Private Vices, Public Virtues. Miklos Jancso’s latest film, is such a feast for the senses - vibrant music, rich coloring, warm, frank sensuality - that it comes as something of a shock to realise how tame and even tedious the whole exercise is. You can manufacture a continuing low level of interest in it, of course, by spotting the Jancso trademarks - dialogue so sparse that it tempts you to dismiss the storyline outright, visuals so lovingly dwelled upon that you break your brains trying to squeeze as much significance out of the scene as the director obviously does, ritual stripping, the humiliation motif, etc. But such high-art gamesmanship soon palls, and you are left with a somewhat dense, but basically centre-less film featuring small doses of inchoate politics and large doses of curiously sexless sex. Many of Jancso’s earlier films, however elliptical in form, are recognisably “about” revolution or the forms of popular expression that make revolution an imaginable possibility. Round-Up, The Confrontation, The Red and the White, Red Psalm are concerned with the struggles of “the people” (peasants/students) against repressive forces, and with the collective activities which nourish revolutionary vision. It is
clear that Private Vices, Public Virtues marks a decided shift in focus.

In this film, instead of the mass and their collective actions, Jancso gives us a tiny fragment of the ruling class - admittedly a rebellious one - and their private attempts at personal transcendence. The narrative concerns the efforts by a Crown Prince of an unnamed European country (although it is obviously late 19th century Austria-Hungary) to resist the Establishment duties and responsibilities of his position and to oppose the hypocrisy and corruption rife in his father’s authoritarian regime. The means chosen for these protests are sexual. The Crown Prince rejects the dominant values of “family, procreation and fatherland” by secluding himself in a rural retreat, refusing to fulfil either his husbandly or royal responsibilities in sleeping with the Crown Princess, immersing himself in sensuality - even debauchery - with willing maidservants, and mocking his father’s name, position, and even image at every opportunity.

Joined by his half-brother and sister (both of whom are the Crown Prince’s lovers and each other’s), they resolve to destroy the old regime in the name of “truth”, to expose its hypocrisy and corruption at a public trial in which they will be the defendants. They plan a sexual cause célèbre so scandalous that the Emperor will be unable either to hush it up or ignore the critique of his regime implicit in their libertine practices and life-styles.

He will be forced to arrest them, and the resulting trial will give them a public opportunity to confront and indict oppressive authority directly.

Their scheme is to demean their aristocratic contemporaries and to compromise this golden generation in a wanton orgy. Evidence will be obtained through photographs of the sensuality which lies under the mask of respectability. In the event, licence leads not only to abandoned sexual behavior but also to treason. The orgy’s sexual freedom liberates the young aristocrats politically, and they are prepared not only to revile and defile the Emperor and his emissaries, but also to subversively declare the throne effectively vacant and the Crown Prince Emperor.

When the party is over, it becomes obvious that the conspirators, now joined by a beautiful hermaphrodite - yes, she has breasts and a penis - from a travelling “circus of truth” will not be allowed their public trial. Effectively prisoners in their idyllic surroundings, they await death at the unmerciful hands of State and Church, and engage in a final prolonged sequence of lyrically filmed polymorphous sex.

And it is here that the film loses all pretense to treating sensual life in a relational sense. Sexuality is no longer portrayed as a means to a political or personal end, but as an end in itself. Everything filmic supports this view: the caressing camerawork, the wordless athleticism of the acts of intercourse themselves, the fluid dimensionality of the music, all attest to Jancso’s exploration of “pure” sensuality. Given even the sketchy social context of the preceding explicitly sexual scenes, this apparently unmotivated final passage appears decisively abstract, the eroticism ultimately reified. The total effect - despite beautiful bodies in beautiful embraces - is cerebral rather than emotional.

At the film’s end, the four sensualists, sacrificially recumbent under a white cloth, are ritually executed. As the bodies are prepared for burial, we hear the “official” announcement of a royal suicide; the bodies lie in state, the revolt without strategy has been quashed and its historical existence denied.

The problem is how to relate Jancso’s final extended sexual exegesis to its eventual defeat by the authoritarian forces. Does it represent something as uncomplicated as a final fling, a last submersion in the life of the senses before the executioner strikes? Or is it a purpose to subject Jancso’s audiences to a lesson in sensuality, to its didactic portrayal as non-threatening and expressive, rather than dominating and instrumental? Is it merely a somewhat overstated illustration of the means by which these four already atypical people have generated the courage to oppose the regime, and to die for their high-minded “cause” of truth? Or is it a statement as to the poverty of the Reichian solution, that sexuality alone provides neither tactics nor strategy for a real revolution against entrenched forces of repression.

In light of Jancso’s other films, the last explanation would fit with his previously expressed preoccupations with the mechanisms of revolutionary vision. Unfortunately, the film itself gives too little justification for such a view. It would be a perverse stretching of the film to over-emphasise the anti-Reichian point. But if Private Vices isn’t about the revolutionary possibilities inherent in sensual life, then you’re stuck to know what the hell it is about. Clues are so sparse, guidance so absent, that you are left with the obvious: it is a film celebrating sex, from the Playboy camerawork in the orgy scenes (open bodices, garters, long stockings for the ladies) to the final sequences where the screen is totally absorbed and suffused in flesh tones. If there is a political motif, it comes either in a bourgeois, literary guise - allusions to Shakespeare’s rebels (Hamlet, Prince Hal, Romeo and Juliet) abound - or in the form of absolutist symbolism: Life versus Death; Spirit versus Order; Sensuality versus The State. The result is, I fear, simply a formal film exercise by a director entranced with his own images and his own undoubted abilities to translate these images onto celluloid, who has simply run out of political steam.

-Kathe Boehringer.