Power, Pleasure, and Perversion: Sadomasochistic Film Pornography

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Source: *Representations*, No. 27 (Summer, 1989), pp. 37–65

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928483

Accessed: 02-10-2017 13:11 UTC

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Sadomasochistic Film Pornography

An Ontological Pornography

*The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making. . . . The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it.*

—André Bazin

André Bazin’s ontology of the photographic image has long stood as a key text in a realist theory of cinema. At its limit this theory states that photography and cinema are not icons that resemble or represent the world; rather, through indexical registrations of objects from the world onto photographic emulsions, they re-present, and hence are, this world. As any student of contemporary film theory knows, however, Bazin’s ontology of cinema is but one pole of a dialectic, the other half of which states, as Bazin does at the end of this same essay, “Cinema is also a language.” But in popular consciousness it is the first part of Bazin’s “ontology of the photographic image” that counts, especially when thinking about hard-core film or video pornography. It is not surprising, then, to find the Meese Commission quoting the above passage from Bazin in its efforts to detail the special dangers of pornography. To the commission, the filmic representation of an “actual person” engaged in sexual acts is exactly the same as if witnessed “in the flesh.” Thus, the reasoning goes, film audiences bear “direct” witness to any violence or perversion therein enacted.

The unprecedented realism of movies seems to lead directly, then, to obscenity. Realist theories of cinema often come up against this problem of an “ultimate” obscenity of the medium at some point in their thinking. Bazin believed that the technological evolution of cinema would ultimately lead to the discovery of new and liberating truths about life. Seeing an “object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it” would, he hoped, empower us. But when he came up against some of the “hard-core” “objects” of this liberation, Bazin could be seen to be grappling, and much more thoughtfully than the Meese Commission, with the pornographic limits of his realist ontology. Writing about a newsreel sequence showing the execution of Communist spies by members of Chiang Kai-shek’s army, he anticipates current concerns about “snuff” films:
"The obscenity of the image was of the same order as that of a pornographic film. An ontological pornography. Here death is the negative equivalent of sexual pleasure, which is sometimes called, not without reason, ‘the little death.’"^5

By the logic of a realist ontology, the vision of such ultimate or extreme "truths" should be admitted to view, no matter how shocking, simply because they exist. But since going to the cinema to watch a death spasm would debase the new art form with obscenities as old as the Roman Circus, Bazin takes refuge in art: in a fiction film, he argues, “actual sexual emotion by performers” is “contradictory to the exigencies of art.”^6 Real sex, like real death, is unaesthetic and therefore out of place. Yet elsewhere in his writing Bazin has celebrated documentary realism in fictional contexts, and he is honest enough here to acknowledge “a critical contradiction,” which he notes “without resolving.”^7

Two primary concerns animate these discussions of extreme and violent contents in pornography. The first centers on the harm done to individuals whose bodies are used to create these images. The second has to do with the possible harm done to viewers. The Meese Commission and antipornography feminists argue that both types of harm occur: that the women used in pornography are also abused by pornography and that viewers of this first abuse perpetuate it by imitating it in real life. But as Bazin's example indicates, the problem is not, as the Meese Commission has it, that the image of violence is the same as if it were happening before our very eyes; rather, it is that the spectacle seems both so real and yet so distant from us—temporally and spatially. Our complicity as viewers of the act is different from what it would be if we were actually in the room with the “object”; it is connected to the fact that we are watching (whether with fascination, pleasure, horror, or dread) an act that seems to be really taking place but with which we have no spatial or temporal connection ourselves.

The “question of pornography,” then, inescapably involves questions of its medium. The problem Bazin raises is one not only of contents that pervert what should have been the noble realism of cinema, but of a cinematic form that is, in its very way of representing objects outside of their usual time and space, perverse. The first concern, the concern of naive realists, involves what could be called a perversion of cinema—that is, a simple misuse of the “natural” realism of the medium to exhibit obscene or violent acts. The second concern is more complex: it addresses cinema as perversion in itself, as an economic, technological, social, and symbolic discourse. The two concerns are certainly related. We would not, for example, be concerned about cinema as perversion if the violent or sexual acts recorded by the medium did not elicit extreme reactions in the first place, if the “contents” did not themselves seem perverse. In hard-core sadomasochistic pornography we thus encounter a double perversion: perverse acts and the perverse pleasure of viewing these acts.

These two concerns over perversion in contemporary pornography coincide
in their location of a cause: at the root of literal or symbolic aggression toward women is a patriarchal, phallic power characterized as sadistic—whether the actual clinical perversion of sadism or the more socially normative voyeurism and fetishism inscribed in cinematic discourse itself. Male viewers in both cases are said to learn that sadistic mastery and aggression are acceptable, even “normal.” Female viewers, in contrast, are said to either take on these values or, more painfully, identify with their own suffering. My object in what follows is to examine the adequacy of these sadistic (and masochistic) explanations of viewing pleasure in the violence of sadomasochistic film and video pornography. Let us begin, then, with what seems an absolute “worst case” scenario.

**The Case of Snuff**

In 1975 rumors circulated in New York City that police had confiscated several underground films from South America containing footage of women who were killed on camera as the gruesome climax to sexual acts. Dubbed “snuff” films because the women engaged in sexual relations were “snuffed out” as they presumably reached climax, the possible existence of such works gave American feminists cause for new concern about the victims of above-ground cinema’s “ontological pornography.”

These fears were seemingly confirmed by the release, in the spring of 1976, of a feature-length commercial film with the very title *Snuff*. As one feminist writer in the influential antipornography anthology *Take Back the Night* puts it, *Snuff* “marked the turning point in our consciousness about the meaning behind the countless movies and magazines devoted to the naked female body. . . . It compelled us to take a long, hard look at the pornography industry. The graphic bloodletting in *Snuff* finally made the misogyny of pornography a major feminist concern.”

The only trouble with the revelations precipitated by *Snuff* (uncredited, 1976) is that the film in question—though unquestionably violent and especially, if not exclusively, so toward women—does not strictly belong to the genre of pornography unless the fantastic special effects of exploitation horror films are included in its definition. The “long, hard look at the pornography industry” was really a rather cursory look at a related genre of “slice and dice” butchery. How such a film came to be the “turning point” in feminist thinking about the “misogyny of pornography” is therefore of some interest to a discussion of those “extreme” works of violent sadistic or masochistic pornography.

*Snuff* opens with two women on a motorcycle pursuing another woman who has made off with a cache of drugs. They capture her and put her in stocks, where she sits until a mysterious man to whom they all seem in thrall reprimands her.
This man is a Charles Manson-style cult figure named Satán who is preparing for an apocalyptic orgy of violence directed against the upper-class decadence of Montevideo. A film producer making an exploitation sex film is their first victim; a subplot involves the American actress who has come to play in the film. Satán and his female followers will eventually attack and kill the American actress, her husband, father-in-law, and friends while they engage in sexual adventures.

In the narrative of Snuff, then, an orgy of violence overtakes the film’s soft-core representation of an orgy of sex. The decadent upper classes are presented as involved in immoral profiteering in both sex (the unmade sex film) and violence (the father-in-law deals arms to both Arabs and Israelis). Satán proposes to purge the world of both forms of profiteering through his own ritual butchering of both sexes. In the film’s penultimate bloodbath the deranged cult members act out Mansonesque murders that culminate in the stabbing of the now-pregnant American actress as she lies in bed.

The violence portrayed in the film is similar to that currently popular among adolescent audiences in exploitation horror films of exaggerated violence perpetrated against young women. In these “slasher” films, of which The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (Tobe Hooper, 1974) is often regarded as a key text, sexually disturbed males stalk and kill young female victims, achieving, along the way, a maximum visibility of blood and guts. In this genre, Carol J. Clover observes, “violence and sex are not concomitants but alternatives.” The human “monsters” of such films rarely rape; they more often kill, but killing functions as a substitute for rape. The violence is often presented as having its origins in unresolved oedipal conflicts—not surprising in a cycle of films that seems indelibly marked by Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho. Like pornography, the slasher film pries open the fleshy secrets of normally hidden things. As Clover notes, in the genre’s obsession with maiming and dismemberment we see “in extraordinarily credible detail” the “opened’ body.”

Today Snuff seems to be a variant of the slasher film, though its South American setting, postsynchronized dialogue, and focus on adult rather than teen-aged victims make it atypical. Yet an epilogue tacked on to the narrative of Satán’s violence made some viewers at the time think otherwise: in this epilogue, after the pregnant actress is stabbed, the camera pulls back to reveal a movie set with camera, crew, and director. A “script girl” admires the director’s work and tells him she was turned on by the scene. He invites her to have sex; she complies until she realizes that this scene, too, is being filmed. When she tries to pull away, the director grabs the knife from the previous scene, looks directly at the camera and says, presumably to the operator, “You want to get a good scene?” and proceeds to slice off first the woman’s fingers, then her hand, and then the rest of her. The sequence culminates in the director cutting open the woman’s abdomen, pulling out her inner organs, and holding them over his head in triumph while the sound...
track mixes heavy panting with the beat of a throbbing heart. The organs seem to convulse. The image goes black as a voice says, “Shit, we ran out of film.” Another says, “Did you get it all?” “Yeah, we got it. Let’s get out of here.” No credits roll.

It was this coda of self-reflexive violence, arising on the very set of the exploitation horror and soft-core sex film that preceded it, that seemed to some viewers to live up to the generic promise of the film’s title. The sequence is as heavily edited and replete with “medical FX” as any other instance of mutilation in this—or any other—horror film. Nevertheless, added signals of documentary evidence—the director’s speech to and “look” at the camera, the indication of film “run out,” the shocking transition from sex scene to violence—all operated to convince some viewers that if what they had seen before was fake violence belonging to the genre of horror, what they were seeing now was real (hard-core) violence belonging to the genre of pornography.

*Snuff*, then, seemed an utterly sadistic perversion of the desire for visual knowledge of pleasure typical of more ordinary forms of the pornographic genre.12 Understood this way, the “it” spoken by the male crew member in the film’s last words (“We got it”) could refer not only to the images photographed but to the death spasm as substitute for pleasure spasm, especially in the context of the hard-core genre’s perpetual quest for documentary evidence of involuntary pleasure in female bodies that do not give as ready evidence of this pleasure as male bodies.

Immediately, petitions were signed and pickets were posted wherever the film played. But it soon became evident that *Snuff* was not “hard core.” As the *New York Times* succinctly put it, “Nobody gets vérité killed.” The writer also pointed out a similar dismemberment in the Andy Warhol-Paul Morrissey *Frankenstein* that was “much more obnoxious.”13 The uncredited film turned out to be the work of the American husband-and-wife filmmaking team of Roberta and Michael Findlay. Even before the mid-seventies rash of slasher films, the Findlays had been known for their low-budget exploitation violence and horror films featuring bizarre death scenes.14 The portion of the narrative concerning “Satan” and his victims was recycled from *Slaughter*, a film the Findlays had shot in South America in 1971 without sound and to which they later added a sound track. At the time their low-budget horror effort was shelved. Later, amid publicity about the possible existence of “snuff” movies smuggled into the United States from South America and in the wake of the new “gross-out” slashers, producer Alan Shackleton of Monarch Releasing Corporation added the final scene of evisceration, retitled the film *Snuff*, and made a small fortune.

The outcry over *Snuff* forced New York City’s District Attorney to investigate the circumstances of the film’s making and to interview the actress who was supposedly killed in the final sequence.15 Even after the hoax was revealed, though,
the idea of snuff continued to haunt the imagination. For many, the horror shifted from the sadistic content of the film to the sadism of viewers who would pay to see what they thought was the ultimate orgasm. “Going all the way” in hard core could now encompass the possibility, already imagined by Bazin but not widely contemplated in the previous American popular filmic imagination, of the perverse pleasure of witnessing the involuntary spasm of death.

Generic confusion of horror and hard core—so successfully capitalized upon by Snuff’s distributor—continues to the present. Certainly many of the most serious of the accusations made about pornography’s harms to viewers apply better to exploitation horror films than to pornography. Yet this confusion is evident not only in the comments of Bazinian realists disturbed by the perversion of cinema—by the misuse of a natural cinematic realism to document obscene or violent realities—but also in the more sophisticated analyses arguing for cinema as perversion—that the very act of cinematic representation cultivates perverse tendencies in viewers.

That significant parallels hold between these two almost equally illegitimate, low-budget genres with particular appeal to male viewers is undeniable. As Clover notes, the slasher film can be seen “encroaching vigorously” on the pornographic though precisely how remains to be examined. Snuff probably became the “case” that it did because it did not, like the horror film, simply displace the sexual desires of characters onto violent acts; rather, its mix of soft-core sex and violence was more messy, interrupting expectations for pleasurable sex with violence and vice versa. Snuff, both the film and the idea, exists at the contradictory intersection of the spectacles of pleasure (generally assumed to be real in hard-core pornography) and pain (generally assumed to be faked in horror films).

It would be a mistake, therefore, to dismiss the issues raised by Snuff as a mere hoax made possible by the confusion of genres by naive realists. What seems particularly disturbing about such visions, in the case of Snuff, and in the case of violent aggression within pornography proper, is surely the sense in which an involuntary spasm of pain culminating in death becomes imaginable as a substitute for the invisible involuntary spasm of orgasm (Bazin’s “little death”) that is so hard to see in the body of the woman. Read in the context of pornography as opposed to horror, a flinch, a convulsion, a welt, even the flow of blood itself, would seem to offer incontrovertible proof that a woman’s body, so resistant to the involuntary show of pleasure, has been touched, “moved,” by some force. The genre mistake that reads Snuff’s violent horror as pornography and therefore as real demonstrates the need to be very clear about what kinds of violence and what kinds of perversions do operate in contemporary hard-core commercial film pornography. To facilitate this clarity, I shall introduce a range of examples of sexual violence that are located securely within cinematic pornography, in order to construct an initial typology of the ways hard-core pornographic film represents sexual violence.
Sadomasochistic Pornography
on Film and Video: Three Categories

The first category of film and video S/M, which I will call amateur sadomasochism, consists of whole films in narrative or loose vignette form given over to the exclusive pursuit of domination and submission. These works are frequently shot on video rather than film and often have low production values and amateurish acting reminiscent of stag films and loops. Many of these works are available only at exclusively “Adult” outlets rather than at the local neighborhood video outlet, and some are available only through special-order catalogs aimed at specialized audiences with tastes for “bondage and discipline” or “S/M.” (One distributor is called “Loving S/M Productions,” another is called “Bizarre.”) Titles often indicate the sadomasochistic content: e.g., Bondage Fantasies (Patrick Barnes, 1975); Bound (1979); Bound in Latex (Patrick Barnes, 1981); Journey into Pain (1983); Femmes de Sade (1976); Perverse Desires (Caroline Joyce, 1984); Platinum Spanking (1983).

The sexual “number” (routine) emphasized in these tapes is typically a prolonged scene of “bondage and discipline” showing the binding and torture of the victim by either dominator or domatrix. In some instances a single scene of torture occupies the entire work. Paraphernalia such as nipple and genital rings, chains, ropes, whips, and wax drippings from hot candles are often employed and frequently replace other forms of sexual activity. Everything is focused on the highly ritualized forms of violence and domination enacted upon the body dominated. This body is often, though not always, a woman’s.

In Journey into Pain the leather-clad male dominator is like the circus ringmaster, putting two women through elaborately staged tableaux designed to dramatize their suffering: the first woman is gagged and tied to a coffee table; a rope attached to her nipple rings is pulled hard. Another woman is tied up and her clothes are cut off; the dominator slaps her bottom until it grows red. Minimal editing emphasizes the real time and space of the enactment. The emphasis throughout is on the suffering and emotion of the victims. At one point the two women cry on each other’s shoulders; at another point close-ups of their faces reveal mixtures of excitement and pain. There is no visible climax, in either the dramatic or the sexual sense of the word, only a suspenseful spectacle of prolonged suffering. At the end the man and women are back in their regular clothes, warmly hugging and happy.

A second, more frequent use of on-screen violence in hard-core pornography is that limited to a single number—the extreme end of a range of numbers typical of contemporary hard core’s “diff’rent strokes for diff’rent folks” ethic. These numbers—which I will call by the industry’s name for them, sadie-max—occur in the course of the protagonist’s wide-ranging search for new and better sex typical of the hard-core film once it expanded into feature-length narrative. The pro-
tagonists may enjoy and repeat these numbers or sample and reject them. These practices might include: a little bondage, *Three Daughters* (Candida Royalle, 1986); a spanking and light “Sadie-Max,” *Depraved Innocent* (Jonathan Burrows, n.d.); anal intercourse, *Loose Ends* (Bruce Seven, 1984); or lurid fantasy sequences with exaggerated paraphernalia, monsters, or beasts, such as the monster with the giant penis who invades the bedroom in the hard-core cult film *Driller* (Joyce James, 1985), a porn parody of Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. The violence in these numbers can add drama, excitement, danger, exoticism, or humor to more “typical” numbers, functioning often as foreplay to genital acts. Whatever form it takes, however, this violence is usually not essential, as it is in the films devoted entirely to sadomasochism, to the protagonists’ pleasures.

The persons aggressed upon in these films are experimenting with different forms of pleasure; only rarely are they presented as habitually dependent upon S/M for one kind of pleasure. For example, Marilyn Chambers as Sandra Chase in *Insatiable II* has a prolonged sadomasochistic encounter with a leather-clad male dominator. Chambers is tied, whipped, spanked, choked, and has hot wax poured on her nipples in a prolonged scene whose long takes and minimal editing resemble the realism of the more amateurish, exclusively sadomasochistic, films mentioned above. Yet, in every other aspect of the narrative and in every other sexual number but one, she dominates the sexual action. Thus the pleasures this form offers viewers do not seem fixed upon identification with this pleasure exclusively.

A third category of violence occurs in films that I will call *aesthetic sadomasochism*. The works that use this form are often shot in the more expensive medium of film rather than video, and they self-consciously situate themselves within an elitist sadomasochistic literary tradition where rarefied sexual tastes are explored. Although these films may also focus on prolonged scenes of sadomasochistic torture to the exclusion of all other sexual numbers, they differ from amateur sadomasochism in their comparatively high production values, professional acting, literary sources, and complex psychological narratives plumbing the nature of sexual identities. If the overwhelming effect of the violence in the *amateur sadomasochism* films is that it seems “real” in the Bazinian sense—it appears neither acted by the performers, nor faked in the editing—the overwhelming effect of the violence in *aesthetic sadomasochism* is that it is “art.” This form of visual pornography is not interested in hard-core evidence of either pleasure or pain. Instead of *amateur sadomasochism*’s fixed stare at the flesh that is slapped, whipped, or pierced in order to catch involuntary flinches of pain, in these films we more typically see the whip poised over the vulnerable flesh, hear the noise of its crack, and, in a separate shot, see the reaction on a face. Eisensteinian montage supplants the Bazinian reality of event, and the moment of threat counts more than that of violence.

In *The Story of Joanna* (Gerard Damiano, 1975), for example, a mysterious aristocratic man brings a young woman who is attracted to him to his chateau. He
is dying of a mysterious disease and wants to be killed by the hand of someone who loves him. Instead of loving her back, however, he coldly humiliates and degrades her in a manner similar to the degradation of O in *The Story of O*: giving her up to the use of other men, telling her she is “not a woman” but “a cock sucker,” initiating her into bondage and discipline. Though she continues to adore him, she gradually catches on to his plan to make her the instrument of his own destruction and, turning cold and inscrutable herself, finally shoots him.

Another example of *aesthetic sadomasochism* is *The Punishment of Anne* (Radley Metzger, 1979), based on the 1956 novella by Jean de Berg. A sophisticated French writer, Jean, meets an acquaintance, Claire, at an elegant literary soirée. Jean's voice-over informs us that although he likes Claire, her lack of vulnerability dampens his desire. Claire’s young friend Anne, however, is all youthful vulnerability, and he is intrigued by the relationship between these two women. In a tour of a rose garden, Jean witnesses Claire's sadistic humiliation of the masochistic Anne, who is made to urinate before Jean. Jean is fascinated.

Later Claire shows him her black-and-white photographs of Anne being tortured. A play of glances between Claire and himself is the first hint that their own relationship is at stake as well. A final photo shows only a pubic area caressed by a hand. Jean notes that the hand seems different from the others; it seems possible that this last photo is of Claire, not Anne. A series of elaborate tortures and/or social humiliations of Anne follow. Claire teaches Jean the pleasures of dominating Anne and the pleasure Anne feels in being dominated: “She loves it when we put her on her knees so we can whip her. . . . She gets all set for her orgasm.” A mostly mute Anne shifts in mood from abject humiliation to triumphant pleasure. The various instances of torture culminate in a penultimate encounter in Claire's torture chamber, already glimpsed in the photos Claire showed Jean. In this scene Claire and Jean use needles and whip to keep Anne in a sustained state of writhing pleasure and suffering. But the scene ends badly, with both Claire and Anne breaking their assumed sadistic roles and with Anne determined to leave Claire.

The next morning, however, Claire comes to Jean dressed in one of Anne’s innocent schoolgirl outfits, an indication that her “role” has changed. Jean, understanding now, orders her to undress. The naked Claire assumes one of Anne’s vulnerable poses. Kneeling, with hands over head, she says, “I’m yours. You can do whatever you want with me.” Jean pulls her onto the stairs, slaps her on the face, lays her down, and thrusts into her. He asks, “What’s my name?” She answers, “Jean,” and repeats over and over, “I love you, I love you. . . .”

**S/M**

As the above, crude typology suggests, the violence of dominance and submission as represented in pornographic film and video forcefully raises all the
Bazinian questions as to the ontological status of photographically represented extreme “things.” For the violence of what has come to be called bondage and discipline can be both real—it can really affect a body, whether to give pain, pleasure, or both—and it can be faked—whether through special effects, editing, or in the role playing of performers who depict dramas of domination and submission. Sadomasochistic sexual acts are thus problematic as sex and as acts: although they may shock and move us by their sensationalism as much as “hard core” genital sex acts, they can also be acts in the theatrical sense of shows performed for oneself or another.

The matter is further complicated by the fact that, as commonly practiced in the United States among consenting individuals, S/M is not a perversion dominated by male sadists. While popular perception sees sadomasochism as the perverse abuse by male sadists of female victims, something closer to the reverse appears to be the case in much actual practice: large numbers of male or female “bottoms” in search of male or female “tops” to dominate them in their quests for sexual abandon. The predominant desire in both male and female sadomasochistic practice appears to be dominated rather than to dominate, although we shall see below that these very terms are themselves complicated for, in a sense, the dominated seeks indirectly to dominate as well.

For the moment, however, we might simply note that while the pleasures of sexual domination have begun to be introduced into mass-cultural representations of all sorts—in the fetish implements of bondage and discipline introduced into the sexual marketplace, in the persona of male and female rock stars, in high fashion, and in mainstream films like Nine ½ Weeks (Adrian Lyne, 1986), Blue Velvet (David Lynch, 1986), and Something Wild (Jonathan Demme, 1986)—the male submissive side of this sadomasochism is less in evidence in hard-core film and video pornographic fantasy than in these more mainstream cultural forms. One reason has to do with taboos against male homosexuality that operate with special force in genres of visual pornography segregated according to heterosexual or homosexual address to viewers. In heterosexual pornography these taboos actively limit the sexual acts that can be deployed to solve the problems of sexuality introduced by these films. In gay male pornography, however, where there is no heterosexual identity to maintain, male submissives occur frequently. So although there are examples of male submission in heterosexual hard core, I have avoided them in the examples given above in order to concentrate on the problem that most concerns feminists: the domination of women proffered as a form of pleasure to both the women depicted and to viewers.

How, then, can we define the pleasures of viewing the above films? Let me begin by trying to describe only the pleasures of a male, heterosexual audience. The answer that feminists have most frequently offered is sadism—understood either in a general sense as a pleasure taken in the power of domination, or in a more specific sense as the sexual perversion that haunts masculine sexual identity
and animates a quintessentially masculine desire to see, to know, and to control. To antipornography feminists, violent pornography offers the most representative instance of the essential sadism of the dominant power of patriarchy—men who “especially love murder” and who create “concentration camp pornography.”

To see a woman phallicly penetrated, bound, gagged, tortured, or (as presumably in Snuff) murdered for male sexual pleasure was tantamount to watching a real woman present in the viewer’s own space-time continuum victimized by these outrages. To feminists in this camp the sexual violence is not only fictionally depicted, it is enacted on the bodies of women in a form that is as “hard core” as “meat” (industry slang for genital penetration) and “money shots” (industry slang for visible ejaculation) are elsewhere in the genre. And if this enacted violence causes pain, then it would seem that viewers are asked to take a sadistic pleasure in the real suffering of real victims.

But the above description of sadistic pleasure in the suffering of others may not accurately describe the experience of watching a woman victim in a film tortured. For as we saw with Bazin, the medium definitively distances the viewer from the presence of the suffering, or the pleasure-experiencing, body. In Insatiable there are signs that at least some of the violence is enacted—the wax could be faked but the red marks visible in the unedited shots of spanking seem real. And in the amateur sadomasochism of Journey into Pain the poor technical quality of the videos themselves enhances the documentary effect. Here too the tugs on ropes attached to nipple and genital rings certainly seem real.

How, then, does the male viewer react to this representation of the woman’s pain? In the case of the sadie-max violence enacted/depicted on Marilyn Chambers in Insatiable he might have several responses. If he thinks of Chambers as a professional actress undergoing the scene for the sake of her art, then he might say that whatever pain she experiences is in the service of this art. In this case he can either applaud the sacrifice in the name of art or his own visual pleasure or he can condemn it as humiliating, dangerous, and degrading. In this respect Chambers is like any actress who “exposes” herself to emotional and physical risk to achieve a convincing performance. Lillian Gish famously exposed herself to both by repeatedly enduring the cold water and ice of the river sequence in D. W. Griffith’s Way Down East. She paid, so she says, with the lifelong effects of frostbite in one hand. The extratextual anecdote of Gish’s frozen hand has become part of the lore of the film and is now, arguably, an element of the pleasure many viewers take in it.

In another response, and one more likely in the example of amateur sadomasochism, the viewer could think that the performers are practicing submissives who enjoy their roles. Here too extratextual information—interviews or ads—may offer assurance that the actresses really “got into their roles” and enjoyed “doing it” for the camera. Marilyn Chambers, for instance, has given many interviews to this effect. There is also the other kind of testimonial, as in Linda Lovelace’s
Ordeal, which attests to a coercion enacted behind the scenes, forcing the actress to play the part. In this case attentive viewers who have read Lovelace-Marchiano’s story can look for the bruises on her body—bruises which become evidence of sexual violence and coercion that although not enacted in the film were enacted behind the camera. They might then sadistically enjoy this evidence of her suffering, although there is also the possibility, in all the above cases, that they could pity the woman’s “ordeal” and masochistically identify with her as well. But as film and video viewers they cannot possibly determine the truth of this suffering from the evidence of the film alone. And this lack of definitive evidence is itself, arguably, part of a more oscillating pleasure between doubt and belief, sadism and masochism, characteristic of sadomasochistic pornography on film and video. For we cannot tell, just by watching, if the actress really enjoys the kiss, the porn actress really orgasms, or Lillian Gish’s fingers really hurt. We can only see apparent evidence of pain or pleasure. As Elaine Scarry has shown with regard to political torture, power relies upon theatrical strategies of the display of instruments, elaborate questioning, and confessional answers achieved through the instrumentation of a torture that produces pain. But pain itself, like pleasure in the woman, offers no incontrovertible visual evidence of its truth since, despite the torturer’s ability to produce it, he cannot know the world of pain.

The male viewer’s pleasure in scenes of domination and submission cannot be simply accounted for by assuming his identification with the whip-wielding torturer. Theories of cinematic visual pleasure have had much to say in recent years about the presumed dominance and sadism of the “male gaze” of cinema. One influential strain of feminist, psychoanalytic film theory has argued that the “look” that governs cinematic narrative is founded on voyeuristic and sadistic male desires that treat women as exhibitionist objects, at best fetishizing their difference or at worst aggressively mastering their threat of difference through various forms of sadistic punishment. Thus all of the normalized perversions of dominant narrative cinema are, according to Laura Mulvey, E. Ann Kaplan, and others, defensive mechanisms—“avenues of escape”—for phallically threatened male viewers.

In this cinema as perversion view, the whole of the institution of cinematic narrative has been seen to be dominated either by sadism or by a sadistic interpretation of fetishism, what Mulvey calls “fetishistic scopophilia,” defined as an erotic instinct focused on the look alone. According to this argument, visual pleasure for male viewers depends on an ability to disavow the difference of woman either through non-narrative fetishistic “overvaluations” of her body as glamorous object or by sadistic punishment proper. In both cases a male fear of castration becomes the cause of the objectification or aggressivity that are ultimately defenses against female difference.

As recent feminist film critics and theorists have begun to assert, however,
here too sadism—and its related perversions of voyeurism and the power to fetishize the woman as object—may not be the whole “story.” D. N. Rodowick, for example, notes that Mulvey’s adaptation of the very term fetishism into the hybrid fetishistic-scopophilia is typical of the lopsided emphasis on aggressive male mastery to the exclusion of the more “feminine” and passive pleasures of spectatorship. In other words, the male/active/voyeuristic/objectifying side of cinematic spectatorship has been stressed at the expense of the female/passive/identifying/fetishized (instead of fetishizing) side. Even more problematic is the way activity and passivity have been rigorously assigned to separate gendered spectator positions, with little examination of either the active elements of the feminine position or the mutability of male and female spectators’ adoption of one or the other subject position.

As Rodowick suggests, and as Gaylyn Studlar further develops in an extended challenge to Mulvey’s position, the term that is most repressed in Mulvey’s original statement of the perverse pleasures of narrative cinema is masochism. Significantly, it is a term that has also been repressed as an explanation of pleasure in pornography. There are good reasons for the repression in both. The recognition of masochism as a form of pleasure does not bode well for a feminist perspective whose political point of departure is the relative powerlessness of women.

Gaylyn Studlar argues, nevertheless, that many of the more passive pleasures of film viewing can be explained by masochism. Those films which do not fit the dominant Hollywood pattern of inviting viewer identification with active goal-oriented heroes determined to “make something happen” belong, she argues, to a category she names the “masochistic aesthetic.” Studlar’s consideration of many of the issues of masochistic pleasure that have been swept under the rug in the wake of a feminist politics of empowerment is impressive. In the final analysis, though, her argument may be too much of an overreaction to Mulvey’s suppression, caught up as it is in the either/or opposition between sadism and an unthinkable masochism instituted by Mulvey. As Tania Modleski has argued recently, the solution to this either/or-ism is not to replace a political critique of phallic/sadistic dominance with a counteraesthetic that values pre-oedipal/masochistic forms of merger, as does Studlar. It is more important, Modleski argues, to see how these sadistic and masochistic pleasures interrelate. Recent feminist film criticism has thus more fruitfully shifted to a model of bisexuality, of more fluid movements on the part of both male and female spectators that “alternate,” as Teresa de Lauretis has put it, between masculine and feminine identifications. Such a model can permit us to understand previously overlooked passive/identifying/masochistic pleasures of male viewers and the active/objectifying/sadistic pleasures of female viewers. But it can only be helpful, as Modleski warns, so long as theories of spectatorial bisexuality are not considered apart from larger relations of power that devalue femininity and ultimately repress male masochism.

A relevant model of how we might consider the confluence of sadism and
masochism in sadomasochistic film pornography can be found in Carol J. Clover's study of the exploitation horror films that we have already seen to "encroach" on violent pornography. Clover argues that although these films invite an apparently sadistic viewer identification with knife-wielding male killers, audience identification shifts away from the killer and toward the "Final Girl": the girl who will be terrorized by the killer but will resourcefully fight back and survive, destroying the killer in the end—at least until the next sequel.33

The typical male adolescent viewer of these films does not necessarily identify "with men" and "against women," Clover argues, since the "Final Girl" is clearly an active hero (not a passively rescued heroine) even in her most extreme moments of victimization. Clover also emphasizes the ambiguous gender of both the killer (his confused sexuality or impotence borrowed from the Psycho model) and the final girl (her androgyny, sexual inactivity, difference from the rest of the girls) to conclude that the killer is a feminine-male while the final girl is a masculine-female. This female “victim/hero” will prevail over the feminine-male to wield the knife and castrate him. Viewers are thus temporarily put in a passive feminine position through identification with the aggressed upon and terrified female “victim/heroes” to experience a masochistic pleasure of identifying with helplessness.34

Clover's analysis of the slasher movie suggests that there is often a more complex “play” of gender roles in films and fantasies than can be accounted for by an appeal to a sadistic “male gaze” or to a pre-oedipal masochistic merger. “Abject terror” is “gendered feminine,” she writes, and it is a pleasure mixed with the vicarious threat of pain; for the adolescent male viewer it is a perverse visual pleasure repeated in slasher film after slasher film but always resolved by the “female victim/hero” triumphantly wielding the knife/chainsaw/phallus at the end. To Clover this triumph is a moment of “high drag” potentially subversive of normal hierarchies of male dominance and female submission: for not only does the woman wield the phallus, but the male viewer has temporarily submitted to feminized, masochistic identification.35 Though there are problems with the subversive emphasis of this analysis,36 Clover’s notion of the heightened “play” of gender roles in place of the literal biological sex of male and female, and her idea that the slasher film “solves” oedipal problems for the sexually anxious adolescent male viewer by permitting a more fluid movement between positions of masculine/feminine, active/passive, sadistic/masochistic, and oedipal/pre-oedipal, may help us to understand similar structures operating for male (and, in different ways, for female) viewers of sadomasochistic pornography.

In hard-core film and video the hero with whom the viewer is asked to identify is only rarely the male. Male activity and pleasure are generally taken for granted in hard core. In heterosexual pornography it is the female, in her mixed function of activity and passivity, who most interests the genre. This single fact of the female hero (versus heroine) deserves emphasis. Nonviolent hard-core por-
nography in which sadomasochism does not figure may be one of the few film
genres that at the level of narrative alone does not regularly punish the woman
for actively seeking her sexual pleasure. In the slasher film, sexual pleasure and
heroic activity are, as we have seen, mutually exclusive. It has thus far been an
iron-clad rule of this subgenre that the only way the female victim/hero can gain
power against her assailant is to be the asexual “good” girl. And her only recourse
in the struggle against her assailant is to take up the phallus herself—as weapon
rather than instrument of pleasure—to join them in order to beat them, as it
were.

In contrast, in sadomasochistic pornography the sexual female “victim/
heroes” survive, not by avoiding sexual pleasure but by being punished in it.
When the female victim cringes at the phallic power of the dominator, she gains
a power over this dominator that resembles the momentary power of the slasher
film’s victim/hero. Yet while these slasher victim/heroes do not so much defeat
the power of the phallus as take over its power in drag, in sadomasochistic film
and video the woman engages in a more self-conscious strategy of role playing:
by playing the role of the “good girl,” that is, by pretending to be good and
corrupted into sex, the woman who is tortured and punished by the phallic domi-
nator gets the “bad girl’s” pleasure. She gets this pleasure as if against her will and
thus as if she were still a “good girl.” Thus by pretending to succumb to the
authority of the male double standard that condemns and punishes women for
pleasure, she partially subverts the system; though she must pay obeisance to a
system of value that condemns her for her pleasure, she does not forego pleasure
altogether.

This question of women’s pleasure—whether in the actual experience, the
representation, or the fantasy of sexual submission—has been deemed unthink-
able by many radical feminists, despite the fact that many women testify to expe-
riencing such pleasure in their sexual relations, as readers and viewers and in
fantasy. It would seem that in regarding film and video pornography empha-
sizing domination and submission that sadism is not the whole story even for the
pleasure male viewers take in such representations. There is an obvious need to
attempt to understand masochism for both men and women. The starting point
for this understanding of masochistic pleasure for the woman depicted in the
film and the woman viewer of the film must be that masochism is a strategy for
negotiating pleasure from a position of relative powerlessness. It is obvious that
pornography in general, and sadomasochistic pornography especially, does not
treat men and women’s bodies equally. But rather than saying that pornography
should treat these bodies equally we should examine what the strategy accom-
plishes. For it is also obvious that women have not come into their sexual identities
or experienced sexual pleasure in situations of absolute equality. This repre-
sented lack of equality is not necessarily a misrepresentation of men and women’s
sexual experience. There is even a sense in which the sadomasochistic encounters

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staged in these films dramatize a truth about sexual relations that is obscured by other forms of “happy sex” pornography: that the experience of power, pleasure, and pain is different for women than it is for men; that women experience less power and more pain in their pleasure. I do not argue that this situation is right or that it is unchangeable, but it is important to recognize that radical feminist claims about the equality of men and women in sex miss what legal theorist Robin West has termed the phenomenological difference of “women’s hedonic lives.”

Sadomasochistic pornography dramatizes and renders visible these differences in a way that other forms of pornography founded on blithe “post-sexual-revolution” premises of the equality of opportunity for pleasure do not. For if women’s experience of sexuality is different, if, as West puts it, women suffer both more and differently than men for biological and social reasons, and if women have derived pleasure from some of these situations and in some cases need to be dominated in order to have pleasure, it does no good at all simply to condemn or deny the experience. We need to try to understand what the experience of masochism is for women. The difficulty is that, as in so many other things, it has primarily been theorized by, and for, men.

Gilles Deleuze’s study of literary masochism is a case in point. Though an important reconsideration of masochism that clearly differentiates it from sadism, Deleuze assumes the subject of both sadistic and masochistic pornographies to be male. Women only figure in this theory of masochism as objects to male subjects: what the sadistic (male) subject desires is repudiation of the mother from whom he wishes to differentiate himself and acceptance by the father and phallic law; what the masochistic (male) subject desires is merger and fusion with the mother and subversion of the father’s phallic law. What the female masochistic subject wants and how she gets it is left unexamined.

Deleuze argues that masochism has its genesis in the male child’s alliance with the powerful oral mother of the pregenital stage. Here the child’s fear is that he will lose the nurturing all-powerful figure of his initial oral gratifications. Instead of expelling his ego and punishing victims who represent this rejected ego (as the sadist does), he splits the ego into narcissistic and ideal halves and expels the superego, which will then assume the role of his torturer. Thus the male masochist disavows adult genital pleasure and his own similarity to the father because possession of the phallus prevents his return to an infantile sexuality and re-fusion with the oral mother.

Exaggerated masochistic suffering is like a show put on for the benefit of the superego; it disguises the masochist’s complicity in the contracted alliance with his female torturer. This masochistic contract reverses the normal patriarchal order in which the woman is only an object. Although the woman torturer in this psychoanalytic formulation is only a player in a male fantasy, she is a player who exercises power over the man. Accounts of the pre-oedipal story behind mas-
Ochism helps explain the function of violence in the sadomasochistic scenarios described above. Unlike the brutal coercion of the Sadean orgy and its misogynist crimes of incest, sodomy, and matricide, the violence of masochism is contractual. In all three types of sadomasochistic pornography described above—amateur, sadie-max, and aesthetic—violence invariably arises out of a contract between dominator and dominated. Although the physical violence may be extreme, its effect hinges upon careful timing, the suspense and anxiety of prolonged suffering, delayed consummations, surprise gestures of either cruelty or tenderness (the whipping of Anne followed by the careful tending of her wounds), frequent role playing, and inversions of hierarchies leading to confusion regarding who is really in power.

Sadistic practice and fantasy can thus be viewed as patriarchal power run rampant: the negation of the difference of the mother and the exaltation of the power of the father who is beyond all law. In no way does the sadistic subject solicit the pleasure of his victim. In this sense it is not accurate to speak of the complementarity of sadistic and masochistic pleasures. Both sadist and masochist seek recognition in the eyes of their sexual objects, but where the sadist seeks recognition by negating this object, the masochist seeks it through complex masquerades played to the superego and designed to give the appearance of passive submission.

What is tricky about masochism, however, is that this search for recognition through apparent passivity is a ruse intended to disavow what the masochist actually knows to exist but plays the game of denying—his (or her) very real sexual agency and pleasure. It is in the degree of this agency and the nature of this pleasure that male and female masochists differ. Psychoanalyst Robert Stoller writes of a female patient whose recurring erotic fantasy featured theatrical pain and humiliation during sex, which Stoller claims functioned as a smokescreen to convince a hypothetical (superego) audience of her lack of complicity in the sexual relation. The patient’s evident submission to a greater power allowed her to preserve a facade of integrity and morality in the face of orgasms that she could then claim not to have willed.

Because women have so often been presumed not to have sexual agency, to be objects and not subjects of desire, masochism has often been taken as the “norm” for women under patriarchy—as if women only suffered the sexual pleasure of others. But we need to recognize the extent to which this “suffering” is also a performance to both self and others; for suffering in sex has not only been the way women have often experienced sex, it has also been the way women negotiate pleasure while submitting to patriarchal law. To a certain extent, then, and it is certainly important to see how this is more true for the male than for the female, masochism represents a subversion of this law, a devious act of defiance. As Deleuze puts it, “The very law which forbids the satisfaction of a desire under
the threat of subsequent punishment is converted into one which demands the punishment first and then orders that the satisfaction of the desire should follow upon the punishment."42

Deleuze views masochism as a conspiracy between mother and son to replace the father with the mother as the figure of power. But as Kaja Silverman has noted of Deleuze’s study and other “utopian” interpretations of male masochism’s challenge to paternal law, this exaltation of the powerful pre-oedipal mother does not mean that mother and son are free of oedipal power. The disavowal of phallic power that the male masochist achieves is itself determined by the oedipal power in which it suspends belief. “Here, as elsewhere,” Silverman writes, “perversion reflects what it undermines.”43 Thus male masochism both reflects and subverts oedipal law.

No equivalent subversion is available to the female masochist, who, as Silverman notes, seems less perverse precisely because masochistic desires seem so culturally “natural” to the prescribed sexual passivity of female subjects. It would seem, on the surface at least, that for women masochism simply offers the “good girl” pleasures that are contingent upon either previous or accompanying punishments which absolve the supposedly desireless woman of responsibility and blame for pleasures she nevertheless enjoys.

Sadism and masochism can thus be viewed initially as (theoretically) separable, though related, perversions of the desire for recognition by an other; in sadism this other is the father, in masochism it is the pre-oedipal mother. Deleuze and Stoller argue that the two perversions are, in practice and in fantasy, rigorously separate. I am less convinced of this divisability, and of the attendant strict separation of male sexuality as active and female sexuality as passive.

I suggest that when a female spectator looks at a woman who submits to the power of another in a contractual sadomasochistic scenario, she may not identify with this woman as pure, passive victim any more than the male viewer of the slasher film identifies with the phallic, knife-wielding killer. Neither masochistic nor sadistic identification is absolute and exclusive of the other.44 For it is always clear in these scenarios that the tortured woman has contracted with another whom she trusts and to whom she will play the role of suffering woman. Unlike our Snuff example, viewer identification with the suffering woman is not simply identification with pain, suffering, and negation—with being the object of someone else’s desire or aggression. Nor is this identification solely with the woman who is tortured.

As Parveen Adams argues in a recent reconsideration of female masochism, this perversion should not be aligned with subordination, passivity, and femininity in fixed opposition to a sadistic superordination, activity, and masculinity.45 Adams goes to the heart of how the female spectator might “identify” with the woman in the masochistic scenario in raising difficult questions concerning the formation of sexual identity not dealt with by Freud. She conceives of sexual iden-
tity as an oscillation between male and female subject positions held simultaneously in a play of bisexuality at the level of both object choice and identification.

Adams reworks the beating scenario in Freud’s 1919 article “A Child Is Being Beaten” to show that identification with any one of the three roles posited by this scenario—beater, beaten, or onlooker—is not dependent on a fixed masculine or feminine identity and the sexual object choice that presumably follows from them. Citing several cases of sexual fantasy on the part of female hysterics, including the much discussed unconscious fantasy of “Freud’s Dora” of a scene of sexual gratification per os (by the mouth), Adams argues that it is in the very nature of fantasy to permit multiple identifications with the full gamut of positions within the scene imagined. It is not true, she claims, that if Dora identifies with her father in this fantasy that she takes up a masculine position, or if she identifies with Frau K. that she takes up a feminine position. Freud’s error in this case, and in terms of masochism in general, Adams argues, is that he too rigidly assumed that identification—the very process by which subjects say “I am like him or her”—was linked to, and produced by, object choice—the process by which subjects say “I like him or her.” Dora is both subject and object of the fantasy of oral gratification; she is, as Adams puts it, both sucker and sucked. Her bisexual identification with the various roles in the scenario is not limited by her male and female object choice.46

Given this play of bisexuality at the level of object choice and identification, Adams maintains that male and female subjects experience both a mother identification and a father identification between which they oscillate. Freud was “right in thinking that the positions of femininity, masculinity, perversion, can be defined through the subject’s relation to the phallus” but “wrong in thinking that these positions can be defined in terms of the oscillatory pairs.”47 Oscillation is movement between; Adams’s lesson about the importance of oscillation would seem to be that there is no such thing as pure masochistic fusion with the object of identification for male or female masochists. Thus one answer to the question of how the female spectator identifies with the scenario in which the female masochist is tortured is, first of all, that she does not only and exclusively identify with the woman who is beaten. She may also, simultaneously, identify with the beater or with herself as onlooker. And even if she did only identify with this woman, she might identify alternately or simultaneously with her pleasure and/or her pain. The woman viewer of sadomasochistic pornography may be in closer “contact” with the suffering of the female victim/hero, but she is not condemned, as Mary Ann Doane has argued with respect to the woman viewer of classic women’s films, to lose herself in pure abandonment, pain, or pre-oedipal merger.48 The crucial point is not to subsume one gender-inflected form of desire or pleasure within another but to see how they interrelate. Nor is it to argue an equality of the two perversions. There seems no question that phallic power and sadistic mastery dominate: the father is the one with ultimate power. But it is also clear

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that there are elements of an active subjectivity at work in masochism, that masochism is a perversion whose passivity has been overestimated.

The mere presence of violence in pornography does not mean that the representation is essentially sadistic, nor does it mean that it cannot proffer pleasure to female viewers. Feminists must, I believe, recognize that the representations of violence that have generated so much heated discussion in debates about pornography are enjoyed by male and female spectators alike who, owing to their different (but not rigidly fixed) gendered identifications and object choices, find both power and pleasure in identifying not only with a sadist’s control but also with a masochist’s abandon. For all of the reasons outlined thus far, it seems to me preferable to employ the term sadomasochistic when describing the fantasies that inform these films. While still problematic, the term at least keeps in play the oscillation between active and passive, male and female subject positions rather than fixing one pole or the other as the essence of the viewer’s experience. At the same time, it does not allow us to forget where ultimate power lies.

Since masochism is such a “norm” for female behavior under patriarchy, it would seem that the utopian component in such pornographic fantasies—of escape from the usual constraints on power and pleasure—would be less in evidence for women than for men. But sadomasochistic fantasy for (and often by) women does not necessarily mean the increased domination of sadism. It more likely means an awareness of the role of power in pleasure. It is precisely this role that traditional (sexually “good”) women have been taught to ignore. Sadomasochistic fantasy offers one important way in which individuals whose desires have not been recognized as legitimate by patriarchy explore the often mysterious conjunction of power and pleasure in intersubjective sexual relations.

Another appropriate generic analogy here is thus not only to horror but also to romance fiction. A persistent theme of much early feminist criticism of romance fiction has been to suggest, with varying degrees of disapproval or acceptance, that mass-market romance is in fact but another form of masochistic pornography. Ann Barr Snitow argues that in romance fiction female protagonists successfully negotiate the sexual danger of situations to which they would like to submit by hiding their desires under the passivity of conventional “good girl” qualities of nurturance and virginity. The narrative eventually rewards the heroine for being a “good” girl with the marriage proposal of the hard, inscrutable, and sometimes cruel phallic male. The “difference” that Snitow locates in romance fiction’s pornography has to do with the play of being a “good girl” and, through the performance of that role, achieving what one really desires.

More recent work has concentrated on how female readers identify with such heroines. Tania Modleski has argued that the narrative form of such romances “solves” the contradictory situation of heroines who would be considered “scheming little adventuresses” if they directly pursued the wealthy and powerful men they desire. The narrative “solution” has the naive heroine misrecognizing
her real desires; she may think she hates this cold and inscrutable male, but, as every female reader knows, her hatred, fear, and suffering mingle with, and mask, desire. This self-deception saves her from the self-conscious duplicity exercised by many “good girls” in courtship. The pleasure of the reader, then, might derive from knowing better than the heroine where her true pleasure lies while still sympathizing with her confusion.

The heroines of these works could best be described as unconscious masochists who misrecognize their own desires. Yet an interesting recent phenomenon of mass-market romance fiction for women has been the transformation of the passive victim/heroine of the late seventies Harlequins and “bodice rippers” into a more knowingly desirous, active, sexually adventurous female hero. This “romance revolution,” as Carol Thurston calls it, in which the latent sexual content of earlier romance is translated into a much more explicit eroticism, was achieved partly as a result of reader pressure on writers. The end of the female heroine and the beginning of the sexually adventurous and sexually self-conscious female hero resulted in the new convention of a great many comparatively explicit sex scenes focused not only on the woman’s active sexual pleasure but on her unashamed knowledge of this pleasure.52

Of interest in this “revolution” is the process by which female readers began to reject a politically unacceptable powerlessness in the unconscious masochism of earlier romance heroines and to recognize that the original form of the genre held a submerged sadistic pleasure in the suffering of the hard phallic male who, although he couldn’t show it, was underneath, as Modleski puts it, “grovelling, grovelling, grovelling.”53 The expression of this suffering now seems to be a necessary ingredient in the make-up of the genre’s male heroes, who must give ample evidence of their feminine and masochistic “vulnerability” before they can truly be sexy and earn the woman’s love.54

As female readers of mass-market romance came to recognize the politically unacceptable masochistic self-deceptions of the genre’s heroines, they began to demand new fictions in which men would be more like women and women more like men. Narratives with female heroes knowingly engaged in sadomasochistic games of power and pleasure with more “vulnerable” male love objects began to appear. I believe that something akin to this more self-consciously aware mixture of active and passive roles occurs in sadomasochistic film pornography as well. To examine this possibility, let us return to some of our examples of aesthetic sadomasochism.

In The Story of Joanna the aristocratic male dying of a mysterious disease at first seems cruel and sadistic to the woman he initiates into rituals of domination. As the film continues, however, we begin to glimpse Jason’s suffering and Joanna’s growing power until, at the end, Joanna becomes his murderer, fulfilling his desire to die at the hand of one who loves him. Jason thus begins the film as “sadist” to Joanna’s “masochist,” but these roles are not fixed. We soon learn of
Jason's secret vulnerability, and we see Joanna's secret pleasure in her humiliation. At the end their roles are reversed: Joanna has become the cold dispenser of punishment, Jason is her victim. In a “confused” middle section of the film before this reversal, however, a remarkable scene occurs that suggests the extent to which fixed sexual identities can be upset by the play of sadomasochistic pleasures.

Jason, who has not been feeling well, receives a massage from his butler. Gradually, and without Jason's asking for it, the butler's massage turns into fellatio. Jason is naked and supine; the butler, who has previously performed sexual acts with Joanna at Jason's bidding, is fully clothed and shows no evidence of sexual arousal himself. Jason's only activity is to place his hand on the butler's shoulder. The act is not continued to orgasm.

This male-to-male fellatio is quite exceptional in feature-length heterosexual pornography. Why does it occur here? Possibly the greater bisexuality and role playing involved in sadomasochistic scenarios permits the admission of such a scene. Up until this point in the film, Jason has been in absolute control. But his desire is not the sadist's desire to seek control by annihilating the woman who represents the woman in himself. Rather, it is the sadomasochistic desire to use his initial control to place himself into the power of another, to be “released into abandon by another who remains in control,” as Jessica Benjamin puts it.55

For the male viewer, identification with either participant in such a scene threatens conventional heterosexual male identity perceived as mastery and control—hence the rarity of these scenes in hard-core films. Yet it is precisely this propensity to upset fixed forms of heterosexual identity organized around phallic mastery—that it is important to understand in sadomasochistic pornography. The Story of Joanna does not subvert phallic mastery, but it does play with it. Jason remains the true power in the narrative, even though his power lies, perversely, in his ability to get Joanna to destroy him.

In The Punishment of Anne, our final example of aesthetic sadomasochism, the dominated Anne would seem to offer a female figure who encourages “pure” masochistic overidentification with a female victim. To the extent that a female viewer identifies only with Anne, this interpretation would be appropriate. But in this film about Claire and Jean's sadistic punishment of the masochistic Anne we gradually learn that Anne is something of a cypher—an image manipulated by Claire to seduce Jean. At the beginning of the film Claire plays the role of Anne's dominator; her goal, however, is to educate Jean in how she wishes him to dominate her. In other words, although Claire, with her whip, needles, and black leather outfits, seems to be the “Sadean woman,” a closer look reveals her to be what Deleuze calls the sadist in the masochistic story. This sadomasochistic scenario in which Claire originally plays the role of the sadist, then, turns out to be not Anne's story, as the film's title suggests, but Claire and Jean's.

When Claire shows Jean the black-and-white photos of “the punishment of
Anne,” she uses these images of Anne’s contorted body to fascinate Jean with the oscillation between pleasure and pain, artifice and reality, so crucial to masochistic pleasure. His voice-over reaction, which alternates between admiration of the art involved and horror at the apparent pain displayed, is quoted almost directly from Jean de Berg’s novel.

The next picture, extremely fascinating in its horror, despite the somewhat romantic exaggeration, could only be the result of a trick. But it was done so well that one could easily be fooled, especially since the contortions of the victim were so convincing. . . . The next is an apparently logical conclusion. The tortured body of the girl, apparently lifeless, is stretched out. . . . Claire’s skill as a photographer is apparent in her loving attention to detail.56

Jean’s description registers a tension between the knowledge of artifice and the contrary belief in its reality, a tension that is the essence of the masochist’s dramatic exhibition of suffering in secret pursuit of pleasure. Jean’s final appreciation of Claire’s skill as a photographer, as well as the play of glances between them as Claire watches Jean’s excitement at the images she has made, indicates her control of the scene, her power to manipulate his desire so as to please them both. But the film holds in store the revelation of the more complex and indirect route of Claire’s desires. We get a hint of these desires when we infer that Claire includes a photo of herself—a hand masturbating a pubis—with those of Anne, and when she breaks with her role of cold, inscrutable manipulator to become momentarily embarrassed and nervous when Jean asks if these photos are of another woman. The film will teach us that this substitution of her “image” for that of Anne is her indirect route to pleasure, and that her present, temporary, role as sadist is part of a larger picture of sadomasochistic manipulation of appearance and desire.

Deleuze’s claim that the masochist expels “his” superego and then casts it in the role of his torturer seems to apply here to Claire’s expulsion of the torturer in herself. This part is assigned to Jean, who learns to play it to perfection. The education of one person in the sexual fantasy of another through complex role playing cued to works of art and imagination is arguably the most distinctive feature of sadomasochistic fantasy. (This, rather than physical punishment, is the most typical element of the writing of Sacher-Masoch and of the films I call aesthetic sadomasochism.) Here it is as if Claire’s early excess of superego, her calculated creation and manipulation of the photographic images, and the even greater design that teaches Jean the proper response to the image she will present to him are all investments in a future pleasure of abandon, the gratification of which is suspended until the film’s final scene. Deleuze writes, “Masochism is a story that relates how the superego was destroyed and by whom, and what was the sequel to this destruction.”57 The sequel, in this case, is the projected utopia of Claire’s pleasurable “abandon to another who will remain in control”; it is played out in
the final scene where Claire takes on Anne’s former role and seeks recognition from Jean, who must now dominate her rather than Anne. So while the film ends with the spectacle of female victimization by a male dominator, the sadomasochistic components of Claire’s desire reveals a pleasure that is quite actively of her own making. Claire’s oscillation between sadist and masochist ultimately tips toward merger and recognition over separation and differentiation. This strategy, moreover, does not depend on the phallus—as actor and ultimate subject of the scenario—to achieve its goals.

Phallic acts in the usual hard-core sense of visible evidence of penetration and ejaculation are, in fact, deemphasized in this, and in most, sadomasochistic films. Jean’s erect penis is sometimes visible, but we never see it penetrating Anne or Claire, even in the final number on the stairs. Strictly speaking, sadomasochistic pornography, because it is structured upon fantasy, is ultimately about the relation to images (and to shifting sexual identities) rather than to organs, as The Punishment of Anne reveals.

Though phallic acts are curtailed (The Punishment of Anne), though the penis itself may be challenged in its heterosexual identity (The Story of Joanna), the phallus nevertheless continues to function in these works as the articulator of meaning and difference. Sadomasochistic film pornography cannot challenge phallic dominance head on. But it is a genre that reveals a remarkable awareness of power’s role in pleasure. The ending of The Punishment of Anne illustrates this well. When Claire arrives at Jean’s apartment in Anne’s schoolgirl clothes, he immediately recognizes her in her new role as the dominated one. He asks, “What’s my name?” In answering “Jean” while abandoning herself to this other who will now remain in control, Claire recognizes him in his new dominant relation to her—a relation that she herself has fashioned. The appeal to recognition by an “other,” the desire for merger, transcendence through suffering—these are the qualities shared to different degrees by all the sadomasochistic films discussed in this essay. In each, the solution to the problem of the protagonist’s desire is to yield to the more powerful other, and at some point the dominator invariably claims to recognize the dominated in his or her way of taking pleasure. It is for this pleasure that the dominated one is tortured, and it is in this torture that he or she finds, perversely—but perhaps more self-knowingly than in forms of unconscious masochism such as the pre-“revolutionary” romance fiction—yet more pleasure.

The rise of sadomasochism in the full variety of its forms may very well indicate some partial, yet important, challenges to patriarchal power and pleasure. In the genre of film and video pornography, S/M’s emphasis on oscillating positions over strict sexual identities, and its extension of sexual norms to include sadomasochistic play and fantasy, suggest a regime of relative differentiations over absolute difference. Some of the apocalyptic force of much sadomasochistic pornography undoubtedly derives from these challenges to phallic laws that
stand for fixed dichotomization. Historically these are the same laws that have
told women that sexual pleasure makes them “bad” girls. They are laws that must
be destroyed if women are to find power and pleasure without being over-
whelmed by the phallus. Sadomasochistic pleasures do not destroy these laws.
Like the slasher film, sadomasochistic pornography is still caught up in the cul-
tural law that divides the “good” girls from the “bad.” The slasher film kills off
the sexually active “bad girls,” treating them as the victim/heroines who cannot
save themselves, and reserves heroic action to the sexually inactive “good girl”
victim/heroes. Sadomasochistic pornography, in contrast, combines the “good”
and “bad” girl into one person. Where the passive “good” girl still needs to prove
to the audience of the superego that her orgasms are not willed, the active “bad”
girl is the author and director of the spectacle of coercion designed to fool the
superego, and part of her pleasure lodges in the very fact that this superego
knows she enjoys it.

This essay has attempted to go part of the way toward an understanding of
the pleasures available to male and female viewers of these sadomasochistic sexual
fantasies on film and video. It has also tried to explicate what, within a feminist
perspective, has often seemed inexplicable. Sadomasochistic pleasures do not
obey feminist goals of equality and autonomy; they serve to remind us, however,
of how out of line these goals can sometimes be with feminine characteristics of
merger and transcendence often valued in other contexts. It is important to be
very clear that what is censorable in these representations are not the desires that
motivate either sadistic or masochistic fantasy or practice, but the sexual violence
that disregards the will and the desire of another person. What is censorable,
in other words, is not the desire or the pleasure but harm enacted on a person who
does not consent. The possibility of real snuff films represents the most fright-
ening example of this lack of consent. But we only confuse issues if we conflate
the possibility of snuff with sadomasochistic film and video pornography.

Perhaps the most unthinkable aspect of the specter of snuff is not the sadism
of male viewers identifying with murderers, but the masochism of women viewers
identifying with an annihilated surrogate. My point is not that this is a politically
incorrect pleasure, but that it is an impossible one. For we have seen that without
a modicum of power, without a little leeway for play within assigned sexual roles,
and without the possibility of some intersubjective give and take and bisexual
movement between gender roles, there is no pleasure. For the masochist as well
as the sadist, there is no pleasure without some power.

Sadomasochistic fantasy’s obsessive repetition of hierarchical, nonmutual
forms of power and pleasure certainly flies in the face of feminist goals of equality.
These are the very same hierarchies that have traditionally prevented women
from actively seeking their pleasure, or that have forced them to pay for it with
pain in advance. But sadomasochistic fantasy recognizes the role of power in the
woman’s different, historically less autonomous, and often circuitous route to
pleasure. And in that recognition it is less the case of female "false consciousness" than it has been taken to be. Its prevalence in contemporary mass culture may even represent for women a new consciousness about the unavoidable role of power in sex, gender, and sexual representations and a new recognition that such power, like sexual identity itself, is not fixed.

Notes

This essay is a considerably condensed version of a chapter from my book on film and video pornography, Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible, forthcoming this fall from University of California Press. I would like to thank Carol J. Clover, Judith Kegan Gardiner, Lauren Berlant, and the University of Chicago Feminist Workshop for generous help with this, most difficult, section of the book.

2. Ibid., 1:16.
4. See, for example, Stanley Cavell, who asserts that the “ontological conditions of the cinema reveal it as inherently pornographic”; The World Viewed (Cambridge, 1974), 45. Stephen Marcus, also a realist, writes that the motion picture was what the genre of pornography “was all along waiting for,” since language had only been a “bothersome necessity”; The Other Victorians (New York, 1974), 208.
6. Ibid., 2:173.
8. A serious problem with most social-scientific evidence on the effects of the media is that it focuses on contents rather than forms of these media. Such studies rarely pay attention to how a particular film or video constructs its sex or violence, or indeed how the very experiments themselves participate in a belief in the ultimate measurability of behaviors and effects that is itself pornographic. These and many other questions are enormously important if we are to even begin to talk about “effects” on viewers.

Nevertheless, since both the Meese Commission and antipornography feminists cite the work of Edward Donnerstein, Neil Malamuth, and other researchers into the effects of media sex and violence as evidence of the harm of pornography, it is worth briefly noting what this evidence claims. Donnerstein, Daniel Linz, and Steven Penrod’s The Question of Pornography: Research Findings and Policy Implications (New York, 1987), published soon after the Meese Commission report, clearly dissociates itself from the conclusions of the commission, calling its recommendations “unwarranted extrapolations from the available research” (172). The most important of these is the assumption that violent pornography has increased over the years when there is no evidence that it has. In fact, studies show that since 1977 there has been a decrease in the depiction of sexual violence in pornography in general. Donnerstein et al. note, for example, that content studies of X-rated versus R-rated films show far more violence against women in the R-rated films, citing a study by T. S. Palys that found more “egalitarian” and “mutual” sexual depictions in X-rated films than in R-rated ones (90, 173). They conclude that concern about violent pornography has been overstated in such a way as to overlook more troubling combinations of nonpornographic depic-
tions of sex in conjunction with aggression (iv). This is not to deny any reason for concern about violent pornography. Donnerstein's own experiments indicate that in a laboratory situation male subjects exposed to visual forms of violent pornography—either film depictions of rape that leave the question of the woman's reaction ambiguous or depictions that show her enjoying it—were more likely to administer electric shocks to female victims than to male victims, and they were more likely to administer shocks than male subjects not exposed to sexual violence. (This same study also showed that exposure to nonviolent but explicit sex had no effect on the aggressive behavior of subjects; 94). Donnerstein et al. conclude that there is no clear evidence that violent images of rape cause males to go out and commit rape. They are more confident in concluding that attitudes toward women—as opposed to behavior toward them—can be changed by viewing such films. But they add that attitudinal changes such as the belief that rapists are not responsible for their acts or that women enjoy rape are less a function of sexually explicit images than of the pervasive images of victimized women prevalent in all sorts of nonpornographic media (174). Donnerstein's own opinion that there is no conclusive evidence that viewers of violent aggression in pornography are led to commit such aggression in life can be taken as one "scientifically" accepted statement of inconclusion about the effects of pornography.


11. Ibid., 198, 205.

12. In my book on hard-core film and video pornography I argue that pornography, as one of the many modern discourses of sexuality about which Foucault writes in his History of Sexuality (New York, 1976), is like these other discourses a form of knowledge, pleasure (a pleasure in knowing pleasure), and power.


14. The Findlays are described in an article in Incredibly Strange Films, Re/Search 10 (1986): 193, as the "most notorious filmmakers in the annals of sexploitation." Bizarre death scenes were their trademark. Titles from the sixties include the "Flesh Trilogy": The Touch of Her Flesh, The Curse of Her Flesh, and The Kiss of Her Flesh. Shortly after the release of Snuff Michael Findlay was accidentally decapitated by a helicopter.


16. As noted above, some of Donnerstein's most convincing examples of the harmful effects of media on aggressive behavior in male viewers comes from horror films; Donnerstein et al., Question of Pornography, 90–91.


18. It is worth noting that these works diverge from the mass of contemporary hard-core pornography on film and video produced since the early seventies in precisely this focus on a single, prolonged, sadomasochistic number rather than on a variety of sexual numbers dispersed throughout a narrative.

19. In this study I examine heterosexual pornography only. In most hard-core narrative pornography on film and video some sort of sexual problem is introduced toward the beginning of the film. It is usually the business of a variety of sexual numbers performed in relation to narrative contexts to "solve" these problems.


21. Lillian Gish explains proudly in her autobiography that the idea of trailing her hand...
was her own idea: “I was always having bright ideas and suffering for them”; The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me (New York, 1969), 233.


23. See Linda Lovelace and Mike McGrady, Ordeal (New York, 1980).


34. Ibid., 207, 210–12. 35. Ibid., 212.

36. I have argued elsewhere about the genre of the horror film—though not about slasher films—that at the moment the woman in the film looks back at the monster who has stalked her she too becomes monstrous, a freak like him. My point is that although there is a potential subversion in the striking affinity and look of recognition between the woman and monster, this subversion is recuperated by the alignment of woman with/as monster. Clover’s point about slashers is that this subgenre spawns a new bisexual strength in the female victim hero not evident in the films I discuss. I think she is right about the relatively greater female bisexual empowerment in slashers, but a question of the degree of subversion afforded by texts in which female sexuality is so rigorously punished when in evidence remains. Linda Williams, “When the Woman Looks,” in Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism, eds. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Williams (Los Angeles, 1984), 96.


38. Ibid., 128.


40. Ibid., 52.


42. Deleuze, Masochism, 77.


44. Writing about the female spectator of classical narrative cinema, Mary Ann Doane has argued that “the masochism of over-identification” is an untenable position for the spectator, placing her too close to the image, denying her the distance so important to male identification, mastery, and pleasure; “Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator,” Screen 23, nos. 3–4 (1982): 87. Doane’s formulation presumes the operation of, on the one hand, a pure sadism (which is dominant and the only tenable
position for spectators) and, on the other, a pure masochism (which is nondominant and ultimately unpleasurable). Doane goes on to say, however, that the strategy many women employ when faced with either a narcissistic or a masochistic overidentification and closeness to the self culturally assigned to women is that of masquerade. Through the “masquerade of femininity” women “manufacture a distance from the image” (87) that enables the further manipulation and production of images. Although Doane conceives this masquerade as a defense against masochism that escapes the fixed position of being (over)identified with the suffering and victimized woman, I think it may be more accurate to say that this masquerade is part of the very nature of a masochism, which has been too often understood as a fixed position of absolute passivity and powerless suffering. In other words, what Doane conceives as a limited way out of the untenable position of the masochist—and by extension of femininity itself—is an oscillation within sadomasochism that is not identical to pure passivity.

46. Ibid., 17–18.
47. Ibid., 28.
52. Carol Thurston notes, for example, that in one romance (Corbin's Fancy, 1985), there are eleven episodes of intercourse, five of cunnilingus, and four of fellatio—in 270 pages; The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity (Urbana, Ill., 1987), 142.
54. Thurston, Romance Revolution, 25.
55. Jessica Benjamin, “A Desire of One’s Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Intersubjective Space,” in Feminist Studies/Critical Studies, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington, Ind., 1986), 97. Benjamin describes the pleasure of self-abandonment as acting out a desire for recognition that ultimately fails, leaving us “encapsulated in our subjective bubble, having fantasies about one another” (93). I would not emphasize this failure of recognition, since all desire must fall short, by definition, of the sort of real recognition Benjamin posits. Instead I would emphasize the powerful appeal of sadomasochistic “solutions” to the problems of recognition.
57. Deleuze, Masochism, 112.