

## The Love That Can't Remember Its Name

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Unlike sex, love is impossible. Lacan tells us sex – the sexual relation – is impossible: “What one calls sexual bliss is marked, dominated, by the impossibility of establishing, as such anywhere in the enunciable, the unique One which is important for us, the One of the relationship ‘sexual relations.’” But Lacan, as everyone knows, was no feminist. What, in part, he was getting at is in the heart of what he understands of the maculate processes of being masculine: “Phallic jouissance is the obstacle which stops man arriving at jouissance in the body of the woman, precisely because what he gets his bliss from is the jouissance of his own organ.”<sup>1</sup> It is Zeno’s paradox: Achilles’s arrow never arrives at the spot that Briseïs has just vacated. But, of course, Briseïs has never completed her second step either, and the One which is pursued in the sexual act, the One of sexual union, is the One of the Real numbers, and it is itself infinite, because, like the step away from the speeding arrow, the price of its completion is death.

This, oh best beloved, is the sole point from which love is comprehensible: the realm of paradox, the necessity and impossibility, the union and the infinite incompleteness, the generosity and the fatality of love. Unlike sex, love is not eternal. Sex is just an instinct. Let us also say: It is an instinct that is incapable of finding satisfaction under any but the most fantastical conditions, conditions that, at any one time, can exist only for the tiniest proportion of the population, and then only for split seconds of historical time. The flamboyance with which he pursued sexual gratification would seem to suggest that the Emperor Tiberius never achieved it. Confronted with the man who boasts constantly of his conquests, or worse, whose lackeys boast of them for him, one doubts the veracity of the tales of the harem of Haroun al-Raschid, and believes instead in the endlessly deferred delights of Scheherazade. This is where love emerges, through the truly secular delights that, unlike the divine, can never be attained.

Love, after all, is pure and holy only if it is love, that is to say, if it is unrequited. Divine love can always be fulfilled, in the mystics' aching visions, in the deaths of virgins and martyrs. But human love can find no peace in death with which it waltzes endlessly. The humble, sublunary love is always fouled in the mires of the bodies here below; it is always a pale shadow of itself, its own retreating echo, fading even as it speaks. The narcissist is uninteresting: the narcissist's lover, the nymph Echo, disappearing, swallowed in the marshes of her own unanswerable love – that is a creature as worthy of respect and devotion as the will-o'-the-wisp desire she follows in her internal exile. This is love, and there is more of it about today than ever before. It has ceased even to be desirable. Perversely, that can mean a return to the body, a reconstruction of *jouissance*, apart from the tedious tyranny of the prick. A tyranny whose reign is, in any case, credited with far more power than it really has; whose ominous grip on the conduct of human affairs is profoundly overrated, and whose ability to provide a lasting sense of good cheer is clearly inadequate to the planetary gloom it is charged with dispelling. The good news is that love has a history: it is only sex that endures.

Love has a strange history; the story of frustrated communication. I take it that the most fundamental quality of human beings is that we are social, cultural creatures, and that our common destiny is to share, to communicate, not for any particular purpose other than to speak to one another, to strike sparks, to be and to become cultured creatures. Everything else – politics, economics, sex – is subordinate. The reproduction of the species is incidental to the communicative business of love. But as it has emerged in the twentieth-century West, love is a bogus communication, premised on the hidden, shameful, puritanical account for sexual action. That shame, as Lacan imagined, laid the foundations for a genital sexuality that lies incommunicado. For once (and only once) McLuhan was right: in sex, and sex alone, the medium became the message.

But now, thank God, we can at least begin to see the far side of this enormous dead weight of hypocrisy and its necessary other, sexology. A terrible virus has not only caused deaths, but has made lives take on a particular shape. If ever it was envisaged as an Old Testament plague driven by a vengeful and malicious god, then the virus, as viruses will, has had its own revenge. In the wake of HIV and AIDS, there is more perversion, not less – a further reduction in the “natural” and “reproductive” functions of sexuality.

In the absence of a governing image of sexuality, of love, of everything that is central to the secular worlds of Anglo-Saxony (whose commonest curse and blessing is “fuck”, the *mana* of the West), there emerges a mode of sexuality that has even less to do with reproduction, less to do with satisfaction, less to do with orgasm, less to do with penetration, less to do with the medium, and more, much much more, to do with the message. Sex

becomes love at the moment it no longer is an end in and of itself. Even self-love needs, demands, an other to complete the vicious circle of Narcissus, the slippery Echo in which vanishes the otherness of the self, to itself in the narcissism – the newest pitfall in the romantic history of love.



TV as metaphor for sex: If McLuhan was right even about this tiny corner of the communicative universe, he was right only temporarily. No one ever learned anything about television by watching TV. You have to watch yourself watching TV, watch yourself making TV: that is TV culture. TV programmes are scarcely interesting because of what they say or do not say, or even the ways in which they say and refrain from saying. TV programmes are interesting only in the ways in which they speak to us about the conditions under which speaking and saying can be undertaken in our time, and about the history of how those conditions came to be.

If the utopian image of communication pertains to a democracy of people and of media (where there is no such thing as broadcasting), then both McLuhan and Baudrillard are caught between mistaking the ideal for the actual, the prognosis for the symptom, and the message for the medium. Terror of dialectical thinking drives both of them into a paroxysm of monomania. The trivialization of dialectic as “binary opposition,” and its replacement with the tyrannical anti-tyranny of postmodern Babel, is a pseudo-anarchism in the service of the managed system. Its democracy is the democracy of the shopping mall, where everyone is equal in the eyes of the surveillance camera, where all knowledge is reducible to statistical likelihood and aberration.

TV has become political: it has shed the role of communication in favour of that of rule. Watching TV has become political: it is an act of subservience or rebellion, but always within the parameters of a medium formed from the centre out, no matter how persuasive, how lovely, how far-out and right-on the terms and trances it proposes. Just so sex. There is no global village of sexualities. For far too long, sex was maintained in an artificial state of nature. Unable to recognize that this “innocence” was in fact a strait-jacket, sex could be posited as the secret of the world: either the greatest good or the greatest evil. By bringing ideology into sex, the Christian demand for reproduction took the innocence out, but brought the creative in. The secular demand for fun crams the sexual act with significance but drains it of meaning.

What is so wonderful about this moment in the sexual life of the Occident is that it is about to lose its grasp on the almighty orgasm. The organs of jouissance, which have,

with their French Theory handle, dominated the establishment of an apolitical canon of theory in the academies of North America, are at last revealed.

Or rather, not. The organs that were once the secret and the centre of coming of age, of *it*, of going all the way, are covered over again, or revealed more nakedly and this time in public. The sorts of sexuality that once were labelled S&M or posing are now everyday dreams and dramas. Fashions reek of the two alternatives available: the nuclear couple and kinky sex. We enter a new dialectic, a new moment: the moment of narcissism. Just as the TV viewer has ceased to seek communication with anyone on either side of the screen (slumping into the solipsism of the electronic relation), the solitary lover's love is deprived even of the pseudo-gratifications of the gonads.

The communicative side of sex has taken over from the genital and the reproductive. It has done so at the same moment that the pursuit of individualism has reached new heights with the collapse of the nuclear family. The logics of the Reagan-Bush era in Anglo-Saxony are clear. The family, which was foisted on the urban populations of the industrial revolution as the only proper recompense for the loss of rural community, has begun to break down where it most counts: in the hinterlands of the ruling classes themselves, the home turf of postmodernism – suburbia. Suburban sociology is the tale of the crisis and dispersal of the nuclear family. Sex was not an accidental arrival in the history of Western culture's secularization. Its purpose was and is to provide a social cement in the face of the decline in traditional social and cultural bonds like serfdom and slavery. The problem has always been that as soon as marriage was unleashed from the bondage of property and arrangement, it left romantic and sexual attraction to provide the supreme purpose in life as well as the links between individual and individual, clan and clan, uniting the members of the political nation-state.

But sex simply could not bear the weight of all this. As the logic of advancing capital became more and more powerfully the right, the duty, of the individual to shit on everyone around, the function of sex became less a mode of social bonding and a bribe to the workers, and more a symbolic announcement of success, the bimbo as essential as the Rolex and the suit to the barometer of achievement. So what's love got to do with it?

It is another strange aspect of the dialectic that the more globally interlinked the moments of the communicative universe become, the more isolated and introverted become the people who make it up. It is strange too that feminism, in its struggles to emancipate women from the status of unwaged labourers and sex workers in the home, and underpaid labourers and status symbols in the workplace, should have served, in hastening the demise of the family, to speed the rise of the narcissist. Somehow we will need





Chome in subgetto  
locho e dimoranza  
E in quella parte mai non a possanza

Perchè da qualitatde non disciende  
Risplende  
in sé perpetuale effecto  
Non a diletto  
mà consideranza  
Perchè non pote laire simiglianza.<sup>2</sup>

And in the second of Pound's two versions:

Where memory liveth,  
it takes its state  
Formed like a diafan from light on shade

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Which shadow cometh of Mars and remaineth  
Created, having a name sensate,  
Custom of the soul  
will from the heart;

Cometh from a seen form which being understood  
Taket h locus and remaining in the intellect possible  
Wherein hath he neither weight nor still-standing,

Descendeth not by quality but shineth out  
Himself his own effect unendingly  
Not in delight but in the being aware  
Nor can he leave his true likeness elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

“Risplende/in se perpetuale effecto”: to shine forth as an effect of one's own perpetual unstillness, to be the form of colour, to be as one with the light which is itself universal. These are qualities which we have not lost through progress but through a programmatic history of forgetting. There is no reason why we should not be contemporaries of this

theogeny of love, save only that we no longer care to reason out the dream in terms of metaphors that we refuse. No metaphor is ever exhausted; it is merely abandoned for the next. Love, standing in the place of memory, concerns the inexhaustible quality of the present as it is, forever a shining forth of the past. Love is the skill of remembrance, the archery of forgetfulness. Not sensory delight but awareness, that thin patina between memory and forgetting, between past and present, past and future, stands love – unphotographable. Like a camera obscura, the metaphysical love of Cavalcanti's canzone hoards light on shade, the image of an image, diaphanous as the moving traces of the light, a memory that cannot itself be memorized.

Until, that is, the moment of the moving image, at which point love, like everything else, becomes utterly different. For if Cavalcanti's love finds being in the perpetual movement ("non si addorna / di riposa mai / Move cambiando / ch'olr riso in pianto") that derives from the unfixed memory in the moving image (and we might now, reordering the hierarchies, mention too that the sounds which Cavalcanti didn't prize are, also, the sources of love's power) alters the being of love itself. For if love, before the moving image, becomes that being whose role is to engender, from the fixity of the image, the motions of the soul, then it becomes a process, a becoming, of memories in the controlled and fixed existence of segmented movement in the recorded frame and the vibrations of amplifiers. Love, now, is the memory of movement beyond its segmentation, of the instant as a motion before its seizure, of the possibilities within each moment lost by the snap-shooter.

Love, for Cavalcanti, meets often with death. Indeed, some things change little in our world. The *ars amatoria* belongs to that field of mortuary arts whose Bazinian aim is the conquest of death. But where Bazin wants the photograph to bear its witness of existence through the unravelling of chronological time, the love proper to the emergent narcissistic and global cultures of the era of the moving image and recorded sound concerns the ways in which the instant itself is the narrow gate to the infinite. In the time it takes the camera to make a shot of the fleeing Briseïs, she has already moved on. This presents problems for the epistemology, if not the ontology, of the photographic image. But for Achilles, the hero drawing the bowstring, there is only the problem of mechanizing his weapon: of changing the eye from the status of a bow to that of a Gatling gun. For Briseïs, there is something much weirder at stake.

That which lies at the heart of the moving image at its moment of origin is not the urge to document the real, but the desire to rewrite the moment of perception. The innocent invention is wired all too soon into the service of dire vignettes: family life, romance,

lone heroics. But before *Le repas de bébé*, before even *The Kiss*, there are *Fred Ott's Sneeze* and *La sortie d'usine* – poems of the involuntary and incommensurable nature of perceptions.

We read that early audiences were more impressed by the leaves moving in the background of Louis Lumière's *Le repas de bébé* than by the show of Oedipal trauma. The wisdom of the pioneer audiences is remarkable. What most appeals to them is the quality of perceptions that cannot be stage-managed, like a crowd or a sneeze. Moments, irreducible in their complex integrity, their inconsequentiality, their emergence from the patterns of history or chronometers, the residue of the inexplicable in any perception. Of course, the cinema was born of the urge to destroy this terrible poetry by mastering and enslaving it in the name of science and commerce. As usual, the blunt instruments of the *zoon politikon* are administered on the creations of the communicative universe to ensure that the minimum of communication occurs. What delights us so in the cinema today is but the songs in chains of a medium in bondage.

And still the evolutionary powers of the dialectic are unassuageable. The invention of digital imaging is a result of the attempt to solidify the grounds before the moving image – now increasingly restricted to the role of distribution media – moves in to capture the fleeting real. If the camera's object is itself already an artifice, then its capture at the hands of another artifice is surely guaranteed. The postmodernists sigh with agreeable relief. The real has escaped into oblivion and need no longer try them. They hail the hyperreal: Death-in-life and Life-in-death. This might have been true, if cinema had ever dealt in the real. But it has not. The core and most intimate dialectic of the cinema has always been its love affair with the processes of perception. If, as Bazin more rightly argues, the cinema is movement (and the Western is cinema par excellence)<sup>3</sup> and movement is not a quality of the real but of our perceptions of it (especially our temporal constructions), what are we to find in the cinema if not the history of our perceptions, their regimes, their riots, their revolutions and their repressions? And in the digital image, what, if not the externalization of the truth we always threatened to reveal, that perception is the slave of desire, as desire was perception's slave?

At last the realism of the cinema admits to the subordination of photographic positivism to psychic abandon. That this should happen first in formal terms is scarcely exceptional in a world whose processes of mediatization have only appeared to have been administered in the name of mass marketeering. For the secret has been that it is the undergrowth that has demanded the architecture: the spontaneous and undeniable evolutionary powers of the communicative universe are as capable of manipulating the globalization of media enterprise as those enterprises are of manipulating the communicative

ecosphere. The retreat into the intrapsychic is the next phase of a dialectic in which the inadequacy of individuality as a socially cohesive unity is at stake. For a Westerner it is no longer possible nor desirable to cling to identity. Love in the post-genital age is a matter of communications. Its tragedy and comedy are the interplay of the temporary, arrogant, and impossibly self-deluded (but therefore all the more boorish and brutal) machinations of the status quo – the as-yet infantile creation that is emerging from the morass of the media age: a species utterly dependent on one another. Narcissism is the last breath of individuality. Heave it and move on.

### Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, *Le Seminaire livre XX: Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 15.
2. Guido Cavalcanti, *Canzone*, "as it appears in the manuscript 'Ld,' Laurenziana 46-40 folio 32 verso, with a few errors corrected. Accents added from the Giuntine edition" (Ezra Pound's note) in *The Translations of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1953), 132-41.
3. Ezra Pound, *Canto XXXVI, The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1964), 182-83. The very difficulty of translation which is so important to Pound's second version and its relation to the Jefferson Nuevo Mundo Cantos should also indicate something of the theological precision of Cavalcanti's verse and the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of bringing it into the modern world.
4. André Bazin, "The Western or the American Film par excellence" in *What Is Cinema? Vol. II*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 141.