above: *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Photofest)
cover: *Mamma Roma* (Photofest)

Pier Paolo Pasolini's Cinema of Poetry

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I am a force of the past.
Tradition is my only love.
I come from the ruins, and churches,
and altarpieces, the abandoned
villages of the Apennines and the Pre-Alps
where my brothers lived.

—Pier Paolo Pasolini

Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975) was arguably the most important artist and intellectual in Italy after World War II. He was a poet, novelist, playwright, linguist, philologist, critic, journalist, actor, painter, polemicist, theorist, political activist, provocateur, Marxist, atheist, homosexual, and film director; few modern artists have been as imbued with a reverence and love of Italian art, language, and culture as he. While his dissident views on Italian politics and contemporary life were controversial during his lifetime, he is now recognized as a visionary and creative thinker whose writings continue to influence European art, politics, and culture.

Pasolini was born in Bologna on March 5, 1922. His mother was a schoolteacher, his father an officer in the Italian army. From an early age Pasolini witnessed a tension between his mother's antifascist politics and the fascist and militaristic values of his father. Pasolini spent much of his childhood in Casarsa della Delizia in the province of Udine. Here in the Friuli region of northeastern Italy, in his mother's ancestral home, the young Pasolini encountered the rich traditions of the Friulian language and culture. His first book of poems would be written in the Friulian dialect.

Giotto, *Madonna and Child*, probably 1320/1330, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

Decameron (Photofest)

In 1939 Pasolini enrolled at the University of Bologna where he studied literature and art. His most important educational experiences took place in the courses taught by the noted art historian Roberto Longhi (1890 – 1970). Longhi's seminal scholarship on the art of Giotto, Masaccio, and Piero della Francesca would profoundly affect Pasolini's aesthetic as a filmmaker. Throughout his life Pasolini referred to Longhi as his true mentor (he dedicated his second film, *Mamma Roma*, to the art historian). Longhi, for his part, recognized Pasolini's talents as both poet and visual artist. Writing about the lack of understanding of Piero's work by art historians, Longhi stated: "Far more worthy of being remembered, I believe, is the poetry devoted to Piero by Pier Paolo Pasolini, who thus follows in the wake of D'Annunzio and Rafael Alberti." It was during his student years in Bologna that Pasolini started to paint.

When Pasolini turned to filmmaking he was already a mature artist and thinker. He had published two important novels: *Ragazzi di vita* (1955) and *Una vita violenta* (1959), in which he explored the same themes of the Roman sub-proletariat portrayed in his first film, *Accattone* (1961). Pasolini remarked in an interview: "When I was studying in Bologna I loved the cinema very much and I was already planning to come and study at the Centro Sperimentale [founded in Rome in 1935]. I have been thinking of films all my life." In addition to thinking about films, he was also thinking about the history of painting. In 1962 he wrote:

> My cinematographic taste does not originate in cinema but the visual arts. What I have in mind as a vision, as a visual field, are the frescoes of Masaccio, of Giotto — the painters I love the most, together with certain Mannerists (for example, Pontormo). I cannot conceive

images, landscapes, or compositions of figures outside of my initial passion for fourteenth-century painting where man was the center of all perspective….I always conceive the background as the background of a painting…and therefore I always attack it frontally. (Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Mamma Roma*, 1962)

The history of art and the lives of artists figure prominently in Pasolini's films. Beyond Giotto, Masaccio, Piero, and Pontormo, one finds references to the paintings of Duccio, Mantegna, Rosso Fiorentino, El Greco, Caravaggio, and the modern painters Giorgio Morandi and Georges Rouault. In *The Decameron* (1970), based on the stories by Giovanni Boccaccio, the director himself stars as a painter who is Giotto's "best pupil." His films of the 1960s best exemplify this love of aesthetic cross-fertilization and reliance upon the visual language of Italian painting. They include *Accattone*, *Mamma Roma* (1962), *La Ricotta* (1963), *The Gospel According to Matthew* (1964), and *Hawks and Sparrows* (1966).

At the heart of Pasolini's film language and visual style reside several intertwined concepts underpinning what he called the "poetry of cinema." They include contamination, the sacredness of the real world (re-sacralizing of life), and cinema as "writing with reality." Taken together, these concepts moved Pasolini away from his roots in Italian neorealism (the films of Rossellini, De Sica, and early Visconti) to a more personal, lyrical, and expressive style (one nevertheless filled with complexity, analytic rigor, and at times, contradiction).

El Greco, *Christ Cleansing the Temple*, probably before 1570, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

Accattone (Photofest)

Contamination

By “contamination,” Pasolini means the combining of the sacred and profane. His films abound with references and links between sub-proletariat characters, e.g. Accattone, and a host of biblical and Christian symbols, characters, and events. His camera techniques and editing often echo Italian paintings of the past. This purely formal contamination can encompass the use of Caravaggesque light, severely foreshortened points of view (à la Mantegna), and close-up portraits of faces (à la Masaccio). While the physical characteristics of his protagonists’ faces recall memorable painted portraits of Jesus, Mary, the apostles and saints in Trecento and Quattrocento Italian art, the roles they act out as pimps, prostitutes, beggars, or street thugs undermine the connection. This contamination causes the viewer to experience disjunction, confusion, and ambivalence regarding good and evil, Christian and pagan, sacred and profane, right and wrong, morality and amorality. These feelings are made all the more palpable in Pasolini films by his selection of music. In *Accattone* and *The Gospel According to Matthew*, for example, we hear passages from Bach’s exulted *Saint Matthew Passion* during some of the harshest scenes of low-life activity.

The Sacredness of Real Life

It is largely through this contamination of images that Pasolini wants us to think about the presence of the sacred in everyday life. The character of Accattone has often been referred to as an inverted Christ figure. Characters’ names refer to their biblical counterparts, for example, Maddalena. Accattone meets his end between two thieves (like Jesus). His final words, spoken not from the cross but from the gutter, are not “It is finished” but “Now I am fine.” The film is visually multilayered and we are made aware of its staging, strange angles of vision, and artificialities — most especially because Pasolini tends to stress the individual shot, to think of it as a static, poetic, visual image like a painting.

Writing with Reality

Pasolini began his career as a poet and writer. His approach to filmmaking is tied to the importance of language and writing. He came to think of cinema as the most potent form of writing and self-expression, as “writing with reality.” It is here that his films combine with his intellect to extend themselves into the social and political realms. The visual and semantic language of his films touches up against a host of contemporary Italian political and social issues, many related to Italy’s postwar industrial boom, the economic transformation of the country, and the abandonment and dislocation of the people, dialects, and customs in the countryside and on the city margins — the people of the Roman *borgate*, for example, where traditional sacred rites still played out in all their ritualistic and often violent ways.

In *Mamma Roma*, a corrupt social and political order destroys any hope a mother (a former prostitute) has for a better life for her young son. The allegedly blasphemous (anti-Catholic) and obscene content in *La Ricotta* (1962) — Pasolini’s contribution to the film *RoGoPaG*, with episodes by Pasolini, Roberto Rossellini, Jean-Luc Godard, and Ugo Gregoretti — led to controversy and a jail sentence. In *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pasolini’s Jesus is a firebrand and revolutionary, the words of his Gospel exploding like spiritual shrapnel. In *Hawks*

Duccio di Buoninsegna, c. 1255–1318, *The Calling of the Apostles Peter and Andrew*, 1308/1311, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

The Gospel According to Matthew (Photofest)

and Sparrows, Pasolini rails against the decadent consumer capitalism of Italy's postwar years and the threat it poses to the last vestiges of a deeply rooted and traditional premodern culture. This message is conveyed in the film through the character of a talking crow (Pasolini's alter ego) who delivers a Marxist critique of the situation. One recalls lines from Pasolini's poem: "I am a force of the past. / Tradition is my only love." This is the same poem Pasolini had Orson Welles read in *La Ricotta*, against the backdrop of a movie set where the Crucifixion of Jesus is being filmed while disco music plays and young people dance.

By the end of the 1960s, Pasolini was eager to enlarge the ambition and scope of his filmmaking and storytelling beyond the confines of contemporary Italy and its plight. He turned to a cycle of mythic topics that included *Oedipus Rex* (1967) and *Medea* (1969). His desire was to create a more universal visual language that placed the great works of Greek tragedy and world literature in service to the modern ideal of individual freedom. The *Trilogy of Life*, consisting of *The Decameron*, *The Canterbury Tales* (1972), and *Arabian Nights* (1974), furthered Pasolini's ideological desire to contaminate and confront the ever-shifting semantics of past and present, image and word, art and the growing threat of a repressive mass-media technology. Given the trajectory of Pasolini's beliefs and concerns, his final controversial and incendiary film, *Salò* (1975), should not have come as a surprise.

Any filmmaker whose work confronts the audience with as diverse a group of writers and texts as Saint Francis, Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Dante, Chaucer, Boccaccio, the Marquis de Sade, Greek tragedy, and the Bible is obviously a director sensitive to the power of both the word and the image. More than any other Italian filmmaker, it was Pasolini who captured the rich complexity of Italy's cultural past and staked his claim

as its legitimate modern heir and champion. His relentless and rigorous dissection of the major social, political, and religious institutions of modern Italy explored and revealed through a controversial and often inflammatory body of written and visual work must certainly be accounted for in any discussion of his violent and untimely death.

Pasolini's brutal murder in the outskirts of Rome on November 2, 1975, was a tragic and ironic twist of fate; to some, an almost preordained event, tied to so many of his personal, political, and artistic attitudes, theories, and pronouncements about art and life. In a sense it was the film of his own life in its final cut — something Pasolini had remarked upon when at one point he said: "It is only at the moment of death that our life, to that point indecipherable, ambiguous, suspended, acquires a meaning."

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