

Between National Censorship and the Limits of Representation: On *Thyestes*, *Salò*, Cultural Warnings and Trauma

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Introduction

To understand the ecology of a narrative text should be to seek out the context in which it was fashioned. In this article it is argued that to do anything less is a crime of ignorance. Here I examine two related issues. Firstly, I investigate how works of art, particularly in one infamous example, are classified in a legal sense as obscene; second, I explore how such a classification, without considering style and context but only content, acts to obscure, misrepresent, and in some cases obliterate the actual meaning of the artwork in question. Additionally, I argue that we should be doubly careful of condemning a work of art if that work is based on the traumatic dimensions of human misery, for the retelling of traumatic incidents within narrative can be a powerful way of mitigating that trauma. Without these considerations, a simple description of what appears in a film should not be the grounds upon which it is banned, nor should it be the grounds upon which a legalistic understanding of the limits of representation are formed in a national context. This will be shown through an analysis of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975, hereafter *Salò*) as a case study through which to test these arguments. I first discuss its social use in comparison with another work of art that regularly crosses boundaries in the history of Western civilization, Lucius Annaeus Seneca's *Thyestes*, to provide the broadest possible context for Pasolini's film. Through this comparative exercise, I then show that commentators have not plumbed the more profound depths of *Salò* as a work of trauma abatement, or the full extent of the director's intent (though it is acknowledged that this is in part due to the fact that Pasolini was murdered soon after the work was completed).

Classical Gut-Turning: Seneca's *Thyestes*

"[A]n unmitigated and bilious puke,"¹ says one thespian blogger, without any sense of irony, about the Hayloft Project's recent production of *Thyestes* in

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Melbourne (2010). After twenty minutes he walked out feeling that there was nothing redeeming about this company's radical (and for me, refreshing) approach to Seneca's play. In so exiting, he missed the climax of the tragedy that, as rumour had it, was encouraging some audience members to copy Thyestes' final moments on stage by also voiding their own stomachs as they rushed from the theatre. In this we might agree with the Romans that *de gustibus non disputandum est*; the stomach can occasionally make more powerful and certain aesthetic statements than our reason and eloquence ever could. In this article, I wish to be somewhat exacting in my study of, first, *Thyestes* as a model of comprehension, and second, Pasolini's *Salò*. This investigation into the alimentary aesthetics of culture is at one level playful, but at another deadly serious. Indeed, for thirty-six years *Salò* has been close to an obsession for the censorship bodies connected with various Australian parliaments. I wish to place the aesthetics of *Salò* in a specific context; hence the comparison with Seneca that follows.

Seneca's *Thyestes* stands as the clearest evidence that cultural texts designed to viscerally rather than only cognitively affect us have existed since antiquity (and have been preserved with exceptional care if we consider the decimation of most of the extant literature from the Julio-Claudian period of the Roman Empire).² Much has been said lately about the 'affective' approach to film and literature, examining texts designed to provoke in us a deep emotive or physical response.³ The recent films of Terrence Malick (*Tree of Life*, 2010) and Lars von Trier (*Antichrist*, 2009; *Melancholia*, 2011) are examples of texts that seek to conjure intense affective responses from their audience, as are the works of so-called 'contemporary extreme' literary authors such as Brett Easton Ellis and Michel Houellebecq. *Salò*, however, does not fit this genre or aesthetic due to its deep, rather than vague, connection with its contextual trauma of World War II and the subsequent events in Italian politics. This is an argument I shall return to below when explicating *Salò*'s affect and influence.

By way of explaining the impact of this film, let me first establish a theme that is quite clear in *Thyestes* and which is most probably a part of the

¹ 'Emmjay,' 'Atomou Walks out on a "Thyestes",' *Window Dresser's Arms, Pig & Whistle* (19 September 2010), at <http://pigsarms.com.au/2010/09/19/atomou-walks-out-on-a-thyestes>. Accessed 19/11/2011.

² L.D. Reynolds and N.G. Wilson, 'The Greek East,' and 'The Latin West,' in *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 44-78 and 79-121, respectively.

³ See for example Teresa Brennan, *Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

reason Seneca chose to re-script this particular Greek drama over the many plots that were available to him. A brief summary of the myth upon which the plot is based is required. Due to extensive family strife in the royal family of Olympia, the twin brothers Atreus and Thyestes take the throne of Argos. Thyestes is eventually banished with his family and while he is in exile Atreus learns that his brother committed adultery with his own wife, Aerope. Seeking revenge, Atreus invites his brother back from exile and prepares a great feast, seemingly of welcome. The main course of the feast is the baked sons of Thyestes, and the play ends with the father eating his own children.

Seneca's skills as a playwright, with one clever exception,⁴ focused on re-writing Greek tragedies, but with an immediate political purpose in mind. From all his (voluminous) writings, there is little hint about when and how the plays were staged, but there is much that can be deduced. If, as one of the leading critics of Seneca's plays Alessandro Schiesaro opines, one reads *Thyestes* as a text, one certainly arrives at a different analysis than if one understands *Thyestes* as a performance script in its social and political context. Later it will be argued that in reading *Salò* and other films in a similar vein, such as *Srpski film (A Serbian Film)*, dir. Srdjan Spasojevic, (2010), outside their own deeply traumatic contexts, one is similarly misjudging these challenging works of art. This miscalculation, moreover, is more serious than a simple error in a matter of taste; it may lead to the prosecution of anyone who accesses such banned material, including academics.⁵

In attempting to contextually analyse *Thyestes* as a way to avoid the pitfalls of such a narrow reading, Schiesaro endeavours to get at what a performance of *Thyestes* in Rome may have looked like.⁶ Sander Goldberg, however, criticises him for speaking of the metatheatricity of *Thyestes* whilst ignoring its possible staging.⁷ His criticism is fair. If we put aside (with

⁴ On Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* as the exception see Christopher Hartney, 'Per Saturam or Performance? Seneca's *Initium Saeculi Felicissimi*: Ritual Hilarity and Millennial Closure in the *Apocolocyntosis*,' in *Religion and Retributive Logic: Essays in Honour of Professor Garry W. Trompf*, eds Carole M. Cusack and Christopher Hartney (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 167-185.

⁵ The most insidious aspect of the discussion of censorship in Australia is that, unless one is working under parliamentary privilege, it is technically illegal for anyone in the academy to examine what has been cinematically banned. See Tony Pitman, 'What's Wrong with Seeing Sex? Offensiveness and the Flawed Australian Censorship System,' *Australian Rationalist*, no. 53 (2000), pp. 13-15.

⁶ Alessandro Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play: "Thyestes" and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁷ Sander M. Goldberg, 'Review of *The Passions in Play: "Thyestes" and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama* by Alessandro Schiesaro,' *Phoenix*, vol. 59, nos. 3-4 (2005), p. 397.

Schiesaro and many others)⁸ the conceit that Seneca's plays were only ever recited as chamber pieces, with the ample evidence on how theatres worked in Rome from other play-text traditions and the archaeological evidence of permanent theatres, it is indeed quite possible to *assume* how a production of this play would have been given at Rome.⁹ Moreover, let us not be too innocent about our reading of this 'Greek' play in its re-fashioned Roman context. In a great tradition of expropriating Greek theatre for the Roman world, one that extends back at least as far as Plautus,¹⁰ the Mycenae/Argos that served as the background of the action in *Thyestes* would be clearly understood *also* as Rome, with the stage becoming a symbolic polity representing both cities. In similar fashion, Pasolini threatens his audience with

⁸ See for example P.J. Davis, 'The Chorus in Seneca's *Thyestes*,' *The Classical Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 2 (1989), p. 421n1. Florence Dupont, 'Le Théâtre de Sénèque A-t-il Été Écrit Pour La Scène,' in *Les monstres de Sénèque* (Paris: Éditions Belin, 1995), p. 12, states, along nationalist lines, "Actuellement l'école allemande continue à affirmer que Sénèque n'est pas jouable, les Italiens affirment le contraire."

⁹ Florence Dupont, *Les monstres de Sénèque*, p. 14, explains that actual productions in the early part of the 1990s in France and Switzerland prove the 'playability' of many of Seneca's texts: "Voici un livre d'actualité. Il est possible aujourd'hui de proposer une dramaturgie des tragédies de Sénèque parce que, depuis cinq ans à peine, les mises en scène se multiplient en France et Suisse: *Thyeste* enfin redécouvert, *Médée*, *Les Troyennes*, *Phèdre*, bientôt tout ce théâtre aura été joué au moins une fois. Volià donc la vieille rumeur voulant que Sénèque ne fût pas jouable, démentie pas les faits. Une rencontre a eu lieu entre les gens de théâtre contemporains et ces tragédies d'il y a bientôt deux mille ans."

¹⁰ At one level, Plautine performances seem to reflect others throughout Greece, Magna Gæcia, and possibly even Greek-influenced Etruria, at the time they were first staged. That is, they gave Rome a cultural activity that brought her into line with the then 'cultured' world of the third century BCE. Plautus' plays *looked* like those of Menander and others. Plautus' 'Greek' comedies were nothing if they were not Roman *because* they were performed in Rome. Clearly Rome framed their Greek material and their tradition as Greek stories. This is not to suggest that studying Greek elements of New Comedy is without value. Rather, I propose that the process of telling Greek stories in Roman places has considerable consequences for the identification and alleviation through laughter, or tragic catharsis, of profound social and cultural tensions prevalent at the time of the play's primary performance. Part of the enjoyment of a play like *Thyestes* must revolve (even for the early imperial period) around the uncomfortable relationship of an original Greek and aping Roman culture. The plays of Plautus resolved these tensions on Roman terms, as did the tragedies of Seneca. An audience conditioned for more than 200 years to read Greek stories for their Roman framing and staging would read a performance of *Thyestes* as the appropriation of a Greek story for Roman ends. See Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play*, pp. 221-251.

the possibility that the post-war Italian Republic could very easily revert to the Republic of Salò.¹¹

In Seneca's play, the city to which Thyestes returns is *both* his former familial kingdom (as the Greek form of the myth suggests) and Rome (as the staging of a contemporary production at the time of Seneca would additionally suggest). In the primary performance of this text (Rome), Thyestes would enter from the side of the stage that suggested he had been out in the world. By the imperial period, his return 'home' would have stood in the audience's mind as the only extant polity. Thyestes' decision to return may not simply be an inane whim of a small-minded man to taste power again, but the only way to return to civilisation as well as the person he considered himself to be.

There remains, however, one *aporia* in the comparison between Seneca's *Thyestes* and *Salò*. Unlike the film, we cannot place *Thyestes* in its *exact* historical context, but there are clear hints from which we can suppose a time based on the deep links between politics and the stage in Augustan Rome and the decades immediately following. The first hint is the commissioning by Augustus of a version of *Thyestes*, written by Varius in 29 BCE to celebrate the leader's triple triumph after Actium (31 BCE). Augustus saw the play as a warning against both tyranny and inter-fraternal war, and he was happy to see his victories and their political consequences in dialogue with the more sobering, gut-turning aspects of the myth of *Thyestes*.¹² The play's constant political relevance can also be seen under the reign of Augustus' successor Tiberius, where the writer Marcus Aemilius Scaurus was executed by the state after the production of his *Atreus*. Cassius Dio suggests it was the play that sealed his fate as a manifestation of *lese majesty* against Tiberius.¹³ If we accept from these examples that the Romans saw an immediate connection between the political messages in the myth of *Thyestes* and Roman politics, it suggests that Seneca made his version to comment on a particular political incident at Rome.

¹¹ Interviews with various members of the cast contained on the Criterion DVD Edition of *Salò*, in particular the interview with actress H el ene Surg ere, stress that the film was made at the time of a fascist resurgence in Italy and that this was a primary concern of the cast during shooting. See Juan Linz, 'Some Notes Towards a Comparative Study of Fascism in a Sociological Historical Perspective,' in *Fascism: A Reader's Guide*, ed. Walter Lacqueur (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 3-56.

¹² See Mario Erasmo, *Roman Tragedy: Theatre to Theatricality* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004).

¹³ Erasmo, *Roman Tragedy*, pp. 101-125.

From the 'Days of Lead' to de Sade: Pasolini's *Salò*

In many respects we are not too far from post-World War II Italy when considering the Civil War of the later Roman Republic. In the late 1960s, Italy descended into a period known as the reign of the *Opposti Estremismi*, where radical factions, left and right, increasingly sought influence in the unstable Italian Republic by demonstration, terrorist attack, and the hope of inciting civil war. Known as the *anni di piombo* or the 'years of lead' – a reference to the great number of bullets used – this was Thyestian territory where citizen/brother sought to eradicate citizen/brother. Left-wing paramilitary organisations such as the Red Brigade used violence to try to stem conservative, corrupt, and neo-Fascist movements in the peninsula, while these movements did their best to fight back.¹⁴ The sight of blackshirts on the streets of Rome and mobs raising their fists in fascist salute as *Salò* was in production was a stark reminder of the conditions under which Pasolini and the crew worked. In this context, the film is clearly a warning to the world that the darkest days of the war in Italy, the period of the pro-Nazi and unquestionably fascist "Salò Republic" established in 1943, could reappear.¹⁵ The author's worry was based in part on the fact that Fascist movements never really lost their appeal in Italy; Italian fascism was a different beast from the extreme kind that evolved in Germany, and Mussolini kept a solid electorate of supporters on side from his rise in 1922 through to his brutal execution by partisans in 1945. Mussolini, moreover, did not rule with complete power and had to, at the very least, consult and negotiate with his cabinet as Prime Minister, with the Grand Council of Fascism, and with the Italian monarch. In 1943, it was the Grand Council that deposed him and the king who had him arrested.¹⁶ Later, *Il duce* was rescued by the Germans and put at the head of the Salò puppet republic. His defeat was pathetic, but his legacy was substantial in the minds of many Italians. It was not strange then that after the war, when the buoyancy of the immediate post-War economic boom in Italy began to waver, fascist groups, fed by a certain sense of nostalgia, attempted to reclaim the public stage during these 'leaden' years that surrounded the making of *Salò*.

Pasolini made it clear that he was a friend of no political movement in Italy as he had a generally Marxist outlook on life. According to Sam Rohdie:

¹⁴ Alessandro Ossini, *Anatomy of the Red Brigades: The Religious Mind-set of Modern Terrorists* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Ray Moseley, *Mussolini: The Last 600 Days of Il Duce* (Boulder: Taylor Trade, 2004), pp. 78-102.

¹⁶ Alexander De Grand, *Italian Fascism: Its Origins and Development* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 170ff.

[e]xcept for a brief period in 1946-7 Pasolini did not belong to the Communist Party. Nevertheless, he called himself a Marxist and communist. He also said he was an atheist, but one with a sense of the sacred and the religious. And although he was anti-clerical, he thought of himself as a Catholic insofar as he, and all Italians, had behind him and within them nearly two millennia of Catholic history and culture.¹⁷

Additionally, after the war, he began identifying as a homosexual and from this perspective found Italian communism a disappointment. In part because of his sexual politics, and his bold critiques of the official communist party, he was ejected from the Italian Communist Party in the late 1940s after a sex scandal with minors in Friuli, although no charges were confirmed. He escaped to Rome. Ignored for many years, he led a life of unfaltering criticism of the political system in Italy from all sides while continuing to write novels and poetry, and work in the Italian film industry. The advent of the papacy of John XXIII engendered in him a profound renewal in what it meant to be, if not Catholic, then certainly Catholic-Italian.

After gaining experience as a film-maker, Pasolini directed *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*) in 1964. In its content and style, it remains one of the greatest works of religious cinema ever produced. Pasolini, gay, radical, left-wing, and atheist, used all his creative talents to make an offering of extreme beauty to the Catholic Church by way of *rapprochement*. Pasolini may have made a Christ story that emphasised the peasant background of the messiah and the holy family, but the film itself was dedicated to the atmosphere of change and engagement with social justice issues that were being fostered by John XXIII. An opening slide dedicates the film to him.

Salò, however, presents something else entirely from *Matthew*; it is almost literally a *cactopia*, a shit-state that is also *katabastic*.¹⁸ That is to say, it is a descent into hell, the end of the digestive system of society. The film opens with a meeting between the four protagonists: the Duke, the Archbishop, the President, and a Judge (hereafter the 'Gentlemen'). As Roberto Carnero puts it,

In the villa of the film we come upon four 'gentleman' (the number four is the basis upon which the complex architectonic structure of the feature film is supported), these represent the various types of

¹⁷ Sam Rohdie, *The Passion of Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 154.

¹⁸ Classical literature is full of *katabases*, or descents into hell. Perhaps the most famous is found in book six of Virgil's *Aeneid*. For a complete discussion of these literary instances see Pilar González Serrano, *Catábasis y Resurrección, Espacio, Tiempo y Forma* (Serie II: Historia Antigua, 1999), vol. 12, pp. 129-179.

power: the Duke (representing the power of the nobility), the Monsignor (that of the Church), the President of the Judicial Appeals Court, and the President Durcet (representing economic power).¹⁹

They propose and agree upon a set of rules for how they will exercise their power over the coming weekend. This is slightly ironic, as what they propose is an anarchy of the exercise of power; this exercise can only take place from within a constitution highlighting how rules are made for those who can best benefit from such rules.

The society formed by the law of the libertines in their *palazzo* of sadism in *Salò* is hermetically sealed against the outside world. The laws are absolute and anti-social. And they are rigorously, obsessively enforced. The laws govern the body in the smallest details and avenge themselves against the body, on all its surfaces, openings, functions, desires. To shit without permission was a crime, certainly to fuck, especially a heterosexual fuck.²⁰

In this way, the sadism of the *palazzo* is legalised. Moreover, the rules establish not only what will take place in the *palazzo*, but what will take place in the film. The rules form a script that threatens Pasolini, who has his own script suggesting what should happen in the action of the film. The obsession the ‘Gentlemen’ have for the rule book throughout the film suggests that it adds rather than detracts from their anarchic romp because it threatens not only the order of power in the ‘Republic of Salò,’ but also that in the film.

In the next scenes we see the machinery of state – soldiers, police, school administrators, and Church officials – rounding up the young of the region. In one way, these scenes are reminiscent of the summary arrests during the fascist period; in another way, it is also the state cruising the streets for the young and the beautiful, an activity not unfamiliar to Pasolini himself and the behaviour behind the official reason for his death.²¹

¹⁹ “Nella villa del film sono presenti quattro “signori” (il numero quattro è il modulo su cui si sostiene la complessa struttura architettonica del lungometraggio), che rappresentano i diversi tipi di potere: il Duca (il potere nobiliare), il Monsignore (quello ecclesiastico), il Presidente della Corte d’Appello (quello giudiziario), e il presidente Durcet (quello economico).” See Roberto Carnero, *Morire per le Idee: Vita Letteraria Di Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Milano: Saggi, 2010), p. 174.

²⁰ Rohdie, *The Passion of Pier Paolo Pasolini*, pp. 79-80.

²¹ The police report into Pasolini’s brutal death in 1975 suggests that he was cruising for sex amongst the youth of Rome. Most of the author’s friends, particularly the writer Alberto Moravia, disagree. The violence of the attack, seen by the violence done to Pasolini’s body, shows an organised (political) group attack. These interviews are recorded in Philo Bregstein (dir.), *Whoever Says the Truth Shall Die: A Film About Pier Paolo Pasolini* (1981). See also Ben Lawton, ‘Why Add “Repudiation of the Triology of Life” to the 2005 Edition of Pasolini’s *Heretical Empiricism?*,’ in Pier

It is in these scenes that unthinking critics of the film most easily launch their attack. A range of children are rounded up in these state-sponsored cruising scenes. Some of them are quite young, perhaps ten or twelve. These children are present, of course, to stress a very particular state of innocence. These children, however, do not appear in the remainder of the film. Other young actors, in their late teens or early twenties, are used in the more explicit scenes that follow. To suggest that because young children are used in the film in non-explicit scenes means that the film is a work and promotion of paedophilia is to build a very threadbare argument usually by those who have not seen the film, or have just seen the opening.²² To suggest that the youths used in the remainder of the film in its more explicit scenes are still too young is to start a debate concerning the age that actors should be excluded from productions such as this. Should we use the age of consent as a marker? If consent in a society is sixteen years of age, as in Australia, does that nevertheless exclude persons of this age appearing in a work of serious cinema that *fictionally* deals with explicit material, even if they themselves cannot watch the entirety of the film until they are eighteen? I would suggest that the age of consent is the clearest form of demarcation, with parental consent if

Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, ed. Louise K. Barnett (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2005 [1972]), p. vii. According to Lawton, "Pasolini is dead, brutally murdered sometime during the night of November 2, 1975, by Pino Pelosi, a 17 year old two-bit punk, and several unidentified associates. The murder was particularly brutal. Pasolini was beaten viciously with a nail-studded board and then run over repeatedly with his own Alfa Romeo. The event galvanized Italian society to an extent almost incomprehensible in this country. If Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, Camille Paglia, Madonna, Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee, Michael Moore and Noam Chomsky were rolled up into a single person, one might begin to get some idea of the impact Pasolini had on Italian society."

²² When *Salò* was banned a second time in Australia, part of the process was a new censorship standard that banned explicit films from featuring anyone who looked under eighteen years old. This is in part due to the outrage of Australian parliamentarians such as Judy Spence. As David Marr and Rebecca Huntley reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, "Counting particularly against *Salò*'s survival are new bans on 'unacceptable fetishes' and the use of actors who appear to be under the age of 18. It was the young, or seeming-young, actors who particularly offended the Brisbane parliamentarian bent on revenge. Judy Spence came away from the twenty minutes she saw of *Salò* convinced it should be banned. 'The actors look like teenagers and behave like teenagers. To me teenagers are still children. Banning the film won't protect children but basically we don't want to encourage people to make films of this kind and use teenagers to make them'." David Marr and Rebecca Huntley, 'Salò Trussed and Bound,' *Sydney Morning Herald* (13 May 1997), p. 13.

necessary. I note, however, that the age of consent is a very shifty marker, quite relative, and in numerous cases the age of consent is earlier; in Italy, for example, it is the age of fourteen.²³ I am certainly not suggesting that fourteen-year-olds be exposed to explicit material, but neither does it immediately follow that a young person in an explicit film automatically knows everything about a scene in which they appear. The illusion of making fiction can also easily remain a fiction to those who are involved in it.

The youths are then brought to a Paladian *palazzo* that serves as the site for Pasolini's almost unreal game of unerotic eroticism. Older female courtesans tell stories of outrageous and violent lust as we enter what an inter-title proclaims is the *Girone delle Manie*, or the circle of mania; this is the first circle of three. This trope of telling a story within the story lends an added distance between the audience and the film; as we see those listening to the stories react in their own ways, it leaves the audience to observe the characters' reactions to the narration than feel that the narration is trying to get the audience themselves to react.

The circle of mania is followed by the *Girone della Merde*, or circle of shit. Here we encounter those scenes which many viewers still find the most uncomfortable. Excrement is collected from all present in the *palazzo* and served up in a great wedding banquet. In reality this excrement consists of badly cooked sausages and chocolate, but it is real enough to turn mine and many others' stomachs in the way that some had the Melbourne production of *Thyestes* turn theirs. The point is the dehumanisation of those present. What is interesting, however, is that the torturers indulge in the eating of faecal matter as much as they force their victims to do so. This is because, again in line with the game of the film, Pasolini is asking us to consider this act at a metaphoric level. Obsessive and passionate about the importance of Italian culture,

²³ A comparison can be made here between *Salò*, whose intent is the degradation of the body for political and social reasons, and a film such as *Maladolescenza/Spielen wir Liebe*, a German-Italian co-production from 1977 directed by Pier Giuseppe Murgia. This film's intent seems disturbingly clear. Under the guise of being a film of serious intent about early adolescence, it clearly operates in this fashion only to hide its scenes of child pornography. While Pasolini uses the camera and bodies in *Salò* to dehumanise individuality for the sake of a political message, the camera in *Maladolescenza* creates a lingering and fetishised image of the children for no other intent than the enjoyment of the audience (and, one imagines with distress, the film-makers themselves). Eva Ionesco stars in the film, and was twelve years old at the time of the shooting. As disturbing as this might sound, this actress also has the dubious honour of being the youngest model to ever appear naked in *Playboy*. These images were published the year before the release of *Maladolescenza* in 1976, when Eva was eleven. See Anne Diatkine, 'Eva Ionesco, tombée de nus,' *Libération* (22 July 2010).

Pasolini was ever eager to make statements about the general dehumanisation of modern life through the factory production of food. In these scenes of shit-eating or corprophagia, the director is suggesting that the fascists scored a complete victory in the dehumanisation of the everyday lives of people, where the contact is lost between food grower, seller, and consumer; this lack of human contact now dominates how we all unquestioningly eat the shit that we are served. According to Rohdie:

[f]or Pasolini, the communists as well as the fascists, the Communist Party as well as the Christian Democrats, were complicit in having promoted a consumerist capitalist society which he regarded as a threat to the values of the past of mankind and to the soul of humanity. So he resisted the contemporary and its politics with the force of an ideal past and an ideal writing with beauty and poetry.²⁴

These difficult-to-watch scenes provoke a political and social reappraisal in the audience by literally inverting the order of things. The carnivalesque is present in all the banquets Pasolini places in his films, but the banquet in *Salò* is the most unwatchable:

Pasolini stages such banquets in the Last Suppers in (his films) *Accatone*, *Mamma Roma*, *La ricotta*, *Il Vangelo*...and the banquet of shit in *Salò*. At these banquets everything was reversed. The sacred was not found in a celestial heaven, but in terrestrial shit. Pasolini reversed the conventional order of the sacred and in so doing offered a criticism of the existing order, and of order itself, especially that of the authorities, of power. He countered power with shit and in a language often composed of it.²⁵

Thus, by the mid-point of the film, in scenes that are as stomach-churning as those in a good production of *Thyestes*, the director has literally put his shit on the table and it is here that we get a glimpse at what these images mean. Metaphorically, they are a reversal of the order of things. Or, as I would put it, an unveiling of a traumatic reality of what Italy meant in the twentieth century in its order of power. It was an order of betrayal as, at one level, those in power sought to de-Italianise Italy and, at another level, exercise their power so that the people of Italy were left traumatised and revolted. This is an issue to which I will return in the article's conclusion.

The end of the film is marked by the *Girone del Sangre*, or circle of blood, the period where those who have disobeyed the 'Gentlemen' are punished and killed (those who did not are invited to return to *Salò* with their captors). The structure of the *girones* makes a clear reference to Dante's *Commedia*, and so a general reference to Italy's own *katabasis* during the war.

²⁴ Rohdie, *The Passion of Pier Paolo Pasolini*, p. 127.

²⁵ Rohdie, *The Passion of Pier Paolo Pasolini*, p. 122.

It would be easy to here divert this article into a discussion about theories concerning literary trends in Europe and how Pasolini appeals to an embodied sense of disgust, lust, and power, but these theories miss the vital impact the film would have had in 1975 amongst those who understood the psychological ramifications of the film's material. Nevertheless, the director has framed the film so that we apply to it a substantial amount of critical academic analysis. In fact, *Salò* is the only fictional film I have encountered that comes with its own bibliography. The opening slide at the end of the credits lists a number of scholarly works which are necessary to understand the film:

Bibliografia essenziale:

Roland Barthes "Sade, Fourier, Loyola" Editions du Seuil

Maurice Blanchot "Lautréamont et Sade" Editions du Minuit

Simone De Beauvoir "Faut-il brûler Sade" Editions Gallimard

Pierre Klossowski "Sade mon prochain. Le philosophe scélérat."

Editions du Seuil

In Italia SugarCo Edizioni

Philippe Sollers "L'écriture et l'expérience des limites"

Editions du Seuil

Alcuni brani dei testi di Roland Barthes e Pierre Klossowski sono citati nel film.

From this list it is Philippe Sollers who most appeals to the thesis of this article in his understanding that the Marquis de Sade, and through him Pasolini, sought to highlight the danger involved in the energy that drives human desire and how this desire must be diverted or hidden. For Sollers, Sadean desire is a manifestation without limits, one that we find Pasolini examining in his film.²⁶ It is essential, however, to return to the situational matrix from which the narrative emerged.

Eduado Subirats puts the paradigm differently. Examining the use of torture in *Salò*, and building this idea of torture into the context of our recent history, he suggests that there are at least three manifestations that highlight the desire of power through torture in *Salò*. Firstly, *Salò* links torture to lust and, within this, a link to destruction, humiliation, and sacrificial death which in turn link to libidinal excitation, sexual violation, and murder, enabling the four 'Gentlemen' to indulge in their narcissistic fantasies of omnipotence at any cost. The second is the link of torture with freedom:

²⁶ Philippe Sollers, *Writing and the Experience of Limits*, ed. David Hayman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983 [1968]), pp. 47-48. See also Roland Barthes, *Sollers Writer*, trans. Philip Thody (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), who examines Sollers' fascination with that which (like desire) is beyond and cannot be encompassed by writing.

[t]o be more exact, *Salò* defines torture as the supreme expression of freedom. There simply is no moral ideal of sovereignty, irregardless [sic] of how paranoid or absolute its will-to-power may be, that can express with greater transparency the emancipation of the self from any and all legal or political fetters; there is no better expression of independence from human customs and norms; no clearer expression of a hegemony that recognizes no limits to its technical and imaginative prowess; there is, in the final analysis, no principle of domination that can be applied in a manner that is so innocent, so absolute, and so impeccable as occurs in the relation of the torturer and his victim.²⁷

Thirdly, Subirats discusses the aesthetics of torture as one that contains within it a distancing effect. This is amplified in the film because, as stated above, the ‘Gentlemen’ who carry out the torture *also* narrate and direct that torture themselves (as a play within a play). It sometimes seems as though the ‘Gentlemen’ threaten to take over the direction of the film itself. I think this is crucial to understanding the deeper national psychosis that Pasolini is seeking to touch in this film. Subirats’ argument is generally correct, but I would take the aesthetics of torture much further.

When watching *Salò* we are stepping inside a very elaborate game. This game operates as a metaphor (as do most games). The bibliography at the start of the film frames the game, in one sense, as an academic exercise. The bland popular dance music that opens and closes the film suggests that this film is blandly like all other fictional films – a ludic *divertissement* of sorts. The recourse to high culture amidst the torture also returns us to a game being played; while the ‘Gentlemen’ torture their victims in the yard at the back of the *palazzo*, we hear on the radio music by Carl Orff and the poetry of Ezra Pound. While one of the ‘Gentlemen’ watches from a distance, the other three maim and burn the bodies of their victims. According to David Savage:

Pasolini pushes the point even further by allowing the fascist-libertines access to an elaborate world of sophisticated language. But their endless verbigeration of Sade, Proust, Pound, the philosophical observations of Klossowski and Sollers and Barthes, are unable to form a symbolic bridge within *Salo*’s distillation of the breakdown of psychic differentiation thereby adding an element of further pain to the film. It is as if culture itself, and symbolic language far from becoming a potential form of salvation, can only function as another chilling aspect of physical psychological imprisonment.²⁸

²⁷ Eduardo Subirats, ‘Totalitarian Lust: From *Salò* to Abu Ghraib,’ *South Central Review*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2007), p. 178.

²⁸ David Savage, ‘A Psychological Consideration of Pasolini’s *Salo*,’ *Journal of the Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2005), p. 89.

That is, at every level, the goal of the game is to give you the feeling that there is no way out of this hell; at the same time, there is no real way into it except through feelings of bodily disgust.

The opening of the film thus strongly frames how we should understand its ludic potentiality. The selection of youths by the state is redolent of numerous themes: arbitrary arrest and the possible cruising of youths by state machinery has been mentioned already, but it can also be compared to a casting call with the young and beautiful being singled out (one girl is rejected because of bad teeth), with the ‘Gentlemen’ and their agents operating as film producers again almost threatening to take over from Pasolini. The film signals itself as a film, a game, and an academic exercise. Pasolini for his part is out to deliver as much shocking material as possible, but it is part of the game of *Salò* to do this. Conservative critics who want the film banned for all time do no more than describe and redescribe only what takes place in the torture scenes (they tend to omit the coprophagic scenes). They do not consider the metaphorical intent of the film, nor understand anything but the slightest details of the film’s operation.

Official Australian Reactions to *Salò*

In the lead up to *Salò*’s second banning in Australia in 1998, David Marr and Rebecca Huntley stated that:

[f]ew of Salò’s opponents in the past few years have actually seen the movie. [Senator Brian] Harradine is an honourable exception: he told Haines one day as they passed in a Canberra corridor that [the film] was not as bad as he’d expected. So summaries of the film rather than the film itself have been the ground of debate. These range from the clinical to the lurid. Many contain details of an incident with a rat which is not in the film but has wandered in, somehow, from the plot of Brett Easton Ellis’s novel *American Psycho*. In these censorship rows, Salò was treated by conservatives not as an exception justified by the importance of Pasolini’s place in cinema, but as setting a standard for the extreme sexuality and violence that today’s “out of touch” censors were willing to allow in any R-rated films. Salò became a kind of norm and its critics used it so skilfully to demonise the R-category that the Keating Government was persuaded in 1994 to keep all R-rated films off normal broadcast pay television. This is almost a world first.²⁹

Inside this game of Pasolini’s, the violence can never really be *real* and actors working professionally in the industry at sixteen or eighteen should be able to understand the game-like nature of their industry. *Salò* is asking of its

²⁹ Marr and Huntley, ‘Salò Trussed and Bound,’ p. 13.

audience to be outraged by the conditions that permit the film to exist, not specifically at the actions inside the film, to translate this outrage at the arbitrary use of power that the ‘Gentlemen’ use for no other reason than their own pleasure in Italy during 1944 and 1974. I think this dimension of play comes through most clearly in the final scenes of torture. Most commentators, including Subirats, mention the way the torture is filmed at a distance through a window in these last scenes as a way to join the spectator in complicity with the torturers. This may be the case, but the torture itself is so woefully done. When a boy’s tongue is cut out the viewer can clearly see that it is a grey and fake tongue. When another is scalped, the bad scalp-wig shows itself. There is no desperate need at the end of the film for reality to be painstakingly recreated. The game is clear. We do not recoil at the images *per se* but at the ideas of pain and torture they represent. And recoil we do. Here I suggest that the inexact aesthetics of the film ask for a wider consideration of what this fictional game politically means, rather than viewing it as a simple work of an artist seeking controversy.

As of 2010, *Salò* has been reclassified in Australia with an ‘R’ or restricted rating (that is, 18+) rather than an RC or Refused Classification rating, which makes owning, viewing, or importing the film illegal. This present ‘R’ rating is only conditional on the 176 minutes of additional features on the DVD which help contextualise the film and which are mandatory viewing. This means that a present theatrical release is impossible without these 176 minutes of additional commentary also being screened.

The moment the Classification Board (Australia’s National Censorship instrument) made this decision in 2010, the minister responsible called for an immediate review of the rating by the Classification Review Board, and a Federal senator also called for the dismissal of the Board’s chairman. *Salò* remains a *rara avis* in that it has been banned (originally from 1976 in Australia), then unbanned (1993), and then re-banned (1998). The full history of this process in quotes from Hansard, Parliamentary Committees, and submissions to the Classification Board, can be found meticulously archived at *Refused-Classification.com*.³⁰ What is fascinating is that in this debate a small army of conservative, or at least religiously conservative, politicians have dedicated large amounts of their time as paid representatives of the Australian people to stress the unacceptability of *Salò* as a piece of culture that Australian adults should be able to choose or not choose to see. The Victorian National

³⁰ ‘Film Censorship: *Salò*, or the 120 Days of Sodom (1975),’ *Refused-Classification.com: Censorship in Australia*, at <http://www.refused-classification.com/censorship/films/salo-or-the-120-days-of-sodom-1975-1.html>. Accessed 21/12/2011.

Party Senator Julian McGauran throughout his political career has been particularly obsessed with *Salò*. For him, the film is linked to violence around the world. On 28 October 1997 he made the following speech to the Australian Senate:

Anyone who picked up today's *Sydney Morning Herald* to read the grim news that in the past 11 months six young women and teenage girls have been kidnapped or murdered or have disappeared along the New South Wales coastal highway would feel grief for the families and grave concern for society. There have been other like tragedies over the years and of late—for example, the missing 11-year-old boy from Western Australia—that make us think just how unsafe society has become.

Our concern is not just restricted to Australia. Who can forget the pictures that ricocheted around the world of the Belgium 'house of horrors' where a paedophile ring was involved in the kidnapping, torture and murder of children as young as eight years old? At each tragedy a family suffers and a society is damaged. At each tragedy society fundamentally changes for the worse as once enjoyed freedoms are taken away, none less than life itself.

Therefore, if we were asked, 'Is there something society can do to help rectify these seemingly irreversible changes?' we would answer yes. If we were told that there was a movie currently showing that graphically displays a story of kidnap, sexual abuse, torture and murder of adolescents in the style of the above incidents I have mentioned—indeed, a movie described as a handbook for the Mr Cruels of this world—would you believe that it should be banned? The answer from society would be yes.

I therefore bring to the Senate's attention the movie *Salo*, which is currently under review by the Film and Literature Board of Review. The review has been prompted by an application by the Queensland government to re-ban the movie. The movie *Salo* was made in 1976 and banned in this country for some 17 years but was released into the mainstream theatres in 1993. The storyline begins with the kidnap of 16 adolescents in an Italian village, eight of each sex. For the remainder of the film, they are subjected to every form of violence, sexual humiliation and torture before being mass slaughtered in a most bizarre fashion. The movie has been condemned outright by every film critic of any note, being described as vile and a treat for sadists and psychopaths.³¹

Although this statement is replete with factual errors and demonstrates that the senator has a second- rather than first-hand experience of the film, I place the

³¹ See 'Film Censorship: *Salò*, or the 120 Days of Sodom (1975),' *Refused-Classification.com*.

statement here as one way of considering *Salò* as a film that could possibly influence evil behaviour. I believe that aesthetically this was not Pasolini's intent, neither was it Seneca's when he chose to write his own version of *Thyestes*. There is another way to consider *Salò* that more than justifies its existence aesthetically, and this is as a work of trauma and healing.

Between Knowing, Unknowing and Trauma

As an Italian, the commentator Maurizio Viano remarks "*Salò* is a cry of despair and its images are often unbearable. Nevertheless, it does not contain anything that we have not seen before."³² Susan Sontag dwells on this idea of "we" in her examination of Virginia Woolf's comments on war in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. The "we" who see sufferings are in one way united, but she also discusses the advent of 'compassion fatigue.' She avers that "citizens of modernity, consumers of violence as spectacle, adepts of proximity without risk, are schooled to be cynical about sincerity."³³ The power of *Salò* overcomes this cynicism because of the power of its political convictions. Additionally, Sontag postulates that some amount of fatigue for the suffering of others is tied up in the way we read images. Images of suffering record for us the existence of suffering, but simultaneously they cauterise in our minds the image of suffering as being apart from the complex social reasons behind why the suffering has emerged. Image after image on the nightly news and in the press does nothing to evoke anything but a feeling of hopelessness and fatigue.³⁴ What is remarkable about *Salò* is that, in its narrative structure, it is able to break through these feelings of complacency and, through our stomachs if nowhere else, evoke in us an active feeling that is based on the suffering of the victims of the 'Gentlemen.'

We may find it strange, moreover, that at the pinnacle of his early military victories Augustus commissioned a *Thyestes* to be played as a part of his war celebrations. That is, amongst the banquets of victory, Augustus deemed it necessary to stage another sort of banquet that would kick people in the stomachs. Was it a warning against further internecine strife in Rome? Indeed it was, just as *Salò* was a political warning to Italians in 1975 about a reversion to fascism. In fact, Pasolini chose to shoot the film at a villa close to the town of Marzabotto where close to 800 residents of the town were victims of a mass murder by the Waffen SS in 1944.³⁵ Neither of these works was thus

³² Maurizio Viano, *A Certain Realism: Making Use of Pasolini's Film Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 295.

³³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 99.

³⁴ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, pp. 16-35.

³⁵ Viano, *A Certain Realism*, p. 294.

staged very far from sites of deep trauma. There is also another dimension to these two works in their context that we must consider as being fundamental to the uses of narrative in any traumatised society.

Indeed, social and individual trauma needs narrative structures in order to help both individuals and societies heal. The U.S. military have realised this and part of the process of treating Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is to ask soldiers returning from Iraq to play a virtual reality game that returns them to Iraq. At first glance this kind of treatment can seem remarkable for verging on insanity in attempting to re-torture those who have already suffered deeply. What the treatment does, however, is allow sufferers to build their own stories within the framework of that aesthetic that most threatened them and to own those stories on their own terms.³⁶ The virtual game allows them to control their own scenarios and thus permit a rebuilding of confidence with the world, permitting a deep healing to take place. When we look for other examples of this process, we find numerous examples. Perhaps the most telling for Australians is the vast and almost completely ignored tradition of Aboriginal Australian comedies, staged predominantly for indigenous audiences throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In these comedies, the laughter is not derived from making fun of whites, but from re-creating actions of white oppression on indigenous peoples. The satisfaction for these performances does not come from changing the outcome of the story (it is obvious to the actors and audience alike that the oppressive outcomes will not change because of a play); rather these comedies allow Aboriginal communities to own the stories on their own terms and abate, to some small degree, the trauma generated by colonisation.³⁷

When one considers the full complexity of issues at play in a film such as Pasolini's *Salò*, one sees how its aesthetic is not simply a matter of an auteur seeking to cross a limit into extreme territory for the simple sake of following a recent literary or cinematic trend. There is, in fact, a deep sincerity driving the challenging nature of the material for a specific political and social purpose.

Conclusion

As one who reveals how his times are unveiling particular patterns of oppression, fear, trauma, and distress, Pasolini made it clear that as an intellectual he had a particular duty. As an intellectual who felt a responsibility

³⁶ Lorin Smith, 'Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy to Combat PTSD,' *WWW.ARMY.MILL: The Official Homepage of the United States Army* (19 January 2010), at <http://www.army.mil/article/33128/>. Accessed 21/12/2011.

³⁷ See Maryrose Casey, *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre 1967-1990* (St. Lucia: Queensland University Press, 2004).

to speak the truth, he proclaimed loudly and with strength and eloquence how he saw through the games of both left and right and *knew* what such games amounted to in the long term development of history. In fact, in his fictional work he was able to replicate those games in extended narratives, literature, and film, and by doing so repeatedly crossed lines that demarcated the limits of representation. In a standout article for the *Corriere della Sera* in the year before his death, he shouted (much in the same way that Zola shouted “*J'accuse!*” during the Dreyfus affair) “*Io so*” (“I know”). In a piece that meditated on knowing and its responsibilities, he in one part explained:

I know because I am an intellectual, I am a writer, one who seeks to follow all who have come before me, to know all that they have written, to imagine all that is unknown or silent to myself, to coordinate facts no matter how far, to put together all the disorganised and fragmentary pieces into a coherent political picture, who seeks to re-establish logic where there only seems to reign the arbitrary, and madness and mystery.³⁸

In light of these claims, those who seek to know have a specific duty (and here I refer to the expertise gathered in their careers by academics, social commentators, writers, and artists, as opposed to the avoidance of knowing embodied in those politicians who refuse to even look at *Salò* while advocating its banishment). This duty is to demonstrate, to the fullest extent of our eloquence, why artworks that breach stated limits of representation in certain circumstances and from certain traumatic contexts need to be championed when, beyond their literalism, deep political, social, and aesthetic messages are being proposed. There may be a warning offered that is so profound and heartfelt that it justifies the means that convey the message. This is especially so when social trauma is being discussed, and when the art is offered as a provocation to human suffering *beyond* the compassion fatigue we presently suffer.

If we permit those amongst us who actively refuse to know to pass judgement on a profound film by a false and shallow reading of its aesthetic, we elevate the denial of knowing as a standard. In the case of *Salò*, this unknowing has grown to monstrous proportions amongst Australian censors and parliamentarians. I would argue that for the state to forbid the viewing and

³⁸ “Io so perché sono un intellettuale, uno scrittore, che cerca di seguire tutto ciò che succede, di conoscere tutto ciò che se ne scrive, di immaginare tutto ciò che non si sa o che si tace; che coordina fatti anche lontani, che mette insieme i pezzi disorganizzati e frammentari di un intero coerente quadro politico, che ristabilisce la logica là dove sembrano regnare l’arbitrarietà, la follia e il mistero.” Pier Paolo Pasolini, ‘Cos’è questo golpe? Io so,’ *Corriere della Sera* (14 November 1974), p. 24.

discussion of *Salò* is to limit discussion of the circumstances that gave rise to the film itself.

Salò has been banned on the grounds that it would cause deep offense to an average (Australian) person. To imagine that this average person would be offended by a fictional film after all that has happened in the twentieth century is to suggest that this film is more offensive than the world in which this average person lives. As Viano notes, *Salò* “does not contain anything that we have not seen before” in the wider context of the century.³⁹ Yet, to exclude ourselves from this “we” that Viano speaks of, we must deny our complicity and our experience of the twentieth century at some level. *Salò* asks us if “we” belong to a world that has experienced and still must deal with the trauma of World War II, the holocaust, the massacre at Marzabotto, and the threat of fascist revivals. As we are all, to some extent, children of one of the bloodiest and most violent periods in human history, to ban *Salò* is to use the machinery of government to, in part, deny that history, deny the trauma that arises from it, and the cultural machinery we use to speak about it. This then leads us to a whole new question, far beyond the reach of this paper: what is it that really lies behind the motivation to set legal boundaries on the limits to representation, to control our access to culture so that we remain artificially “un-offended” by the bloody and horrendous legacy that we are heirs to?

³⁹ Viano, *A Certain Realism*, p. 295.