

Sexual Presence as a Symptom of the Post-Human

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This paper was prepared with the help of the SHRC-CRSH

### Abstract

In this short paper we try to understand the meaning of sexual presence as a phenomenon being born and operating within the post-humanist project. Thus, we start from the position of Peter Sloterdijk in response to that of Martin Heidegger on the question of the overcoming of humanism. Then we attempt an analysis of sexual presence through sexual instinct as defined by Nietzsche and distinguished from the Freudian drive. Finally, we posit sexual presence as a symptom of the post-human because of its redoubling of an illusion.

*Keywords:* sexual presence, post-humanism, illusion, nietzscheism

” This is the CENTRAL SCRUTINIZER... You have just destroyed  
one model XOJ-37 Nuclear Powered Pan-Sexual Roto-Plooker.  
And you're gonna have to pay for it! So give up, you haven't  
got a chance.”

Sy Borg, Joe's Garage, 1979

Frank Zappa

### Sexual Presence as a Symptom of the Post-Human

In 1999, the Sloterdijk affair breaks out in a conference on Martin Heidegger thus paving the way for post-humanism as it is now understood. The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk had then presented *Rules for the Human Zoo: a response to the Letter on Humanism* (Sloterdijk, 1999). This is a critical response to *Letter on humanism*, a text written by Martin Heidegger in 1946 (Heidegger, 1971, 1946); this letter was intended both to question the humanist project and as a hand extended to a young French intellectual in the aftermath of the Second World War. In his response, Sloterdijk begins by defining the humanist project as that of a distant exchange of texts between friends. Project of the Renaissance, humanism would thus aim at creating a network of initiates developing a love of knowledge through the sharing of this one as transmitted by literature, in particular in an epistolary way. This *actio in distans* is strangely interpreted in the following way by Sloterdijk: "Erotically seen, the hypothetical friendship of the writer of the books and letters with the containers of his messages represents a case of love at a distance and this entirely in the sense of Nietzsche, who knew that writing is the power of being loved, but also, through the next person encountered, into the unknown, distant, future life. " Sloterdijk here seems to imply a kind of sexual intensity in the act of sharing knowledge at a distance.

Then, in the same text, Sloterdijk makes the observation that through the evolution of the media in mass culture (radio in 1918 and television from 1945), we entered a "post-literary, post-epistolary and therefore post-humanistic " era. In accordance with Heidegger, he concludes that humanism has failed to respect its commitment to "to save men from barbarism". Assuming that "reading the right books calms the inner beast", the humanists believed that inhibitory education would help to tame Man. According to Heidegger, but not to Slotederdijk, this failure is first of all due to the fact that humanism did not aim high enough, that it stuck too closely to the

Aristotelian definition of Man as a rational animal. This makes Sloterdijk say that Heidegger does not want to consider the animality of Man, that the philosopher of Being adopts a resolutely anti-biologic and anti-vitalistic stance, that his ontology fundamentally separates Man from the rest of the animal kingdom. In a rather hermetic language, Heidegger proposed to recast and go beyond humanism by defining Man as guardian and neighbor of Being, and by designating language as the home of Being<sup>1</sup>. In this way he would force Man to be analogous to Being, which would require greater interiority and greater detachment from the exercise of power. In so doing, Heidegger thought he could move away from the spirit of domination advocated by perverted humanisms, as bolshevism, fascism and americanism have been, according to him.

Sloterdijk takes the opposite view of Heidegger's by explaining the failure of humanism not as a departure from Being or from any founding language but as the non-recognition of the inevitable animality of the human being. The author of *Rules for the Human Zoo* then summons *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and its Nietzschean Overman to bring into the equation the importance of the domestication of Man (Nietzsche, 2005, 1891). In order to succeed where humanism has failed, Sloterdijk suggests using socio-technical means in biological selection toward the post-human. It is precisely the use of the German term *Selektion* which created the controversy in the Sloterdijk affair, first among intellectuals of Germanic origin, then among those elsewhere<sup>2</sup>.

Sloterdijk specifically refers in his text to the third part of *Zarathustra* where Nietzsche allegorically criticizes the false innocence of humanism regarding human breeding. In his literary masterpiece, according to Sloterdijk's reading, Nietzsche leads the reader to the distinction between breeders and super-breeders, humanists and post-humanists. This is a cardinal

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger's philosophical work focused on the metaphysical question of Being, in particular the historical evolution of the place and context of the appearance of Being.

<sup>2</sup> The reaction of the German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas was particularly virulent.

distinction for the “philosopher with a hammer” since it conditions the future of Man, the Man of the future, the Overman (Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*).

### **Post and transhumanism**

Whereas for Peter Sloterdijk transhumanism is a transition to the post-human, according to the French philosopher Joëlle Proust (2011), transhumanism differs from post-humanism by a more radical vision of the changes required to reach the post-human. According to her, a post-human species would have a natural or artificial lineage that diverges from *homo sapiens sapiens* according to several characteristics, and primarily according to its reproductive mechanisms.

The attainment of the post-human, if it can really be realized *in concreto*, would thus pass by the use of a set of anthropotechnics which would be able to control and channel the human sexuality towards precise reproductive objectives. A combination of systematic genetic modifications, neuronal implants, organ-machine hybridization, and adaptive training are to be used together to first enhance physical and cognitive abilities and then act as a vector of selection within the human genome. One of the key parts of the transhumanist movement is therefore the exploitation of virtual reality (VR, and other simulation techniques) in order to create experiences conducive to this selection that will lead to the post-human (Kurzweil, 2005).

### **Sexual presence**

The idea of sexual presence has first been delineated by Lombard and Jones (2004, 2013) in an invitation to scholars to consider the phenomenon. Renaud and colleagues (2014, 2016) have then put forward a definition of sexual presence as a “second order” technologically mediated experience with a psychophysiological state of sexual arousal, including a subjective erotic perception, whose content and extent are determined by the interplay between individual psychobiological predispositions, idiosyncratic past experiences, and what is sexually afforded by a mediating technology. Sexual presence is notably at play in VR sex, cybersexuality,

teledildonics and the use of sexbots. More than simply about the subjective experience associated with technologically assisted masturbation, sexual presence probes into and relies on the fundamental ideas of sexual fantasy and sexual instinct. Thus defined, sexual presence necessarily echoes to “first-order” sexual presence, i.e. the non-technologically mediated experience of sexuality.

### **The Nietzschean sexual instinct**

According to the analysis of the historian Marcel Gauchet (1992), the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche was strongly influenced by the work of the psychophysicists of his time. With the development of electrophysiology measurement techniques, the 19th century became that of the discovery of the central role of the neuron and cerebral automatism in the architecture and functioning of the nervous system. Consequently followed a process of dismissal of consciousness as the *primum movens* of individual action, as well as a fundamental questioning of the very possibility of free will. The conception of a consciousness thus organized and determined from the outside will not only influence Nietzsche but also Eduard von Hartmann in his work on the philosophy of the unconscious (1877). The psychophysiology of nervous automatisms will percolate into the work of Nietzsche, owing among other things to the pioneering work of Ernst Wilhelm von Brücke (1819-1892), Sigmund Exner (1846-1926) and John Hughlings Jackson (1835-1911). We also know that Nietzsche has read the work of Alexandre A. Herzen (1839-1906), *Cerveau et l'activité cérébrale au point de vue psychophysiologique* (1887), that of Charles Féré (1852-1907), *Dégénérescence et criminalité: essai physiologique* (1888), and that he was probably in contact with the research of Wilhelm Roux (1850-1924) on the control and selection of intra-organismic life. According to Gauchet (1992), the theses of Eduard Friedrich Wilhelm Pflüger (1829-1910) on the divisibility and multiplicity of consciousness, and those of Alexandre Félix Joseph Ribot (1842-1923) concerning

the primacy of emotional and physiological life on the intellect, are also very likely to have reached the sharp ears of the Prussian philosopher.

If Nietzsche's philosophy can undoubtedly be described as a philosophy of instinct (Assoun, 1982), it is the Will to Power that nevertheless remains the cornerstone of Nietzsche's thought. It is the latter which would federate all the instincts of Man, which would maintain them together, in spite of the internal tensions and the conflicts existing between them, and this with a view to an ever greater gain of power for the Will to Power. This perpetual gain could only be achieved by maintaining a fundamental illusion, an illusion of continuity, truth, identity, and in particular the illusion of the *ego* as a synthetic concept that masks the sum of individual wills dwelling in each of us (Nietzsche, 1968). Indeed, according to Nietzsche each organ has its own will, purpose and intentions (Nietzsche, 1882, 1997): "The" person " itself is to be understood as an illusion: the main objection is in fact heredity, inasmuch as a prodigious amount of formative forces from much older ages constitute the continual stability of the person". Most likely, this is what brings a Nietzsche ignoring the standard logic to say that it is true which allows the conservation of the species. In this perspective, truth lies only in the illusion since beyond this latter, there is only the incommunicable encounter of the nervous forces put at the service of the next generation.

### **Nietzschean instinct and Freudian drive**

While the Nietzschean Will to Power may in some respects resemble the psychoanalytic concepts of libido and sexual drive, it is clearly distinguishable from them by its monistic ontology and by the fact that it embraces all manifestations of matter, both inert and living. In Freud, the sexual drive is based on somatic sources (erogenous zones and processes) and is



designed in a dualistic way to explain the origin of intrapsychic conflicts<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, according to the economic point of view of the Freudian drive, the latter operates essentially through energetic loss, that is, in an entropic mode (Assoun, 1982, Freud, 1915).

On the other hand, the Nietzschean sexual instinct is only a creature of the Will to Power and sexual reproduction is solely one form of expression among others for the Will to Power. Hence Michel Haar's affirmation: "Every force, every energy whatever it may be, is Will to Power - in the organic world (impulses, instincts, needs), in the psychological and moral worlds (desires, motivations, ideas), and in the inorganic world itself -inasmuch as "life is just a special case of the Will to Power" (Haar, 1977). Contrary to the Freudian drive, the Nietzschean sexual instinct is not a matter of an energetic loss or discharge but rather it is about a surplus of nervous energy that is transferred outside the organism and that reorganizes itself in a negentropic way, adding to the complexity of the world. This metamorphosis of the sexual instinct is active especially in art and its corollary, the creation of illusions: "The illusion of the sexual instinct is a fishing net which, when torn, always repairs itself again" (Nietzsche, 1882, 1997). In fact, the Will to Power as a whole can be likened to the dynamic and incessant flow of appearances themselves.

The American philosopher Alphonso Lingis (Lingis, 1977) eloquently analyzes these links between states of sexual arousal and creation of illusions by referring to the figure of Dionysus in the *Twilight of idols*, and then in *The Will of Power*: « The Dionysian states are states of intensified power, affirmative and creative of themselves. Dionysian frenzy is *above all the frenzy of sexual excitement, this most ancient and original form of frenzy*. Sexual frenzy is art

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<sup>3</sup> Freud, without clearly admitting it, was largely influenced by Nietzsche in the elaboration of his Metapsychology (Freud, 1915; Assoun, 1982; Chapman and Chapman-Santana, 1995).

*as an organic function.* It is a state of surging, overflowing animal vigor, and it arises as a sovereign will to lies. »

**A redoubled illusion: from first-order to second-order sexual presence**

As previously outlined, illusion in the Nietzschean sense acts as a protective shield against the Dionysian forces at work behind appearances. This Dionysian chaos threatening the individual in his Apollonian facade is not only contained and held back by the illusion of the individual self, but at the same time put at the service of the Will to Power by increasing the energy potential of the latter.

The first-order sexual presence, that of sexuality between animals, operates first by masking the absurd lack of meaning of the relationship of the brute forces on which the biological generation depends. It is thus put at the service of the lineage of the human.

Second-order sexual presence, that produced by the encounter of the human organic and the technological inorganic, protects against the deep meaning of this encounter. This meaning is that of the appearance of the post-human and disappearing of the human.

The second-order sexual presence is, in our opinion, a symptom of the post-human in that it redoubles, it redoubles according to the transitive and intransitive sense of the verb *to redouble*. By this we mean, it remakes illusion and, in doing so, it contributes to the extension of the domain of the Will to Power.

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