

TAKE 19

1978: PASOLINI'S LAST PICTURE SHOW

Toward An Understanding of The Film *Salo*¹

Let's cut through all the queenly bullshit about *Salo*, the last and most controversial vision of Pier Paolo Pasolini. If you're alive and gay, you waited two years for the U.S. release of this film. Now that you've seen *Salo*, how do you handle its scenes in your own head and explain them to unkinky gays? Especially since *Salo's* explicit scenes, at first viewing, seem so directly tied to the S&M lifestyle. You can't laugh *Salo* off like *Pink Flamingo's* outrageous Divine eating shit. *Salo* is no joke.²

TWO KINDS OF CINEMA

Make a distinction: movies and films. You go to a *movie* to escape life's tension. You go to a *film* to intensify life. You go to a movie for entertainment. You go to a film for intensified input. Some guys short-circuit when they pay admission for a movie only to find out what's on screen is more than they bargained for: a film.

1 The author's review-essay first appeared in *Drummer* magazine, May 1978.

2 Anita Bryant crusaded her brand of Florida Christianity against homosexuality in the political arena and wound up losing her commercial endorsement of orange juice as well as her recording career. Bryant and her Proposition 6 are examples of the kind of wonderful damage gay pressure can do to bigots.

Avowed heterosexual Ed Davis was the chief of police in Los Angeles. Davis raided gay bars, baths, and gay publishing houses, including *Drummer* magazine. Performance artist Robert Opel streaked the Academy Awards live and was arrested by Davis at a City Council meeting for indecent exposure when Opel protested the legislating away of Los Angeles's nude beaches.

Comedian Richard Pryor made derogatory remarks about homosexuals at the Universal Amphitheater, saying he had tried *gay* sex and didn't like it. A public outcry damned him. Pryor and I come from the same home town and my response to him was, "I remember why you didn't like it, because you weren't any good at it, you were so loaded on drugs."

Before you approach the box office, read reviews and listen to word-of-mouth to determine if the feature showing is a movie or a film. Then figure out if you're in a movie-mood for entertainment, or in a film-mood for intensity. Since most reviewers are confused by trying to judge movies by film criteria, and films by GP-movie standards, you basically pay your money, take your chances, and wind up as your own best movie/film critic.

With an entertainment-movie, you get pretty much the sound of music that you bargained for. With the intensity of a film, you can bet you'll be yanked into some artful spaces you never expected to go. When you leave a movie, you exit much the same as when you entered. When you leave a film, you exit changed by an experience that really opened your eyes and your mind.

SALO IS A FILM

Poor Pasolini: more misunderstood dead than alive. He filmed clues to his murderers' identity. His murderers are our attempted murders. His clue is *Salo* itself: a film about the Bryants and Briggs and Pryors (whose grandmother's name is Bryant). Pasolini's *Salo* is a cautionary film, a warning flag. He is frankly blunt about his message. For him, there is no penitence in *Salo*. No regret. No change of heart or mind. Certain murder, he cautions, lies in wait.

Salo is a dark film shot in a narrow space.

SALO IS ABOUT AMERICAN GAYS TODAY

There are two kinds of S&M: ritual and real. Ritual S&M men go to see *Salo* hoping that Pasolini has made a gay porno-fantasy movie as innocuously entertaining and ritualistic as *Born to Raise Hell*. Instead, Pasolini, although a fan of ritual-macho S&M, in *Salo* presents a film of real S&M. (And often disappointingly straight at that!) Ritual S&M is Black Leather Therapy acted out for mental health with mutual consent. Real S&M is the evil stuff of a Hitler born again in a Bryant, Briggs, or Davis. Real S&M is fascism. Chances are that American gays in the coming eighties are in for a fantastically fascistic bad time. Good-bye glitter, and hello Anne Frank.

CABARET TO JULIA

Films find fascism fashionable. *Cabaret* insightfully showed the easy seduction by fascism when the handsome blond Nordic boy sang "Tomorrow

Belongs to Me.” This sequence detailed fascism’s bandwagon seduction as face after face joined his rousing song. Director Fosse’s own filmic power seduced the American audience right into the spirit of the sunny beer garden song, so that in movie houses everywhere, audiences were shocked to find themselves so suddenly, so easily sucked into the thrill of what began as a gloriously innocent song and built to an impassioned fascist anthem.

Julia more gently shows dramatist Lillian Hellman (Jane Fonda) rescuing liberal Europeans from pre—World War II fascism, which eventually murders Julia herself (Vanessa Redgrave). Less delicately than *Cabaret* and *Julia*, the films of young Spanish director Fernando Arrabal (*Viva la Muerte* [1974] and *Guernica* [1976]) portray the grotesquely real S&M of Franco’s fascism under which Arrabal and the current generation of young Spaniards grew up: gay men shot up the ass with pistols because they were gay, his own father buried to the neck in sand so his head could be used by four horsemen as a polo ball, a woman shitting on a male prisoner’s face. These are strong images meant to stir up strong audience reaction by a filmmaker. A moviemaker, on the other hand, like Ken Russell, rolls Ann-Margret around in chocolate in *Tommy*, and this movie brand of pretend-shit the fainthearted think is “just wonderful camp.”

SOME GUY WON’T FACE TRUTH

So what has fascism to do with gay Americans in 1978? John Dos Passos warned, “We will have Fascism in America, but we will call it Americanism.” Bigots from Bryant to Briggs are Americanists. Americanists do what fascists did. Hitler burned books and censored radio. Germans were not allowed to see what they wanted to see nor say what they wanted to say. Americanist/fascists always want other people, their victims, in tied-up situations.

Pasolini dared demonstrate this by literally tying up *Salo*’s victims, by literally gouging the eye (to symbolize you may not see what you wish), by cutting out the tongue (to symbolize you are not free to speak your opinion), by scalping the head (to symbolize you may not use your head according to your own thoughts), by forcing one couple to make love on command (to symbolize you may not fuck except as ordered), by shooting an interracial pair of lovers (to symbolize you must not only procreate with your own kind, but you must also have passion for nothing but the Movement). And always, fascism makes you eat its shit.

THE WIZARD OF OZ MEETS MUSSOLINI

Salo offers strong images to strengthen the viewer. Pasolini was so aware of the horrors of his third section, "Circle of Blood," that he softened the images by distancing the audience from the bloody action with a telephoto lens that gauzed out the edges. Sometimes assault is the only way to raise consciousness.

Throughout *Salo*, which is not salacious, Pasolini artfully staged his cautionary political warning at a gut level. *Salo's* images are contrived to get your attention. *Salo's* message is to hold your interest. *Salo* is a political film in the antifascist tradition of Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* and Costa-Gavras's *Z* and *State of Siege*.

And despite his serious message, Pasolini has the sense of humor to add the comic relief of those silly women dragged up like Glinda the Good Witch, coming down the Hello-Dolly staircases, telling their naughty, campy tales. But, he implies, behind their fashion lurks fascism.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO MGM MUSICALS?

Lots of gay men don't like real things. They hide in fantasy and ritual. They prefer life in a gay ghetto. They need nobody to cover their eyes and ears. On their own, they ostrichlike refuse to look or listen farther than their cocks can shoot. They miss Pasolini's value of using gay vision in a twisted straight world.

Pier Paolo's images are strong. His message is clear: FASCISM IS COMING OUT OF ITS CLOSET, TOO. His film won't let us ignore it. He shakes us so bodily we want to turn away our faces from the screen. We may not emotionally like what we see; but, understanding his visionary point of view, we can intelligently distinguish and explain how what he films is not about our ritual S&M, but about a real political-moral reality that, like something dreadful, this way comes.

GET THE PICTURE?

In defense of her own bizarre short stories' strong images, Flannery O'Connor wrote about people who have eyes and see not and ears and hear not.

Pasolini's death cry, *Salo*, shouts very large.