

Pier Paolo Pasolini's "Self-Interview" for *Il Corriere della Sera*, 25th March 1975

"Sex as a Metaphor for Power"

The director - who started shooting *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* - explains the main aim behind his work in which four "powerful figures" use their victims in a continuous dialectical confrontation that transforms into a financial and physical clash between those who detain power and those who are subjected to it – The director talks in this self-interview about his casting choices

A few days ago we wrote about Pier Paolo Pasolini starting to shoot in Mantua his new film, *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*. Today the writer and director writes for the *Corriere* from his set, sending us a feature in the form of a "self-interview" to explain us the meaning and aims of his new work that, as anticipated, transfers the characters of de Sade's story to the time of the Salò Republic.

Q. Are the themes in this film somehow anticipated in any of your previous films?

A. Yes, they are. I can mention for example *Porcile* (Pigsty) and *Orgia* (Orgy), a theatre piece that I directed myself (in Turin, in 1968). I conceived it in 1965, wrote it between 1965 and '68 like *Porcile*, that was also at the time a theatre piece. At the beginning also *Teorema* (Theorem, released in 1968) was supposed to be a theatrical text. De Sade entered these works via the Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud and, as much as it may sound strange, also via Brecht, an author who, until that moment, I had loved very little and for whom I developed a sudden and overwhelming passion in the years that preceded the student protest. I'm not that happy with *Porcile* and *Orgia*: estrangement and detachment are not for me, in the same way as "cruelty" is not for me.

On Cruelty

Q. So what about *Salò*?

A. Yes, it's true, *Salò* will be a cruel film, so cruel that (I imagine) I will have to distance myself from it, pretending not to believe in it or to be toying around with this idea a little bit in a frighteningly way...But let me finish my feedback about the links with my previous films. In 1970 I was in the Loire Valley. I was scouting for locations for *Il Decameron* (The Decameron) and I was invited to a debate with the students of the University of Tour. Franco Cagnetta teaches there and he gave me a book about Gilles de Rais and the documents about his trial, thinking that I may have found them inspirational for one of my films. I seriously thought about this possibility for quite a few weeks (a beautiful biography of Gilles de Rais, edited by Ernesto Ferrera, was recently published in Italy). Then I decided not to do it. I was taken too much by my *Trilogy of Life*...

Q. Why did you decide not to do it?

A. Because it was meant to be a "cruel" film and a cruel film would have been political and (revolutionary and anarchic in that precise moment of time) and

therefore insincere. Maybe I prophetically thought that the most sincere thing I could have done in that precise moment of time was to shoot a film in which sex was a sort of compensation for repression, something that wasn't happening anymore. Indeed, in quite a short span of time, tolerance turned sex into something sad and obsessive. I evoked in the *Trilogy of Life* the ghosts of the characters from my previous realistic films. I did it with no will to denounce, but with such a violent love for the "long-lost times" that it turned into a denunciation not of a particular human condition, but of the (perforce permissive) present times we are living in. We irreversibly live in these present times, we have adapted to them. Our memory is always bad; we are therefore living immersed in the current repression of the tolerant power - the most horrid of all kinds of repressions. There is no happiness in sex anymore. Young people are ugly or desperate, bad or defeated.

Q. Is this what you are trying to express in *Salò*?

A. I don't know. This is certainly its "background". I can't ignore it. It reflects the mood I'm in. It's what I have in my thoughts and what I personally suffer in my heart. Therefore, this is maybe what I want to express in *Salò*. A sexual relationship is a language (this was clear and explicit in my work such as *Theorem*): languages or systems of signs are currently changing. The language or system of signs regarding sex radically changed in Italy in just a few years. I can't cut myself outside the evolution of any linguistic convention in my society, including the sexual one. Today sex is the satisfaction of a social obligation, not a pleasure that goes against social obligations. From this derives a sexual behaviour radically different from the one I was used to and for me this trauma was (and still is) almost intolerable.

Q. In a nutshell, for what regards sex in *Salò*...

A. Sex in *Salò* is a representation of - or a metaphor for - this situation we are living in at the moment: sex as obligation and ugliness.

Q. But you also have other intentions that are maybe less deep and more direct...

A. Yes, I do and I would like to talk about these ones now. Apart from a metaphor for the (compulsory and ugly) sexual intercourse that the tolerance of consumerism power is obliging us to live in these years, sex in *Salò* (and there is a lot of it) is also a metaphor for the relationship of power with those ones who are subjected to it. In other words it is the representation (maybe the dreamy representation) of what Marx calls the commodification of man, the reduction of the human body to a thing (through its exploitation). Therefore sex has a horrible metaphoric role in my film. It's completely the opposite of what it was in the *Trilogy of Life* (if we consider how, in repressive societies, sex was also an innocent derision of power).

Q. Yet aren't your *120 Days of Sodom* taking place in *Salò* in 1944?

A. Yes, they are, in *Salò* and in Marzabotto. I took fascist power - and in particular the power of the fascists from the *Salò* Republic - as a symbol of that power that transforms people into objects (as it happens for example in the best Miklos Jankso films). But, as I said, it is a symbol. That archaic power facilitates my representation. I actually leave to all the film a sort of wide margin that dilates that archaic power taken as a symbol of each and every form of imaginable of power...And then...This is what I mean: power is anarchic. And power has never been more anarchic as it was during the *Salò* Republic.

Q. What has de Sade got to do with it?

A. A lot because de Sade was the great poet of the anarchy of power.

Q. In which way?

A. There is always something wild in power - in any kind of power, be it legislative or executive. In the theory and the practice of power we establish and apply the most primeval and blind form of violence of the strong against the weak ones, that is of the exploiters upon the exploited. The anarchy of the exploited ones is desperate, idyllic and, above all, completely airy-fairy and eternally destined to remain unfulfilled. The anarchy of power based on codes of theory and practice: the powerful characters in de Sade write the rules and regularly apply them.

Three Circles

Q. You will excuse me if I go back to the more practical aspects, but in which way does all this come together in the film?

A. It's simple and, more or less, it happens in the same way as in de Sade's book: four ontological and therefore arbitrary powerful men (a Duke, a Banker, a Magistrate and a Bishop), "reduce to things" a group of humble victims. They do so in a sort of sacred representation that, following what were probably the original intentions of de Sade, is formally structured in the style Dante's *Divine Comedy*, so an Ante-Hell and three Circles. The main (metonymical) figure of speech employed is the accumulation (of crimes), but also the hyperbole, and in the film I would also like to push myself to the limits of the audiences' tolerability.

Q. Who are the actors starring as the four monsters?

A. I'm not sure they will be monstrous. But they won't be more or less monstrous than the victims. When I picked the actors I tried to mix them as usual: I chose a generic actor who in more than 20 years of work never pronounced one single line, Aldo Valletti; an old friend of mine from Rome's *borgate* (I met him at the time of *Accattone!*) Giorgio Cataldi; a writer, Uberto Paolo Quintavalle, and, last but not least, Paolo Bonacelli, an actor.

Q. And who will star in the role of the storytelling "witches"?

A. Three beautiful women (the fourth woman in my film is a pianist, because the circles are actually three): Helene Surgère, Caterina Boratto and Elsa de' Giorgi. The pianist is Sonia Saviane. I chose the two French actresses after seeing in Venice the film *Femmes Femmes* directed by Vecchiali: it's a beautiful film in which the two actresses, to remain in the linguistic context of their native tongue, play their roles in a really sublime way.

Q. Who will be the victims?

A. Amateur boys and girls (at least some of them: the girls were picked among fashion models because they had to have nice bodies and because - above all - they didn't have to be afraid of showing them).

Q. Where will you be shooting?

A. In Salò (outdoor scenes), in Mantua (indoor scenes and the outdoor scenes showing the kidnappings and the searches), in Bologna and in the surrounding areas: the village on the Reno river will be used as the destroyed Marzabotto...

Q. I know that the shootings started two weeks ago. Can you tell us something about your work on the set?

A. Please, spare me this question. There is nothing more sentimental than a director talking about his work on his own set.

Pier Paolo Pasolini

(Translated by Anna Battista)