# How Do Systems Fall in Love?:

## Lacanian Explorations of Niklas Luhmann's Communicative Theory

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This essay explores Niklas Luhmann's contemporary sociological theory of love from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis. It proposes a reading of its underlying systems approach according to what Jacques-Alain Miller names 'ordinary psychosis.' These perspectives expose a number of difficulties inherent to Luhmann's approach. First, Luhmann's communicative systems are not structurally diverse. Indeed, only the internal codes and their subsequent communicative elaborations give rise to external points of difference. Second, there are relative problems with sufficiently stabilising any given system. Third, love is always conceptualised as a distinctive system with its own code rather than as that which describes a universal systemic potential.

**Keywords**: Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Niklas Luhmann, Sociology of Love, Communications, Talcott Parsons, Systems Theory, Discourse Analysis

## 1. Decoding Love

Niklas Luhmann's communicative theory of society has persuaded many sociologists that love should be understood as a mode of symbolic communication (see Morgner, 2014). Thus, he wrote that 'love will not be treated here as a feeling (or at least only secondarily so) but rather in terms of its constituting a symbolic code which shows how to communicate effectively in situations where this would otherwise appear improbable. The code thus encourages one to have the appropriate feelings' (Luhmann, 1998: 8-9). This passage should be scrutinised on the basis of its presumption that a primordial code gives rise to an appropriate affection, since this implies that love is not a compensatory response to underlying feelings whose enigmatic content cannot be properly assimilated. This theory proceeds on the basis of a single point of structural determination — an apparent signifier, that is, a 'code' — which only secondarily gives rise to associated feelings.

An inescapable reduction in the theory of love arises therefore as a rejection of the possibility of latent determinations — which may be sensible or enigmatic — underlying communication. In this respect, the theory neglects two modalities of love outlined by Jacques Lacan: first, love as a symbolic impossibility, that is, love as a glitch in the symbolic architecture, and; second, love as an imaginary impasse to symbolic determinations. In the first case, love might be understood as an impossibility of symbolic communication, which thereby renders love as a rejection of symbolic necessities and the ascension of an enigmatic void. In the second case, love might be understood according to the imaginary dimension — extrapolated from clinical notions of 'transference' — as narcissistic capture. In support of this latter point Lacan once claimed that 'it is one's own ego that one loves in love, one's own ego made real on the imaginary level' (Lacan, 1988: 142). In both cases there is a rejection

within Luhmann's theory of the latent dimension of determinations. It is for this reason that we have a sufficient basis to engage in a more nuanced exploration of the Luhmannian theory of love from within the Lacanian orientation.

## 2. Foreclosure of the Binary: The System is an Environment

What is a code? Krause claimed that a code has 'a binary foundational difference of a bi-stable form for generating binary distinctions. Codes are always bivalent, [since they] have a positive and negative value' (2005: 132). The preceding sentence illustrates what is at stake in a Luhmannian code: 'positive' and 'negative' are reduced to adjectives sharing the same noun, 'value,' such that what is valued is the valence (which is 'bi-' in that it occurs twice over). A bivalent binary redoubles a primordial rejection giving way to a 're-jection of rejection itself.' The acceptance of a binary proves fundamental to the rise of communication, discourse, and the social bond since it always includes 'one' and its reject. For this reason, a binary is never ambivalent. Foreclosure of the binary structure in the form of bivalence indicates a rejection of this very separation of the one and its reject. Thus, a system's rejection is constitutive of the one itself and this is the mark of its profound ambivalence. Put differently, there is a question opened up here about the adequate separation of system and its environment.

Any rejection of the binary is also a rejection therefore of latent determinations, or, to put it psychoanalytically, it is a rejection of the unconscious (since what is rejected is also that which would have otherwise been repressed; see Freud, 1925). What would have been repressed is a non-sensical signifier, a signifier which would have necessitated its signified through the distribution of a body of signifiers. The communicative systems of Luhmann are not prepared to be deciphered. It is therefore never a question of psychoanalytic interpretation at stake in the systems' approach. The symbolic element which would have been repressed in this case could have been carried through the chain of its communication as an alternative agency of the structure. Neurotic systems re-

press this rejection of the signifier and open up a latent symbolic structure — the unconscious — for deciphering, and psychotic systems foreclosure this signifier and 'cancel their subscription to the unconscious' (Lacan). Luhmann is not amenable to this minimal diversity of systems but rather describes all systems as if they were lonely spheres of life without an unconscious.

What is most important about a code is not that it is implicated in the establishment of a body of meaning which renders the unfamiliar environment somehow familiar, but rather that it fulfills a function poorly which could otherwise be fulfilled by an enigmatic void. Whereas a bivalent code indicates that it is twice strong (e.g., nothing is missing), that it is powerful even there where it indicates powerlessness, this is not the case for the logic of the signifier whose truth is split between itself and the enigma of jouissance (see Grigg, 2012). It is important to distinguish code from signifier and to relate them both to an underlying void (that which psychoanalysis relegates to the psychoanalytic drive). Whereas a signifier is non-sensical and isolated from a signifier, its function is to prohibit the fusion of subject and environment, a code does not operate with the same functional directive. Indeed, a code does not function through a universal prohibition of the subject and its environment but rather functions to *affirm* as well as *reject.*

A signifier propels the subject along the pathway of the desire which it instigates. It is a desire expressed always as a longing to return to the environment from which it has been separated. However, a code does not express such a desire because it remains nonetheless tethered to its environment from which it cannot anyway distinguish itself. Whereas a signifier is typically repressed in the unconscious and so must be unearthed through the difficult work of analytical deciphering, a code is not deciphered but rather witnessed in the environment itself. A system's ambivalent code compels it to deny the internalisation of an unconscious and to rather witness it as a project within its environment. Thus, a code projects its own threat out into its environment as a consequence of the failure of any universal prohibition to jouissance. This is why a system speaks and enjoys its own language (what

Lacan called 'lalangue'). A loneliness pervades every system because each speaks only to itself, each cannot get beyond itself to articulate that which has not been said before. The operation of metaphoric substitution which should have grounded the system through the barring of its environment has been foreclosed and in its place there are only metonymic expansions and holophrastic gestures from within the sphere of its own competency.

## 3. Ordinary Psychosis: The Process of Invention & the Void

Luhmann's systems are nonetheless not without a body of meaning. We have confirmation of psychosis and its relation to the body within the late teaching of Lacan, where, increasingly, we are forced to consider that one speaks with the body itself: 'it has to be maintained that man has a body, that he speaks with his body' (Lacan, 2001: 566). It is the body of meaning (which circulates around the code) which remains mute, withdrawing, endlessly, from external grasp (see Bryant, 2011). The movement of functional differentiation through which spheres of communicative competency distinguish themselves from their milieu and hence give rise to distinctive codes opens up a locus of invention. Systems become environments, and give birth to further systems. This is similar in effect to Talcott Parsons theory in that every system is also a system of systems. Yet one point of difference is crucial: whereas Parsons remained committed to a notion of 'inputs' and 'outputs,' Luhmann's systems are operationally closed. Parsons' systems extracted from their environment key resources (ultimately, they are signifiers) through the functional directive of 'adaptation' (whereby adaptation is one of four functional directives, the others being goal attainment, integration, and pattern maintenance).

Contrarily, Luhmann's systems perceive themselves continuously under threat from the environment. These systems do not have adaptation as a recourse. Rather they proceed on the basis of exclusion and enhancement of the sphere of its independent communicative body. Moreover, systems are witnesses of their own environmental constructions without realising

that these ostensibly external phenomena are modes of return to the operation hitherto foreclosed: environmental separation. Stijn Vanheule wrote that 'the subject in psychosis [is] a martyr of the unconscious, a passive witness of strange messages that come from without' (2011: 79). Lacanians frequently believe that the master signifier — the phallus — has many names, that is, that one can do without *the* master signifier provided it is put to use. The various names of every systemic code demonstrates precisely this fact: that in each case it is the function of the phallus in question, and in every case it is redistributed into the environment as elementary phenomena. When the phallus as master signifier is foreclosed it returns in the real of the environment as delusional phenomena which the system highlights with conviction and certainty.

One possible recourse is hyper-pragmatic epistemological gestures of boundary maintenance. These are pursued by systems both *too well* and yet *never well enough.* It is in the nature of pragmatism to occupy this bivalent zone of the too-well and the never-well-enough since this is what necessitates its retroactive causation: the pragmatist values truth on the basis of its consequences such that the truth stands always ahead of it. Thus, a given system might urgently hop from one lily-pad to the next, each sinking just as quickly as it has provided support from the turbulent and triumphant waters of jouissance. It becomes a question of what it is that maintains a system amidst the irritations and disturbances of the environment. The threat of submersion into jouissance is constant, yet, at the same time, this is the fixation from which a system cannot be separated, even through functional differentiation since functional differentiation is a mode of remaining tethered: 'systems theory begins with the unity of the difference between system and environment. The environment is a constitutive feature of this difference, thus it is no less important for the system than the system itself' (Luhmann, 1995: 212).

The threat of submersion into jouissance is constant. The subject of neurosis within Lacanian theory is a lack within the chain of signifiers, a place where meaning fails and where one signifier strives to

represent the enigma of subjectivity for another signi-fier. Such a place does not exist within a system, or, if it does, it is only fleetingly brought into existence. From the perspective of the system, there is only ego — just as, for Talcott Parsons, there were only egos and objects within the interaction systems — the sub-ject is reduced to an object of its communication. Fi-nally, we can introduce the clinical category of 'ordinary psychosis' as a third possibility between neu-rosis and psychosis: are Luhmann's systems constitu-tive of the clinical category known by Jacques-Alain Miller and the World Association of Psychoanalysis as 'ordinary psychosis' (see Miller, 2015; Svolos, 2009)? Ordinary psychosis is characterised by discrete signs of psychosis of which there are at least three: social ex-ternality, subjective externality, and bodily externality. Luhmann's systems clearly exhibit the first two fea-tures of social and subjective externality, yet they nonetheless seem to have stabilised in some sense a body of meaning.

Profound subjective externality is indicated by the absence of a space outside of the code. All such spaces are filled up by the obverse of its bivalent possibility: 'powerless,' 'not love,' 'criminal,' and so on. The very space within which a subject might have been placed has been relinquished in advance. Hence, subjectivity is eradicated by the system. Finally, the body's fate is secured by the fact that the system enjoys only its own meaning (see De Battista, 2007). There is some degree of stability since the body is anchored by the code, yet this is only because the systems Luhmann identifies are among those which have overcome the fate of bod-ily externality otherwise characteristic of a psychosis. These are ordinary systems. Yet, we would suspect that these systems shall themselves one day succumb to ir-relevance and live on through functional differentia-tion. This is because their codes are fundamentally inadequate and will eventually force the body to dis-solve into further systemic complexities. Beneath the code, as its underlying impetus, there is nonetheless a void. Systemic bodies are fraught with attempts to outrun the void which nonetheless compels them to-ward embellishing its code. For example, the educa-tion system must fill 'the void of necessary internal determinations [with] ideals and organisation, [with]

ideologies and professional politics, but above all by autonomous reflective theories' (Luhmann, 1995: 206).

A code is always a mark of defence against the void which gives it credibility. It is the void which must be brought to the fore in our analysis of Luhmann's sys-tems since it is concealed — yet obviously implicated in — the perpetuation of a bivalent code. Yet, the nonsensical void, or what Lacanians refer to as 'sinthome,' might also be the means through which a system might enjoy itself and suture itself to its body. Codes are instead charged with the 'obscenity of hav-ing jouissance pass for truth' (to quote a Lacanian col-league whose conversation was overheard recently). Today more than ever we are witnesses of bodies — ones all alone — or rather 'speaking-beings' whose en-joyment is elevated and whose code is expected to pass as truth. Yet even Luhmann was aware in some sense that his codes are inventive responses to the void: 'when no value consensus exists, one can thereby in-vent it. The system emerges *etsi no daretur Deus*' (Luh-mann, 1995: 105). It is the lack of a master signifier, in this case 'God,' which opens up a space for the in-vention of a body of language which speaks to itself and enjoys itself. A code is the invention of a point of determination for the system by way of and as a re-sponse to the jouissance of a void.

## 4. Love Beyond the One-All-Alone

Communicative systems invent environments which would threaten its code: 'since my own code is *love* then that which I do not understand is *not-love*.' Ele-ments of the environment are thereby rendered intel-ligible by the system. It is an act of producing a distinction which hitherto did not exist (see King & Thornhill, 2003: 12). Systems produce their own dis-tinctions — their own environments — as a justifica-tion for the lack which did not anyway arise. It is a self-generated process for solving an underlying trau-matic jouissance which would threaten the integrity of the system. Thus, put psychoanalytically, systems are without a father: they are abandoned to the ma-ternal fusion of what Bracha Ettinger names 'matrixial environment.' It is also possible that a void stands in

place of the signifier and code in order to offer separation from the environment. The void introduces a space away from the real jouissance of trauma. Yet, a code, when properly invented, should offer a 'sinthomatic solution' in place of the void. As Shiela Cavanagh has put it: '[a]nother way to understand the importance of the sinthome is to say that it is something we create in place of a void. A sinthome is a way to name something of/in the [void] that causes anxiety' (Cavanagh, 2019).

It is here that love emerges as a possible gesture of sinthomatic identification (see Dunlap in Goodchild et al., 2017: 352). Whereas Luhmann characterises love as a distinctive system of communication responsible for circulating the code of 'lovable' and 'not lovable,' it is more likely that love is a procedure through which any communicative system might engage with the void of jouissance as the means through which to implement a social bond with other systems. Put another way, Luhmann's conception of love remains trapped within the contours of a particular systemic code, unable to break free of the boundary maintenance activities that constitute it as operationally closed, without realising that any system may elevate the void to the status of a code itself. Bracha L. Ettinger refers to a process of 'communicaring' which involves the sharing of the trauma of the primordial void with another. Recently she invented the following formula: 'trauma is truth of love in beauty.' My interpretation of this formula is as follows: the real of trauma constitutes an imaginary substitute for the symbolic signifier which has been foreclosed. It is the invention of a beautiful self-referential code not as functional differentiation but rather as the basis of a functional relationship among (and not within) systems.

## 5. Talcott Parsons' and Freudian Biology

Talcott Parsons made the ego and its object the primary site of the personality sub-system. This explains why Parsons' reading of Freud always passed through the work of the American pragmatists (who were a bunch of philosophers and psychologists) and the object-relations theorists rather than engaging with the notion of the Freudian unconscious and its drives. Like the vast majority of American sociologists, Parsons rejected the Freudian drives and the unconscious because of their supposed preference for theories of biological determinations. Yet, at the same time Parsons was one of very few early American sociologists to have explored Freudian theory and technique seriously. He trained at the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute under Grete Bibring in 1946 and frequented their clinical gatherings. This is the orientation inherited by Luhmann.

One of the other major problems with Parsons' approach was that he subsumed the Freudian insights into the relatively discrete personality sub-system. Although symbolic interactionist and psychoanalytic themes were present in his analysis they always emerged in compacted and truncated ways, reduced, inevitably, to the lower powers and determined by the higher social and cultural systems (e.g., the codes of the cultural system). Parsons' lower systems — the behavioural and personality sub-systems — provided resources for the overarching social system while the higher sub-systems harnessed those resources and channeled through through the imperatives of pattern maintenance and integration. Davenport wrote that '[m]ore than anything else [...] Parsons relied upon [...] psychoanalytic theory for the personality level of his theory of action' (Davenport, 1966: 275). Parsons therefore ignored what was most Freudian about Freudian theory, focusing instead only on what would be harnessed from it by the cultural system.

Parsons' motivation was to demonstrate the social applicability of Freud's discovery. To do so he was forced to ignore those other aspects of Freudian thought, the unconscious and the drives — both of which are increasingly rendered as enigmas by Lacan

(rather than as determinations compelled by a naive biological substratum). Parsons wrote:

> The primary emphasis in interpreting Freud's work – at least in the United States – has tended to be on the power of the individual's instinctual needs and the deleterious effects of their frustration. [...] The consequence of such a trend is to interpret Freud as a psychologist who brought psychology closer to the biological sciences, and to suggest the relative unimportance of society and culture, except as these constitute agencies of the undesirable frustration of man's instinctual needs (Parsons, [1958] 2016: 321).

Yet, what if the true Freudian discovery was not 'individual psychology' but rather the real sub-stratum of jouissance associated with the emergence of society and culture? The 'oceanic feeling' which was discussed by Freud in his essays on civilisation increasingly contributed to a sociological stance; it is an oceanic feeling which finds its basis also in his neglected essay on death drive, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.* Jouissance and the real increasingly do not have a biological rendering but rather a sociological one. But Parsons could not conceive of a non-biological and hence non-psychological Freudian 'real' associated with the drive and jouissance. He could not foresee within Freud's work the determinations of a real which would contribute not only to the system's inherent frustration but also to the very formation of a social or systemic bond. And American sociologists persist in their interpretation of the biological instincts or drives in Freud's work, finding therein a naïve biological position that has been unpalatable for social science and humanities scholars steeped in the linguistic turn (see Seidman, 2014).

Parsons therefore missed what is most real in Freud's work: Freud was not most interested in affirming the priority of the 'object' or the 'ego' but rather in the agency of 'lack' and 'void' and in allowing the ego to give way or go to that place where meaning is lacking. Lack, as in 'lack of an object,' is synonymous with the real of 'castration anxiety' and it is determinative for the subject. Lacan explained:

> [W]e cannot pose the problem of the object relation correctly unless we begin with a certain framework that must be considered as fundamental. [...] This framework, or the first of these frameworks, is that in the human world, the lack of the object provides the

structure as well as the beginning of objectal [and hence systemic] organization (Lacan, 2018: 53).

Instead of focusing on the real frustrations of individuals – frustrations of ego, image, possession – the object-relations theorists, and, by implication this includes also Parsons and Luhmann, seemed to be interested in an imaginary mode of stabilisation through the consistency and repetition of codes. The paradox is therefore that Parsons did not want to engage with the real frustrations discovered by Freudian theory. He was doomed therefore to reproduce them in his own project as a return of what was hitherto repressed: a system is always threatened by its environment and so must tirelessly persist in its boundary-maintenance. Thus, a system can never relax because its drives are feral and lawless.

In every case, Luhmann, like Parsons before him, presumed that society is based upon relationships among its constituent parts, that systems are derived from systems and that there are multiplicities of atomistic ones all the way down (Luhmann, 1998: 12, 13). Thus, a system is always a collection of ones-all-alone, forever in isolation, forever circulating the codes of its own internal egoistic narcissism to protect itself against the traumatising and threatening real of its environment. Jacques-Alain Miller claimed that this is the urgency with which the psychoanalyst must respond in the twenty-first century. Maria Cristina Aguirre, summarising the Millerian teaching, wrote:

> Following Lacan's proposition in his last teachings, what is at stake in the practice of psychoanalysis today is to find, case by case, the particular way a subject can find an exit from the trap of narcissism with his own resources – imaginary, symbolic, or real – by organising a link to the Other, in the era of the One All Alone (Aguirre, 2018).

Contemporary Lacanian psychoanalysts often begin from a radically different point of departure: any system, any ego, is based always upon a lack-of-relation. We should therefore undermine the lowest level of Luhmann's systems, that of its so-called 'real assets' (Luhmann, 1998: 10). One Lacanian position on love is that it is not at all an asset that one can harness or give — 'love is giving what one *doesn't* have' — such that the following claims are grounded upon

a refusal of truth: love obtains its real assets from sexuality, money from elementary needs, power from force, and, incidentally, truth from perception (ibid.). From what system does one determine whether or not one has obtained an asset? Is the phallus an asset? Is 'having' or 'obtaining' (an asset) not itself the fundamental systemic code which unites all such distinction codes and overcomes their functional differentiation?

Psychoanalysis — indeed all of psychology — seems to demonstrate that truth is not obtained directly from perception without the mediation of a signifier. Similarly, the truth of Orpheus is that the Gods deceived him in order to expose the truth of the inadequacy of the phallic gaze, of perception. If it is true that love obtains its assets from sexuality then this perspective relies upon a resource-based understanding of libido and the drives as quantity while ignoring sexuality as an inherent void or stumbling-block (see Zupancic, 2017; also see Zizek, 2019). Marx already disrupted the popular notion that money is based upon 'needs' when he wrote:

> Man becomes even poorer as his need for money becomes ever greater [...]. The power of his money declines in inverse proportion to the increase in the volume of production: that is, his neediness grows as the *power* of money increases. The need for money is therefore the true need produced by the economic system, and it is the only need which the latter produces (Marx, 1844).

We can see once again that love, as an obstacle to virility and power, is operating within Marx's economic work. Marx discovered that money produces its own need as well as its own limitation precisely as wealth and illusions of power increase. It is not that an economy is based upon needs but rather that needs are themselves produced as semblance. Thus, the behavioural system is itself subservient to the higher systems in a much more insidious way than we typically believe.

Finally, Luhmann has claimed that power has its resource in force. Yet, once again psychoanalysis demonstrates that the real truth of power — what Lacan named the imaginary phallus — is *minus-phi,* that is, castration. One cannot suggest that the political system's code of 'powerful' is marked against 'powerless' without recognising that it is a defence against precisely the inverse perspective: it is the fear of the truth of powerlessness which gives rise to power. Lacan said in one of his seminars that 'the One [...] is symbolised by the imaginary function that incarnates powerlessness, in other words, by the phallus [...]. In psychoanalysis it is a matter of raising powerlessness to logical impossibility' (Lacan, 2018b: 219). Systems are keen on displacing powerlessness as a deciphering mechanism of their environment without counterposing it to the underpinning void. Does this not explain also why sadism and masochism are often found within the same system, whereby one is recognised as the hidden and yet displaced truth of the other? For Lacan and Freud, 'sadism is merely the disavowal of masochism,' since the sadist rejects the experience of castration anxiety (*minus-phi*) and so forces the environment to bear that anxiety instead (Lacan, 1977: 186).

The final asset is perhaps also the most important: sex. Among the remaining confusions within Luhmann's work there is the repeated claim that love obtains its resources from sexuality. Sexuality only obtains its status as a resource via the conduit of love: love is radically without foundation in sexuality since its functional imperative is to compensate for the traumatic void of sex. Sex cannot be marked; it cannot even be marked as an 'unmarked' distinction within a bivalent code. Lacan was therefore able to claim that 'when one loves, it has nothing to do with sex.' The lack of a sexual relationship in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is not a theory of the foreclosure of the relationship; it is precisely because of the impossibility of the sexual relationship that one falls in love. Joan Copjec wrote that 'sex opposes itself to sense, it is also, by definition, opposed to relation, that is, to communication' (Copjec, 1994: 21). Sex, as real impossibility, is also, therefore, without communication and cannot be utilised as a resource or asset. It can only be classified as a loss which not even love can recuperate. For Lacanian psychoanalysts, sex is itself this traumatic void upon which or in spite of which one attempts in so many ways to fall in love.

## 6. Conclusion: Systems Cannot Love

Let us conclude by addressing Luhmann's theory of functional difference. His claim that systems become functionally differentiated from themselves implies that each system relinquishes that which it finds inconsistent with itself. For example, in medieval times, though religion was a dominant hegemonic system, it gave rise to other distinct systems such as education, law, and health, which distinguished themselves from the originating system on the basis of the invention of a new code. We might expect that systems become increasingly differentiated in time, yet, nonetheless, certain systems become 'functionally primary. ' Today, through increasing fragmentation and the proliferation of distinctive codes, we live in a time of the loss of love: systems theory is evidence enough of the loss of love, since it is a discourse of the One-All-Alone. In place of love, there is only the certainty of a code (to be distinguished from the code of certainty). We are left only with a question concerning love within the dimension of psychosis.

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