

# Sade After Eros: Barthes, Carter, and the Pornography of Meaning

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What I object to is making Sade into a literary man. That I object to. He is a pornographer. That's it. That's what he is.

– Andrea Dworkin, *The Marquis De Sade: Pornographer or Prophet?*

There's a whole lot of 'mean'-ing going on.

– Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*

Nothing is more inimical to porn than a plotline. Take, for instance, the final clause of the tricolon crescens of this essay's subheading: 'The Pornography of Meaning'. An apparent oxymoron, to be sure. After all, debates surrounding pornography that characterized the feminist 'Sex Wars' of the late 1970s and 1980s tend to locate 'meaning' not on the side of pornography but of the erotic. As Audre Lorde writes in a well-known 1978 essay, 'diametrically opposed' against the pornographic, 'erotic knowledge' epitomizes 'the passions of love, in its deepest meanings', which then 'becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence'.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Andrea Dworkin – the anti-pornography feminist par excellence – argues that '*pornography* does not mean "writing about sex" or "depictions of the erotic" [...] It means graphic description of women as vile whores. [...] The fact that pornography is widely believed to be "depictions of the erotic" means only that the debasing of women is held to be the real pleasure of sex'.<sup>2</sup> While Lorde distinguishes eroticism from pornography on the basis of the former's facilitation of knowledge production and its utility as a 'lens', Dworkin argues that pornography shuns the erotic by nature of its 'graphic description'. In short: whereas eroticism scrutinizes, pornography describes. Though I would not go so far as to name Barthes an anti-pornography feminist per se, these differentiations offered by Lorde and Dworkin are resonate with Barthes' own in *Camera Lucida*:

there is no *punctum* in the pornographic image; at most it amuses me (and even then, boredom follows quickly). The erotic photograph, on the contrary (and this is its very condition), does not make the sexual organs into a central object; it may very well not show them at all; it takes the spectator outside its frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and it animates me. The *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle *beyond* – as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see: not only toward ‘the rest’ of the nakedness, not only toward the fantasy of a *praxis*, but toward the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul together. [...] the photograph leads me to distinguish the ‘heavy’ desire of pornography from the ‘light’ (good) desire of eroticism.<sup>3</sup>

Insofar as the punctum of a photograph names a – as Barthes earlier defined it – ‘fissure’ in the image, Barthes’ placement of the punctum on the side of eroticism suggests the erotic as the outside of meaning, and which, as a result, ‘animates’ the viewer.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, like Dworkin’s bristling at pornography’s ‘graphic’ nature, the pornographic image, for Barthes, shows too much. ‘Like a shop window which shows only one illuminated piece of jewelry’, he writes, pornography ‘is completely constituted by the presentation of only one thing: sex’.<sup>5</sup> While it may, however briefly, amuse, pornography forecloses the ‘light’ desire of searching for meaning outside of its bare mimesis.

Such a photographic definition of eroticism builds on the logic of Barthes’ earlier observation in *A Lover’s Discourse* that, when in love, the lover comes into contact with the limits of their knowledge of the beloved:

I believe I know the other better than anyone and triumphantly assert my knowledge to the other (*‘I know you – I’m the only one who really knows you!’*); and on the other hand, I am often struck by the obvious fact that the other is impenetrable, intractable, not to be found, I cannot open up the other, trace back the other’s origins, solve the riddle [...] It is not true that the more you love, the better you understand: all that the action of love obtains from me is merely this wisdom: that the other is not to be known.<sup>6</sup>

Rather than the beloved themselves, it is the ‘riddle’ that the beloved offers, Barthes reveals in these lines, that is the site of amorous love, inverting the popular conflation of love and understanding. Like the effect of an erotic

image, the effect of love is to not know. What's more, in an earlier reading of Goethe, Barthes offers an antithesis to this erotic, unknowing love. 'Werther is not perverse', he claims, 'he is in love: he creates meaning, always and everywhere, out of nothing, it is meaning which thrills him: he is in the crucible of meaning.'<sup>7</sup> With Werther's love, Barthes depicts the lover's reaction to the earlier epistemological impossibility of the beloved's riddle. That is, it isn't so much that the lover relishes in the failure of knowledge *tout court*, but instead it is the 'crucible of meaning' that such love, in failing, occasions. Barthesian love, like anti-pornographic definitions of the erotic, comes into relief as a pleasure of meaning-making. On the other hand, the 'perverse' lover would have a relation to their beloved outside that 'crucible of meaning', where it is not meaning 'create[d] [...] always and everywhere, out of nothing', but perhaps something else. Later in his reading, Barthes illuminates the precise locale of this 'crucible' in the beloved's gestures of suggestive yet unclear meaning, such that 'a tiny gesture within the palm, a knee which doesn't move away, an arm extended', function for the lover as a 'paradisiac realm of subtle and clandestine signs: a kind of festival not of the senses but of meaning'.<sup>8</sup>

However, Barthes' paradise of meaning, given a psychoanalytic once-over, may be taken as a more general structuring of relationality as a search for meaning. If the erotic, as Freud writes in *Group Psychology and The Analysis of the Ego*, 'holds together everything in the world', the Barthesian 'festival' of meaning would seem to be more profane than paradisiac.<sup>9</sup> Borrowing from Jean Laplanche's theory of seduction founded on 'enigmatic signifiers', Leo Bersani argues that such gestures of 'suggestive yet unclear meaning' are 'perhaps inevitably interpreted as secrets. The result of this original seduction would be a tendency to structure all relations on the basis of an eroticizing mystification'.<sup>10</sup> As the result of this 'eroticizing mystification', Barthes' erotic-as-mystification merely suggests an awareness to a universal seduction of meaning already underpinning all of relationality. This, for Bersani, has far from the ecstatic effect of Barthes' hermeneutic Eden. 'Once the entire world is received as an enigmatic signifier resisting the will to know', Bersani maintains, 'the epistemological passion must be reformulated as the passion to appropriate the object and, at the limit, to destroy difference itself.'<sup>11</sup> What's more, this 'epistemological passion', for Bersani, is similar to the 'passion for absolute control' by which he elsewhere describes sadism.<sup>12</sup> Searching endlessly for the meaning of 'clandestine signs' and 'enigmatic

signifiers', our paradisiac heaven becomes a paranoid hell, wherein the destruction of alterity is the only feasible possibility of satisfying our obsession for meaning. Relationality, then, is organized by a sadism of the punctum.

Against the Barthes/Dworkin/Lorde conceptualization of pornography as 'heavy', graphic depictions of the 'perverse', defenders of pornography have attempted to contend with this conflation between eroticism and the intimacy that the punctum allegedly portends. In addition to more recent scholars of pornography such as Fan Wu who have attempted to excavate the punctum and other 'node[s] of eros' present in pornography, those actively engaged in the Sex Wars emphasize pornography as nonetheless meaningful, in spite of its divergence from the erotic.<sup>13</sup> 'We do not need eroticism *instead* of pornography', Linda Williams charges. 'Depending on who is looking, both can appear dirty, perverse, or too explicit. [...] [T]hat explicitness helps us to see how things are'.<sup>14</sup> Although Williams observes that eroticism and pornography may be difficult to differentiate, as it depends 'on who is looking', Williams nevertheless exalts the explicitness tethered to the pornographic from its Barthesian subordination to the erotic. While, in this sense, the pornographic remains without a punctum – it only serves to show 'how things are' – pornography would find its redemption in the meaning *within* the frame, rather than the erotic's '*beyond*'. Preempting these rejoinders to anti-pornographic feminisms, however, is Angela Carter's 1979's *The Sadeian Woman*, wherein Carter distinguishes pornography which serves to 'reinforce the prevailing system of values and ideas', with that of the 'moral pornographer' who undertakes a 'total demystification of the flesh'.<sup>15</sup> Taking the titular author as the exemplar, Carter argues that, as a moral pornographer, 'Sade became a terrorist of the imagination in this way, turning the unacknowledged truths of the encounters of sexuality into a cruel festival'.<sup>16</sup> Whether through the proof of a punctum or in the liberating analysis of the useful meaning that pornography's explicitness clarifies, both of these efforts to redeem pornography accede to making pornography, like the erotic, meaningful. Both proponents of pornography's ridiculed meaningfulness and those who criticize pornography on the basis of that meaning's absence thereby imbue heft in hermeneutic value. The Sex Wars, in this way, might be reconsidered as, above all, a hermeneutic struggle – a conflict about what means.

Yet, to recall Bersani, if a relationality pried from its orbiting around the enigmatic signifier would make for a more amicable form of the social,

one less interested in eliminating difference and exerting ‘control’, it may be worth conceding to the anti-pornography scholars that pornography has no meaning and thereby use it to elucidate how such a mode of being could be enacted. That is, against the impulse to prove pornography’s value as a complement to the erotic, I would like to proceed by paradoxically admitting to the charges of Barthes and in turn asking what forms of relationality might be teased out of the pornographic understood as an antiseptic to meaning. Forgoing the dictum of meaning held in such high esteem by all participants in the Sex Wars, the pornographic’s potential may lie in its utility as an aesthetic instruction for more tenable modes of social being. ‘The Pornography of Meaning’ thereby suggests less the struggle to tout the meaning to which pornography belongs than in escaping the ‘pornification’ of meaning, at which anti- and pro-porn philosophers aim. In the context of the heated debates of the Sex Wars, it might prove valuable to return to the earlier writings of Carter and Barthes in order to parse out how pornography’s anathema to meaning came to be the primary site of contestation. In lieu of mobilizing Carter as an antidote to Barthes – or vice versa – I want to approach them primarily as readers of the same object. Funnily enough, the amicability that I want to argue pornography serves to aesthetically instruct might be most clearly glimpsed in the early novels of Donatien Alphonse François, the Marquis de Sade, most notably 1785’s *The 120 Days of Sodom* and 1791’s *Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised*, which catalog countless assaults against their characters.

In the debates surrounding the relationship between eroticism and pornography, all parties involved have a habit of investing Sade with a singular significance. Serving as both the ‘world’s foremost’ practitioner according to anti-pornography feminists akin to Dworkin,<sup>17</sup> as well as a ‘real origin of a relatively modern tradition of pornography’ for pornography’s defenders like Williams,<sup>18</sup> Sade seems to be uniquely positioned to contend with these debates’ hermeneutic penchant. Moreover, as my epigraph from Dworkin emblemizes well, the juxtaposition between Sade’s writing as ‘literature’ and ‘pornography’ bears much resemblance to the more familiar juxtaposition between erotic meaning and pornographic explicitness. While everyone, it seems, has something to say about Sade, the tension between Barthes and Carter seems especially equipped to attend to Sadean pornography, insofar as they both undertake substantial analyses of his writing. In *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, Barthes asserts that ‘in Sade there is never anything real save narration,

the silence [...] is completely confounded with the blank of the narrative: the meaning stops'.<sup>19</sup> While Barthes' opposition between the 'narration' Sade has too much of and the 'narrative' which he lacks adds more nuance to his later antagonism between the erotic, punctum-laden image and the pornographic, it concurrently preempts that antagonism in terms more applicable to Sadean prose. Interestingly, however, Barthes additionally reveals here the consequence of narrative's lack as the discontinuation of 'meaning'. Barthes goes on to specify this discontinuation of meaning in its relation to eroticism, when he observes that

Sade, we have been constantly told, is an 'erotic' author. But what is eroticism? It is never more than a word, since practices cannot be so coded unless they are known, i.e., spoken; now, our society never utters any erotic practice, only desires, preliminaries, contexts, suggestions, ambiguous sublimations, so that, for us, eroticism cannot be defined save by a perpetually elusive word. On this basis, Sade is not erotic: it has been remarked that in his case there is never any kind of striptease, that apologue essential to modern eroticism [...] The difference arises not because Sadian eroticism is criminal and ours harmless, but because the former is assertive, combinatory, whereas ours is suggestive, metaphorical.<sup>20</sup>

And, much later in the same work, Barthes elaborates on the importance of this 'striptease':

The striptease is a narrative: it develops in time the terms [...] of a code which is that of the Enigma: from the outset, the unveiling of a secret is promised, then withheld ('suspended'), and finally both accomplished and avoided; like narrative, the striptease is subject to a logico-temporal order, a constraint of the code that constitutes it (the first being not to uncover the sexual organ). Now, in Sade there is no bodily secret to seek, but only a practice to achieve.<sup>21</sup>

Pornography, then, has a narrative problem alongside its hermeneutic one. Indeed, what these two passages expose is that these problems are, in fact, one and the same. Literary narrative, Barthes seems to suggest, functions to develop the 'Enigma' of the text – what might be analogous to the 'punctum' of the photograph. Just as the problematic of meaning which both the

punctum of the photograph and the unreadable gesture of the beloved introduces are never, and can never be, fully elucidated, so too is the ‘unveiling of a secret’ on which narrative relies ‘withheld’. Sadean *narration*, inasmuch as Barthes distinguishes it from ‘narrative’, obscenely rejects such withholding. Narration, for Barthes, names Sade’s impinging on the ‘suggestive’ with the ‘assertive’ – telling us like it is. Similarly, there has been a history of literary criticism, specifically that of the realist novel, to draw a distinction between ‘narration’ and ‘description’, wherein, as György Lukács is emblematic of, narration is a description that offers not only the events of the plot, but additionally ‘the vicissitudes of human beings’ on deeper thematic levels.<sup>22</sup> Barthes’ differentiation between narration and narrative, however, appears to collapse the distinction between Lukácsian narration and description, made evident by Barthes’ account of pornography (as an abundance of explicit ‘narration’) as being near-identical to Andrea Dworkin’s (as ‘graphic description’).

In this way, Sade’s narrative proves to be anything but. In *Justine*, for instance, Sade chronicles the titular character’s life from twelve to twenty-six. The plot, if indeed it can be called that, however, repeats similar scenes in a circuit of freedom and captivity: Justine repeatedly finds herself deceived into violent scenes of sexual assault, escapes by some means to the road and the surrounding forest, where she meets another character who similarly dupes her. There is never any surprise, at least to the reader, about what will happen to her. Timo Airaksinen positions this emphasis on repetition more explicitly on the level of form, noting that Justine’s ‘journey is formed of four circles, each of which has the same structure, namely, discussion, crime, discharge, and a return to a new starting point. The themes of the discussion are already familiar, the characteristics of the people are predictable’.<sup>23</sup> Carter, too, observes the Sadean ‘narrative’ as circuitous, connecting that circuit to pornography’s libidinal purchase, as ‘the function of plot in a pornographic narrative is always the same. It exists to provide as many opportunities as possible for the sexual act to take place. There is no room here for tension or the unexpected. We know what is going to happen; that is why we are reading the book’.<sup>24</sup> Reminiscent of Freud’s argument in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* that ‘mental life’ is a ‘storehouse for external impressions’ which produce ‘a condition described as “sexual excitement”’,<sup>25</sup> Carter’s observation of *Justine*’s plot as serving to multiply sex acts welds Sadean formalism with pornography’s incitement. Oscillating between the scenes of the pornographic

and the liminal road which leads nowhere save the next scene of violence, *Justine* lends language to the explicitness for which Barthes, as much as Dworkin and Lorde, shuns the pornographic. Carter's connection of the novel's formal elements of plot to the 'why' we bother to read the Sadean novel at all mirrors this path, as the plot only serves to present us with – or, more accurately, to narrate for us – scenes we expect as necessary to the pornographic arousal driving our very reading. 'Scenes of ferocity', Maurice Blanchot writes of Sade, 'succeed scenes of ferocity.'<sup>26</sup> As these readings attest, it only becomes possible to analyze *Justine* not through the index of its minutia – what Lukács refers to as 'insignificant details' – but rather in the circuit of pornographic form which sutures them together in repetition.<sup>27</sup> In this way, the very structure of the *Justine*, both as a circuitous plot and the predictability of pornography's teleology, represents the split Barthes makes between the Sadean abundance of narration and the 'blank of the narrative'.

Interestingly, however, despite acknowledging this formalism of the unsurprising repetitions of violence, Carter nevertheless finds a deeper meaning in *Justine*. '[I]n the character of Justine', she observes, 'Sade contrived to isolate the dilemma of an emergent type of woman. Justine, daughter of a banker, becomes the prototype of two centuries of women who find the world was not, as they had been promised, made for them and who do not have, because they have not been given, the existential tools to remake the world for themselves'.<sup>28</sup> In Sade's role as 'moral pornographer', Carter reads the repetitive narration of sexual violence as an allegory for the 'existential' condition of women from the eighteenth century onwards. While Barthes' critique of pornography relies on its supposed explicitness, Carter, on the other hand, wrests a feminist project from Sade by reading through the lines. Justine's subjection to pornographic narration thereby would be mobilized toward a meaningful end. Or, more exactly, insofar as Carter's 'moral pornographer' has hidden meaning outside of narration's explicitness, *Justine* animates the reader with the meaning beyond its textual frame. At last, pornography has gained its punctum. And yet, Barthes' opposition between narration and narrative allows us to more readily dispense with this redeemed, punctate pornography. While Barthes' observation of, in Flaubert and Michelet, the difference between 'useless details' and the demands of narrative has been well documented and contended with, Barthes' description of narration has received less critical attention.<sup>29</sup> It would seem that the, as Barthes describes it, 'aesthetic verisimilitude' of 'useless details' in Flaubert



may be classified alongside with Sadean narration as mutually exemplary of the 'reality effect'.<sup>30</sup> But is the narration of pornography a convention which essentially attempts to represent the real – be it as the faux empty signifier of the 'reality effect' or the techniques of 'description' that Heather Love has recently claimed 'account[s] for the real'?<sup>31</sup> While Carter's reading of *Justine* asserts that there is meaning to be found in Sade's narration – however circuitous or libidinally enticed it may be – Carter's descriptive use of 'pornographic narrative' is perhaps more revealing in this regard than she intends. While Barthes claims that such 'useless details' 'seem inevitable', with every narrative 'possess[ing] a certain number', 'narration', as we have seen, removes us from the scene of *the* scene.<sup>32</sup> Thus, while Barthes' definition of 'narration' troubles the distinction between Lukács' this-or-that of 'Narrate or Describe?', it is not to collapse narration as presented by Barthes into description as it has been taken up by scholars like Love as offering a *different* access to hermeneutic and sociological meaning.<sup>33</sup> That is, unlike the measurable, 'certain number' of useless details – even if they appear descriptively – it would be impossible to count the instances of narration in *Justine*. Rather, Barthes' definition of narration as the obstruction of narrative meaning pulls us away from close readings of the novel; it merely unfolds, folds upon itself, only to unfold again. Despite Carter's attempts to liberate *Justine* from pornographic explicitness to an implicit feminism, and thereby liberate Justine herself from the 'dilemma' Sade 'isolates', Justine is nevertheless rendered as a product of textual narration which itself occludes that liberation of meaning. In this way, Justine may be counted among the bodies depicted by Sade that, as Marcel Hénaff argues, are 'as remote from hermeneutical coquetry as it is from hysterical bombast [...] Stripped of signs, symptomless, the Sadean body can do nothing other than put a stop to the classical mode of narrative'.<sup>34</sup> Similar to the erotic striptease which, as a narrative that develops the textual 'Engima', is subject to a 'logico-temporal order', 'hermeneutical coquetry' is stripped from the Sadean body as a result of the evacuation of the logico-temporal demands of narrative. 'Pornographic narrative', as Carter wields it, can then only be uttered oxymoronically. In acceding to Barthes' opposition between narration and narrative, we therefore approach the dictum of meaning which narration, the language of pornography, may – against Barthes' own wishes – aspire to foil.

If *Justine* represents Sade's attempt at eschewing the construction of a narrative reliant on textual 'Enigma', he unwittingly perfected such a

technique in the earlier *The 120 Days of Sodom*. Written in 1785 while Sade was imprisoned in the Bastille, the novel is renowned for being ‘incomplete’. Like *Justine*, the story details repeated assaults on its characters, the account of which is organized by the day. The imposition of this formal structure of the day likewise accentuates the sheer repetition of violence, as well as relegating violence to the quotidian banality which reading Sade can so often impart. Of particular import to the debates surrounding pornography, however, are the very ‘incomplete’ sections of the novel, which, as Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver note, are taken to evidence that the novel is ‘unfinished’.<sup>35</sup> Instead of viewing these late sections as indicative of the novel’s incompleteness, I would like to pornographically take the text as it is, deracinated from the ‘meaning’ of the ending’s narratological scarcity that Wainhouse and Seaver ascribe to it. Although the early portions of *120 Days* follow the relatively same formula as the narration of sadistic acts in *Justine*, as the novel progresses Sade’s writing takes the form of notes recounting the events of each day. Consider, for instance, this ledger of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January:

109. *He amputates one foot.*

110. *He breaks one of her arms as he embuggers her.*

111. *Using a crowbar, he breaks a bone in her leg and embuggers her after doing so.*

112. *He ties her to a stepladder, her limbs being attached in a peculiar manner, a cord is tied to the ladder; he pulls the cord, the ladder falls. Sometimes she breaks one limb, sometimes another.*<sup>36</sup>

Rather than emblematic of the novel’s deficiency, these portions’ location at the novel’s end toys with an alternate, more speculative, reading of these scenes as a logical progression of violence’s narration as correlative with a progression in the reduction of prose. The acts of violence become distinguished only by the proceeding numbers which order them temporally. Read pornographically, such acts are recorded only as content over which any veneer of ‘meaning’ in the form of narrative would obscure. The reduction of that meaning transforms narrative into narration, mirrored now not only in the content – as it was with *Justine* – but also in syntax. Although the more ‘complete’ sections of *120 Days* precede these ones temporally, they nonetheless formally portend them. In these late sections, any meaning on the basis of character, setting, or plot is completely elided. While there are short

descriptions at the end of each day, there is no precise context for passages like these – of which there are many – that would illuminate to whom the pronouns of ‘he’ or ‘she’ belong, or if they even refer to the same characters as they repeat from one line to the next. Even more indiscriminate are the parts of the body on which violence is carried out: Which ‘foot’ is amputated? Which ‘bone’ is broken by the crowbar? What is the ‘peculiar manner’ in which ‘her’ ‘limbs’ are tied? Which ‘limb’ is broken? And, like *Justine*, the precise act of violence does little to shape the plot of the novel at large. The foot could be ‘amputate[d]’ just as easily as it could be – as in other portions of the novel – pricked with needles, burned, pissed on, etc. without changing the only possible progression. To recall Carter, readers of pornographic literature ‘know what is going to happen’. Just so, *120 Days* ends with the meticulous listing of the characters of the novel in different taxonomies: when their death occurred, what their role was, whether they should be saved and returned to France, etc.<sup>37</sup> Such a practice of listing evidences what Hénaff implies to be the further progression of the Sadean logic of graphic depiction. ‘The Sadean body – defined by its plastic outlines, classified by its anatomical elements, treated as the simple object of an inventory’, he claims, ‘is *the body literally, to the letter*. But we should not understand this phrase as referring to some primordial simplicity, as being just an ordinary denotational term’.<sup>38</sup> In lieu of a radical return of the body to a ‘primordial simplicity’ (any reader of Sade knows well that the acts of violence are anything but ‘simple’), Sadean violence, operating pornographically, renders its content ordinary through explicit narration. If the diminished language that characterizes the late portions of *120 Days* ought to be, as I have suggested, read not as symptomatic of the novel’s incompleteness but instead as the logical progression of Sade’s pornography of violence, then the novel’s final line might be reinterpreted as a thesis of pornography’s anathema to meaning: ‘sprinkle in whatever tortures you like’.<sup>39</sup>

Reduced to its formal and narratological scaffolding, pornographic violence in Sade is rendered ‘unexceptional’ in the way Arne De Boever describes unexceptional art. Against an artistic culture which cherishes art and artists as singularly incomparable, the ‘unexceptional’ work of art suggests an ‘art world organized around the notion of the copy, not as something against which such a world needs to immunize itself but as the very element in which it operates. It would be an art world outside of the “one”’.<sup>40</sup> Although these acts of violence, depicted pornographically, are not exactly ‘copies’ per se, they

are – in the scope of Sadean narration – fungible. Against the ‘logico-temporal order’ of the erotic striptease Barthes associates with narrative, the disparate acts that occur on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January in *120 Days* could just as easily happen on the 22<sup>nd</sup> or the 24<sup>th</sup>; the order of stops on Justine’s circuitous path of abuse could be easily interchanged with another. Indeed, in Sade, ‘every being is interchangeable’, Blanchot observes, ‘each one has only the meaning of one unit within an infinite number’.<sup>41</sup> Blanchot’s ‘one’ within an ‘infinite’ mimics the unexceptional work of art as outside of the ‘one’. The pornography proffered by Sadean violence resembles this unexceptionalism, pried from the erotic’s exception of meaning that, in turn, makes narrative exceptionally meaningful. Interestingly, in the preface to *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter refers to pornography as the ‘orphan little sister of the arts; its functionalism renders it suspect, more applied art than fine art, and so its very creators rarely take it seriously. Fine art that exists for itself alone, is art in a final state of impotence’.<sup>42</sup> Although the purpose of Carter’s critique of fine art is to, as we have seen, praise pornography for the moralism of its depictions, Carter might also be taken here, in criticizing art that ‘exists for itself alone’, to separate pornography from the art of the exceptional ‘one’. Unexceptional violence, the Sadean language of the pornographic, functions to formalize the erasure of the exceptionalism of meaning; the enigmatic signifier that furnishes the ‘crucible of meaning’ that Barthes, Carter, and all the other participants of the ongoing Sex Wars lavish in.

Should such a pornography of the unexceptional be desired? Or, to return to a question implied earlier: Is a Sadean sociality possible? The question no doubt provokes some worried expressions. What I mean, though, is not a sociality of violence per se, but a sociality of the unexceptional for which Sadean violence serves as a single instruction. Sade, as I have shown, provides us with a literary template in *Justine* and *120 Days* for such an exit from the enigmatic signifier which demands our allegiance to a fascinating meaning never to be found. Such a Sadean template of this relationality of pornography – that is, a relation of subjects uninhibited by the ‘will to know’ caused by epistemological fascination – may instruct us to enact what Bersani refers to as a shift from ‘psychoanalytic’ to ‘aesthetic’ subjectivity.<sup>43</sup> In *The Forms of Violence*, Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit perceive in Assyrian palace reliefs of the ninth century B.C. an antidote to our current, narrativized, conceptualizations of violence. As narratives which ‘elaborate story lines as a way of making sense of experience’, contemporary accounts of violence are

‘reduced to the level of a plot; it can be isolated, understood, perhaps mastered and eliminated [...] we expect this mastery to take place as a result of the pacifying power of such narrative conventions’.<sup>44</sup> This description of violence bears striking resemblance to the ‘will to know’ that Bersani associates with the enigmatic signifier. Insofar as the fascination with an enigmatic meaning incites a relationality expressed through a ‘passion for absolute control’, this account of violence similarly endeavors to ‘maste[r] and eliminat[e]’ violence through its narrativization. Such an understanding of violence might very well align itself with the erotic, as both fixate on the enigmatic meaning that precedes the, as Bersani claims, sadistic attempts at the enigmatic other’s destruction. In contrast to this erotic narrativizing of violence, Bersani and Dutoit maintain that the Assyrian palace reliefs, with their repetitive, related vignettes, lend themselves to an ocular mobility in which the viewer’s ‘attention [is] constantly on the move’.<sup>45</sup> Such a mobility functions similarly to the incessant, circuitous, formally nondescript, violence of early Sade, inasmuch as they both provide no stable footing for the epistemic search of the erotic. Despite, to recall Carter, the enticing allure of the pornographic, pornography has a similar function to the Assyrian palace reliefs that expose an ‘indifference to the objects of our attention, a readiness to continue substituting one image for another’.<sup>46</sup>

‘One person’s pornography is another person’s erotica’, writes Williams.<sup>47</sup> On the contrary, if pornography has any use, it is that it is *not* erotic. Rather than rage against detractors like Barthes who disparage the pornographic on the basis that it lacks the punctum which ‘launch[es] desire beyond what it permits us to see’, it may prove more fruitful to interrogate what exactly an inclusion into such a ‘beyond’ entails. In this way, Barthes is on to something. In showing us, in graphic detail, only what it ‘permits us to see’, the utility of the pornographic is that it frees us from the whole dictum of meaning to which our relations – to art, to literature, to others – are currently condemned. In Sadean pornography we are acquainted with a relational mode alternative to the compulsion to ‘master’ each other spurred by the erotic’s fascination with ceaselessly enigmatic meanings. In this way, as counterintuitive as it may seem, Sade instructs us on how to escape sadism. Although the methodology is violence for Sade, it does not have to be for us. Nor is it – like in the Assyrian palace reliefs or the unexceptional copies of art – the only template. In acceding to the Barthesian pornographic, though, we relinquish the ‘passion for absolute control’ of those around us, giving up the

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fantasy that we may ever know their 'Enigma' that never existed, a fantasy that we enact on them through, paradoxically, violence. Rather than, like Carter, seek to redeem pornography akin to Sade as laden with meaning – that is, the Sade of eros – we may aspire, instead, to be the Sade after it.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic', in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 55–57.
- <sup>2</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Plume, 1989), pp. 200–01.
- <sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 59.
- <sup>4</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 41.
- <sup>5</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 41.
- <sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 135.
- <sup>7</sup> Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 67.
- <sup>8</sup> Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 67.
- <sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Group Psychology and The Analysis of the Ego', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 24 vols, vol. XVIII, pp. 65–144 (p. 92).
- <sup>10</sup> Leo Bersani, 'Sociality and Sexuality', *Critical Inquiry*, 26.4 (2000), 641–56 (p. 646).
- <sup>11</sup> Leo Bersani, 'Father Knows Best', *Raritan*, 29.4 (2010), 92–104 (p. 93).
- <sup>12</sup> Leo Bersani, *Receptive Bodies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. vii.
- <sup>13</sup> Fan Wu, 'A Porn Voyeur's Discourse', *Porn Studies*, 6.1 (2019), 38–47 (pp. 42–44).
- <sup>14</sup> Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), p. 277.
- <sup>15</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: And the Ideology of Pornography* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), pp. 18–19.
- <sup>16</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, pp. 21–22.
- <sup>17</sup> Dworkin, *Pornography*, p. 70.
- <sup>18</sup> Williams, *Hard Core*, p. 11.
- <sup>19</sup> Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), p. 16.
- <sup>20</sup> Barthes, *Sade*, pp. 27–28.
- <sup>21</sup> Barthes, *Sade*, p. 158.
- <sup>22</sup> György Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe?', in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. trans. by Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970), pp. 110–48 (p. 111).
- <sup>23</sup> Timo Airaksinen, *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 146.
- <sup>24</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, pp. 12–13.

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- <sup>25</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 24 vols, vol. VII, pp. 123–246 (p. 208).
- <sup>26</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Lautréamont and Sade*, trans. by Stuart Kendall and Michelle Kendall (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 25.
- <sup>27</sup> Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe?', p. 129.
- <sup>28</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 57.
- <sup>29</sup> Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *The Forms of Violence: Narrative in Assyrian Art and Modern Culture* (New York: Schocken, 1985), pp. 41–42.
- <sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), p. 144.
- <sup>31</sup> Heather Love, 'Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn', *New Literary History*, 41 (2010), 371–91 (p. 377).
- <sup>32</sup> Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 142.
- <sup>33</sup> Love, 'Close but not Deep', pp. 374–75.
- <sup>34</sup> Marcel Hénaff, *Sade: The Invention of the Libertine Body*, trans. by Xavier Callahan (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 17–18.
- <sup>35</sup> Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver, 'Introduction to *The 120 Days of Sodom*', in D.A.F. Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. by Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1987), pp. 183–87 (p. 184).
- <sup>36</sup> D.A.F. Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, in *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. by Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1987), pp. 189–674 (p. 616).
- <sup>37</sup> Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, pp. 670–72.
- <sup>38</sup> Hénaff, *Sade*, p. 19.
- <sup>39</sup> Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, p. 672.
- <sup>40</sup> Arne De Boever, *Against Aesthetic Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), p. 62.
- <sup>41</sup> Blanchot, *Lautréamont and Sade*, p. 24.
- <sup>42</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 13.
- <sup>43</sup> Leo Bersani, 'Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject', *Critical Inquiry*, 32.2 (2006), 161–174 (p. 164).
- <sup>44</sup> Bersani and Dutoit, *The Forms of Violence*, pp. 47–51.
- <sup>45</sup> Bersani and Dutoit, *The Forms of Violence*, p. 104.
- <sup>46</sup> Bersani and Dutoit, *The Forms of Violence*, p. 123.
- <sup>47</sup> Williams, *Hard Core*, p. 6.



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