

# Beauty and Possession. Reversible Eros

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The paper aims at connecting the concepts of beauty and possession, traditionally coupled with the male gaze, with eros as felt by women, by homosexuals, and by those who do not identify with a defined gender (transgender, intersexual, and other non-binary people). First, I will outline the concepts of beauty and possession according to “male thinking”, well formulated by Freud, Plato, Levinas, and Sartre. I will show that, in Western tradition, beauty is seen from a masculine perspective, as a set of charms arousing the subject and stimulating his will to possess. The erotic relationship is consequently considered in a dualistic way: the subject is masculine and active, and desires his “object”, who can be either a man or a woman. However, the mentioned authors also highlight a crucial point: desire is doomed to be unfulfilled, because the transcendence of the other person is ungraspable. I will argue that, despite the latter point, such authors bring forward a reductionist view of eros and relationships between genders. I will suggest a solution to this reductionism, taking inspiration from the concepts of gender performativity, theorized by Butler, and queer orientation, developed by Ahmed. I will also propose to rely on Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the flesh, especially as it concerns its features of reversibility and divergence, in order to give account of every gender identity, including non-binary ones. The concepts of beauty and possession, together with the impossibility to grasp the transcendence of the other person, will not be rejected, but reconfigured through a different way of conceiving subjectivity.

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“The lover of beautiful things has a desire; what does he desire?”

“That they become his own”.

Plato, *Symp.* 204d

## I. The Ambiguity of Beauty

The link between beauty and possession in Western philosophy dates back to Ancient Greece. In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates confutes Agathon's idea that Eros is a god full of qualities, since the divine force which leads us to desire is nourished by an emptiness: eros is the desire to own the beautiful and to own it forever (*Symp.* 205d-206a). If those who desire do not own anything, or own something transiently, there will be a continuous dynamism leading them towards the desired. Traditionally, this tension implies a continuous quest for self-fulfillment which, from the body of the beloved, refers to what is beyond – Plato's Form of the Good, Freud's ego ideal, Levinas' Infinity, or Sartrean freedom. This attempt of encompassing transcendence into immanence is meant to be primarily masculine. It is the gaze of the male which, in all these authors, sexualizes the object of desire and aims to possession: in Plato the object is the body and the soul of the young beloved, in Levinas the woman as a *sui generis* otherness, in Freud the feminine body, in Sartre the flesh as pure facticity. May it be a woman or an ephobic man, the feminine is an object, not a subject of desire: it wants only to be desired and possessed. Moreover, the historical and cultural context surrounding the abovementioned authors leads them towards gender binarism: the feminine is considered as the “other” of the masculine, whereas transgender, intersexual, or other non-binary bodies are nearly ignored.

For this reason, there is a need for a new phenomenology of desire. I suggest that it could start from Judith Butler's theory of gender, Sarah Ahmed's queer orientation, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of flesh. I will adopt the concepts of gender fluidity, ambiguity, and reversibility, in order to reconfigure the link between beauty and possession. I will show that the search for beauty in the other person is a feature of the erotic phenomenon, however it is not limited to a one-way tendency from male to female, and is always destined to fail and rekindle itself.

## II. Dualism of Bodies

Among the authors of what I call here “male thinking”, I will consider Plato, Sigmund Freud, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Emmanuel Levinas. They are part of a long-time tradition, which conceives beauty as attractiveness. According to Freud, beauty is a source of excitement: «The love of beauty seems a perfect example of an impulse inhibited in its aim. ‘Beauty’ and ‘attraction’ are originally attributes of the sexual object» (Freud 1961, 83). Love of beauty, which is usually a form of sublimation in artistic activity and contemplation, originally comes from the libido, the sexual drive of the whole organic life. Saying that every kind of beauty originates from libido may be criticized as reductionist, but Freud presents us with an undeniable truth: the beauty we see in the other person is the source of our attraction for them. Being attracted by beauty does not always involve

physical arousing, since it may stimulate also mental or affective processes, yet it necessarily implies “visibility”.

In his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud states: «Visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused; indeed natural selection counts upon the accessibility of this pathway [...] when it encourages the development of beauty in the sexual object» (Freud 1953, 156). Our libido is often excited by visual stimuli: if beauty is, originally speaking, a source of attraction, then these stimuli will be beautiful and arouse sexual desire. The origins of beauty should be retraced to an evolutive necessity, to the need of copulating and generating children. This is the reason why the sexual encounter occurs. Obviously, excitement is not accompanied by the awareness of this purpose: the two individuals only know that they want to gain pleasure the one from the other.

Beauty stimulates excitement and desire, and possession is its fulfillment. It may not only imply physical enjoyment, but even an emotional grasp of the other person’s body, as it happens in a specific psychical process: the projection of the ego ideal (Freud 1957, 88 ff.). The latter is a model of perfection of our own ego as grownup healthy subjects. Being in a sentimental attachment means projecting the ego ideal out of ourself, towards our partner: the beauty of the other person is seen as a paradigm of perfection. This process, which has a narcissistic origin, explains the link between beauty and possession (Ferro 2021, 181-183). I strive for the beauty of the other, since I strive for my wholeness. Erotic tendency to beauty coincides with the tendency to possess the other person, which is also the tendency to maintain one’s ideal of totality and perfection. Sexual intercourse is just a confirmation of this possession through physical pleasure.

However, Freud describes the attraction to beauty only from a masculine perspective: beauty originally belongs to the female naked body (Musatti 1976, 177-178; Ferrari 2014, 75-80), which excites the phallus and pushes men to satisfy their needs through a sexual intercourse or in masturbatory phantasies. The sight of a beautiful body arouses activity, which Freud usually ascribes to men, whereas women are considered to be more passive. It should be recognized a certain degree of complexity in his position: active and passive tendencies shall not be univocally assigned to a specific gender, moreover homosexuality and bisexuality are taken into account and not simply dismissed as deviant. However, Freudian view is not completely free from stereotypes belonging to a dimorphic view of sexuality. He states that “masculine” is generally used as a synonymous of “active” and “feminine” of “passive” (Freud 1953, 219). Passive characters are also ascribed to some male homosexuals whose virile functions are compromised and female homosexuals tend to be active, masculine, and look for femininity in their sexual objects (Freud 1953, 144-145).

Whereas Freud’s perspective is mainly organicist, Plato and Levinas point out also the spiritual components of eroticism. Plato writes in the *Symposium*:

“In a word, then, love is wanting to possess the good forever.”

“That’s very true,” I said.

“This, then, is the object of love,” she said. “Now, how do lovers pursue it? [...] Well, I’ll tell you,” she said. “It is giving birth in beauty, whether in body or in soul. [...]

reproduction goes on forever; it is what mortals have in place of immortality. A lover must desire immortality along with the good, if [...] Love wants to possess the good forever." (*Symp.* 206a-207a; Plato 2006, 66-67)

In this talk between Socrates and Diotima, beauty is the aim of erotic love, since what is beautiful is also what is good: the beautiful is the appearance of the good. Being good does not exactly coincide with being beautiful, since the meaning of good is more stratified and refers not only to the visible, but even to the invisible dimension. Anyway, the lover desires the good and the desired good is the beautiful. The lover wants to possess the beautiful, yet taking pleasure from the other person is not enough: generation must follow. Love is the desire to possess beauty, giving birth to something else. Fecundity realizes possession, but, at the very moment of birth, what is born is detached from me. Possession is also separation, having something that will not be in my hands anymore: I will be led out of myself forever, in another existence.

A similar view is shared by Levinas, who writes about this issue in several works. In *Totality and Infinity*, he displays a phenomenology of eros, starting with the need of subjectivity to be at home and ending with the desire for transcendence. The I is not satisfied by an autarchic life, where his needs are fulfilled by natural elements, but feels the tendency to meet human otherness. The first kind of alterity he phenomenologically encounters is the Feminine.

The Beloved, at once graspable but intact in her nudity, beyond object and face and thus beyond the existent, abides in virginity. The feminine essentially violable and inviolable, the "Eternal Feminine," is the virgin or an incessant recommencement of virginity, the untouchable in the very contact of virtuosity, future in the present. (Levinas 1969, 258-259)

Beauty has feminine characteristics, previously described in *Time and the Other* (Levinas 1987, 85-88), and the erotic encounter occurs between a man and a woman. The latter is the opposite of the former: she is delicate, vulnerable, frail, «the "pale blush" of the nymphs in the *Afternoon of a Faun*» (Levinas 1969, 256). Unlike Plato, attraction does not aim to possession, since erotic desire is neither the search for a fusion, nor the exercise of power. In Lingis' words, «sensitivity is sensual and libidinal inasmuch as it is affected not with a nutritive element to be assimilated, but with a plenitude over and beyond any notion or possibility of assimilation, stricken by contact with alterity» (Lingis 1985, 73). Eros is the recognition of the Other's transcendence and of the radical difference between the sexes. Albeit their disagreement about the specific object of love, Plato and Levinas agree on a point: every attempt to grasp, possess, and know the love object is doomed to failure. The tendency to the beautiful and the good must necessarily turn to fecundity (Levinas 1969, 267; 1987, 90-91). For Levinas giving birth to artworks, concepts, or good actions is not enough: they are somehow my property, whereas fathering a child means to relate to someone who is not entirely mine, who is part of me but also a different individual.

Both Plato and Levinas conceive eros as a desire for transcendence, which is stimulated by the beauty of its object. Plato ascribes this process to the male homoerotic relationship (Cantarella 2002, chap. 2), where the

lover is older, wiser, and more experienced than the beloved, who is young, beautiful, and has not given birth to truth yet. The lover is stimulated by a physical desire towards the beloved, but also by a higher aim, which is the grasp of the Forms (*Symp.* 209b-c; *Phaedrus* 251a ff.). However, this purpose cannot be obtained during mortal life and the lover must search for immortality through philosophical generation, which gives full satisfaction after death. Plato is skeptical towards heterosexual relationship, which is aimed only at physical pleasure and generation of carnal children (*Symp.* 208e), whereas Levinas states that eros takes place only through the encounter of the opposite sexes and the generation of a mortal offspring. In both cases, the tendency to possess the other person is doomed to non-realization: it is a dynamic process leading the lover to search for transcendence throughout his entire life (Ferro 2016, 184-185). Ambiguity between possession and transcendence may be considered a key insight of both authors, and recognized as an important feature of the erotic phenomenon. However, these authors seem to consider eros only from a masculine point of view.

Plato's highly misogynous context, fifth-century Athens, makes it difficult to understand the feminine point of view. In Aristophanes' discourse, women who relate to men just tend to carnal pleasures, whereas lesbian desire is barely mentioned (*Symp.* 191d-e). Even if, in the *Republic* (*Resp.* 451d ff.), he seems closer to our mentality (roles and functions within the perfect State are fairly attributed to men and women), full equality between genders does not belong to his thought. In the *Timaeus*, Plato refers to the existence of women as a more unfortunate one (*Tim.* 90e ff.) and, in the *Phaedrus*, only male homosexual love is mentioned. Moreover, the latter takes place through a rigid division of roles: the lover is older, wiser, and virile, whereas the beloved is younger, eager to learn, and feminine, following the Athenian conventions of the time. Even if age limits in Plato are different [1] and both partners feel erotic desire, roles are clearly defined: the lover is active, the beloved is passive, the former consciously feels desire, the latter enjoys the company of the former, without fully understanding what happens (*Phaedrus* 251a ff.). On the other hand, Levinas lives in a different social and historical context, and assumes a specific phenomenological perspective: he is a heterosexual male, who shares his point of view on sexuality. However, the problem is that he universalizes his perspective, thus opening the way to feminist criticism (Beauvoir 2011, 38; Irigaray 1991).

For what concerns Sartre, he deserves credit for having deeply discussed the relation between eros and possession. In *Being and Nothingness*, he writes that «desire is the desire to appropriate a body as this appropriation reveals to me my body as a flesh. But this body which I wish to appropriate, I wish to appropriate as *flesh*. [...] The Other's body is originally a body in situation; flesh, on the contrary, appears as the *pure contingency of presence*» (Sartre 1992, 506). Eros is desire for possession, for reducing the transcendence of the Other, who is a body in situation, to flesh, to the «pure contingency of presence». I want the Other's body because I want to establish my transcendence over it, making it a pure object of pleasure, which has to be taken and enjoyed. In order to turn the Other's body into flesh, I need to shape it, to caress it (Sartre 1992, 506-507). Then,

[1] In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates should be almost sixty and *Phaedrus* forty years old, whereas, in the *Symposium*, Agathon should be thirty and Pausanias no more than forty (Switzer 1994, 33; Brisson 2007, 394).

desire is naturally continued not by caresses but by acts of taking and of penetration. The caress has for its goal to impregnate the Other's body with consciousness and freedom. Now it is necessary to take this saturated body, to seize it, to enter into it. But by the very fact that I now attempt to seize the Other's body, to pull it toward me, to grab hold of it, to bite it, my own body ceases to be flesh and becomes again the synthetic instrument *which I am*. And by the same token the *Other* ceases to be an incarnation. (Sartre 1992, 516)

When the caresses saturate the Other's body with consciousness and freedom, the act of penetration is aimed to fulfill my desire of possessing transcendence. However, penetration is just an instrumental act: sexual organs are passive in coitus, it is «the whole body which advances and withdraws, which *carries sex forward or withdraws it*» (Sartre 1992, 515). What should be an act of freedom, possession, and domination is just an expression of contingency. Desire is doomed to failure, since the transcendence of the Other gets out of hand; physical pleasure cannot assert my freedom over the Other's one.

The bond between desire and possession is well emphasized by Sartre, whereas beauty has different features: it is not a source of attraction, but «an ideal state of the world, correlative with an ideal realization of the for-itself» (Sartre 1992, 268). Plato, Freud, and Levinas write about pure beauty, as the most visible Idea (Plato), the goal of sublimation (Freud), the expression of the Feminine plenitude (Levinas), though they also believe in sensible beauties. Sartre does not link desire to beauty, but only to the most carnal features of the body, whereas beauty is seen as purely ideal, as a source of redemption. Albeit this difference, Sartre aligns with the abovementioned authors, since he defines eros as a desire for possessing transcendence, a desire which will never be satisfied and will rekindle itself continuously.

For what concerns homosexuality, Sartre shares a non-judgmental attitude, but his view is dimorphic, as his narrative of Saint Genet demonstrates (Sartre 1963, 79-80): there are a "butch" and a "femme" in lesbian desire, just as a "top" and a "bottom" in gay relations. Moreover, he considers the will to possess the other as focused on the erectile organ, the penis of the man or the clitoris of the woman (Sartre 1992, 515). Anyone who knows female sexuality is aware that the use of the clitoris sometimes recalls the penis' one, but is not employed to penetrate orifices. Unfortunately, the specificity of female sexuality gets lost.

Plato, Freud, Sartre, and Levinas make a careful analysis of the erotic phenomenon, considering the latter as a desire for the other person, who is considered as attractive. Attraction refers to beauty (except for Sartre) and longing for beauty means longing for an eternal possession of it, but possession is doomed to failure: the transcendence of the other person gets out of hand. This principle could be applied to every gender identity and sexual orientation, but the mentioned authors use a male and dimorphic point of view, which links desire to activity and masculinity, whereas the feminine is seen as delicate and passive, an object and not a subject of desire. As a consequence, when feminine men or women feel desire, they do not *want* a masculine man or woman, but *to be wanted* by them. According to my position, this is a reductionist view of eros and relationships between genders, which has also oppressive effects



(Sheets-Johnstone 2000, 183) and needs to be reconfigured.

### III. Fluidity of Bodies

The problem with Plato, Freud, Sartre, and Levinas is that they start from a masculine point of view and adopt a dimorphic perspective. The woman is seen as the “other” of the man, homosexuality and bisexuality perform standard roles, and non-binary identities are almost ignored: transgender, agender, bigender, and genderfluid [2] people are not mentioned, whereas intersexuality is seen as a natural anomaly. It must be recognized that the awareness of queer identities is quite recent, closer to us than the thought of the mentioned authors. However, it is now necessary to overcome gender dimorphism and to adopt a more complex and fluid thought on sexuality.

[2] By “transgender” I mean people who feel themselves in transition between the male and the female gender, not necessarily by means of surgery; by “agender”, “bigender”, and “genderfluid” I respectively mean people who do not identify as either male or female, perceive a double gender identity, oscillate between the two genders.

Male thinking has been criticized by feminists. Among them, Simone de Beauvoir widely discusses the matter, emphasizing the violence of patriarchy, the difficulties for women to express their sexuality and to be active in their role [3]. Becoming a subject of pleasure, not only an object, is particularly complex for them, especially for political and cultural reasons. Beauvoir also deserves credit for dedicating a whole chapter of *The Second Sex* to lesbianism and for distinguishing lesbians from viragos or intersexuals (Beauvoir 2011, 479-480), thus opening to a multi-faceted view of female and queer sexuality. Even Luce Irigaray’s works are important for what concerns criticism of male thinking (Irigaray 1985), or for the appeal to a new symbolic order of the feminine, bond to the image of mucosity (Irigaray 1991, 163). However, Irigaray’s perspective aims to difference feminism, which fights against the dominance of the male and affirms the specificity of feminine thought, without taking into account non-binary identities. For this reason, I have chosen to focus on Butler and Ahmed, who express queer thinking, and on the concept of flesh in Merleau-Ponty’s later thought, which fits a fluid concept of the sexed body.

[3] About the first approach to heterosexual coitus, de Beauvoir writes: «if she is docile, languid, or removed, she satisfies neither her partner nor herself. She must participate actively in an adventure that neither her virgin body nor her consciousness – laden with taboos, prohibitions, prejudices, and exigencies – desires positively» (Beauvoir 2011, 449).

First, it should be asked why the variety of human sexuality is reduced to a binary culture. According to Butler, gender is nothing but a «fictive foundation [...] constitutive of the juridical structure of classical liberalism» (Butler 1990, 3): it comes from the necessities of political and economic power and merges with other factors (ethnic, class, sexual, etc.), thus it is inseparable from cultural intersections (Herdt 1996). Butler reveals the mystification behind the concept of gender, which is performative:

*gender* is not a noun, but neither a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. (Butler 1990, 24-25)

Essentialism is the philosophical version of such an idea, which standardizes some biological attributes and unifies them with practical rules: gender

is not a bundle of supposed qualities, but a performative concept, which shapes and directs identity towards a certain path. Butler openly takes inspiration from Freud (Hird 2002; Hansell 2011), who conceives the educative, social, and cultural context as essential for growth and development. Moreover, children's sexuality is considered as "perverse" and "polymorphous", and its original orientation as bisexual (Freud 1953); finally, the stability of gender identity comes after a process of mourning and melancholia (Butler 1995). However, Butler is detached from Freud because of his theorization of binarism as a natural disposition, which hypostatizes genders and conceives both bisexuality and homosexuality as forms of heterosexuality. [4]

Being a man or a woman does not refer to purely biological features, but to a certain kind of behavior, which often has nothing to share with biology. Why, for instance, a male should be less inclined to cry than a female? Does a penis or a vagina have anything to do with that? The assumption "boys don't cry" is a social and political construction, based on the principle that men are stronger and better rulers than women. Such a framework brings male individuals, preferably heterosexual or active homosexuals, to think, even unconsciously, that *their* point of view is *the* point of view, not one among the others. For this reason, assuming a performative theory of gender helps us understand why so many authors see the feminine, along with other identities, as the Other of the male I. [5]

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler hints at an «identificatory fluidity» (Butler 1993, 100), which may be found especially in Lacan. [6] However, in order to understand what fluidity means from an experiential point of view, I will turn to phenomenology. The latter takes account of how we *structure* our own identities, whereas Butler, just as other poststructuralist authors, mainly focuses on how identities *are structured* (Murphy 2009, 497-500). Ahmed, in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), tries such an operation, taking inspiration from Merleau-Ponty and borrowing his idea of orientation.

In order to clarify what Merleau-Ponty and Ahmed mean, I will refer to Husserl first. He writes that there is a difference between the body as *Körper* and as *Leib*: the former is objective and analyzed by sciences, the latter is subjective and «given as the constant bearer of the center of orientation» (Husserl 1989, § 41, 70), the zero-point (*Nullpunkt*) of orientation itself. It means that our experience starts from our body and extends in space and time. The living body is also the source of our meaning bestowal (*Sinngebung*), through which conscience gives sense to our experience. Merleau-Ponty, inspired by Husserl, writes that «I am my body» (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 151), which is my point of view on the world. It should not be intended solipsistically, but as an intersection of experiences (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxxiv), as a cultural world constituted by relations: my approach to objects, world, and others is due to an intersubjective perspective.

Ahmed takes inspiration from the centrality of the body, the intersection of human experiences, and the idea of orientation. She states that Merleau-Ponty's thought was essential to understand her own life and experience as a lesbian, as someone who does not "think straight" and

[4] According to Freud, the masculine part of us is directed towards the mother (and women in general), whereas our feminine part desires the father (and men); the compresence of both homosexuality and heterosexuality, required by authentic bisexuality, is missing. The same may be said for the unnaturalness of gender identity (Butler 1990, 61).

[5] The fact that a woman feels "out of herself" is also highlighted by Sara Heinämaa (2003, 24).

[6] Butler has more recently dealt with transgender identities by confronting Lacan (Butler 2009).



“live straight” (Ahmed 2006, 19-21). A phenomenological discourse on orientation allowed her to understand her experience as something “deviant” from the usual heterosexual path, as a direction pointed by desire.

Deviation leaves its own marks on the ground, which can even help generate alternative lines, which cross the ground in unexpected ways. Such lines are indeed traces of desire; where people have taken different routes to get to this point or to that point. It is certainly desire that helps generate a lesbian landscape, a ground that is shaped by the paths that we follow in deviating from the straight line. And yet, becoming a lesbian still remains a difficult line to follow. [...] Inhabiting a body that is not extended by the skin of the social means the world acquires a new shape and makes new impressions. (Ahmed 2006, 20)

Ahmed is aware of the difficulties of deviating from the straight line of thinking, of inhabiting a world which is not “made for her”. She points out the importance of the surrounding context and of the social and political configuration, taking inspiration from Butler and other feminist authors. Another key point is the idea of desire, of this propulsive force directed towards other women, which shapes «a lesbian landscape», a different way to live and interact. Even the mention of «the skin of the social» is of particular interest here, since Ahmed assumes the existence of a social body interacting with individual ones. However, an issue remains undiscussed here. Being a lesbian means identifying as a woman, not necessarily in a conventional sense, but as a woman who likes women, thus leaving aside non-binary identities.

Having already accepted Butler’s performative theory and her notion of fluidity, I will reshape them according to a phenomenological framework, dated to Merleau-Ponty’s later works. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, he already develops the concept of ambiguity (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 87; Sapontzis 1978; Weiss 2008, 140-141), according to which the terms of a relation are not clearly distinguished, as shown by the difference between *Leib* and *Körper*. Husserl shows, in his famous example of the touching hands, that both feel themselves as alternately touching and being touched (Husserl 1960, § 44, 97), since there is no clear distinction between the two: the *Leib* is turned into *Körper* and vice versa. The same could be said for the relation between the body and the psyche, the subject and the object (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 517): their boundaries are blurred. This also applies to sexuality, which is conceived as an «ambiguous atmosphere» (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 172) involved in our approach to our own existence and to other sexed bodies. It must be recognized that Merleau-Ponty refers to Freud and Sartre, when he mentions the libido, conceives the bond between sexuality and existence, and defines sexuality as «dramatic» and «dialectic» (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 171-174).

Albeit he takes inspiration from two figures of male thinking, in his later thought he radicalizes his idea of ambiguity and develops the concept of flesh, through which he translates the word *Leib*. The flesh should not be intended only in a subjective sense, but even in an objective one: it is not just my own body, but the body of the world. The flesh is a chiasm, which implies an entanglement between two polarities, namely subject and object, desiring and being desired, a «hiatus between my right hand touched and my right hand touching» (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 148). The two

terms are not separated: they revert one into the other, since they are parts of the same element, of a shared body. It is a circular dialectic of Schellingean origin (Vanzago 2012, 194-195), where polarization is horizontal and dynamic. Applying the reversibility of flesh to erotic desire means that wanting to possess someone implies also wanting to be possessed: a heterosexual or an active homosexual man wants not only to penetrate a woman or another man with his own penis, but also that his own penis is desired by the man or the woman he wants. If the man or the woman he likes does not want him, sexual intercourse is forceful. Against the diffusion of rape culture, it is necessary to insist on the importance of the mentioned reciprocity. A patriarchal and heterosexist binarism is inherently violent, and needs to be fought with every instrument. To highlight reciprocity means also that a heterosexual woman and a passive homosexual man do not only want to be possessed, but even to possess the phallus of the man they like. In a lesbian relationship penetration does not occur with a penis, but with fingers or other objects, but the argument is exactly the same. Even non-penetrative sex implies the same criterion: there is always an organ, a part of the body, or the whole body of the other person which is, at the same time, subject and object of desire.

Up here this reasoning has been applied to the two known genders and to different sexual orientations. For what concerns transgender, intersexual, and other non-binary identities, I need to specify something else. Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh is constitutively non-binary. It is a fluid and common element, «in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle» (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 139). It is an extended first person, which is neither the individual subject, nor the third person assumed by scientists, it is a “general thing”, where egos are connected among them and to other living beings. Applying this concept to bodies in transition means that they are not a simple sum of man and woman, but singular fluid entities, where manly and womanly features revert one into the other, merge and give birth to a unique being. Intersexual bodies present a similar situation from birth, bigender individuals feel this merging by individuating and accepting both polarities, agender people feel that reversibility cannot be defined in one way or another, whereas genderfluid individuals are particularly focused on the dynamism of their flesh. This would require a more deepened research, which I intend to conduct thereafter.

The idea of flesh helps us deal with non-binary identities and may be applied to erotic desire. People who like intersexual, transgender, and other non-binary bodies like exactly their absence of dimorphism: they are beautiful for the dynamic presence of various features which do not characterize men and women only. The desire for a non-binary person is not for a “mutilated male” or a “reinforced female”, but for the specificity of the body of that person, for its being neither and, at the same time, both male and female. The desire for possessing and being possessed, which has been discussed for sexual orientations, may be applied also to non-binary identities.

It may be objected that the concept of flesh merges everything in an undefined entity, losing the specificity of singular bodies. This would be true, if Merleau-Ponty had not developed the idea of divergence, *écart* (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 272), which, in my interpretation, should be considered in couple with reversibility. Divergence means that, even if the

two polarities constituting the circular dialectic of flesh revert one into the other, they maintain an irreducible difference, as it happens with the lines of the  $\chi$  (or  $x$ ) of the chiasm: they meet in one point, but follow opposite directions. The chiasm contains a duplicity which will never be reduced to a single line, it is a “separation in relation”. In this respect, sexuality is considered as the expression of a body which is not clearly separated from the psyche, other individuals, and the surrounding world, but maintains a certain specificity, which is not static and rigid, but dynamic and fluid.

#### IV. Reversible Eros

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology offers some important key concepts to approach eros. Taking inspiration from the latter and integrating it with Butler's gender performativity and Ahmed's queer orientation, the relation between the beauty of the erotic object and the desire for possession becomes wider and richer. In heterosexual, homosexual, and non-binary eros, beauty and possession should be seen in an ambiguous and reversible way. In opposite-sex relations, both men and women are subject to sexual desire, arousal, and longing for possession. In same-sex relationships, desire is not directed to a merely biological difference, but to the specificities of the other's body in their own diversity. Transgender, intersexual, or other non-binary bodies are objects of desire, because their identities do not mirror a specific gender and their sexual organs constitute an ambiguous synthesis.

If the concepts of orientation and gender identity may be reshaped thanks to feminist and queer research, the dynamic nature of eroticism was already understood by Plato, Freud, Sartre, and Levinas. They were right to consider eros as a longing for transcendence, the one of the other person we desperately want to possess. Beauty is a model, an ideal of perfection which we project into the other, but it is actually *our* perfection we are looking for: Freud's ego ideal, Plato's Form of the Good, Sartre's complete freedom, Levinas' Infinity. Beauty is the highest expression of transcendence, which erotic desire ultimately longs for, but cannot fully possess. In my interpretation, sexual intercourse allows us to enjoy the person we like, just as they enjoy us, but we do not possess them and they do not possess us. The beauty of the other person, in its ideal features, is the object of desire, but beauty belongs also to the subject, who wants and gives at the same time, longs both for possession and being possessed. Possession is destined to incompleteness, because of the difference between the I and the other person, a difference which is continuously put into play in eroticism, in the contact between bodies and in the difficulties in distinguishing, inside and outside sex, what belongs to whom. According to Merleau-Ponty's idea of flesh, the sexualized body may be considered as fluid, tending to merge with the other person's one, but without losing itself: reversibility goes together with divergence. The concepts of beauty and possession may be still applied to the erotic phenomenon. I have just tried to reconfigure them in a phenomenological sense, in order to share a view of sexuality which looks beyond male thinking and binarism.

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