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MASOCHISM

Between Philosophy and Psychoanalysis

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Masochism
Between Philosophy and Psychoanalysis

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ἔδιζήσαμην ἐμεωυτὸν

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a kind of desire like stinging pain.”*

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CHAPTER 1

PAIN

*“Liebe ist kein Gefühl.
Liebe wird erprobt,
Schmerzen nicht.”*

Ludwig Wittgenstein

What does it mean to suffer? What does it mean to encounter pain? Is it possible to ask these questions outside the political background that immediately leads us to try to eradicate pain? Is it possible to grasp the *ontological* side of pain, the one connected with the unavoidable negativity of human existence, beyond the reparative measures that try to mitigate *this* or *that* pain? Or are we so trapped in the words that constitute the bars of these questions that we are unable to grasp the negativity that, beyond the bars of language, sustains and jeopardizes our existence? The intention of the following pages is to approach the philosophical notion of negativity through a phenomenological and then psychoanalytic analysis of pain in order to show what I call *the ontological side of pain*: namely the side of pain related to the drive.

1.1

REASON AND NEGATIVITY

The complexity of the questions above lies in the fact that they do not try to grasp a particular object using language as forceps; strictly speaking they do not simply want to indicate or name a particular “pain.” On the contrary they try to query the side of pain that is not ascribable to any semantic reification. The purpose of this question is indeed to grasp something that is beyond language and for this reason is structurally impossible to be reached with words.

Jacques Lacan calls this beyond of language the Real, and describes it as the hole in the Symbolic, the non-space that escapes signification and meaning although it is inevitably corollary. If in fact the Real is the hole around which the Symbolic is coiled, this hole persists as the non-space that cannot be reduced to a stable concept, a non-space that defies signification and meaning.¹ If then, as Lacan suggests, the Real is “quelque chose qu'on retrouve à la même place, qu'on n'ait pas été là ou qu'on y ait toujours été”², it is precisely because the Real is the negativity always present in the structure of the Symbolic as both its condition of possibility and its insuperable limit.

For this reason even if we affirm that the Real is the radically *other* of reason, the *other* side that is structurally impossible to grasp by the category of reason, we have to acknowledge the fact that the Real is also its inexplicable root. Even though the Real escapes signification and meaning, questioning the structure of the Real is not meaningless in itself. The Real is the inevitable consequence of

¹ The Real “est le domaine de ce qui subsiste hors de la Symbolisation”. J. Lacan, *Écrits*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1966, p. 388.

² J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire : Livre II, Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse, 1954-1955*, Points, Paris, 2015, p. 342.

the Symbolic production of meaning and from within the Symbolic order we can try to determine their relation and trace its social and political effects.

From a certain point of view the history of philosophy consists of the most sophisticated attempts to overcome this beyond of reason by trying to dominate it with reason itself. The claim of philosophy has always been to produce a thought able to penetrate anything, to turn anything into a clear and distinct concept³, and in this way to master⁴ even the most disturbing and distressing aspects of existence⁵. In order to achieve this fantasy of sovereignty, philosophy traditionally denies that negativity cannot be overcome. Sometimes simply ignoring it and sometimes making it an aspect of the all-encompassing power of reason, philosophy always pretends to master negativity. Despite these efforts on the part of philosophy, if we acknowledge that negativity cannot be mastered by reason and that, on the contrary, by escaping understanding it jeopardizes the structure of meaning itself, then it appears clear that the universal claims of the cogito are

³ “Nous ne nous devons jamais laisser persuader qu'à l'évidence de notre raison. Et il est à remarquer que je dis, de notre raison, et non point, de notre imagination ni de nos sens.” R. Descartes, *Discours de la méthode, Pour bien conduire sa raison et chercher la vérité dans les sciences*, PUF, Paris 1987, p. 47.

⁴ “The psychological explanation: familiarizing something unfamiliar relieves, comforts, and satisfies us, besides giving us a feeling of power. With the unknown, one is confronted with danger, discomfort, and care; the first instinct is to abolish these painful states.” F. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, edited by A. Ridley and J. Norman, translated by J. Norman, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, p. 179. (Translation slightly modified by me).

⁵ Since Aristotle uses the term θαῦμα to refer to the first sensation that leads towards philosophy (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1, 982 b) it is common to say that for the Stagirite philosophy begins with the feeling of wonder. Nevertheless translate θαῦμα simply with wonder is deceptive and imply a fundamental misunderstanding of Aristotle's theoretical framework. If in fact we think that θαῦμα is the term used by Ulysses when in the *Odyssey* he meets for the first time the giant and horrendous Polyphemus (Homer, *Odyssey*, 9, 190), we immediately understand that the meaning of the term is far more complicated. As not infrequently in the ancient Greek some words mean something and its opposite. In addition to wonder θαῦμα means in fact horror, terror, and fear. A more accurate interpretation of the Aristotelian θαῦμα should then lead us to the understanding of the fact that philosophy is in itself always been a psychological reaction of the fear of death, pain and unhappiness, namely all the things that compromise our (well-)being in the world.

nothing but a fantasy. Indeed, as evidenced by the flaws in *any* philosophical system, there is no *Aufhebung* for what, as irreducibly *other* than reason, cannot be understood and then mastered by reason.

However, it is important to point out that, together with the traditional history of philosophy, there exists a counter-history, and even a counter-philosophy, that slips away from the celebration of the power of the cogito and that tries to deal with the insistence of negativity. Paul Ricoeur names this resistance to the cogito: the *cogito brisé*⁶ – the broken cogito. This name works perfectly because instead of offering a new definition that cunningly reaffirms the all-embracing power of the cogito, it underlines the historical and theoretical fact that the cogito has always been and will always be broken – precisely because the subject, starting from whom the cogito is established, is structurally constituted as a division. Indeed “the hole marks both the place of the Real and the internal division or distance by which we are constituted as subjects and destined to pursue the phantom of meaning through the signifier's metonymic slide.”⁷ When in fact the subject enters into the chain of the signifier it has already undergone the division that creates it as a subject (that is, as a being able to understand and communicate meaning).

According to Lacan, the subject is always constituted as a division between registers – Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real – that permeate and structure him or her as a “*manque à être*”⁸, as a signifier who, trapped in the metonymic chain of

⁶ “Le Cogito brisé : tel pourrait être le titre emblématique d'une tradition, sans doute moins continue que celle du Cogito mais dont la virulence culmine avec Nietzsche, faisant de celui-ci le vis-à-vis privilégié de Descartes.” P. Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1990, p. 22.

⁷ L. Edelman, *No Future, Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Duke University Press, Durham 2004, p. 15, 16.

⁸ “L'être du sujet est la suture d'un manque. Précisément du manque qui, se dérochant dans le nombre, le soutient de sa récurrence - mais en ceci ne le supporte que d'être ce qui manque au signifiant pour être l'Un du sujet : soit ce terme que nous avons appelé dans un autre contexte le trait unaire, la marque d'une identification primaire qui fonctionnera comme idéal.” J. Lacan, *Problèmes cruciaux de la psychanalyse* in *Autres écrits*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2001, p. 200.

the signifiers, never fully coincides with the fixity of a stable concept⁹. From this perspective, the all-embracing power of the cogito appears to be nothing but a fantasy produced by the Symbolic in an attempt to fill the hole of the Real. The broken cogito emerges then as an attempt to think the unavoidable negativity that both structures the subject as a division and that accompanies it throughout its life.

In the field of American literary criticism, queer theory – which was born to give voice to all the forms of intersections that do not let themselves be captured by any kind of either gender binarism or normative sexual identity – has become, in particular with the work of Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman¹⁰, a privileged philosophical perspective to think about negativity and its relation with the division of the subject. Indeed, if the broken cogito is not just a new way to reaffirm the cogito but instead is the effort to escape the cogito's insistence on its sovereignty, if the broken cogito constitutes itself not as a stable identity that adheres to the all-embracing power of reason but instead is the unyielding denial of any fixed identity, and if the broken cogito gives voice to the negativity that does not let itself be captured by reason and instead insists in its dismantling power, then it appears clear that “broken cogito” and “queer” are just *different* ways to “define” the *same* thing – although *this* thing remains structurally devoid of definition. Indeed, whereas the cogito cannot accept the gap that constitutes us subjects (and for this reason creates the fantasy of reason's sovereign control) queerness conversely “insists on the Real of a jouissance that social reality [...] has already foreclosed”¹¹ in the structuring of the subject.

⁹ “C'est en tant que le sujet se situe et se constitue par rapport au signifiant que se produit en lui cette rupture, cette division, cette ambivalence, au niveau de laquelle se place la tension du désir.” J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire: Livre VII, L'éthique de la psychanalyse, 1959-1960*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1986, p. 366.

¹⁰ The so-called “antisocial thesis” or “antisocial turn” in queer theory (as it has been defined at the MLA annual convention in 2005) has been theorized by Leo Bersani (*Homos*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1995) and Lee Edelman (*No future*; Duke University Press, Durham 2004). The reflections of the following chapters emerge from the psychoanalytic intersection between this theoretical framework and the philosophy of the broken cogito.

¹¹ L. Edelman, *No Future*, cit., p. 25.

Lacan uses the term *jouissance*¹² to translate the Freudian notion of the death drive,¹³ namely the anti-social, anti-economical, and anti-symbolic drive that checkmates one's sovereignty over the world and oneself. "Jouissance evokes the death drive that always insists as the void in and of the subject, beyond its fantasy of self-realization, beyond the pleasure principle"¹⁴, which is also to say, beyond the illusory sovereignty produced by the cogito. Therefore, as Lee Edelman suggests, "Queerness is never a matter of being or becoming but, rather, of *embodying* the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order."¹⁵ The death drive is in fact structurally marked in the constitution of the subject from the very moment that subject is produced by entering the chain of the signifiers¹⁶ that lets it give meaning to the world – even though that meaning, as *jouissance* reminds us, cannot remove the negativity that permeates the Symbolic and jeopardizes every *Sinngebung*.

But why use pain as a placeholder for negativity? Why use an experience so saturated with the Symbolic to reveal the negativity that refuses meaning and consequently the Symbolic itself? Certainly the counter-philosophers that try to deal with negativity respond to the notion of pain. Pain is for them a common theme. Nevertheless it is not simply for historical reasons that it is necessary to focus on pain. There are in fact theoretical instances that lead us to think of pain as the privileged experience in which the subject feels its structural division.

According to phenomenology¹⁷, pain is one of the most peculiar moments¹⁸ in which we discover the impenetrable *difference* that constitutes our subjectivity

¹² See J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire: Livre VII, L'éthique de la psychanalyse, 1959-1960*; J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire : Livre XI, Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse, 1964*; J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire : Livre XX, Encore, 1972-1973*.

¹³ See S. Freud, *Beyond Pleasure Principle*.

¹⁴ L. Edelman, *No Future*, cit., p. 25.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*

¹⁶ "The death drive marks the excess embedded within the Symbolic through the loss, the Real loss, that the advent of the signifier effects." L. Edelman, *No Future*, cit., p. 9.

¹⁷ See M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*; G. Marcel, *Etre et avoir*; F. Chirpaz, *Le corps*; M. Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps: Essai sur l'ontologie biranienne*.

¹⁸ Along with pain phenomenology indicates also tiredness, sickness, and sexual stimulation.

- the one that both ties us to and divides us from our body at once. As Chirpaz affirms:

vivant la douleur, la présence découvre au cœur de soi sa corporéité comme étrange, c'est-à-dire à la fois comme mystérieuse et autre. Même répétée, la douleur ne parvient jamais à se rendre familière parce que l'existence ne parvient jamais à s'habituer à elle. Le plaisir, par contre, sitôt qu'il apparaît, se donne d'emblée comme familier. La présence le reconnaît comme sien et se reconnaît en lui.¹⁹

Phenomenology focuses on pain as the most estranging experience and asks if it is not through *hurting* that our body draws our attention to its *étrangeté*. Is it not when a specific part of our body does not work in the way it is supposed to that we actually are cognizant that we possess this specific part of the body? Is it not through pain that we discover that the body (that we are) is also a foreign matter that imposes itself as a structural *difference*? In the absence of pain the *difference* between our body and us is not perceived and we perceive the body as one with ourselves. The various organs, membranes, or body parts that together allow us to perform an activity are not taken into account when we normally perform it. When we eat, for instance, we do not think, for the most part, of having a tongue, teeth, a throat etc. although these parts together make it possible. It is exactly the proper functioning of each of these parts that makes the activity a

¹⁹ F. Chirpaz, *Les corps*, Editions Klincksieck, Paris, 1988, p. 21. Obviously the question at stake becomes with masochism much more complicated: could erotic stimulation be counted as pleasure? And could the *excess* of erotic stimulation still be counted as pleasure and, *e converso*, could the excess of erotic stimulation be counted as pain *even* when it is experienced as pleasure? Complicating enormously the dichotomy between pain and pleasure, masochism needs a reflection that goes beyond the phenomenological approach. Indeed, as we will see in the following pages, the impossibility to answer these questions with the strong subjectivity offered by phenomenology will lead us to approach a psychoanalytic perspective with which it is possible to give an account to the drives that lie at the core of the division of the subject. After building my theoretical framework I will be able to face these questions directly in the first chapter when I will discuss the Freudian notion of primary masochism. For the moment it is important to consider pain just as phenomenology does: as a feeling that a subject - devoid of unconscious - does not want.

kind of automatism that allows us to think about something else at the same time. Indeed each new activity is complicated for the simple fact that we have not yet developed the skills that will make this activity a habit and, for this reason, we have to think through all the movements and focus on all the parts of our body needed to carry it out. Once we have mastered those skills, the body parts that we use for it "disappear", so to speak, into the activity itself. However, when one of these parts starts to hurt, we can no longer perform an activity as if this part did not exist: the part now claims our attention. Instead of being a useful tool, it seems to become an obstacle – an obstacle sometimes so unbearable that we are no longer able to perform the activity and must reorganize our entire life in order to avoid this pain.

Pain is therefore a privileged experience that reminds us, with sharp clarity, that we are composed of parts which do not always agree with each other, parts that can work in the way we want or not, parts that can become so painful that we would rather remove them than keep them. The parts that constitute our body – the parts of the body that we are – can in fact become estranged and even dangerous, to the point that we have to cut them off²⁰. For this reason, even if it is probably true that pain is not the only experience that reminds us we have a body²¹, it is nonetheless true that pain is one of the most significant moments in which we realize that *this* body that we are is also a foreign matter that sometimes, and for different reasons²², reclaims its structural *difference* from ourselves. Indeed we can say that this body – that is, our “véhicule de l'être-au-monde”²³ – does not coincide perfectly with our self and does not always lets itself be dominated and controlled by our will.

²⁰ See Jean-Luc Nancy, *l'intrus*.

²¹ For instance it can be considered undisputed the fact according to which in the stimulation of any erogenous zone one becomes aware of that part of the body.

²² Reasons that are related to the sexual, to identity, to illness, and so on. For a more detailed phenomenological analysis concerned the body mind problem in relation to pain, illness and sexual arousal, see my article *Chirpaz e l'ambiguità del leib in tropos, Rivista di ermeneutica e critica filosofica*, Anno VI, Numero 2, 2013.

²³ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, Paris 1976, p. 97.

In order to give an account to the intrinsic *difference* between the body and the “self,” phenomenology coins the term *Leib* distinguishing it from *Körper*. If in fact the term *Körper* indicates only the body-machine studied by physics, chemistry, and biology, the term *Leib* refers to the complicated *difference* that unites the self to the “extraneous matter” that is its body. Phenomenology wants to underline the co-implication of body and mind (that allows an escape from the classical metaphysics of the soul²⁴) without falling into the scientific perspective offered by all organicistic Reductionisms²⁵. Although phenomenology considers the body the *conditio sine qua non* of the self, it maintains that the self could never be reduced to its body.

In this way phenomenology proposes what has been called the *embodied cogito*, namely a cogito that, emerging from the body, has constantly to deal with its intrinsic *difference*. In so doing, phenomenology makes an interesting theoretical move that, escaping from the dualism of body and soul, puts the universal claims of the traditional cogito at risk. If in fact the subject of the cogito offered by the Cartesian tradition cannot deal with the insecurities of the body – with its structural *difference* – and for this reason presupposes a clear separation between the mind and body, the notion of *Leib* blends them together in a single

²⁴ In the Iliad and the Odyssey the body and soul are the same. In fact, in Homeric language there is no trace of any term that designates the living body as a separate thing from the soul. With the Orphic tradition, on the other hand, in particular with Pythagoras, and later with Plato, there is born a conception of the soul not only understood as a vital breath that gives life to the body, but as something separate and ontologically distinct from the body. There are many passages in which Plato plays semantically equating the body - σώμα - with a tomb - σῆμα - thus identifying the body as the prison of the soul (see *Cratylus*, 400c; *Gorgias*, 493a; *Phaedo* 62b, 82e). Certainly Plato does not debase the body as such. For example, the beauty of the body is enhanced in the Symposium, but takes in *scala amoris*, the lowest level of the ascent that leads to contemplation of the good (The Symposium, 210a, 210b, 210c). Therefore, although Plato does not affirm that the body is something bad in itself, he constantly insists in a clear ontological distinction between the soul and the body that lead to the consideration according to which the former is superior to the latter at a metaphysical and, consequently, ethical level.

²⁵ As an eminent example of this way to think see F. Crick and C. Koch “A frame work for consciousness” in «Nature Neuroscience» February 6th, 2003, p. 126; F. Crick, “Visual perception: Rivalry and consciousness” in «Nature» 376, 1996, p. 486.

substance. Assuming in fact that the body is the condition of thought, instead of dividing sharply the *res cogitans* from the *res extensa*²⁶, phenomenology affirms their union in *Leib*: the living body that perceives itself and is able to think. In this way the body, instead of being other than cogito, becomes its support and its structure, in a word, it becomes its condition of possibility. As is evident, by making the uncertainties of the body the condition of any *cogitationes*, phenomenology compromises the cogito with the particularity of a single body, preventing in this way the cogito from joining the universal truth. Indeed, to incarnate the cogito in a living body means to acknowledge the fact that the cogito is bound to the universal truth in a way that makes a complete conjunction of the two impossible. The theoretical foundation that makes the cogito the direct expression of the truth is in this way undermined. The body in fact, although it is the condition of possibility for any thought of the truth, reveals itself to be also what obstructs the achievement of the truth. Located between the cogito and the truth, the body becomes at the same time the point of their union *and* of their separation. Stranded in the body, the cogito must give up its universal claims.

Despite this fundamental theoretical move, the phenomenological approach itself encounters a basic problem. Even if phenomenology understands the implications that, through the body, undermine the all-encompassing claim of the cogito, it still affirms – with the notion of *Leib* – an existential unity that does not take into account the divisive power of the death drive. The self of phenomenology, despite being ousted by the body to which it is linked, remains always thought of as a strong unity. But as psychoanalysis points out, the self is *always already constituted as a division*. Indeed, although it is true, as phenomenology affirms, that while we exist we perceive ourselves as a living unity, it is *also* true that we perceive the estranging and overwhelming power of the drives that resist any unity of the self and, on the contrary, erupt to undermine any fantasy of sovereignty. The death drive is structurally implicated in the constitution of the subject and, although – since it works unconsciously – we may

²⁶ As indeed Descartes understood perfectly, if we do not fully separate the *res cogitans* from the *res extensa* we would never accede to a cogito as the truth of the subject. See R. Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia*.

remain ignorant of its operation, it cannot be avoided. Ignoring (or pretending to ignore) the death drive, phenomenology²⁷ ends up relapsing into a strong subjectivity very close to the Cartesian one that it challenges. The subject of phenomenology, even if it cannot have access to the universal truth, is a strong entity that does not perceive any other division except the one with its own body. But the division that constitutes our being in the world does not inhere just in the *difference* between the body and the self and cannot be solved through a theoretical concept that purports to overcome that difference. Like the all-encompassing cogito, the unity of the subject is in fact just a Symbolic fantasy produced to protect against the Real. But the drive as the expression of the Real erupts, reminding us of the division by which we are subjects of language.

Reducing the problem of the division of the subject to a body/mind problem, phenomenology is therefore unable to grasp the ontological status of pain – the one that is linked with the negativity that constitutes the Real and that emerges any time we get in touch with pain. In order to understand the connection between pain and the division of the subject beyond the phenomenological perspective, it is useful first to trace the etymology of the word “pain” and then to analyze it through the lens of psychoanalysis. To indicate what we call in English “pain,” the Latins used the word *dolere*, a word whose etymological root – *dar* = *dal*, *dol* – means to break, to break up. It is interesting to notice that this root that binds pain to breakage is not present just in the Ancient Latin but also in the Sanskrit *dalati*, *darmati* that means to burst, to break, to cleave; in the Ancient Greek, *dèro* (δέρω) means to flay; in the Ancient Slavic, *dera* means to lacerate; and in the Gothic, *tair-an* provides the root from which we derive the English verb “to tear”. Furthermore, even if we change the semantic strain, we find a different root but with the same meaning. Indeed the Ancient Greek word λύπη (pain) derives from the Sanskrit *lûmp-ati* that means to break and the Sanskrit *rug’â* (pain) comes from *rug’* that means “to break” as well.²⁸

²⁷ *Mutatis mutandis* the same thing can be said for existentialism.

²⁸ *Dizionario etimologico comparato delle lingue classiche indoeuropee (Sanskrito, Greco, Latino)*, a cura di F. Rendich, Palombi editore, Roma 2010; *The Oxford Dictionary of English*

At first sight this etymology reveals nothing more than the simple fact that pain is always perceived as the thing able to break the subject apart. What is pain in fact if not something that breaks us? What is pain if not something that impedes the subject's freedom of movement or thought, jeopardizing the subject's sovereignty over his body and his ability to interact with the world? *Nihil sub sole novum* then? On the contrary, from a psychoanalytic perspective this etymology reveals something much more interesting linked to the root of human subjectivity. Indeed, if we acknowledge that being broken is the only possibility for a subject to be a subject, that the structure of the subject itself is a breakage, then we understand that pain, instead of being what breaks the supposed unit of the subject, is what reveals its intrinsic division. From this perspective, pain reveals nothing but the occasion in which we experience the unavoidable negativity that structures us as subjects always lacerated by the drives. Indeed, just as the Symbolic cannot escape the negativity that emerges through the drives, so it cannot remove the pain that these drives inscribe in the subject. To interpret with a psychoanalytic lens the etymology that I traced back from different semantic strains is to understand that pain, far more than simply what breaks the subject apart, is what makes him feel the breakage that he *has always been*.

What I am trying to describe of course is not a particular kind of pain that afflicts either the body or the mind, but, on the contrary, what I have called the *ontological side* of pain. Using the term "ontological", I refer to the side of pain that, although it is present in any empirical reifications of pain, cannot be reduced to any of them, and that, for this reason, cannot be cured or redeemed. Indeed, although we can try to cure *this* or repair *that* pain, we cannot avoid the encounter with pain. Pain in fact, as an expression of negativity, "speaks to the fact that life, in some sense, *doesn't 'work'*"²⁹. This is the reason why, regardless of any political and ethical measures that try to erase pain, its *inevitable persistence* shows with sharp clarity the inability of the Symbolic to suture the wound of the Real. From this perspective it becomes clear that to grasp the ontological status of

Etymology, Edited by C.T. Onions, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1966; *Il vocabolario etimologico della lingua italiana*, a cura di O. Pianigiani, Albrighi e Segati, Roma 1907.

²⁹ L. Berlant and L. Edelman, *Sex or the Unbearable*, Duke University Press, Durham 2014, p. 11.

pain means neither to focus on the particular pain that afflicts our life and that of others, nor to feel the *difference* that separates our body from us, but rather to insist on the negativity that structures us as subjects; it means to track down the wound that was produced with our coming into existence and that hurts any time we get in touch with pain.

1.2

SCREAM AND SILENCE

In the *Philosophische Untersuchungen* Wittgenstein suggests:

How do words refer to sensations? - There doesn't seem to be any problem here; don't we talk about sensations every day, and name them? But how is the connection between the name and the thing named set up? This question is the same as: How does a human being learn the meaning of names of sensations? For example, of the word "pain". Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, natural expressions of sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behavior.

"So you are saying that the word 'pain' really means crying?" - On the contrary: *the verbal expression of pain replaces crying, it does not describe it*³⁰

Regrettably, all the English translations that I consulted render the German verb *Schreien* with "to cry", muffling in this way the distressing content of the paragraph. *Schreien* in fact is not only the tearful sobbing that seeks consolation, but it is the desperate scream of anguish that surpasses all possible signification and meaning and – as in the Edvard Munch painting³¹ – expresses what exceeds articulation in words. The intention of Wittgenstein is to show the impenetrability of pain and its refusal of translation into words. The scream then, even when it emerges from pain, dares not speak its name. If the sound of the scream is always

³⁰ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, translated by G.E.M Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and J. Schulte, Blackwell publishing, Hoboken 2009, p. 95, paragraph 244. Italic mine.

³¹ "You know my picture, The Scream? I was being stretched to the limit – nature was screaming in my blood – I was at breaking point . . . You know my pictures, you know it all – you know I felt it all." From the diary of Edvard Munch, quoted in S. Predeaux, *Edvard Munch Behind the Scream*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2005.

perceived as a disturbing noise it is because the scream screams itself without pronouncing those words that could explain what this “itself” *really* means. Like the Real, the scream imposes its presence beyond the words that, in trying to grasp it, would end up denying it. As a wordless voice, the scream can then be seen as a theft of meaning that emerges to give voice precisely to what does not let itself be reduced to meaning and nevertheless paradoxically continuously lures for a signification.

This is the reason why, when a scream catches us unprepared, that is, when we do not know the causes and the context that allow us to interpret it, its unsettling sound is always felt as *Unheimlich*³². Without being able to find its reason we confronted with the absence of meaning that the scream as such always reifies; we come too close to that unbearable Real that escapes the Symbolic. But as Wittgenstein suggests, there is no definition able to grasp the scream of pain, not even the word “scream” itself. All the expressions that try to account for the experience of pain turn out to be merely “behavior” around pain or, if we want, an ethics – the ethics of the Symbolic – that teaches us how to respond to pain, how to deal with or repair it, but that cannot grasp its Real. Pain, therefore, maintains an untranslatable core that is *expressed* through the scream but cannot be signified: a core that, for this reason, cannot be the object of either ethics or politics and because it is what structurally escapes the sense that sustains both of them. Indeed all the political and ethical attempts to translate negativity into meaning, to redeem *this* pain or to repair *that* pain, cannot avoid the fact that the ontological side of pain survives any attempts to erase it as the unavoidable negativity of human existence. This is the reason why, in its being both incomprehensible and Real, pain gives voice to, but cannot explain, the side of ourselves that cannot be processed through reason, and that on the contrary, explodes in the scream that exceeds any possible signification.

³² “The «uncanny» is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” and nevertheless impossible to be completely understood. S. Freud, *The Uncanny*, in *Collected Papers*. Ed. James Strachey, Vol. 4, Basic Books Inc., New York 1959, p. 370.

Certainly, as Edelman has made clear, as much as it is impossible to grasp the Real it is *also* impossible to position ourselves outside of the Symbolic³³. Every theorization, concept, or idea, is a product of the Symbolic. Pain itself, in the moment of being thought and expressed, turns out to be nothing but a concept. And even if we use *scream* as an expression of the unavoidable negativity that emerges from pain, we do nothing but use a product of the Symbolic. Nevertheless, as Edelman suggests, it is important to acknowledge that even if it is true that we are trapped in the prison of language, we can experience the fact that the boundaries of this prison do not coincide with the boundaries of the Real. In its limitlessness, the Real exceeds any boundaries. The fact that we cannot understand ourselves outside of language does not mean that there is not an outside of language, hence the necessity to find some figurative images to render the Real without assuming that those images can grasp the Real itself. What in fact erupts from the inside and tears the subject apart is what does not let itself be mastered by reason and insists in its untranslatability as the voice without words that tempts us toward meaning even if it imposes itself as the meaningless thing *par excellence*.

From this perspective it is obvious that *Schreien* should not be thought of as the Real itself but as a figurative image for what cannot be expressed through words, as the *reaction* to the Real's laceration of the Symbolic, as the meaningless word that explodes the "sense" of pain itself. If, as Nietzsche suggests, "what actually arouses indignation over suffering is not the suffering itself, but the senselessness of suffering"³⁴, it is because pain imposes itself as a void of meaning, an emptiness that claims to be filled by the signification of the Symbolic. In this sense, the emptiness of meaning that characterizes pain reminds us of the hole in the Symbolic that characterizes the Real. Both of these voids impel us toward a signification that is always *unable* to grasp and then fill them. Their presence, although generating meanings, never coincides with them. The meaning with which we coat pain in order to withstand it cannot in fact coat the

³³ See L. Edelman, *No Future, Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.

³⁴ F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Edited By K. Hansel-Pearson, translated by C. Diethe, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 44.

Real to which pain responds. Consequently, even if we master a particular pain, even if the Symbolic finds a way to signify pain, to give it a sort of “meaning”, we cannot erase the ontological persistence of pain as the negativity intrinsic in the human condition. As an expression of negativity, pain can be sublimated through the Symbolic, but its ontological side cannot disappear.

In the movie *The Silence of the Lambs* by Jonathan Demme, there is a scene in which the FBI agent, Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster), is talking with an imprisoned serial killer Dr. Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins), trying to get him to reveal the real name of another serial killer, known as Buffalo Bill, who has kidnapped Catherine, the daughter of Senator Ruth Martin:

Clarice Starling: Doctor we don't have any more time for any of this now.

Hannibal Lecter: But we don't reckon time the same way, do we? - This is all the time you'll ever have.

Clarice Starling: Later. Listen to me. We've only got five...

Hannibal Lecter: No! I will listen now. After your father's murder, you were orphaned. You were ten years old. You went to live with cousins on a sheep and horse ranch in Montana. And...?

Clarice Starling: [tears begin forming in her eyes] And one morning, I just ran away.

Hannibal Lecter: Not "just", Clarice. What set you off? You started at what time?

Clarice Starling: Early, still dark.

Hannibal Lecter: Then something woke you, didn't it? Was it a dream? What was it?

Clarice Starling: I heard a strange noise.

Hannibal Lecter: What was it?

Clarice Starling: It was ... screaming. Some kind of screaming, like a child's voice.

Hannibal Lecter: What did you do?

Clarice Starling: I went downstairs, outside. I crept up into the barn. I was so scared to look inside, but I had to.

Hannibal Lecter: And what did you see, Clarice? What did you see?

Clarice Starling: Lambs. And they were screaming.

Hannibal Lecter: They were slaughtering the spring lambs?

Clarice Starling: And they were screaming.

Hannibal Lecter: And you ran away?

Clarice Starling: No. First I tried to free them. I ... I opened the gate to their pen, but they wouldn't run. They just stood there, confused. They wouldn't run.

Hannibal Lecter: But you could and you did, didn't you?

Clarice Starling: Yes. I took one lamb, and I ran away as fast as I could.

Hannibal Lecter: Where were you going, Clarice?

Clarice: I don't know. I didn't have any food, any water, and it was very cold, very cold. I thought, I thought if I could save just one, but ... he was so heavy. So heavy. I didn't get more than a few miles when the sheriff's car picked me up. The rancher was so angry he sent me to live at the Lutheran orphanage in Bozeman. I never saw the ranch again.

Hannibal Lecter: What became of your lamb, Clarice?

Clarice Starling: They killed him.

Hannibal Lecter: You still wake up sometimes, don't you? You wake up in the dark and hear the screaming of the lambs.

Clarice Starling: Yes.

Hannibal Lecter: And you think if you save poor Catherine, you could make them stop, don't you? You think if Catherine lives, you won't wake up in the dark ever again to that awful screaming of the lambs.

Clarice Starling: [choking up] I don't know. I don't know.

Hannibal Lecter: Thank you, Clarice. Thank you.

Clarice Starling: Tell me his name, Doctor.

Hannibal Lecter: ... Dr. Chilton, I presume. I think you know each other.

Dr. Chilton: Okay. Let's go.

Clarice Starling: It's your turn, Doctor.

Dr. Chilton: Out!

Clarice Starling: Tell me his name!

Boyle: I'm sorry, ma'am. We've got orders. We have to put you on a plane. Come on, now.

[Chilton and the guards start leading Clarice out]

Hannibal Lecter: Brave Clarice. You will let me know when those lambs stop screaming, won't you?

Clarice Starling: Tell me his name, Doctor!³⁵

³⁵ http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/s/silence-of-the-lambs-script-transcript.html

As we can see from the dialogue, Clarice is completely absorbed by her task and desperately tries to make Hannibal reveal the real name of Buffalo Bill in order to save Catherine. From a literal perspective the name that she is looking for is the specific name of the serial killer. However, from a psychoanalytic perspective, what she is trying to do is to master the Real to escape its threat. To give a real name to Buffalo Bill means not just arresting the killer but also arresting the Real that the killer represents. As Lecter points out, to capture Buffalo Bill means to silence the scream of the lambs that have haunted her since her childhood. Even if she is not aware of it, she hopes that “if Catherine lives, she won't wake up in the dark ever again to that awful screaming of the lambs”. For Clarice, it is clear that the only chance to “make them stop” is to “save poor Catherine,” to sublimate the insistence of the Real into a fixed identity in the prison of meaning. Nevertheless, Lecter's relentless questions – which evoke the insistence of the Real – reveal to Clarice the inconsistency of her unconscious hope and leave her as confused as she was in front of the lambs that she tried to save.

As she recalls it, the first time she faced the scream of the lambs, she tried to save them by opening “the gate to their pen, but they wouldn't run, they just stood there, confused”. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, the scene can be read as the first encounter between Clarice and the Real. Indeed, as an allegory for the drives, the lambs did not act in accord with her will and, on the contrary, just “stood there” wrapped in the incomprehensibility of their behavior. The drives work in fact in unpredictable ways, often against the flourishing of the subject to the point of embracing death, like the lambs. If the drives have the power to jeopardize one's sovereignty over the world and oneself, it is because, as the main expression of the Real, they can neither be controlled nor understood.

Clarice's inability to understand or control her drives even if she could clearly feel the angst of the scream shows the structural gap within the subject. Gap that, in those unexpected and uncontrollable moments in which the drives

obtrude themselves on the life of the consciousness³⁶, opens like a chasm, overwhelming the subject. When she “heard a strange noise”, when “some kind of screaming, like a child's voice“ woke her up in the night is the moment when Clarice cannot bear the angst of the Real and surrenders to the force of the drives. Indeed when she hears, without knowing the reasons, the intolerable and unlocalized scream, she cannot resist her own drive to watch. Clarice’s drives are in fact not just aural but also scopophilic: she needs to watch in order to understand, in order to master by seeing the intolerable sound. But she fails to recognize that the drive to see itself, to see what cannot be mastered, to see the horror of the Real, is always implicated in what presents itself as the lawful Symbolic pursuit of reason.

The link between knowledge and vision is very old and deeply-roted in western culture. The stem of the polythematic ancient Greek word ὀράω (that means “to see”) is Οἰδ- from which we derive Οἶδα that is translated with "I know." The reasoning implied is: “I know because I have seen." "Οἰδ-" is also the root of the English word “idea”, the Italian “idea”, the Spanish “idea”, the French “idée”, the German “Ideen” and so on, and lead to the same reasoning: "since I saw I could produce an idea"³⁷. Now the contribution that psychoanalysis adds to philosophical thought is not merely that seeing is not sufficient to know³⁸ but that the will to see in order to know is indissolubly linked to what escapes the will itself.³⁹ In other words, the problem at stake here is not simply that our senses are inaccurate and ambiguous and therefore the knowledge that we derive from them is erroneous, but that knowledge itself is always already compromised with what

³⁶ Following Lacan, Edelman calls those moments: moments of “encounter”.

³⁷ This is the reason why Enzo Paci affirms in the preface to the Italian translation of *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaft und die transzendente Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie* by Husserl: “Quando io ho visto, tenendo presente i termini greci, vuol dire che so.” (E. Husserl, *La crisi delle scienze europee e la fenomenologia trascendentale*, il Saggiatore, Milano 2008, pag. 12.)

³⁸ Question clarified already by Epicurus that, with the “theory of effluvium”, tried to give an account of the fact that perceptions are subjective and unreliable and by the Stoics that, for this reason, formulated the notion of ἐποχή that runs through the history of philosophy up to Husserl.

³⁹ See Lacan, *Kant avec sade in Ecrits*.

cannot be reduced to a pure object of knowledge: the Real. Our relation with knowledge, our need to know, is in fact deeply rooted with the drives that both push us through knowledge and escape this same knowledge. Like in a sort of unconscious synesthesia, “brave Clarice” tries to fill with gaze the hole that the scream has opened inside of her without recognizing that her need to see, her urge to see in order to know, belongs to the very same hole.

Furthermore, in talking to Hannibal, Clarice has to recognize not only that it is impossible to control the drives, but also that is impossible to redeem them. Hannibal’s relentless questions, exasperated by the framing of the camera that slowly gets closer to his face, have the power to lead Clarice back to the encounter with the Real, showing that she is still trying to master her drives and their vicissitudes. This attempted mastery is evidenced by her battle against, and fascination with, serial murderers—which is why the “love story” with Lecter is so important: what drives her is the encounter with him as her mirror, as her specular image (hence the persistent shots of them superimposed on one another via their reflections in a glass). This “detective work” is the sublimation of her drive toward the Real itself — her desire to see into the abyss that leads her to the pen where the lambs are locked up and where she hears them “screaming.” As Nietzsche wrote in the aphorism 146 of *Beyond Good and Evil*: “Whoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become one himself” because “when you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you”⁴⁰ and maybe it will reveal that you are the very same monster or, at least, that there is a part of you that irresistibly drawn to it and that you cannot control.

Despite Clarice’s belief that saving “poor Catherine” means silencing the lambs, she finally has to admit that she “doesn’t know” if this will definitively silence the screams she continues to hear. When Hannibal rhetorically invites her to let him know when the lambs stop screaming, she can do nothing but keep asking for Buffalo Bill’s real name, screaming the request with increasing desperation – as if she could cover with her own scream the scream of the Real –

⁴⁰ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, edited by R.P. Horstmann and J. Norman, translated by J. Norman, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, p. 69.

revealing in this way that, deep inside, she feels now as then that the lamb is *still* “so heavy”: so heavy as to be unbearable. Even if Clarice were able to arrest Buffalo Bill⁴¹, sublimating in this way the insistence of the Real, she could never silence its scream. Even if she consciously would like to end this unbearable sound, she is unconsciously driven toward and by it, just as Hannibal Lecter and Buffalo Bill, more explicitly, are driven by fixations on the void.

Buffalo Bill is just a placeholder, a figurative image for the Real she can never arrest. The Real will always scream in Clarice’s nights as the relentless voice of the negativity that surpasses signification. When in the last scene of the movie Clarice is celebrating that she killed Buffalo Bill and finally feels relieved, Hannibal calls to ask the same old question: “Well, Clarice? Have the lambs stopped screaming?”⁴² In this way Hannibal underlines that it does not matter what sort of sublimation she undertakes: “pour le réel, quelque bouleversement qu'on puisse y apporter, il y est toujours et en tout cas, à sa place, il l'emporte collée à sa semelle, sans rien connaître qui puisse l'en exiler.”⁴³ As if it comes from the unconscious, Lecter’s call throws her back in the vortex of the drives. Immediately she reacts with the same scheme of sublimation by which she dealt with Buffalo Bill: chasing him. Indeed, during the last instants of the call she asks:

Clarice Starling: Where are you, Dr Lecter?

Hannibal Lecter: I have no plans to call on you, Clarice. The world's more interesting with you in it. So you take care now to extend me the same courtesy.

Clarice Starling: You know I can't make that promise.⁴⁴

Clarice cannot resist chasing the killer in order to trap her own drives to kill. The movie ends with Clarice’s invoking over and over again the name of Hannibal Lecter. Another name that could finally trap and erase the Real, showing

⁴¹ As she does in the end of the movie.

⁴² http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/s/silence-of-the-lambs-script-transcript.html

⁴³ J. Lacan, *Séminaire sur la lettre voilé*, in *Ecrits*, p. 25.

⁴⁴ http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/s/silence-of-the-lambs-script-transcript.html

in this way that she is still unwilling to recognize that the Symbolic will never fill the hole of the Real. The title of the movie does not appear in the credits at the end of the movie, suggesting in this way that, even if Clarice was able to arrest Buffalo Bill, even if she was able to sublimate for a while the insistence of the Real, she will never be able to silence the lambs – she will never find the silence of the lambs. And probably she does not want to. The bitter irony that runs throughout the film, and that leads her to the paradox that emerges from the relation between the drives and the human being's conscious life, is in fact that she seeks a silence that can only come with the lambs death. Her need of silence, masked behind his abiding lawful work, turns out to be a deep need of death – a need that she sublimates chasing those who chase the innocent “lambs”.

A few pages after the paragraph I quoted above from the *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Wittgenstein adds: “«Surely I can (inwardly) undertake to call THIS 'pain' in the future.»” - «But is it certain that you have undertaken it? Are you sure that it was enough for this purpose to concentrate your attention on your feeling?» - A *queer* question” - ⁴⁵. Wittgenstein uses the adjective “*Seltsame*” to define his question. I agree with Anscombe who acutely translated the term as “queer”. This question is in fact exquisitely queer. Not only because the object of this question cannot be reduced to a stable concept, but also because, in the way that it is placed, this question queries language itself and the subject that language sustains.

Wittgenstein suggests that we can sublimate pain in the Symbolic by producing a structure of meaning to deal with it; but, as an *ante litteram* queer theorist, he ironizes both that suggestion and our confidence in meaning: Are we sure that the word “THIS ‘pain’” *means* exactly what we are talking about? Is what we are trying to grasp really something that depends on our will and can be so easily managed with language and reason? Or is it something else - something that is beyond our conscious reality and does not let itself be fully understood? If in fact it is always a sublimated version of pain that we understand and try to cure, what about its ontological side? What about the rest that we fail to grasp? In this

⁴⁵ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, cit., p. 100, paragraph 263. Italic mine.

way Wittgenstein not only puts into question the empirical capacity of a single individual to repair pain or redeem it, but he also shows the structural wound inscribed in the subject of language. The problem that remains unaddressed by political and ethical responses to pain is the intrinsic negativity of human existence that checkmates the cogito's rational claims and the fantasy of sovereignty that it produces in the subject.

As Edelman observes, there are “moments that signal the failure or even the inadequacy of knowledge as such, moments when the frameworks of knowing are not simply incoherently at odds with each other but incapable of accommodating the encounter with something unnamable in the terms they offer and irreducible to relation.”⁴⁶ Instead of focusing, like phenomenology, on the intentionality that takes for granted a fixed identity, Wittgenstein gives voice precisely to *those* moments, querying – or *queering* – the unity of the subject and its fantasy of being able to grasp and make sense of any kind of pain. He does not see pain as the accident that, in showing the complex relationship between the body and the mind, identifies a strong subjectivity able to work through and overcome it; rather, he sees it as the expression of the unavoidable negativity that structures the subject.

Now, if pain, as I argue, is the meaningless experience whose screams must be silenced into meaning, if pain is the experience that the Symbolic must redeem it from its intrinsic negativity, then masochism poses a particularly difficult challenge to the Symbolic insofar as it designates the pain that does not want redemption, the pain that take pleasure upon itself, the pain that embraces negativity. Of course, as we have seen, all possible experiences, even those closest to the Real, need the screen of the Symbolic. This is the reason why even forms of masochism, “as embodiments of unintelligibility, of course, must veil what they expose, becoming, as figures for it, the means of its apparent subjection to meaning.”⁴⁷ Therefore, all the symbols, rituals, metaphors, and the most sophisticated scenic aspects of theater that sustain masochism make it, from a

⁴⁶ L. Berlant and L. Edelman, *Sex or the Unbearable*, cit., p. 10.

⁴⁷ L. Edelman, *No Future*, cit., p. 106, 107.

certain point of view, the quintessence of the Symbolic. Nevertheless, masochism cannot be reduced to any of these symbols since what it seeks is always beyond the Symbolic. Indeed, although masochism is built on symbols, although symbols form the structure of its fantasy, they are not the core of masochism. If, as Lacan argues, “le masochisme est le majeur de la jouissance que donne le Réel”⁴⁸, it is because masochism, beyond the symbolic expressions with which it manifests itself, escapes any meanings that could once and for all grasp, understand, and redeem it. As I will argue in the following chapters, as the reification of something that inexplicably lures the subject towards what hurts him, in its insistence on perpetrating what wounds the subject beyond his will, masochism shows “the internal limit to signification and the impossibility of turning Real loss to meaningful profit in the Symbolic without its persistent remainder: the inescapable Real of the drive.”⁴⁹

Instead of redeeming, repairing, avoiding, or curing pain, masochism embraces the negativity that jeopardizes the subject. And if psychiatry, psychoanalysis, philosophy and the “BDSM community” itself all try to explain this thing – making it into a perversion, a statement, a way to overcome fears and anxieties, or a way to break away from common sexual morality – the intention of my work is to show that the drives that push someone to embrace pain and self-destruction cannot be “understood.” Masochism is and remains incomprehensible. This is the reason why, rather than offering reasons for masochism – the presumed reasons that create or turn someone into a masochist – I will investigate masochism in order to approach the Real and its relation with sex, life, and death.

⁴⁸ J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire: Livre XXIII, Le sinthome, 1975-1976*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2005, p. 90.

⁴⁹ L. Edelman, *No Future*, cit., p. 106, 107.

CHAPTER 2

PLEASURE

*“O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.”*

William Blake

According to David Halperin, *“The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, contains the only original account of sexuality that the twentieth century has produced other than Freud’s, and it offers the only account of sexuality that can rival Freud’s and provide a genuine alternative to the normalizing discourses of conventional psychoanalysis.”⁵⁰ Since Deleuze and Guattari also distance

The reason why I often use the original version of the texts that I quote is due to the fact that the translation is either misleading or simply nonexistent.

themselves from conventional psychoanalysis by offering a strongly anti-normalizing and anti-pathologizing account of sexuality, Halperin's statement might sound hyperbolic. Nevertheless, he points out an important issue underlying Foucault's anti-psychoanalytic attempt to *de-psychologize* sexuality. Indeed, even if both Deleuze and Guattari, like Foucault, are devoted to resisting power and social constraints (including those imposed by psychoanalysis), Deleuze and Guattari still consider desire an essential element of sexuality⁵¹ – the element by which the “becoming multiple” of their *Schizoanalysis*⁵² is possible. Foucault, to the contrary, rejects desire because he considers it irremediably compromised by the structures of domination that trap the subject inside its spiral. If Deleuze and Guattari fight psychoanalysis from the “inside,” re-elaborating the notion of desire, Foucault rejects psychoanalysis *in toto*, building his account of “sexuality” on the notion of pleasure(s).

In this chapter I present Foucault's theory of pleasure(s) and in the next one Deleuze and Guattari's theory of desire exploring the political reasons for their struggle against social constraints and the theoretical reasons for their division in relation to pleasure/desire. My intention in this two chapters is to criticize both positions, showing how masochism – which all three of these philosophers assumed to be a privileged object to express their positions – actually shows the weak point of both analyses of sexuality. This critique will allow me to show why the death drive is fundamental for the comprehension of masochism.

⁵⁰ D. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 121. Halperin also express the same thought in a more recent book: “Foucault [...] offered the only theoretical approach to sexuality sufficiently substantive and original to compete with psychoanalysis – and to afford a meaningful intellectual alternative to it within the field of sexuality studies”: D. Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2007, p. 4.

⁵¹ For Deleuze's answer to Foucault's theory of pleasure see Deleuze, *Désir et plaisir par Gilles Deleuze, Lettre de Deleuze à Michel Foucault*, (1977) English translation in A. Davidson, *Foucault and its interlocutors*, The University of Chicago Press, 1997. I will discuss this topic extensively in the second part of the chapter.

⁵² See G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie. L'anti-Œdipe*.

2.1

LE DISPOSITIF DE SEXUALITE

What Foucault calls the *dispositif*⁵³ of sexuality in *Volume I of The History of Sexuality* is a series of discourses, practices, rules, incitements, and inspections that instead of repressing⁵⁴ sex was able to produce a *scientia sexualis*: namely a

⁵³ In an interview right after the publication of the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* Alain Grosrichard asked Foucault: “tu parles, toi, d'un«dispositif de sexualité». Quel est pour toi le sens et la fonction méthodologique de ce terme : «dispositif» ?” and Foucault answered: “Ce que j'essaie de repérer sous ce nom, c'est, premièrement, un ensemble résolument hétérogène, comportant des discours, des institutions, des aménagements architecturaux, des décisions réglementaires, des lois, des mesures administratives, des énoncés scientifiques, des propositions philosophiques, morales, philanthropiques, bref : du dit, aussi bien que du non-dit, voilà les éléments du dispositif. Le dispositif lui-même, c'est le réseau qu'on peut établir entre ces éléments. Deuxièmement, ce que je voudrais repérer dans le dispositif, c'est justement la nature du lien qui peut exister entre ces éléments hétérogènes. Ainsi, tel discours peut apparaître tantôt comme programme d'une institution, tantôt au contraire comme un élément qui permet de justifier et de masquer une pratique qui, elle, reste muette, ou fonctionner comme réinterprétation seconde de cette pratique, lui donner accès à un champ nouveau de rationalité. Bref, entre ces éléments, discursifs ou non, il y a comme un jeu, des changements de position, des modifications de fonctions, qui peuvent, eux aussi, être très différents. Troisièmement, par dispositif, j'entends une sorte - disons - de formation, qui, à un moment historique donné, a eu pour fonction majeure de répondre à une urgence. Le dispositif a donc une fonction stratégique dominante. Cela a pu être, par exemple, la résorption d'une masse de population flottante qu'une société à économie de type essentiellement mercantiliste trouvait encombrante : il y a eu là un impératif stratégique, jouant comme matrice d'un dispositif, qui est devenu peu à peu le dispositif de contrôle-assujettissement de la folie, de la maladie mentale, de la névrose.” M. Foucault, *Le jeu de Michel Foucault*, (interview with D. Colas, A Grosrichard, G. Le Gaufrey, G. Livi, G. Miller, J. Miller, J-A. Miller, C. Millet, G. Wajeman) in M. Foucault, *Dits et Ecrits*, Tome III (1976-1979), Gallimard, Paris 1994, Text 206, pp. 298, 299.

⁵⁴ “Indeed, it is not a question of denying the existence of repression. It's one of showing that repression is always a part of a much more complex political strategy regarding sexuality. Things

stratified and complex relation of judges, priests, doctors, psychiatrists, and psychoanalysts who, in pursuing the “truth of sex,” were able to produce and discipline desire. “Produce” and “discipline” are key terms that cross almost the entire philosophical work of Foucault and that characterize in particular the first part of his analysis of sexuality.

According to Foucault, by extrapolating various groups of people from the general and indistinct mass of the anti-socials and giving them physical and psychological characteristics, specific places to stay, and treatments to follow, modern society created figures such as the fool,⁵⁵ the pervert,⁵⁶ and the criminal.⁵⁷ The same mechanism is used by Foucault in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* to understand how something like sex emerges from the general and indistinct mass⁵⁸ of what he calls *la chair*⁵⁹ – the flesh. As Foucault clarifies in an

are not merely repressed. There is about sexuality a lot of defective regulations in which the negative effects of inhibition are counterbalanced by the positive effects of stimulation. The way in which sexuality in the nineteenth century was both repressed but also put in light, underlined, analyzed through techniques like psychology and psychiatry shows very well that it was not simply a question of repression.” M. Foucault, *An Interview by Stephen Riggins*, (1982), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by P. Rabinow, The New Press, New York, p. 126.

⁵⁵ See M. Foucault, *Histoire de la folie a l'âge classique*.

⁵⁶ See M. Foucault, *Les anormaux*.

⁵⁷ See M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir : Naissance de la prison*.

⁵⁸ “The discursive explosion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries caused this system centered on legitimate alliance to undergo two modifications. First, a centrifugal movement with respect to heterosexual monogamy. Of course, the array of practices and pleasures continued to be referred to it as their internal standard; but it was spoken of less and less, or in any case with a growing moderation. Efforts to find out its secrets were abandoned; nothing further was demanded of it than to define itself from day to day. The legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality, had a right to more discretion. It tended to function as a norm, one that was stricter, perhaps, but quieter. On the other hand, what came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, mad men and women, and criminals; the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex; reveries, obsessions, petty manias, or great transports of rage. It was time for all these figures, scarcely noticed in the past, to step forward and speak, to make the difficult confession of what they were. No doubt they were condemned all the same; but they were listened to; and if regular sexuality happened to be questioned once again, it was through a reflux movement, originating in these peripheral sexualities. Whence the setting apart of the “unnatural” as a specific dimension in the field of

interview published in *Ornicar? Bulletin périodique du champ freudien*, sex is not a “donné préalable”, is not a trans-historical object but is a cultural product of modern society, a cultural object that, like madness, arose in a particular historical period. Of course Foucault is not arguing that people just started having sex in modern times but rather that a specific attention that slowly started to interrogate, to interpret, and finally to classify “le corps, les organes sexuels, les plaisirs, les relations d'alliance, les rapports interindividuels”⁶⁰ has produced “un ensemble hétérogène, qui a finalement été recouvert par le dispositif de sexualité, lequel a produit, à un moment donné, comme clef de voûte de son propre discours et peut-être de son propre fonctionnement, l'idée du sexe.”⁶¹ In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* he affirms:

The notion of "sex" made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an

sexuality. This kind of activity assumed an autonomy with regard to the other condemned forms such as adultery or rape (and the latter were condemned less and less): to marry a close relative or practice sodomy, to seduce a nun or engage in sadism, to deceive one's wife or violate cadavers, became things that were essentially different. The area covered by the Sixth Commandment began to fragment. Similarly, in the civil order, the confused category of "debauchery," which for more than a century had been one of the most frequent reasons for administrative confinement, came apart. From the debris, there appeared on the one hand infractions against the legislation (or morality) pertaining to marriage and the family, and on the other, offenses against the regularity of a natural function (offenses which, it must be added, the law was apt to punish). Here we have a likely reason, among others, for the prestige of Don Juan, which three centuries have not erased. Underneath the great violator of the rules of marriage-stealer of wives, seducer of virgins, the shame of families, and an insult to husbands and fathers-another personage can be glimpsed: the individual driven, in spite of himself, by the somber madness of sex. Underneath the libertine, the pervert.” M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, Pantheon Books, New York 1978, pp. 38 and 39.

⁵⁹ “le sexe, on le voit apparaître, il me semble, au cours du XIXe siècle [...] On a une sexualité depuis le XVIIIe siècle, un sexe depuis le XIXe. Avant, on avait sans doute une chair.” M. Foucault, *Le jeu de Michel Foucault*, cit., p. 12.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 312.

⁶¹ Ibid. p 312.

omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified. Further, by presenting itself in a unitary fashion, as anatomy and lack, as function and latency, as instinct and meaning, it was able to mark the line of contact between a knowledge of human sexuality and the biological sciences of reproduction; thus, without really borrowing anything from these sciences, excepting a few doubtful analogies, the knowledge of sexuality gained through proximity a guarantee, of quasi-scientificity; but by virtue of this same proximity, some of the contents of biology and physiology were able to serve as a principle of normality for human sexuality. Finally, the notion of sex brought about a fundamental reversal; it made it possible to invert the representation of the relationships of power to sexuality, causing the latter to appear, not in its essential and positive relation to power, but as being rooted in a specific and irreducible urgency which power tries as best it can to dominate; thus the idea of "sex" makes it possible to evade what gives "power" its power; it enables one to conceive power solely as law and taboo. Sex - *that agency which appears to dominate us and that secret which seems to underlie all that we are, that point which enthralls us through the power it manifests and the meaning it conceals, and which we ask to reveal what we are and to free us from what defines us* - is doubtless but an ideal point made necessary by the deployment [*dispositif*] of sexuality and its operation. We must not make the mistake of thinking that sex is an autonomous agency which secondarily produces manifold effects of sexuality over the entire length of its surface of contact with power. On the contrary, sex is the most speculative, most ideal, and most internal element in a deployment [*dispositif*] of sexuality organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures.⁶²

As stated in this paragraph, according to Foucault, "sex" is a complex cultural instance even though it has been imposed as a natural object by society. However, the intention of Foucault is not just to show that sex is a speculative artifact; he also needs to establish the theoretical ground from which he can launch his attack. What he really wants to point out is that in creating sex, the *dispositif* of sexuality also creates the fantasy of a "truth" linked to it – a truth

⁶² M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, cit., pp. 154 and 155. Italics mine.

that, hidden in the meshes of desire, could be revealed only through a hermeneutic of this same desire. Indeed, the shrewd question that runs through the entire first volume of the history of sexuality is: are we sure that desire is able to reveal the hidden truth of the subject or, to the contrary, is desire, and the truth that it brings with it, just a product of a *dispositif* of sexuality, a product able to discipline the bodies and the pleasure(s) they contain?

According to Foucault, the Christian pastoral of the seventeenth century, in “prescribing as a fundamental duty the task of passing everything having to do with sex through the endless mill of speech,”⁶³ began the history of a meticulous attention to the “*chair*” that increased during the last centuries covering not only medicine, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis, but also the state systems of justice, prison, and education⁶⁴. In this way, from the Christian pastoral of the seventeenth century to the medicine of eighteenth century, the psychiatry of the nineteenth century, and the psychoanalysis of the twentieth century, the “Western man has been drawn for three centuries to the task of telling everything concerning his sex”⁶⁵ thus creating the conditions whereby the *dispositif* of sexuality could instill

⁶³ “The catholic pastoral prescribed as a fundamental duty the task of passing everything having to do with sex through the endless mill of speech” *ibid.*, p. 21

⁶⁴ “One could mention many other centers which in the eighteenth or nineteenth century began to produce discourses on sex. First there was medicine, via the “nervous disorders”; next psychiatry, when it set out to discover the etiology of mental illnesses, focusing its gaze first on “excess,” then onanism, then frustration, then “frauds against procreation,” but especially when it annexed the whole of the sexual perversions as its own province; criminal justice, too, which had long been concerned with sexuality, particularly in the form of “heinous” crimes and crimes against nature, but which, toward the middle of the nineteenth century, broadened its jurisdiction to include petty offenses, minor indecencies, insignificant perversions; and lastly, all those social controls, cropping up at the end of the last century, which screened the sexuality of couples, parents and children, dangerous and endangered adolescents—undertaking to protect, separate, and forewarn, signaling perils everywhere, awakening people’s attention, calling for diagnoses, piling up reports, organizing therapies. These sites radiated discourses aimed at sex, intensifying people’s awareness of it as a constant danger, and this in turn created a further incentive to talk about it.” *Ibid.*, pp. 30 and 31.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

the idea that sex is “harboring a fundamental secret.”⁶⁶ “a secret whose discovery is imperative”⁶⁷ since it concerns the truth of the subject. “Hence the fact that over the centuries [sex] has become more important than our soul, more important almost than our life; and so it is that all the world's enigmas appear frivolous to us compared to this secret, minuscule in each of us, but of a density that makes it more serious than any other.”⁶⁸

In an interview originally published in *Le Nouvel observateur* on March 1977 (right after the publication of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*) with the title: "Non au sexe roi", Foucault affirms:

Since Christianity, the Western world has never ceased saying: "To know who you are, know what your sexuality is." Sex has always been the forum where both the future of our species and our "truth" as human subjects are decided. Confession, the examination of conscience, all the insistence on the important secrets of the flesh [chair], has not been simply a means of prohibiting sex or of repressing it as far as possible from consciousness, but was a means of placing sexuality at the heart of existence and of connecting salvation with the mastery of these obscure movements. In Christian societies, sex has been the central object of examination, surveillance, avowal and transformation into discourse.⁶⁹

This perspective clarifies how psychoanalysis – the discipline that emerges precisely with the purpose of showing the fundamentality that sex has for the existence of human beings and that, for this reason, produces a “discourse” that places at the center of its own reflection a deep analysis of desire – is not just one of the social constraints that, controlled by the *dispositif* of sexuality, controls the subjects, but is somehow the culmination of a procedure of production and discipline that, pushing the subject to reveal everything concern his sexuality, is

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 69.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 156.

⁶⁹ M. Foucault, *Power and sex*, (interview) in M. Foucault, *Politics Philosophy Culture: interview and Other Writings 1977-1984*, edited by L. Kritzman, Routledge, New York and London, 1988, p. 111.

able to grasp and manipulate every nuance of it. In fact, if “by making sex into that which, above all else, had to be confessed, the Christian pastoral always presented it as the disquieting enigma”⁷⁰, whereas psychoanalysis arose and imposed itself as the form of knowledge that finally can solve this enigma, the supreme form of knowledge able to penetrate the desire of the subject by uncovering its truth, and consequently, revealing who the subject really is. *La volonté de savoir* – the imperative to discourse that the *dispositif* cunningly stitched around sex making it the *viaticum* for truth – finally finds in psychoanalysis the long-sought answer.

Foucault underlines that “dans l’histoire des procédures qui mettent en rapport le sexe et la vérité [la psychanalyse est le] point culminant. De nos jours, il n’y a pas un seul discours sur la sexualité qui, d’une manière ou d’une autre, ne s’ordonne à celui de la psychanalyse.”⁷¹ For this reason, according to Foucault, the contemporary man is constantly and increasingly pushed to reveal everything concerning his desire to psychoanalysts if he wants to find the truth about himself. If sex is the mirror that reflects the deepest truth of oneself, who is better able to look into this mirror to tell who the subject really is but the person invested with the power to decipher sexual desire?

By creating the imaginary element that is "sex," the deployment [*dispositif*] of sexuality established one of its most essential internal operating principles: the desire for sex – the desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth. It constituted "sex" itself as something desirable. And it is this desirability of sex that attaches each one of us to the injunction to know it, to reveal its law and its power; it is this desirability that makes us think we are affirming the rights of our sex against all power, when in fact we are fastened to the deployment of sexuality that has lifted up from deep within us a sort of mirage in which we think we see ourselves reflected – the dark shimmer of sex.⁷²

⁷⁰ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, cit., p. 35.

⁷¹ M. Foucault, *Le jeu de Michel Foucault*, in *Dits et Ecrits* cit., p. 313.

⁷² M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, cit., pp. 156 and 157.

2.2

FOUCAULT AND SEXUAL LIBERATION

No repression, just interpretation! could be the motto of the last metamorphosis of this *dispositif* that, instead of repressing sex, created a series of discourses aimed not just at producing and disciplining it but also at making it *desirable*.⁷³ “One,” argues Foucault, “has to be completely taken in by this internal ruse of confession in order to attribute a fundamental role to censorship, to taboos regarding speaking and thinking; one has to have an inverted image of power in order to believe that all these voices which have spoken so long in our civilization repeating the formidable injunction to tell what one is and what one does, what one recollects and what one has forgotten, what one is thinking and what one thinks he is not thinking – are speaking to us of freedom.”⁷⁴ Foucault concludes the first volume saying, “ironie de ce dispositif: il nous fait croire qu’il y va de notre «libération».”⁷⁵

This attack is obviously directed against the intellectuals committed to sexual liberation – like Reich⁷⁶, and, in a different manner, Deleuze and Guattari:

⁷³ “Doubtless the secret does not reside in that basic reality in relation to which all the incitements to speak of sex are situated—whether they try to force the secret, or whether in some obscure way they reinforce it by the manner in which they speak of it. It is a question rather of a theme that forms part of the very mechanics of these incitements: a way of giving shape to the requirement to speak about the matter, a fable that is indispensable to the endlessly proliferating economy of the discourse on sex. What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the* secret.” M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, cit., p. 35.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁷⁵ M. Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 1: La volonté de savoir*, Gallimard, Paris 1976, p. 211.

⁷⁶ “In Reich's view the problem was entirely one of liberation. To put it somewhat schematically, according to him there is desire, drive, prohibition, repression, internalization, and it is by getting

those who, according to Foucault, pretend to use the notion of desire to free the subject from the social constraints imposed by society without acknowledging that the notion of desire is always already completely saturated by the *dispositif* of sexuality. In an interview with Jean Le Bitoux titled “The Gay Science,” Foucault affirms:

I would say, schematically, that medicine and psychoanalysis have made extensive use of this notion of desire, precisely as a kind of instrument for establishing the intelligibility of a sexual pleasure and thus for standardizing it in terms of normality. Tell me what your desire is, and I’ll tell you who you are. I’ll tell you if you’re sick or not, I’ll tell you if you’re normal or not, and thus I’ll be able to disqualify your desire or on the contrary requalify it. This is rather obvious, it seems to me, in psychoanalysis. In any case, if we look at the very history of the notion of desire, from Christian concupiscence, through the sexual instinct of the 1840s, and up to the Freudian and post-Freudian notions of desire, I think we’d see pretty clearly how this notion functions. Deleuze and Guattari obviously use the notion [of desire] in a completely different way. But the problem I have is that I’m not sure if, through this very word, despite its different meaning, we don’t run the risk, despite Deleuze and Guattari’s intention, of allowing some of the medico-psychological presuppositions [prises] that were built into desire, in its traditional sense, to be reintroduced.⁷⁷

What we have to bear in mind is that for Foucault power is structurally *relational* and there is no possibility of situating oneself outside of power⁷⁸. The

rid of these prohibitions, in other words, by liberating oneself, that the problem gets resolved.” M. Foucault, *The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom*, (interview), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., p. 284.

⁷⁷ M. Foucault, *The Gay Science*, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no.3 (Spring 2011), p. 389.

⁷⁸ “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always “inside” power, there is no “escaping” it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned, because one is subject to the law in any case? Or that, history being the ruse of reason, power is the ruse of history, always emerging the winner? This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships. Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance:

“Repressive Hypothesis” – namely the idea that sex was imprisoned for centuries and that now it is simply necessary to free it in order to free the subject – is completely overturned by Foucault. As he argues, not only has sex been created by a *dispositif* that also carefully produced a series of discourses supposedly able to draw from sex the truth of the subject, but also, with the help of psychoanalysis, the *dispositif* was able to “saturate them [those discourses] with desire.” The sexual liberation movement, believing in the possibility of situating oneself outside of dominant power with the creation of discourses able to discover true desire, does nothing but give to the *dispositif* another “prise” to grasp – a “prise” by which the *dispositif* could extend its power. Indeed, according to Foucault, telling everything about our own sex with the intent of liberating a repressed desire does not lead to a true self but, on the contrary, to the creation of a “chair” subordinate to the coercive “discipline anatomo-politique du corps humaine”⁷⁹ that we call desire. “Ne pas croire qu'en disant oui au sexe, on dit non au pouvoir; on suit au contraire le fil du dispositif général de sexualité. *C'est de l'instance du sexe* qu'il faut s'affranchir si, par un retournement tactique des divers mécanismes de la sexualité, on veut faire valoir contre les prises du pouvoir, les corps, les plaisirs, les savoirs, dans leur multiplicité et leur possibilité de résistance.”⁸⁰ For this reason Foucault continues affirming in “The Gay Science”:

It seems to me that, by using the word pleasure, which in the end means nothing, which is still, it seems to me, rather empty of content and unsullied by possible uses – in treating pleasure ultimately as nothing other than an event, an event that

these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations.” M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, cit., pp. 95 and 96.

⁷⁹ M. Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 1: La volonté de savoir*, cit., p. 183.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 207 and 208. Italics mine.

happens, that happens, I would say, outside the subject, or at the limit of the subject, or between two subjects, in this something that is neither of the body nor of the soul, neither outside nor inside – don't we have here, in trying to reflect a bit on this notion of pleasure, a means of avoiding the entire psycho-logical and medical armature that was built into the traditional notion of desire?⁸¹

If the only way to escape this intricate structure of domination is to refuse to engage with the hidden “truth” of our desire, one possibility can be found in focusing on pleasure(s),⁸² namely to create an *Ars Erotica* against the *scientia sexualis* that forces us into the prison of desire. To experiment with an art of living focused on increasing our capacity for feeling pleasure instead of looking for the hidden “truth” of sexuality is the only strategy that, according to Foucault, can free the subject from the servitude of desire, and the *dispositif* that produced it. As Davidson explains:

while *ars erotica* is organized around the framework of body-pleasure-intensification, *scientia sexualis* is organized around the axis of subject-desire-truth. It is as if one could say that the imposition of true discourses on the subject of sexuality leads to the centrality of a theory of desire, while the discourse of

⁸¹ M. Foucault, *The Gay Science*, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no.3 (Spring 2011), p. 389.

⁸² “Il y a un trait fondamental dans l'économie des plaisirs telle qu'elle fonctionne en Occident: c'est que le sexe lui sert de principe d'intelligibilité et de mesure. Depuis des millénaires, on tend à nous faire croire que la loi de tout plaisir, c'est, secrètement au moins, le sexe : et que c'est cela qui justifie la nécessité de sa modération, et donne la possibilité de son contrôle. Ces deux thèmes qu'au fond de tout plaisir il y a le sexe, et que la nature du sexe veut qu'il s'adonne et se limite à la procréation, ce ne sont pas des thèmes initialement chrétiens, mais stoïciens ; et le christianisme a été obligé de les reprendre lorsqu'il a voulu s'intégrer aux structures étatiques de l'Empire romain, dont le stoïcisme était la philosophie quasi universelle. Le sexe est devenu alors le code du plaisir. En Occident (au lieu que dans les sociétés dotées d'un art érotique, c'est l'intensification du plaisir qui tend à déssexualiser le corps), c'est cette codification du plaisir par les lois du sexe qui a donné lieu finalement à tout le dispositif de la sexualité. Et celui-ci nous fait croire que nous nous libérons quand nous décodons tout plaisir en termes de sexe enfin découvert. Alors qu'il faut tendre plutôt à une déssexualisation, à une économie générale du plaisir qui ne soit pas sexuellement normée.” M. Foucault, *Les rapports de pouvoir passent à l'intérieur des corps*, in *Dits Ecrits*, Tome III, text 197.

pleasure and the search for its intensification is *exterior* to a science of sexual desire. Just as Foucault wanted to divorce the psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious from the theory of sexuality, so he wants to detach the experience of pleasure from the psychological theory of sexual desire, of sexual subjectivity. The modification of the subject aimed at by the true discourse of the science of sexuality uses the conceptual structure of *desire* to excavate the real identity of the subject, and so to delimit the domain of psychological intervention. Desire has psychological *depth*; desire can be latent or manifest, apparent or hidden; desire can be repressed or sublimated; it calls for decipherment, for interpretation. True desire express what one really wants, who one really is, while false desire hides or masks identity, one's true subjectivity. No doubt this is a main part of the reason Foucault could not bear the word *desire*. Although we have no difficulty talking about and understanding the difference between true and false desires, the idea of true and false pleasure (and Foucault understood this point even if he never put it in exactly this way) is conceptually misplaced. Pleasure is, as it were, exhausted by its surface; it can be intensified, increased, its qualities modified, but it does not have the the psychological depth of desire. It is, so to speak, related to itself and not to something else that it expresses, either truly or falsely. There is no coherent conceptual space for the science of sexuality to attach itself to pleasure, and no primacy of the psychological subject in the experience of pleasure. Structures of desire lead to forms of sexual orientation, kinds of subjectivity; different pleasures do not imply orientation at all, require no theory of subjectivity or identity formation. The circumscription of true desire is a procedure of individualization; the production of pleasure is not.⁸³

What is clearly at stake in Foucault's strategy is not a need "to liberate our desire but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasure [*plaisirs*]."⁸⁴ If there is no way to locate ourselves outside of power then we have to resist the structures of dominance playing inside of it by playing with the inner potentiality

⁸³ A. Davidson, *Foucault, psychoanalysis, and Pleasure*, in T. Dean and C. Lane, *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2001, pp. 45 and 46. First italics mine.

⁸⁴ M. Foucault, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, (interview), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., p. 137.

of a “chair” that can find its own way without following – and falling into – the disciplinary itinerary of desire. This is why “the rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment [*dispositif*] of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures.”⁸⁵

⁸⁵ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, cit., p. 157.

2.3

FOUCAULT'S ASKĒSIS OF PLEASURE(S)

Foucault gives S/M as an example of a way in which the subject can enact practices of liberation from the *dispositif* of sexuality. In an interview with Gallagher and Wilson, Foucault affirms: "I don't think that this movement of sexual practices [S/M] has anything to do with the disclosure or the uncovering of S/M tendencies deep within our unconscious, and so on. I think that S/M is much more than that; it's the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previously."⁸⁶ Indeed, for Foucault, S/M is neither a way to reveal the "unconscious" desire of the subject nor is it an expression of his drive. Rather, S/M opens up "new possibilities of pleasure" that are unrelated to the dominant discourse and, in so doing, it provides possibilities for resistance.

The idea that S&M is related to a deep violence, that S&M practice is a way of liberating this violence, this aggression, is stupid. We know very well what all those people are doing is not aggressive; they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body - through the eroticization of the body. I think it's a kind of creation, a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features what I call the *desexualization* of pleasure. The idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure as the root of all our possible pleasure - I think that's something quite wrong. These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations, and so on.⁸⁷

This explicates not only Foucault's attempt to de-pathologize masochism,

⁸⁶ M. Foucault, *Sex, Power, and the Politics of identity*, (interview), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., p. 165.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

but also his more general effort to “desexualize pleasure(s)” or, as Halperin suggests, to “de-genitalize pleasures.” According to Halperin “the notion of ‘desexualization’ is a key one for Foucault” that “has been much misunderstood”. When Foucault speaks of ‘desexualization,’ he “is drawing on the meaning of the French word *sexe* in the sense of sexual organ.” What Foucault intends for ‘desexualization of pleasure’ is then not a detachment of pleasure “from all acts of a conceivably sexual nature” but a detachment of sexual pleasure “from genital specificity, from localization in or dependence on the genitals.”⁸⁸ If in fact pleasure tends to be located in the areas that we are permitted to experience as erogenous, and if we take for granted that pleasure is reachable only through these particular zones and in particular ways, it is because our body is trapped inside a desire that is socially created and manipulated. S/M on the contrary with its peculiar attention to covering the entire surface of the body – stroking, tickling, manipulating, torturing, enlarging, squeezing, whipping, cutting, and breaking it – “represents a remapping of the body’s erotic sites, a redistribution of its so-called erogenous zones, a breakup of the erotic monopoly traditionally held by the genitals, and even a re-eroticization of the male genitals as sites of vulnerability instead of subjects of veneration.”⁸⁹ Detaching the primacy of pleasure from the genitalia and redistributing pleasure across all surfaces of the body, S/M leads to

⁸⁸ “The notion of ‘desexualization’ is a key one for Foucault, and it has been much misunderstood. When he speaks of ‘desexualization,’ Foucault is drawing on the meaning of the French word *sexe* in the sense of sexual organ. What he means by S/M’s ‘desexualization of pleasure’ is not that S/M detaches pleasure from all acts of a conceivably sexual nature (even if it does destroy the absolute dependence of sexual pleasure on sexual intercourse narrowly defined) but that S/M detaches sexual pleasure from genital specificity, from localization in or dependence on the genitals. S/M, along with various related (though often quite distinct) practices of bondage, shaving, tit torture, cock and ball torture, piercing, humiliation, flagellation, and fistfucking, produces intense pleasure while bypassing to a greater or lesser extent, the genitals themselves. It involves the erotization of nongenital regions of the body, such as the nipples, the anus, the skin, and the entire surface of the body. And it finds other erotic uses for the genitals than that of stimulation to the point of orgasm.” D. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, cit., p. 88.

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 88 and 89.

the discovery of unexpected *loci* of pleasure located all over the body. According to Foucault, “the idea [inherent in masochism is] to make use of *every* part of the body as a sexual instrument”⁹⁰, or, in other words, as a site of potential pleasure.

However, even though I find Halperin’s book one of the most interesting on Foucault, I have some reservations about his reading. *Sexe* in French does not refer only to the genitals but also to sex and to sexuality in general. As we have seen, the word “sex” for Foucault is full of cultural meaning and leads to so many implications that it is difficult to believe that when he talks of “de-sexualization” he is matching sex only with genitals. Although it is true that S/M for Foucault, by de-privileging the couple formed by pleasure and genitalia and by resisting genitality as the *telos* of Freudian sexual development,⁹¹ can be seen to constitute a practice of liberation that checkmates the heteronormative foundation of desire that the *dispositif* of sexuality produces, we can see from some of Foucault’s interviews that the idea of desexualization cannot be reduced *only* to a “de-genitalization” of pleasure(s), but must refer to a larger project of which the “de-genitalization” of pleasure(s) is only a part. In the interview with Finas called “Les rapports de pouvoir passent à l’intérieur des corps” for example, the semantic openness that Foucault attributes to desexualization is evident:

Il y a un trait fondamental dans l’économie des plaisirs telle qu’elle fonctionne en Occident: c’est que le sexe lui sert de principe d’intelligibilité et de mesure. Depuis des millénaires, on tend à nous faire croire que la loi de tout plaisir, c’est, secrètement au moins, le sexe : et que c’est cela qui justifie la *nécessité de sa modération*, et donne la possibilité de son contrôle. Ces deux thèmes qu’au fond de tout plaisir il y a le sexe, et que la nature du sexe veut qu’il s’adonne et se limite à la procréation, ce ne sont pas des thèmes initialement chrétiens, mais stoïciens ; et le christianisme a été obligé de les reprendre lorsqu’il a voulu s’intégrer aux structures étatiques de l’Empire romain, dont le stoïcisme était la philosophie quasi universelle. Le sexe est devenu alors le code du plaisir. En Occident (*au lieu que dans les sociétés dotées d’un art érotique, c’est l’intensification du plaisir qui tend*

⁹⁰ M. Foucault, *Sexual Choice, Sexual Act*, (interview), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, p. 152.

⁹¹ See S. Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

à *déssexualiser le corps*), c'est cette codification du plaisir par les lois du sexe qui a donné lieu finalement à tout le dispositif de la sexualité. Et celui-ci nous fait croire que nous nous libérons quand nous décodons tout plaisir en termes de sexe enfin découvert. Alors qu'il faut tendre plutôt à une *déssexualisation*, à une économie générale du plaisir qui ne soit pas sexuellement normée.⁹²

Beyond the short genealogy that shows the historical conditions that lead to the constitution of modern sexuality, what we can clearly read is that Foucault is talking about desexualization without referring at all to sex as sexual organ: it is in fact difficult to imagine that the Stoics that he mentions were suggesting the necessity to *moderate* the genitals. Instead of the genitals, the Stoics were referring to the general and indistinct movements around the *chair* that will be codified in the modern era as what we call sex. The problem, explains Foucault, is that, when the concept of sex emerged from the indistinct tangle of the *chair* embracing the “truth” and becoming its most intimate expression, it codified all pleasures, establishing itself as the cause and core of them. Hence the necessity to desexualize pleasure, hence the necessity to commit oneself to an erotic art that certainly *could* imply a “de-genitalization” of pleasure(s) but that cannot be reduced to it. The erotic arts invoked by Foucault are in fact techniques or, as Foucault will call them subsequently, practices of *souci de soi*, by which people can experience the “possibility of resistance”⁹³ against the dyad sex/truth that imprisoned them in the *dispositif* of sexuality. Those techniques of desexualization, even if they are useful to decentralize pleasure(s) by detaching them from the genitals and displacing them all over the body, are aimed at a real *Epoché* of sex – namely at a suspension of its supposed value as the center and focal point of the truth of the subject. In another interview published in 1977, Foucault explains even better the meaning of his concept of desexualization:

⁹² M. Foucault, *Les rapports de pouvoir passent à l'intérieur des corps*, in *Dits Ecrits*, Tome III, text 197.

⁹³ M. Foucault, *The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom*, (interview), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., p. 292.

Ce qu'il y a de fort dans les mouvements de libération de la femme, ce n'est pas qu'ils aient revendiqué la spécificité de la sexualité, et les droits afférents à cette sexualité spéciale, mais qu'ils soient partis du discours même qui était tenu à l'intérieur des dispositifs de sexualité. C'est en effet comme revendication de leur spécificité sexuelle que les mouvements apparaissent au XIXe siècle. Pour arriver à quoi ? *À une véritable déssexualisation*, enfin... à un déplacement par rapport à la centration sexuelle du problème, pour revendiquer des formes de culture, de discours, de langage, qui ne sont plus cette espèce d'assignation et d'épinglage à leur sexe qu'elles avaient en quelque sorte politiquement bien dû accepter pour se faire entendre. Ce qu'il y a de créatif et d'intéressant dans les mouvements de femmes, c'est précisément ça.⁹⁴

Here Foucault gives us an example of a practice of desexualization that does not concern either genitals or the capacity “to detach pleasure from the genitalia”, but that concerns a group of people who were able to invent a culture and a way of life opposed to what he calls the “monarchy of sex.” From these two quotes, it is possible to understand that the practices of desexualization mentioned by Foucault concern a project which is not limited to the body even if it embraces pleasure(s) that are located in the body. Their goal is in fact to evade sex, to dethrone it. In the last 10 years of his life and in particular after the publication of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault became increasingly concerned with the possibility of creating new cultures in which sex is not the core of the truth.

Foucault, of course, is one of the great opponents of the truth as a trans-historical constant. An eternal truth without history simply does not exist for Foucault. For him, instead, there exist only contingent situations that, as a result of certain historical conditions, imposed themselves as conditions of possibility for the formation of a “truth” that, for this reason, can be nothing but historical. Indeed, he calls these contingent situations *historical a priori*⁹⁵. Obviously,

⁹⁴ M. Foucault, *Le jeu de Michel Foucault*, in *Dits et Ecrits* cit., pp. 321 and 322. All italics are mine.

⁹⁵ See M. Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir*, in particular chapter 3 part V “L'a priori historique et l'archive.”

Foucault is very much aware that each individual, as a product of these *historical a priori*, is inclined to think these contingencies as stable conditions of human nature. But in his only paper on Nietzsche he affirms that “si le généalogiste prend soin d'écouter l'histoire plutôt que d'ajouter foi à la métaphysique, qu'apprend-il? Que derrière les choses il y a «tout autre chose»: non point leur secret essentiel et sans date, mais le secret qu'elles sont sans essence, ou que leur essence fut construite pièce à pièce à partir de figures qui lui étaient étrangères.”⁹⁶ All general notions that are supposed to be without a history and thus eternal, are nothing but fantasies that live as long as the society that produced them. The concept of human nature itself is for Foucault a construction of which it is necessary to be suspicious. In the debate with Noam Chomsky, he declares in fact that all general notions like “the notions of human nature, of justice, of the realization of the essence of human beings, are all notions and concepts which have been formed within our civilization, within our type of knowledge and our form of philosophy, and that as a result form part of our class system.”⁹⁷ And he adds:

If one admits that [a certain human nature exists], doesn't one risk defining this human nature – which is at the same time ideal and real, and has been hidden and repressed until now – in terms borrowed from our society, from our civilization, from our culture? I will take an example by greatly simplifying it. The socialism of a certain period, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, admitted in effect that in capitalist societies man hadn't realized the full potential for his development and self-realization; that human nature was effectively alienated in the capitalist system. And it dreamed of an ultimately liberated human nature. What model did it use to conceive, project, and eventually realize that human nature? It was in fact the bourgeois model. It considered that an alienated society was a society which, for example, gave pride of place to the benefit of all, to a sexuality of a bourgeois type, to a family of a bourgeois type, to an aesthetic of a bourgeois type. And it is moreover very true that this has

⁹⁶ M. Foucault, «Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire», in *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite*, Paris, P.U.F., coll. «Épiméthée», 1971, pp. 145-172.

⁹⁷ M. Foucault and N. Chomsky, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate on human nature*, The New Press, New York and London, 2006, pp. 57 and 58.

happened in the Soviet Union and in the popular democracies: a kind of society has been reconstituted which has been transposed from the bourgeois society of the nineteenth century. The universalization of the model of the bourgeois has been the utopia which has animated the constitution of Soviet society. The result is that you, too, realized, I think, that it is difficult to say exactly what human nature is.⁹⁸

It is impossible to define once and for all what human nature is – and this for the simple reason that “only something which has no history can be defined,”⁹⁹ as Nietzsche points out clearly in the second dissertation of *On the Genealogy of Morality*.

By the same token, according to Foucault, “homosexuality” cannot be *defined*. Homosexuality has in fact a history and, for this reason, can be neither thought as a trans-historical essence nor as a stable *Lebensform*¹⁰⁰. However, it is possible to retrace the history of homosexuality: that is, the history of the procedures by which our society created this concept. A “homosexual essence” does not exist, but individuals exist who happen to be “homosexual” because, in a certain historical period, a definition that abruptly grouped together a certain number of otherwise quite different people was created, thereby generalizing their categorical similarity. The polemics of Foucault against the movement of gay sexual liberation arises precisely at this point. In an interview released for a Spanish journal in 1984 Foucault affirms: “I have always been somewhat suspicious of the notion of liberation, because if it is not treated with precautions and within certain limits, one runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic, and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression.”¹⁰¹

According to Foucault, the problem of sexual liberation concerning

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 43 and 44.

⁹⁹ F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, cit., dissertation II chapter 13, p 53.

¹⁰⁰ See M. Foucault, *Les anormaux* and *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate on human nature*.

¹⁰¹ M. Foucault, *The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom*, (interview), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., p. 282.

homosexuals is in fact that:

les mouvements homosexuels américains [...] ont commencé à chercher des formes nouvelles de communauté, de coexistence, de plaisir. Mais, à la différence des femmes, l'épinglage des homosexuels à la spécificité sexuelle est beaucoup plus fort, ils rabattent tout sur le sexe. Les femmes, non. [...] Les mouvements d'homosexuels restent très pris dans la revendication des droits de leur sexualité, dans la dimension du sexologique. C'est normal d'ailleurs, parce que l'homosexualité est une pratique sexuelle qui est, en tant que telle, contrée, barrée, disqualifiée. Les femmes, elles, peuvent avoir des objectifs économiques, politiques, beaucoup plus larges que les homosexuels.¹⁰²

Foucault is very aware that this analysis leads to a dichotomy. Indeed, if on the one hand he argues that “being homosexual” is an historical construction that traps the subject inside coercive categories, on the other hand he acknowledges the need to claim the right of “being homosexual.” In an interview called *Histoire et homosexualité* dated 1982 he affirms:

Ces catégories ont, en effet, servi à pathologiser l'homosexualité, mais c'était également des catégories de défense, au nom desquelles on pouvait revendiquer des droits. Le problème est encore très actuel : entre l'affirmation «Je suis homosexuel» et le refus de le dire, il y a là toute une dialectique très ambiguë. C'est une affirmation nécessaire, puisque c'est l'affirmation d'un droit, mais c'est en même temps la cage, le piège.¹⁰³

This is the reason why Foucault, instead of declaring explicitly whether homosexuality is *just* a social construction or there is also an innate component in it¹⁰⁴, prefers to suggest the necessity of thinking homosexuality not in terms of a

¹⁰² M. Foucault, *Le jeu de Michel Foucault*, in *Dits et Ecrits* cit., pp. 321 and 322.

¹⁰³ M. Foucault, *Histoire et homosexualité*, in *Dits Ecrits* tome IV texte N°311.

¹⁰⁴ “JOH: Does this focus on cultural context and people's discourse about their sexual behavior reflect a methodological decision to bypass the distinction between innate predisposition to

“true self to discover and release” but as a chance to create new forms of life¹⁰⁵ outside the sex/truth prison. “The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex, but, rather, to use one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships. [...] Homosexuality, argues Foucault, is not a form of desire but something desirable. Therefore, we have to work at *becoming* homosexuals and not be obstinate in recognizing that we are.”¹⁰⁶ For this reason, talking about the gay movement he affirms that although “sexual identity has been politically very useful, it limits us”, and therefore, “we have – and can have – a right to be free.”¹⁰⁷ Consequently, according to Foucault “we should consider the battle for gay rights as an episode that cannot be the final stage.”¹⁰⁸ What the

gay movement needs now is much more the art of life than a science or scientific knowledge (or pseudoscientific knowledge) of what sexuality is. Sexuality is a part of our behavior. It's a part of our world freedom. Sexuality is something that we ourselves create--it is our own creation, and much more than the discovery of a secret side of our desire. We have to understand that with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation.

homosexual behavior and social conditioning? Or do you have any conviction one way or the other on this issue?

MF: On this question I have absolutely nothing to say. "No comment."

JOH: Does this mean you think the question is unanswerable, or bogus, or does it simply not interest you?

MF: No, none of these. I just don't believe in talking about things that go beyond my expertise. It's not my problem, and I don't like talking about things that are not really the object of my work. On this question I have only an opinion; since it is only an opinion, it is without interest.” M. Foucault, *Sexual Choice, Sexual Act*, (interview), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., p. 142.

¹⁰⁵ “To be "gay," I think, is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual but to try to define and develop a way of life.” M. Foucault, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, (interview), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., p. 138.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁰⁷ M. Foucault, *Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity*, (interview), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., 166.

¹⁰⁸ M. Foucault, *The Social Triumph of Sexual Will*, (interview), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., 157.

Sex is not a fatality: it's a possibility for creative life.¹⁰⁹

Although it is true that Foucault's "speculation about power seem to have found their most receptive audience among cultural activists, members of political direct-action groups, participants in various social resistance movements with some connection to university, and – most of all, perhaps – lesbian and gay militants,"¹¹⁰ we should not think that Foucault was a militant *strictu sensu* as well. Indeed, even if he was for almost his entire life a *philosophe engagé*, in the last part of his life he turned to a mode of thought closer to an ethical or an aesthetics¹¹¹ than a strictly *political*¹¹² philosophy and this not just because he saw many of his political struggles¹¹³ failing, but also because he was well aware that the homosexual liberation movement was close to falling into the affirmation of a "homosexual essence"¹¹⁴ to which he was opposed. In his controversial biography of Foucault, James Miller reports an interesting episode:

If Foucault appreciated the sense of community he first discovered in San Francisco, he was considerably more ambivalent about the political tactics favored

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 163.

¹¹⁰ D. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, cit., p. 26.

¹¹¹ "We have to create ourselves as a work of art". M. Foucault, *On the Genealogy of Ethics*, (interview), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., p. 262.

¹¹² "I am going to take care of myself." Ibid., cit., p. 255.

¹¹³ "In the beginning of the seventies, I thought that it was possible to put the light, the real, the concrete, the actual problem', Foucault remarks in one public discussion, 'and then that a political movement could come and take this problem and, from the data of the problem, elaborate something else. But I think I was wrong...the political, spontaneous movement in which, with a great effort, I put my experience, my hopes – well, didn't happen.'" This comment of Foucault is recorded in a cassette tape filed in the Centre Michel Foucault under the title "Talk with Philosophers, 23 October 1980" and it is quoted in J. Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, Simon and Shuster, New York 1993, p. 233.

¹¹⁴ "The creation of a culture posed a problem of identity. Gays had to do more than assert an identity; they had to create it, and Foucault was wary of any suggestion that its creation was equivalent to the liberation of an essence." D. Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, Pantheon Books, New York 1993, pp 367 and 368.

by the most outspoken members of this community. The day after he had taken LSD in Death Valley, he was approached at a party by a young gay militant. The man expressed thanks to Foucault, whose way of thinking, he said (as Simeon Wade recalls the exchange), had 'made things like gay liberation possible.' Foucault politely refused the compliment. 'This is a nice thing to say to me,' Wade recalls him remarking, 'but really my work has had nothing to do with gay liberation.' 'What was it like for you before gay liberation?' the young man continued, undeterred by the lukewarm response. 'You might not believe this,' Foucault replied, 'but I actually liked the scene before gay liberation, when everything was more covert. It was like an underground fraternity, exciting and a bit dangerous. Friendship meant a lot, it meant a lot of trust, we protected each other, we related to each other by secret codes.' 'What do you think of gay liberation now?' wondered the young man. 'I believe the term "gay" has become obsolete,' Wade recalls Foucault responding. 'The reason for this is the transformation of our understanding of sexuality. We see the extent to which our pursuit of pleasure has been limited in large part by a vocabulary foisted upon us. People are neither this nor that, gay nor straight. There is an infinite range of what we call sexual behavior.'¹¹⁵

If Foucault is interested in pleasure(s) – and especially in the desexualization of pleasure(s) associated with S/M – it is because pleasure(s) are a way to create new cultures able to get rid of sex or, in other words, to checkmate the *scientia sexualis* that produces and traps some individuals by, for example, constructing them as homosexuals. His fondness for the bathhouses in San Francisco that he used to frequent when he was teaching in the U.S. similarly derives from his belief that those places created “communities” of people engaged in discovering new pleasures and different ways of being together. In the bathhouses, Foucault not only discovered completely unknown bodily practices, such as fist-fucking,¹¹⁶ but also met people who were actually creating new

¹¹⁵ J. Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, cit., pp. 254 and 255.

¹¹⁶ “Fist-fucking is also known as fisting or handballing. It is a sexual technique in which the hand and arm, rather than a penis or dildo, are used to penetrate a bodily orifice. Fisting usually refers to anal penetration, although the terms are also used for the insertion of a hand into a vagina.” G.

cultures beyond the disciplinary insistence of the sex/truth regime.

As Pat(rick)¹¹⁷ Califia recalls in *Gay men, Lesbians, and Sex: Doing it together*, the first time she went to the house of Steve McEachern – the creator of the famous and exclusive S/M club described by Gayle Rubin¹¹⁸ – she was embarrassed to discover that her girlfriend and she were the only two girls in the middle of more than fifteen gay men. When even her girlfriend disappeared, she found herself “sitting alone in a corner, wondering if she was going to spend the entire orgy feeling sorry for herself.” Nevertheless, in a short time “a tall, handsome man (albeit a little skinny) sat down beside her and said ‘Hi, my name’s Joe. How would you like to fist me?’” The man taught her “how to perform the very severe manicure handballing required” in order to avoid injuries, then, he brought her downstairs and, after lying down on his back, “he wrapped his arms around his thighs and held them apart” offering his ass.

It was like feeding a hungry animal, remembers Califia, I got into him easily, I can’t remember how deep. It seemed like miles. I came to at one point and realized just how vulnerable he was, this big man clutching his thighs and groaning uncontrollably because I was so far into him. The walls of his gut hugged my hand and forearm, smoother and softer and more fragile than anything I’d ever touched before. I think I cried. I know I got wet.¹¹⁹

In the pages that follow the story of her first experience as a *fister*¹²⁰ she points out that those kind of practices “allow people to step outside the usually rigid boundaries of sexual orientation.”¹²¹ Indeed, as she clarifies, the man who

Rubin, *The Catacombs, A temple of the Butthole*, in *Deviation*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2011, p. 416.

¹¹⁷ At the time he wrote these things, Patrick Califia was a woman and her name was Pat.

¹¹⁸ See G. Rubin, *The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole*, in *Deviations*.

¹¹⁹ P. Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, Cleiss Press, Pittsburg 1994, pp. 183 and 184.

¹²⁰ *Fister* is the name for the person who penetrates the other’s rectum with his or her arm. *Fistee* instead, is the person who offers his or her rectum to the other in order to be penetrated by his arm.

¹²¹ P. Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, cit., p. 184.

politely asked her to fist him did not care about her gender. He was just excited by the fact that she was a novice to train. Califia herself, who in 1983 declared herself not a bisexual person, but “a lesbian”, does not mind “have[ing] sex with faggots”¹²² as long as they share “some aspect of her sexuality (like S/M or fisting) that turns her on *despite* their biological sex”.¹²³ Califia ends her essay declaring that she “no longer believes that there is some ahistorical entity called homosexuality. Sexuality is socially constructed within the limits imposed by physiology, and it changes over time with the surrounding cultures.”¹²⁴ What S/M taught Califia lead her to the same conclusion offered by Foucault, who in an interview of 1982 – that is after he had gotten to know the bathhouses of San Francisco – affirms:

by getting away from the categorization homosexuality-heterosexuality, I think that gays [referring in particular to S/M practitioners] have taken an important, interesting step: they define their problems differently by trying to create a culture that makes sense only in relation to a sexual experience and a type of relation that is their own. By taking the pleasure of sexual relations away from the area of sexual norms and its categories, and in so doing making the pleasure the crystallizing point of a new culture¹²⁵

In addition to mitigating the rigid division of gender and sexual orientation, S/M breaks the link between power and social injustice. “My own needs dictate which role I will adopt”¹²⁶ declares Califia. It is not color of skin, gender, or the amount in one’s bank account that locates someone in the position of the master or of the slave, but the fantasy of a person who *chooses to play* this role. “The roles, dialogue, fetish costumes, and sexual activity are part of the drama or ritual, the participants are enhancing their sexual pleasure, not damaging or imprisoning

¹²² Ibid., p. 183.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 185.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 187.

¹²⁵ M. Foucault, *The Social Triumph of Sexual Will*, (interview), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., p. 160.

¹²⁶ P. Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, cit., p. 163.

one another”. In fact, concludes Califia, “the difference between real slavery or exploitation and S/M is that I am interested in something ephemeral – *pleasure* – and not economic control.”¹²⁷ In this way S/M usefully exposes the arbitrariness and cultural constructedness of social power and class/gender domination in “our political system [that] cannot digest the concept of power unconnected to privilege.”¹²⁸ Furthermore, even if S/M acts out structures of dominance, it reproduces them in innovative and unexpected ways. Instead of simply reproducing them in their culturally normalized forms, S/M plays with these very structures by breaking down the rigidity that characterizes the hierarchical order of society. S/M relationships are in fact characterized by the fluidity of the roles that sustain them more than by the roles themselves. Indeed, in talking about S/M Foucault declares:

Of course, there are roles, but everybody knows very well that those roles can be reversed. Sometimes the scene begins with the master and slave, and at the end the slave has become the master. Or, even when the roles are stabilized, you know very well that it is always a game. Either the rules are transgressed, or there is an agreement, either explicit or tacit, that makes them aware of certain boundaries. This strategic game as a source of bodily pleasure is very interesting. But I wouldn't say that it is a reproduction, inside the erotic relationship, of the structures of power. It is an acting-out of power structures by a strategic game that is able to give sexual pleasure or bodily pleasure.¹²⁹

Thanks to the “mixture of rules and openness [that] has the effect [of] intensifying sexual relations by introducing a perpetual novelty, a perpetual tension and a perpetual uncertainty,”¹³⁰ S/M provides an example of a

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 163.

¹²⁸ Ibid., cit., p. 163.

¹²⁹ M. Foucault, *Sex, Power, and the Politics of identity*, in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., p. 169.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 169.

¹³⁰ M. Foucault, *Sexual Choice, Sexual Act*, in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., p. 152.

“laboratory-experience”¹³¹ in which people are free to increase the possibilities of their bodies in unpredictable and creative ways that resist the *dispositif* of sexuality. “Insofar as that encounter produces changes in the relation among subjectivity, sexuality, pleasure, and the body, S/M qualifies as self-transformative practice”¹³² that changes completely the relation between the subject and the truth. Not just because from this perspective there is no longer a truth to discover inside the subject but also because the subject itself is lost within these practices. Indeed, according to Foucault, the main and most desirable consequence of S/M’s fluidity of positions and roles and de-genitalizing power is the dissolution of personal identity:

The intensities of pleasure are indeed linked to the fact that you desubjugate yourself, that you cease being a subject, an identity. It is like an affirmation of nonidentity. Not only because you leave your ID card in the changing room but because the multiplicity of possible things, of possible encounters, of possible pilings-up [amoncellements], of possible connections, means that, in effect, you cannot not fail to be identical to yourself. You could even say that, at the limit, it desexualizes.¹³³

This passage is crucial for two reasons that intertwine with one another. On the one hand, it lays bare the connection between S/M’s “de-sexualization” of pleasure(s) and the practice of “de-subjectification” that – as we will see in a minute – Foucault insists characterizes all his philosophical work, and on the other hand it exposes the weak point of the ethics of pleasure(s) that Foucault attempts to achieve.

In an interview with Duccio Trombadori originally published in Italian with the title *Colloqui con Foucault*,¹³⁴ the philosopher recalls that he was able to

¹³¹ “You find emerging in places like San Francisco and New York what might be called laboratories of sexual experimentation”. Ibid., p. 152.

¹³² D. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, cit., p. 88 and 89.

¹³³ M. Foucault, *The Gay Science*, cit., p. 400.

¹³⁴ M. Foucault, *Colloqui con Foucault: Pensieri, opere, omissioni dell'ultimo maître-à-penser*, a cura di D. Trombadori, Castelvechi 2005. There are two translations of these interviews. A partial

dispose of the philosophies that were dominating the scene of his youth – “the Hegelian system, on the one hand, and of the philosophy of the subject, on the other”¹³⁵ – because he discovered a “protean” and “nomadic” way of doing philosophy unhooked from the traditional cogito¹³⁶ – what I identified in the introduction as the tradition of the broken cogito. For Foucault, those kinds of metaphysics were absolutely unsuitable. If in fact the Hegelian system wanted to reduce the multiple and divergent truths of history into the rationality of a closed unity, then the philosophy of the subject – either in the form of phenomenology or existentialism – “firmly maintained the supremacy of the subject and its fundamental value, without any radical breaks,”¹³⁷ reducing the contradictions of human experiences to the uniformity of the Cartesian subject. Not only did the Hegelian system and its faith in the all-encompassing power of reason appear naïve to Foucault, but so did the philosophy of the subject. Although it was centered in the theorization of everyday life experience, it was still unable to hear what Foucault called *la pensée du dehors*¹³⁸ – which is to say, the force of negativity.

The phenomenologist's experience is basically a way of organizing the conscious perception (*regard réflexif*) of any aspect of daily, lived experience in its transitory form, in order to grasp its meaning. Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot, on the contrary, try through experience to reach that point of life which lies as close as possible to the impossibility of living, which lies at the limit or extreme. They

translation with the title *Interview with Michel Foucault* is in the collection called *M. Foucault, Power*, edited by G. Faubion, The New York Press, New York 2000. The other one, which is integral, is contained in *M. Foucault, Remarks on Marx, Conversation with Duccio Trombadori*, Semiotext(e) Columbia University, New York 1991. In the following notes, I will use the one that, from time to time, seems closer to the original. Anyway, I will indicate each time which one I am referring to.

¹³⁵ M. Foucault, *Remarks on Marx, Conversation with Duccio Trombadori*, cit., p. 44.

¹³⁶ “Nietzsche, Blanchot, and Bataille: they are the writers who permitted me to free myself from the others who had formed me during my university education at the beginning of the 1950s.” *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹³⁸ See M. Foucault, *La pensée du dehors*.

attempt to gather the maximum amount of intensity and impossibility at the same time. The work of the phenomenologist, however, essentially consists of unfolding the entire field of possibilities connected to daily experience. Moreover, phenomenology tries to grasp the significance of daily experience in order to reaffirm the fundamental character of the subject, of the self, of its transcendental functions. On the contrary, experience according to Nietzsche, Blanchot, and Bataille has rather the task of "tearing" the subject from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such, or that it is completely "other" than itself so that it may arrive at its annihilation, its dissociation.¹³⁹

As evidenced in this quotation, what interests Foucault is not the re-appropriation of an experience through its putative meaning but on the contrary, encountering the limits of experience, namely that point of life in which experience itself exceeds reason and therefore cannot be understood. The "extreme" or "the limit-experience" to which Foucault is interested escapes the grip of consciousness and imposes itself as the totally "other" to a transcendental subject that is structurally unable to grasp it. Furthermore, escaping rationality, this "other" jeopardizes the stability of a subject that is sustained by rationality.

My encounter with Bataille, Blanchot and, through them, my reading of Nietzsche. What did they represent for me? First of all, an invitation to call into question the category of the "subject," its primacy and its originating function. And then, the conviction that an operation of that kind would not have made any sense if it had been confined to speculation: to call the subject into question had to mean to live it in an experience that might be its real destruction or dissociation, its explosion or upheaval into something radically "other."¹⁴⁰

Thanks to these philosophers who "tried to reach a certain point in life that is as close as possible to the 'unlivable,' to that which can't be lived through,"¹⁴¹ Foucault discovered and acquired the method for a philosophy of de-

¹³⁹ M. Foucault, *Remarks on Marx, Conversation with Duccio Trombadori*, cit., pp. 30/32.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁴¹ M. Foucault, *Interview with Michel Foucault, (Interview)*, in *Power*, cit., p. 241.

subjectification, that is, a philosophy in which “the idea of limit-experience that wrenches the subject from itself”¹⁴² is the cornerstone. “It is this de-subjectifying undertaking,” declares Foucault, “the idea of a “limit-experience” that tears the subject from itself, which is the fundamental lesson that I’ve learned from these authors. And no matter how boring and erudite my resulting books have been, *this lesson has always allowed me to conceive them as direct experiences to “tear” me from myself*, to prevent me from always being the same.”¹⁴³ If in the same interview Foucault can declare without hesitation that he never considered himself a philosopher,¹⁴⁴ it is because *anti*-philosophers such as Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot have inspired all his work. “These thinkers, Foucault observes, were not “philosophers” in the strict, institutional sense of the term” since they “didn’t have the problem of constructing systems, but of having direct, personal experiences”¹⁴⁵ through their philosophy. Foucault declares: “there is no book that I’ve written without there having been, at least in part, a direct personal experience. I had a personal, complex, direct relation with madness, psychiatric hospitals, and illness. And even with death.”¹⁴⁶

Even if we do not follow the controversial interpretation of Foucault’s life and philosophy that James Miller offers in his biography,¹⁴⁷ an interpretation according to which Foucault always tried to reach death or, at least “limit experiences” as close as possible to death (through S/M and drugs from Miller’s point of view¹⁴⁸), we have to acknowledge that, according to this interview from 1978, a philosophy of “de-subjectification” – to which Foucault refers as a

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 241.

¹⁴³ M. Foucault, *Remarks on Marx, Conversation with Duccio Trombadori*, cit., pp. 31 and 32.

¹⁴⁴ “I don’t consider myself a philosopher.” Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁴⁷ See J. Miller, *The passion of Michel Foucault*.

¹⁴⁸ “the crux of what is most original and challenging about Foucault’s way of thinking, as I see it, is his unrelenting, deeply ambiguous and profoundly problematic preoccupation with death, which he explored not only in the exoteric form of his writing, but also, and I believe critically, in the esoteric form of sado-masochistic eroticism.” J. Miller, *The passion of Michel Foucault*. cit. p. 9.

philosophy that “requires the maximum of intensity and the maximum of impossibility at the same time,” or as a philosophy that leads to “limit-experience that tears the subject from itself”¹⁴⁹ – is not just a phase of his research or a peregrine interest, but is instead the theoretical framework that guided Foucault in *each* of his intellectual elaborations.

This perspective becomes even more evident near the end of his life when Foucault abandons the thematization of power’s constraints imposed on the subject and starts to elaborate an ethics in which the subject can be rid of himself thorough a care of pleasure(s). At the time, Foucault was no longer interested in showing how the subject is imprisoned inside *historical a priori* that reduce him or her to a puppet of society, but in understanding how the subject can be changed by self-transformative practices. This does not mean either that Foucault was disavowing his work on power or that he was no longer interested in understanding the possibilities of resisting social constraints, but rather that he was changing his perspective and putting at the center of his reflection *les modes de subjectivation* instead of the structures of dominance that produce the subject. As Deleuze underlines, “c’est n’est pas du tout qu’il répudie l’œuvre précédente. Au contraire, c’est toute son œuvre précédente qui le pousse vers ce nouvel affrontement.”¹⁵⁰ Indeed, given that the subject is always caught in dynamics of power, Foucault was trying to understand how the subject can escape from himself, how can he resist the structures that create him as he is.

Obviously this change of perspective was difficult for Foucault. Deleuze talks about a real crisis: “Après *La volonté de savoir* il a traversé une crise, de tout ordre, politique, vitale, pensée. Comme chez tous les grands penseurs, sa pensée a toujours procédé par crise et secousses comme condition de création, comme condition d’une cohérence ultime. J’ai eu l’impression qu’il voulait être seul, aller là où on ne pourrait pas le suivre, sauf quelque intime. J’avais beaucoup plus besoin de lui que lui de moi.”¹⁵¹ It took eight years of silence in which Foucault

¹⁴⁹ M. Foucault, *Remarks on Marx, Conversation with Duccio Trombadori*, cit., p. 30

¹⁵⁰ G. Deleuze, *Pourparlers*, 1972-1990, Les éditions de minuit, Paris 1990, p. 149.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

published nothing except interviews¹⁵² to come out from his crisis with the book that marked the turning point¹⁵³ in the way he conceived his work: *The Use of Pleasure, Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality*. In the preface, he explains the reasons why he changed his perspective and how important the crisis was for his philosophical thought:

Quant au motif qui m'a poussé [changing my perspective], il était fort simple. Aux yeux de certains, j'espère qu'il pourrait par lui-même suffire. C'est la curiosité, la seule espèce de curiosité, en tout cas, qui vaille la peine d'être pratiquée avec un peu d'obstination non pas celle qui cherche à s'assimiler ce qu'il convient de connaître, mais *celle qui permet de se déprendre de soi-même*. Que vaudrait l'acharnement du savoir s'il ne devait assurer que l'acquisition des connaissances, et non pas, d'une certaine façon et autant que faire se peut, l'égarement de celui qui connaît ? Il y a des moments dans la vie où la question de savoir si on-peut penser autrement qu'on ne pense et percevoir autrement qu'on ne voit est indispensable pour continuer à regarder ou à réfléchir. On me dira peut-être que ces jeux avec soi-même n'ont qu'à rester en coulisses et qu'ils font, au mieux, partie de ces travaux de préparation qui s'effacent d'eux-mêmes lorsqu'ils ont pris leurs effets. Mais qu'est-ce donc que la philosophie aujourd'hui je veux dire l'activité philosophique si elle n'est pas le travail critique de la pensée sur elle-même ? Et si elle ne consiste pas, au lieu de légitimer ce qu'on sait déjà, à entreprendre de savoir comment et jusqu'où il serait possible de penser autrement ? Il y a toujours quelque chose de dérisoire dans le discours philosophique lorsqu'il veut, de l'extérieur, faire la loi aux autres, leur dire où est leur vérité, et comment la trouver, ou lorsqu'il se fait fort d'instruire leur procès en positivité naïve mais c'est son droit d'explorer ce qui, dans sa propre pensée, peut être changé par l'exercice qu'il fait d'un savoir qui lui est étranger. L'«essai» – qu'il faut entendre comme *épreuve modificatrice de soi-même* dans le jeu de la vérité et non comme appropriation simplificatrice

¹⁵² “C’est pourquoi les entretiens de Foucault font pleinement partie de son œuvre.” Ibid., p. 144.

¹⁵³ “Sans doute *La volonté de savoir* dégageait des points de résistance au pouvoir; mais justement, c’est leur statut, leur origine, leur genèse qui restait vagues. Foucault avait peut-être le sentiment qu’il lui fallait à tout prix franchir cette ligne, passe l’autre côté. Aller encore au-delà de savoir-pouvoir. Même s’il fallait remettre en question tout le programme de l’*Histoire de la sexualité*.” Ibid., pp. 148 and 149.

d'autrui à des fins de communication – est le corps vivant de la philosophie, si du moins celle-ci est encore maintenant ce qu'elle était autrefois, c'est-à-dire une «ascèse» [askēsis], un exercice de soi, dans la pensée.¹⁵⁴

From this standpoint we understand that the notion of *askēsis* that Foucault brings out from the texts belonging to the Greek¹⁵⁵ and Latin¹⁵⁶ wisdom, although it emerges explicitly only in the last part of his life, should be considered the (*anti*-)philosophical keystone that bears the theoretical elaboration of all his books.¹⁵⁷ It is this very notion, thought as *a technique de transformation de soi même*, that not only pushes Foucault to change completely the history of sexuality but also becomes the final goal of the desexualization of pleasure(s). The reason why Foucault decides to dig into texts that belong to antiquity can be read in an interview with Rabinow and Dreyfus:

What I wanted to do in Volume Two of *The History of Sexuality* was to show that you have nearly the same restrictive, the same prohibitive code in the fourth century B.C. and in the moralists and doctors at the beginning of the empire. But I think that the way they integrate those prohibitions in relation to oneself is

¹⁵⁴ M. Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 2 : L'usage des plaisirs*, Gallimard, Paris 1984, pp. 14 and 15.

¹⁵⁵ See M. Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 2 : L'usage des plaisirs*.

¹⁵⁶ See M. Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 3 : Le souci de soi*.

¹⁵⁷ With the exception of *The Order of Things* that Foucault considered a purely academic book: "I have already spoken to you about the "limit-experiences"; this is really the theme that fascinates me. Madness, death, sexuality, crime: these are the things that attract my attention most. Instead, I have always considered *The Order of Things* a kind of formal exercise. [...] *The Order of Things* is not my "true" book: it has its "marginality" compared to the depth of participation and interest which is present in and which subtended the others. Nevertheless, by some peculiar paradox, *The Order of Things* has been the book that has had the greatest success with the public. Probably because of the unheard of concentration of criticism that it received at the time of its publication, everyone wanted to buy it. Tens of thousands of copies were sold. It's a paradox that is due to the unhealthy character of the consumption of a theoretical text in relation to the quantity of criticism that appears in newspapers and magazine." M. Foucault, *Remarks on Marx, Conversation with Duccio Trombadori*, cit., pp. 99/101.

completely different. I don't think one can find any normalization in, for instance, the Stoic ethics. The reason is, I think, that the principal aim, the principal target of this kind of ethics, was an aesthetic one.¹⁵⁸

The attempt of those texts “was not to normalize the population,” indeed they were not meant for common people. On the contrary they were reserved for a “small elite”¹⁵⁹ of people who could afford to have an aesthetic relation with life that could try to *transform* their own lives in an exemplary existence that should be remembered. As I said earlier, during the last part of his life Foucault is more interested in developing an “aesthetic of existence” or, to put it in other words “an art of living” that, borrowing the name from antiquity, he calls *askēsis*. From this perspective, we should remember that the word “aesthetics” comes from the Greek verb *αἰσθάνομαι*, which means to perceive in physical terms. The ethics of Foucault is in fact devoted to an *increasing* of the capacity to feel pleasure(s) in order to transform the self rather than a renunciation of these same pleasures. This is the reason why the notion of *askēsis* theorized by Foucault should not be confused with the notion of ascetism.¹⁶⁰ The ethics of Foucault is not in fact an ethics of sacrifice and deprivation of worldly pleasures aimed to embrace either a metaphysical or a religious dimension. There is no transcendence at all in Foucault’s account. On the contrary, what Foucault presents is the “pure immanence”¹⁶¹ of a life that, following Nietzsche’s step, wants to become art. For

¹⁵⁸ M. Foucault, *On the Genealogy of Ethics*, (interview), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., p. 254.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

¹⁶⁰ “For Foucault the equation of philosophical *askēsis* with renunciation of feeling, solidarity, and care for one's self and for others – as the price of knowledge – was one of our biggest wrong turnings.” *Introduction to Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., p XXV.

¹⁶¹ Absolute immanence is in itself: it is not in something, *to* something; it does not depend on an object or belong to a subject. [...] Immanence is not related to Some Thing as a unity superior to all things or to a Subject as an act that brings about a synthesis of things: it is only when immanence is no longer immanence to anything other than itself that we can speak of a plane of immanence. No more than the transcendental field is defined by consciousness can the plane of immanence be defined by a subject or an object that is able to contain it. We will say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE.” G. Deleuze, *Pure immanence, Essays on a Life*, Urzone, New York

this reason, I agree with Deleuze who explains that “quand Foucault en arrive au thème ultime de la «subjectivation», celle-ci consiste essentiellement dans l’invention de nouvelles possibilités de vie. Comme dit Nietzsche, dans la construction de véritables styles de vie : cette fois, un vitalisme sur fond d’esthétique.”¹⁶²

Obviously, Foucault’s return to the Greeks should not be read as a prescriptive rule. Foucault is far from providing us any prescriptions or rules whatsoever. His aim is to show examples of how it is possible to create aesthetic relations with life that, by increasing the subject’s capacity to feel pleasure, can transform the subject itself. Deleuze suggests that for Foucault:

il s’agit d’inventer des modes d’existence, suivant des règles facultatives, capables de résister au pouvoir comme de se dérober au savoir, même si le savoir tente les pénétrer et le pouvoir de se les approprier, mais les modes d’existence ou possibilités de vie ne cessent de se recréer, de nouveau surgissent, et s’il est vrai que cette dimension fut inventé par le Grecs, nous ne faisons pas un retour au Grecs quand nous cherchons quels sont ceux qui dessinent aujourd’hui, quel est notre vouloir-artiste irréductible au savoir et au pouvoir. Pas plus qu’il n’y a de retour aux Grecs, il n’y a de retour au sujet chez Foucault. Croire que Foucault redécouvre, retrouve la subjectivité qu’il y avait d’abord niée, c’est un malentendu assez profond [...] Je crois même que la subjectivation a peu de choses à voir avec un sujet. Il s’agit plutôt d’un champ électrique ou magnétique, une individuation opérant par intensité (basses autant que hautes), des champs individués et non pas des personnes ou des identités. *C’est ce que Foucault, dans d’autres occasions, appelle la passion.*¹⁶³

The “other occasion” to which Deleuze refers is a dialogue with Werner

2001, pp. 26 and 27.

¹⁶² G. Deleuze, *Pourparlers*, cit., p. 125.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 127. *Italic mine.*

Schroeter in which Foucault, after declaring himself a man of passion,¹⁶⁴ finally reveals that “l’art de vivre c’est de tuer la psychologie.”¹⁶⁵ This dialogue is fundamental because it lays bare the direction of Foucault’s ethics. If the goal of Foucault’s ethics is to establish an aesthetic relation with life that can turn it into a work of art, and if this work of art consists precisely in killing off psychology, then we understand clearly that the desexualization of pleasure(s) – of which S/M is an example – are nothing but practices that lead the subject to get rid of himself. Practices that, in other words, lead the subject into a state of passion in which he can do nothing but cease being himself. These “technologies of the self”, in a Foucauldian expression, are aimed at nothing but creating a desubjectivized art of living.

In this dialogue Foucault also explains the passion that, following Deleuze’s interpretation, characterizes the desubjectivized art of living that Foucault sustains:

Qu’est-ce que la passion? C’est un état, c’est quelque chose qui vous tombe dessus, qui s’empare de vous, qui vous tient par les deux épaules, qui ne connaît pas de pause, qui n’a pas d’origine. En fait, on ne sait pas d’où ça vient. La passion est venue comme ça. C’est un état toujours mobile, mais qui ne va pas vers un point donné. Il y a des moments forts et des moments faibles, des moments où c’est porté à l’incandescence. Ça flotte. Ça balance. C’est une sorte d’instant instable qui se poursuit pour des raisons obscures, peut-être par inertie. Ça cherche, à la limite, à se maintenir et à disparaître. La passion se donne toutes les conditions pour continuer et, en même temps, elle se détruit d’elle-même. Dans la passion, on n’est pas aveugle. Simplement, dans ces situations de passion, on n’est pas soi-même. Ça n’a plus de sens d’être soi-même. On voit les choses autrement.¹⁶⁶

If I had not stated identified already the person who wrote these lines one

¹⁶⁴ When Werner Schroeter asks directly: “Avez-vous une tendance pour la passion ou l’amour?” Foucault answers concisely: “La passion.” M. Foucault, *Conversation avec Werner Schroeter*, in *Dits et Ecrits*, vol 4. Texte 308, p. 253.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 256.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 251.

might have thought they had been written by Lacan, or at least by someone who wanted to describe what Lacan means by *Jouissance*. We can, of course, resist Deleuze's interpretation of Foucault – refusing in this way to associate Foucault's *askēsis* with the passion described in this dialogue – but how then can we explain that Foucault not only declares himself a man of passion,¹⁶⁷ but also describes the state of passion with the same exact words with which he describes the *askēsis* he is trying to achieve? How can we ignore that it is Foucault himself who declares that the only form of knowledge that is worthwhile is “*celle qui permet de se déprendre de soi-même*” since the “*épreuve modificatrice de soi-même est le corps vivant de la philosophie, si du moins celle-ci est encore maintenant ce qu'elle était autrefois, c'est-à-dire une «ascèse» [askēsis]?*” And what does it mean to “kill off psychology” if not to live in a state of passion in which the subject “n'est pas soi-même” given that “ça n'a plus de sens d'être soi-même”? After all, it is Foucault himself who declared that the question that he tried throughout his life was, “can it be said that the subject is the only form of existence possible? Can't there be experiences in which the subject, in its constitutive relations, in its self-identity, isn't given any more? And thus wouldn't experiences be given in which the subject could dissociate itself, break its relationship with itself, lose its identity? Wasn't this perhaps the experience of Nietzsche, with the metaphor of the Eternal Return?”¹⁶⁸

As we have seen, according to Foucault, “there is no ‘abnormal’ pleasure, there is no ‘pathology’ of pleasure”¹⁶⁹ and it is for this reason that he tries to derive from the ethics of the ancients (Greeks and Romans) an *art de vivre* devoted to the increase of pleasure. Nevertheless he has to admit that:

what seems to have formed the object of moral reflection for the Greeks in matters of sexual conduct was not exactly the act itself (considered in its different modalities), or desire (viewed from the standpoint of its origin or its aim), or even pleasure (evaluated according to the different objects or practices that can cause it);

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 253.

¹⁶⁸ M. Foucault, *Remarks on Marx, Conversation with Duccio Trombadori*, cit., p. 49.

¹⁶⁹ M. Foucault, *The Gay Science*, cit., p. 388.

it was more the dynamics that joined all three in a circular fashion (the desire that leads to the act, the act that is linked to pleasure, and the pleasure that occasions desire). The ethical question that was raised was not: which desires? which acts? which pleasures? but rather: with what *force* is one transported "by the pleasures and desires"? The ontology to which this ethics of sexual behavior referred was not, at least not in its general form, an ontology of deficiency and desire; it was not that of a nature setting the standard for acts; it was an ontology of a *force* that linked together acts, pleasures, and desires.¹⁷⁰

The Greeks were aware of the *forces* that sustain pleasure as much as desire (in fact, Greek tragedians acutely demonstrated the overwhelming power of negativity)., They knew, moreover, that the destruction of the subject comes both via pleasure *and* desire. Even if it true, as Foucault argues, that the Greeks were not concerned about kinds of pleasure¹⁷¹, it is also true that they were insistent on the necessity of moderating their "force." "The sexual act did not occasion anxiety because it was associated with evil but because it disturbed and threatened the individual's relationship with himself and his integrity as an ethical subject in the making; if it was not properly measured and distributed, it carried the threat of a breaking forth of involuntary forces, a lessening of energy, and death without honorable descendants".¹⁷² This is the reason why, as Foucault knew, the Greeks and the Romans wrote numerous texts that sought to understand and control what psychoanalysis has subsequently defined as the drive. Indeed, as Foucault affirms, what is essential for Greek and Roman morality is to develop "a certain style of

¹⁷⁰ M. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure, Volume II of The History of Sexuality*, Vintage Book, New York 1990, p. 43.

¹⁷¹ "In Antiquity people were very attentive to the elements of conduct and they wanted everybody to pay attention to them. But the modes of attention were not the same as those that came to be known later. Thus the sexual act itself, its morphology, the way in which one seeks and obtains one's pleasure, the "object" of desire, do not seem to have been a very important theoretical problem in Antiquity. On the other hand, what was an object of preoccupation was the intensity of sexual activity, its rhythm, the moment chosen." M. Foucault, *The Concern for Truth*, (interview) in M. Foucault, *Politics Philosophy Culture: interview and Other Writings 1977-1984*, cit., p. 260.

¹⁷² M. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure, Volume II of The History of Sexuality*, cit., pp 136 and 137.

morality that is *self-control*. Sexual activity is represented, perceived as violence, and therefore problematized from the point of view of the difficulty there is in controlling it. Hubris is fundamental. In this ethics, one must constitute for oneself rules of conduct by which one will be able to ensure that self-control.”¹⁷³

From this perspective it is important to remind ourselves that ὕβρις is the most execrable sin for the Greeks. The *hybristes* is in fact the person who, driven by his own *daimon*, goes beyond the limits of his own human condition so far as to defy the gods. But what does it exactly mean to defy the gods for the Greek culture? It means to step outside the category to which one belongs in accord with nature (κατὰ φύσιν). When the forces that psychoanalysis labels as drive erupt from the unconscious, they overwhelm the subject, leading him to behave in a manner inconsistent with his own status. Extricating the person from himself, the forces end up pushing him outside the category to which he belongs. This is why they are so terrifying. “Some even advised to indulge only ‘if one wants to do harm to oneself.’ A very ancient fear, therefore”¹⁷⁴ concludes Foucault.

For this reason, the most important skill for the Greeks is to manage one’s own forces or drives, to develop the ability to resist them. ¹⁷⁵ Failing this

¹⁷³ M. Foucault, *The Concern for Truth*, (interview) in M. Foucault, *Politics Philosophy Culture: interview and Other Writings 1977-1984*, cit., p. 261.

¹⁷⁴ M. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure, Volume II of The History of Sexuality*, cit., p. 17.

¹⁷⁵ “These are almost the same words that Antiphon the Sophist employed on his own account: “He is not wise [*sōphrōn*] who has not tried the ugly and the bad; for then there is nothing he has conquered [*kratein*] and nothing that would enable him to assert that he is virtuous [*kosmios*].” “One could behave ethically only by adopting a combative attitude toward the pleasures. As we have seen, the aphrodisiac were made not only possible but desirable by an interplay of forces whose origin and finality were natural, but whose potential, by the fact that they had their own energy, was for revolt and excess. These forces could not be used in the moderate way that was fitting unless one was capable of opposing, resisting, and subduing them. Of course, if it was necessary to confront them, this was because they were inferior appetites that humans happen to share – like hunger and thirst – with the animals; but this natural inferiority would not of itself be a reason for having to combat them, if there was not the danger that, winning out over all else, they would extend their rule over the whole individual, eventually reducing him to slavery. In other words, it was not their intrinsic nature, their disqualification on principle that necessitated this “polemical” attitude toward oneself, but their possible ascendancy and dominion.” *Ibid.*, p. 66.

imperative means being brought to one's own downfall. Therefore, what is important is not to renounce pleasure or turn away from all sexual activity but rather to manage its inherent and frightening "force":

If it was necessary, as Plato said, to bridle it [sexual activity] with the three strongest restraints: fear, law, and true reason; if it was necessary, as Aristotle thought, for desire to obey reason the way a child obeyed his tutor; if Aristippus himself advised that, while it was all right to "use" pleasures, one had to be careful not to be carried away by them" – the reason was not that sexual activity was a vice, nor that it might deviate from a canonical model; it was because sexual activity was associated with a force, an *energeia*, that was itself liable to be excessive. In the Christian doctrine of the flesh, the excessive force of pleasure had its principle in the Fall and in the weakness that had marked human nature ever since. For classical Greek thought, this force was potentially excessive by nature, and the moral question was how to confront this force, how to control it and regulate its economy in a suitable way.¹⁷⁶

The *energeia* that drives sexual activity – a force produced, according to the Greeks, by pleasure *and* desire – is intrinsic to that activity and cannot be avoided. What the Greeks believed was possible was to learn how to manage this *energeia* in order to remain master of themselves. They believed that "the battle to be fought, the victory to be won, the defeat that one risked suffering, these were processes and events that took place between oneself and oneself. The adversaries the individual had to combat were not just within him or close by; they were part of him."¹⁷⁷ This is the reason why in an interview with Rabinow and Dreyfus, Foucault admits that the question at stake in the moderation of pleasures that sustained the ethics of the Greeks was always: "Are you a slave of your own desires or their master?"¹⁷⁸

Thus Foucault's ethics, although aspiring to the creation of an *art de vivre*

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁷⁸ M. Foucault, *On the Genealogy of Ethics*, (interview), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., p. 260.

that could lead to a de-subjectivated *askēsis* of pleasure(s), arises from the ethics of the Greeks, an ethics concerned with a strong subjectivity able to moderate the forces driving sexual activity. It is true that, as we have seen, Foucault's return to the Greeks is not a return *stictu sensu*. About this Deleuze rightly observes that "Foucault n'emploie pas le mot sujet comme personne ni comme forme d'identité, mais les mots «subjectivation» comme processus, et «Soi» comme rapport (rapport à soi)." But then he acutely adds "Et de quoi s'agit-il? *Il s'agit d'un rapport de la force avec soi,*"¹⁷⁹ unmasking the problem of Foucault's anti-psychoanalytic perspective. What is this force against which the subject has to fight? What kind of force is it that, operating inside the subject, resists its will and even imposes itself, threatening the subject's relation to his pleasures *and* his desires? If Foucault's ethics oscillates constantly between an *askēsis* of pleasure(s) that leads to a de-subjectivated *art de vivre* and a care of those same pleasure(s) in order to remain master of himself it is because Foucault, despite himself, ultimately shows that what really de-subjectivates the subject is not a willing pursuit of pleasure(s) but an unwilling fall into the abyss of the drives.

Therefore, even if we ignore either Bersani's critique, which reads S/M as the eroticization of power instead of a parodic performance that relaxes the fixation of its social structure;¹⁸⁰ or Gratton's, which shows the "miraculously *unsullied*"¹⁸¹ quality of the notion of pleasure as theorized by Foucault; or Deleuze's, which shows that pleasure is not inherently extraneous to social constraints,¹⁸² we still reach the same conclusion. Even, that is, if we naively embrace the *askēsis* of pleasure(s) theorized by Foucault, and sustained by theorists of S/M like Califia¹⁸³, we paradoxically arrive at the same point maintained by psychoanalysis – namely the inconsistency of the Cartesian subject

¹⁷⁹ G. Deleuze, *Pourparlers*, cit., p. 127.

¹⁸⁰ See L. Bersani, *Homos*.

¹⁸¹ See J. Gratton, *Pleasure in Foucault*, *Journal of Romance Studies*, Vol. 1, Number 2, 2001, p. 32.

¹⁸² See Deleuze, *Désir et plaisir par Gilles Deleuze, Lettre de Deleuze à Michel Foucault*.

¹⁸³ "A good scene does not end with orgasm – it ends with catharsis." P. Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, cit., p. 163.

in relation to his own drives.¹⁸⁴ What is this passion that Foucault describes if not the *drive*, or to be more explicit, the *death drive*? Despite Foucault's resistance to psychoanalysis, what in fact emerges from the Foucauldian attempt to escape from psychology is nothing but a subject who encounters the de-subjectivization affected by the drives that undermine its putative sovereignty. What are the limit-experiences to which he refers in the interview with Trombadori if not the moment in which we are overwhelmed by forces that tug at and expropriate our sovereignty over the world and ourselves? Are not these moments precisely *those* that anti-philosophers such as Nietzsche, Bataille and Blanchot, – and Foucault consequently – tried to acknowledge? If the purpose of Foucault's ethics is to lose the self in an “*askēsis* of pleasure,” what is the precise difference between this *askēsis* and what Bersani (by way of Lacan and Laplanche) called “shattering *jouissance*?”¹⁸⁵ If the goal of this *askēsis* is to “extricate yourself from yourself”¹⁸⁶ (“c'est dépendre de soi-même”¹⁸⁷), then the difference between pleasure and desire – a difference on which Foucault based his entire argument – becomes nothing more than a terminological dispute unresponsive to the fact that the problem lies not in the difference between pleasure and desire, but rather between the system pleasure/desire and what is beyond it – namely the drives.

Thus, even if we understand the reasons that led Foucault to look for a discourse other than psychoanalysis with which to articulate an account of sexuality, we cannot ignore Foucault's own unwitting return to the “forces” that psychoanalysis recognizes as animating sexuality. Thanks to psychoanalysis we understand that pleasure cannot be the reparative loophole by which we escape our desires. Indeed, pleasure is nothing but the other face of desire, and, like desire, it is a site in which the drives jeopardize the subject and his fantasy of sovereignty. For this reason, even if Foucault correctly identified psychoanalysis

¹⁸⁴ Foucault had to admit that “Lacan brought up the fact that the theory of the unconscious is not compatible with a theory of the subject (in the Cartesian but also the phenomenological sense of the term).” M. Foucault, *Interview with Michel Foucault*, (interview), in *Power*, cit., p. 251.

¹⁸⁵ See L. Bersani, *Homos* and L. Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art*.

¹⁸⁶ M. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure, Volume II of The History of Sexuality*, cit., p. 8.

¹⁸⁷ M. Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 2 : L'usage des plaisirs*, cit., p. 14.

as part of the *dispositif* of sexuality, he failed to create a theory of pleasure(s) that escapes the psychoanalytic paradigm; instead, he renames the subject's *willful pursuit* of defeat by its drives as a creative act of resistance to the sexual *dispositif* – a *dispositif* in which, psychoanalysis maintains, such defeat is inevitable anyway.

CHAPTER 3

DESIRE

*“The earth keeps some vibration going
There in your heart, and that is you”*

Edgar Lee Masters

3.1

DELEUZE AND GUATTARI’S WAY OF DOING PHILOSOPHY

Before analyzing Deleuze and Guattari’s account of sexuality, it is important to note that the complexity of their philosophy does not consist only in the concepts that they propose, but also in the way those concepts are expressed. Indeed, the problem is not just that they keep creating new concepts – either in the

form of neologisms or assemblages of common words¹⁸⁸ – but that, instead of explaining them, they put those concepts in relation to other concepts that are new as well, and that in their turn, have never been defined.¹⁸⁹ This gives rise to a dystopic map of concepts without a real center¹⁹⁰ and real development, a sort of conglomeration of synchronic concepts that, although linked to each other, make it impossible to show their diachronic development. In this way, they offer a “theory” which is actually an *anti-theory*. Indeed, instead of providing the solid foundation for an argument that develops through deductive reasoning, they offer partial and rhapsodic illuminations that emerge in unpredictable ways.¹⁹¹

In an interview on *Liberation*, Deleuze underlines that this ambiguous apparatus of interconnected concepts that both intertwine and move away from each other is “ce que Guattari et moi appelons rhizome, précisément un cas de système ouvert.”¹⁹² Indeed, contrary to the conventional systems of traditional philosophy, they do not want to avoid contradictions or enclose their system in a rational unity; on the contrary, they want to keep their system fluid, open to change and modification. This is why their system tries to create a fluidity of forces that propagate everywhere. Commenting on their way of doing philosophy, Robert Maggiori offers an interesting observation: “*Mille plateaux* ne font pas une montagne, mais laissent naître mille chemins qui, contrairement à ceux

¹⁸⁸ “On nous reproche parfois d’employer des mots compliqués pour «faire chic». Ce idiot. Un concept a tantôt besoin d’un nouveau mot pour être désigné, tantôt se sert d’un mot ordinaire auquel il donne un sens singulier.” G. Deleuze, *Pourparlers*, cit., p. 49.

¹⁸⁹ “Il n’y a pas de concept simple. Tout concept a des composantes, et se définit par elles. Il a donc un chiffre. C’est une multiplicité, bien que toute multiplicité ne soit pas conceptuelle.” G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie ?*, Les éditions de minuit, Paris 2013, p. 25.

¹⁹⁰ “Il n’y a pas de concept à une seule composante : même le premier concept, celui par lequel une philosophie « commence », a plusieurs composantes, puisqu’il n’est pas évident que la philosophie doive avoir un commencement, et que, si elle en détermine un, elle doit y joindre un point de vue ou une raison.” Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁹¹ “Créer a toujours été autre chose que communiquer. L’important, ce sera peut-être de créer des vacuoles de non-communication, des interrupteurs, pour échapper au contrôle.” G. Deleuze, *Pourparlers*, cit., p. 238.

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 48.

d'Heidegger, mènent partout.”¹⁹³ The intention of Deleuze and Guattari is not in fact to build piece by piece a sort of splendid cathedral perfect in itself, but to give rise to possibilities of development that find in the open system their multiple and propulsive forces leading to no singular destination.

“Le style en philosophie,” suggests Deleuze, “est tendu vers trois pôles, le concept ou de nouvelles manière de penser, le percept ou de nouvelles manière de voir et d’entendre, l’affect ou de nouvelles manière d’éprouver. C’est la trinité philosophique, la philosophie comme opéra : il faut le trois pour *faire le mouvement*.”¹⁹⁴ Deleuze often defines his philosophy as a nomadic thought¹⁹⁵ that is more interested in creating new concepts than in having an internal coherence or continuity. This movement of creation, since it follows the contradictory movement of life, cannot not be contradictory in itself. Indeed, in response to a question about the change of perspective between the first and second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze responds:

Ni Guattari ni moi nous ne sommes très attachés à la poursuite ni même à la cohérence de ce que nous écrivons. Nous souhaiterions le contraire, nous souhaiterions que la suite de *L'Anti-Œdipe* fût en rupture avec ce qui précède, avec le premier tome et puis s'il y a des choses qui ne vont pas dans le premier tome, aucune importance. Je veux dire que nous ne faisons pas partie des auteurs qui conçoivent ce qu'ils écrivent comme une œuvre qui doit être cohérente ; si nous changeons, c'est très bien.¹⁹⁶

His aim, at least after his “encounter” with Nietzsche, has in fact always been to produce a thought of “affects, intensité, expériences, expérimentations,”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., cit., p. 224.

¹⁹⁵ See *Pensée nomade* in G. Deleuze, *L'île déserte : Textes et entretiens* (1953 – 1974), Les éditions de minuit, Paris 2002, p. 351.

¹⁹⁶ G. Deleuze, *L'île déserte*, cit., p. 387.

¹⁹⁷ “C’est Nietzsche que j’ai lu tard [...] qui vous donne un gout pervers (que ni Marx ne Freud n’ont jamais donné à personne, au contraire) : le gout pour chacun de dire des choses simples en

namely a thought that, instead of imprisoning life inside rational concepts, is able to follow its movement – even if this movement produces contradictory concepts. A little further in the interview quoted above, Deleuze explains that “un système ouverte c’est quand les concepts sont rapportés à des circonstances et non plus à des essences.”¹⁹⁸ Although circumstances are the conditions that create a fact, determining its nature and importance, circumstances depend on an infinite number of influences that change with the changing of time and space. If their concepts, then, are not related to immutable and trans-historical essences but rather to the uncertainty of circumstances, then the concepts they create will necessarily be anything but stable.

In *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, which can be read as their philosophical testament¹⁹⁹, they affirm:

Les concepts philosophiques sont des tous fragmentaires qui ne s’ajustent pas les uns aux autres, puisque leurs bords ne coïncident pas. Ils naissent de coups de dés plutôt qu’ils ne composent un puzzle. Et pourtant ils résonnent, et la philosophie qui les crée présente toujours un Tout puissant, non fragmenté, même s’il reste ouvert : Un-Tout illimité, Omnitudo qui les comprend tous sur un seul et même plan. C’est une table, un plateau, une coupe. C’est un plan de consistance ou, plus exactement, le plan d’immanence des concepts, le planomène. Les concepts et le plan sont strictement corrélatifs, mais doivent d’autant moins être confondus. Le plan d’immanence n’est pas un concept, ni le concept de tous les concepts. Si on

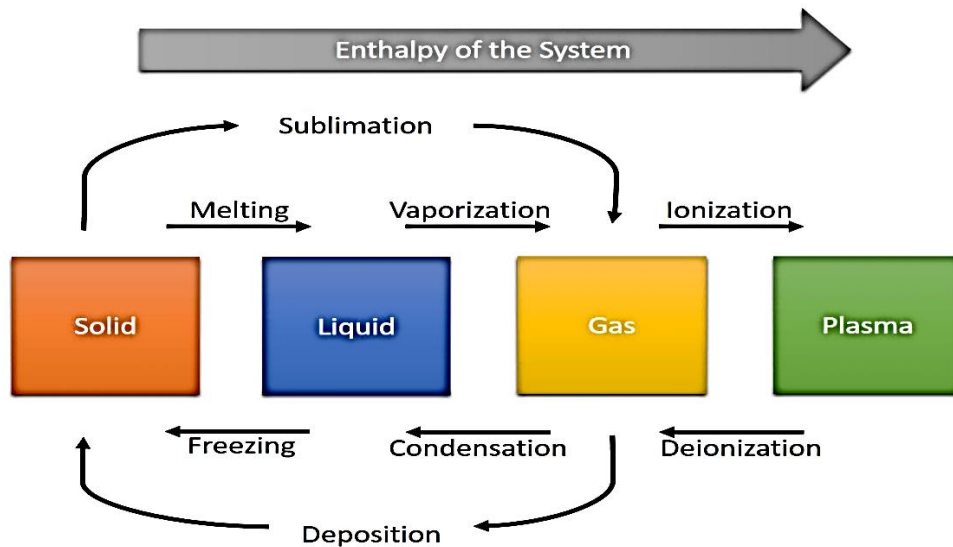
son propre nome, de parler par affects, intensités, expériences, expérimentations.” G. Deleuze, *Pourparlers*, cit., p. 15.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁹⁹ “Peut-être ne peut-on poser la question *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?* que tard, quand vient la vieillesse, et l’heure de parler concrètement. En fait, la bibliographie est très mince. C’est une question qu’on pose dans une agitation discrète, à minuit, quand on n’a plus rien à demander. Auparavant on la posait, on ne cessait pas de la poser, mais c’était trop indirect ou oblique, trop artificiel, trop abstrait, et on l’exposait, on la dominait en passant plus qu’on n’était happé par elle. On n’était pas assez sobre. On avait trop envie de faire de la philosophie, on ne se demandait pas ce qu’elle était, sauf par exercice de style ; on n’avait pas atteint à ce point de non-style où l’on peut dire enfin : mais qu’est-ce que c’était, ce que j’ai fait toute ma vie?” G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie ?*, cit., p. 5.

les confondait, rien n’empêcherait les concepts de faire un, ou de devenir des universaux et de perdre leur singularité, mais aussi le plan de perdre son ouverture. La philosophie est un constructivisme, et le constructivisme a deux aspects complémentaires qui diffèrent en nature : créer des concepts et tracer un plan. Les concepts sont comme les vagues multiples qui montent et qui s’abaissent, mais le plan d’immanence est la vague unique qui les enroule et les déroule. Le plan enveloppe les mouvements infinis qui le parcourent et reviennent, mais les concepts sont les vitesses infinies de mouvements finis qui parcourent chaque fois seulement leurs propres composantes.²⁰⁰

As we can see, according to Deleuze and Guattari, philosophy produces – and is produced by – the exchange between concepts and a “plan d’immanence” in which those concepts emerge. To clarify this difficult passage, we can use “the states of matter” as metaphor that Deleuze and Guattari would certainly have appreciated.



As we can see from the diagram above, the fundamental states of matter are four: solid, liquid, gas, and plasma. All of these states can define a “thing” but that “thing,” depending upon its state, occupies space in a different manner. Indeed,

²⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 69 and 70.

while a solid matter has a volume and a proper form; a material in the liquid state has its own volume, but acquires the shape of the receptacle that contains it; a material in the gaseous state has neither volume nor form, but expands to fill the available space; and finally, matter in the plasma state has, like a liquid, no defined form but can expand like a gaseous substance. The difference between those states is the forces that bind together the molecules that constitute the matter. If the molecules in the solid state are linked by very intense forces that allow only vibration movements, and in the liquid state, the forces between the molecules are less intense and therefore can slide on each other, in the gaseous and in the plasmatic state the forces that bind the molecules together are so weak that they move independently. What is interesting is not just that the matter is the same while its state changes completely, but that in order to have this change – in order to break the bond between the molecules – heating is necessary. Only heat can in fact break the forces that maintain the shape of intact matter, only heat can “schizophréniser”²⁰¹ its molecules. Going back to *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, we can read a passage thanks to which the sense of the metaphor that I am using becomes clear: “la part de l'immanence, ou la part du feu, c'est à cela qu'on reconnaît le philosophe.”²⁰² In this way, with an unexpected Platonic reference²⁰³, Deleuze and Guattari finally say what philosophy is. Unlike science that creates concepts in order to grasp things, in order to grab their proper form, philosophy is able to create *particular* concepts that, instead of remaining as solid, liquid, gas, or plasma, adhere to the *movement* by which the flame of thinking²⁰⁴ does and

²⁰¹ I use this term in anticipation of the discussion that will begin at the end of this foreword.

²⁰² G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?*, cit., p. 90.

²⁰³ It is interesting that despite “le reversement du platonisme” by which Deleuze reduces every transcendence to a general immanence, it is not possible to ignore the reference to the seventh letter in which Plato writes: “For it [philosophy] does not admit of exposition like other branches of knowledge; but after much converse about the matter itself and a life lived together, suddenly a light, as it were, is kindled in one soul by a flame that leaps to it from another, and thereafter sustains itself.” Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 7.341d. Translated by J. Harward.

²⁰⁴ “La pensée revendique « seulement » le mouvement qui peut être porté à l'infini. Ce que la pensée revendique en droit, ce qu'elle sélectionne, c'est le mouvement infini ou le mouvement de

undoes *every* possible state of matter that belongs to the “plan of immanence” that is our life²⁰⁵. If our life, or if we prefer, “l’immanence, ne l’est qu’à soi-même, et dès lors prend tout, absorbe Tout-Un, et ne laisse rien subsister à quoi elle pourrait être immanente,”²⁰⁶ then the aim of philosophy is

d’acquérir une consistance, sans perdre l’infini dans lequel la pensée plonge (le chaos à cet égard a une existence mentale autant que physique). Donner consistance sans rien perdre de l’infini, c’est très différent du problème de la science qui cherche à donner des références au chaos, à condition de renoncer aux mouvements et vitesses infinis, et d’opérer d’abord une limitation de vitesse : ce qui est premier dans la science, c’est la lumière ou l’horizon relatif. La philosophie au contraire procède en supposant ou en instaurant le plan d’immanence : c’est lui dont les courbures variables conservent les mouvements infinis qui reviennent sur soi dans l’échange incessant, mais aussi ne cessent d’en libérer d’autres qui se conservent. Alors il reste aux concepts à tracer les ordonnées intensives de ces mouvements infinis, comme des mouvements eux-mêmes finis qui forment à vitesse infinie des contours variables inscrits sur le plan. En opérant une coupe du chaos, le plan d’immanence fait appel à une création de concepts.²⁰⁷

For these reasons, to gather a coherent and unitary theory will produce an account intrinsically extraneous to the work of Deleuze and Guattari. According to them, immanence is immanent to itself and it is not possible to derive from immanence a unitary theory other than chaos. The only thing that philosophy can do is follow the movement of matter, extrapolating concepts from it. Therefore, although I will sometimes highlight the contradictions that their thinking inevitably produces, I will in the following pages try to follow the flow of their concepts without reducing this movement to a unitary theory. *Nevertheless*, the

l’infini. C’est lui qui constitue l’image de la pensée.” G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie ?*, cit., p. 65.

²⁰⁵ “Si la philosophie commence avec la création des concepts, le plan d’immanence doit être considéré comme pré-philosophique.” Ibid., p. 70.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 89 and 90.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 68 and 69.

aim of those pages will not be just to follow the flow of their concepts, but to show what this flow is structurally unable to see, namely, the static structure of the *fantasme masochiste*.

3.2

SCHIZOANALYSIS

The most important account *against* psychoanalysis but *inside* psychoanalysis comes from *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*²⁰⁸ by Deleuze and Guattari. If, as we have seen, Foucault refuses psychoanalysis and, in order to avoid the coercive and pathologizing implication of desire, he chooses to focus on pleasure, Deleuze and Guattari face directly the psychoanalytic notion of desire, freeing it from the Oedipus complex.

What they call “schizoanalysis” in *Anti-Oedipus* is the attempt to destroy the categories imposed by psychoanalysis: categories according to which the unconscious is a theater in which desire can express itself only through the bourgeois family scene. If psychoanalysis “part d'énoncés collectifs tout faits, du type Œdipe et elle prétend découvrir la cause de ces énoncés dans un sujet personnel d'énonciation qui doit tout à la psychanalyse,”²⁰⁹ the aim of schizoanalysis is the opposite: “partir des énoncés personnels de quelqu'un et découvrir leur véritable production qui n'est jamais un sujet mais toujours des agencements machiniques de désir, des agencements collectifs d'énonciation qui le traversent et circulent en lui, creusant ici, bloqués là-bas, toujours sous forme de multiplicités, de meutes, de masses d'unités d'ordre différents qui le hantent et le peuplent.”²¹⁰ According to Deleuze and Guattari “l'inconscient n'est pas un théâtre, mais une usine, une machine à produire”²¹¹ that produces “micro-

²⁰⁸ See G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

²⁰⁹ G. Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fous : Texte et entretiens* (1975 – 1995), Les éditions de minuit, Paris, 2003, p. 76.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²¹¹ G. Deleuze, *Pourparlers*, cit., p. 197.

multiplicités” of desire that “leak” like fluxes²¹² from themselves. “Le désir, they affirm in *Anti-Oedipus*, ne cesse d'effectuer le couplage de flux continus et d'objets partiels essentiellement fragmentaires et fragmentés. Le désir fait couler, coule et coupe. «J'aime tout ce qui coule, même le flux menstruel qui emporte les œufs non fécondés...», dit Miller dans son chant du désir.”²¹³ There is no waste in desire, all that is produced by desire is desire itself.²¹⁴ Desire is in fact an open force without castration and lack²¹⁵, a restless movement that can do nothing but continuously produce itself.

In an interview originally published in Italian with the title *Capitalismo e schizofrenia*, Deleuze explains that desire consists in “faire des coupes, laisser couler certains flux, opérer des prélèvements sur les flux, couper les chaînes qui épousent les flux,” and he adds, “tout ce système de l'inconscient ou du désir qui coule, qui coupe, qui laisse couler, ce système tout à fait littéral de l'inconscient, contrairement à ce que pense la psychanalyse traditionnelle, *ne signifie rien.*”²¹⁶

²¹² “Le processus, c'est ce que nous appelons le flux. Or, là encore, le flux, c'est une notion dont nous avons besoin comme notion quelconque pas du tout qualifiée. Ce peut être le flux de mots, d'idées, de merde, d'argent, ce peut être un mécanisme financier ou une machine schizophrénique : ça dépasse toutes les dualités. Nous rêvions de ce livre comme d'un livre-flux.” G. Deleuze, *L'île déserte*, cit., p. 305.

²¹³ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *L'anti-Œdipe, Capitalisme et schizophrénie I*, Les éditions de minuit, Paris 1973, p. 11.

²¹⁴ As we will see in the following pages, even the most execrable expressions of humanity are produced by desire.

²¹⁵ “Le désir ne dépend pas d'un manque, désirer n'est pas manquer de quelque chose, le désir ne renvoie à aucune Loi, le désir produit. C'est donc le contraire d'un théâtre. Une idée comme celle d'Œdipe, de la représentation théâtrale d'Œdipe, défigure l'inconscient, n'exprime rien du désir. Œdipe est l'effet de la répression sociale sur la production désirante. Même au niveau de l'enfant, le désir n'est pas œdipien, il fonctionne comme un mécanisme, produit de petites machines, établit des liaisons entre les choses. Tout cela, en d'autres termes, signifie peut-être que le désir est révolutionnaire. Ce qui ne signifie pas qu'il veuille la révolution. C'est mieux que ça. Il est révolutionnaire par nature parce qu'il construit des machines qui, en s'insérant dans le champ social, sont capables de faire sauter quelque chose, de déplacer le tissu social. Au contraire, la psychanalyse traditionnelle a tout renversé sur une sorte de théâtre.” G. Deleuze, *L'île déserte*, cit., p. 324.

²¹⁶ G. Deleuze, *L'île déserte*, cit., pp. 323 and 324. Italics mine.

According to them, the problem of psychoanalysis is in fact that it traps desire inside rigid interpretative structures that deny its free and productive forces. Led by the need to understand and manage the unconscious, psychoanalysis “territorializes” the fluxes of desire that continuously leak from the unconscious, giving them the obligatory reference to the Oedipus. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the structure of Oedipus is just a fantasy²¹⁷ that psychoanalysis has invented in order to control desire but that has nothing to do with the real production of desire. In the same interview, they explain in fact that psychoanalysis gives to the unconscious a structure of meaning that, instead of belonging to the unconscious, belongs to psychoanalysis itself: “il n'y a pas de sens, il n'y a aucune interprétation à donner, cela [the unconscious] ne veut rien dire.”²¹⁸

Their argument is that the unconscious does not produce meanings, but forces, fluxes, intensities: “l'essentiel est la production désirante, le fonctionnement “machinique”, l'établissement de connexions, les points de fuite ou de déterritorialisation de la libido s'engouffrant dans l'élément moléculaire non-humain, le passage de flux, l'injection d'intensités.”²¹⁹ Where psychoanalysis reads parapraxis, lapses, dreams, and jokes, as signs that lead desire back to the structure of the Oedipus,²²⁰ schizoanalysis reads these unconscious expressions as nothing but “productions désirantes”, nothing but flows from the unconscious that propagate everywhere, creating connections with everything.

²¹⁷ “La psychanalyse nous semblait une fantastique entreprise pour entrainer le désir dans ses impasses, et pour empêcher les gens de dire ce qu'ils avaient à dire” G. Deleuze, *Pourparlers*, cit., p. 197.

²¹⁸ G. Deleuze, *L'île déserte*, cit., pp. 324.

²¹⁹ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *L'anti-Œdipe*, cit., p. 473.

²²⁰ “Vous n'êtes pas né Œdipe, vous avez fait pousser Œdipe en vous ; et vous comptez vous en sortir par le fantasme, par la castration, mais c'est à son tour ce que vous avez fait pousser en Œdipe, à savoir vous-même, l'horrible cercle. Merde à tout votre théâtre mortifère, imaginaire ou symbolique. Que demande la schizo-analyse ? Rien d'autre qu'un peu de vraie relation avec le dehors, un peu de réalité réelle. Et nous réclamons le droit d'une légèreté et d'une incompetence radicales, celui d'entrer dans le cabinet de l'analyste, et de dire ça sent mauvais chez vous. Ça sent la grande mort et le petit moi.” Ibid., p. 400.

Contrary to the unconscious in psychoanalysis,

l'inconscient de la schizo-analyse ignore les personnes, les ensembles et les lois; les images, les structures et les symboles. Il est orphelin, comme il est anarchiste et athée. Il n'est pas orphelin au sens où le nom du père désignerait une absence, mais au sens où il se produit lui-même partout où les noms de l'histoire désignent des intensités présentes («la mer des noms propres»). Il n'est pas figuratif, car son *figural* est abstrait, la figure-schize. Il n'est pas structural ni symbolique, car sa réalité est celle du Réel en sa production, dans son inorganisation même. Il n'est pas représentatif, mais seulement machinique, et productif.²²¹

Thought in this way, the unconscious does not have a structure that, once discovered, gives the key to understand its flows. The unconscious of schizoanalysis is in a certain way *absolute*. However, we must use the term absolute avoiding the transcendent implications to which the etymological meaning²²² of the term can lead. Indeed, the unconscious of schizoanalysis is absolute not in the sense that it is unrelated to anything, but that it is unrelated to an *a-priori* structure to which all its acts refer. As we have seen, the unconscious proposed by Deleuze and Guattari knows neither parents, nor, party, nor a God. What the unconscious knows are rather syntheses that – all the time in a new and different way – are created by its desiring propagations. But these syntheses have nothing to do with the transcendent structure of the Oedipus, (to which, according to a certain version of psychoanalysis, all acts are supposed to refer, and all desires, whether “healthy” or “perverted”, are supposed to be bent). These syntheses are rather the immanent and accidental product of the movement with which desire spreads its fluxes everywhere.

Deleuze and Guattari call these syntheses *machines désirantes*.²²³ In *Anti-*

²²¹ Ibid., p. 371.

²²² Absolute comes from the Latin term “absolutus” that is composed by “ab” (off, away from) and “solver” (loosen), and means not related to anything else.

²²³ Explaining how they developed this particular concept, Deleuze affirms in an interview: “Felix m’a parlé de ce qu’il appelait déjà machines désirantes: toute une conception theorique et pratique de l’inconscient-machine, de l’inconscient schizophrénique.” G. Deleuze, *Pourparlers*, cit., p. 24.

Oedipus they explain: “en premier lieu, les machines désirantes sont bien les mêmes que les machines sociales et techniques, mais elles sont comme leur inconscient: elles manifestent et mobilisent en effet les investissements libidinaux (investissements de désir) qui «correspondent» aux investissements conscients ou préconscients (investissements d'intérêt) de l'économie, de la politique et de la technique d'un champ social déterminé.”²²⁴ As we can see with the concept of *machines désirantes*, instead of theorizing a universal and transcendent structure of desire, Deleuze and Guattari propose an immanent production of casual hooks – synthesis – that find in the connection between desire and the world the occasion of their own production.²²⁵ The careful reader will notice that although the transcendent dimension is absent, we cannot say the same thing regarding the transcendental dimension. Indeed, even if the syntheses depend on historical and geographical conditions – and for this reason cannot be defined as transcendent structures – they are the transcendental conditions that make possible the production of desire. As Deleuze himself admits: “L’Anti-Œdipe avait une ambition kantienne, il fallait tenter une sorte de Critique de la Raison pure au niveau de l'inconscient. D'où la détermination de synthèses propres à l'inconscient; le déroulement de l'histoire comme effectuation de ces synthèses; la dénonciation de l'Œdipe comme «illusion inévitable» falsifiant toute production historique.”²²⁶ For this reason we can define the philosophy of *Anti-Oedipus* as transcendental empiricism.

²²⁴ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *L'anti-Œdipe*, cit., p. 483.

²²⁵ “Oui, nous donnons à la machine une grande extension: en rapport avec les flux. Nous définissons la machine comme tout système de coupures de flux. Ainsi, tantôt nous parlons de machine technique, au sens ordinaire du mot, tantôt de machine sociale, tantôt de machine désirante. C'est que, pour nous, machine ne s'oppose nullement à homme ni à nature (il faut vraiment de la bonne volonté pour nous objecter que les formes et rapports de production ne sont pas de la machine). D'autre part, machine ne se réduit nullement au mécanisme. Le mécanisme désigne certains procédés de certaines machines techniques: ou bien une certaine organisation d'un organisme. Mais le machinisme est tout autre chose: encore une fois, tout système de coupure de flux qui dépasse à la fois le mécanisme de la technique et l'organisation de l'organisme, que ce soit dans la nature, dans la société, dans l'homme.” G. Deleuze, *L'île déserte*, cit., pp. 305 and 306.

²²⁶ G. Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fous*, cit., p. 289.

Denied the immutable and trans-historical structure of the unconscious to which, according to psychoanalysis, all acts of desire should refer,²²⁷ “la schizo-analyse renonce à toute interprétation”²²⁸ based on a supposed unitary structure. Indeed, since there is not a structure that determines any correct – and therefore, by the same token, any perverted – development of human sexuality, but just multiple hooks between desire and its “mechanical productions”, there are no signs that have to be interpreted in order to relocate the subject in the “right” place. The problem of schizoanalysis will never be how to read the signs that desire leaves behind, but “de savoir comment fonctionne l'inconscient. C'est un problème d'utilisation des machines, du fonctionnement des «machines désirantes».”²²⁹ For Deleuze and Guattari

l'inconscient ne veut rien dire. En revanche, l'inconscient fait des machines, qui sont celles du désir, et dont la schizo-analyse découvre l'usage et le fonctionnement dans l'immanence aux machines sociales. L'inconscient ne dit rien, il machine. Il n'est pas expressif ou représentatif, mais productif. Un symbole est uniquement une machine sociale qui fonctionne comme machine désirante, une machine désirante qui fonctionne dans la machine sociale, un investissement de la machine sociale par le désir.²³⁰

But how do these *machines désirantes* work? According to Deleuze and Guattari, every time a leak drops from the fluxes of desire and falls on something, it produces an object of desire. Although they refer to it as a “partial object”, they

²²⁷ In an interview, Guattari underlines that the aim of schizoanalysis is: “se laisser glisser du côté des multiplicités réelles. Cesser de renvoyer dos à dos l'homme et la machine dont le rapport, au contraire, est constitutif du désir lui-même. Promouvoir une autre logique, une logique du désir réel, établissant le primat de l'histoire sur la structure: une autre analyse, dégagée du symbolisme et de l'interprétation; et un autre militantisme, se donnant les moyens de se libérer lui-même des fantasmes de l'ordre dominant.” G. Deleuze, *L'île déserte*, cit., p. 304.

²²⁸ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *L'anti-Œdipe*, cit., p. 213.

²²⁹ G. Deleuze, *L'île déserte*, cit., p. 324.

²³⁰ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *L'anti-Œdipe*, cit., p. 213.

underline that it has nothing to do with the “partial object” of psychoanalysis.²³¹ Indeed, according to them, the object of desire does not lack anything²³² and it does not refer to anything other than itself.²³³ The partial object of schizoanalysis does not have a symbolic reference to a structure that produces and explains it. It

²³¹ “Mélanie Klein fit la découverte merveilleuse des objets partiels, ce monde d'explosions, de rotations, de vibrations. Mais comment expliquer qu'elle rate pourtant la logique de ces objets ? C'est que, d'abord, elle les pense comme fantasmes, et les juge du point de vue de la consommation, non pas d'une production réelle. Elle assigne des mécanismes de causation (ainsi l'introjection et la projection), d'effectuation (gratification et frustration), d'expression (le bon et le mauvais) qui lui imposent une conception idéaliste de l'objet partiel. Elle ne le rattache pas à un véritable procès de production qui serait celui des machines désirantes. En second lieu, elle ne se débarrasse pas de l'idée que les objets partiels schizo paranoïdes renvoient à un tout, soit originel dans une phase primitive, soit à venir dans la position dépressive ultérieure (l'Objet complet). Les objets partiels lui paraissent donc prélevés sur des personnes globales ; non seulement ils entreront dans des totalités d'intégration concernant le moi, l'objet et les pulsions, mais ils constituent déjà le premier type de relation objectale entre le moi, la mère et le père. Or c'est bien là que tout se décide en fin de compte. Il est certain que les objets partiels ont en eux-mêmes une charge suffisante pour faire sauter Œdipe, et le destituer de sa sottise prétention à représenter l'inconscient, à trianguler l'inconscient, à capter toute la production désirante. La question qui se pose ici n'est nullement celle d'une importance relative de ce qu'on peut appeler *præœdipien* par rapport à Œdipe (car « *præœdipien* » est encore en référence évolutive ou structurale avec Œdipe). La question est celle du caractère absolument *anœdipien* de la production désirante. Mais parce que Mélanie Klein conserve le point de vue du tout, les personnes globales et des objets complets – et aussi peut-être parce qu'elle tient à éviter le pire avec l'Association psychanalytique internationale qui a écrit sur sa porte « nul n'entre ici s'il n'est œdipien » –, elle ne se sert pas des objets partiels pour faire sauter le carcan d'Œdipe, au contraire elle s'en sert ou feint de s'en servir pour diluer Œdipe, le miniaturiser, le multiplier, l'étendre aux bas-âges.” Ibid., pp. 52 and 53.

²³² “Telle est la loi des objets partiels. Rien ne manque, rien ne peut être défini comme un manque” Ibid., p. 70.

²³³ “les objets partiels ne sont qu'en apparence prélevés sur des personnes globales ; ils sont réellement produits par prélèvement sur un flux ou une hylé non personnelle, avec laquelle ils communiquent en se connectant à d'autres objets partiels. L'inconscient ignore les personnes. Les objets partiels ne sont pas des représentants des personnages parentaux ni des supports de relations familiales ; ils sont des pièces dans les machines désirantes, renvoyant à un procès et à des rapports de production irréductibles et premiers par rapport à ce qui se laisse enregistrer dans la figure d'Œdipe.” Ibid., p. 54.

is *just* an object that, from the moment at which it is invested by the flux of desire, becomes its object. It is important to underline that since desire is a relentless flux that propagates everywhere, the object of desire can never be unique. Desire in fact follows neither rules nor patterns, but propagates itself in all directions, embracing everything, and since it is composed by a multiplicity of accidental fluxes its inner nature is invariably schizophrenic.

Since desire is intrinsically schizophrenic, according to Deleuze and Guattari, only a “molecular” unconscious can produce it. Indeed, only a place of multiplicity of forces, forces that continuously come together and disperse creating twists of desire with the surrounding world, can be the place that houses these exchanges of fluxes: l'inconscient moléculaire ignore la castration, parce que les objets partiels ne manquent de rien et forment en tant que tels des multiplicités libres; parce que les multiples coupures ne cessent de produire des flux, au lieu de les refouler dans une même coupure unique capable de les tarir; parce que les synthèses constituent des connexions locales et non-spécifiques, des dis jonc-tians inclusives, des conjonctions nomades: partout une trans-sexualité microscopique, qui fait que la femme contient autant d'hommes que l'homme, et l'homme de femmes, capables d'entrer les uns avec les autres, les unes avec les autres, dans des rapports de production de désir qui bouleversent l'ordre statistique des sexes. Faire l'amour n'est pas ne faire qu'un, ni même deux, mais faire cent mille. C'est cela, les machines désirantes ou le sexe non humain: non pas un ni même deux sexes, mais *n...* sexes. La schizo-analyse est l'analyse variable des *n...* sexes dans un sujet, par-delà la représentation anthropomorphique que la société lui impose et qu'il se donne lui-même de sa propre sexualité. La formule schizo-analytique de la révolution désirante sera d'abord: à chacun ses sexes.²³⁴

The aim of schizoanalysis then is not just to show the schizophrenic nature of desire, but to free the productive forces that emerge from the molecular assembly that is its unconscious. In order to achieve this goal, rather than try to understand our desires through a structure – the Oedipus – that has nothing to do with the productive forces of desire, it is necessary to *multiply* those forces, to

²³⁴ Ibid., pp 351 and 352.

disseminate their intensities, and *schizophréniser* the synthesis with which the unconscious hooks the world, producing “micro-multiplicités” of desire: “schizophréniser le champ de l'inconscient, et aussi le champ social historique, de manière à faire sauter le carcan d'Œdipe et retrouver partout la force des productions désirantes, renouer à même le Réel le lien de la machine analytique, du désir et de la production.”²³⁵ With its ability to “deterritorialise”²³⁶ the theatrical apparatus by which psychoanalysis tries to reduce the productivity of desire to its scheme, schizoanalysis gives freedom back to desire, allowing it to propagate itself everywhere.²³⁷ Thanks to schizoanalysis “le désir est reversé dans l'ordre de la production, rapporté à ses éléments moléculaires, et où il ne manque de rien, parce qu'il se définit comme *être objet naturel et sensible*, en même temps que le réel se définit comme *être objectif du désir*.”²³⁸

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the molecular unconscious of schizoanalysis allows us to understand the *machinique* production of objects of desire without falling back into a dualistic thought. Indeed, although they use the notion of partial objects, they affirm that there is not a desiring subject on one side and an object of desire on the other. There are only fluxes of desire that are produced *at the same time* as their objects. “Le désir et son objet ne font qu'un, c'est la machine, en tant que machine de machine.”²³⁹ “Machine de machine”

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 62.

²³⁶ “*La psychanalyse se fixe sur les représentants imaginaires et structuraux de re-territorialisation, tandis que la schizo-analyse suit les indices machiniques de déterritorialisation. Toujours l'opposition du névrosé sur le divan, comme terre ultime et stérile, dernière colonie épuisée, avec le schizo en promenade dans un circuit déterritorialisé.*” Ibid., p. 378.

²³⁷ “la schizo-analyse n'a rien à interpréter. Il n'y a que des résistances, et puis des machines, machines désirantes. Œdipe est une résistance; si nous avons pu parler du caractère intrinsèquement pervers de la psychanalyse, c'est que la perversion en général est la re-territorialisation artificielle des flux de désir, dont les machines au contraire sont les indices de production déterritorialisée. La psychanalyse re-territorialise sur le divan, dans la représentation d'Œdipe et de la castration. La schizoanalyse doit au contraire dégager les flux déterritorialisés du désir, dans les éléments moléculaires de la production désirante.” Ibid., p. 375

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 371.

²³⁹ Ibid., p. 34.

means that there is not a reality – *machine sociales* – that produces desire – *machines désirantes* – but that reality and desire come into existence together. Reality and desire are always already together in the world as mutual productions. Desire produces reality and, in the meantime, it is produced by reality: “Si le désir produit, il produit du réel. Si le désir est producteur, il ne peut l'être qu'en réalité, et de réalité. Le désir est cet ensemble de synthèses passives qui machinent les objets partiels, les flux et les corps, et qui fonctionnent comme des unités de production. Le réel en découle, il est le résultat des synthèses passives du désir comme auto-production de l'inconscient.”²⁴⁰ Where there is production there is also desire and vice versa. Desiring productions emerge everywhere as the result of the connective synthesis of reality.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

3.3

THE INNOCENT FORCE OF DESIRE

According to Deleuze and Guattari, desire is inscribed in the reality of the world. Desire is the inner force of reality; it is the cause of all movement and the origin of all intensities. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is the most intimate expression of the reality of the world. Here the Spinozist echoes are evident. The philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, even if it is completely free of the metaphysical faith that sees in the world nothing but the perfection of God²⁴¹, is permeated by a deep trust in life and an optimistic confidence in humanity. Bracketing the conceptual complexity, sometimes their philosophy can seem to have been written by a child who knows only his joy. The philosophy of Deleuze is especially pervaded with that joy – a simple joy of existing that can be extremely touching. This joy also finds expression in the collaboration with Guattari and produces an innocent confidence in humanity that persists even when Deleuze and Guattari face the darker sides of human desire. In *Anti-Œdipe* they affirm: “jamais Reich n'est plus grand penseur que lorsqu'il refuse d'invoquer une méconnaissance ou une illusion des masses pour expliquer le fascisme,²⁴² et réclame une explication par le désir, en termes de désir: non, les masses n'ont pas été trompées, elles ont désiré le fascisme à tel moment, en telles circonstances, et c'est cela qu'il faut expliquer, cette *perversion* du désir grégaire.”²⁴³ Even if it seems that they are condemning desire and the people who desired fascism, in reality they are condemning the Fascist machine, namely the machine that was able to capture the innocent forces of desire. Indeed, even if Deleuze and Guattari

²⁴¹ “Quicquid est, in Deo est, et nihil sine Deo esse, neque concipi potest” B. Spinoza, *Ethica more geometrico demonstrata*, Pars I, propositio XV.

²⁴² Despite the differences between Fascism and Nazism, Deleuze and Guattari use here the term fascism as a general term that encompasses both. To avoid confusion, I will do the same.

²⁴³ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *L'anti-Œdipe*, cit., p. 37. Italic mine.

acknowledge that the masses were not deceived by fascism but actually desired fascism,²⁴⁴ they explain in an interview that this was possible because “le fascisme [...] a «assumé les désirs sociaux».”²⁴⁵ According to Deleuze and Guattari, fascism trapped desire inside its *Weltanschauung*, and channeling its forces, it built up a death machine.

In this way, we understand how they manage to “save” the innocent nature of desire. If in fact as we have seen, the desiring machine works only through the social machine – since their syntheses are the conditions of possibility of desire –, then the innocence of desire is somehow kept separate from its reification. According to Deleuze and Guattari, desire is in itself a force with no purpose or goal; it is only the social development of its force that can be perverted. This is why they seek to build a “revolutionary machine” able to free desire from the perverted coercions of society. As Guattari explains in an interview on *Anti-Œdipe*: “ou bien une machine révolutionnaire se montera, capable de prendre en charge le désir et les phénomènes de désir, ou bien le désir restera manipulé par les forces d’oppression, de répression, et menacera, même du dedans, les machines révolutionnaire. [...] En un sens, ce que nous proposons comme schizo-analyse aurait pour point d’application idéal des groupes, et des groupes militant.”²⁴⁶ In this way, we understand that the purpose of Deleuze and Guattari, far more than theoretical, is political. Indeed, it is not sufficient to acknowledge the molecular nature of the unconscious, the schizophrenic and innocent force of desire, and the *machinique* assemblage of production that combines the unconscious and desire, but is it necessary to build a “revolutionary machine” able to create a new unconscious whose desiring molecules are no longer subjected to the structures that imprison desire and exploit its forces:

Une révolution, c'est une formidable production d'inconscient, et il n'y en a pas beaucoup d'autre, et ça n'a rien à voir avec un lapsus ou un acte manqué.

²⁴⁴ “Les gens, ils bandaient pour Hitler, pour la belle machine fasciste.” G. Deleuze, *L'île déserte*, cit., p. 373.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 373.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

L'inconscient n'est pas un sujet qui produirait des rejetons dans la conscience, c'est un objet de production, c'est lui qui doit être produit, à condition qu'on n'en soit pas empêché. Ou plutôt il n'y a pas de sujet du désir, pas plus que d'objet. Seuls, les flux sont l'objectivité du désir lui-même. Le désir, il n'y en a jamais assez. Le désir est le système des signes a-signifiants à partir desquels on produit des flux d'inconscient dans un champ social historique. Pas d'éclosion de désir, en quelque lieu que ce soit, petite famille ou école de quartier, qui ne fasse branler l'appareil ou ne mette en question le champ social. Le désir est révolutionnaire parce qu'il veut toujours plus de connexions. La psychanalyse coupe et rabat toutes les connexions, tous les agencements, c'est sa vocation, elle hait le désir, elle hait la politique.²⁴⁷

According to Deleuze and Guattari, using the revolutionary nature of desire, it is possible to *schizophréniser* the structures that trap, imprison, and pervert the innocent forces of desire, producing in this way a new unconscious. Now, before proceeding, it is important to make some observations that will help later to specify where Deleuze and Guattari have misunderstood masochism. If we accept that there is something like what they call a “perversion of desire”, then we have to assume that there is a something like a “normal desire” that develops in an either “right”, or “correct”, or at least “useful” way – but this is exactly what Deleuze and Guattari refuse when they argue that desire is a free force that has neither purpose nor meaning. This, however, is not the main problem. Using the Deleuzian category of the *virtual*, we can separate desire into its *virtual* and its *actual* existence. In *L'actuel et le virtuel* Deleuze explains the division between them in these terms:

Le rapport de l'actuel et du virtuel constitue toujours un circuit, mais de deux manières: tantôt l'actuel renvoie à des virtuels comme à d'autres choses dans de vastes circuits, où le virtuel s'actualise, tantôt l'actuel renvoie au virtuel comme à son propre virtuel, dans les plus petits circuits où le virtuel cristallise avec l'actuel. Le plan d'immanence contient à la fois l'actualisation comme rapport du virtuel avec d'autres termes, et même l'actuel comme terme avec lequel le virtuel s'échange. Dans tous les cas, le rapport de l'actuel et du virtuel n'est pas celui qu'on

²⁴⁷ G. Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fous*, cit., p. 74.

peut établir entre deux actuels. Les actuels impliquent des individus déjà constitués, et des déterminations par points ordinaires ; tandis que le rapport de l'actuel et du virtuel forme une individuation en acte ou une singularisation par points remarquables à déterminer dans chaque cas.²⁴⁸

If we accept this division – if we accept that it is conceptual and it should not be diachronically conceived – we can imagine a sort of degree zero of desire (*virtuality* of desire) that is innocent in itself because it is not yet compromised by the world (*actualization* of desire). In this way Deleuze and Guattari can on the one hand argue in favor of a pure force of desire that is not yet contaminated by its reifications, and on the other hand claim to make a political use of this force. However, if the degree zero of desire has a virtual existence then we have to recognize that it has not an actual existence. Indeed, even if virtuality and actuality are both part of the same reality, only the actual has a concrete existence. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, in order to produce its fluxes, desire needs the syntheses between the desiring machines and the world. And here is exactly where the problem lies. To claim that desire requires an embrace of the world in order to move from virtual to actual existence, to claim that it requires entering into the “machinique” production that is the real production of desire in order to produce its fluxes, means that *every* reification of desire, *every* production of the desiring machines, *every* transition from the virtual to the actual, *every* political use that we make of the pure forces of desire, is *in itself* a perversion of the “innocence” of virtual or zero degree desire. Following Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of desire can only lead to the conclusion that *every reification of desire is a perversion*. In this way, we understand that it does not make sense to speak of perversion of desire since *perversion is intrinsic to desire’s actualization in the world*.

But if any reification of desire is a perversion of its innocent nature, why define the fascist desire as perverse? And above all, how can a value judgment be given to different desiring productions? Why do we consider the “revolutionary machine” less perverted than the “fascist machine”? Are they not part of the *same*

²⁴⁸ G. Deleuze and C. Parnet, *Dialogues*, Flammarion, Paris 1996, p.185.

perversion that is the real making of desire?

Furthermore, as an important parenthesis, we have to acknowledge that, even if it seems obvious now to consider fascist desire perverted, we must be cautious about making value judgments about desire. Indeed, from what privileged point of view may we pronounce a judgement on desire? From the point of view of either the "sane desire"? The "correct desire"? The "natural desire"? But is this not already in itself a fascist way of judging? Was it not fascism that condemned, imprisoned, and killed people on the basis of their desires? The myth of the Aryan race did not seek only the elimination of Gypsies, disabled persons, and Jews, but also of homosexuals, those *perverts* whose desire was indeed "perverse." This is the reason why the judgment that we pronounce on fascism should be historical; it must be made on the basis of the deprivation of liberty of thought, on the ethnic and sexual cleansing, on the military adventurism, and not on whether or not the Nazis *desired* torturing and burning communists, Gypsies, homosexuals, and Jewish people. Judging fascism on the basis of desire can only save fascism, not condemn it, for the simple reason that desire is something that we cannot choose. We can choose how to enact our desires, but we cannot choose what we desire. Thus, we cannot judge desires but only the actions that derive from desires. As we will see in the next chapter, the masochistic fantasy is not considered a problem because it relies on a – more or less hidden – death wish, but rather because it produces actions, because it expresses itself within a symbolic order to which it is accountable.

The division between "good" and "bad" desire is always problematic because it implies a privileged perspective not shaped by the logic of desire itself – a perspective that, as Foucault well understood, implies a supposed normality from which to identify perversity. This is why Foucault, in order to avoid the inevitable implications of desire, not only refrains from making any value judgments on desire, but tries to eliminate the concept entirely. If he decides to focus on pleasure(s) instead, it is precisely because, according to him, desire has nothing to do with such pleasure(s), for pleasure(s) imply nothing beyond the surface of the body.

As we have seen, Foucault's account of sexuality is gradually more and

more insistent on what he calls practices of de-subjectification – aesthetic practices that do not offer any political program. Deleuze and Guattari, to the contrary, use desire to propose a program that goes beyond the aesthetics of the individual and aspires to be political in the most general sense of the term. As Guattari underlines, “ce que nous proposons comme schizo-analyse aurait pour point d’application idéal des groupes, et des groupes militant,”²⁴⁹ namely groups of interests. Certainly, their program is not prescriptive. They are very careful to not dictate any rules for distinguishing “good” from the “bad” desire. Nevertheless, they propose a program that consists in building up a revolutionary machine that could keep desire free from interests. During a conference held in Milan, Deleuze said:

Alors quand Jervis dit que notre discours se fait de plus en plus politique, je crois qu’il a raison, parce que, autant nous insistions, dans la première partie de notre travail, sur de grandes dualités, autant nous cherchons à présent le nouveau mode d’unification dans lequel, par exemple, le discours schizophrénique, le discours drogué, le discours pervers, le discours homosexuel, tous les discours marginaux puissent subsister, que toutes ces fuites et ces discours se greffent sur une machine de guerre qui ne reproduise pas un appareil d’Etat ni de Parti. C’est pour cela même que nous n’avons plus tellement envie de parler de schizo-analyse, parce que cela reviendrait à protéger un type de fuite particulier, la fuite schizophrénique. Ce qui nous intéresse, c’est une sorte de maillon qui nous ramène au problème politique direct, et le problème politique direct est à peu près celui-ci pour nous: jusqu’ici, les partis révolutionnaires se sont constitués comme des synthèses d’intérêts au lieu de fonctionner comme des analyseurs de désirs des masses et des individus. Ou bien, ce qui revient au même: les partis révolutionnaires se sont constitués comme des embryons d’appareils d’Etat, au lieu de former des machines de guerre irréductibles à de tels appareils.²⁵⁰

In this way, Deleuze and Guattari surreptitiously define the “good” desire as a free desire. According to them, as long as the innocent forces of desire are kept

²⁴⁹ G. Deleuze, *Pourparlers*, cit., p. 31.

²⁵⁰ G. Deleuze, *L’île déserte*, cit., p. 389 and 390.

free from constraints imposed by society, desire is good. The problem however is not only that they define a good desire, but that they ignore, or pretend to ignore, that only a system of values – a symbolic order – can evaluate freedom over servitude. They invoke the revolutionary machine as if this machine were not a product of society, as if this machine were not an actual reification of desire. They extrapolate the revolutionary machine out of the context that produces it in order to make it appear as the only way to keep free the forces of desire. But as they themselves say: “partout ce sont des machines, pas du tout métaphoriquement: des machines de machines, avec leurs couplages, leurs connexions.”²⁵¹ The revolutionary machine is nothing more than a machine between machines, a machine that is produced as much as the other machines are produced. The militant groups to which they refer are not external to the production of desire, they are part of the production, which is to say, a *particular* production of desire. Even if those groups are anarchist groups that constitute themselves against the state apparatuses, they are not *external* to the symbolic battlefield that produced them.

As Foucault and Edelman showed – each one in his own way and with his own language – there is no possibility of situating oneself outside of the structure of reality. Foucault showed that “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. It should be said that one is always "inside" power, there is no "escaping" it.”²⁵² And Edelman showed that “no one, including those who assume the figural status of the social order’s death drive, can choose to stand outside that order or the Symbolic logic that shapes it.”²⁵³ Schizoanalysis cannot be *external* to the clash of forces that characterizes every society, it is part of it, it is one of the forces involved; and even if it were able to destroy the Oedipus and all the symbolic structures related to it, it could do nothing but produce another symbolic formation within the context of the symbolic order.

Deleuze and Guattari are aware of this problem and in fact in the years that

²⁵¹ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *L’anti-Œdipe*, cit., p. 7.

²⁵² M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, cit., pp. 95 and 96.

²⁵³ L. Berlant and L. Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, cit., p. 18.

separate *Anti-Œdipes* from *Mille Plateaux* they feel the necessity to move away from the concept of Schizoanalysis while maintaining the political program that produced it. In the conference just mentioned, responding to a question concerning the evolution of their work, Deleuze affirmed:

Mais Jervis dit deux choses qui sont importantes: actuellement nous ne nous en prenons pas trop à l'Œdipe mais plus à l'institution à la machine psychanalytique dans son ensemble. Il va de soi que la machine psychanalytique comprend des dimensions au-delà de l'Œdipe, il y a donc pour nous des raisons pour que ce ne soit plus le problème essentiel. Jervis ajoute que la direction de notre travail actuel est plus politique et que nous avons aussi renoncé ce matin à utiliser le terme de schizo-analyse. Je voudrais dire plusieurs choses à cet égard, de la façon la plus modeste possible. Quand un terme est lancé, et qu'il a un minimum de succès comme il est arrivé pour « machine désirante » ou pour « schizo-analyse », ou on le reprend et alors c'est très fâcheux, c'est déjà la récupération, ou bien on y renonce, et il faut en trouver d'autres, pour tout déplacer. Il y a des mots dont, Félix et moi, nous sentons qu'il est urgent de ne plus les utiliser: schizo-analyse, machine désirante, c'est horrible, si nous les utilisons, nous sommes pris au piège. Nous ne savons pas très bien, nous ne croyons pas aux mots; lorsque nous utilisons un mot, nous avons envie de dire: si ce mot ne vous plaît pas, trouvez-en un autre, on s'arrange toujours. Les mots sont de substituts possibles à l'infini.²⁵⁴

They know that words always refer to meanings and that meanings are always supported by a woven structure of common signifiers – what Lacan calls the signifying chain of the symbolic order. Without this structure, we would not even be able to communicate with each other. There is no way of escaping the symbolic order since the symbolic order is not just the totality of all symbolic productions, but also the general structure of meaning. The neologisms invented by Deleuze and Guattari are part of the Symbolic order although they emerge in opposition to it.

In continually creating new concepts, Deleuze and Guattari try to escape the structure of the symbolic. But they inevitably fall back into it each time they

²⁵⁴ G. Deleuze, *L'île déserte*, cit., p. 387.

express themselves. Indeed, if they want to produce concepts, they can only do so inside the symbolic order. What escapes the symbolic can never be a concept, but only a non-meaning, a hole or gap in the logic of meaning that constitutes the Real. The Real is the negativity that the rationality of concepts can never capture. Even if it is expressed in the language of the symbolic, The Real is a concept that gestures toward what refuses conceptualization. Even if we define it as “the thing that escapes every signification,” we should not think that we have really understood what it is. Since it is beyond any possible meaning and signification, the Real is incomprehensible, which is to say, it falls outside the order of comprehension.

Deleuze and Guattari look for something that – like the Real – seems beyond the grasp of words. But what they look for *has* a meaning, a meaning so profound that it can create a political movement capable of freeing desire from the meshes of the symbolic order. Obviously, the meaning pertaining to the concepts they create thoroughly embeds them in the Symbolic, pushing them toward the endless creation of new concepts described by new signifiers.

Even if, moreover, we accept the possibility of freeing desire from the symbolic order, affirming with Deleuze and Guattari that this liberation will *ipso facto* create a political movement not related to the state apparatuses, what assurance is there that this freed desire will not eventuate in death and destruction? Who can tell whether a desire without castration will not take the form of “the pleasure of having the right to exercise power over the powerless without a thought, the pleasure «de faire le mal pour le plaisir de le faire», the enjoyment of violating?”²⁵⁵ Who can say with certainty that pain and suffering are not just extremely pleasurable to see but maybe even to experience? If every society, in every place and at every time, always ritualized death and suffering, making it not only the instrument of power, but also of pleasure, we must ask ourselves – and we will do so at greater length in the next chapter – if death and suffering are inseparable human nature and if they are not themselves bound up with the drive that leads Deleuze and Guattari continually to abandon, turn away

²⁵⁵ F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, cit., p. 41.

from, or dismiss their creations in order to generate new ones. For their part, however, Deleuze and Guattari have no doubts about either the feasibility or the promise of a desire freed from social constraint. Having removed the emphasis from schizoanalysis, their theoretical *and* political program continues in *Mille plateaux* – the book in which they explicitly try to achieve the movement of concepts I described in the foreword, and in which they implicitly try to solve the theoretical problems that we have just highlighted. As Deleuze declares: *Mille plateaux* configures itself as a “théorie des multiplicités pour elles-mêmes, là où le multiple passe à l'état de substantif, tandis que L'Anti-Œdipe le considérait encore dans des synthèses et sous les conditions de l'inconscient.”²⁵⁶ In *Mille plateaux* they move from a Kantian ambition that wanted to show the syntheses of desire to an “ambition post-kantienne (bien que résolument anti-hégélienne).”²⁵⁷ Setting aside the transcendental synthesis of the unconscious, and rejecting the Hegelian system that pretends to overcome any contradictions in the synthesis of the *Aufhebung*, Deleuze and Guattari try to establish a *plan d'immanence* in which only movements of intensities that configure themselves as *multiplicités* exist:

Mille Plateaux [...] essaie de montrer comment les multiplicités débordent la distinction de la conscience et de l'inconscient, de la nature et de l'histoire, du corps et de l'âme. Les multiplicités sont la réalité même, et ne supposent aucune unité, n'entrent dans aucune totalité, pas plus qu'elles ne renvoient à un sujet. Les subjectivations, les totalisations, les unifications sont au contraire des processus qui se produisent et apparaissent dans les multiplicités. Les principales caractéristiques des multiplicités concernent leurs éléments, qui sont des *singularités*; leurs relations qui sont des *devenirs*, leurs événements qui sont des *hecceités* (c'est-à-dire des individuations sans sujet); leurs espaces-temps, qui sont des espaces et des temps *lisses*; leur modèle de réalisation, qui est le *rhizome* (par opposition au modèle de l'arbre); leur plan de composition qui constitue des *plateaux* (zones d'intensité continue); les vecteurs qui les traversent, et qui constituent des *territoires* et des degrés de *déterritorialisation*.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ G. Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fous*, cit., p. 289.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 289.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 289 and 290.

In this context where any duality is overcome and everything configures itself as endless movements of multiplicities, Deleuze and Guattari accent²⁵⁹ the *Body without organs* as the political tool able to maintain the flux of desire. According to *Mille plateaux* “le corps sans organes est un corps affectif, intensif, anarchiste, qui en comporte que des pôles, des zones, des seuils et des gradients. C’est une puissante vitalité non-organique qui le traverse.”²⁶⁰ The BwO²⁶¹ is in fact neither something that I have, nor something that I am, but is rather a process of creation of new ways of being in the world. For Deleuze and Guattari even to say “I” is misleading. Being in the world in fact has nothing to do with the *Geworfenheit* of the *Dasein* and it is not linked with a subjectivity incarnated in a *Leib*. From this perspective, there is neither a subject nor an organism but just an infinite number of molecules that move around transported by desire. “Being in the world” should then be thought of as a process of becoming in which what matters is neither the initial state nor the arrival state but the becoming itself. Indeed, there is no more a proper starting point than there is a proper ending point. Everything is just always in the process of becoming. Deleuze affirms in fact that “il n’y a pas un terme dont on part, ni un auquel on arrive ou auquel on doit arriver. Pas non plus deux termes qui s’échangent. La question «qu’est-ce que tu deviens?» est particulièrement stupide. Car à mesure que quelqu’un devient, ce qu’il devient change autant que lui-même.”²⁶²

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the movement of becoming is not simply intrinsic to the things themselves but *is* the thing itself. What in fact we call “states of being” or simply “things” are nothing but immobilizations of becoming. Any object of the world is constantly changing although the subject is not always able to perceive it. The boundaries of things then have to be seen as abstractions of the becoming that the things really are. This is the reason why we

²⁵⁹ “Nous n’avons jamais compris de la même façon le « corps sans organes».” Ibid., p. 220.

²⁶⁰ G. Deleuze, *Critique et clinique*, Les éditions de minuit, Paris 1993, p. 164.

²⁶¹ From now on I will use the same acronym that Deleuze and Guattari often use to refer to *le corps sans organes*: CsO (or BwO in English).

²⁶² G. Deleuze and C. Parnet, *Dialogues*, cit., p. 8.

should think of becoming not as the intermediary between two states but as the intrinsic nature of every “state of being”. According to Deleuze and Guattari in fact, the states of being are just conceptual fictions that, in creating a fixed image of the movement of molecules, miss their intrinsic movement. As a sort of philosophical reinterpretation of Heisenberg’s *uncertainty principle*²⁶³, Deleuze and Guattari are not suggesting that there is not a physical reality, in fact they affirm that you certainly see things and that you can even describe their properties, but they maintain that in doing so you miss the movement that the things really are, you confuse the abstraction that you just described with the “thing itself.” The core issue for them is that a “thing itself” does not really exist – like as there is not a subject who can grasp it. For Deleuze and Guattari there are just multiplicities that continuously become.

However, Deleuze and Guattari do not assert that becoming is either the metaphysical structure of the world, or its ἀρχή. Through a Nietzschean perspective, they simply affirm that everything becomes and that, in this becoming, the subject and the object, the whole and the part, the form and chaos are no longer distinguishable except as intellectual abstractions. As appears clear Deleuze and Guattari are trying in this way to checkmate the dualistic thought that has accompanied philosophy since its birth.

In this scenario where nothing is stable and everything becomes, what emerges as a common point among all becoming(s) is the repetition of difference. If in fact is true that all things that become become different from themselves, then it is also true that the only thing that constantly repeats itself through all becomings is difference itself, the difference that belongs to the becoming that all things are. From this perspective, difference and repetition appear as the concave and convex versions of the same movement that is the becoming of all things: the difference is in the repetition with which things continuously become different from themselves, and the repetition is in the difference through which things continue to be different from themselves.

²⁶³ According to Heisenberg’s *Uncertainty principle*, you cannot determine both the position and the momentum of an elementary particle at exactly the same time.

Deleuze and Guattari call this moving and open milieu of multiplicities that continuously become “*plan d'immanence*” and refer to the BwO as the part of it that can be used as a political tool to freely maintain the movement of desire. The BwO in fact is not just something that is continuously different from itself, but something that inherently opposes itself to all dimensions that, in giving it an organization and a structure, would immobilize it:

Considérons les trois grandes strates par rapport à nous, c'est-à-dire celles qui nous ligotent le plus directement: l'organisme, la signifiante et la subjectivation. La surface d'organisme, l'angle de signifiante et d'interprétation, le point de subjectivation ou d'assujettissement. Tu seras organisé, tu seras un organisme, tu articuleras ton corps – sinon tu ne seras qu'un dépravé. Tu seras signifiant et signifié, interprète et interprété – sinon tu ne seras qu'un déviant. Tu seras sujet, et fixé comme tel, sujet d'énonciation rabattu sur un sujet d'énoncé – sinon tu ne seras qu'un vagabond. A l'ensemble des strates, le CsO oppose la désarticulation (ou les *n* articulations) comme propriété du plan de consistance, l'expérimentation comme opération sur ce plan (pas de signifiant, n'interprétez jamais!), le nomadisme comme mouvement (même sur place, bougez, ne cessez pas de bouger, voyage immobile, déssubjectivation).²⁶⁴

The BwO is in fact an endless practice of becoming that, following the movement of desire, embraces everything without belonging to anything. If its enemies are organization, signification, and subjectivization, it is because each of these seeks to trap the BwO inside functions, meanings, and purposes instead of leaving it free to expand everywhere. But despite these attempts, the BwO escapes their grasp and configures itself as a flux of mobile and variable intensities. “Un CsO est fait de telle manière qu'il ne peut être occupé, peuplé que par des intensités. Seules les intensités passent et circulent.”²⁶⁵ This is the reason why the BwO rejects any unified organization, be it in the form of a subject, an organism, or a society.

²⁶⁴ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Mille plateaux : Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2*, Les éditions de minuit, Paris 1980, pp. 197 and 198.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

The expression *Corps sans organes* originally comes from a radio play²⁶⁶ in which Artaud declared war against the organs²⁶⁷, but in Deleuze and Guattari's interpretation the enemies of the BwO are not the organs in themselves but the organism, namely the unitary structure of organization of the body:

On ne croira pas toutefois que le véritable ennemi du corps sans organes soit les organes eux-mêmes. L'ennemi, c'est l'organisme, c'est-à-dire l'organisation qui impose aux organes un régime de totalisation, de collaboration, de synergie, d'intégration, d'inhibition et de disjonction. En ce sens, oui, les organes sont bien l'ennemi du corps sans organes qui exerce sur eux une action répulsive et dénonce en eux des appareils de persécution. Mais aussi bien, le corps sans organes attire les organes, se les approprie et les fait fonctionner *dans un autre régime* que celui de l'organisme, dans des conditions où chaque organe est d'autant plus tout le corps qu'il s'exerce pour lui-même et inclut les fonctions des autres. Les organes alors sont comme «miraculés» par le corps sans organes, suivant ce régime machinique qui ne se confond ni avec des mécanismes organiques ni avec l'organisation de l'organisme.²⁶⁸

Lead by the fluxes of desire, the BwO is able on the one hand to break the existing connection between the organs and their functions, and on the other hand to give them unusual intensities. In this way, the BwO releases the body from the

²⁶⁶ “L'homme est malade parce qu'il est mal construit. Il faut se décider à le mettre à nu pour lui gratter cet animalcule qui le démange mortellement, dieu, et avec dieu ses organes. Car liez-moi si vous le voulez, mais il n'y a rien de plus inutile qu'un organe. Lorsque vous lui aurez fait un corps sans organes, alors vous l'aurez délivré de tous ses automatismes et rendu à sa véritable liberté. Alors vous lui réapprendrez à danser à l'envers comme dans le délire des bals musette et cet envers sera son véritable endroit” A. Artaud, *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, t. XIII, p. 104.

²⁶⁷ “Le 28 novembre 1947, Artaud déclare la guerre aux organes: Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu, «car liez-moi si vous le voulez, mais il n'y a rien de plus inutile qu'un organe». C'est une expérimentation non seulement radiophonique, mais biologique, politique, appelant sur soi censure et répression. Corpus et Socius, politique et expérimentation. On ne vous laissera pas expérimenter dans votre coin.” G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, cit., p. 186.

²⁶⁸ G. Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fous*, cit., p. 20.

prison of the organism and gives it new and unexpected possibilities of expression.

Deleuze and Guattari explain also that the enemy of the BwO is not just the organism but all dimensions that try to give it a unitary and organized structure. For this reason, it is not sufficient to separate the body from the organism but it is also necessary “arracher la conscience au sujet pour en faire un moyen d'exploration, arracher l'inconscient à la signifiante et à l'interprétation pour en faire une véritable production.”²⁶⁹ According to Deleuze and Guattari, thanks to the BwO we can experience the intensities of desire without trapping those intensities in the false reifications of subjectivity, meaning, or the organism. The political force of the BwO is precisely that in having no pre-existing path to follow, and no established purpose to achieve, it can roam freely, following only the casual intensities that it finds in its wanderings.

Nothing better expresses the BwO than the metaphor of “*la promenade du schizo*.” But in contrast to the claims of *Anti-Oedipus*, the schizophrenic paradigm is no longer required to achieve a BwO. There are in fact *mille plateaux* to lean on and infinite possibilities of building a BwO: *le corps hypocondriaque*,²⁷⁰ *le corps paranoïaque*,²⁷¹ *le corps schizo*,²⁷² *le corps drogué*,²⁷³

²⁶⁹ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, cit., p. 198.

²⁷⁰ “du corps hypocondriaque dont les organes sont détruits, la destruction est déjà faite, plus rien ne se passe, «Mlle X affirme qu'elle n'a plus ni cerveau ni nerfs ni poitrine ni estomac ni boyaux, il ne lui reste plus que la peau et les os du corps désorganisé, ce sont là ses propres expressions».” Ibid., p. 186.

²⁷¹ “du corps paranoïaque, où les organes ne cessent d'être attaqués par des influences, mais aussi restaurés par des énergies extérieures («il a longtemps vécu sans estomac, sans intestins, presque sans poumons, l'œsophage déchiré, sans vessie, les côtes broyées, il avait parfois mangé en partie son propre larynx, et ainsi de suite, mais les miracles divins avaient toujours à nouveau régénéré ce qui avait été détruit...».)” Ibid., p. 186.

²⁷² “du corps schizo, accédant à une lutte intérieure active qu'il mené lui-même contre les organes, au prix de la catatonie.” Ibid., p. 186.

²⁷³ “du corps drogué, schizo expérimental: «l'organisme humain est d'une inefficacité scandaleuse; au lieu d'une bouche et d'un anus qui risquent tous deux de se détraquer, pourquoi n'aurait-on pas un seul orifice polyvalent pour l'alimentation et la défécation? On pourrait murer la bouche et le

le *corps masochiste*, are just some examples. However, as Deleuze and Guattari make clear, care should be taken not to turn the BwO into an identity – “le corps sans organes n'est jamais le tien, le mien... C'est toujours *un corps*.”²⁷⁴ According to Deleuze and Guattari it is fundamental to keep a “mouvement de déterritorialisation généralisée ou chacun prend et fait ce qu'il peut, d'après ses goûts qu'il aurait réussi à abstraire d'un Moi, d'après une politique ou une stratégie qu'on aurait réussi à abstraire de telle ou telle formation, d'après tel procédé qui serait abstrait de son origine.”²⁷⁵ In this way, no one runs the risk of reproducing coercive structures dictated by either the subject, the organism, the signification, or the society. The right question concerning the BwO should never be *what* – or even worse, *who* – is a BwO, but always “comment se faire un Corps sans Organes?”²⁷⁶ How to use the inherent becoming of all things as a political tool that keeps the movement of desire free from any social constraint: “Là où la psychanalyse dit: Arrêtez, retrouvez votre moi, il faudrait dire: Allons encore plus loin, nous n'avons pas encore trouvé notre CsO, pas assez défait notre moi. Remplacez l'anamnèse par l'oubli, l'interprétation par l'expérimentation. Trouvez votre corps sans organes, sachez le faire, c'est question de vie ou de mort, de jeunesse et de vieillesse, de tristesse et de gaieté. Et c'est là que tout se joue.”²⁷⁷

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the BwO is constantly threatened by a “triple curse” that weighs on desire:

Chaque fois que le désir est trahi, maudit, arraché à son champ d'immanence, il y a un prêtre là-dessous. Le prêtre a lancé la triple malédiction sur le désir : celle de la loi négative, celle de la règle extrinsèque, celle de l'idéal transcendant. Tourné vers le nord, le prêtre a dit: Désir est manque (comment ne manquerait-il pas de ce qu'il désire?) Le prêtre opérait le premier sacrifice, nommé castration, et tous les hommes et les femmes du nord venaient se ranger derrière lui, criant en cadence

nez, combler l'estomac et creuser un trou d'aération directement dans les poumons, ce qui aurait dû être fait dès l'origine».” Ibid., p. 186.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 203

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 195.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 185.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 187.

«manque, manque, c'est la loi commune». Puis, tourné vers le sud, le prêtre a rapporté le désir au plaisir. Car il y a des prêtres hédonistes et même orgastiques. Le désir se soulagera dans le plaisir; et non seulement le plaisir obtenu fera taire un moment le désir, mais l'obtenir est déjà une manière de l'interrompre, de le décharger à l'instant et de vous décharge de lui. Le plaisir-décharge: le prêtre opère le second sacrifice nommé masturbation. Puis, tourné vers l'est, il s'écrie: Jouissance est impossible, mais l'impossible jouissance est inscrite dans le désir. Car tel est l'Idéal, en son impossibilité même, «le manque-à-jour qu'est la vie». Le prêtre opérant le troisième sacrifice, fantasme ou mille et une nuits, cent vingt journées, tandis que les hommes de l'est chantaient: oui, nous serons votre fantasme, votre idéal et votre impossibilité, les vôtres et les nôtres aussi. Le prêtre ne s'était pas tourné vers l'ouest, parce qu'il savait qu'il y était rempli d'un plan de consistance, mais croyait que cette direction était bouchée par les colonnes d'Hercule, sans issue, non habitée des hommes. C'est pourtant là que le désir était tapi, l'ouest était le plus court chemin de l'est, et des autres directions redécouvertes et déterritorialisées.²⁷⁸

With a clear reference to the *Genealogy of Morality*, Deleuze and Guattari use the figure of the priest as the trans-historic instance that programmatically jeopardizes the forces of desire. This is the reason why, although the curses have historical references, they should be thought of as concentric arcs that fold back on themselves in every historical period. “La première malédiction du désir, la première malédiction qui pèse comme une malédiction chrétienne, qui pèse sur le désir et qui remonte aux Grecs, c'est le désir est manque.”²⁷⁹ Deleuze and Guattari indicate the North – the high, the top, the heaven – as the direction of the first curse because from Plato to Christianity the object of desire is located in the transcendent world – a world to which humans aspire but that is unreachable in this world and, for that reason, constitutes desire as lack.

The second curse is located in the South – the low, the bottom, the earth – because it is the place of a “false immanence.” Although the object of desire

²⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 191 and 192.

²⁷⁹ G. Deleuze, *Dualisme, monisme et multiplicités : Cours Vincennes 1973*, available online : <https://www.le-terrier.net/deleuze/anti-oedipe1000plateaux/1126-03-73.htm>. P. 3.

transcends the subject, he does not stop looking for it. But unfortunately, since desire “c'est inatteignable, c'est le pur transcendant,” the subject will always confuse appearances with the true object of desire. Perpetually unsatisfied by the absence of the true object, the subject tries desperately to fill with pleasure the lack that desire structurally inscribed in him. Pleasure comes then to quell the pain that desire creates. As Deleuze underlines: “ce qui vient le remplir ou le satisfaire, qui vient lui donner une pseudo-immanence, ça va être ce qu'on appelle l'état de plaisir, mais dès ce second niveau, il est entendu que cette immanence est une fausse immanence puisque le désir a été défini fondamentalement en rapport avec une transcendance, que ce remplissement c'est, à la lettre, une illusion, un leurre. Seconde malédiction du désir : il s'agit de calmer le désir pour l'instant, et puis la malédiction recommencera. Et puis il faudra le réclamer, et puis c'est la conception du plaisir-décharge.” The hedonistic priest, in pain for the absence of the true object, creates a pseudo-immanence that is useful to unload the tension generated by desire but that is not true since it is still connected with a fundamental transcendence. Confusing the immanent flux of desire that passes through the BwO with pleasure and discharge, the hedonistic priest does nothing but territorialize and arrest the free movement of desire. As I have explained, Deleuze and Guattari see desire as a flux of forces and intensities that should move freely, without constraint or predetermination. Indeed, as Deleuze states emphatically during one of his courses at Vincennes, “le plaisir ou l'orgasme, ce n'est pas du tout l'achèvement du processus, c'est, ou son interruption, ou son exaspération, or les deux reviennent au même et c'est tout à fait fâcheux!”²⁸⁰

Here we find not only an attack on Freud and the problem of the tension of sexual excitement²⁸¹ but also on Reich²⁸² and in a certain way on Foucault as well.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

²⁸¹ “L'idée du plaisir, c'est une idée complètement pourrie - y'a qu'à voir les textes de Freud, au niveau désir-plaisir, ça revient à dire que le désir c'est avant tout une tension désagréable. Il y a un ou deux textes où Freud dit que, après tout, il y a peut-être des tensions agréables, mais encore ça ne va pas loin. En gros, le désir est vécu comme une tension tellement désagréable que, il faut, mot horrible, mot affreux, pour s'en sortir tellement c'est mauvais ce truc là, il faut une décharge. Et cette décharge, et bien c'est ça le plaisir! Les gens auront la paix, et puis, hélas, le désir renaît, il

In a series of notes that Deleuze took just after the publication of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Deleuze summarizes his own position, explicating his wariness about the privileging of pleasure:

La dernière fois que nous nous sommes vus, Michel me dit, avec beaucoup de gentillesse et affection, à peu près: je ne peux pas supporter le mot désir; même si vous l'employez autrement, je ne peux pas m'empêcher de penser ou de vivre que désir = manque, ou que désir se dit réprimé. Michel ajoute: alors moi, ce que j'appelle «plaisir», c'est peut-être ce que vous appelez «désir»; mais de toute façon j'ai besoin d'un autre mot que désir. Évidemment, encore une fois, c'est autre chose qu'une question de mot. Puisque moi, à mon tour, je ne supporte guère le mot «plaisir». Mais pourquoi? Pour moi, désir ne comporte aucun manque; ce n'est pas non plus une donnée naturelle; il ne fait qu'un avec un agencement d'hétérogènes qui fonctionne; il est processus, contrairement à structure ou genèse; il est affect, contrairement à sentiment; il est «haecceité» (individualité d'une journée, d'une saison, d'une vie), contrairement à subjectivité; il est événement, contrairement à chose ou personne. Et surtout il implique la constitution d'un champ d'immanence ou d'un «corps sans organes», qui se définit seulement par des zones d'intensité, des seuils, des gradients, des flux. Ce corps est aussi bien biologique que collectif et politique; c'est sur lui que les agencements se font et se défont, c'est lui qui porte les pointes de déterritorialisation des agencements ou les lignes de fuite. [...] Si je l'appelle corps sans organes, c'est parce qu'il s'oppose à toutes les strates d'organisation, celle de l'organisme, mais aussi bien aux organisations de pouvoir. C'est précisément l'ensemble des organisations du corps qui briseront le plan ou le champ d'immanence, et imposeront au désir un autre

faudra une nouvelle décharge. Les types de conceptions que l'on appelle en termes savants: hédonistes, à savoir la recherche du plaisir, et les types de conceptions mystiques qui maudissent le désir, en vertu de ce qui est fondamental dans le manque, je voudrais que vous sentiez juste que de toutes manières, ils considèrent le désir comme le sale truc qui nous réveille, et qui nous réveille de la manière la plus désagréable, c'est à dire - soit en nous mettant en rapport avec un manque fondamental qui peut être dès lors apaisé avec une espèce d'activité de décharge, et puis on aura la paix, et puis ça recommencera." Ibid., p. 3 and 4.

²⁸² In *The Function of the Orgasm*, Reich explains the nucleus of neuroses in terms of tension and release of energy.

type de «plan», stratifiant à chaque fois le corps sans organes. Si je dis tout cela tellement confus, c'est parce que plusieurs problèmes se posent pour moi par rapport à Michel: je ne peux donner au plaisir aucune valeur positive, parce que le plaisir me paraît interrompre le procès immanent du désir; le plaisir me paraît du côté des strates et de l'organisation; et c'est dans le même mouvement que le désir est présenté comme soumis du dedans à la loi et scandé du dehors par les plaisirs; dans les deux cas, il y a négation d'un champ d'immanence propre au désir. Je me dis que ce n'est pas par hasard si Michel attache une certaine importance à Sade, et moi au contraire à Masoch. Il ne suffirait pas de dire que je suis masochiste, et Michel, sadique. Ce serait bien, mais ce n'est pas vrai. Ce qui m'intéresse chez Masoch, ce ne sont pas les douleurs, mais l'idée que le plaisir vient interrompre la positivité du désir et la constitution de son champ d'immanence (de même, ou plutôt d'une autre façon, dans l'amour courtois, constitution d'un plan d'immanence ou d'un corps sans organes où le désir ne manque de rien, et se garde autant que possible de plaisirs qui viendraient interrompre son processus). Le plaisir me paraît le seul moyen pour une personne ou un sujet de «s'y retrouver» dans un processus qui la déborde. C'est une re-territorialisation. Et de mon point de vue, c'est de la même façon que le désir est rapporté à la loi du manque et à la norme du plaisir.²⁸³

This long quote is the answer that Deleuze gives to Foucault's ethics of pleasure(s). As we can see, Deleuze has for pleasure the same reluctance that Foucault has for desire. For Deleuze, the problem consists in the fact that pleasure on the one hand interrupts the flux of desire and on the other hand territorializes the BwO. According to Deleuze, pleasure permits a person to find himself again amid the experience of being overwhelmed, it allows him to reclaim his body and his identity.

Although Deleuze and Foucault have the same goal – namely the dissolution of the subject and the resistance to social constraints – they consider the impact and the consequences of pleasure and desire in opposite ways. What is fascinating is that this structural disagreement leads them *both* in the same direction: toward masochism. Although in completely different ways, the

²⁸³ G. Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fous*, cit., pp. 118/120.

potential bound up with masochism becomes fundamental for Foucault as well as for Deleuze and Guattari. Though both positions aim to liberate masochism from its psychoanalytic interpretation, according to which masochism (and all other sexual “perversions”) reveals the hidden truth about a subject and his past, they nonetheless interpret masochism in opposite ways. If as we have seen, Foucault thinks of masochism as “the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure”²⁸⁴ freed from desire and for this reason able to resist the *dispositif* of sexuality, Deleuze and Guattari think of masochism “not as a source of pleasure, but as a flow to be followed in the constitution of an uninterrupted process of desire,”²⁸⁵ as one of the ways by which it is possible to fabricate a BwO. Although in their different fashions, both Deleuze and Guattari and Foucault reinterpret masochism as a way to experiment with new and unexpected possibilities of life, as a way to increase the intensities of a life and as a way to act politically against the constraints of society.

Now, what is important to point out is that these two opposite (anti)psychoanalytic re-interpretations of masochism are similarly intent on denying the most important and philosophically interesting intuition of psychoanalysis: namely the (death) drive. It’s not surprising where Foucault is concerned, since he rejects psychoanalysis *in toto*, but this denial is more complicated in the case of Deleuze. Indeed, before the encounter with Guattari, Deleuze was very much interested in the death drive. In *Le froid et le cruel*, he in fact affirms that: “of all the writings of Freud, the masterpiece which we know as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is perhaps the one where he engaged most directly – and how penetratingly – in specifically philosophical reflection.”²⁸⁶ What is really interesting is that in trying to sustain the philosophical impact of Freudian analysis, Deleuze (without Guattari) ends up finding in the death drive *the condition of possibility of pleasure and desire*. Indeed, analyzing *Beyond the*

²⁸⁴ M. Foucault, *Sex, Power, and the Politics of identity*, (interview), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, cit., p. 165.

²⁸⁵ G. Deleuze, *Re-presentation of Masoch* in *Essays: Critical and clinical*, Verso, London and New York 1998, p. 53.

²⁸⁶ G. Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, Zone Books, New York 1991, p. 111.

Pleasure Principle he asks: if it is true that the psychic life of every human being is regulated by the pursuit of pleasure, how is it possible to turn this tension into a principle that regulates the psychic life of the mind? For Deleuze, only from a transcendental point of view it is possible to establish pleasure as the foundation of psychic life. It is then necessary to find “the ‘ground-less’ from which the ground itself emerged.”²⁸⁷ The intuition of Deleuze is that the *beyond* that Freud discovered works *de facto* not so much as a state of exception that jeopardizes the pursuit of pleasure, but as the transcendental foundation of pleasure itself. In Deleuze’s interpretation of Freud “there are no exceptions to the principle but there is a residue that is irreducible to it; nothing contradicts the principle, but there remains something which falls outside it and is not homogeneous with it - something, in short, beyond...”²⁸⁸ precisely because it is its condition of possibility. From the standpoint of the Deleuze of *Le froid et le cruel*, the death drive is the root of the entire Freudian philosophical speculation.

In *Différence et répétition* – a text written a year later than *Le froid et le cruel* and that belongs entirely to the “former” Deleuze – the philosopher develops his thinking concerning the transcendental dimension of the death drive. In the second chapter of the book called *La répétition pour elle-même*, he explains that there is not a pre-determinate structure of mind. On the contrary, the mind builds itself step by step from the *groundlessness* that it is. In order to understand this groundlessness, we have to imagine the nature of the mind as a sort of radical nudity that is always and constantly invaded by life. During those invasions, the bare surface of the mind can do nothing but suffer its own condition, but in the meantime, it creates the scars – or to use a philosophical expression, the synthesis – to which the subject will always *return* in its dealing with life. As Aaron Schuster explains: “it is because of this groundlessness and radical exposure that every mind, in the course of its ‘incomplete constitution’ or ‘failed synthesis,’ will acquire its pathological skew, its idiosyncratic modes of enjoyment, its touch of madness (if not more than a touch) – it is these unique deviances and distortions

²⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 114.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 112.

that hold it together, that compose the secret coherence of the individual and express its abyssal freedom.”²⁸⁹

In this way, we understand that Deleuze overturns the classical interpretation of Freud. According to the classical interpretation of trauma, repetition occurs because there is a traumatized mind. For Deleuze, on the contrary, the mind itself emerges from repetition. The repetition of trauma(s) is the condition that generates the mind itself. Hence the famous sentence of *Différence et répétition*: “Je ne répète pas parce que je refoule. Je refoule parce que je répète.”²⁹⁰ From the classical interpretation of the Freudian paradigm, repetition is the way in which the subject survives those unbearable events that cannot be faced. “According to this scheme, the mind defends itself against painful thoughts and traumatic events by pushing them into the unconscious, but the price it pays for this is that they are never truly left behind or forgotten; they continue to haunt the psyche, returning unpredictably in different guises and contexts, disrupting the smooth flow of psychic life.”²⁹¹ From this perspective the unconscious is a structure that *can be* traumatized – and will be – but that does not find its origin and structure in trauma. Deleuze, by contrast, considers the traumatic event(s) as the spur by which mind constitutes itself. From this perspective, trauma is not an accident, it is the condition from which *every* mind emerges. For this reason, “repetition is not a secondary effect or the consequence of something going wrong, but expresses the very core of the drives, the fact that they are skewed from the start. Put otherwise, repression does not take place in a neutral psychic space, disrupting a prior equilibrium or harmony, but intervenes in a space that is already distorted or awry.”²⁹²

According to Deleuze, there are three syntheses that are connected with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and that are the expression of the temporality of

²⁸⁹ A. Schuster, *The trouble with Pleasure, Deleuze and Psychoanalysis*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2016, p. 51.

²⁹⁰ G. Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, Epiméthée Presses Universitaire de France, Paris 1968, p. 29.

²⁹¹ A. Schuster, *The trouble with Pleasure, Deleuze and Psychoanalysis*, cit., pp. 51 and 29.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

mind: *Habitus* (present)²⁹³, *Mnemosyne* (past)²⁹⁴, and *Thanatos* or the death drive (transcendental synthesis of time).²⁹⁵ “The passive synthesis of habit is submitted to the passive synthesis of memory, which is enabled by the transcendental instance of the death instinct, which is nothing other than the guarantee of the failure of synthesis.”²⁹⁶ In this way we understand how close Deleuze is to Lacan in affirming that it is not possible to trace a linear genesis of mind. “At its earliest beginnings what one discovers is not some first cause or positively definable primal scene, but a rupture or a gap or, in Deleuze’s vocabulary, pure difference. There is a break in the causal chain, a missing link. And the drama of psychic life consists in the process of living this break and repeating it, of cracking up in one’s own fashion.”²⁹⁷ For the earlier Deleuze, the death drive represents, then, not only an important concept in the Freudian itinerary, but the condition of possibility of the formation of the mind, its own foundation and the rock upon which it continually bumps throughout its existence.

Only after the encounter with Guattari does Deleuze become reluctant to use the death drive to explain the formation of the mind and starts to think of desire as productive connections of forces. In *Mille Plateaux* Deleuze and Guattari assert without hesitation: “We are not invoking any kind of death drive. There are no internal drives in desire, only assemblages.”²⁹⁸ The death drive, however, is not just thrown away, but, in the form of Lacanian *jouissance*, it becomes the worst enemy of Deleuze and Guattari. According to them, the death drive is in fact the heart of what they call the third curse of desire.

²⁹³ “La première synthèse exprime la fondation du temps sur un présent vivant, fondation qui donne au plaisir sa valeur de principe empirique en général, auquel est soumis le contenu de la vie psychique dans le Ça.” G. Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, cit., p. 151.

²⁹⁴ “La seconde synthèse exprime le fondement du temps par un passé pur, fondement qui conditionne l’application du principe de plaisir aux contenus du Moi.” Ibid., p. 151.

²⁹⁵ “la troisième synthèse désigne le sansfond, où le fondement lui-même nous précipite : *Thanatos*” Ibid., p. 151.

²⁹⁶ A. Schuster, *The trouble with Pleasure, Deleuze and Psychoanalysis*, cit., p. 67.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 66.

²⁹⁸ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia 2*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London 1987, p. 229.

As Deleuze affirms during his course at Vincennes the third curse is the one that goes east namely toward right-wing conservatism²⁹⁹. In *Mille Plateaux* they in fact affirm: “La figure la plus récente du prêtre est le psychanalyste avec ses trois principes, Plaisir, Mort et Réalité. Sans doute la psychanalyse avait montré que le désir n'était pas soumis à la procréation ni même à la génitalité. C'était son modernisme. Mais elle gardait l'essentiel, elle avait même trouvé de nouveaux moyens pour inscrire dans le désir la loi négative du manque, la règle extérieure du plaisir, l'idéal transcendant du fantasme.”³⁰⁰ According to Deleuze and Guattari, even if psychoanalysis does not connect desire with a transcendent world, it keeps the transcendent separation implicit in the postulation of desire as lack. “On voit bien comment ça fait partie du même truc de dire que la jouissance ce n'est pas le plaisir, ça fait partie d'une espèce de système, que pour tout simplifier, je présenterais comme une conception circulaire du désir où, à la base, il y a toujours le postulat de départ.”³⁰¹ Indeed, since it is accepted that the “première soudure désir-manque, dès lors, ça va de soi que le désir est défini en fonction d'un champ de transcendance.”³⁰²

According to Deleuze and Guattari, with the Lacanian division between pleasure and *jouissance*, psychoanalysis does nothing but perpetrate the idea of a transcendence of desire, although inside the pseudo-immanence of pleasure. *Jouissance* works on two fronts. Although it is connected with pleasure, it is not reachable by pleasure. *Jouissance* is in fact beyond pleasure, in a beyond that, as such, is unreachable by pleasure. In this way, psychoanalysis condemns the subject on the one hand to the dissatisfaction of pleasure, and on the other hand to a tension that leads him beyond pleasure. The same old curse that always

²⁹⁹ “La psychanalyse, c'est pire que l'hôpital, précisément parce qu'elle fonctionne dans tous les pores de la société capitaliste et pas dans des lieux spéciaux d'enfermement. [...] elle est profondément réactionnaire dans sa pratique et sa théorie, pas seulement dans son idéologie.” G. Deleuze, *L'île déserte*, cit., pp. 306 and 307.

³⁰⁰ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, cit., pp. 191 and 192.

³⁰¹ G. Deleuze, *Dualisme, monisme et multiplicités : Cours Vincennes 1973*, available online : <https://www.le-terrier.net/deleuze/anti-oedipe1000plateaux/1126-03-73.htm>, p. 7.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

imprisons desire still falls on the subject, although with a different form and a different name. With *jouissance*,³⁰³ psychoanalysis creates then the third curse or, as Deleuze affirms in his course at Vincennes, the third arc of the curse that always trapped desire.³⁰⁴

Mais, comme dans toute bonne construction, puisque tout ça c'est de la pure construction, c'est pas vrai, c'est faux d'un bout à l'autre, il faut un troisième pour boucler le truc, puisque vous avez cette vérité supposée du désir branchée sur une transcendance de l'Autre, cette illusion ou ce leurre par lequel le désir rencontre des décharges calmantes à l'issue desquelles il disparaît, quitte à reparaître le lendemain, il faut bien un troisième arc pour rendre compte de ceci: que même à travers ces états de sommeil, de satisfaction, etc. Il faut bien que soit réaffirmé sous une forme nouvelle l'irréductibilité du désir aux états de plaisir qui l'ont satisfait que en apparence, il soit réaffirmé sur un autre mode: la transcendance. *Et cette réaffirmation c'est le rapport jouissance impossible-mort*. Et du début à la fin, c'était la même conception, et quand on nous dit: attention, faut pas confondre le désir, le plaisir, la jouissance, évidemment il ne faut pas les confondre puisqu'ils en ont besoin pour faire trois arcs d'un même cercle, à savoir les trois malédictions portées sur le désir. Les trois malédictions c'est: tu manqueras chaque fois que tu désireras, tu n'espéreras que des décharges, tu poursuivras l'impossible jouissance. Alors le désir est complètement piégé, il est pris dans un cercle.³⁰⁵

³⁰³ “quand on introduit la notion de jouissance là-dedans - vous voyez je suis en train d'essayer de faire un cercle, très confus, un cercle pieux, un cercle religieux de la théorie du désir, on voit à quel point la psychanalyse en est imprégnée, et à quel point la piété psychanalytique est grande. Ce cercle, un de ses segments c'est le désir-manque, un autre segment c'est plaisir-décharge, et encore une fois, c'est complètement lié ça.” Ibid., pp. 3 and 4.

³⁰⁴ “Si on ajoute le troisième arc de cercle: désir-manque, tout ça c'est toujours du désir qui est dirigé sur de la transcendance. En effet, si le désir manque de quelque chose, il est comme intentionnalité visée de ce dont il manque, il se définit en fonction d'une transcendance, de la même manière qu'il est mesuré en fonction d'une unité qui n'est pas la sienne, et qui serait le plaisir ou l'orgasme lui assurant sa décharge. Et, pour fermer ce cercle dont on n'a pour le moment que deux arcs – évidemment, le thème qui consiste à établir une distinction entre jouissance et plaisir, est très utile. C'est ça qui va faire fonctionner le tout. Je pense notamment à une distinction chère à Lacan, mais je ne la connais pas, la distinction entre la jouissance et le plaisir.” Ibid., p. 4.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 7 and 8. Italic mine.

All the work that Deleuze and Guattari have done together tries to destroy this apparatus, showing that desire “n'est rapporté à aucune transcendance, il n'est rapporté à aucun manque, il n'est mesuré à aucun plaisir et il n'est transcendé par aucune jouissance, sous la forme ou sous le mythe de l'impossible. Le désir est posé comme pur processus”³⁰⁶ of forces and intensities that cross the BwO and that only through the BwO can stay free.

As I have already mentioned, although Deleuze and Guattari give some examples of possible BwO, they refer frequently to masochism. The reason is not that masochism is a better BwO – no one is better than the others – but that it occupies a fundamental place inside psychoanalytic thought. First with Freud who not only sees masochism as a fundamental step in sexual development³⁰⁷ but also places it at the heart of human sexuality – at least in Bersani’s interpretation.³⁰⁸ And second with Lacan, who refers to masochism not only as the “cœur du problème sur le sujet des perversions existantes”³⁰⁹ but also as the core of desire itself since “ce que nous trouvons au fond de l'exploration analytique du désir c'est le masochisme.”³¹⁰ However, the principle enemy that Deleuze and Guattari have in mind in *Milles Plateaux* is no longer Freud, but Lacan. It is in fact Lacan who gave a new meaning to *jouissance* and who, through the Real, put the death drive again at the center of the psychoanalytic debate.

In *La logique du fantasme*, Lacan argues that desire is inscribed in the divided subject through a logic that firmly separates the subject itself from the object of desire (*objet a*). “L'important [explains Lacan] est d'apercevoir qu'ils [objets a] ne tiennent cette fonction dans le désir qu'à y être aperçus comme solidaires de cette refente (d'y être à la fois inégaux, et conjoignant à la disjoindre), de cette refente où le sujet s'apparaît être dyade – soit prend le leurre

³⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁰⁷ See S. Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

³⁰⁸ See L. Bersani, *The Freudian Body*.

³⁰⁹ J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire: Livre VII, L'éthique de la psychanalyse, (1959 – 1960)*, cit., p. 24.

³¹⁰ J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire: Livre V, Les formations de l'inconscient, (1957 – 1958)*, Editions de Seuil, Paris 1998, p. 313.

de sa vérité même. C'est la structure du fantasme notée par nous de la parenthèse dont le contenu est à prononcer: S barré poinçon *a*.”³¹¹ According to Lacan, the objects of desire are desired only if they are related to a structure that, through a bar, keeps them separate from the subject. This structure that combines in the separation – and that Lacan call *fantasme* – is the logic that sustains the relation between subject and desire. If Lacan affirms that the core of desire is masochism it is because the logic of fantasy to which the subject of desire is structurally linked condemns him to the pain of separation: “le sujet se saisit comme souffrant, il saisit son expérience d'être vivant comme souffrant, c'est-à-dire comme étant sujet du désir.”³¹² The difference between the masochist and the non-masochist, or to use Lacan's terms, the difference between the pervert and the non-pervert, is simply that the former has “affronté de beaucoup plus près à l'impasse de l'acte sexuel. Sujet autant que lui bien sûr [the normal one], mais qui fait des rets du fantasme l'appareil de conduction par où il dérobe en court-circuit une jouissance dont le heu de l'Autre ne le sépare pas moins.”³¹³ This is the reason why, according to Lacan, if it is true that “il n'y a pas d'autre entrée pour le sujet dans le réel que le fantasme,”³¹⁴ then it is also true that “le masochisme est le majeur de la jouissance que donne le Réel.”³¹⁵ We will come back to this structure in the following chapter, for the moment it is important just to point it out as the structure to which Deleuze and Guattari oppose their account of desire.

From Deleuze and Guattari's perspective, to show the incompatibility between masochism and the *fantasme*, does not mean only to take masochism away from the interpretative meshes of psychoanalysis, but also to destroy the entire apparatus on which psychoanalysis builds its account of sexuality. The aim of Deleuze and Guattari is not just to “save” desire from lack, pleasure, and *jouissance* – the triptych that forms the “curse of desire” – but also, and at the same time, to give the final blow to psychoanalysis.

³¹¹ J. Lacan, *La logique du fantasme*, in *Autre Ecrits*, Editions de Seuil, Paris 2001, p 324.

³¹² J. Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre V, Les formations de l'inconscient, (1957 – 1958)*, cit., p. 313.

³¹³ J. Lacan, *La logique du fantasme*, in *Autre Ecrits*, cit., p. 327.

³¹⁴ J. Lacan, *La logique du fantasme*, in *Autre Ecrits*, cit., p. 326.

³¹⁵ J. Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre XXIII, Le sinthome, (1975 – 1976)*, cit, p. 90.

Talking about masochism, Deleuze and Guattari write in *Mille Plateaux*:

«Maitresse, 1) tu peux me ligoter sur la table, solidement serré, dix à quinze minutes, le temps de préparer les instruments; 2) cent coups de fouet au moins, quelques minutes d'arrêt; 3) tu commences la couture, tu couds le mou du gland, la peau autour de celui-ci au gland l'empêchant de décalotter, tu couds la bourse des couilles à la peau des cuisses. Tu cordé les seins, mais un bouton à quatre trous solidement sur chaque téton. Tu peux les réunir avec un élastique à boutonnière – *tu passes à la deuxième phase*: 4) tu as le choix soit de me retourner sur la table, sur le ventre ligoté, mais les jambes réunies, soit de m'attacher au poteau seul, les poignets réunis, les jambes aussi, tout le corps solidement attaché; 5) tu me fouettes le dos les fesses les cuisses, cent coups de fouet au moins; 6) tu couds les fesses ensemble, toute la mie du cul. Solidement avec du fil double en arrêtant chaque point. Si je suis sur la table, tu m'attaches alors au poteau; 7) tu me cravaches les fesses cinquante coups; 8) si tu veux corser la torture et exécuter ta menace de la dernière fois, tu enfonces dans les fesses les épingles à fond; 9) tu peux alors m'attacher sur la chaise, tu me cravaches le seins trente coup et tu enfonces les épingles plus petites, si tu veux tu peux les faire rougir au réchaud avant, toutes ou quelques-unes. Le ligotage sur la chaise devrait être solide et les poignets dans le dos pour faire ressortir la poitrine. Si je n'ai pas parlé des brûlures, c'est que je dois passer d'ici quelque temps une visite et c'est long à guérir.» – *Ce n'est pas un fantasme, c'est un programme*: différence essentielle entre l'interprétation psychanalytique du fantasme et l'expérimentation anti-psychanalytique du programme. Entre le fantasme, interprétation elle-même à interpréter, et le programme moteur d'expérimentation. Le CsO, c'est ce qui reste quand on a tout ôté. Et ce qu'on ôte, c'est précisément le fantasme, l'ensemble des significances et des subjectivations. La psychanalyse fait le contraire: elle traduit tout en fantasmes, elle monnaie tout en fantasmes, elle garde le fantasme, et par excellence rate le réel, parce qu'elle rate le CsO.³¹⁶

As we can see, Deleuze and Guattari attack psychoanalysis and the logic of phantasy that psychoanalysis affirms. From their perspective, masochism does not refer at all to a *fantasme* that orients its acts. On the contrary, masochism is a

³¹⁶ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, cit., pp. 187 and 188.

“program” of creation thanks to which it is possible to establish new relations with the parts of the body that, from that moment, stop having predetermined functions and become *loci* of unexpected intensities. The tortures to which the masochist submits do not follow a fantasy of humiliation but serve to create a flat surface on which he can transport the forces of desire. “On le comprend mal à partir de la douleur, c’est d’abord une affaire de CsO; Il se fait coudre par son sadique ou sa putain, coudre les yeux, l’anus, l’urètre, les seins, le nez; il se fait suspendre pour arrêter l’exercice des organes, dépiauter comme si les organes tenaient à la peau, enculer, étouffer, pour que tout soit scellé bien clos.”³¹⁷ According to Deleuze and Guattari, the masochist is not an algophile. He does not like pain in itself and he does not even use pain to get pleasure. On the contrary he follows the intensities of pain only to create a BwO thanks to which he can live in the uninterrupted flux of desire without breaking it with the discharge of pleasure:

Soit l’interprétation du masochisme: quand on n’invoque pas la ridicule pulsion de mort, on prétend que le masochiste, comme tout le monde, cherche le plaisir, mais ne peut y arriver que par des douleurs et des humiliations fantasmatiques qui auraient pour fonction d’apaiser ou de conjurer une angoisse profonde. Ce n’est pas exact; la souffrance du masochiste est le prix qu’il faut qu’il paie, non pas pour parvenir au plaisir, mais pour dénouer le pseudo-lien du désir avec le plaisir comme mesure extrinsèque. Le plaisir n’est nullement ce qui ne pouvait être atteint que par le détour de la souffrance, mais ce qui doit être retardé au maximum comme interrompant le procès continu du désir positif. C’est qu’il y a une joie immanente au désir, comme s’il se remplissait de soi-même et de ses contemplations, et qui n’implique aucun manque, aucune impossibilité, qui ne se mesure pas davantage au plaisir, puisque c’est cette joie qui distribuera les intensités de plaisir et les empêchera d’être pénétrées d’angoisse, de honte, de culpabilité. Bref, le masochiste se sert de la souffrance comme d’un moyen pour constituer un corps sans organes et dégager un plan de consistance du désir. Qu’il y ait d’autres moyens, d’autres procédés que le masochisme, et meilleurs

³¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 186 and 187.

certainement, c'est une autre question; il suffit que ce procédé convienne à certains.³¹⁸

But if any BwO works as well as any other since each produces an intense “joy” devoid of anguish, shame, pleasure, or guilt, why do Deleuze and Guattari affirm in the end of the paragraph that there are *better ways* than masochism to build a BwO? From what perspective can they judge the value of the masochistic BwO? Is it because the tortures to which the masochist submits in order to interrupt the functions of his own body are dangerous for his health? But this would require judging the BwO of the masochist from an organicist perspective – precisely the one that the BwO is meant to eliminate. If this is true then their argument wobbles dangerously; and they know that. Indeed, in order to protect the BwO from this kind of critique, they explain that it's all a matter of dosage: “la prudence est l’art commune”³¹⁹ to all BwO. But *who* exactly is supposed to dose the intensities of the BwO, *who* has to learn the art of prudence, *who* if not the subject that the BwO was meant to destroy? In this way, we can see that Deleuze and Guattari fall into another paradox, reintroducing the very subject whom the BwO aspired to eliminate. Although it is reduced to a bare minimum, this subject is *nonetheless* required to determine when to flow with the forces of desire and when, on the contrary, to resist them in order to keep control over itself and its political efficacy: “L’organisme, il faut en garder assez pour qu’il se reforme à chaque aube; et des petites provisions de signification et d’interprétation, il faut en garder, même pour les opposer à leur propre système quand les circonstances l’exigent, quand les choses, les personnes, même les situations vous y forcent; et de petites rations de subjectivité, il faut en garder suffisamment pour pouvoir répondre à la réalité dominante.”³²⁰

For Deleuze and Guattari, it is crucial to keep a fine dust of subjectivity in order to defend oneself against the threats posed by reality. Now, beyond the fact that in this way they fall back into yet another contradiction – since the subject

³¹⁸ Ibid., p. 192.

³¹⁹ Ibid., p. 198.

³²⁰ Ibid., p. 199.

that the BwO disorganizes is also the subject that in the end is invested with the power of choosing if it is better to flow with the intensities of desire or to resist them – why do Deleuze and Guattari feel the need to emphasize how important it is for the subject to maintain control and not abandon itself completely to the intensities of the BwO? “Beaucoup sont vaincus dans cette bataille”³²¹ they affirm. But defeated by what? What kind of battle is at stake since they are not talking about the forces of society but of the intensities liberated by the BwO? After invoking the necessity of creating a BwO to resist the constraints of society, Deleuze and Guattari now pull back from the full implications of the BwO. They affirm in fact “il peut être terrifiant, il peut vous mener à la mort!”³²² But why is the BwO so dangerous? Why should anyone need to manage its intensities by preserving the subjectivity from which it aims to free us? Is it because the forces of desire are out of control? Is it because the intensities produced by the BwO do not belong to the subject, but to something else, something that he cannot really master? Even if Deleuze and Guattari want to deny the drive – and in particular the death drive³²³ – they end up recognizing them in the very form of the BwO. Indeed, even if the subject of *Mille plateau* can play hide and seek with the BwO, it must always keep an eye open because the forces that go along with desire – and that the BwO lets emerge – have the power to overwhelm the putative sovereignty of the subject, leading him to death.

Despite their program of liberating the forces of desire, a program in which the subject and its organism have to get lost in the multiple productions of desire, Deleuze and Guattari paradoxically end up claiming the necessity of a return of a subject that has to fight *against* the BwO –*against* those intensities that he cannot control because *they are the expression of the drive*.

Masochism is not a choice. Certainly, people can decide if they want, or if they do not want, to *practice* masochism, but they cannot decide whether or not pain and humiliation lure them. Obviously, I am not saying that masochism is the

³²¹ Ibid., p. 187.

³²² Ibid., p. 186.

³²³ “On invente des autodestructions qui ne se confondent pas avec la pulsion de mort.” Ibid., cit., p. 198.

"true nature" of a person. There is no such thing as the "true nature" of a person. Using the same argument that Foucault used concerning homosexuality, we can say that masochism is nothing more than a historical fiction. *Nevertheless*, this fiction takes the form of a person which embodies certain aspects of masochism, making the fiction real. Therefore, when we talk of masochism we should never refer to "a mysteriously predetermined and permanently fixed orientation, but to the inevitable, unpredictable, and variable process by which desire becomes attached to persons."³²⁴ This process is unpredictable and variable because it happens differently for each person, but it is also inevitable because no one can avoid the encounter with the death drive. As Deleuze himself explained in *Difference et répétition*, the encounter with the death drive is not an accident, but it is the very condition of the structure of human desire:

Nous ne voyons donc aucune raison pour poser un instinct de mort qui se distinguerait d'Érôs, soit par une différence de nature entre deux forces, soit par une différence de rythme ou d'amplitude entre deux mouvements. Dans les deux cas, la différence serait déjà donnée, et Thanatos indépendant. Il nous semble, au contraire, que Thanatos se confond entièrement avec la déssexualisation d'Érôs, avec la formation de cette énergie neutre et déplaçable dont parle Freud. Celle-ci ne passe pas au service de Thanatos, elle le constitue: il n'y a pas entre Érôs et Thanatos une différence analytique, c'est-à-dire déjà donnée, dans une même « synthèse » qui les réunirait tous deux ou les ferait alterner. Non pas que la différence soit moins grande; au contraire, elle est plus grande, étant synthétique, précisément parce que Thanatos signifie une tout autre synthèse du temps qu'Érôs, d'autant plus exclusive qu'elle est prélevée sur lui, construite sur ses débris. C'est en même temps qu'Érôs reflue sur le moi – que le moi prend sur lui-même les déguisements et déplacements qui caractérisaient les objets, pour en faire sa propre affection mortelle – que la libido perd tout contenu mnésique, et que le Temps perd sa figure circulaire, pour prendre une forme droite impitoyable – et que l'instinct de mort apparaît, identique à cette forme pure, énergie déssexualisée de cette libido narcissique.³²⁵

³²⁴ L. Bersani, *Homos*, cit., p. 60.

³²⁵ G. Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, cit., pp. 149 and 150.

To understand why this encounter leads different people to desire different things is impossible, as Deleuze and Guattari recognize. The reason why certain people eroticise pain and humiliation is unfathomable. Nevertheless – as the early Deleuze understood – what psychoanalysis points out is that if all people have to deal with a complicated and often contradictory desire that “s’exprime souvent dans les paradoxes insondables d’un plaisir lié à la douleur,”³²⁶ it is because, beyond each one’s personal modulations, the encounter with the death drive is the unavoidable encounter that structures our unconscious.

Certainly, to believe that masochism solves the paradox of a pleasure related to pain with a simple identification would be naïve. For the masochist, pain and pleasure are *still* two different things. Neither banging their head against the kitchen shutter nor kicking their toe against the corner of the bed is arousing for a masochist. Nobody finds random pain attractive – *especially* the masochist who knows pain so well since he has learned to modulate even the most intense nuances of it. The only form of pain that the masochist loves is in fact the one that gets routed through his own fantasy, namely through the symbolic structure that allows him to eroticize it. Without this structure, pain is terrible. The difference between masochism and torture – the one on which the activists of the BDSM community programmatically insist – is that the masochist voluntarily submits to any kind torture *as long as* these tortures reproduce his fantasy. This explains the importance of the *safeword* as the way the masochist can stop the play if, for some reason, it no longer reproduces the rigid structure of the *fantasme*. In this way, BDSM activists argue, even the worst form of torture has nothing to do with “real” violence.

For these reasons, I agree with Deleuze and Guattari when they affirm that the masochist is not simply looking for pain. Pain is not *in itself* a source of pleasure. The relation of pleasure and pain is much more complicated, much more sophisticated. Pleasure is never simply the consequence of pain and pain is never simply the cause of pleasure. But I cannot follow Deleuze and Guattari when they

³²⁶ Ibid., p. 151.

affirm that “le masochiste s'est fait un CsO dans de telles conditions que celui-ci ne peut plus dès lors être peuplé que par des intensités de douleur, *ondes dolorifères*”³²⁷ without problematizing the fact that “les douleurs sont les populations, les meutes, les modes du masoroi dans le désert qu'il a fait naître et croître.”³²⁸ It is not sufficient to say that the masochist “cherche un CsO, mais d'un tel type qu'il ne pourra être rempli, parcouru que par la douleur, en vertu des conditions mêmes où il a été constitué.”³²⁹ Who constitutes the intensities of BwO? The masochist himself? But then why did he decide to go through all this pain if, according to Deleuze and Guattari, “il y ait d'autres moyens, d'autres procédés que le masochisme, et meilleurs certainement?”³³⁰ Deleuze and Guattari just say “il suffit que ce procédé convienne à certains,” as if it were a choice to be masochistic, as if between numerous possibilities someone at a certain point decided to pick the masochistic one, as if at the root of desire there was a clear political stance. Deleuze and Guattari refuse to acknowledge that masochism is not a choice, that the masochist cannot decide what is arousing for him. The “intensities” that attract the masochist – as much as the intensities that lead each of us in one direction rather than another – do not depend on him but on his relation to the drive that he encounters through the screen of fantasy, on what Lacan identifies as the “sinthome” that radically particularizes each subject's access to *jouissance*. Certainly, not all masochists follow the same fantasy, each masochist has his or her own *fantasme*. But this *fantasme* it is not something that can be changed at will by the subject; it has, instead, a rigid structure that connects the subject to the drives.

If Deleuze and Guattari insist so much on the supposed “program” of the masochist instead of acknowledging the structure of its “fantasy,” it is because a program is manageable and can be changed by the subject. Insofar as the political aim of *Mille plateaux* is to use the BwO to follow the becoming multiple of desire – a becoming that allows escape from the constraints imposed by society – the

³²⁷ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, cit., p. 188.

³²⁸ Ibid., p. 188.

³²⁹ Ibid., p. 188.

³³⁰ Ibid., p. 192.

BwO of the masochist must be free and in perpetual movement. But as I have shown, even this BwO follows intensities that do not depend on the subject. Unfortunately for Deleuze and Guattari, the movement of becoming that, according to them, bears desire, has to stop before the death drive.

Prior to his encounter with Guattari, when Deleuze was still “a highly elitist author, indifferent toward politics”³³¹ and did not have feel compelled to present masochism as a political choice, he offered a more lucid image of the *fantasme masochiste*, presenting the masochist as the great prisoner of his own passion, the one unable to escape from the fantastic framework of his perversions. This was not, for Deleuze, because the masochist is unable control himself, but because, like everyone, he eroticizes the world through the screen of *his own* fantasy.

If one of the principal aims of *Le froid et le cruel* is to break the Freudian dyad sado-masochism, it is because Deleuze there wants to underline not only the peculiarity of masochism *and* sadism, but also to show the *incommunicability between their fantastic frameworks*. If Deleuze describes Sacher-Masoch as the great puppet master, the one able to transform the woman into a doll, into an obedient mistress who acts perfectly the role that she is assigned, it is not because he wants to reverse the dialectical sovereignty informing the couple – reaffirming in this way their specular union. On the contrary, he wants to divide masochism from sadism, showing how much *le fantasme masochiste* and *le fantasme sadique* are different and fixed in an unchanging framework where they cannot communicate. Deleuze writes: “the woman torturer of masochism cannot be sadistic precisely because she is *in* the masochistic situation, she is an integral part of it, a realization of the masochistic fantasy. She belongs in the masochistic world, not in the sense that she has the same tastes as her victim, but because her ‘sadism’ is of a kind never found in the sadist; it is as it were the double or the reflection of masochism.”³³² The woman and her personal tastes and preferences are not taken into account at all, even if she is supposed to be the dominant partner of the couple. She is just the *product* of masochism, the reification of a fantasy,

³³¹ S. Zizek, *Organs without bodies, Deleuze and Consequences*, Routledge, New York and London 2004, p. 20.

³³² G. Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, cit., p. 41.

the puppet that exists only for the time of her performance.

The intrinsic problem in Deleuze and Guattari's joint account of masochism is that they refuse to acknowledge what Deleuze himself perfectly understood in *Le froid et le cruel*, namely that "the art of masochism is the art of fantasy"³³³ and that this fantasy does not depend on the subject since it is the expression of the death drive. Deleuze and Guattari pretend to transform something that is beyond control into something manageable and even useful for the subject. But the drives, as the forces that sustain and create our sexual fantasies and that push us in unpredictable ways toward often undesired places, are not under control. The drives speak the language of the unconscious and although they are the most intimate part of the subject, they exert a control over him he can never exert over them.

³³³ G. Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, cit., p. 66.

CHAPTER 4

MASOCHISM

*“Mentre che l’uno spirto questo mi disse,
l’altro piangëa; sì che di pietade
io venni men così com’io morisse.
E caddi come corpo morto cade.”*

Dante

Human history is characterized by a radical and incomprehensible lust for violence. Violence has held the hand of humanity since its birth, forming with it so close a symbiosis as to suggest that the two cannot live apart. Violence and humanity are in fact bound together so tightly that it is impossible to know which creates the other. Every form of humanity shows a deep need to regulate violence, often by institutionalizing it. The ritual of *σπαραγμός* in ancient Greece³³⁴, the torture of a Hundred Pieces in China³³⁵, the *Conquistadores* of the New World³³⁶, Auschwitz³³⁷, and Guantanamo Bay³³⁸ are just some examples of how violence

³³⁴ See K. Kerényi, *Dionysos: Urbild des unzerstörbaren Lebens*.

³³⁵ See G. Bataille, *Les larmes d’Eros*.

³³⁶ See T. Todorov, *La Conquête de l’Amérique: La question de l’autre*.

³³⁷ See T. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*.

has been and continues to be ritualized historically and globally.

The intention of this final chapter is first to investigate the intimate connection between violence and humanity through the concept of *effervescence* and then, by turning to the concept of *jouissance*, to show the masochistic ground of human sexuality.

³³⁸ See G. Agamben, *Stato di eccezione*.

4.1

EFFERVESCENCE

An experiment conducted by Philip Zimbardo at Stanford University has shown that regardless of origins or cultural background, any individual in a given situation can produce and take pleasure in violence and suffering. Zimbardo's study, called *The Stanford Prison Experiment*³³⁹, was conducted in 1971 by a team of researchers who selected 24 young men deemed to be the most psychologically stable and healthy to impersonate the role of either guards or prisoners. What Zimbardo wished to study were the psychological reactions of the people in charge as well as the psychological reactions of the people under their control. The astonishing results of the experiment showed not only that the torturers³⁴⁰ took pleasure in their role but also that the victims too seemed to develop an attachment to their role, as if they were *enjoying* it. Especially peculiar is the episode in which Zimbardo, noticing that one of the prisoners was suffering enormous mental distress, “rushed to check on him. What he found was 819 [the number assigned to the this particular “prisoner”] hunched over into a quivering mass, hysterical. He put his arms around him trying to comfort him, assuring him

³³⁹ See P. Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*.

³⁴⁰ “Hellmann moves back to center stage: ‘This time, sing it.’ As the prisoners start to count off again, he interrupts. ‘Didn't I say that you had to sing? Maybe you gentlemen have those stocking caps too tight around your head and you can't hear me too well.’ He is becoming more creative in control techniques and dialogue. He turns on Prisoner 1037 for singing his number off key and demands twenty jumping jacks. After he finishes, Hellmann adds, ‘Would you do ten more for me? And don't make that thing rattle so much this time.’ Because there is no way to do jumping jacks without the ankle chain making noise, the commands are becoming arbitrary, but the guards are beginning to *take pleasure* in giving commands and forcing the prisoners to execute them.” P. Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, Random House, New York, 2007, p. 49. Italics mine.

that he will be all right once he has left and gone home. To his surprise, he refused to leave with him to see a doctor and then go home. ‘No, I can't leave. I have to go back in there,’ he insisted through his tears.”³⁴¹ Although the prisoners were clearly suffering in their situation and they were well aware of that, they seemed strangely attached to the situation.

Zimbardo thought it was because of the money that they were earning every day of the experiment. Indeed, although the subjects were not indigent, they were still students for whom money was always a significant motivation. In order to better understand this possibility, Zimbardo proposed to let them “forfeit their pay in exchange for parole.”³⁴² The prisoners accepted it, showing in this way “that money was less important than their freedom,” but then, adds Zimbardo, “each prisoner passively submitted to the system, holding out his hands to be handcuffed, submitting to the bag being put back over his head, accepting the chain on his leg, and, like sheep, following the guard back down to that dreadful prison basement.”³⁴³ This led Zimbardo to wonder “why did none of them say: ‘Since I do not want your money, I am free to quit this experiment and demand to be released now.’ We would have had to obey their request and terminate them at that moment. Yet none did.”³⁴⁴ According to Zimbardo, the experimental subjects assumed the role so deeply, they were no longer able to discern the reality from the simulation. They identified themselves as real prisoners. Indeed, “if they were prisoners, only the Parole Board had the power to release them, but if they were, as indeed they were, *experimental subjects*, each of the students always held the power to stay or quit at any time. It was apparent, observed Zimbardo, that a mental switch had been thrown in their minds, from ‘now I am a paid experimental volunteer with full civil rights’ to ‘now I am a helpless prisoner at the mercy of an unjust authoritarian system.’”³⁴⁵

The experiment that was planned to last for two weeks was abruptly

³⁴¹ Ibid., p. 107.

³⁴² Ibid., p. 140.

³⁴³ Ibid., p. 141.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 141.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 141.

interrupted after only six days because of the uncontrolled violence that was spreading. Indeed, all the subjects involved – the guards as well as the prisoners – were so immersed in the simulation that they were unable to stop the play. Zimbardo himself later said that he was so involved that he failed to recognize how the situation was degenerating. It was Christina Maslach – a graduate student close to Zimbardo but actually not involved in the experiment and for this reason not absorbed by the situation – who asked him to stop the experiment immediately. Only in this way did Zimbardo realize that the seductiveness of violence had clouded his moral sensibility as well as that of the participants, preventing them from seeing clearly what was going on.

In *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, the book in which he draws his conclusions from the experiment, Zimbardo points out: the “forces [enacted by the experiment] that exist in many common behavioral contexts are more likely to distort our usual good nature by pushing us toward engaging in deviant, destructive, or evil behavior when the settings are new and unfamiliar. When embedded in them, our habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting no longer function to sustain the moral compass that has guided us reliably in the past.”³⁴⁶ The experiment proved in the end that the simulation produced a surplus of enjoyment that disabled the conscience of the participants and trapped them in a spiral of violence and pleasure. Unable to stop, they reproduced the same plot every day with an increasing level of violence, degradation and humiliation *as well as* pleasure.

As Durkheim showed with his work *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*³⁴⁷, when people are doing something together – for instance when they manage to kill an animal that will allow them to survive – it can happen that an enormous joy takes possession of them and they start to act in an unusual way while sharing this powerful feeling:

³⁴⁶ Ibid., p. VII. Italics mine.

³⁴⁷ E. Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: Le système totémique en Australie*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1990.

Le seul fait de l'agglomération agit comme un excitant exceptionnellement puissant. Une fois les individus rassemblés il se dégage de leur rapprochement une sorte d'électricité qui les transporte vite à un degré extraordinaire d'exaltation. Chaque sentiment exprimé vient retentir, sans résistance, dans toutes ces consciences largement ouvertes aux impressions extérieures : chacune d'elles fait écho aux autres et réciproquement. L'impulsion initiale va ainsi s'amplifiant à mesure qu'elle se répercute, comme une avalanche grossit à mesure qu'elle avance. Et comme des passions aussi vives et aussi affranchies de tout contrôle ne peuvent pas ne pas se répandre au dehors, ce ne sont, de toutes parts, que gestes violents, que cris, véritables hurlements, bruits assourdissants de toute sorte qui contribuent encore à intensifier l'état qu'ils manifestent.³⁴⁸

Durkheim calls this feeling *effervescence* and describes it as an internal force that erases one's self-control and will, a sort of drug that lets people act like euphoric animals in ecstasy.

Although it seems at first that these situations are dangerous because they can result in uncontrolled violence between people,³⁴⁹ what really happens, according to Durkheim, is that these moments of common madness, far from dividing people, blend them together in a common feeling of belonging that creates the first division between sacred and profane³⁵⁰ and consequently the

³⁴⁸ E. Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: Le système totémique en Australie*, cit., pp. 308 and 309.

³⁴⁹ "L'effervescence devient souvent telle qu'elle entraîne à des actes inouïs. Les passions déchaînées sont d'une telle impétuosité qu'elles ne se laissent contenir par rien." Ibid., p. 309.

³⁵⁰ "Parvenu à cet état d'exaltation, l'homme ne se connait plus. Se sentant dominé, entraîné par une sorte de pouvoir extérieur qui le fait penser et agir autrement qu'en temps normal, il a naturellement l'impression de n'être plus lui-même. Il lui semble être devenu un être nouveau: les décorations dont il s'affuble, les sortes de masques dont il se recouvre le visage figurent matériellement cette transformation intérieure, plus encore qu'ils ne contribuent à la déterminer. Et comme, au même moment, tous ses compagnons se sentent transfigurés de la même manière et traduisent leur sentiment par leurs cris, leurs gestes, leur attitude, tout se passe comme s'il était réellement transporté dans un monde spécial, entièrement différent de celui où il vit d'ordinaire, dans un milieu tout peuplé de forces exceptionnellement intenses, qui l'envahissent et le métamorphosent. Comment des expériences comme celles-là, surtout quand elles se répètent chaque jour pendant des semaines, ne lui laisseraient-elles pas la conviction qu'il existe

appearance of the first archaic societies symbolized by the Totem with which the group identifies itself.³⁵¹ Analyzing Australian aboriginal societies, which, according to Durkheim, are the most archaic form of societies³⁵² and, for this reason, the most useful to understand the origin of religion,³⁵³ he concluded that

effectivement deux mondes hétérogènes et incomparables entre eux ? L'un est celui où il traîne languissamment sa vie quotidienne; au contraire, il ne peut pénétrer dans l'autre sans entrer aussitôt en rapports avec des puissances extraordinaires qui le galvanisent jusqu'à la frénésie. Le premier est le monde profane, le second, celui des choses sacrées." Ibid., cit., p. 312.

³⁵¹ "Puisque la force religieuse n'est autre chose que la force collective et anonyme du clan, et puisque celle-ci n'est représentable aux esprits que sous la forme du totem, l'emblème totémique est comme le corps visible du dieu. C'est donc de lui que paraissent émaner les actions, ou bienfaites ou redoutées, que le culte a pour objet de provoquer ou de prévenir; par suite, c'est tout spécialement à lui que s'adressent les rites. Ainsi s'explique que, dans la série des choses sacrées, il occupe le premier rang." Ibid., pp. 316 and 317.

³⁵² "Nous avons l'assurance que cette religion est la plus primitive qui soit actuellement observable, et même, selon toute vraisemblance, qui ait jamais existé. Elle est, en effet, inséparable de l'organisation sociale à base de clans. Non seulement, comme nous l'avons montré, on ne peut la définir qu'en fonction de cette dernière, mais il ne semble pas que le clan, sous la forme qu'il a dans un très grand nombre de sociétés australiennes, ait pu exister sans le totem. Car les membres d'un même clan ne sont unis les uns aux autres ni par la communauté de l'habitat ni par celle du sang, puisqu'ils ne sont pas nécessairement consanguins et qu'ils sont souvent dispersés sur des points différents du territoire tribal. Leur unité vient donc uniquement de ce qu'ils ont un même nom et un même emblème, de ce qu'ils croient soutenir les mêmes rapports avec les mêmes catégories de choses, de ce qu'ils pratiquent les mêmes rites, c'est-à-dire en définitive de ce qu'ils communient dans le même culte totémique. Ainsi le totémisme et le clan, tant, du moins, que ce dernier ne se confond pas avec le groupe local, s'impliquent mutuellement. Or l'organisation à base de clans est la plus simple que nous connaissions. Elle existe, en effet, avec tous ses éléments essentiels, dès que la société comprend deux clans primaires ; par suite, il ne saurait y en avoir de plus rudimentaire, tant qu'on n'aura pas découvert de sociétés réduites à un seul clan, et jusqu'à présent, nous ne croyons pas qu'on en ait trouvé de traces. Une religion aussi étroitement solidaire du système social qui dépasse tous les autres en simplicité peut être regardée comme la plus élémentaire qu'il nous soit donné de connaître. Si donc nous parvenons à trouver les origines des croyances qui viennent d'être analysées, nous avons des chances de découvrir du même coup les causes qui firent éclore le sentiment religieux dans l'humanité." Ibid., pp. 238 and 239.

³⁵³ "Nous nous proposons de limiter notre recherche aux sociétés australiennes. Elles remplissent toutes les conditions qui viennent d'être énumérées. Elles sont parfaitement homogènes; bien qu'on puisse discerner entre elles des variétés, elles ressortissent à un même type. L'homogénéité

what welds people together in the primitive religious communities is not the feeling that animated the Aristotelian ζῶον πολιτικόν,³⁵⁴ but this sort of experience.³⁵⁵ “C’est [...] dans ces milieux sociaux effervescents et de cette effervescence même que paraît être née l’idée religieuse.”³⁵⁶ For Durkheim, social conformism, far from being the original cause of society, appears when a society has already full-formed a rigid and complex structure of ritual and symbols, namely when people are called to participate again, all together, in the ritual that reminds them of and renews the common feeling of belonging that characterized *effervescence*. Durkheim also maintains that this common feeling is the reason

en est même si grande que les cadres de l’organisation sociale non seulement sont les mêmes, mais sont désignés par des noms ou identiques ou équivalents dans une multitude de tribus, parfois très distantes les unes des autres. D’un autre côté, le totémisme australien est celui sur lequel nous avons les documents les plus complets. Enfin, ce que nous nous proposons avant tout d’étudier dans ce travail, c’est la religion la plus primitive et la plus simple qu’il soit possible d’atteindre. Il est donc naturel que, pour la découvrir, nous nous adressions à des sociétés aussi rapprochées que possible des origines de l’évolution ; c’est là évidemment que nous avons le plus de chances de la rencontrer et de la bien observer. Or, il n’est pas de sociétés qui présentent ce caractère à un plus haut degré que les tribus australiennes. Non seulement leur technique est très rudimentaire, – la maison et même la hutte y sont encore ignorées – mais leur organisation est la plus primitive et la plus simple qui soit connue ; c’est celle que nous avons appelée ailleurs *organisation à base de clans*.” Ibid., pp. 135 and 136.

³⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1, 2, 1253a.

³⁵⁵ “si la vie collective, quand elle atteint un certain degré d’intensité, donne l’éveil à la pensée religieuse, c’est parce qu’elle détermine un état d’effervescence qui change les conditions de l’activité psychique. Les énergies vitales sont surexcitées, les passions plus vives, les sensations plus fortes ; il en est même qui ne se produisent qu’à ce moment. L’homme ne se reconnaît pas ; il se sent comme transformé et, par suite, il transforme le milieu qui l’entoure. Pour se rendre compte des impressions très particulières qu’il ressent, il prête aux choses avec lesquelles il est le plus directement en rapport des propriétés qu’elles n’ont pas, des pouvoirs exceptionnels, des vertus que ne possèdent pas les objets de l’expérience vulgaire. En un mot, au monde réel où s’écoule sa vie profane il en superpose un autre qui, en un sens, n’existe que dans sa pensée, mais auquel il attribue, par rapport au premier, une sorte de dignité plus haute. C’est donc, à ce double titre, un monde idéal.” E. Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: Le système totémique en Australie*, cit., p. 603.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 313.

why every form of society presents a complex structure of rituals:³⁵⁷ their deep motivation is in fact to re-enact the *effervescence* in a ceremony that, by imitating the first moment of *effervescence*, renews the social cohesion that was generated by it.

Responding to this analysis, Girard affirms the concept of *effervescence* and its cohesive power, but criticizes Durkheim for assuming that this overwhelming feeling of common euphoria may simply run out, leaving people in a common peace. For Girard, once people succumb to this overwhelming and relentless force they can do nothing but enact a series of blood feuds, of people seeking revenge on one another. According to Girard, the only possibility of escaping such endless massacre is to channel the force of *effervescence* against one single person who – by virtue of his social queerness³⁵⁸ – is alien to the others and whom no one, therefore, will be interested in avenging:

C'est l'unité d'une communauté qui s'affirme dans l'acte sacrificiel et comme unité surgit au paroxysme de la division, au moment où la communauté se prétend déchiré par la discorde mimétique, vouée à la circularité interminable des

³⁵⁷ “la vie sociale, sous tous ses aspects et à tous les moments de son histoire, n'est possible que grâce à un vaste symbolisme.” Ibid., p. 331.

³⁵⁸ “If we look at the extremely wide spectrum of human victims sacrificed by various societies, the list seems heterogeneous, to say the least. It includes prisoners of war, slaves, small children, unmarried adolescents, and the handicapped; it ranges from the very dregs of society, such as the Greek *pharmakos*, to the king himself. Is it possible to detect a unifying factor in this disparate group? We notice at first glance beings who are either outside or on the fringes of society: prisoners of war, slaves, *pharmakos*. In many primitive societies children who have not yet undergone the rites of initiation have no proper place in the community; their rights and duties are almost nonexistent. What we are dealing with, therefore, are exterior or marginal individuals, incapable of establishing or sharing the social bonds that link the rest of the inhabitants. Their status as foreigners or enemies, their servile condition, or simply their age prevents these future victims from fully integrating themselves into the community. But what about the king? Is he not at the very heart of the community? Undoubtedly—but it is precisely his position at the center that serves to isolate him from his fellow men, to render him casteless. He escapes from society, so to speak, via the roof, just as the *pharmakos* escapes through the cellar.” R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1989, p. 12.

représailles vengeresses. A l'opposition de chacun contre chacun succède brusquement l'opposition de tous contre un. A la multiplicité chaotique des conflits particuliers succède d'un seul coup la complicité d'un antagonisme unique: tous la communauté d'un côté et de l'autre la victime. On comprend sans peine en quoi consiste cette résolution sacrificielle; la communauté se retrouve tout entière solidaire, au dépens d'une victime non seulement incapable de se défendre, mais totalement impuissante à susciter la vengeance ; sa mise à mal ne saurait provoquer de nouveaux troubles et faire rebondir la crise puisqu'elle unit tout le monde contre elle. Le sacrifice n'est qu'une violence de plus, une violence qui s'ajoute à d'autres violences. Mais c'est la dernière violence, c'est le dernier mot de la violence.³⁵⁹

When the butchers have torn him apart, they feel so relieved and purified from their violent act that they enter into a state of catharsis and raise the victim to divinity.³⁶⁰ According to Girard, this original act of *effervescence* that restores social coherence to the group by uniting against the one, is the very origin of religion. This is why Girard maintains that "*le sacré c'est la violence.*"³⁶¹ From this spring the rituality of the sacrifice whose function "is to quell violence within the community and to prevent conflicts from erupting:"³⁶²

³⁵⁹ R. Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde, recherches avec J.M. Oughourlian and G. Lefort*, Grasset, Paris, 1974, p. 33.

³⁶⁰ "La communauté assouvit sa rage contre cette victime arbitraire, sans la conviction absolue qu'elle a trouvée la cause unique de son mal, elle se trouve ensuite privée d'adversaire, purifiée de toute hostilité à l'égard de ceux contre qui, un instant plus tôt, elle manifestait une rage extrême. Le retour au calme paraît confirmer la responsabilité de cette victime dans les troubles mimétiques qui ont agité la communauté. La communauté se perçoit comme parfaitement passive face à sa propre victime qui apparaît, au contraire, comme le seul agent responsable de l'affaire. Il suffit de comprendre que l'inversion de rapport entre la victime et la communauté se perpétue dans la résolution de la crise pour comprendre pourquoi cette victime passa pour *sacrée*. Elle passe pour responsable de retour au calme aussi bien que des désordres qui le précèdent. Elle passe pour manipulatrice même de sa propre mort." Ibid., p. 35 and 36.

³⁶¹ Ibid., p. 41.

³⁶² R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, cit., p. 14.

The community is both attracted and repelled by its own origins. It feels the constant need to re-experience them, albeit in veiled and transfigured form. By means of rites the community manages to cajole and somewhat subdue the forces of destruction. But the true nature and real function of these forces will always elude its grasp, precisely because the source of the evil is the community itself. The only way in which the ritualistic imagination can succeed in its self-appointed task – a task both painstaking and elusive – is by allowing violence a certain amount of free play, *as in the original instance*, but not too much; that is, by exercising its memory of the collective expulsion on carefully designated objects and within a rigorous framework.³⁶³

From this analysis, humanity appears to be linked to violence not simply because of its animal past, but especially because of its religious and cultural development. Human society appears as something that, in order to emerge and flourish, needs violence. Instead of existing only as a means of survival or protection, violence becomes the founding act of the human community itself.

The theoretical perspective that Girard proposes – namely that violence creates the symbolic order of the common life – necessitates hypostatizing the concept of violence, making it a sort of *degree zero* of civilization, a kind of *καιρός*, from which the beginning of humanity is possible. Unlike Girard, I have hard time according violence any archetypal status that can explain the origin of culture just as I resist hypostatizing any instance as the foundational principle of reality. Reality is always beyond our categories of understanding and is always too stratified and complex to be reduced to a *single* concept. Nevertheless, Girard makes an important point in showing that violence is neither simply a side effect of war nor merely a consequence of people's urge to dominate and defeat, but something more radical, something that belongs to humanity and that can show up as a relentless force inseparable from a disorienting pleasure.

The problem with Girard's account is that he considers violence as something that produces pleasure *only* if it is perpetrated in the outside of the subject and against someone else. In this way, he can show the positive and

³⁶³ Ibid., p. 99.

productive side of violence while ignoring, or pretending to ignore, its most insidious aspect. Girard presents violence as a sort of *dispositif* – to use the Foucauldian expression – that blends people together, hiding in this way the antisocial side of violence, the one that takes pleasure from loss and *self*-defeat. Violence in fact produces pleasure, not only in the form of domination and control that brings people together – *effervescence* – but also in the loss of self – *jouissance* – the loss of that sociability that is the crux of any general theory of society. The notion of the death drive, developed by Freud³⁶⁴ and further elaborated by Lacan with reference to *jouissance*, shows that there is something in human nature that works against its flourishing and drives the individual through the dispersion of the self in a repetition of enjoyment that is unable to produce anything other than enjoyment. As Lacan says in the Seminar XX: “La *jouissance*, c’est ce qui ne sert à rien.”³⁶⁵ *Jouissance* in fact has no purpose but it is a compulsory repetition of a useless pleasure similar to pain that conduces to a dispersion of the self that is incompatible with the sociability that Girard gets from violence.

The limitation of theorists like Girard is that they consider the human being as a fixed entity always looking for wellbeing, an entity without negativity and devoid of an unconscious. But after the psychoanalysis of Freud, Lacan, Laplanche, and the antisocial queer theorists, every theory that does not consider the elusive instances of the unconscious ignores a fundamental aspect of the subject. What is important in the psychoanalytic tradition in his regard is its theorization of the death drive, a theorization that radically challenges every theory that tries to understand the human as an entity without negativity, a sort of

³⁶⁴ As we read in the first pages of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the person who first has this radiant insight was not Freud but Sabina Spielrein: “A considerable portion of these speculations have been anticipated by Sabina Spielrein (1912) in an instructive and interesting paper which, however, is unfortunately not entirely clear to me. She there describes the sadistic components of the sexual instinct as 'destructive'.” S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Norton & Company, New York and London, 1961, p. 49.

³⁶⁵ “Jouissance is what serves no purpose” J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1988, p. 10.

animal always seeking wellness.³⁶⁶ As Leo Bersani argued, the death drive us to understand that pain can afford the pleasure of self-defeat, the pleasure of being overwhelmed by unconscious drives or of overcoming or even humbling the subject's presumption of sovereignty. Indeed, through his careful analysis of the work of Freud, Bersani argued in *The Freudian Body* that "sexuality is a tautology of masochism."³⁶⁷

The death drive as the antisocial, anti-economical, and anti-symbolic insistence of the unconscious erupts from within the Symbolic to checkmate every theory that seeks to understand the human condition without considering its problematic link to the overwhelming force of the drives. As we will see in the following pages, when Lacan affirms that "There is no sexual encounter"³⁶⁸, he means that every sexual encounter is a *manque à être*, an unbearable event that needs symbolization in order to be sublimated into a bearable event. By virtue of symbolization we can experience sex without being overwhelmed, but this does not mean that its threat has been completely dissipated by the Symbolic. The force of the Real continues to insist in the form of the drives.

If the critique of the phenomenological approach and the analysis of the *Silence of the Lambs* in the first chapter led us to understand that the structural division that characterizes every human being prevents any kind of separation between the subject and the death drive, and if the critique of Foucault's account of pleasure(s) and of Deleuze and Guattari's account of desire in the second and third chapters led us to understand that neither pleasure nor desire can be used to separate the death drive from masochism, the critique that unveils the *jouissance* hidden behind the *effervescence* theorized by Durkheim and reformulated by Girard finally allows us to close the circle, showing that masochism – far more than a sexual peculiarity – is the root of sexuality itself and for this reason cannot

³⁶⁶ "Psychoanalysis is an unprecedented attempt to give a theoretical account of precisely those forces which obstruct, undermine, play havoc with theoretical accounts themselves." L. Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, p. 4.

³⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 39.

³⁶⁸ J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, cit., p. 30.

be separated from the subject. In the following pages then, rather than base my argument on Girard's conclusion, I will take into account his premises and, broadening his perspective with the help of Lacan's concept of *jouissance*, I will show the intimate bond between eroticism and death that masochism exposes.

4.2

JOUISSANCE

As we have seen, according to Lacan, everything we do as human beings is a product of the Symbolic. We are humans because we are born in an already made structure of meaning – the *Metonymic Chain of Signifiers* – in which every human being becomes a link.³⁶⁹ The subject is in fact a signifier that is structurally connected with the other signifiers, forming all together the fabric of reality. If we can give meaning to things and then communicate this meaning to each other it is because, paraphrasing Shakespeare, we are such stuff as the Symbolic is made on: or, rather, we are constructed as subjects from the stuff of the Symbolic as it colonizes the animal materiality that we were. Nevertheless, as I have shown in the first chapter, there is something in human nature that exceeds the Symbolic, something that naturally escapes from the meshes of rationality that characterize the Symbolic itself, something that for this reason the Symbolic cannot articulate – the Real. Since it is “le domaine de ce qui subsiste hors de la symbolisation,”³⁷⁰ the Real cannot be understood by rational thinking, but only encountered in the overwhelming force of the drives. The drives are that which reveal the subject’s implication in the Real and the source of the *jouissance* of which the subject prefers to know nothing. As Lacan affirms in *L’éthique de la psychanalyse*: “problème de la jouissance, en tant qu’elle se présente comme enfouie dans un champ central, avec des caractères d’inaccessibilité, d’obscurité et d’opacité, dans un champ cerné d’une barrière qui en rend l’accès au sujet plus que difficile,

³⁶⁹ “Notre définition du signifiant (il n’y en a pas d’autre) est: un signifiant, c’est ce qui représente le sujet pour un autre signifiant. Ce signifiant sera donc le signifiant pour quoi tous les autres signifiants représentent le sujet : c’est dire que faute de ce signifiant, tous les autres ne représenteraient rien. Puisque rien n’est représenté que pour.” J. Lacan, *Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir*, in *Ecrits*, Editions de Seuil, Paris, 1966, p. 819.

³⁷⁰ J. Lacan, *Réponse au commentaire de Jean Hyppolite*, in *Ecrits*, cit., p. 388.

inaccessible peut-être pour autant que la jouissance se présente non purement et simplement comme la satisfaction d'un besoin, mais comme la *satisfaction d'une pulsion*.³⁷¹ *Jouissance* is in fact the *reaction* of the subject to the Real, it is the fold that assumes his unwitting return to what characterizes his structural division. This return however, although endless and inevitable, cannot be fully accomplished. The union with the Real is made impossible by the Law of the Other inscribed in the subject itself and *jouissance* is there to prove it. If, according to Lacan, *jouissance* is what takes the place of the impossible, it is not because it does not exist but because it is located at the limit of humanity beyond which the subject – as *living body that thinks* – cannot enter. In *Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir* Lacan writes:

Ce à quoi il faut se tenir, c'est que la jouissance est interdite à qui parle comme tel, ou encore qu'elle ne puisse être dite qu'entre les lignes pour quiconque est sujet de la Loi, puisque la Loi se fonde de cette interdiction même. La loi en effet commanderait-elle: Jouis, que le sujet ne pourrait y répondre que par un: J'ouïs, où la jouissance ne serait plus que sous-entendue. Mais ce n'est pas la Loi elle-même qui barre l'accès du sujet à la jouissance, seulement fait-elle d'une barrière presque naturelle un sujet barré. Car c'est le plaisir qui apporte à la jouissance ses limites, le plaisir comme liaison de la vie, incohérente, jusqu'à ce qu'une autre, et elle non contestable, interdiction s'élève de cette régulation découverte par Freud comme processus primaire et pertinente loi du plaisir.³⁷²

According to Lacan, pleasure serves as a limit or barrier to *jouissance*. Indeed, although it is always perceived by the subject as an irresistible force, *jouissance* is never experienced as pleasurable but always as painful and disagreeable.³⁷³ This is the reason why the subject rejects it. If in fact “pain is the

³⁷¹ J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire : Livre VII, L'éthique de la psychanalyse, 1959-1960*, cit., pp. 247 and 248. Italics mine.

³⁷² J. Lacan, *Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir*, in *Ecrits*, cit., p. 821

³⁷³ As the expression of the death drive, *jouissance* is in fact structurally located beyond the pleasure principle.

organism's protection against self-dissolution³⁷⁴, it appears clear that the body tries nothing but to escape from *jouissance*.³⁷⁵ According to Lacan, the only case in which the body endures the pain of *jouissance* without escaping from it is when pain is a structural part of the subject's *fantasme*. As Lacan underlines in "Kant avec Sade": "Le plaisir donc, de la volonté là-bas rival qui stimule, n'est plus ici que complice défaillant. Dans le temps même de la jouissance, il serait tout simplement hors de jeu, si le fantasme n'intervenait pour le soutenir de la discorde même où il succombe."³⁷⁶ We will come back on the structure of the *fantasme* in a minute, but first we have to point out that pleasure is not the only resistance to the force of *jouissance*. According to Lacan, desire also works against it. In *Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir*, he affirms that "le désir est une défense, défense d'outre-passer une limite dans la jouissance."³⁷⁷ But why is desire a defense against *jouissance*? In the *Séminaire on Transfert*, Lacan explains that the object – cause of desire – is always a missing object. Desire arises and is nourished by the lack which deprives desire of its object. Lacan defines this object in various way – das *Ding*³⁷⁸, ἀγαλμα³⁷⁹, object *a*³⁸⁰, etc – but always referring to

³⁷⁴ L. Bersani, *Homos*, cit., p. 94.

³⁷⁵ As we have seen also with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of BwO, the body follows homeostatic rules useful to preserving its functional wellbeing.

³⁷⁶ J. Lacan, *Kant avec Sade*, in *Ecrits*, cit., p. 773.

³⁷⁷ J. Lacan, *Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir*, in *Ecrits*, cit., p. 825.

³⁷⁸ "La question de *das Ding* reste aujourd'hui suspendue à ce qu'il y a d'ouvert, de manquant, de béant, au centre de notre désir." J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire : Livre VII, L'éthique de la psychanalyse, 1959-1960*, cit., p. 102.

³⁷⁹ "chaque fois que vous rencontrez ἀγαλμα – faites bien attention – même s'il semble s'agir des statues des dieux, vous y regarderez de près, vous vous apercevrez qu'il s'agit toujours d'autre chose." J. Lacan, *Le transfert*, transcript of records (<http://www.valas.fr/Jacques-Lacan-Le-transfert-VIII-1960-1961-J-Lacan-Le-transfert-dans-sa-disparite-subjective-sa-pretendue-situation-ses,271>) p. 238.

³⁸⁰ "C'est en tant que l'obsessionnel est en ce point précis de l'Autre où il est en état de doute, de suspension, de perte, d'ambivalence, d'ambiguïté fondamentale, que sa corrélation à l'objet, à un objet toujours métonymique... car pour lui l'autre, c'est vrai, est essentiellement interchangeable... que sa relation à l'autre objet est essentiellement gouvernée par quelque chose qui a rapport à la castration et qui ici prend forme directement agressive : absence, dépréciation,

it as the thing that does not let itself be captured.³⁸¹ It is its structural lack that keeps desire alive. This is interesting in relation to *jouissance* because if desire survives only in the absence of its object, then the symbolical interdiction of the Law³⁸² that prevents the subject from accessing the Real – namely that prevents the subject from fully accomplishing the *jouissance* of the object *a* – is what constitutes the essence of desire:

Cet objet [*a*] est le principe qui me fait désirer, qui me fait désirant d'un manque – manque qui n'est pas manque du sujet, mais un défaut fait à la jouissance qui se situe au niveau de l'Autre. C'est en cela que toute fonction du *a* ne se réfère qu'à la béance centrale qui sépare, au niveau sexuel, le désir du lieu de la jouissance, et nous condamne à cette nécessité qui veut que pour nous la jouissance ne soit pas, de nature, promise au désir. Le désir ne peut faire que d'aller à sa rencontre, et, pour le rencontrer, il ne doit pas seulement comprendre, mais franchir le fantasme même qui le soutient et le construit.³⁸³

In this way, we can see not only that desire is correlative to the lack of the object *a*, but also that this same absence characterizes the sexual encounter through which the subject tries to reach his desire. Indeed, the subject who seeks the object *a* the “*jouissance* qui se situe au niveau de l'Autre” can find nothing but

rejet, refus du signe du désir de l'Autre comme tel, non pas abolition ni destruction du désir de l'Autre, mais rejet de ses signes. Et c'est de là que sort et se détermine cette impossibilité si particulière qui frappe la manifestation de son propre désir.” Ibid., pp. 417 and 418.

³⁸¹ See in particular J. Lacan, *Le transfert*.

³⁸² “Cet acte est tout le mystère. Il est fait pour nous voiler ceci, que non seulement le meurtre du père n'ouvre pas la voie vers la jouissance que la présence de celui-ci était censée interdire, mais il en renforce l'interdiction. Tout est là, et c'est bien là, dans le fait comme dans l'explication, la faille. L'obstacle étant exterminé sous la forme du meurtre, la jouissance n'en reste pas moins interdite, et bien plus, cette interdiction est renforcée.” J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire: Livre VII, L'éthique de la psychanalyse, 1959-1960*, cit., p. 207.

³⁸³ J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire: Livre X, L'angoisse, 1962-1963*, Éditions de Seuil, Paris, 2004, pp 382-383.

the structural absence of the sexual rapport. The Other³⁸⁴ in fact, since it is the place of the Symbolic,³⁸⁵ can never be the place of the object *a*, but only the place of the *fantasme* that binds together – and at the same time separates by way of the bar – desire and *jouissance*. Lacan renders the structure of the *fantasme* thus:

\$

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a

Lacan shows that the Symbolic divides the subject two times. The first time is when the Symbolic creates the subject as \$, and the second time, which is correlated with the first one, is when the Symbolic separates the subject from the object *a* to which the subject will always aspire through his desire. These two divisions are not two different things: because the subject is divided it enters the logic of desire and the object *a* is “created” as lost. We now understand that desire works as a screen against the *jouissance* of the object *a*. Although desire impels the subject toward its metonymic object, that desire exists only insofar as the *jouissance* of the object does not take place, namely if the distance from the object

³⁸⁴ “Loi en que, dès longtemps, je vous ai appris à la considérer comme fondée sur l'Autre.” J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire : Livre VII, L'éthique de la psychanalyse, 1959-1960*, cit., p. 227.

³⁸⁵ “Le désir s'ébauche dans la marge où la demande se déchire du besoin: cette marge étant celle que la demande, dont l'appel ne peut être inconditionnel qu'à l'endroit de l'Autre, ouvre sous la forme du défaut possible qu'y peut apporter le besoin, de n'avoir pas de satisfaction universelle (ce qu'on appelle: angoisse). Marge qui, pour linéaire qu'elle soit, laisse apparaître son vertige, pour peu qu'elle ne soit pas recouverte par le piétinement d'éléphant du caprice de l'Autre. C'est ce caprice néanmoins qui introduit le fantôme de la Toute-puissance non pas du sujet, mais de l'Autre où s'installe sa demande (il serait temps que ce cliché imbécile fût, une fois pour toutes, et pour tous, remis à sa place), et avec ce fantôme la nécessité de son bridage par la Loi” J. Lacan, *Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir*, in *Ecrits*, cit., p. 814.

a is preserved.³⁸⁶ Pleasure *and* desire constitute together both the barrier against the *jouissance* that we can never fully attain or fully evade and the hook that ties the subject to its symbolic reality, preserving him from the dispersion that characterizes the abyss of *jouissance*.³⁸⁷ This function of protection from the death drive is what constitutes *la logique du fantasme* that, mixing together pleasure, desire and *jouissance*, creates the unique way in which the subject experiences – and survives – the reality of his own sexuality. If in fact on the one hand it is true that “le désir ne peut faire que d’aller à la rencontre avec la *jouissance*” on the other hand it is also true that desire goes there always wrapped in the “safe” casing of its own *fantasme*. To fully embrace the *jouissance* of the object *a* would mean to “franchir le fantasme même qui le soutien et le construit” as subject,³⁸⁸ in other words, it would mean to embrace one’s own desubjectivization, one’s death as a subject. Lacan states very clearly in *L’envers de la psychanalyse*: “le chemin vers la mort n'est rien d'autre que ce qui s'appelle la jouissance.”³⁸⁹

The sentence “*Il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*” means then that the encounter with the Real that the drives make us feel is unbearable and needs, for this reason, the Symbolic reframing that only the structure of *fantasme* makes possible. In itself, “l’acte (sexuel) est impossible. Quand je dis ça, je ne dis pas qu’il n’existe pas, ça ne suffit pas qu’on le dise, puisque l’impossible c’est le Réel, tout

³⁸⁶ “*a*, l’objet du désir, au point de départ où le situe notre modèle, est, dès qu’il y fonctionne..., l’objet du désir. Ceci veut dire qu’objet partiel il n’est pas seulement partie, ou pièce détachée, du dispositif imaginant ici le corps, mais élément de la structure dès l’origine, et si l’on peut dire dans la donne de la partie qui se joue. En tant que sélectionné dans les appendices du corps comme indice du désir, il est déjà l’exposant d’une fonction, qui le sublime avant même qu’il l’exerce, celle de l’index levé vers une absence dont *l’est-ce* n’a rien à dire, sinon qu’elle est de là où ça parle.” J. Lacan, *Remarque sur le rapport de Daniel Lagache*, in *Ecrits*, cit., p. 682.

³⁸⁷ It is interesting to notice that the two deepest theories on sexuality born against psychoanalysis – namely Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari – ground their argument precisely on pleasure and desire, although as we have seen, both fail in providing a subject undivided by the death drive who for this reason is immune to the *jouissance* that jeopardizes him.

³⁸⁸ Subject of desire namely subject that desires because it is divided and protected from the object *a* by the bar of the Symbolic.

³⁸⁹ J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire: Livre XVII, L’envers de la psychanalyse, 1969-1970*, Paris, Edition de Seuil, Paris, 1991, pp. 17-18.

simplement, le Réel pur, la définition du possible exigeant toujours une première symbolisation: si vous excluez cette symbolisation, elle vous apparaîtra beaucoup plus naturelle, cette formule de l'impossible, c'est le Réel."³⁹⁰ The only way to survive the encounter with the Real is through the distance that characterizes the non-existence of the sexual encounter reified by the *fantasme* by which the Real is given to us through the screen of the Symbolic. In other words, the only way by which the subject can endure the pressure of his drives "returning" to the Real is by maintaining the distance that Lacan identifies as the absence of the sexual encounter. This distance is one imposed by symbolization, one that protects the subject from what otherwise would destroy him. Lacan explains in *L'éthique de la psychanalyse* "le seul moment de jouissance que connaisse l'homme est à la place même où se produisent les fantasmes, qui représentent pour nous la même barrière quant à l'accès à cette jouissance, la barrière où tout est oublié."³⁹¹ Nevertheless, it would be a drastic simplification to think that the *fantasme* is the unpassable barrier that divides sharply the subject from the drives. In fact, in *La logique du fantasme*, Lacan also underlines that "il n'y a pas d'autre entrée pour le sujet dans le réel que le fantasme."³⁹² In this way he clarifies that if on the one hand it is true that the *fantasme* is what protects the subject from the threat of the Real, on the other hand it is also true that the *fantasme* is what exposes the subject to the abyss of *jouissance*. A very thin and problematic threshold³⁹³ divides the castration of the Symbolic and the transgression of the Real, and it is precisely on that threshold that the subject plays with his own *fantasmes* while *jouissance* emerges to lure him.

As long as "la métonymie du manque à être"³⁹⁴ that, as we have seen in the diagram of the *fantasme*, structurally keeps the subject of desire separated from the object *a*, is preserved, the encounter with the Real is foreclosed. Nevertheless,

³⁹⁰ J. Lacan, *La logique du fantasme*, transcript of records, (<http://www.valas.fr/Jacques-Lacan-La-logique-du-fantasme-1966-1967>) pp. 442 and 443.

³⁹¹ J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire : Livre VII, L'éthique de la psychanalyse, 1959-1960*, cit., p. 345

³⁹² J. Lacan, *La logique du fantasme*, in *Autre Ecrits*, cit., p. 326.

³⁹³ See in particular J. Lacan, *Kant avec Sade* and J. Lacan, *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*.

³⁹⁴ J. Lacan, *La direction de la cure*, in *Ecrits*, cit., p. 623.

the Real is not erased. As Lacan reminds us, “l'important est d'apercevoir que l'objet *a* ne tiens cette fonction dans le désir qu'à y être aperçu comme solidaire de cette refente (*d'y être à la fois inégaux, et conjoignant à la disjoindre*), de cette refente où le sujet s'apparaît être dyade.”³⁹⁵ In other words, we cannot forget that, although the *fantasme* subtracts the object *a* from *jouissance*, and, in order to protect the subject, transfers it to the Other, the place of the object *a* remains the Real.³⁹⁶ This is the reason why the subject never finds its object in the Symbolic – the Other is in fact structurally unable to receive it.

Lacan uses the sentence “*Il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*”

to translate the formulation “I ask you” – what? – “to refuse” – what? – “what I offer you” – why? – “because that's not it.” You know what “it” is; it's object *a*. Object *a* is no being. Object *a* is the void presupposed by a demand, and it is only by situating demand via metonymy, that is, by the pure continuity assured from the beginning to the end of a sentence, that we can imagine a desire that is based on no being – a desire without any other substance than that assured by knots themselves. Enunciating that sentence, “I ask you to refuse what I offer you,” I could only motivate it by the “that's not it” that I took up again last time. “That's not it” means that, in the desire of every demand, there is but the request for object *a*, for the object that could satisfy *jouissance*. The latter would then be the *Lustbefriedigung* presupposed in what is improperly called the “genital drive” in psychoanalytic discourse, that drive in which the full, inscribable relationship of the one with what remains irreducibly the Other is supposedly inscribed.³⁹⁷

The difference between *effervescence* and *jouissance* arises precisely at this point. If in fact both *effervescence* and *jouissance* look for their object in the Symbolic, only *effervescence* can really find its object there. If Durkheim and Girard showed us that *effervescence* emerges from a violence directed against an external object and that, in the destruction of that object, finally leaves the subject

³⁹⁵ J. Lacan, *La logique du fantasme*, in *Autres écrits*, cit., p. 324. Italics mine.

³⁹⁶ “L'objet *a* du fantasme, se situe dans le réel.” J. Lacan, *Kant avec Sade*, in *Écrits*, cit., p. 775.

³⁹⁷ J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, cit., p. 126.

in peace, with Lacan we understand that *jouissance* is a violence that cannot stop since the object that it finds in the Symbolic is just a metonymic displacement the object *a*. The Real object of *jouissance*, the one that *jouissance* destroys, is the subject itself. Therefore, according to Lacan, *jouissance* is impossible.³⁹⁸ For the subject to attain to *jouissance* would mean that it had managed to to “franchir le *fantasme*”, to remove the division that he himself is and to succumb to the destruction of the (Symbolic) subject by the Real. It is only through the screen of the *fantasme* that this impossible *jouissance* is replaced by an external object that is located at the place of the Other. Thanks to the *fantasme*, the object of *jouissance* is foreclosed and transferred to the outside as the *Imaginary* object of desire that finds in the *Symbolic* order the occasion to avoid its *Real* threat. This is the reason why any time the subject thinks he has grasped the object, he discovers that what he has in his hand is not the *Real* object of desire but just a *fantasmatic* placeholder that occasions the observation, “that’s not it.” Only through the *fantasme* is the subject kept in the “métonymie du manque à être” that constitutes him as divided subject, namely as subject divided between an impossible *jouissance* and a desire always located in the place of the Other.

In the unpublished version of the Seminar *Ou pire, Le savoir du psychanalyste*, Lacan tries to imagine a *jouissance* without *fantasme* and affirms that it is

l'instinct de mort de Freud, qui porte peut-être à dire que le seul acte, somme toute - s'il y en a un - qui serait un acte *achevé*... entendez bien que je parle, comme l'année dernière je parlais d'*Un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* dans un cas comme dans l'autre il n'y en a pas, ni de discours, ni d'acte tel... cela donc serait, s'il pouvait être, le suicide. C'est ce que Freud nous dit. Il nous le dit pas comme ça, en cru, en clair, comme on peut le dire maintenant.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁸ “la jouissance est impossible ou mortelle. Elle est structurellement inaccessible: la transgression est seulement imaginaire, et la jouissance fantasmée.” S. Lippi, *Transgression, Bataille Lacan*, Erès, Paris, 2008, p. 22.

³⁹⁹ J. Lacan, *Ou pire, Le savoir de le psychanalyste*, transcript of records, (<http://www.valas.fr/Jacques-Lacan-Ou-PIRE-1971-1972,216>) p. 21. First italics mine.

Lacan talks about suicide but he underlines that suicide is not really what he is trying to say. The problem is not that he cannot find the right word but that any word, precisely because it is a word, is wrong. Indeed, that to which Lacan is trying to refer to is the impossible act that could accomplish the death drive. Obviously, this act is impossible since every act happens in the Symbolic. This is the reason why suicide cannot work, even if the subject succeeds in giving himself over to death; and this is why Lacan chose to refer to it above. Suicide is a voluntary act that happens in relation to the Other. Regardless of the varied and complicated – conscious and unconscious – reasons that lead a person to commit suicide, what defines that act is its status as a choice. Lacan, on the contrary, is looking for an unwilled act – a pure act of the drives. But since the subject is divided, this act is impossible. Nevertheless, it is only through imagining this impossible act of destruction that, according to Lacan, we can picture a *jouissance* undivided by the Law of the Other.

In *La logique du fantasme* Lacan writes:

Car il se voit aux mises en acte du névrosé, que le fantasme, il ne l'approche qu'à la lorgnette, tout occupé qu'il est à sustenter le désir de l'Autre en le tenant de diverses façons en haleine. Le psychanalyste pourrait ne pas se faire son servent. Ceci l'aiderait à en distinguer le pervers, affronté de beaucoup plus près à l'impasse de l'acte sexuel. Sujet autant que lui bien sûr, mais qui fait des rets du fantasme l'appareil de conduction par où il dérobe en court-circuit une jouissance dont le heu de l'Autre ne le sépare pas moins. Avec cette référence à la jouissance s'ouvre l'ontique seule avouable pour nous. Mais ce n'est pas rien qu'elle ne s'aborde même en pratique que par les ravinelements qui s'y tracent du lieu de l'Autre.⁴⁰⁰

With this passage, we understand that for Lacan there is not an ontological difference between the neurotic and the pervert, both of them in fact are subjected to the Law of the Other as much as they are subjected to the death drive. Nevertheless, according to Lacan, the “pervert” is much closer to *jouissance* than

⁴⁰⁰ J. Lacan, *La logique du fantasme*, in *Autres écrits*, cit., p. 327.

the neurotic because he is able to “short-circuit” the Other. But what does it mean to “short-circuit” the Other? In order to answer this question, it is important to understand what Lacan is referring to when he talks about perversion. Indeed, a few lines later we discover that Lacan is not referring to perversion in general but to masochism in particular. This might not sound particularly surprising since we know already from *L'éthique de la psychanalyse* that Lacan considers masochism the core of all perversion. In that seminar, he in fact affirms that “ce serait pourtant un signe sûr de ce que nous sommes vraiment arrivés au cœur du problème sur le sujet des perversions existantes, que de parvenir à approfondir le rôle économique du masochisme.”⁴⁰¹ However, what is really interesting is that in *La logique du fantasme* Lacan does not use masochism to explain the core of perversion(s), but to explain the core of human sexuality in general. Indeed, not only, as we have seen, does he not make an ontological distinction between the neurotic and the pervert, but he goes so far as to say that “la monstration du masochisme suffit à y révéler la forme la plus générale à abrégé les vains essais où se perd l'acte sexuel, monstration d'autant plus facile qu'il procède à s'y doubler d'une ironique démonstration.”⁴⁰²

In this way, we arrive at a crucial ambivalence of Lacan’s thought. Indeed, if on the one hand Lacan is very much concerned with defining masochism as a perversion, on the other hand he considers it as the root of human sexuality. This ambivalence comes from the fact that, according to Lacan, “la dimension de la *jouissance*” that is at the root of human sexuality “c'est la dimension de la *descente vers la mort*.”⁴⁰³ Certainly as we have seen, *jouissance* is produced only in its intimate relation to the Symbolic. As in fact Lacan explains, “*la jouissance sexuelle* elle-même, quand vous voulez mettre la main dessus, si je puis m'exprimer ainsi, elle n'est plus *sexuelle* du tout, elle se perd”⁴⁰⁴ between the meshes of the *fantasme*. Masochism is no exception; as a product of the Symbolic

⁴⁰¹ J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire : Livre VII, L'éthique de la psychanalyse, 1959-1960*, cit., p. 24.

⁴⁰² J. Lacan, *La logique du fantasme*, in *Autres écrits*, cit., p. 327.

⁴⁰³ J. Lacan, *Ou pire, Le savoir de le psychanalyste*, transcript of records, (<http://www.valas.fr/Jacques-Lacan-Ou-PIRE-1971-1972,216>) p. 19.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p. 23.

it cannot avoid the Other. Nevertheless, if what we have shown is true, namely that the *fantasme* protects the subject, transferring the object *a* to the outside and situating it in a metonymic object, then masochism seems the only case in which the object *a* is brought back *into* the subject *through* the *fantasme*. In fact, in masochism the subject no longer follows the object *a* in the *jouissance* that takes the place of the Other – he becomes the object *a*. Filling the lack that characterizes the non-existence of the sexual encounter with its own body and making the destruction of the self the core of his pleasure and the object of his desire, he makes the *fantasme* coincide with his own “death.” This is the “short-circuit” of the Other that masochism achieves: use the *fantasme* to remove the object *a* from the Other and replace it with himself. In *Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir* Lacan states it clearly: “seule notre formule du fantasme permet de faire apparaître que le sujet [masochiste] se fait l'instrument de la jouissance de l'Autre.”⁴⁰⁵

What is important is to not confuse the Other with the other. The Other is not another person, but the Law, the Symbolic, castration – it is that which, limiting *jouissance*, structures the subject’s desire in the diagram of the *fantasme* that I have explained. To turn himself into the Other’s object of *jouissance* then, does not mean that the masochist voluntarily sacrifices his own *jouissance* to please another person. As we have also seen with Deleuze’s analysis of Sacher-Masoch, the masochist is anything but a docile slave who sacrifices himself for his ‘mistress.’⁴⁰⁶ On the contrary, to turn himself into the Other’s object of *jouissance* means that the Other, instead of being the non-space that, by figuring metonymically the object *a*, protects the subject from his own *jouissance*, becomes what here leads the subject to the *jouissance* of the object *a*. Hence the imperative role that symbols play in masochism and that we have discovered in criticizing Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari: pain, humiliation, and destruction are endorsed only if they belong to the *fantasme* of the masochist. In masochism, the

⁴⁰⁵ J. Lacan, *Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir*, in *Ecrits*, cit., p. 823.

⁴⁰⁶ “In *Venus*, Wanda only becomes sadistic because she can no longer maintain the role that Severin has *imposed* on her («It was you who stifled my feelings with your romantic devotion and insane passion»)." G. Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, cit., p. 50. Second italics mine.

fantasme is not destroyed or surpassed. The *fantasme* is in a certain way indestructible: the link to the Symbolic is unavoidable since it is what structures – together with the death drive – the division that the subject *is*. Nevertheless, in masochism, the symbolic screen with which the subject approaches the Real becomes the instrument of his “death,” the instrument by which the masochist reaches – *as much as his fantasme allows him to* – the deadly *jouissance* that is located at the root of human sexuality. “C’est dans ce nœud que gît en effet le rapport de l’image à la tendance suicide que le mythe de Narcisse exprime essentiellement. Cette tendance suicide qui représente à notre avis ce que Freud a cherché à situer dans sa métapsychologie sous le nom d’*instinct de mort* ou encore de *masochisme primordial*.”⁴⁰⁷

In March 2011, Germany learned the story of Armin Meiwes and Bernd Jürgen Armando Brandes, two men in their forties who met in a chatroom on the internet. After long conversations that led to a first encounter that went “wrong”, they decided to meet again. This second time, with a one-way ticket and more courage than the first time, Brandes reached the friend who, in accord with their prior agreement, proceeded to kill and eat him. The couple documented the entire encounter with a video clip that was shown at Meiwes’s murder trial to prove that the cannibalistic ritual took place in a completely consensual environment. Brandes always desired to die in a cannibalistic ritual and after years of fantasies and small attempts, he finally found in Meiwes the perfect partner. Brandes is thus the extreme case of a person who dissolves himself in a deadly act of Lacanian “suicide” as *jouissance*. In providing this example I am not arguing that every masochist aspires to such a ritualistic death, not only because each masochist is different but also because it is impossible to establish where exactly masochism begins. Where is the line that sharply divides the “neurotic” from the “pervert”? How much pain and humiliation must one desire to be a masochist? And must the pain I seek be physical or can it be mental instead? These questions allow no

⁴⁰⁷ J. Lacan, *Propos sur la causalité psychique*, in *Ecrits*, cit., pp. 186 and 187.

definitive answer.⁴⁰⁸ Nevertheless, the fact that it is impossible to establish the limits of a thing does not imply that this thing does not exist. Masochism exists and exists in an endless variety of forms. From a philosophical point of view, what is interesting is not to try to define its components, but rather to find the constant that repeats itself in them *all*. This is what philosophy does and this is what Lacan did in talking about masochism: he established what, according to him, is its general structure. In describing the structure of masochism, he recognized the general structure of human sexuality. The drive toward this deadly *jouissance* – to which masochism gets close by “short-circuiting” the *fantasme* – belongs to all human beings. From this perspective, the story of Brandes does not appear simply as the radical expression of masochism but as the radical expression of the drives that, independently of the will of the subject, seek the subject’s destruction, which is also to say, its escape from the Symbolic circuit to which it is chained.

⁴⁰⁸ “Nul ne peut dire où commence le masochisme repoussant, où s’arrête le noble goût du risque et l’ambition dite «légitime».” R. Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, Grasset, Paris 1961, p. 295.

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