

Acropolis Cinema
presents:



May 8 - 14, 2020 – Acropolis Virtual Cinema

ABOUT THE FILM

Just before the French Revolution, in a forest outside Berlin, a band of libertines expelled from the court of Louis XVI rendezvous with the legendary German seducer and freethinker, the Duc de Walchen (Helmut Berger), to convince him to join in their mission: the rejection of authority and all moral boundaries. What begins as an evening of strategizing on the proliferation of libertinage, descends into a Sadean night of pansexual one-upmanship.

Liberté is a singular cinematic experience only Albert Serra could deliver, a film in which increasingly dramatic acts of pain and pleasure unfold in counterpoint to cinematographer Artur Tort's luminous images of moonlit sylvan spaces. As Serra and his committed team of regular performers and newcomers "open the gates of Hell" and explore the limits of the erotic imagination, you won't be able to look away.

132 min. | France/Spain/Portugal/Germany | 2019

Philosophy in the Woods by Phil Coldiron

The following is an excerpt of an article originally published in Cinema Scope 79 (Summer 2019)

And so we arrive at the wanderers of Serra's most recent works, the theatrical feature *Liberté* and the double-screen installation *Personalien* (there is a third iteration of this material, a stage play also titled *Liberté*, which I have not seen). Here, the figures are a group of libertines in exile from the French court; the extent to which this exile is of their own choosing is, as with many things in these works, obscure. We come upon them in Prussian woods, "somewhere between Potsdam and Berlin," according to the film's official synopsis, though this information (along with the date of 1774) is absent from either iteration. With the exception of a brief prologue in *Liberté* and the uncanny appearance of dawn which closes both films, the setting is nocturnal, the only illumination the frigid light of the moon. Though it never descends to the depths of absolute obscurity reached by Serra's first three features, it sustains a visual drone which transposes the brittle, blaring quality of the emergency-red *Roi soleil* (2018) luxuriated in to the succulent textures of pale skin and paler wigs picked out of velvet nature.

What is being picked out by these soft highlights is, largely, the slow process of libertine cruising. (There is a certain amount of plot present in *Liberté*, though it is essentially vestigial; there is nothing but erotic action in *Personalien*.) The night does not exactly hide what these men and women are up to, though it conspires with Serra's fondness for long shots and his three-camera set-up's capacity to bring forth consistently surprising angles, to render recognizable events—which range from the dullness of missionary sex

to moderate heights of refined cruelty (more on which below)—on the verge of abstraction, and to create a series of images which militate against sustained psychology, collapsing this group of seven men and four women into essentially interchangeable roles. This sense is particularly strong in *Personalien*, where the absence of any traditional characterization renders who is doing what to whom irrelevant, a move which torques conceptions of sexual experimentation as the enactment of drives and desires which are fundamentally personal into a territory based rather on the effacement of coherent, individual taste.

The installation of *Personalien* had the additional benefit of offering an additional layer to this material's fundamental operation: the exchange of glances. Though this tension, the slow drawing together of figures through looks, registers strongly enough in *Liberté*, the circuit of eyelines activated in the gallery was markedly more complex, as figures at times seemed to be looking across the space to what was happening on the opposite screen, forcing one to choose whether to side with the subject or object. Near the midpoint of both films, a sequence occurs in which the coy, extremely hetero whipping of one of the young women by the prettiest of the men gives way to the violent thrashing of one of the men by two of his companions, his screams of pleasure verging on the inhuman. In *Liberté*, this necessarily happens in sequence: one action runs its course, and then the next begins. In *Personalien*, by contrast, the former begins as one of the few instances where both screens are devoted to the same event—one screen showing the action in long shot, the other showing a reverse shot, seen through the window of the litter upon which the young woman presents herself, which offers her reactions—before peeling away, the sequence continuing on one screen as the other seems to show the young man catching sight of the more violent activity.

Though one might, in *Liberté*, fairly deduce the sense of inspiration that these scenes' presentation in *Personalien* insists upon, the satisfaction of seeing this sense of group improvisation rendered so cleanly and inventively in the latter is, I find, substantially greater. Still, this sense of improvisation is nevertheless critical to the feature as well: it is, finally, where the freedom of the film's title resides. Consider, for example, an early scene in which one of the men—his face badly disfigured, his left arm amputated at the elbow (he is identified in the credits as Capitaine Benjamin Hephie, and so we might assume he sustained these wounds in the Seven Years' War)—lounges in a barrow as the others make preparations for the evening around him. With no particular emphasis, his gaze falls on a pronged object on the ground, a sort of fire poker which, nearly two hours later in the film, will come to be used as his amputated arm is bloodied into raw meat in the film's most extreme bit of BDSM, recapitulating his sacrifice for the homeland as a sexual burlesque. In typical Serra fashion, we are not given the connecting material that would make this connection a given, but this material nonetheless abounds in such instances of looks leading to activity. Erotic collectivity comes to be the process of drawing inspiration in the moment from one's surroundings, of suspending judgment to maintain possibility.

This scene of the Capitaine's torture, which is accentuated with a fine bit of piss play, is present in *Personalien* as well, where it serves as the film's climax. Curiously, there the

torture is relegated to mere implication, a fleeting glimpse of the man's bloodied arm; the urolagnia is instead focused on, to rhyme with the storm that occurs halfway through the installation, a decision which gives the work a clearly defined shape as opposed to *Liberté's* erotic drift. The offering and withholding of this scene offers the most acute instance of what I take to be a basic concern of both works: the search for a refreshed vantage on the tired issue of the relationship between fact and fiction. Put plainly, does it matter if we assume that everyone is enjoying what they are doing, or if we assume that they are not? That this question would necessarily be formulated in the same way as one would ask it of a piece of unquestionable pornography should not be understood as carrying any concern with morality: if either of these works are pornography, they are no more or less art for it.

That *Liberté* is willing to put this question into direct proximity with the potential disappointment of fantasy is, as I said, something of a weakness: the scenes in which fantasy is called on directly—one in which it is disappointed, one in which it is satisfied—both occur in language, and as such drag the film away from its openness into an unsatisfying literalness. And that these fantasies, one that involves bestiality and the other scatophagia, are left in language further points to its odd prudishness. How should we take this decision? If Serra had filmed these scenes, he might indeed have approached something like his Sadean model, or, at the very least, John Waters at his most brash. And yet, perhaps in the end this disappointment might return us to where we began, with the question of stillness and motion, which now might be placed in the context of fact and fiction, document and illusion, reality and fantasy, and given a new charge: to show the pleasures and complications of absolute belief.



@AcropolisCinema



/AcropolisCinema



@acropoliscinema

www.acropoliscinema.com