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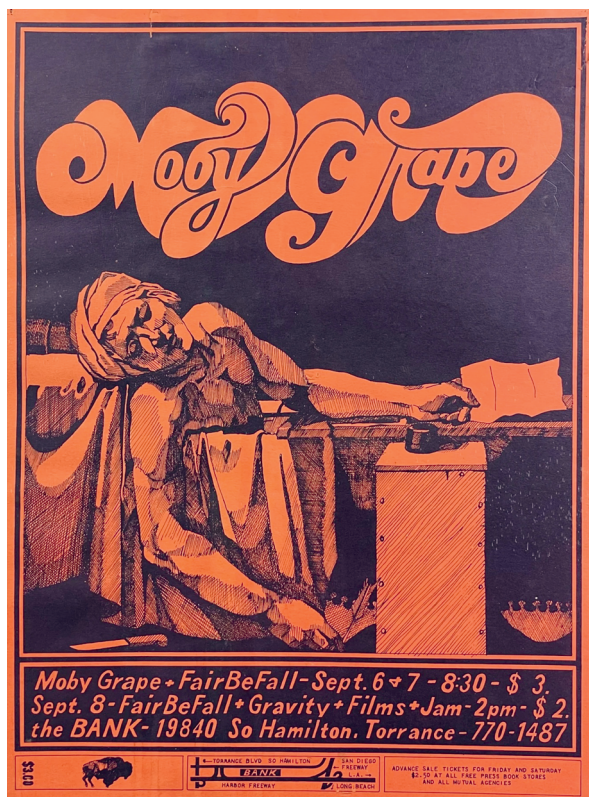
SCENE-SETTING PROLOGUE

THIS BOOK TAKES ITS WRITER back to a beginning, back to an unrealized moment in my first grappling with art, history, and what passed in the day for the theory of both. In the service of that undertaking, I break with the habit of a lifetime in no longer avoiding the first-person voice. But the core subject here is not my life experience, but one of the best-known, most memorable, and widely reproduced paintings in the western canon, *The Death of Marat* being only one of its competing titles; another being *Marat Assassinated* and a third, the dramatic *Marat at His Last Breath* [facing page]; its author, the radical French Revolutionary Jacques-Louis David; its fashioning in the early autumn of 1793, part and parcel of a political watershed leading to what is known as the Great Terror. This present endeavor to understand David's work in as many of its dimensions as possible begins, nonetheless, by circling back to the moment the *Marat* seized my youthful imagination so compellingly that I planned to devote my prospective years of doctoral research to this one object alone. How and why did this eccentric plan come to me? Why did it not happen? And why revive it now?

It would seem unremarkable to note that David's *Death of Marat* first came to me via a reproduction. That would be the case with most works of art for most people. But this reproduction was far from a normal, photographically printed illustration; it was a hand-

rendered copy by Robert Wilson, the accomplished monumental sculptor, part-time rock-poster artist, and nurturer of two orphan tapirs from infancy, he and his wife being active in the conservation of the species. A crisply drawn tapir profile sometimes served for his signature, as did a similar profile rendering of a bison. The latter emblem graces one corner of his poster for an appearance by the San Francisco band Moby Grape in September 1968 at a club in the oceanside Los Angeles suburb of Torrance, the main motif of the poster being a freehand, heavily modeled rendering of David's *Death of Marat* [facing page]. Any connection between David's martyr portrait and the accomplished but somewhat generic music of the advertised band is elusive. Indeed, when Wilson came to craft a flyer for a later concert in Claremont by no less an artist than the blues master Muddy Waters, a musician of incomparable stature and gravity, he re-used the same drawing, where the juxtaposition seems to make a great deal more sense. Nothing could have kept me away from the concert, and I carry an indelible impression of the deep-red stock on which Wilson's repurposed Marat was printed, despite never having seen it since (as Wilson's legacy is sadly vanishing).

As best as I can reconstruct, my first imagined project to secure professional credentials as an art historian ultimately rested on the memory of that revelatory moment. One could well ask how this secondary rendering could compare with even a standard reproduction of the magisterial original canvas. Little in evidence is the immense dignity and composure of the original, David's inspired synthesis of monumental funerary portraiture with an interlocked constellation of accessory objects that conjure the offstage assassin, Charlotte Corday. Nor is there much to be seen of the severely rectilinear compositional scheme and the broodingly undefined background that occupies half the canvas. Wilson's vignette dispenses with virtually all of this. Likewise, nowhere in evidence are the samples of writing meant to signal both the saintly benevolence of the martyr and



Robert Wilson, offset print poster (*Moby Grape*
 at the Bank, Torrance, Calif.), 1969, 22 × 28 cm

the plot points of his demise. One can barely find the fatal wound. The roughly fashioned crate on which Marat writes—an economical tour-de-force of David's naturalistic technique—is narrowed and divested of detail. Only the inkpot remains among the telling instruments of the subject's muck-raking journalistic vocation. But perhaps Wilson offers something else by way of compensation, most

notably in the shape of the body transformed into a buckled relief of emphatic planes of an almost cubist character. Both his omissions and his distortions arguably suit the demands of line work meant to stand out on a cheap, offset handbill.

In my account of persistent memory, Wilson's poster motif manages to look like memory, with all the lacunae and exaggerations that characterize testimony from recollection—unintentionally in keeping with the forensic character of his model. If I am finding a point of origin for my own Marat fascination in Wilson's appropriation, the question naturally arises how might the idea have come to him? There is no way to know for certain, but an overwhelmingly likely prompt had arrived in the previous year with the release in 1967 of Peter Brook's film of his own London theater production *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*. Written and first staged in 1964 by the German author Peter Weiss, Brook's production for the Royal Shakespeare Company had opened the following year, in a translation by Geoffrey Skelton along with the compelling addition of songs by Adrian Mitchell and Richard Peaslee in the tradition of Kurt Weill's collaborations with Bertolt Brecht. A long Broadway run followed, while the popular folk singer Judy Collins opened one side of her 1966 album *In My Life* with a medley from the play—her title song linking the Beatles to Mitchell's vaudeville-like chants, in which the name Marat is repeated over and over. How many among its half-million buyers asked themselves, who was this person?

Weiss had found his pretext in two points of historical data that by themselves entail extremes of social emancipation, violence, sexual excess, and coercion of vulnerable bodies: first, the perennially incarcerated marquis de Sade, during a rare spell of liberty under the Revolution, had delivered a memorial eulogy for the murdered Marat at a meeting of his neighborhood assembly or section; and second,



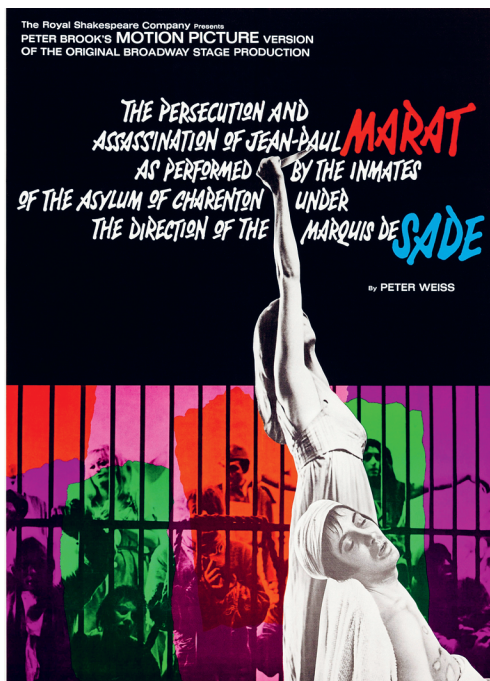
Scene from Peter Weiss's *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*, dir. Peter Brook, Old Vic, London, 1965

Sade was transferred in 1803 from prison to the asylum at Charenton on the eastern edge of Paris, where he remained until his death in 1814. During that time, the hospital director, enlightened for his time, believed in the rehabilitative potential of art and thus encouraged Sade's literary pursuits. Among these were plays performed by his fellow inmates under his direction. On these bare bones, Weiss embroidered an imaginary performance devoted to Marat's assassination, a play within a play, each of the main characters exhibiting a distinct mental disorder [*above*]. Corday, for example, suffers from narcolepsy, needing to be woken when she has a line to deliver or an action to perform, while the paranoiac playing

Marat varies least from the historical actuality of his character. In the play's German title, Weiss specifies, "performed by the acting company [*die Schauspielgruppe*] of the asylum," which implies the analogy with the experimental troupes of his time.

As is also known, well-off Parisians were invited to witness these productions as a form of philanthropic if voyeuristic entertainment. Weiss supplies such an audience in the family of the asylum director, smug at the start only to be overwhelmed in panic at the end, as the inmates, aroused by Sade's exhortations to "Revolution . . . Copulation," break through the proscenium and must be suppressed by the attendants in a violent melee. Weiss's play has entered the repertoire and continues to be regularly performed all over the world, but these scattered revivals can no more than suggest the extraordinary force carried in the general culture by Brook's staging, as it became a major event in the contemporaneous unfolding of the counterculture. "Marat/Sade" brought to generational consciousness earlier cognate experiments in immersive theater carried on by the Polish visionary Jerzy Grotowski or the Living Theater of Judith Malina and Julian Beck, who had been effectively exiled by hostile authorities from New York to Europe in the early 1960s for trafficking in outlawed subject matter. According to the veteran London theater critic Michael Coveney, Brook's staging not only "launched the fringe and alternative theatre in this country, representing an intersection between European theory and new British radicalism," but it "changed the lives of most people who saw it."¹

That moment may seem elusive now; indeed, many culturally aware people have no recollection of "Marat/Sade" at all, despite the weighty symbolic salience of its early incarnations. The film, a literal document of the stage play filmed in seventeen days, makes plain that David's *mise-en-scène* guided the visual presentation of the climactic event [*facing page*]. It is, indeed, difficult to imagine Weiss fleshing out his scenario without having the painting in mind.



Publicity poster for the film, *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*, from the play by Peter Weiss, dir. Peter Brook, United Artists, 1967

The marquis de Sade obviously required no introduction to modern audiences, but the physically unprepossessing Marat, known to history more as a hidden fugitive than as a public actor, survives above all through David's representation.

My inward memory-retrieval of David's painting thus entailed retrieving from partial amnesia at least one monument that defined the countercultural 1960s for those living through it, that excavation

unearthing the political contestation, incendiary violence, cultivated madness, and radical egalitarianism that found expression in this emblem of long-past political martyrdom. The uncanny character of “Marat/Sade” lies in its having come in advance of the counter-cultural flowering it came so closely to mirror. Its composition, beginning well before its German premiere in 1964, preceded the manifestations of these dissident phenomena from 1965 onward. Weiss revised the play more than once in its early years, a process in which Brook and his collaborators then assumed an active role.

Other contemporaneous developments jibed with it in almost uncanny ways. Between the London opening and its capture on film, the celebrity anti-psychiatrist R. D. Laing joined in founding an uncompromisingly egalitarian, therapeutic community in the city’s East End. The renegade Scottish therapist had found fame with a series of studies arguing that the schizophrenic exhibits sane coping mechanisms in the face of unmanageable family dynamics—that is, opts out of oppressive societal norms in microcosm. Just as the overseer of the stage-asylum at Charenton (mischaracterized by Weiss as a bourgeois prig) faces his charges rising up with demands for equality (“We’re all normal and we want our freedom!”), Laing and his professional colleagues were doing their best to live communally among their disturbed patients without distinction of rank or role. Weiss’s alliance of the lucid Sade with his impaired colleagues had already been modeling such a therapeutic pact.

Period demands for equality arising from the American civil rights movement had thus widened to include emancipation of the furthest class of disenfranchised outcasts. An echo sounds of Michel Foucault’s thesis “Folie et Dérason: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique,” written at the end of the 1950s (but only belatedly published in English as the abridged *Madness and Civilization*), his being the foundational argument of the era that mental illnesses were constructed socially as exemplary forms of medicalized exclusion,

effected in the service of normative obedience and social control. In an intriguing convergence, Foucault had written his treatise during a period of teaching and study in Stockholm, where Peter Weiss also lived and worked. Laing, for his part, duly laid claim in 1966 to the then-obscure French thinker as a precursor, just as he also embraced the American acid guru Timothy Leary and the therapeutic uses of LSD (with much personal experimentation). The two together conjoined involuntary derangement with purposeful mind expansion as linked paths to overthrowing policed cognitive conformity.

Long after this peak moment of cultural salience, “Marat/Sade” maintains its uncanny ability to anticipate events, as does its touchstone in David’s martyr-portrait. Even the arch-historicizer Otto Karl Werckmeister (one of my graduate teachers) lambasted the folly of explicating the painting only in the frame of its own moment, as if there were nothing left in the *Marat* for anyone to discover and put to use after 1793. From those new uses emerge revelations of overlooked meaning invested there from the start. He illustrates the point with a revival of Weiss’s play in 2000: “The Berliner Ensemble, Bertolt Brecht’s old company,” he writes, “extolled Marat’s revolutionary tenacity as a paragon of resistance against the social injustice brought by East Germany’s ruthless conversion to a capitalist economy. As the curtain rose, the stage still dark, the asylum inmates performed a whispered, cacophonous recital of Gertrud Kolmar’s defiant paean *To Marat*, written in 1933 as a secret protest against Hitler’s rise to power. The Jewish poet would live through ten years of Nazi oppression until her murder at Auschwitz sometime in the early spring of 1943.”²

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Such were the forces of cultural and political change piled up behind the apparition of Marat on Robert Wilson’s poster in the autumn of 1968. Storing it away in the back of my mind, I would

not yet have collated my exposure to the screen version of “Marat/Sade” alongside Laing’s *Divided Self* or Leary’s *Psychedelic Experience*—throw in Ken Kesey’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and Gregory Bateson’s *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. But I did carry with me some recent memories that resonated with the revolutionary rants voiced by the *enragé* character of Jacques Roux in Weiss’s script. A previous semester spent in France had culminated with my Pomona College companions and I arriving in Paris on 1 May 1968, settling into Latin Quarter digs, and then marveling as all hell promptly erupted around us. Unknowingly, we had chosen a small hotel that lay in the old Cordeliers district, where Marat had sheltered among such Jacobin luminaries as Georges Danton and Camille Desmoulins (the former rue des Cordeliers became la rue Marat in 1793–94, the source of this book’s Poe-indebted title). Just to lean out of the window of my hotel was to see student insurgents waving red and black flags from the roof of the imposing Odéon theater at the top of the street. On 10 May, witnessing the enormous barricade being erected at the angle formed by the rues Saint-Jacques and Gay-Lussac—whole automobiles stacked within an improvised edifice of paving stones, traffic signs, stanchions, grates, and liberated construction debris—in an atmosphere of jubilant shouts and chants, lycéens joining their older brothers and sisters, small fires glowing as night fell, it all seemed to make vivid and actual all the famous street rebellions stretching back to 1789. We had left before the tear-gassing, head-cracking CRS (state security police) goons moved in during the early hours of the morning [*facing page*]. A few inconsequential bruises came later, since it was impossible for a young person to walk in that neighborhood without a roving patrol at some point teaching you a lesson.

No such excitement, obviously, lay in the far eastern suburbs of Los Angeles on our return. But it was a heady time, nonetheless, for art in the small college town of Claremont. Figures of enduring



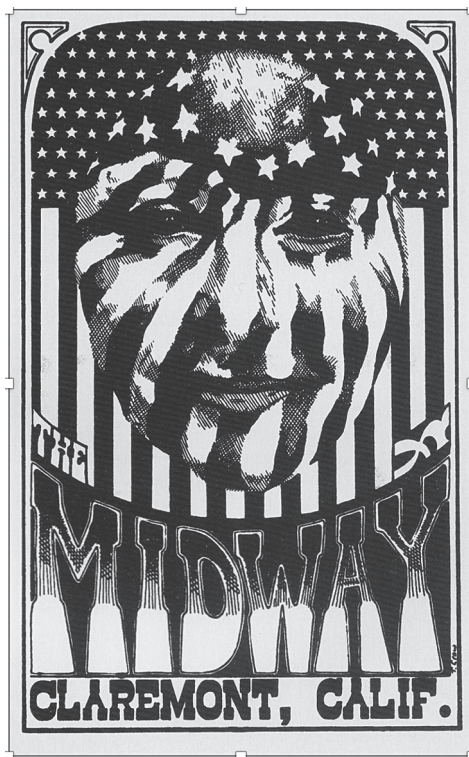
Gökşin Sipahioğlu, 10 May 68, rue Gay-Lussac, Paris CRS riot policeman wielding shields and batons cross a barricade to charge striking students near the Sorbonne, SIPA Press

importance in art history, among them our Pomona contemporary Chris Burden, alongside light conjurer Jim Turrell, worldly expatriate Bas Jan Ader, droll but razor-sharp Al Ruppersberg, austere aloof Lewis “Duke” Baltz, opaquely intense Jack Goldstein, absorbed student of the senses Michael Asher, and self-abnegating, Kyoto-born Hiro Kosaka, were all present (my loss that artists of commensurable stature formed at Pomona, like Helen Pashgian, Barbara T. Smith, and Judy Fiskin, had by then migrated to other parts of California). As I look back, their work constitutes some of the strongest art being made anywhere at the time, which I’ve argued elsewhere more than once. Even lacking that art-historical perspective at the time, all I knew was that I did not want to leave that world, which had made me care about art in the first place.³

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At first, I briefly took up studio training by talking my way into the Master of Fine Arts program at the Claremont Graduate School, where Robert Wilson had matriculated and both Turrell and Baltz were then simultaneously MFA students and teachers. Having failed, however, to find in myself the consuming vocation that makes a good artist as opposed to a merely passable one, I fell back for the moment on a certain knack for the psychedelic graphic idiom, though in a manner shamefully imitative of Wilson (just as my paintings were abjectly derivative of Ed Ruscha). To a lesser degree, I was channeling from a distance the reigning master of cross-hatched technique and my real artistic idol, Rick Griffin, once a high-school surfing cartoonist from Palos Verdes, by then grown into an artist with magisterial command of the baroque poster idiom for the Grateful Dead and the ballrooms of hippie San Francisco. I borrowed from both fine cross-hatching, using temperamental Rapidograph drafting pens, networks of overlaid lines worked around areas of unrelieved black, with lettering incorporated into the hand-drawn composition. One freelance example [*facing page*] was commissioned by the local artists' bar and hangout in exchange for a \$25 tab—a reasonable sum in those days. The image, taken from a photograph I found in *Rolling Stone*, plays up the Left's ironizing of the American flag that Jasper Johns had begun a decade before, along with, I guess, the mime chic that Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-Up* had made current. Nor was I above using these techniques elsewhere, if more discreetly, to support myself by imparting a pastoral feeling to the print advertising of a local subdivision developer. When I left that job for graduate school, Wilson's spouse, Sheryl Todd, took my place, which I thought made some restitution on my debt.

Making it to graduate school, however, would not be straightforward. The choice of art history had been occasioned by my leap into studio art, in that I had been required to make up prerequisites in the subject that I had never acquired. Some excellent instructors in



Thomas Crow, silkscreen poster
(Midway Inn), 1970, 29 × 17 cm

Claremont made the discipline seem feasible and attractive. But I would be one of those semi-autodidact applicants dreaded by admissions committees. Yale (where I would one day chair the department) took a pass, and I gave up on the East Coast. No great surprise, in that I had been doing little to fill in my patchy basic knowledge of the field. Instead, prompted by my unorthodox instructor in Native American arts, Karl Hertel, I had turned to the structuralism of

French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, in over-ambitious expectations of gaining powers of synthetic understanding beyond textbook points of information. I was almost certainly working out my fascination with all things French, but that excursion taught me a lot and remains with me. As this powerful mode of inquiry has lost a great deal of the currency it then enjoyed, a brief sketch might be in order of what I found so compelling in his grand project, where else it led, and how David's *Marat* reappeared at the end of it.

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Lévi-Strauss had begun by analyzing kinship patterns in traditional societies, which demonstrated that apparent absence of technological complexity finds compensation in extraordinary systems of internalized social rules and environmental knowledge. He followed this foundational project with one of even greater scope, as he sought to map the universe of indigenous mythology across the entire New World with commensurate rigor. At the core of his method was unbundling the densely colorful trappings of linear mythic tales in order to isolate the bare concepts or qualities they embody, then to correlate these terms relationally, irrespective of their ostensible narrative functions. The philosopher Vincent Descombes succinctly summarizes the abstract, binary logic involved:

The significance of his characters and their adventures is determined in advance by the rules governing the tales of this particular cultural domain. If, for example, oppositions such as “giant/dwarf” or “princess/shepherdess” should be significant within this code, then the size and occupation of the characters are no longer a matter of choice. Consequently the narrator of a myth is simply actualizing the possibilities inherent in the code, or in the signifying system to which he submits in order to speak. In the end, it is indeed the structure that decides what may—sometimes what must—be said on a given occasion.⁴

All the fantastical personages and exploits, couplings and catastrophes function simultaneously to animate and to cloak the parsimonious bundle of abstract traits at the core of any mythological cycle. No compendium of discrete stories, myth exists less in a corpus than in a ramified network of correspondences, filiations, variants, repetitions, and effects at a distance. As Lévi-Strauss elucidates, “The question of significance does not arise at the level of each myth taken in isolation but at that of the system of which they form the elements.”⁵

As I still understand it from those days, myths fundamentally exist for their tellers and listeners as a way of handling the irreconcilable paradox at the heart of human existence: the clash between Nature, which bestows biological being, and Culture, which confers social identity. The universal prohibition against incest, which Lévi-Strauss posits as present in some form in every society, serves to impose the logic of the code on raw life. Only by virtue of that stricture can two physically cognate individuals of a given sex come under starkly opposed social signs: this one you may marry; this one you may not. That binary carries the survival benefit of group solidarity and cooperation by mandating the exchange of marriage partners beyond immediate family groups—the individual’s initiation into all further systems of symbolic exchange, myth prominent among them, following from that primary submission to binary, signifying logic. The telling of tales cannot reconcile what is irresolvable nor satisfactorily explain away this inescapable fissure in human self-awareness, but can continue to juggle the terms of the paradox, keeping it both in play and at bay.

Such myths may originally be collective, authorless fictions, but, nonetheless, cannot be separated from self-conscious artistic endeavor. The visual and literary arts of the west could barely exist without their substratum of inherited Greco-Roman mythology; indeed, Lévi-Strauss framed his 1955 manifesto essay, “The Structural

Study of Myth,” around the foundational Greek Oedipus cycle, before turning to unexpected but persuasive parallels in the origin stories of North American Puebloans. There thus seemed to me an obvious bridge from structuralist anthropology to the study of art, one that no one seemed to be traversing.

While I was immersing myself in these quandaries, I hadn’t known that Lévi-Strauss was on the verge of publishing his application of structuralist logic to the realm of sculpture. His remarkable *Way of the Masks* (*La Voie des masques*), published in 1975, parses the transformational logic that had governed exchanges of ritual objects between the Salish and Kwakwaka’wakw groups in what is now southern British Columbia. Even in the case of the smoothly modeled and vividly expressive forms of the latter, he proved abundantly able to subject art to the same conceptual unbundling and systematic reconfiguration as he had the linguistic terminology of myths. But there had already emerged from the Parisian forcing house of theory a work of interpretation that applied similar principles of analysis to one representative aesthetic object, in this case a text it then proceeded to unbundle clause by clause to expose a core logic analogous to Lévi-Strauss’s master dichotomy between Nature and Culture.

Published in 1970 under the name of literary scholar and semi-otician Roland Barthes and cryptically titled *S/Z*, it constitutes something of a report on the shared work of a Paris seminar led by Barthes over two years in the late 1960s.⁶ The exclusive object of the endeavor was an early text by Honoré de Balzac, really little more than a story, published in 1830 under the title *Sarrasine*.⁷ Its eponymous protagonist is a young French sculptor dispatched in 1758 from Paris to Rome, where he was expected to refine his craft in the presence of the city’s exemplary monuments and masterpieces. But the ostensible masterpiece on which he fixates is a living one: La Zambinella, the reigning diva of the Roman musical stage. The drama turns

on the naïve foreign artist's misunderstanding of local custom—there could be no public female performers in the Papal States—thus his misrecognition of the singer's physical identity as a castrated male. Though repeatedly warned away from his pursuit of the singer, the headstrong Sarrasine, deaf to every intimation of the truth, resorts to kidnapping the object of his affection. Enlightenment comes too late to prevent his murder at the hands of henchmen dispatched by the castrato's powerful protector, the sinister Cardinal Cicognara.

Balzac nests that story within another, a framing narrative set in the time of its writing, more particularly amid the decadence of the late Bourbon Restoration as the Revolution of 1830 looms. During an opulent Paris soirée, hosted by a family of mysterious origin and fortune, the narrator attempts to beguile his own love interest with the story behind the spectral presence at the party of an ancient personage of indeterminate gender, adorned in eerily vampiric finery. This apparition proves, of course, to be La Zambinella in old age, the source of the fortune enjoyed by her collateral descendants. Balzac contrives a stark antithesis by having the wizened, bejeweled castrato enter the room in which hangs the painted image of the nude statue modelled by Sarrasine from transports of memory and imagination in the solitude of his studio. Copied once in fiction, its real counterpart (though disguised as a replica after Vien for the purposes of the story) is evoked by the narrator for the benefit of his listener and the reader: Anne-Louis Girodet's *Sleep of Endymion*, depicting the radiantly androgynous young hunter put to sleep in eternal physical perfection by the infatuated moon goddess [page 18].

Ample evidence exists that Balzac indeed wove the tale around his fascination with Girodet's 1791 painting, to which he had made great efforts to gain access.⁸ And both text and canvas would now be amply open to interpretation under a rubric of non-binary identity and desire. But Barthes's analytical aim, despite his own gay life, led him to emphasize rather than relax the conventional distinction



Anne-Louis Girodet, *The Sleep of Endymion*, 1791, oil on canvas,
197 × 261 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre

between the genders. Following Freud via the *au courant* French analyst Jacques Lacan, successful repression of the terrifying fantasy of castration marks the passage from the plenitude of infantile Nature to a procrustean Culture ruled by threatening fathers. The child's imaginary sexual rivalry with a parent seeds Lévi-Strauss's macro-prohibition against incest into the micro-formation of the individual subject, where entry into the signifying order entails unconscious disavowal of both desire for the mother and terror at the father's castrating revenge (male being the default gender for reasons of chauvinistic convenience). The scandalous anecdote on which the story of Sarrasine turns thus becomes the scandal of representation itself. Once made explicit in the story, the horror of castration brings the exchange of signs to an abrupt end. As Sarrasine falls to the

assassins' blades, he excoriates his former love object: "Monster! . . . You have wiped women from the earth";⁹ and the woman pursued by the narrator in the fictive present withdraws from him in horror; "Leave me," she commands, their implied sexual contract nullified.

In Barthes's telling, Girodet's *Endymion* can be no more than a weak attempt to assert the impossible wholeness of the body unmarked by the void of castration, and it is accordingly treated with relative indifference as just one iteration in a myth-like chain of replicas. But the granularity of the Barthes seminar's systematic parsing of virtually every detail of a suitably concise object of analysis—each word-cluster assigned a value within one of an interlocking set of codes—struck me with some excitement as approximating the model I was seeking. Even in a short narrative, Barthes's procedure populated a teeming universe of interlocking signs at least analogous in scope to the one encompassing the myths recorded in the annals of anthropology. As such, these particles of narrative become likewise susceptible to unbundling and reconfiguration in some atemporal, tabular array.

In both its macro- and micro-applications, structuralist thought carried the liberating promise of freedom from hidebound humanist ideologies, so seeming to me continuous with the ethos of self-exploration that saturated California culture at the end of the 1960s. But what work of visual art would become my *Sarrasine*? It would be some years down my professional road before I took the obvious bait and profitably followed up Balzac's broad hints about Girodet's *Endymion*, but that wasn't really the one.¹⁰ As broached at the outset of this introduction, it was David's *Death of Marat*, while not obviously related to *S/Z*, that first appeared before me. With the benefit of hindsight, David's crafting of monumental formality out of modest, homely elements must have struck home. The painting possessed a compactness and simplicity on a par with *Sarrasine*, that likeness enhanced by the common core of gendered violence in both,

with the sexual positions of the main actors hidden, displaced, or disguised: the portion of Marat's naked body below the rib cage lies out of view, nor is there even the suggestion of a setting beyond the bare items of still life crowded against the foreground plane. As for the fatal wound itself, to adopt Barthes's Freudian register, the very discretion of the nearly bloodless incision makes the fatal injury loom larger, testifying to the unseen, pitiless female assailant widely characterized in her time as a beguiling object of erotic fascination.

But how to unbundle and reconfigure an already atemporal array of signifiers? My hypothetical plan was to reverse Barthes's procedure and find a way to render sequentially the non-linear, atemporal painting. What I imagined was applying what drawing ability I possessed (long before Photoshop) to model portions of the traced composition, so that any given component of the work's internal symbolic dialogue would stand out from the others, the resulting sheets ultimately constituting an interleaved analogue to the spatial redistribution of narrative achieved by Lévi-Strauss and Barthes.

In 2002, the Chinese painter Yue Minjun exhibited a finely painted, identically sized replica of David's *Death of Marat*, with the conspicuous subtraction from the composition of the figure of Marat himself [*facing page*]. This canvas is by no means the first that Yue has adapted from an esteemed French original, but his previous modus operandi has been to populate his prototypes—Delacroix's *Liberty at the Barricades*, for example—with versions of his signature personage, a grinningly cartoonish self-portrait. But he stopped short of this parodic effect in the face of the funereal gravity of the *Marat*, reversing course by attempting no substitution at all. While that decision may have followed from the dynamics of his own oeuvre, the evident force of Yue Minjun's *Death of Marat* lends suggestive concreteness to the concept I had long ago imagined for art history, that the means of interpretation could at least begin in its own non-textual medium.



Yue Minjun, *The Death of Marat*, 2002,
oil on canvas, 290 × 219 cm, private collection

But there would need to be more and finer operations on the painting than even so vivid an exercise as this one. It was foundational for Roland Barthes that the effect of unity impressed on readers by a well-crafted story, poem, or novel is just that, an effect, whereby

the author has succeeded in suturing into apparent coherence all the disparate, partial precedents mixed into its generic container. That insight applies all the more aptly to works of visual art, as made plain by the preoccupations of old-fashioned art historians with influences, borrowings, and sources. These were generally not wrong, but what should have been intermediate steps toward understanding took the place of its ends. An interpretive vehicle was needed that answered to a higher-order recognition that an apparently singular work is in fact many partial works at once. One way to proceed on the basis of this postulate, it had struck me, would be to transform the painting by varied subtractions, generating a series or gallery of separate works, each to be considered in turn, before letting them collapse at the end back into the whole.

Within the academic profession of art history at this juncture, such a proposal would have been met with incomprehension in virtually any graduate program, if not serious worry about my professional suitability. It proved a stroke of luck that I had simply pursued the local option for graduate study, the University of California, Los Angeles, then a lightly regarded outpost of the discipline far from its vigilant centers in the Northeast (and where I found the fantastic encouragement of peers like Holly Clayson, Leonard Folgarait, Serge Guilbaut, and Mimi Yiengpruksawan, all destined for the upper echelon of the profession). My fascination with ethnography had led me there, my initial mentor being the remarkable, undersung Africanist Arnold Rubin. Having returned from extensive research in the arid Benue Valley of northern Nigeria, Rubin had found himself missing that immersion in the totality of ritual life that lent inert, portable objects their full meanings. His Super-8 films and vivid stories captured the ways in which masks and power objects were presented, manipulated, and worn on ceremonial occasions. The Los Angeles artist Betye Saar, for one, regularly credited his 1975 *Artforum* article, "Accumulation: Power and Display

in African Sculpture,” as informing her conviction that collage components could work on viewers in an active manner that exceeded static contemplation.¹¹

Rubin likewise insisted that ritual abounded in present-day America, ready to be unpacked by eyes attuned to this African attitude toward worked objects as spirit instruments. Looking around the Los Angeles basin for a stimulating substitute, he lighted on the Tournament of Roses parade in Pasadena, a year-around enterprise with forthcoming informants and richly ephemeral aesthetic practices. His seminars on the subject drew his students into participatory forms of learning that militated against the status hierarchies that ruled the discipline. One could make a valid claim that Rubin pioneered the para-discipline of Visual Culture, but too soon to gain traction for the tremendous expansion in available subjects that he had conceived. I feel that the range and curiosity present in all my subsequent work owes as much to his tutelage as to any other influence.

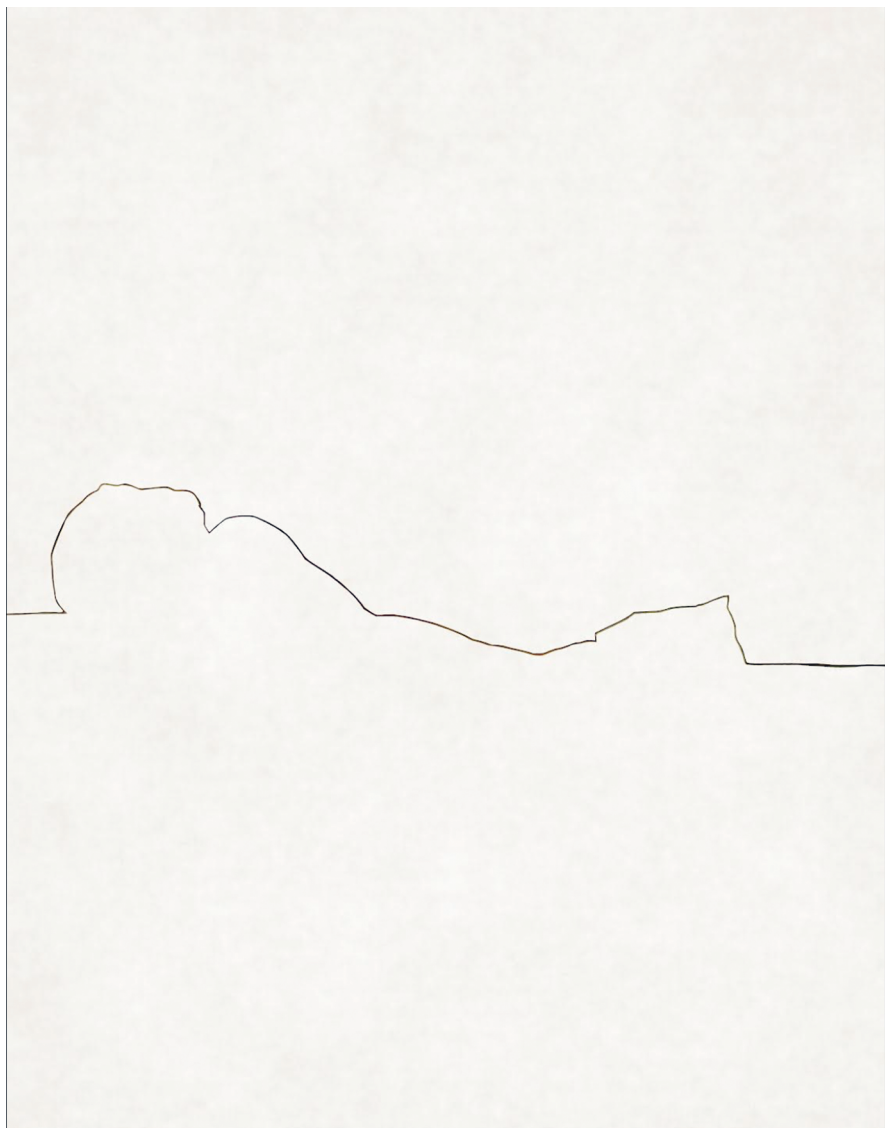
To Rubin’s disappointment, my nerve began to fail, in ways that do me no credit, at the prospect of a long sojourn on my own in the African backcountry. That hesitation coincided with the arrival on the UCLA faculty of the young, then-little-known English art historian T. J. Clark, one of the few practitioners who could make western painting sing with the intellectual panache of a Roland Barthes. So my new path was set, or so I thought. Clark knew his way around all of the theoretical models I was attempting to master and seemed encouraging when I brought him the Marat proposal. His immediate advice, sensible to be sure, was that I needed to know a lot more about the French art of the eighteenth century. That catching up, as it turned out, stretched into a couple of decades, which yielded two books, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* and *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France*, accompanied by a fairly fraught professional odyssey through the aforementioned East

Coast citadels of the discipline. Those professional vicissitudes sent me into writing mainly on modern and contemporary art, where I found friendlier colleagues, while my original project, that thing I wanted to do as a fledgling doctoral candidate, somehow got lost. But recently it began to beckon from the past, like a kind of lost chord, just as structuralism's bygone moment likewise calls out for reconsideration, its worthy legacies deserving rescue from the condescension and amnesia of present-day intellectual fashion.

Both aims have figured in the foregoing self-examination as to how David's *Death of Marat* came so forcefully to my mind in the first place, that excavation having connected with the multiple currents of 1960s dissent that have dominated much of my intervening scholarly work, themes that found unexpected expression in this emblem of long-past political martyrdom. For all of the recondite abstractions entailed in its intellectual points of departure, the aim of this study will be to reconnect the painting with the lives of its creator and his subject. Only two individuals, to be sure, but both could be instanced as exemplars of lives enacted in public for public purposes. Both came marked by highly particularizing physical disfigurement: Marat's livid skin inflammations and David's pronounced tumorous growth on one cheek. But these traits only underwrote their bearers' generalized identities as, respectively, the Friend of the People and the Pageant-Master of the Revolution. The personal trajectories of the pair converged most dramatically on the day prior to the assassination. David was then serving as president of the Jacobin Club, the extra-parliamentary deliberative body for committed Revolutionaries. This rotating position had just previously been occupied by Marat, but he had lately been out of public view. Worry over his always precarious health, it would seem, led David and a colleague to pay a call, and the artist would later publicly recollect his vivid impression of Marat laboring over his papers while immersed in the kaolin-infused bath that soothed the lesions of his skin ailment.

That vignette of tireless labor stoically endured though pain and deprivation encapsulated the legend to which his passionate following subscribed. He was their vigilant champion, alert to every counter-Revolutionary plot or nefarious scheme to profit from the recurrent shortages of food, ever the fiercest advocate for the wholesale arrest and execution of wrongdoers. While David's pre-Revolutionary prestige and his circle of patronage kept him in relative comfort as his growing political role steadily moved to the Left, Marat's uncompromising intemperance had provoked arrest warrants, police pursuit, and a fugitive's privations during the Revolution's earlier phases. Hardship only added to his aura, while failing to deter the regular appearance of his daily sheet *L'Ami du Peuple*. Even being elected to the Convention after the declaration of the Republic could not prevent his arrest and trial in the spring of 1793 at the behest of equivocating Girondin deputies, enemies of David's Robespierist faction, the so-called Mountain. By the time of the artist's visit to Marat's austere rooms in the rue des Cordeliers, the two of them concurred as to the radical measures required to protect the honest *sans-culottes* and the Republic itself from the purported machinations of these Girondins. Then, a day later, one of their sympathizers, Charlotte Corday, appeared out of nowhere to confirm every suspicion.

A peak achievement of European painting would follow from that convergence, one that synthesized both the inspiring lights and grim shadows of its historical moment. *Murder in the Rue Marat* proceeds by means of another telling of the French Revolution, as each portion of code in the painting demands an excursus into one more interwoven strand of historical events.¹² There are of course narrative histories of the Revolution beyond counting, but this one at least differs from the rest by allowing David's painting, which was made out of the Revolution, to disclose in the present what it captured and preserved of living experience in 1793.



Jacques-Louis David, *Marat at His Last Breath*, 1793, image manipulation by
Dominika Ivanická, 2023

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