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If there is no longer an outside,
masochism is the new *love from afar*



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Love claustrophobia in the postmodern age

“There is no longer an outside”, repeats a common saying that is with us since we were born to the postmodern world. There is no longer an outside to capitalism, globalization and the Empire. The universe seems to close upon us. Indeed some astrophysics are used to describe the universe as a continuous infinite space but with a limited diameter. If there is no longer an outside, Hardt and Negri claim, resistance can install itself only *inside* and *against*, being no longer possible to fight the system from *outside*.¹ This sort of claustrophobic condition affects also passions, not just politics.

This feeling became common after '89, when no direct line of flight was any longer perceived. After the *desiring philosophy* of '68, it appeared that only the intensive passions of cynicism, opportunism, (why not) minimalism and anorexia itself were able to draw a new line in art, politics and love. This sense of claustrophobia points in fact to a further dimension. If there is no longer an outside, conflicts are internalized and become intestine wars.

Today take, for instance, the new moralist motto 'consume less'. The word 'sustainable' is revolting to the many precisely as it inspires a suffocating space without escape. As the German chemist Michael Braungart pointed out, would you call the relation with your girlfriend 'sustainable'?²

From modern wars to the social conflicts of the '60s, contemporary biopolitics has turned spatial coordinates outside inwards. Or, as Ballard said of World War III: “The blitzkriegs will be fought out on the spinal battlefields, in terms of the postures we assume, of our traumas mimetized in the angle of a wall or balcony”. What were once collective and public coordinates of conflict are now individually introjected and objectified. Within the new regime of climate fatalism we have established the bunker of our own siege.

Few decades ago it was quite common to explain sadomasochistic practices as the need to somatize new power structures and sublimate new hyper-competitive condition of work. Managers of the London City were typically depicted by tabloids in their after-work sessions with professional dominatrixes. However, to me, the popularization of BDSM is more related to the perception of a new spatial condition than to power hierarchies, that have been in fact always around since ever.

Courtly love, or the intensive distance of desire

In order to measure the space of contemporary passions it can be useful to look at Middle Ages, when the genealogy of secular love started against the dominant Christian moral. *Amor de lonh* was the 'love from afar' that a knight was supposed to cultivate for his lady in order to elevate his soul. It was a spiritual yet intensively carnal form of love that was practiced outside marriage and according to very codified rules. Here the spatial distance made all the intensity. However as Deleuze and Guattari remind:

It would be an error to interpret courtly love in terms of a law of lack or an ideal of transcendence. The renunciation of external pleasure, or its delay, its infinite regress, testifies on the contrary to an achieved state in which desire no longer lacks anything but fills itself and constructs its own field of immanence. [...] The field of immanence is not internal to the self, but neither does it come from an external self or a nonself. Rather, it is like the absolute Outside that knows no Selves because interior and exterior are equally a part of the immanence in which they have fused. [...] The slightest caress may be as strong as an orgasm; orgasm is a mere fact, a rather deplorable one, in relation to desire in pursuit of its principle.³

This idea of the *amor de lonh* resonates with the earlier work by Deleuze on masochism as an intensive form of desire against the extensive form of pleasure typical of the sadist.⁴ In 1977, in a private letter, Deleuze wrote about Foucault: "it is no accident if Michel attaches a certain importance to Sade, and myself on the contrary to Masoch".⁵ Indeed Deleuze's masochism is not specular to sadism and more complex. The masochist is stronger than the sadist. Indeed, Deleuze was right to say that the pleasure of the masochist is not just pain but an intensive extension of its power, like in the Spinozian *conatus*. Masochism is the space of love without outside.

At the end courtly love, despite its secular attitude, was a way to manage troublesome knights just back from war with an excess of male hormones and military adrenaline. Courtly novels started to describe the rise of the a new middle class. The design of passions can be very instrumental to a specific social system. What we save of courtly love is its intensive practice of space.

In Grenzen frei, or the aesthetics of the limit

Decades ago, the punk movement of East Germany was used to this condition of 'no outside'. The whole aesthetic engine of Berlin is still running today on the invisible ruins of this underground sentiment of enclosure, somehow reassuring. The title of a recent exhibition about fashion subcultures in GDR reminds very well of this condition: *In Grenzen frei* ['free within limits'].⁶ We might even say that whereas western punk was about the colonization of post-industrial spaces, eastern punk was about the internalization of this political border.

Has *ostalgie* (the popular nostalgia for GDR lifestyle) emerged also for the addiction to this dimension of forced domesticity? More likely the fetish for GDR sobriety is the longing for a space not yet colonized by brands, media and commodities, where more surfaces were left free and available for a fetish of the inorganic.

Similarly, the current appealing of metropolitan subcultures as well as fashion magazines for BDSM and fetish imagery can be related to the new closed spatial dimensions of capitalism, and not really to a material drive for torture and power games. BDSM and fetish are the emotional practices for a restricted space of desire, an intensive exploration of the inorganic, not just a ritual to exorcise power structures that the silent majorities appears anyhow to enjoy.

The new closed space of globalization and the old closed space of the socialist regime, paradoxically, and ingeniously, overlap each other in the same city, Berlin. Here a new aesthetics of the limit seems to call for a new inorganic anonymity of the metropolis in order to find a new intensive line of flight.

As Hardt and Negri write: "It is unwise to leave love to the priests, poets, and psychoanalysts".⁷ It is time to rethink love in very materialistic and secular terms. As also queer subcultures teach us, the militant discipline of *masochism* can become a new revolutionary practice of love that let us be, at the same time, in the same space, *inside* and *against*.

¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

² Michael Braungart, "Is Sustainability Boring?". *Abitare*, n. 482. May 2008.

³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*. Paris: Minuit, 1980. Translation: *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

⁴ Deleuze, Gilles (1967) *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch: La Vénus à la fourrure*. Paris: Minuit. Translation: *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*. New York: Zone Books, 1989.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, "Désir et plaisir" (private letter to Foucault, 1977). Published in: *Le magazine littéraire*, n. 325, October 1994. Translation: "Desire and Pleasure", in: Arnold Davidson (ed.), *Foucault and his Interlocutors*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

⁶ *In Grenzen frei. Mode, Fotografie, Underground in der DDR 1979-89*. Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin, July - September 2009.

⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009.