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Sexual Attraction. Should We Drag It Out Back, Shoot It Dead, Stake It, Salt It, And Bury It At A Crossroads?

The Case For Maybe Not

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18th January 2017

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<http://humaniterations.net/2017/01/18/sexual-attraction-should-we-drag-it-out-back-shoot-it-dead-stake-it-salt-it-and-bury-it-at-a-crossroads-the-case-for-maybe-not/>

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One of my less popular beliefs (and that's saying something) is that any form of sexuality is *inherently* objectifying. As with all language being violence and all poetry dishonest, that's not the end of the story, obviously, and certainly not an injunction to never engage with it.

My basic argument is that sexual desire is ultimately a very simple lizard-brain thing and while you can hook it up to to complex circuits, there's a limit to the complexity of the triggers, or at least diminishing sustainability to complex triggers. The triggers can be 'relatively' complex, but they have to be ossified enough — have to have permanent enough associations or connections — to actually serve as triggers. You may get off to signs of someone else desiring you, but that's not seeing them as an ends in themselves. You may get off to signs

of someone's else's intelligence and creativity, but that's not seeing them as an ends in themselves. Identifiable tropes or trappings of intelligence or creativity are themselves object-functioning. The causal origin such sexual triggers might reveal desires or motivations or social allegiances that we might say reflect more valorous alignments than others, but any codified trigger is nonetheless objectifying. When we view someone as an "artist" say we objectify them with such simplified pictures in broadly the same way that viewing someone as a body is objectifying, we view them as a thing rather than as an agent. Relating to someone in terms of simplified roles or characteristics is in a similar objectifying vein as relating to them in terms of their body, because such relating turns away from dwelling on the fullness of their existence in all its unknowable subjective complexity.

It seems safe to say from everything we know about biology and neuroscience that in order for any stimuli to trigger sexual desire it has to be sufficiently simple. It gets harder and harder to construct a triggering circuit as the complexity of the trigger rises. A sufficiently complex sexuality may no longer count as a "sexuality" and it seems unlikely to be able to even function as one.

Indeed almost all sexual triggers are incredibly simple. Every remotely common flavor of kink is about severe simplifications of our environments or narratives or relations. In actual life maintaining power or being oppressed can be incredibly complicated and rife with anxiety. But kink uniformly attacks such anxieties, it removes complexity. We see the same with common modes of relating that don't conceive of themselves as "kink", people frequently ground their sexual attraction for others in their capacity to signify an idea or serve a role or generally perform as some *thing*. Even the most vaunted of complex queer practices when they get closer to sexual desire suddenly get very simplistic indeed.

Sexual desire and attraction crudely objectifies. It is most illustrative to keep it conceptually distinct from infatuation — a kind of relishing of open possibility — and love — a kind of inescapable and incompressible tangibility. All sexuality is an orientation of epistemic violence that inaccurately reduces ourselves and others. A world entirely colonized and subsumed by sexual desire would be a world of objects. And it goes without saying that our present world is permeated and ordered by sexual attraction in grotesque fractals of thoughtless violence. But all this does not suffice to prove that sexual attraction cannot be instrumentalized in the service of agency. It merely proves that sex is a dangerous mechanism that always at least partially mutilates what it touches.

Yet we must remember that some of the best and most useful tools frequently live double-lives as weapons of mass destruction.

personal engagement where love can flourish. Of course music tastes and even the automated assignment of numbers of affinity could likewise break such symmetries, but these too would be objectifying processes, even when ultimately serving grander aims.

Conversely, assigning simplistic attractions below an agent's conscious control can also work *against* clumping, when such clumping diverges far from a perfectly connected network (creating epistemic closures and general constraints on freedom).

Sexual desire is often a violently objectifying process, in the sense that any over-simplification that discards detail is always violent. Science can — when successful — entirely compress detail into a more simple description, finding the hidden symmetries and redundancies, *without* slicing anything away. But the fullness of another mind can never be accurately compressed. We defy simplification.

At the same time simplification is necessary and critical for any sort of life. We require simplification. To get anywhere we need to be able to wipe the slate clean, to cut through otherwise tangled knots. Sexuality provides a machete. It's almost always used to hurt people — its simplifications do violence both upon others and upon our own thoughts and agency — but sometimes a machete can be very useful in hacking yourself free. Without tools like machetes our explorations would be more timid and our missteps more overwhelming.

It is precisely tools of simplification that enable searching minds to develop continually blossoming complexity without wandering into deadends and choking themselves out. Sometimes you have to trim to keep growing. Sometimes crude simplification, the slicing away agency and subjectivity, is necessary and useful to serve their expansion. Sometimes you have to take a shot of whiskey to clear your confused thoughts and better ruminate.

Going off of what people say to me in private there's a huge amount of anxiety and unspoken tension in the present radical queer milieu around being incapable of stating actual desires or triggers for fear of being seen as too simplistic, too unintelligent, too undeveloped. So there's a kind of tension between radical queer *social* practice, which delights in exponential complexity and compounding conceptual processes, and the actual sexual desires of said people. The desires tend to be far more simplistic, albeit sometimes cloaked in a bunch of performative academic complexity. Indeed what seems most common in queer practice is the holding of non-standard or unusual desires that are simplistic in function but are necessarily complex in their *explanation* (because of their non-standardness). A very simple system can require an incredibly complicated amount of explanation to be comprehensible within a paradigm not built to refer to it.

I think we're deluding ourselves into thinking sex can be a site of rich intellectual connection; sex is anti-intellectual.

But that's actually the most useful thing about it, it kills thought.

Sex kills anxiety, strips away the tangled and sometimes counterproductive webs we've woven, it reduces us from a realm of rich internal subjectivity to something closer to an object. Sexual desire is — in an ethical lens — a lot like getting drunk, it strips away our agency and renders us less capable of fully recognizing or enshrining the agency of others. All we are left with is very simplistic checkboxes of consent, is the other person displaying enthusiasm, etc. We are inherently left with simplistic codes.

It's important to note that while we seek to expand agency, moments of lesser agency or shallower connection are not uniformly objectionable. After all we go literally unconscious for large portions of every day, reducing ourselves to almost as object-like an existence as is possible. We do this because our brains have limits, because as processes of cognition we grow

overly complex, we need to strip ourselves down, to restructure and refurbish. It is not clear that such refactorization would not be inherent to *any* thinking thing, any process of cognition in this universe. There's an expansive tendency towards building growing networks of possibility and likewise a contracting tendency towards radical slicing away of those networks to restructure towards more stable or more broadly useful roots.

Sex (both desire and mechanism) is a particularly hamfisted means of pruning overgrown complexity, and its internal logic frequently pulls us in the direction of intensely problematic simplicities. But as with alcohol and sleep, sometimes a clunky and intensely dangerous tool is all we humans have to do a necessary job.

I know that the juxtaposition of sex with love risks derision for conjuring a Christian mindset, but it's not like for two millennia millions of folks knew absolutely nothing or were influenced by no substantive insights. And of course such a split is commonly arrived at across many cultures. I think the dichotomy is the most useful/illuminating conceptual schema possible in this realm. Love is grasping the fullness of someone else's reality, the realness of their full being. Love is a level of engagement that denies simplification, that increases the scale of an individual's presence in your perceptual universe, fleshing them in with so much detail and motion it becomes both intractable and unboxable.

Love operates in the hyper-complex and rich realm of agency and subjectivity. Sex operates in the dangerously simple realm of consent and objectification.

You can have loving sex with a partner, in the sense that there's a smooth arc of increased drunkenness and mutual objectification together (as opposed to a discretized jump to objectification via say the abruptness of adopted kinkplay), but sexual desire is never predicated on something as infinitely complex as love. It's predicated on specific isolatable, simplistic triggers. Even when those simplistic (objectifying) triggers are

things more complex than visual pattern recognition of nice bits, like "I feel safe with this person" or "I desire their happiness".

Such simplistic narratives are obviously dangerous, but they can also be grounding, if only to provide a vantage-point for new attempts at constructing complexity.

Sex may even augment and facilitate loving relationships — in the sense that it provides a strong means to mutually shed off the bloated complexities that continuously emerge between two deeply integrated systems. A jump down to a more simplistic base from which to then go back and evaluate the tangles without being caught up in them.

Sex can also function as a kind of game theoretic reset where two parties recognize that their tangled maps of each other have become intractable in a way causing problems. Both parties know their anxieties about the other are likely incorrect, but they're too embedded in a paranoia to state things clearly and without creating further tangles, sex can be seen as a way to ensure mutual defection. Sex offers a way to reduce one another to an "original position" as it were, from which both can collaboratively chart the tangles from a position of relative objectivity.

In a flip, sexuality can also have valorous effects by *breaking* symmetries. Just as self-constrained rationality can be an incredibly useful tactic, it is often desirable to introduce some clumping into an otherwise perfectly connected network to create a kind of topological diversity that facilitates evolution of ideas & cultures. Too complex of affinities and attractions can rapidly make choice between all other agents computationally intractable, thus introducing simple (ie objectifying) attractions can serve to break the ice, as it were, of an otherwise locked up social network. Without something arbitrary like sexual attraction we might find ourselves incapable of selecting among billions of irreducibly complex fountains of agency, much less being pulled into closer orbits of more intense and