

Sex and Class

Extended Abstract

Kink is becoming more mainstream. As some evidence for this, note that it's increasingly common to see kink and BDSM themes explored on the big screen, in Hollywood movies produced for popular audiences.

Take films like *Sanctuary* (2022), for example, a movie about the boundaries of BDSM play and its complicated relationship to the lives of BDSM practitioners. There's also the South Korean romance comedy *Love and Leashes* (2022), which centers on a three-month, master and submissive dynamic between two colleagues; or the Finnish black comedy *Dogs Don't Wear Pants* (2019), in which one man pays a dominatrix to help him work through intense grief. Looking a bit further back, there are films like *Secretary* (2001), a romantic drama about BDSM, trauma, mental illness, and healing; and *The Duke of Burgundy* (2014), an erotic romance about a dominance and submission relationship between two women. And of course, there is also *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015), a wildly popular book-series-turned-box-office-drama which is currently the highest grossing sex film of all time in the US and Canada, as well as the fourth-highest grossing romance film of all time, in both countries.

Now, here's something interesting: all of these films explore the nature and ethics of kink and BDSM as it is practiced by people with *money*. As it is represented in these films, kink is classy. And these class aesthetics seem to play an important role in making kinky activities and dynamics palatable and acceptable (and even, perhaps, desirable) to mainstream audiences.

Of course, it's well known that our moral judgments about the permissibility of action vary across class difference: there are some things which rich people can do permissibly, which people living in poverty cannot do permissibly, where the moral difference here seems to be grounded (to some significant extent) in class difference. This means there is a sense in which these class representations of kink/BDSM are just a specific instance of a more general phenomenon. For again: kink seems to be at its most appealing and permissible when it is

practiced by wealthy elites in penthouses (*50 Shades of Grey*) or in upscale city clubs (*The Matrix*); and equally, kink is cast at its most repulsive when it is practiced by everyday individuals (*8mm*).

Importantly, the difference in our moral assessments here seems closely tied to a difference in *aesthetic* judgments, which are themselves tied to class. So: when wealthy people engage in kink it's permissible because it's classy—the materials are glossy and luxurious, the venues are pristine. Whereas when regular people engage in kink, it's dirty—the materials are cheap, the venues are shoddy, the people look poor. In other words, there is a close relationship between our class-centered aesthetic judgments and our class-centered moral judgments, when it comes to the ethics of sex and sexuality, and specifically, when it comes to kink.

In this paper I examine questions about the morality of kink and BDSM from this perspective. In particular, I'm interested in how high-class representations of kink work to “sanitize” these activities and dynamics of their difficult aesthetic qualities. In other words, the basic strategy for sexual inclusivity here seems to be one which appeals to class ideology in order to lend legitimacy to marginal sexualities. I think it's obvious that this stands to entrench existing patterns of class oppression. But that's not the only issue here.

Many kink activities are violent—these activities can be brutal, disgusting, even perverse. And often, this is intentional: it's part of the *point*. So, what happens when we make kink seem clean, and palatable and luxurious? (And I might add: what happens when we make kink seem academic and intellectual? For of course, these are aesthetic qualities, too—and classy ones, at that.)

Here I argue that the “upscaling” of kink— i.e., this practice of purchasing sexual legitimacy via class privilege—involves overlaying particular aesthetics onto these activities, aesthetics which are often *inconsistent* with the basic nature of these activities, in many cases. And so, as a consequence this, the mainstreamed version of kink isn't the same as what we started with. And this is significant.

First and foremost, this matters because there are substantial and important moral questions about kink which are not answered by this upscaling process, and furthermore, can be *actively obscured* by the class aesthetics here. And, insofar as it matters that we recognize the continued importance and relevance of these moral questions about kink, this is problem. In fact, I argue that this is one way to understand the second-wave feminist critique of kink/BDSM: that popularizing these activities through glossy representations will effectively obscure their moral power.

Furthermore, I argue it is a mistake to think that our aesthetic judgments about these activities automatically answer the moral questions here. In other words: it doesn't follow from the fact that a particular activity is brutal, disgusting, or perverse, that it is morally wrong. To begin to appreciate the complexity here, note that in other areas of our lives, we are very familiar with the exercise of valuing things for their difficult aesthetic qualities. Consider any paradigmatic instance of the horror genre, for example: would films like *Alien* or novels like *Frankenstein* be better if they were less horrific? Certainly not. The fact that horror is horrifying—that it is disgusting, or unsettling; that it puts us ill at ease—is part of the point, part of the value of this genre.

When it comes to kink and BDSM then, the question is not whether we can make these activities such that they no longer seem perverse, unsettling, or brutal to us (and so, whether we can make the moral questions here easy to answer, or else, obscure them all together). The question is instead whether sexual activities with aesthetic qualities like these can be morally permissible, as they stand.

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