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*INTRODUCTION**THE PROBLEM WITH PLEASURE*

Too much or too little. Hysterics come too late, always certain that this is not the one; obsessives come too soon, afraid of missing their chance (Samuels). There is always a problem with pleasure, and not just among the unhealthy, depressed, or neurotic. It is easy to find oneself leaping too quickly or hesitating for too long. Even those of us who put off our own pleasure for the good of our children, God, country, or other causes – and who therefore can feel good about renouncing overt satisfaction – usually remain convinced that others are getting more than their fair share: as the Lacanian critic Slavoj Žižek puts it, we suppose someone is enjoying himself, and we do not like it.¹ And yet, this subject whom we suppose to be enjoying himself helps us to make sense of our own lack of happiness by attributing knowledge and enjoyment to some enviable but distasteful other whose music is too loud and food too smelly. Only perverts and children seem actually to enjoy themselves, a state of affairs that most healthy citizens recognize and that discourages us from a too vigorous pursuit of pleasure, a pursuit few would know how to conduct in any case.

The proper systems for pleasure – sex, violence, looking, food – work intermittently and poorly, which is probably a good thing. For to compensate for what we seem to be missing, we work, raise families, strive: we make civilization. And yet, it seems unlikely that something as complex as human culture could be sustained by rewards as diffuse as money, public admiration, unruly children. Ultimately, I suspect, we respond to older, more primary drives or, rather, to situations that recall those older drives and their attendant

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emotions, whether of joy or horror. In this book I am asking how such a capacity for elementary enjoyment could be linked to social forces. Let me begin with Oedipus.

Perhaps, as Jocasta explains, boys do dream of killing their fathers and marrying their mothers.² But this wish would not get at the heart of the oedipal fantasy. Certainly, something unconscious is at work in Oedipus' rage and desire when he kills Laius and becomes king; otherwise he would not be so horrified to discover at the play's end that he is the criminal. However, Oedipus does not have to look inward to find himself moved toward parricide and incest: it was the Oracle who had said he would commit these crimes. Something beyond Oedipus' desires, beyond his individual motives, drives him to act despite his determination not to do so. The question, then, for Sophocles, would be how he could manage to have Oedipus fulfill his required fate without arousing Oedipus' own horror at such actions. Oedipus could not simply go to his father and kill him, even if he knew who he was. Rather, he does the prudent and honorable thing and leaves his home, a course that frees him to slay older men and sleep with older women to his heart's content, which he does, each time because it is the right thing to do. Had Laius and Jocasta not been his actual parents, he might, at worst, be faulted for covertly fulfilling a secret impulse by redirecting the aim of his desire – he sleeps with *this* older woman, the queen, instead of *that* older woman, Mother. Or perhaps that is the *best* we could say for him, given that the ready alternative – that he kills and marries out of a pure sense of duty and honor – speaks badly for duty and honor.

Too little capacity for pleasure in people with power frightens reasonable people, because we know that lacking pleasure, those with power find other, scarier enjoyments³: the conquest of nations, the beating of wives and children. In the case of Oedipus, the possibilities for pleasure opened to him by the Oracle's promise are too monstrous for him to accept: by pointing to what he cannot have, the prediction effectively leads him to understand that what he wants is impossible, and he may as well renounce his desire. But renunciation opens another path to him, that of submission. Rather than pursue his own pleasure, he can become the tool of the Oracle, of the gods, deriving his enjoyment from submitting to the will of a

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greater power, fate. And so he adheres to the law, striking down the old man who would dishonor him at the crossroads, marrying the queen for the good of a grateful people. And if it is the gods' desire that through his obedience he gain the impossible enjoyments of parricide and incest, at least he was not moved by his *own* desire, at least his actions were ethical.

In the story of Oedipus, one of the inaugural moments of Western culture, we find the social good bound to an ancient and exterior drive, to a fate that precedes and remains exterior to the individual person. Thebes is relieved of both the Sphinx's oppression and the apparently infertile (and hence politically destabilizing) king, and Oedipus is able to enact a drama that might never have occurred to him had it not been whispered to him by the Oracle. That is, the social order of Thebes seems to enlist Oedipus to do its work by providing a means for him to act out perverse, unconscious, and ultimately disastrous desires that he might otherwise have renounced or remained ignorant of. Like Oedipus, we fulfill our fates because our motives remain unknown to us. When Freud called perversion the opposite of neurosis (1905), he meant that the pervert finds a way to enjoy what the neurotic must repress, to pursue what he wants while the normal neurotic turns away. For each of us there is a point at which satisfaction is impossible and not just forbidden: at first we are too young, too weak to get what we think we want, and later we find that the pleasure we seek is not finally the pleasure we wanted, that something is always still missing. It is as if a piece of nature, as Freud puts it, has decreed from the start that the thing we most desire will be lost. Faced with these limits, the pervert looks around for an escape, for some way to evade this fate. The pervert *denies* the laws of nature and culture that limit enjoyment, laws that Freud refers to under the term "castration." He finds a stage on which the drama of desire can be played out, replaying an enjoyment in spite of all boundaries, while for the normal, more or less neurotic person, castration is accepted, the real loss forgotten. But the law of social life that limits desire also implants its perverse opposite, burying that opposite within the very structures that are supposed to keep the destructive drives at bay. The healthy, that is, can still find their enjoyment, perverse or sublime, through the exercise of law.

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Why did Freud call the child's sublime openness to pleasure "polymorphous perversity" if not as a defensive rejection of his own discovery (1905; 191)? The boldness of this formulation is that it locates the wellspring of humankind's wild variety of sexual pleasures in the natural richness of the infant body. It is a Wordsworthian moment to see the child as father of the man in sexuality above all. With one exception, all subsequent forms of sexuality are disdained as perverse fixations on a prior state, as if adult perversity were merely a degenerate remainder of the original pleasure some seducer teased from a responsive child. Only the "normal" sexuality of the genitally, heterosexually organized adult escapes being condemned as perversion. The proof of this escape is that healthy, genital (and male) sex provides such modest pleasure: Freud writes with something like wonder of the lingering taste for perverse pleasures in "uncultivated women" and prostitutes, as well as in all those many other women (by which he must mean otherwise decent wives, sisters, and mothers) with "an aptitude for prostitution" who have, by sheer good or bad fortune, not plied the trade. And yet, normal sexuality, with its various disgusts and shame, provides a haven for that infant body, as a witness protection program preserves the knowledge of the crime by giving the witness a new name and occupation.

When Freud turned to the problem of destruction in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, his principal concern was with the consequences of civilization's having driven aggressive drives into an unconscious, and therefore unreasoning, space where they might flourish without restraint. In his relentless dualism, Freud insisted on separating sex and death drives and therefore found that deprived of uninhibited sexuality, we grow sad; deprived of uninhibited violence, we grow guilty. But as this text shows in an exemplary fashion, Freud's attempt to hold to this dualism leads him into endless revisions and complications throughout the essay as love and death twist together: the pleasure principle falls under the death drive while life is sustained only by the violence of renewal. The apparent confusions may be ultimately rhetorical: Freud wanted to find that the impediment to a peaceful world was an internal tendency toward aggression, that the ancient nemesis was Death. A good man, Freud wanted to choose life. But in his clearest articulation of the death

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drive, he defined it as a tendency to return to the inanimate, to the most peaceful state possible. Which leaves Life as the problem.

Throughout this book I will be following this line of argument in a principally American context, looking at the ways that abject, perverse longings are appropriated to serve socially useful ends. We become, for example, Americans in the service of demands that appeal to ancient longings within us, but which care nothing for our personal good. The songs, pledges, and images that American children learn from near-infancy help to instill a sense of sublime nationalism that transcends any rational commitment to whatever principles might constitute an American character, leading people to declare their Americanness even when their values are deeply at odds with the country's constitution, laws, and social traditions. It is a compulsive repetition of the practices of America, not a reasoned appreciation of the benefit (or harm) that might derive from a commitment to the state, that makes us who we are. The perverse that runs through normal, healthy society comes from a deep unwillingness to accept symbolic satisfactions – love, work, success – as sufficient for happiness because they contain obscure, disturbing traces of an impossible enjoyment. In one way or another, we will seek to repair this loss, but while a proper pervert knows what he wants, the healthy pervert must find enjoyment inadvertently: in the abject or the sublime, in duty and reason, in the obligations of a “fun morality.” My task in this book is to examine the ways in which this inadvertence is exploited by cultural forms for their own ends.

The following chapters explore various crossings between the sublime and the perverse in order to analyze motivations in modern, mostly American, culture. I focus on America because it has been, from its first European explorations, a space of fantasy, sublime in its sheer distance and scale. But it has been perverse as well in the ways merchants, explorers, and the various misfits who came to this land denied the limitations that the laws of God, king, and nature had imposed on them. Whether people came looking for God or gold, they came hoping to restore the losses that haunted their old world, to make something whole out of the new. We see in Americans a continual capacity to be surprised by and disappointed in the failure of their various communities – schools, churches, workplaces, governments – to produce a clear and open space in

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which to engage with others, as if simple greed or stupidity were to blame. The desires that move us are older and less human than we know.

In my next chapter I take up that hope as it is expressed in a desire for “community,” for a social, religious, or economic organization that works, beginning with the phenomenon of Berkeley in the 1960s. The persistence of the hope expressed by that movement, coupled with an equally engrained cynicism, leads me to attempt to work through what we mean by the words “community” and “human.” The work of Lyotard and Nancy, here, helps me to conceive of alternative relations to others and society, relations that acknowledge the fundamental impediments to human interactions, the “un-working” nature of social existence. What both writers express is the profoundly individual nature of enjoyment, even when it is achieved through social interaction. Community does not “work,” although it provides forms that allow us to find compensation for the unavoidable necessity of dwelling with others. The question I ask concerns the importance, if any, of recognizing the perversity in this compensation.

The chapters on Poe and James that follow pick up the idea of the archaic heart that inhabits the new world. For Poe, as for Hawthorne, America has always been old: the old men are oppressive, the houses are ancient, and bodies are buried everywhere. The theory of the cosmos Poe develops in *Eureka* points to the compulsion to repeat that drives all life: the grave is the origin as well as the premature end in Poe’s world. And it is the attraction to this past that he sees as the perverse double to American optimism, infusing every part of social, economic, as well as personal life. In the world James inhabits, this compulsion to dig up the past has been woven into the moral and aesthetic fantasies of American life. The publishing scoundrel of “The Aspern Papers” has so thoroughly romanticized his obsession with a lost, sublime past that he remains oblivious to his more abject, morbid interests in the parental body of the great, dead Aspern. But Juliana Bordereau, like Madame de Vionnet in *The Ambassadors*, has little trouble seeing the connection between the American’s obsession and the cultural enterprise of commerce. The women see that American money, in particular, moves with the

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liquid flux of enjoyment, and they exploit it. This connection, in fact, is the great lesson that Madame de Vionnet teaches young Chad, the very image of advertising and manliness, who is returning to America to tap the money flowing through a dawning consumer culture.

The lesson is both well learned and easily forgotten. When DeLillo looks at Americans abroad in *The Names*, most of them are still obsessed with the fantasy that they can touch a sublime reality, one that lies in the rock of archeological digs or in the “abecedarian” immediacy of words and letters scratched in ancient stone. But the characters’ fixations on an irrecoverable loss make them the fool of anyone who would use them. It is as if the very capacity for love, commitment, and passion, insofar as it is rooted in that distant memory of wholeness, can make these expatriates effective agents of the CIA, make them exporters of an American vision that is at least as cultural as economic or political. In many of his books, the British novelist J. G. Ballard looks at this American culture with an appalled fascination. He points to the ways post-World War II America displaced earlier notions of sublimity around the world with those generated by technology, particularly in its production of cars and film. The meanings of freedom, sexuality, individuality, and life itself have come to be defined by the automobile, the magazine image, the film event. They stage the fantasy of enjoyment, the traumatic loss that lies at the core of every human. And Ballard sees in the world’s embracing of these fantasies the fetishism of cars, terrorism, violence, and other disturbing yet typical behaviors of his era.

William S. Burroughs, the modern master of the American perverse, produces a history of the world in *Cities of the Red Night* (1981) that attempts to account for the failure of the West to produce the freedom that might have been possible. He tells a story of the pirate Captain Mission’s attempt to found a society that would not be based on repression, greed, and violence. What he reveals is that suffering is not simply a consequence of oppression. Rather, the relation between freedom and slavery depends on how enjoyment is distributed: too often, enjoyment and slavery are allied. The history of the West, Burroughs seems to suggest, is the history of how enjoyment

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has been appropriated. America is the end of a historical development that contains in its failures the traces of a past he cannot bear to give up, one to which we will continue to return.

Death: The Problem Drive

The 1986 film *The Hitcher* opens with a boy enacting the death drive in classic Freudian terms: he is falling asleep at the wheel. Hoping for some relief from the drive, he picks up a hitcher, a psychotic killer played by Rutger Hauer, who soon offers, literally, to kill the boy. The offer induces a trancelike state in which the driver nearly asks for death but at the last second screams “No!” and forces the hitcher from the car. The rest of the movie falls into two sections: in the first, the killer pursues the boy, who is now eager to stay alive, even though his desire seems to result in the deaths of all who come near him. In the second half, the film turns, and we realize that the hitcher’s role has become to save the boy, not just from himself but from the now murderously angry police who are chasing him, thinking him the killer. The boy can, in the end, live only by killing the hitcher, by becoming more like him, an ironic, brutal figure of Life. A good movie.

B-movies, like Jim Thompson novels, often provide startlingly direct insights into our passionate lives. What I find clarifying in this movie is that it links life not to pleasure, but to maintaining some intensity, irrespective of its horror or pleasure. This intensity is not Nietzsche’s Will to Power, although such a force could be one form it takes. Violence, that is, is not the only form in which a vital drive toward intense life might appear, but it happens that way often enough to make me doubt the separation of a death drive from a drive toward life or eros. Insofar as the death drive functions as a *return* to a prior state, it has, I think, nothing to do with being dead. Rather, it represents an obsessive return to a traumatic opening where the subject recoiled from an encounter with an impossible Real. In a pattern of approach and avoidance that Lacan describes as “*tuché and automaton*” (1978: 53ff), the subject returns like an automaton “*as if by chance*” (54) to the moment of a traumatic encounter: “Is it not remarkable that, at the origin of the analytic experience, the real should have presented itself in the form of that

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which is *unassimilable* in it – in the form of the trauma, determining all that follows, and imposing on it an apparently accidental origin?” (55). This encounter remains a “missed encounter,” the compelling yet mysterious event that marks a being for life, and for death, shattering the image of simple fullness that had defined life’s purpose prior to the traumatic, incomprehensible event.

The path of intensity first draws infants away from the original, unformed satisfaction of the newly born. At birth, thriving is not the only choice. Like Nathanael West’s desperate lonelyhearts, many newborns are moved only by violence, warmed only by friction until they have been taught appetite: to hunger, to suck. Our weak human instincts need to be supplemented by training, given a taste for intensity that will keep us from returning to the abyss of sleep. Once taught the trick of living, the individual creature returns to this scene of instruction, seeking to repeat the trick in the face of temptations to succumb to a drowsy death. The boy in the car is willing simply to fall asleep and die until the hitcher offers to assist. If there is a dualism here, then, it is between intensity and sleep, “enjoyment” and pleasure. That is, *eros* and *thanatos*, despite the different emotions evoked by them, are equally capable of serving the drive toward enjoyment. Only when the subject has once achieved a place in symbolic culture can enjoyment be bent to moral purposes, to forms of pleasure that draw differences between *eros* and death. But even then, enjoyment persists as an underlying, sustaining force in erotic and aggressive drives, as well as their more civil sublimations, driving us forward, despite their failures to provide full satisfaction.

A death drive, I am arguing, is the reasonable mind’s interpretation of a movement toward something like a Lacanian Real, toward that other, unrepresentable world that sustains our symbolically lived world: it moves toward the sublime. In that other world, “I” is both dead and not yet alive, and *I* return to it as invariably as any zombie to his master. The revulsion we often feel about the death drive is not in its leading us to the famous inanimate state, the place of no desire, of sleep or annihilation, but its absolute denial of the subject’s will and control.

Another example: in the 1989 film *Dead Calm*, the woman Rae drives her baby through a rainy night singing “The Itsy Bitsy Spider.”

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She crashes and the baby dies. She subsequently fails to thrive, as they say of certain neonates, and her husband takes her on a hot, empty cruise to recover. The dead calm of their boat matches that of her depressed, sedated state: she strives for the inertial stillness of Freud's death drive. Her recovery begins when her child "returns," not as an infant, but as Billy Zane, a two-year-old in an adult body whose only interests are sex and destruction.⁴ He tries to kill her husband, rapes her, and yet still looks at her with a baby's open and wondering eyes. Only when she can look into those eyes and reject him can she return to the symbolic world: she "finds" what she has "lost," but it is her husband, now, not her baby – the phallus (who actually kills the "baby"), not the baby-fetish. The spider is washed down the spout into the sewers, the bowels of the house, only to reemerge into the light. This film recognizes that the spider is not simply the evil that returns to haunt our existence, but an image of life's dependence on regular messages from the drain.

The Real Sublime

The triumph of the Enlightenment in the modern world depended absolutely on the ascendancy of symbolic representation as the condition of knowledge. When Descartes divided the world into the inner and the outer, the mental and the physical, the knowable and the unknowable, he laid the foundations for a scientific capture of the world. Knowledge of what lay outside the mind – the entire material, measurable, universe – was given over to a mode of representation governed by empirical observation. The age of science that followed came to define knowledge as such in terms of its own representational system and insisted on the priority of its terms in all questions of reality. Although Descartes held questions of spirit, imagination, and transcendence to belong to another, and ultimately more significant, realm of knowledge, when he set aside this higher "truth" of the material world as unrepresentable, it became an untouchable realm. Philosophy, following the path of certainty initiated by the "I think," would take this sublime realm as its own proper field, but in doing so remove it from our daily lives. Consequently, as Descartes argues, the authority of church and king lay