

Marquis Value: From Sade to Screen

Text and Interviews by Michael Orlando Yaccarino

Then, by allowing this imagination to stray, by according it the freedom to overstep those ultimate boundaries religion, decency, humanness, virtue, in a word, all our pretended obligations would like to prescribe to it, is it not possible that the imagination's extravagances would be prodigious?

from *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795), **Marquis de Sade**

Alternative filmmaker Jess Franco has expressed his interest in the incendiary literary universe of the Marquis de Sade through his own work on many occasions and in a variety of cinematic ways. More precisely, he has adapted Sade's *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* or *Les instituteurs immoraux* (or *Philosophy in the Bedroom* or *The Immoral Teachers*) for several films—most notably, *Eugénie...the story of her Journey into Perversion* (1969), *Plaisir à trois* (1973), and *Eugenie, Historia de una perversion* (1980); and to a much lesser degree, *Eugénie de Sade* (1970) and *Cocktail spécial* (1978). A focus on *Plaisir à trois* will reveal how this oft-overlooked film most faithfully expands, explores, and deepens the core issues and idiosyncratic milieu of its source material. What makes Sade's *La Philosophie...* unique in the non-theatrical oeuvre of the controversial French author's work is its structure. Presented as a series of seven dialogues, it charts the systematic corruption of the virginal Eugénie under the tutelage of a libertine trio. The only action described is the myriad couplings of this decadent ménage, including a mind-reeling assortment of perversities. Coming up for air, each of the immoralists delivers, in turn, a series of exquisitely-wrought and extremely rational arguments. The purpose of these is Sade's undoing of the societal glue maintaining order in the civilized world through repression and censorship—namely, organized religion and politics. By the climax, the former maiden's every orifice—physical, mental, and spiritual—have been explored, leading to her ultimate, if not criminal liberation.

A reading of Sade's irreverent tale begs for a stage or screen adaptation through which its vibrant text would be most fully brought to life. Of course, due to its extremely graphic sexual and violent content, the work could never have been adapted for the public stage at the time of its creation in the late 18th century. Even so, it remains one of Sade's most accessible and enjoyable texts—one that challenges Western mores in a completely modern, not to mention grotesquely humorous way. It is not surprising that Sade was such a proficient dialogue writer, as this text attests, since his mainstream theatrical output was mounted successfully throughout a turbulent career.

Sade's *La Philosophie...* has been adapted for the stage more than once in the 20th century with its most prurient acts simulated—while there have been no shortage of cinematic adaptations. The latter range from Jacques Scandelari's 1969 effort—one exploiting the text's name as its title but none of its actual storyline—to Olivier Smolders' 1991 multi-award-winning short film and a 1995 modern interpretation by Tony Guzman.

In a variation on its source material, Franco's film *Plaisir à trois* concerns three sexual and moral extremists: Martine de Bressac (Alice Arno), a mentally-unstable, sex crime perpetrator; Charles de Bressac (Robert Woods), her duplicitous husband; and their deranged, live-in sex toy, Adèle (Lina Romay). The film's narrative commences with Martine's return home from a sanitarium. The treatment gotten there is quickly proven ineffectual as she immediately immerses herself in the depraved pastimes that resulted in her prior confinement. This includes the subterfuge of hiring prostitutes as artist's models in order to install them as permanent additions to a clandestine museum. Housed within the depths of her isolated villa, this horror chamber displays the human prey of its mistress' warped desires—each perfectly preserved through some ungodly serum. Soon Martine is rejoined by Charles. In a seeming effort to expand their repertoire



An ecstatic moment between Martine (Alice Arno) and Charles (Robert Woods) in their museum of human prey. (image © CFFC)

of transgressions, her spouse suggests they create a stratagem to deflower Cécile (Tania Busselier), a diplomat's virginal daughter. But unbeknownst to Martine, Charles has been conducting an affair with the far-from-unsullied lass during his wife's stay at the clinic. Ultimately, the scheming lovers dispose of Martine by making her the latest installation of the profane museum.

The successful transposition of Sade's work to the screen should amount to much more than a simple re-creation of the abominations that are often found therein. Unfortunately, this has served as the standard formula for most Sade-inspired film. The greater cinematic challenge would be an attempt to capture on celluloid even a modicum of Sade's revolutionary ideas that infuse with intellect and wit even his most nefarious scenarios. Franco has realized this uncommon achievement more than once. And so he may be included rightfully amongst the

esteemed directorial ranks of Luis Buñuel and Pier Paolo Pasolini whose respective films, the Surrealist classic *L'Âge d'or* (1930) and the controversial *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975) are both indebted to Sade. There is little need to include here discussion of *De Sade* (1969) by Cy Endfield, Philip Kaufman's *Quills* (2000), or *Sade* (2000) by Benoît Jacquot, three painfully insipid and grossly



Martine (Alice Arno), the razor-wielding anti-heroine of *Plaisir à trois*. (image © CFPC)

inaccurate biographical films of the Marquis' inherently captivating life.

A curious similarity exists between the critics who disparage Sade and Franco. And that is while vehement opinions flourish in both cases, genuine familiarity with the work of each by detractors is scarce. Furthermore, there seems to be little awareness by the same with the tradition of drawing on monstrous exaggeration for satirical effect. A kindred example might be found in the nightmarish paintings of Francisco de Goya, a contemporary of Sade and Franco's compatriot. Surely, the relish with which all three artists consistently employ taboo imagery shows an affinity for such greater than its use as a stylistic device alone. Even so and more significant, Sade, Goya, and Franco incorporate shock tactics to disrupt their viewers' complacency, thus allowing them to tread beyond the boundaries of the conventional.

Extending the connection between literature and the visual arts, Sade and Franco celebrate equally the role of the voyeur in their own work. Innumerable characters in their scenarios possess this kink. Furthermore and unlike many other directors, Franco is unabashed in his role as omnipotent observer, his curious zoom lens forever probing the action. *Plaisir à trois* includes multiple-level variants on the art of watching. As mentioned previously, Martine as artist sketches the model-victims before their addition to the macabre museum, a veritable temple to her ocular mania. Indeed, just prior to meeting a similar fate, one of her prey is *shown* other examples of the once-living statuary frozen in death's paroxysms. Throughout the film, sexual thrills are gotten via the gaze—Martine and Charles enjoy a slideshow of Cécile as they instigate her defloration; the same couple are incited to lovemaking whilst spying the girl's nightly self-pleasuring exhibitions; Charles surveys Martine and Cécile in the bath; and, when not looking on as dumb witness, Adèle participates in the erotic rondo, herself being scrutinized surreptitiously in certain scenes. One of the key sequences on this theme is the dare game resulting in Martine's striptease performance for the others. She ends the dance by mimicking the pose of a mannequin incorporated into the proceedings in a chilling presage of her own imminent

destruction. Shortly thereafter, while in the process of watching, Martine first suspects her partner's interest in Cécile might be for reasons greater than the ex-virgin's debasement. It is during this scene as Charles makes love to Cécile that Franco captures Martine's reaction, a mixture of desire and fury, in dramatic close-up. Furthermore, the director integrates certain visual motifs as a non-verbal method of conveying meaning about his characters' motivations. A stately tracking shot or pan move from right-to-left is used each time the underground museum is entered. This is an apparent metaphor for the ritualistic and unalterable fervor with which the anti-heroine conducts her misdeeds. And more than once, the deceitful Cécile is shown in mirrored multi-reflection—literally, two-faced.

The unexpected vein of humor coursing throughout much of Sade's work is one of its most endearing aspects. Not for popular consumption, it is a severe brand borne of a radical mind inventing through extremism. A fine instance of this is when Sade ends *La Philosophie...* with the arrival of Eugénie's blueblood mother in search of her wayward daughter. What follows is the noblewoman's horrific ravishment and mutilation orchestrated by the transformed hellcat with the aid of her newly-acquired and thoroughly debauched family. The comedy arises from the severe contrast between the pretentious admonitions delivered by the hypercritical woman and the droll ripostes with which the captors greet them, and these with the gruesome agonies visited upon her. With similar sardonic wit, Franco and screenwriter Alain Petit concoct several scenes for *Plaisir à trois* worthy of a drawing room comedy in hell.



Cruel mistress Martine (Alice Arno) prepares for another day of debauchery with Adèle (Lina Romay) at her feet. (image © CFPC)

One sparkling example is Martine and Charles' «chance» encounter with Cécile's unwitting parents. The scheming duo charade as a typical married couple eager to befriend their daughter—when just moments before, a nearly-nude Martine, in only thigh-high boots, had been occupied with applying makeup whilst Adèle looked on adoringly.

Regardless of one's personal judgment, additional readings of *La Philosophie...* reveal the undeniable sincerity with which Sade's potent philosophy is conveyed beneath the élan of his clever prose. Likewise, repeated viewings of many Franco films expose the richness of their narrative construction as relates to imagery. *Plaisir à trois* offers several occurrences of this. One offers succinct illustration of the film's underlying theme of hidden betrayal. During the previously mentioned scene in which the devious pair scrutinizes Cécile's solitary lovemaking,

Martine sits upon Charles' lap so that both confront the camera in fullface. In this way, while the viewer (whose participation further multiplies the voyeurs involved) can see Charles' expression, Martine cannot. Therefore on a second screening, Charles' euphoric reaction to Cécile is



understood as not being of simple lubricity alone. It is one replete with desire for this clandestine lover—to whom, Charles knows, his union with will be achieved soon enough through the death of Martine, the wife he is making love with at that very instant.

In Sade's work, a revolutionary philosophy, the most excessive erotica, and highly-literate storytelling collide to produce an uncompromising vision that retains the power to astound more than two centuries after its creation. Through a profane marriage of like elements, Franco has successfully captured the Marquis' inimitable spirit on film while avoiding slavish re-creation of the author's texts. One exception would be his period film *Justine and Juliet* (1968). But what is more exciting is when Franco accomplishes this cinematic feat with modern-day characters in contemporary settings. *Plaisir à trois* contains many such Sadean moments, the most unforgettable of these involving the film's central character—Martine's voluptuous stroking of the weird museum's «living»



statues; Martine's viciously gleeful showing of the same to a terrified, soon-to-be victim; and later, incited by her voyeurism of Cécile, Martine's ecstatic and unmerciful whipping of Adèle.

The lingering legacy and recent resurgence of Puritanism in America and Victorianism in Great Britain, albeit each movement amusingly tainted by hypocrisy, have branded literature and film containing extreme elements to the ghetto of pornography. So as a result and with little

exception, there does not exist in those countries a grand and evolving tradition of erotica. While in Continental Europe, the sexual is more readily acknowledged as a vital part of the human experience—making it worthy of philosophical contemplation and as such, a valid element for inclusion in the arts. It is unremarkable then that mainstream English-language critics as a whole consider the majority of Jess Franco's output not worthy of serious review. But then again, in these same countries, the recognition of Sade's serious literary merit suffers the same fate. Hopefully, the preceding analysis might help to disprove this prejudice in Franco's case. Furthermore, by analyzing *Plaisir à trois*—a film unfairly considered a trifle in the director's canon—the authentic intellect and artistry with which Franco approaches his work overall will be further established.

In *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, the Marquis de Sade wrote: «...the more we wish to be agitated, the more we desire to be moved violently, the more we must give rein to our imagination; we must bend it toward the inconceivable; our enjoyment will thereby be increased, made better for the track the intellect follows....» Sade spent the greater part of his adult life incarcerated in several prisons and a mental institute. Guilty of unacceptable excesses, the Marquis' greater downfall was as political scapegoat of his aristocratic class at the hands of the rising citizenry. Even so, no shackles could enchain his soaring imagination. Franco, a true cinematic renegade if there ever was one, and Sade are kindred souls in this way—both possessed of fierce minds, parallel obsessions, and uncompromising sensibilities. Whether eliciting ire or adulation, each deserves respect for daring not only to question, but also to successfully shatter and redefine the conventions of their chosen art.

Waxing Philosophic: Remembering *Plaisir à trois*

Jess Franco (director): If Sade is little known these days, you can only imagine what it was like during my first time in Paris in the early 1960s. At that time, nobody but sinners or transgressors—such as me—had even minimal knowledge of this «monster». I started with *Justine* and was immediately caught by the beauty and quality of the writing, before going on to read the rest of his incredible work. As for my methods, I've almost never done a storyboard in my life and greatly believe in improvisation. Even so, the actors did have the screenplay before the shooting began. Alice Arno is very good. Since Sade had not created the character of Martine, I did so myself! My experience working with Robert Woods was excellent. And I think Lina was perfect for the part, both comical and provocative. Personally, I'm never satisfied with my work. Don't forget—I'm a jazz player who makes films. My solos are always sincere—produced fifty-fifty from my soul and my balls. If I could do it, I would change all my films entirely.

Alain Petit (screenwriter): I discovered the world of «*Le Divin Marquis*» in the 1960s. After reading a pocket version of *Justine*, I decided to buy the deluxe edition of the *Oeuvres Complètes* that had just been released in France about 1966. I recall it being very expensive, requiring me to order each one of sixteen volumes by subscription from the publishers. It was the very first time we had the opportunity to discover the whole thing—books, novels, and even all the letters Sade wrote to his wife and relatives when he was in jail. It was a great revelation to me, not only because of the scandalous and erotic texts—that

Martine (Alice Arno) is tended to by loyal manservant Mathias (Howard Vernon), who grants her every wish no matter how bizarre. (image © CFFC)

The horrific finale of *Plaisir à trois*—(from left-to-right) Cécile (Tania Bussellier), Charles (Robert Woods), Martine (Alice Arno) and Adèle (Lina Romay). (image © CFFC)

aspect being the reason why he is so famous everywhere—but also because of the political and philosophical content of all his works. So I really was familiar with Sade when Jess Franco asked me to work on *Plaisir à trois*. This film is a great souvenir for me of an important moment in my career.

Robert Woods (actor): The ideal situation for a smaller production such as *Plaisir à trois* is when it becomes a collaborative effort. And that is precisely what Jess Franco was able to provide on this and other films we made together. He did this by including everyone involved. Franco was in control, but not *in control*, if you understand what I mean. And that's the difference. I love working with directors like that—and there's not too many of them around. In my experience, I find that even a little picture will turn out pretty well if you go into it with such an approach. Franco could make a reasonable film for so little money. I don't know how he did it! But above all else, Franco's collaborative spirit is the one thing I have to commend him for. He was someone who always encouraged suggestions. And while he may not have used them all, he was never a director who said: «Do it my way or not at all!» I clearly recall that Franco not only had a great knowledge of what he was doing on the set, but also imparted what he knew. He was very good about keeping people working together. So it's no mistake that he's a jazz lover—because that talent in filmmaking is what you call harmony. In retrospect, I believed that Franco was a budding genius at the time. Jess has always been someone who could take a matchstick and make a forest of it.

Additional Notes

Film Credits: While for *Plaisir à trois* Franco used his «Clifford Brown» alias, it is not insignificant that the multi-pseudonymous director chose to employ his genuine name of J. Franco Manera for the screenplay credit. Sade's *La Philosophie...* was published originally as being a «posthumous book by the author of *Justine*» so that the Marquis might avoid scandal. Alain Petit completed the film's dialogue and adaptation of Sade's work. Cast members other than those already noted include: Franco film regular Howard Vernon as Mathias, the Bressacs' chauffeur and major domo, as well as the production's still photographer; and Alfred Baillou in the role of Malou, the eccentric hunchback-dwarf gardener. The film was shot by cinematographer Antonio Millán in Portugal and produced by the late Robert de Nesle, owner of the French film production company CFPC or Comptoir Français de Productions Cinématographiques. The film's alternate titles include: *How to Seduce a Virgin, Pleasure for Three, Ultra-Tumba* (or «Beyond the Grave»), and *Les Inassouvies II* (or *The Insatiable Ones II*)—*Les Inassouvies* being the alternate title for Franco's 1969 effort *Eugénie...the story of her Journey into Perversion*. Franco-directed variations of *Plaisir à trois* include: *Sinfonía erótica* (1979) and *Gemidos de placer* (1982; or «Moans of Pleasure»). While currently not available for commercial sale on DVD or videotape, the film rights to *Plaisir à trois* were purchased at auction from de Nesle's widow approximately five years ago. Even so, French-language videotape versions of the film are obtainable from unofficial sources.

Stage and Other Film Adaptations: A noteworthy stage adaptation of Sade's *La Philosophie...* was its 1964 presentation at the La Grande Séverine theatre in Paris by Maurice Girodias, the notorious publisher of erotica and founder of the Olympia Press. Little detail exists of the film adaptation titled *Philosophy in a Bedroom* (1966), reputedly made by American experimental director Alfred Leslie, best

known for co-directing the Beat Generation classic *Pull My Daisy* (1959) with Robert Frank. Olivier Smolders explained how he coupled his 14-minute version of *La Philosophie...* with another of his short films, *Ravissement* (1991), to form a diptych, the latter concerning Sainte Thérèse d'Avila. The Belgian director chose to do so since both works reflect upon «experiences-limites»—that is, those moments that defy intellect, reason, and the senses while remaining impossible to represent visually. On the appeal of Sade's text for his own adaptation, American director Tony Guzman commented: «I was primarily drawn to filming *Philosophy...* because I liked its combination of humor, sex, and polemics. The mixture of vulgarity, refinement, and wit in the language of the characters, especially that of Dolmancé attracted me as well. The film was conceived and written during the administration of George Bush Sr. and was partly a reaction to living under twelve years



The Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), the 18th-century writer whose forbidden work inspired *Plaisir à trois*. (image © CFPC)

of cultural and political conservatism. Sade's celebration of uninhibited sexuality, atheist values, and personal liberty seemed particularly apt for a contemporary adaptation of the work.»

Character Names: Originating from Sade's notorious 1791 «moral tale» *Justine*, Franco utilized the character surname «Bressac» for the first time in *Justine and Juliet* (1968) and then later in *Plaisir à trois* (1973), *Cocktail spécial* (1978), and *Sinfonía erótica* (1979). While not utilized in *Plaisir à trois*, the name «Eugénie» has achieved iconic erotic status due to its appearance in Sade's *Eugénie de Franval* (1788) and *La Philosophie...* Franco's frequent use of it in many films has further solidified this allure.

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About the Author

Michael Orlando Yaccarino specializes in the analysis of genre films and interviews with their creators. His writings on fashion, music, and unconventional historical figures appear in many international publications. With Scot D. Ryerson, he is the co-author of the critically-acclaimed bestselling biography *Infinite Variety: The Life and Legend of the Marchesa Casati*, as well as the play *Portrait of a Muse*, and the fairy tale *The Princess of Wax: A Cruel Tale*. Visit www.marchesacasati.com for more details.