

A GLAMOROUS AND PERFORMATIVE BONDAGE
FLOURISHES ON INSTAGRAM:
[@DAMOTTAFABIO PHOTOGRAPHY](#)

INTRODUCTION

If we start 'googling' about the Brazilian photographer Fabio da Motta, it calls our attention that he can also be designated as DaMotta Fabio or Fabio DaMotta. The confusion apparently originated when his real name was adapted to identify his Instagram account as @damottafabio, on February 22nd 2015. Throughout the last four years, his virtual signature was transformed in a celebrated trademark by its 134.000 (mostly gay) followers that, in the end, shuffled his personal and public identities. On the other hand, we are never mistaken about the identification of his visual work that until today uses this social network to share photos and videos of his both prolific and provocative production. His images have the Japanese art of bondage as a starting point but he also plays with performative action, body sculpture and drawing lines with colourful ropes. In addition, his almost pornographic pictures and the experiences he lives (or might live) with his models are acclaimed by his audience. In this way, by forging this insinuating BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Sadism, Masochism) atmosphere in his profile, he also exhibits a rebel and flourish visibility of gay men within the society. Accordingly to John R. Burger (1995), porn is not just an erotic tool, but it deconstructs "the oppressing standards of orthodox history"(38).

Fabio da Motta's photography appears when BDSM leaves the underworld and starts to fascinate the public that could even enjoy their popcorn while watching *Fifty Shades of Grey*(2015), directed by Sam Taylor-Johnson, in the big screen. Camile Paglia (2013) in her relatively recent article *Scholars in Bondage* acknowledge this trend saying that "sadomasochism and its recreational correlate, bondage and domination, have emerged into startling visibility and mainstream acceptance in books, movies, and merchandising" and highlights that even "Harvard University granted official campus status to an undergraduate bondage and domination club". I also owe to Paglia one of the inspirations to this text. In this same article, during her review of the book *Dominatrix: Gender, Eroticism, and Control in the Dungeon* by Danielle J. Lindemann, she remarks what could have been a sensational book but was buried in a footnote:

Lindemann says that pro-dominance "may have more in common with other theatrical pursuits than with prostitution." "I was recently struck to find, during a visit to the Barnard College library," she writes, "that the books about strippers were sandwiched between texts relating to pantomime and vaudeville, while the texts about prostitutes inhabited a different aisle . . . Lindemann was poised to place pro-dommes' work into theater history—a tremendous advance that did not happen. (Paglia, 2013)

For this reason, the intention of my text is to go a little bit further from being only a footnote about this subject by focusing in da Motta's performative/theatrical bondage visual production and how his mostly

gay public and models react to the playful erotic game he develops on Instagram.

FABIO DA MOTTA'S GAY AND GLAMOROUS BONDAGE SCENES

Essentially, sadomasochism is a staged ritual. It is a "punitive hierarchical structure . . . a religious longing for order, marked by ceremonies of penance and absolution . . . [It is] paradoxically a reinvigoration, a trancelike magical realignment with natural energies" (Paglia, 2013). The disposal of its performers 'dungeons' (indoor spaces designated for BDSM play) offers well-equipped fetish spaces, punishment rooms, cages and other experiments. Although these references would support the argument that da Motta's BDSM work belongs to the 'research theatre aisle', another particularity of his practice led me to investigate similarities with other artists whose 'erotic staging' is an important feature. In this section, I will oppose his work to the processes of the bondage expert Midori and the gay photographers and artists of *Vogue Magazine* from 1926 to 1945.

Aside the theatricality, the mentioned particularity of the da Motta's production which connects him with these other artists is glamour. Although a diffuse concept, I believe the definition below covers the main aspects I am interested here.

[English art critic, novelist, painter and poet] John Berger has defined glamour as a specifically modern phenomenon, emerging within a culture that was increasingly visual and "specularized". He calls glamour "the happiness of being envied", a commodity manufactured by the publicity industry in a society "stopped half way" in the movement toward "democracy". Glamorous day-dreams compensate for social powerlessness and economic deprivation . . . It also implies the visual pleasure of the perfectly lit, eroticized body. (Waugh, 1998:59)

da Motta's first contact with bondage was in 2007 while photo shooting an editorial for Junior, a Brazilian gay magazine. He had hired a bondage specialist to do some knots on the models and from this moment on, the act of tying was gradually incorporated into his routine. Used to produce nude series, like *Concrete Curves* (2013) (Figure 1), bondage was included since 2015 to bridge a connection between both the person and the space. As a photographer he is not only in charge of the light, the set and human bodies, but also in 'sculpting these bodies' with intimate interaction of flesh, ropes, flowers, masks and other visual elements (Figure 2 and Figure 3). The eroticization of his (mostly) male models comes from the idealized combination of implicit violence, dubious tenderness, provocative behaviour and desirable beauty. His exuberant portraiture (Figure 4) is a conscious option of the artist:

[With bondage I am] able to try all sorts of materials I think can contribute to the scene I am working on . . . I always try to focus on the aesthetics of the act of immobilization, emphasizing its

beauty . . . My inspiration comes from my daily life, the environment I live in, the things I see. My use of color, flowers and other materials is a way to soften the bondage, emphasizing its beauty instead of the more aggressive aspects of immobilizing another human being. (Jansson, 2017, underline not in the original)



Figure 1. (da Motta, 2013) *Curvas Concretas / Concrete Curves*: a pre bondage series



damottafabio



Figure 2. Fabio da Motta bondage series (from @damottafabio instagram profile)



damottafabio
Goiânia, Brazil

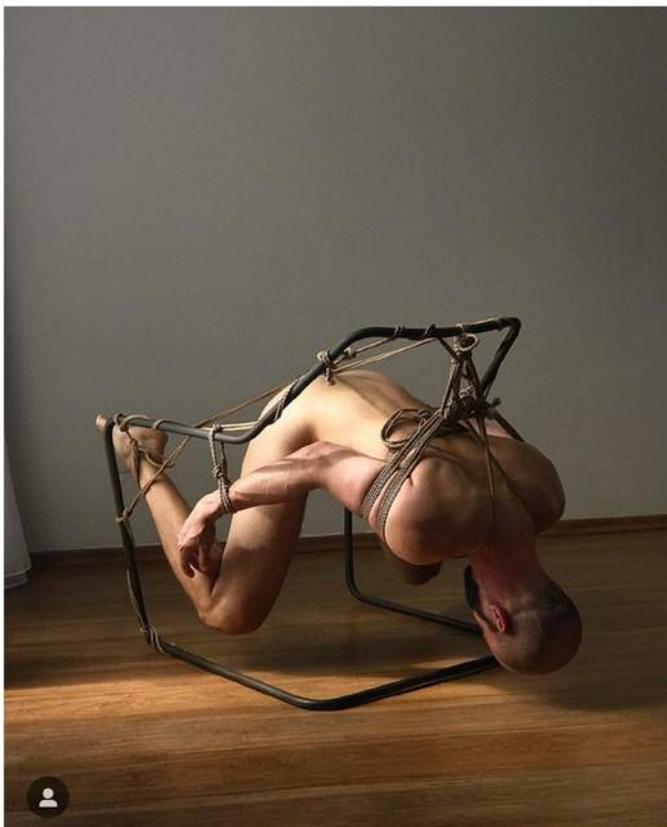


Figure 3. Fabio da Motta bondage series (from @damottafabio instagram profile)



Figure 4. Fabio da Motta bondage series (from @damottafabio instagram profile)

In the same way, the Japanese bondage expert Midori calls attention to the alluring beauty of his craft and the commitment the dominant partner has in orchestrate the environment of the performance. da Motta's bondage series depends exactly on his power of attending the expectations of your models that hire him to engage in the bondage experience and have some photos throughout the process (that will probably be published on his Instagram account) (Figure 5). Since he does not have a studio, each person provides him the setting and other visual elements he ends up incorporating in the pictures. For example, in (Figure 6), the model had a snake as pet and it was used as an accessory in the shooting. Aside from this, he tries to understand the level of exposure the person wants to have in social media (depending on the case he can hide some revealing pieces of furniture or even cover the face of the model (Figure 7)) and how far one intends to engage in the dominance performance (Figure 8). Accordingly to Midori, the difference between a 'technically skilled top' from the 'artistic top' is his ability to creatively interpret each situation, as if he was an actor or the theatre director.

So much of the allure of Japanese rope bondage is the sensual visual beauty of the bound. Simply reducing the submissive's mobility with rope is not enough. Nor is using bondage to enhance sex games. The rope must create visual pleasure, for the one binding, the one bound, and any onlookers . . . The aesthetics of bondage are what make the difference between a good scene and a great scene. (Midori, 2001:7, underline not in the original)



Figure 5. Fabio da Motta advertisement on his Instagram account @damottafabio

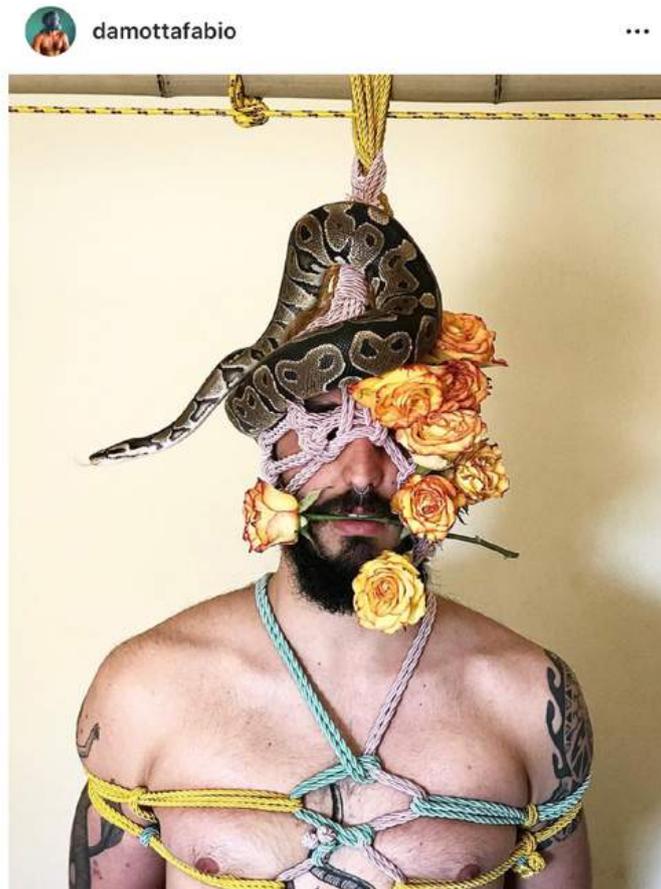


Figure 6. Fabio da Motta bondage series (from @damottafabio instagram profile)



Figure 7. Fabio da Motta bondage series (from @damottafabio instagram profile)

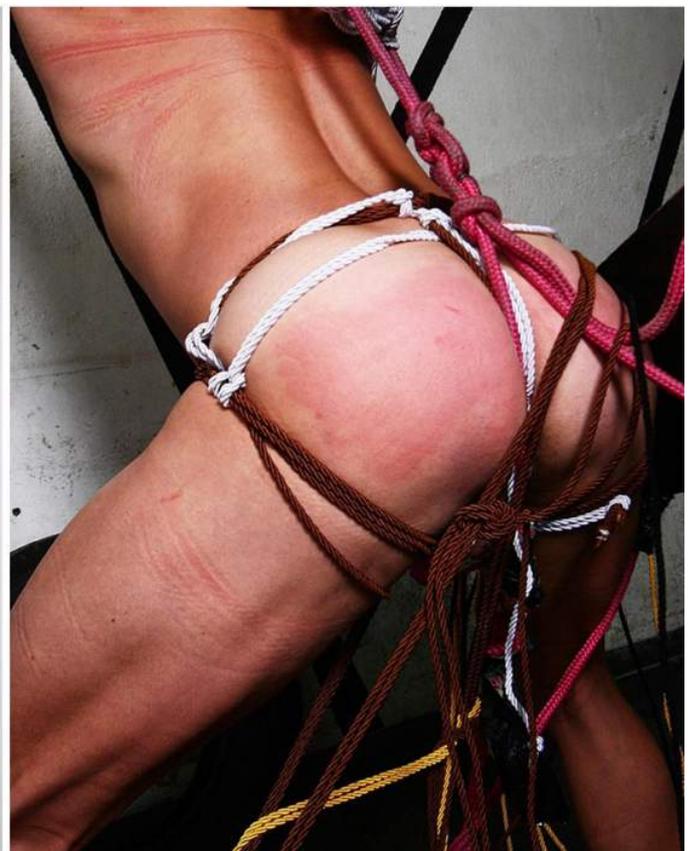


Figure 8. Fabio da Motta bondage series (from @damottafabio instagram profile)

Midori even compares bondage with other traditional Japanese arts like Ikebana (Japanese flower arrangement) and Bonsai (miniature tree sculpting). If Ikebana "understands, incorporates and represents the drama of seasons, Japanese rope bondage understands, incorporates and represents of fantasy and sexual desire" (Midori, 2001:8). Much of its 'drama' and 'fantasy' comes from the way the top respect or, sometimes surpass, the aesthetic rope elements of symmetry, intentional asymmetry, tension, balance and eye flow. da Motta's style normally explores the symmetric rope drawing but uses the flower asymmetrically to create a sense of movement (Figure 9). Different rope colours shape each the male body firmly and try to extract from it other contours and sensations. The marks of the tension produced in the flesh are proudly exhibited in his profile as well (Figure 10). One final characteristic of bondage aesthetic is *gusto*, a quality that both Midori and da Motta shares, that has to do with the self confidence to perform a great scene. "This is the accomplished artist's hand at work, which is focused on the drama and intent on creating an image that conveys a sense of struggle and a story (Midori, 2001:11). In this context, da Motta's provides his gay male followers living and glamorous fantasies that are turned into "images of our desires, and ones associated not with shame and disgust but with pleasure and transcendence" (Maddison, 2017:141).



Figure 9. Fabio da Motta bondage series (from @damottafabio instagram profile)



Figure 10. Fabio da Motta bondage series (from @damottafabio instagram profile)

The next comparison to be made with da Motta's work is with a group of gay male photographers, writers and theatre directors that were at some point connected with *Vogue* magazine during the interwar. I am referencing people like the Russian photographer George Hoyningen-Huene (1900-68) that presided *Vogue* from 1926 to 1935, the German fashion photographer Herbert List (1903-1975), the American writer and photographer Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964), and the French director Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) (Waugh, 1998:60). Considering that in 1952, Alan Turing was prosecuted for homosexual acts, when by the Labouchere Amendment, 'gross indecency' was a criminal offence in the UK, (En.wikipedia.org, 2019), this generation of creative professionals of the first half of the twentieth century managed to share an implicitly gay-coded imagery and homoerotic atmosphere in each edition of this publication (Figure 11). Their strategy to stage a glamorous eroticism "was the artifice of the studio where the dazzling perfection of electric light matched the cosmopolitan rhythm of the industrial metropolis" (Waugh, 1998:63). Through this commercial enterprise, they not only created images but incited needs and desires in the public by spreading an appealing representation of the male and female body. In this case,

homoeroticism arises not from the representation of homosexuality per se, but in eroticization of the male object of desire, where heterosexual women and gay men are either accomplices, rivals, or stand-ins for each other. (Waugh, 1998:63)



Figure 11 (Artnet.com, 2019) - George Hoyningen-Huene photography

Nowadays, da Motta faces a different kind of surveillance: the reporting of content that allegedly violates the Instagram Community Guidelines (Help.instagram.com, 2019). Although his option for a private profile (where the follower needs to request access to see his pictures) gives him more freedom to push the boundaries of his photos, his BDSM content is constantly on the edge of what would be acceptable by his heterogeneous audience. On the other hand, balancing explicitness in order to attend the visual limitations rules of this app, opens space to increase the curiosity of what is not shown (Figure 12). Like any other pornographic picture that was censored, hiding sexual intercourse or genitals do not deny the erotic but calls "attention to what was missing, giving the erotic dreamer a different space in which to *maneuver* than that provided in pornography"(Budd, 1998:55). The softness on his approach does not eliminate a non-conformist attitude. Moreover, he adds glamour as possible layer of bondage practice and desire to make the (gay) imagination flows.



Figure 12. Fabio da Motta bondage series (from @damottafabio instagram profile)

In this section I analysed the relation of da Motta's bondage series with the beauty and theatrical art of Midori's bondage and attempted to show how important is his participation in creating scenes and attending the expectations of his models is. Furthermore, I brought the idea of BDSM glamour coming out of a constant battle to overcome the Instagram's surveillance and compared it with a similar situation lived by the *Vogue* magazine photographers of the interwars (1926-1935). The next part, is devoted to observe how he develops a playful erotic game with and among his followers on Instagram.

FLIRTATION ON INSTAGRAM

From the 1940s on, gay men found in bodybuilder magazines like *Tomorrow's Man* a subtle way to legitimize their homoerotic fantasies (Figure 13). Accordingly to Michael Anton Budd (1998) "fitness magazines took a major step toward the creation of a homosexual subculture based on something more than overt prostitution or chance encounters in public places" (51). Alongside its usual content, these publications used to sell the original photographs by demand. In some cases, this mail-order activity showed to be more profitable than the magazine itself. "Prints were usually small enough (4 x 5 inches) to pass discreetly through the mail . . . erotic had to be suggested rather than shown, and motifs such as

wrestling were a means of legitimizing physical intimacy" (Ewing, 2009:214). Indeed, the physical culture magazines of that time

permitted a greater expression of male affection and admiration of the masculine body. Classifieds, letters, columns, photo contests and the homosocial character of such publications provided a space for a variety of men to enjoy and imagine other men's bodies; to communicate, and even meet one another. (Budd, 1998:51)

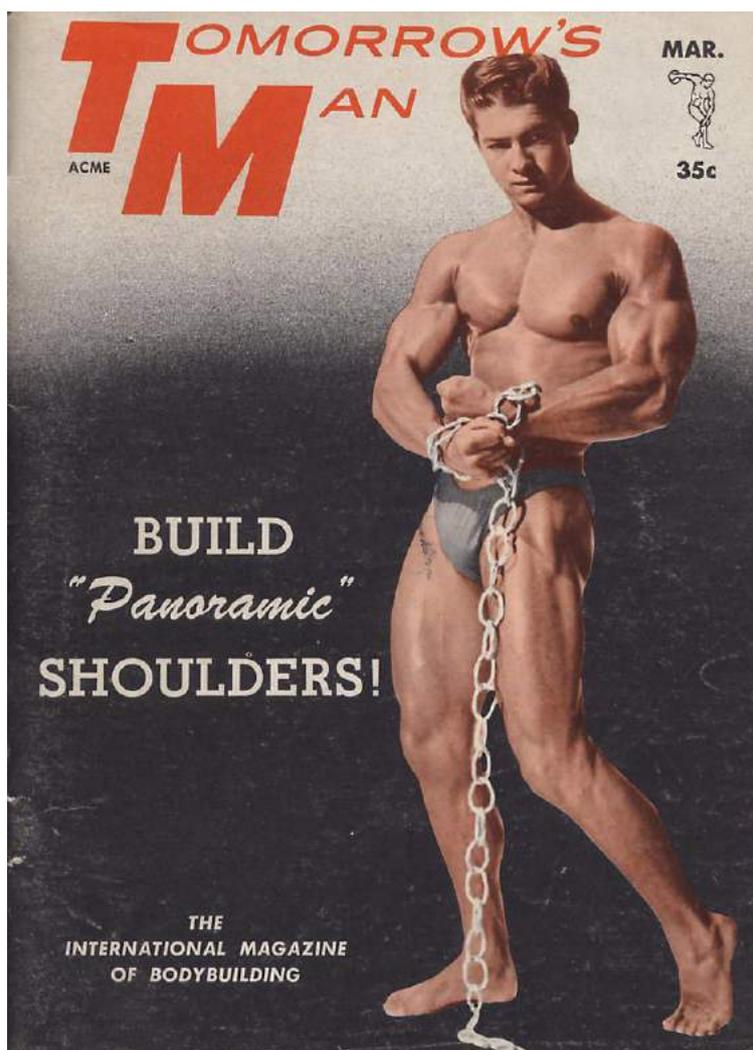


Figure 13. (Pinterest, 2019) - Tomorrow's Man cover

Today, our networked culture allows gays and other sexual minorities to join online groups, create their own communities and support their life style apart from a still existence homophobic society. Nowadays (2019), Instagram is a world reference in social network services available in mobile phones that is used for many purposes, including being a safe place for gay interaction. With a device on hands, it is possible to connect with other people, upload photos and videos and interact with our contacts by sending direct messages. Another feature is called hashtag which organizes 'virtual social clubs' for its members. Hashtags are words or phrases preceded by the # symbol which connect a group of people under a topic

of discussion or interest. For example, if people search for the hashtag bondage they will find among the several options such as #bondagevideo, #bondagegirl, #gaybondage and also one identified as #mottabondage.

On his profile @damottafabio, da Motta created some hashtags. Aside #mottabondage he also uses regularly #mottabondagewflowers, #mottamask, #mottapaddler and performs 'stories' (short films that can be seen for only 24h) about his private life and backstage of photos. Through this perspective it is clear that he uses Instagram not only to share his visual content but also to take advantage of its form to organize information and articulate an erotic narrative about his daily activities. In *Seductions and Flirtations*, Patrizia Di Bello (2008) uses George Simmel's concept of flirtation to illustrate the dynamics of exchanging photographic portraits:

In an essay of 1909, he wrote about flirting as, above all, a performance of meaning in which dynamic balance is achieved between meaning and not meaning what one is speaking or implying by looks, body posture and actions. In flirtation, these oppositions are in a state of tension, and are experienced or played out at the same time . . . The mode of the relationship purposefully playful: "flirtation . . . does no more than play with reality, yet it is still reality with which it plays" (Di Bello, 2008:150)

I would like to use the same reference with a different approach because da Motta hardly shows himself. In his place, the 'photos of his practice' flirt with his followers that can be bondage practitioners, people that fantasize with this kind of experience or just those who want to have the pleasure of seeing a nice portraiture. At the same time, the models who hired him, want to be exposed in his Instagram portfolio. It is an opportunity to look transgressive, admired, envied, in other words glamorous, to the gaze of his 134.000 viewers (on January 2019). This 'reversed flirtation' can be easily measured by the number of likes and comments each photo receives (Figure 14). If the model identity is made public, his Instagram profile would even receive new followers, a situation considered 'dream like' to some users.



Figure 14. Above, two photos with 9.312 and 14.372 likes, respectively. Bellow, some of the comments left by Instagram users. (from @damottafabio instagram profile)

As we could see, Instagram is a fertile terrain from which da Motta has been cultivating his bondage imagery. Moreover, he has the ability to direct actions and inciting desire by using structures available in this application. Sexuality is an continuous discussion regarding gay self-representation and on his profile this specific life style has been expressed.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude this essay hoping to have reached my original intention of going a little bit further of the footnote cited by Paglia (2013) and being able to explore with more depth the theatrical or performative side of BDSM in general and bondage in particular. The option for Fabio da Motta's

production was made not only by the relevance of his photos but by the way he performs with his models and flirt with his gay followers on Instagram. His posture of director of scene and emotions were determinants aspects to my research.

Today a great amount of images circulate on-line and different virtual interactions can be made among users. It may be argued that "in cyberspace, desires can be traded in a shorthand of erotic images and anonymous conversations"(Budd, 1998:42) and also criticize the contradictory isolation and connection feelings that opt for "manufactured bodies instead of real ones" (ibid). On the other hand, Susan Sontag remarks that "the act of photographing is more than passive observing. Like sexual voyeurism, it is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening. To take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are" (Sontag, 1978:12). da Motta's bondage flourishes on Instagram because of multiple possibilities of rehearsing provocative performances within his public.

Word counting: 2.975

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