QUILLS:

The movie begins in early nineteenth century France where a young woman is about to be guillotined.

The movie never lets up.

And while I believe that a movie does not have to have a happy ending or make you feel good to be successful, I do believe it must have a sense of humanity. This movie does not. And, this may be the most difficult review I have ever done, because while I also believe that it is important to judge a movie by its artistic merit and vision by its director to carry a project through, I firmly believe that it must also convey a sense of moral integrity. No not morality, but moral integrity!

The story on the surface is about the Marquis de Sade who is in an insane asylum called Charenton. It is a cold, heartless and ruthless life for the inmates and caretakers. The Marquis, who we are told, is in the asylum because he tortured two women and because of his continued scandalous writing, which is leaking out (and perverting) the moral fiber of the unsuspecting and poor public (especially the impressionable young women).

But the movie isn’t at all about France and history (that’s just the setting), it is about director Philip Kaufman’s perception that all that matters is free speech at all costs. To be sure, the acting by Michael Caine as the obsessed Dr. Royer-Collard is superb, and Geoffrey Rush as the Marquis is splendid.

But the problem is that the only sympathetic character in the movie is the Marquis, and it is not his writing that is bothersome to this reviewer, but the fact that he tortured two women. That’s what I mean by moral integrity. Kate Winslet is the virgin maid Madeleine who deserved a better fate in Kaufman’s film. He allows no one a way out. Joaquin Phoenix plays Abbe Coulmier a young priest who has been assigned the task of overseeing the asylum, but eventually goes mad too.

The movie is about repressed sexual feelings and Kaufman sees the Marquis as a liberator, but I don’t think so. Kaufman belittles in a ruthless style both government repression and worthless church beliefs. As the Marquis says, “How can you base a religion on a belief in a virgin birth?” And his attacks on Dr. Collard are obsessive, and while Collard is a caricature, to be sure, we must remember the times. Life wasn’t easy, and order in a rather barbaric world was still in the belief of an authoritative government. And while asylum’s in this period were crude and despicable places, it was the first attempt by societies to take care of the less fortunate.

The costumes are by Jacqueline West and are very evocative of the times. The screenplay is by an adapted work by Doug Wright and has its moments but it is clouded with twenty first century beliefs and idiosyncrasies. The production designer is Martin Childs and also is first rate.

To be sure this film is filled with grim, torturous scenes. But the most troubling aspects to this viewer, are not those scenes. But two relatively symbolically and masked but shrewd scenes by director Kaufman underscore his agenda. They are almost lost in the foray.

The first, is when the young priest Abbe brings the cut off tongue of the Marquis to Dr. Collard. Symbolically, this is the church selling out to the authorities and complying to their demands. Abbe goes insane and dreams of making love to Madeleine. He becomes incarcerated.

But Kaufman takes a swing at the authorities too. After the Marquis dies, Dr. Collard decides to print his books to make money to support the asylum. This clever but foolish irony, inserted by Kaufman rings true in the 21st century, but seems totally out of place in 19th century France given the character’s previous activities.

Also, the fact that the Marquis has been a “detrimental” influence on two beautiful, innocent and young women (Madeleine and Dr. Collard’s own young bride) is so calculating, so obvious in its intent and misguided to this reviewer, that I find it patronizing at best.

And while some will relish the Marquis’ determination to write, since it is the only way for him to exorcise his demons (as he says), I find it difficult to recommend a movie that shows a sadistic man who writes with his own blood, and then his own excrement. It is crude to the intelligence and emotions.

If the right of free speech as Kaufman asserts here is the ultimate goal at any cost or price, what of the idea of humanity itself?
Other movies done recently, with even a more harrowing scene or scenes, have been more effective in evoking an emotional and genuine reflective response. Last year’s “Boys Don’t Cry” had a devastating and sad rape sequence which brought you back to the center and made you reflect on the topic of intolerance.

The only recommendation here is the acting, but at what price? If the movie wasn’t so message laden, so full of misplaced idealism, one might have a better opinion.

But constantly immersing one’s face in a perverse world with a constant intellectual agenda and meandering, devoid of any genuine human feelings or beacon of reason, and without any sense of humanity, just doesn’t cut it.

But one can also wonder if director Kaufman, on another level, sees all of us in this “Freudian” asylum with repressed sexual urges bursting at the seams with religion and society as our bonds from which there is no escape. Perhaps, nonetheless…

Some reviews have called this a “witty”, “sexual comedy”, “very sexy”, “wickedly funny” movie. I fear not.

RATING: C-