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Eroticism and the loss of imagination in the modern condition

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ABSTRACT

This paper finds its origin in a debate between Georges Bataille (1897-1962) and Octavio Paz (1914-1998) on what is central to the idea of eroticism. Bataille posits that violence and transgression are fundamental to eroticism, and without prohibition, eroticism would cease to exist. Paz, however, views violence and transgression as merely intersecting with, rather than being intrinsic to, eroticism. Paz places focus on imagination, and transforms eroticism from a transgressive, to a ritualistic act. Eroticism thus functions as an intermediary, turning animal sexuality into ceremony and rite. In this paper, I argue that Paz and Bataille are not fundamentally at odds in their conceptualisation of eroticism. Instead, Paz redefines the locus of eroticism by subverting its unsettling aspects. His conception of eroticism gives precedence to the imagination, which in itself is an act of violation. Imagination transgresses normal life, but this transgression – the violation of the habitual world – also introduces a glimpse of the numinous that Paz associates with belongingness. The paper further explores eroticism, as this is perceived today, and argues that it ultimately eliminates the threshold marked by transgression. The rise of the contemporary pornographic society is marked by a loss of imagination and transcendence, which ultimately reduces the subject into a mere automaton that demands instant gratification.

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Violence to imagination

Octavio Paz, the Mexican poet and essayist, characterises eroticism as a surplus – it surpasses sexual desire by transforming it into something beyond the natural order. Paz asserts that sexuality possesses a sense of simplicity, particularly when considering the instinctual sexual behaviours observed in animals. For animals, instinct is a mechanistic function, whose purpose is the perpetuation of species. However, when it comes to humans, instinct grapples with a labyrinthine network of regulations and prohibitions, spanning from the taboo of incest to the contractual obligations of marriage and the voluntary – and yet, equally compelling – customs of free love (see Paz, 1998, p. 10). This complexity arises from the detachment of humans from the natural world, leading to the creation of cultures based on complex norms. Eroticism is the societal dominance over instinct, a product of socialisation, it is a metaphor of animal sexuality, or, to put it differently, it is a societal function: ‘a reflection of the human gaze in the mirror of nature’

(pp. 11–17). When Paz describes eroticism as a metaphor or considers it as a reflection of nature, he implies that the intimacy of the erotic is constructed upon the separation (or distance) it maintains from animal sexuality, which is the very primordial source for erotic intimacy in itself.

The separation of humans from their animal origin suggests a dual movement: a movement backward, or a nostalgic yearning for nature in its primal state (animal sexuality), and simultaneously, a concurrent detachment from it through societal constraints. In this dual movement lies the genesis of eroticism. Paz tells us that while sex remains the primordial source, it undergoes divergence through processes such as crystallisations, sublimations, perversions, and condensations, which transform sexuality into something unknowable (Paz, 1995, p. 7). At the same time, for Paz, eroticism is a purely human phenomenon, separate from sexuality, and its uniqueness lies in being inventive, encompassing a vast array of manifestations, whereas sex maintains a relatively consistent nature (p. 9). His conception of eroticism is distinctive in that he defines it as ‘first and foremost *a thirst for otherness*’ (p. 15). This desire for otherness points towards the lost intimacy with the pre-human, but this irrecoverable primordial harmony with nature also propels humans to seek a glimpse of otherness, without ever being able to arrive at it. Paz portrays this quest for the irreducible ‘other’ as an imaginative projection onto the external world, and this projection is ‘people themselves, arriving at their images, arriving at themselves’ (Paz, 1998, p. 19). Human existence entails a separation from the primordial source (animal sexuality), with eroticism attempting to mimic it but ultimately being unable to return to it. This limitation serves a dual purpose: it both creates a space separate from the original source, which enables the development of culture, and at the same time it posits eroticism as a lure towards the primordial, towards a state that predates human language and time.

There is a sense of circularity imbibed in Paz’s eroticism: the striving for otherness functions as a pathway to the primordial experience. Encountering this otherness disrupts the familiar, allowing a glimpse of the nature from which humans have distanced themselves. A paradox is at work in this ‘*thirst for otherness*’ in that while it allows a movement towards ‘a full life,’ into a primordial condition or a totality (a glimpse of the reconciliation with the animal sexuality), eroticism remains a striving and not an arrival at this ‘total experience’ (Paz, 1998, p. 19), for its essence lies in the movement and not in the arrival. To arrive at this ‘total experience’ would mean the loss of eroticism – a regression into animal sexuality. Eroticism is the movement towards something unknowable that always remains at a distance. It is this distance, this beyondness, that gives birth to eroticism. While Paz presents eroticism as having a transcendental nature, this transcendence is also a movement towards immanence.

Although erotic experience is a striving for strangeness – ‘*thirst for otherness*’ – this strange beyond subverts the idea of transcendence, and the beyondness transmutes into a passage, leaping into the heightened intensification of a moment, where human language and time converge into the immediacy of the present. Eroticism is a movement towards the strange beyond (or what Paz calls the wholly other), but this beyondness serves as a rite of passage into belongingness, characterised by the here and now.¹ This circuitous movement subverts teleological thinking, for Paz’s eroticism does not adhere to a project, or an event to come, and therefore, I describe it as an *obverse teleology*: a movement beyond, but this beyondness also subtracts itself in terms of

transcendentality, and turns it into an immanent presence. In this circuitous movement lies the uniqueness of Paz's erotic poetics, and the transformation of the beyond into a passage sets him apart from the eroticism found in Georges Bataille.

For Bataille, eroticism is a point of rupture, a cut into the everydayness of the participant, and simultaneously, it demands from the subject a sensitivity 'to the anguish at the heart of the taboo no less great than the desire which leads him to infringe it' (Bataille & Stein, 1962, p. 39). While eroticism is characterised by a sensitivity towards the taboo, there is also a desire to transgress it, encompassing a fusion of desire and terror that epitomises a religious sensibility, wherein desire intertwines with 'terror, intense pleasure and anguish' (p. 39). Even in Bataille, eroticism has an undulating existence, but the scope of a return to something primordial, to a state of belongingness, is absent. While Paz's eroticism is circuitous and yet allows for a return or at least a glimpse of the original homeliness (or belongingness), Bataille's eroticism is a leap into horror – it results in a collapse, a state of dissolution, and therefore, Bataille argues that there is an intimate relationship between eroticism and death: 'eroticism is assenting to life even in death' (Bataille, 1962, p. 11). In *Guilty*, he describes eroticism as 'the brink of the abyss' (Bataille, 1988, p. 109), wherein the subject leans towards an irreducible unknown that puts into question everything possible. Eroticism, for Bataille, leads to the dissolution of the metaphysical certainties that the habitual world presents. It is an opening to horror through a passage from the known to the unknown, or as he puts it, 'eroticism is the substitution of the instant or of the unknown for what we thought we knew' (Bataille, 2001, p. 217). It persists as a striving for what remains hidden, and the potency of this hiddenness lies in its concealment, and this concealed and irreducible abyss into which eroticism thrusts the subject has its influence over the known.

Eroticism is an act of violation that disrupts (the violation of the known), and this disruption is a plunge into a 'diabolical' (Bataille, 1989, p. 23) realm. This diabolical world is characterised by a confluence of death and eroticism – a propulsion into the wholly other, which manifests as madness. Paz's circuitous eroticism is a movement towards otherness, but this otherness, as mentioned above, functions as a rite of passage, transforming eroticism into a celebratory act, and the horrific (diabolical) aspect that we encounter in Bataille is subverted to give primacy to imagination. Eroticism is celebratory in Paz, whereas in Bataille, it is something diabolical. Paz subverts the centrality of violence in eroticism to present a vision of eroticism that gives access to an emancipatory form. Despite their differences, both Bataille and Paz emphasise the role of distance in the transformation of sexuality into eroticism. The third section will explore the necessity of distance in the context of eroticism, particularly in today's world where a sense of distancelessness – immanence devoid of transcendence – prevails.

Paz's concept of eroticism is both influenced by, and diverges from, Georges Bataille's ideas. He recounts a personal encounter with Bataille when the latter asserts that violence and transgression are intrinsic to eroticism. For Bataille, eroticism is fundamentally a violation, and the removal of prohibitions would lead to its demise. Furthermore, the absence of sensitivity towards violation, and the loss of distance, would lead to the dissolution of human existence as it has been known since the Palaeolithic (Paz, 1998, p. 69). Paz dismisses the idea that violence and transgressions are central to eroticism; rather, he situates it within the domain of the imaginary. For him, imagination is at the core of eroticism, linking the imaginary to a ritualistic framework where participants

reimagine and re-enact deviations from mechanical sexual acts. Contrary to Bataille's view, Paz argues that while eroticism may intersect with violence and transgression, they are not inherent to its essence. His disagreement does not lie in denying that eroticism imbibes violence and transgressions, but rather in rejecting the idea that they are inseparable from it. By emphasising the transition away from eroticism centred on violence and transgressions, Paz prompts a re-evaluation of our understanding of it. Paz's erotic poetics follow a circular structure; this circularity is a movement away from the world of project (or utility) towards the impossible, that does not have a crippling effect on the subject. By framing eroticism as a submission to the unknown, Paz aligns more closely to Heidegger's idea of dwelling, of a homely coexistence *in* the other.²

In *Erotism*, Bataille posits that eroticism is fundamentally a domain of violence, and its primary function is to dismantle the 'self-contained' (Bataille, 1962, p. 17) character of the participants as they exist in their everyday lives. More than violence, eroticism, for Bataille, is violation: it is a sphere delineated by the transgression of norms; it involves surpassing the permissible boundaries, thereby making it reliant on prohibitions (Bataille, 1991, p. 124). Bataille is of the view that humans have constructed a rational world through the establishment of prohibitions and the enforcement of taboos, and these measures serve to eradicate violence and violent urges that dismantle the serene arrangement of ideas, a state he deems essential for the conception of human consciousness (see Bataille, 1962, p. 38). Furthermore, Bataille asserts that human existence consists of two disparate parts that never converge. One part is where conscious understanding dominates. Where humans try to understand their violent tendencies, and while doing so, this very act of understanding distances them from the 'frenzied raptures' (Bataille, 1962, p. 193) incited by violence. The other part – described by Bataille as primary and sovereign – is marked by violence exceeding its own limits, completely laying hold on our intellect. In this state of extremity, the distancing from the violent nature is nullified, propelling human existence into a state of immanence. This state brings satisfaction to the surface of consciousness, but paradoxically, in this state of extreme violence, humans move away from awareness. Eroticism serves as a conduit between these two realms, with a transcendental emphasis at its core. It is a state of in-betweenness – the erotic act lulls between the two parts, and while the occurrence of immanence results in the elimination of distance (or divergences from the sexual acts), this lure for immanence is a transcendental leap that metamorphoses a sexual act into an erotic act.

As Bataille posits, eroticism is a movement towards the inappropriable abyss (the impossible), an opening to the world of the sacred, which is the 'foundation of the possible,' and at the same time, it puts into question 'everything possible' (Bataille, 1988, p. 109). In *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, he characterises 'the possible' (Bataille, 2001, p. 18) as the flourishing of organic life within a conducive environment. Here, he alludes to the world of work that is underpinned by discourse and rationality, whereas the impossible resides within humanity, impervious to any reduction. Bataille adds that this impossible is only manifested through the possible; in the absence of the possible, the impossible would cease to exist (p. 24). The abyss that Bataille associates with eroticism embodies both the impossible and the possible, but it is also a leap into the impossible, which, while imbibing the possible, is unreservedly dedicated to the impossible from its inception. The introduction of the impossible signifies a departure from any foundational reassurance to the extent that Bataille considers the movement towards the

impossible as a loss of self.³ It is in the shift from the possible to the impossible, in the movement beyond the limit of possible, that he situates eroticism while associating it with nonknowledge.

For Bataille, knowledge is limited to the realm of the possible, and it is rooted in a submissive acceptance of a way of being in the world where each moment's significance is tied to the moments that follow it. What Bataille calls knowledge is anchored by a centre that structures it, whereas nonknowledge is the absence of the certainty that such a foundational centre (God, man, consciousness, etc.) provides. He characterises nonknowledge as the unsettling outcome as one delves into the fundamental depths of any proposition's content; it is the recognition of the crisis in the axiomatic foundation, and a propulsion into an irreducible abyss. Nonknowledge is 'the sudden invasion of the unknown,' and it presents itself as effects such as 'poetic feeling' or 'the feeling of the sacred'; it manifests itself as ecstasy or anguish, and not just anguish, but also as terror (Bataille, 2001, p. 137). Nonknowledge reveals itself as laughter, tears, eroticism, poetic feeling, sacred, anguish, ecstasy, tragedy, sacrifice, intoxication, and others.

Eroticism finds its existence in violation and is not pure violence, as it encompasses both the world of work and play. It is a movement between work and play that disrupts the possible, for it is also lured towards the impossible. Eroticism does not leap into the impossible, but is a movement towards it; it does not give in to violence, as that would negate violence, for 'the total affirmation of violence is its very negation' (Bataille, 2001, p. 239). Bataille associates eroticism with nonknowledge, as both express what language fails to communicate. The structure of language functions through the relationality of 'one being to another, if necessary from one way of being to the absence of that way' (p. 239). However, nonknowledge is the absence of relationality, and so, the death of language. Eroticism is the movement towards nonknowledge – but is not nonknowledge – towards an end of discourse: an opening to a world that replaces knowing with experience.

The divergence in Paz from Bataille's eroticism lies in the subversion of the uneasiness that eroticism as nonknowledge throws one into – where Bataille sees incommunicability, Paz also sees a return. For Paz, eroticism is a medium; for Bataille, a wound opening to the paralysing effect of the unknown. Paz asserts that eroticism is rhythmic, oscillating between the chords of separation and return, a journey back to original oneness (Paz, 1995, p. 26). There is communion in Paz's eroticism – transcendence is immanence – and while eroticism throws one into a state of 'complete alienation,' it also opens one into 'the absolute reconquest of our being' (Paz, 1956, p. 118). Paz's return is transcendental only in the sense that it is the occurrence of the 'beyond' in the *here* and *now*; transcendence is immanence, or as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it in relation to the *techné* of bodies (that echoes Paz's erotic poetics); immanence simply indicates that 'transcendence takes place right at existence, our existence as the existence in which every existent is at stake' (Nancy, 2021, p. 45). The circuitous return in Paz's eroticism points to a primordial reality that predates 'eroticism, love, and the ecstasy of contemplatives' (Paz, 1995, p. 26). This is neither a flight from death nor a denial of the terrifying aspects of eroticism, but an endeavour to comprehend them, and incorporate them into the totality. This understanding is not intellectual, but what Paz calls a sensuous thinking—'the wisdom of the senses' (p. 26). Paz does not do away with the terrifying aspects of eroticism, but he transforms it into a medium that allows an openness to a sensual understanding, revealing one to the strangeness that leads to 'the absolute reconquest of our being' (Paz, 1956, p. 118).

To reiterate, Paz disputes the idea that violence and transgressions are inseparable from eroticism, but while disagreeing, he asserts that in places, it does intersect with violence. For him, as stated above, eroticism is part of the imaginative realm, like 'celebrations, representations, rites – time and again, invented and enacted by men and women – it intersects, in places, with violence' (Paz, 1998, pp. 69–70). He finds the concept of transgression, which is central to Bataille's view on eroticism, to be rather pessimistic. For this reason, he goes back to erotic traditions such as the libertinage of the Gnostics, the Tantrists, and the Taoists. In these traditions, he observes that transgression is transmuted into rituals, and they transform violation into a sacrament; the leap out of the world of work becomes a 'union with the absolute' (Paz, 1990c, p. 92). Transgression is one extreme of the erotic movement, and Paz introduces an alternative that transforms eroticism into a ceremonial act. This association of eroticism with ceremony, or the ritualisation of eroticism, reconfigures it into a quest for the beyond.

In Paz's perspective, eroticism is a quest for the beyond (which is not the same as the impossible that takes away foundational certainties), a departure from Bataille's view on eroticism that acts as a breach of the possible. Paz envisions eroticism as a pursuit of a paradisiacal state, reminiscent of Dante's pursuit of Beatrice, which necessitates traversing through an inferno to catch a fleeting vision of her. Although this quest for the beyond also leaps from the possible, Paz's eroticism lacks the demonic and terrifying elements found in Bataille. This quest embodies a dual search: a yearning for otherness, which concurrently serves as a search for ourselves. Paz posits that this 'other' is our double, and because it is the other, it perpetually eludes us. The 'other' remains an eternal beyond, but this distance presents two possibilities: the annihilation of the 'other' (as seen in sadomasochistic transgression) or its acceptance through love, which is the other extreme of eroticism. It is through imagination that erotic desire ventures towards the beyond, making 'real reality' an image, and 'images' are transformed into embodiments (see Paz, 1990c, p. 93). Here, imagination does not suggest futurity, but a circuitous movement: a beyondness that is *here and now*. It does not imply a regression into animal sexuality, as there is no way back to the primal unity with nature, but humans can invent a new way of glimpsing the primordial 'nature' through a cut in the habitual world, resulting in a glimpse of the numinous. The next section delves into understanding the two trajectories of eroticism (love and sadism) through Paz and Bataille in relation to Marquis de Sade, while emphasising the role of distance and imagination in their works.

Imagination as a pathway to love and sadism

Like Paz, Bataille also agrees with the idea that the realm of the erotic takes on an imaginary form. The world of the erotic bears resemblance to a dream, and the best way to acclimate to this peculiarity is by observing the capricious boundaries of 'an opposite world' (Bataille, 1991, p. 29), a world where sexuality is forbidden. Here, 'imaginary' refers to the divisions, or the distinct realms of human existence, and their arbitrary nature. Prohibitions themselves are imaginary, and lack universality; what is deemed permissible in one place is considered criminal in another (p. 29). Furthermore, within the context of Marquis de Sade's works, there is an intimate relationship between imagination and eroticism.

Maurice Blanchot, the French philosopher, discusses eroticism in relation to 'imagination' within the context of Sade, calling it 'dreamed eroticism' (Blanchot, 2004, p. 27), where imagination serves as a conduit to actuate the infinite possibilities, and not to get exhausted by them. Blanchot asserts that Sade's eroticism is much like a dream, as it is primarily expressed in words; the more this eroticism resembles a dream, the more it requires a narrative from which the dream is expelled, and where debauchery is actualised and experienced. He further states that if Sade has elevated the imaginary, it is because he understands that the foundation of so many flawed crimes is an unattainable crime that only the imagination can envision. Imagination is central to Sade's eroticism, as libertines find it titillating to imagine the infinite possibilities in which crimes, tortures, and sexual acts can be prolonged. Their utopia is to transgress all taboos/laws simultaneously, and start a chain reaction to the extent that each act of theirs can be an occasion for a crime. A crime that would persist even after they are dead, causing a universal disorder. Roland Barthes makes a distinction between Sade's eroticism, and the traditional perception of eroticism, arguing that Sadean eroticism is criminal and ours is 'harmless,' 'the former is assertive, combinatory, whereas ours is suggestive, metaphorical' (Barthes, 1989, p. 27). Yet, Sade's combinatorial approach is imaginative, with the erotic arising from the narrative. Sade may transform sexual acts into mathematical formulas, yet they are still creations of language. As we will see in the final section, contemporary pornographic culture also simplifies eroticism into mere accumulation, but it strips language of its power, leading to an immediate experience devoid of imagination.

In Sade's eroticism, victims are not treated as subjects but rather as signs (numbers). The violence inflicted is not directed towards the victims, but it transcends them. Violence serves merely as a frantic, infinite validation, with each specific instance contributing to the overarching act of annihilation through which the libertine nullifies God and the world (see Blanchot, 2004, p. 26). Sade identifies the foundation of sovereignty in humans in this reduction, or what Blanchot calls 'the transcending power of negation' (p. 28) does not depend on the victims, as libertines view them as nonentities even before their destruction takes place. Paz asserts that in Sade's works, the victim is not a physiological function of the libertine, but rather a mathematical one. The victim is transformed into 'a sign, a number, a sign' (Paz, 1998, pp. 55–56). Sade's libertines, through Blanchot's 'the transcending power of negation,' want to arrive at 'a state of pure insensibility, similar to the impassivity or ataraxia of the ancients' (Paz, 1998, p. 74). However, Paz is also aware that Sade's 'sophistic and reasoning pleasure' is more of 'a geometry lesson and a circular demonstration that traps us' (p. 82). His reasoning does not free us; it confines us to dungeons as dreadful as those of the moralists, the educators, and the despots. Sade advocates for freedom with the intention of transforming each subject into a unit, breaking down all hierarchies (only in the sense that each is equally a victim, a number), but paradoxically, it is for the sole purpose of exercising total control over the erotic objects. Like Bataille, the eroticism in Sade's work is also infernal and dissolutive. However, there is an element missing in Sade, a certain plunge into madness that we see in Bataille. In Sade, there is a progression towards a 'profoundly deranged thought' (Blanchot, 2004, p. 11), seemingly hanging precariously over an abyss. However, there is also an underlying logic that takes charge, and a structure that slowly forms. The supremacy of logic over madness is primarily due to the way the libertines treat each other. In Sade's system, the libertines are prohibited from giving in to their wild passions amongst themselves. We observe that

in his system that logic is pushed to its limit without giving way to 'the dark forces and ominous figures that supported it' (Blanchot, 2004, p. 32). Bataille's claim that 'eroticism is assenting to life even in death' (Bataille, 1962, p. 11) is in stark contrast with the fundamentals of Sade's philosophy. The libertines go to great lengths to ensure their survival (see Brun Annie, 1990, p. 91). While there is an allure towards disintegration, towards 'the brink of the abyss' (Bataille, 1988, p. 109), the libertines restrain themselves from succumbing to the frenzied raptures of the erotic unknown, and maintain a distance from what could lead to the loss of self.

Paz's departure from Sade is a reversal, a movement opposite to Sade's apathy, which the former compares with the insensate, or the Stoic *ataraxia*. This is a movement from insensibility (as seen in Sade), through a total negation of the Other to a 'love' that Paz describes as a total unification. The libertines strive for insensibility, viewing the Other as an object, whilst the individual in love pursues total unification and consequently transforms the object into a subject (see Paz, 1995, p. 144). Paz's notion of love demands 'self-negation,' and instead of denying the Other, one negates 'one's own sovereignty,' which is for him simultaneously 'the acceptance of the Other' (p. 151). Love transforms the erotic object into a person by letting go of 'one's own sovereignty'; the erotic object becomes a subject, and the subject, the desiring object, forming a knot 'made of two intertwined freedoms' (p. 152). To an extent, Bataille's perspective on love aligns with Paz's in recognising it as a 'coincidence of two desires' (Bataille, 1991, p. 113), where the allure lies in the unknown nature of the other's desire. However, Bataille also diverges from Paz in that he infuses the notion of love with violence and lacerations, suggesting that lovers truly commune through shared suffering and the pursuit of the impossible: 'Desire desires in them [the lovers] what's impossible ... You should lose yourself in the bosom of unutterable happiness' (Bataille, 1988, p. 152). In Bataille, love is analogous to a 'carnal eroticism,' where 'the fusion of the object and the subject is its meaning' (Bataille, 1991, p. 160). Paz's approach suggests a transcendental quest that also embraces immanence while presenting us with the modern equivalent of the sacred (numinous) experience, whereas in Bataille, there is an absence of the yearning for the original experience as a state of belongingness. In other words, the ritualisation of the erotic in Paz allows the consolation of an absolute that constitutes the traces of the holy, whilst in Bataille, we see a shift from such assurances. Bataille's immanence is the abolition of transcendence, a state described as the 'absence of individuality, the imperceptible sonority of a river, the empty limpidity of the sky' (Bataille, 1989, p. 50). This occurrence is what he describes as the feeling of intimacy, of being 'like water in water' (p. 19). His immanence is atheological, where consciousness is knowledge standing in an abyss, or where knowledge is nonknowledge.

Eroticism remains a striving, and simultaneously, this striving interrupts – it punctuates the habitual existence, giving primacy to the unknowable other. This movement towards the abyss or nonknowledge may result in the annihilation or the acceptance of the other, but what remains pervasive in eroticism is the presence of distance, a lure to cross the threshold. The contemporary pornified society seeks to eliminate this threshold to produce smoothness to the habitual world devoid of intense experience that challenges modern hyperindividualism.⁴ The next section delves into understanding what leads to the transition of eroticism into porn.

The disappearing eros: secrecy and Hypervisibility

The contemporary world is dominated by a society of hypervisibility, and this pervasive exhibitionism leads to a gradual decline of imagination, culminating in a state of immanence devoid of distance. As mentioned above, Paz emphasises the centrality of imagination in eroticism, and he describes 'desire' as 'an erotic imagination' that drives the participants into an inconceivable beyond: 'Beyond you, beyond me, through the body, in the body, beyond the body, we want to see something' (Paz, 1998, p. 20). This elusive 'something' is the 'erotic fascination,' (p. 20) which makes one come out of oneself; it is a movement towards the wholly other. Similarly, Bataille also views eroticism as a break from all that is conceivable or reducible: 'This is the state of rupture, of letting go of things, of looking forward to death' (Bataille, 1988, p. 109). For both Bataille and Paz, eroticism is 'the brink of the abyss' (Bataille, 1988, p. 109), and the distinction lies in the fact that Paz ritualises the 'abyss', and the erotic beyond constitutes the traces of the Holy, (Paz's immanence is the modern equivalent of the numinous), presenting a circuitous structure to the notions of love and eroticism, in that it points towards a nostalgia for the lost harmony associated with a sense of belongingness; whereas in Bataille, the leap into the impossible is precisely the rupture or relinquishing the assurance of the possible (God being the perfect possible). The abyss, Heidegger (1982, p. 189) tells us, is the absence of grounding, or the loss of certitude. Along the same lines, Bataille describes this groundlessness as the 'impossible' that renounces 'the guarantee of the possible' (Bataille, 2001, p. 23). Eroticism is precisely a movement towards this groundlessness that introduces a sense of alterity, rupturing the habitual world (see Bataille, 1962, p. 17). However, the modern world values transparency, and is characterised by impatience. Any detours are unbearable; the modern individual desires instant access: an information society that seeks to eliminate the uncertainty that the presence of the other entails.

The contemporary world marks the dilution of this alterity, and the surrounding is perpetually transforming into a homogeneous space. Byun-Chul Han argues that this absence of otherness results in the production of a dull immanence, or an immanence devoid of distance. The pursuit or the movement towards the other (irreducible unknown) has been replaced by the comfort of familiarity (see Han, 2017, p. 18). This striving for familiarity, or the absolutisation of the habitual world, seeks to eradicate experiences that interrupt it. Heidegger tells us that to undergo an experience involves allowing something – the Other – to befall on us – it 'strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms us and transforms us ... we endure it, suffer it, receive it as it strikes us and submit to it' (Heidegger, 1982, p. 57). To experience demands a sense of submissiveness. Experiences do not give in to ownership, but they happen to us – they are the gifts of the other. The modern era is marked by an incapacity to give primacy to the other, to permit its befalling on us, for such an allowance would constitute a disruption of the possible. In the absence of alterity, 'time and space are shrinking' (Heidegger, 2001, p. 168) within the contemporary world, yet this 'frantic' eradication of all distances leads to a loss of nearness, for nearness is not merely a matter of physical closeness. Heidegger elucidates that distancing is integral to nearness, for the potentiality of 'pure nearness' resides in the preservation of distance. This idea of nearness holds veracity in the realm of eroticism as well, which necessitates a receptivity towards the Other, and the vigour of this Other is contingent upon its resistance to being diminished to the familiar. The

interrelation of eroticism with the Other precludes its reduction to a mere structure of domination (see Levinas, 1987, pp. 87–88). Instead, eroticism demonstrates a state of helplessness when one encounters the other. The prevailing ‘distancelessness’ takes away the space that allows the other to unveil itself. In the contemporary society of exhibition, distance loses its significance. Put differently, the modern neoliberal world of sameness cannot bear a transcendental relationship where the subject is propelled into an unknown: it is a world marked by impatience.

This dominance of dull immanence erases distance, leaving eroticism and love without transcendence and transgression (see Han, 2017, p. 19). Eroticism suffers from the absence of violation, resulting in a sense of taken-for-grantedness when it comes to interacting with the surrounding. Despite the varied paths of eroticism explored by Sade, Bataille, and Paz, there is never the elimination of distance; instead, eroticism flourishes due to its distinction from immanence. Eroticism dwells in the balance between desire and prohibition – it is an interplay of transcendence and immanence. Bataille argues that, while immanence may be alien to the subject, it is simultaneously the subject’s possession, yet remains ‘impervious to the subject’ (Bataille, 1989, p. 29). While immanence is the property of the subject, at the same time, the subject remains a subject in being distant from it. In a world saturated with visibility, a type of immanence emerges that lacks any sense of distance, where screens lay everything bare, reducing the mysterious and unattainable aspects of eroticism to a vulgar display, stripped of its veils.

The transition from a state of immanence to one lacking depth and distance signifies a gradual disappearance of the imaginative and irreducible aspect of eroticism; the pursuit of the unknown, and the seductive nature of transgression dissipate in the modern era’s pervasive immediacy. Eroticism flourishes in the hidden, not in the overt exposure of all things; it ceases to be a movement from the known to the unknown when it is laid bare. Although Bataille and Paz hold different perspectives on eroticism, they agree that it involves a movement from the known to the unknown; eroticism is the realm of play between transcendence and immanence. Yet, today’s culture of instant gratification and aversion to the unknown has led to a superficial form of eroticism, stripped of the profundity that transcendence brings, turning it into pornography, where the element of transcendence is removed from immanence. Dull immanence, which is characteristic of today’s society of information and accessibility, lays everything bare; nothing is left to the imagination, and there is no act of violation.

Eroticism, whether it manifests as a transition from the possible to the impossible or as a ritualised, circuitous journey, is defined by a path marked with intermittent detours. It is not the bare skin itself, but rather the fleeting glimpse of it between garments that imbues the body with an erotic quality – the glimpse of the skin is what seduces; the erotic does not lie in the body but in its covering and uncovering, or what Barthes calls ‘the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance’ (Barthes, 1975, pp. 9–10). The erotic entails an interplay between appearance and disappearance; what is laid bare does not give everything of itself. It is in the anticipation of what remains unseen that the erotic finds its existence, and concurrently, this erotic gaze keeps the sexual object at a distance; the threshold where the erotic propels remains shrouded in secrecy. The potency of secrecy in the erotic lies in its concealment (and this secrecy associates eroticism with the realm of the imaginary), revealing itself only through its effects, as the

impossible influences the possible. However, in today's culture of overexposure, everything is laid bare, 'stripped, exposed, undressed, and put on show' (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 79).

Paz and Bataille are not fundamentally at odds in their conceptualisation of eroticism; instead, Paz redefines the locus of eroticism by subverting its unsettling aspects. Paz's eroticism presents centrality to imagination, which in itself is an act of violation; imagination transgresses the normal lives, but the violation of the habitual world also presents the glimpse of the numinous that he associates with belongingness. Both of them concur on the fact that eroticism unfolds at the threshold of the possible and the impossible, and the present world, marked by an excess of exhibition, strives to get rid of the negativity of the impossible. Paz's eroticism that presents centrality to 'imagination' is itself an act of violation; 'imagination' transgresses the 'normal lives,' but the violation of the habitual world also presents the glimpse of the Being of beings. Eroticism unfolds at the threshold of the possible and impossible, and the modern era, characterised by an overabundance of exposure, lacks this critical boundary. Without the imaginative leap over this threshold, we are left with a monotonous sameness, or what Han calls '*the hell of the same*' (2020, p. 35).

In the overt pornographic visibility, we are devoid of the threshold that propels us into the unknown; it lacks the negativity of the wholly other. The language of the Other is 'indecisive,' and refuses to give in to the relational aspect of language: 'one cannot speak of the other, about the other; every attribute is false, painful, erroneous, awkward: the other is unqualifiable' (Barthes, 1978, p. 35). Eroticism is suggestive and indirect, setting it apart from the explicit nature of pornography. Pornography is immediate, foregoing any sense of anticipation. In pornography, everything that is indecisive or uncertain is stripped. In contrast, eroticism thrives on postponement, gradual revelation, and diversion. Pornography is blunt, aiming for an immediate resolution, while eroticism revels in the journey, offering hints that linger without fully revealing their secrets. Eroticism engages with the unseen, whereas pornography leaves nothing to the imagination (Han, 2018, pp. 63–64).

The present time is marked by an absence of transcendence; dull immanence erases the otherness of the other, and the disappearance of alterity results in the commodification of everything. In his book *Conjunctions and Disjunctions*, Paz introduces the concept of 'carnal time' (Paz, 1990b, pp. 138–139) that subverts time as a utilitarian notion by rejecting the idea of progress and history; it embodies a circuitous temporality that allows the strangeness of the 'abyss' to befall on the subject, leading to the end of the world of project, but there is also a penetration into the intensity of the presentness of a moment. It is this transcendence that moves vertically in the aliveness of the now, rupturing the time that estranges human existence. What Paz describes as 'carnal time' is the emergence of immanence through the concealment of the Other, which unsettles the subject while simultaneously propelling the person into the immediacy of the present. The presence of the Other defies valuation; there is always a surplus, an excess that challenges the world to be reduced into something measurable or quantifiable.

The absence of alterity, which leads to a lack of diversions, is tied to the absence of ambiguity, illusion, play, metaphors, and secrets. It propels us into a state of unambiguous calculativeness. There is a perpetual de-ritualisation and de-mystification of the erotic as we come down to the modern condition. Baudrillard presents us with a genealogy of the

erotic, describing seduction as pagan and the introduction of love as Christian, illustrating the transformation of religion into affect, suffering, and love – concepts that ancient mythology scarcely considered (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 133). In the realm of rituals, only seduction exists, and love emerges from the destruction of ritual forms. But it is in the world of hyper-display, characteristic of pornography, that eros undergoes complete de-ritualisation. This de-ritualisation of eros results in the transformation of seduction to love that ultimately culminates in the obscene bareness of porn. As we move from one stage to another – seduction to love, then sexuality, and ultimately to pornography – there is a gradual loss of mystery, leaving us in a condition where there is nothing left to unveil (see Baudrillard, 2008, pp. 137–138).

As mentioned above, pornography results in de-mystification (there is nothing to unveil), stripping away the fascinating aspect of eroticism towards the Other, and consequently confining the individuals within themselves. The contemporary realm of hypervisibility, not only signifies the erosion of fascination, but also poses a striving to eradicate the repulsive aspect of the Other. Porn is affective, and not metaphorical, ascribing smoothness to everyday life by getting rid of any mystery or seduction that demands patience from the participants. The bareness of porn constitutes no mystery, distance, or transcendence; therefore, Han observes that the current pornified landscape of the Internet and information cultivates a 'narcissistic self' fixated solely on its own reflection, drowning in its own shadow (Han, 2017, p. 2). Rituals, on the other hand, involve a passage, a progression towards the Other, necessitating a departure from one's own self. Eros, being ritualistic, reintroduces the sacred into existence, unveiling '*what is there* when the subject is "there" no longer' (Bataille, 1988). In other words, eros points towards and presents a glimpse of the state of being "'there" no longer,' and at the same time, the subject remains a subject only when it is at a distance from this occurrence.

Rituals require a rite of passage, a progression towards the other, which simultaneously necessitates a departure from one's own self – it is impersonal and esoteric, establishing a transcendental relationship with the Other. Mircea Eliade speaks of rituals as a way to invoke a 'mythical beginning,' consecrating a dwelling that receives the other (Eliade, 1959, p.83). It is a transition from being-in-the-world to being at home (Han, 2020, p. 2). Similarly, Bataille explains that eroticism, which in itself is structured like a ritual, 'responds to man's determination to merge with the universe' (Bataille, 1991, p. 168). Eros is an act of exteriorisation, and it draws the individual out of itself; it is the antithesis of depression, which makes the individual self-contained. The contemporary society, characterised by utility and transparency, is driven towards a relentless pursuit of success (it is a society that deals in terms of achievement), and this pursuit presents primacy to the self over the other, which, in turn, strips the Other of its otherness, reducing it to a mere reflection of itself. The modern subject is never at home. What becomes evident here is that the onset of societal pornification leads to the dissolution of intense experiences (the capacity to instal oneself in the present), which necessitate the primacy of the Other; the society of hyper-display kills the Other, or to put it differently, it does away with any encounter with the Other for the sake of protecting the self from the negativity of the threshold that disturbs the habitual world. The pornification of society is the intensification of self; it breeds narcissists who lack the ability to accept the '*gift of the Other*' (Han, 2017, p. 3). In a literal sense, every human is transforming into an island.

Modern love and eroticism are not hindered by repression, sublimation, or morality. Rather, sexuality is troubled by the sheer excessive presence of sexuality in the form of pornography. Pornography renders sexuality redundant, which is the true obscenity, and not the abundance of sexual activity (see Baudrillard, 2008, p. 53). It reduces sex into a caricature, a measurable entity where 'everything is to be said, accumulated, indexed and recorded' (Baudrillard, 2001, pp. 34–35). This process strips away the otherness of eroticism and reduces it into something homogenous. As Barthes might say, pornography is the erotic without the wound (see Barthes, 2000, p. 41) – nothing impinges on us, as is in the case of seduction or love – it lacks disruptions. The subject does not involve or initiate a dialogue with the other. Sex as pornography, in the absence of the encounter with the other, evolves into a soliloquy. The hypervisibility of porn signifies a lack of distance, yet simultaneously, the pornographic body cannot offer itself to the other, nor can it allow the other to befall on it. It is characterised by the absence of intensity that secrecy, strangeness, transgression, or in that there is nothing left to discover in the pornographic body or image; it may amuse momentarily, but quickly leads to ennui.

Paz describes imagination as a way of coming out of ourselves but this very act of going beyond, is also an encounter with ourselves. The essence of myths and poetic imagery is found in this interplay between departure and return – the movement towards otherness is a return to unity (see Paz, 1956, p. 161). Imagination is a negative experience that takes us out of ourselves, causing us to cease to be who we are. It disrupts the self-contained character of the subject, and this interruption of otherness paves the way to belongingness. In the informational society, there is no room for fantasy. The excess of accessibility (hypervisibility) ultimately results in the disappearance of any intensified experience. Hypervisibility stifles imagination, and pornography, with its emphasis on visual details, diminishes the seductive aspect of erotic fantasy. Eroticism is an imaginative experience that taps into a deep, unconscious knowledge that is not immediately accessible to our awareness (see Illouz, 2012, p. 230).

Imagination, being 'information-thin' (Illouz, 2012, p. 230) over-values the others, often idealising them based on minimal traits. Pornography, by stripping away mystery, prevents such an over-valuation. Paz (1990a, p. 78), on the other hand, views imagination as an innate ability to transform and embody images, which articulate the ineffable. He advocates a language that allows images to express the inexpressible. Unlike Paz's conception of images that allow for the revelation of the hidden through a negative experience, the computerised high-definition images as the state of hyper-display leaves no room for this vagueness.

Conversely, images born of imagination, are disjunctive conjunctions that find their birth in rhythm, which Paz differentiates from measure. In pornographic imagery, there is a shift from rhythm to something additive. It is characterised by images that instantly stimulate both the sight and the sexual organs, avoiding any detours or any form of interpretive process. The pornographic signals direct interaction, an immediate connection between the image and the viewer's gaze (see Han, 2020, p. 88). The images born from imagination create a blind spot, implying that they do not fully reveal themselves; there is always a surplus, adhering to the principles of poetic rhythm that resist to be quantifiably capitalised. According to Heidegger, rhythm is not about flow or movement, but form. It is the stationary aspect that shapes the motion in dance and song, allowing it to find its own equilibrium – it imparts a state of rest (see Heidegger, 1982, p. 149). The

contemporary move from traditional rituals to the immediacy found in modern platforms like Pornhub or Onlyfans hints towards a transition from restfulness to restlessness.

In *The Disappearance of Rituals*, Han describes rituals as the symbolic methods that transform our existence in the world into a dwelling. They introduce reliability to the space that one inhabits. Similar to a home that provides stability to space, rituals provide structure to time, making it liveable (see Han, 2020, p. 2). In contrast, the short, repetitive nature of digital reels, lasting only fifteen to sixty seconds, reflects our society's impatience and its aspiration to eradicate boredom by indulging in instant gratification. Rituals have the characteristic of repetition; they are not affective and do not provide stimuli. Repetition in rituals takes away the excitement of anticipation and creates a fissure in communication to allow the appearance of emptiness. It is in this feeling of emptiness that being-in-the-world becomes a possibility of being at home. In contrast, a society obsessed with pornographic display always demands something new, and through this constant drive towards new stimuli, the thereness, the here and now, is overlooked (p. 9). The modern condition does not suffer from repression or morality, but from pure accessibility.

The centrality of eroticism lies in the introduction of a transcendental leap. While Bataille views this leap as a violation and Paz sees it as an act of imagination, both perspectives emphasise the importance of distance. Eroticism is not immanence, but a desire for immanence. The leap into the impossible, through eroticism, is a transcendental act. What remains common in transgression and imagination is a threshold, a preservation of some distance from the other. They both are the acts of exteriorisation, moving away from the realm of the possible. At the same time, transgressiveness unsettles and disrupts the possible, giving way to nonknowledge, whereas imagination encompasses both the disruption of the possible, and through the impossible (subverting the uneasiness into a ceremony), a striving to be at home with the world.

The modern condition takes away the negativity of the threshold: there is neither the affirmation nor the annihilation of the other. Rather, it is the other itself that the society of hypervisibility eradicates, and this eradication happens by nullifying the distance in the relationship with the Other. Modern love and eroticism, reduced to pornography, are obsessed with immediate experience, but this immediacy does not imbibe transcendence that we observe in the erotic encounters. In the absence of the wound that the other impinges on the subject, its being-in-the-world lacks intensity. In other words, the modern subject chases fleeting pleasures, which soon lose their allure, prompting a relentless search for novelty. The de-ritualised subject cannot rest or repeat the same. Its despair is to always look for the new, and while doing so, the *here and now* becomes absent. This restlessness heralds a new form of play that is self-contained and circulates within the subject – a solipsistic subject who suffers from premature ejaculation, devoid of the detours that seduction invites. It is distance or the transcendental aspect of eroticism – violation and imagination – that infuses sex with mystery, providing the sexual act with an overabundance or dissemination of meaning. Pornography precisely restricts this overabundance by reducing the erotic subject into a mere automaton, leaving nothing concealed or to be discovered. The onset of a pornographic society marks the erasure of the transcendental from the erotic.

Notes

1. In Paz (1956), Paz discusses Rudolf Otto's idea of *mysterium tremendum*, which involves a double movement: when faced with the wholly other (Sacred), one is repulsed by it, and simultaneously fascinated by it. The otherness pushes us away, and Paz associates it with the notion of abyss. However, this aversion is followed by a contrary urge, where one is unable to divert their gaze from its existence. The encounter with the other is marked by a state of total dependence, and yet, this very state of dependence opens up the possibility of returning to the 'other source' (Paz, 1975, p. 116), an occurrence where one can reconcile with their original state. Paz's idea of eroticism follows a similar circuitous structure where the movement into the abyss transmutes into the possibility to arrive at their primordial condition.
2. Dwelling for Heidegger, denotes a harmonious being-in-the-world, a sense of belonging: 'Mortals dwell in that they receive sky as sky ... they do not turn night into day nor day into a harassed unrest' (2001, p. 148).
3. Bataille (2001, p. 23) correlates the occurrence of the impossible with the idea of being divine, which according to him, is not conforming to the standard of the impossible, but rather about relinquishing the assurance of the possible.
4. I use the term pornified in relation to the wide scale adoption and normalisation of practices formerly contained in the pornographic medium (see Paul, 2005).

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