Document Citation

Title	**Chilling cruelty of 'Salò' still potent after 33 years**
Author(s)	Dennis Lim
Source	*Los Angeles Times*
Date	2008 Aug 24
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma (Salo, or the 120 days of Sodom), Pasolini, Pier Paolo, 1975

HOME THEATER

A SECOND LOOK

Chilling cruelty of 'Salò' still potent after 33 years

Pier Paolo Pasolini's graphic final film was as notorious as the director's death weeks after its completion.

By DENNIS LIM
Special to The Times

"SALÒ, OR the 120 Days of Sodom," the final film by Pier Paolo Pasolini, owes its considerable notoriety not just to the unrelenting parade of degradation and torture that it serves up on screen but also to an unfortunately resonant act of off-screen brutality. On Nov. 2, 1975, just weeks after the movie was completed, Pasolini's mutilated body was discovered in a vacant lot outside Rome. Police investigations concluded that he had been killed by a 17-year-old boy he had attempted to pick up.

A lapsed Catholic and a gay Marxist, Pasolini was the provocative sum of his contradictions. He was a true polymath — a filmmaker, poet, novelist and playwright — and a habitual firebrand, an outspoken public intellectual who made no secret of his homosexuality or his taste for teenage rough trade. And as with so many artists who die violently or before their time, his demise quickly became the prism through which his work — "Salò" in particular — was viewed. Michelangelo Antonioni remarked that Pasolini had been "the victim of his own characters."

More than three decades later, it finally might be possible to free "Salò" from the shadow of Pasolini's grisly death. The alleged killer recanted his confession a few years ago; many people now believe that the murder was politically motivated, undermining the once prevalent view that it represented something of a death wish on Pasolini's part.

As for the film itself, reissued this week by the Criterion Collection in a two-disc edition richly supplemented with essays and documentaries, its extreme, claustrophobic force is undiluted. The 1970s was a hotbed of scandalous art cinema, but "Salò" — unlike such X-rated shockers as "Last Tango in Paris" or "In the Realm of the Senses" — has not been tamed by the passage of years. If anything, there is a cruel, chilling timelessness to both its imagery and its logic. The shock hasn't worn off in the slightest.

While Pasolini mingled the sacred and the profane in much of his earlier work, "Salò" exists in an utterly godless realm. It combines and explicitly links two unmentionable subjects, transposing the Marquis de Sade's "120 Days of Sodom," a massive and minutely detailed catalog of sexual torture perpetrated by four wealthy libertines in 18th century France, to the Republic of Salò, the puppet government that Benito Mussolini established in the final days of World War II.

The authority figures in "Salò" are fascist officials whose regimen of humiliation seems motivated less by sexual desire than by the exercise of total power and control. They round up nine boys and nine girls and proceed to a remote villa, staffed with armed guards and a few middle-aged prostitutes who set the mood by recounting their sexual exploits in vivid detail.

Structured as a series of infernal Dantesque "circles," "Salò" progresses inexorably, as an escalation of horrors and a descent into madness. The boys and girls are leashed like dogs; one is force-fed food laced with nails. Next come some truly stomach-turning experiments in coprophagy, building to a Last Supper-like feast of human excrement. The film culminates in a grueling torture sequence: In an enclosed courtyard, victims are whipped, branded and scalped, their tongues sliced and eyeballs gouged. Meanwhile, the fascists take turns watching from a window. Pasolini presents the grotesque action from the captors' point of view, from above and through binoculars — a distancing device that forces the viewer into the position of voyeur.

Before embarking on "Salò," Pasolini had completed a trio of popular literary adaptations known as the Trilogy of Life. "Salò," for him, was a refutation of the trilogy's affirmative eroticism, which he eventually came to view as suspect.

The 1940s setting of "Salò" is a bit of a red herring: Pasolini's premise acknowledges the perverse erotic appeal of fascism, but his main concern was with what he considered the "new fascism," the rapacious rise of consumer capitalism and its ability to reduce human bodies to commodities. "Salò" is not the most coherent political allegory — Pasolini himself said of the film, "It does not need to be understood." That might be so, but as an agonized *cri de coeur*, a wail of absolute despair in the face of a dehumanizing world, its power is overwhelming.

American Cinematheque

DANGEROUS LIAISONS: *Pasolini's film transposes the Marquis de Sade's catalog of sexual torture to Italy in WWII.*