

BOOK REVIEW

Alenka Zupančič. *What is Sex?* MIT Press, 2017. Pp.168. ₹1696

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“Why sexuality is at the point of “short circuit” between ontology and epistemology?” (blurb) is the question Zupančič discusses in *What is Sex?* Zupančič explores this question from the psychoanalytic point of view. The book has four chapters: Chapter 1: The non-relation is not lack of relation. It is a real and the Real. Sexual relation is not a fantasy that which does not exist but we envisage it to be there. The lack of sexual relation is real as lack. It is fabricated on the presence/existence influencing its logic. The partial pleasures and satisfactions do not exist autonomously but configured by the lack of anything better. They are “*already (in-)formed by the negativity implied by the non-relation*” (18). Accordingly, the fantasy transpires from the configuration of drives. Chapter 2: How do we locate the functional aspect of the Other that goes beyond the mere claim that it does not exist. How do we appropriate the non-relational aspect of it into a profitable one?

Chapter 3: Contradiction is not to stop with mere appropriation. Contradiction is becoming. It is used as an empowering source from the logic governed by this contradiction. Contradictions do not vanish but function in configuring and altering reality. Therefore, we engage with the contradictions to become part of it. Chapter 4: Zupančič discusses the impossibility embedded within sex to the eventual nature of love. While the author does not bring any conclusions, she mentions that within the discourse, the Real is conserved and we lose the ability of naming the effects because it recognizes the “(dis)junction between the necessary and the Real (impossible).” Zupančič returns to love and Lacan’s *Seminar XX* by substituting eventual “drama of love” with comedy of love to emphasize that the passion of exigence can be maintained in its experience even when love regresses. She further discusses the “event” of naming and creation

of new reality or the disjointedness between the necessary and the Real. Our ability to name makes us accessible to reality.

Zupančić deliberates sexuality as a philosophical problem in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Returning to the psychoanalytic grounds of sexuality, she highlights the ontological/epistemological nature of sex and sexuality and the politics/polemics surrounding these contested categories. The (actual) sexual act does not embody any political struggle but the compelling strangeness and the (Lacanian) incompleteness involving sexuality have an empowering political potential in how we fashion our (human) relations.

Psychoanalysis presents enduring contradictions involving the actuality of sex. These contradictions cannot be restricted to mere ontological relevance. The act of sex can take us away from reality transiently but the concern is the part played by sex in wakening lives. Things concerning sexuality is “constitutively unconscious.” It catalogues in reality as repression. The relationship between sexuality and unconscious is not that of “content and container; sexuality pertains to the very being-there of the unconscious, in its very ontological uncertainty.”

Sex is an act of sublimation. Sublimation is traditionally considered a standby for sexual satisfaction. Instead of perceiving sublimation as an enduring behaviour enacted to substitute the excitement of sexual satisfaction, Zupančić assumes it as a natural coping mechanism as an intermediary to experience sexual satisfaction experienced through intercourse. Lacan maintains that sexual satisfaction derived from sex can also be received from talking, singing, praying, writing and other actions (?). The satisfaction derived from these activities is not of sexual origin or nature. Talking or painting is itself sexual and the satisfaction derived is foundational to sexuality, involving its innate incongruences and gratification. In her analysis of Hitchcock’s film *Rear Window*, Zupančić argues how envisaging the possibilities of the other could offer subliminal satiation as sex. The very act of imagining the possibilities opens the windows of fantasy and functions as object of desire.

The passion expressed through sex is as much verbal communication as physical. Desire expressed through sex is demonstrated through a watchful and transformational blend of verbal expression, culture and corporeal proxemics among us. It is the same when intimate physical acts are shared as a culmination of erotic desire or as an instinct to procreate. Zupančič contextualizes the act itself. Unconscious is the linkage between knowledge and its lack, between the sexual act, being sexual and deriving pleasure in alternative forms of interaction.

Zupančič acknowledges Freud's proposition that sexuality/passion is innately associated with the search for knowledge. Any defined distinguishing borders between pleasure and pain, ignorance and insight, sex and restraint remain blurred. The significance is about being and non-being. Our presence/involvement with the social, cultural and religious envelopes our sexuality. Sexuality does not exist within or beyond the symbolic. It exists as the "contradiction of the symbolic space that appears because of the constitutively missing signifier and what appears in its place (enjoyment)."

The presence of nature is not full and humanity is a blanket that enshrouds to offer form to the other's ontological incompleteness. Rather than considering an important subject matter arising out of the intersection between philosophy and psychoanalysis, Zupančič considers sex as a signifier transpiring out of this discourse. Sex is not an ontological predicament but rather a signifier that excites the fissure between knowledge and the subject. Does sex configure an intrinsic incongruity of our reality? Zupančič answers in the affirmative, it augments our understanding of the predicaments of socio-cultural communications, politics and human relationships. The embodied contradiction empowers ourselves from the logic that dominates the presumed incongruities. The presence of equivocity helps us to perceive the inherent contradictions of our reality. Rather than paving way for multiplicity of meanings, it alters meaning from certainty to a differential form to unlock "a certain symptomatic enjoyment invested in the scene of the domestic quarrel and its anticipation" (68). The unlocking is attained by the disruption of linear temporality and alteration of presence.

Zupančič recognizes sex as the missing signifier, the fissure within being and knowledge foundational to discursive realm. Sex is messy because “it appears at the point of the breaking down of the signifying consistency, or logic (its point of impossibility), not because it is in itself illogical and messy: its messiness is the result of the attempt to invent a logic at the very point of the impasse of such logic” (43).

The possibility of sex in its impossibility. It prevents the ontological of the symbolic making reality possible. The author assumes this impossibility as a “hole through which meanings exist as bound together in a given configuration.” (67). Sex is a space with productive possibilities and possibilities of signification. It is inherently linked with our everyday activities and knowledge so as to negotiate this gap. Often, when explicating the impossibility of sex, we envelop it with affirmative knowledge. This continues to create further paradoxes and tautologies. In her analysis of circuitous repetition, she distinguishes between two sexes because she finds the nonexistence of the One.

Zupančič views subjectivity through the lens of signification. The subject, for her, is an articulative being, the signifier’s subject. The subject is possible only through the lack of signification, the subject of the absent signifier. She assumes that there is “something in being that is less than being—and this something is precisely that which, while included in being, prevents it from being fully constituted as *being*” (129).

Unlike Foucault who ignores ontology by picking epistemological reflections on sexuality, Zupančič centres her central question on ontology. “Sex is of ontological relevance: not as an ultimate reality, but as an inherent twist, or stumbling block of reality” (3). In psychoanalysis, sex and the sexual are deciphered as a possibility of irreducible ontological contradiction. However, the “object disoriented” ontology is not objectification of reality or conviction of positivized knowledge of reality but a realization that reality is not effortlessly accessible.

Zupančič smartly names her book with a question, *What is Sex?* Did she arrive at any answer/answers? Is answering the sole purpose of the text? Many might ponder if the author is

lost in the inexplicable? Zupančič's reflections and analysis of concepts, often, remain inconclusive. Rather than opening up a trajectory to guide the reader, the text exposes the paradoxical muddle surrounding sex in an intricate manner. The 'why' questions surrounding sex/sexuality still stay unanswered. There cannot be simple answers to these questions because Zupančič's interrogation attempts to explain sex in the middle ground between ontology and epistemology.

In her discussion, Zupančič lays logic as the foundation on which psychoanalytic (Freudian and Lacanian) interpretations are built. The questions Zupančič poses are at once metaphysical and psychoanalytic. One need to be closely acquainted with Lacan in order to discern Zupančič's approach to the "otherness" of sex as an identity. This book is not about heterosexuality or sexual difference or pleasure principle. The text explains how sex as an ontological problem coexists with a disruption in reality. The knowledge about sex is inconclusive because of its intriguing gap and structural reticence.