

# Twilight of the Gods

By SUE ADLEY

*The Damned* is a powerful film set in Germany in the first years of Hitler's regime. The plot involves an aristocratic industrialist family and its members' corrupt relationships. But the film is not *about* them. It is about the consolidation of a total state power through the manipulation of decent and respectable human motives as well as avaricious and vengeful ones.

One of the frightening things about the film is the way Aschenbach (Helmut Griem), representing Hitler's interests, exploits not only envy and ambition but also love in order to get control of the important steel works. And the regime originally got its foot in the door through the chief stockholder's attempts to *avoid* favoring any of Germany's political factions.

Despicable commercial blurbs tout director Luchino Visconti's visuals as sensational. If you infer that the film is sensationalistic, that simply does not do Visconti justice. The camera's intimate, familiar view functions to draw us into an obscenity that is more than a matter of private vices. We are given a microscopic look at a cell from an incredibly evil cancer, and that is closer than we want to come. For instance, the scene where Martin (Helmut Berger) kisses a little girl is less explicit than Dirk Bogarde caressing Ingrid Thulin's breast, but the contrast of Martin's intentions with Lisa's innocence is almost unbearable. Later it transpires that the child either hanged herself or was murdered; the police connect the case with Martin but say there was no crime be-

cause Lisa was a *Jew*. Thus, the horror of fascism is conveyed in immediate terms.

Visconti is too sophisticated to think that transvestism, homosexuality, and "illicit" love are evil in themselves. So it is interesting to watch how he treats such behavior. The first instance of transvestism intrudes upon a very civilized, refined birthday celebration for old Joachim von Essenbeck. It is in turn broken in on by the announcement that the Reichstag is burning. From there on the illusion created by the von Essenbecks' aristocratic manners disintegrates rapidly. Constantine exploits the event by attributing it to the communists. (It was actually done by Nazis.) The second time males appear in drag, Constantine himself is killed by the SS.

There is more happening in the frequent bedroom scenes than sex. Joachim is shot in bed. So are most of the SA revellers. Martin's mistress is pinned

on her bed by police who are arresting her because she knows too much. Some combination of lighting and imagination made me see blood on the SA youths' shoulders (before they were shot) and on Bogarde's lips after he kissed Sophie (Ingrid Thulin). With the words, "I am going to destroy you, Mother," Martin disrobes and acts out his love-hate relationship with Sophie. Thulin and Bogarde, whose love is so mixed with ambition, are eventually married. Their wedding is consummated in death, not intercourse, and when their corpses are found, they are not even touching.

Visconti has said he made *The Damned* "because we must see to it that what happened in those days in Germany must not come again." Occasionally his attempts to make his point, to sound a warning, struck me as a little self-conscious and superfluous. (E.g., the film didn't need the Institute chancellor's warning to young von Essenbeck to get a haircut or comments on the SS's extensive files on German citizens.) It is so subversive anyway and so absorbing that when I heard noises at the theater door, I momentarily imagined that troops were going to mow us down for daring to watch it.



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