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Sergio Contardi and Mario Perniola

## The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic: A Conversation

**Sergio Contardi:** As a psychoanalyst, I found interesting your latest book, *Il Sex appeal dell'inorganico* (2) (The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic). And I wish to question you about the central point of your theoretical approach, which states that a great part of current culture and art (rock music, deconstructive architecture, virtual reality, metaliterature, etc.) is founded on the experience of the human being as a “feeling thing” [cosa che sente]. What does this concept mean?

**Mario Perniola:** The notion of “feeling thing” derives from an encounter between two different traditions of thought: that which meditated around the thing [das Ding] and that which meditated around feeling [das Fühlen]. The first goes back to Kant (the thing-in-itself), Heidegger (the question of the thing), and Lacan (the Freudian thing); the second also goes back to Kant (sentiment), to Hegel (pathos) and the aesthetics of empathy. I took away the dimension of feeling that this second tradition attributes to the subjective feature. I replace “I feel” [io sento] with an anonymous and impersonal “it is felt” [si sente], something which I had laid out in my previous book, *Del sentire* (“About feeling”).(3) In *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, the “it is felt” assumes a more specific sexual connotation. The “Sex Appeal of the Inorganic” (SAI) refers to a neutral sexuality, suspended in an abstract and endless excitation, always accessible and with no concern for beauty, age, and in general, form. It is perverse not so much because it resembles a specific perversion (sadism, masochism or fetishism), but because it is excited by altogether inadequate stimuli. My book has raised interest especially among non-philosophers because it shows how “popular” SAI is in today’s customs and art.

**Contardi:** Psychoanalysis can be defined as a practice of listening. Freud himself defined this listening as floating or “evenly suspended,” that is, a listening aimed not at unveiling the hidden meaning of what the patient says, but rather at grasping and freeing a new signification. What difference do you see between what Freud calls “listening” and what you define as “feeling”?

**Perniola:** There is a philosophical trend which, starting from Heidegger, emphasizes the dimension of listening [das Hören], as opposed to the dimension of seeing typical of Greek metaphysics. However, I don’t agree with this trend: for the ancient Greeks, sight and hearing were noble senses, clearly distinct from the other three which implied a more total involvement. Still, my notion of feeling is more general and abstract: it might be considered a “sixth sense” which includes the five senses. This poses some problems to psychoanalytic practice. I was struck by the videos of the Zurich psychoanalyst Hans Peter Ammann, which challenged the asexual character of analytic listening.

**Contardi:** Even the concept of “thing” is not foreign to analytic theory. Freud differentiates substantially between “das Ding,” the Thing, and the object, stating that the Thing is the necessarily and fundamentally lost object. As Lacan stated, the true core of unconscious desire consists of an unfillable void, a forbidden jouissance. Thus, every other object is but a derivative, a surrogate, of das Ding, more a “cause” than an “object” of desire. According to Freud, the drive, by its very nature, is destined to remain aim-inhibited. Your concept of Thing comes from modern philosophy, from Descartes and Kant up to Wittgenstein and, in particular, from Heidegger. And even though you maintain a distinction between Thing and object, your

concept of the Thing seems far from that of psychoanalytic theory. You retain that the Thing is practicable for the human being insofar as you, unlike psychoanalysis, make it derive from the object and not vice versa. Am I correct?

**Perniola:** No, my concept is not so far from that of psychoanalysis, because both are part of the same tradition of thought. The Thing, of which Lacan speaks in his 7th Seminar, is the same Thing of which I speak in my book. The fundamental problem faced by Lacan in this very important Seminar is analogous to that which I deal with: the “beyond the pleasure principle.” This “beyond,” which is usually attributed to the last phase of Freud’s work, was instead already present in one of his earliest works, *Entwurf einer Psychologie* (1895), which was a starting point for Lacan’s approach. Unlike Fehner, for whom psychic life was ruled by a universal tendency towards stability (identified with the pleasure principle), Freud goes in an opposite direction. I identify especially with Lacan’s polemic (in his 7th Seminar) against “the man of pleasure,” and against that domesticated psychoanalysis that seems to have no other task than to quiet the sense of guilt, insufficiency and inadequateness. In reading Lacan, I would not put emphasis on the identification Thing = Mother: the notion of “mother” first appears with Kleinian psychoanalysis, one of the most diffused analytic trends at the time of this Seminar (1959-60). In the same way, the terms “subject” and “object” are complementary, they rise and fall together.

Your question reveals your wish to separate Lacan from philosophy in general, and from Heidegger in particular. But in fact, Lacan and Heidegger (as Lacan says on p. 153 of his Seminar) are talking about the same Thing. And even Lacan’s entire discourse on the void and lack, which are both essential to the Thing, comes from Heidegger. But, whereas for Heidegger and Lacan the void is essential to the Thing, I shift the experience of the Thing towards fullness, permanent accessibility, the whole, in short, towards *amor fati* (love of fate). This was the cynics’ and stoics’ teaching: in every moment of our life we have everything we need, the future cannot give us anything better than what the past was able to give. Thus, the thread of Heideggerian-Lacanian thought finds its own point of reference in Luther, while I find it in Ignacio de Loyola. More generally, philosophies of negativeness and nothingness have already played out their historical parabola, while our epoch requires a philosophy of the whole which, while having no illusions on reality, declares itself unreservedly in favor of this whole. Many points in Lacan go in this direction; one characteristic of great thinkers is their richness and complexity. I stress the philo-baroque, rather than the philo-Lutheran, Lacan.

**Contardi:** The difference, which you yourself stress, between “the Thing” understood as originary and lack, and the Thing, understood as fullness and as a whole, marks a boundary between an analytic and a philosophical reading of the Lacanian text. There are not only similitudes, but also deep differences, between Lacan and Heidegger.

When you link neutral sexuality to a new way of understanding and practicing philosophy, do you share the concept of sublimation? In psychoanalytic theory, sublimation is founded on the discovery that all human sexuality is inevitably intellectual, as Freud seems to state in the *Three Essays on Sexuality*. Is this Freudian concept in contrast with your ideas?

**Perniola:** I never liked the notion of “sublimation”: it is connected to negative thought, lack, Catharism, and to the world seen as Evil. If, when you talk about the intellectual character of sexuality, you mean its “spiritual” character, I do not agree with you at all. Organic sexuality has always been marked by the Spirit or by Life: does sublimation show this movement between Life and Spirit?

**Contardi:** By “intellectual” of course I do not mean “spiritual.” One of the most important psychoanalytic teachings consists precisely in reminding us that the sexuality of the human being – in the speaking being, in the *parlêtre*, to use a Lacanian neologism – inevitably passes through the labyrinth of speech. In this sense, sexual is intellectual. And it is also for this that Lacan talks about the subject of desire as “an effect of the signifier.” Thus, the psychoanalytic sublimation does not at all aim towards any idealism, any Supreme Good. An example of sublimation is rather the “sexual theories of children” described by Freud. Psychoanalysis reintroduces into the scientific discourse precisely the ethical dimension of the subject. In fact, the major aim of an analysis, the “royal way” towards a cure, is to lead the individual to a recognition

of, and confrontation with, his/her own unconscious desire. How, instead, to define the ethical assumption of your theory which implies the disappearance of the subject? Or rather, which annihilates the subject itself into the “feeling thing”?

**Perniola:** The title of Lacan’s 7th seminar is “The Ethics of Psychoanalysis.” “Ethics” not “moral”; in German, *Sittlichkeit*, not *Moralität*. In this seminar Lacan sides with Hegel, with the reality principle, and not with Kant and his must-be-that-is-not. This choice is important and moves towards my direction, against idealistic moralism. Good and Evil lie in the order of representation, in moralism, and not in the order of the Thing, of ethics. Idealistic moralism is connected with negation: yet negation does not exist in the unconscious. In short, the unconscious has nothing to do with “values” which by definition are purely ideal, not real. Lacan, with great theoretical refinement, draws Kant into his discourse, highlighting the “noumenic” character of the categorical imperative which, thus, sides not with the subject but with the “thing-in-itself” [Ding an sich]. Lacan’s ethics has nothing to do with the subject, but consists in passing from the subject to the Thing! Let me quote from p. 105: “Now I was once alive, without rules. But when the commandment came, the Thing lit up, came to life, while I, I found death.” On this point I am in perfect agreement with Lacan.

**Contardi:** Certainly, but we have to distinguish, in Lacanian theory, the concept of the symbolic subject – the subject of the unconscious – from the Ego, a purely imaginary function resulting from the sedimentation of identifications that analysis must undo. It is because of this that Lacan speaks of an ethics of desire. Founding an ethics solely on the relation, or fusion, between subject and object risks crystallizing an ethics of fantasy, of jouissance. And, at this point, it matters little whether this ethics is Sadian or Kantian, as Lacan showed in Kant with Sade.

On a slightly different note, what do you think of Baudrillard’s essay, “The disappearance of art,” wherein he basically writes that contemporary art tends towards disappearance, insofar as seduction no longer exists and simulation is generalized. According to him, we are heading towards a “Xerox degree of culture,” a proliferation of images in which there is nothing more to see. He thinks that, in our epoch, art, overwhelmed by “decorative fetishism” and by the “idea,” is no longer autonomous, and is destined to disappear as a specific activity. Do you agree with this extreme prognosis?

**Perniola:** Absolutely not. Baudrillard’s point of view is spoiled by his negativism, by his nostalgia over what was and is no more. Perhaps he is right, but there is no more, because now there is something better. I say “better,” not “best.” For me, the important thing is to be attuned with the experience. He was very much in tune with the 1970’s way of feeling, but he is not in touch with today’s art. Today, the total work of art asserts itself through a freedom which has not been seen for a long time in culture. The walls separating one art from another have fallen.

*Translated from the Italian by Claudia Vaughn*

## **Notes:**

(2) Turin: Einaudi, 1994.

(3) Turin: Einaudi, 1991.