

-Research Article-

## Pier Paolo Pasolini and The Necessity of Mythic Narrative, as an Aesthetic Concern: A Phenomenological Approach

Ioannis Mitsou\*

### Abstract

*In Pier Paolo Pasolini's various written and filmic works of fiction, the notion of myth is often, and unmistakably, characterized by its absence and expressed visually as something that the various heroes need urgently. The fear for the loss of myth is carefully linked with a passionate desire to live authentically, a desire that echoes both existential and Freudian contexts; reality, as a starting point, is never forgotten. Mythic reality is explored in its various connotations throughout Pasolini's oeuvre. The main theoretical points of reference are existentialism and phenomenology but mythic reality, a constant motif in all the films the paper examines is not only explored thematically but also aesthetically. Myth is approached through the flesh (Accatone) the erotic (A thousand and One nights), through fears of loss (Medea) and psychoanalytic journeys to early childhood (Edipo Re). Pasolini's films do not attempt to consciously aestheticize reality, through poetry. On the contrary, they seek the poetic as a force that already lies there, interlinked with the realm of everyday life.*

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, Existentialism, Mythology, narrative.

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DOI: 10.31122/sinefilozofi.1571952

Mitsou, I. (2025). Pier Paolo Pasolini and the necessity of mythic narrative, as an aesthetic concern: A phenomenological approach. *Sinefilozofi Dergisi*, (20), 145–156. <https://doi.org/10.31122/sinefilozofi.1571952>

Received: 22.10.2024

Accepted: 24.06.2025



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-Araştırma Makalesi-

## Pier Paolo Pasolini'de Mit İdeası

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*Pier Paolo Pasolini'nin çeşitli yazılı eserlerinde ve kurmaca filmlerinde, mit sıkça ve kusursuzca yokluk halinde simgelenmiş ve çeşitli karakterlerin acil ihtiyacı olarak ifade edilmiştir. Miti kaybetme korkusu dikkatlice, tutkulu ve özgün bir yaşam arzusuna bağlanmıştır. Bu arzu Freudyen ve varoluşsal bağlamı yankılar; başlama noktası olarak gerçeklik hiç bir zaman unutulmaz. Pasolini filmleri gerçekliği şiirsel bir anlatımla estetize etmeye çalışmaz. Tersine, şiirseli zaten günlük yaşamın içinde olan bir güç olarak aramaktadır.*

**Keywords:** Fenomenoloji, Varoluşçuluk, Efsane, Pasolini.

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Mitsou, I. (2025). Pier Paolo Pasolini and the necessity of mythic narrative, as an aesthetic concern: A phenomenological approach. *Sinefilozofi Dergisi*, (20), 145–156. <https://doi.org/10.31122/sinefilozofi.1571952>

Geliş Tarihi: 22.10.2024

Kabul Tarihi: 24.06.2025



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## Introduction

This essay explores Pier Paolo Pasolini's understanding of the idea of myth as both a *thematic* and an *aesthetic* concern. The concept of mythic narrative, central in existentialist literature, is also explored in its phenomenological connotations, as a means for the individual to *approach reality* and live intensely and authentically, in communication with one's surroundings, through both artistic creativity, that is poetry in its broader sense, and observation of the world. Myth, for Pasolini, presents transcendental qualities while at the same time remains always rooted in social reality and everyday life.

To explore this theme, we will follow several threads through the theoretical lens of phenomenology in its emphasis on corporeality and perception and existentialism, in its emphasis on the subject, the person who lives as consciously and poetically as possible through a poetic interpretation of the contradictions of everyday life and a creative understanding of narrative. Life is not distinguished from art, on the contrary it seen as a story worth exploring, a journey an odyssey. The idea is evident is *A thousand and One Nights*, probably Pasolini's more sensual moment. But before turning literally to stories about stories (in the *Trilogy of Life*) Pasolini focuses on the distance between a mythic reading of reality and a possible loss of this innocent, almost magic view that his films relate closely to artistic production. In *Medea*, as we shall see, the distinction also structures the film, while in *Edipo Re*, again the narrative is based on the presence of a dichotomy: this time between the personal autobiography and the ancient myth that is by definition collective and public, familiar to all. In the paper, I do not examine the films in chronological terms, but follow these threads, beginning from the contrast between immanence and transcendence in *A thousand and One Nights* and continue to the reappearance of similar themes and motifs- notably in *Accatone*, *Medea*, *Mama Roma* and *Theorem*,

As we are focusing on filmic narratives<sup>1</sup>, representations of visual reality and on their ability to express visually both existential needs and aesthetic concerns, I would like to begin our communication with the description of an *image*: The event takes place during the last minutes of Pasolini's *The Decameron* (Il Decameron, 1971), a very personal reading of Boccaccio's 17<sup>th</sup> century narrative work; and comes to our attention exactly because it seeks to re-define, in a very simple and yet effective way, the relationship between the creation of myths in society (through dream, art or cultural production) and the need for authentic experience of everyday reality, a scheme that echoes continental existentialism. After a succession of various seductive encounters and visual representations of everyday life, the film's narration closes with the painter Giotto, interpreted by Pasolini himself. He is drinking red wine together with his workers, while the church bells echo. There is a sense of solidarity between the men and a general feeling of celebration of life, an almost ecstatic joy in the air. As he looks at his fresco, the work of art he has just completed, he wonders in a voiceover: "Why create a work of art, when dreaming about it is so much sweeter?"

In this line, we can feel the presence of a complicated view on the very idea of myth: Myth, in its various connotations, keeps appearing in Pier Paolo Pasolini's films as a constant theme and motif. And yet there is also an unmistakable *distance* from it, a desire to approach reality *in itself*, away from its various transformations, especially the ones that stem from intellectual activity. Pasolini's filmic narratives seek to communicate actively with aspects of the sacred that already exist in everyday life, not to re-establish them or use them to escape from the immanent world of the flesh, transcend it or reach a higher level of existence, in the Platonic sense. On the contrary, the most obvious visualization of the concept of myth

<sup>1</sup> It is notable that Pasolini himself as a figure has been subject to mythological readings, as proved by the general aesthetic concern of Abel Ferrara's *Pasolini* (2014). Viola Brisolin addresses the issue: "The 'canonisation' of Pasolini in some Italian scholarship, the construction of the figure of an artist who aspires to be the consciousness of a nation, to tell the truth to power, of a lay saint, prophet and martyr, has been shown to be the result of persistent mythologizing – begun after the death of the poet but encouraged by Pasolini's self-presentational strategies – rather than of a serious engagement with the artist's works" (Brisolin, 2011, p. 11)

is, notably, the human body and especially the human *face*, an image Pasolini's films always return to and observe in detail.

This tendency, that is to read narratives in human appearances, becomes evident when it comes to the emphasis on the unique-in many ways- faces of the people of the lower classes and Pasolini's insistence on small details like the missing teeth and other natural characteristics. Reality remains always the point of reference, in the tradition of neorealism, and even of older concepts like the operatic *verismo*, but not simply reality as a social concept. In this relation between corporeality and mythic narrative, what we can detect is actually a yearning for *authenticity*, a yearning carefully linked with the importance of lived experience, another important existential ideal. Art, in this sense, has more to do with the existential call for action, an almost erotic call, as described, for example, in Kierkegaard's 1843 monumental philosophical essay *Fear and Trembling*<sup>2</sup>, than it does with intellectual activity or even poetic transcendence.

If one point of refence in Pasolini's understanding of myths and poetic reality is **existentialism**, the other is **phenomenology**, and it is here that his words the conventions of poetry and adopt a truly cinematic language. Not differently from the priority in the senses and the corporeal, including the physical act of looking as expressed in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 1945 book *Phenomenology of Perception*<sup>3</sup>, observation of the world for Pasolini is not to be understood as a passive condition. The procedure of observation for Pasolini is creative- *poetic*, in the literal sense of active participation in life and engagement with reality. The question "Why create a work of art, when dreaming about it is so much sweeter?" in this light becomes clearer, less enigmatic. Indeed, dreaming and approaching reality either through art, or even directly through *lived experience* are actions that are never distinguished in Pasolini's oeuvre.

To sum up, we can note at least three different understandings of the notion of myth in the cinematic works of Pier Paolo Pasolini: First, there is myth approached as an aesthetic concept, as a realm of reality. Here Pasolini seems to be in dialogue with several thinkers like Antonio Gramsci, Vladimir Propp or Roland Barthes, but most notably with the ideas of Henri-Louis Bergson, and his priority of *intuition* as a way to approach reality, a view that has everything to do with what we discussed so far. Then there is myth, in the literal sense, as a cultural product and a source of inspiration. We note at this point that at least three of Pasolini's films, *Oedipus* (Edipo Re, 1967), *Medea* (1969) and of course his adaptation of *A thousand and One Nights* (Il fiore delle mille e una note, 1974) are clearly based on myths. Arguably, all his works follow similar narrative motifs, directly or indirectly. Finally, myth for Pasolini is understood as an *end*, something to be desired, is associated with authenticity and by extension can be characterized by its *absence*, by the fear expressed for its loss. This loss becomes both cultural (an absence of stories in contemporary society, a concern that Pasolini often expresses, especially in later interviews<sup>4</sup>) and personal, a fear of having lost touch with whatever is sacred and powerful, both in society and individually. Notably, the film that makes a narrative out of this fear more directly, *Medea*, is also the one whose narrative and iconography speak more constantly about mythology, combining ethnological, Freudian and tragical elements. In my view this correlation is intentional. In this sense, *Medea*, that appears to be both an adaptation of Euripides' ancient tragedy and a somehow more theoretical approach on rituals and narrations, proves also to be a deeply personal film.

<sup>2</sup> Through the story of Abraham, Kierkegaard describes a desired call for action, through an explicitly mythopoetic language. The religious aspect may differ from Pasolini's priority of the phrase, but the two thinkers share an interest in the subjective realities of everyday life. See (Kierkegaard, 1941,2013)

<sup>3</sup> Observation for Merleau-Ponty is notably understood as a physical, corporeal act. See (Merleau-Ponty, 1945,2012)

<sup>4</sup> A political aspect in this alienation if, for Pasolini, the societal movement towards urbanization that leads to a further distance from both storytelling and the idea of the Sacred, in all its connotations. Erotic, religious etc. As Fabio Benincasa notes on his essay on the The Bibliography of Salò: *Eros, Sadism, and Avant-Garde in Pier Paolo Pasolini's Last Work* : " The destruction of rural civilization therefore relates to the destruction of desire and youth, which nobody during the twentieth century has been able to resist." (Calabretta-Sajder, 2020, p. 134)

Three key open research questions are what this paper seeks to answer. The fact that Pasolini seems often ambiguous about myth and thus the answers to these queries appear to be somehow enigmatic or even contradictory is consistent to his complicated stance on life and art. Artistic creation is to be experienced rather than understood in cerebral terms. Intensity of feeling prevails as a way to approach myth safer than theoretical exploration or the certainties of convictionism.

The questions are as follows:

1. What is the relationship between the experiences of the flesh, the erotic and mythic dimensions of life and art in Pasolini's oeuvre?
2. Immanence and Transcendence, are both apparent as themes and motifs in the process Pasolini's heroes follow, as they travel through difficult paths of life, seeking to redefine the sacred. Is Pasolini critical of religious tendencies? Are his tendencies toward transcendence-e.g. the reconstruction of metaphysical visual motifs that takes place in *Mama Roma* or *Accatone*- contradictory to the films' proposed priority of the flesh?
3. Is Pasolini's world optimistic? His fears of losing an openness to dreams, myths and sensitivity in general or the ability to believe in miracles (the world is to be understood here in its broader sense) are pessimistic or dynamic?

The answers of these queries are inevitably interwoven; they lead as towards a common concern, an emphasis on the idea of myth in its various incarnations.

Thus, the structure of the essay is going to follow a thematic rather than chronological evolution, treating several themes and motifs, as common points of reference throughout Pasolini's oeuvre. We will begin with a reading of Eroticism, Immanence and Transcendence in *A Thousand and One nights*. Through the same emphasis on the corporeal dimension, we will return to *Accatone*, Pasolini's first film, where myth is distanced from any abstract theoretical concepts and attributed to the flesh of the individual. We proceed to the crucial theme of the loss of the ability for mythic interpretation of the world as seen in *Medea*. And continue our analysis in the reading of various aspects and distinct connotations of the concept of myth in *Mama Roma*, *Theorem* and *Oedipus Rex*, before concluding on the necessity of mythic narrative as an aesthetic concern in Pasolini's various narratives.

### **I. Eroticism, Immanence, Transcendence: *A thousand and One nights***

In Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film *Stalker*, that appears at first glance to be the product of a worldview alien to Pasolini's cultural environment, being the creation of a Russian and consciously religious Christian Orthodox film director, always concerned with the notion of transcendence, one of the main characters, the unnamed Writer expresses nostalgic sentiments for a now lost era when "every church had its god, and every house its ghost". It is the same need that Pasolini's films, concerned with the sacred in its various incarnations, express and seek to depict.

The eroticism they suggest, as narratives, sometimes seems to be devoid of Christian guilt, depicted as innocent and playful-take the liberating eroticism that dominates his *Trilogy of Life* (*Trilogia della vita*, 1971-1974)<sup>5</sup>; while other times it is described visually as sadistic and

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Rubmlé defines this aesthetic in the context of an ideological construction, a search towards a liberated personal representation of societal struggles and contradictions. "In this study of the *Trilogia della vita* we have described Pasolini's style of contamination as an ideological form of pastiche, a style that demonstrates the debts of cinematic representation. It is a style of filmmaking that includes what commercial filmmakers must exclude: images that foreground their artifice, narrative elements that exceed any definite plot-function, and experimentations in point of view that cause

frightening, destructive even in its liberating force, understood as violent, socially aware and rebellious, but also as a product of oppression. These contradictions are the main themes that Pasolini's film structures seek to reconcile both aesthetically and intellectually: I am referring here to the eroticism of both *Theorem* (Teorema, 1968) and *Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma, 1975) two films similar in many ways, in their theoretical structure. And yet, as a concept, Pasolini's eroticism remains always rooted in reality. This eroticism is not the ecstatic love of counter-culture and the ideal of the hippie movement (even if there are many similarities to be found here, especially when it comes to the simplicity and adoration of youth that moves the *Trilogy of Life*), nor the platonic ideal of "love as pedagogy" that, as a general world-view, through chivalric literature, has found its way into Christian romantic iconography and medieval poetry, two traditions thematically and visually evident as sources of inspiration for Pasolini's films.

It is not transcendence, but immanence that these narratives intend to depict, a return to the realm of everyday life and an attempt to find sacred aspects in reality *in itself*, moving away from the need to impose intellectual or religious contexts to it. It is evident that even if Pasolini's relationship with Marxism could be characterized as complicated "there is also, unmistakably, a political aspect in this view, in this reading of mythology, life and the human body. *Understanding and experiencing reality* becomes an act of rebellion and it is here that the root in existentialism becomes more powerful.

According to Pasolini's narratives it is essential to implicate oneself with the world of experience, and by extension with the many stories that life seems to construct, rather than escape from it. This is even the basis of the structure, the narrative force behind Pasolini's reading of *A thousand and One Nights*. The film begins with an enigmatic phrase that, once more, evokes phenomenological readings of reality: "Truth doesn't lie only in a dream, but in many dreams". It is attributed to the literary *thousand and One Nights*, but is, in all probability, an invention of Pasolini, even if the spirit of the idea could be characterized as the product of an eastern tradition. Philosophically speaking, apart from the context of the phenomenological connotations we already mentioned, it can be read as a direct attack on Platonism in its various incarnations- and especially on the metaphysical priority of one ideal, as expressed in Christianity. If the truth does not "lie in one dream" then life should not be dedicated to one ideological doctrine, it should be based on curiosity and amazement, seen as a constant source of inspiration rather than a symbol of something else, or a domain that we should sooner or later transcend, either through religious ecstasy or through love; most importantly: if Truth doesn't lie only in a dream but lies in many dreams then life, contrary to the western world's call for constant productivity should be experienced not as a journey to an end, but as an endless *wandering*.

It is such a wandering indeed that moves the plot as the young hero Nur An Din seeks for a slave girl that was stolen from him, throughout the mythical Arabic world. It is notable that even if the abduction of a woman is the narrative force the relationship between them is not one of possession; indeed, their beautiful, touching reconciliation at the end, seems almost accidental. The undeniable fact that she is initially a slave, and later, through the dream logic of the fairy tales, disguised as a boy, she rises to be the King of a faraway land, seems in the context of the narration, to be a narrative convention rather than a power play; A reading blurred by the fact, that, as a king she captures the young boy as a prisoner before their inevitable recognition and reconciliation. Exactly because the film, like its source Arabian Nights, is *a narration about narrations*, a collection of stories and encounters, the violent eroticism that will

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the spectator to ponder the historical and ideological determinants of representation and of vision itself." (Rumble, 2015, p. 139)

<sup>6</sup> "His Marxism was always a heterodox and heretical one. Even his faith in Gramsci's theory of hegemony skirted its rational applications in favor of more intuitive evocations. Ideology found itself routinely suborned by passion in Pasolini's universe, to invoke one of his more famous collections of work". See (Merjian, 2019, p. 38)

find its culmination in Pasolini's next film, *Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, is never really far away.

To return to the idea of the myth as a source of both pleasure and knowledge: Throughout the journey that has preceded this meeting, the young boy, Nur An Din, will encounter many stories, lines of poetry, works of art and participate in many love meetings. These erotic encounters are not *strictly distinguished* from the works of fiction and indeed life and fiction are never distinguished from another, as they are, say, in the works of Francois Truffault or even *the Purple Rose of Cairo* (Woody Allen, 1985) where Cinema and Life are seen as opposite forces and one has to choose between the one or the other. For Pasolini stories lie in everyday life<sup>7</sup>. The only real challenge for the individual is to resist the peril of being alienated, to be authentic enough and available enough in order to receive this underlying poetry of reality and also actively contribute to it.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, such a view does not imply that the desired communication with the most authentic aspects of life is easy. The need for a consciously authentic life, the existential call we already mentioned, goes hand in hand with a constant fear of loss and detachment. Echoing the emphasis on intuition explored by various philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (most notably, the work of Henri Bergson) and the romantic worldview of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Pasolini seems to see suspiciously intellectual approaches of reality. The difference is that, when it comes to Pasolini unlike the Romantics or existentialists, it is not an opposition to Hegelian concepts and dialectic readings in general that inspire this suspicion. It is a fear that intellectualism is, by definition, a form of escape, a detachment from life.

## II. Accatone: Myth approached through the flesh

*Accatone*(1961), Pasolini's very first film, illustrates these contradictions and expresses radically a need for *experiencing* the mythic time in the present, in the realm of everyday life. Visually and aesthetically this approach shares a link with Italian neorealism (*Accatone's* young son seems to vaguely echo Antonio's boy from *Ladri di biciclette*) but at the same time puts its emphasis on the subjective element, underlined through dream imagery. In *Mamma Roma*, the dream will be given through conversation, through narration, whereas in *Accatone* it is visualized, part of what the viewer experiences. *Accatone's* travel is thus a travel also followed by the viewer, a mythic approach in the film's interpretation of everyday life is not only alluded to but *seen*, as one would expect from a film with a powerful phenomenological approach to life. And the imminent death that *Accatone* fears and dreams about is read in mythical terms, correlated with his life in extreme situations of poverty and the tension of liminal spaces. Pasolini's insistence on the resemblance between cinema's editing and dream's tendency to re-organize reality in narrative terms, a view expressed in his theoretical writing, echoes phenomenology's insistence on the perception of the world as a creative process that resembles artistic production.

The fact that this process is given through the narration of the life of so liminal a figure, a "pimp" remains radical and expresses with remarkable clarity the film's worldview. The very title, the nickname, *Accatone*, a word meant to invoke contempt, indicating the wandering

<sup>7</sup> For the idea of "the irrupting of the sacred into everyday life," which for Pasolini is the essence of tragedy, represented notably in *Teorema* through two elements, the body of the Visitor and the desert see (Benini, 2015, p. 119)

<sup>8</sup> The way Pasolini's filmography struggles to reconcile the present reality with the idealized mythological past can be interpreted in the same terms. Such is, for example, the reading of Naomi Greene. The striking and idealized portrait of archaic civilizations found in Pasolini's mythic quartet foregrounds the contrast between past and present which, in various ways, had made itself felt throughout his films. After all, *Accatone* and *Mamma Roma* juxtapose a sacred past-evoked by the presence of Bach and Vivaldi as well as painterly allusions-with a degraded present; reversing the process, *Il Vangelo* depicts the life of Christ through analogies with the contemporary world. (Greene, 2017, p. 129)

tramp, the urchin, stresses this aspect. And it is certainly not a coincidence that Accatone's actual name, Vittorio, Victor/ the "winner", also bears a symbolic meaning and has strong mythical connotations.

The blurring between the subject, the *observer* of the world and the object, the reality of the world *being observed*, the belief that the very process of experiencing reality in poetic (that is, creative) terms gives birth to meaning, lies at the heart of phenomenology. *Accatone*, following a similar approach, seeks a mythic quality in life through the intentional blurring of certainties and binary realities. The film marries the music of Bach with the depiction of extreme poverty, Dante (the beautiful, evocative opening quote "God's angel took me, and he from Hell cried: 'Oh you from Heaven, why do you rob me? You are carrying off with you this man's eternal part for a little tear that takes him from me.'"<sup>9</sup>) with a poetry of the human face that leads to a transcendental quality. High and popular art are merged as classic religious Christian music and Neapolitan love street songs (the unforgettable *Fenesta Che Lucive*) are treated similarly, as expressing the same longings and the same melancholic view of the world as a quest without redemption. Dante's "little tear" (*lacrimetta*), referenced in the opening lines of the film, becomes the embodiment of these themes and a motif in a film built around the notion of corporeality and the experience of the flesh in all its connotations: from the iconography of prostitution to the Christian allusions of the iconography of Vittorio's naked body, before the plunge from the bridge to the river, in the opening sequence of the bet. A flirt with mortality that will find its culmination in the already mentioned grim dream sequence and Accatone's final unavoidable fall.

### III. *Medea* and the loss of myth

The concern is vividly expressed in *Medea* (1969). In *Medea* the concept of myth, as a motif, as a source of poetic inspiration and most importantly as a suggestion, as a way to approach reality is everywhere. Most importantly *Medea* is a narration about the fear for *loss of myths*. The belief in myth as a way to live and a road to passionately engage with and interpret reality *can be forgotten*, lost, just like a dream in the morning. But, most importantly, again just like the dream, it remains subconsciously present throughout the day and will return-when, least expected. Indeed, Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) is a work that seems to be in constant communication with *Medea* even if the relationship between Pasolini and psychoanalysis can be characterized as complicated: he alludes to it often, especially in films like *Oedipus* or *Theorem* and yet his films never give priority to symbolism or free associations nor do they let symbols literally *dictate* the narration in the way the surrealists do. Just like the imaginary beings we encounter during the narration of myths and folk tales, the Sphinx in *Oedipus*, for example, may be enigmatic, stranger to a directly symbolical readings; even if this being stands for repression or other inner conditions, one should not forget that it is also a mythical creature in the literal sense. Pasolini's films do not hesitate to be literal.

In *Medea* the authentic view of the world is understood to be that of childhood; and expressed through the mythical Centaur, presented initially as powerful in himself, empowering as a source of inspiration, depicted faithfully according to the ancient iconography, half-man half-beast, always seen through Jason's perception. But later, in a brave reworking of the original tale, *also* as a human, when taken away from childhood's belief in miracles. For Jason, the initial belief in the divine and the sacred is gradually replaced with a belief in civilization, productivity and conquest. All these ideas have for Pasolini negative associations, exactly because they bring inevitably what existentialists call alienation, that is they make one forget one's inner needs and desires. And yet, the past or childhood can never be truly forgotten, and this is why the world of myth (liberating after all, in a cruel, Bacchic way) will prove to be

<sup>9</sup> L'angel di Dio mi prese, e quel d' inferno gradiva: 'O tu del ciel, perchè mi privi? Tu te ne porti di costui l'eterno per una lacrimetta che 'l mi toglie...' (Pasolini, *Accatone*)

much more powerful than the intellectual interpretation of the world and return violently, a return of the repressed, together with Medea's revenge<sup>10</sup>.

It is exactly the fact that different sentiments co-exist (for example, the belief in the need to give priority to myth as a way to read reality is never put into question, even if eventually it crushes Jason) that makes the film flow and be experienced emotionally as well, even if based on intellectual contexts. And this intentional choice, this coexistence of emotionality and theoretical, philosophical exploration makes the film self-reflective, like a confession.

Aesthetically speaking again this emphasis on multitude, this idea that beauty should be sought in "many dreams", is also present in Pasolini's body of work. In his adaptation of the gospel of Matthew spirituality, or to be exact the need for spirituality is expressed by sounds that belong in different eras and styles, not only the music of Bach but also the voice of Odetta, singing spiritual songs. And this *coexistence* is clearly an attempt to re-define myth and narration, the product of a personal exploration, rather than a play with cinematic conventions.

#### IV. Aspects and connotations of Myth in *Mama Roma*, *Theorem* and *Oedipus Rex*.

In *Mama Roma* we encounter a motif familiar to us from various archetypal mythic narratives, including the myth of Oedipus, later adapted by Pasolini: the identification of a city with a person. *Mama Roma* as Rome, Rome as a tormented individual, corporeal (again the corporeal associations of sex work, *Mama Roma*'s profession) and holy, sacred, at the same time. A tendency to seek the divine in the lower debts of the population is once more linked with phenomenology rather than sociology. It is based on the very imagery of the film and the *direct* perception of life this visualization invokes. We can already note a key aspect in Pasolini's reading of myth: the association of several (*general* by definition) archetypal figures and ideas with very *concrete* personalities and identities, often played by nonprofessionals. By extension, a strong belief in myth as something to be *experienced* (embodied, literally in the flesh), a realm of reality to be sensually rather than intellectually approached.

The narrative choice that alludes more strongly to the world of ancient tragedy is the presence of a *Chorus*, the various clients or "Johns" of the Roman population that hear *Mama Roma*'s narration, forming an audience a collective identity that participates in the action through this passive (but crucial) role, this open dialogue that remains in progress throughout the film.

The very same concept of *embodiment*, of a person corporeally identified with an idea, becomes a steady motif in Pasolini's *oeuvre*. The most radical example is probably *Theorem*.

If *Mama Roma* combined Pasolini's phenomenological explorations with Psychoanalysis and founded a mythic reality in this apparent contradiction, *Theorem* attempts a similar approach through an ambivalent Marxist concern. All the characters are strongly identified with their social class and yet the Dionysian erotic assault, expressed by the Stranger makes all these barriers collapse violently. As the title indicates *Theorem* is structured rationally, mathematically in contrast to the mythical nonrealistic quality of the events depicted.

The heart of the story, I feel, does not lie as much on the often discussed enigmatic first part where the Stranger, the enigmatic young man has sex with the four members of a typical Milanese family (Paolo the father, Lucia the mother, Pietro the son and Odetta the daughter) and their maid, as it does in the destructive and liberating at the same time outcome of these encounters. This fear of abandonment is once more a repetition of the motif of the *lacrimetta*, Dante's "little tear" that leads those who suffer not necessarily to happiness, but to a more conscious and poetic attitude to life, an attitude the film visualizes as precious, even if

<sup>10</sup> For a more feminist- oriented interpretation of the same themes see Colleen Ryan-Scheutz's emphasis on the sacred when it comes to the female archetype of Medea (Ryan-Scheutz, 2007)

destructive. The Visitor, identified with the Sacred, the Deity, and at the same time corporeal and sexual, an *immanent* rather than transcendental presence, offers meaning through his departure, his abandonment of his lovers. And the whole process, radical and unpredictable, is given to us not through abstractions, but through mythical themes and motifs, through the tendency towards literal, archetypal heroes and situations that characterize mythopoetic speech.

As in *Medea*, and in contrast to classic Aristotelian narrative it is not a self-realization but a *loss* that motivates the narrative. The loss of a belief in the sacred is also associated with the grief of an abandoned lover. It is notable that the lyrics of Odetta's *Motherless Child* ("a long way from home") already accompany the imagery of the nativity scene in Pasolini's earlier *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo*, a visualization of the very same association of the powerful fear for abandonment with courageous poetic action. The daughter's name, Odetta, in *Theorem* can be read as either a conscious or alternatively an instinctive allusion to the same personal journey.

*Theorem* seems to evoke a collective attitude towards myth, that resembles slightly Roland Barthes's general ideas on mythopoeia as something interwoven in society and constantly moving and morphing, a vital and palpating rather than *closed*, already completed text. Personal experiences that influence an artistic or cultural text are read by Barthes as one more aspect to be considered in one's reading, not the definitive factor, as auteur theory seems to suggest.

What complicates things, in an intellectually captivating way, is one's inclusion of autobiography in a recognizable myth, as Pasolini attempts in *Oedipus Rex*. An attitude that imposes the need to recognize personal influences, as collective and personal at the same time. Alejandro Jodorowsky's *Dance of Reality*(2013) and *Poetry without End* (2015) will attempt a similar approach in the 21<sup>st</sup> century- the main character is called Alejandro Jodorowsky but surrounded by archetypal, mythical situations the duology seems to read in reality- but the surreal character of the imagery makes it easier for the viewer to interpret what they experience as fantasy. Pasolini's poetic language, as far away from traditional surrealism as possible, can be characterized as a more subtle approach.

The film opens in mythical Thebes as a street sign informs us. Thebes, the birthplace of Oedipus. And yet, whereas the film is never as bald as to suggest that Pasolini is identified with Oedipus, the prologue takes place in an Italian middle-class city, where we witness the birth of the son of a soldier, in a menacing, even if familiar, environment. The birth of the son is read by the father as a bad omen, similarly to the omen given to King Laius. Without any narrative explanation or bridge we are transferred to the ancient world, where we witness a relatively faithful recreation of the tragedy of Sophocles: clearly more faithful to the text, than *Medea* that could be seen as a radical re-interpretation of Euripides, expanding to include the Journey of the Argonauts, including the enigmatic Centaur and overall focusing on different motifs.

Still, *Oedipus* the film differentiates itself from *Oedipus* the tragedy and Oedipus the key 20<sup>th</sup> century text, the founding myth of Psychoanalysis, in three crucial moments. All three of them indicate Pasolini's idiosyncratic view of the mythic as a way to approach personal concerns.

1. Sphinx (represented by a male actor, dressed in an archaic costume with her mask, a sacred figure of the world of African ceremonies, a creature of ambiguous sex and ontological characteristics) does not ask from Oedipus to solve an enigma. On the contrary she is ready to *give* herself an answer to an enigma that is supposed to torment the hero from birth. Oedipus is determined not to hear her answer and murders her violently. "*The abyss you want to throw me into is inside you*" her final cry. A classic visualization of Freudian repression.

2. The landscape is not Mediterranean or Greek, it is vaguely eastern, with African and even some South American visual clues. The past of myth. An oneiric rather than literal landscape. The film was shot in Morocco's desert.
3. In a personal touch, deeply touching in context, it is not the mythical Antigone but Ninetto Davoli, Pasolini's real life lover, a character that visually alludes to Charlie Chaplin, that guides the blinded Oedipus, in his final journey, as the mythical Angelo (an angel). And in this final journey, the film mysteriously returns to the Italian urban landscape of the prologue. Oedipus plays revolutionary songs in his flute, blind and disillusioned, yet passionate as always while Angelo seeks to play football with the youth in the streets. The phrase "the process always returns to the place where it began" closes the film, as in a perfect circle scheme. We can note in these three changes and their regulation the same co-existence of collective, universal mythical motifs (the Marxist song in the flute, the archetypal Sphynx) with personal, individual stories that are treated as collective dreams: the place of birth, the wandering at the hearts the lover as Angel in familiar neighborhoods. And by extension are indeed treated as if they were phenomenologically universal and relevant in their regulation, in the context of the narrative, as if Pasolini's personal story and the tragedy of the blinded king are indistinguishable.

#### **V. Conclusion: On the necessity of mythic narrative as an aesthetic concern**

The research questions we focused on are to be understood in their communication, rather than separate from one another. Eroticism, as a dominant motif in *A Thousand and One Nights* has an immanent, corporeal dimension rather than a transcendent corporeality, even if it seeks to drastically re-define reality and young Nur En Din's relation to it. The same corporeal element is evident in *Accatone*, where the life of a hero too marginalized to be considered even working class is approached in physical terms, through an observation of details that is not devoid of a sensual aspect. Myth is given priority and is to be found even in the lower places of Rome's everyday reality. The idea the myth is also related with perception, with one's poetic tendency, thus it is very sensitive is apparent in *Medea*, a film about the artist's fear of losing an ability to live fully and interpret reality as a work of art.

As we explored Pier Paolo Pasolini's understanding of the concept of myth in its various incarnations as an aesthetic, thematic and philosophical point of reference what we can clearly see is that if anything myths in Pasolini's narratives are far from comforting. This dynamic character that Pasolini attributes to myths is exactly what makes this underlying motif so liberating for us as well. Just like the powerful suggestions of existential continental philosophy the term has nothing to do with self-reassuring understandings of mythmaking. Pasolini's films struggle not only to interpret life, but also to experience. And this return to lived experience in itself can prove to be not only self-fulfilling but also liberating socially, a point of reference in times of fear and social unrest.

#### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author of the article declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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