

The Damned

“The White Eyelid”

Peter Gessner

1970

“But that the white eye-lid of the screen reflects its proper light, the Universe would go up in flames.”
—Luis Bunuel

Crazed, incendiary film-makers like Bunuel are few; most of the time, the movie-screen only gives back to us the asbestos of a dream industry. Money and convention rule. The truly disturbing insight must be packaged and sold in the psychic space of the market place.

Thus Visconti's *Gotterdammerung* is re-titled *The Damned* in America, and we are given ads showing a Deitrich-like figure with the caption: “This man was to become the second-most powerful man in Nazi Germany.” Really prepares you to go leaping out to see a serious movie about the rise of fascism, doesn't it? The theme of sexual perversion, which in the film is really a metaphor for a larger social disorder, is the hype they use to deflect the true intensity of this major work of a serious director.

Visconti has been dealt this treatment before. His *Terra Trema*, a film about an impoverished fishing village, was released nearly ten years ago in a few obscure theatres in New York and died unrecognized there later; *Rocco and his Brothers*, a somberly brilliant story of a working class family who leaves Southern Italy to move to the industrial North, met a similar fate. His three-hour epic of the Garibaldi wars of liberation made in English several years ago, starring Burt Lancaster (!) as a genteel landowner making a last stand before the revolution, was released in this country in such a mutilated version that Visconti publicly disowned it.

Like these earlier films, *The Damned* is rooted in history. 1933 Germany, and the consolidation of Nazi power in the form of the absorption of a family-owned steel works into the state apparatus of control is the sweep of the film. Until finally, it is the SS, who, owing no allegiance to anyone because they are self-made, stand on top. Not only is the morally-bankrupt aristocracy toppled, but Visconti is careful to show that Nazism's own left-wing had to be eliminated. The brownshirted S.A., a kind of para-military organization of ex-WWI Veterans who liked to beat up on Communists and Jews in the streets, had some confused notions about some kind of Germanic State Socialism (taking seriously some of Hitler's early rhetoric).

The elite SS, which Visconti sees as the essence of Nazism, made use of the S.A. against common enemies, and finally and brutally purged them when they no longer were needed. The SS, drawn from all classes and having no social priorities other than their own self-perpetuation as an elite, were capable of a class-relativism which enabled them to destroy those both to the right and to the Left of them. This is perhaps the most striking insight of the film.

The visual surface of the film is rich and luminous; Visconti's use of detail, and above all choice and attention in faces, continually concretizes these larger themes. His ability to use “name” actors, like Dirk Bogarde and Ingrid Thulin, in fresh ways so that they are absorbed into the rest of the film and form a whole with the entire tapestry of people is truly incredible.

Visconti is said to have worked at one time as a director of operas, a seemingly-antithetic form to the movie, given its stylization of form and content. But it seems that what he has carried with him from that experience is a controlled use of movement and gesture, which when combined with his precise historic sense, becomes unique in contemporary movie-making.

People turned on to some of Goddard's more adventurist gymnastics and easy pop politics will probably find in Visconti a cold classicism. It is difficult to imagine Visconti doing any of the things Goddard has done to make him a hip icon of the young, like making films with the Rolling Stones, or punching out his producer at a festival. This is the year where Antonioni got busted returning from America with grass, remember.

Yet somehow a film like *The Damned* has more solidity and truth about it as a total film experience than some of the recent work of more fashionable foreign directors. The film refuses to cop out or compromise, or to play with our political preferences and prejudices. One comes through the film at the end having experienced the "Final Hour" of a civilization not unlike our own.

For Visconti's film fuses historic necessity with the logic of the dream and perhaps this is the kind of cinema Bunuel was talking about, the kind of cinema that if it existed would annihilate the world as we like to think we know it. A cinema which destroys intellectual and psychological complacency.

Specifically, one of the complacencies we are taught to live with about Nazism is that it was some kind of aberration or mass psychosis, rather than an historic culmination of forces at work in history. The German Left at the time saw the rise of Nazism as merely the Old Right in new trappings, and many of them paid with their lives for this mis-evaluation, for although it is true that many nationalists and industrialists saw their salvation from social revolution in a Nazi victory, Nazi consolidation of power meant, as this film shows, their eventual subordination and elimination. A revolution whose purpose was to consume itself.

The politics of "The Final Hour Of The Gods:" Permanent revolution, total control, perpetual terror, designed to last for a thousand years. Visconti has glimpsed into the dark and primal essence of Nazism and has not flinched from throwing it up on the "white eye-lid of the screen." It's a heavy trip.

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Fifth Estate #104, April 30-May 13, 1970

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