The Mediation of Desires: Writing, reading, and viewing in *Quills*

As Marshall McLuhan (1964) famously puts it, “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium” (p. 391). The movie *Quills* (2000) certainly presents another example of this insightful observation. Based on Doug Wright’s play script and directed by Philip Kaufman, *Quills* tells the story of Marquis de Sade at Charanton insane asylum in Paris, where he continued writing obscene novels in spite of censorship and torture. Rather than a biographic account of Sade’s last years, the film is a manifest commentary on artistic expression and censorship, as many movie critics point out. The more writing is prohibited, the more defiant and ingenious Sade becomes in enacting his desire to write.

Writing as an erotic expression not only serves as the subject of the film but also as the narrative strategy: each instance of Sade’s writing drives the narrative further until it reaches temporary closure and starts a new circle. Sade’s writing of desire and his desire to write largely shapes the plot in *Quills*. On the other hand, reading features as prominently as writing in the movie. Sade’s novels are always explicitly addressed to readers, forewarning them of the immorality of the stories, and seducing them to read, revel, and revolt. Reading Sade’s novels, therefore, involves imitating and negotiating with his desires. In this sense, *Quills* is a literal and visual translation of Brooks’ concept of narrative desire: “narratives both tell of desire…and arouse and make use of desire as dynamic of signification” (p. 37).

This paper proposes to read *Quills* as an allegory of narrative desire that propels telling and energizes reading. By examining the positioning of writer, reader and the film viewer in the film narrative and visual metaphors created by the camera work and film editing, this paper argues that *Quills* presents a perfect media text that illustrates the relationship between writing, reading, and film viewing.
Writing and the narrative desire

The film opens with Sade’s telling of the story of Mademoiselle Renard (played by Diana Morrison), who is executed in the guillotine in front of a rowdy crowd. This sequence largely establishes the relationship between the writer, the reader and the film viewer for the entire movie. As the film starts, the audience hears the lustful gasp of Renard followed by Sade’s (Geoffrey Rush) narration in voice-over, soliciting the reader and the film viewer alike into close contact with the story of the licentious Renard. As the executioner binds her hands to her back, Renard looks up from the guillotine to meet the gaze of her author and perpetrator as if to plead for mercy. A reverse shot shows Sade looking down at his victim from behind a barred window without pity. The exchange of looks between the character and the author is the personification of the writer seeing his characters in his mind’s eye. As a later match cut reveals, Sade, who is writing in red ink behind an array of quills, looks at his penning of the novel as if he is looking from on top of the guillotine at Renard. The parallel between his ink-dripping quill and the blood-dripping blade most vividly illustrates the violence of writing.

On the other hand, the readers and film viewers are not only made to observe the brutality of writing, but also to participate in the bloodshed, which culminates in the point of view shot from the perspective of the falling blade, with the camera zooming in quickly into Renard’s neck, and a cut into a full red screen with the splash of her blood. The decapitation of Renard is therefore accomplished by the quill as is by the blade. By seeing with the camera sliding down the guillotine into her neck, the reader and viewer becomes accomplice in her beheading. Sade’s writing thus implicates reading and viewing in its performance of violence, and forces the violent performance on the reader and viewer in an aggressive way.
The implication of readers and viewers in writing is also suggested in the visual metaphor of guillotine frame. While the scaffold set up at the center of the square surrounded by the on-looking mass recalls the public display of terror in French Revolution, the frame of the guillotine is suggestive of the frame of the screen in the theatre and the page of parchment on which the writer pens his story. Not unlike the bystanders at the guillotine, the viewers and readers safely watch and enjoy the atrocities from behind the frames. The point of view shot of the spectators in the guillotine frame over Renard’s head and shoulder suggests Sade’s looking at them in his imagination while they look at Renard’s face on the lunette from under it. By having the readers/viewers look at the spectators from the perspective of Sade, the narrative holds up a mirror to the reader/viewer as they revel in the sadist pleasure in Sade’s story. The readers/viewers of the narrative are no less innocent than the spectators in the narrated space.

Sade’s writing seduces the readers to partake in the textual eroticism and violence and holds up a mirror to their conniving spectatorship. However, the violence done to the fictive character is more or less a mirror image of the violence in the world where Sade’s writing takes place. The iron bars and chains to which the writer is confined suggest the real-life counterpart of the violence that instigates Sade’s desire to tell. Sade is a prey of the state violence as the fictive aristocrat. Sade’s narrative, therefore, is motivated by the desire to produce a mirror image of the viciousness of his life world and to revolt against suppression. As Brooks (1984) argues, “it is in essence the desire to be heard, recognized, understood, which, never wholly satisfied or indeed satisfiable, continues to generate the desire to tell, the effort to enunciate a significant version of the life story in order to captivate a possible listener” (p. 54). Sade’s inscription of the life world in narratives—“I write what I see”—is thus both the rebellion against despotism and the desire to pass on the spirit of revolt to the listener.
The porous boundary between the narrated world and the world of the narrator is not only implied by the parallel action in the guillotine sequence, but also by the mixing of diegetic and non-diegetic worlds in film editing. For instance, Sade’s humming of the children’s song, the motif of writing, is mingled with the children singing at the guillotine, suggesting the penetration of the diegetic world by the narrative situation. Later in the film, the young bride Simone (Amelia Warner) of Dr. Royer-Collier’s (Michael Caine) elopes with their architect and leaves Sade’s novel on their wedding bed, the superimposition of the shot in which the shreds of Sade’s novel are thrown into the air on the next shot in which the novelist is tortured on the “calming” chair creates a sense of surrealism that makes patent the analogue between the violence in the novel and the violence in life. Similar analogy can be found in the scene where Madeleine (Kate Winslet) is bound to the platform and whipped by the asylum guard under the order and supervision of Royer-Collier, an execution of violence that recalls the decapitation of Renard in the guillotine.

The mutual penetration between the narrative and the life world is also hinted by the astounding visual metaphors in the film. After the blade drops into Renard’s neck and the screen turns all red, Madeleine, the laundress is heard collecting linens, and her eyes are then seen in a rectangular frame inside the bloody screen. It is as if she arises from the blood puddle of the beheaded Renard, which either suggests the resurrection of the martyr in Sade’s writing or simply another victim of his novel, to which we shall return later. Importantly, the close-up of Madeleine’s eyes as seen through the rectangular viewing slots makes it seem like she is peeping into the cell where the bloody tale is being told. She is thus a voyeur filled with the desire to read and watch, just as we are as film viewers. The rectangular slots in the doors of the madhouse wards thus recall the screen in the cinema, or rather, the viewing slots of a peep show, where
pornographic performances are put on. The erotic and violent narratives Sade creates and abundant sex toys on display certainly make the space an object of voyeuristic interest. Like Madeleine, the readers of Sade’s novel and viewers of the film alike peep into Sade’s life space through his narratives.

On the other hand, these viewing slots can be shut from both the outside and inside, and the inmates can peep out just as the guards and laundress can peep in, which makes it possible for Sade’s narratives to reflect the life world outside his ward. In fact, the narration of the film is driven by Sade jeering at the moralism and hypocrisy outside his ward in his writing—art imitates life—and his seduction of the readers against the suppression of morality by storytelling. For example, the scene of Abbé de Coulmier (Joaquin Phoenix) teaching Madeleine to write is followed by Madeleine’s reading of Sade’s novel: “Let me be your teacher in the ways of love.” Here Sade’s narrative is both a mockery of de Coulmier’s prudishness and the rivalry of the chaste love de Coulmier preaches, seducing Madeleine by violent lust. Sade also creates a parody out of the sinful story of Dr. Royer-Collard’s passed on to him by Madeleine through the viewing slot. As Sade’s novels, the play named crimes of love holds up a mirror in front of Royer-Collard and ridicules the hypocrisy of his prudery with blatantly erotic and immoral performance, a performance that drives Simone, Royer-Collard’s young bride to look for Sade’s novel.

When the viewing slots are shut from the outside, the inmate can use the round peephole above the viewing slots to observe the corridor, as shown by Sade’s eye in the peeping glass of the holes. If the rectangular viewing shots resemble those of the peep show, the round peepholes are like pinholes of camera obscura, the dark room that project images of its surroundings on a screen, the precursor of photography and film. The darkened image of the vaulted corridors
outside Sade’s ward is a metaphor of the cinematic dark rooms where Sade’s infamous stories are projected; that is, life outside Sade’s ward imitates his narratives, and the novelist is in the position of the film maker. The mutual reflection of life and art, narration and narrated, thus creates mise-en-abyme that resembles the continuous vaults in the madhouse corridor.

As it turns out, the plot of Sade’s novel foreshadows the plot of the film in which it is written and smuggled out. The second novel Sade writes in the madhouse already foretells Madeleine’s fate in the film narrative: “the unhappy tale…of a virginal laundry lass, (and) the darling of the lower wards where they entomb the criminally insane.” It is “awfully violent”, “terribly erotic”, but “comes with a price”. The double meaning of Sade’s tale, one about the content of the novel and the other predicting the fate of the listener, Madeleine, suggests the imitation of Madeleine’s life upon Sade’s narrative creation. Madeleine has to pay for each page of the story with a kiss, a transaction between the writer and reader, and between the desire to tell and the desire to read. Yet the much bigger price to pay for the desire for narrative is her own life: She is murdered by Bouchon (Stephen Marcus) whose desire is incited by the recounting of Sade’s story.

**Reading and narrative transference**

To say that life imitates art is really to engage the question of reading or any other consumption of art: what happens in reading (and film viewing) that lends so much power to the narratives? While Abbé de Coulmier expects the practice of writing, as well as painting and singing, to be purgatory and therapeutic, i.e., for private purposes, Sade’s writing is never self-directed. Narratives implicate a listener, as Brooks (1984) argues among others. Sade always starts his stories by addressing the readers at the beginning of his tale and incorporating them into close contact with what is going to happen in the story. The readers, in return, comply with
the solicitation and invest attention to his narrative. This is not to say, however, readers necessarily duplicate Sade’s desire; rather, they read the novels in various ways and react differently in their negotiation with the writer’s desire.

Madeleine delights in reading Sade’s novels and smuggles his manuscripts to his publishers. She imagines herself as the characters, and plays the parts in the novel. Confined to the madhouse where her labor and lover is, Madeleine finds reading her salvation. To be someone else and to be somewhere else seems to be a constant theme in her characterization. She would look at Sade’s publisher riding away on a black horse through the iron bars of the gate until they vanish. Her desire to read has to do with the replacement of the real with the imaginary while reading the novel. Despite the objection of Abbé de Coulmier, her rationale of reading Sade’s pornography is exactly what de Coulmier hopes to achieve with Sade: to purge the evil desires and to achieve moral integrity. “If I wasn’t such a bad woman on the page, I couldn’t be such a good woman in life”, she claims, alluding both to the madness in the asylum and her repressed love for the Abbé. The double life of Madeleine, reading Sade’s sinful novels while falling in love with de Coulmier, imagining herself to be murderesses and harlots but maintaining her goodness and chastity until death, embodies the triangulation of desire as Girard discusses. Her desire for goodness is instigated by the rivalry of lust.

In contrast, Simone, the sixteen-year-old bride of Dr. Royer-Collard, elopes with the young architect who works in her house under the spell of Sade’s novel Justine. Sade’s fictive narrative allures Simone and “pollutes” her with his desire for erotic pleasure and sexual power. As Simone reads Justine in bed beside her husband and master, the voice-over of Sade is heard as if he is talking to her directly, preaching to the young maidens to “rest free from the tyranny of virtue and taste without shame the pleasure of flesh.” While Simone wets her finger in the mouth
and turns the page, Sade’s slightly tilted and murky image appears as if we see over Simone’s shoulder that Sade is approaching and gazing at her from the book page. Unlike Madeleine who labored in the madhouse and only started to learn about writing and reading, Simone grows up in a secluded convent and learns about the world through nothing but books. For her, the symbolic is the real. Simone seduces the architect with the same book of Sade and escapes the prison her husband has made her with iron bars and luxurious decorations.

The different reading practices and reactions to Sade’s narrative in Madeleine and Simone suggest different processes of reading and the precarious relationship between the reader and the text. As Brooks (1984) argues, a narrative text is “an as-if medium, fictional (as any set of signs must be) yet speaking of the investments of desire on the part of both addresser and addressee, author and reader, a place of rhetorical exchange or transaction” (p. 234). Desire motivates the writing and reading of narratives, but it is subject to negotiation, revision, and rewriting once it enters into the symbolic order. The desire that Sade invests in his writing—to revolt against the tyranny of morality and hypocrisy—is thus reordered and retold in the reading process, during which Madeleine and Simone encounter the text with their own desires.

Madeleine and Simone’s different reading of Sade seems to also suggest the importance of narrative situation—the mode of reading—to meaning making. While Madeleine reads them aloud to her companions in the asylum and her deaf mother, Simone is a solitary reader. As Kittler (2010) notes following Virilio, the difference between the two modes of reading is that reading out to co-present listeners may expose the reader to different perspectives (such as those of Madeleine’s companions), while reading in solitude allows the reader to hold undisputable belief in whatever illusions the books project like a camera obscura (pp. 112-113). This recognition of the relationship between silent reading and film viewing is captured in the film.
with the shot of Simone reading inside the bed net while holding a candle light, with an enlarged projection of her body on the net.

Almost as an illustration of the precariousness of reading, Sade has four inmates living next door to each other to pass on a story from mouth to mouth to Madeleine who would transcribe it in the laundry room. Each man in the narrative relay repeats Sade’s original words, and revises them in the lapses of memory. The paraphrases and improvisations rewrite Sade’s story as it is transmitted. As Sade comments himself, his “prose is filtered through the minds of the insane”. The relay of the narrative is at the same time reading (speaking what Sade says) and (re)writing (passing on to Madeleine and revising) of Sade’s narrative, a metaphorical anatomy of the transactional process of reading a narrative. Narratives are rewritten and retold in the process of reading with the reader projecting what s/he perceives what the writer projects. The mad men’s whispers of the tale produce echoes in the empty corridor of the asylum, producing unremitting reverberation like mis-en-abyme.

The readers are the co-authors of the tale in the sense that they revise the narrative in their own ways. Desire of the writer signified in words is negotiated with the desire of the reader in the reading. Dauphin (George Yiasoumi), the pyromaniac, is incited by the word “fire” and almost burns the whole asylum. Bouchon, the paraphiliac incited by the sexual violence in the story, broke out of his cell and murdered Madeleine. Sade’s writing of perversion is enacted by inmates with their own perversion just as Simone enacts Justine in her desire for freedom. Or to put it in another way, the reading of Sade’s tales involves narrative transference in which the readers substitute the tale for their own life and make it real (Brooks, 1984). While Madeleine maintains the boundary between the real and the make-real, or between life and text, the insane
and the naïve do not distinguish them, a symptom of madness or a blessing as Simone thus breaks free from the prison her husband has set for her.

While reading involves entering the story of another and making it one’s own, the transference often goes nowhere if the story cannot be enacted. According to Brooks (1984), the movement of the narrated tale to the outer frame of the real is a process of “‘contamination’: the passing-on of the virus of narrative, the creation of the fevered need to retell” (p. 221). Of all the readers of Sade, Abbé de Coulmier’s cannot retell Sade’s stories due to his religious vocation. To speak of sinful thoughts and emotions runs the risk of acting upon them, as he tells Madeleine. He is well aware of the power of words: while he encourages Sade to purge his evil thoughts on page, he is not tolerant of Sade’s publishing them. Yet by reading Sade’s novel handed to him by Dr. Royer-Collard, he already loses his chastity and is contaminated with the virus to narrate. The blockage of narrative transmission is accompanied by the constant seduction of Sade’s narratives: watching the parody of Dr. Royer-Collard and his bride, reading Sade’s handwriting on the bed sheets, taking Sade’s bloody manuscripts on his clothes, and reading Sade’s writing in feces. In fact, the narrative of Quills can be read as Sade’s constant narrative seduction and de Coulmier’s resistance and silencing of Sade’s voice.

Although de Coulmier takes away Sade’s narrative media: quills, wine, furnishing, clothes, and tongue, his desire (as signified by Madeleine) becomes more intense as the object of desire is lost. He betrayed his God by committing necrophilia in dream and by torturing his rival. When Sade points him to his swan song in feces lit by beams of light from overhead—a narrative in panorama theatre—de Coulmier is moved by Sade’s desire to tell. The transference of narrative desire is completed when Sade kills himself by swallowing de Coulmier’s cross, removing the obstruction of narrative transmission and freeing de Coulmier to tell his tale. As it turns out, de
Coulmier is placed into Sade’s former ward as a mad man, and, with the quills smuggled in by Madeleine’s mother, started to write. The narration of the film thus comes to closure with the seduced reader taking up the quill and speaking the writer’s story.

The negotiation between the writer and the reader’s desire, however, reorders the narrative. Like Sade who writes what he sees as “proceedings to the guillotine”, de Coulmier pens the evil he has “stared into”. Madeleine, the quintessential symbol of desire, serves as the narrative motivation of both. Yet the new story penned by De Coulmier and narrated in voice-over by Sade is a mixture, or synthesis, of what is previously antithetical: good versus evil. As de Coulmier and Sade’s narration goes, “in order to know virtue, we must quaint us with vice. Only then can we know the full measure of man.” What Sade’s narratives formerly grapple with—desire in opposition to morality—now becomes an epistemological question, a “narrative transformation”, as Todorov (1977) calls it.

Conclusion

As Sill (2001) argues, the origin of the 18th century novel has to do with the attempt to find the cure for passion in addition to the dealing with the question of virtue and truth. Sill’s comment on the 18th century novel can be read as a subtext for the narrative in Quills. Sade’s writing in the late 18th and early 19th century as depicted in the film is the revolt of desire against the tyranny of morality, or passion against virtue, lust against love. As is illustrated in the film, the contestation of the dichotomy is negotiated in writing and reading, and leads to the quest for truth. Sill (2001) also observes two ways to cure passions in the novel: “one that assumes some inherent goodness of heart in the subject of the novel and seeks to restore it to health by removing or moderating the passions that have distempered it; and another that seeks to reform behavior by subjecting the passions to a disciplinary code of manners, or, should that cure fail,
by extirpating them” (p. 11). This resonates with the theories on how to correct Sade’s insidious thoughts hold by the two supervisors of Charanton asylum: Abbé de Coulmier believes that writing purges harmful thoughts and is therefore therapeutic while Dr. Royer-Collard insists that punishment and torture are the ultimate way to restore civility and social order. Sade’s writing, either in compliance with Abbé de Coulmier’s wish or in defiance of Dr. Royer-Collard’s punishment, has to do with the transformation of the bodily desire into passion in the text.

One problem with text is that it is easily transmitted and therefore readily publicized. Had Sade’s writing been kept private and confined to the secluded chamber at Charanton asylum, little fuss would have been made about it. What is wished to be therapeutic practice is circulated in public and incites anger, desire, violence, and disruption. The metonymic relations of text to the body (recall the media of Sade’s writing: handwritten words with quills, blood, clothes, mouth and feces) as well as the addressivity of narratives (the desire to be heard) both suggest the transference of the writer’s desire to the reader. Passion in the text is contagious in that it incites the listener to retell and disseminates the seed to revolt. On the other hand, reading is precarious as the text is always a space of contestation between desires, just as the narrative of Quills suggests in the end: Sade’s rebellious novels are subject to appropriation by the tyranny of commercial greed, a reflective note on the commercial nature of the movie.
Reference


