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EDITORIAL

Editorial

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Emmanuel Marre's *A Man of His Time* (*Notre salut*, 2026) opens on an evening reception in Vichy in September 1940. In a dim salon thick with cigar smoke, someone hums Carmen. Officials from the ministries of Marshal Pétain's new regime sweat into their collars and talk, between glasses, about reforming the civil service. Henri (Swann Arlaud), newly arrived with a self-published treatise, drifts from one group to the next, trying to get a word into the political discussions. Marre shoots the party with a handheld camera that pushes in on faces through abrupt zooms. Bodies that press close over drinks, and mouths that laugh and flirt. The scene bears elements of an orgy in that it provides pleasure reserved for those admitted to it, and Henri has not been admitted. A palm reader then takes his hand and studies its lines. For a moment he has a stranger's full attention and feels the warmth of touch, the closest he comes to the bodies around him. Then the reader tells him nothing remarkable will ever happen to him, a humiliation that binds him more firmly to the circle keeping him at its edge. This erotic perversion, the desire to enter a closed circle of pleasure and power at the price of one's own degradation, is a promise the film sadly does not pursue, opting instead for a realist portrait of an over-zealous *collabo*.

The eroticism of the opening scene may have offered a way into one of the oldest questions about fascism: why it attracted so many people, and what sexual desire had to do with this attraction. Italian directors took up this question in the late 1960s. Luchino Visconti's *The Damned* (*La caduta degli dei*, 1969) follows a family of German steel magnates who ally themselves with the Nazis. Its heir rapes his own mother and ends up in the SS. For Visconti, sexual and political corruption have the same source. Five years later, Liliana Cavani turned to the side of the victims. In *The Night Porter* (*Il portiere di notte*, 1974), set in Vienna in 1957, a camp survivor meets the SS officer who abused her and resumes their sadomasochistic affair, their desire outliving the regime that produced it. The most notorious film about sex and fascism may be Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò* (*Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*, 1975). Four libertines of the Republic of Salò, the puppet state Mussolini led in northern Italy at the end of

the war, lock a group of adolescents in a villa and subject them to sadistic sexual rules they have written down in advance, until desire turns into an administration of bodies.

Salò ends with two young guards in an empty room. Outside, in the courtyard, the libertines torture their captives to death, while the two boys, in uniform and hardly older than their victims, listen to the radio and dance together, chatting about their girlfriends. Why does the torture of others awaken their desire? The German cultural theorist Klaus Theweleit, in a study of memoirs written by Freikorps soldiers, the volunteer militias that fought the German left after the First World War, found men who experienced their own bodies as soft and their desire as a flood that might dissolve them. The uniform, and the blond athletes of Nazi propaganda, offered these men a body that could no longer be rejected, one they could share by belonging to the group. The historian Dagmar Herzog, in *Sex after Fascism* (2005), finds that Nazism rewarded this belonging with sexual pleasure, so that the right to pleasure came to depend on racial and political standing. Seen this way, the pleasure of subjugating others may be a form of reassurance: each humiliated body confirms a place in a hierarchy that once humiliated the man who now rules it. It is hard not to recognize a version of this in the online forums where incels practice what they call looksmaxxing, measuring their faces against a racial anthropology of virility in order to "mog," i.e. outrank and humiliate, others.

Although Pasolini's film was co-funded by France, French cinema never depicted its own fascism as erotic. This did not keep the French philosopher Michel Foucault, however, from accusing French films about the Occupation of using desire to absolve their collaborators. In a 1974 interview with *Cahiers du cinéma*, Foucault took aim at the so-called "mode rétro," a wave of films and novels that returned to the Occupation in the early 1970s, and at its most discussed example, Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* (1974). Foucault thought that the erotic element of these films lay in their own fascination with the period, which turned fascism into a fetish without ever asking why it was a source of attraction in the first place. This fascination said more about the 1970s than about the Occupation, since it revealed, in his view, a society in which power was regaining its erotic charge.

One way of revealing this erotic charge is to openly depict it, and this is what a number of films began to do around the time Foucault voiced his criticism. Dušan Makavejev's *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971), named after the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, cuts the story of a woman beheaded by her Soviet lover against footage of Stalin, so that desire denied to the body reappears as devotion to the leader. A wave of Nazisploitation films, cheap productions that mixed Nazi settings with sex and violence, followed in the mid-1970s, among them Tinto Brass' *Salon Kitty* (1976), and Don Edmonds' *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (1975). Via exaggeration, these films exposed the contradiction Foucault had pointed to and showed the viewer's own desire for

power to be a fantasy.

Notre salut has been received with overwhelming approval in France, by critics and audiences alike. The film serves as a welcoming warning in a country where polls place Marine Le Pen's far-right Rassemblement National atop the next presidential election: it shows how functionaries collaborate, but says little about why voters are drawn to the far right. The opening scene, had it been thought through, would have spoiled this approval. It would have kept the camera in the salon, on necks and mouths pressed close over drinks, until the viewers felt what Henri feels: arousal at bodies that belong to power, and at a stranger's hand that excites them most at the moment it humiliates. A viewer who caught themselves aroused would have had to admit that power turns them on, that they would like to be taken in by those lacquered bodies and, once inside, to enjoy the humiliation of those who stay out. The film would have taken from them the one thing they came for: the certainty that they are not Henri.

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In this month's issue, Anna Batori reviews Mate Ugrin's *Petty Thieves*, which looks behind the facade of tourism on the Adriatic Coast only to reproduce a different kind of representational pattern. Antonis Lagarias saw Erik Tikan's *Between Borders*, a documentary that questions the moral reasoning behind volunteering for the army, and Romas Zabarauskas' *The Activist*, in which a gay man infiltrates a neo-Nazi group, and returns to his previous identity entirely unscathed. Zoe Aiano takes a liking to Zhang Ge's *My Turn* for its calculated playfulness. In the film, two siblings share the same body after the demise of one of them. Finally, Daniel Schwartz took a look at *Termini*, another addition to Laila Pakalniņa's ongoing portrayal of post-Soviet life.

We hope you enjoy our reads.
Konstanty Kuzma & Moritz Pfeifer
Editors