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## PIER PAOLO PASOLINI AND HIS INQUISITORS

**Abstract:** This article sums up the history and work of the famous Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini, and examines the charges of blasphemy and obscenity levelled against him.

**Key words.** modern moral censorship; Pier Paolo Pasolini; violence.

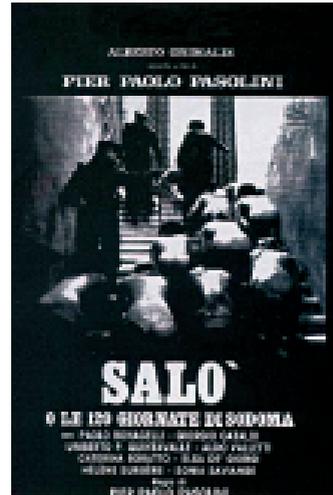
A controversial character, a refined intellectual, a notorious homosexual, a poet and an experimental novelist, a non-conformist thinker and a celebrated director, an eccentric Marxist – this was Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose brutal murder in 1975 came to be seen as either a crime of passion or a laughable incident. The case which I am examining here is of interest to me only insofar as his films are concerned, since they have been overly indicted for blasphemy and obscenity<sup>1</sup>. Pasolini's obsession with eroticism (overstepping erotic limits in the sense of

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1 It is true that Pasolini was, at one point, also denounced for corrupting minors (or for his writings), but it was his filmography that bore the brunt of excessive boycotting and unprecedented persecution. In this study I shall not tackle the films *Oedipus Rex* and *Medea* (adaptations after the famous ancient tragedies), since charges of obscenity were never levelled against these two particular films created by the Italian director.

either excessive or perverted sensuality) and with faith (not necessarily Catholic faith, however), as well as with the rift between the two was little understood and accepted in Italy during the latter half of the twentieth century. In what follows, I shall give a brief chronological survey of his “scandalous” films and of the charges levelled against them, as evinced by documents from the various legal actions that were brought against their director.

In 1962, Pasolini was denounced for the film *Mamma Roma*, which was deemed to have an “obscene content” that went against morals. In 1963, he was sued for the film *La ricotta*<sup>2</sup>, which was incriminated for having blasphemed the crucifixion of Christ. The film’s protagonist, the good thief from the crucifixion scene, was a proletarian from Italy in the 1960s who died on the cross at the very moment when the director-character (interpreted by none other than Orson Welles, yet another non-conformist rebel) was shooting the Calvary scene. In 1968, Pasolini was denounced for the film *Teorema*, which was allegedly an offence to “common decency”. A levy was put on the film, but the court eventually exonerated its director. Finally, the 1970s brought Pasolini several indictments for “obscenity” regarding his movies from the “Trilogy of Life”, namely *The Decameron* (1970-1971), *Canterbury Tales* (1970-1971), and *Arabian Nights* (1973-



1974). Things would not end even with Pasolini’s death in 1975, since he was posthumously arraigned for his most violent film, *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*. Since Pasolini was dead, the one who had to undergo trial was his producer, Alberto Grimaldi. For a while, the film was sequestered, then it had five minutes of its length removed, then it was replevied, only to be seized again. Since 1977, *Salò* has been “free” to be watched.

I shall examine here the films indicted by Pasolini’s detractors with a view to defending them, given that their director was probably the most censored film author of the twentieth century, insofar as the trials he was put to and the media lynching he was subjected to are concerned<sup>3</sup>. The charge of “indecent content” brought against the film *Mamma*

<sup>2</sup> *Ricotta* is a very popular type of cheese in Italy.

<sup>3</sup> Pasolini was, of course, contested also on the grounds of his homosexuality; Pasolini’s sexual orientation and its impact – symbolical or otherwise – upon his filmography are beyond the scope of this essay.

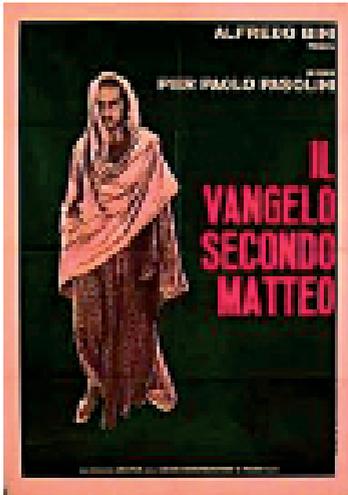
*Roma* is bizarre, to say the least; although it is a neo-realistic film, it has a clear-cut Fellini touch about it, as well as a profoundly ethical strand. Anna Magnani interprets a “fatal” woman of low birth turned prostitute, who is now trying to raise her son under the sign of the law and morality. Society, however, puts all kinds of hindrances in her way, and her son, who has become a delinquent, will die in an absurd manner, like a new sacrificed Christ. It is obvious that the meaning of prostitution is only contextually exploited by Pasolini and that the stakes of the film reside in the absurd sacrifice triggered by bourgeois morality, which avowedly supports a sense of honour and lawfulness but is corrupt and only propagandistically upholds Christian love, without having any genuine interest in it. This is the real reason why the film caused so much vexation. The end of the film is quite explicit in that sense: Mamma Roma is a kind of Mater Dolorosa; in other words, she is the Madonna throughout the Calvary. Hence, one may infer from this who her son is... The film *La ricotta* returns to the theme of the Calvary<sup>4</sup>, but proves to be a grotesque *Imitatio Christi*, given that it is the proletarian (the good thief) dying during the shooting of the very scene of crucifixion that becomes the new Christ, martyred by his fellow citizens who won't even allow him to finish eating his cheese: the character dies from indigestion after having hastily

swallowed the craved after cheese. The musical background of the crucifixion (twist and cha-cha-cha) is considered blasphemous by Pasolini's detractors; so is Maria Magdalena, who performs strip-tease, and so is Christ, who behaves sarcastically towards the Madonna. The director is also reproached for his vision of the crucifixion, which reproduces and reinterprets two famous painters, Rosso Fiorentino and Pontormo. What the detractors seem to have completely failed to realize is that Christ is not the classical “Christ”, but the proletarian acting as the good thief, the one who dies from indigestion. His crucifixion is atypical: the lethal indigestion of *La ricotta's* protagonist conveys a grotesque vision upon Pasolini's contemporary Italy. After all, grotesqueness is a symptom of decadence, including the decay of faith.

Although it was never grounds for litigation, the film *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (1964), which was awarded three Catholic prizes, aroused much controversy and debate. In his memories, Pasolini recounts how the conclave of cardinals watched, like a team of censors, the film's first screening prior to its being released on the market. The director reminisces about the cardinals' final uproar: they were quite uncertain as to how they should react, and their gusty applause came only after they read the director's dedication to the Pope. This dedication appears to have salvaged the film from a censorious official response. In his memories, Pasolini confesses that he was obsessed with the idea of death

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4 Aside from eros, this theme represents probably Pasolini's most blatant obsession.



and that the reason why he chose to direct the Gospel according to St. Matthew is because, compared with the other gospels, it outlines the most humane rendition of the figure of Christ. The film, however, also evinces the director's twisted sense of atheism, since he rejected dogmatic Catholicism, rather than faith itself. Several of Pasolini's confessions are extremely interesting in this respect: "I suffer from neither the inhibitions of a devout Catholic /.../, nor from those of an instinctive Catholic"; "I don't believe that Christ is God's son because I am no believer /.../ But I do believe that Christ is divine"!!! I see no other possible commentary here but the self-evident fact that by rejecting Catholicism, though not discarding faith itself (albeit, by virtue of his Marxism, Pasolini avowed himself to be an atheist), he was, unawares, a genuine believer, without admitting, however, this thing even to himself. His faith was atypical, hence it was little understood or accepted.

Despite the denouncements made against it, the film *Teorema* received a Catholic prize, and with good reason. Starting from his novel with the same title, the film imagines the arrival of a Guest (a kind of sensuous angel or daimon who brings forth the epiphany of Eros) in a bourgeois family who are going to experience tremendous upheavals that will definitively unsettle their lives. The Maid who worships and physically desires him turns into a saint eventually. The Daughter comes to terms with her femininity and falls into an ecstatic trance. The Son realizes his sexual "invertedness" and becomes an anarchist painter, though this is just another term for madness. The Mother acquires a taste for adultery and, after a series of trysts with young men resembling the Guest, seeks refuge in a church, which will serve as her tomb. The Father regains his virility, which has been numbed; then, like a new St Francis (as the film's analysts have dubbed him), he takes off his clothes in Milan's great station, and,



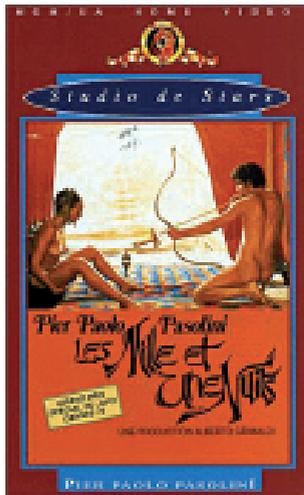
stark naked, crosses the desert in search for faith and redemption. At least three of the characters touched by the Guest end up embracing a form of faith: the Maid who ascends to Heaven, then lets herself be buried and, through the tears she sheds, gives birth to a fountain; the Mother who, like a great sinner, takes refuge in the church; and the Father, whose desperate howl at the end of the film becomes the epitome of humanity's dilemmatic and questioning nature. What is, one may wonder, obscene about this film? Could the discovery of sensuality and virility be regarded as obscene, even when it is followed by mortification? Marxists accused Pasolini of mysticism, while church figures blamed him for his reactionary attitude. This is how the director glosses on his own film: "If Christ were to come back to earth today, there would be an outrage; it would be the same today as it was in his own time"; the Guest "is neither Jesus in today's context, nor Eros identified with Jesus; he is the messenger of a merciless God, of a Jehovah who, through concrete signs, through a mysterious presence, makes people doubt their safety. It is a God that destroys the good conscience [of the bourgeois, my inference]..." It is not hard to guess that the one tormented by self-doubt is Pasolini himself, just like he is also the Father whose desperate howl resounds at the end of the film, as he wanders through the desert in search of his faith.

The three films in the "Trilogy of Life" received lump charges of obscenity, while Pasolini was subjected to a veritable

lynching in the Italian media. Making reference to the "Trilogy", the director asserted his interest in corporeality and sensuality, or, to be more precise, in buoyant<sup>5</sup> sensuality. Boccaccio's *Decameron* fascinates him through its optimism, playfulness and naturalness. In defence of *The Canterbury Tales*, Pasolini says that the protagonist here is "folk corporeality" and that he found it necessary to project this corporeality into the twentieth century, which was marked by a severe cultural crisis; hence, the only palpable reality that he could find was that of the body. Last but not least, Pasolini defends Chaucer for his healthy (vivifying, that is) irony and for his vital coarseness (here are two more emblematic terms), as well as for his themes, which seem to fit the director's obsessions like a glove: sex, love and death. It is not for nothing that *Arabian Nights* was considered a tour de force in the "Trilogy of Life": Pasolini avows here the normality of the human body in its nudity, sexual freedom and the purity of this freedom at a time when sex was considered neither malefic nor obscene, but innocent and uninhibited. It is a film about the golden age of the body, long before it fell from Paradise. For the rigid prudes, the "Trilogy of Life" represented, however, an affront to morals.<sup>6</sup> What they

5 This term seems emblematically well chosen.

6 Via Veneto (the street prowled by Rome's luxury prostitutes) also defied morals, but it had no pretense of transforming itself into art.



found irritating was Pasolini's courage to voice, through images, and to project an aesthetics of the free body.

Pasolini's last movie is *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*; had the director not been murdered in 1975, he would, in most likelihood, have been dragged through tribunals and even sentenced to prison for this film. Adapted, in Pasolinian fashion, after the Marquis de Sade, *Salò* recounts the story of four fascist "Signori" (representatives of the aristocratic, ecclesiastical, judicial and economic power) in Italy during the year of 1944, who gather together the sons and daughters of Italian partisans with a view to re-educating them. To Romanian spectators, the film (open for watching since the 1990s) is reminiscent of the Pitesti phenomenon. The young people are put through three infernal circles: of madness, of excrements and of blood (all these stages are accompanied by ritual tortures and murders. Some of them become collaborationists (a sign that re-education has reached its aim)

or remain pure victims, dying after terrible ordeals. The aggressors' sexual necrophilia is shocking in the film, yet this is also the meaning imparted by the Marquis de Sade in his book. Pasolini had no way of defending this film since he was assassinated before *Salò* reached the viewing public. There are, however, certain testimonies left by the director regarding the contents of the film. Pasolini was struck by the resemblance between Sade's and Dante's infernos, which is why he intended to make a Dantesque and a political film at the same time: the young people brought in for re-education are incarcerated in a camp camouflaged in a castle. At one point, the director trenchantly remarked that he aimed to render the idea of "humanity's transformation into an object". In a March 1975 issue of *Corriere della Sera*, the director claimed that the film was a "metaphor of the relationship between Power and those it is in opposition with"; the film's intention would be, thus, that of "reducing the body to the mere status of an object". Insofar as I am concerned, however, Pasolini's last film seems essential because it actually discusses the concentration camp universe in its stage of extreme brutality. *Salò* tackles the theme of perversion, but it does that with the instruments of a political film. The film's extremism is given by its thorough portrayal of the concentration camp universe. The re-education of the young people in the film is absolute and it could be understood today, for instance, by the Romanian spectator who knows what

happened in the Pitesti prison between 1949 and 1952. To Italian spectators in 1975, however, it may have been a real challenge, and an incomprehensible one, for that matter.

However many charges of obscenity were levelled against Pasolini because of this film, I believe the director's sexual identity has little bearing on the extremist vision of *Salò*. The ethics of this film consists in the very portrayal of the absolute immorality governing the concentration camp and re-education through torture. The political convicts who have survived the Pitesti experience would perfectly understand this film today. Could Pasolini be accused of cynicism simply because he directed *Salò*? He does not sanctify violence, as his detractors might claim; instead, he studies it under microscopic lenses, like an entomologist studies an insectarium filled with atrocities. Through its depiction of the slow-motion ceremony of murdering the innocent, this film is a modern Calvary in the most Christian sense possible. The film was screened for the first time three weeks after Pasolini's death. "Who might doubt my sincerity when I say that the message of *Salò* is denouncing the anarchy of power and the inexistence of history?", the director declared. In an article published in

*Corriere della Sera* in December 1975, a fiend of Pasolini's, Alberto Moravia defended *Salò* against Italo Calvino's charges, claiming that far from being sadistic, this was a profoundly cerebral and provocative film; a film going against an entire corrupt and decayed Italy, which seemed to have relinquished its Renaissance of yore. This is why Pasolini's tragedy is the tragedy of a patriot who is disenchanted with his own country.

Even though Pasolini announced that after *Salò* he was going to make a debunking film about the apostle Paul, his obstinate tackling of topics related to the theme of faith and epiphany indicates the fact that despite his overt Marxism, he was a believer, albeit an atypical believer, as I have already said. He was atypical also because he refused to acknowledge even to himself the unusual, eerie faith that he harboured. As regards his last, extremely violent film, it partakes of a lesson of ethics that its director sought to teach without cosmetic embellishments. Given these tendencies (let us not forget, however, the eroticism unleashed in the "Trilogy of Life") and the provocative and defiant challenges he addressed his contemporary society, Pasolini might be placed in the forefront of the last Gnostics of the twentieth century rather than in the rear-guard of atheist blasphemers.

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