Psychoanalytically Reading Hedonic Consumption in the 50 Shades Trilogy

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The purpose of this paper is to use the popularity of the 50 Shades trilogy to illustrate, through a feminist-inflected Lacanian approach, how the hedonic consumption of sexual desire, as a discursive representation of subversion against the name-of-the-father, serves to disrupt the reified normality of the Symbolic Order.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The libertine philosophy of the Marquis de Sade propagates myriad thought-provoking ideas pertaining to the human condition. In what is arguably his most infamous novel, The 120 Days of Sodom (1785), he subverts the most fundamental social mores that prevailed within eighteenth-century France—and which are largely maintained today—by telling stories of incest, pedophilia, homosexuality, torture, and murder. The Marquis de Sade more explicitly elaborates on his philosophical positioning in his dialogue based prose, The Philosophy in the Bedroom (1795). In this text, he promotes (sexual) hedonism as the only and the ultimate objective; therein, completely negating other human pursuits such as love and morality. Since the circulation of Sade’s writings, his ideas have permeated—with various degrees of tenacity—the sexual discourses in different Western societies across different periods (Jones & Spicer, 2009).

The idea of hedonism has become a mainstay in the marketing literature. More than three decades ago, Hirschman and Holbrook (1982: 92) defined hedonic consumption as: ‘[T]hose facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multi-sensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one’s experience with products’. This form of consumption is ‘motivated by the desire for fantasy, fun and sensual pleasure’ (O’Curry and Strahilevitz, 2001: 37). It is within the phenomenological experience of hedonic consumption that one’s subjectivity becomes proverbially suspended from reality and enters the realm of fantasy (see Addis and Holbrook, 2001). While hedonic consumption has been empirically investigated from a range of methodological channels (e.g., Chitturi, Raghunathan and Mahajan, 2008; Lofman, 1991), and while this notion subsumes the idea of erotic consumption, little is known about how hedonic consumption becomes a source of the subject’s sexual desire. An intervention from psychoanalytic theory presents a fruitful opportunity inasmuch as it offers the analytical resources necessary to conceptualize the libidinal and psychic cathexis of sexual desire. Indeed, this theoretical perspective allows for consideration of how hedonic consumption functions as a psychological mechanism by, and through, which desire manifests.

This paper illuminate how the hedonic consumption of sexual desire, as a discursive representation of subversion against the name-of-the-father, serves to disrupt the normality of the Symbolic Order. To do so, I critically appraise E. L. James’ (2011; 2012a; 2012b) 50 Shades trilogy and, in particular, I scrutinize the character of Christian Grey. The ontology of Christian’s character reveals two important ideas. First, the notion of desire is, by nature, grounded in the ideal image; thus, akin to the imaginary its actualization always remains an impossibility. In other words, desire based on the ideal image is outside of the phenomenological scope of human experience (Prasad, 2012). Second, Christian’s character operates as an embodiment of the object of desire, which is present in the silenced interstices of the Symbolic Order and which performs as a persistent reminder of the potential subversion of the laws that constitutes this Order. As such, the hedonic consumption of Christian Grey, both by the protagonist of the books and by its reader, reflects the covert agency of transgressing from social conventions through the enactment of desire.

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