



Heavenly Earth: Visions of Saint Francis in Italian Cinema

David Gariff



Notes to accompany the films *Francesco d'Assisi*,
The Flowers of Saint Francis, and *Hawks and
Sparrows*, screening Sunday, April 1, 2018, at the
National Gallery of Art

nga.gov/film

(front cover) *Uccellacci e uccellini (Hawks and Sparrows)*
(above) *The Flowers of Saint Francis*
(back cover) *Francesco d'Assisi*
Courtesy Photofest



If you know that I am an unbeliever, then you know me better than I do myself. I may be an unbeliever, but I am an unbeliever who has a nostalgia for a belief.

— Pier Paolo Pasolini (1966)¹



(above) Annibale Carracci, *Saint Francis of Assisi*, 1585, engraving, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Fund



(right) Cosmè Tura, *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, 1470s, miniature on vellum, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection

SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI (1181/1182–1226) was a complex and contradictory figure in religious history. The son of a wealthy silk merchant, he indulged in many of the youthful pleasures and pursuits that his station in life afforded. He was familiar with sin, as he later admitted, and was also ambitious, longing for prestige and status.

Francis only slowly came to alter his life of pleasure. As a young soldier he fought in a minor conflict between Assisi and Perugia during which he was taken prisoner and held captive for a year. He became ill and began to experience doubts about the life he had led up to this point. Upon his release, however, his ambition to become a great knight returned. His princely ambitions were finally shaken by two prophetic dreams that turned his thoughts toward the spiritual life. Rather than striking out on

new military adventures, he decided to remain in Assisi, where he radically transformed his life, embracing vows of poverty, humility, and compassion. Others soon joined him, preaching and living by his example as the Order of Friars Minor.

Francis's religious conversion and the subsequent events of his life are well known: his search for forgiveness in the eyes of God; his turn to a contemplative and prayerful life; his response to God's call to repair his church; his commitment to a life of poverty, suffering, and, at times, humiliation; the experience of the stigmata; his sermons to the birds and animals; his love of nature; and the recognition of the Franciscan order by Pope Innocent III in 1209 all contribute to Saint Francis's status as one of the most venerated saints of the Catholic Church. At times soft-spoken and humble, at other times fiery and uncompromising, Saint Francis inspired innumerable books, plays, poems, operas, musical compositions, ballets, paintings, sculptures, and films, especially in Italy.

Three highly regarded interpretations of the life of Saint Francis in Italian cinema are *The Flowers of Saint Francis* (1950), directed by Roberto Rossellini; *Uccellacci e uccellini* (*Hawks and Sparrows*) (1966), directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini; and *Francis of Assisi* (1966), directed by Liliana Cavani. Each film explores different aspects of Francis: as religious and political radical; marginalized reformer; and voice for the poor, humble, dispossessed, and rejected.

With *The Flowers of Saint Francis* (or, *Francesco, giullare di Dio* [*Francis, God's Jester*], its full Italian title), Roberto Rossellini (1906–1977) emerges from the neorealist tradition of Italian cinema founded, in no small measure, on his earlier films of the 1940s. Rossellini's film displays a simplicity and naïveté based in part on the thirteenth-century prose works *I fioretti di San Francesco* (*The Flowers of Saint Francis*) and *La vita di frate*

Ginepro (*The Life of Brother Juniper*), published after Francis's death. Rossellini seems interested in the broader implications of Saint Francis's message, or philosophy, and its significance for the modern world. Less a biography and more a hymn or rumination on the power of the spirit, Rossellini pushes against the limits of his own neorealist past and charts a more mystical, medieval course.

As in the films of Rossellini's younger contemporary Pasolini, the visual language of *The Flowers of Saint Francis* is never far from that of Italian painting in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Artists such as Giotto (c. 1265–1337), Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449–1494), and the Master of the Legend of Saint Francis (active 1300–1330s?) were influenced by Saint Francis's life, as seen in frescoes in the Bardi Chapel in the Church of Santa Croce in Florence, in the Sassetti Chapel in Santa Trinita, also in Florence, and in the Upper Church of the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi, respectively. Pasolini, in looking back to Saint Francis much in the way these earlier artists had, saw himself as “a force of the past,”² a sentiment echoed in Rossellini's comment that he was inspired by “the historical moment.” As Rossellini states:

It was important for me then to affirm everything that stood against slyness and cunning. In other words, I believed then and still believe that simplicity is a very powerful weapon.... The innocent one will always defeat the evil one. I am absolutely convinced of this.... Then, if we want to go back to the historical moment, we must remember that these were cruel and violent centuries, and yet in those centuries of violence appeared Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Catherine of Siena.³



Bernardo Strozzi, *Saint Francis in Prayer*, c. 1620/1630, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Joseph F. McCrindle

Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975) was among the most important artists and intellectuals active in late post-World War II Italian culture. Born in Bologna, he entered the University of Bologna in 1939, where he studied both literature and art. His most important formative experience at the university, however, occurred when he enrolled in art history courses taught by Roberto Longhi (1890–1970). It was at this time that Pasolini began to study painting and art history seriously. In *Uccellacci e uccellini*, paintings by the Italian primitives (Italian masters of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries) visually underpin almost every frame of the film.

Uccellacci e uccellini was Pasolini's alleged favorite of his films. It is presented as a fable featuring Italy's beloved comedian Totò, the young comic actor Ninetto Davoli, and a talking crow who recites a tale of two friars asked by Saint Francis to preach a doctrine of love to the overbearing hawks and lowly sparrows of the field. The three travelers ramble around the countryside, seeing only a defiled and dreary landscape, abused by the greed of industrial society.

Totò communicates with the hawks by chirping and with the sparrows by hopping. He eventually becomes such a famous holy man that peddlers set up stands and sell brooms and watermelons wherever he prays. One day, in a fit of rage, Totò drives the peddlers away. Pasolini posits that in the struggle between Marxism and Christianity, each "religion" speaks only to those who are already believers.

All of Pasolini's films confront aspects of Italy's contemporary political and social problems related to the country's postwar industrial boom, its economic transformation, and the abandonment of its people, dialects, and customs in the countryside and on the city margins, where traditional sacred rites still played out in ritualistic fashion. Pasolini regarded



Domenico Veneziano, *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, c. 1445/1450, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

Italy's economic boom and the wave of rapid social change that followed as a catastrophe sweeping away Italy's last vestiges of premodern culture and replacing them with the predatory and destructive aspects of consumer capitalism. The talking crow in *Uccellacci e uccellini* delivers the filmmaker's Marxist critique of the situation. An homage to silent comedy, the crow is Pasolini's parting shot at contemporary Italy before he turned to his cycle of mythic films.

Liliana Cavani was born in 1933 in Carpi (near Modena) and studied at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome, Italy's national film school. Her earliest films were documentaries. Cavani made two films about Saint Francis: *Francis of Assisi* (1966) and *Francesco* (1989). Both were controversial.

Francis of Assisi was her first feature film and also the first film produced by the RAI (Italy's national broadcasting network). It displays a realism and visual weight that recalls, in part, Cavani's earlier documentary work. The film enjoyed enormous success and reflected the cultural and societal changes occurring in Italy in the sixties. Because it was a made-for-TV film, its reach and impact were immediate. For some, the film was "heretical, blasphemous, and offensive for the faith of the Italian people."⁴ Cavani's Francis is a youth who challenges authority in all its forms — family, church, state — awakening to the new and often destabilizing forces at work in the world. For others (Pasolini, for example), Cavani's Francis is a failed, or at least flawed, revolutionary unable to move past self-realization to militant action and reform.

Cavani most closely resembles Pasolini as a filmmaker, with similar attitudes and aspirations. The two met in 1966 at a private screening of Cavani's film. Pasolini was gently critical of Cavani's film, praising its aesthetics but less enthusiastic about its ideology and "absence of a sacred myth" necessary to em-

phasize Francis's uniqueness. For Pasolini, "Cavani's Francesco does not succeed in being different, in being a saint."⁵

It can be said that the three Saint Francis films by Rossellini, Pasolini, and Cavani collectively subvert the hagiography of the beloved saint in order to critique the relevance of neorealism, the politics of Italy, the morality of the Catholic Church, the bankruptcy of consumer culture, and the personal crisis of faith. In so doing, Saint Francis's radical visions were enlisted in a contemporary struggle against oppressive accepted norms and conformist ideologies.

Notes

1

Pier Paolo Pasolini, quoted in Gregory and Maria Pearse, "Quo Vadis? The Fate of Pier Paolo Pasolini," cinemaseekers.com/pasolini.html, accessed March 5, 2018.

2

Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Worldly Poem," in *The Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (Chicago, 2014), 312–313.

3

Roberto Rossellini, "Un cinema diverso per un mondo che cambia," *Bianco e nero* 25, no. 1 (January 1964): 14. Cited in Peter Brunette, *Roberto Rossellini* (Berkeley, 1996), 378n9.

4

Gaetana Marrone, *The Gaze and the Labyrinth: The Cinema of Liliana Cavani* (Princeton, 2000), 201.

5

Francesco Bolzoni, "Lo scandalo di Francesco," *Orizzonti*, June 5, 1966, 30.

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