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WHY ADD “REPUDIATION OF THE TRILOGY OF LIFE”
to the 2005 edition of Pasolini’s *Heretical Empiricism*?

Ben Lawton

Quite simply because Pasolini is dead and “Repudiation,” along with his last film, *Salò*, and his posthumous novel, *Petrolio*, like it or not, are the closing sequences of the artist’s tumultuous existence and thus determine to a large extent the montage we make of his life. Pasolini wrote:

It is therefore absolutely necessary to die, *because so long as we live, we have no meaning, and the language of our lives (with which we express ourselves, and to which we therefore attribute the greatest importance) is untranslatable, a chaos of possibilities, a search for relations and meanings without resolution. Death effects an instantaneous montage of our lives; that is, it chooses the truly meaningful moments (which are no longer modifiable by other possible contrary or incoherent moments) puts them in a sequence, transforming an infinite, unstable and uncertain—and therefore linguistically not describable—present into a clear, stable, certain, and therefore easily describable past (exactly in the context of a General Semiology). It is only thanks to death that our life serves us to express ourselves* (All italics in the original; *Heretical Empiricism*, 236-37).

Pasolini is dead, brutally murdered sometime during the night of November 2, 1975, by Pino Pelosi, a 17-year-old two-bit punk, and several unidentified associates. The murder was particularly brutal. Pasolini was beaten viciously with a nail-studded board and then run over repeatedly with his own Alfa Romeo. The event galvanized Italian society to an extent almost incomprehensible in this country. If Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, Camille Paglia, Madonna, Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee, Michael Moore, and Noam Chomsky were rolled up into a single person, one might begin to get some idea of the impact Pasolini had on Italian society. The controversies he initiated throughout his long, prolific career as poet, novelist, essayist, dramatist, and filmmaker still rage. His death had an impact in Italy comparable to that of John F. Kennedy in the United States. Every intellectual, reporter and politician in Italy had a theory about the causes of the murder and about who the guilty parties were. The only thing everyone agreed upon—including the prosecutor—was that Pelosi, alone, could never have killed Pasolini. Although the poet was a smallish man in his early fifties, he was exceptionally fit and tough. Some argued that his death was, somehow, an inescapable final and fitting climax to his life. In his own words, it would finally permit a montage of his life. Pasolini, they said, had described analogous murders in his novels and shown them in his films. He lived dangerously. He prowled the slums of major metropolitan centers around the world, alone, in search of juvenile male sexual companionship, which at best could be described as rough trade. Others argued that his death was a de facto suicide; that, after the complete pessimism of *Salò*, confronted with a society which he described as personally suicidal, he had gone off in search of death (“Repudiation of the Trilogy of Life,” xvii). Others still, Laura Betti pre-eminent among them, argued that he was killed by the ruling Italian political party, the Christian Democrats. Pasolini himself argues in several essays that it is in fact the established power, the state, the church, the educational system, and television, which are responsible for the pandemic violence that has come to be characteristic of Italian cities, and thus, we may presumably extrapolate, for his own death.

Amidst all the debates, accusations, and counter accusation, all the major players appear to have shared one emotion: relief. Pasolini was finally dead. He was no longer an ongoing embarrassment. Finally they could all, in their different ways, deal more easily with the *scrittore scomodo*. Literally, *scrittore scomodo* means, uncomfortable writer, but what the expression really means is the writer who makes others feel uncomfortable, who inconveniences others, who makes them feel awkward—those others being the power structures, right and left, young and old, male chauvinist and feminist, etc. Pasolini eventually spelled out his poetics—which he applied to everything he did—in a 1970 article titled “The Unpopular Cinema” (*Heretical Empiricism*, 267-275). In it Pasolini argues that art is valid only when it is revolutionary, that is, when the artist is on the firing line, breaking the laws of the system within which he operates. Thus, in his filmmaking, he rejected both traditional and avant-garde cinemas—the former because its extreme readability does not force the viewer to reflect on what he has seen; the latter because avant-garde filmmakers have, in his opinion, charged beyond the firing line and, in his words, have been trapped in a prisoner of war camp which they have promptly transformed into an intellectual ghetto. Both, he argued, are consumer products since neither challenges its respective public. Pasolini returned to the firing line by fusing traditional and modernist modes in his “trilogy of life” films: *Il Decamerone* (1971: *The Decameron*), *I racconti di Canterbury* (1972; *Canterbury Tales*) and *Il fiore delle mille e una notte* (1974; *Arabian Nights*). In the process, while acquiring a broader and more popular audience, he alienated the greater part of the intellectuals, critics, and art house patrons who has earlier championed his more esoteric works. At the same time he discovered how accurate he had been when he defined the revolutionary artistic process as sadomasochistic: sadistic in that it destroys the expectations of the public: masochistic because the public will reject the work and attack the artist. Lest it be thought that Pasolini was a complete pessimist, it should be noted that he did add that there is the liberated spectator who rejoices in the freedom of the artist.

Sadistically Pasolini attacked in all directions. Sadistically he was embroiled in endless polemics with everyone in Italy. Masochistically, he paid the price. He was tried 33 times for crimes as varied as armed robbery of a filling station—allegedly, according to his accuser he had a gold bullet in his gun (not guilty)—and contempt for the state religion as a result of the making of *La ricotta* (guilty-condemned to four months in jail, but the conviction was later overturned). Through it all, so far as I can ascertain, he apparently maintained an absolute openness, a childlike candor. He stated and wrote whatever he felt was right, in almost godlike disregard for all consequences. He attacked the government. He argued endlessly in essays which appeared regularly in major periodicals and in scholarly journals, that the contemporary Italian government was, in fact, a seamless continuation of the Mussolini’s fascist government. He attacked the temporal power of the Catholic Church, arguing that by definition it was engaged in a connivance with the state, which corrupted both Church and state. He urged the Pope to sell or give away the Vatican and all its accumulated treasures, and to move into the slums with real people. How, he asked, could this possibly hurt the church? He attacked the PCI. Although not a party member since his expulsion in 1949, Pasolini described himself as a Marxist and he always voted for the Communist party. This did not, however, stop him from attacking the party for its cowardice, and for its compromises with the power structure. He attacked university students during the Age of Aquarius. In the aftermath of a confrontation between students and police, he chastised the revolting students who at the time were the darlings of intellectuals world-wide in what he himself described as “ugly verses” in “The PCI to the Young!!” (*Heretical Empiricism*, 150-54).

Pasolini is dead, but he has not been silenced. Thirty years after his murder he continues to speak to us from the grave with his final prophetic works. Over the years Pasolini attacked consumer capitalism with increasing acrimony. He decided that consumer capitalism was worse than fascism, for while the latter was openly oppressive, and thus offered something against which to struggle, consumer capitalism co-opts its victims through an erosion of values which transforms them into willing participants in their own exploitation. He decided that capitalism must be brought to its knees. But how? The backbone of capitalism, he reasoned, is the traditional family, predicated on patriarchal values. Therefore, he reasoned, the best way to attack capitalism is to attack the family. But how do you destroy patriarchal family values? Sex, the more unconventional the better, became the answer for Pasolini (Lawton, 1992). He articulated these theories in *Teorema*, film in which a mysterious figure visits the family of an Italian capitalist, and eventually seduces all the family members in turn: mother, daughter, son, father, and maid, with the results that might be expected: insanity verging on suicide, except for the maid who achieved a sort of primitive canonization. But then, in an essay which seemed to contradict his attack on patriarchal family values, he condemned abortion. He wrote: "I am traumatized by the legalization of abortion because I consider it, as do many, a legalization of homicide." His solution: concentrate not on abortion, but on the event which causes the need for abortion: heterosexual copulation. And why is copulation a problem? Because, he argued, unlike times past when survival depended on procreation, now survival depends on not procreating. Pasolini's answer to the problem of overpopulation was to promote sexual education everywhere and in particular on television: "contraceptives, pills, different sexual techniques, a modern morality of sexual honor, etc." He urged his readers to remember that in this new context "it is heterosexual relations that are dangerous for the human species, while homosexual ones represent its salvation." And in case the reader has a sneaking suspicion that Pasolini's advocacy here is not completely disinterested, the author ends the essay with a brief paragraph which epitomizes his not infrequently ironic honesty: "Finally: many—lacking the virile (manly), rational capacity to understand—will accuse this essay of being personal, of pleading special minority interests. So what?" (Pasolini, 1975, 123-131).

In 1970, having rejected the increasingly ideological direction in which his work had been going, he began his "trilogy of life" films. Of these films, in an interview with Gideon Bachmann, Pasolini stated that "it is much more difficult to make films in which the ideology is hidden, indirect, implicit, than to make thesis films, defending a clear point of view. . . . I am concerned with the experience of entering into the most mysterious working of artistic creation . . . into the ontology of narration, in the making of cinema-cinema." He added, "I find it the most beautiful idea I have ever had, this wish to tell, to recount for the sheer joy of telling and recounting, for the creation of narrative myths, away from ideology, precisely because I have understood that to make an ideological film is finally easier than making a film outwardly lacking ideology. Outwardly, because every film has its ideology, first of all its intrinsic truth to itself, its poetry, and then its external ideology, which is its more or less self-evident political attitude." With the films of the "trilogy of life" Pasolini proceeded from a focus on the artistic process in the *Decameron* ("why realize a work of art when it is so nice to simply dream it?") to an expression of the "sheer joy of telling and recounting" ("here ends *The Tales of Canterbury* told solely for the pleasure of telling"), to a final acknowledgement in *Arabian Nights*, that the creative process, however painful, does generate enduring rewards ("What a night! God has created none to equal it. Its inception was bitter, but how sweet its end"). In these films, however, we can also observe the increasingly obvious destruction of many of Pasolini's most cherished myths. The childlike innocence, which Pasolini had once found so endearing in Ninetto Davoli and in the sub

proletariat in general, comes under increasingly harsh attacks. Pasolini's view of casual sex in general and of homosexuality in particular also becomes progressively more negative — as a metaphor for the human condition, not necessarily per se (Lawton, 1981).

In the “trilogy of life” films sex continues to be the objective correlative for Pasolini's hidden ideology. It is both intended as a slap in the face of family values and to make very specific comments about the endless exploitation of the poor, regardless of gender. At the same time he was deeply disturbed by the failure of both public and critics to understand his hidden ideology. Essentially, his films were perceived by many as mere pornography, and in fact they generated numerous imitations which he considered to be anything but the highest form of flattery. His response was *Salò*. Once again sex is the metaphor for exploitation, but here everyone, regardless of class or wealth is a potential victim; here sexual activities are depicted in a manner which is so grotesque, so dehumanizing, so brutalizing that they simply cannot become a consumer product. The four “lords,” the authority figures represent all the powers of the state: the duke (nobility), the monsignor (church), the president of the court of appeals (judiciary), and president Durcet (economic). Young working class conscripts are compelled to aid the “lords” in their torture, dehumanization, and eventual murder of young men and women. These scenes are so horrific that of the several hundred people who attended the U.S. premiere at Indiana University in the late 1970s, only a handful was able to remain until the end. And yet, we have seen similar images emerge from Abu Grahb prison, and we have been told that there are many more that are so horrendous that we cannot be allowed to see them. This notwithstanding, only a few working class soldiers have been prosecuted. Not one of the contemporary “lords” has been even so much as reprimanded. How far does the fascist continuum extend?

Pasolini's last essays are profoundly pessimistic. In “Repudiation,” he might as well be speaking about of this country, particularly in the light of events following hurricane Katrina's destruction of New Orleans, when he writes,

My critics . . . seem to think that Italian society has unquestionably improved, that is, that it has become more democratic, more tolerant, more modern, etc. They do not notice the avalanche of crimes that submerges Italy: they relegate this phenomenon to the news media and remove all significance from it. They do not notice that there is no break between those who are technically criminal and those who are not; and that the model of insolence, inhumanity, ruthlessness is identical for the entire mass of young people. They do not notice that in Italy there actually is a curfew, that the night is as deserted and sinister as it was in the darkest centuries of the past; but they don't experience this, they stay home (perhaps to gratify their consciences with modernity aided by television) (“Repudiation,” xix)

The solutions he proposed, which he says apply only to Italy, are typically both absolutely outrageous and yet eminently sensible:

1. Eliminate public education beyond the fifth grade
2. Eliminate television.

The first solution, as I said, is clearly outrageous and deserves to be jettisoned along with the idea of school vouchers — another scheme intended to destroy public education and to further extend the already nearly universal segregation in major urban centers in this country. The second, instead, makes perfect sense. Without this soul-sucking, mind-destroying contraption neither Berlusconi nor Bush would be presidents of their respective countries and there might be

some space for a serious discussion of very serious issues confronting the United States: the erosion of our civil liberties, the advisability of attempting to create a “new world order,” the programmatic attack on all social services, the attempted destruction of Social Security, the jettisoning of pension plans by major corporations, and the lack of universal medical care, just to mention a few.

“What about oil?” you might well ask. Good question. Pasolini’s posthumous novel, *Petrolio* (1975), deals prophetically, precisely with this issue: petroleum as the hidden protagonist behind all the political and economic problems of Italy. This had already been the theme of Vittorio De Sica’s and Cesare Zavattini’s *Miracolo a Milano* (*Miracle in Milan*, 1951). In this film, in fact, we observe the capitalist, not coincidentally called Mobbi (the echo of Mobil Oil cannot be accidental, particularly since we see a Mobil Oil sign) who employs the army to expropriate poor squatters. As we watch those scenes we can’t help but be reminded that the disastrous and illegal preemptive war against Iraq was not about weapons of mass destruction, nor about bringing liberty to the Iraqi people, but to control the second largest source of oil in the world. Why else did we start building 14 “enduring” military bases immediately?

Pasolini’s death served to give his life a meaning which is becoming more important with each passing year. If he was significant when he was alive in Italy, if he continues to be significant three thousand miles away and 30 years later, it is because of his sadomasochistic attack against all forms of political correctness — those hegemonic abominations which are most nefarious when they purport to defend our most cherished hopes, dreams, and aspirations. But of course, if you choose his path, if you choose to expose yourself time and again to the crossfire on the firing line, you are inevitably doomed because, if you will forgive the mixed metaphor, if your enemies don’t crucify you, you will inevitably become a victim of so-called “friendly fire.” And yet, without *poveri cristi* like Pasolini, there really is little hope for the future.

Ben Lawton, 2005