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Ideas of Sex: Discourses on Sexuality in Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* and Cesare Canevari's *The Gestapo's Last Orgy*

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Abstract: *Both The Night Porter (Cavani) and The Gestapo's Last Orgy (Canevari) are often referred to as exploitation. Exploitation cinema's focus on empty excess is in line with the exaggeration/superficiality of "Camp". Despite Susan Sontag's separation of "Camp" elements and homosexual-Camp elements, subsequent commentators have argued that Camp is an exclusively gay critique of the artificial nature of the "performance" of hetero-normative gender roles. My article looks at the ways in which lesbian filmmaker Liliana Cavani discusses queer sexuality through a Camp play on gender roles, and how this same discourse is "developed" in Canevari's virtual remake. German/Italian fascist ideology's preoccupation with the perfected male body and Hitler's original acceptance of homosexuality contributed to the presence of a lingering (masculine) homoeroticism in Nazi iconography. Holocaust history of Nazi domination enhanced this masculine image. Accordingly, the two filmmakers use a binary of male (masculine) Nazi dominator and female submissive prisoner, which is possessing of a heterosexual quality made fragile by the history of fascist sexual ambiguity. Essentially, my paper argues that the films' disruption of the traditional images of Nazi aggressor/innocent victim through the protagonists' depicted collaboration corresponds with the filmmakers' blurring of masculine/feminine roles in their individual statements about queer sexuality.*

The narrative of Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* (1974) details an affair between a male Nazi and his female captive that begins in a concentration camp and is continued in the decade after World War Two. Provoked by the film's explicit depictions of sexuality, *The Night Porter*'s detractors accused Cavani of exploitatively using the Holocaust as a backdrop for salacious spectacle. Yosefa Lotshitzky called Cavani's film "semipornographic" (2). However, *The Night Porter*'s high production values have encouraged some to view it as a "controversial art film" (Krautheim, "Desecration Repackaged", 2009). The film's reputation as exploitation was consolidated by subsequent trashier imitators such as *SS Experiment Love Camp* (Sergio Garrone). One of these re-workings, which also tells the story of an affair between a male Nazi and his female captive, Cesare Canevari's *The Gestapo's Last Orgy* (1977), has been accused of using the concentration camp setting as "a structuring device for sequences of sexual torture and rape" (Koven 23). The title of this paper (ideas of sex) refers to Holocaust survivor/scholar Primo Levi's comments regarding *The Night Porter*: "her film is based on the wrong idea, more precisely on the idea Cavani has of sex. This has nothing to do with the camps" (qtd. in Krautheim, *Masquerades*, 13). Levi's comments indicate that *The Night Porter*, rather than being empty pornography in a Holocaust setting, uses history to express unrelated ideas about sexuality. In this paper, I will look at the history of Italian and German fascism and sexuality, before considering how Cavani uses this history in a discourse on sexuality and sexual identity. I will then look at how Cesare Canevari uses Cavani's concept to express alternate ideas about sex in *The Gestapo's Last Orgy*. As I will show, both reference Holocaust history in their initiating, representative "heterosexual binary" of a male Nazi dominator and his female victim. This binary, already unstable due to the history of

fascist sexual ambiguity, is altered in the films' narratives for the sake of the respective filmmakers' individual statements about sexuality.

The continuing attraction of gay fetishists to Nazi iconography, and lesbian filmmaker Liliana Cavani to a story about Nazism, which outwardly refrains from judgement of its war criminal protagonist, Max (Dirk Bogarde), seems at odds with some known historical facts: during World War Two, homosexuals from Germany and German-occupied countries were—like gypsies, political prisoners and, of course, Jews—subject to horrific persecution and eventual deportation to concentration camps. However, there is arguably a homoerotic element in the fascist aesthetic preoccupation with the perfected male body. As noted by J.A. Mangan, to every variant of the ideology: "sport was an important part of fascist socialisation. The reasons are not hard to find. Sport develops muscle and muscle is equated with power—literally and metaphorically. War, the essence of fascism, demands physical fitness and sport helps promote this fitness" (1). Furthermore, "all of this apparently corresponded to a natural vocation of the male gender: the *Duce* himself affirmed that war is to man as maternity is to woman" (Bellassai 320). In Italy, images of Mussolini participating in sports such as swimming, tennis, skiing and boxing (often displaying his supposedly athletic physique) were regularly circulated as an example to the public: "Mussolini came to symbolise virility, not only for the virile strength of his ideas, and the bravery attributed with reason to him, but also for the power of his muscles and the talent which, it was recounted, allowed him to practice every kind of sport with success" (Gori 43). Gigliola Gori notes that, in line with Mussolini's example, "physical activities for the soldiers, a rich and varied programme, had to be performed with a naked torso" (41). Furthermore, the iconographic art of the period, such as the statues displayed at the Stadium of Marbles in Rome, often depicted muscular male nudes perfectly illustrative of the ideal Aryan build. Although such a reading may not have reflected the intentions of the regime, as noted by Sandro Bellassai, such Fascist masculine imagery "did not lack a homoerotic component of almost sensual satisfaction in and fascination with the male body as an aesthetic value in itself" (323).

In Germany, although Hitler never attempted to portray a public image of athleticism the way Mussolini did, Nazi-sponsored art such as the male nude sculptures of Arno Breker were still intended to inspire the veneration of the Aryan body. This German version of fascism, more focused on Nationalist ideology than its Italian precursor, also utilised the beautified image of the Aryan to enhance negative perceptions of other social groups. As noted by George L. Mosse, under National Socialism, "the ideal human type must be clearly distinguished and set-off against what the Nazis called the counter type, the exact opposite of the normative ideal" (249). In Germany, the image of the Aryan ideal reinforced Nazi-Nationalist ideology through its cultural juxtaposition with negative stereotypes of other, opposing social groups. Whilst simultaneously promoting Aryan superiority, as noted by Mosse, the Nazi "aesthetic sharpened and refined the image of the outsider, while continuing to give him the traditional negative bodily features—for example, the Jew's nose or his pathological gait" (249-250).

Images of the Aryan ideal may not have been intended as homoerotic, however, they have been perceived as such by some: Tim Pursell notes, regarding the Nazi-era painting *Bäuerliche Trilogie* (1941) by Sepp Hilz that "many gay men who have seen this image see it as a clearly homoerotic work; indeed it is an internet favourite" (134). Additionally, the history of the Nazi Party's employment of homosexuals in its early years arguably fuels the view of Nazi iconography as homoerotic. Party member Ernst Röhm remained open about his homosexuality, even as he ascended to the position of head of the brown-shirted

Stormtroopers (*Sturmabteilung* (SA), which was rumoured to be staffed largely by individuals with such inclinations) with Hitler at first remaining tolerant. In 1934, fearing that the German military, which had by this point often communicated their contempt for Röhm and his underlings' indiscreet behaviour, might not support his forthcoming invasion plans, Hitler had Röhm arrested, and subsequently executed. Simultaneously, during what has become known as the "Night of the Long Knives" (*Nacht der langen Messer*), Hitler ordered the SS's (*Schutzstaffeln,* Hitler's protection squads) violent decimation of the SA. The common perception of male homosexual practice as synonymous with femininity meant that the SA had tainted National Socialism's desired masculine image, an issue Hitler resolved with its destruction, before putting laws in place prohibiting homosexual activity.

Nevertheless, a category of more masculine homosexuality remained embroidered in the fabric of National Socialism. Prior to the rise of Nazism, in 1896, the world's first homosexual magazine was published in Germany. *Der Eigene* "had much in common with other right-wing movements at the time, including interests in racial health, body purity" (Pursell 115) and cultivated the idea that "a homosexual male was undeniably masculine and potentially a more masculine male than a heterosexual male because he was not attracted to women … From this perspective, the effeminate queer was a dangerous object, as dangerous as he appeared to homophobes" (116). Raymond van de Wiel cites senior Nazi Joseph Goebbels's written account of a conversation with Hitler on this matter:

> The Führer doesn't like Gustav Gründgens. He is too unmanly for him … The homosexual … tends to undertake the selection of men according to the criminal or at least sick criteria but not their suitability. If you let him have his way, the whole state would become an organization of homosexuality in the long run, and not an organization of manly excellence. A real man will always put up resistance to such an attempt, if only for the reason that he sees in it an attack on his own possibilities of advancement. (9)

Raymond van de Wiel then states that, regarding homosexuality, Nazis believed that it "is an 'ineluctable law' that the 'best and most manly' will be affected by it". (9) Van de Wiel comments that "there seems to be a sort of idealization of the homosexual character" (9). He then concludes that National Socialism's eventual outlawing of homosexuality was "a policy which is not meant to eradicate homosexuality as such, but only homosexual behaviour, that is to say, both actual homosexual activities and perceived homosexual characteristics such as effeminacy" (10). As John Hoberman notes, despite the focus on sport,

> elite athletes were not, in fact, the primary "action figures" promoted by the Nazi regime. On the contrary, it was soldiers, pilots and SS men who were the most celebrated "achievers" of Nazi Germany … athletic dynamism came in a poor second to the legendary *furor teutonicus* of the German warrior. The modern apotheosis of this type was the "hardened" SS man, who became the focus of Nazi eugenic fantasies about the ideal Aryan male. (71)

Hoberman then comments that this kind of hardness "was in the service of an ethic of pure achievement" in Nazi Germany (79). Even more than other military personnel, the SS man "was required to be a superb physical specimen" (79). The image of the Nazi as hardened, ultra masculine dominator, by implication, suggests a view of his captive, as submissive (and feminine—submissiveness being traditionally perceived as a feminine trait). By describing victims of Nazi atrocities as "submissive", I am not trying to imply that their position was in

any way voluntary, simply that their non-military status forced them into an involuntarily submissive position, when faced with aggressive German forces. The concept of masculine Nazi dominator and feminine submissive prisoner is represented in the films' male Nazi and female captive protagonists. The "binary" of male Nazi and female captive is a taking possession of a heterosexuality made fragile by the history of the perceived relationship between homosexuality and fascism, something used by the two filmmakers.

Unlike the later films it inspired, such as *The Gestapo's Last Orgy, The Night Porter* is largely set after the Holocaust, specifically in post-war Vienna, with sporadic flashbacks to the camps throughout the film. Lucia's (Charlotte Rampling) backstory prior to her time at the concentration camp is outlined by another collaborator's identification of her as the daughter of a Socialist, and when we meet her in the 1950s, she is known by the hotel staff as "the conductor's wife". In both instances, in the absence of the Nazi character Max, she is a sidelined female character in a patriarchal world. The chronologically earlier flashbacks in *The Night Porter*, detailing the characters' tenures at the unnamed concentration camp also depict Lucia as feminine and dominated by Max. Early flashbacks portray the nude "registration" of camp inmates, where we see Max's camera first single out Lucia, wearing only a childish ribbon in her hair, from the crowd of Jewish prisoners. True to historical reality, Lucia's hair is shorn during flashbacks to slightly later moments at the camps, but her somewhat boyish appearance is countered by Max's eventually allowing her to wear a dress, instead of the striped pyjamas worn by other inmates.[1] Other chronologically earlier flashbacks demonstrate Max's masculine sexual dominance of Lucia as he coerces her—possessed of a vague look that may well be intended to connote childhood sexual inexperience—to kiss and fellate him.

Max's history as a hardened, dominant Nazi is further corroborated in the "present day" of 1950s Vienna, when we hear one of his fascist comrades comment that "he had fun passing himself off as a doctor, to have a chance at making sensational photographic studies, it's obvious that not one of Max's patients survived", and, accordingly, during one of the flashbacks we see Max in a lab coat. This, of course, refers to the cruel medical experiments carried out on prisoners during that period, and effectively compares Max to figures such as the infamous Nazi doctor Joseph Mengele. During Max's "trial" (actually a ritual resembling a legal trial arranged by a number of Max's former colleagues: they are each tried, before all incriminating evidence is disposed of and, as a result, they obtain closure), we are shown fleeting glimpses of authentic-looking black-and-white photographs of Holocaust atrocities, before we hear another ex-Nazi state that Max "himself transmitted the orders for execution". These trials are held in the hotel where Max works as the night porter, for which he dons a uniform similar to the one he once wore at the camps.

These early flashbacks evoke an atmosphere of Holocaust realism that supports the view of Max as Nazi dominator and Lucia as his victim. Regarding the protagonists of Holocaust flashback films, Maureen Turim states that, "the individual who suffered represents a shared experience of masses of victims, and this weight of a collective horror resonates through the remembered images of the camps" (232). She comments that such films typically feature the "modernist flashback", which "seeks mimetically to represent mental processes, to show the memory flashes and brief disjointed or distorted images which come into a character's mind" (190). The modernist flashback is used by Cavani in the earlier recollections in *The Night Porter*. For example, one of Lucia's initial flashbacks takes the form of a montage of brief shots, first showing her on a fairground ride, again dressed in childlike, feminine attire, with a look of youthful pleasure, which is soon transformed into an

expression of morose blankness as we hear gunshots and resulting screams. These sounds remain as the film then cuts back to Lucia's POV of Max at registration pointing his camera at her.

A turning point in the film is the first surreal flashback at the opera. Instead of the cold silence of the earlier sequence, this remembrance is stylised by the sound of the surrounding performance of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. At this point, there is also a break from the anxiety-ridden brief edits employed in the earlier flashes. Here, Cavani begins to dispense with realistic Holocaust representation to proceed with her own discourse on sexuality. She begins to disturb the atmosphere of heterosexuality by introducing a graphic example of homosexuality when we see two unnamed men (ostensibly SS officers) having sex. The earlier flashbacks are signified as depictions of either Max or Lucia's subjective remembering, by their adoption of what Joshua Hirsch refers to as a "remembering stare" prior to the flashback (105). As the narrative progresses, the "remembering stare" virtually ceases to be applied, indicating that we are seeing something less representative of the real collective horror, and that Cavani is presenting her own imagining of the Holocaust in the flashbacks.

The dream-like flashback sequence in which Lucia performs the song *Wenn ich mir was wünschen dürfte* represents a further progression in the trajectory of Cavani's discourse. The scene begins with a shot of an SS man in a mask, symbolic of the scene's pointed skewering of traditional identities. The choice of music (by Friedrich Hollaender, whose pre-war cabaret shows were heavily critical and mocking of Hitler's regime) is in line with the filmmaker's mocking of Nazism's pretence of heterosexual masculinity, as we see Lucia performing in partial SS drag. The contrast of her visible gender (her breasts are exposed) and masculine attire transforms her into an androgynous figure. Whereas in other flashback sequences, which are seemingly chronologically earlier, Lucia greeted Max's advances with apparent trepidation, in this sequence, she exudes a newfound sexual confidence. At this point in the timeline of the flashbacks, the positioning of aggressor and victim becomes less definite. We see other female camp inmates engaged in relaxed conversation with SS officers. Also, Lucia, at this point, is no longer the victimised child seen at camp registration—the scene is centred on her provocative performance and culminates with her being presented with a "gift" that is symbolic of her now accepting complicity, the severed head of another inmate she reported to Max for "tormenting her". When we meet her in Vienna, she has slipped back into a calmer, more civilised persona. As she resumes her relationship with Max, she again seems liberated, literally screaming with joy. Whereas at the camps, Lucia's liberation coincided with a disregard for masculine/feminine identities in a literal show of androgyny, when she is reunited with Max, her androgynous (masculine-dominant, feminine-submissive) qualities are arguably communicated through less obvious devices such as versatile sadomasochistic role-playing. Again, this release occurs as the aggressor/victim identities are disregarded. Both in the aforementioned surreal flashback and when she is reunited with Max, Lucia's move from feminised victim to sexually confident androgyne is representative of a statement about the potentially liberating effect of accepting a non-heteronormative sexual identity. The character's implied psychological release coincides with a collapse of the binaries of gender and aggressor/victim. At these points in the film, Cavani effectively compares the social marginalisation of non-heteronormative sexuality to the kind of social marginalisation that must result from (the reality of) a move from victim to collaborator in a world which consists almost exclusively of individuals fixed in positions of victims or aggressors.

Max's underlying homosexual tendencies are first indicated by his relationship with Bert (Amedeo Amodio), another of the former SS men hiding out at the hotel where Max works after the war. Fascist sexual ambiguity is referenced in the flashback in which Bert performs Christoph Willibald von Gluck's ballet *Don Juan* for his comrades. Displayed almost nude, Bert's muscular physique is reminiscent of fascist propagandistic imagery of the perfect Aryan body. The sight of the mostly male SS audience staring carefully at Bert, contrasted with the image of Heinrich Himmler, a documented homophobe and supporter of homosexuals' persecution during World War Two, prominently displayed on the wall behind them, reminds us that under Nazism, homosexual urges were contradictorily promoted and suppressed. The majority of the Nazi characters in the film keep any latent homosexuality thoroughly in check. However, as is illustrated by his chosen category of dance (ballet is of course often associated with femininity) as opposed to other athletic demonstrations (as well as his connection with Max), homosexuality is more visible in Bert. The intimate nature of Max and Bert's friendship is outlined in the scene immediately following Bert's performance, when we see Max administer Bert's medication via an anal injection. During this scene, Bert details his desire to have Max at his side all the time: "If I were rich, I'd hire you to do everything for me". Despite their closeness, Max and Bert's relationship never becomes physical, in keeping with Nazism's simultaneous endorsement of male intimacy and prohibition of homosexual contact. When Max indicates remorse, and a desire to abandon evil during his trial (he comments, "perhaps there are no living witnesses, but if there are, can't we leave them in peace, let them forget"), Bert implies that he feels similarly; "remember when we had my trial here, I felt as awful as you feel now". Bert and Max's guilt—their disillusionment with fascist ideology—is aligned with their homosexuality, reinforcing Cavani's notion that being neither an aggressor nor victim, but residing in a separate, socially marginalised moral grey zone, is analogous to living outside of hetero-normativity.

However, Bert never indulges his homosexual urges or distances himself from the Nazi group. In a later sequence, when Max gives a Nazi salute to his comrades as a form of sarcastic mockery, the rest of them, including Bert, to show their unwavering fascist convictions, also salute. Max's drift away from fascism coincides with his embrace of homosexuality in the shape of his relationship with Lucia. The performance of *Don Juan* begins as a private show for Max in Bert's room at the hotel. After a few minutes, the film cuts to what is ostensibly Max's flashback of Bert dancing to the same piece of music at the camps. At this point in the film, since Max is aware of the presence of Lucia (a ghost from his past) at the hotel, but unaware of her affection for him, he is seemingly concerned that she will prompt his descent into the hell of public recognition as a war criminal. Cavani's placement of *Don Juan*—a story in which the protagonist's descent into hell is engendered by the ghost of a man he once killed in a duel—at this moment in the film seems appropriate. However, Lucia is a character who has been symbolically identified as possessing a masculinised androgynous sexual allure that once tempted him away from his role as fascist victimiser. Therefore, we can conclude that Max's fear might not be her reporting him to the authorities, but that she might instigate his again losing control of latent homosexual urges, and drifting away from his colleagues into the moral grey zone of collaboration.

In Vienna, as Max's distance from his colleagues increases, and he becomes closer to the androgynous character of Lucia, he leaves his job (and, therefore, his uniform—a strong symbol of his masculine Nazi dominator past) behind him. When she leaves her husband and moves in with Max, drifting again toward collaboration and away from feminine submissiveness, he first blunts her femininity by removing her earrings before they embrace.

For the remainder of the film, in which she is largely confined to Max's apartment, she is, for the most part, without the kind of explicitly feminine attire she wore whilst at her husband's side. At this stage in the timeline of the film, the two characters again exist outside of heteronormativity and in a world in which the binaries of aggressor/victim are disregarded. The fundamental equality of the characters' relationship at this stage is evidenced by their emerging ability to swap and change roles of dominance and submission, something best demonstrated in one particular scene of sadomasochistic play. In this section of the film, Lucia asserts her dominance by purposefully smashing a glass jar in Max's path, causing his feet to be cut. Max, instead of reacting with anger, simply reaches down to touch his injured foot, before showing her his bloodied hand as a sign of his willing submissiveness. Identities then switch, as, in response, Lucia submissively places her hand beneath his foot, before Max presses down on it, causing her hand to be similarly injured. Arguably, *The Night Porter*'s literal story of a Nazi and his prisoner's gradual move toward collaboration also represents a narrative about the characters' shifting from the heterosexual roles of (masculine) dominant aggressor and (feminine) submissive victim to a place outside of heteronormativity. Cavani sees acceptance of non-heteronormative sexuality as positive, as the characters find equality in their relationship, but face social marginalisation as a result of both their collaboration and their unconventional sexuality.

Like *The Night Porter*, *The Gestapo's Last Orgy* first draws upon the standard binary of male Nazi aggressor and female captive, an image Canevari enhances with more specific reference to Holocaust reality in its characters' verbal classification of the prisoners as Jews (something rarely done in Nazi exploitation cinema). In contrast with the more subtle revelation of *The Night Porter*'s Max's war criminal past, the dominant villainy of his equivalent character in *The Gestapo's Last Orgy*, Von Starker (Adriano Micantoni), and the majority of his group, is firmly established in the opening scene. As we see Von Starker driving towards a meeting, five years after the Holocaust, with Lucia's counterpart, Lise (Daniela Poggi), we hear a radio news report of a Nazi trial, complete with an audio recording of survivor testimonies. First, we hear a survivor detailing her sister's rape and maiming by the SS. Then, we hear an ex-SS man, who worked in the "filing and records department" state that out of the "four thousand, six hundred and eighty six" women sent to the camp, "three thousand, nine hundred and seventy-two" were put to death, and a further "two hundred and twenty-four" died of "natural causes" (in reality of course, this would most likely mean they were killed by exhaustion from physical labour and hunger), before finally, he confirms that it was Commandant Conrad Von Starker who was responsible for so many deaths. When we first meet Lise in the camp, she appears to have given up any regard for her own life or safety, fulfilling the role of the submissive prisoner. Early on, Lise is told of the other inmates' routine of disfiguring a new arrival, so that "the Nazis eliminate her … it's really to have more of a chance of survival, you know, when all the new girls are taken in, they substitute the new ones for us, so it's better to have a few places already vacant". Illustrating her negative attitude towards her own well-being, Lise responds by saying, "you might let me be the next one, alright. Anytime you want, tell it to the others".

In *The Night Porter*, the brief glimpses of Max's original domination of Lucia, an example being his chaining her up and simulating fellatio with his pointed fingers, and the seeming spontaneity of their post-war sexual play gives no indication that the characters' gratification is reached through an arranged, ceremonial repetition of the performance of specific dominant/submissive role-playing scenarios. Consequently, it appears that these are standpoints that are naturally assumed, genuine articulations of inner psychology as opposed to fallacies. In *The Gestapo's Last Orgy*, some of the earlier sadomasochism-themed set

pieces are arranged, ritualistic scenarios designed to portray Nazi dominance of the inmates. When Von Starker suspends Lise and her friend above a pit of corrosive fluid, he tells us, and we see in flashback, that other inmates were previously lowered into the same pit, to their deaths. In the scene in which we see a prisoner dragged screaming from the barracks, another inmate's knowledge of her fate—that she is to be fed to the SS dogs—hints that this too is a ritual designed to intimidate prisoners. Many of the scenes detailing Von Starker's torture of Lise, such as his flogging of her nude body—which takes place on a kind of stage—are in the spirit of more theatrical types of S&M dominant/submissive role-playing. In *The Night Porter*, the seemingly less premeditated, less theatrical, parallel sequences are suggestive of the characters' genuine positions of dominant and submissive at the beginning of a narrative trajectory that concluded in equality. However, in *The Gestapo's Last Orgy*, the arranged "show" of dominant, submissive positioning is proven a complete fallacy, with both the Nazi characters revealed as submissive and Lise eventually revealing her dominant character. The arrival of Von Starker's female sidekick, Alma (Maristella Greco), who violently intimidates the female prisoners whilst also molesting the male officers, begins to disturb the portrayed image of dominant, masculine Nazi as personified by Von Starker, early on in the film.

In *The Night Porter*, Max's gradual distancing from his Nazi comrades is concomitant with his eventual acceptance of a sexuality that symbolically challenges the heteronormative. In *The Gestapo's Last Orgy*, the majority of the fascist characters openly engage in non-heteronormative sexual practice. Alma displays her homosexual tendencies by molesting Lise and the other female prisoners. Von Starker's dominant, masculine persona is debunked when we see him voluntarily submit to Alma's whippings, and her sodomising of him with her staff. In addition, we see that Von Starker, as well as being implicitly bisexual, engages in forms of abhorrent sexual activity. In one sequence, we see him approaching orgasm whilst Alma drags a knife threateningly over Lise's body; this is intercut with a flashback to Von Starker's similar reaction to Alma carving the tattooed flesh from another prisoner's body. Unlike Max in *The Night Porter*, the characters that openly deviate from heteronormative sexual practice are not exceptions in a group of apparently ideologically committed fascists. In an early scene, Von Starker gives a propagandistic presentation to a group of nude SS officers, showing slides of Jewish prisoners in (presumably forced) incestuous sexual poses and others consuming excrement. The intercutting of Von Starker's slideshow with shots of the SS men fondling their genitals indicates their arousal at the site of these images, which is confirmed by the subsequent sadomasochistic group orgy. Unlike Max in *The Night Porter,* Von Starker and Alma never let go of their fascist convictions, or exhibit feelings of guilt, even though their dominant Nazi posturing is either a false or unstable performance (even Alma's weaknesses are exposed when Von Starker turns on her at Lise's urging).

In *The Night Porter*, Cavani makes occasional use of visual indicators of Holocaust realities, such as Max's appearance in a medical coat, and the brief sight of faked atrocity photos in order to suggest a backstory beginning with Max and Lucia as Nazi victimiser and camp inmate victim. Canevari's film, though set mostly in the camps, employs less visual signification of reality. Actual Jewish camp inmates were forced to wear a yellow star, whereas Canevari's Jewesses wear the green star, a colour that in the camps denoted criminality. By showing several of the inmates' routine of disfiguring new arrivals, for the sake of survival, Canevari here seems to develop Cavani's narrative model by making all of his prisoner/victim characters ethically questionable figures (which perhaps explains why they all wear the green star), as opposed to just his female protagonist. Additionally, the inmates are shown wearing grey prison uniforms that bear a greater similarity to the SS uniforms than the striped flannel pyjamas that inmates at actual concentration camps were

forced to wear. The fact that these characters are labelled as criminals—indicating that their fate was sealed by rebellious action as opposed to any outlawed religious affiliation during the Nazi regime—and that they are stripped of the physical characteristics of the Holocaust victim, lends them a kind of collective strength that eventually becomes more clearly recognisable in Lise.

After Lise's early depiction as submissive, we later learn that her behaviour is due to a belief that she caused her family's deportation/execution, something she is eventually told was not her fault. The Nazi doctor who gives her this information can be seen as separate from other representatives of the regime due to his constant outrage at his comrades' barbarity. In one sequence, when the SS group are dining, another Nazi ventures the idea that Jewish bodies be used as a food source for the German people. The doctor instantly protests: "all of this is horrible and monstrous" and as a result is dismissed from the dinner table, before the other SS officers feast on what we are told is "unborn Jew". Immediately after the doctor informs Lise of her innocence regarding her family's demise, the two have sex. This scene, which shows the only coupling involving the doctor, and the only real sexual contact Lise has outside of liaisons with Von Starker, demonstrates the heterosexuality of the two anti-fascist characters. From this point on, Lise feigns complicity with Von Starker for the sake of her survival in the camp, taking the dominant position in their relationship. However, any potential androgenising of her character as a result of her assertiveness is countered by her always feminine appearance (all these fictional camp inmates are allowed to keep their hair), and heterosexuality. During the love scene, we hear a narration by the doctor: "no-one is ever truly evil; people become evil, through circumstance. Often they are forced into it. Men like Commandant Von Starker … are the evil that infects everything that it touches". This speech about the shades of evil during the Holocaust era both excuses the inmates' questionable morality and further establishes Von Starker and his ilk as examples of unadulterated evil. In contrast with the sexually unconventional, unrepentant fascists, Lise remains heterosexual and virtuous, since her eventual complicity is an illusion; her hand is forced by the desperation of her situation and she is in fact still, surreptitiously, opposed to Von Starker.

Luca Prono notes that, "the anti-fascist literary and cinematic works produced in Italy after World War II repeatedly represented the Fascist and Nazi regimes through the figure of the male and female homosexual to stress the decay implicit in those regimes" (334). Canevari carries on this tradition of aligning fascist evil and homosexuality in Italian cinema.[2] His positioning of homosexuality alongside more deviant sexual tastes is, to a certain extent, similar to Bernardo Bertolucci's treatment of Fascism in *1900* (1976). In one sequence in Bertolucci's film, one male Fascist character is seen briefly fondling the male tailor assembling Fascist leader Attila's new uniform. Also, later in the film, Atilla rapes a young boy, thus aligning fascist evil with both homosexuality and paedophilia. However, Bertolucci counters this negative association with the more likeable and less deviant gay character of Ottavio (Werner Bruhns). In Canevari's film, homosexuality is exclusively aligned with fascist evil, and extreme sexual deviance.

To summarise, the history of the ideological emphasis on the importance of the perfected male physique encouraged an image of fascism as inherently masculine. More specifically, in Germany, the image of the perfect Aryan body was contrasted with negative stereotypes of supposedly inferior groups, fuelling the regime's nationalist rhetoric. In addition, German military focus on the importance of "hardness", and the history of their violent persecution and murder of millions during the Holocaust contributed to an image of

masculine Nazi dominator. This suggests the heterosexual binary of male, dominant Nazi/female, submissive captor that is present at the start of both Cavani's and Canevari's narratives. The natural instability of this binary, due to the history of homosexuals in the SA. and the arguable homoeroticism of both Italian and German fascist imagery promoting the masculine ideal, inspired the deconstruction of it during the course of both filmmakers' narrative discussions. Both films detail an affair between a Nazi and his prisoner, but drastically differ in their representations of sexuality. In *The Night Porter*, Lucia is portrayed as liberated by her acceptance of a non-heteronormative sexual identity. Lucia, who becomes symbolically androgynous, and Max form a representation of a kind of non-heteronormative relationship of equals, that is, power is equally distributed between them, as is signified by their sadomasochistic play. Thus, the message of Cavani's film is that a break from hetero-normative sexual identity can lead to release and equality in sexual couplings. Cavani also utilises the Holocaust setting to compare the social marginalisation of non-heteronormative sexuality to the inevitable social marginalisation of the wartime collaborator. Canevari's reworking of *The Night Porter*, *The Gestapo's Last Orgy*, is less positive in its treatment of non-heteronormative sexuality. Cavani's transformation of the dominant/evil/masculine Nazi and submissive/feminine/innocent victim into moral and sexual equals is not repeated by Canevari. Rather, he fixes the aspects of *The Night Porter*'s scenario that offended those unwilling to accept the simultaneous humanising of a Nazi and corruption of a victim: instead of Max's humanity and rejection of fascism, we see Von Starker's fixed evil and fascist conviction; instead of Lucia's questionable complicity, we see Lise's virtue hidden behind forced complicity, thus restoring the more "palatable" image of Holocaust aggressor/victim. In presenting his fascist characters as both irredeemable and homosexual, and their opposition as exclusively heterosexual, Canevari continues a tradition of demonising homosexuality in Italian cinema dealing with fascism. Ultimately, beneath the surface of the similar basic narrative concepts of these two films are two quite different "ideas of sex".

Notes

[1] "For those who had not been sent directly to the gas chambers, passing through the 'sauna' in Auschwitz was the first stage of the dehumanisation process, where they were stripped of their clothes, had all their body hair shaved, and were tattooed with a number" (Vasvari 5). The testimony of Rudolph Reder, a prisoner/member of the Sonderkommando at Belzec details how those detained were even sometimes shaved just prior to execution: "while the women were rounded up naked and shaved, whipped like cattle in a slaughterhouse, the men were already dying in the gas chambers. It took two hours to shave the women and two hours to murder them. Many SS men using whips and sharp bayonets pushed them toward the building with the chambers" (Berenbaum 15).

[2] "In the collective Italian memory invented by the cultural production of the neo-realist movement, queers cease to be victims and become criminals … Roberto Rossellini's legendary film *Roma città aperta (Rome, Open City*, 1945), Vasco Pratolini's novel 'Cronache di Poveri Amanti' (A Tale of Poor Lovers, 1947), are the two founding works of the Italian neo-realist movement" (Prono 334). Both in Canevari's film and in Rossellini's, "fascists are classified as queers and anti-fascists are virtuous heterosexuals" (Prono 339);

The Gestapo's Last Orgy's Alma is reminiscent of Ingrid, the manipulative lesbian Nazi in *Rome, Open City*.

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of lead" (a period of prolific terrorist activity in Italy) on the films, as well as engaging with representations of sexuality, "camp" and the Holocaust.