

Research Article

NSFW: Experiencing Immanentism or Transcendence upon Hearing Gilbert Gottfried's Rendition of Fifty Shades of Grey in the Postmodern Workplace, Or Liberatory Criminology

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Abstract- By examining the self-reports of individuals who have listened to the "audio book" version of the novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* at their place of employment, we argue the practice of such listening can be read as a form of liberatory criminology. Liberatory criminology, we argue, is a counter-hegemonic practice of hearing that tempts both immanentism and transcendence in three enjoyable ways: revulsion, envy, and ecstasy.

Keywords: Postmodern, Helmglot, Criminology, *Fifty Shades*.

Introduction

Immanence has been theorized as a hegemonic totality eliding the possibility of structural transcendence. Not so clear in these efforts to relocate the criminological in the fundamental is the notion of abrogation. Moments of subcultural refusal alternate with moments of the complete abandonment of subject positions contrary to the hermeneutical arc of Dionysian Scapegoating (DS), when this occurs (presumably DS only afflicted lesser developed countries, however, the epidemic of bullying, especially as is discernable in U.S. preschool settings, has belied what was once an obvious truth with rampant exceptionalism). Leftist intellectuals have been as much at fault as any in their failure to capture the subaltern nature of this interrogation, to elide the penultimate mirror stage which must inevitably, if ineluctably, give rise to this refusal ("accept the cut!" intones the Lawgiving Paternalist). Nor can Jung help us out here, as the mandala is, under the discursive formation of this problematic, only a fictive reality. How, then, to recapture that moment of utter intransigence that is necessary for real interventionist politics? Whither now, within?

We argue that moments illustrating this possibility may be found in what seem like the most unlikely texts, and one is the neo-feminist, indeed some have argued Fourth Wave work, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (hereafter *Fifty Shades*). By turning in upon itself in a voice of subrogation, difference

gives way to difference, and the perceptive reader will note the deliberate lack of diacritical marks in our formulation of the contrast. Gilbert Gottfried's commentary upon this text illuminates exactly the sort of rhetorical turn toward which we genuflect, away from the all-too-easy modernism of DS and toward a kind of legal criminological effluence. And what better context to mark this turn than the postmodern workplace?

Sliding under the surface of postcapitalism, this workplace is both virtual and sententious. It is a place of "discipline," and therefore "criminology." As Foucault observes of discipline, discipline is "a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments . . ." [215]. Aside from its pretense to high-mindedness and the metaphysics of presence, the workplace is also primarily identified by three material attributes: (1) a ubiquity of workers using earbuds; (2) a surfeit of cubed workspaces, often separated by push-pin dividers or mauve-colored walls; and (3) a predominance of communicative or emotional laboring, as opposed to manual laboring or "real work." In this context, how can a sado-masochistic "novel" like *Fifty Shades* be read in different nodes of the rhizomatic structure of this workplace? That is what our work attempts to get at.

While mostly self-reportative in skein, the narratives displayed here speak most clearly in their erasure under a sign of abstinence. Hangings of the virtual abound in rituals of self-denial and con-(s)traint. The panopticon of the workplace unfolds in upon its ulterior plane of emergence, truncating that internal eye which, like Helmglot's apocryphal porpoise, seeks only to rise and rise again. These narratives which are yet not narratives but archives, reference their own inversion as specious artifacts, even if true. How can that which is Gottfried's work and yet not Gottfried's work be entrained with the refusal of the phallus? In asking that, we likewise refuse the contexts and restraints of any discipline of the academy, but instead propose a theatre of ritual in which

the proscenium can be nothing less than a realization of the sexual subjectivity of the authors, if not the forceful penetration of the readerly reader or lookerly spectator (the eyes are not windows to the soul, but britches of the soul and necessarily subject to an intellectual spanking, or exploratory but possibly metaphorical thumb). Given this presumption, we turn in our widening gyre to the only theoretical stance from which one can begin: Gilles Deleuze's (also see Cole and Smith).

DeleuzianWorlding: From Be-Bop to Shock Jock

Fifty Shades could almost have been extrapolated as the fictional counterpart of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's Anti-Oedipus project, itself a masterpiece of what many have sometimes (if not rarely) referred to as criminological liberation. No other novel of equivalent public impact has quite reached the heights (and depths) of immanence between author and consumer. Reading the book one becomes a machine-person-book, words circulating into legal, criminological flows. The very nature of the rhizomatic plateaus of human experience theorized by Deleuze begs to be disciplined and penetrated, of course, as we argue.

It is the locus of pleasure and pain which undoes the knot of be-ing and deconstructs the subject, its psyche, and the social milieu of the human world. When a reader/listener encounters the text of Fifty Shades, the experience itself calls into question experience itself. The simultaneous transcendence of being—enabled by the (dis)pleasurable (dis)location of the pleasures within pain—and the immanence of the physical penetration of the sound waves into the ear drum or the light of the text into the eye's photoreceptors creates an impossible moment. It is this moment—a moment of crystallization, where time and space and experience unwind—which we are arguing Fifty Shades uniquely captures for its consumers.

The encounter with Fifty Shades so draws into relief the disciplined nature of re-modern post-capitalistic human existence that we can fairly attribute its popular success to an identifiable schism in society—one which Deleuze's own philosophical agenda suggests liberatory politics of criminology must exploit.

In a word, consuming Fifty Shades is a political act of revolution, one grounded in the very nature of the social-self. Disaffected workers cannot persist without an evolving program of social control of information—that is why Fifty Shades is so dangerous to the capitalist elite. One can easily imagine a scene in Fifty Shades in which electrodes are attached to nipples for a titillating experience. Whereas the "shock-jocks" of radio serve as a sort of spectre of renegotiation wherein societal unrest is redirected back toward functional hegemonic

"entertainment," the more world-making nature of literature—of the text itself—enables a political self-effacement which engenders a more massive political field from which to escape the mundanity of the cycle of life and death. For indeed, *Fifty Shades* offers a narrative of refusing death—it lingers at the edges, impregnates death with life, then aborts it with an auto-erotic asphyxiation of release of some sort, often abridged but sometimes the whole thing).

Someone in need of narcotization because of the pain of redundancy and the repetition compulsion of nothingness. E.L. James's racy, best-selling novel of sado-masochistic frenzy, *Fifty Shades*, may be the novel an employee is listening to for this effect, particularly if he or she is not listening to the radio and instead an audio book. Audio books are not free, like the radio, however they are now relatively inexpensive compared to Internet pornography, which is expensive and which, in many parts of the world. Employers do not allow employees to enjoy workplace (one might respond to Foucault: "To Hell with the Greeks; we are a lot more Victorian than we think."). So, chances are that most workers working with earbuds in their ears are listening to *Fifty Shades* because to date James' book has sold 10 million copies, and at the time of this essay's writing, it was the number one New York Times bestseller.

Readers unfamiliar with *Fifty Shades* may wish to skip this paragraph, as our purpose here is to describe the line of plot flighted by the escapist and sexy novel. It concerns sexy billionaire Christian Grey, a CEO whose enjoyment of mergers and hostile takeovers in the business world is reflected in his sexual exploits, especially his enjoyment of horse crops and handcuffs. He meets a college student, Anastasia Steele, and she signs a contract to enter into a sado-masochistic kind of relationship not wholly dissimilar to the plot of the film *Last Tango in Paris*, except it does not take place in Paris and Christian Grey is 27, so looks nothing like Marlon Brando. Anyway, Grey pursues sexual power and merges and takes-over Steele after she signs the contract and Steele enjoys it so much that she says at one point, "My inner goddess is doing the dance of seven veils." Readers of the bible will recognize this dance is a thinly veiled metaphor for "getting (a) head," which is slang for oral sex. The novel is really dirty and when read in public can cause many readers to blurt things aloud or blush. One of us saw a woman both blush and blurt out

"oh my God" at the Dallas/Fort Worth airport on June 12, 2012.

Perhaps more importantly of noteworthy is that Audible.com has produced a stunning audiobook of *Fifty Shades* narrated by the (in) famous character actor Gilbert Gottfried. Mostly known for his roles in films such as *Beverly Hills Cop 2* and *Problem Child*, Gottfried has established himself as having one of the most distinctive and expressive voices in the industry. In a timbre that rivals the baritone of Avi Albrecht, Gottfried can coax tears

and—apparently—much more than that from the body of the ears lubricated by his golden pipes. It was fitting and certainly proper, then, that Audible hired Gottfried to render his interpretation of James's obviously sensuous prose. His voice is roundly recognized as the objective, standard bearer of dramatic purpose and effectivity.

For our experiment, found five people on the Internet who self-identified themselves as listeners to Gottfried's rendition of *Fifty Shades* to provide self-reports of their experiences, mostly in the form of comments and reviews of the book on retailer websites. While these reports were at variance, a content analysis of key terms revealed three dimensions common to their listening experiences, which we in turn thematize as:

1. Enjoyable Revulsion;
2. Dexterity Envy and
3. Vicarious Ecstasy.

Enjoyable Revulsion

One listener of the audio version of the *Fifty Shades* expressed her disgust in such a way as to demonstrate a pleasure in that disgust:

I really do not enjoy saying bad things about a novel because I so very much admire and want to encourage those who dare to write. However, I am compelled to tell you this book sounded so horrible I threw up in the office break room sink. I decided to just throw the book on top of my vomit.

Another reader said:

I enjoy erotica and heard so much about this book that I had to give it a shot, but I'm five chapters in and just can't take it anymore. This has to be the most appallingly atrocious writing I've ever seen in a major release. The pseudonymous British author sets the action (such as it is) in Washington State, for no reason than that her knowledge of America apparently consists of what she read in another book set in the United States.

These people are revolted but enjoying their disdain.

Dexterity Envy

One of the people we found said that they felt jealous of the Anastasia characters treatment by the kinky billionaire, especially in the scene in which he inserts his hand up and into her private spaces. The criminological liberation of dexterity if further celebrated by this guy, who says he is a retired gynecologist trucker:

Although I am a male senior citizen, I enjoyed learning about this book's protagonist, Anastasia, who has never had sex or even apparently touched herself, but I like the fact that she is having orgasms soon in the book with a helping hand.

As any scientist or engineer that works with or on robots will readily confess, the human hand is an amazing thing. Unfortunately, most of us never learn to use our hands as well as the characters in *Fifty Shades* appear to do.

Vicarious Ecstasy

Finally, hearers reported a criminological satisfaction the book's many kinky sex scenes:

Although I am not really into bondage, dominance, and sado-masochistic stories, I have to confess I really got into this one in a big way. I really enjoyed how Gottfried pronounced his syllabus with such excitement that I was hooked to imaging the scenes despite how disturbing my addiction was to me. The lead character is either totally enthralling or really off-putting, but I liked him and the love story between Steele and Grey is really moving even though she is very submissive and lets him dominate her and she is sometimes scared. He gets her so hot and its so steamy but scary at the same time so I just loved it and lived vicariously through their spankings so much!

Obviously such a confession requires no explanation, as it is obvious this listener experienced the vicarious ecstasy of criminological liberation.

Concluding Remarks: Immanitism FTW! Of the Redemptive Value of Workplace Ecstasy/Revulsion

Eliding the smugness of rationality or intellect, revulsion, envy, and enjoyment exposes a subject's vulnerabilities, rendering the viewer (or audio book listener, in this case) witness to the naked anxieties of the subject. Whether an actual vulnerability or a vulnerability cast upon the subject by the viewer/listener is immaterial—the viewer/listener, in the sociopolitical act of witnessing, becomes responsible for the subject's positionality in the broader community. In the Levinasian sense, our responsibility is recognition of the other—seeing the other's face in its nakedness calls us to community, to hospitality. The tension-in-subjectivity transforms revulsion-as-nauseating to revulsion-as-pleasure.

As has been explicitly bemoaned from the front of this essay, the modern workplace is a space specifically lacking community in which feelings of isolation and estrangement accompany each day, each lunch hour, each paycheck until disillusionment or abandonment of the modernist project. In enabling recognition of the subjectivity of the other, Levinas' theoretical frame shifts the "cubicle farm" to an opportunity for community through audio book listenership. The literal and figurative nakedness of the pain/pleasure dichotomy in *Fifty Shades* marks a significant moment, a tingle in the sympathetic nervous system in which we either recognize the vulnerability of the sadomasochistic other or turn again

Toward the isolation rampant in the modern workplace. Goddfried, then, in his audio book rendering, demands we grapple with our philosophical and behavioral commitments to subjectivity-as-community in a move from pain to pleasure in the further pursuit of liberatory criminology.

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