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THE CUNNING LUST
AESTHETIC AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MASOCHISM

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While the works of Alphonse Donatien de Sade have widely impacted aesthetic and critical discussions in 20th century avant-garde art and critical theory, the supposed 'inventor' of masochism, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, has been largely neglected by scholars and critics alike. Only in recent years and in a tardy response to Gilles Deleuze's *Présentation de Masoch* (1969) have Sacher-Masoch and the subject of masochism received some attention within the debates in both German and Cultural Studies, notably by Albrecht Koschorke. *Leopold von Sacher-Masoch* (1988), John Noyes. *Mastery of Submission* (1997), Michael Gratzke. *Liebesschmerz und Textlust* (2000). *Die verschlagene Lust* expands the contexts in which Sacher-Masoch's work has hitherto been treated to problems in philosophy (master slave dialectic), confessional writing (Rousseau, recent queer studies), history (Sacher-Masoch's historical and political writings), art history (strategies of visual appropriation), and performance studies (Nietzsche, Cansinos Assens, performance art of the 1960's). Examined under these cross-disciplinary perspectives masochism proves to be both a political and an aesthetic strategy, circumventing the dialectical impasses of transgression (as in Sad(e)ism and the early avant-garde) by operating through disavowal, seduction, and experimental reconfigurations of the given. While in existing research, Sacher-Masoch's

work has been predominantly classified as a phenomenon particular to the late nineteenth century, I argue that we must consider its refusal of artistic authorship and destabilisation of the reality principle as prefiguring post-modern theory and aesthetics. The literature discussed includes: Sacher-Masoch's collections *Das Vermächtnis Kains*, Vols. I and II (1877), *Russische Hofgeschichten* (1900), his historical works *Der Aufstand in Gent unter Kaiser Carl V.* (1857), *Ungarns Untergang und Maria von Österreich* (1862), and among others the following: G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology*, Jean Paul Sartre. *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Confessions*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *A Poem is Being Written*, Rafael Cansinos Assens. *Estética y Erotismo de la Pena de Muerte*, Herrmann Nitsch. *orgien mysterien theatre*, and Friedrich Nietzsche. *Birth of Tragedy*.

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PREFACE

Why masochism? The present investigation was initially informed by the question why in a culture that at least in its self-understanding so cherishes notions of individual freedom and self-determination, people choose to be bound, degraded, and even physically hurt. In a first exploration of the existing literature on this topic, we are immediately confronted with one name: Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836-1895), a Galician writer of numerous novellas, theater-plays, some historical treatises, and supposed inventor of the perversion that came to bear his name. Today he is primarily known for his novella *Venus in Furs* – the story of a young man who submits to the cruel whims of his lover and mistress Wanda –, while the rest of his voluminous work, including many folkloric tales is widely forgotten. Whereas authors before him had already sung their praise for the whip (e. g. Rousseau, Swinburne), it was Sacher-Masoch who was chosen by the psychiatrist and fellow countryman Richard von Krafft-Ebing to become the prime example of what up till now is often wrongly understood to be the antinomy of another literary perversion, Sadism. Koschorke (1988) and Noyes (1997) attribute Krafft-Ebing's decision for Sacher-Masoch to liberalist beliefs shared by both authors, making their respective projects parallel endeavors in the exploration of human passions, however, it should also be noted that we find here a competition between literature and the emerging psychological sciences over the authority in these matters.

While the infamous work of Alphonse Donatien de Sade has received considerable attention within the critique of enlightenment in twentieth-century philosophy and critical theory, Sacher-Masoch has – with a few

exceptions, most notably Gilles Deleuze's *Présentation de Masoch* – been largely ignored by scholars and critics alike. In partial disagreement with more recent secondary literature, in which Sacher-Masoch's masochism is seen as being paradigmatic for a defense mechanism of the male liberal subject in crisis at the end of the nineteenth century, *The Cunning Lust* explores the critical potential that Sacher-Masoch's work offers to questions of modern subjectivity and artistic production. Our underlying critical background for pursuing these questions has been largely informed by debates in gender studies and queer theory. Here, the main controversy revolves around the question as to how position masochism in relation to actual patriarchal violence. The problematic tension found here, between public and private sphere, real and staged violence, will also be central throughout our study. While the diversity of the material requires a variety of different methodologies, the guiding question of this investigation could be summarized as follows: what is the critical impact that masochism has to offer for a discussion of conceptions of subjectivity and art as they have been developed in the 19th century?

We decided to divide our six chapters into two loosely paralleled sections: politics and aesthetics – each section begins with a number of more general theoretical concerns that are then explicated in more detail in the following chapters. While the notion of aesthetics does not seem that far fetched when we think of the wardrobe and role-play involved in masochisms, we should clarify at this point that our understanding of politics follows its widest definition to include problems of subject formation, pedagogy, and gender relationships. The following pages will provide a short summary of the individual chapters for readers of English.

Chapter one draws on an allusion made in Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* to a "book by Hegel". Ought we to understand the peculiar love relationship between Severin and his mistress Wanda in this book as a commentary to Hegel's dialectic of the lord and the bondsman? Initially intended to give a descriptive account of a previous stage of civilization, the submission of the bondsman under the violence of the bondsman has in the reception of Hegel's *Phenomenology* taken a normative turn. In order to become a full subject within the social, the immediacy of the original self-certainty of the individual has to be mediated through the encounter with violence. How can we situate masochism vis-à-vis this ideological construction of subjectivity? First of all, we have to note that the protagonist of the *Venus in Furs* is not in the same position as Hegel's bondsman. Severin has already undergone the process of subjection. In our context, the dialectic relationship between lord and bondsman will be regarded as a guiding social myth that structures the way in which subjectivity is being conceptualized. Masochism is characterized by a particular spatial and temporal relationship to this myth. The initial submission is reiterated and at the same time displaced into the realm of a staged fantasy. Especially the latter has led to some misunderstanding in the literature on masochism. In his phenomenological work *Being and Nothingness*, Jean Paul Sartre describes the masochistic quest as being irrevocably doomed to failure. According to Sartre's understanding, the masochist strives to become an object for the other, in order to get a full sense of what he is. By referring to details from Sacher-Masoch's biography, Sartre concludes that the masochist always has to trick his other into playing her designated role and thereby reaffirms the subjectivity that he set out to escape. Against this hypothesis of a failure of masochism, we argue that neither

seduction nor the contractual agreement that we find in the *Venus in Furs* counter the masochistic project, but rather have to be seen as the condition of its success. With respect to this question Gilles Deleuze argues that the *modus operandi* of masochism is disavowal rather than negation, a strategy, to which he attributes a significantly greater potential to reconfigure the structural makeup of the subject. Alluding to Freud, he states that not the child, but the symbolic father is being beaten in the masochistic scene, allowing for a second coming into being of the masochist in which the paternal law is exorcized. In his later collaboration with Félix Guattari, Deleuze elaborates on the anti- (if that is possible) or rather non-Hegelian potential of masochism. In this context we question the usefulness of the concept of the *body without organs* that Deleuze and Guattari introduce to describe the particular characteristics of the masochistic desire and lust.

Chapter two seeks to apply the theoretical findings from the previous chapter by asking how the masochism figures within a concrete political setting. Here, we take a closer look at Sacher-Masoch's cultural and political identifications with respect to his Slavic and Habsburg background. While emphasizing his profound loyalty with the politics of the Habsburgs Empire, he repeatedly defined himself as a Galician Slav, spreading the cultural wisdom of his people. While the acclaimed folkloristic inspiration for his writing is shown to be rather a popularized version of doctrines by Schopenhauer and Darwin, he nevertheless succeeds in developing a style of writing and a position that is fundamentally opposed to the attempts by German writers and historians to establish a unified German Reich.

How can we conceptualize the relationship between Sacher-Masoch's political engagement and his supposedly private perversion? In order to

provide an answer to this question, we take a closer look at the relationship between his early historical works *Der Aufstand in Gent unter Kaiser Carl V.* and *Ungarns Untergang und Maria von Österreich* and his later use of historical motifs in his literary writing. In the latter we find a double displacement, one being spatial (the idyllic villages of the Galician countryside) the other historical of current political and social issues. Masked as folkloric tales from past times these displacements allow Sacher-Masoch to formulate his critique of contemporary issues. Examining his two historiographical studies on the reign and life of Maria of Austria we ask whether we find already here a pre-figuration of what later became the figure of the cruel woman in his literary works. Maria is portrayed as a beautiful and educated woman, who in spite of her attraction to enlightened protestant thought chooses to maintain her power by persecuting the liberal critics of the catholic Habsburg Empire. She operates by seduction and spreading fear among her subjects. This motif is later developed to a fuller extent in a collection of short stories on Catherine II. of Russia. Drawing on the rich mythologies that revolve around the Russian empress, Sacher-Masoch both uncovers the mechanisms of power and a possible masochistic subversion of this form of domination. By over-identifying with the role of the fearing and seduced subject, his characters eliminate the difference between self-interest and political role, and thereby succeed to overcome the very cause of their subjection. By way of concluding this chapter we choose a more contemporary case, David Fincher's movie *Fight Club*, to ask what the actual political consequences of such a masochistic strategy might entail. In Fincher's scenario the temporal de-socialization through the violent rites of initiation ultimately leads to a proto-fascist male bonding among his protagonists. Whereas we see this as a possible outcome of

the masochistic strategy, we will see in the next chapter that it is not a necessary one.

The analysis of three masochistic confessions in chapter three departs from Michel Foucault's observations on the central role of confessional writing for the constitution of the modern subject. If confession already is a form of discipline, what kind of confession can we expect from an individual that claims to take pleasure in this very kind of discipline? Three confessions, by Jean Jacques Rousseau, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, provide the material for the exploration of this question. In spite of describing a very similar scene from their respective childhoods – an incidence in which being spanked was experienced as pleasurable and understood as initiating the later masochistic desire –, we find in these three authors very different modes of writing about their experiences. In order to develop in more detail what we will term a neurotic, perverse, and productive mode of confession, we provide each of these confessors with an exemplary reader. Beginning with Philippe Lejeune's analysis of Rousseau's *Confessions*, we find a paradigmatic illustration for the complicity of psychoanalysis in the confessional *dispositif*. Rousseau's guilt ridden account of the pleasure he received by the punishing hand of his nanny Mlle. Lambercier invites Lejeune's redefinition of the confessional pact into a psychoanalytic contract. He, the analyst, and not the confessional subject will ultimately answer the question what he is in front of the community of the social. This structure is seriously troubled in a confession that Severin delivers to his mistress Wanda on the occasion of their first *rendez-vous*. By referring to an observation made by the psychoanalyst Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel in her perverse patients, we show how the 'perverse' confession is aimed at seducing the other rather than

submitting to his scrutinizing examination. This guilt-free seduction begs for more discipline rather than self-definition and thereby not only endangers the 'benevolent neutrality' of the receiver of the confession but threatens to destroy the psychoanalytic situation itself. Finally, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her semi-autobiographical essay *A Poem is Being Written* invites her readers to provide her assistance in what becomes a quest for a subject position, from which she can articulate her 'perverse' desires. Oscillating between identification and at times sadistic voyeurism when confronting the child Eve Kosofsky, she deploys the visual model of the tableau to write about her experiences. The performative gestures in her text reconstruct her coming into being as a sexual subject in way that allows a re-appropriation of the violence she suffered passively in her youth. Although being structurally similar to a psychoanalytic cure, Sedgwick's confession is not aimed at reintegrating deviant sexuality into acceptable social norms, but to productively create new discursive spaces in which desires like hers can be articulated.

The productive use of visual and performative models in this last confession leads to the question of the aesthetic qualities of masochism, which are the subject of the second part of our investigation. Chapter four provides some general thoughts on how masochistic aesthetics could look like. Again, we depart from psychoanalytic theories on art as being the result of the sublimation of originally perverse drives. In the *Venus in Furs*, Severin describes himself as a dilettante both in art and erotic matters and thereby provides a model that can be used to counter notions of artistic author- and mastership. The latter are shown not only to be at the core of Freud's theory of sublimation, but also to be fundamentally embedded in a heterosexist

model of procreation. Rather than being the father of his artistic creations we find Severin to reconfigure and to invest existing works of art with his own particular attributions. Drawing on Sacher-Masoch's preface to his cycle of novellas *The Legacy of Cain* and a feminist critique of the concept of sublimation (Sarah Kofman, Elizabeth Grosz), we seek to develop an aesthetic theory of perversion that is not modeled on the transcendental creator-father, but the one nature/one substance doctrine in which phenomena are not being regarded as creations but as immanent expressions of nature. We follow the concept of the *parole de la plaine*, developed by Pascal Quignard in his collection of essays on Sacher-Masoch, to provide evidence for such a reading of Sacher-Masoch's texts. His stories and novellas are frequently introduced by long descriptions of almost empty and plain spaces. In these, human beings do not figure as children or creatures of mother nature, but as contingent expressions without any system of reference.

Chapter five focuses on the use of images in the *Venus in Furs*. It is in this context that we find the strongest objections against masochism from a feminist position. Here, Sacher-Masoch is seen in historical and conceptual proximity with decadent painters such as Gustave Moreau. According to the feminist reading, the fear of women that the patriarchal society experienced in the late nineteenth century is exteriorized in demonizing visual representations of female figures such as Salome or Judith. We follow this reading of the use of paintings of 'demonic' women in Sacher-Masoch's *Legacy of Cain* to some extent, while however showing that it is not in the *Venus in Furs*, but in his utopian novella *Marzella*, which presents us with a finale reconciliation between men and women, that Sacher-Masoch becomes most misogynistic. In the second part of this chapter we argue that these valid

points of critique have obscured another side of Sacher-Masoch's utilization of existing works of art that already prefigure what later became known as postmodern strategies of visual appropriation. In order to describe these, we distinguish between two forms of appropriation at work here. One being a physical appropriation of works of art through reproduction, copies, and fakes that transposes the auratic work of art out of the public sphere of the museum into the private sphere of backroom salons and boudoirs, while the other consists of a form of authorial appropriation of the images, in which it becomes for the viewer to decide which meaning to attribute to each painting. If, in a close reading of the pictorial descriptions in the *Venus in Furs*, we attempt to situate Sacher-Masoch's *Ekphrasis* conceptually we find him to be not only in close proximity to the decadence of Oscar Wilde's *Critic as Artist*, but also of the much later *appropriation art*. However, this deterritorialization of significance still serves a preparatory purpose for the masochistic staging. In *Venus in Furs* we find clear intertextual references to the Pygmalion myth. But unlike Galathea, Wanda is not brought to life through male desire (or divine intervention) alone. Following George Didi-Huberman's work on the *inkarnat* we enabled to understand her as the product of a conscious transmedial shift from visual to performative aesthetics.

The latter will concern us in chapter six, in which we explore the problematic status of violence in masochistic in the masochistic stagings. Critics like Theodore Reik and Albrecht Koschorke have taken the performative elements in masochism as evidence for a certain falsity and pretension that they take to be characteristic of masochism. Against these claims, we argue that they follow a too narrow and conventional understanding, in which the terms 'theater' and 'staging' are understood as

enactment of fictional roles and affects. For a conception of the theatricality that is more appropriate to an understanding of masochism we must rather look at a tradition that originates in Friedrich Nietzsche's work on Greek tragedy. Contrary to a still prevalent understanding, Nietzsche is not proclaiming unlimited Dionysian excess, but very clearly emphasizing the necessity to contain the dangerous dissolution of the self by an Apollinian representational surface. Aesthetic semblance (*Schein*) is the condition under which we as spectators and participants can partake in the Dionysian spectacle. In a polemic essay *Estética y Erotismo de la Pena de Muerte* (Aesthetic and Erotic Aspects of the Death Penalty) by the Spanish writer Rafael Cansinos-Assens we find an original and rarely mentioned account of how a theatrical aesthetics can look like, that embraces both Nietzsche's Dionysus and Apollo as well as the concepts of masochism and sadism. Here too, in order for the spectacle of the public execution to qualify as an aesthetic event, a highly aestheticized protocol must be followed. Cansinos-Assens not only understands the public execution as a contemporary version of necessary sacrificial practices, but also as model to overcome the impasses of representational theater. Hermann Nitsch and his *orgien mysterien theater* give us an account of what such new aesthetics for the theatre could look like. His use of materials like raw flesh, blood, and excrement is intended to produce strong and real affects both in the participants and spectators of his rituals. While this *sadomasochistischer grundexzess* (basic sadomasochistic excess) aims at the at least temporal suspension of the civilizing individuation principle, the *o m theatre* does not give in to uncontrolled and random violence. The performances are contained by a carefully scripted guidance. In a final discussion, we map this ambivalence between control and loss thereof to

accounts of 'spiritual' experiences made by practitioners of S/M. Here, we argue that S/M rather than as abject secularization of sacrificial practice must be regarded as a contemporary manifestation thereof, following the same structure of substitution as we find it in religious rituals.

In our concluding remarks, we address the question of how to situate masochism within current critiques of post-modern theory and practice. Three texts by John Noyes, Paul Mann, and Nick Mansfield serve as a basis to discuss the effectiveness and potentially opportunistic implications of the masochistic strategy.