volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 4, Issue 2

Winter 2021

'We Must Find Out If We Are Still Alive!': Sex Apocalypse and How to Survive It in *La Messe dorée*

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ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 December 2021

Date of Publication: 21 December 2021

Citation: David Melville, '"We Must Find Out If We Are Still Alive!": Sex Apocalypse and How to Survive It in *La Messe dorée*', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 4.2 (2021), 172–94.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v4i2.1593.g1707

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'We Must Find Out If We Are Still Alive!': Sex Apocalypse and How to Survive It in *La Messe dorée*[1]

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> And in utterly abandoning himself he found – not, it is true, the rapture of love – but a half-crazed rapture reminiscent of a massacre, of sex-maniacal homicide or, if there can be such a thing, a state of being seized and rapt away by the daemons of the void, who have their habitation behind all the painted scenery of life.
>
> – Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*[2]

Sunset. A black car drives, in the slowly fading light, across a flat and featureless plain outside Paris. We hear, as if from far off, the low plaintive wailing of a flute, the soft insistent throbbing of a drum. Some words flash onto the screen. 'Wanting to lose myself in you, I long for death.'[3] They come from the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic St. Teresa of Ávila. The car pulls up outside an ornate Art Nouveau villa of pale rose-tinted stone, with round turrets at the corners and a sweep of marble steps in front. A chauffeur gets out and opens the rear door for a young blonde woman. She is dressed in white; a diaphanous orange scarf floats about her neck. She climbs the steps to the front door of the house, where an elderly maid tells her she is the first guest to arrive. With her we enter the world of *La Messe dorée*.

The second of two films by the author, illustrator, and stage designer Beni Montresor, *La Messe dorée* [*The Golden Mass*] is a film more talked about than seen. Nor has it been talked about a great deal. Released in 1975, it was widely dismissed as blasphemous and obscene. A critic in *Le Monde* declared: 'Pour l'homme occidental façonné par la morale judéo-chrétienne, pour un catholique romain en particulier, *La Messe dorée* ne peut être reçu que comme un film blasphématoire, attentant à toutes les valeurs reconnues.' [To a man brought up in the Judaeo-Christian morality of the West, and to a Roman Catholic in particular, *La Messe dorée* can only be seen as a blasphemous film, an attack upon all of our accepted values.][4] Lacking a conventional narrative of any kind, it centres on a glamorous high society orgy in the guise of a Roman

Catholic mass. Or rather, and this seems equally valid, a Roman Catholic mass in the guise of an orgy. It is a film not of actions but of textures, of flowing silken robes and gilded Byzantine crowns, of naked skin and limbs entwined in shadow, lit by a sporadic glow of candles and torches. It has the aura of a decadent and erotic nocturnal vision.

Fig. 1: French theatrical release poster for *La Messe dorée* (1975).

At the same time, *La Messe dorée* feels less redolent of any lived experience than of prophecy, madness, and dreams. Its essence is hard to grasp and harder still to define. You might start by imagining the languid high fashion *ennui* of *India Song* (1975) by Marguerite Duras cross-bred with the raw sexual transgression of *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) by Pier Paolo Pasolini. But even that juxtaposition is so bizarre as to leave you scratching your head. Its indefinable essence is reflected in its bewildering range of titles. In Germany it bore an overtly religious title, *Das Ritual* [*The Ritual*], while in Spain it was released (following the death of General Franco) as *La orgía del sexo* [*The Sex Orgy*] (figs. 2 and 3). Its Italian title *La Profonda Luce*

dei Sensi [*In the Deep Light of the Senses*] (fig. 4) bore no relation to any of the others and the Italian distributors re-edited the film to the point of incoherence, reducing it to little more than a classy soft-porn flick.

Yet all these titles reflect aspects of the film and its creator. Born in Bussolengo near Verona in 1926, Montresor spent his childhood in near-orgiastic thrall to the mystical and sensuous rituals of the Roman Catholic Church. 'The church was my dream world and also my bed', he recalled in a 1978 profile in *People*, 'sensuous with the fragrance of incense and flowers and the heat from the candles.'[5] He made his name with his flamboyant sets and costumes for Italian movies – from the Gothic Expressionism of *I Vampiri* (1956) by Riccardo Freda to the mythical fantasy of *Sigfrido* (1957) by Giacomo Gentilomo. Moving to New York in 1960, he designed costumes for Broadway and for the Metropolitan Opera. In 1966, he accompanied a staging of Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* with a children's book that contained his own retelling and illustrations. From then on, he pursued two parallel careers: as a designer and director in opera and theatre and as a prize-winning author and illustrator for children.

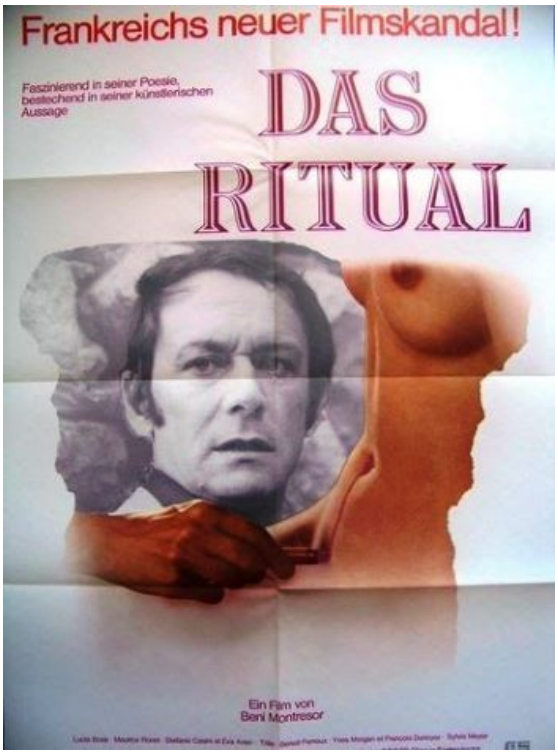

Fig. 2: German theatrical release poster for *Das Ritual.*

Fig. 3: Spanish theatrical release poster for *La orgia del sexo*.

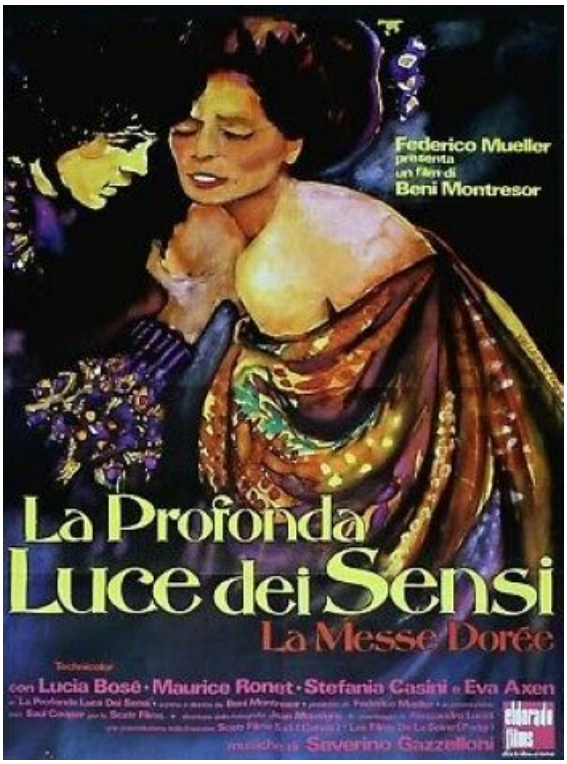

Fig. 4: Italian theatrical release poster for *La Profonda Luce dei Sensi*.

His approach to his work sounds disarming in its simplicity. 'I must astonish and amaze myself first', he said, 'and if I do, then the spectator will react in the same way.'[6] Was it this need to astonish and amaze that led Montresor to start making his own films? His first film *Pilgrimage* (1972) was shot in New York and tells a quasi-Oedipal story of a father, a mother, and a son. His next film *La Messe dorée* was shot in France with two major European stars – the Italian diva Lucia Bosè and the French actor Maurice Ronet – and such rising starlets as Stefania Casini and Eva Axen. It sparked an international scandal and critics snootily opined that it 'confirmed that his talents were more in visuals than dramatics.'[7] Both films were commercial failures and plans for a third – *Victoria Macbeth* with Laurence Olivier and Catherine Deneuve – were put indefinitely on hold. Both *Pilgrimage* and *La Messe dorée* have long since vanished from commercial distribution and neither is available in any home viewing format.

When Montresor died in 2001, his films were treated even by his admirers as a bizarre footnote. Yet *La Messe dorée*, at any rate, holds up an opulent mirror to the aspirations and anxieties of the 1970s. It was a decade when feminism, gay rights, Black Power, a worldwide energy crisis, and a wave of strikes and left-wing movements led the conservative Western middle classes to fear the world they knew was doomed to vanish. Such anxieties were reflected in the all-star 'disaster movies' that dominated the global box office. Films like *Airport* (1970), *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), and *The Towering Inferno* (1974) spoke eloquently for a world that feared it was on the edge of an apocalypse. *The Cassandra Crossing* (1976) even conjured up the spectre of a deadly global pandemic. Ironically, the mass audience found this premise quite ridiculously far-fetched, and the film was both a critical and a commercial flop.

What *La Messe dorée* posits is an apocalypse in an entirely different form – one that is at once spiritual and sexual. In it the nuclear heterosexual family unit – indeed, the very idea of heterosexual manhood – rots away and collapses in upon itself, while the sanctity of the Roman Catholic mass gives way to the profanity of an orgy. The iconic figure of the Virgin Mary remains an object of veneration, but the act of worshipping her culminates in her symbolic mass

rape. This delight in the wilful profanation of the sacred has led critics to compare the film to the works of Georges Bataille or the Marquis de Sade. As Bataille wrote about Sade, 'the essence of his work is destruction: not only the destruction of objects or of a given set of victims […] but also the destruction of the author and his own work'.[8] The problem with this reading is that Sade writes less about sex than about power. His descriptions of sex are graphic but resolutely un-erotic. In contrast, *La Messe dorée* is a work of refined and aestheticized eroticism *par excellence*.

Sexual desire in all its forms is the live and beating heart of *La Messe dorée*. The orgy it depicts is nothing more or less than an all-out Sex Apocalypse. In the course of one night, a mother and father split apart and turn their erotic appetites on their children. Midway through the film, the father beds down with his daughter – although Montresor discreetly avoids showing us what happens. At the end, the mother (Bosè) performs oral sex on her teenage son and this Montresor does show. As Alberto Pezzotta writes, 'Quanto alla fellatio della Bosé, non sarà hard, ma va vista per essere creduta.' [Bosè's act of fellatio is in no way hardcore, but it still has to be seen to be believed.][9] Rather than copulating in order to produce children (as Roman Catholic doctrine prescribes) the parents in *La Messe dorée* seem to produce children so they can have young and beautiful partners to copulate with. At the same time, fatherhood and heterosexual manhood become both disposable and dispensable. As the father, played by Ronet, withdraws from the family and the film, a younger married man watches helplessly as his wife makes love to another woman. Later on, the two women lure him into triangular S&M games that culminate (possibly) in his death.

For all the scandalous nature of his work, Montresor was an intensely private man. Reports of his sexuality are contradictory and varied. But with its rippling brocades, its glittering jewels and its succulent Art Nouveau interiors, *La Messe dorée* has what many have come to recognize as the hallmark of a gay aesthetic. Its images echo such early Kenneth Anger films as *Puce Moment* (1949) or *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954) which also depicts a ritualized high society orgy. Its remote and luxurious mansion stands next door, imaginatively, to the enchanted

chateau of *La Belle et la Bête* [*Beauty and the Beast*] (1946) by Jean Cocteau. In a specifically Italian context, Montresor shows a close aesthetic kinship with Luchino Visconti, 'zooming into one glittering *objet d'art* after another, positively wallowing in acres of ormolu and crystal'.[10] In its visual luxuriance, *La Messe dorée* sits neatly beside several Italian films of the mid-70s – *The Innocent* (1976) by Visconti, *The Inheritance* (1976) by Mauro Bolognini, *The Divine Nymph* (1975) by Giuseppe Patroni Griffi – which are heavy with we might call 'gay style' even though male homosexuality plays little or no role in the action.

Ultimately, *La Messe dorée* can be viewed as a bold and pioneering work of queer art, one that gleefully shatters bourgeois norms while exulting in 'aberrant' or 'deviant' sexuality in all its forms. At the same time, it paints 'i conti col fallimento della rivoluzione sessuale reichiana e le conseguenti utopie già deludenti ed effimere sul nascere' [a merciless and unflinching portrait of a society coming to terms with the failure of the Reichian sexual revolution and the dream of a utopia that was deceptive and ephemeral from the beginning].[11] It is simultaneously a prophecy, a celebration and warning of a coming Sex Apocalypse. In this way it can be seen as foreshadowing the onset of AIDS in the 80s, which gave the notion of 'sex apocalypse' a terrifying biological reality. In the early years of the twenty-first century – and in an age of mass contagion and fears of economic, political, and social collapse – *La Messe dorée* evokes a world that looks alarmingly like our own.

The Last Supper

> Each gesture of the virgin princess was linked to the suffering and death of a man. The old king was well aware of this and as a result kept her macabre virginity hidden in the unknown cloister. The cunning princess knew this too, hence her smile as she kissed the foxglove or tore apart lilies with her deliberate and lovely fingers.
>
> – Jean Lorrain, 'Princess of the Red Lilies'[12]

Like the demonic but virginal princess in Lorrain's 'La princesse aux lys rouges' ['Princess of the Red Lilies'] (1902), the young girl (Eva Axen) who arrives at the start of *La Messe dorée* spends

most of the story in seclusion. Her name is Marie-Odile and she has been invited because she is a virgin (fig. 5). To her will fall the role of the Virgin Mary in the decadent restaging of the Roman Catholic mass. Its climax will be her ritual deflowering. But up until that point, she plays no direct role in the orgy. She stays cloistered up in her bedroom – like Lorrain's princess, in a mystical and hieratic space that is exclusively her own. Her only independent action is to bathe herself and contemplate her nude reflection in a large oval mirror. She does not copulate with the other guests any more than Princess Audovère fights in her father's battles. But just as the princess plucks the flowers and causes men to die, Marie-Odile seems to facilitate the Sex Apocalypse through her numinous and mystical off-screen presence.

Fig. 5 (00:06:40): Eva Axen as Marie-Odile and Lucia Bosè as Hélène.

The stage manager of the orgy – the alluring but merciless puppet master who pulls the strings – is Hélène, the lady of the house, played by Bosè. An actress of haunting and enigmatic beauty, Bosè became an icon of European cinema through her roles in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Chronicle of a Love* (1950) and *The Lady Without Camellias* (1953). Her sulphurous dark eyes, her

ivory skin and her lustrous torrent of black hair gave her the air of a Mona Lisa who has uncannily stepped out of her frame and deigned to mix with mere mortals. Her career was cut short in the 1950s when she married the bullfighter Luis Miguel Dominguín, who forbade her from working and required her to be a full-time wife and mother. But after her divorce in the late 60s, she returned to the screen in a string of obscure and bizarre films. In *The Legend of Blood Castle* (1972) by Jorge Grau, she is an aristocrat who preserves her beauty by bathing in the blood of virgins. In *Arcana* (1972) by Giulio Questi, she is a modern-day witch who longs incestuously for her son and spits live toads out of her mouth.

Yet even for an actress as adventurous as Bosè, *La Messe dorée* was a bold and even a shocking choice. By the mid 70s, it was by no means unheard of for a 'name' actress to appear in a sexually controversial film. Catherine Deneuve had made *Belle de Jour* (1967) for Luis Buñuel and Charlotte Rampling had made *The Night Porter* (1974) for Liliana Cavani and both had emerged as bigger stars than before. However, these were younger women whose fame did not pre-date the 'permissive' moral climate of the 60s. The role of Hélène called for an actress *d'un certain âge* and Ava Gardner and Melina Mercouri had both been offered it and turned it down. In accepting the role, Bosè baulked only at Montresor's suggestion that her real-life son Miguel Bosè might play her son in the film. 'Now, Beni, you go too far',[13] she declared. Her son would make his name as Spain's first 'out' gay pop star and played the transvestite Femme Letal in the Pedro Almodóvar melodrama *High Heels* (1991).

Whatever reservations Bosè may have had, there is no denying *La Messe dorée* is the apotheosis of her later screen career. With her swirling red and gold kaftan and her dark tresses piled atop her head, Hélène seems less a flesh-and-blood woman than a Technicolour Aubrey Beardsley drawing sprung to life. She is at once passionate and cold-blooded, gracious yet chillingly and utterly ruthless. Choreographing her guests as if they were so many life-size automata, she is quick to react when a gauche young woman shows up in a gown that is less than becoming. 'Next time', she says, 'I'll choose your outfit for you.' Her only weakness is her

adoration of her teenage son Philippe (Yves Morgan) – a bond that is clearly incestuous from the start – and her slavish devotion to a mysterious sex guru named Raphaël. This man does not appear until late in the evening and Hélène grows visibly anxious as she waits for him to arrive.

In sharp contrast, Hélène shows little but contempt for her husband David. He is played by the French actor Maurice Ronet, who specialized in wearily sophisticated roués who have often seen better days. Ronet was the first Dickie Greenleaf in *Plein Soleil* (1960) – the René Clément adaptation of *The Talented Mr Ripley* – and the suicidal anti-hero in the Louis Malle film *Le Feu follet* [*The Fire Within*] (1963). His role in *La Messe dorée* is alarmingly small and consists of only four scenes. We first see him hovering in a corner of the living room, casting a wary eye on his wife's guests as they arrive. All of them are young and beautiful and androgynous, that rare and elegant species of Eurotrash you might find in a fashion shoot by Helmut Newton. They wear lashings of mascara and satin robes in bright rainbow colours. And that is just the men. Each one radiates and glitters like an eye in a peacock's tail. David shows not the slightest interest in any of them until, suddenly, he makes a beeline for a handsome blonde stud who stands awkwardly in the doorway.

What exactly is going on here? It is clear the two men do not know each other – but David wastes no time in introducing himself. The way in which he approaches the young man suggests that David may be gay or, at least, bisexual. Could that be why his marriage to Hélène is on the rocks? Later in the evening, when his son Philippe is reluctant to join the orgy, David takes him up to his bedroom and orders him to strip. Dressing the boy up in a diaphanous red kaftan, the father eyes his son with what appears to be naked sexual hunger. 'Don't think a Messiah will come and save you', he warns, 'there is no Messiah'. Just as we are becoming seriously alarmed at the turn events are taking, Hélène enters and delivers the boy from his father's clutches. Although nothing is ever stated directly, *La Messe dorée* may be the only film in which a father and mother are locked in a bitter feud over which of them will get to deflower their son.

Having failed in this endeavour, David eventually beds down with his daughter Élisabeth (Bénédicte Bucher) – a strange child of around twelve who keeps a large black snake in a bathtub and worships it as a pagan god. We do not see what happens between father and daughter. Both of them vanish midway through the film and do not reappear. Yet as strange and shadowy a figure as David may be, what we see in him is an overt abdication of patriarchal authority in any form. Eschewing the role of heterosexual lover to his wife and guide and protector to his children, he becomes instead a predator of a decidedly incestuous bent. He comes across as a bisexual equivalent to Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* – both the 1958 novel by Vladimir Nabokov and the 1962 film by Stanley Kubrick, starring James Mason (whom Ronet physically resembles). He is a morally and perhaps also sexually impotent man who stews in his own superfluity and self-hatred. In him we see the key theme of *La Messe dorée*: specifically, the decay and downfall of patriarchy and the dissolution of any conventionally heterosexual notion of manhood.

Fig. 6 (00:50:16): Maurice Ronet as David and Bénédicte Bucher as Élisabeth.

Even as we watch the implosion of the heterosexual family unit, the majority of Hélène's guests embody the new and polymorphous order that will supplant it. The most striking is Loulou (Stefania Casini) a voracious flame-haired lesbian who wears clomping silver platform heels and appears not to have read Marlene Dietrich's dictum that 'Dark nail polish is vulgar.'[14]

She is there in a tandem with a young married couple. The wife is a delicate blonde beauty called Laure. (The actress who plays her is named Trille, which means literally the 'trill' of a bird.) The husband is a bespectacled and ultra-straight *petit bourgeois* named Pierre (François Dunoyer). The two women are clearly lovers but Pierre does his best to ignore it. It is apparent – as it is with David – that he feels extraneous to his own marriage. He fumes silently all through dinner, as his wife holds up a chicken leg for Loulou to eat. Loulou takes it sensuously into her mouth, licks at it, sucks on it, and gorges it down with great relish.

The scene is an echo of the infamous one in *La Notte Brava* [*The Good Night*] (1959) by Mauro Bolognini – in which an aristocratic playboy (Tomas Milian) dangles a chicken leg for the delectation of a working-class youth (Laurent Terzieff). In both cases, the act is an obvious visual metaphor for fellatio. What makes it so odd in *La Messe dorée* is the fact it involves two women. It is recognizably a gay male sex act performed by lesbians. Just in case we miss the point, Montresor takes the fellatio up to and beyond the point of ejaculation, as Loulou spits out the chicken, half-chewed and gooey with saliva, all over her girlfriend's face. She then cries out 'I love you!' and dabs the girl clean, covering her face passionately with kisses. If we translate the symbolism into literal terms, it is a sequence unimaginable outside of *Deep Throat* (1973) or a hardcore gay porn film. Yet its handling is so masterful that it barely disrupts the mood of refined aestheticism.

Just as the climax of *La Messe dorée* is a profane re-enactment of the Roman Catholic mass, so the dinner that precedes it can be read as a lewd parody of the Last Supper. This idea is in no way unique. The Surrealist director Luis Buñuel plays a similar game in *Viridiana* (1961) where a banquet of cripples and beggars degenerates into an orgy. But the concern of Montresor is not with the outcasts at the bottom of society, but with the perverse and enervated beings at the top of it. Towards the end of dinner, a young woman scrawls on an empty plate: 'Take and eat. This is my body.' Once the meal is over, Hélène leads the women in a wild and orgiastic dance. Swooping and swaying about the room, she takes on the hieratic and mythical air of Maria

Callas in the Pasolini film of *Medea* (1969). The other women swirl around her to the lilting sound of flute and drums like Bacchantes in a classical Greek drama (fig. 7).

Fig. 7 (00:29:56): The dance.

As the dance grows wilder, the men rise out of their seats to join in. The dancers surge in a circle round the table. One by one, they start to strip off their clothes. It is at this point the guru Raphaël makes his entrance. With his androgynous beauty and his mop of curling black hair, the actor who plays him (Raphaël Mattei) has the look of a perverse vampire angel. He looks eerily like the winged hermaphrodite in Aubrey Beardsley's drawing 'The Mirror of Love' (fig. 8). He stares down on the dancers from a minstrels' gallery that overlooks the room. Hélène rushes up to join him and falls slavishly at his feet. She flings her arms round him and begs him to stay with her always. She insists vociferously that he must never leave her again. 'We must find out', she tells him cryptically, 'if we are still alive!'

In the words of Louis Marcorelles in *Le Monde*, Hélène is on a quest for 'des ailleurs insaisissables, de l'évasion sans frein' [an unattainable elsewhere, an escape without limits].[15] This was a fashionable enough quest in the 70s and visible even in the glossy banality of Just Jaeckin's *Emmanuelle* (1974) and its sequels. Yet what exactly does this quest involve and what price must

be paid to see it through? If a full-blown Sex Apocalypse is desirable or possible, who will be its victims and who, if any, will be its survivors? *La Messe dorée* answers none of these questions in any direct or easily explicable way. Its achievement – as distinct from the commercial erotic films of its era – is to ask these questions at all or, perhaps, simply to admit that they exist. It is one thing to demolish the heterosexual nuclear family and the entire patriarchal order as we know it. But what – to put it ever so politely – is anybody meant to do next?

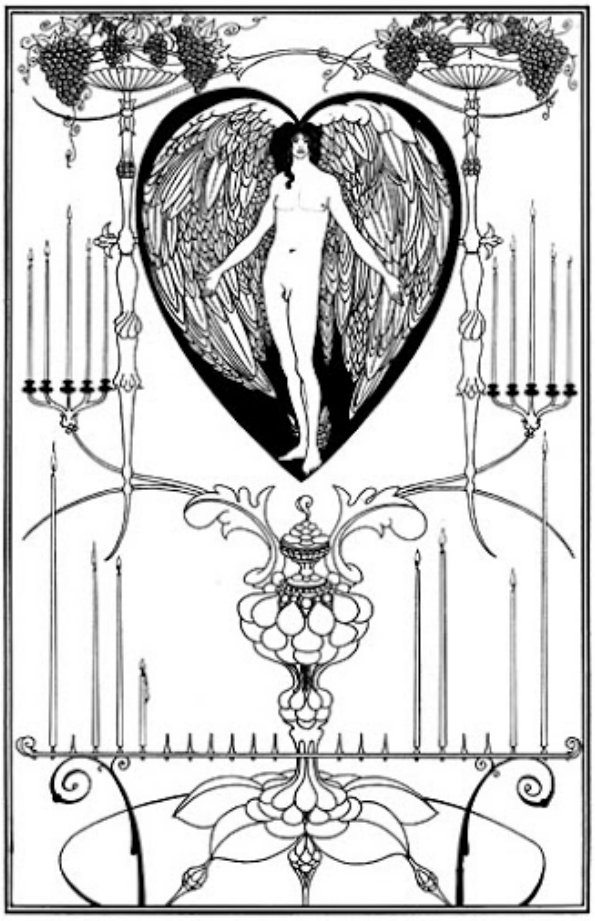

Fig. 8: Aubrey Beardsley, 'The Mirror of Love' (1895).

The sacrifice

> His inner life seemed to detach itself, to fall to pieces, to dissolve in a ferment which spread to the deepest strata of his being, casting up to the surface shapeless fragments of totally diverse nature, unrecognisable as forming part of the life of the same man. Of all these strange things, so

> inextricably mixed and jostling one another so violently, he was dimly aware as in a dream.
>
> – Gabriele D'Annunzio, *The Triumph of Death*[16]

After the feasting and the dancing, the cast of *La Messe dorée* plunges – like the anti-hero in D'Annunzio's *Il trionfo della morte* [*The Triumph of Death*] (1894) – into a maelstrom of sexual excess that leads to the dissolution of their day-to-day social identities and, in one case, to actual physical death. But its darker implications become apparent only later. All we see at first is guests copulating throughout the villa in anonymous twos and threes. One young man sprawls on a sofa and masturbates in full view of the camera. The sight of his erect penis is unprecedented in a mainstream (i.e., non-pornographic) movie apart from Pasolini's 'Trilogy of Life' – *The Decameron* (1970), *The Canterbury Tales* (1972), and *The Arabian Nights* (1974) – and *Salò*. Oddly enough, the guru Raphaël plays no part in the orgy. Instead, he goes upstairs to bathe and groom the naked Marie-Odile for her role as the Madonna in the coming re-enactment of the Roman Catholic mass.

Fig. 9 (00:57:40): Eva Axen as Marie-Odile and Raphaël Mattei as Raphaël.

Hélène too retires to her bedroom. There she encounters a younger woman who gapes at her in slavish adoration. 'Your skin is so soft, like my mother's', the girl marvels. This is presumably the prelude to a sexual act that is (literally) lesbian and (psychologically) incestuous but one that – given Bosè's status as a glamorous heterosexual diva – we do not actually see. All we see is a shot of Hélène primping in her bathroom mirror once the act is over, sliding out of her red-and-gold kaftan and into a robe of deep blue silk. Now she undoes her lustrous black hair and lets it flow freely about her shoulders. She looks more than ever like Da Vinci's Mona Lisa sprung to life. But her cool is soon shattered by the sight of her son Philippe (whom she had, earlier on, rescued from that awkward situation with his father) stealing into her bedroom, slipping off his robe and sliding stark naked into her bed.

Hélène reacts to this with shock and fury. 'You come into the bed of your old mother?' she shouts, and orders him to be gone at once. The sheer vehemence of her outburst suggests that here is the erotic encounter she most desires, but also the only one that her lingering sense of bourgeois propriety will not allow her to commit. The erotic tension between mother and son in *La Messe dorée* is easily commensurate with that of Jocasta and Oedipus, Phaedra and Hippolytus or Violet and Sebastian Venable in Joseph Mankiewicz's adaptation of Tennessee Williams's play *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959). Philippe seems as much aware of this tension as his mother does. Crushed by her rejection, he flees down the hallway to his own bedroom. Hélène's young female friend does her best to console her, telling her that every son secretly desires his mother. But it seems that is no consolation. 'What if the mother is no longer able to resist?' Hélène asks. 'This is not and it cannot be the end!'

Her words turn out to be prophetic. At this point, *La Messe dorée* has only just begun its journey towards an all-out Sex Apocalypse. As Montresor described it, 'The film is about the deepest, darkest place in my soul; all my childhood obsessions [which he pronounces, oddly, 'obsexions']. It terrifies me.'[17] Any autobiographical import is impossible to gauge without a greater knowledge of the director's private life. Yet the family romance in this movie feels less

biographical than mythical and archetypal. Unlike Oedipus in the Greek myth, the young Philippe has no need to slay his father (although he may have to elude his father's sexual advances). The father David withdraws from the family very much of his own accord, as his role as patriarch becomes increasingly hollow and superfluous. That will free the mother and son – sooner rather than later – to consummate their incestuous feelings for each other. Gore Vidal wrote in *Myra Breckinridge* (1968) that 'films are the unconscious expressions of age-old human myths'.[18] Nowhere does that feel truer than in *La Messe dorée*.

In another bedroom, another dethronement of heterosexual male hegemony is taking place. The lesbian couple Laure and Loulou are making love as the conservative and uptight husband Pierre watches forlornly in the doorway. With its images of black lace stockings and cream silk panties sliding over naked skin, the lesbian sex is poised awkwardly between the dreamy soft-focus posing of Susan Sarandon and Catherine Deneuve in *The Hunger* (1983) and the full-on all-you-can-eat lustiness of the Bob Guccione porn epic *Caligula* (1979). Such content is a standard trope of 70s soft-core erotica, but its import here is not primarily erotic. The focus here is on Pierre, the husband, and his mounting despair at his irrelevance and superfluity in his own marriage. As he watches his wife find erotic fulfilment with another woman, he unzips his trousers and begins frantically to masturbate. In a close-up, we see his fingers slimy with drops of semen. He has become as pathetic and ludicrous a figure as David, but lacking any interest in incest or homosexuality to console him.

In this context, the two women's torture and (possible) killing of Pierre is not just a gratuitous S&M *frisson*. It is the literal and physical destruction of a man who has already been symbolically and psychologically destroyed. Stripping him naked and laying him face down on the bed, the two women bind Pierre's wrists to the bedposts – much as Sharon Stone does to her victims-cum-lovers in *Basic Instinct* (1992). Loulou starts off by drawing the marks of scars on his back in bright red lipstick. But soon the women claw his back for real, as Loulou straddles him, grabs him by the throat and beats his head savagely against the bedstead. 'I want to die!' Pierre

cries. 'I want to die!' Like the hero in D'Annunzio's *The Triumph of Death*, he seeks only a physical actualization of his existing psychological state. We do not see what actually happens. We hear a loud burst of music and see other guests come running from all parts of the villa – drawn, perhaps by the screams of a dying man. We see Pierre lying face down and motionless. He does not appear in *La Messe dorée* after this point.

Is he really dead? Or is this part of an elaborate sexual game? It is a common trope in movies for a lesbian couple to seal its bond by killing a man who tries to exert control over one of them. In *Daughters of Darkness* (1970) by Harry Kümel, the Countess Bathory (Delphine Seyrig) and the young bride she has seduced (Danièle Ouimet) slit the wrists of the bride's husband (John Karlen) with the shards of a cut-glass fruit bowl. They assert their identity – both as lesbians and as vampires – by drinking his blood in a perverse Holy Communion. Similarly, in *The Hunger* the liaison between the vampire Deneuve and the mortal Sarandon begins with the exit of Deneuve's male lover (David Bowie) who withers and gets sealed up in a coffin. It cements itself with the slaying of Sarandon's boyfriend (Cliff de Young) who becomes the first casualty of her new life as a vampire and as a lesbian. But whether Pierre is physically dead – as we suspect – or just psychologically dead – as Hélène's husband David undoubtedly is – may well be beside the point. What we have witnessed twice in *La Messe dorée* is the systematic erasure of patriarchy and heterosexual male identity.

What arises in their place is a cult of polymorphous perversity centred on the worship of a mythical Virgin Goddess. It is in this spirit that the guests go upstairs to the attic, where Marie-Odile sits now upon a carved wooden throne. In his role as leader of the cult, Raphaël powders her nude body all over until it is a ghostly shade of white. His fellow votaries join in, applying rouge to her nipples and tracing a red line from her belly to her pubic hair. They dress her in red silk robes, gold medallions, and lengths of glistening gold chains. Hélène places a jewelled Byzantine crown reverently on her head. The guests kneel at her feet and stretch out their hands to touch the folds of her robe. This worship of Marie-Odile evokes – at one and the same time –

the Roman Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary and the pagan cult of an all-powerful Mother Goddess, which are identified by Camille Paglia as two sides of one coin:

> The autonomy of the ancient mother goddesses was sometimes called virginity. A virgin fertility seems contradictory, but it survives in the Christian Virgin Birth. Hera and Aphrodite annually renewed their virginity by bathing in a sacred spring. The same duality appears in Artemis, who was honoured both as virgin huntress and as patron of childbirth. The Great Mother is a virgin insofar as she is independent of men. She is a sexual dictator, symbolically impenetrable.[19]

If we follow Paglia's line of reasoning, we may see both the virgin Marie-Odile and the matriarch Hélène as aspects of this same Mother Goddess. One is fair and one is dark, one is chaste and one is promiscuous and amoral. Yet both embody a power that supersedes the patriarchal rule of men.

Fig. 10 (01:12:06): The final procession.

Lifting the virgin Marie-Odile on her throne, the guests carry her in procession down the long and winding stairs. It is recognizably the parade of the Virgin Mary that is celebrated in most Roman Catholic countries. Some of the guests carry candles, others the gilded fronds of palms. The mood turns from spiritual to sexual in the main hall, where they lay Marie-Odile supine on a large white sheet. As they kneel and bow their heads in prayer, Loulou slits open the

girl's scarlet robe and exposes the nude splendour of her pale and powered flesh. As the worshippers run their hands over her naked body, it is hard not to flash forward twenty years to the live virgin (Laure Marsac) who is sacrificed on the stage of the Théâtre des Vampires in the Neil Jordan film *Interview with the Vampire* (1994). It is the kind of fantasy that only an extravagantly lapsed Roman Catholic could ever have – and both Montresor and the best-selling author Anne Rice seem to slot neatly into this tradition.

The perversely sexualized Adoration of the Virgin gives way, abruptly, to an orgy. The scene is clearly recognizable from the annals of nineteenth-century decadent fiction, notably Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *Là-Bas* [*The Damned*] (1891), with its graphic depiction of a Black Mass: 'In the wake of this act of sacrilege, a wave of collective hysteria now spread through the hall.'[20] The guests make love in a bewildering array of groups and combinations and even Hélène – who has held herself aloof up until now – rolls about on the floor, shrieking in a Bacchic frenzy. The guru Raphaël seizes Marie-Odile's hand and guides it to the cleft between her thighs. A woman forces her own hand into the same place and brutally breaks the girl's hymen. As Marie-Odile cries out in pain, her assailant wipes her own face ecstatically with the girl's blood. This all-out sexual assault upon the Virgin Mary has the air of a ritualized gang rape. The profane and the sacred have merged and become indivisible. A Sex Apocalypse – long feared and long desired – is now well and truly here.

But even that is not the final profanation. As the frenzy rises to a climax, we hear a cry louder than the rest. Hélène rises to her feet and runs out of the hall, her voluminous blue robe billowing behind her. She races up the stairs to her son's bedroom. What follows is cut in its entirety from *Nella profonda luce dei sensi*, the Italian release of *La Messe dorée* that was disowned by Montresor. Its excision makes nonsense of the film's ending and much of what has gone before it. The scene of incestuous fellatio between Hélène and her son is in no way sensational or gratuitous. It is the logical and necessary culmination of the erotic and psychological tensions that have been building up throughout the film. As Paglia has pointed out, 'The Great Mother's

main disciple is her son and lover, the dying god of Near Eastern mystery religion.'[21] The incestuous union of Hélène and Philippe is essential to the destruction of the nuclear family and the patriarchal world order it embodies. As we bear witness to it, *La Messe dorée* grants us a front-row seat at the Sex Apocalypse.

Stealing into her son's bedroom, Hélène peels away the sheet that hides his naked form. Is he asleep or is he just pretending to be? Slowly his eyes open and the mother and son stare at one another, transfixed. As she bends low over his groin, her torrent of black hair shields the act of fellatio from our view. It is of course inconceivable that Bosè – a major star of prestigious art-house films – would ever perform a graphic sexual act on camera. Yet we sit there paralysed with shock by the fact it is happening at all. This is the literal fulfilment of the cult of the Great Mother as Paglia describes it: 'Masculinity flows from the Great Mother as an aspect of herself and is recalled and cancelled by her at will. Her son is a servant of her cult. There is no going beyond her. Motherhood blankets existence.'[22] It is worth noting that, some years later, Lucia Bosè made headlines by posing with her son Miguel Bosé in a discreetly nude photo-shoot. The world was duly scandalized and Miguel was set for stardom.

La Messe dorée ends with a series of disconnected shots of the empty house. The red robe worn by Marie-Odile is spread across the floor of the great hall like a pool of congealed blood. Her jewelled Byzantine crown lies abandoned in one corner. A title flashes onto the screen: 'This film is dedicated to my mother.' A large number of rational narrative questions are left in limbo. How will Loulou and Laure explain away the presence of Pierre's dead body in their bedroom? How much therapy will Marie-Odile require after her ritual deflowering, which may have been followed by an actual mass rape? What will Hélène and David talk about over breakfast, knowing that one (or perhaps both) of them has had carnal knowledge of their own child? All these questions are worth asking but none of them ultimately matter. What this film is about – and what Montresor has shown us – is a radical deconstruction of the nuclear family and patriarchal heterosexual manhood in a delirious nocturnal vision of Sex Apocalypse.

In offering us this sublimely decadent vision, *La Messe dorée* takes us perilously close to the place evoked by Susan Sontag in her essay 'The Pornographic Imagination'. Writing of sexual desire and its power to disrupt accepted social norms, Sontag states:

> Tamed as it may be, sexuality remains one of the demonic forces in human consciousness – pushing us at intervals close to taboo and dangerous desires, which range from the impulse to commit sudden arbitrary violence upon another person to the voluptuous yearning for the extinction of one's consciousness, for death itself.[23]

The art of Montresor is recognizably an art of 'voluptuous yearning'. This may be a yearning for a transcendent sexual or mystical experience. Or it may be an innately decadent yearning for the annihilation of the nuclear family, of patriarchal society or of one's own social, physical, or psychological self. By the end of *La Messe dorée*, any or all of these yearnings strike us as both achievable and achieved. But a question remains as to what if anything will survive this Sex Apocalypse. Even though the twenty-first century is a far less *outré* and glamorous place than the one conjured up by Montresor, it is still a world in thrall to the spectacle of its own decay and the spectre of its own impending collapse. It is hard not to wonder who its survivors will be. Harder still, at times, not to wonder if survival is desirable at all.

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[1] This essay is dedicated to the memory of Lucia Bosè (1931-2020) who passed away due to Covid-19 at the start of the worldwide pandemic. Thanks also to my friends and fellow film junkies David Cairns, Andrea Novarin, and Pete Tombs, and to Saul Cooper for his invaluable kindness and support.

[2] Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities – Volume Two,* trans. by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London: Picador, 1981) p. 399.

[3] Beni Montresor, dir., *La Messe dorée* (Les Films de la Seine, Eldorado Film, SCETR, 1975).

[4] Louis Marcorelles, 'La Messe dorée de Beni Montresor', *Le Monde*, 11 April 1975, my translation. <https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1975/04/11/la-messe-doree-de-beni-montresor_2593486_1819218.html> [accessed 13 December 2021].

[5] Nancy Faber, 'Talk About Something for Everyone: Beni Montresor Ranges from Opera to Porn Movie to Children's Books', *People*, 11 December 1978, <https://people.com/archive/talk-about-something-for-everyone-beni-montresor-ranges-from-opera-to-porn-movie-to-childrens-books-vol-10-no-24/> [accessed 13 December 2021].

[6] William H. Honan, 'Beni Montresor, Artist in 2 Worlds, Dies at 78', *New York Times*, 13 October 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/13/books/beni-montresor-artist-in-2-worlds-dies-at-78.html> [accessed 13 December 2021].

[7] John Francis Lane, 'Beni Montresor – Obituary', *Guardian*, 4 December 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/dec/04/guardianobituaries> [accessed 13 December 2021].

[8] Georges Bataille, quoted in 'Eccentrico italiano: Nel delirio dei sensi', Fondazione Centro Sperimentale del Cinema 22 February 2012. My translation from Italian translation of Bataille. <https://www.fondazionecsc.it/evento/eccentrico-italiano-nel-delirio-dei-sensi/> [accessed 13 December 2021].

[9] Alberto Pezzotta, 'La profonda luce dei sensi', in *Nocturno*, February 2012. My translation. <https://www.nocturno.it/movie/la-profonda-luce-dei-sensi/> [accessed 13 December 2021].

[10] Gilbert Adair, *The Real Tadzio – Thomas Mann's Death in Venice and the Boy who Inspired It* (London: Short Books, 2001), p. 81.
[11] Fondazione Centro Sperimentale del Cinema, 'Eccentrico italiano'.
[12] Jean Lorrain, 'Princess of the Red Lilies', in *Fairy Tales for the Disillusioned: Enchanted Stories from the French Decadent Tradition*, trans. and ed. by Gretchen Schultz and Lewis Seifert (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 139.
[13] Lucia Bosè quoted in Faber, 'Talk About Something for Everyone'.
[14] Marlene Dietrich, *Marlene Dietrich's ABC – Revised Edition* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1984), p. 114.
[15] Marcorelles, 'La Messe dorée de Beni Montresor'.
[16] Gabriele D'Annunzio, *The Triumph of Death*, trans. by Georgina Harding (London: Dedalus, 1990), p. 312.
[17] Beni Montresor quoted in Faber, 'Talk About Something for Everyone'.
[18] Gore Vidal, *Myra Breckinridge & Myron* (London: André Deutsch, 1987), p. 13.
[19] Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae – Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 43.
[20] Joris-Karl Huysmans, *The Damned (Là-Bas)*, trans. by Terry Hale (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 227.
[21] Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, p. 52.
[22] Ibid., p. 53.
[23] Susan Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination', in *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 57.