

The First Sadist: The Marquis de Sade [C1]

Il Marchese de Sade è famoso per il suo stile di vita libertino e per i suoi scritti controversi, che esplorano temi come la sessualità, il potere e la libertà. Nonostante appartenga a un'altra epoca, può fornirci spunti e indicazioni per affrontare le complesse sfide del XXI secolo, come la fluidità di genere e le innovazioni tecnologiche.



The Marquis de Sade evokes images of dystopia, a world pushing **danger**ously at its limits. But many people who felt **bound** by convention also found his philosophy liberating. Alyce Mahon is Professor of Art History at the University of Cambridge and the author of *The Marquis de Sade and the Avant-Garde* (2020). She believes that Sade can help us respond to the challenges of the 21st century: from gender fluidity to technology's most worrying trends. As she explains, while Sade is a product of his times, his experience is comparative to ours. **Alyce Mahon (Irish accent):** He lived in a period of revolution and terror, of liberty and evil, and he was a witness to that. We have the French Revolution, the call of the people for liberty, but also we have a moment of brutal terror and the instrumentalisation of terror. In his prison cell he could hear the sound of the guillotine, he could smell the guillotine, and that's something that he then magnifies,

theatricalises in his books. That almost absurd magnification of terror is something that we see through technology.

THE AVANT-GARDE

In 1904, Guillaume Apollinaire, who [coined](#) the word 'surrealism', edited the first complete volume of Sade's writings. They included Justine, about a virtuous woman who encounters nothing but despair; and Juliette, her sister, a nymphomaniac murderer who is successful and happy. Juliette calls for the freedom of the imagination and of artistic expression. This excited the avant-garde, as Mahon explains. **Alyce Mahon:** Hans Bellmer, Man Ray, Salvador Dalí, but also women of the avant-garde. We have Leonor Fini celebrating Juliette as a philosopher, as a libertine figure; we have Toyen [born Marie Čermínová] exploring her lesbian desires through her illustrations in 1933 for Justine, we have Unica Zürn, the partner of Hans Bellmer, exploring sadomasochism with him in photographs where she is [bound](#), but where she is [pulling the ropes](#), not him.

SEX AND POLITICS

The Marquis de Sade's philosophy became significant for gender politics in the 1970s. **Alyce Mahon:** He attacks those who control our bodies, who tell us what our desires should and should not be. He attacks the law, the church, the nation, the nobility and, most of all, the institution of the family and all the patriarchal values that [are embodied](#). And it's this that [it] took until probably the 1970s to appreciate. He gives this voice to females who are re-educators; females who are philosophers of the boudoir; and the boudoir, the bedroom, is the private space of women, of the domestic. And it becomes the central space for the Marquis de Sade's writings, and they show how sexuality and politics cannot be divided.

OVEREXPOSURE

In the late 1990s, social media was in its infancy. But already its mind-[numbing](#) effects were being examined by artists. Could Sade be an antidote?

Alyce Mahon: With social media there's a great passivity. We're bombarded by violence, by sadism. 'Happy [slapping](#)' is a phenomenon where somebody attacks a stranger [but](#) videos it, uploads it, where the trauma continues through that online forum, which is impossible to control. And it's the same with [rape](#) culture and statistics around it. Statistics don't seem to affect people. The citation of Sade by artists is to try and make people stop, and feel some of the [anger](#).

ROLE PLAY

But social media is also liberating, and the potential of the internet as a place for experimentation, for interrogating norms, is something that Sade would have loved, as Mahon explains. **Alyce Mahon:** Social media is a vehicle for liberty, as well, for sharing, for communities. It is a critique of those who have the money, the power and who tell you what is right, what is wrong. There's a feminist and a queer-feminist use of the Marquis de Sade to explore issues that continue to challenge us: and this has a legacy in a lot of contemporary art's exploration of fetishism, post-porn feminism, [BDSM](#).

SADISM AND MASOCHISM

In 1840, a century after the birth of the Marquis de Sade, the word "sadism" entered the dictionary. The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines sadism as a "psychosexual disorder in which sexual [urges](#) are gratified by the infliction of pain on another person". [Decades on](#), "sadism" would be [paired](#) with "masochism", although the two for Sade were always [bound](#) together. Masochism is defined as "enjoyment of pain: pleasure that someone gets from being abused or [hurt](#), especially sexual enjoyment."

Glossary

- **bound** = limitati
- **coined** = coniare
- **urges** = impulsi
- **pulling the ropes** = tirare le corde
- **are embodied** = incarnare
- **numbing** = stupefacenti
- **slapping** = schiaffeggio
- **rape** = stupro
- **anger** = rabbia, ira
- **BDSM** = sadomasochismo (acronimo di bondage, domination, sadism and masochism)
- **Decades on** = dopo qualche decennio
- **paired** = accoppiare
- **hurt** = ferire