Buggering Freud and Deleuze: toward a queer theory of masochism

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Abstract

Both Freud’s and Deleuze’s understandings of masochism limit the transgressive and subversive forces of masochism by taking sexual difference for granted. Drawing on Newton’s fashion photography for Wolford and on feminist interrogations of Freud, Deleuze, and masochism, this paper therefore seeks to develop an alternative, queer theory of masochism as sexual indifference. Viewing masochism as sexual indifference opens up movements of desire beyond the heterosexual matrix of male masochists and female mistresses. This is therefore an exercise in buggery. In the first half of the paper we bugger Freud’s understanding of masochism with Deleuze’s diverging understanding of masochism. In the second half we bugger Deleuze’s understanding of masochism with other parts of his own work, with feminist critique, and with Newton’s photography.

Keywords: masochism; fetishism; phallic woman; bisexuality; transgenderism; fashion photography

INTRODUCTION

While Gilles Deleuze took it upon himself to bugger the history of philosophy, Sigmund Freud constituted one of the main targets of Deleuze’s buggery. One of Deleuze’s main contributions in this respect was to develop an understanding of masochism in stark contrast to that provided by Freud. Deleuze rejects Freud’s fusion of masochism and sadism in terms of sadomasochism. Further, he contradicts Freud’s Oedipalism by constituting the mother rather than the father as the masochist’s threat and love object. Still, Deleuze’s writings on masochism remain trapped in a heterosexual matrix of male masochists and female mistresses. Like Freud, Deleuze takes sexual difference for granted. This is not only in contrast to Deleuze’s understanding of desire as excessive multiplicity and Deleuzian notions such as the body without organs and becoming-woman: it is also challenged by more recent configurations of masochist and fetishist aesthetics in Western popular culture.

Famous fashion and portrait photographer Helmut Newton’s fashion photography for Wolford made in the late 1980s and the early 1990s is a case in point here. Newton’s photographs combine masochist and fetishist aesthetics wherein phallic women occupy center stage. Alongside all the usual Wolford paraphernalia (pantyhose, stockings, and lingerie), typical Freudian fetishes such as high heels, long legs, wigs, swords, whips, and sunglasses are playfully mobilized to depict acts of domination and submission. We argue that Newton’s Amazon models decentralize the phallus and transgress boundaries of gender and stereotypes of womanhood.

Understanding these expressions of masochist and fetishist embodiment requires a buggery of Deleuzian masochism as well as of Freudian masochism. In the first half of this paper we therefore bugger Freud’s understanding of masochism with Deleuze’s diverging understanding of masochism. In the second half, we bugger Deleuze’s understanding of masochism with other
parts of his own work, with feminist theorizing on masochism and fetishism, and with Newton’s photography. More specifically, we do so by developing a notion of what we call “masochist indifference,” which opens up masochist movements of desire beyond the heterosexual matrix of male masochists and female mistresses.

BUGGERING FREUD WITH DELEUZE

Since German sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing first coined the term masochism in 1886, masochism has been understood as a fantasmatic process involving a fear and longing for orgasm amongst men with perverse desires of being whipped by a dominant woman or man. However, as has been pointed out by Joseph Bristow, Krafft-Ebing does not contribute much to an analysis of the cause of masochism (nor to the other perversions he described through his case studies): for this, we have to turn to Freud, his younger colleague. What Freud does, is to search for the origin, the cause, the reason, the essence of sexual perversity, such as masochism—and he finds it all in the family.

With his early treatise on perversions, Three Essays on the Theory on Sexuality and in his later case studies (of which the studies on Little Hans and the “Wolfman” are the most central), Freud comes to shape the popular understanding of masochism. According to Freud, a recurring fantasy or dream found among men and women is that of a child being beaten. In both, this fantasy can be traced to early childhood, and in both, it creates a desire to masturbate. However, the fantasy means different things in men and women. Whereas the male fantasy is connected to a wish to position himself in a passive—and ostensibly feminine—position, the female fantasy involves a sadistic—and guilt-ridden—desire to see another child being beaten. This guilt can only be solved by the female placing herself in the position of the beaten child. In its first phase, sadism satisfies her jealousy toward the other child. In the second phase, it satisfies her guilt.

It is the female’s guilt-ridden second phase that has come to color our understanding of masochism as an allegedly feminine trait. The little boy’s (or even the adult man’s) desire to be beaten is therefore a desire that can only be understood as a desire to be feminine. Hence, only a man can desire masochism and only a man can be a masochist, but in the disguise of woman. As Freud writes: “But if, as happens so often, you meet with masochism in men, what is left to you but to say that these men exhibit very plain feminine traits?”

Freud’s understanding of masochism is founded on the familial relations of the Oedipal drama. Here, femininity is constituted as passive whereas masculinity is constituted as active. The father’s dominance makes him the biggest threat to the male child. He has the power to castrate, imbue the son with lack, and turn him into a woman like his mother. While lack is deemed natural and normal in the female, it is not so in the male. The male child’s castration anxiety may therefore develop into masochist perversion. The male child’s guilt and fear of castration leads him to assume a passive role in order to placate the father and win his love. Being beaten by the father, then, is “not only the punishment for the forbidden genital relation with the mother, but also a regressive substitute for it.”

But according to Freud, masochism as a sexual preference or desire in the male adult cannot stand by itself. It needs an opposite. Masochism needs sadism because “Every active perversion is [...] accompanied by its passive counterpart.” Indeed, it is all within the masochist. At any time the masochist can turn into a sadist. But not only are all sadists ex-masochists. Both masochists and sadists are sadomasochists as both desires are embodied within one and the same individual.

One of Deleuze’s main contributions to the understanding of masochism is to reject Freud’s fusion of sadism and masochism and to divest and render masochism independent from sadism. On Deleuze’s account, there is an “irreducible dissymmetry” between masochism and sadism. While Freud takes Krafft-Ebing’s terms of masochism and sadism for granted and bases his understanding of sadism and masochism on his own psychoanalytical case studies, Deleuze goes back to the literary works of Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, extending masochism beyond the clinical realm so as to interrogate its formalistic and dramaturgical structure and quality.

According to Deleuze, sadism and masochism are radically different, not only as sexual practices but also as narrative structures. Whereas sadism is
built on chaos, masochism is formal and dramatic, following an aesthetic which extends it into “the arena of artistic form, language, and the production of pleasure through text.” Masochism’s formality is inscribed explicitly in the contract governing masochist relations between two partners. This contract invests masochism with strict rules, roles, and directions. The contract is a narrative in itself already replete with a scenario, a story, and a *dramatis personae*. The two parties are playing the roles that Masoch has instructed them to play. Hence, masochism is both theater and reality. While the masochistic script structures the masochistic performance, this script is first shaped by fantasy and then transformed into reality.

Further on, the masochistic contract subverts the power relations of the two parties involved. While in sadism the masochist slave is in the power of the master, in masochism the master is only powerful insofar as the masochist slave confers power to the master. Hence, the masochist slave is the hero of the masochist drama. Masochism is narrativized and structured by the masochist before the actual performance can take place. Somewhat ironically, the post-Freudian psychoanalyst Bernard Berliner helps us understand this Deleuzian point in more detail. While psychoanalysis typically views masochism as disorder and perversion and emphasizes the victimized position of the masochist in childhood, Berliner argues that the masochist “appears in a double light”—as a passive victim of a brutal and traumatic childhood and as an active “troublemaker who entangles himself in actual conflict by which he constantly makes himself victim again. He is sinned against, and sinning” (Berliner in Glick and Meyers). Though Berliner fails to ascribe any major importance to the masochist as troublemaker, this notion does make some steps toward ascribing agency and power to the masochist victim. And this further enables us to dissociate masochism from sadism. Being a troublemaker means being active in making trouble for others. This invites us to think the masochist as an agent who, via the masochistic contract, actively chooses to locate himself in a passive and inferior position. Hence, there is agency and activity in the passive because it is from this point that the masochist drama is shaped and instructed. While consistent with Deleuze, this finds further support in Theodor Reik’s notion of “victory through defeat,” which first captured the desperate unconscious search for control in the abused child. Disguising power as submission and control as passivity, the abused child—or the adult masochist—may position himself or herself in an imaginary position of power. Even though the masochist contract proscribes a constructed dualism between passivity and activity, between the roles of “victim” and “dominator,” on this view both the submissive masochist and the dominant mistress are both active and passive in their role-playing. The mistress must use the masochist for her own pleasure, but she must be instructed to do so.

Perhaps this explains why on Deleuze’s reading the masochistic drama is a romantic drama. “Of Masoch it can be said, as it cannot be of Sade, that no one has ever been so far with so little offence to decency.” Contrary to the sadistic world of impersonal and violent sex, the masochistic world is colored by dramatic suspense and intimacy wherein the masochist hero is a supersensual hero. As Deleuze reminds us, this echoes Mephistopheles: “Thou sensual, supersensual libertine, a little girl can lead thee by the nose.” In masochism, actual—and obscene—sex is therefore replaced by an idealized and romanticized eroticism, which challenges Freud’s argument that “the true masochist always turns his cheek whenever he has a chance of receiving a blow.” Whenever the masochist turns his cheek to receive a blow, it is crucial that the blow is dealt by the right (kind of) person. The masochist does not take blows from just anyone. Who holds the whip is decisive.

But the infliction of actual, physical pain, which is deemed central to all sadist practices, is not so in masochism. In masochism, pain remains within the realm of possibility. Pain is never actually inflicted—it does not have to be inflicted. Rather, it is the fear of pain and retribution and humiliation which drives the masochist. Hence, the masochist slave’s infatuation, worship, and submission before his master is more important than physical pain or actual sex.
Deleuze further challenges Freud’s fusion of sadism and masochism by providing an alternative etiology of masochism. Whereas Freud’s emphasis on the father’s power to castrate makes the father the primary and determinant figure in the child’s world, Deleuze constitutes the mother as the child’s primary and determinant figure. Masochism goes back to the pregenital and symbiotic phase between child and mother. Both love object and controlling agent for the helpless child, the mother is an ambivalent figure during the child’s oral phase. Breast-feeding the child she also has the power to punish him by withholding breast-feeding and abandoning him. While sadism has nothing to do with love, masochism involves exaggerated love for the other. The masochist may therefore be punished for loving his mother too much, and for wanting her in an erotic way despite knowing that this is the exclusive right of his father. But contrary to Freud, it is not the father who will punish him for desiring the mother, but the beloved and desired mother herself. This makes the mother dangerous as well as comforting, powerful as well as loving. The child’s fear of being abandoned by the mother constitutes the primary source of her authority. Rooted in this early fear, the adult masochist recreates this scenario of abandonment by staging a movement between concealment and revelation, disappearance and appearance, seduction and rejection. In this scenario, the presence of pain functions only symbolically as a way to punish and expel the (unnecessary) father. Indeed, it is not the son but the father who is guilty. And the father must be punished because he is guilty of trying to come between mother and child. For Deleuze, then, masochism cannot be a question of castration anxiety because it is the mother and not the father who is the child’s primary and determinant figure.

By positioning the mother in the Symbolic and leaving the father powerless, Deleuze further invalidates Freud’s Oedipal scenario. For Deleuze, masochism is the female dominion par excellence. Hence, one should not be surprised if, or when, masochism emerges in an “affair of women.” Whereas sadism, as its incommensurable counterpart, stands for the active negation of the mother and the inflation of the father, masochism “[...] proceeds by a twofold disavowal, a positive, idealizing disavowal of the mother (who is identified with the law) and an invalidating disavowal of the father (who is expelled from the symbolic order).”

The adult male masochist re-enacts this mother-child relationship. But even though the mistress punishes the masochist hero in performing the mother role, this is no sadistic punishment. Rather, she inflicts cruelty in love to fulfill her part of the contract. As his “mother,” she must be ambivalent—dangerous and comforting. While punishment is governed by the masochistic contract, she must also punish any attempt to trespass or divert from the contract. Re-enacting the mother–child relationship involves re-enacting the pregenital and symbiotic relationship between mother and child. But the fantasy of entering into complete symbiosis with her and becoming one with her body can only happen in the imagination as real unity means death. Hence, death becomes the fantasy solution to masochistic desire, and the orgasm—the little death—must be postponed.

While the orgasm is important in the masochist’s imagination and fantasy of what is to come, it must be postponed for the masochist to survive. Hence, Masoch’s heroes are forever swooning into a faint before the blissful moment of consumption: “I tore off the ermine jacket and the lace and felt her naked bosom heaving against mine. Then I lost consciousness” (Masoch, 1870).

**SEEMINGLY ON TOP**

Although the mother replaces the father both as threat and love object in Deleuze’s analysis of masochism, it provides no real space for a female subject. Woman may be the dominatrix and the one on top as she sets the rules, but this is a false masque of power. It is the male masochist who is the real subject as he is the one who forces her to impersonate his dream figure of cold, perfect, and dominant womanhood. Deleuze writes:

> In our opinion the woman torturer belongs entirely to masochism; admittedly she is not a masochistic character, but she is a pure element of masochism. […] The torturess escapes from her own masochism by assuming the active role in the masochistic situation.
She is thus only an object obeying his wishes to play the part that he has forced upon her. And as it is often claimed, it is the bottom that holds the real power. This applies both to a purely masochistic scenario and to a sadomasochistic scenario. Hence, in the heterosexual—yet queer—setting referred to by Deleuze, the female is (seemingly) on top. However, given that there is no sadist element to this specific masochistic situation, hers is also a position of masochism (just as that of her “slave”). She is, as a dominatrix, only a vehicle for the masochistic male’s lust. There is no real power in her hands as she carries out the acts that her male slave demands of her: she cannot be in power by her own will, nor find pleasure in that position, as this would interrupt the trajectory that the masochist has set out for her. Therefore, this is a game that only on the surface is about role-swapping and female domination. The dominated male is always in control. Deleuze, however, is fully aware of this:

The woman torturer of masochism cannot be sadistic precisely because she is in the masochistic situation, she is an integral part of it, a realization of the masochistic fantasy. She belongs in the masochistic world, not in the sense that she has the same tastes as her victim, but because her “sadism” is a kind never found in the sadist; it is as it were the double or the reflection of masochism. The same is true of sadism.\(^2\)

Thus, the dominant female is left as an empty masque, a performance and a fantasy created by the male. It seems as if the heterosexual structure of Masoch cannot possibly leave any real power to the female agent, because in his defeat to her, he is the one holding the victory. Hence, it might be argued that the inherent sexual inequality that informs any (heterosexual) sadomasochistic relation according to many anti-pornography feminists is equally present within the masochistic setting.

However, if discussing masochistic practices and desires within a strict poststructuralist framing, it is possible to temporarily leave the political reality of gender inequality behind. Within this chassis, the disintegration of the liberal subject may offer radically subversive possibilities. Following Kaja Silverman’s exploration of male masochism,\(^{17}\) one can start viewing masochism as one of several “deviant” masculinities that represents a tacit challenge not only to conventional male subjectivity, but to the whole “world”—[calling] sexual difference into question, and beyond that, ‘reality’ itself.”\(^{17}\) Male masochism, then, within this theoretical framing, betrays the phallic standard, and hands it over—in theory—to the female.

And if turning our gaze to the ads of fashion photographer Helmut Newton made for the Austrian underwear and pantyhose manufacturer Wolford, displaying phallic women who we read as representations of powerful mistresses, we may find room for gender subversion and equality. These images offer a questioning and a critique of dominant notions of masochism and its heterosexual contract as stipulated by Freud and Deleuze. Their treatises of masochism, as has been pointed out above, are heavily rooted in a strict and heterosexual matrix of male masochists and female mistresses, both of them relying on sexual difference as natural (and desirable).

**NEWTON’S PHALMIC WOMEN**

Let us now turn to examine how Newton’s images may be used to open up for masochistic movements of desire that are beyond this unequal and congealed matrix, to understand masochism as a matter of sexual—or indeed masochistic—indifference. Newton’s photography, and particularly his photography for Wolford, combines masochist and fetishist aesthetics, abounding in images of seemingly straight Amazon and phallic women dressed in or otherwise utilizing fetish paraphernalia: from Wolford pantyhose, stockings and lingerie, to high heels, gloves and wigs, swords, whips, guns, sunglasses, and cameras. While we regret that we are not able to reproduce any of these images here, let us try to provide a description of their key features.

Newton’s phallic Amazon women are alone in these photos. Most of them depict one or two phallic women. There are never any men or other women present. The models rarely look into the camera. Instead, they are facing their back against
the camera, look straight beyond the camera, or look at the camera through mirror sunglasses. In one photo the model is wearing a white pair of the shiny Wolford Fatal pantyhose. Turning her back to Newton’s lens, she holds a photograph in her hand while carrying a camera on her shoulder. While she is made to pose for Newton’s lens, she has made someone else pose to her lens. In another photo, two models wearing Wolford bodies are facing each other, standing up. One of them has her back to the camera. Like the previous photo, they are made to pose as if they have no concern for Newton’s lens. Instead they are caught up with one another, seeking to dominate the other with their medieval design sword. In a third photo one seems to have taken charge. Facing her back to the camera, she has forced the other into a seated position, holding her down with the force of her own hand.

While Newton’s work as a whole has been criticized for being both sexist and misogynist and for romanticizing fascist or even Nazi aesthetics, we find these parts of his work particularly useful for developing a notion of masochistic indifference. While we agree with much of the critique raised against his work, we believe there is more to be gained from reading his work as a critique of the very same things he is critiqued for. Below, we are therefore attempting a counter reading of his work to upset sexual difference and male supremacy. Indeed, reading his sexualized and pornographic work in a way which visualizes established notions about gender, sexuality, and race may empower feminist and queer discourses to question old truths dictated by male thinkers such as Freud and Deleuze. But before doing so, let us return back to Freud’s understanding of phallic woman.

**CASTRATED WOMEN, PHALIC WOMEN**

Although Deleuze omits the idea of the mistress as a phallic woman, Freud in fact gave certain attention: according to him, it is before a phallic and fetishized woman that the masochist hero submits and faints. Yet, it is woman’s castrated nature that is at the core of Freud’s understanding of phallic woman, hence divesting her of any true power. As men are terrified by her lack, woman is reconstituted as a fetishized phallic woman, which conceals her lack and castration. But the fetish triggers sexual arousal in the masochist, connecting terror, and excitement:

> The sight of Medusa’s head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone. Observe that we have once again the same origin from the castration complex and the same transformation of affect! For becoming stiff means an erection. Thus in the original situation it offers consolidation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact. 18

To be stiffed with terror is to be stiffed with desire—in this case, with masochistic desire. Sexual arousal requires terror. Freud, then, views the phallic woman as a male creation invented to help him repress his fears of castration: like in the Deleuzian reading, woman is only a tool, an object, in the male’s masochistic scenario. The threat her lack constitutes is then avoided via the fetishes she wears (she is made to wear)—furs, whips, high heels—because these fetishes divest her of lack and invest her with a phallus.

According to Barbara Creed the phallic woman not only conceals her lack and castration. 19 Her fetishes also invest her with the power to castrate by means of a *vagina dentata*. While the masochist thrives on this fear of castration, the phallic woman is not merely a male creation but a female creation through which women refuse to be reduced to a patriarchal image. Having acquired the phallus, the phallic woman transgresses and denaturalizes sexual and gendered identity. Exposing phallic masculinity as a “put-on,” as mere style, she delegitimizes it as phallic imposture. Masochism may therefore contribute to a queer reversal of sexual and gendered power relations. While this reversal may be pursued through lesbian, gay, and transgender forms of masochism, it is, as we shall argue below, already imbued in what first appears as straight masochism.

And we find that in Newton’s seemingly straight images of Amazon and phallic women, dressed in fetish paraphernalia, the masochist contract reveals itself as one in which both parties share power and powerlessness—as well as sharing...
gendered positions so as to blur them. In his images we find a portrayal of desires and queer positions that go beyond the regular masochistic contract by reversing its positions via the involvement of a becoming-both. In fact, we would go so far as to argue that any masochism involves sexual indifference.

Interestingly, some of the theoretical tools which make such a reversal possible are already implicit in Deleuze—not in his interpretation of masochism, but in his later works with Guattari. It is particularly their notions of the body without organs and becoming-woman which enable us to counter-read Newton’s photography in a way which buggers both Freud and Deleuze.

**BUGGERING FREUD AND DELEUZE**

Deleuze’s ontology of desire is central to our attempt to bugger both Freudian and Delezian masochism and to open up masochism beyond the heterosexual matrix of male masochists and female mistresses. Although this ontology is not explicit—and perhaps even undermined—in Deleuze’s reading of masochism, his understanding of desire as excess rather than as lack was at the core of his persistent attacks on Freud.

Deleuze’s ontology of excess underpins Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the body without organs developed in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Unlike Freud’s notion of desire, the body without organs is not driven by a desire to possess a certain object that it currently lacks. Rather, it is the experimental, accidental, serendipitous, and unpredictable outcome of forces of desire productive in their own right. The body without organs is a matter of endless becoming. It is not given but an experimental practice into which desire continuously invests itself. It cannot be taken for granted, but needs to be created. The body without organs may experimentally seek out directions for its activities, but it may never accomplish or finalize a preset goal. By undermining the organic functioning of the body *with* organs and challenging the psychoanalyst’s search for unitary selfhood, Deleuze and Guattari maintain that there is no end to the process of creating a body without organs. However, making oneself a body without organs should not be taken too literally. Even though Deleuze and Guattari take inspiration from Antonin Artaud, who may be seen to have made himself a body without organs when committing suicide on November 28, 1947, the body without organs has nothing to do with suicide, death, or the Freudian death instinct. The body without organs is full of life. Creating a body without organs is therefore a task to be attacked with caution: “[...] overdose is a danger. You don’t do it with a sledgehammer, you use a very fine file.”

According to Keith Ansell Pearson, creating a body without organs is therefore a matter of cautious, patient experimentation, and of opening up the body to connections and relations “that presuppose an entire assemblage.” As suggested above, there is always a risk with opening up too much. Nevertheless, what Deleuze and Guattari encourage when posing the challenge of creating a body without organs is to openly experiment with new and different bodily habits and ways of life. That is, they encourage experimentation with what a body can do. In conclusion, it may enable one to use one’s body and express corporeality in unpredictable ways that disturb and upset the boundaries dictated by the organism, the guardians of biomedical, social, gendered, and sexual discipline.

Creating a body without organs involves becoming-other. Becoming-woman is the prime trajectory through which they explore becoming-other. Deleuze and Guattari emphasize becoming-woman for three main reasons: it explicitly challenges the dominance of the rationalized male subject in philosophy, science, and society; it involves destructing one’s molar identity by connecting to—without imitating—stereotypes of womanhood; and it involves expanding and changing both the assemblages by which one is constituted and the assemblages of which one is a part.

Unfortunately, Deleuze and Guattari pursue this without problematizing their own manhood or the male perspective presumed, and this is why they have become the target of much feminist critique. According to Elizabeth Grosz, “the metaphor of ‘becoming-woman’ is a male appropriation of women’s politics, struggles, theories, knowledges.” As she points out, however,
the problem with these critiques is that they can be raised against “virtually any male philosopher” and against many female philosophers too. Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari’s malecentrism can be resolved, for example, by relating the body without organs to a notion of “becoming-man.” Whereas becoming-woman is a pseudo-woman implying a male starting point (a man becoming-woman), becoming-man may decenter the male and undermine the fixed essentiality of masculinity by departing from a female position (a woman becoming-man).25

MASOCHISTIC INDIFFERENCE

Although the experimental practices of the body without organs, becoming-woman, and becoming-man may seem very different from the masochistic contract, they are not chaotic like sadism, and the masochistic contract may involve some of the bodily processes actualized through the body without organs, becoming-woman and becoming-man. In masochism, the theatrical structure, with clearly assigned roles, is central, but these roles make possible both a rupture of the female/male dichotomy and, we argue, gender-bending. The masochist goes further in his longing, however: instead of reinscribing sexual difference (by taking the position of the female), he transgresses this difference by becoming not woman and not man, but both. In his longing for pleasure, pain, and intimacy with the (m)other, his desire is to overcome difference and to become one with her, hence upheaving sexual difference to become-both. Instead of reinforcing sexual difference, he is striving for sexual indifference.

The concept of a sexual indifference leaves the Father powerless, deprived of the phallus, since the law of sexual difference is closely connected, and make possible, to the Law of the Father and vice versa. What the concept does, then, is to question not only sexual difference and the Father’s dominant position, but also the Symbolic and the imaginary as two gender dichotomous spheres. Sexual difference, according to psychoanalytical theory, constitutes the basis of, and is inscribed in, the Symbolic. The Symbolic is that powerful imaginary realm that upholds what Judith Butler has called the heteronormative matrix, repetitiously and obnoxiously reinscribing itself as solid truth.26 But according to Butler, these sexually differentiated positions—with Man as the upholder of the law, and Woman as positioned outside of it—are anything but fixed but might be altered, subverted and made invalid by the (un)conscious practices of transgenderism, transvestism, and gender role-playing.

While we agree with Butler that these practices hold an important political potential for subversion of sexually differentiated and gendered positions, other contexts may offer further opportunities for subversion, for instance beyond the constraints of the heterosexual nuclear family. What happens to the Symbolic when for example the father is missing, when there is no Man to uphold the Law, no father to initiate the son into the Symbolic? Will the son of a single mother for always be restricted to the Imaginary?

If “normal” heterosexuality is the prime scene for sexual difference as Butler argues, then any deviation from it may offer a possible upheaval of this very difference. Lesbianism and gayness are perhaps the two main practices in which sexual indifference is most central (and desirable), but even certain “straight” formations may offer a (conscious) upheaval of sexual difference (whether temporary or constant, real or fictional). We want to point out that this desirable indifference should not be understood as a collapsing of the different into the same, in the service of a power that can simply be defined in terms of identity, or that remains inextricably committed to the patriarchal. Rather, it is a specific suspension of differences, somewhere between unity and a longing-for radical diversity and multiplicity.

Notwithstanding the earlier discussion of masochism as “fake” in its formal power-swapping between man and woman, we do believe that male masochism contains a potential for sexual indifference. In this sense, masochism holds contradictory opportunities for the partners involved. It can be read as a conscious denial of sexual difference, as well as a blurring of hom(m)o-sexuality and homosexuality27 within the frames of a stylized scene in which gender and sex may be played out as floating (as well as
rigid). This is not to say that masochistic indifference is in itself a strategy of sameness, nor that it is a (re)invention of it. What this indifference does, however, is to provide an insight into an alternative model of masculine power, one where power is perpetuated by self-mutilation and by simultaneously destroying and reinventing sameness.

Hence, the masochist dreams of an indifference between the sexes and genders, one within which the phallus is decentralized and one within which boundaries of gender can be transgressed. This dream is part of a fantasy centered around an impossible and irrational subjectivity that includes within itself both all its objects and its Others. This will to sexual indifference vacillates between masculine and feminine positions, a dreaming of having and being both. The masochistic total subject dreams of being simultaneously both masculine and feminine, as well as of being both the subject of sexual desire and that same desire’s object. In Roland Barthes’ words, “of a conformity of essence between other and myself, […] I want to be the other. I want the other to be me, as if we were united, enclosed in the same sack of skin” (author’s emphasis). And the Newtonian models, being in that same sack of skin (dressed in tight-fitting pantyhose connoting a second skin within which the I and the Other can both fit) visualize the longing for becoming-both, and the desire to being-both.

To this kind of total subjectivity, nothing is alien, nothing is impossible. Instead of managing binary oppositions by dispersing them in a field of multiplying differences, the masochist imagines a subjectivity in which all contradictions can subsist. Hence, the total subject is able to simultaneously operate and refute power. As a construction of power that contradicts and denies itself, then, masochism crosses the conventional political divides. Although masochism’s transgression of conventional heteronormative practices and identities may reinforce as well as subvert those same practices and identities, it gains its subversive potential from being more than a practice ascribed only to others. When seeing masochism on a spectrum we will at one end find a practice including all of us, because much of our position vis-à-vis the other follows the same pattern as the masochist pattern. As Roy Schafer stresses, every disorder (no matter how small and insignificant, and hence, “normal”), “has its share of unhappiness and unfulfillment, and every one is characterized by repetitiveness, unconsciously designed and executed self-injuriousness” (Schafer).

**CONCLUSION**

And so, Newton’s photos of Amazons in fetish paraphernalia can be studied and understood to open up masochist movements of desire beyond the heterosexual matrix of male masochists and female mistresses. His models decentralize the phallus and transgress boundaries of gender and stereotypes of womanhood. By doing so, they open up for bisexual and transgender desire—amongst the Amazon models as well as in the female and male spectator. Further, they visualize a desire for sexual indifference, or what can be called a becoming-both. By doing so, they also help us see masochism as an expression and a practice that upsets heteronormativity—as well as homonormativity. Through his images of these Amazon and phallic women, the masochist contract reveals itself as one in which both parties share power and powerlessness: it opens up for giving the phallus away, throw it away, or sharing it. And so: the male masochist, as the phallic women in Newton’s photos, remind us that the phallus is a construction, a disposable and distributable idea, an idea which can be shared between the sexes. Seeking it there, seeking it here—not finding it anywhere, or: since both of us have the phallus, let’s play a new game.

**NOTES**

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