Sade’s Theatrical Passions

The Theater of the Revolution

The Marquis de Sade entered theater history in 1964 when the Royal Shakespeare Company, under the direction of Peter Brook, presented a play by the unknown author Peter Weiss entitled, The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade.1 Marat/Sade, as the play is usually called, became an extraordinary success story.2 By combining narrators with techniques developed in a multi-year workshop entitled “Theater of Cruelty,” Marat/Sade managed to link the two modernist visionaries of the theater whom everybody had considered to be irreconcilable opposites: Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud. Marat/Sade not only fabricated a new revolutionary theater from the vestiges of modernism, it also coincided with a philosophical and cultural revision of the French revolution that had begun with Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s The Dialectics of Enlightenment (1944/69) and found a preliminary culmination in Michel Foucault’s History of Madness (1972). At the same time, the revival of Sade was fueled by the first complete publication of his work in French (1967) and by Roland Barthes’ landmark study, Sade Fourier Loyola (1971).3 Marat/Sade had thus hit a theatrical and intellectual nerve.

Sade, however, belongs to theater history as more than just a character in a play. Little is known about the historical Sade’s life-long passion for the theater, about his work as a theater builder and manager, an actor and director. As early as 1764, Sade had participated in amateur theatricals, rebuilt the theater at his Chateau de Lacoste, fallen in love with and sponsored various famous actresses, and during the revolutionary years, earned forty sous a day for his work in a Versailles theater. Even more important, however, are the two dozen plays Sade wrote over the course of his life, some of which received major productions in established theaters in Paris. These rather conventional plays differ markedly from Sade’s notorious secret writings, including 120 Days and Justine, but also from his philosophical play, Philosophy in the Boudoir, which will be the ultimate subject of this essay. Sade’s most well-known critics, including Maurice Blanchot, Jean Paulhan, Adorno, Horkheimer, Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Pierre Klossovski, Luce...
Irigaray, and Jacques Lacan, never mentioned these plays and probably knew little about them. But they form a large portion of Sade’s literary oeuvre, indeed the only continuous artistic endeavor in his volatile life. Sade’s engagement with the theater opens a significant line of inquiry into his work because the theater is intimately connected to all the central questions and categories that have emerged from the critical discourse surrounding him, such as the relation between Enlightenment thought and visibility, fantasy and enactment, watching and doing. Finally, Sade’s theaters highlight the way in which his life and work were shaped by the events of the French Revolution. As Marvin Carlson has argued, the theater is the most public of the art forms and therefore was affected much more immediately by the French Revolution than other genres and modes of expression. Sade’s plays were attuned to the momentous changes brought about by the French Revolution, and they therefore offer a particularly nuanced picture of his contentious relation to the most significant event of his time.

Sade’s dramatic oeuvre includes over twenty plays, which were unavailable even in France until the 1970s and only a portion of which have been translated into English. He arranged to have many of these plays read to the boards of the important theaters of Paris, and in several cases these readings led to successful productions. That a majority of them were finally rejected by the boards was due not to their unconventional or controversial nature, as one might expect, but, on the contrary, to the fact that they often seemed disappointingly conventional in their construction of character, plot, and form. In fact, they could not be more different from the perverse writing that has made Sade notorious. What these plays reveal is not a playwright trying to shock, but one trying to conform to and imitate faithfully almost all available genres and styles of the period. One of these plays, Jeanne Laisné ou le Siège de Beauvais (1783), is a historical tragedy preaching patriotism. It received an official reading for the Committee of the Théâtre Français only to be eventually turned down. Le Prévaricateur [The Shyster], written in the same year, is a comedy in the style of Molière, satirizing hypocrisy à la Tartuffe. A third one, Tancredè, is a short scène lyrique en vers reminiscent of Tasso, and Les Jumelles [The Twins] is a farcical comedy based on the romantic confusion caused by identical twins. L’Union des Arts is an entirely different piece yet again, namely a kind of metatheater inspired by Daiguespierre’s Les Trois Spectacles; it mixes freely, as the programmatic subtitle promises, “alexandrines and dissyllables, free verse, prose, music, and vaudevilles.” As a playwright, at least, Sade really could boast of having tried it all.

The most successful of these plays, Le Compte Oxtiern ou Les Dangers Du Libertinage [The Count Oxtiern or the Dangers of Libertinage], was produced at the Théâtre de Molière as well as at Versailles when Sade
was riding high on the wave of the revolution. The success of this play showed, among other things, the relative ease with which he made the transition from the ancien régime to the revolutionary epoch. Oxtiern is not only Sade’s most successful play, but also, in light of his reputation, his most puzzling one. It does nothing less than denounce, in the tone of moral outrage, the doings of a notorious libertine, the Swedish Count Oxtiern, who is duly punished at the end. Not just in terms of plot and character, but also style and dramaturgy, Oxtiern is the continuation of Sade’s official and conventional career as a dramatist, an author of plays that were written to be performed and that therefore conformed to the mores required and expected in the theaters to which he sent them. He knew the people who would be making the decisions, he arranged readings for them, and expected to present his work to the critical public. Sade was attuned to these conventions, as much before the revolution as afterward. The leaders of the revolution were probably right in being skeptical about Sade’s commitment to conventional drama, and they took objection to a play such as Count Oxtiern parading an aristocratic title. Sade, however, managed to get his play into the theater anyway: he offered to remove the aristocratic title and argued successfully that this play precisely denounced the outrageous abuses of authority committed by the aristocracy of the ancien régime.

Sade knew what he was talking about. A landed aristocrat, he not only possessed all the privileges that came with his class, he also exploited them as a matter of course in those sexual episodes that suggest at least a partial overlap between his life and his fiction. But Sade’s relation to the ancien régime and therefore to the revolution that swept it away, was ambiguous. His mother-in-law, Madame de Montreuil, used every influence at court to imprison him, to recapture him when he escaped, and to keep him under arrest when he was about to be released. The weapon she procured from the King for this purpose was a so-called lettre de cachet, with which people of influence could lock away unwanted family members without trial. Even after the revolution had turned French society upside down, it was this fateful letter that led to Sade’s repeated arrests, including his most fateful and final one.

These aristocratic abuses were precisely what Sade later used to shore up his credentials with the new revolutionary government to which he owed his temporary freedom. Although he had been transferred from the Bastille to Charenton ten days before Bastille Day—he had been caught shouting revolutionary slogans to passers-by through a latrine pipe—the revolution freed him from Charenton soon afterwards. Despite his former status as a nobleman, Sade managed to rise within the new revolutionary political order with relative ease—much to his own surprise. In 1793, he was even appointed
chairman of the entire Piques Section. But things did not continue on this fortunate course for long. As the revolution became increasingly radical and secret dissenters were suspected everywhere, it was inevitable that sooner or later someone as notorious as Sade would become a target of revolutionary zeal. It was in fact Jean Paul Marat, who, after reading an unflattering account of Sade’s pre-revolutionary escapades, decided to draw up a death sentence. In an irony that may have escaped Weiss, Sade was thus saved at the last minute by the very assassination of Marat depicted in Marat/Sade. But the revolution soon caught up with Sade anyway, and he was arrested once more. This time, it was the death of Robespierre, on the 10th Thermidor in the Year II of the Revolution (July 28, 1794) that saved him from the guillotine. He was finally released on 24 Vendémiaire, Year III, only to be arrested once more seven years later, in 1801, and interned at Charenton, an internment that lasted until his death in 1814.

This complicated relation to the revolution, which both freed and imprisoned him for life, may account for the dual, almost schizophrenic character of Sade’s dramatic oeuvre. While he was writing conventional plays denouncing libertinism by day he was composing works celebrating it at night. These other works include his infamous 120 Days of Sodom (1782), Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised (1791), Juliette (1997) and La Nouvelle Justine (1797). They were dedicated to ridiculing and perverting the ideals and doctrines of the Enlightenment, in particular the pedagogical novels of Rousseau, the moralistic novellas of Marmontel, and the sentimental novels of Richardson. They were printed secretly and published anonymously, at great danger to both the printer and the author.

Philosophy in the Theater

The scission between Sade’s official plays and his secret novels culminates in a work, Philosophy in the Boudoir (1795), which he composed in the very same genre chosen for his official oeuvre, namely drama. Unique among his plays, Philosophy in the Boudoir can be seen as the missing link between his conventional dramas and his perverse novels. Written just after Sade’s release from the clutches of an increasingly bloody revolution, Philosophy in the Boudoir must be regarded as his ultimate response to the revolution that had almost cost him his life and that would soon cost him his freedom.

The play’s relation to the revolution, specifically to revolutionary thought and action, is at work on several levels. Divided into seven dialogues, Philosophy in the Boudoir is subtitled The Libertine Teachers and slyly places itself in the tradition of the educational and didactic literature of the eighteenth century that belongs to the literary pre-history of the revolution. Philosophy in the Boudoir presents the initiation of a
young girl, Eugénie, into the “Realm of Venus.” The setting is not so much a “bedroom” as a “boudoir,” a space of female privacy quite different from the dark castles and cloisters of Sade’s other writings. The main teacher here is Madame de Saint-Ange and her brother, the Chevalier de Mirvel, who are reminiscent of La Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont in *Liaisons dangereuses*, the main opus of Baroque decadence to which Sade refers throughout his play. The teaching that is being conducted in *Philosophy in the Boudoir* is of a philosophical and practical kind; instructions in philosophy, about the will of nature and the legitimacy of pleasure, are promptly and elaborately put into action. Eugénie is a good student and quickly picks up on all the different types of pleasure that are pointed out to her, but what matters at least as much is that she also comprehends and internalizes the philosophical lessons that license them. In this way, the play really does what its title promises, namely to introduce philosophy into the bedroom.

A number of critics, including Lacan, Irigaray, and Jane Gallop have argued that Sade’s provocation lies in revealing the pederastic structure of “classical Western pedagogy,” begun with Plato’s dialogues. What I will emphasize is another Platonist lineage, namely that *Philosophy in the Boudoir* provokes not only by associating education with pederasty but also by associating philosophy with the theater. *Philosophy in the Boudoir* is a peculiar type of philosophical drama in the tradition of Plato’s dialogues and needs to be analyzed as such. What is risqué about *Philosophy in the Boudoir* is not only the sex, but also the philosophy, or rather the fact that philosophy holds such a central position and potency in a play, that Sade would introduce philosophy not only into the bedroom, but onto the stage.

The relation between theater and philosophy is a central concern in Sade’s official dramatic oeuvre as well. In fact, these plays are especially conventional in their treatment of philosophy; in them the philosopher is being dragged into the spotlight only to be thoroughly ridiculed and denounced. One of these plays, entitled *The Boudoir* (1788), features an adulterous wife, who has learned that her husband is going to spy on her next rendezvous. Anticipating this hidden observer, she arranges for the meeting with her lover anyway, but puts on a show in which the two pretend that all they do is talk moral philosophy. When it comes to making fun of philosophy, what is even more delicious than such a pretend-philosopher is a real stage philosopher. Such a stage philosopher populates Sade’s very first play, *The Self-Proclaimed Philosopher* (1772). Under the veneer of higher things, this self-proclaimed philosopher is only interested in women. With great delight, the play lets him fall into a trap and be exposed as the hypocrite he really is. All he has left to say is, “Oh Socrates! Oh Plato! What has become of your disciples?” Yes, these disciples have indeed
fallen low. But this is what the theater has always suspected or at least what it has always demonstrated ever since Socrates was made a fool of by Aristophanes. In his official dramas, Sade thus faithfully followed a tradition that began with Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, a tradition that brought philosophy into the theater for the exclusive purpose of humiliating it.

In *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, by contrast, the philosopher is no longer the fool, but instead becomes the successful seducer. It is this attempt to elevate the function of philosophy within the theater that makes *Philosophy in the Boudoir* a play in the tradition of Plato. To be sure, Sade was not an original philosopher and he did not write in an identifiably Platonist manner. However, he had a keen sense for the drift of ideas, and he had the instinct to incorporate them into dramatic structures. Indeed, many of the leading *philosophes*, including Rousseau, Voltaire, and Diderot, had written plays featuring philosophers, some of them with direct reference to Plato’s dialogues. Voltaire, for example, responded to a dramatic ridicule of Enlightenment philosophers with a play in which Rousseau was featured entering the stage chewing lettuce—reminiscent of Aristophanes’ *The Clouds*—and Sauvigny had written a play called *Mort de Socrate*. Sade’s *Philosophy in the Boudoir* continues this connection between drama and philosophy, albeit in a new and peculiar fashion.

The renewed prominence of philosophy in the theater registered in *Philosophy in the Boudoir* was also made possible by the historical event that fundamentally changed the nature and significance of Enlightenment philosophy: the French Revolution. After 1789, philosophy was no longer a laughing matter. In his influential work on the French Revolution, Roger Chartier analyzed the institutions that provided the channels between ideas and actions, philosophical thought and revolutionary deed. Among these channels were libraries, literary societies and clubs, loges, salons and journals, along with rising literacy, and more generally the ways in which readers trained to practice independent judgment, without reference to external authority. In order for Enlightenment philosophy to achieve its full impact, however, it not only needed to circulate, it needed to be translated and popularized. This occurred, as Chartier points out, through any number of “low” genres, ranging from pornographic broad sheets to denunciatory pamphlets, sometimes written by the philosophers themselves but more often by an army of popularizers, which included such well-known figures as Raynal, Du Laurens, Mercier, and Bordes. Their pamphlets turned the philosophical thought of the *Lumières* into revolutionary action.

In *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, philosophy and dramatic action are linked through just such a revolutionary pamphlet. This pamphlet, entitled “One More Effort, Frenchmen, If You Want to Be Republicans,”
is printed in the middle of the play and putatively read aloud by the Chevalier. The revolutionary credentials of this pamphlet are beyond doubt: during the revolution of 1848, this pamphlet was extracted from the play and circulated in order to incite revolutionary action.\textsuperscript{13} Within the play, however, it serves to justify actions of a different sort. It describes the consequences of the liberty advocated by the revolution, the slippage from the Enlightenment’s attack on authority to the unleashing of the unrestrained individual and from philosophical reason to a rationality that obeys no moral law. In their influential chapter on Sade and Kant in \textit{The Dialectics of Enlightenment}, Adorno and Horkheimer regard Sade as the dark side of Enlightenment reason, the moment when reason no longer admits any authority beside itself and becomes a blind and empty weapon. Kant’s definition of Enlightenment, “to use reason without guidance by another,” thus leads to unguided violence in rational form.\textsuperscript{14}

In the pamphlet featured in \textit{Philosophy in the Boudoir}, this logic is developed in full. Instead of a god or a moral law, it posits nature as the sole ground for action and its sole authority. Sade is attuned to the philosophical discourse of the day—and he perceives its dissonances. While Rousseau had spoken of natural rights, Sade turns these natural rights into the rights of nature. Nature becomes the new law or rather the absence of any other law. The pamphlet declares, in the course of developing its argument for incest: “Is it possible to imagine Nature having allowed us the possibility of committing a crime that would outrage her?” (326). Breaking the incest taboo becomes the lever with which this pamphlet unheses family ties and replaces civil society with the desires of individuals. While the family, and thus brotherhood, becomes an occasion for incest, the other two slogans of the revolution are perverted as well: liberty becomes libertinage and equality, sexual exchangeability: “all men therefore have an equal right of enjoyment of all women; therefore there is no man who, in keeping with natural law, may lay claim to a unique and personal right over a woman” (319). The question of equality is also connected to one of the pamphlet’s favorite themes: sodomy. It is here that Sade echoes Plato, or at least what history has made of the \textit{Symposium}: “[To show Eugénie how it is done, he socratizes Augustine himself]” (267). For Sade, however, “socratizing” is only indirectly a question of Plato and more directly a question of the revolution in the sense that it is the sexual practice guaranteeing equality.\textsuperscript{15}

Even as the pamphlet takes the entire philosophy of the Enlightenment and applies it to the boudoir, the crudeness of simply inserting this pamphlet—eighty pages in my edition—in the middle of the play evades the question of how philosophy and action can be truly intertwined. The pamphlet gives us a summary of the way Sade treats Enlightenment philosophy, but it does not say much about how this phi-
losophy is going to transform drama. The relation between philosophy and action, however, composes the center of the play, for Sade recognized that the nexus of philosophical pamphlet and action at work in the French Revolution had consequences for drama. Drama means “action” in Greek. A profound change in the way a culture understands action will ultimately have ramifications for the art form that is, more than any other, dedicated to the representation of action. Just as the revolution had turned Enlightenment philosophy into revolutionary action, almost including the Marquis among its victims, so Sade turns his perversion of this philosophy into his own perverse theatrical enactment: “Let’s speak less, and act more instead. I’ll direct the scene” (260).

_Sade’s Paradox of the Actor_

How can Sade bring his own version of Enlightenment philosophy to bear on the theater? A truly philosophical theater always implies, as it had for Plato, a competition between philosophy and dramatic action in the course of which both are substantially altered. Indeed, Sade’s philosophical theater does not leave the theater in peace, but analyzes it, takes it apart, and looks for its internal contradictions and paradoxes. The primary target of this analysis is the actor.

Simply put, the paradoxical position of Sade’s actors is that his plays describe and demand a specific set of actions, which, however, are impossible for human actors to perform. Sade’s scenarios, the scenes of multiply interlocked bodies, of constantly and endlessly repeated sexual acts, simply go beyond the capacities of human bodies. This paradox can be compared profitably to Diderot’s famous “Paradox of the Actor” (1777). Diderot declared that actors must be in control of their emotions at all times so they can create the perfect illusion of emotion. Theatrical enactment and representation require total control of the actor’s body, gestures, expressions, movements, and posture, a repertoire of tricks through which the illusion of passions and affects is produced. In order to make passions visible on the stage, the actor must not, in truth, be possessed by them. A performance of _Philosophy in the Boudoir_ renders this strategic dichotomy between interior and exterior unnecessary and meaningless. Thoroughly rationalized in both its philosophy and the enactments it demands, the play has no conception of an interiority that must or even could be elaborately expressed by a dispassionate actor. Everything happens on the outside, from the outside, and for the outside, every tableau and interaction is described, explained, and justified with the utmost precision before it is executed. Excitement is not something that must be called forth from the depth of the soul, but something that is produced through a scientific knowledge of the various regions of the body, the sequence
of acts that must be executed in order to produce certain predictable
effects. In addition, Diderot’s paradox would be impossible to sustain
in *Philosophy in the Boudoir* because this play demands that its repeti-
tive script result in one sexual climax after the other, with visible re-
results. False acting—faking it—does not even exist as a possibility;
within the play’s science of pleasure, such pretended excitement has
no place. Action is always actual, direct, unambiguous, and real.

In the theater, acting also means making things visible. Indeed, the
entire play is built around the desire to see theory in action: to watch it
take happen. This general principle is encapsulated in the boudoir, which
is fitted with mirrors everywhere. Madame de Saint-Ange explains
their purpose: “By repeating our attitudes and postures in a thousand
different ways, they infinitely multiply those same pleasures of the per-
sons seated upon this ottoman. Thus everything is visible, no part of
the body can remain hidden: everything must be seen” (203). Every-
thing must be visible, if only for pedagogical purposes. Every demon-
stration must happen directly under the eyes of the pupil, just as the
pupil must exercise under the discriminating eye of her teachers.

Watching, seeing, inspecting, observing—these terms are deeply in-
tertwined with the Enlightenment philosophy that is being staged.
Sade’s dissection of action and acting thus has its counterpart in his
dissection of seeing. Just as a new understanding of action had impli-
cations for *drama*, so a new understanding of sight had implications for
the *theatron*, the place of seeing. Sade thus recognized the Enlighten-
ment’s fetish of the eye and decided to pervert it. The *Lumières*
claimed that they were shedding light on what had hitherto remained
obscure. *Philosophy in the Boudoir* demonstrates the consequences of
this relentless scopic drive and imperative. In the middle of explaining
why the whole punitive system of the monarchy must be done away
with, the pamphlet declares: “All these were acts considered of the
highest importance under the monarchy; but are they quite serious in
a republican State? That is what we are going to analyze with the aid
of philosophy’s torch, for by its light [lumière] alone may such an in-
quiry be undertaken” (311). This light, however, is not only used to ex-
amine philosophical problems, but also, at the same time, directed to-
ward the human, more specifically toward the sexual. In *Philosophy in
the Boudoir*, nothing must remain unseen, nothing must remain un-
staged, nothing must remain hidden. Within the enclosed walls of the
bedroom, light must be shed on everything. Thus the philosophy of
light and enlightenment is turned into a theater in which this light
will encounter no more obstacles. The scopic imperative becomes a
theatrical imperative: everything must become visible and therefore
everything must be enacted and staged.

This spectacular imperative is also caught up in Sade’s paradox of
the actor, for the limit imposed on action is at the same time a limit
imposed on visibility. While Diderot’s actor is concerned about evoking the interior passion through a dispassionate external display of gestures and movements, Sade insists on the purely external so relentlessly that it falls apart. This destruction of the external through an insistence on the external, the destruction of visibility through an insistence on the visible, are the strategies by which Sade launches his attack on the theater. This attack becomes the point of departure for the way in which he revises and re-imagines the theater, for his construction of a new type of philosophical theater.

Ther the Closet

One way of describing the consequences of Sade’s paradox is to say that he no longer envisions his drama in terms of a human theater. Despite his ideological insistence that individual pleasure is the measure of all things, this measure itself is broken apart into its different components, and the human form analyzed as to its different functions without concern for the whole ensemble. This analysis of the human is carried over into the play’s scenes and tableaux. What matters in them is not so much who does what to whom, but how the different body parts can be arranged and re-arranged—no matter to whom they belong. What Sade does through his exclusive interest in the combination and recombination of isolated organs is to construct what Deleuze would call “desiring machines.”¹⁶ The question of whether and to what extent bodies are machines was one of the primary questions of the eighteenth century, raised most succinctly by Julian Offray de la Mettrie influential L’Homme Machine (Man a Machine) (1748). Even Diderot’s paradox had been cast in de la Mettrie’s vocabulary of the mechanical, for the dispassionate actor was supposed to be able to control his body like a machine, as Joseph Roach has shown.¹⁷ Once more, Sade takes Diderot and turns his theory upside down. For Sade, it is not a question of the actor controlling his gestures like a machine, but of the actor actually becoming a machine and thus becoming thoroughly dehumanized. Calling the characters in Philosophy in the Bedroon “desiring machines” is a way of indicating the ways in which they are no longer human but instead assemblages of organs that can be decomposed and recomposed, combined and reconfigured at will. The machine is a concept or metaphor that points to the limit of the human actor in Sade.

The means by which Sade turns characters into isolated and exchangeable, mechanical body parts is by individually naming them with words, by creating an inventory of organs and functions. Philosophy in the Boudoir starts with an Adamic scene of naming, of affixing names to body parts. The lexicon required for such inventories points to another aspect of Sade’s attack on visibility and enactment, namely
what Barthes described as a retreat from the visual and a move towards the textual: “he [Sade] always sides with semiosis rather than mimesis” (37). Naming body parts, arranging them in impossible configurations and tireless episodes is more important than the question of how actors are going to enact these episodes on a stage. Sade’s agent-machines are made of language. Sade may be doing it all, but he is doing it all with words.

This textualist argument, as one might call it, certainly captures an important aspect of Sade’s oeuvre, but it needs to be specified and supplemented with respect to the particular genre of drama with which he was grappling. Philosophy in the Boudoir is probably the most literal version of a genre called the closet drama, a drama purposefully written not to be staged. Indeed, the boudoir of the play’s title is precisely the same as the “closet” which gave the closet drama its name. The genre of the closet drama, which begins with Plato’s dialogues, has tended to withdraw from the stage for two reasons: because it focuses on theory rather than action and because it depicts illicit scenes. One might say that the closet drama was formed for reasons having to do both with philosophy and with the bedroom. The first is an expression of the conventional wisdom that philosophy does not “work” on the stage, as it is often said; the second is an expression of censorship. Sade noticed the odd alliance of these two forms of censorship and connected them. If he were merely a humorist, one might say he tried to titillate audiences by promising that if they were willing to endure philosophy on the stage, their eyes were going to be richly rewarded. This quid pro quo, however, exists only in the nastiest form imaginable. Philosophy in the Boudoir, ultimately, is interested in something else, namely in turning both philosophy and illicit action into a textual extravaganza in which eighty pages of philosophical treatise and lengthy theoretical dialogues are confronted with scenes that themselves exceed the mimetic and therefore dwell only in the sphere of writing.

The genre of the closet drama, with its refusal of visible stage action, further complicates the already paradoxical position of action as it is deployed and undone in Sade’s play. One way in which Philosophy in the Boudoir effects the drift from action (mimesis) to text (semiosis) is through its stage directions. While the characters delight in anticipatory descriptions of scenes and tableaux, the stage directions are short, matter of fact, laconic, and generic: “(They do as they have said)” (205); “(She does so)” (214, 270); “(They arrange themselves)” (260); “(the posture is assumed)” (290); “(All is arranged)” (293); “(The positions are arranged)” (242); “(The stage is set)” (361); “(executing the called-for attitude)” (365); and the final “(Everything is done)” (366). While in his novels, Sade takes every occasion to describe and re-describe his scenarios, in this play he seems to limit himself to de-
scribing a scenario once or, often, not at all. Even as he spends much time and energy going systematically through all the possible combinations and permutations, one begins to suspect that it is not so much the pleasure of each of them that matters, but the idea of enacting them itself. At the moment when Sade could pull all the stops and really have language substitute for action, lavishly describing in stage directions those actions that are impossible to execute on a stage, as many other closet dramas do, he prefers to mark a limit of what language can do. At times, he goes so far as to sketch continual action in order to turn his language back to philosophy: “(It should be pointed out that the pollutions continue throughout all of the dialogue)” (261). The scene, although so central to Sade’s concept of action, is evoked by nothing but a place holder, even an afterthought; you have to fill in the action yourself.

Just as the closet drama questions action, it questions visibility. When Madame de Saint-Ange explains how her mirrors make everything visible to everyone, she speaks of participants who would take a temporary break and just enjoy watching. But Philosophy in the Boudoir ends up assaulting even such temporary spectatorship. The first such assault is directed at the pupil Eugénie, who is instructed to watch an ejaculation. No sooner has she exclaimed “Magnificent spectacle,” than she becomes temporarily incapable of seeing: “... it sprang into my very eye” (262). What precedes this last remark is an ellipsis, indicating a gap in the sequence, a moment of blindness during which the action can be neither seen nor described. A similar moment of blindness occurs a little later. Again, the scene is framed by an insistence on visibility, on the desire to see and to be seen: “I am performing before my master’s eyes,” (281) the Chevalier says. What he does not take into account, however, is that his master may not be in a position to observe him: “I am blinded by fucking,” Dolmance exclaims. Somehow, seeing becomes impossible when it is most desired.

While episodes of blindness like these may be accidental, or at least accidents, they point to a more fundamental undoing of visibility at work in this play. Early on in the third dialogue, for example, Madame de Saint-Ange begins with the usual, “I see your x,” “I see your y,” catalogue, but she quickly finds this unsatisfying and demands of her student instead: “Describe what you feel” (205). The target of such descriptions is not the eye, but the imagination. “By God, what an imagination!” are also the words of highest praise which Dolmance bestows on his pupil. What he means is the following: “Look, Madame, do you see it? Do you see this libertine discharge mentally [de tête], without anyone having touched her?” (Sade’s emphasis, 288). While seeing is restricted by momentary blindness, actions, the interaction of touching bodies, is elevated, dare I say in a Platonic manner, into the mental acts of the imagination.
 However, as much as the category of the closet drama points to the fact that Sade’s philosophical play undoes the categories of acting, action, and seeing, it must be remembered that this undoing occurs in the context of Sade’s varied engagement with the theater. While Barthes and all those who insist on the move from the mimetic to the textual are right in raising the question of invisibility, they forget that Sade was able to stage this iconoclasm only by insisting, at the same time, on the visible and on theatrical action. Martin Jay has pointed out in *Downcast Eyes* that Barthes belongs to an iconoclastic tradition of French philosophy. It is due to the “denigration” of vision in French thought and the insistence, instead, on the purely textual, that Barthes was able to recognize the limits of visibility in Sade’s work. That Sade wrote closet dramas is perhaps the most tangible effect of this denigration of vision.

But this insistence on the textual made Barthes and others disregard (if they were not simply ignorant of) the other side of Sade’s work, namely his sustained dramatic oeuvre for the stage. Once we take this work seriously, a different picture emerges, not one of a simple “denigration” of vision, but of a simultaneous insistence of vision and its destruction. For Sade, it was not so much a question of eyes being downcast, but wide open or, to capture the intermixture of the visible and the invisible, wide shut. Sade was drawn to the theater; he used the theater even as he questioned its fundamental assumptions. He sensed the tensions within theater and drama and used them to stage his own philosophical theater in the tradition of Plato. The absolute dedication to the theater and at the same time its critique becomes clear only when we consider his philosophical theater in contrast to his official work for the public stage. His conventional, visible, possible, actorly, and scenic theater was the necessary counterpart and foil for his other theater that was unofficial, secret, unconventional, invisible, and impossible, an ob-scene theater that defied enactment. Sade was keeping the official theater close at hand in order to bring about its destruction by a perverse mixture of a sexual and philosophical theater.

Sade’s theater did not come out of nowhere. The Enlightenment had always sensed that its project of the visible, of shedding light, its celebration of the eye was linked, in disquieting ways, to the theater. A first, tentative, effort in capitalizing on the theater’s relation to enlightenment philosophy was Diderot’s dialogue *Le Neveu de Rameau* (1762–1774). Ever since Foucault’s *History of Madness*, Rameau’s nephew has been seen as the figure of unreason (*déraison*) incarnate. Detached from all truth, he creates what Foucault calls “the pantomime of non-being” through a theatrical repertory consisting of mimicking, gesturing, and imitation. One might say that Diderot wanted to show to the mid-eighteenth century enemies of the theater that their suspicion had been well founded, that theater really did equal *déraison*. 

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*Martin Puchner*
Rousseau, it turned out, was right in fearing that the *theatron* would do harm to the light of philosophy. But the person who ultimately proved this fear beyond anything Rousseau could have imagined was not Diderot but Sade. Diderot may have confronted reason with drama, but his parodic pantomime seems rather good-natured in contrast to what Sade had in store for Enlightenment thought. Enlightenment philosophy and Enlightenment theater were equally undone by Sade and turned into the material out of which he forged a new philosophical theater.

Notes

1 Originally published in German as *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung Jean Paul Marats dargestellt durch die Schauspielgruppe des Hospizes zu Charenton unter Anleitung des Herrn de Sade* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964).

2 The play was later made into a film: *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum at Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*, prod. Michael Birkett, dir. Peter Brook, MGM/UA, 2000, videocassette.


6 *Œuvres Complètes* de D. A. F. Sade, XXXII, Théâtre, vol. I (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1970). All references to Sade’s work are from this edition unless otherwise noted. In 1993, John Franceschina and Ben Ohmart began what was planned as a four volume translation and edition of Sade’s plays, but only the first two came to fruition. They were published by an obscure publisher and are difficult to find. The Plays of the Marquis Sade: Volume One and *The Plays of the Marquis Sade: Volume Two*, trans. and ed. John Franceschina and Ben Ohmart (Durango, Co: Hollowbrook Publishing, 1993).

7 Comp. Hayman (1978), 22.


10 For an extended discussion of Voltaire and the theater see Marvin Carlson’s excellent *Voltaire and the Theatre of the Eighteenth Century* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998).

11 Chartier’s study is directed in particular against a history of ideas that attributes agency to thought without much consideration for its enactment, as represented in Daniel Mornet classic, *Les Origines Intellectuelles de la Révolution Française: 1715–1787* (Paris: Librarie Armand Colin, 1933).


Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), 88.

There is a second reason for Sade’s preference as well, however, namely that it promises an escape from the paradigm of reproductive sex. This is the only moment in *Philosophy* when the invocation of nature is avoided or rather when one understanding of nature has to be played off against the other. A nature that authorizes enjoyment is good, but a nature that demands reproduction is bad.


For an account of the closet drama in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see my *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).


Ibid., 367.
