

Sex without love: an investigation into desire, culture, and erotic imagination in analytical psychology

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Abstract

This essay examines the relationship between sex, love, and intimacy in contemporary homoerotic experience, articulating desire, culture, and imagination within analytical psychology. Using a theoretical-interpretative approach, it challenges normative assumptions linking affective bonding to psychic depth. It proposes that sexual encounters may constitute imaginal experiences in which body and soul intertwine, enabling symbolic expression and individuation. It concludes that casual sex, repetitive desire, and pornography can be understood as expressions of the psyche, calling for a clinical shift from moral judgment to an imaginal reading of desire. ■

Keywords: sexuality, homoeroticism, intimacy, desire, analytical psychology.

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Sexo sem amor: uma investigação sobre desejo, cultura e imaginação erótica em psicologia analítica

Resumo

Este ensaio investiga as relações entre sexo, amor e intimidade na experiência homoerótica contemporânea, articulando desejo, cultura e imaginação a partir da psicologia analítica. Por meio de uma abordagem teórico-interpretativa, questiona a associação normativa entre vínculo afetivo e profundidade psíquica. Propõe compreender o encontro sexual como experiência imaginal, na qual corpo e alma se entrelaçam, podendo operar como via de expressão simbólica e individuação. Conclui que o sexo casual, a repetição do desejo e a pornografia podem ser escutados como linguagem da psique, implicando uma mudança clínica: do julgamento à leitura imaginal do desejo. ■

Palavras-chave: sexualidade, homoerotismo, intimidade, desejo, psicologia analítica.

Sexo sin amor: una investigación sobre deseo, cultura e imaginación erótica en psicología analítica

Resumen

Este ensayo analiza las relaciones entre sexo, amor e intimidad en la experiencia homoerótica contemporánea, articulando deseo, cultura e imaginación desde la psicología analítica. A partir de un enfoque teórico-interpretativo, cuestiona la asociación normativa entre vínculo afectivo y profundidad psíquica. Propone comprender el encuentro sexual como experiencia imaginal, donde cuerpo y alma se entrelazan, posibilitando expresión simbólica e individuación. Concluye que el sexo casual, la repetición del deseo y la pornografía pueden leerse como lenguaje de la psique, implicando un cambio clínico: del juicio moral a una lectura imaginal del deseo. ■

Palabras claves: sexualidad, homoerotismo, intimidad, deseo, psicología analítica.

Introduction

Some time ago, I participated in a workshop on sexuality in couples therapy, focused on the loss of intimacy and its effects on desire. Among the 22 participants, I was the only gay man—and this affected me more than I imagined. I began to feel uneasy about some of the ideas circulating there as self-evident, especially the idea that emotional intimacy and desire go hand in hand. For most, this seemed almost obvious. But it wasn't what I was experiencing—nor what I heard from other gay men I spoke with that day. It was from this difference that a question arose that still haunts me: does “good

sex” really depend on love—or on a deep emotional bond? Or does this idea say more about a specific, culturally constructed way of experiencing sexuality than about something universal?

From my point of view, the recent expansion of spaces and devices that facilitate sexual encounters between men—such as dating apps, gay saunas, and *cruising bars*—is not just about an increase in casual encounters. What strikes me is that these contexts also seem to broaden the very field of desire, creating situations where demands such as identity, affection, or continuity cease to be central. In these spaces, other forms of eroticism take hold—often

outside the more traditional frameworks that usually organize intimacy.

This issue gains even more weight when placed in dialogue—and also in tension—with classic formulations of analytical psychology. In my reading, by questioning these formulations, we open space to reconsider assumptions that are often taken for granted. For Stein (2020), for example, the loving bond would favor a tendency towards a more total union between body and spirit, intensifying desire and giving the sexual experience a dimension of completeness. In her formulation, when sexuality remains restricted to the merely sensual plane, even if satisfactory in physical terms, something of the order of the soul would remain unsatisfied, as if the encounter did not reach an essential depth.

However, perhaps it is necessary to question these claims beyond what they seem to describe. Aren't they anchored in culturally ingrained images of what love, connection, and psychic fulfillment are? In other words, to what extent does this idea that sex and affection need to be together to be more "complete" respond to a need of the soul—and to what extent is it the product of a cultural way of thinking that has learned to give more value and legitimacy to this combination? Perhaps we have transformed an image into a norm.

From this perspective, the tension that emerges is not simply between "sex with love" and "sex without love," but between different regimes of imagining desire. On the one hand, a narrative that privileges continuity, intimacy, and integration as privileged paths to psychic fulfillment; on the other, experiences that suggest that the erotic can also be expressed intensely, meaningfully, and even transformatively outside these coordinates, opening space for forms of encounter in which the body, fantasy, and the moment are not necessarily subordinated to the construction of a lasting bond.

Perhaps we are, then, going through a historical moment in which certain traditional images of love life—family, stable relationships, the fusion of sex and affection—are beginning to be challenged by other ways of experiencing desire. And, in this movement, a question arises: **are we moving away from**

something essential to the soul or, on the contrary, beginning to distinguish, more clearly, between what we have been culturally taught to desire and what, in fact, moves us at our core?

The distance between lived experience and the assumption that intimacy requires emotional involvement may not be reducible to individual trajectories, but may reveal a deeper conflict between archetypal images that organize our understanding of love and desire. As Santana (2017) suggests, the very symbolic configuration of the family carries a constitutive tension with the erotic—a force that, while founding it, also threatens and destabilizes it. In this sense, eroticism can introduce experiences that break with the usual ways of recognizing oneself and the other: "During sex, for example, a person may not recognize their lover or themselves in the usual way, especially during climax or intense states of arousal" (Santana, 2017, p. 134, translation mine).

Thus, the difficulty in sustaining the coexistence between intimacy and desire appears not only as a personal impasse, but as an expression of this field of forces. By deepening this tension, Hillman's (1998) contribution becomes especially fruitful, as it shifts the question from an opposition between different ways of experiencing desire to an internal differentiation of Eros itself. The author, returning to the Greek tradition, evokes three figures of Eros that are not confused, but are articulated in tension: the *himeros*, linked to the immediate desire for what presents itself as attractive and available—as in the urgency to acquire something desired the moment it is seen; the *anteros*, related to reciprocated and reciprocal love, sustained by mutuality and recognition of the other—as in the forms of bond that characterize romantic love; And *pothos*, which expresses the longing for that which is absent, distant, or idealized—an urgent desire for the unattainable, manifested both in attraction to someone unavailable and in the search for experiences, places, or ways of life that always remain beyond what can actually be lived. *Pothos* is also expressed in sexual desire. By recovering this distinction, Hillman shifts the understanding of love

from a homogeneous unity to a field of internal tensions, in which different forms of desire coexist and sometimes conflict.

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 merely an object of desire, but rather a symbol of that which has not yet been integrated into our psyche. *Pothos* (as sexual desire) impels us to seek this union, even if it seems unattainable.

The presence of otherness in our lives is felt as self-ignorance, self-alienation. I am always a little strange to myself and can never truly know myself except through the discovery of the other whom I fantasize is somewhere – that is why I go in search of him or her. This is felt in my life as ambivalence, dissatisfaction, restlessness (Hillman, 1998, p. 198, translation mine).

If, as Hillman (1998) suggests, the experience of otherness confronts us with an inevitable dimension of estrangement, unease, and searching—a movement in which the other is always, in part, a projection of that which eludes us—it becomes possible to understand love (in its different manifestations) not only as an encounter, but as a symbolic response to this condition of incompleteness. However, this fundamental experience of the psyche does not remain in a raw state: throughout history, it has been progressively shaped, interpreted, and normalized by different cultural, religious, and scientific systems, which have sought to give form, meaning, and often containment to this constitutive unease.

From my perspective, it is precisely in this process that certain forms of love—especially those that link intimacy to continuity, affective reciprocity, and the stability of the bond—come to be privileged as more legitimate or deeper. Other forms of encounter, which are not organized by these same parameters, tend to be disqualified, reduced to superficiality or lack. Perhaps, then, the issue is not the absence of depth in these experiences, but the way we learn to recognize it—or not to recognize it—based on the

cultural images that organize what we call love, desire, and intimacy.

Throughout this work, I propose to understand intimacy not as a necessary effect of romantic love, but as an imaginal experience that can emerge in the erotic act itself, even in the absence of a lasting emotional bond.

Between sex and culture: what do we desire when we desire?

The understanding of love and pleasure in the West is traversed by a complex web of cultural, religious, and scientific influences that have redefined these experiences over the centuries. Rougemont (2003, in *Love and the West*) and Corbin (2024, in *The Harmony of Pleasures*) offer complementary perspectives on the social construction of love and pleasure, highlighting the determining role of philosophical, religious, and scientific traditions in shaping human desires.

Rougemont (2003) shows that love, in the Western tradition, is organized around a fundamental tension: on the one hand, narratives like Tristan and Isolde exalt a passion that feeds on absence, impossibility, and transgression, intensifying precisely because it is not realized in cohabitation; on the other hand, the Christian tradition values a love integrated into marriage, oriented towards stability and continuity. What is established, then, is an internal division: that which is experienced as most intense—passion—depends on conditions that make it unfeasible in daily life, while the love that can be lived—conjugal love—demands routine and commitment, often at the cost of erotic intensity. Thus, the West comes to sustain a structural contradiction: passion is idealized as the most intense experience of love, although it is organized around conditions that make it, to a large extent, incompatible with communal life.

In my view, it is not a matter of claiming that the Christian tradition has simply devalued desire, but of recognizing that it has reorganized it, subordinating it to the logic of connection, stability, and order. In this movement, passion—especially in its most

carnal and transgressive dimension—comes to occupy an ambiguous place: simultaneously present and suspect, desired and contained. We often seek to reconcile intensity and continuity, desire and stability—as if it were possible to fully sustain both in the same arrangement. But this reconciliation is not always achieved without conflict, which leads us to ask whether this difficulty is inherent to the soul or whether it reflects, in part, the legacy of cultural images that organize what we understand by love and intimacy.

Corbin (2024) analyzes the transformations in the perception of pleasure between the Enlightenment and the emergence of sexology at the end of the 19th century, highlighting the progressive separation between love and carnal desire. In Enlightenment thought, pleasure began to be understood in a more rational and scientific way, shifting from a purely moral judgment to a physiological approach. However, this redefinition did not eliminate the tension between idealized love and bodily desire. During the 18th century, philosophers and physicians began to consider pleasure as a legitimate bodily experience, but still permeated by moral contradictions. With the advent of Victorian morality and the consolidation of sexology, this ambivalence intensified, as pleasure was widely medicalized and carnal impulses began to be analyzed within a pathological logic, reinforcing a split between spiritualized love and physical desire (Corbin, 2024).

Instead of adopting a genealogical method, which is legitimate on the other hand, we must forget our beliefs, our convictions, our experience, and discard all concepts subsequently developed. [...]

Doctors, theologians, and pornographers shape desires, pleasures, and regrets; they provoke transgressions, determine attitudes toward others, divided between fusional dreams and instrumentalization (Corbin, 2024, pp. 11, 15, translation mine).

Love and pleasure have been shaped by social and scientific discourses that have influenced both behaviors and the formation of subjectivity. The myth of passionate love has remained alive in literature and popular culture, while pleasure has remained regulated by moral and medical norms. Despite the modern appreciation of individual desires, sexual freedom has come with new controls. Sexology, for example, in classifying behaviors and impulses, has not only studied desire but has also imposed limits on certain expressions of sexuality, labeling them as deviations or pathologies (Corbin, 2024).

It is in this scenario, marked simultaneously by the regulation and reinvention of ways of desiring, that new forms of experiencing sexuality emerge — especially in the context of relationships between gay men.

Sex apps geared towards gay men—such as *Grindr*, *Scruff*, and *Hornet*—emerged in the late 2000s, driven by the popularization of smartphones, and profoundly transformed the way men seek partners, prioritizing quick, geolocated encounters with less expectation of emotional connection (Ven, 2010). Before them, cruising bars already played a central role in same-sex sociability since the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the post-Stonewall context (a landmark in the fight for LGBTQIA+ rights), offering environments of anonymity, sexual freedom, and the construction of a unique gay urban culture (Underwear, 2023). In parallel, **gay saunas**, which gained strength in the second half of the 20th century, consolidated themselves as safe and private spaces for intimate interaction between men, functioning as an alternative to bars and the clandestine nature of encounters in public spaces (Smith, 2021).

Downing (2021) analyzes how, in the 1960s and 1970s, gay liberation movements mobilized sexual promiscuity not as a vice or deviation, but as a political and affirmative gesture. Public sex, multiple partners, and the break with monogamy were practices adopted as forms of resistance to the normative control of sexuality imposed by patriarchy, heterosexism, and Western Christian morality. In this context, sexuality became not only a field

of pleasure but also of insurgency: the gay body, marginalized and pathologized, was re-signified as a territory of freedom and subversion. This valorization of sex as an expression of identity left lasting marks, influencing the forms of relationship and subjectivation of many gay men, even after the collective trauma caused by the AIDS epidemic and its consequent behavioral retraction.

Gay identity, as its proponents claim, focuses more on a critique of the dehumanizing effects of heterosexism and patriarchy than on a rejection of heterosexuality (Downing, 2021, p. 11).

From my perspective, dating apps, *cruising bars*, and gay saunas cannot be understood merely as devices that facilitate encounters, but as expressions of a movement that challenges traditional norms about desire and intimacy. In these spaces, often marked by anonymity, it becomes possible to suspend—albeit temporarily—certain demands for identity, affection, and continuity that organize daily life. It is precisely this suspension that, in my view, opens space for the emergence of desires and fantasies that would hardly find a place in more normative contexts, allowing the erotic to manifest itself in less regulated and, at times, more intense ways.

We are currently experiencing an unprecedented moment in the freedom of sexual and emotional expression among gay men, marked by the growing acceptance of non-heteronormative forms of relationships—such as open relationships, polyamory, throuples, and multi-partner affective networks—as well as hybrid arrangements that challenge the boundaries between friendship, eroticism, and commitment. **What do these changes indicate to us as a movement of the soul?**

Perhaps the main contemporary challenge is recognizing the social conditioning we carry and making room for forms of affection and desire that transcend ingrained dualisms—such as passion versus stability, desire versus guilt, freedom versus norm. And if love, pleasure, and even legitimate forms of relationship have been historically constructed, it

becomes inevitable to also question what we understand by intimacy. **Would it be possible to think of it beyond the frameworks of romantic love—not as an absence of connection, but as another form of relationship with the other, with the body, and with one's own soul?**

Intimacy beyond love: sex as an imaginal experience of the soul

If, as we have seen, love and pleasure have been historically shaped by different discourses, then intimacy cannot be taken as something that exists in isolation, independent of the cultural forms that define it. It depends on the images that organize our relationship with the body, the other, and desire. When we reduce it to the model of romantic love—continuity, reciprocity, stability—we not only describe intimacy but also delimit what can be recognized as such. **Perhaps, then, the question is not whether intimacy exists outside of these forms, but what we fail to see when we insist on recognizing it only within them.**

In this sense, it becomes necessary to shift the investigation to another plane: not only that of cultural norms or social forms of relationship, but that of lived experience in a more symbolic dimension. It is at this point that the concept of *mundus imaginalis* becomes especially fruitful, allowing us to think of intimacy as an event that occurs in between—between body and soul, between fantasy and reality, between the self and the other—opening the possibility of recognizing in the sexual act itself a form of imaginal experience and, therefore, a legitimate way of encountering otherness.

The concept of *mundus imaginalis*, proposed by Henri Corbin (1972, *apud* Thomas, 2024, p. 85), emerges as an attempt to elucidate the complex nature of human experience, situated between the realm of the sensible and the realm of the intelligible. For the author, this intermediate dimension, called *mundus imaginalis*, is not merely a subjective creation of the mind, but a plane of reality with its own existence—ontologically real—endowed with its own laws, forms, and modes of manifestation.

“During the sexual act, what is real and unreal, inside and outside, present and absent intertwine ambiguously and intensely (Thomas, 2024, pp. 80-81).” The author invites us to reflect that these dichotomies do not cancel each other out, but coexist in a creative, almost peaceful tension. He analyzes the contributions of Jung, Hillman, and Corbin in this so-called “*space between*,” highlighting how these authors explore the collapse of the boundaries between subject and image, ego and soul, fantasy and reality (Thomas, 2024).

In this context, the author also uses the concept of *mundus imaginalis* to consider erotic practices, showing how they are not limited to the physical plane but unfold simultaneously in an imaginal dimension. The *mundus imaginalis* thus ceases to appear as a separate domain and comes to be understood as something intertwined with the erotic and psychic experience itself, dissolving the boundaries between the self and the other. The author describes, for example, that among practitioners of BDSM (erotic practices involving domination/submission, sadism/masochism) or other more intense forms of sexuality, both partners can access this dimension, experiencing a unique form of connection. In this sense, consciousness is not limited to the sensory perception of the material world nor to internal mental processes, but actively participates in this sphere of images and symbols that is actualized in the erotic encounter, in which the experience unfolds simultaneously as shared body, fantasy, and affect.

The experience of the passive can also illustrate an encounter with the *imaginal world*. The red marks and the naked flesh now exist in the reality of two worlds: the physical consequences of the whipping as a material fact and the archetypal world of the image in which the eternal fantasies of injury, sacrifice, submission, and initiation find their home. [...] The play is taking place in the space between the two dimensions of personal experience and the archetypal image (Thomas, 2024, p. 86).

Although this example emerges from specific practices, it offers us a broader key to understanding. In my view, the sexual act can be understood as a liminal experience, situated on the border between body and soul, between the material and the psychic. It is not merely a physical encounter, but an event charged with affects, fantasies, and archetypal images—a possible portal to the *mundus imaginalis*, that intermediate territory where symbols and meanings emerge with real power. However, we often fail to recognize this dimension as intimacy, perhaps because we reduce sex to its biological or relational aspects, ignoring its imaginal and transformative depth. For me, this type of intimacy is not necessarily linked to a romantic relationship, but rather to the simultaneous surrender of body and soul to the intensity of that moment.

If sexual encounter opens access to the *imaginal world*, then perhaps it is precisely in voluptuousness that the separation between body and soul begins to dissolve.

Body and soul in voluptuousness — the end of separation

At this point, the very experience of intimacy needs to be rethought beyond the division between body and soul.

Intimacy, as Hillman (2021) suggests, can be understood as an inherent belonging to the other—a deep and extensive familiarity in which elements are mixed, close, and inseparable. This condition is not achieved through a movement of distancing or conquest, but through the capacity to be fully in a situation, as it is. Instead of a freedom “from,” “to,” or “against,” it is a freedom “in”—an integral presence in the experience—that fixes the soul in the lived moment, as if the very call of freedom did not remove it from the situation, but rooted it even more deeply in it.

It is in this type of presence that the body reveals its imaginal dimension. “If you are in a state of profound submission and trust the person who is leading you, then all your senses become focused on them, which pulls you out of yourself and

places you in a state that goes beyond the ego mind (Thomas, 2024, p. 44).” It is in this intermediate space that the paradox of something that is and, at the same time, is not, is sustained—an experience that keeps the dimensions of the body and the imagination united.

Individuation is unique to each soul, but it finds one of its privileged places of realization in the realm of relationships. It is in the encounter with the other—in their different forms—that the psyche confronts what eludes it and, thus, transforms itself. In my view, this experience is not limited to romantic or stable forms of connection: the fantasy of completeness in the other can also manifest itself in erotic, imaginative, or transitory encounters, which participate, in their own way, in the soul’s process of self-realization.

Belonging to the other, in this sense, does not refer to a defined bond, but to an experience in which something mixes and becomes confused—as if, for a moment, the boundaries become less rigid. Being with the other implies a certain surrender to what is happening. And perhaps it is precisely in this suspension—of defenses, of roles, of identity—that the connection ceases to be merely physical and becomes also psychic. The body surrendered to pleasure can, therefore, configure a form of intimacy between souls—not sustained by a stable structure, but by the intensity and presence that open up in the encounter itself.

This affective intensity, however, is not free from ambivalence, pain, or illusion—as Hillman himself (2021) reminds us when problematizing the fantasy contained in the idea of love:

“I love you”, strike such deep chords. What an extraordinarily powerful fantasy is here-at work! How much longing is stirred! Oh, if only... I say fantasy with deliberate purpose, for we each know, from the facts of our lives, that Marriage is often dull, banal, and also a crux of agony; Intimacy brings us to stammers, complaints, and tears; and Freedom is one of humankind’s greatest fears (Hillman, 2021, p. 147).

Hillman (2010) further develops this perspective by stating that the soul cannot be identified with any literal presentation or form, as it is, by nature, a way of seeing—a perspective that sees through things. In this sense, the separation between body and soul only holds within a literalist conception of the body, understood as something enclosed within the skin and situated externally. However, when we begin to perceive the body as a psychic body—a field composed of complexes, symptoms, appetites, images, and intensities—the boundaries between body and soul dissolve. The physical reveals itself as psychic, and the psychic as profoundly embodied.

López-Pedraza (2002) also reminds us that this fusion between body and soul finds radical expression in the epiphany of Dionysus, whose mystical experience differs profoundly from the Western religious tradition. While Christian mystics recount experiences of enlightenment that emerge from a unilateral surrender to transcendence, the follower of Dionysus is seized by a sudden possession of the god—an intense emotional eruption that manifests in the body. This is not an elevation of the soul, but a descent of the divine into the flesh, in the form of ecstasy, delirium, pleasure, or pain. In this context, the body is not merely a receptacle of the soul, but its own living and vibrant language: a field of archetypal revelation.

[...] to remember that what we call orgies today are not orgies, but acts of devotion...and that being possessed by Dionysus is not a celebration, but a particular type of religious experience, the experience of entering into communion with God (Dodds, 1960, cited in López-Pedraza, 2002, p. 35, translation mine).

As analysts, it may be important to question—not only in our patients but also in ourselves—the cultural constructs that separate emotional intimacy from physical intimacy. Recognizing the affective power of casual sexual experiences can broaden our understanding of intimacy, not as something necessarily linked to stable forms of relationship, but as an experience that also occurs in the

encounter itself. In these situations, the erotic is not reduced to the physical plane: it can function as a way of accessing images, affects, and psychic dynamics that, due to their intensity, become susceptible to elaboration. Thus, even when brief or fleeting, the encounter can operate as a form of experience—and, in certain cases, as a possible path to self-knowledge and individuation.

But what happens when this experience ceases to occur through encounters with others and begins to be organized predominantly in the realm of images?

Pornography — Aphrodite's revenge after the end of meaning.

If intimacy can emerge in the imaginal realm of erotic encounter, it becomes inevitable to ask what happens when this realm is sustained without the other—that is, when the experience of desire becomes predominantly organized by the image. In this sense, pornography does not emerge as a separate phenomenon, but as an intensified expression—sometimes dissociated from a field of experience in which the image can gain depth—of the same forces that traverse human eroticism. Fantasy is activated, but not necessarily elaborated.

From an archetypal perspective, we could say, with Hillman (1995), that pornography expresses the return of Aphrodite to a world that no longer offers a worthy place for her presence. Exiled from the symbolic forms that previously organized desire, the erotic dimension of the psyche finds in erotic fantasy—and, in particular, in pornography—one of its main means of manifestation. It is not, therefore, a deviation, but an attempt at survival of the imaginal in a context that has lost its references of meaning.

In this scenario, pornography condenses fundamental tensions of contemporary subjectivity: between freedom and control, exposure and repression, excitement and emptiness. As Tricarico (2018) points out, modernity is marked by a progressive dissolution of the symbolic limits that structured psychic experience, accompanied by an inflation of egoic consciousness that seeks unlimited

expansion and dominion over all spheres of life. The result is not necessarily greater freedom, but often an emptying of meaning.

Giegerich (2004) radicalizes this diagnosis by suggesting that, with the collapse of old metaphysical frameworks, suffering ceases to find a place in a broader symbolic order and comes to be experienced as absurd. In this context, psychic experience approaches a state of ontological nakedness, in which it is no longer possible to resort to traditional narratives to sustain the meaning of existence. Pornography, in this context, seems to me less an isolated phenomenon—or even just a form of pleasure or transgression—and more an attempt to revive experience in a world that no longer offers so many symbolic mediations.

Thus, more than consumption, pornography is revelation. It exposes, without mediation, a soul that insists on the same scenes—fusion, abandonment, domination, surrender, violence—as if revolving around something it cannot transform. The problem is not the excess of desire, but its difficulty in sustaining itself symbolically: a desire that seeks intensity because it finds no other way to lodge itself in experience. In clinical practice, these accounts rarely appear as simple narratives of pleasure; they generally arrive accompanied by affects such as shame, guilt, or a certain disconnect with oneself.

This does not mean, however, that we should adopt a moralizing logic. Pornography tends to evoke polarized responses—between condemnation and celebration—that contribute little to its understanding. An imaginal approach requires suspending this polarization and listening to what these images express, even when they do so in a raw, fragmented, or excessive way.

From a clinical point of view, this implies a change of attitude. Pornography, in this sense, does not ask for correction, but for interpretation: it presents itself as an imaginal organization of desire. Pornographic images, however disconcerting they may be, carry psychic contents that demand symbolic recognition.

The analyst's role, therefore, is not to purify or normalize, but to sustain the tension between the void of meaning and the imaginal power that

still insists on manifesting itself. Pornography, in this sense, can be understood as a form through which the soul continues to express itself in a context where collective ways of living and giving meaning to desire no longer hold up in the same way (such as relationship models, narratives about love, rituals of encounter, or shared ways of imagining the erotic).

It is also from this perspective that the issue of censorship needs to be reconsidered (Hillman, 1995). If images are instinctive expressions of the psyche, repressing them is equivalent, to a certain extent, to repressing vitality itself. Hillman's (1995) position is clear in rejecting censorship and defending the right to fantasy as a fundamental dimension of human life. More than eliminating pornography, it is about understanding it—recognizing what insists on expressing itself within it, even in impoverished conditions. In this sense, pornography is not only a symptom of decadence, but also a sign of resistance—the insistence of Eros in a world that no longer knows how to accommodate it.

Just as pornography can be seen as a contemporary figure of Eros, the dizzying growth of *cruising bars*, dating apps, and gay saunas may indicate not only practices, but images that repeat themselves—ways in which desire finds form and insists on expressing itself. **Perhaps, then, the question is not only where desire expresses itself, but which images it repeats—and what it insists on returning through them.**

And when freedom becomes repetition — or the insistence of desire

If, in the realm of desire, we are often led to associate freedom with expansion, with a multiplicity of experiences and with the absence of limits, perhaps it is necessary to slow down this assumption and turn to the images of desire, asking what they say—or enact—about the soul.

In the context of contemporary gay experience, this association between freedom and excess is often captured by moral discourses that label certain practices as promiscuity, superficiality,

or an escape from connection. But perhaps it is necessary to start from experience: in certain situations—such as in the face of loneliness—sexual desire can emerge forcefully, not as a decision, but as a response. **Is this an escape from melancholy, or one of the ways in which the soul tries not to remain alone?**

This loneliness, however, cannot be understood merely as an individual or contingent experience, but as something that is also inscribed within broader conditions. In many gay men, it is inscribed within a historical and cultural framework in which forms of connection, belonging, and affective continuity are not necessarily organized according to the models consecrated by the heteronormative matrix of the traditional family. This does not imply an absence of bonds, but the emergence of other modes of encounter, often more fleeting, discontinuous, or intensive. In my view, these casual sexual encounters may appear not only as a search for pleasure, but as one of the possible modes of circulation of desire and contact with the other—even without settling into lasting forms. It is, therefore, less about compensation than about expression: movements through which desire is oriented, repeated, and reinvented.

This perspective resonates with Hillman's proposition (2010, p. 131 translation mine), according to which “every soul, sooner or later, will reveal illusions and depressions, overvalued ideas, manic flights and rages, anxieties, compulsions and perversions.” Far from being mere deviations, such manifestations can be understood as constitutive expressions of psychic singularity—forms in which the soul shows itself, including where we tend to pathologize.

It is within this context that the growth of spaces such as *cruising bars*, dating apps, and gay saunas can be understood as the emergence of a unique imaginal field, in which desire is organized by recurring and persistent images. Thus, the notion of *pothos*—desire directed towards the absent, the unattainable—becomes especially relevant. This is a desire that is not resolved by the possession of the object and that, therefore, returns. Not as an error, but as a structure. Here, “structure” indicates that

this return of desire is not accidental, but a specific mode of functioning of the psyche—which can be especially mobilized by the experience of solitude, for example, when being alone intensifies the longing for encounter.

If we suspend the moralizing lenses that have historically organized sexuality—especially in relation to dissident experiences—it becomes possible to recognize that this repetition does not differ, in its logic, from other socially legitimized forms of insistence: incessant work, the continuous pursuit of productivity, excessive care for others, hyper-exposure on social media, and the permanent search for validation. In all these cases, it is a matter of distinct ways of responding to the same condition: the constitutive openness of human experience, which can never be completely filled.

From a clinical point of view, this requires a transformation in listening. Repetition cannot be taken merely as something to be corrected, but as language—a form through which the soul insists on expressing itself. This implies shifting the gaze: it is not about normalizing, containing, or moralizing these experiences, but about sustaining the tension they carry, recognizing in them not only their impasses, but also their imaginal potential. Even where only excess is seen, there may be a form of Eros that has not yet found its place—and which, therefore, returns.

If this hypothesis is taken seriously, then the clinic cannot remain the same.

Analytical Work: the place of Dionysus in desire and in clinical practice

If the clinical practice cannot remain the same in the face of the insistence of desire, then the first movement must be directed at the analyst himself. “As a psychotherapist, my immediate concern is to reflect on my own titanism, which can appear in preconceived theories, missionary attitudes, techniques, manipulative fantasies, cunning strategies, and the destructiveness so common to human nature (López-Pedraza, 2002, p. 16, translation mine).”

López-Pedraza (2002) observes that many psychologists trained in the Jungian tradition have inherited Protestant and Jewish cultural values that tend to repress the Dionysian aspect of the psyche. This inheritance hinders the listening to erotic desire—especially when it is not organized around romantic love. Dionysus, as a psychic principle, manifests itself in intense and bodily experiences that escape morality and reason and, therefore, often find no place in the clinic, whose training remains largely oriented by conceptual and normative demands.

In practice, this implies concrete changes in listening. If this return of desire is not a mistake, but a structure, then, when faced with a patient who reports repetitive sexual encounters, the question is not guided by the need to interrupt the pattern, but by what, in this repetition, insists on expressing itself (a way of dealing with loneliness, an attempt at affective regulation, a search for bodily recognition, or even a way of keeping desire alive in the face of emptiness).

When desire seems absent, listening also shifts: it's not just about restoring functionality or relational adequacy, but about asking where Eros has retreated to—and under what conditions it might reappear (whether there has been withdrawal in the face of experiences of pain or frustration, an affective emptiness, a dissociation from the body, or a loss of investment in relationships). As Santana (2017) suggests, both excess and absence of desire can be linked to experiences of isolation, loss of vitality, or disconnection from the body.

Rather than explaining or correcting these manifestations, it is about approaching them as images of desire, which demand not an immediate response, but a way of looking. In this sense, listening does not aim to correct desire, but to psychologize it—allowing it to return to the soul as a reflection upon itself. Thus, both excess and absence of desire can be listened to not only as dysfunctions or necessary adjustments, but as ways in which the psyche attempts to orient itself, elaborate, and find form, even when it does so in a repetitive, fragmented, or silent manner.

Conclusion

Throughout this journey, it became possible to shift the initial question—whether or not there is intimacy in sex without love—to a broader field: that of the images that organize our experience of desire. What was revealed was not the absence of intimacy, but the plurality of its forms. When understood as an imaginal experience, intimacy ceases to depend exclusively on continuous affective bonds and comes to be recognized as an event that can emerge in the erotic act itself—even when fleeting, anonymous, or repetitive. In this sense, both casual encounters and pornography or the repetition of desire need not be reduced to signs of psychic impoverishment, but can be heard as expressions of the soul that insist on finding form, even in a world that often lacks symbolic support.

This shift in perspective also implies a transformation in clinical practice. Instead of correcting, normalizing, or interpreting desire based on pre-existing models, analytical work now demands a listening capable of sustaining the paradox between intensity and emptiness, between repetition and search, between body and soul. Perhaps, then, the question is no longer how to reconcile sex and love, but how to recognize, in its multiple manifestations, the language proper to Eros—including where it appears fragmented, excessive, or disconcerting. If there is something that runs through all these forms, it is not the loss of meaning, but the soul's insistence on continuing to speak—even when we no longer know, clearly, how to listen to it. ■

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