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“There Is No Sexual Relation,” so We Represent It

by Sergio Benvenuto¹

Abstract

The author attempts to make Lacan’s enigmatic statement “There is no sexual relationship” comprehensible, first by analysing the evolution of how sexual intercourse is represented (particularly in the cinema). The author then inquires into the originally “shameful” nature of sexual intercourse (which makes voyeurism possible) and comes to the paradoxical conclusion that the sexes are not made for sexual intercourse, that the sexual act is a bricolage, and that there is no deep complementarity between the sexes. He also sees Lacan’s statement as an expression of the modern narrative, which tends toward a historical critique of the genders: our era has bet on the fundamental equality of the two genders, thus erasing the very concept of gender. Hence, there is a need for the modern woman to recover in her imagination a “submissive” position in the erotic game, precisely to assert her sovereignty and thus re-establish asymmetry between the sexes.

Lacan’s statement “there is no sexual relation” has inspired a great many philosophers and others, precisely because it is so enigmatic. There are plenty of enunciations that strike us precisely because we cannot express their sense, and hence they become memorable, for example, “Man is the dream of a shadow” (Pindar), “Love, that releases no beloved from loving” (Dante), and “the psyche is extended and it knows nothing about it” (Freud). “There is no sexual relation” belongs to this group of sayings that speak to us, whether they tell us a lot, too much, or nothing.

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Many Lacanians explain this apothegm by saying that the unconscious has no signifiers for “man” and “woman” and that, therefore, there is no signifying relation between the two. However, this does not explain much. What makes analysts say that there are no signifiers for “man” and “woman”? What leads them to this conclusion? What does it mean in practice for human beings that “there is no sexual relation”? There is no *school* explanation that explains anything because it is a known fact that you do not learn embarrassing things at school.

This maxim has been commented on by philosophers (see Nancy, 2001 and Badiou & Cassin, 2010), and has even inspired porn films (see Siboni, 2011). In any case, I won’t contribute another exegesis and will instead take a different path, that of popular culture, common experience (which is rather bizarre in psychoanalysis!), and clinical practice—and not with the purpose of revealing the ultimate sense of this statement. Every thought that leaves a mark ultimately has an idiosyncratic crux, an entirely subjective opacity, and I wonder whether, in the end, even within extremely logical thinking, it is not precisely this opacity that leaves a trace in our hearts. I will take the path of making a glimpse of plausibility emerge from the statement.

I shall say that it is a motto that aims to account for the mystery of shame.

1.

Since the invention of the cinema, we have been able to trace the history of how sexual intercourse, in particular between men and women, has been represented in audio-visual media. Until the 1950s, sexual intercourse in films was never represented but rather *signified*: a couple would embrace and kiss, then the image would fade out, and in the next scene, you might find out that the woman is pregnant. As we can see in Tornatore’s film *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), provincial priests in Italy would cut the kissing scenes from films.

At one point, sexual intercourse began to be signified not with what precedes it (kissing), but with what follows: we see a couple in the same bed, but not in an embrace, and it is clear they have already consummated. Often the actors are “still” naked under the sheets. In both cases, intercourse is signified through metonymy—the figure of speech that signifies the whole through one of its parts.

By the late 1960s, sexual intercourse was finally *represented*: the actors were actually seen in the midst of sexual action, even if doubt remained about whether the coitus was simulated or real. It was generally a very brief representation, with only the “crux” of the sexual act being shown—the woman being penetrated—and nothing else.

For some time now, we have been able to see films and read novels in which sexual intercourse is *narrated*. We can witness the foreplay, then the various positions

chosen and the love games, and they become the phases of a story. “First, he undressed her, then she turned round, resting on her hands and knees ready to be taken from behind, finally she orgasmed” and so on and so forth. These narratives of sexual intercourse may even go on for some time, and both heterosexual and homosexual relations are described. Abdellatif Kechiche’s film *La vie d’Adèle* (2013) shows a lengthy scene of sexual activity between two girls. Today, the common thinking is that if a love story is to be told, it is important to inform the audience about how the characters’ intimate relations developed in their various phases; the narration divests the gossip.

What separates these films from pornography is the fact that they do not show genitals in a state of arousal: they never show an erect penis or a wet, swollen vagina. This is a crucial difference, because the audience of a “serious” film always has to wonder, “Are the actors simulating coitus or are they really having intercourse?” This uncertainty is a studied effect in “arthouse” films, whereas a porn video goes to great lengths not to leave any doubt. In the former, the depiction of sexual intercourse raises doubt in the audience because the genital locking is largely *supposed*. On the other hand, it seems that the purpose of porn’s insistence on the smallest anatomical detail is to convince the audience that they are watching *authentic* coitus, not a simulation (even though the actors are actually performing, and the video is a show). It is as if porn has to struggle against a fundamental disbelief with regard to the possibility of coitus and, in this struggle, the pleasure of the onlooker is triggered, taking advantage of the incredulity of Saint Thomas.

Real coitus is ultimately invisible, hence the temptation to put a camera inside the vagina. It is as if nothing were ever enough to make it really credible.

Some independent films go beyond this barrier and actually show the actors’ genitals, even in a state of excitement. This is something that Catherine Breillat does in several films, as does Lars von Trier in his erotic art film *Nymphomaniac* (2013). However, these are extreme cases to which the critics turn up their noses because “you can’t show everything” if you do not want to risk “lapsing into porn.”

Porn videos are actually an encyclopaedia of the most common erotic fantasies, and they offer a vast menu from which anyone can choose their *phantasme*. As for paedophile or sadist fantasies, videos that aim to satisfy them are illegal and only circulate in the “dark” circuit.

2.

I know several people who are quite disturbed when a movie shows a chapter and verse account of a sexual encounter. The embarrassment seems to arise from the fact that these people have, or think they have, some erotic shortcomings, and such scenes

twist the knife in their wounds. However, if portrayals of sex are so common in the movies, it is because most spectators wish to see them.

Is it voyeurism? No. Quite some time ago now, psychiatry decided to define as voyeurs not those who watch pornographic or erotic material, but only those who watch the sexual acts of people who do not wish to be seen. Watching a striptease show is not voyeurism, but watching a woman undressing through a keyhole is.² From Krafft-Ebing to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5 (DSM-5) (2013), the voyeur has been described as one who derives pleasure from sexual acts *stolen* from those involved in them. Voyeurs are nearly always male, and what ultimately interests them is *surprising the woman* during the sexual act, as if this unmasked her and shamed her. At the same time, the voyeur may have a perfectly normal heterosexual life, but one that fails to provide the surplus pleasure that the perverse act offers.³

Karl Kraus wrote: "The voyeur goes beyond the trial of strength of natural sensitivity: the taste for seeing the woman with the man overcomes the disgust of seeing the man with the woman" (Kraus, 1909/2001). This is an acute observation indeed: the core of the voyeur's interest is *the woman enjoying sex*, a woman who is caught out, exposed, and conscious of the fact that having sex is not a woman's thing. I sometimes wonder whether any homosexual voyeur or exhibitionists exist, as there is no mention of them in the psychiatric literature.

What is it that gives pleasure to so many in seeing others engaged in sexual acts? It is not as if we re-experience our own sexual pleasure through the images we see. If we see a film with people eating delicacies, it does not give us any particular oral pleasure. In fact, we enjoy the pleasures of the palate in company, and we exhibit them—like we do with many other pleasures—unproblematically. Apart from sexual pleasures, our pleasures are without shame, more often than not exhibited to society.

The pleasure of watching someone having sex is undoubtedly peculiar to human beings and is based on a sense of shame, or *aidos*, as the ancient Greeks called it, a word that also meant *respect*.⁴ No one would enjoy the spectacle of coitus if it were not something shameful, if coitus were not something in itself *disrespectful*.

In *Genesis*, the first thing that Adam and Eve become aware of after eating the forbidden fruit is the shame of their nakedness:

² See my analysis of scopophilia in Benvenuto (2016).

³ Psychoanalytic contributions on voyeurism include Fenichel (1953) and Quinet (2004).

⁴ This is a theme that Lacan (1999) tackled in "La signification du phallus" in *Ecrits II*. It refers to the apparition of the demon Αἰδώς in the frescoes of the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii.

7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they *were* naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.
8 And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of Lord God among the trees of the garden.
9 And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?
10 And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself.
11 And he said, Who told thee that thou *wast* naked? Hast thou eaten from the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat? (Holy Bible, Genesis, 3:7–11)

Following Adam and Eve’s sin—in other words, as soon as they become human—having “their eyes opened” means finally gaining knowledge of Good and Evil (as the serpent had promised), which ultimately amounts to the *knowledge* of being naked. Shame consists of opening your eyes, of knowing. In addition, God apparently realizes they have transgressed only when He sees that they feel shame. Shame reveals the sin. They feel shame not for having eaten the forbidden fruit, but for their nakedness: sex coincides with transgression.

Even the most primitive human beings cover their genitals as soon as they are able to produce some garments for themselves because genital desire is transgressive for all human beings. Yet the sexual act in itself is the most normal and routine act in the world; there are almost eight billion of us on this planet, marriage is based on sex, and for the Catholic Church, coitus is even a sacrament—only if a couple consummates their marriage are they truly wed, and carnal union is a mystical act (is it any wonder that some may want to witness this miracle?) In many cultures (the Chinese culture, for example), the first sexual intercourse between a newly married couple required the presence of witnesses whose job it was to certify that there really was a sexual relation. We may also ask whether, in couples who have been married for years and who have a regular sex life, if sexual desire returns only because each time, they add some sort of transgression to their sexual act. Add to this the strange sensation that male children, in particular, have when they discover their attraction to the opposite sex: that women are not made to be *used* sexually! And young females feel that being *used* sexually is a humiliation, a form of abuse. This very strange sensation could account for Lacan’s statement that “There is no sexual relation.” Sexual acts occur all the time, but precisely because there is no *credible* relation between the sexes.

3.

I have met adults who were taken to naturist camps from early childhood. Generally, as adults, they still have no embarrassment about appearing completely naked, but I wonder if they experienced a trauma being naked when they entered puberty (was man's original sin puberty?) and, in particular, when they were attracted for the first time to a peer in the camp of the opposite (or same) sex. Did both of them feel the urgent need to cover at least their genitals? Erotic attraction generates shame, or rather implies it. Desire requires shame to be able to express itself in shameless sex.

Shame is enigmatic because it reveals a fundamental, however unconscious, belief that the opposite sex *is not made for us to have sex with*. As adults, we believe the contrary, that the opposite sex was made by God or nature specifically for sex and procreation. The sexes seem to have been devised by a propitious mind to make intercourse as easy as possible. However, shame arises because, unconsciously, coitus *is not* an act that is indispensable to feeling pleasure as it is among all other primates. It is as if the specificity of Homo sapiens—with their access to the symbolic order through language—implies this un-naturalness of coitus, as if coitus were a bricolage, or as biologists say, an *exaptation* (not an adaptation).⁵ Surrealist bricolage is quite famous, such as the example below by Picasso:



⁵ Cf. the fundamental study by Gould and Vrba (1982). See also Pievani (2008).

This bricolage, made out of bicycle parts, is titled “Bull’s Head.” However absurd it may sound, coitus is a source of pleasure because it is experienced in this way: the male and female sexes juxtapose each other (even more so if the sexes are both male or both female). In the same way as there is no relation between a bull’s head and a bicycle, there is no relation between a *man* and a *woman*; insofar as they are not simply male and female, they are not complementary. (Male and female are actually concepts that imply each other, but this is not the case for “man” and “woman.” For this reason, many female mystics were “womanists” and by no means feminists.⁶)

The pleasure of watching people engaged in coitus, even on video, is similar to the pleasure surrealist bricolage affords us: it gives a new sense to things (the male and female bodies) that have *a different sense*. Some enjoy coitus because it establishes a complementarity that is not given *d’emblée*, that is not given immediately.

I have always found theories of sexual liberation in the manner of Wilhelm Reich’s quite stodgy because they tend to sanctify sexuality in the same way religion does. Both Reichianism (along with akin ideologies) and religion would like to do away with the transgressive side of human sexuality: religion by turning coitus into a sacrament and Reichianism by turning it into a purely “natural” form of expressiveness, without any taint of embarrassment. If that were the case, men would be impotent and women frigid, *de-erotized* by this legitimizing of sexuality.

In fact, desire between partners often fades when sexual relations between the two are no longer experienced as a transgression of a symbolic barrier that no one can utter. If coitus becomes a routine in which there is no *unmasking* (or undressing) of the other, desire dies. If there is no prior shame—and the consequent shamelessness of coitus—there can be no libido.

We could say that in orgies, in group sex, there is no shame in showing oneself in the midst of sexual acts. Orgies are a transgression of a transgression, but they are still a transgression—a transgression raised to the power of two, because the sexual act is already a transgression.

4.

In the 1930s, Claude Lévi-Strauss went to the Amazon to observe the Nambikwara people, one of the most primitive peoples on earth. They walked about naked not out of mere shamelessness, but because they did not have any technique for producing thongs. This is how Lévi-Strauss describes sexual relations among the Nambikwara:

⁶ Cf. my study on Rosvita (Benvenuto, 2006).

Most sexual activity takes place at night near the camp-fires, at times, but more often the partners go off a hundred yards or so into the neighbouring brushwood. Their departure, immediately noticed, is the subject of widespread jubilation; jokes are made, speculations exchanged; even the children are carried away by an excitement whose origins they know perfectly well. Sometimes a little group of men, young women, and children will dart off, whispering and laughing the while, in pursuit of such glimpses of the proceedings as they can secure through the branches. The protagonists don't at all care for this, but they have to put up with it, just as they have to put up with the teasing that will greet them as they return to the camp (Lévi-Strauss, 1961, p. 277).

According to our criteria, this primitive people, who according Lévi-Strauss, were very amiable, was a gang of voyeurs (I use the past tense, because I doubt the Nambikwara still live in this primitive state). In fact, they did not behave much differently from the many voyeurs photographed in the 1970s with infrared film by Kohei Yoshiyuki in two Tokyo parks (Yoshiyuki, 1972/2019). Here, too, we find couples making out at night among the trees, and here, too, the various voyeurs are often bold enough to touch the girls' bodies.



Couples who catch a voyeur actually play his game, in the sense that many voyeurs need to signal their presence, ultimately to *denounce* the woman's sexuality—not because they are moralists who want to condemn female sexual activity but because

female desire is in essence *abnormal*.⁷ A voyeur, unless he is a sadist too, would find no pleasure in watching a woman being raped.

The sexual act implies concupiscence, and concupiscence implies transgression. This implication preoccupied the Christian theologians of the early centuries after Christ: how can it be that God makes human procreation possible only by forcing men and women to be concupiscent, to behave in a way that is intrinsically sinful?⁸ Saint Augustine said that sexual yearning, not the act of coitus itself, is an effect of the original sin. In the pre-sinful state, in the Garden of Eden, there was sexual intercourse, but there was no concupiscence. The sexual organs were used like we use our hands to tighten the screws on a cart or our legs to walk: voluntary acts that did not imply any libido. Before sin, sex was innocent, purely pragmatic; one wanted it but did not desire it. In this theological tradition—primarily a philosophical one—the problem is not sexual intercourse itself, but libido; the latter is sinful, although essential. After all, the heretical Cathars considered coitus a dissolute act, even within marriage: *one always yields* to coitus as to a demonic temptation. I have always thought that the Cathars must have derived extraordinary pleasure from coitus.

But what are the deep roots of this aversion, which is not only philosophical, to desire and to sexual pleasure?

If, strangely enough, men believe that women are not made for sexual intercourse, women have the same opinion (after all, before puberty, females ignore their vagina; young girls practice clitoral masturbation). Helen Deutsch (1944) claimed that feminine pleasure during sex is related to masochistic fantasies, that is, images of rape, violence, prostitution, and childbirth. Perhaps she exaggerated, but I think deep down, she captured some of the truth: women have to experience a kind of underlying humiliation during sexual intercourse if they want to get pleasure from it. In fact, quite a few men become aroused during intercourse with women, even with their wives, if they insult and humiliate them. Many men prefer sodomizing women; this preference makes an abomination of female pleasure emerge.

I think this preference for anal coitus is due to the violational character of the act: the anus “isn’t made” for the male sex and needs to be forced. Normal coitus, so to speak, is not transgressive enough, while real pleasure resides in a violation—enjoyed by the woman, too. Some will object that sodomy unequivocally denotes violence and humiliation, and this leads us back to the enigma of feminine sexuality, which Deutsch delved into. This preference for anal coitus seems to contradict the erotic tropisms of our

⁷ This theme is present in Herodotus’ story about the voyeurism of Gyges, to whom King Candaules of Lydia shows his sexual intercourse with the queen. Not surprisingly, the latter is never named.

⁸ This problematic is retraced by Foucault (2018). Also see Benvenuto (2019).

time, in which men do not want to consider women their subordinates, but on the contrary, their equals: they want women to feel pleasure just as they do. Feminine sexuality should basically be equivalent to male sexuality—but if it is equivalent, how can it be complementary? To feel pleasure, a woman needs to imagine that she is subordinate, a prostitute, or a victim of rape, but deriving pleasure from her subjugation, from what she has to endure, is what makes her a queen: it is the sovereignty of submission. This is a little like what was said of Julius Caesar in Rome—that he was “every woman’s man and every man’s woman” (Suetonius Tranquillus, p. 73). On the one hand, Julius Caesar is a man who can enjoy all women (like the father of the Freudian horde), while on the other hand, he submits like a woman to sodomy from men (something that at the time was considered deplorable). However, it was with this submission that the emperor oxymoronically affirmed his sovereignty. Men, therefore, admire women today insofar as they derive pleasure from their submission, thus affirming their sovereignty. Deep down, a man is not seeking his equal in a woman (however much the dominant ideology would impose this) but, rather, his queen, a woman who will ultimately dominate him. As we can see, the most basic affair in the world, coitus, puts into play some dizzying reversals.

5.

The Lacanian conclusion that “there is no sexual relation” is undoubtedly an *avatar* (in the French sense of the word, not the modern English sense) of the Freudian theory of sexuality. As we know, for Freud, there is no masculine and feminine libido; libido is one, without gender—it is queer. The difference between male and female desire—if it exists—is a product of history (the history of the individual [ontogenesis] in psychoanalysis and the history of society in philosophy). Therefore, there is no such thing as a female essence or a male essence, and this breaks an age-old psychomystical tradition deriving from courtly love. What counted for Freud was anatomy, which, in the final instance, amounts to the presence or absence of the penis. All sexed beings (with or without a penis) need to find a sustainable position toward their anatomy, but desire is unisexed.

This theory happens to agree perfectly with the evolution in the last century of our vision of sexual relations, a vision that makes a painstaking distinction between *sex* (biological, ultimately anatomical sex) and *gender* (the historical and cultural construction of sexual pseudo-identities). Other non-anatomical differences, for example, hormonal ones, which are biologically crucial, are not considered. Sexual egalitarianism, which has increasingly affirmed itself in our hyper-industrialized societies, is based precisely on the fact that there is no real gender difference between men and women. In this sense, the

model of sexual encounters between men and women is more and more that between homosexuals; we are, in fact, experiencing a creeping idealization of homosexual relations, insofar as they do not bring into play gender differences.⁹

Conservatives today, whether Christian or not, anathematize what they call “gender theory” or “the ideology of gender,” which obsesses them like a new Sodom and Gomorrah. The paradox is that this so-called gender theory is one that denies the existence of gender, reducing it to a transient cultural set-up or even a mere social phenomenon. In psychological terms, women and men are (or ought to be) perfectly equal. The fact that we have so many male generals and so few female ones, the fact that we have so many female psychologists and far fewer male ones, is not accepted as something obvious, but as an imbalance that should be condemned, insofar as it is suspiciously the product of cultural stereotypes (men are *by nature* aggressive and suited to command and women are *by nature* fit for *nurturing* activities, of which psychology is presumably a professional sublimation). However, if women and men are psychologically identical, how can the sexual act precipitate? As Lacan would ask, what do we desire of the other sex? Following the example of Freud, Lacan is in fact a child of our times, in which we find it increasingly difficult to conceive of sexual relations as relations between two different genders—hence, the symptomatic oddity of a motto like “there is no sexual relation,” which for me has the sense that every sexual act is ultimately homosexual, that it takes place, in other words, between homologous desires. In any case, the Lacanian maxim can be praised for making plastically evident the conceptual torments of an epoch in which all human beings are recognized (or redefined) as equal: men and women, the young and the elderly, aristocrats and plebians.

In fact, is desire one way—mostly male, Freud admitted¹⁰—to account for the thrilling difference between the sexes that the so-very-discredited notion of gender imposes? For decades, Lacan tried to solve this squaring of the circle by relying on logic and topology. He tried to find again an asymmetry between man and woman (or between the masculine and feminine position, to use the correct terms), plundering the quantifiers of logic (i.e., the possible relations between “all,” “not all,” “at least one,” and “no one”). From here arose a series of no less enigmatic (and seductive) adages, such as “the woman

⁹ Indeed, Masters and Johnson (1979), the most influential sexologists of the 20th century after Freud, explicitly cite homosexuality as an erotic model for heterosexuals. Precisely because they are free from any gender labels, relations between people of the same sex can develop without hesitations.

¹⁰ This tendency to equate desire with the male has infuriated some gender scholars. However, in this case, too, I think Freud was embodying the philosophical direction of our epoch: equality between men and women is ultimately based on a male model. Men today, for example, by wearing an earring (never two), only pretend to feminize themselves. Completely dedicating your life to children and home is by no means a male ideal, not even today, while the women who are admired today are those who advance their careers, demonstrate leadership, and affirm themselves in social life—just like men.

does not exist,” which refined feminists love so much. Everything would straighten out if we also said, “the man does not exist,” but that is something that we cannot say. Exchanges between the sexes are not exchanges between symmetrical beings, even if there are not two genders. The difficult thing is imagining a sexual difference not based on any distinction between essences. What transpires from this Freudian theoretical toil (which other psychoanalysts, such as Jones and Stoller, have tackled differently) is the ethical toil of our culture and its ideal of a symbolic equality between individuals, precisely to give as much room as possible for subjective irreducibility.

To conclude, let us go back to where we began: the pleasure felt from watching the representation of coitus is based on the fact that coitus is something incredible, something strangely impossible. A Lacanian of the strictest school would say that the sexual act is *real* precisely because it is not symbolizable, because there are no sexes in the unconscious. However, this is just a way of reformulating the problem, although in a way, that is far from banal. The problem is precisely this: how the *semblant*, the semblance, of gender can emerge from the sexes. Let us say that coitus is not representable unconsciously and is, therefore, a trauma, but representing it turns this trauma into pleasure. In this sense, watching a coitus is a perverse pleasure, in line with what I have argued before, that is, that perversion means deriving pleasure from a trauma by repeating it as a representation (Benvenuto, 2016). There is something originally inappropriate about coitus, something traumatic, of which shame is the tell-tale: a trauma that does not produce anguish, but rather, embarrassment. (In some, it does produce anguish, and these individuals may turn to a psychoanalyst.) By representing, re-presenting, repeating, and re-petitioning the sexual act, the obscenest act there can be, by putting on stage what is behind the scenes, human beings are left bewildered by pleasure. We can say everything about coitus, except that it is stodgy.

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