

CinemaLab celebrates Pier Paolo Pasolini

March 13

Mamma Roma (1962)
-12:00 PM-
Teorema (1968)
-3:00 PM-

April 10

The Decameron (1971)
-12:00 PM-
Salò, or the 120
Days of Sodom (1975)
-3:00 PM-

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Pasolini, Pier Paolo

“The first duty of an artist is not to fear unpopularity.”

Gino Moliterno

December 2002. b. March 15, 1922, Bologna, Italy d. November 1, 1975, Ostia (Rome), Outside Italy Pasolini is usually remembered as one of the most significant of the directors who emerged in the second wave of Italian postwar cinema in the early 1960s but, within Italy itself, Pasolini was always much more than just a distinctive and innovative filmmaker. By the time he came to make his first film, *Accattone*, in 1961, he had already published numerous collections of poetry, two highly-acclaimed novels, had collaborated widely in cultural-literary journals and firmly established himself as one of Italy’s leading writer-intellectuals. In the 15 years that followed, before being brutally murdered in 1975 — and always inspired by what he himself called “a desperate vitality” and a “love of Reality” — he made a dozen feature films and half a dozen shorts, wrote, translated and sometimes directed theatrical works, published several further collections of poetry, two volumes of critical essays, painted some 40 canvases and, through his numerous articles in journals and his caustic columns in daily newspapers, became the loudest dissenting voice in Italian political and cultural debate. Intensely passionate and iconoclastic, often paradoxical and contradictory, Pasolini was almost certainly, as Zygmunt Baranski has written in a recent critical reappraisal, Italy’s major post-war intellectual. (1)

Born in Bologna in 1922, the year that Fascism came to power, Pasolini spent his early years in various small towns of Northern Italy as the family followed the father, an infantry officer with fascist leanings, in his military postings. Pasolini’s sympathies, however, would always remain with his mother, a schoolteacher who cultivated a love of poetry and who transmitted this devotion to her son. In the mid-1930s the family returned to Bologna where Pasolini finished his schooling and enrolled in the University. During this time he also spent long periods in his mother’s native Northern region of Casarsa, falling in love with its peasant culture and beginning to write poetry in its distinctive dialect. At Bologna University he majored in literature but also studied art history with the renowned art-historian Roberto Longhi, an experience that would later

profoundly influence the visual style of his earlier films. At the end of the war, which had claimed the life of his younger brother, Pasolini and his mother settled at Casarsa where he worked as a schoolteacher while also being active in cultural-literary circles and becoming secretary of the local branch of the PCI (the Italian Communist Party). In 1949, however, he was accused of homosexual activity with students and immediately suspended from his teaching and expelled from the Party. Profoundly disillusioned, he moved to Rome with his mother and settled in one of the *borgate* or shanty-towns at the margins of the city. Here, while eking out a living from a variety of odd jobs, he became fascinated with the sub-proletarian and petty-criminal life going on around him, and began to write about it. However, *Ragazzi di vita*, his first full-length novel dealing with the world of the *borgate*, published in 1955, saw him officially charged with offences to public decency. He was eventually exonerated, in part due to the strong support of many of the leading intellectuals and writers, but this would be only the first of many times that Pasolini and his “scandalous” work would be subjected to official censure and harassment. In fact, from this point until his brutal murder in 1975, Pasolini would continue to play the role of Italy’s most notorious intellectual provocateur (*intellettuale scomodo*), with his books, films and ideas consistently generating controversy and with Pasolini himself often ending up in court. On the positive side, however, his graphic depiction of the Roman underworld brought an increasing number of offers of scriptwriting from established Italian directors like Mauro Bolognini and Federico Fellini so that Pasolini’s move to cinema became almost a foregone conclusion.

The Films

As an established poet and writer, Pasolini came to embrace cinema above all as an alternative form of self-expression, equal in potential to writing itself. In fact, in the film theory that he would develop from the mid-1960s onward, Pasolini would characterise cinema precisely as a *writing with reality*, a writing that would yield what he called a “cinema of poetry” the more the filmmaker was able to stylistically manipulate it for the purposes of self-expression. (2) But self-expression, for Pasolini, was never merely a matter of aesthetics but always opened onto the social and political. In fact perhaps more than any other artist-intellectual in recent Italian history, Pasolini felt completely and personally co-opted by the massive social, economic and cultural developments that were profoundly transforming Italy during this time so that his films, as with everything else he wrote or said, became always, at some level, personal responses to, and ways of intervening in, that reality. His cinema was thus always to be a blend of the lyrical and the political, the poetic and the ideological, passion and analysis.

Not surprisingly, Pasolini’s first films centred on the same petty-criminal underworld of the Roman *borgate* that he had explored previously in his novels. His earliest film, *Accattone*, made in 1960, with another young poet, Bernardo Bertolucci, as assistant-director, made a virtue of his inexperience behind the camera and, in a sense, invented its own cinematic language to present the harsh reality of the *borgate*. However, despite certain superficial similarities with classic neorealism (use of non-professional actors, on-location shooting, etc), the film was ultimately less a denunciation of the existence of the *borgate*, as such, than — in a typical Pasolinian way — a celebration of their radical otherness to the culture of consumer capitalism that was rapidly replacing traditional values in Italy in the wake of the “economic miracle” and which, for Pasolini, represented a social and cultural degradation. Significantly, the central character of the film, a pimp named Vittorio, actually prefers to be called *accattone* (pimp) as a badge of honour and his desultory, half-hearted attempts at a normal job all end in failure. The film ends with Accattone dying in a motorcycle crash while trying to evade arrest for a smalltime robbery, his last words being “Ah, now I’m fine”. The film’s sympathetic attitude to its amoral characters immediately caused a scandal, as did Pasolini’s first use of his technique of “contamination”, in particular that insistent commingling of the sacred and the profane that would characterise his cinema from then on. So a violent street-brawl between Accattone and his ex-brother-in-law is glossed by the strains of Bach’s *St. Matthew’s Passion* and a wealth of biblical and Christological references in the film

ultimately works to make the low-life Accattone into a sort of negative Christ figure (he dies, in fact, between two thieves, one of whom makes the reverse sign of the Cross over him). And the film also clearly displays the distinctive use of the camera and the frontal visual style that would become characteristic of Pasolini's early period, with the camera often panning slowly over the young, delinquent faces of pimps and petty thieves with the same care as an eye moving over the faces in a fresco by Masaccio or Pier della Francesca. Such a positive portrayal of pimps and layabouts immediately drew censure from the authorities who originally sought to ban the film outright and eventually only allowed its release under what was effectively an R rating.

Mamma Roma, made the following year with Anna Magnani in the lead role, was a similar exploration of the world of the Roman *borgate* and was, as Pasolini later admitted, the only time that he actually repeated himself. For the sake and future of her teenage son, Ettore, Mamma Roma makes a determined attempt to extract herself from a life of prostitution in the *borgate*, but she is fatefully drawn back to it and, at the end of the film Ettore, like Accattone, dies as the result of an attempted petty theft. Again mixing the sacred and the profane, Ettore is in the final sequence photographed in clear reminiscence of Mantegna's *Dead Christ*, articulating once again Pasolini's vision of the *borgate* as a world at the margins of bourgeois history and culture but one which, for that very reason, still retained an aura of tragedy and a violence connected to the sacred. In what was now becoming a pattern, *Mamma Roma*, too, attracted official censure for "offending against the common sense of decency" and was only released after lengthy legal proceedings.

By this stage, however, Pasolini's reputation as a filmmaker had been firmly established and his third film, *La ricotta*, was an episode he was invited to contribute in 1963 to a compendium film titled, rather unimaginatively, *RoGoPaG* (from the initials of the four directors concerned: Rossellini, Godard, Pasolini and Gregoretti). Under-rated at the time, *La ricotta* is now rightly regarded as something of a minor masterpiece of Pasolini's cinema, in some ways a summing up of the *borgate* period wrapped up within a metacinematic reflection. The story is simple: Stracci, a poor devil from the *borgate* (his name actually means "Rags"), is working as an extra on a film about the life of Christ, being made on the backlots of Cinecittà, mostly for the sake of the free lunch. Forced to share his first meal with his family, he wilyly scrounges a second which he hides in a cave when he's called back onto the set. On returning he finds that this too has been eaten, by the pet dog of the leading actress. Fortunately he's able to sell the dog to a passerby for enough money to buy a huge amount of *ricotta* which he then gobbles down before the assembled cast and crew in a sort of comic beggar's banquet. Called back onto the set to be one of the thieves crucified with Christ, he suffers fatal indigestion and ironically really dies on his cross at the very moment of the filming of the Crucifixion. This both repeats and refines the interplay between the sacred and the profane in Pasolini's two previous films but the real charm here is that Stracci's pathetic tragicomedy is presented within the interstices of a film-within-the-film, the film of the Passion that the unnamed director, significantly played by Orson Welles, is trying to make but which is stalled due to the director's apparent obsession with recreating two classic Mannerist paintings of the deposition of Christ (paintings that, ironically, Pasolini recreates quite meticulously and in brilliant colour). During a break in the botched attempts to film the paintings, the director is asked a number of questions by a toady reporter from a Roman daily to which he responds, clearly as Pasolini's alter-ego. Especially telling is the director's answer to the question: "What do you think about the Italian people?" Answer: "The most illiterate populace and the most ignorant bourgeoisie in Europe". The film as a whole and certainly the figure of the director were something of a playful self-parody but most of the irony and self-reflexiveness of the film was lost on the authorities who interpreted Stracci's death on the cross from indigestion as an "an outrage against the established religion". Pasolini was consequently tried for the offence and received a three-month suspended sentence, even if this was later quashed on appeal and the film eventually allowed to be released with significant cuts. In the process Pasolini went to a great deal of trouble to explain that he hadn't meant to lampoon the Christ story - far

from it – but his definitive answer to the charges really came in 1964 when he made *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo*.

The project for a film of the Gospel actually went back to 1962 but Pasolini was only able to put the film into production in 1963 after having visited the Holy Land (and also recorded his somewhat disappointed visit in the documentary, *Sopralluoghi in Palestina*). When he came to it, radical as always, Pasolini began by throwing out the entire tradition of pietistic representation sedimented in the gospel film genre and starting from scratch. Risking fragmentation and incoherence, he adopted a variety of expressive strategies and a multiplicity of often contrasting styles to create a socially-committed, quasi-Marxist version of the Gospel preached by a harsh and uncompromising Christ who was in many ways a revolutionary and a provocateur not unlike Pasolini himself. In an interview with Oswald Stack at the time Pasolini admitted that “Catholics come out of the film feeling a bit shaken up, feeling that I have made Christ bad. He’s not bad in fact, he’s just full of contradictions”. As usual, however, a Pasolini film ignited polemics; this time the work was praised by international Catholic organizations like the OCIC (Office Catholique International du Cinéma) which awarded it its Venice prize but was severely attacked by left-wing critics who accused it of pietism and hagiography. In spite of all the controversy, or perhaps in part because of it, the film did bring Pasolini his first international recognition.

Before filming the Gospel, however, Pasolini had taken the unusual step of actually making a documentary film on Italians’ attitude to sex. Entitled *Comizi d’amore* (1964) the film consisted largely of Pasolini himself travelling from the North to the South of Italy, asking pertinent questions about sexual habits, homosexuality, divorce and abortion of Italians of all ages, gender and social class. At several stages in the film writer Alberto Moravia and psychoanalyst Cesare Musatti were invited to comment on the answers given to these provocative questions and on what it said about Italy as a whole. The film remains an interesting document and testifies to Pasolini’s great “love of Reality” even if, ultimately, the question of whether it had uncovered the “real” Italy was left unanswered. Yet if *Comizi d’amore* suggested that Italy was still, in many ways, both backward and fragmented, the country had certainly changed, and for what Pasolini thought was the worse. Pasolini’s long-held faith in the possibility of a Marxist-style revolution guided by Gramscian “organic” intellectuals had by now begun to falter, and the first signs of this ideological crisis surfaced in the genial *Uccellacci e uccellini* (1966).



A fractured fairy-tale with touches of Brecht and Bunuel, intermixing Chaplin and silent comedy with Neapolitan farce, *Uccellacci* is both picaresque adventure and filmic essay. Pasolini himself called it an “ideo-comedy”. A father and his son, played by veteran Italian comic actor, Totò, and Ninetto Davoli, walk along a road at the outskirts of Rome. They are soon joined by a Talking Crow

who hails from the Land of Ideology, born of Father Doubt and Mother Consciousness. As they travel, the Crow, like a true left intellectual, continues to ask questions, make weighty pronouncements and provide a running socio-political commentary. At one stage, as a sort of pedagogical example, he recounts the medieval story of Brother Ciccillo and Brother Ninetto, sent by St. Francis to preach God's message of love to the Hawks and the Sparrows. After much effort the brothers manage to learn the language of the birds and succeed in preaching the message of universal love to both groups individually. In the end, however, when they come into contact with each other, the Hawks still continue to prey on the Sparrows. The moral of the story might be, as St. Francis says when they report it to him, "one needs to change the World", but is that still possible? Having appeared in the medieval fable, Totò and Ninetto are returned to their present journey along the road where, after several other encounters, they witness the funeral of PCI leader, Palmiro Togliatti (presented using documentary footage). Soon after, however, having grown tired of the Crow's incessant commentary, they unceremoniously kill and eat it, and walk off into the distance. A fitting but open-ended conclusion, perhaps, which seems to bear out the sense of the epigraph with which the film opens (and which purports to be the gist of an interview between Edgar Snow and Mao Tse-tung): "Dove va l'umanità? Boh." (Where is humanity heading? Who the heck knows?).

Pasolini would use Totò and Ninetto again for two other charming short fables, *La terra vista dalla luna* (1966) and *Che sono le nuvole?* (1967) but at this point, with the intellectual's guiding role in any possible social revolution in severe question and with the *borgate* themselves rapidly becoming colonised by an ethos of consumerism and mass culture, Pasolini shifted his focus backwards to a mythic time and place when ritual and a sense of the sacred still held sway. The result was *Edipo re*, a remarkable adaptation of Sophocles' great tragedy which was brilliant in its creation of a promordial, archaic and a-historical mythopoetic setting, completely outside the recognizable iconography of ancient Greek culture (the film was, in fact, mostly shot in Morocco). But the film was also remarkable in the way it succeeded in adapting Sophocles' tragedy both objectively (most of the text was actually conserved) and subjectively, to express Pasolini's own oedipal conflict with his father. A prologue and an epilogue set respectively in 1922 and in postwar Bologna serve to relate the Oedipus myth both to modern times and to Pasolini himself, thus effectively creating what Pasolini himself called a "kind of completely metaphoric - and therefore mythicised - autobiography".

Pasolini would return to this mythic setting in his adaptation of *Medea* in 1969 where he would use the tragic and ill-fated relationship between Medea and Jason to express the clash between an archaic culture based on magic and a sense of sacred violence, and its inevitable destruction at the hands of a modernising, rationalistic culture. For Pasolini this clash was still going on, in Italy in the inarrestible destruction of traditional peasant culture by the spread of neocapitalist consumerism and in the world at large in the exploitation of the Third World. Thus, around this time, throwing down the gauntlet to the all-conquering consumer ethos which he so despised, Pasolini consciously set out to make a number of "difficult" films that would remain "unconsumable" and "indigestible" for the great mass of Italians and accessible only to a cultural élite.

The first of these consciously "difficult" films was *Teorema* (1968) which Pasolini had already published as a novel. In the film an enigmatic, handsome stranger, played by Terence Stamp, introduces himself into the home of a bourgeois Milanese family and proceeds over a short period to physically and emotionally seduce all of them, including the maid. Then, as abruptly and mysteriously as he arrived, he departs, leaving all of them to cope with the existential void that he has opened up in their previously complacent existence. Pasolini himself said that the film was allegory for the irruption of a sense of authenticity into the lives of an alienated bourgeoisie and predictably all four members of the bourgeois family (father, mother, daughter and son) deteriorate into states approaching madness although Emilia, the maid, returns to her peasant

village and, after a period of penitence, performs a number of miracles and achieves sainthood. The film ends with the haunting image of the father, having given away his factory to the workers and having taken off all his clothes, running naked and screaming through a biblical desert landscape. The film's powerful indictment of the sterility of contemporary bourgeois values was immediately recognised by no less than the jury of the OCIC (Office Catholique Internationale du Cinéma) which awarded it its prize at Venice. This decision, however, was immediately and violently contested by the rest of the Catholic authorities who soon had the film withdrawn and its author formally charged with obscenity. Pasolini was before the courts for two years before the charges were finally dismissed and the film formally released in 1970. By this time, however, he had already gone on to make what is probably his most "indigestible" film before *Salò* (1975).

Porcile (1969) represents the apex of Pasolini's "difficult" period, a difficulty that here probably derives, at least in part, from Pasolini's own very mixed response to the student uprisings of 1968. Comic and horrific at the same time, *Porcile* tells two separate stories simultaneously through alternating montage. In one story, set on the barren slopes of a volcano, a young man leads a feral existence, carrying out acts of unmitigated savagery which include murder and cannibalism. Gradually he's joined by a number of other people who form a small group around him and which continues to prey on people passing through the area until a trap is set up by the soldiers from a nearby village. The group is caught and the men are condemned to death. While one becomes contrite and kneels to kiss the crucifix, the original leader is unrepentant and before dying shouts repeatedly: "I've killed my father; I've eaten human flesh; I tremble with joy". The second story, its polar opposite in a way, is set in contemporary Germany and revolves around Julian, the son of the powerful industrialist, Herr Klotz. Julian has a secret which he won't divulge but which is preventing him from either going to a student demonstration in Berlin with his fiancee Ida or joining his father's business. It turns out that Julian's secret is that he likes to have sex with the pigs. The secret is discovered by Klotz' competitor, Herr Herditze, an ex-Nazi criminal, who attempts to blackmail Klotz with it. Klotz attempts to counter-blackmail by threatening to reveal Herditze' past. Eventually, as true capitalists, the two decide to join forces rather than fight each other but as they celebrate their future partnership news is brought in that Julian has been eaten by the pigs. On being reassured that not a trace of the boy remains, the two men agree to just keep silent. In attempting to throw light on this dark allegory, Pasolini himself claimed to identify with both the young men, saying that the ultimate message of the film was that all societies devour their own children, therefore an a-political anarchism would be the only viable political stand. It's difficult to believe that Pasolini was really advocating a complete abandonment of politics at this time since his *Appunti per an Oresteaide Africana* (1970) — a sort of travel documentary on Africa but in reality a sort of critical history of that country's yoke under colonialism — shows him still passionately interested in at least the politics of the Third World.

Nevertheless Pasolini's next films would be the three elegant literary adaptations of *Il Decameron* (1971), *I racconti di Canterbury* (1972) and *Il fiore delle mille e una notte* (1974), which he would group together under the title of the "Trilogy of Life" and which he would originally characterise as his most "non-political" films. Lavish in their costumes and settings and splendidly-photographed, with non-professionals chosen, as in the *borgate* days, for their stunningly-expressive faces and powerful screen presences, these were thoroughly "consumable" films and in fact provided Pasolini with his greatest ever commercial success. Later on, contrary as ever, Pasolini would suggest that, in another way, these were also his "most political" films, the politics here being not ideological but sexual, there in the erotic, sexually-energised human body which was being everywhere celebrated in these films and which Pasolini claimed was the only site to have yet escaped domination by consumer capitalism. However, the runaway commercial success and popularity of the films, coupled with the hundreds of soft-porn imitations which were allowed to flood the market in their wake, forced Pasolini to rethink the extent to which the sexualised human body could have been said to have escaped being colonised by consumerism,

the result of this rethinking being a public “abjuration” of the Trilogy, printed as the introduction to the published screenplays.

But the most thorough abjuration of the Trilogy of Life was undoubtedly Pasolini’s next and final film, *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*.. The film was released (and then, predictably, immediately withdrawn under charges of obscenity) only two weeks after Pasolini’s brutal murder at the hands of a young male prostitute, and the gruesome murder of its author inevitably came to colour interpretations of the film itself. It is certainly Pasolini’s most difficult and most claustrophobic film, its cold crystalline cinematic precision — a correlate of its relentless logic and its implacable representational cruelty — making it something of an anomaly among Pasolini’s usually more loosely structured expressionistic films. Yet in essence, as a tightly-constructed but transparent allegory, it’s a return to the style of films like *Porcile* and *Teorema*, with the Sadean text and the reference to Fascism functioning as the pretext for an uncompromising representation of the unbridled exercise of Power over bodies, effectively of bodies commodified and reduced to things. If in the Trilogy Pasolini had, naively perhaps, celebrated bodies and sex as indices of a profound vitality and touchstones of authenticity here, in the most total reversal, bodies become mere sites for the inarrestible imposition of power, for what Pasolini himself called Power’s own anarchy.

The unmitigated bleakness and nihilism of this vision is clearly a far cry not only from the celebration of the body in the Trilogy but also from the possibility of an outside to dominant power in the *borgate* films or an elsewhere to neocapitalist consumerism expressed in the adaptation of the Greek plays. Yet this utter desperation and lack of hope represented Pasolini’s response to what he saw as a corrupted and degraded Italian reality around him in the mid-1970s. As he was making *Salò*, in fact, Pasolini was also calling from his column in the *Corriere della sera* for the arrest and trial of all the major Italian Christian Democrat politicians for their part in Italy’s degradation. More difficult to ascertain, however, is the question of how far this nihilistic and despairing vision, expressed so uncompromisingly in this final film, may have contributed to Pasolini’s own death. Leaving aside whether or not he was killed as part of a conspiracy, did he, perhaps, after months of filming those atrocious scenes, go out that night in November seeking his own death? But perhaps this is to phrase the question wrongly since Death was ever present in Pasolini’s cinema: most of the figures in Pasolini’s films live against Death and eventually succumb to it. Accattone dies, Ettore dies, Stracci dies, Julian dies eaten by pigs and Christ, of course, also dies. And Death even found a place in Pasolini’s film theory. In an interview around the time of *Edipo re* Pasolini suggested that:

Cinema is identical to life, because each one of us has a virtual and invisible camera which follows us from when we’re born to when we die. In reality cinema is an infinite film sequence-shot. Each individual film interrupts and rearranges this infinite sequence-shot and thus creates meaning, which is what happens to us when we die. It is only at our moment of death that our life, to that point undecipherable, ambiguous, suspended, acquires a meaning. Montage thus plays the same role in cinema as death does in life. (7)

Apart from the extraordinary achievement of individual films, then, this may be the ultimate fascination that Pasolini and his cinema still retain for us: not only a provocative, heretical, scandalous cinema that proposes *both* Marxism and a sense of the sacred, *both* revolution and a return to myth but also and above all a complete coincidence between Cinema and Life, Art and Reality.

Filmography

Accattone (1961)

Mamma Roma (1962)

La ricotta (1963) short, 35 mins; episode of compilation-film, *RoGoPaG*

La rabbia (Rage) (1963) short, 53 mins

Comizi d'amore (Love Meetings) (1964)

Sopralluoghi in Palestina (1964) short, documentary, 52 mins

Il Vangelo secondo Matteo (The Gospel According to Matthew) (1964)

Uccellacci e uccellini (Hawks and Sparrows) (1966)

La terra vista dalla luna (The Earth Seen From the Moon) (1967) short, 31 mins; episode of compilation-film, *Le Streghe (Witches)*

Edipo re (Oedipus) (1967)

Che cosa sono le nuvole (What are Clouds?) (1968) short, 22 mins; episode of *Capriccio all'italiana*

Teorema (1968)

Appunti per un film sull'India (Notes for a Film on India) (1969) short, 35 mins

La sequenza del fiore di carta (The Sequence of the Paper Flower) (1969) short, 11 mins; episode of compilation-film, *Amore e rabbia (Love and Anger)*

Porcile (Pigsty) (1969)

Appunti per un'Orestide africana (Notes for an African Oresteia) (1970) 63 mins

Medea (1969)

Il Decameron (The Decameron) (1971)

Le mura di Sana'a (The Walls of Sana'a) (1971) short, documentary, 13 mins; broadcast on RAI TV in 1971; first theatrical showing 1974

I racconti di Canterbury (The Canterbury Tales) (1972)

Il fiore delle mille e una notte (The Thousand and One Nights) (1974) also known as *The Arabian Nights*

Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma (Salò or the Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom) (1975)

Mamma Roma (1962)



The evil you do is like a highway the innocent have to walk down.

It's a perfect set-up for us to see Mamma Roma at her work, a classic philosopher-prostitute as she walks the pitch-black track of midnight Rome, a Socrates in stilettos equipped to take on all interrogators as they toss their varied come-ons and sly remarks her way. The long tracking shots, in which the camera pulls back continuously as Roma struts her stuff, are easily the most iconic and engaging sequences in the film.

With the baseline dilemma of Roma's desire to balance secrecy and intimacy with her son, the true love of her life, now drawn, Pasolini shifts our attention to Ettore's plight as he's forced to find his role in a new neighborhood. He quickly finds a group of guys with whom he runs the streets, and an object of attraction, Bruna, a young woman who seems to have followed a path similar to his mother's. Ettore himself is a displaced sullen slouched, moderately handsome in a scrunch-faced, indolent way.



A non-actor that Pasolini drafted for the role strictly on account of appearances alone when the director saw him serving soup in a restaurant, Ettore Garafolo fits right into Pasolini's custom of seeking out just the right face to flesh out the scenes he envisioned. There are a lot of those moments, where the faces on-screen are arranged in such a way that they appear to be fulfilling some kind of visual fetish on Pasolini's part - hardly unique to him as a director, but a noticeable consistency that carries over into just about all of the clips I've seen of other films he's made.



The central pathos of **Mamma Roma** derives from watching Ettore slide inexorably into the same mess of moral compromise and dead end petty criminality that years earlier ensnared his mother, despite her best efforts and sincere desire to provide a better life for him. His infatuation with Bruna (pictured above), who's already given birth to an "illegitimate" son herself, is exactly the opposite of what Roma intends for her boy, but her only remedy to break the fixation is to hook him up with another, more cynical and emotionally detached prostitute so that his regard for women is sufficiently lowered to the point where he's no longer enthralled by mere sexual attraction. Of course this strategy completely disregards Bruna's hope that in Ettore, she might finally find a man who respects and appreciates her - but what does she matter, anyway?

Meanwhile, Roma propels herself further into the con games that she's mastered so well over the years, bilking a married man out of a wallet full of cash through a manipulative (and amusing) extortion scheme involving a pair of friends who effortlessly seduce him into a no-win situation. She uses the cash to indulge her son, doing what she can to make up for the lost years with happy moments in the here and now, but she instinctively understands the inadequacy of her plans, as she sees her son slip further away in his own world and recognizes the futility of resistance to the sad destiny that life has carved out for her. Roma wrestles with questions of faith in her dialogue with a priest, vacillating between the authority of traditional piety and the innate lessons impressed upon her heart by hard-earned experience. Throughout the final half of the film, at various points of ethical confusion, her (and our) gaze is directed into the very heart of Rome itself, as we see the dome of a church (suggesting [St. Peter's Basilica](#), though it's not) rising about a skyline of apartment buildings that threaten to soon engulf the sacred site - though not yet.

The final crisis ensues when Ettore, suffering from a fever and a fatal bout of ennui, is arrested for a reckless deed of juvenile delinquency. His medical condition and belligerent non-compliance lead the authorities to restrain him via strapping him down to a mattress, a too-convenient pretext for Pasolini to re-enact a favorite Renaissance painting, Mantegna's *The Lamentation of Christ*.

The heavy-handedness of this and the film's final scenes are enough to sever the connection between **Mamma Roma** and some viewers - it's all just a bit too spot on to be digested uncritically - but the visuals are indeed striking and memorable, for those who easily enjoy them on their tragic, quasi-operatic merits or are at least willing to cut the young director a bit of slack. Still, the final shot, of Anna Magnani rushing to her deceased son's bedroom upon hearing the news of his sad demise, resonates with me. It's a passionate moment, as she begins to come to terms with the depths of her loss, a grief that had already been building during the years spent separated from her son, and now on the verge of its fullest consummation. Her impulse is to throw herself out the window and join her child in death, but she's held back by the hands of friends who provide a more kind-hearted restraint on her behalf, even as she's transfixed once again in her moment of crisis by the holy dome, rising like a firm rounded breast that feeds and nurtures all the children of **Mamma Roma**.

Mamma Roma and the Conflicted Passions of Pier Paolo Pasolini

Bruce Hodsdon

"I love life so fiercely, so desperately, that nothing good can come of it."

– Pier Paolo Pasolini (1960) [\(1\)](#)

“Pasolini (in his death) has successfully evaded the mortal synthesis, and repropose around his corpse all the contradictions that characterised his multifarious activities.”

– Don Ranvaud

Authorial Intertext

This article intends to provide both background information on *Mamma Roma* (1962), Pasolini’s second film, and contextualise the lack of unity, the “expressive clash”, in Pasolini’s work which renders him, as Naomi Greene suggests, “a more protean figure than anyone else in the world of film” .

Outlined below are the major discourses, as they circulated in Italian culture, within which Pasolini positioned himself during his lifetime

Humanism

Pasolini’s intellectual development was shaped by the humanism at the core of the Italian school program. Unlike his later struggles with Catholicism, Pasolini never really questioned his humanistic education. He gave “humanism” a positive connotation, relating it to the idea of history as the continual process of perfecting an abstract humanity. He regretted the advent of technocracy and consumerism with its concomitant loss of humanistic values. Humanism contributed to Pasolini’s lifelong self-perception of the “poet” and to his unflinching use, always in positive terms, of the word “poetic” to allude to the superior status of the image that is not straightjacketed into a single meaning. “Poetic” was the adjective that, according to him, best described the language “spoken” by reality and by cinematic images.

Catholicism

Catholicism was ingrained in him from childhood and continued to exert an influence over Pasolini’s thought. Deeply religious as an adolescent, he experienced intense mystical longings expressed in his diary. Messianic fervour prepared the terrain for his embrace of Marxism and Pasolini dedicated much time and energy to the reconciliation of the two. It nurtured his famed myth of innocence with which the peasantry, sub-proletariat and Third World represent existence outside of Western history. That Pasolini never really discussed the religious aspects in his first films “suggests deep ambivalence, even defensiveness, where his own faith was concerned” (5).

Marxism

Marxism challenged his religious faith and gave Pasolini the tools to think through the problems of oppression. His Gramscian version of Marxism (see below) provided an umbrella under which even some of the humanistic and Catholic principles dear to him could gather. He often stressed the contiguity between Marxism and Christianity.

Psychoanalysis

By the mid-'60s Pasolini had enthusiastically subscribed to the Freudianism that had been widely, if superficially, circulating in Italian culture since the 1950s. Freudianism, like Marxism, constituted an attack on bourgeois ideology. Freud also offered Pasolini a clear and coherent “scientific” theory of the cause and nature of

Homosexuality

If psychoanalysis provided Pasolini with the tools to talk about the body rationally, homosexuality gave him the certainty that the body is a purveyor of knowledge and had repercussions on the way he saw the oppressor/oppressed dialectic. Its discourse exposed Marxism's inadequacy in addressing sexual oppression and led him to highlight the private sphere as the location for struggle.

Gramscian, National-Popular Phase of Pasolini's Filmmaking (1961-66)

When Pasolini started directing films in 1961, he had already worked on the scripts of some 15 other movies for directors like Federico Fellini and Mauro Bolognini. It was on the strength of his well-received and controversial Roman novels, *Ragazzi di viti* (1955) and *Una vita violenta* (1959), that he was first asked to work on scripts and many of the films he worked on as a writer are set in much the same milieu as his novels. That is also true of his first films as director, *Accattone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma*, which form a group with the two novels as much as with his subsequent films. It was the disappointment with the way his scenarios were directed by others that gave Pasolini the push he needed to make films himself (6).

Pasolini's Marxist credentials, and his use of locations and non-professional actors in the portrayal of desperate lives comparable to that of the unemployed in *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, Vittorio De Sica, 1948) or the poor fishermen in *La terra trema* (Luchino Visconti, 1948) first raised hopes amongst leftist critics of a socially-conscious neo-realist revival (only for them to subsequently discover that these apparent affinities masked profound differences). The “parabola of desperation and defeat... that might have been confined to the social sphere is imbued with a sense of tragic inexorability that virtually proclaims the futility of social and political struggle” .

Mamma Roma's poverty stricken parents virtually sold her, at the age of 14, to an elderly husband. After her husband was arrested on their wedding day, she was forced onto the streets. As the film begins, after years of prostitution, Mamma Roma has accumulated sufficient savings to establish her son Ettore and herself in an apartment on Rome's outskirts; he had grown up in the country with some relatives of hers. Ettore falls in with a gang of street kids and has his first sexual experience with the easily available Bruna, a sub-proletarian already corrupted by some petit bourgeois influences. Mamma employs blackmail to find Ettore a job. The unexpected return of her former pimp, Carmine, forces Mamma back into prostitution. Ettore, who was in college as a child and been educated by his mother to have a certain petit bourgeois outlook, is traumatised by finding out that his mother is a prostitute. Pasolini commented that, by way of contrast, a boy brought up in a completely sub-proletarian world “[would have given] her a gold watch so that she would make love with him” (8). Viano sees Ettore “as taking up and perfecting Accattone's legacy”, his disaffection from reality, a form of metaphor for “obliquely lifting the mask on Italy's heterosexual face”. Ettore's actions, his “sleepwalking” (detachment) and

illegality (thievery), point towards the homosexual subtext of the film “brought up by precise and yet furtive textual clues” such as the cha-cha-cha (Ettore’s dance with his mother) linking with the two stereotypical gay men during Mamma Roma’s night walk (9).

Accattone, the title character of Pasolini’s first film, is a pimp in the lowest strata of the poverty stricken Roman community – the *borgate*. He is linked by Pasolini to the figure of Christ and the events portrayed have a mythic quality. Mamma Roma’s origins are also in the lowest strata of Italian society, but unlike Accattone, she has petit-bourgeois ideals, and is trapped by the futility of petit-bourgeois morality. Pasolini has described Accattone’s dreams as “epic-mythic-fantastic”. “The projection of his own life to a world beyond is mythic and popular, it isn’t petit bourgeois, it’s pre-bourgeois. The petit bourgeois ideals... in *Mamma Roma* [are] all petty, mundane ideals like a home, a job, keeping up appearances, the radio, going to Mass on Sunday.”

In ennobling his lower class characters Pasolini shows their contradictions: they are victims but not passive and, as such, are not without dignity and complexity. Far more haunted by death than most neo-realist films, both *Accattone* and *Mamma Roma* are also overtly Christian in the intense way this is portrayed (what Pasolini called “the epical-religious”). This, too, must have disturbed leftists. Death is stressed even more in *Mamma Roma* than *Accattone*. The arrangement of the table at the opening wedding banquet in *Mamma Roma* suggests the Last Supper. Ettore’s agony is likened to that of the dead Christ in Mantegna’s painting *Christo morto*. Death for Pasolini “is important only if not justified and rationalized by reason... [assuming] the maximum of epicness and myth”. Pasolini agreed with Roland Barthes that the cinema should not try to make sense but suspend it. In keeping with this, his films “are not supposed to have a finished sense, they always end with a question”.

The “epical-religious” mixing of the Roman sub-proletariat with the music of Bach in *Accattone* scandalised the critics whereas the combination of Vivaldi, more Italian and popular, with the petit-bourgeois in *Mamma Roma*, was less confronting.

Greene refers to the precarious tension between passion and ideology that gives Pasolini’s films a special tone:

This tension inhabits his very first films, in which neorealist milieus and social concerns are filtered through a deeply religious, fatalistic sensibility. But at an even deeper level, as Pasolini suggested, this struggle or tension also gave rise to what was, perhaps, a “new stylistics”. And if this stylistic did not point to the future, neither did it accept the past: for even as it evoked what could be called the “aesthetic of neorealism”, as critics sensed uneasily, it also subverted it. (12)

Pasolini had an aversion to the illusion of naturalism that was at the core of neo-realism. Rather than linking things in a natural flow he isolates them, breaking the sense of spatial and temporal continuity. When he uses long takes, as in Mamma Roma’s night walks, they are stylised in a way that breaks the natural flow of things sought by many of the neo-realists. When characters are seated in groups he pans from one face to another, each person speaking to the camera, non-naturalistically and abruptly, rather than to each other. Greene borrows a metaphor from French critic André Bazin to highlight that “while the neorealists waited patiently for reality to unveil itself, a brutal Pasolini meets it head-on” . “Measured rhythms, slow camera movements, frontal

shots, and long close-ups all create a stylized poetic universe that is, as Pasolini remarked, ‘a frontal, romantic, chiaroscuro world.’”

he fading of the political hopes first represented by Gramsci and the Resistance partisans, and his moving progressively farther and farther away from neo-realism in the adoption of the parable form (either modern or set in an antique past). He regarded *Uccellacci e uccellini* as his “purest film” in the sense of being “the product of a cinematographic rather than a figurative culture, unlike *Accattone*” (22).

After *Uccellacci e uccellini* Pasolini entered a phase of political withdrawal that happened to coincide with the upsurge in left-wing political life in 1968. Pasolini’s isolation was probably motivated by despair with what he saw as the incapacity of the PCI or the ultra-left to halt the “death dealing capitalist embourgeoisement of the world he loved” (23).

The subsequent phases of Pasolini’s filmmaking were: the end of ideology signified by a self-styled “aristocratic” or “unpopular” cinema with the appropriation of Greek myth in *Edipo re* (*Oedipus Rex*, 1967) and *Medea* (1969) and the contemporary fable in *Teorema* (1968) and *Porcile* (Pigsty, 1969); the “Trilogy of Life”, a dream world of “guiltless sexuality” that encompasses *Il Decameron* (*The Decameron*, 1971), *Il racconti di Canterbury* (*The Canterbury Tales*, 1972), *Il fiore delle mille e una notte* (*Arabian Nights*, 1974), and *Salò o le 120 giornate de Sodoma* (*Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, 1975), the first of a proposed trilogy based on Dante’s model: Inferno, Purgatory, Paradise.

A Cinema of Poetry

Pasolini’s first major essay on film, *Il Cinema di poesia* (1965), provided a theoretical map of his view of cinema and the poetic intuitions that marked his work.

From his first venture into filmmaking Pasolini spoke of simplifying, to the maximum, the objective simplicity of cinema: slow pans (“nothing more technically sacred”); frontality (“I always see backgrounds as backgrounds”); the separateness of shots; the absence of over the shoulder reverse angle shots; lenses “which weigh on things, emphasise their fullness, their chiaroscuro, give them density, often unpleasantly” - all deduced from what he saw as the elements in the essentially poetic nature of cinema based on “its expressive violence, its dream-like physicality”

Pasolini saw tightly edited scenes in classical narrative as a kind of straitjacketed cinema of prose, or as Sam Rohdie puts it, “a fictional web, from which it is difficult to be free”, each shot and counter-shot closely motivated within the fiction. Pasolini used a variety of means - pastiche, quotation, citation, parody, analogy - “to pull the spectator out of a fictional logic, beyond the edge of the fiction, to its other side, to the ‘writing’ which produced it. Writing is always present in the Pasolinian fiction, not to destroy the fictionality of the fiction, but on the contrary to emphasise it by starring it.”

Teorema: Just a Boy

By [James Quandt](#)

ESSAYS—

FEB 18, 2020

CAST:

TERENCE STAMP

SILVANA MANGANO
MASSIMO GIROTTI
ANNE WIAZEMSKY
LAURA BETTI
MUSIC: ENNIO MORICONE



In what was no doubt an appeal to subtitle-averse audiences, advertisements the U.S. release of *Teorema* (1968) trumpeted, “There are only 923 words spoken in *Teorema*—but it says everything!” A meager few of those utterances are expended in an early exchange in which the teenage Odetta is asked falteringly by another young woman, “Who is that boy?” The object of her curiosity, a mysterious figure clad mostly in white, has just sauntered into the next room and positioned himself in front of a bookcase, a significant first symbolic association with literature in this book-besotted film. Odetta, also dressed in white, as if to suggest some affinity with the seraphic stranger, shrugs and responds simply, “A boy,” but immediately belies her indifference by swiveling to stare intently at him, a scrutiny then repeated by her middle-aged mother, Lucia, who also turns to peruse the newly arrived guest, with smiling avidity. That Silvana Mangano, who plays Lucia, has the masklike features of a Faiyûm mummy only amplifies the intensity of her gaze, which director Pier Paolo Pasolini emphasizes by according her a subjective shot of the alluring visitor.

Embodied by azure-eyed Terence Stamp, with the dark, tousled looks of one of

Caravaggio's more refined *ragazzi*, the unnamed alien is decidedly not just "a boy." His sudden arrival at the palatial home of a Milanese industrialist is foretold in a mock-biblical annunciation, as a messenger, played by Pasolini's mop-headed muse Ninetto Davoli and tellingly named Angelino, delivers a telegram tersely informing the wealthy family that he is arriving tomorrow. (The Gabriel reference would be laughably obvious even without Davoli's flapping his arms like a demented cherub.) As in a parable, the reasons for the stranger's incursion never are revealed or even seem to be pondered. He simply appears, like a force of nature. The annunciation sequence has led many critics to posit the intruder as a Christ figure, an interpretation that Pasolini resolutely rejected. In a characteristically confusing statement, Pasolini wrote: "The 'visitor' is not to be identified with Christ but, if at all, with God, God the Father, or a messenger who represents God the Father. He is, in short, the biblical visitor of the Old Testament, not the visitor of the New Testament." And in another account, he wrote: "The film . . . speaks of a religious experience. It deals with the arrival of a divine visitor in a bourgeois family." Contrarily, others have cited the visitor's ability to seduce and destroy each member of the industrialist's household in defining the Stamp character as, if not the devil himself, verifiably diabolical. A Canadian church newsletter, criticizing the award bestowed on *Teorema* at the Venice Film Festival by a jury of Catholic critics, stated that the film could be "regarded as a Black Mass, with the celebrant assisted by Marx and Freud as deacon and subdeacon.

As is so often the case with Pasolini's cinema, *Teorema* resists systematic interpretation, despite the logical approach promised by its title. Though the film's structure appears as methodical as the proof of a mathematical theorem—initially introducing in order the five characters whom "the guest," as he is identified in the screenplay, will enthrall and then abandon, with its second half illustrating, again in sequential fashion, the effects of that desertion—*Teorema* remains equivocal in its meanings. Despite Pasolini's contention that "that guest has come to destroy" and that his is a "love that destroys," one wonders if the stranger's serial seductions liberate rather than devastate the maid, son, daughter, mother, father—archetypes all—and just who is seducing whom, given that each member of the household appears more pursuer than pursued, active, willing, or eager in his or her own enticement.

Pasolini also stated: "My passing to a bourgeois setting is purely nominal. In fact, the film is not a social comment about the bourgeoisie, and I 'see' my bourgeois characters in that particular way I define as 'sacred,' as I also see all human beings." Nevertheless, many have understandably asserted that *Teorema* reiterates in extremis the director's abhorrence of the bourgeoisie, a class he once denounced as incarnating "horrible conventions, horrible principles, horrible duties, horrible

democratism, horrible fascism, horrible objectivity, horrible smiles,” adding that “a member of the bourgeoisie, whatever he does, is always wrong.” Perhaps the director’s actual disposition toward his bourgeois “victims” here is something subtler and more ambiguous: he confers tender affection on them in the form of the guest but then withdraws it, making them terribly aware of the inauthenticity and emptiness of their previous existences. This allows them to free themselves from the strictures of class propriety and pursue various routes of refusal or release that are cathartic, if also arguably self-abnegating or self-destructive. Odetta becomes catatonic. Pietro, the son, takes up aleatoric art-making. Lucia becomes zealous in her sexual pursuits. Paolo, the father, reverts to a feral state, a “poor, bare, forked animal” trudging across volcanic wilderness. Pasolini confirms his propensity to romanticize the peasant and proletarian classes by turning Emilia, the maid, into an agrarian saint capable, after imbibing a broth made with nettles, of healing disease and of levitation. (Pasolini wrote, “The subproletariat . . . works its way into this bourgeois environment and slowly becomes the only positive element in the film—even if it is seen from a critical point of view as though it were an ancient peasant religion which had survived into the present.”) To quote the persistent journalist who interviews Paolo’s employees in the documentary-style precredit prologue, which is later revealed to have been a flash-forward: “What are the answers to these questions?”

The answers never come easily with Pasolini. His polymathic career as filmmaker, novelist, linguist, critic, playwright, painter, journalist, and poet frustrates critical scrutiny with its sheer multiplicity, its welter of conflicting ideologies, inconsistent styles, and incompatible influences and allusions. So it is in *Teorema*, which marks the midway point of Pasolini’s filmmaking career and evinces his seemingly irreconcilable allegiances to Marx, Freud, and Jesus Christ. (Here, Carl Jung and Herbert Marcuse further complicate the tangle of philosophical sources.) The director was expelled from Italy’s Communist Party for being a homosexual and vilified by the right for being both a Communist and a homosexual, yet some critics have found *Teorema* to exemplify the director’s self-loathing over his homosexuality—he once said he viewed it as something that had “nothing to do with me . . . my enemy”—in its portrayal of Pietro’s descent into creative psychosis and Paolo’s frenzied divestiture of factory, family, clothing, and self to wander in the desert, after each man’s carnal encounters with the guest, whose seemingly divine crotch is repeatedly examined in rapt close-ups. (Since Pasolini considered the Stamp character a kind of son to the family, incest complicates the sexual equation, which certainly would not have daunted the director who had made *Oedipus Rex* the year before.) It depends on whether one views Pietro’s aesthetic experiments as crazed and impotent or innovative and prescient—the tone of the art-making

sequences is both mocking and exuberant, and his urinating on a canvas oddly anticipates Andy Warhol's celebrated "piss paintings" by a decade—and whether Pasolini intends Paolo's radical acts, after cruising a handsome young man in the Milan train station, as unhinged self-annihilation or liberating atonement for a lifetime of industrial exploitation of workers and the environment.

Pasolini compared making *Teorema* to painting a "large fresco," which invokes the director's admiration for the late Gothic or Renaissance paintings of Giotto, Duccio, Masaccio, Pontormo, and Mantegna, reflected here in the religious icons that surround Emilia's mirror and bed, and in the film's sometimes hieratic close-ups. *Teorema* is bracketed by images of gray desolation, that of Paolo's Milanese factory and that of Mount Etna's Sicilian slopes, contrasted in Pasolini's typical equation of the North with urban alienation and the South with innate authenticity—the volcano was a favorite symbol of the latter for the director, one that he had also employed in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964) and would again in *Porcile* (1969). Throughout *Teorema*, Etna's sifting ashes form a mysterious visual motif—frequently associated with the guest's seductions, as when he makes love to Emilia or keeps Pietro awake with desire—that can be variously interpreted as suggesting the spiritual wasteland to which the characters, save the saintly Emilia, are all destined; as an entropic landscape that mocks the false stability of the bourgeois household, manifested in the monumentality of their Milanese palazzo; or as merely a marker of mortality. Pasolini complicated these readings when he wrote, startlingly, that the desert gives Paolo "a deep sense of peace: as if he had returned, no, *not to the womb of the mother but to the womb of the father*" (his emphasis). The filmmaker originally conceived *Teorema* as the seventh in a series of "verse tragedies," and several months before the movie's release published a novel version, partially in poetry, that helps us (or not) to understand the final cry of the patriarch on Etna—cathartic primal scream or shriek of existential despair?

No one can say what kind of scream
is mine: it's true it's terrible—
so terrible it twists my features
making them like the jaws of an animal—
yet there's a kind of joy in it,
a joy that makes me helpless, a child again.
It's a scream that comes to call someone
or to ask for his help; but also, maybe, to damn him.
It's a scream that wants you to know,
in this desert place, *that I exist*,
or better, not only do I exist,
I do know. It's a scream

that, from anxiety's depth,
reveals some vile accent of hope;
or a scream of certainty, absolutely absurd,
in which echoes, undefiled, desperation.
In any case, this is certain: whatever
my scream might mean,
it's destined to outlast all possible endings.

Less extreme in her reaction to the guest's abandonment, Lucia attempts to fill the void he leaves by cruising in her car for youths to have sex with, men who remind her of him and, in one case, whose clothes she lovingly inspects as she did his, as if they were holy vestments. Lucia desultorily crosses herself early in the film but commits a blasphemous act in her last rendezvous, during which she has sex with a teen in a trench beside a Palladian building in the countryside that is later revealed to be a church, and in which she will immure herself. Pasolini's work was embraced by feminists who recognized his profound understanding of the oppression of women, though his hostility toward abortion—he once launched a long polemic bluntly titled "I Am Against Abortion," calling its proposed legalization a validation of homicide—and gender equality aligned, if somewhat uneasily, with conservative orthodoxy, so one wonders what Lucia's erotic adventures are meant to signify: "the mother abandon[ing] her destiny of motherhood/wifehood and return[ing] to a world of genital but nongenerative sexuality," as one moralistic critic wrote a decade later, or Lucia's liberation from that very fate, which, as she admits in the "confessions" sequence, left her feeling that her life was empty? (Admittedly, her scowl of disgust as she initiates her sexual quest, reminiscent of Caravaggio's Medusa, suggests self-censure and loathing.)

The unfixed nature of *Teorema's* meanings is compounded by the daring combination of disparate influences and allusions in its form. The director described himself as a pasticheur who, rejecting the rationality and artificial organicism that he associated with bourgeois culture, selected "items, objects, and even styles from here and there" to reproduce the richness and clamor of the world. Pasolini characterized his use of pastiche with a typically provocative statement: "I work under the sign of contamination." The artist, he suggested, "contaminates" his work by appropriating styles, icons, and ideologies from other periods and works of art, producing not a "random mixture . . . [but] an amalgam with a stylistic unity." Though less "contaminated" than many of Pasolini's other films, *Teorema* does mix its modes, quickly moving at its outset from a documentary style to silent comedy shot in sepia to full, jewel-toned color and sound in a party sequence that recalls the precredit fete in Luchino Visconti's *Sandra*. The music score segues from the anxious modernism of Ennio Morricone, with its stinging strings, eerie chorus, and occasional electric

guitar, to frequent passages from Mozart's death-haunted Requiem, in a rather lugubrious performance by a Soviet choir and orchestra. The many literary texts cited range from a volume titled *Elements of Civil Construction* and Arthur Rimbaud's collected works to Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and, inevitably, the Bible (Jeremiah 20:7, in one instance). And Pasolini's penchant for quoting and invoking paintings, from the early Renaissance through contemporary times, asserts itself in the lingering shots of Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* and *Two Figures in the Grass*, whose imagery of two men making love abets Pietro's seduction, and in the pop art (Roy Lichtenstein?) and two baroque tableaux glimpsed in the boy's bedroom. As for filmic influences, the appearance of Anne Wiazemsky—who was encouraged by her husband at the time, Jean-Luc Godard, to take the role of Odetta after the two encountered Pasolini when they went to the Venice Film Festival with *La Chinoise*—conjures Robert Bresson's *Au hasard Balthazar*, made two years before, which might also explain *Teorema's* unusually synecdochic fixation on extremities: Paolo's hairy paw resting on a window ledge, and his bare feet after he strips in the Milan railroad station; the guest's hands eagerly undoing Odetta's dress; the doctor's hand that strokes her face; the flailing shoe of the boy who makes love to Lucia in a ditch; the praying hands of the old peasant woman in adoration of Emilia; and, especially, Odetta's clenched, trembling fists as she turns catatonic on her bierlike bed—"Please open your fist, Miss Odetta," cries the maid as she tries to force the fingers free, but Odetta's divine transformation forbids it.

Denounced by the pope, banned for a time and charged with obscenity by the Italian state, *Teorema* proved another emblem of Pasolini's artistic martyrdom. Our times, perhaps even more than Pasolini's own, cry out for the voice of the heretic and prophet who declared, "The first duty of an artist is not to fear unpopularity."

