

-Davetli Makale · Invited Article -

The Ashes of Pasolini

Gary Zabel*

Abstract

Pier Paolo Pasolini's engagement with Antonio Gramsci is both inspiring and tragic, beginning with Pasolini's early poem, "The Ashes of Gramsci," and ending with the film-maker's murder in 1975. In his essays and films, Pasolini explores his affective, aesthetic preoccupation with the "sub-proletariat" of the Roman suburbs, contrasting it with Gramsci's political and strategic concerns. This article analyses that material with special emphasis on its relation to Pasolini's work on the semiotics of film and his theory of the "cinema of poetry."

Keywords: *Pasolini, Gramsci, semiotics, politics, poetry*

Pasolini'nin Külleri

Gary Zabel

Özet

Pasolini'nin ilk şiiri, "Gramsci'nin Külleri", ile başlayan ve film yapımcısının 1975'teki cinayeti ile sonlanan Pier Paolo Pasolini'nin Antonio Gramsci ile olan etkileşimi hem ilham verici hem de trajiktir. Makalelerinde ve filmlerinde Pasolini, Gramsci'nin politik ve stratejik kaygıları ile çelişen, onun Roma banliyölerinin "alt-proleteryası" ile olan duygusal, estetik meşgalesini araştırmaktadır. Bu makale bu bulguyu, onun Pasolini'nin filmin semiyotiği ve onun "şiir sineması"nın teorisi üzerine çalışmasıyla ilişkisine özel önem vererek analiz etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Pasolini, Gramsci, semiotik, politika, şiir*

* Senior Lecturer, University of Massachusetts Boston
E-mail: gary.zabel@umb.edu

Pier Paolo Pasolini is one of the most remarkable figures in the history of film. He was a major poet and novelist before he became a director, a person of petit-bourgeois background who had a profound love of the proletarian slums on the outskirts of Rome, and an openly homosexual man in a society in which the macho image of men was deeply rooted, and sometimes violently defended. In his youth, Pasolini participated in the Resistance, suffered the death of his older brother – also a Resistance fighter – at the hands of the Germans, and joined the Communist Party of Italy (PCI). When, as a high school teacher, a priest accused him of sexual involvement with male students, the Party expelled him, and did not revoke the expulsion when he was later acquitted of the charge in court. In the aftermath of the scandal, Pasolini and his mother moved from their home in the Fruillian countryside to live in the *borgate*, the proletarian suburbs of Rome. Though he remained outside the PCI from the time of the accusation (1949) on, he continued to consider himself a communist, and voted for, and otherwise supported the Party, until he was murdered, under obscure circumstances, in 1975. It is true that he had connections with the radical, extra-parliamentary movement that grew on the left of the PCI in the 1960s and 1970s. He even collaborated with one of its major organizations, *Lotta Continua*, on a documentary film, *12 Dicembre*, about the fascist bombing in the Piazza Fortuna in Milan that the state blamed on the far left, an opening volley in the so-called "strategy of tension" that was to wreak such havoc, and claim so many lives, over the next few years. In spite of his collaboration with the extra-parliamentary left, however, Pasolini continued to argue that the best chance for a livable future in Italy lay with "the old communists."

Pasolini once remarked that he had read very little of Marx's writings, acquiring his understanding of Marxism instead by reading Antonio Gramsci, leader of the PCI who died in one of Mussolini's prisons, and later emerged as one of the greatest political thinkers and cultural theorists of twentieth century. Pasolini's interest in Gramsci is documented in his 1954 poem, "The Ashes of Gramsci," a long meditation at the Roman cemetery for foreigners where the great man's ashes were interred, as an insult, by the fascist regime (Paolini, 1996: 3-23). The poem touches on none of the political or theoretical issues in Gramsci's work, but is instead the poet's attempt to define himself in relation to the revered martyr:

The scandal of contradicting myself, of being
with you and against you; with you in my heart,
in light, but against you in the dark viscera;

traitor to my paternal state
- in my thoughts, in the shadows of action -
I know I'm attached to it, in the heat

Of the instincts and aesthetic passion;
Attracted to a proletarian life
That preceded you; for me it is a religion,

its joy, not its millennial

struggle; its nature, not its
consciousness...

It is significant that Pasolini characterizes his contradictory relationship with Gramsci as an internal scandal (*scandolo*), as if to say that the Party, in his 1949 expulsion, remained on the superficial level of a tabloid newspaper, taking at face value the sordid accusations of a parish priest, while failing to understand the genuine scandal at work deep within the poet himself. What is that scandal? Pasolini's instincts and aesthetic passion drew him to the proletariat of what he later calls "paleoindustrial capitalism" – i.e. capitalism before the technological and mass consumerist phase that commenced in the 1960s. More precisely, it drew him to the proletarian way of life as a dissonant persistence of peasant culture at the economic base of modern society. Pasolini converts Gramsci's emphasis on the relationship between northern workers and southern peasants, in the context of revolutionary political and cultural strategy, into an aesthetic focus on the peasant heart of the industrial worker. The idea that the proletarian of paleoindustrial capitalism harbored a peasant inside himself is plausible if we keep in mind that industrialization began in Italy only at the end of the nineteenth century, and that, even in the most recent wave of southern migration to the North, the migrants carried along with them their old traditions. According to Pasolini, paleoindustrial working-class culture has a religious, mythic, aesthetic, and emotional character that makes it resistant to capitalist modernization. His insight here is profound. Unlike the U.S., Europe remained marked by its passage through the ancient and medieval periods, two pre-capitalist epochs, each of which was far longer-lived than capitalism's current life-span. The values and styles of living of the medieval period in particular continued to shape peasant existence, for good and for ill, until agriculture was industrialized. According to Pasolini, they also shaped proletarian existence in its paleoindustrial phase. In Italy, resistance to capitalism did not result from exploitation at the point of production alone; it was also sustained by the traditional, pre-capitalist, communal culture of the peasantry-turned-proletariat. The aesthetic shape of this culture, and not "the millennial struggle" (the economic and political dynamics of class conflict), attracted Pasolini to proletarian life. Prior to Gramsci – in other words, prior to his conceptual, analytic, strategic intelligence – proletarian culture existed with its popular version of Catholicism, its feasts and other celebrations, its myths, its dialects, and its folk traditions. It is this pre-rational, aesthetic, affective culture that is the "religion" of the atheist, Pasolini.

Yet the poem painfully registers more than the contradiction between Pasolini and Gramsci, which, as we must remember, is a conflict within Pasolini himself, attracted as he is to both poles of the contradiction. It also reflects on the distance between the poet and the proletarians of the *borgata* where he and his mother lived. The poet is a poor man, but wears clothing that the proletarian poor can only gape at in shop windows. More importantly, as the beneficiary of a university education, Pasolini is the owner of that most precious of bourgeois possessions – history:

Poor as the poor I cling,

like them to humiliating hopes;
like them, each day I nearly kill myself

just to live. But though
desolated, disinherited
I possess (and it's the most exalting

bourgeois possession of all) the most
absolute condition. But while I possess history,
it possesses me. I'm illuminated by it;

but what's the use of such light?

Pasolini's conception of history is complicated, as we know from articles he wrote in the mid-1960s. To begin with, it seems clear that he is interested in history as *res scriptae* rather than history as *res gestae*, history as it is written rather than history as it is enacted. For Pasolini, at least in his persona as poet, history is a form of literature. That is why history, in the full and proper sense of the word, belongs to the educated bourgeoisie and petite bourgeoisie. In his articles, however, Pasolini appears to contradict himself by saying that there are, in fact, two histories – that of the bourgeoisie and that of the proletariat. We can interpret him in the following way. Proletarian history, like that of the peasantry, is transmitted from generation to generation through customs, folk and family memory, stories related orally, folk songs, the practices of popular religion, and so on. It is linguistic but pre-literary. Bourgeois history is a written record of the achievements of the bourgeoisie, and its interpretative appropriation of the history that preceded it. Its vehicle is that poor excuse for a national language, literary Italian. By contrast, the linguistic vehicle of popular history is the multiplicity of spoken dialects, some of them with very little connection to Italian. Gramsci's dream of a national language that would incorporate the dialects without suppressing them proved to be a task beyond the capacity of what Pasolini calls "the first [Italian] bourgeoisie," the bourgeoisie that fostered Renaissance and post-Renaissance humanism, which was still the bourgeoisie of Gramsci's day, though in a late and decadent form. In his articles, Pasolini developed the idea of a second, postwar bourgeoisie, based in the technological innovations of the industries of the North, many of them tied to the rise of mass consumer markets. He argued that the second bourgeoisie was in the process of completing the hegemonic project that the first bourgeoisie had failed to bring to a conclusion, by developing a truly national Italian language, in this case homogenized through the vocabulary and grammar of science and technology. Neither humanism nor the dialects are relevant to the new national language in process of formation, whose tendency is to supplant both instead of synthesizing them in a common tongue. (Yet, paradoxically, insofar as it is a science, even Marxism has a place in this new Italian.) Pasolini identifies the emergence of a national language based on science and technology as a central achievement of "the second bourgeois revolution."

Pasolini first developed these ideas two decades after writing "The Ashes of Gramsci." What is the meaning, then, of the melancholy tercets that conclude the poem? They begin as evening falls in the *borgata* near Gramsci's grave.

It is a dim hum, life, and those lost
in it serenely lose it, if their
hearts are filled with it. Here they are,

the wretched enjoying the evening. And potent
in them, the defenseless, through them the myth
is reborn... But I with the conscious heart

of one who can live only in history,
will I ever again be able to act with pure passion
when I know our history is over?

Whose history is he talking about? The history of the Italian working class, now fully converted into myth? The history of the bourgeoisie, destined to be brought to an end by the rising proletariat? Or the history of both, soon to be annihilated in that faceless, a-temporal, technological society, that triumph of the second bourgeoisie in which class and class struggle disappear in a common acceptance of technocratic and consumerist imperatives? It is impossible to settle this question on the basis of the poem, and it may even be unfair to try to do so. Perhaps it is better to see the conclusion of "The Ashes of Gramsci" as a condensation of all three possibilities, or a confusion between them. But, whether condensation or confusion, Pasolini's recognition that "our history is over" remains expressively evocative within the context of the poem, and this means that it is incapable of being fully translated into a conceptual, communicative language. In this way, it resists the linguistic program of the second bourgeois revolution.

In his articles of the mid-1960s, Pasolini distinguishes between the communicative function of language (the province of reason, logic, science, and technology) and its expressive function (the province of literature, especially poetry). The distinction between that part of Pasolini who is with Gramsci and that part who is against him coincides with the one between reason and poetry, between which there is no common ground. The poet lives the revolution differently than the political leader or the theorist, or the proletarian militant for that matter; that is to say, he lives it as an emotional and aesthetic phenomenon rather than a political and economic one. This, and not the sordid accusations of the Frullian priest, is the real scandal to which Pasolini confesses in the presence of Gramsci's ashes.

By 1965, Pasolini had already directed three feature films: *Accattoni*, *Mamma Roma*, and *The Gospel According to Mathew*. The first two are about characters from the "sub-proletarian" stratum of the *borgate*, from what Marx called the "lazarus-layer" of the proletariat in his account of the general law of capitalist accumulation in Chapter 25 of *Capital, Volume 1*. The unusual expression, "lazarus-layer" (*Lazarusschichte*) has nothing to do with the New

Testament story of the resurrected Lazarus. It is, rather, Marx's translation into German of the Italian word, *lazzaroni* or *lazzari*, which refers to the poorest stratum of the Neapolitan population, the volatile mass of beggars, vagabonds, and criminalized poor who mobilized in bloody reaction against the revolutionaries of 1848, and later flocked, just as enthusiastically, to the democratic revolutionary, Garibaldi. The general law of capitalist accumulation concerns the creation of an "industrial reserve army" of the unemployed as a by-product of the accumulation of capital and the concomitant advance in labor productivity. Capital accumulation permits mechanization of the production process, which in turn allows the reduction of labor costs through the employment of fewer workers. The resulting mass of unemployed workers serves a function indispensable to capitalism, by keep pressure on the labor market, depressing the wages of active workers, and thereby increasing the profits of capitalist firms. The reserve army in turn is stratified in various layers: the semi-employed, the seasonally unemployed, the otherwise temporarily unemployed, and the chronically unemployed, including, in the last case, the old and the sick, as well as the beggars, thieves, thugs, pimps, and prostitutes who constitute the lazarus-layer properly so-called. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx identifies the lazarus-layer with "what the French call *la boheme*," which he now names the *lumpenproletariat* (Marx, 1937: 38).

The common idea that Pasolini is enamored of the *lumpenproletariat* of the *borgate* (the "sub-proletariat") because it alone cannot be incorporated into postwar Italian consumerism is at best an overstatement. Both *Accattone* and *Mamma Roma* depict the sub-proletariat as connected to, and in essential continuity with, employed workers. It is true that the eponymous central character of the first film, *Accattone* (literally, "scoundrel") is a pimp, but his brother is dedicated to performing his legitimate working-class job. *Mamma Roma*'s son falls in with a crowd of young criminals when he learns that his mother was once a prostitute, but she is now working hard to make a living by selling produce in the local outdoor market. In neither film does the sub-proletariat live in a world apart from waged workers or, in the case of *Mamma Roma*, poor, self-employed merchants. The tragedies that ultimately befall *Accattone* and *Mamma Roma*'s son are the vicissitudes of a class whose members, employed or not, are defined by the fact that they do not own their means of livelihood.

The third feature film, *The Gospel According to Mathew*, follows organically from the conclusion of *Mamma Roma*. At the end of the latter, *Mamma Roma*'s son is arrested for stealing a radio from the ward of a hospital. He falls sick when he is jailed, but instead of treating the illness in a serious way, the guards strap the boy to his bed so that he cannot disrupt normal operations with his fevered outbursts. His arms are strapped to the nearest bedposts so that the upper arms make a ninety degree angle with his neck and upper torso, and his legs are strapped to the bottom of the bed in such a way that the entire body assumes the posture of Christ after the deposition from the cross, although with a postural reminder of the crucifixion in the outstretched arms. In this way, Pasolini, who had been a student of Quattrocento painting at the University of Bologna, reproduces the formal structure of Andrea Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*. In shooting from the same extremely low frontal angle from which Mantegna depicts his Christ, Pasolini is able to emulate in film the anamorphic quality of the Renaissance painting. Moreover, the tortured suffering of the body of *Mamma Roma*'s

son that ends with the boy's death reproduces on the jailhouse bed the suffering of Christ, and thereby serves as an introduction to Pasolini's next film, his cinematic version of Mathew's gospel.

Accattone is acted entirely by nonprofessionals, as is *Mamma Roma*, with the exception, in the latter case, of Anna Magnani's role as the former prostitute, evidence of the beginnings of Pasolini's film aesthetic in neorealism. But the filming of the boy's body at the end of *Mamma Roma* is a forceful example of the director's predilection for the frontally balanced compositional principles of Quattrocento painting. He also expresses the predilection, in this and other films, in the successive close-ups that isolate characters from a group they collectively compose, rendering each for a moment as though he were the sole immobile subject of a painting. Of course, this painterly technique distinguishes Pasolini's films in formal terms from their neorealist predecessors. In spite of the fact that he was an atheist, Pasolini had an abiding interest in the sacred dimension of human experience, especially as it was preserved in peasant and proletarian culture. This is why it made sense for him to adapt the aesthetic conventions of the religious painting of the Quattrocento to his own cinematic purposes.

Pasolini's most influential article is the written form of a lecture he gave in 1965 titled, "The 'Cinema of Poetry'." (Pasolini, 2005: 167-186). He delivered the lecture at a turning point in the history of postwar continental European thought, when the two-decade-old domination of phenomenology and existentialism was giving way to a concern with semiotics, and more broadly structuralist modes of thinking. This was the moment of the rediscovery of the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, who had developed a general theory of signs and sign-systems, and the ascendancy of figures like Claude Levi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan, who applied Saussure's discoveries to anthropology and psychoanalysis respectively. Without making a fetish of semiotics, Pasolini uses its terminology in his lecture in developing a theory of cinema.

Literature and cinema are both sign-systems, though of very different kinds. What distinguishes them is their relationship to the signs that precede them structurally and upon which they work. Literature works on signifying material supplied by ordinary language which, in Pasolini's view, is instrumental, or utilitarian, in that it serves the function of communication. Literary language liberates the expressive powers of ordinary linguistic signs (lin-signs) by setting them free from subordination to the communicative function. In so doing, however, the meanings attached to the signs of the first-order language persist, as does their general grammatical structure. Without the structured meaningfulness of the lin-signs of ordinary language, literary language would have nothing to transform, and so would have no content. (Working in the background here is obviously an analogy to the relationship in Marx between superstructure and foundation). The problem is that cinema seems to have no primary language upon which to work. The reason is that people communicate with linguistic signs, but not with images. Images have no grammar, and seemingly no meaning either, except the ones they acquire when isolated from their surroundings by arbitrary acts of selection. But the meanings they accrue in this fashion are entirely subjective, holding only for the one who

has performed the selective act. How then can cinema exist at all as meaningful, intersubjective expression?

Pasolini's answer to this quandary is to modify the thesis that images have no meaning prior to their selection by the filmmaker. Though images lack the lexical fixity and grammatical definiteness of words, they nevertheless bear two kinds of primary meaning. First, in advance of their selection, images play a central role in memory and dreams. However, although their oneiric and mnemonic meanings adhere to images prior to acts of selection, these meanings nevertheless remain subjective in that they are internal to the person who dreams or remembers. Second, some images have public, objective meanings: traffic signs are an example, as are conventional gestures. In cinema, some images have established, objective meanings as well; Pasolini's example is the image of the wheels of a locomotive careening along railroad tracks, steam billowing out from below the train's engine. In short, the language of cinema is able to work upon a primary stratum of meaningful image-signs (im-signs), some of which are extremely subjective and others extremely objective.

But, unlike the case of lin-signs, the collection of all subjective and objective im-signs does not constitute a genuine dictionary in which meanings are exhaustively fixed to signs, nor are the im-signs elements in the grammatically structured whole of a genuine language. Their sole advantage over lin-signs is that they are immediately expressive, especially in the case of oneiric and mnemonic images. The fact that they possess an immediately expressive character is the obverse side of the fact that they serve none of the functions of a communicative language. But how can images be used in creating a meaningful cinema when they lack the grammatical structure and lexical definiteness of a genuine first-order language?

According to Pasolini, there are two ways of drawing on the expressive richness of images, while compensating for their lack of lexical fixity and linguistic structure. The first is to superimpose upon them a narrative structure (derived from literature or oral story-telling), a tactic obviously employed and refined by conventional, Hollywood-style film, but present in art-house film as well. The second approach is to use a cinematic adaptation of the literary method of "free indirect discourse," which enables the filmmaker to use point-of-view shots in order to slip him- or herself into the perspective of a neurotic or hypersensitive character. Through the agency of the "free indirect point-of-view shot," the director is able to conduct formal experiments, developing visionary cinematic content under cover of the character's distorted perceptions of the world. (Though Pasolini does not mention the film, there is no more extreme example of the cinematic use of the free indirect point-of-view shot than Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* - released the same year Pasolini delivered his lecture - in which the Polish director shoots from the point of view of a young woman in the midst of a psychotic breakdown). The point of view shots are free and indirect in the sense that they enable the director to play, as it were, with the perspectives of his or her characters. Their literary equivalent is indirect, rather than direct quotation, for example, Pasolini says the filming is going well, rather than Pasolini says "the filming is going well." The second, direct quotation is locked into Pasolini's own perspective, while the first, indirect quotation permits the writer's loose identification with Pasolini, and thereby affords room for variation and experimentation.

The second way of compensating for the primitive semiotic character of im-signs – that of the free indirect point-of-view shot – makes most use of the oneiric, visionary, expressive character of the primary stratum of images, ultimately weaving them into the fabric of a “cinema of poetry.” Yet, this second-order elaboration of im-signs is still not a genuine language, since images, however elaborated, continue to lack the requisite grammatical structure and fixity of meaning. However, what im-signs lack in linguistic substance, they can make up for in stylistic possibilities. Through the use of a range of cinematic techniques – including obsessive or static framing, reversals in narrow and expansive depth of field, abrupt shifts in the treatment of color, swift changes in angle of view, camera distance from the subject, or the focal lengths of lenses, certain kinds of sequence shots, and so on – the filmmaker can create a stylistic substitute for the missing linguistic structure.

According to Pasolini, this inventive, stylistic surrogate for grammatical meaning has characterized the drift of cinema since the end of the neorealist decade. By exploiting the stylistic possibilities of the free indirect point-of-view shot, a new generation of filmmakers has been making use of the expressive capacities of mnemonic and oneiric images, thereby creating a “cinema of poetry.” Antonioni, Bertolucci, and Godard are the foremost representatives of this trend in Western Europe, though there are Eastern European and Brazilian filmmakers who also belong to it. Common to the work of all of them is a penchant for formalistic experimentation that makes them members of a “neo-avantgarde.”

In the final pages of “The Cinema of Poetry,” Pasolini attempts to describe the main stylistic differences that make the work of Antonioni, Bertolucci, and Godard distinctive variants in the cinema of poetry. But there is no need to follow the details of that analysis here. What is important is Pasolini’s quite brief conclusion, which many of his readers and critics have more or less ignored. Up until this point in the lecture, Pasolini has apparently been developing the concept of a cinema of poetry as a way of defining, with a considerable degree of conceptual sophistication, his own approach to filmmaking. What is more obvious than the fact that the poet Pasolini practices the cinema of poetry? But all of a sudden, and in only a few concluding sentences, it turns out that this is a mistake. At the end of the lecture, Pasolini remarks that the abnormal, neurotic, hypersensitive characters who are at the center of Antonioni’s, Bertolucci’s, and Godard’s films are “exquisite flowers of the bourgeoisie.” And insofar as they appear to be typical of the supposed existentially or psychologically alienated human predicament, they are forms of the bourgeoisie’s identification of itself with the whole of humanity, in other words, forms of a false universalism. All of this is the result of an aesthetic “battle to recover the ground lost to Marxism” in the twenty years following the end of the Second World War. Intended for an elite, educated audience, the cinema of poetry reveals:

... a strong general renewal of formalism as the average, typical production of the cultural development of neocapitalism. (Naturally there is my reservation, due to my Marxist morality, that there is a possible alternative: that is, of a renewal of the writer’s mandate, which at this time appears to have expired.) (Pasolini, 2005: 185).

Pasolini never tells us what this “writer’s mandate” might be, or what its relevance is to cinema. Many questions remain unanswered at the end of his lecture. Still, there can be no doubt that Pasolini resists the identification of his own, Marxist work with the cinema of poetry that became ascendant in the wake of neorealism. But we must be careful here. Antonioni and Bertolucci were both communists. In addition, Bertolucci was Pasolini’s friend and protege in writing poetry, and began his filmmaking career when Pasolini invited him to participate in shooting *Accattoni*. Though Pasolini chides Godard for regarding Marxist commitment as old hat, the French director was already on his path to Marxism in 1965, a journey that would lead him to a far-left version of aesthetics and politics three years after Pasolini delivered his lecture, during the *annus mirabilis*, 1968. Far from rejecting these (communist) bourgeois formalists, Pasolini regards them as Europe’s finest filmmakers, Antonioni foremost among them.

Where are we then? Pasolini is no Stalinist; he is not even a disciple of Georg Lukács, condemning the new generation of filmmakers for avant-garde formalism. The fact that he considers Antonioni, Bertolucci, and Godard the finest directors of their time suggests that he believes that they have not arbitrarily created the new avant-garde formalism, but have instead been led to it by objective changes in Italian society. For Pasolini (and here we are reading between the lines), a continuation of the neorealist project was impossible given the triumph of technocratic, consumerist “neocapitalism.” Even the Communist Party had come to accept the new form of capitalism as an inescapable reality for the foreseeable future. (It was during the later part of this period that the PCI proposed an “historic compromise” with the Christian Democrats.) The most advanced form of cinematic expression also had to take into account the transformation of Italian society. No art that was honest with itself could simply proceed as though nothing had changed.

One of the most important marks of a break between neorealism and the cinema of poetry is the shift from working-class to bourgeois or petite-bourgeois central characters. The neurotic, hypersensitive, psychologically alienated bourgeois or petit-bourgeois man or woman takes the place, in the films of Antonioni, Bertolucci, and Godard, of the proletarian resistance-fighter, the unemployed worker in search of his means of getting to work, the impoverished and exploited southern fisherman, the migrant automobile worker laboring in a northern factory, and the other proletarian characters of the neorealist decade. But this is not the result of a false universalism, as Pasolini suggests in his lecture. To the extent that consumerism substitutes the limitless drive to accumulate commodities for older forms of peasant and proletarian culture, the bourgeoisie and not the proletariat emerges as the genuinely universal class.

Pasolini worried a great deal about this development in the years to come (Pasolini, (1987). In his view, mass consumerism was destroying the proletarian culture that made the Italian working class an agent of its own liberation, rather than a passive factor of production, and now consumption as well. Mass consumerism was integrating the working-class population into the order of “neocapitalism.” Once again, Pasolini was operating with a conception of the working class that was aesthetic and affective in character. The late 1960s

were a time of militant labor action, especially in the industrial cities of the North. But Pasolini thought more subtle changes were occurring beneath the surface of working-class life, and that the peasant-based culture of the proletariat was withering. Yet, as it turned out, mass consumerism would be dominant in Italy only for a relatively short period of time. Pasolini made the mistake of assuming that it was a permanent change in the nature of capitalism, and, indeed an "anthropological revolution" in the Italian population. What he did not foresee was that the consumerist heyday would be replaced, within a few decades, by neoliberal austerity programs, involving an assault on both the individual wage and its social supplement (public benefits), and therefore on the mass consumer spending they financed. It is true that, to some extent, mass consumption in Italy has been kept afloat through the accumulation of massive debt. But it is precisely this debt that is now coming due under a draconian regime of austerity. After Pasolini's death, the idea of capitalism as a consumer paradise, even an alienated and destructive one, would unravel with a vengeance.

In the decade following "The Cinema of Poetry" (the final ten years of his life), Pasolini came to believe that there was little real difference between the "clerico-fascism" of Mussolini's regime, and that of the early Christian Democratic governments. The transition to something genuinely new occurred only in the 1960s, when clerico-fascism gave way to the "fascism" of consumerist capitalism. As we have seen, he regarded this transition as an "anthropological revolution," a deep-going transformation in the character of Italian culture. Pasolini's judgment about this is in part an expression of Gramsci's influence, with its focus on the central significance of culture in the lives of social classes. But it is Pasolini's poetic imagination that is active in naming the central event in the triumph of consumerist capitalism, "the disappearance of the fireflies." The vanishing of the fireflies from Italy as a result of large-scale industrial pollution identifies the ascension of the second bourgeoisie with destruction of the environmental basis of the old peasant and proletarian culture that Pasolini loved, and that he believed to be a potent source of resistance to capitalism. The insidious thing about the spread of mass consumerism is that no one can resist it, least of all the poor. (The irresistible, totalitarian character of consumer capitalist power is what makes it a species of fascism in Pasolini's eyes.) By integrating the capital accumulation process with an expanding mass consumer market, Pasolini believed that the second bourgeoisie was succeeding in remaking society in its own image (Pasolini, 1987: 111-14).

There is an aesthetic corollary to this that Pasolini does not seem to recognize. The neurotic characters of the cinema of poetry have an exemplary status. If Pasolini is right about the triumph of consumerism, then far from being atypical "exquisite flowers of the bourgeoisie," these characters represent standard human types under the new consumerist form of capitalism. Pasolini comes close to recognizing this in his later writings when he claims that consumerism infuses the working class with bourgeois orientations, habits, and forms of life. Indeed, even though mass consumerism lasted for only a handful of decades, it did some of the work Pasolini had feared. It hollowed-out the working-class culture that had helped sustain proletarian resistance to capitalism from the *Bienne Rossi* of 1921-22 to the *Hot Autumn* of 1969. Automation, reorganization, and dispersion of industrial production undoubtedly played the major part in dismantling the militant proletariat of the Northern

Triangle; Turin, Genoa, and Milan. But Pasolini is partially correct about the role consumerism played in undermining proletarian culture. It helped prepare the way for the turn to neoliberalism that began in the late 1970s, with its concerted assault on the individual and social wage. Had the Italian working class remained culturally intact, it is hard to imagine Berlusconi rising to power on three occasions. Even Marx believed that farce would follow tragedy only once.

Pasolini drew his pessimistic conclusions gradually in the decade following his lecture, but he also continued the project of creating a form of cinema different than that of Antonioni, Bertolucci, and Godard, one that kept faith with his "Marxist morality." Pasolini's characters remain proletarians in roughly half of his films – in *Accattone*, *Mamma Roma*, and *The Gospel According to Mathew* (in the guise of the exploited Jewish peasantry), and in his later "Trilogy of Life:" *Decameron*, *Canterbury Tales*, and *The Thousand and One Nights*, where Pasolini tells us that he sometimes transplanted the proletariat of the *borgate* physically to the locations where he shot the films, and always narratively into the characters of the stories. He made the last of these, *The Thousand and One Nights*, in 1974, only one year before his death. Of the remainder of his films, two are retellings of classical myths, *Oedipus Rex* and *Medea*. One, *The Hawks and the Sparrows*, has a largely proletarian content (including documentary footage of Togliatti's funeral). The remaining three films have bourgeois main characters, but two of them, *Porcile* and *Salo*, are trenchant critiques of fascism. Only *Teorema* comes close to presenting neurotic bourgeois characters of the cinema of poetry type, and even here this serves very different ends (sacred ends, in Pasolini's unconventional understanding of the sacred) than the films of Antonioni, Bertolucci, and Godard.

Pasolini continued to wage the war of position after the end of neorealism, though in more difficult circumstances than the neorealists had faced. In the course of the protracted struggle, his Gramscian "pessimism of the intellect" sometimes ran away with him, leading him to believe or half-believe that the revolution was all but impossible, that young proletarians had become pale copies of bourgeois youth, that consumerism was the end of human culture, that urban criminality threatened to drown all possibility of a meaningful proletarian politics, and that the "historic compromise" represented the final, definitive capitulation of communists to the bourgeoisie. It may be too much to claim that Pasolini retained the other half of Gramsci's tension-charged couplet, "optimism of the will." Nevertheless, he never stopping fighting for a human society, or making films that were weapons in that battle. His last and highly controversial movie, *Salo*, exposed, in the most graphic way, the nihilistic rage, the perverse sadism that lies at the core of the fascist exercise of power. It goes without saying that fascists in contemporary Italy were not pleased. Soon after the release of his film, Pasolini also published a newspaper article calling for the public trial and conviction of the leaders of the Christian Democratic government on the grounds of criminal mismanagement and betrayal of the people's mandate. A couple of days later, he was dead. He had been beaten to death, and his body horribly mangled by being run over by a car. The 17 year-old male prostitute who confessed to the crime, and served a prison term for it, later withdrew his confession, claiming that Pasolini had been murdered by four men while they shouted at him the epithets, "communist" and "faggot". According to the prostitute, the

four murderers had threatened him with the death of members of his family, though he was able to come forward when the last of the murderers died. It is not clear whether they were fascists, or Christian Democratic thugs, or off-duty policemen, or mafiosi working for Pasolini's political enemies, or even on their own. The Italian police never conducted a serious investigation into those responsible for the murder. But, whatever the case may be, and in a way he could not have anticipated, Pasolini became a martyr to "the millennial struggle." However much the rational and poetic temperaments of the two men might have differed, the ashes of Pasolini now rest metaphorically alongside the ashes of Gramsci.

Bibliography

- Marx, Karl, (n.d.). *Capital*, vol. 1, Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marx, Karl, (1937). *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonapart*, Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Pasolini, P. Paolo, (1987). *Lutheran Letters*, New York: Carcanet Press.
- Pasolini, P. Paolo, (1996). *Poems*, USA: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Pasolini, P. Paolo, (2005). *Heretical Empiricism*, Washington DC: New Academia Publishing.

Filmography

- Pasolini, P. Paolo, (1961). *Acatone*. Italy: Arco Film.
- Pasolini, P. Paolo, (1962). *Mamma Roma*. Italy: Arco Film.
- Pasolini, P. Paolo, (1964). *The Gospel According to Mathew*. Italy, France: Arco Film.
- Pasolini, P. Paolo, (1966). *The Hawks and the Sparrows*. Italy: Arco Film.
- Pasolini, P. Paolo, (1967). *Oedipus Rex*. Italy, Morocco: Arco Film.
- Pasolini, P. Paolo, (1968). *Teorema*. Italy: Ateos Produzioni Cinematografiche.
- Pasolini, P. Paolo, (1969a). *Medea*. Italy, France, West Germany: San Marco.
- Pasolini, P. Paolo, (1969b). *Porcili*. Italy: Film Dell'Orso.
- Pasolini, P. Paolo, (1971). *The Decameron*. Italy, France, West Germany: : Produzioni Europee Associate.
- Pasolini, P. Paolo, (1972). *The Canterbury Tales*. Italy, France: Les Productions Artiste Associes.
- Pasolini, P. Paolo, (1974). *Arabian Knights*. Italy, France: : Produzioni Europee Associate.
- Pasolini, P. Paolo, (1975). *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*. Italy, France: Produzioni Europee Associate.