Fascism in Recent Italian Films

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The year 1969 saw the appearance of one of Luchino Visconti's most problematical films, *La caduta degli dei (The Damned).* It was problematical, at first, in relation to Visconti's earlier films (the tenuous balance he had maintained formerly between ideology and what has been called decadence seemed to dissolve in favor of the latter), and in retrospect, as the harbinger of a disturbing ambivalence towards Fascism (and towards the brutality and decadence inevitably associated with it) which was to surface repeatedly in Italian films of the 1970's. And this ambivalence was widespread: not confined to any particular genre, it cut across different generations of directors quite unlike each other in other respects.

The Damned is the saga of a *grande famille,* the von Essenbecks, steel barons apparently modeled on the Krupps, whose fortune is traced in the crucial period of Hitler's regime following the burning of the Reichstag in 1933. Each of the family members embraces a representative attitude towards the new regime: the liberal Herbert flees for his life while his family is carted off to a concentration camp; the patriarchal and aristocratic head of the family, Joachim, who won't deal with the lower-class Nazis, is killed by the ambitious outsider, Friedrich (the lover of Sophie, widow of Joachim's beloved son killed in W.W.I); the Storm Trooper Konstantin, Friedrich's rival within the family, is killed by the S.S. The victorious survivor of this long and bloody family battle is the degenerate Martin, Sophie's son and Joachim's grandson. Martin's decadence is announced at the very beginning of the film: in his first appearance, he is dressed in drag, doing an imitation of Marlene Dietrich in *The Blue Angel.* In the course of the film, Martin molests two children (pushing one of them to suicide) rapes his mother and, soon afterwards, aided by the Nazis who need him to control the steel mills, forces her to wed Friedrich in a macabre wedding ceremony and then to commit suicide along with her new husband.

Although no one tops Martin's crimes, there is never any doubt that he is only the worst of a group of monsters: Friedrich, after all, engineers Joachim's death, kills Konstantin and sends Herbert's wife and little girls to a concentration camp. It is clear, too, that individual crimes and perverted sexuality are part of a collective orgy of sexuality and violence best seen, perhaps, during the night of the "long knives" when the Storm Troopers, victims of Hitler's need to pacify the army by sacrificing the corps who helped him to rise to power, are massacred by the S.S. after a night of homosexual and heterosexual revels.

Much attention has been paid to the film's literary and cultural sources: Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (a familial/historical saga), *Macbeth* (the ambtious couple of Friedrich and Sophie trapped in a growing spiral of crime), the *Oresteia* (Martin's murder of his mother and her lover), Wagner (spectacle, transgression, and death). For Goffredo Fofi, a left-wing Italian critic overtly hostile to Visconti, the film is a "morbid and tense saga of the Buddenkrupp, an entertaining mixture with the strangest allusions, from Dostoevsky to Shakespeare, from Verdi to Wagner, from Sternberg to the Expressionists, from Mann to the Agatha Christie of *10 Little Indians*, whose inner lack of cohesion [*inefficienza*] is fully revealed by ridiculous dialogue and music a la Zhivago."[1] Fofi feels that Visconti's true sources are not Shakespeare and Mann, but rather two Italians: Verdi (for his emphasis on melodramatic passion) and D'Annunzio (for his "attention to decoration and his sumptuous sinuousness"). Even a more objective Italian critic, like Lino Micciche, also on the left, finds himself troubled by aspects of *The Damned.* While observing that the decadent elements (the emphasis on transgression and death, solitude and damnation, sumptuous sets and costumes, a fascination for the past and disdain for the present) create splendid sequences in this melodrama of theatrical "artificiality," he also notes that the three major poles in this film--poetic (the Shakespearean), ideological (Nazi), and psychological (Freudian)--do not really fuse with one another so that first one pole, then another, comes to the fore. In this way, the last third of the film is dominated by the Freudian drama. But placing Martin's Oedipal drama at the climax of this saga of crime and ambition means that history is somehow "psychologized" (to use Micciche's word): Nazism and capitalism become accessories used to buttress the lavish sets and costumes of the "scenic apparatus," which assumes a virtually autonomous importance.[2] Sets and costumes begin to tower over people and events so that, in the words of another critic, it is almost as if "the set were threatening to cave in and swamp the characters in its ruin. This is particularly noticeable at the end, when the plot has run out....The characters, having lost their autonomy, become masks, and what began as tragedy ends as grotesque."[3] The impact of the film comes not from its historical or social vision; rather, it engraves upon our minds the voluptuous image of the death agony (the film's original title was *Götterdämmerung*) of a world which is both hated and loved, a world bathed in what one of the writers of the film described, in d'Annunzian terms, as the "desperate, decadent, estheticizing, and autodestructive

culture derived from a certain German philosophy predestined towards violence and flames."[4]

Readily acknowledging that the film was not essentially about politics or history, Visconti remarked that he sought to re-create a "historical situation" able to foster certain kinds of atrocities and criminality. His desire to "do the story of a family in whose bosom crimes occur which go practically unpunished" meant that he had to choose a criminal and heinous era. Thus, the film was not really about the birth of Nazism: rather, it was "set at that time to provoke certain conflicts and especially to provoke certain catharses in the characters."[5] As for the emphasis on perverse sexuality, Visconti felt that the film made it clear that perverse sexuality, as well as Nazism itself, was one of the inevitable consequences of a given historical evolution. For him, at least, the "most correct interpretation of Fascism, more correct than the Freudian or psychoanalytic one, is that of seeing Nazism as the last phase in world capitalism, as the ultimate result of the class struggle which has arrived at its most extreme consequences."[6]

The very fact, however, that Visconti felt the need to qualify his own position in this way indicates that troubling issues persist. I will not quarrel with the notion that his distaste for capitalism, and for the bourgeoisie, as well as his fascination with the decadence characterizing an era marked by the "twilight of the gods," are inspired more by esthetic or even aristocratic leanings than by political ones. For the last hundred years, a similar distaste and perhaps similar leanings have characterized many artists on the left without detracting from the depth or the sincerity of their political feelings. Nor would I quarrel with Visconti's assertion that the film has assimilated Marxism in that it reveals the alliance between Nazism and the forces of capital. (After all, it is the bourgeois outsider, Friedrich, who destroys the weak aristocracy as he rises to power before he, too, is discarded by the Nazis as they seek someone even more malleable and more degenerate.) But I do think that when, in his own words, Visconti uses Nazism to show a "tendency towards violence within each of us," he risks stripping it of its historical sense. And I think it very dangerous to turn the horror that was Nazism into a background for crimes better suited to a lurid melodrama. If the "most correct interpretation" of Nazism is not Freudian, why does Visconti have the worst monster of the film rape and murder his mother? And doesn't the luxurious and sensuous portrayal of the trappings of decadence (sets, costumes, perverted sexuality) draw the spectator in so that he comes to share Visconti's ambivalence towards the baroque world in its death throes?

The depth of Visconti's own uncertainty about these issues is embodied in two remarks he made which, at least in the context of this film, seem mutually exclusive. On the one hand, he said that he wanted to concentrate on one family (i.e, that he wasn't filming a history of the Third Reich) and, on the other, that his characters were symbols. But members of a given family are usually psychologically developed characters and not symbols. And if they are not symbols of possible attitudes towards Nazism (if, in fact, the film is not a history of the Third Reich), then what can they symbolize if not

universal good and evil? But the very notion of such moral absolutes subverts history in still another way--by taking it into the realm of metaphysics.

However one may quarrel with the political/historical vision of *The Damned,* it is undeniable that the film stems from deep personal inclinations and a consistent world view. Marxist from a rational viewpoint, Visconti was drawn emotionally to baroque melodrama, sumptuous sets, and to the esthetic re-creation of a decadent and dying world. But what was personal in Visconti was soon to be commercially exploited, especially after 1970 when--spurred on by the political events of the late 1960's, and perhaps the loosening hold of censorship--the political film in Italy became a genre in its own right. An early example of the political genre, and one which may have served as a model for others, was Elio Petri's *Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto (Investigation of a Citizen above Suspicion,* 1969), which concerned contemporary fascism. In this film, a fascist police chief murders his mistress and then leads his men to track him down virtually against their will. Although the chief says that he leaves them clues because he wants to prove that he is indeed "above suspicion," a kind of Nietszchean superman who can kill and go unpunished, the film also hints that he wants to be discovered to satisfy his own obsessive need for order and total faith in the system. At the end, in fact, it seems he will not be prosecuted for fear that would endanger the system he represents and enforces.

Once again, the film's overt ideological message(s)--police repression, fascist police vs. revolutionary students, the equation between fascism and sexual impotence (the chief kills his mistress because she knows he is sexually inadequate), sexual impotence as a metaphor for the impotence of authority--are subverted by Petri's dwelling upon pathological detail and his self-conscious visual style which constantly draws attention to itself. Not only does the mistress' apartment, with its black sheets, exude, in the words of one character, the "odor of sex, of morbid pleasure," but Petri dwells upon the couple's sado-masochistic games: drawn to the chief because he represents authority, his mistress has him photograph her in the poses of murdered victims, begs to be interrogated and tortured. Rather than distancing the spectator from these morbid games, the film turns its audience into voyeurs who share the police chief's fascination with perverted sex. Petri heightens this sense of voyeurism by making us wait for each new sexual revelation: after the opening scene of love-making and murder, successive sexual scenes are shown in intermittent flashbacks.

In several interviews, Petri explained why he dwelt upon the "grotesque" to such a degree. On the one hand, he remarked that he knew it would sell and that he wanted the political message of the film to reach as many people as possible.[7] This, of course, raises a thorny philosophical issue: can a left-wing director really incorporate the undesirable aspects of commercial cinema without undermining the very message he seeks to further? But Petri also observed that he does see the relation between sex and politics in Reichean terms: authoritarianism draws its strength from sado-masochism.[8] In the film, the murdered woman who is drawn to authority ultimately

becomes its victim. Without denying that this is but one aspect of fascism, the film really focuses on this one aspect to the exclusion of all others: social and ideological issues hardly exist. The wealth of pathological detail and the sense of voyeurism thus created are such as to suggest that a visceral fascination with sex and decadence, rather than political conviction, is at the emotional heart of this film. In fact, what is perhaps the most interesting ideological aspect of the film is not readily apparent, especially to foreign audiences. One of the few to articulate this aspect is Goffredo Fofi, who points out that the police chief is a

> product of the Southern petite bourgeoisie without land or industry or any institutional power other than that...it can get through the bureaucracy. [This shows] the mechanism of a certain Italian Fascism: the latent awareness of the lack of real power turns into the desire for compensation, the search for "virility"...an attempt to go beyond mere service to the bourgeoisie and to the bourgeois state.[9]

This tie to social realities snaps--grotesquely--when we arrive at two of the most successful films about Nazism, or, rather, which use Nazism as a backdrop: Liliana Cavani's *Portiere di notte (Night Porter,* 1974), where the concentration camps are the scene of a lurid, sado-masochistic affair between a young Jewish prisoner and a Nazi soldier, and Lina Wertmuller's *Pasqualino Settebellezze (Seven Beauties,* 1976). In the latter film, historical considerations are tossed aside in favor of pathology, sex, and grand guignol. Perhaps critics so disagree about the "political" sense of Wertmuller's films because, although she exploits the political genre, she takes no political stand: Italian macho, Nazism, sexuality, and murder are all reduced to the same level and all exploited for visual and emotional effect. Everything and everyone is equally grotesque: nothing and no one is worth dying for.

The protagonist of *Seven Beauties* is a little Neapolitan, an Italian "everyman" named Pasqualino, whose experience in the death camps (he is caught by the Germans after he deserts the Italian army) is interspersed with flashbacks concerning his former life in Naples where, after "avenging" the honor of one of his fat seven sisters (hence, "seven beauties") by cowardly shooting the man who had turned her into a whore, he was sent to an institution for the criminally insane where he soon raped a prisoner strapped down to her bed. Once in the concentration camp, he decides the only way to survive is by "seducing" the monstrous camp commandant. In a grotesque sexual scene, he painfully mounts her; she, scornful of this "worm" who has managed an erection with her, soon commands him to choose some of his fellow inmates to be exterminated. At the end of the film, he returns to Naples to find that all the women--sisters and girlfriends alike--have turned to whoring during the war and occupation. Thus, the death camp seems to be simply one more example (perhaps slightly worse) of a world of sexual exploitation (whoring, rape) and violence (murder within, murder without) where the strong

bully the weak. (Pasqualino is subservient to the Mafioso boss in Naples just as he is to the camp commandant.) Even the few positive characters in this film die equivocal, crudely farcical deaths: in the camp the Spanish anarchist Pedro commits suicide by jumping into latrines of excrement, while the likeable Francesco, ordered to be shot by Pasqualino, begs his friend to shoot before fear makes him defecate into his pants. Scenes such as this make one wonder whether Wertmuller chose to depict the camps out of a scorn for nobler feelings and a private fascination with grotesque horror and brutality, or purely from commercial reasons.

If she chose to depict this world of crude horror thinking it would sell, then instinct served her well. One of the most disturbing things about *Seven Beauties* (as well as *Night Porter*) was its box office success. The few cries of outrage which greeted the film came not from Italy but from abroad. The most impassioned and eloquent of these came from the noted writer and social psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, himself a survivor of the camps. In "Surviving," published in *The New Yorker* on February 8, 1976, Bettelheim points to Wertmuller's total disregard for accuracy and verismilitude: the Nazis' view of women would have precluded the possibility of a female camp commander, a prisoner who turned on his fellow inmates was not long for this world, prisoners who shared Pasqualino's nihilism probably fared less well than those with hopes or dreams to keep them going. And the notion that Pasqualino could save his skin by "making love" to this female monster falls too much into the realm of crude farce to merit serious discussion. Moreover, as Bettelheim observes, the tone of the film adds to the unease provoked by its cavalier attitude towards history and psychological credibility. The constant flashbacks to scenes of comedy and farce in Naples (scenes which include murder, rape, humiliation) undercut the emotions that should be evoked by the scenes in the camps. Black humor replaces horror. In Bettelheim's words:

> We experience horror, then something grotesquely comic of funny, then scenes of brutality, then farcical humor again. With this technique, the horror becomes background for the comic scene, and the comic scene wipes out not the fact of horror but its emotional impact, with the result that the horror adds, by contrast, to the effectiveness of the comic experience...The film induces us to commit ourselves to not taking any event or situation seriously — not even one that would ordinarily upset us greatly or move us deeply.[10]

These shifts in tone, which reveal and create an ambivalence towards brutality by rendering horror funny in a macabre and distanced way, characterize *Film d'amore e d'anarchia (Love and Anarchy*, 1972), Wertmuller's film about Italian Fascism, a film which seems to confirm the already existing prejudice that, in Visconti's words, "Nazism was a great tragedy, [Italian] Fascism rather a comedy."[11] (Another film which shares this view of Italian Fascism is Fellini's *Amarcord*, where the "pranks" played by the Fascists on the

town socialist have a schoolboy tinge, where the Fascist parade is one more occasion for local festivities, and where the villagers' floral portrait of Mussolini is both touching and comic.) Of *Love and Anarchy's* two protagonists who set out to assassinate *il Duce,* one is a whore named Salome (presumably she was given this profession so that most of the film could take place in a bawdy house), while the other, Tunin, is a fairly simple-minded country lad who has been inspired by the death of a friend who died for his political beliefs. Tunin's hesitations and timidity with women contrast sharply--and not always favorably--with the exaggerated virility of the film's leading Fascist, Spatoletti, who remains more a buffoon than a threat. Although Spatoletti is a caricature, the implicit half-ironic, half-serious familiar equation between Fascism and virility reveals, once more, an ambivalence towards power and brutality. Tunin's death is no less equivocal than that of the anarchist in *Seven Beauties:* thinking the police have come to the bordello for him (when they have really come for the girls), he goes slightly mad and opens fire on them, with the result that he is finally arrested, tortured, and murdered. But we have become so used to laughing at him that his final act of bravery--when he stands up to the police and refuses to crack under torture--rings false.

The depth of this ambivalence towards Italian Fascism in particular is confirmed by several films by Bernardo Bertolucci, a far more complex director than the commercial Wertmuller, a more tortured and self-conscious artist than the extroverted Fellini. His work combines the esthetic (often psychologically-oriented) reconstruction of history, the deep-rooted nostalgia for the past, and the attraction to decadence of Visconti with a highly personal ambivalence, coming from both esthetic and psychological sources, towards the Fascist years. Unlike Visconti, and even Fellini, whose universe grew more subjective and inward-looking with time, Bertolucci (like the protagonist of his first film, *Prima della rivoluzione*) appears to have tried--perhaps only for a short while to transcend the intensely subjective, psychological realm of his early films for more universal issues.

With his two films of 1970, however, both set in the Fascist era--*La strategia del ragno (The Spider's Strategem)* and *il Conformista (The Conformist)*--Bertolucci adheres to a psychological interpretation of the Fascist experience rather than to a political or historical one. The protagonists of the two films offer examples of introspective dilemmas, regarding Fascism as a nuisance invented by history to determine or complicate their lives. In these two films, the young Bertolucci is still grappling with the problem of Fascism as an offense to the individual rather than as a crime against humanity. Both films concern the relatively unsuccessful efforts of a young man to emerge from the shadow of the past (from what has been called a "world of fathers") and to come to terms with himself. In *The Conformist,* the protagonist commits murder for the Fascist party although his adherence to Fascism stems not from ideological conviction but from a desperate attempt to be like everyone else, to "conform"--an effort spurred on by a childhood trauma with homosexual implications he wishes to repress. And since the man he must kill is in

many ways a father figure, the act assumes psychological rather than political overtones. In *The Spider's Strategem,* a young man returns to his home town--to the past--seeking the truth behind the mysterious death of his father, revered as a great anti-Fascist. Despite his discovery that his father was really a traitor (killed by his friends to preserve the legend), the young man cannot really free himself of the spider's web of the past, mainly because he (and the audience) is uncertain that the father actually has been a traitor.

For the critic Fofi, three elements dominate both films: a morbid fascination with "good" and "evil," both seen in bourgeois terms (in Bertolucci's own words, the professor and his wife, victims of the "conformist," are the "other side of the medallion of bourgeois Fascism, linked to it by a chain which is decadence"[12]); the lavish reconstruction of the 1930's through striking costumes, sets, and fittings (Bertolucci remarked that *The Conformist* is lighted like a studio film[13]); and the third, most important element, "the fascination exerted upon the filmmaker by Fascism, seen as a non-lived and non-historical world of the fathers."[14] Clearly, these three elements are closely interrelated. If Fascism so fascinates Bertolucci, it is largely because it evokes both the very notion of authority (what is the party if not the supreme father figure) as well as moral absolutes which bring in their wake a "decadence" linked to exacerbated estheticism which attracts Bertolucci as much as it does Visconti. In *The Conformist,* the young man is irresistibly drawn to a female figure incarnating such decadence, the wife of the man he must kill. The fact that she is doubly forbidden to him--she is both a lesbian and another's wife--increases her fascination. In *The Spider's Strategem,* the protagonist is drawn to the woman loved by his father--an attraction with evident incestuous overtones. And her villa, where much of the film unfolds, is lush and overwhelming, suggesting decadent beauty at the same time that it hints at suffocation.

These three elements persist in Bertolucci's next film, *Novecento (1900,* 1973), despite the director's seeming desire to transcend the realm of involuted sexuality, estheticism, and psychology for that of history and the class struggle. Like Visconti's *The Damned* or his earlier film *The Leopard, 1900* traces a sweeping historical fresco (from the end of the 19th century to the rise and fall of Fascism) through the fortunes of particular families who are, in this film, the wealthy landowning Berlinghieri and the Dalcòs, a peasant family living on the Berlinghieri estate. The historical analysis is clear, at times didactic. The narrative traces the death of the landowning class (the *padroni*) in the person of old Alfredo Berlinghieri, the escapism or weakness of succeeding generations (Berlinghieri's grandson and namesake, Alfredo, is paralyzed by the forces of change about him and complies with Fascist thugs, while his dandified uncle runs off to fashionable places), and the rise of Fascists drawn from the ranks of the bourgeoisie and petite bourgeoisie (the routine management of the estate is taken over by the outsider Attila, an ardent Fascist, who rises to prosperity only to meet a brutal death at the hands of those he has oppressed). On the same day that the young Alfredo is born, a son, Olmo, is born in the peasant family, a son of the soil whose vigor, force, and revolutionary spirit are constantly juxtaposed with Alfre-

do's paralysis, just as the revolutionary ardor of Olmo's woman (they believe in free love) contrasts with Alfredo's neurotic and decadent wife.

But the real energies of this film are not in this rather simplistic historical analysis. Its true vitality, like that of Visconti's films, lies in its visual beauty (one longs for these sun-lit,nineteenth-century landscapes despite the social inequities of the time) and in its depiction of perversion. Once again, although such perversion is ideologically linked either to a decadent class (Alfredo's wife takes drugs, becomes an alcoholic, and, unlike the fertile peasant woman, is unable to conceive) or to Fascism (Attila seems to sodomize a young boy and rape an old woman before brutally murdering them both), while healthy sexuality falls to the peasants (who perform better than ever after joining the Communist Party). Bertolucci, like Visconti, seems to believe in moral absolutes but be fascinated by perversion and decadence for their own sake: the scenes depicting these elemtnts are really the most convincing ones in the film. At the very least, history is "psychologized" in a simplistic fashion: not only is the equation between Fascism and perversion shopworn, but, as Hannah Arendt has pointed out, one of the horrors of Fascism was precisely that so many of its adherents, unlike the sadistic monster Attila, led humdrum lives.

All this is not to suggest that every Italian director uses these particular conventions to depict Fascism. A Pasolini, for example, may use brutal sexuality (*Saló*) or even cannibalism (*Porcile*) as a metaphor for Fascism, but his films are so stylized, so removed from the melodrama of a Visconti or a Bertolucci that, far from becoming voyeurs, the spectators are forced to reflect upon these issues. And there are several filmmakers (Leto in *La villegiatura*, Lino del Fray in *Antonio Gramsci: I giorni di carcere*) who have devoted themselves to a non-melodramatic, ideological examination of the phenomenon of Fascism. But Pasolini, Leto, and other more iconoclastic directors have not enjoyed the box-office success of Visconti, Wertmuller, Bertolucci--a success indicating that they have touched the public's heart in some way(s). And if one agrees with Gramsci that it is important for the critic to analyze the work not as an isolated phenomenon, but to examine its "cultural tendencies," then the success of these films needs to be explained, not merely condemned as even such an insightful critic as Fofi is wont to do.

A few critics have already tried to show how certain ambivalences in Italian cinema reflect deep seated tendencies in the Italian public. In his book on Italian film of the 1960's, Lino Micciché made several remarks concerning the presentation of Fascism in comedies of the early 1960's which seem to have been confirmed by many recent comedies (including those under analysis here). According to Micciché, these comedies, which oscillate between farce and satire, avoid an analysis of Fascism. Instead, they describe "Fascist customs, contrasting the lugubrious and ridiculous practices of the regime...with the 'good sense' of the Italian petit bourgeois" who is both skeptical and sentimentally nationalistic.[15] Such an attitude strips Fascism of its menace, placing it almost at an affectionate distance (as in *Amarcord*) at the same time that it reinforces the

viewer's skepticism towards politics in general and, by extension, the value of all political action. The viewer is reassured about not resisting Fascism as well as about political passivity in a larger sense. Often the protagonist of these films, continues Micciché, is a typical petit-bourgeois, neither good nor bad, attached to his family, highly erotic, who, because of the adventures he undergoes advances to a "first timid gesture of rebellion or (more rarely) to an open anti-Fascist militancy."[16] This description shies away from an analysis of deeper ideological issues, an analysis which might bring about a better understanding of the present as well as the past. While such films as *Love and Anarchy* (where the protagonist is motivated first by the death of his friend and then by the militancy of Salomé) give the average petit-bourgeois a "verbal scolding," they also remind him that the Fascist era was a "heroic and unique" time. Ostensibily about Fascism, these films really dramatize the "Fascism/anti-Fascism ambivalence" of the petite-bourgeoisie; they exorcize that "constant of the national petit-bourgeois psychology which...even fifteen years after the collapse of the dictatorship and fifty years after its beginning--still revealed irradicable roots."[17] And there is no doubt that the seeming anarchy of recent years may have heightened such an ambivalence by making people long for order. In Fellini's recent *Prova d'orchestra* (*Orchestra Rehearsal,* 1979), dictatorship, embodied by the tyrannical conductor, seems no less desirable than the total anarchy of the orchestra before his arrival.

Certainly, one of the problems with these comedies about Fascism is that they apply cinematic conventions suitable in another context to a world where the tone they create is jarring. The antics of Wertmuller's Neapolitan hero undergoing a series of comic-erotic adventures would undoubtedly be less offensive if, say, he were in a peace-time army or even in a prison rather than in a German camp. This point also holds true for the sexual melodramas about Fascism which embody certain tendencies of Italian cinema. Long given to spectacle and melodrama (from the *Cabiria* of 1914 to the nationalist heroic sagas of a Blasetti in the 1930's), in recent years Italian films have also turned towards what Fofi pithily calls "sex and sadism." Forbidden forms of sex (incest, homosexuality, lesbianism, sado-masochism) have become the stuff of which popular cinema is made. In Fofi's view, the violence of these films, which allows the spectator to unleash his frustrations, is "typical of advanced and industrialized societies where the law of the marketplace demands shock and sensation in a systematic operation of degrading every value [offered] to the public as a compensation for the daily frustrations of mass-man, as a way of educating [him] to accept the violence of the de-humanized relationships of neocapitalist urban life and society."[18]

Fofi may be partially correct, but it seems to me that the fascination exhibited by these films with power and brutality, or with taboo sex, or even with the relationship between sex and power, goes back further in history and in the human psyche. Behind neo-capitalism was Fascism, and behind Fascism, imperial Rome. Then, too, isn't the deep hold exerted by Catholicism in Italy at least partially responsible for the fascination with decadence? Pasolini once said that he, like most of his compatriots, had two poles within him:

Christianity and Marxism. Hence, it is possible to find many people who, although intellectually leftist or Marxist, still have an emotional and visceral belief in the moral absolutes of salvation and damnation. For them, the notion of sin--especially sexual sin--still exerts a strong pull.

If, however, the reasons for this fascination are complex (as it certainly seems they are), they are also (if one is to judge by these films and their reception) deeply rooted. And it may also be that, as often happens with popular culture, these films not only reveal certain tendencies but actually add to them, defining as well as responding to visual and emotional sensibilities. Unfortunately, by crudely incorporating "sex and sadism" into their portrayals of Fascism and thereby reducing history and brutality to the levels of simplistic psychology, erotic spice, and melodrama, these films can only add to the ambivalent fascination still exerted by Fascism.

Notes

1. Goffredo Fofi, *Il cinema italiano: servi e padroni* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1971), p. 97.

2. Cf. Lino Micciché, "Visconti e le sue ragioni," in *Morte a Venezia* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1971), p. 55.

3. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Luchino Visconti* (N.Y.: Viking, 1973), p. 188.

4. Cf. interview with Nicola Badalucco in *Morte a Venezia,* p. 134.

5. Visconti, "Dialogo con l'autore," in *La caduta degli dei* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1969), p. 21.

6. Op.cit., p. 22.

7. Cf. Goffredo Fofi, "Conversation avec Elio Petri," *Positif,* No. 126 (1971), 45.

8. Cf. Interview with Joan Mellen, *Cineaste,* VI, 1(1973), 11.

9. Fofi, *Cinema italiano,* p. 132.

10. Bettelheim, "Surviving," 48.

11. "Dialogo con l'autore," pp. 14-15.

12. Bertolucci, "Interview with Marilyn Goldin," *Sight and Sound* (Spring, 1971), 66.

13. Op.cit., p. 65.

14. Fofi, *Cinema italiano,* p. 109.

15. Micciché, *Il cinema italiano degli anni '60* (Venice: Marsilio, 1975), p. 31.

16. Micciché, p. 39.

17. Micciché, p. 34.

18. Fofi, *Cinema italiano,* pp. 146-7.

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