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Abstract: “The Fifty Shades of the Gray Zone” explores the reception of E. L. James’ bestselling trilogy, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and the reception of the print and film versions in Italy.

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The Fifty Shades of (the) Grey (Zone), or, the Absent BDSM Essay in the g/s/i Issue on Domination

Open Contribution Editorial

ELLEN NERENBERG

The call for papers on the theme of “Domination” would yield (at least one of us was certain) an essay concerning BDSM (bondage-domination-submission/sadism-masochism) theory and praxis as they currently unfold in Italy. The gaining purchase of BDSM within gender and sexuality studies in the Anglophone world, in concert with various conferences worldwide and the recent publication of research concerning BDSM in Brazil, Portugal, and India, had encouraged this line of thought. Yet no scholar responding to the journal’s call chose to write on the subject. The absence of such an essay here, however, does not mean scholars are not discussing this subject within the Italophone world. Yet, as Laura Zambelli, has discussed in her scholarship—some of the *unique* scholarly research conducted on BDSM in Italy—current feminist debate in Italy is also relatively silent about the BDSM scene.¹

The biopolitics of BDSM ensure its firm relation to issues at the core of feminist/gender/and sexuality studies: the privatization of the public sphere (and neoliberalism in general), the commercialization of sex, social groups at the margins of normativity, and gendered identity. The body in its sexed, classed, and nationalized configurations subject(ed) to the power of patriarchy that BDSM at once celebrates and lampoons.

The problem of power, access to it, the giving and the taking of it, is a topic of some consequence to these intersecting fields. Feminist ethicist Claudia Card has discussed the relation of “gray zones” of power where she explores the ways in which women are perceived to be ‘complicit’ with patriarchy. Card carefully parses issues of power and domination as concerns issues of gender and politics without inculpating women (or ‘blaming the victim’) for real shortfalls in the social sphere, in the workplace, and in the home.² Card’s use of the “gray” zone acknowledges its provenance, which has everything to do with Italian socio-cultural politics.

In the book of essays published shortly before his death in 1987 entitled *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi named a phenomenon that has had considerable staying power in a number of academic fields including, but not limited to, sociology; studies of the holocaust; feminism, gender, and sexuality studies; critical legal studies; and criminology, among others. The essay entitled “The Drowned and the Saved” explores the circumstances in which the oppressed becomes the oppressor. Levi’s focus is on the role of the *Sonderkommanden*, those detainees in Auschwitz, where Levi was interned from 1944-45, obscenely tasked with operating the gas chambers. Levi’s focus on the camp’s “oppressed oppressors” complicates stark, binarized ideas of domination, power, and oppression, revealing its broader spectrum of ambiguity and interrogating the notion of consent.

Consent, albeit of a very different sort, stands at the heart of E.L. James’ trilogy *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), *Fifty Shades Darker* (2012), and *Fifty Shades Freed* (2012), which predicated on the subject of BDSM as flirted with by the (young, virginal) protagonist Anastasia Steele and her handsome billionaire beau, Christian Grey, a self-described “sadist.”³ Will Ana sign the non-disclosure contract

¹ See Laura Zambelli, “BDSM in Italy: analyzing stereotypes about gender, sexuality and the body”, in *Gender, Sexuality and the Body: Critical Perspectives*, eds. Sofia Aboim and Pedro Vasconcelos (Lisbon: Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa, 2014), 92-104.

² Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002). The chapter in which this is discussed is available online: <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/0195145089.001.0001/acprof-9780195145083-chapter-10>, accessed February 20, 2015.

³ The *DSM*, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, long the standard for definitions in diagnoses, has desisted in using the term “sadist”, preferring “paraphilia”. It is worth noting that, while Christian Grey’s psychiatrist appears to

Christian insists upon? If she signs, will she engage in activity that is, to use one slogan employed by BDSM practitioners, “safe, sane, and consensual”?⁴ James’ trilogy is a corrective and Ana seeks to “cure” Christian of his disease. By the end of the trilogy, the couple have married, had two children, and moved to the suburbs. The naughty “red room of pain” is not only in the past, it is in the city, to be visited consensually when the closet beckons. James’ trilogy appeared in Italian almost simultaneously with the original editions with the titles *Cinquanta sfumature di grigio*, *Cinquanta sfumature di nero*, and *Cinquanta sfumature di rosso*. James’ trilogy became a bestseller in Italy as it had become a smash sensation globally. In Italy, as elsewhere, the syntagm “50 sfumature”—50 shades—became something akin to the utterance “knock knock”: the unmistakable lead-in to numerous satires in a variety of media (cartoons, Youtube videos, television talk shows, and so forth). Reader, it became a meme.

When Sam Taylor-Jones’ direction of *Fifty Shades of Grey* appeared in Italian cinemas February 12, 2015, it quickly became headline news. In the first quarter of 2015 in Italian cinemas, while more spectators attended Clint Eastwood’s *American Sniper*, *Fifty Shades* earned more at the box office. Two months after its almost-Valentine’s Day opening, and nearing the close of the first quarter, *Fifty Shades* was still the “dom” at the box office. By April, it had become and remained at the top of earners at Italian box offices since August 2014, dominating *Fast and Furious Seven*, *The Hobbit*, and the then most recent installation of *The Hunger Games*.⁵

As significant as its earnings are for what they reveal about the Italian context and reception of the film, *Fifty Shades*’s paracinematic discourse is just as interesting. The online talk show attached to the daily *La Repubblica*, *Webnotte*, of February 17, 2015 documents reception of two sorts, one editorialized by the hosts and guests, the other in the form of on-line comments made by spectators. The latter discloses a sort of blasé attitude that fails to explain the box office appeal of the film. As “Claudio” wrote, “50 sfumature ha scatenato molte domande: Perché ho speso 20 euro per vederlo?” (*50 Shades* gave rise to many questions: (like) why I spent 20 euros to see it).⁶ After describing the action of the film in which a woman must sign a contract thrust upon her by a dominant man, one guest cracked wise, quipping that it was just another ho-hum description of the “contratto a tempo determinato”, the Italian labor contract that stipulates the terms of part-time, terminal employment and which has, in its way, contributed to the precariousness of a labor pool inflected also by the politics of gender and age. Another *Webnotte* guest commented that James’ print trilogy was merely “Un libro erotico senza figure” (an erotic book with no pictures) and that “Nemmeno io l’ho letto” (I didn’t read (it) either). Yet, as sales of the book in Italy, as elsewhere, demonstrate, someone read it.⁷ But perhaps what contributes to the dismissive aspect of this

have stepped into the mainstream in terms of definitions, the character is rooted in the more traditional nomenclature. On the DSM’s use of sadism see *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: [End Page 401] American Psychiatric Association, 2000), TR 302.83, 302.84; World Health Organization, *International Classification of Diseases*, section F65, www.who.int/classifications/icd/en/, accessed May 26, 2009.

⁴ Activist David Stain is credited with the alliteration. See also *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sado-Masochism*, eds. Darren Langdridge and Meg John Barker (London: Palgrave MacMillan 2007).

⁵ “Boxoffice: Stagione 2014/2015,” *Movieplayer.it*, <http://movieplayer.it/film/boxoffice/italia/2014/>, accessed May 26, 2015.

⁶ “Webnotte, Deuòll: 50 sfumature di tweet,” *Repubblica.it*, February 17, 2015, <http://video.repubblica.it/rubriche/webnotte/webnotte-deuoll-50-sfumature-di-tweet/192424/191386?ref=search>, accessed May 25, 2015. The several comments following are also drawn from this source.

⁷ The Italian weekly *Panorama* announced Amazon’s 2012 declaration that *50 Shades* had become “re delle vendite del decennio”, supplanting the series of novels from which it derived, Stephenie Meyers’ *Twilight* series not to mention also surpassing J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series. Anon. “E.L. James al primo e al terzo posto della classifica di vendite italiana con le sue ‘Cinquanta sfumature.’” *Libreriamo*, July 10, 2012, <http://www.libreriamo.it/a/2470/el-james-al-primoe-al-terzo-posto-della-classifica-di-vendite-italiana-con-le-sue-cinquanta-sfumature.aspx>.

comment is the trilogy's perceived tameness, something that has been described as "Mommy porn," which itself "understands the novel[s] as so tame and vanilla that *even* mothers indulge in it."⁸ Another *Webnotte* guest stated that "Negli stati uniti questo fatto (che lui la picchia) lo rende molto sexy. Ma in Italia no, si chiama lo stato di matrimonio" (In the United States the fact that he hits her makes the film really sexy. But not in Italy: we call that the state of matrimony). The next shot, in this lightly edited, late night talk show, shows a woman laughing in close-up. It is accompanied by the natural sound of the audience laughing along with her. Aiming for the apex of understatement, someone observed that the purported "kink" of the film was superseded by Pope Francis I lifting the embargo (the term 'sdoganare' is used in the reportage) on spanking on February 15, two days after the film opened.⁹ Spanking was all right, the pontiff reassured a father during an audience; corporal punishment is allowable so long as the result is not "avvilire" (to demoralize) the child. Who is spanked? Jokingly or not, wives and children. One of the hosts dismissed entirely the hype of the film's putative "scabrosità" (indecent); for her, the truly "indecent" thing of the week had been to watch while "tied to the bed" the Sanremo competition.¹⁰

Additional media coverage of the reception of the film in Italy is worth observing. The Rome daily *Il Messaggero* found newsworthy not so much the film as the spectacles unfolding in the cinemas where it was shown. Like YA (young adult) audiences of the film series *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings* the globe over, *50 Shades* spectators attended screenings in costume. Yet more than dress, comportment within the theaters drew attention. Some theater owners in England complained of used condoms littering the floor, of finding handcuffs and other paraphernalia left behind and of discovering some female spectators who "stavano replicando alcune scene del film" (were playing out some of the scenes in the film).¹¹ At least one on-line reader of *Il Messaggero* found such naiveté charming, remarking that

Fanno una tale tenerezza... Ma veramente c'è ancora gente che in pubblico (nella moderna e disinibita Inghilterra poi!) si lascia andare come nei cari anni 70, nelle vecchie sale dei cinema a luci rosse? Dai che tra poco si torna anche alla tabaccaia (sic) di Fellini e alla Gradisca! Clap! Clap!¹²

In James' *Grey* trilogy, what we do not have is Levi's gray zone. The BDSM world depicted in both the novels and the film is dully routinized and neatly compartmentalized: I'm a top, I'm a bottom, I'm a dom(inant), I'm a sub(ordinate). Where is the flow of power, the exchange, the substitution and recombination? Where is the gray in Grey? James promises "kinky fuckery," yet the project's repeated reinscription of one's own (untransformable) role in the power structure is not kink. It is compulsion. Marcel Kelly's script denies Ana (Dakota Johnson) the resolution of her own fraught feelings about pain and pleasure and the film ends on that shaming note. One of the

⁸ Ruth A. Geller and Clarissa Smith, "Reading the BDSM Romance: Reader responses to *Fifty Shades*," *Sexualities* 16, no. 8 (2013): 936.

⁹ Marco Ansaldo, "Il Papa sdogana anche la sculacciata," *La Repubblica*, February 5, 2015, http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2015/02/05/news/il_papa_sdogana_anche_la_sculacciata-106594568/, accessed May 28 2015.

¹⁰ The popular song competition ran from February 10-14, 2015.

¹¹ "Cinquanta sfumature di grigio, la denuncia: nelle sale preservativi usati e sex toys," *Il Messaggero*, February 18, 2015, http://www.ilmessaggero.it/SOCIETA/NOLIMITS/cinquanta_sfumature_di_grigio_sesso_cinema_sale_preservativi_usati_calzini_sex_toys/notizie/1189055.shtml, accessed May 28 2015.

¹² They're so sweet....But are there really people (in modern and uninhibited England no less) who get it on like they used to in the wonderful 70s, in the old red light cinemas? Come on, it won't be too long before we're back to Fellini's tobacconist and Gradisca. Clap, clap. (My translation)

developments of the novels is that they allow Ana the space in which to examine, if only cursorily, her own pleasurable reaction to punishment. What results is the representation of a young (indeed, virginal) woman with more power over decisions concerning her body than most of her generational cohort. A binding contract before physical contact would, for some, be the stuff of fantasy indeed.¹³

The contract—and not the cable ties, ripped blue jeans, and riding crops—is the real fetish in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The contract between a dominant and a submissive is key in the dramas of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, whose name Richard von Krafft-Ebing used to define masochism in his legendary fin-de-siècle *Psychopathia sexualis*. Sacher-Masoch's couples, however, invert the conventional, socially inscribed power dynamic of patriarchy. As Gilles Deleuze observes, “[m]asochism cannot be separated from the contract, but as the same time that it draws up the contract for the dominant woman, it pushes it to the extreme by *dismantling its machinery* and exposing it to mockery.”¹⁴

Consideration of BDSM reveals central tensions, particularly among feminist scholars. Just how liberatory a practice is it? On one hand, some feminists “regard[ed] sadomasochistic sexual practices as inseparable from patriarchal hierarchies based on relations of dominance and subordination” while, on the other, some felt that “sadomasochistic practices constitute[d] a legitimate form of consensual sexual activity that women were entitled to enjoy without fear of discriminatory judgment by society or other feminists.”¹⁵ Deleuze points out the potential for BDSM to unveil the predicament of power and gender, noting that “[w]hen a woman enters into a contract, it is by ‘coming amongst’ men, acknowledging in the process her situation of dependence at the heart of patriarchal society.”¹⁶ For some scholars, the notion of identity as practice enables the BDSM participant to extricate her or himself from a sex-gender binary constitutive of what some believe has been a stalemate in gender theory (if not activism). The fluidity of BDSM identities need not, however, in and of themselves, constitute progressive tendencies on any front, in theory or in practice. That is, being a participant in the BDSM community is no guarantee for, say, anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-classist positions (as it were). Margot Weiss, in her work on BDSM in San Francisco, has discussed the politics of, for example, reenactments of slave auctions at gatherings wherein the dominant is white and the submissive non-white. The BDSM scene in Milan, Zambelli has observed, also tends to reinscribe gender stereotypes (men as dominant and women as submissive) rather than provide space for the articulation of different subject positions.¹⁷

¹³ It is worth noting that the film was released during the fever pitch of concern about the ‘climate’ of consent so much discussed in the North American academy—in whose institutions all the editors of *g/s/i* work, incidentally. Does *50 Shades of Grey*, with its (yet) unsigned contract between the submissive and the dominant semiotically signify? In this regard, the unsigned contract stands as the discussion that in some form needs to take place outlining the contours of what is agreed to and what instead is unacceptable.

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, “From Sacher-Masoch to Masochism,” tr. Christian Kerslake, *Angelaki, Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 9, no. 1 (2004): 125 (emphasis mine).

¹⁵ Chancer, cited in Emily Prior, “Women’s Perspectives of BDSM Power Exchange,” *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality* 16 (2013). ISSN: 15455556.

¹⁶ Deleuze, “From Sacher-Masoch to Masochism,” 123.

¹⁷ Margot Weiss has detailed the reenactments of slave auctions in San Francisco and Zambelli has pointed out that, in the Italian scene, which takes place chiefly in northern Italy, BDSM tends to reinforce gender binarism. See “Margot Weiss talks BDSM and sexuality,” Yasmin Nair, *Windy City Times* October 30, 2013, <http://www.windycitymediagroup.com/lgbt/Margot-Weiss-talks-BDSM-and-sexuality/44959.html>, accessed May 15, 2015. See also Weiss’ *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2011). See Zambelli, “BDSM in Italy: analyzing stereotypes about gender, sexuality and the body.”

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Open Contributions

In addition to its themed sections, *g/s/i* also publishes topical and timely essays on gendered identities and the ways they intersect with and produce Italian politics, culture, and society. *g/s/i* 2 features three such essays, each engaging in topics of enduring interest to scholars of feminism, gender, and sexuality. Ioana Larco's essay on "(Self)Representations of Motherhood in Ada Negri's *Stella mattutina*" locates the autobiographical novel along a matrilineal continuum. The novel's 'mother-quest' empowers the autobiographer to break the mold of the 19-century woman artist as well as woman-mother. Self-knowledge, experience, and the mother-daughter bond center this essay. In his contribution, "Matteo Garrone's *Gomorra*: A Politically Incorrect Use of Neapolitan Identities and Queer Masculinities," Marcello Messina asks us to bear in mind John Champagne's essay entitled "Italian Masculinity as Queer" in *g/s/i*, 1 (2014). Messina explores the queerness of Garrone's film, examining the ways in which the film engineers spectatorial sympathy. Masculinity is also the subject of Martina O'Leary essay in this section. In "Subverting Masculinity or Suppressing the Unmanly?", O'Leary examines representations of embodiment in Aldo Palazzeschi's novel *Il codice di Perelà* (1911) and Luigi Capuana's short story, "L'invisibile" (1901). Motifs of lightness and immateriality are deployed by each author toward different ends of a spectrum of masculine comportment and ideation.