

## “The Philosophical Torch of the Passions”

Apropos of the exhibition *ATTAQUER LE SOLEIL*,<sup>1</sup> at the Musée d’Orsay,<sup>2</sup> 14 October 2014 – 25 January 2015.  
Guest curator: Annie Le Brun.

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For the curator of this exhibition, Annie Le Brun, Edgar Degas’ *Scène de guerre au Moyen-Âge* (above) can be interpreted as “making a link” between Botticelli and Picasso: “we must see what subterranean connections exist between Degas and de Sade; they certainly worried his brother René, who intuitively perceived it in 1864: ‘what brews in his head is

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase “Attack the sun” is a quotation from de Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom*. If one begins with the “divine” character of the sun, it is easy to understand that de Sade’s intention is expressed by the German expression *Himmelsstuermeri*: it is a question of beginning with the assault on the heavens. From the sun emanates the order of the world, which de Sade wanted to shake. If he refers constantly to nature, it is also to contest her authority.

<sup>2</sup> Internet page: [http://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/evenements/expositions/au-musee-dorsay/presentation-generale/article/sade-41230.html?tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=254&cHash=3f6f98c92b](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/evenements/expositions/au-musee-dorsay/presentation-generale/article/sade-41230.html?tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=254&cHash=3f6f98c92b).

<sup>3</sup> Translated by NOT BORED! 19 November 2014 from the French translation made by the author. The original version was in German and was published in a slightly amended version by *Tageszeitung* on 12 November 2014. All footnotes by the author.

frightening.’ In this sense, *Scène de guerre au Moyen-Âge* can serve as the emblematic painting of this exhibition as a whole.”

For Annie Le Brun, a poet, writer and essayist who comes from surrealism, this is not her first exhibition at the Musée d’Orsay. In the spring of 2013, she participated in *L’Âge du Bizarre, le romantisme noir (de Goya à Max Ernst)*,<sup>4</sup> an exhibition that encountered great success and whose catalogue has become impossible to find.

Who else could be entrusted with this new exhibition about de Sade, if it wasn’t going to be this great connoisseur and admirer of the “divine Marquis”? Her many essays on de Sade are written in an inimitable style and with a rare depth, to the point that we tend to forget previous works by other authors, no matter what their qualities are.

Le Brun’s passionate defense of de Sade is more relevant than ever, since, in these last few years, attempts at a new *doxa* have piled up, tending to pass de Sade off as the pathological anticipation of capitalist alienation when he isn’t the literary ancestor of the Nazi regime (a tendency begun a long time ago by Adorno and Horkheimer<sup>5</sup> and still active to this day). This is why one rejoices to see that a good number of the visitors are coming from abroad, notably Germany, which remains hostile to de Sade.

The entrance hall brings the visitor between screens on which are playing extracts from films that are all masterpieces, but only one of them explicitly concerns de Sade: *L’Âge d’Or*, *Él* and *La vie criminelle d’Archibald de la Cruz* (all three by Luis Buñuel); *Peeping Tom*, by Michael Powell; *Eyes Without a Face*, by Georges Franju; *Salò*, by Pier Paolo Pasolini, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, by Victor Fleming.

*Attaquer le soleil* is not at all a biographical exhibition or a personal view of de Sade. The life of the Marquis is certainly summarized in the first room, with 26 years spent in prison, half of them in the Vincennes prison then at the Bastille, and the other half in the lunatic asylum at Charenton (where de Sade was transferred because, from the window of his cell in the Bastille, he’d harangued the crowd to liberate the prisoners),<sup>6</sup> but the project materialized by the exhibition is to illustrate that de Sade’s perspective was not limited to him, although he alone gave it such a clear voice and sought to make a theory of it. Those were precisely the reasons for his prolonged confinement: respectable society rejects those who demand liberty even without making complete use of it, yet it delights in the liars who have the power to act in such a fashion, but hide their machinations. This is why de Sade’s descriptions oscillate constantly between the realistic realization that only the powerful can satisfy their impulses, a freedom that results from their privileges, and the universal demand for uninhibited libidinal pleasure.

The rich harvest of works assembled here greatly enlarges the cage in which de Sade was isolated. The numbers of those who share his impulses are shown to be much greater than morality fears, as the stimulation of desire by scenarios of perversity spreads to the point that it inevitably expresses a universal truth about human beings. For all that, it is less a question of demographic range than, in a more buried way, an essential and irrepressible unity between the search for pleasure and the search for truth. As Annie Le Brun says, “everything, and thought in particular, has its origin in the energy of the impulses,” an idea that one also finds in de Sade: “we declaim against the passions without dreaming that it is by their torch that philosophy lights its own” (*Juliette*). The fact that, at the moment of late capitalism, a mercantile reification of the

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<sup>4</sup> The phrase “The Angel of the Odd” comes from Edgar Allan Poe.

<sup>5</sup> *The Dialectic of Reason* (more precisely: *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment*).

<sup>6</sup> The storming of the Bastille took place 12 days later.

search for pleasure arose in opposition to a similar perspective changes nothing: it was right and it is still right in its very principle. It isn't morality that can extract us from the historical impasse that contains us, but better intelligence in our desires.

The number and diversity of the works presented impress the visitor; the number of their authors surpasses 50. Creations that de Sade saw during his life, such as Clements Susini's wax anatomical models (below), are sometimes shown. This illustrates a strange manner of getting "to the bottom of things," as if knowledge of a being necessarily meant its death, and as if its essence were hidden at the bottom of its organs: so many worrisome *professions of faith* that fill up the metaphysics of sadism.



At the other extremity of the specter one finds representations (they are as ironic as they are elegant) of the anti-religious passions of de Sade, for whom any erotic act implied a negation of God and his world order, as reflected by the celebrated work of the surrealist photographer Man Ray: *Homage to D.A.F. de Sade* (below).



The weakness of the exhibition appears in the diversity of the works displayed: a good number of them, like Rodin's sculptures, thematise a "healthy" approach to eroticism that has

little in common with de Sade's very particular perspective. Certainly, to distinguish eroticism from pornography, or to trace the borders between normality and perversion, are perilous exercises, with the result that a fast-flowing river seems to run through all that is offered here in an attempt to "unify" it. But, at this point, transgression remains inseparable from the perverse thematics of which de Sade was the champion, and so erotic representations that are foreign to this dimension of things run the danger of exceeding the subject at hand.

If one can reproach the illustrations for sometimes getting too far away from the subject, nothing similar could be said about the quotations that were chosen. They remain in close contact with the subject of the exhibition, and their choices are pure perfection. All of them are not by de Sade; some are by authors from the 19th and 20th centuries. Thanks to the excerpts from de Sade's works, in particular, the energetic elegance of the language of his times, and thus the closed logic of his thought, sparkles at us.

A few samples:

"The idea [of God] is, I confess, the only wrong for which I cannot pardon mankind" (*Juliette*).

"I now ask you if the law that orders those who have nothing to respect those who have everything is indeed just" (*Philosophy in the Bedroom*).

"It isn't in pleasure that happiness consists, but in desire, in breaking the obstacles that are opposed to this desire." (*The 120 Days of Sodom*).

And relative to his imprisonment and its effects on his imagination:

"I would quite surprise you if I told you that all the things that go on here, and their recollection, are always what I call to my rescue when I want to stun myself concerning my situation" (letter to his wife).

"You have driven me to create phantoms that I will have to realize" (letter to his wife).

For a man endowed with an appetite for sensual pleasure that was above the norm, it was veritable torture to rot away half his life at the bottom of a dungeon while the powerful, who had condemned him, could satisfy their impulses in secret and without obstacle. The hatred he felt for law and order could only be increased to infinity.

This is a very important aspect that the quotations provided by the exhibition allow one to develop: the constancy with which de Sade objected to the monopoly on violence that the State and religion maintained, all the while refusing its use to the individual. From this came de Sade's explicit opposition to war, that horrible, organized butchery in which millions of people disappear with the sole goal of consecrating the monopoly on violence exercised by the State. For him, a veritable anarchist in this respect, the supreme scandal resided in this fundamental dishonesty. De Sade never stopped protesting against the death penalty: "But of all the laws, the most awful no doubt is the one that condemns to death a man who has only given in to inspirations that are stronger than he is" (*Aline et Valcour*).

For de Sade, it was a question of bringing the battle to the hypocrisy inherent in morality,<sup>7</sup> and of adding the liberation of individual impulses to the political and collective revolution of his era – which would be identical with the refusal of all violence against the

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<sup>7</sup> Those who still have doubts on this subject can easily dissipate them by going to the museums dedicated to torture instruments, which you can find in Vienna, Rudesheim and Prague, and which illustrate the orgies of ferocity that went on during the centuries under the blessings of clerical authorities. Has one ever imprisoned an executioner or punished a tribunal who had recourse to torture?

people exercised by the State or religion. Didn't Nietzsche need to read de Sade to conclude that "all the religions are, in the final analysis, systems of cruelty" (*The Genealogy of Morals*)?