

# *Salò, Or the 120 Days of Sodom: The Contemporary Distribution of Sexual Extremity*

Simon Hobbs

## **Abstract**

Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò, o le 120 giornate di sodomia/ Salò, Or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) is widely considered the most sexually transgressive art film in cinematic history. An allegorical assessment of the corrupting nature of power and authority, the film exists both as a championed piece of artistic transgression and a condemned work of pornographic excess. This article looks to explore these divergent forms of reception through an investigation of the film's paratextual presence as a commercially available home entertainment product. Taking the BFI Distribution special edition UK Blu-ray/DVD release of *Salò* as a case study, this paper will investigate the film's narrative image through an exploration of the Blu-ray/DVD's cover, accompanying booklet and special features in order to reveal the effect that these paratextual entities have upon the understanding and

cultural positioning of Pasolini's often misunderstood narrative. Using these paratexts as bearers of meaning, the article will seek to explore how *Salò* has been rendered within the contemporary filmic climate, and whether its commercial presentation reflects its fluid cultural persona.

**Key Words:** *Salò, Or the 120 Days of Sodom*, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Art Film, Exploitation Film, Paratext, Marketing, Taste, Blu-ray, DVD, Distribution.

## Introduction

Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò, o le 120 giornate di sodoma/ Salò, Or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975), with its combination of extreme sexual imagery and political allegory, manifests a dualism which allows it to straddle both the art film and the exploitation sphere. This dualism has created an encompassing yet often contradictory reception culture, which has become inseparable from the text itself. As

Understanding how these readings are controlled, managed and projected is central to comprehending the film's place within contemporary cinematic environs. Recent developments in film scholarship have highlighted the vital role commercial proliferations – such as posters, DVDs and trailers – perform within the construction of a text's cultural identity. In the present filmic climate whereby consumers are saturated by various forms of supplemental information, these items have become essential to assessing the manner in which a film's existing status is moulded and presented to differing demographics and market sectors. In response to this context, this article will assess the most recent remediation of *Salò* via the 2011 UK

a consequence, the narrative has become encircled by a series of reputations, ranging from a validation of the film's authorial originality to a condemnation of its exploitative excess. These interpretations have irreversibly affected *Salò's* comprehension within the cultural sphere, wherein it has been positioned as one of the most disturbing and radical films in the history of cinema.<sup>1</sup>

Blu-ray/DVD release by the British Film Institute's distribution label in order to explore how the tangible product manipulates, navigates and organises the film's often fluctuating identity.

## Paratextual Theory and Narrative Image

Before approaching the item as a bearer of meaning, it is useful to consider the field of paratextual studies and its principal benefits in greater detail. Originating in the field of literature with the work of Gérard Genette, paratextual study relies on the concept that the text is rarely presented in an unaccompanied state.<sup>2</sup> The main transcript is therefore supplemented by various other forms of information – such as the title or author's

name – which themselves provide information, make known an intention, or advise the intended reader.<sup>3</sup> When applied to filmic artefacts, such items offer the audience their first impressions of a particular film,<sup>4</sup> actively directing, informing and controlling audience's viewing practices; in so doing, they contain the potential to change the meaning of a given text through the specific identities they assign to the text.<sup>5</sup>

The idea that such paratexts direct opinions can be more thoroughly developed in relation to cinematic artefacts through a consideration of John Ellis's concept of the 'narrative image'. Akin to the work of Genette and Gray, Ellis claims that audiences must interpret a series of ingredients, including colours, taglines, images, genre iconography and star branding, in order to understand the text's position within the marketplace.<sup>6</sup> Through this practice of interpretation, the audience makes sense of the semiotic signifiers on offer and accepts a publicly agreed definition of the film. Importantly, the comprehension of these various elements is dependent on the relationship they share with each other, and thus the film's narrative image is reliant upon

a balance between the familiar and the new.<sup>7</sup> Fundamental to comprehending this notion of balance is Jacques Derrida's theory of cultural trace,<sup>8</sup> which can be summarised as a memory which through cultural recollection becomes a sign of past meaning.<sup>9</sup> When read through the framework of Ellis's narrative image, this trace memory develops within the mind of the audience to create a new identity founded upon previous associations and connotations. Through this process of historical recollection, paratextual products help to shape and define a film's cultural personality by recycling significant patterns and configurations and are therefore vital in understanding filmic identities in the present market climate.

### **Pier Paolo Pasolini and *Salò, Or the 120 Days of Sodom***

In order to fully understand the meaning of a paratextual item, it is crucial to more thoroughly map the film's reception climate, as forms of critical and academic scholarship can hold influence over the broader cultural comprehension of a narrative. Termed epitexts by Genette,<sup>10</sup> these freely circulating items, while not always attached to the product, help

to furnish the cultural object with additional meanings.

Significantly, the dualism of *Salò*'s discussed above makes its epitextual discourse especially significant. The film is an adaptation of the Marquis De Sade's novel, *Les 120 journées de Sodome ou l'école du libertinage/ The 120 Days of Sodom, or the School of Libertinism*,<sup>11</sup> but it also explicitly invokes *Inferno* – the first volume of Dante's *La divina commedia/ The Divine Comedy*,<sup>12</sup> the cornerstone of Italian literature – through its structuring of the narrative in a series of circles. Pasolini relocates the tale to the Republic of Salò, a short-lived Fascist State in the North of Italy propped up by the Nazis after the Allied forces took control of South and Central Italy and Mussolini was deposed, and uses De Sade's basic narrative framework to detail the sexual abuse and torture of 18 teenagers by four male characters known only as The Duke, The Bishop, The Magistrate and The President. These characters, which exist as concrete manifestations of the major pillars of society, enable the film to enact a Marxist-inflected political critique which condemns Fascist ideology and exposes the corrupting nature of

power in general. Within the palace, these four libertines use their authority to force the young inmates to consume faeces, while also sanctioning multiple rapes, castrations and murders. Therefore, the film's 'highbrow' source material (in addition to De Sade and Dante, the credit sequence also uniquely contains a critical bibliography on De Sade including such intellectual heavyweights as Roland Barthes and Simone de Beauvoir) and its political activism is placed in close proximity to what Robert Gordon claims is a lexicon of absolute horror borrowed from several 'lowbrow' filmic genres.<sup>13</sup>

This double axis of sexual taboo and politics has,<sup>14</sup> as I have already suggested, characterised the critical discourse that surrounds the film. Significantly, this duality also applies to Pasolini's persona, as he has been both condemned for his transgressive filmic catalogue,<sup>15</sup> and celebrated as an auteur. As Robert Gordon states, "Pasolini's belief in his capacity to impose his voice on any medium, despite its constraints was reaffirmed [. . .] by his experience with film. He repeatedly asserted his autonomy and authority as an "auteur", confidently declaring his

control over every aspect of the film-making process.”<sup>16</sup> It is this contrast between art and exploitation which makes *Salò* such an important and engaging paratextual case study.

It is valuable to address Pasolini’s view on the film as it allows for a greater understanding of the narrative’s dualism. Pasolini intended the film as the first part of a planned ‘Trilogy of Death’ which would constitute a response to the way in which the unexpected and dramatic commercial success of his ‘Trilogy of Life’ – *Il decameron/ The Decameron* (1971), *I racconti di Canterbury/ The Canterbury Tales* (1972) and *Il fiore delle mille e una notte/ The Arabian Nights* (1974) – was the result of a misinterpretation of his intended message and a commodification of his work on the part of the commercial film industry and its uncritical consumption by the viewing public.

Responding to this context, he summarised *Salò*’s intended message as follows: “the body becomes merchandise. My film is planned as a sexual metaphor, which symbolizes [. . .] the relationship between exploiter and exploited. In sadism and in power politics human beings become objects.”<sup>17</sup> Significantly, in order for the film’s explicitness to be sanctioned within

an art film framework,<sup>18</sup> Pasolini’s allegorical explanation must be understood and accepted as justification for the images on screen.

Without this explanation, the film becomes devoid of intellectual significance and exists merely as a series of extreme and transgressive images. The conflict between these interpretations of the film has led to its regular appearance on online ‘sick film’ lists, whereby film fans compile lists of the ‘sickest’ films. This alternative epitextual discourse has been mapped by David Church,<sup>19</sup> whose work lends further credence to the study of *Salò* as a divergent narrative.

As Church’s work suggests, the film’s allegorical message, while being publically offered by Pasolini, has been a point of contention within the critical sphere. For example, Maurizio Viano states that the Fascist iconography adopted by the film merely operates as a signifier for a political reading that is never fully explored (and here I cite Viano as a single example which is representative of a broader critical trend). The author goes on to claim that the brutality of the images deny the audience the ability to move between the film’s layers of meaning, leaving

only the literal readings available for consumption.<sup>20</sup> This tendency to reject the film's political message is recognised by Naoemi Greene, who usefully states that many critics objected to Pasolini's use of a sensitive historical period in a narrative that was so deliberately abhorrent.<sup>21</sup> However, while Greene claims that the extremity of the image threatens to exceed the bounds of the symbolic,<sup>22</sup> there are in fact instances within the film whereby the explicitness of the acts is eclipsed by Pasolini's overriding political doctrine. For example, after a guard is caught having sex with a black servant, he performs a communist salute in an act of defiance towards Fascism before being gunned down by the libertines. This scene operates as an explicit political statement, and thus weakens the argument that the symbolism cannot break through the extremity of the film's taboos.

The inability of critics to move beyond what they saw as an exploitation of historical authenticity led to the film being framed as pornography by writers such as Gideon Bachmann and Danny Georgakas.<sup>23</sup> Positioning the film in such a way denies its political allegory and demonstrates a

misunderstanding of both Pasolini's considered approach to the subject matter and the use he makes of 'pornography'. As Gordon observes, the sexuality within *Salò* is made deliberately repulsive through the combination of excess and repetition.<sup>24</sup> Greene also highlights the film's purposeful repulsiveness, noting that Pasolini aimed to strip sadomasochism of the sexual titillation it had become known for within the genres of romance and pornography.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, while the narrative adopts the trappings of the pornography industry – such as the presence of sustained nudity and the use of particular physical poses and set pieces employing sexual fetish and leather equipment – the active removal of pleasure and sexual excitement ultimately render a reading of the film as pornography inadequate.

Nonetheless, the critical isolation of the narrative's transgressions has resulted in its encasement within what Christopher Roberts usefully terms a critical quarantine.<sup>26</sup> The critical dialogues mapped above, regardless of the prevailing stance, brand the film as taboo, and provide it with a consistently refreshed reputation of notoriety. Consequently, with

several contradictory dialogues operating both within the film's narrative and the surrounding critical discourse, *Salò* becomes a multifaceted text, able to move between the realms of art and exploitation depending on which features are highlighted in the paratextual artefact. This intermediate cultural status, whereby the film is either included or actively excluded from the histories of art and exploitation cinema, raises important questions regarding the social and cinematic signifiers that shape and determine the film's narrative image in the current climate.

### **Paratextual Identities: Selling *Salò***

In order to explore these questions further, it is valuable to assess *Salò*'s latest remediation: a special edition dual format Blu-ray/DVD released on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 2011 by BFI Distribution, which follows earlier theatrical and home video releases of the film by the BFI in 2000 and 2008 respectively. Within the context of a paratextual analysis, the cultural position of the BFI immediately becomes central to assessing how this commercial product situates and organises both the film's history and critical identity. BFI Distribution is part of the British Film Institute, a registered

charity that curates both the BFI National Archive and the BFI Library, while also running the National Film Theatre and the London Film Festival and publishing film scholarship for both a general and specialist readership. Its distribution label is responsible for releasing many culturally legitimised global art films, forgotten British films, independent films (especially documentary, queer and experimental titles) as well as the catalogues of canonised auteur filmmakers like Akira Kurosawa and Jacques Tati. Through its relationship to the country's primary cultural institution for film and to films generally accepted as culturally artistically valid, the label assumes a prestigious quality, which becomes inherently linked to its brand identity and any film released under the BFI imprint. Thus for *Salò*, BFI distribution and its associated imagery becomes a signifier of 'highbrow' capital, which is able to partially invert the stigma that has become attached to the film via the critical discourse mapped earlier.

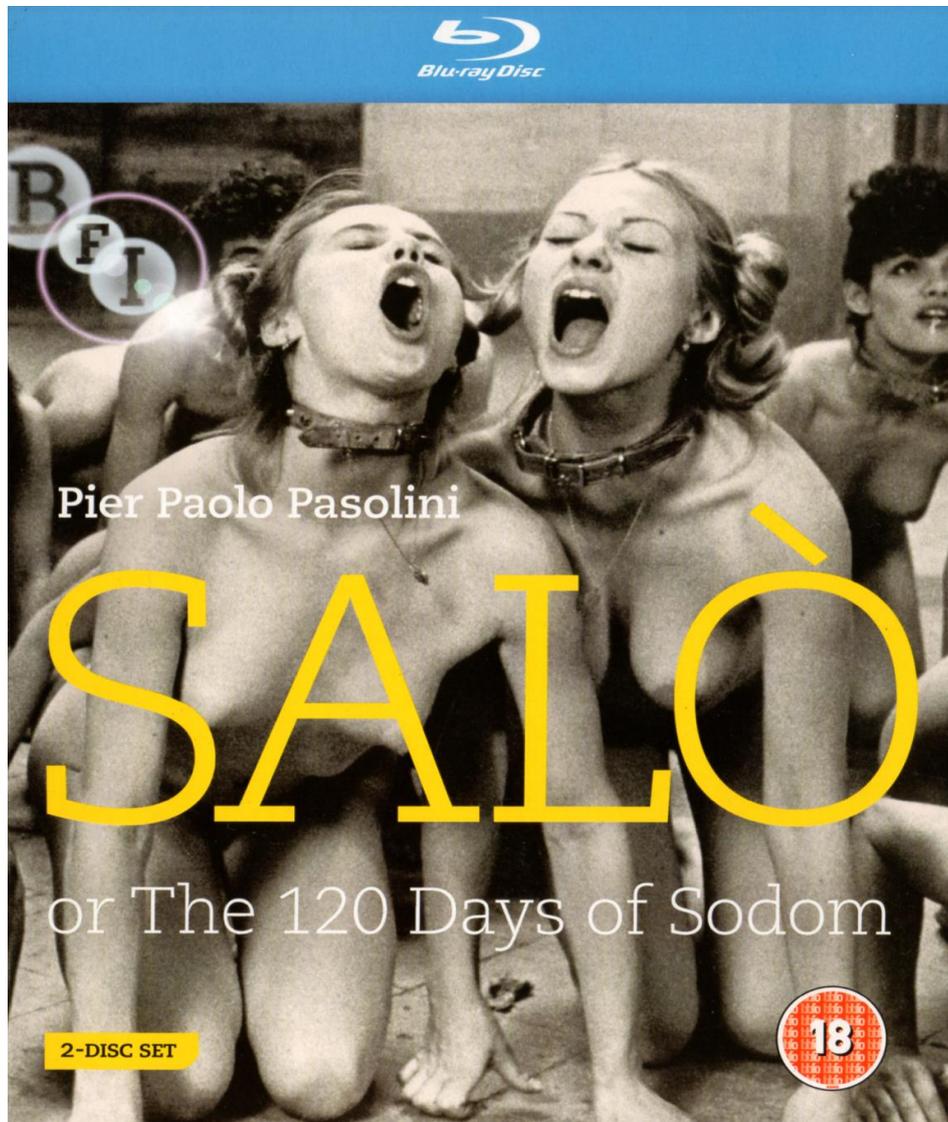
This is significant since the relationship between the BFI and *Salò* has a long history, dating from rare uncensored showings at the

BFI-run NFT in 1982 and culminating in the BFI's submission of the film to the BBFC and its subsequent theatrical release in 2000, together with the publication of a 'BFI Modern Classics' monograph on the film that same year.<sup>27</sup> It is likely that the case for finally passing the film uncut was significantly bolstered by the BFI's imprint, which helped insulate the BBFC from potential criticisms over the decision (a defence of the film was also solicited from film historian and academic Geoffrey Nowell-Smith in the eventuality of legal prosecution).<sup>28</sup> This new release was presented as part of a two-day event sponsored by the BFI and hosted at the ICA in September 2000, during which the duality described above surfaced in a debate between the BBFC Director James Ferman, who maintained that Pasolini's approach precluded the film from being consumed as pornography (a not insignificant matter, since this was his stated justification for passing the film), and BFI Modern Classics author Gary Indiana, who maintained that the film could function in this way for particular audience demographics.

As in these previous instances, the paratextual presence of the BFI and its associated prestige in the film's latest remediation partially eclipses the forbidden quality the narrative engenders and re-contextualises the product as a legitimised artefact of academic worth. In further support of this claim, the edition is a premier release by the company, signified by the additional cardboard sleeve, two disc presentation and supplementary fifty-two page colour booklet. The appearance of this artefact conforms to Barbara Klinger's theories regarding special editions: "Special-edition marketing in particular provides an opportunity to elevate film to the status of high art [ . . . ] In addition, through the often extensive background materials that accompany it, a special edition appears to furnish the authenticity and history so important to establishing the value of an archival object."<sup>29</sup> As such, the artefact and its complementary paratextual items, such as special features and extra

brochures, immediately legitimise  
Pasolini's film, contextualising its history

and endorsing its reputation within an art  
film framework of acceptability.



Invoking exploitation: the front cover of the BFI Blu-ray for *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*

However, whilst the film acquires validity  
through these channels, the product's cover  
image delivers a contrary identity. The sleeve  
is composed of a black and white image of two  
naked women, who are positioned on all fours

with open mouths and leather dog collars. This  
image, which places the women in a  
subservient sexual pose, evokes the titillation  
attached to traditional sadomasochistic  
iconography. The word 'Salò' runs

horizontally through the centre of the graphic, partially obscuring the women's naked breast; however nipples remain visible. This cover image is significant in comprehending the differing trace memories grafted onto the product. It is clear that nudity is a key ingredient of pornography's commercial identity, and whilst the black and white photography alludes to a sense of artistic erotica bolstered by the indication of cultural worth afforded by the capital afforded by the BFI logo, the promotion of nakedness deliberately elicits a pornographic narrative image and thereby also codes the film within the confines of that industry's prevailing stigma.

The sexual potency of the image is supported by the cover's refusal to deal with the film's allegorical message. The short blurb on the back of the sleeve reads: "Banned, censored and reviled the world over since its release, Pasolini's final and most controversial masterpiece is presented here fully uncut and uncensored in a brand new restoration."

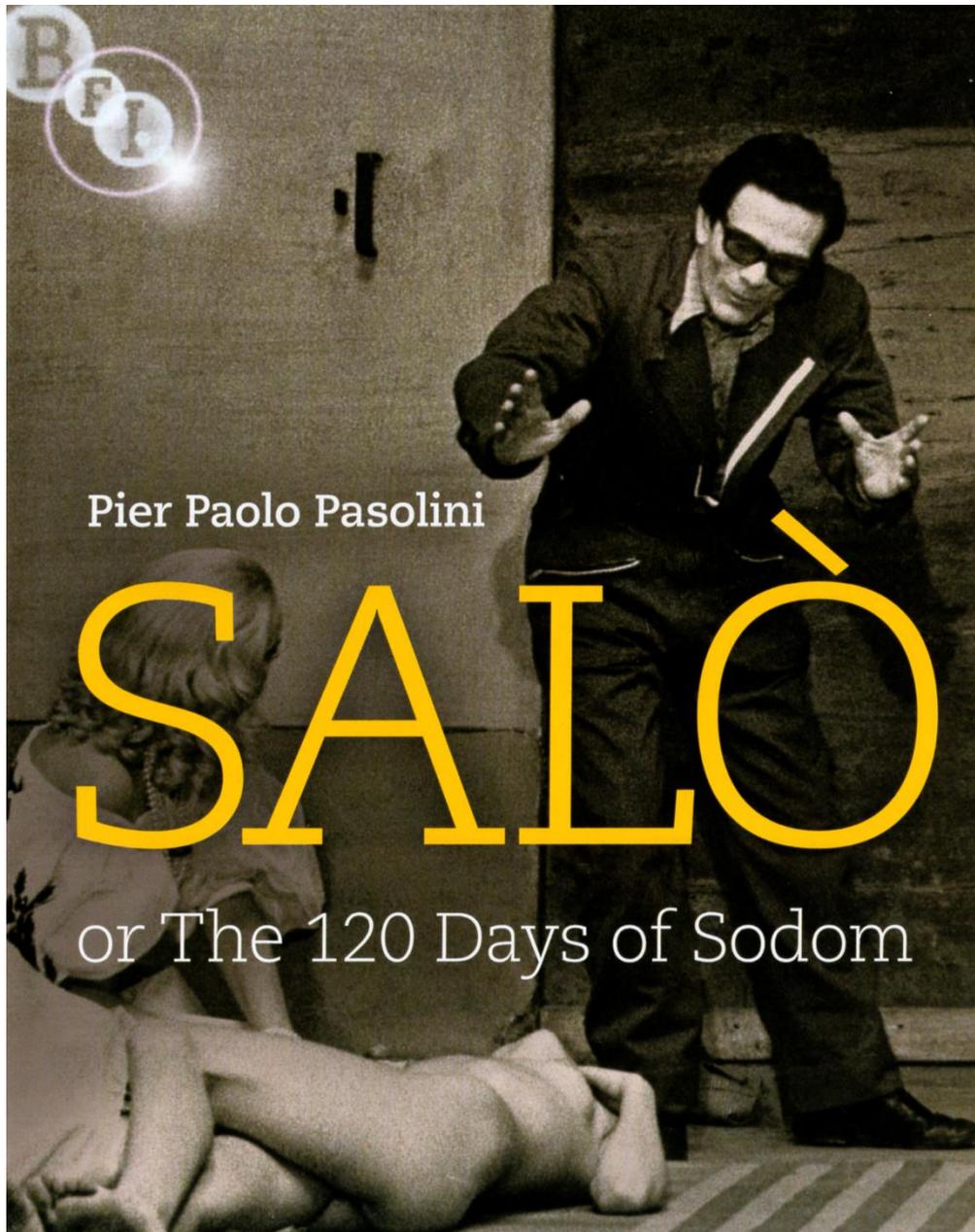
Crucially the opening line 'banned, censored and reviled' isolates and promotes the film's extremity and censorial illegitimacy, an

approach which draws linkages to exploitation marketing strategies. As Kate Egan, writing about the 'video nasty' phenomenon, claims, the longevity of a film's censorship travails increases its desirability, as the exclusivity works as a hyperbolic endorsement of the narrative's forbidden qualities.<sup>30</sup> Through the aforementioned promotion of nudity and the emphasis placed on the narrative's censorial history, it becomes clear that the paratext hyperbolically dresses the film as a forbidden text, situating it alongside a multitude of heavily censored films based around sexual exploitation. Here, the paratextual artefact selectively authorises one reading of the multifaceted film and engineers a carefully constructed identity which ignores other parts of *Salò*'s reception context.

Before considering the extensive paratextual presence available across both discs of this release, we should first turn our attention to the exclusive 52-page booklet, which is described on the film's outer cardboard sleeve as containing a "new introduction by Sam Rohdie, Gideon Bachmann's on-set diaries, reviews, BBFC correspondence, stills and on-set photographs." The cover of the booklet

mirrors that of the sleeve in regards to colour pallet and typography, and whilst nudity is

present, an image of Pasolini acts as the principal focus:



The Auteur upfront: the Cover of the booklet accompanying the BFI Blu-ray release of *Salò*

Consequently, a more traditional form of authorial branding, which was ignored on the outer cover, prevails, directly linking

the film to art film discourse in which the auteur acts as a symbol of legitimacy.

However, the isolation and promotion of

transgression which characterised the product's cover design is re-established on

the booklet's overleaf, where the film still selected contains several naked bodies:



Nakedness and the transgressive motif: the sleeve of the booklet accompanying the BFI Blu-ray release of *Salò*

This juxtaposition of images continues throughout the booklet as 10 out of the 18 screen-captures either portray either nudity or suggested sexual situations or allude to

violence, whereas only six present images of Pasolini. While it can be argued that the portrayal of sexually extreme imagery is unavoidable when reproducing stills from

a film dominated by sequences of transgression, the replication of such images within this booklet nonetheless parallels the hyperbolic promotional tactics of segregation and duplication used throughout the exploitation market sphere.

Importantly, these pictures are, for the most part, contextualised by a series of written passages, the first of which is a five page introduction entitled ‘Salò – An Introduction by Sam Rohdie’.<sup>31</sup> The foreword, which discusses Pasolini’s literary career and his prevailing political views, recalls both the register and distanced approach common within academic scholarship while adopting a traditional auteurist stance. Therefore, while being flanked by images of extremity, Rohdie’s writing provides an appropriate background for the film’s transgressions, and thus offers a framework of cultural validation which is absent from the cover sleeve.

However, the following textual passages deliberately centralise the narrative’s extreme reputation. The first, entitled ‘Pasolini and Marquis de Sade by Gideon Bachmann’,<sup>32</sup> is a reproduction of Bachmann’s onset diaries originally published in *Sight and Sound* in 1975-76.<sup>33</sup> Significantly the piece is informed by a personal style which judges the film subjectively, an approach evident in the following quote: ‘I have seen sadomasochisation, rape, hanging, shooting, scalping, a variety of anal activities, executions by garrotting and electric chair, disfigurements of all sorts, beauty defiled in all possible ways, human bodies destroyed.’<sup>34</sup> Here the author codes the incidences witnessed as acts of reality, effectively collapsing the barriers between fiction and actuality by merging the production process with real events of exploitation. A similar tone is used in the second passage entitled ‘Salò o le Centoventi Giornate di Sodoma reviewed by Gilbert Adair in 1979’.<sup>35</sup> Within this

review, originally published in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* in September 1979, Adair compares Pasolini to the fictional libertines who torture the prisoners, stating: “P.P.P, dandy [...] cineaste and homosexual, encloses himself and his crew for 52 days in an isolated villa (studio interiors) with sixteen beautiful young men and women, on whom he inflicts humiliations less appalling, certainly, than those depicted in the film [...] but humiliations nonetheless.”<sup>36</sup> Both these observations confuse the line between truth and fiction, and further enhance the film’s reputation as an exploitative piece of transgression. Consequently, these two articles support the overtly sexual cover and its promotion of notoriety, ultimately positioning the film as an exploitative artefact.

The next two segments are more flexible in their coding of the narrative. Both pieces centre on the censorial past of the film, building upon the issues introduced

on the product’s rear blurb. ‘*Salò Censored*’, the first of the two articles, is a brief overview of the film’s censorship history written by Sam Rodhie.<sup>37</sup> The piece focuses on the film’s seizure and the creation of a special ‘club’ cut and marks the narrative as an important part of British censorial history. The story of the film’s confiscation draws unavoidable parallels to the ‘video nasty’ scandal, during which, as I suggested above, many distributors promoted their conflicts with censorship boards so as to endorse the transgressive nature of their product. However, after detailing the inevitably sensationalist story of capture, Rodhie transcribes the spoken word prologue and epilogue that bookended the aforementioned ‘club’ cut. Used to ‘legally “explain” the context of Mussolini’s regime at *Salò* and the writings of Marquis de Sade’,<sup>38</sup> the reproduction of this information gives the booklet greater historical resonance and contextualises the status of the current artefact. Therefore, while a history of

ensorial controversy allow the product to accumulate a currency of notoriety, the recognition of this forgotten history foregrounds this new release as an important part of the film's cultural revision, giving it, and the narrative as a whole, a level of legitimate capital it may have previously been unable to obtain.

This notion of historical significance and rehabilitation is continued within 'Letter from the BBFC to the Director of Public Prosecutions in 1979', the second piece to consider the film's censorship history.<sup>39</sup> Written by James Ferman, the Director of the British Board of Film Censors (later Classification) from 1975-1999, the letter was sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Thomas Hetherington, as a defence of the film. The correspondence works within the framework of historical contextualisation, endeavouring to defend the narrative against its various detractors by locating it firmly within its political metaphors. By emphasising that the

narrative is a construct of fictional art, the piece overturns the complicated interpretations provided within the aforementioned reviews. The relationship this letter has to governmental procedures – along with the pragmatic stance adopted by Ferman – removes any sense of hyperbolic ballyhoo from the discussion of censorship, ultimately enabling the release to operate under the rubrics of scholarly reappraisal.

When approached as a single document, therefore, the supplementary booklet dilutes the extreme connotations of the cover images and engages with other aspects of *Salò*'s historical discourse and reception. Therefore notions of academic legitimisation contrast with the isolation of sexual transgression to create a cultural product that bears a conflicted narrative image. This contradiction means the tangible, commercially available version of the film text straddles the cultures of art and exploitation, as the key ingredients of

‘lowbrow’ marketing are counterpointed by a set of signifiers which simultaneously lobby for the film’s acceptance into the ‘high’ cultural sphere.

The re-inscription of this duality in the printed paratext means that a consideration of the audio-visual special features included on the disc prove crucial in determining the public image constructed by this particular commercial release. The first feature, *Open Your Eyes* (2008) is a 21 minute long on-set documentary, which resolutely positions Pasolini as an auteur of significant standing. Comprised entirely of scenes shot by Gideon Bachmann depicting Pasolini directing *Salò*, this on-set diary contradicts Bachman’s own written description of the production environment included in the booklet, as the directorial process is shown to be a precise exercise rather than a series of exploitative incidences. The second extra, a 21 minute documentary directed by Roberto Purvis entitled *Ai passi con Pasolini... Walking*

*with Pasolini* (2008), continues to strengthen the auteur brand of the director, as interviews with film director Neil Bartlett, BBFC Senior Examiner Craig Lapper and academics Prof. David Forgacs and Prof. Noam Chomsky are intercut with BBC archive footage of Pasolini and sequences from the film. In analogous fashion to the libertines in the film, the interviewees represent fundamental pillars of legitimacy – the filmmaking world, governmental institutions and scholarly academia – and therefore, the cultural capital generated both through their statements and the positions they hold within society is grafted onto Pasolini’s film.

Like the other paratextual extras, *Salò: Fade to Black* (2001), directed by Nigel Algar for Film Four, features new interviews, archive footage and montages of key scenes. However, the documentary is presented by Mark Kermode, whose presence has the potential of altering our

understanding of the enterprise, and by extension, the film as a whole. Kermode, while possessing academic capital, also retains a concurrent image associated with the championing of transgressive cinema. This is evident in the essay ‘I was a Teenage Horror Fan: Or “How I learned to stop worrying and love Linda Blair”’,<sup>40</sup> in which Mark Kermode (Age 36) – as the essay credits him – writes a highly personal account of his own horror fandom, before authenticating his sub-cultural capital within a paracinematic environ. Moreover, his academic credentials are often underplayed in favour of presenting a more populist identity as a film critic to the public sphere. Significantly it is this broader cultural role that prevails within the feature, as Kermode’s often sensationalist performance and the lyrical description of Pasolini’s film is framed within a populist mentality. For example, his opening line hyperbolically promotes the Pasolini-brand, validating him within the

paracinematic sphere: “In November 1975 Italian filmmaker Pier Pablo Pasolini was beaten to death by a rugged youth who could have easily stepped out of one of the director’s famously homoerotic films.” This process continues as Kermode deliberately selects a provocative vocabulary, constructing an identity based of Pasolini based around transgression through the use of terms such as “orgy”, “degradation”, “sadist”, “death”, “languishing”, “notorious”, “ritualised”, “sodomy”, “coprophilia” and “rape”, which, while being relevant to the narrative, de-contextualise the exploitive acts and cast the film once again as a forbidden spectacle. Kermode’s involvement thus instantly links *Salò* to the kinds of genre films which constitute his usual critical foci. *Fade to Black*, like the cover, thus shifts the film from the liminal art film market sphere, facilitating its movement into the kind of paracinematic space in which it can

populate the 'sick film' lists discussed by Church, as described above.<sup>41</sup>

The penultimate paratext on the disc is the longest; a 58 minute Dutch documentary entitled *Wie de Waarheid Zegt Moet Dood/Whoever Says the Truth Shall Die*, directed by Philo Bregstein in 1981. The documentary opens with newspaper clippings of Pasolini's dead body before discussing the director's opposition to the Second World War and his life as a poet. While the feature confirms Pasolini's auteur status by concentrating on personal stories and employing trace surrogates such as Federico Fellini, Jean Luc Godard and Bernardo Bertolucci as sites of validation, the slippage between traditional legitimisation and extreme titillation continues. The feature discusses Pasolini's homosexuality and death in a similar manner to the gossip dialogues which engulf mainstream releases, and thereby foregoes the academic register required to certify the consistently repeated images of

extremity. In regards to Pasolini's sexual preference, his homosexuality is demonised, with actress Laura Betti stating he was an intellectual but corrupting homosexual. Furthermore, his sexuality is linked to his death, while the gory newspaper images from the scene of the murder are edited in a manner which creates a disturbing relationship to the film's violent climax. Again, this collapses the barriers between fictional sensationalism and reality, and dilutes the auteur authority of Pasolini.

The final extra is *Ostia* (1987), a 26 minute film about Pasolini by Julian Cole. Made as a student film, *Ostia* stars Derek Jarman, another figure who operates within an auteurist framework of guaranteed cultural capital. Jarman plays Pasolini, with the film charting his final days and brutal murder. Once more, the film blurs the lines between fiction and fact by showing Pasolini's life to be one dominated by the sex and violence that

defined *Salò*. While this can be read within a hyperbolic framework, it is central to recognise the manner in which this short film shows the importance of Pasolini. Working to confirm the status and legacy of the director, the film illustrates the impact Pasolini had on other directors and subsections of the gay community. Its inclusion on this release enables the exploitative imagery of the front cover to be further diluted as it foregrounds the significance of the director and the tragedy of his death.

Thus, the features, like the cover and booklet, slip between three main readings: Pasolini as auteur, critical legitimisation of the film and the hyperbolic promotion of extremity. In this way, the paratextual identity of the film reflects its own slipperiness, as it drifts between several cultural sites through the adoption of often contradictory social signifiers. However, it is clear that, while the majority of features provide an academic framework, the cover

– with its unavoidably sexual illustration – remains the dominant image. Due to its external position, the cover acts as a touch point and the first stage of contact for the majority of the audience. In this sense it is the most influential paratextual zone and, to use the words of Genette, becomes “a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public.”<sup>42</sup> In this image the product is homogenised under the exploitative trace of the pornography industry.

Nevertheless, there is also a possible counter-reading that locates this cover-art within *Salò* overarching political allegory: through the BFI’s employment of the pornographic image, the body, as within the narrative, becomes a commodity and an object of commerce. In this framework, the centralisation of the female form works as a visualisation of the film’s exploration of hierarchal exploitation, and is rendered as a metaphorical image. However, this interpretation – like that of the film itself –

is itself dependent on the audience already possessing knowledge of the text which would allow them to decode and understand the hidden relevance of the image. Arguably this exclusive reading would be overlooked by majority of the audience, and unavailable to the casual consumer. Therefore, drawing on the work of Joan Hawkins,<sup>43</sup> it is perhaps most useful to claim that, while the supplementary information allows the film to become a new object and one of substantial cultural worth through its inclusion of an extensive historical account of the film's broader context, the BFI simultaneously and actively takes advantage of the film's infamous status. In the case of *Salò*, then, the distribution company consciously filters and normalises the film's sexual extremity in order to maximise commercial opportunities and attract a larger section of the audience. To return to Naomi Greene's assessment of the film which opened this article, a text that is widely considered one

of the most disturbing in the history of cinema becomes dressed in the memories of sexual titillation, and is therefore able to shed its complex persona in favour of a commercially streamlined, yet troublingly inaccurate, erotic identity.

---

<sup>1</sup> Greene, N. (1990) *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Cinema as Heresy*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 196.

<sup>2</sup> Genette, G. (1997) *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>4</sup> Gray, J. (2010) *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and Other Media Paratexts*. New York: NYU Press. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Gray, J. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and Other Media Paratexts.*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ellis, J. 30-31.

<sup>7</sup> Ellis, J. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, J. (1976) *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Spivak, G. (1976) "Translators Preface", In: Derrida, J. (ed.), *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press. ix-lxxxvi (xvii).

<sup>10</sup> Genette, J. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 344.

<sup>11</sup> De Sade, M. (1987 [1785]) *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*. Grove Press, New York.

<sup>12</sup> Dante (1939[1320]) *The Divine Comedy*. trans: John D.Sinclair. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Gordon, R. (1996) *Pasolini: Forms of Subjectivity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 259.

<sup>14</sup> Greene, N. (1994) "Salò: The Refusal to Consume", In: Rumble, P. and Testa, B. (eds), *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Contemporary Perspectives*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 232-242 (234).

<sup>15</sup> Greene. 134.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon. 91.

<sup>17</sup> Pasolini, P.P., quoted in Bachmann, G. (1975-1976) "Pasolini on de Sade: An Interview during the Filming of 'The 120 Days of Sodom'", *Film Quarterly*, 29 (2), 39-45 (40).

- <sup>18</sup> Krzywinska, T. (2006) *Sex and the Cinema*. London: Wallflower Press. 45.
- <sup>19</sup> Church, D. (2009) "Of Manias, Shit, and Blood: The Reception of *Salò* as a 'Sick Film'", *Participations*, 6 (2), available from: <http://www.participations.org/Volume%206/Issue%202/church.htm>, accessed 19/4/2015.
- <sup>20</sup> Viano, M. (1993) *A Certain Realism: Making use of Pasolini's Film Theory and Practice*. University of California Press: Los Angeles. 299-300.
- <sup>21</sup> Greene. 126.
- <sup>22</sup> Greene. 205.
- <sup>23</sup> Bachmann, G. (1975) "Pasolini and the Marquis de Sade", *Sight and Sound*, 45(1), 50-54 and Georgakas, D. (1978) "*Salò*", *Cineaste*, 8 (3), 45-47.
- <sup>24</sup> Gordon. 260.
- <sup>25</sup> Greene. 234.
- <sup>26</sup> Roberts, C. (2010) "The Theatrical Satanism of Self-Awareness Itself", *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 15 (1), 29-43 (30).
- <sup>27</sup> Indiana, G. (2000) *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom*. London: BFI.
- <sup>28</sup> Lapper, C. (undated) "*Salò* and Censorship: a History", *BFI website*, available from: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20090113153245/http://bfi.org.uk/features/salo/history.html> (accessed 19/4/2015).
- <sup>29</sup> Klinger, B. (2006) *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*. California: University California Press. 66.
- <sup>30</sup> Egan, K. (2007) *Trash or Treasure? Censorship and the Changing Meanings of the Video Nasties*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 194.
- <sup>31</sup> Rhodie, S. (2011) "*Salò* – An Introduction", In: *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom*, booklet accompanying the Blu-ray/DVD of *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom*, UK: BFI, 1-5
- <sup>32</sup> Bachman, G. (2011) "Pasolini and the Marquis de Sade", In: *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom*, booklet accompanying the Blu-ray/DVD of *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom*, UK: BFI, 8-22.
- <sup>33</sup> Bachmann, G. (1975) "Pasolini and the Marquis de Sade", *Sight and Sound*, 45(1), 50-54.
- <sup>34</sup> Bachman, G. (2011) "Pasolini and the Marquis de Sade", In: *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom*, booklet accompanying the Blu-ray/DVD of *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom*, UK: BFI, 22.
- <sup>35</sup> Adair, G. (2011) 'Salò o le Centoventi Giornate di Sodoma reviewed by Gilbert Adair in 1979', In: *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom*, booklet accompanying the Blu-ray/DVD of *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom*, UK: BFI, 26-27.
- <sup>36</sup> Adair, G. 27.
- <sup>37</sup> Rhodie (2011) 'Salò Censored', In: *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom*, booklet accompanying the Blu-ray/DVD of *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom*, UK: BFI, 29-31.
- <sup>38</sup> Rhodie , 29.
- <sup>39</sup> Ferman, J. (2011) 'Letter from the BBFC to the Director of Public Prosecutions in 1979', In: *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom*, booklet accompanying the Blu-ray/DVD of *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom*, UK: BFI, 34-39.
- <sup>40</sup> Kermode, M. (2001) "I was a Teenage Horror Fan: Or 'How I learned to stop worrying and love Linda Blair' Mark Kermode (Age 36)", In: Barker, M. and Petley, J. (eds), *Ill Effects: The Media Violence Debate*. London: Routledge. 126-134.
- <sup>41</sup> Church.
- <sup>42</sup> Genette. 2.
- <sup>43</sup> Hawkins, J. (2000) *Cutting Edge: Art Horror and the Horrific Avant Garde*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press. 44.