

Risk and Ecstasy in Erotic Practices*

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Abstract

The present article reflects upon the different experiences involved in contemporary eroticisms. Principally, we concentrate on how these practices permit us to decipher links between sexual practices, gender norms, and the limits of sexuality (that is, the frontier zone between norms and transgression, consent and abuse, pain and pleasure). Our main question is with regards to a more general trend (which is quite strong in Brazil): the shift from erotic forms and experiences that were understood in the 1980s to be pro-sex or sexually liberating (the alternatives and rhetoric of the debates surrounding the collection *Pleasure and Pain* edited by Carol Vance in 1984) towards new semantics and practices of bodily eroticization and of the risks of the frontier zone where terms such as consent and vulnerability exist in dispute and tension.

Keywords: Gender, Eroticism, Sexuality.

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Saturday, 11:30 PM at the Café Concerto Uranus in Santa Cecília, a neighborhood in downtown São Paulo. I have known the place for some time, now. It is sort of a bar with tables scattered about a large main room. There is a stage at the back with all the appropriate dressing: wooden floor, columns on the side, curtains and lighting. Tonight, a Halloween party is taking place. The place is not full, but a number of the people here are known to me. They are gathered together in their small groups, sitting or standing, drinking, laughing and talking. Many of them are not wearing costumes, which would be appropriate for the holiday. Instead, they are dressed in BDSM gear, the women in corsets and stiletto heels, the majority of the men in their usual basic black wardrobe (pants, shirt, and shoes). Some people are wearing collars. Looking around more closely, I note that here and there, some women are dressed up as nurses and others are wearing devil's horns and tails. I also see that some of the men are dressed as Catholic priests, with white, red or black cassocks. One boy is dressed as a feather-winged angel.

The costumes on display are more diverse than the sexualities, genders, races and classes of the people here tonight, however. As on other occasions and in other places, white, middle class, heterosexual couples predominate. There are also some men here on their own – the so-called “podos”¹ – who occasionally come up to the women in order to enthuse about the ladies' feet. On this night, however, as on most of the other occasions that I have been to *Dominna* parties, I see no homosexual couples.

I stand near the bar, observing and conversing about the party with the people I know. I adopt a casual pose, as one does when one is face to face with something one has seen many times before. Shortly after midnight, a couple takes to the stage. The man is wearing a black suit and a tango dancer's hat from the 1950s. He is carrying a suitcase and we soon discover that it is full of different whips and ropes.

¹ From podophile. [N.T.]

The man is known as Mr. Bondage. He is about 60, white, and accompanied by New Moon, his wife and submissive partner with whom he will engage in live performance (announced on the party flyers) involving bondage, suspension and spanking. New Moon is blonde and maybe 40 years old. She has pale white skin and is slightly chubby. She wears dark satin robe and climbs barefoot onto the stage. There, she quickly strips down to a pair of black panties.

New Moon kneels while Mr. Bondage pulls his gear out of the suitcase. There is a thick rope that he uses for suspension and thinner ropes to tie up his wife's body. I begin to get uneasy about the amount of time she is on her knees, imagining how much pain she must be in. She holds her body erect as she kneels, eyes fixed on the floor, her face covered by her hair. Mr. Bondage begins to tie her up. First, he binds her feet behind her, securing them tightly to her calves. Then he binds up New Moon's torso, with the rope running between her breasts. As he ties his knots, his wife's breasts swell.

Mr. Bondage's gestures are precise and he pays total attention to the technique employed in his task. New Moon stays completely still and silent. As if it were in a state of ecstasy, her body seems to swell until it occupies the entire stage. My gaze is fixed exclusively upon her as her husband begins to haul her up using his thicker ropes. Suspended two meters above the ground, the lights play over her white and immobile body and she seems transformed: her organic being becomes, indeed, the Moon. Then, Mr. Bondage gives the Moon a shove and, as she rocks back and forth, he begins to stroke her with a whip. (Field diary, October 2013).

The episode I relate above made me finally understand what these erotic experiences are made of and, in particular, what transgressions they propose. In reality, they do not merely seek to violate norms. The erotic, in the case described above, was contained in the movements and gestures that crossed over borders separating domains, among which we find the frontier

marking off the conventions that suggest what is “common” and what is “uncommon”. What motivated these desires was found in the exposition and juxtaposition of contrasting elements, beginning with the social homogeneity of the group gathered in the bar as opposed to their S&M style gear. Even though this scene was not novel, it impacted upon any possible sensation of being in a place that was easily classifiable. The café could have been a bar, a theater, a dungeon, a dance hall – or any and all of these together. The people at the event did not appear to be extraordinary or exotic, but they were not just wearing costumes: they were performing. This means that they are playing roles in a sort of interactive theater whose characters are created and performed in a somewhat realistic manner according to a shared script that designated roles in sex and seduction games.

The environment, the practices exposed on the stage and – most especially – the flesh and blood body that was transformed into marble and light all affected my senses. But what really impacted upon me and made me finally understand what was going on, in a short but intense revelation, was that these erotic performances are also an aesthetic experience. Having an undeniably burlesque aspect, the performance reminded me of an erotic vision that Masoch created in *Venus in Furs*:

Once, upon returning to my room via one of the avenues that led to my house, I suddenly saw a female form, white as stone and illuminated by the Moon.... The spectacle is unforgettable when the Moon – now full –peeks out, transparent, between the trees. The prairie was illuminated by silver reflections and the goddess seemed to radiate the sweetest light (Masoch, 1976 [1870]:24).

The tension, in this case, mobilized both high culture and ordinary life, with all the “low” elements found in between them. The ugly knotted rope, the breasts drooping with age, the tormentor with his nylon clothes – all the elements were purposefully in conflict with the tying techniques used and, in particular, with New Moon’s performance.

Her giving herself over to total impassiveness, rather than revealing the dominator's power to subjugate her, showed the strength of her performance. There she was, shining with the body of Masoch's goddess, being transformed into the moon. She was flawless and relentless in this transposition and in her parody of the socially widespread notion that associates (at times in a deterministic fashion) femininity with the passivity of submission.

In the opening of the film *La Venus a la Fuorrure* (2013), director Roman Polanski sets Masoch's work in a contemporary context while highlighting the same set of tensions between contrasts. In the first scene, we follow the camera into a theater. Alone in the audience sits Thomaz Novachek (played by Mathieu Amalric), adapter of text and director of the play. He complains about the difficulties he is having in selecting an actress for the role of Wanda de Dunaiew. Talking on his cell phone, probably to the producer of the play, Novachek says he is looking for a "sexy young woman with classical training and a scrap of brain in her skull. A girl who at least knows how to pronounce 'inextricable' without having to take a course in diction to do it". At the entrance of the theater, a not-so-young Vanda Jourdain (played by Emmanuelle Seigner) observes him. She is late. A torrential rain has drenched her, soaking her hair and smearing her eyes. She is dressed in black and wears a leather cord with padlock around her neck. She presents herself to Novachek, chewing gum, and says that she is interested in acting in the play, which she finds "sexy, I think, or erotic. Humiliation and that sort of thing. An S&M porno?" Novachek tries to put her off, but can't resist her insistence and the test begins. Jourdain pulls a long lacy dress from her bag, ties her hair in a bun and cleans off her excess lipstick. Slowly her voice softens and her neck lengthens. The camera, which was previously fixed on the mouth and the gum within it, moves to accentuate her eyes. The bodily transformation accompanies the richness of Masoch's text, and it is masterfully interpreted.

Such dynamic shifts between the conventions of cinema, theater and literature give the film a singular strength. The entire

story takes place on a stage full of old and broken objects. The strength of Vanda and Thomaz' acting and their ability to coax performances out of their bodies create the sense of being in a garden and turn mundane objects such as a stool into singular pieces such as throne. The aesthetic quality of the scenes gains intensity by the burlesque eloquence of the text (which is recited without hesitations) and through seduction. The bodies enunciate the text – the main object of eroticism that unfolds in the piece. This piece is different from the show at Café Uranus, whose strength was generated by bondage techniques and, above all else, by Moon's abstract bodily gestures and disturbing silence. In this case, the center from which the aesthetic sense of the performance emanates is the fixation of the image of a body being transformed into a point of light in the sky.

In both cases, the aesthetic effect is also erotic. Both performances mobilize a repertoire of sexual desires based upon a dynamic interplay of contrasts, blurring boundaries. Above all, it blurs the limits between the fields of literature (which acclaimed a classic obscene text that was then adapted into a film by a likewise acclaimed director) and the regular expressions of the contemporary erotic market. This shifting between high culture and everyday life, between the spectacular and the commonplace, is a mechanism utilized in teasing or mocking. Heloisa Pontes helps us to better understand this type of operation in her analysis of the life and artistic career of Brazilian actresses, (among them Cacilda Becker):

Actresses who made their bodies a privileged tool for the reconversion of the experiences of others, and in so doing, dominated theatrical conventions to the point where they could mock social constraints of class, gender and age, infusing their characters with a wide range of new and unexpected meanings (Pontes, 2010:25).

This sense of cheating, teasing, or mocking should not be understood as a sort of fraud, producing damage. Rather, it should be seen as the debauchery or scorn of the burlesque art itself,

which seems to intervene directly in the scenes described above. In order to mock positions and constraints, it creates a transgressive effect that (as in the words of Anatol Rosenfeld, as remembered by Pontes, when he affirms that there is no art that merely wants to imitate life) declares there is no eroticism without teasing, cheating, or transgression, even in today's politically correct atmosphere. Or, in other terms, in the shrewd words of a submissive BDSM practitioner: "It is not the prerogative of domination to cure the problems of the soul: this here is just a fetish!"

All the research I have conducted over the years has sought to understand the connections between conventions of gender and sexuality by looking at new modalities of eroticism (especially those that refer to matters involving pleasure and danger) and analyzing how these connect with contemporary market practices.² This is a more intricate scenario than it might appear at first glance, for it is in the market that such connections materialize in the experiences of people. It was for this very reason that one of the concerns I had in the course of these years of research was to consolidate the notion of the erotic market, seeking less Manichean concepts than those usually employed in denouncing the alienating power of the market. It is undeniable that this operates through standardizations, linking together those that diffusely circulate throughout the social world, simplifying content and, especially, creating standards. In the case of new forms of eroticism, my research over the years has uncovered an intriguing process: products, images and practices born in the U.S. American scene in the context of the struggle for the expansion of sexual rights have arrived in Brazil through the market, creating a "female" pornography niche in this country.

This is not a trivial change. We should not forget that porn in the western world, from its first appearances, has been basically

² See Gregori (2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2016).

produced by and for the masculine world. This new inflection only became possible by the contemporary association of sexual practices and higher self-esteem, as well as the healthy care of the body. The feminization of the erotic market is intimately linked to the diffusion of a politically correct eroticism on a global scale.

The implications of the new eroticisms on gender and sex conventions are numerous. On the one hand, they permit an expansion of tolerance and of the space allowed for sexual experimentation, a situation illustrated by the expansion and diversification of erotic products. On the other hand, however, they risk making women responsible for the maintenance of sexual contentment in loving relationships by reinforcing a sort of erotic etiquette that is still composed of strongly heteronormative conventions. Aside from this, as I have noted in my studies of the erotic market, there is a trend to present the body that is adorned with or manipulated by sexual toys as “feminized”. Alternatives are still limited for masculine or “masculinized” bodies.

However, the risk of creating a new standard that requires sexually active and creative women is mitigated by experiencing the use of erotic goods. The experiences of those who use them allow us to glimpse significant shifts that increase the ambivalence of norms. The experiences that these users narrate (which point to a vivid polymorphous sexuality) reveal at least two effects: first, the destabilization of the matrix that links sex, gender, sexuality and desire, based upon the model of sexual dimorphism; second, the transitivity of agency between people and objects, which shows the limitations of theories that disregard the importance of the impact of the material world on social relations, people, and their bodies.

Finally, research into practices that operate in the tension zone between pleasure and danger reveals that the limits of sexuality are opening into a creative range of simulations, shifting the normative commands that regulate our desires and perpetuate inequality and domination, while also rehabilitating the strength of transgressions to contest norms.

Limits of sexuality: between risks and ecstasy

Erotic practices are risky ventures. They may endanger the current rules and conventions of gender and sexuality and thereby broaden the scope of our experiences with pleasures and bodies. There is no guarantee, however, that they can avoid abuse and violence, depending on the circumstances. This border between erotic transgression and abuse is so thin that it allows several current erotic alternatives to be set in motion in the midst of a set of controls and anxieties. The explicit consent to remove vulnerability, the invention of devices and techniques related to mental and body care, and the attention paid to liturgies are all central parts of sadomasochistic expression in its BDSM and fetishistic modes. These controls affect the production of pornographic material (both those considered to be mainstream and porn that is understood to be alternative and bizarre), the consumption of erotic objects, swing relationships and practices, and homoerotic variants involving everything from virile masculinities to intergenerational erotic relationships. One significant aspect of the contemporary world is that we have created an erotic market that is marked by a politically correct and attentive eroticism, especially with regards to health, safety, and self-esteem issues. However, in this same contemporary world, people continue to associate erotic pleasure with experiences of transgression. They thus creatively interpret the rules, defy prohibitions and parody social norms.

The dynamic nature of the new erotic practices has generated academic interest, resulting in reflections on how people qualify and realize their desires and orient their sexual activities³.

³ The research that most closely looks at erotic practices, creating a rich contribution to our understanding of them, includes Guita Grin Debert and Brigeiro (2012) Julio Assis Simões (2008), Adriana Piscitelli (2013), Maria Filomena Gregori (2011, 2014), Regina Facchini (2008) Isadora França (2006; 2010) Camilo Braz (2010), Carol Parreiras (2012), Maria Elvira Díaz-Benitez (2013), Jorge Leite (2009; 2012) and Bruno Zilli (2009). Two collections bringing together relevant articles about this same theme have been organized by Carlos

This dynamic seeks to legitimate behaviors and sexual preferences (which tends to create normative stabilization), even as it seeks to encourage acts and relationships that bend or break the rules, in order to provide alternatives which can create *desiring escapes* (Perlongher, 1987). This border area where the tension between pleasure and danger is generated can be called “the limits of sexuality”.

The studies that are concerned about these limits are based on a field of erotic experiences and theories. They generally reference the collection organized by Carol Vance, *Pleasure and Danger* (1984). Pleasure is associated with the sense of well-being and delight and indicates an inclination towards life. Danger suggests a condition that foreshadows evil to someone or something. Going beyond the dictionary, the idea of associating pleasure and danger comes from my examination of feminist literature, where I found one of the conventions that, in my opinion, illustrates the possibilities and paradoxes created by the connections between these two terms: eroticism, when looked at from the perspective of gender, is pleasure and danger (Vance, 1984). Danger in that it is important to bear in mind the existence of such things such as rape and sexual harassment. *Pleasure* because here we find a search for new alternatives, for erotic promises that can break the restrictions of sexuality when it is understood as merely an exercise in procreation. Instead of confronting satisfaction and risk, as if they were mutually exclusive terms, I chose to observe the dangerous pleasures present in the erotic market. I also tried to deal with the dangerous pleasures found in variants of eroticism, without falling into the trap of the objectification theories proposed by radical feminism, even while I take into consideration the risks of heteronormative reiteration and violence that can result from these practices.

Eduardo Figari and Maria Elvira Díaz-Benitez (*Prazeres Dissidentes* (2009) and that organized by Maria Filomena Gregori and Maria Elvira Díaz-Benitez in the “Pornós” special issue of *cadernos pagu* (2012).

The limits of sexuality, in fact, have become an important object for studies like mine, whose focus is not properly directed at the political processes of the expansion of rights, but rather towards the detailed investigation of sexual practices and what and who these mobilize. The approaches taken by this research have shown that when one focuses on the practices of eroticism, one finds that there is greater flexibility in the sexual orientations and identities of the people involved. One cannot simply presume that these practices exclusively correspond with the domains of homosexuality or heterosexuality. These studies thus do not produce views and results that are easily or conventionally classifiable, because they deal with gender and sexuality as intimately linked (or rather, intersectionally crossed), without defining a point that can clearly demarcate them as part of “gender studies” or “sexuality studies”.

In terms of referring to erotic practices and not to norms and regulations, the notion of the limits of sexuality is clearly inspired by Foucault’s concept of *dispositifs* (apparatuses or devices) of sexuality (1976) which has, since the late 18th century, forged our ideas about “sex.” However, it should be recognized that the recent tensions observed in erotic practices are better understood via an update of Foucault’s theory, most particularly through the lens of the consolidation of the notion of sexual rights, which has taken place since the mid-1980s. Examining Brazilian sexual politics, Sergio Carrara (2015) points to a more general transformation in the management of these *dispositifs*, which indicates the emergence of a new regime of sexuality that is consistent in terms of its moral regulations with the language of human rights. Carrara suggests that we are witnessing the emergence of a new regime supported by contemporary socio-legal logic, but which, at the same time, coexists (although in a heuristically contrasting mode) with the old regime of the past three centuries. This old regime is strongly supported by an “anatomy-politics of bodies within a biopolitics of populations” (Carrara, 2015:335). In the set of demands presented by feminist and LGBT activism in their proposals for public policies and laws,

sex has is seen as a technology that, in and of itself, promotes citizenship. According to Carrara, these new demands trace out a new geography of evil and sexual peril and this cartography focuses on three types of intervention. The first of these is the configuration of new pathologies which, with medico-pharmacological support, are characterized by forms of pleasure that are not properly consummated. An example of this would be the absence of libido or erection. The second is the situating of desires as inadequate because of the difficulty or lack of self-control. The third and final intervention falls upon “unwanted desires”, or rather those desires which create interactions in which the consent of the participants cannot be ensured.

In the debate surrounding sexuality and sexual rights issues, we are thus witnessing the shift and sometimes disputation of meanings which qualify sexual practices that previously had different valuations. Today, we see the condemnation (even in legal terms) of sexual harassment, pedophilia (Lowenkron, 2007) and sex tourism (Piscitelli, 2013). The criminalization of these practices, however, does not end all regulation of rights. A very good example of where all this might be heading can be seen in the interventions, outside the legal and political framework, that have created therapeutic and educational procedures to promote self-control for those “addicted” to sex, or those who love too much (Ferreira, 2012).

These new regulations, which have often originated in the actions of feminist, gay and lesbian movements (but also in movements defending children and adolescents), indicate the demand for greater liberation of sexual expression and choice, on the one hand. On the other, however, they indicate the emergence of new anxieties related to what constitutes *acceptable limits* in sex, indicating a kind of sexual panic.

In the case of feminism, these anxieties derive from a radical tendency that conceives of sexual liberation as a mere extension of masculine privilege. This line of thought has created much of today’s anti-pornography rhetoric, based upon a rigid analysis of power asymmetries. Catherine Mackinnon (1980), one of the main

theoreticians of this ideology, affirms that sexual relations are entirely structured through subordination, in such a way that acts of sexual domination constitute the social meaning of “man”, while the condition of submission likewise constitutes that of “woman”.

Other feminist, gay and lesbian tendencies critique this deterministic view of sexual relations and fight against restrictions on women’s sexual behavior. These strands are linked to the sexual liberation movement of the 1960s and have produced innovative studies and practices in terms of sexual pleasure and choices. For Rubin (1984), the relationship between sexuality and gender cannot be understood through the lens of causality, or fixed as necessary in all cases. In this sense, Rubin seeks to create an alliance with sexual minorities, preparing the foundations for a new repertoire of knowledge about sexuality that is not confined to heterosexual marriage. To understand and defend sexual minorities (those who adopt less-valued or even prohibited practices) is to attempt to expand the boundaries of what is accepted and socially legitimate, situating pleasure as not only a release but as emancipatory. In this case, Rubin bets upon transgression and the capacity that these unsanctioned sexual practices have to contest sexuality and gender norms and create new collective identities.

But even recognizing the power of this contestation, many erotic practices include risks of violence. Because of this, when we look at these new forms of eroticism, we quickly see that, with few exceptions, they emphasize the importance of consent. Interestingly enough, over the last 15 years we have witnessed the spread, through society, of the notion that the pleasures and dangers involved in different erotic expressions should be translated into practical and rhetorical operations that clearly identify the consent of the people involved in acts or, alternatively, the presumption of impossibility of consent when such acts occur among people considered to be vulnerable. It is possible to state that, today, consent and vulnerability are the central terms around which rights and sexual practices are put into action. If at an earlier

time (and in the context of pro-sex feminist contributions), pleasure and danger formed a convention that had significant analytical fruitfulness, it has now become necessary to recognize the shift towards concerns involving consent and vulnerability.

As I pointed out above, consent is currently being associated with the notion of individual autonomy and (quite strongly) a subject's rational and conscious ability to engage in sexual interactions.⁴ People who involve themselves sexually with vulnerable subjects (whose most prominent cases in the context of sexual rights are children and animals) are condemned precisely because one cannot reasonably determine these subjects' ability to consent. In this context, the practices of sadomasochism, as described above, are wrapped up in processes that try to abstract away vulnerability (whether of the bodies that are injured or that which is created in domination games) and place consent front and center. In order to see their practices as erotic and not as abuse or violence, S&M practitioners and fetishists create certain procedures or "protocols" that, if properly followed, suggest the removal from any situation that evokes or approaches a sense of vulnerability. The parodies, spoofs, and the simulations produced by these practitioners mobilize a set of positions that highlight positions of power, the figures that occupy these positions and the marks of social differentiation, putting these at risk. These practices endanger the normative configurations that tend to be employed as erotic conventions; they denaturalize and remove the essentialist meaning that underpins the socially diffuse notion of sexual desire. I thus see in these practices some positive ruptures, as well as scenarios that contest gender inequalities. These are risky relationships that, in transforming tensions into "libidinal stressors" (Perlongher, 1987), place the social markers that produce difference at the service of the libido.

⁴ For a detailed comprehension of recent studies' contributions to the debate regarding consent and vulnerability, see Gregori (2014) and, in particular, Lowenkron (2015), Diaz-Benitez (2015) and Sarti (2008).

In a very tentative way, I think that these eroticisms and their limits, as well as the ways they express themselves in personal and collective experiences, imply an unresolved dilemma that has been posed by different strands of feminism and the gay and lesbian movements since the 70s and 80s of the last century. This is the clash between the defense of sex and an emphasis on sexual liberation and emancipation, on the one hand, and on the other, a condemnation of sexism that has tended to produce anti-pornography legislations that cite the risks of objectification. Over the course of the recent decades, the political stakes and practices of both sides of this clash have generated new scenarios. New social actors have entered the scene, including the movements to defend and protect children and young people and to combat human trafficking. We have thus seen a process of densification of the consolidation of sexual rights, a process that is normative and which sets parameters and new laws geared towards protection and the reduction of the risk of violence.

As a result, we see on the one hand the attempts to resolve the *dangers* of eroticisms with consent (an alternative opened up by the pro-sex strands) run into obstacles created by the relatedness and complex dynamics of the power positions that are involved in what we believe we want sexually. This creates a certain obsession with wrapping practices in liturgies and controls (as is the case in BDSM) and the development of a politically correct eroticism that displaces the erotic to the realm of health, safety and personal self-esteem. On the other hand, we see that the attempt to protect the vulnerable have resulted in policies which seem to fix vulnerability or (in more contemporary terms) stabilize it as an attribute, removing any agency from those who are adjudged to be vulnerable. What was configured, up until the 1990s, as the dispute between oppression and transgression, has become the contrast between the ability to choose and vulnerability, creating effects that I feel need to be pondered.

Perhaps we have to recover the power of transgression in the context of eroticism, as Georges Bataille has indicated. This author is crucial to understanding aspects that are still present in

contemporary pornography and which call out for further study. Bataille (1987) proposes to think of erotic ecstasy as a movement that triggers the “breaking down of established patterns (...) of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals” (1987:17). Bataille’s theory, however, still preserves and even enshrines a dualism and polarization between masculine/active and feminine/passive attitudes, whose effects on gender issues have yet to be examined. Bataille affirms (and not merely in formal terms) that in the movement of dissolution of beings, the male part performs an active role and the female part a passive role. Moreover, according to this description, the female part is the first to be dissolved as a formed being, followed by the male part, in a conjoined movement of fusion.⁵ Women are, in Bataille’s view, privileged objects of desire precisely due to their passivity. They are understood as a kind of “bait” that attracts male aggressiveness. Undeniably, we then must consider that we are dealing with purely speculative digressions here and that Bataille’s purpose, rather than setting normative intent, expresses an exercise of questioning moral maxims precisely in order to point out the fragility of such notions as the self-determination of the subject and the rationalism that defines and validates the said subject. This interest in transgression is, to my way of understanding, the current and contesting side of Bataille’s theory.

It seems necessary, however, to submit some of Bataille’s notions to critical scrutiny⁶, for even if we admit that the author

⁵ It is interesting to note that he uses the expression. “masculine or feminine part” quite a bit, which indicates, in theory, a certain sensibility towards questions of gender. In practice, however, this does not seem to be the case: gender attributions are routinely swapped, without any nuance, with categories such as “man” and “woman” without any indication on the author’s part that this might be problematic.

⁶ I use this expression in the sense elaborated by Butler, who proposes that we learn and subvert the limits of categories – those meanings and feelings that are included and their resignifications – as well as expose such ideas to already undertaken efforts of translation or critique.

was a prisoner of his times, we can't use his ideas to widen the discussion about the effects of eroticism, without necessarily falling into the normative traps of gender and sexuality. First of all, even recognizing that Bataille's reflections cannot be reduced to a facile biological determinism, the analogies he employs between the physiologies of reproduction and the identities of men and women, suggest that his speculations (and even his imagination) are imprisoned by a model that understands sexual difference in terms of sexual dimorphism. The effects of this sort of model are today well known in terms of their control over female sexuality, over the definition of sexual pathologies associated with homosexuality and, more generally, as a justification for the submission of women. When one reads Bataille as Sade's most obvious heir, one sees that his thoughts are indeed shot through with fantasies of sovereignty. Such fantasies presume that the desiring subject seeks ecstasy in the negation of social position, of speech (silence being the libertine's characteristic condition) and in a fusion in which the differences between two partners are highly emphasized in order to be later dissolved.

The contamination of Bataille's imagination by the model of sexual dimorphism has effects that are not inconsiderable, especially in terms of which norms the author's theory of eroticism sought to transcend and which it would leave intact. The point I want to call attention to is that there is an essentialism rooted in Bataille's ideas that is based, above all, on the use and abuse of references that are relative to binary norms of gender. His views are also infused with a clearly heteronormative disposition, as Braz so insightfully points out (2010).

Ecstasy, as a state in which one experiences being "outside of oneself", is an idea that does not indicate a position of sovereignty or transcendence so much as it implies a relational tie – or, more precisely, the exciting notion of "constituting oneself" as well as "losing oneself" in the face of the other. The incompleteness of being is clearly demonstrated, according to Butler (2004), by experiences that concern agony (or melancholy

in the face of loss) or that involve desire. In these cases, no one remains intact, which is something that creates a consequence:

As a mode of relation, neither gender nor sexuality is precisely a possession, but, rather, is a mode of being dispossessed, a way of being for another or by virtue of another (Butler, 2004a:24).

This idea is very effective in terms of thinking about the profitability of transgressions in an erotic framework. It not only postulates that the subject is not composed by stable borders - and in this sense, establishes the subject as relational - but it also pushes us to think of the dynamic movement between norms, choices and changes. I agree with Butler that objective does not lie in challenging the evidence of norms, nor in making such notions as autonomy obsolete. It means that we do not merely accept norms as inescapable destiny, as nature, with autonomy being understood as self-determination. Thinking about gender and sexuality -- from the point of view of erotic experiences and references -- makes it impossible for us to not address the norms, phenomena which construct us without our entirely choosing to do so, but which paradoxically furnish us with the resources and repertoires for the choices we have and make.

Aside from this, when we deal with sexuality in its erotic expressions, we are face to face with experiences that mobilize fantasies and ghosts: situations, references, images, fragments of memory and sensations that, even as they are managed around and through norms, point beyond them. Fantasies are not the opposite of reality. They concern us because, according to Butler, they provide us with the limits of reality or what constitutes reality's "constitutive exterior". Fantasies and fetishes, such as those that are emphatically present in the sadomasochistic play described at the beginning of this article, are thus relevant to anthropological reflection -- and not only for the sciences of the spirit or mind -- precisely because they expose the contingency of sexuality and gender norms. This effort is important for us to think, on the one hand, about reality, or, in other words, to inquire about the rules

that are socially defined as constituting what is real. On the other hand, contingency opens up investigation into changes, and may even be useful for overcoming certain inequalities linked to markers of difference such as gender and sexuality. Before these markers can be considered as stable or definitive, they can be taken as terms open to imagination and to struggle.

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