

## Following Pasolini: In Words, Photos, and Film, and his Perception of Cinema as Language

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**Abstract.** Discussing the intercultural reception of Pier Paolo Pasolini, this article looks into the intercultural and medial crossovers of his person and his work. It shows the historical particularities of Pasolini's work, and it traces layers of intermedial references in his movie production, describing the many-layered intercultural interplay. Lastly, it focuses on the discussions of media relations, and the remedialisation inherent in much of Pasolini's work.

**Keywords:** reception, myths, intermedialisation, and remedialisation, film as poetry

### INTRODUCTION

Forty years have passed since the famous Italian movie director and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975) was murdered on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November, 1975 and found dead in the district of Ostia outside Rome. The city of Bologna, where he was born, has dedicated a comprehensive homage program in his honor, stressing the importance of his work as a writer, essayist, novelist, actor, and film director. The title for the event was taken from one of Pasolini's own poems, “more modern than any modern” (“più moderno di ogni moderno”)<sup>1</sup> and described as a voyage of discovery into the impressive creative universe of one of the most important intellectuals in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

Also in Rome, in 2015 Pasolini has appeared in numerous places – cinemas, galleries, theatres, and exhibitions.<sup>3</sup> *Il Teatro di Roma per Pasolini* (The Rome Theatre for Pasolini) has arranged for marathon-readings of his unfinished novel *Petrolio*. The readings are by many famous Italians, artists, and actors, including Pasolini's own favorite actor, Ninetto Davoli. The photographic exhibition *I tanti Pasolini* (“the many Pasolinis” or “the many faces of Pasolini”) was shown at Spazio 5 just around the corner from the Vatican, describing him in single word as a multitalented genius. Indeed, Pasolini's face has become an icon in Italy, in the sense that his portraits appear not only in exhibitions and books, but also as a form of graffiti on the walls running along the Tiber in Rome. Notwithstanding all the praise, and the fact that today Pasolini's many

faces are found all over Rome and Bologna, his work has continued to maintain its degree of transgression and controversy across the boundaries of media and time.

## WRITING FILM

Pasolini referred to his filmic production as a work of “writing”, possibly because of his passion for the literary fiction and poetry of Arthur Rimbaud, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Coleridge, or Novalis as well as his own poetic inclinations and literary studies at the University of Bologna. Pasolini’s image, even after his death, stress the close inter-artistic links of his oeuvre, relating it to his life and pointing to the historicity of medial configurations that Irina Rajewsky has explored. This configurations involving technical aspects as well as changing conceptions of art and media on the part of the media’s recipients and users (Rajewsky, 2005: 51) can be seen at play in Pasolini’s works, constituting “the definitive intermedial aspect [...] in relation to the media product or system to which it refers.” (Rajewsky, 2005: 59).

Pasolini’s work because intermedial in several ways. First because of the crucial part played by his own life on his art and in the construction of modern Italian identity, as Italian film historian, Roberto Chiesi, now in charge of the Pasolini archives in the Cineteca (film library) in Bologna, has claimed in several interviews and articles. A recent Argentina-India coproduction at Teatro di Roma, *Sono Pasolini (I am Pasolini)* by Giovanna Marini makes use of these intermedial aspects combining opera, music and recitation from Pasolini’s essay collection *I giovani infelici (Unhappy youth)* and his 1941 Friulian poems, *La meglio gioventù (The best of youth)*, written to defend dialects against standard Italian. The choir presents itself as a sort of classic Greek choir, which comments and laments the events of Pasolini’s death.<sup>4</sup>

Worldwide, Pasolini is regarded as one of the major intellectuals as well as a major film director, alongside Jean-Luc Godard.<sup>5</sup> His films, similar to French New Wave directors such as Godard, are highly innovative in terms of style but also socially critical, mostly inspired by Marxism. They are frequently set in the Italian suburbs and the infamous *borgate* areas, in the peripheries of Rome, where Italian Neorealists, like Visconti, Lizzani, and De Sica, also sought to depict life in the margins. Pasolini collaborated with Antonioni and Fellini, and young Bertolucci became assistant in Pasolini’s own films.

Conservative in his defence of Catholicism within the Communist Party, progressive in his radical stylistic innovations, Pasolini was both director and actor, for example, giving life a criminal gangster ex-partisan in Carlo Lizzani's Neorealist movie, *The Hunchback of Rome (Il Gobbo*, from 1960). Described as a Neo-Neorealist, Pasolini always thought of himself as a poet, calling himself the force from the past (“Io sono una forza del passato”), in the collection *Poesiain forma di rosa (Poetry in the shape of a rose)*.

This crossing of boundaries in his life and in his art, is exemplified in the episodic film *La Ricotta (Curd cheese* 1962), the story of a poor hungry man, presented as an allegory of Christ's Passion in order to criticize the film industry as well as the double standards of the Catholic Italy of the time. The film features American director Orson Welles who reads from a book Pasolini's famous quote “Io sono una forza del passato”. The book cover shows the image of Italian actress Anna Magnani, who had played the leading role in Pasolini's second movie *Mamma Roma* (1962). Thus, the illustration becomes a remediation of the movie in the printed format, and the quote from the Welles reading Pasolini also hints at the intermedial relationship between film making and writing, placing the film within the book and this one within another film.

And what exactly is the force of the past, “la forza del passato”? Is it the poem within the book, the book within the film? Indeed, *La ricotta* uses intermedial references to introduce the poetic genre as a particular force from the past barging into the new media. By interrupting the temporal flow of the storyline, this reflection on the poetic qualities of cinematography creates a space for critical reflection on the borders between artistic media. Playing on the referentiality of both the written word and the image, the film can be read as an intermedial aesthetic negotiation between the cinematic and the poetic; between filmic dynamism and the statism of poetic performance, transforming the pace, the atmosphere, and the mode of representation of the movie.

Another example occurs in the introduction to *La Rabbia (The Rage)* from 1963, where Pasolini's voice over says “[for this purpose] I have written this film” (“ho scritto questo film”). When he says that he *writes* movies, he refers to the fact that he often adapts literary texts, but to the idea that visual images have narratological properties and speak a language of their own. To this purpose, Pasolini uses not just voice overs but also other stories and myths which are incorporated within his films conforming an intermedial semiotic texture. In fact, Lone Klem has

claimed that Pasolini has anticipated work by semiologists such as Saussure, Barthes, Greimas: “long before the real breakthrough of semiology been claiming that critical film analyses should be ‘philological’ in their image analysis” (“længe inden semiologiens gennembrud hævdet, at filmkritikken skulle være ‘filologisk’ i sin billedanalyse” – Klem, 1995: 195).

Luciano di Giusti has claimed that in his films, Pasolini engages in semiological debates on the relation between linguistic and non-linguistic signs, using images to ‘write’ and compose his visual story (Giusti, 1983: 20). Cinema was for him a revolutionary form which incorporates hybrid languages in order to mobilize people against capitalist exploitation. Thus, although his first films, *Accattone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962) are set in Rome or its outskirts, his later movies move outside the city and even outside Italy. *Edipo Re* (*Oedipus Rex*, 1967) is shot in Piazza Maggiore in Bologna, in different locations in Lombardy, and in Marokko (Ait-Ben-Haddou and Ouarzazate). *Medea* (1969) is shot in Tyrkiet (Cappadocia), Syria and Pisa.

As mentioned, the intermedial appears at various levels in Pasolini’s productions. Some scenes incorporate the pictorial onto the movie, as in *Accattone* where there is a clear reference to Renaissance artist Andrea Mantegna and his painting *La lamentación de Cristo* (1480). The film epigraphs, not surprisingly, some lines from Dantes *Purgatorio Canto V*: “O tu del Ciel, perché mi privi? / Tu te ne porti di costui l’eterno / per una lacrimetta che’l mi toglì”. (“O thou from Heaven! Say wherefore hast thou robb’d me? Thou of him the eternal portion bear’st with thee away, For one poor tear that he deprives me of.”) In his biography, Enzo Siciliano describes Pasolini’s first film as a meditation on the risks of life; as when the main character, Accattone, stands with an angel statue behind him on one of the bridges crossing the Tiber in Rome, ready to jump into the waters (Siciliano, 1987: 229).

Pasolini was particularly fond of Renaissance painting (Caravaggio, Merisi, or Mantegna among others). The Danish art historian Christine Marstrand has shown how the *chiaroscuro* style is an important influence on his films. Religious themes, homoeroticism and the use of marginal figures as main characters (such as prostitutes, vagabonds, slaves, etc.) were also used in an allegorical way to shock and mobilize his bourgeois audiences. His radical methods sought to criticize mass production and consumption as well as expose hypocrisy.

Many of Pasolini's later movies mix historical, religious and literary texts, as well as mythical sources. This is the case of the films just

mentioned as well as *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo*, (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 1964). A screening of the movie was shown in Notre Dame Cathedral in 1964 with an audience of 5000 people. The dense Biblical visual symbolism depicts the crucifixion and suffering of Christ in a strange mythic universe was utterly provocative for left-wing intellectuals and Catholics alike (see the description of Michelle Cournot in *Nouvelle Observateur* 16).

In general Pasolini's films cultivate the epic and the mythical simultaneously presenting the brutality of the world. Another famous example is the sexually provocative *Il fiore delle Mille e una notte* (literally “the flower of the thousand and one nights” also known as *Arabian Nights*; 1975) was part of his *Trilogy of Life*, which began with *The Decameron* and continued with *The Canterbury Tales*. During his last year of life, Pasolini rejected his *Trilogy of Life*, seeing it as insufficient in its description of the extent of the decay of his contemporary society (In “Abiura della Trilogia della vita”, June 15, 1975, later published in *Lettere luterane*, 71-76)

Increasingly violent, *Salò* (1975) was shown in Paris the day before Pasolini was killed on Nov. 2, 1975. The name *Salò* refers to a city in Northern Italy that became the capital of the puppet government that Hitler requested of Mussolini at the end of World War II. The use of intermedial techniques help Pasolini cross spatiotemporal boundaries, moving between the fascism of his own time, inextricably tied to the advancing of neo-capitalism, and the writings of the Marquis of Sade.

## CONCLUSION

The remediations of Pasolini's image, whether in theatrical, musical, or photographic form, moving between words and images, still and moving pictures, stress the immense popularity of this Italian artist. At times, his person becomes central. The scandals in his life, his homosexuality and his erotic adventures, seem to blur the differences between the person and the director, moving between the intertwined social, aesthetic and political engagements of his works. Italian director, Michelangelo Antonioni once said that it was almost as if Pasolini had been made the victim of one of his own characters. Indeed, his own death seemed part of a movie scene, mythologized as if his life itself became an artwork.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Bologna omaggia Pasolini a 40 anni dalla sua scomparsa", "Col progetto speciale *Più moderno di ogni moderno*, la città di Bologna ricorda l'intellettuale con proiezioni, letture, visite guidate e un'emozionante mostra fotografica": <http://style.corriere.it/persone/bologna-omaggia-pasolini-a-40-anni-dalla-sua-scomparsa/> Nov.2, 2015

<sup>2</sup> "Un viaggio alla scoperta dell'universo creativo di uno dei più importanti intellettuali del Novecento" i *Più Moderno Di Ogni Moderno, Pasolini a Bologna*. <http://agenda.comune.bologna.it/cultura/piu-moderno-di-ogni-moderno>. Nov.2, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> At Galleria della Biblioteca Angelica, David Parenti presented "Pasolini Con la Forza dello Sguardo" and published *Pasolini. Per Pura Passione* with his paintings of stills of Pasolini from some of his most iconic movie scenes.

<sup>4</sup> <http://teatrodiroma.net/doc/3665/sono-pasolini>

<sup>5</sup> See <http://hcl.harvard.edu/hfa/films/2010julsep/pasolini.html>

**Annette THORSEN VILSLEV** received her PhD degree in Comparative Literature from University of Copenhagen with the dissertation "Affective World Literature" about the literary theory and novels of Japanese writer Natsume Soseki. She has been teaching world literature courses, and courses about Japanese and African literature at the University of Copenhagen. She was awarded a stipend at the Danish Academy in Rome Italy for her research into the intercultural and intermedial relation of Pier Paolo Pasolini's work in a world literary context, and has also written about his movies and texts on Africa.