

The Destiny of Sexes and the Decline of Sexual Illusion

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When both sexes leer at each other, one through the other, the masculine leers at and through the feminine, the feminine leers at and through the masculine. This no longer takes place through a seductive gaze, but through a generalized sexual leering which might reflect moral and cultural values. That which is beautiful leers at the ugly, Good at Evil, and vice versa. They connect, and while doing so, they try to divert and absorb the other's distinctive features. In fact, they are accomplices in this short-circuiting of difference and function as communicating vessels, acting according to new mechanized rituals of commutation.

While the play on sexual otherness exacerbates itself within seduction up to the moment it becomes defiant, then, on the contrary, the play on difference attenuates itself into commutation and interactive exchange.

Seduction is that which takes meaning away from discourse and makes it veer away from its truth. Thus, through seduction, that which is manifest, discourse at its most superficial, turns around and back upon its deepest level (conscious or unconscious) to cancel it out and substitute it with the charm and decoy of appearances. These appearances are not frivolous at all, but signal a game, its stakes, and a passion for displacement — since seducing signs themselves is more important than the emergence of any truth — a passion which interpretation overlooks and destroys in its quest for a hidden meaning.

It is through seduction, through the illusion of desire, through artifice and gaming, that sexual difference reaches its maximal intensity. It is through artifice that Woman is truly fatal, that each sex is fatal for the other and therefore the bearer of a radical alterity.

In naturalistic, biological terms, those upon which our modern sexual difference relies, and consequently also our “sexual liberation,” in those very terms, sexes are less different than one thinks. They tend to merge, indeed, to switch positions. Bisexuality, transsexuality (in a non-anatomical sense), are within nature, and within each individual. And that which “this liberation” will liberate is not the specificity, the singularity of each sex, but their confusion and their virtual indetermination. It thus remains to be seen whether woman is not more different from man than man from woman.

That which is liberated is the relative indifferentiation of both sexes and, of course, once the ecstasy of desire and the orgy have taken place, their affective indifference to one another. Sexuality, as destiny, disappears with its liberation. When do we hear of passion in this sense? We do not even hear about desire any more. Its decline from the firmament of concepts has been rapid. It has become the astral theme of a promotional, psychoanalytic Newspeak. The utopia of sexual difference is reaching its end while it takes place in the commutation of sexual polarities. Instead of an agonistic duality, sexuality becomes a reversible function; instead of alterity, an alternate current.

The Seductress: A Fetishized Effigy

When I say that woman is more different from man than man from woman, I mean that man is *only* different, whereas woman is more different than difference: other, strange, absent — enigmatic, antagonistic. And it is in order to ward off this strangeness, this fatal form of absence, this dual form of relationship which is based upon incompatibility, upon the radical exoticism of one sex for the other that sexual difference was invented, not just as biological and anatomical difference, but also as an ideological, juridical, political one as well. All of this may be negotiated within a regulated opposition, each sex thus claiming its difference, and their libido being equally shared. But this opposition is fictive. Properly speaking, it does not even exist: it is only the substitute for a dual and dissymmetrical form by a symmetrical and differential sexual form. One may just as well say that such a form is an extremely fragile compromise, since one can never trust nature.

Liberation, then, is always a naturalistic form. It contributes to the naturalization of desire as function, as energy, as pleasure, and such a naturalization of pleasures and differences naturally leads to the loss of sexual illusion. Sex, once returned to nature, takes woman, as a naturalized being, away from illusion, from artifice, from seduction, from its conscious and unconscious economy (and nobody knows whether or not this is the reality of sex). Woman as a naturalized being is returned to her legitimate and full presence as a sexual being, instead of as one who finds her destiny in absence and thereby becomes the destiny of the Other. Every liberation movement tends to take her away from her artificial condition and restore her to her natural being and to the bourgeois utopia which recognizes her as such. It also recognizes the masculine, but it is

nevertheless the feminine which operates as the privileged pole in this process. The *femme fatale* is such, not as a natural, elemental, instinctive element of disorder — and transgression — but as artifice, and in particular, as the projected artefact of masculine hysteria.

Prismatic Effect of Seduction

This is another space of refraction. She is not a simple appearance, not a pure absence, but the eclipse of a presence. Her only strategy is to be there and not to be there. Absence seduces presence there and secures a blinking effect, a hypnotic operation which crystallizes everyone's attention outside of any meaning. Absence seduces presence.

This is the sovereign presence of the seductress: she eclipses any context, any will. She cannot let other relations establish themselves, even the closest ones, emotional, loving, sexual relationships — especially not those — without destroying them, without reversing them into an estranged fascination. She eludes ceaselessly all those relations which might, one day, at one time, unavoidably raise the question of truth. She undoes them effortlessly. She does not deny them, she does not destroy them; she makes them scintillate. This is where her whole secret lies, in the blinking light of her presence; not to be where you think she is, never where you will desire her. She is, as Paul Virilio would put it, an aesthetics of disappearance. She makes desire function as a decoy. For her, there is no truth of desire, or of the body, any more than of anything else. Love itself, and the sexual acts, may become part of seduction only if they are fused with the ecliptic form appearing and disappearing, i.e. with the discontinuity of a figure which puts an end to all affects, all pleasures, all relations, in order to reaffirm the superior demand of seduction: a transcendent aesthetics of seduction vis-à-vis the immanent ethics of pleasure and desire.

Love itself, and the flesh, are seductive finery, the most refined, the most subtle among those which woman invents in order to seduce man. But modesty and rejection may play a similar role. All is finery in that sense: that is the incredible genius of appearances. There is no respite either: such a fascination cannot be stopped, as it thus risks self-destruction. The true seductress can only be in a state of seduction. Beyond that, she is not woman anymore, nor object, nor subject of desire. She is faceless and unattractive, as only her passion is there. Seduction is sovereign. It is the only ritual which eclipses all others, but this sovereignty is cruel and must be cruelly paid for.

Thus, in seduction, woman is bodiless. But what is a body, and what is desire? She does not believe in them and she plays with them. Not having her own body, she turns into pure appearance, an artificial construction where the other's desire lets itself be caught.

Every seduction consists of letting the other believe that he is, and remains, the object of desire without letting oneself be taken in. It can also consist of transforming oneself into a seductive sexual object of man's desire as such: seduction may well be expressed

through “seducingness” (*séduisance*) and may well transcend it as the charm of seduction “goes through the allure of sexuality” (*passé à travers l’attrait du sexe*). But the stakes consist precisely of provoking and disappointing desire, the only truth of which is to scintillate and to be disappointed: desire itself deceives itself about its power, which is only given to be subsequently withdrawn. It will not even know what is happening. For the one who seduces may really love or desire, but it still remains that more deeply, or superficially in a way, in the superficial abyss of appearances, another game is being played, which neither partner knows, and whose protagonists in the desiring game are only extras.

For seduction, desire is a myth. If desire is the will to power and to possession, seduction forever opposes to it an equal will to power through its use of simulacrum, and it is through the grid of appearances that it arouses this hypothetical power of desire and exorcises it. Similarly, for Kierkegaard’s seducer, the naive gracefulness of the young girl, her spontaneous erotic power is but a myth and has no other reality than that of being resurrected in order to be destroyed. He may love her and desire her, but elsewhere in the suprasensual space of seduction where the young girl is but the mythical figure of a sacrifice, the power of man’s desire is a myth upon which the seductress will exert herself in order to arouse it and abolish it.

The artifice of the seducer, who aims at the mythical grace of the young girl, is quite equal to the artificial construction of her body by the seductress, who, for her part, aims at man’s mythical desire. In both cases what is at stake is the destruction of this mythical power, whether that of Grace or that of desire. *Seduction always aims at reversing and exorcising power. If seduction is artificial, it is also sacrificial.* Death is at stake there, always, when one has to capture and imitate the other’s desire. But, on the other hand, seduction is immortal. The seductress wants to be immortal, as does the hysteric, forever young and without tomorrow — to everyone’s astonishment given the intensity of her universe of despair and deception, given also the cruelty of her game. Yet precisely she survives this game because she operates beyond the bounds of psychology, of meaning, of desire. The construction of an absent, ideal, or diabolical woman, always absent and fetishized, this constructed woman, this automaton Eve, this mental object, goes well beyond sexual difference. She denies difference, in a way, as she plays upon desire and the subject of that desire. What we have here is a mental object, a pure object (i.e. one which does not take itself for a subject), an unreal being, made-up, cerebral, a devourer of grey matter and libidinal matter. Through her, it is desire itself which is laying a trap and it is the object that seeks revenge.

Seduction, passion, alterity are not concerned with recognizing the other as such. On the contrary, they presuppose that both terms are irreducible, that their strangeness is unresolvable and that it is within this strangeness that a complicity full of charm and violence is being played out. Singularity has nothing to do any longer with identity or with difference; it does not presuppose a recognition of the self as such, by the self or by others. In fact, it plays itself out as an arbitrary, singular power; that is all.

Recognition goes with difference and both are bourgeois virtues. Sexual difference, since it belongs to Nature, is historically unstable. It only surfaces in modern times. Before the nineteenth century, it did not exist: such were the times of complicit pleasures. Today it tends to disappear, for such are the times of complicit indifference. In any case, as soon as it appears, it is immediately and powerfully offset by a positive and negative idealization, by a masculine hystericization of the feminine, by a feminine hystericization of the masculine. This is more feminine than the feminine—the woman as object—and more masculine than the masculine—that which is virile, machismo. Parenthetically, the sexual figure of Woman as object is not at all the same as man's machismo, the latter being the equivalent for man of the status of woman as object for woman: man being hysterically projected by woman as a virile object, just as the woman is hystericized by man as a woman-object. These respective hystericizations proceed from the same attempt to negate objective sexual difference.

This respective hystericization of roles decreases while belief in Nature disappears in modern bourgeois times. This is because sexual liberation has disclosed the ambiguous and problematic nature of this difference. Transsexuality put an end to ideal femininity, or to femininity as object, at the same time that it put an end to virility.

At any rate, sexual difference is either denied, or exceeded, or erased by default, in our present conjuncture of indifferentiation. Through excess, the *femme fatale's* strategy is not at all one of the negation of her status as a woman-object, but one of outbidding and displacing this hysterical femininity which is essentially a masculine construction. She plays upon this speculative image while increasing the power of her own image. She outfoxes masculine speculation through her own, and becomes such for others. She is not beautiful, she is worse (as Marie Dorval has demonstrated).

The Artifice of the Seducer

What is at stake with sexuality is never sexual difference, but rather the illusion which appears through reality, the absence which surfaces through presence, the feminine which transpires through the very traits of this ideal artificial type constructed for her, not at all in order to bring out “the real woman” (or the biological and psychological being, conscious or unconscious, which she is supposed to be), but in order to distance herself all the more from her true nature and transform this artifice into triumphant destiny.

If the central characteristic of the seductress is to become pure appearance, in order to confuse and lure appearances, what can we say about the other player, the seducer?

He too becomes an illusion in order to lure, but, curiously, this lure becomes a calculation, and finery yields here to strategy. But if the woman's finery is obviously strategic, the finery of the seducer is surely an inverse display of calculation (*parade de calcul*)—through which he defends himself from some adverse power. There is a strategy of finery and a finery of strategy.

Discourses which are overly confident, including strategies of seduction, should be read in another way. As totally rational strategies, they are still only the instruments of a destiny of seduction, of which they are as much the victims as the instigators. Is the seducer not finally caught up in his own game? He who believes himself the master of the game, is he not the primary victim of the tragic myth of strategy?

What about Kierkegaard's seducer's obsession with the young girl? This is an obsession with this state of virginity (*état inviolé*), still non-sexual, which is one of grace and charm since, because she is a being of grace, one must find grace in her eyes. Like God, she holds a unique privilege. She thus becomes the mighty stakes of a challenge: she is to be seduced, she is to be destroyed because it is she who is by nature endowed with the seduction in its totality.

The seducer's vocation is to exterminate this natural power of the woman, or of the young girl, through a deliberate operation which will equal or surpass the other and thus offset through an artificial, equal, or superior power the natural power to which he has succumbed from the very start, in spite of all the appearances which make him the seducer. The seducer's goal, his will, his strategy, all work together to exorcize him in the face of the gracious and seductive predestination of the girl, all the more powerful because she is unaware of her power.

The last word cannot be given over to Nature, for such are the highest stakes. Her exceptional, innate, immoral grace, like one's evil half, must be sacrificed and immolated through the seducer's operation. The seducer's allure will take her to the point where she surrenders erotically, thus relinquishing her own powers of seduction and ceasing to be a threatening force.

Thus the seducer is worth nothing. The source of the seduction is entirely the young girl's. Calculated seduction is the mirror-image of natural seduction: it feeds on its original image, perfecting its extermination.

This is also why the young girl does not have a chance. No initiative will be left to her in the game of seduction. She is the defenceless prize. Her moves came first, so the whole enterprise of seduction will only make up for a natural deficit, or reveal a pre-existing challenge, that of natural beauty in the young girl. Seduction here reverses its meaning. Originally an immoral operation, that of the rake applying his talents at the expense of virtue, it functions as a cynical deceit yearning for sexual gratification and thus is of little interest. But seduction turns mythical and sacrificial. That is why seduction secures the "victim's" assent, so readily obtained as if she were giving in to the orders of a divinity who demands of all powers that they be reversible and sacrificed, whether they are the powers that be, or seduction's natural powers, because any powers, and above all those of beauty, are by definition sacrilegious.

The scenario of seduction according to Kierkegaard is a spiritual one, plied through acumen. There one needs wit continually: i.e. calculation, charm and the refinements of a conventional language in the eighteenth-century sense of the term. Seduction never plays upon desire or amorous propensity. All of this would be vulgar, mechanical, physical, and carnal, and thus uninteresting. Everything has to respond through subtle allu-

sions; all signs have to be trapped. Thus, the artifice of the seducer is the reflection of the young girl's seductive essence, and she is demultiplied in an ironic, theatrical production, the exact decoy of her own nature by which she will be easily trapped.

We are not dealing here with a frontal attack, but with a diagonal seduction which operates as a witticism, has the vivaciousness and the economy of a *trait d'esprit*, because it uses the same tools. According to Freud's formula, the arms of the seducer are identical to those of the young girl and thus are being turned back against her. Such strategic reversibility is the essence of the seducer's charm and witticism.

But the two sexes have an asymmetrical destiny: there is the same outbidding, the same double or nothing on virility's ideal which has been imposed upon man and is not really possible for him. He can only emerge from his role through a discarding of cards, not an outbidding. That is why, in this sexual mutation of difference, it is the woman's destiny which is fascinating, not that of the man. Thus, in our present conjuncture, and cinema certainly witnesses this, woman loses this privilege, although man does not recuperate it. The privilege of a fatal solution disappears quite simply in favour of a final solution: the dissolution of sexuality in all its scattered limbs, in its partial objects, in its fractal elements.

The End of Sexual Illusion

The emphasis which our culture puts on "natural" sexual difference, on a sexuality which is by definition unconscious, natural and democratic (think of the role played by desire, fantasy and libido), has largely contributed to the restructuring of sex as destiny in order to introduce sexuality as difference (or worse, as an entitled difference, a democratic platitude even more ridiculous than that of human rights), and after ecstasy to introduce the metastasis of sexual liberation in endless little operations of libidinal transfusion and perfusion, micro-scenarios of transsexuality or unsexuality in all its forms.

With sexual liberation it is the true woman who wins out. But with the vacillation of these differences, the virtual end of liberation (i.e. of the orgy), what becomes of her? Man himself loses his reality and, if there is no longer a *femme fatale*, there is no longer a man to become her prey. In the Low Definition Sexual Game, the woman does not sacrifice herself to him any longer, nor can the man be sacrificed in return.

Simultaneous deflation of extreme phenomena (those which are more feminine than feminine, those which are more masculine than masculine), decline of the illusion of sexuality as a game of desire, of which hysteria was the latest avatar (and it will not be by chance if hysteria disappears today, after having given us the extreme figures of an entire century's sexual mythology) — thus hysterical reduction, the effacement of sexual differences. But perhaps other forms will replace them, which are the witnesses of a sexual metaphor which some take to be irreducible but henceforth erratic.