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Pasolini's Counter-Political Gaze at the Sacred

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Deleuze sees Pasolini as a formalist who seeks to define the “essential element” of the “cinematographic image.”¹ Yet the formal is subordinated in Pasolini to something else. Pasolini himself provides the clue to it when he states that his cinema is, above all, a “cinema of poetry.”² In turn, Deleuze indirectly supplies a precious interpretative key for analysing the latter, namely, his distinction between “qualities,” “forces,” or “affects,” on the one hand, and “states of things,” on the other hand.³ For Deleuze writes about Dreyer – whom Pasolini greatly admired⁴ – “to extract from the event [...] that which goes beyond its own actualisation,”⁵ to wit, an “affect” *qua* “entity,” is also Pasolini’s purpose.

One can appreciate it e.g. in his close-ups of Ettore, the young peasant protagonist of *Mamma Roma* (1962) played by Ettore Garofolo, whose *suffering* expresses not only that of an individual, nor even only that of a social class, but that of a way of being-in-the-world which came to an end with the “anthropological revolution” (the term is Pasolini’s)⁶ brought about by neo-capitalism. One can also appreciate it in his close-ups of Margherita Caruso in his adaptation of Matthew’s Gospel (1964), whose silent opening shots manage to extract from Caruso’s expression the profound *sadness* of an unjust feeling of rejection in which all similar feelings ever felt by anyone take shape beyond the particular story, legend in this case, told in the film. And one can appreciate it in his close-ups of Ines Pellegrini and Franco Merli playing Zumurrud and Nur ed-

¹ G. Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (London & Minneapolis: The Athlone Press & University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 73.

² P. P. Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism* (2nd ed.; Washington DC: New Academia, 2005), 167-186.

³ *Ibid.*, 87-122.

⁴ *Pasolini su Pasolini. Conversazione con Jon Halliday* (Parma: Ugo Guanda, 2014), 41, 55.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁶ P. P. Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters* (New York: Carcanet Press, 1987), 118.

Din – whose gazes are not just innocent but the very embodiment of *innocence* itself – in *Flowers of the Arabian Nights* (1974).

In this sense, Pasolini's cinema can be defined as an *Andenken*, i.e. as a “rethinking” and a “remembrance,”⁷ of the “sacred” (understood in a non-necessarily religious way, see below) that combines (a) *nostalgia* for bygone meaning and coherence; (b) *perceptiveness* to their liminal gleaming in a degraded, neo-capitalist, world in which everything is consumable; and (c) *awareness* of that gleaming's politically-disruptive force.⁸

What, then, do I mean by “sacred” in this context? I mean – borrowing from S. Claxton – the *fundamental* “affective aspects of being”⁹ on which human lives ultimately rely however *differently* they may be experienced and portrayed.¹⁰ Thus, for example a sorrowful departure cannot be but a departure whose *regretfulness* must be perceptible as such regardless of the particular circumstances in which it may be experienced and independently of the fashion in which it may be depicted; likewise, a beautiful encounter cannot be but an encounter that brings perceptible *joy* regardless of the specific circumstances in which it may be experienced and independently of the way in which it may be portrayed; and so on and so forth.

⁷ The expression is Hölderlin's, whom Pasolini both read and translated; see R. Amaba, “Dioses desconchados. Ruinas de Pasolini y Hölderlin,” *Shangrila* 23–24 (2015): 54-74.

⁸ On the “sacred” according to Pasolini, see e.g. P. P. Pasolini, “Una visione del mondo epico-religiosa” (*Bianco e Nero*, 25.6, Jun. 1964); and, more generally, S. Benini, *Pasolini: Sacred Flesh* (Toronto, Buffalo & London: University of Toronto Press), 22-27. The politically-disruptive force of the sacred in Pasolini, it could be argued, is analogous to that of the anonymous “Visitor” in his 1968 film *Teorema*.

⁹ S. Claxton, *Heidegger's Gods: An Ecofeminist Perspective* (London & New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2017), 59.

¹⁰ I therefore endorse a *non-religious* approach to the “sacred.” C. A. Barton and D. Boyarin persuasively argue (*Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2016]) that it was in the 5th century that the Latin term *religio* acquired its current meaning in the writings of various Christian authors, for whom it began to denote a system of beliefs and its corresponding practices, institutions, traditions, etc. When pre- and extra-Christian notions of the “sacred,” understood as that which is *put apart* and *cared for*, are forced into the category “religion,” they are conceptually denaturalised. Thus, for example, D. Chidester (*Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* [Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2014]) shows that the term “religion” has been used to map and distort the so-called African “religions.” I have addressed these and other related issues against the backdrop of contemporary concerns on “worlding” in two publications co-authored with S. Gevorkyan: “Post-Heideggerian Drifts: From Object-Oriented-Ontology Worldlessness to Post-Nihilist Worldings” (*Das Questões*, 9.1 [2020]: 3-18), and “Earth and World(s): From Heidegger's Fourfold to Contemporary Anthropology” (forthcoming in *Open Philosophy*).

Yet I am far from invoking here any type of essentialism, if for “essence” one understands something like an atemporal norm or model. Undoubtedly what counts is concrete here and now, but what counts is also what *lives* in the concrete: that *of* which, viewed from a poetic perspective, the concrete is not the copy but the *expression*. For otherwise how could *we*, too, and anyone with a minimum of sensibility, feel Ettore’s despair, Mary’s sadness, or Zumurrud’s and Nur ed-Din’s innocence. Put otherwise, “something” must flood the *viewed* and the *viewer* in order to unite them in a *vision*: the vision of that which is “sacred” because it is *precious*, of that which is *treasured* because of being precious, and of that which is precious and treasured because it provokes *awe*.

Now, the *extra-modern* peoples of Africa and elsewhere, and the European *peasantry* of the mid-20th century, including the peasants that had migrated to the suburbs of the big cities, seemed to Pasolini to be far more capable of *perceiving* and *expressing* the sacred – or, again, the fundamental affective aspects of being that frame, by definition, any authentically-human life – than the modern industrialised classes.¹¹ In fact he recruited many of the protagonists and non-protagonists of his films among them. Accordingly, it is their *gaze*, still sensitive to the sacred regardless of whether some of such subjects may be already undergoing a transformative process for the worse, that Pasolini often attempts to *capture* with the camera and to *reproduce* on the screen.

Pasolini explores this political *counter-gaze* by means what he calls “free indirect subjectivity” (after the notion of “free indirect speech” or “free indirect discourse” in literature, which designates the speech of a character that takes up the narrative to express her/his own thoughts and feelings).¹² More exactly, he uses the camera to *show* the gaze of the extra-modern or pre-modern *eye*. For, he writes, the gaze of the latter “embraces another kind of reality from that which the gaze of a cultivated bourgeois

¹¹ M. Maingois, “[Interview with] Pier Paolo Pasolini” (*Zoom*, Oct. 1974), 24. Even if the pre-modern sacred was often at risk of being institutionalised and alienated, as Pasolini acknowledges (see the excerpts quoted in Benini, *op. cit.*, 22-23).

¹² See further Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 79-101, 167-186; Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 72-76, 228 n.2; *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London & Minneapolis: The Athlone Press & University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 148, 183-184, 307 n.34, 313 n.49, 314 n.56; N. Greene, *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Cinema as Heresy* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1990), 115ff.

sees when it is directed at it: in fact the two see ‘different’ things; the very same thing appears differently to their respective ‘gazes.’”¹³

There is no exaggeration in affirming that, in this manner, Pasolini *anticipates* what is called in contemporary anthropology the “ontological turn”: different cultural perspectives do *not* only vary from one another in epistemological terms, that is, they do not only amount to different *interpretations* of the world, but convey different realities, different *ontologies*.¹⁴

To conclude, I should like to stress that by thereby *showing* the premodern gaze, by making it *happen* on the screen before the viewer’s eyes, whose *own* gaze is thus invited – provoked – to undergo a perspectival *shift*, Pasolini builds a new *reality*. For, as he himself suggests, cinema is *not* evocative, it is *not* literature, it works with and produces reality – or, *images in movement*:

Cinema expresses reality with reality. [...] We ourselves make cinema by living, [...] by existing practically, that is, by acting. *All of life, in the whole of its actions, is a natural, living, cinema.* [...] By living we represent ourselves, and are present at the representations of others. The reality of the human world is nothing other than this double representation in which we are both actors and spectators: a gigantic happening, if you like.¹⁵

¹³ Pasolini, *Empirismo Eretico* (Milan: Garzanti, 1972), 182 (my translation).

¹⁴ On which see M. Holbraad and M. A. Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹⁵ Cited in Greene, *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, 99 (Greene’s translation).