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Masochism, or The Cruel Mother in Maria Beatty’s Pornography

‘You are dreaming,’ she cried. ‘Wake Up!’ She grasped my arm with her marble hand. ‘Wake up’ she repeated, this time, in a low, gruff voice.

Von Sacher-Masoch

Introduction: Performing Masochism

This essay proposes a theory of women’s sexuality and eroticism as conceived in masochistic screen performances. The essay will center around the work of Maria Beatty, an internationally renowned masochist performer and independent filmmaker who works at the edges of the New York porn industry, having been nurtured by an older generation of performance artists such as Carolee Schneemann and Annie Sprinkle, and as a professional submissive by the dominant school of New York dominatrixes. In this essay, the theory of masochism applies to performance and film aesthetics, and is primarily derived from recent analyses of Gilles Deleuze’s *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, an introduction to Von Sacher-Masoch’s diaries which was originally published in 1967. Although Deleuze’s study has been developed into a comprehensive film theory for classical narrative film by Gaylyn Studlar in *In The Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (1988), the aim of this essay is to examine such theory in light of a new generation of filmmakers and theorists, and the culture of lesbian pornographic short films and videos.

A central figure in Deleuze’s study is the ‘cruel mother’ as a larger than life archetype and proponent of anti-reason who participates in sexual politics by obsessively carving out new zones of the sexual body and bodily awareness. The essay will explain ‘masochism’ as a gradual surrender to such ‘feminine’ body sculpting, resulting in desire which isolates fragments of the body and networks fragments between shifting erotogenic zones. The slow and ritualized process of networking zones (through pain and pleasure rituals) is the subject of Beatty’s porn repertoire as she represents masochism through stylized, fetishistic film aesthetics. The mother-figure also becomes a central trope in critiques of psycho-analytical theory such as Teresa de Lauretis’ study *The Practice of Love* (1994). De Lauretis shows that lesbianism is a sculpting of the body that does not rely on phallic
imaginaries. ‘Mother’ functions as an absent figure who does not consolidate the young woman’s existing body but creates experimental deviations and alternate zones. This process of disassembling and reassembling the female body is shown in Beatty’s lesbian s/m film *The Black Glove* (1996) as a peculiarly dark and primeval impulse. Both Deleuze and de Lauretis believe that such forces may lead to new types of bodily imaging, perception or even sexual politics. De Lauretis posits that a renewal of the female body occurs through ‘lesbian desire’, a doubling of the lost maternal body in other female bodies. (De Lauretis 1994: 25) Female bodies do not awaken this loss as negativity, but as limitless desire or searching for zones of the body which seem lost, are conjured up temporality, then lost again to fantasy. The essay will show that the body-visions of feminist and queer scholars such as Teresa de Lauretis, Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler are cinematically evoked in aspects of Maria Beatty’s pornography. As theorists have come up with structuralist definitions of the body which replace female gender and genitals with bodies as perverse textualities and sites of construction, Beatty’s movies show the ecstasies of pain and pleasure involved in exhibiting processes of construction – the raw somatic fragments and uncanny debris produced in private acts of erotic cruelty or societal dismemberment.

Current proponents of Deleuze’s study insist on his presentation of sadism and masochism as distinctive psychic modes of perversion and cultural practices. Masochism is no longer seen as a sexual strategy which leads to sadism, but as one which channels desire into consensual and formalized modes of performance. Deleuze brought a radical shift to Freudian psycho-analytic theory as he viewed masochism as a sexual game and an erotic meditation on the flawed nature of gender inscription and authoritarian law and order. Deleuze challenged Freud’s essay ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, in which he claimed that sadism and masochism were complementary perversions operating in one psyche, whereby masochism’s tendency to self-destruction develops a tendency to enact sadistic brutalities against others. Freud also equated sadism with the emergence of a gendered masculine subject, which would be a more natural development in the male. Deleuze critiqued Freud’s affirmation of a genital sexuality inherited from the father, and instead celebrated the masochist as a gender-fluid subject who desires an identification with the mother. Moreover, rather than enacting cruel compulsions onto others, the masochist develops introspective performance strategies for the renewal of his/her own sexual identity. Renewal occurs through an intense process of disorientation and bodily discomfort which Deleuze calls the ‘art of destruction’. This art of destruction requires