

Rosa Martínez
What To Desire

'Only images in the mind vitalize the will. ... There is no intact will without exact pictorial imagination.'¹

Walter Benjamin

'The origin of suffering is attachment to desire.'

The Second Noble Truth of Buddhism

In the 2006 film *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek affirmed that our problem isn't establishing whether our desire is satisfied or not, but knowing what we desire. According to Žižek, there is nothing spontaneous or natural in human desire; our desire is artificial, we have been taught to desire. Contrary to what we usually believe, desire is neither an instinct nor a subjective drive but a cultural learning, a social construction that is regulated through institutions such as family, school, the state and the media. The basic structures of subjectivity depend to a great extent on the social medium in which individuals are born and educated, on the codes they inherit and have to filter in order to shape the affections that can make them happy. If the natural desire of each being is to be, to exist and to persist in its being as Spinoza declared, the structures of sexual division in androcentric societies, that delimit the distribution of power and knowledge, channel the organisation of desire and set the guidelines of how to be—how to be a man, how to be a woman—and of what to desire.

In the belief that the division of the sexes is natural, that it exists both in the principle of reality and in that of representation, we are captivated by what Virginia Woolf called 'the hypnotic power of domination'.² To have a room of one's own, the right to vote, to construct one's own discourses and live as desiring subjects instead of objects of the desire of others, was a necessary challenge for the deterritorialisation of the historical distribution of power and its quantitative and qualitative balance. In the sixties and seventies, Feminism, as a political philosophy that pursues equality between men and women, helped enable women to conceive their desire, to express it verbally, artistically and politically. In spite of its victories and of the utopian attempts at opening up new paths in existing order made by counterculture and the May 1968 movement, the cognitive paradigms by means of which we think, speak and act continue to be established by male sexuality and patriarchal legacy which conceive desire as a lack and a force to be repressed.

In 1972 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari challenged this traditional notion in their work *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, in which they spoke of the unconscious as a desiring machine,

a factory, and described desire as a production of images resulting from the negotiation between individual action and the influence of the collective.

In our day and age the economy of pleasure is regulated by global capitalism. The market generates and sells desire, encouraging a thirst for novelties, promising unknown and presumably endless pleasures. Creating false needs and desires, commercial manipulation of the instinctive does not lead to liberation but rather increases repression and subjection to the existing order, placing the individual on a path of dependence and permanent dissatisfaction.

So, what power does the individual have in order to challenge this mechanism? Is there any truth in personal desire? Each individual subject is a crossing of organs, awareness and ideology. In this battlefield throbs the engine of desire; the starting point that triggers it could be rough or subtle but it is always physical and generates a current of energy that causes the matter we are composed of to vibrate. In this way, the intensity of a gaze can lead to a game of interactions and the appropriateness of a word is able to express unconscious desire and shape conscious desire. Relevant images condense desire in icons and representations we look to in order to find the enlivened or peaceful reflection of our anxiety. For desire to be born what is needed is an event, an incline, a difference in potential that will set the energies in motion and give rise to a new reality, 'a flash of lightning or a stream', as Deleuze tells us in his posthumous *Gilles Deleuze's ABC Primer* when he speaks of D as in Desire.

Desire is always contextual and relational, not autonomous. Marcel Proust said that when one desires a woman, one also desires the landscape enveloping her, the atmosphere she breathes, the situations around her. Our body is then mobilised for pleasure, not only that of a sexual nature but the pleasure provoked by perception, by existence. Desire, like thought, has the power of generating its object; it is a force that produces reality. 'What I think becomes real because it occupies my mind, as if it were real,' we learn from Buddhism. And the force of unconscious desire is such that even Oscar Wilde advised caution when he wrote, 'Be careful what you wish for, it might come true.'

What is important is to examine the connections between desire, reality and the 'capitalist machine'; to assess the destabilising potential of desire for constructing new ways of thinking, new ways of feeling. Michel Foucault stated that 'It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that possesses revolutionary force'.³ Even if this displacement of desire to become a work of art should reduce its revolutionary potential, representation is still useful for satisfying a series of psychological needs that mitigate, in part,

the malaise of the civilising process.

In the notes that preceded the making of his film *Wings of Desire* (1987), under the heading 'An Attempted Description of an Indescribable Film,' Wim Wenders explained how art is born of desire when he said that 'At first it's not possible to describe anything beyond a wish or a desire. That's how it begins, making a film, writing a book, painting a picture, composing a tune, generally creating something. You have a wish. You wish that something might exist, and then you work on it until it does. You want to give something to the world, something truer, more beautiful, more painstaking more serviceable, or simply something other than what already exists.'

The connection between the art that is born of desire and the masculine gaze is analysed by Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), where she demonstrates how the privilege of this active gaze has been the prerogative of men, both as regards production and enjoyment, and not only in the field of film but also in that of artistic production in general. The historical and ideological construction of the gaze has a referent in Lacan's phrase, 'the look is the erection of the eye.' The creation of 'spaces' such as the Secret Cabinet in the Naples Archaeological Museum also clearly exemplifies how power conceives and regulates access to representations.

When the ruins of Pompeii were excavated between 1755 and 1857, the appearance of a set of frescos, mosaics and sculptures depicting nudes and a variety of sexual practices triggered a debate regarding what could be shown in public and what should remain hidden, in the custody of the government. According to the Royal Decree proclaimed by Charles III of Spain, then ruler of the territories of Pompeii and Herculano, access to these pieces that would end up assembled in the Secret Cabinet exclusively reserved for male members of the aristocracy was forbidden to the women, children and the masses. As Beatriz Preciado has asserted,⁴ this secret museum established a hierarchy and a political segregation of the gaze in terms of gender, class and age, thereby defining a strategy of surveillance of the excited or excitable body.

Another obvious example of ways of regulating the visible or invisible, of reserving for oneself the pleasure of the gaze can be found in Lacan, who in 1955 acquired Courbet's *The Origin of the World*, considered one of the most obscene works in the history of art. Lacan kept the picture in his country house concealed behind another painted by André Masson following the advice of his wife Sylvia Bataille, who told him that the neighbours and the cleaning lady wouldn't understand it—in other words, that the order of obscenity, of what

should not be exposed, had to be preserved.

When Lacan died in 1991, the painting fell into the hands of the French government in payment for inheritance taxes, and since 1995 it has been on display at the Musée d'Orsay alongside other work by Courbet. Legitimated by the state, the painting lost its aura of obscenity and today is regarded as another of Courbet's exercises in Realism.

The works presented in the show *What To Desire* condense iconological meanings and references from a historical moment in which the questioning of phallic power, the reflections on identities and gender, the phenomenology and the logic of sensation and the poetics that emerge from shared writing suggest new ways of gaining access to desire. Created over the past thirty years, these works have a great historical precedent in Duchamp's *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even), reproduced life-size in the entrance hall to the exhibition space. This work contains one of the most complex ideograph charts of the functioning of desire, that is still open to multiple interpretations.

The construction of bridges between past and present, and between the physical experience of the works and their interpretation, reveals how the contemporary awareness of desire as an 'active affection' is created, for the works act as desiring objects and question viewers, transforming them into agents of their meaning and of their formation. In this way they become engines of transfer that breach the gaps separating us, favouring the creation of new fields of play in which to shape fantasies and develop the rhetoric of ecstasy. Relational writing and the shared gaze define affections, opening up new doors to desire.

¹ Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, 1928. Quoted by Susan Buck-Morss in 'Walter Benjamin – Revolutionary Writer (I),' *New Left Review* (London), 1/128, July–August 1981.

² Quoted in Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, translated from the French by Richard Nice, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001.

³ Michel Foucault, 'Preface' to *Anti-Oedipus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 1984.

⁴ Beatriz Preciado, 'Museo, basura urbana y pornografía,' *Zehar*, 64, 2009.