

LECTURE 4 – SEMNAR SESSION

(Lacanian) Psychoanalysis

Coexistent Perspectives (ADAA7000)



Question 2. De/constructing the Human: *In what ways do **contemporary artists and designers** challenge and reconfigure dominant constructions of the human subject through lenses such as **feminist theory, posthumanism, queer critique, or psychoanalysis**? How do such practices trouble the boundaries between self, other, and machine?*

Louise Bourgeois and Jacques Lacan

(...Freud, Kristeva, Winnicott)

Devising and Scoping a Research Essay Question

EXAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. *How do Louise Bourgeois's sculptural environments, particularly her Cells series, visualise Lacan's concept of the mirror stage and the illusion of a unified self?*
2. *In what ways does Bourgeois's work confront the viewer with Lacan's notion of the gaze, revealing the self as constructed through the eyes of the Other?*
3. *How does Bourgeois's repeated return to themes of motherhood, trauma, and sexuality express Lacan's idea of desire as structured by lack?*
4. *How does Louise Bourgeois's sculptural practice materialise psychoanalytic ideas of the fragmented self, repressed memory, and desire?*

The Mirror and the Fragmented Self

Essay Question: How do Louise Bourgeois's sculptural environments, particularly her *Cells* series, visualise Lacan's concept of the mirror stage and the illusion of a unified self?

- **Rationale:**
- Lacan's *mirror stage* proposes that the ego is formed through misrecognition — the self sees an image of wholeness but is internally divided.
- Bourgeois's *Cells* enact this psychic architecture: mirrors, enclosures, and bodily fragments create spaces of both identification and alienation.
- The question invites exploration of how form, space, and reflection operate as metaphors for the *imaginary register*.

The Mirror and the Fragmented Self

Essay Question:

How do Louise Bourgeois’s sculptural environments, particularly her *Cells* series, visualise Lacan’s concept of the mirror stage and the illusion of a unified self?

Thesis Statement:

Bourgeois’s *Cells* transform Lacan’s *mirror stage* into architectural form, staging the psyche as a fragile enclosure that both constructs and fragments identity. Through reflection, repetition, and spatial separation, her work visualises the instability of the self as it negotiates between interior fantasy and external image.

Theory Frame: Lacan’s Mirror Stage and the Imaginary

- Lacan’s *mirror stage* describes the infant’s identification with its reflection — a jubilant yet deceptive moment where the child sees itself as whole, even though internally fragmented. This misrecognition produces the *Imaginary order*: the realm of visual coherence masking psychic division. The ego, therefore, is not innate but a fantasy of unity.
- Bourgeois’s ***Cells*** and ***Femme Maison*** translate this into sculptural and architectural language. Mirrors, doors, and cages create spaces where identity is reflected, refracted, and contained. The viewer’s own reflection within these works reproduces the experience of the *mirror stage*: self-knowledge fractured through the gaze of another.

Essay Stage	Focus	Key Works / Concepts
Introduction	Bourgeois’s exploration of identity and psychic interiority.	Context: <i>Cells</i> , <i>Femme Maison</i> .
Theory Frame	<i>Mirror stage</i> , <i>Imaginary order</i> , ego as image, self-alienation.	Lacan, “The Mirror Stage.”
Analysis 1	<i>Cells</i> as psychic architectures — containment and reflection.	<i>Cell (Eyes)</i> , <i>Cell (Glass Spheres)</i> .
Analysis 2	<i>Femme Maison</i> — body/house hybrid; image as mask.	Early painting series.
Conclusion	The self as a spatial fiction; identity as constructed and unstable.	–



Cells Series (1989–2008)



Femme Maison (1946–47)

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Essay Outline

1. Introduction

- Brief overview of Bourgeois's focus on memory and selfhood.
- Introduce Lacan's *mirror stage* (Imaginary register, misrecognition, ego formation).
- **Thesis:** the *Cells* perform this psychic process materially — mirrors, enclosures, and thresholds externalise the divided self.

2. Theoretical Context: Lacan's Mirror Stage

- Explain how the ego forms via identification with an image.
- Discuss the tension between perceived unity (Imaginary) and underlying fragmentation (Real).
- Connect this to art's role as a site of self-recognition and alienation.

3. Case Study 1 – *Cells* Series (1989–2008)

- Analyse one *Cell* (e.g. *Cell (Eyes)* or *Cell (Glass Spheres)*).
- Spatial enclosure = psychic boundary; mirror = ego image.
- Viewer's reflection activates the work: we become part of the mirrored subject.

4. Case Study 2 – *Femme Maison* (1946–47)

- Hybrid body/architecture motif; home as projection of self.
- Illustrates early tension between internal world (body) and external social image (façade).
- Links to Lacan's Imaginary: the body as image-bound fiction of coherence.

5. Conclusion

- Summarise how Bourgeois reconfigures Lacan's mirror stage in sculptural terms.
- Suggest that her practice exposes the *self-as-construction*, inviting the viewer into that unstable structure.

The Gaze and the Other

Essay Question: In what ways does Bourgeois's work confront the viewer with Lacan's notion of the gaze, revealing the self as constructed through the eyes of the Other?

- **Rationale:**
- For Lacan, *the gaze* destabilises the subject — we are seen before we see ourselves.
- Bourgeois's works (e.g. *Spider*, *Destruction of the Father*, *Fillette*) stage encounters between exposure and concealment, desire and shame.
- The question lets students examine how Bourgeois manipulates the act of looking — both her own and the viewer's — to expose the psychological dynamics of visibility and vulnerability.

the Gaze and the Other

Essay Question:

In what ways does Bourgeois’s work confront the viewer with Lacan’s notion of the gaze, revealing the self as constructed through the eyes of the Other?

Thesis Statement:

Through the interplay of concealment and exposure, Bourgeois stages encounters with Lacan’s *gaze*—the unsettling awareness of being seen by an Other beyond our control. Her work turns spectatorship into a psychological event, implicating the viewer in the dynamics of desire, shame, and self-objectification.

Theory Frame: Lacan’s Gaze and the Symbolic Order

For Lacan, *the gaze* is not simply the act of looking but the unsettling awareness that we are seen by the world before we see ourselves. Vision, in this sense, belongs to the *Other* — the field of language, culture, and social codes that define subjectivity. The gaze exposes our lack: the subject realises it is not sovereign but dependent on the eyes of others. Bourgeois’s works such as *Fillette* (1968) and *Arch of Hysteria* (1993) enact this reversal of visual power. The suspended, abject *Fillette* unsettles the viewer’s gaze, evoking both humour and disgust; it “looks back” at us, revealing our own complicity in objectification. Similarly, *Arch of Hysteria* turns the male body into spectacle, stripping it of control and exposing vulnerability. Both works transform the viewer’s position — no longer an observer but caught within the field of the Other’s gaze.

Essay Stage	Focus	Key Works / Concepts
Introduction	The gaze as destabilising; vision as a site of power and exposure.	Define Lacan’s “gaze.”
Theory Frame	The gaze as position of the subject within the Symbolic; being seen by the Other.	Lacan, <i>Seminar XI</i> ; Mulvey, Silverman.
Analysis 1	<i>Fillette</i> — abjection, humour, erotic anxiety.	The gaze reversed.
Analysis 2	<i>Arch of Hysteria</i> — exposed male body, vulnerability, inversion of power.	Viewer implicated.
Conclusion	Bourgeois reclaims vision as shared exposure; the gaze as relational, not possessive.	—



Fillette (1968)



Arch of Hysteria (1993)

the Gaze and the Other

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Through the interplay of concealment and exposure, Bourgeois stages encounters with Lacan's *gaze*—the unsettling awareness of being seen by an Other beyond our control. Her work turns spectatorship into a psychological event, implicating the viewer in the dynamics of desire, shame, and self-objectification.

Essay Outline

Introduction

Introduce the idea of the gaze in psychoanalysis and visual art.

State thesis: Bourgeois's works materialise the destabilising effects of being seen — by others, by the past, or by the self.

Theoretical Context: Lacan's Gaze

Distinguish between the act of looking and *the gaze* as a structural position of the subject.

The gaze exposes lack — we are looked at before we look.

Tie to feminist psychoanalysis (Mulvey, Silverman): subject/object dynamics in representation.

Case Study 1 – *Fillette* (1968)

Suspended phallic sculpture (latex, biomorphic).

Simultaneously comic and abject: challenges male-centric symbolism.

The viewer's gaze oscillates between attraction and disgust — embodying the instability of desire.

Case Study 2 – *Arch of Hysteria* (1993)

Bronze contorted male figure in ecstatic pain/pleasure.

The gaze reverses traditional power relations — male body as spectacle, passive and exposed.

Illustrates the *return of the gaze*: the artwork looks back.

Conclusion

Summarise how Bourgeois reclaims viscosity from patriarchal control.

The *gaze* becomes not mastery but vulnerability — a shared condition of spectatorship.

Desire, Lack, and the Unconscious

Essay Question: How does Bourgeois's repeated return to themes of motherhood, trauma, and sexuality express Lacan's idea of desire as structured by lack?

- **Rationale:**
- Lacan defines *desire* as the desire of the Other — it arises from what is missing or unattainable.
- Bourgeois's work continually revisits absence, loss, and longing (e.g. the absent father, the maternal body, childhood memory).
- The essay could explore how her recurring motifs (spiders, suspended forms, empty cradles) give material form to this *lack*, turning psychoanalytic theory into sculptural language.

Desire, Lack, and the Unconscious

Essay Question:

How does Bourgeois’s repeated return to themes of motherhood, trauma, and sexuality express Lacan’s idea of desire as structured by lack?

Thesis Statement:

Bourgeois’s art materialises Lacan’s principle that desire is born of absence. Through recurring motifs of the mother, the wound, and the spider, she gives form to *lack* as both psychic pain and creative drive — transforming absence into a generative aesthetic force.

Theory Frame: Lacanian Desire and the Logic of Lack

For Lacan, desire is not driven by fulfilment but by the impossibility of satisfaction. When the child enters the *Symbolic order* (language and law), it becomes separated from the maternal body — the first object of love and loss. From this rupture emerges *lack*, the void around which desire circulates endlessly. The elusive ***objet petit a*** — the object-cause of desire — stands for what we seek but can never retrieve.

In Bourgeois’s work, this structure of loss and longing is both personal and universal. The monumental ***Maman* (1999)** transforms the maternal figure into an ambivalent protector: nurturing yet terrifying, absent yet monumental. Likewise, ***The Destruction of the Father* (1974)** stages the fantasy of consuming paternal power — an impossible satisfaction that reveals desire’s cyclical nature. In each case, Bourgeois converts *lack* into a sculptural and affective language: repetition as both mourning and creation.

Essay Stage	Focus	Key Works / Concepts
Introduction	Desire as lack; the mother as first lost object.	Context: early trauma and repetition.
Theory Frame	<i>Objet petit a</i> ; Symbolic separation; repetition and sublimation.	Lacan, <i>Écrits</i> ; <i>Seminar XI</i> .
Analysis 1	<i>Maman</i> — ambivalence of maternal love and fear.	The mother as lacking Other.
Analysis 2	<i>Destruction of the Father</i> — fantasy of revenge, working-through of trauma.	Desire as repetition.
Conclusion	Bourgeois transforms lack into creation — art as sublimation of the unconscious.	–



Maman (1999)



The Destruction of the Father (1974)

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Essay Outline

Introduction

Introduce Bourgeois's biography: recurring maternal themes, the absent father, early trauma.

Define Lacan's concept of desire: not satisfaction, but the endless pursuit of what is missing (*objet petit a*).

Thesis: Bourgeois transforms lack into creation — art as sublimation of desire.

Theoretical Context: Lacan's Desire and Lack

Outline *objet petit a* as the unattainable object-cause of desire.

Explain the Symbolic's structuring role — language creates absence.

Connect to art-making as repetition of loss (Freud's *Fort/Da* game).

Case Study 1 – *Maman* (1999)

The spider as mother and protector; monumental yet menacing.

Simultaneous love and fear express ambivalent desire for the maternal.

Links to Lacan's *lack in the Other* — the mother is never fully complete.

Case Study 2 – *The Destruction of the Father* (1974)

Cathartic act of devouring authority — the fantasy of resolution.

Represents desire for autonomy and revenge, yet staged as impossible satisfaction.

The scene becomes a theatre of the unconscious — repetition of the unspeakable.

Conclusion

Desire in Bourgeois's work is cyclical, not resolved — creation and compulsion entwined.

Her sculptures affirm Lacan's paradox: lack is not a deficit, but the very condition of artistic and psychic life.

PART 2 – FOLLOW UP – MAPPING OUT A RESEARCH ESSAY

**Theme 2 – De/Constructing the
Human
(Lacanian) Psychoanalysis**

Case Study: Louise Bourgeois

Essay focus: *How does Louise Bourgeois's sculptural practice materialise psychoanalytic ideas of the fragmented self, repressed memory, and desire?*

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Context

psychic biography

Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) explored **memory, family trauma, sexuality, and the unconscious** through sculpture, installation, and drawing. Her practice blurs **boundaries between interior and exterior, personal and universal, body and object** — precisely the territories **psychoanalysis** seeks to understand.

background context

Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) explored **memory, family trauma, sexuality, and the unconscious** through sculpture, installation, and drawing. Her practice blurs **boundaries between interior and exterior, personal and universal, body and object** — precisely the territories **psychoanalysis** seeks to understand.

Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) occupies a singular position within modern and contemporary art: her work fuses autobiography with psychoanalytic inquiry. From her *Personage* sculptures of the late 1940s to installations such as *Cell (I)* (1991) and *Maman* (1999), Bourgeois transforms deeply personal material—family trauma, sexuality, maternal ambivalence—into sculptural form. Through this process, she renders visible the unconscious forces that shape identity.

Drawing on **Freud's** model of repression and **Kristeva's** notion of abjection, this essay argues that Bourgeois reconfigures the human subject as a site of **psychic fragmentation and corporeal memory**, troubling the boundary between inner and outer, self and other.

theoretical context

Psychoanalysis and the Split Subject

- **Freud** situates the self as divided by the operations of the unconscious; desire and anxiety return through displacement and repetition.
- **Lacan** extends this: the subject is never whole but formed through the gaze of the Other and the misrecognition of the mirror image.
- **Kristeva** adds a feminist re-reading: the abject (bodily fluids, maternal proximity, decay) marks what must be expelled for the self to cohere—yet continually threatens to return.
- **Bourgeois's work resonates with all three.** Her practice externalises the internal drama of subject formation: sculpture becomes symptom, confession, and cure.

Theoretical Lens:

***Key
Psychoanalytic
Thinkers***

Theorist	Concept	Application to Bourgeois
Sigmund Freud	The unconscious; repression; return of the repressed	Bourgeois externalises repressed emotions through visceral, bodily forms.
Jacques Lacan	The mirror stage; desire of the Other	Her <i>Cells</i> become psychic architectures—spaces of reflection and fragmentation.
Julia Kristeva	Abjection; maternal body	Bourgeois’s organic materials evoke the unstable border between self and other.
Donald Winnicott	Transitional object	Sewing, binding, and assembling become acts of repair and containment.

Key Works

- ***The Destruction of the Father* (1974)**

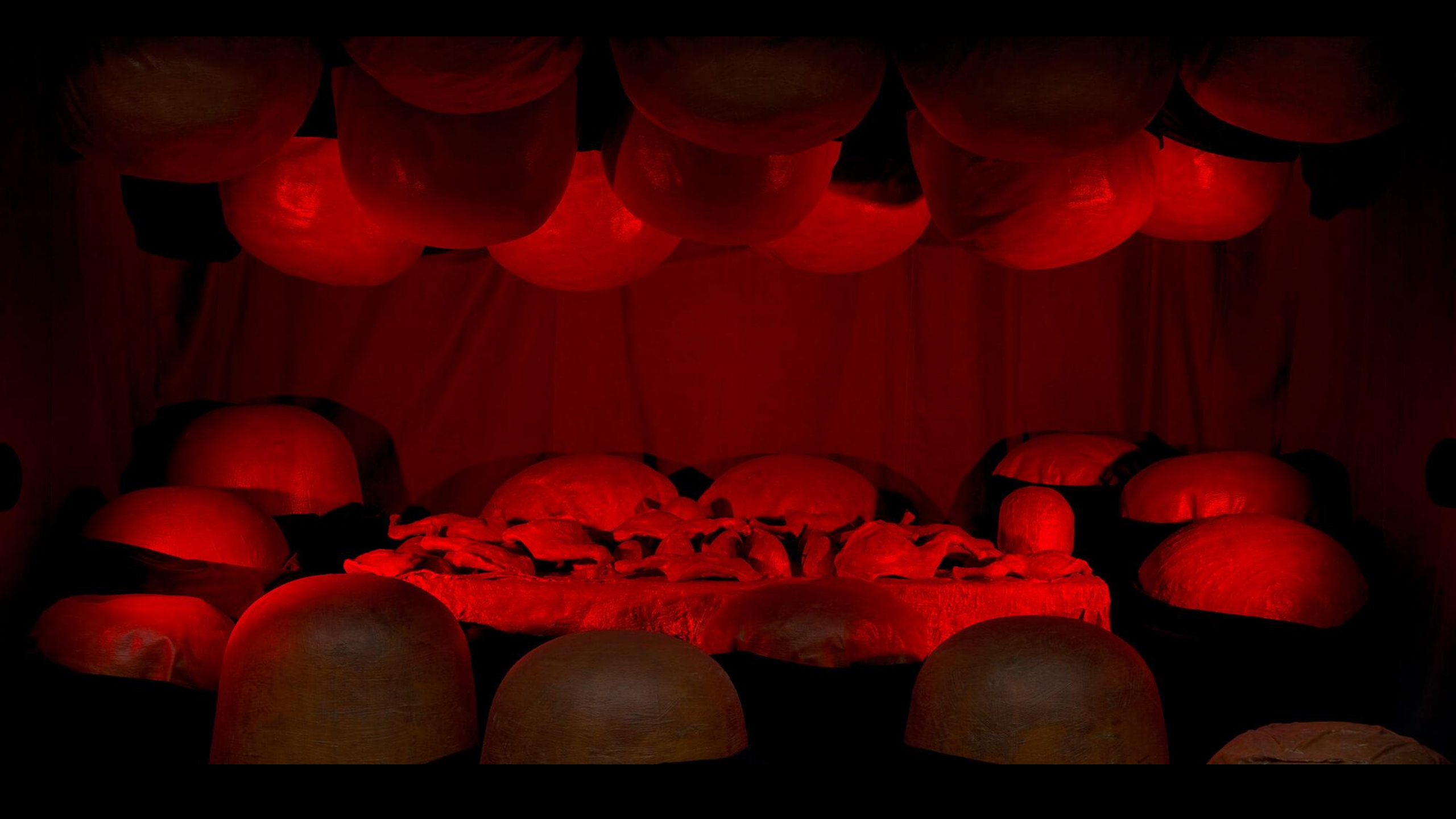
A symbolic dinner scene in which the “father” is devoured by his children. The work literalises the Oedipal drama — an act of revenge and release, where psychic repression becomes sculptural form.

- ***Cells Series* (1989–2008)**

Enclosed spaces filled with objects, mirrors, fabric, and body fragments. Each “cell” becomes a metaphor for the mind’s compartments — memory, desire, fear — simultaneously protective and claustrophobic.

Case Study 1: The Destruction of the Father (1974)

- An installation-tableau of fleshy biomorphic forms suggests an Oedipal dinner scene in which the “father” is literally consumed.
- The work stages the **return of repressed aggression** toward the paternal figure, echoing Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*.
- The claustrophobic enclosure and visceral materials evoke the **oral and digestive drives** central to Freudian psychosexual theory.
- The father’s devouring becomes an act of psychic liberation—an assertion of agency against patriarchal control.
- Through this symbolic cannibalism, Bourgeois performs psychoanalysis sculpturally: transmuting trauma into material form.



Case Study 2:

Cells Series (1989–2008)

- The *Cells*—cage-like enclosures containing objects, fabrics, and body parts—serve as physical analogues for memory and repression.
- Each is a **spatialised psyche**: boundaries separate interior from exterior, but traces of the past leak through.
- The recurrence of clothing, mirrors, and anatomical fragments aligns with Lacan’s **mirror stage** and Kristeva’s **object body**.
- The viewer becomes both voyeur and analysand, caught between empathy and discomfort.
- Bourgeois thus externalises the psychic structure: the “cell” as ego, protecting yet haunted by what it encloses.



Reading the Work

- Bourgeois performs a **sculptural psychoanalysis**: trauma is not described but enacted through material and form.
- The body is **fragmented**, echoing Lacan's notion of the divided subject.
- Her objects are both **object** and comforting — revealing Kristeva's tension between the maternal and the monstrous.
- Making becomes a therapeutic act — “the talking cure” through touch and material.

Analysis: Materialising the Unconscious

- Bourgeois's process literalises Freud's *talking cure* through making: sewing, cutting, casting, stitching—gestures of both injury and repair.
- These acts enact what Kristeva calls **the semiotic chora**—a pre-linguistic, rhythmic field of drives and affects.
- Her materials (latex, fabric, marble) carry **mnemonic charge**, acting as extensions of bodily memory.
- The works function as **transitional objects** (Winnicott), mediating loss through tactile presence.

Conclusion

Bourgeois's art gives sculptural form to the psychoanalytic condition of modern subjectivity: divided, desiring, haunted by its origins. She challenges the modernist ideal of the autonomous self, presenting instead a porous body whose identity is constituted through **trauma, fantasy, and repetition**. In doing so, she reconfigures the “**human**” not as a unified essence but as an ongoing negotiation between the **conscious and the unconscious**, the self and its others.

Developing Your Essay

- **Possible titles/questions:**
- How does Bourgeois's use of materials express the repressed and the abject?
- In what ways can the *Cell* installations be read as spatial metaphors for the unconscious?
- How does Bourgeois's work trouble the notion of a stable, unified self?

Prompts

Essay Development Tasks

- **Prompt 1:** How does Bourgeois visualise psychoanalytic ideas of repression, desire, or abjection?
- **Prompt 2:** Choose one artwork and one theoretical concept; write a short paragraph explaining how material and form communicate psychic states.
- **Prompt 3:** Debate: Does Bourgeois *resolve* trauma or *keep it alive* through repetition?

Essay Structure (Five-Paragraph Model)

Overview

- **1. Introduction (Setting up the question)**
 - **Purpose:** Introduce the topic, establish the theoretical frame, and state the argument.
- **2. Theoretical Context (Framing the argument)**
 - **Purpose:** Establish key psychoanalytic ideas to be applied to the artwork.
- **3. Case Study 1 – *The Destruction of the Father* (1974)**
 - **Purpose:** Apply theory to a specific artwork.
- **4. Case Study 2 – *Cells* Series (1989–2008)**
 - **Purpose:** Extend analysis and develop synthesis.
- **5. Conclusion (Critical synthesis)**
 - **Purpose:** Return to the question and consolidate insights.

Essay Structure (Five-Paragraph Model)

Introduction

- **Introduction (Setting up the question)**
- **Purpose:** Introduce the topic, establish the theoretical frame, and state the argument.
- **Content:**
 - Briefly define psychoanalysis as a theory of the divided or unconscious self (Freud, Lacan).
 - Introduce Bourgeois as an artist whose work visualises the psychological landscape of memory and trauma.
 - Present a clear thesis statement: e.g.,
- “Bourgeois’s sculptural environments enact psychoanalytic processes of repression and return, transforming trauma into tactile form and revealing the human subject as fractured, affective, and perpetually in flux.”

Essay Structure (Five-Paragraph Model)

Theoretical Context

- **Theoretical Context (Framing the argument)**
- **Purpose:** Establish key psychoanalytic ideas to be applied to the artwork.
- **Content:**
 - Outline **Freud's** concepts of repression, desire, and the return of the repressed.
 - Introduce **Lacan's** mirror stage and the gaze of the Other as mechanisms of identity formation.
 - Draw on **Kristeva** to discuss abjection and the unstable boundary between self and other.
 - Explain why these theories help us *deconstruct* human identity in contemporary art.

Essay Structure (Five-Paragraph Model)

Case Study 1

- **Case Study 1 – *The Destruction of the Father* (1974)**
- **Purpose:** Apply theory to a specific artwork.
- **Content:**
 - Describe the installation and its symbolic narrative (consumption of the father).
 - Analyse the work through **Freud's Oedipal complex** and **Kristeva's abjection** — the devouring body as a site of both fear and liberation.
 - Explain how Bourgeois uses materials (flesh-like latex, enclosure) to externalise the unconscious.
 - Show how the work performs “repetition as working-through” (Freud).

Essay Structure (Five-Paragraph Model)

Case Study 2

- **Case Study 2 – *Cells Series* (1989–2008)**
- **Purpose:** Extend analysis and develop synthesis.
- **Content:**
 - Describe how the *Cells* spatialise memory and the psyche.
 - Apply **Lacan's mirror stage** — fragmentation, reflection, and the formation of self through the gaze.
 - Bring in **Winnicott's transitional object** — materials (fabric, mirrors, glass) as mediators of trauma.
 - Interpret the viewer's role: voyeurism, empathy, and identification within a psychoanalytic dynamic.

Essay Structure (Five-Paragraph Model)

Conclusion

- **Conclusion (Critical synthesis)**
- **Purpose:** Return to the question and consolidate insights.
- **Content:**
 - Summarise how Bourgeois's practice reconfigures the self as divided and performative.
 - Reflect on how her work transforms psychoanalysis from a theoretical discourse into a sculptural, embodied one.
 - End with a broader implication:
- In making trauma material, Bourgeois redefines the human subject as an affective process rather than a fixed identity.

