

The Prince of Puke Introduces “SALÒ, OR THE 120 DAYS OF SODOM”

Written by Lianne Spiderbaby
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John Waters is more than just a filmmaker. He’s an innovator, a subversive spit in the face, a wickedly talented screenwriter, novelist and the self-proclaimed “Prince Of Puke.” In his 1981 book *SHOCK VALUE*, he states that bad taste is what entertainment is all about: “I’ve always tried to please and satisfy an audience that thinks they’ve seen everything. I try to force them to laugh at their own ability to still be shocked by *something*.” On October 23, Waters presented perhaps the most shocking movie of all time—Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *SALÒ, OR THE 120 DAYS OF SODOM*—at Toronto’s TIFF Bell Lightbox Theatre. It’s safe to say that the audience was shocked by at least *something* in the film.



“*SALÒ* is right up my alley,” Waters said during his introduction. “I think it’s a very good film, a beautiful film, and yes—it is a shocker. I saw this film when it first came out at the New York Film Festival, and I remember being amazed at the stunned reaction by people in the audience. The film is still far out there—it hasn’t mellowed in the can in the last 20 years. I’m a huge fan of Pasolini.”

SALÒ was Pasolini’s final film; 17-year-old hustler Giuseppe Pelosi ran over Pasolini with his own car several times before the film was released. However, there are conspiracy theories that an extortionist and/or politicians and the Secret Service killed Pasolini. What really happened to him, we may never know, but his work lives on: *SALÒ* was screened at the Bell Lightbox Theatre because it is #47 on TIFF’s “Essential 100 Films” list, and it also is part of the Criterion Collection, ensuring that it will never be forgotten.

SALÒ is based on the story *120 DAYS OF SODOM* by the Marquis de Sade, the French aristocrat and writer famous for his sexually charged lifestyle. Pasolini’s adaptation is so graphic, violent, sadistic and erotic that it was banned upon its release, and remains so in

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several countries today.

Set in 1944 during the Fascist occupation of Italy, the story centers on four men who are drunk on power. The Duke (Paolo Bonacelli), the Bishop (Giorgio Cataldi), the Magistrate (Umberto Paolo Quintavalle), and the President (Aldo Valletti) lead us through four segments, each worse than its predecessor: the Anteinferno, the Circle of Manias, the Circle of Shit and the Circle of Blood.



The powerful men flaunt their evil nature as something ingrained in the human spirit, as these desensitized sadists organize the kidnapping of young virgin men and women and imprison them in an isolated villa, subjecting their captives to various forms of torture, humiliation and perversion. One boy is shot dead trying to escape, and one girl commits suicide. The victims are put on leashes and made to behave like dogs, an eyeball is gouged out, a girl is made to urinate on one of the men, and victims are made to feast on feces. Then, after all that, the victims are raped, tortured further and eventually murdered.

Although the film depicts hell on Earth, it is hard to ignore how visually striking it is: the cinematography is wonderfully crafted, highly composed and stylistically balanced. The musical track is at once uplifting, frightening, yet soothing. “The sound effects in this movie are absolutely beautiful: the bomber planes, and the music by [Ennio] Morricone...it’s all really beautiful and simple,” Waters told the audience. The sets and costumes, especially the ball gowns worn by the aged whores who tell sexually explicit stories to arouse, are magnificent; one dress is reminiscent of Grace Kelly’s stunning outfit in Hitchcock’s REAR WINDOW.

There is a lot more going on in SALÒ than initially meets the eye (the horrors, the sex, the asshole contest); it is a commentary on fascism, the powerful and the rich. Pasolini dives into the terrors of the upper class feasting on the less fortunate. When SALÒ touches on the relationship between the victims and the possessors, it creates a grotesque and unsettling portrait of people turning on one another. If you want to break things down to a primal level, SALÒ is to sexual horror what Umberto Lenzi’s CANNIBAL FERROX is to violence: an epic of antipathy that revels in its own disgust to reveal the truth about power and humanity, and how we allow evil things to happen even if we aren’t committing the crimes. Pasolini claimed that parts of the film (the shit-eating, for example) were also a commentary on the consumption of

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mass-produced food—so if you’ve ever eaten preserved food, you’re just as bad.

Over 20 years later, SALÒ is still relevant. One of the most powerful quotes in the film is, “When men are of equal power, they cannot be happy”—something that we all can relate to, living in a capitalist system every day. Nonetheless, “Could this film be made today?” Waters asked during his introduction. “I don’t think so, because all of the kids playing the kidnapped teenagers were between 14-18 years old, which is *highly* illegal in any country in the world.”



SALÒ screened to a completely sold-out audience, and not one person walked out of the theater. At the end of the film, the men of power watch the murders of their victims from a window inside, through binoculars. This is surprising at first, because SALÒ does not hold back at any other moment; we are privy to all. During the Q&A session, I asked Waters why he thought Pasolini made this stylistic choice.

“I think that through the binoculars, the violence at the end is more about voyeurism,” he replied, “and it’s more evil because you’ve ordered this, but you’re not there. You get to watch it truly as evil voyeurism, masturbatory pornography, rather than having to do it. If you were the killer, this is one move that you’re setting up to watch, which is even more evil, and why Pasolini did that.” While I loved meeting Waters, and hearing his introduction to probably the most horrifying film I’ve ever seen (and as you might have guessed, I’ve watched a lot of f**ked-up shit as a horror fan) was a pleasure, I doubt I will be watching SALÒ again anytime soon.

*Pick up Waters’ latest book **ROLE MODELS** for more delicious insight from the wonderful Prince of Puke. Add Lianne Spiderbaby on Twitter: @liannemac and see her blog [here](#) .*

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