

## The Only Game

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“When she used to wake me up in the morning sucking me off and then hand me a cup of coffee before taking it in her mouth again, I felt dizzying heights of appreciation and tenderness. She knew how to stop just before I would come, she could have kept me on the edge for hours. I was living inside a game, a tender and exciting game, the only game left for adults; a universe of simple desires and moments of unlimited pleasure”.

Michel Houellebecq, *Platform*.

We would probably have to start by *remembering Foucault*. In opposition to the Baudrillardian instruction to forget him, it is absolutely essential to bear in mind that everything in the universe of humankind is *produced*, and more particularly *everything* that has to do with the realm of desire and pleasure, everything dealing with the regulation of [that inscrutable known as I] the psychic life in the order of phantasm and representation. There is no sexuality either before or after its *production*, and even the means of its *production* can take highly paradoxical, highly unpredictable paths. There is, or could be, an exhaustive production of sexuality in its deliberate prohibition, as well as a growing deproduction in its inevitable obscenification.

Nonetheless, what is actually in play in both extremes is always the same thing. That is, how does the apparatus of power fit in with this economy, and how are the mechanisms of despotization of psychic life inscribed in the body by the

apparatus of control within these games of production, deproduction and, ultimately, of regulation.

The first and foremost question would have to be: what is the dominant regime of regulation operating in our societies at the present moment in time. Or let's put it another way: how does the apparatus of socialization inscribe in the regime of the relationship of bodies its own particular form of capturing and organizing affective life and, by extension, of the production of psychic life as a whole. Or, to reword it yet another way, how do we modulate and despotize the forms of desire in our new societies.

This would immediately lead us to formulate another suspicion: that a regime of *exhaustive deproduction* is establishing its current hegemony in another of obscene total ostentation. A lot of sex, yet little desire; a bit of pleasure, but no *jouissance*. Or what is the same: a regime of *shrewd proscription* which operates through the production of a falsifying total *obscenification* –or, even further, of a *exhaustive total pornification* (of everything).

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What has the artist got to do with this game—that strange and probably dated character belonging to bygone organizations of the economy of the symbolic? The wisdom on the mechanics that enters into the fray in a decisive manner—in all plotting of desire: of the visual, of the scopic. Every story of love—every epic of the management of desire associated with the construction of the character, or



otherwise the management of representation - is first and foremost a *story of the eye*.

That is the reason why the artist has a part to play on this stage (the classic stage *par excellence* of painting with Courbet as the paradigmatic painter) of *representing* desire. Yet the good artist knows that his role does not end there—it does not consist only in representing once again *that obscure object* (as if such a thing existed on its own, outside the economy of assignations, outside the complex web of stipulations of an atavistic –and, I would venture, hairy – role game). In fact, there still remains the *representation of the representation* –of desire: laying it bare, stripping it down. *Desire* is no longer sufficiently depicted by merely painting its object, rather it is a matter of painting this in relation to the gaze that constitutes it as such. The *double game* in which the (good) artist always enters is this: he is the one who looks, but also the one who shows to the one who looks.

Bernardí, with his fire-spitting eyes, does just this.

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In this realm, the gaze is *power*.

Yet we're not merely talking about the power that imposes, that dominates, that forces—the power-*pouvoir*. But also the power that makes something real, possible, the power-potential, the power that leads to an event – power-*puissance*.

Here, both logics operate at the same time, openly and without beating around the bush. In fact, the opposite is true, there is an extreme and generalized (this is why we can say that we are dealing with a case of latent porn) *mise en évidence* –which precisely lays bare the *mise en scène*. The outcome is that a direct operation—the game of the artist producing-dominating-enhancing the model – is subtly redoubled with a movement of *citation*, in an order of metalanguage. In this way, what is staged is the very *mise en scène*—transferring all the power of the mechanism not into a Pygmalion operation (the artist conferring identity) but into the tension of *representing* it. The artist is not a voyeur rather the device that *reveals* the constitution of the object in the gaze. Put another way—the artist is not on stage, he is the eye that looks and configures the field. The interest of this work, its *reflexivity*, lies in introducing this *instituting outside* into the problematized inside of the stage itself, of the represented, of the happened.

However we could easily have suspected that this might happen. It is a while ago now since Roig showed his preference for the *powers of art*. We only have to think of his *levántate y anda* [arise and walk]. *Leidi B* has a different voice yet seems to say the same thing. And perhaps, once again, questioning the *place of the artist* in relation to the statement of this performative ...

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We could possibly describe our societies –when reflecting the desiring imaginaries they exhibit - as societies of total consent, of absolute pornification,

where everything can (and must) be shown, where all choices of fantasy are tolerated (and forced), permitted and encouraged. There are scarcely a few remaining redoubts—those of child pornography, incest (of course) or snuff movies— that draw the limits of forbidden places, but even there consent is extended as long as what is shown is *simulated* in the order of the phantasm, of fantasy—and in these realms everything is permitted. We should recognize the fact that this extended permissiveness does not imply a fracture or a relaxation of the scope of the Law: on the contrary, what it in fact prevents is all transgression. To be a *libertine* in a society of extreme visibility is what has become unthinkable, impossible, impracticable.

This is the greatest effect of the new (falsified) tolerance: displacing the horizon of fantasy to the repertoired order of a negotiable offer. Reducing the realm of excess and the intolerable to the order of the most rank domesticity.

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Reading the sexual biography of Catherine M, the notorious editor of a French conceptual art magazine, nobody would come away with the sense of having read a programme where the echoes of some inheritance of Sade are still to be heard—as one would expect, to be honest, from a habitué of the parties of Barthes or Philip Sollers. Only occasionally can the coldness, the tedium in the monotonous reiteration of the descriptions, the frank lack of drive it all reveals—remind us even remotely of known cadences. Nevertheless, here everything is playing the opposite game: in Sade these *literary* mechanisms (the tedium, the coldness, the monotony, the appearance of complete normality) were part of the means. Here

they are the end, the final result. When turning the last page, and after having (inevitably) read it laterally, one cannot help asking oneself what could have made the editor believe that a life so normal and boring, so lacking in the most minimum passion for *literature*, could be of interest to anyone other than those curious to know something more of the strange story of French conceptualism.

By the way, there is a lot to be learned from its anal rankness.

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“There is no question that if sexuality has to enter into the equation of exchange goods, the best solution is to use money, the universal mediator that already allows us a specific equivalence with intelligence, talent and technical ability; it already guarantees the perfect homogenisation of opinions, tastes, life styles”.

Michel Houellebecq, *Platform*.

Of all Houellebecq's novels, *Platform* is undoubtedly the best. It is not the most inventive, literarily speaking, and it has even lost a part of the vitriolic resentment that one recognised in *Atomised* (in the UK, translated as *The Elementary Particles* in the USA) as one of the most intense spirits distilled in any example of the literature of the 90s (of the little deserving of the title). Yet its *dictum* and that of *Whatever* (*Extension du domaine de la lutte*) is soon exhausted in confirming the resounding and terrible failure of the “sexual revolution” attempted by the triumphant generation, the current rulers of the world. In *Platform* this confirmation is repeated –as could not be otherwise, because it is

necessary to keep on talking about this tremendous and *historic* failure - yet now it is recounted almost in first person, by someone who has the guts to question himself on how to live with, and survive, it. Or what amounts to the same thing, as if still managing to make the word 'love' make some sense for him—for all of us *posthumous* subjects of the devastated world they have passed on to us. Yet it would have to be admitted that the novel pulls its punches at the end, and Houellebecq sidesteps the dilemma—the dilemma of our time – with unforgivable impudence. However, in the meantime he brings into play the most lucid of evidence, the only one that actually adds anything to the already ubiquitous proclamation of the failure of the generation of our immediate predecessors. With all the package of activities capable of producing symbolicity and subject, a new industry, emerging in recent years, has implacably taken over the whole matter—the matter of sex.

This is what *Platform* addresses and what all contemporary novels should speak about: how the systematic industrialization of affective life—or psychic life if you will- tends to make all form of loving relationship between human beings completely irrelevant. And how to reach, and maintain there, such degrees of treatment becomes the challenge *par excellence* of the new contemporary epic, the unattainable heroism that the new politics would underline—now removed from those pyrrhic wretches that boss us around nowadays – for these merciless times. That he did not dare to state it and quickly resorted to Islamic bombers to put an end not just to sexual tourism in Indonesia, but also to his frank love for another survivor of these impossible times shows just to what extent Houellebecq is as corrosive as he is cowardly, a poor dispossessed cry baby.

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“It is still political alienation that is under question: the foreclosure of pleasure (and even more so of *jouissance*) in a society functioning on two morals: one, a majority moral of mediocrity; the other, a factional moral of (political/scientific) rigour. We could say that the idea of pleasure no longer satisfies anyone. Our society seems to be at once peaceful and violent, yet without a doubt it is frigid”.

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*.

If there has been (and, yes, there has been) a secret world war in recent decades, it has been between the two moral factions –of mediocrity and of rigour- and in it the first defeat was the third exclusion, strategically silenced by Barthes (that in which the speaker was hidden). There is no doubting who has won the war, in which no prisoners were taken. In this way, political –and we can no longer remember that it is - alienation is irrefragably triumphant. What that leaves outside, probably for centuries, is any form of *politics of jouissance*. Which is equivalent to condemning this unarmed world to one hundred years and a day of frigidity.

But we should (obviously) be careful because this is far from signifying a de-eroticization, a proscription of the overt presence of sex. On the contrary, the strategy of deproduction of *jouissance* is precisely guaranteed by the (abominable) method of metastasis –of Baudrillardian transexuality. Not only that form of “sex everywhere except in sex”, but an inexorable deterritorialization that resituates all its potential for symbolicity under the visibilizing regime of the new industries of experience and subjectivity. Under its aegis, sex can take absolute presence in any

scene, in any territory, but in any case its appearance is *light*, inconsequential, unscandalizable. There is no promise of being, or no longer being, in a sexuality purged of all potentiality of spirit. Perhaps the day is even near in which all sexual psychopathy disappears from the face of the earth (like a virus from another century)—and psychopathy begins to be of *another order*. Reduced to a catalogue of classified options, any objectual projection represents, solely, an acclaimed possibility for a new industry of the phantasm. Desire is projected in figures regulated *a priori*, in advance. Now nobody can desire—except that which is allowed to be attained. The removed—the foreclosed — is that margin *en plus* which condemned desire to exist as unattainable infinitude, pure productivity. Today, a strategy of systemic orientation towards possible authorized figures has fully returned to the horizon of calculated loss, the supermarket of induced needs.

And in this scenario, what has become definitively impossible is infinite desire, the unattainable longing and, by extension, the eventuality of its instantaneous, untameable and secret satisfaction. The eventuality of the little infinite satori-orgasm that would equally shudder the flesh or the soul, organ and body without organs. The maintained occurrence of this distended state, in which all economy of the being would oscillate suspended between the name and its lack, between constituting the self and scattering the self as inevitability and simultaneous impossibility —of being subject.

This beautiful game that was a *challenge* to surrender to in the infinite mornings wherever the adventures of the world take place. Perhaps it is this, *the only game* that is left to us. To inhabit *sine die* that improbable yet unwaivable “universe of simple desires and moments of unlimited pleasure...”