

# Game: On Instrumentalised Desire

*Pieter Conradie*

## Abstract

In this paper, I discuss two uses of the concept GAME in relation to the repression of desire. The first use refers to the common use of the term: board games, sports, and riddles, while the second refers to sexual prowess. Following Herbert Marcuse's concepts of surplus repression and the performance principle, I argue that the supposed liberation of desire in an advanced capitalist society transfigures desire into another consumable product under rational control. Such desire further alienates us from one another since relationships become a constant game of manipulation in which we seek to suppress, produce, and negotiate desire. In a series of interludes, I then imagine societies with alternative expressions of desire. In doing so, I seek to describe as well as to perform a world free from excessive rationality. However, under academic strain, this project faces monumental inclinations to justify and explain what would otherwise be an honest form of playing. In the spirit of critical social theory, I sketch the reality of a game-driven society yet locate transformative potential in our radical intersubjectivity.

## About the author

Pieter (Pauw) Conradie is wrapping up his Honours in Philosophy at Stellenbosch University. He is curious about questions on the human condition and how we are to speak and live together in such a vast estranging world. These topics he pursues at the hand of processual, linguistic, and deconstructive philosophy. [As a closet existentialist] he also expresses and explores such themes through creative writing.

## 1. Introduction

The repression of sexual desire has long been an object of social and critical theories, as has been the emancipatory possibilities of overcoming such repression. But how might desire be liberated in a fully industrial, instrumentalised world? This paper undertakes an analysis of how desire is subjugated for the sake of labour and then further repressed for the sake of excess production, drawing on Herbert Marcuse's concepts of surplus repression and the performance principle. Following a close analysis of the use and popularity of two notions of GAME, I argue that the reintroduction of desire, in a world ruled by the performance principle, mutilates desire into yet another consumable product without the immediacy of unmediated feeling. Any liberation of desire is hence superficial. Through a deferral of pleasure, fulfilling desire itself becomes an objectified goal. Lastly, in a series of interludes, I consider a few tentative practices that might allow for the freer expression of an open sexuality.

## 2. Freud's Reality Principle

The repression of desire is such an entrenched phenomena that its historical origin is of little account. Emphasis rather falls on the ways in which it is perpetuated, such as taboos or moral institutions. In an analysis of these mechanisms of perpetuation, Freud posits that the pleasure principle (libido or sex-drive) is overtaken by the reality principle, which is a structural necessity for civilisation (Marcuse, 1955: 11). The relation between the pleasure principle and the reality principle loosely corresponds to nature-culture, unconscious-conscious, and emotional-rational distinctions. When the reality principle triumphs, immediate satisfaction, playing, consumption and freedom is changed into delayed gratification, working, production and security (ibid., 12). The reality principle acts in service of greater control, utility, reason, predictive accuracy, and general manipulation of the world (and of one another). Crucially it means that our desires are no longer our own, but rather constructed in accordance with our place in society (ibid., 14). It is in a world

dominated by the reality principle in which we find ourselves. It is in such a world that the need for liberation arises most poignantly.

## 3. Marcuse on Overproduction

It is on Freud's notion of the reality principle that Marcuse builds his own concepts of surplus repression and the performance principle, which he situates much more prominently in the socio-economic domains of Western-European history. His project can be described as marrying Freud with Marx in an attempt to describe and overcome the industrial society of his time. For Marx, labour acts in service of self-formation in a transcendence of natural impulses, but Marcuse argues that this process is inverted in the overarching structures of capitalism where one rarely works for oneself, but rather for an alienating system (Farr, 2019). Thus, the individual no longer works to gratify their own desires, but instead acts in service of progress and profit. Here, Freud's reality principle is no longer sufficient to account for the mass repression of desire (Marcuse, 1955: 129).

Marcuse interprets Freud through his dual notion of surplus repression and the performance principle. Firstly, he draws the distinction between repression that is "basic" and "surplus". Basic repression is the minimal level of libidinal repression for society to *work*. Work is thus a structural condition of society that transforms the pleasure principle into a basic form of the reality principle. Surplus repression refers to levels of repression that transcend that which is necessary for society to function (Elliot, 1996: 139), such as working after-hours for non-essential commodities. This repression acts in service of the performance principle which is characterised by overproduction and overconsumption. The performance principle thus no longer caters simply to our human needs, but rather to artificial desires created by advertisement.

In such a world, scarcity can be wholly overcome, resulting in a liberated subject. Yet, due to how resources

are distributed, scarcity is kept alive artificially (Farr, 2019). Labour continues for the sake of progress in industrial capitalism, casting individuals as mere functional components in a system; functionaries which are subject to further fragmentation and alienation (Elliot, 1996: 139). The individual is no longer in touch with the erotic. Rather, they are mere objects, bound to the authority of the system which dominates them through mass media and commodified culture (ibid., 140). In such a world, the erotic becomes virtually fully repressed and without it, there is no more place for authentic individual feeling. Where the erotic once had the power to overthrow social conventions, it now gives way to advertisement so that the triumph of reason and domination may be complete.

#### 4. On Game

The concept GAME has a long history of philosophical analysis. Here, I focus on the implications for two of its common conceptions. In the first sense, GAME denotes a competitive activity, usually for fun, with objective goals. This conception illustrates the working of the reality principle since it already deals with deferral and delayed gratification. This gratification is also subject to prior practice and reason, especially in the case of most board games. While there is certainly a greater element of freedom in games than in work<sup>1</sup>, we see that the pleasure principle is already infiltrated. GAME can further be contrasted from FREE PLAY, which is a more open and immediate form of sensation and satisfaction. For example, a friend at a pancake party may slap your cheek with their pancake, making you spew your drink with laughter. This playing has no name, no reason and little language. It only becomes a game when you start formulating rules and

objectives (for example, trying to be the last to spew your drink). With these goals enter the axes of victory and defeat and as soon as you can win “the pancake game”, strategy enters into it. Free play, with all its immediate absurdity and joy, would become objectified into a rational enterprise.

The second meaning of GAME has recently emerged with an immediate and problematic relation to desire: that of sexual prowess. Likely popularised by Neil Strauss in his book *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists*, phrases such as “You need to up your game” and “He has no game” has become common. On Q&A websites, such as quora.com, Hadi Akmal (2021) has defined game as “the ability to negotiate desire”. While this definition at first glance seems to encourage genuine interaction, from the advice Akmal gives, it quickly becomes clear that he is more interested in seduction. “Negotiation” is simply a substitute for “manipulation”. This manipulation of desire acts in the service of further goals, such as sex and/or validation – construing another human being as an object which you can use to fulfil your desires. The lack of personhood is evident in Akmal’s maxim (2021) that “the one who cares the least in a relationship, has the most power”. As GAME suggests, modern sexuality is based on delayed gratification, especially in comparison to the premarital sex play practices of the !Kung people (Lee, 1985: 38) and the practices of fictional societies such as the Adem and the Dothraki. Due to delayed gratification in modern sexuality, some form of rationality is almost always involved before an initial expression of libido between people. Thus, the notion of GAME assumes a poignant role in our world, especially in its associations with conquest and manipulation.

---

<sup>1</sup> I distinguish “work” from “game” through the inclusion of material and credential benefit.

## Bathing interlude

In Patrick Rothfuss' fantasy series, starting with *The Name of the Wind*, there is a culture (the Adem) which is so sexually liberated (unrepressed) that the concept FATHER does not exist. There is no taboo on sexuality and, similarly, no taboo on nudity. Once a taboo emerges, it relegates public phenomena to the private realm where those who participate therein are objectified through all manner of rumours and insidious whispers. Transparent communication becomes almost impossible. Yet, all taboos have a cultural lifespan and are reinforced through practices, products and especially through architecture (i.e., through curtains and obscured glass). Similar to the Ancient Romans, the Adem have systems of public baths. Unlike the Romans, their baths are unisex. We no longer see prominent examples of such structures in contemporary Western society.

I would like to imagine a large white building with ancient pillars next to the gymnasium. Upon entering, you pay a small fee and borrow a towel. Heated either naturally or artificially and kept clean through modern sanitary technologies, the baths are truly welcoming. Inside, there are men and women laving in the hot water, partly obscured by cusps of steam. It is a place to relax after a long day, to meet strangers and to catch up with old friends. Through repeated visits to the baths, myths about the body are demystified and replaced with open conversation. Through an exercise in vulnerability, the baths open up spaces for developing honest confidence and self-respect. For Marcuse (1955: 140-141), such fantasy links reason and emotion and preserves suppressed desires in art and culture. This expression aims beyond the rational where a liberated erotic reality may yet prevail (Marcuse, 1955: 146). In other words, beyond the logical exposition of arguments, imagination facilitates the expression of desire.

## 5. Desire "Liberated"

Another of Marcuse's projects is the development of a radical revolutionary subjectivity. In his search, he abandons Marx's trust placed in the proletariat to revolt when they grow conscious of their marginalised position in the system. He also moves away from Freud's descriptive and circular patterns of revolt against the father (Farr, 2019). Instead, Marcuse recognises the revolutionary potential of psychoanalysis to describe and overcome socio-historical structures. These structures are temporal entities: they had an origin and will eventually come to an end. Ironically, Marcuse locates this potential to liberate humanity from controlling systems in the performance principle itself (ibid.). Through surplus repression and its resulting overproduction and with the right distribution channels, coupled with advances in science and technology, full control over nature is possible. This control includes the production and sharing of resources and perhaps even includes our cognitive and social needs. With such control, we would have increased

security over most dimensions of life and be able to put an end to all scarcity.

The end of scarcity would ensure that individuals no longer have to work to survive and that they may be emancipated from the alienating systems of the performance principle. For Marcuse (1955: 152), such a mature, industrialised civilisation will fulfil the needs, including leisure and open sexuality, of all its citizens. Marcuse uses the term 'libidinal rationality' to describe the way in which a transformed society would be able to merge a transformed pleasure principle into the entire sphere of personality, including work and civil progress (ibid., 199). This is similar to a claim made by Audre Lorde (1978: 2), who calls for the erotic to enrich all aspects of existence with acute feeling. Unfortunately, the reintroduction of sexuality into a world ruled by the performance principle does not seem to yield such results.

Shortly after the publication of *Eros and Civilization* in 1955, the sexual revolution started gaining traction, moving away from the repressive norms and taboos of monogamous, patriarchal societies. While the libido

was celebrated to a greater extent than before, the tendencies of deferring desire through reason meant that it was reconfigured as a product rather than a primal drive. Here, a distinction between libido and desire becomes necessary. I use “libido” to refer to the natural drive towards sexuality and “desire” as a form of artificially induced sexuality. Desire is subject to reason, manipulation, and advertisement. While some form of natural feeling remains, it is focused on sexual stimulation (physical or imaginative), rather than an eroticism of the entire lived experience (Elliot 1996: 139).

Since the domination of the performance principle, leisure and sexuality have been commodified (Marcuse, 1955: 94). This commodification can be seen in a wide variety of available products of desire – from pornography, erotica, dating manuals and literal sex toys. These products are not an end in itself, rather an objectified means aims towards producing desire or material gains (such as money or social credit). Desire has essentially become labour. It has become a game. These products may be a vehicle for liberation, and there are certainly some emancipatory aspects to them, but by their deferred nature, they cannot cater towards the primal libido. Rather, they seek to fulfil desires that they themselves create. It is evident that desire has become instrumentalised through an alleged freeing of repression under the performance principle.

## 6. Perpetuating Instrumentalised Desire

Instrumentalised desire, while not wholly unproblematic in its products, becomes truly problematic once it infiltrates the sphere of direct human interaction. Such infiltration takes place when other people are seen as objects of desire or as means to fulfil desire. Desire becomes an exchange in which the promise is:

“I will fulfil your desire if you will fulfil mine”. Here, the notion of game as a negotiation (manipulation) of desire becomes acute, since to fulfil the other’s desire, the desire itself must first be created. This happens through measures of rational control over the libido, both yours and the other’s, for the sake of a form of gratification which is delayed. To successfully manipulate and fulfil, desire is portrayed as a triumph, fit for congratulations, as is commonly seen in communicative practices where sexual encounters are related. A friend after a night out might, for example, describe where they went, what they had to drink and brag about how they approached a stranger and made out with them after some conversation. Instead of shared joy in the expression of a free libido, the listeners would applaud this successful negotiation of desire – as if it were an achievement.

Making an achievement out of desire also creates a social expectation to participate in further sexual encounters and to “up your game”. In a cruel twist, surplus repression and the performance principle works in on desire itself. Especially in clubbing-and-dating culture, people are socialised into a system of artificial desires (produced by the mechanisms of advertisement and portrayals of desire in mass media). In order to fulfil these desires, people need to further repress their instincts and their immediate satisfaction. This repression frees time for practice and personal progress in the ability to manipulate desire – that is, for the sake of having more and better intimate encounters. Countless website manuals are produced to cater towards this need for better performance. These manuals then, in turn, produces more desire, perpetuating the cycle. Finally, since writers like Hadi Akmal regard honesty about the libido as an ineffective technique for manipulating desire, there is very little room left for genuine human interaction. Hence the triumph of instrumentalised desire is complete.

## Jawadi interlude

I believe we have an almost libidinal drive towards honest interaction and shared feeling, especially in a world of instrumentalised desire. How might such a primal force be expressed if most talk about sexuality either conforms to the mechanisms of GAME or to cold academic analyses? If there is hope for liberation in this world, it lies in the sharing of worlds, in intimate communication. Yet, fear of ridicule often stops us short of having such conversations, especially with those to whom we are attracted. Furthermore, such conversations cannot effectively be facilitated in larger gatherings, for fear of being rationalised. A language game, such as “What are the best strategies for holding intimate conversations?” would clearly incorporate reason in order to achieve its goals. Facilitation remains after all a rational process of guidance and control.

Let us return then to whispers in the bedroom, to hidden dialogues and the person-to-person transmission of ideas. This is a project which was shared with me orally, one which I really shouldn't write about. Like a chain message, a person is challenged to have an intimate conversation with someone to whom they are attracted. Thereafter the first person challenges their partner to engage two more people in a similar conversation. Thereafter, a symbol – Jawadi, the name of a fictional friend – is shared so that others might recognise that we have also had the conversation. KNOWING JAWADI becomes a code or concept for “Yes, I have experience of such a conversation and I agree to rather be honest about my immediate feelings, not to resort to any manipulation of desire. You can trust me.” The code, Jawadi, may be inconspicuously slipped into conversation, i.e., “My friend Jawadi...” to which the other person responds, “Oh, I know them too...” to create safe interpersonal bubbles where compassion and honest sexuality are encouraged.

## 7. Critical Considerations on Marcuse

The work of Herbert Marcuse is highly influential in the field of critical social theory and beyond (Farr, 2019). In merging Marx's analysis of society with Freud's analysis of the individual, Marcuse is able to show how the individual is placed in and shaped by social forces as well as how society is made out of the repression of the individual. In this analysis, the repression of the erotic creates culture and the force of Eros is transformed into a working civilisation (Marcuse, 1955: 81-82). Marcuse's adaption of the reality principle into the performance principle based on surplus repression more effectively captures the tendencies of advanced industrial capitalism (Farr 2019) – tendencies which are still at work in contemporary society. In his involvement with his students and other

marginal members of society, Marcuse has located the potential for a radical revolutionary subjectivity. He identifies students as the agents for overcoming the alienation brought about by surplus repression. Even though this liberation may lead to other forms of rational domination, the spectre of his Great Refusal<sup>1</sup> still offers hope and a critical angle whence to practically transform society.

Marcuse's analysis also has some important limitations. With his emphasis on the repression of Freud's drives, he has been accused of reinforcing gender stereotypes. However, Nina Power (2013: 79), suggests that his project to universalise traditionally feminine qualities (such as care and emotion) alongside reason rescues him from most of these criticisms. According to Elliott (1996: 140), Marcuse's notion of libidinal

---

<sup>1</sup> Drawing inspiration from Marx's spectre of communism, the Great Refusal is a movement that counters resignation in the face of injustice. It claims that a different life is possible *here* and *now*.

rationality remains underdeveloped and in placing the erotic *next* to reason misses the opportunity to locate the erotic *within* the rational. Audre Lorde (1978: 4) sees such a conjunction of the erotic and reason as the necessary condition of joy. Lastly, Marcuse's focus on the individual and the society fails to account for the intersubjective level of human interaction (Elliot, 1996: 140). This crucial level, developed in the Jawadi interlude, forms the basis of all empathy and intimate communication. Within such interaction lies the erotic as a deeply personal and connected feeling which crucially cannot be further expressed through objective language (Lorde, 1978: 1), and thus cannot be systemically rationalised. It is this level where the subjectivity of others is most prominently recognised and realised. This realisation creates potential for a radical revolutionary *inter*-subjectivity to arise and for small-scale engagements free from rational domination.

## 8. Conclusions

In this paper, I have described how the libido is repressed for the sake of rational civilisation. I have underlined Marcuse's theory of how an excess in such repression leads to overproduction and overconsumption and I have shown how his theory is practically manifested in GAME and how it plays itself out in new forms of artificial desire. I discussed how this new desire then infiltrates the realm of personal interactions and objectifies people as a means to fulfil desire. While not a universal phenomenon, this process explains some aspects of the alienation we feel towards our acquaintances. In between these arguments I have also entertained somewhat practical fantasies of a future that challenges these processes and champions human connection. In setting out these visions, I attempted to take a break from the work and from purely rational argumentation. This project, although perhaps performatively significant, largely fails, (1) because I am still afraid of digressing too far from the standards of reason and (2) because of the academic language game with all its rules, I could not resist the expectation to explain and justify, once more skewering the erotic with reason.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> You too, dear reader, partake in such a skewering, insofar as you ask me to explicate, exemplify and help you understand.

## A poem, fragile and formidable

Hey, Nienke?

It's okay if you want to kiss  
    with other people—  
I'm not saying that you want to  
    just— it's okay if you do.

I mean—  
    it would be a relief  
To know I don't have to be  
    your one and only.

Maybe me saying this  
    will help one day  
When the ardour of our passion  
    burns our skin away  
It'll help to know that you may.

                    All I ask—  
(if we are to deconstruct authority)  
    is that we be honest  
And intimate with our wants.

(sincerely)  
Pieter

## Bibliography

- Akmal, H. 2021. "What does it mean to have "game" when dating?" *Quora* [online]. Available at: <https://www.quora.com/What-does-it-mean-to-have-game-when-dating> [Accessed 2021/10/08].
- Elliott, A. 1996. "Psychoanalysis and Social Theory" in B. Turner (ed.). *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc, 133-159.
- Farr, A. 2019. "Herbert Marcuse" *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [online]. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marcuse/> [Accessed 2021/10/08].
- Lee, R. 1985. "Work, sexuality and aging among !Kung women" In J. Brown (ed.) *In her prime: A new view of middle-aged women*, pp. 34-46.
- Lorde, A. 1978. *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* [brochure], New York: Out & Out Books.
- Marcuse, H. 1955. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Power, N. 2013. "Marcuse and Feminism Revisited" *Radical Philosophy Review*, 16(1): 73-79.

I also make reference to the following fictional source:

Rothfuss, P. 2011. *The Wise Man's Fear*, London: Gollancz.