

CHAPTER 1

'THE FILM YOU ARE ABOUT TO SEE IS BASED ON DOCUMENTED FACT': ITALIAN NAZI SEXPLOITATION CINEMA

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The cycle of Nazi atrocity films ... are without a doubt some of the most distasteful example of exploitation ever committed to film It is interesting to speculate whether the sordid events depicted are so outrageous due to the fact that they seek to exploit events from recent history. ... Time can be a great healer but I doubt whether any film which revels in the misery of the Holocaust can ever be anything other than a highly dubious form of 'entertainment' which can only be viewed as an example of the lowest forms of trash culture.¹

THE NAZI SEXPLOITATION FILM

This chapter deals with a kind of European exploitation cinema which, as noted by Luthor-Smith above, that seems to defy even the most nominal categories of a taste culture. This is a cinema that emerged out of a long-standing exploitation tradition, but even by those standards, seems to have pushed the envelope too far. Italian exploitation cinema has always been characterised by cycles of

imitations and down right rip-offs of other European and American films. A film will emerge that seems to take the national box-office, or at least the receive the media's attention, and then very quickly, often before the original has reached the Italian cinema screens itself, a whole slew of imitators emerges.² One of the questions this article asks is what sparked off the cycle of Nazi Sexploitation films (predominantly Italian in origin), which emerged over a brief period, 1975–77, after which the cycle quickly petered out?

One of the aspects that emerges in the study of this kind of film is, a devolutionary trajectory running from a 'high' or artistically informed culture (which is defacto *bourgeois*) to a more *vernacular* cinema that 'reduces' the artistic and intellectual complexities of the antecedents into base forms of exploitation. Following from that, however, when these films are placed within a cinematic historiographic context,³ a different discourse opens revealing *how* the Nazi Sexploitation cinema engages with the historical period it exploits.

Omayra Cruz, one of the few scholars to have written on these films, notes regarding the Nazi Sexploitation film cycle:

Although within the context of the Italian movie experience these films make perfect sense, a general outcry usually condemns them for commercialising and exploiting a 'serious' issue. How could anyone stoop so low as to bastardise the terror and tragedy of the Nazi experience for profit?⁴

Cruz identifies *Il portiere di notte* (Italy, 1974, Liliana Cavani) [*The Night Porter*] as the first of these films. Or rather, that based on this one film's success, a cycle emerged which quickly degenerated into exploitation fare.⁵ But in his consideration of these films, Cruz neglects *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (Italy, 1975, Pier Paolo Pasolini) [*Salò*] as being another 'high-art' precursor, particularly in its depiction of Sadean sexuality, a theme that is picked up in many of these later films. Within the same tradition, one could equally include *Salon Kitty* (Italy, 1975, Tinto Brass; and released the same year as *Salò*), which depicts a Nazi-era bordello and the decadence of the Third Reich. *Salon Kitty*, however, owes more than just a little of its *mise-en-scène* to *La Caduta degli dei* (Italy, 1969, Luchino Visconti) [*The Damned*].

What emerges from a study of these films' influences and precursors is a genetic generic code that moves downward from 'art' films like Visconti's through Brass' glossy but salacious re-working, down into the Nazi Sexploitation period proper. This particular thread, from *La Caduta* through *Salon Kitty* gives way to what can be called the 'Nazi Bordello' film: high-art prototypes such as *La Caduta* and perhaps *Il portiere di notte*, give way to the extreme exploitation films *Casa private per le SS* (Italy, 1977, Bruno Mattei) [literally 'Private House of the SS' but known in English as *SS Girls*], *Le Lunghe notti della Gestapo* (Italy, 1977, Fabio De Agostini) [*Red Nights of the Gestapo*], with *Salon Kitty* holding a more ambivalent middle place between high and low cultural product. What gets picked up from *La Caduta* is the former film's decadent visual style and its emphasis on Weimar decadence and exoticism. Of course this is a superficial reading of Visconti's film, but it is the reading which Mattei and De Agostini pick up on to exploit in their films. Likewise in Brass's *Salon Kitty*,

the bordello setting changes from Weimar decadence to a Nazi-era house of spies, wherein suspected enemies of the state are able to expose their treachery while in the arms of Berlin's most desirable Aryan prostitutes. In Mattei and De Agostini's films, while the setting remains the Nazi bordello and the shadows of Weimar decadence are still in evidence, the films are more concerned with staging explicit sexuality. This is but one thread of the Nazi Sexploitation film.

Another thread in Italian Nazi Sexploitation cinema, and one which seems to cross a definite 'taste' line, as Luthor-Smith noted above, situates the action within the concentration camp; although none of the films specifically identify their location as either a 'concentration' or 'death' camp, nor have they been given any historically authentic names such as Auschwitz, Belsen, or Treblinka. The camps that are the setting for many of these films are often identified by the incongruous title of 'love camp'. 'Love Camps' are Nazi bordellos, but unlike the 'Nazi Bordello' thread, these films privilege the spectacles of rape and sexual humiliation. Frequently the films feature a group of captive and imprisoned women, forced into prostitution against their will. With the 'Nazi Bordello' films, the women are presented as more 'complicit' in their sexual exploitation. In the 'Love Camp' thread, the women, like the young people in *Salo*, have been taken by force.

The first cinematic reference to women in any kind of Nazi camp sequestered over to bordello-duty to satisfy the desires of either the camp's guards or soldiers arriving on furlough, appears to be *The Pawnbroker* (USA, 1964, Sidney Lumet), where, in a flashback to his experiences in a concentration camp, Sol Nazerman accidentally discovers his wife held in such a bordello against her will. It is this experience in particular, the film argues, that finally destroyed Nazerman's humanity and partially explains his current alienation. As with the Nazi bordello films, we see a devolutionary trajectory from high-minded films like *The Pawnbroker*, into the more exploitation arena of *Love Camp 7* (USA, 1969, Lee Frost), really the first Nazi Sexploitation film (albeit an American one) – which presents, for our voyeuristic pleasures, the idea that the Nazis set up these bordellos for the entertainment of their soldiers on leave. Although both *The Pawnbroker* and *Love Camp 7* are American, yet very different kinds of films, the same idea of sexually assaulted women prisoners is in both, and this is a theme taken up by the Italian films that are the major focus of this chapter.

The difference between films *about* sexual exploitation and sexual exploitation *films*, is largely in evidence through one obvious point of comparison: *L'Ultima orgia del III Reich* (Italy, 1976, Cesare Canevari) [*Gestapo's Last Orgy*] directly reworks the narrative framing device of Cavani's *Il portiere di notte*: in both films, a dual time frame is demonstrated between a Nazi/concentration camp past, and a present tense set a decade or so later. In *Il portiere*, Cavani explores the sado-masochistic relationship between Max and Lucia, a former concentration camp commandant and a young Jewish woman prisoner, both during the war and after in Vienna when their paths accidentally cross again. Likewise in *L'Ultima orgia*, Commandant Von Starker meets up with Lise years after the war for a rendezvous on the site of the camp where Lise was imprisoned and sexually tortured by Von Starker during the war. But the comparisons end at that surface level. The same theme of power and sexual control maybe seen in both films, and throughout Nazi Sexploitation cinema; how that theme is presented, however, greatly differs.

Where the focus of *Il portiere* is in Vienna 1957, wherein flashbacks tie the present to the past,

the opposite underlines *L'Ultima orgia* as the present tense story line serves as a structuring device for sequences of sexual torture and rape. In Cavani's film, the flashbacks are presented impressionistically, not much more than flashes of memory, and only one flashback sequence is developed in any kind of detail or length – the famous bar-room song, where Lucia is presented wearing nothing but a pair of men's trousers with braces and an SS hat, singing a German torch song *à la* Marlene Dietrich. But diegetically, Max is telling this story to a friend and embellishes it into a Salome-parable. The other flashbacks are not so much 'told' by characters as evidence of their memories. The reverse is the case in *L'Ultima orgia*, where, after a lengthy set up, the present day reunion between Von Starker and Lise is impressionistically presented in between extended sequences of rape and sexual torture.

Significantly how the flashbacks are photographed also differs: in *L'Ultima orgia*, there is no subjectivity in the film's presentation. The spectator is positioned more or less objectively to the horrendous events on screen. The horrors are presented as if on some kind of Grand Guignol stage. However Cavani demonstrates her intentions with the sexual degradation in the first few minutes of *Il portiere*: the first flashback shown is Max's and we are positioned along side of him photographing the in-coming prisoners awaiting registration and focusing on Lucia. The second flashback, however is Lucia's, as we are now seeing the same moment but from the alternative perspective – among the prisoners, being blinded by the bright light of the movie camera. And where as in Max's flashback, we focus specifically on Lucia, in Lucia's 'reverse-flashback' Max is indistinct, eclipsed by the arc light of the camera. By setting up this dual perspective on the sexual exploitation within the concentration camps, Cavani is able to present flashbacks featuring rape, bondage and medical and sexual experimentation (see below) without appearing as exploitive as Canevari does in *L'Ultima orgia*, when he presents similar images (in terms of basic content) but without the subjectivity which problematise the notions of memory which are one of the central themes in Cavani's film.

The films' conclusion also underlies the differences between exploitation and 'higher-brow' cinema: in *L'Ultima orgia*, Lise murders Von Starker, after having sex with him among the ruins of the concentration camp, implying that her contacting him after so many years was all a vengeful (and fully justified) ruse. In *Il portiere*, Max and Lucia escape from an underground cadre of former Nazi officials, whose membership had included Max himself. The cadre wanted Max to kill Lucia as she was the only survivor who could identify his war crimes, but rather than murdering her, they barricade themselves in his flat and hope the cadre will give up and go after other targets. They do not give up, Max and Lucia are shot as they attempt to escape on foot, and the final image we have in the film is a long-shot of the bridge where two small figures of Max and Lucia lie dying where they stood. Ok, granted, when phrased like that, *Il portiere* sounds almost as exploitive as any action film, but it is the complexity of Max and Lucia's relationship that is the focus of the film. Rather than leaving ambiguous, as Cavani does, why Lucia would resume her relationship with Max, Canevari explains his Lise's motivation as a vengeance ploy. Significantly, both Lise and Lucia die in their respective conclusions.

Although Cruz above does mention that many of these Italian exploitation films (in general as well as specifically these Nazi Sexploitation films) are often derivative of American originals, his only precursor to this sexploitation cycle is *Il portiere di notte* and as I noted above, and little is mentioned

of other Italian influences, like *Salon Kitty* or *Salò*. However, it was not *Love Camp 7*, or even *Il portiere* which sparked the cycle under consideration here, but a surprisingly successful American mainstream pornographic film, *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (USA, 1974, Don Edmond). *Ilsa*, with its emphases on women prisoners as fodder for the bordellos and men as slave sexual labour, also offers spectacles of the women prisoners used in medical experiments. The 'medical experiment' thread, along with Pasolini's *Salò* introduced an explicit Sadean aesthetic of sexual torture and these are what really characterize the Italian Nazi Sexploitation cinema.

The vast majority of these Italian-made Nazi Sexploitation films run a similar pattern of devolution from high-art, or at least 'respectable', precursors down to some of the nastiest of European cinema. As an interesting side note, although not an Italian *sexploitation* film, one other film buzzes within the margins here: ***Holocaust parte seconda: i ricordi, i deliri, la vendetta* (Italy, 1980, Angelo Pannacciò, known in English as *Holocaust 2: The Memories, Delirium and the Vendetta*)**. Here, as in *Il portiere*, is an underground cadre, but this time of Holocaust survivors and their children, who assassinate escaped Nazis – Simon Wiesenthal as an action hero. What is significant about *Holocaust parte seconda* is that it too derives its exploitation plot from Cavani's film, albeit in reverse, and simplifies it by removing any ambiguity as to meaning or motivation. Exploitation cinema, particularly in this Italian context, is simplified cinema. Like comic book versions of literary classics, these films rework/remake art cinema into something more accessible, thereby creating a more vernacular cinema. An independent American film like *The Pawnbroker* can give way to a *Love Camp 7* (also an independent American film), which can then be further tracked to films such as *Lager SSadis Kastrat Kommandantur* (Italy, 1976, Sergio Garrone) [literally, 'SS Camp of the Castrated Commandant' but known in English as *SS Experiment Camp*] or *L'Ultima orgia*. ~~*Salò*, which along with *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*~~. These texts, although on opposite ends of the '(high/low) culture' scale, bring into play a theme of explicit visual sadism and medical experimentation. It is this last aspect, of the medical experimentation theme, I now wish to turn to in more detail and relate these graphic images of pseudo-justified horror to the historical period to which the films are ostensibly referring.

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THE EXPLOITATION OF HISTORY

It is worth reiterating the question posed by Cruz above, 'How could anyone stoop so low as to bastardise the terror and tragedy of the Nazi experience?'⁶ But, as I hope I have demonstrated previously, Cruz's 'bastardisation' is not as simple as he would have it: the Holocaust in these films is certainly simplified, certainly reduced to its most base elements, but such is the purview of exploitation cinema in general. Each of the films cited here make some direct reference to the historical period in question, in this case the Nazi era. But we need to ask *how* have these Italian exploitation films simplified the representation of history?

In reference to this question, some historical documentation is needed to back up the historiography of these films.

To begin with, at least one film (albeit one of the American films) makes a direct recourse to historical verisimilitude. *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* begins with a title card, while on the soundtrack we

hear a sound recording of one of Hitler's Nuremberg speeches. This title card is problematic, for it bring to the fore the representation of history that these exploitation films utilise.

The film you are about to see is based on documented fact. The atrocities shown were conducted as 'medical experiments' in special concentration camps throughout Hitler's Third Reich. Although these crimes against humanity are historically accurate, the characters depicted are composites of notorious Nazi personalities; and the events portrayed, [sic] have been condensed into one locality for dramatic purposes. ... We dedicate this film with the hope that these heinous crimes will never occur again. [Signed] Herman Traeger, producer.⁷

The creation of Ilsa as a composite figure cuts to the heart of exploitation cinema, particularly historiographic exploitation. Rather than a biographical portrait, even a fictionalised one like *Schindler's List* (USA, 1993, Steven Spielberg), *Ilsa* and the Italian films discussed here, reduce the historical complexities of the Holocaust into its most base and readily accessible form. If we contrast *Ilsa* with Max in *Il portiere*, what is missing in the former is any of the subtleties of Dirk Bogarde's ambiguous performance in the latter: while not a 'sympathetic' or even remotely likeable character, Max is absolutely 'human' in his pettiness and in many respects embodies the Hannah Ardent description of Eichmann as 'the banality of evil'. Ilsa, on the other hand, is a cartoon depiction of 'composite' Nazi personalities, specifically Ilse Koch. Robert Wistrich gives this summary biography, which is worth quoting at length:

Known as the 'Bitch of Buchenwald' for her sadistic cruelty and power-mad behaviour towards prisoners under her supervision, Ilse Koch was the wife of Karl Koch, Commandant of Buchenwald. ... A powerfully built, formidable nymphomaniac ... [she] was especially fond of horse-riding exercises ... [and] ... like[d] to ride through the camp, whipping any prisoner who attracted her attention. Her taste for collecting lampshades made from the tattooed skins of specially murdered concentration camp inmates was described as follows by a witness at Nuremberg: 'The finished products (i.e. tattooed skin detached from corpses) were turned over to Koch's wife, who had them fashioned into lampshades and other ornamental household articles'.⁸

Even this 'historical' description of Ilse Koch, from a historical encyclopaedia-type book, reduces the complexities of a real person into its most sensational elements in order to convey the extreme behaviours of those who ran the concentration camps. But other characterisations of Ilse Koch also appear in some of the Italian Sexploitation films too. For example, in *L'Ultima orgia*, Alma, the camp's lascivious second-in-command, proudly shows off a pair of gloves made from a baby's skin, and, more 'historically accurate', a lampshade made of human leather to preserve a beautiful tattoo. In the sequence from *L'Ultima orgia*, Alma shows Lise these grisly artefacts in a demonstration of both the Nazi's ruthless mastery over others (turning what were once human beings into artefacts), and their disregard for (apparently our) morality.

I do not wish to be misunderstood in my use of the word 'accurate': I am not for a second suggesting that these exploitation film-makers did any kind of research, at least not as academics would understand the term. Nor am I arguing that these films offer any kind of 'truthful' historiography. In this case, although Ilse Koch is not known to have fashioned gloves out of an infant's skin, she did order prisoners with interesting tattoos to be slaughtered so she could obtain their leather, which was fashioned into lampshades. However, Ilse Koch, as notorious a historical figure as she may have been, is not dealt with in either *Ilsa* nor in *L'Ultima orgia* as any kind of motivated individual character, but as a two-dimensional cartoon-like figure that is meant to just represent the extremes of Nazi power. This is the entire point of exploitation cinema. Yet, *what* these film-makers got right, and what they got wrong (presumably unintentionally, in meeting the demands of exploitation cinema) is what the rest of this chapter is concerned with. Specifically: how these Italian films exploit history.

To begin with, I have been unable to find any historical verification of the 'love camp' – certainly not under that name, and exceptionally few references to women used in bordellos or for sexual favours. What few references there are to in-camp prostitution *explicitly exclude* Jewish women. For example, in Auschwitz, 'Block 10 also housed some 20 prostitutes, its only regular *non-Jewish* residents, who were available to elite prisoners as a work incentive and prophylactic against homosexual practices'.⁹ Under the Third Reich, any kind of sexual activity between Jews and non-Jews was strictly forbidden, even when those Jews in question, were prisoners in a concentration camp. According to the historical accounts, such a prohibition was more or less followed. Central to the Nazi ideology was the concept of '*Rassenschande* (racial shame – that is, behaviour beneath the dignity of one's race)'.¹⁰ Seen as 'sub-human' and 'racially inferior', Jews, specifically Jewish women, would have been unlikely sexual conquests. Felicja Karay, in her work on women's experiences in the forced labour-camps, notes the following:

The Germans, most of them young bachelors, attempted to quench their libido by exploiting the Polish women in the factory, although this was explicitly prohibited. Much more dangerous were attempts to approach Jewish women, which might be construed as *Rassenschande*. In all three Werks [industrial owned work camps], however, there were *rumours* of 'forbidden sexual liaisons' and the exploitation of Jewish women.¹¹

'Rumour' is a word that keeps cropping up in survivor testimonies regarding sexual assaults by the SS on Jewish women. By rumour, I am not referring to the more vernacular understanding of the word, as in 'falsehood', but in a more sociological way, as a widespread, and *plausible* word-of-mouth fear. Myrna Goldenberg offers this example: 'As a beautiful, vivacious teenager, [Judith Isaacson] was troubled by persistent rumours of Jewish girls being sent to the front as prostitutes and then shot into open ditches'.¹² The seemingly fictional existence of these cinematic 'Love Camps' then is, partially, a representation of the fears that Jewish women experienced about their expected treatment at the hands of the SS.

What hypothetically emerges from this contrast between rumour and reality is a psychological paradox of the Holocaust for women: namely, that any kind of *organised* sexual assault on Jewish

women was unthinkable to the Nazis, since they were not seen as human beings to begin with; whereas, from the victim's perspective, logically they would have feared sexual assault. Of course, in reality, *Rassenschande* would break down, but it did so in idiosyncratic ways – singular one-off events. The exception that proves the rule of *Rassenschande* is noted by Karay:

Dozens of testimonies mention the Werkschultz commander Fritz Bartenschlager, who would sometimes attend selections in order to choose 'escort girls'. In October 1942, for example, five of these women were taken to a feast at his apartment, where they were ordered to serve guests in the nude and were ultimately raped by the revellers.¹³

Parties, like those of Bartenschlager, are a standard trope in all of these films, for obvious voyeuristic reasons, and is literally realised in *Ilsa*. However, it is intriguing to note that sometimes these film sequences involve diegetic willing participants (*L'Ultima orgia del III Reich*), while other films feature sequences where the women are raped and/or murdered (*Lager SSadis Kastrat Kommandantur Camp, Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*).

Jews are conspicuously absent from these Nazi Sexploitation films as signifiers, with one notable exception. The majority of the sub-genre prefer pointed euphemisms: in *Ilsa*, the prisoners are referred to as 'inferior races', while in *Lager SSadis Kastrat Kommandantur* they are referred to as 'political criminals' – both euphemistically used for 'Jew' in the historical literature, but these film-makers seem shy about the ethnic/racial specificity of the Nazi programmes of genocide. The exception to this is Canevari's *L'Ultima orgia*, wherein the women victims/prisoners are specified as Jews. *Rassenschande* is explicitly reflected in the film in one particular sequence (what Stephen Ziplow refers to as an 'orgy number').¹⁴ In this sequence, a line of naked young German soldiers stand across a large room from a line of naked young Jewish women, while the Commandant informs the men that under Nazi ideology, since Jews are considered 'subhuman', an Aryan is forbidden to have 'sexual' relations with a Jew; however, an Aryan *is* allowed to use her merely to satisfy themselves. This is not a Third Reich legal argument I have been able to verify from historical sources, but seems designed by the requirements of the *generic* laws to lead into the 'rape/orgy' number). Again we see the process whereby the complex and subtle racial ideologies of the Third Reich are simplified in exploitation cinema.

Although the women victims/prisoners in Sergio Garrone's *Lager SSadis Kastrat Kommandantur* are designated simply as 'political criminals,' one other character, referred to as a 'political enemy' is clearly signified as Jewish. The assistant camp doctor, Dr. Steiner, turns out to be one Professor Abraham (an explicitly Jewish name, who later in the film is seen wearing something resembling a yarmulke and prayer shawl), a world renowned surgeon who faked his own death during the bombing of his hospital, and took the identity of a Gentile colleague who died in the bombing. Camp Commandant, Colonel Von Klienmann (literally, 'little man', which can be read as a pointed reference to Von Kleinmann's missing penis/testicles, and this is also reflected in the literal translation of the film's title) wants an experimental testicular transplant on himself (his own were bitten off by a Red Army soldier he was raping). He discovers Steiner's real identity and blackmails the famous surgeon to conduct the operation. In exchange for this rather bizarre medical procedure, Von

Klienmann promises Steiner/Abraham the identity files. Although Steiner/Abraham is operating at the Love Camp under his new identity as a Gentile, prisoner doctors at Auschwitz were allowed to assist the Nazi doctors in their surgery and research. Lifton and Hackett note:

Like other SS doctors at Auschwitz, Mengele made use of prisoner doctors. ... Most were Jewish, and they were used primarily to diagnose and sometimes treat research subjects. ... Mengele went so far as to set up a series of colloquia with prisoner doctors, some imported from other camps. ... [T]he prisoner doctors at Auschwitz included many distinguished physicians. Most were vastly superior in skills and knowledge to the SS doctors...¹⁵

Garrone appears to be surprisingly historically accurate, at least within this exploitation genre context: Jewish doctors were able to assist Nazi doctors in their work, however the reality, at least at Auschwitz, was that these doctors were not able to hide their Jewish identity.

Another emergent thread within the Italian Nazi sexploitation film is the 'Medical Experiment' theme, and although the specifics of the medical experiments depicted in pictures like *Ilsa* and *Lager SSadis Kastrat Kommandantur*, as well as in films like *Il portiere di notte*, serve more to offer the audience Sadean images of (naked) women being tortured, medical experiments were also done by the Nazis, and equally horrendous.

Medical experimentation ... was a small part of the extensive and systematic medicalized killing that was basic to the Nazi enterprise as perfected at Auschwitz. As tangible medical crimes, however, such experiments achieved considerable prominence at the Nuremberg Doctors' Trial in 1946-7. Indeed, their blending of ordinary science and extreme ideology made them emblematic of science under Germany's National Socialist regime. The considerable curiosity and notoriety aroused by research they carried out has to do with ethical questions that reach beyond Nazi doctors, and particularly with the radical Nazi reversal of healing and killing.¹⁶

Stories about Dr. Mengele's experiments at Auschwitz of injecting blue dyes into dark-eyed subjects, and morphological dissection of twins and dwarves are well known. So too is the knowledge that the Nazis experimented with new processes of sterilization, including experimental castrations and injections with caustic substances.¹⁷ Lifton and Hackett note, however, that other experiments in Auschwitz's research laboratories were the stuff of horror movies:

Experiments took place throughout the camp. In block 41 at Birkenau, for example, three noted German professors conducted surgery that entailed the exposure of leg muscles and the test application of medications. Medical students performed experimental surgery on a female hospital block, which offered the opportunity to practice whatever procedure suited their particular interests. (Sometimes a prisoner with a relevant medical condition was selected; sometimes the choice was arbitrary.) With no ethical considerations at issue, a more opportunistic surgical laboratory than Auschwitz could hardly be imagined. Beyond

convenience, a doctor could rationalize his experimentation with the thought that since his patient was ultimately condemned to death in any case, he could truly do no harm.¹⁸

Furthermore, 'with the help of an advanced medical student, relatively healthy Jewish inmates had toxic substances, some petroleum-based, rubbed into their arms and legs. It was hoped that the resulting infections and abscesses would provide information useful in detecting ruses by malingerers trying to avoid military service'.¹⁹ Although the case of Dr. Mengele is perhaps the better known, also at Auschwitz, Dr. Wirths experimented with infectious diseases that 'might threaten the health of troops'.²⁰ The litany of medical atrocities reads like an outline for *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*; 'Camp 9' is an experimental medical camp, designed to research the effects of various extremes (air pressure, heat, cold) on soldiers, but using (naked) women for experimental purposes. Furthermore, at Camp 9, prisoners are injected with infectious diseases so Reich doctors can experiment with new drugs. As Lifton and Hackett note with regards to Auschwitz, 'The Hygienic Institute used human, rather than animal, muscle for its culture media. Animal meat was simply dearer in such an environment, even as Auschwitz substituted human guinea pigs for lab animals'.²¹ Again, like with the issue of the presumed fictional 'Love Camps', the experimentation on human guinea pigs was less a Sadean desire for torture, and more the ideology which saw Jews and other non-Aryans as simply sub-human – the *equivalent* of animals. Strangely enough, apart from the experimental testicular transplant in *Lager SSadis Kastrat Kommandantur*, the other kinds of 'experiments' going on have no apparent factual appeal, unlike *Ilsa*'s: they seem to be experiments in 'arousal' and really consist of little but Aryan men raping different prisoner women in different situations. There is no attempt to explain these experiments, other than as voyeuristic 'sex numbers'.

Again and again, what we see in these Nazi sexploitation films are 'composites' of historical reality – Jewish doctors working in the camp infirmaries, specious medical experimentation, sexual assaults on women prisoners – composites which 'for dramatic purposes', as the *Ilsa* title card reads, simplify the historiographic complexities of the Third Reich. However, these Nazi sexploitation movies are merely doing what exploitation cinema has always done, namely reduce complex issues to their most basic and primal meanings. Finally, we end up back at the Luthor-Smith quote I cited at the outset. What perhaps *does* make these particular films feel different is their relationship to a much more recent history – often still a *living* history.

CONCLUSION

Studies of cult and exploitation films often try to justify their interest based on kitsch or aesthetic grounds. Jeffrey Sconce's 'paracinema' attempts to explore the inherent aesthetics of the film, even when they violate academy defined notions of taste and quality. He notes:

By concentrating on a film's formal bizarreness and stylistic eccentricity, the paracinematic audience ... foregrounds structures of cinematic discourse and artifice so that the material identity of the film ceases to be a structure made invisible in service of the diegesis, but becomes

instead the primary focus of textual attention. It is in this respect that the paracinematic aesthetic is closely linked to the concept of 'excess'.²²

In the Nazi sexploitation film, it is those moments of 'excess', the extreme 'numbers' depicting sex, rape and torture, which are 'the prime focus of textual attention' (in Sconce's terms). But these films do more than just offer sadomasochistic voyeuristic pleasure, for their historic specificity requires some kind of discursive consideration about the nature of their representation of the Holocaust. Clearly these films have different agendas to more 'respectable' Holocaust narrative films – *Schindler's List* or *La Vita e bella* (Italy, 1998, Roberto Benigni), for example – specifically in how they simplify and create their own 'composite' narratives, but the processes of reduction and explication are not dissimilar.

Space does not permit me to fully explore a fuller contrast between American and European cinema – at the level of exploitation (i.e. *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* contrasted with *L'ultima orgia*) or art-cinema (i.e. *The Pawnbroker* contrasted with *Il portiere di notte*), or even within middle-brow, popular cinema (i.e. *Schindler's List* contrasted with *La vita e bella*). Any of those comparisons would reveal, I believe, less a direct contrast than a spectrum reflecting degrees of 'composites' between European and American exploitations of the past. Be that as it may, and to return the discussion to where I began it (the Luther-Smith quote used in the epigram), what emerges from studies like this is an alternative discourse to that offered by Sconce (and echoed by Hawkins):²³ exploitation cinema is not necessarily 'alternative' or 'paracinematic' art, but a discourse of address which needs to be approached at its own level of articulation. The Italian Nazi Sexploitation cycle may in fact be 'the most distasteful example of exploitation ever committed to film' – but it is also infinitely curious too, despite its disavowal to the discourses of 'art'.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Sconce, J. (1995) 'Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style', *Screen*, 36 (4), 371–93; Hawkins, J. (2000). *Cutting Edge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Betz, M. (2003) 'Art, Exploitation, Underground', in M. Jancovich, A. Lazaro-Reboll, J. Stringer, and A. Willis (eds) *Defining Cult Movies; the Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 202–22.
- 2 Mendik, X. (2000) *Tenebrae*. Trowbridge: Flicks Books; Mathijs, E. (2004) 'Daughters of Darkness (*Les Lèvres Rouges*, 1971)', in E. Mathijs (ed.) *The Cinema of the Low Countries*. London: Wallflower Press, forthcoming.
- 3 Dyer, R. and G. Vincendeau (eds) (1992) *Popular European Cinema*. London and New York: Routledge.
- 4 Dyer, R. (1997) *White*. London: Routledge.
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CHAPTER 1

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CHAPTER 2

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CHAPTER 3

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