

Pleasure and Danger: notes on feminism, sex shops and S/M

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Sexuality, culture and politics A South American reader

Although mature and vibrant, Latin American scholarship on sexuality still remains largely invisible to a global readership. In this collection of articles translated from Portuguese and Spanish, South American scholars explore the values, practices, knowledge, moralities and politics of sexuality in a variety of local contexts. While conventionally read as an intellectual legacy of Modernity, Latin American social thinking and research has in fact brought singular forms of engagement with, and new ways of looking at, political processes. Contributors to this reader have produced fresh and situated understandings of the relations between gender, sexuality, culture and society across the region. Topics in this volume include sexual politics and rights, sexual identities and communities, eroticism, pornography and sexual consumerism, sexual health and well-being, intersectional approaches to sexual cultures and behavior, sexual knowledge, and sexuality research methodologies in Latin America.

Pleasure and Danger: notes on feminism, sex shops and S/M*

Maria Filomena Gregori**

This article will deal with pornography. It will examine, in particular, some of porn's interfaces with feminism. These two social practices were initially seen as antagonistic, especially within a puritan cultural milieu. Today, however, we are witnessing the creation of a politically correct eroticism whose activists are also involved in aiding and advocating for sexual minorities. The discussion that follows situates the debate in the emergence of this new aspect of eroticism and identifies its most immediate implications. On the one hand, this represents a shift in understandings of eroticism, from transgression to meanings increasingly associated with the healthy care of the body and the strengthening of the *self*. On the other hand, it is also a neutralization—a domestication of sorts—of the violence involved in sadomasochist practices.¹

It is tempting to take as our starting point the definition of pornography widely accepted among experts:² written or visual expressions that present, in a realistic form, genital or sexual behavior with the deliberate intention of violating moral and social taboos.³ This notion of pornography as a transgression of sanctioned moral conventions is found in the works of authors such as Pietro Aretino from the sixteenth century onwards. According to historians of pornography, it sums up the modern meaning of this type of representation.⁴ However, the analysis of the effects of this tradition on gender issues

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¹ This article is a modified version of the text "Relations of violence and eroticism" published in *Cadernos Pagu* (20). Many of the ideas discussed here emerged from research carried out in the USA, with FAPESP support, as well as from discussions with my friends and colleagues Adriana Piscitelli, Guita Debert, Heloísa Pontes, Iara Belleli, Mariza Corrêa and my students in the Violence, Gender and Eroticism course at the Graduate Program in Social Sciences and Gender Studies during the first semester of 2003. To all of them I owe special thanks.

² Although common sense establishes a distinction between eroticism and pornography, I use the two terms interchangeably, following those who study the tradition of erotic writings and images from the Renaissance onwards. See Lynn Hunt *The Invention of Pornography – Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1993).

³ Peter Wagner, *Eros Revived: Erotica of the Enlightenment in England and America*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1988.

⁴ According to Lynn Hunt, the pornographic tradition reveals many things about the consolidation of modern culture, especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From Ragonamenti de Aretino's sonnets (1534-36), through L'Ecole des Filles (1655), to the Marquis de Sade's writings in the seventeenth century, pornography highlights the confrontation between free thought and the idea of heresy; it also appropriates aspects of natural philosophy and science and challenges absolutism.

is still limited. Moreover, even though this depth of analysis is not the aim of this article, it is worth emphasizing that the conception of eroticism as a transgression of moral convention is permeated throughout by masculine/feminine dynamics which, in turn, revolve around an active/passive dyad.⁵

This unique representation, which associates pleasure with the violation of socially instituted norms is alive and well even today, following my general hypothesis, and illustrates the diversity of sexual choices and identities.

A question remains, nevertheless: why is it that, within this dissolution, the locus of violation is almost always the “feminized body”? Such a body may be a woman’s body, although it can also be that of a man submitted to a re-symbolization that gives it feminine meaning. This aspect of the problem was emphasized in a heated debate that took place in the USA between those feminists who organized the anti-pornography movement and those who positioned themselves as “anti-puritanical” and “pro-sex”, opening up new possibilities for reflection on sexual minorities. An examination of the literature that forms the basis of this debate, especially with regards to how each side understand and relates to violence and eroticism, highlights implications regarding these relationships that are intriguing, to say the very least.

The end of the 1970s was a particularly significant moment in the history of American feminist activism, resulting in a re-configuration of the theoretical field.⁶ Groups with antagonistic positions appeared in the feminist landscape, against a backdrop of the threat of a revival of traditional morality at the hands of the New Right.⁷ *Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media* was founded in 1976 and *Women Against Pornography* in 1979; Samois, the first sadomasochist lesbian group, emerged in 1978. Interestingly, the reaction to “right-wing” moralism led, paradoxically, to the emergence of two opposed discourses within feminism. On the one hand, it spurred the creation of an anti-sex feminist moralism, spearheaded by the anti-pornography movement, which was no less normatizing in its rhetoric than the New Right. On the other hand, it also inspired a reaction within the lesbian community that sought to legitimize sexual choices and alternatives such as sadomasochism, challenging the belief that domination-submission games were exclusively constituent parts of heterosexual relations.

⁵ George Bataille sums up this idea with great clarity in *Eroticism*. Bataille is an excellent guide to aspects of porn that are still present and which demand critical discussion today. He proposes a nexus between violence and erotic ecstasy, which is a violation of socially established content that nonetheless maintains the dualism that is stipulated by masculine-active and feminine-passive poles.

⁶ It must be emphasized that although it is possible to situate the emergence of the anti-pornography movement within the ranks of U.S. American feminists, this movement is not restricted to the USA. Beatrice Hanssen, in her book *Critique of Violence* (2000), shows its dissemination with her discussion of the relevance of the debate between pro- and anti-pornography feminists, especially in Germany and Austria.

⁷ The New Right was a movement organized by Republican politicians and religious leaders whose agenda prioritized sexual issues. They pursued measures and attempts to change laws that decriminalized abortion and barred the extension of rights to homosexuals, as well as supported different proposals to impede women from acting in the public sphere so that they could better dedicate themselves to home and children, etc.

Anti-pornography groups—part of what those who research this field classify as “radical feminism” (Ferguson 1984)—were constituted by women who identified with a section of the lesbian feminist community. These women not only rejected heterosexual sex as the basis of sexual choice, but also as a consequence of a particularly deterministic reading of the dynamics of power within heterosexual relations. Catherine Mackinnon⁸—considered an avatar of radical feminism—presents an analysis of sexual relations as structured by subordination in which acts of sexual domination become the social meaning of “man” and the condition of submission becomes the social meaning of “woman”. According to Judith Butler (1997), this strict determinism has at least two implications. First, it stipulates that any power relation is a relation of domination and thus any gender relation can only be interpreted within this grid. It also juxtaposes sexuality and gender—understood through rigid and simplified views of power—understanding gender, with no further analysis, as defined by “man” and “woman”. Radical feminism raised its flag against heterosexual institutions such as pornography, taking porn as an example of danger and violence against women. The movement also targeted sadomasochism, prostitution, pedophilia and sexual promiscuity. The political and theoretical impact of this group within feminism stretched far beyond its immediate frontiers through its alliance with the feminist groups that fought against violence.

At the beginning of the 1980s, when radical feminism was at the height of its popularity, voices within the feminist field and the lesbian community attempted a counter-attack. Particularly strong voices in this debate were those who were critical of the essentialism that had characterized oppression discourse since the 1970s. A conference held at Bernard College in New York in 1982 launched these new perspectives, bringing together heterosexual feminists and lesbians who supported and reflected upon sexual alternatives that involved the partner’s pleasure, including practices that were targets of the radical feminists. The results of this conference were published by Carol Vance in her book *Pleasure and Danger*. This book is a significant landmark text within the field, as it problematizes (and to a certain extent denies) the association of sexuality with coercive models of domination, as well as the linkage of these models to static positions vis-a-vis gender in a totalizing map of patriarchal subordination. Rooted in the feminist tradition of defense of sexual freedom (and bringing together activists and scholars of several disciplines), Carol Vance—I argue—created a “convention” of eroticism that organizes a considerable section of the interventions and reflections of contemporary feminism. Vance also contributed to the consolidation of a field of thought within cultural critique—Queer Theory.⁹ This “convention” implies the idea

⁸ One of McKinnon’s most cited articles is ‘Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: an Agenda for Theory’ (signs, 7, nr.3, Spring 1980).

⁹ Queer Theory is a wide field, with researchers trained in the tradition of Gay and Lesbian Studies. Some commentators tend to associate the two fields or even use the two terms indistinguishably. These researchers tend to be gay or lesbian, but they also take as their object of investigation aspects of social life related to such a choice or condition. In her seminal article “Against Proper Objects”, Judith Butler (1977) situates these researchers and their research in relation to feminism. In: Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Shor (eds.) *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

that women's sexual freedom involves both pleasure and danger. Danger, in so far as phenomena such as rape, abuse and beatings are irrefutably involved in the exercise of sexuality. Pleasure, because there is at the outermost limit of eroticism and the quest for new erotic alternatives a promise of transgress of the restrictions imposed on sexuality when it is understood solely as a reproductive exercise. While this "convention" undeniably expands the discussion about the problem of pleasure, there is on the other hand a tendency to dissociate pleasure from danger, understanding them as isolated entities without examining the nexuses that combine them. By rejecting the rigid and simplifying determinism of radical feminism, these new perspectives created a trap, if not a ruse: they emphasized conceptions of pleasure, the meanings of which were not completely problematized in social and historical terms. This resulted in a belief that pleasure contains in itself a liberating force, as long as it is pursued among consenting partners. The "side effect" of danger was treated in a simple manner, as if consent or a mere act of will could guarantee its translation into pleasure. In this transposition or passage, the problem of violence was parenthesized.

We must thus turn back to that original debate, in order to clarify these stratagems within the development of feminism.

In an article included in Carol Vance's edited volume Gayle Rubin states that the relationship between sex and feminism has always been a complex one. This is because sexuality is the nexus of gender relations and much oppression originates, is measured and constituted through sexuality. Two previously identified tendencies emerge from this complexity: one that understands sexual liberation as a mere extension of male privilege (this line was well developed within anti-pornography rhetoric¹⁰) and another which is critical of any restraints on the sexual behavior of women. This second tendency was linked to the sexual liberation movement of the 1970s and has since been further developed, producing innovative studies and practices in regard to pleasure and sexual choices. According to Judith Butler, the relevance of Rubin's article "Thinking Sex", resides in her emphasis that feminism is not the only discourse—or even the most appropriate one—to deal with power relations formed and regulated by sexuality.¹¹ The "feminism" criticized by Rubin is that which includes the theories of Catherine Mackinnon and which is based, in particular, on the idea that the modeling, direction and expression of sexuality organize society into two sexes: women and men. For Rubin, sexual relations cannot be reduced to gender positions. The inter-relation of sexuality and gender cannot be viewed through the prism of causality, or fixed as necessary in all cases. Rubin thus allies herself with sexual minorities, departing from radical feminist activism and proposing a new conceptualization. She presents descriptive and

¹⁰ Rubin jokingly labels this tendency "demon sexology" and suggests that it represents the most reactionary product of any social movement on this side of the Vatican.

¹¹ This type of formulation was also used by Drucilla Cornell, Bell hooks and Ann MacClintock, besides Carol Vance. These are researchers who emphasized that in a post-colonial context and in Developing countries, gender is not more central than race or class for the purposes of research on sexual practices.

theoretical tools with which to think sexuality and develops the notion that sexual acts, practices and choices within modern Western societies take place inside a hierarchical sexual value system. Within this system, the sexuality that is viewed as normal is the one exercised within heterosexual relations within wedlock, geared towards reproduction. This pattern is also followed in other situations, ranked within a hierarchy of values in descending order: non-married monogamous heterosexual couples; single people with an active sexual life; long term, stable gay and lesbian couples; single gays who do not lead a promiscuous life; single gays who lead a promiscuous life; fetishists; SM (sadomasochists); non-masculine feminized positions (transvestites, drag queens etc.); paid sex; and inter-generational sex (in particular, sex between adults and minors). The last few behaviors are at the bottom of the system, condemned to systematic devaluation when they are not the object of criminalization, as in the case of pedophilia.

It is interesting to note that in this article, Rubin links the different practices and positions within her system to what she calls “sexual minorities”—an analytical decision that associates sexual choice with the constitution of collective identity. Whether this is due to American society’s characteristic capacity for division or to the author’s efforts towards politically legitimizing those whose sexual practices are socially devalued, the fact is that, from that moment onwards, a new theoretical field opened up in the intellectual landscape, permitting novel and compelling contributions. These are of some interest, because when we examine in detail the works about sexuality produced in the 1990s, we find a striking number of studies of sadomasochist, fetishistic, and other practices engaged in by same sex partners—especially produced by scholars in the USA.

Gayle Rubin attempts to shift feminism from its prominence as an exclusive discourse on sexuality by suggesting that it is necessary to create more flexible visions of gender and sex in order to account for a more diverse set of sexual minorities. Within this context, it is worth noting the visibility and notoriety that gay and lesbian writings have gained over the last two decades. There is a recognition in the literature that such studies not only gave a more systematic treatment of the empirical realities experienced by homosexuals, but that they also constituted theoretical contributions that allow us to frame the deeper effects of the heterosexual model. In particular, I would like to highlight the debate in the feminist field about heterodox sexualities, which has a clear tendency to emphasize lesbian phenomena and practices. In fact, a significant number of critical writings and theoretical debates reveal two trends. The first deals with the question of desire in line with those theories that highlight the objectification of the female body (an example of which is the anti-pornography campaign). The second criticizes the demonization of sexuality presupposed by objectification theory. This second trend, however, situates and circumscribes the whole debate by taking the feminine desire present in woman/woman relations as both its beginning and end point.

The debate is clearly restricted to this set of human relations—relations that still presume a certain amount of equality. It is as if thinking about sexual alternatives and perversions

is only possible in relationships whose foundation presupposes symmetry; as if because these relations take place among same sex persons, consent was guaranteed from the outset and violence and danger were transposed to the arena of pleasure. Whether this is or is not an exaggerated critique, there is indeed a lack of engagement in this literature with the problem of violence. Discussion of violence seems to be something that is restricted to the field of that sort of rigid and deterministic type of radical feminism.

This is the hypothesis I have been developing, through an examination of the bibliographical material on the topic, but also as a result of an empirical research among sex shops in San Francisco and Berkeley. There seems to be a kind of duplication of this tendency present in the theoretical developments of feminism—especially in the “pro-sex” and “anti-objectification” camps—and in the opening of alternative fields within the sex market. Here we can find a series of attempts to question the conventional sex market and the promise of a “politically correct eroticism”, whose meaning transgresses restrictions on the free exercise of sexuality. While sexual practices classified as violent (S&M and some fetishes) are condemned within heterosexual relations, in gay sex shops around Castro Street and in Good Vibrations (a lesbian sex shop that opened in 1975), they have acquired a place, visibility, acceptance, and accessories.

1. Sex shops

The research I carried out in sex shops in San Francisco and Berkeley was an opportunity to develop and verify new hypotheses drawing on my examination of the recently produced bibliography that theoretically articulates questions of violence, gender and eroticism. San Francisco is a city that has gained international visibility since the 1970s as a place of great tolerance towards the free exercise of alternative sexual choices. Not only were significant sections of that decade’s sexual liberation movements most prominent here, but also considerable numbers of empirical cases used to generate theoretical concepts regarding sex, gender and violence were drawn from the city’s gay/lesbian communities. I also chose this empirical field based upon its potential for comparison, because in San Francisco, one can find many unconventional erotic practices.

Sex shops are spaces through which one has commercial access to erotic materials. They can be found in the majority of contemporary urban centers. Most sex shops target the heterosexual public through the commercialization of books, videos and various accessories (vibrators, lingerie, essence oils, sex dolls) that comply to a certain model of desire that presupposes the exercise of sexual fantasies. These fantasies violate, play with or even transgress an entire set of practices and symbols surrounding sexual experiences that are socially non-condemnable (being that they are heterosexual and aimed at reproduction). In such a market, one can easily find materials that accentuate—in their color, shape and objective—certain violations of what is deemed conventional.

This set of symbolic elements is variable in historical, social and geographical terms. However, we can find in the pornographic market a restricted symbolic universe, as many of these signs follow conventions regarding a particular style. In other words, the commercialization of sexual objects and accessories corresponds to a style shaped by conventions that are not particularly creative, although they may vary. There are a lot of black leathers, red suspenders, artificial laces, dildos¹² of varying sizes—all with a certain emphasis on endowment—, and images of the female body in which blonde Aryan types predominate (preferably an artificial blonde), displaying enormous, firm breasts. Most male bodies are muscular and there is a particular emphasis on enormous male sexual organs. Videos focus on uncommon sexual combinations or arrangements, although they are also circumscribed by symbolic borders that seek, at their limit, to stress certain aspects which are constitutive of gender relations. Female bodies (or feminized bodies when the focus is men) are adorned to highlight the locus of penetration; male bodies (and there is no counterpart or alternative for masculinized female bodies) are adorned to highlight that which penetrates. In the exercise of sexuality between same sex bodies, sex among women predominates and its meaning corresponds to the same logic: it becomes an accepted practice and a stimulant to certain masculine voyeuristic desires.

When they are not simplifying drastically, some feminists qualify these sex shops and the items and practices they display as being part of the “hydraulic model” of desire, i.e., desire as something conceived as part of an input/output model of corporeal relation. Regarding the debate which concerns us, this model presumes that pornography implies the contestation of habitual and sanctioned modes of sexuality and, more importantly, presents a model in which sexual differences are based upon the incommensurability and complementarity between a body that desires and a body that is the object of desire. In spite of variations and different symbolic arrangements, the first body is configured according to a set of signs that symbolically circumscribe the masculine. Meanwhile, the second body is configured as an object of desire through a set of signs that symbolically demarcates the feminine.

The sex shops I researched in San Francisco and Berkeley represent exceptional cases and they are in some ways critical of or in contrast to most conventional sex shops. Gay establishments not only target the non-heterosexual public, but also present products that emphasize new patterns or configurations of male bodies and alternatives of desire between men. The lesbian sex shop also plays to different audiences, although its offers are less sectarian. Here, we find rhetoric and a set of products that aim to offer alternatives for heterosexual, gay and lesbian couples.

¹² Objects designed to be inserted in the vagina or anus. They do not vibrate like vibrators (similar objects, often of the same shape, which vibrate when turned on—although some vibrators do not look like phalluses—a point I discuss below). Dildos, according to pamphlets found in the sex shop, have existed since the Paleolithic period, are also to be found in drawings on the vases of Ancient Greece, and are mentioned in classical Greek comedies.

The first important consideration when looking at these sex shops is that one must understand that they are a development of an alternative to the conventional market. Their products and accessories aim to be different from those presented in a standard sex shop. There is an effort to differentiate that creates a type of segmented market contemplating different sexual choices. There is in this sense a clear dialogue between conventions. Although standard sex shops emphasize feminine bodies, breasts and blonde hair, we do not find the same references with the same frequencies in gay and lesbian shops. Although I carried out research in several gay sex shops, I will focus the description and analysis which follows on the one sex shop I studied which was created by lesbians.

2. Good Vibrations

Valencia, a street off the Castro area, is known in local circles as the center of a lesbian neighborhood. Following modern zoning, in this “area” of the Mission District there are shops and spaces that affirm gay female and feminist culture. Good Vibrations is to be found here, next to tattoo and piercing studios and a building which houses many women’s and gay rights organizations. Good Vibrations was founded in 1977 by lesbians who were aligned with feminism and interested in expanding the universe of information about and alternatives for sexual choice to a more diverse audience (the shop targets the heterosexual public, as well as women and gays).

The creators of Good Vibrations see their store as being more than a trading post for sexual products: they believe that they are advancing a mission. They begin from the premise that there is more sexual pleasure available than concrete experience would normally suggest. Therefore, they aim to offer access to materials that can help expand experiences, improve the levels of information about sex and combat fear, ignorance, prejudice and insecurity. To those who claim that this type of business is not in line with the feminist agenda, they reply: “We believe that honest communication about sex is a prerequisite for equal rights, both in and out of the bedroom” (Good Vibrations 1994:1). The store’s founders also believe that their main line of products—“sex toys”—is revolutionary: “The idea that pleasure for pleasure’s sake is sufficient motivation for sexual activity, and that no means of experiencing sexual pleasure is morally, aesthetically or romantically superior to another, is the subversive philosophy behind the enjoyment of sex toys.” (Good Vibrations 1994:2). Sex toys were not created with the aim of helping or solving sexual problems. They were created to entertain—that is why they are called “toys”. Moreover, they are accessible to the average consumer and they come with detailed consumer information.

A politically correct sex shop is how we might best define Good Vibrations. To a certain extent, as highlighted above, there is a clear attempt to differentiate this type of business within the sexual market. Good Vibrations goes beyond aiming at profits and

attempts to legitimize the exercise of diverse sexual choices, while avoiding reinforcing stereotypes or practices that amount to objectification. The store is, in fact, preoccupied with domesticating and neutralizing the feeling of violation that is involved in the current meaning of eroticism. In place of violation, Good Vibrations introduces, through its apparatus of products and manuals, a new concept that highlights the exercise and strengthening of the self. There is a clear effort in the store's ideology and product line towards integration and not subversion. Let us thus take a deeper look into the store...

First impressions: on the outside, the shop is painted in pastel colors. Although the inside cannot be seen—doors and windows are made of etched glass—there is nothing that differentiates it from the surrounding shops that sell furniture, clothes and books. As we cross the threshold, the first impression is confirmed: the space is light and clean. The windows offer direct light, which is even brighter due to the yellow walls. Wooden shelves—and a light colored wood—divide the interior of the shop into different sections. In every visit I found the shop crowded: heterosexual and homosexual couples, many of them young. Some exhibited tattoos and wore black; others were unremarkable in appearance. All had a pleasant and happy face as they manipulated some device, smelt incense, candle or balm, leafed through books. The smell completes the picture—a light aroma of sandalwood and lavender calmed and comforted the shoppers.

Since it targets an alternative audience, one that includes women as well, the feminine is, above all, a symbolic material to be valued, albeit, in a particular manner: going against everything within the conventional market, the exhibition of women's bodies emphasizes that which counteracts artificiality. Posters around the walls show older women—and age, rather than being a degrading aspect is carefully presented as something natural; the bodies are not thin or fat, neither are they sculpted by surgery or exercise; armpits and legs are not shaved. Wrinkles, lumps and body hair are not hidden but are rather part of the bodies that want to be sexy. There is an incorporation of a clear hippy aesthetic, but one that is articulated to certain meanings that highlight sensuality and sexuality. Here the tendency is to associate sensuality to a non-artificial body, seemingly to legitimate a new conception of 'politically correct' sensuality. Nothing debases or limits. Erotic games can be operated within a logic that, far from 'objectifying' the feminine, seeks comfort, the common woman, a type of democratization of choices—or better, of the idea that eroticism is available and desirable for everyone.

The organization of elements is striking. On the left hand side of the shop, an infinite number of dildos of various sizes and colors are exposed on the wall: purple, light blue, light pink, shiny red... There are shapes for different tastes, some thicker, others smaller. Textures that vary between latex and silicone, some penis shaped, including scrotum sac; others smooth. Some are hard, others soft. Just above them, dildo straps are exhibited. All differently colored, some made of fabric, others of leather. Along the same wall, other materials are presented: there is a section for objects related to SM

practice—leather or plastic whips of various colors, black leather or latex clothes, rings and handcuffs;¹³ another place for essence oils, balms and lubricants; and there is the video shelf.

In the center of the shop, the products are organized on shelves for display. On them we can find books classified by type: erotic fiction, guides for several types of practices (masturbation, anal sex, oral sex), massage techniques books, photography books and several books about how to have safe sex, including leaflets that explain the difference, advantages and disadvantages of essence oils and lubricants. The variety and sophistication of the information on display is remarkable. It is also striking the number of manuals available. There is an explicit attempt to teach sexual practice techniques, with illustrations and detailed descriptions about body movement. There is not much difference between the way such manuals present the different sexual practices and techniques and physical education or body training literature. Their source is the same tradition. This is the most immediate implication: the concept of body in these guidebooks is one moldable by techniques and tips for its appropriate performance; however, in contrast to phys. ed. books, they cover techniques for sexual enjoyment. The beginning of all guides—either about SM practices, masturbation or the use of sex toys—presents a text in which there is a preoccupation to legitimize the practice in question. Their aim is to disinvest the transgressing character of the practices, to move away from the idea of a pathological or perverse character in the agents involved and to invite the reader to experience those forms of sexuality. They all emphasize how this expansion of erotic frontiers reinforces people's self-esteem, liberating them from prejudice and stimulating their imagination.

On another shelf vibrators are exhibited. The shapes vary, oscillating between the phallic ones (such as the dildos) and some enormous ones, with shapes that are similar to microphones or drinks mixers. One looks like an electric drill, but where the drilling bit would be there is a soft textured ball. The similarity to domestic appliances intensifies the attempt to make sexual practices into something routine and normal. It is as if their designers were suggesting to the consumers that they should leave domestic chores and invest in pleasure itself. Whether as irony or *boutade*, this aesthetics that suggests a continuity with that which characterizes female housework is food for thought. The vibrator that looks like a microphone is also interesting. It is as if the absence of women's speech and voice in the public sphere was being critically discussed, through an ironic metaphor, in order to highlight the emphasis on a new subjectivity characterized by the quest for pleasure, self-esteem and entertainment.

Shiny pieces—dildos and vibrators—when exhibited this way lose any violating character. The fact that they are the most prominent objects, both quantitatively and qualitatively—is intriguing given the exuberance of their shapes. It is not an exaggeration

¹³ SM is the abbreviation of so-called sadomasochistic practices.

to state that they are the dominant sex toys. This makes me think that in this new configuration of eroticism there is an emphasis on 'genitality'. There is a part of the body—the genitals—that seem to be the object par excellence of the sexualities that are to be discovered.

The fragmentation of the body into different parts has been the topic of numerous studies. In most analyses, such a phenomenon corresponds to the increasing objectification of the body as a result of consumer culture and medical practices (Lyon and Barbalet, 1994; Csordas, 1994). There is also a strand of studies within feminist theories¹⁴ that, I argue, brings complexity to the interpretations that condemn objectification. For one of the theoretical strands of feminism—the one that challenges the binaries mind/body, nature/culture and any essentialist or substantialist approach—the body is seen as corporeality, something that acquires capacity to act or have agency. These theories have been developed by authors who seek to understand the body as it is experienced, represented and used in particular cultural situations. 'For them, the body is neither brute nor passive but is interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification, and representation. On one hand it is a signifying and signified body; on the other, it is an object of systems of social coercion, legal inscription, and sexual and economic exchange.' (Grozs, 1994:18). To deconstruct the polarity mind/body, which is one of the foundations of this theory of corporeality, implies, according to these authors: to take the materiality of the body beyond the inscriptions defined by the laws of physics, i.e., taking materiality as a continuity of organic matter; subsequently, not to associate corporeality to one sex only, as in our cultural tradition in which the body is associated with the woman, freeing men up to the exercise of the mind; to refuse singular models and to theorize corporeality within a plural field of alternatives, mixing sex, class, race and age in a constellation of possible representations and practices. In essence, this is a perspective that aims, by avoiding biologizing or essentializing, to see the body as an active place (not passive and, therefore, as a product and creator) of inscriptions and productions or social, political, cultural and geographical constructs (Grozs, 1994).

Following these theories, the emphasis on genitality—something that is striking in the symbolic alternatives of this 'politically correct eroticism'—should be interpreted in a non-linear manner. On the one hand, there is a visible neutralization of those inscriptions that position corporealities according to sex, race, age, etc. It is not only a question of a procedure that erases or places parentheses around the social positions occupied by the individuals who carry the genitals. Rather, what is in question is a type of erasing of the inscriptions of a corporeality in which desire or pleasure can be elaborated through other surfaces or combined with other parts of the body or the bodies involved. To a

¹⁴ Elizabeth Grozs (2000) in her competent theoretical review of the body in philosophical tradition and feminist thought, differentiates three groups of authors: egalitarian feminism, theories that advocate social constructionism, and those for whom the point of departure is sexual difference. The latter group includes authors such as Lucie Irigaray, Helene Cixious, Gayatri Spivak, Jane Gallop, Judith Butler, and Monique Wittig, among others. The trend of thinkers I refer to fits this classification.

certain extent, focusing on the genitals the possibilities of fruition tends to obliterate difference. However, it is necessary to consider that, in the same way as dildos and vibrators are varied, this new erotica is allowing us to think another quality of difference, expanding or even exploding the relationship between a type of body (of a certain sex, color, age, etc) and its corresponding preference of sexual practices. This is the side for which these alternatives create new horizons for theoretical reflection: there is no correspondence between the position of the individual in sociological gender or racial terms or an ideal type of behavior or sexual preference. The field broadens, even though at the price of fragmentation. Or rather, fragmentation itself is employed as something positive, as a re-signification that aims at expanding the possibilities of pleasure and the implosion of models or conventional modeling of sexual behavior.

While this open positivity tends to emphasize the genitals in such practices, the character of sex manuals is that of a pragmatic functionality. That is absent from the cases offered by other sex shops. Good Vibrations offers its consumers an approach that celebrates sex as a source of pleasure, entertainment, and health—mental and physical. In order to achieve this objective, the products are presented with the pragmatism of instruction guidelines. This undoubtedly amounts to 'commodification'. However, this is a kind of marketization that is associated with a tendency to strengthen the self, allowing a balance between the mind and the body. Such categories are not being negated; rather, the question is to promote alternatives for a functional and appropriate balance. This tendency is even more evident when we examine the material available in the shop for those who practice sadomasochism (SM).

3. SM

"In fact, S/M has nothing to do with coercion, either sexual or non sexual. The common denomination in all S/M play is not a violent exchange of pain but a consensual exchange of power"

(Good Vibrations, 1994:210)

This definition challenges common ideas about sadomasochism, including the idea present in the dictionary that takes the practice either as a perversion of a sexual nature; or as something that describes a dynamic between people involved in coercive or abusive relations. The counter-discourse offered highlights, on the contrary, that SM is a matter of erotic power, rather than an emotional or physical abuse. Moreover, it re-conceptualizes this alternative in tune with the participants of SM organized groups who prefer to adopt other terms: domination/submission, sensuality and 'mutuality', sexual magic, radical sex or power and trust games. These groups are careful in their talks and workshops, to divulge the need to practice SM in a safe environment and are organized on the basis of negotiation and communication between those involved: 'The bottom line is, you can't dominate your partner unless he or she allows you to take control, and you can't submit to your partner unless he or she accepts control' (Good Vibrations, 1994:211).

In the attempt to legitimize sadomasochism as an acceptable erotic alternative, the character of violence associated with it is substituted by the connotation of a consensual game between partners who play with the content and exercises linked to positions of domination and submission. The colorful whips and some scenes in the videos reinforce this trend. Everything seems to be carefully set up to perform a situation that simulates violence but that, simultaneously, repels or neutralizes violence. Pain is not part of this performance; neither is real or concrete subjugation. The performance is gradually set up on the basis of sexual fantasies. They are, indeed, almost theatrical and private performances of two different fantasy natures: fantasies of being dominated and subjugated by kidnappers, rapists, sometimes, by aliens; or those that position the individual in control of the relationship with a kind of love slave.

At the limit, there is an attempt to legitimize SM, since they believe and explicitly state that the power game is central to our erotic imagination. The idea behind such a statement is that sex between two people rarely takes place on an equal footing or involves mutual satisfaction through simultaneous orgasm. It is more frequent that each partner takes turns in controlling the sensations of the other. Undoubtedly, this is a type of naturalization of eroticism. It is as if it was disembodied of a whole symbolic mapping carefully woven within historical and cultural processes.

It is also interesting to note that SM manuals or the chapter about this practice in Good Vibration's sex manual offer, in contrast with those relating to other practices, more categorical statements and a whole detailed discussion about how to define who is in control and who is under submission. Moreover, they continuously emphasize that this is a form of safe sex. They also state, which is surprising, that like sex toys, SM does not focus on genital intercourse. Guidebooks advise those taking part to abstain from alcohol or drugs when practicing it. There is a whole set of norms that the SM potential practitioner should follow: to identify their desires and fantasies; find a partner; negotiate the scene; find an appropriate place to perform it; choose positions and characters; be aware of health and safety. This normatization is accentuated in the materials dealing with this kind of activity.

I hypothesize that the pragmatism that imbues SM play results precisely from the urgency to make it politically correct, by distancing it from violence.

Therefore, my preliminary conclusion is that the silence on violence in its most contemporaneous erotic-practical expression (SM) reveals something that leads to the need to further develop our reflection. The feminist theories and practices had the merit of highlighting the meaning of gender violence that configures heterosexual relations, often falling into reductionism and the victimization of women. Some trends, critical of such reductionism, developed pro-sex positions, amplifying, in a rich manner, the possibilities of thinking new erotic alternatives, including those that illustrate or are close to a violent meaning. They elaborated a 'politically correct' version of eroticism,

sufficiently intriguing for us to examine some of its paradoxical implications.

We can do so firstly by thinking about what is gained and lost with this 'politically correct' expression, what is gained in the amplification of the breadth of possible sexual choices and practices. However, this is a simplification that carries a price: the dislocation of the meaning of pornography, which loses its connotation as obscenity. In fact, a substitution of meanings can be identified. The 'obscene', dear to erotic expressions that have been drawn on sources ever since the sixteenth century, gives way to the idea of sexual practice as corporeal technique that aims to strengthen individual self-esteem.

Secondly, as I suggested throughout my analysis, the feminist debate about eroticism established a disjunction between pleasure and danger, as if to guarantee a politically acceptable fruition, it would be possible to erase violence. This disjunction is illustrated by the S/M proposal in which theatrical simulation, because it is ruled by consent, could guarantee access to relations in which violence has no place. It is still necessary to investigate the extent to which this idea of consent as an immediate act of will may be oversimplified.

It is necessary to think about the implications of this type of solution, both in theoretical terms and in terms of its political implications. In fact, we face a scene that on the one hand reduces violence to a dichotomy between victim and executioner; while on the other hand, in order to understand its difficult connections with pleasure, moves it to another semantic field, preventing it from becoming an object of reflection.

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