

FILM CRITICISM

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Editor's Note



After managing to catch up with our production schedule by publishing four issues last year, we find ourselves six months behind once more with the late arrival of the current issue. It has been a long, hard winter, marked by the sudden death of one of the journal's founding fathers, Frederick Bohne. Fred belonged to the original group of five who began *Film Criticism* at Edinboro College in the mid-1970s. Always in the background, evaluating manuscripts, editing copy, even cutting-and-pasting in the early years, and best of all, just going to the movies with us, he was, despite his unassuming manner, an inspiration. Along with his wife Lucy, Fred had been busy editing a special issue of *FC* on British cinema, which will be published later this summer and dedicated to his memory.

We have also postponed the deadline for manuscripts to be considered for the special number on psychoanalysis and the cinema. We expect to publish this issue early in the Fall and invite submissions through the end of July. A general number will also be appearing in the Fall, completing Volume 14.

In addition to apologizing for these delays, we ask our readers' indulgence in advance for any errors in record keeping that may occur in the next few months. We have just completed the process of converting from our original index card files to a computerized program for billing and mailing. We think the new program will prove more efficient, of course, but we are still learning the system and hope you will bear with us during the transition.

L.M.

Pasolini's Theorem

Tony Cesare

Today it seems that only Platonic (I add: Marxist) intellectuals—even devoid of information, but certainly devoid of interests and complicity—have some probability of intuitively grasping the meaning of what is really happening—naturally, however, provided that this intuition of theirs is translated—literally translated—by scientists, Platonists themselves, into the terms of the only science whose reality is as objectively certain as that of Nature, i.e., Political Economy.

Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters*

According to his biographer, Enzo Siciliano, the theorem of Pasolini's *Teorema* (1968) is the idea of an incarnation, an appearance of the sacred in reality and that reality itself possesses the quality of being sacred. However, Pasolini was an atheist and materialist whose conception of reality as sacred implied no belief in god or the immortality of the soul; instead, he intended to show that one should have an idolatrous relationship with reality. A psychological analysis of the bourgeoisie, based on an historical theory and an empirical economic law, is Pasolini's real theorem and not the metaphysical idea of the appearance of the sacred in reality. The theorem is a materialist one about the *disappearance* of the sacred from reality. The film itself is the first part of a trilogy on the psychology of the bourgeoisie, followed by *Pigsty* (1969) and *Salo* (1975), each film more despairing than the previous one.

A handsome young visitor (Terence Stamp), who symbolizes god, arrives one day at a bourgeois household and, after having seduced each member of the family and their maid, he just as suddenly leaves them all to struggle with the crisis caused by the spiritual void left by his departure. Since most of the film's running time is devoted to the consequences of the god-figure's departure and not his stay with the family, *Teorema* cannot be about the *appearance* of the sacred in reality, as Siciliano believes. Pasolini's

theorem is the *disappearance* of the sacred from reality, really the nineteenth century event of the death of god. However, Siciliano maintains that, "it was the idea of a visit from god who involves and overwhelms everyone—a visit that explains the sacredness of the real and renders it demonstrable. It was precisely the idea of a theorem" (312). And he goes on to say, "had the 'theorem' at this point been demonstrated? Had the reality of the divine coincided with its representation? I do not believe it is possible to give a positive answer to these questions. Pasolini had perhaps demonstrated a single point; he had shown how much his cinema was really the epiphany of an immense sexual fetishism. His 'hallucinated, childish, pragmatic love for reality' had remained stationary, stripping the polished body of Terence Stamp [nudity functions as a metaphor for reality in the film] and suggesting that this body was sacred." Siciliano concludes that "the 'theorem' remained a statement rather than a demonstration" (318).

Pasolini's theorem of the disappearance of the sacred from reality is not the metaphysical one Siciliano believes it to be, but a political and ideological one, soundly deduced from the methodology of orthodox Marxist political economy. In an interview with Oswald Stack, Pasolini explains that *Teorema* is about the bourgeoisie (155). The crisis that overcomes the bourgeois family, after their young guest leaves them, is a peculiarly bourgeois crisis, an ideological rather than an existential one, that derives from the family's bourgeois class status and their world of petty bourgeois manners.

"The theory is not new and it is simple," a reporter remarks in the first scene of the movie, which is a premonitory flash-forward of the father, Paolo (Massimo Girotti), in despair over his young guest's departure, turning over his factory to the workers. It is an act of piety intended to replace the passion of his lost love with religious passion. The theory, which Marx describes fully in "The So-called Primitive Accumulation" in volume one of *Capital*, is simply that the bourgeoisie developed, during the transition from feudalism to capitalism, from peasants who sold their surpluses at a profit in the markets of the growing towns and from peasants who were able to join the ranks of the trade guilds. Pasolini concludes from Marx's theory that "whatever happens to a bourgeois, even a miracle or a divine experience of love, he is not able to reawaken in himself the ancient metaphysical feeling of the peasant age" (Pasolini, 178).

To this theory of orthodox Marxist political economy, Pasolini appends his materialist psychology of the bourgeoisie. Thus, he follows Marx's guideline on psychology in the 1844 *Manuscripts* that no psychology that neglects the "history of industry ... can become a real science with a genuine content" (Marx, *Writings*, 162-63). So Pasolini's psychology is materialist, since it not only acknowledges the history of industry, but insists that the transition from feudalism to capitalism is an integral part of his psychological examination of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie nostalgically yearns for the spirituality of its peasant ancestors in order to give meaning to the vacuity of its bourgeois existence.

The transition from feudalism to capitalism is in economic terms the transition from simple commodity production to capitalism. The historical theory itself, that the capitalist class developed from the peasantry, is based on the empirical law of exchange under capitalism, which Marx designates abstractly as M-C-M'. M is the money the capitalist pays out in wages to the worker and the outlays for plant, land, and equipment (the means of production). In the formula, Marx considers the labor power of the worker and the means of production themselves as commodities, which the capitalist buys, and they are symbolized by C. The M' is the original amount of money advanced by the capitalist plus an increment, which is the profit he obtains after the process of production is completed and he sells his commodities on the market. The increment from M to M' constitutes the income of the capitalist, the amount of surplus value. This is the form exploitation takes under capitalism.

In his interview with Stack, Pasolini comments that "the point of the film is roughly this: a member of the bourgeoisie whatever he does is wrong" (Stack, 157). In the novel, *Teorema*, published before the movie was released, Pasolini discusses the bourgeois tendency to act without deciding (a theme that recurs throughout the book). Although Pasolini himself was a man of action, he valued contemplation more highly than action (Siciliano, 397). (He especially admired men like St. Paul and Lenin who achieved a balance between action and contemplation in their lives.) The bourgeois tendency to act without deciding is the reason why a bourgeois can do nothing but make mistakes. And Pasolini does not mean only historical errors, but also everyday slips. This tendency is a result of bourgeois activity, or exchange under capitalism, what Adam Smith calls "the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange," which Smith does not think is an original principle of human nature but rather a necessary consequence of the faculties of reason and speech. Marx, following Smith, says about this bourgeois activity that "the restless never-ending process of profit-making alone is what he [the capitalist] aims at" (Capital, 151), which is symbolically the movement M-C-M'. The restless activity of profit-making, in which the bourgeois loses himself, makes the bourgeois value action above thinking. There then is no balance between contemplation and action in the bourgeois lifestyle. Action is alienated from thought and for the bourgeoisie becomes a fetish, worshipped as a goal in itself. This division between thought and action in bourgeois society is the source of bourgeois alienation and stupidity.

The whole family's responses to the parting of their handsome young guest are mistakes because they all are merely indulging in a flurry of activity, which can do nothing to recover their spiritual loss. The father gives his factory to the workers--a bourgeois mistake in ideological terms, since it is not the revolutionary act of the workers as a class seizing the means of production. And it is a mistake in psychological terms because it brings him no closer to regaining the religious passion of his peasant origins. The mother, Lucia (Silvana Mangano), throws herself into an orgy of sexual activity. In this respect, Marx observes how under capitalism people

feel more human when they are performing an animal function like having sex rather than when they are performing the uniquely human function of working. This is because their alienating jobs reduce them to robots (*Writings*, 125). Pietro, the son (Andres Jose Cruz), goes the way of the struggling artist, and Odetta, the daughter (Anne Wiazemsky), chooses inaction by withdrawing into a deep catatonic state. But their actions to fill the void left by the young guest's departure are effete and in vain. But the maid, Emilia (Laura Betti), becomes a saint able to levitate and perform miraculous healings. Only she recovers the peasant's religious passion because her sub-proleterian class status makes her less removed from her peasant origins.

This analysis of Pasolini's materialist psychology and its orthodox Marxist basis corrects the erroneous perception that Pasolini was a Marxist heretic. This error naturally arises from Pasolini's somewhat facetious title for his book, *Heretical Empiricism*, in which he argued that the masses did not need to be delivered from their philosophy of common sense. But in fact Pasolini himself rejected empiricism (Siciliano, 399). However, there is common to both Marx's method and Pasolini's an empirical basis, since both deduce their analysis from the simple empirical fact of exploitation.

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