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**Book Review: Knafo / Lo Bosco - The Age of Perversion: Desire
and Technology in Psychoanalysis and Culture**

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DANIELLE KNAFO and ROCCO LO BOSCO: THE AGE
OF PERVERSION: DESIRE and TECHNOLOGY in
PSYCHOANALYSIS and CULTURE. LONDON:
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Reviewed By

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INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the term "perversion" it may be considered a distinct psychoanalytic concept which has fully penetrated everyday language, similarly to words such as "Freudian slip", "repression" or "the unconscious". Commonly used, the term perversion is often thought to denote sexual deviance or sexualised practices that venture beyond the norms of a society. Perversion has often been linked to sexual practices and some may have been labelled as "perverse" in the past but have been rendered "normal" or struck off the list of perversions over time (e.g. homosexuality). Danielle Knafo and Rocco Lo Bosco's book *The Age of Perversion: Desire and Technology in Psychoanalysis and Culture* (2017) is a rigorous and immersive effort to define and develop perversion in the clinical sense and to analytically relate it to a range of phenomena (such as dolls, online communication, surveillance or organizational structures), technology and contemporary digital media. The book may be situated within an emerging area, which I call psychoanalytic media studies, that makes use of psychoanalytic concepts and methods for thinking about digital media and how they affect subjectivities and societies today (Dean 2010; Krzych 2010; Turkle 2012; Rambatan and Johanssen 2013; Bainbridge and Yates 2014; Balick 2014; Singh 2014; Johanssen and Krüger 2016). The authors begin their book by offering an overview of perversion today and how it relates to social matters that go beyond individual psychopathology or mental health. They define perversion as a movement on a "crooked path" (Knafo and Lo Bosco 2017: 2) that navigates away from the norm and what is considered normal. Perversion is a slippery term to define and one may speak of perverse tendencies in a subject, or in a relationship, which may not quite be the same as perversion per se. It is always located somewhere on a wide spectrum. Perversion may be impossible to define properly. The book does not offer a clear definition of what the term exactly means. This is one of its strengths. The term is not

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closed down but instead used to cover a range of phenomena that are messy, excessive and slippery themselves.

The fundamental argument in the book is that technology, information and communication technology in particular, and its rapid growth have facilitated a culture of perversion. To that end, Knafo and Lo Bosco diagnose that contemporary societies are structured by a dehumanization of people and a humanization of objects at the same time. In part, this constitutes perverse tendencies. Digital technology (and examples like online dating, hook-up apps, sexting, MMORPGs, dolls or robots) has profound effects on social and cultural dimensions of our lives today. The authors identify both technology and perversion as transgressive forces that seek to move beyond limits and existing frameworks. Through specific case studies, the book sets out to explore how. Following an introduction to the concept of perversion and how it has been variously, and differently, conceptualised within psychoanalytic thinking beginning with Freud, the authors move on to discuss specific case studies. When it comes to sexual perversion, psychoanalysis more generally regards perversion as an acting out of sexual fantasies. They are lived out in specific scenarios. Post-Freudians in particular identified an element of hostility and a disavowal of reality in perversion. Particularly the object-relations tradition regards perversion as occurring in relationships. Those with perversions treat the other in a relationship as an object that they fill with hatred, cruelty and humiliation (Bach 1994; Stein 2005). A perverse relationship is a semblance of recognition and care while those attributes are in reality betrayed. "Perversion as a mode of relatedness points to relations of seduction, domination, psychic bribery and guileful uses of 'innocence,' all in the service of exploiting the other" (Stein 2005: 780-781). What psychoanalysts emphasise is that a relationship that is structured by dynamics of perversion constitutes the creation of a singular world that shuts out reality and external influences. New rules for and in the relationship are created. Perversion is thus always an attempt to ignore, subvert or actively go against the law (Lacan 1994). The pervert's object – whether it be a real person or an object - is (ab)used and manipulated while at the same time being idealized and cherished (Khan 1979; Celenza 2014). While perversion may feature a specific fetish, this may not always be the case. The authors discuss that perversion is often gendered and that it appears that mainly men suffer from perverse tendencies rather than women. Perversion is an act of mastery which denies human fragility, dependency on others, and ultimately death (Ogden 1996; McDougal 1972, 1995). While perversion, in its more common usage, entails a negative judgment, the book also highlights the potentially positive aspects of perversion. It is a form of creativity, transgression and a crossing of boundaries that may be liberating (Chasseguet-Smirguel 1984). Perverse tendencies, such as specific fetishes, may also be an (unconscious) way of working through trauma and a means to live with it.

The authors identify six characteristics that unite different psychoanalytic discussions of perversion. Perversion is universal; it functions across a spectrum of varying degrees; it may relate to trauma and loss which is disavowed and masked through perversion; it may feature sado-masochistic dynamics in relationships; it features experiences of excitement, mastery and illusion; and it is expressed differently by men and women (Knafo and Lo Bosco 2017: 52-54).

Chapters 2 details a case study based on one of Danielle Knafo's patients. Knafo, who is also a practising psychoanalyst, discusses her patient's relationship with a life-like, human-size sex doll: the RealDoll. Her patient is described with great empathy and understanding. His use of the doll is not (only) rendered pathological but also explored as a way of helping him with feelings of loneliness and experience of trauma. Nonetheless, real human relationships can of course not be replaced with dolls. While this chapter details a case study of a patient who felt a sense of unease in being with the doll and eventually let go of her, Chapter 3 discusses Davecat, who lives with three dolls. He has been widely covered in the media e.g. on TLC's *My Strange Addiction* (Johanssen 2012) and maintains active Twitter profiles of himself and his dolls. For Davecate, the dolls he lives with have become real because he treats them as human beings with distinct character traits and life histories. Similarly to the previous chapter, the authors spend some time discussing Davecat's life history and how he became a collector of RealDolls. "Davecat's world is one that transcends law and embodies the wish that things could be different from the way they are." (Knafo and Lo Bosco 2017: 89). The chapter details a fascinating account of how Davecat both makes sense of his dolls and narrates their life histories and functions for him and themselves. He is fully aware that they are dolls, yet speaks about them as if they are humans. Knafo and Lo Bosco approach Davecat with warmth, empathy and curiosity. They nonetheless take the phenomenon of the life-like doll as perversion and a cultural symptom of how sexuality is becoming intertwined with technology on a wider level whereby a "disavowal of the human" (82) is taking place. Chapter 4 similarly covers women who collect life-like baby dolls (mostly known as Reborn dolls), who, not unlike the RealDoll community, sell their dolls online and interact with each other in online discussion forums. The collecting of baby dolls often serves as an (unconscious) means to cope with experiences of trauma.

The book then shifts from exploring perversion as a subjective, pathological state to explore perversion as a socio-cultural phenomenon in the next three chapters. The second half of Chapter 4 explores examples of perversion in different settings (such as corporate greed and corruption or the collusion of APA members with the US government in drafting torture guidelines to be used against terrorist suspects). The authors argue that capitalism itself manifests a perverse structure in which exploitation, workplace bullying, greed and profit maximization at all costs are championed in corporate cultures (see also Long 2008). In other words, the treatment of workers in contemporary capitalism signifies a "disavowal of vulnerability, pleasure in harm, soaking in excess, boundary violations, fixity, casting illusions, means– end reversal, dehumanization" (Knafo and Lo Bosco 2017: 174).

Chapter 6 of the book is entitled *Technology and its discontents: The dark side of cyberworld*. In it Knafo and Lo Bosco explore "the underbelly of the Internet" (183). To begin with, they focus on the "deep web", realms of the Internet that are not indexed by Google and are more difficult to access but can be found through software such as Tor. They are often used for illegal or outlawed activities in order to go unnoticed by law enforcement agencies. The book highlights the split off, dark aspects of the Internet (selling of weapons, recruitment of terrorists, illegal pornography, selling of drugs, etc.) but does not mention that Tor is also used for activist purposes in order to bypass censorship in totalitarian countries for example. While such examples may convincingly reflect perverse structures within the Internet, the discussion is too one-

sided here. It fails to highlight other usage of Tor for example. The authors then move on to addiction to Internet pornography and illustrate their discussion with vignettes from clinical cases which vividly highlight pathological (ab)uses of the online sphere. The chapter also includes a discussion of the creation of fake profiles on social media that are used to create identities which do not really exist in order to convey a particular impression to others for the sake of false romances, cyberbullying or fraud. "Yet the question remains as to whether people's online selves express a self-state or something different and separate from the self." (203). At this point, it may have been useful for the authors to engage with the work of Aaron Balick, who has explored this question in his book (Balick 2014) in some length and heads down a slightly different route from Knafo and Lo Bosco. For Balick, we do not live in an age where online communication is characterised by narcissism and fake profiles.

Chapter 7 further explores the social side of perversion by relating it to George Orwell's novel 1984. The book has lost nothing of its significance given the mass surveillance practices in the Western world revealed by Edward Snowden. Their essential re-telling of the novel is a little lengthy and could have been shortened, for it is very clear that the book serves as a perfect example to illustrate perverse structures of ubiquitous surveillance. The authors brilliantly tease out the book's themes and how they show perversion at work and relate them to totalitarian states (such as Nazi Germany). The chapter could have engaged more fully with the surveillance of spy agencies and corporate bodies that has come to define contemporary societies. Towards the end of it, the authors discuss that since 9/11 the US and allied forces have been engaged in a war which is seemingly without end and have also intensified surveillance activity of citizens across the world as well as security measures. All of this has been accompanied by a sophisticated surveillance regime by the NSA. "While heads of state talk of endless war without raising an eyebrow, throngs of citizens wait in line for hours for the latest version of the iPhone. How much this phenomenon is resulting from a subterranean government agenda or an unfortunate confluence of events is open to debate." (232). What is not mentioned in that sentence is that there have also been wide-ranging protest movements in response to the endless wars and privacy invasions. The discussion of the more recent 1984ization of the Western world comes across as too hasty and leaves little space for resistance, protest or subversion. It also would have been interesting if the authors had focussed on some of the aspects in more detail and e.g. analysed NSA surveillance and its official response narratives by politicians and NSA members in more detail through the prism of perversion.

The final chapter wraps up the book and further illuminates our age of perversion as exemplified by a whirlwind of phenomena that have become mainstream: sado-masochistic fashion and popular culture; reality television and ritualised shaming; celebrity culture. Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* is taken as a telling description of techno-perversion today and how it might evolve in the future. The chapter then moves on to discuss advances in robotics towards posthumanity and there is a sense of scepticism found between the lines as to whether robots who are capable of expressing emotions and engage in conversation for example are benefitting humanity.

The book presents a rigorous, complex, vivid and engaging effort to demonstrate the applicability of a clinical, psychoanalytic concept – perversion – for analysing individual and social realms within contemporary societies. It is this psychosocial

combination that brings together detailed case studies from Knafo's consulting room with wider structural questions that make the book such a fascinating read. It is the analytical clarity with which perversion is applied as a lens to look at both subjects as well as objects and their increasing entanglements that makes the book a highly relevant one. The book also serves as a detailed introduction to psychoanalytic concepts but can equally be appreciated by readers who are familiar with psychoanalytic terminology. It is therefore highly recommended to both media and communication scholars, as well as psychoanalysts alike. The book is very well-written and, importantly, does not pathologize the many patients whose case histories are explored but approaches them with empathy, warmth and understanding. However, it is open to debate to what extent the examples drawn on constitute niche phenomena that are followed by minorities and are artificially heightened by the media. They may therefore appear to be mass phenomena. Do we therefore really live in an age of perversion? Or are there rather perverse tendencies at work in different spheres and to varying degrees? The authors define perversion as a spectrum and subsume a variety of different phenomena under it, but such phenomena are always situated within other psychic structures both subjectively and socio-culturally that may compete with or negate them at the same time. What is then the relationship between perverse tendencies and other forces that complement them, or are in opposition to them?

Sometimes the Knafo and Lo Bosco make rather sweeping statements and sound a little too negative and deterministic about technology. For example, the authors state that: "Connectivity replaces communion, chat rooms replace community, texting replaces talking, tweeting replaces meaning, and virtual worlds replace reality." (23). It may be a little more nuanced than that. It also seems that the authors sometimes could not help themselves and engaged in predictions about the future, while, as they themselves do acknowledge throughout the book, it is entirely uncertain how the future will look like with regards to our use of and becoming of objects, media and machines. This may be exemplified by the following quotes: "Furthermore, I believe both genders will participate in this new sexual revolution, especially at the point at which robots that closely resemble human beings enter mainstream life." (108) or "We predict that laws will prohibit humans from driving in the future due to this technological advantage [of self-driving cars]." (149). Apart from this point, *The Age of Perversion* is an important book which illuminatingly demonstrates the power of psychoanalysis for thinking about issues of subjects / objects in and beyond the consulting room today.

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