

Desire in the 'Text of 1968

Peter Klapes
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Professors Gallagher, Kearney, Savage
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Riddle: *If passive is the opposite of active, then what is the opposite of action?*

A: *passion!*

Much like—perhaps synonymous with—desire, passion takes the form of an automatic, autonomic, and autopoietic eternal flow. Desire and passion can indeed be understood as passive, the *hyle*—the canvas or clay—that allows for creative and imaginative poesis, or production. Not through an active search for fulfillment or pleasure, but, rather, through an act of desiring desire (or, desiring the impossible), creative production and societal progress can be realized. That is, desire, which is, as I will claim, always an act of imagination, and which is always for that which is not currently realized, makes the impossible *possible*.

At its omphalos a movement of desire—based on the desire of young men and women to be granted the permission to sleep with one another—the Paris student revolts of 1968 took a unique shape. Carried out in part by philosophers of desire: Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Jean-Paul Sartre, Julia Kristeva, and Roland Barthes, to name a few, and based on such maxims as “all power to the imagination”, “it is forbidden to forbid” (*Il est interdit d'interdire*), and “Be realistic, ask for the impossible”, (*Soyez réalistes, demandez l'impossible*), the 1968 movement was, indeed, an embodiment of a particular philosophy of desire: that desire is for desire, and not pleasure, and that this autopoiesis of desire is always embodied in a ludic (creative or artistic) act. In what follows, nonetheless, I address the ‘philosophy of desire’ of some of 1968’s ‘greats’.

1968 featured, yes, a public revolt (the students were quickly joined by workers), where Paris witnessed a grand display of ‘activism in the streets’, based on the desire to find the ‘beach under the paving stones’ (“*Sous les pavés, la plage!*” was frequently uttered by the students). But, a textual revolution also ensued. Philosophy, art, music, and literature was prolifically produced, a result of the notion that the pleasure unexpressed in the streets (a certain

‘remainder’, in a sense, of desire) could be expressed in the text, in a sort of textual (or textualist) escapism from the streets. Even here—in this desire for text—we see an embodiment of 1968’s notion of desire. That is, through the *hyle*, or material, of the text, the image of a just, ‘better’ society can freely take form—the impossible can become possible. The *desire* for an impossible ‘perfect’ society can continue to *be* a desire with the text; the desired Real can persist as an object of desire (and, that is, remain unfulfilled) in the text.

Specifically, though, the text itself (as understood through linguistics and literary theory—both of the ‘60s and ‘70s and of today) is an embodiment of 1968’s *desire for desire*. That is, the text (and narrative) always expresses, or articulates, desire. Implied in every linguistic utterance is a statement of want—the statement of “I want to say” that necessarily precedes every iteration. But, furthermore, texts and narratives themselves make use of our own desire (or, *desire for desire*). The act of reading (or viewing or listening) is an act of desire—a desire to learn, or to be entertained. And the message contained in creative oeuvre is always *delayed*—but that’s exactly what we desire. Language is always *deferring*, as Derrida established, and that is exactly what we desire in language: its inability to ever fulfill our desires. Roland Barthes—one of 1968’s ‘greats’—captures this notion in his concept of ‘dilatory space’ (*un espace dilatoire*)—or, the ‘middle’ of a text—which he describes as “the space between beginning and ending”, where the text sets up “*delays* (obstacles, stoppages, deviations) in the flow of the discourse.”¹ Through the ‘dilatory space’, desire can live up to its autopoietic potential—it produces itself (and surely does not resolve itself, or provide fulfillment) in the text or creative oeuvre. In many ways, I would claim that the revolution of 1968 was constructed as a

¹ Brooks, Peter, “Narrative Desire”, *Style* 18.3 (Summer 1984).

‘dilatatory space’. The critic Jay Clayton holds that “desire is a creative force”², and, in 1968, desire (for sexual liberties; for a just society) was, indeed, a creative force—bearing creative, to say the least, fruits. The act of reading or revolting (or Critical Theory itself) can lack determinate resolutions (Deleuze writes about the “indeterminacy” of “the event” of 1968 in his “May 68 Did Not Take Place”), but can, indeed, bear creative results. Was the textualist and semiotic turn in 1968 so much escapism as it was, perhaps, a different, but equal, brand of revolt? Reading, writing, and revolt all seem, nonetheless, to be founded on the experience of desire.

The break-down—the retardation, delay, or dilation—of the text (or narrative), which is always ‘slow to act’ (as is denoted by ‘dilatatory’) is, indeed, productive (of desire), an embodiment of the “creative force of desire”. Such notion of desire—wherein desire is productive, a “creative force”, emanating from dilation—is also seen in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, both ‘greats’ of 1968. In the duo’s *Anti-Oedipus*, it is explained that “desiring-machines work only when they break down, and by continually breaking down.”³ 1968’s break-down (and continual break-down) of machines seems, nonetheless, related. Through the break-down (delay, perhaps) of the desire-curtailing machines of society (for Deleuze and Guattari, the family, the law, and the psychiatric institution, to name a few), desire prevails. And this was, without a doubt, a goal of 1968 and of Deleuze and Guattari’s oeuvre, which Foucault named a ‘work of ethics’, teaching the ‘ethics of taking your desires as reality’.

And, here, we see also a main point of Deleuze and Guattari’s project, which, indeed mirrored a belief central to the movements of 1968: that the subject’s experience of desire (or, on

² Clayton, Jay, “Narrative and Theories of Desire”, *Critical Inquiry* 16.1 (Autumn 1989): 35.

³ Deleuze, Gilles; Guattari, Felix, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (London: Continuum, 2004 [originally published, 1972].) p. 31.

a larger scale, his own construction-of-self [the self is always constructed by the other; one views himself in relation to the other]) is always effected by the external world (the institutions or ‘situation’ in which he finds himself). The duo described Judge Schreber, a German psychotic, who Freud diagnosed with repressed homosexuality, as having “sunbeams in his ass. A solar anus.” They continue: “And rest assured that it works: Judge Schreber feels something, produces something, and is capable of explaining the process theoretically. Something is produced: the effects of a machine, not mere metaphors.”⁴ Here, nonetheless, Deleuze and Guattari critique Freud’s method: Schreber’s psychosis is a result not of “mere metaphors” (Freud understood the judge’s psychosis to be an expression, or metaphor, of his repressed homosexuality), but of “a machine”. Society’s machines, Deleuze and Guattari claim, produce psychosis. In a similar manner, for Deleuze and Guattari, the mental institution itself produces psychosis. Referring, it seems, to the psychosis-producing *residential* psychiatric institutions, Deleuze and Guattari articulate that “the glaring sober truth *resides* [emphasis mine] in delirium.” The truth is, indeed, located in delirium (the schizophrenic out for a walk, say Deleuze and Guattari, is a “better model” than the neurotic on the psychoanalyst’s couch), but what is accepted as truth (the “glaring [or brightly-lit—imagine here neon lights] truth”) is also a delusion (which causes the delusion [or psychosis, or condition] of the schizophrenic). The realization is here, again, that society’s machines produce problems. Judge Schreber’s psychosis is a result of external, societal machines, not his own internal deficiency or lack. To make us aware of these dangerous machines seems to be the project both of Deleuze and Guattari’s oeuvre and of the demonstrations of 1968.

⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 25.

And, moreover, through 1968's philosophy of desire (which we are commanded to take as reality), the impossible becomes possible. Deleuze and Guattari establish that "revolutionaries, artists, and seers [...] know that desire clasps life in its powerfully productive embrace, and reproduces it in a way that is all the more intense." A realization of desire allows us to understand that "the real is not impossible; on the contrary, within the real everything is possible, everything becomes possible. Desire does not express a molar lack within the subject; rather, the molar organization deprives desire of its objective being."⁵ Through the liberation of desire—our liberation *from* the "molar organization" that "deprives desire"—we will be able to produce. Yes, we may produce a better society (wasn't this the goal of the 1968 demonstrations?), but we will definitely produce (work, or oeuvre), as those of 1968 surely did.

The 1968 Paris student revolt—a movement, I claim, of desire—demonstrated the way in which desire (always an imaginative act, expressed through the granting of 'power to imagination') is a mode of social change and progress. The impossible is realized, or actualized, through and by the desire for desire (which is always, indeed, based on the desire for the impossible—the desire for the image, or the *imagining*). Through the text—the philosophy, (street) art, and music that was generated by the movements of 1968—which is always *of* desire, desire (for progress; for the amelioration of societal conditions) can ensue. But only the liberation of desire itself—its liberation from the "molar organization", as Deleuze and Guattari elucidate—will lead to the 'revolution of desire', or, perhaps, the 'textual revolution', we see in 1968.

Works Cited

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 50.

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