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Sex, Love and Coronavirus

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In Ireland, HSE issued guidelines about practicing sex in the time of coronavirus, and the two key recommendations are: “Taking a break from physical and face-to face interactions is worth considering, especially if you usually meet your sex partners online or make a living by having sex. Consider using video dates, sexting or chat rooms. Make sure to disinfect keyboards and touch screens that you share with others. / Masturbation will not spread coronavirus, especially if you wash your hands (and any sex toys) with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before and after.”¹

Reasonable common sense advices for a time of epidemics spread by bodily contact – but one should note that these advices just conclude the process which was already going on with the progressive digitalization of our lives: statistic shows that today’s adolescents spend much less time with sexuality than with circulating the web and drugs. Even if they engage in sex, is doing it in virtual space (with hard core pornography) not much easier and more instantly gratifying? For this reason, the new US TV series *Euphoria* (described in publicity as following “a group of high school students as

they navigate drugs, sex, identity, trauma, social media, love and friendship") is thus almost the opposite of the portrayal of the dissolute life of today's high school population. It is out of touch with today's young and, for this reason, weirdly anachronistic - more an exercise in the middle-age nostalgia for how depraved once the young generations were.

But we should make even a step further here: what if there never was a fully "real" sex with no virtual or fantasized supplement? The usual definition of masturbation is "doing it to yourself while imagining partners" – but what if real sex is always up to a point masturbation with a real partner? What do I mean with this? In a comment in *The Guardian*, Eva Wiseman refers to "a moment in *The Butterfly Effect*, Jon Ronson's podcast series about the aftershocks of internet porn. On the set of a porn film an actor lost his erection mid-scene – to coax it back, he turned away from the woman, naked below him, grabbed his phone and searched Pornhub. Which struck me as vaguely apocalyptic" – and, she concludes: "Something is rotten in the state of sex."²

I agree, but I would add the lesson of psychoanalysis: something is constitutively rotten in the state of sex, human sexuality is in itself perverted, exposed to sadomasochist reversals and, specifically, to the mixture of reality and fantasy. Even when I am alone with my partner, my (sexual) interaction with him/her is inextricably intertwined with my fantasies, i.e., every sexual interaction is potentially structured like "masturbation with a real partner," I use the flesh and body of my partner as a prop to realize/enact my fantasies. We cannot reduce this gap between the bodily reality of my partner and the universe of fantasies to a distortion opened up by patriarchy and social domination or exploitation – the gap is here from the very beginning. So I quite understand the actor who, in order to regain erection, searched Pornhub – he was looking for a fantasmatic support of his performance. It is for this same reason that, as part of the sexual intercourse, one partner asks the other to go on talking, usually narrating something "dirty" – even when you hold in your hands the "thing itself" (the beloved partner's naked body), this presence has to be supplemented by verbal fantasizing...

This worked for the actor because he was obviously not in a personal love relationship with the actress – her body was more a living sexbot for him. If he were to be passionately in love with his partner, her body would have mattered to him since every gesture of touching her would disturb the core of her subjectivity. When one makes love with someone one truly loves, touching the partner's body is crucial. One should therefore turn around the common wisdom according to which sexual lust is bodily while love is spiritual: sexual love is more bodily than sex without love.

Will, then, the ongoing epidemics limit sexuality and promulgate love, a distant admiration of the beloved who remains out of touch? The epidemics will definitely give a boost to digital sexual games without bodily contact. Hopefully, however, a new appreciation of the intimate bodily contact will arise out of the epidemics, and we will learn again the lesson of Andrei Tarkovsky for whom earth, its inert, humid stuff, is not opposed to spirituality but its very medium. In Tarkovsky's masterpiece *Mirror*, his father Arseny Tarkovsky recites his own lines: "A soul is sinful without a body, / like a body without clothes." Masturbation in from of hard-core images is sinful while bodily contact is a path to spirit.

¹ <https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/sexual-health/sex-and-coronavirus/>.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/dec/08/rough-sex-and-rough-justice-we-need-a-greater-understanding-of-consent>.