

On Virtual Sex and Related Matters

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Since I am a psychoanalyst, the question which interests me, of course, is: how do the new electronic media affect our notions of sexuality? The problem that lurks in the background is: How we are to propel again the desire to copulate today, in an age when, due to its direct accessibility, i.e. due to the lack of obstacles that would heighten its value, the sexual object is more and more depreciated — or, to quote Freud's classic formulation:

"The psychological value of erotic needs is reduced as soon as their satisfaction becomes easy. An obstacle is required in order to heighten libido; and where natural resistances to satisfaction have not been sufficient men have at all times erected conventional ones so as to be able to enjoy love."¹

Within this perspective, courtly love appears as simply the most radical strategy for elevating the value of the object by putting up conventional obstacles to its attainability. When, in his seminar *Encore*, Lacan provides the most succinct formulation of the paradox of courtly love, he says something apparently similar, yet fundamentally different: "A very refined manner of supplanting the absence of the sexual relationship by feigning that it is us who put the obstacle in its way."² The point is therefore not simply that we set up additional conventional hindrances in order to heighten the value of the object; external hindrances that thwart our access to the object are there precisely to create the illusion that without them, the object would be directly accessible. What such hindrances thereby conceal is the inherent impossibility of attaining the object. In order to render palpable this deadlock, let us for a moment turn to an example from another domain, that of the so-called "computer highways" (Infonet, etc.). If, in the near future, all data, movies, etc., were to become instantly available, if the delay were to become minimal so that the very notion of "searching for" (a book, a film ...) were to lose meaning, would this instant availability not suffocate desire? That is to say, what sets in motion human desire is a short-circuit between the primordially lost Thing and an empirical, positive object, i.e. the elevation of this object to the dignity of the Thing. This object thus fills out the "transcendental" void of the Thing, it becomes prohibited and thereby starts to function as the cause of desire. When, however, every empirical object becomes available, this absence of the prohibition necessarily gives rise to anxiety: what becomes visible via this saturation is that the ultimate point of prohibition was simply to mask the inherent impossibility of the Thing, i.e. the structural deadlock of desire. (Therein resides one of the antinomies of late capitalism: on the one hand, this saturation, this instant gratification that suffocates desire; on the other hand, the growing number of the "excluded," of those who lack the basic necessities of life [proper food, shelter, medical care, etc.] — excess and lack, suffocation and deprivation, are here structurally codependent, so that it is no longer possible to measure the "progress" by an unambiguous standard. That is to say, it is inappropriate to claim that. Since some people live in abundance, while other live in deprivation, we must

strive for universal abundance: the "universalisation" of the form of abundance which characterizes late capitalism is impossible for structural reasons. Since, as it was pointed out already by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right*, in capitalism, abundance itself produces deprivation.)

It is against this background that one can throw some new, perhaps unexpected light on so-called "political correctness." One of the aspects of the PC attitude is to reintroduce Prohibition in the domain of sexuality and to set us to discern everywhere the hidden traces of "incorrect" (patriarchal, racist etc.) enjoyments. One is therefore tempted to conceive PC as a Foucauldian "strategy without subject" aimed at arousing our interest in what its official, public discourse pretends to prohibit. From this perspective, PC appears as a kind of "cunning of reason" by means of which history counteracts the alarming fact that, in the aftermath of the "sexual revolution" of the 60s, people are less and less prone to copulate (according to the latest polls in Western Europe, 70% of young women prefer dinner in an expensive restaurant to a passionate night of love). What we are witnessing is an ironic reversal of the 60s, when (sexual) desire was experienced as a "progressive" liberating agency enabling us to get rid of rigid traditional values: (sexual) desire in its effectively disturbing dimension, from obscene talk to self-humiliation, is now on the side of "reaction." Irony resides in the fact that, in the PC attitude, the very "straight," "normal" sexuality is almost prohibited, while the more one's sexuality approaches the so-called "perverted" forms, the more it is approved of — one has almost to apologize if one is to indulge in old-fashioned penetrative heterosexual activity . . . The "False Memory Syndrome" (in which, by means of the psychiatrist's suggestion, the patient projects his disavowed fantasmatic content into external reality and "recalls" how, in his youth, he was seduced and/or sexually abused by his parents) is for that reason the symptom of PC, an exemplary case of how "what was foreclosed from the Symbolic returns in the Real." The primordial "politically incorrect" sexual harasser is, of course, none other than the Father-Enjoyment, the fantasmatic figure of the obscene pre-symbolic father.³

The very rehabilitation of the theory of seduction is to be conceived as an index of the changed status of subjectivity in our post-modern late-capitalist society, i.e. of the shift towards a "pathological Narcissus" to whom the Other (desiring subject) as such appears as a violent intruder — whatever he or she does (if he or she smokes, laughs too loudly or not loudly enough, casts a covetous glance at me . . .), it amounts to a disturbance of my precarious imaginary balance. Threatened by every encounter of the Other's desire, this "pathological Narcissus" endeavours to dwell in the virtual space (in the precise sense this term acquires in the computer universe): in the space of virtual communities in which one is free to change one's identity, in which no link is effectively binding since I can at any moment withdraw from any "relationship." Therein resides the fatal flaw of the PC fight against "hate speech" by way of replacing the "aggressive" with neutral terms (a weak-sighted person is "visually challenged," an undeveloped country is "developing," etc.). The problem with this strategy is that the power discourse can easily turn it to its advantage by way of using it to render aseptic the raw brutality of exploitation: why shouldn't also brutal rape become "non-consensual sexual satisfaction," etc.? In short, the PC-newspeak simply imitates today's bureaucratise, in which the murder of a political opponent becomes the aseptic "annihilation of the target," etc. — what is at stake in both cases is the endeavour to suspend the "stinging" dimension of speech, the level at which the other's word impinges on the very kernel of my being. And is this protection against the encounter qua real not the true underlying impetus of "debasement in the sphere of love" today?

Our point is therefore that the PC-attitude effectively contributes to "debasement in the sphere of love" via its effort to suspend all traces of the encounter of the Real, of the Other qua

desiring subject. With what does it strive to replace it? Here, the underlying fantasy of Robert Heinlein's *Puppetmasters* can provide an answer. Today, the motif of parasitic aliens which invade our planet, stick on our back, penetrate our spinal cord with their prolonged stings and thus dominate us "from within," tastes like stale soup; the film shot in 1994 visually affects us as a rather mismatched combination of "Alien" and "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." Its fantasmatic background is nonetheless more interesting than it may seem: it resides in the opposition between the human universe of sexual reproduction and the aliens' universe of cloning. In our universe, reproduction occurs by means of copulation, under the auspices of the symbolic agency of the Name-of-the-Father, whereas the alien invaders reproduce themselves asexually, via direct self-copying duplication, and therefore possess no "individuality": they present a case of radical "immixing of subjects," i.e. they can communicate directly, bypassing the medium of language, since they all form one large organism, One. Why, then, do these aliens pose such a threat? The immediate answer, of course, is that they bring about the loss of human individuality — under their domination, we become "puppets," the Other (or, rather, the One) directly speaks through us. However, there is a deeper motif at work here: we can experience ourselves as autonomous and free individuals only insofar as we are marked by an irreducible, constitutive loss, division, splitting, only insofar as our very being involves a certain "out-of-joint," only insofar as the other (human being) ultimately remains for us an unfathomable, impenetrable enigma. The "aliens," on the other hand, function precisely as the complement that restores the lost plenitude of a human subject: they are what Lacan, in his Seminar XI, calls "lamella," the indestructible asexual organ without body, the mythical part that was lost when human beings became sexualized. In contrast to a "normal" sexual relationship, which is always mediated by a lack and as such "impossible," doomed to fail, the relationship with "aliens" is therefore fully satisfying: when a human subject merges with an alien, it is as if the round plenitude of a complete being, prior to sexual divisions, about which Plato speaks in his *Symposium*, is reconstituted — a man no longer needs a woman (or vice versa), since he is already complete in himself. We can see, now, why, in Heinlein's novel, after a human being gets rid of the grip of the parasitic alien, he is completely bewildered and acts as if he has lost his footing, like a drug addict deprived of the drug. At the novel's end, the "normal" sexual couple is reconstituted by means of a (literal) parricide: the threat to sexuality is dealt with.

Our point, however, is that what this novel stages in the guise of a paranoid fantasy is something that is slowly becoming part of our everyday life. Is not the personal computer increasingly evolving into a parasitic complement to our being? Perhaps the choice between sexuality and compulsive playing with a computer (the proverbial adolescent who is so immersed in a computer that he forgets about his date) is more than a media invention: perhaps it is an index of how, via new technologies, a complementary relationship to an "inhuman partner" is slowly emerging which is, in an uncanny way, more fulfilling than the relationship to a sexual partner — perhaps Foucault was right (although not for the right reasons), perhaps the end of sexuality is looming on the horizon, and, perhaps the PC is in the service of this end. Any relationship to the intersubjective Other is therefore preceded by the relationship to an object onto which the subject is "hooked" and which serves as a direct complement, a stand-in for the asexual primordially lost object. In pop-psychoanalytical terms, one could say that the subject who, via computer qua object-supplement, participates in a virtual community, "regresses" to the polymorphous perversity of "primordial Narcissism." What should not escape our notice is, however, the radically "prosthetic" nature of this (and every) Narcissism: it relies on a mechanical foreign body that forever decenters the subject.

The outstanding feature of computerized "interactive media" is the way they are giving birth to a renewed "drive-to-community" as a substitute for the progressive disintegration of our

"actual" community life: what fascinates people far more than the unprecedented access to information, the new ways of learning, shopping, etc., is the possibility of constituting "virtual communities" in which I am free to assume an arbitrary sexual, ethnic, religious, etc. identity. Or, as some journalist put it: "Forget race, gender. In cyberspace, you are what you care about." A gay mate, for example, can enter a closed sexual community and, via the exchange of messages, participate in a fictionalized group sexual activity as a heterosexual woman. These virtual communities, far from signalling the "end of Cartesian subjectivity," present the hitherto closest attempt to actualize the notion of the Cartesian subject in the social space itself: when all my features, including the most intimate ones, become contingent and interchangeable, only then is the void that "I myself am" beyond all my assumed features the cogito, the empty Cartesian subject. However, one must be careful to avoid various traps that lurk here. First among them is the notion that, prior to the computer-generated virtualization of reality, we were dealing with direct, "real" reality: the experience of virtual reality should rather render us sensitive to how the "reality" with which we were dealing always-already was virtualized. The most elementary procedure of symbolic identification, identification with an Ego-ideal, involves, as Lacan had already put it in the 50s, apropos of his famous scheme of the "inverted vase," an identification with a "virtual image / l'image virtuelle/": the place in the big other from which I see myself in the form in which I find myself likeable (the definition of Ego-Ideal) is by definition virtual. Is not virtuality therefore the trademark of every, even the most elementary, ideological identification? When I see myself as a "Democrat," "Communist," "American," "Christian," etc., what I see is not directly "me": I identify with a virtual place in the discourse. And insofar as such an identification is constitutive of a community, every community is also *stricto sensu* always-already virtual. This logic of virtuality can be further exemplified by Oswald Ducrot's analysis of different discursive positions a speaker can assume within the same speech act: assertive, ironic, sympathetic, etc. — when I speak, I always constitute a virtual place of enunciation from which I speak, yet which is never directly "me." Today, one likes to point out how the universe of virtual community, with its arbitrarily exchangeable identities, opens up now ethical dilemmas: suppose I, a gay male, assume in a virtual community the identity of a heterosexual woman; what if, within the virtual sexual play constituted by the interchange of descriptions on the screen, somebody brutally rapes me? Is this a case of "true" harassment or not? (Things will get even more complex with the prospect of more persons encountering each other and interacting in the same virtual reality: what, precisely, will be the status of violence when somebody attacks me in virtual reality?) Our point is, however, that these dilemmas are not really so different from those we encounter in "ordinary" reality, in which my gender identity is also not an immediate fact but "virtual," symbolically constructed, so that a gap separates it forever from the Real: here, also, every harassment is primarily an attack on my "virtual," symbolic identity.

This, however, in no way implies that nothing really important is taking place with today's technological virtualization of reality: what takes place is, in Hegelese, the very format inversion from In-itself to For-itself; i.e. the virtualization that was previously "in-itself," a mechanism which operated implicitly, as the hidden foundation of our lives, now becomes explicit, is posited as such, with crucial consequences for "reality" itself. What we have here is an exemplary case of Hegel's Minerva's owl which "lakes off in the evening": a spiritual principle effectively reigns as long as it is not acknowledged as such. The moment people become directly aware of it its time is over and the "silent weaving of the spirit" is already laying the groundwork for a new principle. In short, the properly dialectical paradox resides in the fact that the very "empirical," explicit realization of a principle undermines its reign. The second trap, the opposite of the first, resides in proclaiming too hastily every reality a virtual fiction: one should always bear in mind that the "proper" body remains the unsurpassable

anchor limiting the freedom of virtualization. The notion that, in some not too distant future, human subjects will be able to weigh the anchor that attaches them to their bodies and to change into ghost-like entities floating freely from one to another virtual body is the fantasm of full virtualization, of the subject finally delivered from the "pathological" stain of a. Which of these two traps is worse? Since they are co-dependent front and back of the same coin, one can only repeat Stalin's immortal answer to the question "Which of the two deviations is worse, the left-wing or right-wing?": "They are both worse!" The more impending question is rather: What is it that we are effectively running away from when we take refuge with the virtual community? Not directly from the authentic symbolic engagement — there is something between the symbolic engagement proper and the virtual community. Let us recall the distinction between the traditional marriage arranged by parents and the modern, post-traditional, marriage based on love. The replacement of the traditional marriage by the marriage based on love is usually celebrated as the sign of liberating progress: however, things are far more ambiguous and can always take an unpleasant turn into the murky superego waters. The traditional marriage asks of the spouses only fidelity and respect (or, rather, the semblance of respect) — in it, love follows the wedding, it is an accident which emerges (or not) out of the marital habitude, so I'm not obliged to love my spouse. In the marriage based on love, on the contrary, I soon find myself in the paradox of obligatory love: since I'm married, and since marriage should be based on love, I must be loving my spouse — a superego command which terrorizes me from within. The worm of doubt is thus soon at work, setting in motion the incessant questioning ("Am I really still in love with my spouse?") which, sooner or later, gives rise to a guilt feeling . . . This unbearable superego injunction is what the subject runs away from into the "cold" universe of virtual relations in which the other is no longer a true intersubjective other — his or her death, for example, has rather the status of the death of my imaginary opponent in a video game.

So, perhaps, the notion of interactive media conceals its exact opposite, namely the tendency to promote the subject as an isolated individual who no longer properly interacts with others: the "interactive" computer network enables the subject to do his buying (instead of going out to stores), to order food by home delivery (instead of going to a restaurant), to pay the bills (instead of going to a bank), to work (on a computer connected via a modem with the company the subject works for, instead of going to work), to engage in political activities (by participating in "interactive" TV debates), etc., up to his/her sex life (masturbating in front of the screen or "virtual sex" instead of an encounter with a "real" person). What is slowly emerging here is the true post-Oedipal" subject, no longer attached to the paternal metaphor.

Notes

1. Sigmund Freud, "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love" (1912), in: *The Standard Edition*, vol. 11 (London: Hogarth, 1986), p. 187.
2. Jacques Lacan, *Le seminaire, Livre XX: Encore* (Paris: Editions do Seuil, 1975), p. 65.
3. Cf. Leonardo S. Rodriguez, "The False Memory Syndrome," *L'Ane. Le magazine Freudien*, no. 57/58 (Paris, 1994), pp. 53—54.