

# **Salo: why the Classification Review Board banned it**

*The Classification Review Board has released the reasons for its decision to reverse the previous classification of Pasolini's controversial film Salo*

**T**he film *Salo o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (Italian moviemaker Paolo Pasolini's 120 Days of Sodom) was submitted for reclassification by the federal Attorney-General Daryl Williams on the request of the Queensland Attorney-General Denver Beanland in the winter of 1997. The *Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995* makes provision for the re-classification of films already classified.

In accordance with the request, the Classification Review Board met and a majority of its members banned *Salo*, classifying it RC (Refused Classification). It had previously been classified "R 18+" - i.e. for viewing only by those 18 years and over.

The film's plot is as follows: four powerful fascists in World War II Italy make a pact to explore the theme of "all things are good when carried to excess". They select and abduct a group of 16 young teenagers to pursue this end. The Classification Review Board determined that the plot contained several depictions of violence, sexual references and adult themes of high intensity. In its view, many scenes in the film depicted not only violence or sexual violence but also cruelty, and portrayed persons in a demeaning manner. The Classification Review Board also found the film to contain scenes of sexual violence which were offensive (likely to cause outrage or extreme disgust to most people) and of sexual activity accompanied by fetishes which were offensive.

According to its recently released findings on its decision to ban *Salo*, the Classification Review Board was mindful of the requirement of Section 11 of the 1995 Act to take into account in classification the literary, artistic or educational merits of a film. But the majority of the board found that the film's metaphorical statement about fascism and the corruption engendered by absolute power was not clearly established and could not, therefore, be used as justification for the inclusion of scenes which do not meet aspects of the classification code or guidelines.

In addition, the majority of the board also determined that while the film could be said to have artistic merit, it was not such as to outweigh the clear prohibitions in the guidelines against offensive and high impact definitions of cruelty, sexual violence and sexual activity accompanied by offensive fetishes.

The demeaning portrayal of persons was also taken into account by the Classification Review Board whose members drew attention to the National Classification Code which requires that adults should be able to see, hear and read what they want but also highlights community concerns about depictions that portray persons in a demeaning manner. The use of the phrase "demeaning portrayal of persons", imported into the 1995 Act following landmark legislation in the Canadian Supreme Court in 1992, marked the first time a film has been banned in Australia on the basis of offering a "demeaning portrayal of persons". The board

determined that *Salo* deals with sex, cruelty and abhorrent phenomena in a way that offends the standards of morality, decency and propriety generally accepted by reasonable adults.

So, the Classification Review Board decided to set aside the previous decision to classify *Salo* "R 18+", determined that the film would not fall into the R category and classified it Refused Classification.

A minority of the board did not agree with the majority findings. They highlighted the context of the film, stating that Pasolini was one of the most important film makers of post-war Italy. They also said that the film was based on Sade's 120 Days of Sodom updated to 1944 when Italy had fallen to the Allies. Its theme of terminal fascism has generally been accepted by major critics to be a metaphor for the oppression of fascism and the corrupting effects of power.

In addition, the minority said that the film has been analysed and discussed both in its own right and in the context of Pasolini's work and the development of post-war Italian cinema by respected art critics and film historians in publications dealing with the art or history of cinema. *Salo* has been permitted public screening in countries including the U.K., U.S., France and Japan.

The minority said that the film "whilst certainly challenging from a classification standpoint, could nonetheless be accommodated in the Restricted Category, defined as this is to encompass material considered possibly offensive to some sections of the adult community...although the film deals with indecent or obscene phenomenon, it does so in a manner which is neither indecent nor obscene in itself when viewed in the context of a film of merit where even the most problematic of elements clearly serve the director's metaphorical purpose. For the minority, the film is neither exploitative nor voyeuristic, but a powerfully realised political statement on the violation of innocence and freedom."

Karen Winton