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Seminar: Lusting after Submission? The Cultural Politics of *50 Shades of Grey*

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Lusting after Submission? The Cultural Politics of *50 Shades of Grey*

Reading Journal

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1. West, Robin L. (2001). “The Erotic Appeal of Submission“ (199-209)

1.1. Introduction

In an article to be found in the *Wisconsin Women's Law Journal* (15: 199-201), Robin L. West investigates “the erotic appeal of submission” (199) on the background of differences in women’s hedonic lives, repeatedly adducing Desclos’ *Story of O* (1954) before relativizing the radical feminist debate about pornography.

1.2 Central Aspects

1.2.1 The Erotic Appeal of Submission:

In terms of sexual submission, West (2001) emphasizes the necessity to distinguish between erotic appeal and value based on trust and its danger based on fear. In the widest sense, both can lead to submission, the difference being that trust is a source of pleasure, while fear is a source of pain, damage and injury (2001: 201). Plainly speaking, trust is good and fear is bad. More elaborately, West argues that sexual acts motivated by trust are enlivening, while those motivated by fear are deadening (2001: 201). Consider for example a woman’s consent to submission when a) she has to fear being beaten (or worse) and b) she has nothing to feel and fear but erotic pleasure based on controlled submission. In general, the loss of control and responsibility are characteristic of submissive sexual acts. What happens is the objectification of a human being. What is decisive in this regard is that the transformation from subject into object takes place voluntarily. Only then, when the permission to be objectified is based on trust and given voluntarily, is sexual submission supposed to be pleasurable. In this regard, West, under reference to an interpretation by Benjamin (1988), first adduces *The Story of O*.

Arguably, the lines of erotic pleasure and excitement blur in *The Story of O*. What seems to be problematic is “O’s consent to pain and enslavement” on the one hand and her master’s “rational, calculating, even instrumentalizing attitude” (Benjamin 1988 in West 2001: 200) on the other hand. The article continues to address broader societal topics such as the equality of women and men coming at a high cost. In more detail, trust is not only considered the source of pleasure, but also the cost of equality when it is realized through submissive sexual acts. As much as in sexual encounters, human beings need to be able to trust one another in order to be on the same level, i.e. to be equal. A lesson to take away from the importance of trust not only in (submissive) sexual acts, but more generally also in society is “[t]he capacity to safely depend on another” (West 2001: 201). What this means for society as much as for sexual relationships is that the strong, i.e. the predominant, must be trustworthy for the weak, i.e.

inferior party. Then again, testing said trustworthiness is argued to enhance erotic fantasies and pleasure (2001: 201). Less testing of trustworthiness than giving in beyond the cost of pleasure arguably is what happens to O. This is to the extent that the price she pays, i.e. first her identity and ultimately her life, exceeds the pleasure(s) she received in return. In the end, it is argued that, in order for modern women to avoid similar fates, they have to, with the help of corresponding literature, above all, get a better understanding of themselves, including their own erotic fantasies and to what extent they allow them to be practised (2001:203). It is crucial to be able to individually determine precisely hedonic thresholds not to be surpassed.

1.2.2 The Pornography Debate

Addressing pornography on the background of radical feminist concepts, West specifies the term itself and elucidates corresponding pros and cons. More specifically, the general degrading of women in the form of subordination, resp. submission can be considered the “root cause” of the problem the Indianapolis anti-pornography ordinance has with pornography. This is because sexual submission does not fit into the (feminist) framework of equality. On this background, the contradiction concerns objective inequalities and subjective pleasures. What is a thorn in the eyes of the ordinance, can, in fact, be hedonically pleasurable to many women, i.e. sexual submission (in pornography). Apart from subordination being the root cause of the controversy, violence is a further central aspect. While subordination is considered the root cause, violence against women is argued to be a symptom of it which can be enhanced by corresponding depictions. Such depictions should, it is argued, be abandoned altogether because of their violent, coercive, resp. forcing nature. In addition to the theoretical distinction between root cause and symptom, the motives for submission (fear vs. trust) also play a major role in the pornography debate. In short, it is argued that when submission is motivated by fear, it is never pleasurable (2001: 205). Even more so, it is “damaging, painful, unpleasant, deadening, and not at all erotic” (West: 2001: 205). For pornography this means that, if the sexual submission depicted can be interpreted to be motivated by fear, i.e. abusive, it should be chargeable. Interestingly, this is supposed to concern visual depictions (i.e. videos and pictures) more than literary outlets, as (violent) pictures of dominance and submission are more likely to cause violence than words, which are perceived rather in an erotic, i.e. pleasurable manner. Then again, whether it is explicit depiction or literature (or something else), when submission is motivated by trust, it is not only erotic, but also valuable. Given dichotomy is recurrently crucial to the article. Furthermore it is crucial to be able to tell bad, i.e. dangerous and harmful pornography apart from good, i.e. freeing and enlivening

pornography. As for the latter, it is necessary to be based on trust and when it is, it may well consist of clear hierarchies in different kinds of porn. Corresponding benefits include not only erotic pleasure and liberation but also education, the last of which forms the backbone of the article's quintessence. In the end, West argues that controlled objectification, domination and submission in sexual acts as depicted visually or literary need to be reconsidered, i.e. they may no longer be treated as taboo as they cannot be denied their pleasurable potential when based on trust. Accordingly, literary representations such as the *Story of O* are needed in order for women to better understand themselves, in order to ultimately facilitate the determination of individual boundaries that may or may not consensually be surpassed. Finally, in a broader Kantian sense, such individualizations contribute to a woman's being human.

1. 3. Discussion

Reading West's article for the seminar, I first wondered about the value (of sexual submission) she speaks of. To repeat, she argues that "sexual submission has erotic *appeal* and *value* when it is an expression of trust" (2001: 199). In my opinion, this sentence can be read two ways. The first one may seem more obvious to the extent that it limits both appeal and value to eroticism, meaning that, under the condition of it being motivated by trust, sexual submission can not only be stimulating, but also erotically precious because of the pleasures it entails. The second one first and foremost extends the meaning of the value of sexual submission to relationships in society. Not only can submission increase eroticism when it is carried out in sexual acts, but also encourage the private lives of (sexual) partners to the extent that sexual submission teaches them to safely trust, depend and rely on each other in their everyday lives. In other words, the kind of trust that is needed for sexual submission may also be beneficial, resp. valuable to partners outside of erotic pleasures.

Apart from that, the decisive question in terms of trust remains unanswered in West's article, namely: What does it take for a woman to trust? Obviously, possible answers to given question would need to be highly individual and manifold, but what this aims at is the difference of some women voluntarily taking on submissive parts in so called one night stands, while others need to develop a minimum level of trust in years of relationship. As for *50 Shades of Grey*, Steele may be argued to not necessarily belong to the latter kind, as she develops subjectively sufficient amounts of trust to Grey in a seemingly short time. Corresponding reasons shall do for a different paper, but what is promoted essentially is the testing of individual limits of trustworthiness, which, as such, describes the process behind the fascination. Another question that came to my mind along these lines was what happens when

trust is broken? Does it automatically turn into fear? In other words, what may be some of the consequences of a dominant part in an hierarchical sexual act going too far, i.e. crossing the hedonic threshold? Applying these questions to *50 Shades of Grey*, the contract, as detailed as it is formulated, may be viewed as an attempt to avoid any kind of (negative) consequences on Grey's behalf.

Furthermore, it is not only argued in West's article that, when it is based on trust, submission can be pleasurable, but also that, essentially, words can be more appealing, resp. more erotic than (moving) pictures (2001: 207). Years after the publication of West's article, this might, at least partially, explain the success of *50 Shades of Grey*. While the novel is characterized by rather comprehensible words, readers do, at no point, get the impression that Steele's submission is motivated by fear, which lulls them into safe erotic appeal in spite of comparatively low literary requirement. With the screen adaptation of the novel, producers arguably tried to make the most of it, providing not only literary, but also visual appeal.

Another aspect in West's article I focused on refers to the fact that not all women "who enjoy[] fantasies of erotic domination would enjoy literal servitude" (West 2001: 201). To me, this is a false conclusion to draw from any story of women openly and voluntarily enjoying a loss of control, etc. in a sexual environment, but I can see how suggestive this may be to less reflective readers. What it takes first and foremost is the ability to differentiate between sexual and non-sexual environments, the first of which is clearly marked in form of the so called "red room" in *50 Shades of Grey*. While this may be a comparatively luxurious and explicit variant of such an environment, it enhances said differentiation to the extent that the way Grey dominates Steele in given room is not comparable to the subtle control Steele has over Grey outside of this room. In this regard, the novel incorporates West's argument. Secondly, the difference between erotic domination and literal servitude may not be as obvious to all readers. The way I interpret it is that erotic domination is characterized by a reciprocal process of giving and taking with the overall aim to please both parties involved, whereas literal servitude is more of a dead end road for the serving party. This is to the extent that pleasure is reserved for the dominant, who receive without giving. The task for any novel, story or relationship fuelled by eroticism is to determine where erotic domination ends and (literal) servitude starts, in order not to cross hedonic thresholds, resp. run the risk of losing its erotic appeal and value.

When it comes to pornography, West draws a fine line in my opinion. In a simplified manner, this line refers to the unmistakably clear negative notion of violent porn promoting violence against women and a number of kinds of porn being acceptable and potentially

pleasurable, as long as trust can be considered the underlying motivation (of the actors). To me, there is no doubt that the acting out of any kind of passive or active aggression or violence should not be suggested in porn. I also agree that all kinds of porn doing exactly that should be abandoned altogether. West, however, argues that

pornography that depicts sexual relationships of domination and submission which does not legitimate or encourage the violent, forced, coercive expropriation of sexuality [...] may well be relatively harmless, is probably a pleasure for many, and might be liberating for a few. (2001: 207)

This, in addition to domination, resp. submission only being pleasurable when based on trust, is where said fine line is to be drawn. On the one hand, violent porn should be banned, on the other hand, pornographic content including domination/ submission based on trust cannot be denied a number of benefits. What is missing is how to tell these kinds of porn apart. Who is to say whether or not certain displays are motivated by and based on trust and not fear? Again, being highly subjective, where do voluntary and pleasurable submission and objectification end, where do discrimination and violence start? Presumably, the implicit assumption in West's article must be that it is only possible to determine said differences objectively, when the reviewer is not looking for subjective pleasures.

One last aspect I particularly focused on was the analogy West draws between nuclear and erotic energy. Both are argued to come at a high price, which may sometimes exceed the justifiable. As for nuclear energy, the damage and danger it causes on the environment are necessary evils. Not going into detail, examples of the consequences of misuse and accidents are well-known. In terms of erotic energy, it seems as though more publicity and education is needed. This particularly applies to instances in which the price for individual erotic pleasures is too high. What is acceptable, but less of a necessary evil, is to pay for erotic pleasures, i.e. energies with voluntary and controlled submission. Becoming a slave or mistreated under the pretext of sexual pleasures is a price not worth paying. Given analogy I find especially suitable due to the duality of pros and cons on both sides as well as the adequate dramatization of corresponding risks.

After all, what I found to be the overarching lesson for me to learn from this paragraph of the article was that, “[w]hatever causes women pleasure without causing attendant pain is something we should celebrate” (West 2001: 207). What I particularly enjoy about this quote is that is applicable beyond the scope of the article, it is not limited to pornography, not to sexuality, but applicable to everything that can bring joy.

2. Mader, Franziska (2015). “Ästhetik des Ersten Mals“

2.1 Introduction

In her essay on the *Aesthetics of the First Time* (my translation), Mader (2015) elaborately addresses *The Sublime in E L James' >>50 Shades<<- Trilogy* (my translation). Taking into account various contributive aspects, Mader's analysis goes beyond the sole textual representation(s) in that a number of selected promotional visuals are put into perspective as well.

2.2 Central Aspects

In the beginning, Mader (2015) dedicates three, resp. four paragraphs to refer to some more or less justified criticism that the novel has received. In short, said criticism mainly relates to the comparatively low literary demand and is often based on insular conceptions on why the trilogy has become so successful and popular. Besides, even before the definition of the sublime in the following paragraph, it is argued that, in order to evoke enthusiasm as an effect of the sublime, Literature needs to make use of fright, which already hints at the positive role of something that would usually be ascribed negative connotations (i.e. fright, terror, fear, dismay) (2015: 1).

The definition itself is as integral as is it comprehensible. The sublime is defined as an aesthetic experience in need of a triggering source, which can come in the form a natural happening, i.e. a volcanic eruption or in form of artwork as for example Caspar David Friedrich's *Sea of Ice* (2015: 1). More generally, the five main kinds of triggers according to Burke (1980) relate to power, darkness, privatization, hugeness and infinity, all of which also play a role in *50 Shades of Grey* (2015: 1). Regardless of different triggers, however, it is decisive for the spectator to be safe, i.e. to witness the happening from a safe distance, in order to experience what is called “happy fright” (Burke 1980 in Mader 2015; my translation). The latter is a key element of the sublime and describes a mixture of fascination and dismay (2015: 1).

As for *50 Shades of Grey*, Mader considers BDSM the main (triggering) source of the sublime (2015: 2). At first, this is because the fascination is restricted to suggestions rather than actual practices. The so called “red room” including all of the potentially dangerous and intimidating constructions and tools is a good example of objective dangers and distress not being actually that, but stimuli to the protagonist's, resp. reader's fantasy. Something that enhances especially the latter is the fact that the novel is told in Steele's inner monolog. The

combination of said monolog and present tense increases the overall potential of the reader to identify with Steele and therefore, metaphorically speaking, become one with the protagonist.

On a more general level, Mader addresses the importance of curiosity as a precondition of any aesthetic experience. This notion was introduced by Burke in 1980 and basically assumes that curiosity is (one of) the most basic emotions humans can have (2015: 3). Accordingly, the more familiar we are with something, the less interested in it we are, i.e. the less sublime it is to us. In *50 Shades of Grey*, novelty is arguably a recurrent concept to the extent that every sexual encounter Steele has with Grey differs from the previous one and therefore always consists of something new, i.e. unknown, not to forget that, in the first novel, Steele is still a virgin, also increasing and prolonging the intensity of all that is sex related. In other words, the protagonist, resp. reader, experiences a number of firsts and is therefore more prone to the sublime.

What is furthermore interesting, particularly on behalf of the readers, is the difference between the sublime and the beautiful, the former of which is ascribed an animating impact alongside adjectives such as “cold”, “raw” or “dark”, the latter of which is said to be relaxing in addition to warm, soft or bright associations. Moreover, these concepts are attributed gender specifications by Burke (1980). In short, the beautiful is connected to the feminine, while the sublime is attributed the masculine. Consequently, Grey impersonates the sublime, Steele the beautiful. The source of the sublime, Mader argues, is Grey’s sexual preferences (2015: 4). Due to Grey’s immense power, which is mostly emphasized by his wealth, the masculine, i.e. the sublime appears to be superior to the feminine, resp. beautiful. Examples include Grey’s skyscraper symbolizing an erected phallus and his extravagant hobbies, both of which are made possible by his far-above-average income. Further aspects contributing to the fact that the sublime is superior to the beautiful in *50 Shades of Grey* can, however, not be explained in terms of financial wealth but character traits, as for example his need to be in control, the impenetrability of his background as well as the overall unpredictability of his mood and behaviour. Besides the more obvious displays of his power based on his wealth, it is Grey’s character that reveals a sense of danger and thus suggests the sublime. Steele’s characteristics on the other hand, serving as the source of the beautiful, are mostly restricted to her appearance as for example regarding her skin and clothes. In this regard, Mader gives an interesting example of how Steele’s clothes are used to illustrate her (emotional) dependence on Grey in the form of corsages, which, on the one hand, can literally be bond very tightly in order to emphasize a woman’s curves while, on the other hand, symbolizing how (tightly) bond Steele is to Grey (2015: 5).

The last important of Burke's notions Mader applies to the novel is the continuous altering of the relaxing and animating effects of the beautiful and sublime. First of all, it is argued that staying on either side is unhealthy (2015: 5). Even the relaxing effect of the beautiful is said to be life threatening in that it can lead to cardiac arrest in the worst case (2015: 5). As for the altering of the beautiful and the sublime in *50 Shades of Grey*, Mader observed that, in the course of the narration, Grey adopts more and more beautiful, resp. feminine traits, as for example regarding his sexual preferences. In the beginning, Grey prefers rough, but playfully dominant sex exclusively in the "red room". Later on, this shifts towards a more conventional kind of sex in his bedroom. In addition to the shifting sexual preferences, Grey's control and dominance develop into affirmations of his love, which, in turn, are characteristic of the beautiful. Steele on the other hand acquires rather masculine, i.e. sublime traits, especially in terms of the power she increasingly gains over him in addition to an unpredictability she develops. According to Illouz (2013: 46 in Mader 2015: 6)), both characters need to be labelled "androgynous". Most importantly, the exchange of masculine and feminine attributes of the characters in *50 Shades of Grey* does not support the perception of a typically conservative hierarchy in their relationship. Instead, it suggests a very contemporary gender equation.

Then again, the mere fascination of the sublime transfers readers to traditional hierarchies. What happens is that BDSM undermines male dominance, while, at the same time, having a releasing effect. In this regard, *50 Shades of Grey* obscures traditional roles of genders under the pretext of free female sexuality and a removal of taboos from sexual preferences such as BDSM. As a result, the roots of the public criticism can, in fact, be pinpointed in the novel(s).

2.2.1 Visual Representations

Along the lines of her textual argumentation, Mader uses a number of selected visual representations, i.e. movie advertisements, to further illustrate her observations. She comprehensibly explains how each representation supports various aspects of Burke's (1980) concepts. Whether it is in terms of colours, as for example regarding certain backgrounds or clothes (bright vs. dark) or explicit textual suggestions ("curious"/ "lose control"⁷ "Mr. Grey will see you now"), or with regard to Burke's five major triggers of the sublime (privatization, darkness, hugeness, power and infinity), the advertisements attract and confront recipients to, resp. with obsolete gender relations beyond the usual readership.

2.3 Discussion

A first aspect I would like to extend regards the (source of the) sublime. I can relate to the fascination of the potentially dangerous, as I am easily fascinated by waterfalls, volcanoes, mountains and the sea for example, all of which can be lethal to human beings in the worst case. It is argued that when witnessing such forces a safe distance is obligatory in order to classify them as sublime. Having heard of this notion before in a seminar on Gothic literature, it was very interesting to see it being applied to sexual fantasies and practices. In this regard, I have come to understand that people are of different opinions when it comes to literally and more metaphorically safe distances. In other words, what is safe to one person, is not necessarily so to another. Consider people stepping so close to a waterfall the spume already soaks them, or wandering so close to a volcano they can almost touch the lava, while others tend to stay far away. Similarly, a lot of readers may be drawn to the unpredictable and objectively distressing behaviours and preferences of someone like Christian Grey. In my opinion, it is decisive for readers to actually believe the sexual fantasies and according tools and toys of Grey can be dangerous sources of the sublime. Hence the challenge for the author is to present all these elements in a credible and appealing way. In terms of potential danger, however, I struggled with one of Burke's notions Mader mentions. I found it strange to consider something beautiful dangerous. To be exact, I find it hard to agree to the extent that the danger of the beautiful can consist in its relaxing effect. Essentially, it is argued that the beautiful can be too relaxing. It may be a naïve and unfinished thought, but I have not yet heard of a human being dying of relaxation. I understand the characteristics and the role of the beautiful in Burke's framework applied to *50 Shades of Grey*, but its danger remains more of a dubiousness.

A further notion that seemed rather controversial in spite of its comprehensibility to me was our love for things that subject themselves to us. In more detail, it is argued that we love what subjects itself to us. In other words, we love to be superior, we love to be cherished. In terms of the novel(s) given notion applies to Grey more than it does to Steele. Interestingly, *50 Shades of Grey* is notoriously told from the subjected perspective nonetheless. In this regard, I wondered whether or not this could be an aspect attracting male readers to the novel(s). I wondered whether or not (male) readers realized the arguably religious parallels. Our desire to be cherished, to have inferiors subject themselves to us resembles God's relation to his creation. Exaggeratedly spoken, Grey is superior to Steele in the same way God is superior to mankind. As a result, male readers may be more likely attracted by said parallel.

What was also interesting to me was Burke's concept of curiosity as one of the most basic emotions of human beings. I enjoyed reading about said concept being applied to *50 Shades of Grey* very much as it just seemed so right and comprehensible. Anything that is new draws our attention. In those terms it seems almost too logical of a reason for that many readers to enjoy the novel(s) with every sexual encounter notoriously differing from the previous, constantly revealing something unknown, resp. new. Given Steele's virginity, I wondered whether or not female readers, who are virgins themselves, might enjoy this aspect even more than more experienced readers. Could it not be that the former class of readers, because they do not need to imagine they were still virgins, are more likely to identify with the tension and the excitement of the protagonist and therefore enjoy it more? My idea behind this assumption is that sexually experienced recipients have to fictionally relive their virginity and are furthermore able to re-enact what a first time actually feels like, while the non-fiction of both may enhance the identification of virgin-readers with the protagonist. Admittedly, given assumption is limited to the point of the protagonist losing her virginity and can thus be applied to more experienced readers from that point onwards as well. What this suggests on a more general level is a classification of readers in terms of their own (sexual) experience, which may impact their ability to identify with Steele. Such classification may consist of readers, who are a) virgins with literally no sexual experience, b) sexually experienced but not in terms of BDSM and c) familiar with and pleased by BDSM practices. Still, suggested classification is not meant to display different degrees of enjoyment when reading the novel(s), it is solely supposed to address the potential to identify with the protagonist in terms of individual (sexual) experience.

A further point of my particular interest is also related to the readers of the novel(s). Regardless of the classification given above, the omnipresent sublime in *50 Shades of Grey* is said to have an animating effect, which I understand to prompt readers to replicate (some of) the practices described in sufficient detail by the protagonist. The considerable increase in sales of sex toys such as handcuffs and more does not allow doubt in this regard. To me, it is remarkable to see current sales numbers undermine an argument made decades before its corresponding application to sexual preferences. To this end, *50 Shades of Grey* is a prime example of literature having an actual impact on a specific part of many people's lives. Whether or not given impact is perceived as equally positive, i.e. pleasurable by all parties involved is up for debate. One way or the other, first- and second hand recipients are prompted to question their own sexuality and put it into perspective on the background of the

novel. Who would have thought, I asked myself, that something so primitive can actually cause such a massive stir in society.

In terms of visual representations Mader (2015) analyzes a number of selected promotional posters to which, at first, I did not feel like I had something to add, but I have come across two aspects that are neither explicitly mentioned by Mader nor have they been addressed in more detail in the seminar. The first could be considered a hint at the interplay or exchange of the sublime and the beautiful among the two lead characters. On the posters analyzed on page seven for example, the beautiful dominates besides the literal main teaser “curious?” in that bright colours (mostly white), which have been argued to resemble said concept, prevail. The more obvious aspect suggesting a presence of the sublime in Steele is her dark hair. Regardless of specific lighting, it stands out as unmistakably dark, i.e. sublime. Then again light contributes a second hint at the sublime. In more detail, due to her secretive pose supported by specific lighting angles, only half of Steele’s face is visible, with exactly that part of her face covered in a tempting shadow. As I studied the poster in more detail, I interpreted both, hair and shadow, as hints at the sublime in the character of the protagonist. Similar reasons for a concurrent interpretation are given with regard to the poster showing Grey with a tie in his hand (also page seven). In this case, colours attributed to the sublime dominate, i.e. mostly black. What is suggestive, though, is Grey’s white shirt, worn under a black jacket and half of his face being lighted, so that, again, only half of his face is covered in shadow. Not only does the lighting hint at a split character in terms of the sublime and beautiful, but the jacket may further be interpreted as an attempt to cover, if not hide, the beautiful the story unravels in Grey. Lastly, the final conclusion I interpreted from given posters was that Grey is the perfect surname for a character supposed to have sublime as well as beautiful traits, exemplary resembled by dark, i.e black, and bright, i.e. white, colours, a mixture of which results in “Shades of Grey”.

3. Dworkin, Andrea (1975). “The Root Cause”

3.1 Introduction

In the widest sense chapter nine of Dworkin’s book *Our Blood: Prophecies and Discourses on Politics* (1975) is dedicated to the underlying (socio-political) reasons for the inequality of men and women, or what she calls “realities and possibilities” (99).

3.2 Central Aspects

Dworkin (1975: 99) begins said chapter with the introduction of what she calls brutal realities and seemingly impossible possibilities, the first of which implies crimes committed against women, while the latter, it becomes clear as the argumentation unfolds, is a demand to break down sex classification as we (still) know it. Throughout the entire chapter the most important basis of Dworkin's argumentation is a principle, resp. model of two different (magnetic) poles standing in direct opposition to each other. On this background, Dworkin adds that "the male sex [...] has positive qualities" (1975: 100) while the female sex is ascribed negative qualities. In short: "Man is the positive and woman is his negative" (1975: 100). Essentially, viewing a woman as a negative counterpart to a man is what fuels Dworkin's argumentation in the process of determining the root of all that is wrong and evil in terms of sexes. She continues with drastic, but authentic examples of how women have suffered under the effects of given view for centuries and compares the development of technology to the treatment of women. In more detail, she compares spacecraft technology to methods of contraception, which, especially in comparison, are argued to be inadequately obsolete (1975: 101). Apart from given comparison, Dworkin stresses the reality of intellectual in addition to physical assaults. She explains that, besides the fact that women are hurt physically in countless absurd ways, intellectual assaults aim at, among others, the stupidity of women, which is furthermore argued to be enforced by a systematic denial to (formal) education.

A further crucial backbone of Dworkin's argumentation is pornography. The latter, she argues, is "the most vivid manifestation [...] of female negation" (1975: 101). In this regard, terms such as "sadism", "masochism", "dominance" and "submission" (1975: 101) are repeatedly stressed. The relation of given terms is explained to be the following: In a society in which men are viewed to be the positive and women their negative, men dominate and women (have to) submit. Applied to pornography, said relation is formulated more drastically: "male sadism feeds on female masochism; male dominance is nourished by female submission" (1975: 101). As a result, Dworkin understands male sadism in pornography as a display of power, of superiority acted out in everyday circumstances. Most importantly, men are said to reify their manhood first and foremost by degradation of all that is female. In more drastic words, men need to destroy the body and will, i.e. the identity of women in order to experience their own real manhood and identity. In addition, just like in much pornographic content, the ultimate degradation of the female, resp. the perfect establishment of manhood is for a man to publicly own a woman. It is argued that a man cannot be a man "until her degradation is publicly witnessed and enjoyed" (1975: 102). In this

sense, (public) degradation means humiliation, humiliation means ownership and ownership means manhood. Ultimately, it is not until the annihilation of a woman's individuality and identity have publicly been displayed that a man completely owns a woman. Ideally, Dworkin argues, ownership leads to an objectively bizarre acceptance of given situation(s). The ultimate disbelief would then be for a woman think that she is "the pick of the litter", actually coming to terms with her subjugation.

Another central topic is the "essentially homosexual character of male society" (1975: 102). This interesting assumption is based on the argument of men connecting with each other by means of the annihilation of women's bodies, will, individuality and identity. As a result, the only real sex is male, so that all societal interactions are reserved for men, which literally makes society homosexual, i.e. homosocial.

What follows is a definition of love for women. Essentially, women experience love in their subjugation, or worse in their humiliation. The twist in comparison to a more general definition of love is that it is basically equivalent to submission. In other words, without submission there is no love for women. Corresponding definition can thus be narrowed down to a woman's willingness to be annihilated, i.e. to have her whole self destroyed. Consequently, Dworkin argues, the essence of female love is best captured in pornography, which is characterized by female masochism, i.e. a need or desire to submit, to be abused, to be objectified (1975: 103).

A further act undermining male positivity and dominance is fucking. In short, the act of fucking for a man is about not being swallowed by a woman. During said act, a man's self is restricted to his penis, which runs the risk of being swallowed by a woman's vagina, literally wrapping itself around it. The verification of manhood by the act of fucking consists in his ability to accept and survive given danger of losing his whole self inside of her. Ultimately, in the act of fucking, men are said "to experience their own reality, or identity, or masculinity" (103), which makes it worth to repeatedly enter said danger. In this regard, pornography plays its own crucial role to the extent that it tries to diminish men's fear of the act. For women on the other hand, being fucked is not pleasurable at all. What happens is "accidental clitoral friction" (1975: 104) and the experiencing of self-negation.

Finally, before her ultimate conclusion, Dworkin distinguishes two important terms, namely reality and truth. According to her definition "reality is always a function of politics in general and sexual politics in particular" (1975: 104). Most importantly this means that juxtaposition of two sexes, male and female, is a reality in this world. It is real that one cannot be the other, just like a negative magnetic pole cannot become a positive one. What is also

real, Dworkin (1975: 104) stresses, is the crimes and degradations committed against women. Then again, it is not necessarily the case that what is real is also true. “Truth”, Dworkin explains, “is absolute in that it does exist and it can be found” (1975: 104). It is our task as humans to “find it so that reality can be based on it” (1975: 104). Sometimes it is possible for notions of reality to change in favour of truth. After all, this is what Dworkin aims at, a change of the human notion of reality in favour of truth. She argues that, while “*gender polarity is real, it is not true*” (italics original, 1975: 104). There are no two polar and opposite sexes, no positive polarized men and negative polarized women, no free women inside a system of sexual polarity. It is the destruction of the latter in addition to that of the “phallic identity in men” (1975: 105) and manhood as such that will revolutionize the global system in favour of suppressed and imprisoned women.

3.3 Discussion

Before I commence with the actual discussion of certain aspects, I would like to emphasize that I had never read comparably radical and controversial literature for a seminar before. I had never taken a class on feminism before, so that my experience with corresponding literature was much of a blank sheet, all of which largely affected my first reading of Andrea Dworkin’s *The Root Cause*. I had never felt comparably offended before, though surely not insulted, while and after the reading of a text. At first, I felt as if, for the sake of considering myself a man, I were to blame for the misery of all women on this planet, as if I were the one actively and consciously degrading and suppressing all that is female. As if I were the one promoting the crimes committed against women in porn, literature and everyday life.

What the text has not evoked in me, however, is the questioning of my manhood. I have had a hard time coming to the conclusion that, in the 21st century, I can actually be and call myself a man despite not publicly owning and sharing my girlfriend with other men, despite not degrading or suppressing women at all, despite never even having considered parallels of magnetic poles and gender polarity. One of the parallels that I did recognize after having read Dworkin’s chapter is that by watching porn, consumers are the ones raping, abusing, burning, choking and generally degrading women just like people enjoying a good piece of meat every now and then are responsible for the killing and disgusting factory farming of animals. The problem I had and still have to a certain extent is that, apart from pornography, which is arguably only a display of male superiority designed to diminish the questionable fear of literally entering the so called “female void” (1975: 103), being a man itself is enough of a target for Dworkin to call for a total eradication of manhood. I have stated above I felt

offended, which, in retrospect, I trace back to Dworkin's harsh formulations listing things that need to be "destroyed" or killed (1975: 105). I considered Dworkin's plea a call to arms. A call for feminists to (metaphorically, i.e. intellectually) shoot at anything that is male, resp. might promote manhood.

I agree with Dworkin in many respects as much as I view her approach much too radical. There is absolutely no doubt that crimes and degradations of all kinds committed against women need to stop and be sanctioned, that men and women need to be treated and paid equally to experience equal degrees of freedom. What I would have liked to ask her is whether or not it was really necessary to a) generalize men and the way they can achieve true manhood and b) call for the death of manhood and a breakdown of the gender system. I understand that sometimes, in order to draw public attention, words need to be more controversial than convenient, but the last couple of paragraphs sound like a call to man-hunt to me, to seek and destroy (cultural) institutions, religion, art, law etc. (105), in order to free women from a suppressive system characterized by an obvious gender model. I mean, I had to let that sink in for a moment, Dworkin is literally asking her readers to destroy religion, a system that, just like the classification of the sexes, has been practiced for irretraceable amounts of periods. Accordingly, just like Dworkin formulates it, anything achieved in this regard can be considered revolutionary. I wonder what she would have made of neuter toilets in public environments for instance, which, in comparison, are at least paving the way for further revolutions. Restrooms for people who do not seem to fit into the established system of polarity and the option to tick *n* for neuter on official documents may only be the beginning.

In addition to the impression I got and the effect it had on me, Dworkin's work contains a number of interesting aspects that I would like to dedicate more attention to in this paper. For example, it is analogously argued that the submission of women to men in society needs to be counteracted (1975: 105). In terms of sexual acts, resp. pornography, submissive behaviour is the only way for women to experience love according to Dworkin's definition. In this regard, I must disagree. Without a doubt, women must not be treated as inferior to men in society, they need not submit. When it comes to love, and the experiencing of love in particular, though, I am convinced that it is not mandatory for women to be submissive in order to experience love. Admittedly, this may be restricted to private intercourse outside of pornography. To this end, I consider Dworkin's argumentation exaggerated. It seems almost ignorant to deny examples of sound relationships between men and women, in which women are not subjugated and still experience love. Other than that, there are, in fact, examples of

women dominating men in- and outside of sexual acts. Even though this does not have to do with the experiencing of love, consider dominatrixes. In this case, men voluntarily submit to a woman, which is an aspect totally missing in Dworkin's work. Obviously, it does not suit her point, which is focused on male superiority/ positivity. It could be possible nonetheless to interpret male desire to be dominated by a woman as a result of their (male) dominance and power in many societal (and erotic) realms.

A different aspect I missed while reading *The Root Cause* was non-sexual relationships. Applying Dworkin's argumentation to familial relationships for example would mean that a mother cannot love her son, a grandmother her grandson, a cousin her cousin, an aunt her nephew, a sister her brother unless they submit to them, which is simply absurd in my opinion.

Dworkin's notion of manhood and corresponding ownership are additional aspects I have to discuss. Analogously, a man has to (publicly) own a woman, to master her will and body in order to be a real man (1975: 102, 104). What this means, strictly speaking, is that single and/or handicapped men are not to be considered men, as they are unable to fulfil the aforementioned criteria. Generally, I refuse to accept the necessity of (the public demonstration of) ownership as a precondition of manhood. Never before have I witnessed (public) ownership of a woman by a man. None of my friends and acquaintances would dare to even consider owning their girlfriends or wives, and neither do I. If, according to Dworkin's argumentation, this means "[I am] not thoroughly a man" (1975: 102), I am fine with that. In spite of that, there is one fact that cannot be disregarded and refers to the veiling of women. Regardless of Dworkin's notion, one can get the impression that veiled women are owned by their men to the extent that they are told by them what to wear and how to look. However, it should be noted that veiling often has religious rather than gender-relational reasons, which, then again, explains why Dworkin demands the breakdown of such institutions. Apart from my disagreeing, Dworkin's notion of ownership may be interpreted to actually play a role in *50 Shades of Grey*. It is argued that, on the one hand, a woman's identity and individuality need to be destroyed for a man to fully own her, while, on the other hand, said individuality can be reinforced by the belief of being "the only, i.e. the chosen one", evoking a sense of speciality. Given the respective backgrounds of the characters in the novel, Steele may actually ask why someone as rich and powerful as Grey would be interested in (dominating) her. After all, Grey does own Steele to a certain extent.

A further parallel I noted from the drastic examples Dworkin gives refers to the verification of male positivity. One of her historical examples is that, in China, said positivity

was reified by taking away women's ability to walk, the consequence being that given ability was reserved for men. Similarly, in BDSM practices, the dominant party, be it male or female, commonly constrains at least one ability of the sub, as for example the ability to see, move arms and/ or legs or even to breathe. What happens regardless of the corresponding sex of the dominant part is that positivity is reified.

The last two aspects of particular interest regard female consumption of pornography and their argued denial to formal education. As regards the former I wondered why, if pornography is such an unworthy depiction of male savagery, including the unpleasant act of fucking, do women consume porn, too. Why would they enjoy watching other females being fucked, being degraded and owned? What makes sense for men to enjoy, who, according to Dworkin, establish fellowship via the mutual (enjoying the depiction of) humiliation of the female will and body, appears rather irrational for women. Along the lines of her argumentation Dworkin presupposes that men take pleasure from both being the one who is fucking and fantasizing about or watching other men fuck, i.e. degrade and own women, ignoring the possibility of the latter consuming exactly that on their own behalf. Last of all, the argument of women systematically being denied access to formal education does not apply to this day and age. To be exact, I dare to argue it does not apply to Germany in the 21st century. Men and women alike, under the condition of equal qualifications, have equal access to formal education. Admittedly, Dworkin once again presupposes male dominance in society and thus also in institutions regulating access to education, which, so she argues accordingly, have to be destroyed. This is not say that Dworkin's argument does not have any substance and does not apply to specific societies even in this day and age, but just like most of her claims in *The Root Cause*, I consider it exaggerated.

Overall, Dworkin's *The Root Cause* was a very uncomfortable, inconvenient, but inciting read to me. The examples she uses are drastic, but real and thus uncomfortable to read. Her parallels and comparisons are as comprehensible as they are profound. Her formulations are harsh, but plausible. Her conclusion is as controversial as her suggestion is bravely revolutionary.

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