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“I Feel Love”: A Musical-Psychoanalytic Meditation

Summary:

This article approaches the themes of love and eroticism by combining philosophical, psychoanalytic, and musical sources. Beginning with Ficino’s statement that we all love badly and “*continovamente*”, we ask whether erotic experience is capable of generating truly new encounters. The repetition of the same failures, stumbles and disappointments seems to support the idea that love is inseparable from the death drive. Yet, the musical and visual material here analyzed suggests that, while some love encounters are driven by what Jacques Lacan called a “phallic jouissance” (saturated with identity and repetition), there are also experiences that embody what Lacan called the “Other jouissance” (opened to contingency and to formlessness). The songs and audiovisual material by Madonna, Beyoncé and Jay-Z here discussed suggest the former perspective, characterized by a fixity of identities, types and libidinal investment, while Donna Summer’s, Anthony and the Johnsons’, Shara Worden’s and Liniker’s performances embody the creative counterpart of death drives and the repetition compulsion, thus disclosing a different way to “feel love”.

Introduction

Writing at the daybreak of the Italian Renaissance, in a time of metaphysical optimism and proliferation of orations on the dignity of human beings, Marsilio Ficino (1985/2003) opens his commentary on Plato’s major work on love with a daunting declaration: we all love very badly. He writes:

As a general rule, a thing which humans do frequently and often, after a long experience they do it well, and the longer they are accustomed to it, the better they do it. But in the case of love, this rule, because of our stupidity, and much to our sorrow, does not hold. We all love continuously (*continovamente*), in some way but almost all of us love wrongly, and the more we love, the worse. And if one in a hundred thousand loves rightly, because that is not the common practice, no one will believe it to be love. We fall into this great error, unfortunately for us, because we boldly start out upon this difficult journey of love before we learn its destination or how to travel the perilous path of the journey. The further we go, the further we stray to our great undoing; and losing our way in this dark forest is more important than any other journey because we travel there in large numbers and more often. (Ficino, 1944, p. 238)[1]

Thus, according to Ficino, whereas in other human activities, the more we practice them, the more we improve, in the case of love, the more we do it, the worse we do it, so much so that, should it happen, as it very rarely does, that one really loves, we would not believe it to be the case. This confusion is what Ficino renders by recovering Dante’s (1320/2009) famous opening metaphor of the *Divine Comedy*: being lost in a dark forest (*selva oscura*), and being pushed back there, after all attempts to climb directly to the mount of purgatory, enlightened by the rays of the sun. As we learn from the rest of Dante’s journey, and which

Ficino confirms, in order to reach the sun, one has indeed to go through that very “*selva oscura*”, and fully experience being lost there, since it is the most important of our journeys.

Ficino (1944) underlines the multiplicity of love and the repeated attempts by humans to experiment with its different forms by using the strange expression “*tutti continuamente amiamo in qualche modo*”, that is, we all love in one way or another and we do it in constantly new ways (*conti-nuovamente*): the very term “*continuovamente*”, which combines the two words “*continuamente*” and “*nuovamente*” is an expression that suggests both the constantly changing nature of love (*nuovamente*) and the persistence of the error (*continuamente*), including the uncanny remark that, should we happen to really fall in love, we will not even be able to recognize it. But notice also that the expression “*continOVAMENTE*” contains within itself the very term *ova*, the plural of *ovum*, that is egg, which, as we will see, will turn out to be an important image for our journey.

Having chosen this unfortunate topic ? love ? but also being aware that, as Ficino (2013/1985) warns us, the more we will proceed in this “*selva oscura*”, the more we will err, we have decided to take an unusual path (p. 15). We will neither try to put forward a theory of love, in the way philosophers do, nor to follow a more or less private pattern of association of ideas, in the mode of the poets. We will proceed, so to speak, in a musical way: Drawing inspiration from jazz musicians, we will identify two basic melodic lines and then improvise around them, pursuing possible variations, above, below, and around them. In doing so, we will take some musical performances as sources of inspiration.

In other words, we do not intend to use the conceptual tools of philosophy and psychoanalysis to unveil the truth hidden in these musical examples. The power of works of art in general, and music in particular, is not that of a latent content (in the Freudian sense of the term), which would only be revealed by a psychoanalytic interpretation able to convert it into manifest content. On the contrary, we are interested in the manifestations of the unconscious and subjectivity that occur on the surface of artistic phenomena, and even on the surface of the stories provided by philosophers such as Ficino (1985/2003), experiences that can instruct, reaffirm or provoke transformations in the psychoanalytic conceptual grammar itself. Hence more than simply putting forward a psychoanalytic reading of works of art, we would like to provide a musical-psychoanalytic meditation inspired by them.

The idea of jazzing with our thoughts can be read both as a way to recover the unity between music and concepts that characterize the early Western philosophical tradition (think of Presocratic poem/songs), but also as a way to go beyond philosophical Eurocentrism. Whereas the European philosophical treatise, with its condensed format (the article), has become the worldwide hegemonic format for doing theory, we want to recover modes of expression developed by those who have been systematically excluded from Theory with capital T, and have thus developed alternative forms of philosophizing, beginning with music itself.[2]

I Feel Love (Donna Summer)

Let us begin with the music that gave us a title – Donna Summer’s 1977 song *I Feel Love*.

One may think of this choice as arbitrary, but one can also point to the deep influence that this song exercised on the music scene, as attested to by its numerous remakes, some of which we will analyze. This song, with its combination of voice and electronic sounds, anticipated a new trend, which has been intensified by contemporary digital techniques. Currently, most of the musical production in the US, for instance, takes place through software that does not even presuppose the presence of musical instruments so that the only body in the performance is, increasingly, that of the vocalist.

Yet, perhaps for this very reason, the bricolage of Donna Summer’s 1977 video feels so weird, both very close and very far away (Etnevic, 2013).[3] After half a century, it still evokes a TV show scenario, with a support band behind, the cold feeling of electronic synthesizers and drum machines, the three black women

choir, whose sinuous bodily movements contrast with the artificiality of the setting, precisely as much as Donna Summer's warm and velvety voice contrasts with the mechanic, repetitive sound of the electronic equipment. The three backing vocalists are dressed as if they just came back from church, reminding us of the gospel tradition. Giorgio Moroder and Donna Summer are performing separately, each one immersed in their own world. This very singular aesthetic choice, somehow unclassifiable, is conveyed by heterogeneous elements that are displaced from their ordinary place. As accurately stated by Simon Reynolds (2017), *I Feel Love*:

pointed the way forward and blazed the path for genres such as H-NGR, Italo, techno and trance. All the residual elements in disco – the aspects that connected it to pop tradition, show tunes, orchestrated soul, funk – were purged in favor of brutal futurism – mechanistic repetition, icy electronics, a blank-eyed fixated feel of posthuman propulsion.

Whether aesthetic revolution or political radicalism, *I Feel Love* (Summer, 1977) evokes the fusion and friction between the African-American and European musical styles. Aside from its political and aesthetic originality, the song brings up illuminating insights about love and the ways of feeling and performing its grooves. In his brilliant article on the topic, Reynolds (2017) also noted that “love in *I Feel Love* is closer to an out-of-body experience than hot between-the-sheets action”, and that concerns – amongst other aspects that we will further develop here – the “song’s feeling of suspension from time, of being lost in a loop of ecstasy or reverie”.

The lyrics indeed describe love as an experience of “feeling love”, of entering the space of a dyadic intersubjectivity (“you and me”) through an indeterminate action of “fall and free, fall and free” (Summer, 1977). This indeterminate falling is followed by the expression of an equally indeterminate “it’s so good, it’s so good”, which inaugurates a movement that returns for the entire song. The dyadic expression “you and me” appears only once in the lyrics, and is quickly transcended into a space of indeterminacy, where the action itself (falling, being good) takes the space of the subjects performing it. Within this movement towards an indeterminate space, even the sentence “I got you” and “what you do” ends up referring to both the partner of the dyadic couple and an unspecified “you”, which can very well just be love itself. To put it in George Bataille’s (2004/1957) words, we could say that, at the peak of mystical/sexual experience, seduction doesn’t often have genitivity as its object, but the erotic itself (p. 362).

In this sort of journey, we get close to a mystical experience, but of a very peculiar type. What is at stake is neither the negative mystical annihilation of the individual body to make space for divinity, nor the positive ascending movement towards God through the typical path of the *itinerarium in deum*. It is a form of mystical experience in the etymological sense of the term, that is of the *mysticus*, the Latin term for those who are initiated to the *mysterium*, that is to what they do not know, and they cannot know. Notice, however, that the Latin term *mysticus* derives from the Greek *mustes* (the initiated person) and the Greek verb *muein*, that is “to close the eyes or lips”, but also “initiate”. This *itinerarium* represents, as Bataille (1957/2004) remarks, a certain dissolution of the sensible into the void of the sensual, and a refitment of layers derived from sexed feelings that now have the status of “states of soul” (Bataille, 1957/2004, p. 154). A “vertiginous effect” (Bataille, 2004/1957, p. 373), in the middle of which eroticism is both connected and disjointed from determined sexual drives and identifications.

Now, if you go back to the video, you will remember that Donna Summer closes her eyes for most of it, and it is precisely when both her eyes and lips are closed that the darkness surrounding her solo performance starts to be illuminated by quick flashes of light which also correspond to the drums (Etnevic, 2013, 3:29) It is also in this precise moment, when the light appears, that the image of her solo performance starts to float around encountering that of Giorgio Moroder, playing the keyboard, and the rest of the band. The following movement is significant – hands clapping, thus transforming the previous isolation of the two main performers into a rhythmic encounter between two parts of the same body. The final scene continues that movement, alternating images of Giorgio Moroder playing the keyboard and Donna Summer singing “I feel love”, in their being together while being apart, and being apart while being together in the same scene.

Desire goes beyond the empirical objects, even if these objects do give support to the experience, and, we may add, are never completely transcended. It is rather this going beyond them, into the space where both eyes and lips are closed, that enables the rhythmic encounters between two clapping hands. We can summarize the trajectory described by this song as an oscillating movement between the dyad “you and me” and the indeterminacy of the statement “I feel love” (“it’s so good”).

Lacan defined the Other *jouissance* as a mystical kind of pleasure, which is beyond the phallic order, and thus associated with feminine *jouissance* (Lacan, 1975). In particular, in his Seminar *Encore*, Lacan (1975) designates Other *jouissance* as “supplementary” to phallic *jouissance* (pp. 93-95). There he speaks about the mystical experience of Saint John and St. Teresa of Avila, and argues that Other *jouissance* is experienced only contingently, and in a way that cannot be represented by any kind of knowledge or epistemological framework. The object of this non-predicable and “not-all” designable *jouissance* is the famous *objet a*. The latter is less an empirical object than a primarily logical function, which operates as a void that isolates desire towards a (rare) experience with no determined symbolic or imaginary coordinates. Of course, empirical objects and sensations can still provide a trigger for this kind of mystical affection. And Lacan recognized how strongly corporeal the narratives of St. Teresa were, and how much sensibility was present in them. Other *jouissance* is not, in this sense, a transcendental experience, because it is not exactly sublime, nor is it devoted to describing the transformation of sensibility into ideas. It is a threshold (in the Bataillean sense of the term) between the sexual and the sensual. It therefore surpasses mere genital sexuality. Experiencing the Other *jouissance* means surpassing sexuality as a field, as something determined by genital or other bodily organs’ specific pleasures.

This peculiar experience of love also therefore questions established gender and sexual categories. Although Donna Summer’s video (Etnevic, 2013) may appear as traditionally gendered, the indeterminacy of the experience *I Feel Love* also points towards an overcoming of traditional binary gender roles. This appears even more clearly if we compare this space with the narrative of heteronormative phallic completion of a typical “I love you/you love me” relationship. As an example of the latter, let us consider Beyoncé’s successful video *Crazy in Love* featuring her partner Jay Z (Harrison, 2003).

***Crazy in Love* (Beyoncé ft. Jay-Z)**

The video (Beyoncé, 2013) begins with Jay-Z in a car uttering the first two sentences that invoke craziness, but also immediately domesticate it through the heteronormative framework of the lyrics, making it clear that it’s a boy-girl business: “Yes/It’s so crazy right now/Most incredibly, it’s ya girl, B/ It’s ya boy, young” (Harrison et al, 2003).[4]

Throughout the entire video, we see the usual narrative of boys and girls we are used to: Beyoncé is constantly dancing, working, adorning her body in different, colorful clothes, while Jay-Z appears as very static, dressed in sober colors, and only moves his hands up and down (Beyoncé, 2013). In Lacanian terms, we could say she has to work a lot to cover her castration with so many, constantly changing different clothes, while he can just stay still, in his simple black T-shirt because *he* has the phallus. Hence, the feline, animal poses that she assumes in her dance moves, invoking the stereotypes of the hyper-sexualized black female body, are progressively domesticated by his phallic performance. He has the phallus, she becomes his phallus, he loves her, she loves him. The circle is closed.

This phallic completion narrative conveys what English psychoanalyst John Carl Fluegel (1930) aptly called the “great masculine renunciation”. While until the French revolution men used to wear the same kind of colorful, adorned garments as women, including wigs, stockings, and merlettes, after 1789 a deep transformation took place in their attire, whose effects are still very visible today; men have given up their exhibitionist desire, the desire to adorn their bodies in the most colorful and elaborated form, in order to assume the typical post-French revolution male garments, that is the dark, sober color two pieces outfit. The

idea that as a man one is supposed to dress in the same dark uniform as other men so as not to call attention to themselves as objects of beauty has not lost its appeal. Today the presidents of almost every country world-wide wear the same two-piece, sober-colored suit as a college senior going for a job interview. That is clearly not the case for women, whose wardrobe and fashion still exhibits an extraordinary range of colors, forms, and adornments.

The question obviously emerges of what happened to that masculine scopical-libidinal investment, and one of Freud's (1930) underexplored hypotheses is that the desire to be seen has been transformed into a desire to see. In this video, we see a perfect illustration of that transformation. Jay-Z's sober, uniform-like attire is the specular phallic side of Beyoncé's constant change of dresses and styles through the performance. In this sense, their video also reproduces the history of the great masculine renunciation itself. Whereas bourgeois men have been wearing the same dark, two-piece suit now for almost two hundred years, women's attire has gone through an astonishing number of transformations within the same period. Jay-Z's restrained black T-shirt outfit, rather than completely subverting its white, bourgeois counterpart (the suit), simply represents the rapper variant of the same phallic strategy. He does not need to attract attention to himself, and thus derive pleasure from being *seen*, because he can look at her, and thus *see* his phallus. This is further underlined by the very fact that Beyoncé is portrayed through the eyes of a fashion shoot, even while dancing. Not only is she working all the time, but her performances are always geared towards the male gaze, as symbolized by the camera for which she is performing. This is what gives her and her persona the aura of a successful woman, as suggested by skyscrapers behind her photo-shoot.

As Patricia Hill Collins (2000) noticed, one of the long-lasting effects of the history of slavery in the US, is that women of color, even when emancipated and rich, always tend to be represented as hard workers. We see a similar symbolic strategy in another successful video, Kanye West's *Fade* (West, 2015).[5]

The lyrics of the song allude to the feeling that love is fading and the attempt to regain it is cast in the same narrative of phallic completion through heteronormative connubial. In this case, we see the body of the black woman, hyper-sexualized and overworked, dancing and working out in a gym for almost the entire duration of the video (3 minutes out of a 3:44 video) (Beyoncé, 2013). Then the image is suspended only to turn into a not-so-original-sex in the shower scene, where the black woman's body is completed by its cis-male counterpart. This triggers the narrative of domestication alluded to in the final scene, which is also, in a way, the primal scene for a social unconscious influenced by Christianity, i.e., the nativity scene. In the very brief last image, we indeed see the heteronormative couple inside a nativity scene – the man whose hair is now much higher, the hyper-sexualized black woman who has been domesticated, since she now appears as a domestic feline, with a cat-like face and a tail, the tool of the transformation is the baby-phallus, which now unifies the black couple in what feels like a 'black vs white' nativity scene, with the contrast between the black glamorous couple and the white sheep. It is again the same narrative of the heteronormative family we are very familiar with.

***Crazy in Love* (Anthony and the Johnsons)**

We would like to compare the narrative of phallic completion explored above, one where, despite the title of Beyoncé's song, there seems to be very little craziness left, with Anthony and the Johnsons' cover of Beyoncé's *Crazy In Love* (Harrison et al, 2003) directed by Joie Iacono and featuring footage of Pink Lady by James Elaine (REBISMUSIC, 2009).[6]

The first striking feature of this video is that the *imago* of the body is shattered and even broken into pieces; the body of the Pink Lady appears only in fragments, never in its phallic unity. This fragmentation of the body image is further underlined by a blurring of the picture itself, which is literally shaking in different moments of the video, when it also often assumes the different shades of green. There is a lot of green in this video, and a lot of dark colors, and leaves, reminding us of the "dark forest", with which we began. Once

again, though, it is precisely through this losing of oneself within such a forest, and thus abandoning the phallic completion of the unitary body, that something akin to the “I feel love” experience emerges, as symbolized by sudden flashes of light in the darkness. Instead of the many different scenes, quickly succeeding one another, *continuovamente*, we could say, as in the Beyoncé video, we have here a very slow pace, where images retreat to the background, so to speak, rendering the voice all the more prominent, and thus the real protagonist of the performance.

In contrast to Beyoncé’s video, the dominant tone of this video is melancholy, which reminds us of what Judith Butler (1993) has called the melancholy of gender identification (p.180). In contrast to other objects, gender cannot be mourned, because gender identifications always remain within the subject, making them therefore intrinsically melancholic. This explains the sorrowful side of the drag performance of the Pink Lady at the beginning of the video, but also alludes to a process of mourning that seems to go beyond that, precisely because it goes beyond the image. Think here of how the voice is given prominence by the harp sound in the background.

The harp sound, precisely like the vocal cords, and the diaphragm that sustains the voice in the body, vibrates (left and right but thus also up and down), and has long been associated with the connection between the upper and the underworld. The string, be it the vocal or the instrumental one, is the membrane that puts the two worlds in communication. Not by chance, in ancient Greek mythology, the god Hermes was chosen by Zeus as herald of all gods and the messenger god, because he invented the lyre, the prototype of all string instruments.[7] Hermes is also the god who leads the souls to the world of the dead, and is therefore called *psycho-agogon* [conductor of souls]. Hermes, the god of all communication, including travels and dreams, is thus the bridge between the lower and the upper world, in the same way in which the string instrument he invented vibrates between them. As the first psychoanalyst *ante-literam*, Hermes reminds us that the talking cure (psychoanalysis) is also a love cure.

Again, it is by playing the lyre, and by singing the pain of the loss, that in, Greek mythology, Orpheus manages to placate the fury of the Furies who control access to the underworld, and thus open the path for regaining his lost love. In Gluck’s (n.d.) homonymous opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* we see how the same journey *ad infernos*, the journey in the world of the dead that Dante (1320/2009) and Ficino (1985/2003) alluded to, becomes the condition for finding love; it is only through mourning the lost object, and through singing the pain of that loss through the lyre, that Orpheus overcomes the opposition of the Furies, and, despite his all too human nature, manages to find the lost love.[8] We could therefore say, no mourning, no love. Or, to put it in the words of Brazilian poet Vinicius de Moraes (1986) “The tragedy of love is not being abandoned; it is being forgotten” (p. 257).

Future Lovers/ I Feel Love (Madonna)

Madonna’s (2005) version of the *I Feel Love* remake series starts precisely with forgetting (drownedtheo, 2021)! [9] Madonna appears on the scene in the garments of a rider, along with images of savage horses, and males on a leash, including a black man wearing a Mohawk hairstyle, and she utters the following words in a sententious tone:

I’m gonna tell you about love/

Let’s forget your life/

Forget your problems/

Administration, bills and loans

Come with me

The scene appears as that of a superego (whose “ambitions,” as we learn from the following lyrics, are “high”) that brings out jouissance to a field of not so original imaginary eroticism. The idea of “future lovers” increases the *puissance* of this imaginary, celebrating a satisfaction that is already at play in the universe of commodified sexual phantasies. Within this scenario, if love is still a question, it is kept at a certain distance. To forget about previous life is one of its passwords, and to project it into a phantomized future is the other. This double form of negation – of the past, and of the present – doesn’t seem to open any road to a future. No mourning, no love. And, where negation and refusal prevail what we find is melancholy, isolation. And some friction maybe, but no bonds.

The isolation of the singer is underlined at the very beginning by the doubling of her image, through a specular phallic image: Madonna appears as the double of herself, while dressed in BDSM garments, with a phallic, ejaculating hat and a rider’s crop, ready to hit the back of a horse. She is the phallus. Despite the fact that the song begins with the exhortation to forget daily life with its “administration, bills and loans”, the scene performed in the video is precisely that of stereotyped and commodified BDSM, some of which are now so largely regulated through contracts, bills and the circuit of capital that they seem to have lost the subversive potential they had in queer countercultures. Here, thus, we forget about daily life only to end up in a “future” scenario that is not much different from the way daily administration works, and the imperative to “forget” seems precisely to reproduce the repetition of the same. The commercial success of BDSM dating apps is indeed due to the fact that they allow one to negotiate all of the details of the forthcoming sexual encounter, which is often reported to be disappointing in comparison to the excitement of the contract stipulation. The same imaginary has furthermore been brought to the large public by the incredibly successful blockbuster movie *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Taylor-Johnson, 2015), depicting a BDSM relationship between a wealthy businessman and a young, innocent girl, a movie that also portrays the same obsessional search for enjoyment through contracts stipulations and the administration of pleasure.[10]

Madonna’s (drownedtheo, 2021) video proposes a similar imperative of “enjoy, enjoy, enjoy” which is nothing but the other side of our neoliberal imperative of “work, work, work”. The fact that the woman in this video is now occupying the space of the law in this “law & enjoyment” injunction does not subvert the traditional gender roles of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Taylor-Johnson, 2015), for instance, precisely because it simply turns them upside down. In the same way, we can suppose that the commercial success of this commodified BDSM imaginary stems from the fact that, given its very strict role codes (you are either bottom or top, or switch), it can work as a way to relieve anxiety in times of gender fluidity. Whatever position one chooses to perform, it will be strictly regulated within certain parameters including a written contract and the recourse to a “safe word”.

Despite her past as an icon in the questioning of the male’s heterosexual gaze,[11] in this video, Madonna seems to reproduce its internal dynamic, just turned upside down. Along with the gender norms, Madonna’s video also clearly reinforces racial stereotypes. Like the above-mentioned video *Fade* (West, 2015), this video is also aesthetically dominated by the black and white contrast, but features the opposite power dynamic. The striking difference between them is that, in West’s video, all the human bodies are black, whereas the sheep are white, whereas in Madonna’s version, all the bodies occupying the position of the phallic law are white, with the only black body on the scene being animalized and ?literally? on a leash. Of the four men who are put on a leash by their Madonna-guide and walked on four legs, only one is black, as we see in the close-up that shows the horse bit in his mouth. Among the four men, the black one is also the only one wearing a mohawk, which, in the settler colonial context of the United States where Madonna originates, cannot but recall the colonial fetish of the savage-Indian. An imaginal association between the black body, the animal and the savage-Indian is thus suggested. Significantly, we only see a zoom onto the body of the black man on a leash under the (white) Madonna’s control precisely at the moment when she starts to sing Donna Summer’s *I Feel Love* (Summer, 1977) lyrics. This happens towards the end of the video and cannot but appear as an act of appropriation of the erotic capital of the black body, within a general movement towards the celebration of white supremacy, which is, unfortunately, so politically relevant today. Needless to say, in contrast to Donna Summer, Madonna never closes her eyes; everything in this video is about the image, about seeing, about controlling, and about the imperative to forget, which, in

its turn, can only lead to the repetition of the same.

We do not need to be reminded by the lyrics that there is something like a religious tone in the strict adherence to the law that the super-ego scenario portrayed here embodies (“Some call it religion/ This is not a coincidence/ Would you like to try?/ I will be your guide” [Madonna, 1984]). “Madonna”, a singer who made her career with the song *Like a Virgin* (1984), cannot but recall the figure of the Christian *ma-donna*, the Christian *mea-donna* par excellence. As has been pointed out multiple times, it is a striking fact that the Christian image of the *mea-donna* is so constantly and intrinsically associated with her suffering. It is not by chance that the canonical hymn for the musical celebration of the Madonna is that of the *stabat mater dolorosa* (mother remaining in pain), and it is perhaps not by chance that the iconic representations of the Madonna’s miracles are, very often, statues crying blood. Why do Madonnas always cry in Catholic miracles? Why all that blood coming through their childish faces? Why has nobody ever had a vision about a laughing Madonna? Maybe because they are menstruating, showing their full adulthood and their capacity for a maculate, bloody conception; it is their revenge for having been reduced for centuries to the role of intermediary of the divine. Pure *ressentiment*, a formidable display of *suffrance et jouissance*, which Madonna (the singer) here perfectly reproduces, just by turning it upside down; the Madonna that has been reduced for a few millennia to the role of the *stabat mater dolorosa* is now the Madonna pop-star who is actually inflicting pain on those she dominates – same story, just turned upside down.

Maybe there is a religious tone in both Donna Summer’s (1977) *I Feel Love* and in Madonna’s (2005) remake of her song, but they seem to go in opposite directions – love and the mystical “I feel love” in the former, and love/law and “I inflict pain” in the latter.

***We Added it Up* (Shara Worden/Nova)**

Let us now go back to the *I Feel Love* melody and try to expand on that space with the reference to a more contemporary performance, which, despite the many differences, has more in common with Donna Summer’s (1977) song than it may *prima facie* appear. Singer, composer, songwriter and performer, Shara Nova is an artist so prodigiously polyvalent that if we try to add up each one of her aesthetic gestures, we’re about to end the sum... “to zero-oh”. In her musical performances, we witness the dissolution of styles, stereotypes and even the borders between erudite and popular, classic and contemporary. Sometimes she is singing as if the voice were just a medium for the expression of intangible sentiments. And some other times she uses her amazing vocal technique to trespass – with the unpredictability of subtle melodies – every single harmonic code or contingent structure towards the uncanny of a very peculiar musical performance. We can try to render the different *layers* of her performances through the concept of a *sound sculpture*, that is of an *entre-deux* produced by vocal traces that amalgamate language and sound, on the one side, and the modulations of the body that gives them “image” (in space and time) on the other (Prigent, 2003, p. 36). The “violent formation of that shape”, as the French author Prigent claims, is also represented by significant modulations during the narrative, which oscillate between a more inter-subjective approach and a formless bond, opened to indeterminacy and to contingency (p. 36). The resulting musical expression is *tout musical*, as Adorno says, something “that is produced against the intentions, which it (the *tout*) integrates by the means of negation of particular intentions, unseizables” (Adorno, 1963/1982, p. 7). This paradoxical totality – claims the German philosopher – embraces all intentions into it, not to dissolve them in order to obtain a more abstract and higher intention, but opening itself to the call of the unintentional.

One of Nova’s (then Shara Worden) most impressive performances is with the theme *We added it up* (My Brightest Diamond, 2011).[12] The song begins with a folkloric theme performed by acoustic guitar – in a kind of Django Reinhardt style – while the lyrics describe the dramatic but charming oppositions between two partners at once united and separated by their differences. Specularity is the sign that apparently marks that partnership, but also its correlate mismatch. Names, places, nouns, every significant name that designates one of the protagonists is rapidly contrasted with/against the other, and this oppositional link

gives visibility to the strange complementarity between the pair. Love rears its ugly head then, captured by the perverse intentions of “a grand puppeteer”, who inexorably held together the failed but insistent attempts of love from two beings whose passions are massively rubbed one against the other. This unstoppable sum or accumulation – or this *plus-de-jouir*, as Lacan would say – can turn into a deathly isolation by the paradox of a desperate movement to produce unity. *Il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel* at this point, what can just coincide, as Monique David-Ménard (2011) explains, with “the experience of disillusion of sexed love” (p.195).

The narrative proceeds inside the frame of a *you and I* dynamics, while the music also echoes more conventionally. And then comes the phrase “what a fit of exhausting inexhaustibles”, which denounces the circularity of a bond where the position of a subject is always determined by the contrasting position of the other. Entropic energy circulating, an energy that can produce fragments or moments of contingent unity or coalition, but into a system whose general rule is co-determination, established between their inexorable separation. Nevertheless, after that phrase, the harmony turns into something very dystopic. The oscillation between major and minor chords (upon the same key) is accompanied by melodies changing subtly, as if they were trying to sew the fragmentation of the theme. “Fusion” slides into “confusion” and finally... “love binds the world”. “Love binds the world” is repeated multiple times, expanding from the singer’s voice to the mouth of the musicians, all joined in an echoing *legato*: “love binds the world, forever and ever and ever”. This transitory and mystical moment of “I feel love” in the song ends up the way it began, but leaves (as a kind of immaterial memory) a rest – “we added it up to zero” (Linker, 2015). The sum of true love maybe is not one (as Plato dreamed), nor two (as Badiou claims[13]), but zero. Oscillation between its figures and its unfigured moments is what, binding the couples, may bind the world as well. Especially for those who are capable to live/love and let die.

Zero (Liniker)

Zero (Liniker, 2015) is, significantly, also the title of our last song. The crucial expression to understand the love experience in this song is “*Com medo de te transpassar*” [afraid of trespassing against you]. “Trespass” here means to go beyond, or enter onto a land without the owner’s permission. Let us remember that in Portuguese the word *transpassar* also means to pierce, and in the pronominal sense “to die”, “to extinguish itself”. The ecstasy of Saint Teresa is represented, in Bernini’s (1652) sculpture, by the condition of being trespassed by an arrow of divine love. The annihilating condition represented by this act seems to invert the most conventional ways in which we understand phallic organization. If the phallus (the phallic signifier) is what names, gives a basis, localizes someone or something, or even signifies/inaugurates the order of linguistic reality, the arrow that represents it on the scene of trespassing reveals instead a certain duplicity. In that scene, the arrow seems to pierce the very order it had instituted and opens, to the subject, a jouissance experience that is decentered, uncanny and multiple. The symbolic order sustained by the phallus is destabilized here by a “*doublure*”, a particular effect that evokes the Other jouissance. This strange form of sensibility includes what is non-identical, what is alien (radically Other) to the ego, but includes also, as Liniker says, even “*até o que é o mais normal de nós*” [what is the most normal among us]. This Other jouissance, expressed aesthetically in this art, stratifies and condenses all the paradoxes of a non-limited jouissance and “*fazer tudo caber na malinha de mão de um coração transpassado*” [makes everything fit into the little handbag of a trespassed heart]. Liniker could be said to be a soul-music artist, a style rooted in blues and gospel, which here quite literally means “God-spell”. In the *Zero*, the vocal performance dismantles binary codes of singing categories, sliding from falsetto to diaphragmatic grave. The writer and essayist Pascal Quignard (1996), argues that “sonore castration” is precisely the phenomena that characterizes men’s voices.[14] Men lose their most sharp vocal tonalities by the time of puberty. Women remain always on soprano, while men submit to a transition that often exposes them to a certain identity crisis. A male adolescent whose voice starts to change sometimes slips back towards the infantile soprano notes, thereby potentially causing feelings of shame around his peers.

The phono-audiologic treatment of voice is very common during gender transitions, especially the man-to-woman trans, who can be trained to develop a feminine voice by recovering their infantile experience. But Liniker's (2015) performance seems to allude to a trans-space that does not aspire to be subsumed into a definite identity within the gender binary "men" vs "women". Along with the voice, the images themselves also allude to a queering of the traditional gender role, where more typical cis women's garments, such as the long feminine skirt and the black-woman-headscarf, are accompanied by typical cis male features, such as the moustache. We may remember here that, as Paul Preciado (2013) among others noticed, the displacement of hair on the body is one of the crucial techniques for techno-gender, that is for the construction of gender as one of the products of our pharmaco-pornographic era. Playing with hair is, consequently, a crucial site for those who are trying to undo gender, that is for the sort of gender-pirates action that Preciado invokes as the only possible means of resistance. Once again, it may be precisely this impossible summing up of (gender) mismatches that can open the possibility of adding it up to zero.

Instead of a definitive conclusion, we would like to close these meditations remembering that, with his typical irony, Lacan observed that the most appropriate image for the Platonic idea of the original unity from which love springs is not that of the sphere, but rather the egg. The egg has indeed exactly the shape of a zero, thus not the perfect original sphere, where two specular halves complete each other, but a slightly elongated form. "*A casser l'œuf se fait l'Homme, mais aussi l'Hommelette*," says Lacan (1966, p. 211).[15] Perhaps it is from this mess of a *homme-lette*, from this mismatch that the possibility of a zero emerges. The egg is indeed also the lamella, which, in the Lacanian version of the myth, is the original libidinal organ that can cover and suffocate you, but also the one that, when broken or given some temporary shape, can generate pleasure, precisely like the diaphragm can transform breathing into voice. By going back to the quote from Marsilio Ficino (1985/2003) at the beginning, we can provisionally conclude by reminding ourselves that we are destined to love badly most of the time, but also that, at some point or other, we may actually be able to love *continOVAMENTE*, that is, by adding it up to zero (0).

Coda

In this series of meditations, we did not try to provide a definitive psychoanalytic interpretation of musical performances. On the contrary, we tried to draw inspiration from musicians, and attempted to follow the manifestations of the unconscious and subjectivity that are displayed in these artistic performances, and which, we believe, can in their turn trigger transformations in the philosophical and psychoanalytic conceptual apparatuses.

A beautiful example of this process is the impact of the short story "The Sandman" by Hoffman (1817/1982) on Freud's 1919 article, entitled *Das Unheimlich*. Through his meditations on this short story, Freud elaborates the concept of repetition compulsion, with which the hypothesis of an inexorable predominance of the pleasure principle over the course of mental events is shaken. A year later, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the death drive concept appears as a meta-psychological complement to the repetition compulsion. And, since then, it has changed the paths of his psychoanalytic approach. Although several clinical and conceptual elements have contributed to these modifications in Freudian theory, the impact of the aesthetic experience of Hoffman's tale seems unquestionable.

This article began with Ficino's (1985/2003) tragic assertion: the more we love, the worse we do it. The pessimism at play in this statement is reaffirmed by the idea that a lover is almost incapable of believing in a successful love experience, because it is a rare and unusual event. Our interest here, however, was showing how, despite the failure that the author considers as necessary in love experiences, it tends to repeat itself continuously, "*contiuovamente*". While love may thus appear to be marked by a compulsion to repeat, our reading of Ficino's proposition suggests that there are not only destructive libidinal processes at stake in this "*contiuovamente*" process. An epistemological approach to love exclusively based on the death drives would certainly result in the prediction of endless suffering, caused and sustained by the necessary decline of

the belief in lasting bonds. But one can also develop Ficino's metaphor by exploring two strands of love experience, one that tend to comply with the phallic jouissance and one where we witness the opening towards a different jouissance. The latter results in experiences of love, which have more to do with the promotion of vital impulses and with the life drives than with the *desolatio* of the disillusionment and death drive. As we have seen in the artistic experiences analyzed above, love seems to be more successful when it is able to renounce subjective, political or social ideals of codified forms. And that could also mean renouncing fixed identities, and stereotyped or irreducibly conditioned partnerships based on consumer fetishism, including that of merchandised pleasure, while also being able to include what is most normal in us, as Linker (2015) states in the *Zero* song.

In a short series of lectures on love and eroticism, Freud (1912) states that:

The love life of human beings seems to be split in two directions that are personified by art as heavenly and earthly (animal) love. When they love they don't desire, and when they desire they can't love. They look for objects they don't need to love, to keep their sensuality away from loved objects. (p.182)

The splitting of the erotic experience in two apparently irreconcilable directions indicates a cleavage between a sublimated type of affection – idealized and purified of “vicious” or sexual predicates – and another type, which privileges the sexual encounter understood as *via regia* for the accomplishment of the pleasure principle. Freud bases this distinction on the vicissitudes of his Oedipal theory, considering that the object choices of adult life that identify with unconscious incestuous objects are those that, most likely, will have a “heavenly” destiny. Barred by repression at the level of direct satisfaction, they can only be experienced at the level of ethical and aesthetic affectivity, and thus celebrated and admired, while the subject will have to look elsewhere for objects where they can enjoy carnal sexuality. The “degradation” of the latter seems to be the necessary counterpart for the accommodation of these objects into the framework of sexual satisfaction. This argument is complex and largely sexist (strongly connected to Freud's focus on male eroticism).

However, for our purposes here it is important to note that Freud's remark identifies a general trend of the erotic life in capitalist societies, one that splits the modern subject into a double path of relations to the body and sexual objects. In our meditations on love, by drawing from authors such as Bataille and Lacan, we considered not only the existence of such a split, but also the possible opening of a much more fluid threshold between the sexual and the sensual. Bataille's (2004/1957) studies on mystical eroticism and Lacan's (1975) seminar on the Other jouissance (or feminine jouissance) clearly contribute to the advancement of the psychoanalytic theory of love and desire, in a way that goes beyond Freud's split. They point, on the one hand, to a form of love where parts of the eroticism defined by the phallic grammar can be exchanged with different experiences, more open to indeterminacy. And they also point to an Other jouissance, which is not transcendent or “heavenly”, but which presupposes experiences of less fixed identities, and thus also a displacement of the genital primacy, in favor of a broader and more multifaceted bodily eroticism.

In sum, we tried here to explore the interfaces between these possible changes in the state of love and the soundscapes of what Adorno (1963/1982) exemplarily designates as “informal music”. Even within tonal music, the internal articulation of its elements can lead to modulations, rhythmic transformations and the creation of soundscapes that give us the feeling that, within the same music, different songs are played. Wagner was a composer who, to a great extent, impressed Adorno for his ability to create from unique fusions between these heteroclit elements, permanently shifting the boundaries between the carnal and the celestial in music. To do justice to the artists whose works have been discussed here, it is essential to recognize that they all create aesthetic experiences whose breadth goes far beyond the considerations we have made. What we were looking for were not points of aesthetic convergence, let alone a homogeneous music material. Rather, we tried to follow the inspiration coming from the musical, scenographic and narrative atmospheres of the analyzed audiovisual material, which leads us to believe that love is a noun that can be expressed in the plural, and that its repetitive force cannot be conceived as completely

extemporaneous to its creative dimension.

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Notes:

[1] “Sogliono i mortali quelle cose, che generalmente e spesso fanno, dopo lungo uso farle bene: e quanto piu’ le frequentano farle meglio. Questa regola per la nostra stoltizia, e nostra miseria, falla nello Amore.

Tutti continovamente amiamo in qualche modo, tutti quasi amiamo male: e quanto piu' amiamo, tanto peggio amiamo. E se uno in centomila ama rettamente, perche' questa non e' comune usanza, non si crede. Questo mostruoso errore (guai a noi!) ci avviene, perche' temerariamente entriamo prima in questo faticoso viaggio di Amore, che impariamo il termine suo, ed il modo di camminare i pericolosi passi del cammino. E pero' quanto piu' andiamo, tanto piu' (ohime' miseri!) a nostro gran danno erriamo. E tanto piu' importa lo sviarsi per questa selva oscura, che per gli altri viaggi, quanto piu' numero e piu' spesso ei si cammina" (Ficino, 2003/1985, p. 15). English translation modified by authors from the standard English translation of Sears Reynolds Jayne.

[2] Women and people of color are a clear example of voices that were systematically excluded from the philosophical canon and whose philosophy can often be found in their musical production. On this point, see: (Hill Collins, 2000; Davis, 1999; Baraka, 1991).

[3] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nm-ISatLDG0>

[4] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViwtNLUqkMY>

[5] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxGvm6btP1A>

[6] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lAqxRA7h0Ds>

[7] According to the Greek myth, Hermes did this by adding string to a turtle shell, thus connecting the origin of the lyre to an animal that can be both in the water but also outside of it.

[8] See, in particular, the recitativo '*Deh placatevi sdegnosi*'.

[9] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gcfqu35IRt8>

[10] For instance, already at the end of its theatrical run, it was the fourth-highest-grossing R-rated film of all time (Mendelson, 2015).

[11] According to Georges-Claude Guilbert (2002), for instance, even when Madonna's aesthetic seems not to be more than typical narcissist exhibitionisms of pop stars, "there is something that operates as the opposite of a typical situation. The classical sexual object turns into a feminist subject. This questioning of male's heterosexual views is Madonna's habit" (p. 51). Although we agree with Georges-Claude Guilbert's analysis of previous instances of Madonna's videos, we believe in this one she fails to really push a feminist and intersectional agenda.

[12]https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLIFQf3iQ0M&list=RDjLIFQf3iQ0M&start_radio=1

[13] According to Badiou (2009), love is "a construction, is one life that is made not from the point of view of the One, but from the point of view of the Two". This Two, the author remarks, means that "once declared, love must be double-declared (re-déclaré)", contingently, and in order to reach and reaffirm its status of truth.

[14] "Men lose their infantile voice (...) humans which voice leaves them as a change. Well men, by the same way they have cut their testicles, they are cut by the change. That's the infantile voice, lost forever. They are the castrated. But then men make music with that lost voice. We call them the composers" (Quignard, 1996, p. 155).

[15] The standard English translation of this passage is "Man ['Homme] is made by breaking an egg, but so is the "Manlet" [l'Hommelette]" (Lacan 2006, p. 717), but we prefer to keep the French original in the text itself to keep the asymmetry between "*Homme*" (man) and "*Hommelette*" (omelet).

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