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Designing Surrender: Set, Setting, and Altered Consciousness in BDSM

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Abstract

Practitioners and researchers increasingly recognize that altered states of consciousness, such as subspace and domspace, are central to BDSM experiences. These states are often described as immersive, ego-dissolving, and transformative, involving shifts in time perception, identity boundaries, and affective intensity. Yet the mechanisms shaping these states remain undertheorized. This talk introduces a novel theoretical framework grounded in the concept of set and setting – borrowed from psychedelic studies – to analyze how BDSM scenes are not only enacted but also architected to produce specific states of consciousness. "Set" refers to the participants' psychological state, intentions, and expectations; "setting" encompasses the material, social, and symbolic environment in which the scene unfolds. Together, these factors co-create the experiential field in which altered states of consciousness emerge. By viewing BDSM as a designed state of consciousness rather than a deviation from normativity, we shift the focus from risk and pathology to intentionality, aesthetic ritual, and embodied epistemology. This reframing also opens ethical and philosophical questions about agency, especially in scenes involving voluntary surrender, consensual non-consent, and willless engagement. Rather than interpreting these acts as threats to autonomy, I suggest they instantiate an alternative logic of subjectivity, desire, and relationality.

Keywords: agency; embodiment; erotic ritual; phenomenology; subjectivity