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IX. SALO: THE LAST PASSION OF PASOLINI

Friday morning brought the rather silly festival "retrospective" of a 1913 silent melodrama by French director Leonce Perret about an obnoxious little Shirley Temple-type brat who gets kidnapped by some dreadfully stereotyped (in America, they'd undoubtedly have worn blackface) "underworld" figures. The most interesting thing about the whole boring event was the proclamation in the festival program that the horrendous little girl was "a plucky little boy," making one wonder who watched this one before it was selected. But forget all that. The drivel certainly belonged in the festival's revival series, not in a prime-time evening showing. But forget all that, too.

On Friday afternoon, the festival dropped its biggest bombshell, *Salo*, the last film made by Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini before he was murdered by a male hustler he'd picked up. To say that the film is a work about, for and presumably by advocates of unconventional sexuality would be putting it mildly.

Salo's focus on scatology and sadism make it easily, to my knowledge, the most brutal and offensive movie ever made. I don't find it pornographic or prurient, and I'm not willing to dismiss it as sick, perverted, or any of the other

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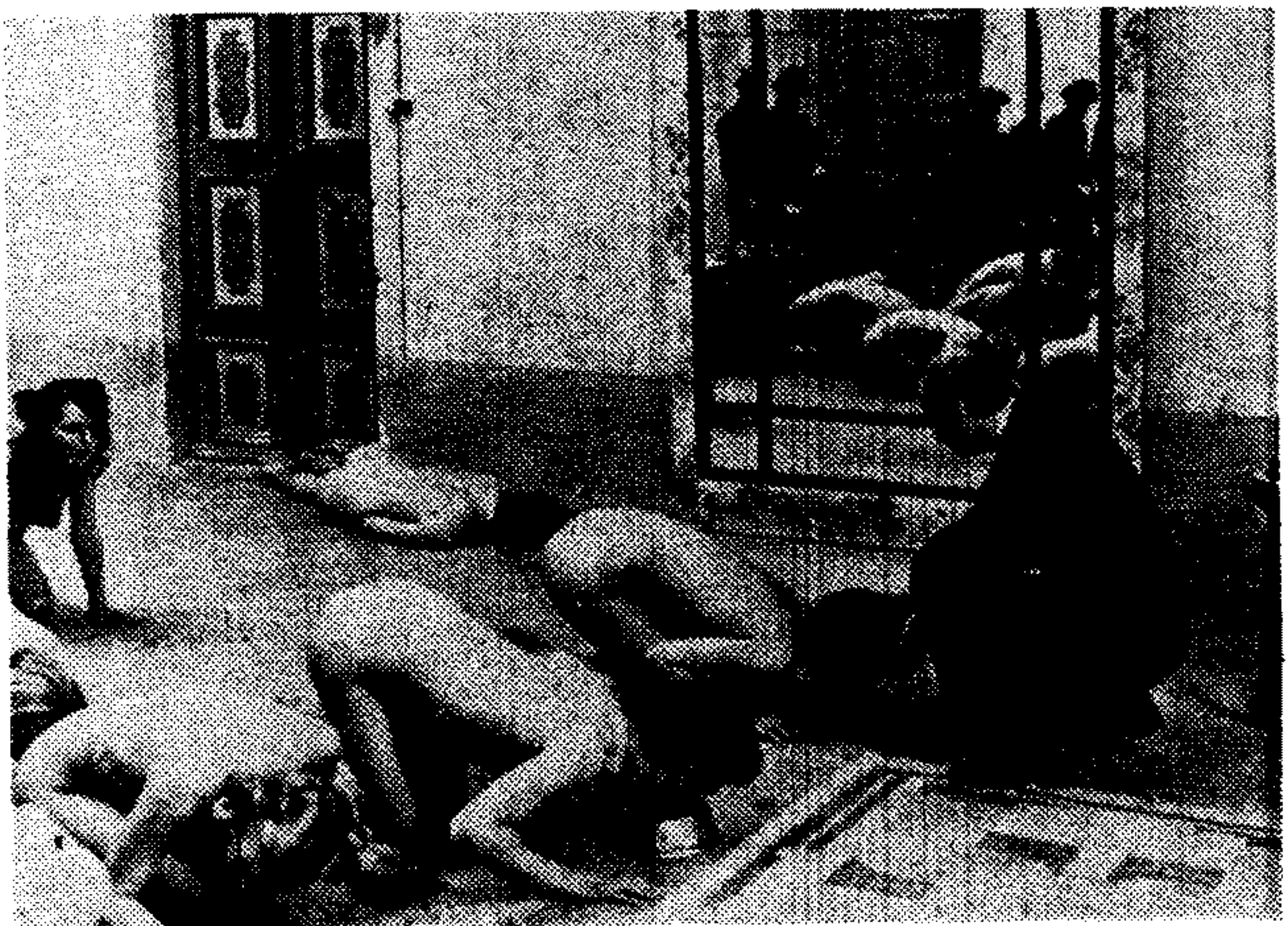
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names I heard people call it as they walked out of the hall. Brilliantly conceived and excellently made, it has its own sort of artistic logic and integrity, and even a tinge of plain old erotic appeal.

Based on a combination of a novel by the Marquis de Sade and an actual experiment in sexual fascism in an Italian community called Salo in 1943, Pasolini's film chronicles a world of ambisexual lust without love, of rape and dismemberment, of role-playing and talking-dirty, layer upon layer of degradation of the sexual act, ridiculing tenderness while cruelty and defecation and humiliation of all sorts are glorified and gloried in.

In the film, four middle-aged men and four prostitute storytellers retire to an Italian villa with a number of handsome young soldier studs and a bevy of select young adolescents (I think nine boys and nine girls — all extraordinarily beautiful). While the whores relate assorted explicit details of their various liaisons with customers over the years, the four men, flanked by the half-dressed soldiers and their young victims, sit around in a kind of large sitting room with several cubicles easily accessible by a side door. As the stories grow filthier and filthier, the men fondle the soldiers or proceed to deflower and degrade the younger boys and girls. This continues for several weeks, after which virtually all the victims are tortured and killed. One girl is scalped, another skinned alive; one boy's tongue is cut out, another's eyes are gouged. Not a pretty picture.

Pasolini is curiously noncommittal about all of this, and I understand that the English subtitles do that objectivity a disservice by mistranslating certain phrases about "normality" and "perverts." I wish I could be one-tenth as objective and non-committal in my assessment, but I can't.



Salò: scatology and sadism