

Document Citation

Title	The damned
Author(s)	Brenda Davies
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	La caduta degli dei (The damned), Visconti, Luchino, 1969

THE DAMNED

Directed by Luchino Visconti. Produced by Alfred Levy and Ever Haggis. Screenplay by Nicola Badalucco, Enrico Medioli and Luchino Visconti. Director of photography, Armando Nannuzzi and Pasquale de Santis. Editor, Ruggero Mastroianni. Music, Maurice Jarre. Art director, Pasquale Romano. A Pegaso-Praesidens production, distributed by Warner-Pathe. Italy/W. Germany. Eastmancolor, print by Technicolor. Cert X. 152 mins.

Friederich Bruckmann, DIRK BOGARDE: Baroness Sophie von Essenbeck, INGRID THULIN: Aschenbach, HELMUT GRIEM: Martin von Essenbeck, HELMUT BERGER: Elisabeth Thallman, CHARLOTTE RAMPLING: Olga, FLORINDA BOLKAN: Baron Konstantin von Essenbeck, RENE KOLLDEHOFF: Herbert Thallman, UMBERTO ORSINI: Guenther von Essenbeck, RENAUD VERLEY: Governess, NORA RICCI: Lisa Keller, IRINA WANKA: Thilde, VALENTINA RICCI: Erika, KAREN MITTENDORF: Baron Joachim von Essenbeck, ALBRECHT SCHOENHALS.

I think it is Hochhuth, in his preface to *The Representative* who says that the Nazi crimes were so monstrous that he felt obliged to tone down the known facts to make them credible to his audience. This is a difficulty which must always face chroniclers of the period but Visconti, who has never been timid about excess, seems just the man to overcome it. Certainly, with a story inspired, according to the distributors, by Macbeth, the Nibelungen

and Thomas Mann, 'among other sources' there can be no doubt that he was aiming at a vast apocalyptic vision of damnation, an epic of human depravity. And the internecine strife in a German armaments dynasty involved in the rise of Nazism makes a likely enough subject, with the great steel furnaces to hand as a ready-made metaphor for Hell. All the more disappointing therefore, that the total effect of his *Götterdammerung* is less than shattering.

It begins well, with the von Essenbeck clan gathering in 1933 to celebrate the birthday of their chief, Baron Joachim. The sumptuous decor and furnishings, the uniformed servants, the formality of the proceedings, quickly establish the luxurious way of life of these steel tycoons. But it happens to be the night of the Reichstag fire, a coincidence that seems a little forced, and the exposition of family relationships and attitudes which follows is ponderous and confused. The old man, Joachim, is on the way out. He has co-operated reluctantly with the Nazis for the sake of the firm, now the family are eager to push him aside and are also fighting among themselves for control of the vast steelworks. Nephew Konstantin, an officer in the Stormtroops, seeks the succession for himself and his son Guenther. Daughter-in-law Sophie wants power for her engineer lover Friederich Bruckman, but her son Martin, the heir apparent, has his own reasons for wanting to keep Friederich out. All are anxious to ingratiate themselves with the new regime in the person of Aschenbach, a cousin in the SS. Only Herbert Thallman, who is married to Elisabeth, Joachim's great-niece, has openly opposed the Nazis. He is rapidly disposed of when Friederich shoots the old man with Herbert's gun and Herbert is forced into exile. The plot from here on becomes a series of intrigues whose focal points should be Friederich and Sophie, the Macbeths of the enterprise. Actually they fall into the background, partly because Dirk Bogarde is unconvincing and ill at ease as Friedrich, but largely because the balance is upset by concentration on

Martin, a good performance by Helmut Berger, whose perversions are explored at great length with very little effect on the progress of the story. One of his victims is a little Jewish girl, another plot point which seems slightly strained. But the subject suddenly comes into its own in the central sequence which, in spite of the film's disingenuous preface to the effect that no reference is intended to any person living or dead, is in fact a reconstruction of the ghastly massacre of storm troops known as 'the night of the long knives'. Here at last is the atmosphere at which the whole film seems to be aiming. The strength-through-joy boys romping naked in the woods and the water, the puerile pranks, the steady intake of beer and the gradual noisy descent into maudlin nationalism with the self-hypnotic chanting of the Horst Wessel song ending in collapse into swinish sleep. And then the awakening—the rattle of the SS machine-guns and the piling of bloody corpses—all this against a background of glorious lake-land landscape. The bestiality is frightening and all too horribly convincing. The fact that the entire sequence is played in German undoubtedly adds enormously to its effect. The rest of the film is in a strange, stylised literary English which

seems at variance with the fairly muted playing of the principals. The editing style is curious too, consisting of many short scenes each building to within sight of its climax only to cut to parallel action, then return to complete the climax. It is a disruptive method which becomes irritating and eventually monotonous. The final section in which Martin forces his moribund mother and her lover through an obscene mock marriage in front of his degenerate playmates and then leaves them to kill themselves has a certain horrid stylishness which, like the rest of the film, gains from the sensitive use of colour and the excellent sense of period. If, like some of the early scenes, it lacks the impact of the massacre, it is because of the strangely inappropriate restraint Visconti has so improbably imposed on his most appalling of subjects. BRENDA DAVIES