

Adorno on the Dialectics of Love and Sex

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“Love is the power to see similarity in the dissimilar”.
“Love you will find only where you may show yourself weak
without provoking strength”.
“There is no love that is not an echo”.
(§ 122; § 139).

“Sexuality is the *strongest force* in human beings,” claims Joe, the main character (portrayed by Charlotte Gainsbourg) in Lars von Trier’s famous and much discussed 2013 film *Nymphomaniac*. And “love is strange: how can something so wonderful bring such great pain?”, asks Murphy of himself, the main character (portrayed by Karl Glusman) in Gaspar Noé’s controversial film *Love* from 2015, thus pointing out what we may call the antinomical character of the experience of romantic love, oscillating as it is between the greatest of all joys and sometimes the greatest of all sufferings; (as Nick Cave sings: “Well, I’ve been bound and gagged and I’ve been terrorized / And I’ve been castrated and I’ve been lobotomized / But never has my tormentor come in such a cunning disguise / I let love in”). Although one could surely put this primacy into question and wonder whether love and sex are really *the strongest forces* in humanity, as claimed by the protagonist of *Nymphomaniac*, it is anyway impossible to negate their being at least *some* of the *strongest forces* in our lives.

When one thinks of philosophies of love and sex, certain names may come easily to mind, beginning with Plato’s conception of eros and arriving at Kierkegaard’s intense meditation on the role of love in the aesthetic, ethical, and religious dimensions of human life; and, more recently, coming to Foucault’s influential work on the history of sexuality. Scholars of philosophy and the history of ideas such as Anders Nygren and Clive S. Lewis, in turn, have investigated the nature of love and paid attention to such differentiations as those between eros and agape, or between affection, friendship, eros and charity (I thank my colleague and friend Donato Ferdori for these references). Broadening the picture beyond the limits of the Western tradition, in his recent book *Ars Erotica. Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* Richard Shusterman has investigated this topic by focusing not only on the Greco-Roman context and on Medieval/Renaissance Europe, but also on Chinese, Indian, Islamic and Japanese theories of erotic pleasure, politics, culture, religious beliefs, and habits. Thinkers belonging to other traditions in contemporary philosophy have also sometimes paid great attention to these questions, and in this context it can be worth noting the Frankfurt School’s attempt to emphasize the relation of sexuality with domination in the *unreconciled and administered world* and, at the same time, its relation to potential emancipation and freedom in the perspective of a future *reconciled condition*.

In reflecting on the Frankfurt School and the role played by the dimension of *eros* in the history of human civilization, most readers will probably spontaneously, and understandably, think of Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*. However, Horkheimer and Adorno also emphatically suggested in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that “sexuality is the

body unreduced”, “it is expression”, and, as such, it bears the trace of a potential transformation to promote *human* liberation. It is especially in *Minima Moralia* that Adorno offered significant observations on love and sex. Among the penetrating, and sometimes truly illuminating, meditations on love in *Minima Moralia*, we can find, for example:

Someone who has been offended, slighted, has an illumination as vivid as when agonizing pain lights up one’s own body. He becomes aware that in the innermost blindness of love, that must remain oblivious, lives a demand not to be blinded. He was wronged; from this he deduces a claim to right and must at the same time reject it, for what he desires can only be given in freedom. [...] [H]e who has lost love knows himself deserted by all, and this is why he scorns consolation. In the senselessness of his deprivation he is made to feel the untruth of all merely individual fulfilment. But he thereby awakens to the paradoxical consciousness of generality: of the inalienable and unindictable human right to be loved by the beloved (§ 104).

Or further:

If love in society is to represent a better one, it cannot do so as a peaceful enclave, but only by conscious opposition. [...] Loving means not letting immediacy wither under the omnipresent weight of mediation and economics, and in such fidelity it becomes itself mediated, as a stubborn counterpressure. He alone loves who has the strength to hold fast to love. Even though social advantage, sublimated, preforms the sexual impulse, using a thousand nuances sanctioned by the order to make now this, now that person seem spontaneously attractive, an attachment once formed opposes this by persisting where the force of social pressure, in advance of all the intrigues that the latter then invariably takes into its service, does not want it. It is the test of feeling whether it goes beyond feeling through permanence, even though it be as obsession. The love, however, which in the guise of unreflecting spontaneity and proud of its alleged integrity, relies exclusively on what it takes to be the voice of the heart, and runs away as soon as it no longer thinks it can hear that voice, is in this supreme independence precisely the tool of society. Passive without knowing it, it registers whatever numbers come out in the roulette of interests. In betraying the loved one it betrays itself. The fidelity exacted by society is a means to unfreedom, but only through fidelity can freedom achieve insubordination to society’s command (§ 110).

Not only romantic love, however, but also sex is significantly present in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno’s collection of “ingenious aphorisms” and “vivid scenes taken from [...] apparently unassuming or remote subjects” that, because of its nuanced writing style, “fascinated [...] even Thomas Mann” (Müller-Doohm 2005, 344). For example, in critically discussing some Freudian ideas about eroticism, reason, and society, Adorno establishes a connection between sexual pleasure, truth, and utopia: here, indeed, the Frankfurt thinker claims that “he alone who could situate utopia in blind somatic pleasure, which, satisfying the ultimate intention, is intentionless, has a stable and valid idea of truth” (§ 37). In a sense, Adorno’s aphorism seems to suggest that the “intentionless” nature

and the intensity that characterize the experience of pleasure is able to satisfy the “ultimate intention” of life, namely happiness and the achievement of a non-suffocating and non-coercive but rather liberating unity between different human beings. The joy of lovemaking, with the somehow “blind” character of the somatic pleasure that it brings, is nonetheless capable of “opening our eyes” (also at a philosophical level) more than many concepts and argumentations can do, if only we are able to overcome certain preconceptions and to fully understand the power and significance of erotic experience in all its nuanced richness.

For Adorno, the relation between *eros* and the aesthetic dimension was also a fundamental and indeed constitutive one. As he claimed in *Aesthetic Theory*, his great but unfinished masterpiece in the philosophy of art: “[a]esthetic comportment assimilates itself to [the] other rather than subordinating it. Such a constitutive relation of the subject to objectivity in aesthetic comportment joins eros and knowledge” (Adorno 2002, 331). A passage from Müller-Doohm’s biography of Adorno is also revealing about the relation between the aesthetic and the erotic dimensions in the Frankfurt thinker’s philosophy. In fact, apropos of Adorno’s extramarital affair “with Charlotte Alexander, the wife of his friend and doctor, Dr Robert Alexander”, Müller-Doohm quotes a passage of a letter sent by Adorno to Hermann Grab in May 1946, in which he talked “of his love for Charlotte” and wrote: “The term ‘fornication’, which by the way refers to something the reverse of contemptible, is a far from adequate description of what has taken place – terms such as ‘aura’ or ‘magic’ would be more apt. It was as if the long-forgotten childhood promise of happiness had been unexpectedly, belatedly fulfilled” (Müller-Doohm 2005, 61-2). The constellation of the ideas of aura, magic and *promesse du bonheur*, that famously play a fundamental role in such works as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Aesthetic Theory*, is fascinatingly connected here to the erotic dimension.

Above all, what is surely remarkable in the context of a discussion on the dialectics of love and sex in Adorno’s thinking is the fact that in *Negative Dialectics*, his main work in theoretical philosophy, he precisely used an erotic metaphor to formulate what he considered to be the final aim of philosophizing, saying that “in philosophy we literally seek to immerse ourselves in things that are heterogeneous to it, without placing those things in prefabricated categories. We want to adhere [...] closely to the heterogeneous” (Adorno 2004, 13). Pietro Lauro, the Italian translator of *Negative Dialectics*, has argued that Adorno, in using the verb *sich anschmiegen* in this passage (translated as “adhering to”, and actually indicating a kind of “amalgamating oneself with the other”, or also a kind of “coming together”, inasmuch as an *anschmiegende Umarmung* is an amalgamating embrace, i.e. the union of two or more human beings in a sexual encounter) aimed to claim that “an erotic metaphor was able to express the fundamental question of non-identity” (Lauro 2004, 370). As Lauro writes in his Glossary to the Italian edition of *Negative Dialectics*, “just as in sexual intercourse the individuals are united together but still different from each other, without cancelling their individuality”, in a similar way a negative-dialectical form of philosophizing should promote a form of non-coercive union or fusion with the non-identical, without aiming anymore to arrive at “a Hegelian form of synthesis” (Lauro 2004, 370-1). Hence sexual intercourse is *not* viewed as a one-sided activity, comparable to a boring monologue of an

active subject with a passive recipient, but is rather comparable to a *dialectical* relation of simultaneous “entering in” and “being-received in” or “being-welcomed in”, in which all the partners involved, experimenting an enchanting sense of *affinity*, take part in an exciting intersubjective *dialogue* and quite often exchange their roles in a spontaneous and pleasurable way.

As once noted by Marcuse in *The Aesthetic Dimension*, art as such “cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world” (Marcuse 1979, 32). Shifting our discourse from artistic experience to erotic experience, we can perhaps paraphrase and reformulate Marcuse’s convincing maxim by saying that perhaps a joyful sexuality as such cannot change the world (in an emphatic meaning of the idea of “changing the world”), but it can surely offer a glimpse of freedom and reconciliation even in an unfree and *unreconciled* world, perhaps pointing to a gradual transformation of existing reality and human relations starting from our most intimate, delicate, beautiful, communicative and, for this reason, powerful and sometimes life-changing experiences of unity, fusion, mutual permeation and interpenetration (or, so to speak, of merging together) with other human beings. From this point of view, observations like those offered by Adorno disclose the possibility of conceiving of sexuality in a radically non-reductive way as a sort of actualization of something that, in the radiant fleetingness of an intercourse, also bears in itself a trace of the utopia of reconciliation between human beings.

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Biography

Stefano Marino is Associate Professor of Aesthetics at the University of Bologna. His main research interests are focused on critical theory of society, phenomenology and hermeneutics, neopragmatism and somaesthetics, philosophy of music, and aesthetics of fashion. He is the author of several books on Theodor W. Adorno, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Heidegger, Radiohead, and Frank Zappa. He has translated from German into Italian four books by Adorno and Gadamer, and from English into Italian a book by Carolyn Korsmeyer. He has published as co-editor several collections (books and special issues in journals) on Kant, Nietzsche, Gadamer, Adorno, deconstruction, popular culture and social criticism, popular music and romanticism, aesthetics and affectivity, fashion, and feminism.