

**Female Masochism in Michael Haneke's *La Pianiste*  
and Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac***

**Weiblicher Masochismus in Michael Hanekes *La Pianiste*  
und Lars von Triers *Nymphomaniac***

by

Kristin Yaworski

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## **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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## Abstract

The figure of the female masochist, along with her desires and experiences, has been largely ignored within theories of masochism and examinations of masochistic aesthetics. With the rise of more graphic and challenging representations of female sexuality in cinema, it is time to readdress the female masochist and her representation in film. This thesis aims to fill this gap by examining representations of heterosexual female masochism in Michael Haneke's film *La Pianiste* (2001) and Lars von Trier's film *Nymphomaniac* (2013). Both films centre around a female protagonist whose masochistic desires and impulses propel the narrative forward. While these masochistic desires lead to ugly and violent sexual encounters with the main male character in each film, masochism is not condemned as the reason for this violence. It is, instead, normalizing world views that violently restrict notions of female subjectivity and sexuality. In this thesis, I examine the empowering aspects of masochism presented in these films.

The female masochist exercises control over her desires and fantasies by creating and establishing a masochistic contract with her partner. In analyzing the contract in both films, it becomes clear that it allows for the female protagonist to be empowered. That the contract is betrayed and the female masochist is subjected to violence is indicative of how she continues to be restricted by gendered expectations of female behaviour. Such a conclusion is further supported through both films' use of an anti-aesthetic. In contrast to the normative aesthetics of S/M, which emphasize pleasure over pain, the aesthetic in *La Pianiste* and *Nymphomaniac* insists on showing the infliction of pain and its effects on the female masochist. It is through this depiction of pain that both films invite spectators to reconsider the dangerous comfort of views that allow for such violence to persist.

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## 1. Introduction

In *Female Masochism in Film*, Ruth McPhee notes that, from the 1990s onward, an emerging trend can be observed across a variety of dissimilar films, including Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999), Michael Haneke's *La Pianiste* (2001), Julia Leigh's *Sleeping Beauty* (2011), Steven Shainberg's *Secretary* (2002), and Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996). What ties these films together is not just that they are narratively centred upon female protagonists and their subjectivities, but that they raise concerns about how the heterosexuality of these female characters is directed by masochistic desires. More precisely, McPhee states that these films portray female characters who "find their pleasure through the relinquishing of control to the dominance of the other, placing themselves in perilous or humiliating situations, seeking pain, opening themselves up to the assumption of passive or submissive positions" (1). Whether covertly or explicitly represented, female masochism serves "as an organizing principle for the protagonist's subjectivity and the narrative trajectory of the film" (McPhee 1). In addition, within the films McPhee analyzes, representational boundaries and taboos are tested in order to present graphic imagery that is sexually explicit, violent and/or shocking, and seldom found in mainstream cinema. That this imagery is increasingly visible in films centred around female masochistic desire leads her to conclude that "Female masochism ... has emerged as a means of forging an aesthetic that questions, deconstructs and subverts normative cultural frameworks surrounding female subjectivity and sexuality" (2). This aesthetic is one that "echoes, enhances or engages with the vicissitudes and ambiguities of masochistic desire, and that addresses the viewer in such a way as to catalyse a masochistic form of spectatorial experience rooted in a

combination of pleasure and unpleasure” (McPhee 1). The increasing prevalence of heterosexual female masochism in film therefore suggests that a re-consideration of masochism is needed.

In this thesis, I hope to meet McPhee’s demand for a reconsideration of masochism and challenge the notion of the female masochist as a passive and victimized subject. To do so, I have chosen to investigate the ways through which the female protagonists in Michael Haneke’s 2001 film *La Pianiste* and Lars von Trier’s 2013 film *Nymphomaniac* achieve a sense of control and empowerment through their masochistic desires.<sup>1</sup> I decided to focus on these films not only due to their narrative and thematic concerns, but also because of how they create and contribute to the masochistic aesthetic identified by McPhee. Admittedly, in the process of repeatedly viewing these films, I have become fascinated by these female protagonists. The struggle to have their desire recognized and respected is, to me, admirable. Moreover, I find that these films offer a frustratingly realistic portrayal of how women continue to be limited by heteronormativity in contemporary society. Current debates about rape culture and sexual consent are mirrored on the screen as I watch the female character in each film endure sexual assault by a man who justifies his actions based on his understanding of her sexual desires and history. Therefore, I believe that each film is open to an interpretation that addresses feminist concerns about gendered power structures embedded within heterosexuality. Such an interpretation is possible in spite of feminist concerns over women willfully adopting submissive roles. ‘Submissive’ is not a descriptor that I would assign to either of the female protagonists in these films. That their masochistic desires

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<sup>1</sup> Due to its considerable running time of just over five hours, *Nymphomaniac* was split into two volumes. These volumes were then edited to condense the film’s narrative and explicit scenes were cut for the film’s theatrical release. The uncut version of the film was made available upon its DVD release. When I refer to the film, I am referring to it in its entirety – that is, both volumes, uncut.



lead to dissatisfying, disastrous, and even violent experiences does not mean that the female masochistic position should be condemned.

In each film, masochism is represented as providing a sense of control over the sexual fantasies and experiences of the protagonist. This control is revealed to be a crucial aspect that is missing in other areas of these women's lives. In *La Pianiste*, Erika Kohut (Isabelle Huppert) is overwhelmingly stifled by her mother (Annie Girardot); her every act and movement, and even her appearance, is strictly observed and presided over. Consequently, Erika engages in a number of activities which test the boundaries of what is expected of her, not only by her mother, but by society overall. Similarly, in *Nymphomaniac*, Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg) strives to undermine gender expectations and fundamentally questions what it means to be labelled perverse, mentally ill, or, as she refers to herself, 'bad.'<sup>2</sup> Fantasy allows these women to adopt, play with, and act out, different roles, even different identities. The narratives created to sustain these fantasies are self-scripted, putting both Erika and Joe in control of their desires. Consequently, they are empowered by masochistic fantasies and desires to achieve pleasure and gratification through a form of submission that is chosen.

What enables these masochistic fantasies to come to life, and is therefore a vital element of my analysis, is the masochistic contract. The contract serves as an agreement between the masochist and her partner in regards to the sexual relationship and acts they will participate in. It allows the masochist to plan, in advance, the enactment of her fantasy and her submission. The contract is an element of masochism which demonstrates how the masochist is an active agent in their sexual experiences and is crucial to shifting the perception of the masochistic role from one

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<sup>2</sup> Joe is portrayed by multiple actresses but predominantly through Charlotte Gainsbourg and Stacy Martin, who plays the part of young Joe.

of passivity to one that is decidedly more active and assertive (McPhee 25). In each film, the main female character, Erika or Joe, constructs and utilizes a masochistic contract to control the relationship and sexual experiences she has with the respective main male character. In Erika's case, the contract takes the form of a letter she writes to Walter (Benoît Magimel), describing the sexual desires and scenarios she fantasizes about. For Joe, it is a biographical story that she chooses to share with Seligman (Stellen Skarsgård), detailing her sexual experiences. My analysis of each contract is guided by the following research questions: How can the contract ensure that the masochist maintains control? What is the role of the partner in the contract? Does form (e.g. a signed document, letter, narrative) have an effect on the success of the contract? Can a breach of contract completely undermine its transgressive potential?

At the times of their release, both *La Pianiste* and *Nymphomaniac* drew disapproval from film critics concerning their unconventional treatment of sex. Interest in Haneke's film, an adaptation of Elfriede Jelinek's 1983 novel *Die Klavierspielerin*, was prompted largely by the curiosity of audiences as to whether or not they would see the shocking or scandalous elements from the novel on screen (Wortmann 197). *Nymphomaniac* in particular caused a stir due to its being marketed as von Trier's first pornographic film, teasing the public with the idea that it would show explicit sex between relatively famous actors (Williams 20). Arguably, neither film met with audience expectations. With the exception of the pornographic film that Erika watches, Haneke shies away from including nudity and graphic representations of sexual acts commonly associated with pornographic representations of sex on screen. Instead, sexual acts are obscured through either extreme close-ups of facial expressions or long shots which hide the relevant body parts. In contrast, sex is not hidden in *Nymphomaniac*. By using below-the-belt body doubles and

prostheses to portray what Linda Williams terms “relatively explicit sex” (20), von Trier’s film creates the illusion of being pornographic. Debates about the choices of Haneke and von Trier to exclude, include, or imitate pornographic representations of sex have dominated discussions about how each of these films treats sex and sexuality.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to commenting on pornography, these two films also present the risks of engaging in a BDSM lifestyle.<sup>4</sup> Consent, a core principal of BDSM, figures into the enactment of specific scenes by BDSM practitioners, as well as in the maintenance of a BDSM relationship. Sexual limits and safe words are established which operate to protect individuals from engaging in sexual practices they do not consent to. Communication is crucial in determining consent and *La Pianiste* emphasizes the dangers that arise when that communication fails (Knauss 221). Neither Erika nor Walter communicate clearly what it is that they want from their relationship and from each another. As a result, both end up being misunderstood and hurt by each other. However, it is Erika who suffers most as Walter corrupts her masochistic fantasy and coerces her into accepting responsibility for his violence towards her. Therefore, in contrast to an agreed upon and consensual scene employing the aesthetics of BDSM, the audience is witness to a scene of violence which leaves Erika bloodied, bruised, and raped. Haneke focuses on the threatening and dangerous aspects of BDSM as opposed to its pleasures (Knauss 219). *Nymphomaniac* challenges the notion of consent altogether when Joe enters into a BDSM relationship with a

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<sup>3</sup> In a review of *La Pianiste*, featured in *The New Yorker*, David Denby describes a sexual encounter between Erika and Walter as “[what] may be the strangest sex scene in the history of the movies.” In a scholarly article, Stefanie Knauss emphasizes the film’s “contrast between the aesthetics of showing-it-all, as it happens in porn, and [Haneke’s] own way of re-presenting . . . sexuality through its (visual) absence” (218). *Die Zeit* summarizes film critics’ reactions to *Nymphomaniac Vol. 1* by asking “Ist das jetzt ein Porno oder nicht?” (“Nymphomaniac”) while *The Globe and Mail*’s Liam Lacey, in his review of *Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*, concludes that “The stimulation offered here is more aesthetic and, occasionally, intellectual, than erotic.”

<sup>4</sup> BDSM is an abbreviation, but also a catch-all term, for the following erotic practices: bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadism and masochism.

sadist named K. Upon their first meeting, K informs Joe of his rules: “The first rule is that I don’t fuck you... The second rule is that we have no safe word... if you go inside with me there is nothing you can say that will make me stop.” The refusal to use safe words points to how easy it is to misuse them and push past the boundaries they invoke, and as Rosalind Galt notes “is a provocation to ‘politically correct’ audiences who would like to insist on a realist representation of safer sex practice” (“Suffering Spectator”). In the relationship between Joe and Seligman, Seligman betrays the masochistic contract established between them by simply assuming consent. This assumption leads to the end of their relationship, as Joe, in an act of self-defense, shoots Seligman.

Beyond challenging notions of consent within BDSM relationships, both films portray masochism in a manner whereby pain, not pleasure, comes to the fore. This is in marked juxtaposition to normative BDSM aesthetics which withdraw from showing the infliction of pain.<sup>5</sup> This aesthetic typically revolves around the fetishizing of specific objects, role-playing, and styles of sexual play (bondage, spanking, use of wax, etc.) used to create and enhance the enactment of scenes of fantasy, where pleasure is the goal. Neither film addresses the masochistic desires, fantasies, and sexual acts of its female protagonist using an aesthetic that calls to mind the rich tableau of BDSM. In *Fantasies of Fetishism*, Amanda Fernbach argues that, within contemporary culture, fetishism involves a specific style or fashion which includes leather, rubber, and latex suits, as well as corsets and high-heels (7-8). In contrast, the aesthetic used in these two films might be considered an anti-aesthetic. I intend to show how these

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<sup>5</sup> Films which adhere to such normative BDSM aesthetics include: *Belle de Jour* (1967), *Secretary* (2002), *The Duke of Burgundy* (2014), *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015).

directors insist on an anti-aesthetic that highlights the sometimes ugly and brutal reality of sex by analyzing formal aspects of *mise-en-scène*.

Finally, it might be questioned how it is this that thesis meets the requirements for the completion of an MA degree in Intercultural Studies in German. The core of my thesis examines artistic works by two of European cinema's leading auteurs, Michael Haneke and Lars von Trier. Moreover, both *La Pianiste* and *Nymphomaniac* are international co-productions, involving multiple production companies from across Europe. Therefore, these films move away from being associated with a national cinema to being products of and contributing to European cinema. For example, *La Pianiste* features a cast of largely French actors speaking French in Vienna, where the language spoken in the background and on television is German. In addition, both films draw attention to elements of European culture; one cannot watch *La Pianiste* without thinking about the history of classical music in Vienna or see *Nymphomaniac* without being overwhelmed by references to the literature of Izaak Walton and Edgar Allan Poe, as well as the ideas of Sigmund Freud and the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. These films invite one to dwell on the confluence of cultures and provide an encounter with difference. This difference extends beyond the cultural to include the question of difference that arises from the conflicts faced by Erika and Joe as heterosexual female masochists.

### **1.1 A Preliminary Literature Review as Orientation**

Admittedly, approaching these films through the subject of masochism is nothing new. Analyses of masochism in Haneke's *La Pianiste* are particularly numerous. I will therefore present the various interpretations of masochism in Haneke's film in order to establish how this

thesis will address these and fill some of the gaps within the existing literature. To begin, I follow the lead established by Jean Ma, who argues that, because Erika's masochism functions to make one uncomfortably aware of how normalized violence frequently surfaces within erotic desires and fantasies, it cannot be considered within the realm of pathology (19). Stefanie Knauss echoes this sentiment, declaring that, throughout his films, and especially in *La Pianiste*, "Haneke does not talk about individual cases, but about society and its pathologies which on all levels lead to dysfunctional relationships, miscommunication, isolation, unmotivated violence, and not least forms of living sexuality that are destructive to the individual" (226). Thus, according to Knauss, individualizing approaches risk dismissing the film and its representation of sexuality as the sole experience of one psychologically disturbed or damaged woman. I similarly wish to avoid the pitfalls of such an approach, specifically because it tends to lead to a pathologization of the individual. Evidence of this pathologization can be seen elsewhere in the tendency to label Erika as a repressed woman or a tormented sadomasochist (Wheatley 117-118). Equally troubling as the attempt to classify her person is the argument that Erika's rape is something which she herself manoeuvres, by either manipulating (Brunette 100-102) or taunting (Wigmore 305) Walter into doing it. Insisting on the ambiguity of the rape scene problematically fuels the notion that victims of rape are in some way to blame for the offence committed against them. I argue that this rape is not ambiguous; Walter purposely misinterprets her desires in order to justify his actions, on top of telling Erika that she herself is responsible for what transpires.

What I intend to contribute to the discussion of this film, and its relation to the subject of masochism, is how it implores spectators to recognize and be critical of the limits of heteronormativity. This is in contrast to Iuliana Vaida who argues that, because Haneke's film

favours a Freudian model of sadomasochism, spectators are invited to fall back on traditional ways of thinking about gender and sexuality (218). It is, however, possible to successfully apply a different theory of masochism to interpret the film and its representation of sexuality. Gilles Deleuze's theory of masochism, presented in his essay "Coldness and Cruelty" and with its emphasis on the role of the masochistic contract, can allow for an interpretation which emphasizes how the film questions normative scripts of femininity and female sexuality. Such an examination also challenges the conclusion by Galt, who states that, "By making Erika into a metaphor for what is wrong with society, Haneke forecloses on non-normative sexuality as a place from which a potentially engaged critique of the normative might emerge" (238). But to say that Erika's masochism is the result of her living within a society that is damaging and is therefore 'wrong' ignores the way in which the film presents masochism as beneficial for Erika. In other words, whether society or the individual is mythologized by these critics results in robbing the female protagonist of any possible exploration of sexual desires and fantasies. The power to choose who to submit to, what form that submission will take, and in what circumstance, is made available to her through masochism. In other words, she assumes a kind of control that would otherwise be unavailable to her within the heteronormative relationship that Walter desires.

Masochism's potential to destabilize normative concepts of female sexuality is far more prevalent in von Trier's *Nymphomaniac*. One reason for this potential is because of the film's focus on Joe and her narrative; she directs the sequence and series of images shown on screen. Joe characterizes herself as a woman who relishes in her sexuality and strives to achieve sexual pleasure at all costs. In her attempts to attain pleasure she repeatedly defies what is expected of

her as a woman by refusing to engage in monogamy or believing in romance and love. This narrative can be interpreted as a contract through which Joe convinces Seligman of her person and desires. The two engage in an almost playful back-and-forth dialogue which leads Joe to carefully adapt her narrative for Seligman. However, according to film critic Darragh O'Donoghue, their interactions are anything but playful. He argues that, "If telling stories is a form of control, of putting shape on the flux of experience, of asserting one's own identity, and even an analogue of sexual power ... then Seligman's literal and formal intrusions on Joe's narrative are a form of violence" (13). Instead of viewing these interruptions as violent, I understand them as a renegotiation of contract that enables Joe and Seligman to enter into an agreement. Their agreement concludes with the understanding of what type of person Joe is capable of becoming, as well as establishing the status of their relationship: they are to be friends. Immediately thereafter, Seligman betrays this contract by attempting to rape Joe and offering up the following excuse: "But you ... you've fucked thousands of men." This betrayal extends beyond Joe and includes the spectators who have identified with Seligman and his alleged feminist arguments justifying her past behaviour. Galt suggests that this identification is a trap where "the spectator is led to believe in a liberal discourse of reason embodied in a character who turns out to be violent against women" ("Suffering Spectator"). This sensation of being trapped or played with by von Trier appeals to forms of spectatorial experience where masochistic pleasure is found in identifying with the protagonists on screen. Galt herself approaches the film through sadomasochistic theories of spectatorship to argue that the film's political message is dependent upon it generating an intense and unsettling reaction for the



spectator.<sup>6</sup> She argues that: “von Trier’s cinema is precisely a machine for destabilizing bourgeois forms of life and other structures that restrict agency. *Nymphomaniac* ... make[s] plain the role that sex plays in this resistance, deploying perverse regimes of spectatorship to ... disorder the social world” (“Suffering Spectator”). These perverse regimes of spectatorship are constructed through von Trier’s tendency to toy with spectators beliefs and expectations. Playing with the spectator in *Nymphomaniac* involves encouraging the spectator to identify with Seligman only to have this identification become highly problematic, if not dangerous, in its invitation to become complicit in violence. According to Galt, “This play with the spectator’s emotions and identifications can feel uncomfortable or even assaultive, but ... its context is one of complicity and consent. We bought the tickets [to see the film], after all” (“Suffering Spectator”). The destabilizing effect created by watching this film forces the spectator to rethink their sexual politics. Considering my own reaction to the film – discomfited by the violence of the sex on screen and angered by the film’s conclusion – I find Galt’s approach to be productive. However, I want to extend beyond Galt’s exploration of the spectatorial response and focus on how the film’s narrative and aesthetic allow for a similarly political, as well as feminist, reading.

In the case of *La Pianiste*, it can be argued that a more feminist understanding of its narrative might arise from an analysis of its adaptational source. I have chosen to focus on the film instead because, in contrast to Jelinek’s novel, the film offers relatively little rationale for

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<sup>6</sup> Galt builds on Miriam Hansen’s analysis of spectatorship within *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* and describes her work in the following statements: “Hansen’s engagement with cinema’s sadomasochism offers a suggestive model for the political potential of a perverse apparatus. She uses the masochistic masculinity of Rudolf Valentino to argue that cinematic modernity’s structures do not form a singular closed system, but can be historically and culturally variegated in their regimes of desire. Moreover, and, especially significant in this context, she argues that, in their sadomasochistic pleasures, something potentially destabilizing can happen. I find Hansen’s reading so productive here because of her broader insistence on cinema as an apparatus and an experience” (“Suffering Spectator”).

Erika's behaviour. The spectator is, as a result of this, forced to construct explanations for and coherence from the sexual and violent episodes that dominate the film's plot. In her analysis of masochism in both the film and the text, Vaida argues that this lack of explanation for Erika's conduct makes it appear more "repugnant" and "gratuitous" than it really is and that "our perception of Erika as a victim is even more diminished in the film than in the novel, so it is easy to perceive her rape as something that she has brought on herself" (211). I want to interrogate this notion that the film makes it 'easy' for the spectator to conclude that Erika has invited this violence upon herself. As Vaida suggests, such judgements about Erika's character are not so easily reached in the novel, where the reader is apprised of her traumatic childhood, as well as Walter's chauvinist thoughts.

## **1.2 Outline**

What has driven me to write this thesis is the need to argue that Erika and Joe are *not* victims because of their sexual masochism. There is a method to the so-called madness of masochism: it comes with benefits. In order to demonstrate how masochism is capable of shifting power dynamics within a heterosexual relationship to favour the female submissive, I will begin by briefly outlining the theoretical history of masochism. Masochism's potential to empower the female masochist has remained relatively unexplored, owing to continued misconceptions of masochism. Therefore, my survey of its history, beginning with the literary work of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, through to the psychoanalytic conceptions of masochism by Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Sigmund Freud, and, finally, Gilles Deleuze's theory, aims to account for the persistence of certain definitions and models of masochism. How a feminist

approach to female masochism is possible will round out Chapter 2. Having established my theoretical framework, I will move on to an analysis of both films in Chapter 3. In these analyses, the role of the masochistic contract will feature heavily, as it is vital to empowering the masochist. Equally important is how the contract is received and betrayed by each female protagonist's interlocutor because it brings into question the contract's transgressive potential. An examination of the contract demonstrates how these women exercise control through their masochism. Chapter 4 will highlight how these women are not victims of their masochism, but rather a social order which continues to support gendered expectations of female behaviour and sexuality. The limits placed upon female subjectivity and sexuality are exposed through the use of an anti-aesthetic in both films. I will analyze formal elements of *mise-en-scène* to establish how this aesthetic differs from normative S/M aesthetics. What constitutes this normative aesthetic will be examined and addressed through a brief survey of Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* (1967) and Sam Taylor-Johnson's *Fifty Shades of the Grey* (2015). The components that I will specifically draw on for my analysis include: setting and props, costume, make-up, and performance, namely, the facial expressions of the actors. These elements distinguish the aesthetic used in *La Pianiste* and *Nymphomaniac* from typical S/M aesthetics. Finally, in my conclusion I will emphasize the importance of continuing to acknowledge and question female heterosexual masochism and the recent proliferation of its representation in contemporary cinema.

## **2. Masochism: Theory and Methodology**

Because each film's narrative is driven by a female protagonist who attempts to gain a sense of control over her life through masochistic practices, it is necessary to review how theories that have come to shape our contemporary understanding of masochism have addressed the female masochist. The aim of this chapter is to show how society's understanding of masochism has been limited by early psychoanalytical theories and what alternatives a feminist perspective can offer. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to outline the founding theories of masochism and to consider the work of various theorists who challenge the psychoanalytical conceptualization. This is followed by a brief discussion of the principal feminist critique of heterosexual female masochism which serves to highlight how the female masochist has been largely ignored within both psychoanalytic and feminist theory. Finally, I conclude with how a feminist perspective of masochism, as depicted in the films analyzed, challenges the concept of heteronormativity and the limits it places upon sexuality.

### **2.1 Defining Masochism**

The principal definition of masochism within the *Oxford English Dictionary* is: "the tendency to derive sexual gratification from one's own pain or humiliation." A rather simple definition, it fails to account for how this practice, placed within various contexts, embodies a number of complex power dynamics. Therefore, I find the following meaning, as explained by John Noyes in *The Mastery of Submission*, to be far more illuminating:

[Masochism] draws on stereotypes of violence and technologies of control in order to convert them into technologies of pleasure. In the process it perpetuates these stereotypes,

but it does this – so its proponents argue – in a way that renders them harmless, parodies them. Masochism is a *techne erotike* in the truest sense. Consequently, the struggles we have come to associate with masochism are struggles for a technology of control. (5)

In order to understand the importance and meaning of this statement, further explanation of Noyes's project is required.<sup>7</sup> To begin, Noyes examines how male masochism emerged from the “intense inner conflicts and contradictions in discourses of liberalism and modernism” (8) of the late nineteenth century. One of these conflicts arose from the theorization of man and his body as machine; the body could, through institutions and technologies of discipline, become a controlled and economically productive machine within society. The body of the male masochist is addressed through the technologies of discipline in two ways: “If the body is to be intelligible within the mechanistic paradigm, its participation in the regime of control and usefulness will have to be theorized as a desire for submission. And if the body is to be useful, it will have to be disciplined as a machine and theorized as desiring its own discipline” (Noyes 11). However, the eroticization of disciplinary power points to an awareness within the subject of how disciplinary powers are meant to control and produce subjectivity. It is for this reason that proponents of masochism argue that masochism can render disciplinary power harmless. Noyes does not accept

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<sup>7</sup> References to technologies of control or power, and of the self, relate to theories and concepts of power developed by Michel Foucault. Noyes relies on the historical method proposed and modelled through Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, where, through his “repressive hypothesis,” Foucault explained how the emergence of various sexual identities and bodily practices in the eighteenth century was linked to increasingly dominant disciplinary discourses, specifically legal and medical ones (Noyes 10). Foucault's inquiry into how disciplinary discourses create systems of knowledge and technologies through which humans understand themselves became the objective of his work thereafter. In “Technologies of the Self,” Foucault offers a summary of these technologies where technologies of power are described as those which “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject” (18) and technologies of the self “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (18).

this position himself. For him, this awareness is merely a self-deception that still allows for the continuation and perpetuation of disciplinary violence (Noyes 14).

Once applied to the sphere of heterosexual female masochism, Noyes's explanation of masochism – with its emphasis on how masochism equips the masochist with the toolkit through which to assume a sense of control and empowerment – tests the perception of the masochist as a victim. The female masochist is actively engaged in determining the details of the masochistic scenario – the situation, costumes, roles, acts, dialogue – in which she is willing to perform submission. In this way, the technologies of discipline used to control her and her body are rendered visible and open to scrutiny. Phrased differently, the female masochist plays with the expectations and limits that, placed upon her, have come to determine her sense of self. She attempts to destabilize the social order which limits, and violently acts upon, the female subject.

The origins of masochism can be traced back to the literary style and work of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, best known for his novel *Venus im Pelz* (1870). Its plot can be summarized as follows: the main protagonist, a nobleman named Severin, convinces a woman, Wanda, to entertain his sexual fantasies by embodying the figure of a fur-clad dominatrix and humiliating him. Their relationship begins to unravel when Wanda changes Severin's fantasies to satisfy her own sexual desires and this eventually leads to him abandoning his masochistic pleasures. It is in response to this and other works of Sacher-Masoch that psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing coined the term 'masochism' and defined it as a pathology in *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886):

Unter Masochismus verstehe ich eine eigentümliche Perversion der psychischen Vita sexualis, welche darin besteht, dass das von derselben ergriffene Individuum in seinem geschlechtlichen Fühlen und Denken von der Vorstellung beherrscht wird, dem Willen

einer Person des anderen Geschlechtes vollkommen und unbedingt unterworfen zu sein, von dieser Person herrisch behandelt, gedemütigt und selbst misshandelt zu werden.

(99-100)

Krafft-Ebing further identified elements of the behaviours and fantasies represented in *Venus im Pelz* as symptoms of a sexual psychopathology, the defining characteristic of which is the submission of one's will to another as a means of attaining sexual pleasure (129). Resultantly, masochism became firmly entrenched in the realm of pathology and conceptualized as a perversion in contrast to 'normal' sexual behaviours.

Masochism's shift from Sacher-Masoch's literary aesthetic to an identifiable and distinct sexuality was further propelled by Freud's theories of masochism. According to McPhee, the representations of masochism in *Psychopathia Sexualis* provided a critical foundation from which Freud formulated his thoughts on masochism (5). Krafft-Ebing had already expressed the idea that masochism and sadism are characteristically complementary to one another through the observation that "Das vollkommene Gegenstück des Masochismus ist der Sadismus. Während jener Schmerzen leiden und sich der Gewalt unterworfen fühlen will, geht dieser darauf aus, Schmerz zuzufügen und Gewalt auszuüben. Der Parallelismus ist ein vollständiger" (158). Freud's theories sustained the notion of a dialectical unity between sadism and masochism further by situating each of these tendencies within the heterosexual couple. In *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*, Freud notes that most men's sexuality contains aspects of aggression ("Die Sexualität der meisten Männer zeigt eine Beimengung von Aggression," 21), and goes on to define sadism as a condition in which an aggressive component dominates the sexual instinct (21). Masochism, as sadism's binary opposite, refers to "alle passiven

Einstellungen zum Sexuellen und Sexualobjekt" (21), implying it is a condition typically associated with women. Summarizing Freud's argumentation, McPhee notes that "sadism ... is equated with masculinity, activity and dominance and masochism is associated with the converse of these attributes: femininity, passivity, submissiveness and victimization" (5). The assumption that these attributes were biological givens, determinant of sexual tendencies, ensured that masochism was emphatically gendered as female. Masochism was considered a perversion in men because masochistic fantasies placed them in a female situation (where they experienced castration), which supported the characterization of female sexuality as inherently masochistic ("Problem des Masochismus").

In addition to sadism and masochism coming together to create a perfect union, mirrored in the sexual drives of the heterosexual couple, these two very separate paraphilias became conflated as being one and the same through the concept of the sadomasochistic entity. Freud's initial observations on the topic from *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* and his essay "Triebe und Triebchicksale" regard masochism as a secondary phenomenon, a 'turning around' of sadism's aggressive impulses, and a continuation of a kind of sadism directed towards oneself:

Der Masochismus als Perversion scheint sich vom normalen Sexualziel weiter zu entfernen als sein Gegenstück; es darf zunächst bezweifelt werden, ob er jemals primär auftritt oder nicht vielmehr regelmäßig durch Umbildung aus dem Sadismus entsteht. Häufig läßt sich erkennen, daß der Masochismus nichts anderes ist als eine Fortsetzung des Sadismus in Wendung gegen die eigene Person, welche dabei zunächst die Stelle des Sexualobjekts vertritt. (*Drei Abhandlungen* 22)



A clarification of this process involves explaining a number of theoretical concepts and, as such, extends beyond the scope of this thesis. What is important is the idea that, because masochism may be regarded as a form of sadism, an interconnection between the two exists that holds the potential for transformation or reversal (Deleuze 68). This connection reaffirms the theoretical unity of masochistic and sadistic partners where these instincts, even if they differ within each individual independently, are distributed equally amidst the pair.

The possibility that a primary form of masochism exists is an idea that Freud entertains in “Das ökonomische Problem des Masochismus.” This primary form differs from the secondary in that, rather than emerging from having one’s aggressive instincts towards others turned back on the self, it stems from self-destructive tendencies inherent within the self:

Wenn man sich über einige Ungenauigkeit hinaussetzen will, kann man sagen, der im Organismus wirkende Todestrieb – der Ursadismus – sei mit dem Masochismus identisch. Nachdem sein Hauptanteil nach außen auf die Objekte verlegt worden ist, verbleibt als sein Residuum im Inneren der eigentliche, erogene Masochismus, der einerseits eine Komponente der Libido geworden ist, andererseits noch immer das eigene Wesen zum Objekt hat. (“Problem des Masochismus”)

The significance of this type of masochism is that it illustrates why, contrary to one’s drive for self-preservation, feelings of unpleasure and pain are sought out. The experience of these sensations holds the potential to satisfy and assuage the drive towards self-annihilation. In this way, then, pain becomes pleasurable and even enhances the pleasure experienced. Of course, within this paradigm, it remains difficult to conceive of pain and pleasure as anything other than sensations which are wholly opposite to one another. Consequently, masochism has been

conceptually and socially marred by the need to address and solve the enigmatic relationship it creates between pain and pleasure. Elaborating on this relationship, McPhee declares that “behaviour associated with the deliberate pursuit of pain and other sensations of displeasure [are] widely regarded as at best a puzzlement and at worst a perversion that signifies mental disturbance and the potential for the destruction of self or others” (7). However, she goes on to argue that, “it is precisely the potential of masochism and its attendant physical and psychological experiences to throw open [...] oppositional binaries that enables it to act as a radical and ethical force” (7). *La Pianiste* and *Nymphomaniac* are, without question, films which force a radical rethinking of masochism and its pleasures, outside of the dichotomies present in Freud’s theory. These films do not fall back on reversing, and thereby reinforcing, the existing model, but propose alternative modes of thinking about sexuality, sensation and gender that attend to the complexities of the masochistic subject position and their encounter. I propose that such alternatives can be identified through an initial recourse to Gilles Deleuze’s theory of masochism.

## **2.2 Deleuzian Masochism and the Masochistic Contract**

Deleuze’s re-examination of male masochism and of Sacher-Masoch’s work in *Coldness and Cruelty* (1971) shifted the dominant discourse on masochism. In it, he challenges the assumptions made by Krafft-Ebing and Freud in terms of the complementarity between sadism and masochism. He deconstructs the notion of the sadomasochistic entity, as well as the sadomasochistic couple, by arguing that sadism and masochism have nothing to do with one another:

As soon as we read Masoch we become aware that his universe has nothing to do with that of Sade. Their techniques differ, and their problems, their concerns and their intentions are entirely dissimilar. It is not valid to object that psychoanalysis has long shown the possibility and the reality of transformations between sadism and masochism; we are questioning the very concept of an entity known as sadomasochism. (13)

The differences Deleuze refers to begin to hint at the incompatibility between the sadist and the masochist. He goes on to elaborate that it is unimaginable for the sadist to enjoy the pain and torture inflicted upon a willing participant or masochist. Similarly, a masochist could never accept a genuine sadist as a partner (Deleuze 40-41). Instead, the masochist is in search of someone who can be persuaded to become the individual of their fantasy; the person to whom they wish to submit to. In order to fulfill this role, the masochist's partner must be willing to fully partake in the imagined scenario, adhere to its specifics, and suspend reality. A contract or agreement is therefore crucial in bringing the masochistic fantasy about.

The masochistic contract, a critical element in the expression of masochistic desire, is a device that is meant to work in the favour of both the masochist and his partner. Strict commitment to the masochist's wishes carries the risk that his consort becomes a mere accessory to achieving pleasure and thus subject to objectification. The contract, if executed correctly, is meant to prevent this objectification. Therefore, reciprocity is essential to the process of creating and modifying the contract; both partners must have their needs recognized. According to McPhee, the contract acts "as a mechanism for ensuring the vital aspects of reciprocity and recognition with the masochistic scenario, thus serving as the primary signifier of the (disavowed) agency and control of the masochistic subject and of the balance of power within

such relationships” (36). This reciprocity is evident in the relevant passages from *Venus im Pelz* where Severin and Wanda decide upon the details of their arrangement. Their discussion oscillates between being playful (“Sie lachte,” Sacher-Masoch 62) and utterly serious (“mit großem Ernste,” 62) as each contractual condition is deliberated and eventually agreed to: “Ich will ganz in deiner Hand sein, Wanda, ... ohne jede Bedingung, ohne jede Beschränkung deiner Gewalt über mich, ich will mich auf Gnade und Ungnade deiner Willkür überliefern” (63). However, neither addresses the possibility of a breach of contract or the dissolution of their masochistic coupling. Of course, owing to Severin’s belief in his absolute and enduring need for Wanda, this oversight is to be expected. But, in due course, Wanda introduces her own desires and elements into their relationship, thus altering and triggering the collapse of Severin’s fantasy. A breakdown of the contract becomes evident when Wanda incarcerates him as punishment for staring at one of her female servants. Rather than expressing his admiration of Wanda, the way he normally reacts to her actions, Severin concludes: “Ich glaube, ich fange an, dieses Weib zu hassen” (99). His fantasies are irreversibly shattered when Wanda, after deceiving him into believing that their “Scherz und Spiel” (128) has ended (“Aber jetzt ist es genug, nicht wahr?” 128), invites her Greek lover to whip him – a deeply humiliating experience for Severin:

Und er begann mich zu peitschen – so unbarmherzig, so furchtbar, daß ich unter jedem Hiebe zusammenzuckte und vor Schmerz am ganzen Leibe zu zittern begann, ja die Tränen liefen mir über die Wangen, während Wanda in ihrer Pelzjacke auf der Ottomane lag, auf den Arm gestützt, mit grausamer Neugier zusah und sich vor Lachen wälzte ... Mir war es, wie das Erwachen aus einem Traume. (134-5)

In many ways, this rupture mirrors the experience of the female protagonists in *La Pianiste* and *Nymphomaniac* that will be discussed in later chapters.

Furthermore, what makes Deleuze's theory invaluable to my analysis of these films, is his emphasis on the need to theorize masochism within the field from which it originates, that of aesthetics and literature (Mennel 37-38). Returning to the literary origins of masochism reveals that the dominant, clinical approach to masochism ignores the specificity of that world – with its whips, chains, and masks – that its aesthetic creates. This aesthetic is reliant upon typical themes, props, and settings, as well as specific roles and cultural stereotypes that frequently surface in S/M fantasies.<sup>8</sup> Noyes argues that, “In the masochistic scenario, identity is nothing more or less than the momentary adoption of stereotyped identities in the pursuit of bodily pleasure,” and these identities may be “selected and combined at will” (215). The purpose of such behaviour is not to assume all facets of an identity but to briefly use it to achieve pleasure.

Additionally, the masochistic aesthetic in normative S/M minimizes sensations other than pleasure and suspense despite the fact that pain, its deliverance and experience, is essential in the achievement of masochistic pleasure. In marked juxtaposition to normative S/M, both films insist on showing this pain, especially when it does not lead to pleasure. Pain is represented in a highly realistic manner where its ugliness comes to the fore in explicit and graphic imagery. Both films examined here belong to a body of films which “demonstrate a deep interest in making the body visible in a manner that shares affinities with pornographic cinema [in which] we frequently see an exploration of the boundaries between pleasure and pain” (Kerner and Knapp 17). They push

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<sup>8</sup> Various roles include “master/slave,” “dominant/submissive,” “prisoner/torturer,” and “student/teacher.” The actions which play out in the fantasy, as well as the relationship dynamic established between partners, is dependent upon the choice of these roles.

the boundary, in terms of cinema's conventional treatment of sex, by portraying it graphically and violently. In this way, these films can be said to be building an anti-aesthetic.

It is this anti-aesthetic, created through these two films' portrayals of female masochism, that encourages a feminist interpretation. This aesthetic daringly plays with our perceptions of what is real versus what is fantasy. The element of the theatrical, present in normative S/M films through means such as setting and costume, is deliberately subdued in *La Pianiste* and *Nymphomaniac*. I am very much interested in analyzing the visual presentation of female masochism and the acting of these characters, in order to build up the argument that these films are creating an anti-aesthetic.

### **2.3 Female Masochism**

It is worth undertaking a brief summary of feminist critiques of heterosexual female masochism in order to address a gap in feminist scholarship on the subject of female masochism. The problem of masochism for feminist theorists hinges on a number of concerns including: the relationship between fantasy and reality, issues of consent, and if masochistic practices maintain gendered power dynamics within a patriarchal society. The question of whether the violence or cruelty depicted in masochistic scenarios is real or not is a constant concern. It is difficult to uncouple the bruised and battered body of the female masochist from discourses of victimization and passiveness. The fact that heterosexual female masochism can mimic, in appearance, the oppression of women within a patriarchal society does not mean that it is a complete reproduction of it, when the female masochist chooses submission and is in control of it. In addition, the described feminist critique ignores other elements that embellish pleasure in the

masochistic fantasy. Such elements can include pre-arranged decisions concerning the clothing, location and timing of the sexual encounter between the masochist and her partner. The potential that female sexual submissiveness is fuelled by the internalization of patriarchal notions of female desire leads to further concerns about a woman's capacity to freely consent to sex with a male partner (Walters 66). However, the argument that female masochistic desire is the result of patriarchal oppression ignores the agency of the female masochist – to choose, to consent (McPhee 17). Ultimately, feminist critiques of heterosexual female masochism have left the subject of the female masochist and the range of her experiences relatively unexplored.

I propose that a more positive and open feminist interpretation of contemporary representations of heterosexual female masochism is possible. This interpretation involves recognizing that Deleuze's overall theory is problematic for the reason that it focuses on the male protagonist of Sacher-Masoch's novel and sees the dominatrix as a parental substitute. Thus, I want to reach beyond Deleuze to include an analysis of how the *female* protagonist is empowered, i.e., how the women break gender expectations, and, in particular, how masochism is represented beyond the confines of what is defined and regulated as acceptable sexual behaviour for women.

Owing to the fact that *La Pianiste* and *Nymphomaniac* are emblematic of the current trend to use graphic imagery in the representation of female sexuality, I believe they provide sufficient subject material from which to support my thesis. Masochism is depicted as a radical means of achieving control over the dynamics of power in heterosexual relationships. The collapse of the masochistic contract and fantasies created by Erika and Joe, and the resulting explosively violent encounters with their interlocutors, serve as a critique of heteronormativity.

These clashes serve to remind audiences of the limitations placed upon sexuality by heteronormativity; sexual pleasures outside of the norm carry risks. Noyes notes that when these risks become too heavy for Severin in *Venus im Pelz*, his masochism is abandoned and he becomes cured of it (210). Mennel supports this view and offers the following analysis of the novel's conclusion: "Severin overcomes his masochistic relation to Wanda and enters a marriage in which gender roles function in a clearly traditional division-of-power relationship. The narrative frame depicts the status quo of the real, which is juxtaposed to the reversal of gender roles in the fantasy" (47). Neither *La Pianiste* nor *Nymphomaniac* follow a similar line of narrative – there is no reversal of existing gender roles – and it is for this reason that they are arguably all the more compelling. Instead, the ambiguous ending of each film taxingly compels one to re-evaluate normative ways of thinking about gender and sexuality. In this way, then, these films support the masochistic endeavours undertaken by the female protagonist.



### 3. The Masochistic Contract

The focus of this chapter is to question the transgressive potential of the contract in terms of its transference of power and control to the heterosexual female masochist. Despite the fact that neither *La Pianiste* nor *Nymphomaniac* feature a contract in its traditional form, a document signed by both parties participating in a masochistic relationship, similar devices are evident in both films. Within these films, constructions of female masochism revolve around the failure of the contract. Analyzing and comparing the ways in which these contracts fail to fulfill their function emphasizes the difficulties faced by the female masochist. In deviating from gendered expectations, in terms of sexual behaviour and pleasures, the female masochist faces greater resistance than her male partner in having her fantasies realized (McPhee 39). Evidence of this resistance can be seen in how various characters, specifically the interlocutor of each film's protagonist, respond to these female masochists' masochistic desires. Walter accuses Erika of being sick and in need of professional help: "Du bist krank, Erika. Du solltest dich behandeln lassen." In Joe's case, Seligman problematically instrumentalizes her sexuality as a nymphomaniac in order to validate his attempt to rape her. Consequently, it can be said that the contract provides no effective safeguard against the violence of these male characters. However, it is not designed to do so. The contract is meant to be created and enacted with reciprocity in mind, leaving no partner in doubt about what the other expects (McPhee 36). Elements of reciprocity are arguably present in the relationship between these female masochists and their partners, and yet it is not enough to ensure the success of the contract. The questions that overwhelmingly weigh on me are, then: why do these contracts fail? What does their potential for transgression add up to if, on the one hand, they allow the female protagonists to feel

empowered and in control of their sexual selves and, on the other hand, they do nothing to protect either Erika or Joe from violence? Using Deleuze's theory as a framework, I will not only answer these questions but also demonstrate the difficulty in reconciling the benefits of chosen submission.

It is worth outlining, as a point of contrast, how the male masochist in *Venus im Pelz* benefits from the masochistic contract. Deleuze argues that Severin, by giving himself over to Wanda, is in effect, transferring all power to the mother figure within the oedipal complex. Consequently, the incestuous relationship denied to him by the father is permitted. From this relationship, the masochist is able to experience a rebirth and become a new man. Deleuze describes this process in the following: "The masochist practices three forms of disavowal at once: the first magnifies the mother, by attributing to her the phallus instrumental to rebirth; the second excludes the father, since he has no part in this rebirth; and the third relates to sexual pleasure, which is interrupted, deprived of its genitility and transformed into the pleasure of being reborn" (100). In addition, in his masculinity, the figure of the Greek is representative of, in the words of Deleuze: "the hope of a rebirth, the projection of the new man that will result from the masochistic experiment" (66). After being whipped by the Greek, Severin experiences this rebirth, described as the awakening from a dream, and becomes a sadist. While the breaking of his contract liberates Severin, by allowing him to become a new man, neither Erika nor Joe experience such a rebirth. Similar to Severin, the breach of contract results in both Erika and Joe experiencing violence, but an important difference is that, in the aftermath of this violence, the potential for a 'rebirth' of these female protagonists is left open.

### 3.1 *La Pianiste*

Before addressing further aspects of the masochistic contract in this film, I want to establish why the command that it offers is so crucial for Erika. The film presents Erika as an individual struggling to gain and exercise control over her life. Her attempts invariably affect her relationships, particularly the one she shares with her mother, and carry unintended consequences. An example of her efforts are captured within the opening scenes of the film. Erika arrives home late to find her mother waiting for her. Her mother blocks the entrance to Erika's room and demands that she account for her whereabouts and activities during the past hours. Erika explains that, after a trying day, she has been out walking. This response fails to convince her mother, who proceeds to grab her handbag from her and search it. A sardonic "wunderbar" is uttered as her mother pulls a striking and recently purchased dress from the bag. Erika, taking advantage of this distraction, runs to her room and begins to search her closet for a particular outfit. While her mother is examining the entries in her account book, to ascertain the price of the dress, Erika returns and demands to know where this other outfit is. Her mother's clueless response drives Erika to violence; she grabs and pulls her mother's hair. The two eventually make peace and are later shown preparing to sleep in a shared bed. It is clear from this exchange that Erika is allowed little personal freedom. She herself criticizes her mother's authoritarianism by using an ironic tone to question whether an activity as innocuous as walking is permitted: "Ich war spazieren. Ist das erlaubt?" More important than this awareness of her mother's tyrannical attitude, though, is Erika's willingness to challenge her mother and test the bounds used to keep her in check. The speed with which both suspect the other of deception suggests that this is not the first time Erika has attempted to hide things from her mother.

Nevertheless, in spite of the violent nature of their struggle, Erika and her mother remain inexplicably entwined; their need for the other remains. The issue of how it is possible for Erika to break away from her mother, in order to form intimate or even sexual relations with another, becomes vital.

The film depicts Erika as exploring and attending to her desires in a manner that breaks with gendered expectations and, therefore, undermines the self that her mother has laid upon her. Erika is no longer the good daughter, but rather a woman who actively seeks to explore her sexuality. An example of Erika challenging perceptions of female behaviour is depicted when she pays to watch a pornographic film in a sex shop. While waiting for an available film booth, she stares pointedly at a group of men who have begun to look over at her. She returns their gaze in a defiant manner, as if she is daring them to challenge her right to partake in the pleasure of watching an adult film.<sup>9</sup> Once she enters the booth and makes her selection, a film centred upon an act of heterosexual fellatio, she unexpectedly pulls a used tissue from the trash bin next to her and inhales its scent. Erika's stillness in this moment – her unwavering attention towards the screen in front of her with an undoubtedly sperm-encrusted tissue under her nose – calls to mind the actions not shown, such as those of self-touch or masturbation (Lebeau 67). In this way, then, Erika's behaviour upsets the practices typically associated with the consumption of pornographic images. At the same time, Erika's voyeurism makes her vulnerable. For all that it can be argued that being the one who looks, rather than the one being looked at, places Erika in a position of power, one where she appropriates the male gaze; her looking exposes her and opens her up to

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<sup>9</sup> According to Lebeau, the static shot of Erika while she is waiting acts to emphasize her loneliness and “difference” for the audience (68).

social judgement (Knauss 222).<sup>10</sup> Such is the case when she is caught watching a couple having sex at a drive-in. Giving in to her desire, Erika observes them until, excited to the point of crying and urinating, she catches the attention of the man in the vehicle. He stops what he is doing to chase after Erika, shouting at her to stop when she begins to run. Erika appears unshaken by this encounter as she continues to pursue and give in to her desires in spite of the danger they carry.

Entering into a masochistic relationship with Walter provides Erika with an opportunity to exercise control through the realization of her fantasies. The contract is crucial in ensuring the execution of the fantasy, as well as denying the masochist's active role in the circumstances of their submission. Deleuze argues that, while the necessity of the contract remains unknown, masochism "cannot do without a contract, either actual or in the mind of the masochist" (76). Erika drafts a contract, in letter form, for Walter after their sexual encounter in the washroom of the conservatory. It is during this meeting that Walter glimpses what his relationship with Erika might entail. She consistently issues orders and, when Walter fails to comply, threatens to walk away from him and end their relationship. Brunette takes the position that it is Erika's aim to humiliate Walter by "controlling every aspect of the sexual situation," but acknowledges that others may perceive her actions as "reclaiming a balance of power in a relationship that, under patriarchy, is always by definition unequal" (97). However, interpreted within the context of masochism, Erika's actions become pedagogical rather than humiliating. She is training and preparing Walter for his position as her master, albeit one who will dominate according to her rules. It is also possible that putting Walter in a position where he must be obedient and passive is arousing for Erika. Her actions do not qualify her as a sadist. She does not derive pleasure

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<sup>10</sup> See Lebeau for more on Jelinek's critique of the male gaze within her work, especially in *Die Klavierspielerin*. Lebeau also touches on how the subject of looking is addressed in Haneke's adaptation.

from inflicting pain but from viewing Walter's submission as a projection of what her future submission might look like. The promise to send Walter her instructions in a letter confirms the belief that she has found a partner willing to perform the role of torturer within her fantasies.

Deleuze contends that the male masochist is constantly in search of a woman who embodies the essence of masochism and renounces her own masochistic instincts (42-43). Vaida argues that, based on the need for this essence, Deleuze's theory reveals why it is then impossible for the female masochist to have her fantasies satisfied, and Vaida declares the following:

in order to fulfil her fantasies, a masochistic woman would have to find a man who embodies the 'essence' of masochism and at the same time is willing to renounce it, or at least postpone his own satisfaction for the sake of the woman's pleasure – an impossible task in a patriarchal society, in which men neither want to nor have to put their desires on hold for the sake of women. (217)

The problem with this statement is that, once again, it denies the female masochist options: her pleasures are either determined or restricted by patriarchal notions of female sexuality. Moreover, the idea that the female masochist must find a man who is either exceptional or nonexistent (according to the perspective taken by Vaida) functions to support conventional 'you complete me' narratives, which, as McPhee argues, "disavow the transgressive potential that masochism as perversion holds" (24). Haneke's representation of Erika's masochism challenges the idea that she is, at least initially, restricted by Walter's nature and his pleasures. In the washroom of the conservatory, Erika tests Walter and forces him to contend with the fact that her pleasures will dictate the rules of their relationship. Walter seemingly chooses to cope with his powerlessness in this situation by convincing himself that, in the future, their sexual relations will be different:

“Nächstes Mal wird es schon viel besser gehen mit uns.” For him, ‘better’ involves engaging in more normal sexual acts and voicing feelings of love, both of which Erika repeatedly distances herself from, upon their next meeting. It is then, during a piano lesson, where Erika hands Walter a letter and instructs him to read it privately and telephone her later to discuss it. Rather than waiting to read it, Walter implores her to go away with him, to let go for once and give in to her emotions. Erika crosses the room, putting distance between herself and Walter, and replies: “Ich habe keine Gefühle, Walter. Schreiben Sie sich das hinter die Ohren, und sollte ich welche haben, werden sie nie über meine Intelligenz siegen.” This response can be interpreted as a warning – if Erika were to give in to her emotions, she would never allow herself to lose control. The specific mention of her intelligence suggests that she is aware, even suspicious, of Walter’s use of emotive language. Contrary to the argument that Erika is unable to recognize Walter’s desires (Knauss 223), or that she allows herself to be seduced by him (Vaida 207), Erika is decidedly aware of Walter’s character and his expectations of her. Entering into a masochistic relationship with Walter presents her with the opportunity to have her desires recognized, to create her own narratives of control, and, as such, its success outweighs any risk of failure.

### **3.1.1 Erika’s Letter as Contract**

It is Erika’s letter to Walter that serves to function as a masochistic contract. The reading of the contract occurs in Erika’s bedroom, to which the door has been barricaded in order to prevent Erika and Walter from being interrupted by her mother. While only snippets of its content are spoken aloud and revealed by Walter, it becomes clear that Erika wishes to be subjected to specific violent and humiliating acts:

wenn ich flehe, dann ziehe bitte die Fesseln noch fester, und den Riemen ziehe bitte um 2-3 Löcher, je mehr, desto lieber ist es mir, fester zusammen, und außerdem stopfe mir dann noch alte Nylons von mir, die bereitliegen werden, derart fest in den Mund, daß ich nicht den geringsten Laut von mir geben kann. Später nimm den Knebel bitte heraus und setze Dich auf mein Gesicht und schlage mir Deine Fäuste in den Magen und zwinge mich so ... Dir meine Zunge in den Hintern zu [stecken]. (Haneke 89)

Unsurprisingly, these orders shock Walter; he is either unable or unwilling to read them “within the framework of Erika’s desires [as opposed to] the framework of normatized sexuality” (Knauss 224). As Walter questions the contents of the contract, it becomes increasingly apparent that his image of Erika is shattered. While reading her letter, he repeatedly pauses to make eye contact with her, to sigh and rub at his eyes, as if this somehow might change what it is that he is reading. Despite Erika’s insistence that she has had the desire to be beaten for years (she even pulls various S/M instruments from under the bed), Walter tells her she is sick. Furthermore, he no longer feels capable of loving her: “Ich schwör’ dir, daß ich dich geliebt habe. Aber das kapiertst du wahrscheinlich gar nicht. Jetzt graust mir nur noch” (Haneke 93). Walter’s reaction, his rejection of Erika’s contract, raises two important points that I would like to elaborate on.

Firstly, it exposes the insincerity of his feelings towards Erika. Walter’s love for Erika is contingent upon her being as he expects her to be. Consequently, once Erika becomes, in his eyes, sick, she is no longer fit to be touched – much less loved: “Leute wie dich greift man nicht einmal mit der Kohlenzange an” (Haneke 93). Such a statement contradicts the “innocence” of



his love, as it is described by Harriet Wyre.<sup>11</sup> The film's portrayal of Walter's attraction to Erika, as a sexual conquest or genuine love interest, remains highly ambiguous. Their interaction in the washroom hints that it is a case of the former as Walter, presuming a "hidden wildness" (Wyre 463) in Erika, states: "Ich bin nicht dumm, sondern du. Du solltest wissen, was man mit einem Mann machen darf und was nicht. Ich bin für jedes Spiel offen, aber die Spielregeln müssen für alle gelten." Rather than question what drives Erika's actions or what would please her in this instance, Walter's conclusion is that she must become aware of the sexual acts acceptable to not only him but to a man in general. Furthermore, the claim of being open to all sexual games seems to suggest Walter's interest in Erika's desires, but this acceptance is conditional upon his desires being met.

Secondly, the intensity with which Walter reacts to and rejects Erika's contract speaks to its potential to dispossess the masochistic partner of control or power. Erika's fantasies not only shock but alienate Walter, leaving him asking: "Soll ich das ernstnehmen?" Walter's reaction highlights the issues that arise when the self is confronted by the Other. McPhee argues that "Walter finds himself in close proximity to an otherness he had never envisioned" and that this raises an anxiety and fear within him (42).<sup>12</sup> This anxiety can only be compounded by the thought that he must accede to Erika's demands in order to continue his relationship with her. Left out of the creation of the contract, he is restricted by Erika's imagination of their sexual

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the labelling of Walter's love as innocent is meant to emphasize the difficulty of whether Erika is able to accept it or not because, as Wyre argues, she "has so little experience of the mutuality that is key to intimacy" (461). This argument fails to address what qualifies Walter's love as innocent and how this love accounts for his capacity to engage Erika in an intimate relationship.

<sup>12</sup> McPhee reaches this conclusion after analyzing Walter's response through Freud's concept of the *Nebenmensch*. This concept describes the tension between the self and the other, who "appear as love object but also hated enemy, attractive yet revolting, simultaneously comparable and incomparable to the self" (McPhee 42). Walter, in scorning Erika's letter, shows a fear not only of her, but also of himself.

relationship. He sees nothing of the relationship he visualized with her in the proposed contract; there are no weekend getaways, no slip in Erika's control, not even an escape from her mother.<sup>13</sup> Surprisingly, Erika's mother plays a central role in the contract as it is Erika's wish to be tied to her: "daß Du [...] mich, wie es mein sehnlichster Wunsch ist, zusammengeschnallt und krummgeschlossen mit meiner Mutter, doch für diese hinter meiner Zimmertür endgültig unerreichbar, liegenläßt, und zwar bis zum nächsten Tag" (Haneke 90).<sup>14</sup> The submissive role given to her mother further signals the extent to which the contract is intended to put Erika in control. That Erika chooses to remove herself so completely from Walter's control in this matter causes him to reject the contract and the powerlessness that he perceives it assigns him.

Walter's response can perhaps be partially attributed to the form of the contract. Although it functions as a means through which Erika can express herself and build a connection between herself and Walter, its reading radically alters its intent. Walter asks her to verbally clarify what it is that she has written: "Vielleicht kannst du mal deinen ach so kultivierten Mund aufmachen und dich zu dieser Scheiße äußern, ja?!" (Haneke 90). The suggestion that she open her cultured mouth draws attention to the obscene nature of the letter's content. Moreover, it emphasizes the disconnect between the Erika he sees before him versus the one described in the masochistic scenarios. She insists that her letter is not a joke, like Walter initially presumed, and that he knows this: "Es ist kein Scherz, was ich dir geschrieben habe, das weißt du doch" (Haneke 93). This explanation fails to move Walter and he leaves. Shortly thereafter, Erika seeks him out at the arena (where he plays hockey) and asks him to forgive her the letter, arguing that it would

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<sup>13</sup> Walter proposes such a romantic escape to Erika during one of their piano lessons.

<sup>14</sup> Note that in this instance the film's dialogue deviates from Haneke's script as it appears in Grisseemann. In the film, the idea of Erika being tied to her mother is absent: "eingesperrt zusammen mit meiner Mutter."

have indeed been better for them to talk: “Bitte verzeih mir den Brief ... Wir hätten sprechen sollen, wie du gesagt hast” (Haneke 98). It seems therefore that, with Erika’s own admission of its inadequacy, her letter is an unsuitable form through which to establish a masochistic contract. But the question of whether, as she suggests, oral communication would have yielded a different response is highly ambiguous given the discussion that follows between them.

After appealing to Walter, Erika attempts to focus on how she might satisfy Walter’s desires. Erika surprisingly proclaims her love for Walter as a means of convincing him that she is committed to his concept of their relationship: “wir werden es schön haben ... ich liebe dich ... ich werde dir nie wieder etwas schreiben, was du nicht willst ... Du sagst mir, was du willst, ja?” (Haneke 98-99). A complete reversal of attitude is detectable in these words: Erika is now in favour of the romantic relationship previously proposed by Walter. To an extent, her sense of self has been shattered by Walter’s reaction of disgust towards her masochistic pleasures. She seems to be exploring an alternative self, one that would appeal to Walter – she even goes so far as to repeat his words back to him: “Und wir spielen jedes Spiel, das du willst” (Haneke 101). With these words, Erika arguably admits to playing a game herself. Her endeavour to retain her relationship with Walter necessitates that she use the same romantic phrases and ways of behaving employed by Walter previously. However, just as this conduct failed to elicit Erika’s love, it is unsuccessful in reviving Walter’s. Consequently, I would argue that while Erika’s letter fails as a contract, it serves as a more effective means of expressing herself; writing it allowed Erika to attempt to exercise control through the narration of her fantasies. More importantly, she defined what is erotically arousing to her.

### 3.1.2 A Betrayal of Contract

Despite not having come to a contractual agreement, Walter arguably betrays Erika's letter by perverting the fantasies it outlines. The carefully crafted masochistic scenarios are twisted by Walter in order to rationalize his subjecting her to humiliation, violence, and rape. Other interpretations of the rape scene suggest that it represents a genuine attempt by Walter to satisfy and enact elements of Erika's fantasy (cf. Brunette, Restuccia, Wigmore). Erika's begging Walter to stop hitting her prompts the following questions from Brunette: "But is she being honest here – whatever being 'honest' might mean – or is this an indirect way of manipulating the angry Walter to pleasure her by beating her up? Is she powerless at this point, or all-powerful?" (100-1). Interrogating what is shown on the screen and questioning whether Erika may in fact be in a position of power is admirable. However, the implication of these questions, that Erika might be getting exactly what she wants from Walter, is unsupportable. To begin with, it ignores the significance of the element of fantasy, alongside ritual and suspense, that comprise the masochistic aesthetic and epitomize masochistic desire. The masochistic fantasy requires dramatization and ritualization (Deleuze 74), and neither is detectable in this scene. Erika alluded to these features previously when she showed Walter the articles of S/M play (specifically nylons, cuffs, rope, clothespins, and a mask) she had for him to use and informed him that he would become responsible for choosing her clothing from the outfits in her wardrobe. Furthermore, interpretations which call Erika's rape into question make a critical error by, as McPhee argues: "[equating] masochistic corporeal pleasures with the act of vaginal penetration" (40). The fragments of Erika's letter voiced by Walter contain no reference to vaginal penetration. Walter's 'rape' is therefore clearly an act over which Erika has no control.

The terrible and unusually cruel way in which Walter uses the contract's instructions against Erika, dispossessing her of her own fantasies, suggests that the contract puts the female masochist in a position of vulnerability rather than power. This raises the question of whether the transgressive nature of the contract, the control and agency that it offers Erika, is ultimately undermined by the ability of the masochist's partner to negate and, in this case, corrupt it. One way to answer this question is to interrogate what role mutuality plays in the masochistic relationship. Deleuze states that, within the structure of masochism, the contract "represents the ideal form of the love-relationship and its necessary precondition" (75). I interpret Deleuze to mean that the contract effectively forms a foundation upon which a loving relationship is able to be built. Conversely, in his review of Peter Strickland's *The Duke of Burgundy* (2014), a film centred around the masochistic relationship of a lesbian couple, Darius Lerup understands Deleuze's statement to mean that it is the ideal love-relationship, rather than the contract, that "functions as Masochism's 'necessary precondition.'" This presupposes that the success of the contract, in any degree, is contingent upon the masochist and her partner already having a loving bond – is this bond necessary though? Must the female masochist wait to foster such a connection before proposing a contract to her partner? According to my interpretation of Deleuze, this is not the case. The act of giving her letter to Walter, imploring him to recognize her and her desires, can be understood as an early attempt to form an intimate relationship. By violently rejecting Erika's offer of intimacy, Walter reasserts "ideologies of masculine heteronormativity" (McPhee 40) which fuel understandings of Erika and her desires as 'sick'. The contract's potential to bring about meaningful communication and closeness between the two is therefore lost.

A positive and empowering reading of the contract's corruption is possible which supports its benefits for the heterosexual female masochist. The betrayal of contract encourages Erika to take control of her life in a much more pronounced way. The evening after she is raped, Erika is meant to perform in her school's concert. She waits in the foyer of the conservatory while the audience, including her mother, trickle into the hall. Walter arrives late, with his arms around a young woman, and greets Erika; nothing in his manner hints of his actions the night before or, indeed, of a relationship other than that of a student and teacher between them. In the film's final scene, we see Erika standing alone in the foyer when she pulls a knife from her bag and plunges it into her shoulder. This act of self-mutilation should not be viewed as a suicidal gesture (cf. Wigmore, Wyre), but rather an attempt to regain control. Vaida argues that this action, in connection with an earlier scene where Erika is shown cutting into her genitals, demonstrates how Erika's self-mutilation is "a means of taking back the control over her body – from her mother, from Walter" (211). While it is one thing for Erika to engage in cutting, which only pierces the surface of her skin, it is quite another to stab oneself. This stabbing represents a break from her previously ritualized cuts in that it causes irreversible damage; it will likely end her career as a pianist. When the knife is back in her bag, she leaves the conservatory and is shown walking away from it – from Schubert, her mother, and Walter.<sup>15</sup> Erika's movements are captured by the camera in a static long shot which continues even once she exits the frame. Jean Wyatt suggests that the "opening up of the spatial frame" that occurs as Erika comes out of the conservatory and moves down the street indicates a sense of freedom (476). This freedom stems

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<sup>15</sup> This is referring to Franz Schubert (1797-1828), the Austrian composer. Erika's career as a pianist and music teacher has revolved around her affinity for Schubert and performing his works. She is meant to have performed a piece of his on this evening.

from the career-ending wound that stands to liberate Erika from her mother, who has invested so much in Erika's identity as a professional pianist: "Thus to refuse the position demanded by the mother is to cut through the whole maternal knot of demand, submission, rebellion and guilt" (Wyatt 477). Erika is now able to reframe her existence and begin to live a life that is her own.

The cost of Erika's liberation, the pain and sacrifice of her ability to play the piano, draws attention to the difficulties faced by the female masochist. While Sacher-Masoch's Severin endures a cruel bout of whipping from the Greek and emerges thereafter as free from his weaknesses ("ich bin gesund geworden," 137), Erika emerges both physically and emotionally scarred. But crucially, in contrast to Severin, who is cured and depicted as a sadist, Erika's fate remains unknown. In this way, her future is left open to her, rather than anyone else, including the audience. A similar conclusion is achieved through the betrayal of the masochistic contract in *Nymphomaniac*.

### **3.2 *Nymphomaniac***

The masochistic contract in *Nymphomaniac* is established through the first person narrative of its female protagonist, Joe, and her interactions with her interlocutor, Seligman. Her narrative emerges as a means of explaining why it is that she had been left beaten and wounded in an alley when Seligman finds her: "It's my own fault. I'm just a bad human being." Initially, the purpose of her narrative is to convince Seligman that she is a bad person. She insists that she be judged as such and that any examination of her character can only support this conclusion; this is the masochistic fantasy that is proposed within her contract. The episodes she uses to

support the realization of her fantasy serve as metaphorical S/M props. Instead of whips, chains or latex, Joe uses her former sexual exploits cast within narratives. As she herself admits, these stories are, to an extent, rehearsed: “Whenever I’ve told other men about experiences, episodes in my sex life, it was easy to see that they became quite excited.” These exploits act to dramatize and ritualize the fantasy (Deleuze 74-5). The attention accorded to her fantasy is only one of the ways in which her narrative functions as a masochistic contract.

### **3.2.1 Joe’s Narrative as Contract**

During the course of the film, a rapport develops between Joe and Seligman that is indicative of one of the main aspects of the contract: reciprocity. This reciprocity is demonstrated through the intertwining of their narratives. Whenever Seligman interrupts her, argues or disagrees with her, she reacts by either contesting or incorporating his responses into her story; she maintains control as the narrator. It is in fact Seligman who, with an educational anecdote about fly fishing, triggers and provides Joe with the inspiration needed to begin her narrative: “To begin with the bait, I discovered my cunt as a two-year old.” The reference to bait draws on Seligman’s preceding remarks. Similarly, in a subsequent sequence depicting Joe and her friend, B. (Sophie Kennedy Clark), engaging in sex with multiple men on a train, Joe’s narration and its accompanying visuals are subject to the superimposition and juxtaposition of images and video related to fly fishing as Seligman is heard interpreting her narrative as an act of “reading the river.” Seligman compares her and B.’s walking down the aisles of the train in search of sexual partners to a fisherman’s ability to locate (read) the position of fish within any given river. This back and forth, present throughout the film, serves as a contractual negotiation.



The negotiation between Joe and Seligman ensures that each other's desires and needs are recognized by the other. During her narration, Joe demands and expects the attention of Seligman. A number of instances occur in which she questions his attentiveness and responses to her words. An apt example of her questioning Seligman is when he disputes the plausibility of the coincidences which seem to pile up in Joe's account of her relationship with the love of her life Jérôme (Shia Labeouf). She counters with the following: "So what? That's the way this story goes. And I'm the one telling it, and I know what happened. Do you want to hear it or not?" Seligman again repeats his doubts, which leads her to challenge him: "Which way do you think you'd get the most out of my story. By believing in it or by not believing in it?" Reluctantly, he agrees with Joe and resumes his listening. This interaction stresses how it is Joe who controls the story and Seligman must accept this.<sup>16</sup> In exchange, Joe provides Seligman with company; it is clear from how he lives, in a barren bachelor's apartment, that he is alone. Moreover, the hint of existing as an outsider or loner clings to him. He separates himself from the locals when speaking of his fishing abilities: "But I don't catch much. The locals catch a lot more." For Seligman, Joe's presence provides the opportunity to engage in meaningful communication and to build a relationship. The speed with which he shares his anecdotes and Joe's patience in listening to them further indicates a mutual recognition between the two.

The duration of the contract is determined by the beginning and conclusion of Joe's narrative. By its conclusion, the aim of the contract shifts. The scenarios described by Joe to

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<sup>16</sup> Joe's control of her contract is further supported through von Trier's editing, which mirrors her flashbacks. When Joe so chooses, these "flashbacks" are cut, i.e., she interrupts her narrative, depending on whether she wishes to address one of Seligman's interruptions or hide something from him. An example of her concealing aspects of her story from Seligman occurs when she feels trapped by him and is forced to share the traumatic experience of having surgery as a young child. This incident leads one to question Joe's reliability, while also emphasizing that she is not beholden to Seligman or the audience. She decides what she reveals, and that is all we can hope to learn. Editing is therefore crucially involved in the representation of the contract.

convince Seligman of her being a bad person range from how her addiction to lust destroys the people around her to her abandoning her child in order to regain the ability to orgasm, and, ultimately, her wish to kill Jérôme. It is the intent and unsuccessful attempt to kill Jérôme which leads to Erika being beaten by him in the alleyway where Seligman finds her. In spite of her justifications, Seligman assures her that she is not a bad person. Here the shift is most visible. Joe, citing her exhaustion, rather surprisingly allows his arguments and judgements to stand. Before falling asleep, though, she mentions that she is grateful to Seligman: “Let me just say that telling my story as you insisted, or permitted, has put me at ease ... I want to say thanks to my new, and maybe first friend. Thank you, Seligman.” This conciliatory change in Joe’s attitude signals the end of the contract and the initiation of a new relationship between the two of them. The protective boundary imposed by the contract, the defences used to maintain the fantasy, is gone – reality comes crashing in, as, at the very end of the film, Seligman attempts to rape her. His action amounts to a betrayal of not only their newly established friendship but also their contract.

### **3.2.2 Seligman’s Betrayal**

In his breach of their contract, Seligman not only betrays the trust of Joe, but also the ideals he himself championed. After being questioned why he does not show any indication of being sexually aroused by Joe’s stories, Seligman explains that he considers himself asexual and that this makes him a better listener to her narrative: “I have no preconceived notions or preferences. I’m actually the best judge you could give your story to ... I’m a virgin. I’m innocent.” Of course the spectator knows this claim of innocence is somewhat false because

during her narrative Seligman engages in a fantasy of Joe in a classroom, playing suggestively with classroom props, in a manner reminiscent of mainstream pornographic imagery. This glimpse into his thoughts suggests for the first time that he is not as reliable as he presents himself to be. The final image of him, advancing on Joe with his penis in his hand, upends his portrayal of himself as ‘innocent.’

Aside from his character, the arguments he puts forward to justify Joe’s sexual undertakings amount to nothing. The pseudo-feminist tone of these arguments demands a closer inspection in order to expose Seligman as the “false face of misogyny” (Galt “Suffering Spectator”). For instance, Seligman problematically pardons Joe’s behaviour by arguing that, had she been a man, the same exploits which fascinated when told by her would become irrelevant and, in his words, “banal.” This reversal of gender expectations, however, does nothing to challenge such expectations; it merely reinforces them. Seligman, in his effort to explain Joe’s behaviour to herself, reinforces the gender binary in his interpretation of her narrative:

When a man leaves his children because of desire, we accept it with a shrug, but you as a woman, you had to take on a guilt, a burden of guilt that could never be alleviated ... And all in all, all the blame and guilt that piled up over the years became too much for you, and you reacted aggressively, almost like a man I have to say, and you fought back. You fought back against the gender that had been oppressing and mutilating and killing you and billions of women.

Despite highlighting the injustice of gender-based double standards Seligman problematically proceeds to cast Joe’s behaviour as masculine. To be aggressive, fight back and, in a general sense, be active remain masculine-coded characteristics. In short, Seligman reinstates a gender

binary. In addition, by claiming that Joe had been fighting against an entire, presumably male, gender, he reduces her rage at being forced to exist on the margins of society to a fight against the male gender. But this rage expresses so much more: the frustration of having others assume control over her, of having her subjectivity dissected, diagnosed and explained to her by others. Joe herself contests Seligman's understanding of her narrative by highlighting the fact it fails to defend the violence she intended to visit upon another: "But I wanted to kill another human being." Seligman discards this point because she did not commit murder and instead, in his words, "celebrated human worth." To me, these words are not only empty, but condescending. Seligman presumes too much; his role in Joe's narrative is to listen and contribute, but not to explain Joe's actions to herself. Lastly, his effort to rape Joe exposes the hollowness of his arguments. His liberalism does nothing to stop him from taking advantage of the sleeping Joe.

For Joe, this betrayal has the immediate effect of forcing her to defend herself against Seligman by using the gun that she had failed to use earlier to shoot Jérôme. In effect, she is forced to commit the crime which she was so relieved of having avoided earlier. Williams argues that Joe's narrative incites a "delayed arousal" in Seligman and that this "turns him into Joe's victim and this makes her the film's victim" (22). While Williams uses Sadean literature as a framework for her analysis of the film, which supports the notion that Joe's story is told with the intent to arouse and possibly corrupt the 'innocent' virgin Seligman, she fails to account for Joe's right to defend herself; she determines her sexual partners and he is not one of them. In addition, the point of the narrative is not necessarily to arouse Seligman but to test his rationalization of her behaviour. Joe's narrative is an exercise in agency, in assuming a control over and understanding of her life that conforming to normative ways of being cannot provide. Nowhere

is this effort more evident than in the scene where Joe quits therapy, stating: “That empathy you claim is a lie, because all you are is society’s morality police, whose duty is to erase my obscenity from the surface of the earth.” Immediately thereafter, Joe tells Seligman that she came to the realization that “society had no room for me, and I had no room for society and never had.” In spite of her conclusion, Seligman voices his hope throughout the film “that Joe can be rehabilitated” and “folded back into the world despite her unruly actions” (Galt “Suffering Spectator”). As Galt notes, “social conformity offers no cure” and more importantly, fails to protect her from the violence that disproportionately effects the marginalized. In fact, Joe has come to terms with being pushed to the margins of society and manages to embrace her existence on the fringes. Joe is supported by the film in her rejection of the rehabilitation offered by Seligman – the screen turns black just as Seligman is about to rape her and the audience hears only the shot of the gun and the sound of her exiting the apartment. This dark screen recalls the beginning of the film with its extended darkness before introducing shots of a confined alleyway and Joe’s still figure. While Joe is arguably introduced as a victim, this characterization is radically altered as the film concludes with her overcoming various wounds and betrayals and walking away. While Williams argues that Joe is left with nowhere to go (22), I propose that this black screen offers us limitless possibilities of where it is that Joe can go and end up. I cannot presume to know what will happen to her or where she will end up, and that seems, to me at least, to be the point. Joe’s disappearance from the spectator’s vision, from the image, leaves her in control, as much as she can be, of her future.

### 3.2.3 “I am a Nymphomaniac”: Taking Pride in Nymphomania

In its narration, the masochistic contract allows Joe to construct her sexual exploits in a manner that centres around her identity as a nymphomaniac. The use of this word is of course problematic owing to, as noted by Williams, “its history as pathology, and as a particularly female pathology” (22). For her, the film’s usage of the term is incorrect; nymphomania is not, as she states, “synonymous with female sexual power” (22). Lynne Huffer offers a slightly more nuanced interpretation of the film’s usage and representation of the term: “What was once locked up in a condemnation justified by the Cartesian exclusion of the mad from the cogito – the nymphomaniac as a form of madness and a figure of moral excess – becomes, ostensibly, the site of a celebratory self-truth and self-love.” While wary of the effects of self-care, in terms of how it risks isolating the individual further from society, I am convinced of the film’s portrayal of its benefits for Joe, specifically through her self-identifying as a nymphomaniac.<sup>17</sup> The narratives she builds around her identity as a nymphomaniac allow her to design and track the trajectory of her sexual desires from early childhood onwards. Therefore, that she becomes aware of her sexual nature at the age of two serves to explain, at least within her narrative, why it was and continues to be difficult for her to adopt subject positions which come into conflict with her sexual needs. For this reason, she could never be the dutiful daughter, the happy housewife or ideal mother – the roles expected of her by society. In addition, in choosing to refer to herself as a nymphomaniac rather than a sex-addict, Joe refuses the treatment and rehabilitation suggested by the term addict (Norris 12). She embraces her own form of treatment – self-love: “I am a

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<sup>17</sup> The degree to which practices of self-care, which encompasses the notions of self-truth and self-love, can be harmful are identified and critically examined in Laurie Penny’s article “Life-Hacks of the Poor and Aimless.” The idea that the individual is wholly responsible for their own personal wellness can exacerbate feelings of being isolated and disconnected from society. However, Penny highlights the benefits of self-care in cases where individuals marginalized by society use it as a tool for survival and political resistance.

nymphomaniac, and I love myself for being one. But above all, I love my cunt and my filthy, dirty lust.” Her masochistic contract, which emphasizes her love and pride in identifying as a nymphomaniac, is a narrative that acts to counter the attempts to pathologize and ‘normalize’ her.

Joe’s resistance to what Galt refers to as “normative scripts of femininity and female sexuality” (“Suffering Spectator”) is supported not only through her narrative but also in the aesthetics of the film. The following chapter will examine how the aesthetics in *Nymphomaniac*, as well as in *La Pianiste*, represent the difficulty of this resistance. It is pain, rather than pleasure, that is shown to be the principal sensation of one’s existence as a female masochist. Consequently, this aesthetic can be read as an anti-aesthetic in its refusal to adhere to the normative cinematic portrayal of masochism.

#### 4. The Aesthetics of Female Masochism

The aesthetics used to represent female masochism in *La Pianiste* and *Nymphomaniac* operate to confront normative frameworks which shape female subjectivity and sexuality. By moving away from the flashiness of typical S/M aesthetics, these films create an encounter with pain and difference. The painful experiences of Erika and Joe reveal the inadequacy of normative frameworks to explain or define female subjectivity and sexuality. Rather than having their embrace of otherness, of sexual difference, accepted by the individuals in their lives, both Erika and Joe are met with violence. Through the aesthetics of each film Erika and Joe's masochistic desires become more than struggles for control; they become a critique of gendered expectations of female behaviour and heteronormativity. I will address this aesthetic by first establishing how it differs from normative representations of S/M encounters as expressed in Luis Buñuel's famous film *Belle de Jour* (1967) and the contemporary popular film *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015). Having determined its difference, I will demonstrate what exactly it is that identifies this aesthetic as an 'anti-aesthetic' by examining the formal elements of each film's *mise-en-scène*, although I shall also refer, at times, to editing.<sup>18</sup> The chapter will conclude with a reflection of what this anti-aesthetic achieves.

##### 4.1 The Normative Aesthetics of S/M

I have chosen to illustrate normative aesthetics of S/M via the films *Belle de Jour* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The first, a classic of erotic cinema, centres around the masochistic desires

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<sup>18</sup> In my discussion of *mise-en-scène* I am relying on the definition and descriptions provided by Bordwell and Thompson in *Film Art: An Introduction*. The term *mise-en-scène* is defined in the following manner: “[it signifies] the director's control over what appears in the film frame” and “includes those aspects of film that overlap with the art of the theater: setting, lighting, costume and makeup, and staging and performance” (113).



of a woman named Séverine (Catherine Deneuve). In the film's opening sequence, she and her husband Pierre (Jean Sorel) are being driven, in a horse-drawn carriage, through a park. In a close-up of these two characters, we see that she is dressed completely in red, a colour which contrasts with the muted tones of the setting and the dark colours worn by Pierre and the coach drivers. Pierre, suddenly irritated by Séverine's cold demeanour, calls for the carriage to stop. He exits and, when Séverine refuses, has the drivers forcibly remove her and drag her into the woods. The film cuts to her legs being dragged through grass, with one stocking gathered around her ankle and dirt marking her skin, foreshadowing how this respectably dressed woman will be abused. She is tied to a tree and Pierre rips her dress and bra in order to bare her back. The drivers take up their whips and begin to hit her. Séverine's cries convey both pain and ecstasy. She violently declares her love for Pierre, and, just as a driver embraces her, intent on following Pierre's order to have sex with Séverine, the film cuts to the couple's bedroom. It is only now that the spectator is made aware that what was just shown is a work of Séverine's imagination, a fantasy. Discontinuity editing is used throughout the film to juxtapose scenes of reality (Séverine's unhappy marriage, her secret life as a prostitute) and fantasy (scenes of abuse sanctioned by her husband, which result in pleasure) to the point that it becomes difficult to ascertain whether what is occurring on screen is real or fantasized.<sup>19</sup>

The opposition of reality and fantasy in *Belle de Jour* emphasizes how normative S/M aesthetics handle the depiction of pain and pleasure. While the infliction of pain in Séverine's fantasies – in which she is gagged, whipped, and splattered with mud – is explicitly shown, the

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<sup>19</sup> Discontinuity editing disrupts the continuity of the narrative and has the effect of blocking "our normal expectations about story action and forc[ing] us to concentrate on piecing together the film's narrative" (Bordwell and Thompson 259).

painful actions of her clients at Madame Anaïs's brothel, where she takes up work, are omitted through elliptical editing that cuts out action. In order to show this divide, I would like to focus on two specific scenes. After her first shift at the brothel, Séverine fantasizes about her husband and their acquaintance Henri (Michel Piccoli) in a field where cattle are being herded. Both men are dressed in outdoor attire; their thick woolen pants and jackets act to emphasize the cold elements of their barren surroundings. After a brief conversation next to a campfire, the two are seen shoveling mud into a bucket. The camera cuts to, and dollies towards, Séverine, whose hands are spread and loosely tied to stable posts (Fig. 1). She is wearing a white dress, which, in spite of her standing in mud, is immaculate. Her costume makes her appear glamorous, even more so because of the background setting, an open stable and autumnal fields, behind her. In combination with costume, make-up is used to highlight her pale skin and the blondness of her hair; the overall effect is a suggestion of purity. Pierre and Henri then begin hurling mud towards her, soiling her dress and skin, while shouting insults such as "whore" and "slut." As her face is



Fig. 1: Séverine is visibly aroused by her humiliation. (*Belle de Jour*, cropped)

covered with dirt, Séverine gasps and smiles with pleasure. Crucially, the camera does not cut away during this undoubtedly painful and pleasuring experience – the components of *mise-en-scène* and editing emphasize that she is in control of her fantasies.

Conversely, the depiction of Séverine's painful sexual encounters with the male clients at Madame Anaïs's brothel is omitted; only scant hints of the pain she has experienced are shown. At one point, an Asian man appears with a small box, the contents of which are a mystery, that emits a soft buzzing sound when opened. Unlike another woman at Madame Anaïs's, Séverine does not shy away from the box completely. As she looks into it, her facial expression shifts from discomfort and concern to fascination. The man's insistence on the presence and use of the box, however, establishes it as a fetish object; it, along with the bell he fastens to one finger, must be incorporated into their sexual encounter, for him to achieve pleasure. She submits to his desires; a decision that seemingly pays off, as she is later shown to be physically exhausted but content. However, the pleasure she has just experienced contrasts with elements of *mise-en-scène*: there is a blood-stained towel on the floor and multiple objects have been knocked out of place. The infliction of pain has been cut from their encounter. The omission of the painful component of masochism (whatever caused the blood stain) and the focus on the pleasure achieved through it (Séverine's satisfied appearance later on) points to the normative aesthetics at work in those scenes of *Belle de Jour* that are set in Séverine's reality. Whenever she is not fully in control of her masochistic desires – the way she is in her day dreams –, her sexual pain is hidden from the audience.

Owing to its popularity, it is also worth examining the recent *Fifty Shades of Grey* film and its presentation of S/M practices. This adaptation of the first book belonging to the

immensely popular *Fifty Shades* trilogy written by E.L. James series is actually an “S&M-flavored love story” (Grindberg) that heavily borrows from the catalog of S/M elements seen in previous films. It can be argued that the film is aimed at a target audience that knows little about the intricacies of S/M; its aesthetics may then be understood as normative because they are supposed to be easily recognized by an audience otherwise unfamiliar with this subculture.<sup>20</sup> The film’s male protagonist, Christian Grey (Jamie Dornan), first introduces his future submissive Anastasia ‘Ana’ Steele (Dakota Johnson) to the practice of S/M by taking her into his ‘playroom’ (thereafter referred to as the ‘red room’) – a chamber filled with paraphernalia commonly associated with S/M (Fig. 2). This room is thoroughly separated from Christian’s apartment, both *spatially*, as he holds the one and only key to it, and *aesthetically*, as the room’s interior represents a stark contrast to the surrounding living area. The rest of his apartment is largely open, with floor-to-ceiling windows which capture a city skyline. The red room breaks with this



Fig. 2: Christian Grey’s ‘red room.’ (*Fifty Shades of Grey*)

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<sup>20</sup> In a recent article examining the success of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, CNN quoted writer Twanna A. Hines as saying: “BDSM is appealing because while many Americans have heard of ‘Fifty Shades of Grey’ and can tell you it’s an erotic book, not as many can tell you what the letters BDSM stand for, so there’s this allure, the siren call to find out more” (Grindberg).

open atmosphere: the colour red dominates, making the room feel small and intimate, and various instruments (whips, canes, floggers, hand cuffs, blindfolds, rope, suspension hooks) hang along the walls and down from the ceiling. A red leather-covered bed, encased in an ornate dark wooden four-poster frame is positioned in the centre of the room, offsetting the other shades of red present. Through an overhead source of lighting, the bed shines, drawing our attention but also hinting at its importance: the future acts performed and experienced upon it will not be hidden by shadows, or even sheets. Verticality dominates the composition of the shot through the bed posts and lengths of the torture instruments. This verticality guides the spectator to these items. The design of the room builds an atmosphere that is temporally distinct from the outside world. The difference of this space, in comparison to the rest of Christian's apartment, is felt and shown by Ana who embraces herself as she peruses the articles within. After brushing her fingertips along a cane, she disbelievingly remarks "You're a sadist?" This question confirms the association between the described aesthetic and practitioners of S/M. Ana's question brings him to explain that he is a dominant and that there are rules when entering into a relationship with him. The mention of rules foreshadows the introduction of a contract.

The negotiation of the contract is explicitly treated as a business agreement. Ana is invited to research any of the acts or terms listed in the contract that she might be uncomfortable with. We watch her search the term "submissive," which brings up image results featuring women bound in various positions with rope (no male figure is discernible – suggesting that sexual submission is for women only). Following this research, Ana asks to meet Christian at his office to discuss the terms of the contract. The discussion occurs while they sit across from each other at a boardroom table. Despite the corporate setting, a sense of intimacy is present owing to

orange backlighting which presents the actors in silhouette. More extreme corporeal pleasures, such as vaginal and anal fisting, are removed from the sexual acts Ana is willing to agree to. Crucially, despite these negotiations, Ana still does not sign the contract.

In regards to the actual play that occurs in the red room, the majority of it is shown to deliver pleasure. As Christian moves the tip of a riding crop over her body, building suspense before it hits her flesh, Anna trembles. Once she is hit, she gasps and responds to his question “How does it feel?” with a slight smile on her face: “Good. Sir.” Marks from the crop are never made visible on her skin. Each hit on her body is followed by a cut and close-up of her face, making her pleasure visible through her expression. In a different scene, we see Ana being bound with red rope to the bed posts and, once her naked form is resting on the bed, blindfolded with a grey satin eye mask that shines under the lighting above the bed. Christian teases a peacock feather along her body as a prelude to the brush of the flogger’s tips later shown moving across her body. Ana gasps and squirms from this treatment; her body arches when finally hit with the flogger and we see how her movement pulls the ropes binding her. The sound of the flogger is heard over close-up shots of her restraints and her face. Pleasure is at the fore of this pain and their encounter ends with Christian moving his face between her thighs to presumably perform oral sex. It is only when Ana questions his need to punish, which leads to him striking her bottom six times with a belt, that the idea of experiencing life as a submissive becomes too much for her. These six lashes leave her in tears, and she refuses to let Christian try to comfort her through touch. He respects her wishes and she leaves the apartment, concluding the film.

The encounters described here are indicative of Hollywood’s treatment of S/M narratives in contemporary cinema. Through means of *mise-en-scène* S/M in *Fifty Shades of Grey* is given a

touch of the forbidden, and the film's finale suggests that what is at the heart of S/M, pleasure through pain, is too much for a mainstream audience. In his analysis of the film *8mm*, Steven Allen notes that "in mainstream Hollywood, BDSM attire is evidently shorthand for evil" (41). The same can be said about *Fifty Shades of Grey*, though here it is the aspect of setting and props whereby Christian's character is somehow darkened: "I am fifty shades of fucked up." The suggestion here is that one only desires these pleasures if one is traumatized, ill, or mentally unstable. Ana's behaviour, her constant demands for an explanation of his desires and sexual lifestyle, fuels this pathologization of S/M practitioners. The way Christian comes to pursue and need Ana suggests that her innocence and character can somehow 'cure' him. Their relationship is representative of how the male fetishist achieves sexual pleasure within classical fetishism: Christian's domination of Ana through fetishized objects allows him to experience pleasure and piece his fragmented sense of self (his feelings of being "fifty shades of fucked up") back together to become whole again.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, as Emma Green writes for *The Atlantic*, "There is no big idea or provocative subject matter or boundary-pushing craftsmanship. It's just a conventional love story that happens to incorporate a lot of kinky sex."<sup>22</sup> The normative representation of S/M, gender binaries, and the aesthetics in *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *Belle de Jour* stand in sharp contrast to the challenging imagery and aesthetics used in *La Pianiste* and *Nymphomaniac*.

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<sup>21</sup> Fernbach defines and describes the model of classical fetishism as follows: "In classical fetishism the fetish stands in for the mother's missing phallus and masks her sexual difference, defined in this model as lack. The fetishist achieves sexual stimulation via the fetish through a fantasy of phallic sameness and the disavowal of sexual difference" (4-6). Consequently, classical fetishism's focus on the male fetishist leaves no room for the consideration of the female fetishist and her fetishes.

<sup>22</sup> Green is referring to the novels, but, considering how faithfully they have been adapted, this statement is applicable to the films as well.

## 4.2 The Anti-Aesthetic in *La Pianiste* and *Nymphomaniac*

The aesthetic used in these films can be said to be creating an anti-aesthetic insofar as it invites the spectator to be aware and critical of the role aesthetics play in shaping female subjectivity and sexuality. More precisely, in its insistence on showing the pain experienced by Erika and Joe, this anti-aesthetic deconstructs the dominant narratives surrounding the female masochist, and normative frameworks are thrown into chaos. I will discuss how exactly these frameworks are deconstructed after an examination and analysis of the formal aspects of *mise-en-scène* (select settings, costumes and make-up and factors of staging) which drive this anti-aesthetic.

### 4.2.1 *Mise-en-Scène* in *La Pianiste*

The combination of settings used in *La Pianiste*, from the stifling walls of her mother's apartment to the disciplined rooms of the conservatory, serves to emphasize Erika's confinement. In his analysis of the film, Felix Tweraser declares that: "In almost every frame the film conveys a sense of confinement, both within the unit of the family and in the rigorous training necessary to become an accomplished concert musician," and this confinement is achieved "through the *mise-en-scène*, with its emphasis on doors, gates, bars, and enclosed spaces" (195). Within the familial setting, hallways, doorways and closets are used to allow Erika's mother maximum visibility, and therefore control, over her daughter. Such control is evident in the opening scene where Erika is afforded little privacy: her whereabouts and activities are interrogated, her room and closet are regularly searched by her mother, and they even sleep side-by-side. When Erika and Walter discuss the contract in her bedroom, her mother is shown repeatedly trying to gain



access to their conversation: she pulls on the door handle, puts her ear to the door and constantly peers at Erika's door through the hall. The bathroom is the sole space in the apartment where Erika is allowed privacy and she uses it to explore her body. After cutting her genitals, the lengths to which she must go to hide the evidence, lest her mother discover her habit, is focused on: the blood must be wiped and washed from the surface of the tub, the razor blade hidden in her bag, and the bloody tissues flushed. Erika is adept at hiding habits that her mother would not approve of or understand.

Within the conservatory, the feeling of confinement follows. The monotony, control and discipline required in musical training is laid bare when Erika tutors her pupils. Shots of Erika standing in front of her window, staring out at the city, provide more than just a distraction from the repetitiveness of her work – they offer a glimpse of the world and life outside of her confines. At the same time, the restrictive setting is a space which enables Erika to exercise authority, to confidently revel in her talent and skill as a musician. Taking comfort in the security of a space is shown to be dangerous, though, as Walter becomes her student and threateningly plays with her composure.

In an attempt to regain control of her surroundings, Erika reimagines her mother's apartment as a space of fantasy. By staging her masochistic fantasy in the domestic sphere controlled by her mother, Erika challenges her mother's authority and asserts her own. The investment of libidinal impulses in the fantasy being performed with her mother nearby makes the apartment a far more appropriate setting than any other space. This staging defies the notion that the fulfilment of masochistic pleasures requires a highly stylized space similar to that of the

red room in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Moreover, the banality of the everyday associated with the domestic setting can also be countered and made anew within the fantasy.

S/M paraphernalia is vital in defining setting as a space of fantasy and S/M play. The lack of such items is keenly felt in *La Pianiste*. This absence points to the significance of props in “manipulating a shot’s setting” (Bordwell and Thompson 117) and signifies how integral masks, whips, cuffs, etc., are to the S/M aesthetic. Haneke plays with the audience’s expectations when Erika, in order to prove the seriousness of her desires to Walter, pulls out a grey shoebox containing nylons, chains, rope, and a mask. These items are not on stylistic display, as they are in the shot of the red room – they become almost mundane rather than exciting. Moreover, the contents of this box remain unused. The lack of these items in the scene where Walter rapes Erika emphasizes how his actions deviate from her fantasy. The violence in this scene is not mediated through the controlled use of S/M props; Walter uses his fists and feet to hit Erika in ways that she never intended.

*La Pianiste* uses costume to both enhance Erika’s characterization and reinforce its narrative themes. When first introduced, Erika enters her apartment wearing a beige trench coat, purse, and gloves, apparel which seems appropriate if not slightly conservative. The fact that her mother discovers an expensive floral-print dress, the fabric of which shines, suggesting it is made of silk or satin, contrasts with the subdued clothing Erika has on. As previously noted, the purchase of this specific dress symbolizes an act of rebellion and reveals how clothing is a source of conflict between mother and daughter. A separate incident reveals how her mother asserts her authority over Erika through managing her outward appearance. When Erika finishes performing at a house concert, her mother drapes a light-blue sweater over her shoulders before she is able to

socialize with others. Considering Erika is already fully covered in a long-sleeve blouse and floor-length skirt, this gesture seems overbearing rather than overprotective. As a result, when Erika is seated next to her mother watching Walter's performance, her clothing conveys a guarded innocence. At the same time, this outfit presents her character as cold – frigid even. Her frigidity acts to spur Walter's interest, and she becomes a conquest of his.

The remoteness of her character is cemented through the reappearance of the trench coat, illuminated via the strong overhead fluorescent lighting; she keeps it done up as she enters the sex shop and while watching the porn film (Fig. 3a). Done up to her chin, Erika's state of dress seems to emphasize, rather absurdly, her restraint in the face of intimacy. With no perceptible flush of arousal on her face and, therefore, no need to loosen her clothing, Erika appears cold. Additionally, the coat calls to mind the figure of a voyeur out on the streets, and the indiscernibility such a figure aims for. But Erika cannot disappear from the spectators' gaze, and they are forced to think of their own voyeuristic gaze; who are we to judge Erika when we are complicit in the act of watching? She wears the coat again when winding through the cars at the drive-in (Fig. 3b). This time, she has added a predominantly white scarf to cover her head. The established narrative expectation is that, when Erika is seen wearing the coat, her behaviour and actions will be unpredictable as well as shocking. The film delivers on this expectation as she spies on a couple having sex and urinates excitedly. Erika's signature trench coat, together with the array of blouses, sweaters, and long skirts that she wears within the conservatory, set the tone of Erika's wardrobe: muted, conservative, and reserved. For this reason, Erika's provocative actions are all the more unexpected.



Fig. 3a (left): Erika going to a sex shop; Fig. 3b (right): Erika spying on a couple. (*La Pianiste*, cropped)

It is only after her initial attempts at physical intimacy with Walter that she dresses in warmer colours and wears more markedly feminine clothing. The day upon which Erika gives Walter her contract, she is wearing a peach coloured blouse and a red sweater. Later on, when Walter reads her contract, Erika walks to her closet and implores Walter to choose her clothing for her. Her hands brush over the clothing, and she asks him what his favourite colour is, so that she may wear it; a connection between clothing and domination is clear here. After his rejection, she visits him, at the hockey arena, determined to convince him of her love. Clothed in a light pink dress, printed with flowers and trimmed with lace under her trench coat, Erika has clearly taken care to present herself in a feminine manner. Despite the attempts to appear more pleasing to Walter and win his affections back, Erika's actions (vomiting after performing oral sex on Walter) invite Walter's scorn. He repeatedly tells her that she stinks, and, with that, the image of an appealing lover that she aimed to present is shattered. We do not see Erika dressed in warm colours again. In fact, each costume thereafter is meant to highlight the pain and ugliness visited upon her body, by Walter and herself. In the scene where Walter visits Erika's apartment to

confront her about her desires and rape her, she is wearing only a white nightgown, with an indiscernible pattern. After Walter strikes Erika and kicks her in the face, she sits up and pulls the hem of her gown up to stem the flow of blood gushing from her nose. In the process, she bares a single breast and blood begins to trickle down it. Walter assures her that the sight of her body does nothing for him and she remains seated, with her back against a dark wall. Setting and costume combine to draw all attention to Erika, to the tiniest movements and expressions she makes, in this moment. A medium close-up captures her upper body and face and shows her trembling; her bottom lip quivers, shoulders shudder and tears can be seen forming and falling down her face. Similarly, the cream-coloured blouse Erika wears to her performance at the concert hall emphasizes her self-inflicted stab wound; the tear made by the knife and the blooming of blood from the cut is made visible by the blouse. As Erika moves through the foyer of the conservatory, the shape and length of her skirt creates a billowing motion around her legs which stresses her furious and nervous movements to exit the building.

In addition to being confined by her settings and subdued in her dress, the character of Erika Kohut is portrayed as emotionally and physically restrained. Her thoughts and feelings are guarded by the very careful and precise facial expressions of Isabelle Huppert. I wish to explore her expressions and gestures in two very specific scenes: the reading of the contract and her rape. Erika invites Walter to sit in a chair angled across from her as he reads her letter. This positioning allows her to watch his expression closely. While he reads the letter aloud, she turns the focus of her eyes downwards, blinks repeatedly, and pushes her body slightly forwards. Erika is enjoying hearing her unspoken desires voiced through Walter. When he pauses to look at her, she clenches her lips slightly before turning her head to look at him. She widens her eyes, pushes her

shoulders back and stares at him. As Walter starts to question the sincerity of what he has just read, she fights to keep from smiling, but a slight upwards turn of her mouth gives her emotions away. She revels in the surprise her letter has caused. However, as he continues to read, she begins to nervously play with her hands. Walter pauses and leans over to manipulate her breast – as if this will bring Erika to react in a manner he understands –, but he pulls his hand back when he recognizes Erika is unmoved by this type of attention. She then pulls her shoebox filled with S/M instruments out and lays the contents out before her. Walter’s reaction is not shown during this sequence and Erika’s back is to the camera. She finally moves to sit back down and begins speaking to Walter. Throughout her explanation, Walter remains quiet, and this pushes Erika to the verge of tears. Eventually, she kneels before him. As Walter begins to insult her, she opens her mouth, only to close it. Her nostrils flare and she takes deeper breaths to fight her emotional response. The recognition of her desires, meant to bring her pleasure, has brought pain instead.

Pain and ugliness also mark Erika’s expressions in the moments when Walter perverts her fantasies and uses the instructions in her letter to justify his violent actions. After Walter hits her, she cries out and covers her head with her arms. Forced to the ground by a hit from behind, Erika looks up at Walter, panicked, wide-eyed and covers her mouth with her left hand. She begs Walter to stop, and he kicks her, leaving her nose bloodied. She sits up, her body is racked by quiet sobs, and she repeatedly clenches her eyes while she stems the blood from her nose. As Walter heads towards the kitchen, her eyes follow his movements. Once there, he yells that she must accept that she is, in part, responsible for his actions. The camera cuts from Walter in the kitchen to Erika, where the bleeding has stopped, but her hand remains raised. As he calls out for confirmation, she breathes deeply and moves her hand, fingers splayed, just under her nose. With

disbelief and shock still running through her, eyes blankly staring in front of her, she answers timidly: “Ja, Walter.” Shortly thereafter, Walter forces himself upon Erika, and she remains as still as possible. Her body is rigid, her hand loosely closed as a fist, lips trembling and eyes barely open. Erika is portrayed as feeling complete shock and pain (Fig. 4).<sup>23</sup> In no way do Walter’s actions represent the actualization of any aspect of her fantasy – she did not choose this.



Fig. 4: Erika’s expression, moments after being raped. (*La Pianiste*, cropped)

The film’s components of *mise-en-scène* – confined settings, muted clothing, restrained acting, and the female protagonist’s lack of make-up – combine to create an aesthetic that upends the normative aesthetics of S/M. There is an absence of lush settings for the masochistic fantasy and fetishizing of specific S/M instruments. In the absence of these elements, the power dynamics that the masochistic aesthetic seeks to make visible and negotiable is left in question. Instead, Haneke employs an aesthetic which emphasizes the pain and brutality of maintaining what is considered to be ‘normal.’ Erika is therefore not a victim of her masochistic desires but rather of the limitations placed upon her through gendered expectations and heteronormativity.

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<sup>23</sup> In this shot one also notes the lack of make-up, Erika’s plain nightdress, and the presence of blood, which are not usually depicted in normative S/M aesthetics.

Before turning to the anti-aesthetic used in *Nymphomaniac*, a final word on *La Pianiste* and the subject of adaptation is necessary. In examining the formal elements of the film, it becomes evident that *La Pianiste* is very much the work of an auteur. Haneke manages to humanize figures who, in Jelinek's novel, are difficult to sympathize and identify with. In *Die Klavierspielerin*, Erika's character is senselessly cruel to those around her and Walter is reduced to a characterization of a hyper-masculine and misogynistic youth. By way of contrast, Erika and Walter are presented as far more sympathetic figures in the film. Huppert's performance as Erika encourages the spectator to dwell on her character's contradictory struggle to express her emotions and desires while, at the same time, distancing herself from them. Walter's feelings of disbelief as he reads Erika's contract are felt by the audience through Magimel's expressions and gestures. By making these characters more human through choices of casting Haneke intensifies the potentiality of spectatorial response to the film. The spectator is compelled to invest his or herself in these characters and question not just their actions, but what motivates them. In this way, *La Pianiste* urges audiences to question how society influences and shapes such figures. As mentioned earlier, because the novel provides details of Erika's traumatic past, it encourages a far more individualizing interpretation than the film. For this reason, focusing on the film has led me to conclusions that would not hold if I were to have analyzed the novel.

#### **4.2.2 *Mise-en-Scène* in *Nymphomaniac***

I will focus on aspects of *mise-en-scène* as presented in the framing of Joe's narrative because it is through her narration that Joe is presented as masochistic. Joe's masochism is therefore markedly different from Erika's, which is focused around the aspect of sexual



submission. Aesthetically, then, *Nymphomaniac* challenges the construction of normative S/M aesthetics by emphasizing the need for masochistic control, even outside of the sexual context. Joe is building a narrative which defines her subjectivity and sexuality in a way that allows her life to become livable; she embraces the difference eschewed by societal norms.

The complexity of Joe's narrative, its sequential and biographical nature, entails that numerous settings are used. Therefore, I wish to focus on the one of utmost importance: Seligman's apartment. Almost the entirety of their contact occurs within one room of his apartment. The room, with its single source of lighting, is covered in dull, dirty and stained wallpaper and contains worn-looking furniture (Fig. 5). However, in spite of its barren state, Joe is still able to use what few objects of interest the room contains to take advantage of the space.



Fig. 5: Joe listening to Seligman in his bedroom. (*Nymphomaniac*)

She turns the room into a type of personal stage where she is able to craft a narrative which affirms her perception of herself as an outsider, as a nymphomaniac. The chapter headings of her narrative reflect how she uses the objects in Seligman's room. The fish hook on the wall leads her to name chapter one "The Compleat Angler;" a cake fork reminds her of her lover, and

chapter two is called “Jerôme;” and so on. In this way, these objects are not fetishized but they contribute to the fetish of story-telling, of assuming narrative control.

This setting serves to counter-balance the varied settings within the narrative that Joe relates throughout the film. Seligman’s drab and cramped room contrasts with the more open surroundings of Joe’s story which incorporate more vivid colours, natural lighting, and allow for movement. For instance, when Joe discusses childhood walks with her father, the surrounding trees and their leaves become metaphors for human behaviour. When walking through a park in winter, he comments on the trees, saying “It’s actually the souls of the trees we see in the winter. In summer, everything’s green and idyllic, but in the winter, the branches and the trunks, they all stand out. Look at how crooked they all are.” This voiceover is accompanied by a moving shot of the naked trunks and crooked branches which surround Joe and her. She looks up at these branches, taking in their crooked form, as if considering what it might mean if trees had souls. The importance of this sequence, as well as others where nature serves as the setting, fully emerges when Joe finds a tree that, in its crooked and deformed shape, represents the image of her soul (Fig. 6). She finds this tree when she goes on a walk to the hills on the outskirts of the city where she experienced her first orgasm as a child. Joe revisits this place in order to say goodbye to her life as she has known it in the city; she can no longer stay there because the knowledge that Jerôme and her young protégée and lover of sorts, P. (Mia Goth), have become attached has made it unbearable. As she reaches the top of a rocky hill, the film cuts to her face: she is staring intensely, blinking and opening her mouth, at the image in front of her. The following cut places the tree in the foreground and a backwards-moving crane shot is used to position Joe in line with the trunk of the tree and under the bend of its branch. Joe becomes a part

of the tree, and invokes this experience later when she speaks of her will to define and control her life herself: “I will stand up against all odds. Just like a deformed tree on a hill.”



Fig. 6: Joe discovering her soul tree. (*Nymphomaniac*)

In terms of costume and make-up, when Seligman first finds Joe in the alleyway, her clothing is dirtied and stained; streaks of blood from her nose cover her cheeks. It is clear that she has not been in an accident, as Seligman suggests, but beaten. Joe’s clothing – knee-high boots, jeans, a dark-coloured shirt, and a brown coat – provides few clues about her identity and her current state. When she and Seligman reach his apartment, she showers, and he provides her with a long, blue and white striped dress shirt; reminiscent of a sleeping gown, it is appropriate for sleeping in his bed. With its stripes and oversized fit, the shirt is evocative of an exaggerated prison uniform. It establishes Joe as a type of prisoner, but it remains unclear whether she is a prisoner of the lifestyle which led her to the point of being beaten and requiring the assistance of a stranger, or a prisoner of Seligman. The blood on her face, a reminder of the violence she experienced, has been washed away and replaced with purple bruising along the right side of her cheek and under her left eye. Joe’s appearance as a beaten woman serves multiple functions. Her

bruises support her characterization of herself as a person who has been and is bad and, as such, is deserving of physical punishment. Yet, as more of her character is revealed through her narrative, her appearance acts to contradict this self-description. The bruises on her skin become representative of the violence visited upon her by society, in terms of the attempts taken to control her behaviour and body. When she concludes her life story and defiantly states that she will find a way of making her life livable, she turns her face away from Seligman, and tears fall down her cheek. In this moment, her appearance creates an image of resistance; in spite of her pain, both physical and emotional, she will persevere.

Joe's narrative is made all the more powerful by the film's cuts to her facial expressions in-between telling it. These expressions reveal the difficulties involved in maintaining narrative control while building a relationship with Seligman, who routinely interrupts her narrative with questions, objections, and the assertion of his interpretative authority. For instance, when Joe argues that her behaviour on the train was reprehensible, Seligman leans forward and clasps his hands in front of him, saying "Oh my darling," and she forcefully responds "Don't you little darling me." Joe shakes her head as she says this, her expression and angry tone signalling to Seligman that his patronizing will not be tolerated. The camera cuts to his face, and he closes his eyes while bringing his hands to his mouth; he has been chastised and seemingly accepts that Joe wants none of his pity. In addition, Joe visibly holds herself back from Seligman, adopting expressions of boredom and polite interest when he uses long-drawn-out metaphors to interpret her behaviour (Fig. 7a). It is only very rarely that she responds to his anecdotes with a slight smirk. No hint of sentimentality or smile crosses her face otherwise while she contemplates her narrative. She is, however, receptive to a number of his interruptions and questions, and at times,

this receptiveness causes her discomfort. In the instance when Seligman coerces her into explaining her feelings of loneliness, in spite of the number of her sexual partners, she compares it to the experience of having surgery as a child: “It was as if I was completely alone in the universe. As if my whole body was filled with loneliness and tears.” Recounting this experience upsets Joe, she leans forward and complains about it being trivial; she holds back the emotion from her face as he asks “And I’m still not allowed to feel sorry for you?” She closes herself off from this line of inquiry, imploring him to follow her lead by tilting her head and eyes downward after asking “Shall we go on?” (Fig. 7b).



Fig. 7a (left): Joe is bored by Seligman; Fig. 7b (right): Joe’s defiant expression. (*Nymphomaniac*, cropped)

The struggle to attain control over the narrative comes to a climax when Joe and Seligman argue over how to define her behaviour at the end of her story. After Seligman declares that Joe was merely demanding her rights, she turns her head to look at him and lifts her eyes from the ground; her expression elicits a defensive response from Seligman. With one arm resting over the back of his chair, Seligman comfortably argues his overall interpretation of her narrative. Crucially, his interpretation becomes a voiceover that is accompanied by a montage of clips from her narrative. This voiceover acts to dispossess Joe of her narrative and puts Seligman in control of inscribing it with new meaning. Joe’s response is to smirk slightly and snort; she

dazedly admits to being too tired to argue with him. Seligman smiles and appears satisfied in the knowledge that he has gained control of her narrative. However, Joe does not give way to him completely. Through her tears, an emotional renewal of sorts, she declares control over her future and evades Seligman's questions about what it will look like (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8: Joe is emotionally overwhelmed by her self-realization. (*Nymphomaniac*, cropped)

In spite of the ugliness and confined atmosphere of Seligman's room, Joe is able to craft a narrative which simultaneously embraces and transcends her surroundings. She uses the objects in Seligman's room as catalysts – they frame but also transform the narrative which she has become familiar with (she has rehearsed and told aspects of this story before). She refuses to hide the ugly and painful experiences which have contributed to her understanding of her sexuality and subjectivity because they are essential to it. To hide her pain is to hide from a portion of herself. Therefore, the film cannot aesthetically shy away from showing the infliction of pain: its consequences are real. It is all too often that aspects of pain and discomfort are hidden away in film and, as such, support structures of domination which oppress women. By depicting the female masochist's pain, *Nymphomaniac* presents masochism through an aesthetic

where its potential to render negotiations of power within structures of domination and submission is made visible. It is this potential which I now wish to elaborate on.

### **4.3 The Potentiality of Female Masochism**

In framing the masochistic desires of Erika and Joe through an anti-aesthetic, *La Pianiste* and *Nymphomaniac* confront normative frameworks which shape female subjectivity and sexuality. The violence and resistance that these two female protagonists encounter, as a result of their efforts to exercise control, highlight the extent to which the effects of the gender binary system limit the female subject. Rather than leaving these limits unexplored, Erika and Joe's masochism brings them violently into focus. The depiction of their pain, then, is a consequence of pushing the limits of normativity and encourages the spectator to reconsider and reimagine encounters with difference. It is through this reimagining that masochism's potential is fully realized. It is therefore crucial that each film leaves the future of its female protagonist open to interpretation – it is the spectator who must envision a future where the heterosexual female masochist is afforded control.

By triggering and insisting on presenting the pain of Erika and Joe, these films address issues of violence that are often neglected within cinema. In refusing to shy away from depictions of pain, they build an aesthetic that confronts misunderstandings of female masochism. The female masochist is not a victim of violence because of her masochistic desires, but rather because her partner abuses his power within their sexual relationship. In addition, the graphic imagery used to present Erika and Joe's pain creates a sense of discomfort within the spectator. This discomfort invites the spectator to question and reconsider how normalizing

frameworks act to deprive and undermine any sense of control these female protagonists might have. Indeed, it is these frameworks which continue to support structures of patriarchal domination and violence.

Both films demonstrate how sexual relationships can become ugly and violent. In *La Pianiste*, Erika's masochistic desires are twisted and used against her; the staging of her fantasy is ignored as Walter inflicts pain that is, in no way, delivered with the aim of becoming pleasurable. Walter's rape of Erika is meant to restore patriarchal power dynamics, wherein there is no space for the female masochist to control her submission; she is merely meant to submit. In the immediate aftermath of her rape, Erika's expression, in combination with her bloodied clothing, reveals what submission of that nature can look like. While Erika appears defeated and lifeless, it is important to note that Walter is never shown standing above her. He is not allowed to appear triumphant in this moment. Instead, all focus is on Erika and the pain that she experiences. This scene invites the spectator to question the circumstances which have led to this moment: how Erika's deviation from gendered expectations of female behaviour and sexuality threaten Walter's manner of framing the world and his existence within it. Her difference invites judgement and violence rather than acceptance and understanding.

Pain comes to the fore of *Nymphomaniac* through Joe's storytelling. It is not only the contents of her story but the manner in which she tells it that hints at her pain. Her struggle to maintain narrative control highlights how important that control is. She fights Seligman's efforts to dispossess her of her narrative by forcing him to accept and listen to her story *as she tells it*. This fight exhausts her and by the end of the narrative, it shows: the bruising on her face has become more pronounced and her movements lethargic. Seligman takes advantage of her



vulnerable state by entering into the room, where she is sleeping, and attempting to rape her. He interprets her account of her sexual history to mean that, because she has slept with countless numbers of men previously, she will consent to sleeping with him. Joe defends herself by shooting him, which, as the screen turns black, is only hinted at through the sound of a gun being fired. Seligman not only betrays Joe by pressing beyond the limits of their relationship, but he also betrays those spectators who have identified with him. By interpreting Joe's narrative through discourses of rationalism and a feigned feminism, Seligman makes it accessible, acceptable, and even, normal for the spectator; the destabilizing effects of her story are neutralized. However, the comfort of organizing the world according to such discourses and views is revealed to be dangerous as Seligman turns violent.

Erika and Joe are made subject to further pain through their defiance of gendered expectations of female behaviour and sexuality. The restrictions placed upon their characters is felt through elements of each film's *mise-en-scène*. In Erika's case, her character is constantly limited in her actions and behaviour through the confines of her surroundings. She is dominated by her mother whose control is so great, it extends beyond the walls of their apartment and expresses itself through Erika's dress. While escaping these confines allows Erika a sense of freedom, it is not without risk. When Erika goes out, to the sex shop and drive-in, her voyeurism – her difference – generates attention. This attention makes her vulnerable to judgement and potential cruelty when she is chased by the man through the drive-in. Pursuing a masochistic relationship with Walter therefore presents her with the opportunity to safely explore her desires and control the circumstances of chosen submission. However, both Erika and Walter are wary of emotionally opening up to one another. In her effort to do so, through her letter, Erika is met with

disgust and accusations of illness. Walter's response causes Erika anguish: tears fall down her face, as she kneels before him and asks him to hit her. Her attempts thereafter to become the ideal woman, who holds the same desires as Walter, also leads to an ugly encounter between the two. In this way, then, *La Pianiste* aesthetically captures and critiques the limited representations available to female desire and subjectivity.

In *Nymphomaniac*, Joe defies conceptions of femininity through her willingness to embrace an identity as a nymphomaniac. By centring her narrative around this persona, she emphasizes how her sexuality pushed her to the margins of society. Existence on the fringes required her to take up criminal work as a debt collector. It is through this change of career that she finds Jérôme again and, out of her feelings of jealousy over his relationship with her protégée, decides to kill him. Her failure to shoot the gun leads to her being left beaten and depicted as a victim through her bloodied face and dirty clothes. As Joe's narrative concludes, Seligman reverts to judging her behaviour as if she had been a man. In this way, then, her identity and sexuality become products of the gender binary system, rather than a challenge to it. Joe fights this interpretation and passionately declares that she will continue to find her own path in life, in spite of the insistence by others that such a path is impossible. Here, it is her tears, in combination with a reference to the deformed tree on top of a hill, where the pain of challenging and confronting social norms is made evident.

Finally, it is through their masochistic aesthetics that these films allow for and encourage a feminist interpretation. The pain of these protagonists serves to expose how female subjectivity and sexuality is limited through social and gender norms. Heteronormativity is, in particular, criticized through the actions of Walter and Seligman as it fuels and supports their sense of

entitlement to penetrative sex with Erika and Joe. It is therefore not their masochism which condemns Erika and Joe to violence, but the privileging of heteronormativity as a world view that disallows their sexual difference. Masochism serves a vital purpose in these films in that it enables Erika and Joe to challenge these views and take control of their own bodies, desires, and narratives. The portrayal of heterosexual female masochism in these films provokes the spectator to reimagine confrontations and encounters with difference. In her article on Haneke's films, Knauss notes that *La Pianiste* "finds the space to ask its irritating questions, not in order to provide answers, but to force us to continue asking, leaving viewers in an uncomfortable space of not knowing which frameworks to use in order to make sense of what they see" (228). *Nymphomaniac* achieves a similar effect by shrouding the final moments of the film in darkness. Joe is able to escape our view, and any attempts to assume the future of her narrative are thwarted. We are left to contemplate our confusion and discomfort because there can be no comforting ending in a world that continues to allow systems of domination which sanction violence against women to persist.

## 5. Conclusion

I began this thesis by quoting extensively from Ruth McPhee's *Female Masochism in Film* because her argument and call for a reconsideration of heterosexual female masochism is genuinely compelling. The issues and questions raised through cinematic portrayals of masochism capture current feminist concerns over a woman's right to control her sexuality, body, and stories. In a recently published essay, feminist and cultural critic Laurie Penny elaborates on the subject of stories and the necessity of engaging in stories from diverse perspectives. In response to the idea that stories are 'only' stories, with no political effects, she writes: "Only a story. Only the things we tell to keep out the darkness. Only the myths and fables that save us from despair, to establish power and destroy it, to teach each other how to be good, to describe the limits of desire, to keep us breathing and fighting and yearning and striving when it'd be so much easier to give in" (98). Penny's words underline what is at stake when we immerse ourselves in narratives. The control to create and voice one's story is essential to one's subjectivity, and this is what the portrayal of Erika and Joe's masochism emphasizes. It is their masochism that empowers them to take control of their desires and fantasies. Masochism therefore provides these women with the impetus to fight for control of their bodies and stories.

The history of masochism, along with its definitions and representations, is complicated. What began as an aesthetic form within the literature of Sacher-Masoch became a pathology under Krafft-Ebing and Freud. The invention of the sadomasochistic entity reinforced existing paradigms of male and female characteristics, where to be active and dominant is male and to be passive and submissive is female. This entity also privileges heterosexual couplings, where the attraction between members of the opposite sex mirrors the attraction of oppositional pairings

such as the sadist and masochist. Deleuze offered an alternative conceptualization of masochism by examining it aesthetically within the realm of literature. For him, masochism is wholly separate from sadism and contains its own unique elements. One such element is the device of the masochistic contract. By highlighting the contract's potential to assure the masochist control through a reversal of power dynamics, Deleuze's theory of masochism becomes highly useful in analyzing how masochism can function as an empowering subject position as opposed to one that is victimized. While Deleuze neglected the subject position of the female masochist, I have gone beyond his theory to address representations and experiences of female masochism.

A detailed analysis of the power dynamics at work in both *La Pianiste* and *Nymphomaniac* is made possible through an examination of the masochistic contract. The masochistic letter written by Erika and the narrative told by Joe act as contracts, which are meant to ensure their control and the fulfillment of their fantasies. In contrast to Severin in *Venus im Pelz*, neither Erika nor Joe have their fantasies realized or experience a liberating transformation as a result of the breach in their contracts. However, the betrayal of contract in both films serves as an indictment of the conventional and all-too-comforting frameworks which inform specific views of the world. *Nymphomaniac* specifically criticizes the gender binary and its structuring of gender roles within its narrative while *La Pianiste* is more subtle in its critique of sociocultural norms – its criticisms are made evident through its anti-aesthetic.

Both films create and present masochism through an anti-aesthetic that challenges the normative aesthetics of S/M. Examples of what constitutes this normative aesthetic can be found in the films *Belle de Jour* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Through aspects of *mise-en-scène*, these films situate sadomasochistic desire within fantasies structured through what Fernbach refers to

as classical fetishism. In this sense, props and outfits are fetishized in order to dispel the threat of female difference and lack. Additionally, pain is hidden through careful edits or neutralized through shots of its enabling pleasure. Neither *La Pianiste* nor *Nymphomaniac* hide the pain, signified not just by acting but by the presence of blood and bruising, experienced by their female protagonist. It is through this emphasis on pain, how it marks both the body and psyche, that these films contribute to contemporary political and feminist debates about the rights of women. The discomfiting and explicit images of inflicting pain upon another hold the potential to jar the spectator and destabilize sedimented ways of thinking.

While the female viewer may not feel empowered after watching these films, she can feel hopeful about the emerging cinematic trend of attending to the violent realities of women being dispossessed of their fantasies and stories. *La Pianiste* and *Nymphomaniac* make the viewer disturbingly aware of how dangerous thoughtlessly accepting sociocultural norms can be. They do so by highlighting the pain that is caused by abuses of power within sexual relationships, as well as through the restrictions placed upon the female subject and her sexuality via the continuing domination and persistence of heteronormativity.

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