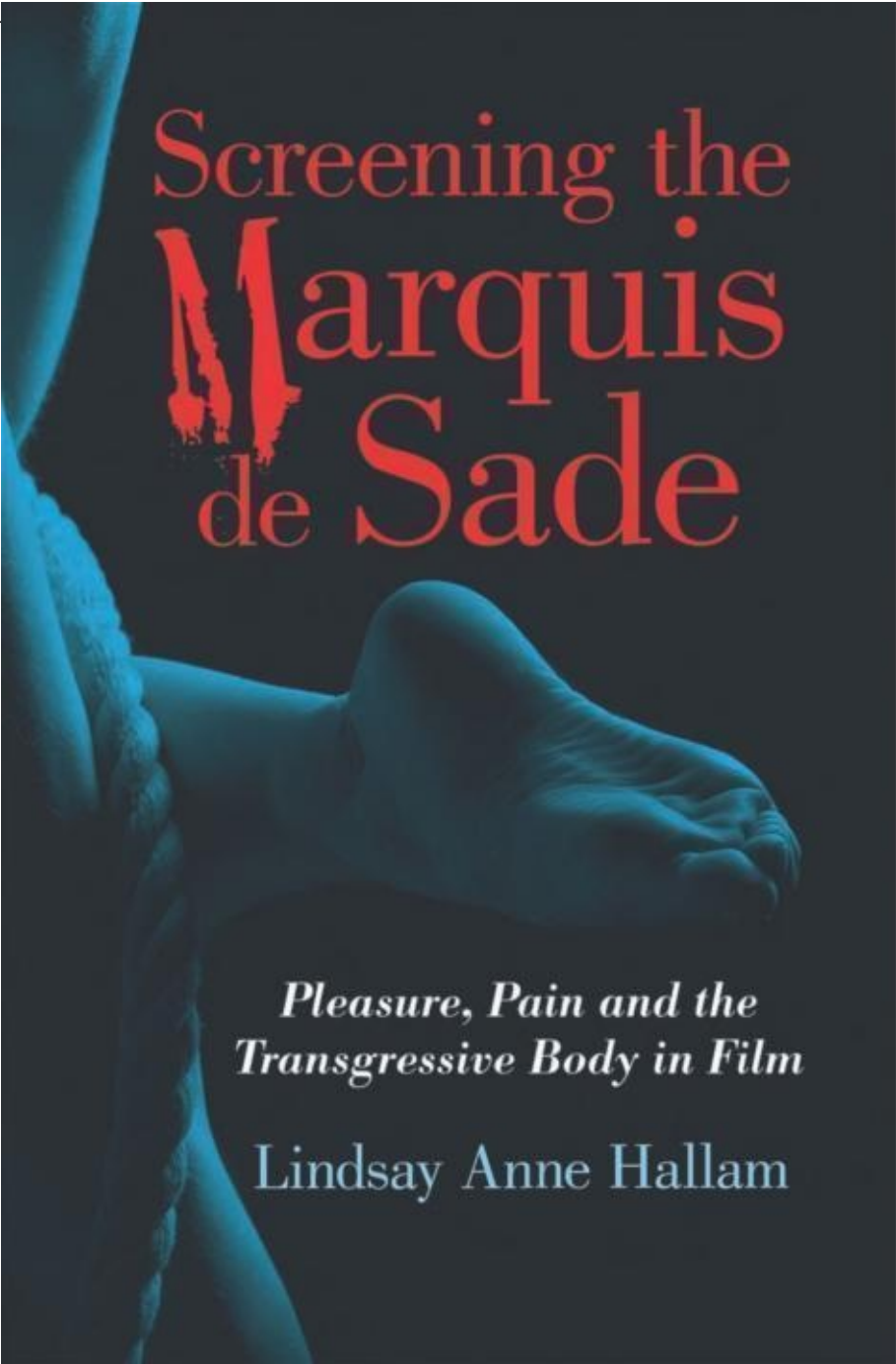


Screening the
Marquis
de Sade

*Pleasure, Pain and the
Transgressive Body in Film*

Lindsay Anne Hallam



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LINDSAY ANNE HALLAM



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Preface

Cinema's fascination with the depiction of the body, from its agony to its ecstasy, has been relentless since this medium's inception. In fact, the body's experience of pleasure, conflict or trauma has been the basis for the vast majority of film narratives and representations, whether mainstream or alternative. When films take this fascination with the body to explicit extremes through the graphic depiction of sex, violence, or atrocity, as viewers we are both disturbed and confronted with the realization of our own interest in the sight of the body's participation in transgressive acts.

One figure that has been continually marginalized and censored due to the transgression of bodily taboos within his work has been the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814). Sade is a significant figure in this respect, as his works have been at the center of censorship debates ever since they were written. Sade's texts explore, in detail, bodily behavior that is prohibited by law and by social taboo. What is more, Sade celebrates this behavior and accompanies his graphic descriptions with philosophical justification.

During the twentieth century, however, Sade's work began to be studied and examined by other philosophers and thinkers of the time, from psychoanalysts such as Jacques Lacan and Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel to post-structuralists such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze.' It soon became apparent that in Sade's radical thinking were the means to explore the darker aspects of humanity, such as the urge to violate and transgress bodies and taboos. Due to this re-evaluation, Sade has since become a central figure in the critical revision of ideological foundations of the human subject, as he explores precisely the limits of the normative and the transgressive. Whereas before, art works which transgressed bodily norms were rejected and marginalized, scholars found that there was an inherent fascination with pushing these bodily boundaries. Thus, the transgressive body can be defined as a body representation that no longer fits into society's normative categories, and instead challenges cultural, biological and sexual norms.

Since Sade proposes a philosophy which also challenges and defies societal norms and law, representations of the transgressive body are central to his work. That Sade chooses to express this philosophy in the form of stories, novels and plays demonstrates that fiction can be used as a philosophical tool. Thus, it can be argued that other forms of fiction, such as cinema, can also be used in this a tool to challenge and subvert social taboos and bodily norms. Cinema, not unlike literature, is fascinated with depicting the transgressive body in all its states. However, in spite of the correspondence between Sade's body representations and the transgressive bodies depicted in cinema, his philosophy has rarely been systematically applied to film analysis. For just as the bodies and actions described in Sade carry significant meanings, so too does the transgressive body in cinema. Consequently, by applying Sadean philosophy to the analysis of the transgressive body in cinema, this book will examine the boundaries of society's norms regarding sexuality and biology.

The human condition in Sade is essentially a bodily one. Indeed, Sade seems obsessed with breaking conventions and exploring the limits of the body in order to tell us something about the human condition as an embodied condition. By applying Sade's bodily-oriented philosophy to film analysis, this book provides a comprehensive discussion of the cultural significance of the

transgressive bodies represented in cinema. By analyzing transgressive representations it becomes apparent that they mean more than themselves. We are, in fact, not so different from these representations: they constitute us both as bodies and as subjects. This book, it is hoped, will contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural interest in the transgressive representation of the body, which may in turn lead to a better understanding of our nature as human subjects.

Thus, a Sadean reading of the transgressive body onscreen reveals something about the human subject that other frameworks of interpretation of cinema may lack. The symbolic destruction of the social order through bodily transgression is a positive and creative force derived from Sade's conception of nature. According to Sade, the subject is driven primarily by the natural bodily urges that society tries to repress through law and taboo. In Sade's works an alternative hierarchy is created in which those who follow nature's instincts for lust and aggression dominate those still under the sway of society's repression. It is nature, whose instincts and urges are felt and expressed through the body, that is exposed as the guiding force of the human subject, a force that works in opposition to external cultural influences. To transgress against these cultural taboos thus strengthens the subject's position within the Sadean natural hierarchy.

While psychoanalysis, feminism, semiotics, and post-structuralism have informed the field of film analysis for many years, using the work of Sade as a way of understanding film is still relatively new within this field. Whereas many analyses use theory to excuse and thus dilute the power of sexual and violent images, the application of Sadean philosophy to film is deliberately transgressive and confrontational, seeking to examine cinematic representations of human relations as unflinchingly as Sade did in his novels.

This book aims to be both academic and also understandable to the more casual reader. I refrain from analyzing adaptations of Sade's work, or films that present Sade's life story (with the exception of Pasolini's *Salò*), and instead use Sade's philosophy to analyze a wider array of films. My purpose in doing so is to develop Sadean philosophy as a form of film theory that can be applied to many films, not just those that deal directly with Sade and his works. Sade is integral to my analysis, as his philosophy provides a method of thinking that uncovers the ways in which cinema challenges bodily norms in order to suggest broader cultural and political transgressions.

Before the film analysis can begin, it is necessary to explain Sade's philosophy in further detail. In the following introductory chapter I will provide a brief explanation of the main Sadean concepts which will be applied in the film analysis to follow. Investigation into Sade and the transgressive body will then be carried out in four parts. Part One, "The Monster in Horror," will focus on the three main monsters found in the horror genre: vampires, zombies and werewolves. Through the analysis of several horror films, a Sadean reading will uncover that which psychoanalysis, traditionally the main interpretive methodology applied to the analysis of the monster in horror cinema, does not: that the monster's body is a positive representation that demonstrates nature's power. Although Sadean characters are not monstrous in appearance, they have much in common with the monsters found in horror movies in that both the monster and the Sadean libertine are outside of society and therefore represent the "Other." However, a Sadean reading of the monster will show that it is precisely because the monster represents a threat to the established social order that it is a figure of fascination, and that its transgressive power can actually be celebrated rather than marginalized.

"Monstrous Humans," Part Two, will examine bodies that may look more "normal" than the monster, but who also engage in transgressive behavior: serial killers, cannibals, and the transhuman. These bodies illustrate the repetitive nature of transgression, such that once a limit is transgressed, the cycle of transgression is put into effect. The bodies discussed here transgress to the point that, like the Sadean libertine, they no longer feel that they are a part of humanity. This then allows them to engage in activities that transgress all of the basic taboos of civilized society, leading to increased opportunities for pleasure and dominance.

Yet, despite these opportunities to experience heightened power and pleasure, Part Three "Victims," examines how the transgressive body can be punished for its transgressions. Here the focus is on the two transgressive bodies that are frequently victimized by society's strict standards: women and adolescents. What becomes apparent through this analysis, however, is that although societal and cultural authorities are capable of the same cruelty and sadism that Sade saw in nature, it is only through further transgression that the victim is able to overcome its subjugation.

Part Four, "Sexual Transgressors," will demonstrate that the transgressive body is a sexual body, as the act of transgression brings with it a highly sexual charge. In the practices of sadism and masochism, seemingly non-sexual acts involving pain and violence are experienced as forms of transgressive pleasure, demonstrating that the sexual and the violent instincts are not separate forces but are, in fact, connected. This idea is central to Sade's philosophy, as all of his works entail the seeking of sexual satisfaction through the violation of taboos, and the utilization of violence as a vital part of sexuality. Sade is integral to an unflinching examination of all aspects and implications of these sexual transgressions.

Introduction:

The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade

The body is a central notion in Sade's philosophy, as it is the thing through which his ideas are expressed. In fact, in Sade's thought there can be no ideas without the body. Sade's basic principle is that we are all isolated beings, that our bodies are all that we have. Therefore, we need strive only to fulfill our own bodily needs and desires, no matter the cost or imposition on others. Thus, he devoted no thought to the relationship between the body and the society at large; for him, only the self-interest and pursuit of pleasure is important.

This pursuit of pleasure inevitably involves the sexual function. In Sade, sex is the driving force behind all actions. The search for ever greater sexual satisfaction leads to a desire to go beyond the limits imposed on sexual activity, through the transgression of sexual mores in an attempt to push the body to greater heights of ecstasy. By looking beyond normalized heterosexual intercourse, Sade incorporates elements that are usually banished from sexual representation. Some of these elements include: the use of all parts of the body, bisexuality and group sex, blasphemy, images of the abject (namely, death and filth) and other deliberately "scandalous" behaviors. Most controversially, Sade incorporates the infliction of pain and violence on others as a means to obtain sexual gratification.

Such is the power of Sade's representations that his name has come to mean the deliberate hurting of others in order to achieve self-gratification. It must be stressed, however, that the sexual sadism described by Sade is a textual one, only occurring within the realm of fiction. While his own acts of sadism in reality led to his imprisonment, he found that through writing he could continue to explore the darker aspects of sexual desire.' It could be argued that writing provided an outlet for him as a cathartic purging of his sexual fantasies, in a way that ensured no harm would come to others; but such an idea is beyond the scope of this book. Sade's writing could also, just as easily, be viewed as a record of sexual dysfunction, proof that his rightful place was inside a jail cell. In fact, Sade's writing did lead to a term of imprisonment.' Within the context of this book, however, Sade's work is utilized because it presents a philosophy that explores all aspects of the transgressive body. Its anti-establishment stance, where all societal norms are opposed, conveys a view that, when applied to film theory, uncovers cinema's own capacity to subvert and transgress societal norms and taboos.

Sade's philosophy is developed in his four main novels: *Justine*, *Juliette*, *The 120 Days of Sodom* and *Philosophy in the Bedroom*. In his blending of obscene and pornographic images with philosophical discourse, he enables certain themes to emerge which deal with the body and its power to transgress societal taboos. Sade offered an alternative to society's teachings of Virtue and Vice; whereas church and state extolled the rewards of Virtue, Sade explored the freedom that can be found if one follows the path of Vice. In Sade's eyes the role of God and religion has usurped that of nature, as they are tools used to dissuade the people from following nature's urges. What society deems as animal instincts, which must be repressed for the greater good, Sade saw as our true selves; we are

defined by our individual urges. This divides people into a strict hierarchy: above are those women and men who live according to their desires, and below are those destined to become mere instruments of the desires of others.

This hierarchy of perpetrator and victim is expressed in his two novels *Justine* and *Juliette*.⁴ The two title characters are sisters, Justine being the epitome of virtue while Juliette is the embodiment of vice. Justine is beset by bad luck, with her eternal goodness continuously exploited and her chastity repeatedly violated. Juliette, however, enjoys a charmed life, her sexual promiscuity and criminal nature leading her to wealth and privilege. While Justine denies her carnal desires in order to gain a place in Heaven, Juliette uses her body to attain pleasure and success, and is therefore rewarded. Juliette is the ideal of the Sadean libertine, someone who has situated herself outside of society and acts in opposition to the prevailing morals of the time. The libertine, being bisexual, polymorphous, perverse and criminal, consciously decides to embrace all that society represses as a testament to their superiority and power over the masses and the laws that govern them.

Because Sade's libertines feel superior to others, they view themselves as no longer subject to law or standards of behavior. In fact, the libertines instead form their own separate societies. Juliette, for instance, becomes part of the Sodality of the Friends of Crime, a group who devote themselves to sexual pleasure through crime. Its statute proclaims that the group "considers itself above the law because the law is of mortal and artificial contrivance, whereas the Sodality is natural in its origin and obediences, heeds and respects Nature only." The group does not follow societal law, it instead follows nature. Nature, which destroys as much as it creates, is therefore not according to the laws and rules of civilized society, criminal in that it can kill and destroy without remorse. For example, the devastation caused by an earthquake or a hurricane has the power to decimate a population without reason or guilt, the phenomenon itself remaining completely unaffected. Likewise, if within the course of libertine activity a person comes to harm in some way, neither does the libertine feel anything for having caused it.

The superiority of the libertine over his or her victims is similar to the power that royalty has over its subjects. The libertines are no longer a part of society because they feel that they are, in fact, sovereign over it. Therefore, they are free to use those that they view as beneath them in whatever way they please. Because they are so removed from other people, they have absolutely no compassion, nor any other feelings for them. They are completely apathetic and think only about their own pleasure.

What defines Sade's sexual scenarios is the inequality of the participants. Sex is not an expression of love for another but a source of individual pleasure. The aim is to find what best satisfies one's own desires. This cannot be achieved with an equal, as this would lead to a conflict of interests; the other, too preoccupied with his/her own pleasure, will not be thinking of one's own. Just as a person sacrifices his/her own wants and needs in order to serve his/her god or king, so a person must put his/her own wants, needs and pleasure aside when in service of the Sadean libertine.

The apathy of the libertine means that in order to achieve pleasure she/he must participate in more extreme and excessive activities. Due to their apathy, Sade's libertines feel nothing, and instead experience pleasure through the thought of acts committed. The realization that they have transgressed a taboo and have participated in an act that is thought to be wholly evil and have done it without the least sense of guilt and what gives the libertines pleasure and a sense of achievement. The apathy that

Sade describes in his books leads to the ability to gain sexual gratification through crime and violence which is the most controversial aspect of Sade's philosophy. Sex and violence—two elements for which cinema is in Sade, shown to be connected. These two urges, which in Sade represent the base instincts of the human subject, are trained to be suppressed in order for society to function. In contrast, Sade sought the expression of these instincts. As one of his characters, Madame Delbene (his libertines were not exclusively male), states:

This capricious portion of our mind is so libertine nothing can restrain it: its greatest triumph, its most eminent delights come of exceeding all limits imposed upon it; of all regularity it is an enemy, it worships disorder, idolizes whatever wears the brand of crime ... what is of the filthiest the most infamous, the most forbidden, 'tis that which best rouses the intellect... 'tis that which causes us most deliciously to discharge.'

Since the Sadean libertines' only loyalty is to their own pleasure, they feel no kinship with their fellow humans. In fact, they seek only to exploit, abuse and offend others. This selfish tendency allows them to explore the sexual aspects of violence and transgression.

What drives these activities is the thrill that accompanies transgression. As one character claims "It is not the object of libertine intentions which fires us, but the idea of evil." The object is irrelevant because, for the Sadean libertine, the sexual partner is inherently inferior. Those classified as inferior are labeled so because they follow society's repressive forces instead of embracing nature's instincts. By not giving in to nature, they are destined to become the victims of someone else's base desires.

In Sade's view, society's norms are cultural constructions imposed upon the body and naturally exhibited by it. In order to stem the natural urges—carnal desires and violent impulses—both church and state have condemned them as evil. Therefore, for Sade, to do evil not only satisfies natural urges, it also delivers the thrill that accompanies acts that are forbidden by or transgressive of civil and moral norms. This is, for example, illustrated in the many acts of blasphemy described in his works. Indeed, Sade's libertines repeatedly insist that there is no God:

The universe runs itself, and the eternal laws inherent in Nature suffice, without any first cause or prime mover, to produce all that is and all that we know; the perpetual movement of matter explains everything: why need we supply a motor to that which is ever in motion?'

By blaspheming, the Sadean libertine publicly pronounces that he/she is no longer subject to God or his laws. The fact that the majority of society does believe in God makes blasphemy an outrageous and transgressive act, and therefore a thrilling one. In breaking this taboo, the libertines gain further pleasure.

These views on that God does not exist and that religious repression should be cast off-positioned Sade outside mainstream society. As indicated above, rather than pursue religion and its restrictions on carnality, Sade followed nature. Sade believed that because we are all created by nature, any urges or desires that we feel are from nature and in consequence must not be ignored or repressed: "Absurd to say the mania offends nature; can it be so, when 'tis she who puts it in our head? Can she dictate what degrades her?"⁹

Contrary to Christian religion, which preaches to love one's neighbor, in nature there is only the survival of the fittest. For Sade, other people are competition: either potential oppressors or victims to be abused. Because he saw no bond between people and no God presiding above, Sade instead looked to nature and the instincts that come from it. He understood our instincts and desires to be like messages from nature, urges that it needs us to express in order to ensure its survival. Yet, these urges are both creative and destructive. Indeed, we experience the desire for both sex and violence, and on occasion these desires are expressed within the same act. While society rules that these desires are base, animalistic and in some cases criminal, the church views them as evil. In general, there is a distinct opposition established in Western culture between nature and religion, which Sade embraced. As church and society viewed the natural as antithetical to the idea of the good and the virtuous, Sade and his characters, aligned themselves with all that was seen as reprehensible, blasphemous and evil.

However, in contradiction to his view that nature's instincts must be followed, Sade also thought that nature's designs should be thwarted, because as well as being creative, natural forces also lead to destruction and death. Hence, by destroying nature and going against its designs, the Sadean libertine paradoxically perpetuates it. Accordingly, homosexuality and abortion are condoned and celebrated by Sade as strategies that neutralize the chances of conception inherent in sexual intercourse. For example, one of Sade's characters advises that "there are milder means for keeping the population trimmed to neat and sensible dimensions: they would be by encouraging and recompensing sapphism, sodomy and infanticide. These three activities ensure that the only thing to be produced from libertine activity is the libertine's own pleasure.

Another way of thwarting nature is to impose rules and methods while exercising nature's urges. "Let us put a little order in these revels; measure is required even in the depths of infamy and delirium." Pleasure is gained not only from performing an act it is gained also by thinking through and analyzing all aspects of the act, in order to ensure that the full potential of each situation is realized and no chance to break any further taboos has been missed. Thus, Juliette is admonished by one of her mentors, Clairwil, for committing crimes only in the heat of passion:

Whenever Juliette commits a crime, it is One must proceed calmly, deliberately, lucidly. Crime is the torch that should fire the passions, that is a commonplace; but I have the suspicion that with her it is the reverse, passion firing her to crime.'

It is crucial to emphasize at this point that although nature has given the Sadean libertine the desire to commit violent, carnal or criminal acts, for Sade it is the idea of these actions and the transgressiveness of the activity that create pleasure. These actions should not simply be the result of an immediate impulse; rather, the impulse must be felt, then analyzed and then carried out. For Sade's characters, nature's urges are followed, but only after they are subjected to intellectual reflection. As an expression of their sovereignty, they follow nature yet also conquer it.

Thus, whenever a group of libertines meet for debaucheries, their activities are always meticulously planned and organized. Although the four Masters in *The 120 Days of Sodom* hid themselves in a chateau away from the outside world, their first address to everyone in their household is a list of rules that must be followed and a routine that is set out for each day. In *Justine*, Justine is taken prisoner by another group of four men: an order of monks who keep their female captives locked within their monastery. Both groups of libertines have rigid systems of conduct set in place, with the

victims divided into different classes and subgroups. One of the most important voices in the critical debates concerning Sade's transgressive literature, the American author and scholar Camille Paglia, is correct when she describes the libertines as being similar to "colonies of ants": the libertines follow the natural order in which every person has a certain place and a certain duty to perform.¹³ The hierarchy is like a food chain, with those who are stronger presiding over those who are weaker.

But while following nature, the libertines also subvert it. Rather than succumb completely to their urges that almost overwhelm them, once they are engaged in carnal activities the libertines simultaneously engage in philosophical debate: "There's more to it than just experiencing sensation; they must also be analyzed. Sometimes it is as pleasant to discuss as to undergo them." The intermingling of sex and thought is a trait common to all of Sade's sexual scenes, with descriptions of sexual acts presented alongside lengthy dialogues. For example, *Philosophy in the Bedroom* is made up of nothing but dialogue, being set out more like a play than prose. The activities of the characters are known to the reader only because the characters narrate what they are experiencing." This, again, represents an obedience to nature's laws, followed by their subversion.

Natural processes are also perverted by Sade's libertines through the practice of sodomy. The sexuality depicted in Sade's works is very fixated on the anal, with sodomy as common as vaginal intercourse. This use of sodomy carries a symbolic function, representing the fundamental aspects of Sadean sexuality. While vaginal intercourse has the capacity to create life, with anal intercourse there is no chance of reproduction. The anus is the orifice through which waste is excreted, from which toxins, bacteria and all that the body no longer needs is expelled. Without such expulsion, the body becomes poisoned and begins to die. These connections with waste and filth set anal intercourse in opposition to the regenerative and reproductive aspects of vaginal intercourse. Vaginal intercourse leads to life; therefore, anal intercourse is linked with death.

It should be noted that the idea of anal sex being linked to death is a rather old-fashioned and outdated view, which risks sounding homophobic. Certainly the fact that contraception is now widely available means that all forms of sex can now be non-procreative. Yet, in Sade's time this was one of the only full proof forms of contraception available; therefore, it was valued, as it was conquering nature and its procreative will. The prevalence of anal sexuality also goes against what Leo Bersani describes as the "taboo on 'passive' anal sex," where "[t]o be penetrated is to abdicate power." Throughout his novels all his libertines engage in passive anal sex as a form of pleasure while still maintaining power. Just as one gains power from conquering nature, power also comes from conquering, and then embracing, a social taboo.

Yet, for all their power, there is still a linking between sex and death in Sade's works and philosophy. These forces of sex and death both exert great power over the drives and urges of the body and mind, and certainly there are points where the two become intimately connected. In Sade's native language, French, the orgasm is also referred to as "la petite mort" the "little death." In fact, death is present in all of Sade's sexual scenarios, as he explores a sexuality that is apart from reproduction. All of his libertines spend a good deal of time thinking about and planning their sexual exploits, yet gain very little from the experience because nothing is produced from their efforts. Their excess has only a numbing effect, as if they were playing out their inevitable demise. It is all for nothing because eventually in death they too will be nothing.

Another aspect of anal sexuality in Sade is its effects on gender. While the genitals of male and female are different, men and women are alike in that they both possess an anus: "Male/female differences are annulled in anal equivalence." Therefore, in Sade's works people are no longer divided by gender but by their place in the natural hierarchy of master/mistress and slave. To demonstrate this gender equality, Sade has both women and men take active and passive roles in sodomy. Many of his male characters are effeminate, possessed of soft, rounded bodies, with appetites for passive sodomy and penetration (for example, Durcet in *The 120 Days of Sodom*).

Likewise, many of his female characters have masculine attributes. Even females not in possession of physical anomalies participate in active sodomy through the use of dildos and other implements. Again, this highlights the unnatural aspects of the Sadean libertine's sexuality, as the phallus in these scenarios is artificial. For the libertine, it is not the act that brings the most pleasure; it is the idea. But, of course, there is no idea without the body: the female asserts her dominance over her victim by using their bodies to perform transgressive and unnatural deeds.

From a Freudian perspective, this anal fixation also represents the Sadean libertine as infantile since playing with the body's filth and waste is a childlike gesture. It is only as the child develops that it is taught that the body's waste is a source of disgust which must be hidden. Although this book does not rely on psychoanalysis, it is interesting to note that Sigmund Freud writes of certain people whose character and eroticism can be said to be "anal" in nature, a condition which he believes stems from childhood experience:

As infants, they seem to have belonged to the class who refuse to empty their bowels when they are put on the pot because they derive a subsidiary pleasure from defecating; for they tell us that even in somewhat later years they enjoyed holding back their stool, and they remember ... doing all sorts of unseemly things with the feces that had been passed.¹⁹

This behavior is certainly displayed by most of Sade's libertines. Freud states further that many children hold back their stools as an act of defiance. This is in keeping with Sadean sexuality, where playing with the stool is an expression of defiance of societal norms and taboos. There is a celebration of all that is disgusting and shameful. In *The 120 Days of Sodom* several days are devoted to coprophilia and coprophagy: these perversions are discussed, their merits analyzed, and then the activity is publicly performed.¹⁹ This demonstrates that the Sadean libertine has an infantile sexuality, as the emotions of disgust and shame have not yet developed. Feelings of empathy and compassion for others are undeveloped also. Like the infant, the Sadean libertine is selfish and apathetic and thinks only of his/her own pleasure and survival.

Another trait of the libertines' infantile sexuality is its polymorphously perverse nature. In Freudian theory, this means that the sexuality of the child is not yet centered on the genitals, but is instead, felt throughout the body. It is thus a transgressive sexuality in that it is expressed and felt in areas that do not serve the sexual function. The Sadean libertine's desire is polymorphous, as his/her sexual activities incorporate many different parts of the body (for example) the ingestion through the mouth of the waste product of the anus or being whipped on the back). As well as situating themselves apart from mainstream society, and casting off the prevailing morals concerning behavior, the bodies of the Sadean libertines also function differently. Their polymorphous perversity is a symbol of their divergence from societal norms. While the Church and the State teach that sexuality

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