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POLITICS AND ACTION
ECHOES

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Aleš Bunta*

In Times of “Chastity”. An Inquiry into Some Recent Developments in the Field of Perversion¹

This essay is part of a project that has set out, as one of its primary approaches, to observe perversions as important indicators of broader changes and developments within society. I believe that both of the momenta I follow in this study meet all the requirements for such an inquiry. First, they are both recent – indeed, both can be seen to some extent as permanent social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which played an important role in both developments and even catalysed them to some degree. And second, both developments are massive and far-reaching enough that they can indeed be considered indicators of significant change.

The first development to be examined is what I will call *the decline of pornography*. At a time when all of society is increasingly becoming pornographic in so many ways, it sounds strange to talk about the decline of pornography. And yet pornography as a genre is, I believe, losing ground to something else – to a distinctly different system of unfolding sexuality and its economic exploitation.

The second development to be discussed is *the rise of masochism*. In this context, I will analyse certain reports that show that, especially since the outbreak of the pandemic, the number of people practicing masochistic “heavy play” has increased significantly. What can we say? It appears that in a period when one would expect people to be dreaming of the lifting of restrictions, freedom, or whatever, many have chosen to undertake the cruel path of “servitude”.

Eventually, I will show that these two developments are essentially connected, probably even consubstantial.

¹ This article is a result of research project J6-2589 “Structure and Genealogy of Perversion in Contemporary Philosophy, Politics, and Art” and the research program P6-0014 “Conditions and Problems of Contemporary Philosophy”, which are funded by the Slovenian Research Agency.

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The Obscene Surplus of YouTube Sexuality

Recently, a video entitled “Girl on tractor” appeared on YouTube and became an instant commercial success: five months after its initial release, the video was already approaching ten million views, and the numbers still seem to be steadily increasing.²

Clearly, this popularity must have something to do with “sex”. First, we cannot avoid the question of the sexism of the title. Of course, I am not suggesting that all the people who decided to click on the “Girl on tractor” video were male chauvinists who do not believe in women’s ability to drive a tractor, or who, more likely, found the idea of a woman sitting in the driver’s seat of a tractor – arguably still a place of great symbolic importance – so irritating that they simply could not resist watching it. Still, it is clear that the title grabs one’s attention by pointing out this “anomaly”. Eventually, the video itself dispels such preconceptions, as the tractorist Giulia is a true tractorist virtuoso: seeing her handle and manoeuvre her colossal Fendt Favorit 920 certainly explains what the video producer had in mind when he said that after watching the video we will all understand “*di che pasta è fatta questa ragazza, tanto bella quanto brava.*” In other words: by showing Giulia’s ability to perform even the most difficult harvesting manoeuvres on a challenging sloping terrain at high speed and with utmost precision, the video seems to ultimately score a moral victory over the likely sexist source of its success. And why not: perhaps in all that follows we see a kind of liberating profanation of one of patriarchal society’s most symbolically charged stools.³

The thumbnail, after all, also contains another, much more directly obscene lure: a giant vibrating, lurching, thrusting machine upon which sits the body of an attractive woman. In this respect, the video certainly does not fall short of viewers’ bawdier expectations.

246

² Killercrock 88, “Girl on tractor: Giulia and Fendt Favorit 920/ Sorghum Silage”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrfoBy88byI&t=629>, accessed 19 November 2020.

³ In a broad sense, I am referring to Agamben’s theory of profanation perceived as a political task for the coming generations. See: Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. J. Fort, Paris, Payot & Rivages, 2005, pp. 115–117.

Giulia, the tractor operator, is a good-looking young woman by all the usual standards (more on the delicate side, actually), clad in a low-cut black top that rather "generously" (but by no means exaggeratedly) reveals her chest. Initially, the camera is "conveniently" located near the top of the cockpit's front window, providing a "perfect view" into the depths of Giulia's cleavage. Later, the camera is moved over her right shoulder, to an angle that shows even more (or at least creates such an illusion). Especially when she turns – and she must turn constantly because her efforts must be coordinated with a companion combine pouring grain into the trailer of her tractor – one can get the impression that the fabric is going to slip completely off her breast (which, of course, never happens). Last but not least, a Fend Favorit 920 is a powerful machine that, despite its built-in hydraulic system, generates vibrations that create a very special dynamic in the aforementioned area. The difficulty of the bumpy terrain that the heavy machine has to cross contributes its part to this impression.

At a certain point, Giulia starts going downhill at very high speed: Her hydraulic driver's seat swings violently up and down, right in front of the viewer's eyes – and yet at this point I'm already becoming lewd, I'm imagining things, regardless of the fact that I'm basically just describing the video rather objectively, without adding much interpretation – because after all, what we are really looking at is just a person going about her daily work, in her normal work clothes, which actually seems quite appropriate for a hot, sunny summer day on the beautiful hills of Ascoli. The obscene undertone that seemed to surface for a moment – the fleeting impression that the video, describing a normal day in rural life, has suddenly morphed into some kind of futuristic, machine-driven cybersex experience – is not only repelled, but also somehow transferred to the narrator trying to describe it. Surprisingly enough, the video is far from vulgar; its atmosphere is probably best described as playful. There is no doubt that Giulia's quivering and writhing bosom is the focus of the entire 44-minute video; but over time, what the viewer initially perceives only peripherally – the surprising complexity of the various controls, the speed with which Giulia operates them, and the unusual sensation of floating high in the air in a capsule, probably caused by the size of the tractor and its hydraulics – gradually comes into focus and achieves a kind of equilibrium.

The reason I find the "Girl on tractor" video particularly interesting is that it provides us with an example of how sexuality is represented and deployed on

YouTube that must be considered both rather atypical and essentially paradigmatic. And the first reason I find it rather atypical lies in the fact that – given the commercial success of the video – it is actually *surprisingly modest* in terms of explicit nudity or explicit sexual behaviour. Considering that almost every sportswear try-on haul on YouTube involves widely-used routines like “squat-proofing” (a model in tight leggings positions herself in a low squat position directly in front of the camera so the viewer can check that the fabric is tight enough to prevent her crotch from showing), it almost strikes me as a kind of voyeuristic, retro-avant-garde act to peek into a woman’s blouse (which the “Girl on tractor” eventually has to offer). Hence: sure, the popularity of the video has something to do with “sex”, but the real question is more like: How is it possible that it has attracted so much attention with so little of it?

Micro-bikini try-ons, Russian masseurs, yoni yoga performers, fitness competitions, lingerie try-on hauls, sexually charged ASMR, twerking tutorials – given the amount of near-explicit nudity that regularly pops up on YouTube, it is a serious question indeed. But should we not also address this question to the entire realm of YouTube sexuality, considering the ultimate explicitness of pornography that the internet is literally awash with?

One type of statement describes the specific paradox that underlies this situation particularly well. I have heard it several times from various YouTube influencers who (among other things) produce content such as thong try-ons or lingerie try-ons. For example, one very popular content creator, Gwenn Gwiz, used to reproach viewers who only watched her videos to see her breasts and bottom: “Like I usually say, I would try all this [see-through lingerie] on video if it wasn’t for creeps. It’s just for someone who wants some lingerie and wants to know how it fits.”⁴ On one occasion, she even revealed that “there’s a little thing out there on the internet called PornHub,” which she highly recommended to all those viewers who, in her words, were looking for sexual relief at the wrong address.

Of course, such statements may be seen like extreme hypocrisy: the content creators on YouTube are regularly fed information about the gender makeup of their viewership, and unsurprisingly, things like thong try-ons are predom-

⁴ Gwengwizetc, “Victoria Secret & Adoreme try-on haul”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iCTEOilOdM&t=26s>, accessed 18 January 2019.

inantly viewed by men who are less concerned with the actual "clothing" than what these minimalist garments barely attempt to cover up. So, by supposedly sending away viewers who were only interested in her "tits" and "ass", the content creator was essentially "dismissing" the vast majority of her channel fans. And yet, both sides knew that the stated request to leave the channel was meant as an order to be disobeyed (still as an order, though) – a provocation, perhaps, or a teasing gesture that might even get viewers to stay until the end of the video. More importantly, the statement also very clearly reveals that the influencer who uttered it *was well aware that PornHub was not a serious alternative for viewers of her channel*, not a threat at all.

I believe that YouTube sexuality has grown into a powerful force that is beginning to achieve something that had long seemed unattainable – it has managed to put pornography on the defensive on its own turf. In other words, I think pornography (in its traditional form) is losing ground to the YouTube type of deployment of sexuality. And I must add right away that the reason for this is not, as one might think, that people are growing tired of pornography, or that more and more people find its vulgarity repulsive while still finding pleasure in "softer", more playful depictions of sexuality such as those found on YouTube. On the contrary, I believe that YouTube sexuality is gaining the upper hand on pornography for a much more direct reason and in a much more direct sense: YouTube sexuality is able to produce (or is perhaps even based on) a kind of *obscene surplus that pornography is unable to reproduce*.

This may sound strange, of course, because pornography can essentially be described as a system of obscene reproductions of all sorts of content. But the case of its relation to YouTube sexuality is specific: namely, in this case pornography is surpassed, so to speak, on the level of its own essence. In other words, while it is clear that this obscene excess of which I speak cannot be measured in terms of sexual explicitness, I nevertheless believe that this fleeting excess of obscenity makes YouTube sexuality essentially more pornographic than pornography itself.

Finally, one might say that pornography cannot reproduce this obscene excess of YouTube sexuality because this obscene excess is, in fact, *an essential reproduction of pornography itself*. What I think is crucial here, however, is that we should not understand this in the sense that pornography finds in YouTube

sexuality a new form, a new means, and an entirely new field for its own expansion. Such an interpretation is, I believe, only a reflection of the growing moralistic tendencies that want to see the world on the verge of being devoured by the pornographic monster. I do not think so, and I will try to explain below that the essential reproduction of pornography, as inherent in the obscene excess of YouTube sexuality, *leads to a much more radical transformation* that eventually produces a very *different form of pleasure consumption* – one that, as Peter Klepec indicated in his *Capitalism and Perversion*, is paradoxically close to masochism.

Of course, these are all claims that are difficult to substantiate. But some recent developments show that they are not empirically unfounded. It is widely known that in recent years new social platforms with adult content such as Onlyfans, Chaturbate, and to some extent Patreon (where only “artistic nudity” is allowed) have taken over a significant portion of the internet “sex” market. Especially since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, which brought the traditional porn industry to a halt (as regards filming), the role of these new platforms became almost indispensable: a large number of erotic performers who found themselves without income discovered that platforms like Onlyfans allowed them to create independent, homemade content and sell it directly to their consumers. Considering that this was the first time many sex workers were given the opportunity to work independently of their shady managers and the “industry” itself, many of them, such as actress and webcamming star Lily Labeau, welcome these new platforms as a means of important social change.⁵ However, while it is true that Onlyfans has been boosted by the arrival of the “COVID sex migrants”, we must also bear in mind that Onlyfans has also spawned a whole new breed of content providers who have never been involved in the porn industry proper – and many of these new content providers, including some of the most financially successful, are in fact YouTubers who have brought their already established fan bases with them. How do we know this? The answer is simple: these content creators talk very openly about these topics on their YouTube or Instagram channels.

Of course, you could say that what is shown on Onlyfans is still pornography pure and simple, and on a graphic level, that is of course true. However, the

⁵ Alone with the Pope podcast, “Lily Labeau”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANY9J2sSHTI>, accessed 4 December 2020.

entire *social substructure* and, even more importantly, the *fundamental relationship between the content provider and the consumer* is completely different. And while it may be true that much of the content on Onlyfans can be technically labelled as pornography, voices are being raised, especially within the new generations, who disagree with this assessment and emphasise that Onlyfans has a very different “vibe” compared to pornography:

Onlyfans feels much healthier than porn. I really don't watch porn, it's not my thing. If I wanted any sexy content, I'd probably go to Onlyfans. And I feel like – ok, I'm giving seven dollars a month or something – and I'm going to *this person*, that's fine. It has a different vibe to it.

Dude, I hate porn! It never turns me on. Okay, if I find some webcamming so I can see the *real people*, that's fine. Porn is like, I would say, guys with bad tattoos fucking a woman with emotional problems, and that's too much like my parents – a little too close to home for me.⁶

These two statements actually reveal two very crucial differences between Onlyfans and traditional pornography. The first statement highlights the fact that Onlyfans is always about “that person” – a consumer is paying to see that particular person; a person with whom a consumer may (if he or she chooses to pay for a high enough tier) even be able to communicate, perhaps even get some of that person's attention. And that, of course, is very different from the traditional porn experience.

Pornography, as such, is first and foremost a gigantic aggregate of anonymous bodies at one's disposal, constantly renewed by the arrival of “fresh” bodies. For me, at least, pornography has always had a kind of “communist” appeal surrounding it – an appeal that is somewhat ruthless, a bit proletarian, and righteous in its own way: *every body counts*, all bodies that enter the scene must somehow be coped with, accepted; they all belong to the experience. And even if someone has decided to watch a film because it features an actress that that viewer finds particularly attractive, there is always the chance that on that day

⁶ Politically Homeless podcast, “Onlyfans vs. PornHub with Lacey Claire Rogers”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EploAvMgLE8>, accessed 20 October 2020.

he or she will eventually end up finding pleasure in someone else whom he or she might otherwise find even repulsive.

Onlyfans, on the other hand, seems to be a very different story. The organisation resembles a beehive: there is always a queen bee at the centre – “that person” who occupies the sole focus of attention: the content provider. Of course, the experience itself may in fact be much more personal, and therefore perhaps even easier to accept from a moral perspective. Behind this “ethical curtain”, however, there is clearly another allure, which is also highlighted in the statements above as the second particularly important feature of the experience of the difference between Onlyfans and porn: the personal approach can also give consumers the impression that they are dealing with “real people” – not with a monotonous pornographic display of anonymous bodies, but with a real person whose “personal reality” *takes the reality of the whole experience to a whole new level*. What lies behind the more personal approach is still the “passion for the real” that Klepec posits at the core of pornography’s essence: “In what follows, we will try to show that a porn film is permeated by only one passion, namely the passion for the real, if I may borrow this term coined by Alain Badiou.”⁷ At the same time, however, it is clear – and this still keeps me close to Klepec’s brilliant exposition – that this reiteration of the essence of pornography at the core of the Onlyfans experience *is something that eludes pornography*, because it is obviously inherent in the more personal approach, which, as we have seen, concerns the very essential difference in the experience of Onlyfans sexuality and porn.

I think we have thus reached the point where we can reiterate the thesis and underline it with its first statement. Pornography is indeed surpassed on the level of its own essence: if what drives pornography is indeed “passion for the real,” then Onlyfans seems to be the next stage of development within that same drive – one in which consumers no longer seem to care so much about the reality of the sexual act itself, but about the *reality of the person* performing that act. And herein lies the first reason why I am convinced that the signifier of this redirection of the collective drive must be YouTube and not Onlyfans: the explicitness of the act itself, as represented in pornography, no longer represents the central focus of this drive. Indeed, it is tempting to speculate that because the pornographic sexual act must necessarily be staged, its explicit representation

⁷ Peter Klepec, *Dobičkonosne strasti. Kapitalizem in perverzija 1*, Ljubljana, DTP, 2008, p. 96.

is increasingly experienced by consumers as something *that stands in the way* of achieving a real experience. In the podcast mentioned above, for example, the speakers vigorously lamented that the pornographic camera, which constantly takes close-ups of genitalia and penetration, completely misrepresents the actual experience of a sex act. By contrast, what makes the fleeting moment of obscenity in the "Girl on tractor" video so real is precisely the fact that it was neither staged nor intended. And besides, Giulia the tractorist is, of course, a *very real person*: the fact that she is so good at driving her tractor must, in this sense, be directly recognised as the driving force of her sex appeal.

The fact that YouTube sexuality is restricted by some rules that prevent more explicit representation should therefore not be seen as an obstacle in its triumphal march. On the contrary, the fact that sexual content must always be hidden in a discourse that is not directly sexual clearly gives it the upper hand in the sense that it represents an almost ideal laboratory for perversion. Many of the popular creators of the more or less explicit sexual content on YouTube therefore make some (indeed highly perverse) adjustments to their discourse:

For example, the content creator Sophie's Stage, who performs dancing in lingerie, usually adds an after-recorded audio to her performance, in which she critically comments on her clothes in a monotone voice: "This material is so CHEAP; you can see the LOW quality of the fabric; the garter belt is so CHEAP that it's going to fall off; the panties are so CHEAP that you can almost see my butt-crack through it."⁸ So, after all: it's an "honest" fitting, and that seems to go over well with viewers. Another content creator, Naidies Aqua, whose dark sarcasm I actually find remarkable, uses a different strategy. Her tactic is not to comment on her (barely there) clothes; instead, she comments directly on her body as if it were a mere commodity: "A lot of you have been quite concerned about me not eating enough. Would you know, I get it, I get it. So, on my Amazon gift-list there is now gift-cards for food. So, if you are that concerned just buy me a gift-card for food so I can eat, since you know, you are all so concerned."⁹ In other words: she does not mind eating; she just wants to get paid to do so. This example

⁸ Sophie's Stage, "Lingerie try-on haul", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wea2cNS-goG4&list=PLbTGIXA5N97Ls7TS9wjKuHsdYc_n3DFRS&index=42&t=760s, accessed 25 September 2020.

⁹ Naidies Aqua, "Sexy Micro Bikini", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfWcJPrsKwg>, accessed 23 April 2021.

perhaps best illustrates how the lack of explicit sexuality can be replaced with something even more real – namely, the relentlessly honest portrayal of what’s really going on in the video.

The “Surge” of Masochism

Masochism is on the rise. And by that I do not just mean that masochism is coming out of the shadows, so to speak, because people are starting to be more open about their quirks and sexual habits than ever before. In that respect, masochism is still one of the quieter and more secretive forms of sexuality, for obvious reasons. What I really want to draw attention to are reports that indicate that the actual number of people practicing masochistic play has seen a dramatic increase in recent years. Furthermore, these reports – which come from the only sources actually in possession of the necessary data, which is obviously not readily available – also reveal surprising information, to say the least, as to when exactly these “surges” of masochism have occurred:

When Donald Trump won the 2016 election, I saw a surge in female, racial, and religious minorities who contacted me; people who, because of external events, were required to be unyielding and resolute in their day-to-day struggles, seeking heavy play that helped them break down within the context of a safe and trusting environment. I’ve seen *a similar response during COVID-19*, and wanted to deconstruct it a bit. It may seem counterintuitive to think that when times are tough someone might want to add to that pain by seeking out things like discipline, humiliation, pain, or physical confinement. After all, isn’t it tricky enough just to make sure you’re wearing pants on your Zoom meeting? And yet many do find themselves craving BDSM when they feel especially vulnerable, particularly those with a submissive bent. Of course, this is not the only reason people seek out BDSM. Like music, comedy, or any form of expression, it can serve a specific purpose or it can simply be sexy and fun – a lust for adventure and curiosity for new things, the excitement of breaking social taboos. But when people are feeling vulnerable, helpless and anxious, there can be a particularly strong urge to be dominated. Why is that?¹⁰

¹⁰ Mistress Iris, “A Dominatrix on why BDSM Business is Booming During Trump and COVID”, *Daily Beast*, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/a-dominatrix-on-why-bdsm-business-is-booming-during-trump-and-covid?ref=scroll>, accessed 29 September 2020.

Mistress Iris is not the only dominatrix who has made such an observation. In 2017, the journalist Carrie Weisman conducted a survey that included a series of interviews with dominatrices and porn site editors, all of whom agreed that since Donald Trump was elected president, demand for BDSM content had increased significantly.¹¹ Furthermore, similar observations regarding the COVID-19 era have also been made by many other dominatrices recently appearing on podcasts, such as *La Maison du rouge*¹² or *Alone with the Pope*,¹³ which predominantly cover BDSM-related topics.

Of course, we should not pretend to be very surprised by the fact that a person in a period of social isolation can develop some sort of introverted sexual proclivity, which can include some form of introverted sexual aggression. What is really interesting in this particular context is the more “technical” aspect: How is it possible that the BDSM business boomed at a time when dominatrices and their submissives were actually unable to have any kind of physical contact with each other? This is indeed the question that will interest us most, for the consequences of its ingenious solution are far-reaching, even from a purely theoretical point of view. And yet – when you put it all together – it is astonishing: in times when you would expect people to spend much of their time dreaming of the full restoration of freedom, of the lifting of restrictions, or (as in the case of Trump’s presidency) even of fighting the regime, many have chosen – in a gesture that in itself is by no means devoid of emancipatory cravings – to undertake “servitude”.

Speaking of this “servitude”, attention must be drawn to one detail in particular. In some of her explanations as to how masochistic sessions actually work, Mistress Iris stressed that no dominatrix with an established reputation would even consider making an appointment with a client who was only looking for a one-off experience: some form of *relative permanence* to the established power relationship between a dominatrix and a submissive seems indispensable to the

¹¹ Carrie Weisman, “Dominatrices and Porn-sites Report a Huge BDMS Uptick since Trump Became President”, *Vice*, 6 March 2017, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/vvjew4/dominatrices-and-porn-sites-report-a-huge-bdsm-uptick-since-trump-became-president>, accessed 23 March 2021.

¹² *La Maison du Rouge* podcast, “Interview with Educatrix and Creatrix Domina Colette”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNRw-SEV7Bs>, accessed 23 March 2021.

¹³ *Alone with the Pope* podcast “Madeline Marlow”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-1jc4jPX11Q&t=310s>, accessed 26 February 2021.

experience of genuine masochistic play.¹⁴ There are many reasons for this, and some of them are purely practical, such as building trust, getting to know each other, and finding out the limits of the submissive. But there is another, much more substantial, explanation, which, among other things, also points to what distinguishes masochistic play from any other form of sexual activity: namely, the most essential reason why the duration of a relationship is key to the quality of the experience of being dominated is not the actual number of sessions, but the *intensity of the periods in between them*. In fact, arguably the most important part of a masochistic session actually *takes place off-session*. Later we shall find that this must be understood in the most literal sense.

These observations clearly go hand in hand with Deleuze's famous thesis that masochism is essentially built on the *suspension of time*: in his canonical study *Coldness and Cruelty*, he repeatedly stressed the importance of Masoch's literary ability to freeze time, or even to petrify those moments that precede the actual execution of a "punishment".

The whip or the sword that never strikes, the fur that never discloses the flesh, the heel that is forever descending on the victim, are the expression, beyond all movement, of a profound state of waiting closer to the sources of life and death. The novels of Masoch display the most intense preoccupation with arrested movement; his scenes are frozen, as though photographed, stereotyped or painted.¹⁵

Another important parallel can be drawn with Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's own obsessive preoccupation with precise timing, as seen in his famous contracts with the "cruel women" who obliged themselves to "enslave" him by signing these documents:

On his word of honour, Mr. Leopold von Sacher-Masoch undertakes to be the slave of Mrs. von Pistor, and to carry out all her wishes for a period of six months. [...] These six months need not run consecutively: they may be subject to inter-

¹⁴ Mistress Iris, "Kinky Sex & Relationship Advice", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qoWhQSZnaGI&t=206s>, accessed 25 February 2021.

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty" in *Masochism*, New York, Zone Books, 1991, p. 70.

ruptions beginning and ending according to the whims of the sovereign lady. [...] Came into operation 8th December 1869.¹⁶

The duration, then, the relative permanence of the established power relationship that extends beyond the session itself, is clearly part of the essence of masochistic play. However, while we speak of the duration of a masochistic relationship, we are actually speaking of its *intensity*: the session, once one enters into it, *takes place all the time*. All within the confines of a game, of course – and yet Mistress Iris says that when she meets one of her clients purely by chance in a grocery store or a theatre, she expects him to make some kind of discreet gesture of recognition of the hierarchy that has been established between them.

Finally, we should also not pretend to be surprised by the fact that some people seek a form of emancipation by engaging in masochistic games. After all, this topic has been widely discussed by very eminent philosophers.

Is our civilisation perverted? Of course it is! It cannot be otherwise, for it has made its highest value and perhaps its only meaning out of a wheel of torture called freedom. Nietzsche's diagnosis could not have been clearer: freedom was first invented as an instrument of guilt. And by beginning to feel guilt, we have in fact become guilty of an incessant cruelty – namely, the cruelty to ourselves that Nietzsche calls "bad consciousness."¹⁷ This lash of freedom and "bad consciousness" by which we inflict wounds on ourselves has been indispensable in the historical process that has shaped us into "sovereign individuals." And since our civilisation, as Nietzsche famously says, has never had any purpose or meaning other than this creation of "sovereign individuals," this also means that our entire civilisation is essentially built on this self-inflicting cruelty: it has shaped us into what we are, but it also makes us fundamentally sick, tormented beings.¹⁸ Freud's invention of the concept of the "superego" naturally adds another essential perspective to this diagnosis.

¹⁶ Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, "Contract between Mrs. Fanny von Pistor and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch", in *Masochism*, pp. 277–278.

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. C. Diethe, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 56–58.

¹⁸ Even though Nietzsche himself was always advocating for "purity" in man's ways of life, we should probably note the small detail that he, Lou Salome, and Paul Rée had a photo

Because our civilisation is fundamentally sick due to this combination of freedom and “bad consciousness” that lies at the heart of its development, it will always end up spontaneously reproducing perverse cruelties under the guise of progress and righteousness, such as the following passage from Catherine II’s Law Code that was brought to our attention by Foucault:

It is a triumph of civil liberty when the criminal laws derive each penalty from the particular nature of each crime. In this way all arbitrariness ceases; the penalty does not depend on the caprice of the legislator, but on the nature of the thing; it is not man who does violence to man, but the man’s own action.¹⁹

It is not difficult, therefore, to understand the emancipatory appeal of masochism. If freedom was indeed invented as the wheel that turns the perverse machinery of guilt, then the masochistic decision to give up freedom by taking on “bondage” can indeed be perceived as a kind of remedy for this inherent self-imposed cruelty on which society was built. Masochism can be perceived as a sexual perversion that simultaneously reflects the grotesque truth of our society and eludes its grasp. That is why Deleuze, for example, saw the masochist as triumphant over the “law of the superego.”

It seems to work: numerous people who practice the Japanese bondage art of *shibari*, for example, describe such sessions as therapeutic. And of course, it is not at all surprising that letting go of freedom can produce very liberating effects.

On the other hand, Slavoj Žižek has developed a number of critiques of the notion that perversion can be seen as a means of subversion. And one of his main arguments is based precisely on the fact that perversion seems to work so well. In fact, Žižek says that perversions work all too well: a perverse subject, according to Žižek, must be seen first and foremost as someone who has found a way to exploit the given situation for his or her own pleasure, and through this pleasure he or she remains essentially attached to it: “The pervert is thus the ‘inherent transgressor’ *par excellence*, he brings to light, stages, practices the

taken of them together, representing their own (very innocent) version of the famous scene of “Aristotle and Phyllys”, which had been popular during the Middle Ages.

¹⁹ “Article 67”, in Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. A. Sheridan, New York, Vintage Books, 1979, p. 117.

secret fantasies that sustain the predominant public discourse, while the hysterical position precisely displays doubt about whether those secret perverse fantasies are 'really *it*'."²⁰

On top of all these philosophical dilemmas, dominatrixes have developed their own rather straightforward doctrines of emancipation regarding their "slaves." Many of them see themselves at the forefront of the feminist struggle. Domina Colette, for example, says that the work of a dominatrix is about creating a new shape of power: "We need a new symbol of power – one that is feminine, wild and free; a new shape of power that we are shaping into our future."²¹ Mistress Marx and Mistress Malissia, see "female supremacy" as the only way for humanity to survive in the future, and so on. Finally, most of them seem to be convinced that domination actually emancipates their "slaves" – in the sense that it liberates them from the patterns and attitudes of patriarchal society (such as egotism, narcissism, machismo, etc.).

In this essay, however, I will not engage in these inherently political debates as to the subversive or emancipatory potential of masochism, both its positive and negative aspects. What I really want to scrutinise is the "economic miracle" of masochism – the fact that the business of dominatrixes has done so well during the pandemic, which seemingly should have brought it to a halt. The first question to ask, then, has a purely practical or technical sense: how did the dominatrixes solve the problem of growing demand for their services?

The first thing that comes to mind might be that the dominatrixes also resorted to homemade pornographic videos. But that answer is largely wrong. Mistress Iris, for example, immediately rejected the idea of making pornography. And her dismissive attitude is perfectly understandable: in fact, it is highly questionable whether there can be such a thing as "masochistic pornography" at all. Of course, the genre exists as such; but the question remains: Does it really appeal to true masochists? Basically, there are two reasons why I find this hard to believe. The first is that a masochist needs *something done to his own body*

²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, London and New York, Verso, 1999, p. 248.

²¹ La Maison du Rouge podcast, "Interview with Educatrix and Creatrix Domina Colette by Dia Dynasty", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNRw-SEV7Bs&t=6s>, accessed 23 March 2021.

(or soul); masochism is arguably the most introverted form of sexuality, which cannot be compensated for by voyeuristic pleasure: seeing another person tortured can hardly satisfy a masochist's cravings. Much more important, however, is the second reason: pornography cannot reproduce what we described earlier as the *essential duration* of masochistic play, which extends far beyond the actual session; it cannot reproduce the essential intensity of the periods between sessions; it cannot effectively compensate for those interruptions of time (followed by nothing) that Deleuze finds so essential to Masoch literature.

Why is this so essential? Because what the dominatrixes *have actually done* to make their art flourish during these seemingly very inconvenient times is to opt for a particular technique that *directly fills up with matter* those very moments of intense agony between sessions:

The technical term is “to put men in chastity”. A “chastity box” or “chastity cage” is a metallic device shaped like a penis in its non-erect state. The procedure involves inserting the penis into this tight-fitting, downward-facing device, which is then locked behind the scrotum – thus preventing any possibility of an erection. Of course, “chastity play” is not a new invention; some dominatrixes say that “locking away the penis” is to be observed as a prerequisite for any serious masochistic session, and the reason for this supposedly lies in the fact that by “locking away the penis” the entire body becomes increasingly sexualised. The most important purpose, however, is that “chastity play” *can extend the session* beyond its actual duration. Mistress Iris reports that the ideal duration for this type of torture is two weeks: in the first week, submissives become “sullen”, “grumpy”, and “hyperactive”, but by the second week they become truly “desperate and willing to endure any kind of sexual humiliation”; by the beginning of the third week, their libido usually decreases and they enter a kind of “Zen state.”²²

260

Ultimately, one could say that “chastity play” captures, or even materialises, one of the most essential aspects of the masochistic dialectic: the “chastity box” is a device designed to elicit extreme sexual frustration, but at the same time it is also an instrument that turns *that very frustration into a means of to-*

²² Mistress Iris, “Chastity & O Denial”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VkyNOqkkU4>, accessed 31 March 2021.

tal sexualisation of both body and time. "Chastity play" works from a distance and *at all times*, but without relying on pornographic voyeurism. No wonder Mistress Irene Blunt famously asserts that for a dominatrix, no other pleasure even remotely compares to the sensation she feels when she takes all the keys entrusted to her for safekeeping and shakes them in a large jar, knowing full well that each one of those keys represents a man who, *at that moment*, is cruelly reminded that he belongs to her. Servant Bertha – one of the few masochists who has chosen to share his story of being locked up in "chastity" (for life, in his case) – says that these "reminders of belonging" are especially painful on nights when men tend to get particularly strong night-time erections.²³

Given that the device is designed to produce tormenting effects in the absence of the actual tormentor, it is immediately clear how indispensable it has become since the outbreak of the pandemic. Or perhaps we should turn the tables completely and ask the following question: What if it was actually the COVID pandemic that revealed to the dominatrixes that this small, simple device was all they really needed to turn masochism (which has always been surrounded by a kind of elitist secrecy) *into a mass production industry?*

Indeed, this seems to happen: as Mistress Iris observed with such lucidity – during pandemics people become increasingly frustrated, and for some people at least, one way of dealing with frustration is to actually add to it, or even to try to derive sexual excitement out of their very frustration (the masochistic game). On the other hand, the pandemic also created an environment in which *everything had to be done remotely* – and was that not an "excellent opportunity" for all those who, under normal circumstances, would not even dare to dream of actually seeking out a dominatrix? On the one hand, the pandemic set the stage for a new influx of frustrated customers, while on the other, seclusion made everything much easier: basically, all that is required of a dominatrix is to appear on her channel or website and issue an order: "My servants, bottoms and pets, for the next two weeks you will serve my pleasure by being locked in chastity!", that is essentially it.

²³ Servant Bertha, "Life in chastity part 4", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEZW-qCrx-pw>, accessed 24 December 2020.

But let us go back to the other side of the map we have been drawing: Isn't a "chastity device" a near-perfect metaphor for YouTube sexuality? Of course, I'm not suggesting that masochism is the sole impetus behind so many different types of sexual content shown on YouTube. But I do believe that the connection is strong.

One thing is for sure, the YouTube type of deployment of sexuality and masochistic play have one thing in common – they are both heavily based on what is called "tease and deny" in BDSM parlance. "Chastity play" is really just a tool of this tactic of sexualisation, which is far more important to many dominatrixes than the actual infliction of physical pain. On the other hand, YouTube sexuality is also not designed for masturbation or the direct arousal of the viewer. What YouTube sexuality actually does is create a kind of *micro-molecule of "sex"* that must be small and weak enough to reach us at any given moment. Unlike watching pornography, which (for most people) is based on choice, the micro-molecules of YouTube sexuality are constantly scattered and tend to develop into little involuntary habits. And the sole purpose of these micro-molecules of "sex" is to leave us wanting *more of the same* kind of content, and not to create some kind of vivacious crescendo of excitement or passion. In a way, you could say that these micro-impulses of "sex" that YouTube sexuality operates with are designed to *tame the libido* by keeping it constantly at the same level of desire for more of the same kind of content. Of course, these sexual impulses also tease, but preferably this teasing is not strong enough to provoke actual arousal: what YouTube sexuality is aimed at is getting the viewer to click on another video, and not to find satisfaction in any single one of them. In this regard, it is clear that YouTube sexuality, with all its limitations, represents a commercial dreamland of the pornographic business that pornography itself is absolutely incapable of realising.

262

Therefore, YouTube sexuality operates within the confines of frustration: video after video of similar salacious content that always seems to push the boundaries a little further, and yet we know in advance that this is an illusion, because no matter how small the micro-bikini gets, the video will always remain within the boundaries of what is allowed. And yet, people keep coming back to watch these videos. Is it not clear that somehow frustration itself must play the deciding role here? Or, to put it another way, is it not clear that people come back so that their libidos are both somewhat aroused and tamed?

Perhaps we should propose the following synthesis: YouTube sexuality, in its direct form, actually represents another step in the evolution of "passion for the real". Previously, we noted that this passion can no longer be satisfied with the reality of the sexual act itself that characterises pornography, and must be supplemented by the reality of "the person" that characterises Onlyfans or Chaturbate. But what if this "passion for the real", which must also be a passion for scepticism – we have observed how quickly it loses faith in what can be considered the legitimate basis of that "real" – now demands a higher and different kind of investment? Not the boring staged sex act, not the personality of a shady starlet, but something that *is actually real*, and which is the viewer's own frustration?

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