

Mass Suicide, the 'Heaven's Gate' Sect Heleni Koumidi

Is an individual suicide different from a mass suicide? On March 26, 1997, the police discovered 39 dead bodies, all members of the Heaven's Gate Sect. They claimed they were extraterrestrial beings and believed that the earth would be recycled, so it was vital for them to immediately abandon the planet.

That year, the leader of the Heaven's Gate Sect anticipated the passage of the comet Hale-Bopp near the earth and he predicted that a UFO would follow the comet's tale. The sect's members believed that, by committing suicide, their souls would reach up the flying saucer. The members followed the leader's delirium and the mass suicide took place in a ritual way. As members of the crew of a spaceship, they wore the same uniform with the label *Haven's Gate-Away Team*, then swallowed the pills and lied down. In a same way than Schreber, they had the idea of a world 's new order, hence bringing a cause for their act as well as a life purpose.

J.-A. Miller states that " the collective is made up of a multiplicity of individuals taking the same object as ego Ideal. The same ego Ideal is put in the position of common denominator of several individual egos"¹.

In the same text, J.-A. Miller also speaks about mass transference, mentioning that "it is perfectly conceivable : it is a multiplied transference, caused for a large number of subjects by the same object supported by the same subject supposed to know, which is manifested in negative feelings as well as positive, and which is constitutive of a group"². In this particular case of mass suicide, the leader is the one who knows through his delusional conviction.

Every member has a transferential relationship with the leader who is the one who bears the *agalma*, the object *a* as a precious object. "I love the person I assume to have knowledge"³, says Lacan. So, every follower here has the position of "lover" regarding the leader.

Mass suicide here comes as the end of a journey. Hence, it is an act inside a continual frame where the *identification with the leader* and the *common ideal* dominate. Consequently, for the members of the sect, there is no suicide. There is no death, only life somewhere else. "Let's go home!" they said cheerfully.

The *common* sign between an individual and a mass suicide is that the subject becomes equivalent to the object *a*. But each time, their *difference* has to do with each encounter: an "unfortunate encounter" could change the story of the subject.

The smile on their lips before this act, which according to the newspapers was "difficult to understand", attests the Jouissance One.

Translated from Greek by Vasiliki Vitsara

1 Miller, J.-A., "Torino's theory of the subject of the School",
<http://www.amp-nls.org/page/gb/60/the-turin-theory-of-the-subject-of-the-school>

2 *Ibid.*

3 Lacan, J., The Seminar, book XX, *Encore*, On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, Norton 1999, p. 67 (Translated by B. Fink).