

Perverse Aesthetics: Maria Beatty, Masochism, and the Cinematic

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Given the history of bdsm as a practice (or identity formation) difficult for either feminism or gay and lesbian politics to absorb, it was perhaps inevitable that critical work on bdsm film would seek to fence theoretical value off from bodily excitement.¹ In an exemplary essay on lesbian porn, Cherry Smyth lauds Cleo Uebelmann's bondage study *Mano Destra* (1986) because it "dissects desire rather than attempting to arouse it."² Smyth finds in the film an example of new and promising ways that representations of lesbian desire break heteronormative rules, but it still seems odd that what is to be valued is the dissection rather than the arousal of desire. Dissected things are dead, their inner organs promising scientific knowledge. As a surface/depth mode of inquiry, this analogy offers only *ex post facto* truths and forecloses on any further transformations of the body. By contrast, aroused things were merely sleeping and have been awakened to change. Arousal elicits transformation, both of the body and the mind, and knowledge that comes from arousal is qualitatively different from that derived from dissection.

To imagine the critical stakes of arousal, I turn to Walter Benjamin's proposal of a closely related term, "awakening," as "life's supremely dialectical point of rupture."³ Between dream and waking consciousness Benjamin finds "the 'now of recognizability,' in which things put on their true—surrealist—face." This concept of awakening grounds a materialist history in an analogy, a figurative awakening staged via artistic representation. Thus, "Just as Proust begins the story of his life with an awakening, so must every presentation of history begin with awakening; in fact, it should treat of nothing else."⁴ To articulate the awakening of the body in art is to gamble on the possibility of rupture as a historical project. Arousal is a special form of awakening. To arouse is to wake from sleep, or *as if* from sleep. It is already, as in Benjamin's political process of awakening, a metaphor. In this doubly figural figure, politics is overwritten with the sexed body as a subject of history. Moreover, in the arousing film, it is the spectator who is awoken, not (only) the fictional subject of narrative. The aroused body can see things differently, think differently, experience differently. Sexual arousal promises both to transcend thought or subjectivity and to transform it. Between consciousness and unconsciousness, it models the dialectic of awakening. The bdsm films of Maria Beatty, I will argue, provoke the political force of arousal, not only because they construct a queer scene of perverse desire but also because they figure the work of the cinematic in making rupture visible. Beatty's films evoke the need for an aesthetics of arousal, something that film theory has often been invested in, but has rarely actually provided.

Maria Beatty's filmmaking career spans feminist performance art, lesbian bdsm porn, and narrative features. Since we are thinking about arousal, it should come as no surprise that my focus here will be on some of her more pornographic work. But it is important to note the context within which Beatty makes her promise of spectatorial transformation. Her early work includes *Sphinxes without Secrets* (1991), a documentary on performers such as Holly Hughes, Carolee Schneemann and Diamanda Galas, and she has collaborated with many of the leading lights in the feminist performance and experimental film scenes. For example, she made *Sluts and Goddesses Video Workshop* with Annie Sprinkle in 1992 and *A Lot of Fun for the Evil One* with M.M. Serra in 1994. More recently, she directed *Bandaged* (2009), a horror-

tinged lesbian romance that spurs comparison with Georges Franju's *Eyes without a Face* (1959). This institutional diversity might be used to argue for her location in the category 'art' rather than the category 'porn.' Certainly, her work has been shown in various art institutions, including the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir in Paris, and the London Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. But we could also locate Beatty in the institutions of sex work: her production company website focuses on dvd sales of her porn films, and one of those films, *The Elegant Spanking* (1995), was funded from the proceeds of her and her leading lady's professional bdsm sessions.

Historically, this nexus of art/porn/bdsm has been troubled. The story goes that Sprinkle fell out with Beatty over the politics of lesbian bdsm, and her work has never found a secure home in either feminist or queer art/film circuits.⁵ Beatty cites Robert Mapplethorpe, Jean Genet and Pier Paolo Pasolini as influences in using bdsm in art, and clearly this is a list of people who have had problems with various institutions of art.⁶ There is something politically interesting about the difficulty of this position, opening out, as it does, to questions about feminist and queer politics, the history of explicit images in art, and the uniquely inflaming properties of "somasochism" in representational politics, whether in the public sphere of censorship debates or the insider spaces of (apparently) progressive scholarship on sexuality. I will touch on these questions below as the politics of sexual representation is always at stake in thinking Beatty's films. Indeed, it would be fair to say that the intersection of art/porn is at the heart of my argument. But I am not interested in policing these boundaries, nor in finding a way to read Beatty's work as 'art.' Beatty is a case study of a mode of cinema that promises a queer arousal, but doesn't fit into clear generic or sexual categories. Her films rearrange our view of film aesthetics because they locate arousal—unusually—in the place of the masochist.

As a professional submissive and sometimes actor in her own films, Beatty describes her own project as representing the point of view of the submissive, which is absent in most bdsm porn.⁷ This lack is echoed by many (especially female) theorists of bdsm, both in cinema and more broadly. Lynda Hart points out that while critics such as Leo Bersani and Kaja Silverman have reimagined the radical potential of male masochism, female masochism has been largely excluded from queer theory.⁸ Chris Straayer finds that in Beatty and Serra's *A Lot of Fun for the Evil One*, it is easy for the spectator to identify humorously with the top but much harder to produce identification with the bottom.⁹ And Katrien Jacobs claims that "Although the institution of S/M has become more available to women in straight and lesbian relationships, the female submissive persona has scarcely been analyzed and touched upon by critics and theorists of pornography."¹⁰ As an example, she cites Sasha Waters's documentary *Whipped* (1998), which finds pro-doms¹¹ of some (highly conflicted) feminist interest, but sees no space for political agency in the experience of their submissives. This lack demonstrates the inadequacy of approaches based in the common misconception that dominant women are a reversal of patriarchal relations and should be seen as "good" by feminists, whereas submissive women merely reiterate patriarchy and are "bad." While the staging of power dynamics in bdsm is clearly of interest to feminism, the notion that sexual positions allegorize patriarchal power relations in such a doggedly literal fashion presents a highly limiting model of the politics of desire. Where it leaves lesbian bdsm partners is only one of the problems inherent in this overly allegorical understanding of bdsm.

Many commentators point to the uniquely interwoven histories of bdsm, feminism and queer politics in the 1970s-1990s. While the culture wars conflated sadomasochistic with feminist and homosexual images in the rightwing attack on art, feminist, gay, and lesbian writers just as often sought to dissociate themselves from bdsm.¹² Pat Califia has written of the rejection of bdsm within queer, lesbian and feminist communities, and the threat that it poses to established power structures, including those of sex and gender. Califia asserts “This may be why S/M is so threatening to the established order and why it is so heavily penalized and persecuted. S/M roles are not related to gender or sexual orientation or race or class.”¹³ This is a radically different claim from that of Parveen Adams, for example, who argues that lesbian bdsm offers a radical rejection of categories, while heterosexual bdsm is politically reactionary.¹⁴ As the debate entered feminist film theory from the 1970s onward, the antiessentialism and psychoanalytic perspective of most writers ensured a broadly positive reception of “perversion,” but still accounts like Tania Modleski’s see female dominance as the only means to the transformation of patriarchy.¹⁵ Without wanting to minimize the significance of lesbian specificity, I would argue that there is a fundamental simplification involved in valorizing bdsm as a vision of ‘women on top.’ Califia’s emphasis on bdsm itself as a queer practice is echoed in Jacobs’s claim that “Beatty’s film art is incompatible with feminism because it encapsulates the return of ‘polymorphous perversity’ in a new generation of female sex radicals who are unwilling to deal with the knowledge transfer ideologies of older generations.”¹⁶ I would contest the idea that Beatty’s queer bdsm is incompatible with feminism, but what I find particularly important in regard to this debate is that her films reject the association of sexual dominance with political agency. Instead, I will argue, they link masochism with queer arousal in order to bring into view a history of perverse aesthetics.

The most frequently invoked critic of masochism these days is Gilles Deleuze, and indeed it is to him that Katrien Jacobs, one of the only scholarly readers of Beatty, turns.¹⁷ For Jacobs, *The Black Glove* (1997) is Beatty’s most formally masochistic film in Deleuzian terms because it excludes any relationship to a mistress and represents a purely formal exercise of power.¹⁸ We do not know who the submissive is, or who is punishing her, and the film’s shiny and spatially constricted mise-en-scène precludes much sense of psychic space. Sensuality is disavowed even as the film focuses on the sensory experience of the bound submissive and the textural detail of wax and metal on skin. It is a text of surfaces, all glossy cinematography and textured objects, deliberately removing bourgeois fantasies of depth the better to engage cinema’s (and the body’s) surface experiences. Here, the law is not narrativized, staged in a suspenseful or intersubjective relationship, but abstracted to such a degree that only the residual form of its enforcement remains. However, if this film is Beatty’s most Deleuzian text, her work also demonstrates precisely the limits of a Deleuzian account of masochism.



Glossy surfaces in *The Black Glove*

As Amber Musser argues, Deleuze's masochism is essentially patriarchal, despite or indeed because of its veneration of coldly powerful women. (Again, this is where the grudging pop feminist celebration of the dominatrix is mistaken.) It is concerned with the power of the individual subject and his ill-fated revolt against the Oedipal order. In this agonistic model, the masochist is therefore inherently alienated.¹⁹ Hart also finds that Deleuze's initially promising account of masochism goes wrong in its investment in patriarchal subjects. She argues that it begins well for a queer reader by allowing two women to take up places in its contractual powerlessness and goes some way to overthrowing a Hegelian master/slave model. However, she finds it goes off the rails when Deleuze argues that the dominant must only be a woman and ideally a heterosexual one. The cold dominant woman is a prop merely, and the female submissive a theoretical ghost for a masochism that really aims to reproduce heterosexuality and to reconstitute men out of fantasized mother/son relations.²⁰ If *The Black Glove* is susceptible to Deleuzian interpretation, films like *The Elegant Spanking* and *Ecstasy in Berlin, 1926* (2004) illustrate Beatty's ability to queer this patriarchal masochism. Rejecting Deleuze's decoupling of masochism from sadism, Beatty proposes a queer and feminist account of bdsm that is intersubjective and reorganizes the locations and locutions of power. Instead of focusing on the alienated masochist, the films imbricate the performance of powerlessness with the performance of power. Practically, the submissive and dominant actors are equally 'stars,' and co-creators, active personae in the bdsm scene, each of whose film performances require the collaboration of the other. Many of Beatty's films are indeed co-directed. Beyond this practice of intersubjectivity, the films formally rescue both submissive and dominant from the status of prop precisely by a transvaluation of the prop itself.

Of course, the prop is part of the iconography of masochism. The fetish object, whether it be feathers, fur, or shoes, is a key element in masochism's strategy of delayed pleasure. Thus, in the Deleuzian scene, the physical prop, like the cruel woman, is part of the paraphernalia of the male ego, and the point is that the submissive man plays at being an object while ensuring that it is actually the woman and the fetishes that have that status. A critique of this version of object relations in masochism is folded into many analyses of masochistic films. Barbara Mennel, writing on Monika Treut's *Seduction: the Cruel Woman* (1985), for instance, writes that "*Seduction's* stylization of S&M performances in staged tableaux quotes the stillness and coldness of the construction of the 'original' dominant woman in *Venus in Furs* and creates the suspense that underlies the masochistic aesthetic."²¹ For Mennel, these stylized tableaux produce transformative meaning only when read alongside the more active

relationships that the film depicts in non-bdsm settings: against the theatrical enclosure of the bdsm club, vanilla lesbian sex is represented as dynamic, “characterized by a repetition of movement and cuts.”²² While she supports the film’s queer project, Mennel is less comfortable locating political potential in the stylization and aesthetic qualities of masochism. A system of binaries emerges in accounts of the film in which vanilla/perverse maps onto both narrative/mise-en-scène and real/stylized. To take another example, Birgit Hein finds the film to be insufficiently subversive because “too picturesque.”²³ The proliferation of masochistic props makes a scene beautiful but lifeless, in a rhetoric we might recognize in the ‘all surface, no depth’ criticism of mainstream art films like *In the Mood for Love* (Wong, 2000). When even queer and feminist readers find the masochistic aesthetic of prop, fetish and arousing scene to be unassimilable, we see how engrained is an anti-decorative discourse of cinematic value. A rejection of perverse style suffuses contemporary culture, even as postclassical cinema increasingly embraces its potential.

The necessary response, I would suggest, is to engage with masochistic aesthetics as a political question, rather than only valorizing representations of queer relationships that are made possible in the depiction of the bdsm scenario. For Beatty, it is not that subjects can be lowered to the status of objects, but that objects—cinematic things, the space of mise-en-scène—can be valued as productive alongside subjects. We see this most clearly in the fetishistic investment in surface details of skin, clothing, crops, etc., as well as in the figuration of the submissive as furniture—an eroticized object with sensory abilities. This play with objects evokes (inflames, even) the problem that traditional feminism has had with bdsm: the fear that it replicates patriarchal power relations by encouraging women to enjoy submission. Hart articulates this fear succinctly when she writes that “Masochism continues to be the term that signals a red flag within feminism, not only because of its historical associations with a ‘feminine ontology,’ but also because it is the masochistic sexual desire that most profoundly signals a destabilization of ‘self’ that feminism so jealously guards.”²⁴ Loss of self meshes with the aesthetics of decoration, for it ushers in a movement into objecthood, where the submissive becomes decorative; desirable and even arousing in the material qualities of her bodily arrangement. But a move into materiality raises other questions in film, where materiality, the ontological, and the fetishistic pleasures of seeing people as things lead us to the grounding qualities of the medium. Beatty’s films eroticize the decorative as a form of cinematic materiality, making the spectator aware of the closeness of their pleasures and, indeed, provocatively staging the masochistic *as* the cinematic.

As I have argued elsewhere, the decorative names an area of exclusion from patriarchal aesthetics, a lesser realm of feminine or effeminate ornament, without the nobility or value of patriarchal linear and austere styles.²⁵ If this is the case, then the decorative provides a unique space of potential for queer aesthetics to constitute cinematic space differently. This potential must be of especial value for a masochistic disposition, where the fetish, the prop, and the object are vectors of arousal. But this affinity is not only conceptual, for perversion and decoration share a modern historical constitution. The nineteenth-century classificatory drive produced hierarchies and taxonomies of (among many other things) both ornamental and sexual practices. John K. Noyes tells us that “The modernist solution to the challenge of masochism typically tries to collect social experiences into a system that can lay claim to universality while at the same time taking cognizance of and, within limits, tolerating the diversity of human experience. This was certainly the underlying intention in Krafft-Ebing’s attempts to develop a system of objective pathology. He hoped to be able to categorize

transient acts as more or less deviant performances of a code whose status was absolute.”²⁶ For the nineteenth-century sexologists, perversion took its place in a highly codified system, forming both its necessary condition and its object of epistemological control. But if this codification is well known to critical theory, its twin impulse with regard to aesthetics in the same period is less so.

From the late 1870s until the beginning of the twentieth century, aestheticians and art practitioners in western Europe produced an impressive field of ornamental grammar. In France, Jules Bourgoïn’s *Elementary Grammar of Ornament* (1880), Charles Blanc’s *Grammar of Decorative Arts* (1882), and Eugène Véron’s *Aesthetic* (1878) deployed the scientific language of taxonomy to break down ornamental style into clearly marked variants. Physical categories thus included arabesque, leaf, palm, and tile; cultural categories were also enumerated, such as Bourgoïn’s Arab geometry, Japanese nature, and Greek art (no prizes for guessing which is judged the superior option here).²⁷ British participants included Owen Jones’ influential *Grammar of Ornament* (1856), Ralph Wornum’s *Analysis of Ornament* in 1882, and the Arts and Crafts movement, which produced a popular discourse on the social and aesthetic qualities of decorative arts.²⁸ And in Germany, practical grammars by practitioners like Franz Sales Meyer (1886) and Alexander Speltz (1904) helped form a culture of ornamental systematization within which Alois Riegl’s *Problems of Style*—as influential in its way as Krafft-Ebing—could emerge.²⁹ While Riegl, like Bourgoïn, organized the field of decoration into basic shapes (the palmette, the rosette, the tendril and the zigzag), he was also engaged in a polemic against a materialism of technological determinism, claiming a historical continuity, an inherent structure, to the shapes of ornament.

As cultural historians have pointed out, these nineteenth-century cataloguers of ornament often sought to control its proliferations and limit its excesses. Rae Beth Gordon tells us that “Indulgence in ornamental patterns and objects is tolerated and even nurtured in, say, French classicism because the privilege of the center is always maintained. It is when the central figure is threatened with usurpation that moralizing about ornament begins.”³⁰ And this moralizing is often strikingly sexual in nature. Gordon glosses the problem of improper ornamental style as “throw[ing] the spectator into a vertiginous debauchery of the senses,” and the language of nineteenth-century discourse on ornament repeatedly echoes with an anxiety around arousing ornament.³¹ Wornum separated properly conventional design from the “ornamental abominations” of objects that deformed and perverted accepted limits of decorative decorum.³² Lewis Day referred to “perversity” in describing the Japanese rejection of European aesthetic codes.³³ And John Ruskin separated good from bad ornament with these words: “I do not mean by *luxuriance* of ornament *quantity* of ornament. In the best Gothic in the world there is hardly an inch of stone left unsculptured. But I mean that character of extravagance in the ornament itself which shows that it was addressed to jaded faculties; a violence and coarseness in curvature, a depth of shadow, a lusciousness in arrangement of lines, evidently arriving out of an incapability of feeling the true beauty of chaste form and restrained power.”³⁴ Across the field of ornamental grammar, violent curvature stages a perversion of chaste form.

Thus, in both sexology and aesthetic theory, we find a highly-organized code that seeks to rationalize diversity of expression, and a claim of objectivity that nonetheless structures hierarchies of value. Deviant variations within the taxonomy must be admitted—why else have a taxonomy?—but their status (that of perversions as well as inferior Oriental or

luxuriant design formations) is overdetermined by an implicit or explicit value judgment. The grammars of ornament took decorative design seriously in a way that was enormously important, as were the radical changes wrought by sexology in its various forms. But the recurrent Eurocentric assumptions and sexualized rhetoric make plain the political as well as aesthetic hierarchies that suffuse these texts. This point can be made, of course, about many modern classificatory structures. But what stands out for me in comparing sexology to ornamental grammar is the tension between the rigid rules of taxonomy and its fluid perversions. Riegl's categories and classes, the careful enumeration of each kind of palmette, pulls against the sinuous line and surface exuberance of decorative style, just as sexual perversions exceed the scientific propriety of 'objective pathology.' Perhaps those lesser forms of ornament need to be tamed in the same way as unruly sexual practices: the arabesque line echoes the curve of the bullwhip.

Beatty's films deploy this tension in a queer refusal of both anti-decorative aesthetics and heteronormative sexuality. The masochistic aesthetic is intertwined with decorative style, conjuring arousal out of restriction and rule. Just as bdsm has been theorized as a discourse on and refusal of patriarchal power relations, we can read masochistic aesthetics as a play with dominant aesthetics and its hierarchies of style. This is no mere analogy, but rather a claim on the ability of decorative form to articulate a queer textual politics. *The Elegant Spanking* illustrates this linkage in its final intertitle, which, entirely unconnected to the film's narrative, reads "In the darkness, turning pupils deeply fixed with meaning, she dropped a pair of kingfisher ornaments, mounted on an elephant, turned her back on me. (Tang Dynasty 618-907 AD)." Ornament is closely aligned to erotic power relations, vocalized from the point of view of a submissive. We might note that it is also, always already a play with the geopolitics of style and desire. Beatty's decorative pleasures—the sexual fetish and the unnecessary ornamental additions to an object—awake as if from sleep out of the structures of the law.

Ecstasy in Berlin expands on ornament's ability to figure queer arousal. From the beginning, the film presents an aestheticized gaze on a historical scene. A woman with blonde finger-waved hair wears a lace slip. As she injects her thigh with drugs, we view both the needle entering her flesh and her pierced labia. The image is softly lit, with a dual emphasis on prettily nostalgic signifiers of 1920s style and the more hard-edged metallic props of the piercings and needle. Both 'soft' lace and 'hard' metal are constituted as decorative aesthetic objects. Ornamentation and bodily violence are aligned: these signifiers do not produce conflict in the image but work together to arouse sensation. The next sequence begins with a shot of parted curtains with a woman seen out of focus beyond them. The curtains are florally patterned with beaded tassels, and we move from focusing on their sensory detail to that of the woman seated inside. The decorative works to frame and enfold the scene of masochistic arousal. This effect is iterated—elaborated and refined with each self-enclosed 'scene' in the film.



Sensory detail in *Ecstasy in Berlin*

In one striking instance, a whipping scene takes place in the background while very close to the camera there is an art nouveau lamp shaped like an angel. We begin with the lamp in focus (like the curtains); its sinuously feminine sculpted figure provides an internal point of view on the action. The focus shifts to the top pushing the bottom to her hands and knees, but the lamp remains prominent in the frame. As the scene continues through boot-licking and whipping, the lamp, rug, and modern rectangle-patterned wallpaper play recurrent roles in the *mise-en-scène*. The actors' fetishistic play with decorative shoe-objects is surrounded by a broader fetishistic investment in decorative interior design objects. The scene is set with objects, in cinema as in bdsm.



The decorative object as organizer of desire

Moreover, the emphasis on decorative objects enables a dispersal of point of view across the screen that evokes the (non)space of the submissive. Without a visual or subjective perspective, the submissive's sensory experience plays across the *mise-en-scène*.³⁵ In a later scene with a bullwhip, the submissive wears a corset with long tassels that hang down over her backside. As the whip hits her (moving too fast to be very visible), the tassels leap and swing, mobilizing decorative objects as an indexical trace of sensory experience, as well as

playing with the display and concealment of the body. Ruskin's violent curvature indeed perverts chaste form and works to express an erotics of bodily pain that exceeds the proper arrangements of corporeal pleasure.

The decorative scene is also, for Beatty, a historical and a cinematic scene. Both *Ecstasy in Berlin* and *The Elegant Spanking* combine evocations of queer histories with an explicit play on film histories. Beatty has said that "Weimar Berlin fits me like a long, black, tight, leather glove,"³⁶ and we see in *Ecstasy* all the familiar semiotics of Weimar as a lesbian-oriented and kinky subculture. We have a chic dominant in a man's suit, hair slicked back, channeling Garbo and Dietrich; in another scene she wears strong eye makeup, dark lipstick and hair styled to resemble that of the girls in *Mädchen in Uniform* (Sagan, 1931). The submissive is styled like a silent starlet with backlit blonde hair and cupid's bow lips. (Does *Ecstasy* hint at Hedy Lamarr's notorious debut?) And there are dance shoes, jazz music, and flapper pearls used as sex toys. As these references suggest, queer history is closely linked to film history, and the films return to late silent film styles by presenting 1920s cinema as a space of queer plenitude, radically reimaginable. While aesthetic theory often found art nouveau to be restrictive and stifling, a regressive vision of modernity, Beatty redeploys its aesthetic pleasures as a way to render visible and audible the perverse possibilities of cinematic space.

This staging is not simply a question of reference to the lesbian divas of interwar cinema. Rather, it is the cinematic itself that enables a masochistic sensory experience to emerge. Irises, superimpositions and other common tropes of late silent cinema work both to conjure historicity and as decorative supplements to the image. In *The Elegant Spanking*, intertitles articulate the submissive maid Kitty's thoughts, allowing the spectator to access her point of view even when she cannot speak. Camera effects do the same work, as where an iris into a pearl necklace indicates Kitty's fantasy around her mistress's jewelry. Point of view is thus produced in a way that is both specifically cinematic and tied to a masochistic sensorium. In *Ecstasy*, a close up focuses on the rectangles of the wallpaper and the tiny florals of the submissive's underwear. It is neither an optical point of view shot nor an expression of the sub's perspective, but it nonetheless evokes her dispersed yet corporeal sensory space. The film synthesizes the masochistic with the cinematic in aligning the erotic with the decorative object and the texture of the screen. Beatty interleaves the history of cinema with the history of queer arousals, combining 1920s sexual subcultures with the fetishistic history of film divas and the aesthetic pleasures of late silent era production design.

As Candace Moore has provocatively suggested, there is in Beatty's queer bdsm a trace of cinema itself, a materialization of the fetish as the supremely cinephilic object. For Moore, Beatty's films "work by contusion, teasing images out of celluloid while eroticizing pain made tangible."³⁷ The trace of impact on skin can render visible the queer erotics that underlie the cinematic image: there's a reason that cinematic spectatorship is so often evoked in the psychoanalytic terms of fetishism, the mantra of 'I know very well but all the same.' The fetish is arousing; it arouses our love of cinema, our love of images, our love of objects, of bodies, and of sensations. Beatty's films create an overt connection among these arousals, while offering something other than the dubious patriarchal pleasures of mastery and gender conformity. I agree with Moore in finding Beatty's queerness to exceed representational politics, but where Moore focuses on issues of temporality and authorship, I want to link the materiality of the masochistic image to the elaboration of a queer aesthetics. What one can

see in Betty's films is not a chiasmus of femininity, in which an invisible center (of pleasure or truth) is displaced across a fetishistic surface, but a visible—material—violence enacted on bodies whose arousal transforms the aesthetic field.

We can read the difference a masochistic arousal makes by contrasting Moore's cinema of contusions to Laura U. Marks's erotics of the haptic.³⁸ Marks finds haptic images in video art to be inherently erotic because intersubjective. Moreover, she connects the haptic to Gaylyn Studlar's account of masochistic identification with the surface of the screen.³⁹ But despite these suggestive affiliations, her tendency to associate female and lesbian filmmakers with closeness, a refusal of voyeurism, and mother-daughter relations intimates a version of feminine aesthetics that makes me slightly nervous. While for Marks the optical image produces a relationship of mastery, "the ideal relationship between viewer and haptic image is mutuality."⁴⁰ She admits, however, that if the image 'touches' the spectator, then that touch has the potential to be violent rather than caressing. The viewer's awareness of this potential places a tension at the heart of intersubjectivity: "Haptic visibility implies a tension between viewer and image, then, because this violent potential is always there. Haptic visibility implies making oneself vulnerable to the image, reversing the relation of mastery that characterizes optical viewing."⁴¹ Although there is, to my ear, a bdsm implication in this eroticism composed of tension around violent touching, Marks characterizes the viewer of bdsm video art as "cautious" and needing to be "cajole[d]" by the effects of haptic abstraction into watching a violent scene. In contrast, viewers of other kinds of (vanilla?) video art simply deploy the haptic to distinguish "hot sex scenes" from porn.⁴²

Marks imagines violent touching as unpleasurable, a potential pitfall of the haptic for the spectator and, correspondingly, sees pornography as limited by an optical vision characterized by Stanley Cavell's "inherent obscenity of cinema."⁴³ This binary re-instantiates an iconophobic thread in film studies, in which the image is inherently pornographic and something must be done to it to ameliorate its obscene visibility. The overvaluation of the haptic image is, for me, simply the corollary of this iconophobia and, while Marks espouses a gender critique, her looking/masculine/mastery vs touching/feminine/mutuality system seems limiting for either feminist or queer accounts of the cinematic image. But what if violent touches were instead arousing, awakening, transformative? What if marks made on bodies were both indices and provocations of pleasure? We might break apart the double bind of an optical 'obscenity' of looking (at the film) or a haptic violence of touching (by the film). Betty's films propose a mutuality in violent touching and aroused looking, and a kindling of a queer relationship to the cinematic in their figuration of masochistic scenic spaces. In her films, mutuality does not describe a 'feminine' closeness or fantasy of escape from the structures of power, but rather a potential to experience cinema differently. It is the cinematic itself that provokes masochistic pleasure, and in the arousal of this pleasure, as in Benjamin's dialectical moment of awakening, the political force of the cinematic might be reimaginable. Outside of cinema, this queer cinematic turn has already been intimated. Lynda Hart, who didn't live to see Betty's recent films, evoked Laura Mulvey's famous application of Freud's concepts of perversion to classical Hollywood film, the patriarchal double bind of sadistic storytelling and fetishistic overvaluation. Hart was writing of sadomasochism's discursive field and not of film, yet her response to Mulvey resonates with the cinematic. She proposed that masochism could broach this system's carapace, the masochist's desire enacting "a desire for another symbolic order."⁴⁴ Maria Betty's films explore the possibility that cinema has, all along, contained the possibility of such an awakening.

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Notes

I would like to thank Candace Moore for kindly sharing her work on Maria Beatty. Her ideas on Beatty resonated strongly with my own research, and the exchange was inspiring and nourishing to this article.

¹ I use bdsm to refer to a variety of practices that have been named as S/M, sadomasochism, bondage and discipline, or domination and submission. The connotations of each nomenclature is outwith the scope of this essay, but the term bdsm attempts to be inclusive, both of diverse practices and of the relationships between theories of sexuality and cultural practices/identities.

² Cherry Smyth, "The Pleasure Threshold: Looking at Lesbian Pornography on Film," *Feminist Review* 34 (Spring 1990): 159.

³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 464.

⁴ *ibid*, 464.

⁵ Katrien Jacobs describes the falling out between Beatty and Sprinkle in "The Lady of Little Death," *Wide Angle* 19/3 (1997): 24.

⁶ Maria Beatty quoted in Ernest Green, "The Divine Decadence of Fetish Noir," *Taboo* (no date): 53. Accessed via <http://www.bleuproductions.com/about.html>.

⁷ *ibid*, 54.

⁸ Lynda Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadomasochism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 84-90. Hart argues that in finding masochism specifically liberatory for men, theorists like Bersani and Silverman oddly continue a Freudian structure in which men can do masochism as a sexual perversion while women simply are constitutionally masochistic. See also Sigmund Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud vol 19*, trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: Vintage, 2001), 159-170, Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁹ Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-orientation in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 191-3.

¹⁰ Jacobs, 20.

¹¹ 'Pro-dom' refers to professional dominatrices, like Rosemary Delain, the mistress in *The Elegant Spanking*. Waters' film doesn't draw a strong distinction between the lives of pro-doms and the experience of bdsm as a not-for-profit sex practice.

¹² For an overview of these debates, see Mandy Merck, "The Feminist Ethics of Lesbian s/m," in *Perversions* (London: Virago, 1993).

- ¹³ Pat Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2000), 166.
- ¹⁴ Parveen Adams, "Of Female Bondage," in *The Emptiness of the Image* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 27-48.
- ¹⁵ Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 152-159; see also Teresa de Lauretis, "Upping the Anti in Feminist Theory," in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, ed., *Conflicts in Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1990): 255-270.
- ¹⁶ Jacobs, 31.
- ¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Zone Books, 1989).
- ¹⁸ Jacobs, 24-5.
- ¹⁹ Amber Musser, "Masochism: A Queer Subjectivity," *Rhizomes* 11/12 (Fall 2005/Spring 2006), <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue11/musser.html>.
- ²⁰ Hart, 68-70.
- ²¹ Barbara Mennel, "Wanda's Whip: Recasting Masochism's Fantasy – Monika Treut's *Seduction: The Cruel Woman*," in Ingeborg Majer O'Sickey and Ingeborg von Zadow, ed., *Triangulated Visions: Women in Recent German Cinema* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 156.
- ²² *ibid*, 158.
- ²³ Birgit Hein, quoted in Julia Knight, *Women and the New German Cinema* (London: Verso, 1992), 168.
- ²⁴ Hart, 60.
- ²⁵ Rosalind Galt, "Pretty: Film Theory, Aesthetics, and the History of the Troublesome Image," *Camera Obscura* 71 (Summer 2009): 1-41.
- ²⁶ John K. Noyes, *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 204.
- ²⁷ Jules Bourgoïn, *Grammaire élémentaire de l'ornement* (Paris: Librairie Ch. Delagrave, 1880), Eugène Véron, *L'Esthétique* (Paris: Reinwald et cie, 1878), Jules Bourgoïn, *Théorie de l'ornement* (Paris: Duchet et cie, 1883), Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des arts décoratifs* (Paris: Librairie Renouard, 1882). Geopolitical categories from Bourgoïn (1880): 5.
- ²⁸ Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (London: Quaritch, 1868), Ralph N. Wornum, *Analysis of Ornament: the Characteristics of Styles, an Introduction to the Study of the History of Ornamental Art* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1882).
- ²⁹ Alexander Speltz, *Farbige Ornament aller historischen Stile* (Leipzig: KF Koehlers Antiquarium, 1904), Franz Sales Meyer, *A Handbook of Ornament* (London: Duckworth, 1974), Alois Riegl, *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament*, trans. Evelyn Kain (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
- ³⁰ Rae Beth Gordon, *Ornament, Fantasy, and Desire in Nineteenth Century French Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 25.
- ³¹ *ibid*, 16.
- ³² Wornum, 9.
- ³³ Lewis Day, quoted in E.H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: a Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979), 58.
- ³⁴ John Ruskin, *Stones of Venice vol. III* (London: Smith, Elder and co., 1967), 4.
- ³⁵ The film's soundscape also produces a submissive point of view. Underwater sounds tie the spectator to a sensory experience other than that staged by optical point of view.
- ³⁶ Beatty quoted in Green, 53.

³⁷ Candace Moore, “Fetish on (and of) Film: Queer Temporalities and Antagonized Pleasures in the Works of Maria Beatty and Jennifer Reeves,” unpublished conference paper presented at Thinking Gender Conference, UCLA, 2007.

³⁸ Laura U. Marks, “Video Haptics and Erotics,” *Screen* 39/4 (1998): 331-348.

³⁹ Gaylyn Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

⁴⁰ Marks, 341.

⁴¹ *ibid*, 341.

⁴² *ibid*, 342.

⁴³ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), quoted in Marks, 342.

⁴⁴ Hart, 70.