

Pasolini: The Last Days

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So the British public is not going to be able to see *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom*. Perhaps some mature reflections by one who saw the film as long ago as July 1976 at the quaint Pagoda cinema in Paris, might be of interest to the readers of *New Blackfriars*.

At the outset it appears that Pasolini is using a device we find in his film *Pigsty* where he tries to tell two related stories at the same time and keeps cutting from one to the other. There is first the story from de Sade of the four, rich, degenerate men who, looking for some new stimulus for their jaded appetites plan a monumental orgy. They seek out beautiful and innocent boys and girls, take them to a remote castle and there indulge in all manner of depravities for 120 days at the end of which they torture and kill their victims. Then there is the story of the short lived fascist republic that was established at Salò in North Italy in 1943-4 and the enforced recruitment of young peasant boys to serve the Nazis in the war against the allies and their own countrymen. But it soon becomes apparent that the fascism that Pasolini is interested in is not so much Salò as the 'nonfascist' fascism of present day Italy under the capitalist system. The historic Salò is soon forgotten and the four men are shown as pillars of Italian society: *Il Duca, Monsignore, Eccellenza and Presidente*. It is these contemporary figures who become the protagonists of the de Sade story. The orgies take place in three stages or *gironi*. A word chosen perhaps to remind us of the Dantean circles in hell. Each of them is introduced by a female character who recites the scene that is enacted before us. The fourth woman accompanies the narration at the piano. The first *girone* is that of Frenzy. Here the object is simply to use the victims to provoke and incite the assembled company to solitary orgasm. The second *girone* that of Dung subjects the victims to the indignity of having to eat excreta¹ The third *girone* of Blood is that of torture and death. In these three ways the four men find satisfaction at the expense of the once young and innocent.

¹ It is to be noted that in the filming of these scenes a mixture of chocolate was used. But this is no more comforting to the spectator than the knowledge that in the opening scene of *Un Chien Andalou* it was not a human but a pig's eye that was slit by Bunuel's razor.

The link between certain political systems and sexual depravity is not particularly original. Visconti used it in *The Damned* and our own Ken Russell has played around with the idea. But what makes Pasolini's film exceptional is the coldness of the treatment. There is no pity. Any laughter on the screen is loud, forced and mirthless. For the audience there are no giggles, nothing lubricious or suggestive. Nothing is left to the imagination and so one cannot escape into fantasy, one is forced to watch what is taking place, the director is torturing his audience. Horror is piled on horror but it is all objective and it follows a ritual; children on all fours lashed together like dogs, acts of sodomy, coprophagy, scalping, gouging out of eyes. But it is this that so nauseates the spectator that stimulates the four men. The film would only excite somebody already depraved. If it is pornographic, it is pornographic in the sense that Belsen and Auschwitz were, not *Emanuelle*.

Why then waste time and space in discussing such a work? I think it deserves serious consideration because it was Pasolini's last work and it followed three films that have had a wide circulation even in England and they have helped to form an image of Pasolini as nothing more than a commercially minded pornographer. *The Decameron*, *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Arabian Nights* formed the *Trilogia della Vita* and they were an important stage in Pasolini's development. After his serious and rather intellectual works like *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (1964), *Theorem* (1968), *Pigsty* (1969) and the two treatments of classical themes, *Oedipus Rex* (1967) and *Medea* (1969), he decided to turn to something else. He saw an artistic challenge in the adaptation of a collection of stories into one film. But he was also fascinated by the erotic and wanted to express an uninhibited joy in life where sex was experienced without feelings of guilt. This desire to return to a state of innocence where man was naked and unashamed was also an attempt to liberate himself from the restrictions of the catholic, puritan, peasant, culture in which like many Italians he was immersed. Undoubtedly, there are times in each of these films where he manages to capture something of the vanished paradise. In fact, one of the striking characteristics of his earlier films had been a sense of the wonder of life and the sacredness of things. His camera dwelt on landscape and the human face in a way that was reminiscent of the great Italian painters.

But in 1975 all this was quite deliberately changed. When the script of the *Trilogy of Life* was published² Pasolini wrote by way of preface an abjuration of these three films. He allowed that he was sincere when he made the films but now (it was in the last months of his life) he rejected them totally. When he is engaged in a work the writer or artist, he says, has to express himself sincerely

² *Trilogia della Vita* Pier Paolo Pasolini. Capelli Editore. Bologna, 1975.

and say what he feels without any regard or fear for the way in which his work might be used in the future. But once the work is completed, then the writer can take account of the way in which his work has been received and if he thinks it has been distorted, then he has the right to disown it. His reasons for this action were that the stand he had taken on the side of free expression, authenticity and tolerance was in fact being exploited by the unscrupulous consumer society. A pseudo-tolerance and false sense of freedom was now being preached. In some ways the situation was worse than it was before. In a society where nothing is permitted, everything is possible. But in a society that does tolerate some things, then only what is tolerated can be done. When perversions are no longer taboo, we have to be perverse in order to succeed. Present-day Italy thinks she is now a liberal society, more democratic, more tolerant, but below the surface there is crime, cruelty and self-interest. Sexual liberation has left people unhappy, it has made them aggressive and unable to enjoy sex for its own sake, it has become mercenary and commercialised. Innocent bodies are violated and manipulated by the consumer society. He says that he now hates those bodies and sexual organs in which he used to take so much delight because they have been depraved by modern society.

This perversion of an ideal that he had tried to express in the *Trilogy* made him see the need for a much more explicit film which would spell out exactly what modern society was like. *Salò* is that film and it was intended as a comment on the way his other work had been interpreted. To make this statement intelligible Pasolini had to identify with the evil ones. He had to learn their language and present it in cinematographic form. In the *120 Days of Sodom*, de Sade put the following words into the mouth of Blagny "On the day of judgment, God will surely scold us in these terms, 'Since you saw that on earth all is vicious and criminal, why did you lose yourselves on the road to virtue? The perpetual disasters which I, God, have imposed upon the universe, how could they fail to convince you that I love only disorder? Every day I supplied you with examples of destruction, so why did you not destroy? Imbecile! Why do you not imitate me?'" But Pasolini is more secular than de Sade. He has no quarrel with God. The evil genius that invites us to imitate him is Power, the forces that govern the capitalist consumer society. It is their invitation that Pasolini takes up and the result is a work of destruction and annihilation.

How much of this abjuration was a radical change in Pasolini's own sense of values. How much of it was an artistic device? Did there take place a tragic loss of humanity in a hitherto sensitive and gentle creative artist? Did he become a monster of depravity?

The answer is complicated both by Pasolini's own life style (he

had long been a practising homosexual) and by his death which occurred shortly after the completion of *Salò*. The circumstances of that death, the struggle at night on the piece of waste ground, the killing and mutilation of the body by the fact that it was run over twice with his own automobile, leave the way open to many interpretations. Was it a deliberate ambush, an act of vengeance by someone who could not forgive him for having made *Salò*? Was it a legitimate killing in self-defence by a youth who resisted his impure importuning? Did Pasolini provoke his own death at the hands of one of the youths he now despised? We shall probably never know the truth. Psychological interpretations for Pasolini's last years of life and his tragic death, abound. It has been argued that he became filled with disgust for his own way of life and projected this hatred on to others. He has been seen as another Dorian Gray³ becoming progressively steeped in evil, but appearing to himself and the world as good and innocent. Then confronted with his true image in an evil world he tried to strike it down and his own death ensued.

There is the temptation to use *Salo* as a moral tale. To see in it a vindication of the standard moral theology teaching that unrestrained and unbridled sex as found in the *Trilogy* inevitably leads to the depravity of *Salò*. Once one neglects the curbs that the Church and society put on sex you inevitably end up in Sodom. To be healthy and productive sex must be controlled. As in gardening, the more you prune the better things grow. Let the instincts go free and wild and after a period of luxuriation, they will become barren and sterile.

But perhaps the psychological and moral explanations distract from the main issue. Much has been written about Pasolini in Italy.⁴ Little can be found in English.⁵ But he deserves better of us because we too have our problems of sex, violence, the consumer society.

After *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, he had the idea of making a film about St. Paul. He eventually decided against this and made the *Trilogy* instead. But one has the feeling that remnants of a half digested Pauline theology are to be found in both the *Trilogy* and *Salò*.

³ *Giornate di Sodoma* Uberto Paolo Quintavalle. Sugar Co Edizioni. Milano. 1976.

⁴ A full bibliography is to be found in *Bianconero*. Anno XXXVII, fasc 1/4 gennaio-aprile 1976.

⁵ Gideon Bachmann has two good articles. *Sight and Sound* Winter 1975-6 and *Vogue* December 1976.