



Salò Island

By Juli Carson

[Salò] bothers everybody. . .it prevents anybody from getting through customs.

-- Roland Barthes, *Le Monde*, July 16, 1976

What I remember most about Fashion Island – a 1960s open-air shopping center in Newport Beach, California – was how the wind chimes on the front of Robinson's Department store would ring throughout the day. Designed by Tom Van Sant, they were the world's largest and made an eerily beautiful sound that became more pronounced every autumn and winter when the Santa Ana winds blew in from the Mojave Desert, leaving the coast hot, dry and dusty. There wasn't much there, on September 9, 1967, when Fashion Island inaugurated its opening with a performance by the Santa Ana High School Saints Marching Band. In fact, the site had previously been home to the national Boy Scout Jamboree. So folks of my generation reminisce about making forts and mischief on the land before Fashion Island opened its doors, and then, later, making trouble in the funky modernist playground that stood at the mall's center. Aside from the beach, Fashion Island was a readymade baby sitter for people my age, a polymorphous DIY daycare for kids with struggling Boomer parents launching their careers in the yet-to-be developed Newport Beach. That was 1972, the same year President Richard Nixon was reelected in an historic landslide against George McGovern, an event that hardened progressives, people like my parents, who had committed their lives to changing the world. Today, Fashion Island is owned by The Irvine Company and has become a booming corporate mall like any other in North America, with the exception that Fashion Island's parking lot is now peppered with Bentleys, Porsches and 7 series BMWs. A Tesla showroom, a veritable playground for the 1%, has supplanted the sculptural kindergarten from my childhood. Gone are the original family owned department stores and boutiques, replaced by Neiman Marcus, Bloomingdales, and the like. Van Sant's wind chimes remain, in situ, although now they've been silenced. Like a relic out of Pompeii, the chimes are present but embalmed. And yet, if all this signals the triumph of American neo-liberal economics, it's precisely what makes Fashion Island – wealthy clientele and all – so ordinary, so *ubiquitous*.

Cut to Italy, 1975. The year that Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini penned his scathing critique of a sublimated, *consumerist* Fascism



for the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. It was the same year that Pasolini filmed what has since been deemed the most controversial film ever made: *Salò, or The 120 Days of Sodom*. It was also the year of his murder, his body abandoned on the beach:

The scene of the murder, Idroscalo, recalls a setting for a Pasolini film or novel: Shacks lie scattered across a beach and in the distance rise the slums of Nuova Ostia. A 17-year-old rent boy nicknamed "Joey the Toad" Pelosi was charged with the murder - a homosexual assignation gone fatally wrong. Or was Pasolini the victim of a political assassination? His presumed killer, it emerged, was in league with the Italian neo-fascist party. The verdict is still open. Pasolini was 53.¹

But I've raced ahead. First, the scene of Pasolini's *aesthetic* crime. *Salò*, as the film's subtitle attests, is based on Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* (1785), a prolific catalogue of sexual perversions written from the confines of the Bastille. In Sade, who was despised and imprisoned by 3 different regimes – the monarchy, the republic and the empire for his staunch critique of reason and Enlightenment – Pasolini recognized a fellow traveler, as he himself was the quintessential 'bad object' for the left *and* the right. As the Italian writer Leonardo Sciascia put it:

There is conformism in proclaiming oneself a Marxist especially in Italy; there is conformism and no originality whatsoever in continuing to be a Catholic in a Catholic Country; There is conformism and much banality in manipulating for the cinema the dear manias of the dear old Marquis de Sade: but these three conformisms put together, and lived the way Pasolini lived them, produced a tragic desperate anti-conformism, one of the most significant and lasting of our time.²

In these tempest seas of combined Marxist, Catholic and homosexual sensibilities, Pasolini restaged *120 Days of Sodom*, set in the last days of the Republic of Salò, Mussolini's Fascist puppet state, where Pasolini himself had once lived and suffered. The film's Dante-esque narrative gives us 4 circles of hell – anteinferno, circle of obsessions, circle of shit and circle of blood – each of which spirals downward, one after another, as we witness 16 boys and girls be raped, tortured and executed at the hands of 4 Fascist libertines: a duke, a banker, a chief justice and a cardinal. Pasolini's *mise-en-scène* – the frontal, symmetrical arrangement of his actors – evoked the "solemn efficacy of Nazi 'choreography'."³ At the same time, however, the scene was contemporary to 1970s neo-capitalist consumer style, form and dialogue. In either context, the libertines, who ruthlessly torture



their victims, were ordinary bureaucrats – not so far from any one of us – which is why *Salò* dismayed the left and repulsed the public.

As such, *Salò* is a double allegory. On the one hand, the film analogizes Sadism with Fascism, wherein one's body is lost through physical subjugation by violence (here we lose the left, dedicated to Barthes' sublimated, discursive Sade). On the other hand, it analogizes Fascism with post war neo-capitalism, wherein one's body is lost to the cultural spectacle of forced consumption (here we lose the right, dedicated to Fordist mass consumption *versus* Fascist mass domination). In *Salò*, "Fascism" is thus a sliding signifier: it at once signifies "Sade-the-monster" and 1970s "neo-capitalism." This is why *Salò* is so unsettling, stopping the left and the right in their ideological tracks. Prior to this, Pasolini's films had been committed to populist neo-realism, through which Italy's 1960s rural landscape played background to the homoerotic antics of proletarian bad boys in search of trouble (as in *Accatone* and *Mamma Roma*). But in 1975 when the fire flies that had once sparked along the Italian coast were driven away by the vast environmental pollution attending Italy's industrial sprawl – a real life metaphor for the extinction of the proletarian's identification as non-bourgeoisie – Pasolini renounced the vision he had poeticized in *Ashes for Gramsci*. As Bernardo Bertolucci put it: "In his early films he tells fairy-tales to children. They grow up. Then he tells them the truth in *Salò*."⁴ Released after his murder, *Salò's* allegorical nature expanded to include the image of Pasolini's disfigured corpse, spectacularized in the press. The film was so unsettling that during one of its screenings a critic actually cried out: "Luckily, they killed him."⁵

Yoshua Okón's video installation, *Salò Island*, returns to these *mise-en-scènes* – Fashion Island, *Salò* and Pasolini's Murder – as an abstraction. The setting is now global neo-liberal economics: that dynamic blend of free trade, privatization, minimal government regulation and reduced public expenditure, all of which is perfectly synchronized by internet commerce and social media. Through Okón's somnambulant lens, we now envision Fashion Island as a burial ground, one in which Pasolini's murder is conceptually evoked as signifying the death of an era: 1960s Newport Beach culture, with its independent businesses, adolescent sexuality and human scale architecture. In its place, we enter a filmic montage of current day Fashion Island, presented as a surreal late night corporate labyrinth, completely devoid of people, although perfectly lit and ready for

Left: Yoshua Okón, *Salò Island*, 2013, video still
Center: Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Salò*, 1975, film still
Right: Situationist graffiti, circa 1968, archival image
Cover: Yoshua Okón, *Salò Island*, 2013, video still

business. A real life visualization of neo-liberal capitalism that proffers up readymade environments, while thwarting usable public space and corporeal self-control, in Okón's hands this contemporary *mise-en-scène* sets the stage for a real time public intervention. Enter the specter of *Salò's* human-dogs. No longer are they Pasolini's young dogs *in* hell. Now, they return to us as dogs *from* hell, aged and decrepit. An allegory for what was once there, in situ, and what might still come to be, *Salò Island* is both a poetic rumination and a solemn warning.

Writing from the confines of Silicon Valley – where The Irvine Company's real estate holdings loom large – it's impossible to escape *Salò Island's* corporate, consumer imagery. It's everywhere, on every building, selling me "a better way of life." As such, I'm reminded that Okón's critique isn't unique to Fashion Island, nor of what might have been there. Rather, *Salò Island* addresses a global condition of economic alienation that began in the 19th Century. In Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* ("Estranged Labor"), he says that when humans are "identical with their life-activity" (that is, when they're reduced to living labor) they become indistinguishable from animals, "eating, drinking, procreating, or at most...dwelling and dressing-up."⁶ Recently, the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler transposes this line of thinking to the electronic era. He observes that by the year 2000, the Internet had subjugated all facets of the user's psychological, economic and culture milieus to the demands and developments of the global neo-liberal market: "Markets are above all consciences – acting as places for exchanges by consumers whose consciences are themselves consumer 'goods,' and for market financiers whose 'consciences' are investors and speculators."⁷ No longer the Marxist crisis, wherein human-animals are physically reduced to labor, we now have human-animals virtually reduced to disembodied consumption. And in the context of social media, when humans are identical with their life-activity as shoppers and bloggers, the effect is a timeless, placeless, sense of consciousness: an insatiable state of *déjà vu*.

Salò Island's 3-channel projection aptly captures this devolution from radical embodiment to virtual disembodiment. 3 points of view (a result of Okón simultaneously shooting from the left, center and right of a slow moving car) continuously loop around and throughout Fashion Island's streets. While each projection has its own focal point and offers different moments of time, it's the phenomenological center of the moving car itself that spatially unifies them. This is why the peripheral perspectives seem to relate to the central one, even though the 3 projections are not, in fact, synchronized to reflect the real time manner in which the scenes were shot. The result is a monadic visual center founded upon a physical body – *neither* our own, *nor* given-to-be seen – relentlessly focused on the architectural landscape: the storefronts, parking lots, banks, etc. Okón's *mise-en-scène* is thus an inversion of those staged by Pasolini who, as a *rule*, never shot landscapes. Relegating them to the background, Pasolini focused his gaze squarely upon the figure, "never wandering far from Masaccio and his proud *chiarascuro*."⁸ Okón, to the contrary, focuses on the landscape and breaks it into pieces, scanning through these bits with the keenness of a taxonomist's eye. In so doing, Okón's camera lends Fashion Island the iconicity – to the level of complete disembodied fetish – that Pasolini lent his realist characters. But why, we might ask, does he do so?

Which brings us back to Pasolini's human-dogs of 1975 that Okón resuscitates in 2013. If Fashion Island's architectural landscape is *Salò Island's* protagonist – a disembodied spectacle of consumer

goods, investors and speculators – then the human dogs traversing this terrain are specters of the repressed *physical* body – in the form of a walking unconscious – that exist somewhere *beyond* the site. One of the Situationists most famous graffiti from May 1968 was: "Beneath the pavement, the beach." *This* is the body that exists beyond *Salò Island's* corporate spectacle, both physically and poetically. For the beach is the reservoir of this site's history. It existed for ages before neo-liberalism came to pass and, like history itself, will remain for more to come. The question now is: which call of the sublime will we heed? Is it that of the waves, rhythmically pounding the ground upon which they land, inexorably evoking our human scale vis-à-vis the vastness of nature? Or will it be the disembodied siren song of cultural consumption that *Salò Island* evokes? It's impossible, of course, to heed only one of these calls, with any purity. It is *Salò Island's* proposition, however, that we should contemplate this very impasse.

- 1 Ian Thomson, *The Guardian*, Feb 22, 2013.
- 2 Leonardo Sciascia, "God behind Sade," *Pier Paolo Pasolini: The Poetics of Heresy*, Vol. II: 2 Special Edition, 1982, p. 104.
- 3 Naomi Greene, *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Cinema as Heresy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 200.
- 4 Bernardo Bertolucci, *Whoever Says the Truth Shall Die – A film about Pier Paolo Pasolini*, Philo Bregstein, 1981.
- 5 Greene, p. 201.
- 6 *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed., Robert Tucker, (New York: Norton & Company, 1978), p. 74.
- 7 Bernard Stiegler, *Technic and Time, 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*, trans., Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 2-3.
- 8 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *My Cinema*, (Bologna: Cineteca Bologna, 2012), p. 33.

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Yoshua Okón SALÒ ISLAND

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