

Theory by other means: Pasolini's cinema of the unthought

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*Basta, c'è da ridere. Ah oscure
tortuosità che spingono a un «destino d'opposizione»!*

Ma non c'è altra alternativa alle mie opere future

[Enough, this is laughable. Oh obscure

Entanglements that push to a
“destiny of opposition”

There is no other alternative for my
future work]

(Pier Paolo Pasolini, “*Il progetto di
future opere*”, in Pasolini 1982,
p.198)

Pier Paolo Pasolini was probably the most prominent disident Italian intellectual of the 1960s and early 1970s. The targets of Pasolini's criticism were many and distributed across the political spectrum: globalisation, mainstream neoliberalism, the Catholicism of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the students' bourgeois intellectualism, and *Operaismo* – the Italian Marxist workerism movements. For example, in his 1968 poem “The Communist Party to the Young” on the violent struggle between the student movement and the Roman police, Pasolini took the side of the police. He acknowledged that the police were on the wrong side, but supported them “because they [were] the sons of the poor”, unlike the students whom he saw as bourgeois. Similarly, in 1975 he vehemently reacted to the debates over the legalisation of abortion, since it equated sexuality and life with consumption in the culture of disposability. Writing before the legalisation of abortion, Pasolini (see 1981, p.98) stated, “*Oggi la libertà sessuale della maggioranza è in realtà una convenzione, un obbligo, un dovere sociale, un'ansia sociale, una*

caratteristica irrinunciabile della qualità di vita del consumatore [Today the sexual liberation of the majority of people is, in reality, a convention, an

obligation, a social duty, a social anxiety, an inalienable factor in the life of the consumer].” This, however, did not stop Pasolini from developing a Marxist critique of capital (mainly through Gramsci) or aligning himself with Lotta Continua – the new radical Left in the early 1970s. The unconventional positions he developed in relation to progressive and radical politics make it difficult to situate him in the postwar trajectory of the European Left, even in that fractured landscape gener-

ated by the clashes between the traditional Marxist–Leninist Communist parties, such as the Italian Communist Party (PCI), and emerging workerist and autonomist movements. On account of his open homosexuality, the PCI's traditional Stalinist Left considered him a “degenerate bourgeois”. An article in the party's newsletter, *l'Unità*, on 29 October 1949 explained,

La federazione del Pci di Pordenone ha deliberato in data 26 ottobre l'espulsione dal partito del Dott. Pier Paolo Pasolini di Casarsa per indegnità morale. Prendiamo spunto dai fatti che hanno determinato un grave provvedimento disciplinare a carico del poeta Pasolini per denunciare ancora una volta le deleterie influenze di certe correnti ideologiche e filosofiche dei vari Gide, Sartre e di altrettanto decantati poeti e letterati, che si vogliono atteggiare a progressisti, ma che in realtà raccolgono i più deleteri aspetti della degenerazione Borghese.

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[On 26 October, the Italian Communist Party Unit of Pordenone has decided to expel Dr Pier Paolo Pasolini, born in Casarsa, from the Party due to immoral behaviour. We move from the facts that have determined such a grave disciplinary action against the poet Pasolini to denounce once more the deleterious influence of certain ideological and philosophical undercurrents of Gide, Sartre and other similarly celebrated poets and literary figures who pose as progressives but in fact incorporate the most deleterious dimensions of bourgeois degeneracy]. (PCI 1949)

Meanwhile, the radical Left accused Pasolini of being populist in idealising Italy's archaic peasant past over the social advantages of revolutionary ideals. Pasolini was also accused by leading figures of the *Operaismo* movements, who included Alberto Asor Rosa of *Autonomia Operaia*, of being a bourgeois intellectual, and at the same time, a populist (see Rosa 1965). Pasolini's outright rejection of anything associated with the forces of modernisation made (and still makes) it extremely difficult to cast him as an intellectual forbearer of contemporary radical Italian politics that sought (or seeks) "a new and powerful productive subject, born out of the decline of the centrality of the factory and exposed to the full pressure of the economic crisis" (Castellano *et al.* 1996, p.233). Rather than dismiss him as a populist (as the autonomists and radical Left did in the past) or distance him from some of his more provocative statements (so as to recuperate him as a figure of neo-autonomism or workerism), I would like to explore how his commitment to radical otherness developed into a critique of revolutionary universalism.

Like Michel Foucault, Pasolini was deeply critical of the way in which modern thought privileges the "human" as the subject of all knowledge but simultaneously evades thinking and thinking's singular relation to life, the world, perception, experience, and ethics. Rather than think and unthink relations, modern thought creates a singular relation to an other who is both indispensable and exterior to the subject of knowledge. The figure of otherness, as Foucault describes it, is not a figure of opposition or uncertainty, but "a brother, a twin, born, not of man, or in man, but beside him and at the same time in an identical newness in an unavoidable duality" (Foucault 1972, pp.326–328). Western thought pursues thinking the other as a form of the unthought that possesses the means of reconciling the human with his or her own essence. It is the promise of transcendental

idealism and universalism, whether in the form of identitarian politics (speaking in the name of the oppressed, the workers of the world, or the post-colonial subjects) or in the form of non-teleological politics (such as Alain Badiou's "universal singularity" (Badiou 2003), or Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's "Multitude" (Hardt and Negri 2005)), that becomes the "preliminary ground upon which man must collect himself and recall himself in order to attain his truth" (Foucault 1972, p.327).

Pasolini did not position himself within Marxist or radical political movements, but pursued an interest in radical otherness that did not support one type of political party or practice over another. Nor did it offer grounds for doing that. His engagement with radical otherness developed into a critical practice that forced him to confront what is unthought in thought. Rather than posit otherness as a defining negativity (as psychoanalytic and postcolonial theories often do), he presented otherness as an intense set of relations – an encounter between the senses, embodied perceptions, and material realities that produces a radical (desubjectified) affirmation of life. In "*Il progetto di future opera*", Pasolini calls this unthought an "unexpressed existent" (*Impresso Esistente*). It is this intensity that challenges thinking by exposing the prejudices and constraints of Western thought – that is, how thinking is often predicated on *a priori* (the good, the true), common sense or a general model (the subject, desire, will, justice). Such practices that utilise analogies or affinities (resemblances) to produce concepts mistake thinking for representation. Instead of playing into the politics of representation (a practice of identification through resemblances and associations), Pasolini's pursuit of radical otherness led him to the practice of unthinking (unlinking such resemblances and associations). Pasolini challenges us to rethink the very constructs of difference and opposition, but does not leave us with the figure of nothingness (in contrast to Blanchot; see Blanchot 2003, pp.34–40). Radical otherness cannot provide us with a stable image of thought (whether the common good, justice, or nothingness) but it provides us with a set of images in relation to texts, ideas, and criticism that reflects on an ethics of existence – images that may still have much to contribute to current political discourse that attempts to bridge universalism with singularity.

Well before the emergence of postcolonial studies and cultural theory, Pasolini's films, poems, and essays had already put forward a critique of conventional dichotomies between North and South, East and West, Left and Right. He examined the problem of defining difference in terms of opposition and advocated an alternative: a rethinking of how we encounter otherness in all its forms and how such encounters question conventional forms of representation. Even if these encounters did not provide him with an alternative (a revolutionary subject), his treatment of such encounters with difference provides powerful examples of the type of critical work needed to unthink the deleterious narratives enabled by such dichotomies (Heidegger 1968).¹ His poetry and "cinema of poetry" articulated a series of relations that show how cinema can be a tool for theorising alternative politics – one that refuses identity politics or the politics of opposition. This is not a valorisation of difference as such, but a questioning of how differences and resemblances are constituted and imbued with the power to judge others.

The predicament of the Left, Pasolini argued, was always being in the opposition to the ruling party – a position that has become even more problematic since the end of the Cold War. With the collapse of global communism and the emergence of the European Union, traditional European socialist and communist parties have either splintered, lost power, or moved ever closer to neoliberal positions. Responding to changes in global politics, Leftist intellectuals have even voiced doubts about the survival of Marxism and Socialism once severed from labour movements.² While the collapse of State Socialism has put the transcendental subject into crisis – the proletariat as the subject of the history of oppression in whose name and on whose behalf Marxist intellectuals used to speak – the politics of opposition has not disappeared with the collapse of the political subject of oppression. Opposition has simply splintered into a series of opposing factions. Paolo Virno identifies "the political emergence of the different 'minorities' in the USA" in the 1960s as the moment "in which the modern *multitude* affirmed itself: no longer a unitary people but a plurality of heterogeneous subjects, proud of their specificity, resisting a univocal synthesis" (Joseph 2005, p.28). The impulse of Leftists like Virno is to treat the identity politics of the multitude as the subject of radical democracy that must be "unconditionally

respected, as . . . an uncontroversial improvement for all the future" (Moreiras n.d., n.p.). Moreiras argues that this embracing of the other is another form of idealisation of the subject of production or oppression:

It is rather the denial of the negation of politics that occurs through the pretence that, once the subject of democracy – whether demotic or despotic, democratic or communist, subaltern or hegemonic – speaks or performs her Idea, her word is good once and for all and must be unconditionally respected, as if the new regime of the visible, the new aesthetic sensorium were written in stone as a net gain and an uncontroversial improvement for all future. It is not like that.

Similarly in his plenary speech for the 1993 conference entitled "Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective", Jacques Derrida linked deconstruction to the spirit of Marxism and called for a "New International" to oppose the "plagues" of the "new world order". But Derrida (1994, pp.56–60) also turned Marx, Marxism, and communism into a "messianic promise", a hope, a yearning, for ". . . justice . . . a day belonging no longer to history, a quasi-messianic day . . ." But for Derrida, this "justice" is not only "undeconstructible", it is the "condition of any deconstruction". Pasolini's position was very different. To him, the problem was precisely the discursive political role of that future: it is the image of a promised revolution or democracy (always to come but never here) that never stops wounding us. In "Il pianto della scavatrice [The crying of the excavator]" Pasolini writes: "*La luce del futuro non cessa un solo istante di ferirci* [The light of the future never ceases even for an instant to wound us]."

As the discourse of the subject was collapsing or taking on new forms, the discourse of power as superpower remained intact – Hardt and Negri's (2009, p.448) "empire", Agamben's (1999, p.307) "state of exception", Virno (2010) and Marazzi's (2000, p.107) "neoliberal hegemony", or Žižek's (2010, p.348) "horror of the Thing". To Rancière (2010, p.215), "these forms of superpower-in-competition are all ways of capitalizing on one and the same superpower – the superpower of truth that, once upon a time, was wagered in the notion of the superpower of productive forces." The recent radical Left has struggled to develop new discursive constructs to ground political opposition to neoliberalism without replicating the humanist *a priori* political subject or the Durkheimian "culture

of coherence". As Virno puts it: "We are left with the thorniest of problems: how to organise a plurality of 'social individuals' that, at the moment, seems fragmented, constitutionally exposed to blackmail – in short, unorganizable?" (Joseph 2005, p.32). Terms like the "multitude" (Negri, Hardt, Virno), the "common" (Virno), the "commonwealth" (Negri, Hardt), or the "spectral" (Derrida, Žižek) all attempt to create a new consensus or, in Derrida's words, a "new international".

A real problem arises when neoliberalist discourse that has been accompanied by a neoconservative political rhetoric appropriates the language the Left uses to discuss ethnic and racial dichotomies (difference), as well as images of global politics rooted in binary oppositions such as good and evil or for and against. These dichotomies only further support global hierarchies by effecting a double erasure: they fail to represent any kind of otherness that cannot be reduced to a simple opposition, and second, they efface key internal divisions within societies such as the status of the poor within the nation-state, minority populations, refugees, immigrant and diaspora populations, hybrid identities, multinational citizenship, etc. As Pasolini wrote in "Vittoria", a 1964 poem, "The good Communist does not realise that his heart becomes enslaved to his enemy, and follows him." The Left becomes defined by and defines itself in opposition to the Right (neo-liberal economics, corporate capitalism, or the 1 per cent), what Gilles Deleuze calls, "a regressive and progressive double series" (Deleuze 1994, pp.137–138). The multiplication of differences (this affirmation of the multitude) is also behind the escalation of regionalist, xenophobic, and separatist parties like Forza Italia, Alleanza Nazionale, and Lega Nord. The rhetoric of opposition plays into such divisions, turning these gestures of opposition into what Pasolini saw as a dialectical game that gets out of control, producing nothing but imaginary resolutions.³

I want to show that Pasolini's cinema and poetry are political theory by other means. He saw cinema and poetry as powerful genres to unthink the discursive moves of both the Right and the traditional Left and expose the madness of dialectics. Cinema and poetry were a way of thinking the relation of thought to perception, experience, and ethics. Doing art was a means of dramatising such relations. This does not mean submitting art to a moral judgment, but revealing how moral

judgments are already imbedded within politics and aesthetics. It is a way of exposing how this relation of aesthetics to morality and politics remains unthought. This is particularly clear in Pasolini's writings and cinema from the late 1950s to mid-1960s – the period before the new Left's and the radical Left's split from the European communist parties that continued to follow Stalinism. That was when Pasolini turned away from the PCI, but without turning to either workerism's new powerful subject of universal revolution or to the student movement. He pursued, instead, a form of radical otherness as a radical act of desubjectification, outlining some of his most provocative critiques of Marxism, populism, and the belief in revolutionary universalism.

Poetics of a persona non grata

Pasolini liked to think of himself as a poet who made people feel uncomfortable, and did succeed in that. He was disliked by both the Right (which he publicly called neofascist), and the Left (which he criticised for assimilating bourgeois values and continuing "to be simply depositories of the moralistic blackmailing of man"; Pasolini 1964, pp.91–92). He saw the struggle between what he dismissively called the "Centre-Right" and the "Centre-Left" as purely theatrical between the discourse of "*sviluppo*" (change) of the Right and the discourse of "*progresso*" (progress) of the Left. For Pasolini, both change and progress stem from the belief in technological advancement. Although these words, "progress" and "change", separate Right from Left along party lines – where "change" is a goal of the Right and "progress" a goal of the Left – both factions depend on "*il contesto dell' industrializzazione borghese* [the contest of bourgeois industrialisation]" (Pasolini 1981, pp.175–178). Yet according to Pasolini change must be assumed as a strategy of the Left (in terms of technological advancement), and this causes the problem of consciousness which becomes more conscious of the goals of the Right than the needs of the working class.

As there was no real difference between the two coalitions, Pasolini argued that they were forced to produce a mere effect of difference by projecting different imaginary futures and creating hopes in them. When he said that both the Left and

the Right were blackmailers he meant it as a description. They always ran political campaigns on a better future that was always just not quite here – a future that was both fictitious and necessary as a discursive construct, a space for applying the dialectical method to generalised pairs of theses and antitheses.

That compelled Pasolini to look for a different, radical form of otherness that would avoid these same old narratives of opposition and the dialectical systems that fed on them. He located it in groups that were, and to some extent still are, at the margins of Western bourgeois culture: proletarians, peasants, Third World people(s), and homosexuals. But because the proletariat, the peasantry, and Third World people(s) were already aligned against the Western bourgeoisie, Pasolini was uncomfortably left to reproduce the same oppositions he was trying to undo. Not only did he end up turning these groups into an emblem of difference, but did so despite the fact that they did not always fit his criteria for otherness. For instance, many of these others had already become petite bourgeoisie or at least participants in consumer capitalism, leaving Pasolini to argue that the radical homogenisation brought about by modernity annihilates the desire for and the possibility of becoming other. Pasolini had to contend with the disappearance of non-homogenised others because he refused to dislodge the discourse of the other from its bodily incarnation. Otherness could not exist in the abstract, but needed to be embodied to produce a potential disruption. Likewise, otherness did not amount to competing identity politics that vie for recognition within a neocapitalist global system.

In *Le mura di Sana'a*, Pasolini records the onslaught of Western products that can be bought almost everywhere in developing nations. He asks: "Why so many consumers, and such zealous ones, now? Do these consumers – typical representatives of neocapitalism – mourn the passing of the capitalism of iron-mine bosses? Is it a matter of the habitual cultural tardiness of the great masses, awaiting – as folklore scholars say – the 'descent' of products devised and worn out by chronologically more advanced elites?" The conformity of ex-colonies throughout the Middle East, Africa and South East Asia to a neocapitalist economy made Pasolini feel he was arriving too late to find any outside of global capital. What he found, instead, was lost innocence, the initiation of a greater



FIGURE 1. In *Comizi d'amore* (1964), Pasolini interviews the Italian public about their opinions on sexual liberation, homosexuality, the women's movement, the family, work, the southern question, etc (Figure 1).
Source: *Comizi d'amore*, 1964. [documentary] Pasolini, P.P. dir. Bini, A. prod. Italy: Arco Film.

dependency or addiction to consumer goods. In *Comizi d'amore*, a documentary film, Pasolini showed that 1960s liberalism coincided with mass marketing strategies: "revolutionary ideas" regarding sex, divorce, and abortion, which he directly equated to the logic of consumption and the culture of disposability (see Figure 1).

Unlike Habermas, who championed the "public sphere" as an ideal space, unaffected by politics of State or economic policies, Pasolini argued that in those same years, that *il pubblico* no longer corresponded to *gli italiani reali*. The public space had become indistinguishable from the market place. *Comizi d'Amore* is constructed as a series of interviews with people throughout Italy and conversations with noted intellectuals like Cesare Musatti (a pioneer of Italian psychoanalysis), Alberto Moravia, Oriana Fallaci, and Dacia Maraini. Like the people interviewed, these intellectuals speak about Italy in general, but cannot identify a "real" Italy. They can only localise a series of symptoms surrounding a mythical Italy that nobody can identify anymore. But Pasolini asks, who is this phantom public, and how is it that this phantom can generate so many symptoms?

While Musatti speaks of a variety of complexes, Moravia addresses the inauthenticity of people's responses to questions about sex, homosexuality, and gender equality, and Maraini and Fallaci discuss the Italian double standard about sex, matrimony, and gender. They offer an interpretation, but they still cannot account for the theatricality of responses made by the "real Italians" Pasolini interviews. Although the film does not offer a vision of a true Italy, it reveals a pervasive

consciousness of the bankruptcy of critical thought. Foucault describes the people interviewed by Pasolini “as not even trying to give the impression that they believe what they say. With their smiles, their far-off tone, their silences, their glances that dart from left to right, the answers to questions have a perfidious docility” (Foucault 1990, p.229). They are simultaneously ironic and moralistic, ethnographic and imaginary, repetitive and theatrical. *Comizi d'Amore* does not set up contradictions as much as corruptions, contaminations, or blurrings between the notion of the public-sphere and the notion of the popular (mediated by commercial interests).

The film points to the collapse of public discourse into performances of popular stereotypes which in turn explains the centrality that cinema came to assume in Pasolini's work. It was at this point that he came to see cinema as a way to express an unrealised reality (*realtà irrealizzata*), the potentiality of radical otherness. Rather than being merely mimetic (a simulation of reality), cinema presents reality as an infinite possibility of thinking about the difference between performing the public and knowing what the public means. In his *Cinema di poesia* (1965) Pasolini equated the cinematic image – what he calls the *imsegno* (image-sign) and the *sonsegno* (sound-sign) – to a form of *écriture*, a cinematic writing. The *imsegno* and the *sonsegno*, however, do not stand for an absent referent – whether implied meaning or the lack of all meaning – but make manifest the image-thing, sound-thing, or concept-thing. The cinematic sign or icon is reality's own heightened articulation. Individual films, of course, limit these possibilities by realising (or, in Deleuze's terminology, by actualising) some of these possibilities.⁴ Without the possibility of filmic expression, the potential of otherness (thinking or actualising the unthought) could end up mirroring the advertising for a promised future that supported the very ideologies he despised.

Pasolini saw otherness as a radical affirmation of material life or sentient bodily experience – an otherness that could be found in the wretched person who enjoys an evening instead of being consumed by misery, or in the overcoming of the limits of one's own life, or in the mystical becoming one with others through ritual or sexuality. His concept of radical otherness stands in contrast to Lacan's barred or imaginary other that exists solely to provide an empty space upon which the subject

can reflect and become conscious of himself. Pasolini's notion of otherness also goes beyond Edward Said's imaginary orientalist other against which the West distinguishes and identifies itself. Rather than simply eroticising the other, Pasolini looks to otherness as a radical force that can disrupt bourgeois moral values, and demonstrate how bourgeois culture itself has already been replaced by its mere reproduction and simulation in consumer culture.

The search for radical otherness informed all of Pasolini's work, from poetry and theatre to film and criticism. Published in 1943 as the fascists were trying to eradicate regional dialect to homogenise the Italian language, Pasolini's earliest poetry collection – *Poems in Casarsa* – was written in his mother's Friulian dialect to capture the language and lifestyle of Italian peasants. Similarly, the novels and films he produced while Italy was enjoying the economic miracle of the 1950s – *Ragazzi di vita* (1955), *Una vita violenta* (1959), *Accattone* (1961), and *Mamma Roma* (1962) – focused on the language and lifestyle of the urban poor of the Roman slums left behind by the economic miracle. Then, in a 1960 poem entitled “*Fragment to Death*”, he invoked Africa as a symbol of the Third World and called it his “sole alternative”. Pasolini turned towards Third World peoples as the alternative to Western culture – a move he then pursued in travelogues like *Smell of India* and films like *In Search of Locations in Palestine*, *Hawks and Sparrows*, and *Notes for a Film on India*.

His desperate attempts to locate radical otherness ended up exposing the pitfalls of such a move. His early turn towards the peasantry, the Roman slums, and the Third World could be seen as a naive eroticisation or orientalism of poverty. Similarly, his attempt to adapt Aeschylus' *Orestes* to a contemporary African setting in his 1970 film *Notes for an African Oresteia* may be read as a form of neocolonialism – a Western intellectual's projection of Western ideals of democracy onto former European colonies. Pasolini, however, was deeply self-conscious and aware of the risks he was taking. Over and over, he attempted to draw analogies between his own otherness (his *diversità* or homosexuality) and the representation of the otherness of Africa and the Third World. By problematising his own approach to otherness, Pasolini foresaw the problem that post-colonial theory was to face later when seeking to vindicate

a pre-colonial subjective identity (think of Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Decolonising the Mind*; wa Thiongo 1986), or when championing a hybrid or marginalised identity that, in fact, represented an idealised form of otherness (Homi Bhabha's (1995) hybrids or bell hooks' (1989, pp.145–155) marginalised others) (see De Certeau 1988, p.3). Instead of hybridity, Pasolini offered a model of critical thinking that confronts what Deleuze calls the intolerable, “the perpetual hole in appearances, embodied in false continuity” (Deleuze 1989, p.170). He abandons any belief in the world, but not in the flesh. Like Artaud, Pasolini “gives discourse to the body, and for this purpose, reaching the body before discourses, before words, before things are named . . . it makes the unrolling of the film a theorem rather than an association of images, it makes thought immanent to the image” (Deleuze 1989, p.173; here Deleuze references Foucault's (2001) relation of thought to the unthought).

Thinking as heresy

Pasolini's movement away from a traditional Leftist view of revolution towards a radical politics of otherness, and finally towards a poetic strategy of thinking and unthinking identity, opposition, resemblances, and analogies, can be traced throughout his poetry and films. He delineated this poetic strategy in his 1963 poem “*Il progetto di future opere*”, and articulated it shortly after in his 1967 film *Edipo re*. I treat this poem as a manifesto. In it Pasolini advocates “unpopular thinking” – unpopular because it unthinks conventional expectations and truisms, and thus makes readers and spectators feel uncomfortable with the ideological, psychological, or sexual narratives they have used to identify themselves.

His trajectory to “unpopular thinking” can be traced back to his famous poem “*Le ceneri di Gramsci*” (1957) and the heretical form of Marxism he outlines there by contrasting the role of instincts and sexuality to what traditional Marxism ascribed to the secular struggle between consciousness and false consciousness. Casting instincts and sensuality as sharing in the role of the pre-capitalist sacred, he rejects the belief that historical struggle of oppressor and oppressed can be reduced to a struggle for rational consciousness coming into its own enlightenment. To Pasolini, Enlightenment leads to a bourgeois ideological

awareness, but also away from the sacred “innocence” and primitive joys of the working class world. Innocence here cannot be equated with moral purity, rather it is an affirmation of life. Although Enlightenment thought speaks in the name of the exploitation and living conditions of these others, it can never participate in their life experiences.

Just as this poem marks a radical break in Pasolini's ideological commitment to the Marxist tradition symbolised by Antonio Gramsci, it also marks a stylistic departure from his previous work. “*Le ceneri di Gramsci*” abandons the hermetic style of his early poetry to adopt, instead, what Alberto Moravia called *poesia civile*. Civic poetry was usually associated with politically committed poets who addressed popular culture and civil values. But Pasolini's *poesia civile* is a parody and pastiche of traditional poetic styles: from poetic realism to the rhythm of the *terzina* (reminiscent of post-Dantean didactic and satirical verse), the prose poem of Pascoli, the multilingualism of the *poesia di ricerca*, and its polemics against the homogenisation of languages. “*Le ceneri di Gramsci*” simultaneously demonstrates and comments on the transformation of poetry from self-expression to a self-conscious objectification of the role of the poet and poetry within the poem itself. It represents poetic thinking about the role of poetics in contemporary society. Viano (1987–88, p.56) argues that: “The ‘anti’ of antagonism remains, out of a passionate hatred against power, as a tribute paid to a body used to permanent opposition and perennial scandal. But the ‘anti’ which in Gramsci meant rational anticipation of an *aufhebung* to come, is gone. At the level of historical reason Pasolini is no longer ‘anti’ but ‘post’. Pasolini represents the stage of a left losing philosophical legitimacy, a left surviving as passionate alterity against power”.

“*Le ceneri di Gramsci*” recounts a struggle between reason and passion. It opens with the image of Gramsci being put to rest in the English cemetery in an active working class neighbourhood in Rome, the Testaccio. Too far from Catholic orthodoxy, Gramsci is banished to rest among the foreign dead. But as he lies next to *stranieri* he has also been banished from the working class life that surrounds the cemetery. As the poem unfolds, the physical presence of Gramsci withdraws into a grey stone tomb. What remains are only his ashes, and his fading light that withers away into ideals

carried on by the Italian Marxists. This separation of the bodily from the ideal marks a crisis for the poem's persona. In the middle of the poem, the persona remarks on the predicament of being ideologically with Gramsci but also viscerally attracted and attached to the sensuous world of things, bodies, and passions – the world that surrounds the cemetery but is external to it. While critical of what he calls a decadent bourgeois fascination with sensuality and sentimentality, Pasolini is equally critical of the Italian Communists' idealisation of Gramsci, which he reads as just another form of heresy – a way of re-killing Gramsci by turning a humble comrade into a didactic “maestro” and finally into a “a pure, heroic ideal”.

The heresy expressed by the poetic voice is, instead, of a much different sort. It is heretical because it privileges “the instincts and aesthetic passions of an older proletarian life”. The proletariat becomes a spiritual entity to Pasolini – no longer the subject of class struggle, but the embodiment of a joyful sensuous experience that transcends the boundaries of the individual self. This joy or force of becoming resembles Nietzsche's Dionysian excitement of “seeing oneself altered right in front of oneself and now acting as though one had really entered another body, another character” (Nietzsche 1999, pp.56–57). As such, it also becomes a form of theatricality.

While it is only through “*dark viscera*” that the poetic voice of “*Le ceneri di Gramsci*” can experience “the bodily collective presence”, this feeling of oneness is interrupted by consciousness – the “poetic light”, which prevents any form of self-overcoming. The poetic voice remarks: “I'm enlightened [by Gramsci] but who needs light?” The light that allows us to recognise this *élan vital* also separates us from it. For Nietzsche, it is this very struggle between the joys of a Dionysian self-forgetfulness and an Apollonian self-individuation that produces the art of tragedy. The poem evokes a pathos that reacts less to Gramsci's passing away than to man's lost ability to become other. Nietzsche takes this tragic struggle to be overcome by Socratic rationalism, but for Pasolini it is consciousness itself that leads away from the “pre-history of life incarnate” (or “passion of being in the world”) into a desolate of “post-history of the death of poetry”. “*Le ceneri di Gramsci*” ends with a sense of disillusionment, as if Marxism has not led to the promised revolution, but is only left with “their red rag of hope”.

“*Il progetto di future opere*” concludes, “the revolution is no longer anything but a feeling”, leaving Pasolini with no other choice than to articulate “an aristocratic unpopular opposition”. The fusion of Marxist revolutionary politics, the Freudian family romance, and the project of the Enlightenment produced nothing but opposition in and of itself. Marx and Freud simply established new hierarchies between classes, between advanced capitalism and developing nations, fathers and sons, men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals. To expose the contradictions and impasses embedded in such discourse, Pasolini chooses to “mimic so as to defile every preceding systematization of meaning, first under the sign of Marx, and then under the sign of Freud. By repeating their structures, I will establish a new reigning hierarchy” – one that parodies itself.⁵

Pasolini's short film *La ricotta* (1963, part of the film *RoGoPaG* alongside *Illibatezza* by Roberto Rossellini, *Il nuovo mondo* by Jean-Luc Godard, and *Il pollo ruspante* by Gregoretti) underscores and obliterates the cinematic illusion – for example, it ridicules the practice of dubbing actors by putting words into the mouth of a dog, reveals the disparity between sound and image by playing a twist over the image of the deposition of Christ, and exposes the appearance of continuity montage by shooting the alleged same scene part in colour and part in black and white. It was the exposure of cinematic devices coupled with a critique of the discursive devices of Marxist ideology and Christian aesthetics corrupted by consumerism and sexuality that provoked Italian authorities to seize the film. Pasolini was put on trial for *l'imputazione di “vilipendio alla religione di Stato [being accused of insulting the religion of the state]”* (1963), found guilty, and sentenced to prison for four months; a year later his conviction was overturned on appeal. The Procuratore della Repubblica Di Gennaro described the film as: “*il cavallo di Troia della rivoluzione proletaria nella città di Dio [the Trojan horse of the proletariat revolution in the city of God]*”. Ironically, the film is about the making of a Passion of Christ film by a Marxist director played by Orson Welles. The fictional director (Welles) is very conscious of these contradictions (the same ones that Italian authorities seemed to misunderstand). When asked by a journalist what he intends to express in the film, Welles (as the fictional director) answers: “*Il mio intimo, profondo, arcaico cattolicesimo [My*



FIGURE 2. In *La ricotta* (1963), Orson Welles plays the part of a Marxist director making a film about the Passion of Christ
 Source: *Ro.Go.Pa.G.*, 1963. [film] Pasolini, P.P. dir. Bini, A. prod. Italy: Arco Film.

intimate, deep, archaic Catholicism].” But we see the irony of this statement in his sudden change of expression from serious reflection to suppressed laughter. Even the journalist is in on the joke – he laughs as he records the director’s statement. Just to emphasise these contradictions, in Welles’ response to a question about death, he undermines his response about his profound Catholicism, by admitting, “*Come marxista è un fatto che non prendo in considerazione* [As a Marxist, [death] is a fact that I do not take into account].”

Here the role of director as cultural critic (or even *auteur*) is treated as simply another fiction. This in turn compels the audience to reflect on how film sets up a perspective (a way of looking) that it will then identify with. But in the case of *La ricotta*, no such perspective is offered. Instead the film offers multiple critical perspectives, including a critical perspective on the audience’s inability or unwillingness to engage with cultural criticism. For example, the journalist admits that he doesn’t understand Pasolini’s poetry, but rather than attempt to enlighten him, Welles (as director) excoriates the journalist by calling him “*un uomo medio* [an average man]”, which he proceeds to define as “*un mostro, un pericoloso delinquente, conformista, razzista, schiavista, qualunque* [a monster, a dangerous delinquent, a conformist, a racist, a slave-owner, a right-wing populist and monarchist]”. Even after his tirade against the impieties of the “*uomo medio*”, the director is ultimately forced to admit that the producer of the film is the same man who owns the paper the journalist writes for, and therefore, to acknowledge they both are serving the same master. The director will need the journalist to promote his film, and the journalist will be forced to write a favourable review of the

film even if he does not understand it. By showing how Welles (playing the part of the director) embraces the producer and his entourage at the end of the film, Pasolini even criticises his own relation (as director) to the production of this film.

Given that Welles (an already infamous director with Leftist political leanings) plays the part of a famous director who reads one of Pasolini’s poems from *Mamma Roma* as an example of profound intellectualism, it is not clear whom he is making fun of as the impertinent intellectual director. Is he a parody of Pasolini, Welles himself, or all intellectual *auteurs* who use film as a means of pedagogy? (See Figure 2.) Here the film makes a poignant critique of the arrogance of the filmmaker who uses film to indoctrinate a public he detests – calling Italian society, “*Il popolo più analfabeta, la borghesia più ignorante d’Europa* [The most illiterate people and the most ignorant bourgeoisie in Europe]”. But more importantly, he fails to see any real connection between his Marxist rhetoric and the working class actors he employs. If it weren’t for the self-criticism of the film’s own pedagogy we might be able to read the film as the Italian authorities had: as representing the tragic death of the subproletarian actor (Stracci) who dies on set while nailed to the cross. But even Stracci – who is introduced as hungry (having not eaten for days), humiliated by the other more bourgeois actors, and ignored by the director who leaves him nailed to the cross for hours in the hot sun – does not die of hunger, but overindulgence.

Although Stracci is shot in black and white, in contrast to the shots of the film within the film, he is not a neorealist hero. Rather he is a burlesque figure in the tradition of Charlie Chaplin. For example, in the scenes where Stracci tries to find food, the film is sped up as is the soundtrack of Verdi’s “*Sempre libera degg’io*” from *La Traviata*. Stracci’s comedic accelerated speed stands in sharp contrast to the other actors who are shot in “real-time” (twenty-four frames per second). Similarly, the live tableau of the actors who attempt to enact (mimic) the two iconic Christian paintings – both entitled “*Deposizione*”, by Pontormo and Fiorentino – reveal only the hypocrisy of such gestures, and implicitly of contemporary spirituality. These tableau reenactments are discredited by a series of sound and image mismatches. First, twist music is mistakenly played only to be replaced by Scarlatti’s “*Sinfonia from the Cantata profana*”. This points to a cinematic convention that uses



FIGURE 3. The staging of the painting “*La Deposizione dalla croce*” by Rosso Fiorentino (1521) in *La ricotta* (1963)
Source: *Ro.Go.Pa.G.*, 1963. [film] Pasolini, P.P. dir. Bini, A. prod. Italy: Arco Film.

“sacred” music to produce the desired affect of a dramatisation of the sacred. Second, a man’s voice reading Jacopone da Todi’s “*Donna de Paradiso*” is dubbed onto the main actress who plays Mary, but it is the actress who is chastised for overacting. (See Figure 3.) These scenes seem to undermine the iconicity of such images by showing the actors’ everyday gestures and non-dramatic responses to their craft: one actor picks his nose, another starts laughing, while the actor playing Christ falls to the ground. The only image that remains sacred in the film (and it is underscored by Tommaso da Celano’s interpretation of Jacopone da Todi’s “*Deus Irae, Dies Illa*”) is the scene where the subproletariat family of Stracci eat their lunch in the meadow next to the film set. Yet even this image falls apart as one by one each family member (with the exception of the mother) is sexually tempted by one of the more affluent actors on the set.

Similarly, *Uccellacci e Uccellini* (1966) starts by asking Mao: “Where is humanity going?” Mao’s answer – an ambiguous “Bhah” – sets the tone for a film that questions where Marxism is going. Signs that European and Soviet styled socialism is no longer relevant to the working classes permeate the film. Even the road signs do not point to local destinations (or local Communist leaders), but to distant ones: China, Cuba, Istanbul, and the Third World. At the same time, Mao’s ambivalent response to the question regarding the future of humanity (or international Marxism) undermines the attempt to look towards the Third World for an international Marxist revolution. Communist self-consciousness is not embodied by institutions, parties, or people, but by a crow that pesters the film’s two nomadic characters played



FIGURE 4. In *Uccellacci e Uccellini* (1966), a crow is the speaker for the Left, shown here on a sign that reads “Private Property”
Source: *Uccellacci e Uccellini*, 1966. [film] Pasolini, P.P. dir. Bini, A. prod. Italy: Arco Film.

by Totò and Ninetto Davoli. The crow, which speaks with the voice of a Marxist intellectual, comes from “the land of the future” (or more likely of a promised future) and can no longer communicate with lower class Italians whose desires have become bourgeois (Figure 4). The voice of the crow – which is actually performed by Francesco Leonetti, the experimental writer – echoes Pasolini’s self-parody as director and Leftist intellectual. At the same time, this voice of the crow also serves as a parody of free indirect discourse in cinema (which is illustrated by Orson Welles in *La Ricotta* when Welles reads lines from Pasolini’s *Mamma Roma* (“*Io sono una forza del passato . . .*”) only to indicate how there is a radical disconnect between Pasolini’s poetry and public understanding. But, in the case of *Uccellacci e Uccellini*, the two protagonists, tired out by the pedantic crow eventually kill and eat it. It is not clear, however, whether they “ingest a little bit of Marxism” or whether they are simply ridding themselves of the obsessive pedagogy of the crow (Nowell-Smith 1977, p.12). Digestion is a recurring theme in the film, yet in this case the characters seem to relieve themselves without maintaining anything of what they have ingested. They lack political direction and consciousness, but they clearly identify themselves with waste-producing consumer culture.

With the disappointment of always arriving too late to find some sacred otherness untouched by consumer capitalism, he turned to mythical figures like Orestes, Oedipus, and Medea. Although these figures have been appropriated by the bourgeoisie (as Adorno and Horkheimer have shown), Pasolini turned those appropriations against themselves. Rather than tell a story or

simply demystify conventional mythic narratives, he sought to produce “inconsumable narratives” that juxtapose competing versions of the same myth in order to disrupt the moral and political meanings invested in such myths. Films like *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo*, *Edipo re*, *Medea* (for a reading of Pasolini's theory of cinema *impopolare*, see Ravetto 2003), and *Saló* (for a reading of *Saló* as a form of radical unthinking, see Ravetto 2001) are *impopolare* because they reveal how the sacred myths of Western bourgeoisie are themselves based on a desecration of the sacred. It is such a desecration that makes possible Deleuze's societies of control, and what Deleuze and Guattari (2004) call the re-territorialisation or oedipalisation of the globe.

Unthinking subjectivity

In *Empirismo Eretico* (a collection of essays from 1964–1974), Pasolini articulated his theory of *cinema di poesia – écriture* of action that produces its own reality by giving presence to what Heidegger (1971) refers to as the thingness of things. In “The Origin of the Work of Art”, Heidegger (1971, pp.26–27) calls the thing concept: “Thing as matter (hule) and form (morphe). The Thingness of art, matter of which it consists, concept is formed matter.” Rather than re-present images as figures, Pasolini is interested in the relations of thought that emerge with the image. Cinema simultaneously produces more of what Artaud called a *subjectile* – a self-conscious gesture that performs a subject that is neither subject nor object but the affect of subjectivity. As Derrida (1998, p.65) argues: “a subjectile appears untranslatable . . . That is to say the support, the surface or the material, the unique body of the work in its first event, at its moment of birth, which cannot be repeated, which is as distinct from the form as from the meaning and the representation.” In other words, while the subjectile is an act of subjectification, “subjectification doesn't have anything to do with a ‘person’: it is a specific or collective individuation relating to an event. It is a mode of intensity, not a personal subject” (Deleuze 1995, pp.98–99).

In film the subjective point of view is never completely unified, instead it presents a type of thinking through the relation of actual images to filmic events. Pasolini refers to such subjectiles, thoughts, events, and images as “brute objects”.

Rather than a naïve endorsement of transparent, naturalistic representation (as some critics have claimed), Pasolini presents cinema as a form of “secular spiritualism”. It endows the subject matter with a corporeal presence, heretically giving life to the empirical thing. This is not a harmonious or organic expression of vitality, and it is not tied to any Good or God. Unlike neorealist cinema, which makes it difficult to discern the filmic event (actualisation of a virtual reality) from filmic representation (aesthetics of realism), Pasolini does not document what he sees as “reality”. He rather foregrounds the artificiality of film and all other cultural constructs, icons, music, and ideology: “My fetishistic love of things of the world makes it impossible for me to consider them natural. It either consecrates them or it desecrates them violently, one by one; it does not bind them in a correct flow; it does not accept this flow. But it isolates them and adores them, more or less intensely, one by one” (Pasolini 1972, p.227).

Even though these actual subjectiles and objects “do not exist in reality”, they constitute a set of relations, “a communication with others” (Pasolini 1972, p.42). Because these relations constantly change with the introduction of new elements, *cinema di poesia* cannot produce either narrative meaning or the possibility for audience identification with characters or particular subjective points of view. Baudrillard (1988, p.22) argues that in order to be consumed objects must become a sign. That is, as he explains: “the object must become external to a relation that it now only signifies, assigned arbitrarily and non-coherently to this concrete relation, yet obtaining its coherence, and consequently its meaning, from an abstract and systematic realisation to all other object-signs. It is in this way that it becomes personalised and enters in the series, it is never consumed in its materiality, but in its difference.” What interests me in Baudrillard's analysis of the object as sign in relation to Pasolini's materialism is that both agree that the personalised is circumscribed in a certain arbitrariness, which goes beyond any Marxist theory of alienated subjects who experience false consciousness. This personalisation of consumption allows for constant fluctuations and delimitations of object relations, a constant merchandising of the new, thus, a constant dissembling of relations (also modelled on the consumable). Relations, therefore, become subject to constant destabilisations, and necessitate the consumption

of stability in the form of control (gated communities, designer genes, i.e. total insulation as, for example, Howard Hughes) while simultaneously infinitely consuming and submitting to the manipulation of arbitrary signs. The model implies a decentralisation of power, even a void; at the same time it also implies the centralisation of power on the ability to control consumption, and manipulate the flow and intensity of systems of information, images, and representation. The abstraction of all relations amounts to the politics of speed, rapid transitions, take-overs, disappearance, and emerging markets, a purer form of capitalism.

More than a simple distinction between the dominant mode of narrative (Hollywood) and poetic (experimental or non-narrative) film, *cinema di poesia* realises the clash of the artist's poetic vision (non-narrative expression that attempts to mimic reality) with various human actions (those that will constitute an unreal narrative). It opens up a space for radical thought or the radical unthinking of subjectivism from Descartes to Kant and the German Romantics. Enlightenment thinking heralds the death of God but also the withdrawal of modern thought from the sacred as a shared experience, a *Mitsein* (being with others, or being with Being) into an exclusive concern with self-knowledge, and self-interest. Pasolini does not follow modernism or avant-garde cinema that, as Heidegger explains, "withdraws into a conception of reality that is subjective and isolated" (Heidegger 1971, p.54).

His *cinema di poesia* is a model of free indirect discourse designed to suspend subjectivity. Although the possibilities for poetic cinema are infinite, he defines three distinctive articulations. The first is the kind of "aesthetic consciousness" exemplified by Antonioni's *Deserto Rosso* (1964) with its obsessive framing of the "free indirect point of view shot". "In *Deserto Rosso* Antonioni no longer superimposes his own formalistic vision of the world on a generally committed content, [instead] he looks at the world by immersing himself in his neurotic protagonist, reanimating the facts through her eyes. [By doing so] he has substituted in toto for the world view of a neurotic his own delirious view of aesthetics" (Pasolini 1972, p.48). Pasolini does not advocate a suspension of the subjective point of view of the filmmaker, but the suspension of all identity formations. He does not deny subjectivity but puts it into crisis by

foregrounding the narrative and cinematic devices through which it operates.

The second attribute of *cinema di poesia* is a type of cinematic intensity created by "the abnormal duration of a shot or of an editing rhythm that explodes into a technical scandal" (Pasolini 1972, p.49). Bertolucci's *Prima della rivoluzione* (1964) serves as the prime example. Unlike Antonioni, who subsumes the point of view of the neurotic character, Bertolucci's vision is contaminated with the visions of his characters. This creates a tension between Bertolucci (who often digressively follows his own worldview) and his characters (who wander aimlessly, abandoned by his vision). The long *durée* of the shot helps to expose the gap between objectivism (that strives to depict a subjective point of view) and subjectivism that attempts to produce an affect (the emotional state of the characters).

The third articulation of *cinema di poesia* is the cinematic formalism that produces "camera consciousness". Pasolini finds this self-critical type of cinema in Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963). *Le Mépris* demonstrates how the cinematographer performs a "double operation" by simultaneously expressing the internal monologue of the filmmaker (or direct discourse) and by commenting on that very subjective operation from another external point of view. For example, the film opens with Godard reading the credits while we watch the main character, Michel Piccoli, being filmed. This camera consciousness is supplemented by the casting of Fritz Lang in the part of an embittered director forced to comply with the demands of a Hollywood producer who is solely concerned with marketing. The role of Lang comments not only on Lang's experience in Hollywood, but also on Godard's own bitterness caused by the producers who forced him to make the film more accessible and to film Brigitte Bardot in the nude. Godard consciously makes the filmmaking process (including his various roles within it) both subject and object of his film. The rendering of perspective as its own subject matter "makes it impossible for the spectator to delude himself that he is simply in front of a film" (Pasolini 1972, p.271). By objectifying the subjective perspective, Godard distances himself from this vision while making present the role of his vision within the film.

For Pasolini, cinema is the art of presence that has no pretensions to authenticity or originality and it does not reinforce subject/object positions and

oppositions. It is instead a medium that can call attention to itself, to its language and its devices, bringing the spectator into an ironic awareness that his/her own perspective is purely a fabrication (see Rumble 1996, p.27). *Cinema di poesia* responds to the trend in semiotic film theory to explore psycho-analytic tropes of the doubling or the splitting of the self, and what Heidegger (1971, p.76) calls the impulse to “misinterpret creation as the self-sovereign subjects’ performance of genius”. The role of *cinema di poesia* is “to create a language that puts the average man into crisis, the average spectator, in his relationship with mass media” (Pasolini 1972, p.28). Cinema provides Pasolini with a medium that can produce an impersonal, collective, type of singularity – a being with that goes beyond the boundaries of the bourgeois individual (borrowing from Duns Scotus, Deleuze and Guattari (1980, p.261) name this type of individuation *haecceity*, since it “consists entirely of relations of movement and rest between capacities to affect and be affected”).

De-centring the modern subject

Edipo re was the first of Pasolini’s films to take the construction of bourgeois individuality as its subject matter. Previous films like *La ricotta*, *Uccellacci e Uccellini* documented the disappearance of alternative modes of subjectivity, but were made in the style that Pasolini called *cinema nazionale popolare* – using characters from the under-classes, and a filmic style that was often likened to neorealism. *Edipo re* marked the shift towards unpopular cinema.

Unlike other myths, Oedipus has become a household word – Freud’s narrative model of everyman’s journey to individual subjectivity through sexual repression of libidinal desires. Pasolini’s *Edipo re* demonstrates how the myth of Oedipus has become so ingrained in popular culture to the point of representing all forms of sexual and political repression (all sexual relations and relations of power). The Oedipus complex covers up more nuanced readings and competing interpretations of the myth ranging from the ancient myth of Oedipus, to Sophocles’ tragic *Oedipus Rex*, Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Freud’s own Oedipal Complex, Lacan’s spectre of Oedipus, Deleuze and Guattari’s schizophrenic capitalist

subject, and even Pasolini’s autobiography. This film juxtaposes the interpretations of all these authors, bringing them face-to-face.

By introducing his own autobiography in the prologue to the film, Pasolini presents himself as an Oedipal subject:

In *Edipo Re* I recount the story of my own Oedipus complex. The little boy of the prologue is myself, his father is my father, a former army officer, and the mother, a teacher, is my own mother. . . . But while *Edipo Re* is the most autobiographical of my films, it is (also) the one that I regard with the most objectivity and detachment because, although it is true that I recount a personal experience which is over and which hardly interests me any longer. . . . Deep within me, it is no longer alive and violent. (Pasolini 1967, pp.13–16)

Later on, however, we encounter another Pasolini playing the part of a priest in Sophocles’ play, introducing us to the text of *Oedipus Rex* by delivering its first lines.⁶ This constant shift of roles between actor, director, analyst, and analysand is meant to undercut any stable notion of subjectivity. The reality represented in *Edipo re* is the reality of the theatricality of dreams, desires, and sentiments such as fathers’ hatred of sons, sons’ hatred of fathers, sons’ love for their mothers, and feelings of loss and abandonment. For instance, images of the father in *Edipo re* are simultaneously symbolic and ridiculous. The first resembles Pasolini’s own father, whom he describes in his parodic autobiographical poem “*Cocodrillo*” as “a fascist, a poor creature who came into the world just to be pitied and then to croak”. It is this figure who appears at the beginning of the film in full uniform, standing alone under the fascist flag. The same actor performs the part of Laius, who appears in imaginary royal attire, with an exaggeratedly tall crown to over-emphasise his phallic role. Oedipus, however, does not cower in fear but laughs at him and his empty symbols of power (Figure 5). He also seems to recognise Laius on some visceral level – an identification that propels him into a defiant rage. Pasolini does not present identification with the father as replacing a primary desire for the mother, as Freud argued, but shows that the refusal to identify with the father precedes the sexual desire for the mother. It is the hatred for the father or sovereignty that drives Oedipus to his sexual relationship with his mother.

What we have here is not an authority figure but the parodic theatricality of the Freudian Father. To make the connection to psychoanalytic theory



FIGURE 5. Image of Laius from *Edipo Re* (1966). Laius puts on his phallic crown only to have Oedipus laugh at him
 Source: *Edipo Re*, 1966. [film] Pasolini, P.P. dir. Bini, A. prod. Italy: Arco Film and Somafis.

more explicit, Pasolini (playing the role of the director) introduces Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* through the use of title cards. These inter-titles appear throughout the film, inserted in between images and characters so as to comment on the workings of the unconscious on the character's actions. Functioning as the literary device of free indirect discourse, these references to Freud end up questioning psychoanalysis' attempt to rationalise the unconscious and to territorialise desires and dreams through the imposition of Oedipal structures. *Edipo Re* points to the eschatological nature of psychoanalysis that, as Deleuze and Guattari (2004, p.271) put it:

mobilizes all the resources of myth, of tragedy, of dreams, in order to re-enslave desire, this time from within: an intimate theater. Yes, Oedipus is nevertheless the universal of desire, the product of universal history – but on one condition, which is not met by Freud: that Oedipus be capable, at least to a certain point, of conducting its autocritique. Universal history is nothing more than a theology if it does not seize control of the conditions of its contingent, singular existence, its irony, and its own critique.

The film does not begin with a dream, but with a precise autobiographical reference to the primal scene of Pasolini's birth (in Bologna in 1922). The point of view of the camera, however, remains distinctly disoriented. The establishing shot – of a replica of an ancient milestone inscribed with a hand pointing towards Thebes – is one of a series of rapid montage style shots, followed by the exterior shot of a city from the outlying fields, which is then followed by the exterior shot of a building. Only here, in front of this façade, does the camera seem to orient itself, zooming in on a window where we see a woman giving birth to a

baby boy. While the camera follows the image of the baby, it never enters the home or the room, but hovers voyeuristically outside the window.⁷

It is not until the next sequence that the camera takes the subjective point of view of the baby – watching the mother's hand as she holds a flower, and her feet as she runs off in the distance. The shot is then interrupted once again by a series of long shots, ending with the mother's direct gaze into the camera. This long-take shot of the mother's gaze reveals her face as both an affect image and a reflective surface that responds to the presence of the camera that inscribes her within a Freudian Oedipal narrative. After this long-take during which we watch the mother's face as it changes expression (from pleasure to anxiety, horror, and finally to resignation), the next shot takes up once again the subjective point of view of the camera. But this perspective is dizzying, moving from the face of the mother up to the trees, and quickly panning from right to left only to return to the face of the mother. Rather than suggesting that the mother is the centre of the child's world, Pasolini implies that this return to her face does not form a circle but a spiral. The mother is, in fact, presented as an object of the gaze, not so much of the child as of the adult who recalls her face and places her within his narrative. This questions whether the Oedipal narrative begins with childhood, or is learned as an adult and projected nostalgically onto one's own memory of childhood (see Figure 6).

This pan visualises the contamination of recollection (a memory without a narrative) with memory (a moment within a narrative). It also comments on the distortion of time required to turn memories into narratives. Rather than suture all these perspectives – of an objective camera, of a free indirect subjective point of view of the camera, of a direct gaze of the actors, or of the camera's mimicking the various characters' points of view – Pasolini presents their contamination. It is this confusion of perspectives (of subjective and objective positions) that points to the ambiguous boundaries of the self and its contrived narratives. Cinema functions as a self-overcoming – a self-critique of cinema and the place of subjectivity.

The shift in location sites cannot be explained as simple Oedipal projections, since each site is replete with competing historical markers. Bologna is the place of Pasolini's birth and Friuli the place where Pasolini grew up, but 1922 is the same year that Mussolini marched on Rome,

marking the beginning of State fascism. It is when the monarchist/fascist father grabs the baby by the ankles that we have the first shift in location and shift in time – from fascist Italy to an unspecified desert in North Africa. This movement from the autobiographical section of the film to the mythic part of the film seems to mimic an Orientalist gesture that defines the West (Italy) as historically specific (advanced) and the Orient as both untimely and mythic (backward). However, the movement from fascist Italy to North Africa recalls Italy's own failed colonial aspirations – beginning in 1909 with the colonisation of Libya and continuing with Mussolini's invasion of Eritrea and the Balkans in the 1930s and early 1940s. So it is not clear what exactly is being projected onto the Moroccan desert: the universal (imperial) Oedipal myth, or Fascist Italy's desire to associate itself with the history of the Roman Empire. What is clear is that this sudden juxtaposition of landscapes undermines the boundary between the historic and the imaginary. It is more than a simple critique of the West's (Europe's or Italy's) colonial imaginary, its acts of historical erasure, and the effacing of named space. By replacing ancient Greece with Morocco, Pasolini simultaneously presents two incompatible options: on the one hand, he presents Morocco as an ahistorical space. Ahistorical, however, does not mean that Morocco lacks a history. Instead it designates Morocco as a site that cannot be assimilated to Western narratives without such narratives exposing their political biases. On the other hand, it presents Morocco as a site that is undergoing oedipalisation – creating its own independent state that is modelled on a Western notion of the State.

But it is impossible to tell where Pasolini's myth of Oedipus originates. Ancient Greece or fascist Italy? Colonial or post-colonial Africa? In the prehistoric, prelinguistic, pre-Oedipal space of myth or in the Freudian family romance that begins with the son's guilt over his desire to kill his father? Or is it, as Deleuze and Guattari (2004, p.166) argue, that "everything starts in the mind of the Laius [who] . . . with his paranoia oedipalizes the son"? Is Pasolini suggesting that the universalisation of the Oedipal narrative is an attempt to oedipalise the Third World? All of these issues are purposefully left unclear. Instead of identifying the perpetrator (as Freud does), Pasolini uses an anonymous title card – "you are here to take my worldly place, throw me into the



FIGURE 6. The face of Jocasta in the opening of *Edipo Re* demonstrates a gradual change in emotional expression
Source: *Edipo Re*, 1966. [film] Pasolini, P.P. dir. Bini, A. prod. Italy: Arco Film and Somafis.

void and rob me of all that I have. And the first thing you will rob me of will be her, the woman I love, you have already robbed me of her love."

This inter-title appears after a shot-reverse-shot where the camera takes the perspective of the father looking down at his son in a baby carriage, and then the son looking up at his father dressed in a fascist uniform. The tension between father and son is conspicuously depicted by the father's glare and the son's crying but it is not clear whether the title card speaks for fathers against sons (individualised repression or paranoid oppression), for sons against fathers (repetition or rebellion against authority), for the individual against the fascist State, for the oedipalisation of the father by the fascist state, for the father's power over the son or for the son's mere existence that marks the imminent replacement of the father, or simply for a mutual dislike. Because of such ambiguities, "the individual Oedipal triangle is never allowed to form" (Caserino 1992, p.40). Moreover, these ambiguous relations treat the Oedipal triangle as what Deleuze and Guattari call an assemblage that effaces rather than sustains an ordered set of subject positions predicated on object relations.

Just as Pasolini brings various authorial figures face to face to question each other's authority, he also juxtaposes the landscapes of urban and rural fascist Italy, Morocco, and post-industrial Italy. The film cuts from fascist Italy to an ahistorical landscape (set in Morocco, but with characters wearing fantastic costumes), finally leaping to contemporary Italy. The musical soundtrack, which is used very symbolically throughout the film, has European classical (or serious music in minor key) mixed Romanian, Slavic, Greek, Arabic, and Japanese elements. Pasolini juxtaposes

different kinds of actors as well. He imports Sicilians, Neapolitans, and Romans from the slums to play the parts of Oedipus and his servants, while using professional actors speaking high Italian to play the part of the other nobles.

These multi-level shifts force us to think about the relationship of Oedipal fantasies to fascism, Italian and European colonialism, post-Industrial Europe, and pre- and post-fascist fantasies about North Africa. We are also asked to question the relationship of the universal Oedipal structure of the family to the individual Oedipus who is both a native born son and a stranger to his homeland. In *Edipo re*, Oedipus does return to his place of birth, but his return is just another form of exile. For example, at the end of the film, Edipo returns to Italy, but it is not the Fascist Italy of his father and his youth, but contemporary Italy. His return begins in Bologna and moves to Milan, but ends up in the same pasture in Friuli that we see in the beginning of the film. It is here that he realises his end in his beginning. But what does this knowledge offer?

Following Pasolini, we come to ask how Edipo's pursuit of knowledge leads to nothing other than the guilty knowledge that he is no longer innocent, that his very pursuit of knowledge (his origin) destroys its own object (his origins). Ironically, this desperate search for self-knowledge and self-identification leaves Edipo without anything other than a self, yet a self devoid of all passion and life (potential for becoming). Like the sphinx in *Edipo Re*, knowledge (as rediscovery) seduces us with a promised re-appropriation, and self-recognition, but can only beg the question, "there is an enigma in your life, what is it?" By refusing to address this question the Sphinx claims that Edipo opens up an internal abyss into which both the Sphinx and the question are cast. Ironically, it is only in the process of responding to such a question that he foments "the abyss inside" by moving out of his senses into an obsessive pursuit of what is irrecoverable – the past, origin, the repetition of a sense of presence. Pasolini's Edipo points out that the Freudian Oedipus is never finished with the Sphinx. In fact, once Oedipus becomes fixated with self-knowledge he abandons the circular time of myth and with it his erotic relations with the world, accepting the rigorous and static order of the untimely and other-worldly narcissistic ego. As Deleuze explains: "The narcissistic ego has no more than a dead body, having lost the body at the same time as the objects . . . It is the relation

between the narcissistic ego and the death instinct that Freud indicated so profoundly in saying that there is no reflux of the libido on the ego without it becoming desexualized and forming a neutral displaceable energy, essentially capable of serving Thanatos" (Deleuze 1994, p.111).

It is after identifying the enigma as man (identifying with the enigma) that the tragedy of Oedipus begins: he marries Jocasta, becomes King of Thebes, and replaces the Sphinx as the city's scourge. That is, once Oedipus installs himself in a linear narrative with its beginning (what walks on four legs in the morning?), middle (what walks on two legs in the afternoon?), and end (what walks on three legs in the afternoon?), he replaces Eros (with all of its endless relations and possibilities) for Thanatos (which is a pure form, or an empty form of time, an obsession with death at the expense of life). Rather than read the Sophocles tragedy or the Freudian version of Oedipus offering universal models, taboos, and laws, his Edipo offers no solutions, resolutions, or purifications, via catharsis.

Edipo is left with an empty identity as an abstract universality. This emptiness seems to have two characteristics: the black nothing of desire, which Lacan describes as desiring one's own repression (Edipo's desexualised pursuit of self-knowledge); and the white nothing that Deleuze (1994, p.28) describes as a "calm surface upon which float unconnected determinations like scattered members" (a series of scattered images, a poetics that does not amount to narrative meaning). It is this white abyss that the film asks us to contemplate. It is an abyss of potentials rather than a representation of failed narratives – failed desires, empty meaning, endless repression, and repetition of the same.

Unlike the film's narrative, the juxtaposition of landscapes, people, time-images, recollection-images, music, and cultural references creates a sense of ambiguity, and uncertainty that does not amount to dread nor a unified subject that can be classified as the multitude or hybridity. Pasolini gives us neither a past nor a future, but a series of possible poetic connections. To recognise or identify plurality, heterogeneity, or the multitude as a force of resistance, would simply presuppose an affinity between opposition, morality, and truth (whether it is primordial or future-oriented). But it also would constitute what Deleuze calls a future-oriented, "eternally blessed unspecified eternal object", whether in the form of Oedipus, repression,

free market capitalism, communism, socialism, or Tea Party Christianity. There is nothing new about these ideologies based on a promised future or an irretrievable past. “For the new – in other words, difference – calls forth forces in thought which are not the forces of recognition, today or tomorrow, but the powers of a completely other model, from an unrecognized and unrecognizable *terra incognita*” (see Deleuze 1994, pp.136–138). Deleuze (1994, p.136) argues that it is only through recognition as a sign that “thought ‘rediscovers’ the State, rediscovers ‘the Church’ and discovers all the current values that it subtly presented in the pure form of an eternally blessed unspecified eternal object . . . What gets established with the new is precisely not the new. For the new – in other words difference – calls forth forces in thought which are not the forces of recognition, today or tomorrow, but the powers of a completely other model, from an unrecognized and unrecognizable *terra incognita*.” This construct of an eternally blessed, unspecified eternal object is part of what Deleuze calls representation in general.

For Pasolini (Figure 7), this “*terra incognita*” erupts, and corrupts the images of the past and the future by making incompatible associations. As Deleuze writes,

It is not difference which presupposes opposition but opposition which presupposes difference, and far from resolving difference by tracing it back to a foundation, opposition betrays and distorts it. On what condition is difference traced or projected on to a flat space? Precisely when it has been forced into a previously established identity, when it has been placed on the slope of the identical which makes it reflect or desire identity, and necessarily takes it where identity wants it to go – namely to the negative. (Deleuze 1994, p.51)

This opposition produces an other, but is merely an abstraction of an encounter – the unique encounter is transposed from a foundational expression into a legible relation out of which a two-dimensional, negative, identity is formed. It is an identity, which relies on the recognition of difference, but here the

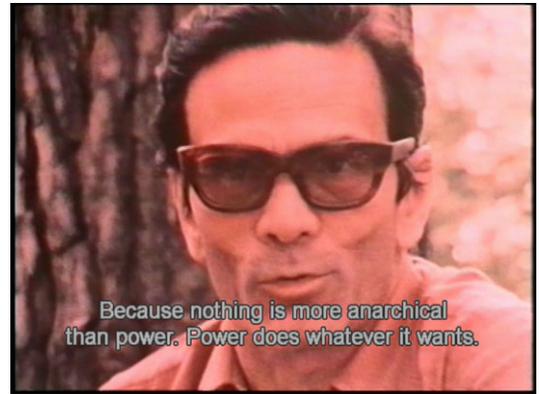


FIGURE 7. Pier Paolo Pasolini (1995), a 58-minute documentary by filmmaker Ivo Barnabò Micheli
Source: Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1995. [documentary] Micheli, I.B. dir. Italy: Istituto Luce.

singular expression of difference is translated into a general understanding.

Pasolini's unpopular opposition, on the other hand, does not function like the practice of opposition described by Deleuze. Rather it performs the unthought, revealing how opposition is just another form of representation that disguises itself as thinking. What remains unthought is the transformation of empirical facts, situations, and experiences into images or identities. But cinema allows Pasolini to simultaneously produce a sense of presence, and reflect on it critically. By juxtaposing myths, poetry, histories, and various other narratives (visual, literary, etc.) poetic cinema “unthinks” the logic of positionality that gives legitimacy to institutional and conventional truths. What emerges is a radical otherness as a form of affirmation but it cannot affirm an identity, because it involves too many analogies (too many possible differences and resemblances at the same time), too many perspectives, and too many possible others, expressions and experiences of otherness.

Notes

1. Martin Heidegger suggests that “we are still not yet thinking”, rather we are “blinking”, i.e. “playing up and setting up a glittering deception which is then agreed

upon as true and valid – with the mutual tacit understanding not to question the set-up.” To think, therefore, must be more than to question, it must question all

truisms, all self-deception about history that prevent us from hearing the language of thinking. Hence for Heidegger, the “unthought is the greatest gift that

thinking can bestow” (Heidegger 1968, pp.74–79). Unlike reality, cinema can simultaneously produce a sense of presence, and reflect on it critically. By juxtaposing myths, poetry, histories, and various other narratives (visual, literary, etc.), poetic cinema “unthinks” the logic of positionality that gives legitimacy to institutional and conventional truths.

2. In response to Derrida, Slavoj Žižek (1994, p.17) argues that we should look to this spectre as the last refuge for ideology: “We should recognize the fact that there is no reality without the spectre, that the circle of reality can be closed only by means of an uncanny spectral supplement. Why, then, is there no reality without the spectre? . . . [Because for Lacan] reality is not the ‘thing itself’, [rather] it is always-already symbolized . . . , and the problem resides in the fact that symbolization ultimately always fails, that it never succeeds in fully ‘covering’ the real . . . [This real] returns in the guise of spectral apparitions. ‘Spectre’ is not to be confused with ‘symbolic fiction’ . . . reality is never directly ‘itself’, it presents itself only via its incomplete-failed symbolization, and spectral apparitions emerge in this very gap that forever separates reality from the real, and on account of which reality has the character of a (symbolic) fiction: the spectre gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality.” In his “Introduction to *Passive Nihilism: Cultural historiography and the rhetorics of scholarship*,” Sande Cohen makes a radical critique of both Derrida’s and Žižek’s notions of spectrality and the future (past) of Marxism. Cohen (1999, p.179) argues that: “despite the heroics of the project, it unfortunately makes ghosts and specters come before every ‘before’ . . . It hollows out, first, the cultural space of language with phantoms, specters, and ghosts, and second, idealizes a new scholar who can speak to absences of all kinds . . . This new scholar is

to offer sure play instead of opting for the risks of criticism.” As Cohen points out, the Marxist subject has turned into a ghostly ethics, an absolute obligation to the past.

3. “*Gioco dialettico sprofondato nel profondo, oh / sì!, da ricostruire stilema per stilema, / perché in ogni parola scritta nel Bel Paese dove il No / suona, c’era opposto allo stile quel Sema / imposto, la lingua di un popolo / che doveva ancora essere classe, problema / saputo e risolto solo in sogno* [Dialectical game sunken into the deep, oh / yes! To be reconstructed styleme after styleme / because in each word written in the Bel Paese where the No / sounds, there was opposed to the style of the Seed / unpossessed, the language of the people /who still needed to become a class, a problem].” (“Il progetto di future opere” from *Selected Poems*, 1982, pp.91–92). It is this “dialectical game” played by academics, priests, politicians, and revolutionaries “with their bourgeois thinking” that ends up presenting opposition as a model a beginning or seed, a problem of style rather than what is truly radical about existence.

4. However, as Deleuze points out, the virtual (the image, the icon or myth) needs to precede the actual (realisation, actor, object, or thing) in order to bring about the very possibility of experiences being actualised. The determinations of the virtual and the actual in both Pasolini and Deleuze are signals of an attempted reversal of Platonism. Here we have a clear logic that goes against representation. If Platonism hinges on logic of the original and the copy, or rather, as Pasolini claims, an opposition between the Form-model and the simulacrum (the ‘bad copy’), then he makes a move antithetical to this logic. In Deleuze, instead of the Platonic Forms we have the virtual, while the simulacra of Plato become the actual in Deleuze. Hence, the question is no

longer “Was the film realistic?” But “What was realised in the film?” (see Deleuze 1989, 1994; see also Schwartz 2005).

5. “*Per ironia, terrò a vile, ogni precedente sistemazione e sotto il segno primario di Marx e quello, a seguire di Freud, ristabilirò nuove.*” [To mimic so as to defile every preceding systematization of meaning, first under the sign of Marx, and then under the sign of Freud. By repeating their structures, I will establish a new reigning hierarchy].

6. But in Pasolini’s *Affabulazione* written in 1966, he gives Sophocles the first word. In the first few lines of the play Sophocles introduces himself and the themes of the play in the prologue. Yet, unlike the real Sophocles, Sophocles (the character) does not talk about the tragic fate of kings who are destined to kill their fathers and marry their mothers. Instead he talks about arbitrary relations and unpredictable outcomes of the complex relationship between fathers and sons. In *Affabulazione* it is the father who kills his son after the son rejects his love. However, this is not a rejection of authority. The son only seemingly rejects authority so as to please his father (who wants him to rebel against the law of the father). But he finally admits to his father that all he wants is to be a bourgeois industrialist like his father, and to conform to bourgeois moral values. Conformity is therefore the only expression of rebellion open to the son, and it is conformity without love. In *Affabulazione*, the ghost of Sophocles also gets the last line, by commenting on the role of theatre itself: he explains to the father: “*L’uomo si è accorto della realtà / solo quando l’ha rappresentata* [Man becomes conscious of reality / only when he has represented it]” (*Affabulazione*, Pasolini 1977, p.236). The play therefore points to its own theatricality, the one involved in the process representation. Rather than just signal the

collapse of the sacred fortress of the bourgeois family, *Affabulazione* like *Teorema* points to the implosion of traditional narratives, aesthetic forms, moral values, and religious beliefs.

7. As David Wiles (1997, pp.426–427) notes: “The spatial opposition

of *orchestra* and *skene* door articulates a conflict that is, in large measure, a conflict of male and female.” He goes on to argue that the “gendering of space” in the *Oresteia* “is typical of fifth-century Greek thinking. The woman is associated with enclosed space in accordance with her sexuality

(enclosed genitalia), her reproductive functions (the enclosing womb) and her economic role (within the *oikos*, the home), while the male is associated with the public space where, according to democratic ideology, his major role lay” (as in an Attic tragedy).

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