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SALO, 120 Days of Sodom

written by Pier Paolo Pasolini and Sergio Citti, from the novel
120 Days of Sodom, by the Marquis de Sade

directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini

produced by Alberto Grimaldi (Zebra Films)

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It is important to know about Salò, although I never would recommend seeing it. It is a harrowing experience, which sends the viewer reeling from the theatre, speechless and spent. When first released two years ago, this last, greatest film of Pasolini was banned as obscene in Italy and seen only under the most stringent conditions in France. After being shown successfully in those countries, then in Sweden and Japan, it finally is being released in the U.S. and undoubtedly will be provoking heated controversy here for years to come. Salò may be the most powerfully upsetting movie ever made. Certainly it is among the most eloquently anti-fascist.

In 1933, the year that Hitler came to power, psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich delineated the connection between blocked orgasmic longing and sadism in "The Mass Psychology of Fascism." The Nazi era proved the correctness of his thesis. Now Pasolini, in fictional form, illuminates the psychological dynamics.

Fascism develops in extreme authoritarian-paternalistic societies. Their populations are submissive, obedient, sexually repressed and full of latent hostility - fixated at the anal level of psychosexual development. Fascist leaders hate their mothers- the original frustrating love-objects , then all women.

Their ideology deflects love feelings towards the state and its leaders - the symbolic father. It mystifies and exalts racial purity and manliness, punishes and humiliates women. The limited sexual satisfaction of the fascist is anal, through passive homosexual intercourse, aggressive anal rape and other, pregenital anal perversions. Without the capacity for tenderness, the full-blown fascist finds all human relationships impossible. In a political situation of unbridled power, he uses both sexes as temporary objects of gratification. His sadistic impulses expand until torture and murder become the only reliable outlets for sexual tension.

Pasolini dispassionately portrays the progressive psychological deterioration of the fascist leader and everyone he comes in contact with. Salò is a sexual concentration camp, then a holocaust in microcosm in which to examine the effects of fascism on its leaders, their henchmen and their victims. The story is in three parts:

First a group of innocent adolescents, boys and girls, are kidnapped, isolated in a lavish country villa and forced to participate in imaginative sado-masochistic orgies. Their degraded captors are seeking titillation, pleasuring and release, but each perverse act ultimately is disappointing. The tormentors' sexual frustration heightens and their panic escalates, because nothing can arouse and gratify them. Second there is systematic humiliation and purposeful violence against the youngsters. They ~~then~~ become objects of abuse because they cannot satisfy their tormentors sexually. Third is the inevitable conclusion, the

victims' slow agony and death in a nightmare courtyard scene, where they are skinned alive, scalped, burned, dismembered and hanged.

As in Hitler's concentration camps, it is the threatening and violent atmosphere, the corruption, humiliation, punishment and deprivations that weakens the victims into defenseless prey. Scared out of their wits, never totally believing what is happening, slowly they lose individuality, submit and curry favor. They never group to resist and, until the end, cannot conceive of dying.

At first the henchmen identify with the all-powerful tormentors. Soon they, too, are infected by the atmosphere and become afraid. As the horrors increase they detach emotionally, trying to deny the consequences of participation. One woman, overwhelmed by the reality, jumps to her death into the courtyard of tortures.

The leaders progress inexorably from sexual deadness through sado-masochism ~~sublimation~~ into violence, torture and murder. Monstrously psychotic at the end, they dance with unrestrained glee as their sadism is fully satisfied.

As a psychological instrument this film works brilliantly. Pasolini, ever the moralist, first taps into the viewer's own "normal" sado-masochism, evoking his fantasies like an ordinary porno movie does. Then the explicit sex and violence take on a searing purpose, to revolt the viewer until he turns against his own previously acceptable ^{sadistic} feelings and vows to expunge them from his character, ^{his} relationships and ^{his} dreams.

The politics of Salo have universal applicability. "Hell hath no fury like a fascist unleashed", Pasolini is saying. Watch out for the political leader who is sexually sick. He cannot be self-regulating or restrained by ordinary social rules. Police his power or another holocaust will overwhelm us all!

As surrealistic art the movie is equally successful. The staging is straightforward yet ^{brilliantly} imaginative, like a long dream. The performances are so sincere you become totally absorbed in the feelings of the victims, the onlookers and the murderers.

Ironically, Pasolini was killed last year, run down by his own car. The driver was a seventeen year old boy he had picked up for sexual services - the same age as the youngsters he misused so cruelly in his imagination. We know, from the film, how harshly Pasolini must have judged his own perverse behavior. Salo stands as a monument to his genius, insight and suffering; to his exalted idealism and ignoble end.

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