

RED PILL OR BLUE PILL? VIAGRA AND THE VIRTUAL

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1. Introduction

In a famous scene from *The Matrix*, Morpheus gives Neo a choice between two pills: red to learn the truth and blue to return to the world as he knows it, that is, to the unreal world of Virtual Reality. In real life, some men are choosing the blue pill, that is, the pill of virtual sex. Angus McLaren writes in his cultural history of impotence that men who use Viagra are “deceiving themselves” (McLaren, 2007, p. 236). Any interpretation of Viagra potency as a “reality” so perfect that it convinces even the pretender, invites a critical revision of Viagra’s reality as a virtual form of reality.

Etymologically, ‘virtual’ signifies strength and manliness. Lee Quinby, in his essay on “Virile Reality,” could have left the term “virtual” unaltered because the idea of virility is definitely contained in the virtual. For Quinby, Virile Reality is “mediated violence, clean war, and computer games” (Quinby, 1999, p. 1083) necessarily producing a “Viagra Effect” which is “a union of simulation and flesh that assumes penile erection to be the be-all and end-all of sexual pleasure” (p. 1084). Through Viagra, sexual virility is put at the center of sexual culture, but it resides there not as a *real* quality (openly adopting a full-fledged macho posture) but rather *virtually*.

‘Virtual’ in the sense of ‘potential’ is distinct from ‘fake’ though the temptation to construe Viagra as a drug producing fake phenomena par excellence exists. Potts and Tiefer, for example, find that “what seems to be real (a Viagra assisted super-erection) may in fact be equally construed as ‘fake’” (2006, p. 270). However, the Viagra-erection is not a simulation of something existing (still bearing a relation with reality) but rather the creation of a new reality. Jennifer Croissant is convinced that Viagra sex is ‘hyper-real sex’ or ‘hypersexual reality’ and that “Viagra similarly participates in a hyperreal sexual landscape, steeped in nostalgia and generating and venerating a mythical originary sexuality” (Croissant, 2006, p. 335). Croissant compares Viagra with Disneyland in which objects “are experienced as superior to their originals: safer, cleaner, more authentic and unlikely to be changed by urban development or decay, or moral crusades” (p. 337).

Some might hold that Viagra does not produce a hyperreal simulation, but rather a first order imitation of a man’s youthful past and has therefore nothing to do with Virtual Reality. Croissant is aware of this argument and refutes it by

saying that “if that were entirely true, there would have been no need for Levitra and Cialis, drugs advertised to make up for the perceived lacunae in Viagra, particularly the uncontrollable timing of erections” (p. 335). In this chapter, I develop further arguments in support of the virtual character of Viagra sex by looking more closely at its socio-cultural functions determined by a curious interdependence of the physical and the psychological. It is not a coincidence that the virtualization of sexuality could be pushed through most successfully in the realm of ED because, according to the European Association of Urology, “ED is probably never purely organic or purely psychogenic in origin; almost all cases have a mixed aetiology” (Dean, et al., 2006, p. 781). A peculiar mixture of the real (physical) and the unreal (psychological), the natural and the acquired, the seen and the unseen, has been present in the Viagra phenomenon from the beginning. It makes us lose hold of our usual, common-sensical notions of the real.

2. “Desire is Always There”

The most intriguing claims about Viagra and the virtual can be made when thinking about the phenomenon of desire. Sex without desire is macho sex. The macho man is compulsive which means that he perceives desire as being identical with a compulsive drive. The macho man might use Viagra as an aphrodisiac though he will always claim that he is *not*, pointing to Pfizer’s commercials, which clearly confirm his claim. According to Pfizer scientists, Viagra does not *cause* an erection but *helps* an erection that has been *desired* beforehand. The descriptions of the pharmacological notices that C. R. Samama offers in his contribution to the present volume make this very clear. The drug can augment an erection but not cause one to occur by itself.¹ The difference is subtle but important. Viagra enhances but does not create; it does not even augment the desire but merely helps the erection. More technically speaking, Viagra does not *produce* the chemical GMP which causes the involved muscles to relax, but only inhibits its breakdown (Levine, 2001, p. 238). Because erections do not occur without some kind of sexual stimulation, Viagra is not perceived as an aphrodisiac, though the result is similar. With Viagra the macho man is able to have his cake and eat it too—to have the benefits of an aphrodisiac without having to admit that he has taken one.

The media rarely respect the difference between an enhanced and a produced erection, that is, between “virtual desire made actual” and fake desire with its necessary consequence: a fake erection. In spite of Pfizer’s well chosen rhetoric, Viagra is “represented in various media as a drug that could increase desire, that could make you super, duper horny” (Vares, p. 327). For many, Viagrazation means dildoization (McLaren, 2007, p. 236). The first problem is the mechanistic model, which invites such an abuse. Second, the confusing of desire with sex-drive—a fallacy that is already contained in Freud’s

materialistic definition of the libido as “sexual drive”—leads to an artificial view of sex in general. The separation of the arousal’s manifestation from the socio-psychological stimulus called desire is artificial; who can rule out that arousal is unable to *augment* desire? Arousal is just one of the components that equip the erotic place determined by desire in which sexuality is located. For Viagra engineers, on the other hand, “desire is not considered (...) and its presence is rarely questioned” (Potts, 2004b, p. 24).

As a result, Viagra “enables a man to match his physical ability with his assumed desire for sex” (Potts, *ibid.*). As subtle as the distinction between ‘enhanced’ and ‘produced’ may appear, in the end it is meaningless. Desire is always *present* and Viagra makes things function in the present: “Men always want sex. Desire is never the problem” (Mamo & Fishman, 2001, p. 21). In Master’s and Johnson’s “Human Sexual Response Cycle,” desire has been included as a stage preliminary to arousal and orgasm (Marshall, 2002, p. 135). While Freud materialized desire and turned it into a drive, Viagra dematerializes desire and turns it into a virtual quality that is always potentially available and can be made present at any moment by a drug: “The assumption seems to be that if you can get the penis ‘functioning’ properly, desire will follow and/or simply be enacted” (Marshall, 2002, p. 136).

We should take the Viagra engineers by their word and reflect for a while on the difference between enhancement and production. Since Viagra does not *produce* an erection, what is it that produces an erection? The question is difficult to answer, but let us concur for the moment that there must be a force that is commonly referred to as *desire*. Where and when exactly does desire enter into the discussion? It is not true that desire is always there; even Pfizer scientists recognize that this is a bland simplification: “A successful erection, Pfizer scientists deemed, requires arousal, brain messages to the penis, release of nitric oxide, expanded blood vessels, and increased blood flow to the penis” (Loe, 2004, p. 45). Do the brain activities create desire or are they the result of desire? The latter is obviously the case. Then why would the brain send these messages? It sends messages because there is a desire, but the desire must be stimulated by a real or imagined environment and not simply be present in the form of a virtual quality made real by Viagra.

What all this means is that the Viagra vision of sex does not negate the existence of desire nor does it declare desire to be ever-present, but that it incorporates desire into its mechanical model in the form of an ever-present *potential quality*. By declaring desire to be neither present nor absent but virtual, scientists circumvent the existence of the soulless ego-body described by Robert Redeker in this volume. How can the body be soulless if there is desire? For Viagra scientists, undesired, disinterested, “mindless sex ‘like a battery man’ (i.e. in the fashion of an automaton)” (Potts, 2004a, p. 5) is simply impossible. For them, the Viagra body is not a machine-body with a techno-implanted desire, but a “natural” body that has been refashioned until it has

become “more ‘real’ than the real thing” (Mamo & Fishman, 2001, p. 21). Using Redeker’s terminology, we can say that inside the Viagra-enhanced “appliance-body” of constantly flowing energy, the drug will finally work like nature: “The user is unable to tell where his body leaves off and technology begins; it is a seamless, ‘natural’ integration” (Mamo & Fishman, *ibid.*). However, this is a fallacy because “real” desire has no place in the Viagra model. Real desire is not a potential quantity readily available within a linear script of foreplay to intercourse to orgasm. It is part of a politics of pleasure “fought out” in real space.

3. Viagra and Nature

Some say that it is testosterone that creates desire;² however, in reality desire is a highly contextual notion that cannot be objectified though psychoanalysis did exactly that, by turning desire into the libido, the sex-drive, or the will. When Morgentaler holds that impotence has been “misinterpreted in the past as the failure of a man’s will,”³ the “will” is not understood as an intellectually controllable instance, but rather as a drive permanently “present” and unable to fail as such. This means that the sex-drive is simply *nature* and Viagra “does not increase the sex drive” (Loe, 2004, p. 46) but merely fosters its physical manifestation. The use of Viagra is declared to be “normal” and “natural” because, according to Pfizer, the erection will “occur with normal sexual arousal” (Vares, 2006, p. 320) enabling the Viagra engineers to describe the entire process through which the virtual becomes actual in naturalistic terms. The exclusion of the cultural dimension of sex, that is the reduction of desire and eroticism to a drive or a will unable to fail, enables Viagra to become “natural” in a very peculiar sense: “One of the primary scripts that the advertizing texts rely on is the links forged between the technology of Viagra and the ‘natural’” (Mamo & Fishman, 2001, p. 21). This means that we have to do here with a sort of virtual version of nature. Viagra pretends to do nothing more than help the body do again what it is supposed to do *naturally* by “bring[ing] an involuntary bodily response under the control of a pill” (Elliott, 2003, p. 83). Both will and pill are able to overcome the body and this is called a “natural” process. That this is absurd is demonstrated when, in the end, we are asked to consider as “natural” a seventy year old man who begins to function like a twenty year old. The only reason this man *can* conceive of his capacities as “natural” is because he restricts his perception of sexuality to the existing internal link between arousal and erection (a link that is severed in the case of the “unnatural” aphrodisiac). If I’m not aroused, I don’t get an erection. Ergo: Viagra is natural. This internal logic creates a self-sufficient “natural” reality, which is thinkable only as long as the “natural” is not linked to anything concrete.

Viagra provides the ability to “respond naturally again, (...) it does not seem to be doing anything artificially, it just restores a function that was there naturally, in the younger days” (Potts, 2004a, p. 5). However, in the real world, “nature” can mean many different things. Sylvanus Stall, in his 1901 book for example, suggests “that it was *nature’s course* to diminish sexual power in men once their peak reproductive fitness had passed.”⁴ Stall saw sexuality as a concrete place determined by desire dependent on age and concluded that *this* was natural.

The result of this simplification is the complete confusion of desire, drive and hydraulics, paradoxically conveying Viagra (which is purely medical) a cultural status similar to that of Prozac and other psycho-pharmaka. In reality, these drugs, just like Boehringer’s “female Viagra,” which increases dopamine and norepinephrine, are very different from Viagra because they work directly on the brain. If Viagra did work on the brain it would not create a virtual reality, but an imagined, hallucinated or fake reality.

Now, through the sex-drive’s virtualization on the one hand, and through its simultaneous equation with desire on the other, Viagra can be perceived as a natural phenomenon. In the popular view, Viagra does *not* function like beta-blockers, which “prevent the body from what it naturally does” (Elliot, 2003, p. 83) but it merely restores a natural function. “Function” becomes an abstract category disconnected from any concrete time and place; it is virtual. In the worst case, Viagra will become a “desiring machine” taken as a drug against “low desire disorder” (Potts et al., 2003, p. 715) and believed to be able to interfere in psychological conditions and not merely in connections between a psychological condition and its bodily manifestation.

4. Viagra and the Self

Marie-Laure Ryan, in her book on virtual reality, explains that “the virtual is not that which is deprived of existence, but that which possesses the potential, or force, of developing into actual existence” (Ryan, 2001, p. 27). In the medico-scientific terms issued by phallic engineers, erections are placeless, abstract phenomena that can be enhanced by a pill. The Pfizer “reality” is not the erotic *real* place able to create desire but the artificial reality fed by a *virtual* desire that is assumed to be perpetually present simply because it is potential. Just like the gene, the sex-drive does not exist in a real and actual form but is only *made real* and actual through Viagra.

As I have shown elsewhere (2006), genes are not concrete elements but express more or less evident facts existing within certain conditions. Though the physicist Erwin Schrödinger attempted concrete descriptions of the gene as “large molecules” or “crystals or solids” (Schrödinger, 1956, p. 29), the history of genetics shows that, in the end, definitions of the gene as something “material,” were abandoned. “Genetic information” was declared to exist not

on a molecular basis, but in “DNA sequences” or so called “programs,” or, in an even more abstract fashion, as information that is not directly linked to “biological meaning.”

The self-sufficient model of sex that is not *located* in an erotic place or time, but based on a virtual model of desire leads to the loss of the self as a desiring locality. Robert Redeker explains, in the present volume, why the Viagra body is not only without a soul but also without a self. At times, glimpses of the “self” are incorrectly reproduced through the idea of the Viagra erection as a “self-produced reaction.” However, what can “self-produced” actually mean if not “being produced by a *desiring* self?” The self cannot be reduced to a hydraulically efficient body. Potts is right when claiming that the distinction between “self-produced erections and erections generated through the use of a drug” (Potts, 2004a, p. 12) is blurred. More precisely, for this definition of the erection a desiring self did not exist from the beginning. James Waddell has pointed out that any questions about the self and the other “arise from my existing in a world where I am oriented towards others and they are oriented towards me. The questions are about linkage in a shared world, where fields of possibilities overlap, reform, and create fresh ones” (Waddell, 1997, p. 7). Within the Viagra model, on the other hand, desire as a cultural or socially interactive component has no specific role to play as Viagra simply makes a potential, ever-present, and “natural” sex-drive “real.” This is why Viagra leads to a “fastfood technological depersonalization” (Levine, 2001, p. 241) in the realm of sexuality.

More so than any other philosopher, Alexandre Kojève has insisted on the importance of an environment conducive for the formation of a desiring self. Especially in sexuality, desire always remains the “desire of the desire of the other.” We do not simply desire, but we desire to be desired because we want the recognition of the other. Kojève insists that it is by “‘his’ Desire that man is formed and revealed—to himself and to others—as an I, as the I that is essentially different from, and radically opposed to, the non-I. The (human) I is the I of a Desire or of Desire” (Kojève, 1969, p. 4). There is no abstract desire that can be formulated as a drive. Humans who are merely reacting to drives and not to desires simply have no self:

Therefore, to desire the Desire of another is in the final analysis to desire the value that I am or that I “represent” the value of the other: I want him to “recognize” my value as his value. I want him to recognize me as an autonomous value. In other words, all human, anthropogenetic Desire—the Desire that generates Self-Consciousness, *the human reality*—is, finally, a function of the desire for recognition. (p. 7)

Obviously, Kojève is talking about the real world and not about Virtual Reality. In the real world there is impotence and there is the self; and, in the words of

Robert Redeker, the self is “agony, battle and doubt.” Any sign of potency is only possible when there is also a sign of impotence.

Slavoj Žižek, who addresses the Viagra phenomenon in his book *The Ticklish Subject* (1999, pp. 382-284), explains that Viagra desexualizes copulation because it deprives male potency of its mystique (a point that some feminists might like because it makes men and women equal). Though Žižek does not point to the virtual dimension of Viagra, but treats it rather like an aphrodisiac, he insists that the possibility of impotence must exist because it is a true psychological attitude. Žižek is fascinated by “this gap, the fact that it is never directly ‘me’, my Self, who can freely decide on erection” because there remains a quantity of the “unfathomable X” which decides on erections. In sexuality like elsewhere, the self is not entirely self-determined, is not simply dependent on willpower or rational-instrumental procedures, but inserted into a place where it is determined by other selves.

There is no place for the self and for “real” desire as a desire to be desired in the Viagra scenario. The lack of interactivity becomes clearest through Žižek’s description of a world in which Viagra manages desire: “What will remain of a woman’s notion of being properly attractive to a man,” that is, how can she satisfy her desire to be desired? Žižek concludes that Viagra desexualizes sex because, in the end, nothing will be left of the “phallic dimension of symbolic potency.” Symbolic notions are a matter of a concrete place, they become real only through the recognition of the other. For Žižek, the man who takes Viagra has a penis, but no phallus. In the light of such claims, recent statements like those by scientists in the *British Medical Bulletin*, that Viagra “may be used as a personal resource improving self-confidence and esteem positively enhancing relationships” (Rubin & Wylie, 2009, p. 58) sound ridiculous.

Viagra engineers have also disliked the idea that potency is dependent upon the will. As mentioned, Morgentaler criticizes the idea that impotence has been “misinterpreted in the past as the failure of a man’s will” because this will remains intellectually uncontrollable. They redefine the will as a drive unable to fail as such because it is permanently and virtually present and only sometimes not real. And then Viagra can help. Interestingly, the functional character of Viagra negates not only the real, but also the imagination which is such an important part of sexual reality. It is important to point out the distinction between the virtual and the imaginary. While the virtual is unerotic and desexualizing, imagination is highly sexual. Very often this difference is not acknowledged. Croissant, for example, mentions the augmentation of sexual fantasy through pornography which has, in her opinion, “a hyperreal quality that produces models of women’s bodies and sexuality that no ‘real’ women can live up to” (p. 336). However, pornography is not virtual but imagined, which is—withstanding the mechanized character of pornography—still in the field of the erotic.

In his film *The Perverts Guide to Cinema*, Žižek (2006) points to the necessary transference of the erotic place into the realm of the imagination: “In sexuality, it’s never only me and my partner, or more partners, whatever you are doing. There has to be always some fantasmatic element. There has to be some third imagined element which makes it possible for me, which enables me, to engage in sexuality.” Žižek explains that the mere “reality” of sexuality can actually feel quite bland (“my God, what am I doing here, doing these stupid repetitive movements”) without some fantasmatic support. Sex is constantly permeated by the unreal, but not by the virtual which is disconnected from both reality and imagination.

5. Conclusion

The restoration of a natural male function via Viagra does *not* lead to the creation of a reality. When Potts and Tiefer say that a Viagra-assisted super-erection *seems* to be real but it is actually fake, we have to ask what are the standards of reality? The erection is *there*, why would it be fake? Finally, an erection is proof for the existence of a sex-drive—what could be more real? It is real just like “Andropause is a fact, not a fiction” (Nicolls quoted from Marshall, 2007, p. 520). The problem is that reality is always linked to a time/place, which is in this case the time/place of desire. Super-erections might be “natural” at a certain place and a certain time, but they are not natural in others. The confusion of desire and drive leads to circular reflections that turn desire into a virtual phenomenon disconnected from concrete reality; why bother about desire if Viagra gives you an erection anyway? Or a Viagra consumer might think that the fact that he has an erection proves that there must have been desire. Here reality becomes genuinely virtual in the sense of a self-producing reality unable to refer to authenticity. Authenticity can only exist in time/place.

Desire is real; however, it is nothing but a condition perpetually produced in time and space. In other words, sex takes place in time and space conditioned by desire. The consumption of too much alcohol, for example, influences desire as much as age. Desire produces its own time and space that cannot not be dictated by Viagra. Obviously, Levitra and Cialis, are advertised “to make up for the perceived lacunae in Viagra, particularly the uncontrollable timing of erections” (Croissant, 2006, p. 336). The problem is that desire is never perpetual (like Virtual Reality) but the space of desire is rather a tragic land, “tragic” in the sense in which it is defined by Nietzsche. It is no Newtonian physical space that can be measured in inches but rather an Aristotelian, “natural” place subjected to the laws of space and time.

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1. A. Morgentaler, "Male Impotence" in *Lancet*, 354 (1999), p. 1713, quoted from Thompson, 2008, p. 77.
 2. Cf. Marshall 2006 quoting R. Werland, 'Manhood Checkup', *Chicago Tribune*, 27 June 2004, 9: "If you think you can Viagra your way out of this one, think again: It and similar drugs might help with the mechanics, but not with desire; testosterone is what fires the libido" (p. 352).
 3. Morgentaler quoted from Thompson, 2008, p. 83.
 4. Sylvanus Stall, Stall, S. *What a Man of Forty-Five Ought to Know*. Philadelphia: VIR Publishing Co. 1901, p. 59, quoted from Marshall, 2006, p. 346, my italics. Marshall continues: "The author saw this as an advantage because 'the stress of passion will be past, the imagination will become more chastened, the heart more refined, the lines of intellectual and spiritual vision lengthened, the sphere of usefulness enlarged'."