Femdom, the Libidinal Edge of Interfacial Heaven

Seung-hoon Jeong
Seung-hoon Jeong
FEMDOM, THE LIBIDINAL EDGE OF INTERFACIAL HEAVEN

Abstract

The sadomasochistic subculture of “female domination,” namely femdom, has formed a conspicuous mode of digital carnality that prevails among new media interfaces while radicalizing interactivity. The submissive man’s relationship with the dominant woman is never simple here, not just pornographic but symptomatic of complex phenomena regarding power and society, media and life that shape our techno-libidinal age. This paper sheds light on its sexual, psychological, psychoanalytic and socio-ethical implications, drawing on and reframing theories about masochism, abjection, biopolitics, nihilism and so on. Full of paradoxes, femdom embodies a formally structured governance of sensation and determination, an exceptional law beyond normal law by which submission to a sexual sovereign leads to both the slave’s self-deprivation and regain of freedom. His failed desire for the unobtainable object then takes on the Lacanian drive, the instant satisfaction of circulating around the void as if to constantly “edge” without closure, as typified in the digital loop of gif images. More precisely, desire and derive mingle indiscernibly in the disintegration of the Symbolic and the Real, of the private and the public that characterizes the self-destructive addictive culture of capitalist hedonism. In this context the femdom wonderland turns out to be a permeable network of numerous Dom/subs’ life-building communities, a self-modulating interactive heaven of the undead desire-drive without outside, without nirvana.

Pornography has been a cutting-edge platform for visual media experiments on “embodied” spectatorship beyond immobile passivity. Seducing and exciting spectators, it provokes them into touching themselves in a vicarious thrill mixed with autoeroticism. The screen is a permeable membrane between performance and observation, fantasy and reality, vision and tactility. The age of the Internet has only intensified this media experience, virtual sex turning into actual masturbation in diverse ways. Porn filmmaking has digitally upgraded...
cinematographic techniques to maximize reality effects from the viewer’s “point of view” (in the subgenre called pov, “pornstars” perform while looking at the camera, i.e. the viewer). Porn websites have become endlessly hyperlinked databases of photos and clips including User Created Contents (sex with an “ex/girlfriend” is a popular source for amateur videos, real or fake). But it is interactive interfaces that have brought more active and easier participation of the user as viewer and doer: avatar-using computer games and Virtual Reality sites (Second Life), online chat forums equipped with live webcams or phone calls (Skype, NiteFirt), individual websites/blogs and profile pages on Social Network Services (Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr). Although the digital revolution immaterialized photographic indexicality into algorithmic info-codes, it has paradoxically served to materialize the mostly male erotic desire to <jack of> by <jacking in> and playing with a <joy stick> (of a console-interface and, why not, of his body). Technology transcending corporeal limitations rather enables one to <reclaim experience through the flesh>.

Submission and freedom

One conspicuous mode of this digital carnality that prevails among all these interfaces while radicalizing interactivity is the sadomasochistic (SM) subculture of “female domination,” namely femdom. It includes all imaginable types of a submissive man (“sub”)’s masochistic relationship with a dominant woman called “dom(me)” or “dominatrix”. In explicit videos, a domme, often tightly dressed in latex/rubber/leather clothing and harness, leads a usually undressed sub to sexual humiliation for perverted jouissance. She holds him in bondage, or makes him kneel and crawl, lick her feet and kiss her ass, serve as a human chair or pony; she slaps, spits, sits on his face, wrestles and scissors him by her legs, whips and tramples his body, kicks and tortures his “cock and ball”; she pisses on his mouth, teases yet denies his orgasm, “fucks” him with a “strap-on” dildo, forces him to “cum” and even slurp his “cum” spilt onto her boots or the floor… The list goes on, with more and more such acts tested, repeated, tagged, and registered in a haphazardly proliferative, infinitely anatomic matrix of femdom subgenres. Likewise, every part of the female body is categorized as a specific fetish object to peep into, drool over, appreciate and worship from big tits to deadly asses, blond hair to mesmerizing eyes, dirty socks to stiletto heels.

1 Sobchack 2004: 175.

2 While a dom can be male (and a “sub” can be female), a domme usually, though not strictly, refers to a non-professional female dominant and a dominatrix to a professional one (“pro-domme”). This essay focuses on the female domme/male sub relationship (abbreviated as “D/s,” reflecting their power hierarchy) as the salient popular feature of the current SM scene.
An overwhelming height, slick long legs, and sexily trained muscles are trendy qualities that dwarf, captivate, and threaten small impotent men in fascination.

All these occur not only as role playing games between (semi-)professional actors (and clients), but also in the actual relationship between real life dommes and “slaves” who ardently desire to serve their “masters” in person without minding being photographed or filmed, then exposed in cyberland, thereby causing and circulating the same desire among viewers. Online and offline spaces merge together in this loop of interactivity. But even with no physical encounter, interactivity involves a variety of much more common interfacial and intermedial activities. Texting, emailing, updating Sns, and (video) chatting are basic but crucial in everyday exchanges of desire. And many dommes make and sell photos and videos in on-demand fetish markets (Clip4sale, Kinkbomb, Iwantclips), sometimes reflecting customer requests for specific Pov acts. Dommes also run membership sites and “own” slaves by contract under certain terms and conditions. Through all such channels, subs are enticed and ordered to send their mistress money and gifts, chant a mantra of obedience, write “I am X’s slave” on his body or on paper hundreds of times. Subs are encouraged and urged to “jerk off”, “eat cum”, ruin their orgasm at the last minute for their princess’ entertainment, or cage their penis in a “chastity device” whose key is sent to her. Subs are initiated and forced to become a “sissy” who transvestites himself, a “gay/bi” who takes pleasure in “cock-sucking”, or a “cuckhold” who pays for their goddess’ date with an “alpha male”. From “small penis humiliation” to “mind-fuck hypnosis”, dommes despise, insult, degrade, make fun of losers as the object of “Laugh-Out-Loudly”, and simultaneously lure, exploit, brainwash, manipulate them into deeper and deeper addiction to a mortified, servile status that most “vanilla” people could neither accept nor understand. And all this interplay is shot, posted, shared, and promoted by both dommes and subs.

A thorough study on SM is not feasible here, but there seem a few notable motivations of this peculiar new media femdom. Biologically, some dommes state that female beauty, especially sexual, is programmed to cause male arousal for the evolutionary purpose of reproduction (in the animal world as well). Therefore it is the universal law of nature that men are physically and mentally drawn to sexy women, wanting to attract them by pleasing them, offering what they want. Male desire is to fulfill female desire; this is a basic instinct. Bossy confident women can take full advantage of their beauty for the female-led relationship even beyond the feminist pursuit of gender equality, reversing the power hierarchy in the name of female supremacy. Having a vagina means not lack, but rather power to harden, control, and exploit a penis, thereby possessing its owner’s mind and wallet. This inherent inequality in favor of women also implies inequality among women who can stimulate men and who cannot. Dommes exert maximal power as femme fatale, seducing normal men into servitude, taking their money reserved for their “ugly/old/fat” wives or girlfriends, making subs doing whatever filthy things (including ejaculation onto their
wedding photos), sometimes by “blackmail”, even leading them to breakup or divorce. This “home wrecking” femdom normalizes a female caste system based on sex appeal as predatory capital, which is monopolized by the dominant few who ruin ordinary relationships and take over their capital. It sets up a state of exception to social norms, yet conversely embodying today's normative winner-take-all ideology, the neoliberal law of the jungle in its greediest version.

This exception as norm is multifaceted. Sexually, femdom is exceptional to the pleasure principle to begin with, driven by the adventurous desire to experience eccentric carnal jouissance in cruel, thus dreadful manners. Many SM plays display the liminal experience of ecstasy right in the midst of pain, often through severe violence thrown onto the vulnerable skin. Dommes experiment on the destruction of moral constraints on sexuality by hurting subs’ body, embodying pure evil in ecstasy weirdly shared with their brutalized victims. But “cruelty”, if explored in Antonin Artaud’s view, is not just about bloody atrocities; it aims at “sensation” that extreme actions beyond limit generate as vital force encarnalized in an affective vortex of nervous sensibility and pre-linguistic synesthesia. With each sense freed from its boundary, the organic form of body is (virtually) dissolved into its immanent fundament — Gilles Deleuze would call it the “meat” as the flesh revealed through bodily disfiguration in the paintings of Francis Bacon, or the “body without organs” (coined by Artaud) as the asubjective plane of deterritorialized identity with organs being disorganized. Masochism has the potential to reach this instinctive, immediate plane of immanence, dismantling the established psychoanalytic, capitalistic structure of phallocentric desire and Oedipal subjectification, replacing the paternal with the maternal power. This latter is pre-Oedipal, partly evoking Julia Kristeva’s idea on the mother’s body as “abject” that threatens patriarchal subjectivity formed in the Symbolic order.

Yet another point is that masochistic abjection strictly demands another aspect of Artaudian cruelty, “determination”. The masochist must undergo a highly ritualized disciplinary system and endure all suffering from doing tasks imposed by the dominant, in order to cross the threshold of self-destablization. Determination characterizes, as Deleuze puts, the “coldness” of cruelty under the contract as a sort of purely artificial law. And this new law mimics (even mocks) the Law scrupulously in a primitive form to the extent of revealing its foundational absurdity and arbitrariness (at the origin of the Law is the mystic whim of the sovereign who forces it). In effect it is a self-deconstructive law that prohibits pleasure only to provoke more pleasure, with punishment becoming

---

stimulation in a “stick-as-carrot” principle. Whipping thus not only reaffirms
the masochist’s submissive position, but also brings him an erection. Sensation
does not directly come from pain, but from suffering in going through a sym-
Bolic form in which strict obedience to obscene sovereignty rather liberates
the masochist from the normal law and its standardized pleasure. The masochist’s
self-effacing jouissance occurs in this formally structured governance of desire.
Unknown libidinal bliss comes as durational self-abandonment trained by a
law outside the law, not instant self-abandon unleashed in a chaotic anarchy of
schizophrenia.

By extension, more psychologically, the paradox of exception as nomos causes
the complexity of freedom. Many subs are aged or married, with a good job and
successful career, but (potentially or unconsciously) in a typical midlife crisis of
sorts. While full and busy, their established patriarchal life lacks something that
makes it meaningful beyond their symbolic status in which the more power and
freedom inevitably entails the more duty and responsibility. Femdom fills in
such an existential black hole, while opening a rabbit hole into a wonderland of
sexual fantasies where subs can put down their social burden and jump into a
thrilling new life by only serving and obeying dommes who take all control and
make all decisions. If viewed in Erich Fromm’s classical terms, submission then
implies “escape from freedom” through a double paradox of freedom: freedom
from the yoke of the Symbolic (in which the masochist is a small free agent of
the social big Other) and freedom to a new small symbolic order (in which the
dominant embodies the Other per se with absolute power, leaving no freedom
to subs). In the end it is a desired self-deprivation of freedom (and the freight
of freedom), leading to euphoric servitude: subs are happier when being subject
to dommes’ authority than when being autonomous with everything on their
shoulder. The subject of one’s own life becomes a subject of the femdom nation.
It is in submission that subs find a new purpose of life, its true meaning missing
in their dull existence. Their free choice, if any, is that of their total responsibility
for their master’s joy, which in turn delights them in their loss of freedom. This
paradox occurs more powerfully among “beta males” who lack normal lifestyle
and social relationships, especially romantic, sexual ones. These pathetic “los-
ers” find a haven of belongingness and a heaven of happiness under the feet of
dommes for whose luxurious life they work harder and pay more, even if they
subsequently have to live in more poverty and misery. Abjection is salvation.

In this way femdom goes beyond the prompt consumption of perverted
sexuality. Its genuinely interesting aspect is not limited to its display as just a
sort of online porn. It incites self-loss, the liberation from individual subjectiv-
ity subjugated to social constraints, yet it also forges a sustainable interactive
relationship through self-transformation, the change of the subject into an

7 Fromm 1994. The Freight of Freedom is the original German title.
abject that is, however, not abandoned but held by the domme. The abject is the sub, not the domme, who is no longer a maternal abject but a super alpha woman. They build a unique power structure in which abjection can be seen biopolitically: being cast off from one’s identity and community but not equal to a thing, thus stuck between subjectivity and objectivity, between life and death. It resonates with the very “state of exception” that the “sovereign” declares in order to suspend the normal law, so that anyone stigmatized as *homo sacer* can be killed beyond the juridical system. This figure reduced to “bare life” is nothing but the “social abject”, in the case of femdom, the naked male sub in front of the well dressed domme, who still covers her nipples or genitals even in a revealing outfit – the genre of “clothed female nude male” (Cfnm) epitomizes the ontological division between the domme, whose individual fashion visualizes human subjectivity, and the sub, whose exposed meat is deindividuated like a herd of animals. A domme owns many subs called “pigs”. They live and work for her, giving more and more until potential or actual bankruptcy and even death in fantasy if not in reality.

A pigsty run by a domme is thus, by nature, a virtual labor/detention camp, evoking a Southern plantation with Black slaves or Auschwitz with Jewish inmates. Subs are subhuman, working like work bees for their queen but not forming a working class against the exploiter. Yet what distinguishes them from the historical abject is that the paradox of freedom literally works here as infamously phrased on the entrance of concentration camps: “*Arbeit macht frei*” – work sets you free; the more submissive, the more liberated. True subs voluntarily embrace, sincerely believe, and actively practice this ideology in person. At least in this sense they are rather closer to German citizens (than to Jewish victims) who, as Fromm argued, escaped from their political freedom, entrusted it to their absolute *Führer* and instead gained a new guided life cleared of uncertainty with social problems, i.e. free from the dread of freedom. Likewise, the domme is a hegemonic sovereign accepted by her abject subjects whose independent subjectivity is reshaped as desired subjection. Her supralegal power is a (pre-modern) transcendental source of authority to which total submission secures a certain comfort and protection. It sometimes manifests unpredictable whim or irrational hazard, just as a sub may be suddenly punished or kicked off. But this mysterious contingency makes the domme all the more sublime object of desire and obedience, like an angry god. The sub eagerly waits to be recognized, called a “good boy”, or taken back after being discarded. Her positive answer from above, as in the case of love, will save him in blissful abjection.

No doubt such sovereignty takes on divinity, and some dommes consciously cause religious effects. The sub follows orders of reverence like “ten commandments”, makes a shrine with photos of his goddess, bows down to her (image on

---

8 Agamben 1998.
monitor), and evangelizes potential subs. He praises her beauty and power, but also her original personality that he gets to know in comparison to other dommes, and he sacrifices his time, energy, and money for her. He does whatever that may please her, with great pleasure. Indeed his devotion is no other than pure love of giving all with no return. The master’s paradox lies here: the master is the one whose acceptance of a gift from the subject is viewed as its own reward. The sub wants to give the domme gifts and tributes for which she often says, “you are welcome” instead of “thank you” because it is he who thanks her for giving him the privilege to please her. The gift exchange is perverted asymmetrically; giving itself is already giving back as being received, just as believers dedicate everything to a god who does nothing but accepting it and only thereby enabling the condition of bliss in belief itself. This semi-auto-exchange, as it were, is far from the gift exchange rooted in symmetrical calculation (“economy”). However, it is neither the Maussian potlatch based on reciprocal generosity with excess increasing in each give-and-take (“pre-economy”) nor the Derridean gift as purely given away, impossible to recognize and repay, yet still grounding the actual gift exchange (“aeconomy”). Somewhere between these two, femdom creates a unique gift culture in which unidirectional gift giving brings bidirectional satisfaction in acceleration (let’s say, “pseudo-economy”). The more the sub gives the domme, the happier they both are.

“Financial domination” i.e. findom thrives in this happiness, which is strongly sexualized as well as deeply emotional. Sending money is the sub’s virtual way of “making love” with the domme without intercourse; it is love and sex at once, with both his heart and cock throbbing. He feels more arousal when buying her video than when getting it for free, and this extra ecstasy defines the magical X of self-dissolving sexual cathexis; while losing money (in addition to sperm) that could be saved, he gains all the more pleasure. He is instructed to jerk off, then enforced to pay even a “cum tax”, which implies that an orgasm is her gift to him, given in the opposite direction, so it is redefined as a debt owed to her that he has to pay (back), thereby losing himself (money/sperm) again. One may ask: if he somehow gets pleasure at the cost of money, is findom not another kind of (online) prostitution? There is a thin line between them, and there are would-be dommes whose sole aim is financial. However, the domme is neither a whore nor even a “sugar baby” dependent on a powerful guy who can buy her (things). It is the domme who has power by which to “rape” the sub’s wallet, and this power basically comes from her seductive existence itself. A true, successful domme has a mostly innate, if trainable, bossy character with insatiable greed, devilish cruelty, and manipulative skills. It is not that she has to sell her body to make a living, but that her body easily makes the sub surrender

his asset for her lavish lifestyle. She does not need but only want money. She does not beg him for money, but he begs her to allow him to give her money. Or she demands and orders him to send her money claimed to be hers. She owns him, not vice versa.

In this power hierarchy, the domme is a divine goddess, a sovereign queen, a bratty princess, and a ruthless mafia. She often plays as a “humiliatrix”, degrading the sub as a loser, a “jerkoff junkie”, a “piece of shit” whose only usefulness is to be a money slave, a “pay pig”, a “human Atm”. Her snap of a finger makes him order items on her Amazon gift list, pay for her bills and receipts, book her flights and hotels. Some dommes schedule “cash point meets” for subs just to drop money off and disappear. Some subs offer their credit cards, a tithe directly deposited from their paycheck, or simple tributes, required or volunteered. But the genius of femdom lies in the paradox of submission. The more insulted, debased, “fucked up” the sub is, the more excited, obsessed, motivated he is to serve the superior mistress. The more he suffers and sacrifices himself, the bigger smile he sees in her face and the happier he is. The worse, the better. He loves to see splendid photos of her dates with “real men” or her jet set vacations he funded, while eating cat food in his dingy room alone. He dreams of being humiliated in person, sucking her toes, becoming her secretary or housemaid. Any punishment by her turns into his fatalistic pleasure of reconfirming his status as servant. To see her power to conquer numerous subs effortlessly turns him on. Her reign of terror, her dictatorial politics of fear by blackmailing, blocking, or hacking him for any gesture against her, rather puts him in affective adoration and libidinal awe. The sub male is the most inferior of the human species whose redemption lies in serving the capitalist female supremacist. So the slave worships and obeys the master like a god. Slavery is reborn in mutual desire.

**Desire and drive**

This semi-religious biopolitical economy of femdom deserves psychoanalytic and ethical elaboration as well. It is tempting to reframe the Hegelian master-slave dialectic here: the master’s desire, based on lack, causes the fight-for-recognition of the slave who desires to fill it by offering metonymic objects like gifts. But since the lack is perpetual, desire remains unfulfilled. In Lacanian terms, its final satisfaction is, like phallic jouissance, the illusion of oneness between the subject and the Other through the mediation of the object-cause of desire (objet a). In reality the subject remains repetitively frustrated and neurotically suffering from the fateful failure of desire, fantasizing about a transcendent exceptional being in total fulfillment (like the alpha male who has the domme). In Christianity, one shall be united with the Other, God, only through postmortem salvation following the faithful atonement for one’s (original) sin in doomed life to be endured in resignation – in the Nietzschean context, hence the slave morality...
of “negative nihilism” that negates the active affirmation of the earthly life. For the sub, life is at best an asymptotic approach to oneness with the domme in the Imaginary illusion mediated through objects that she wants and he gives. Otherwise unattainable, she lures and holds him in this illusion. Yet the point is that she does not hide but highlights the gap between reality and fantasy, which teases and denies his access, leaving him crazily stuck in the very gap. Sure enough, pornography maintains «the intangibility of its own fantasy in the same gesture with which it brings it closer – in a mode that is unbearable to look at»\textsuperscript{11}. Femdom maximizes this contradiction as both imposed by the domme and embraced by the sub with maximal pleasure. Again, its core lies not in any deception, but in the sub’s truthful acceptance of his low place under her feet. The misery of his inaccessibility to her triggers his desire to have her in its own self-conscious renouncement. This destiny of desire even evokes courtly love: practically impossible, affectively melancholic, and tragically romantic.

However, desire is not the best and only term to characterize femdom. Its unavoidable failure also opens the gap between the Other as virtually lost and its \textit{objet a} as fantasmatically available (from tits and butts to gaze and voice). This small object of desire can then be detached as an autonomous object, encircling the subject to trigger another libidinal movement that is momentarily self-consuming and endlessly self-resuming in its own closed circuit of satisfaction. This movement is “drive” as different from “desire”. Desire aspires to the lost Other as the impossible Thing, then gets stuck onto an \textit{objet a} as its partial remainder, a metonymic stand-in for its void toward which the subject strives to transcend all particular objects. Desire draws a utopian trajectory. But drive is the break of this infinite quest for the incestuous Thing, the loss of the orientation toward ultimate fullness. Drive rather circles around a particular object forever, the \textit{objet a} which then introduces an interstice to the transcendental continuity of desire, radically materialized in a perpetual presence of repetition. If desire is to end up with the self-annihilating unification with the void (or say, the body without organs), similar to the conventional meaning of the “death drive”, drive embodies its paradoxical meaning: the “undead” eternal impetus caught in a small libidinal cycle of pleasure and pain, the uncanny immortal urge persisting beyond the big biological cycle of life and death. Here, «a drive turns failure into a triumph as it were – in it, the very failure to reach its goal, the repetition of this failure, the endless circulation around the object, generates a satisfaction of its own»\textsuperscript{12}. This satisfaction, jouissance, is a synonym of pleasure offered to the body, comes back again and again in negation and rebirth. It defines human life as more than being just alive, as possessed by «the strange

\textsuperscript{11} Agamben 2007: 47.
\textsuperscript{12} Žižek 2007: 132.
drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things.\textsuperscript{13}

The essence of femdom lies in the turn of desire to drive, the turn of failure to satisfaction, the turn of the impossible love/sex to its possible simulation. While this mechanism underlies porn at large, femdom consciously plays on it in its explicit power structure. In this regard as well, the domme’s humiliation of the sub does not simply degrade him but also stimulates him. Though unobtainable, she still “appears” to his eyes with overwhelming attraction, just as a fantastmatic lady does to her loyal knight. And this obtainable image of the unobtainable Other or its part objet a, cut off from her entity itself, forms an autonomous circuit of his autoerotic attachment to it in abjection. That limitedly obtainable object of drive is enough to make him infinitely rotate in this circuit. His one-sided love is enough to please him in the process of worshipping her and sacrificing himself, even if never having her heart. His pathetic solo sex is enough to get him off in the process of masturbating, ejaculating, then after guilt and exhaustion, repeating the same over and over, even if never owning her body. His drive is fulfilled in redoing the very process, not in reaching a terminus. The goal of desire is repetitively delayed with different images or semblants of the transcendent Thing, but this Derridean \textit{différance} itself is the whole nature of drive.

Likewise, sexual pleasure may lie more in the piston movement itself rather than in orgasm that completes sexual desire but terminates sexual drive. In this sense femdom without orgasm is more interesting. For example, tease and denial: this is not a double bind of tragic desire so much as a short circuit of dynamic drive going back and forth between frustration and its perverted pleasure. The domme seduces the sub only to reject him; her body is almost exposed but never fully; masturbation is promoted yet ejaculation is prohibited. But the moment of being denied is the moment of returning to being teased. The failure of his desire enables the success of his drive. She is renounced but regained; the drive is driven to rebound. When physical restraints like bondage are used, stimulation coils around his penis (its head), which is rubbed by her hand (job), even by her vagina without penetration, only to the extent of not reaching orgasm. Or she ruins orgasm by removing (or making him remove) stimulation right before his ejaculation so that his semen is anticlimactically released with hands off. His desire is utterly ridiculed, but his drive pulsates in this ruination. An extreme case of orgasm control called “blue balls” is to encage his penis in a chastity belt or a similar locking device, leaving him with prolonged arousal without release. The sub then aches, moans, agonizes, and begs for “cumming” in complete dependency on the domme. It is in such a trap without exit, a

\textsuperscript{13} Ivi: 130.
cut from the normal continuity of desire that the drive of corporeal urge and psychological need becomes intensified to the utmost.

On the Internet, perhaps drive could not be better visualized than in the gif (Graphics Interchange Format). Like the digital version of a flipbook, it shows a very short loop of image-actions extracted from a longer source of the moving image, a clip or a film. A gif of a sexual act, any instant part of it or its edited whole, then replays the eternal return of the same action, even just a simple wink, walk, or “twerk”, with no start and end. In femdom GIFs, a domme permanently throws a “ballbusting” kick; a sub continues to kneel and bow down; a domme’s hand repeatedly flashes a roll of bills; a sub’s penis never stops dribbling “precum”. A more prevalent visual format is the single image with captions inserted or attached, mostly the domme’s words to the sub: “Give it to me, give in to me…” In particular, the sub is commanded to stroke his cock for her and feel how good it is; to not resist but embrace his undying obsession with “hand humping”; to be proud of that and masturbate any shame away; to leave his identity, society, dignity, even humanity, and live a new piggy happy life consecrated to her pleasure and wealth. The effect of this seduction, once instilled in the sub’s mind and body, becomes irreversible through the repetition compulsion, especially in tease and denial: the sub is stimulated until right before the climax, then only allowed to stay on the brink or “edge” of orgasm without its promise at the end. “Edging” is better than “cumming”, not wasting the drive force but keeping it in the mix of torturous joy and beautiful agony. It is like a half-hypnotic state of exception in which his normality is washed away, his brain is emptied out, his money is drained to her selfish hand, his body is reduced to a hard needy drooling penis. His entire life is owned, reprogrammed, and erased by her. Edging is called “goon”; it must “go-on” for hours day after day in this “mind fuckery” of fantasmatic submersion into the Other, the trance of self-oblivion.

Now this may indicate a critical point, a certain dead end of the drive whose undead energy cannot help destroying the subject, thereby paradoxically taking on the fulfilled desire for the Other though this Other is still never possessed or accessed. In sum, drive is the death drive against death-oriented desire, producing a peculiar loop of pleasure on the edge of jouissance, but this life force tends to transgress the limits of the normal pleasure principle in its submersion into the fantasized object which is nothing but nothingness. The drive in the service of the Imaginary signifier is excessive, repetitive, and ultimately destructive. The sub’s life-changing momentum of being freed from a boring standard life leads him to detrimental dependency on the self-enclosed drive of self-loss. What the domme gives him messes him up. Her “gift” is “poison”; pleasure is danger. Nonetheless, he can’t stop it. That is why the object of drive is addictive. Indeed, like porn, femdom thrives on the mechanism of addiction. One tastes it out of curiosity and wants it more and more; then, one fears it with fear and guilt, and tries to avoid it; then, one realizes that resistance is futile and the
only escape is rather to let go of oneself deeper into it. In short the flowchart of stimulation, pleasure, regret, and return to the start is drawn. And the more one circulates here, the faster one does so, the less anxious one feels. Anxieties give way to the confirmation of this repetition as fate, which, once accepted, becomes one’s new comfortable nature, like *amor fati* – “love your fate, then you will be freed from it”. In this sense the domme’s repetitive remarks on the sub’s weak willpower imply psychological and linguistic performativity: the words perform their content, causing the truth effect, through their reiterated utterance. The problem is never that he does not know his weakness, but that he knows it so well that he cannot help but admit his helplessness and surrender to the drug of femdom. Some dommes pretend to offer “fandom therapy”, but of course it is her manipulative play to inject more drug, and subs also know that it is another play for deeper addiction. Like Sartrean “bad faith”, therapy is available as a free option, yet only to demonstrate that the patient is incurable, with his true free will denied.

Femdom as drug has different facets of addiction in general. It temporarily alleviates the sub’s multilayered depression that results from his burdened or meaningless life; from the gap between this tepid reality and his twisted fantasy; from the conflict of pleasure with guilt in this fantasy; and from the inescapability of the very addiction. Interestingly, Freud suggests that all other addictions are substitutes for the primal one: masturbation. It functions like a primitive autoerotic apparatus that restores infantile omnipotence as the sub regressively hides in his small pleasure dome, shutting himself off from all social relations. In sum, addiction indicates the ego’s imbalance between regression to psychosis and progression to mastering anxiety. By the same token it implies a disorder resulting from the dysfunction or absence of a superego that can put him in order. The addictive is thus a mythological protective gear against the destabilized relationship with the parents, the law, i.e. the Symbolic. In other words, the addicted subject directly access jouissance by bypassing or lacking the Other, though structurally dependent on an Other believed to be impossible for connection. The domme precisely takes the position of this necessary but unapproachable Other; the neuropsychiatric master who disciplines the sub’s habit and reward, anxiety and jouissance, and by doing so molds him into a Pavlovian dog that drools over kinky dopamine like a brain dead puppet. This master is thus a new type of superego, an obscene superego who orders “enjoy”, no longer prohibiting but rather embodying the id, just as the god, if any, of the postmodern late-capitalist market only promotes an imperative to enjoy shopping, a surrender to the drives of impulse buying and infinite wanting, and the subject consumes itself under the pressure of consumerist addictions.

---

14 Markel 2012: 170.
According to Nietzsche, after the death of God, the aforementioned negative nihilism turns into “passive nihilism”. With no social big Other's orientation available, the subject called “the last man” only seeks apathetic comfort in detached security to enjoy small secular things for individual pleasures. This negative to passive turn of nihilism may correspond to the turn of desire to drive in capitalist hedonism. The governing principle of the drive is not fundamental lack and inevitable failure so much as instant satisfaction and rapid rebirth. The unattainable object of desire, the transcendental Thing, now takes the form of simulacra as material things easily purchasable and consumable in the market rather than utterly disappearing. The subject is just fine with these semblants of the Other, i.e. fantasmatised substitutes for the Real. Such illusionary signifiers construct the Symbolic reality as displayed through an Imaginary show window to which the subject is attached obsessively. Likewise, the domme shimmers behind the screen as a prohibited goddess, who however prohibits nothing in the sub’s self-indulgent, self-abusive drive towards her images and words coming from the very screen. He gets closer and closer to her fascinating Imaginary-Symbolic and goes deeper and deeper into her toxic Real, though the screen is the best thing he can touch and under her feet is the best place he can be. Conversely, the fact that his utmost belongingness to her is preconditioned by their impossible co-belongingness is the precondition of his regressive pleasure ordered by her. He is the last man for whom no outer world, nothing else matters.

“Active nihilism” attempts to overcome this decadent individualism by destroying the status quo and creating new values with the will-to-power (as typified by radical activists and even suicidal terrorists who sacrifice their life for a big cause). For the sub, it may start with grasping nothingness of the Other disguised as simulacra, and quitting the vicious circle of the addictive drive. Or the (death) drive may need to become extreme with the free will to death, not degenerating into self-destruction without changing anything, but negating the hallucinatory Symbolic order built up by the libidinal Other even at the risk of self-destruction. This nihilism is utopian in Fredric Jameson’s sense. Utopian is not merely a regime change but a biopolitical revolution, by which to reject all self-preservative concerns over an ideologically structured life(style), its pleasure and satisfaction beside the misery and abjection of humanity. To do this means to overcome the fear of death, in today’s society, the fear of losing desire or consumerist addictions. However, for many addicted subs,
the renouncement of femdom is literally utopian, i.e. impossible. They always come back to their domme they left, confessing their vain efforts to quit their dirty habit for guilty pleasure, or rather, their sole vital force that sustains their life as more than a mere meaningless one though in the form of subhuman piggy life for their mistress. They would rather inverse active nihilism in favor of glorious bliss-filled self-destruction. They do everything for their domme: humiliating, sacrificial, even illegal like hacking someone’s Sns account. Her desire and pleasure is a fascist sovereign cause to act for at the price of their individual interest. Addicted subs are femdom fundamentalists.

Community and network

Then, is there no alternative? But despite its nihilistic implications, femdom as an ever-growing mode of sexuality demands complex attention beyond the dichotomy of good and bad. Before seeking for positivity, it is primary to discern the ways in which desire and drive organize this sexual subculture and the extent to which they underlie its outside as well. In effect, there is no sheer outside just as addiction is pervasive in every aspect of today’s lifestyle. A further point to make is the actual convolution of desire and drive rather than the clear turn from one to the other in theory. Edging brings pleasure as close to jouissance as possible while prolonging it, and therefore overlaps the functions of drive and desire, leaving only a thin permeable line between them. Drive is on the edge of jouissance, and jouissance is in the circuit of drive. Jouissance is not reached in the form of orgasm but resolved in the process of self-satisfying drive, while remaining in the mode of unfulfilled desire that triggers another cycle of drive. The two are virtually indistinguishable, coming as rapturous pain or painful rapture in an ouroboros of lust feeding into itself. This is the sub’s Real emerging among the domme’s imagery arranged as the Symbolic of their micro-cosmos. Here, the screen is not a safeguard from the toxic Real like coffee without caffeine, but the only available interface that maximizes illusory addiction to the Real, the interface as edge of carnality or drive-vehicle. I drive my drive on the edge of myself driven by the fantasy of the Real that is truly real for me, the “true fiction” incarnating affective effects. In sum, jouissance is not transcendentally transgressive. Its exceptional state is normalized and can be maximally optimized within a new Symbolic on the edge of drive.

The same goes for the larger world. As mentioned above, the big Other, if any, of late-capitalist systems enacts only the law of unremitting consumption, and reality is filled with ever more objects of desire-drive. The superego and the id, the Symbolic and the Real undergo an asymptotic fusion with each other in the way that the system becomes a non-system. That is, the distinctions melt down between reality (principle) and pleasure (principle), between work and leisure, between repression of libido and its explosion, between normalcy and perver-
sion, etc. The ego was believed to change through the dialectic conflict between these oppositions. Now, it only undergoes the constant self-transmutation of one and the same “Real-ized” Symbolic. The Real is a self-erasing Symbolic with no real outside left except death as such. This is why porn is everywhere and femdom is now a fashion. Its commercial mainstream culture and queer subculture feed, influence, and radicalize each other. Especially the Internet is a free market of everything with no border, where a common world is just clicks away from a horny underground. And while the porn industry expands professionally, the boundary of porn itself is blurred as amateurs freely expose themselves to different degrees in diverse manners. Dommes include not only role-playing pornstars and dungeon-running dominatrices, but also bossy ladies and bratty teens who may live next door, but lead a femdom lifestyle partly or wholly in or outside the industry, posting their daily selfies, clothes, events or gifts from subs. They have a normal life with alphas, yet simultaneously enjoy “milking”, “pegging”, “cuckolding”, and “sissifying” betas. They adore “big black cocks” and scoff tiny white ones, raise the middle finger with a cute smile, enslave female subs and even other dommes. There is no hypocrisy or contradiction in their double or multiple life, which is basically a single ongoing self-modulation, and sexual identities are no other than malleable options to shuffle, perform, and change. “The order of things” is de-ordered or disordered. And all this is exhibited to the entire globe at the speed of light.

In this context, the entry barriers to the kinky realm of sexuality are increasingly lowered while the most private things are all the more publicized. Dommes show off photos of their subs’ humiliation or sacrifice made in live cam sessions or real meetings at a private place. Some supreme mistresses do not fear public eyes, walking her slave on a leash like a dog or using him as a human shopping cart in downtown Manhattan. Such self-exposure, online and offline, does not appear to be the coming out of a queer queen who claims her marginalized right to enter the public sphere, but rather as an invitation of the general public to her bedroom where nothing immoral is banned. What occurs is less the destruction of the minimal moral threshold between private and public spaces than the privatization of the public space as if there is no such threshold. Femdom as sexual minority does not infringe the majority in the exhibitionist spirit of violating a taboo (“I want to do what you forbid!”) so much as it aims to be desired and colluded with the majority in the nihilistic attitude of negating the taboo itself (“I do what you also want to!”). It is distributed without censorship on the assumption that everyone would share it in the society where the big Other is lost or addicted itself, just as “public sex” porn is set in a bus, a school, a hospital, an office, etc. where a couple’s sex is ignored or condoned, secretly envied or potentially joined by the rest of people. Likewise, while the cyberland functions as an easily accessible democratic public sphere, it paradoxically paves the way for a fascistic bondage regarding explicit desires as sharable unlimitedly – the effect is: nobody can blame anyone when everyone is involved in the
same crime. A private secret is already a public one. Femdom boldly accelerates the hedonic privatization of the public order.

Therefore femdom is not simply a sexual ghetto for sick freaks completely detached from society. To the contrary, it is quite open and immanent to society. And a great portion of it reflects a do-it-yourself culture of diverse people who build a digital space, like many other cases, to explore and enjoy what is in them more than themselves. They are honest about it and pursue an ecstatic if not aesthetic experience of it. They are not artists but express their taste of beauty in media: photo, video, painting, cartoon, and so on. Intermediating these, interactive interfaces enable them to embody their sexual proclivity through the digital convergence of technology, communication, electronics and entertainment, in tech-savvy and sometimes quite avant-garde manners. This life-media relation somewhat evokes and updates aesthetic modernism that, as Jacques Rancière sees, attempted to remodel the relation of art and life, especially its early 20th-century constructivist and futurist tendency of art being for the sake of life, not isolated but engaged in building a new world while dismantling old artistic conventions. In fact there is “femdom art” some of which visualizes incredible imagination about SM plays and even a fictive land or planet where femdom governs every domain of life from slavery and amusement to eugenics and bioengineering, as if to prefigure a future of humanity. But daily activities of dommes and subs are rich enough to demonstrate their life-building media experience that expands its territory ever more aggressively to the entire world.

This life-media experience or (re)mediation of social life occurs in the form of “community” building as well. Each domme is not an impersonal whore inhumanly purchased in a brothel, but has an individual character and style around which a certain fandom of femdom is formed. Subs love, worship, serve, and obey their domme’s specific attributes while getting to know her synthetically like a family member through time. Some loyal subs’ lasting servitude particularly keeps her community viable and viral. Of course the more uniquely attractive her personality is, the more popular her community is. So, while all dommes boast of their singularity, they are comparable and competing with each other. One is a lovely gorgeous princess with great humiliating skills; another looks like a healthy daughter of wild nature and a powerful urban cat woman at once; another hypnotizes subs through her expertise in psychology; another focuses on taking money by maximizing the effect of her silicon-injected curves; another is a brutal doctor who deforms subs’ genitals by her scalpel; another only takes calls and raises rates per minute exponentially; another sodomizes her womanized subs and uses them as guinea pigs for sex experiments; another is a theorist of female supremacy and practices it with housekeeping slaves; another runs cash point meetings globally to create a world wide empire… Each domme is the

---

transcendent center of her community, i.e. the unobtainable utopian object of desire. All subs belong to her while she belongs to none of them. This vertical structure exerts binding power using through subscription, contract, consensual blackmail, regular tribute, etc. With sovereign authority, the domme can enslave, punish, reject or abandon subs in her kingdom. Its boundary operates for them in the mode of being in or out.

However, in effect, a domme’s community is not self-closed that much. If it is a system of desire, it is inherently a non-system of drive. The sub is attached to the domme’s images detached from her self, and this gap opens room for sliding over other images linked in and outside the community. His devotion to her does not prevent him from drifting among other dommes who attract him, from whom he can be distracted too. Attraction is distraction in this non-system, which should be called “network”. As Gilles Deleuze would put it, the network is not a tree-shaped vertical structure, but a “rhizomatic” horizontal net as endlessly working with no utopian terminus. It works not in the “in/out” mode, but the “on/off” mode. There is no binding belongingness, but simply connection or disconnection. The network of femdom thus comprehends countless femdom communities, proliferating democratically, fragmentarily, amorphously, and schizophrenically as a whole. If the domme’s insurmountable power is “dynamically sublime”, the network’s immeasurable quantity is “mathematically sublime” in Kant’s terms. Here, digital images are immediately circulated and ephemerally consumed, yet also perpetually archived and ashistorically remediated. Dommes, mirroring their desire and learning from each other’s domination skills, are not always competitors but more often friends, who sometimes get together and play a group femdom. They share and even caption their or others’ images with a femdom story or haiku from the viewpoint of the model of the image as though they are the model. Even subs put such captions, taking the domme’s position to humiliate other subs. This schizophrenic vicarious pastiche of identities suggests that the image is not a mask hiding a true face, but a true face itself as simulacrum without original. A domme then appears through innumerable faces to seduce subs into infinite edging. The Other is nothing but a network of others that disperse ecstatic pleasure everywhere without limit. While the fusion of life-media is modernist, its networked nature is postmodernist.

In conclusion, the desire and drive of femdom brings about its community and network though just as the first two are convoluted into each other, so are the last two. In the community, the domme is a divine sovereign who, by stripping the sub down to naked life in humiliation, rather frees him from his social burden or existential solitude. Given a new purpose of life to serve her, with romantic illusion for this object of desire, he offers himself in blissful slavery. This asymmetrical dialectic of self-regression with no social exit brings about a unique unreciprocated gift relationship. Here, self-sex without real sex does not simply indicate the failure of desire, but the successful way of satisfying the fatal
drive in its Real-ized Symbolic circuit of simulacra. It is not that coffee without caffeine is the only thing available, even healthy without toxic core, but that it rather maximizes the addictive pleasure of edging in the illusion of real coffee, simultaneously revitalizing the body like life-giving water and intoxicating it like poison (Gift in German) maybe more than real coffee. In this perversion, pleasure and guilt becomes guilty pleasure, and the public space is privatized. All such oppositions disintegrate into the single self-modulation of the undead desire-drive.

The network of communities emerges here, connecting visual synapses beyond organic, geographical boundaries and conveying neuronal pleasure-jouissance to every capillary in the body that virtually surfs the entire world. This surfing is edging on the surface of the network. It is so widely open and easily accessible to the general public that the most ghoulish act of femdom can contingently pop out of one's mobile phone by a single touch. The “banality of evil” takes on a new color in the domme's habitual psychosomatic, financial “rape” of the sub, which is not something enforced but a daily dose of their desired addiction. When an innocent-looking college student domme spits out cruel curses and cutely gives the finger to a much older sub, it is this incongruity that turns him on. Most dommes are not gaudy but classy, while they can seamlessly switch playing a vanilla look and enjoying a kinky compulsion. The raw hardcore desire can erupt anytime onto the surface of a cool and luxurious lifestyle. The exceptional Thing is in the midst of normal things. The Real pervades reality. Many lewd captions are put in the pictures of fashion models or anonymous “babes” who may have nothing to do with their content, but the effect is that what the viewers may fantasize is shared unrestrainedly through the voice of the Other who whispers “enjoy” and spreads the order. My desire-drive may be yours; there is no outside of this homogenized network. And this resonates with, even fundamentally results from, the way in which the global network of neoliberal capitalism structures our desire and drive in general through the interfaces of interactivity. No nirvana is allowed in this network.

References

Agamben, G.
Artaud, A.
Critchley, S.
Deleuze, G.

Deleuze, G. and Von Sacher-Masoch, L.

Derrida, J.

Fromm, E.

Jameson, F.

Lacan, J.

Markel, H.

Nietzsche, F.

Rancière, J.

Sobchack, V.

Žižek, S.