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The heretical landscape of the body: Pier Paolo Pasolini and the scopic regime of European cinema

Matthew Gandy
School of European Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9QN, England
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Abstract. Pier Paolo Pasolini, the Italian poet, novelist, and film director, is widely regarded as one of the most significant figures to emerge in postwar European culture. In this paper I focus on four of Pasolini's films, *Mamma Roma*, *Theorem*, *Arabian Nights*, and *Salò*, in order to explore the innate tension in his work between nature and culture emerging from his search for cultural authenticity and artistic autonomy. I show that his earlier concern with the superiority of rural life evolved into an emphasis on the body and sexuality as an ontologically privileged and prelinguistic source of meaning in his 'cinema of poetics'. I suggest that Pasolini never successfully resolved the problematic place of the cinematic medium in relation to culture as a contested historical process of ideological signification. I conclude that the contradictions within Pasolini's work have implications for the contemporary critique of occularcentrism under Western modernity.

1 Introduction

> "By studying cinema as a system of signs, I came to the conclusion that it is a non-conventional and non-symbolic language [*linguaggio*] unlike the written or spoken language [*lingua*], and expresses reality not through symbols but through reality itself."
>
> Pier Paolo Pasolini (1969, page 29)

This paper concerns the pervasive and beguiling power of images under 20th century modernity. So dominant has the image become to our aesthetic sensibilities that a powerful critique of this 'occularcentrism' has been developing in tandem with the increasing prevalence of image-based modes of cultural expression and their mass dissemination. I want to explore here a specific facet of this complex debate: namely the struggle to preserve some degree of artistic autonomy and cultural authenticity within the cinematic medium. In order to develop my argument I have chosen to focus on the Italian film director Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose rich and complex legacy of work is capable of illuminating not only the inherent weaknesses of film itself but also the extent of the crisis running through the visual and iconographic traditions of Western modernity.

Pier Paolo Pasolini is one of the most complex figures to emerge in 20th-century European culture. He has been described by Susan Sontag as the most significant postwar figure in Italian arts and letters, and the legacy of his work continues to provoke debate and controversy today. In the early 1960s he was undoubtedly one of the leading figures in the development of European cinema, yet his work entered a spiral of decline and despair mirroring the broader dissolution of the European left in the post-1968 era. As I shall show, however, Pasolini was only ever ambiguously connected to discourses of social and political liberation, yet the contradictions in his work provide a window through which we can observe a deep-seated crisis in the status of Western culture under consumer capitalism.

From the beginning of Pasolini's cinematic career we can detect a tension between his attempt to portray 'reality as reality' and his desire to communicate a range of mythical symbols and underlying meanings drawn from his reading of the

confrontation between postwar Italian society and the counter discourses of Gramscian Marxism and rural peasant culture. During the 1960s, Pasolini's 'cinema of poetics' rested on his notion of a distinctive cinematic language of 'free indirect discourse' which not only afforded it prelinguistic ontological closeness to reality but also allowed his work the semblance of artistic autonomy. This helps to explain the current renewal of interest in his work within the context of postmodernist aesthetics and the crisis in cultural modernism. Giuliana Bruno argues, for example, that Pasolini's concerns with language prefigure poststructuralist and feminist concerns with the social production of meaning "embodying a materiality of writing—a Pasolinian corpo*reality*" (1994, page 102). Yet these types of responses to his work do not adequately address the ontological limitations of his representation of the body. In the cinema of Pasolini we find a radical extension of nature-based sources of ontological purity to include the body and sexuality as primordial sources of meaning and cultural authenticity located outside the hegemony of consumer culture. I argue here that this aesthetic strategy leads to an essentialist impasse within which there is little space for any cultural discourse outside of the binary metaphorical traditions of Western thought.

Pasolini was born in Bologna in 1922 to a lower-middle-class family—his mother a schoolteacher and his father a low-rank officer in the Italian army. During the war he lived in Friuli in northern Italy and developed a deep affection for Italian peasant culture, which was to have a formative influence on his life and work. In defiance of fascist sentiment he published a set of poems in the local Friulian dialect in 1942, the *Poesie a Casarsa*, serving as an early demonstration of his search for cultural authenticity persisting in the local and historical traditions of rural Italy. His time in Friuli was also a period of politicisation as he learnt of the hardships endured by the agricultural *braccianti* (day labourers) under the repressive control of wealthy landowners. These experiences sparked a deep interest in Marxism, knowledge of which he gained primarily through the writings of Antonio Gramsci, and led to his joining the Italian Communist Party in 1948.[1] By the time of his directorial debut with *Accattone* in 1961, Pasolini was already a highly acclaimed writer and poet, yet he increasingly found that cinematic modes of expression were more fulfilling than literature:

> "The passion that had taken the form of a great love for literature and for life gradually stripped itself of the love for literature and turned to what it really was—a passion for life, for reality, for physical, sexual, objectual [*oggettuale*], existential reality around me. This is my first and only great love and the cinema in a way forced me to turn to it and express only it" (Pasolini, 1969, page 29).

I show in this paper, however, that this decisive move into the 'culture industry' was to heighten the irreconcilable tensions between his own work and the postwar growth of consumer culture. In placing him in the position of an outsider or cultural heretic, his life and work were consistently in conflict with the Italian state and church: his films and writings were subject to some thirty-three legal challenges ranging from blasphemy to obscenity, and nine of his films encountered censorship

[1] Pasolini's relationship with the European left was complicated by two traumatic events in the immediate postwar period. In 1945 his younger brother, Guido, was killed in intrapartisan feuding over the possible succession of the Friuli region to Tito's Yugoslavia. And in 1949 he was expelled from the Italian Communist Party for 'bourgeois degeneration' after an indictment for a homosexual act, which also lost him his job as a teacher in a local school. For biographical details see Allen, 1982; Boarini et al, 1982; Greene, 1990; Siciliano, 1987; and Snyder, 1980.

problems before his death in 1975.[2] Seeing his own role as a teacher or cultural ambassador, Pasolini was persistently troubled by the role of the intellectual in any political transformation of society. In *Hawks and Sparrows* [*Uccellacci e Uccellini*] (1966), for example, he mocks the certainties of orthodox Marxist discourse and reveals his growing alienation from the political and economic realities of 1960s Italy. Pasolini sought to express a cultural authenticity through his work in the face of what he saw as the emerging 'unreality' of bourgeois consumer society (Bondanella, 1991; MacDonald, 1969; Petraglia, 1974). This search for meaning is explored in his earlier films through a complex mix of Western iconographic and intellectual traditions worked through a dominant tension between Gramscian Marxism and Catholicism. Catholicism and Marxism came together through Pasolini's depiction of the moral superiority of the poor, most strikingly in *The Gospel of St Matthew* [*Il Vangelo secondo Matteo*] (1964), which is widely held to be his greatest cinematic achievement. By the late 1960s the tension between Catholicism and Marxism was supplanted by an increasing emphasis on sexuality as the only powerful force with sufficient cultural authenticity and ontological primacy to counter the development of materialist individualism. The sharpness of the ultimately irresolvable tension between these different strands is intensified by Pasolini's own homosexuality, with which he never fully came to terms, lending his work an intense sense of existential isolation and affording his critical vantage point an especially problematic relationship both with the heightened self-awareness of modernity and with what he saw as the 'false tolerance' of bourgeois culture.

I have arranged this paper into four parts in order to allow a chronological discussion of a series of interrelated themes. I begin by examining Pasolini's place in the Italian neorealist cinema, and focus on his second film *Mamma Roma* (1962). I then examine his move away from neorealism through an increasing interest in allegorical constructions based around his mythological quest for a 'poetic cinema', for which I have chosen *Theorem* [*Teorema*] (1968). In the next section I focus on *Arabian Nights* [*Il fiore delle mille e una notte*] (1974) taken from the 'trilogy of life' series of 1971–74, in which Pasolini retreated into an imaginary and exoticist world in order to escape the growing contradictions of the cinematic medium. Finally, I consider how his last film, *Salò* (1975), reveals the culmination of the contradictory impulses in his work marked by a retreat into nihilistic isolation.

2 Mamma Roma and the limits to neorealism

Pasolini began his involvement with cinema in the late 1950s through his collaborative role as a scriptwriter for other directors, notably on Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960) and Bernardo Bertolucci's *La commare secca* (1962). In his early work Pasolini worked within the idiom of neorealist political cinema in order to expose the reality of the hardships of postwar Italian society, and his first two feature films, *Accattone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962), can be placed in the cinematic tradition exemplified by the Italian film makers De Sica, Fellini, Rosi, Rosselini, Olmi, and Visconti (see Bondanella, 1991; Marcus, 1986; Nowell-Smith 1977). The release of *Mamma Roma* in 1962 scandalised the Italian establishment by its direct and uncomprising portrayal of poverty, prostitution, and bourgeois hypocrisy over sexual morality. The film is set in the context of the increasing material prosperity

[2] Doubt still remains over the motivations in and circumstances of Pasolini's death. Although one person was imprisoned (and has recently been released), there are suggestions that a number of people may have been involved—perhaps even the Italian state with which he was in conflict for virtually all his working life (Macciocchi, 1980; Schwartz, 1992; Siciliano, 1987).

of the early 1960s and the mass migration of Italians from the countryside, and involves a critique of postwar capitalism combined with concern for the spiritual emptiness of modernity:

> "Alienation derives not merely from working in a world where one's work product is controlled by an exploitative capitalist class, but it may also be caused by the loss of a sense of mythical identity, a sense of harmony with nature that is destroyed by a pragmatic, technological civilization" (Bondanella, 1991, page 279).

Mamma Roma opens with a wedding banquet in a small town in rural Italy. During the wedding sequence we are introduced to a particularly ribald guest, the former prostitute Mamma Roma (Anna Magnani), who decides to leave for Rome with her teenage son Ettore (Ettore Garofolo). They arrive in Rome to begin a new life on a grim housing estate on the outskirts of the city. The new home is especially disorientating for Ettore, who yearns to return home and finds himself ostracised by most of the children in the neighbourhood. A little further into the film Ettore goes for a walk through waste ground with his new girlfriend Bruna (Silvana Corsini); she identifies the sound of cicadas as crickets, only to be corrected by Ettore who then begins to introduce her to the beauty of wild flowers among the rubbish-strewn landscape. For Pasolini, the country represents something untainted by capital, a repository of beauty and cultural authenticity, in contrast to the sterile modernity of postwar Italian consumerism and Mamma Roma's ultimately futile search for happinesss through her embrace of urban materialism. This theme is emphasised in the film with its depiction of an urban vista of desolation and ugly mass-housing projects visible from the window of Mamma Roma's apartment. The unexpected arrival of Carmine (Franco Citti), her former boyfriend and pimp, marks a decisive turning point in the film as he forces Mamma Roma to go in search of new clients. Ettore despairs at his mother's return to prostitution and abandons his steady job in a restaurant. He then turns to crime, only to be captured by the police and sent to prison for stealing a radio from a patient in the local hospital. Once imprisoned Ettore rapidly deteriorates, suffering fit-like convulsions and becomes delirious. He is isolated from the other prisoners and kept in solitary confinement, strapped to a bed in a gloomy cell. He eventually dies on his bed with his arms outstretched in a Christ-like fashion with classical imagery drawn from the paintings of Mantegna and Pontormo (see Jehle, 1976). We can find powerful religious symbolism throughout the film, from its opening banquet scene reminiscent of the last supper to the dramatic ending where Mamma Roma is portrayed as the grieving mother of Jesus (figure 1). The death of Ettore can be interpreted as Pasolini's modern morality play illustrating the inevitable crushing of rural life by a combination of urban materialism, corruption, and the Italian state. For Pasolini, death is imbued with mythic and epic qualities as the dominant tension underlying reality and serves as a repeated resolution to the narrative tensions within his work.

The film *Mamma Roma* provides one of Pasolini's clearest expositions of the cultural tension between rural and urban Italy in the immediate postwar period. For Pasolini, the hegemony of materialism and consumer society was becoming so pervasive and destructive to traditional cultures and ways of life that his political outlook became increasingly despairing of Marxist orthodoxy with its productivist urbanism, suspicion of cultural forms, and neglect of rural life. In interviews and writings Pasolini displayed a close sympapthy with the ideas of Gramsci and with the articulation of a more culturally orientated Marxist discourse in which the peasantry were identified as a potential revolutionary force (as opposed to a primarily industrial working class) and where cultural and intellectual life was afforded a more transformative role than by the traditional Marxist emphasis on the

organisation of economic production (see Bellamy and Schecter, 1993; Williams, 1985). Pasolini's distinctively cultural Marxism was consequently at variance with the more programmatic and orthodox contemporary Marxists, such as Gyorgy Lukács and Asor Rosa, who saw cultural and mythological concerns as largely frivolous and irrelevant to class struggle. The Italian left disliked *Mamma Roma* and charged Pasolini with depicting a 'poetic and fatalist vision', in which the Marxist impetus for social change and improvement had become subverted (Greene, 1990, page 23). It is the lack of hope and existential futility of Pasolini's early works which ultimately places them apart from the classic neorealist cinema in which the audience was invited to participate in building a better society.

The distance between Pasolini and cinematic realism in *Mamma Roma* is also suggested by the way in which he intensifies the tension between representation and everyday reality through the use of lingering camera shots, particularly of faces, in which a narrow depth of field is employed to emphasise the diffuse appearance of the background to particular scenes. The extensive overdubbing of dialogue similarly underlines the unreality of the cinematic scene whilst at the same time lending a mythical and dream-like quality to his work. It is these deliberately nonrealist and mythological elements which find fuller expression in his later films and mark out the distinctive characteristics of Pasolini's cinema. The scenography of Pasolini seems to evoke with uncanny clarity Edgar Morin's early enthusiasm for the cinematic medium, where there is a "resurrection of the archaic vision of the world in recovering the virtually exact superposition of practical perception and magical

Figure 1. *Mamma Roma* (1962). Mamma Roma (Anna Magnani) hears of the death of her son Ettore. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

vision—their syncretic conjunction" (Morin quoted by Jay, 1993, page 461). By the late 1960s, however, a beguiled response to visuality was to prove an increasingly inadequate critical reading of cinema and it is to Pasolini's handling of this shift in aesthetic sensibilities that I now turn.

3 Theorem and the disruption of bourgeois rationality

With *Theorem* [*Teorema*] (1968), Pasolini's work moved closer to the more overtly political cinema of Antonioni, Bertolucci, Goddard, and other European directors who sought to resist the advances of mass culture through the guise of Hollywood realism—in which an illusion of reality is created in order to hide the social and ideological realities of existence from the viewer (Greene, 1990, page 94). In *Theorem* Pasolini began to explore ways of subverting the limitations of the cinematic medium by emphasising the body and sexuality as a privileged source of meaning capable of developing a 'poetics' of cinema irreducible to linguistic and semiotic conventions (de Lauretis, 1980; 1984; Deleuze, 1989). *Theorem* begins with a confrontation, set in Milan, between a wealthy industrialist (played by Massimo Girotti) and his workers. This introductory scene, displaying a classic conflict between capital and labour, is to be subverted during the course of the film through a series of tightly structured explorations of the political and cultural legitimacy of Italian bourgeois society framed within the context of the breakdown of the industrialist's family. Shortly after the industrial dispute, the catalyst for the family's breakdown is provided by a mysterious stranger (Terence Stamp), whose arrival at the house is unexpected and unexplained (figure 2). The stranger soon establishes an intense relationship with each member of the household and proceeds to seduce each member of the family in turn. At one level, *Theorem* can be read as a satire against the emptiness and vulgarity of bourgeois Italy in the 1960s. More importantly, however, it is an exploration of the role of sexuality in subverting bourgeois rationality within the context of wider social injustices indicated by the industrial dispute in the opening moments of the film.

Figure 2. *Theorem* [*Teorema*] (1968). Terence Stamp plays the mysterious stranger who visits a wealthy family in Milan. His sexual allure exposes the emptiness of bourgeois rationality and with his departure halfway through the film the family fall apart. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The narrative structure is marked by a sudden break halfway through the film, when the stranger abruptly leaves the family and never returns. The family is thrown into disarray. The family's peasant maid (Laura Betti) returns to her village in the countryside and is now blessed with powerful spiritual energies which include the ability to heal the sick. At one stage she is pictured floating above the rooftops of the village before many hundreds of people. The miracles performed are symbolic of the strength and authenticity of her rediscovered religious belief. In contrast to the maid, the rest of the family drift into a spiral of decline. The daughter (Anne Wiazemsky) suffers a mental breakdown and becomes catatonic. The son (Andres Jose Cruz), who is an artist, feels incapable of producing anything worthwhile: his work appears meaningless and ridiculous after the pretensions of bourgeois creativity have been exposed (at one point we see him urinating on his paintings while wearing a blindfold). The mother (Silvana Mangano) drives aimlessly around working-class neighbourhoods in search of sexual gratification. Eventually she seeks solace in a church but institutionalised religion has lost its meaning (sharpening the contrast with the spiritual awakening of the maid). Most dramatically, in a symbolic reversal of rationality, the father decides to give his factory to his workers. After this gesture he wanders into the main Milan railway station and, after realising that he has homosexual longings, undresses in the station concourse surrounded by a crowd of bemused onlookers. In the next scene he is pictured naked, wandering in a desolate place (the slopes of Mount Etna), and he screams into the wilderness to mark the end of the film. The blinding sunlight and desert imagery suggest a return to primal or perhaps even biblical origins: once everything is removed, the emptiness of bourgeois existence is exposed. For Gilles Deleuze, it is Pasolini's desert imagery which "makes prehistory the abstract poetic element, the 'essence' co-present with our history, the archean base which reveals an intermediate history beneath our own" (1989, page 244). We are presented with an uncompromisingly essentialist reading of nature as a physical embrace around the everyday world of bourgeois reality.

In *Theorem* we find a further estrangement of Pasolini from mainstream political discourse. The Italian establishment and the political right were outraged at the depiction of (mainly male) nudity and the blatant juxtaposition in the film of religious and erotic imagery. From the left there was concern with the subversion of the problem of class exploitation to one of spiritual emptiness; in effect an escape from dialectical materialism into an "ahistorical, aestheticized world of Absolutes—a world where Death, Sacredness, and Myth ruled supreme" (Greene, 1990, page 168). In addition to the political distance which now opened up between his work and his erstwhile supporters on the left, a semiotic tension also emerged. In a series of essays in the late 1960s, Pasolini expounded his theory of a 'cinema of poetics' rooted in a prelinguistic oneiric realm (see Pasolini, 1966). Like Christian Metz, Pasolini argued that cinema had its own distinctive system of image-based signification which is quite unlike spoken and written language. Pasolini's films and writings of the late 1960s became increasingly far removed from the analytical and Saussurian semiological traditions of Emilio Garroni, Aldo Rossi, and Umberto Eco (Costa, 1977; Lawton, 1977). Deleuze, for example, has argued that Pasolini's cinema can be conceived as post-Kantian and post-Saussurian through its voyeuristic privileging of seeing and a physical ontology based around "returning discourse to the body ... before words, before things are named" (Deleuze quoted by Greene, 1990, page 109). Similarly, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith explores how Pasolini's lingering camera shots move beyond neorealist social characterisations to capture 'the enigma that is the

human face':

> "What we are dealing with here is the filmic equivalent ... of the poetic use of language, a use of language which is metaphoric rather than metonymic, which is connotative rather than denotative, which is self-referential and which opens up on spaces of consciousness which prosaic language does not reach" (Nowell-Smith, 1977, page 11).

One might reasonably ask, however, whether a mythological or poetic reading of visual representations of the body risks masking the historical dimensions of changing aesthetic sensibilities towards sexuality. The film *Theorem* emerged at a time when the earlier celebration of film director as auteur in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* of the 1950s was increasingly displaced by new attempts to uncover the ideological dimensions to the cinematic medium and to challenge the bourgeois humanist notion of artist as individual genius (Jay, 1993). In *Theorem* we can begin to uncover one of the most troublesome issues for Pasolini, which was to haunt him in his later work: the social and cultural implications of greater self-awareness under modernity. On the one hand, Pasolini is trying to depict the need for sexual liberation from the strictures of tradition, the bourgeois family, and institutionalised religion, but on the other hand he is worried by what he sees as the intrusion of individualist and materialist gratification into the cultural realm of a posttraditional order.

4 The 'trilogy of life' and the imaginary worlds of European exoticism

> "The trilogy has been my most ambitious project, requiring from me the most intense formal attention and stylistic commitment. A political-ideological film is easy. But it is rather more difficult to make a pure film, attempting to create a pure act of narration as the classics did, keeping oneself outside ideologies while at the same time avoiding escapism".
>
> Pasolini (quoted in Willemen, 1977, page 77)

With his growing alienation from contemporary political and cultural discourse in the late 1960s, Pasolini turned his attention to a detailed exploration of human sexuality in premodern and non-Western cultures in three films known collectively as the 'trilogy of life'. The three films that make up Pasolini's trilogy are adaptations of canonical premodern texts: Bocaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and the traditional epic from the Arab world, *The Thousand and One Nights*. In these films, Pasolini developed his ideas about human sexuality by presenting the liberation of sexual desire through mutual attraction as derived from a distinctive cultural authenticity and physical ontology quite separate from that of capitalism. I want to argue, however, that he achieved nothing of the kind, as his visual representation of imaginary worlds was drawn from well-established Western cultural traditions. Instead of developing his critique of cultural imperialism and bourgeois rationality he became further entangled in its contradictions, not least through the relationship between the cinematic medium and consumer culture; a tension which was to be heightened by the enormous popularity of these films which introduced Pasolini to a much larger cinema-going public.

Pasolini was especially drawn to past and distant cultures, and in this respect followed the path of many other European writers and artists before him.[3] I want to focus here on *Arabian Nights* [*Il fiore delle mille e una notte*] (1974) which was shot on location in Eritrea, Yemen, Iran, and Nepal. The structure of the film is

[3] Pasolini's fascination with Africa can also be found in the North African and Middle Eastern landscapes of *Medea* (1969) and in his documentaries *Appunti per una Orestiade africana* (1970) and *Le mura di San'a* (1974).

essentially a collage of sexual vignettes centred mainly around the female slave Zumurrud (Ines Pellegrini) (figure 3). During the course of the film we are led through a labyrinth of chambers and encounters, the film switching between numerous different subplots all of which play on the themes of courtship, seduction, and betrayal. In a key sequence Zumurrud is made king of a desert kingdom in a playful reversal of patriarchy when she is mistaken for a man, and is eventually reunited with her lover in one of the main resolutions to the film's rather inchoate narrative structure. It has to be said that *Arabian Nights* now seems bizarre and rambling, badly edited, dogged by poor sound and technical deficiencies, though praise was once lavished on this film. Nowell-Smith (1977), for example, noted its 'celebration of life' through the liberal portrayal of nudity and sexuality, whereas Noel Purdon lauded Pasolini's trilogy as "an act of mass liberation" (1975, page 113). There are real difficulties, however, with treating *Arabian Nights* as a political work which seeks to emphasise the liberatory powers of a sexuality 'unspoiled' by capitalism. These problems stem primarily from Pasolini's inability to recognise the cultural and historical roots of Western sexuality in relation to non-Western societies, and his reconstruction of what Richard Dyer refers to as 'the imagery of oppression' (1977, page 63). With *Arabian Nights*, the ethnographic precision of his earlier neorealist work, which so unsettled the Italian establishment, had now given way to a largely imaginary and self-indulgent universe:

> "An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourses of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (Bhabha, 1992, page 312).

In *Arabian Nights* Pasolini clearly replicates this juxtaposition of prehistorical cultural stasis and stereotypical imagery which Homi Bhabha and other postcolonial theorists

Figure 3. *Arabian Nights* [*Il fiore delle mille e una notte*] (1974). The slave Zumurrud (Ines Pellegrini) is mistaken for a man on arrival at a remote desert kingdom and is declared king. In this scene she reveals herself to be a woman to the consternation of her child bride. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

have uncovered within European cultural discourses. Despite Pasolini's desire to step outside of European cultural traditions, *Arabian Nights* resonates with the 19th-century fascination for the Orient and the South Seas as places of mystery and sexual passion. Examples of this genre include Eugène Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827), Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Odalisque with a Slave* (1842), and Edwin Long's *Babylonian Slave Market* (1875). In these types of paintings we can find recurring images of the harem and the subjugation of women's sexuality; a space within which the 19th-century male artist was free to depict the female nude and at the same time affirm and reinscribe the colonial and bourgeois iconography both of women and of non-Western cultures (see Brooks, 1993; Kabbani, 1986; Lucie-Smith, 1991; McClintock, 1995; Young, 1995). In *Arabian Nights* Pasolini extended and reworked these themes to include homosexual as well as heterosexual desire, but remained trapped within an Orientalist scopic regime. In an attempt to portray an authentically noncapitalist realm of human sexuality he in fact achieved quite the opposite, through a process of reinscribing the cultural fascinations which constitute the 'other' in the development of European modernity. In attempting to move further away from capitalist development in space and time, Pasolini ultimately travelled to its very core and depicted the web of relationships which facilitated the emergence of European modernity and capitalist urbanisation.

We can take the critique of *Arabian Nights* even further than the reconstruction of colonial myth, to encompass the limits of visuality and the cinematic medium. There is a tension between the Orientalist perspective and the optical centring of Western cultural discourse which reveals what Jacques Derrida identifies as inextricable links between the specular philosophical tradition and white mythologies (see Rodowick, 1988). The scopic drive of cinematic fetishism is thus "bound up with the Western metaphysical tradition of seeing and vision whose photological vocation it realizes" (Daney quoted by Jay, 1993, page 470). For Jean-Louis Baudry, Roland Barthes, and Christian Metz, the confusion of reality and simulacrum in cinema echoes the Lacanian concern with the imaginary and a regression to subject/object confusion through the 'primitive narcissism' associated with the mirror stage of psychological development, where the viewer is able to identify with the camera eye 'as transcendentally omniscient subject' (see Jay, 1993, pages 475–478). By the time of the release of *Arabian Nights* in 1974, film theory had begun to develop a powerful critique of the cinematic medium itself. Metz, for example, in a disavowal of his earlier insistence on the autonomy of cinematic language, expressed a desire to resist the love of images and expose the ideological workings of the cinematic apparatus, whereas Barthes now craved for "abstinence from Images, for every image is Bad", and lamented the ability of the photographic image to fill "the sight by force" (quoted by Jay, 1993, page 455). Thus by the mid-1970s, Pasolini's 'cinema of poetics' had begun to embody ever more forcefully both the contradictions of Western culture and the limits to cinema as a source of cultural authenticity; a tension which was to engulf him in a personal and artistic crisis until his death in 1975. Pasolini could not extricate himself from the inherent limitations of the cinematic medium nor from the specular traditions within which he sought ever more desperately to recover an autonomous realm of noncapitalist aesthetic sensibility.

5 *Salò* and the space of disintegration

The growing tensions within Pasolini's work were to reach their apotheosis with the release of *Salò* in 1975, a film in which he attempted a metaphorical indictment of the 'new fascism' of postwar Italy. The impact of this violent and disturbing film was

rendered even more piognant by the death of Pasolini himself only weeks before its scheduled release. The background to the despondency surrounding its production can be traced in a variety of letters and interviews drawn from the early 1970s (see Lawton, 1980; Macciocchi, 1980; Ulrich, 1976). Pasolini clearly despaired of the irony that it was his erotic films which had given him both commercial success and vastly larger audiences. His 'trilogy of life' coincided with a period of commercial appropriation of sexual freedom as his films spawned a wave of pornographic imitations. The fetishism of the body and sexuality under the hedonistic impulse of consumer capitalism shattered Pasolini's faith in sexuality and the body as a mythical realm of purity and innocence (George, 1994; Siti, 1994; Slavin, 1994). Although sexuality had appeared to offer an effective challenge to bourgeois culture in the 1960s, by the 1970s it had been all but subsumed by what Pasolini saw as the 'false tolerance' of social democracy leading to an aesthetic impasse.

The film *Salò* is set in Italy during 1943, and is based loosely on historical events. After the Allied invasion of Southern Italy, Mussolini fled to the North where he set up a short-lived fascist republic at Salò on Lake Garda. In Pasolini's portrayal, four fascist 'libertines' (a duke, a bishop, a judge, and a banker) abduct twenty teenage peasants in the region and take them to a deserted château where they are systematically humiliated and finally murdered. The narrative of violence and decline draws heavily on Dante, and the film opens with reference to academic treatises on de Sade.[4] The images of sin are loosely based on Dante's circles of hell in *The Divine Comedy*. In the opening canto we learn of the sins of the wolf (deceit and treachery), the sins of the lion (violence), and the sins of the leopard (lust, gluttony, and self-indulgence).[5] In *Salò* these become the circles of manias, shit, and blood, which divide the film into three increasingly violent segments. In the 'circle of manias' (*girone delle manie*) the claustrophobic mise en scène is developed with an austere interal décor suggestive of the exhaustion of modernity complete with paintings by Léger, Severini, and Duchamp. We are introduced to the four libertines and their victims, and the narrative structure begins to reveal a descent into increasingly abusive and violent interactions further and further removed from the usual parameters of cinematic realism (figure 4). In the 'circle of shit' (*girone delle merda*), excretion and faeces are used by Pasolini as a symbol of materialism through a reworking of the Freudian analysis of money. The eating of excrement serves as an unpalatable metaphor for the ability of postwar Italian consumer society to absorb and digest any opposition. In the 'circle of blood' (*girone del sangue*) the film reaches its grisly finale. The final scenes of murder and torture are watched through a window from within the film—we cannot hear the screams of the victims but we can see their faces through the lens of the libertines' binoculars. For Pasolini, *Salò* represents a direct challenge to his audience as complicit within this voyeuristic spectacle, and marks the disintegration of his relationship with mainstream European cinema. *Salò* is a uniquely disturbing film because whilst it seeks to expose the exploitative basis of sexual and material gratification in modern society it simultaneously forces its audience to become passive voyeurs.

[4] The readings of de Sade referred to in *Salò* are Klossowski's *Sade mon Prochain* (1947), de Beauvoir's *Faut-il brûler Sade?* (1952), Blanchot's *Lautréamont et Sade* (1963), Barthes's *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1971), and Soller's *L'Écriture et l'Expérience des Limites* (1968). For further analysis of Pasolini's use of de Sade in Salò see Bersani and Dutoit (1980) and Greene (1990).

[5] The influence of Dante in *Salò* is explored by Slavin (1994) who reverses the allegorical significance of the wolf and the leopard adopted in most readings of *The Divine Comedy*.

Figure 4. *Salò* (1975). The 'libertines' choose the most beautiful ass in Pasolini's metaphorical indictment of the 'new fascism' of postwar consumer culture. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In *Salò*, Pasolini presented an interrelated nexus of sadism and fascism as arising from a combination of sexual repression and contempt for the body under a specific set of historic circumstances. Yet the dynamic interplay of meaning between author, text, and audience remains unrecognised in many critical responses to *Salò*. For Enzo Siciliano the film is simply conceived as a frozen document of authorial intent, as an exposure of the "irrationality of power" (1987, page 388), whereas Maurizio Viano treats it as "an allegorical indictment of contemporary reality" (1993, page 302), thereby ignoring any contextual dimension to its meaning beyond the original art-house cinemas for which it was made. Following Annette Kuhn (1994), we can argue that the significatory power of *Salò* has deteriorated since its release by virtue of the changing circumstances of its dissemination and relations with its audience. We might further object that cinema is in this instance a peculiarly unsuitable medium for any critical exposition of the connections between sexuality and fascism for three reasons. First, Pasolini's representation rests on the aestheticisation of politics through the infusion of genocide with erotic imagery. This strategy not only rests on a historical trivialisation of real events but also obscures the extent of the commodification of sexuality: just as his 'trilogy of life' formed part of a shift towards liberal representation of sexuality in cinema in the early 1970s, *Salò* is now recognised as an example of a specific genre of sadomasochistic erotica emerging in the mid-1970s, extending to the work of Liliana Cavani and Nagisa Oshima. Second, Pasolini's clumsy treatment of de Sade misses the philosophical subtlety of his writings. For de Sade, the sexual imagination was integral to greater self-awareness under modernity and the tension between rationalist and irrationalist impulses in Enlightenment thought (see Blanchot, 1965). Third, the Manichean metaphors of 'pure' and 'impure' running through the development of sexual morality in Western

thought, which remain partially hidden in his earlier work, emerge in *Salò* through the systematic destruction of women, youth, and beauty as reified entities of cultural authenticity (see Frappier-Mazur, 1991). Pasolini's antipathy towards consumer culture undoubtedly derives in part from the increasingly ubiquitous appropriation of the fascist aesthetics of beauty and physical perfection in mass culture. Yet as Sontag (1980) suggests, the postwar waning of the political import of fascist ideology has been displaced by the sexualised representation of fascist imagery in everyday life. Such a distinction would have been incomprehensible to Pasolini because of his antipathy towards new forms of sexual and social liberation capable of taking an ironic stance in relation to cultural discourses surrounding the body, gender, and sexuality. What Pasolini is really objecting to in *Salò* is not fascism as a historically constituted ideology, but the spread of consumer culture to engulf his artistic autonomy in the realm of the body and sexuality. With *Salò*, Pasolini tried to bring together a totalising critique of the commodification of sexuality, and extend the theme of the exhaustion of Enlightenment through his exposure of the 'new fascism' of consumer capitalism. Yet the film reveals a stark deterioration in his intellectual ability as an artist through his simplistic misuse of the cinematic medium. As Barthes rightly notes:

> "Fascism is too grave and insidious a threat to be handled in a simple analogy, merely substituting fascists for Sade's libertines .... A failure of figuration (whether of Sade or of the fascist system), Pasolini's film has value as hazy recognition of something in each of us, poorly mastered but definitely embarrassing: it embarrasses us all, thanks to Pasolini's own *naivety*" (Barthes, 1977, page 66).

6 Conclusion

One of the first themes we can draw out of this exploration of the work of Pasolini is the long-standing romantic suspicion of materialism, urbanism, and the technological trappings of modernity. We saw this sentiment in *Mamma Roma* expressed in a relatively simple narrative juxtaposition of rural and urban life, whereas in his later films, such as *Theorem* and *Arabian Nights*, the draw of nature is increasingly articulated through a return to the body as a privileged source of cultural authenticity. We can argue, therefore, that Pasolini's cinematic oeuvre is built on a powerful aversion to the cultural dimensions of rationalist or instrumentalist reason, yet the precise nature of any underlying distinction between nature and culture is never satisfactorily resolved. The problem with this ontological strategy is that the political and ideological dimensions of the social construction of nature remain suppressed and ready to rear their ugly heads under the guise of his increasingly desperate search for sources of meaning untainted by capital:

> "To posit the body and its pleasures as an unquestionably affirmative category is a dangerous illusion, in a social order which reifies and regulates corporeal pleasure for its own ends just as relentlessly as it colonizes the mind" (Eagleton, 1990, page 344).

This is precisely the political and aesthetic dilemma which led Pasolini towards the creation of *Salò*, with his lurch towards the denigration of the body and sexualtiy. As David Forgacs (1986), Klaus Theweleit (1987), and Angela Dalle Vacche (1992) show, the interrelationship between fascism, sadism, and bodily abjection is far more complex than Pasolini's simplistic treatment can allow; where we find his fetishistic representations wallowing in a form of ahistorical irrationalism. Time and again, ideologies by their very nature seek to ascribe to themselves the advantages of invariance and ontological privilege over competing systems of ideas, and this is nowhere more intense than over the cultural appropriation of the body and sexuality.

Given Pasolini's restricted conception of artistic autonomy, he became ever more desperate to find a space within which he could find a distinctive and authentic voice to escape from his growing sense of aesthetic marginalisation and political irrelevance. In 1974 Pasolini tried to reaffirm his position at the forefront of the cinematic avant-garde by declaring that "artists must create, critics defend, and democratic people support ... works so extreme that they become unacceptable even to the broadest minds of the new state" (quoted by Greene, 1994, page 241). His films still have the capacity to shock, even to offend, but this in itself is little measure of their critical worth unless we choose to ascribe some critical value to art on this basis of risk or transgression alone (see Bürger, 1984; Guilbaut, 1980). With sophisticated developments in the reading of film since the 1970s, the idea of a distinctive cinematic system of signification has proved increasingly untenable. The critique of the cinematic medium has developed into a more subtle and heterogeneous understanding of the relationships between films and their audiences to delineate more carefully the interrelationship between visual pleasure and gender (de Lauretis, 1984; 1987; Mulvey, 1989; Rodowick, 1991; Shaviro, 1993). Although Pasolini undoubtedly played a key role in developing and reworking aesthetic sensibilities towards the body and sexuality he never successfully transcended the narrowly based intellectual and iconographic traditions running through his work. His representations of homoerotic imagery, for example, challenge heterosexual scopic regimes but remain rooted in the Oedipal optic of a multiperspectival male gaze (see Rose, 1986; Soper, 1995). For Pasolini, the psychological and historical dimensions to sexual difference are never sufficiently articulated in order to free his cinema from the oneiric realm of a biologically driven unconscious or the search for 'moral-aesthetic' utopias in the Western humanist tradition.

Since the 1970s there have been major developments in the critique of occularcentrism in the feminist thought of Hélène Cixous, Griselda Pollock, Luce Irigaray, and others, who make explicit the interconnection between the Platonic heritage of Western philosophy and the type of phallocentric scopic regime within which Pasolini developed his weak conception of social and cultural 'otherness'. With the demise of any ontological privilege for visuality, Pasolini faced the artistic dilemma of maintaining his artistic autonomy in relation to the instrumentalist hegemony of capital—which led him to turn against any possibility of commercial appropriation after the success of the 'trilogy of life' series in the early 1970s. Pasolini never appreciated the interrelationship between his own aesthetic sensibilities and the consumer culture which he strove to challenge and subvert. When Pasolini began his work with film in the late 1950s, Italy was experiencing its postwar 'economic miracle' under which ever greater numbers of people began to enjoy a degree of material prosperity for the first time. It is against this background that we must interpret Pasolini's despair at what he saw as the cultural levelling of everyday life under consumer capitalism. Yet his dismissal of mass culture as an ideological device is too simplistic an assessment of the process of cultural modernisation in modern Italy (Forgacs, 1990). Not only does such a view reject the possibiltities for material advancement in a high-handed way, but it is ultimately founded in an ontological 'purity' which refuses to engage adequately with the complexities of human culture. Pasolini's attempt to affirm the poetic dimension to life through a Gramscian reconciliation between the rationalist and irrationalist dimensions of modernity is ultimately lost in his inability to free himself from an essentialist conception of nature and the corporeal dimensions to meaning. We can reject Pasolini's ontological strategy because the treatment of nature as something outside of social discourse risks introducing biological fixity into our understanding of culture and

exposes the limited extent to which the philosophical discourse of modernity has engaged with cultural representations of nature. To recognise the dynamic interrelation between nature and culture is to affirm a posttraditional order beyond the nature-based categories of race, gender, and sexuality. This enables us to "remap the borderlands" between nature and culture and "envision a different and less hostile order of relationships among people, animals, technologies, and land" (Haraway, 1989, page 15; see also Adler and Pointon, 1993; Soper, 1995).

We can conclude that Pasolini's attempt to recover a degree of cultural authenticity despite the replicability and historical contingency of the cinematic medium remains trapped within his dualistic conception of nature and culture. In the iconoclastic cinema of Pasolini we find a vibrant example of the occularcentrist heritage of Western culture in all its confusion and contradictions. As Martin Jay notes, "the sole scopic regime of modernity cannot be identified *tout court* with Cartesian perspectivalism", yet "the anti-occularcentrist discourse has successfully posed substantial and troubling questions about the status of visuality in the dominant cultural traditions of the West" (Jay, 1993, page 589). A critical reading of Pasolini's work forces us to rethink our aesthetic sensibilities towards the essentialist discourses of nature and the body which permeate the European scopic regime. It is only by transcending this aesthetic and intellectual impasse that we can imagine different ways of being human.

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