

## Sadism and Masochism: Body, desire and resistance

Cross-elective | 4 Credits | 15 weeks

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“You're going to dig the tunnel until your hands bleed! At night, you may cry in pain in your cot, but you will keep on digging! ... Otherwise, an epic punishment awaits you.”

— Berlin in *Money Heist*

“If you ever looked at me once with what I know is in you, I would be your slave.”

— Heathcliff to Chatherine in *Wuthering Heights* (1939 adaptation)

“Bring something incomprehensible into the world!”

— Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*

How are the foundational principles of law, politics, bureaucracy, architecture, and aesthetics derived from the experience and ethics of the body—through the ways it is trapped, confined, abandoned, folded, confessed, aestheticized and cherished?

This course is not about sex, but rather about two motifs in art, literature, and cinema—namely sadism and masochism—that lie at the heart of our conceptions of the body, desire, law, and power. It tells a cultural history of the modern world through the lens of a fierce philosophical battle between two ways of understanding the self. One side is led by Georges Bataille, who through his analysis of Sadism, invites us into a world of excess, obscenity, wasteful expenditure, transgression and cruelty. It is a philosophy of the absolute limit, where sovereignty is found in the moment of rupture and the shattering of taboos. Who among us has not thought of breaking the social constraints with a violent force at some point in life? Through Bataille, we confront the question: Can true freedom only be found in the violent, ecstatic annihilation of the self and the structures that imprison it?

The other side in this battle of thought is led by Gilles Deleuze, who sees in masochism a strategy to escape, to slip-out, while still affirming and faithfully sticking to the contract with the power. Rather than confronting and destroying the oppressive structures, is it possible to agree with them and affirm them only to reveal their inherent absurdity? What happens if one thinks of the world as a theatre, and goes through all the routines with coldness but at the same time creating authentic moments of laughter at each point (most of the memes work in the same way)? This side asks: Is liberation a patient, aesthetic project of building new worlds and new bodies through imagination and affirmation?

The course also calls upon Freud, Nietzsche, Kafka, and Han Kang, among others, to mediate this battle. The ultimate goal is to make sense of the grammar of desire that locates political formations, state apparatuses, aesthetic ideals, and literary forms on the surface of the body.

The course is open to all undergrad and postgrad students and requires no prior training.

### Chapter 1 Love, Curse and Evil

#### Essential readings

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

### **Suggested readings**

Bataille, *Literature and Evil*

Baudelaire, *Flowers of the Evil*

Walter Benjamin, *The writer of modern life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*

Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

Miraji, *Main darta hoon masarrat se (poem)*

“Be always drunken. Nothing else matters: that is the only question. If you would not feel the horrible burden of Time weighing on your shoulders and crushing you to the earth, be drunken continually. Drunken with what? With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you will. But be drunken.”

— Baudelaire, *Poems in Prose*

## **Chapter 2 Production of Desire**

### **Essential readings**

Deleuze, *Anti-Oedipus*

### **Suggested Readings**

Antonin Artaud. *Manifesto of the Theatre of Cruelty*

Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*

Lacan, *Seminar X*

“The truth is that sexuality is everywhere: the way a bureaucrat fondles his records, a judge administers justice, a businessman causes money to circulate; the way the bourgeoisie fucks the proletariat; and so on. ... Hitler got the fascists sexually aroused. Flags, nations, armies, banks get a lot of people aroused. A revolutionary machine is nothing if it does not acquire at least as much force as these coercive machines have for producing breaks and mobilizing flows.”

— Gilles Deleuze, *Anti-Oedipus*

## **Chapter 3 Law, Cruelty and Transgression**

### **Essential readings**

Bataille *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*

*Whiplash* (movie)

### **Suggested Readings**

Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*

Bataille, *The Accursed Share*

Bataille, *The cruel practice of art*

Simone de Beauvoir, *Must we burn Sade?*

Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*

Foucault, *Sade: Sergeant of Sex*

“A close examination of masochistic fantasies and rites reveals that while they bring into play the very strictest application of the law, the result in every case is the opposite of what might be expected. It is a demonstration of law’s absurdity.”  
— Deleuze, *Masochism*

“I have infinitely less reason to fear my neighbour’s passions than the law’s injustice for my neighbour’s passions are contained by mine whereas nothing stops or contains the injustices of the law.”  
— Sade

## Chapter 4 Aesthetics of Fascism

### Essential reading

Walter Benjamin, *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* (essay)

### Suggested Readings

Susan Sontag, *Fascinating Fascism*

“All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminates in one thing: war.”  
— Walter Benjamin, *The work of art...*

“Tyrants are never born in anarchy, they only flourish in the shadow of the laws and draw their authority from them.”  
— Sade, *Juliette*

“Something about fascism he says, and they go on walking, talking about fascist aesthetics and the modernist movement. ... Usefulness and specificity of fascism as a political typology in the present day. Aesthetic nullity of contemporary political movements in general. Related to, or just coterminous with, the almost instantaneous corporate capture of emergent visual styles. Everything beautiful immediately recycled as advertising. The freedom of that, or not. The necessity of an ecological aesthetics, or not. We need an erotics of environmentalism.”  
— Sally Rooney, describing a date in *Intermezzo*

## Chapter 5 Humour, Absurdity and Fetish

### Essential readings

Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Fur* (novel)

Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*

### Suggested Readings

Kafka, Letters to Milena

Kafka, *A report to an academy*

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*

Helene Cixous, *The laugh of the Medusa*

Sartre, Jean Paul. “First Attitude Toward Others: Love, Language, Masochism” in *Being and nothingness: An essay in phenomenological ontology*.

Freud, Sigmund. *The economic problem of masochism*

“You modern men, you children of reason, cannot begin to appreciate love as pure bliss and divine serenity: indeed, this kind of love is disastrous for men like you, for as soon as you try to be natural, you become vulgar.”  
— Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Fur*

“Laughing at the universe liberated my life. I escape its weight by laughing. I refuse any intellectual translations of this laughter, since my slavery would commence from that point on.”

— Georges Bataille, *Guilty*

“A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.”

— Franz Kafka, Letter to Oskar Pollak

“I usually solve problems by letting them devour me.”

— Franz Kafka, Letters to Milena

## Chapter 6 How to free the body from itself?

### Essential readings

Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*

### Suggested Readings

Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*

Foucault, *History of Sexuality III: Care of the self*

Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie* (2008)

Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*

“This tremendous world I have inside of me. How to free myself, and this world, without tearing myself to pieces. And rather tear myself to a thousand pieces than be buried with this world within me.”

— Franz Kafka, *Diaries, 1910-1923*

“I cannot make you understand. I cannot make anyone understand what is happening inside me. I cannot even explain it to myself.”

— Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*

“You are the knife I turn inside myself; that is love. That, my dear, is love.”

— Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena*

### Learning Outcomes

Course Intended Learning Outcomes	Teaching and Learning Activities	Assessments/ Activities
Politics and desire	Lectures and close reading	In class exercises
Literary/philosophical history of body	Lectures and close reading	Response essay
Law and transgression	Lectures and close reading	Term paper/creative project
Resistance and escape	Lectures and close reading	Term paper/creative project

### What to expect in the classroom?

The course is structured around six essential readings and one film. Each unit spans four sessions: two dedicated to close-reading excerpts and discussing student responses, and two featuring lectures that expand on the unit's themes through the essential and suggested readings.

## Scheme of Evaluation and Grading

Assignment 1: A response essay on one or more readings  
 1500 words | Due in 6<sup>th</sup> week | 30 marks

Assignment 2: Attempt one of the following options:

Option 1: A conceptual essay on a real, fictional or imaginary space, or

Option 2: A creative project (sketch/painting/short story/photo-essay/poetry/any other genre) on spaces at the edge of the imagination

1800-3000 words | Due in 13<sup>th</sup> week | 40 marks

Assignment 3: End-term exam | 30 marks

### Grade definitions

Letter Grade	Percentage of Marks	Grade Value	Grade Definitions
O	80% and Above	8.0	Outstanding: Exceptional knowledge of the subject matter, thorough understanding of issues; ability to synthesize ideas, rules and principles and extraordinary critical and analytical ability
A+	75%-79%	7.5	Excellent: Sound knowledge of the subject matter, thorough understanding of issues; ability to synthesize ideas, rules and principles and critical and analytical ability
A	70%-74%	7.0	Very Good: Sound knowledge of the subject matter, excellent organizational capacity, ability to synthesize ideas, rules and principles, critically analyse existing materials and originality in thinking and presentation
A-	65%-69%	6.0	Good: Good understanding of the subject matter, ability to identify issues and provide balanced solutions to problems and good critical and analytical skills
B+	60%-64%	5.0	Fair: Average understanding of the subject matter, limited ability to identify issues and provide solutions to problems and reasonable critical and analytical skills. Average understanding of the subject matter, limited ability to identify issues and provide solutions to problems and reasonable critical and analytical skills
B	55%-59%	4.0	Acceptable: Adequate knowledge of the subject matter to go to the next level of study and reasonable critical and analytical skills
B-	50%-54%	3.0	Marginal: Limited knowledge of the subject matter and irrelevant use of materials and, poor critical and analytical skills
P1	45%-49%	2.0	Pass 1: Pass with Basic understanding of the subject matter
P2	40%-44%	1.0	Pass 2: Pass with Rudimentary understanding of the subject matter.
F	Below 40%	0	Fail: Poor comprehension of the subject matter; poor critical and analytical skills and marginal use of the relevant materials. Will require repeating the course

## Session Plan

	Class Plan	Approach/pedagogy	Assignments
Week 1	Love, Curse and Evil	Lectures	
Week 2	Contd.	Close Reading	
Week 3	Production of Desire	Lectures	
Week 4	Contd.	Close Reading	
Week 5	Law, Cruelty and Transgression	Lectures	
Week 6	Contd.	Close Reading	A response essay on one or more readings
Week 7	Aesthetics of Fascism	Lectures	
Week 8	Contd.	Close Reading	
Week 9	Humour, Absurdity and Fetish	Lectures	
Week 10	Contd.	Close Reading	
Week 11	How to free the body from itself?	Lectures	
Week 12	Contd.	Close Reading	
Week 13	Responses/Reflections	Workshop	Conceptual/Critical Response
Week 14	Responses/Reflections	Workshop	
Week 15	Responses/Reflections	Workshop	End Term