Recasting transgression in modernity

Prohibition, pleasure and otherness

Submitted by

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A thesis submitted in total fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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January 2020
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Abstract

Sadomasochism represents both the mark of interdiction and its transgression. The erotic suffering and social ruptures effected by this confrontation are invoked in literature, cinema and subcultural movements. Through a critical approach to sadomasochism as reflected in these cultural forms, this thesis explores the emergence and the promise of transgression as the manifestation of a critical attitude. The thesis analyses this through a series of in-depth studies into sadomasochism in Western culture to illuminate its continuous confrontation with and challenge to norms, moral precepts and laws of social existence. The thesis utilises theories of transgression that exerted a profound influence on French thought of the 1960s and 1970s.

For Georges Bataille, and the generation of influential thinkers that followed, the changing horizon of knowledge consisted in the elaboration of a critical discourse on the limits of human subjectivity and experimentations with the possibility of going beyond them. Through engagement with the work of Bataille, Julia Kristeva and Michel Foucault, this thesis interrogates different operationalisations of the concept of transgression. Of particular interest are their critiques of the subject and of Enlightenment rationalism. In consequence, the writings of Kristeva and Bataille enable an analysis of an interior experience that undermines symbolic coherence in order to attain transgression. Additionally, consideration of transgression via the work of Foucault allows for an analysis of contemporary subjects who apply the terms sadism and masochism to their own practices, forging an aesthetics of existence.

The thesis argues that from a position of sexual non-conformity – which includes but is not reduced to pleasure – sadomasochism has been the impetus for exploration of new cultural directions, engendering new kinds of social and sexual relations. From this perspective, the subversive and creative potential of sadomasochism is understood as a valid mode of resistance to specific forms of rationality and socially imposed limits.
Statement of authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma.

No other person’s work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

The thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

This work was supported by a La Trobe University Postgraduate Research Scholarship (Australian Postgraduate Award).

Catherine Papadopoullos
Acknowledgments

I wish to express gratitude to my family and friends for their supportive confidence in me. I thank my supervisors Katie Wright and Sara James who demonstrated great patience and dedication to the development of this thesis and who provided feedback on numerous chapter drafts. I am grateful to Ivan Krisjansen for his sagacious suggestions. Lastly, I thank Monika Benova for her cheerful companionship.
Introduction

What is the place of transgression in a secular and rational modernity? This thesis interrogates this question via key explorers of the transgressive in modernity: literature, cinema and sexual subcultures. The thesis investigates principal texts and writings that reflected on and recast the place and purpose of transgression in a society transformed by the values of science and reason.

In one of the last essays that Michel Foucault completed before his death in 1984, he proposed that modernity’s enduring connection to the Enlightenment can be traced to a permanent ethos of critique and an aesthetic project of self-fashioning.¹ For Foucault, Immanuel Kant’s short essay on the question ‘What is Enlightenment?’ seemed to proffer a unique motive for philosophical inquiries that hitherto tended to direct reflections on the present onto analyses of the internal logic of epochal transitions, rather than the problem of ‘contemporary reality alone’.² Foucault discerns that the peculiarity of Kant’s text is in its reflection on the status of “today” as a motive for a particular philosophical task’.³ Opposed to what he terms the ‘blackmail’ of dialectical thinking within ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ criticisms of Enlightenment rationalism, Foucault suggested that it is possible to go beyond the kind of dogmatism produced by analyses of this kind, and to reflect on the shifting grounds of modern life by analysing modernity as an attitude.⁴ According to Foucault, the experience of Western modernity is marked by a permanent and robust critical project that may or may not entail ‘faith in Enlightenment’.⁵ This modern attitude does not merely consist in recognising oneself as belonging to a particular historical present; it also ‘requires work on our limits’ and ‘the possibility of going beyond them’.⁶

² Ibid, 34.
³ Ibid, 38.
⁴ Ibid, 39.
⁵ Ibid, 38.
⁶ Foucault invokes Charles Baudelaire’s representative thought on modernity to exemplify the modern attitude. Baudelaire characterised modernity as a vertiginous and ‘dizzying’ experience. But to merely recognise oneself as being a part of this fleetingness is not enough to satisfy the modern individual. He or
This ‘limit-attitude’ of modern philosophy, as Foucault calls it, does not seek to engender a totalising doctrine, nor to establish the limits of possible transgressions; rather, it distinguishes from the contingency of what makes us subjects ‘the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think’. By the same token, the critical attitude turns towards the self; the material, the body determined by historically dependent and variable constructions. Foucault specifies that the continuing legacy of the Enlightenment does not mean ‘faithfulness to doctrinal elements, but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude – that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era’. This is a history of the present where power intertwines with struggle and resistance and is continuously transformed in the face of subversive antagonism. From this perspective, Foucault claims, it is possible to determine the expired exigency of specific outcrops of Enlightenment rationalism or what he terms ‘rationalities’. One object of new expertise and scientific rationality was the problematic relation existing between ‘healthy’ and ‘pathological’ sexual behaviours.

In this thesis, sadomasochism (S/M) is the axis of reflection for modernity’s ethos of symbolic inversions and transgressions. Foucault’s concept of the modern ethos of critique shares clear affinities with the intellectual projects of two other theorists who also direct this inquiry into erotic transgression: Georges Bataille and Julia Kristeva. The writings and thought of these intellectuals enable an approach to transgression in the context of Western modernity that comprises a broader elaboration of a critical discourse on the limits of experience and thought. The thesis directs the analysis of transgression – understood as a modified, shifting and historically dependent force – in case studies marking the limits of representation and the historical surface of themes, controversies and attitudes found in different forms of cinema, literature and contemporary S/M ‘play’. The thesis examines

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7 Ibid, 46.
8 My emphasis. Ibid, 42.
10 The neologism ‘S/M’ refers to the practices of consensual sadomasochism and is used in this thesis with reference to the latter as well as to its representation as a sexual practice in the media.
critical discourses that are central in contributing to the recasting of transgression as a positive antagonism of boundaries.

The works of Foucault, Kristeva, Bataille consider transgression in relation to historical and social limits that comprise the social field of the subject. Transgression is the frontier escaping the outer-most edge of stable normativity and has the potential to signal the imminent dissolution of this homogeneous field. Each theorist offers an analysis of transgression as a powerful and indispensable force capable of effecting a disruptive and transformative breach of the social order that can engender new kinds of social designations and sexual transitions in human relations. It is argued that the subversive antagonisms examined in this thesis can undermine the hegemony of reductive scientific thinking in relation to non-normative forms of sexual desire.

The thesis sits within a tradition of critical thinking whose common thread can be traced to the undermining of the Enlightenment myth of a pre-given subject who, through reason, can master its own ego. In 1960s France, during the period in which Kristeva was conditioned as a theorist, and Foucault was thinking on the heels of Friedrich Nietzsche and Bataille, the intellectual milieu was in a state of upheaval. After the era of Jean-Paul Sartre’s influential humanism, which had obliterated the difference between subject and object in the positing and privileging of a transcendental ego – according to which the ego ‘would become absolute master of itself and of the objective world for it would be continuous with it’ – the emerging structuralist generation sought to elaborate a new theory of the subject.11 The derailing of the nexus between representation and the thing in itself, and, crucially, restoring the subject–object dualism in Western thought are important consequences of this intellectual upheaval, and here some of the principal contributions of Bataille, Foucault and Kristeva to this shift in thought will be examined.

In this turbulent intellectual context, each theorist reflects the precarious outer boundaries of human experience and the space that articulated the limits of our subjectivity. Each undermined the autonomy of the subject through diverse philosophical inquiries. Foucault’s proclamation of the ‘death of man’ at the end of The Order of Things exemplifies the anti-
humanism of the emerging intellectual scene that portended a subject different to anything that humanist philosophy had hitherto proposed. One of the most significant consequences of these theoretical developments was the decentring of the stable, unified subject of the Cartesian *cogito* and the opening of an impasse to forms of interpretation that were barred in Western thought for centuries. It was in these domains of inquiry that Bataille’s writings exerted their most profound influence on French thought in the 1960s and 1970s. For Bataille and the generation of influential thinkers that followed, the changing horizon of knowledge during the twentieth century revolved around a central question that is extensively examined in this thesis, namely: ‘How can the subject become other than itself?’

Bataille (1897–1962) is primarily known as a writer of pornographic or erotic fiction. The librarian, sociologist, philosopher and writer of pornography is an anterior reference to post-structuralist thinkers, including Foucault and Kristeva, in problematising the status of the subject. However, he is somewhat aberrant to the extent that his approach is not concerned with critiquing the foundations of subjectivity; rather, with liquidating it. His writings are marked by an exigent demand to affirm life in the exuberance before death. Indeed, the reception of Bataille and his legacy in France is unthinkable without reference to his thought on self-dissolution: the question of the sacrifice of the subject, the liquidation of the subject.

Equally significant in approaching Bataille’s powerful influence on French thought is the Tel Quel group, founded by Phillipe Sollers in 1960. Among other prominent intellectuals, Kristeva and Foucault were affiliated with the group. In the intellectual context of the mid-1960s Bataille was still relatively unknown and underrepresented. Tel Quel was instrumental in resurrecting Bataille as a representative modern thinker. The efforts of Foucault and Barthes are undoubtedly contributing factors in this regard. This was a part of

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a shared interest in affirming figures who had experienced marginal influence in France due to the hegemonic influence of Sartre’s existentialism.16

The critical engagement with important concepts found in the works of Bataille intersects and aligns with the works of Kristeva and Foucault. Bataille’s theories of transgression, expenditure, sacred sacrifice, the profound link between individual excess and social order appear at symptomatic moments in the work of structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers who sought to re-evaluate Bataille’s thought.17 For Foucault, Kristeva and others including Maurice Blanchot and Roland Barthes, Bataille offered an exit from the rationalism of either Marxist or Hegelian critiques, enabling these thinkers to ‘drive a wedge into the conceptual frameworks of their time’ and to elaborate new avenues of inquiry.18

Psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious in the twentieth century challenged the prevailing Cartesian rationality and undermined the pretention of the subject to self-knowledge. With the ‘Copernican revolution’ introduced by Sigmund Freud, the conscious ego, as with the earth itself, could no longer be the centre of the solar system.19 The decentring of the conscious ego by the psychoanalytic movement was taken up again, in France, during the middle of the twentieth century by Jacques Lacan, whose integration of structural semiology into Freudian psychoanalysis was inherited by Kristeva.20 Her early thought, as it appears in Revolution in Poetic Language (doctoral thesis published in 1974), bears the mark of this influence. Following Freud, Kristeva’s point of departure is ‘the decentering of the ego and the dethronement of consciousness’ in order to interrogate manifestations of the unconscious in human life.21

16 Ibid, 98.
21 Kristeva’s conceptual model evolved from and draws upon Lacan’s introduction of structural semiology into Freudian psychoanalysis.
*Revolution in Poetic Language* contains the laborious and detailed explanation of the distinction between the ‘semiotic’ and ‘symbolic’ dimensions of subjectivity. These can be roughly equated with the Freudian distinction between ‘pre-Oedipal’ and ‘Oedipal’ sexual drives. Crucial to Kristeva’s work is the ambiguity of the interaction between these two modalities. For Kristeva, the heterogeneous realm of drives (semiotic) and the social order (symbolic) is not reducible to ‘irrationality’ as opposed to ‘rationality’. Instead, she targets an integral otherness and its exclusion or subsumption by the symbolic. Kristeva theorises the semiotic in terms of the subversive impetus behind, or the ‘raw’ material of, transgression. Operating through a system of signs and representations, she raises the unconscious to pre-eminence when interpreting artistic and literary transgressions.

Part of Bataille’s attraction for Kristeva, Foucault and other figures of structuralist and post-structuralist thought is that he did not recourse to grand theories or absolutes.22 Bataille did not seek to replace God’s absence with a new metaphysics – a doctrine, or a totalising view; but rather, with a new conception of ‘morality’ that consists in ‘sovereign’ transgression.23 Kristeva recognised the heuristic value in Bataille’s thought and in the group attached to the College de Sociologie (the sociologists of the sacred). For them ‘it was a matter of invoking the probability of human freedom that would part company with servile rationality’.24 Foucault, Kristeva and Bataille interpreted the ‘Death of God’ as the end of dogmatic and ideological rationalisations for oppression. The absolute object of the hermeneutical project had disappeared. The monumental event of God’s ‘death’ opened a cavernous abyss. It prompted significant questions. What do we become with the new-found potential for unlimited freedom and no universal moral compass to guide us? Where is that harbour at which we should arrive? The fear of death covered over for centuries by Christianity was exposed as belonging to an apostolic repository fettered to myth and a censorial belief system acting as an encumbrance to secular enlightenment. John Lechte notes the significance of Bataille’s thought during this period as follows:


Part of Bataille’s attraction for Kristeva and others is in showing that the death of God is not the end of the story – either philosophical or historical. In its continuation, this story – especially as it is taken up by the writer – refuses to bypass the horror of death (man’s own death) which Christianity masked, and which humanity must now confront alone, if it can confront it at all.25

For Bataille, Foucault, Kristeva and others, after God’s death, meaning is no longer dependant on finding a harbour, or a teleology (a finality). This new territory, this chasm of ontological insecurity made vacant by God’s disappearance became the basis for new possibilities of thought and experience, a new point of departure from which a renewed interest in the sacred emerged.26

Inspired by Bataille’s writings and thought, Foucault interrogated the possibility of transgression after the death of God – in a ‘world now emptied of objects, beings, and spaces to desecrate’.27 In the absence of a transcendent being and the sense of the infinite, the writing of limits (sexuality) affirms limited being and Bataille’s writings play a crucial role in interrogating the limits of the subject, and, more precisely, the play of the limit and transgression. The language of sexuality is contemporaneous, ‘both in time and in structure, with that through which we announced to ourselves that God is dead. From the moment that Sade delivered its first words… the language of sexuality lifted us into the night where God is absent’.28 ‘A Preface to Transgression’ was published in the journal Critique after Bataille’s death in 1962. In this seminal essay that inaugurated the critical discourse on transgression, Foucault writes that sexuality ‘is a fissure – not one which surrounds us as the

25 John Lechte, Julia Kristeva, 17.
26 The sociologists that founded the College de Sociologie and the journal Acéphale consisted in the tripartite of Bataille, Michel Leiris and Roger Callois, who wanted to ‘study forms of the sacred in everyday life in light of the so-called capitalist disenchantment of the world’. Lechte is referring to the opinion of Leiris. John Lechte, ‘An Introduction to Bataille: The Impossible as (a Practice of) Writing’, Textual Practice, 7/2 (1993), 180.
basis of our isolation or individuality, but one which marks the limit within us and designates us as the limit’. 29 Foucault contends furthermore that:

We have not in the least liberated sexuality, though we have, to be exact, carried it to its limits: the limit of consciousness, because it ultimately dictates the only possible reading of our unconscious; the limit of the law, since it seems the sole substance of universal taboos; the limit of language, since it traces that line of foam showing just how far speech may advance upon the sands of silence. 30

Foucault made clear that the language of sexuality is linked to a transgression that operates at the limit of discourse. The representations found in the writing of limits leads this thesis directly to the Marquis de Sade. Accordingly, the writings of Blanchot, who declared that Sade is both ‘master of the major trends of thought and of the modern sensibility’ are pertinent. 31 Sade was a profound voice who, from a ‘completely monstrous way of behaving’, engendered a new knowledge: the ‘other’ of reason, which signals the dawning of a humanity engaging in a critical ontology of ourselves as moderns. Sade can be situated beside Nietzsche and Hegel as decisive influences on Bataille’s thought.

Indeed, Bataille’s insistence on the notion of ‘joy before death’ and his disdain for servile rationality recalls Sade. Bataille’s concept of sacred transgression – a notion influenced by Sade’s pornographies – is outlined in his book Erotism. In what may be described as his ‘history of eroticism’ Bataille offers a theory that describes history as one great process of prohibition – of the progressive expulsion of the sacred from human life. According to Bataille the rational world of work deprives us of ‘sovereignty’. The human potential to achieve sovereignty is elided by reason. To attain sovereignty, then, is to have the freedom that consists in consuming without telos, profit, reason. Bataille’s theory of sacrifice and expenditure (dépense) opposes the capitalist logic of production. According to Bataille ‘sovereignty’ is ‘opposed to the servile and the subordinate’ and can be revealed and experienced in the saturnalia of eroticism, festival, intoxication, laughter, poetry – in

30 Ibid.
surrendering oneself wholly to the present moment. The sovereign sacrifice, in Bataille’s view, puts the symbolic realm under threat and a state of excess and somatic dissonance temporarily releases the subject from servitude.

For Bataille, when engaging in expenditure – states of excess and bacchanalia – the subject relinquishes utilitarian ideals and concerns for a future that encumbers continuous being. And this dépense – which he also found in the subversive fiction of Jean Genet and the poetry of Charles Baudelaire – is the basis of all literary and poetic writing for Bataille. In *Erotism*, Bataille canvases the importance of Sade to transgression as follows:

> And if today the average man has a profound insight into what transgression means for him, de Sade was the one who made ready the path. Now the average man knows that he must become aware of the things which repel him most violently – those things which repel us most violently are part of our nature.

The sovereign is related to the symbolic (culture) in the form of the heterogeneous, which includes everything that the homogeneous world (social order) or the world of utility excludes as disgusting or abhorrent – including ‘the sacred social or asocial elements but also the exciting elements of erotic life and in general everything which is an object of disgust’. In some respects, Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic resembles Bataille’s elaboration of a science of the heterogeneous. Both Kristeva and Bataille conceive of the exclusion of sacred elements (heterogeneous) as the indispensable condition of all social forms.

**Transgression**

It is important to establish the definition of transgression that features in the present thesis. What is transgression for the purposes of this thesis? The term transgression carries a straightforward meaning, designating an infraction or violation of a law, norm or code. Importantly, transgression must be distanced from its usual negative associations.

Transgression does not seek to destroy foundations, the law; it does not seek to subvert or do violence to ethics. Philosophically, transgression is more complex, and here some of its key texts and theories will be examined. Transgression as ‘limit experience’ designates the limit that shatters ontological boundaries and epistemological certainties. Foucault proceeds from Bataille, arguing that these kinds of experiences do not give themselves up to discursive meaning – beyond speech and understanding, the limit of discourse and culture, the impossible limit experience is outside of history. What really interested the intellectual generation that came after Bataille was more than his philosophical insights. The délire or stupefaction evoked by the non-knowledge of sovereignty interested them. Bataille writes, for example:

what if knowledge, at least the first impulse of knowledge, were servile? What if servility (the immediate servility) of knowledge had resulted in our current inability to see beyond the useful, to envisage, as – in spite of everything – we might expect, the sovereign: beyond the means, an end that would not be subordinate to any other, a sovereign end?35

Or, to put it in Foucauldian terms, knowledge is the domain of managerial discourses, which saturate the lives of its subjects.36 In counter-point, sovereignty in the Bataillean sense presages a radical autonomy and the ability to imagine a world that does not subordinate all human activities to regulated and systematised patterns of behaviour. Our social existence is not tethered to a reified system of productivity and labour. Blanchot described the limit experience as ‘the response that man encounters when he has decided to put himself radically in question’.37 A limit experience is opening oneself to a disruption of the body and the psyche, to shatter the reflection in which we are shaped as subjects – removing the mask and critiquing its foundations.38

36 ‘For was this transformation of sex into discourse not governed by the endeavor to expel from reality the forms of sexuality that were not amenable to the strict economy of reproduction: to say no to unproductive activities, to banish casual pleasures, to reduce or exclude practices whose object was not procreation?’ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction, tr. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 36.
38 Ibid.
If we understand transgression as a means to de-familiarise the self, to experiment, to move beyond what is comfortable and familiar, we can start to see it for its positive, affirmatory and creative potential. Transgression is the root of the process of invention, of discovering something ‘other’. Bataillean transgression is always at the frontiers of thought and experience. The transgression is not a violent movement representative of radical or global upheaval; but rather, a mode of problematising the sociohistorical limits of the subject. Lechte elaborates:

For Bataille, transgression properly speaking is never absolute, is never about the transformation of society as a whole, and is always limited in time. This is why it is very different from revolutionary practices which aim at the complete overthrow of the existing social order.39

Echoing these sentiments, Foucault recognised that transgression functions most intensively at the moment it crosses the limit: ‘transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration’.40 In Bataille’s thought, transgression and prohibition possess no meaning except in relation to each other. As Foucault put it, ‘The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows.’41 Transgression, in its scintillating movement, must constantly seek new limits. In perhaps the most well-known paragraph from Foucault’s critical discourse on transgression, he conjectured about its future:

Perhaps one day it will seem as decisive for our culture, as much a part of its soil, as the experience of contradiction was at an earlier time for dialectical thought. But in spite of so many scattered signs, the language in which transgression will find its space and the illumination of its being lies almost entirely in the future.42

40 Ibid.
41 Michel Foucault, ‘A Preface to Transgression’, 34.
42 Ibid, 33.
The writings of Kristeva, Foucault and Bataille radiate a sonorous call to transgression, and they express the importance of transgression in principal moments and texts which, in turn, form a significant part of the exegesis in this thesis. For Bataille, as subjects servile to calculative reason; for Foucault, as subjects of discursive knowledges and practices that determine our mode of existence, ways of thinking and relating; and in Kristeva’s work, preserving the human faculty of representation, in the semiotic that lies ‘beyond’ language. These perspectives are critically important to understand because we come to know and shape our world through transgression – the imagination of new possibilities, new ways of thinking and behaving.

Kristeva, and especially Bataille look to transgression as a journey of ecstasy, desire and excess, often invoking representations in art and literature to illuminate aspects of the inner experience. Four hundred years ago, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio communicated in art a sadomasochism imbibed with horror. In Italian Renaissance art, Judith and Holofernes was a common subject. Ostensibly biblical, in one of his twelve illustrations of decapitations, Caravaggio depicts the Jewish heroine Judith, who saved Israel from the invading Assyrian army by decapitating the general, Holofernes after he was made helplessly drunk. This is a self-portrait of the artist, like many of his other paintings. Holofernes’ head is cut off without difficulty because Judith’s strength was given to her by God’s divine assistance, ‘Strengthen me, O Lord God of Israel’. His face is contorted and blood gushes from his head as Judith carves through his neck. An ugly crone, toothless and deeply wrinkled, waits next to her mistress with a bag for Holofernes’ head.

The first of Caravaggio’s paintings of severed heads is also a self-portrait. These paintings are representative of a story of decapitation from Greek antiquity. The cut-off head of the Medusa is painted on a leather shield. A torrent of metallic blood streams from the Gorgon’s head – she has serpents for hair and bulging white eyes. We are looking at the horrified creature just moments after decapitation. The Medusa’s face turned anyone who looked upon it into stone. So that he did not have to look at her face, Perseus had to use a mirror to cut off

43 The prostitute Fillide Melandroni was his model, who also sat for St. Catherine and for the Conversion of the Magdalene.
her head.\textsuperscript{44} On the basis of her theory of the semiotic (see Chapter Two) Kristeva illuminates that the decapitation symbolises the separation of the infant from the mother. The mourning of that abandonment is represented as a decapitation and the pain of separation is overcome through eroticising it in representations of ecstatic victimhood. It is this transubstantiation through representation that Kristeva believes connects humans to the sacred and opens up the space of freedom.

Bataille, Foucault, and Kristeva are united in linking transgression to eroticism, though references to the words sadism and masochism are few in their works with the exception of Foucault in some of his interviews. Sadomasochism appears in Foucault’s thoughts at specific moments, on the question of practices that can have de-subjugating effects and then giving opportunity for the emergence of new kinds of creative communities.

The reader may detect the significant absence in this thesis of one name: Gilles Deleuze, whose paradigm shifting work \textit{Coldness and Cruelty} has become a critical reference for theorising the terms since the English translation was published in 1989. The critical analysis in Deleuze’s work of the incommensurable nature of sadism and masochism could provide this thesis with a critical perspective on the conjunctive account offered by Freudian psychoanalysis. This is not because I consider Deleuze’s engagement with sadomasochism to be negligible. This thesis demonstrates how sadomasochism is linked to the emergence of sexual categories of perversion in nineteenth century scientific thought. A close reading of Deleuze’s theoretical perspective would preclude or at least restrict an in-depth analysis of the connection between sexual categories such as sadomasochism and the positivist science that sought to divide populations, and to supress desire and abolish difference in the interests of hygiene and disciplinary control. The appreciation of the historical context in which the term was produced, as Alison Moore notes, is ‘precisely what is missing in Deleuze’s account’.\textsuperscript{45} Accordingly, the thesis engages Foucault’s genealogy of sexuality in the first volume of \textit{The History of Sexuality}. Critically, this thesis is concerned primarily with transgression; rather than the theorisations of sadism and masochism.


The entrance of sadomasochism into modern discourse

Until the late nineteenth century, the words ‘sadism’ and ‘masochism’ did not exist. The term ‘sadomasochism’ is an invention of modern medical sciences. During the mid-nineteenth century the twin sciences of sexology and criminology began to engender a new nomenclature for talking about sexual acts and behaviours.46 As Elisabeth Roudinesco notes, the old way of speaking about sex – ‘fucking, arses, or cunts, or different ways of wanking, fornicating, buggering, eating shit, sucking, pissing or shitting’ – was replaced by sophisticated terminologies derived from Greek. Latin was also deployed in order to preserve decorum when describing lewd and offensive acts.47

With the discovery of the ‘perversions’, sadism and masochism became, for the first time in history, an object of knowledge.48 In a hallmark of nineteenth century sexology the Austrian psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing developed the classifications in the Psychopathia Sexualis (1886). In this catalogue of sexual aberrations and their relationship to mental illness Krafft-Ebing relied for inspiration on the literary imagination of the novelist (and colleague at the University of Graz), Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and the infamous antecedent, Sade. Sacher-Masoch was archetypal in giving a name to the paradox of pleasure in pain and, importantly, the algolagnia (bondage and humiliation) in masochism, and Sade was useful in giving a name to the pleasure of inflicting cruelty and violence onto other subjects.49

The attempt to classify and encode human sexual behaviours into a great archive of information gradually transformed the sexual ‘other’ from a religious problem into one of hygiene and regulation. Roudinesco demonstrates that with new hygienic vocabularies for talking about sex, based on science and not on religion, the sexologists in alliance with a bourgeois state effectively divided individuals into categories: the ‘normal’ and the

48 Until the nineteenth century, these practices and behaviours were not classified ‘aberrations’ or ‘perversions’. In the seventeenth century, physicians and prostitutes described flagellation as a remedy for erectile dysfunction. See Gilbert Herdt and Cymene Howe, 21st Century Sexualities: Contemporary Issues in Health, Education, and Rights (London: Routledge, 2007).
‘perverse’. This secular and scientific dualism in both intention and consequence replaced the earlier religious polarisation of ‘vice’ and ‘virtue’. Those who choose to ritually inflict harm on one’s own body or the bodies of other subjects (the masochist, the sadist) came to be defined as pathological and sexually aberrant, attached to a personage requiring scientific observation, intervention and regulation.

Chapter One will discuss how Foucault shows the historically constructed and discourse laden nature of these terms. In the History of Sexuality, Volume One, Foucault carefully mapped the history of scientific discourses on sex and sexuality. He attempted to demonstrate that the emergence of modern scientific classifications and pathological constructions in the nineteenth century was linked inextricably to a modern form of liberal power, ‘biopower’. Foucault analyses discursive constructions or ‘dividing practices’ that effectively separate and isolate ‘perverse’ individuals from the rest of society on the basis of their identity. A number of these discursive constellations are critically examined in this thesis. For example, in the twentieth century sadism and masochism was connected to dissipated constitutions that aligned them with ideas of barbarism and sexual perversion. In this historical context, Sade came to serve as a kind of idiographic exegesis for the evil of Nazi cruelty and perversion.

In contemporary Western societies sadomasochism does not have the stigmata of perversion. The twenty-first century has seen a new taste for sexual gratification by whippings and lacerations. In the 1970s and 1980s S/M gained significant cultural currency as a sexual ‘taste’ defined by practices. As Lynn Chancer put it, sadomasochistic sexuality is more on the side of ‘kinky’ rather than ‘sick’, ‘the term now circulates casual conversation with more frequency and fewer stigmatized associations’. In the Netherlands, Australia, the US, Canada, Germany, Britain, Sweden, Denmark and Norway, sadomasochism is a booming subculture. Although there are no definitive numbers, in the US it is estimated that over 14

51 Alison Moore, Sexual Myths of Modernity: Sadism, Masochism, and Historical Teleology (London: Lexington Books, 2016), 55. Moore notes that Kraft-Ebbing, Havelock Ellis, and others of their generation were engaged in a genuine project with the aim of helping patients.
53 Alison Moore, Sexual Myths of Modernity, 11.
21 million individuals engage in S/M behaviour, or 5–10 per cent of the population. Scholars say that in recent years sadomasochism, although still listed in the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) as a pathological illness, is emerging as one life choice among a plurality of others. At mainstream sex shops individuals can purchase S/M paraphernalia such as whips and riding crops.

Media representations of alternative sexualities have also increased dramatically in the last twenty years. It is not unusual to see S/M iconography and motifs in popular music – Robbie Williams, Marilyn Manson and Madonna (who also published her book, Sex, in 1992) are frequently cited examples. Through advertising, Continental Airlines, Ikea, and the fashion and lingerie label Victoria’s Secret have all used S/M motifs and iconography to sell products. In mainstream cinema, Steven Shainberg’s Secretary (2002), a popular film about a man and a woman in a dominant/submissive relationship is another example examined in some detail in Chapter Three. In the 1970s, in both arthouse cinema and low-budget pornography, Nazi iconography became the ultimate symbol of dangerous eroticism. The fascination with eroticised Nazi cruelty is emblematised by Tinto Brass’ Salon Kitty (1976) and Liliana Cavani’s The Night Porter (1974). Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom (1975) depicted a connection between Fascism and sadomasochism. In contrast to Cavani and other filmmakers of that genre, Pasolini was not eroticising Fascism for entertainment. His film derives its orientation from a range of post-war theorists, specifically, Blanchot, Simone de Beauvoir, and Pierre Klossowski’s writings on Sade, and he offers an astonishing vision of Fascist Italy’s descent into rationalised barbarism.


55 Many of the practices associated with S/M are classified as ‘paraphilic disorders’ within the DSM-5. The term ‘perversion’ was never a category within the DSM. The term ‘sexual deviation’ was replaced by the apparently more scientific and less moralistic term ‘paraphilic disorder’ in the DSM-5. Thus, it is possible now for a person to engage in consensual atypical sexual behaviour (for example, masochistic behaviour, fetishism) without being labelled with a mental disorder. Still, the removal of the word ‘perversion’ from psychiatry allows modern medical science to describe anyone as a ‘paraphile’. Darren Langdridge and Trevor Butt, ‘A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Investigation of the Construction of Sadomasochistic Identities’, Sexualities, 7/1 (2004), 31–53.

Thesis rationale and approach

The perspective developed in the thesis on sexual transgression in sadomasochism draws much of its theoretical posture from French post-structuralist theory. The thinkers and writers represent a tradition in critical theory that undermined the human pretension to self-knowledge. Foucault, Kristeva and Bataille offer different ways of thinking about sexual transgression in a society that strives for the rationalisation of sexuality as a knowable process of nature. Foucault saw, apropos Freud and Sade, that the formulation of an erotic language will not reveal any sort of positive truth concerning sexuality. The referents and knowledge that are invoked in the new, formalised taxonomy for diagnosis and the programmatic aspiration informing accounts of sexuality and sadomasochism in the context of scientific positivism is occluded in this thesis.

Based on the writings of representative theorists, this thesis suggests that particular forms of transgression are preceded by critical self-reflection that is coeval with new kinds of social practice, thought and modes of relating. Transgression thus reveals a self-understanding of the contingency of what makes us who we are, including how we think and behave in the realm of sexuality. In order to tease out these dimensions the thesis uses a pastiche of literary text, cinematic text and practitioner’s perspectives from qualitative studies and documentary films. A selection of historical, sociological and artistic sources is invoked in order to establish a wider cultural context for each chapter. In the process, a range of themes emerge: civilisation, progress, morality, pleasure, prohibition, victimhood and mastery, all through different treatments of transgression. The case studies in Chapters Two, Three and Four permit the thesis to direct examinations towards more concrete and empirical transgressions and allows for the elaboration of links between theory and practice.

Having established the motive for the thesis, it is necessary to consider issues of rationale and approach. First, the decision to examine French literature needs further clarification. The tradition of French intellectual thought engaged within the thesis was concerned with expounding the literary text as a model site for transgressing limits. The literary representation has the capacity to breach the limits of discourse, of thought, and experience.

since writing permits the exploration of states and potentials that are proscribed in everyday life. Kristeva, Foucault, Bataille and others depart from the essentialist dichotomies of scientific culture, in contradistinction to healthy v pathological, regressive v progressive, rational v irrational, natural v contrary to nature, and so on – they looked to transgressive texts as exemplary instances of the decentred subject. They saw that the erotic writer can still use language in a poetic way, such that the reader, assaulted by obscenity, gripped by the shock of the unexpected and unimaginable, is moved into the ambivalence of loathing and pleasure.

Importantly, this is a thesis which engages seriously with the aesthetic of sadomasochism, beginning with representations in literature, then advancing to figurations of sadism and masochism in cinema. The thesis orientates itself around cinema and literature with the conviction that they provide a specific and unique window into the modes of thinking and ways of relating particular to their moment. The texts and theories combined comprise the angle that I introduce to understand sadomasochism as a mode of transgression that has been used through history as a provocative means to challenge hegemonic regimes of control.

**Thesis structure**

Chapter One addresses the question of the subject in the writings of Freud, Kristeva, Bataille and Foucault. The chapter identifies at the heart of the making of the subject the experience of prohibition, theorised differently between psychoanalytic and Foucauldian perspectives. In this problematic, the different theorists demonstrate the social, political, sexual and psychic aspects of sadomasochism that cannot be thought outside of social taboos and the realm of discourse.

Freud is significant for two main reasons. First, for the psychoanalytic ‘discovery’ of the unconscious Freud is situated beside Nietzsche and Karl Marx, among those ‘whose works define the horizon of contemporary knowledges of human subjectivity’.\(^58\) Freud’s theories contributed to the dethronement of the Cartesian subject and its pretention to self-understanding. The ‘knowing’ subject of the prevailing Cartesian understanding was

radically interrupted by a consciousness decentred by hidden drives and unconscious desires. Freud departed from the embedded scientific conservatism of his time, postulating in 1905 that perversion exists to different degrees in all forms of human sexuality. Freud’s theories of the unconscious and infantile sexual development become fundamental in explicating an understanding of perversion. In Freud’s early work, the re-sexualisation of prohibition experienced during early childhood is central to his interpretation of sadomasochism, placing it within a theory of perversion. This is necessary to unpack and carefully delineate the connections between the sexual instincts, the Oedipus complex, the threat of punishment and the creation of a superego. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud reformulates the early theory of sadomasochism and assumes that in principle there is no difference between sadism and masochism – both stemming from primary masochism (death drive).  

Freud’s interpretations are preliminary, and the recent hermeneutics found in Kristeva’s ‘post’ Freudian texts serve as a form of re-evaluation. Kristeva’s work occupies the centre of this chapter. Her contribution provides critical analytic insight into the importance of language in the formation of the subject. The subject’s formation as a speaking and representing being permits an analysis of the details concerning the representation of repressed fears and desires in writing and art. These depictions engulf images depicting decapitations and are linked to narratives portraying mortifying sexuality and dangerous sadomasochistic liaisons. For Kristeva, artistic representations of sadomasochism are made possible by a rupture of the semiotic into the symbolic. The semiotic ‘breach’ or rupture into the symbolic constitutes a crisis of subjectivity and the condition of a possibility of creative transgression.

The thought of Bataille is drawn upon to bridge the Foucauldian and psychoanalytic theories. In *Eroticism*, Bataille theorises that the universal taboo against murder and incest is essential to understanding the foundations of the social order (this idea unites Bataille with Kristeva and Freud). For Bataille, eroticism is intimately linked to taboo and transgression. Bataille recognises eroticism as a source material for a dissolution of self that removes the individual subject from their normal state of self-possession. Eroticism is intrinsically linked to violence

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59 And throughout Freud’s later writings in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), though it is mostly explicitly discussed in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930).
in Bataille’s works, it encompasses what the world of work excludes with its diverse interdictions. Eroticism and violence express heterogeneity as opposed to order and rules and persist in repressed form beneath all social arrangements (institutions, family, culture). The ambiguity between heterogeneity (difference, otherness) and symbolic homogeneity in modernity is crucial to understanding the representative theorists in this thesis. Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, Volume One, while not directly applying these terms, nevertheless, is concerned with investigating modern liberalism and its attempt at controlling its ‘other’ in the production of discourses; this also points to the formative influence of social interdiction impinging the subject. The analysis seeks to demonstrate through these diverse analyses that the intervention of the social on the subject is a normalising one. The chapter thus argues that their common contribution to this issue is the generative or productive capacity of interdiction.

Chapter Two discusses the literary amplification of transgression to extreme limits of thought and experience. The authors of erotic literature provided a vocabulary and an iconography for thinking about the destructive dimensions of human subjectivity. The works of Sade, Baudelaire, Bataille and Genet demonstrate prescient reflections on their given epochal present. The literary representation of violent and dangerous eroticism is analysed against their consciousness of modernity, extending from Sade in the eighteenth century, to Baudelaire in the nineteenth, and then continuing with Bataille and Genet in the twentieth century. Sadomasochistic passions, desires and fantasies are invoked as a mechanism for exposing and critiquing the limits of historically variable sociosexual norms. The transgressive literature from which Foucault discerned the ‘scattered signs’ of transgression that, more profound than sociohistorical contingencies, push against the constraints of socially sanctioned sexual behaviours to portray violent lacerations and mutilations that exceed history and social period, affirming limited being and exposing the deep-rooted borders of the subject.

Accordingly, the essays by Barthes and Blanchot are essential in thinking about Sade. The chapter explores the implications of Sade’s philosophy and his ideas about nature, particularly in relation to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Enlightenment. In turn, Baudelaire, the poet and prescient thinker of modernity depicts the ‘vices’ of urbanised and industrialised nineteenth century France. Baudelaire heroized the self-conscious modern man and woman
of the street. The modern individual embraces the novelty and fleetingness of urban life, always looking for new experiences and sensations, emerging as a kind of transgressive flâneur. Baudelaire’s transgression in the book of poems, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) was to elevate criminals and outcastes alike to the status of heroes. There was a palpable aggrandisement in Baudelaire’s portrayal of the ‘condemned’ – lesbians, self-torturers, prostitutes, murderers. In consequence, Baudelaire conveys unsparing severe judgements on the nineteenth century science that sought to impugn and pathologise marginalised expressions of sexuality and perversion. Finally, Bataille and Genet are situated together as contemporaneous figures during the middle of the twentieth century. They continue the Sadean legacy of transgression in the depiction of characters who experience ecstatic pleasure in the destruction of limits.

Sadomasochistic eroticism is coupled with the subversive moves traversing the narratives of authors where sexualised violence dislocates and reconfigures the whole edifice of religious authority (Sade), the detersive moralism characteristic of Enlightenment institutions (Baudelaire), and seditious desiring production confronting normative interdictions (Bataille, Genet). These authors examine, expose and contest unified subjective being. They problematise the prevailing philosophical ideas of the time, such as the dialectic of opposites separating good and evil, pleasure and pain, and the boundaries separating subject and object. The characters of their fictions are embodiments of elements, features and facets of both sociohistorical epochs and the transgression that sought to dismantle them.

Chapter Three is devoted to a more specifically focused discussion of Foucault’s work. As noted, in his early writings Foucault sought the philosophical counterpart for thinking about the subject at the limit of identity in the writings of Bataille. The obliteration of individual personal history, identity, and the ‘ego’ of the Bataillean limit experience is contrasted, in Chapter Three, with the later works on ancient technologies of the self that, for Foucault, can have a de-subjugating consequence that amounts to a transgression of normalising regimes of the body in favour of self-fashioning. In Foucault’s view, an aesthetics of existence that is highly personalised and not guided by totalising doctrines of the body, can correspond to technical and strategic elaborations of the self seen in S/M sexuality. Foucault’s is potentially a more political operationalisation of strategies of transgression. For Foucault, the possibilities for contesting and re-evaluating subjectivity are found within the field of power.
itself. The Foucauldian conceptual framework forms the basis for understanding the practices of consensual S/M as correlative with a form of a new politics of the self.

To illustrate this, the chapter examines the techniques devised by early gay and lesbian activists to change their relationship with oppressive power structures. The discursive reversal of power’s effects in displacing the original pathological meaning of sexuality through a strategic ‘reterritorialisation’ is expounded. I discuss how early sexual minorities disengaged themselves from the identity model through which power had labelled and governed them. Finally, the experiences of S/M are analysed and presented as ethical sexual practices, often reacting to and reformulating the way in which the collective is created. This is conveyed by practitioners predominantly in terms of transformative limit experiences that involve certain learned techniques and prescribed forms of conduct. From this, it is argued that S/M practice is both a political and ethical act of resistance. The S/M subculture demonstrates that the realisation of transgression can have far-reaching political implications. Foucault’s pronouncements on S/M as an example of a self-stylising practice is a part of a call in the later period of his writing for a new ethics of the self in modernity.

Chapter Four examines recent trends in contemporary cinema in order to expound the question concerning whether transgression is still possible in modern society. It considers the practice of art cinema and its capacity to attest to and refract transgression. The chapter focuses on erotic violence in contemporary cinema and provides a critical analysis. I begin by describing how popular fascination with sadomasochism started to emerge in ‘sexploitation’ films and low-budget pornography during the late 1960s and the 1970s. Next, I critically examine the enlistment of scientific and normative ideas that sadomasochism is packaged within. Beginning with Bataille’s thought on waste and expenditure, most clearly articulated in his early essay ‘The Psychological Structure of Fascism’, an insight can be found into the attraction of transgression in modern cinematic representations. Nevertheless, from a Bataillean perspective, the profane use of sacred elements to generate rational products for consumption does not constitute true transgression.

The discussion of sadomasochism in mainstream film and entertainment culture is contextualised within the discursive setting that underlies and informs these representations themselves. I offer a short reading of Shainberg’s film Secretary and E. L. James’ Fifty
Shades of Grey (2011) and consider the extent to which normative and pathologising discourses permeate representations of sadomasochistic eroticism in these two popular stories. Insofar as it functions as a crucial transfer point for the dissemination of ideas, the presence of sexual violence in internet pornography is an important consideration that receives attention.

Of particular interest here is the relationship of the cinematic image to violence and sexuality. The art film exploits voyeurism rather than empathy for characters as a part of a project in which the director seeks to transform the way audiences think and feel in a cruel way. It is a ‘cinema of evil’ designated to destabilise the normative social membrane. This transgressive practice remains at the centre of debate, notably in France. The question raised is whether cinema enables genuine instances of transgression in Bataille’s sense, or rather, on the contrary, it deviously breaks boundaries in the guise of being a more honest presentation of the violence in the real world. Transgression is frequently used by agents as they struggle with regulatory procedures of normalisation that divide and regulate populations.

The conclusion draws the central themes and arguments of the thesis together and returns to the wider question of transgression in modernity. The history of sadomasochism – ‘discovered’ by nineteenth century science in literature, revisited and recast by scholars and philosophers in the twentieth century; the S/M practices around which subcultures continue to form, and the nocturnal language of destructive pleasure and excess represented in the cinema of ‘evil’ – demonstrates that it has a rich and long-standing proximity to the self-understanding of a society that constantly seeks out new limits to transgress. Sadomasochism, as Chapter One and Three demonstrate, is complex and viscous, especially when considered in the terms of psychoanalytic and Foucauldian analysis. In undertaking a re-reading of key texts and thinkers from the French literary tradition that paved the way for our understanding of transgression, the essential features constitutive of veritable transgression are explored and recast in new ways. For Kristeva, Bataille and Foucault the tableau representing the taboo, the knowledge of transgression in its rule-breaking function remains exigent; their writings provide a means, providing methods and approaches, for individuals to continue to reassess the limits of what it means to be transgressive.
Chapter One

Interdiction as a culturally productive force: Freud, Kristeva, Bataille and Foucault

Sadomasochism is not conceivable without the formation of basic taboos – religious or secular – that govern societies and individuals. A central point of analysis in theorising the subversive subject encompasses the play between interdiction and transgression. This idea is expounded in the works of four European thinkers: Freud, Kristeva, Bataille and Foucault. Freud conceptualised sadomasochism and theorised its relation to ‘perversion’. Historically, sadomasochism and its practices and behaviours were not always seen as pathological. In the late seventeenth century, London and Paris had a thriving range of specialised flagellation brothels. Physicians and prostitutes prescribed flagellation as a remedy for erectile dysfunction, with no specific classifications to describe these practices. A century later, the word sadism became a major concept for Krafft-Ebing and the generation of psychiatrists, including Havelock Ellis and Albert Moll, who linked it to masochism, and associated it with a grid of thought articulating sexual perversion in modern civilisation. In this fin de siècle psychiatric setting the relationship between the civilising process and retrograde barbarism was a commonplace discussion. Freud, who conceptualised the entity of sadomasochism, made a significant departure from Krafft-Ebing’s degenerationist assumptions and, going beyond classification, ascribed to sadomasochism a universal instinctual element.

This chapter examines Freud’s account in terms of historical foundations and foregrounds some important psychoanalytic concepts, before moving into contemporary psychoanalytic perspectives using the works of Kristeva. From this point in the chapter, the desires and passions that correspond to sadomasochism are discussed using a different nomenclature. The objective, in expounding the psychic dimensions of transgression, is to distance the analysis from rigid classifications and to interrogate the subject bound up with fears and passions that Kristeva relates to the semiotic. The inaugural ‘events’ of the acquisition of

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60 Alison Moore, Sexual Myths of Modernity, 3.
62 Ibid, 56.
language and the castration complex are fundamental to her elaboration of transgression in the symbolic structure. Here, the chapter elaborates the psychic pre-conditions of representational art that depict eroticised suffering and victimhood. Although Kristeva maintains a critical distance from the Freudian position, she adheres to some key Freudian concepts that are discussed in the chapter: castration complex, ambivalence, and life and death drives. As a semiotician and a psychoanalyst concerned primarily with analysing the connection between the semiotic and artistic and literary transgressions, Kristeva provides an analysis of the entrance of (reversible) drive energy in the social through a symbolic process of representation.

Continuing on the trajectory of ‘interior experience’ of transgression the chapter moves into an analysis of Bataille’s thought on unproductive expenditure, which is constitutive in his theories of transgression and sacrifice. Bataille’s writings and thought insist on the necessity of subversive forms in exceeding the limits of the rational world of utility and production. In a violent movement that affirms the power of the sacred, transgression exceeds the limits of order and stability necessary for work life. While prohibition or taboo is fundamental to the existence of transgressive erotic forms, all sexual practices presuppose a discourse. As Barthes writes: ‘Let us (if we can) imagine a society without language. Here is a man copulating with a woman, a tergo, and using in the act a bit of wheat paste. On this level, no perversion.’63 The ‘perverse’ thus presupposes the existence of art, language and discourse on sex.64 Foucault’s work comprises a historical interrogation of discourses of ‘truth’ that, he claims, since the eighteenth century constructed ‘sexuality’ as a source of truth and self-knowledge. The discourse on sex and its intrinsic relation to the modern regime of liberal power is expounded with a focus on the normalising effects of scientific discourse. The normalising consequences of these technologies of power confine subjects to their identity in a ubiquitous and encompassing procedure of enforced, though barely perceptible, interdiction. We begin, however, with Freud’s theoretical expositions.

64 The perversions, in particular: sadism, masochism, fetishism, exhibitionism and voyeurism derived to a considerable extent from pornographic and erotic literature and art. Anna Katharina Schaffner documents the extent to which sexologists depended on the authors of pornographic literature and art for formulating encyclopedias of perversion. Anna Katharina Schaffner, Modernism and Perversion: Sexual Deviance in Sexology and Literature, 1850-1930, (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
Freud, sexuality, subjectivity and sadomasochism

Freud’s theory of sadomasochism developed through two major formulations, first in relation to the sexual and ego instincts, and then in relation to the dualism of the life and death instincts. To the extent that these developments contributed to the evolution of the theories of the instincts, sadomasochism is of considerable importance to Freud’s psychoanalytic thought. Sadomasochism is presented by Freud within in a developmental account of subjectivity – from infancy to adulthood – formed in the psyche through transformations in the subject at the stage of the Oedipus complex. Central to Freud’s theory is the threat of castration during the Oedipal phase. The castration complex initiates a ‘desexualisation’ of libidinal impulses directed at the parents, which are replaced with morality in the form of the superego, culminating in the destruction of the Oedipus complex. The psychic formation of sadomasochism represents a disavowal of castration (prohibition) as the re-sexualisation of the Oedipus complex, a re-cathexis of repressed pre-Oedipal drives. I expound the question concerning what this path of transgression taken by the subject is a means to.

In Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, Freud defines perversion as a transgression and as inhibited development: ‘Perversions are sexual activities which either (a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designated for sexual union, or (b) linger over the immediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim.’ In this view, there is an attachment, characteristic to the child, to the erogenous zones (mouth, anus, skin) that orient the body of the child to the mother. The ‘oral’ and ‘anal’ drives are structured around the mother’s body. The period of these drives, fundamental to the development of infantile libido is called sadistic and concludes after the destruction of the Oedipus complex. Of the two, the anal


phase is the most important, because it is the last to be suppressed before the imposition of the Oedipus complex. The sadistic drive is essential to the normal phases of libido organisation, and, in the first theory, is the origin of sadism proper, with masochism being complimentary to sadism as its reversal onto the subject’s own self. Before we proceed, it is necessary to take a few steps backwards in order to consider the perspective from which Freud’s theory of sadomasochism first developed.

Freud rehearsed the prevailing views of nineteenth century sexology, pioneered by Krafft-Ebing, who was also his contemporary.\(^{68}\) The sexological views of the nineteenth century were varied, but the dominant idea was that the perversions signal a return of savage impulses. As Moore explains, the Darwinian interpretation of nature informed the discourse of sexologists. The theory of evolution of the human species from animality into civilisation supported the notion of inferiority or degeneration.\(^{69}\) Freud inherited the idea that perversion is an essential part of civilisation. But rather than grounding perversion in the return to animal nature as the sign of human degeneracy that can never be surmounted, he argues instead that access to culture is the only thing that can save humanity from its own self-destructive drives. Freud had to abandon this aspect of perversion derived from sexology in order to maintain that ‘there is indeed something innate lying behind the perversions … something innate in everyone’.\(^{70}\) Freud continued to contend furthermore that his contemporaries ‘ascribed much more influence to hereditary – than to the other primeval period – that is, to childhood’.\(^{71}\)

With Freud, sadomasochism shifted from being seen as abnormal regressions to civilisation’s barbaric past, or as ‘decadent neurosis’ characteristic of the fin de siècle society, to a predominant component drive in normal sexual development. Freud’s discussion of sexuality in Three Essays begins with sections on homosexuality, fetishism, exhibitionism, sadism and

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\(^{68}\) And others of his generation, including Ellis and Moll, who held the view that perversion was a result of degeneration. According to Moore, ‘Sexual pathology in this view resulted from decadent civilization’ in which individuals regress to earlier phases of civilisation. See Alison Moore, *Sexual Myths of Modernity*, 28. For a detailed study on sexologists see Frank J. Sulloway, *Freud, Biologist of the Mind: Beyond the Psychoanalytic Legend* (Burnett Books: London, 1979).

\(^{69}\) Alison Moore, *Sexual Myths of Modernity*, 47–49.

\(^{70}\) Ibid, 50.

masochism, all having in common their grounding in infantile sexuality.\textsuperscript{72} Thus, the perversions lose their abnormal character once they are situated within, as Leo Bersani has aptly described it, a ‘history of sexuality’.\textsuperscript{73}

According to Freud, the infant child begins life in a ‘polymorphously perverse’\textsuperscript{74} disposition, designating the phase in psycho-sexual development before the genital organisation of sexuality, which permanently continues its existence in the sexuality of adults in repressed form.\textsuperscript{75} During the course of development, the pre-genital ‘component drives’ are harmonised and adjusted to genitally focused sexuality.\textsuperscript{76} It is pivotal in Freud’s thinking, to understand that the sexual drives are not ‘soldered’ to a linear path that leads to heterosexual and reproductive coupling.\textsuperscript{77} For Freud, heterosexuality is an object choice, a manipulation of the drives in the face of a multiplicity of possible object choices. Consequently, heterosexuality is for Freud an artificial unification of the drives through which they are geared toward genital sexuality and the coupling of members of the opposite sex. Freud’s theory postulates that the perverse is a structure of human sexuality, that every subject is potentially perverse, and that ‘every subject could be defined as a former pervert who had become normal after having internalised the principles of the Law as major taboos’.\textsuperscript{78} In Three Essays, Freud introduces a new subject ‘completely alien to the angelism of the Rousseauistic child’,\textsuperscript{79} which shocked his contemporaries.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, 13.
\textsuperscript{74} Even before Freud described them as ‘polymorphously perverse’, children were already considered sexual beings. During the nineteenth century, childhood perversion became the object of scientific interrogations, in the attempt understand its origins and discover ways of curing it. Within psychiatric discourse, childhood masturbation came to be seen as both a symptom of and potential cause of perversion. Elisabeth Roudinesco, Our Dark Side: A History of Perversion, 65.
\textsuperscript{75} Sigmund Freud, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, 69.
\textsuperscript{76} The pre-genital are the phases delineated by Freud ‘in which the genital zones have not yet taken over their predominant part’. Ibid, 76.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, 39.
\textsuperscript{78} Elisabeth Roudinesco, Our Dark Side: A History of Perversion, 73.
Beginning with ‘The Sexual Aberrations’, the title of the introduction to the first essay of the *Three Essays*, Freud’s counter-teleological argument is evoked as a discrepancy concerning the pre-eminence traditionally ascribed to the object, in favour of the drives.\(^80\) It is from this perspective – maintaining our thoughts on the drives as opposed to the object – that, in the 1915 essay ‘Instincts and their Vicissitudes’ we are guided by Freud to consider the possible variations of the sadistic and masochistic drives in regard to the aim, which is always satisfaction.

**A sadist is always at the same time a masochist**

Freud’s contention that ‘a sadist is always at the same time a masochist’ produced the entity of ‘sadomasochism’.\(^81\) In ‘Instincts and their Vicissitudes’, Freud illustrated the manifold variations of the drives in the achievement of satisfaction through sadism. For Freud, sadism precedes masochism and derives from the aggressive or sadistic component of the sexual instinct. The sadistic component is an aspect of normal sexual instinct and is thought to be essential in facilitating the achievement of satisfaction (mastery or dominance over an object).\(^82\) At this stage it is not cruel, the aim is gratification. In the sadist, according to Freud, the sadistic component becomes independent of the sexual instinct ‘and, by displacement has usurped the leading position’.\(^83\) Here, Freud postulates two types of sadism: one that is aggressive and aims at domination, and one that is pleasure-seeking in that its objective is to produce pain in others. The sadist’s pleasure in inflicting pain onto the other is explained through the earlier experience of masochism. According to Freud, the sadist is only able to experience pleasure in inflicting pain onto other people because he or she has experienced an earlier connection between his or her own pleasure and the pain he or she has suffered. It would never occur to the sadist to find pleasure in other people’s pain if he or she had not first undergone the masochistic experience of a link between pain and pleasure. The sadist


\(^{81}\) Ibid, 36.

\(^{82}\) The *aim* of a drive is fixed, geared toward gratification. What is most variable about the aim of a drive is its *object* (*Objekt*), being ‘the thing in regard to which or through which the instinct is able to achieve its aim’. Sigmund Freud, ‘Instincts and their Vicissitudes’ (1915), in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIV, tr. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press), 122.

can experience sexual pleasure in the pain of the other from what Freud describes as a ‘convenient’ position.\textsuperscript{84}

Freud provides an explanation for masochistic pleasure in pain. Stimulation, passing beyond certain qualitative limits, is the basis for masochistic erogeneity. Freud does not doubt that the masochist experiences pleasure in the violence or humiliation inflicted on them, because ‘we have every reason to believe that sensations of pain, like other unpleasurable sensations, trench upon sexual excitation and produce a pleasurable condition, for the sake of which the subject will even willingly experience the unpleasure of pain.’\textsuperscript{85} The erotogenic basis of masochism makes possible the sexual pleasure in the pain of punishment. Freud contends furthermore that this erogeneity is the factor which makes possible the masochist’s re-sexualisation of the Oedipus complex.\textsuperscript{86}

According to Freud, the Oedipus complex is the origin of all perversions, including sadomasochism. We are concerned here with the influence of prohibition at the Oedipal phase of sexual development and its resolution. The main factors that determine the reversal of sadism upon the subject’s own self are the castration complex and the sense of guilt.\textsuperscript{87} According to Freud, masochism begins by wanting to take the place of the father. At the genital stage of development, when the drive and object are maturing and the child seeks its first love object, the child directs sadistic impulses at its rivals (siblings, mother), who stand in the way of receiving the undivided love of the parental figure. Freud writes that the fantasy is spoken as: ‘My father does not love this other child, he loves only me.’\textsuperscript{88} According to this theory, the subject will attempt to evade the consequences of the transgression against the father through identifying with the mother, and offering itself to be beaten by the father. The

\textsuperscript{84} Sigmund Freud, ‘Instincts and their Vicissitudes’, 129.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 128.
\textsuperscript{86} Freud described the father’s (imagined or real) interference with the mother–child relationship as the Oedipus complex.
\textsuperscript{87} Sigmund Freud, \textit{Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality}, 37.
sadistic drive thus becomes inverted in a passivation that constitutes masochism. For Freud, the Oedipus complex has great importance in masochism because the desire to be beaten by the father comes from the sadistic component of the sexual instinct, the last to be repressed after the threat of castration.

The guilt feelings and the threat of castration cause the ego to turn away from the Oedipus complex – incestuous wishes are repressed and remain unconscious. The desexualisation of the Oedipus complex is completed by the formation of the superego, which is the ego’s introjection of the parental figures, the first objects of the sexual instincts. The superego is the substitute for the Oedipus complex, and the cause of its destruction by virtue of the desexualisation of the complex and the institution of morality in the form of the superego: ‘in this way the Oedipus complex proves to be – as has already been conjectured in a historical sense – the source of our individual ethical sense, our morality’. Freud is referring to the mythic story of the murder of the primordial father found in his 1913 essay titled Totem and Taboo. The origins of patriarchy are theorised by Freud as having an archaic symbolic function in the history of the foundation of the social code and that of religion, in which Freud theorises the social and historical significance of the emotional ambivalence felt toward the father. The murder of the primordial father by his sons and their obedience to the dead father inspired longing for the vanquished father through the religious reassertion of paternal authority and the obedience thereof. Thus, for Freud the foundation of society is guilt –

89 Freud associates with masochism the intense erotic pleasure in being ‘gagged, bound, painfully beaten, whipped, in some way maltreated, forced into unconditional obedience, dirtied and debased’. Sigmund Freud, ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’, 162.

90 The identification with the mother during the Oedipal stage is through the character of sexual passivity and being castrated. This image of the mother is not the result of a confrontation with the female reality; rather, it is a projection of the subject’s fantasy of what he would be like if, like the mother, he submitted to the father sexually.

91 The ego is responsible for the unification of the demands of the id and the superego. In The Ego and the Id Freud defines the ego as an agency that intervenes in the conflict between the sexual instincts originating from the id and the demands of external reality. ‘The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions.’ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Ego and the Id’ (1923), in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX, tr. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), 25.


engendered after the crime of murder and incest – which would establish the basis of the social contract in the name of the original parricide, the Oedipal law.

Through what process is Freud led to ascribe masochism to the ego and sadism to the superego? Freud carefully distinguishes between them; despite that they seem to be analogous expressions characterised by a severe sense of morality and a tendency to punishment. In one case, the ego is not actually masochistic but submits to a cruel superego. In the other, a masochistic ego will offer itself, in roundabout ways, to be punished by the superego or an external agent. The superego assumes the inclination to punish and supervise of the introjected parental figure that it replaces. The superego is a formation of the ego’s repression of ‘the id’s libidinal impulses’ and the internalisation of the punishment. But the success of repression is, it may be said, flimsy. A re-cathexis of repressed incestuous Oedipal objects, the re-sexualisation of the Oedipus complex, is constitutive of a disavowal of the morality of the Oedipus complex.

A masochistic ego seeks punishment either at the hands of the sadistic superego or some external parental power. However, a sense of guilt is not what characterises the moral masochist. Masochism cannot come about without the process of desexualisation and resexualisation:

We now know that the wish … to be beaten by the father stands very close to the other wish, to have a passive (feminine) sexual relation to him and is only a regressive distortion of it. If we insert this explanation into the content of moral masochism, its hidden meaning becomes clear to us. Conscience and morality have arisen through the overcoming, the desexualization of the Oedipus complex; but through moral masochism morality becomes sexualized once more, the Oedipus complex is revived and the way is opened for a regression from morality to the Oedipus complex.

95 The moral masochist seeks suffering in variable forms. Freud nevertheless recognises that one form of suffering replaces another. In the life of a moral masochist all that matters is a certain constancy of suffering. The authentic masochist, Freud writes, ‘always turns his cheek whenever he has a chance of receiving a blow’. Sigmund Freud, ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’, 165.

96 Ibid.

Freud postulates that there is no masochism without a sexualisation of the prohibition; in order to make sexual pleasure possible without guilt the masochist repudiates the morality embedded in the Oedipus complex. The authority of the Oedipal system imposes hidden incestuous desires in children’s psyche and engenders jealous aggression in the depths of the body. The authority of the father is introjected as the superego and, in masochism, it is disavowed in an artful transference, a conversion where punishment emerges as a source of libidinal pleasure. Masochism is thus evocative of a transgression of the internalised principles that had been instilled in the subject in the form of the law ‘thou shalt not kill (thy father)’ and the prohibition against incest ‘thou shalt not commit adultery (with thy mother)’.98

Freud’s account of masochism is evoked in detail in ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’ as a re-sexualisation of the already surmounted (desequalised) Oedipus complex. Here, Freud mentions that the danger of this particular combination of the instincts (aggressive and libidinal) is that they have their origin in the death instinct. We are being led by Freud into a new interpretation of the ego instincts and the sexual instincts, which alters the understanding of the origins of masochism. While sadism can be reversed on the self as masochism Freud eventually situated sadomasochism outside of the category of the perversions because of the theoretical development of the death drive. This does not mean that the Oedipus complex cannot instigate sadism’s ‘reversal upon the self’ – this theory remains; however, Freud maintains that masochism’s origins are in the death drive. In this theory, all subsequent formations are secondary to primal sadism, which is the same as masochism.99

**Primal sadism, masochism, and death instinct**

Freud first introduced the death instinct in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’. The life and death instincts now replace the old formulation of the ego and sexual instinct. Freud was not

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98 Freud writes, in ‘Thoughts for the Times on War and Death’ that ‘the very emphasis laid on the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” makes it certain that we spring from an endless series of generations of murders, who had the lust for killing in their blood, as, perhaps, we ourselves have today’. Sigmund Freud, cited in Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Our Dark Side: A History of Perversion*, 73.

99 Freud complains of knowing too little of sadism and masochism. In a footnote in *Three Essays*, from 1924, Freud writes: ‘It is this enquiry that has led us to assign a peculiar position, based upon the origin of the instincts, to the pair of opposites constituted by sadism and masochism, and to place them outside the class of the remaining “perversions”.’ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 38.
concerned with exceptions to the pleasure principle – because the principle interacts with other psychic mechanisms that often lead to unpleasure – namely, the ‘reality principle’; but rather, with what he meant by the ‘beyond’ of the title. If the libidinal instincts govern human life, then how is the masochist’s desire to take pleasure to the extreme of self-dissolution explained? And for sadism, the pleasure in inflicting cruelty and destroying other people? Sadism and masochism, inter alia, are concerns that led Freud to posit the death drive. With this new theory, sadism and masochism are explained according to the fusion of life and death drives.

According to Freud, the life drive works to unite or bind the cells of a living organism through an increase of tension. The aim of the life drive and the essential aim of sexuality is the union of two organisms through tension increase. The death drive unbinds the unity of all living organisms that is created by the life instincts. Freud asks, ‘How can the sadistic instinct which aims at destruction be attributed to the sexual instinct (Eros)? Is it not possible that this sadism is in fact a death instinct?’ He continues:

The existence of a masochistic trend in the instinctual life of human beings may justly be described as mysterious from an economic point of view. For if mental processes are governed by the pleasure principle in such a way that their first aim is the avoidance of unpleasure and the obtaining of pleasure, masochism is incomprehensible. If pain and unpleasure can be not simply warnings but actually aims, the pleasure principle is paralysed – it is as though the watchman over our mental life were put out of action by a drug.100

Recognising that the inorganic or non-living state precedes the living, Freud postulated the existence of a drive in the life of an organism, contrary to the erotic principle of unity, which tends toward a return to ‘an earlier state’.101 The death drive is a biologically rooted tendency to repeat what came before the advent of life, the inorganic state and homeostasis. Silent, except for when it becomes fused with Eros, the death drive cannot be given as it is without

its fusing with the sexual instinct. With the help of the life drives (Eros), the death instinct (Thanatos) is eroticised.

The 1924 essay, ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’ is Freud’s most important text on the relation between the death drive and sexuality. Freud identifies a ‘primary masochism’ out of which two later forms can develop, ‘feminine’ and ‘moral’ masochism, while masochism as self-directed sadism is given a separate term, ‘secondary masochism’. Freud contends furthermore that part of the death drive is directed outwards through the muscular system toward the external world as ‘the will to power’.102 In the presence of the sexual instinct, this pure destructive impulse constitutes sadism, and the portion of the drive which remains ‘libidinally bound’ inside the subject, and ‘does not share in this transposition outwards’ but remains inside, corresponds with what Freud termed ‘erotogenic’ masochism.103 Erogenous masochism is an eroticisation of the death instinct. The pleasure that is beyond the pleasure principle is a pleasure that derives from the sadistic component of the sexual instinct, which Freud identifies with the death drive.

In the historical context of the moral and scientific conservatism enveloping Freud’s milieu, the death drive was a radical hypothesis. As Nobus notes, ‘many post-Freudian psychoanalysts, including Anna Freud, rejected Freud’s death drive on the grounds that it was superfluous – an immaterial and unnecessary speculation – or simply morally objectionable’.104 Freud’s earlier theory of sadomasochism (which conformed to the category of ‘perversion’) continued to hold sway among post-Freudians who were sceptical of the death drive. In *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Freud mocked his prudent contemporaries: ‘for little children do not like it when there is talk of man’s inborn tendency to “wickedness”, to aggression and destruction, and therefore to cruelty’.105 Despite retaliations and resistances within psychoanalysis, the different theoretical currents influenced by this component in

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103 Ibid. Nevertheless, we once again encounter Freud’s original postulation of ‘sadism turned around’ – a secondary masochism (in the form of ‘feminine’ or ‘moral’ masochism), which is added to original masochism.


Freud’s theory include those of Kristeva, who sheds new light on the impact of the ‘death drive’ identified by Freud.

**Kristeva: representations of semiotic transgression**

Could sadomasochism be the secret of the unconscious? Freud comes close to thinking so when he assigns a logic of drives to the unconscious and when he describes those drives as reversible: active/passive, Eros/Thanatos.

– Kristeva

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva makes note of Freud’s silence ‘on the subject of anality’, with reference to the limitations of psychoanalysis in taking into account the ‘economy of the subject bound up with those fantasies that dissolves the symbolic and language’. Kristeva is referring to what Freud terms the sadistic component of the sexual instinct, which he connects to the death drive. For Kristeva, the ‘reactivation of anality’ can result in a transgression of symbolic systems (language, sign) which, in turn, can put the subject ‘in process/on trial’. Kristeva’s conception of the semiotic stands in contrast to Freud’s emphasis on the paternal function and emphasises the developing child’s relation to the mother’s body. The focus on the mother-child relation in Kristeva’s account of human sexuality and subjectivity is widely looked to among scholars as a feminist response to Freud’s phallocentric theories.

The semiotic motility represents a maternally orientated space that predates the imposition of an Oedipalised system regulated by paternal law. This pre-Oedipal realm of nondifferentiated otherness is terminated by the necessary separation or loss of the maternal world and inaugurates the acquisition of language in the developing child. For Kristeva, the structure of language belongs to the symbolic order. The symbolic and language, however, stand on the semiotic realm of heterogeneous drives and energy.

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108 Kristeva’s ‘subject in process/on trial’ presupposes a decentred ego and is distinguished from both the trascendental ego of phenomenology and the Cartesian ego. Ibid, 149.
charges that originate in the maternal world, which was ‘abjected’ in the process of the separation between self and other.

Kristeva’s work, broadly speaking, is concerned with the binding of psychoanalysis and semiotics in the analysis of pre-Oedipal semiotic drives in transgressive literature and art. Part of the value of Kristeva’s work is her provision of a language or nomenclature for articulating the profound impression on the psyche by the intervention of social structures onto the maternal and autoerotically gratified pre-Oedipal child. Freud’s psychoanalysis demonstrates that the sadomasochist erotices interdiction. Kristeva’s inflection of psychoanalysis to semiotics permits an analysis of its symbolism: the cut, the scission that evokes the decisive separation of the want-to-be subject from the maternal world.

In Revolution in Poetic Language (1974), Kristeva provides a detailed explication of the distinction between semiotic and symbolic. Demonstrating semiotic transgression in the symbolic order of meaningful syntax through variations in rhythm, breaks and tonality, she directs her analysis towards avant-garde nineteenth and twentieth century literature and poetry found in Arthur Rimbaud, Comte de Lautréamont and Stéphane Mallarmé, as well as James Joyce and Bataille. For Kristeva, avant-garde texts demonstrate that the semiotic is observable in ‘practice’ through repetitions, intonations and rhythms – the musicality of poetic language.

Kristeva conceptualises the semiotic as a maternally oriented realm of drive affect comprising the (‘imaginary’) pre-conditions of the symbolic and the ‘raw matter’ of subversion.\textsuperscript{110} It precedes meaning and signification – it is pre-sign, pre-semanticisation.\textsuperscript{111} The semiotic modality represents psychical ‘marks’ and articulations of drives and ‘energy’ charges moving through the not-yet-subject’s body. The drive affect of the energetic motility articulates what Kristeva has termed the \textit{chora}, adapted from Plato’s \textit{Timaeus}. The semiotic \textit{chora} is not a position because that would already imply representation; it is an unspecified space, of amorphous and dispersed non-verbal, rhythmic energy and drives travelling through

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\textsuperscript{110} Elizabeth Grosz, \textit{Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction}, 151. \\
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid, 25–26.
\end{flushright}
the dependent child’s body. Like Freud’s pre-Oedipal phase, the drives corresponding to the semiotic are regulated, though they are not yet organised or channelled toward heterosexual and genitally orientated sexuality.

The symbolic, by contrast, is an Oedipalised system, which is regulated by the paternal function. In agreement with Freud, the inauguration of the subject into the symbolic and the constitution of sexual difference is, for Kristeva, regulated by the Oedipal organisation of sexuality. The symbolic encompasses the realm of communicative representation (coherent and meaningful speech) and of ordered and meaningful signifying practices and social institutions. The imposition of the order giving symbolic ensures a unified, speaking subject, a regulated identity determined by social and historical limits. Elizabeth Grosz notes that Kristeva stresses ‘the historical and social specificity of signification and subjectivity’. The ordered feature of the *chora* that Kristeva claims is subjected to a symbolic process of regulation is governed by ‘natural socio-historical constraints such as the biological difference between the sexes of family structure’.

According to Kristeva, the semiotic is never fully abolished by the inscription of the subject into the symbolic. It is succeeded on the path leading to the establishment of the symbolic by a phase which Melanie Klein designated as the ‘depressive position’ – a stage corresponding with a decisive mourning, which will transform the autoerotic baby gratified by partial objects into a speaking being. The depressive phase marks the transition from a sexually autoerotic child into an autoeroticism of thought in a mature subject. For Kristeva, the symbolic testifies to our ability to lose the mother and, in moving beyond the grief of that


113 Kristeva explains that ‘Drives involve pre-Oedipal semiotic functions and energy discharges that connect and orient the body to the mother.’ She continues, ‘We must emphasise that “drives” are always already ambiguous, simultaneously assimilating and destructive’ yet despite what can be described as ‘contradictory’ structure of the drives, ‘the most instinctual drive’, the death drive dominates. At this stage, Kristeva explains that an economy of energy travels through the body of the future subject (because the subject is not yet constituted at this stage) and, in the process of development become arranged and channelled for social regulation. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 25–28.

114 Kristeva assumes that ‘even though this is a ‘feminine’ phase dominated by the mother, the mother is always considered phallic’. Ibid.


abandonment, to be able to symbolise and create through representation. We can symbolise the mother only on the condition that we lose her. ‘I have lost mother? No, I hallucinate her: I see her image, then I name her.’\textsuperscript{118}

Kristeva thus challenges the view that the child’s separation from the mother initiates with the intervention of the father at the Oedipal phase – through the ‘discovery’ of castration.\textsuperscript{119}

In contrast to Freud, Kristeva views castration as only the final stage of a gradual process: ‘Castration puts the finishing touches on the process of separation that posits the subject as signifiable, which is to say, separate, always confronted by another’.\textsuperscript{120} Kristeva proposes that the entrance of the subject into the symbolic is preceded by an intermediary phase, called ‘the thetic’. The thetic phase prepares the ‘want-to-be’ subject for the symbolic order.\textsuperscript{121} It prepares the basis of signification through establishing the possibility of a boundary between signifier/signified, subject/object. The thetic phase is the precondition of language and ‘marks the threshold between two heterogeneous realms: the semiotic and the symbolic’.\textsuperscript{122} Without the thetic there would be no language and no communication. The thetic is inextricably connected to the paternal function – of social demands – through which the subject is instituted into the symbolic order. It is what is breached in transgressive poetic works and representational art.\textsuperscript{123}

The ‘cut’: prohibition

Once the thetic phase has been established in the subject, which separates the semiotic and symbolic dimensions, Kristeva designates that the semiotic chora acquires a much more distinct status. The chora, originally a precondition of the symbolic that could only be articulated in theory can now function through signifying practices (language, representation) as a transgression.\textsuperscript{124} The semiotic is not accessible to reason, let alone analyses, except for

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, 5.
\textsuperscript{119} Julia Kristeva, \textit{Revolution in Poetic Language}, 46.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid, 47.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid, 48.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid, 68.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
when it manifests itself in the symbolic as transgression. Kristeva posits that the drives encompassed by the semiotic are both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’, simultaneously creative and destructive. The semiotic is the space in which the subject is both ‘generated and negated’.\textsuperscript{125} This ‘doubling’ of the drives generates a ‘destructive wave’ that Kristeva maintains is an expression of the most dominant of the drives, Freud’s death drive.\textsuperscript{126} Kristeva connects the component drives of oral and anal sadism to the semiotic. During the anal phase of development, the pleasurable movement of the drives passing through the sphincters is aroused at the moment the matter belonging to the subject is expelled and rejected from the body. Kristeva postulates that the expelled objects are in fact the child’s first experience of separation, which arouses pleasure.

Significantly, Kristeva assumes that this pleasurable loss is ‘simultaneously felt as an attack against the expelled object, all exterior objects (including father and mother), and the body itself’.\textsuperscript{127} In what way is this aggressive anality held in check? The answer, Kristeva claims, is in the Oedipal process. The threat of castration serves to curtail this aggression, identifying the body of the not-yet-instituted subject with one of the parents, in the phase in which the drives become harmonised with an exterior object, establishing both the ‘not yet’ ego and the ‘object’. These rejected objects, according to Kristeva, become supressed as maternal objects, a part of the semiotic \textit{chora}. Consequently, corporeal writing and art that manifests whatever brings boundaries into question is evocative of the mother and not the father because the semiotic comes before the imposition of paternal law. Kristeva writes that ‘at the same time, the rejected object definitively separates and is not simply rejected but supressed as a maternal object … with whom only one relation is possible – that of the sign, symbolic relation \textit{in absentia}'.\textsuperscript{128}

It is at this decisive stage in development that the child overcomes the separation from the mother’s body, which causes it to suffer, by establishing itself in the symbolic through

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid, 28.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid, 151.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid, 150–152.
language, or signs, thereby repressing the *chora*. The prohibition signals simultaneously the emergence of language and the inscription of the subject into the symbolic. According to Kristeva, this event expresses ‘the cut’, or a scission between the order of the semiotic and the symbolic and, consequently, the establishment of the borderline that represses the drives. Kristeva thus theorises the collision of the developing child of unbounded drive flows with the law embodied by the paternal figure, sending the want-to-be subject into a critical phase of survival.

It is from this perspective that Kristeva introduces a second terror that the child must subdue, related to the first. Here, we have two archaic repressed terrors stored in the deep well of memory: ‘the archaic fear of losing the mother, to the point of impotence and death … and the fear of castration for the man, with its corollary that is the castrated woman’. A stable identity and determinate sexuality within the symbolic order are predicated on the child’s submission to the castration complex and acceptance of the power of the phallus. For Kristeva, the symbolic Father’s intervention serves to separate the child from an engulfing and potentially catastrophic relation with the mother. Crucially, the enforced separation is experienced in the soma of the infant as a violation, a mortal wound inflicted on the psyche from which the child must recover in order to survive. As Kristeva writes, ‘Once formulated, internalized, the cut is called a *prohibition*, which is imposed in order to be transgressed: no one wants it’. The suffering of this stage can be dealt with, Kristeva claims, through representing it – the cut – in art or literature. In *The Severed Head*, Kristeva elaborates, writing that ‘skull worship commemorated two events: the original loss of the *mother*, the source of *melancholy*, and the *phallic* trial, the threat of castration by the father’. Thus, in Kristeva’s view, decapitation is the symbolic substitute for castration. Therefore, she designates the Medusa as the iconic human experience.

Kristeva’s recent work, entitled *Visions Capitales* (translated into English more provocatively as *The Severed Head*) was written in conjunction with an exhibition that

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129 Ibid, 5.
130 Julia Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 83.
131 Ibid, 87.
132 Ibid, 17.
Kristeva curated at the Louvre in 1998. The object of Kristeva’s interest in *The Severed Head* continues to develop a critical theme in her work *The Powers of Horror* (1980). The book focuses on the theme of decapitation, and explores representations of decapitated heads and skulls starting with ancient sculptures and moving to contemporary art, including Francis Bacon’s *Portrait of Jacques Dupin*. She invokes decapitated heads from ancient mythologies and artefacts, renaissance art and Christian theology (St. John the Baptist). Kristeva contends that the image of the decapitated head reproduces vulnerable and ambivalent fears and desires ineffably linked to the fear of castration and separation from the maternal body.

Artistic and literary portrayals of the ecstasy of victimhood transubstantiate suffering and loss (of the mother and the violent drives and dissonance mediated by signs). It is a transubstantiation through representation, Kristeva claims, that links sadomasochism to an overcoming of the fear of castration and gives a new meaning to the ‘impotence of infancy’ by soldering it to eroticism. In the imagination of decapitation, the genitally and symbolically mature subject returns to the ‘cut’ of prohibition = castration, which enacts separation from the mother’s body and inaugurates the subject into the symbolic. The autonomous speaking being, with its ability to imagine, create and project, is elaborated as follows:

unlike the fear of death … the terror of castration can be eroticized, played with …

Nevertheless, against the terrifying risk of castration, the subject now has at his disposal the resources of his eroticism and his language, which he did not have at the time of his infantile impotence. Seduction and representation can come to the aid of the fear of death and grieving, and catastrophic melancholy can perhaps be combated by the pleasures of sadomasochistic perversity.

The sign of the head embodies a return by the artist to ‘the archaeology of the subject’s unity, leading to the material of language and of thought itself’. Kristeva understands that the artist who exploits the semiotic is ‘in process/on trial’ – a crisis in subjectivity – enacted through a transgression of the ordered realm of the symbolic.

134 Julia Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 47.
The capital disappearance of the mother is substituted in Caravaggio’s capital vision of decapitated heads. With their unquestionable resemblance to the artist himself, they exhibit a sexual excitation that covers over the fear of castration, ‘a masturbatory pleasure’ that, according to Kristeva, metamorphoses the ‘horrible relic into a fetish’. Why decapitation? As Freud recognised, ‘to decapitate = to castrate’.136 The artist and the viewer may take turns at being the one inflicting the wound, and the one holding the knife: Judith or Holofernes. The active pleasure inflicted on some other person as object allows the subject to delight in passive pleasure. Or, no longer wanting to be a victim, the subject depicts the violence directed at him or herself.

In this context, Kristeva recalls Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which he puts forward the ‘logic’ (if it can be said to have one) of the death drive in relation to its eroticised expression in masochism. As we recall, Freud speculates that, in principle, there is no difference between the instinct turning from the ego to an external object and the instinct turning from an exterior object onto the ego. The eroticised cruelty of sadism and eroticised morality of masochism stem from the peculiar interaction of the life and death drives.

In another example of the artist as decapitated (castrated) victim of the law who turns around to eroticise the violence of the cut (prohibition), Kristeva evokes the literature of ‘the divine Marquis’. She descriptively writes:

> The Marquis de Sade continues and heightens this association by linking sexual satisfaction with decapitation … The divine Marquis mocks the supreme being by pitting against him the destructive power of sexual pleasure, its principle agent being Woman as supreme castrator, beheader, devourer, with her mortifying sexuality.137

The significance of Kristeva’s analysis is not confined to the agony of the artist. The artist exhumes the repressed semiotic and makes visible the catastrophe of the mortal wound

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137 Julia Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 33.
inflicted on all of us. The fears and passions that recall the capital separation from the maternal realm and the threat of castration.138

In *The Severed Head*, Kristeva also invokes the symbolism of the cut-off head of the Medusa. In an extension of concepts from *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva writes that the image of the Medusa can wrench the subject in a paroxysmic haste into ‘a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject’.139 Kristeva theorises that the representation of semiotic drives and affects in art constitutes a *turning back* by the subject, in critical self-reflection:

> Cut off the Medusa’s head and make it into a reflection if you want to see (it), if you want to know. Spectacle, speculation – whether erotic or philosophic – is rooted in your first triumphs over your archaic terrors; they depend upon your ability to face head-on, and to make others see, your endogenous melancholies. Beginning from there, you can give your fantasies free reign, including … your Sadean fantasies. Could Medusa be the patron goddess of visionaries and artists?140

Thus, the exploitation of the semiotic by the artist constitutes a ‘return’, as Kristeva describes it, ‘a repetition of language in its origins, in its past, and thus a regression’.141

Although originally a precondition of the symbolic, the semiotic is only representable as a transgression of the symbolic. According to Kristeva, eruptions of the semiotic into the symbolic represent transgressions of the stabilising strategies, norms and regulations of the symbolic. The semiotic is the subversive potential behind all signification. Through art and literature, it can enact a breach within the ‘thetic’ order – the boundary between the semiotic and symbolic – as dissonance, disorder and transgression.

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138 In 1905, Freud theorised the term ‘sublimation’ to describe a type of creative activity that derives from the sexual drive insofar as it cathects socially valued objects. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 56.


140 Ibid.

In *Revolution in Poetic Language* Kristeva maintains that the entrance of these repressed contents into the symbolic constitutes a breakdown of subjectivity. Kristeva is not suggesting that sublimations of these ‘crises of subjectivity’ in art involve the freedom of expression of some pre-existing subjectivity.142 On the contrary, as Lechte points out, the work of art is the basis of creation of the subject, that ‘subjectivity may be seen to be formed in and through art’ – a transformative consequence of the transgression of the ‘thetic’ subject of the paternal symbolic.143

An eruption of the affective impulses of the semiotic into the symbolic can be described as an assault of the drives – an appearance of the object-less undifferentiated energy in language. The artist puts into signs the wound that afflicts them, the forbidden passion for the mother and the separation enacted by prohibition – he or she does not ‘take pleasure in a man, a woman, an object, or even ego, but in the signs’, the artist celebrates the ecstasy of their victimhood in creation that distances the death drive.144 Art, for Kristeva, is an act of Eros. But the death drive chooses its images. The death drive ‘takes pleasure in choosing the themes of my painting, drawing, poem without asking my opinion’.145

The semiotic origins of signification is the essential condition of social forms. Kristeva’s perspective on the ambiguous relation between the semiotic and the symbolic, as Lechte points out, offers something much more profound than sociological accounts of cultural products (institutions, family, literature, subjectivity).146 According to Lechte, sociological perspectives tend to focus entirely on the symbolic dimension of social forms and do not consider the precondition for the symbolic in the semiotic dimension.147

The semiotic is a libidinal source of subversion. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the return of the rejected elements of the semiotic signals the presence of the death drive. In a letter to

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145 Ibid.
147 Ibid.
Catherine Clement, from their book *The Sacred Feminine*, Kristeva suggests that social change rests on the resources of the drives:

> anyone who wishes, whatever the cost, to effect a profound change relies on the unconscious resources of sadism, the nature of which is force. To impose a new order, in fact, one must permit a fierce resistance, an extreme anger, a revolt of pride, to come into oneself.148

A revolutionary force exemplified by the avant-garde traditions, the semiotic feminine filters its way into the symbolic as a transgressive violation that encompasses the idea of the divided subject, the materiality of language and the role of sexuality and pleasure in signification.149

In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler expresses scepticism about Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic as a feminine force of subversion.150 Butler’s argument is that Kristeva presupposes the category of ‘sex’ and thereby uncritically participates in and further legitimises the regulatory strategy of power that Foucault describes. However, it is arguable that Butler’s sociological assessment of Kristeva’s psychoanalytic thought does not take into account that Kristeva theorises the preconditions of normative subjectivity. Chronologically, the child’s relationship to the maternal body predates the intervention of the paternal function as the symbolic. Thus, the semiotic is not representable except as rhythm, tonality, colour, music – it has no object, it is pre-signification. In Kristeva’s analysis, the semiotic precedes historical and discursive productions. Nevertheless, the breach of the semiotic into the symbolic is historically dependent and can rupture within and threaten to destabilise the homogeneous social order.

In turn, Butler problematises Kristeva’s notion of a maternal body, arguing that the assumption of an already ‘sexed’ body is the product of a ‘historically specific organization of power, discourse, bodies, and affectivity’.151 Butler invokes Foucault's analysis of

151 Ibid.
sexuality in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, which demonstrates that ‘sex’ and ‘sexuality’ is a historical production with a genealogy specific to itself. Butler is doubtful about the existence of a maternal modality that predates patriarchal law. In other words, if we are to accept Foucault’s view that ‘sex’ and ‘sexed being’ are historical constructions with traceable genealogical roots, it follows that the idea of a maternal body (coextensive with reproduction, sexed being) is dependent on a category that is itself discursively produced, which, on Butler’s view, would consequently render the revolutionary force of the semiotic futile. In short, Butler questions whether the semiotic feminine is a construction of culture (the symbolic) rather than a precondition for its existence.

There are some issues with Butler’s interpretations of Kristeva’s theory. While Butler recognises that the semiotic is ‘occasioned by the maternal body’, she understands that Kristeva’s model of the maternal corresponds to women and the female body – to a sexual identity.152 Grosz makes explicit that the kind of fusion existing in the non-identity of the semiotic *chora* is intrinsically liked to Kristeva’s model, where ‘maternity is a process unregulated by any subject’.153 Grosz explicates Kristeva’s contention in *Desire in Language* (1980) that the foetus growing inside the mother’s body does not have the faculty to represent; it is not yet an ‘I’ or ego that knows itself or any other but is itself an ‘other’ within the *chora*. This is not a place but ‘a nameless receptacle’.154

> Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on.
> ‘It happens but I’m not there.’ Motherhood’s impossible syllogism.155

Crucial to Kristeva’s work, from *Revolution in Poetic Language* onwards, is the understanding that the semiotic *chora* is not a position; rather it precedes and conditions the acquisition of language as communication and *sui generis*, as Lechte put it.156 Butler

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154 Ibid.
155 Julia Kristeva, cited in Ibid.
continues to describe Kristeva’s distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic as follows:

If the Symbolic and the semiotic are understood as two modalities of language, and if the semiotic is understood to be generally repressed by the Symbolic, then language for Kristeva is understood as a system in which the Symbolic remains hegemonic except when the semiotic disrupts its signifying process through elision, repetition, mere sound, and the multiplication of meaning…

Kristeva’s theory differs from other theories of social and cultural formations that focus exclusively on the symbolic. For Kristeva, the semiotic is not a modality that becomes definitively superseded by the imposition of the symbolic; rather, it exists in a continual ambiguous relation with the symbolic. Lechte points out that this is a common oversight in appreciating the complexity of Kristeva’s work, and an idea that is ‘difficult for an Anglo audience to accept’. He continues to write that ‘for the theorist of the semiotic, there is no clear separation between art, society, and language on the one hand, and the individual subject as the outcome of the interaction between the semiotic and symbolic on the other … As Kristeva sees it, the category ‘family’ and the societal beings, mothers, fathers and children, are exclusively of the symbolic order’.158

Kristeva’s analysis of the semiotic and symbolic dimensions should be seen as a dynamic interaction between the two modalities. For instance, to propose that the colours, textures and themes of the semiotic correspond to Caravaggio’s fear of the symbolic (castrating) father would be a point of contention for Butler because the mother’s body is always already a question of gender. Conversely, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the Medusa or the cut-off head of Holofernes exemplifies the collision between the unbounded drive charges of the semiotic chora with the ‘form-giving’ symbolic.

This explains, at least in part, why Kristeva invokes works of art to illuminate the concepts. As mentioned, the work of art is a ‘confrontation with psychosis – with the breakdown of the

157 John Lechte, Julia Kristeva, 105.
158 Ibid, 130.
symbolic function’. In other words, to exploit the semiotic in order to subvert the symbolic
the subject would have to surrender coherent identity, and thereby signifying practices and
norms, and retrieve those experiences to which it was exposed in crisis.

Kristeva views eroticised victimhood and cruelty as expressions of semiotic suffering and
abjection, manifested in sadomasochism’s eroticisation of law – the law that confined these
turbulent desires deep within the psyche. In psychoanalysis, because the father is the
symbolic mainstay of the law, the transgression constitutes a direct challenge to the phallic
organisation of subjectivity and sexuality. Parallel to Kristeva’s interpretations in some
important respects, though using a different nomenclature, Bataille sees the liberation of
excess, which can be equated with Kristeva’s semiotic, as an expenditure that disrupts the
order of identity and determined sexuality. For Bataille, the dépense of erotic suffering
liberates discontinuous beings from servitude to productive and means-end rationality.
Bataille theorises the place and meaning of the sacred in eroticism’s play of prohibition and
transgression.

**Bataille and the sacred transgression of the law**

In Bataille’s major theoretical work, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*
(1949) the central notion of the ‘general economy’ is pivotal to understanding transgression.
The general economy gives place to excessive forms of value based on unproductive
expenditures of energy that, in economic terminology, constitutes ‘loss’. Loss and sacrifice
are constitutive of transgression and contrasts with the principle of accumulation that must
compensate for expenditure in the economy of ‘balanced accounts’ governing Western
bourgeois society. Bataille emphasises the necessity of waste and rejected elements of all
kinds. The excluded elements embody the difference and otherness interior to all social
forms. He abandons the impotent liberty attached to reason and affirms that when:

> Confining ourselves to knowledge structured and guaranteed by the practice of
> reason, we might believe in the possibility of an ordering of all things, which would

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159 Ibid, 53.
exclude risk and caprice and would ground authenticity on nothing more than prudence and the pursuit of usefulness. 160

Or, to put it in Freudian terms, Bataille’s thought embraces repression just enough to be disruptive of identity without being entirely negative or destructive. This gave Bataille’s writings the revolutionary edge and introduced the kind of dissonance that unsettled the stultifying emphasis on rational and sane thought in 1960s France. We will now turn to the aspect of Bataille’s thought that found kinship with Kristeva’s oeuvre.

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva posits that a precondition of art is the expenditure or *dépense* of semiotic violence. Bataille’s notion of *dépense* is represented by eroticism and other non-utilitarian activities such as poetry, festivals and especially laughter – these are wasteful expenditures that evoke sovereignty. 161 These states can stand beyond reason and utility but do not exhaust the list; they are not the only ones to evoke ‘sudden openings beyond the world of useful works’ not consigned to rational ends – a part of the economy of ‘unproductive expenditure’ – the antithesis of production servile to the market. 162 Eroticism is defined differently from reproductive sexual activity because it is not concerned with the future but rather the immanence of the present moment. It is unbridled desiring production.

‘Heterology’ is the science of the ‘excluded part’. 163 It is neither a philosophy, nor a complex theory; it designates the ‘unassimilable’ – what the symbolic ‘system’ cannot incorporate – ‘not only the sacred elements whether social or asocial but also the arousing elements of erotic life, and generally speaking all objects of disgust’. 164 The science of the heterogeneous encompasses the excluded elements that are hostile to the rationalism of a dialectics that excludes the negativity brought into play by eroticism, and in so doing, they put the values of society in question. This aspect of Bataille’s thought resonates strongly with the psychoanalytic insights of Kristeva in her study of the semiotic.

162 Ibid.
164 Ibid.
The experience of anguish, exhaustion, loss is not just the consequence of the meeting of opposites; it is psychoanalytically linked to the experience of castration. Bataille makes heterology’s proximity to psychoanalysis explicit when he says that it ‘reaches directly to eroticism, genitalia and excreta’ which is also the domain of heterology. Bataille contends furthermore that, for religion, ‘these elements too find themselves loaded with sacred value … what sacred things, obscene things and certain social sectors have in common is that they are entirely other’.

The myth of Icarus’ ascent towards the sun and his disastrous fall is not only emblematic of the experience of anguish that resounds throughout Bataille’s works; it is also ‘interpreted by psychoanalysis as the staging of the castration complex’. Bataille’s concept of heterology turns repressed fears and desires of the Oedipus complex into an occasion for sovereignty in ecstatic joy. In Kristevean terms, Bataille’s writings transubstantiate the fear of castration into artistic representation – insofar as the ‘cut’ of castration motivates the symbolic presentation of the decapitated head. The ecstatic victimhood expressed by Caravaggio’s decapitations thus shares with Bataille’s concept of sovereign sacrifice the anguish of an inner experience. In a conjunctural sense Kristeva writes that what ‘necessitates a beheading, [is] a traversal of consciousness so that the inferno of the void can be revealed – no one has taken more risks to affirm this than Georges Bataille’.

The sacred element is fundamental to the analysis of both Kristeva and Bataille. The (sacred) transgression of the law in unproductive expenditure is an order instituting force. Transgression, for Bataille, is positive because it contains violence by positing it. Nevertheless, a certain practice accompanies this positing of violence: the dépense of unproductive, wasteful and destructive expenditures, including sexual activities not intended for reproduction. What, then, is the taboo indispensable to Bataille’s theory of transgression? And to what does it owe its obligatory force? As mentioned, Freud evokes the foundational act of murder and incest, in Totem and Taboo, as the foundation of society, culture and

165 Ibid, 36.
166 Emphasis in original. Ibid, 35–36.
168 Julia Kristeva, The Severed Head, 127.
interiority. The first crime engendered the first law in the name of the parricide – the law of the father. The most basic taboos, of murder and incest, as Jürgen Habermas describes it, ‘are like dams set up against the swamp of a luxuriously exuberant nature which assures abundance and continuity of life by entwining individual existences’.169

For Bataille, there is no eroticism without the play between transgression and prohibition. Bataille designates that prohibition is not an arbitrary formation, nor is it merely functional; rather, the prohibition owes its obligatory force to the authority of something sacred. The unified subject of the symbolic; coherent and sociable, approaches the sacred with both terror and attraction – without even having to touch it. This is the ambivalence generated by sacred objects, and Bataille’s statement goes to the heart of this immanent experience, the inner experience: ‘Are there not some persons who claim to prefer death to touching an even completely harmless snake?’170 For Bataille, the fear inspired by the sacred element is indispensable to transgression. The relationship between transgression and prohibition is the heartbeat of the sacred. Eroticism opens to infinite transgressions – and thereby, to the sacred.

Bataille claims that transgression is desirable precisely because it is forbidden: ‘The taboo would forbid the transgression but the fascination compels it.’171 For Bataille, the taboo represents the ‘refusal of nature’ by the individual. The profound connection between sex and death lies in the connection they share to wasteful expenditure, ‘regarded as a squandering of living energy and an orgy of annihilation’. On this basis, ‘we can no longer differentiate between death and sexuality’ – the primary taboos – ‘both of them signifying the boundless wastage of nature’s resources as opposed to the urge to live on characteristic of every living creature’.172

According to Bataille, the inner experience is a transgression that risks the destabilisation of the world of labour – issued by reason. Labour is a collective activity that compels man to

171 Georges Bataille, Erotism: Death and Sensuality, 68.
172 Ibid, 61.
relinquish urges to violence and sexual enjoyment. The world of work is the basis for the establishment of prohibitions that expel the sacred from everyday experience.

Bataille understands the expenditure to be a transgression of the boundaries drawn between the subject and the world of objects. The unproductive expenditure of transgression goes to the core of human subjectivity and destabilises it to reveal the fragility of the borders of the subject, the ‘thetic’ subject in Kristeva’s terms. For Bataille, this would be a sacred transgression of the law. On Kristeva’s view, the evocation of the semiotic in artistic endeavours, though in important respects heterogeneous to the social order, entails a crisis of subjectivity that does not leave this order unchanged by its presence. In Revolution in Poetic Language, Kristeva illuminates as follows:

> in our opinion classical anthropological sociology has a more accurate view, assigning sacrifice an ambiguous function, simultaneously violent and regulatory. For sacrifice designates, precisely, the watershed on the basis of which the social and the symbolic are instituted: the thetic that confines violence to a single place, making it a signifier. Far from unleashing violence, sacrifice shows how representing that violence is enough to stop it and to concatenate an order. Conversely, it indicates that all order is based on representation: what is violent is the irruption of the symbol, killing substance to make it signify.

The ‘practice’, mentioned earlier, and which precedes the sacrifice is the expenditure of energies in dance, song, art, poetry, festival. Kristeva writes that sacrifice

> deploys the expenditure (dépense) of semiotic violence, enters the symbolic order and tends to dissolve the logical order, which is, in short, the outer limit founding the human and the social.

For Bataille, there can be no eroticism without sacrifice, and the purest form of sovereignty is the ritual sacrifice. Sacred transgression is affirmatory in that it posits the limit as it exceeds it. On this point, Kristeva’s theory of abjection differs from transgression in that it is much

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173 Julia Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, 75.
174 Ibid, 79.
more violent. Abject moments shake identity – they threaten the disappearance of the subject, the disappearance of the ‘I’ in spite of him or herself. Abject matter has the power to strike the exposed person suddenly, like a car accident, rendering them helplessly nauseated; an unbearable agony, which signals that the boundaries of the individual self-contained existence are collapsing:

for example, the sight of blood, the odor of vomit, which arouse in us the dread of death, sometimes introduce us into a kind of nauseous state which hurts more cruelly than pain. Those sensations associated with the supreme giving-way, the final collapse, are unbearable.175

Bataille provided the underlying philosophical basis for Foucault’s deconstruction of the subject, a dismantling of the subject. Intertwined with his interest in Bataille is a search for sexuality as an experience in which our foundations are put into question, as experiences that shed light on the negativity that constitutes human subjectivity. Here, Bataille’s concept of transgression occupies a central place in thinking about the decentring of the subject. However, Bataille’s critique of modern forms of subjectivity as servile to production and labour is not so much concerned with discovering the deeper foundations of subjectivity as liquidating it, leading to continuous being that we flee from through productivity.

Foucault: the obligation to truth

Foucault views the psychoanalytic account of the libidinal organisation of sexuality as a formalisation of historically specific discursive constellations. Foucault demonstrates that the transformation of sex into discourse and the proliferation of so-called ‘perversions’ is intrinsically linked to a modern regime of normalisation.176 The History of Sexuality, Volume One, is a historical account of (Western European) sexuality, not from the perspective of the sciences; but rather, through a genealogical history of power/knowledge. For Foucault, the phenomena of the past are significant, in as far as they continue to have relevance in determining contemporary modes of being. Foucault’s ‘histories’ are not assisting us in

175 Ibid, 126.
176 Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume One, 61.
rediscovering a pristine lost subjectivity that we can resurrect in the present but rather his works enjoin us to recognise that we are formless subjects, a web of countless possibilities, unformulated and fluid. The self is shaped and given form by practice and knowledge. This shape changes over time and depends on history. This shifting identity is largely discovered and is given shape in circulations of power (a grid of force, a heterogeneous grouping, an ensemble of institutions, administrative arrangements and facilities of governance). For example, since the beginning of the seventeenth century, Foucault reveals the emergence of *personages*, namely, ‘the nervous woman, the frigid wife, the indifferent mother … the impotent, or sadistic, perverse husband’, who were incited, deployed and sanctified by the family, by doctors, by educators as well as psychiatrists.¹⁷⁷ Foucault’s argument is that these sedimented significations given to experience are determined by forms of power that constitute the individual. They define and mark out the grid of identities and differences and the image through which the individual recognises their subjectivity in the form of identity.

The premise of Foucault’s work is always particular in that it centres on the material; analysing the historical limits imposed on a body ‘determined by practices and discourses’, and serving as a point of departure for problematising both the conditions of knowledge that informs thought and the possibilities of its constitution.¹⁷⁸ Problematising the subject in relation to historically determined regimes of the body also elaborates a critical discourse on the links between rationalisation and the excesses of modern liberal power. For example, Foucault outlines how the Enlightenment institutions of positivist sciences aligned with the state, and how these arrangements of power ‘promised to eliminate defective individuals, degenerate and bastardized populations’.¹⁷⁹ Foucault thus includes and implicates sadomasochism within modernity’s problematic and the distribution of peculiar divisions existing in the relationship between normality and pathology.

In Foucault’s lexicon prohibition takes the form of the various valorisations and incitements of the discursive mechanism that controls what is possible or acceptable based on an enforced ideal of normality. When Foucault references norms and laws (social and sexual) he is always

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 110.
¹⁷⁸ Michel Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, 49.
¹⁷⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume One, 54.
referring to the embodiment of those norms: a truth that is gradually outlined, formed, stabilised and expressed through the subject. The formation of the normalised subject intrinsically presupposes ‘technologies of power’. These technologies, Foucault maintains, have an objectivising effect on the subject and are related to the work that the subject must enact on itself in order to make itself into a subject. It is important to note that, for Foucault, this is not always negative; objectification is a necessary consequence, such as when the subject problematises itself as a part of a project of self-formation. The mode of objectification that Foucault refers to in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* has as its ultimate objective the normalising of the subject.

The technologies of the self are ‘suggested or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it in terms of a certain number of ends, through relations of self-mastery or self-knowledge’.

To the extent that modern liberal power preserves a degree of agency in the subject, Foucault is always referring to *relations* of power, or the relationship between the subject and ‘games of truth’. That is, so that the subject may also participate in its own normalisation. In *The History of Sexuality*, Volume One, Foucault argues that modern liberal power’s insidious entrance into the everyday life of the individual attaches the subject to its own identity, and imposes ‘a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects’. This is what Foucault means by ‘governmentality’.

Akin to Kristeva’s thought, Foucault assumes that the want-to-be subject’s interpellation of normative demands is occasioned by a state of original dependency. Butler explains, that ‘to desire the conditions of one’s own subordination is thus required to persist as oneself … one is dependent on power for its very formation’. The subject, formed in and through relations of power, embraces the conditions that *enact* ‘it into being’. Consequently, in Foucault’s view, there is no subject prior to the effects of power. Modern subjects are constructed in their subjectivity within a complex political economy of truth, which is itself a product of

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181 Michel Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, 781.

power, and which Foucault believes can be analysed within specific domains of everyday experience.¹⁸³

Nevertheless, Foucault indicates that this style of power is capable of progressively increasing patterns of power and conquering more areas of control over its subjects because it functions not merely to reproduce and maintain norms and relations, but also to create, and to innovate, thereby making it much more comprehensive.¹⁸⁴ Sexuality is a powerful apparatus which can drive an individual into established normativity: ‘marriage, morality, monogamy, the sexuality of reproduction, and the limitation and disqualification of pleasure’.¹⁸⁵

Foucault shows that during the nineteenth century there was an immense proliferation of discourses about ‘sex’. For the main part, this was because sex and sexuality were constructed as the key to the hidden truth of the subject; a line of thought that Foucault suggests culminated in Freud’s theory. It is without debate that contemporary Western society enjoys sexual freedoms that during the Victorian and Puritan periods would have been unimaginable. However, according to Foucault, to whatever degree sexual liberation has become a familiar notion in the West, it is undeniable that the revolutionary implications of human desire have not in the least been understood. Foucault asks, ‘why do we Europeans want, and why have we wanted, for millennia, to know the truth about our sex rather than to achieve the intensity of pleasure?’¹⁸⁶ The reason, Foucault argues, is because the Western world clings tenaciously to the idea that sexuality is a source of truth. For Foucault, sexuality is given too much importance in the West, assigned with the role of a self-defining activity and the root of self-knowledge.¹⁸⁷ The idea that each individual must realise one’s ‘sex’ in order to come into contact with the truth about oneself is misleading for Foucault, whose

¹⁸⁴ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume One, 106–107.
¹⁸⁶ Michel Foucault, ‘Sexuality and Power’, 119.
works attempt to demonstrate that it is the notion of ‘sexuality’ that binds pleasure to identity.188

Foucault problematises the ‘repressive hypothesis’ in *The History of Sexuality*, Volume One, not so much to reveal that it is erroneous, but rather to incorporate it as a part of the general economy of discourses on sex.189 The ‘subjugation’ of sex to discourse facilitated the binding of sex to ideas of truth. From this perspective, the lifting of prohibitions surrounding sexuality is thus not the issue. The privilege of this kind of knowledge passes away for Foucault because he positions sexuality as an integral part of an essential apparatus, a principal dispositif in contemporary Western society.190

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault documented the transition from religious and moral interferences under the *ancien regime* to a new regime of power based on Enlightenment values of science and reason. Opposed to the old regime of ‘power over life and death’, the bourgeois state instituted a life-preserving form of power.191 Modern power’s liberal ‘life-affirming’ face makes it more insidious in that it cannot be easily observed. As Foucault contends in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, ‘[power’s] success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms’.192

Like other forms of power, modern power has generated its own ‘discourse of truth’ that serves to provide it with legitimacy. To be clear, Foucault does not argue that the subject is formed through prohibition; but rather through ‘sexualisation’; not through repression, but through an ensemble of heterogeneous discourses.193

188 Ibid.
189 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume One, 11.
190 In an interview in 1977, Foucault explained what is meant by the dispositif: ‘What I’m trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus.’ See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, tr. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 194.
192 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume One, 86.
193 Ibid, 114.
The nineteenth century and our own have been rather the age of multiplication: a dispersion of sexualities, a strengthening of their disparate forms, a multiple implantation of “perversions.” Our epoch has initiated sexual heterogeneities.194

There seems to be nothing prohibitive about the proliferation of sexualities, except that Foucault makes a clear distinction between sexual interdictions, and other forms of interdiction, where ‘unlike other interdictions, sexual interdictions are constantly connected with the obligation to tell the truth about oneself’.195 Thus, interdiction is of importance to Foucault’s analysis of power in The History of Sexuality, Volume One; not in the psychoanalytic sense, but as a form of normalising regulation that is intimately tied to the imperative to tell the truth about oneself. For Foucault, discourse is the world of prohibition.

In The History of Sexuality, Volume One, Foucault reveals the contribution that Catholicism made to the history of sexuality: confession.196 As a pastoral technology of power, the confession features as one important technique providing the basis for the modern apparatus of sexuality. The pastoral concern, which ‘prescribed as a fundamental duty the task of passing everything having to do with sex through the endless mill of speech’, evolved and eventually acquired a secularised theme of self-constitution.197 Bersani illuminates that psychoanalysis, in some important respects, exemplifies a modern secularised form of confession:

Certain aspects of psychoanalytic theory and technique (perhaps especially the notion of a normative psychosexual growth and the insistence, in treatment, on a total exposure of the “truth” about one’s sexuality) merely update disciplinary tactics already laid out by sixteenth-century revisions of the Catholic pastoral.198

194 Ibid, 37.
196 Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume One, 58.
197 Ibid, 21.
For Foucault, the history of the development of these techniques plays a key role, not only in the history of sexuality, but in the history of the self – the construction of the Western subject. For this reason Foucault argues: ‘this is the essential fact: that since Christianity, Western civilisation has not stopped saying, “To know who you are, know what your sexuality is about”’.199 Foucault pursued the history of these discourses ‘which to us appears so characteristic of our civilization’.200

**Scientia sexualis**

In ‘A Preface to Transgression’ (1963) Foucault planted the seed of a critical approach to sexuality that would be demonstrated thirteen years later in *The History of Sexuality*, Volume One. Foucault writes, ironically, that sexuality having ‘been lingering in the shadows and hiding under various disguises … has regained, in contemporary experience, its full truth as a process of nature’.201 Sexuality positively constituted as ‘truth’ or nature designates, in Foucault’s view, a key organising feature in the normalisation of individuals. The will to self-knowledge – the hidden truth of sexuality – that characterises Western subjectivity is inextricably linked to discourse through the confession, for Foucault, to the putting into speech the ‘truth’ of one’s desires.

During the course of the eighteenth century, the pastoral theme of the ‘truth’ of sex developed into a scientific method of extracting the truth from subjects, the *scientia sexualis*.202 According to Foucault, the category ‘sex’ is an ‘artificial’ construction that facilitates the unification of a mixture of non-related structures, functions and affects: ‘anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures’.203 The *dispositif* or apparatus of sexuality is a technology of power – a ‘will to knowledge’ that centres on the subject and the most intimate aspects of its life – including its sexual desires, dreams, fantasies and enduring obsessions. This is the reason, Foucault argues, the apparatus of

200 Michel Foucault, ‘Subjectivity and Truth’ in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 87.
202 Ibid, 63.
203 Ibid, 154.
sexuality was deployed by the power regime of the body – in order to support the connecting of new forms of power and knowledge to new objects and domains.\textsuperscript{204} Significantly, if modern sexuality has a defining feature, for Foucault, it is the will to know its secrets.

From the Christian pastoral method, to the proliferation of scientific discourses about sexuality that Foucault says has characterised modern sexual subjectivity – power penetrates the body, and defines its maladies and perversions with the support of medical sciences. In its scientific definition as a process of nature, sexuality served to provide the epistemological basis onto which the sciences could construct and then isolate its subjects.\textsuperscript{205} Consequently, for Foucault, sexuality is an essential fabrication of modern power. The formulation of a scientific discourse on the body and its pleasures transformed the status of the subjects concerned: the ‘perverse’ were dehumanised in order to turn them into scientific objects for study.\textsuperscript{206} Foucault demonstrates that the ‘perversions’ are a consequence of a ‘governmentality’ by which Foucault means the techniques used in order to facilitate the saturation of power into the private lives of its subjects. The ultimate aim, Foucault clarifies, is the banishment of ‘fruitless pleasures’ from the lives of its subjects. As Foucault proclaims, in a remark reminiscent of Bataille’s theorisation of his own historico-political present:

\begin{quote}
For was this transformation of sex into discourse not governed by the endeavor to expel from reality the forms of sexuality that were not amenable to the strict economy of reproduction: to say no to unproductive activities, to banish casual pleasures, to reduce or exclude practices whose object was not procreation?\textsuperscript{207}
\end{quote}

The notion of ‘sex’, according to Foucault, is a discursive production deployed in the service of social control and the regulation of subjectivity. In the power regime of sexuality, sex is organised as a category from which desire springs – the root or genesis of desire. From this perspective, the perversions are defined by an instinct, which is sex. As Butler notes, the body of the sexual pervert ‘not only appears a sign of guilt and transgression, as the embodiment of prohibition and the sanction for rituals of normalization, but is framed and

\textsuperscript{204} Ibid, 19.
\textsuperscript{205} David Halperin, \textit{Saint Foucault}, 40.
\textsuperscript{207} Michel Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality}, Volume One, 36.
formed through a discursive matrix of a juridical subject’. 208 Sexuality is sanctioned as an essential substance that constitutes a bond that obliges people to be fettered to this identity. In this view, ‘sadomasochism’ is not a ‘nature’ or essence of a thing; it is a discursive construction deployed in the service of normalisation.

Chapter Three discusses Foucault’s analysis of practices that can have de-subjugating effects. According to Foucault, the power regime of the body is one historical form of techniques of the self – aimed at the cultivation and regulation of normative patterns of behaviour. With the objectification of the subject as fundamental component, this other kind of technology of the self has at the core of its composition an ethical relation of the self to the self and is based on the overarching principle, the *epimeleia heautou*, the care of one’s self. Foucault explains that both forms of technologies ‘implies certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes’. 209

In his later work, Foucault wanted to understand how the ‘care of the self’ – the overarching ethical principle of Roman and especially Greek antiquity – eventually came to signify, with Christianity, renunciation of the self. 210 The fantastical societies of Sade’s literature can be viewed as hyperbolic parodies of this dichotomy: as pastiches of the Romantic expression of self-sacrifice, in contradistinction to the ancient goal of mastery of the self, corresponding to Nietzsche’s will to power. In Sade’s writings, the morality of Christian self-sacrifice is punished as a slave ideology by the libertine masters who embody the will to power. However, the will to power in Sade’s thought is a perverted and appears as unbounded death drive. One of the effects of the care of the self in antiquity, according to Foucault, was distinguishing oneself from the rest of the population through self-styling practices. 211 The universal moral codes of Christianity established subjective homogeneity. As we will discover, Sade’s libertines recognise this, whereby nothing distinguishes one person from another, and use it in order to gain power.

210 Michel Foucault, ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics’ in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 277-278.
211 Ibid, 267.
Conclusion

The ‘limit attitude’ expressed in the works engaged with in this chapter elaborate the boundaries of the subject and reflect on the conditions of its possibility. Consideration of the subject’s historical and social determination is perhaps the most obvious and central component in Foucault’s method. Nevertheless, the shared recognition that transgression is not an overthrow of the existing social order is apparent. The subversion is immediate and intimate in that it directs its violations onto the limits that are nearest to the subject. For example, in the subject’s relation to everyday experience (Bataille) and in symbolic institutions of family and social structure (Kristeva). Each theorist recognises the rigours of limitation and problematises the space of knowledge where historical specificity delimits the subject within contingent boundaries.

In turn, the Freudian conceptualisation of sadomasochism emphasised the transgression of an introjected morality implemented by the intervention of social and family structures. Freud inherited nineteenth century classifications, nevertheless he postulated something radical with the death drive. The focus on the psyche, on the subject bound up with the passions, fears and desires of the Oedipal phase is a more universal theory of the Western experience of norms, the symbolic ‘system’ of signifying practices and their norms. Here, subjectivity is united under that illusory mastery of the ego. Violence and violation are the perfunctory words necessary to describe the rupture and dissolution of the subject, putting it on trial and exposing it to heterogeneity: the interaction between the two energetic dimensions that can expand symbolic and imaginary capacities. Kristeva’s ‘subject in process/on trial’ is a problematisation of the subject in its ‘truth’ and in its symbolic being. For Kristeva, this is the work of freedom.

Bataille problematises the rational world of labour that elides the human capacity for sovereignty. The sacred transgression is an affirmation of the present moment – and expenditure of surplus energy for the sake of the moment – with no accompanying telos. Chapter Two will show that, for Bataille, unproductive expenditure is a subversion of the modern subject, forced to exist as an object in the capitalist system – as a means, and not as
end in itself. The confrontation in transgression with otherness, difference, that is constitutive of social forms, is a subversion of the existing order – it is a contestation and affirmation of limits that introduces into the profane world of work and interdictions the possibility of the sacred. Foucault also brings the analysis far from notions of heterogeneity and excess, but nevertheless analyses the discursive construction of the sexual ‘other’ as a process of dividing and individuating that isolates subjects in order to obliterate difference and constitute perversion as a knowable and scientifically curable and regulatable phenomenon. Put another way, the ‘pervert’ is no longer a transgressor but somebody who is mentally ill, sick, and in need of treatment. A sterilised persona.

The play of transgression and prohibition and the interaction of perversity in literature has been fundamental to French theorists of the twentieth century. Foucault, Kristeva and Bataille are also writers of experience and their thinking at the limits of what is possible derives much of its concrete and empirical figuration through literature. The following chapter will allow the authors to speak for themselves in the sense that the erotic texts express the enigmatic possibilities for transgression.
Chapter Two
Sacrilegious transgressions and erotic excess in subversive French literature

Literature is not innocent. It is guilty and should admit itself so.
– Bataille

After the Second World War, several French intellectuals engaged with the literary text as an exemplary locus for exploring the boundaries of the subject. The multiple attention given to being and the shape of human nature are found in the essays of Bataille, Kristeva and Foucault, as well as Blanchot, Barthes and Sollers. In a publication that appeared in the obituary issue of Critique (1963), Foucault’s essay on Bataille extolled the enigmatic multiplicity of being found in language and welcomed the emerging themes of an integral exegesis on desire, the body, life, production and labour. Separate from philosophical discussions of transgression as contestation, which was thought to replace the notion of contradiction, Foucault alluded to the Bataillean délie of non-knowledge. The unproductive expenditure of transgression evokes heterogeneity (defined by Bataille as the ‘excluded’ elements, including ‘violence, excess, delirium, madness’). This is conceived as an experience of excess, an experience of limits, and the experience of difference that can make possible transgressive new relations with the self. Blanchot writes, ‘in these works rupture is nearly effected with discourse’. The texts examined in this chapter orbit around an analytics of finitude and the obscure dimensions found in heterogeneity and excess. The works analysed evoke the violence and disorder of eroticism. The power of eroticism exists in an interminable crossing of limits and subverts social norms and conventions by means of reappropriation and rapprochement of manners and libidinal investments. Caught in the constraint of limitations and a body prescribed by prohibitions the literary subversions were

212 Georges Bataille, Literature and Evil, 3.
215 Maurice Blanchot, Lautréamont and Sade, 47.
directed at regimes of authority, God, the law; an order that designates and delimits the space of the body and its experience.

In *Literature and Evil*, Bataille defines poetic language as the ‘means by which man can escape from being reduced to the reflection of things’, in other words, as an escape from the homogenising and objectifying discourses of philosophy and the sciences.\(^{216}\) For Foucault, the displacement of sex from its threatening proximity to pleasure and sensation, as well as transgression and taboo, signalled a significant departure from eroticism. Here, eroticism is understood as the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake, without reference to utility, or consideration for what is permitted and forbidden.\(^{217}\) In Western societies this is an inheritance from the nineteenth century. Patrick Ffrench illuminates as follows:

We may hear an echo here of Foucault’s proposition regarding the era of the biopolitical, in which power passes from determination by the symbolic to the analytic framework (*dispositive*) of discourse, the discursive management of life. Power ceases to be a question of the law and its interdiction, and becomes instead a question of the management of life essentially at the level of discourse, the arrangement and ordering of life according to the sanctioned modes of what it is possible to say.\(^{218}\)

The confinements, segregations and exclusions endured by Sade, Baudelaire, Bataille and Genet and the problems, concerns and intentions evoked in their works are situated within the context of this momentous modern transition: from sovereign power over life and death to the modern liberal affirmation of life by the French Penal Code.

In the French literary tradition ‘sadomasochism’ does not exist as such; it is a part of eroticism, psyche and desire.\(^{219}\) The writers engaged in this chapter are demonstrated to

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\(^{217}\) Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume One, 56–57.  
\(^{219}\) For instance, in Genet’s fiction it is possible to observe the enjoyment in humiliation, power and submission and erotic cruelty – elements proper to sadomasochism. However, Genet does not use the term ‘masochism’, nor does he allude to Sacher-Masoch, or to the pervasive scientific studies on masochism promulgated during the interwar period. The decadent period between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries throughout Western Europe (particularly France) produced Swinburne’s *Poems and
provide signs or representations for the exclusions that underpin and threaten to collapse social and subjective order. For Foucault, what remains in the wake of God’s death is a particular sense of the sacred encompassed in the notion of taboo that provides the possibility of ‘profanation in a world which no longer recognizes any positive meaning in the sacred – is this not more or less what we may call transgression?’

He continues, ‘the death of God does not restore us to a limited and positivistic world, but to a world exposed by the experience of its limits, made and unmade by that excess which challenges it’. The language of sexuality, of limits and transgression, Foucault contends, is contemporaneous with the secularisation that generated the death of God, ‘sexual liberation’ and the medical sciences – but also the deconstruction of metaphysics that permitted the pleasurable and dangerous interrogations of limits and the exuberance gained by crossing them. We begin this literary exposition with the subterranean figure that history has hidden and resurrected repeatedly, Sade.

**The excesses of transgression: Sade**

Sade’s imagination enabled the realisation of a criminal utopia in which the law that governs human society was inverted. The society where crime, sodomy and incest are considered to be obligatory; where torture, acts of blasphemy, and a taste for flagellation and transgression are practiced by libertines in boundless and extravagant proportions. The ‘most subversive man who ever lived’, writes Bataille, has provided a name for the enjoyment in erotic cruelty: sadism. The pathologisation of Sade, according to Bataille, helped to render him more palatable and the publication of his work more acceptable. The attempt to define sadism based on Sade’s narratives by psychiatric discourse imposed an elaborated framework of

_Ballads_ (1866), Octave Mirbeau’s _The Torture Garden_ (1899), Huysmans’ _Against Nature_ (1884) and Lautréamont’s _Les Chants de Maldoror_ (1868).


221 Ibid, 32.

222 Bataille says that ‘what transgression means’ for individuals, was prepared by Sade. Georges Bataille, _Erotism: Death and Sensuality_, 196.


224 I am referring to Kraft-Ebbing’s use of Sade’s name but also to the stream of scholars and writers, who include de Beauvoir and Jean Paulhan, who sought to prove Sade as a precursor to Freud. Dany Nobus, _The Law of Desire_, 3.
normative delimitations onto his oeuvre.225 French post-war scholars, including Barthes and Blanchot, as well as other writers, artists and psychoanalysts, discarded the ‘scientific’ classifications of Krafft-Ebing. Instead, they resurrected the ideas of Freud, who never read Sade’s writings, and this provided ‘a universal instinctual dimension that went far beyond assigning it to the purely sexual practice of inflicting pain on the other and having pain inflicted by the other’.226 Following the interpretations of a selection of French writers the chapter expounds the value of the ideas espoused in Sade’s books, the force of which endure today ‘like the sun, no less glorious if we turn our weak eyes away from its blaze’.227 Sade’s writings remain decisive for theorising erotic cruelty, the limits of reason and the self. To do this, it is first necessary to place Sade in context.

Sade’s insubordinate and voluptuous sexual practices divested of moral concerns have a social and theoretical basis, taking inspiration from Enlightenment materialist philosophy. His writings belong to the late-eighteenth century, shortly before or during the French Revolution. His most well-known novels include The 120 Days of Sodom (1785), Philosophy in the Bedroom (1795), Justine (1791) and Juliette (1797).228 The books are set in fantastical societies, but they are bound to a particular time and place, in the aristocratic society of Louis XV, a milieu consistent with the social organisation of society before the revolution. A man of his age, André Michels notes that Sade was deeply affected by the end of the ancien régime, by the Enlightenment and by the French Revolution.229 Sade’s fiction is at once retaliation and a provocation against the philosophical, political, social and literary milieu of eighteenth-century France.

225 For a detailed discussion of psychiatric topologizing and a critique of Deleuze’s inflection of psychoanalysis into literature in order to conceptualise Sade’s sadism, see Alison Moore, ‘Recovering Difference in the Deleuzian Dichotomy of Masochism-Without-Sadism’, 33.
228 There are three very different versions of Justine. This study uses the most common story of Justine, Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue. This 1791 version is significantly less extensive in comparison to the final version of more than one thousand pages. In this version, the story of Justine is a first person narrative, the story is told from the perspective of a pious and naïve young girl. In contrast to Nouvelle Justine, published in 1797, the version examined here is considerably less obscene. This was not an arbitrary choice; in my consideration of the text I preferred to read the experience of Justine from the point of view of the victim. Furthermore, my reading of Juliette, as well as the 120 Days of Sodom, at least from a linguistic level sufficed to grasp the extremity of Sade’s obscene writing.
During the period leading up to the revolution, Paris had experienced a taste for a specific brand of novels, known as ‘philosophical’ books.\footnote{74} The popular, yet clandestinely consumed genre commonly used satire and obscenity to mock and deride the corrupt and oppressive authorities of the time, religious (clerical) or political (aristocracy). The story of Justine emerges in this literary setting. In addition to its subversion of the mores of its day, supported by the aristocracy, it represents a mockery of the conte moral (the moral tale) which was a popular genre of the time. Thus, the connection between Justine and the virtuous novels of the eighteenth century is maintained through irony.\footnote{75}

Sade was born in 1740 at the Condé mansion in Paris. Child of Jean Baptiste François Joseph, Count de Sade and Marie Eléonore de Maillé de Carman – cousin and lady-in-waiting to the Princess of Condé,\footnote{76} the Sades are an ancient aristocratic family, and can be traced to the twelfth century.\footnote{77} Very little is known about the early years of Sade’s life. What is known is that his formal education began at a Jesuit college at ten years old (1750–1754); then, at fourteen years of age, he enrolled at an esteemed cavalry training school. Sade became lieutenant of the King’s infantry regiment. In 1763, after the Seven Years’ War, he was discharged with the rank of cavalry captain. By the same year, at twenty-three years of age, Sade had already earned a troublesome reputation with the police and his contemporaries.\footnote{78} Aside from accruing substantial gambling debts, Sade became well-known for his predilection for flagellation and lecherous sexuality. Sade’s father was eager to relieve himself of his son who had become a burden, and arranged Sade’s marriage to Lady de Montreuil, a woman who was not of royal blood, but from a reputable family.\footnote{79} Gilbert

\footnote{74} Sade’s contemporaries Denis Diderot and Mirbeau also composed libertine works, yet Sade’s libertine novels remain unsurpassed in the extremity of their subversions.

\footnote{75} For a study of the satirical dimensions of Sade’s works see Stephen Werner’s Comic Philosophes: Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, Sade (Birmingham, AL: Summa Publications, 2002). Werner views comic irony as the trademark feature of the aesthetic of French Enlightenment fictions. The aesthetic genre is characterised by dialogue, repetitive narrative structure, and especially by comic irony.

\footnote{76} The Condé mansion encompassed what is today the rue de Condé, the rue de Vaugirard, the Monsieur-le-Prince and the Odéon intersection. Gilbert Lély, The Marquis de Sade: A Biography (New York: Grove Press, 1970), 22.

\footnote{77} Ibid, 19.

\footnote{78} Ibid.

\footnote{79} Ibid, 29–40.
Lély’s biography records that the phase of Sade’s imprisonment for sexual offences began about four months after his marriage, when he was sentenced to fifteen days at Vincennes Fortress ‘for excesses committed in a bawdy house’, in 1763.236

It is not necessary to enumerate a list of Sade’s scandalous behaviours. This aspect of Sade’s life has been used to silence the heuristic value in his philosophy. Moreover, in his debaucheries, Sade was not at all unique. From a retrospective point of view, Sade’s biographers illuminate that stigmatised behaviours were a commonplace for the nobility at the time.237 Michels notes that the offences and juridical sentences Sade endured were ‘less because of their seriousness than their scandalous character that struck the imagination of his contemporaries’.238 He might have escaped social disapproval but Sade, unlike most other nobles, was not clandestine in his escapades. Eventually, due largely to the unremitting dedication of his puritanical mother-in-law, Madame de Montreuil, Sade was concealed in prison to avoid shame and scandal brought to the family because of his alleged libertine practices.239

The first two periods of confinement, until his release from the Bastille in 1790, were quite different from his last confinement, from 1801 until his death.240 At Vicennes (1777–1784) and the Bastille (1784–1790), Sade’s confinement is linked to the reactionary ideology of a feudal system, which sought to preserve the honour of the Family and escape scandal as a priority.241 After the revolution, a bourgeois state ruled and the nobility disappeared. Sade was confined at St Pélagie, Bicêtre and then finally the asylum at Charenton, from 1801 until

236 The details of which are unknown, notes Lély. Ibid, 52.
237 It was a commonplace of the nobility at this time to keep une petite maison, a small house, used exclusively for debauched sexual escapades. It also is worth noting that flagellation in Sade’s time was not rare. In 1764, a young count asked to have himself beaten until he bled. In the police report, the officer noted that ‘many people are being reduced to this extremity, and today there is no brothel without a number of birch-rods’. Ronald Hayman, Marquis de Sade: Genius of Passion (London: Tauris Parke, 2003), 28. In Lély’s biography of Sade, Dr André Javelier is quoted in a letter that ‘the torture chambers of modern brothels daily witness similar scenes, and it scarcely even enters the victims’ heads to complain’. Gilbert Lély, The Marquis de Sade: A Biography, 73.
238 André Michels, ‘What Does Sade Teach Us About the Body and the Law?’, 218.
239 Roland Barthes, Sade, Fourier, Loyola, 177–178.
1814, for offending the state by publishing his books. Sade’s second phase of imprisonment was a matter of morality, because he transgressed social codes, threatening the moral fibre of a bourgeois society.242

The almost thirteen-year period (between 1777 and 1789) in prison was an extremely productive one for Sade.243 In a burst of creativity, Sade produced a canon of writing, notably *The 120 Days of Sodom* – a story about four wealthy libertines, their accomplices and their victims at an isolated chateau where they engage in tortures, debaucheries and philosophical dialogues for four months. At the dawning of the French Revolution in 1789, Sade was imprisoned in the Bastille. On 14 July the ancient prison was stormed. From his window Sade seized the opportunity to escape, provoking the mob to attack the ancient prison by using an improvised loudspeaker to broadcast that prisoners were having their throats cut.244 During the attack three quarters of Sade’s works were destroyed. The manuscript of *The 120 Days* was presumed lost. In a letter to his lawyer, Sade expressed that he had ‘shed tears of blood’ for an irrereplaceable loss, writing ‘you can replace beds, tables, commodes, but you cannot get ideas again … no, my friend, no, I can never tell you how desperate that loss has made me; for me it is irreparable’.245 Despair for the loss of a manuscript through which Sade sought to prove, based on the elaboration of a complete ethical system, the right to unlimited pleasure. This is a truth he endeavoured to reveal in his later works, *Justine* and *Juliette*.

According to Bataille, unlike the libertines of his novels, Sade maintained a deep emotional involvement with society.246 In his last years of freedom (despite once being a noble), Sade became a friend of the revolution and obtained several official positions in the government. He was now ‘Citizen Sade’. In 1793, Sade became President of the Piques Assembly, and used his powers where he could to intervene in favour of those who came under his jurisdiction. Sade cleared the Montreuils from the list of people accused of plotting against the revolution, effectively rescuing his mother-in-law from the guillotine, the woman who

243 Sade’s personal library included works of Enlightenment philosophy of La Mettrie, d’Holbach, Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot, decisive intellectual influences.
245 Ibid, 316.
caused Sade so much suffering and so many years in confinement. The proposals of the Piques Assembly were ‘horrible’, ‘utterly inhuman’ in Sade’s view.\textsuperscript{247} For publishing the story of \textit{Justine}, Napoleon sent Sade to the asylum at Charenton, just outside of Paris, where he would spend his last days (1801–1814). 

Barthes challenges the censorious reading of Sade’s texts. He notes how Sade’s books were destroyed by his family and repressed by authorities for a century and a half. But what has been more deleterious to Sade, according to Barthes, is the field of proliferative iterations comprising the \textit{endoxa}: the ‘received word of others, the repetitious manner of common opinion’ that bury the text in a quagmire of commonly held ideas.\textsuperscript{248} In light of this, Barthes writes that ‘sadism is only the coarse (vulgar) \textit{contents} of the Sadian text’\textsuperscript{249} and he is not just referring to the way in which Sade’s name was offered by Krafft-Ebing and Ellis to science.\textsuperscript{250} What has been, and what continues to be, ignored today, precisely because of the censorship of the \textit{endoxa}, is Sade’s ‘intellectual project: to explore the scope of transgression’.\textsuperscript{251}

Notwithstanding this, Sade survives the \textit{endoxa}, according to Barthes, because a powerful ‘counter-censorship’ is contained within the works themselves. The ultimate subversion, Barthes writes,

\begin{quote}
\textit{does not consist in saying what shocks public opinion, morality, the law, the police, but in inventing a paradoxical (pure of any \textit{doxa}) discourse: \textit{invention} (and not provocation) is a revolutionary act: it cannot be accomplished other than in setting up a new language.}\textsuperscript{252}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{247} Gilbert Lély, \textit{The Marquis de Sade: A Biography}, 351.
\textsuperscript{248} Ibid, 126.
\textsuperscript{249} Ibid, 170.
\textsuperscript{250} The reader is reminded that in the previous chapter, Krafft-Ebing was mentioned in regard to his 1886 work, \textit{Psychopathia Sexualis}, a taxonomy of perversions, in which he famously adapted Sade’s name into a perversion for classification.
\textsuperscript{252} Roland Barthes, \textit{Sade, Fourier, Loyola}, 126.
In the darkness of his small prison cell, Sade’s writings provided him with an *ausgang* (exit). He founded a complete ethical system, which served as the basis for a new modality of being in the world, ontologically despotic and disciplinarian. In this sense, Foucault refers to Sade as the ‘Sergeant of Sex’, and claims we need to leave behind the medieval courtyard of disciplinary society and, instead, reach for new inventions of the body, ‘with its elements, surfaces, volumes, and thicknesses, a non-disciplinary eroticism – that of a body in a volatile and diffused state, with its chance encounters and unplanned pleasures’. Sade’s essentialism, if it exists, embraces a natural law, an intensity where desire destroys the other and oneself in sexual excess.

During the period between his death and the Second World War, Sade’s work was banned and repressed, but his writings were not completely forgotten; they had a subterranean life underground. The taste in *Le Bonheur du Mal* (The Pleasures of Evil), gradually and with increasing momentum pervaded the literary imagination during the nineteenth century. A constellation of writers, including Guillaume Apollinaire, Baudelaire, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Lautréamont passionately read and valued Sade in the century following his death. The decade following the Second World War marks an unprecedented intellectual interest in Sade’s work. In the aftermath of the violence of two world wars, scholars flocked to Sade’s fiction in an attempt to comprehend the limits and failures of the processes of rationalisation, put into effect by the practices of the totalitarianism that turned humans into things. Klossowski’s *Sade My Neighbour* (1947) was among the first to consider the philosophical and literary significance of Sade’s reason, illuminating Sade’s assault on Christian values and the ideals of the Enlightenment.

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254 As Nobus points out, the Romantic decadent writers, who explored the ‘depths of taste’, were writing often in ‘direct allegiance to Sade’s libertine novels’. Dany Nobus, *The Law of Desire*, 5.


The Sadean philosophy of nature and the destruction of morality in a death of God world are engaged in the works of existentialist philosophers, Albert Camus and de Beauvoir.\textsuperscript{257} The man who overturned values and sexual norms also infiltrated the Surrealist movement, Sade’s most open apologists during the interwar period. Notwithstanding that the major intellectual currents of the day engaged Sade in their writings, Sade’s literary merits and proximity to some of the most burning questions of modern philosophy remained unrecognised until Barthes, Blanchot, Lacan, Klossowski, Foucault and Bataille opened the path to reading Sade’s works.\textsuperscript{258} As Ivan Krisjansen notes, Sade’s engagement with his present, as ‘the consummate critic of both earlier romanticism and rationalism … is why he is such a seminal influence in the development of the entire edifice of modern French thought’.\textsuperscript{259}

Sade’s transgression is discussed here for its power to reimagine the world, based on the destruction of traditional hierarchies, institutions and beliefs. In Sade’s novels, untrammeled destruction is profoundly linked to erotic enjoyment. On this basis, Sade sets the tone for the chapter, forming the plinth on which I base my subsequent analyses of Baudelaire, Bataille and Genet.

**Juliette and Justine (or The Misfortunes of Virtue)**

The stories of Justine and Juliette are separate texts depicting a Janus-faced portraiture of orphaned sisters who experience fates of opposite extremes.\textsuperscript{260} The character Justine represents virtue and remains loyal despite repeated punishments at the hands of her captors.


\textsuperscript{258} In the post-Second World War era the idea that Sade anticipated and even outstripped Freud on the grounds that Sade was something of a great symptomatologist became preponderant in Europe. In the first section of ‘Kant with Sade’ (1963) Lacan points out that the fault is with the scholars, calling it ‘a stupidity’. Jean Paulhan, for instance, stated that ‘Freud was to adopt Sade’s very method and principle’ in the essay ‘The Marquis de Sade and His Accomplice’ (1945). In her essay ‘Must we Burn Sade?’ de Beauvoir suggests that Sade anticipated Freud’s ‘pan-sexuality’. Jean Paulhan, ‘The Marquis de Sade and His Accomplice’, in *The Marquis de Sade: Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings*, tr. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press), 18.

\textsuperscript{259} Ivan Krisjansen, ‘Loveless Apathy: Sade’s Erotica and Erotic excess in Lars von Trier’s Film Nymph(m)aniac 2014 (Directors Cut)’, *Studies in European Cinema*, (2018), 2.

Her sister Juliette represents vice, a triumphant libertine whose lascivious imagination knows no boundaries. Sade lampoons the romantic novels of his day that extolled notions of idealised love, romance and the virtues of faithfulness and fidelity – treatises to and exemplary forms of ‘courtly love’, in which society gratefully takes comfort from the simulacrum of writers and moralists whom, Sade in turn, disdains. These virtuous novels are discernible as pastiches of Rousseau. Notably, Sade pits the sexual violence of his novels against those of Jonathan Swift and Samuel Richardson, with their righteous themes and mythical prognostications claiming that charity, virtue and good deeds will bring happiness and fruitful rewards.261 Foucault writes that the ‘demonstration-by-absurdity’ of what Sade deemed to be the ‘inanity’262 of Rousseau and eighteenth century moral philosophy, are manifested in his principles that permit total liberty of destructive desire. As Krisjansen argues:

In Sade’s literary canon regimes of authority, claiming the primacy of utility, charity, virtue and invoking sexual constraint are met with parody and are depicted as the normative wreckage that delimits the density and complexity found in human sexual experience.263

Sade’s attack on morality and religion has its sources in a reasoning deeply rooted in the popular philosophies of atheist materialists, Baron d’Holbach and Julien Offray de La Mettrie, and stems directly from Baruch Spinoza. From these philosophies, Sade’s fiction amounts to a new kind of humanity seeking to undo the epistemological privilege of God, and underscores the beginnings of a new ethics, freed from universal morality and what Sade deemed to be its numbingly anti-experimental utilitarian principles.

The Sadean social order ‘refuses to enclose desire in overarching structures such as consecrated religious or social authorities with their immanent and dogmatic totalities’.264

261 The title *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue* is an obvious parody of Richardson’s novel, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740).
263 Ivan Krisjansen, ‘Loveless Apathy: Sade’s Erotica and Earodic excess in Lars von Trier’s Film Nymph(omaniac 2014 (Directors Cut)’, 3.
264 Ibid, 2.
Nevertheless, it imposes its own stifling form of despotism. As Krisjansen and Michels argue, to different ends in their respective articles, Sade formulates ‘at the same time and in the same way, rules that are even more constraining and restrictive’. It is for this reason that Foucault is against the complete eulogising of Sade, who he speaks of as the ‘Sergeant of Sex’; generator of ‘an eroticism proper to disciplinary society’, associated with instrumental rationality. According to Foucault, Sade formulates an eroticism that is predicated on a ‘regulated, anatomical’ hierarchy of the body and its pleasures where, as Krisjansen points out, the ‘achieved self-satisfied indulgence emphasises mathematical sequence and ordered rules’.

In her essay on abjection, Kristeva posits that Sade’s orgies broaden ‘Meaning, Body, and Universe’, but this is interlaced with the verbiage of his philosophy, through which everything is meticulously rendered nameable. Sade’s erotics disallow spontaneous fluctuations and expressions of desire. The Sadean world, writes Kristeva, ‘allows for no other, no unthinkable, nothing heterogeneous. Rational and optimistic, it does not exclude’. Consequently, Kristeva contends that Sade’s text does not recognise a sacred domain, ‘and in that sense it is the anthropological and rhetorical acme of atheism’. This chapter discusses Sade’s eroticism in relation to the despotisms, horrors, and punishments of his fictional universe. First, it is necessary to demonstrate how crime is the foundation of law in Sade’s society.

In a Spinoza-like formulation, in which nature replaces God and divine order, Sade implements a philosophy of nature that serves as the basis for a moral order. For the benefit

265 André Michels, ‘What Does Sade Teach Us About the Body and the Law?’, 214.
266 Michel Foucault, ‘Sade: Sergeant of Sex’, 226–227.
267 Ibid.
268 Ivan Krisjansen, ‘Loveless Apathy: Sade’s Erotica and Earodic excess in Lars von Trier’s Film Nymph()maniac 2014 (Directors Cut)’, 6.
270 Ibid.
271 Ibid.
272 Mario Praz has pointed out that the French philosopher Diderot was one of the greatest exponents of the Système de la Nature. Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony, tr. Angus Davidson (Cleveland, Ohio: Meridian Books, 1956), 97.
of his libertine heroes, Sade declares what appears for him an intransigent proposition: nature’s law of perpetual motion favours crime, since nature must destroy in order to create, because matter is not inexhaustibly available. Nature, as Sade understands it, is excessive and murderous. Nature provides the basis for a universal law because it is seen as the source of all tyrannies. The libertine desire to destroy the other and to destroy themselves has a practical value, and a theoretical rigour, because it is through crime that the individual serves nature’s creative force. In a passage from Juliette, Sade reiterates nature as a supreme example for conduct: ‘destruction is the soil and light that renews her and where she thrives; it is upon crime that she subsists; it is, in a word, through death she lives’.273

Nevertheless, the libertine monsters do not entirely claim to be the disciples of a philosophy of nature, pleasure or eroticism. As Blanchot recognised, Sade’s maxim ‘enjoy oneself, at the expense of no matter whom’274 consecrates the discourse of jouissance which pushes the libertine to unbearable sexual limits. The apprentice of jouissance speaks, ‘give yourself over to all those who desire you’ and ‘take all those you desire’.275 The Sadean discourse imposes no limit on what can be enjoyed. Parts of the body, and whatever flows from its orifices, are irredeemably debauched and dissipated, as between the libertine Delbène and her novice accomplice, Juliette:

Pray avail me that part of your body which is capable of giving me a moments satisfaction, and if you are so inclined, amuse yourself with whatever part of mine may be agreeable to you.276

Each part of the body is fetishised: the eyes, the breasts, the anus. From ‘that part’ a direct comparison can be made with Freudian pre-Oedipal partial objects (breasts, mouth, eyes). Furthermore, the sexual act always consists in treating the other as an object. As Barthes discerns, orgies consist in taking turns being the object; the coprophagist becomes the coprophagee; the sodomist, the one sodomised, and so forth.277

274 Marquis de Sade, Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue, 52.
275 Maurice Blanchot, Lautréamont and Sade, 10.
276 Marquis de Sade, Juliette, 63–64.
277 Roland Barthes, Sade, Fourier, Loyola, 30.
The thought of genitally focused sex evokes in Sade’s libertines a ferocious irritation to the same degree as when God is evoked in conversations. Sade disavows the ordering of pleasures that is dictated both by natural and sociohistorical constraints such as biological difference between the sexes and family structure: marriage. The bodies of Sade’s fictional victims are treated with sadistic aggression: eyes are torn out, flesh is ripped apart, heads are decapitated, limbs are severed and organs removed. In Sade’s novels, victims are turned to dust, and then new victims replace them, again and again. Sade wants to show that both victims and masters of his fictional world exist in a magnetic desert of negativity. Because the transcendental deity is absent in Sade’s world, the libertine executioner asserts his or her abject indifference and apathy over the victim by making him/herself god on earth. The libertine speaks imperturbably, often resigned to a state of lethargy and being secluded – a characteristic motif in Sade’s novels – which can be taken as a metonymy for the absence of God, law, morality. Sade bears witness to a world of horrors, punishment, torture and contracts between masters and victims that escapes representation.278

Sadean society: masters and victims in the academy

In Sadean society the internal order mandates that nothing obliges a person to sacrifice his or her happiness in order to preserve others. As Bataille avows, this is a sovereign solitude achieved through a complete ‘denial of the rights and feelings of other people’.279 Sade’s solitary heroes are not concerned with ordinary pleasure. They exist in a kind of indulgent solipsism where the libertine derives intense pleasure in trampling underfoot taboo and prohibition. In terms of practicality, it is understandable that the Sadean world must be set in secluded castles, forests or underground cellars where the free play of pleasure, sacrilege, licentious orgies and jouissance is not inhibited by imperatives to benevolence dependent on the superior principle of the Good.280 The so-called wisdom and consequences of the

278 As Roudinesco put it, ‘how can anyone fail to see that the world of Sacher-Masoch was already present in Sade’s literary works, and that Sade has much more transgressive power?’ Elisabeth Roudinesco, Our Dark Side: A History of Perversion, 51.


280 When Delbène leads Juliette into an underground cellar for her initiation, she makes a point of their telluric venture into the bowels of the earth: ‘If we thus burrow far down into the realm of the dead, it is to be at the greatest possible remove from the living. When one is a libertine, as depraved, as vicious as we are,
conventional unquestioning acceptance of our embodied selves and our social selves is hacked away by villains as they perform a scission, cutting themselves loose from ordinary society. They cut away the connecting tissue of obligatory traditional morality, ideals, sexual codes and traditions.

Below, I unpack specific features of the victim and the master in Sade’s fictional society. Lacan depicts Sadean society as an academy, much like the Platonic Academy of ancient Greece, a place where eager pupils go to receive instruction and initiation into ethical principles foundational to the social structure. Sadean society is separated into two classes of people: the unlimited being and the subservient object-for-others. In this society, libertines encountered by Juliette on her path are pedagogical. Lady Clairwil, Delbène, Saint Fond and the Russian, Minski, teach Juliette to rise above the myopia of prejudice, to renounce all boundaries that get in the way of enjoyment, and to depend on nothing external to herself. Echoing Kant’s Enlightenment imperative, the libertines cry out: ‘dare and be yourself … dare and think for yourself!’ The right to unlimited pleasure of the libertine is not a gift given by instructors to willing initiates, but attained through a rigorous process of self-constitution, a laborious becoming – a kind of ascesis in horror and torture.

Juliette’s sister, Justine, embodies a parody of the immaturity of pre-Enlightenment reason. She represents a kind of arrested development that signifies a mythical perspective where logic endlessly links charity with kindness. Her mythical rationality only allows for an irrational repetition of hope that is always frustrated and then quickly accelerates into an event with despairing repercussions. Justine is robbed by a beggar, raped by a monk and when she refuses to be an accomplice to a crime she is charged and punished for it. By the end of the novel, she does not come any closer to understanding libertine crime. Each time she is captured, she behaves in the same way – in utter disbelief. Endlessly naïve, her only succour and resource resides in preaching virtue to her tormentors. According to Sade, self-sacrifice (to virtue, humanity, God) is equivalent to allowing oneself to become a slave,

one likes to be in the bowels of the earth so as the better to avoid the interference of men and their ridiculous law.’ Marquis de Sade, Juliette, 55.

281 Ibid, 3.

nothing but an object used by others for their happiness and enjoyment, a passive fungibility
to be passed around from person to person. Sade’s victims are cherished by the libertines
for their essence, virtue, and as a source of infinite destructive pleasure.

In contrast, Juliette and her accomplices echo Kant’s call for liberation from guidance and
direction from another, but with a line of exclusion where the privileged autonomy in
governing the self is guided by an unfettered cold reason freed from socially sanctioned moral
values. Juliette falls back on nothing but a kind of reasoned apathy; her machinations and
self-serving calculation. Nobus points out that this is a connection made by Theodor Adorno
and Max Horkheimer.

Juliette and her acolytes reject any consideration of extrinsic, socially sanctioned
moral values when advancing their doctrine. They believe unreservedly in the power
of reason, provided it is stripped of its emotional dimensions (what Kant designated
as the ‘pathological’), so that it becomes a formal, rigorous, ‘apathetic’ faculty.

Juliette can thus be read as a monster of Enlightenment reason. As Delbène informs Juliette,
‘the less one is sensitive, the less one is affected, and the nearer one draws to veritable
autonomy’.

In Sade’s writings, sexual satisfaction is linked with flagellation, torture, decapitations,
incest, cannibalism and coprophagia. All of these sexual tastes are within the bounds of
nature’s laws, as Nobus suggests, ‘for Sade’s libertines, there should be no limit to a human
being’s compliance with this natural “moral” principle’. After multiple ‘graduations’ in
libertinage, Juliette manifests a modality of being in ‘vice and excess’; attitudes which
‘possess an ontological weight capable of embracing indifference and invoking unbridled
lasciviousness’. Through his imaginary prodigy, Juliette, Sade declares: solitary man

283 Marquis de Sade, *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue*, 469.
287 Ivan Krisjansen, ‘Loveless Apathy: Sade’s Erotica and Earodic excess in Lars von Trier’s Film
*Nymph()maniac 2014 (Directors Cut)*’, 16.
recoils at nothing; shatter the obligations which tie us to others, find happiness in violating all the ties which bind us to society. As Nobus observes, in ‘proceeding to realize this fantasy’, the complete libertine must renounce

all common human feelings of sympathy, respect, compassion, charity, benevolence, kind heartedness, affection, gratitude, shame, guilt and remorse—all those empirical objects and hypothetical imperatives that Kant too would have designated as ‘pathological’, and therefore as goods to be discarded from practical reason—in order to become both the reliable instruments of Nature’s desire, and the invincible incarnations of supreme jouissance.

As has been reiterated throughout this section, the guiding moral principle of the Sadean libertine is indulgence in the selfish pursuit of prescribed pleasure. This includes the pleasure in torturing others, as well as pleasure in one’s own suffering. Freud’s later formulation of the ‘beyond’ of the pleasure principle includes the seemingly contradictory pleasures of erotogenic masochism, ‘tantamount to human beings finding “pleasure in pain”’. Having wholly embraced the spirit of destructive jouissance, Juliette can do everything, as Blanchot writes, her infinite possibilities match her capacity for destruction. To paraphrase Blanchot, if there is hell in a library, it is Sade’s Justine and Juliette.

This section demonstrates Sade’s intrinsic contemporaneity with the death of God. To illuminate this contention, I begin by examining a characteristic feature of Sade’s eroticism: Sade’s obsession with calculation. Barthes observes that to a society conditioned by courtly love the elements that characterise eroticism take the form of ‘suggestions, preliminaries, contexts and ambiguous sublimations’. Because of this stereotype, Sade’s eroticism

288 Noirceuil to Juliette: ‘One of our foremost prejudices attaching to the subject under discussion is bred of the sort of tie we gratuitously suppose to exist between other men and ourselves: an illusory tie – an absurd tie whence we have concocted this curious sort of brotherhood sacralized by religion.’ Marquis de Sade, Juliette, 176.
290 Ibid, 4.
291 Ibid.
292 Maurice Blanchot, Lautréamont and Sade, 36.
293 Ibid, 7.
294 Roland Barthes, Sade, Fourier, Loyola, 26.
appears strange and unusual. Sadean eroticism is encapsulated in the brutal command to ‘Take it off!’ Barthes points out that Sade’s eroticism is ‘assertive’, disciplinary, whereas ours, generally, is ‘suggestive, metaphorical’. For example, the libertine Minski orders his victims in a rage to ‘Strip,” he orders, “all of you, off with every stitch. You,” he goes on “you will bugger-fuck me while I am in action, and you … put your asses where I can kiss them side by side”. Sade describes nothing about textures of the body, nothing distinguishes one object of desire from another; more accurately, nothing pulsates, but rather everything evokes a coldness that lends to the idea that the Sadean victim has no other purpose than to ‘manifest the quality of “already [being] dead”’. Moreover, and key to the present argument, the victim’s body can be debased, soiled in excrement, blood and sperm, yet in the eyes of the libertine the victim remains a profound source of enjoyment.

The libertine is primarily concerned with increasing the number of murdered victims. Saint Fond tells Juliette about his plan to annihilate half of the population of France by poisoning its food supply. In the eyes of the libertine obsessed with quantity – with masses of cadavers – the victim does not exist as a single entity, but rather as an indistinguishable part of an ‘indefinitely exchangeable … enormous erotic equation’. Blanchot writes that ‘to consider human beings from the standpoint of quantity kills them more completely than does the physical violence that annihilates them’. The obsession with quantity leads one to understand more fully Sade’s emphasis on the equality of beings in the eyes of nature. In the eyes of nature, no person is distinguishable from the rest.

In this aspect of Sade’s system, the idea that all beings are meaningless in the eyes of God becomes the basis of the Sadean libertine’s negation of humanity. The murder and torture of the victim by the libertine ‘verifies their nothingness. He becomes master of their

295 As Bataille notes in *Erotism*, ‘the kind of sexual satisfaction that suits everyone is not for Sade’s fantastic characters’. Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, 167.
297 Marquis de Sade, *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue*, 586.
300 Ibid, 24.
nonexistence, and he draws great pleasure from this’. 301 The Sadean libertine affirms his or her power over other people through a radical negation of individual existence. Klossowski asks, does not the denial of God, and the appeal for unbridled freedom involve the denial of the neighbour? 302 Klossowski upholds Blanchot assertion, when the latter claims that Sade’s libertine master makes manifest the emptiness and the nothingness of his or her neighbour through murder. 303

In his novels, Sade determined to unpick the very fibres of both the numinous pre-modern and the rational modern self. The de-legitimisation of pre-modern values and systems of belief and the formulation of a new system with its foundations in total freedom involves an immanent critique of Enlightenment philosophies of reason and freedom. As a ‘dark’ philosopher of the Enlightenment Sade revealed the obduracy and mendacity existing in Enlightenment ideals; tenets which were supposed to liberate humanity from despotism and dogma, instead, generated its own form of despotism. In the authoritarian heroine, Juliette, Sade propagates the image of a ‘monster’ configured as a self-seeking and cold-hearted rationalist belonging to Enlightenment Reason. She is a metaphor for a body that endures and is enthralled by moral turpitude. Juliette stridently attacks pity, love, marriage, forgiveness and purges any normative ethics that seeks to redeem or extol Christian values. Self-aggrandisement and accumulating wealth whilst denying others access is her credo. Pleasure is an agreeable distraction only if it remains a pragmatic tool for the pursuit of calculated, self-serving schemes to usurp the lives of others.

Bataille once reflected that the only conceivable end to the unceasing torture and murder of victims is the possible desire of the executioner to be the victim of torture himself. 304 This destructive drive reached its climax when Sade demanded that all traces of his existence ‘disappear from the surface of the earth’ as he hopes his ‘memory will vanish from the memory of men’. 305 But there is more to Bataille’s observation. Interrogating the meaning of

301 Ibid, 25.
302 Pierre Klossowski, Sade, My Neighbour, 70.
303 Maurice Blanchot, Lautréamont and Sade, 25.
304 Georges Bataille, Literature and Evil, 98.
305 Ibid.
his remark further, it seems to confirm and give full expression to Sade’s reputation as an eternally unrecognised man. Even later, as Blanchot writes, ‘When we then saw in him the example of an anomaly also found in certain individuals, we rushed to shut him up in this unnameable aberration, for which only his unique name seemed to be suitable’. 306 The ignominious use of Sade’s name in the jargon of science and notions of Nazi and fascist evil had power on its side; the hegemony of a supposedly apolitical discourse spread to the terminology of agents of the State, of the media, and of everyday conversation and become endoxa. For Barthes, Foucault and others, Sade’s fictions represent a stage of self-consciousness that sees humanity forced to confront the horror of death without God. Sade envisions a utopia without illusions: the illusion of fundamental limits of personhood and individual identity. Baudelaire follows Sade, historically, from the end of the ancien régime to France’s Second Empire and intends to criticise the illusion of rational mastery through science and reason, the illusion of progress in technology – the justifications of bourgeois oppression.

**Épater les bourgeois! Baudelaire and the spleen of the nineteenth century**

You gave me your mud  
And I made it into gold.  
– Baudelaire 307

The spirit of transgression first found in Sade’s writings reappears in the fraternal literary figure of Baudelaire (1821–1867). 308 A mid-nineteenth century poet, essayist, art critic and an esteemed translator of Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire wrote one of the most important contributions to poetry in Europe during the nineteenth century, *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The book, which is the focus of the present analysis, became a bible for the Parisian avant-garde, a central ‘text’ of the symbolist and modernist movements (the painter Edvard Munch was

commissioned to illustrate a deluxe edition of the book), and over the decades it has come to be regarded as a classic.309

In his poetry, Baudelaire translated into pure classical verse scenes of abject cruelty, violence and eroticised hatred. The poet’s reputation during the 1850s radically and permanently shifted from moderate success among literary circles, to notoriety and widespread derision. A dominating concord of scathing reviews by popular journals reduced Baudelaire and his work to insignificance.310 Despite his fame as an underground poet, and efforts by influential writers to revive interest in Baudelaire, the poet spent his final years in debt, failure and disease. He died at forty-six years of age, paralysed and unable to speak.311 For this reason, together with Sade, he may be understood as one of the great European thinkers who committed themselves to social exile by speaking the unspeakable.

Baudelaire’s poems represent a sustained challenge to the romantic idealisation of virtue that endorsed corporeal meanings belonging to a disposition of power that is fully committed to bourgeois morality. As Pierre Bourdieu has argued, Baudelaire’s conflict against the ‘right thinking’ bourgeoisie embodies ‘the most extreme position of the avant-garde, that of revolt against all authorities and all institutions, beginning with literary institutions’.312 The secularisation of sexuality during the nineteenth century, starting from 1810 with the French Penal Code, transformed the way sexual practices were perceived. A product of the revolution and inspired by the Enlightenment movement, to different degrees, it influenced all European countries throughout the century. Except for adultery, sexual practices could no longer be considered crimes, if they were practised in private and between consenting adults.313 At the same time, authors of literature that accentuated the appeal of vice in pornographic and licentious books could be persecuted for ‘offending public morals’.314

309 The posthumously published book of prose, Le Spleen de Paris (in 1869), and the Journaux Intimes (1887) are also famous and influential works.
310 Alex De Jonge, Baudelaire Prince of the Clouds: A Biography, 8.
311 Ibid.
314 Ibid.
From this perspective, Roudinesco brings attention to the hypocrisy of the very same system that penalised the author of *Justine*:

As for the bourgeois, they were, from the Restoration until the Second Empire, free to indulge in their libertine desires in clandestinity, provided that they condemned such practices in the name of public morality and respected, within the bosom of their families, the laws of procreation, which were essential to humanity’s continued survival.315

In 1857, Baudelaire was prosecuted for publishing *Les Fleurs du Mal*; fined but not imprisoned, certain poems were expurgated and removed from the book. The ban reinforced the Second Empire’s adverse assessment and secured Baudelaire’s reputation as a Satanist poet and a sexual pervert. He was excluded from ‘good society’ and the salons and became a stigmatised man, barred from the literary milieu by mainstream press and the papers.316

In his poetry, Baudelaire portrays the anonymous lives of ‘perverts’, deviants and criminals hidden within the burgeoning Parisian crowds of the mid-nineteenth century. In the section below, the analysis draws on the perspectives of Marshall Berman, Walter Benjamin and Foucault who have interrogated the complex and original characteristics of Baudelairean modernity, defined as the will to bring a heroic dimension into a history of the present.317 The product of a lifetime of reflection and writing, Baudelaire’s vision of modernity and his subversive book of poems are linked together with the central element of modern heroism. I argue that this central Baudelairean motif at the heart of *Les Fleurs du Mal* is constitutive of its transgression. The text elevates and transforms the social outcasts and the dispossessed – condemned by both God and rational man – into modern heroes demonstrating variants of transgressive sexuality – with Eros and Thanatos shamelessly blending together, purified by stylised beauty.

315 Ibid, 55.

91
**Baudelairean modernity**

Baudelaire defines modernity as a ‘consciousness of discontinuity of time: a break with tradition, a feeling of novelty, of vertigo in the face of the passing moment’. In this well-known account of modernity from ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ (1859–1860) Baudelaire celebrates the ‘dazzling appearances’ of modern fashions, parading military troops and the latest developments in modern technologies. Despite the absence of critical depth in these convictions, Baudelaire does convey something important about modernity. The dazzling allure of the spectacle is intrinsic to the outward show of modernity, which ‘can blind even the most incisive self to the radiance of its own darker life within’. According to De Jonge, 1850s France ‘wanted to be amused, to get rich, to comfort itself with the thought that things were improving steadily and of their own accord, safe in the knowledge that one day science would create an earthly paradise’. This verisimilitude of comfort and progress did not want to know about modern malaise, secret passions and vice. In its focus on the outward achievements the modern notion of progress ignored the real suffering of people whose lives were being overturned by destructive political upheavals and social transformations.

Baudelairean modernity as provided by Foucault, Benjamin and Berman is not merely an acceptance of the contingency and fleetingness of the present but an attitude that consists in ‘recapturing something eternal that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it’. Baudelaire’s thought on modernity proffered Foucault an insightful example for modernity as attitude. The experience of modernity as Baudelaire delivered it is not simply about recognising oneself within an ephemeral moment. Baudelaire disparaged the ‘realism’ of his day, which, according to him, merely mimics the present; on this basis, he sought to

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318 Charles Baudelaire, cited in Michel Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, 35.
319 These are the same soldiers, writes Berman, who massacred 25,000 Parisians in the coup d’état of June 1848, which cleared the way for Napoleon III to come to power in December 1851. Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, 137.
322 Ibid.
recapture something akin to the spirituality of art. For Baudelaire, ‘an art that is not épousé with the lives of men and women in the crowd is not properly modern art at all’. Baudelaire sought to capture the heroic spirit of his epoch in the experiences that arise from the everyday life of Napoleon III and Haussman’s Paris during the Second Empire; experiences which ‘carry a mythic resonance and poetic depth that propel them beyond their place and time and transform them into archetypes of modern life’. The heroes of the Gazette are shown to reside at the centre of the modernity he determines to expose.

The modern hero recognises him or herself as being a part of a complex arrangement. Baudelaire was fascinated by contemporary mid-nineteenth century Parisian life: the fashions of the black frock coat that were testament to the modern obsession with death, the endless flux of anonymous faces and the dandies – the heroes of modern life. The dandies seek to turn their lives into a work of art. As Baudelaire’s reflections on modern heroism deepened, he resolutely attacked the prevailing ideas informing progress; particularly the idea that material progress is coextensive with spiritual progress. In terms of literary practice Baudelaire criticises one of the defining characteristics of modernity: the restrictive literary contours of authors who are paid to inspire love and respect for the prevailing ideas of the time. As he puts it:

The majority of the writers who have concerned themselves with the really modern subjects have contented themselves with the certified, official subjects, with our victories and political heroism. They do this reluctantly and only because the government orders them and pays them for it. And yet there are subjects from private life which are heroic in another way. The spectacle of elegant life and of the thousands of irregular existences led in the basements of a big city by criminals and

324 Marshall Berman, All that is Solid Melts into Air, 146.
325 Ibid, 124.
326 Michel Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, 41.
327 Ibid, 40.
kept women – the Gazette des Tribunaux and the Moniteur demonstrate that we need only open our eyes to our heroism.328

Baudelaire’s view of modernity embraces the ‘underbelly’ of bourgeois existence, the harsh realities of the disenchanted in an industrialised world and the spiritual crisis that it engenders. He claims that urban development during the Second Empire ‘at once inspires and enforces the modernization of its citizens’ souls’.329 Amid fleeting faces there are modern heroes whose deeds are reported by the papers, revealing that ‘the fashionable world is here … linked to the underworld, with dark desires and deeds, with crime and punishment’.330 It has a human depth far more arresting than the pallid fashion plates of the painter of modern life.

In Les Fleurs du Mal Baudelaire describes neither Parisians nor Haussman’s renewed streets during the Second Empire. He looked beyond external appearances in order to capture something enduring within a moment that was so deeply a part of him. Baudelaire transfigured a disenchanted and hypocritical humanity in its fallen state; prostitution, homosexuality, flagellation and decapitations portray an eroticism torn between the desires of jouissance and guilt.331 Baudelaire’s poems immortalised the behaviours of a decaying body in the portrayal of man’s indefatigable assault against a God. The sadomasochistic foundations of such an eroticism are revived in Les Fleurs du Mal, in which Baudelaire reveals the new menagerie of modern vice, or the ‘new powers of evil: prostitutes, brothels, pornography, syphilis, artificial paradises, spleen, exoticism and mysticism’.332 Sade is the resounding sign of those elements in the French tradition. The literary refusal of subservience to the bourgeoisie and a sexology that Baudelaire and his contemporaries disdained includes Huysmans, Gustav Flaubert and Guy de Maupassant. For this tradition of writers, ‘Sade became the underground hero of an awareness of evil that could subvert the new moral

329 Théodore Faullain de Banville, cited in Marshall Berman, All that is Solid Melts into Air, 132.
330 Ibid, 143.
331 Benjamin offers a portrait of Haussmann’s great remodeling of Paris commissioned by Napoleon III, and the consequences for life in the city.
order’. As much as it did Sade in his time, the pretence and moral hypocrisy of the day angered Baudelaire. In fact, Les Fleurs du Mal flagrantly unsettles and directly confronts the reader as Baudelaire poignantly declares: ‘Yes, you – you hypocrite – my next of kin!’

The Flowers of Evil

In this section I offer a close reading of a poem from one section of the book, entitled ‘Fleurs du Mal’. Thematically, this segment of the book is pervaded by destruction and death, forbidden sexuality, erotic cruelty and victimhood. In conjunction, I consider other poems from the book that reflect themes of a self-conscious poet, ennui, beauty and its dispossession. This facilitates connecting the analysis more poignantly to Baudelaire’s form of subversive eroticism, which imparts and expresses the heroisation of modern men and women.

First, it is crucial to draw the reader’s attention to Baudelaire’s commitment to evil. Flaubert once reproached Baudelaire for having over stressed the importance of the spirit of evil in his works. Baudelaire’s response was that he had given this criticism much thought, however, examining his muse, the complex human subject, he was absolutely convinced of the impossibility of extracting the petrifying image of ‘l’intervention d’une force méchante extérieure à lui’ – the intervention of a malicious exogenous force. In ‘Fleurs du Mal’ Baudelaire makes the devil an allegory for the author of all vice. Satan is represented as the demon who has a subterranean dwelling in the boulevards. In a stanza from the poem ‘Litanies to Satan’, the devil is the great vanquished and the prince of the dispossessed, an essence to whom Baudelaire pledges obeisance. The psalm extols an exogenous underworld complete with transcendent power:

\[
\text{Prince of exiles, wronged, and stripped of power,} \\
\text{Triumphant as the phoenix in the fire,} \\
\text{Satan, have mercy on me in this hour!}
\]

Ibid.


Lord of the Underworld, omniscient kind,
And healer of the wounds of humankind,
Satan, have pity on my suffering.

Scholars have queried what impelled Baudelaire to give theological form to the revolt against dominant powers (the bourgeoisie), the modern concept of truth (progressions of knowledge and technology), beauty and ‘the good’. Sartre’s study negatively reveals an infantile and masochistic attitude in Baudelaire, which he claims inspired the latter’s dedication to evil. Sartre suggests that Baudelaire wanted his transgressions to be judged at every moment of the day by a constant observer. He wanted a gaze or ‘the look’ – ‘a look that ordered and condemned’.

Equally unsympathetic to Baudelaire’s attitude, Blanchot’s essay entitled ‘Baudelaire’s Failure’ (1949), attributes to the poet an existential choice suggesting that Baudelaire ‘wanted to live poetically, but he recoiled before the consequences of that decision, which would have deprived him of the daily comfort and support of an unwavering morality’. Concerned with being-for-others, Blanchot argues that Baudelaire failed to attain the freedom of the poet, a freedom which he was forever afraid of, always seeking ‘guarantees on the side of a truth or of an objective, moral, social or religious authority’. According to this view, Baudelaire falls back on authority; unable to stand alone, he did not dare create anything new in his transgressions.


337 Baudelaire’s self-harming (including self-willed poverty though aversion to work, and one suicide attempt), hatred for the bourgeoisie, guilt and his Catholicism nourished his art, as Sartre, Bataille and Benjamin have noted. In 1866, Baudelaire writes, ‘I have put my whole heart, my whole affection, my whole religion (in disguise), my whole hatred, my whole misfortune into this atrocious book … It is true that I will swear the contrary, that I will swear by the gods that it is a book of pure art … and I will be an arrant liar.’ Ibid, 29.


340 Ibid, 135.
In another analysis, Benjamin contends that Baudelaire’s Satanism must not be taken too seriously. If it has any value, ‘it is as the only attitude in which Baudelaire was able to sustain a non-conformist position’. The blasphemous tone that pervades Baudelaire’s poems is characteristic of the theological form he gives to his rejection of modern regimes of the body. Moreover, notwithstanding that before and after the revolution of 1848 Baudelaire’s political insights were ambiguous, contradictory and even ‘ignorant’, Benjamin further suggests that Baudelaire could easily have shared the opinion of Flaubert, who declared, ‘Of all politics I understand only one thing: revolt.’ Viewed in this way, it is arguable that Baudelaire’s anti-conformism regulated his attitude towards eroticism. Opposing the Rousseauian belief in the natural virtuousness of humanity, Baudelaire preferred to view the sexual act as evil rather than to affirm that sex is a natural ‘life-giving’ function.

The bourgeois ‘normality’ that Baudelaire disdained is inseparable from the normative and utilitarian values of sexologists during the nineteenth century. At this time, Roudinesco notes that sexual perversion was defined by a transgression of the natural order of things that was decipherable by science. Homosexuals, for instance, were no longer the men who introduced the polis to masculine pleasure, as Foucault examines in the second volume of The History of Sexuality; neither were they the sodomites who broke the laws of nature. The object choice of a man deviates from society’s ideal. They are perverse. As Roudinesco points out, ‘The definition of perversity also applies to those who forcefully take or penetrate the body of the other without his or her consent (rapists, paedophiles), to those who ritually destroy or devour their own bodies or those of others (the sadist, the masochist … the scarifier, the mutilator)’, and the list continues. This new regime of the body and its pleasures aimed to establish a distinction between the ‘normal’ (procreative, heterosexual sexuality) and the so-called ‘perverse’ (death, non-utilitarian sex and jouissance) and is the product of a moral ideology of the bourgeoisie. In his representation of licentious and criminal pleasures, Baudelaire mocks Enlightenment values and the representatives of bourgeois medical science, who sought to paint vice the better to marginalise it.

344 Ibid.
The Condemned Women

In certain poems of the *Fleurs du Mal* Baudelaire synthesises the transitoriness, ever-changing and innovating attitude of modernity with images of classical antiquity. Greek antiquity extends into Baudelaire’s world, providing the image of the heroine ‘which seemed to him worthy of being carried over into modern times … The lesbian is the heroine of modernism’.345 The ‘Condemned Women’, one of the greatest and most popular poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal* according to Benjamin, is devoted to lesbian love between women who bear Greek names, Delphine and Hippolyta. The poem was among those declared obscene during the 1857 trial of *Les Fleurs du Mal* and was banned from the book. The significance of this poem is understood by the title Baudelaire originally considered giving the book, *Les Lesbiennes*.346 Benjamin shows that the lesbian is an erotic ideal for Baudelaire – she is an ideal of resilience and courage – synthesised with a historical ideal, the greatness of the ancient world, which also explains why Baudelaire contemplated for so long giving the title to the lesbians.347

Delphine and Hippolyta are exemplary models of the kind of transgression that this thesis explores: a transgression that risks the securities of social order and expresses an attitude of critical revolt against enforced homogeneity. Baudelaire’s women are ‘condemned’ by passion and the pursuit of erotic freedom. The lovers break with social and moral limits around normative subjectivity and declare tastes and desires against dominant and socially valourised forms of pleasure. Hippolyta has taken a bite from the forbidden fruit of subversive pleasure. She is aware of the gravity of her transgression. She is an outsider of bourgeois normality. Hippolyta confesses to Delphine that she regrets nothing and would persist with her ‘even if that kiss should cost me heaven’, but she is nevertheless troubled by

346 Lesbianism as a theme for both literature and painting were not uncommon in France during the nineteenth century. See ibid, 90–1; see also Graham Chester’s notes in his translation of the text in Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, tr. Graham Chester (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1995), 215.
a profound guilt.\textsuperscript{348} This expression of guilt signals the splitting of the subject that secures deep inner control, so vital to the bourgeois privileging of the family and reproduction.

Having dual responsibility of lover as well as pedagogue, Delphine responds by accusing Hippolyta of preferring, out of weakness, the comfort of puerile obedience and servitude. There is more to Delphine’s admonition. Virtue, as Foucault has argued, is directly linked to obedience. Foucault argues, in ‘Sexuality and Power’, that obedience as an outcome is desired as an end in itself. According to Foucault, ‘Obedience must lead to a state of obedience. To remain obedient is the fundamental condition for all the other virtues.’\textsuperscript{349}

Delphine rejects a system that makes love the loyal servant of virtue: ‘When faced with love how dare you mention hell? // To hell with him who got us in this mess! // The one who first became enamoured of // Decency, wickedness, virtue and vice – who muddled up morality and love!’ Delphine finishes her reproach with these words, which continue to resound throughout all poems of the cycle: ‘in this world only one true master can be served!’\textsuperscript{350} That puissant though silenced master she refers to is desire. Baudelaire’s lesbians are deployed in a Sadean-like destruction of the ideals of the bourgeois state that imposed sexual morality based on the dominance of the ‘romantic family’.\textsuperscript{351}

It is worth drawing a parallel between Baudelaire’s tale of homosexual pleasures and the story of Herculine Barbin. S/he was a mid-nineteenth century French intersex person whose diary Foucault published as an anecdotal and emblematic revelation of the regulative demands of ‘sex’ as an invented or artificial category within the discursive production of sexuality.\textsuperscript{352} In h/er journals, Herculine relates her passionate love affair with Sara. Herculine reported to doctors a mysterious genital ailment – a series of confessions that led to physical examinations, resulting in Herculine being legally obliged to transform into a male. Herculine

\textsuperscript{349} Michel Foucault, ‘Sexuality and Power’, 124.
\textsuperscript{350} Charles Baudelaire, ‘Damned Women: Delphine and Hippolyta’, 297.
\textsuperscript{351} In the short essay ‘Of Virtuous Plays and Novels’, Baudelaire cites the ‘divine Marquis’ whose name was still forbidden. Charles Baudelaire, Selected Writings on Art and Literature, tr. Patrick Edward Charvet (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 109–112.
was separated from Sara and before h/er suicide, Herculine condemned regulatory and juridical agencies for interfering in the realm of transgressive pleasure that s/he had been forcibly dissociated from. In a melodramatic tone, Herculine’s diary recapitulates the story of impossible love:

Society, that pitiless judge, could sully with impunity the holy affection of two loyal souls who had been cast together upon the edge of a secret abyss and whose inevitable fall had been the mysterious bond between them. Stupid blindness of the crowd, which condemns what it should absolve!  

Herculine’s case will be considered again in the following chapter. What is noteworthy here is the parallel between Herculine and the lesbians, who pursue a sterile love somehow ‘outside’ of the natural order of things. Their pleasures correspond to an ontological transgression because the homosexual lifestyle represents a mockery of the laws of procreation. Baudelaire commits a further mockery by anointing the lesbians with the aesthetic beauty of the ancient Greek world. Baudelaire abandons his women, leaving them with these words: ‘Aroint thee, wretched victims, and begone, // Begin the sharp descent through endless hell!’  

Baudelaire’s scene, of lesbian lovers hidden away from the streets, the crowds and the laws, transfigures them into underground heroes. For Baudelaire, social ostracism was inseparable from the heroism of lesbian love.

Baudelaire organised the sequence of poems himself, guided by thematic order. This is important because ‘Delphine and Hippolyta’, one of three Les Lesbiennes poems, is placed within a cycle of poems where the lust for pain and destruction of self and others is dominant. Baudelaire’s orchestration prompts the question: what is the association between condemned lesbian love and mutilation and destruction of self? Baudelaire represented dangerous pleasures, consciously pursued in knowledge of the suffering it will bring to the subject. The reason is ennui – the most powerful force in ‘our grotesque

353 Ibid, 92.
355 As seen in ‘To a Madonna’, ‘Destruction’, ‘A Martyr’ and ‘The Two Good Sisters’.
menagerie of vice’. As Baudelaire declares in the opening poem to the book: ‘Ennui! Daydreaming of the guillotine … Reader, you know this armchair terrorist.’

Literary theorist Bersani suggests that ‘ennui is a state in which any evil might be committed’. This is because ennui harbours nothing. Ennui is evil precisely because it is empty, it can house anything inside its void. Etymologically, the word comes from the Latin ‘in odiare’, meaning to hold in hate, or ‘in odio esse’ – to be the object of hate. It connotes a hatred of the world and of oneself, with a somewhat stronger tone than acedia and melancholy, which brings it closer to modern boredom. In its sources, ennui can be identified with the Enlightenment revolution: the new, secular and materialist interpretation of human temporality displaced the faith in a divine order, coming redemption and transcendent meaningfulness, and substituted it with belief in human progress and earthly happiness. This revolution meant also the fragmentation of the old traditional values, beliefs and forms of existence based on a theological discourse. The Enlightenment created the new myth of rationality and universalised its scope, experiencing it – mythically – as the revelation of the ultimate meaning of existence.

The behaviour of Baudelaire’s heroes appears to relieve and displace a feeling of ennui. Ennui signals a response to being trapped: one is tired of who one is: self-hatred provokes destruction in the need for a way out. The spirit in which Baudelaire portrays his heroes also appears in the character Stavrogin, from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel Demons. Being ‘merely lukewarm’ was not an option for Stavrogin. His confession at the end of the novel reveals that ‘every extremely shameful, immeasurably humiliating, mean, and, above all, ridiculous position I have happened to get into in my life has always aroused in me, along with

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boundless wrath, an unbelievable pleasure’. This ‘limit attitude’ that Foucault uses to designate the modern experience resonates, and is found at the core of Baudelaire’s work.

In the poem ‘Destruction’, the devil is an allegory for ennui. It enters the poet, a lucid and self-aware victim, through his lungs. He swallows with subtle and insatiable desire, ‘And in this wise he leadeth me, half dead; all out of breath, far from the sight of God, In a great waste land of inanition.’ This stanza illustrates the devil as a kind of alchemist who tempts victims through seduction:

           Knowing my love of Art, he may select
           A woman’s form – most perfect, most corrupt –
           And under sanctimonious pretext,
           Bring to my lips the portion of her lust.

Having torn the woman to pieces, the poet is brought before the ‘bloody garments stained by open wounds’. The poem ends not in satisfied lust but emphasises where he has been led by ennui. Delphine and Hippolyta are also condemned by a seductive force that is beautiful and attractive, a ‘desir éternel et coupable’.

The devil’s intervention provides a series of erotic, sadistic, masochistic and religious images, which are bound together by their diverse links to death and destruction. In ‘A Beatrice’ the poet masochistically humiliates himself in self-directed irony, and then makes sexual advances at the demons that taunt him. In turn, the poem ‘A Martyr’ finds the poet entering a luxurious nineteenth century boudoir, where he finds the corpse of a woman with her legs spread open. In what appears to be a fetishistic display of ritualised torture, the head of the young beauty has been severed from her body. The poet regards this scene of ‘une

360 Ibid, 692.
361 Michel Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, 46.
364 Ibid.
coupable joie’ as an act of forbidden sexual pleasures. The poet asks what has led this woman to this extreme, in ‘des desirs errants et perdus?’ In the following line, the poet captures the defining image of this cycle of poems: ‘She’s just a girl! // What lust could tantalize the boredom in her soul, // To recklessness while such enormities as this held her in thrall?’

A poem from ‘Spleen and the Ideal’ concludes this exposition into Baudelaire’s modern heroes. The poet in ‘L’Heautontimoroumenos’ is tormented by the heart that has become its own mirror. The title is from a Greek word meaning ‘The Self-Torturer’. The self-torturer epitomises the profound capacity for destruction in the search for sensation, and there is no difference whether he receives it or inflicts it. The seductive force of ennui hijacks the poet’s taste for crime and leads to the destruction of love, youth and beauty alike. In the last stanzas, the other person – the victim – is essentially ‘me’, the poet: ‘I am the sinister mirror, // Where the shrew looks at herself.’ The poet embodies both victim and executioner, master and slave, mutilator and mutilated:

I am the wound and the knife!
I am the cheek and the slap
I am the limbs and the rack,
The victim and the executioner!

In this vision of modernity, the self-conscious poet is reflexively heroic, predicated on an ontological image of a subject divided by the knowledge of God, morality, the law, along with the simultaneous desire to do violence and experience the destruction of these boundaries. Baudelaire gave us ‘modernity’ at the same moment he offered us a vision of transgression and its pleasures, where alternative orders can be imagined, and dominant ideas can be critiqued. Baudelaire’s voluptuous, wounding and tormented eroticism filters through the French tradition with Bataille and Genet, who continued to defy reason and preach transgression.


369 Ibid.

370 Ibid.
The accursed share: Bataille and Genet

These final authors continue the lineage of the Baudelairean celebration of the diabolical, the prostitutes, the spleen of modern life that could subvert the moral order; and Sade’s violent obliteration of difference and ‘rational’ attack on Christianity.371 According to Edmund White’s biography of Genet, these two eminent writers of twentieth century France knew each other but they were not friends, intellectually or otherwise.372 Issues of contention, instigated by Bataille and directed at Genet are important; however, I seek primarily to posit a common project and a shared intelligibility that links these two authors. In Bataille and Genet, the experience of transgression is rendered affirmative, imparting a sensuality that consecrates the heterogeneity and difference evoked by eroticism.

It is not difficult to form a bridge between Bataille and Genet. Both knew Sade’s work well and shared Sade’s conception that death is intimately linked to sensual excess.373 Bataille himself stated that the knowledge of transgression, ‘what transgression means’ for individuals, was prepared by Sade.374 More generally, they also shared Sade’s idea that human life was characterised not so much by an aspiration to the good and to virtue, as by a permanent quest for the enjoyment of evil: the desire for cruelty, a love of infamy and an aspiration to torment and suffering.375 An aspiration to the sacred through the portal of eroticism-obscenity is representative of their transgressions. Both interpreted erotic writing as a practice of excess and self-dissolution in opposition to modern rationality with its imperatives to order, sobriety and stable self-identity.

373 Georges Bataille, Erotism: Death and Sensuality, 18.
374 Ibid, 196.
375 In their critiques of modern rationality, the Bataille circle, associated with Artaud and Klossowski, were strongly influenced by the early twentieth-century rediscovery of Sade – initiated for the most part by Iwan Bloch’s 1904 publication of The 120 Days of Sodom. Romana Byrne, Aesthetic Sexuality: A Literary History of Sadomasochism (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 89.
Concerning the question of lack of mutual appreciation between Genet and Bataille, White suggests an element of personal animus. However, one might also consider differences engendered by their proximity to, and obsession with, the same aspiration: sovereignty – the lot of the ‘accursed share’. The sovereign ‘has no more regard for the limits of identity than he does for the limits of death, or rather these limits are the same. He is the transgression of all such limits. In the midst of all the others, he is not work that is performed but rather play’.

In *The Accursed Share* Bataille links transgression to the sacred and introduces to humanity another God, which is not one of prohibition, but rather – *the God of sovereignty*. This is an apostasy that disfigures the normative logos for Bataille, and provides a touchstone for the pursuit of transgression.

Likewise, Genet stresses a crucial element of transgression in a sustained recourse to the heterogeneous elements of social life: otherness embodied by waste and other rejected elements which disgust. However, Bataille recognises that ‘unless the taboo is observed with fear, it lacks the counterpoise of desire which gives it its deepest significance’.

In Bataille, the anguish that results from breaking the law is fundamental to the experience of ‘loss’. The following is an attempt to unpack this conjecture through a reading of Bataille’s 1937 novella, *Madame Edwarda* before engaging one of Genet’s stage plays, titled *The Maids* (1947).

**Madame Edwarda**

Sacrifice itself and its participants are in some way identified with the victim. So, as the victim is being put to death, they can lean over into their own nothingness.

– Bataille

In the period between 1941 and 1944, Bataille wrote, and published, the story of *Madame Edwarda*, as well as *Inner Experience* and *On Nietzsche*. Throughout his writing, Bataille reflects on the meaning of (sacred) communication in relation to sacrifice and eroticism. The ultimate meaning of eroticism, for Bataille, is the ‘cut’, or the wound inflicted on isolated

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individuality, opening self-contained existences to communication. Without the wound of sacrifice, humanity cries out in the wilderness of solitude. \textsuperscript{379} Eroticism and sacrifice express a desire for a laceration that unites separate existences. And obscene mutilation evokes love: ‘Communication is love, and love taints those whom it unites.’ \textsuperscript{380} Communication is linked to anguish and loss of the subject: ‘In eroticism: I am losing myself.’ \textsuperscript{381} For Bataille, eroticism is related to sovereignty because the experience of partial self-dissolution is the sacred instant beyond knowledge, the \textit{délire} of non-knowledge. Bataille contends that ‘eroticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns … of what regulates social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals’. \textsuperscript{382} The eroticism of sacrifice involves transgression – a disruption, mutilation and liberation of heterogeneous elements. As Lechte notes, even though the ritual sacrifice that Bataille refers to is historically now rare, eroticism, laughter and anguish still evoke it. \textsuperscript{383}

For Bataille, literature that is capable of communication is necessarily evil. ‘Literature is either essential or nothing’ and the essence of literature is evil, ‘which is the basis of intense communication’. \textsuperscript{384} Bataille’s theories of transgression and sovereign sacrifice are personified by the characters of his fictions who express an unconditional yearning to violate the limits of being. The encounter between Madame Edwarda and the nameless narrator happens at night, engendering a general sense of the promiscuousness, eroticism and disorder of night life. In the dark the narrator is afflicted by curiosity; darkness intensifies the opacity and the fluidity of borders, producing (in a metaphysical sense) the abject conditions for crime, murder and the violation of individual identity. In this sense, the darkness functions as a further evocation of reckless expenditures.

\textsuperscript{379} Bataille notes that Christ’s sacrifice is perceived by Christianity as the ultimate evil. The crime committed by Christ’s executioners is shared by all of humanity – ‘insofar as one does evil’, they nail ‘Christ on the cross’.
\textsuperscript{379} Ibid, 17.


\textsuperscript{381} Georges Bataille, \textit{Erotism: Death and Sensuality}, 31.

\textsuperscript{382} Georges Bataille, \textit{Erotism: Death and Sensuality}, 18.

\textsuperscript{383} John Lechte, ‘An Introduction to Bataille: The Impossible as (a Practice of) Writing’, 183.

\textsuperscript{384} Georges Bataille, \textit{Literature and Evil}, 3.
In *Madame Edwarda*, God appears as a woman and a licentious whore without boundaries. At the beginning of the novella, the first-person narrator wanders the street in drunken stupor. A kind of mystical yearning for his own undoing leads him to a brothel, where he meets Madame Edwarda. She is the antithesis of productive expenditure, that is, productive activity servile to the market. Instead, she is anti-utilitarian, obscene and all consuming. Edwarda is tensile, ‘mindless, rapt, absent’, the essence of sovereignty, which is *unknowing*.\(^\text{385}\) The transgression of boundaries in eroticism is linked to a temporary dissolve of the subject as he or she exists in normal everyday life, where displacement and intense abandonment ‘does not involve the sovereignty which classical political theory sees as unity; it is rather the heterogeneous, sacred instant beyond knowledge’.\(^\text{386}\) Bataille’s concept of sovereignty stands in opposition to the instrumental rationality that dominates the modern world. For Bataille, to be sovereign means to not allow oneself to be reduced to servile object, but to allow oneself to surrender to the immediacy of the present moment. The essence of sovereignty is the heterogeneous, which emerges in the symbolic as disorder.

According to Bataille, in Western bourgeois societies, the emphasis on ‘values of sobriety, hygiene, duty, useful activity’, issued by reason, have effectively consigned eroticism to a ‘homogenized moral economy’.\(^\text{387}\) As Lechte puts it, sexual reproduction is ‘good’ because it is useful, and reaffirms ‘the Father’s interests’, which in psychoanalytic terms is the key organising feature of patriarchal cultures ‘equivalent to social responsibility … the only pleasure allowed’.\(^\text{388}\) The heterogeneous encompasses the unassimilable, or what cannot be incorporated by the homogeneous order of society: human waste (excrement, blood, vomit), delirium, the unconscious, death and sexuality in excess of normative patterns. These elements comprise the field of the gratuitously non-utilitarian ‘unproductive expenditure’, capable of breaking absolutely with constituted normativity.

In *Erotism*, Bataille specifies that eroticism is heterogeneous to the profane world (social order), and, insofar as it is capable of engendering ‘loss’ of being, belongs to the realm of the

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\(^{385}\) Georges Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man*, 137.


\(^{388}\) John Lechte, *Julia Kristeva*, 74.
sacred. 389 Being, as Lechte defines it, can be understood ‘as an imaginary equilibrium and continuity, the basis of (symbolic) homogeneity (of individual identities), presence, and society’. 390 The sacrifice of eroticism introduces continuity of being, or the impossible confrontation with mortality that the human subject attempts to evade – seeking to preserve itself in future-oriented activities. 391 What is this sense of shattering loss? The negativity of death that is negated in production and work is consumed in unproductive expenditure. Psychoanalytically, Bataille’s ‘expenditure’ corresponds to an affective drive charge of unbounded energy that is beyond the pleasure principle and signals the presence of the death drive. 392

This aspect of Bataille’s thought shares resonances with Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic, which manifests in ‘practice’ as a transgression of drive energy into the thetic realm of signifying practices. 393 Kristeva postulates that Bataille was the first to have ‘specified that the plane of abjection is that of the subject/object relationship (and not subject/other subject) and that this archaism is rooted in anal eroticism rather than sadism’. 394 Bataille’s fiction brings the boundaries of the subject into question because it evokes what has been expelled from the body (both social and individual) during the formative years, in order that an ego subject may exist.

Gazing at the prostitutes dispersed on the street, the narrator is stricken by a desire for sensual excess and then feels the need to remove his pants. In Bataille’s writings, half-clothed bodies are indicative of disorder and strangeness, where ‘what garments there are serve to emphasise the disorder of the body and show it to be all the more naked, all the more disordered’. 395


Indeed, as Lechte notes, Bataille’s fiction unsettles the barrier between ‘poetry (practice) and theory – poetry being understood in its strongest sense as a practice of affectivity’. John Lechte, ‘An Introduction to Bataille: The Impossible as (a Practice of) Writing’, 175.

Julia Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, 68.

Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, 64.

Georges Bataille, Erotism: Death and Sensuality, 170.
narrator is already on the path of unproductive expenditure in erotic excess. A desire for ‘infamy’, as the narrator describes it, indicates the desire for contact with the heterogeneous. The heterogeneous is introduced in moments of shock when those categories that guarantee coherent and regulated interaction between the subject and the world of objects are temporarily dissolved. In other words, the narrator is looking to attract the agonising experience of fungibility and dissolution of being in sensual excess, and Edwarda is attracted to him. Once on this path of disorder and excess, according to Bataille, further steps in the same direction are ‘brutality and murder’.  

Inside the brothel, the narrator selects Edwarda and without speaking a word to each other, they have their first sexual encounter. The narrator is moved into a state of shock: ‘I became unhappy and felt painfully forsaken, as one is when in the presence of GOD’. The sacred presence signals the dissolution of the self as subject in a world of objects. It is for this reason that eroticism is linked to violence. Eroticism involves a violation that renders individual integrity unstable. It undoes self-enclosed monadic existences, in losing the ‘I’ or ego – thus opening oneself to experiencing oneself as one with the other person or object.

Standing under an arch, the narrator regards Edwarda from a distance, and observes the sovereign attitude of God:

she was entirely black, simply there, as distressing as an emptiness, a hole. I realised she wasn’t frolicking, wasn’t joking, and indeed that, beneath the garment enfolding her, she was mindless: rapt, absent. Then all the drunken exhilaration drained out of me, then I knew that she had not lied, that she was GOD.

One cannot know Edwarda; the narrator of the story can only reiterate his own inner experience. The ‘inner experience’ of eroticism is linked to sacred transgression of the

396 Ibid.
397 Georges Bataille, My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man, 134.
399 Ibid, 137.
profane world of prohibition in unproductive expenditure. Edwarda’s sexual excess is an inexhaustible ‘expenditure’ that drains the narrator of energy, ‘to the point of exhaustion and loss’. The narrator recklessly squanders energy to no purpose and exudes a stunning unconcerned attitude towards life and death:

As I waited for annihilation, all that subsided in me seemed to be the dross over which man’s life tarries. Squared against a silence so black, something leaped in my heart’s heavy despair’s midst. Edwarda’s convulsions snatched me away from my own self…

In Bataille, the profound link between eroticism and death is in the dissolution of being. ‘The luxury of death in this respect is considered by us in the same way as that of sexuality … as a negation of ourselves.’ Sovereign ‘sacrifice’, according to Bataille, is leading oneself to one’s own execution, indifferent to suffering and death.

I ‘knew’ that a season of agony was beginning for me. I consented to suffer, I desired to suffer, to go farther, as far as the ‘emptiness’ itself, even were I to be stricken, destroyed … I wanted that knowing, for I lusted after her secret and did not for one instant doubt that it was death’s kingdom.

As a point of comparison, one may refer to *Histoire d’O* (1954) by Anne Desclos, originally published under the pseudonym Pauline Réage. ‘The paradox of O’, writes Bataille, ‘is that of the visionary who died from dying, it is the martyrdom in which the torturer is the accomplice of the victim’. The heroine of the novel, known only as ‘O’, is the embodiment of Bataille’s definition of sovereignty. O’s paradoxical path to sovereignty leads her to self-mutilation, defilement, torture and humiliation. This is not understood by Bataille as masochistic self-punishment. On the contrary, O’s death is a sacred violence that reveals true

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401 Georges Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man*, 139.
404 Desclos’ publisher, Jean-Jacques Pauvert, also published the works of Bataille and Sade.
sovereignty in the sacrifice of herself as a subject living in a world of objects. She is the fascinating agony of death, where the world of contradiction is dissolved. Baudelaire’s self-loathing poet and Bataille’s theories of sovereign sacrifice have in common the elision of the difference between the executioner and victim. Both executioner and victim experience the repulsion and horror of the abject negation of boundaries.

In *Erotism*, Bataille posits a profound relationship between prohibition and transgression. Central to Bataille’s theory of social life is the notion that transgression illuminates the boundaries that constitute human subjectivity. A limit is drawn around human subjectivity that comprises our major taboos that restrain drive energy.

In as far as it differs from animality, humanity is based on the observance of taboos, some of which are universal: the prohibition of incest, of contact with menstrual blood, of obscenity, murder and the consumption of human flesh …

The social prohibitions, for example, that pertain to contact with cadavers, separates the polluting element from the homogeneous or profane (ordinary world) and expresses the heterogeneous character of the sacred. In this respect, eroticism is related to the religious in that they both link the confrontation with taboos to the horror that is experienced in doing violence to the prohibition. Consequently, what Bataille means by eroticism is transgression and taboo. The observance of taboo is also what provides us with the possibility of the sacred: ‘the creation of a sovereign (or sacred) element … of a sacrificial victim, depends on the negation of some interdict’. For Bataille, the unproductive expenditure of sacrifice reveals that the rational subject is constituted in and by prohibition. The homogenous world is a product of humanity’s own efforts – separating itself from animal nature through work and reason:

The truth of taboos is the key to our human attitude. We must know, we can know that prohibitions are not imposed from without. This is clear to us in the anguish we


feel when we are violating the taboo, especially at that moment when our feelings hang in the balance, when the taboo still holds good and yet we are yielding to the impulsion it forbids.409

In eroticism, there is no nostalgia for departed gods and the dialectic of transgression and prohibition momentarily coincide: the violence and the law enjoin. The confluence of contradictory states in erotic excess unsettles the integrity of the dialectic of opposites. The taboo and its violation gestures at the profound ambiguity underlying social life. This is the reason Bataille pronounced that ‘the truth of eroticism is treason’.410 For Bataille, the ritual sacrifice is the purest form of sovereignty. The astonishment and fear of eroticism’s horror is like the sacrificial killing of the king – a momentary triumph of disorder over order and stability. In turn, I offer a reading of The Maids, about a sacrificial murder.

**Genet’s ceremony**

Genet, the French novelist, playwright and poet was born in Paris in 1910. Like Sade, Genet became a writer in prison.411 During the period between 1942 and 1949, mostly while he was incarcerated, Genet composed all his five novels including his most well-known book, *The Thief’s Journal* (1949), and several plays including *The Maids* (1947). The heroes and heroines of Genet’s novels are outcastes, the dispossessed and criminals – the social filth that the bourgeoisie do not want to touch. As Oreste Pucciani suggests, Genet’s characters are the ‘dung pile’ on which the bourgeoisie world grows.412 The prostitutes, pimps, murderers and maidservants of Genet’s fictions are immobile. Their identities as outcasts are fixed. They do not possess social mobility except within the milieu of criminals and social misfits. This accursed share of suffering and abjection, far from being felt as privations, are occasions for sovereignty. When Genet’s heroes spit they spray diamonds, and halos sit above the heads of his criminals.413

410 Ibid, 171.
To produce his plays Genet rebaptised his deep personal association with the texts to render them more acceptable for public viewing. *The Maids* stages a spectacle of eroticised domination and submission, a theme that pervades all of Genet’s writings.\(^{414}\) The play is about a ritual. The ritual does not take place solely between the dramatic characters on the stage. Genet’s theatre actively engages with the spectator’s consciousness, opening on to the territory of Antonin Artaud’s vision for the theatre, which called for bringing the spectator on the stage in the place of the characters.\(^{415}\) Indeed, Artaud’s formulations for the theatre had a considerable influence on Genet, who once wrote: ‘Truly, in leaving the theatre, the spectators should carry away in their mouth this famous taste of ashes and the stink of corruption’.\(^{416}\) Genet’s conception of theatre shares with Artaud the invoking of waste products of the body, society and thought; elements that are hostile to the symbolic order, and which even threaten to destabilise it.

Crucial to the present argument, White suggests that ‘both writers see the theatre as an arena in which to represent death and ritual resuscitation’,\(^{417}\) as inebriating religious ritual. I argue that the Bataillean notion of transgression is constitutive of what may be called the ‘organ’ of Genet’s liberation from a society that homogenises its subjects according to the ideal of bourgeois normality. Beyond the profane world of interdictions, of rationality and self-possession lies the realm of ritual sacrifice, embodied by Genet’s characters in *The Maids*.

*Les Bonnes* was first staged in 1947, at the Théâtre de l’Athénée in Paris, directed by the most celebrated stage director of the time, Louis Jouvet. The central characters are maidservants named Solange and Claire who interchangeably impersonate their Madame. The love and adoring obedience shown to the Madame by the women is an artifice; they really hate their Madame and want to kill her. Solange and Claire sent anonymous letters to

\(^{414}\) Genet explains in an interview: ‘I tried to make objective everything that until now had been subjective, by translating it before a visible public. My position as writer was changed at that point, for when I wrote in prison, I did it for solitary readers; when I set about creating my plays, I had to write for spectators in a group….’ Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography*, 302–303.


\(^{416}\) Ibid, 302.

the police, falsely implicating their Madame’s lover in a crime. A phone call reveals that Monsieur has been released from prison. When Madame arrives, Claire prepares for her a cup of poisoned tea. But Madame discovers that the Monsieur has been released, and neglects her tea out of excitement, rushing away to greet him. The maids know that the anonymous letters will be traced back to them and that they will be exposed for their betrayal and punished ingloriously. When Madame leaves, Claire and Solange finish the ritual murder which will sanctify Claire, breaking both herself and Solange free from the ‘monstrous soul of servantdom’.418

The maids are bonne à tout faire: good for all their Madame’s basic needs; they dress her, shine her shoes, and make her tea. Existing in a life of utility and compelled to work the maids are denied the state of sovereignty explicated by Bataille.419 For example, Bataille writes, that ‘Life beyond utility is the domain of sovereignty.’420 Claire and Solange fully acknowledge their status as vassals, endlessly rendering homage to their Madame. They are contemptuous of their status as objects serving the needs of others and abhor their fungibility, recognising that their Madame loves them as objects, ‘the way that she loves her armchair…Not even that much! Like her bidet, rather. Like her pink enamel lavatory seat’.421 Their objectification precludes questioning their mode of being just as you do not question the existence of the armchair. Society treats them as objects, as a means, never as a person. Even more than the humiliation of the maidservants, their degradation is a kernel of signification that intoxicates their hatred for themselves as well as their Madame; they hate themselves and each other: ‘we, we can’t love one another … Filth … doesn’t love filth’.422 Degradation and subservience reinstates their everyday relations with order and their growing sense of opposition.

The first scene opens in the boudoir of Madame, bourgeois luxury exudes with decorative flowers and furnished Louis-Quinze furniture. Claire is impersonating Madame. Solange is

420 Ibid, 198.
422 Ibid, 16.
impersonating Claire. Madame is obviously not at home. When Solange-as-Claire begins dressing Claire-as-Madame, the ritual has begun and the sadomasochistic dynamic between them appears immediately. Claire-Madame mocks the garret where Solange-Claire sleeps, with its cheap iron beds and a small altar to the Holy Virgin. She kicks Solange-Claire in the head with the heel of her shoe. The dominant and submissive dynamic between the sisters is marked by obvious erotic undertones. As the ritual progresses, cruelty is inflicted and received with rapturous pleasure. As Solange declares, ‘I see the marks of a slap, but now I’m more beautiful than ever!’

The maids describe themselves as being composed of ‘filth’. However, their status as abject beings, objects of social loathing, serves as the means through which sovereignty is manifested. Bataille’s remarks on Genet’s attitude will help to clarify:

Genet wants abjection even if it only brings suffering … He wants it because of a vertiginous propensity towards an abjection in which he loses himself as completely as the ecstatic mystic loses himself in God.

In Bataillean terms, Solange and Claire evoke the disruptive elements of the heterogeneous order. Genet gives expression to elements that are peripheral to symbolic order and even threaten to destabilise it. The maids belong to ‘the world you touch only with tong’. A contagious, ‘vile and odious breed … Servants ooze. They’re the foul effluvium … seeping into us’. The maids are transgressing agents that society will spit out from its body like cancerous tissue, as when Claire-as-Madame says, ‘I vomit you!’ Claire-as-Madame’s insults act as a goad to sensuality – Solange celebrates her own abasement. The intimate bond between punishment and sovereignty finds expression in Genet’s characters, who are bonded by the same inner desire for transgression that risks the dissolution of being itself. The first sign of transgression begins with ignoring feelings of guilt. The sacred transgression of boundaries in sacrifice does not imply self-surrender, but liberation to true sovereignty: ‘We

423 Ibid, 11.
424 Ibid, 16.
425 Georges Bataille, Literature and Evil, 152.
426 Jean Genet, The Maids, 40.
shall be the eternal couple, Solange, the two of us, the eternal couple of the criminal and the saint.’ 428

The play ends in the sacrificial killing of Claire-as-Madame. Here, the victim becomes the accomplice of the executioner. Solange survives, but she nevertheless shares in what Claire’s sacrifice reveals. Claire’s sacrifice is linked to the transgression of the world of interdictions, which preserves self-enclosed existences. What Genet implements through the maids is a desire to destroy contradiction and discord between self and other in the ecstatic moment in which symbolic unity falls apart: ‘We are beautiful, joyous, drunk and free!’ 429 The executioner is both victim and perpetrator, and in Bataille’s view, is liberated into continuous being – Claire is liberated from servitude to a state of sovereignty – she dies without dying.

**Genet’s failure**

Genet’s abject creatures exude glory and saintliness. Genet adored criminals. For Bataille, Genet’s love for abjection was not limited by taboo. Genet’s absolute glorification of degradation and destruction caused the value of the transgression to lose its force. The power of transgression almost dissipates aimlessly. Transgression and prohibition must possess the same value, according to Bataille: ‘no taboo gives Genet the sensation of a taboo anymore and, with numb senses, he finally founders’. 430 As Bataille writes, ‘Without transgression, sacrifice and eroticism have nothing in common.’ 431 Central to Bataille’s notion of sacrifice is the communicative aspect that links it to the sacred, a reaffirmation of the violence that engendered our laws. As Lechte has pointed out, sovereignty is intimately linked to ‘sacrifice’ in the sacred transgression of taboo, making it central to Bataille’s theory of social life. 432 In comparison, Genet, according to Bataille, was concerned with sovereignty *for himself*. The communal or social aspect of sacrifice was central to Bataille’s notion of

428 Ibid, 22.

429 Ibid, 23.


431 Ibid, 90.

sovereignty. Genet, as Bataille saw it, foundered in his own solitude. On this point, Bataille agrees with Sartre who concluded that in order to uphold a nothingness in solitude, Genet committed himself to the rejection of every value, a self-willed exile in which he exhausts himself in upholding ‘Nothingness in solitude’.433

Conclusion

Sade, Baudelaire, Bataille and Genet deliver dissections of the controlling generalities of modernity. Sade’s Justine, the ideal of purity, demonstrates the elision of the classical ideal with the triumph of Christianity. This is arguably the reason why Sade chose a woman – a woman who is helpless but able to defend moral integrity and chastity against the wicked and powerful libertines. In Sade’s narratives transgression is inescapable, not as a return to barbaric ‘nature’ as Kraft-Ebbing and his contemporaries defined it; but rather, as an expression of our exclusions that remain immune to logical argument and enlightened reasoning. For Foucault, the language of sexuality addresses itself to these exclusions. The writing of transgression produces, through images of violent sexuality, flashes of light illuminating the contours of the disorder and heterogeneity on which society precariously stands. Baudelaire collected the experiences of a dizzying modernity and arranged them into the reflection of a disillusioned and distorted consciousness. His deserted vagabonds are captivated by excesses of eroticism and wasted by the indefatigable need to mutilate themselves. Bataille recognised the essence of transgression in the Sadean text – the dissolution of the self. Bataille’s formative spaces in which sacred transgression filters into the symbolic engenders a radical otherness that threatens the annihilation of normative boundaries designating subject and object. The sacred transgressions concentrate on expenditure for the sake of the immediacy of the present and enable a kind of unconstructed and autonomous freedom. The predominance of women, a series of women, within the diverse works discussed in this chapter also demonstrate transgressions that are historically embedded in rules or social conventions. Bataille’s sovereignty is the attraction of liberty; the everyday prostitute and her customer. Bataille’s God is a whore. The ‘base’ and lowly existence of a prostitute, the brothel, and the shame of sexual behaviour evoke both specific

historical contexts (Catholicism) and a vision of sovereign autonomy that the everyday individual of the street can attain. Genet’s maids are conscious of their being. As subjects who are subordinate, and who seek to transgress the prison of their servility, identity is sacrificed, and transgression is fully dissimulated into the body. Collectively, their works express the same inner experience whose transgression risks the destabilisation of the rational and unified subject of social order; the texts manifest a subversive world that obscures contradiction and painfully, violently, embraces heterogeneity and ambiguity.
Chapter Three
Desexualising pleasure: S/M praxis and the politics of resistance

Sexual behavior is not, as is too often assumed, a superimposition of, on the one hand, desires which derive from natural instincts, and, on the other hand, of permissive or restrictive laws which tell us what we should or shouldn’t do. Sexual behavior is more than that. It is also the consciousness one has of what one is doing, what one makes of the experience, and the value one attaches to it.

– Foucault

The S/M movement and the gay and lesbian liberation movement share, in some important respects, a mutual history. Towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, homosexuality and sadomasochism had been delineated as aberrations of genetic or hereditary origin. The ‘accursed share’ of these ‘perverse’ people was to suffer the constraints of being forced onto their identities and separated from the rest of the human race. The homosexual and the sadomasochist were depicted by the discourse of positivist science as a mentally ill, degenerate, asocial, and dangerous class of individuals. But perversion was also recognised as an illness that could be treated, dealt with and innovatively managed, as Roudinesco explains:

If the perverse were defined as ill, but as capable of reverting to the norm with the help of hygienics, psychiatry or sexology, it followed that civilization no longer needed them as a heterogeneous element or sanctified figure: they were nothing more than individuals who were sexually ill, proscribed and objects of either horror or compassion.

434 James O’Higgins and Michel Foucault, ‘II. Sexual Choice, Sexual Act: An Interview with Michel Foucault’, *Salmagundi*, 58/59 (2015), 224.
437 Ibid, 38.
Desires, fantasies and pleasures that are commonly considered sadomasochistic are still imagined in terms consistent with the nineteenth century formulations. But they are also increasingly celebrated as transgressive and postmodern. As Roudinesco attests in the above quotation, the recourse to liberationist understandings and medical terminologies that makes no allusion to the powerful drives and words that subvert norms and conventions indicates that transgression no longer has substance. The proceeding chapter will develop this contention and the debates surrounding it and, in some detail, analyse these issues in relation to contemporary depictions of ‘extreme’ sexuality in the media and in arthouse cinema.

The accounts by S/M practitioners that I examine in this chapter are embroiled in a history of counter ideological struggles against technologies of power that constrained them in their discursive identities. The attempt, by S/M-identified individuals, to reconstitute themselves as subjects of desire and pleasure, opens up a space for subverting normativity and, potentially, can recover difference in modernity. The twentieth century confronted two separate and subversive waves of ‘coming out’ – at first, gay and lesbian movements, and then, in proximity, S/M activists who applied similar tropes and strategies utilised in gay liberation. They envisaged the freedom of practicing their sexuality without fear of social disqualification or legal condemnation.

Following from Martin Weinberg’s seminal research in the 1980s, most recent scholarship on S/M affords theoretical privilege to subjective accounts of S/M lifestyle and experience. In much of this new scholarship, the anecdotes of practitioners are represented and analysed

439 An example cited by Moore is the imagination of Nazism as sadistic and linked to barbarism. Alison Moore, Sexual Myths of Modernity, 14.

440 Ibid.

441 Ibid.

using phenomenological and existentialist frameworks. These studies are important and necessary, insofar as they open the space for consensual practitioners to pronounce knowledgably about their own experiences, and attest to their capacity to produce forms of pleasure not assimilable to the homogenising frameworks of sadism, masochism and sadomasochism. Following these recent trends in scholarship, the chapter critiques and seeks to distance sadomasochism from explanations of pathology and deviance in order to propose an alternative reading of S/M lifestyle and experience. It examines understandings of S/M experience as potentially transformative, where technologies of the self are informed by and engage with active self-forming practices and encounters. In such encounters, as described by practitioners, the subject problematises its relation to norms and standards of conduct, and desires to adapt themselves to a reality exhorting new modes of affective relations. Following Foucault, the practices of S/M may be analysed and understood as demonstrating a certain attitude towards the self; an attitude consistent with critical self-transformation, often reacting to and even reformulating the way in which the collective is created. This chapter investigates S/M as an example of a practice that is consistent with self-forming technologies and procedures, capable of diverse forms of art, thought and life. Aesthetic forms of transgressive violence can at times lead to a rapid dissolution of shared understandings common to the homogeneous field.

The chapter concentrates attention on something other than an outline of transgressive sexual practices that defy the given social order – as if subversion were enough to establish a direct political resistance – or worse, to liberate repressed libidinal energies. Instead, the chapter is concerned with the way in which the social self creates a culture in society through sexual practices and self-forming activities. Following Foucault, I reiterate that understanding S/M does not depend on discovering an essential or immanent nature of these practices, as is the concern for some practitioners; rather, the problematic in this chapter targets the cultures and


fabrics that practitioners are devising and fashioning through their engagement with intense forms of pleasure.

From Foucault’s perspective, the struggles and resistances of gay culture facilitated the production of new dynamics within an established network of power relations. This is important because, in Foucault’s view, the modification of one’s relation to specific forms of power opens the possibility for new kinds of social and personal relationships. These are the transgressions prioritised by Foucault; concrete and empirically observable transgressions that were directed at the technologies of power that structured everyday experience and manifested as social dependence. For Foucault, transgression occurs ‘in a wave of extremely short duration’, as specific antagonisms and resistances against historically variable limits whose exigency has an expiry date.445 In an interview, Foucault stated:

When I study the mechanisms of power, I try to analyze their specificity: nothing is more foreign to me than the idea of a ‘Master’ who imposes his own law. Rather than indicating the presence of a ‘master,’ I worry about comprehending the effective mechanisms of domination; and I do it so that those who are inserted in certain relations of power, who are implicated in them, might escape them through their actions of resistance and rebellion, might transform them in order not to be subjugated any longer.446

The S/M community can be seen to represent what Foucault means by the process of invention, on the part of the subjugated; it serves as a means to escape from relations of power and forges a practice of freedom. In this context, there is a mimetic impulse in Foucault’s blending together of the Bataillean ‘limit experience’ which, he claims, ‘tears the subject from itself’ and the cultivation of knowledge (savoir)447 through certain practices, rendering de-subjectivation and self-transformation possible.448 In order to expound this contention, I summarise Foucault’s analysis on S/M and gay and lesbian subcultural formation within the context of his interest in technologies of the self, found in his later work on classical Greek

445 Michel Foucault, ‘A Preface to Transgression’, 34.
447 Savoir as distinct from connaissance designates a knowledge which changes or alters one’s being. Michel Foucault, ‘An Interview with Stephen Riggins’ in Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, 131.
448 Michel Foucault, Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori, 31.
and Roman ethical practices. Finally, having provided the conceptual tools through which the chapter considers S/M, I will introduce practitioner testimonies, and use these conceptual tools to unpack the complexities of self-creation that are inherent in these testimonies.

**Sadomasochism, sexuality and modern power**

Sadomasochistic eroticism, and other related pleasures (flagellation, consensual violence and bondage) are not new sexual inventions. In modernity, these ‘limit experiences’ came to be divided up into a variety of discursive objects gathered together under the rubric of ‘sexuality’. What is new is the personage of the ‘sadomasochist’; a pathologised sexuality that is representative of a history of exhumations of pathologies (including the homosexual, the transsexual, the exhibitionist, the zoophile) during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which human subjects were transformed in being and signification into objects of scrutiny, and required to assume perversion as essence of self. It is within a complex history of social, economic and political relations of power that sadomasochism, and a list of numerous other perversions, were constructed and deployed.

Foucault challenged the indispensable idea of the last two centuries: sex is a natural ‘truth’ traceable in the body, indicative of an internal essence of the self. For Foucault, the pervasive eighteenth-century theme of a cryptic ‘truth’ of sex was artificially constructed as ‘the secret’ that must be scrupulously uncovered. This modern imperative to unearth the ‘truth’ of oneself, as discussed in Chapter One, served to provide form to the incitement to discourse. Foucault outlines this shift in governmentality (formal technologies through which the subject is constituted as a subject) in his introduction to the diary of Herculine Barbin.

Foucault published the journals of Herculine (Alexina), the nineteenth century French hermaphrodite, along with the juridical and legal documents that provided the authoritative basis on which h/her ‘true’ sex was determined. Foucault was interested in Herculine’s story,

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449 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume One, 61.

450 And in which ‘traditional fears could be recast into scientific-sounding vocabulary’, writes Foucault. Ibid, 55.

451 Ibid, 35.
both because it documents the incitement to discover the ‘truth’ of one’s sex, and because it occurred precisely during the period in which the sciences first began to identify, define, and categorise the different types of perversions. In the short introduction to the text Foucault writes, ironically that:

if it was believed for centuries that it was necessary to hide sexual matters because they were shameful, we now know that it is sex itself which hides the most secret parts of the individual: the structure of his fantasies, the roots of his ego, the forms of his relationship to reality. At the bottom of sex, there is truth.

Alexina, as s/he is called throughout the text, describes in h/er memoirs a kind of metaphysical malediction that impelled h/er through guilt and anxiety to confess h/er secret to priests and doctors. H/er ‘confession’ demarcates a kind of secular pastoral care designed to ‘know’ the individual. After medical examinations, s/he was legally obligated to change the sex which she had been assigned at birth from ‘female’ to ‘male’. Before h/er suicide, the tone of Alexina’s journal changed from helplessness and despair into rage and resentment for the imposed limitations of medical and legal authorities. H/er sexual identity was forced to align with the changing vocabularies, objects and targets informing the scientific order.

According to Foucault, Alexina’s journals offer a narrative illustration of pleasure not secreted by identity. Alexina’s life evoked a ‘happy limbo of non-identity’ exceeding sexual categories and personal identity before medical experts and the judiciary intervened. Herculine’s ‘true’ identity had no importance. The pleasures, caresses and kisses exchanged between sisters and mothers at the convent drifted between bodies in this

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452 Michel Foucault, ‘Introduction’, in Herculine Barbin, xi.
453 Ibid.
454 Butler argues that Foucault’s account espouses romantic and emancipatory ideals that, in some respects, contradict his deconstruction of sexuality in The History of Sexuality, Volume One. According to Butler, in proposing that Herculine somehow existed in a sexual world ‘outside’ of discourse, Foucault does not take into account that Herculine’s narrative of impossible love and romance is not purely naïve; Butler refers to the French Romantic literary tradition, of which Alexina was no doubt familiar and provides a discursive background for Alexina’s tragic and melodramatic evocations of forbidden passion, particularly of homosexual love. See Judith Butler, Gender Trouble, 122–126.
455 Ibid.
naïve world untrammeled by concerns for identity. Foucault presents this sexually indeterminate existence in the form of allegorical wit: ‘grins hung about without the cat’.456

It is important to call to mind that, in his early writings, Foucault sought, in the writings of Bataille, the philosophical counterpart for thinking about the subject at the limit of identity.457 The influence of Bataille on a generation of French intellectuals (including also Barthes and Kristeva) has been posited in earlier chapters. For contemporary Bataille scholars, this aspect of Foucault’s thought remains pertinent despite changes in the focus of his later work, and the threatening predominance of constructionist interpretations and applications in the broader scope of social theory.458 Following philosophical underpinnings in the works of Nietzsche and Bataille, Foucault took his intellectual departure from theories that presupposed the a priori existence of the subject.

Despite transitions in the focus of Foucault’s work, Bataille’s thought provided Foucault with a clear direction concerning the intransigence of subjectivity and identity. The question that never receded from Foucault’s work was expressed in 1978: ‘Can’t there be experiences in which the subject, in its constitutive relations, in its self-identity, isn’t given any more? And thus wouldn’t experiences be given in which the subject could dissociate itself, break its relationship with itself, lose its identity?’459 The question is pregnant with Foucault’s analytical objective, notably the relationship between subject and truth in the Western experience. For Bataille, as for Foucault, destabilising the subject or ‘to call the subject into question had to mean to live it in an experience that might be its real destruction or dissociation, its explosion or upheaval into something radically “other”’.460 Bataille’s

456 Ibid, xiii.

457 Foucault’s unequivocal remarks in this direction, specifically from ‘A Preface to Transgression’, have appeared in the previous chapters of this thesis.

458 For a critique of social constructionist interpretations of Foucault’s analytic method, see Matti Peltonen, ‘From Discourse to “Dispositif”: Michel Foucault’s Two Histories’, Historical Reflections, 30/2 (2004), 205–219. Peltonen reviews the tendencies in the social sciences to interpret social phenomena as artificial constructions and to assume that the objects of Foucault’s historical analysis (madness, sexuality, crime) do not predate their discursive constitution. Peltonen quotes Foucault’s response to these interpretations in an interview: ‘On the contrary, I have tried to show that it was precisely some real existent in the world, which was the target of social regulation at a given moment.’ Matti Peltonen, ‘From Discourse to “Dispositif”: Michel Foucault’s Two Histories’, 208.

459 Michel Foucault, Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori, 46.

460 Ibid.
concept of the ‘limit experience’ underpins the deepest meaning of eroticism, which is the liberation of heterogeneous elements that temporarily displace the continuous self, calling into question the artificial symbolic unity of the ‘subject’. Foucault argues that the limit experience of eroticism would be meaningless if the subject did not find itself modified.

The reference to changing oneself as a subject constituted in and by the arrangement of unifying and normalising ideals might be raised more appropriately if the value of limit experiences as a form of cultural resistance is brought into question. To echo a question that Butler has asked: what do we make of a resistance that can only undermine, but which appears to have no power to re-articulate the symbolic terms by which subjects are constituted? This is not to suggest that the limit experience introduces nothing into the symbolic. Transgression as limit experience, according to Foucault, is resistance to subjugation (in Bataille’s terms, servitude) insofar as the experience encourages the temporary displacement of subjectivity – as an expression of individuality, sexuality, identity and personal history – ‘in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such, or that it is completely “other” than itself’.

Chapter Two invoked Kristeva, and put forward that semiotic transgression can threaten the symbolic ‘system’ and dissolve that order temporarily, so that it is no longer symbolic but semiotic. It remains, however, an unsustainable cultural possibility, a less effective political operation for potential transgression. Butler critiques notions of psychic resistance, proposing that the psyche as ‘precisely what exceeds the imprisoning effects of the discursive demand to inhabit a coherent identity’ can thwart the law ‘in its effects, but cannot redirect the law in its effects’. Subsequently, this line of enquiry leads Butler to state that, ‘To thwart the injunction to produce a docile body is not the same as dismantling the injunction or changing the terms of subject constitution.’ The Foucauldian perspective reiterates Butler’s point,

461 Georges Bataille, _Erotism: Death and Sensuality_, 18.
462 Michel Foucault, _Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori_, 69.
463 Judith Butler, _The Psychic Life of Power_, 88–89.
464 Michel Foucault, _Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori_, 31.
465 Judith Butler, _The Psychic Life of Power_, 98.
namely, that possibilities for contesting and re-evaluating subjectivity must be found within the field of power itself.467

According to Butler, the subject is formed and repeatedly produces itself within universally inscribed models that determine the grid of intelligible and manageable identities.468 Plainly, as Butler points out, power relations are inscribed internally and intimately onto our sense of who we are as individuals.469 The discursive formation of the subject is at once a ‘framing, subordination, and regulation … in normalization’.470 Here, we are searching for the possibility of a subversion that can rearticulate the terms by which subjects are constituted. In Foucault’s work, resistance appears in the process of a subject formation that exceeds the normalisation on which the constitution of the modern subject depends; for example, through a ‘reverse discourse’, a subversion of technologies of power that will be examined in later paragraphs.471

Foucault’s work carefully maps the social production of the subject through regulatory technologies of power. He considers not only how the subject is constituted in and through relations of power, but also the way in which the subject constitutes itself ‘in one specific form or another, as a mad or a healthy subject, as a delinquent or nondelinquent subject, through certain practices that were also games of truth, practices of power, and so on’.472 Foucault’s historical analysis of mechanisms of power in the first volume of The History of Sexuality provided important conceptual tools to those ‘who are inserted in certain relations of power’ and who wanted to escape the constraining consequences of their subjugation.473 As David Halperin writes, the ‘implications of Foucault’s discursive approach to sexuality have not been lost on lesbians and gays, who have been the objects, in particular, of

467 Ibid, 93.
471 Ibid, 93.
472 Michel Foucault, ‘The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom’ in Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, 290.
473 Michel Foucault, Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori, 174; Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume One, 86.
murderously pathologizing, criminalizing, and moralizing discourses’ and who have consulted Foucault in order to challenge the dividing practices and excluding models of sexuality and society.474 In Foucault’s view, the production of the subject takes place in and through the investment of power. Hence, he proposes that the possibility of the subversion of that subject is contained within the mechanism of power itself.

**Sadomasochism, ancient ethics and self-stylisation**

As the focus of Foucault’s later studies shifted from sexuality and power to an interrogation of techniques of self-formation, sexual behaviour, as a ‘domain of valuation and choice’, became the object of his concern. How does a human being make itself into a subject? Throughout his writing, from the early to the late, Foucault remained dedicated to creating histories of the modes and procedures through which we construct ourselves as subjects – of sexuality, in Volume One of the *History of Sexuality* – and later, in his seminars of the 1980s, as subjects of ethical self-transformation. Foucault examines technologies of the self in late antiquity, whereby the regulation of the pleasures was a part of a voluntary practice of self-fashioning, which among other elements included the teleological goal of achieving mastery of the self and others.475 Foucault problematised tabula and typologies of order that enlisted obedience to a necessary and visible authority. He favoured a kind of cleavage, dislocation and critical dissonance, techniques that could detach subjects from prescriptive and rigidly ordered systems. Thereby, a space might be opened that precludes subordination to established authority and allows for the possibility of creating one’s life ‘as a work of art’. This is the political end maintained in this ethics of the self:

> if I was interested in Antiquity it was because, for a whole series of reasons, the idea of a morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared. And to this absence of morality corresponds, must correspond, the search for an aesthetics of existence.476

474 David Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 42.


Foucault’s studies of ethical practices of the self in classical antiquity can be seen as providing an opportunity for modern Western individuals to perceive new liberties and new forms of existence developed within an ancient social setting. Fashioning an aesthetics of existence or becoming an artist of the self is a form of resistance to the constitution of the subject as an object of discourse. The incitement to discourse discussed in Chapter One – the imperative to confess the truth about one’s sex – reminds Foucault of the gulf that separates modern subjects from the practices of an ‘erotic art’ – the techniques for producing pleasure in oneself and in another person, and the initiations into pleasure practiced by the Greeks in the form of the aphrodisia.477

During the late 1970s and the 1980s, Foucault was attentive to the modes of knowledge informing S/M subculture, but he was not concerned with validating the diagnosis of this kind of behaviour as an effusion of violent and aggressive impulses in part made possible by a permissive and affluent society. For Foucault, S/M culture promised the creative elaboration of pleasure and signalled the possibility of stylising freedom.

In the second volume of The History of Sexuality Foucault considers sexual ethics in classical Hellenistic/Roman and particularly Greek periods.478 Foucault’s interpretation of ancient Greek regulations concerning what was called the aphrodisia shows that individuals subjected themselves to strategies of ‘moderation and timing, of quantity and opportunity; and this strategy aimed at an exact self-mastery – as its culmination and consummation’.479

The prescriptive codes of ancient morality were not universal rules or laws that everyone was obliged to obey. On the contrary, they were principles ‘of stylization of conduct for those who wished to give their existence the most graceful and accomplished form possible’.480


478 Foucault’s work on the ‘care of the self’ is presented in numerous interviews, as well as transcripts of courses he taught at the Collège de France, and the second and third (unfinished) volumes of The History of Sexuality (published weeks before his death in 1984). This chapter draws primarily from Foucault’s interviews in order to elucidate his perspective on gay and lesbian politics within the context his work on sexual ethics in antiquity.

479 Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume Two: The Use of Pleasure, 250.

480 Ibid, 250.
Moreover, they were more like proposals rather than imposed rules. In Foucault’s interpretation of classical morality, sexual austerity was based on a practice, a very self-conscious project of self-making. In the *History of Sexuality*, Volume Two, Foucault defines the ‘arts of existence’ as

> those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.\(^1\)

For Foucault, Greek morality had more to do with stylising freedom with the goal of setting oneself apart through ethical self-formulation than with following codes or regulations. It belongs to ethical stylics that were dominated by the principle of the *epimeleia heautou*, the ‘care of the self’, as an ethical practice of liberty that comprises the work one performs on oneself to produce themselves as the subject that they want to be. Sexual behaviour as a domain of moral experience was a means of developing a specific kind of aesthetics of existence.\(^2\) Halperin assesses the implications of Foucault’s innovation as follows:

> What Foucault understood by an ‘art of existence’ then, was an ethical practice that consisted in freely imposing on the form of one’s life a distinctive shape and individual style, and thereby transforming oneself in accordance with one’s own conception of beauty or value. The late antique ‘culture of the self’ and the self-fashioning that was its intended result was not to discover one’s ‘true’ self but to work on one’s self so as to transform into a vehicle of personal autonomy and social pre-eminence. It is within this perspective of Roman and especially Greek practices of the self upon the self that Foucault develops the notion of self-transformation in contemporary times.\(^3\)

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\(^1\) Ibid, 10-11.
\(^2\) As an example, the use of pleasure in the relationship with boys was a cause of anxiety for the Greeks, which Foucault notes may seem paradoxical in a society that is believed to have ‘tolerated’ what we call ‘homosexuality’. The Greeks considered preference for either sex as more of a fondness, or taste, for one form of pleasure or another, which varied during a person’s life span. They did not regard such preferences as in some way indicative of coordinates of desire, as representative of nature, or the truth of desire. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume Two, 50.

\(^3\) David Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 69–70.
Foucault’s work on the care of the self and the genealogy of the modern subject are well known for their considerable influence on queer theory.484 As Paul Miller points out, ‘the Stoic and Platonic models of the care of the self offer crucial resources to all marginal groups that seek to fashion new forms of subjectivity, experience, and resistance to the dominant forms of governmentality’.485 According to this view, techniques of self-fashioning fit a sociopolitical project that seeks to elaborate new possibilities for resistance, where the cultivation of the self as an art of life ‘is not a personal identity so much as it is a relation of reflexivity, a relation of the human subject to itself in its power and its freedom’.486 This is not to argue that Foucault has the last word, or that he had developed an answer to the complex moral conundrum of developing a sexual ethics in the absence of enforced moral codes. Rather, that he had made a prescient contribution to the modern problem of finding spirituality in the Western world, and sexuality far from being a moral problem of prohibition becomes the focus of an ‘arts of existence’. It is here that sexuality, for Foucault, becomes the possible site for practices of freedom.

Halperin points out that the concept of the ‘care of the self’ in the classical sense certainly cannot be revived in contemporary times. Foucault makes it clear that he is not proposing a rediscovery of some forgotten classical philosophical activity that represents ‘the key to everything’. But certain aspects of ethical self-constitution can be transposed into a modern form of creating the self as a subject and in this sense contributing to a history of the present. An ethics and aesthetics of existence was in part presented by Foucault as a means of resistance to the commodified, sexualised and normalised subject of capitalist modernity. For Foucault, practices of pleasure such as those created in S/M can offer the ‘crystallising’ point of new ways of relating, a new relation of self to self, new types of existences, new values, and exchanges between people who are neither the same nor superimposed on existing cultural forms.487

484 David Halperin’s book, Saint Foucault, demonstrates how Foucault came to play a central role in the development of queer activism.


486 David Halperin, Saint Foucault, 75–76.

Thus, Foucault ascribed importance to the renewal of possibilities for making the self an aesthetic project, self-stylisation and other forms of inventing pleasures by the emergence of gay and lesbian communities, and S/M as a construction or innovation of these new styles of existence. Calling the subject into question cannot be confined to speculation and theory – it is a matter of doing, of praxis, a performative disruption of the ‘order of things’. It is here that the practices of consensual sadomasochism are correlative with a form of a new politics of the self. A practice that challenges the boundaries of social identity and the limits of individual lived experience, which can encourage an ineradicable strain and identity dissociation, a de-territorialisation whose seismic impact can result in a transfiguration of self or ‘subjecthood’ into something ‘other’.488

**The deployment of sexuality: political resistance against social domination**

One of the main strands of the sexual liberation movement of the 1960s, which also became the basis for gay and lesbian liberation, was a conception of one’s sexuality as an essential part of one’s identity. According to Foucault, the notion that sexuality is a hidden substance or truth that has been repressed, and then the demand that it be recognised, served to perpetuate and to conceal oppressive relations of power behind the nexus that represented the edifice of the sexual apparatus. Foucault’s criticisms of sexual liberation and the affirmation of sexual categories surpass the reductionist assumption that liberation and repression are mutually exclusive outcomes. His distrust of emancipation falls precisely on the apparatus that early liberationists wanted to defend. In *The History of Sexuality*, Volume One, Foucault describes the desirability of ‘sex’ as a profound theme emergent with the incitement to discourse, which compels us more deeply towards it.

By creating the imaginary element that is ‘sex’, the deployment of sexuality established one of its most essential internal operating principles: the desire for sex – the desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth. For Foucault, this technology of power constituted ‘sex’ itself as something desirable:

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‘And it is this desirability of sex that attaches each of us to the injunction to know it, to reveal its law and its power; it is this desirability that makes us think we are affirming the rights of our sex against all power, when in fact we are fastened to the deployment of sexuality’. Foucault is thus critical of the affirmation of sexual categories because the demand by gay liberationists to be acknowledged ‘naturally’ derives vocabulary from and reiterates those exact discourses through which they had become linked to nineteenth century pathologising, insulting and accusatory iterations. Despite these criticisms, Foucault did not immediately and resolutely reject the strategies of early liberationists, and acknowledged that the early affirmation of sexual categories was, as Halperin put it, a necessary ‘strategic move’.

One of the political incentives of the medicalisation of sexuality was to construct and then divide individuals into ‘normal’ and ‘perverse’ populations. For Foucault, the taxonomy of new sexualities demonstrates the proliferative and generative capacity of phobic strategies of modern power. As Bersani has put it, ‘through the classification, distribution, and moral rating of those sexualities the individuals practising them can be approved, treated, marginalized, sequestered, disciplined, or normalized’. The ‘marked’ population, including homosexuals, transsexuals and sadomasochists, connects these identities with a variety of associations including deviance, mental illness and perversity and in its social constitution as ‘problematised’, to a whole variety of social disqualifications and implications.

In Foucault’s view, any conception of the subject as ‘outside’ of power is spurious because the unified subject (a fixed identity) is itself a manifestation of power. Moreover, the problem cannot be resolved by the profusion of more and more sexualities. As demonstrated by Foucault, sex is an apparatus, a crucial tool for making people subjects – subjects to their

491 David Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 58.
493 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume One, 55.
identity by the incitement of self-knowledge, as well as subjects to control. For Foucault, this is the connection between human unhappiness and sex: sexuality is an instrument, a machine that houses an entire arsenal of technologies on which the normalisation of modern subjects depends.

In The History of Sexuality, Volume One, Foucault argues that, ‘Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.’ If relations of power always contain the possibility of resistance, how does resistance to normalisation take place within power? One example is the experience of ‘coming out’ promoted by S/M activists. Anecdotes of S/M individuals and activists during the 1970s reveal that in ‘coming out’ subjects were exposed to various forms of social disqualification. Because being ‘closeted’ means that one feels obligated to hide from oppressive power relations, the process of ‘coming out’ de-privatised the individual in an emancipated transformation and constituted one of the first acts of resistance. S/M individuals began to act for themselves in a more permissive atmosphere. At this juncture, the image of S/M in the popular imagination assumed it was unequivocally about sex, an echo of discursively produced ideas about homosexuality. Like gays and lesbians, S/M identified individuals experienced discrimination, harassment and violence by the straight public, anti-S/M feminists and the police. The resistances to the S/M subculture by lesbian feminists and gay activists is pertinent. The early gay and lesbian groups were primarily concerned with identity politics and did not readily tolerate diversity. As Moser and Klenplat note, ‘A leader of a gay rights organization admitted that her resistance to

495 In ‘The Subject and Power’, Foucault argues that this technology of power is ‘a form of power which makes individuals subjects’. Michel Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, 781.
496 Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume One, 95.
497 David Halperin, Saint Foucault, 30.
498 Reflecting on her published article titled ‘A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality’, Patrick Califia, a leatherdyke and S/M activist during the late 1970s, describes being ‘tired of reading lies about my sexuality, tired of being told I didn’t exist – and if I did, it was only as a distant cousin to a rapist or a chainsaw killer’. Patrick Califia, Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Cleis Press, 1994), 12.
working with SM groups was because SM “made [her] sick”\textsuperscript{500} The ‘shock value’ of sadomasochism, Gayle Rubin notes, also made it an easy target for exploitation by police and the media\textsuperscript{501}.

The S/M community, representing a potent form of transgression, provides a pertinent illustration of the ways in which individuals gradually created interstices within the modern regime of power. The formation of political identities based on sexual practices became the early basis for resistance against pathologised identities; for example, Rubin argued for the affirmation of an S/M identity on the model of gay and lesbian movements\textsuperscript{502}. Indeed, the early S/M communities marched in the footsteps of LGBT groups formed in the 1960s\textsuperscript{503}. Here, Rubin’s affirmation of sexual orientation is germane: ‘The first time I came out was over a decade ago, when I realized, at the age of twenty, that I was a lesbian. I had to come out again, several years later, as a sadomasochist’.\textsuperscript{504} Instead of acquiescingly accepting labels indicative of abnormality or perversity, the individual defiantly adopts a manifestation of their distinctive sexual choice – which itself risks having the essential character of ones’ sadomasochistic sexuality fed directly back to oneself: ‘this is what I am’ – ‘Ah, yes, so you are that, and only that.’\textsuperscript{505} The defiant affirmation of discursive categories, ‘the term which not only names, but forms and frames the subject’, appears to have an integral capacity to make the one declaring sexual identity the instrument of the subject’s own subjugation\textsuperscript{506}. The declaration of sexual identity is a procedure of normalisation, precisely because the individual learns to recognise itself as a subject of sexuality, ineluctably bound to the truth that he or she speaks. Our selfhood emerges as a morphological constant and is designated and established by our sexual identity. According to Foucault, modern liberal power is

\textsuperscript{503} Not without resistance and retaliation, specifically from lesbian groups. See Patrick Califia, \textit{Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex}, 164; and Gayle Rubin, \textit{Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader}, 196–197. Califia documents a specific incident in which the Gay Freedom Day Parade Committee tried to pass a resolution that would ban leather and S/M regalia at the parade. The incident serves to underscore forms of social exclusion enacted even by groups who seek to challenge traditional ways of being and promote respect for alternative ways of being.
\textsuperscript{504} Ibid, 123.
\textsuperscript{505} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{506} Judith Butler, \textit{The Psychic Life of Power}, 93.
efficacious in that it conserves a level of individual autonomy, enhancing and promoting responsible management of one’s own conduct. The subject only remains a subject through the reiteration of itself as a subject. ‘Coming out’ presents a risk of falling into the trap of ‘renormalization’; for Butler, the danger resides in the pathologising framework appearing to exist outside of the continual repetition of normalising categories, and this serves to mask the ‘very regime of normalization by which it is spawned’. In this way, the S/M subject realigns with normative objectives and mis-recognises the effect of normalising power.

In what Butler refers to as a ‘strategic reterritorialization’, conventional technologies of the self are re-constituted and displace the original pathological meaning. Foucault has described the unexpected reaction of power rebounding onto itself as a ‘counter-attack’. As he puts it, ‘Suddenly, what had made power strong becomes used to attack it. Power, after investing itself in the body, finds itself exposed to a counter-attack in that same body.’ Thus, resistance to a taxonomy of power consisted, paradoxically, in affirming the discursive formula of labelling, and then turning that very mechanism of signification against itself: ‘Coming out is an act of freedom, then, not in the sense of liberation but in the sense of resistance.’

The experience of ‘coming out’ is pertinent to understanding how resisting the effects of power can engender a new relationship to forms of power. Here, resistance is not entirely or altogether liberating; as one interviewer put it to Foucault, ‘to resist is not simply a negation but a creative process’. Foucault responded in the affirmative. Gay and lesbian reverse discourse constitutes a form of resistance that is not entirely reactionary. The counter-discourse achieves the decentring of identity categories while precariously co-existing within oppressive shaming and pathologising constellations that act as an agency of sex.

507 Nevertheless, this dependency on repetition for its coherence of identity may indicate the subject’s ‘incomplete character’, as Butler describes it. Ibid, 99.
508 Ibid, 100.
509 Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge, 56.
511 Gallagher and Wilson, cited in David Halperin, Saint Foucault, 60.
New cultural directions: the formation of S/M subculture out of gay and lesbian culture during the twentieth century

According to Charles Moser and Peggy Kleinplatz, until the early 1970s the S/M community in the US and Western Europe was underground and predominantly gay.512 The contemporary S/M community in the US has its roots in gay motorcycle clubs that formed after the Second World War. Veterans returning from the war who, because of their experiences and their homosexuality were prevented from going home, congregated in the San Francisco area or in New York City. Some of these men were also interested in sadomasochism (the term ‘leather’ as a synonym for S/M has its origins in these groups).513 A gradually larger and more diversified scene emerged after the sexual revolution in the 1970s.514 According to Halperin, Foucault was interested in S/M especially as it was cultivated and elaborated in gay male urban enclaves in the United States as part of a wider practice of subcultural community formation, not as the expression of a deep psychological impulse which a permissive society had finally enabled people to indulge but rather as something new that modern subjects could do with the sexuality to which their identities had become so closely attached.515

Foucault’s perspective on S/M eroticism appears to be continuous with his critical genealogy of ‘sex’. In the final pages of the first volume of The History of Sexuality, Foucault pronounces that the multiplication of ‘bodies and pleasures’ is a possible act of resistance against the homogenising consequences of modern disciplinary power:

513 Ibid.
514 Gay and straight groups divided into separate factions. Leatherydyes had no community of their own until the mid-1980s, when the group SAMOIS in San Francisco and the Lesbian Sex Mafia (LSM) in New York City were founded as women-only groups. Califia was at the forefront of this battle. Patrick Califia, Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex, 12.
515 David Halperin, Saint Foucault, 87.
It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim – through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality – to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility for resistance.516

As much as it was necessary to assert political demands through recourse to identity categories – to strategically reverse one’s position as an object of that name into a subject who wields the power to determine and pronounce one’s own identity, the gay and lesbian liberation movements did not stop at this junction. Because modern liberal power is a strategy that can and does result in a state in which it is unilaterally exercised – regulations, norms and codes that determine the field of what is valourised and accepted, Foucault argues that the liberation of homosexual identity did not ‘automatically open to the possibility of creating relationships’. Interviewed in 1982, Foucault stated:

Still, I think we have to go a step further. I think that one of the factors of this stabilization will be the creation of new forms of life, relationships, friendships in society, art, culture, and so on through our sexual, ethical, and political choices. Not only do we have to defend ourselves, not only affirm ourselves, as an identity but as a creative force.517

Foucault proposes that the continued elaboration of marginal existences, new kinds of pleasures and new relationships is constitutive of an act of resistance against political strategies of normative regulation.

During the 1980s, the S/M community gained significant cultural visibility as organisations began to multiply and hold S/M parties, meetings and educational events.518 As it emerged in connection with gay and lesbian sexuality, S/M was not conceived as a sexual practice but more radically and more disruptively to the socially normative fabric as an integral element of ‘homosexual ways of life’. Halperin describes the ossification of S/M to alternative lifestyles as follows:

516 Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume One, 157.
517 Michel Foucault, ‘Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity’ in Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, 164.
What that means is that fist-fucking and SM did not remain merely occasional or isolated practices but became linked to other expressions of subcultural development, including dress, patterns of life and work, the transformation of neighbourhoods, the growth of community organizations, the provision of public services, the staging of athletic events, and ultimately the emergence of locally based and funded social and political groups.519

In 1984, Foucault suggested in an interview that rights should be conceived of exclusively in the juridical sense but also and importantly as the ‘establishment of lifestyles and modes of existence’ that do not seek to position themselves within already available cultural and social forms.520 In the S/M subculture, whole new relational worlds and modalities of everyday life were being invented on the basis of a practice of pleasure. In an interview titled ‘The Social Triumph of the Will’ Foucault clearly supports the rights-based political approach to the problem of sexuality. However, he is careful to point out that the legal decriminalisation of homosexuality is politically insufficient:

I think we should consider the battle for gay rights as an episode that cannot be the final stage. For two reasons: first because a right, in its real effects, is much more linked to attitudes and patterns of behavior than to legal formulations. There can be discrimination against homosexuals even if such discriminations are prohibited by law. It is therefore necessary to establish homosexual lifestyles, existential choices … in which sexual relations with people of the same sex will be important…. It’s not only a matter of integrating this strange little practice of making love with someone of the same sex into preexisting cultures; it’s a matter of constructing … cultural forms.521

The emergence of a budding new S/M subculture out of gay and lesbian enclaves, which led to the proliferation of communities, bars, clubs, was consistent with what Foucault viewed as a creation of new lines of force ‘which are really new and are neither the same as, nor

520 Michel Foucault, ‘The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will’ in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 160.
superimposed on, existing cultural forms’ and which could be transferrable to other sexualities.522

A ‘queer’ positionality

The early period of gay and lesbian liberation was a movement without a premeditated cultural direction. The strategy, of ‘out of the closet and into the streets’ indicated a progression towards the formation of a new dynamic of power relations ‘whose ultimate effects extended beyond its immediate effects’.523 The early movement succeed in disengaging itself from the identity model through which power had labelled and governed, and through this destabilisation of sexual norms and its categories, possibilities emerged for making pleasure ‘the crystallizing point of a new culture’.524 Foucault recognised that resistance begins with a rearticulation of identities – not as essences; but rather, as a positionality, defined by whatever is opposed to heteronormativity. Queer, as Halperin put it, is a positionality defined by ‘whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant’.525 Queer represents a term of affiliation that does not fully describe those it represents. In its non-specificity, ‘queer’ destabilises the position in which power initially placed the individual.526 Queer, dislocated from the principle of identity and nature, is a propitious position from which a creative ethics of the self could be practiced.

Consideration of the accounts of contemporary S/M praxis disturbs clear-cut normative identity labels. The analysis of contemporary S/M praxis, akin to erotic literature, is shown to impoverish the scientific account of non-consensual barbarism. The dislocation of pleasure from identity and the blending of intense pleasure with the knowledge of a practice can change or transform the subject’s relation to itself and to others. The practices are shown to permit a modification of one’s relation to truth and the field within which the subject experiences its present. The actual practice of S/M concerned Foucault, as a ‘creative

522 Ibid, 160.
523 Emphasis in original. David Halperin, Saint Foucault, 87.
525 David Halperin, Saint Foucault, 62.
526 Ibid.
enterprise’ and as a means of achieving the ‘desexualisation of pleasure’\textsuperscript{527} by means of a voluptuous transgression of established modes of sexuality in favour of ‘bodies and pleasures’.\textsuperscript{528}

**Do S/M practitioners purposely engage with ethical and/or aesthetic projects?**

The practitioner of sadomasochism is as a skilled performer. A considerable amount of education is needed to be able to perform specialised techniques and highly technical practices. As Staci Newmahr describes, ‘all SM participants must acquire specialized information and learn challenging skills’.\textsuperscript{529} She notes that S/M involves developing certain competencies that require ‘the utilization of skills, intense concentration’, which can be physically and emotionally challenging.\textsuperscript{530} Members of the community learn technical skills under the instruction of experienced members, who implement a strong emphasis on physical, emotional and psychological safety.\textsuperscript{531} For example, a demonstration on the appropriate use of a flogger includes instructions on where one may or may not strike a person’s body without causing serious harm; as well as being prepared to deal with unexpected emotional responses from submissives (bottoms).\textsuperscript{532} The faculties of care, dedication, and dexterity are crucial. Japanese rope bondage or ‘shibari’ is a most recent development in S/M play. It involves an elaborate, aestheticised form of bondage.\textsuperscript{533} Understood as a practice and accumulated as experience, practitioners learn techniques and reflect their knowledge back into the practice to intensify its pleasure. Education is an integral

\textsuperscript{527} Ibid, 165.

\textsuperscript{528} Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume One, 157.

\textsuperscript{529} Staci Newmahr, ‘Rethinking Kink: Sadomasochism as Serious Leisure’, *Qualitative Sociology*, 33/3 (2010), 321.

\textsuperscript{530} Ibid, 327.

\textsuperscript{531} The community is called ‘the scene’, which refers to a network of BDSM oriented people, organisations, meeting places, dungeons, webpages, email lists, conferences and so forth.

\textsuperscript{532} Staci Newmahr, ‘Rethinking Kink: Sadomasochism as Serious Leisure’, 322.

part of initiation into the S/M community, where ‘learning to play’ as a ‘social process shapes and reshapes motivations and contributes to identity formation’.534

Newmahr also discusses the way in which the BDSM community self-regulates the principles and values of safety, respect and negotiation. She suggests that BDSM performances, workshops and play parties produce the norms of consent, care and respect in the S/M community just as they produce SM practitioners. However, these ideals are not hermetically sealed within an ideal ‘Safe, Sane and Consensual’ utopia. Rather, they are mediated by economic, social, and cultural regimes and dominant systems of power. In part, this is the reason why political (often feminist) critics of S/M argue that the practice uncritically replays both social (sexism, racism) and individual (abuse) forms of oppression. Similarly, Bersani’s differing assessment of Foucault’s views, as explored below, questions whether S/M activities are capable of transgressing normative sexuality and gender – or whether S/M eroticism actually serves as evidence of the deeply entrenched nature of power. In this view, the argument by S/M supporters that S/M is a performance of (not real) violence and humiliation and that it is consensual does not necessarily distinguish S/M from other non-consensual and violent behaviours. Ideally, S/M interactions and play parties interact in a scene voluntarily and with preestablished consent based on a mutual understanding of what activities will take place.535 However, it is important to acknowledge that sexual abuse and consent violations in S/M practice do occur, both within and outside the community. In theory, if not always in practice, consent in a BDSM context represents a continuous process that involves precautionary measures, including negotiations of the scene, agreement upon a safe word, open communication of boundaries and desires, the notion of transparency and ensuring protection from harm through competence and skill.536

Habitués of sadomasochism report experiencing the practice as transformative.537 Newmahr’s four-year ethnographic study of a pansexual community is one of very few

534 Staci Newmahr, ‘Rethinking Kink: Sadomasochism as Serious Leisure’, 319.
immersive studies conducted in real life S/M communities. In this study, practitioners commonly expressed that increased competency in specialised skills is a major part of the fulfillment of personal goals of ‘self-actualization’ and ‘self-expression’. Newmahr’s account of the BDSM subculture in San Francisco shares with veteran S/M activist, Rubin the evocation of S/M’s transformative aspects. Habitués meet for ‘play parties’, performances and mutual exchanges. At the ‘Caeden’ community Newmahr described the formation of strong social bonds and affectionate relationships through practices of pleasure: ‘This community is built around play, and it is through play that community identities are constructed, sustained, and nurtured’. In her study of S/M communities, Newmahr posits that practitioners commonly experience the practice as an interpersonal adventure towards critical self-examination and transformation: including changes in lifestyle, enhancing intimacy between partners, and seeking extreme experiences of pleasure and pain.

Weiss’s study suggests that increasingly the S/M scene is populated by heterosexual white professionals – pointing to the demise of the sex radical and subversive scene of Foucault’s days. The early days of the so-called ‘Old Guard’ were secretive community and novices were introduced to S/M practices through personal mentors, having to undergo certain initiations. The territorial aspect of the S/M community detached and dispersed into online and networked communities ‘located in nebulous, diffuse, often suburban spaces: burger restaurants, cafes, online chat rooms, and e-mail lists.’ In light of such changes, Weiss challenges the notion that S/M practices are radical queer subversions or brave transgressions of social codes, norms and rules. Rather, Weiss points to the development of an erotic community thoroughly focused on techniques in self-constitution interwoven with consumerism; linking S/M to the proliferation of commodity-oriented sexual communities

538 As opposed to studies of online communities.
540 BDSM is an encompassing term which stands for bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadomasochism.
542 Ibid.
and the expanding market for sex toys. This raises important questions: does the commodification of BDSM reduce politics to a consumerist lifestyle? Is this a form of normalisation via commercialisation? For Weiss, the market ultimately undermines the radical potential of identity-based movements and reduces politics to consumerism. This does not mean, however, that ‘there are no longer any leathermen in San Francisco, or radical queer genderfuck play parties, or other more-fringe SM events and scenes.’

In tracing this reflective transaction in daily life, we turn now to qualitative studies involving S/M practitioners, as well as interviews from Love Hard (2014), an Australian docu-portraiture about BDSM and intimacy. In its study of the lifestyles and relationships of five subjects, Love Hard presents reflective accounts of S/M as a practice of art and intimacy and a path to transformation. This production is particularly useful for the questions explored in this thesis, because it is an inquiry unconcerned with investigating the ‘truth’ about the desires and conducts of practitioners. Rather, the production permits self-identified BDSM practitioners to speak autonomously about their experiences. Importantly, the subjects whose personal narratives and experiences are represented in the documentary collaborated with the filmmakers, resulting in a process ‘in which the person whose image is being taken is a party to the construction of that image’. In S/M subculture, individuality seems to unfold into a power of creating the self and, it can be argued, this corresponds with resistance and animus against the standard bearers of moral rectitude. The following explanations of S/M in relation to questions of pleasure refer to an interior experience that sidesteps the normative forecasting of essentialism.

544 See Robin Bauer’s challenge to Weiss’ argument that BDSM is a model of consumer of sexuality based on his own observations from a different BDSM community. See Robin Bauer, Queer BDSM Intimacies Critical Consent and Pushing Boundaries (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
545 Money is involved in the constitution of an S/M identity – purchasing the toys, instruments, outfits and piercings. Members of the organised community are expected to be able to pay for expensive gear, tools, costumes, toys required to create and fulfil the ‘scene’, as well as entrance fees for play parties. As one practitioner from Weiss’ study said: “When you add it up like that it really does take money to play. I don't think that a lot of people who are wondering where they're going to buy their next milk and bread are going to do that ...” Ibid, 107.
Reclaiming difference

Practitioners who participated in the film and qualitative studies being drawn upon do not view sex as an essence that exists inside the person. In such essentialist notions of liberated desire, it is possible to interpret an incarnation of disciplinary codes posing as subversive but operating in the service of standardised social and sexual codes. Emma Turley’s study of S/M discusses erotic experiences of S/M praxis in relation to notions of ‘embodied liberation’ and depicts the fracturing of social limitations. She quotes Patrick, who describes his BDSM experience as a kind of break with established normativity. Significantly, he emphasises the taboo aspect of S/M eroticism, which is made ‘sanitised’ in order to be acceptable:

Everyone tells us how sex should be and shouldn’t be. Sex should be loving, sex should be safe, it shouldn’t be with a stranger, or more than one person at a time, it should be clean and sanitised, or it should be diluted. Sex should conform to Cosmo [Cosmopolitan magazine] standards where orgasm is the achievement. It should include foreplay and lube and shouldn’t deviate. What I’d just done broke all those rules and more! … BDSM and fetish is taboo, except the cleansed and sanitised versions allowed. I loved the fact that BDSM was all these things to me, and still do.548

In this sense something reactionary underpins this kind of S/M practice, particularly when practitioners are attempting to achieve a form of liberated sexual identity. In response to questions about role play some practitioners note that S/M is not ‘play’ but an element constitutive of the subject’s sense of self-identity.549 As Moser and Kleinplatz discern, ‘some do not regard SM as a set of interests or desires but as an identity, just as some (not all) people who engage in homosexual acts adopt a gay identity’.550

549 Niklas Nordling et al., cited in ibid. ‘…[SM] cannot be thought of as unitary phenomenon: People who identified themselves as sadomasochists probably mean different things by these identifications. The proliferation of specialised SM identifications: perverts, masters, masochists, pain sluts, slaves, pain fetishists and daddies; further shaped by sexual orientations: dykes, gays, bisexuals and genderqueers; and styles of relationships and power dynamics, are finally complicated by interests (for example, flogging, shibari, humiliation)’. BDSM practices are often called ‘play’ or ‘role play’. The ‘scene’ is differentiated from a scene, which refers to a particular S/M encounter.
Participants in qualitative studies of S/M and discussions from Love Hard suggests that some practitioners do not conceptualise S/M within essentialist terms. In this understanding of S/M sexuality, the idea that ‘my identity as a sadist, or a masochist, is an essential aspect of myself’ is generally opposed. As Moore points out, within S/M scenarios there are distinct forms of fantasy in the roles of top and bottom, or sadist and masochist, that are not necessarily spoken of as either sadism or masochism, ‘but which is nonetheless deeply complimentary to it’. The commonly used euphemism WIITWD (‘what it is that we do’) is a witty response to the insistence on identity (specifically from the LGBT community) – a refusal to ascribe identity categories to sexual object choices. For example, Ivan, a self-described queer masochist discloses that in enacting a scene he experiences a kind of dislocation of personal identity – an intense pleasure that returns one to a fluid and mutable body:

I get to a point in these masochistic scenes where I get so broken down, so reduced to nothing, so positioned only in my body that all sorts of other things cease to exist around it and that isn’t to say that this masochism is some kind of secret of myself or that it’s the core of my identity or that it’s who I really am, I don’t think that at all. But I think that what is left there is somehow also like the essence of my survival…there’s something in there which I can use to rebuild myself from. And that in a sense there’s something really life affirming about having this sort of violence done to me and surviving it.

Similar attitudes are expressed by practitioners in Turley’s study. Turley reads this practitioner’s testimony in terms of an ‘embodied liberation’, in which freedom is experienced through pushing corporeal boundaries and the possibilities of identity:

That’s what I like about role play, there’s no end to the possibilities, you can conjure people up and mould and shape them how you want. You’re not restricted by race,

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553 Bobby Harrington and Gala Vanting, Love Hard [video].
gender, class, ethnicity, intellect, ability, it’s like taking a break from yourself, and in a way having lots of new partners.554

Similarly, Andrea Beckmann quotes a practitioner who claims: ‘we felt transformed into someone whom it felt better to be’.555 This suggests that for the duration of the scene, participants can experience the play of difference outside of the signifying network of socially determined standards. Implicated within these accounts are suggestions of another mode of relating to the self.

It’s play-acting. It’s like going onto a stage, you can step outside of yourself and pretend to be something you’re not. I can be a man, a woman, someone’s teacher, their father, their baby, their prisoner, anything.556

Turley argues that S/M situations are capable of permitting a transformative interaction with otherness and futurity through the embodied exploration of different roles and identities.557 Age, gender, race and social status are experimented and played with – even humanness, as Turley showed, can be substituted for animality. Practitioners suggest that S/M is a way to live relationships and practice sexuality in a way that is somewhat more of their own making – a style and mode of sexuality and being which is possibly much more enriching and enjoyable. The practitioner seeks to render her own range of pleasures, freeing her body from socially sanctioned forms of pleasure which foreclose experimentation with the body. Practitioners from Beckmann’s study express compatible views:

554 Emma Turley, “‘Like Nothing I’ve Ever Felt Before’: Understanding Consensual BDSM as Embodied Experience”, 155.
557 Emma Turley, “‘Like Nothing I’ve Ever Felt Before’: Understanding Consensual BDSM as Embodied Experience”, 155.
We’ve already lived in a repressive culture anyway, this is why I keep pushing my boundaries to see what works for me … I think people have to make their own choices without that power within: you can’t do this, you can’t do that.558

**Desexualising pleasure**

Crucial to Foucault’s interest in S/M is the notion of the ‘desexualisation’ of pleasure, designating the fracturing of sexual pleasure from genital specificity. In S/M practices, the entire body becomes eroticised, conducive to a realisation that not all pleasure is ‘sexual’ and discovering new ways of relating to the body and to pleasure.559 Foucault saw S/M as a technique, whereby the focus of sexual pleasure is removed from the privileged localisation of the genitals, creating new and unexpected pathways of pleasure. In an interview, Foucault describes S/M as an exemplary locus for the practice of distancing pleasure from the principle of identity:

For instance, look at the S&M subculture, as our good friend Gayle Rubin would insist. I don’t think that this movement of sexual practices has anything to do with the disclosure or the uncovering of S&M tendencies deep within our unconscious, and so on. I think that S&M is much more than that; it’s the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previously. The idea that S&M is related to a deep violence, that S&M practice is a way of liberating this violence, this aggression, is stupid. We know very well what all those people are doing is not aggressive; they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body – through the eroticization of the body. I think it’s a kind of creation, a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features what I call the desexualization of pleasure. The idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure as the root of all our possible pleasure – I think that’s something quite wrong. These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations, and so on.560

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559 Michel Foucault, ‘Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity’ in Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, 165.

560 Ibid.
S/M scenes produce intense pleasure while surpassing genital fixations that personify normative sexual practice. Charlie, who calls herself a queer sadist, deep sea diver and technohead, describes pleasure in S/M practice in terms of violence:

I enjoy the giving of violence and you just don’t get to do that on a daily basis. You can go boxing but the physical side of being a sadist gives me great pleasure and pleasure which isn’t genital because a masochist can be hit and I’ve heard a lot of people say that when they’re hit they physically feel sexual pleasure which I don’t and a sadist only uses usually their hands in order to hit their partner … so the pleasure isn’t sexual it’s another kind of pleasure.

Echoing these sentiments, Patrick Califia described ‘SM orgasm’ as ‘the reaching of an emotional, psychological, or spiritual state of catharsis, ecstasy, or transcendence during an S/M scene without having a genital orgasm’. Foucault was careful to distinguish pleasure from desire. The latter, in Foucault’s view, has been discursively attached to the government of sexuality.

The most effective kind of resistance to this disciplinary productivity should, Foucault suggests, take the form not of struggling against prohibition but rather as a kind of counter-productivity. As Bersani puts it, altering one’s relationship with power is not a question of lifting prohibitions but rather of ‘deliberately playing on the surfaces of our bodies with forms or intensities of pleasures not covered, so to speak, by the disciplinary classifications that have until now taught us what sex is’. Bersani describes the creative innovation of new pleasures in sadomasochism as a continuous ‘counter productivity’ against the

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561 The ‘scene’ is differentiated from ‘a scene’, which refers to a particular S/M encounter. The scene stresses the modern mantra that all BDSM practices should be ‘safe, sane, and consensual’. Martin Weinberg, Colin Williams and Charles Moser, ‘The Social Constituents of Sadomasochism’, 379–389.


heteronormative government of sexuality. The essay ‘Gay Daddy’ recontextualises Foucault’s ideas about desexualising pleasure within notions of fantasy and desire in order to interrogate the possibility of a politics of sexuality that transcends them. Bersani’s scepticism about Foucault’s pronouncements on S/M centres on a psychoanalytic interpretation of the transgressive acts of gay S/M men as a complex re-enactment of the law of the father – a perilous dance of fantasies and desires between sons and fathers – a masochistic embrace of social power. Bersani’s essay privileges masculine masochism and shows that the sexual outcast (the homosexual, the sadomasochist) is infatuated with the law that binds and condemns him. Bersani views S/M play as capable of stripping power to its most inner or hidden elements: a desire for mastery that is ineluctably tied to eroticism. For Bersani, despite being consensual and despite the reversibility of roles S/M scenes reinforce rather than resist psychologically entrenched power. Ultimately, Bersani seeks a reconciliation with the project of Foucault. He asks whether the ‘sentiments and conduct we might wish to associate with love can emerge as a resistance, in the Foucauldian sense, to the violence and avidity for power inherent in all intimate negotiations between human beings.’

In Foucault’s view, the emphasis on pleasure must correspond with a de-emphasis on the notion of desire. The ancients were not so much concerned with the object of desire as they were with techniques of producing and intensifying pleasure. Moreover, pleasure is transpersonal – it has nothing to do with people as subjects, or with an integral kind of identity. Foucault clarifies this idea as follows:

I am advancing this term [pleasure], because it seems to me that it escapes the medical and naturalistic connotations inherent in the notion of desire. That notion has been used as a tool, as a grid of intelligibility, a calibration in terms of normality: “tell me what your desire is and I will tell you who you are, whether you are normal or not, and then I can validate or invalidate your desire.” One keeps running into this tactic which goes from the notion of Christian concupiscence all the way through to the Freudian notion of desire … Desire is not an event but a permanent feature of the

566 Ibid.
subject: it provides a basis onto which all that psycho-medical armature can attach itself.\textsuperscript{568}

As a case in point, Nio, who was interviewed for \textit{Love Hard}, described herself as an emotional masochist, a performer and artist, and a hardcore feminist. Here, S/M practice is expressed by Nio as a resource for an ordeal, which, in its extremity, surpasses sexual pleasure. She states:

I think of myself as an emotional masochist. The thing that really gets me off is being hurt … What I get out of it is I get sexual pleasure out of it, but it often goes beyond sexual pleasure. I think it’s a kind of relief when you’ve been beaten and yelled at and … my favourite place to get to, which doesn’t happen often, is when I’m crying and my body is shaking so much that I no longer feel in control and there’s something incredibly liberating about that … And I think I’m a junkie for fare, and I often compare kink to extreme sports. It’s just this desire to do precisely what terrifies you, and to sort of jump off a cliff and feel the relief of letting go.\textsuperscript{569}

In turn, Charlie, also speaking from the documentary \textit{Love Hard}, describes a strong appetite for the pleasure of the senses – privileging the taste and sight of blood – proof of the vulnerability of her partner and the intimacy that unites them:

I get a very big pleasure from the aesthetics of S/M. From the bruises, from the way he moves when I hit him, all of this is aesthetically very pleasing, and the blood as well adds to this, \textit{it’s a way of showing that my body becomes your body}, there’s a fullness to having blood spilled, to licking it, tasting it … having it smeared is just part of the experience of getting into someone at that sort of deeper, more intense level.\textsuperscript{570}

The inner experience can be seen in extreme eroticism where a proclivity apropos dangerous and taboo sex (sadomasochism) finds a person proffering their mortal body to the other; without fear of being perverse, profane, breaking laws or engaging with imminent danger.

\textsuperscript{568} Michel Foucault, cited in David Halperin, \textit{Saint Foucault}, 93–94.
\textsuperscript{569} Nio, cited in Bobby Harrington and Gala Vanting, \textit{Love Hard} [video].
\textsuperscript{570} My emphasis. Charlie, cited in ibid.
The eroticisation of power

Calafia remarks that S/M eroticism focuses on forbidden feelings or actions and searches for a way to obtain pleasure from them: ‘There’s an enormous hard-on beneath the priest’s robe, the cop’s uniform, the president’s business suit, the soldier’s khakis … in an S/M context, the uniforms and roles and dialogue become a parody of authority, a challenge to it’. In S/M situations pleasure is not reducible to sexuality and power can be dramatised as an element of pleasure. In the use of the tactics and strategies of power to create pleasure, relations of power within the S/M situation are fluid and can be reversed or turned around at any moment. ‘Of course,’ observes Halperin, ‘the classic case of the strategic use of power differentials to produce effects of pleasure instead of effects of domination sadomasochistic eroticism’.572

Some S/M scenes appropriate and mock ‘technologies of government’ for pleasure. In S/M, regulative systems of power are often exposed through dramatisation and transformed into vehicles of pleasure through role play. Other scholars have observed that S/M can also involve the parodying of various contractual relationships, notably the marriage contract. In Gary Taylor and Jane Ussher’s study, other practitioners (identified as ‘V’ and ‘H’) give expression to the use of strategies of power in S/M scenes:

We play with the power thing … it’s like a sex toy … I’ll have it for a while then she’ll have it … (V)575

we’re actually now play acting, experimenting with things that were oppressive … but we’re doing it in a totally different way … totally … (H)576

571 Patrick Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, 170.
572 Ibid, 85.
576 Ibid, 303.
In S/M, the gender polarisations essential to heterosexual coupling can lose their significance. This abolition of rigid polarised roles is evident in Taylor and Ussher’s study, where another practitioner (identified as ‘Q’) expressed that the S/M situation confounds gender polarisations and remains an open space where one’s position can be freely exchanged for another:

It’s more to do with the confusion of the two (male and female gender) … like I’ll talk about my cock and stuff when it’s quite apparent that I’m female and I will refer to myself as he … she … whatever feels right … it’s more gender fuck really, it’s not strongly identifying with one another … it’s about playing with the whole notion of gender … (Q) 

Within this alternative economy of bodies and pleasure, arousal does not always depend on gender polarisation. Califia once poignantly remarked: ‘If I had a choice between being shipwrecked on a desert island with a vanilla lesbian and a hot male masochist, I’d pick the boy.’ The significance of this statement resides in that Califia would choose experiencing S/M pleasure (sadism) in favour of sexual identity (lesbianism).

On the basis of S/M’s appropriation of power structures for pleasure, some radical feminists have accused S/M practices as little more than scenes and role play that ensnare S/M in the replication of oppressive power relations. One response to such arguments would be that to operate within the system of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination. In evoking a sense of delimitation, constraints that have become intolerable (masculinity, heterosexuality, homosexuality, gender sexism, race etc.) – and practising those

577 Ibid.
578 Patrick Califia, Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex, 157.
579 The collection of essays entitled Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis constituted one of the most powerful attacks by radical feminists against the BDSM community. The central argument of the book is that consensual sadomasochism replicates the dynamics of dominant patriarchal ideology and thereby reinforces repressive power structures. The debate continues today between radical (sex-negative) feminists and liberal (sex-positive) feminists; the former arguing that the eroticisation of female submissiveness is veiled by a rhetoric of choice but it is culturally identical to domestic violence. One of the obvious problems with this argument is that they fail to take into account that female professional dominatrixes regularly service male clients who ask to be dominated. See Robin R. Linden et al., Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis (San Francisco, California: Frog in the Well, 1983).
fluid strategies of power within S/M culture through the techniques of parody, dramatisation and amplification – practitioners celebrate the opportunity to experience the possibility of rendering the body risible, and discover a means of ulterior activity that challenges with new assignations and assignments.

Studies of S/M suggest that it is understood by practitioners as a game and a novel practice that performs the functions of rendering rigid power relations mutable and even transferable. In S/M, partners are assigned roles, however, as Newmahr suggests these roles can be changed. This is called ‘switching’ or represented by people who ‘switch’.580 Importantly, the performance of a scene is agreed upon, yet a degree of mutability is permitted in order to encourage spontaneous expression and authentic experience.581 In S/M role reversal between the master and the slave or dominant and submissive is common and both partners can be ‘bottoms’, and more rarely, both can be ‘tops’.582 S/M thus offers the possibility of, paradoxically, using mutable but rigid relations of power which is not its consolidation but its displacement.

Some qualitative studies ground practitioner accounts within a limiting rubric of identity that presupposes deviancy and abnormality. For example, Taylor and Ussher ascribe practitioner narratives within escapist ‘themes’ and interpret the meaning of practitioners’ statements in terms of escaping from one’s identity, from one’s relationship to society, from the mechanical boredom of everyday life.583 Taylor and Ussher provide an account of S/M variously as pleasure, dissidence, escapism, self-transcendence, pathology, as intra-psychic, as learned behaviour and as being ‘inexplicable’.584 The authors organise this thematic perspective under the subheading ‘SM as escapism’:

   discovering SM was a bit like rediscovering sex … I also discovered a whole new scene … new clubs … new people … a new way of life really … (A)585

580 Staci Newmahr, ‘Rethinking Kink: Sadomasochism as Serious Leisure’, 316.
581 Charles Moser and Peggy Kleinplatz, Themes of SM Expression, 42.
582 Ibid.
584 Ibid.
585 Ibid.
Contrary to Taylor and Ussher, this practitioner emphasises an encounter with a new lifestyle based on their involvement with an alternative subcultural scene that combines sexual experience with a collective or interpersonal practice. In signposting the above statement under the sweeping subheading of ‘escapism’, Taylor and Ussher stigmatise S/M as a form of entertainment. Amy, a shibari model interviewed for Love Hard, discloses that the adventurous experience of bondage impacts other aspects of life and remains inseparable from the desire to extend the margins of the ordinary:

I think that mindset has enabled me to be quite exploratory and experimental not just in kink but in my life more broadly, and that informs probably a lot of what we do. It’s not just kink, its food and cooking and friends and sharing experiences and travel and all these other things, relationships and love, and all these other broader bigger things.

In turn, Nio from Love Hard describes a wounding experience, which evokes a sense of ‘loss’ or wasting of the self in states of surrender that are unique to the S/M experience:

If someone sort of beats you and opens you up and you become that vulnerable in front of a person, that’s actually a side of yourself you don’t ever show anyone. In day-to-day life you spend a lot of time being together, and being happy, and surviving … in the scene you can let that go, you can be vulnerable, you can cry, you can have snot dripping out of your nose and spit dribbling down your chin and become incredibly abject … and that’s the kind of intimacy that you just don’t get normally.586

In Nio’s statement one can read a desire for intimacy in a dynamic mode of communication that demands the wounding of two self-enclosed individuals. The dominant partner mutually experiences unencumbered freedoms not acceptable or conceivable outside of the S/M relationship. This is illustrated when Charlie from the documentary Love Hard describes her relationship with Ivan:

586 Nio, cited in Bobby Harrington and Gala Vanting, Love Hard [video].
Our relationship is a very very loving one, a very caring one … and I love him very very dearly and I feel the love back. I can for a very fleeting moment … remove myself from that love and just enjoy him for the gift of this body which I find obviously very hot … and putting him in these incredible positions of stress, of pain, of tension, of crazy bodily experiences and doing this without having to care for him … just removing myself from that loving caring position and just trashing someone because your body is appealing … and I’ve just got that violent … silly even childish destruction … urge … when you really desire it a lot. 587

In a similar vein, Nio describes the depths of pleasure that borders on abjection:

part of the experience of getting into someone at that deeper and more intense level, and there are other ways of doing that … but that experience of someone else’s body can be pushed through dragging liquids out of them and just seeing how you can … mingle together in that sort of big pile of messy stuff from which something other and quite beautiful is going to emerge. 588

Ivan discloses that, for him, the extraction of truth from the submissive immersion is imperative to interpreting the experience:

A part of the process for me isn’t just being tied up, having my liberty taken away, and being hit or having violence done to me in various ways. For me, it’s also a matter of making sense of that experience. And because I say I’m being reduced to nothing for me that’s quite important to make sense of … it would be absurd for me to walk away from that experience just holding it as a point in time that will diminish with memory. 589

Nio recalls the experience as a violent shattering of identity, fracturing the self-enclosed individual tied to possessions and things. This experience resonates profoundly with the limit experience of eroticism and, in mobilising the ‘messy stuff’ of disgust, foreshadows the threat of losing one’s identity. Through S/M practice, she attempts to violate utility, productivity

587 Charlie, cited in ibid.
588 Nio, cited in ibid.
589 Ivan, cited in ibid.
and the accumulation of goods – elements that bind her to identity. This enclosed experience approaches a form of sovereignty and Nio claims to experience estrangement from the seriousness with which we regard normative valuations informing morals and intelligibility – the type of seriousness that forecloses possibilities for thinking differently. She defines her masochism as an abandonment of the worldly self in intense pleasure that makes possible a new relation with the self:

I think that’s why I love being destroyed. That’s why I love having someone rip apart everything I am, and humiliate me, and just, you know, break apart all these things I’ve built about myself, my morals, my beliefs about what I should be, to have someone come along and just tear that to shreds, it makes you realise you don’t need those things, and for a moment you’re just free of those things, and you’re just body, you’re just this sweaty, spit covered, trembling creature.590

Nio reflects on her own experiences of transgression using Susan Sontag’s essay, ‘The Pornographic Imagination’.591 She compares her practice to the artist’s foray into the subterranean and the dark places of unreason. In her art Nio embodies the character of the transgressive artist who works from within the liminal zones.

The role of the artist is to visit the periphery of what is socially acceptable, and we give the artists licence to do so … to sort of flirt with danger … psychological danger, to sort of do the things that compel us or intrigue us, but which we as ‘good’, solid citizens don’t do … sometimes I think of kink as a sort of exploration into the borderlands of what’s socially acceptable and I feel like I’m gathering material to take back and hopefully put into my art somehow. If I can become entirely disinhibited when I’m fucking, maybe I can bring a bit of that into my art and become a bit more fearless, and a bit more deranged [she laughs].592

590 Nio, cited in ibid.
592 Nio, cited in Bobby Harrington and Gala Vanting, Love Hard [video].
From her long term participant observations, Newmahr recounts her own experiences in the field, recalling an immersion into strange pleasures and sensations, which facilitated the confusion of boundaries of identity and desexualised pleasure:

As my time in the field increased, I became more cooperative during play – more malleable, more docile. Immersed in a community in which I had explicit permission to absolve myself of accountability of my own decisions, I began to do so. My own boundaries – between active and passive, candor and coyness, adult and child, and indeed masculine and feminine were becoming blurry not only when I played, but also when I wrote about my scenes. Over time, the voice in my notes changed, revealing an increasing malleability in my behavior and in my perspective.593

Like Newmahr’s account, Ivan links the inner experience of S/M to an awareness of being a member of a particular community of people. Fashioning one’s own existence is linked to a reluctance to conform with established patterns and conventions. Ivan privileges sensations that combine, communicate and arrange themselves in unprecedented ways:

Having sadomasochistic sex is very political in a lot of senses because it’s growing from a sort of community where certain things are considered to be abnormal or problematised for whatever reasons or controlled for whatever reasons. Because it’s so intensely personal to me … the best that I can do with it is to turn it into something which is accessible to other people so that they can get a sense of maybe they would want to experience their own bodies in that sort of way. By showing how you can step outside of structured sexual relationships, structured gendered relationships, and actually create a beautiful act and a set of beautiful ideas that go with it.594


594 Ivan, cited in Bobby Harrington and Gala Vanting, Love Hard [video].
**Avid self-transgression**

I have explored the notion that S/M is a sensuous lifeworld building activity, life explored as a work of art and a practice defined subjectively. Part of the attraction of S/M to Foucault was how S/M often occurs in a social context, and thus encourages alterations in one’s relation to one’s self and one’s relation to others. For Foucault, the practices of S/M amount to modes of being and accretions of existence not foreseen at its inception. S/M represents, for Foucault, a subversive intelligibility, and an ethics of the self that is tensile, diaphanous and mobilises self-transformation. Practitioners attest to a capacity where the experience of variegated forms of pleasure and desire are not assimilable to nineteenth century frameworks. The S/M subculture is an example of an individual and collective attitude of self-questioning in order to effect a change on the self and on the social. This is a form dynamic transgression. The questioning of one’s relation to systems of power lead to attempts to alter one’s relation to that system. In the determination to alter one’s relation to technologies of power (sexuality) a consequence is a change in our relationship to ourselves. For example, challenging the differences of the sexes in S/M is a mode of ‘changing the game’ of power relations that construct those normative constitutions. In Foucault’s view, these transgressions are specific, they exist in exigent modes of emancipatory practice and are contingent on specific historical constructions. S/M experience set in specific determinations that are demanding and unique. Encompassing an unbounded spatiality of the body, S/M confronts the prescribed finitude informing normative sexuality and its overarching positionality appropriates the complexity of the past in order to approach the present and the future. The ‘truth’ of our sex, our history – scientific, social and political – may be historical constructions but they have a new future in front of them. We no longer mirror the established patterns of values around sexuality but seek new horizons where divergent lines and de-subjugated intersections can conceivably transform sex beyond identity. The intrinsic difference and alterity of pleasure uncouples the legitimating factors of personal history and ‘nature’: the truth about his or her desire.

Chapter Four

The language of transgression in contemporary cinema

The blending together of theory and practice in the recent trend towards a ‘cinema of evil’ is particularly manifest in French cinema. This chapter will examine the evocation of violence in contemporary film in relation to Bataille’s concept of transgression. Transgression, for Bataille, is the sacred positing of violence. As discussed in Chapter One, while it is a violation, transgression is nevertheless positive because it serves an important social function, to confirm the law. As Bataille writes, ‘transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it’.596 Nevertheless, the (sacred) confirmation of the limit necessitates a practice – the deployment of violence as unproductive expenditure.597 Carnival (festival) has the same function. It suspends the law temporarily in a saturnalia order to affirm it. In Literature and Evil, Bataille sees its literary analogue in works by authors whose violations as expenditure or dépense form the possibility of the sacred.598 As it concerns politics, excluded elements are summoned by Sade, Baudelaire, Genet and Bataille to subvert the established order. The filmmakers and theorists of the early avant-garde approached cinema in comparable ways. The ‘historical’ avant-gardes (1910s–1930s) were fascinated with the ability to express subversion though the image in movement (exemplified by Luis Buñuel’s Un Chien Andalou, 1929). Cinema was experimental in eliciting sensation and affect, in excess of the formal requirements of narrative and character development.599

This chapter argues that it is still possible to make arthouse cinema, films exuding affective potential and exploring violent pleasures without regress into meaningless melodrama. The present chapter examines a selection of filmmakers who, Martine Beugnet argues, offer ‘examples of overlaps and hybridisations between experimental and feature film’.600 For

596 Georges Bataille, Erotism, 63.
597 The reader is reminded that Kristeva makes this statement in Revolution in Poetic Language – indicated in Chapter One of this thesis.
598 Georges Bataille, Literature and Evil, 173.
600 Ibid, 3.
Beugnet, recent art cinema can communicate violence in the Bataillean sense. She grounds this assertion while defending Bataille’s concept of expenditure from accusations of sensationalist violence as it appeared in recent (particularly French) cinema. For Beugnet, what inaugurates and sustains the cinema of evil is ‘the gratuitous or “surplus” nature of the vision, in its beholding of the forces of chaos, and in the way it engages us emotionally as well as aesthetically with the irrational and unacceptable.’ Debates have emerged over whether or not the ‘cinema of transgression’ evokes veritable transgression, or rather the films represent the deployment of violence in absence of ritual prohibition and therefore fall into abjection. Transgressive filmmaking was eventually made international within this ongoing intractable debate and includes directors such as Michael Haneke and Lars von Trier. Scholarship on this dialogue in French and European cinema often engages critically with Bataille’s work, as he remains a key influence on filmmakers including Catherine Breillat, von Trier, Haneke, Gaspar Noé and others. In this important area of inquiry in film scholarship, Beugnet’s work on sensation and transgression proffers insightful illuminations.

Before discussing the cinema of evil, I first examine the discursive setting that underlies and informs representations of sadomasochism in mainstream film and entertainment culture, serving as an important discussion in this context because it foregrounds an analysis of diverse utilisations of transgression. The reading of Shainberg’s film Secretary and E. L. James’ Fifty Shades of Grey (2011) considers the extent to which normative and pathologising discourses permeate representations of sadomasochistic eroticism in Hollywood landscapes of popular culture. Insofar as it functions as a crucial transfer point for the dissemination of ideas, the presence of sexual violence in internet pornography is a corollary and an important consideration that receives attention.

Martine Beugnet, Cinema and Sensation, 40.


Martine Beugnet, Cinema and Sensation.
Abject crime and transgression in the image

Cinema is thought capable of imposing violence, such that the spectator, assaulted by obscenity, gripped by the shock of the unexpected and unimaginable, is moved into the ambivalence generated by abject loathing and pleasure.604 In discussing transgression in film, it is necessary that we consider Kristeva’s theory of abjection, which is related to Bataille’s concept of transgression as it concerns the excluded matter, linked to the sacred. As mentioned in Chapter One, abjection is inextricably linked to the maternal body, as what is expelled by the subject in its formative stage in order to institute itself within the symbolic. According to Kristeva, abjection manifests in the social as that which ‘does not respect borders, positions, rules’, it ‘disturbs identity, system, order’.605 Transgression engages abjection, momentarily, in order to confirm limits, as an apparatus for its containment. A key aspect of abjection resides in the psychoanalytic concept of ambivalence, designating the destabilised border between repulsion and attraction and generated in the subject by taboo matter.606 In this respect, abjection is exemplified by crime insofar as ‘crime puts the subject into question in its symbolic and representational guise’.607

The filmmakers concerned with eliciting sensation and transgression are accused of evoking abjection because they often portray scenes of bloody violence, particularly rape, and sadomasochism (perversion, related to corruption and crime, exemplifies abjection as a subversion of rules, the law).608 It is important to distinguish abjection from other crimes. Crime is not abject per se because its entire context can be heroic, especially when conceived as ‘rebellious, liberating, and suicidal crime’. Abjection necessitates a corrupt element, a manipulation of the law, cunning or hypocrisy. Abjection is the friend who stabs you in the

604 Beugnet makes this contention at specific moments in her book. She argues that in contemporary cinema it is primarily through the experimentation with cinema’s formal properties and affective capabilities, as with the projects of the early avant-garde filmmakers. See ibid, 8.


606 See in particular the chapter ‘From Filth to Defilement’ in Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, 56–89. Sociologically, the abject relates to rituals of exclusion inextricably linked to pre-modern social and cultural forms. Nevertheless, Kristeva postulates that as a psychological force, these sacred exclusions continue to have relevance for secular societies.


back, ‘a hatred that smiles’. As I will show in relation to Haneke’s *La Pianiste* (2001), the austere and respected interpreter of Franz Schubert condemns her student for consuming hardcore pornography, while in secret, she visits viewing booths and sniffs the discarded tissues of previous customers. As film scholar, Barbara Creed illuminates in her book, *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993), abjection arises from the decentralised ocean of the semiotic and threatens the expulsion of the rational subject:

> Abject things are those that highlight the ‘fragility of the law’ and that exist on the other side of the border which separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction … The subject, constructed in/through language, through a desire for meaning, is also spoken by the abject, the place of meaninglessness – thus, the subject is constantly beset by abjection which fascinates desire but which must be repelled for fear of self-annihilation. A crucial point is that abjection is always ambiguous. Like Bataille, Kristeva emphasizes the attraction, as well as the horror, of the undifferentiated.

While Lechte agrees with Creed that abjection can be represented in the image, he raises doubts concerning whether Bataillean transgression is still possible in modern secular societies – and therefore whether true transgression can be evoked in cinema. As mentioned above, these are important concerns because transgression interacts with abjection as an apparatus for its containment. In absence of ritual elements of prohibition, there can be no transgression, only abjection.

The European film directors discussed in this chapter are considered in the context of a narrative of decline, which holds that the halcyon days of the ‘historical’ avant-garde have been succeeded by a series of tragic miscarriages of transgression. The offending group of directors are labelled in a much cited essay, where film critic, James Quandt, calls them ‘New French Extreme’. According to Nikolaj Lübecker, critics of contemporary avant-gardes sought to show that the counter-cultural objectives of the early avant-garde were repeated by

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609 Ibid, 4.
new movements and that these repetitions eventually served to institutionalise the ‘avant-garde as art’, thereby clearing the path for ‘the cooptation of the avant-garde by the culture industry’.612 Echoing these sentiments, Régis Michel introduces Kristeva’s book *The Severed Head*, analysing the challenge for contemporary art in the postmodern production of ‘media rubbish’.613 For Michel, the potential sacred value of contemporary art is diminished and restricted to that of merchandise. The culture industry renders a docile body, ‘entirely subject, in his social behaviour to the same norms as the works, which are abstract norms (canons, models, codes)’.614 In this view, the value of cultural subversions, trivialised by the cooption into the market, would exude a certain symmetry between fetishism of the commodity form and the status quo ante of stereotypes.

In secular societies governed by the calculative reason of the market, Bataille’s theorisation of unproductive expenditure acquires resonance. It is true that Bataille’s death preceded the unbridled consumption of consumer capitalism. He did not witness the transformations in a society beleaguered not so much by production and future oriented thinking, but by instant gratification without concern for the future. Nevertheless, as Lechte notes, Bataille understood that in Western societies ‘the full realization of non-productive expenditure is often veiled behind other kinds of activities’: luxury, war, competitive sports and unproductive sexual practices.615

Could the contemporary ‘cinema of evil’ be considered a veiled expenditure? Are we to consider the films futile pseudo-transgressions? Is Quandt correct in arguing that they represent a recent filmmaking scene of abject and nihilistic productions? The filmmakers of transgressive cinema will be discussed in relation to two defining characteristics: (1) their works are reactions to and provocations against consumer society, and often parody the conventions and traditions of specific mainstream genres; and (2) the directors are concerned with the affective and aesthetic value of shock, of which gratuity is an essential element. While subject matter is a concern, it will be demonstrated that it is primarily through *form*

614 Ibid, xv.
615 John Lechte, *Julia Kristeva*, 73.
that extreme cinema enacts its provocations and, potentially, attains transgression. In other words, our interest resides not purely in what the films present ideographically, but how this spectacle reflects forms of transgression and shapes an interlocking nexus with an interpellation open to innovative and emancipatory alternatives.

**Modernity and its appropriable other**

The ‘cinema of evil’ is opposed, in intention, technique and perspective, to the productions of plot-based commercial cinema.616 Krisjansen’s essay on von Trier’s transgressive cinema clarifies the distinction between these forms, where ‘standard Hollywood realism is rebuked because it is recognised as a kind of synthetic tableaux that conditions our knowledge with predictable and illusory romantic banality’.617 Krisjansen argues that von Trier and other filmmakers reject mainstream feature films as dispositifs of normative standards and conventional modes of perception.618

A brief examination of popular cinematic representations of sexual transgression will provide the basis for an analytical distinction between two different forms of filmmaking. The first is utilitarian, market inspired and entertainment oriented, and the second has gratuity as a main element, which aims to produce discomfort in the spectator often to provoke critical engagement. To the extent that the latter form tends to invoke mainstream pornography as a parodic metonymy for the Western sexual imagination, the pornographic genre is also expounded. A critical examination of the normative discourses that saturate mainstream cinematic representations comprises part of a boarder argument made in this thesis about the contradictory meaning of liberation in consumer culture. It is argued that the reiteration of gratifying and attractive affectations ascribed to sadomasochistic representations in popular culture represent a counter-censorship; making it appear as though possibilities have been unleashed, but which results in a redoubled oppression. This is reminiscent of Foucault’s notion of bio-power, which aims to produce consent through complex and innovative

616 The ‘cinema of evil’ resonates with Bataille’s book *Literature and Evil*.
617 Ivan Krisjansen, ‘Loveless Apathy: Sade’s Erotica and Earodic excess in Lars von Trier’s Film Nymph()maniac 2014 (Directors Cut)’, 3.
618 Ibid.
mechanisms of domination (social, sexual and aesthetic); power ‘incites, it induces, it seduces’.619

The pseudo-transgressions of mainstream cinema are eagerly awaited by the market. The cultural privileging of transgressive sexual practices does not reside outside of the social transformations that underscore its cultural force. The link between ideas about sexual freedom based on a new ethics of the self (specifically in relation to the body) and consumer capitalism needs brief examination. The counter-cultural ambience of the 1960s produced certain strains of ideas, and were influenced in no small part by Herbert Marcuse’s Eros and Civilization (1955), which embraced an idea of Dionysian, ‘transgressive’ sexual expressiveness as a conduit for emancipation from repression and disciplinary control.620 Since the 1960s this deployment of sexuality has increased as its institutional and social field of use has progressed to wider forms of modern individualism and the market economy.

Foucault’s argument, in the first volume of The History of Sexuality, claims that the monumental developments in sexual patterns in the nineteenth century were contemporaneous with the establishment of a new organisation of disciplinary control. The contemporary transformations in the cultural treatment of sex are not coincidental either – but leveraged against market forces. As sociologist Zygmunt Bauman put it, sexual emancipation is not so much a consequence as it is an ‘instrument’ of marketisation.621 Since sex became unfettered from the old ‘deployment’ of sexuality, which harnessed it to purposeful reproduction, its ‘exchange value’ has metamorphosed and multiplied.622 In the context of these social and economic transformations, the identity of the ‘sadomasochist’ has undergone a dramatic representational shift, leading scholars to declare that the new, postmodern face of the S/M subculture has gained significant cultural currency in the twenty-

619 Michel Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, 789.
620 The principal values of the revolution, defended by students and youth, are listed by philosopher Charles Taylor in A Secular Age. Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 502.
622 Elisa Glick sees that the link between consumerism and sexual liberation is encapsulated ‘in a word’ by ‘Playboy’. Glick asserts that, ‘for Playboy founder Hugh Hefner and other proponents of sexual freedom, the ‘liberation’ of sexuality meant that sex was liberated to become ‘a commodity, an ideology, and a form of “leisure”’. Elisa Glick, ‘Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression’, Feminist Review, 64/1 (2000), 26.
first century. What was once endorsed by the sciences and reiterated by the social as the sexual practices of an accursed race: of sexual perverts, social misfits, mentally ill, and the morally depraved, one could argue that sadomasochism is now an au courant lifestyle choice.

Sadomasochism has been thrust into the popular imagination by the *Fifty Shades* (2011, 2012) trilogy. But S/M began to creep out of the realm of the forbidden long before the pseudonymous ‘E. L. James’ made it a domestic fantasy. Sadomasochism began to feed into the cultural production of images in the 1970s, with the eroticisation of fascism in Nazi exploitation (or Nazisploitation) films and low-budget pornography. The feature-length productions of the Nazisploitation genre exploited the representation of Holocaust perpetrators as sadistic and perverse for entertainment and commercial purposes. On the political register, according to Moore, the films are exemplary representations of discourses constructed by the sexual sciences, which hypostasised the purported proximity between interwar fascism and perversion.

One of the most influential films of the genre is Don Edmonds’ 1975 arthouse film, *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS*, which ignited a torrent of filmmakers to produce similar films. Italian filmic representations of eroticised Nazi cruelty fall under the ‘Sadiconazista’ genre; its most well-known titles include Brass’ *Solon Kitty* (1976) and Cesare Canevari’s *La Ultima Orgia de la Gestapo* (‘The Last Orgy of the Third Reich’) (1977). The films often depict sadistic SS

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625 For a more in-depth analysis of this subgenre of pornography, see Alison Moore’s book *Sexual Myths of Modernity*. Moore demonstrates the relation between filmic depictions and broader sociocultural theories that linked Nazism to sadism and perversion. Moore shows that during the interwar period (1919–1939) European citizens were exposed to increased media publicity of violent sexual crimes that augmented public fears concerning the relation between sexual violence and the extreme political climate. Of the surviving discursive constructions is the idea that ‘sadomasochism is a legacy of Nazism’. Alison Moore, *Sexual Myths of Modernity*, 81.

626 Ibid.
officers in possession of an enormous range of torture equipment, set in camps, prisons or Nazi brothels.

During the 1970s sadomasochism and its nuanced affectation had become fashionable; and its elaborate iconography was making its way into Hollywood films and commercials. Fascism, with its dominant manifestation in Nazism, became the ultimate symbol of decadent eroticism. According to Moore, in its depictions of power and powerlessness, total submission and total freedom to dominate, the depoliticised sexualisation of the fascist aesthetic lends form to the erotic attraction of domination and submission and the cultivation of sadomasochistic fantasies.627

Bataille’s essay on the concept of waste in ‘The Psychological Structure of Fascism’, written in 1933, offers insight on the affective appeal of fascism. Not satisfied by Marxist considerations of socioeconomic crisis, of which fascists were the exploiters, Bataille employs a social-psychological approach to thinking about mass submission to the fascist führer, focusing on its affective dimensions. In Bataille’s view, the fascist leader is modern history’s peculiar shape or embodiment of the sovereign ‘other’ who, although made profane by its usefulness in the acquisition power, rises above the detached sobriety of the masses in excess and entrances them. Bataille writes, ‘violence, excess, delirium, madness characterise heterogeneous elements to varying degrees: active, as persons or mobs, they result from breaking the laws of social homogeneity’.628 According to Bataille, the fascist state fuses both homogeneous and heterogeneous elements. The mixing of the realm of order, discipline and performance peculiar to the latter, and the (sacred) squandering of resources and violence of the former, results in a ‘governmentalized sovereignty’.629 For Bataille, the filtering of heterogeneous elements into the homogeneous realm (the social order) evokes feelings of fascination and terror incited by the affective force of ‘attraction and repulsion’.630 In this view, mass self-surrender to the fascist leader is analogous to the rapture of erotic submissiveness – the loss of self in ecstatic states.

627 Ibid, 168.
Bataille perceived the danger of rationality continuing under the cover of true sovereignty in modern societies, where the rational use of material and spiritual commodities did not permit the other type of consumption: wasteful expenditure. In the context of ‘post liberation’ societies wherein the chains of prohibition in the sphere of sexuality are seemingly lifted, the chapter begins its examination through surveying some of the forms of pseudo-transgression in mainstream cinema and pornography. I focus on the popular fascination with sadomasochism, in its exemplifying of transgression as a challenge to norms and rules.

**Sadomasochism as attractive deviance**

The portrayal of S/M lifestyle and existence in mainstream media is limited by conventions predominantly intended for and targeted at specific audiences and which serve consumerist strategies that precede and condition the film. One of the main problems that scholars have identified in relation to these representations is that they invite viewers to understand S/M sexuality within a normalising framework of pathology and conventional social and sexual norms. According to Margot Weiss, ‘these representations offer acceptance via normalization, and understanding via pathologizing’. 631 The film *Secretary* and the book *Fifty Shades of Grey* are exemplary in this respect. The discursive iterations of deviance and pathology that underpin representations of S/M sexuality are not new strategies of heteronormative culture – which routinely confine non-normative sexualities to a positionality designating a ‘marked’ category of people, as opposed to heteronormativity as an ‘unmarked’ and therefore unproblematised category.

Critics supplied glowing reviews of Shainberg’s 2002 film, *Secretary*, using adjectives like ‘tender, sweet … touching, gentle, warm-hearted, and life-affirming’. The film was described as a ‘feel good movie about sadomasochism’ and ‘a *Pretty Woman* for the bondage set’. 632 The film is about a young woman named Lee Holloway who struggles with psychological issues, the nature of which are unknown to the viewer. These hidden issues manifest in gestural outbursts, including compulsive self-harming. The film depicts Lee drawing painful

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632 Ibid, 103–132.
cuts into her skin by using a sewing kit needle and other household instruments. At the beginning of the film it seems that society is not present to Lee. She is detached from her family, companionless and alienated from enjoyment and pleasure. Lee’s self-mutilating behaviour has made her into an outsider; she achieves a peculiar and strange sort of nomadism.

The film begins when Lee is released from a psychiatric institution on the day of her sister’s wedding. Lee stands at a distance from the festivities. The wedding is a symbol of normative happiness and self-fulfilment, something that Lee will apparently never experience. All of this is to suggest that Lee desperately needs help, but neither her mother (who locks away sharp objects in a cabinet) or the doctors at the institution can help improve her miserable circumstances. The film suggests Lee’s destructive self was bred within the context of an oppressive family structure. Lee recognises that she is a symptom of familial oppression and seeks to extricate herself from the humdrum of her mother’s housekeeping and her father’s drunken detachment. She applies for a job as a secretary at a law firm. To the surprise of both herself and her mother Lee is hired by Edward Grey who immediately observes that she hardly possesses the experience necessary for the job. Nevertheless, Edward does not fire her for her incompetence, and soon discovers Lee’s compulsion for self-harming and with apparent clarity questions her motivations:

Edward: “Why do you cut yourself, Lee?”
Lee: “I don’t know.”
Edward: “Is it that sometimes the pain inside has to come to the surface and when you see evidence of the pain inside you are finding now you are really here? Then, when you watch the wound heal, it’s comforting, isn’t it?”
Lee: “That’s a way to put it.”

Edward has his own appetites and the professional relationship soon turns into a dominant/submissive romance. A key scene from the film is a spanking scene, when Edward provokes Lee’s latent, not yet realised sexual masochism. The spanking ends when Lee, in pain, lets out a rapturous exhalation of masochistic pleasure. The release represents a revelation and is the realisation of her inner desire surfacing as a dazzling voice and electrifying corporeal expression; an inner exhilaration that had remained dormant until this
moment. With each strike to Lee’s extended backside, Edward apparently shatters layers of complexes and inhibitions, thereby emancipating her hidden identity. Lee is sexually masochistic – she can now breathe.

The representation of S/M discussed here is exemplary in its portrayal of sadomasochism as a symptom of a deviant type of person who is mentally ill. Edward healed Lee because she was self-harming and that is pathological. The S/M relationship transformed self-harming of masochism into a healthy way for Lee to express her need for pain. As Volker Woltersdorff put it, Edward transformed ‘the tension within her into a dynamic between them’.633 They are joined together by corresponding drives that inflame the senses and by the film’s end Lee is transformed, cured of an obsession for self-mutilation that has caused her to suffer. Lee tells her mother: ‘the lock can come off the cabinet now’. In the next scene, Lee throws her little box of cutting tools into the river. During a crisis near the end of the film Lee seeks out Edward’s sadism instead of retreating to the cutting instruments. The film posits that unfettered sexual freedom is the solution to self-harming behaviour. The final mise-en-scène depicts the enchantment of a radical metamorphosis of personhood: suddenly Lee comes alive.

The film also resembles a Hollywood narrative of female sexual awakening. Lee’s sexual desire resided within her all along. Edward perceived it and all that he needed to do was approve of and consecrate her sexual masochism through an approbation of her freedom to do so. The film endorses the view that sexuality is a kind of mantle that one can put on, which magically provides an exit from psychological pain. Lee is rescued from her self-harming behaviour and can begin to live a normal life in an S/M relationship.

A similar drama unfolds in the book Fifty Shades of Grey by James. The exceptional popularity of the book and the number of media responses and academic commentaries that it continues to inspire make it relevant to the present chapter – which concerns itself with cultural representations of sadomasochism.634 After its release in 2011, it achieved immediate


popular success, topping best-seller lists and selling more than 100 million copies worldwide, bringing S/M sexuality to a far larger audience than any previous media product.635

Much like Shainberg’s film, James stated that the appeal of the novel is that it tells a ‘simple love story’.636 The story conforms to the narrative of the classic romance novel insofar as it follows a traditional trajectory of heterosexual courtship between a sexually naïve, younger female, and a more experienced and older male; ideographically represented in the seduction and modesty found in the novel Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë. In turn, in James’ novel Fifty Shades of Grey, the protagonist, Anastasia Steele, is a virginal college graduate who meets the self-made billionaire, Christian Grey. The sparks of a romantic relationship between the pair begin and then very quickly Anastasia is informed by Christian of his BDSM penchants.

The generic structure of mass-marketed romance fiction (epitomised by the Harlequin novels of the 1970s) characteristically depict a naïve heroine who is submissive and sexually inexperienced.637 Anastasia’s virginity and lack of sexual experience are accentuated at the beginning of the book, as she is an incarnate ideal, something that can be moulded and initiated by Christian. According to Linda Williams, the female heroine displays a faux consciousness about her desires, and the male characteristically resembles a hawk swooping down on the female, subjecting her, feeding her. Williams notes that reader identification with the heroine of romance fiction novels is an important factor to consider; it is recognised, for instance, that if the female protagonist were to actively pursue the wealthy and powerful lover she would probably be perceived as a scheming seductress, a devious femme fatale. The heroine must be portrayed as naïve, misreading her real desires, she must be unassuming.638

638 This literary representation, argues Williams, became a matter of contention for both readers of the novels and feminists, as they began to recognise their politically incorrect implications about the ‘unconscious masochism’ of women which the heroine is thought to represent. In contrast, the new romance novel of the ‘romance revolution’ is a response to reader demand for a more autonomous, sexually active female heroine in contrast to the submissiveness of the female heroine portrayed in the original form of the genre. Ibid, 218.
The expression of S/M as transgressive sex is delivered within ‘a conservative literary generic form’ characteristic of mass-market romance stories, ‘delivering a comfortable and traditional social narrative culminating in marriage and reproduction’. From this perspective one might read Alex Dymock’s attempt to link Bataille’s concept of transgression with *Fifty Shades* and, more broadly, to consider the trilogy within the literary canon of transgressive writing, as fundamentally misguided. Dymock contends that

> What *Fifty Shades* offers the reader, then, is an experience of this ‘immediacy’ that harks back to the vision of transgression found in the work of Bataille. The subject is confronted with the possibility of limitlessness, of passing from a rational ordered realm to an irrational and chaotic one.

The ‘immediacy’ Dymock refers to is the confrontation of the subject with heterogeneous excluded elements. Dymock utilises the ambiguity of Bataille’s concept of the inner experience to argue that the novels’ protagonist Anastasia achieved true freedom through sexual submission. The trilogy, Dymock contends, provides a hopeful evocation of alternative forms of sexual expression, and changing formations of female power and pleasure – suggesting a politically subversive ‘reverse discourse’ of female masochism.

As Lisa Downing has noted, one of the important details in the story, overlooked by Dymock’s analysis, is that James rationalises S/M behaviour by attaching it to a discourse of pathology. Christian’s sadism is explained as a consequence of childhood trauma. As Downing notes, James lends a ‘cod’ psychological model of childhood trauma and reinforces the idea that the person who seeks non-normative sex is invariably a victim who misguidedely seeks therapy through ‘reparative adult acting-out’, and this is another iteration of normative discourse. The mainstream film representations of S/M permit audiences to ‘flirt with danger and excitement, but ultimately reinforce boundaries between privileged normal

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640 Alex Dymock, ‘Flogging Sexual Transgression: Interrogating the Costs of the “Fifty Shades Effect”’, 886.
642 Downing, Lisa, ‘Safewording! Kinkphobia and Gender Normativity in *Fifty Shades of Grey*’, 98.
643 Ibid.
sexuality, and policed and pathological not normal sexuality’.644 In Weiss’ view, S/M practices are still aberrant and pathological in the popular imagination, though rebaptised through romance stories in order to offer consumers ‘a tantalizing glimpse of something other (sexy, exotic, kinky) that is safely viewed and evaluated from a detached, privileged, and normative position’.645

The iterations of sexual pathology and heteronormative privilege that underpin stories like *Fifty Shades* and *Secretary*, which are advertised and sold to viewers as ‘acceptance’, ‘liberation’ and ‘progressive politics’, are insulting to the communities which they depict. The pseudo-scientific knowledge about S/M sexuality, as Foucault has demonstrated, are artificial constructions of ‘experts’ who assumed the authority to speak on behalf of the experiences of so-called perverts. The mainstream acceptance of S/M lifestyles and existence is predicated on safeguarding and reinforcement of heteronormativity and conventional lifestyle. To whatever extent the products are celebrated as a form of cultural warming to queer modalities, above all, they reveal the ingenious workings of capitalism’s cooptation of diversity and otherness. According to Weiss, S/M, rendered acceptable through pathologisation and normalisation, offers the possibility for consumers to encounter otherness and transgression from a position of ‘*distanced consumption*’.646

**Mainstream pornography**

Internet pornography remains a significant genre for the transgressive. Williams includes pornography among other ‘body genres’: films of genres such as horror, melodrama in that the form is designed to provoke an affective response in the bodies of spectators.647 The body genres aim to arouse, to shock, to stimulate the bodies of spectators. Scholars have argued that the pornography industry functions as a crucial transfer point in the dissemination of new forms of pleasure and sexual expression.648 For the most part, this is because of its significant

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645 Ibid, 103.
646 Ibid.
economic power, as an article in The Economist magazine states: ‘the greater part of the sex business’ should be located ‘where it ultimately belongs – as just another branch of the global entertainment industry’. Its significant cultural force in promoting sexual trends makes it relevant to our argument, and is a force that, as we will see, contemporary art cinema responds to. The evolution of communication technologies, deregulation, commercialisation and the emergence of a more diverse sexual culture are some of the key factors which have accelerated the growth of the pornography industry. The mainstream pornography industry is no less culturally significant than other key institutions, like education and television; as Brian McNair, the author of Striptease Culture (2002) writes, pornography is ‘the totem around which contemporary attitudes to trends in sexual culture revolve: an index of sexual democratization to some; to others, a denunciatory label attached to those forms of cultural sexualisation judged undesirable’. The present section is concerned with the prevalence of sexual violence in mainstream pornography, as distinct from the subgenre of S/M pornography; it examines hardcore film which features sexual violence and degradation, an important discussion as pornography remains one of the key explorers and purveyors of sexual transgression.

The period between 1969 and 1984 is referred to as the ‘Golden Age’ of pornography. It was a time when feature-length American pornographic films achieved widespread popular acclaim. Scholars have pointed out that something more drastic and more serious than its effortless availability, the relaxation of laws, or the fashion in pubic hair, has changed in hardcore pornography since this time. According to Williams, one of the primary concerns of scholars in this constantly shifting territory is the prevalence of sexual violence or extremity in mainstream hardcore pornography. In her discussion of pornography, Natalie Purcell summarises these major transformations:

650 Ibid.
651 Brian McNair, Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratisation of Desire, 12.
652 Andy Warhol’s Blue Movie (1969) is a seminal film produced in this period, and Deep Throat (1972).
Continuing a trend apparent in the 1990s, many contemporary pornographers work to generate intensity by amping up overt expressions of hostility, anger, and contempt in their movies. If words like “bitch” and “cunt” were used only in rape scenes during the 1970s, they are more universally deployed in the 2000s. So are physical gestures that traditionally signal hostility, such as wringing women’s necks, holding their heads against the floor, or pushing fists and feet into their mouths.\textsuperscript{654}

Purcell’s study identifies the increasingly sadomasochistic oriented themes of mainstream pornography, suggesting that sexual violence and erotic extremity in pornography are no longer confined to niche genres. According to Williams, consensual S/M pornography involves contractual scenarios in which it is made explicit and obvious that the submissive actor is a self-willed participant.\textsuperscript{655} Williams points out that pain and degradation in S/M pornography are not ends in themselves; but rather, they are a means to other things like staging dramas of suspense, self-abandon and catharsis. The S/M scene is a voluntary exchange of dominance and submission between willing and consenting participants. On this basis, Williams argues that the niche genre of pornography that is devoted to sadomasochism is not so much a cause for concern. Rather, it is hardcore pornography that features sexual violence, degradation, humiliation, dominance and submission that appears unplanned, spontaneous and therefore more authentically brutal, which is problematic.\textsuperscript{656}

Williams is also concerned with the way in which viewer opinion informs representations in pornography itself. Responding to a demand by consumers for reduced narrative, less dialogue and even less depth in characters; and the desire for raw spectacles of intense and explosive action, the industry provides what can be called ‘pure’ pornography, or Gonzo.\textsuperscript{657}

\textsuperscript{654} Natalie Purcell, \textit{Violence and the Pornographic Imaginary: The Politics of Sex, Gender, and Aggression in Hardcore Pornography} (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 118.


\textsuperscript{656} In a study by Ana Bridges, Robert Scharrer et al., the researchers examined violent and degrading content in best-selling pornographic films. They found that in the 304 scenes analysed, more than 88 per cent of material featured physical aggression, and over 48 per cent of scenes featured verbal aggression. It is noteworthy that the researchers included acts of violence and aggression that the performer did not appear to actively try to avoid, which resulted in much higher percentages than other studies, which only record attempts at avoidance from harm. Ana Bridges, Robert Scharrer, et al., ‘Aggression and Sexual Behaviour in Best-Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update’, \textit{Violence Against Women}, 16/10 (2010), 1065–1085.

\textsuperscript{657} Natalie Purcell, \textit{Violence and the Pornographic Imaginary}, 108.
In 1998, the author David Foster Wallace attended the AVN awards night, equivalent to the Oscars ceremony for the American pornography industry. He left the event almost certain that ‘snuff’ film658 was the apogee of pornography. As Williams writes, ‘‘going all the way’ in hard core now encompasses the possibility of the perverse pleasure of witnessing the involuntary spasm of death’.659

Echoing the above sentiments, the journalist Susannah Breslin observed the production of a film by famous porn director Jim Powers in 2009, writing afterwards that ‘The products that Jim produces are videotaped vivisections, studies in which homo sapiens lie upon the operating table, the director is the doctor, the camera is the scalpel, and the only question worth asking is, How far will we go if we are pushed to our limits?’660 Like the horrors of Sadean orgies, the snuff film becomes the logical extension to the aspirations of hardcore pornography – to expose the body’s otherwise imperceptible spasms and fluctuations. The highly contentious and internationally discussed film Snuff (1976) is the ultimate expression of the pornographic limit experience, when the director tears out the organs of his female victim and holds them still throbbing over his head in triumph.661

The principal task for twenty-first century pornographic filmmakers is to keep up with the demand by consumers for more extremity, more violence and more shocking content. To illustrate, here is the description of a film in the popular Gonzo genre:

Angelica and Nicole are the victims of an ANAL AMBUSH by an onslaught of angry hard-ons! Ava, Diamond and Hunter get their pussies SLAMMED, STRETCHED, and JACKHAMMERED into quivering pink pulp, they will need lots of Tongue and Cock therapy to recover. ALL OUT WAR is declared on these torrid little tramps

658 ‘Snuff’ is a genre of film, not regarded as ‘pornography’, in which the female actor in the movie is actually murdered at or after the supposed point of climax.

659 Ibid, 193.

660 Natalie Purcell, Violence and the Pornographic Imaginary, 125.

661 The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), part of the popular ‘slasher’ film genre also replaces sexual pleasure with death and torture.
and they will take no prisoners in this epic tale of ORAL, ANAL and VAGINAL DESTRUCTION!\footnote{Note: the grammatical, punctuation and spelling errors are all from the original, as is the unconventional capitalisation. Nicol Purcell, \textit{Violence and the Pornographic Imaginary}, 117.}

The female performer resembles Sade’s victim – she is a piece of plumbing and a ‘frozen creature’.\footnote{Ivan Krisjansen and Trevor Maddock, ‘Educating Eros: Catherine Breillat’s \textit{Romance} as a Cinematic Solution to Sade’s Metaphysical Problem’, \textit{Studies in French Cinema}, 1/3 (2001), 141–149.} In the case of most heterosexual pornography, the female body is the source of sensorial provocation in viewers – the mixture of sex with taboos such as excretion are a common pornographic tool intended to add piquancy to viewer arousal.\footnote{Steve Jones, ‘Horrorporn/Pornhorror: The Problematic Communities and Contexts of Online Shock Imagery’, in \textit{Porn.Com: Making Sense of Online Pornography}, ed. Fiona Attwood (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 123.} The woman who eats excrement and smiles is abject; Creed argues that the ‘woman-as-victim is represented as an abject thing’.\footnote{Barbara Creed, \textit{The Monstrous-Feminine}, 130.}

The idea of women in a position of sexual submission and coercion is a concern for some feminist critics.\footnote{Although not discussed here, to anti-pornography feminists, violent pornography is exemplary of the sadism of hegemonic patriarchy – men who ‘create concentration camp pornography’. What concerns most feminists is the domination of women proffered as a form of pleasure to both the women depicted and to viewers. See Linda Williams, \textit{Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the ‘Frenzy of the Visible’}.} There are two main concerns in discussions of violent and extreme contents of pornography. Firstly, in its efforts to articulate the specific dangers of pornography, the Meese Commission draws from Andre Brazin’s theory of cinema.\footnote{The Meese Report was the report from an official investigation into pornography ordered by US President Ronald Reagan.} To the commission, the filmic portrayal of sexual violence performed by an ‘actual person’ is the same as if witnessed ‘in the flesh’.\footnote{Linda Williams, ‘Power, Pleasure, and Perversion: Sadomasochistic Film Pornography’, 37.} According to this view, the image is a re-presentation of reality enabling audiences to bear direct witness to the violence enacted in the film.\footnote{Andre Brazin cited in ibid,186.} The second concern is less naïve and focuses on the harm done to the performers themselves. Krauss notes that ‘whether or not the feminine subject is actually at stake in a given work, it is the character of being wounded, victimized, traumatized, marginalized, that is seen as what
is in play within this domain’. Stephen Maddison argues that this is not a reactionary attack against sexual freedoms, but a recognition of a reality that infiltrates the mainstream industry at all levels. Of course, violence against women, humiliation and pain does not comprise the entire sphere of internet pornography. Nevertheless, it is a major consumer good that millions of people use for sexual arousal.

The easily accessible, private and anonymous world of online pornography has led to the far-reaching expansion of its market power. Online pornography is an immense, boundless realm that persistently violates limits: in the world of internet pornography, a general ‘rule’ is that if you have just seen something ‘fucked up’, there will always be something ‘more fucked up than what you just saw’. As discussed in Chapter Two, Sade’s libertines go to extreme lengths to invent new ordeals that perpetually exceed the last and are enraged when they fail. This literary example echoes the evolution of pornography: it is never enough. The fad for sadomasochistic violence says more about modern Western culture than that we are simply more tolerant of non-conventional sexualities.

**The cinema of evil**

With the cinema of evil, we continue the trajectory of sexual extremity in pornography, except that the cinema of evil does not have viewer gratification as an objective. Breillat is a French director whose reputation is portrayed variously as an ‘auteur of porn’, an ‘art-porn provocateur’ and a purveyor of ‘arthouse smut’. Such comments, if they are to be understood correctly, should not be dismissed as isolated polemics directed at a single director. Critics have also indicted Bruno Dumont, Claire Denis, Noé and François Ozon as determined on breaking every rule. Beugnet and Lübecker refer to Quandt’s article, *Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema*, which provoked and extended the

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671 Natalie Purcell, *Violence and the Pornographic Imaginary*, 118.


debate concerning extreme cinema from France to international film directors. Quandt argues that the ‘images and subjects once the provenance of splatter films, exploitation flicks, and porn-gang rapes, bashings and slashings and blindings, hard-ons and vulvas, cannibalism, sadomasochism and incest, fucking and fisting, sluices of cum and gore-proliferate in the high-art environs of a national cinema’. Such is the critical impetus behind the dismissal of these films, in its kinship to the genres of horror and pornography, critics sought to show that the films represent an abject refusal of limits. Moreover, Quandt recognises, rightly, that the cinema of evil is undefinable in terms of genre – a mixture of ‘high’ art and ‘low’ art – including slasher, horror, gore and pornography – characterised by a sensibility for transgression and eliciting sensation.

Indeed, the experimentation with the sensorial dimensions of film motivates some directors of art cinema to borrow from and subvert aspects of body genres that rely on sensory shock (pornography, melodrama and horror). To this extent, the films are accused, understandably, of bordering too close to the pornographic. I will show that the constellation of films associated with the cinema of transgression are about pornography. In a sense, pornography is the element that binds the films together.

When analysing transgression and cinema in terms of ‘evil’, Kristeva provides a conceptual model where the image can be thought capable of re-presenting the semiotic. ‘The cinema will not be outdone’. She writes, ‘It will take over for the history of painting and thus, inevitably, of decapitation’. As a pre-Oedipal motility of articulations of drives and affects, the semiotic has no object. For Kristeva, the condition of its re-presentability is its interaction with the symbolic. As indicated in Chapter One, the semiotic remains theoretical speculation until its rupture into the symbolic as a form of transgression. Still, (re)presentations of the semiotic are always approximate articulations. The semiotic appears indirectly, as suggestion. As noted, Lechte raises important questions concerning abject violence in contemporary cinema; he discusses whether recent film is capable of communicating semiotic violence as transgression that, he claims, ‘provides a way of dealing with violence


676 Julia Kristeva, The Severed Head, 117.
and trauma that has hitherto been subject to taboo and thus repressed’. Lechte concludes that if contemporary cinema is to be thought capable of transgression and not mere abject refusals of limits, the filmmaker, as artist, must preserve a quasi-sacred dimension:

Only in quasi-sacred contexts – of which art in general is a part – can transgression in Bataille’s sense be realized. As a carnivalesque phenomenon, art may well confirm the rule, the taboo, the prohibition; but it can also reveal and contain the violence and potential conflict integral to every social fabric. Cinema should thus be understood in this sense.

Lechte ends the sentence with a caveat. Without the sacred context, the evocation of violence would approximate just another profane manifestation of abjection, rather than facilitating its containment. Crucial to understanding Bataille’s theory of transgression is the violence to which it addresses itself. Psychoanalytically, we understand that violence rests at the foundation of the law. Or at least, as Lechte points out, the law cannot be separated from violence. Transgression as sacrifice renders visible the law’s origin and designates its social significance as the basis of the social code.

If the unified subject and the social order are constituted by the exclusion of sacred elements – filth, waste, excrement – if the other of reason is more than just its antithesis in the irrational – namely, the incorporable abject (that which ignores borders) which cannot be touched by reason, except at the cost of the dissolution of the rational subject – then the eruption of the semiotic into the symbolic entails a decentring of the borders of regulated identity. By the same token, the dominance of the symbolic over the semiotic is weakened. As Beugnet proposes ‘what is at stake’ in recent art cinema ‘is the evocation, irretrievably enmeshed in the very texture of the images and sound, of those borderline states that reveal the inherent vulnerability of the self’. If cinema is capable of communicating true transgression, then ‘I’ as a spectator am necessarily involved in the practice. If cinema can bring the ‘I’ into

678 Ibid, 57.
679 Ibid, 58.
680 Ibid.
681 Martine Beugnet, Cinema and Sensation, 7.
question it is because it also encompasses the symbolic father from whom identity and order are derived.

This film form demands a different approach to viewing in comparison to the way we usually approach cinema. The kind of filmmaking and film viewing that this implies is, in fundamental ways, distinct from the plot and character centred films of mainstream cinema. In contrast to the conventional feature films which we are accustomed to, this cinematic form negates the ‘realism’ of popular fiction, preferring instead to deliver spectacles. The spectator is ritually denied gratification as the films ‘disarm’ and repel ‘those audiences habitually expecting the fleshed-out characters of interestingly complex individuals’. The cinema of evil does not mediate images of violence and sexuality with narrative and sympathetic characters. This is because, above all else, the filmmakers want to elicit affective responses. The objective of the films is to disorientate and disturb spectators. Krisjansen and Trevor Maddock argue that the films are beyond appraisals of ‘pleasantness and unpleasantness’ and require a different set of critical standards because they invert the guidelines of realism.

In these works, the presence of human figures does not necessarily mean that the artist will deliver a story with psychologically complex characters that viewers will find morally wholesome and uplifting. The film form, pointedly formulated, imposes abrupt breaks in the diegetic narrative – experiments in form and composition with extreme close-ups, visual disorientation and sounds that disorient the spectator. Changing the way we see film – from viewer with expectations, who watches already knowing – to a cinema that proffers the experience of seeing for the first time, the work is disorienting and causes the viewer to change habitual perceptions. Beugnet ascribes to this filmmaking practice an intrinsic transgressive element, wherein ‘to open oneself to sensory awareness and let oneself be physically affected by an artwork or a spectacle is to relinquish the will to gain full mastery

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682 Ibid, 23.
683 Ivan Krisjansen and Trevor Maddock, ‘Educating Eros: Catherine Breillat’s Romance as a Cinematic Solution to Sade’s Metaphysical Problem’, 141.
684 Martine Beugnet, Cinema and Sensation, 23.
685 Ibid.
over it, choosing intensity and chaos over rational detachment’. The affects and emotions provoked by these films can differ between abjection, disgust, arousal and laughter.

Quandt contrasts recent trends in European cinema with films by directors like Henri-Georges Clouzot, Pasolini and Jean-Luc Godard. According to Quandt, the subversive practices of European art cinema of the 1950s and 1960s contributed to a long history of French counter-cultural movements and literary subversions. An excellent example is Pasolini’s film, *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom* (1975), an adaptation of Sade’s novel from 1785. Gary Indiana notes that Pasolini attempts to transpose some of Sade’s ideas into a meditation on consumer society. As discussed in Chapter Two, Sade straddled the earlier institution of religion and the emergence of the bourgeois State; parallel in some important respects is Pasolini’s *Salò*, simultaneously a reflection on the fall of Fascist Italy, the failure of the events of 1968 and the consumer society of 1975 – the year in which the film was produced. The creative subversion of *Salò* is to transpose and recast the Sadean narrative into a critique of our own ‘epoch’; the reign of capitalism serves to reproduce earlier forms of subjection, but in the guise of the spirit of freedom.

In its portrayal of a list of ‘perversions’ Pasolini’s *Salò* may also be discussed as a commentary on the commodified sexual culture of the 1970s. During this period changing sexual trends reflected by the ‘public visibility of “extreme sexuality” was an aspect of the emphasis on “lifestyle” as a fashion choice’. In relation to Sade, *Salò* is metonymic as a presentation of ‘the very model of life as most human beings have known it in the 20th century, a metaphor of feudalism as reinvented by the multinational corporation, the military coup d’état and the mediation of all reality via the symbolic’. In this totalitarian aesthetic, Pasolini sought to show that the modern subject, in its behaviour, is entirely subject to the symbolic code of norms distributed through market-oriented cultural products. Pasolini attacked the abstract standards of taste and perception reified by commercial works, such as the ones examined earlier in relation to depictions of S/M in popular cinema. The ‘body

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686 Ibid, 3.
687 Gary Indiana, *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom* (London: British Film Institute, 2000).
688 Ibid, 47.
689 Ibid, 46.
genres’ of pornography, horror and melodrama raise the affective viewing experience to pre-eminence in order to offer more violence and more sexually explicit images. Yet, the cinema of Pasolini remains proscribed and unacceptable.

Quandt argues that in contrast to the work of Pasolini and Godard contemporary filmmakers of subversive cinema represent little more than empty posturing. While Quandt recognises that strong aesthetic vision and the mixing of genres by some European films might be artistically fruitful, he believes this is only intended to conceal their inability to engender a meaningful critique about the social world. The films of the ‘New French Extreme’, to Quandt’s way of thinking, represent a travesty of the radicality peculiar to the twentieth century avant-gardes. In the absence of political thought on social issues the films are redolent of a modern crisis of values. Here, we must also question whether there is more to these filmic depictions of sexual extremity than, using Francis Bacon’s words, mere ‘blood splattered against a wall’. I have selected for further analysis the films of Breillat and Haneke. Throughout their works, from the 1990’s onwards, Breillat and Haneke remain dedicated to engaging critically with their audiences and to problematising the structures that form the background of everyday modern life. Similarities and affinities in method and outlook are clear. Filmic representations in terms of practice and consciousness raising, deconstructing social and sexual trends, problematising the modern ethical crisis and attempting to critically reflect and posit an alternative vision, remains a joint aspiration in the works of these auteurs. The films chosen for the last part of the chapter inform an analysis of the status of transgression in contemporary art film.

Breillat: dark fecundity and female sexuality

Sex is a doorway to the transcendental, and that’s why it’s taboo.

– Breillat

The films of French filmmaker Breillat (1948–) are famous for their graphic portrayals of sex and depictions of the female body. Of all the films in Breillat’s oeuvre, À ma Soeur! (Fat Girl in English, 2001) is notorious for its inscrutability and for the explicitness with which she treats her subject. Breillat elicits those elements that appeal to audiences on a visceral level: ‘horror, porn and melodrama’, but insists that the viewer must be responsible for what they are asking for. A film that denies the spectator an escape aptly begins with a miserable summer vacation in Italy. The film’s protagonist, Anaïs, is thirteen, overweight and significantly less beautiful compared to her older sister, Elena, who is fifteen. Elena dreams of conventional romance, to marry her one and only and to live a bourgeois existence. Anaïs, by contrast, is disillusioned. She wants to lose her virginity to ‘une personne’, a nobody, someone that she does not love.

Two much debated rape scenes of the film provide material for this analysis. In a manner that is characteristic of her genre-breaking approach, Breillat’s film shifts from coming of age to slasher. While they sleep vulnerably in the car, a madman wielding an axe smashes through the windscreen, brutally murders Anaïs’ mother and sister in front of her, and then rapes the thirteen-year-old on a bed of mud and leaves in the forest.

The point at which most filmgoers probably begin to wonder about the intentions of the film is when Anaïs wraps her arms around the rapists’ neck. In this scene, there is a moment where both victim and executioner look into each other’s eyes – a second of transfixed recognition. Anaïs and the rapist share a common identity as undesirables. Both are stuck in a type of ‘nature’. Anaïs is female – she is abject by nature. She knows her destiny – she will be an object to others and to herself before becoming a subject. Her older sister has shown her the future – female identity is marked by subjugation. The rapist is also abject: he is an evil


693 Nikolaj Lübecker, The Feel Bad Film, 3.
‘nature’. Stuck in an identity marked by suffering, victim and perpetrator are claustrophobic and frustrated, both hate the world.

The second scene happens earlier in the film. In what some scholars have called a rape, Anaïs watches Elena get sodomised by her boyfriend who convinced her that anal intercourse does not count as losing one’s virginity. For the duration of the twenty-minute scene, the spectator is forced into the room shared by the sisters to witness the event. The room is dark. The walls are a pasty green. Breillat abandons contrast lighting to depict both rape scenes in virtually pitch-black night shots. The scenes, shot in near complete darkness, do not possess the impressive aesthetic quality of commercial cinema. Night prefigures eroticism’s essential link to violence, as Lechte writes:

Violence always occurs at night, if not literally in the dark, then in a context evocative of evil as a dark force (its metaphysical side), engendering the general promiscuousness, eroticism and disorder of night life. More generally, darkness heightens ambiguity and the fluidity of borders. In this sense, darkness functions as a further evocation of the abject.

Breillat destabilises the ‘spectatorial contract’ and turns the Baudelairian mirror (‘hypocrite spectator – my double’) toward the viewer, who is manipulated into identifying with Anaïs. Anaïs covers her face with her hand, but furtively looks through the cracks between her fingers. ‘It is too violent, too sexual, too debauched … but I cannot help myself, I want to see.’ In an interview Breillat explains that Anaïs is ‘both shocked and disgusted … yet at the same time she wants to watch’. As Maddock and Krisjansen have argued, Breillat’s provocation is to represent a Bataillean experience of sovereignty. Breillat’s film suggests that the ‘real’ rape is the one with Elena and, while she does not condone rape,

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696 Nikolaj Lübecker, *The Feel Bad Film*, 3.

697 Ibid, 11.

Anaïs’ experience is intrinsically connected to a sovereign avowal of non-identity. I am not woman, I am other, I am becoming, without being. In the final freeze-frame, when Anaïs looks directly into the camera, she is vacant. The film testifies to a continued belief in the connection between transgression and the sacred.

The presentation of sadomasochism in Breillat’s films is intimately connected to at times the search for, and at other times the destruction, of identity. Her cinematic approach evokes materiality and reality in concerns with the rhythm of bodies, tonalities of colour and sound. The use of extreme close ups, characteristic of pornography, studies bodies languid in passion and bodies mutilated by hatred. In Breillat’s cinema, the woman’s body is soiled, debased, subjugated and annexed by discourses of ‘sex’. In contrast to mainstream variants of the genre, in which audiences are charmed and titillated, the meeting between a dominating male and a submissive female in Breillat’s film has implications which extend far beyond sexual awakening. As Maddock and Krisjansen argue:

Awakening has always been a controversial theme but never more so than in Breillat’s hands. For her, sexual awakening is awakening into the fierce order of the wild, an unsettling image that draws attention to the violence at the edges of all our lives. No trivial violence this, it threatens the very existence of society. Thus the image of awakening in A ma Soeur is a vision of evil, and Breillat’s cinema is a cinema of evil.699

Breillat transposes the standard coming of age film – a teenage girl losing her virginity to a summer love – into an event that provokes revulsion and frustration. Moreover, the ambiguity of the rape scenes, particularly because such provocative mise-en-scènes would not normally be depicted this way, subverts clarity and engenders uncertainty as the spectator struggles to make sense of how the rape should be interpreted. The spectator attempts to make sense of the loss of self; visions of ecstasy as the self is being obliterated by the ‘other’ on the screen. Breillat’s film, as Tanya Horeck writes, challenges ‘dominant representational paradigms of

rape and victimhood’. It is the destabilisation of borders and boundaries, as well as the collapsing of representational categories, codes and rules, that makes Breillat’s film an obscenity. As with Sade’s fiction, we are not supposed to like the films – they do not invite audiences to imagine themselves within a reality in which they wish they could live and participate.

**Haneke: the director as manipulator**

... guiltless complicity is also that to which violence in film owes its all-overpowering presence. The surrogate action banishes the terror of reality; a mythical narrative mode and an aestheticizing mode of representation allow a safe release of our own fears and desires ... The salesman who defines and produces film as a commodity knows that violence is only – and particularly so – a good sell when it is deprived of that which is the true measure of its existence in reality: deeply disconcerting fears of pain and suffering. Except for the individual case of the pathologically sadistic voyeur, those fears remain non-consumable and are bad for business.

Austrian director Haneke (1942–) wants to remind, rather than to distract, spectators of our ambivalent condition as moderns. Thematically, Haneke’s films are about the complicated problematics of the Western predicament: alienation, nihilism and repression in middle-class bourgeois European existence. These issues are most often explored within the family microcosm, which becomes, in Haneke’s films, the locus of the breakdown of the carefully structured order of bourgeois life. The ethical dilemmas raised by Haneke’s films are evocative of a modern mode of nihilism, a form of conduct marked by indecision, writes Lechte, ‘to the point of indifference’, acting without resolve or conviction, this form of nihilism is ‘more in accord with the popular imagination’ and ‘enables abjection to flourish’. The violent disruptions that are characteristic of Haneke’s films can be described as the opening of a fissure beneath the carefully placed bourgeois carpet – exposing the

violence and disorder that underpins everyday life. With each feature – *The Seventh Continent* (1989), *Benny’s Video* (1992) and *Funny Games* (1997) – Haneke has affirmed his presence as one of cinema’s most important provocateurs.

The recurring presence of television in Haneke’s films can be described as one long meditation on the media and its relationship to violence, alienation and social catastrophe. Television, Haneke states in an interview, is symptomatic of and connected to an even greater modern crisis: collective alienation and social disorientation. The true character of mass culture, as Haneke sees it, is the pathological rationalisation of violence as entertainment. This pertinent remark that Haneke makes about mass culture is reminiscent of Adorno and Horkheimer’s deconstruction of the culture industry: ‘The absolute equivalency of all the contents stripped of their reality ensures the universal fictionality of anything shown and, with it, the coveted feeling of security of the consumer.’

This is the precondition of its acquiescence. The consumer perceives mediations of the world through the verisimilitude of the image. Haneke’s feature films, as Kristeva would interpret them, confront the evacuation of affect from the image and the general deterioration of symbolic and imaginary capacities.

Haneke’s most internationally successful film, *La Pianiste* (translated into English as *The Piano Teacher*, 2002), is adapted from the semi-autobiographical book published in 1988, by Elfriede Jelinek. The film portrays a love affair between piano teacher Erika Kohut and her student, Walter Klemmer. The spectre of a love relationship is complicated by Erika’s attempt to develop a sadomasochistic relationship with Walter. In contrast to the novel, Haneke’s rendition omits any reference to Erika’s memories of her father and her childhood, which might permit us to account for her unusual sexual choices. Without the provision of psychological explanations, Erika’s actions remain ambiguous and enigmatic. Haneke’s secretive treatment of the sources of Erika’s complex sexual behaviour suggests that a representation of masochism does not profit from a study of stereotypes. At issue are, rather, the at-once desired and threatening consequences of sadomasochistic pleasures, deployed by Erika’s ‘accursed race’.

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703 Michael Haneke and Christopher Sharrett, ‘The World that is Known: An Interview with Michael Haneke’, in *ibid.*, 585.

704 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

La Pianiste is a film about suffering and violence. The film is a pastiche of melodramas, a parody of the genre that exploits the love romance in order to introduce an unexpected turn of events – an anti-romance. In seeking to re-expropriate violence from the territory of mass culture, as mediated iterations of stereotypes, Haneke refuses to permit the spectator detachment from the image. The means through which he achieves this are complex and multifarious, though we can identify one central constituent of Haneke’s films. In contrast to genres of horror and action, which displace violence in phantasmagoria, Haneke represents violence within an ontological context recognised by spectators as close to their own immediate life reality. In placing violence within the domain of the family, Haneke encourages identification and thereby closes the distance between image and the spectator’s reality.

The spectator enters a strange contractual relation with the director and is denied the privilege of distanced voyeur that permits the viewer to consume sexuality and violence from a safe distance. The result is a congested intimacy, an effect enhanced using close-ups and long takes, as is also characteristic of Breillat’s filmmaking. Haneke’s is a reflexive cinema, in the visceral sense, and imbues his films with questions that demand certain responses from the spectator. As Haneke’s cinema pertains to violence, ‘The question is not: “What am I allowed to show?” but rather: “What chance do I give the viewer to recognize what it is I am showing?” The question – limited to the topic of violence – is not: “How do I show violence?” but rather: “How do I show the viewer his own position vis-à-vis violence and its portrayal?”'

For Haneke, the agenda of most commercial products is to make the ‘obscene’ a commodity. According to Lübecker, Haneke’s representation of violence in the film is premised on ‘assuming that we want violence and pleasure in combination, and then tells us that we should not want it’. Similarly, Kevin Stoehr argues that Haneke ‘is a critic of the superficiality


707 Ibid, 579.

708 Ibid.
and complacency bred by a materialistic consumer culture. And he is not afraid to reveal the dangers involved in such an existence’.709 The shocking visceral effect of these sequences borders closely with the excesses of the horror film rather than the art film, and in this regard Haneke’s work participates in kinship with the transgressive films by contemporaries such as von Trier and Breillat. Characteristically, Haneke offers no reassurance to the spectator.

The characters in Haneke’s films are bound to the broader historical context of contemporary European society. The film is set in Vienna, the universal centre of classical music and symbolic capital of high culture. As Jean Wyatt notes, ‘Vienna is also heir to the Romantic idealization of music as the highest spiritual expression of humankind. According to the German/Austrian idealist aesthetic, music lifts the spirit above the petty concerns of the ego and puts it in touch with universal truths.’710 The protagonist Erika frequently discharges herself from the austere and respectable position at the conservatory to engage in her evenings of perverse practices. The film creates disharmonious scenes by juxtaposing Schubert’s music with scenes that show Erika in porn booths sniffing the discarded sperm stained tissues of previous customers. She is wearing gloves, restricted; seated upright, she is stiff, contained. Freud posited the cultural and historical contingency of perversion,711 which figures in Haneke’s depiction of Erika, who represents the contemporary subject, in a configuration of normality.

Barthes writes in A Lovers Discourse that a love letter is typically an offering, a proclamation given to the amorous subject. In anxiety, the lover wonders: what will the other do with my desire?712 Erika writes a letter to Walter and anxiously waits for his response. When Walter reads the letter, the audience already knows that Erika will completely sabotage the fantasy that he had begun to construct between them. We have already watched Erika’s clandestine movements – her double life – which include drawing cuts into her genitals with a razor. In other words, Erika and Walter are not interested in the same thing. All the elements of the

710 Jean Wyatt, ‘Jouissance and Desire in Michael Haneke’s The Piano Teacher’, American Imago, 64/4 (2005), 453–482.
romantic love fantasy are there. However, the fantasy will disintegrate to the misfortune of both subjects. In her letter to Walter, Erika reveals, to Walter’s bewilderment, the coordinates of her fantasy. She asks that he sit on her face and punch her in the stomach, that he let her penetrate his anus with her tongue, and that he binds her hands and feet, lock her up in her room and leave her for several hours. It is a long instruction manual, but also a set of demands – an assertion of mastery, of power.

Reading the letter, Walter becomes infuriated. He cannot give her what she wants. These are monstrous demands, not the love fantasy that he assumed he was entering into. His expectations were innocent enough. He wanted to fall in love, quite conventionally. He was unwittingly courting what he would later call a ‘parasite’. He asks, ‘Is this supposed to be serious? … You’re making fun of me, aren’t you?’ Walter would never have suspected the cultivated music teacher to be a ‘pervert’ with violent fantasies. She is the embodiment of the ‘invisible deviant’ – Erika is a ‘respectable, educated, middle-class’ woman who lives a double life.\textsuperscript{713} Erika remains silent. She looks at him vacantly, but also apparently confused by the strangeness of his words. He presses her again: ‘Maybe you’d care to open your cultured mouth and explain this shit!?’. The mute woman reaches under the divan and removes a pile of \textit{Vogue} magazines. The magazines conceal a box which contains the paraphernalia it seems Erika has been waiting for years to present to the right candidate. She tells Walter that she has had the desire to be beaten for several years. ‘I waited for you, you know?’

In her bedroom with Walter, with the door locked, she begins emptying the box packed with various instruments: rope for Walter to bind her hands and feet with, a black latex mask, and stockings for Walter to shove deep into her mouth. It is not that Walter is caught up in the platitude of the social world – that he simply cannot understand a different economy of desire. The problem is that Walter is a part of another structure, which implies that he lives in accordance with the social norms of that milieu. Erika is alone. She is not a part of a milieu, and the norms set by society are of no concern to her. She carefully lays the objects in front of him. This scene is an ominous premonitory instance for the future catastrophe: the

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{713} Alison Moore, \textit{Sexual Myths of Modernity}, 83.
disturbance of one system by another. In the novel, Jelinek makes this quite clear: ‘Things can only go awry if Klemmer reads the letter and disapproves.’ 714

Erika remains trapped in her identity as a parasitic creature, an outsider, an untouchable – she is abject. Walter does not want to touch her, he says ‘I don’t want to dirty my hands. No one would touch your sort, even with gloves on.’ She cannot be touched without soiling the other’s hands. Erika wanders, and cannot penetrate the world inhabited by others, nor can others penetrate her world. She remains outside. In the film, Erika is an allegory for Schubert’s wanderer from Winterreise. The seventeenth song, according to Haneke holds a central place in the film, and could be viewed as the motto of Erika and the film itself. The whole cycle establishes the idea of following a path not taken by others, which gives an ironic effect to the film, I think … of course there is a great sense of mourning in Schubert that is very much part of the milieu of the film … Die Winterreise transcends misery even in the detailed description of misery. All important artworks, especially those concerned with the darker side of experience, despite whatever despair conveyed, transcend the discomfort of the content in the realization of their form. 715

In terms of understanding modernity Haneke’s vision resembles a Baudelairean lineage, in which the privileged experience of the artist is to transfigure reality in the realisation of aesthetic form. Erika evokes the innocence of humanity’s childhood; the perverse vagabond’s isolation reflects the fate of the Baudelairean modern hero and the dark underside of transgressive pleasure.

Erika vomits after performing fellatio on Walter. Erika’s expulsion of abject matter: vomit, blood, urine – can be interpreted as an attempt to expel her mother. According to Walter, Erika’s vomit means that she is composed of filth. She says after vomiting: ‘I am clean … I am all clean. Like a baby. Inside as well as outside.’ Can she excoriate the maternal noose

715 Michael Haneke and Christopher Sharrett, ‘The World that is Known: An Interview with Michael Haneke’, 584.
and recompose herself in the symbolic order? So long as she remains abject, how could he or anybody love her? In the climactic scene the failure of the fantasy manifests itself.

To the same extent that Walter is disgusted by her, he is also fascinated by her. In the middle of the night he pounds against her door, screaming for her to let him in. He has been standing outside her apartment masturbating – he reacts as if perversion is contagious, like a virus without an antidote. The abject leaves Walter convulsing with fear. She lets him inside and, as if to punish her for polluting his world, he literally enacts Erika’s fantasy. He first locks her mother away and then beats Erika, and then rapes her. It is the actual enactment of Erika’s sadomasochistic fantasy.

The horror of the scene is not merely in its violence, but in how useless the powers of reason are in explaining it. Haneke denies the spectator the possibility to interpret the violence through narrative or sociological causality. In its gratuitous destabilising of the law, codes and rules, Haneke’s film evokes the obscenity of a transgression that is an end in itself. In one interview he stated:

I would like to be recognized for making in La Pianiste an obscenity, but not a pornographic film … Insofar as truth is always obscene, I hope that all of my films have at least an element of obscenity.716

Elsewhere, it has been argued that Walter punishes Erika for attempting to master him.717 In a similar way to Anaïs’ character from A ma Soeur! Erika wants to determine her form of submission herself. However, as if Walter perceives her concealed attempt instinctually, he must rape and beat her in order to reassert himself as active subject and not passive object. In the novel, Erika is described as using ‘her love to make this boy her master’. However, ‘The more power he attains over her, the more he will become Erika’s pliant creature. Klemmer will be her slave completely … Yet Klemmer will think of himself as Erika’s master. That is the goal of Erika’s love … He has to be convinced: This woman has put

716 Ibid, 588.
herself entirely into my hands. And yet he will become Erika’s property.’ Walter reacts with animalistic violence – as a person whose parameters have been threatened and weakened. Erika stops resisting the actual enactment of her fantasy – the inhibitions that have allowed her to function unravel, and she is lost forever.

Throughout the film Haneke introduces the possibility of erotic fulfilment but repeatedly denies it. Haneke denies satisfaction because this is Erika’s world – not Walters. A last-minute happy ending would betray the type of reality that this film wants to convey. Erika is either during the day, within the Vienna conservatory, or by night, in pornographic stores, or other sordid environments. Erika has vertigo – a dizzying mixture of two incompatible worlds. In the final scene, Erika exiting the Vienna conservatory dazed, slipping away from herself, she stabs herself in the chest with a knife. Haneke’s portrait of a modern woman, Erika, conveys the obsessive relation that our ‘epoch’ entertains with death, a kind of finitude where ennui, the death drive overwhelsms us. Like Erika, we are all fascinated and repelled by the void – the abyss, as Bataille shows, is the precipice that evokes dread but remains an image and a yearning that engenders an ambiguous sense of obscene eroticism: a life affirming intensity enthralled by death. Inside the armature of our modern limits exists a paradoxical calling, answering this call is at the cost of self-dissolution.

Contemporary cinema, in its own specific way, makes itself the explorer of transgressive experiences, for better or for worse. Are there limits that should not be crossed? Haneke’s cinema contributes to the already long history of that complex question. Since, like the act of writing, cinema is an exploration of limits and transgressions, the cinema of Haneke and Breillat can be considered ‘evil’.

Conclusion

The ambitions of these loosely connected directors are varying, though the premise of Breillat’s and, even more so Haneke’s, cinema is to reclaim obscenity, violence and extremity from the forces of consumerism. The cinema of evil is necessarily brutal, an experience that

718 Elfriede Jelinek, The Piano Teacher, 207.
is suffered. The spectator, content to witness the transgression of social norms and rules, is much less accustomed to having their own limits violated. The medium of representation – the image – demonstrates similarities to the literary transgressions discussed earlier in the thesis. As we saw in the discussion of transgression and abjection, specific artistic practices need to be considered in terms of veritable transgression, and more than a temporary skirting of prohibitions or barriers. In turn, art needs to be a designated sphere of transgressive practices akin to subversive literature. As discussed in Chapter One, Kristeva shows that art expands symbolic capacities, thereby making the self a ‘work in progress’. The standard of Hollywood realism is to insulate its audience from such semiotic violations. Indeed, this is a part of its appeal. The spectator is fascinated but not moved. The image is not capable of encouraging a libidinal connection. The realism of the image conveys the absence of affect from the image – it appears fascinating, spellbinding, pacifying. It does not arouse libidinal reaction to the image – an emotional connection – but rather, a distancing effect. The image drained of affect is the sign without the semiotic ‘beyond’ that is the human being’s capacity to symbolise through separation from the mother’s world. If the image is all there is, representation has no real affective dimension.

In a society where violence and entertainment blend into a continual process of alienation – of the spectator, consumer – from extant experience, the directors of the cinema of evil have an important task. As Bataille has made clear, to be considered true transgressions, the work must be able to posit violence as a mechanism facilitating its containment. What is significant is ‘communication’ in Bataille’s sense of the word, the lifting of limitations of unified identity and unified social order to encounter the intolerable otherness through sacred transgression. But the practice must maintain transgression – that is, its sacred heritage – for, when transgression dissolves into abjection, it becomes another secular practice partaking in violence – and thereby exacerbating it. The cinema of evil can present this to spectators, who are invited to engage in ritual contract with the director. The films do not portray anything morally or psychologically significant in the characters’ actions but a set of concrete gestures – attempts to retrieve via ritual that which may be lost. We anticipate the

violence, in a sense we look forward to it, as to the satisfactory completion of a sacrificial transgression.
Conclusion

The subject on ‘trial’ reflects a deliberate attitude of questioning one’s self and one’s own being, which also designates, to Foucault, our modern ‘ethos’. This thesis has shown that there emerged in France intellectuals who remained committed to the problem of recasting transgression in secular modernity, with its values of science and reason. Sade’s texts became a principal harbinger of the modern crisis of values. Juliette is the acme of atheism; Sade had shown that God cannot be eliminated so readily, and were He to be, humanity would also be a casualty, with rationalised nihilism taking up the slack. As Nietzsche reiterated in his text The Gay Science, the collapse of moral truths and the ensuing consequences ‘are the opposite of what one might expect – not at all sad and gloomy, but much more like a new and barely describable light, happiness, relief, amusement, encouragement, dawn’. Nietzsche articulates this new demand in terms of a critique of moral values – ‘the value of these values themselves must first be brought into question’. The diverse works of Kristeva, Foucault and Bataille speak to these exigent questions. The key works examined attempted to transform contemplative theoretical appraisals of our limitations into a necessarily ‘active’ critique that takes the form of a transgression. The idea of a deliberate and stubborn attitude that questions the limitations of knowledge, identity and being is made essential to the subject. This attitude of permanent re-evaluation is not a nihilism – we can have values, but we cannot claim that there are any universal or necessarily objective values (eternal truths).

Bataille inherited the Nietzschean lineage and made eroticism the avowed principle of the transgression of values. His poetic writings evoked affect at the level of language and signifying practice as a means of introducing discontinuity and disequilibrium into consciousness. The inner experience – as Foucault, Blanchot, Barthes and Kristeva each recognised – sheds light on the limitations of unified being. Eroticism can erase the boundaries separating the rational subject from the world of objectivity. Bataille’s thought on eroticism-obscenity was a formative influence in restoring the destabilised subject that

722 Ibid.
was intolerable to humanism, offering some intellectuals, dissatisfied with either Marxism or phenomenology, with serious new possibilities for theorising the human subject. In the thought of Kristeva and Foucault, there is no recourse to rational Enlightenment ideals or humanist philosophy – the human subject of unity, stability and coherence is ‘put on trial’, and its language, its discourses, its limits and its resistances – are problematised. Both methods of inquiry assume an ‘archaeology’ of the foundations of the modern subject. The historical orientation of the former and the psychoanalytic orientation of the latter offered this thesis a fruitful dynamic upon which it is possible to explore and examine several fields of transgression. The preceding chapters provided a series of vignettes into these complex intellectual trajectories, and together evoked a sense of passage from one form of transgression into another.

As Chapter One outlined, Kristeva’s psychoanalytic interpretation shows that a coherent and unified subject and a stable social order is predicated on the exclusion and separation of instinctual semiotic drives. For Kristeva, in modern secularised society we place attention on symbolic structures – minimising the interior experience of the psychic space. The realm of the symbolic – image, representation, language and sociability exists as a consequence of the separation from the semiotic realm of affect. This interpretation of the semiotic foundations of all social forms replaces an exclusive focus on the institutions, structures and symbolic practices of the social order. The role of institutions, of the family, of education and social groups in the development of the individual is not the primary object of Kristeva’s analysis. Kristeva shows that the psychic space is an important source that inspires creativity and resistance. Is the psyche secondary for creation? Kristeva’s work demonstrates that the diversity of interior experience is the antidote against the banal homogenisation of the world.

The semiotic supplies the ‘material’ of a transgression, which is proffered to the subject through a ‘return’ – putting the self on trial, which is simultaneously reflection, interrogation and thought. The ‘turning back’ that no simple transgression can stimulate in the subject provokes a ‘crisis in subjectivity’ in order to re-present the lost mother in signs. The artist negates the negativity of death through sublimation. The image is a testament to separation from the mother, a sign of achievement, and a creative way of dealing with the pain and suffering experienced during the subject’s formative years. Kristeva interrogates the capacity of the subject to present something ‘beyond’ its immediate surroundings. Chapter One has
shown that images of the decapitated head represent the archetypal human experience. Freud’s oedipal complex is the superego implanted – the law of the father draws the limits of subjectivity and establishes sexual difference, procreative sexuality and a coherent symbolic identity. Kristeva’s semiotic feminine comes to disrupt the name of the father as the embodiment of the paternal function (father, mother, child triad), as discussed in Chapter Two. Kristeva’s idea of the subject in process declares: ‘one can know’. This returns us to a form of belief in the ‘beyond’ of language – introducing a sacredness that is not institutional religion or any other dirigisme, but the necessary condition of self-creation, return and remembrance of maternal passions.

The semiotic transgressions can only take place from a position within the symbolic ‘system’. Only a representing/signifying subject can undermine the limits of representation. Similarly, Foucault argues that the subject’s potential for self-transformation resides not ‘outside’ of power but within the games of power relations that constitute the subject in its identity. Foucault’s analysis of the symbolic dimension of subjectivity, in contrast to Kristeva, works at the level of discourse and power relations in order to analyse the links between the subject and truth. What interests Foucault above all are the procedures and practices that work to define the truth of subjects and which makes the subject submit to an identity derived from their sexuality. In Foucault’s view, the social divisions and forms of power that support homogeneous existence are historically dependent and contingent. The forms of resistances against power, such as the S/M practices discussed in Chapter Three, are the result of a critical consciousness which simultaneously questions the status of the self and asserts the right to be different. For Foucault, then, these struggles of resistance revolve around one central question: ‘Who are we?’ The desire to know is linked to a project of self-critique that comprises a modern form of ethics of the self. Thus, Foucault’s vision of transgression implies critical self-consciousness, practical reasoning and determined self-fashioning.

Baudelaire’s representative understanding of modernity, as outlined in Chapter Two, served to illuminate some of the features of this ‘limit attitude’. The modern subject, for Foucault, does not seek to discover the secret or hidden truth of its nature. It tries to invent itself. For Foucault, modernity compels its subjects to forge an aesthetics of existence, a personal and

723 Michel Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, 781.
political project of self-creation. The forms of resistance that Foucault discusses, especially in his later works, express fortitude against the distracting fleetingness of modern life, and consist in ‘adopting a certain attitude with respect to this movement’.724 As Chapter Two expressed, Baudelaire characterised lesbians as representatives of an ideal, individuals capable of enormous courage and resilience against everything that divides the individual. This is a formidable fortitude, so strong that it ‘breaks [her] links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on [herself], and [things that tie her] identity in a constraining way’.725 The early struggles of S/M-identified groups captured Foucault’s interest in similar ways. The S/M practitioner asserts the right to be different and to be truly individual. S/M groups devised political strategies based on a mission of individual freedom that aimed to confound imperatives to normative identity and obfuscate the claims of normative scientific knowledge. In Foucauldian terms, the neologism ‘S/M’ implies a historical and social knowledge of the conditions of its (phobically motivated) construction; and it also can be taken to represent a creative strategy aimed at rendering tensile the rigid and tenacious grasp of power’s normalising technologies. As discussed in Chapter Three, Foucault ascribed importance to the renewal of possibilities for making the self an aesthetic project. Ethics becomes a creative act, like art, and deep introspection and critical self-analysis are encouraged.

Considering how Foucault’s work has been taken up in queer theory, it is significant to note that for him transgression does not ‘achieve its purpose through mockery or by upsetting the solidity of foundations’.726 This mode of creative becoming consists in achieving awareness of the powers that operate internally and that determine the subject in its relations with others and with themselves. The analysis, in Chapter Three, of practitioner experiences show that in ‘play’ the subjects exploit methods of discipline and punishment both as a means to producing extreme pleasure and, simultaneously, in order to ‘disarticulate personal identity and to disrupt the order of the self on which the normalization of modern subjects depends’.727 The practices of consensual S/M are correlative with a new political demand

724 Michel Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, 39.
725 Michel Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, 781.
726 Michel Foucault, ‘A Preface to Transgression’, 35.
727 David Halperin, Saint Foucault, 111.
and a creativity that developed new communities of questioning. They suggest an attitude of deep introspection which reflects the diverse projects of Kristeva, Foucault and Bataille. The S/M practitioner, Ivan, quoted in Chapter Three, illuminates:

Having sadomasochistic sex is very political in a lot of senses because it’s growing from a sort of community where certain things are considered to be abnormal or problematised for whatever reasons or controlled for whatever reasons. Because it’s so intensely personal to me … the best that I can do with it is to turn it into something which is accessible to other people so that they can get a sense of maybe they would want to experience their own bodies in that sort of way. By showing how you can step outside of structured sexual relationships, structured gendered relationships, and actually create a beautiful act and a set of beautiful ideas that go with it.\(^{728}\)

The shape and form of transgression manifests in the creation of new cultures, new pleasures and new relational possibilities. Foucault recognises an ethic of the self that is not governed by universal and totalising norms but rather by individualised regimes that are contingent and where practices on the self open the possibility for resisting oppressive technologies of power. The creation of alternative lifestyles based on intense practices of pleasure in S/M served as an example of active, self-forming practices that seek to challenge the imperious and pressing investments informing normative culture and identity.

Transgression results from critical reflection in the sphere of a return to and objectification of one’s personal history and opens new vistas where the subject can be other than itself. The transformations of the self introduced through S/M practices clearly extend beyond the realm of pleasure, and into experience, identity and personal ethics. By the same token, this is a recognition that this thesis provided a specific kind of hermeneutics, composed of a selected number of theoretical and literary works. The limitations in utilising secondary qualitative and documentary sources precluded a deeper and more targeted exploration of questions related to lifestyle, social activities, friendship and love relations. In terms of directions for future research, new interview based studies into S/M could target the ethical platforms informing the S/M alternative lifestyle.

\(^{728}\) Ivan, cited in Bobby Harrington and Gala Vanting, *Love Hard* [video].
Sadomasochism carries the weight of two hundred years of cultural history – the positivism of Europe, scientific reason and its inherent domination, elements of Nazism and barbarism, as well as an au courant postmodern attitude towards the sexual practice. However, inasmuch as sadomasochism can be used as a catalyst for discussing resistances to domination and exploitation, it must be made clear that transgression and its future is not reducible, and certainly not synonymous with subversive sexuality and eroticism.

This important and influential spectrum of proliferating creativity and knowledge is embroiled within complex stands and strains of resistance that have continued to transform over time. The struggles against forms of subjugation are continuously developing – the importance of transgression has not disappeared. On the contrary. In arthouse cinema, transgression is invoked as a challenge to the affect-less images of mass media. The constant flux of images disengages the subject from the materiality of representation. The word and the thing are tantamount to each other and the image no longer expresses affect. When the difference between sign and image is obliterated – the sign no longer communicates something that comes from ‘beyond’ (the semiotic, the presence of which in the social can be disruptive and transformative). In Kristeva’s thought, this invokes and signifies a modern crisis of representation. Kristeva’s work designates the disappearance of transcendence from Western cultural and artistic forms. This loss of transcendence signals the draining of affect from language and signs. It was not within the purview of this thesis to explore this issue in depth, a deeper engagement with these ideas in relation to the capacity of semiotic transgression to expand signifying and representational capacities would be beneficial in future research.

The practice of transgressive writing is a counter discourse examined as a strategy that encourages contingent self-awareness and aligns with movements of social and political transformation. The eroticism of Sade, Baudelaire, Bataille and Genet exceed Krafft-Ebing’s classifications and Freud’s conceptualisations. Sade elaborated a complete subversive ethical system. As a critic of Enlightenment philosophy, Sade was a writer of sacrilege and blasphemy, of perverse sexual practice, inter-generational marriages and scatological experiments – transgressive passions and desires that go beyond Freud’s account of sadomasochism. Indeed, Foucault, Bataille and Kristeva are suspicious of the dogmatism and prejudice that organises contradiction and difference into classifications and oppose the
reductive dichotomising of the indeterminate possibilities of desiring production. Collectively, the three analyses immobilise any attempt to reflect sadomasochism as a unitary phenomenon.

Sade set out to destroy the vestiges of normative cultural values repeatedly, underlining the importance of disruption, displacement and discontinuity. He fragments normative culture, violating the hallowed components of society: family, love, morality and divinity. In Baudelaire, the destructive powers of sadomasochism are pitted against reason, truth and science. It was not until Bataille and other important scholars, namely, Blanchot and Barthes that the significance of Sade’s literature emerged from the darkness to which it had been banished by nineteenth century science. The erotic excesses of Sade’s criminal utopia interested Bataille in particular, insofar as it opened the path to linking sacred transgression to eroticism. According to Bataille, the objects of social exclusion that Sade’s libertines derive unbounded pleasure from and which ‘repel us most violently’ are intrinsically ‘part of our nature’.

Sade’s characters Justine and Juliette demarcate a division, their stories draw a line of exclusion between transcendence and virtue, and the materialism and calculative reason found emergent within the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Juliette delineates the incarnation of calculative rationality that began to sweep over a world in absence of a transcendent ideal. Sade’s heroine is faithless, she declares: God does not exist. Juliette will not serve the obfuscation tied to metaphysical entities and she begs the question: what stops us from becoming gods? Why not use this sovereign power to procure boundless wealth, power and pleasure. Without God (the limit) the world opens to the possibility of limitless enjoyment; there is nothing to stop the libertine torturer from robbing, torturing and murdering her neighbour. For, as Juliette would say, if it gives me pleasure to torture and destroy others, I am only fulfilling nature’s will to power. In her world nothing can conquer violence; Juliette is not an untrammelled relativist, she remains circumscribed in Sade’s narrative, if only as a force of nature.

729 Georges Bataille, Erotism: Death and Sensuality, 196.
Baudelaire’s modern vice was ennui. The poet in Les Fleurs du Mal is a slave to boredom. Ennui drags the poet to fascination with transgression – to challenging God, science, reason and ideals of progress. Baudelaire’s characters often act on violent and destructive urges in states of lucid self-awareness. A central motif is the poet who laughs ironically at his own indispensable revolt at himself. The path of self-destruction led by the characters in Baudelaire’s poems combines the attributes of a confrontation with the law being transgressed and unmitigated challenges being pitted against an ideal: love, beauty, divinity or science. The poet’s transgressions reflect an abject Jekyll and Hyde figure who is obsessed with an ideal of good that is constantly desecrated in order to challenge God. The poet disavows the milk of human kindness, pursuing instead frenetic states of transgression.

For Bataille, eroticism is nothing without the transgression of the taboo. Transgression in Sade’s thought is murder set as the pinnacle of erotic excitement. ‘Eroticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns … of the regulated social order’.\textsuperscript{730} Bataille characterises Sade as a kind of unbounded white heat where nothing can set limits on licentiousness; he writes, ‘the best way of enlarging and multiplying one’s desires is to try to limit them’.\textsuperscript{731} The flesh is a fundamental element belonging to violence and ‘violence belongs to flesh, the flesh responsible for the urges of the organs of reproduction’.\textsuperscript{732} ‘Flesh is the extravagant within us set up against the law of decency … [and] the flesh signifies a return to … threatening freedom.’\textsuperscript{733} The expenditure of energy makes possible a new relation with the self, signifying the essence of transgression.

Collectively, Sade, Baudelaire, Bataille and Genet demonstrate that transgression is not possible without prohibition – they ‘depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess … transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows’.\textsuperscript{734} These remarks, made by Foucault in 1963, could not be more relevant in terms of the contemporary situation. The pseudo-transgression is the empty movement of

\textsuperscript{730} Georges Bataille, \textit{Erotism: Death and Sensuality}, 18.
\textsuperscript{731} Ibid, 48.
\textsuperscript{732} Ibid, 93.
\textsuperscript{733} Ibid, 92.
\textsuperscript{734} Michel Foucault, ‘A Preface to Transgression’, 34.
monotonous violence not capable of effecting a rupture in the social. As shown in Chapter Four, Haneke’s and Breillat’s films are commentaries on the numbing and pacifying reality of the image in contemporary societies. For Kristeva, cinema will replace other forms of art and painting and preserve semiotic creativity.

A comparison between Sade’s fiction and the spirit that informed the scientific classifications of Kraft-Ebbing and Ellis is pertinent. Sade’s criminal utopia does not exclude. It obliterates difference, destroys affectations of guilt and love, reduces subjects to objects, and supresses desiring production to disciplinarian regimes. But the comparison ends there. Seen through positivist science, without the law and the transgression of the law, sexuality can no longer be used to disobey God, to challenge the monarchy or even to express the ambivalence that underlies social life. In turn, the postmodern reign of the affectless image reflects the new ‘Sadean’ perverse utopia of abolishing difference.

The powerful critiques of Foucault, Bataille and Kristeva cannot be more contemporary. In post-liberation societies ‘perversion’ and dangerous sexuality is increasingly defined positively, as a conceptual and intellectualised act, as a scientifically knowable process or as exciting and consumable difference. It is no longer conceptualised in the negative sense, as disobeying dominant norms and laws of social existence. The knowledge of transgression in its taboo and rule breaking function is exigent. Prohibitions saturate modern secular societies. Yet, critically, without the magnetic charge between the opposite pole of transgression there can be no possibility of the sacred – the artistic enterprise depends on this quasi-sacred dimension for creations beyond the realism of immediate surroundings. The play between transgression and prohibition is indispensable to modalities of resistance that challenge stagnation and opens the possibility for change.

Transgression expresses a resistance against fragmenting, isolating and individuating pressures. Transgression is a rapport with a scintillating movement – a flash of lightning in the dark – the spark of creative imagination that forays into the limits of thought and experience. Bataille, Foucault and Kristeva demonstrate that transgression is linked to a mode of questioning that looks beyond the appearances of external reality. Violation suggests breaching everyday transience with the presence of something eternal. For Kristeva and especially Bataille, this eternal element that shines through profane is the sacred.
Transgression is excess – a spilling over of heterogeneity, or otherness and difference into a homogeneous social order. For Bataille, the excess that instigates suffering and discontinuity in the subject is the transformative element of transgression, a necessarily a wounding experience. The ‘cut’ of humanity, eroticised and re-presented in art, literature and cinema, brings light to the prohibition that separates us from violence and abjection. Transgressive sexual forms of experience open roads into problematising identity. Ongoing re-composition and recasting provide an opportunity for moderns to confront their intransigence, explore states of dissolution and critical reflection and ascribe a new kind of language that is incompatible with normative values. Sharing it with others, new communities build an existence that seeks to escape a form of life buried in reified objects of exchange, a modality common to the hollowed-out life of utility. One does not simply transgress limits for titillation or excitement, but because one adopts a critical stance against the submission of subjectivity. In contemporary society, the practical questioning of one’s status as a subject and the struggle against forms of submission is becoming more and more important. The example of transgressive sexual form as an opening to a road into problematising identity is pertinent. Permanent re-composition and recasting provide an example for moderns about how to confront our states of dissolution and criticism – to ascribe a language to it and share it with others, and to create new communities of questioning. The works of Kristeva, Foucault and Bataille open horizons where individuals can engage in ‘active’ critique and continue to reassess limits and continue to transgress and deploy new modalities of power. There is no foreseeable shape or delimitation regarding future resistance. Transgression does not promise an absolute or universal final-end. It is not difficult to understand how the realm of sexuality can do this. One can compromise between pleasure and the form one gives to sexual practices – and what is not yet achieved or discovered but that is nevertheless in a state of germination. This is a sensuous ‘work in progress’ where the body is positioned as the central focus – heralding its criminalities, its inventiveness, its limits, and its language and semiotics.
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