

STILLP • INT
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DESIRE AND PLEASURE

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Translated from Italian by Giuseppina Mecchia

It is hard to contend against desire, because it takes what it craves from our soul.

~ Heraclitus

Ever since Eros has been separated from Logos and opposed to it, and that historical rationality has been conceived as a separate sphere, unrelated to erotic desire, history has been dominated by the economic principle, which reduces other bodies to instruments of accumulation instead of partners in pleasure.

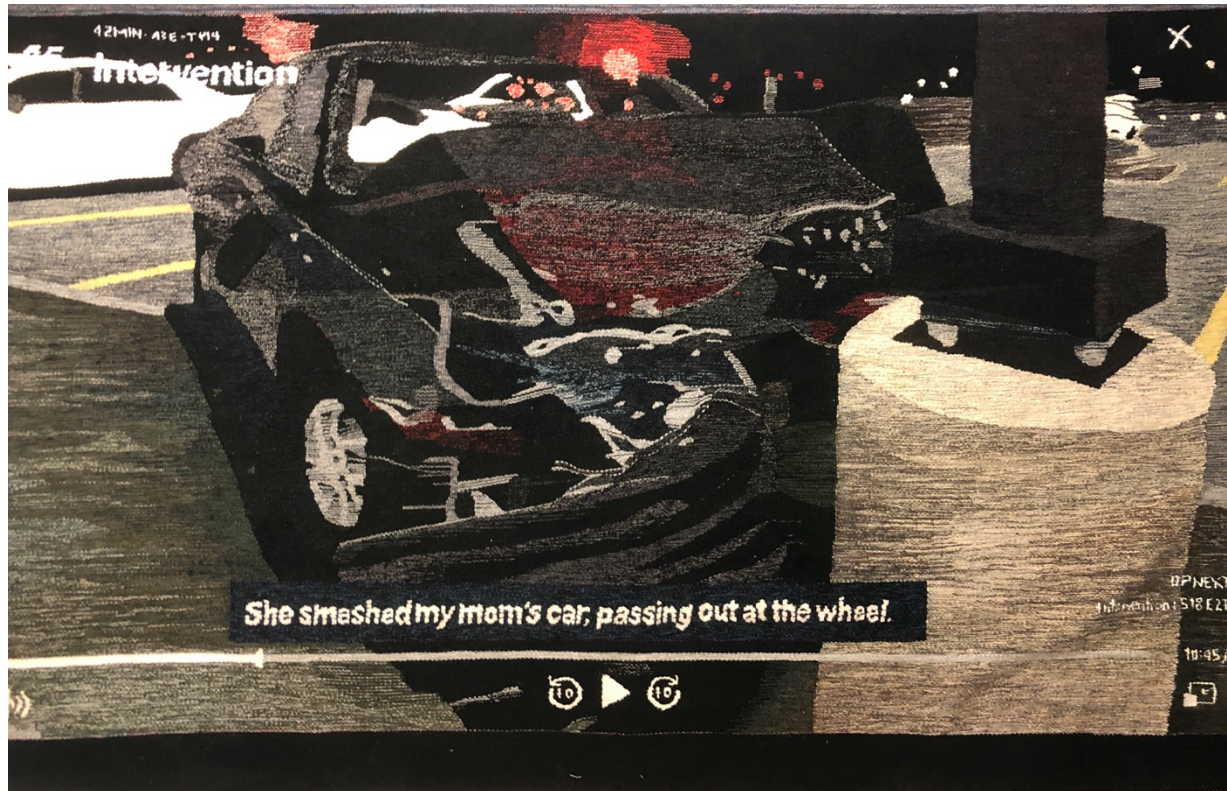
We need to analyze in depth the reasons for this separation and for the devaluation of love: the opposition between Eros and Logos originates in the distinction between *eros* and *agape*, between ethical and erotic love. This is the origin of the historical impossibility of love, and its confinement to utopia. But what do we mean by 'love'? The word emerges in the historical discourse related to the message of Jesus Christ, acquires all its social power during the Romantic era, and finally becomes a mere advertising gadget in late modernity, when any residual human dignity has been degraded to commodity status.

Are we to understand love as *eros* or *agape*? As desire or friendship?

Let us abandon the word 'love,' which is too overloaded with meaning to still really mean anything, and focus instead on two more specific concepts that the philosophical and psychoanalytic traditions have distinguished and even opposed: desire and pleasure.

First of all, we should say that desire is creative tension, while pleasure is the release of that tension, and thus a moment of harmony between the body and its environment. "Creative tension" means that the object of desire does not precede desire but is a projection of desire itself. Obviously, the desired person has their own, separate life, but you don't desire their separateness—you desire the situation that your imagination creates in your relation with them.

In Plato's *Symposium*, Aristophanes says that eroticism is the aspiration to recompose the original unity of the human being. Let us remember the playwriter's story: at the dawn of humanity there lived the androgynes, who had two faces, four arms, four legs, and two sexes. Zeus, fearing the power of their self-sufficiency, cut them in half. From that traumatic act was born the human species as we know it. Love, then, would be our nostalgia for our old completeness, and desire the tension toward rejoining our lost half. Pleasure, on the other hand, consists in the temporary reconstitution of the original androgyne.



Intervention ~ Erin M. Riley

But in the Platonic text, after Aristophanes speaks Agathon, a beautiful, young tragic poet who reads his poems in the city's theaters. Agathon answers with a distinction between Eros and its effects. Eros is the incarnation of Beauty, but its effects on the human being are painful, because more than anything else, desire is lack and a tension that can never be satisfied. Then it is Socrates' turn, who tells us what Diotima taught him: love is the desire for a gradual ascent that at first encounters erotic bodies, then noble souls, and finally Beauty as supreme value. The love that Diotima taught him, says Socrates—anticipating an idea that will come back in Christianity with the early Renaissance poets—is the path guiding the human being to perfection and wisdom.

At that point, Alcibiades arrives and reproaches Socrates for refusing to make love to him, even though he's beautiful and desired by all the young women of Athens. In Alcibiades's words surfaces the idea that knowledge comes from direct contact, a theme found in another Platonic or pseudo-Platonic dialogue, the *Theages*. In this dialogue, attributed to Plato but probably spurious, a former student tells Socrates that being next to him, physically touching

and being touched by him, made him grow in wisdom, as if carnal conjunction allowed knowledge to be transferred between two bodies:

I will tell you, Socrates, what is incredible, upon my soul, yet true. For I never yet learnt anything from you, as you know yourself: but I made progress, whenever I was with you, even if I was merely in the same house, without being in the same room, but more progress, when I was in the same room. And it seemed to me to be much more when I was in the same room and looked at you as you were speaking, than when I turned my eyes elsewhere: but my progress was by far the greatest and most marked whenever I sat beside you and held and touched you.

The reconstitution of the individual body is the condition of knowledge, and in particular of ethical knowledge, which has nothing to do with the law, nor with rules or moral values, but is the knowledge of the pleasure of the other, and our sensitivity to it.

But unfortunately, as we all know, ethics has drowned in an ocean of shit: our relation with the other has been reduced to competition with an Other that has become disembodied, skinless. It is a pure, cold desire that won't give us any pleasure. The nexus between desire and pleasure is the energy that makes ethical knowledge and courtesy possible, it is a game based on language and caresses.

In a 2019 book that I found enlightening, *Sul piacere che manca (The Missing Pleasure)*, Paolo Godani quotes a letter written by Gilles Deleuze speaking about his relationship with Foucault:

The last time we met, Michel, very gently and with true affection, said to me something like this: I can't stand the word desire . . . and he added: maybe I call pleasure what you call desire, but in any case I need another word.

Here I am forced to make an auto-biographical detour, which is also a self-critique. I adhered to the thought of Deleuze and Guattari in 1976, while I was in jail and a friend sent me a copy of *Anti-Oedipus*. But maybe since the very beginning, I did not understand the difference between pleasure and desire, which is unforgivable.

Maybe because I lived a life of pleasure I never thought of talking about it, and my philosophical spin was centered on the concept of desire.

It is time to make amends: maybe because in my old age pleasure has become unattainable while desire torments me, I have finally understood the difference between the two concepts, which in the past seemed irrelevant to me. Desire is the tension that pushes us toward an object that does not exist, but that we create in that movement. Far from being the fulfillment of a need, or the remedy of a lack, desire is the creation of the other as attractor and myth.

Desire is king in the realm of the imaginary, and this is why the forces pervading the social sphere are born and organized in its sphere. This is the message of *Anti-Oedipus*, a book that had a decisive influence not only on my own thought, but on an entire generation of

autonomous rebels at the end of the 1970s, when social movements escaped the economicist reduction and integrated the unconscious dimension in all processes of social subjectivation.

Identifying desire as a tension toward subjectivation, we thought that the main task of communicative and political action was the alliance between desire and friendship. We thought that if desire is the strongest attractor—actually an irresistible one as Heraclitus suggests in his “Fragment 105”—in the relation between sensible and conscious beings and builds the most radical bonds, then the only way to finally make history a human dimension where happiness and peace are possible was to build an alliance between *eros* and *agape*, desire and friendship.

The message of love, which in the Christian faith had a sacrificial aspect, seemed to have found (in desiring thought, in the experience of the anti-authoritarian movements based on desire) a materialist dimension.

“Happiness is subversive when it becomes collective,” said one of the slogans of the “desiring autonomy” movement: this meant that joy is a feeling that can be purely individual, but acquires a political power if it spreads to the social environment. Such appeared to us the season (which I don’t hesitate to call ‘happy’) that started in the global 1968 and the “Summer of Love” and finally culminated in the Italian 1977. But the exclusive emphasis on desire derived from the reading of the works of Deleuze and Guattari caused a nervous breakdown of our collective energies, a breakdown that Jean Baudrillard had repeatedly addressed (never explicitly, never rudely) in his critique of Deleuzian-Guattarian thought.

But now that pleasure is failing me (besides the pleasure of reading *The Missing Pleasure* by Paolo Godani), I realize that without a symbiosis with pleasure, desire becomes torture, and is the cruel motor of an endless and joyless race: it is the engine of capitalism, as Baudrillard used to say.

Desire belongs to the imaginary, while pleasure belongs to the real.

Capitalism, and the increasingly ferocious and accelerated networks of semio-capitalism, are the mobilization of desire and the infinite interdiction of pleasure. An economy of accumulation pushes you to desire, but it denies you pleasure, and above all denies you time for pleasure, because all your time must be spent on competing, on accumulating, and thus on desiring, virtually and endlessly.

The fanaticism of the absence of limits persecutes the Christian mystic but also the apologists of neoliberalism. Our ‘no-limits’ fanaticism, that originates in Marinetti’s futurism and ends in bio-technological transhumanism, promotes aggression, violence, exploitation, and war. This raises the question of the relation between desire and death that Freud had already posed in his own way. Godani says:

If we don't want to reintroduce the death drive we need to recognize that there are deadly effects that don't originate in a fundamental drive, but in the dynamics of desire. . . What exists is not the desire for death, but the deadly effects of desire.

Capitalism incessantly produces its deadly effects, which don't come from an original death drive, but from the psychological dynamics of a competitive economy. If desire is tension, projection and impulse, pleasure is the harmony between a singular sensual drift and the rhythm of the cosmos, or between the vibration of two different bodies.

In other words, as Godani says, "the flesh of pleasure is always *gratiae plena*. The cosmic dimension of grace does not come suddenly, but constitutes its only mode of appearance." Grace is the suspension of the weight of being, and a desire that does not include the possibility of pleasure is graceless, it torments the soul and causes infinite suffering.

When, in his 1973 Vincennes lecture quoted by Godani, Deleuze says that "the idea of pleasure is completely rotten," or when he mocks or abhors pleasure understood as "discharge" (a horrible, atrocious word according to Deleuze), I have the impression that we see the kind of Christian-masochist ascendancy that sometimes surfaces in his work. What Deleuze does not understand when he opposes pleasure and desire is that contemporary capitalism is founded on this very opposition, as Lacan suggests in his texts on "the discourse of the capitalist."

This text originally appeared as "Confusione (imperdonabile) tra piacere e desiderio" on 15 June 2019 in Doppiozero. You can find it at:

<https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/confusione-imperdonabile-tra-piacere-e-desiderio>.

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Intervention is shown here as a portion of the full accompanying artwork originally featured on stillpointmag.org.