Predators Far and Near: The Sadean Gothic in *Penny Dreadful*

ABSTRACT:

In Episode 3.2 of *Penny Dreadful* the character of Justine is introduced, in reference to the title character of the Marquis de Sade's 1791 novel *Justine*. But while Sade's Justine is an eternal victim, in *Penny Dreadful* the character's fate is changed, under the tutelage of season regulars Lily Frankenstein and Dorian Gray. In the show's reimagining of Sade, certain features of his work are adapted and revised. This sub-plot is the first to directly cite Sade's work, but this chapter argues that his influence has always been present in the series. References to Sade's transgressive philosophy can be found throughout *Penny Dreadful*, primarily expressed through characters such as Justine, Lily and Dorian, who fit the mold of the Sadean libertine. The series itself is situated as a Sadean text, melding high and low cultural forms through its appropriation of penny dreadful literature within the context of contemporary "quality television," which echoes Sade's merging of philosophy with pornography and violence.

KEYWORDS:
Marquis de Sade
Transgression
Gothic
Philosophy
Television

In Episode 3.2 of *Penny Dreadful*, season regulars Dorian Gray and Lily Frankenstein prepare for an evening of sinful decadence, arriving at a party filled with other wealthy aristocrats whose tastes are apparently similar to theirs. A young woman, naked and afraid, is brought shivering before them. She is to be the night's entertainment, her torture played out for the audience's pleasure.

The scene begins in a manner reminiscent of the work of the Marquis de Sade; it is no surprise then that the young victim's name turns out to be Justine, the same name given to the titular heroine of his 1791 novel. The evening takes a turn, though, as Lily and Dorian save Justine and take her as their new companion. In Sade's source novel, Justine is the epitome of incorruptible innocence, destined to be continually abused. Yet in *Penny Dreadful*'s reimagining, several aspects of Sade's work are adapted and revised. Further incorporating elements from Sade's other novels *Juliette* (1797) and *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795), this sub-plot is the first to reference his work directly, but I will argue that his influence has been present throughout the series.

Firstly, I will outline key aspects of Sade's philosophy, which emerged at a time of great societal upheaval, driven by a fundamental shift in thinking about humanity's place as a part of Nature rather than an expression of the divine. Sade's works interrogated society's institutions, exposing them as corrupt, with freedom from these constraints only possible through crime and transgression. I will then further discuss how this philosophy was expressed through fiction, sharing many aspects with gothic literature, which similarly explores darker aspects of the self and society through the representation of violence and perversion. This fusion of the gothic and the Sadean in *Penny Dreadful* will be examined primarily through the representations of Justine, a character directly referencing Sade, and her guardians Lily Frankenstein and Dorian Gray, who both fit into the mould of the Sadean libertine. Finally, I will situate *Penny Dreadful* itself as a Sadean text, melding high and low

cultural forms through its appropriation of penny dreadful literature within the context of contemporary "quality television."

Before continuing, clarification is needed on the ways in which Sade's philosophy is being used in my analysis. While there are elements of Sade's philosophy that call for the rejection of religious and patriarchal repression and the defiance of societal norms, there is another aspect of his thinking that accepts, and even advocates for, abuse and violence. While I argue that Sade is an influence, this does not mean that I myself or showrunner John Logan endorse Sade's worldview. Indeed, given that the series uses the character of Justine but then changes her fate signals that this appropriation of Sade is part of a complex negotiation and interrogation of his ideas, similar to how the series adapts and revises other stories and characters from gothic literature.

The Sadean Libertine

Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade, was born in 1740 and died in 1814, a period that saw world-changing events such as the French Revolution, as well as significant cultural moments such as the Enlightenment and the emergence of gothic literature. In his work as a writer and philosopher, Sade encapsulated the monumental shift in thinking that occurred at this time, from believing in the infallibility of God as a being who created the world and instilled the systems of power according to His will, to the rise of reason, rational thought, and science to explain the natural world and people's place within it. With the French Revolution, "the divine right of kings" was obliterated, but what was put in place of it was not a land of liberty, equality, and fraternity, but a Reign of Terror where many battled for dominance and much blood was spilled. We see in Sade's work these extremes played out in tales where there is a strict hierarchy of those who dominate and those forced to submit, a hierarchy put in place not by God, but by Nature.

Sade's philosophy is predicated on the notion that there is no God and therefore we have no soul. There is nothing beyond our own bodies and their urges, which should not be repressed as society dictates: "I'll tell you I am not aware of having any soul, that I'm acquainted with and feel nothing but my body" (Sade, *Juliette* 44). Sade often presents this idea that we must cast off societal constraints and religious repression in an ironic form, with many of his most ardent libertines being members of the Christian church. *Juliette*, for example, begins in a convent, where Juliette is taught the ways of the libertine by the abbess Madame Delbene, who proclaims:

> Social ordinances in virtually every instance are promulgated by those who never deign to consult the members of society, they are restrictions we all of us cordially hate, they are common sense's contradictions: absurd myths lacking any reality save in the eyes of the fools who don't mind submitting to them, fairy tales which in the eyes of reason and intelligence merit scorn only[…] (10)

Having these words spoken by a nun illustrates the inherent corruption in the institutions of both church and state, as those who enforce the laws seldom heed them.

Instead, the libertine follows Nature, which is seen as the source of all instincts and desires. Thus, when the libertine acts, they are merely following Nature. Within Sade's philosophy, Nature is without morality since morality is something created by humans, subject to change over time and according to geographic location. Nature is similarly "in ceaseless flux and action" (Sade, *Juliette* 171), but this means that no one act can be deemed either right or wrong: "Absurd to say the mania offends nature; can it be so, when 'tis she who puts it in our head? Can she dictate what degrades her?" (Sade, *Juliette* 230). The Sadean libertine feels no remorse for their crimes, just as any act of Nature feels nothing for the destruction it causes, nor does an animal feel remorse for killing another in order to ensure its own survival and sustenance. For Sade, the human is not superior to the animal for

it *is* an animal, and "the laws that govern animals" are "in much stricter conformance with Nature" (Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom* 218).

As in the animal kingdom, in Sade's view humanity is similarly divided into the categories of predator and prey. Those that follow Nature and indulge their vices are rewarded, while those who follow the virtuous path and obey societal rules are punished and preyed upon. It is fitting then that the character of Justine in introduced in *Penny Dreadful* in an episode entitled "Predators Far and Near," with this dichotomy of predator/prey played with throughout the series, often expressed through animal imagery. Alongside the opening scene of the episode, which presents the spectacle of a flock of predators encircling their prey, this episode also portrays the growing attraction between Vanessa Ives and Dr. Alexander Sweet, a zoologist working in a museum. As Vanessa and Dr. Sweet converse, they are surrounded by taxidermied animals, both predators and prey enclosed in glass. This image of animals, frozen in motion and caged, expresses the repression enforced by Victorian society, a repression that is unleashed when characters give into their natural (and supernatural) urges.

Vanessa sits in on one of Dr. Sweet's lectures on the scorpion, which just happens to be Vanessa's animal talisman. The scorpion, a small but fierce predator, embodies the wild and dark side of Vanessa's nature with which she continually battles. For Vanessa, her animal nature is bound to notions of evil and the demonic, and throughout the series she fights to save her soul, a fight that is won through her death and ascension to a Heavenly state. By contrast, the trajectory of Lily, and her previous iteration Brona, is one that is bound to the corporeal. As Chloe Germaine Buckley states:

> In death, Vanessa is aligned with spirit not body, completing her elevation from female grotesque to classical body, closing off the mobility her position as a grotesque

> afforded. In contrast, Brona/Lily remains anchored to her body, a body implicated in the economic exchange of prostitution, gendered violence and political struggle. (12)

While Vanessa's death makes her transcendent, Brona's death makes her monstrous, as she is taken by Dr. Frankenstein and resurrected as Lily. It is only after death that Brona/Lily begins to transform from prey to predator.

For Sade, by following Nature we must follow its perpetual cycles of creation and destruction. Indeed, violence and destruction are essential: "destruction is the soil and light that renews her and where she thrives; it is upon crime she subsists; it is, in a word, through death she lives" (Sade, *Juliette* 172). This statement can also be applied to Lily, who becomes powerful not only through her own death, but through crime, violence, and destruction. Her living-dead state presents a transgression against one of the most fundamental laws of nature, an act that ironically still aligns her with Sadean ideals. Sade called not only for Nature's designs to be followed, but also for them to be thwarted as part of this trajectory toward death and destruction.

A further way of obstructing nature's plans is to subject them to a system of order. Sade writes, "Let us put a little order in these revels; measure is required even in the depths of infamy and delirium" (Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom* 240). While Lily indulges her passions and desires, she is unlike her companion Dorian Gray in that it is at the service of a larger plan to overthrow the prevailing patriarchal order and instil her own.

The character of Dorian Gray in *Penny Dreadful*, obviously based on the titular character of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), is very much in the libertine mould. However, there is the element of the supernatural which is missing from Sade, with Dorian eternally youthful while a portrait in his attic continues to age. Unlike Lily, who has a clear purpose and ideology, Dorian is obsessed with the superficial, to the point of there

being nothing below the surface. This allows him to act without feeling or remorse, and also drives him to more extreme sexual and violent behaviour. As Sade attests:

> [B]elieve me when I tell you that the delights born of apathy are worth much more than those you get out of your sensibility; the latter can only touch the heart in one sense, the other titillates and overwhelms all of one's being. In a word, is it possible to compare permissible pleasures with pleasures which, to far more piquant delights, join those inestimable joys that come of bursting socially imposed restraints and of the violation of every law? (Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom* 342)

In the opening scene of episode 1.4, we see Dorian take part in an orgy, and throughout the series he seduces most of the characters, both male and female as well as transgender. These transgressions though are fuelled by a ceaseless apathy, a desire to flout convention and cause offense and outrage for the sake of it. Again, echoing Sade: "It is not the object of libertine intentions which fires us, but the idea of evil" (Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom* 364).

While Sade was known to write political pamphlets, his philosophical ideas were primarily expressed through fiction (and it is important to stress here that the philosophical ideas presented by Sade in this essay are explored only in the textual realm, as a way to examine *representations* of transgression). His libertine novels are now considered to be classics of pornography, fixated as they are on detailed descriptions of sexual scenarios that run the gamut of all manner of perversions and peccadillos, with no taboo left unexplored. But it is Sade's obsession with sex as a form of violence, which is inflicted on another as a form of pain that sexually excites the perpetrator, that led to Sade's name being adapted into the term "sadism," used to describe a pathological condition.

Sade himself can be considered a sadist, given his propensity for assaulting lower-class women and sex workers. Over the course of his life, Sade spent almost thirty-two years in prison, for these criminal acts and other instances of sexual debauchery. He was

imprisoned in the Bastille from 1784-1789, and during his stay wrote *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785). He was transferred from the Bastille just ten days before it was stormed during the French Revolution, believing that his (unfinished) manuscript had been destroyed in the process. Later in life, Sade was arrested at the behest of Napoleon after he was identified as the author of two of his most famed novels, *Justine* and *Juliette*.

These two novels are connected in that they are the tales of two sisters, one who follows the path of virtue (Justine), the other who follows the path of vice (Juliette). The two sisters are mirror images; many of their adventures are similar but what is different is how they react to the events and people around them. As Maurice Blanchot explains:

> We see this virtuous girl [Justine] who is forever being raped, beaten, tortured, the victim of a fate bent on her destruction. And when we read Juliette, we follow a depraved girl as she flies from pleasure to pleasure [....] [T]he two sisters' stories are basically identical, that everything that happens to Justine also happens to Juliette, that both go through the same gauntlet of experiences and are put to the same painful tests. Juliette is also cast into prison, roundly flogged, sentenced to the rack, endlessly tortured. Hers is a hideous existence, but here is the rub: from these ills, these agonies, she derives pleasure; these tortures delight her. (49)

While Justine finds herself constantly victimized, Juliette seizes each moment as an opportunity for pleasure. When we first see the character of Justine in *Penny Dreadful*, she appears as a victim, much like her namesake, completely vulnerable and at the mercy of those around her who wish to do her harm for the sake of their own pleasure. Yet, through the intervention of Lily Frankenstein and Dorian Gray, Justine's fate is changed and she begins a new life where she turns the violence done to her back on her perpetrators.

While it can be argued that Justine in *Penny Dreadful* therefore becomes a character styled after Juliette, she can be more likened to Eugenie, the young heroine of Sade's

Philosophy in the Bedroom. In this story, Eugenie is instructed in the ways of sex by two older libertines, Dolmance and Madame de Saint-Ange. What is significant, though, is that the sexual situations Eugenie is taken through also involve acts of violence, culminating in a series of brutalities committed against Eugenie's mother. Alongside these acts, as in all of Sade's works, there are long philosophical monologues delivered by the characters detailing their worldview. *In Philosophy in the Bedroom*, the sexual acts are an integral part of these conversations that are presented in the form of lessons, functioning as a form of "education" and indoctrination into the libertine way of life. As Madame de Saint-Ange urges, this way of life goes against all the rules that society demands a woman follow:

> [I]t is necessary that when once she reaches the age of reason the girl be detached from the paternal household, and after having received a public education it is necessary that at the age of fifteen she be left her own mistress, to become what she wishes. She will be delivered unto vice? Ha! what does that matter? Are not the services a young girl renders in consenting to procure the happiness of all who apply to her, infinitely more important than those which, isolating herself, she performs for her husband? Woman's destiny is to be wanton, like the bitch, the she-wolf; she must belong to all who claim her. Clearly, it is to outrage the fate Nature imposes upon women to fetter them by the absurd ties of a solitary marriage. (219)

Detailed here is a proclamation that a young woman should no longer be considered the property of her parents or her husband, that she should "become what she wishes," with no regard for what society expects of her. For Justine in *Penny Dreadful*, Dorian and Lily act in much the same way by initiating Justine into their plans and encouraging her to take back power, although in this case it is not in order to attack the institution of the family but of the patriarchy.

As with Eugenie, Justine's initiation comes in the forms of both sex and violence. Justine tells Dorian and Lily of her plight, stating that she had been bought by a man at the age of twelve, who then later lent her out to others who abused her, before finally selling her to be publicly executed, with each person being charged a mere ten pounds to watch. Dorian and Lily then present her with the man in question and a knife and Justine enacts her own bloody and violent revenge. After the murder, the three then proceed to have sex, bathed in the man's blood, an act that merges sex and death.

The Marquis de Sade and the Gothic

Writing in the late eighteenth century, Sade was a contemporary of writers of the gothic such as Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Gregory Lewis. While Sade's works, given that they relied so heavily on a philosophy linked to the supremacy of the natural world, did not contain anything supernatural or fantastical, there are still aspects that align his work with the gothic. As E.J. Clery states, "The libertinism he advocated is cognate with 'liberty,' yet sexual freedom as he portrays it is invariably decked out in the gothic trappings of incarceration and tyranny" (86). Many of Sade's tales take place in old castles, following young maidens who are imprisoned and endangered, their virtue always in peril. There are also plenty of seductive male characters who may at first appear good but then are revealed to be evil scoundrels compelled by the darkest of desires. The spectre of incest, in the gothic always lying beneath the surface in the subtextual, is brought front and centre in Sade (as with all other manner of sexual taboos and transgressions), as in his short story "Eugenie de Franval," where a man becomes obsessed with his own daughter. Will McMorran (2021) also acknowledges the gothic elements in Sade: "Sade's pornographic novels do share some features with the English gothic in terms of characters (virtuous heroines, debauched

aristocrats and monks) and locations (isolated castles, dark forests, and even darker dungeons)," but remarks that "this has seemed a matter of coincidence rather than influence."

While there is no direct influence from gothic writers in Sade's libertine novels, Sade did write about the rise of the gothic in his essay "Reflection on the Novel," written in 1800. Speaking of "these new novels in which sorcery and phantasmagoria constitute practically the entire merit" (108), he goes on to make the observation that "this kind of fiction, whatever one may think of it, is assuredly not without merit: 'twas the inevitable result of the revolutionary shocks which all of Europe has suffered" (109). Sade here is referencing in particular the French Revolution and the continuing after effects, further stating: "to compose works of interest, one had to call upon the aid of hell itself, and to find in the world of make-believe things wherewith one was fully familiar merely by delving into man's daily life in this age of iron" (109). For Sade, the horror of these novels reflected the horrors that so many had experienced at that time. Such a statement makes Sade one of the first commentators to make this connection between the gothic and the time and place from which it originates. Similarly, in *Penny Dreadful* we will see the tropes of the gothic updated and revised to comment on twenty-first century issues.

This updating is primarily expressed through the development of the character of Lily Frankenstein. Like Dorian, she is also immortal, having been resurrected by Dr. Frankenstein in Episode 1.8 as a mate for his Creature who has returned for revenge. Previously in Season 1, we saw Lily when she was alive as Brona, an Irish immigrant who turns to sex work as a means of survival but ultimately dies due to consumption. She meets Dorian for the first time in Episode 1.2 when he invites her to his house, proclaiming, "I always wanted to fuck a dying creature." As they have sex, Brona accidentally coughs blood onto Dorian's face, an act that clearly excites him. For the libertine, sex and death are bound up in violence. This

moment is echoed and magnified later in Episode 3.3 when Dorian, Lily, and Justine have sex bathed in blood after committing murder, blood itself becoming a sexual fluid.

In the transformation of Brona into Lily, we have an instance of doubling, a common gothic trope. Despite sharing a body, they are opposites, much like Sade's sisters Justine and Juliette. Like Justine, Brona is downtrodden, destined to live a life of suffering. In contrast, Lily comes into life as a monster, one of Frankenstein's creations. Frankenstein falls in love with her, but as she learns more about the world, she soon begins to rail against the oppression she sees against her and all womankind. Similar to Juliette, Lily comes to own her sexuality, rejecting Frankenstein and taking up with Dorian in a bid to raise an all-woman army seeking to overthrow the patriarchy. In her own way, Lily is planning her own revolution in a bid for "liberty," which she describes as "a bitch who must be bedded on a mattress of corpses." As Buckley argues, "Brona[/Lily] is a revolting body in the double sense of that word. As well as being presented as an object of grotesquerie, she revolts against the abject conditions in which she is placed" (12). Lily's status as a revolutionary is inextricably linked to her corporeal status as grotesque, abject and monstrous. She is a living corpse, often seen covered in blood; one of her revolutionary acts is to call for her followers to bring her the severed arms of men in an act of symbolic castration, signalling the beginning of her battle for female supremacy.

Lily explains to Justine that women who refuse to be degraded and protect themselves are called monsters, echoing Angela Carter's assertion in her book *The Sadeian Woman*, that "[a] free woman in an unfree society will be a monster. Her freedom will be a condition of personal privilege that deprives those of on which she exercises it of their own freedom. The most extreme kind of this deprivation is murder. These women murder" (30). *Penny Dreadful* takes a similar view of monstrosity, being not an aberration of nature but an expression of

opposition against societal norms that are shown to be oppressive. Transgression becomes a means of rebellion.

Dorian goes along with Lily at first but soon comes to tire of the crusade as things get more serious – and less centred on him and his pleasure. As he tells Lily in Episode 3.7, he has simply become bored:

> I've lived through so many revolutions, you see. It's all so familiar to me, the wild eyes and the zealous ardour, the irresponsibility and the clatter. The noise of it all, from the tumbles on the way on the way to the guillotine to the roaring mobs sacking the temples of Byzantium. So much noise in anarchy and it's all so ultimately disappointing.

The reference to the guillotine is clearly alluding to the French Revolution, which, as mentioned earlier, Sade linked explicitly to the rise of the gothic. Dorian conveys Gilles Deleuze's point that the Sadean hero "appears to have set himself the task of thinking out the Death Instinct (pure negation) in a demonstrative form" (31), his life of excess creating a numbing effect that ultimately annihilates the self – there is as much depth to Dorian and his endless beauty as that of his two-dimensional portrait.

While Sade wrote in the eighteenth century, the character of Dorian Gray and the penny dreadful originated in the nineteenth, the penny dreadful made available in the form of serials that could be purchased cheaply each weekly instalment. R.A. Gilbert states that in these works, "extended descriptive passages made way for a constant succession of sensational events described in lurid terms" (215), with narrative being secondary to spectacle. This attention to spectacle rather than story development brings to mind Sade's unfinished novel *The 120 Days of Sodom*, which, due to it not being completed, descends into

a list of incredibly lurid and violent (and in some cases rather ridiculous) atrocities. It was these elements that Sade was most focused on.

A *Dreadful* Mix of High and Low

Named after these cheap gothic serials, the television series takes characters such as Dracula, Frankenstein, Dorian Gray, the Wolf Man, and Dr. Jekyll, and melds them together, emphasising their transgressiveness, their revelling in the spectacles of sex and violence. Further, it imbues them with a contemporary sensibility, but in a way that also teases out what was always there in these stories.

The series thus combines together references to literary works written over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with further nods to the many adaptations of these works that have been produced for both film and television since the beginning of the twentieth century to the present. Sade was writing in the last decade of the eighteenth century, while Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* were published in 1818, 1890, and 1897, respectively. These works are all merged together into a late nineteenth century Victorian setting, in itself a monster created from many different parts – or, from another perspective, it is a Sadean narrative combining all manner of transgressions and perversions, which are then ordered within an organised system of episodes.

Given it is a television series produced by cable network Showtime, *Penny Dreadful* is also an example of the new age of "quality television." While the original penny dreadfuls were considered low cultural forms for their catering to the masses, contemporary cable drama series have been positioned as high culture. Unlike earlier forms of television, which were similarly looked down upon as presenting mindless entertainment, "quality television" has been compared both to classic literature from the likes of Charles Dickens, with its

expanded scope and ability to develop complex narratives and characters, as well as to arthouse cinema (see Martin). Benjamin Poore argues that this current discourse is referenced in *Penny Dreadful*'s title:

> [...] a further layer of meaning to the title *Penny Dreadful* is that not only does it anticipate the joke about its own pulp origins, but it also makes an explicit, appropriating gesture towards all of television as being mere penny dreadful fiction. The joke can only work, in that sense, now that television is understood, post-*The Sopranos*, post-*The Wire*, post-*Breaking Bad*, as an art form, with identifiable showrunner-auteurs instead of undifferentiated hack writers (Martin 11). The joke only works, that is, because it is palpably no longer true: it bespeaks a new confidence in the medium. (68-9)

As Poore suggests, the title signals that the series will be taking a once-derided form and appropriating into a new one – itself also once-derided – situating it as a part of the recent trend of shows that deconstruct genre conventions for an audience of educated and savvy viewers (see also *American Horror Story* [FX, 2011 -]; *Watchmen* [HBO, 2019]; and *Lovecraft Country* [HBO, 2020]).

This re-evaluation of previously disparaged texts again recalls the work of Sade, who was rediscovered in the twentieth century by a generation of intellectuals, such as George Bataille, Gilles Deleuze, and Simone de Beauvoir, who saw in Sade's philosophy a way of thinking about humanity that confronted its darkest aspects. Guillame Apollinaire famously declared Sade "the freest spirit whoever lived," while Deleuze explains in *Coldness and Cruelty*, his book examining Sade and Leopold von Sacher Masoch, that

> […] whether Sade and Masoch are 'patients' or clinicians or both, they are also great anthropologists, of the type whose work succeeds in embracing a whole conception of

> man, culture and nature; they are also great artists in that they discovered new forms of expression, new ways of thinking and feeling and an entirely original language. (16)

Deleuze sees in Sade and Masoch something beyond just mere pornography; he sees in their work an attempt to examine the nature of existence and humanity's capacity to reason, expressed in a completely new artistic form. Sade's transgressions are of form as well as content.

This reappraisal from intellectual elites further led to Sade being discovered and referenced in popular culture. In her book *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde*, Joan Hawkins explores the collision of high and low cultural forms in cinema, pinpointing Sade as a key figure in this discussion:

> Consider the works of the Marquis de Sade, whose books are sold in mainstream bookstores and adult bookstores and housed in university libraries. Sade's works, which the intellectual elite view as masterful analyses of the mechanisms of power and economics are also—at least if we are to take their presence in adult bookstores and magazines seriously—still regarded as sexually arousing, as masturbatory aids. (6)

As Hawkins elucidates here, Sade stands at the crossroads of high and low culture, embraced by both the intellectual elite and suppliers of smut.

In cinema, there have been several adaptations of his works, most notably Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Saló, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) and various soft-core erotica adaptations by filmmaker Jess Franco. With Pasolini and Franco, we again see the melding of high and low culture: Pasolini was considered both an arthouse auteur and a scandalous provocateur, with *Saló* subject to bans in several countries; Franco is often pigeonholed as a purveyor of trash,

but his films incorporate elements of formal experimentation and philosophical reflection that mirrors Sade's melding of pornographic scenarios and theoretical discussion.

Sade also has a history of being referenced in the horror genre, in *The Skull* (Freddie Francis, 1965), *Waxwork* (Anthony Hickox, 1988), and *Night Terrors* (Tobe Hooper, 1993), and was clearly an influence on films such as *Bloody Pit of Horror* (Massimo Pupillo, 1965), *Hellraiser* (Clive Barker, 1987), and *Tenemos le carne/We Are the Flesh* (Emiliano Rocha Minter, 2016), to name just a few. Examples of extreme cinema, such as the "torture porn" trend of the noughties and films from the New French Extremity, continue Sade's exploration of all possible perversions and atrocities.

Moving back to television, central to the development of "quality" or "complex" television is its status as "adult" entertainment, presenting images of sex and violence previously deemed taboo. Early examples of quality television such as *Oz* (HBO, 1997-2003) and *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007) were ground-breaking not only as a result of the complexity of their narratives, but also because of their graphic representations of sex and violence, particularly scenes of sexual violence and misogyny. This aspect was pushed even further in the wildly popular *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019), which was often criticized for its over-reliance on rape as both spectacle and narrative device. The excesses of *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-2015) and *American Horror Story* can also be considered Sadean, with their focus on extreme acts of violence, often perpetrated by libertine characters, such as cannibalistic serial killer Hannibal Lecter or the vampire Countess of *American Horror Story*'s fourth season, who view their deeds as part of the expression of their personal philosophy.

Such shocking representations are deemed acceptable through both their high cultural status and their target audience of intelligent and shrewd adults. Xavier Mendik and Graeme Harper utilized a Sadean approach in their study of the reception of violent images in cinema

by a knowledgeable cult audience, arguing the following: “Sade’s theories and experiments are paradigms of active rather than passive creation and reception. Here, the text’s audience is both enticed into its celebrations of evil and perversity before being shocked, misled or violently forced to reflect on their gratifications from the narrative proceedings” (238). What Mendik and Harper explain here is that excessive images work twofold: first by shocking its viewers and then forcing them to reflect on their relationship to these images. Just as Sade did in his written work, there is a confrontation with our own culpability and attraction to violence and sadism, a confrontation also present in the staging of violence in cable television series. It is this movement beyond mere titillation that demarcates the shift from low to high (although it can certainly be argued that there is an element of “having your cake and eating it, too,” with that aspect of titillation still being present).

Penny Dreadful thus takes its place within this new tradition of quality television, wherein high and low forms meld together. The transgressiveness of its characters and scenarios, the graphic nature of its representations of sex and violence, and its appropriation of gothic tropes owe a debt to Sade, who was one of the first to fuse high and low through a combination of pornography, horror, and philosophy. The characters of Dorian Gray and the Lily Frankenstein both methodically experiment with different perversions and break all societal laws, in a manner derived from the Sadean libertine. Sade’s influence is thus present throughout the series, one of the many references to eighteenth and nineteenth century literate that are melded together in a series that revels in the transgressions inherent in the gothic genre.

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