

*H-France Review* Vol. 3 (September 2003), No. 105

**Pierre Klossowski and Maurice Blanchot**, *Decadence of the Nude/La décadence du nu*. Ed. Sarah Wilson. Introduction by Alyce Mahon. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2003. 205 pp. Figures, bibliographies, and notes. \$26.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 1-901033-62-7.

Review by Brett Bowles, Iowa State University.

This volume is the latest offering from Black Dog, a London-based press that seeks to provide “an eclectic and fresh take on the contemporary cultural scene”[1] with books on contemporary art, architecture, design, and photography. *Decadence of the Nude* is the third title in the press’s “Revisions” series edited by Sarah Wilson, who holds a joint appointment at the University of London’s Courtland Institute of Art and the Sorbonne, Paris IV. The series is meant to reintroduce overlooked French artists and previously published theoretical essays about their work to a new generation of scholars.

In order to reach as wide an audience as possible, the essays are presented side by side in both French and English, as are the various elements of the accompanying critical apparatus. It includes a substantial introduction by a professional art historian (in this case, Alyce Mahon of Trinity College, University of Cambridge), numerous illustrations, and bibliographies of both primary works by and secondary writings about the artists represented. Following the precedent established by the first two “Revisions” entries—essays by Jean-François Lyotard on Jacques Monory[2] and by Michel Foucault on Gérard Fromanger[3]—the choice of Klossowski underscores the avant-garde kind of artist and art criticism targeted by the series.

As Mahon establishes in her lengthy introductory essay, which accounts for roughly one-third of the book, Pierre Klossowski (1905-2001) played a significant role in French art, literature, and philosophy from the 1930s through the 1980s. His writings rehabilitating the Marquis de Sade as a figure of legitimate literary significance and exploring the philosophical dimensions of pornography, as well as his own substantial corpus of erotic novels and drawings, drew attention from influential critics such as Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard. Yet today Klossowski’s work remains relatively obscure, even among scholars conversant in contemporary art and theory. This compilation attempts to reestablish Klossowski by presenting three of the artist’s essays—“Decadence of the Nude” (1967), “Description, Argumentation, Narrative” (1975), and “The Indiscernible” (1978)—with Blanchot’s “The Laughter of the Gods” (1965), a knotty meditation on the philosophical value of Klossowski’s literary and graphic creations.

Klossowski’s biography alone is sufficient to pique the interest of specialists outside art history. Born in Paris to a Russian-Polish mother and a Polish-French Huguenot father, he was mentored during his childhood by Rainer Maria Rilke (his mother’s long-time companion after her separation from Klossowski’s father), then in the 1920s by André Gide, for whom he worked as private secretary and copyeditor of *The Counterfeiters*, a trilogy of novels expressing Gide’s philosophy of self-discovery through hedonism and sexual experimentation. Klossowski subsequently embarked on what would be a

lifelong quest to blend these two formative influences by exploring the redemptive theological potential of sexually transgressive art.

By the early 1930s, the Marquis de Sade had become Klossowski's *maître à penser*, an affinity that he shared with Surrealists including Robert Desnos, Paul Eluard, and Georges Bataille. Unlike his peers, however, Klossowski was interested in the philosophical implications of Sadean pornography rather than in violence, excess, and immorality as tools of socio-political contestation. At the height of the Popular Front, Klossowski's trepidation regarding the use of art for political purposes and his fascination with the role of new technologies in artistic production led him to befriend Walter Benjamin, whose seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" he translated into French. Klossowski's deepening interest in theology and distaste for politics led him to join the Dominican order of La Lesse in late 1939. He spent the war studying and working as a chaplain in a Vichy internment camp for political prisoners but was never ordained, leaving the monastery shortly before the Liberation.

An original member of the *Dieu vivant* discussion group formed in 1944 to work out the moral questions posed by the Occupation, Klossowski participated in the Existentialist movement during the late 1940s and early 1950s by contributing articles to *Les Temps Modernes*. He argued that the expression of extreme evil, whether in the form of Nazism or Sade's sociopathic embrace of perversity—a topic explored in his 1947 book, *Sade mon prochain*—is, in fact, morally redemptive because it prompts spiritual resistance through acts of kindness, thereby reawakening and strengthening humanity's impulse toward good. Klossowski's view of philosophy as a fundamentally personal process of self-discovery and a form of solidarity with others, rather than as a call for collective engagement and social reform, placed him closer to Camus than Sartre, though he never openly took sides in the grand polemic between the two.

Klossowski's career as a creative artist began in 1954 with the publication of *Roberte Tonight*, the first in a series of self-illustrated, neo-Sadean novels whose heroine is, shockingly, an alter ego of the author's wife Denise, a former deportee and survivor of Ravensbrück whom he married in 1947. The novels, later collected under the title *The Laws of Hospitality*, recount the adventures of Octave, an aging Catholic scholar who willingly gives his wife to all willing guests in their home so that he may experience voyeuristic pleasure and provide his nephew Antoine with a sexual education. As with Sade, it is at first glance difficult to discern any philosophical or theological message at work in such an apparently one-dimensional narrative, particularly in light of the accompanying pencil drawings of explicit sex scenes (often orgies laced with sado-masochism) and solitary nude women splayed in various pornographic poses.

In his "Laughter of the Gods" essay, Blanchot lauds Klossowski's work as "a new gnosis [that] brings to literature what it has lacked since Lautréamont" (p. 163) and "a sacrilege that attests to the sacred, for if transgression requires an interdict, the sacred requires sacrilege, so that the sacred, which is only witnessed through the impure speech of blasphemy, will not cease to be indissociably bound to a power always capable of transgression" (p. 175).

Following Blanchot's lead and Deleuze's equally admiring characterization of Klossowski as a "theopornologer" [4], Mahon contends that "Klossowski's fiction combines two sorts of theatricality: that of the Marquis and his ritualised ceremonies of decadence and that of Saint Augustine and his concept of *theologis teatrica* as a means of moral exegesis, exemplified in the thirteen books of his *Confessions*. St. Augustine praised God for his good and evil acts, depicting sin as a perverse love which frustrates man's basic drive toward being and perfection. Like St. Augustine, Klossowski believed that man must find his identity outside himself and that he must choose either to rise above himself or to leave the love of God and sink. Man can turn his back to God, having sinned, and recognize that the full potential of his being lies with God. . . . Roberte's physical exposure is intended to lead her and the viewer/reader to a spiritual catharsis, in recognition of a greater power" (p. 65).

Though it fits the artist's unusually heterodox intellectual background, such an interpretation is intuitively difficult to accept. Even if Klossowski cultivates extreme perversity with the noble intention of prompting readers to address their own struggle with the antagonistic needs for physical gratification and spiritual aspiration, the skeptic may wonder about the real impact of his "superior pornography" (p. 66). Unlike the pornographic pre-Revolutionary bestsellers studied by Robert Darnton<sup>[5]</sup>, Klossowski's novels have little concrete political or social significance, except perhaps in mocking the conventions of classic nude paintings and in violating moral taboos for the sake of art.

Indeed, Klossowski's own essays about his work focus on formal considerations and make no lofty philosophical claims. In "Decadence of the Nude" he offers a perceptive critique of the "elusive secret" (p. 116) concealed in the work of nineteenth-century French masters of the genre and its subversion in the twentieth century: "that the very idea of the Nude is only a neutralisation of a primitive and violent act, an aesthetic and social compromise" (p. 121). Modern artists such as Klee, he continues, have exposed this latent violence to shatter the hypocrisy of bourgeois good taste, but "their rebellion has destroyed what they wanted to liberate and the break with this neutralisation has only been at the cost of the primitive act" (121). Klossowski concludes by claiming that "a so-called 'erotic' painting, representing a rape scene, has nothing in common with the simulacrum of appropriation of the female body by the vision of her as a nude. Such representation is only fortuitous explanation for the primitive violence inherent in the looks cast upon the nude. The 'erotic' painting empties and purges the look of all the explosive potential with which the traditional Nude always remains charged. . . . In our universe, the very principle of the gaze is brought into question" (p. 122).

The point is well taken when contextualized in this way, but what to make of Klossowski's own representation of women? It is especially troubling that *Roberte* is often forcibly (albeit willingly) immobilized during her sexual encounters. Here Mahon compares Klossowski's heroine to Sade's *Justine*, claiming that "the imaginary worlds of both writers are dominated by female figures of sexual and psychological power. This sets both authors apart from the typical generic conventions of the pornographer" (p. 59). In fact, Mahon goes so far as to assert that "Klossowski may be marrying philosophy and pornography as a polemical assault on patriarchy's enslavement of woman, and thus that his *Laws of Hospitality* trilogy must be read in the same tone as Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom*" (60).

Many feminist critics would disagree with this position given that it is Octave (*Roberte's* husband), who derives pleasure from her outlandish trysts while *Roberte* herself remains consistently emotionless. Higher philosophical intentions aside, it seems clear that, at the most basic level, Klossowski reproduces the phallogocentric gaze and power dynamic of "generic" pornography by staging the male fantasy of violent sexual domination. The fact that the woman voluntarily embraces her submission not only feeds the fantasy, but also excuses it. This economy of desire is all the more questionable as some sort of redemptive philosophy because Octave, in what is clearly a neo-Sadean form of sexual pedagogy, encourages his young nephew to participate and share in his voyeuristic pleasure.

A useful counter-example is the recent push by several female French filmmakers to produce sexually explicit work that subverts the power of the male gaze and addresses women's fantasies and desires. Two different approaches have emerged thus far. The first is represented by Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999), which uses graphic intercourse scenes as a basis for questioning the complicated relationship between physical and emotional intimacy. The second, by far less sensitive, is exemplified in Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi's *Baise-moi* (2000), which follows two female rape victims on a road trip during which they avenge themselves through the violent sexual domination, and eventually murder, of several men. Both films have generated heated debate among feminist critics over the potential value and form of so-called "feminist porn."<sup>[6]</sup>

Against this background, one is hard pressed to accept the contention that Klossowski's work somehow seeks to undermine patriarchy. Klossowski's own explanation of the aesthetic motives underlying his

pornography are rather more convincing and modest. In “Description, Argumentation, Narrative,” he claims that his novels and drawings imitate and distort pornographic stereotypes in order to exorcise the obsession that gave rise to them: “I will not forewarn the contemplator in the manner of the cunning Magritte: ‘this is not a buttock’; rather, I will say, before someone holds it against me, ‘this is not a painting,’ but once again a simulacrum of everything I want to show according to the Gulliverian viewpoint of the Dean of Dublin—that viewpoint which made him disgusted in ‘painting,’ but which I contracted long ago like a disability, a morbid state of attention, of disproportionate persistence” (p. 138). Klossowski thus appears to consider himself a satirist whose work mocks the conventions of traditional pornography in an attempt to reinvent the genre.

During the 1970s Klossowski found new means of expression using the technologies of “mechanical reproduction” that captivated the imagination of his old friend Walter Benjamin. He turned first to photography, working with Pierre Zucca on an illustrated version of *La Monnaie vivante* (which develops the idea that money might usefully be replaced by a “libidinal economy” in which sex is the only valid currency), then to film adaptations of his novels, first by Zucca, then by Chilean director Raoul Ruiz. As Klossowski mentions in his essay “The Indiscernible,” cinema allowed him to flout all the conventions of movie-star culture and commercial filmmaking, both mainstream and pornographic; in that sense he shares the preoccupations of Robert Bresson, in whose film *Balthazar* (1967) he appeared briefly. At the end of the essay, in an imaginary interview with a belligerent film reporter, Klossowski vehemently rejects all labels for himself and his art, claiming to be “neither a writer, nor a thinker, nor a philosopher, nor anything else in any mode of expression—nothing at all before having been, being, and remaining a monomaniac” (p. 159).

In the end, *Decadence of the Nude* is a thought-provoking, if at times difficult, book that accomplishes its goal of providing a concise general introduction to Klossowski. Mahon’s introductory essay, clearly written and easily accessible even for non-specialist readers, does an excellent job of summarizing Klossowski’s biography and contextualizing his work. In addition, detailed bibliographies of the artist’s many essays, translations, films, and expositions provide a valuable basis for further research. The arcane and controversial nature of his work will limit somewhat the book’s appeal for mainstream social and political historians, but readers interested in twentieth-century intellectual history, art, and critical theory will discover useful links to many familiar figures and themes.

## NOTES

[1] Black Dog Publishing <http://www.bdpworld.com/books/about.html> (September 2003)

[2] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Assassination of Experience by Painting: Monory* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2003).

[3] Michel Foucault, *Photogenic Painting: Fromanger* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2003).

[4] Gilles Deleuze, “Pierre Klossowski ou le corps-langage,” *Critique* 214 (March 1965): 200.

[5] Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1996).

[6] See for example Stéphane Spoiden, “No Man’s Land: genres en question dans *Sitcom, Romance, et Baise-moi*,” *Esprit Créateur* 42/1 (Spring 2002): 96-106; “Ruth Hottell and Lynsey Russell-Watts, “Catherine Breillat’s *Romance* and the Female Spectator: from Dream-Work to Therapy,” *Esprit Créateur*

---

42/3 (Fall 2002): 70-80; Gwendolyn Wells, "Accoutrements of Passion: Fashion, Irony, and Feminine Point of View in Catherine Breillat's *Romance*," *Sites* 6/1 (Spring 2002): 51-66; Scott Mackenzie, "Baise-moi: Feminist Cinemas and the Censorship Controversy," *Screen* 43/3 (Autumn 2002): 315-24; Maximilien Le Cain, "Fresh Blood: Baise-moi," *Senses of Cinema* 22 (September-October 2002): <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/archive/index.html>; "Bérénice Reynaud, "Baise-moi: An Angry-Yet-Feminist Personal Reaction," *Senses of Cinema* 22 (September-October 2002): <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/archive/index.html>

Brett Bowles  
Iowa State University  
[bcbowles@iastate.edu](mailto:bcbowles@iastate.edu)

Copyright © 2003 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172