

# Frameworks, rituals, mirroring effects. A queer reading of the SM relationship

MASSIMO FUSILLO

**ABSTRACT:** Sadomasochism played an important role in Foucault's reflection on power and sexuality; according to this perspective, some theorists highlighted the queer potential of BDSM: the ability to create a space for the experimentation of new relationalities. This vision certainly depicts some subversive aspects of BDSM culture, such as the figure of the *dominatrix* or the practice of gender reversal, but it sounds too anarchistic and one-sided, since in the BDSM prevails a fascination for totalizing and coherent roles. This paper will argue that the queer nature of the master and slave relationship lies in its performative and ritual character: in its exaggerating scenes and costumes in a specific setting, and in its presenting power as a consensual game, based on empathy and mirroring effects. After this theoretical discussion, which will cover Lacan's concept of masquerade as re-used by Linda Williams, the paper will analyse some of the few literary and artistic representations of BDSM devoid of stereotypes: especially some recurrent scenes in Robbe-Grillet's production, which can be read in parallelism with his wife's Catherine Robbe-Grillet's activity as *dominatrix*.

**KEYWORDS:** BDSM, Performativity, Power, Empathy, Masquerade, Robbe-Grillet

Sadomasochism intersects with gender at the point of performance. We perform our identities, which include gender, and we perform our relationships, which include sex. Transgender is simply identity more consciously performed on the infrequently used playing field of gender. S/M is simply a relationship more consciously performed within the forbidden arena of power.

Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw. On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*.

The universe of BDSM, which is an overlapping acronym of Bondage and Discipline (BD), Dominance and Submission (DS), Sadism and Masochism (SM), defines a complex and variegated ensemble of sexual practices, all safe, sane and consensual, which can be read in terms of queer relationalities, not only because they transcend any rigid correspondence between gender and roles, but especially because they all stress the performative character of any sexual behaviour. A particular clear and effective example could be age play, a marginal practice which does not generally feature in

the current BDSM landscape, but which is totally based on mental identification and on strong performative strategies. A seventy-year-old male can feel and act like a seven years old young girl, and this can be part of an intensive relationship of domination/submission, coded by protocols and ethical rules (no sex is allowed, of course), or can be, on the contrary, a solitary and emancipatory performance. The same twofold alternative can be found in dog training and other forms of deliberate animalization, based on identification with other species and on a non-genital sexuality; even more in objectification and mummification, which deconstruct the border between organic and inorganic, or in the practice of chastity belts, focussed on domination as de-sexualization. Moreover, other practices of repurposing the genitals, such as cock and ball torture (CBT) have been read in terms of “deterritorializing bodies” (Holmes, Murray, Knack, Mercier, Fedoroff). Finally, this performative element is particularly evident and striking in the various BDSM role plays, usually activated by complex, literary scripts: dad/son, cop/arrested, military camps, prisons, mental hospitals. They often re-enact and deconstruct power relationships, thus arousing a negative empathy which can have a strong cathartic function, especially if it plays out scenes of discrimination such as simulations of homophobic violence by naziskins, or rape scenes with a consensual non-consent.

I will focus on the most famous and so to say canonical kind of sexuality inside the wider BDSM universe, sadomasochism, which is usually (but not necessarily) linked to a very specific form or relationality, the master-mistress/slave (M/S) relationship. It is exactly this kind of relationality which can be read in queer terms, giving rise to some interesting hermeneutical problems.

SM fully exploits and radicalizes the profound connection between sex and power which is at the core of manifold creative and philosophical experiences (from Sade to Bataille), and which is notably central in Michel Foucault’s late works, not incidentally an author who practiced BDSM in his own personal biographical experience. Let us read a good synthesis of Foucault’s theory by Lisa Downing (2007: 127, emphasis mine):

Foucault espied in Sm the potential for constructing an alternative form of community and relationality, which would escape regulatory and normative relations of knowledge and power, *by playing with and de-contextualizing that power*. SM dramatizes the elasticity and two-way directionality of power as re-conceptualised

by Foucault (a productive and mobile relationship of exertion and resistance, rather than a top-down model of oppression) by enabling players to reverse the roles of dominant and subordinate partner at any given point (unlike in the fixed hierarchies of society) [...]. Moreover Foucault saw in SM a desexualisation of pleasure, by which he meant the possibility of reconfiguring bodily pleasures in ways that are not dependent on the traditional meaning and functions. He also saw it as a means of accessing 'limit-experiences', a term he borrows from Bataille.

I anticipate that for me one element of this passage, «at any given point» is highly problematic, while on the contrary the concept of de-contextualization sounds extremely helpful and important. But let us proceed gradually. Foucault's vision certainly gave a significant impulse to queer readings of BDSM in terms of a safe space, a territory of experimentation, which allows to transcend biological sex and fixed roles, and to express a performative and polymorphic sexuality. From this point of view, we can certainly mention the figure of *dominatrix* as a true subversion of the normative cultural image which identifies masculinity with activity and power.

As a matter of fact, though interesting and seductive, this interpretation does not describe the most common practices of BDSM, in which the switching of roles is still a minority choice, although it is increasing in the new generations, more and more attracted by fluidity in sexual dynamics (however, these statements are based on my personal experience, and I do not know any scientific literature on this topic). BDSM shows, on the contrary, a fascination for totalizing, pure and coherent roles, because it thematises and exploits power. The Foucauldian and queer interpretation proves in my opinion too easily anarchistic and one-sided, especially when it assumes a totally free and immediate interchangeability of roles, "at any given point" of the relationship. Switching appears to be quite rare inside the framework of a single session, and is more conceivable in a polyamoric context and in multiple coexistent relationships, but less so within a single one.

In my opinion we must look for other perspectives to explore the queer potential of SM relationalities, not incompatible with Foucault's vision, but with a wider range of application and reading. A good suggestion comes from porn studies, especially from an article by Anne McClintock, titled *Maid to Order. Commercial S/M and Gender Power* (2003: 238):

Hence the paradox of consensual S/M. On the one hand, it seems to parade a servile obedience to conventions of power. In its clichéd reverence for formal ritual,

it is the most ceremonial and decorous of practices [...]. As theatre, S/M borrows its décor, props and costumery (bonds, chains, ropes, blindfolds) and its scenes (bedrooms, kitchens, dungeons, convents, prisons, empire) from the everyday cultures of power. At first glance, then, S/M seems a servant to orthodox power. Yet, on the contrary, with its exaggerated emphasis on costume and scene S/M performs social power as *scripted*, and hence as permanently subject to change. As a theatre of conversion, S/M reverses and transmutes the social meaning it borrows, yet also without finally stepping outside the enchantment of its magic circle. In S/M, paradox is paraded, not resolved.

The subversive value of SM lies chiefly in its ritual and performative character: in presenting, living, and therefore deconstructing, power as a consensual game. This element of parody is the best answer to the attacks coming from some trends of feminist thought, which consider BDSM as the ultimate expression of patriarchy and, as such, inherently fascist (RETI 1993). A valuable contribution comes from Robin Bauer's brilliant fieldwork on dyke + queer BDSM, based on interviews with persons of extremely various sexual identities, and on transgender studies. She deconstructs the heteronormative ideal of harmonic sex, highlighting on the contrary:

alternative intimacies and, more specifically, exuberant intimacies, intimacies that reject reason, moderation, mediocrity, harmony and equality as well as reproduction and usefulness. Instead, alternative intimacies celebrate difference, tension, intensity, risk, excess, ecstasy, wastefulness, perversity, campy extravagance, fluidity and insanity as well as becoming something beyond the human. Yet, since all this occurs in a space that is partially contained through the negotiating of consent, exuberant intimacies present an alternative sexual ethics rather than transgressiveness *per se* (2014: 4).

The mannerist, almost camp excess of theatrical elements aims at highlighting the limits, the frames and the coded character of the game, but this very important factor, with which we will deal later, does not imply a literal theatricality of BDSM; on the contrary, there are strong differences with theatre as aesthetic experience. A BDSMer does not and cannot have the detachment from his role that an actor must constantly have, even in the most empathic praxis.

The interpretation I am suggesting here was implicit in Foucault's concept of de-contextualizing power, or in Leo Bersani's definition of BDSM as "a laboratory testing the erotic potential in the most oppressive social

structures” (1995: 100); but they must be better articulated. Before doing that, I would like to criticize another too simplistic attitude, which is quite widespread and has significant philosophical and artistic backgrounds. I am referring to the Deleuzian (and Pasolinian) aesthetic of masochism, which deliberately separates it from sadism, exalting it as a true and profound renunciation of power. In this case too I take some suggestions from porn studies, in particular from their formerly pioneering and now most canonical work, Linda Williams’s *Hard core*, in a passage devoted to the discussion of Kaja Silvermann’s theories (1999: 207): “There is often a more complex play of gender roles in films and fantasies that can be accounted for by appealing either to a sadistic male gaze or to a pre-oedipal masochistic merger»; and later on: «I think that the masquerade is part of the very nature of a sadomasochism that has been too often understood as inalterable passivity and powerless suffering. In other words, the masquerade of femininity [...] is actually an oscillation within sadomasochism which is not identical to pure passivity” (1999: 208).

Exploiting Lacan’s concept of masquerade, Linda Williams questions any rigid dichotomy in sadomasochism, highlighting the oscillations and the intersections which are at the core of every viewer’s experience. The same phenomenon can be recognized in SM practice, even if the roles are rigidly coded inside the frame of each session, because the M/S relationship is animated by various empathic strategies.

BDSM is a practice based on consent, mutual respect, and identification. The M must feel a strong empathy towards the S, in order to understand his/her emotional responses, and to create a profound mental dialogue. That usually happens through a wise use of the gaze, and through some mirroring effects: the M sees the S as a part of his/her self, because of the above-mentioned interconnection between sadism and masochism; sometimes in particular as a part of his/her past, since a previous experience of submission is a usual presupposition in the experience of a dominant, especially when the age difference amplifies the performance of power.

Conceived in these terms, the SM relationship is a playful transformation of (self-)destructive drives, which can have a strong cathartic and even therapeutic value, as it has been stated by Dossie Easton’s reading (2007), based on a Jungian category, shadow. The Aristotelian concept of catharsis can also be particularly valuable, because it links the SM relationship and its performative character to the social function of art and imagery, and

especially to the crucial function of discharge. In our aesthetic experiences we can elaborate the most obscure strata of our psyche through positive and negative empathy; in a similar way in BDSM one can discharge power, violence and oppression through their serious parody and their performative de-contextualization.

Consensual games and performances need a clear frame to be effective. This is a sociological concept which turns to be now a crucial element of visual theory and cinematic experience. In BDSM frames are highlighted in multifarious ways, emphasizing borders, thresholds, and autonomous settings totally separated from everyday life, such as dungeons and play-rooms. The transition from the everyday world to the BDSM session can have different gradations, sometimes following complex protocols, usually negotiated in advance. The presence of a safe word, which guarantees the immediate interruption of the game at any given point in case of any trouble or discontent, also highlights the sense of the frame, although it is generally rarely used (the M usually feels the necessity of a break before any request), or even refused, in order to push the boundaries to the extreme or to a voluntary excess (on the sexual performativity of the word “no” see KULICK 2003). Nevertheless, there is an undeniable trend to totalization in BDSM, as usually in relationships with a high emotional involvement. Hence the so-called 24/7, which can be a rather problematic practice from a political point of view, since it recreates the classic patriarchal power system, especially if the relation is between a male master and a female slave. Of course there is a crucial difference: in the SM relationship everything is a deliberate, consensual and negotiated choice, not an act of oppression and violence. Nevertheless, the absence of a frame reduces the performative and parodic nature of BDSM. As I have already hinted at, the solution is gradation: even in a 24/7 SM relationship there are different dosages and different forms of domination, which make the relationality more flexible.

My last point regards literary and artistic imagery. Why has this complex and nuanced kind of relationality I tried to describe so far so rarely been represented in literature and arts which dealt with sadomasochism? Why do shady, damned and violent connotations usually prevail, instead of a focalization on consensual and cathartic game (leaving aside the militant BDSM literature)? I have two very different answers to this question. One is more political and more predictable, and involves what we usually call hetero/homonormativity, which emphasizes genital sexuality

and the (monogamous) couple, and marginalizes, spectralizes, demonizes every other form of relationality and sexuality. This is certainly the most important factor. But I think that there is also another reason, which involves the aesthetic field, and what we called the discharge function. To depict non-consensual violence in a well-structured narrative context can be much more effective from the point of view of dramaturgy and catharsis. This phenomenon overlaps with the dynamics of negative empathy: in the literature of every age and in the cinema of every genre, especially in contemporary productions (for example TV series, such as *Breaking Bad*), we identify with more or less fascinating evil characters, who are totally far from our values and ethical choices. It is an important phenomenon, systematically overlooked by current studies on empathy, which surely is a component of the social function of arts.

A good example to understand this mechanism can be Alain Robbe-Grillet. In his narrative and filmic production, especially in his last, postmodern phase, we frequently find sadomasochistic scenes and episodes, especially in the movies *Glissement progressif du plaisir* (France, 1974) and in *La Belle captive* (France, 1983), but they are chiefly non-consensual, strictly linked to his poetics of murder and of anti-psychological narration, totally focused on objects and settings. It is certainly an aesthetic choice in my opinion, not a concession to mainstream culture and heteronormativity. In his personal life Robbe-Grillet was a passionate BDSMer: thanks to a good financial loan by his publisher, he could even buy a beautiful castle, the 17th-century Château du Mesnil-au-Grain (he was only its fifth owner since its construction, and the first without aristocratic lineage), and equip it as a perfect dungeon. His wife, Catherine Rstakian, was first his submissive, and subsequently became a famous dominatrix; after working as actress and photographer she devoted herself to writing, giving convincing representations of SM relationships and an interesting picture of her life with Alain, which could mix intense sentimental involvement and an open relationship based on the mutual telling of their BDSM experience. Her production is quite variegated, alternating fiction, autofiction, theatre, interviews, movies, sometimes under the pseudonym Jeanne de Berg (the two novels *Image*, adapted as a movie by the sexploitation director Radley Metzger, and *Cérémonies de femmes*), sometimes as Catherine Robbe Grillet, sometimes in collaboration with Dennise Cooper or with her much younger submissive, Beverly Charpentier. Now, in her nineties, she is

still active, and defines herself as a «scenographe de BDSM», stressing once again the importance of setting. If we take into consideration this biographical background, we can state that Alain Robbe-Grillet's choice of representing non-consensual sadomasochism was due to its cathartic and expressive power.

I would like to conclude with a positive signal regarding a less criminalizing and stigmatizing vision of BDSM in the media: the recent short TV series *Bonding*, which tells the story of the collaboration between a gay young man and a straight *dominatrix*, representing, in a playful and ironic way, various BDSM practices, from age play to pissing, from bondage to whipping, totally deprived of the usual connotations of perversion, monstrosity, and arbitrary violence. On the contrary, BDSM can contribute to a queer dismantling of hetero/homonormative hierarchy, which privileges genital sex, and can broaden and enrich the forms of pleasure, as the late Foucault's utopianism argued. It can show how every part of the body, every kind of object (from diapers to handcuffs, from bowls to coshes, from boots to ties) can be part of intense erotic, subversive experiences.

Massimo Fusillo

massimo.fusillo@univaq.it  
Università dell'Aquila

## REFERENCES

- BAUER R., 2014, *Queer BDSM Intimacies. Critical Consent and Pushing Boundaries*, Palgrave MacMillan, London-New York.
- BERSANI L., 1995, *Homos*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA.
- DOWNING, L., 2007, "Beyond Safety: Erotic Asphyxiation and the Limits of SM Discourse", in LANGRIDGE, BARKER 2007: 119-134.
- EASTON D., "Shadowplay: S/M Journeys into Our Selves", in LANGRIDGE, BARKER 2007: 217-228.
- HOLMES D., MURRAY S. J., KNACK N., MERCIER M., FEDOROFF P., 2018, "Degenitalizing the Sexual: BDSM practices and the *deterritorialization* of bodies and pleasures", in HOLMES D., MURRAY S.J., FOTH T. eds., *Radical Sex Between Men. Assembling Desire-Machines*, Routledge, London-New York: 117-141.
- JENKINS H., GIBSON P.C., 2003, eds., *More Dirty Looks. Gender, Pornography and Power*, Palgrave BFI, London.
- KULICK D. 2003, "No", in *Language & Communication*, 23: 139-151.



- LANGRIDGE D., BARKER M., 2007, eds., *Safe, Sane and Consensual. Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- MCCLINTOCK A., "Maid to Order. Commercial S/M and Gender Power", in JENKINS and GIBSON 2003: 237-253.
- RETI I., 1993, "Remember the Fire: Lesbian Sadomasochism in a Post Nazi Holocaust World", in RETI I. ed., *Unleashing Feminism. Critiquing Lesbian Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties*, HerBooks, Santa Cruz: 79-99.
- WILLIAMS L., 1999, *Hard Core. Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*, Expanded Edition, University of California Press, Los Angeles.

