

# QUEERING DESIRE

## Knowing "Feeling"

**Desire** is one of the most difficult concepts to define, certainly to the satisfaction of those who would use the word, and often seems to defy the powers of language to produce meaning. We often use it as synonym for other words—*love*, *attraction*, *longing*, *wanting*—and certainly each of these words helps us get closer to an understanding of what individuals may mean by the word, though no single one of them stands satisfactorily in the place of *desire*. Complicating the problem are the ways in which various of the human sciences and arts go about defining, describing, and, in some cases, measuring *desire*, and, indeed, there are those who might scoff at the idea of being able to quantify desire itself. Similarly, another difficulty is that the word is more often than not tied to a particular domain of experience: we might ask, is “sexual desire” the same as “desire for peace,” or “desire for chocolate”? Obviously, in each case in the previous sentence, the object of desire is different (sex, peace, chocolate), but is the nature of what it means to desire them the same or different? Nonetheless, since much of what moves people to identify as queer (or to be identified as such by others, including non-queers) originates in desire, it is necessary to explore it, even if it feels always slightly out of reach—as, indeed, such psychoanalytic theorists as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and others suggest is the nature of desire: that which, if satisfied, no longer exists as desire.

### DESIRE: “THE SPIRIT’S WINGS” OR “THAT FIERY SADNESS”?

The first phrase used to describe desire in the heading above comes from the German Romantic poet and dramatist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who described desire as that which lifts the spirit (or soul) up and enables it to take flight and to transcend the everyday things that would interfere with achievement and happiness. The modern poet, composer, and musical performer Patti Smith coined the phrase “that fiery sadness” as a metaphor

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING AND VIEWING

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