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## Pasolini's Cinema of Regression

Pier Paolo Pasolini's most famous piece of film theory is "The Cinema of Poetry" (1965), in which he revives (consciously?) a distinction made almost forty years earlier by Viktor Shklovsky between a prosaic cinema and a poetic one. According to Shklovsky, "[in] its plot construction, its semantic composition, a prose work is based primarily on a combination of everyday situations," while "in a poetic film the technical-formal features predominate over the semantic features."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Pasolini defines the cinema of prose as the cinema of classical narrative, which is based on a repression of the cinema's poetic qualities. With the establishment of the conventions of the cinematic prose narrative, the cinema's "irrational, oneiric, elementary, and barbaric elements were forced below the level of consciousness."<sup>2</sup>

Pasolini identifies cinema with dreams and memory because both are based on the signification of images. This identification places the poetic cinema closer to the primary process than the cinema of prose. Plot becomes a form of secondary revision, turning cinema into a "genre of escapist performance, with a number of consumers unimaginable for all other forms of expression."<sup>3</sup> Thus the cinema of the prose narrative is a deformation of the true cinema, the cinema of poetry, a deformation caused by the consumerism that Pasolini saw all around him and which he hated for its ability to degrade everything it touched. However, just as psychic repression never destroys the repressed content, so too "the fundamentally irrational nature of cinema cannot be eliminated."<sup>4</sup> Pasolini finds moments of poetry even

in prose narrative films. In his own films, he sought to restore the primary nature of cinema. His is a cinema of regression.

Freud distinguishes three kinds of regression in *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

(a) *topographical* regression, [i.e., from consciousness toward the unconscious] . . . ; (b) *temporal* regression, in so far as what is in question is a harking back to older psychological structures; and (c) *formal* regression, where primitive methods of expression and representation take the place of the usual ones.<sup>5</sup>

All three types of regression find expression in Pasolini's films. His attempt to move from the cinema of prose, of rationality, toward a poetic cinema related to the primary processes is a form of topographical regression. The nostalgia of many of the films parallels their pregenital eroticism; both are forms of temporal regression, one in the broad sense of the word, the other in the more properly Freudian sense of a return to an earlier stage of libidinal development. Most importantly, formal regression takes the shape of Pasolini's search for a more poetic narrative structure. Despite labeling narrative as typical of prose cinema, he never rejects narrative itself. Instead he rejects the dominant mode of narrative (as in the classic Hollywood film) based on the Aristotelian dicta of a unified plot tracing one action completed by a protagonist, in which the action proceeds according to laws of probability and necessity and the characters maintain a psychological consistency.

If, as Peter Wollen has suggested, film makers write theory primarily to explain their most recent work, the most logical film to begin with would be *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to Matthew*), which came out in 1964, the year before Pasolini wrote "The Cinema of Poetry." But in fact, elements of a poetic regression can be found in his previous two fictional features, *Accatone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962). *Accatone* contains a dream sequence in which the title character attends his own funeral, a sequence which Pasolini called "epic-mythic-fantastic," adding that "these aren't typical characteristics of the petit bourgeoisie."<sup>6</sup> By locating the cinema of poetry in opposition to bourgeois cinema, Pasolini links his aesthetics to his politics. Because the bourgeoisie is a totalizing force of corruption and hypocrisy, it cannot be defeated but can be eluded through

regression to the pre-bourgeois, which Pasolini identified as the peasant, the archaic, the unconscious. Besides the dream sequence, the episodic nature of the narrative also gives *Accatone* its epic-mythic-fantastic quality. Like the epic, *Accatone* has an episodic plot tracing the history of an individual, without the teleology and unity of the classic film narrative. The same can be said of *Mamma Roma*. In this case, the narrative's episodic nature is underscored by a repeated shot of the desolate view from Mamma Roma's coveted high-rise apartment. This shot returns like a refrain several times in the course of the film, and becomes the film's final shot. This use of a refrain is a link between the cinema and oral culture, itself a regression towards the past away from the present of mass media communication.

Similarly, *Gospel* preserves the episodic structure of the original instead of presenting the event as a seamless plot in the manner of the Hollywood Bible picture. Pasolini makes no attempt to stitch the episodes together to provide a continuity; rather, the episodic structure serves to emphasize the contradictory nature of the gospel. Christ is by turns severe and gentle, imperious and humble. This emphasis on contradiction constitutes an example of formal regression, a move toward the primary process. The kind of narrative continuity that Pasolini discards can be seen as similar to Freud's secondary revision, which "fills up the gaps in the dream-structure" so that "the dream loses its appearance of . . . disconnectedness and approximates to the model of an intelligible experience."<sup>7</sup> Christian Metz specifies that cinema's similarity to dreaming is limited to a film being "a dream in which secondary revision does nearly everything by itself, a dream where the primary process plays only a furtive and intermittent role, a role of gap-maker, a role of *escape*."<sup>8</sup>

Pasolini introduces new regressive strategies in *Gospel* intended to increase the role of the primary and make the film more poetic and thus anti-bourgeois. One is the choice to film a work written two thousand years earlier. Freud himself linked psychic regression to the return to a historical past: "the primitive stages can always be re-established; the primitive mind is, in the fullest meaning of the word, imperishable."<sup>9</sup> Another strategy introduced in *Gospel* is the depiction of storytelling. One might expect the parables to be absent from the film as undramatic events, but Pasolini leaves them in as another ingredient in the film's

regressive nature. Storytelling is usually associated with the parallel prehistories of childhood and antiquity. Walter Benjamin lamented that storytelling began to die in the modern age because “experience has fallen in value.”<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, like Pasolini, identifies economic forces as the suppressers of experience (or “reality” in Pasolinian terms); both see storytelling as a direct transmission of experience/reality from teller to listener.

For Benjamin, the rise of the communications media and of information doomed storytelling. Information, based on plausibility and verifiability, devalues the magical and the miraculous in favor of explanation. With storytelling, “marvelous things are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader.”<sup>11</sup> Thus storytelling, like poetry, is positioned as closer to the primary than modern forms of narrative.

After *Gospel*, Pasolini was to set almost all of the rest of his films in the past, varying the degrees of remoteness from antiquity to the days of the Salo government. *Teorema* (1968), lacking this nostalgic regression to the past, instead introduces a new form of temporal regression that will become increasingly important: depictions of regression to pre-genital forms of sexuality. The narrative structure is once again episodic, but there is no protagonist whose life the episodes trace. Instead there is a central figure, a visitor who acts as a mathematical function; each character who comes in contact with him has a different value after the interaction. The structure resembles a table of three columns of figures: the characters before meeting the visitor, during the visitor’s stay, after the visitor leaves.

This narrative structure derives not from the older patterns of myth and epic but from Pasolini’s attempt to separate reality and nature. Since the reality expressed in *Teorema* is mostly that of a Milanese bourgeois family and not the archaic reality of the subproletariat or the peasant, Pasolini uses a mechanistic structure to break down the bourgeois reality, to attack it. The narrative events are arranged schematically; the members of the family are introduced one by one, they fall in love with the visitor one by one, and they react to his absence one by one.

Because of the frequent closeups on the visitor’s crotch and his universal appeal, he seems to be an embodiment of phallic sexuality,

itself pre-genital because it downplays any notion of sexual difference or reproductive sexuality. His arrival can be seen as a return of the repressed that starts the family on a regression which is perhaps best described as a Lacanian one. That is, they all seem to regress to a pre-symbolic state. Once their contact with the phallic force of the visitor has returned them to a pregenital stage of libidinal organization, they lose their place in the social structure. The mother embarks on a course of compulsive promiscuity. The son becomes an artist, but one dedicated to removing content and intentionality from his work by painting random lines on glass. The daughter becomes catatonic. The father donates his factory to the workers, strips in the train station at the sight of a desirable young man, and runs screaming into the wilderness. All seem to have lost the ability to speak by the end, except the maid. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith explains the difference:

the [bourgeois] characters can only live in bourgeois society, with the family in the heart of it. When that goes, they cannot live in any society at all. But the maid's universe survives, which is that of her peasant origins, a (supposedly) non-bourgeois order, and to this she can return. In other words, she regresses.<sup>12</sup>

The theorem demonstrated by *Teorema* seems to be that regression—libidinal, formal, or temporal—is not just an escape to the mythic, poetic reality suppressed by the bourgeoisie; it is also a weapon to be used against the bourgeoisie.

Pasolini's films based directly on myth, *Edipo Re* (1967) and *Medea* (1970), continue the notion of a more archaic reality that survives. The fact that both the Oedipus and Medea stories exist as myth and as tragedy gives these two films aspects of the fantastic, the epic, and the ritual. His version of Oedipus starts during the Fascist period of Pasolini's own youth, than shifts to antiquity, only to end in contemporary Bologna. Here temporal regression is used to point up the primal underpinnings of modernity that must be embraced and not repressed. The return to the world of antiquity and myth in *Medea* also signals a return to storytelling. The very first scene in the film finds the centaur Chiron telling the young Jason the story of his family. While Medea's country, Colchis, is the site of the primal in the film, the land of ritual (the section of the film set there is virtually without dialog),

Jason's birthright is Corinth, where "everything is secular, modern, refined, cultured."<sup>13</sup> Brought up in exile from Corinth, Jason is suspended between the primal and the modern. Hence Chiron appears to him in two forms: as centaur and as human. As the human Chiron explains, the centaur is an avatar of an earlier, sacred reality that Jason knew as a child which has been replaced by the desecrated, human version. The centaur remains, mute, as the inspiration for the feelings that the human expresses. This is an almost exact parallel to the relation that Freud describes between the primary and secondary processes:

the primary processes are present in the mental apparatus from the first, while it is only during the course of life that the secondary processes unfold, and come to inhibit and overlay the primary ones.<sup>14</sup>

Jason falls in love with Medea because she is still in touch with the sacred reality that he is moving away from. His decision to marry Glauce, the princess of Corinth, marks his rejection of the primitive for the material wealth of the modern. Because of this rejection, Medea regresses to a primal state in which she regains the magic powers she had in Colchis and exacts revenge on Jason by killing Glauce and her own sons. As in *Teorema*, regression becomes a weapon against the repressive force of the modern, although in this case it also destroys the person who wields it.

While *Medea* begins with the telling of a story, Pasolini's next three films, known collectively as the *Trilogy of Life*, use the act of storytelling as a recurrent motif. All three films are adaptations of famous collections of tales: *The Decameron* (1970), *The Canterbury Tales* (1971), and *The Arabian Nights* (1974). They represent also the culmination of Pasolini's regressive strategy and his most optimistic films. This optimism stems mostly from the suspension of narrative closure, which Pasolini associates with death: "death effects a rapid synthesis of a past life . . . this is the way in which *a life becomes a story*."<sup>15</sup> The act of telling a story, conversely, can enhance life. Cramming several tales into each film of the trilogy suspends any closure, since "the transitions between episodes are so abrupt and unexpected that we often find ourselves well into the next tale before we realize that the previous one is over."<sup>16</sup> Blurring the tales' beginnings and endings emphasizes their middles. Such an emphasis allows Pasolini to foreground "the desire

and excess that characterize the middle phase of narrative," as Laura Mulvey puts it.<sup>17</sup> Mulvey goes on to point out that this phase is also "marked by . . . extraordinary events in which the rules and expectations of ordinary existence are left in suspense."<sup>18</sup>

This focus on the middle narrative phase opens a space in which regression becomes a pleasurable escape from inhibitions instead of a destructive force. The clothed crotch shots in *Teorema* are replaced by abundant nudity, with an emphasis on the penis second only to the phallic display of gay porn. *The Canterbury Tales* also contains a remarkable amount of pregenital imagery, especially of the anal variety, from the homosexual sodomy that opens the second tale to the demon in Hell at the end who shits clerics. Nowell-Smith points out that *Arabian Nights* seeks to erase sexual difference by blurring the distinctions between male and female beauty.<sup>19</sup>

Besides this libidinal regression, the films of the Trilogy also display the types of formal regression found in earlier Pasolini films. The epigraph of *Arabian Nights*—"The complete truth does not lie in one dream but in several"—refers not only to the complex narrative structure but also to the dreamlike quality of the film, in the form of the elaborate coincidences which advance the narrative and the unusual number of special effects. Humor also allows the primary process to emerge at least partly. As the first intelligible line of dialog in *Canterbury Tales* puts it, "Between a jest and a joke, many a truth can be told." The humor of the Trilogy can best be described as carnivalesque. Mulvey summarizes Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of carnival as that which "gloried in the peasant side of the cultural connotations associated with the peasant/noble opposition, the lower part of the body, its functions. . . . Carnival inverted the normal experience of daily life, celebrating pleasure and excess in food, drink, and sex."<sup>20</sup> The emphasis on the face in the earlier films is thus displaced to the emphasis on the phallus, which gets nearly as many closeups in the Trilogy as the face does. Carnavalesque humor thus functions as another regressive strategy, liberating the repressed.

Pasolini's last film, *Salò* (1975), probably contains more nudity than the entire Trilogy, but the difference is striking. While the Trilogy exalts the body, *Salò* mortifies it. Pasolini explained this reversal as a rejection of the Trilogy because the sexual revolution, in whose spirit it was



made, had turned out to be just another tool used by consumerist capitalism to expand its hegemony. Pasolini filmed the Trilogy mostly in what he considered to be the non-bourgeois milieus of Naples, northern Africa, and the Middle East because “the last bulwark of reality seemed to be Xinnocent’ bodies with the archaic, dark, vital violence of their sexual organs.”<sup>21</sup> After finishing the Trilogy, he decided that “even the reality of ‘innocent’ bodies has been violated, manipulated, enslaved by consumerist power.”<sup>22</sup> Pasolini is thus forced to confront the present, which means “adapting to degradation and accepting the unacceptable.”<sup>23</sup>

*Salo* is the dramatization of this confrontation. In the course of the film, Pasolini rejects everything—not just his old enemies, the bourgeoisie and the Aristotelian plot, but also all the things he had previously believed in: the body, sex, humor, storytelling, regression. Pasolini abandons the episodic, organic structure of the Trilogy for a schema as rigid as *Teorema*’s. After the opening, the film is divided into three sections, or “Circles” as they are called in reference to Dante’s *Inferno*, each one focussing on a different perversion. While the sinners in *The Decameron* escape punishment, and the Hell in *The Canterbury Tales* was reserved mostly for clerics, this man-made Hell punishes the body without regard for innocence or guilt. Sex, the experiencing of one body by another, here becomes a weapon of domination. Physical beauty, the sign of innocence in *Arabian Nights*, here becomes a symptom of vulnerability and submission. The libertines select the most beautiful pair of buttocks and submit its owner to torture. Storytelling, which had been the occasion for the celebration of life and escape from oppression, here becomes merely a blueprint for degradation.

The film moves systematically from the extremely rigid and static action and visual style of the opening to the irrational eruption of the end; in other words, it regresses from being highly “secondarized” to being highly “primary.” But while regression in the Trilogy brings one closer to reality, the libertines’ regression takes them further away from it, as it did for the bourgeois family in *Teorema*. They reject reality for a corrupt, repressive regression. The carnivalesque humor of the Trilogy is replaced by the nihilistic absurdity of the jokes told by the President. The blurring of sexual difference in *Arabian Nights* is first rejected by

the gender segregation enforced by the libertines, then mocked by their childish behavior in drag. While the sexual behavior is almost entirely at a pregenital stage, the emphasis is on the sadistic forms of anal and oral sexuality.

In all of Pasolini's earlier films, regression became a move away from the conscious towards memory and the unconscious. The libertine regression of *Salo* merely inverts conscious rationality, producing a repressive desublimation of terror, nihilism, pain, and the irrational. By the final orgy of destruction, the libertines have retreated from reality so far that they take turns watching the torture from an upper window through binoculars to distance themselves from the scene even more thoroughly. Meanwhile, two of the young guards clutch each other awkwardly and dance slowly in a circle.

This, the last image from Pasolini's last film, has occasioned more disagreement than any other single shot in his work. The critics who see the film as a rejection of homosexuality and who regard Pasolini's murder as the logical conclusion to his sexual habits tend to read this image as the lowest point of hell, with the young men indifferent to the suffering around them. I would argue that the shot instead marks the revival of Pasolini's interest in regression as the only possible escape from the symbolic structures of the bourgeoisie's pervasive fascism. Instead of a regression to the past, the subproletariat, the Third World, pregenital sexuality, humor, memory, dream, epic, myth, storytelling or any other past strategy, the guards represent the most radical regression of all—back to the imaginary dyad. Having lost faith in all political, social, or sexual solutions, Pasolini retreats as far as possible—back to the moment of the establishment of the ego—but he does not surrender.

*David Pendleton*

#### Notes:

1. Viktor Shklovsky, "Poetry and Prose in Cinematography" (1927) in Stephen Bann and John E. Bowlt, eds., *Russian Formalism: A Collection of Articles and Texts in Translation* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1973), pp. 129, 130.

2. Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism* (1972), trans. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 172.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon Books, 1965), p. 587.
6. Oswald Stack, *Pasolini on Pasolini* (London: Thames and Hudson Limited, 1969), p. 46.
7. Freud, p. 528.
8. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (1977), trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 123.
9. Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (1970), trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1973), p. 387.
10. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 83-84.
11. Ibid., p. 89.
12. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Pasolini's Originality" in Paul Willemen, ed. *Pier Paolo Pasolini* (London: British Film Institute, 1977), p. 16.
13. Pasolini, "Pasolini on Film" in Willemen, p. 67.
14. Freud, p. 642.
15. Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, p. 251.
16. Millicent Marcus, "The Decameron: Pasolini as a Reader of Boccaccio," *Italian Quarterly* 82/83, Fall 1980/Winter 1981, p. 178.
17. Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 170.
18. Ibid., p. 171.
19. Nowell-Smith, p. 18.
20. Mulvey, pp. 167-68.
21. Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters* (1976), trans. Stuart Hood (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1983), p. 49.
22. Ibid., p. 50.
23. Ibid., p. 52.

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