

Sex (between gay men): on pleasure, fetishes, the numinous, and individuation

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Abstract

The work explores male homoaffective sexuality from the perspective of Jungian analytical psychology and Hillman's archetypal psychology, addressing themes such as pleasure, the numinous, and individuation. Through clinical accounts and theoretical analyses, sexuality is discussed as an archetypal expression of the psyche, connected to imagination, the Shadow, and the process of unconscious integration. The cultural and historical repression of sexuality is analyzed in contrast with its creative and transformative potential, highlighting practices and fantasies as portals for self-discovery and connection with the Self. By emphasizing the importance of integrating these dimensions into therapeutic work, the text advocates for an approach that values the symbolic richness of sexual experiences, recognizing their role in archetypal dynamics and expanding consciousness. ■

Keywords: analytical psychology, sexuality, pleasure, fetishes, numinous, individuation.

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Sexo (entre homens gays): sobre o gozo, fetiches, o numinoso e a individuação

Resumo

O trabalho explora a sexualidade masculina homoafetiva sob a perspectiva da psicologia analítica de Jung e da psicologia arquetípica de Hillman, abordando temas como o gozo, o numinoso e a individuação. Por meio de relatos clínicos e análises teóricas, discute-se a sexualidade como uma expressão arquetípica da psique, conectada à imaginação, à Sombra e ao processo de integração do inconsciente. A repressão cultural e histórica da sexualidade é analisada em contraste com sua potencialidade criativa e transformadora, destacando práticas e fantasias como portais para o autoconhecimento e a conexão com o Self. Ao enfatizar a importância de integrar essas dimensões no trabalho terapêutico, o texto defende uma abordagem que valorize a riqueza simbólica das experiências sexuais, reconhecendo seu papel na dinâmica arquetípica e na ampliação da consciência. ■

Palavras-chave: psicologia analítica, sexualidade, gozo, fetiches, numinoso, individuação.

Sexo (entre hombres gays): sobre el goce, los fetiches, lo numinoso y la individuación

Resumen

El trabajo explora la sexualidad masculina homoafectiva desde la perspectiva de la psicología analítica de Jung y la psicología arquetípica de Hillman, abordando temas como el goce, lo numinoso y la individuación. A través de relatos clínicos y análisis teóricos, se discute la sexualidad como una expresión arquetípica de la psique, conectada a la imaginación, la Sombra y el proceso de integración del inconsciente. La represión cultural e histórica de la sexualidad se analiza en contraste con su potencial creativo y transformador, destacando prácticas y fantasías como portales para el autoconocimiento y la conexión con el Self. Al enfatizar la importancia de integrar estas dimensiones en el trabajo terapéutico, el texto defiende un enfoque que valore la riqueza simbólica de las experiencias sexuales, reconociendo su papel en la dinámica arquetípica y la expansión de la conciencia. ■

Palabras clave: psicología analítica, sexualidad, goce, fetiches, numinoso, individuación.

Introduction

“Last week I had an amazing experience with a guy from Grindr. I was fucking him and suddenly he shits on my dick. I know it sounds gross, but it felt so powerful. It felt wrong and yet I was doing it anyway – the cumming was incredible” (gay male patient report).

The lack of discussions about sexuality and sexual fantasies in my clinical practice, especially among heterosexual patients, intrigues me. This absence contrasts with the views of Jung (2015) and Hillman (2013), who conceive of sexuality not only as an instinct, but as a fundamental creative force for individuation. I believe that, as Jungian analysts, we have underestimated the importance of sexuality in our clinical practice. This gap reflects a broader cultural symptom, rooted in our own practice,

marked by repression and taboo around sexuality. Paradoxically, in my experience, gay men often approach the topic openly and deeply during sessions.

Looking back, I can say that I am the only one who has pursued the study of the two problems that most interested Freud: that of archaic residues and that of sexuality. The error has spread that I see no value in sexuality. Quite the contrary, it plays a great role in my psychology, mainly as a fundamental expression – but not the only one – of psychic totality. My essential concern, however, was to delve deeper into sexuality, beyond its personal meaning and its scope of biological function, explaining its spiritual side and its numinous meaning [...]. As an expression of a chthonic spirit, sexuality is of the greatest importance. This spirit is the “other face of God”, the dark side of His image (Jung, 2015, p. 174).

Hillman also expands our understanding of sexuality, seeing it not merely as a biological instinct but as a psychic phenomenon that reveals the depths of the human soul and its archetypes.

The lacerating and torturous suffering, instead of being healed by Apollo’s medicine, becomes an initiation into the cosmos of Dionysus (Hillman, 1984, p. 232).

To deepen my analysis, I will use accounts from gay patients and excerpts from interviews. Based on Jungian and archetypal psychology, I want to explore theoretical aspects related to sexuality, seeking to identify patterns and generalizations that transcend sexual orientation. However, given my own experience as a gay man, the reflections will be directed towards understanding homosexual male sexuality.

Although Freudian theory made important contributions to the understanding of sexuality, such as the concepts of perverse polymorphism in

psychosexual development and fetishism, it was Jung who expanded this discussion by exploring sexuality as an expression of symbols from the collective unconscious. While Freud emphasized the perverse polymorphism of the libido – “polymorphic” due to the multiplicity of ways of obtaining pleasure and “perverse” due to transcending the standards of adult sexuality –, Jungian theory highlighted the enantiodromia of libido, that is, its transformation from the instinctual to the spiritual. In this sense, a Freudian fantasy such as incest can be understood symbolically, according to Jung, as a nostalgia for rebirth: no longer a literal desire for penetration into the maternal vagina, but a symbolic return to the archetypal womb, representing the transpersonal unconscious from which we all came. For Jung, the great cause of modern man’s neuroses is not sexual repression, but the atrophy of his symbolic capacity (Downing, 2006).

In modern society, several cultural factors have impoverished our symbolic experiences and conditioned us to a specific and rigid behavior of sexuality. Corbin (2024) highlights the evolution of sexual practices and intimacy, showing how pleasure was gradually “civilized” and integrated into social structures. He discusses the impact of morality, social conventions and cultural changes on the perception of pleasure, revealing how the body and sexual desires were regulated and transformed over time. For example, in the Middle Ages, Christian religious discourse strongly shaped the view of sexuality, portraying sexual pleasure as sinful and something to be controlled. Institutions such as the Catholic Church established strict rules for sexual practice, limiting it to the context of marriage and only for procreation, repressing any expression of desire outside this model. Furthermore, during the 19th century, with the consolidation of the Victorian era, sexual repression was even more evident. Social norms imposed an ideal of modesty and restraint, especially for women, while practices such as masturbation were demonized and associated with physical and mental illnesses. Even medical science influenced sexual behaviors, labeling

unconventional practices as “deviations” or “pathologies”, creating a system of control based on supposed scientific truths. Even today we can see how bodies are regulated by the media and advertising, which create unrealistic standards of beauty and desire, impacting the perception of oneself and pleasure (Corbin, 2024).

As analysts, and thinking about the individuation process of our patients, could we explore sexuality (and sexual fantasies) more in the clinical office?

Individuation, a central concept in analytical psychology, is a process of formation and singularization of the soul. By differentiating oneself from collective standards, the individual develops his or her singularity. Repressing this process harms vitality and creativity. The individual and the soul connect deeply with symbols and imagination, expanding perception and reflection. Thus, our experiences, however personal they may seem, connect to a broader, archetypal and mythical context (Jung, 2013a).

How to recognize sexual experiences (images) as emanations of the soul (archetypal)? Are they numinous?

Corbett (2012) describes the numinous as a direct experience of the individual with the sacred; the encounter with forces that transcend the individual experience with the world, and that does not necessarily need to be linked to teachings, doctrines or religious traditions. He also quotes Rudolf Otto who describes these moments as “the tremendous and fascinating mystery that takes hold of us”.

We feel stunned, astonished and full of wonder because we have been approached by something strange, something that is not part of our ordinary world, something very difficult

to express in words (Otto, 1958, *apud* Corbett, 2012, p.12).

In this sense, in my view, recognizing the numinous aspect of sexuality and working with sexual fantasies can be a creative path to self-knowledge and individuation. As Hillman proposes, the task is not to rationally interpret these fantasies, but rather to welcome them and integrate them into our psychic experience, allowing a deeper dialogue with the unconscious (Hillman, 2010).

The Metaphor of Sex: Multiplicity and Shadow

“Since the beginning of our relationship, we had sex with condoms because I knew he was HIV positive. And for many years, our sex life was satisfactory like that. But when we decided to open up the relationship and I saw him having sex with other guys, without a condom, being cummed on by them, then I realized that that was sex for me; it brought me to ecstasy!” (gay male patient report).

“I love gangbangs. As a bottom, I feel extremely good when several guys are fucking me. It’s like I’m an object to them and they can do whatever they want to me” (gay male friend’s report).

Both analytical psychology and archetypal psychology criticize the categorization of sexuality within pre-established social molds, delimiting psychic experiences and devaluing the vast range of images that can flourish from these experiences. Both understand sexuality as an imaginal and polymorphic phenomenon.

Jung argued that a real problem in psychology would be a strong tendency to allow sexuality to be confined within social prejudices, which delimit the psyche and devalue

the vast range of psychic contents (Santana, 2017, p. 46).

The multiple nature of sexuality, the plasticity of instinct and its easy contamination by oral-ity, aggression and creativity, mean that sexuality is never “always” or “only”, never one and the same (Hillman, 1984, p. 65).

Berry (2014) also reminds us that when depth psychology looks at early childhood fantasies, certain patterns reveal themselves clearly - above all, the multiplicity of sexual expressions. There are experiences involving the mouth, the anus, the genitals - and each one offers its own specific type of pleasure. Childhood fantasy, from this perspective, presents us as multisexual beings, capable of experiencing sexuality in a variety of ways. It's important to note that these pleasures are not, at first, linked to gender - identifying with masculinity or femininity is something that is formed later on. Before we recognize ourselves as boys or girls, we are psychologically perverse: desirous, excitable, sensual in every way. Every region of the body, at some point, can be seized by a particular erotic energy (Berry, 2014).

How can we experience the delight of gender without falling prey to these defensive, limiting dogmas? One step could be to reconnect gender with the original field of pre-gender pleasure. Instead of seeing gender as a development that takes us away from the polymorphous, perhaps we could experience it as another form of the many pleasures, one of the ways in which sensuality lives on (Berry, 2014, p. 61).

From the Jungian perspective, the expressions of male homoaffective sexuality can be interpreted as manifestations of the archetypal dynamics of the anima, associated with a maternal complex, and influencing how the man internalizes and relates to the feminine (Jung, 2014).

Hillman (1985) problematizes the binary logic present in traditional Jungian theory, suggesting that the opposition between psychic elements is merely one among various possible modes of

expression of archetypal patterns. While Jung emphasizes the “tension of opposites”, Hillman proposes a more dynamic perspective: instead of rigid opposition, he speaks of a dialectical tension between these pairs, which are engaged in a continuous and mutually illuminating relationship. Thus, pairs such as masculine/feminine, light/shadow, active/passive are not locked in static opposition or dualistic conflict, but rather move together in an ongoing dialogue, where each complements, reveals, and even depends on the other to acquire meaningful existence.

In this context, Hillman draws upon the notion of *syzygy* — archetypal pairs in symbolic union — to illustrate that both poles simultaneously participate in the same reality (Hillman, 1985). The syzygy invites us to recognize the presence of multiple facets within each individual, with the potential to experience and develop diverse aspects of sexuality. This sexual fluidity can be understood as the capacity to move between different sexual expressions and identities without being fixed in a single point. By acknowledging the coexistence of polarities, the syzygy provides space for this fluidity, challenging the need for rigid labels and categories.

According to this second position, every archetype implies another: child-mother, mother-hero, hero-father, father-son, son-wise old man, wise old man-daughter, daughter-mother, mother-child, and so on, it does not matter where we begin or how we proceed [...]. Thus, the anima can take on different names, valences, and images depending on the tandem in which it finds itself. It seems we can only grasp its essence in contrast to something else. Traditionally, this contrast has been associated with contrasexuality. But we also speak of the anima in tandems with the ego, the shadow, the persona, and the self (Hillman, 1985, p. 183).

Within the conceptual framework of analytical psychology, a fundamental opposition is

emphasized between the persona — the socially adapted facet of the personality — and the Shadow, composed of those aspects of the self that are repressed or denied. The persona represents the public “I” shaped by social expectations and conventions, whereas the Shadow harbors personal contents that are incompatible with one’s conscious self-image and prevailing collective values. This antithetical relationship generates an inner conflict that, according to Jung, must be confronted in order to enable full psychological development. Indeed, the integration of the Shadow constitutes one of the most arduous tasks in the process of individuation (Jung, 2013b).

In the context of this psychic maturation process, sexual fantasies — including fetishistic desires and other erotic imaginations — emerge as a symbolic path to accessing the dark contents of the psyche. Much like dreams and active imagination, such fantasies may bring to light impulses and images stemming from both the personal Shadow and collective archetypal patterns, offering the individual an opportunity to confront and work through these unconscious elements. By allowing repressed aspects of the personality to find symbolic expression, sexual fantasies serve as a psychic space in which consciousness may engage in dialogue with the Shadow. This engagement gradually facilitates the assimilation of unconscious content and, in doing so, contributes to the advancement of the individuation process.

Thomas (2024) describes some examples of the encounter with the Collective Shadow (archetypal) among BDSM practitioners (an acronym that encompasses several practices related to domination, submission, control and pleasure):

In these practices, distinctive features that make up a personal identity have been erased. The person in the role of Submissive is transformed into an object of property belonging to the Dominant. This is the response of the Shadow that privileges, in Western culture, individuals with self-confidence,

personal responsibility, independence, individuality, and ability. As an exercise in denial and erasure, the figure of the Submissive, in its latex clothing, poses certain unthinkable questions: What is left of you when you are no longer a person? When you let go of the vestiges of identity, where do you go? What happens to a personal relationship when the construction of the person disappears? What happens to the psyche when it is freed from the stories you tell yourself and others about the person you think you are? (Thomas, 2024, p. 44).

For the author, these experiences hold, from the perspective of the soul, great psychic value, as they expose a part of the Shadow that has not been examined by the conscious ego, as well as the bias of our collective thinking (the hero). The passage shows the pleasure of surrender that accompanies submission, this submission requires courage and strength.

There is nothing more sublime or divine, connecting to the Self, than erasing the ego and its sense of self. What happens from an inner perspective when the submissive person is led, by a chain, tied, is that all the senses are elevated beyond the egoic mind; you are left with an aesthetic orientation. If you feel that you need to be in control to guide the world, then you have been defeated. If you are in a condition of deep submission and you trust the person who is pulling you, then all your senses are focused on them, which takes you out of yourself and puts you in a place that is beyond the ego mind. And this increases a sense of altruism in a really deep condition of submission, which can lead you to this sense of oneness with the Self - connection with the senses that are left. It is a connection at least with the person who is leading you, at least to a condition of being greater than the enclosed body (Thomas, 2024, p. 44).

On a broader social level, the Shadow reveals the uncomfortable truths of our collective nature, contrasting with the idealized narratives we construct about ourselves and society. We can observe expressions of the Shadow in the glorification of aggression, the obsession with control, sadism, and the pursuit of pleasure through humiliation and domination.

Human sexuality — particularly within the dynamics of power and submission — transcends individual preferences, reflecting deeper aspects of the collective psyche. The ways in which we relate to power, vulnerability, and desire are shaped by archetypal patterns and social experiences that influence our understanding of sexuality. Recognizing the complexity of the human psyche and the interconnectedness between the individual and the collective is essential for understanding the dynamics of power and submission that pervade sexual practices.

Enjoyment: Rebirth and Death

“I have sex almost every day. On weekends more than once a day. I don’t see any problem with this. Do you?” (gay male patient report).

“I asked my boyfriend to slap me in the face, but he got scared and ended up losing his erection” (gay male patient report).

Hillman (1998) identifies three distinct dimensions of Eros: *himeros*, physical and immediate desire; *anteros*, the reciprocated love; and *pothos*, the longing for the idealized and inaccessible. *Pothos* represents the spiritual dimension of love, the incessant search for something beyond the present. It is this force that drives individuation, leading us to seek experiences that transcend the immediate and the known. For the author, the signs of *pothos* in us manifest themselves as a nostalgic desire to leave, an anxiety, erotic desire, and an urgent impulse for transgression (Hillman, 1998).

This search is marked by ambivalence and restlessness, revealing a deep desire for the union of opposites (*Syzygy*). The other, in this context, does not represent only an object of desire, but rather a symbol of that which has not yet been integrated into our psyche. The *pothos* drives us to seek this union, even if it seems unattainable. In this way, *Pothos* also manifests in the relentless pursuit of sexual pleasure, although its essence lies in a more transcendental longing (Hillman, 1998).

Otherness, that is, the presence of the other in our lives, is felt as a lack of self-knowledge, an internal alienation. There is always within us a feeling of strangeness, of being somewhat unknown to ourselves, and we can never fully know ourselves except through the discovery of the other, who we often fantasize is somewhere far away. That is why we set out in search of this figure, be it a man or a woman (Hillman, 1998, p. 198).

Edinger (2008) explores the idea of the *Coniunctio* as the integration of opposites (masculine and feminine, active and passive, conscious and unconscious, spirit and instinct) in the human psyche. He points out that the union of opposites is a natural movement of the alchemical process and analytical psychology: represented by alchemical images such as the sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*), which reflects psychic integration. The *Coniunctio* requires the tension between opposites and the ability to endure psychic conflict. Integration occurs when these forces are reconciled (e.g., new Shadow content is recognized and integrated into consciousness). As an archetype, we can understand the *Coniunctio* as this continuous movement in the search for integration (Edinger, 2008).

Pothos, according to Hillman (1984), drives the soul towards integration. Thus, the search for enjoyment can be seen as an attempt to achieve *Coniunctio*, the union of opposites and the integration of the psyche.

Heroic consciousness of the ego follows an ascending path. The movement of the libido represented by Dionysus comes and goes [...]. The libido descends in search of refuge when it is pressured by the excessive demands of Lyncus, the blind tyrant of the will to dominate exemplified by the mythical king of the Iliad (Hillman, 1984, p. 249).

Still for Hillman (1984), the Coniunctio is not only a psychic process of integrating opposites, but also an archetypal expression of the soul's longing for relationship and connection. In this sense, sexual desire is not only a catalyst but an essential component of the soul's alchemical process, evoking profound images of union and separation that keep the creative energy of the psyche alive (Hillman, 1984).

And so orgasm, according to Hillman (2010), can be considered as an experience of temporary transcendence of the ego, a moment in which everyday consciousness is suspended. This "momentary death" of identity can be understood archetypically as a descent into the world of the soul (*Psyche*):

I mentioned earlier how our fantasies lead events to an incurable possibility, to meningitis or cancer, or to suicide. The incurable possibility is nothing less than death (Hillman, 2010, p. 229).

Hillman (1984) links Eros (the archetype of union) with Thanatos (the archetype of death) to emphasize how desire and sexual ecstasy confront us with profound aspects of our mortality and transcendence. This interaction can be seen as a symbolic dynamic that fuels the process of individuation:

The Hades within Dionysus suggests that there is an invisible meaning in sexual acts — a significance for the soul in the phallic parade — indicating that all our vital force, including the polymorphous and pornographic desires of the psyche, refers to the underworld of images (Hillman, 2013, p. 77).

Hillman (1984) further asserts that the soul is formed and transformed along the course of life. What holds meaning for life simultaneously holds meaning for the soul; therefore, it is necessary to consider one's way of living in light of Hades — the inner world of depths, shadows, and invisibilities. Another facet of this mysterious identity — Dionysus within Hades — reveals that there is an archetypal vitality (*zoë*) present in all shadowy phenomena. "The realm of the dead, after all, is not as dead as we might expect". Hades can take possession of the psyche through sexual fantasies, unveiling a secret libido that inhabits the shadows. His images are also Dionysian — not fertile in a biological sense, but fertile from the standpoint of the psyche, in the realm of images, imagination, and soul. "In this sense, Hades and Dionysus are the same" (Hillman, 2013, p. 78).

"Psyche's supreme beauty is one that not even Aphrodite possesses and that must come from Persephone, the Queen of dead souls, whose name means "bringer of destruction" [...]. The box of beauty that Psyche must seek as her last task alludes to a beauty of the underworld that can never be seen with the senses. It is the beauty of the knowledge of death and its effects on all other beauties. Psyche must "die" in order to experience the reality of this beauty [...]. We recognize the first fruit of a psychologically creative union by the experiences of pleasure (between Psyche and Eros) — for this is the name of their first child. Pleasure, delight, joy, Voluptas [...]. In our story, Psyche's fulfillment is Pleasure, the pleasure born of the soul" (Hillman, 1984, pp. 96-97).

Sex in the Office: The Analyst and Unconventional Sexual Practices

"Do you shit in my mouth?" (personal experience)

"While I'm fucking, I love to choke the bottom!" (gay male patient report)

Hillman (1995) invites us to see sexual desire not simply as a biological impulse, but as a rich tapestry of symbols and archetypes. Every fetish, every erotic fantasy, can be interpreted as a dramatization of these deep archetypal forces.

Pornography, for example, functions as a stage where archetypes such as Eros and Thanatos intertwine, creating complex narratives about power, submission and the duality between life and death. The images we find in this content go beyond the explicit, revealing a world of symbolic meanings that dialogue with our deepest desires and fears (Hillman, 1995).

Tziallas (2015) delves deeper into this analysis, showing how contemporary pornography reinforces and recreates cultural archetypes. He describes the recurring representation, on gay male pornography websites, of power dynamics such as domination and submission, sadism and masochism, which take us back to ancient myths and legends.

Thus, sexual desire is not just a physical experience, but a symbolic journey that connects us with the depths of the collective unconscious. When we explore erotic images and fantasies, we are, in fact, dialoguing with archetypes that shape our perception of reality and of ourselves.

The task of archetypal psychology, and of its therapy, is to discover the archetypal pattern of forms of behavior. It is always assumed that everything fits somewhere: all forms of psychopathology have their mythical substratum and belong to or have a home in myths [...]. So that today, when we want to find the gods, it is to our pathologies that we must look. For us, the main work of therapy, more than the analysis of the unconscious, consists in the preservation, exploration and vivification of the imagination and the insights derived from it (Hillman, 1998, p. 184).

Sexuality, especially in its less normative forms, challenges conventions and confronts us with the “other” within ourselves – an archetypal aspect that is simultaneously an “it” and a “you”. This confrontation, though challenging, has the potential to open new avenues of psychic integration and self-knowledge, allowing repressed or denied aspects of the personality to come to the surface (Thomas, 2024).

In the analytic space, sexuality emerges as a portal to the depths of the psyche. Therapeutic work is not limited to categorizing or judging these dynamics; rather, it offers an environment in which the patient can explore his or her fantasies and inner images, confronting the instinctual and symbolic forces that shape his or her sexuality. This process allows the individual to recognize the archetypal richness present in his or her experiences and begin to integrate the meanings that emerge from this dialogue with the unconscious.

Thus, sex ceases to be just a physical or biological act and reveals itself as an agent of psychic transformation. It acts as a bridge between the literal and the imaginal world, where each sexual encounter becomes an opportunity to explore the symbolic.

Conclusion

Sexuality and sexual fantasies represent powerful and often neglected dimensions in analytic work. This neglect may be a reflection of a culturally imposed morality that limits our ability to access these contents in depth. As analysts, we also carry our own prejudices and resistances, which need to be faced and integrated so that we can help our patients in their individuation processes.

For Hillman (1985), the integration of psychic images requires attention to their relative autonomy, recognizing them as symbolic expressions that transcend the personal. The recognition of this “psychic polytheism” allows us to see beyond projections, perceiving the impersonal archetypal force that shapes the psyche. Hillman (1985) states:

“Recognizing that my entire self and my important subjectivity come from an archetype that is totally impersonal” (Hillman, 1985, p. 137).

By integrating sexual fantasies into clinical practice — in the same way we do with dreams — we open up a space for consciousness to dialogue with unconscious content in a dialectical and symbolic way. This work is essential for the anima to cease

being experienced as an autonomous entity and begin to be understood as a function of the psyche integrated into the individual’s totality. Thus, recognizing and integrating these dimensions helps our patients access not only their transformative potential, but also a broader and more legitimate understanding of sexuality as a vital and creative expression of the soul. ■

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