In 1975, in an interview entitled “Sade, Sergeant of Sex,”¹ a critic from Cinématographe questioned Michel Foucault about Pasolini’s Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom (1975) and some other films that the interviewer cited for their “sadistic” nature. In response, Foucault immediately and almost randomly brought up Werner Schroeter’s The Death of Maria Malibran (1972), to emphasize the use of pleasures as a way of deprogramming the organic functions of the body. To him, Salò in contrast constitutes the cinematic symptom of a civilization that experiences desire solely through the regulated order of anatomy and especially through the prism of a “political apocalypse,” represented by the fictive Nazi-Fascist republic that serves as the film’s setting.

The representation of the alliance of Nazism and sadism in Salò or in Liliana Cavani’s The Night Porter (1974) did not find favor in Foucault’s eyes as he considered it an historical error. “It’s the foul petit bourgeois dream of racial hygiene that underlies the Nazi dream,” he goes on to say. “Eros is absent.”² Clearly, Foucault is thinking here less directly of the Marquis de Sade than of the intellectual construct that derives from a diagnosis regarding the libidinal economy attributed to Nazism, of the eroticism that he says is proper to a disciplinary society. He thus leaves aside the Pasolinian analysis of Italian capitalism. For the Pasolini of the Scritti corsari,³ this neo-capitalism represented a more pernicious and definitive destruction of the social body than fascism itself.

Foucault later acknowledged this aspect of the Pasolinian critique in a brief review of Comizi d’amore (Love Meetings) (1965) bearing the superb title “The Gray Mornings of Tolerance.”⁴
To give more substance to Pasolini’s intent, it may be useful to consider in the background Georges Bataille’s 1933 essay “The Psychological Structure of Fascism”, in which he defines the exercise of sovereign authority as a “differentiated sadistic activity,” independent of any masochistic tendencies. Fascism would thus be a major instance thereof, enacting the institution of authority in the cruelest of ways. But even though Bataille’s text also sheds light on many aspects of what Foucault calls a “disciplinary society,” the discussion is only of sadism as a category of an “existential psychology,” and not of Sade himself.

One can find lateral insights regarding these questions in Klaus Theweleit’s *Male Fantasies*, an exhaustive examination of the proto-fascist libidinal economy in the writings of the Freikorps, first published in Germany in 1976. Sade, although his place in this study remains anecdotal, exemplifies for the author a form of “romantic terrorism” in literature. He sees Sade and his ilk as representing a subjectivity that premeditates its object, fully conscious of its affects, whereas “when the fascist awakens from his destructive frenzy, by contrast, he does not believe he has really been evil.” The sexual sadism of a sergeant major in the Bundeswehr is discussed in the second volume, but the soldier in question, concerned with army regulations, qualified these affects as belonging primarily to the realm of his fantasies. All of which seems to lend punctual support to Foucault’s argument: there is something erroneous in the association of the object “Nazism” and the object “sadomasochism.” But in the short 1975 interview, literary
history and medico-psychological knowledge do not contribute to the discussion, even in a critical way. It was simply a polemical moment, if stimulating for reflecting on these objects.

In contrast, Roland Barthes based his criticism of Pasolini on a programmatic foundation. He formulated two precepts that I would summarize as follows: (a) the literature of Sade is essentially fantasmatic and hence not figurable; (b) fascism, a “constraining object” for thought, cannot be critiqued by analogy (and art can only demonstrate how it comes to be). In short: “all that which derealizes fascism is bad; and all that which realizes Sade is bad.” The first proposition seems coherent to me with the ongoing historical urgency not to treat fascist barbarism as an ordinary aesthetic object, even under the aegis of artistic criticism. The second proposition does not seem to leave room for any form of destiny in cinema or in the visual arts for Sade’s texts.

It remains that there has been an irreducible Sadeian dimension in the aesthetic field ever since these texts have circulated. In his 1967 preface to Sade, My Neighbor, Pierre Klossowski wrote that to be an atheist is to declare God to be nothing. Atheism, he wrote with ironical perplexity, thus essentially liberates itself from nothing. But the traces of this process of liberation are numerous, and Sade’s writings are considered major traces thereof by those who read or experienced them in one form or another. What is Sadeian in our sensibility and in our aesthetics may very well be, for one thing, our attachment to the very long decomposition of theocratic politics in Europe, and to what it has produced in subjectivity until now.

On the level of political concepts, a similar role has been attributed to the writings of Spinoza: one of his most attentive readers writes of the “decomposition of Thomistic politics,” by which he means that Spinoza’s system and his reading of Machiavelli delivered a mortal blow to the politics based on Thomas Aquinas’s theology. But if Sade had served such a purpose only, critical theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer would not have seen his writings as the complement of the “instrumental reason” they saw in Spinozism. To them, Sade’s Juliette embodies the figure of the self-destruction of European reason that they call amor intellectualis diaboli (intellectual love of the devil). In other words, Juliette represents a logico-historical decadence of an amor intellectualis Dei (intellectual love of God, or of Nature), that one can stabilize in Spinoza’s corpus as the self-affection of a collective subject (or a “multitude”) in the deployment of a rationality subtracted from the State-form.
The fact remains that Pasolini himself readily cast Spinoza as a cunning specter. In the play version of *Porcile* (*Pigsty*), the Amsterdam philosopher tries to convince a passive reader of the *Ethics* of the relative virtue of his taste for living amongst pigs. By the end of their exchange, Spinoza has abjured his own philosophy. In the film version of *Porcile*, this scene is replaced by the wanderings of a gang of medieval cannibals around the slopes of Mount Etna.\(^\text{15}\) Pasolini may ultimately have been conscious of the sapping that he, like Adorno and Horkheimer, reserved for the author of the *Ethics*, whom he may have seen as one of the doctrinal supporters of a “neo-capitalism.” In the wake of Foucault’s critique, I now wonder whether he mishandled Sade with similar intentions.

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**Berlin, Neukölln, 17/01/2019**

Olivier Surel: Did you come across that interview with Foucault, “Sade, Sergeant of Sex”? I’ve been startled by one of its assertions, that for some viewers of Pasolini’s *Salò*, the Nazis were evil erotic geniuses. And then he has this corrosive zinger, saying that Himmler was a chicken farmer, his wife, a nurse, and that the combination of their fantasies produced the concentration camps, the equation behind them being for him, “hospital plus chicken yard.”

Samo Tomšič: Yes, these comparisons often reemerge in discussions regarding fascism, and they seem to bear some kind of negative fascination with the entire machinery of exhaustion of bodies. Here the extreme position would be the bodies of internees in the Nazi concentration camps, ultimately reduced to ‘bare life,’ which assumes the appearance of a thin layer of flesh covering the bones. But I must admit that this negative fascination fills me with discontent.

OS: And in that way Foucault underlines their wish to purify the social field of whoever they took to be subhuman. But again, Foucault is questioned about *Salò*, and to give weight to his argument, he implicitly if cheekily says that chicken farmers and nurses can only sustain a poor erotic imaginary. He’s using that to say that there’s no evil genius in whatever we can reconstruct of Nazi sexuality or erotics, that they were “the most disgusting petit bourgeois,” and not great erotic madmen.

ST: To speak of the Nazis in such terms would suggest that one sees them as personifications of subjects presumably possessing some kind of surplus knowledge of sexuality, or as experts in *scientia sexualis*, sex scientists. This is already bordering on fetishism. But one could argue that in some way the Nazis enacted the very essence of toxic masculinity.
OS: Someone recently wrote that the kinks of today were a mere reenacting of things that had been catalogued by Sade more than 200 years ago; it was a strange way of antiquating the present. Maybe one can more modestly say that some subversions of reproductive sexuality can coexist with a bourgeois management of sexuality. In Pasolini’s film, we see how in Sade’s narrative, the purported subversion of the content of the law reappears in the form of the law itself.

ST: Yes! But if we hold onto the critical assumption that there’s no evil genius position in erotics and no “subject supposed to know,” as Lacan would put it, then Sade exemplifies that the best one can do is to be a bureaucrat of possible sexual practices and object fixations. One part of what Foucault called “biopolitics” consists in this bureaucratic attitude towards the field of sexuality. The flipside of this attitude would be the attempt to regulate the juncture between the symbolic and the anatomical, to bring the two orders into a stable and adequate relation, whereas we know from psychoanalysis that
the sexual stands in excess over the anatomical, and that anatomy is anything but destiny (this time contrary to what Freud occasionally wrote). In any case, I would say that in the sexual field we do not meet geniuses, but experimenters.

OS: That would fit with Foucault’s belief that the Western canon couldn’t possibly produce an *ars erotica*, but only a *scientia sexualis* of sorts. Now if we go back to the text of *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785/1904), it is indeed as if Sade reduced the method of natural history to a bureaucratic practice when it comes to sex. But I somehow still see it as a subtle subversion of the *scientia sexualis* rejected by Foucault’s own erotics. In a way, this is in line with Early Modern attempts at producing natural histories of passions, but with a twist. In the book, the work of recounting the sexual acts is delegated to the *historiennes*, who are in fact not scientists but ‘madams’ of sorts. And by calling them that, the text is converting these pseudo-figures of sexual science into small-scale managers of the libidinal field indeed. So when it comes to the junction of the economic and the libidinal, Sade operates a pure reduction and basically says to the reader: “You might be shaken by what you’ll read, but worry not, it will only cost you a bit of cum.” And the talk of cost seems like an address to a sexualized *homo oeconomicus*: walk here freely, fear no God, at worst you will lose the merely physiological product of your *jouissance*.

ST: Yes, you will definitely lose less than a pound of flesh, you will sacrifice a bit of cum, or experience some arousal. One could say that Sade not only subverts *scientia sexualis*, but entirely questions the Foucauldian opposition between *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica*. Sade demonstrates that in the universe of Early Modern science knowledge remains a “means of enjoyment,” and I am merely repeating Lacan’s phrasing of the problem. So it would certainly be too hasty to say that pre-modern science was stained by libidinal fantasies (think of how in Aristotle the highest point of thought coincides with the highest point of pleasure) whereas modern science stands for complete rejection of enjoyment from the field of knowledge. No, science does not escape the libidinal sphere, even if it stands in a more or less antagonistic relation to it. According to Lacan the accumulative regime of knowledge invented by Descartes at the dawn of modernity should be thought together with the accumulative regime of value, hence with capitalism, and one could add that they both point toward the accumulative regime of enjoyment, in which surplus value marks the effort to quantify enjoyment. In order to accomplish this jump to the ‘measure of pleasure,’ if I may say so, one needs the intervention of science, precisely of modern science, since the premodern regime of knowledge was incapable of producing such quantification.
OS: I guess that in that specific sense, Sade’s writings could well be taken as literary relics of the Early Modern production of surplus knowledge in the libidinal field. But there’s much more to them than this.

ST: I guess one can interpret Sade’s work in this way, as a text in which production of surplus knowledge concerning enjoyment constantly takes place. Then Sade’s work would stand for nothing more and nothing less than a ‘per-version’ of *scientia sexualis*. But Sade also demonstrates the compulsive character of enjoyment, and in this respect he touches upon a crucial critical insight of psychoanalysis. In addition to this, one could raise the question whether modern science presupposes a subject that valorizes itself in the epistemic regime, with knowledge serving as a form of surplus enjoyment. Many ‘spontaneous philosophies’ of science insist that scientists practice science for the sake of science, produce knowledge for the sake of knowledge, and that this is what characterizes scientificity in the first place. But from Marx we know that production for the sake of production is a deeply libidinal thing. It is no coincidence that in all key passages of *Capital* (1867), Marx describes capital as the drive, speaking of the drive of enrichment, the drive of self-valorization, even the drive of extending the workday. If we take up the homology between science and capitalism seriously, then surplus knowledge, surplus value, and surplus enjoyment most certainly occupy the same structural position.16

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At the height of the revolutionary 18th century, Kant founded the project of a rational harmonization of society on a necessity of nature itself. The formulation of the moral imperative that he called categorical was also founded for him on a type (*Typus*) proper to the lawfulness of nature.17 These texts can be discussed from the philosophical standpoint alone, but Jacques Lacan preferred reading them together with Sade, who wrote in his introduction to *The 120 Days of Sodom* that he was delivering something that had never been written before, not by the ancients or the moderns, nor more broadly by all those who fetishize “this beast” they call “Nature.” Commenting on *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795), Lacan wrote the following:

> We hold that the Sadeian bedroom is equal to those places from which the schools of ancient philosophy took their name: Academy, Lyceum, Stoa. Here as there, the way for science is prepared by rectifying the position of ethics. In this, yes, a ground-clearing occurs which will have to make its way through the depths of taste for a hundred years for Freud’s path to be passable. Count sixty more for someone to say the reason for all of that.18
By and large, it is ill-advised to take Lacan literally, but in this case, I think we can. Sade cleared the (analytical) way for Freud through the “depths of taste.” But it would be going too far to claim that Sade served solely to build up the fragile practice that is psychoanalysis. In this sense, we can limit ourselves to the proposition according to which in Sade, understood here as being the discoverer of libidinal economy, ethics is rectified, and science finds itself conditioned in a new way as a result.

It would remain to be seen how the long process that turned Sade into a ‘sergeant’ positions us in terms of ethics. In a sense, Foucault tried to answer this question in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, when he examines how sexuality in modern Europe became a subject of knowledge, and how sex constituted a “problem of truth” bearing on what divides subjectivity at its core. For him, it was this problem that may have driven H. S. Ashbee, the presumed author of *My Secret Life* (1888), and perhaps Sade himself, to write. Following Foucault, we would also have to say how the Sadeian discourse has arisen in relation to different types of “terminal forms of power,” first and foremost the type he calls “the juridical monarchy” (and thereby also say why Pasolini chose to transpose Sade’s text to a fictive republic). What unfolds in *The 120 Days of Sodom* is indeed something related to the illimitation of power over bodies, permitted by what Sade calls the “mysterious fortunes” of what we by now know as the first phase of capitalist accumulation.

But Foucault did not read Sade in the same way that Lacan did. If indeed any future metaphysics that will be able to come forward as science cannot ignore the libidinal sphere, and if indeed Sade delivers the complement of Kantism while tainting the purity of its morals, then we can see more clearly what the object of psychoanalysis is. In other words, Kant built a moral philosophy in which any dimension he thought “pathological” (e.g., that of pleasure) is in a surplus position. In reading Kant together with Sade, one can ask a simple and abyssal question: what happens when we put *jouissance* itself in the place of the categorical imperative? No doubt it was by starting from such a place that Freud could build his whole theory of drives, and we can recognize that this touches on something that can be called libidinal economy. In saying this, we also make headway in interpreting the writings of Sade. Now it remains for us to explore what these texts make possible in the “depths of taste.”

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Paris, 8th arrondissement, 23/03/2019
OS: You’ve said a couple of times that you had read *The 120 Days of Sodom* at age 15, after a very bad acid trip had sent you back from Hawaii to California. I was wondering to what extent the structure of the book had an influence on the way you structured your first writings, given the fact that your first piece of writing was an 800-page pastiche of sorts of *The 120 Days*.

Dennis Cooper: Yeah, and I burned it all! But the structure was as important to me as the fact that it had material I was interested in. And the fact that it was unfinished and thereby became an avant-garde construction almost by accident. You know the way it devolves, and becomes a heap of notes and lists, it was all completely fascinating to me. I was really taken with it, and the way he deals with the family structure itself in it. But I wasn’t using that kind of language; I was following whatever terrible way that I wrote and spoke back then. It was basically the same kind of idea except that it wasn’t about politics or class in general or anything like that; it was about the hierarchy in place with the teachers where I was going to school, the power figures and the way they related to the students there. And the people they captured, how they were organizing into groups and how they carried experiments with them.

OS: So back in the seventies, following Sade was a way of putting your teenage self’s fantasies into circulation?

DC: In a way, yes. But since I had many starts at writing with such material, and even though I was equipped for it, it was a way of figuring out if it wasn’t just some haunting, fucked-up thing in my head and if it could be used to write serious fiction. And in turn it was a way to understand the fantasies. It was me and myself having a conversation, and trying to get to a quasi-objective viewpoint, to stratify the way they bounced between the very need to get them out and the necessity of making them accessible and legible. To make the material communicable as much as possible, but in a way that did not conceal or short shift my own interests.

OS: I’m also wondering what you made of the locations in *The 120 Days*, the fact that we’re reading about a castle in Switzerland turned playground for sex-crazed French aristocrats who abuse, mutilate, and kill the progeny they have captured, towards the end of the reign of Louis XIV. All of this has somehow become folkloric, and the “castles of subversion,” as Annie Le Brun once called them, remained central fixtures from Sade on to the English gothic novel. But your fantasies were mainly originating, and literarily unfolding in the context of suburban California, and back in the era when Reagan was still the governor.
DC: Well, I wasn’t interested in picking up something that was unfamiliar to me, namely the historical model that Sade put forward. So everything unfolded mostly between somebody’s house and their swimming pool. And the fact that I was in Los Angeles was hugely important for a lot of reasons, one thing was that... There was that stuff in my head. And then it was a time when there were a lot of serial killers roaming around Los Angeles well into the seventies, including one who killed some boys of my age. And those were in the news and really intrigued me. The crimes were happening before DNA forensics, so you could easily get away with it. Los Angeles is a lot more built up now, but back then there was a lot of empty space, a lot of space where people didn’t go, except for hikers sometimes. So you could just go and drop a body off in the scrub or in the woods, or by the side of the freeway. Also Los Angeles is very organized if you know it well but it can seem very disorganized, and back then Downtown was nothing; it wasn’t the center yet. All of that just made it interesting for me, and I didn’t have to pick up on a space that was really private and protected, except these one-story houses which themselves are in areas that are really open.

OS: And yet, years later, *The Marbled Swarm* (2011)\(^{22}\) begins in a “Château Étage.”

DC: Well, yes because I wanted to write a French novel! So there’s this castle in rural France, but even then it all ends up taking place in somebody’s apartment in Paris over and over, and it was part of my experimenting with setting up these models that were slowly becoming familiar to me but still foreign in some way.

OS: In the francophone world, it seems that Sade often served as a vector of self-stylization of the sexuality of the bourgeoisie. And when I first peeked through your *Marbled Swarm*, I said to myself: OK, he’s had enough of the classical fantasies of francophone Sadeians, and he’s tried to pervert their perversion, to skillfully exhaust their fantasy material with his own and into something that’s much more than a parody.

DC: Oh yes, that’s certainly true. And I was trying to stay away from literary models for that as much as I could. The aftermath was somehow Sadeian, but I was not deliberately thinking about Sade. The language was very baroque, and it is really what happens when you take English and try to over-fancy it, or at least try to make it tricky in a way that I imagined speaking French would be like. But nonetheless a lot of things permeated through my friendship with Catherine Robbe-Grillet, who is a dominatrix and very much like what you’re describing! So a lot of the primary material in *The Marbled Swarm* is derived from my experience of being in her château.
OS: What also struck me was that from there, you mobilized cultural elements that are somehow distant cousins of Roland Barthes’ objects in his analysis of the ‘mythologies’ of 1950s France. For example the fact that the protagonist, a probable bastard son of Pierre Clémenti who retained some traits of the young cannibal in Pasolini’s *Pigsty*, is driven around in a customized Citroën Hypnos. It is an actual prototype of a car, and probably regarded as a jewel of national industry by some. And you put that into overdrive and made of its name an overcharged libidinal object, denoting both hypnotic states and the possibility of violent abduction. A lot of things seem to work like this in the novel.

DC: Oh yes, all of this has been carefully researched. The graphing that I had to do beforehand was pretty intricate, in order for almost everything in the book to resemble and turn into everything else. It’s supposed to be this language that is secretly manipulating you. The structure has a little bit of a relationship to *God Jr.* (2005)\(^{23}\) and what happens in the last chapter when everything wilts into the game. But the book is mainly my attempt at trying to write in a language that wasn’t mine.

OS: What about the way all of this affected yours and Zac Farley’s cinematic language? There’s very little sadism in *Like Cattle Towards Glow* (2015) and *Permanent Green Light* (2019).
DC: There’s a tiny bit, but it’s more something like a myopic hunger than anything else. I’m not interested in sadism for the sake of itself at all, and just saw Sade as a formal device. I see it clinically: if you use something that seems sadistic, what does that facilitate in terms of making things happen?

OS: If we go back to your George Miles Cycle now: I was also thinking of this moment in Frisk (1991), when the Dennis character meets Pierre, the hustler. And Dennis confesses his fantasies of hyper-violence to him. As a reader you’re first horrified, but then you go on, and it seems that the fantasies themselves crumble almost irremediably, and that the rest of the cycle is dedicated to putting these bits back together in some way.

DC: Yes, again one of the things is that the cycle is one body that devolves or whatever: each of the books pertains to the same body but the damage that is enacted then impacts the form in the second one, and then there’s a recovery and it goes on. So that there’s almost nothing left in Period (2000). So that’s happening, and it’s happening in the way you say, too. It’s kind of... There’s a damage that’s done to the novel beyond the form. The five books are one universe, even though you can read them separately. So at some point I had to work with what had been revealed, and try to reconstruct it or something. But my friend George Miles didn’t go through what his avatars in the book go through, the resemblance being mostly physical and emotional. The whole cycle stands as an homage to him, even though I thought he was alive and it turned out he was dead the whole time.

OS: It wasn’t a matter of getting him out of your system?

DC: No... Because I had explained to him how I intended to do it as much as I could at that point, three or four years before I finished the first novel. And I wrote it for him to read, and I assumed at that point that we would continue to be friends. So it wasn’t like that. It was an homage to him because he was a person who was brilliant but had terrible, terrible chemical imbalances, which killed him eventually. So there was this dimension of making his presence in the world, and I knew that he would never be able to do it by himself because he was too fucked up. And then it was also a... a way for me to... to protect myself against the possibility of becoming sadistic. Because he is the boy; he is the mind that changes into other characters. It’s always him, and I would never really become sadistic to him, even in the context of fiction there would eventually be something to counter that.

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Until the very last paragraph of *Period*, a monotone will-o’-the-wisp that prowls in the debris of the text, the George Miles Cycle strikes me as a complex proof of love. An open question remains, inspired by Cooper’s heuristics, and which, to my mind, echoes Foucault’s question: what does sadism make possible in cinematic narration?

Some years ago, Moira Weigel indicated the possibility of theorizing a transition between the European “New Waves” and what she calls “sadomodernism,” or to put it less succinctly, the cinematic exploration of sadistic traits through the aesthetic codes of modernism. She sees sadomodernism culminating in the films of Michael Haneke and Lars von Trier. In Haneke’s films, Weigel argues, the characteristic of this sadistic strain of modernism is a radical forcing of the viewer’s moral autonomy (*Selbständigkeit*). In this sense, Haneke would be producing a very particular version of the Kant/Sade relationship, with unpleasure as an imperative of reception and with the goal being to wrest filmmaking from the form of storytelling that Nazi, Soviet, and American imperialist ideologies have imprinted on it.

To turn my attention here, as Weigel does, to Haneke, and to the apex of his sadomodernism: very few films have done quite as much as *Funny Games* (1997) in rendering explicit the affect of cruelty in the representation of violence in movies. The banality of gore is eclipsed by the protraction of psychological suffering portrayed in the film. *Funny Games* offers thereby the precipitate of a form of white terror that an
experienced eye alone can detect from the very first minutes: the violence of a slowed-down and misplaced slapstick routine, a priori unqualifiable as a perverse prelude to torture. The social bond of the two protagonists is thus reduced to an overtly criminal variant of the bond existing between two of the most prominent little shits of pop culture: Beavis and Butt-Head.

Haneke’s fascination for the Van Eyck brothers’ *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* (1432) has been said to have led him to seek to recreate the lost Hell of this altarpiece by other means. But reducing his work to a biographical trigger amounts precisely to reintroducing too much mystique into the analysis. What he is often doing is registering the fact of the mass representation of violence, and trying to unfold all its consequences in his apparatus (and thereby to forge a cinematic purgatory fitted to the repressions of the democratic life of Europeans). When I say together with Weigel that there is a sadistic strain in Haneke’s modernism, I don’t mean to say that all he did was devise a cruel game. More clearly, beyond the sadistic traits of his movies, Haneke invents a syntax, meant to represent violence inside the very industry that derealized it.

At this point, we could ask what in sadomodernism is most figuratively Sadeian. If Haneke or von Trier are not relying on the Sadeian text, the specter of BDSM, which has become a standard object of cultural industry, sometimes haunts their images: it is to a certain extent present in Haneke’s *The Piano Teacher* (2001) and more clearly in von Trier’s *Nymphomaniac* (2013). But BDSM does not appear there fully in the way it is most often experienced—namely, as a culture of consent and play, permitting among other things to make the symbolic mandates that organize sexuality more explicit. After his stay in California, Foucault himself saw it as an eroticization of power, in which a quasi-utopic fluidity of roles can exist.
Beyond this, what remains of sadomodernism today? In Haneke’s cinema, *The White Ribbon* (2009) responds almost exactly to Barthes’ concern about *Salò*: that of not showing fascism by analogy, but showing instead how it comes to be. More crucially, in *Amour* (2012), violence is almost completely gone. Hints thereof are present here and there, but they are illusory and practically taken to a point of self-derision. His syntax has not been completely dismantled but it is put to other uses (in this case, depicting the complexity of conjugal love in the anticipation of mourning). In von Trier’s work, reflection seems to have given way to a combinatorics of cruelty gone overboard, exclusively addressed to the professional subjects of critique.

As far as Sade’s writings are concerned, they still allow us to see literature as a contagious reservoir of fantasies by the slowest of means. In the field of cinema, a faster means, these writings seem to have been subject by and large to the unreflective autonomization of what Barthes called their “vulgar” contents—namely, sadism. It may very well be through such an autonomization that a lowbrow Machiavellianism has reproduced itself in sensibility, which we ended up believing was our final word on the complexity of desire.

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Footnotes

2. Foucault, p. 226.
14. This is one of the propositions that led me to engage in a systematic reading of the prison writings of Antonio Negri, in a book that I hope to publish soon.


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