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Ballgags, ropes, and spatulas

BDSM toys between specialty stores and everyday objects

ABSTRACT: This article is aimed at investigating the way toys are used within BDSM practices. “Toys”, as a term, encompasses a wide variety of objects such as gags, cuffs, or whips which form the material bedrock for BDSM sexualities. At the same time, the presence of so many objects within sexual practices is a cause of anxiety, evident even in specialist scholarship on kink. Drawing on examples from my fieldwork among Polish BDSM practitioners, I will be attempting to provide a different perspective on the role of toys in kink, one that does not replicate the anxieties about fetishism and commodification, while at the same time attending to the queer use of everyday objects that is so common within the world of BDSM.

KEYWORDS: BDSM; sex toys; commercial sex; material culture; anthropology

A ballgag is, in its simplest form, a BDSM¹ accessory taking the shape of a ball a little larger than a ping-pong ball, usually dyed black or deep red. This ball is then attached to a leather or plastic buckled strap, which allows the gag to be locked behind one’s head after being put between the teeth, making it difficult or impossible to spit it up. Wearing a ballgag all but prevents one from speaking legibly and, depending on its size, muffles other sounds. It also often causes uncontrollable drooling. It visually distorts the face and is immediately recognizable as a fetish accessory. Wearing it for extended periods of time can cause numbness of the jaw and unpleasant abrasions in the corners of the mouth, where the lip meets the strap.

Although united by their general purpose, ballgags are a diverse category of objects. They differ in size, material, and the color of the ball. Sometimes, this has a practical purpose: the gag is more effective the more it fills the mouth. However, it also shouldn’t be too large: even if it can be forced between the teeth, it can then become too uncomfortable for the person wearing it (which, of course, under certain circumstances, may well be the reason it is being used). Material is likewise important. It is usually rubber or silicone, elastic enough that if teeth are pressed into it, neither will be damaged. These

¹ Or possibly invoking, intentionally or not, the history of domestic violence.

soft materials are preferable to the more rarely used hard plastic.

Some ballgags, aside from the single buckle in the back, are equipped with additional straps making a harness for the whole head. Other than the aesthetic effect, such harnesses can help to better secure the gag in the mouth, making it exceptionally hard to spit it out. Furthermore, d-rings may be attached to the harness to make it useful for the purposes of restraining the head in sexual bondage.

Ballgags are also some of the most recognizable accessories that are used within BDSM practices. A red ball with a black strap metonymizes kink in general. In fact, a mere implication of this sort of a mouth restraint in fashion can be used to evoke the allure and danger of sexual fetishism and sadomasochism (BURTON 2016). But the ballgag isn't just a sign: for many BDSM practitioners, it is an object they become intimately familiar with. The question here becomes not what it represents or symbolizes as an object, but rather *what does it do?* The apparent purpose is obvious: it is a gag, and so it meant to *gag*. But that is hardly the whole story. Even in the abbreviated description above, hints of its other uses abound.

In fact, as anyone who has ever worn a ballgag can attest to, if we take its purpose to be one to muffle and make quiet, it doesn't serve it very well. A person with a ballgag in their mouths can still vocalize loudly; it's only speaking that is rendered almost impossible by its presence. So here is the first of the many things it does: it prevents speech. What else? Within the context of BDSM practices, it can also be worn so that a person being flogged has something to bite down on as blows rain on their back. It can be fun to wear for the submissive, producing pleasure from the sensation of having one's mouth filled or losing control over one's face. It can be an element of a fetish outfit. In some kinds of play (like humiliation play), the drooling it causes can also become relevant. Finally, it can also serve as a thing for a dominant partner to forcefully shove into the mouth of their submissive, creating a material, spectacular representation of the power dynamic in play. All those functions can also occur at the same time; they are not mutually exclusionary.

Although I am singling out the ballgag here due to its iconic status (alongside the collar, the riding crop, and the "gimp hood"², it makes for

² One can, of course, interpret that as a veiled anxiety regarding the unmentioned, but experiential issue of commodification.

some of the most recognizable visual markers of BDSM) I don't want to imply that it is somehow unique. Its multiplicity of functions and forms does not set it apart from the vast array of objects and accessories participating in BDSM practices. It would be futile to attempt to provide a full list of them, as they can range from cheap sex-shop hand-cuffs through a variety of whips and floggers, repurposed medical equipment (sounds and speculums), and all the way to custom-made and ludicrously expensive kink furniture. The material focus of BDSM practices and the importance of those objects, commonly referred to as toys, has not escaped the attention of the scholars of kink (NEUMAHN 2011; WEISS 2011; LINDEMANN 2012; BAUER 2014; CAMPBELL 2020), further stressing that while the word "toy" can suggest something irrelevant and childish, the sexual play I am referring to here can be a very serious business (PAASONEN 2018).

It stands to reason, then, that these toys ought to be taken seriously and analyzed in a way that does justice to the important role they play in facilitating BDSM sexualities. However, for reasons I hope to explain below, with some exceptions, the tendency within kink scholarship has been to relegate toys to a secondary importance, casting them as mere accessories and gadgets, apart from the purported essence of kinky practices. Furthermore, very little scholarly attention has been given to the material aspect of these toys and the way they meet and interact with the flesh of the practitioners. Most extended treatments of kinky toys as objects and things tend to arise when they make an entrance into the world of fashion, but even there they tend to be treated mostly as signifiers of perversion, of capital's appropriation of alternate sexualities, or of the men's objectification of women's bodies (STEELE 1996; CARTLEDGE 1999; NEEDHAM 2014; BURTON 2016). In this article, I hope to reverse this tendency by instead focusing on the question of what kinky toys do, and how they operate and circulate among BDSM practitioners. In doing so, I will be trying to provide a different perspective on what could be tentatively termed the "material culture of BDSM practices", one that emphasises the lived experiences of the users of toys rather than their putative cultural meanings, which are, as Gary Needham observes, often far detached from the realities of BDSM play.

To this end, I will be using material gathered during my participant observation within the Polish hetero/pan BDSM communities, conducted between 2016 and 2020 in major cities in this country. The research took

place both within semi-dedicated SM spaces³ and in private apartments of various practitioners. The Polish situatedness of my research bears on my findings in a few ways that need to be noted first. While BDSM communities in Poland are patterned and inspired by the ones in the West, they have a far shorter history (having emerged within the last decade or two), and have yet to develop a comparable level of community organization, or continuity of local traditions and knowledge. Furthermore, there is also a notable lack of an organized queer kinky community in the country, which makes certain notions regarding queer BDSM communities that are popular within queer studies (FREEMAN 2010; BAUER 2014; WESTENGARD 2019) difficult to translate into the local context (I will return to this point later).

Throughout the article, I will be quoting at length from semi-structured interviews I have conducted in the field. The names of the respondents have been changed to protect their anonymity; and for this same reason, I have collected only the most limited demographic data about them.

1. FETISHES AND THE MARKET

Before my field material can be brought up, however, a few trends in how the material culture of BDSM is framed need to be noted, primarily its close links with the related notion of sexual fetishism (STEELE 1996). As categories, sadism, masochism, and fetishism all emerged from similar debates and investigations of late 19th century sexology (NOYES 1997; MOORE 2015; KAHAN 2019). Fetishism was the first of them to come into use, being popularized within French sexology of the 1880s (NYE 1993), quickly becoming one of the key concepts for the entire sexological project of understanding and classifying sexual perversions (MATLOCK 1993). As concepts, sadism and masochism developed in this context, and in relation to it. While for the Austrian psychiatrist, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who is credited with introducing sadism and masochism into the taxonomy of sexual perversions (NOYES 1997), they were separate phenomena from fetishism, he also saw them as being in obvious proximity; sadism and masochism represented perversions of interpersonal relations, while fetishism indicated an aberrant relationship to an object. Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus* was, after all, in furs. Sadomasochism as a cultural style that developed

³ In this article, I will be using terms "BDSM", "SM", "and "kink" interchangeably to indicate diverse set of sexual practices centered on, but not restricted to, erotic play with power and pain.

in the 20th century was also a style of various fetishisms (BIENVENU II 1999), and already in mid-century the two concepts started being treated as coterminous (GEBHARD 1969). The history of sadomasochism is a material history: of leather and rubber, fur and silk, of riding crops and ballgags.

It is also a history riddled with anxieties and fears, and its discussion tends to be dominated by the overarching worry about sexual fetishism – that the “natural” orientation of desire towards persons of opposite sex can be displaced by the attraction towards sexless, non-relational things, thus threatening the very core of reproductive heterosexuality (NYE 1993). This dovetails with the idea present both in the earliest sexological attempts at framing fetishism, as well as in far more modern works (STEELE 1996), which suggest that fetishism, and, more generally, the very presence of objects and commodities within the sexual sphere, is a particular affliction of the (post)industrialized West, increasingly distanced from the natural, unalienated ways of expressing and practicing sex. In its vulgar form, this anxiety takes the shape of opposing the city (understood as the site of the processed, technological life, and as a hotbed of sexual pathologies) to the primordial, natural and non-technological world of sex and sexuality (NAMASTE 2000). Unsurprisingly then, one finds “sex using toys” on the outer ring of Gayle Rubin’s famous “charmed circle”, the diagram illustrating the ways the sexual hierarchies in the West are established by opposing “good” and “bad” sexual practices (RUBIN 2011). This is further reinforced by the lingering stigmatisation of the sex trade, whether as pornography (WILLIAMS 1989), sale of sex toys and aids (COMELLA 2017), and especially of sex work itself, often accused of debasing intimacy by rendering it into an object of monetary exchange (DOBROWOLSKA 2020). An echo of this worry can even be found in the hyper-influential Foucauldian term, the “apparatus of sexuality”, giving a distinctly mechanical tenor to the displacement of the *ars erotica* by the 19th century *scientia sexualis* (FOUCAULT 2013).

Tellingly, even within attempts to remove the stigma from the general use of sex toys – for example, in the sex-positive feminist sex-store movement (BETTER 2016) – the status of kinky toys remains ambivalent. It is unsurprising that many feminist sex-stores have at times refused to carry such equipment in their stock, finding it far more difficult to justify than seemingly more innocent sex aids (COMELLA 2017). This is a testament to anxieties at the bedrock of numerous criticisms of BDSM that have been raised over the past several decades, both because of the

suggested inhumanity of those practices (evidenced by the use of “torture devices” as toys) (HOAGLAND 1982), as well as because of its ostensible deep integration with the sex trade. Toys often stand at the center of those critiques: as they can be readily found in most contemporary sex-shops, the argument goes that BDSM itself originates from the sex trade. This is the view of BDSM as produced by pornography (NIJAKOWSKI 2010), mass culture and new romance genres (ILLOUZ 2014) or niche fashion circuits (STEELE 1996). Caricatured as a particularly unnatural and anti-humanistic form of sexuality, it can easily be then cast as especially representative of the failings of modernity and the horrors of capitalism. Such critiques often end up being heavily indebted (more or less directly) either to a Freudian notion of fetishism as an improper way out of castration anxiety in boys (and therefore a form of stunted psychological development in men) (FERNBACH 2002)⁴, or to a tradition of a Marxist analysis of the way the capital influences and distorts both the relations between humans, and the relations between them and the world of made things they inhabit (BROWN 2016).

The most developed and mature form of this critique can be found in *Techniques of Pleasure*, an ethnography of the Bay Area kink community by the American anthropologist Margot Weiss. For Weiss, BDSM is the realisation of post-Fordist capitalist principles within the area of sexuality. She reaches such conclusions chiefly through the analysis of the use of toys within the community she researched. The world she describes, of luxury boutique sex-shops (like the famous Mr. S in San Francisco) and collections of BDSM accessories that can be valued in tens of thousands of dollars, is a world of commodities around which the BDSM community crystalizes:

There is a similar relationship between toys and subjectivity: sm subjectivity produces and is produced by the market for sm toys and paraphernalia.(...) Capitalism, and consumption in particular, is productive; people become [BDSM]

⁴ The gendered aspect is important here – within the Freudian scheme, fetishism is only possible for men (GROSZ 1993). This idea, inherited from earlier 19th century sexology, has likely contributed significantly to pathologisation of SM within psychoanalysis-influenced feminist critique, providing basis to the idea of such expressions of sexuality as intrinsically masculine and anti-women. While this line of critique is not the main object of my attention in this article, the shadow of psychoanalysis looms large over any discussion of fetishism as a concept. A useful overview and polemic with its utilisation within feminism can be found in Amanda Fernbach’s work *Fantasies of Fetishism* (FERNBACH 2002).

practitioners with a sense of collective belonging to the SM community by developing such technical and bodily knowledge and buying and using toys. (WEISS 2011: 120)

Weiss stresses not just the purely monetary aspect of participating in markets of erotic toys, but also the importance of a different kind of capital for the SM community: the technical, embodied know-how. Toys require practice and knowledge. Much of Weiss' description is devoted to workshops and seminars organized within the community, providing an opportunity to acquire the skills needed to use BDSM toys. Those can be, for example, flogging lessons, teaching how to hold particular whips or where and how to safely strike the body. Participation in those circuits of knowledge requires investments that are beyond just money: one needs to put in time and effort to practice. In this light, BDSM is the model example of the middle-class economy of leisure time. Toys, meanwhile, are fetishes, including in the sense of commodity fetishism. Weiss describes them as prostheses, of both the body (when a whip becomes the extension of a hand) but also, and more importantly, of relations:

In the end, these moments of cultural ambivalence reveal the fetishistic displacement—onto people, objects, and toys— of the social contradictions of late-capitalist social relations. In other words, even as we see commodity exchange and bodily objectification as more than lack or asocial destruction, we must also recognize that these bodily and relational potentials are produced within social dynamics of privilege, exclusion, and power. (WEISS 2011: 144)

What is striking about Weiss' analysis, backed by an extensive fieldwork, is how easily it slips into repeating the axioms of the intellectual anxiety stirred by the indelible presence of objects within the practice of BDSM. There is a cultural tendency to view sexual relations between persons and things as immediately suspect. Even if they are not taken to be outright pathological, such relations tend to be seen as false, secondary, ersatz. Within that, one can find an unexpressed view castigating the realm of objects, things, commodities, and toys as alien or at least external to sexuality. This opposition – a variant of the nature/technology binary – is a key issue in trying to understand the material culture of BDSM.

Although certainly nuanced in her analysis, Weiss ultimately accepts a top-down model of the material culture of BDSM, as of a sexuality produced by participation in markets and circuits of exchange. If we were to

understand this tendency, as I suggest, as anchored in opposing technology to nature, we could see this as a repetition of the old narrative about the transformation of the natural (and so passive and stable) nature by the active, but treacherous technological civilizing process (HALBERSTAM 2020). Whether this is then perceived as a threat or not, such a perspective continues to perpetuate a number of ideas about sexuality, and especially alternative forms of it, such as BDSM practices. Those ideas are based on a number of common-sense oppositions bounding the idea of a natural, unalienated and non-commercial sexuality as the ideal to aspire to. But, as I hope to demonstrate below, those oppositions only hold for as long as we think of the toys as passive objects and commodities, not involved partners in the creation of the kinky sexual life.

2. BROOMHANDLE

During my fieldwork, I had an opportunity to listen to a conversation by a group of men during a kinky party. One of them was demonstrating his newest acquisition: a lacquered, wooden carved paddle, ornamented with folk patterns. Displaying the toy, he narrated how it came into his possession: it was commissioned from a traditional craftsman from a rural region of Poland. It wasn't his first order, either. Relying on traditional crafts allowed him access to well-made toys made according to his specifications. When asked if the craftsmen involved knew what he was using their work for, he replied that most of them did not: one of them even asked if the paddle was to serve as a broomhandle. It was better that way, too. Those who realized what they were making would hike up their prices or drop the order.

As a BDSM toy, the paddle distinguished itself by being unique and professionally made. Although certainly a commodity, the history of its creation and purchase did not easily fit the narratives of off-the-shelf kink. Instead, it indicated a more complicated situation, where the lines separating the sex trade from other branches of the economy, and sex toys from everyday objects, turn blurry and uncertain.

The irony of the craftsman's question about the unclear purpose of the "broomhandle" he was carving lies in the fact that broomhandles themselves are a common enough substitute of flogging paddles in BDSM practices to serve as an object of community in-jokes. But while the image of a dominant partner using a broom or a brush on their submissive's buttocks

is comical, it also hints at a widespread phenomenon I have observed in the field. When specialty kinky toys are not accessible, everyday objects, which could scarcely be expected to serve a sexual purpose, are commonly used in their stead.

But that should not come as a surprise. To hold to the description of the paddle for a moment: it was a simple piece of wood, 20 to 30 centimeters in length, and equipped with a handle. Its size and weight gave the blows delivered by its specific properties, but ultimately it was mainly its thickness and the quality of the finish that distinguished it from one of the most common ersatz paddles known to kink practitioners: a wooden spatula, available from every larger supermarket. In fact, the same supermarket would likely stock a whole slew of other potential BDSM toys, be they duct tape, tealights, wax candles, or shrink wrap. Under certain circumstances, the public space of the shop itself could turn into a sexual device.

The material culture of BDSM cannot be therefore discussed as limiting to the visual spectacle of fetish gear, to ballgags and bespoke paddles. It is a wider phenomenon that encompasses more than the participation (and use) of specialty equipment. Furthermore, the practitioners themselves do not necessarily assume the position of a passive consumer of sex trade goods, but rather present a more diverse set of approaches towards the material side of their sexuality, approaches which are rife with ambivalences and anxieties I would like to focus on.

The quotes below are a sampling from my collection of interviews, showing the variety of responses to the question on the importance of toys in the BDSM practice of the respondents:

KAJA [submissive, woman]: I'd say that some are [important]. For example, I would like to experiment more with ropes and corsets, because they give visual and psychological pleasure. If someone hits me on the leg with an open palm, it is a bit of a nothing experience, I mean that it doesn't cause any special emotions in me. But if it is a riding crop or I expect it to be, how is it called, one of those bamboo sticks... It's more point-focused pain, and I react better to it. A hand just can't have this sort of an effect on a body. So sometimes some sensations can't be had without a toy. So I would say that toys are important for me, but most psychological things don't need them at all. Play like where I'm walking with someone hand in hand, and that's it, everything is happening in my head.

ALICJA [submissive, woman]: I generally have a fetish for toys. I like to go to sex-shops, watch vibrators, read about them. And I think that my Master shares

this, because we have a lot of toys. But we can also play without them, and not everything is from a sex-shop. Sometimes it is just a floating ball to toss into a swimming pool when I am swimming in, and I have to fetch it.

ALEX [switch, genderqueer]: I'm speaking from the perspective of a person who, up until very recently, had a very limited budget, I mean I didn't have a full-time job. You can do without [toys], but it's nice to have a [collection]. (...) But human creativity really has no limits, so you can do without, but it is nice to know that if I like something – and of course, it's not just about me – then it will be nice to buy it, to use it.

DANIEL [submissive, man]: Since it is really important for me for my will to be successfully restrained, [toys] are very important for achieving such results.

MARCOWA [submissive, woman]: They are not important at all. Toys, gadgets, accessories. I'll say something that can be silly, but a collar is something you have in your head. Whether you belong to someone or not, it's in your head. Of course, I have an everyday collar, or a normal collar, which I wear, and tattoos are something important to me, because they highlight my emotions. But they are not necessary. Bluntly, you can beat someone's ass with anything, with a hand, a piece of cable, I don't know, a wooden stick.

Toys emerge from those responses in several roles: as commodities, as tools, as objects of desire. The interaction between those roles, as well as the kinds of importance ascribed to it are what I would like to examine next, trying to pay a closer attention to those individual functions of particular toys in their various uses.

3. TOOLS

At the most fundamental level, toys in BDSM are needed for the functions they can play. As one of my interviewees put it:

ADRIANNA [masochist, woman]: Are toys necessary? Toys are necessary for BDSM, because without them, there would be too little.

“Without them, there would be too little” – why? While the word “toy” suggests something that is without particular utility, an object defined by its sumptuousness, in the context of BDSM practice, toys often become indispensable. The reason behind that is practical: there are many practices which rely on particular objects to enable them.

It is hard to restrain a partner without a rope or a pair of cuffs. Sure enough, what counts as a rope or a pair of cuffs isn't immediately obvious – a specially-treated cotton shibari rope or a pricey set of leather cuffs can often be replaced by the pants belt, a scarf, a pair of surplus police handcuffs, or a roll of scotch tape. In the end, however, certain practices rely on the body being joined by particular toys, without which there is “too little”.

In bondage, at least, ersatz bindings are not hard to find. However, even here Kaja's observation that “some sensations can't be had without a toy” stands true. After all, bondage is about more than just binding someone – even if a roll of tape can restrain someone just as well as a jute rope, it will never provide the experience of the rope brushing against naked skin (just as the rope can never provide the particular visual spectacle of being bound with duct tape). Similar issues arise around other practices exclusively reliant on particular objects: not every candle's wax feels the same once melted and poured over a partner's exposed back, and only some kinds of it are suitable, even if without it there can be no such play at all.

Toys can also provide a basic frame for individual practices, like in certain kinds of role-play:

EDYTA [submissive, woman]: I like the kink of the kind I used to dislike: role-playing. I started liking costumes, playing a disobedient schoolgirl for example, so for me a schoolgirl uniform is important. We all know how it looks.

This brings us back to the example of the ballgag, with which I opened this article. As I have noted, its multi-functionality means that it may just as well be used to establish a mood or an aesthetic, just as it may serve any “practical” function associated with the idea of a gag as a device for muffling sound and preventing speech. In fact, among the many types of gags that are used in BDSM, some do not serve either of those functions at all. Ring gags, for example, are meant to force the mouth open and allow for a more “sodomasochistic” oral sex; bit gags evoke riding equipment and the taming of animals, setting the stage for various kinds of role-play.

This is not to say, however, that toys serve the role of mere props; although they are important for the more theatrical side of kink, this theater is nonetheless reliant on their tangible presence as objects touching or entering the body. To successfully evoke a mood, a toy needs to be effective at what it is supposed to do, even if this effectiveness isn't directly aligned

with its apparent purpose as an object. Performances of kink shouldn't be understood as just theater (HART 1998).

Toys in use need to be good at what they do. A gag shouldn't be easy to spit out, hands shouldn't slip out of the cuffs, a whip should give the right kind of pain and not fall apart in the top's hands. But to complicate the matter further, there is no single standard by which the utility of toys can be measured; it is always dependent on individual preferences of practitioners, wanting different sensations out of similar practices. Daniel's preference for being bound using a cattle chain and a padlock, which makes it impossible for him to slip from the restraints, probably wouldn't appeal to my other respondents concerned with the visual appeal of their bondage. However, for Daniel the chain is vital; his partner is a woman smaller than him, and so to experience being dominated by her, he needs aids like heavy restraints which are effective at keeping him down.

For scholars such as Staci Newmahr (2011) and others focusing on BDSM as a kind of performance or theater, the utility of toys lies in their ability to provide a semblance of reality within the scene. Newmahr writes that "the top must provide the appropriate material cues to the bottom, in order for the performance to succeed" (NEWMAHR 2011, p. 74). This dovetails with Weiss' view, in which toys are seen as prostheses enabling otherwise impossible forms of expression. This builds to an understanding of toys as the material base of kinky practice, and its precondition. And while this is certainly not wrong, it is not enough to explain the importance of toys as that without which there would be "too little".

The way of navigating through this confusion can be found in the perspective of toys as tools, as it was proposed during one of my interviews:

JS: How important are toys for you in BDSM?

MONIKA [switch, woman]: It depends on what side. I mean, when we're talking about my masochist side, those toys are needed, because pain inflicted by hand won't give me the pleasure of pain inflicted by rope, or an appropriate tool, [like] a needle or a knife. I'm not particularly attached to any tool, so it is not *that* knife or *that* scalpel, but rather a general type. However, when I am on the other side [being the top], it doesn't matter, because toys are means to an end. And they can be things that lie on the table and which we use in our daily lives. But they are not necessary because kink between me and my partner relies on what we say to each other. Tools are needed because he requires to be solidly and really restrained, so without a chain and a padlock I won't bind him,

because he'll escape from everything else. But this is just to help him achieve a certain state of mind, not of body. (...) [Toys] are for me means to an end, to create a state which is desirable in a given moment. It may be pain, it may be submission, service, whatever. They are tools, not attributes. I can just as well be a dominant lady in a tracksuit and fluffy slippers. (...) [A toy] is a tool that makes things easier.

In Monika's words, the physical and mental effectiveness of toys blends together. The chain and the padlock are a must, but their utility comes not only from the tangibility of restraint they provide, but also from the state of mind they help to create. Pain, commonly understood as a purely physiological reaction, is here enumerated along with submissiveness as a mental state that can be created using a given tool.

There is a striking parallel here with the way the "tool" as a category is understood in the writings of Elaine Scarry. In her analysis of torture, which she understands not as a discrete practice, but as a kind of a relation, she pays attention to the use of objects in the act of torturing others. This leads her to eventually provide a distinction between "weapons" and "tools". The former are what wounds, destroys and "unmakes" the world, making their victim retreat into the solitude of the titular "body in pain". Tools, on the other hand, are what is needed to overcome the limitations of the fragile human body, and what enables it to enter into relations with others (for Scarry: only other humans). As such, they are what "makes" the world, which is understood, in a quasi-Arendtian way, as the network of human relations (ARENDR 1998). Scarry writes that "the mute facts of sentience (deprived of cultural externalization) are wholly self-isolating. Only in the culture of language, ideas, and objects does sharing originate" (SCARRY 1985: 256). It's an observation that fits surprisingly well with Monika's own. Toys-as-tools are a material aid in the establishment of relations: of dominance and submission, of sadism and masochism, but also of trust and caring. They must not, however, be seen as completely ready-to-hand and fully subservient to the designs of the practitioners. Toys-as-tools are constituent parts of relations they help to create.

Unfortunately, they also help to delimit who has the access to practicing kink. What I am referring to here is not just the mere access to toys as commodities (that not everyone can equally afford), but also to how specific sexual scripts crystalize around particular toys. As we are reminded by Sara Ahmed (2019), usability and utility are not neutral categories, and

often mask histories of subtle exclusion. Tools are usable and have utility always for *someone*, not *everyone*. Kinky toys are no different. Not all of them will fit every body. Sometimes, this is literal. People who are too thin or too big can struggle to find cuffs fitting their limbs, and most ballgags will turn out too large for people with narrow jaws. Sometimes, more indirect forms of exclusion are at work: vegans can find it very difficult to find some types of popular toys (cuffs or collars) which are not made out of leather. It's important to note, too, that those examples are not hypothetical and represent struggles that I have encountered in the field.

Access to sex and play spaces is another factor structuring this exclusion. While my respondents tend to collect toys, those collections are ones that fit into a duffel bag or travel case which can then, if needed, be stuffed under the bed or into a wardrobe. The ability to pack up your toys is important both to protect one's privacy from guests or family, but also because of the mobility it provides. Gags, cuffs, or dildos can be easily taken to a newly-met person or a hotel room. However, not all BDSM practices are equally mobile; fantasies of having access to spaces equipped with heavy furniture like cages or pillories abound, but very few get to actually play in them, let alone own them permanently.

The barrier here is financial, but not only. Obviously, specialty furniture can be a very expensive affair, as such objects need to be made to order. However, even then one has to have access to more than just money: a small apartment won't fit a whipping post, or one's kinky spaces also need to be kept away from the eyes of "vanilla" guests or family, requiring even more space. Screwing in suspension hooks into your bedroom's ceiling is only an option if you are not renting the apartment. Furthermore, even if you have access to both space and money, there are other factors. Many of my respondents had to cut down on their kinky furnishings on account of having small children that they wanted to keep away from their kink.

In the end, owning a play space is a rare luxury among practitioners. For the vast majority, the only access to such equipment can be had in clubs or paid studios, which can themselves be exclusionary spaces (the scene I have done my research with was ostensibly welcoming towards LGBT+ people in theory, but predominantly and sometimes aggressively cisheteronormative in practice). The requirement to keep your collection of kinky toys mobile isn't just a matter of convenience, but also a testament to

how the material culture of kink arises out of the need to adapt to external circumstances shaping the practices. And like it or not, market conditions make for an important one.

4. COMMODITIES

The debates on consumerism and BDSM have a long history. Over the span of the last decade, they have received further publicity due to the massive (if short-lived) boom in the SM market due to the great success of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series of books and movies (DYMCK 2013; SCOTT 2015). Not all of those debates foregrounded kink as such, tending to instead focus on the question of the new erotic markets for women (COMELLA 2017). However, the aforementioned anxiety about BDSM as a particularly consumerist form of sexuality recur in them, often resonating with the in-community worries about the potential for the gentrification and touristification of SM (WEISS 2011; BAUER 2014; SCOTT 2015).

The two most common forms those anxieties assume are either that the cost of specialty toys is making it impossible for people without big budgets to become practitioners, or that the all-too-easy access to those same toys in chain sex-shops is making the barrier to entry into BDSM too low, leading to an erosion of kink's authenticity and its replacement by a market-driven, consumerist attitude of getting your kicks off the sex-store's shelf.

Those concerns have repeated in my fieldwork too:

ŻELAZNY [dominant, man]: You know, I'd much rather have a nice partner to whip her ass with a bare hand, than a collection of fantastic whips and floggers that'll lay unused without anyone to smack.

The great anxiety around fetishism – that objects will replace humans in sex – echoes in statements like that. However, on closer examination, the issues of apparent consumerism within the world of BDSM practices can take on rather unexpected forms, in a way not dissimilar to how toys can serve as tools in counterintuitive ways.

First of all, it needs to be stressed that sex-shops themselves, those unfortunate black characters of narratives of sexual consumerism, tend to be approached with suspicion by practitioners. In Poland especially, there is a pronounced lack of specialty SM stores (with a few small exceptions), and the toys on offer in sex-shops are generally thought to be of low quality.

There are no good local equivalents to luxury BDSM boutiques that can be found in places like San Francisco and London. Furthermore, feminist/queer sex stores which tend to make the care for quality of toys a part of its broader mission (COMELLA 2017), are not only rare in Poland, but also do not always stock BDSM gear. As such, off-the-shelf toys have a (mostly deserved) reputation as garbage meant for bored couples looking to spice up their bedroom life once or twice. Assembling a collection of toys that can serve as useful tools requires different sources.

MONIKA: I like to spend money on things which won't get wrecked after a single use, so I don't buy in sex-shops, because it's garbage. I try to get things made to order. The exception is my submissive, who requires a cattle chain and a padlock, but that you can get in every hardware store.

MAGDA [switch, woman]: [I especially like] my riding crop, I got it as a present, it's from a sports store, it has a rubber tip, is very comfortable, very handy, and hurts like fuck.

Żelazny: "If you don't like it, then make one better". So I did. I work on them [floggers], I feel like I am an expert, I know a lot of details others miss: how it should be balanced, differently for a woman or a shorter person, different for a large guy, all that shit. So if I make things, I need to be good at them. And I must use them, it's basically a professional thing.

There are several alternatives to sex-shops outlined above, which can be broadly categorized into three main approaches: making the toys themselves, having them made to order by specialized craftsmen, or acquiring them outside of the confines of the sex trade.

Purchasing from craftsmen is the leading alternative to sex-shops. It is also a very varied field, and a difficult one to generalize. The craftsmen in question include both professionals whose work can be found in the few upscale kinky stores in the country, and who take individual commissions on the side, as well as amateurs who make toys for their own use (thus overlapping with the DIY approach) or to share with friends. Toys made by particular, well-known craftsmen can be objects of pride: they are given as gifts, shown-off at parties, they help to build status. In this sense, the informal craft market is the closest equivalent to luxury sex-shops in Polish kink.

Making toys yourself can include both creating them from scratch (making whips and floggers that way is particularly popular in this regard), as

well as tweaking and improving toys bought from other sources, using cheap goods as a base for personal work. In some areas, such as in the creation of BDSM furniture, the DIY approach is dominant, as the extant professional sources of such equipment are both few and far between as well as prohibitively expensive. Yet, it would be a mistake to assume that financial motives are the main driving force behind the DIY approach; just as often, it is considered a hobby and a point of pride, sometimes playing into the rugged, *macho* style of individualism preferred by some practitioners.

Still, craft and DIY both are elite approaches, not just financially, but also in terms of other kinds of capital, especially with the DIY toy creation operating as a leisure time pursuit. However, as I have already noted, toys are sometimes surprisingly easy to acquire outside of the sex trade, even if in substitute form. Hardware, hobby, and sporting goods stores can serve as an alternate source of toys; with the presence of fetish elements in more mainstream fashion, one can accessorize for kink in chain stores specializing in, for example, goth or rock apparel.

Those sources are not just easier to locate and visit, but also, on the whole, tend to be cheaper. A riding crop bought in a sports store will probably be more affordable than the equivalent item purchased in a sex-shop (even if they are essentially the same item): a phenomenon sometimes referred to as the *pervert tax*. As the example of craftsmen raising their prices upon learning about the nature of their order indicates, this phenomenon isn't limited to stores themselves. Furthermore, considering the poor quality of sex-shop wares, equivalent goods acquired from alternate sources may well be of higher quality.

The logic behind this is rather clear. Sex-shop bought toys, due to their shoddy quality, tend to be seen as incapable of serving as tools. Their poor materials, bad fit and finish, and focus on appearance over functionality, are all in stark contrast to a riding crop from an equestrian shop or a chain bought from a hardware store, which are meant to be tools in the first order.

However, one does not have to venture out to a shop to look for an alternate source of kinky toys. The first order of business is usually to check the drawers in one's own home, to look for household objects (like the aforementioned wooden spatula) that can be adapted for kinky play. Such items are utilized in a way contrary to their defaulted purpose. While a riding crop hitting a horse and hitting a man does fundamentally the same thing (although requiring different technique) and a chain is intuitively

understood to be a mean of restraint, there is something queer about the use of a kitchen implement as an implement of corporal punishment⁵. *Queer use* is a term that Sara Ahmed proposes to describe such use of things that moves outside of their default, “normal” use. She notes that:

Use is a restriction of possibility that is material. Even when we use something in ways that were not intended—a cup as a paperweight, for instance—we do so given the qualities of a thing. Perhaps when we use something in ways that were not intended, we are allowing those qualities to acquire freer expression. The keys that are used to unlock a door can be used as a toy, perhaps because they are shiny and silver, perhaps because they jangle. Queer uses, when things are used for purposes other than the ones for which they were intended, still reference the qualities of things; queer uses may linger on those qualities, rendering them all the more lively. (AHMED 2019: 26)

The tendency towards queer uses in BDSM practices speaks against the view of this sexuality as something a readymade, available off-the-shelf. While toys are often purchased as commodities, the relationship of the practitioners to them cannot be always rendered to mere consumerism. Just as often, the purchase is only the first step of complex bricolage practices stemming from the lack of access to quality toys in their role as tools. The needs answered by a chain from a hardware store, a riding crop from a sporting store, or a kitchen trowel from a supermarket do not obviously slot into ordinary market niches. Queer use of toys is, on one hand, a reaction towards (and possibly against) the trend to gentrify kink by stressing ever more exclusive, luxurious toys-as-commodities, but on the other it is also a reaction to the fact that the market itself doesn't really cater to the needs of practitioners, with sex-shops aiming their wares at incidental players, not people who think themselves serious about BDSM. “Furry handcuffs” as the iconic representation of shoddy sex-shop toys suggest a client whose practices are aimed towards novelty more than serious play.

The rubric of queer use within BDSM also encompasses the way that coaxing kinky use out of everyday objects can require altering one's approach towards them. Let's consider, for example, the apparently simple sex act of having intercourse with a partner bound to a bed. While ostensibly very simple, in practice achieving it can prove rather tricky,

⁵ A full-face leather or rubber mask.

due to prosaic reasons mostly opaque to non-practitioners. As it turns out, many beds found today around homes are not equipped with bedposts or legs that make for convenient anchor points for cuffs or ropes. Securing a partner to a bed can then require a dive into the poorly-explored guts of the bed's structure, to find attachment points such as the hinges of a folding sofa, bringing forwards the parts of the object which would normally remain hidden from view. In order to transform a bed for sleeping into a bed for kinky play, one must sometimes get rather intimate with the bed itself, learning about its construction and exercising one's creativity. This can itself be a form of foreplay, where preparing a bed in anticipation of using it with a partner becomes in itself an erotic act; on a more general level, it teaches ways of looking differently at objects. To look at a bed on display while trying to see if it will yield easily to kinky functions is to approach it from a perspective markedly different than the caricature of a sex-trade customer seeking sexual fulfilment in an act of a purchase.

Such practical lore about queer use of common items has many forms within BDSM practice. Various clips and clamps, commonly applied to a submissive's body (usually the nipples and crotch area) for reasons of both pain play and visual spectacle, provide another example. While sex-shops often stock specialty clamps (usually rather ornamental), most practitioners tend to do with cheaper and more readily available alternatives that can be found in homes or office supplies. Clothespins, paperclips, or alligator clamps can each serve this role, and all have their own properties in it, causing different sensations and marking the flesh in unique ways. Knowing the particularities of their touch on the skin, how to best apply them or how to suffer wearing them, establishes another site of practical, bodily knowledge. And just like with beds, it teaches different ways of looking at those common objects and allowing the sight of them, even in a neutral, non-sexual environment to still carry a hint of an erotic charge, a suggestion of another side to our everyday surroundings.

In this hint of otherness, the notion of *queer use* can be extended by referring to the idea of *misuse value* suggested by Bill Brown:

By misuse value I mean to name the aspects of an object—sensuous, aesthetic, semiotic—that become palpable, legible, audible when the object is experienced in whatever time it takes (in whatever time it is) for an object to become another thing. (BROWN 2016: 51)

For Brown, the notion of misuse value is a way of navigating the old philosophical distinction between *objects* and *things*, and its utilisation in Marxist theory. He directs his critique against ideas that see contemporary, late-capitalist society as incorrigibly completely alienated from the thinginess of matter, experiencing it only as fully commodified objects. It is a capacious concept, and in the context of the material culture of BDSM, it provides a handy way of describing how the relations between practitioners and their toys (both as tools and commodities) get together to make BDSM possible. It also draws attention, alongside Ahmed's theorizing, to the breaks in the ordinary provided by the queer use of everyday objects. The possibility of those being Brown's "another thing" also carries a suggestion of the possibility of another relation to them.

It's arguable how central those queer uses are, however. While in my field material, and in the interviews, they are a constant theme, there are also hard limits to them. While a luxury flogger can be replaced by a kitchen trowel, and a rag stuffed into one's mouth and secured with duct tape can stand for some of the uses of a ballgag, if one is looking for electrostimulation, improvisation becomes far more difficult. Helena's experiences with vibrators speaks to that:

HELENA [submissive, woman]: Before, [toys] used to not be necessarily important, and were just a curious novelty. But because of certain issues, including being on antidepressants, they became rather crucial because I couldn't achieve orgasm [without a vibrator], which was rather frustrating, and [toys] were the best help, so to speak.

Just as the multiplicity of toys' functions aren't the same for all bodies, so too their queer uses are a potential that shouldn't be thought as universal for all categories and types of toys. It opens possibilities in certain places as it closes them in others.

With all that in mind, I would still go as far as to risk suggesting that the notions of queer use and misuse value represent some of the central ways that toys make up the material culture of BDSM. Furthermore, it seems clear that even once we stop viewing them as purely commodified, we should also work to acknowledge that their interactions with bodies and the role they play in BDSM practices isn't fully under the control of those who employ them. The fact that the pleasure of a ballgag far exceeds its principal function, or that one can enjoy leather cuffs just as much for

the pressing touch of leather on skin as for the restraint itself, brings this errancy to attention. Within my interviews, further examples of it abound:

ALICJA: I have a nice hood for sensory deprivation, laced in the back, with a profiled nose. A very neat little thing, it puts you in a kind of a quiet. My master expected that it would completely cut me off from external stimuli, but when it turned out that I still hear a bit, only muffled, he was very disappointed. He said he would throw it away or sell it online, but I went “no, no, that was so great, I was relaxed”.

In Alicja’s partners’ eyes, the hood failed its purpose as a tool; however in that failure she managed to find a queer use (and a queer pleasure) in the act of wearing it, thus saving it from the fate of a faulty commodity good only to be discarded or sold away. Her apparent misuse of it turned out to be a source of unlikely satisfaction that had not been previously expected.

Although representative of Robin Bauer’s utopian bent in his analysis of queer BDSM communities, his notes on the use of toys seem to touch on a similar thread:

One may consider dyke + queer BDSM tools and toys such as whips, hand cuffs and dildos as an instance of objects that are a commodity and create niche markets, but have not been completely appropriated, since they still embody the hope for something that is beyond commodification. (BAUER 2014: 245)

From the perspective of my fieldwork, Bauer’s analysis seems to be on the money as far as practice is concerned, even if it is not at all reflected in my respondents’ intentionality. It would be a mistake to think of queer use in Polish BDSM practices as a conscious political project meant to answer the encroaching commercialisation of sexuality. In fact, the latter has not appeared as a significant concern in the communities I have researched. Queer use in my field material arises more in response to a sense of lack, not as a contestation of overabundance. However, I believe that even if the Polish kinky market was more developed and saturated, those elements wouldn’t go away, remaining in the sexual misuse of daily objects as kinky toys.

On the other hand, for all the ways the commodification of sexuality is resisted within kinky use of toys, a notable ambivalence still surrounds the use of toys, becoming clearly visible in many of my interviews. In most cases, it was expressed in the terms of the old anxiety regarding fetishism

as threatening to displace the proper object of desire⁶.

In an excerpt quoted earlier, Marcowa stressed her belief that toys ought to play a secondary role compared to affective relations (such as of dominance and submission) which make for the “real” bedrock of BDSM. Żelazny was one of several of my respondents to express a similar view:

ŻELAZNY: You know, for me it is mostly a psychic matter. A matter of character. It's less about, I don't know, toys, gestures, names. (...) All those gestures, toys, in reality they could vanish. But the domination, the submission, all this BDSM: that would still remain.

In fact, for some toys can appear not just as superficial, but as actively distracting from the real matter of intimacy, and sometimes actively detrimental to relationships:

MARIA [switch, woman]: It's interesting but [my partner] says that he doesn't always expect them [toys], but I think it's a matter of training. We've been together for so many years and I think that he's always needed there to be high heels, latex, all those things... and I want my sex to be spontaneous, I don't like being forced to prepare for it. And that is difficult to me in this BDSM that you have to prepare for, and I don't like it, because it completely kills my sexual energy. And so in result we haven't had sex in a really long time.

But for all those anxieties, which can be understood as an attempt to put a distance between oneself and the spectre of fetishism, fetishism as an attitude and a practice remains common. The real challenge is in providing a good account of it.

5. FETISHES, SEXUAL ARCHITECTURE AND OTHER RELATIONS

Immediately after stating that toys are not at all important in BDSM, Marcowa went on to add that:

MARCOWA: There is no need for any out there toys, but some things smell nice. Like leather. My dominant, my lady, has a bunch of leather toys, and I can sit down in a corner and hold the whip in my hand to smell it. And if you were to look in my eyes as I do, you'd see glass, as if the smell itself was enough to arouse me.

Leather, one of the most recognizable of SM fetishes (STEELE 1996; BIENVENU II 1998; CAMPBELL 2020; STEIN 2021), is another recurring motif in

⁶ Purely BDSM-focused clubs are a rarity in Poland and have not featured in my research.

my interviews. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it features in them regularly as a particularly attractive, and sometimes outright arousing material. Marcowa herself admits to an erotic reaction to the leather toy itself. And this is something of a problem.

Thus far, I have focused on the way toys, circulating between being toys and commodities, facilitate or complicate SM relationships. It is a perspective that does not actually stray all that far from Weiss' view of toys as prostheses, positing them as something that functions *between* people, where they play their role as tools for and obstacles in establishing and maintaining erotic relationality. In emphasising the way toys can aid mutual sexual attraction, instead of displacing it, the anxiety that their presence in kink can disrupt the putatively necessarily inter-personal character of erotic relations is assuaged.

The struggle against the popular perception of kink as an anti-human, commodity driven⁷ form of sexual expression, has defined much of its public history over the past century (RUBIN 2011; WARNER 2011; MOORE 2015; STEIN 2021). The shadow of fetishism – of the perverted man drawing sexual satisfaction from the touch of the dead matter of fur instead of the living flesh of a woman – looms large over those attempts to depathologize kink. In the public-facing kink, but also in the personal narratives of it, there is therefore scant room left for admitting the possibility of “other relations” or celebrating the potential for an erotics of a person-toy interaction. Such relations, if they are at all mentioned, are relegated to the impoverished sites of culture, such as niche pornography making a spectacle of the union between the flesh of a woman and the untiring piston of a fucking machine (SCHASCHEK 2012; CRUZ 2016)⁸.

The issue is that however much such relations end up being disavowed and denigrated in theory, they keep coming back up in practice. Marcowa's vacillation between refusing to validate the importance of toys and sexually enjoying them attests to that. In fact, this bind can be well-described by paraphrasing a famous answer recorded by Esther Newton, which she received to her question on the possibility of heterosexual drag queens:

⁷ And one very closely associated with the likewise maligned sex trade.

⁸ This anxiety, notably, is larger than kink. The theme of the danger of a vibrator as a tool that can end up distracting sexuality of women from being directed towards other people can also be found in feminist critiques of vibrator use (SCHASCHEK 2012). In fact, it feels like every time a toy is heavily involved in sexual practices, related criticisms are raised, more or less openly. See, for example, Lyna Hart's analysis of the lesbian dildo wars (HART 1998).

“in practice they exist, in theory they are impossible” (NEWTON 1979: 6). In theory, there is no way to have a valid erotic relation with a kinky toy, because even if one was to arise, it would be a pathology and an obstacle to overcome. And yet, in practice, such relations not only coexist, but may actually form symbiotic relationships, with the interpersonal side of BDSM.

To elaborate here: by those “other relations”, I mean here the novel ways of experiencing and interacting with things in erotic context, which tend to emerge in the break of the multiplicity of their queer use. To take Ahmed’s formulation literally, it is what is the result of certain qualities of the thing being rendered all the more lively.

A kinky toy used as a tool rests close to (sometimes inside of) the body. The pleasure drawn from its presence may slip from the control of all partners involved and move beyond the purported purpose of the toy; its touch then becomes *its own*, not reducible to serving as an extension or a prosthesis of the other partner’s body – even if it is *also* working in just that way at the same time.

The popular formulation of “somasochism”, which originated in psychoanalysis (NOYES 1997; WESTERNICK 2009) carries in itself an implication that the pleasures of kink are symmetrical: the masochist enjoys receiving the pain that the sadist enjoys inflicting. But this is a simplistic way of thinking about BDSM that reduces its erotics to a bare exchange of power and sensation. In practice, its pleasures do not have such a common denominator and often mean and matter in incommensurable ways. One can find flogging arousing because of the sensation of the blows, from the exertion of the body and the touch of leather on skin. But just as well, one can find the pain itself entirely unpleasant, but still enjoy the experience through the sheer satisfaction of submitting to their partner. The person administering the blows may not even enjoy causing pain, but just find it fun to fulfill another’s desires, or find a wholly autotelic pleasure in mastery of the whip. There is evidence to suggest that some extreme forms of kink can be experienced in a profoundly non-sexual way, as a personal challenge more akin to a demanding sport (KLOTZ 2014).

Where do toys fit in all that? A similarly complicated nexus of complementary but incommensurable pleasures can be drawn around their use. The joy Alicja draws from being put in her faulty sensory deprivation hood isn’t limited to the power-play inherent in having someone put it on her;

it also stems from the way it touches her and affects her senses and her mood. Those pleasures are proximate to each other, and likely play into each other (it's less fun to put the hood on yourself, but it is also less fun to be with someone and without the hood), but they are not the same. And, crucially, the hood in this relation acts independently of the design imposed upon it, representing the capacity of matter, to use the language proposed by Jane Bennett, to become vibrant and not "a dull, mechanistic stuff in need of a supplement to become active" (BENNETT 2010:68).

While this operation of the hood may be considered unique, stemming from the individual flaw of a given object⁹, one of the most popular kinky practices in Poland provides another case of multifaceted play mediated and facilitated by the actions of specific toys. I am speaking here about *shibari*, a style of rope bondage said to originate out of Japan, which is a fixture of kinky parties in Poland. What is interesting about it is that it carries a reputation of often being something of an art for an art's sake ("knitwork", as one of my respondents derisively described it). While undoubtedly visually spectacular, the complicated process of putting a person in an elaborate rope harness can leave little time (and sometimes little physical possibility) for more openly sexual play. In many cases, *shibari* as a practice can boil down to the laborious process of binding a person, followed by a moment of appreciation for the finished ropework (and likely shooting a few photos), and then a lengthy undoing of ropes and knots. In fact, some of the more visually striking positions that one can be put into in *shibari* put too much stress on the body to be held for an extended period of time.

Some cite this as the reason why the whole thing can be disappointing, and rather non-sexual. And yet, for others this distinctly non-genital practice can be profoundly sexual in its own ways, up to inducing "rope orgasms" from the mere experience of the rope on the skin. It isn't difficult to imagine how a protracted, almost meditative process of being bound, which involves constant, shifting touch, a subtle power-play, and the pleasure of being the object of one's attention and craft, can be an intensely erotic experience. But it is the rope itself, the vaunted jute or cotton *shibari* rope, that works as a key factor in this experience, in some ways no less

⁹ Or, more probably, from the lack of awareness on the side of Alicja's partner as to what results isolation hoods are capable of achieving outside of the realm of sexual fantasy.

important than the skill of the person doing the bondage (the rigger).

When asked if she prefers cuffs or ropes, Marcowa replied that:

MARCOWA: [With cuffs] there is no room for interactions, there's just bam, and they're on. But [ropes] take time.

The simple fact that rope bondage is far more time-consuming than putting the cuffs on lays the groundwork for the kind of a pleasure it can provide. Furthermore, the rope itself isn't just a neutral object, a medium by which the rigger's skills are manifested:

ALEX: I would really love to have ropes that won't abrade too much. I have a few meters of pure cotton, and that's wonderful.

The partner's hand, no matter how proficient, cannot on its own replicate the experience of a quality rope rubbing against the skin, or produce the kind of marks it leaves on it, and which are often an object of admiration. Such pleasures are unstated, but welcome, expanding beyond the bare "plan" of any given practice, and emerging not only from the interaction between the human partners, but also of those between them and the material frame of their practices.

Those frames can, in turn, be very wide indeed. Daily objects can be transformed into toys, and the interaction with them intensely erotic (just think back to the example of diving into the guts of a bed). In fact, there is no hard limit to what manner of objects can be thus transformed into sexual experiences. Daniel's fascinating remark on the sexual potential of architecture attests to that. When asked if BDSM would become less interesting to him without toys, he responded that:

DANIEL: It depends on how wide your definition of toys is (...). If you're to strip away toys that are things, toys that are clothings, toy rooms, then [kink] becomes impoverished. But I can imagine BDSM that works with that, even if it loses much. I can imagine leaving someone naked in a public toilet in a movie theater, and going to watch a movie. The question here is: are there toys involved? We have a toy: the movie theater.

This capacity of BDSM to draw out the latent erotic potential present within everyday objects has been observed by Robin Bauer, who noted how BDSM practices can transform one's relation to "everyday life":

Fetishes might also expand one's sexuality into everyday life (...). The different realities of BDSM and ordinary life are not completely separate; cross-pollination

occurs, transporting meanings back and forth and constantly transfiguring them. Thus, these different realities co-exist and can be pictured as overlapping spheres rather than as separate entities with clear demarcations. (BAUER 2014: 62)

In this, we can find a hint of an answer to the anxieties of fetishism which does not rely on subordinating the material side of sex to some kind of an assumedly natural and primordial shared humanity of sexuality. What if what is worrying in the presence of erotic relationships with things is not the spectre of perversion and sexual insanity, but also that it may lead to the disruption of the divide between the sexual and the everyday? It is by maintaining the “special status” of sex (to use Susan Sontag’s famous formulation) that it is being governed. But in BDSM, sexuality constantly overflows the boundaries set for it, extending not only past the genital sphere, but also more generally beyond the culturally permissible spheres of sex. And in that, the question of the role played by toys in kinky sex emerges as a problem of sexual politics.

It also provides a stark demonstration of the validity of Paul B. Preciado’s old provocation. In *The Countersexual Manifesto*, he claimed the priority of the dildo over the bio-penis, stating that it is the latter that imitates the former (PRECIADO 2018). For Preciado, this was a way to make an opening for a critique of the deeply-rooted belief that there exists a kind of a natural sexual body, primordial and primary to sexuality as a technology. In other words, for Preciado there is no sex before culture. Inspired by Donna Haraway, Preciado puts that very opposition under a question mark, denying the possibility of sex that isn’t always already involved in the technologies that constitute it. And the dildo – the foremost of sex toys – is the emblem for his critique.

Crucially, Preciado is more attuned than most to the fact that the dildo he writes about is a tangible object, and not an abstract concept representing a technique or a relation. To fall back on an overused distinction, whether or not it is a *phallus*, it is definitely a penis. And it is also one of the many possible penises that he sees as being beyond the bio-penis that some are born with. Preciado wants his readers to learn how to turn all the extremities of their bodies into dildos, and to that end prescribes them exercises meant to liberate this dildonic potential.

And for this reason, perhaps, that he is capable of seeing the latent sexual potentials of the things that surround us. In fact, this serves as a

through line for much of his work. In his excellent study *Pornotopia*, he analyzes the way Playboy mansions can be understood as an architectonic means for producing new sexual subjects, a technology going hand in hand with pornography and pharmacology (PRECIADO 2013) in order to establish the modern sexual body. All those things – buildings, pills, dildos, and media representations – are not a superstructure built over the foundations of natural sexuality, but rather the sexuality in itself, which could not exist outside of its technological, material entanglements.

For Preciado, this opens up the possibility of insurgent, wilful practices. He formulates a robust theory of misuse: in *Countersexual Manifesto* of the extremities of the body as a series of dildos (PRECIADO 2018), and in *Testo Junkie* of the modern pharmacopeia as a means to bio-hack our way out of the binary binds of gender (PRECIADO 2013). While I may not entirely agree with his generally Promethean outlook on our capacity to transcend the limitations of our embodiment through the application of various technologies, this line of thinking holds promise for opening a fresh perspective on the material culture of BDSM.

In trying to provide a conclusion, I would like to return to the example of the ballgag, with whose plastic-and-leather materiality I have opened this article. One of the few, if not only, pieces of academic writing on gags is a book chapter by Laini Burton, entitled “Gagging beauty” and devoted to the appearance of “fashion gags” in the world of *haute couture*. The first words of her text are as follows: “gags are objects that have little or no place outside of sexual, medical or violent acts” (BURTON 2016: 1). The strangeness of this enumeration is not remarked upon, but should be noted, as should the fact that she tacitly accepts the idea that gags as objects and potentially violent tools have their place in the bedroom. After all, not a quarter century ago, a high judge of the European Court of Human Rights condemned sadomasochistic practices, including their whole material side, describing them as “‘unrestrained permissiveness’ likely to lead to debauchery, pedophilia and torture” (STEIN 2021: 386). Writing about the pervasive presence of the gimp mask in popular culture, Gary Needham has likewise observed the way this kinky toy works as a potent cultural signifier of brutality, cruelty, and violence (NEEDHAM 2014).

The anxiety around the gag, and all the other myriad toys employed as tools within the realm of BDSM practices, likely runs deeper than the worry about ready-made, off-the-shelf sexuality would suggest. Perhaps

it is nowhere more apparent than in graphic comparisons drawn between medieval torture and consensual SM that can be found on the pages of the *Against Feminism* collection. “What has happened to our movement when „feminists” spend so much time and energy building torture chambers, buying wrist restraints, etc.?” asked Marissa Jonel (1982: 19), clearly suggesting a general inappropriateness of such objects *at all* within the sexual sphere. While old, this critique retains much of its rhetorical strength, relying on the gut-feel wrongness of “torture chambers” and “wrist restraints”.

This adds severity to the charge of consumerism, as the commodities in question are seen as irrevocably violent and cruel objects that have little to no place outside of sordid acts. The danger of fetishism is heightened when a relationship with other humans is displaced not only out of a piece of inanimate matter, but also onto matter that is tainted by its seeming association with histories of violence. And is there not one? Are those toys not adapted, often wholesale, out of historical implements of torture? Shopping around for BDSM restraints in specialty stores, one can find a wide variety of options, styled after medieval shackles, or institutional medical restraints, or maybe something evoking the atmosphere of a prison and the erotic power of the jackboot. It is not hard to see how embracing such allusions in the search of sexual gratification may come across as inappropriate.

But this is where Scarry’s conceptualisation of tools as that which build relationality becomes helpful once more. If we look past the appearance of those objects as implements of violence, and focus on the way that they are used, we find out that they are chiefly employed to build and extend relations, to bring people into intimacy, and not out of it. A gag *gags*, but that is not the chief purpose for which it is being worn within a BDSM scene.

What BDSM toys are, on some level, is a misuse of objects. And this misuse is, to again rely on the concept of misuse value offered by Brown, “the efficacy and the effects of some untoward deployment of an object—some new valuation emerging from the object’s displacement from routine systems or networks of use” (BROWN 2016: 373). Kinky deployments of objects are definitely untoward. How much varies depending on the object, and the context in which it is used, but a hint of it, I believe, remains even in the most commodified forms of BDSM trade, as the tension between the wrongness of the object and its erotic use lingers, even if only as a trace. Which is, to continue quoting from Brown’s powerful theorizing, the “caption[ing] of the effectiveness of broken routine (the interruption of habit)

as an unanticipated mode of apprehending the object world anew” (BROWN 2016: 373).

If I have put special focus in this article on the queer uses of daily objects that, out of necessity or convenience, can become kinky toys, it is not because I wanted to oppose those practices to the commodified realm of sex-shop BDSM apparel, but rather to question the possibility of such an opposition. Queer use is how toys are used in BDSM, because to use them as toys requires certain (if already somewhat naturalized) “willingness to be perverse, to deviate from the straight path, the right path” (AHMED 2019: 201). By the same token, however, I do not want to imply that the material culture of BDSM is some kind of a site of perennial subversion and contestation of the capitalist drive towards consumerism. In fact, I do not think this culture is any discrete thing, or a set of things, but rather that it is better to try to understand it, after Preciado, as a latent potential for different relations present within the object world that we inhabit.

In a way, it is an observation similar to the notion, prevalent within queer theory, that BDSM practices provide an avenue for denaturalizing and subverting power relations (MACKENDRICK 1999; BAUER 2014; FUSILLO 2020). Some of the most sustained and intellectually energizing defenses of kink have emerged from this perspective, especially in attempts to show the way that BDSM provides a way to work through the legacies of racialized violence in the US through various forms of playing with race (FREEMAN 2010; MUSSER 2014; CRUZ 2016; STEINBACK 2019). However, those analyses have tended to focus on US (and Western European) queer BDSM communities and practices, often providing a perspective on kink that seemed at best uninterested in less playful and subversive forms of it present within cisheteronormative environment of straight BDSM. As a result, they sometimes provide a slightly utopian vision of kink treating the subversive potential present within it as some kind of intrinsic queerness of those practices. A somewhat different perspective is possible when thinking from the perspective of other relations relations in the distinctly non-queer (in the common use of this word) communities in which I have done my fieldwork offers a somewhat different perspective.

Queer use does not require a queer user and does not have to yield a queer result. What is important in it is not that it provides a way out of the miasma of cisheteronormative sexuality (though it certainly can), but that it offers evidence for how “other relations” are *possible*. Whether

queer or not, erotic relations between humans and things should be viewed with less suspicion than the term “fetishism”, employed in a pathologizing mode, usually suggests. Such relations, common as they are, are routinely disavowed due to a series of cultural anxieties fundamentally rooted in the nostalgic longing for some sort of a “natural”, unalienated sexuality that can be kept wholly separate from the object world. This disavowal, then, is what makes the material culture of BDSM so difficult to describe without lapsing into those very same anxieties having to do with the fear of commodification and the displacement of proper desire; we simply do not have the language to properly account for how those untoward deployments of objects affect us.

Perhaps even speaking of “material culture of BDSM” itself perpetuates those anxieties, positing that there is some form of its culture that isn’t always already material and involved in the world of things that surround us. But it is not a way of thinking that we are at all accustomed to. Even queer writing on BDSM, wonderfully attentive though it is to the subversive potentials present within flows of desire and the play of relations that constitutes kink, often remains at a loss when it comes to accounting for the vibrant matter without which kink would not be possible – whether it is queer or not.

In that, academic theorists are not that different from my interview partners who kept conceding that certain experiences cannot be properly expressed in words and must instead be witnessed:

LILIA [dominant, woman]: The biggest stimuli [for my partner] is rope and the touch of rope. She experiences orgasms not through penetration, but through touch, through being near me, through what I do with her. It’s difficult to put into words (...). It can’t be described. You would have to see it. Come to a club, and you’ll see it.

In the end then, there may not be that much that we know how to say about the ballgag, when one is trying to talk about wearing it.

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