fantasy of ‘rational’ and ‘conflict-free’ organization works to cover over alternative elements in organizational life, that fall outside its scope of the pursuit of the ‘common goals’ of productivity and profit. How does this fantasy of consistency retain its fascination? And what effects does this have on the signification of work and other areas of managerial practice? These are just some of the questions that can be asked when we analyze organizational images on the basis of their role in giving consistency to a particular Imaginary reality. We must remember, however, that this fantasmatic consistency is in itself impossible to maintain, and it is routinely subverted by alternative meanings that arise in the signifying chain. This brings us to the question of signification and its limits, which are part and parcel of the Symbolic register.

9 ‘*Parlêtre*’ may also be read as a play on ‘*par lettre*’, by way of the letter.

10 Here, Lacan also plays on the coincidence of the word ‘*mentalité*’ with the verb ‘*mentir*’, to lie (2005a: 66), stressing that the conscious mental states of the subject are often deceptive.

Symbolic Sinthomes

In seminar XXIII, Lacan identifies the Symbolic primarily with the function of the hole. Above, I introduced the Symbolic order as language in its structuring form, which allows the subject to come into being and provides it with the linguistic categories that give rise to its existence in the social. With the introduction of the *sinthome*, Lacan links this Symbolic order to the function of ‘the hole’. Hereby Lacan draws even further attention to the paradox of the subject’s dependency on the fundamentally flawed and incomplete structure of language. The *sinthome* brings the Symbolic network of signifiers in a stable relationship with its lack, the impossibility at its centre. It fixes a place for desire within the structure of language.

In order to elaborate on this a bit more, I would like to refer back to the topological problem of the ‘false hole’ that I discussed above. The figure of the false hole is constituted within the knot, and it necessitates the presence of an intersecting line, needed to keep the structure in place. In terms of internal consistency, the line is necessary to sustain the figure of the hole, otherwise it unravels. Lacan uses the figure as a way of saying that the Symbolic is structurally incomplete; it is structured around a hole, something that is missing from it. The Symbolic (supported by the *sinthome* in Lacan’s topology) allows the hole to become visible, although the hole itself defies representation. Within any discursive context, signification is never total and in that sense always structured around a missing element, a hole.

From a Lacanian perspective, the meaning that we experience as subjects is a product of the machinations of the signifying chain. Signifiers gain their sense only by way of their position in the complete chain of signifiers, by virtue of everything they are not. There is no inherent connection between signifiers and meaning. The differential relation between signifiers fleetingly provides them with meaning, yet this meaning is never definite or stable, but rather characterized by a certain degree of indeterminacy. Signification is not total, but retains some ambiguity, and the meaning that is produced in a discursive context depends upon the shifting network of signifiers that constitute it. It is incomplete in this sense, structured around an impossibility of full representation. It is in this way that we can understand the ‘hole’ in the Symbolic. Language continuously comes up against the impossibility of fixing representation; it cannot prevent alternate meanings from ringing out, or unexpected substitutions from taking place in the signifying chain.

If we approach organizational analysis on the basis of this notion of the Symbolic register as representation of the hole, a useful starting point can be to explore the signification of organizational processes. For example, we can investigate the way in which the organization as a signifier attempts to account for organizational processes. As a proper name, it can be understood as something that groups and quilts the processes that take place under its heading. But all of these activities fail to be fully represented by the organization-signifier. Rather, they cut into other areas of life. Organizational life is therefore not bound to any specific place or time, but exceeds the processes that are quilted by its signifier. Therefore, the boundaries that this organization-signifier attempts to set are insufficient and its significations spill into other areas of social life.

At the same time, the significations that it produces are not singular but rather multiple and overdetermined (Freud, 1993: 310, 338); they arise from the totality of the signifying network rather than any one signifier. The organizational processes that are grouped under the organization-signifier ring out with multiple meanings. A host of activities that take place in organizational settings can be seen as ‘alternate meanings’, as processes that do not fall under the dominant reading of what an organization is, or what purpose it serves. Here, we are reminded of practices of workplace resistance, from overt forms of resistance (see for instance Ezzamel *et al.*, 2001; Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995) to more subtle forms of resistance such as the use of silence (Brown and Coupland, 2005), cynicism and dis-identification (Fleming, 2005; Fleming and Spicer, 2003) or subversion of control initiatives (Rosenthal, 2005).

In light of the *sinthome*, the Symbolic register as ‘representation of holes’ emphasizes the themes of incompleteness and failure. These provide a useful way of exploring the signification of organizational life and how it is marked by an impossibility to fully capture its object.

Real *Sinthomes*

Whereas the Symbolic is that which surrounds the hole, thereby enabling that absence to be represented as such, the Real is precisely that which is excluded. It has a status of ex-sistence. It resists representation in the Symbolic, and therefore functions as an ultimate barrier to the signification that takes place within this register. It is in this sense that Lacan says that “the Real conditions reality” (2005a: 132): the Symbolic is structured around the Real, which functions as its absolute limit. It is barred from both the Symbolic chain of signifiers as well as the Imaginary field of images and meaning.

In seminar XXIII, the Real appears as a force that not only cuts up speech and consistency of the subject, but that also maintains a balance in the registers: “the Real bring forth the element that can keep [the Imaginary and the Symbolic] together” (*ibid.*: 132). It is, as we have seen, tied up in the Borromean knot with the other registers and the *sinthome*. The Real is simultaneously the limit of representation in the Symbolic, and the space in which fantasy takes shape in the Imaginary.

However, the Real does not figure as pure absence in the later work of Lacan, unlike his earlier works where it has the function of pure lack or loss of the Other. We see it emerge here as the place where the drives arise. Lacan argues that the drives suspend the subject from the life of language, and from the relationship to the body (*ibid.*: 148). This is the subject of the drive, the subject that ex-sists. It is nothing else but a drive for *jouissance*.

We can pursue this thematic of the Real as ex-sistence as a basis for the study of organization only in relation to the other registers. Since it resists representation, the Real has no empirical status of its own, and therefore can only be used as a heuristic. This can be used to explore two functions of the Real. Firstly, it is that which disrupts the consistency of the Imaginary, and it marks the limits of the Symbolic order. It *cuts up* the other two registers. Secondly, it ex-sists as the subject of affect, as *jouissance*. The subject can temporarily function within the drive, away from the Law of the

signifier, in search of enjoyment. The ex-sisting Real is in a sense an outside in which the subject escapes, outside of the gaze of the Other.

An example of how the thematic of the Real may be useful in organizational analysis would be to explore how *jouissance* is distributed in a particular organizational context. For Lacan, *jouissance* “is what serves no purpose” (1998: 3). I suggest that any exploration of *jouissance* in an organizational setting must ask this very question, and look at the way in which activity that “serves no purpose” is sustained at work. One can consider for instance employee pastimes such as gossip, humour or aimless web surfing from the viewpoint of the *jouissance* obtained. This form of enjoyment cannot be framed in terms of a transgression of the Symbolic law, in which the subject tries to take its *jouissance* back from the Other, but which provides it with fleeting exhilaration unlinked to any other commandment than the superego’s incitement to “Enjoy!” By means of this definition of *jouissance*, we can gain insight into how managerial discourses not only work to structure organizational life on the Symbolic and Imaginary level, but also how they are entangled in the subject’s Real.

Dénouement

These three inflections of consistency, hole and ex-sistence may serve as a fruitful starting point to begin to think the *sinthome* within the context of organizations. Although I have only been able to provide a very brief description of its effects on the registers here, I hope that it has introduced a set of questions that can shed light on the complex ways in which language and *jouissance* affect subjectivity in organizational contexts.

What makes the *sinthome* especially salient to management and organization studies, is that it is itself a mode of organization. It conceptualizes a singular knot between the different functions of language, which also regulates the distribution of *jouissance* that takes shape within their interrelations. It represents the discursive and extra-discursive particularity in which the subject takes shape, and can in that sense be compared to the diagnosis of the present that a clinical analysis of organization and management would undertake (Butler, in this issue). Thinking through the *sinthome* highlights the ways in which the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic aspects of discourse are quilted together in a singular manner, and grouped around a kernel of enjoyment. Therefore, the *sinthome* can be thought of as the specific constellation of the registers in a socio-historical context, by organizing its *jouissance* and giving it a superficial sheen of consistency. It reproduces itself in the registers and thereby ensures the superficial coherence of an ideological discourse.

It is exactly on this surface, this apparent consistency, that any interruption of the Real in a particular ideology must be sought. The task for organizational analysis then consists not only in identifying this *sinthome*, but as some have suggested, in identifying with the *sinthome*. This means taking up the place of that which allows for *jouissance* within a particular ideological frame, to acknowledge the “pathological singularity on which the consistency of our enjoyment depends” (Žižek, 1991: 138). By

acknowledging the *jouissance* that is central to an ideological discourse, and its constant interruption in our social reality, we can begin to unravel the knot that supports it.

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