

Must we celebrate Sade?

Quills, directed by Philip Kaufman, screenplay by Doug Wright, based on his play

David Walsh, Joanne Laurier
9 January 2001

Quills is a fictional account of the last days of the notorious Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), the French writer and philosopher. During the last years of his life Sade was confined at the Charenton insane asylum. The film envisions a drama in which two figures enter into conflict over his fate: the Abbé Coulmier, a gentle soul and a believer in the humane treatment of mental disorder, and Dr. Royer-Collard, a doctor sent by Napoleon's regime to "cure" Sade or silence him. Another participant is a young laundress, Madeleine, attracted by the Count's eroticism and sinister charm.

Director Philip Kaufman and screenwriter/playwright Doug Wright present Sade as a libertine and pornographer fighting for the right to have his works published. When he continues to smuggle his writings out of the asylum, against orders and through the efforts of Madeleine, the Abbé takes away his pens and paper. Sade despairs. But he comes up with the idea of writing on sheets with wine, his own clothes with blood and, eventually, after his tongue has been cut out, with his own excrement on walls. The struggles with authority kill him. This is a story of the irrepressibility of art and desire, which are identified. Madeleine is sacrificed along the way, a victim of the passions Sade's stories arouse in a madman. Royer-Collard pays for his oppressiveness by having his young wife run off with a handsome architect. The Abbé, who has suppressed his desire for Madeleine, goes mad at her death and ends up replacing Sade as the resident artist and story-teller.

Does it matter, should it matter, first of all, that the film is historically preposterous, that it calmly falsifies the elementary facts of Sade's life and character?

Sade did not die in a battle with authority, after having his tongue removed—of all ridiculous "dramatic" devices. (It seems unlikely that this was a common practice in Napoleonic France!) This is how Simone de Beauvoir, in her well-known essay "Must We Burn Sade?," describes his last days: "Probably because the meaning of his life lay henceforth in his work as a writer, Sade now only hoped for peace in his daily life.... He agreed to compose a *divertissement* on the occasion of a visit to Charenton in 1812 by the Archbishop of Paris. On Easter Sunday, 1805, he distributed the holy bread and took up the collection in the parish church. His will proves that he had renounced none of his beliefs, but he was tired of fighting. 'He was polite to the point of obsequiousness,' says [Charles] Nodier, 'gracious to the point of unctuousness ... and he spoke respectfully of everything the world respects.'... He expired in peace, however, carried off by 'a pulmonary congestion in the form of asthma' on the 2nd of December, 1814." (He was also hugely fat by this time.)

More significantly, Sade in *Quills* is a relatively light-hearted lecher and pornographer, prone to lusting after buxom laundresses and so on. Whatever one chooses to make of Sade, he was not this trivial, or, for that matter, given primarily to "normal" heterosexual practices. Whether he was terribly interested in sexuality as such is an issue. The French writer

Georges Bataille, somewhat melodramatically, observes that "Sade, who cut himself off from humanity, only had one occupation in his long life which really absorbed him—that of enumerating to the point of exhaustion the possibilities of destroying human beings, of destroying them and of enjoying the thought of their death and suffering." We'll return to this question.

Wright's method, which involves paying scant attention to historical or social realities, owes something to post-modernist playfulness. Here he describes it: "And given the extremity of his prose, Sade raises inevitable and necessary questions about the very nature of art. What is its true function in a culture? To uphold society's tenets, or to challenge them? To reassure, or to agitate? To buttress those institutions which shape civilizations—the government, the church—or to expose them? Does political oppression actually breed—rather than stifle—provocative art? What happens when we silence our extremists? What happens when we give them voice? As I began to write *Quills*, these questions were more important to me than a literal, biographical account of Sade's life. (Real lives rarely have narrative and thematic continuity, and they can seldom be compressed into two hours. Furthermore, I could never claim the Sade I conjured would be 'accurate.' Inevitably he would be a jumble of assorted facts and my own suppositions.) So I gave myself a gift; that liberating concept known as 'poetic license.'"

How convenient. The "accurate" of course must be in quotation marks, otherwise we might draw the conclusion that Wright is a bit lazy or simply not up to the task of representing an historical figure in any depth.

Is "poetic license" infinitely expansive? Does anything go? Sade is an historic figure of some resonance. We know, for a fact, that he bore very little resemblance to the character in the film. There is a qualitative point beyond which "poetic license" involves distortion and begins to have consequences for the way in which people view the past. History in Wright's work is reduced to a sequence of confrontations between individuals (artists) who seek to act freely, on the one hand, and authority, on the other. His view of Sade is one from which the revolutionary, volcanic character of the age—with all its suffering and sacrifice and disappointment and utopian possibility—has been largely excised. This approach doesn't encourage critical thinking; it merely confirms the sexually and artistically "liberated" middle class in their complacency.

In their *Marquis de Sade*, Wright and Kaufman have invented some figure of the counter-culture of the 1960s. Royer-Collard is a sort of Kenneth Starr type, a cold, reactionary kill-joy, the head of the morality squad. The sub-plot concerning Royer-Collard's wife is absurd. The hypocritical doctor takes her from a convent and on their wedding night forces himself brutally upon her. After witnessing one of Sade's theatricals, she goes and purchases one of his forbidden works and pastes it inside her book of verse for ladies. Reading *Justine* apparently is enough to transform her into a throbbing bundle of sensuality. If such

transformations were so painless, if revolt was so accessible, if the impact of art was so immediate and decisive...

The questions that Wright says he asked himself, at any rate, are legitimate, if a little banal, but they are answered far too easily. In fact, we know the answers before we settle down in our seats in the movie theater. Art's function *is* to challenge society's tenets; it *is* to agitate; it *is* to expose those institutions which shape civilizations. Political oppression breeds rather than stifles provocative art. We pay a price when we silence our extremists; we also pay a price when we give them voice. Etc., etc. Is there anything unsurprising in any of this, anything likely to convince someone not already convinced?

There is an element of protest here, but it is a weak and diluted one. And it threatens to turn into its opposite. The point is made a number of times, almost as a threat to the powers that be, that if violent and subversive thoughts are not permitted artistic expression they might take more dangerous forms. Individuals are dangerous in their imaginations or their literary works, so they are relieved of that responsibility in everyday life. Art is not a challenge, it turns out, of existing institutions, but a relatively harmless substitute for such a challenge, a safety valve. This is not a work that conceives of art as playing a role in the transformation of reality.

The drama too is weak. We know everything about these characters within 10 minutes. Sade is a wit, a rake, with a hint of depravity; Royer-Collard is ceaselessly villainous; Coulmier is tormented and uncertain; Madeleine is pure, but inquisitive and mischievous. The film unfolds as a series of sequences in which the creators manipulate the characters and force them into antics in order to give the semblance of life to an essentially repetitive and predictable work.

Kaufman's filmography is not that encouraging. Conventional action pictures—*The Great Northfield, Minnesota Raid, The White Dawn*—the remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, an adaptation of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Henry & June* (about Henry Miller, his wife and Anais Nin) and the anti-Japanese *Rising Sun*. It's difficult to discern a strong theme in these works, although there is obviously an interest in erotic and vaguely oppositional material.

Quills does not impress with its intellectual weight. A great deal of time has been spent on sets and costumes, and not enough on thinking through the historical and moral questions. The radicalism is facile. It is the sort indulged in by fundamentally comfortable people who are upset by this or that act of official society, but not enough to dedicate their lives to resisting its functioning.

And there is a related and more disturbing issue. It must be noted that both Kaufman's film and Benoît Jacquot's recent *Sade*, although very different in tone and substance, take as their starting point, as a given which "everyone accepts," that the French Revolution was simply an abomination, a catastrophe. Kaufman-Wright's work begins with an extended pre-credit sequence involving a young woman being prepared for the guillotine. The screen goes blood red, the film begins. Sade's struggle for freedom is purely individual. The masses, seen drooling and howling around the guillotine in the opening, are a wretched lot and a more general liberation is out of the question. This is the point to which a type of "protest" politics has arrived.

Peter Weiss's play *Marat/Sade* (1964, filmed by Peter Brook in 1966) adopted a different stance. It consists of a running debate between Sade and the French revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat. The latter speaks of the Terror:

Now it's happening and you can't stop it happening
The people used to suffer everything
now they take their revenge
You are watching that revenge
and you don't remember that you drove the people to it
Now you protest
but it's too late

to start crying over spilt blood
What is the blood of these aristocrats
compared with the blood the people shed for you
Many of them had their throats slit by your gangs
Many of them died more slowly in your workshops
So what is this sacrifice
compared with the sacrifices the people made
to keep you fat

What are a few looted mansions
compared with their looted lives

Sade responds:
...[M]an has given a false importance to death
Any animal plant or man who dies
adds to Nature's compost heap
becomes the manure without which
nothing could grow nothing could be created
Death is simply part of the process
Every death even the cruellest death
drowns in the total indifference of Nature
Nature herself would watch unmoved
If we destroyed the entire human race

And so on. Weiss may not have written a perfect play, but it is a hundred times more serious than the recent efforts.

Wright turns Sade into an aging roué. He distorts history to get his fairly limited points across.

But what about the real figure of Sade and the infatuation of intellectuals in this century with that figure, which, I suppose, Wright and Kaufman reflect, even in a shallow and relatively respectable form?

Sade was rediscovered in the twentieth century. His major work, *120 Days of Sodom*, was not properly published until the 1930s. In France the poet Guillaume Apollinaire got the ball rolling, calling Sade "the freest mind that ever was." The Surrealists took up his cause, labeling him, logically, "Surrealist in sadism." When André Breton published an excerpt from *Juliette* in his *Anthology of Black Humor* in 1940 he was somewhat more circumspect, describing Sade's writing, "psychologically speaking," as "the most authentic precursor of Freud's work and of modern psychopathology in general." He and Trotsky had disagreed in their discussions in Mexico on an assessment of Sade.

In the postwar era, under conditions of disillusionment with the great social projects that had animated masses of people in the first decades of the century, Sade found some of his most wholehearted defenders—Pierre Klossowski, Georges Bataille, Simone de Beauvoir.

In typical French rationalist style, none of these authors find a means of accurately situating Sade. Much of their response reads like a pose, and a predictable one. The authorities say A—Sade is a monster, his works must be banned; we say B—he is a genius, a liberator, a martyr. It may be, in fact, that one should neither burn nor celebrate Sade.

His writings are generally repellent. In *The 120 Days of Sodom*, for instance, written in the Bastille in 37 days, four libertines, in a remote fortress, assault, torture and eventually murder dozens of victims. Bataille acknowledges, "Sade's fantasies were such that some of them would disgust the most hardened fakir. If anyone pretended to admire the life led by the villains of Silling [in *The 120 Days of Sodom*], he would be boasting." De Beauvoir, the existentialist, writes: "Even his admirers will readily admit that his work is, for the most part, unreadable; philosophically, it escapes banality only to founder in incoherence. As to his vices, they are not startlingly original; Sade invented nothing in this domain, and one finds in psychiatric treatises a profusion of cases at least as interesting as his."

Obviously influenced by eighteenth century materialism, Sade argued that Nature was hateful and destructive, that in obeying his instincts he was merely imitating her. "We are no guiltier in following the primitive

impulses that govern us,” he wrote, “than is the Nile for her floods or the sea for her waves.” He compared himself to plants, animals and the elements: “In her hands I am only a tool that she [Nature] manipulates as she pleases.” Nature would “desire the utter annihilation of all living creatures so as to enjoy her power of re-creating new ones.” The triumph of the strong over the weak and the effectiveness and inevitability of brute force are merely the working out of the natural order. There is nothing terribly original, much less attractive, in this sort of Nature-based defense of cruelty and tyranny.

So what does de Beauvoir find of interest? That Sade “tried to make of his psycho-physical destiny an ethical choice.” Later she observes: “His chief interest for us lies not in his aberrations, but in the manner in which he assumed responsibility for them. He made of his sexuality an ethic; he expressed this ethic in works of literature. It is by this deliberate act that Sade attains a real originality.” De Beauvoir claims not to be moved by the content of Sade’s ideas, but merely by his “headstrong sincerity,” his “authenticity.” She associates his name with the anarchist-egoist Stirner and the German philosophers Nietzsche and Heidegger. “Sade must be given a place in the great family of those who want to cut through the ‘banality of everyday life’ to a truth which is immanent in the world.”

But there is a level of agreement with his conceptions. Universal laws and considerations of any kind, as well as efforts to remake the world, are fraudulent and lead to catastrophe. “This is probably why he [Sade] finds so many echoes today [1951], when the individual knows that he is more the victim of men’s good consciences than of their wickedness,” de Beauvoir writes. The universe is composed of particular beings, separate and isolated. “Thousands of individuals are suffering and dying vainly and unjustly at every moment,” she writes, “and this does not affect us. If it did, our existence would be impossible.” The only truth is individual, subjective. “He adhered only to the truths which were derived from his own actual existence.” And this gem: “Fundamentally, the content of the experience is unimportant. The thing that counts is the subject’s intention.”

“Regaining authenticity by an individual decision,” a decision whose content is immaterial, sincerity, raising one’s obsessions to a principle—de Beauvoir could be describing anyone, including a fascist thinker or artist. The German militarist-nationalist author Ernst Junger was undoubtedly a figure of great sincerity.

The issue is not the authenticity of Sade’s work, but its *truth*. Is it true that “there is no reality other than that of the self-enclosed subject hostile to any other subject which disputes its sovereignty” (de Beauvoir)? Sade and de Beauvoir ignore the reality that human beings do not lead their lives in Nature directly, but mediated through Society, and that Society, as every level of being, has its own *qualitatively* distinct laws, which are not identical with lower levels of being. Society, including eighteenth century French society, is not a mirror of brute Nature, but a radical transformation, an affront to Nature. Sade, in a revolutionary time, chooses, for reasons of his own, largely to ignore the possibilities and potentialities revealed by that revolution. He wishes to go on as before. That does not recommend him to us as a philosopher.

Although he joined the revolution briefly after his release from prison in 1790, Sade was at heart hostile to leveling and democracy. He felt a society based on solidarity and virtue was a lie against Nature. Prefiguring Nietzsche, he thought it would result only in stagnation and inertia. No doubt a certain type of intellectual is attracted to the proposition that “the only thing that has truth for me is that which is enveloped in my own experience; the inner presence of other people is foreign to me” (in de Beauvoir’s interpretation), but it is one we reject.

Sade is a malignantly fascinating figure, a libertine atheist, a feudal materialist, a recounter of the worst fantasies. Someone had to write down all the terrible thoughts of which humanity is capable. Sade the accursed, an aristocrat at the dawn of the bourgeois age, incarcerated for 27 years of

his life (six of them in the Bastille) accepted that assignment. As an embodiment of psychopathology he retains interest. But to make a positive program out of such nightmares or their “headstrong sincerity”? To confuse that with the ultimate expression of freedom? No, that is to give in too easily to the difficulties of our time.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact