

Sade Concerns Us All: An Interview with Annie Le Brun¹

Frédéric Joignot: We celebrate the Marquis de Sade as a classic. We show his works, we publish them, we comment on them, we analyze them – he who was censored for so long, considered to be a damned soul. Are we seeking to neutralize him?

Annie Le Brun: Sade will resist all neutralization; I believe that, where he is concerned, we can be reassured of that. No doubt people do not read Sade more today than in the past, but they envelop him in more diverse kinds of analysis – historical, psychological, medical, linguistic – so as to protect us from the abyss with which he confronts us. A whole enterprise of normalization has begun. The modern form of censorship is no longer to prohibit, but to neutralize through commentaries and interpretations, through a kind of overload that ends up rendering everything equivalent. But the work remains irreducible.

Q: What is it about Sade – who concerns us today – that is resistant to neutralization?

A: The extraordinary thing about Sade is that, before Nietzsche, before psychoanalysis, he put thinking to the test of the body. He truly put philosophy into the bedroom, as opposed to all the others, who, in the best of cases, make eroticism dependent on their systems. But he revealed to us that the exercise of the faculty of thinking isn't an abstract activity, but that it is determined by the movement of desire and that the source of thinking is, above all, instinctual [*pulsionnelle*]. Let us recall a famous phrase in the *Histoire de Juliette*:² “People rail against the passions without dreaming that it is with its torch that philosophy lights its own.” This is what characterizes Sadean thinking. His heroes never think coldly; they dialogue, they take pleasure; there is a perpetual “animation” of the mind, a continual competition [*surenchère*] between the erotic imagination and reasoning, which is troubled by it. And this trouble is communicated to the reader, who is subjugated in his or her turn. Juliette, Sade's favorite heroine, says it well: “My thinking is quick to get hot,” which reveals how thinking puts itself into motion. Sade was the first to tell us this and, moreover, to make us feel it.

¹ “*Sade Nous Concerne Tous. Entretien Avec Annie Le Brun.*” Interview conducted by Frédéric Joignot. Published 20 October 2014: <http://fredericjoignot.blog.lemonde.fr/2014/10/20/1965/>.

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² Donatien Alphonse François de Sade, *Histoire de Juliette, ou les Prospérités du vice*, published in 1800.

Q: You speak of a Sadean “cogito,” of a major philosophical rupture, which pushed us towards modernity.

A: From 1792 on, Sade was indeed opposed to Descartes. “*I think therefore I am.* This idea, the author says, has no sound, no color, no smell, etc., thus it isn’t a work of the senses. Could we constrain ourselves as obsequiously [as this] to the dust of the school?” He concludes: “No senses, no ideas.”³ For him, thinking is always incarnated. He shows us that the desiring body works⁴ and always undermines reason, pretty speeches and morality, and that, on the other hand, a thought is a working operation [*à l’œuvre*] that nourishes desires, incites us to pursue them without ever renouncing them, no matter how excessive, sometimes to the point of crime. Because for Sade there is a criminality inherent in desire, as he affirms in *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*: “There isn’t a man who doesn’t want to be a despot when he has an erection.” This is what we cannot pardon him for. Even if here and there, he foreshadows Freud as well as Dr. Krafft-Ebing.⁵

Q: What do you think about the catalogue of sexual passions in *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome*?⁶

A: In that work, Sade describes 600 passions, which are divided into “simple passions,” “doubled passions,” “criminal passions” and “murderous passions.” This made Maurice Heine, who published his works in the 1930s, say that Sade is “the man who initiated the methodological and systematic description” of sexual perversions.⁷ Yes, but unlike the descriptions that Krafft-Ebing made in his *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Sade shows those perversions in action, he incarnated them in people indulging in their vices, making scandalous remarks. He accompanied them in their pleasures [*leur vertige*] and the worst of it is that he involves us in them. Georges Bataille⁸ saw this clearly when he recalled that one doesn’t read *The 120 Days of Sodom* without some kind of “sensual incitement” [*énervement sensuel*] that awakens buried urges in us. Especially because, in this perspective, Sade is continually aware that he places Man in the middle of the forces that rule

³ Sade, “Pensée (ou Pensée sur Dieu),” which was unpublished during his lifetime. Included in *Oeuvres complètes*, published by Jean-Jacques Pauvert in 1986.

⁴ Cf. “desiring machines” in the works of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

⁵ Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing, author of *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), a “medico-forensic study.”

⁶ Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, written in 1785 but unpublished in the author’s lifetime.

⁷ Maurice Heine (1884-1940), a French writer and publisher.

⁸ Georges Bataille (1897-1962), a French writer and librarian.

the universe, that make him have a violent, sexual and immoral nature, and that, at the same time, it is important for him to exceed it because that nature constitutes a challenge to his thinking.

Q: Some people, while defending this free, sovereign and pleasure-seeking individual, have said that Sade wanted a pathological cult of despotic aristocrats. Or that he was an ultra-liberal individualist before there was any such thing. What do you say in response?

A: It is baseless to say that he was the first ultra-liberal thinker, a kind of budding libertarian libertine. Sade knew that freedom is dangerous and that the sovereign man is troubling. He is one of the very few writers, maybe the only one, to lay human nature bare. He portrays people liberating all the violence of sexual passion, exercising it to the detriment of others, sometimes to the point of an unparalleled cruelty. But where he troubles us the most is when he reminds us that such acts are common currency in history. The people who enjoy their crimes have always existed. On the very first page of *The 120 Days*, he warns us that he is going to show us “leeches always on the lookout for public calamities that they have not appeased, but have created, so that they could enjoy them all the more.” He obligates us to look these people in the face; he shows that they trouble us and that they live in us. This is why Sade concerns us all. His books recall to us how the veneer of civilization is fragile and from what troublesome night our desires come and could resurge at any moment. Look at what happened nearby here, in the former country of Yugoslavia during the 1990s – all the massacres, the kidnapped women, the rapes. . . .

Q: But we still read that Sade justified sexual crime. In his film, *Salo*, inspired by the works of Sade, Pasolini associates *The 120 Days* with fascist violence.⁹

A: Though I consider Pasolini to be a great filmmaker, it seems impossible to me to link Sade’s novels to a precise historical period or to associate them with this or that particular regime. For Sade, crime remains crime, whatever the ideological packaging. He remains the narrator and radical thinker of human darkness,¹⁰ refusing all the justifications that we customarily find to excuse our savagery, whatever the country, religion, race or revolution. Sade strips away all our excuses, all our safeguards, all of our very convenient explanations, to show us a man who is a pleasure-seeker by nature, quick to use others, carried away by unjustifiable

⁹ *Salò ou les 120 Journées de Sodome*, a film by Pier Paolo Pasolini, was released in 1976.

¹⁰ The French word used here, *noirceur*, can also mean “bruise.”

passions. In this, his thinking challenges and defies optimistic thinkers such as Hegel and the progressive current, which advances the idea that, after the dark periods of history, reason will assert itself and negativity will dissolve in a new impetus of social progress and positivity. For Sade, the “blackness” resists, like an abundant creative source, still giving us a glimpse of the void that is in front of us.

Q: And yet you say that Sade is moral. In what way?

A: In his lifetime, Sade was opposed to the death penalty; he denounced the massacres perpetrated during religious wars and the Inquisition; he was opposed to the use of the guillotine. Compared to Robespierre, who was in principle opposed to the death penalty but justified it for ideological reasons, Sade – paradoxically – is moral; he completely refused the idea that the end justifies the means. His “misfortune,” as one still says, “was having received a firm soul that has never and will never bend.” To think like of one his libertine heroes that philosophy “is not the art of consoling the weak” and that “it has no other goal than giving accuracy to the mind and rooting out its prejudices”¹¹ – Sade is still moral.

Q: At the same time, he is resolutely atheistic and materialist and doesn’t stop engaging in blasphemy.

A: Sade had read the materialists and atheists of the 18th century: Nicolas Fréret, La Mettrie, Diderot, Helvétius and Baron d’Holbach, who, over the course of several decades, had shattered European thinking and wanted to liberate Mankind from its religious and political shackles. The characters in his novels quote them or, more often, hijack their words. Relying on them, he never failed to show the inexistence of God, as if this were a gymnastic exercise necessary for the health of the mind. And if here Sade meets up with Don Juan de Molière and the thinkers of the Enlightenment, he also proposes to eradicate from Mankind the need to believe – to inaugurate a transcendence – that is at the origin of all the forms of voluntary servitude. In this, he went much further than all the others.

Q: That is to say?

A: It wasn’t enough for him to reject God; he also had to draw all the consequences of such a rejection, by opposing the sovereignty of any law that was likely to limit the passions and, at the same time, to attack the singularity of each one. For him, someone who had spent 27 years in prison, that is to say, a third of

¹¹ Sade, *La Nouvelle Justine ou les Malheurs de la vertu*, was published in 1799.

his life, there was a continual struggle between the sovereignty of the individual, the laws of society and its moral and political prejudices. This wild affirmation [of his rights] is upsetting because it came at the moment that the Revolution and Robespierre were celebrating the worship of the Supreme Being, which took the form of the ideological lie that Sade forcefully denounced in “*Français, encore un effort si vous voulez être Républicains*,” the fifth dialogue of *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*.¹² In this text, he foreshadowed the immense stakes of modernity.

Q: Is this the modernity that you want to show in the exhibition *Attaquer le soleil*, at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris?

A: If the influence of Sade’s thinking at the depths of the 19th century has been recognized in literature, whether it was Apollinaire, Barbey d’Aurevilly, Baudelaire, Huysmans, or Lautréamont, this hasn’t been the case where painting is concerned. The challenge of the exhibition is to demonstrate the encounter between Sade and the sensibilities of the 19th century, at the moment that, following the rise of disbelief, the frameworks of thinking – the norms of representation being in the process of collapsing – were asking questions about the inability to represent the violence of desire that were the same questions that were then troubling painting.

Q: For example?

A: In his *Journal*, Delacroix speaks of “this totally black background to be satisfied.” Very close to Baudelaire, he had probably read Sade. Even if he had not, their encounter with each other gives us a lot to think about. For example, the study for *La Mort de Sardanapale*, which we had the opportunity to borrow from the Louvre: one might wonder if it isn’t an illustration for *The 120 Days of Sodom*, though the text of this novel remained unknown until the beginning of the 20th century. It is also important that, when you begin to confront such forces, you can no longer paint in the same way as before. Thus Degas, whose *Scène de guerre au Moyen Age* (1863-1865) shows the hunting down of women, one of them pursued by a horseman, the others cut down or killed by arrows, depicts a kind of violence that leads him to reinvent the nude. No doubt this is why Degas visited Parisian brothels to capture in his engravings the savagery of naked bodies escaping from coded attitudes. For his part, Ingres paints increasingly eroticized bodies, as we can

¹² “Frenchmen, one more effort if you would be Republicans,” *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795). For more comments about this text, see Ms. Le Brun’s interview with *Philosophie magazine*: <http://www.notbored.org/language.pdf>

see from the differences between the first version of *Roger délivrant Angélique* (1819) and *Le Bain Turc* (1862). No to mention Courbet and the violence that is at work in *L'Origine du monde* (1866) or the even greater violence we find in Cézanne's earliest work.

Q: But isn't it at the beginning of the 20th century, with the Surrealists, that Sade is officially recognized as a major author?

A: Without a doubt, but this is the history of a great de-centering, in the course of which desire comes to be the [main] subject of painting. In fact, it is a subterranean history that, starting with *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, ends with *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), the title of which, at the start, was *Le Bordel philosophique*. And not without reason, since, with this painting, Picasso put painting in the bedroom, years before Surrealism recognized desire as the great inventor of forms. At the beginning of the century, the great smuggler of Sade [whose works were banned] was Apollinaire. His novel *Les Onze Mille Verges* (1907) isn't a tall story, but a disturbing, troubling text about the ferocity of desire. It is interesting that this book was published the same year that Picasso, with whom Apollinaire was very close, finished work on *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Several years later, it was through Apollinaire that Breton, Soupault and Aragon got to Sade. A little later, Robert Desnos published *De l'érotisme. Considéré dans ses manifestations écrites et du point de vue de l'esprit moderne* (1923), in which he explained that there were periods "before" and "after" Sade. The journal *La Révolution surréaliste* began a column called "News about the Marquis de Sade," Georges Bataille wrote an erotic text called *Histoire de l'œil* (1928), and Breton's manifestoes incited Man to wholeheartedly pursue his desires and dreams. Such was Sade's influence at that time.

Q: That influence was felt with even more intensity in the visual arts. According to you, that wasn't by chance. Why?

A: Painting is thinking about the body, even more so an accounting of its metamorphoses. Because the image of the body is shaken from the inside, as the works of Félicien Rops, Edvard Munch and Alfred Kubin show quite violently, approaching an expression that was for a long time kept in the margins of curiosa or madness – also evoked in the Sade exhibition – in order to join with Sade's naked thinking, which allows no religious, ideological or social presuppositions.

Q: Photography, the cinema, rated-X and horror films – the new arts of the [20th] century were also affected.

A: Many photos by Man Ray and Henri Cartier-Bresson, erotic postcards, the photomontages of Jindrich Heisler and Hans Bellmer – there are so many works for which Sade seems to be the distant source¹³ and that disrupt the accepted representations of sexuality. In the “Sade at the cinema” cycle, we present Luis Buñuel’s *L’Age d’or* (1930), Pasolini’s *Salo ou Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome* (1975), and even Nagisa Oshima’s *L’Empire des sens* (1976), the first non-pornographic film to show real sexual scenes and the intensity, if not the ferocity, of feminine desire.

Q: How can we not think of Sade’s Juliette, of whom it is said that she was the first sexually free woman? – and completely free, at that.

A: Sade’s Juliette is an extraordinary character, upon whom, I believe, Sade projected a lot of himself, and it was a stroke of genius to have chosen a woman to incarnate that radical freedom. In that novel, the woman and the man are equals in freedom, ambition, perversion and crime. All the traditional female roles are swept away by Juliette herself, who, day after day, reinvents her uniqueness to seek out in herself, during of erotic reveries, what she really desires. For Apollinaire, Juliette represents “the new woman” whom Sade glimpsed – a being, he says in a somewhat angelic formulation, “of whom we still have no idea, who frees herself¹⁴ from humanity, who has wings, and who renews the universe.”¹⁵ It isn’t the least of the paradoxes that Sade, someone who so often described women being abused, had also imagined a radically free female character who proclaims, “The past leaves me indifferent, the present electrifies me, I do not fear the future.” That says it all.

¹³ The French word used here, *foyer*, can also mean “firebox” or “fireplace.”

¹⁴ The word phrase here, *se dégage de*, can also mean “absolves herself.”

¹⁵ Guillaume Apollinaire, *L’Œuvre du Marquis de Sade* (Paris, Bibliothèque des Curieux, 1909).