

The Masochism of the Commodity Form: Queer Porn and The Fine Art of Paradox

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1. Desire at work and its capture

Today a common critique recognizes Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's two volumes work on schizophrenia (*Anti-Oedipus* written in 1972 and *A Thousand Plateaus* written in 1980) as a specular incarnation of post-Fordist capitalism with no political or revolutionary potential: their 'capitalism and schizophrenia' project is dismissed as late capitalism is said to be already *schizophrenic*. According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri only if their *desiring production* is framed within a *biopolitical production*, the crucial axis of contemporary economy and the exploitation of affective labour, immaterial labour and migrant labour can be properly understood. In a notorious passage of *Empire* (2000) they write:

Machines produce. The constant functioning of social machines in their various apparatuses and assemblages produces the world along with the subjects and objects that constitute it. Deleuze and Guattari, however, seem to be able to conceive positively only the tendencies toward continuous movement and absolute flows, and thus in their thought, too, the creative elements and the radical ontology of the production of the social remain insubstantial and impotent. Deleuze and Guattari discover the productivity of social reproduction (creative production, production of values, social relations, affects, becomings), but manage to articulate it only superficially and ephemerally, as a chaotic, indeterminate horizon marked by the ungraspable event.

The notions of *desiring production* and *biopolitical production* have, however, a common Spinozian genealogy. In the *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari's polemical target was the structuralism of Lacan and his idea of the unconscious organised as language (including also the whole Freudian theatre). Leaving the middle class sofa of psychoanalysis for the post-68 social movements, they wanted to shift philosophy from a critique of *representation* to a critique of *production*. On the other hand, in *Empire* Hardt and Negri's concern is to reverse Foucault's notion of biopolitics in order to restore a positive notion of *productive subject* against a claustrophobic notion of power that is said to shape any form of desire. Along the tradition of *operaismo*, Hardt and Negri have also expanded the Marxian definition of working class into the 'multitude' to include the whole metropolis as a productive subject (the so-called 'social factory'). They redesigned then the notion of labour itself to cover the general productive power of the whole *bios*.

In their most recent book *Commonwealth* (2009) Hardt and Negri developed further the point of capture of 'desire' by capitalism. They make a parallel between the production of social relations and Marx definition of the commodity form as an incarnation of these social and economic relations, also known as *commodity fetishism*.

Although wealth in capitalist society first appears as an immense collective of commodities, Marx reveals that capital is really a process of the creation of surplus value via the production of commodities. But Marx develops this insight one step further to discover that in its essence capital is a social relation or, really, the constant reproduction of a social relation via the creation of surplus value via the production of commodities. Recognizing capital as a social relation gives us a first key to analyzing biopolitical production.

Capitalism is said then to produce value capturing the production of social relations, that is the production of 'the common' according to Hardt and Negri. This notion of capture refers also to the 'apparatuses of capture' described by Deleuze and Guattari in a chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) and it can be used to articulate the relation between desire and economy, if the commodity form is taken precisely as a conurbation of both *desiring flows* and *economic flows*.

The inner diagram of the commodity, however, is not symmetrical and frictionless. In this text a *conceptual diagram of masochism* is advanced as an attempt to articulate the basic form of the capitalistic capture by showing the paradoxical nature of commodity fetishism. The notion of masochism is employed then to spotlight both the paradoxical nature of desire and the paradoxical nature of commodity.

2. A molecular diagram of masochism

In the last decade the academic debate about *bios*, pleasure and desire seemed to have been polarised by three main tendencies: a Deleuzo-Guattarian jargon celebrating desire as absolute endless flow; a Lacanian jargon analysing just the ideological contradiction of any political economy of pleasure; and a biopolitical jargon indulging in the repression of 'naked life' by evil forces. For sure, Deleuze and Guattari had the important role to re-introduce an energetic reading of desire and a materialistic plan of immanence where language, dialectics and metaphysics have no hegemony. Yet how to rethink the limit of desire without falling again in the temptation to use the limit of an external language or the limit of an external power to describe it? The question is how to imagine a new diagram of energy for the desiring flows, in which desire has to face its interior limits and its inner contradictions.

In his book *Félix* (2001) Franco Berardi noticed how in Deleuze and Guattari the third pole of depression is rarely mentioned: psychopathology oscillates between paranoia (state) and schizophrenia (capitalism). Depression is clearly one of the intrinsic limit of the economy of desire, but its political

potential is quite questionable. Apart from depression, can another (positive) intrinsic limit of desire be imagined? How to describe the diagram of the capture of desire beyond flow and code, infinite immanence and metaphysical separation? The definition of masochism could be useful as masochism is considered a notion of desire that includes its negation and its paradox.

Masochism is of course invoked in its conceptual form as it was described, for example, by Deleuze in his book *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* (1967) and as it has been used by queer theory beyond BDSM practices themselves. Inspired by these very practices, the definition of an economy of desire that includes its limit and negation does not refer to any transcendental framework. Here everything can be very immanent. Indeed we are still within a Spinozian ethics as masochism can be seen as an expansion of desire itself, as a *conatus* that expands its enjoyment, consciousness and control through a peculiar subjection. The masochist is stronger than the sadist.

3. Netporn: pornography as a biopolitical commodity

In his book *Profanations* (2005) Agamben describes pornography as the ultimate commodity and faces the problem of separation under the conditions of the society of the spectacle. Capitalism, like religion, is meant to bring each aspect of life (body, sexuality, language) into a separated sphere. The political gesture opposed to this separation is what Agamben calls *profanation*: not simply the gesture that abolishes and erases the separation, but the gesture that knows how to play with its constitution in a positive manner. Interestingly, Agamben is inspired by pornography as the ultimate example of capitalist partition. Pornography intervenes precisely to inhibit a possible “new collective use of sexuality”, Agamben writes. The pornographic image should be *counter-profane*, Agamben suggests, in the same way it profaned sexuality. A reverse profanation is not about censoring pornography but using it in a different way, claiming back the possibility that it captured. According to Agamben:

The unprofaneable of pornography—everything that is unprofaneable—is founded on the arrest and diversion of an authentically profanatory intention. For this reason, we must always wrest from the apparatuses—from all apparatuses—the possibility of use that they have captured. The profanation of the unprofaneable is the political task of the coming generation.

Yet as Katja Diefenbach reminds in her essay on fetishism (2009), queer culture started a long ago to play with and transform the pornographic genre:

As evidenced by the films of Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith or John Waters, or – as a late echo – by Fassbinder’s *Querelle*, beauty was directly combined with experiences and images of despair, violence, decay and fragility. These connections between beauty and dirtiness, or, in the tradition of the Theatre of the Ridiculous, between porn and scenes of failing, silly sex, are not made in order to provoke the guardians of normality, to shock the middle classes [...].

They are made to produce an immanent pleasure of non-naturalised, non-nurturing, non-love-dedicated, non-reproductive sex. In this sense postporn politics had already entered the present a long time ago, but due to the Marx-inspired anti-fetishism of the New Left and the essentialist threads in the feminism of the 1970s and 80s, it has been partly forgotten.

Can this be a suitable form of profanation for Agamben? However, something new happened in the early 2000 when digital technologies and cheap cameras made these queer explorations join the big ocean of internet pornography and its 'commodified' formats. The early 2000 witnessed the rise of the so-called *indie porn*. Previously known as *alt.sex* in the underground of the old Usenet, in a decade it emerged into prosumer platforms such as *ishotmyself.com* and *beautifulagony.com*. The digital colonisation produced a short circuit between the dark underground of the internet and the mass media imaginary. The viral sex tape featuring Paris Hilton became the first example of the pervasive *pornification* of teenage culture too.

In particular indie porn was born out of the hybridization of the mainstream porn industry with the underground subcultures just to find new life style to sell and new market niche to exploit. See for example Vivid Alt, a branch of Vivid Entertainment (the world's largest adult video producer) dedicated to alternative porn made by Californian art academy graduates for their own subcultures (skaters, punks, gothics, and so on). Or take for instance *suicidegirls.com*, that for a short time was quite a success also among queer anarchists. Indeed some queer groups took this new pop wave as an opportunity to become more visible and to use the porn genre as a medium of gender performance. Other made business with a *sexually correct* spin. With these words the pay-per-view website *nofauxxx.com* presents itself:

No Fauxxx, established in 2002 by award-winning pornographer Courtney Trouble, is the basis of today's queer porn movement. Awarded "Best Queer Porn Site" of 2009. Featuring performers of all genders, sizes, races, sexual orientations, No Fauxxx gracefully mixes artistic queer erotica and hard core sex with an "alt porn" appeal. Things we love and have a lot of: Fisting, gangbangs, gender queers, butch dykes, femmes, tattoos alt porn stars, and trans men and women.

The exploration of queer porn or post-porn have been documented by many events (see *The Art and Politics of Netporn* conference organised in Amsterdam in 2005 or the *Post Porn Politics* symposium in Berlin in 2006). However this queer libertarian approach to pornography was criticised by many radical circles, by the neo-puritanism of Adbusters magazine, for instance, and the old puritanism of feminists against pornography. However also within the queer community these experiments were accused to be complicit with a regime of commodification as precisely the digital creates a continuum with the arena of biopolitical exploitation and spectacular capitalism.

After its 'golden age' queer porn became less fashionable. How Florian Cramer (2007) noticed: "The contradiction of all pornography is that it destroys

the obscene". Queer porn had also to face the inflation of libido and the energy limit typical of any *desiring machine*, but more specifically it emerged as a very self-conscious genre. Being a self-conscious political gesture queer porn failed to cope with the paradoxical dimension of the pornographic commodity, that is it failed to fully embrace the obscenity of its capitalistic exploitation. Here a masochistic relation should be introduced to escape this impasse and to redesign this medium of queer activism keeping together the 'unconscious' of the commodity. Obscene is not the content in itself but the incarnation of social relations within pornography as commodity, as Marx underlined in his notion of fetishism.

4. Warporn: the darkest side of the dark side

In the same years of 'the rise of the netporn society' another global event—the Iraq war—affected the collective imaginary. When the pictures of Abu Ghraib scandal spread out on the web, they created another morbid short-circuit between mainstream media and porn underground. Hysteria about BDSM practices started to circulate on mass media (see Weiss 2009), if also Susan Sontag (2004) wrote on the New York Times: "you wonder how much of the sexual tortures inflicted on the inmates of Abu Ghraib was inspired by the vast repertory of pornographic imagery available on the Internet". Warporn is the term introduced by Anglo-American journalism to describe the fetish for war adrenaline, military machinery and uniforms, footage of explosions and killings. With the Abu Ghraib scandal warporn became literally a new narrative genre. Queer porn could not compete with such a degree of obscenity. At the time the notion of 'warpunk' was suggested to imagine a subversive aesthetics able to hijacked this imaginary, like punk did with war imaginary already in the 1970s (see Pasquinelli 2005).

In the video *I Like to Watch* (2001) by controversial transgender artist Chris Korda, porn scenes of oral sex and masturbation are mixed with football and baseball matches and with the images of the September 11 attack. In a literally 'phallic imagery' the Pentagon is hit by an ejaculation, multiple erections are turned into the Manhattan skyline, the Twin Towers themselves become the object of an architectural fellatio. The video condenses and reprojects the lowest instincts of American society: a subterranean ground that binds together spectacle of war, pornography and sport.

Could indie porn or queer porn compete with such an obscenity potential and libidinal power of the Abu Ghraib pictures? Against warporn critical theory, left-wing circles and queer activism failed to elaborate the dark side of power, simply as they defended a very plain, *radically correct* and non-paradoxical notion of desire. If previously a new notion of masochism was invoked to cope with the capitalistic obscenity of the pornographic commodity, here a masochist art of image is advocated to deal with the dark side of the imaginary of power.

5. The just masochism of imaginary

The uneasy relation of modernity with the image (and more generally, with the mediascape) has its genealogy in the neutralisation of the faculty of imagination originally conducted by Medieval Christian culture. In his book *Stanzas* (1979) Agamben identifies this distinct separation between phantasy and the “vital spirit” (or *pneuma*), which occurred nearly nine centuries ago in the Western tradition. Before this, the *pneuma* was considered a unique faculty together with imagination, or *spiritus phantasticus*. In Medieval psychology, in Italian poetry of the 12th century (Dolce Stil Novo) and also, in the conception of courtly love, Agamben recognizes a common and positive conception of phantasy that is strictly related to love and the “animal spirits” of the body. For instance, in his seminal treatise *De Amore*, Andreas Cappellanus introduced love as the “immoderate contemplation of an internal phantasm”.

Like modern times, the Middle Ages also had its temptations in the form of phantasies of “half-naked ladies”. It was quite usual to encounter medical and anatomical references in the religious and philosophical works of the Middle Ages. In Avicenna and Averroes, for example, it is simply impossible to distinguish between medicine and philosophy. In the same way, love and the imagination were usually described as deeply connected to the good and bad humours circulating in the body. The *pneuma* as *spiritus phantasticus* was the mediator between the soul and the body, before modern science definitively severed the body-mind relation. A hydraulic and topological description of the mind only re-emerged with Freud’s theory of the unconscious and, more materialistically, with Deleuze and Guattari’s desiring flows. In a famous passage of *La Vita Nuova*, Dante described the ‘metabolism’ of love as the simultaneous stimulation of different spirits and their organs. Agamben defines this doctrine as *pneumophantasmology*, linking the vital spirits of the body (*pneuma*) and the images of love (*phantasmas*) together in an organic and harmonious way. Mental images were generally considered under a negative light, but the conception of courtly love and other profane currents struggled to develop a civilised and healthy discipline of the interior demons. With such a positive conception of desire and phantasy, Agamben defines this avant-garde of the secular culture in the Middle Ages as the proper “civilization of the image” (opposite to the contemporary society of the spectacle).

In fact the diagram of the *immoderata cogitatio* is about the relation with the image more than the relation with the content of that image. As Deleuze pointed out in his book on masochism *Coldness and Cruelty*, “There is no specifically masochistic fantasy, but rather a masochistic art of fantasy. The masochist needs to believe that he is dreaming even when he is not; sadism offers no such discipline in the art of the fantasy”. Likely there is no queer pornography to promote but a queer art of the pornographic commodity.

6. Resistance as a constituent paradox

If pornography is taken as the ultimate commodity and queer porn as the ultimate form of activism on the biopolitical commodity itself—the issues that queer porn rarely managed to deal with are recapitulated as: the obscenity of the capitalistic relation incarnated in the pornographic commodity and the obscenity of the power relation incarnated in the pornographic mediascape. Indeed what is supposed to be considered *obscene* is the relation behind the image and not its very content. Like in Marx, fetishism is in the social relations embodied within the commodity and not in the commodity in se. Also Agamben's profanation must be moved to this level, otherwise it remains ambivalent exercise. As Katja Diefenbach suggested, it is time to abandon left-wing anti-fetishism to reverse commodity fetishism into a political tool.

Here a masochistic diagram must be introduced to describe our paradoxical relation with the paradoxes of the commodity—the economic paradox and the power paradox—as *paradoxes seem to be the very productive core of capitalism and power*. How to grasp them and reverse them is the question, as everybody is immersed in these apparatuses as a sort of masochistic 'victim'. Possibly, like in a masochistic practice, we should not be scared of the obscenity of command but we should be able to 'profane' it (as in Agamben) or to reverse its capitalistic relation (as in Marx). Masochism is strictly related to fetishism and to an inorganic expansion of desire, as also Deleuze remarked. Then it is a matter to explore this inorganic extension of our desire in the folds of commodity fetishism.

In his book *The Communist Postscript* (2010) the art critique Boris Groys has defined commodity like "a paradox that conceals its paradoxical nature". If the nature of the commodity is paradoxical, then instead of a fetishism of the commodity form Marx could have introduced coherently a *masochism of commodity form*. In order to reverse economic and power relations then an art of paradox must be learnt. If in the novel *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) J.G. Ballard advocated *just psychopathologies* to survive the contemporary mediascape, a *just masochism* is suggested here to exceed the 'schizophrenia' of late capitalism. If power and capitalism are paradoxical, then new form of paradoxical resistance, paradoxical aesthetics and paradoxical organisation must be practiced—that is anyhow the everyday life of politics since ever.

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