

Chia Yu Lien // For philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, desire produces perpetually new objects. Unlike Freud and Freudian scholars, who consider desire as lacking and trace the desired object back to the mother–child relationship, Deleuze and Guattari argue: “the real object can be produced only by an external causality and external mechanisms; nonetheless this knowledge does not prevent us from believing in the intrinsic power of desire that creates its own object—if only in an unreal, hallucinatory, or delirious form” (1983, 25). A few paragraphs later, they continue: “desire is not bolstered by needs, but rather the contrary; needs are derived from desire” (1983, 27). People in a feudal society desire a very different object than people from a capitalist society. In this sense, lack or need is created and organized through social production. What people desire and the things they feel they need or lack, are produced in a particular social assemblage, created by the dominant class, for the purpose of profit.

In late-capitalist society, as suggested by Horkheimer and Adorno, the objects of desires can be grouped into two kinds: the desire for consumption and the desire for self-preservation and self-mastery. I use the term “desire for consumption” to refer to both natural desire and commodified desire. In a capitalist society, natural desire, such as the desire for food or sex, is organized by commodified objects, mass media and by various governmental techniques. The desire for mass cultural products discussed in “Desire I: Desire and the Formulation of Bourgeois Subject” falls into the category of desire for consumption. The desire proposed by Deleuze and Guattari can be understood under both categories. People desire products as well as the relations of production that make those products. Because of the latter desire, people invest their energy and libido into an “existing social field, including the latter’s most repressive forms” (1983, 29). In other words, people may desire servitude as much as they desire their salvation.

In her article “Cruel Optimism,” Lauren Berlant conceptualizes the desire of consumption and the desire of self-mastery in a similar way, both as “a cluster of promises we want someone or something or something to make to us and make possible for us” (2010, 93). This definition explains why approaching the object of desire feels like approaching a cluster of promises. It also explains why people insist on pursuing an object even when it is impossible or toxic to do so. As Berlant notes, the continuity on the object “provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (2010, 94). In other words, insisting on an object provides the desiring subject a sense of him- or herself. Loss of the object, on the other hand, means loss of the promises attached to the object. Consequently, people who lose the object may feel like they are losing all of that hope.

Throughout their lives, people construct an emotional habitus around objects such as love, work, appetites, patriotism, or any of a vast range of others. Due to the affective attachment built around these objects, people are likely to hold on to them, even when having them in their life becomes debilitating. Berlant gives the example of a pair of poor African American brothers. One of the brothers, Loftis, saw being rich as having a good life, while the other, Cooter, saw a good life in enjoying cultural products, such as watching TV, listening to music, and reading comic books. They robbed their neighbor and stole an amount of money they never thought they would have. Loftis, who was attached to the promises of upward mobility, hoarded the money until his death, while Cooter, who was attached to the promises of enjoyments, found himself with no cultural capital to enjoy. Through this example, Berlant portrays an impasse of the fulfillment of desires. At the same time the brothers possessed the object, they found that the object they were longing for is only a placeholder for its promises, which nevertheless, are insufficient to bring them the satisfaction they promised.

In the example of the brothers, we can see that there are some parallels with Horkheimer and Adorno. For the Cooter and Loftis example, the objects they each attach themselves to fall into the categories of the desire for consumption and the desire for self-mastery. Cooter does not differ much from the lotus-eaters of Greek mythology, who lived a life without labor. The materials that he consumes—the music, comic books, and TV shows—are, for Horkheimer and Adorno, the contemporary equivalents of siren songs. Loftis, meanwhile, represents the bourgeois subject who defers enjoyment and makes calculations in the system of exploitation and exchange. For him, what is most enjoyable is not spending the assets he accidentally acquired, but hoarding them for as long as possible. This is similar to Juliette, for whom sex itself is less desirable than the process of calculating and manipulating sex. Nevertheless, as neither Cooter nor Loftis reach the satisfaction they strive for, Berlant warns us that the object of desire and the cluster of promises it brings us can become too toxic—especially for those bearing a history of disadvantages.

Works Cited

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