

The Delay of Death – Pasolini's Trilogy of Life

On the occasion of new DVDs by Criterion and a MoMA retrospective, a look at Pier Paolo Pasolini's "Trilogy of Life" and *Salò*.

Gabriel Abrantes 24 DEC 2012



Above: Giotto, *Meeting at the Golden Gate*, 1305.

Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò* (1975) was released by Criterion in 1998 and in 2004 they released *Mamma Roma* (1962). This past month they released a much belated box-set of his six-hour *Trilogy of Life* (1971-1974), in a beautiful restoration and accompanied with an awesome heap of great docs, essays and other goodies. On December 13 MoMA started a month-long *retrospective* dedicated to his work.

I. Defending Pasolini Against His Devotees

The prevailing view of Pier Paolo Pasolini has become subjugated to the misshapen reputation of his most infamous film, *Salò* (1975). The film's unyielding serial descent into ever more severe cycles of mutilation, sodomy, coprophagia, and chronic rape of a group of 12-15 year olds has scandalized and influenced a culture that is frantic for any stimuli that can remind its constituents of their humanity. The film has furnished ample fodder for generations of filmmakers intent on appropriating and capitalizing on its capacity for shock, as a last ditch attempt to have any effect whatsoever on an audience, in an age where culture has lost all religious and political credibility. This tendency has degraded Pasolini to the status of a hollow pulpiteer of scandal, the type of fashionable figure that he so adamantly admonished during his lifetime. Yet *Salò* gains enormous depth when regarded as a punctuation to Pasolini's entire discourse, and seen through the prism of his struggle to comprehend and wrestle with a society that was progressively debasing itself into a

conformist and racist creed. The *Trilogy of Life* is the positive accumulation of his discourse, with a vision of culture that is far more elucidating than the adolescent fascination with the effect of violence: culture as the delay of death.

II. Cinema of Poetry

The system of contradictions which models the complexity of Pasolini's cinema can begin to be revealed by the description of a few binary oppositions. His framing, lens variation, shot language, casting choices, art direction, musical choices, and editing strategies can all be seen as subject to a logic of conjoining 'high' and 'low' culture.

The title cards in his films already proffer a disorienting opposition of the aural and visual. The beginning of *The Decameron* blinds with a white field of grain and the black all capital roman lettering of the credits. The font on the background creates the distinct impression that the names intermittently appearing on screen (director, producer, cast, etc.), carry the weight of the Roman names engraved in their senate's monument to peace, the *Ara Pacis*, but transformed by the flickering warmth of liquid emulsion. Over this dignified procession of letters, we are lambasted by Ennio Morricone's vulgar cacophony of monorhythmic five-tone harmonicas, cornets, bells, bagpipes, Jews' harps, tambourines, laughing, singing and percussive dancing. Already in the credits we are confronted with a complexity of class and cultural references scintillating into each other, on a scale that spans the entire social history of Roman culture (from the Republic's *Ara Pacis* to the Cinecitta, and from the folk songs of Naples to Ennio Moricone's trademark soundtracks).

Top Comments



Above: YouTube comments for Pasolini's *Decameron*.

Pasolini used an inverted version of this opposition in his first film, *Accattone*. He managed to sanctify a rascal pimp (played by Franco Citti) and a landscape filled with the most brute and crass (albeit charming) hoodlums by cuing them with sixteenth century 'holy' music:

"I think what scandalized [the audience] in Accattone was the mixture of violent Roman subproletariat with the music of Bach."¹

In this first film, along with his second, Pasolini developed an aesthetic that hinges on a dialectic, a style that he described as 'reverential.' In both *Accattone* and *Mamma Roma* he would film his

thieving, pimping, and prostituting sub-proletarian protagonists in frames referencing Medieval and Mannerist religious paintings. Pasolini most often cites Masaccio, and in later films Giotto, Piero della Francesca as well as the colors of the mannerists Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino. The pose and composition of a Masaccio crucifixion is replicated in the conclusion of *Mamma Roma*, with the proto-bourgeois teenage thief Ettore in the place of Christ, sweating from consumption, horizontally crucified in the isolation of a prison cell.

These references come from two shunned periods of art history, the Medieval and the Mannerist. Both are usually regarded as inferior to the periods that they frame: Ancient Rome, the Renaissance and the Baroque. Giotto, Masaccio, and Piero della Francesca are on the transitional cusp of the invention of perspective, the age of reason, and the nascent strands of industrial logic. Giotto's malformed and disjointed perspectives, with each building receding towards its own horizon, are part of the same pre-industrial 'reality' and 'innocence' that Pasolini would later read in Boccaccio and Chaucer. Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino, on the other hand, are protagonists of the Mannerist period, with canvases covered in supernaturally elongated figures and ethereal palettes of pastel pink, green and cerulean. This kitsch pastiche of exaggerated Renaissance forms was a clear disengagement from the rigid logic of its preceding period.



Above: Masaccio, *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve* (before and after restoration), 1426.

Pasolini eventually had to modify his 'reverential style,' and adapt these aesthetic references to a different subject matter. On the first day of shooting *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, a film

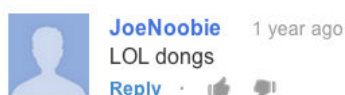
portraying the life of Jesus according to the Gospel of Matthew, Pasolini nearly gave up the project, intuiting the superfluity of his 'reverential style':

"Already in Accattone my style was religious... Using a reverential style for The Gospel was gilding the lily: it came out rhetoric... Reverential technique and style in Accattone went fine, but applied to a sacred text they were ridiculous;... When I was filming the baptism scene near Viterbo I threw over all my technical preconceptions. I started using the zoom, I used new camera movements, new frames, which were not reverential, but almost documentary."²

By understanding the redundancy of filming a religious subject with references to religious paintings, Pasolini discovered his revolutionary cinematographic methodology, and its transformative potential. In order to forge a new perspective of Christianity, he would have to film Jesus Christ as a man, as anything but holy. Pasolini decided to film the gospel with a profusion of verité techniques:

"The alternation of different lenses, a 25mm and a 200mm on the same face; the proliferation of wasted zoom shots, with their lenses of very high numbers which are on top of things, expanding them like excessively leavened bread; the continuous, deceptively casual shots against the light, which dazzle the camera; the hand-held camera movements; the more sharply focused tracking shots; the wrong editing for expressive reasons; the irritating opening shots; the interminable pauses on the same image, etc."³

Casting would be one of the most creative aspects of Pasolini's work, and (after the period of his Roman films) would manage a striking effect: every character in history would now become a sub-proletarian body. Pasolini's imaginary worlds would become populated exclusively with rough local non-professional actors, regardless of whether they represented cuckolded bakers, sex-obsessed good-for-nothings, enthusiastic virgins, adulterous queens, perverted friars, or even the incestuous Oedipus Rex.



Uploader Comments (UfoRocker88)



Above: YouTube comments for Pasolini's *The Canterbury Tales*.

It is surprising that Pasolini refrained from positing Caravaggio as an influence, as he seems to have so much in common with him. Caravaggio, a 17th century Italian baroque painter, usually rendering mythical, religious, or moral themes, also exclusively cast his models from the lowest social classes of Naples. Further parallels can be found in Caravaggio's sexuality, his attraction to violence, and his death, which like Pasolini, was from knife wounds on an Italian beach. Pasolini only once mentioned how he felt about Caravaggio, stating that he was not much influenced by him. He justified this, stating that everything Caravaggio painted had the patina of death, although he concedes that the world Caravaggio placed in front of the easel was a spectacular invention; 'the neglected children of the greengrocer, disparaged women of the people, etc.'⁴ What made Caravaggio's work revolutionary was his choice to alter his perspective, detailing the low, vulgar, and disparaged classes of society. *The Entombment of Christ* is painted from the point of view of beggars' feet, the *Conversion on the Way to Damascus* consecrates a quarter of its surface to the chiaroscuro modeling of a horse's rump, and all of his paintings are filled with representations of Christ, Mary, saints, and apostles modeled by the weathered faces, scum-filled fingernails, and withering breasts of bodies that suffered a lifetime of social oppression. This political dialectic of representing the holy with the marginalized factions of society is so analogous to the dynamic of Pasolini's cinema that his denial reveals itself as all the more conspicuous.

These examples point to the centrality of Pasolini's approach to casting and the dialectic that founds its political distention. As P. Adams Sitney established in his text *Acattonne and Mamma Roma*, the source of the genealogical shift in between Neo-Realism and Pasolini's cinema arose from the mytho-poetic torque that Pasolini infused in his characters and actors.⁵ In *Mamma Roma*, Anna Magnani incarnates the Mother Madonna as she hangs from the window of a social housing building, weeping for her son who lays feverishly bound to a crucifix.

These series of contradictions (camera, acting, music, casting, art direction, etc.) are then conjoined, sometimes forming overlaps of pairs (i.e. Bach contrasts with the sub-proletarian pimp, who in turn contrasts with medieval icon composition), creating a highly complex polymorphic network of contradictions, which establish the principal impetus of his discourse: the Nietzschean dialectic of Epic and Folk. Pasolini often refers to the notion of epic:



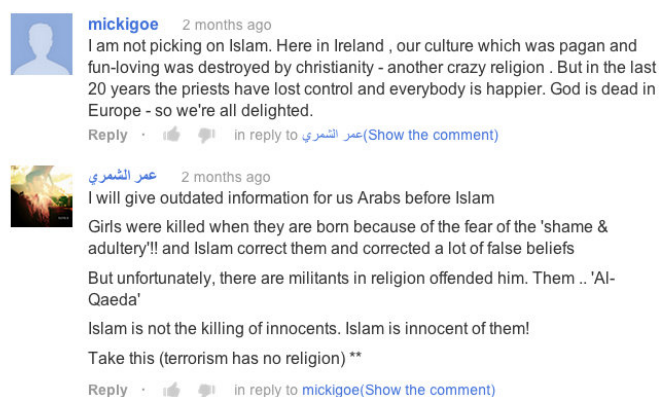
Above: Pontormo, *Descent from the Cross*, c. 1525.

“Dreyer, Mizoguchi and Chaplin, they are all epic, - not epic in the Brechtian sense of the word; I mean epic in the more mythic sense of the word - more natural epicness which pertains more to things, to facts, to characters, to the story, without Brecht’s detachment. I feel this mythic epicness in both Dreyer and Mizoguchi and Chaplin: all three see things from a point of view which is absolute, essential and in a certain way holy, reverential.”⁶

The juxtaposition of the epic and the folk lies at the center of his work, and all of its particular modular contradictions. It is intended to guide the films towards the mythic. This is why it is unjust to delimit his work as burlesque eclecticism. The structure of his individual works and of the body of work did not assemble a totemic pastiche, accumulating different symbolic forms one on top of the other, but, rather, through a flexible dialectic assembled the likeness of a new world, a world founded in the fragmentary oppositions of the subconscious.

In contradistinction to the dynamics described above, *Salò* works to elide the majority of techniques that Pasolini had elaborated and used until then. For the movie offers only a consistent and

unyielding linearity of axis in camera angles, acetic limit of lens variety, overall restraint from camera movement (especially handheld), and the rigidity of an unidirectional climactic story. The film even manages to discard sentiment in its narrative construction, eschewing any pretense of suspense, preferring instead the more basic structure of a story without plot, where events merely proceed one after the other in spite of motivation (much like the primitive man's fireside story, glued together with an endless 'and then, and then, and then...'). This unidirectional frigidity permeates the majority of *Salò*, and if it were not for one particular scene, it could justifiably be seen as the equivalent to cheap nauseating snuff attacking sexually deviant fascists.



Above: YouTube comments for Pasolini's *Arabian Nights*.

This singular scene rotates the hinge of the entire film, altering our moral perspective. The scene, the centerpiece of the film, reveals the four patriarch libertines lounging, brandy in hand, after an exhausting bout of torturing, degrading and defiling their pubescent captives. In one of the rare camera movements in *Salò*, a tracking shot introduces them, neckties loosened, arms and legs akimbo, sprawled over the carpet of a secluded drawing room. The cinematography, in an unusual movement and attitude for Pasolini, does not concentrate on their faces, but rather obfuscates their presence in the musk of their surroundings. It pivots in a measured and contrite half circle that leaves their conversation to be heard over the objects that surround them; a low voice can be heard quoting a Baudelaire verse as the camera moves over a vast industrial-erotic Fernand Leger fresco; another voice doubts that the quote is Baudelaire's as we see a set of exquisitely framed Dada and Suprematist collages. Completing this measured half circle around the room, the camera settles into the familiar Pasolini close-ups (albeit in less frontal, three quarter portraits) where the men agree that they were in fact quoting Nietzsche. The men, cigars in hand and swiveling their glasses, exhibit bohemian postures transported directly from Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*. They assume, in context and persona, the port of left-wing intellectuals that fascists so vehemently excoriated. The modernist poetry, paintings, and bohemian lifestyle represented in the scene form a material list of the objects and social behaviors that the Fascist state had deemed 'degenerate.'



Above: Caravaggio, *Entombment of Christ*, 1602.

This is the only scene in *Salò* that appeals to the revolutionary potential of Pasolini's previously developed dialectic strategies. In an ironic reversal of the representation of the sub-proletariat as saints, Pasolini represents Fascists as left-wing intellectuals. In this he invests in the same leverage that his dialectical approach affords, but applies it as a gesture of masochistic self-effacement. At that moment the excoriating libertinage of the patriarchs is not seen as the objectionable pursuits of pathological reprobates, but as the sexually liberated experimentation of sensitive philosophically minded dandies. There is no doubt that by setting up this incongruous representation of fascists, Pasolini meant to momentarily unweave the gossamer filter that divides his radical left wing politics from the extreme right wing politics that he had so malevolently remonstrated throughout his life.



BanGayMarriage 2 years ago

Behold: the dreadful torments that will be inflicted upon the reprobate sinners when they reach their proper home in HELL!!! Once you pass through those horrid gates, it is too late to repent - either it has to happen in THIS LIFE, and preferably RIGHT NOW, or otherwise thine soul will be forfeit and you will suffer at the hands of the Accursed Dragon for all time!

Reply · 👍 👎

Above: YouTube comment for Pasolini's *The Canterbury Tales*.

III. Delay of Death

The Trilogy of Life, although not yet subscribing to this pessimistic and auto-destructive perspective, is already a premonition of it. During its conception Pasolini had already lost confidence with all of his Marxist prerogatives, and so the trilogy operates as a conscious delay of death. In this sense it can be categorized as a six-hour elegiac rumination on the ruins of what Pasolini considered to be a perished humanity. With it, he forged the culminating statement his body of work, and wittingly went about it in a manner that was a wild critical and commercial success. This success, as well as the films' faux naïveté and mock optimism, reinforces the grand irony of succeeding this trilogy with *Salò*.

The three sources for the trilogy, Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, and the anonymous *1001 Nights* are all products of medieval (pre-industrial) cultures that relish in caricature, vulgarity, sexuality and trickery. The structure of the books are similar, as they are all composed of a series of stories strung together by a frame narrative. The choice of medieval narratives for the trilogy, especially ones that lean so heavily on a blatant erotic crudity as a source of gregarious jest and joy, comes as an evident culmination of Pasolini's previous interest in a pre-modern authenticity and view of liberated sexuality as the most effective tool against the bourgeoisie. In addition to these two facts underline the texts' most significant particularity (which is also shared in common with Sade's *120 Days*): the main impetus for storytelling is to delay a confrontation with death.

How each frame operates as a 'delay of death' is clear in their summaries. In *The Decameron* a group of Florentine citizens barricade themselves in a countryside castle in order to avoid the black plague scourging the city. While they are barricaded each member of their party tells a story in order to pass the time. In *The Canterbury Tales*, a group of English men and women tell each other stories to pass the time as they proceed on their pilgrimage towards Canterbury. The relation of this frame to a delay of death is founded on its structure around a pilgrimage. These long voyages to visit holy relics (throughout history as well as today) most commonly function as a demonstration of faith entreating divine providence to cure personal illness. In *1001 Nights* an artful young woman marries a sultan who has been chronically slaying his wives one after another on their wedding night out of spite for being cuckolded by his first wife. The young woman attempts to save herself (and the many women that would come after her) by telling an extended chain of stories, which, keeping the sultan in suspense, delay her immanent execution. In all three cases the frame characters set about telling stories in order to delay their confrontation with death, whether it be the black plague, divine providence, or the rancorous sultan's sword.



Above: Still from 35mm film of *The Arabian Nights* by Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1974.

All three books posit storytelling as a form of entertainment in order to pass the time, as well as a form of escaping death. Regardless of the fact that Pasolini's trilogy does away with the frame narratives (although he had originally filmed and edited over 20 minutes of the pilgrims in *Canterbury*, he ended up editing these out the night in between the press screening and the public screening at the Berlin Film Festival premiere), the films operate on this same, basic premise. *The Trilogy* arises out of a disillusionment with the political potential of cinema, and acquiesces to a conception of life that views culture as a manner to dream away time, as a way to postpone our irremediable existential condition of 'thrownness-towards-death.'

This logic arises out of the Pasolini's desperation in regard to the political impotence of having an audience that was limited to the dominated factions of the bourgeoisie (artists and intellectuals). It also comes out of his disappointment in the aesthetics of anarchy proposed by the 'cinema of poetry'; they were to readily appropriated into a fashionable canon of international filmmaking, much like Marxist posturing became fashionable for the youth of Europe. Pasolini and his producer, Alberto Grimaldi, evaded the politics of marginal, alternative and counter-cultural fashion, by attempting to formulate and market *The Trilogy* as a mass spectacle.

This strategy was enormously successful, and *The Trilogy* was widely awarded, critically acclaimed, and commercially successful. *The Decameron* won the Silver Bear at the 1971 Berlin International Film Festival, a year later *The Canterbury Tales* won the Golden Bear, and in 1974 *Arabian Nights* won the Grand Prize of the Jury at the Cannes Film Festival. Up till the production of *The Decameron*, Pasolini had only won one other major prize, grabbing the Special Jury Prize at the '64 Venice film festival, with *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. The films' commercial success can be linked to a politics of the producer's publicity strategy and Pasolini's content. All three films were advertised as salacious farces celebrating the joy of a liberated sexuality, the puerile delight of extramarital foolhardiness, and the comic mishaps of beguiled naïfs. The posters mimicked the styles of pornographic B-films, with the inevitable display of nudity, burlesque grimaces, wide mouthed pantomimes, and a variegated saturation of exotic locations and costumes. The trailers exacerbate this logic even further, utilizing an alternating montage that

flips rhythmically in between explicit sex and close-ups of grotesque hooting, cackling, moaning, and flatulence. They conclude with a boisterous tongue in cheek V.O. boasting of the films' XXX rating. Such strategy would pander —quite successfully—to a mass audience craving commodities that fed their recently liberated senses of self, the same audience that had previously been alienated, wearied, or bored by Pasolini's less jocular films. Such commercial mechanisms functioned so well that, by the end of the trilogy, the longest review of *Arabian Nights* ran a staggering eleven pages, punctuated over thirty spreads of Italian *Playboy's* soft-porn bunnies.⁷

The trilogy and *Salò* are very different, but they are founded in a common impetus, experimental research on how one can go about as a poet in a secular and politically flaccid culture. Both films posit the same answer, albeit in different typologies: one through the escapism of a gregarious popular form and the other through a melancholy fueled pessimism. They both revel in affirmations of the Elegiac form as the only justifiable genre of cultural production. They operate as a preemptive elegy, as a funeral oration, or a funeral speech: a discursive locus for collective mourning in order to usher the fabricated qualities of the dead back into a living corpus.

“Now hearing this gospel of universal harmony, each person feels himself to be not simply united, reconciled or merged with his neighbor, but quite literally one with him, as if the veil of maya had been torn apart, so that mere shreds of it flutter before the mysterious primordial unity (das Ur-Eine).”⁸

Special thanks to David Phelps.

Notes

1. Stack, Oswald (ed.) “Accattone.” in Pasolini on Pasolini. (Thames and Hudson, London 1969.) 52.
2. Stack, Oswald (ed.) “Accattone.” in Pasolini on Pasolini. (Thames and Hudson, London 1969.) 83-84.
3. Pasolini, Pier Paolo. “The “Cinema of Poetry”.” in Heretical Empiricism. (New Academia Publishing, Washington, D.C. 2005.) 184.
4. Pasolini, Pier Paolo. “La Luce di Caravaggio.” in Saggi sulla letteratura e sull'arte, Tomo II, (Meridiani Mondadori, Milano 1999.)
5. SITNEY, P. Adams. “Accattone and Mamma Roma.” in Pier Paolo Pasolini - Contemporary Perspectives. RUMBLE, Patrick (ed.) (Toronto Press Incorporated, Toronto 1994) 173.

6. Stack, Oswald (ed.) "Accattone." in Pasolini on Pasolini. (Thames and Hudson, London 1969.) 43.
7. Pasolini, Pier Paolo. "Il fiore delle mille e una notte "le mie mille e una notte"" in Italian Playboy. Sept. 1973. Print.
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