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## **Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom**

(\$39.95; Release date, Aug. 26, 2008) The Criterion Collection

**Cast:** Paolo Bonacelli, Giorgio Cataldi, Umberto P. Quintavalle, Aldo Valletti.

By **PETER DEBRUGE**

**As spine No. 17 in the Criterion Collection, "Salo" was among the first titles released on DVD by the esteemed label, following in the footsteps of such unassailable classics as "The Grand Illusion," "The Seven Samurai" and "The Seventh Seal." In a sense, the Criterion brand alone implied a standard of artistic merit, allowing the film to take many audiences by surprise (this critic included) when discovering the true nature of Pier Paolo Pasolini's last, and most astonishing, achievement, for "Salo" is arguably the most disgusting, degrading and controversial film ever made.**

By virtue of that distinction (compounded by the disc's sheer scarcity), "Salo" has become one of the most sought-after DVDs ever made. Its notoriety made the incendiary film popular with the most unlikely range of adventure seekers, as both arthouse connoisseurs and the "Faces of Death" crowd spent hundreds of dollars competing for copies of that out-of-print early edition on eBay.

Of course, for some, that unforgettable shock of a first viewing predates the DVD by at least two decades, like scar tissue on the moviegoing memory of those who were titillated enough to sample it during midnight screenings in the late '70s (you never forget your first encounter with "Salo," that much is certain). But Criterion's involvement is significant in that it lends a measure of legitimacy to a film banned in its home country and widely reviled as pornography of the most extreme sort upon its release in 1975. The fact that the company has further decided to re-release the film, now remastered in high-definition and packaged with serious-minded extras, goes even further to reinforce its position as a work of art.

For many young moviegoers, those early explorations along the fringes of cinema promise access to forbidden sights of sex and violence (pity today's adolescents, who satisfy their curiosity among the untamed wilds of the Internet). Whether sneaking latenight movies or diving head-first into the likes of

Takashi Miike or John Waters, there comes a time in every cineaste's personal development when he (or she, though the impulse seems largely masculine) actively flirts with the outre.

"Salo" packs an unmatched reputation in this realm. Pasolini's ambitions may have been artistic -- in the film, he transposes the Marquis de Sade's "The 120 Days of Sodom" to Mussolini-controlled northern Italy during the final years of Nazi-Fascist occupation (echoing Marco Ferreri's "La Grande Bouffe," while trading decadence for depravity) -- but it is curiosity to see images many would argue should never be depicted that first attracts most audiences.

Sure enough, the film begins with a certain erotic promise, as the director gathers 18 attractive young people at an imposing estate and strips them bare, encouraging us to ogle their genitalia (in doing so, he implies a certain complicity with the film's future torturers, allowing us to objectify the victims from their perspective). The camerawork will later retreat to passive, even impotent wide shots that ambivalently document the degradation to follow, betraying neither arousal nor disgust, but here, Pasolini indulges one of the rare, overtly pornographic close-ups of the film and implicates us in the process.

Others are far more eloquent in addressing the film's deeper meanings (Criterion offers six exceptional essays with the release, far more insightful than the mini-docs included on disc two), but the central theme is one of power and how societies willfully allow those who wield it to abuse them. The four central figures in the film are a duke, bishop, magistrate and president, representing the aspects of society Pasolini deemed most corrupt. Sequestered in the estate -- a microcosm of Italy and the world at large -- the libertines' lust for power only grows as they control their captives' every move, playing gods to these helpless riff-raff and peasants as they dictate what they eat, wear and do. Their whims are particularly capricious when it comes to sex, and any boy and girl caught fornicating in private are immediately punished or even executed on sight.

Pasolini's pessimism extends to the bitter end, as the film's sadists push the degradation to ever more unspeakable limits. Even so, the experience is beyond upsetting, testing the very limits of what many audiences can stomach. In the same way the final scene of Stanley Kubrick's "Eyes Wide Shut" is a challenge to the audience (effectively asking why couples turn to a movie for erotic stimulation when they would be better off seeking it in each other), "Salo" holds no reward for viewers who keep their seats until the end. To walk out on the film is to triumph over the impulses it critiques; to pause, rewind and zoom, by contrast, is to fall prey to that very nature.

Here is a film that forces the audience to confront their individual reactions to the material, an experience so extreme that those who endure it may even go so far as to re-evaluate what they seek in movies and why.

By re-releasing "Salo," Criterion has elevated it from its under-the-counter status and reopened artistic conversations of its validity and worth. The critical interpretations, including those by contemporary Bernardo Bertolucci and fellow provocateur Catherine Breillat, give valuable context to the work. A making-of documentary suggests the unimaginable: That many takes were ruined because the performers (many of them non-professionals) couldn't keep from laughing at the scenarios Pasolini asked them to depict -- a valuable reminder that it is, after all, just acting.

But most important is the remarkable improvement in picture quality. As it turns out, the film is actually quite beautiful. In my memory, it had become a dark and sinister thing, but the opening shot across the Bay of Salo is breathtaking, and once you've gotten past the actions it depicts, you realize the great care cinematographer Tonino Delli Colli (who would go on to shoot "Life Is Beautiful") and production designer

Dante Ferretti ("Gangs of New York") took with the material. Unlike such extreme horror films as "Texas Chainsaw Massacre" and "Saw" where those tools are manipulated to enhance the audience's emotional identification, in "Salo," Pasolini permits beauty to seep in -- and this latest transfer reflects that.

Pasolini was no great formalist (in one featurette, when asked, "What is technique in cinema?" he is quoted as saying, "It's a myth"), and many of his early films border on the inept. In matters as simple as progressing from shot to shot, he frequently stumbled, and throughout his oeuvre the framing is awkward, the acting amateur (he cast more for faces than ability and was frequently susceptible to the beauty of otherwise talentless young men) and the dialogue badly dubbed after the fact (for that reason, "Salo" loses nothing if watched in English instead of Italian).

But Pasolini was a poet, leaving behind one of the richest bodies of work of any filmmaker, and his best creations resonate with layers of meaning. "Teorema" may be more high-minded and his "Trilogy of Life" more fun, but "Salo" is Pasolini's most accomplished work, serving not only as a damning critique of human nature but also a naked autobiographical peek into the dark and tumultuous reaches of his own unique psyche.

Perhaps the most frightening thing about the film are those aspects of yourself you find reflected there.

Color, Dolby Digital Mono, 1.85:1 anamorphic widescreen. Running time: 112 MIN.

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