

Case Study

<https://doi.org/10.70731/fn7pkh84>**Marat/Sade: More than a Play**Ying Zhao ^{a,*}^a Jackie Chan Movie & Media College, Wuhan Institute of Design and Sciences, Wuhan 430205, China

KEYWORDS

The Empty Space;
Gaze;
Camera

ABSTRACT

A great deal of academic research on *Marat/Sade* draws upon the dramatic film of the same name directed by Peter Brook. Shot in 1967, this film was reproduced by Brook as a direct adaptation of the stage production of *Marat/Sade*, essentially recreating its theatrical scenes for the screen. Cinema, as a medium of reproduction, is certainly capable of replicating renowned ballets, operas, and similar performing arts. Yet even if we grant that such reproductions meet the unique demands of the silver screen, some of them are ultimately little more than “preservation” of the original works hardly compelling in their own right. The 1967 *Marat/Sade*, however, stands apart. It is not just an essential viewing resource for anyone studying the play *Marat/Sade*, but also holds intrinsic value as a work of cinematic art.

INTRODUCTION

Peter Brook’s play *Marat/Sade* (full title: *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*) was presented in the 1960s, premiered in 1965 at the Aldwych Theatre in London, and produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company. It immediately caused a sensation in the West. As Susan Sontag (2011) noted in her essay collection *Against Interpretation*: “In Brook’s production, madness proves to be the most authoritative and sensuous form of theatricality.” The play was written in 1963 by playwright Peter Weiss, representing the culmination of his dramatic philosophy. It depicted a scene at the Charenton Asylum on a day in 1808: the asylum’s director, Coulmier and his family watched a play performed by the inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the direction of the Marquis de Sade, recreating the 1793 assassination of Jean-Paul Marat, leader of the

Jacobins during the French Revolution, who was stabbed to death in his bathtub. The script offers audiences two narrative timelines: the central conflict between de Sade and Marat, and a play-within-a-play depicting Charlotte Corday’s three attempts to visit and assassinate Marat. Additionally, the inclusion of choral segments creates a distinct Brechtian alienation effect.

Weiss’s own dramatic concepts were greatly influenced by Bertolt Brecht. He followed in Brecht’s footsteps and once openly admitted, “As a playwright, Brecht has had the greatest influence on me. I learned from him how to express myself clearly, making social issues more evident in a play; I also learned from him the art of light expression—he never approached the portrayal of the German psyche in a heavy-handed way.” Under Brook’s direction, *Marat/Sade* stands as the ultimate synthesis of “theatre of cruelty” and the “alienation effect.” The actors went back and forth between two timelines: the 1793 assassination of Marat and the 1808 performance unfolding before us. Without

* Corresponding author. E-mail address: 1034008190@qq.com

any warning to the audience, an actor (inmate) flared up in unpredictable bouts during the assassination scene and was dragged away. The director (Sade) had a natural conversation with Marat, the play's main character throughout the play. Coulmier's wife, startled by a mentally ill patient, opened the cage that separated the audience from the actors. By the play's close, the asylum inmates were utterly divorced from Marat's assassination. They surged toward the audience in a carnival-like frenzy, hands outstretched, wailing and roaring without pause.

Numerous academic papers both at home and abroad have already conducted detailed studies on the play itself. Examples include Dong Weina's *The Fusion of Aura and Shock: On the Aesthetic Pursuits in Peter Brook's Direction of Marat/Sade*, *Epic Theatre and Theatre of Cruelty: An Ideological Critique of Modern Theatre Regime* by Zhou Ning, a professor at Xiamen University, and the section *Marat/Sade/Artaud* in Susan Sontag's essay collection *Against Interpretation*. There is no need to reiterate these here. What this article aims to analyze is how Brook's 1967 film *Marat/Sade* becomes not just an essential viewing resource for anyone studying the play *Marat/Sade*, but also holds intrinsic value as a work of cinematic art.

This play was created back in the 1960s, so audiences can no longer experience it in person in a theater, in a fully immersive, on-site way. A great deal of academic research on *Marat/Sade* draws upon the dramatic film of the same name directed by Peter Brook. Shot in 1967, this film was reproduced by Brook as a direct adaptation of the stage production of *Marat/Sade*, essentially recreating its theatrical scenes for the screen. As we all know, Theatre is characterized by its immediacy, and we often choose to record it via video as a way to preserve it for both archiving and research purposes. Interestingly, however, when watching such recordings, audiences rarely equate them with the art of cinema. They will casually say, "I watched a performance of a play today", even though they were not actually there. Despite the fact that these video recordings feature actors, a storyline, and even camera editing, viewers still lack a "cinematic consciousness" when watching them. Cinema, as a medium of reproduction, is certainly capable of replicating renowned ballets, operas, and similar performing arts. Yet even if we grant that such reproductions meet the unique demands of the silver screen, some of them are ultimately little more than "preservation" of the original works hardly compelling in their own right. The 1967 *Marat/Sade*, however, stands apart. It is not just an essential viewing resource for anyone studying the play *Marat/Sade*, but also holds intrinsic value as a work of cinematic art.

THE EMPTY SPACE AND CINEMATIC SPACE

Space plays an extraordinarily important role in the film *Marat/Sade*. First, it reproduced the stage setting of Peter Brook's stage play, fully capturing the live essence of its original performance. What sets this play apart from conventional theater is its unchanging backdrop: the entire story unfolds within a modern-day bathroom of a sanatorium, without any shifts in scenery, any sudden curtain changes, or any added backdrops throughout the performance. Brook sought to craft a poetic sense of space through such an imagery-driven approach to staging.

The use of theater lighting was equally distinctive: the presence of light was minimized, with the main light source, not particularly bright, coming from the left side of the stage. Unlike conventional stages, where lights were focused on lead actors, the lighting here was evenly distributed and remained entirely unchanged from start to finish. Brook believed that the form of theater must be as simple as possible, accessible yet profoundly meaningful. It is for this reason that all plays directed by Brook, much like traditional Chinese paintings, turn the stage into an "empty space", which is nearly empty except for essential elements.

The narrative space changes were fully accomplished through the performance of characters, rather than through traditional scene divisions. It is the narrator who acted as the bridge between scenes: time and again, he rapped his staff against the floor and announces to the camera, "Corday's first visit." "Corday, wake up. You have an appointment to keep, and there is no more time for sleep. Come on, Charlotte, do your deed." "Now for the third time you observe the girl whose job it is to serve..., as Charlotte Corday stands once more waiting outside Marat's door." "Corday's third and last visit." ... These scene transitions are seamless, all mediated by the narrator.

The actors' performances were highly symbolic, with stage props kept to a minimum. In the scene *Sade Under the Whip*, where Sade was supposed to be whipped by Corday with a whip, Brook took a starkly impressionistic approach. Sade removed his shirt, knelt before the camera and muttered to himself. Behind him, the actress playing Corday bent forward, lowered her head, and used her hair to mimic a whip. With each of Sade's lines, she "lashed" his back, again and again. Other characters stood around watching.

Brook noted in *The Open Door*: "An inherent and inevitable feature of the 'empty space' is the absence of scenery. This isn't a value judgment—I'm not drawing comparisons here, merely stating an obvious fact: an empty space simply cannot have scenery. Once there's scenery, it's no longer an empty space, and the audience's minds are already filled with pre-set images."

In his view, life in the theatre is more readable and intense because it is more concentrated. The act of re-

ducing space and compressing time creates a concentration. The compression consists of removing everything that is not strictly necessary and intensifying what is there, such as putting a strong adjective in the place of a bland one, whilst preserving the impression of spontaneity. For in such a space, objects cease to be mere objects: hair can stand in for a whip; the sound of a staff rapping the floor can pass for a knock at a door; the clatter of iron bars hitting the floor can represent the execution of a king This “emptiness,” paradoxically, gives the audiences a perception of “fullness”. Freed from the constraints of the director’s minimalist form, we look beyond these simple elements and delve deeper.

There was an additional narrative timeline in the film. As previously noted, the play *Marat/Sade* employed a “play-within-a-play” narrative structure with three timelines: the first was the 1960s, when the play *Marat/Sade* was going on; the second was the “primary play”—set in 1808, where the Marquis de Sade directed the performance while Coulmier, his wife, and their daughter watched it on-site; the third was the play-within-the-play, depicting the 1793 assassination of Marat by Corday. Among these three timelines, the 1808 timeline constantly shifted and intertwined with that of 1793. This, combined with the chorus’s occasional interventions, created an alienation effect. In the film *Marat/Sade*, the director added an extra timeline and another layer of space. It is easy to observe that beyond faithfully capturing the play’s scenes and performances, Brook included an additional audience in the film: the camera offered a wide shot of a dense, dark crowd watching the ongoing staging of *Marat/Sade*. In other words, Brook established four timelines in the film. To the previously mentioned 1960s setting, he added a present-tense timeline: film audiences were watching the 1960s theater audience watching the ongoing play. And it is precisely this added timeline that successfully transformed the theatrical space into a cinematic space.

How does this transformation occur? When audiences watch a theatrical recording captured by a camera, they are with a strong consciousness of “stage space”. In other words, the spatial positions presented in the footage are already presupposed as “theatrical space on a stage.” Meanwhile, ordinary recordings of plays also intentionally present themselves this way: switching between wide shots of the stage, medium shots, close-ups, and extreme close-ups of the actors’ performances. Thus, what we see is a theatrical performance, and the space we perceive is a stage space; camera cuts exist only to help us better observe the state of the actors during the performance.

Brook’s approach in the film, however, was particularly intriguing. Unlike ordinary theatrical recordings, which merely document what happens on stage and present the actors’ performances, he added a layer of “theatrical audience in the stalls” in this film. Our viewing experience thus becomes: watching an audience in a theater watching a staged play—namely, a “play within the

film.” At this point, the theatrical performance is no longer just a performance; it becomes a theatrical performance being watched by a theatrical audience. The stage is no longer just a stage; it becomes a theatrical stage being watched by a theatrical audience. The theatrical audience, together with the stage, are transformed into a cinematic scene.

DYNAMIC NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In his theatrical theory book *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook begins with these words: “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.” In other words, “someone else’s gaze” (perspective), “walking” (performance), and “space” (stage) constitute the most fundamental elements of theatre. Here, “someone else’s gaze” is merely the basic perspective of the narrative recipient, while the perspective of a text is a comprehensive view that combines both narrative perspective and recipient perspective.

Brook attached great importance to the audience’s gaze. In *The Open Door*, he once gave an example: during rehearsals, he often used a carpet to mark the rehearsal area, and outside the carpet were daily life, where people could do as they pleased, but once an actor stepped onto the carpet, they were on a responsibility: they must have clear motivations and act with initiative. That is to say, when an actor was being watched within a specific space, they ceased to be themselves and became part of the play. The act of gazing is thus a vital component of Brook’s creative process.

The theatrical play was composed of three-layer perspectives. In the play *Marat/Sade*, there were three layers of viewing perspectives that formed a nested structure: The first perspective came from Sade, who, as a director, oversaw the performance of the asylum inmates and stepped in to guide them when necessary. The second was the gaze of Coulmier and his family, who watched the asylum troupe performing *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat*. The third perspective belonged to the audience who were watching the play. These three perspectives weaved together three timelines—1793, 1808, and the 1960s when the play was going on—with their respective acts of viewing, converging to form a “present moment.” As Brook put it: “Theatre is not a building, or a text, or an actor or a style. It is an enchantment called ‘the present moment.’”

The film was composed of four-layer perspectives. As mentioned earlier, the additional narrative layer added in the film *Marat/Sade* not only transformed the theatrical space into a cinematic scene but also infused a subtle significance into the film’s narrative. When combined with the gaze of film audiences in front of the screen,

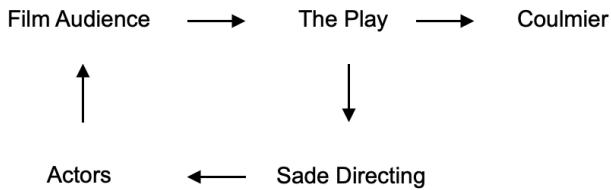


Figure 1 | Relationship cycle

this formed four-layer perspectives. What is even more intriguing is that the director introduced yet another layer of gaze in the film: actors looked directly at the camera (and thus at film audiences). The film was filled with close-up shots of this kind—actors on stage mutter their lines while looking intently into the camera (**Figure 1**).

Here, the director presents us with an illusion called “the present moment”. When the audience watches the film, they are actually not at the moment of the dramatic performance. However, as the actors recite their lines to the camera with great emotion time and again, the film audience in front of the screen will be immersed in the delusion that “he is talking to me”. It combines both the past and the future into the present moment. It helps us extricate ourselves from the predicament we are deeply trapped in, and at the same time connects us with people and things that were originally far away.

In this circular schema, the actors are not merely active “gazers” to the audience, but are equally a passive “one being gazed at.” This highly corresponds to the Sartrean existentialism. When the object is not a thing but a person, it signifies a transformation in our world. Just like the example of the blanket mentioned earlier: when an actor stepped into the blanket and was gazed at, they were no longer the same person they had been outside the blanket. In *Marat/Sade*, one can be an audience member, yet not merely an audience member; One can be an actor, yet more than just an actor.

Combined with the fourfold timelines mentioned earlier, this forms a nested film structure—much like a Russian nesting doll, where one layer reveals yet another beneath it. As time and space shift constantly, and dramatic time-space interweaves repeatedly with cinematic time-space, every character is gazing at others while being gazed at in return. This enclosed framework draws each viewer into the film, holding them within its world. Notably, this added layer of narrative does not stand out in this Brechtian narrative drama. When the multi-temporal, shifting narratives of Weiss’s play were adapted to film, Weiss simply took on one more “layer”—just like adding another doll to the set.

THE USE OF CINEMATIC LANGUAGE

Most of the theatrical video materials we usually see are recorded with a fixed camera positioned from the

perspective of the audience, aiming to replicate, as closely as possible, the experience of watching a live play. In this case, the camera essentially symbolizes the audience. This approach also shows the utmost respect for the actors’ stage movements and performances—after all, during rehearsals, both actors and directors arrange their blocking under the assumption that the audience sits directly in front of the stage. Similarly, changes in shot scale (such as close-ups or medium shots) serve solely to capture the actors’ performance states: if an actor is speaking, the camera focuses on them; if they’re expressing anger, a close-up is used. Here, the camera’s only role is to reproduce the performance as it unfolds, thus the films lack vitality or creativity. Clearly, the passive recording of a play, as described earlier, carries none of the distinctive qualities of cinematic art. In contrast, film directors must think over how to construct a shot: the internal composition of shots, their editing, and their movement in cinematic art are loaded with intention. A film director, by choosing a specific camera angle, dictates what appears on screen. They can hide elements they wish to obscure or delay revealing, and emphasize what they deem important—even if that importance isn’t made obvious by the scene itself. In other words, a director can highlight something that would only be visible if the camera were placed in that exact position. With this in mind, let’s revisit how shots are handled in the film *Marat/Sade*.

The camera work in *Marat/Sade* was far more elaborate than that of ordinary theatrical recordings. Rather than being confined to the perspective of the audience, the camera was in constant motion: at times filming from the audience’s seats, at other times moving into the center of the stage to follow the actors, and even incorporating several subjective shots. Its extensive use of carefully crafted compositions and shallow depth of field are hallmarks of cinematic thinking. The film opened with a tracking shot from backstage, unsteady and swaying left and right—mirroring the erratic mental state of the actors. This was followed by a series of panning shots across the lead performers, offering a simple yet effective introduction to the main characters. Let us examine how Brook used cinematic techniques to handle Charenton’s opening monologue in the first act. The shot began with a strictly centered composition and a classic cinematic framing. It then pulled back as Charenton walked forward, gradually revealing a fence behind him. The camera shifted right, finally settling beside his wife and daughter. For viewers in front of the screen, this single shot creates a layered psychological progression: first, “Charenton is beginning his speech”; then, “Ah, Charenton is delivering this monologue from a confined space.” Imagine watching this scene in a theater: the audience would be seated right in front of the fence from the start, immediately aware that Charenton’s monologue is separated from them by this barrier. The psychological changes caused by the long take would not take place.

Let's look at another shot: during the conversation between Sade and Marat in Scene 15 of Act I, *Marat and Sade Continue Their Conversation*, Brook made a deliberate choice—he did not show the interaction between the two characters, and Marat did not even appear in the frame. Instead, the shot focused solely on Sade and a patient, using a shallow depth of field to create an intimate effect: Sade seemed to be speaking directly to us, while the patient in the background remained utterly still. In this lengthy static shot, all we see are these two figures in the frame, and all we hear is Sade's monologue, as if addressed to us personally. Yet within this seemingly simple composition, a subtle detail emerges: Sade and the figure in the background were wearing the same colored clothing and having the same white hair. Unconsciously, the viewer begins to wonder about their connection—as if the seated figure was Sade himself. Then, as Sade turned around, the focus shifted abruptly to the patient. The patient slowly crawled from the bench toward Sade, muttering repeatedly, "A mad animal; Man is a mad animal..." Our attention shifts right along with the change in focus. This is where the film differs from the play: an actor's performance and lines are no longer the sole focus of the film audience. Their attention is subtly guided by the director's camera work—shifts that reveal new meanings which are impossible to get from the actors' performances alone. Such depth is something no mere theatrical recordings could ever capture.

Before devoting himself fully to theatre, Peter Brook studied film production. Beyond *Marat/Sade*, his notable film works included *Moderato Cantabile* (1960), *Lord of the Flies* (1963), *Tell Me Lies* (1968), and *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (1979). Yet he is most renowned as a theatre director, with landmark productions like *The Mahabharata* and *The Valley of Astonishment* earning worldwide acclaim. Against this backdrop, *Marat/Sade* (1967) stands out as a work distinctly different from conventional theatrical recordings. Its filmic treatment is evident in every frame: deliberately cinematic settings, thoughtful use of shot scales and depth of field, and a camera that constantly shifts angles across the stage. These choices elevate it from a mere "recording of a play" to a fully realized film in its own right. At the same time, the film remains a faithful expression of Brook's theatrical philosophy. From its spatial design to the interplay of "gaze" between audience and performers, and even the illusion of "the present moment" it conjures for viewers, every element draws the audience deeper into the theatrical core of the work.

In my view, the success of *Marat/Sade*—a work that was successfully reproduced from a play to a film—depends largely on Brook's creative foundation: "the empty space."

As we all know, although a play unfolds within the single space of a stage, shifts in time or setting require scene or act divisions. Such transitions rely on changes

in backdrops and props to alter the audience's psychological perception of space, signaling, "The performance has entered another time and place." Cinema, however, operates differently: through editing and montage, it can easily fragment space—one moment the scene is a frigid, snow-covered landscape, and the next, it cuts directly to a sweltering summer day. Yet for Brook, this particular quality of cinema mattered little, for what he pursued was "the empty space": a stage stripped of all scenery, a "single stage" in the truest sense. This "emptiness" draws the audience into the play as deeply as possible. "A bare space cannot tell a story on its own, and thus each viewer's imagination, attention, and thoughts remain unshackled". It is this same "empty space" presented in the film as that singular stage.

As a director who was active in both theater and film industries, Peter Brook believed that theatrical space was more flexible than cinematic space. The fundamental reason lies in what he sought: an "empty space" with no scenery at all. This "emptiness" in a theater could be filled by the audience's imagination. In contrast, a film screen needed to reproduce a complete world, and everything that appeared on the screen must be connected through logical unity. Perhaps it is precisely because of this philosophy that Brook had gone further in his theatrical career than in his film work.

References

1. Santag, S. (2011). *Against interpretation* (W. Cheng, Trans.). Shanghai Translation Publishing House. (Original work published) (p.179).
2. Dong, W. N. (2010). *The integration of aura and shock: On the aesthetic pursuit of Peter Brook's directed Marat/Sade* [Dissertation]. Shanghai Theatre Academy. (p.16).
3. Kracauer, S. (1981). *The nature of film: The redemption of physical reality* (M. Shao, Trans.). China Film Press. (Original work published) (p.35).
4. Chen, S. X. (2013). *Directors: From Meiningen to Barba* (2nd ed.). Xiamen University Press. (p.494).
5. Xu, M., & Zhao, L. (2015). The image of emptiness and empty space: An analysis of the narrative mode of Peter Brook's *The Suit*. Sichuan Drama.
6. Brook, P. (2016). *The open door* (T. Yu, Trans., 1st ed.). CITIC Press Group. (pp.24, 92).
7. Arnheim, R. (1981). *Film as art* (Y. Yang, Trans.). China Film Press. (Original work published) (p. 39).