

## **Adaptation As Defense Against Film Censorship:**

### **Pasolini's *Salò – 120 Days of Sodom* in Italy and the UK**

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#### **Introduction**

*Salò – 120 Days of Sodom* is a feature film written and directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, filmed in Italy in 1975. Both the film structure and violent imagery are inspired by Dante's *Inferno*, probably the most influential Italian poem across the various arts and media (see Iannucci 2004). But the controversial film is more than simply an adaptation; it is a fascinating example of how central issues of adaptation—intention, fidelity and reception—work in two different countries to determine degrees of censorship.

The film's content was itself undeniably distressing. The story is set in a 1943 dystopian Republic of Salò, the last stronghold of Benito Mussolini's Fascist Regime. Formed in 1943 during the Second World War, it collapsed in 1945, following the Italian Liberation operated by the Allied forces (see Duggan 2013). Here, a band of Fascists kidnap a group of underage boys and girls. They are then brought into a luxury mansion where a group of Sadists — the representatives of the institutions and the Catholic Church — subjects them to 120 days of unprecedented violence and sexual abuse, including pedophilia, rape, urinating on the victims and coprophagia. These are only a few of the controversial acts that the film presents as a caustic metaphor to criticize the Italian transformation of the early 1970s into a fast-growing

mass-society.

However, the story of the film's distribution is even more compelling than its graphic narrative and imagery. In fact, in the same weeks when *Salò* was being edited and programmed to be released in Italian and international cinemas, the reels were stolen, the director brutally murdered, the producer put on trial and the censorship board intervened to block the film. Pier Paolo Pasolini was found dead on the Ostia shore, the main coastline of the city of Rome, the night of November 1-2, 1975. The mystery of his death still remains unsolved (see Siciliano 1982).

Starting from a comparative evaluation of the constrained distribution in both Italy and the UK, this chapter then focuses on how aspects of adaptation intervened in support of the film release. In particular, I first examine aspects of adaptation in the director's intention to honor Dante's *Inferno* within the film aesthetics. Following on from this, I move toward discussing the awareness of the Italian audience to this tribute in comparison with the British audience in light of the cultural importance that Dante plays in Italy as a national symbol. I then examine how the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) looked to reconfigure the perception of the British audience to reading *Salò* as an adaptation of De Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* seen through the lens of both recent Italian history and Dante's *Inferno*. This change led the film to finally become available to the public, albeit in its mutilated version.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the chapter draws together the most important aspects of adaptation and other forms of film

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<sup>1</sup> While the story of the constrained circulation of *Salò* in Italy has been widely investigated for the past forty years, very little has been written on the British release. This study was made possible particularly thanks to the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) in London which let me access archival material and sources crucial to this investigation. In respect of the confidential nature of the majority of the correspondence contained in the BBFC file on *Salò* in London, I have omitted all personal details and data therein contained. This did not prevent me from reconstructing the key events that eventually led to the distribution of *Salò* in the UK. For further reference see the BBFC website.

distribution, including TV, DVDs and the Internet. In essence, by examining aspects of film aesthetics, production, distribution and reception, this chapter investigates where adaptation is from various angles in order to solve the following questions: does adaptation lie in the director's intention? Or can it be found in the film aesthetics? Or instead, does adaptation lie in the audience's perception? Or in aspects of film circulation? Or maybe in a combination of all these aspects? Before facing these key questions in more depth, the following table usefully charts the main stages of the distribution of *Salò - 120 Days of Sodom* in both Italy and the UK.

#### **A Comparison Between The History Of The Italian And The British Distribution**

This comparative timelines traces the main degrees of censorship carried out in Italy and the UK throughout the decades. In both countries the film in its uncut version became finally available after year 2000, albeit only for an 18+ audience (see Chiesi 2015 and BBFC file on *Salò*).

<b>The Italian Context</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>The British Context</b>
Prior to national distribution, the film reels are stolen from the Technicolor Buildings in Rome.	<b>1975</b> <b>August 14th-18th</b>	
The new final cut of the film is made from the intermediate contact negative survived from the stealing.	<b>1975</b> <b>September</b>	
Producer Alberto Grimaldi presents the film to the Italian board of film classification, named Commissione per la Revisione Cinematografica.	<b>1975</b> <b>End of October</b>	
On November 1st, Pasolini is found murdered in Ostia shore, near Rome. Meanwhile, the Italian Commissione per la Revisione Cinematografica rejects the distribution of the film in Italian	<b>1975</b> <b>November</b>	

<p>cinemas. While Grimaldi appeals against this judgment, <i>Salò</i> premieres at Paris Film Festival, France, on the 22nd.</p>		
<p><i>Salò</i> receives formal authorization to be screened in Italian cinemas, albeit in its censored version.</p>	<p><b>1975</b> <b>December 23rd</b></p>	
<p>Several boycott actions against the film are registered, including the release of “stink bombs” (Chiesi 2015, 37) in Milan on January 13th.</p>	<p><b>1976</b></p>	<p>Meanwhile, in January, United Artists submits the film for classification for national cinema release to the BBFC, but the BBFC refuses an X (over 18) classification as: (i) the film could result in a charge for “gross indecency” (BBFC website), and (ii) consequently the majority of local councils would be likely to deny permission for the film to be screened in their areas (iii) the number of cuts required would have seriously compromised the understanding of the film. Meanwhile, in autumn the film is screened “as part of the London Film Festival [...] without incident [...] but only members of the National Film Theatre were allowed into the performance” (Malcolm 1977, 3).</p>
<p>On March 10th, the film is redistributed again and could be seen by “two million” people (Chiesi 2015, 39). Meanwhile Alberto Grimaldi is called for trial again. Following further protests, in June the authorities confiscate the film for the second time.</p>	<p><b>1977</b></p>	<p>United Artists sell the rights of the film to the Old Compton Street Cinema Club in London where only members can purchase a ticket. The cinema club shows the film uncut, but the police seize it because they feel it is nonetheless “grossly indecent” under common law. In response to the seizure of the film, James Ferman, Secretary of the BBFC, suggests to the Director of Public Prosecution (DPP) that the accusation of “gross indecency” might be dropped when the Criminal Law Act 1977 comes into effect, because this Act — which extends the Obscene Publications Acts to cinema films — would protect <i>Salò</i>. The DPP agrees to drop the pending charges of gross indecency, because the legal test under which it has been seized is due to be removed by the Criminal Law Act 1977. However, the DPP does not agree that the film will not be obscene, if distributed again, under the new tests laid out in the Criminal Law Act 1977.</p>

	<b>1978-1979</b>	The BBFC, together with legal advisers, works on making various cuts to the film to make it suitable for screening in members-only cine clubs. These cuts include the addition of a new explanatory prologue and epilogue.
	<b>1979</b>	This new version opens in a club cinema but is then confiscated again as potentially “obscene” (as opposed to “grossly indecent”). At this point, Ferman writes to the DPP, reminding him of the background and the very significant changes already made to the film. Ultimately, the prosecution is dropped and the film is distributed in British cinema clubs.
The film can finally be redistributed in Italian cinemas, albeit in its censored version.	<b>1985</b>	
	<b>1991</b>	The film applies for TV transmission but is rejected.
The film is broadcasted on private channel Tele+ as uncut for the first time in Italian television.	<b>2000</b>	On November 16th, the BBFC grants its authorization for the film to be distributed in British cinemas as uncut for an 18+ audience. On December 19th the film receives an 18 uncut certificate for video and DVD release.
For its 40th anniversary the film is screened uncut at the 72nd Venice Festival where it receives the Best Restoration Award. In the same weeks this restored version produced by Cineteca Bologna gets distributed in DVD format.	<b>2015</b>	

After detailing the main historical dates and story of the film’s fortunes in both Italy and the UK since *Salò*’s first release in 1975, let us consider in more depth aspects of film adaptation in order to understand why they were fundamental in producing and distributing *Salò*.

## Authorship: Adaptation and the Director's Intention

*Salò* represents a suitable case study in which to frame adaptation within the role of the adapter, as Pasolini was actively involved both in the writing and the directing of his last movie, and, most importantly, he was also fairly aware of the wide impact of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* in his own artistic production. Some critics argue that adapting for the cinematic screen implies a "paradigmatic collaboration whose function explodes the claims of any single filmmaker to complete authorship by revealing that all filmmakers are collaborators"<sup>2</sup> (Leitch, 2008, p.79). Others claim that "an adaptation must be viewed as an original screenplay. It starts from the novel, book, play, article or song. That is source material, the starting point. Nothing more" (Field, 2003, p.324). Whether we stand with the collaborative approach or with the issue of originality, John P. Welle (1995) has highlighted the complex work of Pasolini as the adapter by showing how, by concomitantly working as a director, poet, journalist and novelist,

Pier Paolo Pasolini expresses his engagement with Dante in novels, poetry, and film [...] Pasolini championed Dante's mixture of linguistic levels, resuscitated interest in Italian dialect poetry, and wrote in Dantean inspired tercets. He also saw himself as Dante's heir as a civil poet, i.e, as a critic of Italian society. (qtd. in Musa 1995, p.389)

It is in fact in this specific adaptation of the infernal metaphor to 1970s Italian society that Pasolini first conceived *Salò*. Let us consider this extract from what will be known

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<sup>2</sup> For extended reading on the issue of authorship in film adaptation see also Leitch (2007) or Palmer and Boyd (2011).

as Pasolini's last interview before his murder, an interview in which the Italian director heavily attacked the representatives of the main institutions: "I go down through the Inferno and I know things that don't bother other people's peace. Beware though: the Inferno is coming up to you. [...] And you are with schools, television, and the apathy of your newspapers, you are the main caretaker of this horrendous order based on the idea of possessing and destroying" (Io scendo all'inferno e so cose che non disturbano la pace degli altri. Ma state attenti. L'inferno sta salendo da voi. [...] E voi siete, con la scuola, la televisione, la pacatezza dei vostri giornali, voi siete i grandi conservatori di questo ordine basato sull'idea di possedere e sull'idea di distruggere) (Pasolini 1975). Contrary to Dante, the inferno to which Pasolini is referring is not related to an afterlife alternative reality. Instead, this inferno is well rooted to the present society through aspects of mass exploitation. More specifically, Pasolini attributed the origins of social inequality in the Italy of the 1970s to the current government, administrated by the so called Christian Democracy (DC) which the Italian director defined as "dirty ... dishonest ... idiotic ... ignorant ... consumeristic" (sporco .. disonesto ... idiota ... ignorante ... consumistico) (Pasolini 1974). This critique is also at the heart of the aesthetics of *Salò*, a second stage through which adaptation intervenes, and in which links to Dante's *Inferno* can be found in both the film structure and imagery. This second stage can be investigated in the light of the issue of fidelity, another seminal aspect widely debated by adaptation studies.

## **Fidelity: Adaptation and Film Aesthetics**

The manner in which aspects of fidelity intervened in *Salò* is central to both its aesthetics and its perceived relationship to Dante's *Inferno*. The premises of fidelity were first theorized by Geoffrey Wagner in 1975 to indicate the level of alteration/preservation of aesthetic and narrative elements when subject to practice of adaptation. To Wagner and many theorists who followed and who developed this concept, the more a film "transposes" its reference text, the more it is faithful to it. On the other hand, if the film presents only some "analogies" to the film then it is less faithful to it.<sup>3</sup> The issue of fidelity has widely dominated the academic debate as it questions whether the adaptation process involves transferring elements from literature to cinema, to what extent this can be measured and understood, how it is possible to avoid hierarchies among the different media if fidelity is kept as central within this interpretative model, and, most importantly, if the adaptation process is oriented in exclusively one direction or if it is instead part of a wide dialogue among different media across nations and times. Starting from film aesthetics, the structure of Pasolini's last film is in fact the most immediate echo of Dante's *Inferno*: the film is composed of four main parts, each of them explicitly quoting Dante's key terminology thanks to the employment of introductory titles for each moment of the story. These are a poem named *Antinferno* (Infernal Vestibule), followed by three *Gironi* (Circles): Circle of Manias, Circle of Shit, and Circle of Blood. Each of them is specifically dedicated to a thematic form of punishment to which the victims are subject and that is being repeated to the same beat of the mechanism of retaliation and imagery ruling

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<sup>3</sup> For extended readings on Wagner's categories of "transpositions, commentaries and analogies" see Wagner, G. (1975), pp.222-226. See also Dudley Andrew's categories of "borrowing, intersection and fidelity of transformation" in Dudley, A (1984), p.98. Regarding aspects of adaptation and intermediality see Bolter, J. D. and Grusin, R. (1999).



all Dante's infernal circles.

However, when it came to distribution in both Italy and the UK, aesthetic allusions within the film did not suffice to combat censorship objections. In fact, in 1975 the Italian Commissione per la Revisione Cinematografica blocked the release of the film as the infernal imagery was judged to be "so aberrant and repugnant in relation to sexual perversion that it would surely offend the morality and consequently overwhelm the main theme of the anarchy of the power that inspires the film."<sup>4</sup> The same concern was also expressed a few months later in the UK when the BBFC decided not to certify *Salò* as suitable for public screening as "the film is obsessive, and the matter perverted. [...] On current Board standards [the film] would require 40-60 cuts even if we accept the overall theme and the fact that the subject of debauchery are all teenagers" (BBFC *Salò* pp.5-6). As the previous table has shown, despite both these initial oppositions, further negotiations were respectively held in the following months between the production company and the Italian Commissione per la Revisione Cinematografica and the British Board of Film Classification. Still, these negotiations led to two different types of cuts. In Italy the incriminating scenes were related to "the sodomy of President Doucret [...] the masturbation of the inexperienced boy and the mannequin" along with "the sodomy of Blangis" and "the President masturbating in front of the mirror and the sodomy of the Bishop" ("La scena riguardante la sodomizzazione del presidente Doucret e quella della masturbazione del ragazzo inesperto e del fantoccio [...] la sodomizzazione del personaggio di Blangis [...] la scena della masturbazione del presidente davanti allo

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<sup>4</sup> Sentence 601/67442 dated November 12, 1975 issued by the Vth Cinematographic Revision, Rome, Italy (reproduced in Chiesi 2015).

specchio [...] la sodomizzazione del Vescovo”) (Chiesi 2015, 39). Instead, in the UK the cuts required were mainly related to violent and sexually explicit scenes and not to the acts of sodomy—except for the one involving the “homosexual buggery between the Monsignor (Bishop) and soldier” (see BBFC *Salò*, 110-29). Why did such different—almost *opposite*—outcomes transpire in these two countries if the negotiations took place in the same months? Though the film was basically accused of the same crime—“gross indecency” in the UK and “obscenity” in Italy—a possible answer might be found in the different cultural relationship the two nationalities have with Dante, and therefore, by extension, different perceptions of the adaptation’s fidelity with Dante’s *Inferno*.

### ***A Different Approach to Dante: The Italian Context***

Dante’s poem was first banned in Italy by the Catholic Church when it was first written, and over 700 years later, in the same country, Pasolini’s film was attacked and seized in relation to the scenes involving acts of “consentient sodomy, in which three of the four Sadists [...] practice passive sex and get possessed by the henchmen or get possessed by themselves” and not in relation to “violence, torture or rape scenes (La Corte avesse imposto l’eliminazione dal film non delle scene di violenza, di torture o stupri, ma delle sequenze di sodomia consenziente, ossia di quelle in cui tre dei quattro Signori [...] praticano il sesso passivo e si fanno possedere dai loro scherani o si possiedono fra loro”) (Chiesi 2015, 39).

In a historical moment when Italy was governed by a party called Christian Democracy (DC) and the first movement for gay rights started in 1971, it is not

difficult to understand why the image of homosexual acts perpetrated by the representatives of the political class and the Catholic Church were not considered suitable for public screening (see Dunnage 2014). On the other hand, once the battle for distributing *Salò* in Italian cinemas was concluded in 1979, other infernal aspects and the structure of the film arranged in Dantean circles were not deleted from the footage. In summary, within mid 1970s Italy, references to homosexual practice were considered to offend morality, while scenes of physical or psychological violence perpetrated on underage and non-consensual boys and girls were eventually approved for an adult audience. Italian cinema was in fact used to adaptations of Dante's *Inferno* or of Dante's characters on the big screen such as "the 1949 version of *Conte Ugolino* directed by Riccardo Freda, [...] Raffaele Matarazzo 1950 film *Paolo e Francesca*" (Musa 1995, 389) and "numerous Italian films in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s" (idem). However, it is important to remember that Dante's legacy in Italy was not only consolidated by the mandatory readings of the poem in most schools or its relationship with its adaptations on the big screen. Indeed, in Italy Dante and his work are a fundamental part of the construction of the national cultural identity. Stefano Jossa (2012) notes that "we find statues of Dante Alighieri in central squares of most the Italian cities, from the north throughout Italy to the south" (Audeh and Havelly 2012, 39). This is a symbol of how Dante is considered not only as a great "poet, but mainly a warrior, a fighter, a patriot [that] had already been recognized as a means of creating the common imagination and the common rhetoric of Italians in order to make them feel part of the same history and the same community" (ibid 33-37). It has been widely discussed how, in the 20th century, the appropriation of Dante has also

been “accepted into communist rhetoric” (ibid 31-32),<sup>5</sup> a kind of political discourse in which Pasolini himself often participated from the pages of the main national newspapers, identifying in the Italian Communist Party (PCI) the only real alternative to the already mentioned Christian Democracy (DC) which was governing Italy at the time *Salò* was being produced.<sup>6</sup> For all these reasons, it is possible to conclude that the Italian audience of the late 1970s was mostly aware of the relationship of the adaptation between *Salò* and Dante’s *Inferno* and this is likely why, after censoring scenes of homosexual intercourse, the Court did not impose any introductory captions or other supporting material for highlighting practices of adaptation.

### ***A Different Approach to Dante: The British Context***

The same awareness cannot be said to have been possessed by the British audience, as—despite several scholars having studied the circulation of Dante’s work in the UK through practices of adaptation (see Pieri 2007, and Calé 2007) —Dante does not intentionally serve as a stronghold for the construction of the national cultural identity. For this reason, on the opposite side of Europe, the battle for protecting the distribution of the film was initially fought on sustaining the artistic merits of the film and only later by proving the relationship of adaptation between

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<sup>5</sup> Stefano Jossa further reminds that Dante was quoted in the Italian edition of Marx and Engels Manifesto of the Communist party in which “after a few pages we find a celebration of Dante” (qtd. in Audeh and Havelly 2012, p.32). See also Derek’s article on the first seizure of *Salò* in London, in which we can read that: “Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending upon your view on the film, there appear to be some moralists left in England. Yet arguably, the biggest moralist of them all was Pier Paolo Pasolini. He was a Marxist who was deeply critical of contemporary society, almost as critical of himself and certainly anxious that what he said through his art should not be misunderstood” (Derek 1977).

<sup>6</sup> See Pasolini (1974): “It is sure that in this moment the presence of a great party at the opposition like the Italian Communist Party is the salvation of Italy and its poor democratic institutions” (“E’ certo che in questo momento la presenza di un grande partito all’opposizione come è il Partito Comunista Italiano è la salvezza dell’Italia e delle sue povere istituzioni democratiche”).

Pasolini's *Salò* and Dante's *Inferno*. James Ferman, who at the time was in charge as the Secretary of the BBFC, was the main authority defending the film's right to be screened in the UK, which he considered "wielding of absolute power with the temptation to satisfy all private desire, and the result is a parade of moral and physical horror the like of which has rarely been portrayed on the screen" (BBFC *Salò* 23-24).<sup>7</sup> This is one of the main reasons why he was willing to continue working toward its release in the UK. The film aesthetics was evaluated not made to beautify violence as "in almost every case, the sexual and other horrors are presented either in long shot or off-screen, and there is no exploitation sensationalizing. We are meant to hate everything we see, and there is no covert gloating over the spectacle" (idem). Because of this, "cuts would destroy the film's purpose by making the horrors less revolting and therefore more acceptable; a turn-on rather than a turn-off" (idem). When these arguments were considered not strong enough by the Director of Public Prosecution (DPP), who refused to confirm the film would not be prosecuted if released in 1977, Ferman did not give up. He then worked toward proving the artistic merits of the film by providing evidence of adaptation between *Salò* and the most important Italian literary poem: Dante's *Inferno*. Proving this would in fact uphold the British "reputation for artistic freedom" (ibid p.133)<sup>8</sup> at an international level. The first key step was therefore tracing practices of adaptation of the infernal structure and imagery between Dante's *Inferno* and Pasolini's *Salò* within matters of fidelity. The scene of the coprophagia banquet is a good example of how this tracing took place. When Ferman contacted the University of Warwick to find a legitimate

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<sup>7</sup> Letter dated 16th August, 1976 between James Ferman and the office of the Director of Public Prosecution (DPP) in London.

<sup>8</sup> Letter dated June 6th, 1979.

precedent in Dante's *Inferno* that could protect this sequence and consequently the whole film from further cuts the response was the following:

After further research on the question of eating excrement in Dante, I must confirm that in the final analysis it would be difficult to maintain that the characters in canto 18 of the *Inferno* are actually involved in eating. However, given that the characters are totally submerged in it and the elaborate description employed to close the canto, it would be equally as tenuous to assume that they can avoid it. My conclusion is therefore that although there is no intention and hence no 'justification', the situation should be enough to establish a connection between the two works that goes beyond the formal verisimilitude intended by the film-maker. (BBFC *Salò* 54)<sup>9</sup>

From this extract we acquire an important perspective: the academic world recognized that the practice of adaptation from Dante's *Inferno* was intentional since the director started to work on the film. As a result, a "connection" between the two works was created in both their aesthetics and imagery. However, the scholar who provided this letter posited that we read this connection beyond the "formal verisimilitude" established between the poem and the film, beyond the director's mere intention or aspects of formal fidelity within the film aesthetics. This change of focus would place the debate of adaptation in the broader context of the entire national artistic production, where past and present dialogue together in a transhistorical perspective. As a result, inviting the audience to acknowledge the cultural importance of Dante and its adaptations in Italian identity was the next step to take in 1979, when the new cut of the film was granted release without interference to British cinema clubs.

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<sup>9</sup> Letter released by *University of Warwick – School of Italian*, December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1978.

## Perception: Adaptation and the Audience

The type of work that needed to be done in 1979 to allow *Salò* to be distributed in the UK required cine clubs, among other obligations, to introduce the screening with a “film explanation” in order to place the film “in its proper moral and cultural context for the benefit of the audience” (BBFC *Salò* 22).<sup>10</sup> The kind of film explanation which the DPP required needed to explicitate practice of adaptation between Dante’s *Inferno* and Pasolini, and then to frame the violent content of *Salò* in the symbolic light of a moral parabola which acquires its significance if read through the lenses of the Italian cultural identity. This intervention meant training British spectators to become a “knowing audience” (Hutcheon 2013, 120) therefore to being able to recognize not only the link between source materials and the adaptation they were experiencing as viewers but most of all their significance at a cultural level. In these way, British spectators were prepared to watch the film with the cultural awareness that the academic world had just recognized.

More specifically, before each screening in 1979 and throughout the 1980s the British audience was informed that:

[Pasolini] uses too, some of the imagery of Dante’s *Inferno*, with its terrible Circles of Hell, where those who had done violence to man and god included the blasphemers and the sodomites. For Pasolini, there was, too, the violence of dehumanized sex, of the exploitation and degradation of the human body, which he felt to be at the heart of Fascism. In one circle of Dante’s Hell, as in Pasolini’s film, the sufferers are immersed in excrements to await their fate. In Italy, such imagery is traditionally associated with the degradation of the body and the spirit. (BBFC *Salò* 90)

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<sup>10</sup> Extract from letter dated May 9th, 1979.

This introductory caption and the few cuts that I have previously discussed eventually helped the film to be finally distributed in cinema clubs in the UK and also shaped the perception of the phenomenon of adaptation within different audiences. While on the one hand the caption explains the formal correlation between the infernal imagery used in Dante and the ones adopted by Pasolini, it ends up highlighting the cultural significance of this type of infernal imagery. This shift therefore necessitated a greater evaluation of the significance of Dante's *Inferno* in Italian art and—more broadly—in Italian cultural identity. In essence, analyzing how and if different viewers perceive adaptations as being adaptations meant reconsidering adaptation as no longer a mere aesthetical interpretation, but an evaluation which Robert Stam (2008, p.15) defines as “a cumulative understanding of what the text means as a piece of literature and as a cultural object”.

### **Circulation: Adaptation and Modes of Film Distribution**

A final consideration of the relationship between adaptation and film censorship is the further circulation of the film as, in the case of *Salò*, achieving distribution in cinema theatres did not automatically eliminate other forms of censorship and restricted access to the viewing of the incriminated film, but instead it resulted in the rise of a variety of contradictions. In fact, once this distribution for theatrical release was progressively achieved in both Italy and the UK, viewing the film was allowed — and remains allowed today — only to an 18+ audience.<sup>11</sup> This 18

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<sup>11</sup> The 18 certificate also appears on the covers of most DVD and Blu-Ray editions. See e.g the BFI edition of the film with catalogue number BFIB1114 available at <http://shop.bfi.org.uk/sal-or-the-120-days-of-sodom-dvd-bluray.html> or the 2015 restored version by Cineteca Bologna available in DVD at



certificate became fundamental when the film company which produced *Salò* attempted to find distribution on television as their application was formally rejected by the British TV network in 1991, whilst in Italy the film was broadcasted only once in 2000 by a pay-TV channel.<sup>12</sup> It is important to remember that adaptations can be read not only in the light of the shift “from one mode of media production to the other” (Cartmell 2012, 364), but instead, through the different ways adaptations as products may (or may not) circulate across different types of screens. In light of this, a possible reason for this initial restriction which continues still today may be provided by Sherryll Vynt (2012), who has investigated how in recent years, and especially amongst the flurry of digital technologies, “television viewers are no longer limited to viewing during the broadcast time [and] similarly, the sale of DVDs of both film and television means that they are often watched in identical ways” (Telotte and Duchonvay 2012, 69). This perspective is therefore in accordance with the cinematic experience of users of audio-visual media beyond the cinema theatre. However, contrary to cinema theatres where audiences are required to prove their age to attend an 18+ screening, this criterion is more difficult to be ascertained of TV viewers and this is probably why the broadcasting of *Salò* on TV continues to be heavily restricted. In addition to this, scholars such as Henri Jenkins (2006) along with David J. Bolter and Robert Grusin (1999) have shown how technological development often allow to bypass censorship regulations when the cinematic experience is carried through other audio-visual media and especially the internet. In fact, if we type the

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<http://cinestore.cinetecadibologna.it/bookshop/dettaglio/99>

<sup>12</sup> In the UK the film was considered “not suitable for transmission at any time on satellite TV”. As seen in the BBFC file on *Salò*, pp.147-150. Document named: “Registration Form for TV Transmission” dated at 21/10/1991 with reference SAF60207.

keyword “Salò” on Youtube from the UK, we can access several clips of the film with no form of age control, including scenes that have previously been censored. And many of these videos have attracted hundreds of thousands of views.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the same film in its uncut version is also available for free and without a password on VIMEO and it has more than two million views.<sup>14</sup> It is important to underline that none of the clips available on Youtube nor the copy on VIMEO provides an on-screen warning of the graphic content of the film. This widespread, nascent phenomenon of providing unrestricted access to a film through digital media challenges the boundaries of law policies and film classifications and invites us to revise the idea that, forty years after its first screening, “Salo, is a film of limited appeal and is unlikely to ever receive widespread distribution” (BBFC website).

## Conclusion

The history of *Salò*'s constrained production and distribution is therefore substantially linked to aspects of adaptation of Dante's *Inferno* — specifically its infernal imagery to the 1970s Italian political scenario. This chapter has demonstrated how, on the one hand, Pasolini himself was consciously inspired by Dante's work and that Pasolini actively worked toward adapting the infernal imagery in his own last film. This practice of adaptation is explicitly visible in the structure of the film composed of Dantean circles which then pervade the climate of the film: violent,

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<sup>13</sup> See e.g. the final sequence, available at the following link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6q\\_lz4SfHA4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6q_lz4SfHA4) and that counts more than 500.000 views; or the coprophagia scene available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GVV7L66xh4> and that counts over 400.000 views. [Last access: May 2017].

<sup>14</sup> As seen at <https://vimeo.com/68045309?bu=1510000149>

sadistic and potentially perpetual. This chapter has further reflected on the importance of the audience's perception when they experience practices of adaptation. On the one hand, as Dante and his work are key to the Italian cultural identity, the censorship board there did not feel the need to include explanatory captions for the release of the film at a national level. Instead it only intervened in those scenes which were considered obscene at that time: acts of sodomy carried out by a representative of the ruling class and the Catholic Church. On the other hand, the same awareness of the adaptation cannot be said for the British audience, and this is why, in the legal battle for distributing *Salò*, inviting British spectators to read *Salò* as an adaptation of Dante's *Inferno* was considered a powerful way to bolster the film's artistic merits and consequently deter further acts of censorship. This resulted in the creation of an explanatory caption explicitly stating both this formal link and the cultural importance of this imagery adapted from Dante. A final point to address is the identification of adaptation in aspects of a film's circulation across various media, as shown by the history of *Salò's* constrained distribution from its rejected attempts to be broadcast on TV to the film being today available on free video-sharing platforms such as Youtube and VIMEO. All these points help us to understand that tracing adaptation with impeccable precision is tough, even if adaptation can be framed by the director's intention, the film aesthetics, the audience awareness, and its further circulation across various media. However, by moving from "what adaptation is toward what adaptation does" (Dicecco 2015, 163), the case of *Salò* has both proved and explored the complexity of this phenomenon, showing the significance of adaptations not only in aspects of film aesthetics but, most importantly in the impact they play in the political and social sphere, which are able to enhance

public discourse within changing times and policies.

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