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Author
Ruberg, Bonnie

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Pixel Whipped: Pain, Pleasure, and Media

by

Bonnie Ruberg

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and the Designated Emphases in

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and

Women, Gender and Sexuality

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Michael Lucey, Chair
Professor Eric Naiman
Professor David Bates
Professor Abigail DeKosnik

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Abstract

Pixel Whipped: Pain, Pleasure, and Media

by

Bonnie Ruberg

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

Designated Emphases in New Media and Women, Gender and Sexuality

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Michael Lucey, Chair

At a time when technology seems increasingly poised to render the material realities of its users obsolete, putting the body back into digital media has become a matter of pressing social significance. Scholars like Lisa Nakamura have written compellingly about the importance of attending to the embodied identities of those who sit behind the screen: a crucial step toward disrupting the systems of inequality that characterize much of twenty-first-century Western digital culture. Similarly dedicated to issues of social justice, this project argues for turning attention to another essential element of the relationship between technology and the body: how digital media makes users feel. Far from being disembodied, digital tools have become crucial platforms for expressions of selfhood and desire. Yet, on a phenomenological level, virtual experiences also have a surprising capacity to directly affect the real, physical body. To demonstrate this, this project maps a network of key examples that illustrate how pain and pleasure—commonly imagined as the most embodied sensations—have in fact been brought to life through a range of media forms.

Beginning with the novels of the Marquis de Sade, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, and Pauline Réage, this project contends that concepts of sadomasochism and literature have evolved side by side for more than two centuries. Moving from textual to visual forms, the project turns to Pier Pasolini's *Salò*, a film that notoriously "hurts to watch," to investigate the intersection of violence, complicity, and viewership. Next, the project moves into the digital realm, offering a reading of the erotic power exchange that drives video-game interactivity. In the final chapter, the project explores digital BDSM: practices of bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism that take place entirely in virtual spaces. Across these chapters, the project argues for the value of "kink" as a critical lens, much like the "queerness" in queer studies, which underscores the cultural and personal significance of experiences that hurt. Together, the works and cultures considered here bring much-needed attention to the place of non-normative desires in media, both digital and non-digital. They also serve to productively challenge the perceived divide between the "virtual" and the "real."

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"Words are at their most powerful when they compel the body to repeat the movements they suggest," writes Gilles Deleuze in "Coldness and Cruelty," his extended reflection on sadomasochism.[1] Deleuze draws his interpretations of pain and pleasure from literary works by the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, novels in which tales of taboo passions, once heard or read, often inspire characters to perform the acts described. In one sense then, Deleuze is reflecting on specific, self-contained textual worlds, the power of stories within these stories. Yet, like many before and after him, Deleuze is also using Sade and Sacher-Masoch as exemplars of a system of sadomasochistic erotics that extends far beyond the page. In this sense, Deleuze's proclamation resonates outward, suggesting that any study of the relationship between sadomasochism and media must make sense of the interrelation of this trifecta: *language, power,* and *the body*.

Though my own formulations of sadomasochism and media will differ notably from Deleuze's, the belief that words and other mediums of communication (both non-digital and digital) can deeply affect the body is likewise central to the present project. Just as bodies matter, *language matters*. This means both that language cannot be separated from the materiality of the world it describes—and that conscientious word choice is of the utmost importance. Many of the topics discussed in the chapters that follow have complicated relationships with the terms that describe them. Often these vocabularies have emerged through histories of medicalization, marginalization, and misunderstanding. Talking about these topics respectfully and with attention to linguistic nuance is as much a political practice as articulating the importance of these topics themselves.

This project is about pain and pleasure. It is also about media, the digital, the body, and the insufficiency of paradigms of the "real." The language that describes these ideas can get messy precisely because these ideas themselves are messy. Terms like "virtual reality," "technological intimacy," and "sexual expression" seem to speak to something like a universal human experience, lived in the early decades of a twenty-first century, technology-rich Western culture—yet they mean very different things to different people who have very different ways of speaking about them. Establishing a basis of shared terminology, while limiting by definition, nonetheless represents an important first step toward articulating the full semantic, cultural, and phenomenological complexity of pain and pleasure as experiences of media—and media as an experience of pain and pleasure, in the present moment as well many others before and after it.

As Margot Weiss has rightly argued, it is especially important to pay careful attention to language in discussions of pain and pleasure as lived cultural practices.[2] What Deleuze calls "sadomasochism" goes by many names, and though they are related they are rarely interchangeable. In this project, I use "sadomasochism" to refer to the concept of the interplay between pain and pleasure as it has been constructed through literature, scholarly theory, and even popular media.[3] I use "BDSM" (bondage, discipline, domination, submission, sadism, masochism) to refer to the real-life contemporary practices of those

who engage in consensual play with pain and pleasure. Expanding on their use in BDSM communities, I use the terms "kink" and "kinky" to signal a more loosely defined affiliation with pain, pleasure, and the dialectics of power. "Pain and pleasure" I use, as seen, to abbreviate a system of affects that might involve erotic suffering, play with power, or other experiences that destabilize the divide between happiness and hurt.

What is the body? What is sex? Such terminology is elusive by nature. The examples of embodied experience that this project explores challenge the normative logics through which these words have been previously defined. Terms of this sort are perhaps better understood through constellations of associations. Here, I talk often about embodiment and disembodiment. While these terms are themselves fluid, I understand embodiment to be linked to sensation, affect, phenomenology, and the material. Similarly, rather than refer to sex or sexuality per se, I often point toward "erotics," a term I derive from the works of Georges Bataille.[4] I take erotics to mean a system of sexual signification that can operate beyond the confines of individual sex acts or sexual identities: a semantics of desire. At other times, I refer simply to the "erotic"; while eroticism might be conceptualized in myriad ways, I am thinking here specifically of the type of sexually-charged friction between subject and object, a push and pull of intimacy and distance, articulated by media scholar Laura Marks.[5] Throughout this project, my understanding of the interrelation of language and desire is also indebted to thinkers like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler.[6]

The third key nexus around which the terminology of this project centers is media. In my use of the term, "media" plays two simultaneous roles: that of the many and of the singular. On the one hand, in the spirit of Marshal McLuhan and the thinking his work has inspired, media functions as a shorthand for a long lineage of forms—mediating platforms from the written word to the computer screen through which human interactions can be represented and experienced.[7] When I say media then, I mean literature, visual art, film, video games, websites, mobile phones, etc. At the same time, media means more than the sum of its parts. It is also Media with an implicitly capital "m," an entity as much as a concept—one that has the potential to relate intimately to the subjects who read it, view it, or play it. In this way, media is similar to but not synonymous with technology. Many of the media forms discussed here are built on what are (or have been) considered cutting-edge communication technologies, yet media expands upon these tools. Media is technology in action: technology as a platform for experiences of culture and the self.

Lastly, I want to add to this list of vocabulary the words "virtual" and "real," which appear throughout this project in seemingly diverse and yet deeply entwined contexts, from online virtual worlds to video games, film, and literature. I will not define these terms here; one of the core goals of this project is to excavate and re-imagine their meaning. However, I do want to point out that they are commonly used in the context of digital cultures to describe a perceived dichotomy of experiences. The virtual typically refers to the disembodied, the imagined, the thing that happens on screen, while the real refers to the embodied, the flesh and blood, the non-digital. In common internet parlance, "IRL" (in real life) has come to mean simply "offline." For my purposes, I would ask readers, wherever they encounter the terms virtual and real in this project, to imagine them in quotation marks. The virtual is always the idea of the virtual, the real always the idea of the

real. Pain, as will become clear, is the experience that exposes the mechanisms through which virtuality and realness are constructed. And, after all, what is pain?

[1] Gilles Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," as contained within *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty & Venus and Furs* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 18.

[2] Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), vii.

[3] Other scholars, like Romana Byrne, have reflected more extensively on the term sadomasochism itself and whether it should only be written in its component parts ("sadism" and "masochism"), a question that harkens back to a longer tradition of theorizing the relationship between sadism and masochism as distinct or complementary desires. Romana Byrne, *Aesthetic Sexuality: A Literary History of Sadomasochism* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 6.

[4] Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 1986).

[5] Laura Marks*, Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xvi.

[6] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[7] Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

<div align="center">Introduction:
A Whip Cracked on the Internet</div>

"I'm smacking your ass so hard it's going to hurt for a week. Can you feel it?"

      "Stop, please! I can't take anymore. Please, sir, that really hurts!"

      In a text chat window on a social network that connects users interested in kinky sex play, two site members are engaged in a scene of BDSM from nearly one thousand miles apart using only words.[1] In a bedroom in the Pacific Northwest, the dominant partner (the "dom") sits before his desktop computer. The submissive partner (the "sub") lays in his bed in Southern California wearing only his underwear. Though the sub is alone, and though the slapping he is receiving from the dom involves no actual physical contact, he describes himself as in pain.

      These two are engaging in digital BDSM, play with pain and pleasure that takes place on and/or through platforms of communication technology. BDSM itself scrambles normative expectations about what feels "good" and what feels "bad," and here digital BDSM is bringing into question yet another divide. For those who equate kink with "real" experiences of the flesh—slapping, flogging, bruising, bleeding—a scene like this one appears to defy the logic of reality. What does it mean for a BDSM scene to take place on the internet if the internet is virtual? How can this sub say that he feels pain when his body is not now and has never been touched by his partner?

      Such scenes reflect a set of subcultural practices that have been thriving in online spaces for decades. Digital BDSM take place all over the internet. In vast role-playing video games, users participate in kinky sex through customizable avatars; using webcams, "play partners" send and receive commands to hit and bruise via voice and images on a screen. Even more pervasive than online kink are the innumerable encounters of a more generally sexual nature that occur via web-based technology each day.[2] Internet users have sex through video sharing. They have sex through instant messages. They have sex inside virtual worlds. The eroticism of these encounters blurs the line between the "virtual" and the "real." That which is imagined as most bodily, the pains and the pleasures of the flesh, is brought to life through seemingly disembodied contact—and it is happening almost everywhere humans can interact on the internet.

      This dissertation emerges from my experiences with scenes like the one described above: moments when the practice of kink in digital spaces raises broader questions about the relationship between technology and the body, both at the present moment and across a longstanding media history. Can one person flog another over the internet? Can a virtual flogging hurt "for real"? These questions are inspired by digital BDSM, but their implications extend far beyond it. They tie back to the origins of sadomasochism, as it has been conceptualized in Western Europe and North America over the past two centuries through infamous works of literature. They speak to representations of sexualized violence in films and the hurt communicated between the screen and viewing bodies. They bring to the fore physical experiences of pain in contemporary media forms like video games. And they suggest an understanding of human interactions in virtual, online spaces that is

sensual, sensory, intimate, difficult, and notably non-heteronormative. They imbue media with an erotic potential that is at once kinky and queer.

In this investigation of media and the body, sparked by the suggestive practices of digital BDSM, I will be stepping back as far as late eighteenth-century literature, moving forward to mid-twentieth century film, interrogating the physicality of immersive video game technologies, and returning for a closer look at practices of kink on the internet. Throughout this project, I argue for an interpretation of *media as inextricable from kinky experiences of the body* and an interpretation of *kink as inseparable from its cultural evolution through media*. I call this fundamental interrelation the *kink/media dialectic*. In short, my answer will be "yes." Yes, one person can flog another over the internet. Yes, that flogging can actually hurt. But also yes, answering these questions in the affirmative will require deconstructing and rebuilding a wide range of accepted concepts about what it means to interact with media, what it means to hurt, and what it means to be real. Media can hurt because the basic experience of interacting with media is grounded in dynamics of pain and pleasure, and because pain and pleasure are not absolutes of the body but experiences long shaped by their manifestations in media.

More than a project simply about digital BDSM then, this is a project about kink in virtual spaces, broadly defined: experiences of pain and pleasure that are, seemingly against all odds, communicated through the mediated terrain of digital, visual, and textual landscapes and into living human bodies. These experiences tell a story about how encounters with media can also be (and perhaps always are) encounters with extreme sensation: interplays of kinky intimacy, felt in the body, that form in the space between the subject and the page or the screen. The implications of this work and the new perspectives it espouses are wide-reaching. Putting the body back into media is a way to reinstate embodied diversity in contemporary cultures of technology. It is also a way to argue for the wider cultural relevance of sexual experiences, like kink, often dismissed as marginal. Speaking theoretically, this project works to shift paradigms and blur binaries—to challenge the divides that limit as well as delimit, that leave little room for ways of desiring and ways of being that fall between the lines. As Bruno Latour has argued, such divides are social constructs that come with time to seem "natural" and true.[3] Yet what the material considered here makes clear is that natural and true, like real and virtual, are no longer sufficient categories for making sense of human experience, if they ever were.

Part new media studies, part cultural studies, and part literary studies, what follows is also part polemic: an argument for embracing both the body in erotic pain and the lived experience of the digital as rich sites of knowledge, power, and meaning. In its politics, the work of this project is also the work of reclamation. Among its driving forces is the impetus to reclaim sexual expression from pathology, to reclaim works of literature and film often regarded as too "perverse" for consideration within larger cultural narratives, to reclaim pop cultural forms like games as material for critical analysis, and to reclaim media as a locus of nuanced, embodied experience central to which are the dynamics of desire.

Asking whether one person can flog another on the internet requires first asking an even bigger question: what is the relationship between technology and the body, and how is this relationship commonly understood? In a twenty-first-century American context, this relationship is most often imagined as a paradox, one that underlies a wide range of contemporary debates around embodied experience and the digital.

Many (if not most) contemporary subjects in today's media-rich, industrialized Western societies live their daily lives inside the *paradox of digital embodiment*. Popular discourse, such as that produced and circulated by mainstream news commentary, regularly conflates digital media usage with experiences of disembodiment. Hours spent online, on cell phones, or in front of game consoles are described, at once anxiously and idealistically, as hours spent disconnected from a physical reality.[4] At the same time, the everyday experiences of digital subjects and the emergent trends that surround interactive technology point toward the persistent importance of the body. The steady rise in practices like sexting and online dating, the pervasiveness of internet-based erotic play, and the growing interest in bringing physical sensation into video games through virtual reality devices are some of the many examples that illustrate how, now more than ever, twenty-first-century interactions with digital media and twenty-first-century experiences of the body are in fact intimately tied.[5]

This is the paradox of digital disembodiment. On the one side stands the widely-held belief that technology distances users from their bodies. On the other side stands the daily experience of interacting with technology as bodies—bodies whose needs and desires are more and more commonly made manifest through digital space.

The paradox itself hinges on a tension between the intangible and the tangible, and an implicit debate over the value of that which seems not quite "real." Metaphors of digital impermanence collide with artifacts of the material bodily brought into being through technology. Silicon Valley rhetoric suggests the ethereality of data in the "cloud"; films like Spike Jonze's *Her* present near-futures where untouchable loved ones emerge from (and then disappear into) personal electronics.[6] These images of digital acorporeality stand in contrast to the proliferation of fleshly bodies rendered, reflected, and expressed in virtual spaces. The internet overflows with the mimetics of the material body: selfies, amateur pornography, Twitter feeds detailing each outfit worn and each meal eaten.[7] Not infrequently, it is the body that *does not* represent itself online that runs the risk of disappearing. Recently, in a moment of morbid curiosity, I Googled my first high-school boyfriend. When my search turned up no results, I concluded (thankfully erroneously) that he must have died. How could a middle-class thirty-something from New Jersey exist today and leave no traces on the internet?

More than an actual logical impossibility then, the paradox of digital embodiment is a contradictory tangle of cultural constructs and lived experiences. In dissecting the paradox, it is useful to imagine this contradiction as a skirmish between two forces: the myth of digital disembodiment and the embodied experience of the digital body.

The myth of digital disembodiment itself takes two primary forms: *fantasy and anxiety*. Seemingly opposed, these forms in fact represent two expressions of the same

(sexually) charged response to constantly shifting technologies, allowing them to persist side by side in the popular imaginary. Taken together, they electrify discussions of shifting technologies with a tense anticipation about the future of the body.

Professed by idealists (à la Clay Shirky) and utopianists (à la Ray Kurzweil) alike, the *fantasy of digital disembodiment* imagines the divide between technology and the body as the promise of liberation.[8] Virtual environments render the body obsolete, allowing users to leave the complications of the flesh and its pesky identity politics behind. The military veteran who lost his legs can walk in *Second Life*; the stay-at-home mom who cannot afford to hire a sitter has the chance to earn her college degree by taking courses online.[9] Like the fantasy of a post-racial society, the fantasy of digital disembodiment centers around the belief that progress means the elimination of difference, and that equality means body-blindness.[10] On the internet, no one knows you're a dog and even a woman can edit Wikipedia.[11] Taken to the extreme, the fantasy of digital embodiment becomes the fantasy of the singularity, in which humans shed their physical form and enter the collective cloud. Today, this fantasy also feeds the fetishistic celebration of "big data," which offers to reduce embodied subjects to numbers (though feminist scholars like N. Katherine Hayles have long argued for the materiality of information).[12] The coded gender and racial politics of the disembodiment fantasy, which reflects the privileges of those subjects who can afford to silence discourses of the body, should not go underestimated.

Like the fantasy of digital disembodiment, the *anxiety of digital disembodiment* is characterized by a preoccupation with the belief that technology will increasingly divorce contemporary subjects from their bodies. Epitomized by Sherry Turkle's admonitions in her 2010 book *Alone Together,* this valence of the disembodiment myth is fearful, reactionary, and socially conservative in ways that differ from but mirror the hopeful yet equally conservative narrative of progress in the disembodiment fantasy.[13] In this arena, the anxiety of digital disembodiment makes itself particularly visible around the use of cell phones by young adults as a mode of interpersonal connection. Today's digitally-native teens are frequently figured as tech junkies who would rather text than interact with their friends in "real life" and who no longer value the human intimacy and "realness" of the physical world. As Shaka McGlotten has argued, shifting experiences of intimacy are indeed of central importance in contemporary digital cultures; I myself turn to intimacy many times in this project as a powerful paradigm for modeling interrelation.[14] Yet a look at a longer media history reveals that concerns like Turkle's have been voiced at moments of widespread adoption of almost every new entertainment and/or communication technology—including novels, once imagined to tempt young women from the concerns of the material world and into the romanticized realms of fantasy.[15]

Perhaps counter-intuitively, the anxiety of digital disembodiment sometimes manifests as the anxiety that technology will become *too embodied*. This is most often the case when sex explicitly enters the picture. Internet porn, warn the specialists, may be so accessible and engrossing that regular viewers will lose interest in sex with flesh-and-blood partners.[16] (Such sensationalism is also part fantasy, of course—made explicit, for example, in David Levy's 2008 *Love and Sex with Robots*, which promises readers that by 2050 robot lovers will become so sexually skilled that humans will happily pass up sex with non-machines.)[17] In this version of disembodiment anxiety, the bodily delights offered by

the digital world are imagined to dangerously tempt users away from the real one. Yet the concern that technology will become too bodily is also hardly unique to the digital age. As early as the 1782 publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, anxieties around technology have been expressed as tales of dangerous intimacy between the body and the machine.[18] Worrying about what it means to be human in relation to technology has long been a matter of worrying about the implications of "love and sex with robots."

On the other side of the paradox, running counter to the myth of disembodiment, is the proliferation of trends, accounts, and artifacts that testify to *embodied experiences of the digital*. The innumerable overlaps between expressions of the material body and contemporary digital cultures stand as a testament to the central role of embodiment in technology and technological media.

Nowhere is the embodied experience of technology more apparent than in the intersection of the digital and sexuality. "The internet is for porn," sings the cheerful monster from *Avenue Q* during his late-night, online escapades—and it's true.[19] Historians have demonstrated how technological advances from the printing press to the home computer have been driven by the economic and libidinal incentives of more easily and widely circulating pornography.[20] But the internet is not only for porn; the internet also *is* porn, in a sense. Almost any new addition to the online media ecology takes on a life as a site of sexual interaction and a host to sexual content. Consider the infamous ChatRoulette. Despite explicit site policies prohibiting nudity, approximately 13% of all users at any given time on the site, which connects strangers from around the world for webcam-based conversation, are partially naked, fully naked, or engaged in "lewd acts."[21] Even those who would not consider themselves sexually active on the internet are likely exploring or experiencing sex through interactions with digital media. As *Wired* columnist Regina Lynn wrote in *The Sexual Revolution 2.0*, few Americans today lead romantic or erotic lives that are not, in some way, entangled with technology.[22] Looking for love? Want to buy a sex toy? Wondering about sexual health? The answer is the same: go online. Even the most seemingly analog amorous entanglements work their way into Twitter posts and Facebook relationship statuses. To the extent that the twenty-first-century life is a digital life, the embodied pleasures of that life are also inescapably digital.

However, digital embodiment means more than physical experiences facilitated *through* technology. The evidence for the importance of embodiment can also be found in the bodily experience of interacting with digital interfaces themselves. In the most literal sense, I am referring to the material realities of technologies commonly imagined as immaterial—the effects of physical devices on the physical body. Every interaction between user and device involves the body, even at those moments when the body appears most inert and least engaged. Irene Chien has spoken about the embodied experience of smart phone use, for example: how the back hunches and the wrist ligaments cramp, while the fingers flit like dancers across the screen.[23] Similarly interested in material technologies, Gregory Bagnell has argued for understanding video game controllers as manifestations of dominant, heterosexual masculinity.[24] Even when ignored, the demands of the body persist. What do specialists in workplace ergonomics do if not remind computer users that their physical forms have needs when they sit before the screen?

Importantly, the embodied experience of interacting with technology can take yet another form—and this is the one on which I want to place particular emphasis. Engaging with digital media can itself *engender sensation*. Even when no "real" touching occurs, the body can be moved to physically feeling through seemingly "virtual" interactions. Once again, sex serves as a helpful illustration because it brings the body so clearly to the fore. From 2004 to 2009, I worked as a journalist specializing in sexuality in digital cultures. As research for a weekly column I wrote for the *Village Voice*, I spent long hours in virtual bathhouses, watching online porn, and interviewing everyone from webcam performers, video-game escorts, and digital sex toy designers to "regular" folks who, in different ways and different places, experienced the day-to-day realities of their sex lives on or through the internet.[25] In my virtual travels, I consistently encountered digital embodiment not as a concept but as a lived experience: hot, steamy, and immediately present. Some of the most affecting experiences my subjects described took place entirely in virtual spaces. These were encounters of the type that Julian Dibbell describes in his formative online ethnography *My Tiny Life*: sexual interactions composed of zeros and ones that nonetheless affected the bodies of participants as deeply as any real-life exchange.[26]

And so, even when technology seems most disembodied, digital interfaces have the power to communicate and inspire embodied feeling—as have, it turns out, forms like literature, art, and film before them. Despite fantasies and anxieties of the technologically post-human, participants in today's digital cultures are primarily engaging with technology not to lose touch with their bodies but to express and explore their embodied selves. What then is the resolution to the paradox of digital embodiment? Why does technology seem disembodied when it is deeply tied to bodily experience? The answer lies in concepts of the real, which practices of pain and pleasure stand poised to challenge and redefine.

Real Pain in Virtual Spaces

Arguing for digital embodiment as embodiment that really matters entails arguing for a definition of realness that defies traditional prescriptions of the real. In its place, it calls for a concept of realness that is fluid, self-determined, and based on embodied experience rather than objective measure. As it stands, the paradox of digital embodiment hinges on a struggle for legitimacy between the real and the virtual. The uncertainty and anxiety that drive the paradoxical feeling that digital subjects are both embodied and disembodied derives, at its heart, from the implicit sense that bodies experienced virtually may not be sufficiently real to count as bodies at all. Is sex on the internet really sex? Is sending a hug emoticon via text as real as giving a hug in person? This line of questioning draws on an imagined sliding scale of realness and un-realness. On one end exists the purely real, on the other the purely virtual. Traditionally, the virtual has been conceived of as a state of mediation and distance. Alexander Galloway calls this connection that operates from afar the "desire for nearness," but it is "nearness with a catch:" it can "be present to us" but we can never be "present to it."[27] In colloquial parlance, something that is virtual is almost, but not really; to virtually achieve a goal is to get most of the way there, but never to make that achievement real. At its most basic, the division between the virtual and the real is

understood in relation to the tangible body. If I introduce myself to a colleague online, I say, "It's nice to virtually meet you." The first time I shake hands with that colleague in person, I am likely to exclaim, "It's nice to meet you for real."

It is this direct relation to the body—or seeming lack thereof—that proponents of the real profess as the problem with the virtual. In *Alone Together*, Turkle tells the story of taking her daughter to a Charles Darwin exhibit, where her daughter refuses to acknowledge the value of putting a real Galapagos turtle on display when an animatronic one could prove just as educational and more humane.[28] For Turkle, this anecdote is foreboding. What will come of future generations of humanity if they no longer value what's real? Turkle's own flesh and blood has failed to see the importance of flesh and blood. The concern that this incident elicits is testament to the hierarchical system of value by which Turkle (and the cultural perspective to which she gives voice) assigns the imagined animatronic turtle less intrinsic worth than the "real thing." Yet *policing the line between virtual and real* can come to function as an *act of hegemony* when it denies others the right to assign value to their own experiences. Sex on the internet is real if it is real to those who participate in it. An animatronic turtle has the potential to really matter because it has the potential to really matter to someone.

In the current technological climate, this hard and fast divide between what is and is not real is beginning to look increasingly archaic. Technologies that blur the divide between real and virtual experiences are gaining visibility as a matter of both mainstream interest and concern. "If it were any more real, it would be real," reads a billboard advertising the 2013 release of Microsoft's Xbox One video game console. In the image that accompanies the slogan, an armored Greco-Roman warrior, meticulously digitally rendered for maximum realism, stands with his mouth wide, shouting at his enemy. At the 2015 Game Developer's Conference, dozens of companies exhibited products designed for use with the Oculus Rift, a head-mounted gaming peripheral that immerses players in three-dimensional "virtual reality" environments. Meanwhile, public anxiety mounts around the use of unmanned military drones, controlled virtually by pilots many miles from the zones of conflict. These drones conjure up dystopian visions of violence enacted on-screen becoming all too real.[29] Rightly, they inspire worry that war conducted virtually will obscure the realities of the violence done to bodies on the ground. In effect, breaching the boundary between the real and the virtual brings with it the promise and the fear that we, as individuals and as a society, might manage to lose touch with something called reality.

Dismantling the divide between the real and the virtual has important implications for the paradox of digital embodiment. If the virtual world is simply understood as unreal, then bodily experiences that take place in virtual spaces can be dismissed as fake, or at best performative—insufficiently real to matter.[30] This is why pain and pleasure in virtual spaces are so important for modeling digital embodiment. Pain and pleasure experienced through media make it clear that digital embodiment is also *tangible, sensory, and "real."*

At first glance, the presence of pain in virtual spaces may seem superlatively paradoxical. The internet is often imagined as a world without pain, and pain itself is traditionally figured as irreducibly bodily, the very antithesis of the virtual. Much prominent thinking about the relationship between pain and media is still shaped by Elaine Scarry's 1985 *The Body in Pain*, in which Scarry famously argues that pain can never

adequately be described with words.[31] "Physical pain does not simply resist language," she writes, "but actively destroys it."[32] Today, even those who seek to give language to suffering often replicate Scarry's notion of pain as fundamentally unrepresentable.[33] Such work reinscribes the insistence that, on some fundamental level, pain cannot be communicated; it can only be felt. The very idea of representing suffering is often perceived as offensive, even ethically abhorrent. The photographs of the abused prisoners at Abu Ghraib released in 2011, for example, offended America's public sensibilities because they stirred the nation's human compassion, but also because of their status as media. How dare photography purport to capture the suffering of those abused, and how dare we look at a photograph that flattens pain through mediation? The fact then that something called pain can exist in virtual spaces represents a fundamental challenge to existing concepts of pain. When a whip is cracked on the internet, so to speak, pain is not simply represented through media. In that moment, *pain and media are one and the same*. This is the kinkiness of media, in one of its many manifestations: a bond so intimate and enmeshed that it can be hard to tell where affective subject ends and media object begins.

Let me be especially clear that when I talk about pain in virtual spaces, I am not talking about the abstract idea of pain, or pain derived from physical contact between bodies and interfaces. Fascinating work is being done by scholars like Diana Pozo and video game designers like Eddo Stern, Merritt Kopas, and Robert Yang on digital media that either represents dynamics of BDSM or directly delivers pain (e.g. through electric shocks) to players.[34] However, I am talking about *pain that is really felt, yet is transmitted entirely through media* elements: words, images, sounds, interfaces. It is this phenomenon of experiencing real pain virtually that I am calling being *"pixel whipped."* Why whipping? Why not flogging, slapping, or striking: all modes of delivering hurting within practices of BDSM that could serve as metaphors for the way that media reaches out to human bodies? Though whipping runs the risk of conjuring up the camp imagery of an earlier era, à la Tom of Finland, it also has a long history as a shorthand for dynamics of pain and pleasure more broadly, dating back at least as far as Severin's fascination with the whip in *Venus in Furs*. If the image of whipping seems dated, it is because it brings a historical past to the present. The term "pixel whipping" signposts the importance of that history and serves as a reminder that the experiences of contemporary digital technologies must be conceptualized within a long and formative lineage of media, culture, and visions of desire.

Each of the chapters of this dissertation explores a manifestation of "pixel whipping" in a different media form. Indeed, while pixel whipping may be most visible in practices of digital BDSM, it has important corollaries in experiences of literature, film, and many other media. This is evidenced in part by its resonance with theorizing that pre-dates the digital. The concept is perhaps most closely aligned with the visceral media encounters described by Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others* and "Against Interpretation," as well as the literary phenomenology outlined in Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, both of which underscore seeing and reading as experiences felt—blissfully and painfully—in the body.[35] Within the media landscape of the present moment, pixel whipping has the potential to explode the paradox of digital embodiment. To be pixel whipped is to experience the realness made possible in/through the virtual. In this way, the phenomenon shatters the

divide between real and virtual, opening the door for new interpretations of media that recognize the embodied experiences of a full diversity of digital subjects.

Why Pixel Whipping Matters: Media, Bodies, and Social Justice

The stakes of reconfiguring the relationship between pain, pleasure, the virtual, and the real go far behind debates of rhetoric. Challenging the divide that supposedly separates technology and the body represents an important step toward bringing social justice to contemporary cultures of digital media. It is, for example, a necessary precursor to the task of giving voice to modes of desire that speak from the margins. As Lisa Nakamura has so compellingly argued, the myth of digital disembodiment obfuscates embodied identities like race and gender, silencing the perspectives and histories of women and people of color—or allowing those identities to be coopted by a white, straight, cisgender digital mainstream.[36] Nakamura's work serves as an invaluable reminder that cultures of technology cannot be sufficiently understood without accounting for the bodies that sit beyond the screen. One of my goals here is to take Nakamura's emphasis on the body a step farther, exploring embodiment on the literal level of *embodied sensation* rather than (or, perhaps more accurately, in addition to) codified social identities. The body itself, with all its pains and pleasures, has the potential to act as a complex, intersectional, counter-hegemonic system where diverse vectors of sense and selfhood converge.

Putting the body back in the digital has never been of more pressing importance. No matter how disembodied they might seem, virtual spaces are also real spaces, and virtual actions have real-life consequences. This is one of the most urgent and actionable messages this project can communicate: a message at once empowering and cautionary. For better and for worse, what happens on the internet matters. Unchallenged, the presumption that only face-to-face interactions "count" not only discredits virtual experience; it also encourages online behavior in which participants deny their own accountability and facilitates internet-based cultures of aggressive behavior. GamerGate, the extensive online harassment campaign directed at women working in the video game industry, was made possible in part by a set of tech cultural standards dictating that what happens online did not count as real.[37] When the victims of GamerGate attempted to notify authorities that they had received threats of violence, police representatives repeatedly refused to offer assistance on the grounds that online harassment was not real harassment.[38] In such moments, it becomes painfully clear that the divide between the virtual and the real functions in support of dominant power structures. Bringing something like equality to virtual spaces by necessity means redefining the terms of realness.

Arguing for the importance of embodiment in technology is also a way to call attention to difference and promote inclusivity. As long as it goes unchallenged, the myth of digital disembodiment will continue to broaden the digital divide. The term "digital divide" describes the stark disparity in technological usage, literacy, and opportunity observed between demographic groups.[39] Authors like Clay Shirky have talked about digital media as the great equalizer, offering people from all walks of life the opportunity to publish and be heard.[40] However, as Matthew Hindman and others have argued, access to technology is by

no means democratic or universal.[41] Claiming that digital media gives voices to "everybody" means turning a blind eye to the millions across the globe without the resources to join the collective of digital subjects.[42] Importantly for the present project, the myth of the digital democracy relies on the myth of digital disembodiment to justify its erasure of the material conditions of inequality. Only taken out of their embodied contexts can internet users seem uniformly empowered. In turn, directing attention back to the body makes issues of race, gender, ability, and class once again visible.

The stakes of foregrounding embodiment relate to agency as well as identity. Among its many values, attending to the body draws attention to the forces of capitalism, and specifically to the ways that corporations are capitalizing on the intimate relationships between users and machines. Advertising algorithms track previous purchases and make uncomfortably accurate assessments about users' bodies (especially the bodies of women) in the name of target marketing: who is pregnant, who is plus-sized, who is menstruating, who is dieting, and what are they likely to buy?[43] A veritable sea of mobile apps stands at the ready to count steps, track food intake, and issue reminders about birth control.[44] Increasingly, when digital media lays claim to the conditions of embodiment, it does so for a profit. If the interplay between users and digital media is like a kinky relationship, where is the consent? What are the safewords? Who decides the boundaries of the scene and who has the right to say no? Kink (with its motto "safe, sane, consensual") is a metaphor but it is also a model.[45] It shows us that dynamics of technological control and freedom, to borrow Wendy Chun's terms, can themselves be pleasurable and valuable—but it also reminds us to accept nothing less than the right to choose our own hurt.[46]

In this sense and many more, the impulse behind this dissertation is a feminist one, with an eye toward intersectionality.[47] A recurring theme in the chapters that follow is how women's embodied experiences have been uniquely formative for shaping cultural concepts of pain and pleasure, and how these same experiences stand uniquely poised to transform accepted paradigms of the body. Another important undercurrent that runs through the project is queerness. For queer-identified subjects, leveling the monolith of realness has particular significance. The discourse of the real resonates strongly with the rhetoric that has been used to discriminate against transgender and genderqueer folks, who have faced a long history of exclusion from single-sex spaces reserved for "real" women or "real" men.[48] Likewise, those for whom sex does not necessarily mean heterosexual penetration and those for whom romantic partnership does not necessarily mean monogamy must fight battles against a set of mainstream norms that typically understand "real" sex as the act of genital contact between a cisgender man and a cisgender woman and "real" relationships as those that follow the narrative of couple-hood and marriage. This is one of the ways in which debates around media and the body intersect debates around sexual identity more broadly. Destabilizing realness in digital cultures is a gesture toward destabilizing the very notion of the real as a category of value and a tool of oppression.

Queerness is also a guiding force in this project on the level of ideology. Work by queer theorists like Lee Edelmann, José Muñoz, and Jack Halberstam has broadened the field to imagine queerness as a mode of desire and as a lens for interpreting art and culture—"a basic desire to live life otherwise."[49] I have found this to be a powerful mantra

for understanding the kinky modes of desire that I consider here, subversive "counterpleasures" that reject the neoliberal notion of romance and offer visions of notably "otherwise" ways of living and being in the world.[50] In this sense, the discussions of pain and pleasure in digital media found in this project emerge from a cultural moment shared with the rise in scholarship around other sub-fields, like queerness and video games, which similarly put non-normative desire in dialogue with technology.[51] Much as queer game studies seeks to reclaim the queerness in video games and gamer spaces while establishing the value of queerness itself as an analytical lens, I seek to *reclaim the kink in media* and argue for *kinkiness as a way of seeing media*. Broadly speaking, it is my hope that the present work will underscore how the combination of pain and pleasure, so long pathologized, can emerge as a powerful assemblage of personal and cultural meaning. This assemblage, in turn, offers valuable new perspectives by giving voice to *media as an embodied experience* rather than a static object. The concept of art as experience, though originally articulated by scholars like John Dewey nearly half a century before the rise of the internet, nonetheless resonates with particular force at the present moment in Western history, when it so often feels that we stand on the verge of a notable shift in how it feels to us, as bodies, to relate to digital media.[52]

Reclaiming Marginalized Desires

Nestled in an unassuming storefront, Wicked Grounds looks much like any other coffee shop in San Francisco. Rainbow and leather pride flags hang in the windows. Patrons seated in a motley array of chairs sip lattes and work on laptops. In other ways though, Wicked Grounds is not like every other coffee shop. It bills itself as a "kink cafe," a BDSM-themed establishment where butt plugs are sold alongside pastries, and where you are just as likely to encounter bondage demonstrations as board-game nights. Of all the queer-friendly spots in a city known for its sexual openness, Wicked Grounds is unique for being explicitly designed as a place where kinksters can share moments both sexy and mundane. For me, Wicked Grounds stands as both an important center of community and a welcome (and welcoming) reminder of the humanness of kink. BDSM is by no means a social menace, but it is also not a purely theoretical practice. It is part of a chosen sexual identity for many individuals, who live their kinky lives as real people and whole selves.

I emphasize this humanness not to normalize or sterilize kink—which has the potential to be deeply radical—but to set the stage for the reclamatory politics of this project. Even today, with the increasing prominence of queer studies, kinky sexualities are still widely misunderstood and overlooked. Much existing scholarship on the topic focuses on conceptual sadomasochism and aims to unearth the "true" psychoanalytic impulses of the sadist and masochist, mythic figures who seem to exist only in fiction.[53] In popular culture, BDSM has faired little better. Many Americans have few constructive reference points for kink. Movies like *Pulp Fiction* conjure up satirical or unsettling images of men in ball gags and leather hoods.[54] *50 Shades of Gray* has brought sadomasochism to the center of mainstream discussions, but the kink represented in E. L. James' book is a travesty at best: a soft core muddle that demonstrates little familiarity with the culture of consent and

upholds misogynistic gender norms.[55] Contemporary America would like to imagine itself as sexually tolerant, even celebratory. However, those who value sex worker rights or the de-stigmatization of kink continue to struggle in a predominantly neoliberal climate of hetero- and homonormativity. Feminism too has largely failed BDSM. At a moment when the sex negativity of the second wave seems a thing of the past, kink remains one of the last bastions of sex shaming between feminists. Women who engage in kink as submissive partners are seen as emotionally damaged—or worse, they are imagined to promote sexual violence against all women.[56] Admittedly, there are a handful of scholars who have done or are doing valuable, insightful work on pain and pleasure, among them Margot Weiss, Jack Halberstam, Karmen MacKendrick, Romana Byrne, and Gayle Rubin.[57] Writing by and for BDSM communities is also available through specialty presses and online. However, much of the work from within the academy on recognizing kink as a rich, complex, and often joyful set of practices has yet to be done. I strive to accomplish part of it here.

The other set of marginalized sexual practices that this project aims to reclaim are those that take place through and/or with technology. Like the popular discourse around BDSM, the mainstream rhetoric used to discuss technologically-mediated sex is typically judgmental. Similar to the ambivalent myth of digital disembodiment, the commonly heard narratives around internet sex fall into two camps, one fearful and one romanticizing, which might be summarized as tales of "good times turned bad" vs. those of "digital love against the odds." In the first, virtual flirtations start as harmless fun. Inevitably though, the curtain of fantasy is pulled back to reveal a horror of violence and deception. David Slade's film *Hard Candy*, Dennis Cooper's novel *The Sluts*, NBC's hit series *To Catch a Predator*, and the national news flurry that accompanied the 2009 arrest of the "Craigslist killer" all reflect a shared fascination with online spaces as the hunting grounds of dangerous perverts.[58] By contrast, the second version of the narrative recasts technology as the tool that brings together unlikely heteronormative couples whose romance overcomes great obstacles. A 2011 *New York Times* article titled "It's Love at First Kill" tells a typical story.[59] He's a divorcee from California; she's a single mother from Atlanta. They met as avatars in *World of Warcraft* and now they are married in real life. This version of the internet sex story is no less technophobic than its counterpart. It sanitizes technologically-mediated sexual encounters with the promise of normative offline endings.

The stories that do not get told are precisely those that fit neither model—and they are by far the most common stories. What about the *World of Warcraft* players who have sex online and never meet in person? What about the Craigslist users who meet for a pleasurable but otherwise uneventful one-night hookup? What about Grindr, Tinder, Bang with Friends: wildly popular social media apps that facilitate recreational sex between consenting adults? Each day on the internet, countless partners take part in sexual exchanges using communication technology. These numbers will only continue to increase as technological literacy and adaptation spread across more diverse demographics, including younger and older users, and as online populations in the Global South grow rapidly as a result of expanding internet and cell phone availability.[60] Though they have been pushed to the margins, neither digital sex nor BDSM are marginal practices. (A 2005 study, for example, concluded that 36% of adults in the United States use masks, blindfolds, or other kinky equipment during sex.)[61] Diverse sexual expression is key to diversity,

whether online or off. Disrupting dominant narratives of deviance is an important step toward social justice. De-stigmatizing desire thus represents as pressing an issue as access, accountability, agency, privacy, safety, and all of those other concerns that more commonly appear in discussions of digital cultures. To this list I believe we must add issues of pleasure and selfhood: the opportunity to desire openly as digital subjects and the right to decide for ourselves how technology makes us feel.

The Media/Kink Dialectic: New Perspectives on Media and Sadomasochism

Digital technology is hardly the only place to turn for evidence of how experiences of media impact the body. Literature and film also serve as important reference points for new formulations of pain and pleasure. "Whatever commandment the prisoner has disobeyed is written upon his body," explains the officer to the foreign explorer in Franz Kafka's 1910 short story "In the Penal Colony."[62] Standing before the colony's elaborate and gruesome execution machine, the officer uses a live victim to demonstrate how the torture is enacted. Over the course of twelve bloody hours, the human-shaped harrow of the machine, with the patience of a lover, etches the condemned man's sentence into his flesh like a pen marking ink on a blank page. Often those men sentenced to die on the device do not know the rules that they have broken, and the sentences etched on their flesh appear too obscured by gore to read. Yet, where the traditional functions of text fail, pain succeeds. Via the embodied horror of his torture, the condemned man learns the story of his crime through how it *feels*. "You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one's eyes," the officer explains, "but our man deciphers it with his wounds."[63]

Kafka's execution machine literalizes and mechanizes a confluence of pain, media, and technology that is at once frightful and deeply intimate. As a symbol for how the machine might relate to the body, it stands in striking contrast to the myth of digital disembodiment. For the prisoner who interfaces with this machine, text (media) and hurt (embodiment) are one and the same. Language cannot be disentangled from the wound it inscribes; the wound itself speaks. As for the technological marvel of the torture device, it earns its claim to prowess with its superlative power to blur flesh and tool: it is a piece of technology that functions seamlessly and simultaneously as a technology of the body. In part, I mention Kafka's story here to bring non-digital forms into our discussions of media—but more importantly because, in its viscera, the story evokes an alternative vision of embodiment, one in which pain and pleasure cannot be understood separately from the medium of their representation, and in which *language and technology truly hurt*.

As a practice, understanding kink in relation to media emerges from a long and admittedly often problematic history. Since the publication of sexologist Krafft-Ebing's 1886 compendium *Psychopathia Sexualis* (and arguably even before), sadomasochism has been identified, characterized, and pathologized through its representation in literature: Krafft-Ebing's descriptions of sadists and masochists draw heavily from the writing of their namesakes, the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch.[64] In this way, the real, lived experiences of those who take pleasure in pain were conflated with works of fiction. Following in this tradition, theorists throughout the twentieth-century used literature as a

primary reference point for interpreting sadomasochism, often presented as an abstract concept rather than complex and personal human practices.[65] Similarly conflating kink and literature, Foucault writes in *The History of Madness* that sadomasochism as a genre of desire did not come into being until the very same moment that Sade first put sadomasochistic pleasures into words.[66] Today, those seeking to reflect on the nature of real-life torture still cite fictional works, like Pier Passolini's film *Salò*, as source material.[67] The overwhelming popularity of *50 Shades of Gray* has brought this habit of conceptualizing real-life sadomasochistic practices through their literary representations back into vogue.[68] With its many, many months on the bestseller list, the novel serves as a first and only reference point for many Americans with no previous experience with BDSM. Just as sadomasochism *was* the writing of Sade and Sacher-Masoch, kink *is 50 Shades of Gray*. Media representation comes to stand in for reality.

The trouble though (or, more accurately, one of many troubles) is that, in the case of kink, media and "reality" cannot be so clearly separated. In proposing a new way to understand the relationship between media and kink, then, I am pushing back against two theoretical traditions at once: the first says that sadomasochism can simply be understood without consideration for lived sexual practices, while the second says that (recalling Scarry) pain cannot exist in relation to representation. By contrast, I view the dynamics of pain and pleasure as a hybrid of media and experience: they must be understood as more than impersonal abstraction, but they must also be understood as deeply entwined with their representations in media. Pain cannot be separated from embodiment, but it also cannot be separated from the media discourses through which it has entered the popular consciousness. Rather than being absolute, it is *culturally specific, personal, and mediated by language*. Recent scholarship by Romana Byrne and Susannah Mintz, who are both invested in the interplay between literature and pain, similarly points to the importance of language in pain and pleasure.[69] In *Hurt and Pain*, Mintz challenges her readers to consider that "how we talk, write, and read about pain may be as significant as how we react to the physiological realities that cause pain," and that "pain is, to some extent, always already a function of how we live through language, how we translate raw experience into words."[70]

What the present study, with its emphasis on a range of media forms, has the potential to demonstrate is the reciprocity of this dynamic: not only has media shaped pain and pleasure, but pain and pleasure have fundamentally shaped concepts of media. Popular discourse, for example, commonly figures digital technology as kinky. This becomes most pronounced at moments of major technological and cultural shift, when public anxiety around change takes on a tense, erotic quality (as in the paradox of digital embodiment). Social concerns about evolving media forms are often voiced as fears about media-inspired, sexually-charged violence. Like comic books before them, video games are often figured as conduits for sadomasochistic perversion, turning children into rapists and killers.[71] Surrounded by a swirling moral panic about online pornography, the internet becomes the territory of would-be child abusers.[72] Notably, the dominant narratives about the supposed association between technology and sadomasochism tend to focus on the vulnerability of children. Even at less moralistic moments, metaphors of kink shape the discourse of digital media. The word "to beat," with its valences simultaneously violent, sexual, ludic, and digital, appears frequently in the context of video games and computer hacking. To lose a

game to an opponent is to be beaten. To play a game to completion is to beat it. To work one's way around a firewall that blocks access to online porn is to beat the system. Such language imbues the everyday experience of interacting with digital media with a sadomasochistic corporality. It also brings to mind Freud's 1919 essay "A Child Is Being Beaten," suggesting that what appears to be a set of anxieties about the dangers of technology might be better understand as a constellation of masochistic fantasies.[73]

This is the *media/kink dialectic*: a reciprocal relationship not unlike Hegel's famous master/slave dialectic in which both parties, through a dynamic struggle, bring each other into being.[74] The vision of media and kink suggested by the dialectic looks less like the sadomasochism of Krafft-Ebing and more like (a notably less frightful version of) Kafka's torture machine. In this vision, pain, pleasure, media, and technology exist in a network that is complex and driven by deep-seated vectors of interrelation. Media both reflects the movements of the body and has the power to *move* it. No longer a paradox, the idea of real pain experienced in virtual spaces emerges as the logical extension of the media/kink dialectic. Texts, films, video games, online environments, etc. have the power to communicate pain and pleasure to the body because they are themselves experienced as painful and pleasurable. Kink is a set of real, lived cultural practices, but also a way of imagining the intimacy between subject and page or screen. In a sense then, literature is the "natural" home of pain and pleasure; it makes sense for BDSM to go digital. This pairing of media and kink also upends existing hierarchies around the "passiveness" and "activeness" of certain media forms. Many contemporary scholars still categorize viewing film, for example, as inherently more passive than playing a video game or roaming the internet.[75] The media/kink dialectic reveals that all media encounters are active. Interactivity takes place on the level of the body. Pain is active. Pleasure is active. Even the viewer who sits seemingly still before a movie screen interacts actively through the kinky, dialectical exchange between the media object and the media subject.

Chapter Breakdown: Pain and Pleasure across Media Forms

The structure of this dissertation is designed to place media forms in dialogue from across a lineage of Western representations of sadomasochism. This selection of key works and cultural moments lends a historical perspective to contemporary experiences of media. Yet my approach is not primarily historical. Rather than a comprehensive survey of sadism and masochism in art and digital cultures, what follows is a story told through a particularly illustrative selection of works—including literature, film, and digital media—that testify to media's ability to transmit sensation from the page or screen into the body. Among their similarities, these examples have in common that they wear pain and pleasure on their sleeves. In many cases, they are infamous for their focus on sexualized violence. The intensity of their subject matter allows them, more visibly than less visceral works, to breech the divide between subject and media by bringing hurt to life, whether in the form of a whipping or just a churning gut. At the same time, they suggest an infinite array of other sensations that media might impart.

Methodologically, this project draws primarily from the humanistic traditions of close reading and cultural analysis, but it is also influenced by social science practices like ethnography as well as my background in journalism and, at times, my own first-hand experiences as an embodied subject relating intimately to media. Fittingly, the story that the project tells stands at the intersection of art, desire, and society. The impulse that unifies these chapters is an interest in reading *across* media forms, an approach that stands in contrast to traditional teleologies of "old" vs. "new" media. Frequently, scholars approach new media through narratives of progress or stasis. Either new technologies are described as fundamentally different than what came before or older forms are purported to have long ago laid claim to what today seems new.[76] By contrast, reading across media allows forms to co-exist and shed new light on one another. Elements of the old live on in the new; technologies of the new can be found operating in the old. When media is given the chance to contribute to a bigger picture, trends and concepts emerge that transcend these divides and speak to a larger, longer, and more nuanced set of interrelations.

In chapter one, *"Sadomasochism and/as Literature: Sade, Sacher-Masoch, and Réage,"* I begin this work by looking at key texts from the canon of sadomasochistic fiction in order to argue that, for more than 200 years, Western cultural concepts of pain and pleasure have been inextricable from their representation in literature. Sadism, masochism: our very words for erotic suffering come from the names of authors whose biographies blur the line between textual expression and sexual experience. Scandalous classics like Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom* and Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* in turn inspired subsequent generations of infamous kinky novels, such as Pauline Reage's *Story of O*. Réage's tale too has shaped the image of BDSM in the popular imaginary. Today, kinky porn websites bear names like "The Training of O" and "Roissy." Meanwhile, kinksters themselves describe their encounters through literary metaphors, like the language of the "scene." In each of these cases, literature does more than reflect real-life sexual practices: it provides the imaginary and the imagination to bring those practices to life. More than any other sexual practice, I contend in this chapter, BDSM understands itself through language. What is more, these dynamics of "literature and/as masochism" can already be found operating within the novels of Sade, Sacher-Masoch, and Réage, where language is the ultimate erotic instrument and the bruises left on the skin by a lover's whip can be read like language.

Moving from literature to film, chapter two, *"Too Painful to Watch: On Intimacy and Complicity in Pasolini's* Salò*"* takes up a colloquial turn of phrase and asks: what does it mean for a film to "hurt"? A precursor to discussions of the digital, film scholarship has traditionally described the viewing subject as disembodied. Yet, as Pier Pasolini's notoriously unwatchable *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* illustrates, visual media has the ability to communicate physical suffering simply through sight. Set within a fantastical re-imagining of the tortures of Fascist Italy, *Salò* overwhelms its viewers with scenes of erotic violence. Like the virtual dom who can inflict real pain on a sub hundreds of miles way, Pasolini's film engenders experiences of nausea and extreme distress without "real-life" contact. An analysis of sight in *Salò* reveals that the film achieves its effect on viewers' bodies through an intimate invitation to complicity: watching powerful men terrorize children hurts because watching itself seems to condone the pain on screen, making it real. Often cited as an example of art *in extremis*, the superlative discomfort that *Salò* causes its

viewers actually renders visible a sadomasochistic dance of complicity that can be understood to operate within film as a medium more generally. In this way, *Salò* helps illuminate the larger relationship between pain, pleasure, and media by making legible the kinky intimacy that implicates and enlivens both film and the body of the viewer.

Chapter three, *"Video Games that Hurt: Interactivity, Virtual Reality, and the Return of the Body,"* explores dynamics of pain and pleasure in video games. Popular media commonly equates video games with acts of real-life violence. Though this negative stereotyping is misguided, a kernel of truth remains; in the pantheon of media forms, video games do have a special ability to communicate pain. In *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*, Jesper Juul argues that the experience of losing is central to games, and that losing hurts.[77] To understand the "pain of playing video games," this chapter turns to the feature that makes video games seemingly unique: interactivity. Interactivity, formulated here, becomes a kinky exchange not unlike that between a dominant and a submissive partner. Notably, the hurt engendered by this kinky exchange is rendered literal in the emerging trend of virtual reality (VR) games. VR games are, on the one hand, celebrated as the future of gaming, offering players the opportunity to become freer than ever from their bodies. At the same time, these games are notorious for making their players unbearably nauseous. Ironically, it is through these new technologies, which promise to liberate players from the constraints of reality, that the body is insistently reasserting itself. The pain of playing VR games translates the kinkiness of interactivity into the flesh, interrupting the narrative of progress as increasingly disembodied gameplay and allowing diverse, embodied experiences to direct much-needed attention back to issues of gender, agency, and affect in video games and video-game culture.

In chapter four, *"BDSM in Virtual Spaces and the Kinky Pleasure of Digital Media,"* I return to the subject of digital BDSM. At the intersection of kink and digital cultures stands a diversity of technologically-mediated sexual practices in which participants play with pain and pleasure entirely through virtual means. This chapter contextualizes and maps these practices, which take place on mainstream and kink-specific platforms ranging from social networks (e.g. FetLife) to webcams (e.g. Kink Live) to mobile applications (e.g. Whiplr). Such interactions exemplify how purportedly disembodied media can bring sensation to life in the bodies of its users. Online doms use text to inflict pain; video becomes a tool of bondage, like the ropes and chains; avatars take on the quality of bodily proxies and strap one another to St. Andrew's crosses. The logistics of these scenes are as diverse as the platforms through which digital kinksters connect. What these practices have in common is their relationship with the kinky pleasures of digital tools themselves. Far more than a mere substitute for real-life sex play, digital BDSM is driven by a system of desires in which media plays a central role. Digital interfaces function as both tools and lovers. In this way, digital BDSM brings important new perspectives to media studies by reframing interactions between users and media objects as complex, erotic interplays. It also demonstrates how supposedly marginal practices like kinky online sex play can in fact speak to broader divisions between the online and offline worlds through compelling case studies in which the body felt "in real life" becomes indistinguishable from the body lived "virtually." Rather than negate one another, the intersecting experiences of the virtual and the real merge to form a system of erotics that is at once deeply embodied and (to use a

term that, fittingly, describes a foundational relationship between media and the structures of technological platforms) "born digital."

Finally, in my conclusion, *"From Sade to Sexting: Media as Embodied Experience,"* I reflect on the striking ways in which these phenomena of pain, pleasure, and media, drawn from across heterogeneous media forms, resonate with one another and suggest new ways of understanding media. Together, they form a larger image of media as more than a set of objects, whether digital or non-digital. Rather media should be also, if not foremost, conceptualized as an experience: embodied, affecting, intimate, reciprocal, dialectical, painful, pleasurable, and (to use the term that will come, over the course of this dissertation, to encompass these myriad other descriptors) kinky. This emphasis on experience, and specifically kinky experience, prompts us to confront the central importance of our own messy, difficult, and erotic bodies as interlocutors with and expressions of digital media—especially at moments when media seems most disembodied. At the same time, the material presented here also speaks back to the nature of pain and pleasure. As a set of desires that cannot be disentangled from the history of their representation, sadomasochism, BDSM, and kink will always be, in some sense, mediated. This state of mediation does not make kink less authentic. To the contrary, it is immensely powerful. As a network of pleasures that straddles the imagined divide between the real and the virtual, kink models an invaluable way of being *between*, of feeling what is real even when reality itself may no longer, in the traditional sense, matter.

Though its main characters are some of the most scandalous works from the wide world of Western media, the story that this dissertation tells is not one of exceptional cases. It is a story made legible through pain, infamy, and extremes—but at its heart it is a broadly applicable tale about what it means to be an embodied subject in a rapidly digitizing world. It is a story that compels us to look at what is difficult to see (the gruesome, the abject, the painful) precisely because hurt itself can be a way of seeing, and because only through the lens of the body can the full embodied diversity of media start to become clear.

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[1] Though this particular exchange took place on the mobile phone application Recon, similar sexual practices are facilitated through a variety of digital platforms. For more on the logistical functions of these tools, see Chapter 4, "BDSM in Digital Spaces and the Pleasure of Digital Media."

[2] For more on the everyday practices of online sexuality see Regina Lynn, *The Sexual Revolution 2.0: Getting Connected, Upgrading Your Sex Life, and Finding True Love—or at Least a Dinner Date—in the Internet Age* (Berkeley: Ulysses Press, 2005) and Audacia Ray, *Naked on the Internet: Hookups, Downloads, and Cashing in on Internet Sexploration* (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2007).

[3] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[4] Interestingly, one of the main ways that this emphasis on disembodiment plays out in popular reporting is through an emphasis on obesity, i.e. over-embodiment. A 2012 Slate.com article reports, for example, that the amount of "screen time" children spend each

day is widely blamed for the tripling in childhood obesity rates since the 1980's. Darkshak Sanghavi, "Are TV and Video Games Making Kids Fat?", Slate.com, April 13, 2012, accessed July 4, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2012/04/are_video_games_making_kids_fat_screen_time_and_childhood_obesity_.html.

[5] Sexting serves as a helpful example of the steady increase in the sexual usage of digital technologies because it has been more closely studied than other, related practices in recent years. A 2011 *New York Times* piece reported that, among a pool of 745 U.S. college students, eighty percent had sent or received sexually explicit text messages. Michelle Drouin, "Sexting Is More Common Than You Think," *The New York Times*, June 9, 2011, accessed July 5, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/06/09/whats-wrong-with-adult-sexting/sexting-is-more-common-than-you-think.

[6] Spike Jonze (dir.), *Her*, Annapurna Pictures, 2013.

[7] For a discussion of the notable rise in amateur pornography, uploaded to YouTube-style websites, see for example Anna Pulley, "'Making Porn Is Fun': The Startling Rise of DIY erotica," Salon.com, May 17, 2015, accessed July 4, 2015, http://www.salon.com/2015/05/18/making_porn_is_fun_the_startling_rise_of_diy_erotica_partner/.

[8] Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009); Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (Penguin Books: 2006).

[9] The website of the American Intercontinental University, for example, an online-specific institution, advertises its courses as particularly well-suited to stay-at-home mothers who "are developing skills for an eventual return to the job market, continuing their own personal development, or setting a good example about the value of education to their children." Aiuniv.edu blog, November 2, 2012, accessed July 4, 2015, http://www.aiuniv.edu/blog/november-2012/why-women-are-choosing-online-education#sthash.SgSikb6k.dpuf.

[10] H. Roy Kaplan, *The Myth of Post-Racial America: Searching for Equality in the Age of Materialism* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2011).

[11] The absence of women on Wikipedia has been a point of debate among feminist technology scholars. It helpfully illustrates the tensions inherent in increasing diversity representation in digital platforms. A notoriously unwelcoming space for female contributors, Wikipedia nonetheless presents itself as a democratic platform. Yet that narrative of democratization also renders unspeakable the very real experiences of disadvantage and discrimination encountered by marginalized contributors.

[12] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[13] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

[14] Shaka McGlotten, *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Socialities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014).

[15] Anna North, "When Novels Were Bad for You," *The New York Times*, September 14, 2014, accessed July 4, 2015, http://op-talk.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/when-novels-were-bad-for-you/?_r=0.

[16] Davy Rothbart, "He's Just Not That into Anyone," *New York Magazine*, January 30, 2011, accessed July 4, 2015, http://nymag.com/news/features/70976/.

[17] David Levy, *Love and Sex with Robots: The Evolution of Human-Robot Relationships* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 22.

[18] Theodora Goss and John Paul Riquelme, "From Superhuman to Posthuman: The Gothic Technological Imaginary in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 53.3 (2007): 434-459; Heather Latimer, "Reproductive Technologies, Fetal Icons, and Genetic Freaks: Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* and the Limits and Possibilities of Donna Harraway's Cyborg," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 57.2 (2011): 318-332.

[19] Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx (music and lyrics), *Avenue Q*, 2003.

[20] Lynn Hunt, *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800* (New York, Zone Books 1993), 13.

[21] Robert J. Moore, "Chatroulette is 89 Percent Male, 47 Percent American, and 13 Percent Perverts," TechCrunch.com, March 16, 2010, accessed July 4, 2015, http://techcrunch.com/2010/03/16/chatroulette-stats-male-perverts/.

[22] Regina Lynn, *The Sexual Revolution* 2.0, 45.

[23] Irene Chien, "Dancing Towards Global Interconnection in Mobile Phone Gameplay," *Society for Cinema and Media Studies*, Montreal 2015.

[24] Gregory Bagnell, "Queer(ing) Gaming Technologies: Thinking on Constructions of Normativity Inscribed in Digital Gaming Hardware," in *Queer Game Studies: Gender, Sexuality, and a Queer Approach to Game Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

[25] For a complete list of pieces that ran as part of my Village Voice column "Click Me," see http://www.heroine-sheik.com/articles/.

[26] Julian Dibbell, *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998).

[27] Alexander Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012). 11.

[28] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, 3-4.

[29] Steve Coll, "The Unblinking Stare: The Drone War in Pakistan," *The New Yorker*, November 14, 2014, accessed July 4, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/11/24/unblinking-stare.

[30] In this way, the language of the virtual resonates with the gendered discourse about orgasm. Whose pleasure is real and who is "faking it"? The anxiety around sexual faking gives rise to the "frenzy of the visible" discussed in Linda William's *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989).

[31] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[32] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 4.

[33] See, for example, David Biro's *The Language of Pain*, which opens as follows: "Pain is difficult to express. Language and pain seem as far apart as the opposite poles of an electric current." David Biro, *The Language of Pain: Finding Words, Compassion, and Relief* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2010), 11.

[34] Eddo Stern, *Tekken Torture Tournament* (2001); Merritt Kopas, *Consensual Torture Simulator* (2013); Robert Yang, *Hurt Me Plenty* (2015).

[35] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2003); Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2000); Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

[36] Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[37] It is difficult to list any one piece of writing as a definitive source for outlining the events of GamerGate because what GamerGate consists of and what it means is itself a topic of intense debate between the opposing communities involved. For a feminist perspective on the related issues, see Katherine Cross' "We Will Force Video Games to Be Free: On GamerGate and the License to Inflict Suffering," First Person Scholar, October 8, 2014, accessed July 5, 2015, http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/we-will-force-gaming-to-be-free/.

[38] Anna Merlan, "The Cops Don't Care about Violent Online Threats. What Do We Do Now?," Jezebel.com, January 29, 2015, accessed July 5, 2015, http://jezebel.com/the-cops-dont-care-about-violent-online-threats-what-d-1682577343.

[39] Coinage of the term "digital divide" is commonly attributed to Lloyd Morrisett, then president of the John and Mary Markle Foundation, a charitable organization focused on researching technological in support of the public good. Benjamin M. Copaine (ed.), *The Digital Divide: Facing a Crisis or Creating a Myth?* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011).

[40] See "Everyone Is a Media Outlet" in Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*.

[41] Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[42] The type of crowd-sourced authorship that Shirky cites as an example of digital democratization can also obfuscate difference in other ways. For example, I have written about how art exhibits in which pieces for display are selected by online voters tend to reinscribe problematic mainstream politics of racism and sexism in representation. Bonnie Ruberg, "Curating with a Click: The Art that Participatory Media Leaves Behind," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 7 (2015).

[43] The most famous example of this is the story of teen who began receiving advertisements from Target for pregnancy-related items. Her father complained to Target, only to find out that his daughter really was pregnant. This case sparked a flurry of interest in how companies like Target use data from bowser histories, etc. to make assessments of consumers' bodies. Charles Duhigg, "How Companies Learn Your Secrets," *The New York Times*, February 16, 2012, accessed July 5, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/magazine/shopping-habits.html?_r=2&hp=&pagewanted=all.

[44] In the birth control reminder category alone, there is an array of options for mobile phone applications, including MyPill, My Reminder, Don't Forget the Pill, and The Pill. Period and fertility trackers are even more numerous, with nearly 90 available through the iTunes app store as of June, 2015.

[45] Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy, *The New Topping Book* (Eugene: Greenery Press, 2003).

[46] Wendy Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2006).

[47] Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299.

[48] The example that has typified this type of discrimination over the last four decades is the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which ran from 1976 to 2015 and vocally enforced its policy of only admitting "womyn born womyn."

[49] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009); Jack Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure (Durham: Duke Uniersity Press, 2011). Quoted text comes from from Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2.

[50] I use the term "counterpleasure" in reference to Karmen MacKendrick, *Counterpleasures* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

[51] For an introduction to the sub-field of queerness and video games and its recent emergence, see Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (eds.), *Queer Game Studies*.

[52] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton and Balch, 1934).

[53] For more on this lineage of scholarship, see chapter one, "Sadomasochism and/as Literature: Sade, Sacher-Masoch, and Réage."

[54] Quentin Tarantino, *Pulp Fiction*, Miramax, 1994.

[55] Emma Green, "Consent Isn't Enough: The Troubling Sex of Fifty Shades," *The Atlantic*, February 10, 2015, accessed July 5, 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/consent-isnt-enough-in-fifty-shades-of-grey/385267/.

[56] While classic spokespeople for this perspective have been second-wave figures like Andrea Dworkin and Susan Griffin, the belief that BDSM promotes violence against women still operates in contemporary debates. Catherine Scott, "Thinking Kink: Does Female Submission Mean Oppression?", *Bitch Magazine*, July 9, 2012, accessed July 5, 2015, http://bitchmagazine.org/post/thinking-kink-female-submissives-BDSM-feminist-magazine-sex-consent.

[57] Margot Weiss, *The Techniques of Pleasure*; Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*; Karmen MacKendrick, *Counterpleasures*; Romana Byrne, *Aesthetic Sexualities*; Gayle Rubin, *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2011).

[58] David Slade (dir.), *Hard Candy*, Vulcan Productions, 2005; Dennis Cooper, *The Sluts* (New York: Void Books, 2004); Chris Hansen (host), *To Catch a Predator*, MSNBC, 2004-2007; Maureen Orth, "Crime@Craigslist," Vanity Fair, October, 2009, accessed July 5, 2015, http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2009/10/craigslist-murder200910.

59 Stephanie Rosenbloom, "It's Love at First Kill," *The New York Times*, April 22, 2011, accessed July 5, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/24/fashion/24avatar.html.

60 According to Internet Live Stats, the number of internet users worldwide jumped from two billion to three billion between 2010 and 2014. As of 2013, 48% of users were logging on from Asia, 22% from North and South America, 19% from Europe, and 10% from Africa.

61 Rose Eleveth, "Americans Are More into BDSM than the Rest of the World," *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 10, 2014, accessed July 5, 2015, http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/americans-are-more-bdsm-rest-world-180949703/?no-ist.

62 Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 144.

63 Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, 150.

64 Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Burbank: Bloat, 1999).

65 Among many examples, some of the most prominent include Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Gilles Deleuze.

66 Michel Foucault, *The History of Madness* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 361.

67 Eduardo Subirats, "Totalitarian Lust from Salò to Abu Ghraib," *South Central Review* 24.1 (2007) 174-182; Alessia Ricciardia, "Rethinking *Salò* after Abu Ghraib," *Postmodern Culture* 21.3 (2011).

68 E. L. James, *Fifty Shades of Gray* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).

69 Romana Byrne, *Aesthetic Sexuality*; Susannah B. Mintz, *Hurt and Pain: Literature and the Suffering Body* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

70 Susannah B. Mintz, *Hurt and Pain*, 2, 3.

71 Gerard Jones, *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

72 Marjorie Heins, *Not in Front of the Children: "Indecency," Censorship, and the Innocence of Youth* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

73 Sigmund Freud, "A Child Is Being Beaten," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).

74 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

75 Alexander Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 11-13.

76 For an example of scholarship that posits new media as fundamentally different than media forms that came before, see Mark J. P. Wolf, *The Medium of the Video Game* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001). For an example of scholarship that posits that that which seems "new" in new media has in fact long been present in more traditional forms, see Peter Ramey, "*Beowulf*'s Singers of Tales as Hyperlinks," *Oral Traditions*, 26.2 (2011).

77 Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).

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Chapter One:
Sadomasochism and/as Literature: Sade, Sacher-Masoch, and Réage

"Pornographic writing retains this in common with all literature—that it transforms the flesh into word."

- Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*[1]

Key to the set of desires that has come to be known as "sadomasochism" is their relationship to language. More than any other mode of sexual expression, the combination of pain and pleasure has entered (and continues to enter) the popular consciousness through its representation in literature. Any understanding of BDSM in the contemporary American or Western European contexts must therefore account for kinkiness as a literary phenomenon as well as a lived experience—or rather, for kinkiness as a lived experience that is continuously being imagined, re-imagined, and brought to life through its textual manifestations, as it has been for more than 200 years.

From the time that sadism and masochism were first given names, the semiotics of "kink" (the term that stands throughout this project for the fluid and dialectic dynamics of pain, pleasure, domination, submission, etc. that drive, among other manifestations of desire, the practices of BDSM) have been tied up in the world of text. At the moment in European history when, as Michel Foucault famously argues, the vagaries of human sexual practice were being corralled into categories, sexualities, and perversions, many pleasures were christened with latinate constructs (like "homosexuality") or the names of biblical or mythical characters (like "onanism").[2] Yet, in the wide landscape of desires as outlined by German sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his 1886 compendium *Psychopathia Sexualis*, only sadism and masochism were named for authors.[3] From Krafft-Ebing's time to the present day, perhaps the only exception to this rule has been the term "sapphism," in which the poet Saphho stands metonymously for sexual contact between women—and, by extension, the term "lesbianism," in which the island of Lesbos stands metonymously for Sappho. Recourse to literature, it seems, is reserved for those supposedly perverse desires that, to the makers of discourse, seem most comprehensible and thus best signified through the authors who put such longings into language.

As namesakes, the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch make for uncertain ontological subjects. Are they patients, the most infamous sufferers of inflictions that have entered the dictionary under their own names?[4] Or are they authors, the best-known writers of a nexus of now notably literary pleasures? What, for that matter, might it be mean to author sadism and masochism? To author is to write, but also to create, to parent, and to bring into being. This idea that, when it comes to kink, writing might be the same as creating—that language might provide the spark that compels the sexual subject to erotic action—underlies the present discussion, in which literature and conceptualizations of sadomasochism are understood as co-constituted cultural constructs. What came first, the longing to whip and to be whipped, or the novels that gave these longings their names?

The answer to this question relates as much to the embodied qualities of text as a medium as it does about experiences of pain and pleasure.

In the *History of Madness*, Foucault writes, "Sadism is not a name finally given to a practice as old as Eros; it is a massive cultural fact which appeared precisely at the end of the eighteenth century, and which constitutes one of the greatest conversions of Western imagination: unreason transformed into delirium of the heart, madness of desire, the insane dialogue of love and death in the limitless prescription of appetite."[5] The precise moment of unreason and delirium which Foucault is naming as the origin point of sadism is the French Revolution. However, the end of the eighteenth-century is also the moment of another set of revolutionary acts: the writing of the Marquis de Sade. Indeed, what Foucault describes as a "massive cultural fact," characterized by a "madness of desire," sounds less like sadism as it is commonly defined (taking pleasure in the pain of others) and more like "sadeianism": the cruelties and excesses perpetuated by Sade's insatiable libertines.[6] Foucault's vision of this "conversion of Western imagination," the very birth of sadism, could serve as a dust-jacket summary of Sade's *Justine*, *Juliette*, or *The 120 Days of Sodom*. This is no coincidence; since the time of the French Revolution, Sade's writing has played a foundational role in the cultural history of sadomasochism. In ways that are both powerfully rich and yet often problematic, his texts have come to serve widely as source material for conceptualizing lived experiences of pleasure taken in pain.

Whether Foucault was right that sadism did not exist before the end of the eighteenth century is less interesting, to the media studies scholar, than whether sadism existed before Sade.[7] The former is a question about sex as such; the latter is a question about how sexual practices are shaped by the discourse that describes them. Of course, the answer to both questions is yes and no. Most likely, humans have desired to hurt and be hurt as long as they have desired anything at all. In a different sense, though, Foucault is surely right: that thing that we call sadism did not become semantically real until it emerged in writing—and until, from that writing, it was given a name. The same can be said of masochism. As Judith Butler has so compellingly demonstrated, linguistic subjects make sense of their bodies through language.[8] This is equally true for embodied sensations like pain and pleasure, which are themselves constructs of language. As I discuss in the introduction, this is a simple yet provocative claim. The idea that pain might be a function of language rather than its opposite runs counter to the arguments of thinkers like Elaine Scarry, who contends in her influential text *The Body in Pain* that suffering is fundamentally unrepresentable; indeed, says Scarry, far from engendering language, suffering destroys it.[9] Yet the relationship between Sade and sadomasochism models a different way of understanding the relationship between language and pain. Once rendered into words, sadism and masochism become interpreters of sensation and markers of identity, allowing them to bring experiences of the body into being. Though the history of sexological medicalization, in the context of which "sadism" and "masochism" were first coined, is a history of oppression, it is also a history of meaning-making—of making things matter, and of making them real. The realness of how kink feels cannot be separated from the textual history through which its meaning has been made.

Long after the earliest, clandestine circulation of Sade's texts at the turn of the eighteenth century, sadism and masochism as cultural constructs have continued to be

conceptualized and codified through their appearances in writing.[10] In its time, Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, published in 1870, was a bestseller, inspiring chatter about erotic suffering across Western Europe.[11] When Pauline Réage's *Story of O* appeared in Paris in 1954, it became the subject of ongoing controversy that reached far beyond France, ensuring its place as a hotly discussed pillar in what could be called the canon of sadomasochistic literature.[12] Over the past sixty years, *Story of O* has sold millions of copies and sparked numerous films and adaptations; for a period, it was one of the best-read contemporary French novels outside of France.[13] Today, E. L. James' *50 Shades of Gray* has become the latest in a lineage of texts to bring sadomasochism to the masses.[14] While its literary merits are questionable at best, its impact on the way that kink is being talked about in mainstream America (and worldwide) has been undeniable. To date, it has sold over 100 million copies and been translated into more than fifty languages.[15] It has likewise been a topic of discussion on innumerable talk shows, popular websites, and centers of mainstream debate.[16] For a huge number of people around the world, the *50 Shades of Gray* series is their only exposure to BDSM practices (or something like them).[17] What James describes in these novels, for many non-kinksters, is synonymous with kink.

As the case of *50 Shades* suggests, the long tradition of understanding practices of pain and pleasure through their representations in literature is not without its complications. There is a distinct danger in interpreting the desires of real people through fiction. Much of the most prominent secondary scholarship on Sade, Sacher-Masoch, and sadomasochism hinges on problematic assumptions about the line between kink as written and kink as lived: namely, that there is no such line. Perhaps due to its emphasis on fictional source material, such writing often perpetuates an abstract, retrogressive notion of the figures of the "sadist" and the "masochist" as archetypes rather than people. Psychoanalytic writing, such as that by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Gilles Deleuze, is most notable for relying heavily and often reductively on literature in its assessments of sadism and masochism.[18] Many otherwise insightful commentators also replicate this myopic focus on sadomasochism's representation in fiction, including Maurice Blanchot, Pierre Klossowski, Georges Bataille, and Roland Barthes.[19] Taking cues from these thinkers, contemporary work still commonly makes statements about those who take pleasure in pain without considering testimonials from flesh-and-blood kinksters. This abstracted approach to theorizing sadomasochism, which perpetuates pathologization and denies sexual subjects a role in their own meaning making, is highly problematic. At times, it reads like queer theory might if it were written by straight scholars who thought gayness was a curious sickness that existed only in books.

With that said, there exists in the association between literature and sadomasochism a foundation of truth. In life as in literature, kink and language are meaningfully and fundamentally linked. In addition to the fact that contemporary concepts of pain and pleasure have evolved along with their representation in novels, naming and discourse are of central importance to today's BDSM communities. As Margot Weiss demonstrates in *The Techniques of Pleasure*, the discursive assemblage that BDSM communities use to identify themselves and their practices is complex and at times contested. Semantic points as basic as how to write the abbreviation for sadomasochism (SM, S/M, S&M, or simply BDSM?) become sites of debate that speak to larger questions

about how kinksters understand their identities through language and how they position themselves in relation to the discursive histories from which their identities emerge.[20] What is more, the metaphors through which BDSM practitioners conceptualize and communicate their play practices are highly literary. When partners take part in prearranged kinky activities, they engage in "scenes."[21] What demarcates the boundaries of these scenes is words. Partners construct the magic circle of the scene through discussion and verbal consent.[22] The circle is broken as soon as a partner speaks his/her "safeword," an utterance that ends the scene and shifts the shared fiction of play (a kind of collaborative, erotic authorship) back to reality.[23] In chapter four of this project I discuss BDSM communities, their histories, and their differences in more detail—especially as they relate to contemporary cultures of digital media. Many of these diverse communities share in common their emphasis on the importance of language.

Where language meets experiences of pain and pleasure, the boundaries of what is real and what is fantasy become fuzzy—and that is precisely the point. Literature that represents sadomasochism has long aroused and inspired the bodies of readers to replicate the fictional acts they read on the page. The exponential increase in the sale of handcuffs, blindfolds, and whips that has followed the popularity of *50 Shades* demonstrates this.[24] Fiction is inspiring a new wave of kinksters to act out scenes in their own bedrooms. In a related vein, BDSM as practiced by kinksters borrows from literariness to make sense of the liminal space that kink inhabits between real-life context (which gives kinky play its meaning) and pre-arranged fiction (which creates the sense of safety necessary to engage with real life). As I will discuss below, the authors whose names have been used to establish the language of erotic suffering also stand at the intersection of biography and literature. At times, their lives overlap with their fictions—or are perceived to overlap with their fictions—so notably that it can be hard to separate the writer from the written. "Language reaches its full significance when it acts directly on the senses," writes Deleuze in "Coldness and Cruelty," his extended essay on Sacher-Masoch and Sade, suggesting that literature is foremost a matter of pain and pleasure.[25] We might equally say that pain and pleasure are foremost matters of literature. Each cannot be understood without the other. Considered together, they speak to the hybridization of embodied sensations and their representation in media: the kinkster as cyborg, part lover and part text.[26]

In order to explore the relationship between sadomasochism and literature, I turn here to the three texts that have been, before the publication of *50 Shades of Gray*, arguably the most influential in shaping sadism and masochism as they are imagined in America and Western Europe from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the present: Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*, Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, and Réage's *Story of O*. In the case of *Venus in Furs* and *Story of O*, this selection has been self-evident; these works clearly stand out as the most widely read and discussed from their authors' oeuvres. The selection of *The 120 Days* requires more explanation. Sade is known less for one specific text than for his writing as a whole. *The 120 Days*, which was only published for the first time in 1904, has actually had less time to assert its cultural impact that *Justine* or *Juliette.* However, I have chosen *The 120 Days* because it is the text in which Sade most clearly articulates a system of connections between sexual violence and language that recurs throughout his work—

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and because it is a text that, far more than his more palatable and accessible works like *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, demonstrates how reading can itself hurt.

My goal in working with these three novels is to reposition them in discussions of pain, pleasure, and textuality. In doing so, I hope to suggest a new model of relation between literature and sadomasochism—a model that, drawing from Wendy Chun's notion of "race and/as technology," figures *sadomasochism both with literature and as literature*.[27] The key here is a return to the works of Sade, Sacher-Masoch, and Réage. For Krafft-Ebing, these texts and their authors were clinical subjects in a project of codification. For others, they are the raw stuff from which theory is shaped. For many more, they are popular discussion points to be referenced but not actually read. However, though these novels have been instrumentalized (and often misinterpreted), they are far more than instruments. A re-reading of them reveals that each already engages, in rich and at times surprising ways, with the relationship between pain, pleasure, and language. In all three, that set of desires called sadomasochism is intimately entangled with words. Together, Sade, Sacher-Masoch, and Réage offer an assemblage of alternate approaches to interpreting the deep-seated relationship between language and erotic pain. Their narratives explore whipping (a central metaphor that appears throughout the canon of sadomasochism) as text and text as whipping. They envision dominance and submission as discursive modes. Bruises and marks become the language through which flesh speaks back to the whip. In these foundational texts, long influential but often under-analyzed, sadomasochism is itself a literary medium and an embodied system of discourse, communication, and meaning that challenges the divide between language and the body.

Literary Namesakes: The Influence of Sacher-Masoch and Sade on Krafft-Ebing

Before moving into a discussion of these novels, I want to linger for a few moments over the act of naming that has made Sade and Sacher-Masoch household names. The conditions under which the terms "sadism" and "masochism" entered popular discourse merit scrutiny because they demonstrate the profound influence of literature over conceptualizations of sadomasochism as a set of desires experienced by real people. Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* in particular illustrates how fiction as much as fact shaped the late nineteenth-century medicalization of pain and pleasure, which in turn set the precedent for work by later psychoanalysts on which scholarly discussions of sadomasochism have long since been founded. Deconstructing Krafft-Ebing's references to Sacher-Masoch and Sade also reveals how the literature of erotic violence has functioned as a central reference point for culture at large. As a case study in the conflation of the canonical authors of kink and their biographies, and the conflation of" kinky" literature (an anachronistic phrase, perhaps, when referring to the works of authors who wrote long before the popularization of the term, but an apt appropriation of the adjective given its signification in the present project) with real-life kinky sex practices, *Psychopathia Sexualis* represents a pivotal document and speaks to broader dynamics in the relationship between pain, pleasure, and textuality.

It is worth nothing that, while *Psychopathia Sexualis* presents itself as a manual exclusively for mental health professionals who hope to save their patients from unjust legal sentences, the text was in fact widely read by a popular audience.[28] Originally published in 1886, it became an international best-seller and was issued in twelve revised editions (of ever-increasing size) over the course Krafft-Ebing's lifetime.[29] Presumably, many of its readers were more interested in the 500+ case studies included in the volume, which told the tales of patients and their proclivities in intriguing detail, than the abstract, interstitial prescriptions of the author reflecting on the nature of various and sundry "perversions." However, it is safe to say that, whatever the exact nature of its appeal, the text greatly influenced popular thinking. In addition to informing professionals' approach to their patients, Krafft-Ebing's representations of sadism and masochism, among many other so-called pathologies, would have played a central role in the way that readers understood their own desires. Like the characters in the books to which Krafft-Ebing makes reference, whose passions are often unlocked by reading erotic literature (more on this to come), readers of *Psychopathia Sexualis* would likely have made sense of their own sexual identities through Krafft-Ebing's engagement with literature.

Nowhere is Krafft-Ebing's recourse to literature more evident than in his section on masochism, which draws heavily from his interpretations of Sacher-Masoch and his work. To understand how greatly Sacher-Masoch's writing influenced Krafft-Ebing's, it is helpful to know the basic plot of *Venus in Furs*, Sacher-Masoch's infamously "masochistic" novel (a descriptor which is admittedly tautological). *Venus in Furs* opens as an unnamed frame narrator describes a dream in which he is visited by the Goddess Venus, who is chilly, wrapped in furs, and tantalizing in her beauty and her cruelty. The narrator awakes and heads to the home of his eccentric acquaintance Severin, where he notices on the wall of Severin's home a painting of a woman in furs, much like the Venus he has just dreamed of, with her shoe resting on the back of a man who kneels at her feet.[30] When the narrator asks about the painting, Severin hands him, by way of explanation, a manuscript derived from a diary he kept a handful of years before. This manuscript, which makes up the majority of the novel, is the story of Severin's relationship with Wanda, a young widow whom he idealizes and ultimately convinces to play the part of his cruel mistress. Along the way, Severin signs a contract acknowledging his role as Wanda's legal slave. Eventually, in a move at least partially orchestrated to fulfill Severin's own fantasies, Wanda leaves Severin for another man, but not before this new lover gives Severin his final whipping; the whip has been Severin's preferred implement of punishment, yet when it is wielded by another man he finds it unbearable. The novel ends with Severin's disavowal of his masochistic desires, and his insistence that men must wield power over women.

Writing within a medical rather than a novelistic tradition, Krafft-Ebing's discussion of masochism appears in a very different generic context, yet the similarities between his diagnoses and Sacher-Masoch's narrative are striking. That Krafft-Ebing is engaging with Sacher-Masoch is readily apparent; he talks about the author directly when he addresses his use of the term "masochism." The first edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis* followed the publication of *Venus in Furs* by only sixteen years. In 1886, when Krafft-Ebing's book reached the public, Sacher-Masoch was still a highly regarded contemporary author.[31] Krafft-Ebing's choice to use Sacher-Masoch's name to describe a sexual pathology was

therefore controversial and potentially slanderous.[32] Krafft-Ebing acknowledges this implicitly when he defends his choice of words by turning his readers' attention to Sacher-Masoch's own desires. He writes:

> During recent years facts have been advanced proving that not only was Sacher-Masoch the poet of masochism, but also that he himself was afflicted with this anomaly… As a man, Sacher-Masoch cannot lose anything in the estimation of his cultured fellow because he was afflicted with an anomaly of sexual feeling. As an author he suffered severe injury as far as the influence and intrinsic merit of his work is concerned, because when he eliminated his perversion from his literary efforts he was a gifted writer, and as such would have achieved real greatness had he been driven by normal sexual feelings.[33]

Here Krafft-Ebing's conflation of the fictional and the real, which drives his impulse to read real-life desires through literary representations, manifests explicitly in the logic by which he correlates Sacher-Masoch's writing and his sexuality. Krafft-Ebing first makes an appeal to realness: Sacher-Masoch was himself a masochist, he asserts (for what it is worth, the records of history enthusiastically support this fact), and therefore the choice of the word "masochism" to describe taking pleasure in pain does not represent slander but an extrapolation from fact.[34] Yet Krafft-Ebing also bring questions of realness back to Sacher-Masoch's fictional writing by claiming that Sacher-Masoch's "anomaly" should be blamed for what Krafft-Ebing sees as the poor quality of his fiction. For Krafft-Ebing then, Sacher-Masoch's pathological desires and the mediocrity of his writing are expressions of the same affliction. From cover to cover, Krafft-Ebing's manual is dotted with references to canonical literary authors and philosophers—including Plato, Rousseau, and Kant—yet it seems that Krafft-Ebing engages more extensively with writing by figures like Sacher-Masoch, whose work he deems of a lower caliber, because he feels justified in pathologizing the fiction written, the desires represented, and the author all at once.[35]

Despite Krafft-Ebing's low opinion of Sacher-Masoch as an author, it is clear how deeply Sacher-Masoch's story influenced Krafft-Ebing's thinking on masochism. Though Krafft-Ebing claims to have drawn his characterization of masochism from his many case studies (he includes nearly forty in his section on masochism alone), his basic definition of "the masochist" much more accurately describes Severin than any of the individual patient histories he provides. "By masochism I mean a particular perversion… where the affected individual, in sexual feeling and thought, is controlled by the idea of being completely and unconditionally subject to the will of a person of the opposite sex; of being treated by this person as by a master, humiliated and abused," writes Krafft-Ebing. "The masochist lives in fantasies, where he creates situations of this kind and often attempts to realize them."[36] If this is the masochist at "his" most fundamental (like Sacher-Masoch, Krafft-Ebing considers masochism a primarily male set of desires), Severin is masochism's poster boy. Time and again, Severin proclaims that he wants nothing more than to be unconditionally subject to the whims of a beautiful woman. Above all, he lives in fantasy. After reading stories in which cruelty figures, Severin is compelled by the very drive that Krafft-Ebing describes to realize such situations in real life. At some moments, Krafft-Ebing goes so far as to map

Severin's story onto the testimonies of his patients, interpreting their case studies through the language Severin uses to narrativize his own desires. In this way, Krafft-Ebing draws from Sacher-Masoch to formulate and ultimately replicate what Amber Jamilla Musser has described as the literary narrative of masochistic becoming.[37] If *Psychopathia Sexualis* was the gateway through which masochism entered mainstream discourse, literature did more than give masochism its name. It also shaped how masochistic desires were identified, defined, and interpreted.

Another important element of this relationship between *Venus in Furs* and *Psychopathia Sexualis*, one that history has frequently overlooked, is the original authorship of the word "masochism." Though Krafft-Ebing is often credited with coining the term, it may be more accurate to say that he popularized it.[38] The exact origins of the word remain unclear. Some scholars have pointed out that, elsewhere, Krafft-Ebing mentions how the term was proposed to him by an anonymous correspondent.[39] Others have suggested that "masochism" was already in use before the publication of *Psychopathia Sexualis* in underground ads, where it was deployed as a code between potential sexual partners.[40] This complication in the story of masochism's naming matters because it speaks to the "who" as well as the "what" of using Sacher-Masoch as a signpost for making sense of a sexual practice. Was the semantic link between literature, pain, and pleasure made by an erudite "expert," or did it emerge from within the discursive fields of sexual subcultures? That is, did Krafft-Ebing coin the term or did early nineteenth-century kinksters (to use another anachronistic yet apt term)? The former suggests that the terms of the relationship between sadomasochism and textuality were set by privileged, singular men. The latter suggests an alternate history in which literature empowered sexual subjects with the language to put their desires into words.

As for the word "sadism," also frequently credited to Krafft-Ebing, it was assuredly in use before it appeared in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, though Krafft-Ebing's text would have similarly popularized the term.[41] Sources place its first appearances as early as the 1830's, less than two decades after Sade's death in 1814. It is questionable, however, whether "sadism" could be called a word of the people. On the one hand, Sade's works were banned throughout Europe from the 1830's to the 1890's and only available through private sellers at great expense.[42] On the other hand, Sade's infamy spread with far fewer obstacles than did his book, and it is reasonable to imagine that those who first used his name to describe the experience of taking pleasure in giving pain had heard tales of the Marquis and his scandalous volumes but were not, in a first-hand sense, familiar with his work. Such instances serve as valuable reminders that language and textuality, though they often overlap so completely as to obscure the differences between them, are not in fact produced and received under identical circumstances. The materiality of a book as object lends a corporeality to the embodied language contained within, yet that same materiality also restricts its movement, leaving it vulnerable to other concerns of the flesh, like imprisonment (e.g. the seizure of texts) and destruction (e.g. book burning). It is not inconsequential that the word for sadism, following from Krafft-Ebing's popularization, is derived from the name "Sade" in dozens of languages—from German, French, Spanish, Italian, and English to Russian, Norwegian, Yiddish, and Welsh—including more than a handful of languages into which Sade's full works have never been translated.

Given the importance of Sacher-Masoch in the masochism section of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, what is the role of Sade's texts in Krafft-Ebing's formulation of sadism? Krafft-Ebing's engagement with Sade is less obvious in nature than his engagement with Sacher-Masoch. This may itself also be due in part to the limited availability of Sade's writing. In Krafft-Ebing's time, *Venus in Furs* was a breakaway hit; he would almost certainly have read the novel. By contrast, Krafft-Ebing himself notes that Sade's books were "fortunately" hard to find in the second half of the 1800's.[43] It is possible (or even likely) that Krafft-Ebing too, though he discusses Sade, never actually read any of Sade's writing. The result is that Sade takes on a kind of present absence in Krafft-Ebing's section on sadism. References to Sade appear mostly as footnotes, and even these footnotes primarily focus on speculations about the atrociousness of Sade the man, a kind of mythic figure of literary evil, rather engaging with his writing.

Still, in a number of key ways, I believe that we can see Krafft-Ebing's vision of sadism as sadeian. Many of the extreme examples of sexual violence that Krafft-Ebing cites (he groups everything from serial murder to domestic abuse under the heading of "sadism") read like scenes from the pages of Sade's novels. When Krafft-Ebing does discuss Sade, he deploys the type of erroneous, fast-and-loose biographical characterization that appears frequently in early writing on the Marquis—but with an important twist.[44] He calls Sade a "monster" of "lust and cruelty" who could only achieve sexual arousal "when he could prick the object of his desire until the blood flowed."[45] As a biographical claim, this is imaginative at best; though Sade, in his youth, certainly lived the life of the libertine, his biographers do not support Krafft-Ebing's peculiarly particular statement of his tastes, nor the larger accusation of Sade's monstrous cruelty.[46] Sade's *characters*, however, could certainly be called "monsters of lust and cruelty." Many of them, in fact, would likely relish the title. Yet, if Sade's writing is indeed the model for Krafft-Ebing's depiction of sadism, it is clear that Krafft-Ebing own thoughts on the matter were not so deeply affected by cruelty as represented by Sade. The give-away that Krafft-Ebing's sadism does not match Sade's is Krafft-Ebing's position on gender. "Sade declares himself unequivocally for the right of women to fuck," writes Angela Carter in *The Sadeian Woman*, "as if the period in which women fuck aggressively, tyrannically and cruelly will be a necessary stage in the evolution of a general human consciousness."[47] For all the horrors of the sadeian universe, it is a place of radical gender equality. Some of Sade's most tirelessly lustful and unapologetically destructive characters are women. So when Krafft-Ebing writes that, "in the intercourse of the sexes, the active or aggressive role belongs to the man [while] woman remains passive, defensive," it becomes obvious that Sade is more a cultural marker for Krafft-Ebing than a meaningful interlocutor.[48]

The difference in Krafft-Ebing's engagement with Sacher-Masoch and his engagement with Sade helpfully models two of the primary modes of slippage between sadomasochism and literature that also operate in broader cultural contexts. In the case of masochism, Krafft-Ebing insists on the interrelation of Sacher-Masoch's biography and his work as a way to justify naming a real-life "affliction" after an author of fiction. By contrast, in his discussion of sadism, Krafft-Ebing's recourse to biographical fact and his understanding of Sade's writing are messy and fraught. In this second case, the author and his work themselves become a fiction, a literary creation that in turn is put to use as a case

study. Both sections demonstrate how literary sadomasochism as a sub-genre of the novel left a distinctive mark on the writing of a foundational medical thinker at this pivotal moment of psychological categorization. They also demonstrate how Sacher-Masoch and Sade have themselves become figures betwixt and between. Part biography, part text, part pathology, part mastery, their legacies mirror the very co-mingling of embodiment and textuality found in their texts. Straddling modes of knowledge and modes of meaning-making, they themselves becomes semantic tools.

The Legacy of the Marquis de Sade: Text, Materiality, and the Body in Excess

Sade the libertine, Sade the pervert, Sade the criminal, Sade the prisoner, Sade the revolutionary, Sade the glutton, Sade the writer: frantic, compulsive, limitless in his lust and in his words. These are the many faces of the Marquis de Sade as he has been explained, derided, co-opted, and/or celebrated by his late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentators. As a result, he has come down through history as an author whose texts are imagined to be inextricable from his own erotic life and the embodied practices of his writing. One need look no further than the movie *Quills* (2000)—in which the Marquis features as a dangerous, middle-aged pornographer with a sexual allure so overpowering that even the staff at the mental asylum where he is imprisoned cannot resist his allure—to see that Sade's appeal in contemporary popular culture likewise hinges on the idea of the tantalizingly uncertain divide between his writing and his own desires.[49] A founding figure of sadomasochism, he epitomizes the amalgam of life, textuality, and sexuality that builds around formulations of pain and pleasure and/as literature. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the discussions that have surrounded what is often referred to as his masterpiece, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, a text that itself insists on inextricable links between embodied excess and the painful, material experience of readership.[50]

In a sense, Sade's legacy, which has so shaped contemporary concepts of sadomasochism, begins in a small town in Provence: Lacoste. The Chateau de Lacoste stands out like a silhouette against the clear Provençal sky.[51] Perched atop a rocky outcropping on the ochre hills of the Languedoc-Rousillon region, it looks from afar like a long-forgotten ruin. Just visible below the castle is the town of Lacoste: a cluster of blue-shuttered houses trailing up an incline to the castle. Up close, the path that leads to the crumbling chateau is steep and uneven. At the top, the castle, its heavy wooden doors barred, overlooks the valley below. In spring, the orchards bloom, lush and fragrant; in fall, the trees become a patchwork of oranges and reds. Positioned in the grass near what was once the entrance to the chateau, a bust, larger than life, stands on a pedestal: the gleaming marble likeness (or rather, an artist's imagining of his likeness) of Donatien Alphonse François, the last Marquis de Sade.

Enamored readers of Sade, a motly crew though we may be, began making the pilgrimage to Lacoste, Sade's ancestral home, as early as 1948, when André Breton's surrealist circle made the trip from Paris to experience the spectral presence of (as Apollinaire famously called him) the "Divine Marquis."[52] In Breton's day, the castle was truly a ruin, destroyed like so many aristocratic estates during the French Revolution. Yet

something remained in these ruins, something surprisingly sentimental and notably human. Sade began his life a wealthy libertine and ended it a prisoner. Of his many abodes along the way, from his mansions to his apartments to his cells, Lacoste was the place that he considered home.[53] As a young scoundrel pursued by the law, he returned loyally and compulsively to Lacoste, even when it meant he would surely be captured and perhaps even executed. From Sade's political polemics, spoken through the mouths of his pitiless libertine protagonists, it often seems as if he loved no one and nothing beside his pleasures and his freedom.[54] But Lacoste he loved, and it is not hard to see why.

Today, at first glance, the Chateau de Lacoste still looks much like a ruin. Large chunks of rock have fallen from the sides of the structure. Ceilings and walls have caved in, exposing rooms to the elements. However, part of the castle still stands—and that part, it turns out, is no ruin at all. In 2001, it was purchased and renovated (over the subsequent decade) by the fashion mogul Pierre Cardin.[55] A theater that Cardin has built in the nearby quarry from which the stone for the chateau were cut now plays host to an annual theater festival. In fact, Cardin owns many of the properties in Lacoste. Most of what he has not purchased is owned by Georgia's Savannah College of Art and Design, which uses the town as the home base for a semester-long, undergraduate study abroad program.[56] During one of my visits to Lacoste, I happened to be sitting in the central square (such as it is) when a bus-load of tired, excited art students arrived from their overnight flight from Atlanta. Suddenly, the silent, shuttered town came to life. Once the domain of aristocracy and then the domain of the citizens of Provence, Lacoste has once again passed into the hands of rich men and seekers of beauty.

If you chat with Lacoste's twenty-first-century residents over a *petit cafe*, those whose families have lived in Languedoc-Rousillion for centuries, you will find that many of the locals would prefer that their town be known for something other than an infamous pornographer. The owners of Sade's second family residence, a more modest home ten miles away in Saumane, have gone even further to distance themselves from their house's history.[57] A tall metal fence surrounds the property; no signs or markers have been posted to clue in passers-by to its storied past. By contrast, the owners of the Sade's third residence, a mansion in nearby Mazan that has been converted into a four-star boutique hotel, are proud of their associations with the Marquis.[58] Morning coffee comes with an explanation of how Sade staged plays right here in the dining room.[59]

Why travel to Lacoste, of all places, when so little of Sade's history remains there? Because it is a homecoming, of sorts. If Sade is the father (forgive the heteronormative metaphor) of sadism as we know it today, Lacoste is the ancestral home of contemporary kink as much as it is the ancestral home of Sade. Sade did not write his books here; the vast majority of them were composed in prison or in asylums. Yet, as many have argued, Sade's texts extend far beyond the walls of confinement, outward into the world of impossible appetite and insatiable fantasy. Long after Sade relinquished his aristocratic title and became Citizen Sade, he continued to write tales populated with libertines of the upper crust, such as could only exist in a then bygone era. In this way, for all their relentless lust and cruelty, Sade's fictions exhibit a kind of nostalgia, a longing that points like an arrow back to Lacoste, the place of Sade's birth and the place where his pleasures, in the form of orgies and other debaucheries, became real.[60] Lacoste is the birthplace of kink in that it is

the birthplace of the person who, to draw from Foucault's assertion about the origins of sadism, wrote it into being. The image of the castle as such has also entered the visual rhetoric of sadomasochism as a centerpiece in the fantasy of pain and pleasure. It plays an important role in Sade's own writing, such as in *The 120 Days of Sodom*, and it will appear again in Réage's *Story of O*. In the American context, it lends an alluring quality of "European-ness" to daydreams of sexual transgression.

Lacoste matters because it marks the human life behind the tales of the Divine Marquis. It puts the tangible back into the fantasy by drawing attention to the ground that Sade called home. This materiality is an important antidote to the abstraction that dominates much writing on Sade. At the same time, it underscores the materiality of Sade's own writing. Setting aside the diligent work of his more recent biographers, Sade comes down to us more as a myth than as a man.[61] No portraits of him made in his lifetime exist today. The mostly commonly reproduced renderings of Sade are conjured from vague descriptions in court records or from the interpretations of artists like Man Ray. Above all, what has survived of Sade is his writing, and it is through his writing that the majority of his commentators claim to know him. In a practical as well as a conceptual sense then, Sade is a figure who cannot be separated from his textual production. Yet, rather than speculate as to Sade's psychological makeup as others have done, I am interested in the mechanisms of this conflation of life and text, and how the slippage between the two can speak to broader dynamics in the relationality between pain, pleasure, and literature. That is, I am interested in highlighting rather than eliding the messy role of the material body.

Like Sacher-Masoch, Sade is commonly presumed to have drawn from autobiographical experience in composing the erotic scenes of his fiction. Yet, whereas in the case of Sacher-Masoch this presumption is largely accurate, in the case of Sade it is far more often erroneous, but also more telling. That Sade might be confused with his fictional worlds—in which libertines rape, disembowel, and slaughter for pleasure—demonstrates the considerable extent to which sadomasochistic literature has incited imaginations to blur the line between fact and fantasy. The incorrect assumptions that frequently appear in discussions of Sade primarily take two forms. In the first, it is assumed that Sade himself must have lived a life identical to those he wrote about, or at least that he would have if he could. In this portrayal, he is the ultimate sadist; the use of Sade's name to define the set of desires called sadism in turn is used to define Sade. In fact, the few crimes for which Sade was actually imprisoned, while troublingly nonconsensual, seem tame in comparison to those he describes in his books.[62] The second assumption is that "sadistic" is in fact an accurate description of Sade's writing. Though erotic violence figures strongly in his works, the full range of desires that appear in a text like *The 120 Days of Sodom* can hardly be contained by such a narrow characterization. While many of Sade's libertines live to wield the whip, others are equally passionate about *being* whipped. Sade's characters are equal opportunity in their dedication to the logic of absolute sexual license, which dictates that it matters to "fuck" and thereby "fuck things up," to quote Carter.[63] Although the word "sadistic" has been used as an instrument of pathologization, the concept of the "sadeian" continues to defy categories.

While the conflation of Sade's biography and his fiction has often led to misconceptions, such conflations have at others times lent themselves to compelling

interpretations of the role of embodiment in Sade's authorship. Most striking for the purposes of tracing the relationship between lived experiences and literature is theorizing that puts into dialogue Sade's own embodied materiality and his writing of *The 120 Days of Sodom*, composed in 1785 while Sade was a prisoner in the fabled Bastille. *The 120 Days* is the earliest of Sade's immense pornographic volumes, followed later by *Justine* and *Juliette*. In one sense, *The 120 Days* is a novel with a plot. Four rich and powerful libertines enlist and/or capture a party of children, well-endowed young men, female storytellers, and members of their own families to lock up in a secluded castle. Using this party, they stage elaborate and often violent sexual acts (more than half of the party is murdered) over the course of four months and then return home. In another sense though, *The 120 Days* is better understood as a kind of compendium, not entirely unlike *Psychopathia Sexualis*.[64] The vast majority of the text is taken up by lists of increasingly elaborate and alarming sexual acts, relayed to the company by the storytellers. In the text's introduction, the author states that his goal is to create the "most impure tale that has ever been told," in which every possible erotic act that can be imagined has been put on the page.[65] *The 120 Days* then is an attempt at exhaustiveness, a project of overwhelming proportions that aims to account for every iteration of human desire. Sade completed only the first of the novel's planned four sections, one for each month. The result is a text of approximately 500 pages. Had it been completed, *The 120 Days* today would come into our hands as a tome approximately 1,200 pages long: a textual object of excessive materiality.[66]

Of Sade's many works, *The 120 Days* has the most storied history. It is this story that has so intrigued scholars interested in the relationship between Sade as embodied sexual subject and as writer. The conditions under which Sade wrote *The 120 Days* are themselves the stuff of fantasy and tragedy.[67] Having already spent more than seven years as a prisoner in the royal dungeons, Sade wrote the text in secret over the course of only twenty consecutive evenings. Fearing his writing would be taken from him by his guards, he wrote in miniscule handwriting on sheets of paper less than five inches wide, which he attached end to end and rolled into a forty-foot-long scroll he could hide between the stones in the walls of his cell. On July 4 of 1789, however, Sade was transferred to the Charenton asylum. His possessions, including the scroll, still remained in the Bastille when it was stormed on July 14. For the rest of his life, Sade mourned *The 120 Days*, which he thought destroyed or lost in the rubble from that fateful siege. In fact, the manuscript had been recovered by a revolutionary, and for the next two centuries it remained in private hands. Published in German in 1904, it first appeared in the original French in installations between 1931 and 1935. In 2014, for the first time ever, the scroll itself was made available for public viewing after its acquisition by the Musée des Lettres et Manuscrits in Paris.[68] Unfurled under the glass of a long, narrow display case, it is truly an overwhelming and awe-inspiring object: dense with what seems impossibly small handwriting, browning and intimately corporeal. It magnifies the physicality that makes the story of the text's history so captivating, calling to mind the body of the Marquis hunched over the scroll in the glow of candlelight.

The image of Sade writing such ecstatic tales from inside his cell has inspired many to read *The 120 Days of Sodom* (and, by extension, Sade's writing more broadly) through the embodied conditions of its production. "It was prison, the experience of oppression, that transformed the rake into the philosopher," writes Carter. The confinement of his

body, which "deprived [him] of the fact of flesh," drove him to write into being a substitute world to both replace and destroy the one he could not possess: "a desolate charnel house of the imagination."[69] Here the often seen image appears of the composition of *The 120 Days* as a frantic explosion of the body, an overflow of desires that, since they could not be realized from within Sade's cell, poured themselves onto the page. Bataille, in *Literature and Evil*, describes Sade as writing the manuscript of *The 120 Days* with "his own blood, sweat, and semen."[70] Indeed, Sade wrote to his wife that, when he discovered the scroll had been (ostensibly) lost in the storming of the Bastille, he cried "tears of blood."[71] For both Sade and his commentators alike, *The 120 Days* stands out in the Marquis' oeuvre as the text that most clearly speaks to the inextricable connection between writing and the author's body.

In her essay "Must We Burn Sade?", Simone de Beauvoir uses this tale of *The 120 Days of Sodom* to reframe the connection between literature and sadomasochistic desire through images of embodied excess. Beauvoir is struck by the idea of Sade as an imprisoned glutton: one whose appetite for food seems to her as bottomless as his appetite for writing erotic fiction. Indeed, though reports tell us that Sade cut a slim and dashing figure before his confinement, once in prison he gained a considerable amount of weight. In a letter written during his time in the Bastille, Sade lamented that he had "taken on… such an enormous amount of fat that [he could] hardly move about." A visitor to his cell similarly reported on his "immense obesity which hindered his movements."[72] For Beauvoir, the state of Sade's body—a body in excess—is important because it parallels the excesses of his textual production as epitomized by the production of *The 120 Days*. "From 1782 on," writes Beauvoir, "[Sade] demanded of literature alone what life would no longer grant him: excitement, challenge, sincerity, and all the delights of the imagination. And even then, he was 'extreme.' He wrote as he ate, in a frenzy."[73] The connections that Beauvoir articulates between gluttony and sexual frenzy were not lost on Sade. In *The 120 Days*, Sade himself was already drawing parallels between extremities of lust and consumption. Before embarking for the chateau, the libertines prepare for the decadent cruelties they will perform by throwing supper parties so lavish that "neighboring countries as well as all France [had to be] ransacked" for the "rarest and most exquisite" delicacies.[74] Those who produce food are also shown special respect in *The 120 Days*. At multiple points, the libertines and the author alike insist that, in the midst of rape and murder, the cooks must not be molested in any way.[75] Only the libertines and the storytellers share such privileged positions of safety within a landscape of violent caprice.

There is yet another layer to add to this discussion of the physicality of *The 120 Days* as it speaks to broader interplays between sadomasochism and literature. In addition to Sade as an embodied figure and the text's history of materiality, it is valuable to consider the way that *The 120 Days* impacts the bodies of its readers as well. Carter asserts that one of the defining traits of pornographic literature is that it reminds readers of their bodies.[76] Unlike other forms of storytelling, the very labor of pornography is to rouse the reader to desire, to stir up sensation (rather than to invite readers to lose themselves in a story, an experience of disembodiment). *The 120 Days* complies with but also breaks this mold. It reminds readers of their bodies in ways that are potentially both arousing and unpleasant. The text begins with the type of narrative structure and careful detail of a pornographic

novel designed to enthrall. Yet its sheer length and its compulsion toward comprehensiveness make it, as many have noted, largely unreadable.[77] It is not only exhaustive; it is exhausting. Writing all of human sexuality is, needless to say, an impossible task, and it overwhelmed even Sade, who was not able to complete the work.[78] In this way the text is at once impotent, unachievable, and utopian: a half-written project whose aim is to communicate the "incommunicable," always yet-to-be-finished, existing in perpetual futurity.[79] Its fragmentary nature mirrors the experience of the reader, who attempts and (quite likely) fails to follow the 500+ pages of lists of increasingly violent and stomach-turning acts: gruesome tortures delivered with artful, libertine glee. On the broadest level, the project of this dissertation is to understand how embodied sensation can be communicated through seemingly disembodied media. *The 120 Days* models an important answer to this question by demonstrating that, in its very form, a narrative about sexual violence can also perform a sexual violence upon its reader.

Language as Domination in *The 120 Days of Sodom*

In *The 120 Days*, language is itself a key tool in dynamics of domination. The narrative can be understood as a celebration of the power of language as much as an enumeration of pleasures. Throughout the text, words serve as the medium through which sexual excitement is communicated to the body. They also serve the function of the "top," who tells the libertines what sexual acts to perform, as well as the functions of the whip, that symbol for ever-impending punishment that recurs throughout the literature of sadomasochism.[80] The role of language in *The 120 Days* suggests a model of relationality between text and pleasure in which words are fundamental to sadomasochistic erotics.

Language is central to the narrative mechanisms of *The 120 Days*, which is structured around the telling of erotic stories. At the heart of the libertines' elaborate scheme is the belief that nothing so arouses the body as the spoken word. In the novel's introduction, the author (or it might be more accurate to say the introduction's narrator, since the narrative begins in the introduction, and so the introduction itself comprises part of the fiction) explains this phenomenon as follows:

> It is commonly accepted amongst authentic libertines that the sensations communicated by the organs of hearing are the most flattering and those whose impressions are the liveliest; as a consequence, our four villains, who were of a mind to have voluptuousness implant itself in the very core of their beings as deeply and overwhelmingly as ever it could penetrate, had, to this end, devised something quite clever indeed… The plan was to have described to them, in the greatest detail and in due order, every one of debauchery's extravagances… all of what is termed in libertine language its passions.[81]

In order to hear these "extravagances" described for their pleasure, the libertines hire four experienced female prostitutes to serve as their storytellers. Over the four months of their stay, each storyteller is expected to deliver "meticulous reports" of 150 different examples

of debauchery, taken from their own experiences. For their part, the libertines and their entourages, gathered together in the main hall, "were to pay close heed, were to be mentally heated, and were to end by extinguishing… the conflagration the storytellers were to have lit." That is, the libertines, aroused by the storytellers' tales, plan to re-enact them. Remarks the author-narrator, "Nothing [is] more voluptuous in this project than the luxurious manner whereby it was carried out."[82] According to both the libertines and the narrator then, the most exciting element of *The 120 Days*, which catalogues all possible desires, is the mediation of sadomasochistic erotics through language.

This should surprise us. In a text overrun by bodies stimulated and tortured in nearly innumerable ways—from anal sex on one end of the spectrum to the eating of human eyes on the other—it is notable, to say the least, that the spoken word should leave the "liveliest impression." When Sade writes that the "voluptuousness" of language will "implant itself in the very core of their beings as deeply… as it could penetrate," words take on the job of the active and well-endowed sexual subject: a "fucker," in the parlance of *The 120 Days*. The storytellers' tales become the rigid phallus that the libertines, who adore being anally penetrated by the young men in their party, eagerly wait to receive. The very volume that is *The 120 Days* cannot be separated from this storytelling. These "recitations" make up the majority of the text; the novel itself seeks to "penetrate."

From his notes, it seems Sade took quite seriously the notion that the libertines could only repeat with their bodies those sexual acts that had first been communicated through language. Included with the scroll on which *The 120 Days* was composed is a short set of directions that Sade wrote to himself for completing and revising the manuscript. These directions include tips for keeping straight Sade's extensive cast of characters ("keep a notebook [with] the names of all those who play important roles") and ideas for tortures not already included in the narrative (have a woman "swallow a snake which… feeds upon her entrails"). Importantly, they also include the imperative, "Above all never have the four friends [i.e. the libertines] do anything until it has first been recounted. You have not been sufficiently scrupulous in that connection."[83] This bit of appended material offers an important window into Sade's vision for the connection between sexuality and language in *The 120 Days*. For all their power and planning, the libertines can only repeat what the storytellers have described. In this sense, it is language rather than flesh that is the primary and most potent agent of pain and pleasure in the text. If it is true, as Deleuze writes, that "words are at their most powerful when they compel the body to repeat the movements they suggest," the words of *The 120 Days* are immensely powerful.[84]

The power of language to compel the body also extends to the relationship between *The 120 Days* and its readers, as described by the author-narrator. Initially, the stakes of the narrative are stated in such superlative, grandiose terms that they seem acorporeal: as mentioned, the author-narrator seeks to put forth "the most impure tale that has ever been told."[85] Almost immediately though, these stakes are revised, adjusted to the humble scale of the individual human body. Though the text aims to arouse, the narrator-author admits that not all of the scenes described will excite every reader. Yet, no matter: at the least, the book will contain something for everyone, we are told, and that something will stir us as desiring, embodied subjects. "There are amongst [these pages] a few which will warm you to the point of costing you some fuck," assures the author-narrator, "and that, reader, is all

we ask of you."[86] Just as the libertines' elaborate plan might be simplified to the re-enacting of stories, the exhaustive and intricate text of *The 120 Days* states its simple goal as bringing readers to orgasm through the pleasures of the text.

In a narrative world where language has the superlative power to master the body, power belongs to those who master language. As the four months that the libertines spend at the chateau wear on, their treatment of their captives becomes more and more ghastly. Yet the storytellers remain immune to danger. To the contrary, they are themselves dangerous. Sade writes that, even when the other party members cowered at the thought of their fate in the chateau, the storytellers "knew very well they were there as sacrificers and priestesses rather than victims."[87] Whereas the libertines demand that the other members of the group must go naked, the storytellers remain "magnificently dressed as upper-class Parisian courtesans."[88] When they tell their stories, they sit at the front of the assembly on a throne.[89] In this kingdom, the storytellers rule, reigning through their command over the language of body.

Likewise, language and textuality set the rules for life at the castle and the terms of the libertines' tyrannies. The everyday routines and regulations observed by the libertines and their captives—when they rise, where they relieve themselves, whom they can penetrate and how—are dictated by a very specific set of thirty-five pre-written statutes.[90] These statutes function like a contract (a trope, like the whip, that figures frequently in the literature of sadomasochism) between the libertines and their subjects, who, having no choice but to consent, sign with their tears: each and every one cries upon hearing the statutes read aloud.[91] The statutes also stand as a contract between text and reader, and a contract between Sade and himself. Over the next 500 pages, these rules will dictate the scenarios through which the author structures his narrative, such as what scenes Sade can describe and when. Once composed by those with authority, whether the libertines or Sade himself, these written commandments take on authority of a higher order. Rendered into language, they become binding regulations that not even those who wrote them can break. In *The 120 Days*, language, once uttered, must be respected and obeyed.

However, the narrative also complicates this equation of language with power. The libertines have hired the storytellers expressly because they imagine that their way with words will be arousing. Yet, not infrequently, the libertines complain about the inadequacies of the storytellers' tales. One of the four libertines interrupts Duclos, the first of the storytellers, as she recounts her childhood dalliances with two libidinous monks. Unsatisfied with her level of description, he chides her: "Your narrative must be decorated with the most numerous and searching details… The least circumstance is apt to have an immense influence upon the procuring of that kind of sensory irritation we expect from your stories." For example, he complains, "I have not the faintest notion of your second monk's prick, nor any idea of its discharge. In addition, did he frig your cunt, pray tell, and did he have you dangle his device? You see what I mean by neglected details."[92] Without these details, it seems, the story does not arouse. Who holds the power in this moment? Only the storyteller can speak the words that will sufficiently "irritate" the senses of the libertines. The libertines, however, can demand when, how, and in what detail the storytellers speak. At such times, language becomes a tool for self-domination. The libertine listener longs to be topped by the language that will act upon his body. Displeased

with the effects of a sub-optimal speaker, he takes hold of the word-as-whip and demands that this verbal domination fit his desires. Through language, he tops from the bottom.[93]

As an incomplete work, *The 120 Days* sends its own mixed message about the power of language in relation to the body. After the first month of storytelling, the text quickly devolves into notes. Like the storyteller who speaks with insufficient detail, Sade's text fails to describe in any but the most cursory fashion the proliferation of sexual acts the author planned to address. Carter writes that, in pornographic literature, "the text has a gap left on purpose so that the reader may, in imagination, step inside it."[94] In this light, one might read *The 120 Days*, as it has come down to us in its incompletion, as a particularly inviting text, one that leaves more than ample space for readers to step inside its gaps and try to fill them with their own erotic imaginations. By filling these gaps, readers enter with the text something like Hegel's dialectical pact between master and slave. The text dominates by forcing upon its readers a seemingly endless litany of violent sexual acts. Whether these arouse, disgust, or simply exhaust us, they compel the body. Readers, in turn, must bring their textual master (i.e. the novel) into being by completing and enlivening the words on the page. This is what Gaston Bachelard calls the reciprocal ecstasy of the poetic image, brought to life in the body of the reader.[95] In the model of relationality between text and body that *The 120 Days* proposes, language is the key to domination. Yet language also needs the body to dominate. If it cannot incite its pain and pleasures, it remains inanimate, insufficient, and powerless.

Venus in Furs: Media as Whip, Media as Lover

Language is similarly central to the constructions of pain and pleasure proposed by *Venus in Furs*. However, Sacher-Masoch's text serves as a useful complement to Sade's because it interprets the medium of this centrality differently. Whereas, in *The 120 Days*, the power of language most commonly manifests in the spoken word, the importance of language in *Venus in Furs* can be located in its protagonist's preoccupation with a wide range of written (and visual) media. Media itself quickly comes to serve as the object of primary erotic fascination for Severin, as well as a tool of domination. Sacher-Masoch's masochist submits under the whip of writing. In this way, *Venus in Furs*, read in contrast to the associations of language and power in *The 120 Days*, points back to the importance of literature.

Traditionally, scholars interested in the role of language in *Venus in Furs* have focused on the contract signed by Severin and Wanda. In signing the contract, Severin ostensibly gives his freedom and control of his body over to Wanda.[96] Emphasizing the mystifying power of this document, Deleuze writes, "While the contract implies certain conditions like the free acceptance of the parties… the law that it generates always tends to forget its own origins and annul these restrictive conditions."[97] That is, the contract, once written, exerts a control that extends even beyond its own restrictions. Undoubtedly, the contract is of considerable symbolic importance. Writing codifies and solidifies the terms of the relationship between mistress and slave. Yet, I think it is a mistake to take this contract too seriously; Wanda and Severin themselves do so only intermittently. Like so much else in the novel, the signing of the contract is best understood as a performance. Both Wanda

and Severin seem to know that it is largely for show, a prop in an ongoing fantasy.[98] What is more notable about the contract is that it plays with the blurry line between fantasy and reality. It lays claim to the real, the idea that Severin must not "really" belong to Wanda, but uses the language of a flight of fancy. This is most clearly indicated by the inclusion of the clause that dictates that "cruel mistress" Wanda must "appear as often as possible in furs" (Severin loves nothing more than a beautiful woman in furs).[99] While this may seem a small condition, it serves as a reminder that the contract has in fact been written as much, if not more so, to please the one who will cede power as the one who will gain it. It is the textual document that serves as mediator between dialectic poles of power.

As mentioned, *Venus in Furs* can be read as largely autobiographical. Intriguingly, many of those events from the novel that Sacher-Masoch did not draw from real life in fact came to fruition after the book's publications. The author's second wife entered his life by writing to him as "Wanda"; later, a correspondent who called himself "the Greek" (the name given to the lover whom Wanda runs away with in *Venus in Furs*) captivated Sacher-Masoch with his epistolary advances.[100] In the web of desires and events that surround the text, literature is both the product of and the instigator of sadomasochistic pleasures. This narrow divide between fact and fiction, mediated by textuality, is replicated in the novel itself. For example, the frame narrator and Severin share conspicuously similar fantasies, tastes in books and art, and writing styles. The story that Severin tells in his diary seems somehow to be an extension of the frame narrator's dream. Though Severin says that the manuscript he hands the frame narrator has been drawn from his diary, implying a mimetic relation to reality, the diary conceit becomes less and less plausible over the course of the novel. At one moment, Severin seems to be writing from a prison cell, with no access to pen or paper.[101] Increasingly, the narrative strays from the plausible into surreal, erotic tableaux vivants. In the villa where Wanda and Severin live as mistress and slave, "three beautiful negresses" periodically emerge as if from nowhere to assist Wanda in doling out the whip.[102] In a scene that recalls the dream sequences of Luis Bunuel's *Belle de Jour*, the three women yolk Severin to a plow and whip him while he pulls the plow through the mud.[103] The effect of these moments of dreamlike blurring between fact and fiction is to bring the veracity of the diary as genre into question. All writing become the medium of fantasy, of pain and pleasure as erotic daydreams, with a tenuous relation to reality.

As in *The 120 Days*, language in *Venus in Furs* possesses a unique power over the body. In Sade's text, sexual encounters rendered into words arouse the libertines; Severin's desire too is roused by stories. He cites *The Lives of the Matyrs* as one of a number of works, read in his childhood, that sparked his taste for "horror mingled with intense pleasure."[104] However, whereas in *The 120 Days* words themselves often do the dominating, language in *Venus in Furs* is primarily a tool of domination, i.e. a medium through which domination is communicated or enacted rather than a primary agent. After Severin and Wanda sign the contract, for example, the shift in their roles—from lovers to mistress and her slave—is marked by a semantic shift. Severin may no longer call Wanda by her first name, and Severin must henceforth be known as Gregor. Thereafter, the names the characters use for one another become codes denoting the oscillating status of their power dynamics. When Wanda uses the name "Severin," she demonstrates intimacy and vulnerability. By contrast, when she uses "Gregor," she asserts dominance. Early in their courtship, Severin makes a

gesture of his submission by writing a poem and giving it to Wanda while retaining no copy for himself.[105] In this way, he leaves himself, symbolized through his textual proxy, entirely in the hands of his cruel mistress. These demonstrations of dominance through the regulation of language speak to the importance of words in *Venus in Furs* as the mechanisms through which erotic power is established and maintained.

The relationship between textuality and sadomasochism in *Venus in Furs* is also foundational for the way that Severin makes sense of his desires. Fiction, poetry, theater, sculpture, and painting all figure prominently in the landscape of his fantasies. Severin spends much of the novel musing on the nature of love and longing, and nearly all of his thoughts on the matter are mediated through art. His vision of the beautiful, cruel Venus in whose image he shapes Wanda comes to him through paintings (like Titian's *Nude with a Mirror*) and epic narratives (like Homer's *Odyssey*). Before meeting Wanda, he reflects on his own inexperience in the ways of romance using metaphors of painting and performance: "In love... I am an amateur who never gets beyond the first brushstrokes, the first act of the play."[106] Severin sends his most important communications to Wanda by letter—for example, the poem in which he professes his desire to be dominated and the notes in which he attempts to end their relationship. *Venus in Furs* presents itself as a story with wide-reaching messages about desire and its perils—and Severin understands both of these things through media. Accordingly, the body merges with text at key moments in the narrative. Severin opens his manuscript by insisting that he "writes with no ordinary ink but with the red blood that drips from my heart."[107] When Wanda reads the contract aloud, she "punctuat[es] each sentence with a kiss."[108]

Severin claims to desire a cruel, beautiful woman who will whip and humiliate him. However, the primary object of desire in *Venus in Furs* is media itself. Sacher-Masoch's protagonist is driven more by his longing for artistic and textual representations of his fantasies than he is by an interest in enacting them. More than as a lover, Wanda appeals to Severin as the very incarnation of media. He is initially drawn to her because of her resemblance to a statue of Venus. Later, as if she were indeed a work of sculpture, he describes her as "cold marble."[109] Severin's romantic ideals have been derived from literature, and only a mistress who seems to have stepped from their pages will suit him. Wanda's presence, he says, "acts upon [him] like music, like poetry."[110] Eventually, she too comes to understand her role through media metaphors. When a lovesick young artist arrives to paint her portrait, she insists on showing him a scene she herself has "painted." She returns with a whip and positions Severin on the floor at her feet, creating a tableau that will become the inspiration for the large oil painting that so strikes the narrator.[111] In the years after their split, this painting is all that Severin retains of Wanda. Having begun as a sculpture, she is once again safely re-media-ized. Such media representations are the novel's primary bodies. The myth of Pygmalion, which Severin cites, makes for an apt reference—to a point.[112] The artist (Severin) brings his beautiful creation to life, only to discover that he preferred making love to her as a work of art all along.

Similar to *The 120 Days*, *Venus in Furs* too establishes and then productively complicates this equation of erotic power with language and media. At many moments, *Venus in Furs* reads as a cautionary tale. Severin tells the frame narrator that his story should serve as a warning about the perils of allowing women to dominate men.[113]

Elsewhere though, it seems the real warning the narrative communicates is to beware of the conflation of media and erotics. Often Wanda serves as the voice of reason—the "reality check"—who reminds Severin that his insistence on submission is a performance and his idealization of art is absurd. Wanda regularly asks Severin whether he really wants her to be cruel; she is highly aware of the media-inspired contrivances of her situation.[114] In a moment of frustration, she mocks Severin's melodrama by asking, "What play is that from?"[115] In contrast to Severin, her primary attachment is to reality. Early in the novel, Severin muses that he would like to be covered in the skin of a wolf and hunted. "When you were sewn in the wolf's skin, mauled by the hounds or stretched on the rack, poetry would quickly lose its charm," Wanda assures him.[116] Indeed, when Wanda's new lover whips him, Severin laments: "Apollo whipped all poetry from me."[117] Notably, this moment represents Severin's "cure," the moment when he abandons masochism. His desire to be dominated is conflated here with poetry. Once poetry leaves his body, so does his submission.

Like theorists who have used *Venus in Furs* to characterize real-life desires, Sacher-Masoch's novel attempts to reach out from the page. The pitfalls of this position are most apparent in the novel's approach to gender. Severin's vision of masochism is rigidly gendered (if not rigidly heterosexual).[118] In the world of the text, only men can be masochists, and only domineering, fur-clad women mistresses. Indeed, more than this text seeks to characterize a specific type of person ("the masochist"), it presents itself as being about universal gender truths. Severin ends his story by reflecting, "The moral is that woman… is man's enemy; she can be his slave or his mistress but never his companion."[119] This parting attempt to breach the boundaries between media and life underscores the potential perils of the entanglement between literature, pain, and pleasure. Like *50 Shades of Gray*, with its similarly reactionary gender politics and worrisome representations of consent, *Venus in Furs* continues to shape popular perceptions of kink—most recently in its (equally sexist) re-interpretation as a Tony-Award-winning Broadway play by David Ives, itself made into a movie by Roman Polansky.[120] In this sense, Sacher-Masoch's novel serves as an important reminder that, while the works considered here offer valuable ways to think about the rich relationship between pain, pleasure, and language, they themselves must also be interrogated and challenged.

Ultimately, *Venus in Furs* suggests a model of relationality between kink and text in which language serves as both whip and lover: i.e. both tool of domination and the beloved who dominates. In the sexual exchanges between Severin and Wanda, the pains and pleasures of the flesh are designed primarily to reflect their pre-existing representations in literature. For this reason, Severin's relation to media itself can be called kinky. He desires most those media objects that compel him to do their bidding; he seeks out pain and humiliation in order to please his masters, as he understands them: art and books. Like *The 120 Days*, *Venus in Furs* directs our attention to the relationship between reader and what is read as a dialectical dance of pain and pleasure, dominance and submission, media consumption and readerly compliance. However, it also pushes this thinking further by suggesting that we consider literature an experience of sadomasochism at the same time we consider sadomasochism an experience of literature. For Severin, giving oneself over to a book is as profound and pleasurable an act of submission as giving oneself over to a lover.

In the circuits of sadomasochism, words have power, but that does not mean that they are only instruments of domination. Language is equally important for submission. In his study of Sade, Bataille writes that the rhetoric of violence is always that of the sadist, never that of the masochist, since the one who feels pain cannot put that pain into words.[121] The final text I want to consider here challenges this position. It models a system in which words written on/by the body can give voice to experiences of erotic suffering, and the choice to speak or remain silent can offer complex opportunities for agency to the one who seems to fall before the whip. Of the many other notable literary works that explore pain and pleasure, I conclude then by adding to this discussion a novel that engages perhaps most explicitly with the relationship between sadomasochism and language.[122] This is a work that draws from and yet also subverts the dynamics of power and textuality as represented by Sade and Sacher-Masoch, one that shifts perspectives on fact and fantasy: Pauline Réage's *Story of O*.[123] Réage saw herself as writing directly in dialogue with Sade, and her engagement with erotic suffering both draws from and rebels against the representations of masochism found in *Venus in Furs*.[124] In writing *Story of O*, Réage both enters into and also solidifies the canon of sadomasochism.

Often misrepresented as a simple tale of submission, *Story of O* is in fact a novel about self-possession and transformation through erotic suffering. O, a fashion photographer, is brought by her lover René to a chateau on the outskirts of Paris, where she is inducted into a society of women who make themselves always available for sexual penetration and beatings. After her stay at the chateau, O returns to Paris, where René offers her to his much-adored half-brother, Sir Stephen. As René becomes increasingly enamored with Jacqueline, a model whom O photographs, the bond between O and Sir Stephen grows stronger. Sir Stephen decides that he would like to leave his mark permanently on O's body, and so sends her to Anne-Marie, a female mistress. Anne-Marie clamps a metal ring bearing Sir Stephen's name onto O's labia and brands her lower back with his initials. This time, upon returning to Paris, O herself seduces Jacqueline. Together O, Sir Stephen, René, Jacqueline, and Jacqueline's younger sister leave for a vacation on the Riviera. At the request of a local aristocrat, Sir Stephen brings O to a nearby lavish party, where she sits naked except for an owl mask while guests explore her body. On the novel's final page, a note has been made that, in a final chapter that does not appear in print, Sir Stephen attempts to abandon O, but she requests rather to be allowed to die.

Story of O is a third-person narrative, but the tale is very much told from O's perspective. Throughout the novel, O undergoes whippings, floggings, and aggressive sexual treatment. Readers experience these moments of intense pain, pleasure, and humiliation alongside O, through the interiority of her thoughts. For O, these moments are by no means easy. Her physical suffering is at times overwhelming. Yet she regularly describes the pleasure she finds in her pain: "sweetness mingled with the terror."[125] Erotic violence takes on a religious quality for O, who finds transcendence under the sting of the whip, and who feels she is worshipping before the altar of a god when her mouth is being used by an anonymous lover.[126] As the narrative progresses, O's independence, confidence,

and agency increase. She begins her journey, during her time at the chateau, in an attempt to please René. By the novel's end though, she has become a complex and active sexual subject. She dominates other women almost as frequently as she is dominated by men. Most importantly, she decides her own fate and her own level of suffering. Sir Stephen can give her permission to die, but first she must ask. Réage, in an interview conducted twenty years after *Story of O*'s publication, describes this as the logical conclusion of O's drive toward self-destruction and enlightenment: "O is trying to see how far she can go, to test the limits of herself."[127] Ultimately, O is a strong feminist figure who makes meaning through her pain and who controls the conditions of her own living, suffering, and dying.

For decades following its publication in France in 1954, *Story of O* was surrounded by a storm of controversy, conjecture, and legal action.[128] Written under a pseudonym (Pauline Réage is not the author's real name), the novel quickly became infamous for its content as well as its mystery. Called "the most scandalous book ever written," it was brought before a board of vice squad censors in 1955 and banned in the US until 1965.[129] The author's identity was debated for decades. Many insisted that *Story of O* could only have been written by a man, and since Jean Paulhan had penned the book's introduction, "Happiness in Slavery," some suspected him of being the author.[130] In the intervening time, "Réage" published supplemental material to *Story of O*, including the essay "A Girl in Love" and "Return to the Chateau," the final chapter of the novel.[131] Only in 1994, in an interview with *The New Yorker*, did translator and editor Dominique Aury (given name Anne Desclos), then 87 years old, publicly admit to authoring the text.[132] Aury had been Paulhan's long-time lover and coworker. *Story of O*, according to Aury, was written as a "love letter" to Paulhan.[133] Yet her accounts in "A Girl in Love" suggest that the process of composing the novel was as much a labor of self-exploration as of "seduction."

In the sixty years since its publication, the influence of *Story of O* has been as wide-reaching as the scandal it initially inspired. In addition to the millions of copies sold since its initial release, it was, for a number of years, one of the mostly widely read works of contemporary French fiction. It is a polarizing text. Many have rejected it as pornographic, misogynist, or otherwise without merit.[134] Many more have celebrated its literary achievement.[135] Indeed, it is beautiful written: arguably superior in its poetry to any other work in the sadomasochistic canon. Along the way, *Story of O* has inspired movie adaptations, graphic novels, and visual art, including an astounding series of illustrations by surrealist artist Leonor Fini.[136] Of the three texts discussed here, it is also the one that has been most widely adopted and adapted by contemporary BDSM communities. Like *The 120 Days* or *Venus in Furs*, the heart of *Story of O* is literary fantasy—but it is a literary fantasy far more realizable and far more resonant for those who practice kink in real life.

Story of O too has an ancestral home, so to speak: the chateau at Roissy, where O is taken by René. Roissy is perhaps the best-known element of Réage's novel. The image most commonly associated with *Story of O* is precisely that of O dressed in elaborate proto-fetish gear and passed mercilessly between men, all against the backdrop of the lavish country home that doubles as her temporary prison. With surprising frequency, discussions of *Story of O*, both scholarly and popular, focus almost exclusively on these opening scenes, though they make up only a quarter of the novel. This is likely because they are the most fantastical, the most expressly pornographic, the least concerned with the mundanities of

everyday life that dot the rest of the novel (e.g. O going to work, O buying new bras, O ordering ice cream)—but also because they are the least complicated. At Roissy, O is "content to rejoice in her chains."[137] On the Riviera, O no longer needs chains. She is her own slave and her own mistress.

Yet still, the vision of Roissy has its appeal—an appeal that speaks to *Story of O*'s characteristic positioning between life and literature. A place of pure aesthetics and libertinage, its sole purpose, as imagined, is the staging of complete sexual freedom. Roaming its red and black rooms are men who stand at the ready to take a woman any time of the day, and women who willingly agree never to close their legs (literally). These are the images for which *Story of O* has become a namesake in popular culture. Though there is, as yet, no such thing as "réagism," there are many things named for her novel. One of the many spin-off websites of Kink.com, America's top producer of kink and fetish pornography, runs under the name "The Training of O." Each video on the site features a sequence in which a new young woman is "initiated" into the ways of the chateau. Most visibly, it is the chateau that characterizes the sub-genre of fantasy that has emerged the reception from *Story of O*. Until 2010, when it was renamed, the site currently known as "The Training of O" was titled simply "Roissy."

For those interested in making such fantasies into a reality, visiting the site of the infamous chateau from *Story of O* is both easier and harder than making a pilgrimage to Lacoste. For all its tantalizing mystery as a sexual set piece, Roissy is also a very real place, perhaps disappointingly so. The narrator of *Story of O* describes Roissy as a "small, peaceful town" about a thirty minutes' drive from Paris. It still takes about thirty minutes to drive from Paris to Roissy, but today Roissy is hardly a small, peaceful town. It is the site of the Charles de Gaulle international airport.[138] This choice of location is perhaps not quite so mismatched as it seems. Like so many major hubs of contemporary air travel, the Charles de Gaulle airport is a maze of looping roads and tangled corridors. Given its associations with the lovers of Roissy in *Story of O*, it is hard at times not to imagine it as a sadistic prison of the distinctly less tantalizing variety.

If the value of visiting Lacoste is to insist on the materiality of the Divine Marquis, then the value of visiting Roissy is to experience the palimpsests of fiction that build around the literature of sadomasochism. Roissy, as it appears in *Story of O*, has always been a literary construct. Roissy was indeed once home to a castle, the Château de Caramans, first built in the 1400's and reconstructed in the early 1700's in the style of a small-scale, pseudo Versailles. Like the chateau at Lacoste, however, the Château de Caramans was largely destroyed during the French Revolution. Since the beginning of the twentieth-century, all that has remained of the castle is a section of its outer walls. Yet, the chateau that Réage describes does not emerge entirely from imagination. Nineteenth-century postcards of the Château de Caramans depict a castle of the very sort Réage instructs us to picture: wide and many-roomed, with an imposing entryway and vast grounds. Might she have seen one of these postcards? Aury claims to have picked the name "Roissy" on a whim while driving through the town, yet it is hard to shake the image of the chateau in the novel as a nostalgic fantasy for a place that was at once real, unreal, present, and already past.[139] Ground was broken on the Charles de Gaulle airport in 1966, twelve years after the publication of *Story of O* in France and only two years after it first appeared in English. At

almost the same instant that the tale of the chateau reached American readers, Roissy itself was being once again transformed. It has survived only as an idea, as a word.

This is fitting for a novel that itself exists somewhere between literature and life. The conditions of its production are more sentimental but no less storied than those of *The 120 Days*, and they similarly bridge embodiment and authorship through the medium of sadomasochism. Driven like O to please the one she loves, Réage describes writing the first section of the novel in one long, passionate night while curled up in her bed.[140] In bed at Roissy, O, constrained by her chains, curls into an identical position as she lays awake after a particularly harsh whipping and awaits the arrival of her lover.[141] Like Severin relinquishing his poem to Wanda, Réage reports giving the manuscript of *Story of O* to Paulhan while retaining no copy for herself: "No carbon copy, no first draft: she kept nothing," she writes in "A Girl in Love."[142] In this way, alongside O, Réage races toward self-annihilation and becoming. O's path toward self-possession is also mirrored in Réage's composition of the novel. After that long, first night of writing, Réage reports composing the rest of *Story of O* in smaller sections, steering the narrative away from the fantasy of the chateau and into the realities of daily life.[143] The text also becomes increasingly explicit in its feminism; domination, submission, gender roles, and interpretations of power become fluid. Réage's own politics and daily life begin to appear in the text.[144] Aury later wrote of her nom de plume, "Who am I, finally… if not the long silent part of someone, the secret and nocturnal part which has never betrayed itself in public by any thought, word, or deed, but communicates through the subterranean depths of the imaginary?"[145] *Story of O* navigates this divide between the public and the imaginary. It gives the unspeakable desire power by rendering it into language.

Story of O: Silence and the Language of the Body

As in *The 120 Days* and *Venus in Furs*, power and language are intimately linked in *Story of O*. In a sense, this association between domination and discourse follows a similar pattern as it does in Sade and Sacher-Masoch's novels: he/she who controls the word controls the body. However, in Réage's novel, a key difference emerges: the emphasis of discursive control is placed on *silence* rather than on what is spoken. In turn, the power of silence paves the way for alternate modes of textuality. The body, marked and bruised, becomes the primary medium of communication. In this final formulation of the relationship between pain, pleasure, and literature, sadomasochism itself takes on the quality of writing.

In *Story of O*, speech is a marker of control. While at the chateau, O and the other women are commanded to remain silent. This regulation is designed as a sign of their powerlessness; the men in the chateau, who are free to come and go as they please, can speak at any time. The women's compliance signals their submission, and speaking is punishable by a whipping. Willing abdication of language is also used as a gesture toward ceding power. Much as O submits to the whims of René, René submits to Sir Stephen, to whom he offers O as a surrogate whom Sir Stephen can penetrate and whip. René is confident and well-spoken with O, yet in Sir Stephen's presence he barely speaks. Early in their relationship, O herself finds it nearly impossible to speak in Sir Stephen's presence:

"the hardest thing was simply to speak."[146] When he insists on receiving her consent before he whips her, she can manage only to repeat a verbal agreement first dictated by Sir Stephen. In these passages, silence matters more as a symbol of power relations than the content of any utterances spoken.

Yet silence quickly becomes more than a sign of submission in *Story of O*. Choosing not to speak frequently represents an act of self-possession and even agency. While at Roissy, O reflects that she has no problem complying with the rule of silence. She remains silent because she prefers not to speak. "Nothing had been such a comfort to her as the silence," she reflects.[147] Other rules, like the prohibition against making eye contact with men at the chateau, she is more inclined to break—and so she does. By contrast, being able to maintain silence is frequently, for O, a way to demonstrate that she remains in control of herself, even when her body is being used by others. More disgraceful to O than being shared between men she does not know is to be caught moaning beneath one of their caresses. "She had… cried out under the impact of a stranger's member as never her lover had made her cry out," she laments after René brings a man to her room. "She felt debased and guilty. She could not blame [René] if he were to leave her."[148] At other times it becomes clear that her masters know the power of silence. Following her stay at Roissy, O is ordered to keep her "nether lips" always open; she may never sit with her legs crossed or her knees together. This is one of the rules of her submission that O finds most bothersome. While this rule seems to relate to the body (and the carnality of the ever-open "nether lips"), it also relates to language. In French as in English, the word "lips" (*levres*) takes the meaning both of the labia and the lips of the mouth. Even at moments when she remains otherwise willfully silent, O's open lips seem perpetually posed on the edge of an utterance. By insisting that her legs remain open, O is refused the right to say nothing. She is denied the powerful self-possession that comes with silence.

When she is able to achieve it, silence for O is simultaneously a gesture of willful submission, a mode of resistance, and a mode of authoring fantasy. By the time of the trip to the Riviera, O no longer bothers to keep her legs open if she is not in the presence of René or Sir Stephen. As she grows more independent, she reclaims the embodied terms of her submission and the symbolic conditions of speech. The narrative itself is structured as a kind of speech-through-silence. Though the novel is told in the third person, *Story of O* has the distinct characteristics of a story being written (and re-written) in the imagination of its protagonist. For example, the novel begins twice, with two iterations of the same scene. In the first, O's lover René instructs her to get into an unmarked car, where he undresses her while a silent driver steers them toward a small, unassuming Parisian home. Here the narrative stops and begins again: "Another version of the same beginning was simpler and more direct."[149] In this second opening, O is again ushered into a car, but it is the driver who tells O she will be undressed and bound—and, rather than to a town home, O is delivered to the infamous chateau de Roissy. Both scenes are dominated by the logic of sexual fantasy, in which no questions are asked. The second iteration is grander though, more ambitious. Like a daydream, the fantasy of this initially unexplained abduction is replayed, reconfigured, and reshaped until it suits just right the pleasures of the dreamer. Even as a silent passenger in both versions of the beginning, O is writing her own story.

The paramount importance of silence becomes clear in the novel's striking final scene. In this moment, O achieves transcendence by moving beyond the plane of language. The novel culminates when Sir Stephen takes O to a ball, where she is presented to the guests naked save for an elaborate owl mask. With the mask in place, O's transformation is complete; she no longer seems human. Throughout the course of the long evening, she speaks to no one, and no one speaks to her:

> O stared at [the party guests] with eyes that, beneath her plumage, were darkened with bister, eyes opened wide like the eyes of the nocturnal bird she was impersonating, and the illusion was so extraordinary that no one thought of questioning her, which would have been the most natural thing to do, as though she were a real owl, deaf to human language, and dumb.[150]

In this scene, even the third-person omniscient narration loses access to O's thoughts. As soon as Sir Stephen drives her to the ball, O becomes unknowable. We hear no more about how she feels or what she desires. In the morning, when the ball has ended, Sir Stephen and the party's host remove O's chains, lay her on a table, and "possess her one after another."[151] Of all the moments in which O is used for the pleasure of her masters, only in this final scene do we learn nothing of O's reactions or thoughts. It is as if, in some sense, O has died and left her body behind, as if she has become an object that cannot be accessed through discourse—as if, in finally evolving beyond language, she achieves the self-destruction and self-completion toward which she has been "vaguely racing with all her might," as Réage writes, since the novel began.[152] Controlling and then abandoning language has allowed her to belong to everyone and no one, not even herself.

This tension between speech and silence is encapsulated in O's very name, which both signifies and suggests the limits of signification. In one sense, "O" is a mere abbreviation (Réage has told interviewers that it simply stands for Odile). In another sense, it is a name, like O herself, that is bound and restrained: reduced to a single letter. Some have argued for understanding "O" as an empty vessel, the name of a woman who could be any woman—or, alternately, the name of a woman who waits always to be filled by the desires and bodily protrusions of others. These interpretations misunderstand the power of O's semantic emptiness. "O" is an absence, yes, but it is also an incantation, an apostrophe, a moan, an utterance of adoration, the verbalizing of sensation and affect that can neither be rendered sufficiently in language nor suppressed. "O" is the sound that slips out from between barely parted lips, spoken tenderly, fearfully, yet uncontrollably. In "A Girl in Love," Réage calls the character of O "an idea, a figment, a sorrow, a negation of a destiny."[153] "O" is then also the vocalization of regret, sadness, and loss: a name for a character whose realm is fantasy, who lives the life that the fantasizer only dreams of, and lives it unto death, until she has transcended herself and only the shell of the "O" remains. "O" is a spoken silence. It is the name that dares not speak its name. Or, rather, it is the name that refuses to speak its name.

Amidst its many silences, *Story of O* buzzes with another kind of language: the language of the body. When spoken language is suppressed or withheld by Réage's protagonist, flesh itself becomes the medium of communication. This communication takes

place primarily through marks and bruises, which emerge like writing on the skin—blue-black, dark, and legible as spills of ink. Almost all of the text's characters show a notable interest in the marks left behind by beatings. At the chateau, the women wear dresses that expose their breasts, genitals, and backsides to show off the welts that crisscross their skin. O herself spends hours gazing at her "lovely long deep welts."[154] These bruises take the traditional place of language. The lovers of Roissy are uninterested in O's moans and screams, which they deem unreliable as indications of her suffering. Only by the marks and bruises that appear in response to their blows do they know when and where to strike. O's body likewise tells the story of her submission. The ring permanently attached to her labia and the brand on her back declare to any who see them that O belongs to Sir Stephen. Even at moments when O chooses to remain silent, her body speaks.

O's body is in fact the central site of textuality in the novel. As a medium of communication, she is at times used to pass messages between others. When Sir Stephen sends O back to René covered in "thick, purple welts like so many ropes spanning the back, the buttocks, the belly, and the breasts," René admires the marks and murmurs, "How I love you."[155] It is unclear, in this moment, whether René is speaking to O or whether he is dotingly admiring the handiwork of Sir Stephen, the man he reveres and cherishes. Like a missive sent between lovers, O bares the marks of a longing written out in a bodily code: "O realized that through the medium of her body, shared between them, they attained something… more intense than an amorous communion," writes Réage.[156] At other times, it is O herself who speaks through the marks on her body. This dialogue takes place on the level of the flesh. The whip is the call; the bruise is the response. When she is ordered not to speak, the "long lovely deep welts" are her replies to the commands of her masters. Spoken discourse may be the domain of the dominant and the powerful, but the submissive and the subaltern speak through the bruise.

Story of O is a crucial addition to the present study of sadomasochism and literature because it suggests alternative ways to understand the relationship between language and power. Discourse is equally important in Réage's novel as in Sade's and Sacher-Masoch's, but here discourse can mean more: it can mean silence as well as speech, bodies as well as words. *The 120 Days* and *Venus in Furs* both model systems in which text has a unique power to compel the body to action and words are key to sexual domination. In *Story of O*, words are likewise key, but power is located in the choice to not speak. Rather than language compelling the body, the body becomes the agent who speaks through the language of the bruised flesh. Sadomasochism itself takes on the quality of writing. Whippings leave behind marks through which the body in pain tells the story of its own erotic suffering. As an embodied language, these marks cannot be disentangled from hurt; the body cannot speak without being whipped. Finally, pain and speech merge. O finds transcendence in her suffering, the ultimate manifestation of which, in the novel's final scene, is silence—or rather, a rejection of the very notion of speech. *Story of O* shows us that language is power, but that neither language nor power may look as we imagine them.

This chapter began with a discussion of how literature has informed both mainstream conceptions of sadomasochism and lived practices of BDSM over the past 200+ years. Throughout the dissertation, my goal is to demonstrate how experiences of pain and pleasure, commonly imagined as fundamentally embodied, are in fact inextricably tied to supposedly disembodied media forms and media history—bringing into question the very divide between embodiment and disembodiment. In the case of literature and sadomasochism, these intertwined ontologies are clearly evidenced by the influence of authors like Sacher-Masoch and Sade on Krafft-Ebing (and later Freud, Lacan, Deleuze, etc.). At a key moment in the codification of sexual identities, recourse to fiction played a defining role in the meaning made from what we now call sadism and masochism. The interrelation between sadomasochism as life and as literature is also illustrated by the works of Sade, Sacher-Masoch, and Réage, those giants of the sadomasochistic canon who have come down through history as hybrid figures: embodied author interwoven with their fantastical fiction. In the formulation of "sadomasochism and/as literature," these points represent the "sadomasochism *and* literature" component. Pain and pleasure as a cultural history cannot be told without the literature that brought it into being.

What is gained by analyzing these novels themselves: Sade's *120 Days*, Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, and Réage's *Story of O*? Adding a preposition to the equation, one might call this the consideration of "sadomasochism *in* literature." This analysis allows for a closer look at the material that has shaped the image of pain and pleasure in the popular imaginary. What quickly emerges is a *mise en abyme*: sadomasochism and literature reflected back on one another in a loop. In the texts that act as pillars for the canon of sadomasochism, language and writing already play key roles in dynamics of power. All three novels present systems of domination and submission that hinge around the control of discourse. In the case of all three, something like literature inspires the erotic actions of the narrative. Sade's libertines replicate the storytellers' tales, Severin acts out scenes from mythology, and Réage herself wrote to show Paulhan she could author a story like those of Sade.[157] These works in turn have inspired future generations of kinksters to re-create the tableaux contained within their pages. The slippery materiality of places like Lacoste and Roissy is once again replicated in the physical manifestations of desires.

Of particular importance for the present project is the fact that, in all three of these novels, characters are moved to real, embodied sensation through acts of reading and listening. When Severin reads *The Lives of the Matyrs*, he experiences "fear intermingled with sweet pleasure." The libertines of *The 120 Days* can achieve arousal in no other way than through words. Admittedly, for O, this communication of sensation through discourse operates in reverse. The real, embodied sensations of her whippings become acts of writing when they elicit marks from her skin. By modeling pain and pleasure as assemblages of experience both physical and linguistic, these examples speak to the questions raised in my introduction about the power of media forms to communicate feeling. They also resonate with discussions elsewhere in this project about the line between the real and the virtual— or, to use an analogue that has appeared throughout this chapter, fact and fantasy. Sadomasochism as a construct of literature straddles that divide. In this way, it shares with

newer, digital media forms the messiness of embodiment. This demonstrates how these complicated relationships go beyond the contemporary digital moment and into the experience of media itself. They also suggest ways that we might read works like those by Sade, Sacher-Masoch, and Réage through metaphors of the digital. In what way, for example, are these texts virtual? Does the material reality of the book bolster or hinder its ability to exist between factual and fantastical worlds?

These foundational representations of sadomasochism in literature also have insights to offer into the importance of language in lived practices of BDSM. Given the long, problematic precedent for using fiction to theorize (and often pathologize) kinky subjects, I want to tread carefully in this area. Yet, as co-constituted cultural constructs, it makes sense that the novels that have inspired kinksters' fantasies and identities would have something to say about the desires they inspire. The works considered here are founded on a belief in the interrelation between pain, pleasure, and language. As such, they challenge us to think about sadomasochism itself *as* literature. *Story of O*, for example, underscores the idea that marks on the body can act like writing—that kink can itself be a form of communication and media production. Not only does kink produce text, it is text. Consider the whip. In the novels of Sade, Sacher-Masoch, and Réage, sometimes a whip is a whip, and sometimes a whip is a word. The reality lies somewhere between the two. Part material implement and part textual construct, the whip is conjured up by tales of submissives in their chains. It is a character that steps from the pages of fantasy into the bedroom (or the local dungeon, as the case may be). The impulse of the imagination that daydreams the whip is novelistic; the pain that the whip brings when it lands against flesh is real.

Ultimately, the texts discussed in this chapter suggest an understanding of literature itself as kinky. In these novels, reading, writing, and speaking are the domain of hurt. The encounter with language is simultaneously a painful and a pleasurable one; it is a deeply embodied encounter. "Pornographic literature retains this in common with all literature— that it turns the flesh into word," writes Carter.[158] I want to conclude this chapter with a similar gesture toward literature as such. Is it possible to be dominated by a book? Can we call domination bookish? Sade, Sacher-Masoch, and Réage are all, in their respective ways, saying "yes." If the production of text is inextricable from the production of pain and pleasure, then writing as a medium takes on the quality of kink. If language is one and the same with the whip, then reading itself means submitting to "sweet pleasure mixed with pain."

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[1] Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (New York: Penguin, 1979), 12.

[2] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978).

[3] Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Burbank: Bloat, 1999).

4 In "Coldness and Cruelty," Gilles Deleuze proposes a third option: that Sade and Sacher-Masoch were great diagnosticians. Gilles Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," in *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty & Venus in Furs* (New York: Zone Books, 1989).

5 Michel Foucault, *History of Madness* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 362.

6 I derive this term from its use by Angela Carter in *The Sadeian Woman.*

7 This is a question that Pauline Réage, the author of Story of O, herself raises in her extended 1979 interview with Régine Deforges. Régine Deforges, *Confessions of O* (New York: The Viking Press, 1979).

8 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

9 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

10 Marquis de Sade, *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, & Other Writing* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 450.

11 Deleuze and Sacher-Masoch, *Masochism*, 10.

12 Deforges, *Confessions of O*, 1.

13 Deforges, *Confessions of O*, 8.

14 E. L. James, *Fifty Shades of Gray* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).

15 Alison Flood, "Fifty Shades of Gray trilogy has sold 100m copies worldwide," *The Guardian*, February 27, 2014, accessed May 23, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/feb/27/fifty-shades-of-grey-book-100m-sales.

16 Examples of this are too numerous and varied to begin to list here. It serves as an illustration that mainstream publications as venerable as even *The New York Times* and NYTimes.com have run nearly 100 articles on the *Fifty Shades* trilogy and the accompanying *50 Shades* movie between 2012 and 2015.

17 As mentioned elsewhere in the project, the version of kinky sex play represented in 50 Shades of Gray does not match the practices of BDSM communities, which commonly stress communication and consent. For more on this see Anna Smith, "50 Shades of Gray: What BDSM Enthusiasts Think," *The Guardian*, February 15, 2015, accessed July 22, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/feb/15/fifty-shades-of-grey-bdsm-enthusiasts.

18 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990); Sigmund Freud, "A Child Is Being Beaten," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Touchstone, 1997); Jacques Lacan, "Kant with Sade," in *Ecrits* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2007); Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty." For a discussion of Lacan and Deleuze's engagement with the literary figures of the masochist and the sadist, see David Sigler's "Read Mr. Sacher-Masoch: The Literariness of Masochism in the Philosophy of Jacques Lacan and Gilles Deleuze," *Criticism* 53 No. 2 (Spring 2011), 189-212.

19 Maurice Blanchot, *Lautréamont and Sade* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004); Pierre Klossowski, *Sade My Neighbor* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991); Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil* (New York: Urizen, 1973); Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

20 Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), vii.

[21] Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure*, viii.

[22] The term "magic circle" here is drawn from Johan Huizinga's foundational text on play, *Homo Ludens* (London: Beacon Press, 1955). For a further discussion of the overlaps between sexual scenes and ludic magic circles, see Bonnie Ruberg, "Sex as Game: Playing with the Erotic Body in Virtual Worlds," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, Issue 21 (Winter, 2010).

[23] Janet Hardy and Dossie Easton, *The New Bottoming Book* (Emeryville: Greenery Press, 2001), 44.

[24] Natasha Velez, Gabrielle Fonrouge, and Natalie O'Neill, "50 Shades of Grey whips sex toy sales into a frenzy," *The New York Post*, February 14, 2015, accessed July 22, 2015, http://nypost.com/2015/02/14/fifty-shades-of-grey-whips-sex-toy-sales-into-a-frenzy/.

[25] Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," 17.

[26] In calling kinksters "cyborgs," I am using the term in the sense laid out by Donna Harraway in "A Cyborg Manifesto." Donna Harraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[27] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Race and/as Technology, or How to Do Things to Race," in *Race After the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura (New York: Routledge, 2011).

[28] Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, x, xxviii.

[29] Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, xxx.

[30] It is notable that the frame narrator has fallen asleep with a book in his hand, which the text refers to as simply a work of Hegel's. The subtle implication, for those familiar with Hegel's work, is that the frame-narrator has been reading his essay on the master-slave dialectic: a topic that would be of great interest to Severin. Joel Golb and Albrecht Koschorke have argued that Sacher-Masoch plants this reference to frame *Venus in Furs* as a "counter-commentary" on Hegel's dialectic. To the contrary, the novel's narrators (and, by extension, its author) very rarely critique the works they reference. Rather, they serve as the inspiration for their fantasies, which often replicate what they have read. Joel Golb and Albrecht Koschorke, "Mastery and Slavery: A Masochist Falls Asleep Reading Hegel," *MLN* 116 No. 3 (2001): 551-563.

[31] Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, xxxii.

[32] Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, xxxii.

[33] Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 120.

[34] Deleuze and Sacher-Masoch, *Masochism*, 10.

[35] Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 9. Though my discussion of the influence of literature on Krafft-Ebing's work will focus on Sacher-Masoch and Sade, others have pointed toward the importance of additional writers, most notably Rousseau, whose Confessions contain consider discussion of the author's masochistic desires. Amber Jamilla Musser, "Reading, Writing, and the Whip," *Literature and Medicine* 27 No. 2 (2008), 204-222.

[36] Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 119.

[37] Amber Jamilla Musser, "Reading, Writing, and the Whip," *Literature and Medicine*, Volume 27.2 (fall 2008), pp. 204-222.

[38] Romana Byrne, *Aesthetic Sexuality: A Literary History of Sadomasochism* (New York: Bloombury, 2013), 6.

[39] Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 174-5.

[40] While I am intrigued by this idea, I myself have been unable to track down references to "masochism" made in ads between the years of 1870 (the publication of *Venus and Furs*) and 1886 (the first publication of *Psychopathia Sexualis*). More research with European newspaper from this time is required. Bert Cutler, "Partner Selection, Power Dynamics, and Sexual Bargaining in Self-Defined BDSM Couples" (PhD diss, Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality, 2003).

[41] Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, xxxii.

[42] Marquis de Sade, *Juliette* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), ix.

[43] Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 659.

[44] Sade, *Justine*, xi.

[45] Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 98.

[46] In my references to Sade's biography, I am pulling primarily from Francine du Plessix Gray's excellent study *At Home with the Marquis de Sade: A Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

[47] Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 27.

[48] Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 83.

[49] Philip Kaufman (dir.), *Quills*. (Fox Searchlight, 2000, film).

[50] Marquis de Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 183.

[51] I conducted my research in Lacoste in 2008 and 2011. My visits to Sade's other nearby homes in the region took place in 2008. References to the current state of the chateau and these homes refer to my visits in those years.

[52] Sade, *Justine*, 11.

[53] du Plessix Gray, *At Home with the Marquis de Sade*, 76.

[54] The most well-known of these tracts is the political pamphlet contained within Philosophy in the Boudoir titled "Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, If You Would Become Republicans," which interrupts the narrative for more than forty pages. Sade, *Justine*, 296-339.

[55] Hugh Schofield, "Where the Marquis de Sade and Pierre Cardin meet," BBC.com, July 12, 2011, accessed May 23, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20110707-where-the-marquis-de-sade-and-pierre-cardin-meet.

[56] The website for the Savannah College of Art and Design's program at Lacoste calls it an "idyllic medieval village" with "pastoral beauty" far from the "distractions of daily life." Accessed May 23, 2015, http://www.scad.edu/locations/lacoste.

[57] du Plessix Gray, *At Home with the Marquis de Sade,* 22.

[58] I found this to be true during my own stay at the Chateau de Mazan. On their website, the owners continue to proudly promote the house's history with a prominently placed section on the Marquis de Sade. Accessed May 23, 2015, http://www.chateaudemazan.com/.

[59] du Plessix Gray, *At Home with the Marquis de Sade*, 117.

[60] du Plessix Gray, *At Home with the Marquis de Sade,* 113.

[61] Most notably du Plessix Gray, but a number of others in the last twenty years, including Maurice Lever's *Sade: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1993), and Neil Schaeffer's *The Marquis de Sade: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 1999).

[62] du Plessix Gray, *At Home with the Marquis de Sade.*

[63] Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 27.

[64] Simone de Beauvoir, "Must We Burn Sade?", in *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writing*, Marquis de Sade (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 19.

[65] Marquis de Sade, *The 120 Days*, 253.

[66] This estimate of 1,200 pages assumes that each of the four months of tales, once completed, would run for approximately as many pages as the first month, which Sade did complete.

[67] de Sade, *The 120 Days*, 184.

[68] The Musée des Lettres et des Manuscrits featured the scroll in a special exhibit, "largely dedicated to libertinage," that ran from September, 2014 to January, 2015 titled Sade: Marquis de l'ombre, prince des lumières. André Balbo, "Derniers jours de l'exposition Sade et l'éventail des libertinages, au mLm," *EVous*, February 19, 2015, accessed May 25, 2015, http://www.evous.fr/Sade-et-l-eventail-des-libertinages-XVIe-XXe-siecles-fin-septembre-au-musee-des,1187319.html.

[69] Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 32.

[70] Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil* (London: Marion Boyars, 1990) 105.

[71] de Sade, *The 120 Days*, 185.

[72] de Beauvoir, "Must We Burn Sade?", 5.

[73] de Beauvoir, "Must We Burn Sade?", 14.

[74] de Sade, *The 120 Days*, 196.

[75] de Sade, *The 120 Days*, 249, 670 – 672.

[76] Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 14.

[77] de Beauvoir, "Must We Burn Sade?", 4.

[78] Marquis de Sade, *The Passionate Philosopher: A De Sade Reader* (London: Peter Owens Publishers, 1991), 45.

[79] Beauvoir writes of the tales in *The 120 Days*, "For all their repetitiveness, their platitudes and clumsiness, [Sade] is trying to communicate an experience whose distinguishing characteristic is, nevertheless, a tendency to be incommunicable." Beauvoir, "Must We Burn Sade?", 4.

[80] Niklaus Largier, *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

[81] de Sade, *The 120 Days*, 218.

[82] de Sade, *The 120 Days*, 219.

[83] de Sade, *The 120 Days*, 673.

[84] Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," 4.

[85] de Sade, *The 120 Days*, 253.

[86] de Sade, *The 120 Days*, 254.

[87] de Sade, *The 120 Days*, 253.

[88] de Sade, *The 120 Days*, 266. This interest in the costumes of the storytellers is taken up in the beautiful, elaborate, and distinctly decadent dresses that appear in Pier Pasolini's *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom*, an adaptation of Sade's work that will be the focus of the following chapter.

[89] de Sade, *The 120 Days*, 250.

[90] de Sade, *The 120 Days*, 241.

[91] de Sade, *The 120 Days*, 253. All the members of the party, except for the libertines and the storytellers, instantly "burst into tears" upon hearing these dictates.

[92] de Sade, *The 120 Days*, 271.

[93] In the parlance of contemporary BDSM communities, "topping from the bottom" takes place when a sub in a scene attempts to control the actions of the top. An example of this might be insisting on the use of certain implements (e.g. a flogger vs. a cane). See Hardy and Easton, *The New Bottoming Book*.

[94] Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 16.

[95] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Beacon Press, 1994), xv.

[96] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 219-221.

[97] Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," 91.

[98] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 267, 269.

[99] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 220.

[100] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 281.

[101] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 233.

[102] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 222-3.

[103] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 232; Luis Buñuel (dir,), *Belle de Jour*. 1967.

[104] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 178.

[105] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 164.

[106] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 153.

[107] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 151.

[108] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 196.

[109] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 240.

[110] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 236.

[111] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 241, 148.

[112] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 156.

[113] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 271.

[114] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 195.

[115] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 260.

[116] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 179.

[117] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 268.

[118] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 180.

[119] Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 271.

[120] David Ives, *Venus in Fur: A Play* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011); Roman Polanski (dir.), *Venus in Fur*, 2013.

[121] Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," 17.

[122] These works might include, for example, Octave Mirbeau's *The Torture Garden* (1899) or Rachilde's *The Marquise de Sade* (1887).

[123] Pauline Réage, *Story of O* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

[124] Jean Paulhan, "Happiness in Slavery," contained within Pauline Réage, *Story of O*, xxix.

[125] Réage, *Story of O*, 23.

[126] Réage, *Story of O*, 19.

[127] Deforges, *Confessions of O*, 142.

[128] Geradline Bedell, "I wrote the Story of O," *The Guardian*, July 24, 2004, accessed July 22, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/jul/25/fiction.features3.

[129] Deforges, *Confessions of O*, 3

[130] Deforges, *Confessions of O*, 5.

[131] Pauline Réage, *Return to the Chateau preceded by A Girl in Love* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995).

[132] John de St. Jorre, "The Unmasking of O," *The New Yorker,* August 1, 1994, accessed July 22, 2015, *http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1994/08/01/the-unmasking-of-o.*

[133] Deforges, *Confessions of O*, 70.

[134] Andrea Dworkin, "Woman as Victim: 'Story of O,'" *Feminist Studies*, Vol 2.1 (1974), pp. 107-111.

[135] *Story of O* won the Prix de Deux Magots in 1955.

[136] Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 109.

[137] Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 18.

[138] Note that the majority of the Charles de Gaulle airport technically stands in a neighboring district but that its official address places it within Roissy-en-France.

[139] Réage, "A Girl in Love," 21.

[140] Réage, "A Girl in Love," 6.

[141] Réage, *Story of O*, 26.

[142] Réage, "A Girl in Love," 11.

[143] Réage, "A Girl in Love," 11.

[144] Deforges, *Confessions of O*, 39, 47.

[145] Réage, "A Girl in Love," 13

[146] Réage, *Story of O*, 74.

[147] Réage, *Story of O*, 38.

[148] Réage, *Story of O*, 31.

[149] Réage, *Story of O*, 5.

[150] Réage, *Story of O*, 202.

[151] Réage, *Story of O*, 203.

[152] Réage, "A Girl in Love," 12.

[153] Réage, "A Girl in Love," 17.

[154] Réage, *Story of O*, 12.

[155] Réage, *Story of O*, 109.

[156] Réage, *Story of O*, 105.

[157] Réage, "A Girl in Love," 3.

[158] Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 13

Chapter Two:
Too Painful to Watch: On Intimacy and Complicity in Pasolini's *Salò*

"Casual viewers should be warned that *Salò* has a reputation as one of the most revolting movies ever made. But there is a method to its brutal madness, and those who can stomach the film's startling imagery will be amply rewarded."[1] This quote comes from a 2012 *Time Out New York* listing for an upcoming screening of the Pier Pasolini's 1975 *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom*. As the quote suggests, in its contemporary American context, *Salò* is arguably more widely known by its reputation as a film that hurts to watch than it is actually watched. Yet what does it mean for a film, even a film noted for its "startling brutality," to reach out from the screen and engender pain in the bodies of its viewers?

 Salò, which reimagines Sade's *The 120 Days* as a litany of tortures performed by four powerful "libertines" under the tyranny of 1940's Fascist Italy, is considered a masterpiece by many. For others, however, the film's infamy overshadows its mastery—an infamy that hinges as much on its ability to implicate viewers' bodies through sight as on its controversial content. Along with other classics of what might be called "painful cinema," such as John Waters' *Pink Flamingos*, *Salò* has taken on a kind of mythic quality as a film that so effectively coopts the senses that it is hard (perhaps even too hard, depending on the fortitude of potential viewers) to stomach. This daunting reputation, along with a history of censorship that kept the film in limited circulation from the 1970's through the early 2000's, has made *Salò* and its visceral treatment of sexual violence more myth than masterpiece.[2] In the first two decades of the twenty-first century though, with a 2008 re-release from the Criterion Collection and amidst fervent public debates about political practices of torture, *Salò* has become the subject of increased attention. Most commonly, the film is being read, not unproblematically, as an inside perspective on the psychology of torturers. By contrast, at a time when photographs of abused prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay are both scandalizing and politicizing the American public, I believe that *Salò*'s most important contribution to discussions of systemic violence in fact lies in its insistence that viewers confront the relationship between pain, spectatorship, and their own complicity. The film performs the complexities of this nexus on the level of embodied viewership as well as the level of narrative. *Salò* is a film about watching hurt *and* a film that hurts to watch. In both modes, it challenges viewers to reflect on crucial questions about suffering, media, and mediation. How can images communicate hurt? Why does watching violence cause discomfort? To whom does the pain of bearing witness matter?

 Pasolini's film is often described as superlatively difficult to watch. A *New York Sun* review of the Criterion re-release warns, much like *Time Out New York*, that the movie "contains some of the most repellant and disturbing imagery ever put on film."[3] YouTube compilations and other online lists created by amateur film buffs regularly list *Salò* among the most disturbing films of all time.[4] In its promotional materials for a season of screenings dedicated to Pasolini, the Berkeley Pacific Film Archive calls the film simply "unwatchable."[5] The subject matter of *Salò* is indeed gruesome. Like Sade's novel, the film is structured around the systematic and ritualized abuse (and, in some cases, subsequent

murder) of a group of boys and girls who have been kidnapped and transported to a secluded chateau for the pleasure of a group of powerful, pitiless, and inexhaustibly perverse men. Little happens in the film apart from the parade of increasingly horrific tortures: the children are raped, forced to eat a banquet of human feces, gauged, scalped, bound and quartered. Pasolini's camera is as pitiless as the libertines; it refuses to look away from these scenes, which it presents to the viewer in long, unblinking shots. Yet, though the frankness and unrelenting persistence of *Salò*'s violence give it the power to impact viewers with particular force, it is a mistake to imagine that the film is alone or even fundamentally exceptional in its ability to influence the bodies of its viewers. *Salò* makes explicit a set of interrelations between viewing subject and viewed media object that resonates across experiences of spectatorship. As *Salò* makes clear, viewing is a deeply embodied experience, the basic unit of which is hurt. In this way, *Salò* points toward a mode of interpreting the cinematic medium that focuses on film as an *experience* rather than as an object—or, more aptly, as an object that always stands in dialogue with the experience of its viewership, i.e. the way it makes viewers feel.

What would it mean to take seriously the claim that watching *Salò* actually, physically hurts? From one perspective, this idea might seem to support the condemnatory argument that representing violence in media in turn begets real-life violence (or, in this case, real-life pain), a supposition often used to critique violent video games.[6] Yet attending to the physical hurt that *Salò* engenders, interpreted through a critical rather than a reactionary lens, also has the potential to demonstrate something truly provocative. The embodied experience that *Salò* models disrupts both how we think about pain and how we think about media. Following from Elaine Scarry's highly influential text *The Body in Pain*, in which Scarry insists that the actual experience of suffering is fundamentally incommensurable with language, dominant scholarly thinking has long held that embodied pain cannot be communicated through its representation, as discussed elsewhere in this project.[7] *Salò*'s striking capacity to hurt brings this into question, and along with it the very definition of pain. Meanwhile, across a long tradition of media studies, discussed in more depth below, film has been figured as a disembodied medium, divorcing viewers from the sensations of their bodies. Though a number of scholars have worked to reintroduce the body into film studies in recent decades, they most frequently do so with metaphors of touching, caring, and intimacy. *Salò* gives us new, more insistently visceral metaphors—like affront, abuse, and hurt—through which to understand what it feels like and what it means to watch. The intimacy of viewership that *Salò* proposes is a *kinky* intimacy, a term I use again here to signal a dialectical erotics that is related to yet also distinct from lived practices of BDSM, made up of equal parts pleasure and pain.

The two partners in this dance of kinky intimacy that surrounds *Salò* are the film and its viewers, and it is these two voices that guide the insights and arguments of this chapter. My own embodied experience with *Salò* and that of fellow viewers also serve as entry points for understanding what, how, and why the film brings pain to the viewing body. On these topics the film itself has much to say, and many of the issues raised by viewers, such as concerns about complicity and beauty, can be found already operating within the film. In this way, *Salò* speaks back to the phenomenology of its viewership through its content as well as the bodily sensations that it engenders—consummating a

reciprocal, erotic exchange (to borrow Laura Mark's concept of the erotic as the oscillating exchange of power between subject and media object) that is at once conceptual and corporeal.[8] Far from being a mere mimetic reflection of the "realities" of torture, *Salò* intentionally plays with torture as fantasy. It challenges the conditions of reality by staging a "Fascist fairy tale" whose realness is ambiguous yet grounded in bodies of its viewers.[9] In this sense, the film serves as a commentary on the act of viewing: both the viewing of *Salò* and viewing of film more broadly. In *Salò*, imagery is the most powerful of media forms, but it is also fundamentally incapable of seeing fully—and it is through these blind spots that the viewing body and its pleasure enter the scene, often to painful effect. Pasolini's libertines take their cruelest satisfaction through sight; they watch eagerly as their captives are tortured for the pleasure of their viewership. If the libertines were to turn their gazes away, would the violence perpetrated against their victims stop? For that matter, if a viewer of *Salò* stops watching the film, does the violence on screen become more or less real because it goes unseen? In their ongoing roles as those who watch others in pain, the libertines simultaneously stand in for and yet repel the film's viewers, for whom the libertines' pleasure is mirrored in the pleasures of *Salò*'s cinematic beauty. Ultimately, by compelling its viewers to confront with their bodies this uncomfortably ambiguous position between pain and pleasure, as well as the implications of their own spectatorship, *Salò* challenges us to ask whether all viewing experiences, even those that seek to invoke pleasure rather than pain, might not contain an element of the kinky intimacy and uneasy complicity that make Pasolini's film "too painful to watch."

The Importance of Pain in *Salò*

Issues of pain, pleasure, suffering, sight, and the body are all central to *Salò*. Pasolini situates the film in the desolate landscape of the final days of the Fascist decline. Four rich and powerful libertines, Blangis, Curval, Durcet, and the Bishop (to borrow their sadeian monikers, since they go without proper names throughout the film), send military guards to scour the poorer reaches of the countryside for young boys and girls to abduct. These children, accessed by the libertines for their beauty and innocence, are driven to a government-seized palace outside the town of Salò; this palace serves as the opulent and yet oddly empty prison where they will be locked up and abused for the libertines' amusement. Lustful and unrelentingly corrupt as they are, Blangis, Curval, Durcet, and the Bishop are also sagging in their middle age, and so they enlist the help of "fuckers," well-endowed young male collaborators who also serve as the guards keeping watch over the captives. Finally, as in Sade's tale, the libertines hire four "storytellers," female prostitutes, their aging beauty caked in makeup and wrapped in the alarming decadence of sequined gowns, with plenty of worldly experience to share in order to stir the blood of their listeners. During their stay outside Salò, which is a real-life town and the site of a historic Fascist slaughter, the libertines institute a regiment of rape, torture, and ritualistic humiliations.[10] They demand that their victims strip naked, making themselves sexually available at all times; they insist that their victims only defecate when instructed; they force their victims to eat human waste; they buckle collars onto their victims' necks and

drive them across the cold stone floors on all fours like dogs. In the film's final moments, many of the children are tortured and executed in the palace courtyard. Meanwhile, the libertines take turns alternatively watching from an upstairs window as the gruesome scenes unfold below and taking part in the flagellations. In this scene, *Salò*'s violence and spectacle culminate in a theater of cruelty from which no one, not even the libertines, will emerge unscathed.

The images of pain and suffering that appear in *Salò* are highly visceral. Not only do they present graphic violence; they also implicate the senses in the suffering on screen. One such notorious moment comes during the wedding feast held for Curval and Sergio, the libertine's favorite captive. Here the four masters, along with their storytellers, guards, and victims, sit dressed in their finest attire. Dramatically, the lid of a large serving tray is lifted to reveal a cornucopia of feces. A guard grabs his nose, gagging at the smell. The nude servers make their way around the table, placing a piece of excrement on each white plate. As the new bride gazes in horror at his meal, his libertine "husband" commands him to eat and spoons thick, dark smears into his mouth. Both repulsed and intrigued, the camera tightens its frame to contemplate a bit of excrement in a chunky blood sauce. Yet the sight of feces at the dinner table alone is not enough to communicate the captives' revulsion to *Salò*'s viewers. Cues from the bodies of the actors prompt the bodies of viewers, though they can neither smell nor taste the scatological feast, to fill these sensuous gaps with projected disgust. This pain-inducing sensory deprivation achieves new heights of unbearableness in the film's silent final sequence. At the climax of their cruelties, when the libertines stage scenes of torture in the palace courtyard for each other to observe from a window above, they watch through binoculars as the captives are cut, whipped, burnt, or scalped. Here Pasolini gives his viewers no sound—not the sounds of screams nor the sounds of fulfilled desires—to interrupt the violence of the visual. Although the viewer, who also sees the scenes through the libertines' binoculars, watches from a "safe" distance, the claustrophobic frame binds the gaze, refusing the audience the option to retreat into distraction, forcing them either to watch the painfully "unwatchable" or stop watching altogether. Moments such as these draw particular attention to sight as a vehicle for the communication of the senses, and in particular hurt.

The body in pain is also key to *Salò*'s narrative structure and the peculiar logic of its character development. As mentioned, the film lacks a traditional story arc. Instead, its narrative momentum is derived from the film's push to an inevitable conclusion of abuse and pain: viewers are given no indication that the children, once abducted, will ever be saved. The camera too is fascinated by these suffering bodies. Throughout *Salò*'s many scenes of torture, it lingers on bodies in peril. Overwhelmed by the horrors that the libertines promise to enact, one girl cries out for her mother; the libertines, aroused by her wailing, order her to crawl on her knees to a freshly produced fecal specimen and consume it with a spoon. Assembled, all the inhabitants of the palace (along with the viewer) must watch as she inches forward, her back buckling with sobs. Covering her face in shame, she sits down in front of the feces. "Mangia! Mangia!" shouts Blangis. Shaking, the girl dips her spoon into the brown substance. For nearly a minute the camera holds its gaze as the girl wretches, trying to swallow the feces, which sticks to her teeth and mouth. Her blond hair hangs down over her face, coated in mucus and tears. "Mangia! Mangia!" Blangis continues

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to shout—loudly, too loudly. At such a volume his voice cracks and rumbles from the recording. It seems to break through the screen, doing violence to the mechanics of cinematic sound that prove themselves unable to contain his gruff, unanswerable commands, reminding viewers of the physical limits of the medium itself. Likewise, in keeping with the body rather than the narrative, the film privileges flesh over personhood. Most of the characters in *Salò* are given few lines. Even the libertines have little to differentiate their personalities; they all crave similar debaucheries and are similarly cruel. Losing track of who is who "reduces everyone to numerical flesh," as Gary Indiana has noted of the film.[11] Though signals of bodily experience (screams, moans, wounds) populate the film, viewers rarely receive information about characters' interiority. In this sense, *Salò*'s main character is pain itself. In fact, pain is the only character who grows and changes (from unpleasant to unbearable), the only nuanced, three-dimensional character (reaching out from the screen). This gives the film itself a bodily quality that refuses to be rationalized away from the rawness of flesh. It makes pain the star of the show, as well as the show itself.

Existing scholarship on *Salò* is notable, but it largely steers away from considering the experiences of the viewing body. Given Pasolini's status as a controversial *auteur* and the scandalous contents of his oeuvre, *Salò* has been a subject of considerable scholarly interest in both Europe and America. However, whereas mainstream discussions of the film highlight audience response, *Salò* scholarship has primarily attempted to explain the film's meaning through non-phenomenological categories, and for this reason rarely addresses the pain it causes its audience. Traditional Pasolini scholarship has approached the film through politics, psychoanalysis, and auteurship. Those interested in Pasolini's mastery have frequently focused on telling the tale of the film's production.[12] In the Italian context, by contrast, *Salò* is most often discussed in conjunction with Pasolini's Marxist politics; the film is discussed as both a critique of fascism and a condemnation of consumerism (in which, so the metaphor goes, capitalist subjects gobble up even their own waste).[13] Notable American criticism has taken the film as a psychological case study that purportedly offers insights into the "true desires" of the sadist, a dematerialized archetype who has long dotted the psychoanalytic landscape, as discussed in chapter one of this project.[14] Also common in scholarly work on *Salò* are extensive comparisons between Sade's original text and Pasolini's interpretation.[15] In the most recent wave of writing on the film, scholars have begun calling for the renewed importance of *Salò* as a film that supposedly helps illuminate the abuse of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib.[16] Though considerations of embodiment are notably absent from most existing scholarship, a more poetic vein of criticism—including work by Leo Bersani, Ulysse Dutoit, and Gary Indiana— does make gestures to the embodied experience of the film, with brief references to pleasure.[17] Yet they do not push further to consider the body as a site of experience. However, given the privileged role of bodily experience in twenty-first-century American encounters with *Salò*, and given the incontrovertible place of physical pain in the film itself, I believe that scholars have overlooked lived, embodied experience as an important lens through which to situate the film.

The importance of embodied experience to *Salò* should not be underestimated. It is my interest in the visceral that differentiates my approach to *Salò* from that of previous

scholars. Indeed, an emphasis on the body in Pasolini's film differs in meaningful ways from much of the thinking that emerges from contemporary schools of film criticism. Most notably, the mode of film analysis that I am proposing, which thinks first and foremost through viewers' bodies rather than about bodies on-screen, runs contrary to traditional theories of spectatorship, like those put forth by Christian Metz in *The Imaginary Signifier*, which have historically emphasized the primacy of sight and disembodied voyeurism.[18] More recent waves of analysis have pushed back against this accepted view of film as disembodied by reasserting the importance of embodied affect as a critical lens. Work by scholars like Linda Williams, Vivian Sobchack, and Steven Shaviro foregrounds the "sensational" experience of film.[19] Others scholars, such as Laura Marks and Jennifer Barker, have argued for the "haptic," skin-like quality of film itself.[20] Yet the case of embodied experience in relation to *Salo* suggests that this work into bodily investigations can be pushed farther still. Even theory that is invested in corporeality often maintains a professional distance from the messy work of averted eyes, heaving stomachs, and unexpected ejaculations.[21] Admittedly, that previous *Salò* scholars have sidestepped phenomenology makes a certain sense. If watching the film is painful, then speaking one's experience of watching has the potential to be more painful still. It also requires a kind of dangerous honesty. Which scenes hurt me? Which scenes arouse me? Which parts of my body spring to action in response to the bodies on screen? Yet these are precisely the kinds of questions that *Salò* itself demands that viewers confront. Because of the extremities of its violence, the film calls to be unpacked through a phenomenology that is equally invested in the facts of the flesh.

In this way *Salò* stands poised to point toward a new way of thinking about the experience of film, and specifically thinking about it in relation to pain and even pleasure. Indeed, the stakes for reconsidering these theories of embodiment and film stretch beyond *Salò*. The modes of embodied experience that *Salò* makes so legible can in fact be found operating across experiences of cinema. In its bold strokes, *Salò* renders visible a new way to understand the point of contact between viewer and screen. Rather than a "touch," to use Marks' term, *Salò* models this connection as a reciprocal *affront*, a form of obfuscated and aggressive intimacy. I borrow the word from Gaston Bachelard, who uses it to describe the complicated relationship between reader and text.[22] Yet "affront" can also offer a fresh perspective on seeing as well as reading. I deploy it here simultaneously in its everyday sense (an insult, an outrage, a provocation) as well as in the Old French meaning through which it enters English (an attack, specifically a blow to the face or the forehead, *afronter*) and in its original post-Classical Latin form *affrontare* (to border upon, to delimit).[23] A cinematic "affront" then signifies an invisible blow reaching out from the screen whose signature is the embodied yet elusive experience of audience pain. "Affront" also calls to mind questions of shared or contested territory: the skin of the film and the skin of the viewer pressed side by side. This affront cuts both ways; the viewer affronts the film just as the film affronts the viewer. In this phenomenological formulation, which will extend to incorporate concepts of complicity below, the lived encounter with the moving image takes on the quality of a pain-based consummation (or communion, to use Bachelard's term). The "movie that hurts" thus can be seen in both its subjective and objective guises: the film that causes pain, and the film itself that suffers. This formulation speaks to pain as an unspoken

yet pervasive form of lived experience that lies just beneath the current network of speakable modes of viewer engagement.

Salò as Embodied Experience

My own experience with *Salò* has always been a deeply embodied and physically difficult one. I have found that my body has been intimately implicated in these encounters since the first time I watched the film nearly a decade ago. When I was an undergraduate, a professor recommended *Salò*, but his recommendation came with a warning. "It's a classic," he said, "but it's also very hard to watch. I've actually never made it to the end." I took this as a challenge. Months earlier I had become an avid reader of Sade. I found something genuinely if morbidly delightful in his writing, and while I did not exactly consider reading Sade physically *easy*, I did consider it palatable—even *The 120 Days of Sodom*, that sprawling, relentless, compendium of sexual assault, bestiality, and incest on which *Salò* is based. Compared to the innumerable atrocities of Sade's text, how bad could 116 minute of film be? I sat down to watch *Salò* one day in a student computer lab. I came prepared with a pen and a pad of paper; surely I would be sufficiently shielded from the atrocities on screen. At first I was impressed with my fortitude. The film's opening moments, in which the child victims are pulled from their homes, moved me to sympathy, but they hardly hurt. Yet *Salò*'s unwatchability mounts as the film progresses, and soon the film's standard litany of sensations began to take over. I felt disgust at the sight of the oozing, orange-brown dishes served up at the banquet of feces. I felt dread when the libertines lined up the male and female "harems" with the goal of killing whoever had the most attractive backside. At the sight of a girl forced to eat dog food containing broken glass, I felt pain. By the film's final sequence, I was completely overwhelmed. I was watching as the libertines and their accomplices hold a knife to the face of a female victim. The binocular gaze of the camera pulled in close as her torturers begin to saw off her scalp. Dark blood ran down her forehead as one torturer pulls back the wide, loose flap of her flesh. And here is where my memory goes fuzzy. I do not know if I succeeded in finishing the film. At some point I must have left the computer lab. I came back to my senses only a few hours later, when I found myself wandering the nearby university graveyard. Like a trauma victim, I had lost time and memory; I had disassociated. How had this happened? Never before had I reacted to a film in this way, and never have I since. The "unbearable" film that I thought I could handle had taken over my body completely.

It perhaps goes without saying that my thinking about *Salò* has in part always been colored by this first experience. In the intervening years, when *Salò* came up as a topic of conversation, I frequently found myself asking others about how it felt to watch the film, curious if they had reacted in similar ways. In fact, when pressed, it seemed that the majority of people who had something to say about *Salò* had not actually seen the film, or at least had not seen it all the way through. Its infamous reputation indeed preceded it, and it appeared that simply knowing *Salò* was supposed to hurt often supplanted a sense that it mattered to actually see the film. I also found that, whether or not my interlocutors had seen *Salò*, their comments echoed the embodied rhetoric of the film's infamy. Stressing

what they imagined as *Salò*'s unbearableness, they responded with comments like, "I started watching that once, and I had to turn it off" or "That's the one where they eat feces, right? No thank you. It makes me sick just thinking about it." What was particularly interesting to me was that, more than other films, *Salò* seemed to make it acceptable—or perhaps required—for viewers of all sorts to respond through physicality, even in very traditionally academic settings, where affect and the body are rarely given priority over analytical readings. Speaking about *Salò*, by contrast, required accounting for one's own physical response to the film (or simply the idea of the film). Interestingly, at the same time that this emphasis on physical response made the film tantalizing, it also often made it dismissible, foreclosing on the possibility of viewing. One scholar told me, in response to a conversation I tried to strike up about *Salò*, "I've *seen* that movie, ok? I've sat through it once. That was plenty for me." For this viewer, physical discomfort, once endured, said everything there was to say. "Sitting through" the thrills and chills of *Salò* was the end of the story and the conversation was over.

Until recently I had only seen *Salò* by myself (it is a difficult movie to convince friends to watch recreationally), but in the last few years I have had the opportunity to view the film in public contexts with larger groups. This seemed to me an invaluable opportunity to observe as well as to question. While I was interested in attending public screenings so that I could ask how my fellow viewers described the experience of watching the film, I also wanted to observe how they responded to it with their bodies. What I have found, speaking generally, is that the experience of watching *Salò* has indeed been an intensely bodily one for the vast majority of those whom I have observed and spoken with—but that these embodied experiences have varied greatly from person to person. Though writing like the reviews of *Salò in Time Out New York* and *The New York Sun* imply that the film's power to hurt is homogenous in nature, unsettling and nauseating all viewers equally, my own discussions with viewers have suggested that there are in fact many more complexities, nuances, and differences that appear among individual responses. In turn, the network of these individual responses can point toward a more complex understanding of how and why pain functions in the film.

The first public screening of *Salò* that I attended was on a university campus. *Salò* is an apt film for thinking about the power of the big screen vs. the home screen (how does sitting in the movie theater affect the body of the viewer differently than sitting before a television?) and this was going to be a big screen showing. The atmosphere as those around me in the theater took their seats was charged; a nervous silence was broken sporadically by anxious laughter. Excited and a bit afraid, the audience seemed to hold their breath for what was coming. Once the film began and its opening credits rolled, the mood quickly changed. I turned around in my seat periodically to watch my fellow viewers. Given the films reputation for *moving* the bodies of those who viewed it, and given my own experience of movement in response to the film, I had expected to see notable movement in the audience: viewers wincing, heads turning, overwhelmed individuals standing up to leave the theaters. Instead, I was surprised to find that I saw nearly perfect stillness. Except for two or three people who slipped silently away during unassuming scenes, no one stirred. However, I found it notable that this did not seem like the respectful, calm movie-going silence of contemporary viewership. It seemed forced, worried, involuntary. Hands

rested stiffly on armrests; legs did not cross and uncross. The air hung heavy with the kind of stillness that comes with holding one's breath until some unbearable trial is over.[24] For those around me, the moving images on screen appeared to have an effect that was, in fact, paralyzing. It was also striking to me that I had not found myself strongly affected by seeing the film on a big screen, as I had expected to be. To the contrary, I actually experienced the film as more safe and less upsetting in a group environment than I had when viewing it alone. Watching *Salò* on a small screen by myself, I realized, had been an intimate and therefore especially uncomfortable experience; because I was not watching with anyone else, I had lost myself in the viewing experience. There in the theater, surrounded by people, the film did not engulf me in the same way, however. The bodies around me reminded me about the world outside *Salò*. If the people sitting here were real, then the film, though it seemed in danger of taking over the reality of my body, must in fact be a fiction.

When the screening of *Salò* ended, the audience sat quietly for a moment before letting out a long-held collective sigh. Those around me began to stand up and make their way out of their rows. They spoke to each other in whispers—some wearily murmuring comments to each other that indicated that, even though they had stayed still during the screening, the film had indeed impacted their bodies: "I don't want dinner anymore," "I need a drink," "Why did you bring me to this thing again? I feel sick." Outside the theater, I had the opportunity to ask a few acquaintances about their experience watching the film. At first they seemed wary of the question, as if the trauma and guilt they felt in response to the film had already become private and unspeakable. "Why do you want to know?" one woman asked with a cold, leery stare.

Taking pity on me, a friend of hers answered my question. This had been his first time seeing the film. He came in expecting something truly unbearable, he said, but ultimately found the torture scenes "silly" because they seemed fake. "The scalping was done pretty well," he reflected, "but the tongue, when they're supposed to be cutting it out of the boy's mouth, looks all rubbery. It's obviously a prop." For this viewer, the success or failure of "realness" was crucial to *Salò*'s ability to hurt. Since the film felt fake, he did not feel its impact in his real body. Another member of the group reflected, "What I didn't expect was for *Salò* to be so beautiful. I thought it would be all violence and gore. But it's a gorgeous film. I think that's the thing that made it the most difficult for me." This inspired a number of nods of assent from the group: the aesthetic pleasures of the film had been surprisingly hard to take, they said, given the comparatively unpleasant subject matter of these pleasurable filmic moments. Then the women who had responded angrily to my initial question spoke up. I noticed that she looked flushed, queasy, and unsteady on her feet. "You want to know what I thought of the film?" she asked. "I hated it, okay? I felt horrible. I almost walked out a hundred times. I kept saying to myself, 'Leave, walk out, leave, you have to leave,' but I couldn't. I felt so *complicit*, sitting there, like, the fact that we were all watching together and doing nothing made it okay, like we made it possible for them to hurt those people." For a moment after she had finished speaking we all stood in silence. Whereas, for her friend, the film had not looked sufficiently real to impact his body, for this women the fact of her bodily presence had made the film all too real. This concept

of complicity was not one that I had considered before, and a number of her points have become central to the analysis of *Salò* and the filmic experience that I provide below.

A few months after the public screening of *Salò*, I had another chance to observe a group of viewers of the film and ask them about their experiences. As part of an academic colloquium series, I gave a presentation on *Salò* to a group of colleagues. Here too I encountered another set of difficult yet very meaningful embodied encounters with the film. As it had at the screening, the atmosphere before the presentation seemed charged with eager, nervous energy. Many of my colleagues were familiar with *Salò*'s reputation but had not "worked up the nerve" to watch it. The way that the group spoke revealed that the film was indeed the stuff of myth. One colleague described having seen the film on the shelf of a video rental store for years; though he was intrigued, he felt too "afraid" to rent it. Another told a story about a friend of a friend who bought a copy of the *Salò* re-release box set to leave sitting on his bookshelf still in its shrink wrap. He wanted to advertise that he was sufficiently subversive in his interests to own the film, but not sufficiently perverse to actually watch it.

As the presentation began, I attempted to make the subject matter welcoming, or at least less frightful. I mentioned that I considered myself a "fan" of the film, though I too find it hard to watch (a dilemma I share with Indiana). I also explained that I would be showing images of sexualized violence and invited attendees to step out of the presentation if they preferred. During the presentation itself, I show a clip of the scene in which Blangis forces the young female captive to consume his feces—a particularly difficult moment to watch for the reasons mentioned above. Afterwards, perhaps because the presentation took place in a more intimate setting than the public screening had, my colleagues seemed more comfortable sharing what it felt like to them to view the clip. Though their experiences varied, they all spoke clearly to the deeply embodied nature of their viewership. Some reported disassociating or feeling stunned One colleague described experiencing a "suffocating tension" that took over her body while she watched. Interestingly however, the most common physical response noted by my colleagues was nausea. The majority of the talk attendees described experiencing an internal struggle with a kind of spectatorial sickness inspired by the scene I had screened. Two attendees admitted that they had been gripped by the urge to actually vomit. Another described actually gagging in time with the shots in which the young girl, fighting to swallow Blangis' fresh excrement, herself gags. This nausea, which seems to meld the gut of the viewer with the gut of Pasolini's character, has interesting resonances with the idea of identification. Lisa Cartwright has re-imagined spectatorial identification as more than "feeling what the character on screen feels"; instead Cartwright sees empathy as a warm and caring interplay between viewer and viewed.[25] Yet this interplay was about pain, not about "warmth and caring." It was an empathy of pain and suffering.

The most challenging and impactful response that I received came after the presentation session had ended, when a colleague who had remained silent during the Q&A approached me individually. While others filed out of the room, she motioned me to sit and pulled up a chair next to mine. She explained that she had felt so nauseous during the clip that she had slipped away to the bathroom for a time. "I need to understand you, and I need you to understand me," she told me. "I'd heard about this movie before, how awful it was,

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and now I see why. It's horrible. I can't understand how you can say you like this film and I can't understand how you can justify showing it to other people. What happened to you to make you this way? There are real people in the world suffering, being tortured. My mother is a Holocaust survivor. This film makes violence look beautiful. How is that okay? Think of the people you're hurting when you show a film like this." As she was speaking, she began to cry. "It's not just the story. I've read Sade; that's fine. It's that this is film. Once it starts playing, I can't make it stop. With a book, I can close it when I want to, but when I'm watching a movie I can't escape." Staring back at this person who had been moved to tears, now it was my turn to feel sick. In this moment I needed to confront the physical reality of someone's pained response to *Salò* and its troubling emotional resonances, and it was almost too much to bear. Yet, even though I disagreed with and was myself hurt by many of the things my colleague said to me that evening, I was also grateful. Her response offered me many important new ways to think about what the experience of watching *Salò* meant to her and others. I would not have seen the complexity of the film's capacity to hurt without hearing about her experience.

These experiences of viewership were not always easy, neither for my colleagues who watched the film nor for myself . Yet these difficult experiences were also highly instructive. Pausing to hear from others around me allowed me to think about embodied responses to *Salò* in ways that related to but also expanded beyond my own experience and the film's reputation simply as a movie that "hurts to watch." Speaking with others and reflecting on my own story encouraged me to begin asking important questions about how *Salò* impacts the body. What is the role of film as medium in the experience of Pasolini's film? How does one explain this sensation of complicity and how does it contribute to the hurt that the film engenders? To what extent were these reactions personal or to what extent did they reflect broader social issues—and could (or should) the two be constructively disentangled? The responses that I had heard showed me that *Salò*, in keeping with its reputation, does indeed hurt to watch, but it doesn't always hurt in the same way. This then is one of the many values of attending to the body. Because each body reacts differently, each body has its own story to tell, and in this way gestures toward individual and nuanced interpretations of the experience of film.

Reading vs. Seeing

Among the issues that my own experience with *Salò* had prompted me to consider was the difference between encountering "painful" imagery as a reader versus as a viewer. Given that I had reacted in a considerably more visceral way to Pasolini's film than to Sade's original text, was there perhaps something about the shift in medium that accounted for the shift in embodied experience? At first glance, it might seem that *Salò*'s content is to blame for the pain it causes a viewer like me, its ruthless combination of lust and abomination. Yet, if this was what had so moved my body, why had I been so much less affected by the Sade? In theory, the most alarming tableaux in Pasolini's film should have paled in comparison to the litany of sadeian torments. Both Bersani and Indiana note that Pasolini actually renders his version of *The 120 Days of Sodom*, in some senses, less

unbearable than the original. For Bersani, the Fascist context makes the film approachable, familiar. Even the bodies of Pasolini's libertines have been rendered more palatable than in Sade's text.[26] Nor could the shift in my experience be accounted for by the narrative structure of *Salò*, with its clipped, calculated movement.[27] Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* is far more repetitive, endless, and hopeless. Its story itself, if it could be said to have one, is enough to inspire groans of torment. And yet none of the fictional atrocities I'd *read* about, apparently, had prepared me for *seeing Salò*.

Implicit in this claim that seeing *Salò* hurt more than reading Sade's text could be found a suggestion about the differences between media forms that I want to point out as problematic. The idea that film by nature exercises a more powerful and therefore more painful grip on the bodies of its viewers than literature does on its readers has the potential to feed into a worrisome narrative that pits various media forms against one another in a struggle for supremacy. I am wary that arguing that film possesses a holding power beyond that of writing might downplay the power and potential of textuality. As seen in chapter one, literature has the potential to exert its own painful hold on its readers. To frame this issue more generally, I find that newer media usually make visible modes of engagement that have, in less obvious ways, already long operated in older media. Therefore, saying that cinema accomplishes what text cannot runs the risk of playing into a hierarchy founded on false distinctions. I am even more wary of feeding into a discourse that figures cinema as inherently sadistic. In both popular and intellectual circles, the relationship between film and viewer is still often described as pathological; either the audience forces itself upon the screen or the screen forces itself upon the audience. This is especially true of cinema that contains images of violence. Thus, presenting film as a medium that "hurts" means potentially throwing fodder on the reactionary flames by implying that *Salò* is somehow itself cruel—whereas the truth is much more complicated.

Where does that leave my first hypothesis that *Salò* had been much more painful to *see* than Sade's text had been to *read*? The film itself, upon closer inspection, provides an answer. In order to understand the functions of films as they differ from the functions of literature, I found that I needed to consider cinema's defining characteristics, such as movement. Perhaps what gave the violence of *Salò* its power, to investigate a second hypothesis, was not its visual quality (the fact that it is made up of images) but its quality of animation (the fact that it is made up of *moving* pictures).[28] In what way might on-screen motion *move* the bodies of those who view it, and why should Pasolini's film provide such a notable example? Critics of graphic imagery in mainstream media profess that seeing violence will drive viewers to commit it, replicating the motions of the moving image with their own dangerous movements. Scholars of pornography have described the genre's ability to bridge screen and flesh, moving the viewer's body to arousal by displaying bodies in motion.[29] The aroused body in turn is driven to perpetuate further movement: the fast flow of blood vessels to the centers of pleasure, the motions of intercourse, the frictions of orgasm. It would be reasonable to theorize that *Salò*'s imagery, an arresting intermingling of violence and sex, could crystalize and magnify the power of the moving image to arouse. If my movements had mirrored those of the abused and abusive bodies on screen, if I had been aroused to pain, so to speak, then it would come as no surprise that I had been moved to such extremes. Whatever the answer, it became clear to me in comparing my

experiences of viewing and reading that the immediacy of spectatorship itself was playing an important role in the way that I was experiencing pain in response to *Salò*—and that the relationship between sight and pain would need to be a central axis for a study into what it might mean for a film to hurt.

Rather that theorize the role of spectatorship abstractly, I would like to turn here to the images of watching that *Salò* itself provides, with the goal of allowing the film to speak back to these questions of sight, power, and pain. Firstly, *Salò* speaks to the very issue of imagery and textuality that I described a moment ago. The film initially appears to enforce, yet ultimately challenges, the divide between the impotence of text and the impact of sight. Fittingly given the shift in medium, representations of language, images, and power differ from Sade's original text to Pasolini's film. In Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, words protect those who master them. Angela Carter points out that, in the midst of the chaos of the libertines' chateau, Sade's four female storytellers manage to remain safe. For Carter, their roles as gatekeepers of narrative elevate them beyond the economy of victims and victimizers.[30] Pasolini makes a crucial change in translating the storytellers for the screen. While three of the four storytellers do tell stories, the fourth remains silent. Mutely, she plays the piano; her only other role is to die. During the film's final sequence, this fourth storyteller stands up from her seat at the piano, walks to a window overlooking the courtyard, catches sight of the violence below, and unceremoniously throws herself to her death.[31] Words have failed her, both in the sense that she barely speaks and in the sense that her title ("storyteller") has not protected her. Indeed, throughout the film, language seems to be presented as insufficient and weak. The libertines complain that those storytellers who do speak do not convey their tales with sufficient detail to arouse their listeners. Pasolini includes in the film's opening credits a peculiar bibliography, including theoretical works on Sade by Roland Barthes and Pierre Klossowski: a satirically erudite recommended reading list that the viewer is presumably never meant to read.[32] The implied image of a stack of dry tomes contrasts with *Salò*'s wet violence. As the film progresses, language itself begins to fracture and disappear. When Blangis forces the young, weeping girl to consume his feces, he shouts "Mangia!", but the word, meant to compel her to action, must be repeated several times before she complies; its force is not in its meaning, but only in its sheer sound. The film's concluding moments are presented in almost perfect silence. Language has no place in the most sacred and more abhorrent of the libertines' rituals. In the end, language in *Salò* fails in all of its functions. It fails to survive. It fails to instruct. It fails to communicate. It fails to make sense. Given that Pasolini explicitly derives his film from a textual source (the *120 Days of Sodom* is right there in the title), his portrayal of language as impotent could be seen as a boast. In the face of a filmic incarnation, Sade's original will read as weak, powerless, and absurd. No wonder, should this be true, I could read it in relative peace.

Initially, the film appears to communicate the message that, in contrast to text, images possess a unique power over the embodied realities of human subjects. Sight, as compared to text, seems to be presented as the film's most potent and most painful sense. Whereas the storytellers fail to entice their listeners, the mere act of seeing often suffices to drive *Salò*'s libertines to a lustful frenzy. When the child victims are first brought for their inspection, the sight of their stripped bodies compels the four men to rise and approach

like hungry wolves. Later, when the masters instruct their captives to bend over and bare their backsides, the visual array so excites the four eager judges that they ecstatically proclaim that the child with the most appealing behind will be killed a thousand times. Not only does sight in *Salò* have the power to compel the body to pleasure, it also has the power to compel the body to pain. The film's culminating and most painful sequence is arguably more a series of scenes about sight than scenes about torture. Instead of joining the bodies in the courtyard for close-ups of the unbearable blows, Pasolini's camera watches through the palace window. This mode of seeing is a key part of the ritualistic game, perhaps more key than the violence itself. Instead of a performative speech act, which completes an action merely by being spoken, this is a performative sight act, one that actualizes the power and pain of the ritual by transforming it into spectacle. Whereas text failed to force the viewer to read, vision in the form of the binoculars succeeds in forcing the viewer to see. The camera frame narrows to these twin circles, eliminating any excess imagery in which the viewer might hide. Sight is also, of course, the powerful tool through which *Salò* achieves the alchemical feat of transforming the pain experienced by its characters into the pain experienced by its viewers. It would seem that the film itself has preempted my own inquiry into the power of spectatorship by proclaiming the answer before the question: when it comes to representations of violence, it just hurts more to see.

However, there are key moments throughout the film that upend this equation of sight with power by arguing for the insufficiency of sight. What most frequently characterizes sight in *Salò* is actually its own inability to fully see. Many of the scenes in which Pasolini seems to privilege visibility in fact expose a notable absence in visual information. This is certainly true in the film's final sequence, where the camera's binocular vision insists upon the act of seeing while at the same time blacking out the peripheries of sight. A similar visible absence characterizes scenes that take place in the "orgy room," the main hall where the libertines frequently assemble their entourage. Wide shots of the room, with their *Last-Supper*-esque composition, try and fail to impress the viewer with the collection of bodies that barely begin to fill the cavernous room. Most cinematically striking is the scene in which the libertines, upon arriving at the palace, assemble their band to formally present the rules of their treacherous collective. As the captives file into the courtyard where they will be addressed, they move in a tight mass. This shot gives the impression of multitudes, as if innumerable victims might walk indefinitely onto the scene. In the courtyard itself, Blangis, Carval, Durcet, and the Bishop stand alongside the storytellers on a commanding balcony overlooking a grassy backyard where the children and their guards cluster close, listening in various states of interest and despair. The camera alternates its perspective, looking up at the libertines from the captives' position below and looking down at the captives from the height of the balcony. Yet Pasolini quickly shatters the initial illusion of multitudes with a wide view that reveals the scene's own artifice: the yard is actually mostly empty. Victims stand together at its center, but around them is open space, compared to which their numbers (and the cruelty that will be enacted on them) look paltry and staged. This moment of visibility—the moment when the viewer is allowed to see farther, to see wider—in fact reveals that there is nothing to be seen, or else it reveals the very insufficiencies of sight. Seeing, in such moments, is indeed powerful, but its potency can uncover only the impotence of the visible. Thus, to the extent that the

film points toward the power enacting by seeing, the supremacy of sight proves little more than a tempting facade in the search for answers to *Salò*'s pain.

In such moments, the film suggests an interpretation of the relationship between sight and suffering that hinges specifically around sight's insufficiency. The failure of seeing to see all, as it appears in *Salò*, leaves blind spots in the visual field into which viewers can insert themselves and their own spectatorship. By positing and then undermining the power of the visual, *Salò* proposes an interpretation of visuality as neither more powerful or painful than text. Instead, seeing engenders pain with particular efficacy precisely because of its failures. *Salò*'s gaps, its moments of visual lacunae and sight-triggered sensory deprivation (the viewer can see torture, but not hear it; the viewer can see feces, but not taste it), leave space for the bodies of the audience, beckoning them to enter the violence of the film through these notably fleshly voids. The extra space in the orgy room, like the empty space in the courtyard, leaves room for viewers to imagine themselves joining the cast of the damned. The idea of the body implicated through absence speaks back to the ties between the visual and the text. It resonates with the theories of Wolfgang Iser, who posits that the subjectivities of readers expand to fill a text's interstices, shaping a series of words into a coherent and dynamic whole.[33] However, Iser's focus, like Bachelard's, is writing, not film. If the theory of visual insufficiency holds equally true for textual insufficiency, it cannot offer the answer to the particular, medium-specific pain of *Salò*, so striking in contrast to the experience of reading Sade's novel. It is worth noting though that, in this one sense, film actually functions like and not differently from text— implying that the right approach to this question of medium specificity may be to read across forms rather than reading them in opposition.

Empathy and the Ethics of Watching *Salò*

If not because of the unique power of film, why then does *Salò* hurt? The answer that comes perhaps most immediately to mind is empathy: the idea that viewers empathize with the victims they see abused on screen and project themselves into the abused bodies whose suffering they are watching. However, I think that this is too simplistic an answer. As mentioned above, the film denies viewers the ability to identify with its characters; identification is a necessary step in the process of empathy. In addition, empathy as an explanation for the pain of watching *Salò* does not account for the mediating effects of the screen and the way that it positions viewers not so much as participants as it positions them as witnesses. Alternatively, one might argue that the film hurts because viewers identify with the libertines and, in worrying that they themselves have taken on sadistic roles, react by feeling a kind of pain that both obfuscates and concretizes internal experiences of guilt and shame. This too seems an insufficient answer. Rather, I would point to the larger stakes of such hypotheses. Both of these potential explanations for the pain of *Salò* are ethical in nature. Indeed, as my discussions with other viewers suggested, ethics are a central concern that underlies the experience of watching the film. What would it mean for it to be ethically wrong simply to watch a movie, and how might that relate to pain felt in the body in the process of viewing?

The ethics of viewing *Salò*, especially when it comes to questions of pain and pleasure, are indeed complicated. One of the most striking aspects of my colleague's comments on the evening of my presentation was her disbelief that a "good" person like me could take pleasure in a "horrible" film like *Salò*. As I have mentioned, it seems that *Salò* more than other films, when discussed with others, calls for an accounting of one's own personal and physical response. My relationship to the ethics of watching *Salò* is admittedly ambivalent. I find the film masterful, I find the way it affects the bodies of its viewers fascinating, and I feel a deep personal connection to artistic works that tackle the complex interrelation between pain and pleasure. I cannot say, however, that I find watching the film fun, in any traditional sense, and I certainly would not claim that I experience enjoyment when I see bodies harmed against their will, even fictional ones. To the contrary, representations of non-consensual violence make me feel sad, helpless, hopeless—yet, for me these feelings are not incommensurable with something called "liking" (remember that I opened my presentation by calling myself a "fan" of *Salò*). Gary Indiana describes this blend of pain and pleasure with elegant brevity: "I love *Salò* (and hate it)."[34] For my colleague, however, my enthusiasm set off an ethical red flag, triggered by the presumption that liking such an unsettling film revealed something equally unsettling about me. She had demanded to know "what happened to make [me] this way"—as if my critical interest bespoke a hidden sickness that needed to be understood to be contained. I wonder, however, whether my liking of *Salò* is really so different from responses of more "normal" viewers. A handful of times other scholars have suggested to me, not without a certain lascivious smirk, that perhaps the pervasiveness of *Salò*'s reputation as "physically nauseating" or "too painful to watch" should be attributed not to the film's repulsiveness but to its taboo appeal. Might these socially acceptable responses serve to obfuscate the arousal felt at the sight of the young nude bodies abused on screen? I am wary of such claims, as they imply that viewers cannot be trusted to speak their own stories. So I was surprised to hear many of those present at the talk I gave offer similar explanations during the Q&A. When speaking at such moments, it is worth noting, they frequently switched from the first-person singular to the safer first person plural. Maybe the film felt so unpleasant because "we" liked it, and this frightened "us," they posited. Maybe it touched a deep, dark place inside "us" that needed to repressed with disgust. Even the colleague who took me aside to speak to me individually, in her comments, reported being moved by the film's beauty. If it is true that the pain of *Salò* in some sense harbors its pleasure, then the difference between "good" and "bad" people may not be whether they like the film, but whether they are willing to say it.

In a discussion of the ethics of viewing *Salò*, it is also important to address the film's own ethics. Though it represents torture, the film does not in fact promote it, but rather reflects on troubling issues of pain and power. This was one of the many arguments operating beneath the surface of my colleague's response to my presentation. On the most basic level, she was rehearsing the familiar erroneous argument, discussed in chapter three in relation to video games, that representations of violence beget violence, stirring in their viewers the desire to hurt others. "Don't you think that, by showing things like this, you're promoting actual torture?" my colleague had asked me. The answer, for me, is no. Firstly, though it makes reference to real historical crimes, the suffering that takes place on screen

in Pasolini's film is entirely fictional. Secondly, *Salò* is clearly a critique of violence, not an advertisement. Thirdly and most importantly, I believe that representing violence, looking closely at those representations, and interrogating what it means to react to them is one of the most crucial tasks of both the artist and the scholar of visual cultures. Far from promoting torture, watching *Salò,* talking about watching *Salò*, and insisting on lingering on the pain that one feels when watching *Salò* are all ethically commendable—indeed ethically imperative—acts. Graphic violence, including scenes of torture, permeate contemporary entertainment media.

This point becomes most clear when *Salò* is compared to other works of film media in which representations of torture play a central role. Jack Bauer, the protagonist of Fox's highly popular television series *24* (2001 – 2010), regularly maims terrorists in the name of national security.[35] Yet the action-packed *24*, to believe the accolades of its immense fan base, is anything but hard to watch. This does not mean, however, that its ethics are unquestionable; much to the contrary, I would argue that *24* is far less ethical than *Salò*. Whether or not the imagery that appears in the television series drives viewers to commit one-on-one acts of violence, the show's right-wing, pro-nationalist agenda certainly encourages the mainstream, voting public to support government policies that facilitate injustices like those committed at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. That is, the show promotes actual torture by making it seem necessary, heroic, and even fun (as long as the torturer is fighting for the side of good, of course). Pasolini's film, by contrast, refuses to allow viewers to witness abuse without feeling abused themselves. In its world, there is no good torture. Putting *Salò* before the eyes of others does not make violence sexy, nor does it, as some recent scholars have claimed, offer a window into what torturers are "really" like. But it does refuse to let the face of suffering go unseen, to let the physicality of pain be subsumed by the appeals of mild-mannered media consumerism and fear-mongering.

Yet I would also argue that we should not simply dismiss the issue of ethics when watching *Salò*. Rather, I believe that by analyzing the issue of ethics we can helpfully turn our line of thinking back to questions of the real and the body. Beneath the ethical implications of watching *Salò* lays an economy of realness. My colleague made frequent recourse to the real in order to argue for the "horribleness" of the film ("There are real people in the world suffering"), to establish her authority as one who could speak to the morality of representing violence ("My mother [really] survived the Holocaust,"), and to insist on the only acceptable means by which my own interest in the film could be rendered comprehensible ("What [really] happened to you to make you this way?").[36] Her statements insinuate that *Salò*'s fictional violence insults the memory of those who have experienced actual suffering, as if seeing someone tortured on-screen could sap the meaning from real-life torture. Most importantly, they also imply that merely watching the film has the alchemical power to increase the suffering of actual people off-screen. Watching itself, in this formulation, becomes a form of "real" violence. My colleague meant this as a reason not to watch the film, but I take it as one of the most important insights I have gained from the responses of *Salò*'s viewers. It is a road sign at a key juncture pointing toward how film as a medium manages to hurt. Some of the other viewers I've spoken with also described their uneasiness with the film in terms of realness—yet the realness to which they have referred has fallen within standard definitions. One reported feeling he was doing something wrong

in watching *Salò* since he imagined that the shoot must have been traumatic for the real teenage actors on set. Another said that, in a society where viewing child pornography is itself illegal, seeing real minors in explicitly sexual situations made him feel like he had committed a crime. Yet understanding the anxiety that simply watching violent films like *Salò* could engender real pain requires a new formulation of realness. The violence of Pasolini's film is perceived by its viewers as becoming real because it is *felt* as real. What is the mechanism behind this alchemy, a power imagined as traveling through the body to unleash violence on the world? The answer brings together the comments of my colleagues as well as those from the public screening: the feeling of complicity.

Complicity as an Experience of *Salò*

Here I would like to transition, moving through this issue of ethics as an experience of the body and back to the specific nature of the filmic medium. In particular, I am interested in film as a series of moving pictures, a medium that presents imagery in a perpetual present. It is the movement on screen and its liveness that gives it the impression of realness, and makes one feel that an act of violence is taking place in "real time." This liveness imbues film with the sense of movement that is then mirrored in the body of the viewer, whether in the form of motion or emotion. The audience at the public screening of *Salò* I attended had held still during the film. I had found myself in some sense similarly anesthetized after my first encounter with *Salò*. Yet, as at least one audience member reported, this stillness had masked a frantic desire to flee, a frenetic frenzy frozen within flesh. The resonance between motion on screen and the motion of the body in turn creates a sense of complicity—the fear that the very act of viewing the film is in some way bringing to life the violence represented on screen through the act of viewing.

   The concept of complicity surfaced at a number of key moments in my discussions with *Salò*'s viewers. Though the majority of those I spoke with focused their responses on feelings of the body (nausea, suffocation, paralysis), in unpacking these references to complicity I have come to believe that related concerns in fact underlay many of the reactions I observed, including those that did not call complicity by name. The two viewers who did directly cite anxieties around complicity as one of the sources of their discomfort, i.e. the woman whom I talked with outside of the public screening and the colleague in my department who approached me after my presentation, provided the most verbose and openly heated commentary in their respective evenings of observation. It is my strong suspicion that these viewers were exceptionably able to put into words a set of apprehensions that operated beneath the surface of many other viewer's reactions as well. Read closely, their comments in fact provide a roadmap to finally making sense of the pain of *Salò*, and the "kinky" experience of film more broadly. Though their use of the term "complicit" shorthands a diverse and at times contradictory mix of fears and self-accusations, it also sheds light on commonly held misgivings. Whereas an attempt to differentiate the powers of film from the powers of other media forms proved to be an insufficient explanation for how *Salò* manages to communicate pain, complicity provides a much less tidy and yet much truer answer to what makes movies hurt. As an answer, it

offers a particular rich array of challenges and insights specifically because it has emerged not from hypothesis but from lived experience.

On the one hand, complicity might sound like a reactionary response to issues of violence in film. At first glance it may seem that complicity, as it appears in these responses from *Salò*'s viewers, should be dismissed as erroneous. On the most basic level, accusing oneself or others of complicity reads as a judgment, or even a criminal allegation. Like many of my particularly vehement colleague's comments, such accusations ring of the contemporary American rhetoric of moral panic, the logic of which dictates that engaging with representations of violence drives one to commit (or at least sanction) violence in turn. In this sense complicity seems to be deployed as synonymous with enabling or enacting. It points a finger of blame at the misdeed of playing along with the practice of hurt by watching. It is not inconceivable to see how this same accusation of complicity could be used as grounds for an argument to censor *Salò*. Certainly my colleague, when she insists that screening the film promotes torture, is implying that merely offering *Salò* for viewing defies the dictates of ethics. The idea that bearing witness to film constitutes an act of complicity also represents a potentially troubling conflation of fact and fiction; it proposes that witnessing imaginary violence makes one somehow accountable for real suffering. To the scholar who believes in the value of watching and reflecting on difficult films, and who feels it is crucial to reject the discourse of moral panic that so frequently surrounds media, these claims of complicity may sound irksome at best: impediments to the work of accessibility and analysis.

Yet complicity is also a more complicated concept than it might at first appear, one that merits more careful consideration and analysis. I do not think that complicity as a theoretical framework should be so easily cast aside. Mapping the functions of complicity reveals the extent to which the concept speaks to a wider set of experiences shared among viewers. What did complicity mean for the viewers whom I spoke with? For the woman I talked with outside of the public screening, complicity played many roles. It existed simultaneously as a point of shame, a point of camaraderie, and a point of possibility. "I kept saying to myself, 'Leave, walk out, leave, you have to leave,' but I couldn't," she told me, as quoted above. "I felt so complicit, sitting there. It was like, the fact that we were all watching and doing nothing made it okay. It made it possible for them to hurt those people." Imbued with guilt and self-blame, this naming of complicity acts as an implicit accusation that the viewer levels against herself: if she had summoned the courage to exit the theater, she could have put an end to the wrongdoing on screen. Though this accusation is directed at the individual, it also has larger ramifications for the collective. Complicity in this case is imagined to condone a wider, social system of questionable ethics: "doing nothing made it okay." Paradoxically, this complicity both alienates the viewer (from her body, which she cannot control) and connects the viewer (to those around her). Most notably, complicity here is not an action, a violence in and of itself, but a facilitation, the grease that allows the cogs to turn in the machine of abuse. This viewer saw her complicity as a crucial yet unwitting tool that brought pain into being. Complicity was, to put it otherwise, a name for the feeling that she had enabled violence by her watching.

In the case of the colleague who approached me after my presentation, complicity signified something different yet related. Her comments presented complicity as an active

state rather than a passive facilitation. This active state was colored by the unsettling bonds of intimacy she perceived as built between viewer and film. She reported, "It makes me so sick how this movie makes violence look so beautiful… Yes, 'complicit' is definitely the word. This film makes me complicit sitting there watching it be beautiful." Complicity here is inextricably linked to ethics of aesthetics. Beauty, it seems, makes viewers complicit by refusing distance. It attracts the spectator, who sanctions the morality of aestheticization with her appreciation of visual mastery. Again complicity names a manner of guilt, in this case the guilt of pleasure. Beauty alone does not possess agency, however. The viewer must act, must "sit there watching it be beautiful," in contrast to the viewer whose complicity is engendered by a failure to stop sitting. For the woman who spoke after the public screening, complicity facilitated a breach in logic through which the pain of fiction was able to cross into embodied reality ("the fact that we were all watching… made it possible for them to hurt those people"). My colleague's comments, by contrast, formulated complicity as itself the agent that delivers hurt to the body. *Salò*'s beauty, with its irresistible allure that spreads the contagion of questionable ethics, "makes [her] sick." For this viewer, complicity was the name for the feeling that she had been forced into a relationship with the film, through which the film was able to do harm.

Yet, read together, the embodied experiences of these viewers offer us a richer impression of what complicity might mean in the context of watching *Salò*. It is only logical that these meanings of complicity, as personal as the individual experience of each viewer, should demonstrate their own unique inflections. Beneath their differences though, two striking similarities surface in these accounts that gesture toward a shared network of meaning underlying experiences of spectatorial complicity. Firstly, in both accounts, the term "complicity" appears to describe a transgression (bringing violence through the screen and into the world by watching), but in fact describes a *feeling*. No "real" crime has been committed; the crime has only been felt. Thus, in this context, complicity names the way it *feels* to watch *Salò*, the way it *feels* to witness representations of violence, and the way it *feels* to confront one's own embodied and troubling relation to that representation. This leads to the second and equally important similarity between these accounts. In both cases, the feeling to which complicity gives a name is triggered by an intimacy between viewer and film, perceived as deeply problematic. This anxious proximity is imagined to create a pact that brings violence to life. At the public screening, the woman I spoke to described "sitting there" as the reason that "they" were able to "hurt all those people." She felt that the very physical presence of her body, brought into contact with the immense presence of the film, would enact hurt. My colleague similarly emphasized beauty in her description of complicity. "Sitting there watching [*Salò*] be beautiful," she envisioned herself as engaging in a private, even erotic tête-à-tête with a film she nonetheless found morally abhorrent. Together, these responses point toward a shared experience of complicity as the feeling of coming too close, of fearing oneself entangled and therefore implicated with *Salò*. This feeling—at once sensuous, alarming, and overwhelming— overflows the bounds of the conscious to manifest in the body, where it takes the physical form of nausea, suffocation, and pain. While the crime of complicity may be only imagined, the hurt of the film is real.

In this way, complicity as it functions here in relation to the pain of watching *Salò* differs notably from commonplace definitions of the term. Understanding complicity (or, more accurately, understanding a version of the thing called complicity) as an experience that responds specifically to film requires first delineating the traditional stakes of the concept. In the precedent of Western theorizing, complicity has most frequently taken two forms. One formulates complicity around action, the other around inaction, but both elide the concepts of complicity and culpability. These theories have most frequently been framed through large-scale historical atrocities, real-life suffering on a grand scale, such as the Holocaust and South African apartheid. In the first conventional definition, complicity's ontological status is determined through the things that one *does*. In the years following regimes of terror, moral authorities have often led the charge to determine who can be called complicit and what that complicity means. The 1995 South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example, operating after the end of apartheid, labeled as "non-principle perpetrators" a wide range of civilian agents who had helped facilitate the conditions of oppression, including those who had staffed state prisons or espoused religious beliefs that endorsed segregation. Anyone who had actively greased the wheels of the atrocity machine was named "complicit." The second definition of complicity broadens its scope to include a lack of action, the things one *doesn't* do.[37] This conceptualization of complicity has frequently been characterized by silence, or "turning a blind eye." In his response to the 1894–1906 Dreyfus Affair, Emile Zola famously wrote that an unwillingness to speak up against anti-Semitism made the subject of the anti-Semitic French state as culpable as its government.[38] *Salò* too brings historical atrocity to bear on its version of complicity. The film explicitly engages with Italian Fascism, its injustices, and its traumas. Yet the fictional nature of Pasolini's film necessitates differentiating between the feeling of complicity as expressed in response to media and expressions of "real-life" complicity. *Salò* is no more and no less than a Fascist fairy tale, a nightmare, an absurdist spectacle, a subversive mixture of fact and fantasy, an exercise in asking who is complicit when all the world has gone mad: a refraction of history rather than its mimetic reflection. Understanding the feelings of complicity provoked by the film requires conceptualizing complicity differently.

In the case of *Salò*, it seems fitting to look for other models of what complicity might mean, ones that are better suited to the film as a media object rather than (or perhaps in addition to) a moment or an action in history. Recent work by scholar Naomi Mandel offers an intriguing third definition of complicity. Mandel's reformulation of the concept proves particularly useful here because it focuses on representations of violence rather than acts of violence themselves. In *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America*, Mandel focuses on the unspeakableness of historical atrocity. She links this culturally accepted unspeakableness—for example, the commonly posited claim that the unbearable horrors of the Holocaust could not and should not ever be sufficiently rendered into words—to anxieties of complicity.[39] The drive to remain silent around suffering, she argues, presents itself as a sign of respect, but in actuality denies the experience of pain a voice. This silence is perpetuated by the fear that those who speak will make themselves complicit with the acts of violence to which they offer language. They will be seen, they worry, as standing "in improper relation to evil." Rather than assuaging this fear by

assuring readers that making violence speakable constitutes a morally uncomplicated act, Mandel boldly states her stance that, yes, giving a voice to violence puts one in a state of complicity, but that this complicity itself is neither good nor bad. Instead, complicity becomes a site of potential, not a crime. It "precedes the charge of collaboration or the conclusion of culpability. Complicity is, in fact, the condition of possibility for the articulation of these charges."[40] That is, for Mandel, complicity could be explained as coming close enough to suffering to be able to communicate with it, and communicate for it. It is a form of intimacy, the necessary precursor of crime but also the necessary precursor of speaking pain. Mandel's perspective on complicity is helpful for the present project because it is founded on issues of representation rather than action. It helps articulate what is "unwatchable" in *Salò* by suggesting parallels with what is unspeakable. It also makes clear the tension inherent in complicity: the idea that complicity is, in itself, neither good nor bad, but a space of possibility and a step toward bringing an issue or an image to light and making it, in this sense, real.

Drawing from Mandel's definition, I would restate the experience of complicity as a state of intimate relationality. This has been true in the way that the viewers I have observed have deployed the term. Specifically, in the case of *Salò*, the term complicity seems to describe a worrisome feeling of intimacy with representations of "evil." It names the impact on the mind and the body of finding oneself entangled in a confusion of fact and reality: that unshakable feeling in the gut that watching fictional violence does actual wrong. Complicity is the name for the feeling of mutual affront and mutual tenderness, for the way the body engages with the sensuous slap of the screen. This complicity does not enable violence, though it is itself a form of reciprocal violence. It enables the possibility to fully see *Salò*, to fully experience *Salò*, to fully connect with *Salò*, and to fully confront *Salò*. This definition of complicity aims to concretize the feeling I have identified as a primary factor in viewers' responses to Pasolini's film—and, I would speculate, to film as a medium more broadly. It describes a slippery yet significant relationship to representation. However, it is worth noting, this definition does not undertake to remake political, judicial, or historical standards for identifying real-life complicity. The complicity I am laying out here names an interplay between embodied fact and on-screen fiction. It is not the complicity of the "real" world. It is the complicity of the place where a viewer experiences the real world breaking down. It is a state that is kinky, mutual, intimate, and alarming on a physical level. Together film and viewer bring experience into being. *Salò* demonstrates how this process and complicity itself can be deeply embodied.

This complicity then is what makes it possible for a film, seemingly disembodied, to reach out and "hurt" its viewers. As a form of connection, complicity builds a bridge between body and screen. Like an electric charge, the film's hurt leaps across this pathway into the flesh. When the pain of the film becomes unbearable, that spark is felt like a lightening bolt, making it "too painful to watch." The body of the film and the body of the spectator momentarily meld; the place where they meet is suffering. This experience of complicity is itself painful. It breaches the boundaries of the self. Thus the film enters the body through complicity's mutual intimacy and mutual affront. In this sense, complicity also offers a different model of filmic identification; it proposes that the relationship

between media object and viewing subject be understood through an interplay between bodies on- and off-screen rather than thorough mimetic mirroring.

Through this relationality, complicity defies accepted paradigms of identification. It is able to exist as a *relation* because it forms at the intersection between two distinct subjects: viewer and film. Since the days of Laura Mulvey and Christian Metz, identification has been central to thinking about how viewers bridge the gap between their bodies and the screen. Even Carol Clover's groundbreaking *Men, Women, and Chainsaws,* which overturned traditional prescriptions for identification by arguing that male viewers of slasher movies derive pleasure from identifying with female victims, still hinges on identification as the primary mechanic of spectatorship.[41] By contrast, implications that viewers identified with *Salò*'s characters appeared rarely in the responses I observed. The painful experience of *Salò* cannot therefore be explained by identification. Complicity offers a more accurate if complicated model. I would posit that, in other films that do offer viewers the opportunity to identify with characters and/or points of view, identification actually obfuscates rather than explains the pain of cinematic violence. The television series *24* provides viewers with a clear, relatable protagonist in whom to lose themselves. This sublime relinquishing of the self eliminates the distance necessary to recognize the relationship of complicity and therefore to question the message communicated on screen.

While I would argue that complicity plays a role in a wide array of film experiences, *Salò* in particular magnifies this feeling, making it unavoidably legible. The film represents a perfect storm of triggers associated with viewership and painfully questionable ethics. As seen, *Salò* combines historical violence (Fascism), with which the concept of complicity is most commonly associated, and the sexually-motivated abuse of children, considered one of the most abhorrent and unspeakable forms of violence in a contemporary cultural context. Watching the film offers the viewer an assemblage of crimes. Feeling intimately complicit with each of these crimes comes with its own anxieties, which together multiply. The film's explicit integration of lust and violence further troubles the waters of the viewing conscious and augments the legible sensation of complicity. The viewer who fears herself complicit with this confusingly masterful film and its violence blames herself, in part, for taking pleasure in the moving image before her: its beauty, its intimacy, its holding power. *Salò* itself insists that viewers confront a dynamic in which desire is inextricable from torture. In this way the film strives to reinforce the feeling of complicity it engenders by acting as a meta-commentary, reflecting back to the guilt-wracked viewer the image of other desiring spectators (the libertines) whose hungry gaze does indeed bring pain into the world. Ultimately, what the film shows us is that the feeling of pain that watching *Salò* conjures up is the very feeling of that intimate connection, that complicity.

In keeping with the larger claims of this dissertation, it merits underscoring that the complicit interrelation between film and viewer entails an almost erotic consummation. While the experience of complicity hurts, it is also closely bond up with pleasure, a combination on which *Salò* itself hinges. Pleasure can be found in the film's beauty, but also in the taboo of watching the unwatchable, and in the flirtation with evil. Likewise, pleasure underlies the self-accusations of guilt and shame often coupled with feelings of complicity. Joined thus by both their pain and pleasure, viewer and film engage in what Bachelard would call a "communion." The film brings the viewer to life by imbuing her with feeling (in

this case hurt), and the viewer brings the film to life by offering her body as a vessel for its resurrection (at once giving herself and making the film her own). As a sensuous state that defies the logic separating fact from fiction, complicity enacts a transubstantiation that brings the representational into the realm of the real. This interactive union produces a co-constitutive coming into being. Pain marks the feeling of complicity, and complicity makes possible the experience of spectatorial pain. Consummated, the kinky interplay between entangled subjects pinches and jabs up until the moment the credits roll—and possibly beyond. This is true not just for viewers of *Salò* or other movies that hurt, but for the basic experience of viewing.

Learning from Movies that Hurt

As the name for an affective relationship to representation, complicity could in theory be applied to any experience of media. Reading, as seen in chapter one, involves an intimate and kinky relation. Interactive digital media like video games, as will be discussed in chapter three, require players to actively participate in on-screen activities with ethical implications. However, the feeling of complicity has the largest role to play in the embodied experience of cinema. This is for two reasons. First, commonplace conceptualizations of complicity hinge around sight, like seeing a crime committed and declining to stop it. Everyday phrases from the popular consciousness that come to mind include: "turning a blind eye," "sitting idly by and watching," and "watching and doing nothing." Film, as a medium of visibility, requires that viewers *see* but offers little opportunity to *act*. My colleague mentioned above that, if a movie is playing, she can "get up and walk away," but she can't "make it stop." Because no present action will change the prerecorded images on screen, the viewer has only the choice to "sit idly by and watch," or not watch at all. The second reason that film superlatively conjures the feeling of complicity is that film exists in a linear, one-to-one temporality with its viewer. Each time a film is viewed, it seems to the senses of those who watch it to take place in real time. The actors breathe; the viewers breathe. This experience of seeing through the body conjures the impression of presence and continual action. Though Pasolini directed his film four decades ago, and though *Salò* itself addresses a political regime that collapsed three decades prior to the film's creation, the perpetual motion of the film (and here is the true impact of the "moving" picture) draws viewers in as if that violence were happening again, or perhaps for that first time. This impression amplifies concerns around enabling. It *feels* as though viewers could, but fail to, make it stop. Seeing torture on screen does not uniquely stir these feelings of enabling the prerecorded as it occurs in real time, but it does make them palpable through pain.

Understanding filmic experience through complicity reveals the unspoken stakes of watching movies that hurt, and makes clear why that hurt matters. As seen above, the common association of films like *Salò* with viewer discomfort has often been used to justify foreclosing on the film as an object of closer investigation. The film's pain has been read as an embodied fact that would do better to remain unspeakable. In my formulation, however, the fact that *Salò* hurts has opened new perspectives and sites of meaning. With pain as its

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roadmap, complicity reveals itself as a key feeling operating beneath the experience of viewership. This complicity, when experienced as unbearable, hinges on hurt. Yet the experience of complicity is not itself negative. Instead, it is fundamental, unavoidable, and generative, if often frequently obfuscated or sublimated into the realm of the invisible. As a state of relation, complicity comes into play across viewing experiences. The value of pain in the case of *Salò* is to draw attention to that complicity and lay bear its functions. Remaining aware of the complicity of viewership—an awareness that manifests in the body—is crucial both for understanding the cinematic experience and for confronting the perceived ethical implications of standing, eyes open, in relation to suffering. Like complicity, the pain of this awareness is not a bad thing. It is a necessary precondition for understanding. Neither pain nor complicity then are incidental, dismissible, or unfortunate elements of watching *Salò* that tragically mar or even condemn Pasolini's filmic masterpiece. The very point of *Salò* is its pain. Its message exists in how much it hurts. To ignore the importance of this hurt is to leave *Salò* "unwatchable," to silence the body as well as the stories that Pasolini tells about history, helplessness, and power. Deliberately lingering over narratives of experiences, by contrast, has here enabled a confrontation of pain, the central role it plays in the twenty-first-century American life of *Salò*, and the insights it offers into what it means, as an intimate and anxious body, to watch.

To summarize: Pasolini's infamous 1975 *Salò*, in the contemporary American context, has a reputation as a film that's "too painful to watch." Indeed, this film, the tale of four Fascist libertines and their violent crimes, is most frequently described by popular media and widely circulating rumors as superlatively capable of reaching out to "hurt" its viewers. Understanding how *Salò* is able to so effectively transgress the confines of the screen has required attending first and foremost to the lived experience of the film's viewers. This phenomenological approach has chosen as its primary focus narratives of the spectatorial body over a preoccupation with the film's unsettling content. In hopes of allowing these bodies to tell their stories, I have worked closely with informal reports and observations from a variety of viewers, including myself, colleagues, and others in my cultural milieu. These observations have guided me on my search for an answer to the question: how can *Salò*, or any film, actually hurt? My own first encounter with the film initially suggested that its power came from the fundamental capacity of cinema to impact the body more than other media forms. However, my work with the theories of Gaston Bachelard and Wolfgang Iser, along with *Salò*'s own commentary on visuality and text, revealed this conclusion to be insufficient. Wondering perhaps if the moving nature of moving pictures could account for the film's ability to move the body, I attended my first public screening of *Salò* and watched audience members in motion. To my surprise though, I witnessed an unexpected stillness that rejected and resisted the motion on screen. However, a handful of particularly heated viewer comments pushed me to think about *Salò*'s pain in a new way: through the framework of complicity. Though complicity initially seemed to me to name a counterproductive accusation, recent writing on the topic helped me reformulate complicity as a necessary, painful, and powerful state. This state, I have concluded, takes the form of an intimate consummation between *Salò* and its viewers that turns the hurt of the film into a reality, locating meaning at the site of reciprocal pain.

These conclusions have more to offer than a new interpretation of *Salò*. They speak to a broader network of "movies that hurt," as well as to movies that are not commonly discussed in conjunction with pain or complicity. Given its reputation and the reports of its viewers, it would seem *Salò* possesses a unique capability to hurt those who watch it — and, to a certain extent, it does. Yet its brazen content and undeniable impact on the body also amplify and therefore make legible the mechanisms of intimate cinematic relations at play across the medium. In Pasolini's film complicity becomes so unavoidable and so palpable that it can actually be felt. Even films that contain no violent or sexually transgressive content, however, engage their viewers in a consummation of complicity. This complicity forms the contract between spectator and film through which the visual comes to life. And since complicity is itself a form of intimate suffering, this contract is fulfilled through a kinky interplay that transforms the disembodiment of media into the reality of flesh. As elsewhere in this project, my goal here has been to map a medium's relationship to the experience of pain and pleasure. I have selected as my object a film that directly tackles pleasure and pain because, by addressing these issues, such a piece renders most explicit the kinky dynamics that lie beneath the cover of content. This chapter has also sought to model the analytical potential of attending to the lived experiences of the subjects who wrestle with these media objects. Though embodiment does have a place in contemporary film criticism, this work points to the importance of pushing further, of confronting the painful as well as the pleasurable in discussions of phenomenology, and of allowing bodies to tell their own stories. These stories, further explored, will surely continue to open new doors to reconsidering the experience of media and to uncovering the subtler affective operations of media itself. Importantly, these stories also demonstrate the importance of hurt as a mode of making meaning, connection, and possibility.

In closing, I would like to re-emphasize the value of watching a film like *Salò*. This values lies not in moving past its hurt, but in lingering to experience it. Hurting in this fashion proves both difficult and rewarding. It offers viewers and scholars alike a new way of seeing through what the body does not want to see. Movies in this vein, long the casualties of censorship and moral panic, are frequently accused as unethical promotions of violence. In fact, I have argued here, they do bring hurt into the world, but a meaningful personal hurt, not real-world violence against others. Watching through hurt is challenging indeed (physically and morally), yet this challenge functions as a compelling call to reexamine cultural and scholarly paradigms. *Salò* challenges viewers to stay present in their bodies when they experience viewership. It challenges scholars to make sense of the relationship between media and pain. It challenges all who watch to confront the feeling of becoming complicit with violence. It therefore also challenges the wider viewing public to question the ethics of representations of violence that do *not* invoke pain. It challenges assumptions that pigeonhole art that contains violent and/or sexual imagery. The personal nature of responses to *Salò* also challenges scholars to embark on future work that considers the phenomenological experience of the film in a wider diversity of national and social contexts. Through hurt, *Salò* and films like it unveil the interplay of the bodily and the screen, and offer alternative modes of theorizing the contemporary landscape of violence in media.

[1] "Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom," *Time Out New York*, March 15, 2012. Accessed June 13, 2014, http://www.timeout.com/newyork/film/salo-or-the-120-days-of-sodom.

[2] At the time of its release in the mid-1970's, the film was banned on grounds of obscenity in a number of countries, including its native Italy; many of these countries have only approved it for public viewing as late as the mid-1990's. For a case study in the history of *Salò*'s controversial reception, I recommend Refused-Classification.com's breakdown of the many decades of censorship the film has faced in Australia. "Film Censorship: Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom," Refused-Classification.com, accessed June 13, 2014, http://www.refused-classification.com/censorship/films/salo-or-the-120-days-of-sodom-1975-1.html.

[3] Bruce Bennet, "Pasolini's Cruel Masterpiece," *The New York Sun*, August 26, 2008. Accessed June 13, 2014, http://www.nysun.com/arts/pasolinis-cruel-masterpiece/84572/.

[4] "Top 26 Most Disturbing and Unsettling Films Ever Made," 12wolfie23 (Youtube user), uploaded July 19, 2011, accessed June 13, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCHLf4dokV4.

[5] "Watching the Unwatchable: Films Confront Torture," Pacific Film Archive, accessed June 13, 2014, http://bampfa.berkeley.edu/filmseries/torture.

[6] Gerard Jones, *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

[7] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

[8] Laura Marks*, Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xvi.

[9] Erik Christian Haugaard, translator from the Danish of the tales of Hans Christian Andersen, has been quoted as saying, "The fairy tale belongs to the poor. I know of no fairy tale which upholds the tyrant, or takes the part of the strong over the weak. A fascist fairy tale is an absurdity" (Bernheimer, 7). Yet *Salò* is just such a fairy tale, and just such an absurdity.

[10] Gary Indiana, *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 33.

[11] Indiana, *Salò*, 35.

[12] Indiana, *Salò*, 13.

[13] Indiana, *Salò*, 79.

[14] Joan Copjec's analysis of *Salò* in *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (2002) epitomizes this approach. For Cobjec, the film purportedly unveils the nature of real-life sadistic longings through the portrayal of the libertines' fictional actions.

[15] Armando Maggi in *The Resurrection of the Body: Pier Paolo Pasolini from Saint Paul to Salò* (2009) performs a particularly compelling and meticulous comparative reading.

[16] See, for example, Eduardo Subirats' "Totalitarian Lust: from *Salò* to Abu Ghraib," (*South Central Review*, 2007) and Alessia Ricciardi's "Rethinking *Salò* after Abu Ghraib," (*Postmodern Culture*, 2011).

[17] Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, "Merde Alors," (*October*, Vol. 13, Summer, 1980), 29 –30.

[18] Here I am specifically thinking of the oft-cited passage in which Metz describes film viewers as fish in tanks, their eyes bulging. He writes, "Spectator-fish, taking in everything with their eyes, nothing with their bodies: the institution of cinema requires a silent, motionless spectator, a vacant spectator, constantly in a sub-motor and hyper-perceptive state… acrobatically hooked up to himself by the invisible thread of sight, a spectator who only catches himself at the last minute, by paradoxical identification with his own self, a self filtered out into pure vision." (Metz, 96).

[19] Vivian Sobchack. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); A handful of references suffice to illustrate this broader trend in film scholarship. Linda William's pivotal 1991 "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess" draws attention to the ability of "sensational" film genres to move the viewer and "give our bodies an actual physical jolt." In *The Address of the Eye* (1992), Vivian Sobchack espouses the value of phenomenological readings of film as a new way of seeing. Steven Shaviro's *The Cinematic Body* (1993) considers closely film that conjures excitement and dread.

[20] Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) and *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

[21] Eve Sedgwick's influential *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, and Performativity* (2003) exemplifies this divide. While Sedgwick is deeply invested in the role of the senses, the affective experiences she describes center on "good," caring feelings: to touch, to fondle, to enfold (Sedgwick, 14).

[22] Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1957).

[23] Oxford English Dictionary, "Affront," accessed June 13, 2014, oed.com.

[24] It is useful here to consider the exact nature of this audience, and the ways it might have differed from other possible audiences. If those around me had not been mostly professors and graduate students, who are trained to approach even affectively difficult material with the semblance of analytical cool, would I have observed the same type of stillness?

[25] Lisa Cartwright, *Moral Spectatorship: Technologies of the Voice and Affect in Postwar Representations of the Child* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.

[26] In Sade's text, the libertine Curval is described as having "drooping buttocks that rather resembled a pair of dirty rags flapping upon his upper thighs." Yet the libertines in *Salò* — who present between them merely a receding hairline, a unibrow, and a lazy eye — have transformed from creatures of utter abjection into mildly unappealing middle-aged men (Bersani and Dutoit, 27). Interestingly however, Indiana implies that the film reinstates this corporeality in the fact that three out of four of Pasolini's libertines did not have experience as trained actors. Since they do not perform with nuance or expressiveness, they exist on screen purely as hunched, grimacing, stilted bodies (Indiana 48).

[27] Bersani and Dutoit, "Merde Alors," 28.

[28] This hypothesis was itself inspired by observing others' reactions to *Salò*. After explaining my interest in the film to a number of colleagues who had all heard whispers of

its revolting reputation, my colleagues began flipping through my copy of Gary Indiana's book, which includes a number of full-color stills from the film. Somehow disappointed, they proclaimed that seeing the shots out of the context of motion and sound made them little more than mildly unsettling.

[29] Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California press, expanded reprint 1999) and *Screening Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

[30] Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 25.

[31] Bersani and Dutoit are also very interested in the piano player, whom they see as a singular figure of impenetrability. They also suggest that, amidst Salo's blood and gore, her suicide so effectively startles viewers precisely because it reminds them that they are no longer startled by violence (Bersani and Dutoit, 33 – 34).

[32] The full contents of this "bibliografia essenziale" include: Roland Barthes' "Sade, Fourier, Loyola" (1971), Maurice Blanchot's "Lautréamont et Sade" (1949), Simone de Beauvoir's "Faut-il brûler Sade" (1972), Pierre Klossowski's "Sade mon prochain" (1947), and Phillipe Sollers' "L'écriture et l'expérience des limites" (1968). The Klossowski text, as noted in Pasolini's bibliography, is quoted many times within the diegetical space of the film itself.

[33] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

[34] Indiana, *Salò*, 11.

[35] For a more detailed account of the debates surrounding *24* and its ethical implications, see Donal P. O'Mathuna's "What Would Jack Do? The Ethics of Torture in 24" (Global Dialogue, winter/spring 2010).

[36] Furthermore, her accusations assume that I am not close enough to "real" violence to understand the ethical injustices I am committing by engaging with this film; should I answer that I do have a real personal history with violence, real encounters with abuse, and an identity that is really shaped by my relation to pain then I become sufficiently real as a suffering subject to speak about *Salò.*

[37] Mark Sanders, *Complicities: The Intellectual and the Apartheid* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

[38] Emile Zoya, *The Dreyful Affair: J'accuse and Other Writings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[39] Naomi Mandel. *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006).

[40] Mandel, *Against the Unspeakable*, 22.

[41] Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

What does it feel like to play a video game? In one sense or another, almost all video games seem to offer players the opportunity to move beyond the constraints of their bodies. Some games allow players to engage with imagined worlds in ways that exceed the limits of human strength, resilience, or perception. Other games abstract experiences of mastery or exploration until they appear to have little or no relation to the human form. In keeping with these transcendent experiences, game scholars and designers have traditionally discussed video games either outside the realm of embodiment (i.e. with attention to narrative or mechanics rather than to players' bodies) or through concepts of virtual, synthetic, projected, or constructed embodiment (i.e. with an emphasis on how players identify with bodies on screen). In fact, however, video games deeply implicate the bodies of those who interact with them—and they do so in ways that are real, immediate, physical, and meaningful on an individual as well as a cultural scale. The importance of embodiment in gameplay operates both on the level of tangible interfaces and the level of sensation. Every time a player engages with a video game, whether that game is an elaborate first-person shooter or a simple puzzle game for a mobile phone, the player's body comes into contact with a device that dictates, in part, the physical experience of play. At the same time, video games themselves have the capacity to communicate sensations, like pain and pleasure, to the bodies of their players: sensations that are affective but also physically *felt*. Far from being incidental or merely anecdotal, I believe that the sensations that video games engender point toward an important mode of interpretation that, to adapt a phrase from John Dewey, I call video games as experience.[1] To longstanding analytical frameworks like narratology and ludology, experience adds phenomenology—and with it a focus on the myriad ways that video games make players feel as entry points for discussions about diversity, made manifest through the body, in video games more broadly.

Though all gameplay experiences involve the body, some video games make the physical sensations of play more apparent than others. This is becoming increasingly evident with the rise of virtual-reality (VR) technologies, which simultaneously promise players immersive experiences that transcend the body and put the pains of the body front and center. As many players report, virtual reality *hurts*. This has certainly been true, to speak from my own embodied experience, in my interactions with VR. The first time I used a virtual reality headset, it made me so nauseous that I felt sick for days. I was visiting an undergraduate university game program, where students were demoing a selection of their projects—including one in which players use the Oculus Rift, a VR headset, to navigate a three-dimensional replica of a sixteenth-century slave castle located on the southern coast of Ghana. Following its debut in 2013 and its subsequent acquisition by Facebook, the Rift has drawn considerable attention from both mainstream outlets and video-game communities, making it the most talked-about among a generation of VR devices widely lauded as heralding the future of video games, if not all digital media.[2] At the time, the device was only available for purchase as a comparatively expensive "dev kit," designed for

developers rather than consumers, so opportunities to play games that used the Rift were rare. At the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco earlier that month, I had watched attendees wait for hours in line at the Oculus expo booth for the chance to experience a brief demo. I was eager to try the device for myself.

My experience with the Oculus Rift did not go as I hoped, however. One of the students who had worked on the replica slave castle sat me down, slipped the device over my eyes, and handed me a controller. Worn like a set of goggles, the Rift creates the impression of a visual field that surrounds the user on all sides. Because the device registers motion, users can turn their heads to look up, down, left, right, etc. to explore the 360-degree view. At first I experienced the new environment that surrounded me as a kind of revelation. A moment ago I had been sitting in a classroom, but now I was walking through an open castle courtyard beneath a clear, blue sky. The game (to use the term loosely) did not involve sound, so I could still hear the idle chatter around me, a striking contrast to the silence of the beautiful, haunting structure I seemed to wander alone. With no representation of my body in-game, I moved along the pathways as a hovering point of sight, climbing the steps toward computer-rendered versions of cells that had once held men and women waiting to be forced onto boats and sold as slaves in the New World. Reflecting on this history, I felt acutely aware of my dual presence: my physical body sat comfortably in Southern California while my virtual self inhabited a place whose importance within a long lineage of institutional violence made it no less "real." Before I could make my way any further through the castle though, I began to feel sick—very sick. At first I thought I was just adjusting to a new sense of space and motion: getting my virtual sea legs. Soon, unfortunately, my queasiness grew into an overwhelming nausea. With an apology to the student game-maker, I took off the Rift, made a beeline for fresh air, and sat with my head between my knees. After hearing so much about the exciting potentials of virtual reality, I had not expected to walk away from the experience in pain. Yet it turns out that I am far from alone in my response to VR. It also turns out that feeling sick while interacting with VR technologies is a matter of social, conceptual, and technological importance as well as a reminder of how video games can impact the body.

I am interested in experiences like this one because they demonstrate some of the most legible ways in which playing video games can make the body *feel*, and because they illustrate how embodied experience can serve as a primary lens through which to interpret gameplay. As throughout this dissertation, I am also drawn to moments when the line between the virtual and the real blurs—specifically, to moments when pain and pleasure strikingly underscore the fact that embodied experiences of media have the power to defy and even destabilize perceived divisions between virtuality and realness. Video games have had a long, troubled, and unfortunate relationship with hurt. In response to accusations that video games beget real-life violence, supporters of the medium have come to emphasize the value of games as instruments of empowerment, education, and fun. However, video games are equally important when playing them feels *bad*. Pain brings attention back to the body, creating alternate opportunities for enacting agency, complicating the normative terms of desire, and suggesting that gameplay "matters" in its material conditions. This chapter once again proposes *kink*—which stands here for an intimate and dialectical exchange of pain, pleasure and power—as an analytical lens that

frames the relationship between media object (video game) and subject (player) by emphasizing the importance of giving voice to bodies in pain.

Video Games and the Body

That video games can engender real, physical sensation in their players may seem, at first, counter-intuitive. In keeping with what I describe in the introduction as "the myth of digital disembodiment," video games are commonly imagined to distance players from their bodies, an impression that takes on both positive and negative valences. Opportunities for in-game expression and exploration seem, on the one hand, to liberate players from the constraints of their physical forms; as avatars in action-oriented genres, players can typically run faster, jump higher, and hit harder than they could in real life. This ability to transcend embodied constraints is empowering, but it also drives the impression of games as "male empowerment fantasies," a term commonly deployed as a pejorative amidst discussions of feminist critique and video games. In other game genres, such as those in which players do not have on-screen avatars or avatars do not closely resemble human forms, it may seem that bodies are largely irrelevant to gameplay, and that therefore, in keeping with the myth of digital disembodiment, issues of embodied identity and associated cultural privilege are not of central concern. At the same time that the myth of disembodiment, applied to games, can take on utopian qualities though, it can also be used to condemn game players as disconnected from reality. Stereotypical representations of massively multiplayer online role-playing games depict players as under-slept and over-fed gaming addicts who ignore the concerns of the physical body even as they dedicate themselves to their mastery in a virtual world.[3] As discussed elsewhere in this project, the very idea that video games could communicate pain also runs counter to longstanding theoretical traditions, which hold that hurt can be neither fully represented nor expressed through its representation in media.[4]

In keeping with this vision of video games as distanced from the physical body, game studies has rarely engaged with embodied experience as a matter of primary interest. Much of the most widely influential game scholarship engages with video games on the level of narrative (narratology) or structural components and procedural rhetoric (ludology). Critical perspectives of this sort focus on games themselves, i.e. their contents and their structures, as objects distinct from the bodies that play them. Other schools of thought approach games as cultural phenomena and centers of community formation. This work commonly focuses on issues of identity, group meaning-making, and the broader social implications of video games.[5] Yet, while scholarship of this sort is interested in the reception of games as well as games themselves, less attention has been paid to the embodied experience of play on the level of the body. (The burgeoning field of queer game studies, which brings together game studies and queer theory, is beginning to productively challenge this divide by exploring communities that are constructed around embodied issues, like desire.)[6] I do not mean to imply, however, that game scholars have heretofore ignored the body completely. Considerable scholarship has been done on the relationship between players and bodies on screen, especially the bodies of sexualized female

characters and/or self-constructed avatars in virtual worlds.[7] However, this work has been, in a sense, hampered by a larger trend in which games are figured as "synthetic" or, at best, "half-real."[8] When they are seen to be distinct from the realness of the physical body, video games cannot be adequately understood as experiences that deeply affect players in ways that are about more than projection or identification, but about "real" sensation felt in the body that sits before the screen.

Despite the absence of the body in much existing writing, embodied experience is in fact central to the experience of playing video games. Though it may seem to transport players beyond the limitations of the here-and-now, gameplay never takes place in a vacuum; whether they are holding controllers, typing on keyboard, or running their fingers over touch screens, players' bodies are always involved when they play games. As designers and critics of human-computer interface know well, the mode of interaction between the body and the machine is neither neutral nor self-evident. It has real implications for how playing feels, who can play, and what playing means. Think, for example, of the many new repetitive-stress injuries that have become common among users of smart phones.[9] Consider also how increasingly complex and bulky design of video game controllers has, over the last decades, been shown to render games less accessible to those with smaller hands (primarily women) and inexperienced players for whom elaborate button schemes represent a nearly insurmountable barrier to entry. Some have argued that even the way players hold contemporary controllers, with their phallic designs, reinscribe heteronormative, male-dominated notions of value and power.[10] Increasingly, as mobile and wearable technologies are becoming more pervasive, movement and other particularly demonstrative forms of physical play are also translating the small gestures of gameplay designed for handheld controllers into clear expressions of the physical body.

Much as I have for literature and film in earlier chapters, I also want to point to another important way that video games involve the body: by how they make players feel. At other moments in this project, I have described the power of seemingly disembodied media forms to communicate sensations to those who read, view, and play them by using metaphors like the poetic "affront" (Gaston Bachelard) and the haptic "touch" (Laura Marks).[11] Another approach to theorizing this exchange, one that I find to be particularly well-suited to the interactive nature of video games, is through John Dewey's concept of "art as experience" and the idea of video games as "expressive objects." Dewey contends that art objects cannot be sufficiently understood except when considered in conjunction with the feelings they conjure up in those who encounter them. Bemoaning the tendency to put art on a pedestal and thereby segregate it from the experiences of its reception, Dewey argues for a mode of artistic analysis that emphasizes the importance of the human subject and material conditions of the body. He writes:

> In common conception, the work of art is often identified with the building, book, painting, or statue in its existence apart from human experience. Since the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience, the result is not favorable to understanding… [The problem is that] art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the material and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement… The task is to restore

continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.[12]

Though Dewey is speaking specifically of fine art, his statements about the importance of attending to material and to human "sufferings" could be applied equally if not even more aptly to video games, where interactivity makes the interplay between art object and subject notably literal (more on interactivity below). In this sense, video games match Dewey's definition of "expressive objects": works that "present the world in a new experience which [the players] undergo."[13] Another term for this interest in "video games as experience"—to connect Dewey's writing to work by Merleau-Ponty and the passages from Hegel's master-slave dialectic that have been referenced at a number of points in this project—might be the *phenomenology of video games*.[14]

Dewey, like Bachelard and Marks, is primarily interested in works of art that make viewers and readers feel good—that is, he is interested in the relationship between aesthetics and experiences of pleasure. While I want to hold onto the importance of pleasure, I am personally even more interested in the importance of pain (or, perhaps more accurately, the place where pleasure and pain overlap). Insisting upon the importance of experiences that hurt is a notably provocative position because it entails both the claim that *art can hurt* and that *hurt matters*. When it comes to video games, I believe that play experiences that *feel bad* rather than good have a superlative value that is at once illustrative and political. They demonstrate in particularly legible terms how gameplay experiences can and do manifest on the level of bodily sensation for players. Drawing attention to hurt as an important category of video-game experience also matters because it pushes back against what I call the "hegemony of fun."

Hegemony and counter-hegemony are two of the key forces at play in any debate about the place of the body in digital media. In their 2011 co-authored article, Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Marie, and Celia Pierce use the term "hegemony of play" to describe the codified and effectively discriminatory system by which video games are designed, developed, and marketed: a "complex layering of technological, commercial, and cultural power structures [that] have dominated the development of the digital game industry over the past 35 years, creating an entrenched status quo which ignores the needs and desires of 'minority' players, such as women and 'non-gamers."[15] The hegemony of play dictates and is dictated by a system of "conventional wisdom" about who plays video games and what players expect from a successful game. Fron et al. argue that disrupting the hegemony of play means instituting change from the ground up, challenging large-scale game studios where the "hegemonic elite determines which technologies will be deployed, and which will not; which games will be made, and by which designers; which players are important to design for, and which play styles will be supported."[16] The hegemony of play cannot be meaningfully overturned, say the authors of the article, until developers rethink their risk-averse capitalist concerns and stop imagining their primary player bases (and their ideal colleagues) as white, male, cisgender, straight "gamers" whose idea of fun is competition and the achievement of mastery.[17]

Though Fron et al. focus their critique on the game industry's limited vision of what and who play video games, I also read between the lines of their essay an argument for similarly broadening perspectives on *how* and *why* players play. As I have argued elsewhere, game designers, players, and scholars alike contend with surprising consistency that the primary experience a successful video games should offer is fun.[18] Design textbooks instruct students in strategies for making the most fun games.[19] Game-makers publish theories about the nature of fun and how to construct fun experiences for players.[20] Even those who build games designed to educate players about alarming, upsetting, or otherwise "serious" topics insist that video games should be "fun first."[21] This is the hegemony of fun—and it demonstrates how the hegemony of play is as much a hegemony of affect as it is a hegemony of design. I reject the hegemony of fun for a number of reasons. Much as Fron et al. contend that, once they overturn the hegemony of play, developers will see that video-game design and game audiences can in fact encompass far greater diversity than is currently assumed, I believe that the experience of playing video games can, should, and in fact already does engender a far greater range of emotional response than simply having a good time. Video games, like any art form, have the potential to productively challenge, trouble, and unsettle players. Even more pressing than this though, the hegemony of fun works to uphold many of the exclusionary practices that pervade video games and video-game culture. When it goes unquestioned, fun privileges dominant heteronormative modes of pleasure. (Whose version of fun is this, anyways?) Fun has also become the rallying cry for self-described defenders of video games, like those participating in the large-scale harassment campaign GamerGate, who see themselves as saving video games from feminist critics who refuse to concede that games should be "just for fun."[22] But fun is never "just for fun." Even the most fun games include experiential elements that hurt or are otherwise "no fun." This suggests that fun itself may be more complicated and non-normative a form of pleasure than it seems—one that is, in the context of video games, perhaps inextricable from the parts of play that hurt.

The problem with arguing for pain as an antidote to the hegemony of play is that video games already have a long, complicated, and often problematic history of cultural association with hurt. For decades, video-game players and makers have found themselves forced to actively defend against the stereotypical perception of video games as sadism machines: socially irresponsible systems of interaction and representation with the power to transform impressionable players (especially young men) from virtual aggressors into real-life killers.[23] Whereas violent films have become largely acceptable as part of the contemporary landscape of entertainment media in America, violent video games are still regularly referenced as the presumed cause of even the most unfathomable crimes, such as school shootings and other acts of domestic terrorism.[24] Often, the narratives that surround violent video games are also sexualized. "Parents, we are training our kids to be killers, and we are training our sons to treat women like whores," proclaimed right-wing pundit Jack Thompson on Fox News in 2008. Thompson's accusation, and in particular his use of the word "train," succinctly models the anxieties underlying the fear that video games make players violent. Because games are interactive, they seem capable of forcing players to act violently, coercing and reeducating them through play. The matter gets even more delicate when realness enters the equation. Experts working to dismantle the

accusations that video games make players violent take on the task of *disproving* the connection between virtual actions and real experiences.[25] Saying that playing video games does indeed cause real pain, even if that pain is felt simply in the body of the player, runs the risk of reading as a reactionary statement. I certainly do not intend it this way. Yet the implications of upholding the divide between the virtual and the real can be just as worrisome, if not more so, than the implications of saying that games cause real pain. Harassment campaigns like GamerGate, for example, can only emerge from cultural contexts in which online aggressors are not held responsible for their supposedly virtual actions with real-life consequences.

There is yet another reason why the body in pain matters for video games: because it draws attention back to the individual beyond the television, computer, or mobile phone screen. As Lisa Nakamura has demonstrated extensively, eliding the bodies of internet-users and game-players in a celebration of the post-human does not solve the problems of inequality; it merely and thereby silences difference.[26] Reframing video games as experiences is also a way to insist upon the importance of understanding video games within the context of lived, material struggles. Why use pain as the exemplar of this experience? More than so-called "fun" feelings, pain and other seeming unpleasant physical sensations are commonly relegated to the margins of discussions about playing video games. This positions pain as an experience that speaks back from the margins, from where it can give voice to those who have been marginalized by the hegemonic systems of game design, the game industry, and game culture.

The Pain of Playing Video Games

Having established *why* it matters to talk about pain in the context of video games, it remains to say, among many other things about the physical experience of gameplay, *what* and *how* video games hurt. There are a number of ways in which a game might inspire sensations of physical discomfort in a player. Some games are explicitly designed to hurt, others are designed to play with the idea of hurt, and many more can be made to hurt through the emergent practices of playing "the wrong way." This first category of games, ones that are designed to hurt, incorporates experiences of pain and self-destruction into gameplay. Terry Cavanagh's fast-paced *Super Hexagon* (2012), in which players must navigate a rapidly spinning maze without hitting any of the constantly shifting walls, exemplifies a genre that has been termed "punishment games." Punishment games intentionally cause their players pain by ramping up the difficulty level so high as to be almost humanly unbeatable; none but the best players can navigate *Super Hexagon*'s twisting, pulsing puzzle for more than a few second before dying. The *Burnout* racing game series (Criterion Games, 2001-2011) takes a different approach to pain: it turns expectations for fun and in-game success on their heads by making self-destruction the stated goal of the games' "crash modes," in which players earn points for slamming their own vehicles into oncoming traffic and causing the most destructive accidents. Artist Eddo Stern's installation "Tekken Torture Tournament" (2001) literalizes the experience of playing with pain. Two players participate in the installation by strapping their arms into

devices that can deliver electric shocks—then they face off in the fighting game *Tekken 3* (Namco, 1997). When a player's character on screen sustains damage, that player receives a painful shock. "Tekken Torture Tournament" raises the stakes of winning or losing by incorporating physical pain into gameplay at the same time that it comments on games themselves as systems of hurt.

In addition to video games that are explicitly designed to hurt for fun, a small but notable handful of games engage with the interaction of pain and pleasure by inviting players to step inside scenes of BDSM (bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism, masochism). To say that BDSM and "kinksters," a self-identifying terms for BDSM practitioners, have appeared infrequently in video games to date is a drastic understatement. Queer game scholars have pointed toward the relative dearth of LGBTQ characters in video games; representations of kink, itself a queer identity marker, has proven even scarcer still. Game studio BioWare recently included the first BDSM romance option in a mainstream title, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), setting a promising new precedent; players can choose to pursue a romantic relationship with a half-man, hall-bull who is also an experienced and caring top. (Previous to *Dragon Age*, perhaps the only identifiable kinkster in mainstream games was Voldo from Namco's fighting series *Soul Calibur*, a mute and vaguely monstrous slave occasionally portrayed wearing a ball gag, leather harness, and assless chaps). Emerging from the realm of independent game development, both Merritt Kopas' 2013 *Consensual Torture Simulator* and Robert Yang's 2015 *Hurt Me Plenty* have taken BDSM as their primary subject matter. In the text-based *Consensual Torture Simulator*, players take on the role of a top creating a scene for their sub; *Hurt Me Plenty* similarly prompts players to spank their partner in accordance with pre-negotiated boundaries. As I will discuss more below, Kopas and Yang's games address kink, intimacy, and consent as interpersonal practices, yet they can also be read more generally as reflections on the relationship between pain, pleasure, and video games.

Video games do not need to be designed to hurt or to play with the idea of pain in order to inspire experiences that are "no fun," however. Any game can be played in a way that hurts, if the player chooses to ignore or defy the conditions that the game has established for success. I, for example, love playing *Mario Kart* games (Nintendo, 1992–2014) so that I can run my race cart off the edges of the most treacherous and ridiculous obstacles. I love playing the *Need for Speed* games (Electronic Arts, 1994-2013), which prompt players to speed around city streets, by driving slowly and obeying traffic laws. I love slashing grass in *Zelda* games (Nintendo, 1986-2015) long after there are any coins to be found inside; I do it because it gets me nowhere, it wins me nothing, and I take a deep and perverse pleasure in playing the way that I like, not the way that the game would like. This mode of gameplay shares much in common with what Alexander Galloway calls "countergaming" and what Edmond Chang, building from Galloway, calls "queergaming": ways of playing against the system (or otherwise in accordance with the counter-hegemonic desires of the player) that function within the game and yet resist the game's structures.[27] Playing a game the wrong way is also a way of playing hurt, because it rejects the experiences of fun around which the game has been designed.

However—and I want to stress this—I believe that hurt as an experience of gameplay is not limited to games that engage explicitly with pain or games that players

choose to play against the grain. Pain plays a role in almost all video games; playing games always, in at least one sense, hurts. In stating this assertion, I am spring boarding (and not uncritically) from recent work by ludologist Jesper Juul. In his book *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*, Juul argues that all video games involve failure, all failure hurts, and that therefore all video games are in some sense painful even when they seem primarily fun.[28] The games that Juul discusses represent the full range of genres, from platformers to adventure games to role-playing games. In the case of each of these game types, Juul argues, failure should be understood as a crucial part of what it means to play— whether that failure takes the form of losing a level, finding oneself stuck on a particularly difficult puzzle, or getting crushed by an online opponent. Juul feels so strongly about the importance of failure in video games that he calls games themselves "the art [form] of failure." Through the breadth of his survey, he succeeds in demonstrating the pervasiveness of failure as a fundamental component of almost all video games. Following from Juul's association of failure with pain then, it is equally feasible to call video games "the art of playing with pain."

I have written elsewhere about how Juul's text can be read in conjunction with Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (two books that emerged at almost the same moment bearing strikingly similar names, though their authors did not know about each other's work until after their respective publications).[29] Juxtaposing these works offers a chance to argue that failure in games, and by extension games themselves, can be interpreted as queer. As regards pain though, what I find most striking about Juul's *Art of Failure* is the visceral nature of the pain he describes. Though the failures that Juul discusses take place entirely within what seem like virtual realms, the language Juul uses to articulate the stakes of in-game failure lends the experience a distinctly bodily character. This language demonstrates how the "pain of playing video games," as Juul conceives it, is neither abstract nor entirely virtual; it is really felt in the body. Here is how Juul describes his own experience of failing at video games, a passage that suggests that the embodied sensations of both pain and pleasure play a central role in what it feels like to fail:

> I am a sore loser. Something in me demands that I win, beat, or complete every game I try, and that part of me is outraged and tormented whenever I fail to do so. Still, I play video games though I know I will fail… On a higher level, I think I enjoy playing video games, but why does this enjoyment contain at its core something that I most certainly do not enjoy? When I fail, I do not feel too good about myself. [However, though] I dislike failing… I will return to playing games, submitting myself to a series of unhappy failures, once again seeking out a feeling that I deeply dread.[30]

Though he does not directly mention his body, Juul's rhetoric is heavy with corporeality. Words like "torment," "dread," and "submission" conjure up the image of an "outraged" game player who might sit before the screen cringing, sweating, shouting, or clutching a churning gut. Equally corporeal is the language Juul uses to describe his desire to play games despite (or perhaps because) of the pain that they will cause him: words like "demanding," "seeking," "feeling." It is the coexistence of these embodied states within himself, dread and enjoyment, that confuses and concerns Juul. He calls this mix "pleasure

spiked with pain." Driven by the tension between these forces, Juul sets out to explain the "paradox of failure," i.e. the fact that players choose to play even though they know they will fall, returning time and again, in the manner of Freud's *fort/da* game, to an activity that hurts.[31] Juul suggests many possible solutions to the paradox but never arrives at a conclusive answer. This, it seems to me, is because the very idea of the "paradox of failure" is flawed. Why must pain and pleasure be opposites? For a text about playing with pain, the word "masochism" (a term that, stripped of pathologizing functions, helpfully shorthands the taking of pleasure in pain) remains conspicuously absent. The pain of playing video games can never be adequately explained without considering that pain can be its own pleasure.

The conspicuous absence of masochism as such in Juul's text speaks to larger lacunae in how pain is narrativized in existing writing on video-game failure. By extension, it also speaks to a yet insufficiently rich engagement with the *pain* of playing games. While writing like Juul's does the important work of demonstrating the prevalence of failure in games, it also commonly bows to the neoliberal impulse to repurpose hurt in the name of good-feeling and normative success. Such theorizing refuses, in short, to let pain be pain. "It is safe to say that humans have a fundamental desire to succeed and feel competent," writes Juul.[32] This assumption (to which the kinky sub and the scholar of queer failure might both well protest) drives Juul's interpretation of failure, shaping his tentative conclusions that perhaps losing in games allows players to become better real-life citizens, or that perhaps it offers players the chance to overcome anxieties about their own inadequacy. Jane McGonigal, writing in her best-selling book *Reality Is Broken*, goes even farther in insisting on the normative use-value of playing pain as a way to make players "better."[33] Her chapter titled "Fun Failure and Better Odds of Success" opens, like *The Art of Failure*, with a question: why do players play video games when they know they are going to spend a significant amount of their time losing? McGonigal writes:

> No one likes to fail. So how is it that gamers can spend 80 percent of the time failing and still love what they're doing?… Do gamers actually enjoy failing? As it turns out, yes… When we're playing a well-designed game, failure doesn't disappoint us. It makes us happy in a very particular way: excited, interested, and most of all optimistic… [For example, researchers noticed that] whenever a player made a mistake in *Super Monkey Ball 2*, something very interesting happened when… the monkey went whirling and wailing over the edge and off into space. This animation sequence played a crucial role in making failure enjoyable. The flying monkey was a reward: it made players laugh. But more importantly, it was a vivid demonstration of the players' agency in the game. The players hadn't failed passively. They had failed spectacularly, and entertainingly… When we're reminded of our own agency in such a positive way, it's almost impossible not to feel optimistic… The more we fail, the more eager we are to do better.[34]

I quote this passage at length because it so effectively demonstrates the rhetorical acrobatics required to repackage masochism through neoliberal optimism—that is, to fight off the specter of pain as a counter-hegemonic pleasure. At first it seems McGonigal will be

proposing something truly provocative: that players "actually enjoy failing." Yet, just as soon as the pain of playing games is acknowledged, it appears that it must be contained, neutralized, and put in the service of the status quo. Players enjoy failure because it does not feel like failure, McGonigal says; rather than hurt them, it makes them excited, entertained, optimistic. It lets them experience themselves as active agents in their own spectacular demise. *Reality Is Broken*, which is a foundational text for the rise in "gamification" as a corporate technique, has been widely critiqued. Heather Chaplin and Ian Bogost have pointed out that by calling reality "broken," McGonigal directs much-needed attention away from material realities and encourages players to strive for a false sense of mastery.[35] The "promise of happiness," to use Sarah Ahmed's term, that underlies McGonigal's assertions about failure is equally problematic.[36] Rather than challenge the hegemony of fun, McGonigal leverages the anxiety provoked by the "paradox of failure" toward an agenda of what Lauren Berlant has called "cruel optimism"—the idea that if we try hard enough to succeed according to (rather than question) dominant measures of personal value, we will find ourselves struggling indefinitely under the false belief that we can make make the world a better place.[37] After all, the subtitle of McGoingal's book is "Why Video Games Make Us Better and How They Are Going to Save the World."

Of course, the notion that pain in video games can be explained away by claiming that it "makes us better" is insufficient to say the least. Like all art, video games are not self-actualization seminars or simulators for better citizenship. Even when they comply with the norms codified by the hegemony of play, they represent rich, expressive, and complicated systems of experience. In addition to being largely enjoyable, as Juul's work suggests, games are also difficult, messy, and painful. With that said, I do not want to dismiss McGonigal's *Reality Is Broken* too quickly. Stripped of its neoliberal trappings, the "Fun Failure" chapter operates on the same two intriguing premises about the relationship between video games and pain as does Juul's *Art of Failure*. These are the insights I want to hold onto from these texts. They could be summarized as:

1) Pain is central to the experience of playing video games.
2) Pain is in inextricable from what makes video games pleasurable.

Despite the efforts of their authors to account for the paradox of failure, both *The Art of Failure* and *Reality Is Broken* leave readers with the distinct impression that players *do* indeed enjoy losing, and that hurt can be its own form of pleasure. This becomes evident when Juul describes his longing to return to gameplay experiences that make him feel "outraged and tormented." It is also apparent in McGonigal's description of players who enjoy "failing spectacularly" when they lose a level of *Super Monkey Ball 2*. Though McGonigal makes claims to the contrary, I would argue that *Super Monkey Ball 2* (Sega, 2002) makes for a strange example of "fun failure"; it is not actually a very fun game to lose. Players roll a monkey in a ball through floating platform mazes of increasing difficulty. The moment that the monkey falls, "wailing and whirling over the edge and off into space," may prove entertaining the first few times that players view this sequence, but it soon becomes irritating, even maddening, to be forced to watch this upbeat animation at each instances of failure. There is, however, a type of pleasure in this frustration—but one of a distinctly

more subversive sort. McGonigal uses the term "spectacular failure," a phrase that Halberstam also uses in *The Art of Failure*, where he deploys it to describe the masochistic power of failing in a way that is excessive, fantastical, and unapologetic. Thus a queer failure, which takes pleasure in its pain, can already be found operating within the "spectacularly" painful gameplay experiences that McGonigal describes.

   Those who doubt that video-game players take pleasure in their pain need look no further than the popular phenomenon of game "fail videos." These videos, thousands of which have been posted to YouTube alone, capture moments of absurd self-destruction and comical incompetence. Recorded in-game, they show player-characters accidentally blowing themselves to pieces with grenades, lighting themselves on fire, launching off of treacherous cliffs, etc. They are meant to be funny, but they are also fun—both for viewers and for the players whose failures the videos record. Failing spectacularly becomes its own kind of mastery. Yet I would be very hesitant to explain the appeal of fail videos by saying, to call back to McGonigal, that shooting or watching them functions as a "vivid demonstration[s] of the players' agency." Fail videos are pleasurable, for those who enjoy them, because they demonstrate and magnify the inability of the body to control its environment, even (or especially) within video game systems that seem to offer players control. Whether the pleasure of watching fail videos is understood as sadistic or masochistic—i.e. whether viewers enjoy watching other players self-destruct or whether they enjoy identifying with self-destruction—these videos stand as evidence that "the pain of playing video games" cannot be separated from the pleasure of playing video games. When it comes to games, the coexistence of pain and pleasure is not paradoxical. Fun itself, viewed counter-hegemonically, involves enjoying what hurts.

Interactivity as Kinky

It is with this combination of pain and pleasure that I want to return to the analytical lens I have proposed throughout the project: kink. The experiences that Juul and McGonigal describe, in which gameplay both hurts and feels good, should not be considered paradoxical. Rather, they should be considered *kinky*. "Kinky" describes a set of lived subcultural sexual practices such as those performed in BDSM communities. However, in my usage, it also describes a more abstract but no less embodied set of dynamics between subject and media objects: an intimate, dialectical interplay of pain, pleasure, and power. The lens of kink brings with it the metaphors of BDSM (like "consent"), as well as a belief in experiences of hurt as an important site of meaning. To the extent that all video games can be said to involve elements of control and/or hurt, the medium of video games itself can be interpreted through the lens of kinkiness. In this sense, video games are kink machines rather than sadism machines, as they are imagined in popular media. When I say kink machines, I mean "machines" both in the technological sense and in the sense of ludic systems. Video games create kinky experiences for their players, but they themselves are also "play partners," to use the BDSM term for those who engage in kink scenes together.

   What makes video games kinky? Pain and pleasure of the kind discussed above are part of the equation, but the kinkiness of video games goes even deeper, to the fundamental

mechanisms of digital play. That very thing so often cited as the defining feature of video games—interactivity—is itself kinky. Scholars and cultural commentators alike frequently refer to interactivity as the quality that sets video games apart from previous media forms. "Whereas works in traditional media are made up of fixed, linear sequences of text, image, or sound… which remain unchanged when examined multiple times," writes Mark Wolf, "events experienced in a video game will vary widely from one playing to another" since they require input from the player.[38] This, says, Wolf, makes playing video games "active" (as opposed to, for example, the supposed passivity of viewing film) and full of "open possibilities."[39] For Wolf, the smallest unit of interactivity is the choice, which allows the player to co-author the gameplay experience alongside the game. These choices may be big or small, vastly varied or binary, narrative in nature or simple opportunities to acquire or jettison items of value. Whatever the nature of these choices, they make the play experience seemingly personal, expansive, and above all *interactive* in ways that are, at the very least, more legible than in other media forms. In Wolf's words, "the structure of a game's interactivity and the nature of the choices that make it up are at the heart of the gaming experience."[40] If interactivity, which allows players to affect the world represented on screen, is indeed the heart of the gaming experience, then arguably the central experience of gameplay is a sense of empowerment and control.

Yet, in truth, the experience of interactivity is not that simple. Stating that interactivity lies at the heart of video games still leaves many open questions about the nature of interactivity itself. When it comes to systems of power, interactivity in video games appears, upon closer inspection, to be its own paradox. On the one hand, interactivity seems to offer opportunities for self-expression and "open possibilities" unprecedented in the history of media. Players call the shots, so speak; they decide whether to walk left or walk right, to make friends or foes, to live or die. However, the idealized vision of in-game choice as a demonstration of empowerment, voiced by Wolf among many others, only accounts for part of the picture. In truth, the options afforded to players by most video games are by nature extremely limited and extremely limiting. Possibilities for interacting are rarely, if ever, infinite and players who attempt to make decisions that fall outside the narrow range of interactions that the game rewards (or even recognizes) quickly face failure or simply stasis. To progress, they must comply with the "logic of digital games," entering into a system of compliance and complicity with both how the game is played and the stories it tells.[41] Often, winning a game means making the right choices at the right time, exercising one's agency to interact in exactly the way that the game has pre-prescribed. Indeed, the acquisition of "games literacy" could be reframed as the internalization of a way of seeing and thinking "like a gamer"—that is, in accordance with long-standing expectations for how a video game should be played. In short, interactivity controls players even as it appears to cede control. For this reason, it could be said to aptly model Wendy Chun's concept of a "control-freedom" technology, one that seems to empower its users while in fact designed to limit their freedoms.[42]

This tension between freedom and control characterizes the experience of interactivity in even the most seemingly open-ended video games. Consider Nintendo's *Endless Ocean* (2007), a scuba diving game released into the North American market under the tagline "Dive, discover, dream," in which these power dynamics become particularly

striking. The official promotional material for *Endless Ocean* celebrates the game as an immersive play experience that abandons restrictive, go-to game mechanics. In their place, it reportedly offers players free reign to explore the pristine, teeming waters of a fictional Southern Pacific island—a literalized display of what Wolf imagines as infinite possibilities for the expression of player choice. The rhetoric of freedom features prominently in the *Endless Ocean* press release:

> From the moment players experience their first dive, they're introduced to a magnificent world of sun-pierced water, vibrant color, and flourishing sea life. With no time limits, point systems or possibility of failure, it's a pick-up-and-play game for the entire family to enjoy. Intuitive controls and the game's encouraging "explore at your own pace" approach create a momentary retreat... In Endless Ocean, the possibilities of underwater exploration are, well, endless. Beginner and experienced snorkelers and scuba divers alike will find a deep sea gaming environment unlike any other, while families just looking for a fun yet relaxing experience with their [Nintendo Wii game consoles] now have the smooth sounds and aquatic sights of mother nature to look forward to! [43]

With no time limits, no points, and (seemingly) no way for players to fail, *Endless Ocean* is presented as a game that offers truly "endless" possibilities—a free-form experience guided entirely by the pleasure of exploration. Yet, while the press release does not represent the facts of the game erroneously, the actual experience of playing *Endless Ocean* is far from empowering or even "relaxing." Ironically, the opportunities for player choice that the game offers are so restrictive as to render *Endless Ocean* nearly unplayable. The map that players use to navigate dive sites gives them very few options for where to explore. Within each dive site, the ocean below the player's boat is segmented into small sectors divided by invisible barriers—an attempt on the part of developers to reduce the time that players must wait while the game loads the dive area. If players wish to swim more than fifty feet in one direction, they must first go through the tedious, time-consuming process of returning to their boat and moving it before reentering the water. For all the game's emphasis on the rhetoric of open possibilities, almost every opportunity for interaction in *Endless Ocean* looks the same. See a fish and wonder about its species name? Press the x button to pet it. Encounter a turtle and want to learn what it eats? Press the x button to pet it. Ultimately, the game's biggest accomplishment lies in its ability to concisely modeling the ways that interactivity (and the discourse that surrounds it) both offers and rescinds the opportunity for choice.

I do not cite the example of *Endless Ocean* in order to paint a negative picture of interactivity and the promise of player agency, however. Chun's concept of control-freedom is critical by nature; I too believe it is important to remain wary of the discourse of empowerment when that discourse does not also reflect critically on its limitations. Yet I myself value and even enjoy the odd mix of control and freedom that a game like *Endless Ocean* offers. Indeed, I also believe that the power dynamics of interactivity can be understood in a positive light if they are reframed through the lens of kink. Interactivity and its complexities, refigured as kinky, become affectively meaningful rather than

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deceptive. Like kink, interactivity represents an economy of control in which power and agency are always in flux. This economy can be understood as a set of intimate and even erotic exchanges in which both player and game are brought into being through the dialectical dance of power. Without a player to play it, a video game has no opportunity to exert control. It remains dormant, an object of unrealized potential. At the same time, the player who plays the game brings its systems of interactivity to life. In such moments, who is in charge, the player or the game? What does control even mean if a player can both enact choice while having choice taken away? These questions demonstrate the value of interactivity as a model for challenging larger assumptions about the nature of power, much as BDSM encourages participants to challenge assumptions about power through pleasure. Not coincidentally, the name both for interacting in video games and interacting in BDSM scenes is "play." Interactivity itself is playful as well as kinky, shifting the balance of power from subject to object like a sexual partner teasing and testing the body of a lover.

When I call interactivity (and by extension video games) kinky, I want kink to speak to the power dynamics of gameplay and the *erotics* of gameplay. As I mentioned in the preface, I use "erotics" here as a term derived from Georges Bataille to signal a system of desires that operates on a more conceptual scale than individual sexual identities or specific sex practices.[44] The kinkiness of interactivity makes playing video games, regardless of their content, an erotic experience. Admittedly, seeing interactivity as erotic requires pursuing a less than traditional definition of eroticism, one that characterizes the erotic more though a system of relations than through sexual contact per se. Writing in *Touch* about the "haptic" experience of encountering digital art, Laura Marks reflects on the erotics of media in this way: "What is erotic? The ability to oscillate between near and far is erotic. In sex, what is erotic is the ability to move between control and relinquishing, between being giver and receiver."[45] Marks' definition of the erotic as that which "oscillates between near and far" and between "control and relinquishing" clearly resonates with the kinky qualities of video-game interactivity. When choosing how to interact within strictly predetermined systems of choice, players "move between control and relinquishing." "Oscillating between near and far" can be read as another way to describe the constantly shifting positionality of the player in relation to the game. At moments of "farness," players might feel apart from, alienated by, or otherwise distinct from the games they are playing. In moments of "nearness," the world of the game and the world of the player meld, and bonds are forged through the shifting economy of power. In short, if interactivity is fundamental to games and interactivity is kinky, kinkiness itself sits "at the heart of the gaming experience."

The lens of kink, applied to interactivity, also offers opportunities for finding new meaning in behaviors observed within gamer culture. Control is a notable feature of interactive entertainment technologies, but it has also emerged as a key concern among fans of those technologies—and specifically among self-professed "gamers." Hardcore gaming communities that deride the video games they perceive as insufficiently hardcore (epitomized by the attacks launched against designer Zoe Quinn's 2013 game *Depression Quest*) desperately seek control over the future of the medium that they love—both on a macro and a micro level. Who controls what video games look like and the content they address? Though their behaviors are at times inexcusably hateful, gamers worry over these

questions not because they hate video games but because they feel intimately connected to them, and they fear that those connections may be taken away.[46] Game developers like those at Electronic Arts' BioWare studio have found themselves enmeshed in related power struggles between those who make games and those who play them. When Electronic Arts (EA) published *Mass Effect 3*, the final title in a wildly popular trilogy of role-playing games, players who felt unsatisfied with the ending of the game flooded community websites with complaints, demanding that EA recall the game and rewrite the concluding chapters.[47] To bolster their protest efforts, an ad hoc community group called Retake Mass Effect raised nearly $100,000 from fellow fans. They also shipped 402 vanilla cupcakes, frosted in a variety of colors, to the EA offices in Redwood Shores, California; the cupcakes reportedly represented the many *Mass Effect 3* endings that looked different but all "tasted" the same.[48] After enough badgering, the U.S. Better Business Bureau issued a report in support of the fans' grievances, the co-founders of BioWare were pressured into early retirement, and the studio released a free downloadable epilogue. The fans got their new ending. Somewhere along the line, "retaking" *Mass Effect 3* had become a game, complete with its own interactive struggle for control, and the players won. Perhaps such an example is better described as manipulative than kinky. Still, the qualities it shares with kinky interactivity points toward how acts of aggression from within gamer communities can also be understood as driven by concerns about control and intimacy.

Calling games kinky is a way of arguing for putting non-normative desires front and center in discussions of video games and game culture, even when they appear to most vehemently uphold the hegemony of play. It is also a way to circle back to the relationship between interactivity and hurt. Recall that the stereotype of video games as sadism machines hinges on their interactive nature: the idea that interactivity gives games the unique capacity to entice, coerce, and train young players to become killers. Though this reactionary vision of games is largely misinformed and misguided, as I mentioned above, it does contain a kernel of truth; video games do have a unique capacity for communicating experiences of hurt through interactivity. However, this hurt is not of the sort imagined by those who condemn video games as dangerous to society. Rather, it is a hurt that occurs in the body of the player—or, more accurately, in the intimate and erotically charged space between player and game. Such hurt is far from a bad thing. To the contrary, it is an integral part of "video games as experience," a part that draws much-needed attention back to the body. Calling interactivity kinky, in and of itself, does not tell us who holds the power in the relationship between player and video game. What it does tell us, perhaps more importantly, is that this constantly shifting exchange of power is precisely the point of interactivity. Video games are about neither absolute control nor absolute freedom, but about playing in the space between the two.

Reflecting on Kinkiness through Game Design

Video games, like all art forms, have the capacity to speak their own critiques at the same time that they invite others to critique them. I want to take a few moments to consider instances in which games and their makers are already reflecting on issues of kinky

interactivity through the practices of game design. Some of these works use design to explore the relationship between erotic control and gameplay explicitly. In other instances, games take on the quality of kinky partners through their design mechanics. Game designer Anna Anthropy has argued for thinking about the job of game designer as akin to the role of a top in a BDSM scene: the designer creates an experience for the player that may be painful or difficult but ultimately aims to please.[49] As incarnations of the rules constructed by their designers, games themselves could also be understood to play tops to their "sub" players. Some game-tops are more giving and/or communicative than others. Attention to user experience has an important place in the development of most commercial video games, yet rare is the game that negotiates or even clearly states the parameters of its gameplay with its players.[50] Video games that involve explicit representations of violence are no more likely to "dominate" their players than those whose content seems comparatively benign. For example, the design of social network games like Zynga's *FarmVille*, in which players must return periodically to tend crops, makes these games particularly "toppy." *Farmville* reaches out from the confines of the game to dictate how players must also behave in real life, i.e. when they should log-on to their social networks and when they should walk away. Games like this one demonstrate how kinkiness might be understood as a game design principle as well as a gameplay experience.

This is where I would like to return to two of the explicitly kinky games mentioned above: Merritt Kopas' *Consensual Torture Simulator* (2013) and Robert Yang's *Hurt Me Plenty* (2015). These games directly engage with the subject of BDSM, using gameplay to send messages about the importance of consent and communication in kinky sex play. Yet, through their design, they function equally as reflections on gameplay itself as kinky. Kopas and Yang's games make the pains and pleasures that operate beneath the surface of interactivity visible by making them literal: players really take on the role of BDSM tops providing painful experiences for their subs. Drawing from Anthropy's equation of game design with topping, it could also be said that these games allow players to play at game design itself. Both *Consensual Torture Simulator* and *Hurt Me Plenty* play with the traditional video game tropes in their translation of BDSM play to gameplay. In this way, they model how considerations of pain and pleasure encourage counter-hegemonic thinking—whether about video game design, power exchanges in gameplay, or paradigms of agency more broadly.

Written using the design platform Twine, Kopas' *Consensual Torture Simulator* is a text-based game that offers players the opportunity to walk through the experience of responsibly topping and caring for an eager sub. As the sub expresses during the negotiations that precede the scene, she would like to be hurt until she cries. This then becomes the player's mission. The experience of playing *Consensual Torture Simulator* is part erotic and part educational; the game alternately offers and restricts choices as a mode of instruction. Players choose which implements (whip, flogger, cane, or hands) to use and on what part of the sub's body, but the game limits these options to acts of "safe, sane, consensual" play, to use the mantra of BDSM communities—in effect teaching players, for example, that a flogger can be safely used on the chest, back, or ass, but a cane should only be used on the ass or the soles of the feet. A win state is achieved once players whip, flog, and cane their sub enough times to make her sob. *Consensual Torture Simulator* concludes

with a scene of aftercare. The player-character wraps the sub in a soft blanket, makes her tea, and the two hold one another while sharing a moment of affection and warmth.

Though the game is constructed entirely from text, playing *Consensual Torture Simulator* is a strikingly embodied experience. During the game's primary playable segment, the BDSM scene itself, almost every line of text describes the sub's bodily reactions. "Her breath starts to come in ragged rasps… She shakes and cries out… She screams into the sheets." *Consensual Torture Simulator* clearly demonstrates how even the most seemingly disembodied of video game genres can deeply engage (and engage with) the body. One might even say that the game insists on the importance of embodiment in video games by making physical experience central to gameplay and turning sex play itself into a game. Indeed, beyond the confines of the individual BDSM scene it depicts, Kopas' game implicitly suggests that video games themselves might be productively read in relation to kinky sex play. It also scrambles the configuration of game as dom and player as sub. In Kopas' game, players play the part of the dom, which requires them to submit to the dictated conditions of the game; yet it also allows them to hit, flog, and cane the sub (a stand-in for the game itself), though only according to her desires. This matrix of control and submission demonstrates the rich complexities of kinky power exchanges and points toward the similarly complex exchanges of power that underlie video-game interactivity. In addition, by drawing comparisons between video games and BDSM, and especially by emphasizing practices like negotiation and aftercare, *Consensual Torture Simulator* communicates an ethical imperative about gameplay derived from the community values of BDSM: playing the "dominant" role in a virtual space does not give you free license to hurt others without taking responsibility for the pain you inflict. In this way, Kopas' game responds to mainstream games, which often include violent content, yet commonly lack critical self-reflection on subjects of violence. She does so by modeling a different type of designing, playing, and experiencing pain in video games.

Like Kopas' game, Yang's *Hurt Me Plenty* also describes itself as a "simulator," one that similarly gives players the chance to take on the role of a top in a BDSM scene—and one that similarly foregrounds communication and consent. *Hurt Me Plenty* takes only a few minutes to play and its control scheme is simple: players move the mouse, which stands in for their outstretched hand. The game open as the player negotiates with their play partner (a fit, shirtless white man) about the parameters of the spanking that is about to take place. Players "negotiate" by moving their mouse up and down to shake hands while the game rolls to decide whether you should hit hard, medium, or softly. Once negotiations are complete, the scene shifts and the sub appears again, ready for his spanking. Success is achieved when players provide a spanking of an intensity that matches the sub's desires. The game stresses listening and sharply punishes those who refuse to do so. Players who continue to spank their partner after he has repeatedly used his safeword are blocked from playing their copy of the game for eighteen days. In this sense, the consequences of committing acts of nonconsensual violence in this virtual space are very real. Similar to *Consensual Torture Simulator*, *Hurt Me Plenty* uses its design mechanics to critique the accepted tropes of violence in mainstream games, where killing and other acts of aggression rarely come with consequences. In Yang's game, hurt must be negotiated before

it is performed. Those players who cannot be trusted to respect the boundaries of this negotiation can also not be trusted to play the game.

  Hurt Me Plenty, as mentioned, emphasizes communication between BDSM partners. A poster that hangs on the wall in the background of the game's play space reads "No power exchange without negotiation." The most obvious form of this communication is the negotiation that takes place between the player and the sub. Yet, I would argue, there is another kinky partnership in Yang's game that necessitates communication: the partnership between player and the game itself. Though players are prompted to listen to their subs—by paying attention to their stated boundaries, respecting their safewords, etc.—it is really the game that players must listen to in order to succeed at *Hurt Me Plenty*. Players are instructed to go hard or gently when they spank their sub, but what counts as gentle and what counts as hard when both levels of intensity are performed with nearly identical flicks of the wrist that move the player's mouse? Only by testing the waters and seeing how the game reacts to each subsequent spank (too hard, too soft, or just right?) can players learn to top well in *Hurt Me Plenty*. Like *Consensual Torture Simulator*, Yang's game succeeds in using such mechanics to excavate some of the complex vectors of power that connect players and games. *Hurt Me Plenty* can also be read as an argument for thinking about the kinky intimacy brought into being through acts of play, and about how video games can play the role of embodied lovers to their players.

  When it comes to games like *Consensual Torture Simulator* and *Hurt Me Plenty*, it is tempting to say that BDSM serves as a metaphor—a way of thinking about gameplay that prompts us to reflect on manifestations of pain and consent—and in a way it does. However, these games and the BDSM practices they present to their players also gesture toward something more visceral and more "real" about what it feels like to play video games. In ways that recall the "pain of playing video games" articulated by Jesper Juul and Jane McGonigal (but do not recall their neoliberal politics), *Consensual Torture Simulator* and *Hurt Me Plenty* suggest that all video games might be understood as experiences of pain and pleasure. Kopas and Yang's games depict the very act of play as kinky. In these games, kink means more than the representation of spanking, flogging, or hitting. Kink also describes a system of interactions characterized by a push and pull of power, whether those interactions take place between play partners or between player and game.

Virtual Reality and the Return of the Body

Among the many genres of contemporary video games, there is one that is bringing the visceral pain of gameplay to the attention of mainstream players and developers like never before: virtual reality games. Watching players trying out the Oculus Rift for the first time makes it hard to deny the connection between video games and the body. Among the initial "demos" released for the Rift, short games and other interactive experiences created to demonstrate the capabilities of the device, the one that has most consistently proven itself the stuff of viral videos is the rollercoaster ride. In this demo, players wearing the Oculus headset find themselves seemingly seated on a rollercoaster as it chugs up a steep incline, crests the rise, and then plunges through twists and turns below. The roller coaster demo is

a staple of Oculus Rift "reaction" videos because of the extreme bodily reaction it elicits from Rift users. A YouTube compilation from 2014 shows user after user reacting in similarly outrageous ways.[51] In the video's opening sequence, two men stand in the courtyard of an indoor mall; one wears the VR device over his eyes, while the other watches a 2D approximation on a nearby screen of what the first sees in inside the Rift. At first the man wearing the Rift stands, seeming unperturbed, as the screen shows his view of the roller coaster climbing higher and higher. When the roller coaster begins its rapid decent, however, the man suddenly drops to the ground. His friend grabs him by the arms, trying in vain to keep him upright while he kicks his legs so wildly that passersby begin to gather in an attempt to come to his aid. When someone finally pulls the Rift off of his head, he looks around dazed, buries his head in his hands, and laughs so hard that he cries. The physicality of such displays are matched in the other popular genres of Rift reaction videos—including scenes in which players react to virtual-reality horror games (players often scream) and first-person, virtual-reality pornography (players often reach out as if to grab or caress the figures appearing in front of them.)

 The Oculus Rift and other virtual-reality devices are making the body an undeniably important part of the video-game experience in other ways as well. I described at the beginning of this chapter how exploring a recreated slave castle in VR made me overwhelmingly nauseous. Countless others writing in online forums recount similar experiences. In a thread posted to the official Oculus website titled "nausea thread – how do i get use to the rift?", one user laments, "ive had my rift for 3 days now but unfortunatly i really can't use it for longer then a few mins (which makes developing for it pretty hard). even on day 3 after like 5mins of playing half life 2 (which is giving me the best experience so far) i can't use the rift for the rest of the day because im feeling pretty dizzy."[52] Hundreds of users who have found the Oculus Rift similarly nauseating have since responded to this thread. The experience of feeling nauseous in VR even has its own name, "Virtual Reality Sickness," and it is causing real trouble for game developers as well as players. In the spring of 2015, a *New York Times* article cited a number of experts who confirmed that solving the nausea problem represented the greatest technological hurdle to the sale of VR devices on the mainstream market.[53] Much of the still limited research into virtual reality sickness equates it to simulator sickness, a phenomenon studied primarily in the context of military flight simulators. What is most striking to me about virtual reality sickness is the stark contrast between the utopian rhetoric of the Rift and other such devices as tools with the superlative capacity to take players beyond their bodies—and the frank, unpleasant, and currently insurmountable reality of a feeling as base as nausea. Virtual reality will surely lead to a new era of interactivity, just as soon as it stops making players fall down in great slapstick displays and/or vomit.

 Within the larger discussion of video games and the body presented here, VR devices have an important part to play because they are making the physicality (and the pain) of gameplay so immediately apparent. On the one hand, these devices are being heralded with promises of "complete immersion"—the vision of an embodied self rendered immaterial and subsumed into the world of the machine so wholly that the so-called virtual environment can substitute for the so-called real one. On the other hand, the experience of using a VR device is, at least for now, a deeply and even painfully embodied one. This is in

part because using VR devices requires that players actually move their bodies more than a traditional controller would (products like the Virtuix Omni platform take this even further by allowing players to move through virtual spaces by literally walking) but also because using VR quite simply hurts. Testing out an Oculus Rift is, for now, as much like having something *done* to your body as it is like *doing* something with your body. The technical obstacles that cause virtual reality sickness, like lagging frame rates, have plagued video game developers for decades. Yet VR makes these obstacles a matter of how players *feel*. Apparently, at the turbulent intersection of cutting-edge technology and the realities of the material world stands the human stomach. Like the return of the repressed, to use Freud's term, the body refuses to face the pending dissolution of its own materiality without a fight.[54] It hurts and in hurting insists on its own right to existence.

Nausea has its own cultural and theoretical history, which has been traditionally imagined outside of the history of sadomasochism outlined in chapter one. Existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre approached nausea as a philosophical state. The protagonist of Sartre's novel *Nausea* suffers from a feeling of "sweetish sickness" so persistent that it cuts him off from his human connections and ultimately from himself.[55] *Nausea* is both a narrative and a conceptual text, and within its pages the feeling of sickness comes to function as a physiological expression of existential angst: a material manifestation that makes an abstract unhappiness concrete, and knowable through the suffering of the body. In this version, nausea is introspective and felt alone. As a category of pain then, nausea differs from the types of erotic suffering most often seen in representations of sadomasochism (Pasolini's *Salò*, the subject of chapter two, being a notable exception) in that nausea is rarely inflicted on another person. Rather than the result of an exchange between two subjects, nausea is more commonly imagined as a solo *experience*. And as an experience, nausea has become an increasingly prominent feature in the landscape of contemporary entertainment media, both in the arenas of video games and film. Viewing movies in 3D, not so long ago a notion that called to mind the kitsch of 1950's red and blue glasses, has become increasingly popular in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Today, it is often difficult to find a screening of a newly released blockbuster offered in anything but 3D. Yet the popularity of 3D films comes with its own consequences for the body. A 2013 study concluded that 55% of those who watch a movie in 3D walk away suffering from "visually induced motion sickness."[56] Interestingly, the idea of nausea as a response to media suggests new interpretations of Sartre's "sweetish sickness." Nausea becomes the side effect of an interaction between subject and (media) object rather than a physical manifestation of an emotion felt alone.

Feeling sick in response to 3D movies or virtual reality is more than a matter of personal discomfort, however. The experience of nausea, incidental though it might seem, comes with real implications for the politics of gender and identity in digital cultures. Prior to the introduction of VR devices, discussions about gender, nausea, and video games appeared most frequently in the context of first-person shooter games (FPSs). FPSs, which involve navigating terrain and engaging in combat from a largely disembodied first-person perspective, are among the most "hardcore" and male-coded of game genres. Confirming significant anecdotal evidence, researchers have concluded that women are made to feel unwelcome in these games in ways that are physical as well as cultural. According to at

least one study, female players are more likely than male players to experience motion sickness while playing FPS games.[57] On the one hand, this research validates the reports of female players who have argued that such games are not designed with their experiences in mind; if women, trans folk, and genderqueer folk were included in the playtesting process, would developers produce games with multi-million-dollar budgets that made more than half the population feel sick? On the other hand, this research might be taken to legitimize negative stereotypes about female players, e.g. that they are simply not as good at hardcore games as their male counterparts on a fundamental, biological level. While biology may indeed play an important part in these differing experiences, emphasizing a scientific perspective on nausea in video games runs the risk of obfuscating the ways that nausea is also a cultural and social issue.

Like pain more broadly, nausea as a response to digital media is a feminist issue. This is because nausea gives voice to the experiences of female players, but also because embodied experiences like sickness have been so long stigmatized. Within gamer culture, players who involve their bodies in gameplay are commonly seen as inexperienced, incompetent, and weak. Admitting to feeling sick while playing an FPS game, much like moving one's head around to try and get a better view on the first-person perspective, marks one as a "newbie." This feminizing stigma implies that the player is not tough enough to "play with the boys." Indeed, generally speaking, video games that explicitly involve mimetic motions of the body—like dance games, fitness games, or others in which players use motion-sensing controllers to act out physical expressions—are looked down upon as games for children, older players, and "girls." Nintendo's advertising campaigns for the Wii console, which featured images of female and male players of diverse ages happily swinging Wii-mote controllers, reflect a similar sense that games that explicitly involve the body are coded as less hardcore than those that involve the subtle pressing of buttons alone. Given this, it seems important to consider not just who feels nauseous while playing video games, but also who *reports* feeling nauseous while playing video games. In a game culture notably concerned with assessing who does and does not count as a "real gamer," performances of masculinity play an important role in establishing valid subjecthood. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that some male players may experience nausea yet feel pressured, on a conscious or subconscious level, to disavow the responses of their bodies— a phenomenon that has been observed among male fighter pilots, who often underreport instances of simulator sickness for fear of seeming weak.

Needless to say, the larger stakes of nausea in video games also come to bear on virtual reality. For this reason among others, the topic of virtual reality sickness is a touchy one: male players who report it risk seeming feminized (sadly, a serious status blow within most gamer communities), while female gamers who report it risk seeming insufficiently hardcore or "real." This perhaps explains why the majority of the discourse that currently surrounds virtual reality sickness focuses on it as a technological challenge rather than an experience with its own significance. News stories about game developers hard at work solving the problem of nausea caused by VR speak to an imagined need to quiet the sensations of the body; a successful technology, according to this logic, must evolve beyond its embarrassing associations with the body. Yet this is only one of the narratives we might construct about virtual reality and the body—and only one of many value systems we

might subscribe to. What other stories might we tell about what it feels like to play a video game and why/whether these feelings matters? Virtual reality devices are making the pain of video games an especially legible and pressing issue, but they are also issuing an invitation to reflect on the ways that players narrativize the experience of play. Video-game nausea is no longer just a women's issue (not that it ever really was one). It has taken on broader visibility, making the embodied and often painful experience of playing video games suddenly speakable. Yet the question remains: *how* do we speak about it?

Narrating Gameplay through Embodiment

I am intrigued by the notion that the pain of virtual reality is, in some significant part, a matter of telling stories about the body. When I say "telling stories," I am thinking both about how players narrativize the embodied sensations of gameplay and about what it means to give voice to experiences that have been traditionally stigmatized and silenced. Much of the existing writing on virtual reality sickness repeats the notion that women are more likely to experience nausea in VR than men. While it is encouraging to see gender become an acceptable part of discussions about gaming technologies, the repetition of the notion that women find VR fundamentally more painful serves to problematically naturalize and essentialize differences in gendered experiences. I suspect that the reality of this so-called gender divide is as much a matter of cultural constructs as of biology. With that said, it is important to note that the implications of cultural constructs can themselves be *felt in the body*. How players imagine the relationship between games and their bodies can itself deeply affect the way that video games make them feel.

In order to move my research beyond the quantitative approaches that dominate current discussions of virtual reality sickness and toward a phenomenological perspective, I turned to players themselves. Inviting them to narrate their own experiences with VR, I spoke at length with eight subjects—four men and four women—about how virtual reality made them feel. Though a handful of VR devices are currently available in limited markets, including Google Cardboard and the Avegant Glyph, I chose to focus on players' experiences with the Oculus Rift, since the Rift is currently the most widely influential virtual reality technology. Because the Rift is available only as a "dev kit" as of this writing, those I spoke to were likely to work in fields related to video games and digital media, where they had access to professional conferences or other events where Rift-compatible games were being demoed. All of the subjects I spoke to were between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five. Two were people of color and half identified as queer (a fact that likely results from the biases of my own social networks, but nonetheless a potentially meaningful factor). In one sense, these eight interviews give voice to only a tiny fraction of the experiences players have had with virtual reality. At the same time, they offer the opportunity to delve deeper into individual stories and to consider closely what role the body plays in how players make sense of their gameplay experiences.

Informed by the cultural stakes of nausea and gender, I entered into these discussions with the presumption that I would encounter a distinct gender divide. I expected that female respondents would report feeling nauseous and generally skeptical of

the value of VR technologies, but also that some would do so only hesitantly, due to initial anxieties about the stigmas associated with experiencing video games through the body. I also expected that, by contrast, male players would narrativize their encounters with VR through an emphasis on immersiveness, i.e. through the dissolution of the physical body, and would express more excitement about new developments in VR technologies. (The celebratory fandom that surrounds the release of new consumer devices is itself a highly gendered phenomenon.) Because I did not want my predictions to bias the subjects I spoke with, however, I employed an approach similar to the taking of oral histories—opening the floor to respondents to describe when and where they tried the Oculus Rift, what they thought of the experience, and finally how the device made them feel.

I quickly found through these discussions that my presumptions about how players would narrative their encounters with VR did not sufficiently account for the full complexity of ways that video games are experienced through the body. On the issue of nausea, the respondents were split, and not exactly along gender lines. Though a few players reported experiencing dizziness, eye strain, or increased body temperature, nausea was indeed the most consistently reported physical side effect of virtual reality. Some had experienced nausea as an unfortunate but seemingly unimportant side effect of gameplay; for others, it was the defining characteristic of the VR experience. Here is how one subject narrated her first encounter with the Oculus Rift: "I was really excited to try out the Oculus, but it made me super sick. I played a demo at the Game Developers Conference and after only five or ten minutes I was so nauseous. It started while I was playing, but I didn't realize until I took off the headset how sick I felt." Another respondent put her experience of virtual reality sickness in even less uncertain terms: "I hated using the Oculus Rift. It made me nauseous. I was about to throw up the whole time. I told [the students who were demoing the game] that I was feeling crazy, like I was going to have one of those epileptic seizures." Equally common though were narratives in which nausea featured as an afterthought, an inconvenience, or a problem to be solved. "Feeling sick is just what happens when I try almost any VR demo," reported one male respondent. "It's a big problem right now, and almost all the games I've played have it."

As these quotes perhaps already suggest, the gender divide I encountered did not affect *who* felt nauseous (of the four respondents who reported virtual reality sickness, two were men and two were women), but it did affect how those who felt nauseous situated their physical discomfort in the story of their experience with VR. Whereas the two female subjects reported their nausea instantly upon being asked about the Oculus Rift in the most general terms, the two male subjects reported their nausea only after a series of questions that became increasingly directed toward the body. Their initial responses, in contrast to those of the female respondents, focused on how impressive they found the Oculus technology. The second male interviewee who reported feeling nauseous while playing VR games answered the question "How would you describe your experience with the Oculus Rift?" by exclaiming: "Amazing, exciting, so cool. It makes me feel like 'Oh My God, I'm really there!" Only when asked directly asked about any negative physical side effects did he reply, "Yes, it makes me feel pretty sick. I'm not sure what causes that, but it's a little bit alarming." What distinguishes these responses then is less the actually feeling of sickness and more the sense of whether or not that feeling of sickness matters enough to feature

prominently in a narrative about the experience of virtual reality. This suggests broader implications about the gender politics of discomfort and pain in video games. That which the female respondents valued highly (affective embodiment) the male participants deemed to be of lesser or even minimal importance.

Interestingly, the stories that I heard from these subjects suggested that I had been wrong in my prediction that I would see a negative correlation between experiences of nausea and excitement about VR technology. As a group, the male respondents did indeed express considerably more unrestrained enthusiasm about the Oculus Rift and its potential to shape the future of video games. However, at least one of the women professed similarly effusive sentiments ("It was astonishingly cool and I came out of [the demo] grinning from ear to ear. I really want all games to be like that!") and another stated her cautious excitement. Even more strikingly, there seems to have been no clear relation between those who did or did not experience negative side effects when using VR devices and those who did or did not express enthusiasm about using the device in the future. Two of the respondents who reported no negative feelings also described their encounters with the Oculus Rift as uninspiring, or even boring. Said one such subject, "I found the graphics and the whole experience totally underwhelming." By contrast, a subject who admitted to feeling nauseous while playing VR games "all the time" also expressed nearly boundless praise for the immersiveness made possible by devices like the Rift. It seems that what mattered most in whether players felt moved by the experience of VR was less whether they felt pain or pleasure, and more whether they felt anything at all. These reports also demonstrate how pain and pleasure, felt in response to VR or games more generally, often coexist within experiences of gameplay. It is questionable whether a player who loves demoing virtual reality games even though they make him sick is drawn to VR *because* he enjoys nausea. Yet feeling sick nonetheless represents a key component of the experience that this same player might describe as "amazing, exciting, and cool." For many, it seems, pain is part of the pleasure of virtual reality.

Regardless of whether using the Rift made them feel good, bad, or apathetic though, one thing remained consistent across all of the subjects' stories: they narrated the experience of virtual reality through their bodies. For some, this meant emphasizing nausea as a central experience. For many others, it meant describing VR as an expression of the physical body. Multiple subjects, when asked about using the Oculus Rift, responded by describing how it had made them smile and laugh, or how their mouths had dropped open in astonishment. Operating in a similar vein, a respondent offered the following description of the "power of VR": "What makes VR so powerful is that you're cutting out the screen. In traditional games, you're supposed to be the character, but in reality you're sitting on the couch. With VR you're not using a controller; you're using your own body." Even those who had found virtual reality unimpressive told the story of their ennui through the relationship between their bodies and the VR device. One respondent repeatedly returned to a description of how the Oculus headset, which she had to fit over her glasses, felt uncomfortable on her face. Another characterized her experience by saying, "I was standing on a show floor at an art exhibit [when I tried the Oculus Rift] but my head was in this device, so my body felt very vulnerable." The importance of the body in narratives of VR

gameplay was expressed most emphatically by one particularly enthusiastic VR fan. Asked to explain what he loved about virtual reality games, he replied:

> Take [the survival horror game demo] *Dreadhalls* for example. That has got to be nearly my favorite game because it invoked genuine fear unlike anything I've experienced. You sweat, you shake, you tremble, and you can become too scared to move any further. Even with the low res, it doesn't matter. You forget about it completely and you're in that moment. You're not thinking about anything else. You're just completely immersed.

This account of the extreme bodily response that VR can engender recalls the YouTube videos of Oculus Rift users falling dramatically during the rollercoaster demo. For this respondent, however, "sweating, shaking, trembling" and a kind of fear-based paralysis did not represent negative experiences. Rather, they made *Dreadhalls* "nearly [his] favorite game"—a "genuine" experience of the body.

Ultimately, what I want to draw from these interviews is the way that narratives of the body related to experiences of "complete immersion" in VR. The stories that these subjects told pointed toward an interpretation of immersiveness in which the body plays a central role. Rather than distancing players from their bodies, the most reportedly immersive virtual reality experiences actually heightened physical sensation. To succeed at creating the impression that the player has truly stepped into an alternate world, immersiveness needs the body. More specifically though, it needs the body to cooperate. When the player quoted above sweats, shakes, and trembles, he does so in compliance with the experience constructed by the game: the designers of *Dreadhalls* want him to feel physically scared because the game is supposed to be frightening. In this way, the player's embodied response contributes to the experience of immersion. Nausea works differently, however (at least until developers design a game that makes players sick on purpose). It interrupts the feeling of immersion and insists that the player exit the "virtual" space and return to the "real." This is in keeping with what Rommel Romero—a representative from the development studio Minority Games, which has been working on a virtual reality game—described in recounting to me his observations of hundreds of players demoing Minority's new game. He reflected, "In VR, you can't do something like cut scenes," i.e. short non-playable moments much like brief films, "because it removes you from the immersion. You go from believing you're the character to watching the film, and that creates discomfort. VR fools your brain into thinking that it's somewhere else, and whenever you become aware that something is happening that doesn't match reality, that's when you start to feel sick." Following from this observation and from the experiences narrated by VR players, immersion might be better understood not as a dissolution of the body but as a harnessing of the body. Immersiveness succeeds when the feelings of the body match the reality presented "on screen." This is itself a kind of intimacy: player and machine experience sensation in tandem. Nausea, by contrast, rejects immersiveness by marking the friction between the virtual and the real. To eliminate nausea would be to erase this dissonance, and with it the important perspective it provides. In this sense, nausea is not

just an unfortunate side effect of VR technologies. Like pain in a BDSM scene, it marks its own sites of meaning and communicates its own message: remember the body.

Where the Virtual Meets Reality

I began this chapter with an anecdote about my own painful first experience with virtual reality. This moment, when my material body refused to allow me to immerse myself in an immaterial world, brought into focus for me how experiences of pain during gameplay can matter just as much as video games themselves. Working against the myth of digital disembodiment, I argued for the importance of bodies in video games and, by extension, for understanding games as embodied experiences as well as narrative and structural systems. Attending to the body, I contended, enacts a form of resistance against "the hegemony of play" and "the hegemony of fun" by giving voice to a wide range of feelings and non-normative desires. Drawing from research by Jesper Juul and Jane McGonigal, I also posited that, among the many sensations video games can engender, the commingling of pain and pleasure may be arguably the most pervasive. After illustrating some of the ways that games might overtly play with pain (or be played with in ways that are painful), I asserted the claim that hurt in fact represents an important part of all gameplay experiences. This hurt, however, should not be confused with the common misconception that video games turn players into perpetrators of real-life violence. Rather, given the intimate nature of "the pain of playing video games," it is more appropriately understood through the lens of kink.

As others before me have asked "Where is the queerness in games?", I ask "Where is the kinkiness in games?"[58] I answered that kinkiness operates within games on a fundamental level, because interactivity itself can be interpreted as kinky. Though interactivity appears to fit Wendy Chun's concept of "control-freedom," enticing players with the promise of agency while taking agency away, I argued that the exchanges of power that occur between player and game should in fact be reframed in more positive terms: as the dialectical dance of two kinky play partners. This interpretation of interactivity is itself explored in Merritt Kopas' *Consensual Torture Simulator* and Robert Yang's *Hurt Me Plenty*, both of which draw parallels between BDSM and video games as related modes of "play." In the final sections of this chapter, I returned to virtual reality devices to illustrate how the pain of playing video games, and with it the stakes of embodied gameplay, are becoming increasingly literal and legible with the rise of technologies that seem, ironically, to promise to transcend the body. Discussing "virtual reality sickness" draws important attention to the role that gender plays in figurations of video games and the body—and suggests that even experiences like nausea can relate to feminist issues. In order to see how such embodiment might shape the ways that players describe virtual reality, I invited eight subjects to tell the story of their encounters with the Oculus Rift headset. Though no two respondents told the same tale, a larger pattern did emerge: all eight subjects narrativized their gameplay experiences through sensations they felt in their bodies. These stories, in conjunction with observations from a game developer working with the Oculus, suggested that the immersive potential of virtual reality lies not in eliding the body but in harnessing

it. It is when experiences of the body do not match experiences of the game that the dissonance between the "virtual" and the "real" in virtual reality is felt as pain.

At its most basic, the point that I hope to have demonstrated through this chapter can be summed up in a few short words: when it comes to video games, bodies matter. They matter even, or perhaps especially, at moments in the history of digital media when new technologies offer to render the material realities of the body increasingly obsolete. Bodies matter to video games because without them any conceptualization of the experience of play would be woefully incomplete. However, they also matter for cultural as well as conceptual reasons. Experiences of the body are by nature personal, individual, and sensuous as well as being concrete manifestations of larger social markers of difference. Allowing bodies to speak opens the floor so that a greater diversity of voices can contribute to dialogues about an important contemporary media form. I place special emphasize on pain in my discussions of players' bodies because pain (along with those who feel it) is so commonly stigmatized and silenced—and because the deeply embodied quality of pain makes it clear that the "experience of video games" must take into account the importance of the body. Much like nausea disrupts the experience of immersion, attending to the significance of players' pain has the power to disrupt larger cultural narratives about who plays video games, why they play them, and why it feels good to play them. Upholding the divide between video games and the body also upholds the hegemony of play; dismantling that divide creates opportunities for exploring new systems of value.

Video games have been long plagued by negative stereotypes equating play with real-life violence. Kink offers an alternate framework for thinking about the relationship between video games and pain. As a critical lens, kink reminds us that hurt itself has meaning—that feeling badly can be an experience to be inhabited rather than a problem to be solved. Calling games kinky is a way to argue for the importance of non-normative pleasure in a medium that so commonly caters to the pleasures of the norm; it is also a way to de-marginalize queer and kinky identities by making kinkiness central to games. On an even larger scale though, arguing for the kinkiness of video games means arguing for the value of moments that hurt—the places where the "real" and the "virtual" collide in the body. At times of change, it becomes especially important to think critically about narratives of progress. It is very possible that, in a few short years, developers working with virtual-reality technologies will have "solved" the nausea problem and that playing VR games will no longer hurt in such legible ways. This is all the more reason to document and reflect on the discomfort of the present, so that the story of technological progress does not erase the complications of the body. The history of virtual reality, in its twenty-first-century incarnation, will always have been a history of pain. Likewise, no matter how seemingly disembodied gameplay may become, playing video games will always hurt, in a sense—and they *should* always hurt, because hurt reminds us that it matters not just what digital media enables us to do but also how it makes us feel.

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[1] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

[2] This rhetoric also characterizes the way that Oculus, the makers of the Rift, market their devices. Oculus describes itself in its website materials as "a technology company revolutionizing the way people experience video games." Accessed July 29, 2015, https://www.oculus.com/en-us/.

[3] New reports of some of the most extreme cases of this behavior, such as an *International Business Times* piece about a Korean man who died after playing an online role-playing game for three days straight, often describe especially long play sessions as "binges," suggesting an in-game physicality that leads to real-life consequences. Abigail Elise, "Gamer Dies in Internet Cafe after Three Days of Gaming Binge, Hardly Anyone Notices," *International Business Times*, January 19, 2015, accessed July 29, 2015, http://www.ibtimes.com/gamer-dies-internet-cafe-after-three-day-gaming-binge-hardly-anyone-notices-1787936.

[4] For more on traditional theories about the relationship between media and embodied sensation, see discussion of Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* in the introduction and chapter one.

[5] See, for example: Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009); T. L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006); Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

[6] Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (eds.), *Queer Game Studies: Gender, Sexuality, and a Queer Approach to Game Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

[7] One of the most common points of discussion in this area is the representation of women's bodies in video games. Such discussions have been primarily dominated by debates about in what ways players do or do not identify with their avatars and whether strong, sexualized female characters should be condemned as objectifying or celebrated as empowering. For an overview, see Helen W. Kennedy, "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?", *Game Studies*, 2.2 (2002).

[8] Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005); Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[9] The official Apple website actually includes an extensive series of pages on repetitive motion injuries and possible solutions, which are broken down into categories like "upper body risk factors," "seating," and "eyes and vision." Accessed July 29, 2015, https://www.apple.com/about/ergonomics/index.html.

[10] Gregory Bagnell, "Queer(ing) Game Technologies: Thinking on Constructions of Normativity Inscribed in Digital Gaming Hardware," in *Queer Game Studies*, Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (eds.).

[11] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

[12] John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 1-2.

[13] John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 86.

[14] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2002); G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[15] Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Marie, Celia Pierce, "The Hegemony of Play," published in the proceedings of the 2007 Digital Games Research Association Conference, 1.

[16] Ibid.

[17] I place "gamers" in quotes here because the category of the gamer has itself been called into question by commentators like Leigh Alexander, who argues compellingly that "gamer" is a constructed and often exclusionary identity that represents only one subset of those who play video games. Leigh Alexander, "'Gamers' don't have to be your audience. 'Gamers' are over," Gamasutra.com, August 28, 2014, accessed July 19, 2015, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/224400/Gamers_dont_have_to_be_your_audience _Gamers_are_over.php.

[18] Bonnie Ruberg, "No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games that Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2.2 (2015), 108-24.

[19] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004); Brenda Brathwaite and Ian Schreiber, *Challenges for Game Designers* (Boston: Course Technology, 2009).

[20] Raph Koster, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* (Sebastopol: O'Reilly Media, 2004); Jenova Chen, "Flow in Games (and Everything Else)," *Communications of the ACM*, 50.4 (2007), 31-34.

[21] Tracey Lien, "Tapping into Player Psychology for Games for Change," Polygon.com, April 23, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015, http://www.polygon.com/2014/4/23/5645156/games-for-change-psychology-bias

[22] Katherine Cross, "The Nightmare Is Over: They're Not Coming for Your Games," Polygon.com, July 19, 2014, accessed July 29, 2015, http://www.polygon.com/2014/7/29/5947661/the-nightmare-is-over-theyre-not-coming-for-your-games.

[23] Gerard Jones, *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

[24] Matt Jaccarino, "'Training Simulation:' Mass Killers Often Share Obsession with Violent Video Games," Fox News, September 12, 2013, accessed July 29, 2015, http://www.foxnews.com/tech/2013/09/12/training-simulation-mass-killers-often-share-obsession-with-violent-video-games/.

[25] A 2013 *New York Times* article rounded up a range of expert findings on the effects of violent games. One study did show that players who engaged with aggressive fighting games were more likely, for a brief period immediately following the play session, to "act a little more rudely." However, psychologists, economists, and media scholars all conceded that no science could confirm the alleged link, for example, between game violence and the Columbine High School massacre. Benedict Carey, "Shooting in the Dark," *The New York Times*, February 11, 2013, accessed July 29, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/12/science/studying-the-effects-of-playing-violent-video-games.html?_r=0.

[26] Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[27] Alexander Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Edmond Chang, "Queergaming," in *Queer Games Studies*, Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (eds.).

[28] Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).

[29] Bonnie Ruberg, "Playing to Lose: The Queer Art of Failing at Video Games," in *Identity* Matters: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, forthcoming); Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Halberstam and Juul met for the first time as part of a public dialogue titled "The Arts of Failure" at the first annual Queerness and Games Conference held at UC Berkeley in 2013. The transcript of this dialogue will be published in *Queer Game Studies*, Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (eds.).

[30] Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure*, xi, 1.

[31] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1990).

[32] Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure*, 2.

[33] Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011).

[34] Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, 77.

[35] Heather Chaplin, "I Don't Want to Be a Superhero," Slate.com, March 29, 2011, accessed February 26, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/gaming/2011/03/i_dont_want_to_be_a_superhero.html; Ian Bogost, "Reality Is Alright," Bogost.com, January 14, 2011, accessed February 26, 2014, http://www.bogost.com/blog/reality_is_broken.shtml.

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[38] Mark Wolf, "The Video Game as Medium," in *The Medium of the Video Game*, ed. Mark Wolf (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 2.

[39] Mark Wolf, "The Video Game as Medium," 3.

[40] Mark Wolf, "Accessing Interactivity through Video Game Design," *Mechademia*, 1 (2006): 84.

[41] Aden Evens, "The Logic of Digital Gaming," *Mechademia*, 6 (2011): 261.

[42] Wendy Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

[43] "Endless Ocean," Nintendo, accessed February 27, 2014 http://www.nintendo.com/games/detail/HibwEvcAuiAvMKvZZulIaP_CPGfFjLel.

[44] Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Book, 1996).

[45] Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xvi.

[46] Katherine Cross, "The Nightmare Is Over"

[47] David Their, "Why Fans Are So Angry about the Mass Effect 3 Ending," Forbes.com, March 14, 2012, accessed July 29, 2015, http://www.forbes.com/sites/davidthier/2012/03/14/why-fans-are-so-angry-about-the-mass-effect-3-ending/.

[48] David Their, "Mass Effect 3 Protesters Sending Cupcakes to BioWare," Forbes.com, March 27, 2012, accessed July 29, 2015, http://www.forbes.com/sites/davidthier/2012/03/27/mass-effect-3-protesters-sending-cupcakes-to-bioware/.

[49] Anna Anthropy, "Kink and Play," presentation at the Queerness and Games Conference, October 26, 2013.

[50] What would it mean for a game to be a communicative top? It might, for example, mean clearly stating the terms of success it sets for its players. Most commonly in games, this communication takes place in the form of the "tutorial," an opening segment of gameplay in which players learn step by step how to play. Yet tutorials come with their own cultural baggage, as they are often perceived to mark a game as too "casual" for a hardcore audience. Games that communicate their expectations clearly are, in short, looked down upon. This is one of many instances in which game design can benefit by taking lessons from BDSM. Tops who do not communicate are not better or more hardcore tops; they are simply irresponsible. In order to be inclusive, video games too need to communicate with their players so that their players can be equal partners in informed consent—so that they know how to play and so that they can agree to do so.

[51] "Ultimate Oculus Rift Reactions 2014," uploaded May 6, 2014, accessed July 29, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYihtrqtkWM.

[52] "nausea thread – how do i get used to the rift?", Oculus.com, initial post uploaded July 5, 2013, accessed July 29, 2015, https://forums.oculus.com/viewtopic.php?t=2340.

[53] Nick Wingfield, "To Bring Virtual Reality to Market, Furious Efforts to Solve Nausea," March 4, 2015, accessed July 29, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/05/technology/solution-to-nausea-puts-virtual-reality-closer-to-market.html.

[54] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003).

[55] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (New York: New Directions, 2013).

[56] "Study: 3-D Movies Leave Many Feeling Sick," NBC News, February 25, 2013, accessed July 29, 2015, http://www.nbcnews.com/health/study-3-d-movies-leave-many-feeling-sick-1C8518074.

[57] Melissa S. Terlecki and Nora S. Newcombe, "How Important Is the Digital Divide? The Relation of Computer and Video Game Usage to Gender Differences in Mental Rotation Ability," *Sex Roles*, 53.5 (2005): 433-441.

[58] Colleen Macklin, "Where Is the Queerness in Games?", in *Queer Game Studies*, Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (eds).

Chapter Four:
BDSM in Virtual Spaces and the Kinky Pleasure of Digital Media

"To some of us, the fantasy of BDSM is as powerful as the reality."

      This statement comes from the "about" page of a group called "Online BDSM," one of many groups dedicated to digital BDSM play that can be found on FetLife.com, the widely popular social network created "for kinksters by kinksters."[1] With 2,578 members as of June 2015, "Online BDSM" is actually one of the smaller digital kink groups on FetLife. The group "Online Roleplaying" has 7,564 members, for example, while "Skype Webcam chat" has 13,984. On the forums of these groups, FetLike members regularly post messages seeking play partners for scenes of pain, pleasure, domination, and/or submission (to name just a few modes of play) that take place entirely through digital communication technologies. In such scenes, media platforms like webcams, chat clients, and mobile applications take the place of locales like the bedroom or the dungeon. Forum posts bear titles such as "Looking for an online sub slave" and "Online Dom/sub relationship." After connecting through these threads, digital play partners meet to play on other platforms, like Gchat or Skype. Occasionally, kinky role-playing also takes place within the forums themselves, where posters play out textual scenes in long lines of public comment threads.

      Groups like "Online BDSM" represent only one corner of a much larger contemporary network of kinky sexual practices taking place in virtual spaces. FetLife members are by no means alone in their enthusiasm for online BDSM. Across a wide variety of communities, identities, and digital platforms, kinksters from North America, Europe, and beyond are using technologically-mediated communication to engage in scenes of kinky sex play: interactions that hinge on the dynamics of pain and pleasure yet involve no physical contact between bodies. Such interactions take place *virtually*, yet they are also *real*. Though sex of all kinds pervades digital cultures, BDSM, with its emphasis on extremities of sensation, may seem an unlikely candidate for enactment via the purportedly disembodied computer screen. In fact, practices of digital BDSM are deeply sensory and embodied, destabilizing the very divide between the virtual and the real. The popularity and diversity of these practices challenges us to ask: if virtuality can be felt as powerfully as "reality," and if digital media can communicate pain and pleasure, then do we need to *reconsider realness* as a presumed category of experience in discussions of technology and the body? Digital kink, in short, has the potential to reveal reality itself as a construction.

      In what follows, I introduce, contextualize, taxonomize, and unpack early twenty-first-century practices of digitally-mediated BDSM, with the goal of allowing them to speak to larger dynamics in the relationship between embodiment and media. As throughout this dissertation, my approach is founded on a resistance to pathologization. In contrast to a long history of sensationalist writing on sadomasochism, my purpose lies in exploring this rich and meaningful element of human sexual expression—which has been underserved by many existing scholarly and popular traditions—as it intersects with contemporary digital cultures. My perspective comes at once from the outside and the inside. As a kinkster and a former sex tech journalist, I myself have been a member of many of communities that I

describe. Therefore, while much of the material presented here falls in the realm of the ethnographic rather than the personal, it is also informed by first-hand experience with the power of digital tools to move the body. I do not, however, mean simply to generalize from my own experience. Sensation and materiality are always individual—uniquely felt and variously shaped by specific cultural context—at the same time that they constitute an important part of a set of larger human experiences. It is my hope then that this work will draw attention to the body without essentializing it. The modes of longing and feeling I want to highlight have wide-reaching implications, but they happen at the human level.

How does BDSM operate when it takes place via digital media? Why practice BDSM in virtual spaces rather than in "real life"? Of the answers that I will be offering here, some of the most important come from the testimonies of digital kinksters themselves. For many of those I spoke with, digitally-mediated BDSM did not merely substitute for real-life play; instead, it was a pleasure unto itself. Kink that takes place in virtual spaces has much in common with kink that takes place offline, but it also operates through mechanisms specific to digital media. These technological mechanisms too are kinky. That is, far from being incidental platforms for facilitating sexual interactions, digital media forms are themselves key components of the technological kinky experience. When partners *play with one another via media*, they are also *playing with media*. Counter to the notion that technology divorces users from their bodies, these practices demonstrate how technology can take on bodily qualities, becoming an object of, as well as a conduit for, desire. In the final sections of this chapter, following from these observations, I discuss how digitally-mediated kink can be read as a rebuttal to the myth of digital disembodiment outlined in the dissertation introduction. Ultimately, digital kink resonates with and yet complicates contemporary media theory on the dynamics of sensation, control, and pain in relation to technology—including writing by Laura Marks, Wendy Chun, and Alexander Galloway—by *reframing human-machine interaction through kinky intimacy*.

Given the hybrid nature of this work, which brings together the study of digital cultures and media theory, it seems fitting to include a note on methodology.[2] Many of the sections below make use of "case studies," loosely defined, to illustrate different types of digital BDSM communities and practices in action. Considering the constraints of a single chapter, this approach is economic, allowing me to cover a significant amount of ground over a relatively short number of pages. However, I would stress that much more extensive work could (and should) be done to map the full complexity of technologically-mediated kink and its many voices. Digital BDSM, with its multiple overlapping communities and subcultures, represents a wide, diverse field of potential study. Wider still and infinitely rich would be the study of marginalized, non-normative sexual practices in digital spaces more generally. Rather than offering a conclusive study then, I hope that the examples provided here will raise valuable questions and suggest generative lines of inquiry. My goals in this chapter are therefore exploratory as well as demonstrative. In addition to bringing digital BDSM into dialogue with media studies, I want to open the door for future work on digitally-mediated kink that will move beyond anecdote. In the meantime, this study serves as a snapshot. Scholarly studies of fast-changing digital cultures such as this one always run the risk of appearing outdated by the time they reach their readership.

Imagine what follows then as a series of points along a history of technologically-mediated sexuality that nonetheless resonate beyond the contemporary moment.

Cybersex: Real Pleasure on Digital Platforms

Digital BDSM stands at the intersection of two broader and more commonly discussed areas of subcultural sexual practice: cybersex and BDSM. The present section and the one that follows provide context for digital BDSM by offering cursory introductions to these related practices. I begin with a brief discussion of cybersex, in order to demonstrate how digital BDSM relates to broader trends in technologically-mediated sexual expression. In addition, existing work on cybersex usefully highlights important issues of embodiment and pleasure that are likewise key to understanding the functions of kink in digital spaces.

Though cybersex may sound like a dated term, it is a useful one. It runs the risk of conjuring up memories of the mid-1990's, when the World Wide Web first entered millions of American homes and chatter about the new "cyber" frontier proliferated.[3] Still, the term, with its relative openness, continues to serve a valuable semantic purpose (and has yet to be superseded by a more *au courant* phrase). The word "cybersex" encompasses all sex play that takes place across digital platforms between two or more human partners. In this way, it helpfully differentiates between sex enacted by two acquaintances in a chat room, for example, and non-reciprocal encounters with sexual material in digitally spaces, such as the viewing of online pornography. Cybersex is sex via technology. In fact, cybersex has a history that far predates what is often called the "digital age" and spans a long lineage of technological forms. In the 1870's, telegraph operators struck up sultry scenes across the wires.[4] In the 1950's and 60's, following the popularization of the polaroid camera, kinky sex play was extensively practiced via the United States Postal System through the exchange of letters and home photos.[5] In the 1980's and 1990's, phone sex operating agencies flourished (and have since been replaced by pay-per-sext agencies).[6] Early adopters of the internet often played together in text-based virtual worlds. Today, mobile smart phones have entered the ranks of the most prominent of cybersex platforms.[7]

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, cybersex is taking place in many forms and in many places.[8] A useful rule of thumb: anywhere that users can communicate via technology, they are finding ways to have sex. While some of these platforms explicitly invite sexual interactions, most cybersex communities and practices are emergent. As such, sexual techniques and etiquette have evolved differently according to the specificities of each platform.[9] Some of the most popular tools through which cybersex currently takes place include:

- *Webcams:* the relative affordability and proliferation of webcam technology, along with the availability of free software applications like Skype, have made "camming" a cybersex staple. Most webcams apps offer video, voice, and text chat capability. Cybersex partners engaging via webcam might use any or all of these functions. Commonly, webcam sex involves one or more partners presenting their bodies for the camera. It might also involve masturbation, sexual performance, or the

pleasures of voyeurism. As smart phones with video streaming functions become more ubiquitous and cellular data more affordable, cybersex via mobile phone cams is also increasingly common.

- *Text:* though few recently developed sexual platforms exclusively offer textual interactions, text-based play is still a staple of the contemporary cybersex landscape. In text-based cybersex, partners use language to discuss and describe sexual acts and/or fantasies. These partners may either engage in a descriptive mode (e.g. "I like it when a woman takes off my underwear with her teeth"), a speculative mode (e.g. "If I were there right now, I would get in the shower with you"), or a performative mode (e.g. "I am kissing you, running my fingers through your hair"). While text-based cybersex still happens in longstanding platforms like IRC chat clients, today it has largely transitioned to SMS in the form of "sexting" and SMS alternative mobile apps, like Kik.

- *Voice*: voice is often used in conjunction with other tools (such as a webcam) to add an aural dimension to the sensations of cybersex. As a mode of interaction deployed without visuals, voice-based sexual interactions function much like phone sex, which itself follows a similar conversational model as text-based cybersex. Indeed, the most common platforms for these interactions are apps like Skype and smart phones. Cybersex partners who do not know each other in real life or have not established an ongoing online relationship are more likely to exchange Skype handles than phone numbers, since phone numbers are commonly linked to personal information like full names and geographic location.

- *Avatars*: cybersex that takes place in virtual worlds, such as *World of Warcraft* or (the increasingly *dépassé*) *Second Life*, is often enacted through on-screen avatars in conjunction with text and/or voice chat exchanges. Customized by users, these avatars are able to interact with one another in ways that vary according to the mechanics of each virtual world. For example, in *Second Life*, which allows users to implement original scripts for animated avatar movement, users click on floating spheres that trigger animations through which their avatars engage in sexual actions. Users can also design and sell genitalia and other cybersex accessories.

- *Teledildonics:* much talked about but still comparatively little used, teledildonics are pieces of technological hardware that can be controlled through digital interfaces. Examples of consumer-grade teledildonics include OhMiBod, a vibrator controlled remotely via an iPad interface. Teledildonics are often marketed as aids for heternormative couples seeking to connect across long distances.[10] In fact, the most prominent users of teledildonic technologies today are professional cam models, online sex workers who use the toys in their live webcam performances.[11]

In establishing an overview of cybersex techniques, it is helpful to note that these platforms are commonly used in conjunction with one another—whether within one cybersex

session, or across a number of encounters. For example, partners may start their flirtations as avatars in a virtual world, move to text-based chat, then progress to play over a webcam. What unifies these modes of sexual play is that they are digitally-mediated.

Since coming to the attention of the mainstream more than two decades ago, cybersex and those who participate in it have often found themselves the unlucky objects of stigmatization, stereotyping, and sensational reporting. Sex that takes place in virtual spaces is frequently seen as a poor imitation of "real" sex, and it is assumed that those who play online do so because they cannot find sex partners in real life. Striving to counter these stereotypes, writers like Regina Lynn and Audacia Ray have worked to normalize and even encourage online play. Both Lynn's *The Sexual Revolution 2.0* and Ray's *Naked on the Internet* present cybersex as an exciting new frontier for sexual expression.[12] Scholars of digital cultures have also displayed their interest in digitally-mediated sex. Sherry Turkle wrote about cybersex in her classic text *Life on the Screen*, in which she discussed performances of gender in text-based MUDs (multi-user dungeons) as they intersect with sexual expression.[13] Three years earlier, in 1992, Susie Bright was already arguing for the subversive political power of sex that took place in "virtual reality." In the intervening years, scholars have continued to pursue this interest in sex in digital spaces. Recent examples of related work include Shaka McGlotten's *Virtual Intimacies* and a number of pieces on the gay hookup app Grindr.[14]

Though its subject is the now nearly defunct MUD LambdaMOO, journalist Julian Dibbell's 1998 book *My Tiny Life* remains, in a sense, the most insightful work to date on the relation between cybersex and media.[15] Dibbell began research for the book as part of a *Village Voice* feature story, "A Rape in Cyberspace"—an immersive investigation into an incident of forced sex that took place entirely within the text-based virtual world. The project grew to greater proportions when Dibbell found himself absorbed in the day to day life of LambdaMOO and its citizens. Soon he started taking place in all kinds of "tiny" pass times, from politics to sex. In describing his experiences in LambdaMOO, and particularly his virtual sexual encounters, Dibbell emphasizes the importance of bodily realities in seemingly disembodied spaces. "No bodies touched," he writes, reflecting on the implications of the rape that brought him to LamdaMOO. "Whatever physical interactions occurred consisted of a mingling of electronic signals."[16] Yet, Dibbell reports, the user whose avatar had been assaulted found her trauma very real. For her, the "emotional content" of the rape was "no mere fiction;" when it happened, she burst into tears.[17] Drawing from this incident as well as his own embodied experience in LambdaMOO, Dibbell underscores how sex in virtual environments brings into question the bodily realness of sex itself:

> To participate… in this disembodied enactment of life's most body-centered activity is to risk the realization that when it comes to sex, perhaps the body in question is not the physical one at all, but its psychic double, the bodylike self-representation we carry around in our heads—and that whether we present that body to another as a meat puppet or a word puppet is not nearly as significant a distinction as one might have thought. I know, I know, you've read Foucault and your mind is not quite blown by the idea that the notion that sex is never so much an exchange of fluids as

it is an exchange of signs. But trust [me], it's one thing to grasp the notion intellectually and quite another to feel it coursing through your veins amid the virtual stream of hot netnookie.[18]

Later in his text, when Dibbell relays the details of his first cybersex session, he uses similarly corporeal language, describing his state as "lucidly embodied," even though, as he emphasizes, he does not masturbate or achieve orgasm during the scene. In this way, Dibbell's text handily illustrates how cybersex can challenge the very definition of sex. The debate over what "counts" as sex also has significant implications for queer communities, both offline and on. Traditionally, sex has been understood as male-female genital penetration, relegating same-sex interactions (to name one example) to the status of "less than real."[19] This is one of the many contributions that an understanding of cybersex can make to the greater cultural landscape. Sex on the internet is defined by those who participate in it, not by an outside set of regulations about bodies touching and the ways in which they touch.

      Practices of cybersex and writing about them demonstrate the variety and complexity of the forms that sexual expression can take in digital spaces. They also demonstrate how technologically-mediated sex, rather than standing in for "real" sex, exercises its own appeal for participants and functions via its own systems of erotics. Whether these encounters occur on webcams, sext exchanges, or in virtual worlds, digital media itself is an integral part of the sexual experience. Mastery of the medium is inextricable from mastery of pleasure. As Dibbell writes, "In [virtual worlds], it's the best writers who get laid."[20] In what follows, this will hold true for digital BDSM as well: digital platforms cannot be separated from the experiences that they communicate, no matter how intimately embodied.

BDSM: Definitions and (Non-Digital) Debates

Equally important for understanding digital BDSM is a brief background in BDSM itself, as well as an overview of the ways that BDSM has been represented in scholarly and popular writing to date. First, I want to take a moment to reiterate some of the basic definitions and concepts that surround the acronym BDSM (elements of which have been addressed in the preface, the introduction, and chapter one) to establish a common vocabulary and ensure that we are working from knowledge of kink as a lived practice rather than a cultural myth.

      What is BDSM? The answer is multifaceted. David Ortmann and Richard Sprott define BDSM as a "compound acronym, derived from the terms *Bondage and Discipline* (B/D), *Dominance and submission* (D/s), and *Sadism and Masochism* (S/M). It serves as a sort of umbrella label… for forms of sexuality that incorporate restraint, pressure, sensation, and elements of power exchange between the engaged parties."[21] BDSM activities might include, but are by no means limited to: flogging, rope bondage, temporary piercing, or role-playing. Within the terminology of BDSM, each individual instance of these activities is called a "scene."[22] Partners in the scene "play" together; for this reason, many BDSM practices are often described with terms like "pain play" or "puppy play." The

acronym BDSM can be used to refer to practices between partners of any gender or sexual orientation. While gay male community members sometimes prefer to identify with the labels "leather," and others use "fetish," most of these play practices also fall under the more general heading of BDSM—or simply "kink." I also use "kink" and "kinky" here, as I have throughout this dissertation, as terms that extend beyond the bounds of BDSM. Whereas "BDSM" marks a set of cultural practices, "kink/kinky" gestures toward a broader range of experiences at the intersection of pain and pleasure.

For decades in America, BDSM has most commonly appeared in popular culture as either a sickness or a tantalizing taboo. Kinksters (a self-identifying term for those who understand themselves as kinky), or more often kinksters as they are imagined by non-kinksters, have been the subjects of exposé news reports and fictionalized crime shows that purport to offer a window into a set of alarming, marginal practices. As Gayle Rubin documents in "The Leather Menace," this highly public form of discrimination dates back to the 1970's.[23] More recently, beginning with the surge in popularity of E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) and the subsequent blockbuster movie by the same name (2015), the mainstream discussion around BDSM has shifted.[24] Kink has become the stuff of "housewife fantasies," the basis for a boom in the sale (and subsequent return) of whips, handcuffs, and other kinky sex toys.[25] However, pop cultural representations rarely emphasize the core values of BDSM communities: respect and communication. As the SF Citadel, a community-run dungeon in San Francisco, writes on their newcomer FAQ page (appropriately titled "Did 50 Shades get you interested? Our FAQ can get you started"), "We foster a culture of respect in which all play is safe, sane, and consensual."[26] Safe, sane, and consensual is indeed the mantra of BDSM, repeated often in kinkster-oriented spaces. As for the perceived marginality of kink practices, this too is a misconception. Nearly four million self-identified kinksters are registered on FetLife alone.[27] This does not account for those millions more who engage in kinky sex without taking part in social media or explicitly identifying as kinksters.

The largest body of existing writing on BDSM comes from within kinky communities. This includes material published in print as well as blog posts, websites, and personal narratives. Such writing frequently focuses on introducing new kinksters to BDSM, encouraging best practices between play partners, and teaching safe and effective techniques in areas from knot tying to urethral sounding. Classics in this genre include Philip Miller and Molly Devon's *Screw the Roses, Send Me the Thorns* and texts by Dossie Easton and her collaborators, like *The New Topping Book*, *The New Bottoming Book*, and (operating under a similar ethos of sexual respect and communication) *The Ethical Slut*.[28] Websites such as those for the Society of Janus maintain blogs with advice-oriented topics like "Finding a kink aware therapist" and "How do I know if I'm topping from the bottom?" Elsewhere on the internet, archives of amateur erotica like Literotica.com feature stories (both fictional and autobiographical) about BDSM play. More stories of this kind appear in collected volumes of kinky erotica sold both online and in feminist, sex-oriented retail establishments across America, including Good Vibrations.[29]

The proliferation and positivity of writing by BDSM community members stands in contrast to the dominant tone of scholarly writing on kink. Because of the taboo (and commonly misunderstood) nature of the subject, there has been considerably less

scholarship published on BDSM than other queer sexualities.[30] As discussed in the first chapter of this project, much influential writing on the combination of pain and pleasure focuses on abstract theorizations of sadomasochism derived from its representation in literature. Thinkers like Gilles Deleuze, Maurice Blanchot, and Pierre Klossowski, to name only a few from an otherwise venerable assembly, have written about the figures of "the sadist" and "the masochist," psychoanalytic archetypes interpreted through the pages of novels by the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. Even more commonly seen are references to kinky desires as pathological or sick, especially when they manifest in female subjects as pleasure taken in pain. Historically, such judgments have been passed under the unified banners of social conservativism and feminism (a worrisome combination found also in debates around sex work, pornography, and video games). Many of the texts that espouse these views about sadomasochism are today still considered classics, and their positions on kink are rarely questioned. An example of this comes from the opening pages of Alice Miller's foundational book *The Drama of the Gifted Child*:

> The repression of brutal abuse experienced during childhood drives many people to destroy their lives and the lives of others… [Some] people actively continue the torture once influenced upon them in self-scourging clubs of every sort in sadomasochistic practices. They think of such activities as 'liberation.' Women who allow their nipples to be pierced in order to hang rings from them can then pose for newspaper photographs, proudly saying that they felt no pain while having it done and that it was even fun for them. One need not doubt the truth of their statements; they had to learn very early in life not to feel pain, and today they would do to any lengths not to feel the pain of the little girl who was once sexually exploited by her father and had to imagine it was fun for her.[31]

Condescending, presumptuous statements like these are insulting, misguided, and problematic—to say the very least—and yet pervasive. Among many other misdeeds, they deny agency to the sexual subject, re-labeling sexual expression as sexual abuse.

Among this kink-negative cultural landscape, a few key examples of scholarship that engages conscientiously and generatively with BDSM stand out. Ortmann and Sprott's *Sexual Outsider*s encourages mental health professionals to accept kinky desires as part of a rich, broad range of meaningful human desires. Taking the approach of the anthropologist, Margot Weiss has studied Bay Area kink communities between the years 2003 and 2007, and argues for understanding BDSM as a circuit of desire bound up with the politics of gender, race, and consumerism.[32] These works contrast with writing on BDSM communities from the early 2000's, like Mark Thompson's collection *Leatherfolk*, by focusing less on individual, personal narratives and more on the outside "expert" perspective of the clinician or the ethnographer.[33] More recent BDSM scholarship also differs from earlier work in the field by challenging, or simply sidestepping, ideas of kink as subversive or counter-normative. Whereas texts like Karmen MacKendrick's *Counterpleasures* (1990) argue for understanding sadomasochism as a form of anti-hegemonic resistance, Weiss sees it as a circuit of capitalist exchange that plays with and yet ultimately reinforces neoliberal ideals.[34] For my part, I think Weiss too quickly conflates

BDSM as a wider set of practices with the particular straight, middle-aged, Bay Area post-tech-bubble community she is studying. Like MacKendrick, I believe that taking pleasure in pain can be understood as a radical mode of resistance and agency. In this thinking, I am drawing from works like Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, in which Halberstam describes masochism as a rejection of success and an embrace of destruction.[35]

Many valuable insights come from these existing works. For example, Ortmann and Sprott point out that, like cybersex, BDSM practices raise important ontological questions about sex and realness: "Being restrained and put on display… need not involve anyone's genitals or even contact between two bodies, but it can result in an intensely pleasurable and exciting experience… [BDSM] shows us the incredible breadth of sexual expression far beyond that of traditional genital and oral intercourse."[36] However, what existing writing on BDSM, both scholarly and popular, has yet to sufficiently account for is the immense importance of digital communication platforms in the landscape of kink over the last two decades. With few exceptions, previously published work looks at BDSM practices that take place largely in the bedroom, in private dungeons, or in public play spaces. Yet a sizable proportion of kinky play is today taking place in online spaces rather than physical ones. The discussion of digital BDSM that follows is therefore informed by writing that has come before it, yet it seeks to take a meaningful next step by bringing these debates and discussions into dialogue with cultures of technology.

Digital BDSM: When Kink Goes Online

An important yet under-considered subset of contemporary BDSM is made up of those practices that overlap with cybersex: kinky sex play that takes place on/through digital platforms. While recognizing that the relationship between technology and kink in these play practices is complex, I shorthand them here under the general heading "digital BDSM." Like cybersex more broadly, digital BDSM has become an increasingly prominent feature in the sexual landscape since the mid-1990's with the rise of the personal computer—and, more recently, with the marked increase in smart phone adoption. While digital BDSM represents a sizable sector of early twenty-first century kink, discussions of digital play remain largely absent from existing writing on BDSM. When it does appear in this work, digital BDSM is often stigmatized, even by those who take an otherwise kink-positive view. Ortmann and Sprott, for example, mention online play briefly, but only to warn readers that it is "dangerous" and "isolating," an assessment they derive from the fact that digital BDSM appears to take place outside of the checks-and-balances of offline community.[37] (This is untrue; as will become clear below, digital BDSM practices are shaped as much by online community standards as play that takes place offline.) Similarly, discussions of BDSM are largely absent from existing writing on cybersex, perhaps because much of cybersex writing argues for mainstream legitimacy, and the erroneous association of kink with nonconsensual violence complicates this narrative. Yet, BDSM play that takes place through digital interfaces, such as webcams and mobile phones, stands as a mainstay of kink in the "digital age" and a notable genre of digitally-mediated sexual expression.

BDSM's presence in online spaces takes many forms, some more visible than others. Internet pornography websites are widely reported to draw nearly half a billion unique visitors each month, and kink/fetish porn account for a considerable portion of both niche and mainstream porn sites.[38] BDSM-focused studios like Kink.com, which sell and distribute their videos digitally, continue to generate considerable revenue even as the larger adult industry struggles to compete with the proliferation of free online content.[39] The internet is also a central node for the dissemination of information about BDSM and the formation of BDSM communities. Websites like those for the Society of Janus and the SF Citadel feature educational introductions to kink, as well as logistical info for local meet-ups and play parties.[40] Likewise, online social networks such as FetLife and the paid site Alt.com represent important centers of communication between kinksters. Within these sites, groups like the ones mentioned above offer opportunities for building sub-communities. Given the shame often faced by kinksters who attempt to "come out" to their offline friends and family, kinky social networks can function as extremely meaningful safe spaces for freely expressing sexual identity. Digital tools also connect kinksters looking to meet offline. Findings in 2015 from the Pew Research Center indicate that 22% of Americans between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four have used online dating sites.[41] For those whose sexual interests do not conform to the mainstream, it is reasonable to expect that these statistics might rise higher still. Here I want to clarify that BDSM as it lives online does not reflect a singular, uniform kink community or set of desires. As Adrienne Shaw has argued of queer communities, kink should itself be understood as an interrelated array of identities, many of which share in common their presence on digital platforms.[42]

In less public but no less pervasive online spaces, kinky play itself takes on digital forms. This is digital BDSM, and it can be enacted using an array of communication technologies and virtual environments. As in cybersex, digital BDSM partners use text, webcams, voice, avatars, etc. to engage in active sexual exchanges. After negotiating the parameters of a scene, one partner might command another to hurt or humiliate her/himself while the first partner watches, for example. Alternatively, partners might describe for one another a scene of bondage or other kinky play. The possibilities for digital BDSM scenes are as diverse as the desires of the participants, and each technological platform provides its own affordances and limitations. In the sections that follow, I propose a rudimentary taxonomy of digital BDSM, broken down by the platform on which kinky sex play takes place. For those unfamiliar with kink online, these interactions can be hard to visualize; for this reason, illustrative examples have been included in each section. Together these practices suggest the full breadth of digital BDSM and the potential of technologically-mediated kink to speak to larger issues of media and the body.

Before entering into this taxonomy, I want to offer a few basic frameworks for thinking about digital BDSM practices. Firstly, it is helpful to highlight the distinction between kinky sex that is represented, discussed, or *facilitated through digital platforms* and kinky sex that itself *takes place on digital platforms*. This is the difference, for example, between play partners playing offline after meeting online, and play partners engaging in kinky cybersex online. We might abbreviate this distinction as meeting digitally vs*. playing digitally*. While the former is also a key component of BDSM's presence in online spaces, the focus of the present inquiry is the latter. I am particularly interested in kinky sex that takes

place through/with the machine, with no physical contact between participants' bodies. Within the category of "playing digitally," we could also make the distinction between *role-play* and *physical play*. For example, in a role-play, two play partners chatting over SMS might collaboratively describe a scene in which one submits to the sexual desires of the other. In a sense, such a scene is entirely "imaginary." The actions of the participants' bodies do not stand in mimetic relationship to the actions of the bodies described. (When regularly having cybersex was part of my job as a columnist, I used to engage in these sorts of role-plays while eating lunch to save time, typing between bites). These scenes differ from ones in which a top may instruct a sub to hurt, restrain, or debase themselves: for example, by smacking themselves with a flogger or placing a ball gag in their mouth. Such scenes involve "real" actions of the body. However different these two types of scenes may seem, it is in fact best to imagine them not in binary opposition but as different modes of play that can co-exist within the same interaction. Often physical play involves role-play elements; even the most fantastical role-play deeply implicates the bodies of the players.

Another potential point of distinction is that between what we might call *one-way vs. two-way interactions*. One-way digital BDSM interactions would be those that involve only one human subject interacting with the machine (e.g. browsing for kinky pornography), whereas two-way interactions would involve two (or more) human subjects interacting with each other. While my focus here is on two-way interactions, it is valuable to challenge this very distinction. Can users have kinky sex with digital media itself? If we understand sex as taking place reciprocally between human partners, it would follow that only two-way interactions could count as "sex." However, digital interactivity could be interpreted as a reciprocal dynamic—a point that I argue in my discussion of video games in chapter two. Indeed, this interactivity, a feature of all digital media interfaces, is most often discussed in the context of games, where the potential for kinky reciprocity becomes most apparent. When players of the single-player game *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2015) enter a kinky relationship with Iron Bull—a half-man, hall-bull creature and an experienced dom—can this dynamic between player and game be called "one-way"? Many players have reported feeling deeply affected by the relationship. The player leaves her mark on the game by choosing kink, and the game in turns leaves its mark on the player. This may not be sex between players, but could a definition of sex, already challenged by BDSM and cybersex, not also expand to consider kinky sex between subject and machine?

Among the questions that surround digital BDSM, perhaps the ones that loom largest are: why and how? For some, the very notion of digital BDSM inspires incredulity and confusion. Why engage in BDSM in virtual spaces? When whips and chains require physical proximity to produce their desired effects, as most commonly imagined, what is the fun in kinky play that takes place purely through seemingly disembodied technology? Is kink really even kink if it happens at a great distance? In short, digital BDSM epitomizes the paradox of digital embodiment discussed in the introduction. Kink is commonly characterized by its association with physical pain—and physical pain, following from the work of thinkers like Elaine Scarry, is frequently understood to be irreducible in its ties to the body, unrepresentable and incommunicable in language or other media.[43] How then can BDSM function in digital spaces, where it manifests through media? The answer takes us back to the tension between the real and the virtual, discussed throughout this project.

When the digital is conflated with the virtual, and the virtual with the disembodied, the deeply embodied practices of kink as enacted in virtual spaces seem absurd (or, at best, performative). Yet digital BDSM is very real, in the sense that it is really practiced by many and has real meaning for practitioners. "To some of us," as the member of the FetLife group "Online BDSM" wrote, "the fantasy of BDSM is as powerful as the reality." This question of realness stands as a backdrop to the descriptions of BDSM practices that follow.

The answers that could be given to "Why digital BDSM?" are, one the one hand, as diverse as the desires of the individual kinksters who practice it. In the interviews I conducted with digital BDSM participants, some practitioners cited ease of access and anonymity as the reasons they prefer to play in virtual spaces. For those living in socially conservative areas, where locating nearby BDSM partners may prove difficult, or for those who prefer that their identities remain unknown, the internet offers the opportunity to engage in kink safely and with comparatively minimal effort. Other practitioners of digital BDSM explained that they engaged in kinky sex online because it gives them the opportunity to play with fantasies that they would not wish to act out in real life, such as scenes involving under-aged participants or incest. Still others stated that they believe control to be the sexiest element of BDSM, and they found that control could be enacted pleasurably through online tools. While a top may not be able to reach out and flog a sub through the computer screen, that top can nonetheless use the functions of the computer screen to take control. In the words of one respondent: "Instead of asking why we *do* we have kinky sex online, you should be ask why wouldn't we. It's fun, it's sexy, and it feels good. That's enough reason for me."

Running throughout these conversations, however, was another answer to the question "Why digital BDSM?" In speaking with practitioners, it became clear that part of the appeal of digital BDSM was in fact the *pleasure of interacting with/through technological platforms themselves*. In this sense, digital BDSM does more than facilitate connections, fantasies, or control. *The digital in digital BDSM is also "sexy*." And specifically, its genre of sexiness is kinky. One need look no further than the dozens of amateur erotica stories posted to sites like Literotica.com that tell tales of online sex to see that virtual space and their tools can become the subjects of their own fantasy. Many such pieces begin with characters meeting online and then connecting in real life. Others, like the story "Threesome via Skype" (with its self-explanatory title), take place entirely on digital platforms.[44] "Webcam Sister," in which a brother discovers that his sister works as a cam performer and is invited to join her for a live sex show, reflect desires that are specific to digital technologies.[45] In "Mistress's Online Panty Auction," a top positions her sub before a webcam that is running a live, public feed. Chiding her sub for the wetness of her underwear, the top "pulls [her] panties to the side and exposes her slut for all of the internet to see."[46] Here, the webcam and the internet are more than tools: they are featured as key components of the erotic scene. Stories like these speak to the kinky pleasure of digital media. Digital BDSM as a mode of sexual expression cannot be fully understood apart from the sexual charge of the digital platforms through which it takes place.

1. Digital BDSM and/on Social Networks

With these qualifications and questions in mind, I want to transition here to presenting a rudimentary taxonomy of digital BDSM, distinguished by play platforms. The platforms I lay out below include: social networks, mobile apps, interactions with professional webcam models, virtual worlds, and chat applications such as Google Chat and IRC. In each of these sub-sections, my goal is to elucidate how digital BDSM functions within the technical and cultural parameters of a specific digitally-mediated environment—illustrating distinction and also larger similarities between the mechanisms of kinky sex play on these platforms. Ultimately, the breakdown of digital BDSM and accompanying illustrative "case studies" that follow will demonstrate the varied yet potent capacity of these seemingly virtual interactions to enact real experiences of pain and pleasure.

As the above references to FetLife and Alt.com suggest, social networks represent some of the most common places where BDSM practices take place online today. In a cultural moment marked by the widespread popularity of general-interest networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, niche and subcultural social networks have also proliferated and flourished. In addition to an array of online dating sites and community networks formed around sexual identities, sites for those who share other interests similarly abound. For example, CafeMom.com, a social network for "mothers and mothers to be," has been reported to be the most trafficked site by women on the internet.[47] In the realm of kink, networks like FetLife and Alt.com are joined by smaller sites like DaddyHunt.com, which matches young and older gay men for romantic meet-ups and includes a significant subset of users looking for partners interested in leather or fetish. The tools that members use to communicate with one another within these social networks vary by site. Almost all such networks incorporate email-style messaging, as well as real-time private (i.e. person-to-person) text chat. Some also offer options for more public discussions, such as group chat and forum posting. In addition, it is becoming increasingly common for social networks to include built-in webcam chat clients—which enable users to "cam" while remaining within the confines of the site rather than exchanging Skype handles—and integration with mobile phone applications.

Digital BDSM is both facilitated by and takes place within these kinky social networks. While sites like Alt.com explicitly market themselves as portals for locating partners for offline meet-ups, the communication tools provided by the sites also become spaces for kinky play. Such play might be enacted through email-style messaging, text chat, webcam chat, or forum posts. Alternatively, partners who initially find one another on such sites might later move their web-based play to other platforms, like off-site webcams or mobile phone apps. A key element of the kinky interactions that take place on these sites is the role of the personal profile, a mainstay of social networks. As McGlotten has argued, profiles function as powerful opportunities for digital subjects to articulate their desires and sexual identities—i.e. to craft portraits of themselves as they wish to be seen.[48] Users creating kink-oriented profiles typically include explicit information regarding their interests: what type of partner they are looking to play with, what type of scenes turn them on, and how they understand their own kinky roles. Indeed, sites like FetLife.com have designed their profile options specifically to map to these categories. Upon signing up, users are prompted to choose from a drop-down menu of self-identifying markers, such as

top, dom, boy, baby girl, pain slut, etc. For members of BDSM communities that stress the importance of boundary negotiation, profiles operate as opportunities for communication as well as self-formation. Whereas offline play partners must speak (or write) their desires to one another, comparing points of interests and negotiating the parameters of scenes, online play partners can rely in part on social network profiles to locate like-minded playmates and facilitate the first stages of sexual information exchange.

Case Study: FetLife
Launched in 2008, FetLife now advertises itself as having nearly 4 million registered members. Similar to more mainstream social networks like Facebook, the site encourages users to express themselves through a variety of tools. Along with the textual components of their profiles, members are prompted to upload photos, post status updates, and write personal blog posts. Users can also search for upcoming local events and join a wide range of groups (over 87,000 and counting) organized by fellow members around shared interests, desires, or geography. At the same time, FetLife differs from mainstream social networks in some key ways. Whereas Facebook, for example, emphasizes "realness"— which the site interprets to mean, among other things, that members should use only their legal names—FetLife does not require users to verify or even present accurate information about their offline identities.[49] Few users give their full, legal names; some intentionally list their locations as far-off or otherwise improbable places (nearly 29,000 users have registered themselves as living in Antarctica). These policies allow users to take steps to ensure that their FetLife profiles will not be traced to their offline identities.

As an important hub for BDSM communities and kinksters in both North America and abroad—with approximately 2.5 million of FetLife's members listing their location as the United States—FetLife's population represents an impressively diverse array of interests, and digital BDSM is clearly present among them. The groups mentioned above, like "Online Roleplaying" and "Skype web chat," serve as opportunities for users to find partners for digital play. Users who reply to threads in these groups are frequently invited by the poster (if he/she is interested) to send a direct message through the site's internal email system. In other instances, users exchange Skype or Kik handles and move from the FetLife forums to off-site spaces. On a social network like FetLife, these communication tools are themselves intimate components of the sexual expression facilitated by the site. Messaging and text-chatting become mediums of flirtation and spaces for play. They operate like the bedrooms of kinky social networks, inviting users to enter and explore. It is also important to note that, while these digital BDSM groups make users' interest in technologically-mediated play explicit, they likely represent only a fraction of FetLife's many members who use the site's communication tools for kinky play. In a sense, by being a digital platform for expressions of kinkiness, all of FetLife falls under the broader category of digital BDSM.

2. Digital BDSM and Mobile Apps

In addition to scenes enacted in social networks, kinky play conducted through mobile phone apps has also emerged in recent years as a primary genre of digital BDSM. Some apps with kinky sub-communities, like DaddyHunt, offer integration with browser-based networks, incorporating both online and mobile platforms. Others more closely follow the model of general-interest hookup apps like Grindr and Tinder, which remain exclusively mobile. Grindr and Tinder also serve as models for the mechanisms of kink-oriented apps. Such apps typically focus on low-friction, geographically convenient matches for casual sex play. Minimizing the time commitment for finding partners often required by online dating sites, these apps aim to make "hooking up" easy. User profiles tend to be considerably shorter and more photograph-focused than those on web-based social networks. Immediacy and low-friction communication are foregrounded, and most apps of this sort incorporate real-time, SMS-style messaging. In the realm of kink-specific mobile apps, Recon currently holds the position of the most widely used service for gay men interested in finding partners for fetish play, according to its description in the Apple app store. The more newly launched Whiplr (tagline: "a messenger with kinks"), which entered the market in 2015 and includes options for both gay and straight users, offers an equivalent experience for a more general audience looking for BDSM hookups

The interface design of these apps is also guided by the directives of clear and present desire. Brevity and proximity are key factors for those looking for low-friction connections. Recon users scroll through lists of potential play partners ordered by their distances away from the user: i.e. twenty feet away, a mile away, twenty miles away, and so on. Each listed user is shorthanded with five basic features: age, body type, race/ethnicity, percentage dominant vs. passive, and a single photograph. Given the economy of these lists, which allow users to browse play partners quickly, it is perhaps unsurprising that Recon's tagline is: "Find someone to spank today." Yet, though the rhetoric of apps such as this one often emphasizes finding real-life hookups in the immediate area, these apps are also platforms for digital play between users potentially thousands of miles apart. The text and video chat functions available in some kink-oriented apps offer ample opportunity for digital BDSM exchanges. Indeed, it would appear that users looking for online hookups are such an established feature of the kink app landscape that some worry they will shift attention away from in-person play. Many Recon members, for example, list on their profile pages that they are *not* looking for digital BDSM. Writes one member, "Don't message me if you just want to meet up online. I'm here to meet people in person." Another warns, "Don't waste my time if you just want to cam." From these disclaimers, it would seem that users cruising for digital BDSM are so prevalent that they have become irksome.

Case Study: Whiplr
Like Recon, Whiplr's interface is designed for ease of navigation and quick perusal of minimalistic profiles. Upon opening the app, users are presented with a collection of profile photos, arranged in a mosaic-esque array of hexagons. Tapping a tile opens a profile. Most prominently featured in each profile is the user's photo, followed by the number of kilometers away they are currently and, in smaller, print, their kinks, body type, and safeword. Users can message one another directly within the app, SMS style, or star each other's profiles to indicate their interest (a form of flirtation that recalls Facebook's once

prominent "poke" feature). A mobile webcam tool is also built into the Whiplr system. Users can send requests for cam sessions to others who are currently online and take part in real-time visual play without switching to another application. Notably, Whiplr does not dictate (or even suggest) the manners in which members use the app: that is, whether it is best used for finding offline or online hookups. Interpretation of the types of play facilitated by the app is left open to the interpretation and emergent practices of the users.

While conducting research in Whiplr, my interactions with other users suggested that the app may in fact be used more commonly for meeting digital BDSM partners than for finding in-person playmates. Additionally, in speaking with interviewees via the app's chat interface, I found that the in-app communication systems themselves carried a sexual charge for my interlocutors. Each of the subjects I spoke with, when asked whether they believed there to be considerable amounts of digital play taking place through Whiplr, responded in the positive: yes, it happened all the time. The types of digital interactions they described engaging in through the app varied, however, as did the way they narrativized the embodied experiences of these interactions. One respondent discussed using the in-app voice and cam functions to "make subs spank themselves, flash, and play in unusual places." Though this respondent reported that taking part in BDSM play offline felt considerably different than online, he nonetheless noted that he derived significant pleasure playing with subs through Whiplr. Even though he had no tangible contact with these digital partners, he said, the thrill of "the physical pain is replaced by the humiliation of making them do it to themselves." Another interviewee emphasized that using digital tools like Whiplr allowed him to establish a "mental connection" with play partners that made the experience even more affecting than an in-person scene.

Even within these interviews, the sexual quality of communication tools like the in-app SMS system became quickly apparent. Despite my best efforts to present myself as a neutral researcher, I was regularly read as a potential sex partner. I believe this was because asking Whiplr users about their digital BDSM practices through the app's SMS function—a tool that these users regularly used to enact kinky sex play—made the interviews themselves seem flirtatious. At a number of points, the line seemed to blur for these respondents between interview and text-based cybersex. "Enough about me. Tell me more about what sexy stuff you're into," one tried to insist. Said another, when asked about the differences in how he experienced online vs. offline BDSM play, "I get a real kick out of telling my partners what to do even though I'm just a stranger sending messages. I'd bet you'd like it if I told you to do something for me, wouldn't you?" In part, these interviewees' actions were simply in keeping with larger patterns in how male users act toward those they identify as female in sexually charged online spaces, like dating sites. However, Whiplr's own digital tools also played an important role in this behavior. To these users, these interactions seemed sexy because the digital platform (SMS) through which we were communicating felt sexually charged.

3. Digital BDSM with Pro Webcam Models

Another place where a significant amount of BDSM play is taking place online is in the work of professional webcam models. Webcams are both a medium of communication used in kinky exchanges and their own subdivision of the online erotic economy. Cam models are performers who engage in sexual activities in front of their webcams in exchange for a cut of their tips. Their live video feeds are usually hosted by a parent site, like Chaturbate.com, MyFreeCams.com, or CameraBoys.com. Sometimes users pay a per-minute rate to view these feeds and chat with the models. In other instances, feeds are free to view, but users purchase and then spend website-specific currencies to enter private sessions—or to encourage models to take off articles of clothing, show certain body parts, use certain toys on their bodies, etc. The types of performances offered by cam models vary widely to suit the tastes of diverse clienteles. A significant number of models either specialize in or offer kinky performances. In these performances, models might take either the dominant or submissive role—commanding or berating their clients (in the dom role) or acting upon themselves at their clients' command (in the sub role). Across these varied modes of interaction, the protocol around communication tools generally remains the same. While models present themselves to their clients via video, voice, and text chat, clients typically only make their presence known via text chat. If the clients want to speak with the models, they can only type; they cannot be seen or heard.

Kinky cam modeling differs from other forms of digital BDSM in a handful of important ways. First, it explicitly bridges the arenas of online kink and sex work. Cam models who perform "toppy" fetish shows take on the job of what we might call the virtual prodomme or prodom: professional dominants whose clients pay to take part in kinky scenes. (Interestingly, the job of pro sub seems to exist only in virtual spaces, likely in part for safety reasons.) The money that changes hands between client and online model adds new layers to the dynamics of power that partners play with in digital BDSM. The mechanisms of the cam site interface, through which clients tip the models, also complicate the situation. Even when paying to watch a cam model be toppy, clients still call the shots— or rather, their tips do. At the same time, the disparity in modes of communication between the model and the clients creates dialectics of power around issues of voice and visibility. The cam model and anyone the model may be performing with can be seen, whereas the client can only present as lines of text. Does this mean the cam model is more powerful or less than the client? When is visibility empowering and when is it objectifying? In truth, these are not "either/or" questions. In fact, this combination of power and vulnerability account for part of what makes watching webcams uniquely appealing. Cams are commonly likened to live porn, but they are in fact far more interactive. Clients play active parts in the performances they see on screen. In this sense, to call back to my discussion of video-game interactivity in chapter three, even "vanilla" cam performances can be interpreted through kink. In addition to the content of these performances, the power dynamics of the digitally-mediated interplay between model and client on which they are based can make such exchanges kinky.

To those who have spent time searching for sexual content on the internet, webcam models and cam sites can seem bafflingly infinite. Webcam ads proliferate on all manner of porn websites; a Google search for "webcam girls" turns up pages and pages of what appear to be different cam sites, each with hundreds if not thousands of models ready to perform.

It is true internationally that, since approximately 2009, cam modeling has become increasingly popular as a job that models can do part-time, according to their own schedules, and from their own homes.[50] With that said, the seemingly endless proliferation of cam sites is in part a trick of online smoke and mirrors. Models are frequently listed on multiple sites and sites not infrequently bolster their ranks with fabricated profiles. Yet a number of sites do employ large numbers of models. Among the five top general-interest cam sites oriented toward straight male clients (the largest segment of the cam site market, but by no means the only one) are ImLive.com, LiveJasmin, ScoresLive, Webcams.com, and iFriends. Two of the largest sites oriented toward gay male clients are CameraBoys and VGuys. Kink may not be the exclusive focus of these sites, but kink is an important part of what happens there. In addition, a handful of webcam sites are dedicated specifically to kink and kinky performances. One such site is Kink Live.

Case Study: Kink Live
Kink Live is a webcam site owned and operated by the fetish porn giant Kink.com. As of June, 2015, Kink Live remains in beta, with a full launch planned for later this year. Currently, approximately twenty-five cam models are active on the site at any given time, either streaming publicly or in private sessions (though hundreds are registered on the site). A description of the following scene helps demonstrate the types of performances offered by kinky cam models like those on Kink Live. Identifying information, include website handles, has been changed to protect the privacy of the model and her client.

It is 4:00 in the afternoon, and a young cam model using the name WickedFlower is streaming live. Her photo appears on the front page of the Kink Live site; clicking it brings potential clients to her feed. When I open her feed, WickedFlower is sitting on a bed covered with a cheetah-print blanket. She is wearing small black shorts and a red tank top. Positioned next to her on the bed is a basket of toys. In her briefly worded profile, she describes herself as "a submissive finding my way in the world of kink… Spanking my big and fleshy bottom and torturing my nipples are just two ways that you can use to see me experience the beautiful harmony of pain and pleasure." Like most of the models on Kink Live, WickedFlower provides a clear, à la carte list of the cost in tips that she charges for various elements of her performances. For two dollars, she will hit herself twice with a silicon paddle. For fifteen dollars, she will tie up her hands and feet for ten minutes. For five dollars, she will slip an anal bead into her ass. Or, for those looking for a bargain, she will insert all five anal beads for the discounted rate of twenty dollars.

Speaking aloud to the camera, WickedFlower is engaged in a negotiation with an anonymous user. As is standard, the user is communicating via the public chat function, so his requests are visible to the other visitors in the room. "I want to mark your pussy," he types. WickedFlower pulls a flogger from the basket beside her, running the tails playfully through her fingers, and says that that can be arranged. Already in topping mode, her potential client types in quick succession, "Can you promise to hit it as hard as you can? I want to mark and bruise your pussy. Can you hit it nonstop unit you cry? Will you obey?" WickedFlower grins and nods enthusiastically. Once the scene and the price of the performance have been negotiated, the two enter private chat, and WickedFlower's public feed cuts to a screen notifying other users that she is not currently available to play.

This scene helpfully illustrates how the seemingly disembodied "virtual" tools through which digital BDSM is enacted can in fact direct attention back to matters of embodied realness. Even though the sexual interactions that take place between WickedFlower and her client will not involve actual contact between bodies, WickedFlower's client seems turned on particularly by the idea that WickedFlower will be affected in physical ways by the experience. Though he is playing his role as top via virtual means, he is driven by the desire to see the affects of his dominance played out on a bodily level. He says, "I want you to mark and bruise your pussy. Can you hit it nonstop until you cry?" Despite the importance of role-play in this interaction, the client is not looking for a performance of imagination, but for bruises and tears (not that the two need be separate). Broadly speaking, his rhetoric points toward the ever-presence of the physical in digital interactions—the body, rather than the ghost, in the machine—as well as to the more specific importance of corporeal experience in digital BDSM.

4. Digital BDSM via Text-Based Chat

Cybersex enacted entirely through language has the longest lineage of the forms discussed here, since text-based cybersex has its roots in (among other traditions) the types of MUDs and MOOCs described by Julian Dibbell in *My Tiny Life*. As voice and video technologies become more commonplace in consumer-grade digital platforms, digital BDSM conducted entirely through text takes on the quality of preference more than necessity. Those who choose to play through text—whether over a messenger like Google Chat or through IRC—frequently do so because they derive enjoyment from the medium of language itself. While the community of those who engage in BDSM through text-based chat could today be described as niche, more contemporary communication technologies are facilitating new iterations of text-based interactions, such as sexting and sexual exchanges via Snapchat, which often go hand in hand with the exchange of visual material like photos. In one way or another, text still plays an important role in almost all forms of digital BDSM. While only some interactions involve video, voice, etc., the use of language as a tool for communication and kinky play is nearly universal.

The appeal of text-based BDSM relates to a mastery of words as much as a mastery of the body. In such interactions, the imaginative world of the role-play is woven through language. For this reason, language becomes more than a medium; it becomes the very substance of the exchange. This explains why those looking for text-based BDSM encounters emphasize that they are seeking partners who are especially skilled with words. Posts to FetLife's "Online Roleplaying" group, especially those from female-identified users, frequently include disclaimers like: "Only message me if you know how to write well. No one-handed typing. I get off on good writing." While text-based play may include one partner instructing the other to perform real-life actions, it more commonly resembles a kind of collaborative, real-time erotica writing. Together, the participants weave scenes of pain and pleasure, the resulting transcripts from which read like works of fiction. These transcripts also serve as documentation of the sexual exchanges that occur

between partners. In this sense, such exchanges, enacted through language and felt in the body, are in fact one in the same with the words that describe them.

Case Study: KinkstersChat.com
Viewed from within the present techno-cultural moment, KinkstersChat.com is something of a throwback. Amidst the many networks and apps that advertise multi-platform features, this website is dedicated explicitly to connecting users for chat-based digital BDSM. While the site does offer users the ability to connect via voice and cam, the KinkstersChat.com community managers whom I spoke with reported that voice and cam features are used largely for social purposes, while BDSM scenes themselves take place almost exclusively through text. KinkstersChat.com hosts a variety of kink-themed chat rooms, with topics like "Flirty and Dirty" and "Daddies and Girls." There, users meet, flirt, and then typically enter private chat for play sessions. At any given time, approximately 150 users are logged onto the site; approximately 1,500 unique visitors view the site each month. At its core, the KinkstersChat.com community consists of a group of a few hundred regulars, who can frequently be found in the public chat rooms or in private play. Though the "Flirty and Dirty" room is technically designed for more public play, the site's managers report that public scenes are rarely sustainable due to non-participant interruptions. When I visited the room one recent afternoon, things seemed quiet, but the moderator had set the chat topic to "Roleplay and have fun but always be nice to each other."

Text-based BDSM may seem particularly distanced from the realities of the body, since it does not involve images of the participants or the sound of their voices. To the contrary, those I interviewed at KinkstersChat.com stressed the connections between their text-based practices and their offline lives. I spoke with two website managers who proudly reported having met their current real-life partners on the site: one of the two is in the process of moving in with her new partner, and the other is now engaged. This cross-over between online and offline also extends into the experience of text-based BDSM itself. One interviewee, who described himself as having been a practitioner of digital BDSM for the last sixteen years, stressed that he was only interested in playing scenes that he would also engage in in real life. Despite this emphasis on realness, this same respondent felt strongly that his prowess as a textual partner could be in large part attributed to his attention to words rather than to his immediate physical body. "I'm not here masturbating [during a scene]" he explained. "I'm in it for the mind fuck, topping by using words to play with people's heads. How could I have time to masturbate? I'm always thinking about what is coming next. That's what gives me a jolt. That's what give me pleasure." While the experiences and desires associated with text-based digital BDSM surely vary between practitioners, this interviewee's response helpfully points toward the sexual power and the erotic charge of language itself.

5. Digital BDSM and Virtual Worlds

Some of the most complex and nuanced practices of digital BDSM take place in virtual worlds. Virtual worlds are commonly defined as massively-multiplayer online

environments created through computer simulation. Users navigate these environments via avatars, visual representations of themselves or their personae. Some virtual worlds, like Linden Lab's once thriving *Second Life*, are not organized around structured play or predetermined quests. Instead, users are invited to interact with others, explore an array of open areas, and express themselves creatively by contributing to shared public spaces. Other virtual worlds, such as Disney's *Club Penguin*, designed for children as young as six years old, emphasize scripted interactions; *Club Penguin* users chat via pre-designated phrases, play mini-games, and care for virtual pets. Many of the most prominent contemporary virtual worlds are rendered as three-dimensional visual games, but virtual worlds in fact have their history in multiuser, text-based environments. As a category, virtual worlds overlap with massively multiplayer online role-playing video games (MMORPGs), such as *World of Warcraft*, where players are given more specific play directives, but nonetheless are encouraged to socialize and explore.

Due to their open-endedness and their social features, virtual worlds and MMORPGs make prime locations for digital BDSM practices. Cybersex, in one form or another, takes place in almost all such worlds—even those like the long-running, teen-oriented *Habbo Hotel*, where designers have attempted to severely restrict opportunities for sexual exchange. Cybersex is also common in *World of Warcraft*, with its highly customizable avatars and opportunities for real-time voice interaction. The communication tools available to users in each virtual world vary, as do the cybersex practices enacted within them. Among virtual worlds, *Second Life* has played host to the most vibrant and visible of digital BDSM communities. A handful of small, BDSM-specific virtual worlds, custom-built for kinky play, have also been released. *Red Light Center* is an "adult" virtual world that allows users to play (via their avatars) using equipment in three-dimensional, computer-generated dungeons. *Virtual Wasteland*, which advertises itself as "*Second Life* with ball gags and butt plugs," hosts in-game fetish parties, BDSM film festivals, workshops, and lectures.[51] Like many virtual worlds, *Red Light Center* and *Virtual Wasteland* participate in an economy that is at once virtual and real. "Working girls and guys" can be hired in-world for kinky services in exchange for paid digital play.

Case Study: Second Life
Though *Second Life*'s population numbers have dwindled significantly in recent years, the virtual world once boasted as many as 88,000 concurrent users, with more than twenty-one million user profiles registered.[52] During its heyday, *Second Life* played host to a range of BDSM communities and practices. Clubs, dungeons, and kinky enclaves, all created by users, existed throughout the virtual world. One such locale of many, the Bondage Ranch, featured a variety of outdoor areas for kinky play via avatars, including cages, crosses, racks, and a barn for pony play. In addition to these explicit centers of digital BDSM, individual users engaged in kinky play of many more marginal types (*Second Life*'s furry and Gor communities both thrived, for example). Creativity and consumerism have also played large roles in *Second Life*'s BDSM cultures. Users have the opportunity to design and sell their own clothes, accessories, body types, objects, and "pose balls," which animate avatars into sexual positions. The official *Second Life* marketplace still features thousands of kink-related items, each sold for Linden dollars, which can be bought with real-life

currency. These items include, for example, whips, crops, and restraints—and nearly 700 collars.

In some senses, digital BDSM as it manifests in a virtual world like *Second Life* is exceptional. The openness of the platform and its emphasis on the elaborate design of personal avatars offers uniquely rich opportunities for sexual self-expression. Likewise, the anonymity of the world—where users take on handles and can choose to reveal no personal information about their offline identities—facilitates exploration and experimentation while allowing users to feel safe from real-life discrimination. In another sense though, *Second Life* is not exceptional. Rather, the proliferation of BDSM cultures in *Second Life* makes visible the important role of kink in online spaces more generally, and the underlying potential of digital communication tools to become sites for kinky play. For many, *Second Life* has represented the endless possibilities of the digital age. The fact that the world is (or at least has been) home to so many BDSM communities tells us that digital subjects, given the opportunity to explore their desires via technology, are drawn to kink. Since *Second Life*'s decline in popularity, it remains to be seen whether a different social platform will replace it as a hub for BDSM play in a 3-D graphical environment, or whether digital BDSM has definitively moved to platforms like social networks and mobile apps.

As demonstrated by case studies like these, which I have been able to describe here in only the most cursory fashion, the practices of digital BDSM merit the attention of more extensive future study. A potential expansion of this project could address a number of the questions suggested by this initial, exploratory analysis. For example, I suspect that it would be revealing to discuss with interviewees the differences between their online and offline sexual practices. How do the experiences of those who engage in kinky play only in virtual spaces differ from the experiences of those whose digital BDSM play practices more closely mirrors their offline sex lives? It would also be helpful to hear more from practitioners about how they describe their own embodied experience with digital BDSM. What do they feel, in their own words, when they play digitally? This work could also be expanded through additional observation—i.e. observing digital BDSM exchanges in progress—and more close readings of transcripts and recordings from kinky sessions. These are only some of the ways that work on digital BDSM might precede in the future. What has been presented here lays a wide-reaching foundation, but more work is required to excavate the full richness and meaning of these practices.

On Realness and the Erotic Power of Digital Tools

Even within this limited taxonomy, a number of trends have emerged that speak to the specific pains and pleasures of digital BDSM. Across the many platforms on which these kinky exchanges have been shown to take place, the importance of media tools themselves remains consistent. That is, while such encounters are deeply affected by subcultural standards and individual desires, they are also fundamentally shaped by the features of the specific technological medium through which they take place. In the case of social networks and mobile apps, this manifests when functions like chat become the sites of kinky play, or when profiles, with their explicit articulation of desires, act as flirtatious foreplay. Similarly,

in the case of professional webcam modeling, the technological mechanisms of language can be understood as key structural elements of each sexual encounter: the cam model speaks to the camera, the client responds by typing text, etc. It is arguably true of all technologically-mediated sex that technology plays a role as crucial as the more expressly sexual content of the exchange. Yet the importance of the medium emerges as particularly pronounced in practices of digital BDSM, which explicitly foregrounds exchanges of control and power that can be found operating more subtly in many forms of human-machine interaction. Digital BDSM makes the power of technological-mediated erotics literal.

What is more, digital BDSM illuminates the ways that digital tools can themselves come to function like sexual subjects within intimate, technologically-mediated exchanges. While BDSM partners interacting on a social network may play in very different ways than partners engaged in a scene in a virtual world, these exchanges are likely to share that they sexualize the tools of communication as much as the content communicated. In this sense, the platforms through which digital BDSM is performed—from websites to mobile phones all the way back to the telegraph and beyond—are inextricable from the sexual exchanges that take place there. These case studies reveal that, when it comes to technologically-mediated sex, technology is itself sexy.

Another element that unifies the forms of digital BDSM discussed here is the capacity of technological tools to affect the bodies of participants. Far from being disembodied, these experiences intersect directly with embodied realness. In turn, this realness resonates out to instantiate other forms of meaning-making. That is to say, because it is both real and virtual, digital BDSM has the power to "really matter" despite its more immaterial qualities. This finding resonates strongly with the observations of a representative from Kink Live, whom I spoke to about the interactions between kinky cam models and their clients. In his description of these interactions, he stressed the capacity of digital BDSM to affect clients in ways that felt, at times, more real than in-person interactions. He began by situating kinky cam performances within the larger state of the adult entertainment industry:

> The adult industry is headed more toward live performances and away from pre-recorded shoots because clients feel more connected to the live stuff. We've found that those direct connections with the model are especially meaningful to clients who are interested in BDSM, more so than for clients who are looking for something vanilla. Part of it has to do with finding what you want. There are so many individual fetishes within kink, and interacting with a live model means you can get more specific because you can ask for something specifically. Most of all though, there's this *sense of connection* between the model and the client, especially for those who are closeted or far away from other kinky people. That's true more for kinky people than for vanilla people. Sometimes, it's something you have to be so secretive about. You don't feel you can share it. But talking with a cam model is a way of coming out to someone who you know won't judge you. That moment really means something for the clients, even if it's mediated across a Skype screen.

This quote offers a perspective on the relationship between cam models and their clients that differs in valuable ways from both sensationalist stereotypes and improbable fantasies. Though the representative from Kink Live is admittedly speaking on behalf of his employer's website and therefore has an incentive to frame this relationship in positive terms, I believe that there are true and important elements to his depiction of these relationships. In particular, I am interested in how he frames this connection through the rhetoric of realness, and how this realness is inextricable from the technological tools of the webcam. For the webcam clients he describes, a feeling of real connection is founded on the experience of "liveness" (i.e. the live webcam feed) and the experience of personalized interaction (i.e. the opportunities for negotiation afforded by the cam interface). The realness of the client's connection to the cam model is made all the more palpable by the kinky nature of their interaction: "that's true more for kinky people than for vanilla people." Liveness becomes a kind of lifeline, both to the outside world and to the sexual self. "Even if it's mediated across a Skype screen," the Kink Live rep stresses, the experiences of digital BDSM "really means something." I would push this further and say that these experiences really mean something *especially* because they are mediated across a Skype screen. The digital in digital BDSM makes such interactions possible, but it also imbues them with a meaning that can carry a superlative importance.

Though the representative from Kink Live uses the rhetoric of realness to describe the importance of individual experiences, I believe that the "real" also serves as a helpful entry point for approaching digital BDSM through a more conceptual mode. In shifting here from the specific cultures of technologically-mediated sex and into interpretive theorizing, I hope to link digital BDSM to wider dialogues about the relationship between media and the body—and, in turn, to bring insights from some of these wider dialogues back to digital BDSM as a way to begin articulating its functions, mechanisms, and erotic power. In particular, I want to suggest a new framework that will prompt us to think about the realness of the digital BDSM experience as *really doing* as well as *really feeling* and *really mattering*. "Really doing," as will be shown, is a concept that demonstrates the capacity of digital BDSM and other forms of cybersex to effectively blur the divide between the virtual and the real as it has been discussed throughout this project. It also has the potential to suggest new ways of imagining human-machine interactions as sexual acts and media itself as erotic.

To explain this idea of "really doing," let me begin by returning to the distinction I mentioned earlier between *role-play* and *physical play* as interrelated modes of digital BDSM. The first involves real-life physical action (e.g. a scenario in which, via Skype, a dom instructs a sub to paddle herself); the second involves action collaboratively constructed, most commonly through language (e.g. a scene in which a daddy and a boy use the SMS-style features of a cruising app to engage in a textual scene of edge play). I mentioned briefly that the distinction between these categories is somewhat misleading. Indeed, the examples of digital BDSM provided here have illustrated that these two modes are by no means mutually exclusive. When a webcam client requests that a cam model "bruise her pussy," as above, the model responds with physical action. Yet the interaction between client and model is itself formed on an unspoken foundation of role-play. The model takes on the role of the ever-ready object of desire, eagerly waiting in her/his bedroom for a

playmate. Meanwhile, the client takes on the role of the benevolent voyeur, the adoring benefactor who "tips" rather than pays. Similarly, interactions that appear to take place purely in the register of imagination always involve the body. When the manager from KinkstersChat.com described chatting for the pure pleasure of "mind fucking" rather than for achieving orgasms, he seemed to set aside the physical satisfaction he might have derived from his sexual experience. However, the way that the website manager described these experiences highlighted the perpetual presence of his body during such scenes. Playing with language "is what gives me a jolt," he reported, suggesting that language affected him physically much like an electric shock. Whether aroused or disgusted, excited or bored, the body of each digital BDSM partner is invariably involved in such interactions. The value of separating these two modes of play, ultimately, is to better understand how they work as complementary, co-existent, and even co-constitutive forms of erotic expression.

The categories of role-play vs. physical play relate in important ways to the issues of realness, some of which are more immediately apparent than others. From the perspective of normative binaries, it is tempting to call physical play more "real" than role-play, because physical play involves pain and the body in a way that is most immediately legible, and more in keeping with dominant logics of what it means to touch and feel. When a dom instructs a sub to paddle herself, a real implement lands against her real flesh causing "real" pain. Yet media itself complicates the association between digital BDSM that involves physical action and realness. The type of realness offered by digitally-mediated physical play is *always already partially virtual* because of its association with media. Even more strikingly though, role-play brings into question the very nature of the real and what it means to really act. Role-play interactions seem to emerge entirely from the imagination. In fact, these acts are very real, not just because they impact real bodies or incite real feelings, but because they are themselves real actions. Interactions in this mode of digital BDSM represent more than fantasies or daydreams. They are themselves acts. Much akin to speak acts, these scenes become real in being spoken. That is, when play partners engage in digital role-play, they are not simply describing something; they are *doing something*. This is important because it suggests that realness as a concept need not be directly tied to the body. Even though the motions of digital BDSM are not enacted through flesh, they are real, complete, and far more than virtual.

Challenging Paradigms of Pain, Pleasure, and Media

Digitally-mediated kink has many important insights to offer that extend beyond the subcultures of cybersex. The practices of digital BDSM bring important new perspectives to the field of media studies, and especially to existing work that seeks to theorize the affective nature of the contemporary digital moment through metaphors of pain and pleasure. To date, writing on pain, pleasure, and media has deployed the concepts of sadism and masochism largely as abstract markers of the perceived differences between digital media and pre-digital forms. In Alexander Galloway's *The Interface Effect*, Galloway argues that a distinction should be made between cinematic media, which he characterizes

as "masochistic," and computer-based media, which he characterizes as "sadistic." Galloway bases this division on the idea that film acts forcefully upon its viewers, while digital media prompts users to act forcefully themselves by shaping the online environment. Watching cinema requires that viewers make themselves invisible before the screen, writes Galloway. In order to take part in the act of viewing, "one must subject the self to the ultimate in pain and humiliation, which is nothing short of complete erasure."[53] By contrast, Galloway posits, roaming digital spaces "erases the world" rather than the self. It entails subjecting everything outside the digital subject "to various forms of manipulation, preemption, modeling, and synthetic transformation," putting "superlative power" in the hands of the user.[54] This equation places the pain of the cinematic in opposition to the pain of the digital: the former is viewed as the pain of media-consuming subject, the latter is viewed as the pain of media itself.

Digital BDSM challenges this divide between masochistic and sadistic media experiences. It also challenges the divide between digital and pre-digital media as defined through metaphors of masochism and sadism. The examples of digital kink given here suggest, by contrast, that computer-mediated environments, far from simply giving users power over the machines, facilitate and even inspire playful, dialectic exchanges of power. This play is neither primarily masochistic nor sadistic. Rather it is *kinky*, a fluid assemblage of interactions in which participants willingly set the terms of their own pain, humiliation, manipulation, and transformation (to use Galloway's terms). Considered in conjunction with online BDSM practices, Galloway's stark division between the cinematic and the digital also reveals itself as insufficient. "We do not cry at websites like we cry at movies," Galloway writes, implying that computers cannot conjure the same embodied, emotional experiences as film and that therefore they do not exert the same affective hold. "There seems to be more affect today than ever before… [but] when something is perfected, it is dead."[55] To the contrary, digital BDSM practices clearly demonstrate that deeply embodied experiences can indeed be brought into being through technologically-mediated means. We can—and do—cry at websites. In this way, the digital is not fundamentally different than the media forms that preceded it. The unique power of the digital is to *make visible* a set of kinky interplays between subject and media object that, once given name, can be found already operating in older media forms, cinematic and otherwise. Digital BDSM also demonstrates that the categories of "sadistic" and "masochistic" are more than metaphors. They are also lived experiences, elements of real sexual identities. Those for whom these descriptors carry deep, personal meaning are engaging in practices that speak back to the abstraction of pain and pleasure as functions of media by staking a claim and setting the terms of what it looks like when sadomasochism goes digital.

It is crucial not to erase pleasure and even joy from discussions of sexual expression. Galloway's use of the terms masochistic and sadistic hints at, but ultimately sidesteps, the implication that pleasure is an important element of the intersection between pain, power, and media. Masochism and sadism are not the same as simply feeling pain or subjecting others to it. Both masochism and sadism are by definition circuits of pleasure. The cinematic viewer who undergoes "a complete erasure of self," to the extent that Galloway is correct, *enjoys* that self-erasure. Likewise, the computer user who "erases the world" *enjoys* that act of destruction. I point this out to gesture toward ways that theories of media like

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Galloway's that deploy masochism and sadism as pejoratives might be recast and re-appropriated toward a kink-positive interpretation of the digital experience. Though I disagree with Galloway's conceptual divisions—both between digital and cinematic media and between sadism and masochism—I find something valuable in his impulse to bring dynamics of pain and pleasure into contemporary media studies. Dynamics of pain and pleasure are indeed key to understanding media. As the practices of digital BDSM make clear, however, expressions of pain and pleasure in seemingly virtual spaces to do not enact erasures of the self or body. Rather they perform acts of creation, meaning-making, and becoming.

I began this chapter by arguing for the importance of digital BDSM as a rich set of cultural practices and a meaningful area of study. In order to situate digital BDSM within the social and historical contexts from which it emerges, I outlined the tools and techniques of cybersex, and drew from writing by Julian Dibbell to argue that sex in virtual environments can nonetheless deeply implicate the body. I also provided an overview of BDSM and kink communities, including a discussion of the debates between those who have condemned BDSM and those who have celebrated it. However, I posited, a key component has gone unexplored in considerations of BDSM: the prominence of digital platforms as sites of community-building and kinky sex play. Kinky play performed via digital platforms ("digital BDSM") represents a sizable subset of the myriad modes of sexual expression taking place in contemporary digital spaces. Digital BDSM does raise some unique questions though—or, more accurately, it brings to the surface questions that resonate with a wide range of digital experiences. I suggested and then complicated distinctions between "role-play" and "physical play," "one-way" and "two-way" interactions, and sex that takes place "via" vs. "with" technological devices. With these concepts as backdrops, I dedicated much of the chapter to creating a taxonomy of digital BDSM. I provided overviews and short case studies for the most prominent platforms where digital BDSM takes place today, including social networks, mobile apps, professional webcam sites, chat clients, and virtual worlds.

This taxonomy serves as a framework for future research. It also gestures toward some of the erotic mechanisms that drive digital BDSM. Throughout this chapter, I contended that technological tools represented an important component of kinky online interactions—and that such tools came to carry their own erotic charge for digital BDSM practitioners. Tying the sexual practices considered in this chapter to the larger conceptual stakes of the dissertation, I argued that digital BDSM should be interpreted in part through questions of realness. To that end, I pointed toward reports that kinky webcam exchanges, for example, can facilitate "real connections." I also suggested that we think about digital BDSM as a series of "real actions," much like speech acts, rather than virtual imitations of physical acts. In both of these cases, the realness of digital BDSM was derived from its digital features, a fact that usefully underscores the insufficiency of defining the "real" in direct relation to the body. Addressing media studies writing that uses the ideas of masochism and sadism abstractly, a scholarly trope that I addressed at length in chapter one, I countered the claim that digital experiences are "sadistic" by arguing that they are better understood as kinky: that is, digital BDSM demonstrates that interactions with the

virtual can combine elements of pain, pleasure, dominance, and submission in ways that invite technological subjects to play with power rather than simply wield or relinquish it.

"Can one person whip another on the internet? And, if so, can that whipping really hurt?" This is the question with which this dissertation began. The answer, as this final chapter had demonstrated, is yes: amidst a variety of online subcultures dedicated to digital BDSM, people can and do whip each other the internet, and they do it every day. As for whether or not that whipping really hurts, that is a matter I have tried to address throughout this project. I have done so by taking a broader view of what the digital might mean and interrogating the relationship between pain, pleasure, and media across a variety of forms. What I have found is that a whip cracked on the internet most certainly has the power to reach out to the body and *hurt*. This is likewise true of the whip cracked over the pages of a novel, the whip cracked from the movie screen, or the whip cracked amidst the interactions of a video game. Yet I have also found that interacting with all of these media forms involves experiences of pain and pleasure even when the content presented on the page or the screen seems unrelated to sadomasochism and BDSM. This is what I mean by the kinkiness of media: the sense in which that media "as experience" is itself kinky. I believe that this formulation demonstrates the value of kink as way of seeing relationality, intimacy, and power exchange that goes far beyond the bedroom or the dungeon. Kink models a set of dynamics that are embodied and sensory, yet defy traditional definitions of realness, like what does or does not make sex "real." Over the last four chapters—from my discussions of sadomasochism and/as literature to my interrogation of films that hurt, from my argument about the cultural stakes of the pain in playing video games to my overview of digital BDSM cultures—I have shown the value of attending to hurt and its meaning. I have also shown how pain and pleasure as experiences of media form at sites of friction between the old and the new, the virtual and the real, the embodied and the disembodied, the world as it has been and the world to come.

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[1] Fetlife main page, accessed June 23, 2015, https://fetlife.com/.

[2] The research in this chapter complies with the standard protocols for ethically responsible data collection as outlined by the University of California at Berkeley's Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects. Berkeley's internal review board (IRB) guidelines state that IRB approval shall not be sought for projects involving three or fewer interviews from each research site. In compliance with this regulation, no more than three subjects have been interviewed for each of the digital BDSM communities discussed below. Additionally, permission has been requested for access to all platforms that require user-created passwords. Research for the section on Second Life was conducted and published as journalistic reporting for *The Village Voice* prior to the writing of the current project and has been marked accordingly. All individual identifying information has been removed or altered to protect the privacy of interviewees and digital BDSM practitioners.

[3] For a sex-positive snapshot of this moment in the history of sex and technology, see Susie Bright, *Susie Bright's Sexual Reality: A Virtual Sex Reader* (Berkeley: Cleis Press, 1992).

[4] These practices are rendered in the form of a romance novel in Ella Cheever Thayer's *Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes* (New York: W. J. Johnston, 1880). For a discussion of parallels between Wired Love and contemporary cybersex practices, see Clive Thompson's blog post "'Wired Love': A tale of catfishing, OK Cupid, and sexting… from 1880," July 24, 2013, accessed June 23, 2015, http://www.collisiondetection.net/mt/archives/2013/07/wired_love_a_ta.php.

[5] Michael Leigh, *The Velvet Underground* (San Francisco, Last Gasp Publishing, 2001).

[6] Mark Kernes, "The Adult Industry Remembers Gloria Leonard (1940-2014)," AVN.Com, February 6, 2014, accessed June 23, 2015, http://business.avn.com/articles/video/The-Adult-Industry-Remembers-Gloria-Leonard-1940-2014-548396.html.

[7] Michelle Drouin, "Sexting Is More Common Than You Think," NewYorkTimes.com, June 9, 2011, accessed June 23, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/06/09/whats-wrong-with-adult-sexting/sexting-is-more-common-than-you-think.

[8] These practices are covered extensively in my *Village Voice* and VillageVoice.com columns "Click Me" and "The Clickable Clit," which ran between 2007 and 2009. For a complete list of columns, see http://www.heroine-sheik.com/articles/.

[9] The categories that follow have been adapted and updated from Audacia Ray's *Naked on the Internet: Hookups, Downloads, and Cashing in on Internet Sexploitation* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007).

[10] An example of this is the KIIROO, a set that includes a vibrating dildo and male masturbation sleeve, advertised as "teledildonics for long-distance relationships." See https://www.kiiroo.com/, accessed June 23, 2015.

[11] The website Chaturbate.com, for example, features a sub-section of webcams in which customers interact with models through the OhMiBod interface. https://chaturbate.com/tag/ohmibod/, accessed June 23, 2015.

[12] Regina Lynn, *The Sexual Revolution 2.0: Getting Connected, Upgrading Your Sex Life, and Finding True Love – or at Least a Dinner Date – in the Internet Age* (Berkeley: Ulysses Press, 2005).

[13] Sherry Turkle, *Life on Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

[14] Shaka McGlotten, *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014); see, for example, Jaime Woo's "Grindr: Part of a Complete Breakfast" in *QED: A Journal GLBTQ Worldbuilding*, Vol.2 No. 1, Spring 2015.

[15] Julian Dibbell, *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998).

[16] Dibbell, *My Tiny Life*, 14.

[17] Dibbell, *My Tiny Life*, 16.

[18] Dibbell, *My Tiny Life*, 17.

[19] Kelsey K. Sewell and Donald S. Strassberg, "How Heterosexual Undergraduate Students Define Having Sex? A New Approach to an Old Question," *Journal of Sex Research*, volume 52, issue 5, 2015.

[20] Dibbell, *My Tiny Life*, 21.

[21] David M. Ortmann and Richard A. Sprott, *Sexual Outsiders: Understanding BDSM Sexualities and Communities* (Plymouth: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2013), viii.

[22] Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure,* 1.

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[29] An example of this is the collection *Bound for Trouble: BDSM Erotica for Women*, edited by Allison Tyler (Berkeley: Cleis Press, 2014).

[30] Ortmann and Sprott point out that this is true in clinical as well as theoretical writing on BDSM. Ortmann and Sprott, *Sexual Outsiders*, 4.

[31] Alice Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self* (New York: Harper Collins, 1980), 2-3.

[32] Margot Weiss, *The Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[33] Mark Thompson (ed.), *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice* (Los Angeles: Daedalus Publishing, 2004).

[34] Karmen MacKendrik, *Counterpleasures* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

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[36] Ortmann and Sprott, *Sexual Outsiders*, 3.

[37] Ortmann and Sprott, *Sexual Outsiders*, 10.

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