

Fictitious Coercion: BDSM Practices and the Negotiation of Narrative Temporality in *Transparent*

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When tracing the ethical implications of the concept of sexual consent, difficulties arise when our analysis relies on essentialist claims about what constitutes safe/risky sex practices. Such claims can be said to stem from heteronormative discourses and practices that determine the way people relate to each other, both in time and space. In this paper, I conduct a temporal analysis of two scenes that represent modes of interpersonal relations that complicate neoliberal normativity. By shifting the consent debate away from the overdetermined field of sexual politics and into questions of intersubjectivity and temporality in narrative, I hope to expand the work that the concept of consent can do.

My first object of study is a scene from the TV series *Transparent* (2014-present), created by Jill Soloway for Amazon Studios. In its third season, Sarah Pfefferman (Amy Landecker), the daughter of the main character of the series, explores BDSM practices – ritualized exchanges of power – with a professional dominant practitioner, or 'pro-dom'⁶, called Pony (played by the gender-queer porn star Jiz Lee). In the episode "Just the Facts" written by Jill Soloway and directed by Silas Howard, Sarah attends what will turn out to be their last session together. On this occasion, Sarah decides she wants to 'top' Pony – that is, she wants to 'switch' roles and be the 'dom'. Pony accepts and proceeds to make a "quick verbal contract", stating that they have "hard limits" and that their safe word is "red". The session does not go well: Sarah quickly loses control and Pony has to use their safe word not once but three times less than a minute into the scene, as Sarah seems to have become unable to hear Pony. The scene is short but very powerful. Despite being scripted,

⁶In BDSM terminology, the person who plays the dominant role ("dom") is also referred as the "top", while the one playing the submissive role ("sub") is the "bottom".

there is something particular about the way violence is framed in this scene which seems to interrupt the temporality of the fiction. In so doing, the spectator's attention is shifted from the fictional narration to the reality of the performers. Could it be that we become more aware of the visceral aspects of staged violence and coercion when it takes place in the context of practices of desire where consent plays a pivotal role? How can the concept of consent help us understand the negotiations that take place in this scene between the *performance* of violence and *actual* violence?

In this paper I will show how both BDSM practices and spectatorship alike are grounded in intersubjective dynamics that can be described in terms of consent and coercion. *Transparent's* representation of a BDSM scene within a fictional narrative causes spectatorship and practices of consent to interact in a manner that unsettles each other. The framing of the violence in *Transparent* interrupts the time of the narration, and reveals affective elements of the actual bodies and lives of the performers. We witness something that feels *too* real, and this makes us wonder whether we were likewise coerced into watching something we did not consent to. I argue that the resulting meta-device, of a temporal rupture in a fictional narrative, enables the narrative to point at its own temporal organization, thereby creating space for the spectator to recognize the complex dynamics that are taking place between them and the narrative. The resulting metafiction shapes an intersubjective relation between narrative and spectators which I call a *fictionally-coerced audience*.

To construct my argument, I turn to Jessica Benjamin's *Beyond Doer and Done to: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third* (2018) in which she develops a theory of intersubjective recognition. Drawing on her distinction between complementary and reciprocal relationships, I propose a reading of BDSM practices as the enactment or performance of a relation of complementarity within the boundaries of a relation of reciprocity. Relations of reciprocity unfold in complex temporalities that are never simply linear. In order to unpack such temporal complexity, I draw on Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005) and his concept of 'queer time', Elizabeth Freeman's notion of 'chrononormativity' as introduced in "Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography" (2005), and Michel Serres' *The Parasite* (first published in 1982). Using them, I suggest that queer time can be considered parasitic to hegemonic narratives of time; it is both included in

heteronormative temporality, and yet interrupts it by proposing a different logic. Comparing *Transparent's* scene to the aversion therapy scene in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), I argue that both narratives instrumentalize our vulnerabilities as spectators who, lacking the necessary information, can never fully consent to suspend our disbelief. While Kubrick's scene achieves this by making us witness actual violence, *Transparent* does so by providing us with the necessary tools to assist us in recognizing our own *fictional coercion*, thereby enabling new and queer forms of consensual intersubjectivity to arise.

Pony and Sarah's scene is shown in two parts, each approximately a minute in length. During the first part, Pony and Sarah have the conversation about switching roles that leads to the subsequent verbal contract and Pony's safe word. The second part starts by showing Pony in a submissive position, pants down and hands tied up, ready to be spanked. However, the role-play seems to end before it even starts: Sarah feels self-conscious and asks Pony: "can I just be me and you be you?" ("Just the Facts" 14:33-14:35), indicating that she wants to return to their habitual roles. But when Pony answers "yes, ma'am", Sarah asks to be called "boss" instead. Being called "boss" puts Sarah into character and so, holding a leather paddle spanker, she starts threatening Pony with hitting them: "where do you think it's gonna hit? you think it might be your ass? maybe I'll hit your face, would that be good? maybe your cunt". Then she proceeds to hit them several times while Pony lets out what sounds like a genuine "ouch". Yet Sarah shows contempt: "oh, does that hurt?" and gets more aggressive: "shut up stupid fucking twat!" Sarah then loses control and starts yelling at their face, threatening to kill them, unable to register Pony's safe word:

Sarah: you know what I should do? I SHOULD BEAT THE SHIT OUT OF YOU,
THAT'S WHAT I SHOULD DO. I SHOULD FUCKING CUT OFF YOUR FUCKING
HEAD...

Pony: RED

Sarah: ...AND PISS DOWN YOUR THROAT...!

Pony: RED!

Sarah: ...YOU UGLY FUCKING CUNT...

Pony: RED!!

It takes Sarah four seconds to finally hear Pony and stop hitting them. The scene ends with Sarah panting and looking shocked. This is Pony's last appearance in *Transparent*; after this encounter Pony will leave town, and despite Sarah's attempts to reach them, Pony and Sarah will never talk again.

The boundaries between consent and coercion in this scene are framed around Pony's safe word "red". Before they start role-playing, Pony tells Sarah their safe word, which can be understood as an illocutionary or performative speech act that declares Pony's consent to the role-play⁷. When Pony utters the safe word during the role-play, the meaning of the illocutionary act shifts to "I do not consent to this any longer". But Sarah cannot register Pony's cessation of consent and continues to make use of a power that is no longer consensual. This in turn opens up another level of complexity that is not resolved until after the final time Pony shouts "RED!" and Sarah stops hitting them. It only takes Pony's first utterance of the safe word to retract consent and turn the role-play into coercion. And it takes four seconds for Sarah to stop that coercive violence. My claim is that something happens during those four seconds in which the trust the characters had shared is betrayed, that makes the spectator question the very fictionality of the scene. This questioning is achieved through the narrative's incorporation of the negotiation of the role-play into the fictional storyline, and its emphasizing of the betrayal of that contract.

The resulting meta-device – the exposure of a consensual performance (the role-play) within a fictional performance (the filmed scene) – discloses the very boundaries of the fiction in which it is rooted. The sense of hyperreality – in this case, the inability to clearly distinguish where/when the fiction ends and reality begins – establishes a different

⁷In the work of John L. Austin (1962), an illocutionary act is an utterance that rather than describing a state of affairs, actually brings about the very state of affairs that the utterance refers to. In this sense, saying "I consent" should be understood as an illocutionary act, as it brings about, by way of a convention, the act of consenting.

temporality that makes the spectator wonder about the actual bodies of the performers who are playing the fictional characters. We may inquire whether someone's boundaries were crossed during the filming of the scene. Certainly, the viewer cannot have access to such information solely from watching the scene, and yet it is as if by making this instance of (non)consent so central, other instances of consent became conspicuous by their absence: how did the performers consent to this scene? Did they have another safe word that they could use in case they wanted to stop filming? Which of the two people acting do we consider to be in a more vulnerable position, the one playing the 'bottom' or the 'top'? We may initially consider the person playing the submissive role to be more vulnerable. Yet, this question resists a simple answer once we take into account the fact that the person playing the submissive role is Jiz Lee, a queer-porn star experienced with BDSM sexuality, while the dom is Amy Landecker, a TV actress who is a novice in non-normative sexualities⁸. This brings me to the argument that the way violence is framed in this scene seems to interrupt the storyline of the fictional narrative with the temporality of the experiences, lives, and bodies of the people performing it. The spectator's attention is suddenly shifted away from the logic of the fiction to that of the reality of the performers. Even though we can never be sure whether or when someone's boundaries are crossed during the shooting of a film, this scene brings questions around consent in performance clearly to the fore.

Before demonstrating how temporality can inform our account of both this scene and BDSM practices, we first need to examine the dynamics that take place in consensual and coercive relations. For this I now turn to Jessica Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity and her distinction between relations of reciprocity and complementarity.

⁸See https://www.huffpost.com/entry/transparent-amy-landecker-sarah-pfefferman-bdsm_n_57ec328ce4b024a52d2cae51?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xILmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAHCzoWBb3Vsfe_Hk9rWJBwldScnbnUxPuG2NKGbHDNmMNxUjl3Y5Nql_AOgbXLfAxNfE_yEiCO_iOfviL3gjRBdK2h6HQL6T1wEQa-00-mnGZW8mTknbr5UG7cQQLyjiKvUQN7OG1MgGMwnw33CGRQ8bf2kP92IH9ZK8GV8KbUs

Also, in another interview (<https://www.vulture.com/2017/09/amy-landecker-on-transparent-threesomes-and-poop.html>) Landecker states: "I find rage to be the scariest emotion as an actor, for me personally, to tap into. I don't like anger, and I don't like conflict particularly in my life".

Between you and me: Benjamin's Third

Benjamin writes that intersubjectivity denotes a "relationship of mutual recognition" in which "each person experiences the other as a 'like subject', another mind who can be 'felt with', yet has a distinct, separate center of feeling and perception" ("Beyond" 5). Intersubjectivity is characterized by what Benjamin calls the position of the "Third", which she explains as:

a position constituted through holding the tension of recognition between difference and sameness, taking the other to be a separate but equivalent center of initiative and consciousness with whom nonetheless feelings and intentions can be shared. (*Beyond Doer* 4)

Therefore, the Third is the name given to the intersubjective space between one person and another when they are in a relation of *reciprocity*. In contrast, relations of *complementarity* – of 'twoness' – can be described by the dynamics of "push-me/pull-you" and "does/done-to", in which "dependency becomes coercive" ("Beyond" 9). In relations of complementarity, "each person feels *done to*, and not like an agent helping to shape a co-created reality" (9). The erasure of the in-between intersubjective space leads to one-way dynamics – in contrast to the two-way streets of thirdness. In complementarity, thus, each person struggles to gain the other's recognition, and each feels either submissive or resistant to the other's power – "each perceives the other as 'doing to me'" ("Beyond" 10).

The Third refers to a space between oneself and the other that allows one to feel related to, but not fully determined by, the other. In this sense, a relation of thirdness is one in which two people co-create a common space/narrative. In contrast, a relation of complementarity is one in which people feel that the narrative of the other is being forced upon them, and thus none of the participants feel they are responding with a sense of *agency* and *authorship*. We could then say that, in the case of thirdness, the fact that the sense of reality is co-created implies that both people experience *one* narrative as

including *both* their senses of reality; whereas in the case of twoness, people experience their sense of reality as being forced onto them, interrupted by the narrative of the other.

I propose that the distinction between relations of complementarity and reciprocity can inform our understanding of practices of consent. It may be clear that abusive relations are better described by the formal structural pattern of twoness, while consensual ones relate better to relations of thirdness. Although Benjamin does not speak about consent in the context of non-normative sexualities, I propose that in order to account for the dynamics that take place during BDSM, we need to make use of both twoness and thirdness *simultaneously*. People who decide to engage in a mutually-agreed practice of desire that moves beyond the oppositional binary of 'risk' and 'safety' (I will return to this) do so from a place of thirdness, since they recognize each other as a "separate [yet] equivalent center of initiative and consciousness". In this way, we could describe the formal structural pattern of such role-playing as *the negotiation and enactment of a relation of twoness within the reciprocity of a relation of thirdness*.

The fact that BDSM practices can be explained as the enactment of a relation of complementarity confined within the boundaries of reciprocity brings us to the question of agency in narrative. Feeling coerced implies that one is unable to respond with agency and authorship within a given relationship; one feels unable to negotiate meaning with the other. On the contrary, our sense of agency derives from the feeling that our reality is co-created with others. If a fictional narrative assumes the readers to be passive receivers of information, we could say that it tries to establish a relation of twoness with them. Yet, if we as spectators consent to suspend our disbelief in order to follow a fictional logic and structure, that is, if we consent to *what* we are being exposed to (i.e., either fiction or nonfiction), we can then consider ourselves to be agents with some freedom to *interpret* meaning. But, as we are about to see, the line between fiction and nonfiction is never clearly demarcated, and as such it is not always tenable to claim this freedom of interpretation.

When discussing intersubjective relations between fictional narratives and spectators, it becomes evident that Benjamin's theory does not take into account the temporal dimension in which relationships unfold. Considering temporal complexity can allow us to account for the different ways that narratives – different chronologies that

explain successions of events – can interact with one another: either by *interrupting* each other, *collapsing into* one another or *folding onto* themselves. From within this temporal frame we could argue that what keeps a BDSM performance contained within the boundaries of reciprocity – what turns the relation of twoness into a performance – is the agreement that all parties have the power to decide *when* to cease the scene. In other words, it remains a relationship of thirdness insofar as all the people involved feel they have agency over the temporal boundaries of the scene of twoness⁹. It is in this way that all people involved in a BDSM scene – both the ones playing the submissive and the dominant roles – negotiate meaning in the relationship.

In the case of *Transparent*, we should consider Pony and Sarah's role-play as unfolding in a threefold temporality, as it is (1) a performance of twoness in (2) a relation of thirdness, *which takes place within* (3) *a fictional narrative*. When Sarah threatens to cut Pony's head off, Pony senses that the Third may have *collapsed*, and that Sarah cannot recognize them as a 'like subject' anymore – that is, she cannot see Pony as a distinct and separate subject. The four seconds in which Sarah is unable to register Pony's will to stop the scene evidence this collapsed Third; in that moment, only Sarah has agency over the temporal boundaries of their interaction. Without a common sense of time, Sarah has assimilated Pony in her own narrative, merging with them into a 'oneness' that eradicates difference and renders Pony no longer an "equivalent center of initiative"¹⁰. Pony realizes that the *performance* of twoness has become conflated with an *actual* relation of complementarity, and tries to stop the role-play so as to regain agency. Although all this still operates within *Transparent's* fictional narrative, the resulting metafiction signals the spectator to the intersubjective relation they establish with the narrative – that is, the scene points at our own position as *audience*.

Another example of a scene that instrumentalizes our vulnerabilities as spectators is the aversion therapy scene in Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). In contrast to *Transparent*, this scene does so by making us witness actual violence. In this disturbing scene, Alex (Malcolm McDowell) undergoes a very violent therapy, called the 'Ludovico

⁹It would be interesting to apply the concepts of twoness and thirdness to scenes where more than two people are involved. I believe these concepts can apply not only to individuals, but also to groups.

¹⁰This is what Benjamin refers to as the "perversion of the moral third", which "accompanies the kill-or-be-killed complementarity and marks the absence of recognition of the other's separateness" ("Beyond" 16).

Treatment', that is intended to help him overcome his own violent behavior. The scene takes place in a cinema, where Alex is straitjacketed and his head is strapped into a medical device and wired up with electrodes. The therapy consists of pumping him full of drugs and then forcing him to watch extremely violent footage of a gang beating up a man, and then another gang raping a woman. From the back of the room, more than 10 doctors in white coats expressionlessly observe the treatment. Alex's eyes are kept open using lid locks in such a way that he is not able to blink, look away or in any way interrupt his viewing of the narrative of violence that he is being exposed to. While a doctor applies drops on his eyes, we hear Alex's voice-over narrating what is happening to him in the past tense: "they clamped like lidlocks on my eyes so I could not shut them no matter how hard I tried. It seemed a bit crazy to me, but I let them get on with what they wanted to get on with" (71:30-71:41). The use of the past tense emphasizes Alex's sense of coercion as he is unable to account for his own experience in that present. After a short while, Alex's voice-over says he "began" to feel sick. Then, Alex's diegetic body speaks, begging the doctors to stop the film and give him something to vomit into. Despite his violent retches, the doctors do not react.

One common reading of this scene is that it represents the state's use of violence in penal and medical institutions, in an effort to make the bodies of criminals docile. The doctors make Alex feel physically sick while exposing him to a linear narrative of what is considered violence, so that he will associate that narrative with horror and physical pain. The condition for this therapy/torture to work is thus that Alex has no choice but to be exposed to "the line of fire" of the footage – to images whose colors, Alex says, look more real than those of the real world. This last comment together with the fact that this scene is set in a cinema function as a meta-comment that makes the spectator question the complex layers of violence in this scene.

But if we take into account that the doctor who is applying the drops to Alex's eyes is not simply an actor acting as a doctor, but an actual doctor from Moorfields Eye Hospital in London, then another reading becomes possible. If we consider that the actor McDowell really needed those drops in order to keep his eyes open during shooting, then the doctor and the eye drops become elements that cannot simply be considered 'fictional' – in the sense that they are not just representations. Even though his eyes were anesthetized,

McDowell states in an interview that he underwent excruciating pain, and that one of his corneas got scratched during this scene, almost causing him to go blind¹¹. In light of this, we have on the one hand the narrative of torture within a film that shows a character being forced to watch violent footage, and on the other, an actor in pain who is risking his sight in order to shoot the scene. Even if we did not know the actual risk that McDowell underwent, seeing the actor in such a vulnerable situation makes us wonder about the actual conditions of shooting – just like with Landecker (Sarah) and Lee (Pony) in *Transparent*, although in *A Clockwork Orange* the outcome is far more distressful. This brings me to the argument that when spectators are prompted to question whether a performance carries risks of leaving affective or physical marks on the bodies of the performer(s), the fictional narrative is interrupted by a real one. Insofar as the performers may be compromised by the fiction they are enacting, performances like this one – with physical implications that exceed fictional representation – can expose their audience to non-consensual violence.

In light of this, and considering the suffering that McDowell actually underwent, we realize that this scene, by instrumentalizing the spectators' suspension of disbelief, forces us to watch *actual* violence. We are coerced into the same position as Alex: forced to watch violence to which we did not consent. The fact that McDowell underwent 'excruciating pain' when acting the role of Alex, implies that the distinction between the body of the performer and that of the character collapses in this scene. The possibility that the actor's body is at risk overwrites the fictional time, and thus puts the audience in the position of the "done to". Therefore, Kubrick's representation of the state's use of violence is itself coercive in how it forces the audience into Alex's position. Even though I understand that the scratch in McDowell's cornea was the result of an accident and not of a coercive relationship, Kubrick's decision to keep the footage in the movie puts the viewer in a situation in which they think they are watching the *performance* of suffering (*fictional* violence) when the case is otherwise. We may have consented to watch Alex's suffering, since most people who watch this movie know prior to watching that it portrays violence, but have we consented to watching McDowell's suffering? Put more simply, when we expect to see the performance of violence/suffering and are instead exposed to actual violence/suffering, we are being forced into watching something we did not consent to. Although the boundaries between acting and suffering are permeable, the question of

¹¹See <http://collider.com/malcolm-mcdowell-leon-vitali-interview-a-clockwork-orange/>

when performance turns into violence is a deeply ethical one and, for that reason, should continuously be (re)considered.

Parasitic Temporalities and Queer Relations

We realize by now that in order to determine whether a relationship can be considered consensual or not, we need to take into account not only the testimony of two (or more) individuals, but also, on another level of accountability, the place and time of that relation. In this way, the concept of consent brings up the challenge of accounting for multiple temporalities. This is to say that we need conceptual tools that permit us to consider how different testimonies relate to each other – whether these testimonies interrupt each other or run in parallel. In an attempt to build a topological account¹² of interpersonal relations, I imagine that the testimonies of the people involved in a consensual relationship (in which people co-create a sense of reality) run in parallel with each other, never interrupting or crossing the other (etymologically, 'parallel' means "besides one another"). Conversely, coercive relationships are those in which people feel that someone else's narrative is being forced upon them, thus interrupting their sense of reality. A relationship in which people's experience of reality interrupt each other is what I consider a 'parasitic relationship'. A parasite – etymologically, "the one that eats next to" – obtains something from someone else, its host, and gives nothing in return, and, I would add, it does so without consent. In the case of relations of complementarity, we could argue that the sense of reality of both individuals is simultaneously parasiting and being parasited upon by the narrative of the other. Paralleled or parasited, in either case the prefix *para-* means 'beside', 'near', and it thus already structures a type of relation.

In *The Parasite*, Michel Serres explains that a parasite feeds from its host and gives nothing in return. Therefore, chains of parasitic relations create an order that moves

¹²In "Topologies: Michel Serres and the Shapes of Thoughts", Steven Connor defines topology as "the study of the spatial properties of an object that remain invariant under homeomorphic deformation, which is to say, broadly, actions of stretching, squeezing, or folding, but not tearing or breaking. Topology is not concerned with exact measurement, which is the domain of geometry, whether Euclidean or non-Euclidean, but rather with spatial relations, such as continuity, neighbourhood, insideness and outsideness, disjunction and connection."

always in one direction, like the flow of time: “the chain of parasitism is a simple relation of order, irreversible like the flow of the river” (182). A system, defined as a pre-existing set of relations, is not simply vulnerable to parasitic relations. Rather, it is constituted by such interruptions, since each relation is already the interruption of some previous relation, of some previously open channel of communication. In this way, a parasite, rather than being a relation to another entity, is a relation to an already established order. Further, a parasitic interruption is always productive because it introduces a new order, a different logic. For Serres, a parasite is “what is between, what exists between. The middle term. The means and the means to an end. The means and the tool; the tool and its use; the means and the use” (65). In a parasitic account on subjectivity, a sense of self is the by-product of a previously established relation. In this way, the ‘self’ is no longer a centralized agent but is rather the result of a relation. This complicates the categories of inside and outside, antecedent and consequent. Thinking in terms of parasitic/parallel relations can thus help us unpack the temporal complexities of the concepts of consent.

If we understand intersubjectivity as a system constituted by relations and interruptions, we can then explain relations of reciprocity and complementarity as relations where temporalities either come together or interrupt each other, respectively. In other words, a relation of reciprocity is one that takes place in a temporality that is felt to be co-created by everyone involved. The temporality of such a relation is thus recognized as a common realm, belonging simultaneously to everyone and to nobody – as Benjamin writes in the context of the thirdness of attuned play: “To the question of ‘Who created this pattern, you or I?’, the paradoxical answer is ‘Both and neither’” (“Beyond” 18). In contrast, in a relation of complementarity, people experience the narrative of the relation as being imposed by the other, in such a way that the relationship unfolds in a temporality that is parasitic because it interrupts one’s own narrative. Serres writes: “If the relation succeeds, if it is perfect, optimum, and immediate; it disappears as a relation. If it is there, if it exists, that means that it failed. It is only mediation. Relation is nonrelation. And that is what the parasite is” (79). Here Serres is arguing that we are only able to experience a relation when it has somehow failed as one, that is, when it has been interrupted. This seems to suggest that the time of thirdness, rather than being experienced as being *in* a relation, is experience as *the* relation itself. While the parasitism of complementarity is experienced as

an interruption to a previously established temporality, the parallelism of reciprocity is experience as one shared temporality.

Elizabeth Freeman coins the term 'chrononormativity' to refer to the temporal mechanisms employed by neoliberal societies to organize individual bodies toward maximum productivity. These mechanisms produce sequential forms of time that are constructed around concepts such as family, marriage, heredity and generationality. Together, these form a historical, heteronormative narrative of belonging and becoming. Jack Halberstam argues that "Hegemonic constructions of time and space are uniquely gendered and sexualized" (8); i.e., heteronormativity organizes the interpersonal experience of people both in time and space. For Halberstam "queer" refers to "nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (6). "Queer time" is thus constituted by specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism when the temporal "frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, *risk/safety*, and inheritance" (my emphasis 6) are resisted. We can therefore say that normative sexualities result from narratives of time that establish a sequential temporal order following the logic of chrononormativity. This organization of subjective interrelations not only determines the kinds of relationships we create with others, but also the quality of the intimacy that we are able to access. In this regard, *consensual non-normative sexualities can be viewed as a set of practices that, by renegotiating the normative sites where intimacy and intersubjectivity are nurtured, have the potential to interrupt the prescriptive temporal order of neoliberal lifestyles*. In other words, queer time can be said to function as a parasitic interruption to the hegemonic, heteronormative narrative of time, from which new kinds of intersubjective consensuality can arise.

In the community around BDSM there are different views on the binary of 'risk' and 'safety'. "Safe, sane and consensual" (SSC) became a slogan for a US BDSM scene in the early 80's. However, around the 2000's a new kind of ethos came about in opposition to SSC: "Risk-Aware Consensual Kink" (RACK)¹³. This alternative asserts the right to engage in activities that may be considered 'risky', as long as the people involved are aware of the

¹³For discussions on SSC and RACK see: <https://xcbdsm.com/educational-offerings/handouts-and-resources/ssc-vs-rack/>, <http://www.leathernroses.com/generalbdsm/medlinssc.htm> and <https://epochryphal.wordpress.com/2015/02/16/rack-vs-ssc-kink-consent-ableism-agency/>

risks and are willing to accept them. RACK (also known as 'edgeplay') critiques SSC for using subjective terms like 'safe' and 'sane' to define a practice, arguing that this reifies authorities who decide what 'safe' or 'unsafe' play means. Instead, RACK puts the responsibility of risk management on the individual by foregrounding the fact that all sexual activity carries a degree of risk. In so doing, RACK challenges the binary opposition between 'risk' and 'safety'. Lisa Downing writes: "wanting something dangerous *despite* or *because of* the lack of a guaranteed safety clause could be a valid version of an ethics of pleasure" (original emphasis "Beyond Safety", 123). Practices of pleasure that dissociate from the binary of risk/safety can thus breach the established temporal order. Therefore, logics of pleasure in which risk is desirable – and thus control over safety is given up – unfold in a queer time that parasites chrononormativity.

The suspension of disbelief that is necessary to follow a fictional narrative also carries risks for the spectator. When we consent to suspend our disbelief, we agree to enter into an intersubjective relation with the narrative. When looking at *Transparent* through the frame of parasitic temporalities, we can distinguish two distinct temporal interruptions taking place in this scene: (1) chrononormativity is interrupted by the representation of a non-normative practice of desire where pleasure is exchanged for money and the oppositional binary between 'risk' and 'safety' is challenged. When the role-play becomes non-consensual, (2) the queer temporality that had just started is abruptly interrupted. This begins, in turn, another distinct temporal account which I call *fictitious coercion*. This scene thus brings forward two distinct levels of intersubjective relations with the spectator, which I represent in the following way:

(1) [[BDSM in Transparent] within chrononormativity]

(2) [[[BDSM scene] within Transparent] within chrononormativity]

In the first case, the BDSM scene is the parasite of chrononormativity, which means that the fictional narrative of *Transparent* is not interrupted, and thus still functions as an end in itself; whereas in the second case, the BDSM scene is a parasite to *Transparent's* fictional narrative. In the later case, the role-play turns the fiction into a medium – rather than an end – through which the director initiates an intersubjective relation with his spectator. As mentioned above, narratives have the potential to either co-create

temporalities with their spectators or assimilate them into an already established reality. With the performance of a BDSM scene that parasites an already fictional narrative, the director Silas Howard makes clear that *for a narrative to parasite the time of the spectator, it needs their consensual suspension of disbelief*. In this scene, Howard queers time by bringing to the fore the multiple temporalities unfolding *between* the time of the narration and our own lived temporalities.

This brings me to the argument that *Transparent's* fictional narrative, by showing the negotiation of played roles in a BDSM practice, alludes to the very parasitic temporality it establishes with the audience. Gesturing at the complexity of the temporal organization of its performance, this scene establishes an intersubjective time in which it surrenders to *being with* (parallel to) the spectators. Benjamin writes that in relations of complementarity, one can recover subjectivity by recognizing one's own participation in the relation, that is, by *surrendering* to the principle of 'reciprocal influence' in interaction ("Beyond" 11). Surrendering implies "freedom from any intent to control or coerce" ("Beyond" 9) and requires a "certain letting go of the self, and thus implies the ability to take in the other's point of view or reality" ("Beyond" 8). In *Transparent*, the moment of surrender coincides with the four seconds of hyperreality during which the viewer can disengage from the complementarity of the fiction and look through, as it were, into a reality that includes both the spectators' and the performers' subjectivities. This is achieved by incorporating the discourse/practice of consent, that functions as a meta-device that both stems from and reflects on the performance of a BDSM scene within the boundaries of a fiction. This meta-device functions as a (meta-)parasite that is able to comment on its own parasitism. In other words, the scene manages to bring forward the very dynamics it establishes with the spectators by synchronizing (putting in *parallel*) the time of the narrative with that of the BDSM meta-narrative. The scene thus manages to establish, for a limited time, a relation of thirdness with the spectator by recognizing and showing how the *temporal/fictional structure from which it borrows is founded on the very parasitic relation that it seeks to represent*. By doing so, the narrative of this scene creates a common temporality with the spectator, a relation of reciprocity in which the spectator feels recognized and is thus free to negotiate meaning. This brings us back to questions of consent and spectatorship: when exposed to a narrative, do we feel free to negotiate meaning together with it, or, do we feel coerced into having to agree with it?

Conclusion: Responsibility and Consensual Suspension of Disbelief

This brings me to the conclusion that narratives construct audiences through the spectators' consensual suspension of disbelief. An audience, in this sense, should be understood as the relationship that narratives establish with spectators. The fact that narratives compromise spectators in constructing audiences raises questions about the responsibilities and ethics of narratives. Considering that narrators make stories for spectators that are not yet present, and that suspending disbelief carries the risk that spectators may witness actual violence, I ask: can violence be responsibly represented in fiction?

I propose that an ethical narrator is one who is aware of the risks to which an audience is exposed, and uses that awareness to construct the chronology of their story. When the vulnerabilities of the audience are brought into the narrative, without being instrumentalized, the narration can then represent violence without itself performing it. In this way, an ethical narrator is one that is not afraid of exposing the fictionality in which their story is rooted, because their narration operates not only at the level of representation but also at one of intersubjectivity. Therefore, *the question of responsibility resides less in the content of the narrative and more in the relationship that that narrative uncovers discursively*. As we have seen, the fictional depiction of violence in *Transparent* and *A Clockwork Orange* interrupts the narrative of the fiction, thus alluding to other layers of temporality in which the reality of both the actors and the spectators are included. It is partially through this interruption that violence is represented. By uncovering the previously hidden parasitic temporality in which the fictional narrative is rooted, these scenes bring problematic questions around consent in performance clearly to the fore.

However, *A Clockwork Orange* instrumentalizes the spectators' suspension of disbelief by making us witness actual violence, while *Transparent* coerces the spectator only *fictionally*. In *Transparent*, we become attuned to the violence *as if* it was real, but the scene always remains within the bounds of the narrative's fiction. Thus, by revealing the temporal boundaries that keep this narrative distinct from reality, this work opens up a time of intersubjectivity. Indeed, by incorporating in the fictional storyline the negotiation of a role-play and next the betrayal of that contract, the narration succeeds in commenting on its own fictionality, thereby making the fictional violence feel *more* real than the other

fictional acts, without ever breaking out of its fictionality. The resulting metafiction creates a *fictitiously-coerced audience*: the scene *seems* to force the audience into seeing non-consensual violence – it *performs* a scene of complementarity – while simultaneously providing the necessary tools to assist us in recognizing our own fictional coercion. In so doing, this scene opens a time of reciprocity in which it actually surrenders into *being with* the spectator. This is how *Transparent* manages to remain fictional/consensual, while simultaneously parasiting the logic of chrononormativity and, in so doing, creating spatial and temporal conditions for new queer narratives and consensual practices to arise.

Pre-lude: [(not) Rules]

When we consent to a BDSM scene, we are agreeing to enter together into a temporality during which gestures and words will not convey their usual (normative) meaning. Our relationship will thus function, for a limited time, in a different narrative from the usual one. Such a game is a parasite to heteronormative practices because it interrupts their hegemonic logic. We thus become agents who are able to establish temporalities whose logics exceeds the normative one. The scene will last until one of us decides to end it. The possibility of interrupting the alternative narrative at any time is precisely what makes this a game; if someone takes this power away from the other, then the play and its narrative will cease being a game and turn into force instead. We could say that consent is experienced as the feeling of being capable of refraining from whatever logic or narrative one is exposed to; while coercion is the feeling that one is not able to do so. If one of us feels coerced at any time and cannot communicate that within the logic of the game, it is important that we use our safe word to stop the scene and return to equal grounds. My safe word is time-out. What is yours?

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