



THINKING ITALIAN ANIMALS

Human and Posthuman in Modern
Italian Literature and Film

EDITED BY
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ITALIAN AND ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES



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Creatureliness and Posthumanism in Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò*

Alexandra Hills

With this essay, I wish to offer a reading of two films occupying an infamous space in the Italian cinematic canon of the 1970s, Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* (*Il portiere di notte*, 1974) and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò* (1975), arguing that they contribute to the theoretical debate surrounding the posthuman through their portrayal of the relationship between embodiment and history.¹ While the films are often analyzed together for their sexualized portrayal of fascism, the important and interlocking themes of the materiality of historical influence on the body and the body's subsequent metamorphosis and animalization have hitherto been neglected by scholars. Thus this paper builds on Kriss Ravetto's reading of a body of Italian cinematographic works that, in Ravetto's words, "refus[e] to disengage Nazism and moral humanism" by exposing the "rhetoric of violence at the heart of bourgeois humanism" (227).² First, *Salò* and *The Night Porter* engage with humanism in the sense of the Romantic notion of humanist art that revealed man's true essence. As Margaret Atwood explains, "[W]hat man wrote [. . .] was self-expression—the expression of the self, of a man's whole being" (52). But along with staging humanism as the artistic expression of man, I argue that Cavani and Pasolini are responding to a renewed investment in the notion of "humanity." This term, privileged in Italian postwar cultural production, was used to explain the urgency of assessing fascism and the crimes against humanity perpetrated during the Second World War, in the name of salvaging a notion of "the human," which was felt to be still redeemable in the aftermath of almost three decades of fascist rule, Nazi occupation, and global

war. As Robert Gordon argues, “[I]nterrogating the ‘humanist’ and partly Christianising topos of Man as a part of a response to the Holocaust is a telling feature of this postwar moment more widely” (53).³ My essay argues that the films expose continuity between moral humanism and the cultural traditions it engendered, showing that, for Pasolini and Cavani, the logical outcome of these same traditions was the aberration of fascism. Thus the notion of the “human” is cast under suspicion in the aftermath of the war and the Holocaust, which represent, for Gordon, “a perfectly rational and *inhuman* end, pursued through the ‘means’ of millions of men, with extreme violence and pure reason producing immense suffering and [...] paradoxically vast reserves of residual humanity” (114, emphasis mine).

In *Salò* and *The Night Porter*, humanistic values and culture that center on the notion of man in control of the universe and its representation are responsible for ontological and bodily fissures in the physical and psychic makeup of mankind—the inverse of the self-presentation that Atwood posits. *Salò* and *The Night Porter* both thematize the violence of fascism as inherent to the dominant artistic practices of Western Europe (including opera, ballet, and literature) and its bodily effects. For both directors, the body is a site of cultural, social, and aesthetic investment: as Myra Seaman notes, embodiment “troubles the human ‘person,’ and is a highly slippery entity despite its concrete givenness, due to the porosity of the mind to the vicissitudes of the body and vice versa” (247). Thus manifold forces exert themselves on the body and subject, where creatureliness and rationality compete to define the status of human beings. These beings exist at the frontiers between an idealized rationality and affect, and the bodily forces that constantly resketch the status of mankind. Indeed, as Andrew Benjamin observes, “the body is the continual register of human animality” (23). Notions of porosity and limits play a major role in my analysis of the two films: how is the limit between human and animal historically conditioned? What is the particularity of human animality as depicted in *Salò* and *The Night Porter*? How does the exposure to historical and physical violence transform, or animalize, one’s humanity? Depicting subjects undergoing experiences that are, to borrow Aaron Kerner’s phrase, “at the outer limits of our subjective and cultural capacities” (6), *Salò* and *The Night Porter* take place in the “after,” the “post” of the fascist catastrophe, and envisage the physical and psychological consequences of life in the throes of tremendous political upheavals.

In *The Night Porter*, Lucia, a concentration camp inmate, is reunited in postwar Vienna with her former lover and tormentor, the *Sturmbahnführer* Max. Their memories and fantasies are replayed against Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, and Viennese imperial architecture serves as a backdrop to a relationship that ends in the couple’s death at the hands of Max’s fellow former Nazi officers. The film relies on the nexus of architecture and embodiment, sensuality and memory to retrace the repressed history of Austria’s involvement in the Holocaust. In *Salò*, Pasolini depicts a catastrophic, even

apocalyptic, undoing of the joyful optimism for the body he portrayed in his cinematic *Trilogy of Life* (*Trilogia di Vita*): *The Decameron* (1971), *The Canterbury Tales* (1972), and *Arabian Nights* (1974). Scenes of torture, rape, and coprophagia feature in *Salò*'s dramatization of Italy's double capitulation: first, to historical fascism, emblemized in Pasolini's chosen setting of Marzabotto for the opening sequences of *Salò*,⁴ and second, to what Pasolini called the "new," "structural" fascism of postwar neocapitalism. Through a combination of the historical legacy of Italian fascism and the "new" fascism of consumer capitalism, Pasolini claimed that humanity was entering a new era whose manifestations were primarily traceable at a bodily level. In the "Repudiation of the *Trilogy of Life*" ("Abiura della *Trilogia di vita*"), Pasolini notes—in a statement that could also apply to *The Night Porter*—that this nefarious combination has meant that "even the 'reality' of innocent bodies has been manipulated, manhandled by consumerist power: indeed, such violence to human bodies has become the most macroscopic fact of the *new human epoch*" (*Lettere* 71–72, emphasis mine).⁵ Here Pasolini claims that mankind is entering a posthuman era, in the sense that "innocent bodies" are being refigured through the violence and coercion of economic and political power—namely, the "new fascism" that has evolved from the historical event depicted in *Salò*. Together *Salò* and *The Night Porter* interrogate the consequences of the porosity of biology and politics and thereby portray humans undergoing the physically distorting force of power, complemented by modes of embodiment caused by what Anat Pick has called "the permutations of necessity and materiality that condition and shape human life, the inhuman side of culture" (5). These films debunk the notion that "human essence is freedom from the wills of others" (Macpherson 3, emphasis mine) and pose questions as to the remainders of humanity in the aftermath of violent historical catastrophe. Thus, within this essay, I will expand Pasolini's observation about the innocent bodies of the *Trilogia di vita* by asking whether this "new human" is actually posthuman, and what vision of history is implied by its advent.

Posthumanism and the Creaturely

Posthumanism is often seen as an optimistic theory, thanks to important contributions by Katherine Hayles, Myra Seaman, and Cary Wolfe that aspire to empower human beings as liberated, "prosthetic creature[s] that ha[ve] coevolved with technology and material" (Wolfe xxv). Yet Jeff Wallace's more somber exploration of the "posthuman" will inform my investigation; he notes that "the 'posthuman' tends to combine connotations of evolutionary development with those of transgression and loss. A notion of some integrally 'human' condition is confronted with its demise" (26). I suggest that Pasolini and Cavani sketch the loss of an integrally important part of human nature—namely, its ability to invite compassion and

an affective response from the other—a loss embodied in the depiction of “creaturely” bodies in both films.

The notion of “creatureliness” indicates a spectrum of physical disturbances that crystallizes both directors’ engagement with fascism and the aftermath of humanism, thus shedding light on the intertwining of animality, culture, and history. The term *creatureliness* condenses the liminality of man and animal as well as the tension between man as part of God’s creation (the word *creature* is linked etymologically to that of *creation*) and as an object being that can be instrumentalized, provoking disgust and fear. Indeed, the OED defines *creature* first as “a created thing or being” and second as “a human person or being, an individual” who can be described either with “a modifying word indicating the type of person, and esp. expressing admiration, affection, compassion or commiseration,” or as “a reprehensible or despicable person.” Third, *creature* stands for “a living or animate being; an animal, often distinct from a person.” Finally, *creature* is subservient in that it can be defined as “a person who is willing to do someone else’s bidding.” Etymologically speaking, *creature* generates four productive lines of enquiry for this essay: the creature as (1) created by forces external to it; (2) interpreted as human, in which case inviting a particular kind of affective response, positive or negative; (3) animal or human; and (4) subservient, echoing the first definition of the creature as “created” or “creation,” owing its existence to something external to itself.

The first intensive reflections on the issue of “creatureliness” in the twentieth century appear in the journal *Die Kreatur* (*The Creature*, 1927–30), which posited an editorial stance that all worldly beings were united by their having been created and by their shared vulnerability: “This publication wishes to speak of the world—of all beings, things and all the elements that compose today’s world—so that their creatureliness [*Geschöpflichkeit*] may be recognised” (Buber, von Weizsäcker, and Wittig 2).⁶ One essay in particular emphasizes the creature’s vulnerability, as well as man’s tendency to exclude himself from the spectrum of creatureliness and thereby ignore the violence done to other creatures in the name of the (false) superiority of man: “Mankind has promoted itself so high above the rest of creation [. . .]. [M]ankind has dreamed and philosophised itself so deeply into a supracreaturely intellectual world that the distance between man and creature has become very great. [. . .] When the new power [Wittig is speaking of religious faith here] by means of which we will inherit the earth, becomes strong enough, then the creature will be freed from the physical causality into which we have built our own violence” (Wittig 138).

In 1930, Wittig’s concept of creatureliness offers a possibility of redemption, since the creature is a religious creation, while it also collapses animality and humanity as hierarchical categories and promises renewed hope in compassionate affect beyond species and power relations. However, in light of the historical violence that lay just around the corner, new inflections of “creatureliness” were necessary. Eric L. Santner’s recent study *On*

Creaturely Life (2006) adapts the redemptive, religious idea of the creaturely while retaining the ethical impact of the concept. His concept of creatureliness also hinges on the biopolitical aspect of the notion, defined as follows: “The essential ‘disruption’ that renders man ‘creaturely’ has a distinctly political—or better *biopolitical*—aspect; it names the threshold where life becomes a matter of politics and politics comes to inform the very matter and materiality of life” (Santner 12). Here, the creaturely moves from the optimistic guarantor of the unity of God’s creation to the symptom of a traumatizing entrapment in the political that defines and molds man’s physicality, suggesting once more the previous definitions and their notions of the creaturely passivity of the person “doing someone else’s bidding.” A consideration of Karl Schoonover’s *Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Italian Cinema* (2012) may help clarify by contrast. Arguing that the neorealist portrayal of the “brutalized body” grounded a “global empathy in cinematic corporeality” (xv), Schoonover identifies a visual politics of “brutal humanism” that invokes an imagined spectator who, at the sight of the suffering body, “is overcome with political pathos, cosmopolitan goodwill, liberal guilt and charitable imperatives” (xvii). By contrast, in *Salò* and *The Night Porter*, suffering, rather than absorbing the spectator into affective compassion for the victims, alienates the viewer, who does not recognize a common humanity in the sufferer. Rather, viewers are faced with an uncanny and discomfiting creatureliness that underscores the precariousness of humanism as an ethical mode of engagement with others and complicates the notion of suffering as redemptive.

Surfaces of Consumerism

Both Pasolini and Cavani problematize their position as filmmakers and intellectuals within a European humanist legacy. However, neither director seeks to establish a valid moral code to counter this humanist political and cultural inheritance. Rather, Pasolini and Cavani work to show how this humanist tradition has been turned into its opposite: an inhumane exchange of images and visual pleasures at the expense of a human being that has been commodified (Ravetto 8).

Cavani’s film exposes the violence inherent in humanist cultural production. A significant scene is set in the darkened Vienna opera house where the protagonists watch a scene from Mozart’s *Magic Flute*, an opera describing the pleasures of married life and directed by Lucia’s American husband. Max and Lucia exchange glances, each look followed by an image of their relationship in the concentration camp where Max was a guard and Lucia an inmate. Their gazes are complicated by the fact that, first, the opera in no way reflects Lucia’s marriage to her rich but uninterested spouse and, second, the performance offers hints that Max and Lucia’s relationship is more authentic due to its physical, noneconomically

consumerist basis. Furthermore, Lucia's husband is actually conducting the scene of the opera, which shows the coextensiveness of the culture industry and the marriage economy in the film. But the reverse-angle shots jump between Pamina's light melodies on married life and scenes of a sadistic and sexual nature from the concentration camp; violent sexuality and Nazi symbolism intertwine to provide a counternarrative to Lucia and Max's current existences. Hence Lucia's past as sexually abused inmate acts as a point of resistance to the conformist narrative she now subscribes to as the wife of a successful conductor.⁷ While the scene shows the collusion of high art with consumerism through the figure of the American conductor/husband (a cipher for Western wealth and consumption), the opera also stands for sexual consumption within the fascist economy of desire for power through the *mise en abyme* of the opera scene and concentration camp flashbacks. Thus this episode shows the highly problematic status of humanist culture that is literally in bed with a contaminated historical legacy and the consumerist economy that it both represents and sustains.

Max and Lucia's visions of the camp, while being a salient portrayal of physical abuse, rely on what has become a standard iconography of the Holocaust. The inmates' striped pajamas, the SS guards' black leather gloves and uniforms, and the showy SS banners are well-known features of material archiving the Holocaust. Furthermore, the horrifying stereotypes of the camp doctor (also emblemized in Lina Wertmüller's *Pasqualino Settebellezze* [1975]) and the music-loving SS guards demanding that the inmates entertain them (Bert, the ballet dancer, performs for the guards seminude, further demonstrating the consumption of the body at a cultural, political, and economic level) contribute to a stock image that replaces a sense of suffering in the reality of the camp. Despite the lack of color filter that adds rawness to the images of the camp, the setting of the *Lager* is unarguably kitsch in the sense proposed by Tomas Kúlka: "[K]itsch does not appeal to individual idiosyncracies [. . .] [S]ince its purpose is to please the greatest number of people, it always plays on the most common denominators" (27). The heavily stylized "Holocaust" scenes invite the audience to delight in their capacity to be moved while indulging in the visual pleasure of well-circulated, familiar, and impacting images. Kúlka borrows Milan Kundera's definition of kitsch emotion to elucidate this: "Kitsch causes two tears [. . .] [T]he second tear says, how nice to be moved, together with all of mankind" (27). Thus Cavani problematizes the ways in which human emotion is commodified as an instrument of pleasure through the self-conscious deployment of kitsch images, suggesting that like Mozart, images signifying the Holocaust belong to an equally consumable cultural economy. In *The Night Porter*, human vulnerability is absorbed into a logic of capitalism, voyeurism, and exchange, as bodies and emotions are conditioned by structural powers.

In *Salò*, human vulnerability and suffering are coopted into the libertine's regulated system of exploitation and consumption, which overrides

any affective humanist responses to the suffering body. Pasolini's film emphasizes the nexus of victimhood and sexual pleasure by staging beautiful, classically proportioned bodies chosen by the libertines for their perfection (for instance, one girl is rejected due to a blackened tooth). Furthermore, Pasolini's adaptation of Sade's hyperviolent novel *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785) to a fascist-era context underscores his condemnation of the complicity between humanist culture and dehumanizing violence. *Salò* shows, beyond the accusations of grossly equating Nazism and Sadism, how the lust for the spectacle of violence is embedded within European culture at the same time that it highlights Pasolini's own position within that very culture.⁸ This provokes a transition between the body as a means of experiencing reality in the *Trilogy of Life* to the body as rigid, frozen image in *Salò*. One need only think of the symmetry and coldness of the architecture matching that of the eight male and eight female victims and their thin, pale bodies, whose movement obeys the libertines' orders and desires. In his review of *Salò*, Barthes writes that Pasolini's "stubborn" adaptation of Sade's text resulted in a purely descriptive form of figuration: "Pasolini has shot his scenes to the letter, the way that they had been *décrites* [described] (I do not say "*écrites*" [written]) by Sade; hence these scenes have the sad, frozen and rigorous beauty of large encyclopedic sheets" (100). Yet the ossified brutality that Barthes sees as the consequence of "describing" the Sadean text, for Pasolini is the figure of the contemporary bourgeoisie. It is, in other words, the driving force and product of the exploitative structures of capitalism as "creators of a new type of civilization," which "could not help but arrive at the de-realization of the body" (Pasolini, "Tetis" 246). The human body of *Salò* is the interface on which various modes of signification and exploitation have inscribed themselves, a mere virtual surface. As Ravetto notes, Pasolini's obsession with cultural "layering" (his quotations of Sade, Klossowski, Nietzsche, to cite but a few) "culminates in the disappearance of notions of depth" (128). Suffering and eroticism are removed from the realm of affect to that of the image in *Salò*, as for instance when the young victim Renata's suffering at the death of her mother is displayed to the libertines as she sobs beneath a painting of Maria, *mater dolorosa*. Yet in *Salò* the collusion of affect and eroticism into the libidinal and consumerist economy of the libertines means that rather than being a guarantor against the exploitation of others as Joseph Wittig would have it, emotional vulnerability and an appeal to shared bodily vulnerability only entrench the libertines' power over their victims, stripping the latter of their dignity as unique human sufferers.

Cavani and Pasolini thus represent the body in the throes of the historical violence represented by "fascism-substance," defined by Barthes *not* as the precise historical phenomenon of fascism but as "one of the modes in which political 'reason' happens to color the death drive which, in Freud's words, can never be seen, unless tainted with some kind of phantasmagoria" (102). In this sense, Pasolini's and Cavani's characters are remainders,

in that historical violence becomes imprinted on the psyche and its bodily manifestation, and the repetition of the *Gestus* replaces the vitality of the act, a theme to which I will return later. Thus Pasolini and Cavani shatter Nietzsche's optimism that art ultimately furnishes man with the capacity to see himself joyously from the outside, to experience himself as an "aesthetic phenomenon" (104). Instead, in both films, a redeeming perspective becomes impossible, as all modes of signification are inscribed into the heavily referential, thus closed, representational economy. In other words, a concern for aesthetics amounts to being coopted by the system that causes the devaluation of the human, reduced to a knot of economic, cultural, and political influences: art, politics, ideology, and consumption are all equally contaminated. But how is this cooption of corporeality into the political worked out in *Salò* and *The Night Porter*?

Creaturely Embodiment in the New Human Epoch

Both Pasolini and Cavani dramatize the modes of human embodiment brought about by the intimacy of the political and the physical. I would suggest that the exposure of the human body to the vicissitudes of the political brings about new "creaturely" forms of embodiment in *The Night Porter* and *Salò*. Santner states that a creaturely body manifests the "uncanny proximity between human and animal" (146); it is one that has begun to exist in ways that are precarious, liminal, and subject to collapse as a result of exposure to the political and its practices of exclusion. In Santner's words, "Creatureliness will thus signify less a dimension that traverses the boundaries of human and nonhuman forms of life, than a specifically human way of finding oneself caught in the midst of antagonisms in and of the political field" (xix). Thus the creaturely is the bodily medium whereby the traumas of historical and political violence are inscribed on and expressed by the human body, whose lack of corporeal and affective depth is compensated by a continuing, animal, animated energy. Whereas Santner sees the "creature" as an ethical and redemptive figure that elicits compassion and attentiveness in the name of rescuing humanity from the instrumentalization of reason, Cavani and Pasolini foreclose an ethical response to the "creatures" they depict in order to complicate the viewer's ethical framework. New posthumanist configurations of the human body emerge in these films, configurations that reflect the concept of creatureliness and recall Seaman's observation: "Posthumanism observes that there has never been one unified, cohesive 'human,' a title that was granted by and to those with the material and cultural luxury to bestow upon themselves the faculties of reason, autonomous agency and the privileges of 'being human'" (247).

An exemplary character in *Salò* highlights the collapse of the boundary between the animal and the human. Renata, one of the victims whose

mother died trying to save her, is petted and given food by the Duc—a situation that mirrors Signora Vaccari's story of sharing food with her tormentor's dogs. Renata's humiliation is first expressed in animal terms. Armando Maggi perceptively links the persistent reference to the mother's sobs and death to the following scene where she is forced to eat feces kneeling down; her retching body echoes the mother's sobs (267). As Maggi illustrates, the Freudian overtones in this episode are clear. First, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud situates the advent of humanity at the moment when human beings begin to revile excrement, thus separating themselves from the animality of their bodies (99). Second, Renata's crouched posture undermines what Freud would have considered the civilizing force of man's upright gait.⁹ Thus her grief for her mother as well as her humiliation are turned into bodily abjections, which due to the spectator's lack of access to Renata's interiority obfuscate the psychic malaise at their root. The conversion of the psychic into the bodily resonates with the conversion of traumatic memories (the death of the mother) into bodily symptoms, which Santner describes as "creaturely" due to "a traumatic kernel around which the 'ego life' of the other has, at some level, been (dis)organized" (xii). Thus the traumas that stem from a toxic history are reenacted as a physical symptom. Furthermore, in *Salò*, Pasolini exchanges the sexual dynamism of the promiscuous bodies of *Decameron* for a closed and static body, which in all its physical beauty is sterile and lifeless. The victims of sexual violence are most often portrayed crouching or sitting down (think of the disturbing scene in which some of them kneel in a vat of excrement), and in one striking scene, they are leashed up and forced to walk about on all fours like dogs, suggesting the dehumanization effect of subjection to another's will.

As Pasolini does not dwell on the affective states of the victims but includes them in an overall economy of desire and consumption, the viewer feels no compassion or excitement at their plight. The cringed postures and animalistic behavior of the victims dehumanize them to the extent that they inhabit the uncanny margin between animality and humanity, and the violence of this positioning is registered on the body. While Renata is a victim of an intolerable situation, which may otherwise evoke pity or compassion in the viewer's response, her dilating rib cage and her submission to her torturers' will provokes revulsion in the spectator. Blangis even addresses the young prisoners as "creatures" before reading them "the rules that will govern your life," signifying their submission to the will and rules of others: "[W]eak enchained creatures, destined for our pleasure, I hope you have not deluded yourself that you will find here the ridiculous freedom conceded by the outside world."

The Night Porter further thematizes the creaturely in-betweenness provoked by the traumatic exposure to history. Like predators honing in on their prey, the gang of ex-Nazis stalks Lucia and Max as the couple begins to starve in Max's apartment until they are forced to surrender by leaving

the flat. Despite their starvation and imminent death, Max and Lucia's relationship evidently fulfills their desires, which makes the scenes in the apartment some of the most disturbing in the film. Their relationship to the tight, confined space of the apartment that provides safety from external predators underscores the physical dehumanization caused by a toxic past.¹⁰ Their subjection to the predators who are stalking them transforms them physically. Indeed, once they move into the apartment, Max and Lucia almost stop speaking altogether and their movements revolve around making love, touching each other, fighting physically for food or sexual dominance, and crouching and crawling under tables. When Max cuts his foot on a piece of broken glass, Lucia licks his wound in an animal-like way. As food becomes scarcer, they break a jam jar and cut their mouths, tongues, and faces trying to lick its contents. Furthermore, when Max leaves the apartment in search of food, he chains Lucia to the bed; from then on, until the final scene on the bridge, we do not see Lucia without her chain, which animalizes her further. As their bodies become more and more crouched from hunger, confinement, and pain, the couple not only collapses the victim–perpetrator binary (she as postwar Europe's archetype of the “victim,” and he as a Nazi guard, the archetypal “perpetrator”) that society imposes but also blurs the boundaries between human and animal through their gestures and silence. Their relationship cannot be integrated into a political system where the past is systematically denied. This results in their physical transformation into an uncanny amalgam of animal-like physicality, rendering them creaturely. According to Santner, “[Creatureliness] is an excess of pressure—really a kind of life in excess both of our merely biological life and of our life in the space of meaning” (34). Their liminal, creaturely bodies mirror this as symptoms of “caesuras in the space of meaning” that cannot be recuperated into the social order (Santner xv). To quote Agamben, “the non speaking man is a bridge from the animal to the human” (35), and it is precisely from their suspension between these two poles that Max and Lucia's creatureliness springs.

Furthermore, since *Salò* and *The Night Porter* dramatize subjection to systemic modes of embodiment that transform the legibility of the body as human from without, both films engage with Agamben's concept of “bare life,” which defines the breakdown of boundaries between the human and animal. In Agamben's words, “[E]xperiments in totalitarianism involve the ‘bare life’ of human beings which collapses the biological and the political” (46)—that is, the human being under totalitarianism is “separated and excluded from itself” (76). Agamben contends that man can only exist historically by policing his animality, and that the role of culture and society has been to ultimately separate human agency from its animal bodiliness. *Salò* and *The Night Porter* portray the re-encroachment of animality into the historical life of man, denoting that the human being is the product of a historical disaster that undermines the Hegelian notion of history as progress. Thus in light of Pasolini's and Cavani's portrayal

of human embodiment after the onset of an “inhumane” regime, we may ask, via Agamben, “*What becomes of the animality of man in posthistory?*” (12). According to Agamben, man is “a field of dialectical tensions. [. . .] Man exists historically only in this tension; he can be human only to the degree that he transcends and transforms the anthropophorous animal which supports him, and only because, through the action of negation, he is capable of mastering and, eventually, destroying his own animality” (12).

Salò and *The Night Porter* disclose an opposite process to this; man cannot be confidently distinguished from the animal, because the body’s dehumanization at the hands of historical and structural fascism undermine man’s historical agency. Without an anthropocentric definition of man, the usefulness of a concept and practice of history starts to erode, to the extent that the blurring of boundaries between man and animal shift humanity into a posthistorical framework. Thus through the demands made on the human body by the dehumanizing forces of historical violence, man and animal draw closer in this postcatastrophic zero hour of Pasolini’s “new human epoch.” The inviolability of man has been corrupted by the instrumentalization of his animality for the pleasure of the libertines in *Salò* and by his exposure to the aftershocks of historical violence in *The Night Porter*. The film apparatus is complicit in this process that undoes the autonomy of Agamben’s posthistorical subject described thus: “[P]osthistorical man no longer preserves his own animality as undisclosable, but rather seeks to take it on and govern it by means of technology” (80). Pasolini’s and Cavani’s figures are “creatures” in the sense of “creations” of a system who also willingly comply with it; they have lost all potential for self-governance due to the manipulation of their animality.

Nonproductive Sexuality and Homeostasis

The sexual relationship has been one of the battlegrounds on which recent theorizing of the posthuman has taken place. As Slavoj Žižek imagines, “[T]he end of sexuality in the much celebrated ‘posthuman’ self-cloning entity expected to emerge soon [. . .] will simultaneously signal the end of what is traditionally designated as the uniquely human spiritual transcendence.” Sexuality is generally seen as uniquely human; however, what becomes of sexuality when it is relegated to the aforementioned “surface phenomena”? An exploration of the depiction of sexuality as nongenerative and nonaffective in these two films shows that sexual relations and bodily intimacy cannot be sites of resistance but are instead coopted into the system of exchange and capital.

Salò has been referred to as “the death of sex” (Musatti qtd. in Boarini et al. 131) as well as “the funeral dirge of eroticism” (Chapier qtd. in Greene 116). In his essay “Tetis,” Pasolini expressed disillusionment with the joy of the popular body, now reshaped by the new fascism of consumerism. The

essay illustrates how Pasolini realized that the relaxation of censorship in Italy actually contributed to making the human body part of a capitalist machine of sexual freedom. The new sexual permissivity was determined, according to Pasolini, by “a new hedonistic and completely (if stupidly) secular ideology. [. . .] Eros is in the area of such permissiveness. It is both source and object of consumption” (“Tetis” 246).

Indeed, *Salò* follows a logic of symmetry and repetition, fundamentally contrary to that of excitation and titillation based on concealment and surprise. Also significant are the villa’s symmetrical hall of mirrors as the setting of the farcical wedding: four libertines and four female narrators line up eight male and eight female victims amid the gelid lines of the decor. The windows are too high to see out of and as such only provide lighting for the perverse spectacle, with the mirrors echoing the closedness of the system. The libertine fascination with sodomy and the abjuration of female genitalia emphasizes this closedness and nonproductivity. In a much analyzed sequence, the duke states that sodomy is “the most absolute gesture, for all the fatal significance it contains for the human species, and the most ambiguous because it accepts social norms in order to break them.” The act of sodomy sterilizes sexuality by recuperating it into a mechanics of repetition: “It’s the most gratuitous, and thus most expressive of the infinite repetition of the act of love, and at the same time the most mechanical” (Bachmann 44). Furthermore, the repetitiveness of sodomy betrays the libertines’ unquenchable lust for consumption: “[T]he gesture of the sodomite has the advantage of being able to be repeated thousands of times.”

Sodomy (and to some extent, excrement) also contributes to the abolishment of sexual difference in *Salò*. Pasolini had previously expressed political hope in the idea of unrecognizability, claiming that intellectuals must make themselves “continuously unrecognizable [. . .]: they must scandalize, disturb” (*Lettere* 125). However, for Rinaldo Rinaldi, the collapse of difference in accordance with a politics of “unrecognizability” culminates in universal sameness and bourgeois hypostasis: “This equivalence is the perfect schema of the new world” (184). Žižek poses a pertinent question: “What if sexual difference is not simply a biological fact, but the Real of an antagonism that defines humanity, so that once sexual difference is abolished, a human being effectively becomes indistinguishable from a machine?” A vision emerges of bodies of imperialist capitalism transformed into automata due to their absorption into the economic system of pleasure production. *The Night Porter* and *Salò* show the physical outcome of political manipulations: the body is caught in the sphere of the biopolitical and rendered creaturely and sterile. Indeed, Maggi restructures *Salò* as the perverse genesis of a nonproductive, apocalyptic social order through a sodomitic negation of sexual intercourse and maternity (330). Sodomy is coupled with excrement in this new, static world: “In *Salò* shit is the sign of the new

perennial decadence, the sign of a perverted, albeit static and enduring system” (Maggi 302). It is no coincidence that at the libertines’ wedding banquet, excrement is served.

While Pasolini’s victims are doubtlessly subjugated, Joan Copjec suggests that the source of the libertine’s excitement is “that of the other’s choosing to stop rising above the pain, to which he has up until now been subjected, and deciding instead to submerge himself in it” (223). Recalling the OED’s definition of the creature as the “despicable person,” subject to the wills of others, the libertine takes delight in “the other’s free decision to identify himself with the obscene, unutilisable facticity of his pain” (Copjec 223). Thus the victims themselves are complicit in this system of consumption and repetition, which forecloses the possibility of feeling compassion. In *Salò*, the lack of psychological depth accorded to the victims encourages the viewer to objectify them, and consequently, as Greene writes, “unable to feel for the victims as fellow human beings, we become uneasy, unsure about the extent of our own humanness” (199). The violated body does not elicit a compassionate, “human” response, and so the validity of ethical thought and affect is thrown into disarray. Pasolini’s diagnosis of modern Italy is that historical fascism is coextensive with economic exploitation. In a critique of modern Italy, which proclaimed itself to be radically antifascist after the 1948 elections, Pasolini unmasks the false dichotomy of the Italy of *Salò* and the Italy of the economic boom. Pasolini’s reflections in *Salò* provide an allusion to Marx, who diagnoses the progress of modern capitalism as reliant on the enslavement of its subjects in *Capital*: “It squanders human being, living labour, more readily than does any other mode of production, squandering not only flesh and blood, but nerves and brain as well. In fact it is only through the most tremendous waste of individual development that the development of humanity in general is secured and pursued, in that epoch of history that directly precedes the conscious reconstruction of human society” (182). Thus Pasolini’s *Salò* exhausts any possible redemption for Italy and its bodies.

The Night Porter also dramatizes how the body compulsively repeats the past and forecloses any avenues for progress or transformation. In the final scenes of the film, Max and Lucia dress up in their concentration camp uniforms. This once again points to the disturbing idea that the pair see their camp experience as the only true locus of their desire. For Cavani, “The war is only a detonator: it expands the field of possibility and expression, takes off the brakes, opens the floodgates. My protagonists have removed all restrictions and live their roles lucidly” (x). However, it is difficult to see the resistance or lucidity that Cavani discerns in the plot, as there is nothing liberating about this relationship. Max and Lucia are unable to live under the conditions of everyday life due to their fixation on their past, which they compulsively repeat. Their performance is inflexible and conditioned by the clichéd repetition of the past to which they finally

succumb; in this sense, one may be able to describe them as always already *undead*, a condition which Santner describes as a creaturely “stuckness” between “real and symbolic death” (xx).

Conclusion: Spectating the Creature at the End of History

In Cavani’s and Pasolini’s worlds, the possibility of resistance or dissent is completely foreclosed, and any hope for historical change disabled; the creaturely, subjected bodies undermine the possibility of historical agency and intervention, underlining the films’ posthistorical framework. In *Salò*, when one of the victims is denounced and executed for a genuine act of sexual intercourse with a fellow prisoner, his last gesture—a communist salute—is followed by a gunshot wound to the head. Thus sexuality and left-wing politics are undermined as strategies of resistance by the collaborators, and by extension, by the viewers, who are forced to adopt the gunman’s perspective. This shot is taken from the subjective point of view of one collaborator, which is sutured onto that of the viewer. In the closing scenes of *The Night Porter*, the couple’s car is followed by another, from whose position the camera follows the couple in a long tracking shot: the camera, and by extension the spectator, alternate between shots of Max and Lucia and their pursuers, not only heightening the tension of the chase, but making the viewer occupy the unsettling position of both pursuer and pursued. As Marguerite Waller affirms, “[T]he camera’s restless comparison of every position to every other is among the film’s most powerful and most disturbing strategies” (216). They are filmed from a distance, a formal choice that problematizes the destructive and ambivalent modes of vision as well as the pervasiveness of the Nazi past that radically ossifies the body in postwar European culture. Thus Max and Lucia are punished for their relationship, which brings the history of the camp back to the foreground of contemporary society as well as to the foreground of the screen image; they are also shot in the back, from a camera position that is simultaneously that of the executioner and spectator. The way the spectator is forced to watch the scenes in both films suggests an unconscious complicity in the actions taken against the characters on screen.¹¹ As Copjec argues, “[T]he lens that produces objectivity is not in front of but *behind* the spectator” (202, emphasis mine). Thus the directors suggest the viewer’s implication in the societal processes that disable an affective response to the suffering human body: we become “creatures” of the camera.

The films end with a disturbing interrogation of the conditions of postwar spectatorship that enable us to challenge the scopic relations on which humanism and ethics are based. After collecting material for her first documentary about the history of the Third Reich aired on RAI Television in 1961 and 1962, Cavani stated in an interview how the archival

footage revealed a disturbing thirst for images that challenged the limits of spectators' experiences: "The Germans loved to record every event on film, and they did it well. My editor and I saw rolls upon rolls on the *Lager* and the Russian campaign. [. . .] Clearly there has been a progress in cruelty, a true escalation. For whom did those cameramen think they were leaving these images? For monsters?" (qtd. in Marrone 84). Perhaps it was for the new "creatures" of the postfascist, posthuman era depicted in *Salò* and *The Night Porter*.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for providing the funding to make the research for this publication possible.
2. These are works that Marcus Stiglegger calls *sadiconazista*, which he defines as a genre of films featuring a combination of the following: (1) they make assumptions about fascism as a system; (2) they use fascism as a screen for individual obsessions; and (3) they use the historical backdrop as an excuse for sadomasochistic excess and pornography (31).
3. Gordon references Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* (*Se questo è un uomo*, 1946), Natalia Ginzburg's essay "The Child of Man" ("*Il figlio dell'uomo*," 1946), and Alberto Moravia's *Man as End* (*L'uomo come fine*, 1954) as examples of this preoccupation with "man" as a problematic, yet ultimately redemptive, notion in Italy. Wider European studies of this discourse include Levinas's *Humanism of the Other* (1972), which investigates the possibility of humanism after the Holocaust, and Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958).
4. Marzabotto was the location of a large scale massacre of civilians in the final days of Mussolini's puppet republic in 1944.
5. Unless otherwise indicated, translations in this essay are mine.
6. The journal was edited by Buber, Viktor von Weizsäcker, and Wittig, respectively Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant, and it was chiefly preoccupied with religious and philosophical concerns.
7. Indeed, Lucia later claims to her husband that, while he goes to conduct in Frankfurt, she wants to stay behind in Vienna because of "all that shopping [she] wanted to do," thus conforming to feminine and capitalist clichés.
8. Roland Barthes notes that "it is eventually not Pasolini's world that is bared, but our glance: our glance stripped naked, such is the effect of the letter" (100).
9. Freud writes that man's newfound ability to walk caused "a deterioration of man's olfactory stimuli" which in turn led to the urge for cleanliness based on a newfound repugnance for excrement. The

- transition to an upright posture leads to a disavowal of man's animality: "The fateful process of civilization," writes Freud, "would thus have set in with man's adoption of an erect posture" (99).
10. The apartment becomes a sort of den: both an animal dwelling place and a place of refuge that buffers the couple from exposure to their habitat. In their exploration of dens and nests, Paul Farley and Michael Symmons ascertain that "there is always an element of danger as if the nest-like space is all the more secure for having some darkness and threat it needs to keep out" (42). Gaetana Marrone reveals that the apartment was reconstructed in Rome's Cinecittà studios with mobile walls to enhance the enclosure of the protagonists under siege. She describes the close-up, squared shots as "tight, confining" (87).
 11. Millicent Marcus identifies this uncomfortable complicity underscored in *The Night Porter*: "in the malevolent activities of the ex-Nazi officers who seek to exorcise the couple's threat to their post-war normalization we cannot help but recognize our own complicity" (55).

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