



HYPERALLERGIC

INTERVIEWS • WEEKEND

No Rest Cures for the Wicked: An Interview with Psychoanalyst Jamieson Webster

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Felix Bernstein | October 9, 2016



Jamieson Webster

A psychoanalyst and cultural commentator, Jamieson Webster upends academic discourses on a daily basis. Her first book, *The Life and Death of Psychoanalysis* (Karnac Books, 2011), confronts antinomies emerging from real and imaginary encounters with theorists and psychoanalysts Alain Badiou, Theodor Adorno, and Jacques Lacan, in sex dreams, fights, confessions, and critiques. Her forthcoming book, *Conversion Disorder*, continues in this unconventional style of diaristic fantasies, affective intuitions, and astute structural readings. *Conversion Disorder* deftly tackles compelling and controversial subject matter, hysteria: “Every time I bring up hysteria or femininity, people act like I’ve vomited, which I probably have.” But Webster is optimistic and sees in the outmoded diagnosis of hysteria a golden ray of light, arguing that psychosomatic

conversion is a potential cure for today's neurotics. A physicalized and joyful outburst would be a way to overturn stagnant "half-symptoms" — backaches, compulsions, addictions, and the endless vague diseases tacked on regularly to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. In a world where symptoms are eradicated before they can be confronted — medicated and mediated away through pills, screens, and ironic distancing — her wager is a nice jolt. In our conversation she traced a symptomology that ranged in subject from Anna O. to Pokémon Go.

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Felix Bernstein: *"Conversion Disorder" doesn't paint a very flattering picture of today's neurotics. Are we too far gone, in our numb, medicated stagnancy, for that eureka moment of traversal and confrontation pictured in the Hollywood endings of psychoanalysis?*



Gabe Rubin, "Supplements" (2016) (courtesy the artist)

Jamieson Webster: Not at all, not too far gone. The problem is that people need to rethink what psychoanalysis really is — the work, the “confrontation.” One can sit for a very long time in a kind of soup of half-suffering and half-requests for help or a listening ear. And then accept half-

cures: drugs are more available than ever, along with a multitude of therapies, body-healers, coaches, and hypnotists. You can love the Tylenol as much as you hate the headache. But this is just an attempt to place the object under your control, which is the same thing as disgust, because if an object disgusts you then you know exactly where it belongs ... which is in the toilet.

FB: *Porn and sex apps definitely seem to provide disgust as much as desire, brokering an endless pickiness, a phallic jouissance of gambling that never ends. When sex in real life finally occurs, the disgust overwhelms the desire — before sex the person is uglier than their picture, during sex tiny gross details disrupt orgasm, and after sex there is post-coital shame, and a desire to spin the wheel again. But can all this disgust also be a cause of libidinally pleasurable desires?*

JW: Yeah, but you have to find the desire that's buried in disgust. Disgust can become very comfortable since it moves you back to yourself; it's not like a love that you don't know what to do with. It's the disgust that you know exactly what to do with, as well as the headache you have a cure for, versus the symptom that builds up to the point that you don't have control over it. And then you need to go ask someone for help. But half-symptoms never reach a point of crisis. So the problems of love and sex bring people knocking at my door. Deep down, your generation [of millennials], beneath the Instagram mania, is disgusted with their lovers, hiding a disgust with themselves for being unable to love.

FB: *And can that disgust ever be eliminated, if, for example, you find the perfect match?*

JW: No, you'll find the disgust will appear magically every single time. The toenail, the hair growing out of the shoulder, the stain on the teeth, or just ... it's always there. It's always there like a stain.

FB: *A bit like Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130," where his muse has black wire hair, and rancid breath, but he loves her none less for it.*

JW: Disgust is appetizing. Freud says that we have to link anorexia, anesthesia, and hysterical disgust, because it's disgust at the things of the appetite always. I think these three terms form a knot of post-modern ennui.

FB: *Maybe because we are sick of consuming everything, and the instant incorporation of difference and abjection through political memes and hash-tags. Maybe, we can't find sexual difference that isn't prefabricated as a brand, or, as it's called on Grindr, a "tribe."*

JW: Because there's no real tension built up?

FB: *Right, not just to valorize bathhouse orgies. But when the frighteningly different and the repressed are already pornographized, which is a kind of pre-digestion, or regurgitation, it's hard to even have an unconscious. Is this where having a hysterical physicalized conversion might cause a radical shift out of melancholic stasis?*

JW: Yes, conversion in the Freudian sense means that there's a transformation that takes place in the mind, unconsciously, that produces a real symptom that can be worked with. Something insists on the level of the body — it hasn't quite turned into psyche yet, he says, versus something caught in the psyche — your mind goes GURGH, and then turns it back into body and the body stands in for psyche, and in fact, that's when it's analyzable, not when it's a series of conscious anxiety thoughts run rampant. When it's in the body, it forms an entire network of unthought thoughts, or repressed thoughts, that have a kind of latent potential, a storehouse or preserve of power. Thinking on the other hand ... we can't think our way out of anything.

FB: *Reminds me of John Sarno, the NYU doctor who cures celebrities of their back pain by telling them rather quickly, you don't actually have a medical problem. He got a high percentage of cures, so it seems that what people need is an established authority to tell them they don't have a problem. And then sometimes he would say, they need to go to analysis, but often they didn't even need that. They just needed to be continually reminded by him that they don't have a medical condition.*

JW: But that goes in the other direction too: from something real into something not-real, or suggested to you as not-real. It's like hypnosis — hypnosis is fast, it's two, three, four sessions. You just establish your authority, you suggest the illness away, and *poof* it's gone.

FB: *Why do we need psychoanalysis if you can just do hypnosis?*

JW: You *can* just do that. If you want to be in analysis, you want to be in analysis. If you want your back pain to go away, go find someone who you believe could tell you it should go away.

FB: *Do you think that's why Freud moved away from hypnosis? Because it's too easy or doesn't get under the surface?*

JW: Being a hypnotist is like being a refrigerator repairman. You just do the same bloody thing every day. *Poof*, be gone. I'd commit suicide if I had to be the support or agent of that kind of repetition. Psychoanalysis is something else.

FB: *What about the rest-cure?*

JW: That one didn't work. You can't rest or masturbate the problems away. Although I know an analyst who takes rest-cures in hotels alone, but only, so he said, in order to find the way to dream again when the demands of life have neutralized his unconscious. One can rely on a certain point in hysteria that is a pitch of longing for something in reality.

FB: *A problem with therapy in New York is that you can confront cultural and personal antinomies, but as soon as you go back into the social network, it's all smoothed over. You lose your ability to experience loss.*

JW: I agree. You enter into a world of self-promotion.

FB: *And analysis is, of course, part of LinkedIn. So you have all these analysts not as a potential for singular experience but as a million tabs, ad infinitum, a wheel of fortune. And then when you're in analysis, you convert it into more fodder for the network. When I was a teenager, any insight from analysis I'd immediately put in my YouTube videos, desperate to convert it into cultural cache.*

JW: Right, when I was first in analysis I would just vomit everything on everybody who would get near me, too. Most obvious of which was my anxiety about my analysis. But I think there's a moment when you don't want to give it to anybody anymore. When you keep regurgitating your analytic knowledge, you are really only at the point of half conversions and half symptoms, which means that there's no operative unconscious, yet. Nothing reaches the level of having a status in the repressed, where real elaboration is possible. You forget that this is an achievement — one, to have a symptom; two, to have an unconscious; three, to have a singularity that you don't want to share; and four, to commit things to absence.

FB: *I like that, a four-step program! Do we still talk too much about our analysis? Making HBO shows or web series' about it.*

JW: Self-aggrandizement is so much nihilism — critical, self-lacerating feelings of total impotence. And I think there's an impulse towards self-aggrandized branding of mental illness, but I think when you have real live flesh-and-blood people it's not pretty, it's not *Girls*. It's not even funny.

FB: *And New York is the classic place of that sort of neurotic, Woody Allen type who "gets it," so he or she doesn't really need analysis, but clearly he or she really does ... and not in a joking way. The cliché is that comedians, academics, and hipsters are pretending to be analytical, when in fact they don't want to be analyzed at all. I came out of the closet on YouTube in 2008, semi-ironically, but people will say, "Oh,*

obviously he's just caught up in the social network ... camp and post-Freudian irony." In other words, the hipster or digital native seems to Marxist and Freudian traditionalists to eternally resist any "real" radical change or self-confrontation.

JW: Well, on the other hand, all of those found YouTube videos you collage, in your Whitney show *Bieber Bathos Elegy*, are so moving. These people are making videos with an aspiration to be more than just an ordinary YouTube user. It's like *American Idol*, or watching *Gladiator*, watching the slaughtering. And I don't know why we're not in tears the entire time. ... But at the very end of Lacan's late paper, "L'Etourdit," he says, "we must give up the fascination with abjection." Abjection makes a hole in the self – which is terrifying, but simply structural — too imaginary, too glamorous, too YouTubeable. You're giving the hole too much presence versus what would it mean to really write absence, write your own disappearance. What would it mean to write a real hole? It's so much harder. And I think it's a more interesting aesthetic question.

FB: *Maybe the problem is the audience. The audience becomes attached to the people they watch (on videos, in museums, on American Idol, on Tinder) as an object-cause-of-disgust. They claim to want a real Hole, to want an experience, but whatever they see is immediately converted into something boring, familiar, into chitchat. The art world can be called out as neophilic, but what part of Facebook or social media isn't? All that's left in that trapping is to ask what's next. I have friends who didn't follow through on their suicide because they got so curious about what would happen, could happen, next.*

JW: I think you have to thrive on that curiosity. And maybe this is the part of social media that has the status of a truth of some sort. This will towards its own dissolution.

3^e PÉRIODE ... PÉRIODE DES ATTITUDES PASSIONNELLES PL.IV.





Fig. 1.

Phase triste



Fig. 2.

Phase gaie

A. Delahaye et E. Lecrosnier.

A plate from “Etudes cliniques” (1881), Wellcome Library, London (via [Wikipedia](#))

FB: Which brings us to hysteria. Is there something “after” hysteria that can be good? There’s this interesting detournement in your book with Anna O. You show that her story isn’t merely tragic.

JW: Well, the reason it was tragic is because [Josef] Breuer was a bad analyst. He ran away, afraid of her. Anna O., later in life, wrote stories under a pseudonym where she made herself male, and she went on to rescue all of these prostitutes and orphan children. She was clearly attracted to the abject waste of the city. But then she was supposedly a real nasty kind of school-marm

punitive judgmental woman. That's the little unanalyzed piece of it — that she would kind of torture these women for any fidelity they had to men or master figures, but she was a master figure herself, dominating presence. She didn't recognize her own contradiction, which is one of the dangers of unanalyzed hysteria. The problem wasn't analysis, but rather that her analysis didn't go far enough. So it's a story that shows you what might be on the other side of hysteria.

FB: *Maybe this is something that could still be done in writing, a self-analysis that pushes far into the contradictions that are disavowed but lurk within straight male discourse?*

JW: You have to pass through any discourse in order to recognize that there was some desire in you for it, that this contradicts your wishes to be free of it. And then it's up to you to resolve that dilemma within yourself. That was a huge part of the first book I wrote, and it's still something that I struggle with. Someone told me to stop saying "Lacan says," and I can't quite bring myself there. Am I hiding behind Lacan?

FB: *Speaking of that, Lacan says that humans need a supplement to sexuality, like cave painting or masculinity. Does porn serve a similar function? And at what point does it stop acting in the service of sex and instead start to make sex impossible? Literally, we can't have sex, can't get it up, we do not want to meet other humans.*

JW: I don't think porn functions as a supplement because it doesn't add anything. I think it's a subtraction. You're constantly subtracting anxiety, subtracting desire, subtracting your place in the world ... which eventually becomes the very subtraction of the thing itself that porn is centered on, sex, orgasm, other humans ... even if they are only orifices. What does it matter if you don't feel anything anymore? The other doesn't even make you anxious. You don't crave anything.

FB: *Or does it create a new place in the world – one full of kitten videos, puppy love, where sex is forever postponed?*

JW: Only if you want what's essentially non-human. But in turning away from the human world you are invariably turning away from the complications of being a sexed person — it's a new asexuality, an anti-jouissance. You've got porn, which is not love, and then you've got love without any sex, and the whole complication of being a sexual person is to try to put these two things together.

FB: *Why doesn't online flirtation lead to sex?*

JW: Well, flirtation is great because it's about drawing out desire. But you *do* it, it's the end of the game, and you have to figure out how to start over again. What desire is going to pop up next? It's a very difficult moment to move from whatever, the culmination of the act, to the next thing, the next desirous moment. So I think flirting is wonderful, but you can't use it to avoid completion.

FB: *Is in-person, IRL, sex really that important, though?*

JW: No, you're right, there isn't a reason to solder sex to the idea of completion. But think of it in terms of crossing a certain threshold of comfort. When you get really comfortable with flirtation, you keep avoiding the next step. So it's about trying to move as far across the edge as possible. You have to fall down somewhere new. Which is what falling in love is, that's why it's dangerous. It messes up your whole world. For instance, what happens when someone falls in love with a furry, do they have to become a furry?

FB: *Seems like a good Netflix sitcom plot.*

JW: But this leads back to how, at first, there's this dangerous thing of falling in love with a furry, but when it becomes a sitcom and you're making money from repeating this "weird" thing over and over again, then you're not getting anywhere. You have to keep doing something new. It can't just stop with a sitcom.



A copy of “Welcome to NHK” (2006) on DVD

FB: *A few magazines have run headlines that Pokémon Go is “praised by health experts” as a kind of cure-all. Here’s the solution to Internet agoraphobia, and hikikomori culture, that uses the same characters that enabled the addiction to begin with. With this idea of the cure-all, I’m reminded of the underlying desire to “catch ’em all.” But what happens then to the desire for the not-all?*

JW: There’s something funny about Pokémon Go, which is this desire to find harmony again in one’s relationship with the outside world. It was always there in the original Pokémon series — and even, by the way, the name-of-the-father, since all the Pokémon can say is their own name, and they are loyal, as opposed to those humans who want to misuse the Pokémon for power or exploitation. There’s something also about re-establishing a new order in the world and here I think you can find the not-all, even behind the fact that this is being used to sell things and advertise. The attraction to the game comes from its being hinged on something real, something that *is* not-all. Which makes sense, since it’s incredibly maternal and feminine to spend all day taking *care* of your Pokémon.

FB: *But is there also a kind of cruelty to this power you get over the cute cat you “like” or the Pokémon you catch? And I worry that this power from online “exploration” leads to a repressive desublimation, since fundamentally you’re hiding behind a screen, or in your childhood bedroom. Which can be a kind of sick deadlock.*

JW: Right, but you can break a piece of this desublimated fantasy off and send it forward. Here is the piece of psychoanalysis, which attempts, god forbid, to speak universally — we are all trying to work through the same sick deadlock. Some people and events, like Pokémon Go or “sex addicts,” just make that deadlock more obvious ... and god bless them, since we are all much too content and blind in our half-sickness.

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