

MEDIATING THE HUMAN BODY

Technology, Communication,
and Fashion

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Sade Triumphant: The Body in Contemporary Art

Raimondo Strassoldo

1. THE BODY IN THE ARTS

All art is a bodily affair. Even in its most spiritual aspects, art is produced by the body and perceived through the body. Traditionally, music has been defined as the most spiritual of arts, because it cannot be touched or seen and because the inner ear is such an inconspicuous part of the body. But the extent of muscular strain implied in its production is well known to anyone who performs it, as well as to anyone who watches a live concert; and music has a peculiar ability automatically to set the body in motion. Written poetry and literature would appear to be even more disembodied; but writing and reading are physical activities, subject to the laws of bodily movements and postures. Chinese poets and medieval copyists competed in the formal elegance of their writings and the implied hand gestures and brush strokes. In our own times, the competition between electronic and paper-based media revolves, among other things, around the different bodily requirements in their use. It is still difficult to read a computer screen in bed, in the toilet, or in a crowded subway.

In the performing arts the body is the main expressive tool. Actors use it along with the voice, and dancers, mime artists, acrobats, and clowns rely almost exclusively on their control of bodily movement. Then there is that new form of art, garment fashion, in which the body exists in symbiosis with the artifact.

In the visual arts, the human body has been by far the most popular subject, at least in the Western tradition. I would guesstimate that, up to the 20th century, 90 percent of sculptures and 75 percent of paintings represented human bodies (the rest being mainly horses and other animals in the case of sculpture, and architecture, landscapes, and again animals in the case of paintings). Architecture is the least corporeal of the arts, although anthropomorphism is a well-known feature of architectural forms, and many other ties with the human body (movement, kinesthesia, functions) can be pointed out.

2. THE NUDE

In Western painting and sculpture, the human body appears in three main genres. The first is the figure (classically, the persona or the mask), which represents a social type, an historical category, or an abstract idea. The figure is identified by signs and symbols, trappings and props—beginning with the dress. The second genre is the portrait, in which subjects are not only located in a precise historical and social situation, but also characterized psychologically in their unique individuality. The portrait is a far less widespread genre than the figure; very few visual cultures (such as the ancient Roman and the modern European ones) have developed it.

The third genre is the nude (and not merely the naked). To qualify as a nude, the representation of a naked body must meet at least two requirements. The first is a certain degree of eroticism. The nude must appeal, however faintly, to sexual desire (Clark, 1956). That is why the crucifix, even though almost naked, cannot be labeled as a nude; nor can pictures of children, cupids, or angels. There are, however, obvious problems of borderline cases and possible improprieties (Higonnet, 1998). The second requirement is that the nude be treated as a "symbolic form" to express universal emotions (not merely love and desire, but also pathos, energy, ecstasy, and so on) rather than sociohistorical categories or individual characters.

The nude was an invention of the Greeks and is a peculiarity of the Western tradition. It flourished in two distinct periods: between the 5th century BC and the 4th century AD; and between the 15th and 19th centuries AD. Only India, of the other high civilizations, had a comparable and, erotically, even more impressive tradition of the nude; although it seems that the Greek stimulus was seminal in developments in India.

The Western nude occurs in two basic models. By far the most enduring is the classical Mediterranean model, first established by the Greeks and revived by Renaissance Italians. Polyclitus spelled out the laws (the canon) of the ideal male body; Praxiteles created the template for the female body. Polyclitus' canon is alive and well, being embodied in most contemporary images of male beauty (Dutton, 1995). The female ideal form, even within the classical tradition, exhibited greater variation in vital statistics, ranging from the plumpness of the baroque to the tautness of the rococo; but Greek marble Venuses, and their imitations in Italian Renaissance paintings, in general still please the eye. The second model is the Gothic northern one, marked by more elongated proportions and fewer curves; it lived on well into the 16th century, and reappeared briefly even later. Since the end of the 19th century, it has been favored by the upper classes and by high fashion.

3. THE BODY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY WESTERN ART

The climax of the classical tradition of the nude in Western art was arguably reached in the late 19th century, with the highly erotic works of Bouguereau and Cabanel, in the academic style, and of Renoir and Rodin, in the impressionist/ex-

pressionist style. In the years around the turn of the century, certain movements, such as symbolism and decadence, developed a taste for a different female body type, sinfully androgynous and emaciated (Strassoldo, 1997).

In the 20th century, Western art split into three main contrasting currents. The first—which survived up to about midcentury—was the traditional art system, centered on the great public institutions for the teaching, conservation, and enjoyment of art (mainly museums, galleries, academies, ministries, and markets). Here the classical nude survived for a while, more or less jadedly.

The second was the avant-garde, based in Paris in the first half of the century and in New York in the second half. With some notable exceptions, the avant-garde ridiculed and eschewed the classical nude, subjecting the human body—like any other object—to all kinds of distortion, dissection, and mutilation. The process began with Degas' and Roualt's unpleasant pictures of prostitutes, and was most clearly manifest in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*. The representations of the human body usually expressed indignation, rage, hate, and contempt for the present state of affairs (society, nature, the world). Sexuality was usually depicted as base, repulsive, and abnormal, rather than delightful and pleasurable—recall here Schiele's necrophiliac, skeletal, lecherous lepers; the rotting flesh in Kokoschka's and Lowith's bodies; the angular puppets of other expressionists; Dubuffet's public-lavatory-style scribbings; Man Ray's roped and broken Venus; Hopper's lonely naked urban housewives; de Kooning's toothy harpies; the offal clumps of Francis Bacon; Lucian Freud's bloated monsters.

The third area was commercial art. Pictures of the human body and often of the nude were widely circulated by the new cultural industries, starting with the producers of portfolios of "art photographs" (reproductions of nudes taken from high art, or their staged imitations). From its very beginnings, the advertising industry found one of its main tools in the human (mainly but not only male) pleasure in watching beautiful bodies (mainly female). Street posters and illustrated magazines were full of such images (Gabor, 1972). At about the same time, the motion picture industry started to flood the world with animated images of beautiful people, in ever more scanty dress and ever more sexually explicit scenes. A side industry of erotic and pornographic images developed (Webb, 1978). And then of course came the collapse of traditional sexual mores, television, the videocassette, and the Internet. In the second half-century, the infosphere exploded like a supernova of untold billion images of nudes—mostly very beautiful and endowed with supernaturally developed sexual traits.

4. THE AESTHETICS OF THE UGLY

The high-art hostility toward the classical nude can thus be interpreted as a reaction to its banalization in the culture industries. But it can also be set in the wider context of the epochal inversion in the self-definition of art, that is, in the sudden

transition from the "fine" to the "ugly" arts, from the aesthetics of beauty to the aesthetic of ugliness (Bodei, 1995).

How did the 20th-century avant-garde justify its strange ways of (mis)treating the human body? A host of rationalizations have been offered:

- Beautiful bodies are rare, or at any rate beauty is transient. In reality, most people are ugly. The images of beautiful bodies permeating academic art are hypocritical, and those in mass culture and commercial art are a misleading sham. True art must represent the truth, that is ugliness.
- All the aesthetic potentialities of the genre have been explored and exploited; nothing new can possibly be extracted by the beautiful body. Because the main duty of the artist is to be original, there is no alternative to the experiments with the ugly body.
- In all times, art has represented ugliness and violence as well: the wicked, the devil, torture, death, the crucifixion, illness, and so on. The beautiful classical nude is only a part of the story. The mistreatment of the human body in art has a long tradition.
- The duty of art is not to convey sensual pleasure through beautiful images, but to irritate, arouse, enrage, displace, and shock; and this can better be achieved through ugliness.
- Capitalist, industrial, bourgeois society is bad, and the artist must denounce it in order to awake the masses and excite them to revolt. Art must represent the darker, uglier side of reality, in order to negate present society.
- In the 20th century, humans have caused the most horrible crimes: war, extermination, genocide, famine. Human bodies have been violently maimed and destroyed wholesale, by the hundred million. In everyday life, bodies are being continually broken by machines, on the roads, and in factories. Experiences and images of such scenes are ubiquitous. Art cannot refrain from representing them.
- After Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Chernobyl, it is no longer possible to be proud of humanity or to nurture faith in human progress. Humankind is a cancer on the planet, and is rightly doomed to annihilation. Artists, being endowed with greater sensibility and intuition than most people, are only anticipating the inevitable with their apocalyptic visions.

In the course of the first three quarters of the 20th century these doctrines became conventional wisdom, almost clichés, constantly repeated in all brochures for avant-garde art exhibitions and artists' summaries. In the past two or three decades, however, some fresher theories have accompanied the spread of new experiments in avant-garde art:

- Humankind has reached the limits of technical civilization; the only way to survive is to rewind the evolutionary clock and start again from primordial

conditions. Humankind must return to a state of nature, to the authenticity of the tribal way of life, with all the implied dirt and violence, including all sorts of manipulations of the body typical of primitive cultures.

- Humankind has reached the threshold of an evolutionary leap comparable in magnitude only to what happened with the hominid revolution itself, some million years ago, and with the invention of symbolic culture, about 50,000 years ago. Humankind has now assembled a sociotechnical system that can evolve by self-design, according to its own inner rules and goals, toward a future of unlimited potential (omniscience and omnipotence). We are entering a posthuman world, in which the individual, the person, the subject, the body is an increasingly irrelevant part of the system. The natural, biological endowments of individuals are less and less adequate to the requirements of the sociotechnical system. Humans can and must be reprogrammed genetically, redesigned, improved, equipped with new mechanical and electronic prostheses (cyborgs). The process will inevitably entail some experimental failures, mistakes, and suffering; and some monstrosities may occur. However, that is the road to the future, and artists should cooperate with scientists and technologists in making it come true (Bell & Kennedy, 2000; Lunenfeld, 2000).

5. BODY ART: A TYPOLOGY

As remarked at the outset, all art is basically body art. But only in the 1960s was the term *body art* coined to refer to a growing variety of peculiar practices stemming from what were originally visual artists (Vergine, 2000). The main idea was to de-reify art, to decouple artistic production from the practices of industry, market, and merchandising. Artists were to refrain from producing objects that could be sold and bought, and instead create ideas, visions, awareness, emotions, concepts. The artist must evolve into prophet, theorist, philosopher, ideologist.

Some of the early names of these practices were conceptual art, behavioral art, actionism, performances, happenings. Their enaction closely resembled what was done by the more established performing arts: Conceptual artists did something (e.g., cutting themselves and drawing blood, or masturbating, or quartering lambs, or washing linen, or planting trees) in front of a live audience. Usually, however, they had the performance recorded by photography, film, or video camera, and thus converted into something more akin to the traditional visual arts. They often used props, tools, and costumes, but the main medium of the performance was the artist's body. Only the setting (art galleries, ateliers, exhibitions, even open spaces, instead of theaters) and the life history of the artist marked the difference between this kind of body art and the more established performing arts.

But the term body art is also used for other artistic practices:

- The exhibition of living human or animal bodies, in their more or less natural state.

- The use of human bodies as brushes or knives—Yves Klein smeared his models with blue paint, and then threw and pressed them on the canvas.
- The emphasis on the body gestures by which the art object is produced. Jackson Pollock had himself photographed while moving around and on the canvas and dripping his pigments. Reference to his postures, gestures, and muscularity was considered an important symbolic content of his canvas.
- The body as canvas. The painting of the surface of the body is an ancient and widespread cultural practice. In tribal communities it has a great variety of symbolic functions. In modern societies it is mainly limited to women, and has basically cosmetic and sexual functions. Hair stylists and beauticians have always done it. Body artists have used it as part of their performances or in its own right.
- Permanent alterations of the body: tattooing, piercing, branding, scarification, constraints, cosmetic surgery. Many cultures have treated the human body as an object to be manipulated for symbolic and aesthetic purposes. The inclusion of tattooing in this category, instead of the preceding one, is because of its permanent and three-dimensional (in the thickness of the skin) character. Piercing, branding, scarification, and constraints have for a long time been confined to non-Western cultures, but neo-primitive, neo-tribal, and neo-ethnic lifestyle trends have made them popular again in postmodern Western society, and artists have explored their aesthetic potentialities—usually on their own bodies because it is not easy to find subjects willing to undergo permanent bodily modification just to satisfy someone else's creativity. Some artists in California are reported to be experimenting in the alteration of the interior of the body, for instance blood composition, by ritually inoculating each other with the HIV virus.
- Visual exploration of hitherto neglected aspects of the body. Macrophotography has been used to produce large images of tiny parts of the external anatomy, such as wrinkles, pimples, and hairs. Microvideocams have been inserted by artists (e.g., Mona Hartum) in various bodily orifices in order to benefit the public (often interactively) with visions of the pulsating interiors of their bowels.
- The coupling or integration of the human body with technological systems (techno body art). Bio-engineering has been working for generations in this field, for both medical and ergonomic purposes. More recently, science fiction and cyberpunk culture have elaborated at length on the theme, envisioning a cornucopia of integrated human / machine organisms, prosthetic people, cyborgs, androids, and so on. But, as L. Borgese once remarked apropos of architects, in circus parades the acrobats are followed by the clowns; some artists (e.g., Stelarc and Antunez) have also explored these perspectives, designing and using technological prostheses in their performances. The possibility of aesthetic interaction, via technological communication systems, between bodies widely separated in space, is one of the

frontiers of "media art." The pupils of the Köln School for Media Art have developed an electronic system of videocams, computers, and robots that allows two faraway individuals to engage interactively in sadomasochistic erotic practices.

- The use of dead human bodies, or parts thereof, as materials for art. This practice is not new. Many primitive cultures used parts of dead bodies (shrunk heads, skulls, and so on) for personal, home, and public decoration. Egyptian mummies and medieval Christian relics were certainly treated with an eye for aesthetics, although the main reason was religious. In modern Western society, the use of dead human body parts is strictly reserved to medical and scientific practices. However, there are borderline cases. In Germany a few years ago, great success was enjoyed by an exhibition of artistically modeled and posed skinned human corpses, which a couple of medical doctors had managed to stabilize and crystallize chemically so as to give the muscle tissues the appearance of crisp freshness. In London, a fashionable young sculptor found a way to coat chunks of human bodies electrolytically in metal. When caught he was arrested, because artists, unlike medical researchers, do not (any longer, or not yet?) have the right to use dead human bodies as raw material.¹ Is that an acceptable ethical limitation on artistic creativity?

6. DE SADE IN THE ARTS

In the contemporary art system, exhibitions focusing on the human body are very popular and successful.² In most of them, most of the items are not pretty in the conventional sense. The visitor is presented with homely, ugly, or monstrous bodies, or with humiliated, suffering, defaced, punctured, deformed, opened, disassembled, penetrated, tortured, tied, reconstructed bodies, or with body/machine contraptions.

The texts written around such events (in catalogs, brochures, panels, press releases, reviews) usually refer to some of the clichés summarized earlier in Section 4. I would not deny that most of them have some basis in these rationalizations; but I would add a simple, encompassing explanation. Such exhibitions are staged, and people flock to them, (a) because sadism is a basic human drive, and (b) because we are living in a culture heavily imbued with Sadean thought.

What is to be seen in those exhibitions has an undeniable family resemblance to what the Marquis de Sade wrote down 200 years ago, in many thousands of

¹We have not been able to retrieve the clippings from the *Corriere della Sera* arts pages with more detailed information on these cases. A picture from the German case is displayed on the cover of Perniola (1998).

²One can randomly recall the "L'ame au corps" at the Grand Palais in Paris (1993), the Venice Biennale on the theme of human identity (1995), the "Flesh Factor" exhibition at the Linz Ares Electronica Center (1997), "Der Anagrammatische Koerper" at the KMZ in Karlsruhe (2000), the "Mennesket" at the Arken (Denmark) Museum of Modern Art (2000).

pages. His heroes and heroines delight in destroying beauty (having abused it sexually), and also in having sex with ugly, deformed, decrepit, revoltingly sick, and crippled bodies. They use living bodies as pieces of furniture, cut them up and re-assemble them in fanciful ways, compose *tableaux vivants* with bodies of various types and in various stages of manipulation, decorate the venues of their feats with corpses and dismembered body parts. They exalt in the design and use of the most sophisticated machines for delivering torture and death. They enjoy altering living (unanesthetized) bodies by all sorts of surgical operations: skinning, ripping open, sewing, chopping, grafting. Victims are hung in midair by hooks and straps. De Sade's heroes and heroines deal erotically with body exuviae and excreta, and, of course, are enthusiastic cannibals (one of the most memorable is an ogre named Minski, just like the computer science guru). They also enjoy wholesale massacres: Ferdinand of Naples has hundreds of victims theatrically butchered at each of his parties, and the French prime minister, the Prince of Saint Fond, a typical Sadean hero, during one of his orgies details the plans for the extermination (by poisoning water supplies) of 5 million surplus Frenchmen.

The Marquis' immense literary output³ describes all sorts of horrors that can be performed on the human body; hardly anything is left to the imagination. His is the definitive catalog in this genre. His imitators (e.g., Swinburne, Apollinaire, Lautréamont, and de Mandragues) pale beside him.

The place of the Marquis in Western culture is peculiar. On the one hand, the attempt was made to suppress him: He was locked up in jail and the madhouse for most of his adult life; and his writings were outlawed and destroyed. But they seeped out, and circulated underground like a karstic stream. There were almost no references to his work in official culture for nearly a century, until the science of psychiatry used his name—along with that of Masoch—to label a mental sexual disorder. On the other hand, there is little doubt that his influence on all Western culture has been enormous. True, de Sade himself can be seen partly as the result of a peculiar mix of Enlightenment *forma mentis* (his endless tracts attempting to demonstrate the soundness of his philosophy rationally and scientifically) and of Romantic content (hatred of God, nature, reality). But it can also be argued that much subsequent Romantic culture, from painting (Fuseli, Delacroix, Gericault) to literature (Baudelaire) to philosophy (Nietzsche), was imbued with Sadean visions. The influence was especially strong, of course, in the Parisian intellectual milieu, from where it radiated to the whole of the Europe. A more detailed analysis of Sadean motifs in high culture would be interesting, but impossible in the present context. The list of de Sade's open or covert disciples would be impressively long.⁴ Instead, mention

³See Lely (1952/1957) for a bibliography. A bibliography of 65 items (some of them more than a thousand pages long) has been compiled by Seaver and Wainhouse (1966). A much more limited one can be found in Englisch (1927), which however is commendable for its extensive review of erotic and pornographic French literature in de Sade's times.

⁴Two cases in point: Gabriele d'Annunzio, one of the most important Italian authors at the turn of the century, whose works are full of Sadean motifs; and Michel Foucault, perhaps the most famous Parisian (and hence global) intellectual of the 1960s and 1970s, whose philosophical interests as well as private life are clearly Sadean (see Miller, 1993).

should be made of the presence of Sadean motifs in the developing mass culture: For the past quarter-century, popular novels and newspapers have been filled with a mix of sex and death.

In the 19th century, de Sade was the *deus absconditus* in high culture; after Freud, Lombroso, and Krafft-Ebing, his name came out of the closet (and the libraries' infernos), and references to his name gained legitimacy, first in scientific discourse and then in general culture. It can be argued that most avant-garde authors of the 20th century were well acquainted with de Sade, and many admitted it openly. Guillaume Apollinaire, the prophet of Cubism, besides writing a book on de Sade tried to imitate him in the *Les 10.000 vierges*. Kafka called de Sade the patron saint of the 20th century. However, in my opinion, the explicit acknowledgment of de Sade's influence and the open study of his works and thought represent only a tiny fraction of his de facto presence in our culture. This is so deep, so pervasive, and of such immense scope as to blind us. As is well known, the strongest ideologies are those that we are unaware of.

Only in the past half-century he has been the object of extensive scholarly analysis.⁵ Some of the studies seem to find some redeeming social value in his writings, as manifestos of absolute individual freedom. In my opinion, there is no way to consider him as anything other than by far the most uncompromising destroyer of all human values, the greatest prophet of universal hate and cosmic annihilation, the complete anti-Christ.

In the second half of the 20th century, the Sadean mixture of eros and thanatos, of pleasure and pain, of sex and violence, of orgasm and horror, became the main fare of mass culture too. People look eagerly for it in all media, which compete in supplying ever greater and more extreme doses of what they want. The popularity of art exhibitions featuring the bloody body can be interpreted, at least to some extent, as a side effect of this general trend.

7. CONCLUSION

The Marquis de Sade's objectives in his relentless literary output are plain enough: to excite himself in the contemplation of his terrifying fantasies, and to convince the reader of the soundness of his ideas about the fundamentally evil essence of the world. For him, the only natural imperative is to pursue one's own pleasure; beauty gives the more intense pleasure by being destroyed, and pleasure derives mainly from the suffering and death of others. His heroes state again and again that all the horrors they perpetrate have the sole function of "making my sperm squirt a shade more hotly."

What then are the objectives of those who produce Sadean images in contemporary Western culture? One, clearly, is to make money. The cultural industries

⁵ Among the best known are Bataille (1957), de Beauvoir (1951/1952), Blanchot (1949), Brega (1962), Horkheimer and Adorno (1947), Klossowski (1947), Paulhan (1946), and Zolla (1964). See also Paglia (1990).

are in business for profit, and they discovered a long time ago that sadism sells very well and that there is an unlimited market for it.

But a string of further questions comes to mind. Why do people like to read and watch such stuff? Does symbolic/artistic/commercial sadism perform other (perhaps "redeeming") social or moral functions? Are there innate limits on the extension and intensity of sadism in our culture, or should limits be imposed by law?

As to the first question, a number of answers can be aired. The taste for sadism can be imputed to the manipulation ("corruption") of individuals by the cultural industries themselves, in a self-amplifying vicious circle. It can be imputed to general conditions in industrial society: alienation from nature and community, the violence of mechanical systems, violence against nature, a surplus of psychophysical energy no longer used in work or war, the lack of familiarity with real sex, violence, and death in everyday life, the banalization of "normal" sex, and so on. It can be imputed to society in general: the long prevalence of war, male domination. Personally, I am inclined to think that the contiguity of pleasure and pain, of aggression and excitement, of eros and thanatos, is a basic constituent of human nature, linked with our evolution as predatory primates, as killer apes, as carnivorous and cannibalistic hunters. It is the deep, dark side of our psyche; the evil in our genes, which most social systems have tried to harness; our original sin, from which religious and ethical systems have tried to redeem us through repression and sublimation, and that now is simply let loose.

As to the second question, the debate has been long and inconclusive. After myriads of psychological and sociological studies, the old two theses are still unresolved. According to one, images of sex and violence tend to excite people to imitation; they are one of the main causes of sadistic behavior. According to the other, those images have a cathartic function; they allow sadistic tensions to be released in the virtual, symbolic, or fantastic realms, thus keeping them clear of behavior. Of course, these two main theses can be endlessly refined, for example, in relation to the different effects according to the stage of psychic development.

Finally, it is hard to imagine that the cultural industries—of which the art system has largely become a segment—would autonomously impose limits on the quantity and quality of sadism in their outputs. In Western society, art and culture, as well as science, have for two centuries developed on the principle of "no limits": No social, moral, or political restrictions can be imposed on them. Thus, all previous criteria of "obscenity" in the representation of sex and violence have been rapidly transgressed, with the one exception, so far (for how long?), of pedophilia.

Whether this trend can last indefinitely is open to question. Many thinkers suggest that cultural systems sway from one extreme to the other, and that eras of hedonism give way to eras of asceticism. Malraux predicted that "the 21st century will be spiritual, or will not be." Personally I think that the sociotechnological conditions in which we live are so radically different from what humankind has experienced so far that no known theory can help us. What the future holds for

relationships between the body, the aesthetic realm of the arts, science and technology, and ethics is wholly unclear, and rather hair-raising.

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