

# Pasolini, Fassbinder and Europe



Pasolini, Fassbinder and Europe:  
Between Utopia and Nihilism

Edited by

Fabio Vighi and Alexis Nouss

**CAMBRIDGE**  
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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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## PROLOGUE

### COLLOQUIO/GESPRÄCH: AN IMAGINARY DIALOGUE BETWEEN PIER PAOLO PASOLINI AND RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER

Rainer Werner Fassbinder: *Art? With the things you do, you try to sensitize your audience in a certain way to life and the world around them. That's a sensitizing process which you've put yourself through and now have to transfer to your audience – that's all it is.*

Pier Paolo Pasolini: It's much more! Artists must create, critics defend, and democratic people support works so extreme that they become unacceptable even to the broadest minds of the new Power.

RWF: *If art, or whatever you want to call it, seizes the opportunity to get discussion going among people, it's achieved its maximum effect, I think.*

PPP: In every shot it can be said I set myself the problem of driving the spectator to feeling intolerant and immediately afterwards relieving him of that feeling.

RWF: *I entertain. I tell stories in such a way that the moviegoer is entertained and afterwards is no stupider. Film can give the moviegoer the courage to continue expressing things, taking a position on them, and making it known. I do feel that film as a medium can be effective in all sorts of ways. And it's always a means of entertainment, and should remain that, too. Like literature, which is also supposed to be fun, or music, quite aside from the effect it can have.*

PPP: But the message is almost always evil, lying, hypocritical, even when very sincere. Who could doubt my sincerity when I say that the message of *Salò* is the denunciation of the anarchy of power and the inexistence of

history? Nonetheless put this way such a message is false, that is, logical in the sense of that same logic which finds that power is not at all anarchic and which believes that history does exist. The part of the message which belongs to the meaning of the film is immensely more real because it also includes all that the author does not know, that is, the boundlessness of his own social, historical restrictions. But such a message can't be delivered. It can only be left to silence and to the text. What finally now is the meaning of a work? It is its form. The message therefore is formalistic; and precisely for that reason, loaded infinitely with all possible content, provided it is coherent—in the structural sense.

RWF: *With films, I would argue much more for shock effects, because I agree with Kracauer when he says that when the lights go out in the film theatre it's as if a dream were beginning; in other words, a film works through the subconscious.*

PPP: Ok, so what's the difference between cinema and reality? Cinema is identical to life, because each one of us has a virtual and invisible camera which follows us from when we are born to when we die. Let's talk about life, about happiness...

RWF: *What we are taught to experience as happiness is a pretext that a society shaped by various forms of compulsion offers the individual. And I'm not about to accept that offer. I get the strength to go on working from my utopian ideal, from my perfectly concrete yearning for this utopia. If this yearning is driven out of me, I'll come to a dead end. That's why I have this feeling I'm being murdered as a creative person in Germany, and please don't take that for paranoia.*

PPP: The problem is consumerism, which in Italy has the traits of a real anthropological catastrophe. I live existentially this catastrophe. It is from this existential experience, which is direct, concrete, dramatic and corporeal, that all my ideological protests emerge. I've called it second fascism, which isn't paranoia either.

RWF: *Once we had a fatalistic form of fascism, which only worked because of the widespread urge for destruction, whereas this new form, what we have now, is actually much worse because it's settling in for the duration. It'll look perfectly innocuous, people will think they're living in a free country, and so on. To me the development that's taking place today seems more depressing somehow, because you can't do anything to fight*

*it. All you can do is keep your eyes open, and if you do, you certainly see the craziest things, if you look really hard.*

PPP: That's why I want to attack the permissiveness of our new ways. So far, society has repressed us. Now it offers only a false front of permissiveness. One of my characters says: "While society represses everything, man can do anything. When society begins to permit something, only that something can be done". This is the terrible result of our new liberties: a greater conformism than ever before. Today's tolerance is false, because in truth nobody has ever had to be as normal and conformist as the consumer; and as for hedonism, it belies a decision to predetermine everything with unheard of cruelty.

RWF: *The everyday oppression people experience is criminal. I could almost go so far as to say that you really can't make anything but crime films. Everything should be declared criminal. You read the paper, listen to the news, and you get madder and madder at what you hear, see, and read. I got to the point where I didn't feel like doing anything but portray criminal situations.*

PPP: Here there is a desire to kill. And this desire bonds us together like sinister brothers in a sinister failure of an entire social system. I pay a price with the life I lead... it is like descending into hell. The first tragedy is a shared, obligatory and mistaken education that forces into us the need to have everything at all costs. Everyone is guilty, because we are all ready to partake in this game of massacre in order simply to possess. The lessons we have been taught are: have, possess, destroy. A horrible New Prehistory will be the condition of late capitalism until its end. Late capitalist industrialisation will dry the seed of History. That's why a structural revolution is necessary.

RWF: *But I'm basically against any form of organization. I'm a romantic anarchist. How can we preserve individuality in a totally organised society, in a system that will soon be using computers to store information on each of our habits and preferences, if we don't fight it with halfway similar methods? As in fact the reactionaries are doing. As for democracy, I understand it as something that functions like a kaleidoscope, that is, not permanent revolution, but permanent movement, permanent questioning by every generation.*

PPP: I miss the pure, direct revolution of the oppressed people whose only aim is to free themselves and determine their own destinies. I believe such an historic moment could still arise in the future. But I want to be clear: I go down into hell and I know things that do not disturb the peace of others. But hell is now coming up to everyone.

RWF: *That's why the theme of my films has remained the same, and always will: the manipulability, the exploitability of feelings within the system that we live in, and that at least one generation or more after us will certainly have to live in. Take terrorism. In the last analysis terrorism is an idea generated by capitalism to justify better defence measures to safeguard capitalism.*

PPP: The bourgeois is a vampire that finds no peace until it has sunk its teeth into the neck of its victim for the pure, simple and natural pleasure of seeing her turn pale, sad, ugly, void of life, contorted, corrupted, ill at ease, full of guilt, calculating, aggressive, terrifying, *just like him*. Workers, intellectuals and students alike have all been bitten at night by the vampire and they too are unwittingly becoming vampires themselves!

RWF: *Only those who are truly identified with their own selves no longer need to fear fear. And only those who are rid of their fear are capable of loving nonjudgmentally. The ultimate goal of all human endeavour is to live one's own life.*

PPP: For a long while now I have been feeling a great nostalgia for poverty, both mine and that of others, and I have said that we were wrong to believe that it was evil. These were reactionary affirmations that I nevertheless knew I was making from an extreme left that has not yet been defined. I say *poverty*, not *utter deprivation*. I am ready to make any necessary personal sacrifice. As compensation, it would be enough for me to see the old way of smiling return to people's faces; the old respect for others that was respect for oneself. Then it may be possible to start over again.

RWF: *I believe life doesn't become manageable and accessible until the moment when death is accepted as the true aspect of existence. As long as death is treated as a taboo, life remains uninteresting. A society based on the exploitation of human beings has to treat death as a taboo. In my life there came an important moment when my body suddenly realized it was mortal. Since then life's been much more fun for me.*

PPP: In fact I have realised that freedom, this mysterious word, only means, in its deepest connotation... “freedom to choose death”. This is a scandal, because to live is a duty: on this point both Catholics (life is sacred as it is a gift of God) and Communists (one must live as it is a duty towards society) agree. Nature also agrees: and to help us be lovingly attached to life it provides us with the “conservation instinct”. However, nature is ambiguous, and to prove its ambiguity it also provides us with the opposite instinct, the death-drive. This conflict takes place in the depths of our soul, in the unfathomable depths, as we all know. But “authors” have the responsibility to render this conflict explicit. They are tactless enough to reveal, somehow, that they “want to die”, or else that they want to disobey the conservation instinct: or, more simply, disobey conservation as such. Freedom is a self-damaging attack on conservation. Freedom can only be expressed through martyrdom, either an insignificant or a substantial one. And each martyr martyrs himself through the reactionary executioner.

RWF: *The terrible recognition that we will come to an end, instead of liberating us, which it actually could and should, rather shores up our tormented pursuit of pleasure, our happiness in our mediocre unfreedom. The enjoyment made possible by this recognition of the ultimate meaninglessness and actual fortuitousness of every existence—indeed of every existence from that sacred moment of recognition on, which should confer meaning on it again in free decision and great strength in the fight for something wonderful, possible, meaningfully conferring meaning in the midst of meaninglessness—every existence is not taught as enjoyment to be experienced, not as pleurably liberated pleasure, but as fear. This admirable jungle seems to have no way out, except through the decision in favour of death, or the path into madness. One day, when I demand a decision of myself, I hope I’ll have the courage to choose one of those paths, and not to settle for an easy way out.*

PPP: Until I die no one can guarantee to really know me. 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 and puts them in a sequence, transforming an infinite, unstable, and uncertain present into a clear, stable, certain, and therefore easily describable past. *It is only thanks*

*to death that our life serves us to express ourselves.* Editing performs on the material of the film the operations that death performs on life.

# INTRODUCTION

## BETWEEN UTOPIA AND NIHILISM

### FABIO VIGHI AND ALEXIS NOUSS

In an age when Europe is increasingly perceived as an administrative and bureaucratic machine unable to inspire socio-political passion, it is perhaps time to bring back Walter Benjamin's reflections on Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*: what if it is only by directing our gaze to the ruins of the past that we might be able to think the New? What if, more precisely, we can imagine a truly alternative vision of Europe only by redeeming the utopian spark betrayed by key events in Europe's recent past?

The present collection of essays originates in an international conference on Pasolini and Fassbinder which was held at Cardiff University in spring 2009.\* The aim of the conference was to reflect on the notions of nihilism and utopia not only as they are articulated in Pasolini's and Fassbinder's cinemas, but also, and at the same time, as they qualify the cultural legacy of Europe. While with this volume we cannot aspire to exhaust such a complex issue, our intention is nevertheless to open up a space for debate on what we deem a crucial question concerning the present and future configuration of Europe, namely the significance of such concepts as utopia and nihilism.

Pasolini and Fassbinder are amongst the last radical authors to have emerged in Europe. Born in Italy and Germany, they inherited a traumatic social and political past which they chose to address either directly or via different topics related to the cultural memory of Europe. The link between law and violence—a quintessential Western quandary that has haunted European philosophy since *Antigone*—is, for instance, a central preoccupation in their works, illustrating what Georg Simmel called “the tragedy of culture”. This tragic dimension is reflected in their aesthetics

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\* The conference has been generously supported by Glamorgan University (ATRium), the Goethe-Institut (London), the German Embassy Cultural Department (London), and the Italian Cultural Institute (London).

through a number of similarly articulated and unresolved tensions: high and popular cultures, theatre, literature and cinema, ideology and narration, major and minor codes of expression.

The uncompromising character of Pasolini's and Fassbinder's works, fluctuating between utopia and nihilism (but also tradition and revolution, mythology and realism) encourages us to reconsider subjective and collective questions which from today's perspective seem lost forever. These questions are often unconsciously embedded in their films and require critical interventions aimed at locating them against the grain of conventional criticism. To only look at these questions in the context of the 1960s and 1970s and their climate of revolt misses the scope of the two authors' creative undertakings.

The cinemas of Pasolini and Fassbinder present a number of common features that, in their comparative capacity, have generally been neglected by commentators. Their works can be analyzed according to a variety of themes, such as class, sexuality, race, religion, anarchy, nationalism, *etc.* Our book focuses on some of these themes, unraveling their potential to speak for a European identity to come. We believe that a reflection on Pasolini's and Fassbinder's cinemas provokes us into asking difficult yet pressing questions, such as "What is the European culture today?" or "What does it mean to be European?"

Our book opens with an imaginary dialogue between the two directors. For the first time they do here what they did not have the chance, and perhaps the desire, to do when still alive, i.e. discuss some of their ideas concerning film, society, politics, life and death. The dialogue has been pieced together from a selection of comments made by Pasolini and Fassbinder in interviews and short intimate pieces. The artificiality of the format does not detract, we hope, from its attempt to signify some of the real concerns emerging from the uncommon imagination, energy, and intellectual awareness of both authors. The aim of this dialogue is therefore to reopen some of the wounds from which the voices of Pasolini and Fassbinder can reach us today, addressing questions that are still here with us, and more often than not remain unanswered.

The book is divided into two parts, each containing six essays. Part I consists of essays attempting to bring together the two directors by comparing a number of key features within their artistic and intellectual sensibility. The six essays in Part II, on the other hand, focus on specific themes emerging in either Pasolini or Fassbinder, though often suggesting comparative implications. In the opening essay of Part I, Mauro Ponzi argues that the most fruitful way of linking Pasolini and Fassbinder is by reflecting upon both their pessimistic vision of the modern notion of

progress and their use of artistic materials drawn from tradition in thoroughly original ways. Quoting Benjamin, Ponzi argues that “organizing pessimism” should be seen as the motto uniting Pasolini and Fassbinder. In the following essay, Vighi considers Jacques Lacan’s notion of *surplus-jouissance* as a useful interpretive lens through which Pasolini’s and Fassbinder’s works acquire a strong political significance whose potential remains intact today. The representation of “entropic humanity”, Vighi argues, attests to both authors’ desire to identify that surplus dimension of our social constellation which, in Lacanian terms, is the site and expression of a radically antagonistic universality. The third essay, by Emanuela Patti, also makes use of the Lacanian framework to discuss the meaning of cinematic realism as developed by the two directors. Patti argues that what is at stake in their cinemas is not only the question of the representability of the real, but more crucially that of the emancipation from what is perceived as an oppressive system of representation that informs our reality. In Chapter 4, taking as a central task the analysis of self-expression as a particularly revealing entry point to Pasolini’s and Fassbinder’s cinemas, Deirdre Russell probes questions of authorship, subjectivity, and marginalization. In doing so, she critically evaluates a number of commonalities and divergences between the two directors. Turning his attention to the profilmic, the following essay by Stefano Baschiera looks at the relationship between body and space as a way to politicize Pasolini’s and Fassbinder’s respective *oeuvre*. Focusing especially on *Accattone* and *Mamma Roma* (Pasolini), and *Martha* (Fassbinder), Baschiera explores types of cinematic aesthetics based on the representation of bodies which are over-determined by class conventions, from that of the sub-proletarian to that of the bourgeois. In the final essay of Part I, Lauren Faithfull makes a case for the connection between Pasolini and Fassbinder on the ground of their cinemas’ common mobilization of death-drive intended as an ethical stance. Faithfull focuses especially on Pasolini and reads his use of despair as a critical tool as well as a source of hope.

Part II begins with a piece by Agnès Blandeau examining the notion of heresy as appropriated by Pasolini through his original reading of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Blandeau contends that Pasolini’s choice of Chaucer should be seen as an attempt to bring to the fore the heretical potential inscribed in the *Tales* as a way to promote subversive counter-discourses emerging at the margins of the dominant one. In the following essay, on Pasolini’s *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, Ricardo Domizio argues that the film’s power to shock and provoke is to be located beyond both its literal and symbolic impact, precisely in its deliberate disruption

of the process of signification, which ultimately makes Pasolini's last work irredeemable. Catherine Nigianni's subsequent essay engages with the question of myth in Pasolini, looking particularly at *Decameron*, the first film of the so called "Trilogy of Life". Discussing *Decameron*, Nigianni examines Pasolini's take on the sacred, his display of contradictions and humour, as well as his use of myth as a form of artifice and parody. In Chapter 10, Béatrice González-Vangell and Alexis Nouis reflect on the impossibility of realism (and the realism of the impossible) in Fassbinder, especially in relation to one of his masterpieces, the epic 1980 film *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Here the authors consider questions of adaptation from literature to film (not only Fassbinder's reading of Döblin's novel, but also Phil Jutzi's one of 1931), while unraveling the interconnections between utopia and nihilism in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as well as in other works by Fassbinder. The question of adaptation returns in the following chapter, where Richard Hand analyses Fassbinder's work *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, both as play and as film, i.e. as a case of self-adaptation. The use of melodrama as an original way to attack bourgeois sentimentalism is here regarded as the key feature of this complex work. Moreover, Hand draws on his own experience directing the play—one of the highlights of our conference in 2009—to discuss questions of characterization and reception. Finally, in Chapter 12 Michael Goddard and Benjamin Halligan develop an engaging dialogue on Fassbinder and terrorism, expanding their discussion around such themes as film aesthetics, film theory, and the social conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, they draw a series of thought-provoking parallels with European directors of Pasolini's and Fassbinder's generations.

The volume ends with a "double-bill" Epilogue. First, Anthea Kennedy and Ian Wiblin illustrate their video installation entitled *For Children*, which was created specifically for our conference. The aim of the installation was to reflect on the place of children within family and state through images and ideas from films by Pasolini and Fassbinder. Then, to conclude, we have added a dialogue we recorded immediately after the screening of one Pasolini's lesser known works, the short film *Che cosa sono le nuvole?* With this dialogue we intend to draw attention, first and foremost, to what we regard as the fertile interconnections between an artistic object of sheer creative power, and the conceptual issues that define this volume, namely utopia and nihilism in the wider context of Europe's identity.

# **PART I**

## CHAPTER ONE

# PASOLINI AND FASSBINDER: BETWEEN CULTURAL TRADITION AND SELF-DESTRUCTION

MAURO PONZI

In November 1991, Heiner Müller, the famous German playwright, took part in an international conference on Walter Benjamin in Rome, organized by the University of Rome “La Sapienza”. His contribution to the discussion was extremely unique: he read two of his own poems and an old poem by Pier Paolo Pasolini. We can see Benjamin, Pasolini, Müller and Fassbinder as one constellation only if we consider them in a very particular way. In fact, the artistic areas in which they worked and the artistic languages that they used, are very diverse. There is, nevertheless, something that ties these authors together: their pessimistic conception of history, their sceptical view of modernity and—last but not least—an artistic procedure based on a montage of different materials in sharp contrast with one another. Both of these authors uses allegories and images drawn from marginal materials to which they submit the ambitious function of expressing the crisis of their epoch. Their artistic method represents a break with tradition, which is carried forward by conceptual “jumps”, “illuminations”, in which the allegory plays a fundamental role. In his essay on Surrealism Walter Benjamin wrote: “In fact organizing pessimism means to estrange the political from the moral metaphor and to discover in the space of political action the radical, absolute imagined space (*Bildraum*)” (Benjamin 1980: 309). “Organizing pessimism” could be the motto that unites these authors.

“The duel between the industry and the future”: with these words Heiner Müller defines “the cry of Marsyas that breaks the lyre’s ropes of the divine flayer of skin” (Müller 1989: 22). In Greek mythology, the satyr Marsyas is the central figure in two stories involving music: in one, he picked up the double flute that had been abandoned by Athena and played it; in the other, he challenged Apollo to a musical contest with his lyre.

The victory was awarded to Apollo, who tied Marsyas to a tree and flayed him alive. Heiner Müller emphasizes the cry of the dying Marsyas, which broke the strings of Apollo's lyre.

Marsyas' mythos is very useful in describing, allegorically, the method of these writers, who "invented" new artistic languages (even if they found them in the cultural tradition and adapted them to the present). These authors challenged the sacredness of art and emphasized the destructive character of modernity with their challenge to the establishment. Pasolini sets himself, therefore, on a critical thought process which picks up directly or indirectly from that legacy; its root clearly lying in Nietzsche's thought and its nihilist component. He draws from the expressive means of artistic languages and also their eccentric method, that is the tortuous and mediated approach through which art becomes its expression—and this involves the necessity of expressing meaning through allegory.

The author's striving to modify a given situation, to oppose the continuous catastrophe of history, is destined to fail, it is the cry of Marsyas. And we have to acknowledge that Pasolini had expressed in a literary and cinematic form, since the beginning of the 1960's, his scepticism towards progress and modernization, and had formulated his critique of industrialization and modernity through allegories and using prophetic tones. The strange constellation of Benjamin, Pasolini and Fassbinder makes sense only when related to the critique typical of modernism and its allegorical language.

Pasolini was one of the few intellectuals who did not have any faith in progress. He affirmed the Italian cultural folk's identity and always denied the easy optimism of science and technical progress. He rejected early on the American way of life, in which he saw the danger of a language and behavioural homogenisation and a levelling down of all values. He was practically the only Italian intellectual who wanted to reevaluate the cultural tradition and identity at a time when all intellectuals, on both the left and the right, manifested an unshakable faith in progress. We have to say, nevertheless, that he was not the only European writer to show a certain scepticism towards the false promises of happiness that have characterized modernity since its beginning. I do not refer here to the many *laudatores temporis acti*, with whom Pasolini had nothing to do. I mean those isolated and eccentric intellectuals who tried to follow an original—and utopian—path, blaming and criticising those false illusions, sending out a cry of alarm. Intellectuals who did not refuse the technological novelties of modernity, but who rather knew how to use them to the utmost, who built theories of progress, who were masters of communication and nevertheless blamed the nihilist and destructive character of modernity:

Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Karl Kraus, Fernando Pessoa, Walter Benjamin, to name but a few. Pasolini's international reach is perhaps better appreciated in foreign countries (especially in Germany and in France) than in Italy because it is easier (and quite automatic) for them to relate his theories and intellectual attitudes to other European writers.

The goal of Pasolini's work was the recovery of cultural values that he contrasted with the material values of the affluent society (then in an embryonic state), identifying the former with those of the "folk" (even though this conception had a strong idealistic component). Consequently, Pasolini strived for the education of people from lower classes to draw on high, "classical" cultural traditions. The rational-educational and the nihilist-destructive elements represent a permanent conflict in his work, but they constitute at the same time its political dimension.

Pasolini lived in a very difficult transitional period, during which Italy passed from agricultural production to industrialization. He recognized and condemned early on the contradictions of this Americanisation of Italian society. Fassbinder lived through another period, where Pasolini's utopian ambition to change and improve modern society was no longer practicable. Both filmmakers represented the "unhappy consciousness" in an affluent society. While the communications system celebrated daily the achievements of progress, with the post-war technology causing widespread euphoria, both filmmakers shattered this illusion and revealed the pain, the discomfort, the trouble of living in an affluent society, and gave it an artistic form of expression. The perturbing aspect in their films does not consist in the erotic sequences, which they so often shot provocatively, but rather in the fact that they brought into question the developmental model of post war society: an affluent society with only one goal, namely to always produce more and newer commodities, a society in which the citizens are handled only as customers, one in which everything can be bought. The euphoria for the new time, for the new commodities, for the new reconstructed country celebrated by media advertising, was merely the façade behind which unhappiness and misery dominated. The work of these filmmakers showed, at times brutally, at times poetically, the uneasiness of modernity. They were therefore censured, insulted, and sometimes persecuted. Today, when the affluent society and industrial production are beginning to destroy themselves and endanger the very life of the planet, the work of these filmmakers allows us to remember that, as it were, all that glittered was not gold in the recent past.

When we want to try to grasp the core of these almost parallel lives and receive the powerful signal that their works communicate, we have to

point out that sometimes the outsiders—despite their personal neuroses—precisely because they are excluded from the dominant ideological coordinates, are able to locate and criticize the main trends of social development early on and send a warning signal about modernisation and the oppression and exploitation it carries with itself. We can use here a sentence from Walter Benjamin: “All the New that this society can hope to become will turn out to be an ever present reality, much less able to redeem it than a new fashion to renew society” (Benjamin 1980: 1256, my translation).

Still more perturbing is the way in which both directors constructed their works. They were indeed both influenced by Nietzsche’s thought, pinpointing how the “unhappy consciousness” can be best expressed when a work of art represents the self-destructive elements of modernity. The uneasiness of the individual in the modern day corresponds to the identity crisis caused by those wrong answers (or those illusory promises) of which Benjamin speaks. The “even newer” in the end seems only new; the changing face of modernity reproduces the old power relations.

The lives of both filmmakers diverged in the end, not because both met with a tragic death, but rather because both authors achieved a different historical dimension. While Fassbinder changed and renovated the style and language of German film, Pasolini created an epoch-making dimension insofar as he claimed to radically criticize the developmental model in all its social, linguistic, artistic and communicative aspects. Pasolini called into question the affluent society, its myths, its illusory promises, its communicative and artistic languages. He aimed to save from oblivion not only the cultural values of Italian literary tradition but also those images and concepts of classical antiquity in which he found the psycho-anthropological heritage of western culture.

What joins these two filmmakers—more than their being outsiders, more than their provocative attention to the erotic, more than their Oedipus-complex—is simply their “negative” approach to the production of art. Both—each one following a different but parallel path—conceived art as an artist’s failure, one that inevitably leads to self-destruction, but through which it is possible to make a radical social critique and to give to a work of art an effectual and compelling expressive power.

Both authors expressed in their works a sense of their solitude, their ‘outsideness’, but they needed to work with a team, with a community of friends, which was perhaps a substitute for an ideal or lost community (perhaps a lost family). Franco Citti says of Pasolini: “When Paolo is shooting a film he works creatively and wants especially to shoot a film about friends and among friends” (in Naldini 1989: 351, my translation).

Both filmmakers developed a frantic, even furious attitude to work, because artistic expression was the only possibility to represent their world outlook, to give an artistic form to their vitalism, a sense to their self-destructiveness. Art was the only possibility to make that Nietzschean “will to nothingness” visible and productive. Both were authors of transgression, because they believed that the bourgeoisie could only be shocked through excess, and that they could create honestly and effectively only by expressing themselves through an excessive artistic language.

When Nietzsche says that Moderns stand in front of the past like a eunuch in front of a woman (who, for him, represents the “eternal inaccessible”) he marks an insuperable borderline between past and present. Though all his arguments aim to affirm the splendour of the past and the “weakness” of modernity, he does not want however to identify himself with antiquity: “But even if we wanted to reassure ourselves happily about this calling to be the followers of antiquity, [...] nonetheless we would find it necessary to ask whether it must always be our purpose to be *pupils of a declining antiquity*” (Nietzsche 1967-77 vol. III.1: 302, my translation). The upsetting novelty of Nietzsche’s approach to antiquity consists of the deconstruction of an “Olympian” view of Greek culture and of the consideration of its Dionysian, chthonic aspect, namely of a rupture that opens the way to nihilism.

The “untimely” expresses an “eccentric” critique of humanism. The “untimely” catches the secret germinations buried in the pre-Christian antiquity and brings back modernity to this labyrinth, which gradually emerges from the tragic Greek world, emphasizing figures like excess, intransigence, overbearing and disgust. In fact, modernity is for Nietzsche the reflex of a representation of antiquity. All the disruptive and transgressive force of transition philosophy, which searches for the roots of theological and moral world-order in the subterranean labyrinths of ancient thinking is, therefore, concentrated in Nihilism.

Knowledge for Nietzsche happens through “astonishment” turning into *pathos* as soon as we perceive that life goes by, that it melts into nothingness. Only life, “that dark, stringent force, insatiably avid for itself”, is sitting in judgement of the past. However, vitalism turns immediately into nihilism: “Only the man whose breast is oppressed by a present need and who wants to cast off his load at any price has a need for critical history, that is, history which sits in judgement and passes judgement” (Nietzsche 1967-77, vol. III.1: 264). Benjamin’s concept of history—despite the multiplicity of its roots—is that which “judges and condemns” (look at Blanqui, “called as judge to the tribunal of history”)

and “saves the past” from oblivion. However, Nietzsche wrote that “a person must have the power and from time to time use it to break a past and to dissolve it, in order to be able to live. He manages to do this by dragging the past before the court of justice, investigating it meticulously, and finally condemning it. Every past is worthy of condemnation” (Nietzsche 1967-77, vol. III.1: 269). It would be redundant to emphasize the consonance of this meaning with Benjamin’s concept of history, in which the “sentence” does not involve the forgetting of certain images which leap forward or flash up from the past. The “critical way” of conceiving history consists of breaking up and dissolving the past. Benjamin radicalizes this meaning of Nietzsche: the images of the “happened” have to be torn away from their context; have to be “quoted”.

Nietzsche conceives his own thought as “untimely”, or rather in opposition to his time. In him there is an ever-present “tension” in his relationship with his epoch. His interest in antiquity is also conceived as “untimely”—in strict opposition to the instrumental use of the past operated by the others “humanists” of his epoch—but in this warring relationship with his century Nietzsche became the model for Benjamin’s approach to history and time: fighting against time assumes the meaning of “brushing history against the grain”, to upset through action the nihilism implicit in the negation of his own epoch “for the benefit of a coming time”—as Nietzsche wrote in *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* (Nietzsche 1967-77, vol. III.1: 247).

At the beginning of 1965, in a letter to Don Giovanni Rossi, Pasolini used an image from the life of St. Paul to define his own situation: “Perhaps because I have always been falling off a horse: I have never sat boldly in the saddle (like many powerful men or poor sinners). I have always been falling, with my foot caught in the stirrup, so that my run is not a ride, but something like being carried away, with my head in the dust and knocked against rocks. I can neither remount the Jew’s or Gentile’s horse, nor fall on the God’s land” (in Naldini 1989: 293). The famous image of Paul’s vision is reformulated here and transformed to express his negative theology. In a similar vein, Walter Benjamin speaks in a letter to Gershom Scholem on Kafka of the “inside of nothingness of revelation” to define his own path to art. Pasolini here transfigures his negative and self-destructive conception of art using Catholic images to describe his cinema and its connection to religion. The image of a rider being ‘carried away’ suggests a hint of that “storm blowing from paradise”, which Benjamin mentions in his allegory of the angel.

Walter Benjamin tried to define the nature of modernity. While other German emigrants put all their hope into the concept of progress,

Benjamin conceived a book project, the *Passagen-Werk*, which centred on a strong critique of the modern and its social and cultural structure. The famous allegory of the angel facing backwards was almost incomprehensible for his contemporaries, because Benjamin's conception of history was very peculiar, eccentric even. His way of arguing, his approach to modernity was, in fact, an *Umweg*—an eccentric one. Walter Benjamin's work is mainly characterised by this kind of "sitting on the fence", and his method allows him to recognize the destructive traits of modernity earlier and more clearly than his contemporaries. He draws the concept of a cross-section from architectural terminology and uses it as a key with which to interpret several artistic and social phenomena of his time, in which it is at the same time possible to trace the end of the whole epoch. In architecture, the cross-section is a schematic representation of a building, depicting it as if it were sliced down the middle. It shows the parts used to construct the building (the structural components). The cross-section does not reproduce the whole building, but gives a very particular view from an unusual angle and is sometimes able to show aspects that in other views would not be visible. Benjamin wanted to provide a cross-section of his epoch, because he believed that only by doing this would it be possible to represent modernity and its illusions. The work of Pasolini and Fassbinder fits just as easily into Benjamin's concept: it is after all a cross-section of modern affluent society, and from this perspective we can look at its neuroses, its uneasiness, its dark and perturbing side.

Fassbinder created two parallel forms of film, referred to by the author as "Kinofilme" and "bürgerliche Filme". The concept of "Kinofilme" is very similar to that of Pasolini: in his essay *Il cinema di poesia* (The cinema of poetry, 1965) he affirms that the writer and the filmmaker use images drawn "from the world of dreams and memories". He speaks of a "dictionary of images", a "system of linguistic signs". It is much like that which Walter Benjamin called *Bildraum* (image-space); namely a reservoir of dreams, memories and cultural images from which the author draws to express his artistic language. The cultural tradition is a fundamental component of this imagined space.

Fassbinder used, on the one hand, German literary and film tradition and, on the other, Hollywood tradition with all its clichés. In fact, he said in a 1974 interview:

What I would like to realize is a symbiosis between shooting beautiful, powerful and pleasant films, like those Hollywood films that nevertheless do not justify the bourgeoisie. I have a dream: to make a beautiful, powerful, fantastic German film that nevertheless criticizes the system as a lot of films in Hollywood do. (Fassbinder 2004: 358, my translation)

The model for his Kinofilme was also the work of Godard and Rocha, as well as the French *nouvelle vague*. Fassbinder's way of reaching the public and achieving success consists in blending a Hollywood-style melodramatic setting and *Heimatkunst* (German literary and film tradition). Born in the post war period, this seems to have been the wrong time for him; he therefore referred to himself as a "Besatzungskind" (occupation-child). He was able to overcome his guilty feelings, indeed his identity crisis about being German, only by drawing on the German authors who criticize the social system: Brecht, Fleißer, Döblin, Ödön von Horvath. It would be possible to recover German art only if man had connected art production directly to those of the Weimar Republic, before the Nazis. As he said in an interview a few hours before he died, he aimed to build a German Hollywood and not to go to Hollywood itself.

Fassbinder conceived his own work as a resistance against the homogenisation of modern society. Indeed, he asked in an interview: "How can we preserve our individuality in a totally organized society, in a system, that in the future will store all our habits on computer?" In Fassbinder's best films, his critique of the modern society is supplemented by a reflection on the destiny of a woman. In his BRD trilogy on German women, he was able to interlace the melodramatic effect of Hollywood with a strong critique of the German economic miracle. Beyond a façade of bourgeois respectability his movies reveal a background of oppression, exploitation, cruelty and disappointment.

His film language takes shape, therefore, in an attempt to use the provocative expression of the avant-garde in which the respectability of the bourgeoisie collapses and breaks over the course of the film, whilst using images depicting the social contradictions and difficulty of interpersonal relationships. All of this is represented with a ruthless cynicism to develop the leitmotif of the saleability of emotions. The filmmaker combined this provocative tone with the attempt to reach, if possible, the general public. He recognised the potential in Hollywood B-movies, a functional model employed to disguise the cruelty of the represented situations. He represents the scenes in an over-refined way, but the clichés he uses—the camera angles, the obsessive and claustrophobic representation of spaces—give his films an estranging effect that link his production to that of Brecht. In fact, in his work there is a strange amalgamation of strict formal rigour and an estranging effect of light and colours that exemplify the return to traditions of the theatre (Brecht, Fleißer, etc., models which he utilised masterfully).

A great deal has been written on Fassbinder's connection with the German literary tradition. The use of the literary model is, however,

characteristic of the so-called “New German Film”. With Fassbinder, the literary model and its adaptation is nevertheless always oriented to an actualisation, a translation, a transfiguration of his visual form and his outlook. Therefore, the cultural tradition changes its expressive function insofar as it is deconstructed and rebuilt in another, completely different expressive context. The sense of his Hollywood model has not, until now, been sufficiently analysed, and here he found a solution—without giving up his poetry of cruelty—which allowed him to reach the general public and to break out of the cine-club reserve. The typical situation of a sentimental triangle—with all its psychological tensions and ruptures—appears both in *Maria Braun* and in *Lola*. It is represented as a critique of the bourgeois double morality and, at the same time, as a woman’s attempt at “emancipation”, selling her body and her emotions to improve her material condition. And just as these female characters and the narrative structure are drawn from the German literary tradition, they are, at the same time, inspired by Hollywood film. Indeed, Fassbinder’s films—centred as they are on desire, dream, anxiety and the failure of the individual—are crammed with quotations and references from the literary and cinematic tradition.

In his film *La ricotta* (1963), Pasolini shows a film being shot in the countryside, on the outskirts of Rome. What is being shot is the representation of the crucifixion, Christ’s passion. At the beginning of the film, the character of the director appears, played by Orson Welles, who is really a projection of the author himself. This short film marks one of the best moments of Pasolini’s film production, because we can find here—even in a synthetic form—almost all the motifs of his poetry: namely the iconography of the cultural tradition, the ridiculing of clichés, the centrality of folk figures, the focusing on hunger, poverty, reification and—last but not least—the Catholic iconography, revisited through pauperism, which is the leitmotif of this work. In the film narrative the director (Orson Welles) answers the questions of a journalist in a way that is in part provocative and in part a declaration of his poetry—confirming the identification of author and character:

Journalist: What do you want to express with this your new work?

Director: My deep, archaic Catholicism.

Journalist: What do you think about Italian society?

Director: The most illiterate people, the most ignorant bourgeoisie of Europe.

Without doubt, this is the belief of Pasolini himself. He always tried to “translate” the cultural tradition into a language and images accessible to

the masses. This assertion is, at the same time, a meta-linguistic interpretation of his own film: the character Stracci, who struggles all day long to feed his family with the lunch provided for the extras on set, but who then eats ricotta to satisfy his atavistic hunger, represents nothing but the actualised and folk version of Christ's passion. In fact, he dies on the cross during the shooting of the film. The representation of the Passion of Christ as filmic fiction becomes the true and concrete death of the poor man.

Pasolini's aversion to the bourgeoisie is not only political, but also caused by the fact that the Italian bourgeoisie is considered by the author to be especially underdeveloped from a cultural point of view. At the end of the interview sequence in *La ricotta* the director quotes from a poem by Pasolini, written in June 1962:

I am a force of the Past.  
 My love lies only in tradition.  
 I come from the ruins, the churches,  
 the altarpieces, the villages  
 abandoned in the Appennines or foothills  
 of the Alps where my brothers once lived.  
 I wander like a madman down the Tuscolana,  
 down the Appia like a dog without a master.  
 Or I see the twilights, the mornings  
 over Rome, the Ciociaria, the world,  
 as the first acts of Posthistory  
 to which I bear witness, for the privilege  
 of recording them from the outer edge  
 of some buried age. (Pasolini 1975: 344)

Memories become allegories of change, regarding not only psychological situations, but also and above all the topography of the city, the memory of squares and buildings. And Pasolini describes the radical change of the Roman outskirts with an equally critical approach. He writes in his poem *Il pianto della scavatrice* (*The digger's cry*):

I strip in one of the thousand rooms  
 where in via Fonteiana people are asleep.  
 On everything you can dig, time: hopes,  
 passions. But not on these pure  
 forms of life... (Pasolini 1975: 103)

The digging of the machine to change the form of the city is here compared to excavating memory. The author recalls the time when he

lived in the outskirts of the city which he felt were changing “more quickly than the heart of a mortal”—to use Baudelaire’s words (Baudelaire 1975: 85).

Pasolini began as poet and always remained a poet, even when he used other expressive media. He was a poet of excess, provocation, of symbolic expression, but always pursuing a utopian, metaphysical, aesthetic ideal that becomes a stylisation, a language, a desire perhaps as far from the reality as is possible: namely, to use his own words, the “dream of a thing”. The complex aim of Pasolini’s language, strongly connected with realism, reveals itself through his role as a witness always attempting the recovery of reality, i.e. of a primordial state, perceived as a danger, but nevertheless lost from the beginning as an archaic condition that was perhaps dreamed, but never really possessed. The utopia of an authentic, true, anthropologically primordial dimension is inscribed in Pasolini’s poetry, primarily as a psycho-anthropological element. This explains his epic-auratic as well as his sacred tone—even if it generally manifests itself in a desecration of common behaviour and of current values. It would be very easy to link Pasolini’s attitude to the Catholic and peasant horizon with all its self-destructive, heretical and pauperist variants, yet impregnated with a metaphysical-religious tension that sometimes emerges as a positive, though mostly negative, suffering tone. This negative theology is an essential component of Pasolini’s poetry, both in the anxiety of sin and in this paradoxical search for salvation through perdition that nevertheless always has as a reference point the “true” and redeeming message of his very personal reading of the Gospel and the classical texts. At the centre of his poetry the poor in spirit, the outsiders and dejected, find themselves in a dynamic oscillation between rage for the injustice in the world and the, as it were, “desperate hope” for redemption, that, given the historical conditions, can only happen through transgression.

Despite the seeming simplicity and spontaneity of Pasolini’s poetic language, the latter is grounded on a tight linguistic and semantic structure, recovering a very complicated literary and figurative tradition. He grounds his utopia in psycho-anthropological, literary, historical and artistic studies, which are alien to the rural world he wants to “save”. Hence the main contradiction from which he is unable to escape. A contradiction that brings him, in the last part of his life, to a creative *impasse* without solution of continuity. In fact, the realistic element present in his first novels, poems and films is always conjoined with a utopian element, which induces him to a meta-historical idealisation of the primordial condition of people—meta-historical precisely because it did

not exist either in the outskirts of Rome in the 1950s nor in the countryside of Friuli in the 1940s. Pasolini is always looking for a lost time that he locates in a meta-historical, Oedipal, archetypal dimension. The author himself was fully aware of this contradiction when he gave up reality to deal directly with myth; to broach, in other words, the fundamental problems in their pure and expressive symbolic power. But at this stage the other side of the contradiction emerges on a communicative level. The symbolism of the anthropological myth could only be understood by the cultural elite that Pasolini had always opposed, and not by the “folk”, even if idealised, who were always the protagonists of his work.

All of Pasolini’s cultural production stood as a fight against the modernisation and the standardisation of language. He also theorized this meaning. In a 1964 article in the journal *Rinascita* entitled “Nuove questioni linguistiche” (*New linguistic problems*), he directly considers the problem of the technologically-developed society and the implications for linguistic communication. This article, written 45 years ago, boasts an astonishing analytical sharpness and clarifies, perhaps better than any other critical and meta-critical reasoning, Pasolini’s poetic (and political) perspective. The author starts from the observation that “a proper national Italian language” does not exist (Pasolini 1972: 9). This linguistic *koiné* is a fiction: on the one hand there exists a literary language of the cultivated class, with strong connections to the cultural and literary traditions, whose relation to reality is only a contrastive one. On the other hand, there are several local, dialectal, folk languages, contaminated by use, that have expressive and communicative value and whose users are absolutely uncultured.

Literary criticism very often evoked the prophetic character of Pasolini’s work. The fact remains that his radical refusal of any homogenisation of language allows him to draw attention, earlier and more effectively than his contemporaries, to the risk of losing cultural identity in the face of what today we call globalisation. He perceived the pressure of technological language, which by standardizing consumer goods and the behaviour of the masses destroyed their cultural roots. Even though it may seem astonishing coming from such a provocative and transgressive author, his strong reference to tradition represents the attempt to recover and increase the value of these roots—both the high and the folk culture. If Pasolini is today considered a *maître à penser*, it is due to the fact that he tried to bring the cultural traditions up to date. It is no accident that he drew from the Catholic tradition (*Il vangelo secondo Matteo*), as well as the classical (*Medea*) and the literary (*Decameron*, *I racconti di Canterbury*) ones. Finally, embedded in Pasolini’s work is the

tension between globalism and localism that characterises our current situation. He was decidedly opposed to the globalism which tended to standardise cultural models and behaviours, but his focus on local traditions never became a passive nostalgia for the old times or an obtuse refusal of any innovation. On the contrary, he tried to use the “power of the past” to modify the present; he tried to make the high cultural tradition available to the derelict masses. He wanted to salvage cultural memory and use it to provide the present with recognisable cultural features. He did not shut himself away into the language, the culture, the habits of the small local communities, but he recovered local values combining them with ancient ones. In his novels, for example, he did not use only the traditions of Friuli; on the contrary, his best works are those in which he used the dialect and topography of Rome (namely a ‘foreign’ language and place). This signifies precisely that, for him, the dialect and the “folk” have an expressive function: they do not represent reality but instead a linguistic construction, a fiction, able to best express the uneasiness of transition from localism to globalism, from an agricultural society to industrialisation.

Facing the danger of one-dimensional globalisation, Pasolini does not find refuge in the microcosmic culture of the small hometown, but follows another path; he chooses an “elsewhere” which is partly protest and partly utopia. He chooses that corporeity, that irreducible “naked life” evoked in the above-quoted passage from *The digger’s cry*. The analogy of this procedure with that of Walter Benjamin cannot be missed: he also looked for the key to understand and modify the present in the “recent past”, in the “prehistory of modernity” and wanted to save the cultural treasure of the vanquished from oblivion. If we have to “dig” into the past to rebuild the transformation of the city, of the cultural tradition—if, as Walter Benjamin says, “all that will be ripped from us someday, also this world of forms” (Benjamin 1980: 1000)—then Pasolini is gripped by a melancholy (like Baudelaire, or Benjamin) as he emphasizes the fact that life’s experience, the “naked life”, cannot be recovered except by memory, it cannot even be reduced to an element of globalisation, it cannot be made to conform to standard models. And here, in this very concrete, corporeal and at the same time very utopian “place”, Pasolini finds his resistance and protest.