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### Pasolini's Ashes: Absence and Excess in Teorema and Salò

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**Pasolini's Ashes:**

**Absence and Excess in *Teorema* and *Salò***

Alan Ke

MS190: Senior Seminar

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### Three Feasts

Sacred days though are feast days.  
—Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*

We open on a shot of three pigs dressed in costume, trotting their way into a banquet hall. Inside is the scene of a wedding, with the bride and groom at the center of a long table, surrounded by their fellow members of the working class. Despite their threadbare surroundings, the air is ceremonious and jovial. Prodding the pigs along, the prostitute Mamma Roma (Anna Magnani) likens them to the newlyweds, announcing, “Here come our brothers! She’s a lady of the night!” The newlyweds take to this insult with offense, but a toast is offered and their poverty returns to being ridiculed, even reveled in, by song. Lines that are romantic—“O sweet acacia flower”—devolve quickly into vulgarity—“O flower of shit.” Pasolini’s neorealist films *Mamma Roma* (1962) and *Accattone* (1961) depict Rome’s underclasses with a style that negotiates their barren realities with a humanist optimism. Sexuality is spoken of freely, publicly, delighted in, derided in, chewed on like cud. As Pasolini’s subjects shift from the borgata toward the bourgeois, the unity of the feast remains constant.

The scene of the feast figures prominently across Pasolini’s cinematic works, serving as a meeting point of class. In these sequences, Pasolini’s characters, ranging from pimps and prostitutes to aristocrats and artists, are presented as one unit joined in the rites of the feast. While the settings of these scenes differ from one group to another, they encapsulate Pasolini’s critique of bourgeois identity. The two dinners in *Teorema* (1968) are the only scenes in which the bourgeois family is pictured together, casting their social bonds into an interminable insignificance. In *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1976), the feast marks the height of the libertines’ fantasy, the point where man’s body transgresses its own order beyond redemption.

These latter two films will serve as the basis for my inquiry into Pasolini's ideas of class consciousness and its applications to his own cinema.

Pasolini exposes the empty nature of the bourgeoisie through a marked style that submerges his films in their class consciousness. From the family's dissolution in *Teorema* to the corrupt fantasies of *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, Pasolini offers two models of the alienated bourgeois subject: one characterized by his embodiment of absence and the other by his fantastical excess. These two portraits present the bourgeois' fallible status as foiled by their incoherent expressions of sexuality.

### **Poesis**

Penned in 1965, Pasolini's essay "The Cinema of Poetry" envisions a filmmaking practice where a "pure expressivity" is achievable in a unison of image and style. Essentially, Pasolini views the process of filmmaking as a kind of writing. He distinguishes between traditional narrative cinema, which belongs to a "language of prose," and one that arranges objectivity with the subjective consciousness of a narrator, corresponding to a pretextual "language of poetry." Instead of words, cinema is founded upon the image, which lacks a referent. The structure of a filmed language is redefined: shots renamed as "im-signs" and editing likened to grammar. The invention of the term "im-sign" unites image and sign in a gesture that "recognizes its iconic and metonymic nature," as explained by Giuliana Bruno.<sup>1</sup> Thought of in this way, the images seen in a film constitute a cinematic vocabulary otherwise absent in the "chaos" of infinite possible images.

Tiptoeing the borders between objectivity and subjectivity, Pasolini's argument often falls back on its own contradictions, which is, to an extent, the point. According to Pasolini, the director's subjectivity upon the film is twofold. First, it involves the choice of an appropriate

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno, "Heresies: The Body of Pasolini's Semiotics" 33

im-sign “from the meaningless jumble of possible expressions (chaos).” Second, it requires the director to present it within the hierarchy of images, contextualizing it so as to “add to such a purely morphological sign its individual expressive quality.”<sup>2</sup> Concurrently, Pasolini posits the film image is “characterized by a degree of unity and determinism,” an objectivity universally understood in the viewer, hence their naming as “brute objects.” Pasolini’s key idea within these elliptical movements is summarized by John David Rhodes as follows:

Even in its most densely irrational, subjective articulations, cinema, because it is cinema—that is, because it presents to us photographic (therefore objective) images of “reality”—will always live out its throbbing existence on the borders of subjectivity and objectivity.<sup>3</sup>

The distinction Pasolini makes is thus a qualification of style. In its reduction of film to the “im-sign,” cinema of prose progresses no further beyond signification, empirically grounded in a “mythical and infantile subtext.” A cinema of poetry differs in its harnessing of the image’s “oneiric physical quality,” narrativized through an “expressive violence.”<sup>4</sup> This process “which imbricates the abstract into the concrete”<sup>5</sup> is thus a cinematic analog to the function of metaphor or parable, as remarked by Robert S.C. Gordon. If the language of images is universal and cannot be made class-specific, then class consciousness must be a function of character. Rhodes further explains, “style is paid for in the currency of subjectivity: that of the author and that of the character, whose performance and vision is but the vessel of the former.”<sup>6</sup> After all, subjectivity in film comes from subjects, found not in the filmmaker but the characters.

Reconciling the contradictions between objectivity and subjectivity, Pasolini defines the “free-indirect point-of-view shot,” redoubling literature’s concept of free indirect discourse<sup>7</sup> with

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<sup>2</sup> Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism* 169-70

<sup>3</sup> Rhodes, “Pasolini’s Exquisite Flowers” 147

<sup>4</sup> Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism* 172

<sup>5</sup> Gordon, *Pasolini: Forms of Subjectivity* 231

<sup>6</sup> Rhodes, “Pasolini’s Exquisite Flowers” 151

<sup>7</sup> “Free indirect discourse is a means of representing the thought or speech of a character in narrative, in the context of a narrator’s discourse, in which the subjectivity and idiom of the character are preserved but the shifts in person

its cinematic analog. The appearance of a cinema of poetry is pretextual, achieved when the film's image and the character's gaze overlap. Through such a style, a class consciousness is made to appear through the eyes of a particular character. For Pasolini, these subjects take preference in bourgeois protagonists, whom he affectionately names the "exquisite flowers of the bourgeoisie." The subject of the "free-indirect point-of-view shot" is ideally irrational, alienated from reality. Their flawed subjectivity allows for their "sick" and "abnormal" obsession with the world to appear through cinema. Cinema's depiction of these characters embodies their class consciousness:

The "cinema of poetry"—as it appears a few years after its birth—thus has the common characteristic of producing films with a double nature. The film that is seen and ordinarily perceived is a "free-indirect point-of-view shot." It may be irregular and approximate—very free, in short, given that the filmmaker makes use of the "dominant psychological state of mind in the film," which is that of a sick, abnormal protagonist, in order to make it a continual *mimesis* which allows him great, anomalous, and provocative stylistic freedom.<sup>8</sup>

What is entailed by this mimesis? It becomes clear that cinematic language retains a commitment to a subject, in other words: a body. The protagonist interprets the "im-sign" in relation to a reality that is at once bodily (subjective) and physical (objective). Class consciousness, which is similarly fraught between experiences of the individual and social function, is thus expressed in the vehicle of film, "which in the final analysis is a form of class consciousness."<sup>9</sup> Because there is no subjectivity without the subject, there is no vocabulary without the neurotic protagonist, whose "body constitutes a reserve, an archive that informs the decoding of images—the locus where signification makes its mark, embodying the social process and historicity."<sup>10</sup> The body is

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and tense that ordinarily accompany the citation of a character's discourse are not made." Gunn, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*

<sup>8</sup> Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism* 182

<sup>9</sup> Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism* 177

<sup>10</sup> Bruno, "Heresies: The Body of Pasolini's Semiotics" 37

wrapped up in this endless signification, translated into the erratic perspective of the “free-indirect point-of-view shot.”

In Pasolini’s oeuvre, one finds the clearest practice of the “free-indirect point-of-view shot” not in the detachment of society’s elite like in *Porcile* (1969) but in *Teorema*’s middling bourgeois family. We will return to these questions on free indirect discourse and class consciousness in our examination of this film, as instantiated in each of its five protagonists.

### **Teorema**

Unlike his other films that revolve around the plight of a singular character, such as *Accattone* or *Edipo Re* (1967), *Teorema* gives equal weight to each of its five protagonists. The characters represent the structural unit of a bourgeois family: maid (Laura Betti), son (Andrés José Cruz Soublette), mother (Silvana Mangano), daughter (Anne Wiazemsky), and father (Massimo Girotti). As critics often point out, the film’s title lends itself to interpretation as a mathematical theory: “a statement which has proved to be true, or asserted as true and capable of being proved.”<sup>11</sup> If X, then Y. Over the course of the film, each character becomes seduced by an unnamed man (Terence Stamp) who visits their household. Though they all fall victim to seduction by the same individual, the family’s paths never overlap; as Gordon commentates, “relations are instead played out through the guest in one or two dimensions, lines between two characters or triangles between three, but not within the family itself.”<sup>12</sup> Their arcs may be sequential, constituting a chain reaction of sorts, but they unfold in parallel, experienced alone from start to finish. The fragmentation of the family signals their division both sexually and familiarly. Their seduction corresponds not to the liberation of the family’s individual desires but to a methodical exposure of the emptiness symptomatic of their bourgeois conditions.

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<sup>11</sup> “theorem, n”. OED Online. March 2023. Oxford University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon, Robert S.C.. Audio Commentary. *Teorema*, Criterion Collection 2020.

Structured in a prologue and two acts, *Teorema* maps the lives of its family members from their status quo, to their revelatory encounters with the visitor, and finally their path to ruination as driven by the visitor's departure.

The film's prologue opens with a panning shot on a bleak industrial horizon, an unimpressive image outside the purpose of signification. The camera coolly surveys a factory complex. Though nondescript, we gather the setting is within a reasonably developed European city. Later on, the dialogue situates the film in Milan, but we are otherwise afforded no concrete setting, neither time nor place. Within this ambiguity, Pasolini focuses not on any one society but instead on what his locations stand for: a prestigious school, a factory, a city—all leading back to the familiar safeguards of modern bourgeois society.<sup>13</sup> These institutions come under immediate attack in a barrage of politically pointed questions, in which the factory is revealed to have been given away to its workers. The scene is shot via a handheld camera, evoking a style of *cinema verité* akin to *Love Meetings* (1965). Pasolini points to the filmmaking apparatus, placing cameras and microphones in plain sight. This realist gesture simultaneously lays bare the artifice of film and asks audiences to question their proximity to the events on screen. The interviewer presses on with insistence, asking, “as a symbol for the new course of power, can this be seen as a first prehistoric step in the transformation of all humanity into the bourgeoisie?” As the one-sided inquiry expands, the responses shorten, ending in the reporter's last words echoing out unanswered, “then you have to answer the new questions posed by the changing bourgeoisie. Can you answer those questions?” In the absence of a response, these questions posed within *Teorema*'s opening minutes echo out unanswered.

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<sup>13</sup> The introduction to the film accompanying the Criterion Collection's edition, excerpts a 1969 interview with Pasolini. French journalist Cécile Philippe asks Pasolini whether he expects the reactions from French audiences to differ from those in Italy, to which he equates, “Scandal and hypocrisy are the same in all countries. One part of the audience laughs to defend itself. Another part of the audience admires it. I think it's the same in Italy and France.”



As the title credits roll, the urban scenes are displaced by a location of a natural grandeur: the sulfurous dunes of Mount Etna. Unnamed, these recurrent images belong not to the film's narrative but to a symbolic order of "brute objects," like the pre-grammatical images detailed in "The Cinema of Poetry." The wasteland's setting recalls a primitive quality that predates both civilization and language. Sometimes appearing as precedent to sexual encounters between the family and the visitor, other times standing in for the act itself, these images resist any narrative rationalization. Critical readings differ on the significance of *Teorema's* desert. Cesare Casarino has noted that what it "postulates as axiomatic is its omnipresence: it is always here and now,"<sup>14</sup> whereas Damon R. Young attributes its appearances to the subjective function of an "opaque filmic narrator."<sup>15</sup> While these interpretations address their incoherence as a narrative device, they do not account for how their appearances are rendered universal for every family member's individual catharsis. Otherwise absent of explicitly sexual imagery, *Teorema's* universal glimpses of desert project the desires of the bourgeoisie onto an empty landscape. In spite of the different social roles that each character represents, they each originate from the same void. Thus, what unites the family are not the bonds of kinship but those of an unlocatable desire found in the visitor's otherness. Though the desert underlies each family member's experiences, only one of them appears within it: Paolo, father, patriarch, industrialist.

Following the credits, the gray slopes of Mount Etna come into full view, accompanied by the recitation of a biblical passage, "But God led his people about, by way of the wilderness."<sup>16</sup> The film presents the image of the barren landscape as the wilderness from which the characters and settings emerge, standing in for civilization's speechless origin. Foreign to the film's primary settings, the sight of Mount Etna becomes recognizable as an "im-sign" of a

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<sup>14</sup> Casarino, "Pasolini In The Desert" 98

<sup>15</sup> Young, "*Teorema's* Death Drive" 333

<sup>16</sup> Exodus 13:18 KJV

location external to the diegesis. Still, the desert runs parallel to the scenes within society. The film cuts from the desert to the factory, now colored by a sepia tone. Under a unifying aesthetic, we glimpse the everyday lives of the family before they are upturned by the visitor's arrival.

The opening sequence plays out in silence, introducing the family via their muteness. The father is chauffeured home from the factory while the son and daughter leave school to embark on their respective romantic pursuits. The film subtly hints at the girl's interest in photography. The front page of the daughter's book is emblazoned with a photo of her father which simultaneously reveals her filial kinship. Amid these sequences, the desert is inserted indiscriminately alongside shots of Milanese streets, assimilated within the narrative. The sepia grants these scenes a celluloid look, attributing them an archival quality much like the tint of the photographs in the girl's clutches. Whereas the desert belongs to a prehistoric, pre-linguistic order, its linkage to modernity casts these familial scenes into an unrecoverable past. The sepia filter produces an effect of "denaturalization," as Simona Bondavalli observes; it "removes their life from the immediacy of the present."<sup>17</sup> The images of the family's routines substitute their lack of speech, projecting the class consciousness of the bourgeois into the film's language.

This substitution takes place both in the part and the whole. In the family's mansion, the mother Lucia idly reads from a book whose title is obscured, illuminated by Maurizio Viano as "a question of form rather than content." Lucia is introduced via the vague outline of her social position, indicating that "her place is in the house, enclosed in the private sphere of which she is the appointed guardian angel."<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Emilia, the maid of the household, is characterized by her service. She receives a telegram announcing the arrival of the visitor from Angelino, the flirtatious messenger (Ninetto Davoli). Angelino's entrance replaces the brooding Morricone

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<sup>17</sup> Bondavalli, *Fictions of Youth* 171

<sup>18</sup> Viano, *A Certain Realism* 207

score for the electric rhythms of rock-and-roll muzak, indicating the entrance of the new. Unbeknownst to them, the news brought by the telegram will soon erode the shelter of domesticity, breaking them from their photographic stasis.

The prologue thus renders each family member as idealized actors of the discrete social roles they fulfill—empty and morphological. The visitor’s arrival fills this void with language. Gathered around the dinner table in a static shot, one of two instances<sup>19</sup> in which the family is convened in full (the other being the mirrored scene of the visitor’s departure), they read its message: “Arrivo domani.” In this climactic unity, to borrow again from Bondavalli’s insights, “rather than being the meeting point for the ideal family, the silent table becomes the stage for the destruction of the conventions on which the family stands.”<sup>20</sup> The visual spell of the sepia is broken, the image is replenished with color, language is restored.<sup>21</sup> Once the visitor arrives, these patterned scenes of bourgeois routine are irreparably set into disorder—thus ends the prologue.

### Stasis

Because I do not hope to turn again  
 Because I do not hope  
 Because I do not hope to turn  
 Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope  
 I no longer strive to strive towards such things

—T.S. Eliot, “Ash Wednesday”

From the lowest rungs of class to the highest, Pasolini depicts the emptiness within bourgeois society, from those who reproduce it through labor to those who command it. Thus, the first to come into contact with the visitor is not a bourgeois but the maid Emilia, the

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<sup>19</sup> Later, when Odetta falls into a catatonic state, the nuclear family is gathered around her still body at her bedside.. However, by this point, the family has already begun to splinter. The Emilia we know has left for her village and has been replaced by another maid who, inexplicably, is also referred to as “Emilia.”

<sup>20</sup> Bondavalli, *Fictions of Youth* 171

<sup>21</sup> Still, Casarino observes that when the visitor is first referred to he is named “a boy,” not in Italian but in English “as if to emphasize that he is a foreign element.” The “otherness” of the visitor is precisely the catalyst of change, as likened by Viano to the nameless, genderless pronoun “its,” stating that “*Teorema* wants to cluster signifiers of difference around *it*. The visitor/*it*.” Casarino, “Pasolini In The Desert” 99 & Viano, *A Certain Realism* 204

proletariat *par excellence*. Despite her lower class, her role as a servant reproduces the domestic structures of the bourgeoisie, making her no less susceptible to the nameless force that overcomes the family.

Her encounter with the visitor takes place in the mansion's garden, during a sequence characterized by an obsessive gaze, silence, and repetition. Textbook in one hand, cigarette in the other, legs spread open, the visitor's posture seductively invites Emilia's gaze. The film alternates between shots from Emilia's view and ones in which she is filmed as its object, introducing Pasolini's "free-indirect" mode. Emilia's gaze frames the visitor in stable medium shots, emphasizing his seductive posture. By contrast, the reverse shots render Emilia in frontal close-ups, increasing in rapidity and in proximity to her. Conventionally, the reverse shot would correspond to the perspective of the visitor, which is revealed to be an impossibility as he gazes away, replacing his textbook with the erotic poetry of Rimbaud. Thus, the shots of Emilia can only belong to an external observer. This perspective both isolates her as the protagonist of the film's subjectivity while also displaying her erraticism from a narratorial distance. Pasolini's use of the "free-indirect point-of-view shot" translates Emilia's gaze to the screen, depicting reality under her aggressive subjectivization. From this shared standpoint, we witness her magnifying obsession as the visitor's crotch becomes framed in extreme close-up. Dutifully, Emilia rushes to the foot of the visitor to wipe the fallen ashes off his leg. Returning to her task of gardening, she starts over and abruptly halts, transfixed in a reverent, silent gaze.

The silence of Emilia's seduction corresponds to the unspeakability of her sexual attraction toward the visitor. Their encounter is wordless—only glances are exchanged. As if to omit any ambiguity found in language, the sequence uses the "objective" image to capture Emilia's consciousness. As articulated by Naomi Greene, "silence gives the characters an

unrealistic cast even as it permits eroticism to emerge as the only language.”<sup>22</sup> Just as her desire cannot be put into words, the image of the visitor resists the categorization into a sign. The attention paid to the crotch projects the family’s perspective at the tipping point of their desire, where it transgresses into the unknown. Damon R. Young identifies these moments as “[signaling] a perversion of their vision...infecting the ‘objective’ narrative voice.”<sup>23</sup> The visitor’s crotch comes to stand in for precisely that which it withholds, defining the erotic both in its capacity and limit. The crotch’s function of concealing becomes the act of signification, imbuing cloth with the fissure of the *punctum*,<sup>24</sup> à la Barthes, “a kind of subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see...toward the absolute excellence of a being, body, and soul together.”<sup>25</sup> Further, the film’s gaze perpetuates a sexuality under genitality. The focus on the visitor’s phallus reveals the divisions of the body as both the subject of labor and of eros. Signaled by Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization*, “the libido becomes concentrated in one part of the body, leaving most of the rest free for use as the instrument of labor.”<sup>26</sup> Every character comes to center their desire around the visitor’s body but never consummates it. The crotch works in the same way, as a kind of aura or lost object, promising a sexual catharsis never to be attained. In the realm of seduction, no sign, neither word nor image, can gratify the sexual liberation sought by the family.

Within the film, each individual instance of desire manifests with respect to the social functions bound to the character. Emilia’s meeting unfolds as a byproduct of her labor; the children encounter him through art; and the parents do so in their guardianship of the household.

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<sup>22</sup> Greene, *Cinema as Heresy* 146

<sup>23</sup> Young, “*Teorema*’s Death Drive” 340

<sup>24</sup> “A detail which attracts or distresses me,” the “prick” of a photograph (its double entendre indelibly felt here) that Barthes identifies as distinctly personal, “an intense mutation of my interest.” Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 40, 59

<sup>25</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 59

<sup>26</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* 48

While they all look upon the visitor for remedy, their means of attraction conform to their socialized activity. Pasolini's writings echo these distinctions of eros:

In fact, the "gaze" of a peasant, perhaps even of an entire town or region in prehistoric conditions of underdevelopment, embraces another type of reality than the gaze given to that same reality by an educated bourgeois. Not only do the two actually see different sets of things, but even a single thing in itself appears different through the two "different" gazes.<sup>27</sup>

These expressions of sexuality give voice to a stifled eros resembling Marcuse's concept of "surplus-repression." Marcuse posits that individuals' erotic impulses and sexual drives conform to their social performance, their control by "the specific historical institutions of the reality principle and the specific interests of domination."<sup>28</sup> The institutions governing Emilia's domination are nestled in her identities as laborer, caretaker, and Catholic. These "socially useful" dominations produce a divided subject where "body and mind are made into instruments of alienated labor."<sup>29</sup> For the laborer, work is shaped as the basis of survival, but "performance of such work hardly gratifies *individual* needs and inclinations,"<sup>30</sup> that is, their erotic impulses.

The film represents Emilia's loss of identity through a whirlwind of gestures that recall these fragmentations of self. An out-of-focus shot tracks Emilia as she abandons the garden for the kitchen. She momentarily hovers before the gas stove (later repurposed as an instrument for suicide). Collecting herself by her mirror adorned with biblical illustrations, Emilia's newfound sexuality ruptures her faith. She strips off her earrings and performs a gesture of prayer before returning to her task of gardening. Unsurprisingly, Emilia proves unable to continue, reenacting a sequence of earlier events—distractedness, gazes unreciprocated, and pious silence. Here, her socially determined "surplus-repression" fails to express her erotic attachment. The performance

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<sup>27</sup> Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism* 177

<sup>28</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* 37

<sup>29</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* 46

<sup>30</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* 85

principle can no longer sustain. Emilia's sexual impulses thus return in service of the death drive. She rushes back to the kitchen, brings the pipe to her mouth, and huffs gas. Under these cycles of transgressions and reversions, Pasolini voices Emilia's individual turmoil, merging her class consciousness with the film.

Uniquely, the visitor approaches Emilia, unlike the others in the family who seek him. He carries her away from the gas pipe to her bed, where they make their long-awaited contact. Awestruck, Emilia offers herself to the visitor but he politely refuses. Unable to contain her impulses, she piously kisses his hand and the visitor capitulates. Fully clothed, he lies atop her as if to engage in intercourse but without penetration, eluding the crotch's pleasures of genitality. The desert reappears.

The homosexual relation between the visitor and the son Pietro remains suspended by desire, reflective of its non-reproductive ends both sexually and socially. "It's been a real invasion," remarks Pietro as he and the visitor undress in his bedroom. Despite being the only nude scene of the visitor, his genitals are not the focus of the gaze. Pietro lies restlessly awake, desiring the visitor. A shot of the dunes signals a flash forward, yet the temptation remains. The boy's seduction upsets his heterosexuality assumed in the prologue, where he is seen courting a girl. Pietro's sexual orientation is overwritten and so too is his identity. In their homosexual bond, the visitor leads Pietro astray from his social reproduction as successor to his father's industry. His homosexuality, which subverts the natural principle of procreation, leaves Pietro helplessly desiring the visitor. Later, the two leaf through a book of the violently homoerotic art of Francis Bacon, whose paintings are mirrored later in their act of sleeping in the same bed.<sup>31</sup> This inspires Pietro to represent the visitor through art, a mode of work that exists outside of

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<sup>31</sup> One of the paintings Pietro's eyes linger on, *Two Figures in the Grass*, resembles the later meeting between Paolo and the visitor at the river bank. In a roundabout way, the Oedipal dynamics of desire flow both directions.

socially useful labor. As noted by Marcuse, “artistic work, where it is genuine, seems to grow out of a non-repressive instinctual constellation and to envisage non-repressive aims.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, Pietro’s homosexuality proffers both his deferral of desire and his resistance to being reproduced as the monogamous, patriarchal subject. If the visitor’s arrival is an invasion, it is certainly a welcome one.

For Lucia, her crisis of maternal bourgeois identity is brought out by its obscuration. Like the others, Lucia’s encounter with the visitor is spawned by an act of looking. She remarks at the sight of the visitor’s clothes piled on the ground, a position she soon finds herself sharing. In a point-of-view shot, the camera flips over his dress shirt, satin pants, cashmere sweater, and lastly, underwear, like a disembodied strip-tease. Spying the visitor frolicking on the estate, she follows his lead, tossing her garments on the ground. The “objective” shots of Lucia’s stripping are muddled by the shakiness of the handheld camera, evoking a feeling of restlessness that matches her inner turmoil. The image of Lucia’s discarded clothes appears on screen, despite being made impossible by her position on the floor. This shot subjectively imposes her seduced consciousness, yet comes from an “objective” image imprinted in the syntax of the editing. The sight of Lucia’s clothes, as remembered by the film, becomes the sign of her seduction. Whereas the visitor’s body is reducible to the seductive sign, Lucia’s own nudity is absent of eroticism.

Framed by a static camera, the visitor approaches Lucia, finding her lying nude in a state of impressibility. As he advances, the camera tracks along from a low-angle, transitioning from an objective mode of surveying to the subjective act of looking. Drawing closer, his body enters the frame, blotting out the shimmering sun with a halo-like luminosity. In the reverse shot, Lucia and the visitor are pictured together, but we see only him from the waist down, taken from Lucia’s line of sight. The framing of the visitor’s crotch implies a viewing of him through

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<sup>32</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* 84



Lucia's obsessive perspective. Wordlessly, he lowers himself to her lying supine, inverting the perspective with a high angle in which Lucia's body is completely covered by his embrace. The visitor's eclipsing over the family's individualities is translated from the realm of the symbolic to the tangible. A loss of sense, and subsequently of self, comes as a prerequisite for their encounters. Across the family, each member confronts the visitor in the disembodied absences of speech, sight, motion, or touch. Even in his absence, the visitor is overlapped with signs of non-presence and blinding, invoked in images of stripped garments and dazzling light. His ineffable influence is figured most prominently in the arc of Paolo, the father.

The visitor usurps Paolo from his seat of patriarchal control. Bearing witness to his family's seduction, his encounter emulates them from a position of spectatorship. Stirred awake, Paolo traverses the sites of his family's seductions. From his point-of-view, he attempts to block out the blinding sun with his hand, an image parenthetically linked to the desert via a quick cut. Peering into Pietro's bedroom, he finds his son and the visitor together in bed, inciting him to recreate their act with his wife, however impotently. Pietro's aimless wanderings and sexual failures render him powerless. Despite his roles as father and provider for his family, his seduction divests his paternal control, echoing the developments in Marcuse, where "the traumatic experience of the father is superseded by more exogenous images."<sup>33</sup> The father is replaced by a nameless visitor whose influence is inflected in the image of the family's shared emptiness, signified by the desert. The father's helplessness is epitomized in the scene when Paolo, after falling ill, looks on as his daughter admires the visitor's handling of him.

Back in the yard, the daughter Odetta photographs the two men before hastily running off with the visitor to her room. Encircled by his legs, the camera trembles with Odetta as she shows her photo album to her disinterested guest. For a film that emphasizes the point-of-view shot,

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<sup>33</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* 95

Odetta animates the frame with lively camerawork, captured via tracking shots and shots that shift in and out of focus. When she rises to kiss the visitor, half her face is obscured, revealing only their gazes, empty, partial, displaced by an unrequited attention. Odetta undresses, exposing her breasts to the camera, a view held by no one. Unlike the camera's obsessive gaze of the visitor's crotch, Odetta's body is shot from a purely "objective" lens, devoid of any eroticization, in annihilation of her facets of youth and beauty. Pasolini thereby underlines that she is not the object of the gaze but its neurotic beholder. Her bourgeois notions of love, previously in allegiance to her father, are replaced by the dispassionate love of a nameless other.

Returning to Paolo in the company of the visitor, the other homosexual bond contained within the family, he confesses his reasons for needing to speak to him. Verbalizing his upset, Paolo states, "first, there's my moral sense, and then there's this sort of confusion inside me that perhaps can only be cleared up by talking about it." Speech is recognized as the remedy to his confused sexuality but remains inarticulable, just as before. Gilles Deleuze notes of the film that "thought finds itself taken over by the exteriority of a 'belief,' outside of any interiority of a mode of knowledge."<sup>34</sup> For Paolo, there is no knowledge of the self—hence his retracing of the steps taken by his family. Paolo follows the visitor to the bank, where the two lie together in the grass, a silent union in the wilderness of the city's recesses. The dunes return, announced by a Bible passage voicing what Paolo's ramblings could not express: "O lord, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived: thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed: I am in derision daily, every one mocketh me."<sup>35</sup> Like so, the father is deflowered.

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<sup>34</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 175

<sup>35</sup> Jeremiah 20:7 KJV

## Ecstasy

Back in the mansion, Emilia receives another telegram from Angelino who, upon hearing her speak, cries, “what did you say? So you can talk after all.” The visitor reads the message at the dinner table, again in laconic terms, “I must leave. Tomorrow.” Just as his arrival in the first half ruptures the family’s individualities, his departure leaves behind the irreversible imprint of a wound, a gaping absence in their personalities inflected in their elicited confessions. Back at the sites of their encounters—bedrooms, garden, and river bank—the members of the family speak to the visitor about the shattering of their bourgeois ego. Recalling the questions posed in the film’s opening minutes, the meaninglessness of the family’s bourgeois status is recognized for the first time. Though the inner turmoil of the characters is dislodged from its purely visual representation and put into speech, the resolutions that each of them seek is no more coherent than the performance of their bourgeois functions as before.

The crisis of the visitor’s departure prompts each character to embark on their own sublimative journey in an attempt to recover their loss. What was implied in the first half of the film is restated in the narrative through spatial division; the disintegration of the family takes place in the disintegration of the self.

Before falling under a catatonic state, the fleeting energies of Odetta’s youth are first captured in a detachment from her surroundings, as conveyed by a dizzying tracking shot spinning in 720-degrees. Her restlessness turns into intense perception as she peers out the mansion gates—possibly in search of the visitor, yearning for the return of his otherness. As if to recreate past events, she fervently measures the spaces once occupied by the visitor, retracing his photographed figure and sending herself into a catatonic state. Maurizio Viano views Odetta’s paralysis as a voluntary act, “for she now prefers to embody madness rather than live as an

appendage of the Father,”<sup>36</sup> thus making Odetta one of the few characters who exercises agency over their trajectory, albeit in stagnancy. Her path culminates in a resolute fixedness. Her clenched fist functions both as the symbol of her resistance and the limit to the control she has over her loss.

Pietro finds consolation via art. The young man defends his bourgeois standing in his juvenile attempts at painting. In an absurdly avant-garde gesture, he urinates over his own work and blindly pours paint over a canvas. While Pietro’s creative work liberates him from being heir to his father’s industry, they emphasize his meaningless pursuits over artistic ability. Instead of confronting his bourgeois identity with art, Pietro retreats further into it, uttering his own failure, “no one must realize that the artist is worthless, that he’s an abnormal, inferior being squirming and slithering like a worm to survive.” The desecration of his artwork and his willful act of blinding submits his body as the apparatus of painting, his craft thus (de)valued only by the commodification of his person.

Similarly, Lucia attempts to recreate her encounters with the visitor through affairs with young men she picks up off the street in a vague prostitution. The symbols associated with the visitor reappear but without the same profundity. After sleeping with one of them, the desert appears, now out of focus. The stripped clothes on the ground no longer hold seductive appeal but rather wrests her from her sexual fantasy. Her desperate sexual exploits resume with another man at the site of a ditch outside a rural chapel. Even though these promiscuous acts entail a diffusion of Lucia’s sexual impulses outside the monogamy of the household, they are undermined by her immediate retreat to an absent spirituality.

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<sup>36</sup> Viano, *A Certain Realism* 210

After her erotic encounters, the mere sight of religious imagery impels Lucia to reckon with her adulterous behavior. Gazing up toward a sculpture of Christ atop a building,<sup>37</sup> Lucia finds herself in front of a convent troubled by her moral conflict. Lucia's sudden self-awareness can only be superficial, each affair occurring in proximity to a church. Her return to the rural chapel is thus taken as an empty gesture driven by desire rather than devotion. This performative spirituality echoes the duality of the taboo that Georges Bataille calls "the experience of sin" dividing between religious experience and eroticism, or more precisely:

The inner experience of eroticism demands from the subject a sensitiveness to the anguish at the heart of the taboo no less great than the desire which leads him to infringe it. This is religious sensibility, and it always links desire closely with terror, intense pleasure and anguish.<sup>38</sup>

Lucia's "inner experience" is therefore torn between a fearfulness demanded by religion and her irrepressible desire, driving her to repeat her past actions. In search of redemption, Lucia drives back to the chapel, this time entering it. Sharing Lucia's perspective, the camera draws near the altar. This sequence of her multiple affairs and the return to the sites of her (un)holiness condemns her to a cycle of ruination, failing to recreate the rapture she once attained.

While Lucia must seek out religious experience, it is already omnipresent in the imagery surrounding Emilia. Indeed, Simona Bondavalli identifies a telling conjugation of the two women's arcs:

The cut from Lucia's close-up, as she looks up to what should be the altar, to the empty bench on which Emilia had been sitting in the previous sequences, highlights both Emilia's authentic 'sanctity' and the inauthenticity of a type of religion that fails to provide Lucia with alternative values to those of her class.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Recalling both the opening scene of *La Dolce Vita* (1960)—for which Pasolini had co-written dialogue—and the position later held by Emilia, ascending from her position on the village bench.

<sup>38</sup> Bataille, *Death and Sensuality* 38-39

<sup>39</sup> Bondavalli, *Fictions of Youth* 176

In contrast to Lucia, Emilia's devotion produces her as the sole figure of true spirituality, exalting her as a martyr for the working class. Her piety amounts to a meeting with the divine.

By leaving Milan and the family behind, Emilia rejects the reproduction of her body as the subject of bourgeois influence. While the members of the nuclear family all confess to their crises, Emilia remains speechless in her farewell. As the visitor leaves, she offers to carry his bags for him: one last act of service, which again defaults to a display of passion when she stops to kiss his hand. The silence and stillness deliberately received in Odetta comes naturally to Emilia in her becoming ascetic. Returning to her village, Emilia retires to a bench where she remains fixed, subsisting off a diet of nettles. Her motionlessness runs in distinction to Odetta's restlessness. Inverting the spiraling tracking shot of Odetta, the camera pans in a 360-degree motion starting and ending from the bench. The shot frames the entire village, both its people and the space, as if to unite Emilia with the members of her class. Though she embodies a kinship with her class, she is exalted by a miraculous sainthood. When we return to the empty bench, she is no longer seated but levitating above a building. The villagers flock to the scene to worship Emilia's still, hovering body. Thus, transcending her class and her former relegation to the gaze's beholder, her body now becomes emblemized in image.

In her final scene, Emilia quits the village and traverses the streets back to the city. At a nondescript construction site, suggesting the ceaseless expansion of an urban sprawl, she lowers herself into a ditch where she chooses to be buried. With her body inhumed, only her eyes remain uncovered in the dirt. From her point-of-view in the ditch, she looks out toward the sun, no longer a blinding light but instead diminished, setting on the horizon. Emilia sees her future with clarity. Having risen to the status of the sign, her burial rejects the appropriation of her body into image. She assigns herself to a fate where she will no longer be seen, interred beneath the

foundations of a nameless building built by the working class for the bourgeois. Emilia's sanctified burial equates the urban land to a wilderness within civilization. Just as bourgeois society has profaned the body with arbitrary, failed expressions of sexuality, so too have they contaminated the grounds which they use toward their meaningless ends.

Desert and industry become one in Paolo. We arrive back at the factory from the very first scene, now revealed to have been a flash forward. Paolo has given away the factory to his workers, stripping him of his ownership and soon all his worldly attachments. In a slice of neorealism, Paolo is framed by a sequence shot, a rare sight in *Teorema*. Cutting in between Paolo pacing the platform and a stranger eyeing him seductively, the film takes on an intensely anxious yet restrained subjectivity. Paolo resists the young man's signals: legs spread, holding a pointed gaze—an inversion of Emilia's initial seduction. In a long shot of the station, he begins to strip. Paolo walks out through the crowd of the train station, cut to a matching shot of his footsteps in the desert. After stripping away everything (family bonds, material wealth, bourgeois standing) Paolo finally enters the wasteland that once appeared to shape his desires—but finds nothing in it. The visitor is absent. Abandoned, Paolo roams the uncivilized, empty expanse. Removed from society, language no longer suffices. Civilization's signs lead him nowhere. Paolo lets out an anguished scream, echoing out into the speechless void.

*Teorema* dismantles the institutions of the bourgeois through a methodical approach. The film immerses its audience in the family's irrational, obsessive neurosis, exposing the faults that existed long before the events of the film. Though their emptiness is evident outright, the film establishes a proof that no solution for this society exists: neither in sexuality, nor spirituality, nor speech. The theorem states its proof, so to speak. A bourgeois society founded on principles of domination will forever be carved out of its empty origin, absent of virtue, signifying nothing.

## A Theorem of Death

They have brought whores for Eleusis  
Corpses are set to banquet  
at behest of usura.

—Ezra Pound, “Canto XLV”

In Pasolini’s letter “Trilogy of Life rejected,” he denounces his popular, bawdy adaptations made in the early 70s, citing a change in society’s “representation of eros.” He observes “the ‘reality’ of innocent bodies has been violated, manipulated, enslaved by consumerist power,”<sup>40</sup> which would become the subject of his final film, *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*. Part mythification of Mussolini’s Republic of Salò, part adaptation of Marquis de Sade’s pornographic novel, the film occupies a space between fiction and reality, mirrored in the libertines’ realm of sexual excess. Planned as the first installment to a “Trilogy of Death,” the film repudiates his former celebrations of sexuality in favor of representing the body in its present state of degradation. The class consciousness in *Salò* is the libertines’ sexual fantasy, predicated on prohibition. In the rules of *Salò*, transgression of prohibition replaces the sex act itself, causing the fantasy’s collapse in what Deleuze called “a theorem of death.”<sup>41</sup> Whereas sexuality in *Teorema* was expressed individually and implicitly, *Salò* affords no ambiguity in its multiplication of eros toward its final stage: the orgy.

From the onset, the libertines’ society of debauchery is outlined by paradoxical terms of prohibition. The nameless libertines are identified only by their positions of power, Duke, Bishop, Magistrate, and President. In the garden of the villa, the libertines announce the rules of their realm:

Any lewdness will be allowed...All participants, dressed according to ritual, will lie on the floor, and following the example of animals, will change position, intermingling,

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<sup>40</sup> Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters* 50

<sup>41</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 175



entwining, and copulating incestuously, committing adultery and sodomy. Any man found having sex with a woman will be punished by the loss of a limb. The slightest religious act committed by anyone will be punishable by death.

The permission for “any lewdness” justifies their boundless perversity. At the same time, these rules are rewritten in outlawing heterosexuality<sup>42</sup> and spirituality. The constant transgression of these laws define the libertines’ acts. Their desires then are directed not toward sexual liberty but to their victims’ conformity to these principles. The contradictions of these rules recall Bataille’s commentary on the nature of the taboo: “prohibition simply imposes the necessity for submitting sexual activity to generally accepted restrictions.”<sup>43</sup> For the individual who transgresses the taboo, there always exists the crisis of “inner experience,” the contradiction of the social or spiritual order to which one abides. In denouncing religious acts, the libertines outlaw spiritual resistance but also strengthen kinship to it as one of the last remaining truths of “inner experience.” The suppression of these urges, whether toward sexually permissive or inhibitive ends, results in violence against the individual.

The bodies of the youthful victims, each handpicked and brought to the villa, are subjected to a constant sexualization and a violent deindividualization. The eighteen subjects—nine boys and nine girls, all teenagers—are stripped naked. Their nude bodies are vitiated as interchangeable objects for the libertines’ pleasure. In removing the clothes around the erotic regions, the victims’ entire selves are suffused with their adolescent sexuality. Barthes’ assessment holds true, “in perversion there are no ‘erogenous zones’”<sup>44</sup>—eroticism both appears and disappears under nudity. The allure of the victims’ bodies thus no longer functions individually but only as a collective. Pasolini’s casting of nonprofessional actors to play these

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<sup>42</sup> Notably the only reproductive form of sex. The one instance of straight sex in the film is between the guard Ezio and the enslaved maid, which is met with both their executions.

<sup>43</sup> Bataille, *Death and Sensuality* 48

<sup>44</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* 10

teenage parts brings him closer both to the bourgeoisie he degrades and to Sade's source text. The ambiguity of their age further unsettles our spectatorship. The actors are made "ambiguous objects and ambiguous agents,"<sup>45</sup> as Rhodes terms for their unspecified age and consent. Even their characters' names are hardly known, instead they are appraised by the libertines for their physical features. The libertines' exploitation of their virility alienates the victims from their bodies yet simultaneously reduces them to its naked sign. Annihilating individuality both in terms of "inner experience" and the signification of the body—destruction comes from both within and without.

Stripping their identities, the libertines reconstitute their victims as a class designed to appease their sexual fantasies. In the regulation of their body's functions and anatomies, the youths are made into divided subjects of sexual labor. The manipulation of the victims thus submits their bodies to a pleasure that is not their own, again bringing Marcuse's insights of "surplus-repression" to light. Their "societal" performance is no longer alienated by their division between labor and eros but by their excessive doubling. The victim's "surplus" is realized in the sacrifice of his own body to his sexual labor. The stories arouse action in the libertines, made real via animalistic acts and elaborate rituals, oftentimes intertwined. These acts are realized at the borders between savage violence—the realm of the animal, who recognizes no taboo—and their submission to the order of law. Evidenced by these contradictory terms, the fallibility of the libertines' society becomes recognizable only as fantasy.

The horrors of the rituals lie not in the acts themselves but in what they attempt to mask in the libertines' own misguided fantasies. Three women perform as storytellers, recounting indecent tales of their adolescence with the accompaniment of a piano. In the contrast between the perverse acts and their lighthearted retelling, *Salò* sets up a dissonance between aural fantasy

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<sup>45</sup> Rhodes, "Watchable Bodies" 454

and physical reality. These scenes both structure the acts of the film into Dantean circles of hell<sup>46</sup> while also stimulating the libertines' lurid imaginations. The Circle of Manias culminates in the marriage of two victims: Sergio and Renata. After the wedding ceremony, the libertines instruct the couple to "give free rein" to their feelings but rebuke its actual consummation: "that flower is reserved for us." The Duke and President scurry to molest the victims on their own accord. During this scene of sexual violence, bombings and artillery are audible from outside, pointing to the horrors of the Second World War right at their doorstep. This diegetic sound is expressly ignored when the Magistrate joins in the orgy, retreating further into his excessive fantasy.

Prior to this vulgar display, the Duke acknowledges the incomprehensibility of their acts, ruminating, "the obscene gesticulation is like deaf-mutes' language, with a code none of us, despite unrestrained caprice, can transgress. We've to subject our pleasure to a sole gesture." The sole gesture of the libertines is the frenzy of orgy, which Bataille equates to "the disorder of lost beings who oppose no further resistance to the frantic proliferation of life...into the regions where all individuality is shed, where the stable elements of human activity disappear."<sup>47</sup> The orgy is aimed at the violation of the reproductive principle governing sex itself. Transgression therefore overrides eroticism, revealed in the violence against the self and the law. Indulgence in the orgy does not rescue the libertines from the atrocities of war nor does their nonparticipation excuse their ignorance. Instead, the duplicitous nature of excessive eros and violence emerges: "the origins of war, sacrifice and orgy are identical; they spring from the existence of taboos set up to counter liberty in murder or sexual violence."<sup>48</sup>

The violence of the film not only pervades the vulgar acts but also its degradation of the body. In preparation for their feast, the libertines restrict their victims' defecation. Those who fail

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<sup>46</sup> Named Anteinferno, The Circle of Manias, The Circle of Shit, and The Circle of Blood, respectively.

<sup>47</sup> Bataille, *Death and Sensuality* 113-14

<sup>48</sup> Bataille, *Death and Sensuality* 116

to abide are condemned by being written into a black book. Only then are their names recognized, as they will later become subject to an even greater torture. During the second wedding scene, the libertines and their victims gather in a banquet and are served their own excrement—the “metonymical sign, [...] the offspring of a new societal and cultural order,”<sup>49</sup> the excess itself. Not only are the products of the victims’ labor repulsive, they are indistinguishable from each other, removed from any bodily referent. Coprophagia, as Viano notes, signals “the vicious circle of a text in which the signs are condemned never to get out of themselves.”<sup>50</sup> The libertines’ system reduces their victims to a void of insignificance. Bodies are silenced; domination is translated from the corporeal to speech. Pasolini’s version of *The 120 Days of Sodom* observes the rules Barthes outlines of the Sadian text:

The master is he who speaks, who disposes of the entirety of language; the object is he who is silent, who remains separate, by a mutilation more absolute than any erotic torture... Speech is wholly bound together with the overt mark of the libertine, which is (in Sade’s vocabulary) the *imagination*: it might also be said that *imagination* is the Sadian word for *language*.<sup>51</sup>

Mastery diminishes the body to a subject, submitting it as another sign to be harnessed by the libertines’ language, that which they use to spell out their imagination. Violence is therefore just as linguistic as it is bodily. The practice of “The Cinema of Poetry” is presented at its most nihilistic and its most visceral in *Salò*. Taboos around eroticism are reinforced in the rites of feast and orgy, always referring back to its own signs. The Duke remarks, “the sodomite’s act can be repeated thousands of times.” Try as they might, “the executioner’s act” cannot be performed twice. Outside of fantasy’s reach remains the greatest taboo of them all: murder.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Maggi, *The Resurrection of the Body* 303-4

<sup>50</sup> Viano, *A Certain Realism* 307

<sup>51</sup> Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* 31

<sup>52</sup> “As taboos came into play, man became distinct from the animals. He attempted to set himself free from the excessive domination of death and reproductive activity (of violence, that is) under whose sway animals are helpless.” Bataille, *Death and Sensuality* 83

At the film's climax (a word perhaps more suited to *Salò* than any other film), we witness the libertines' torture of the victims through a re-emergence of the "free-indirect point-of-view shot." Gathering in the mansion's yard, the libertines take turns watching the others torture the victims by branding, scalping, hanging, and mutilation. The camera offers the viewer the voyeuristic perspective of the libertines, gazing at these horrors through a pair of binoculars. The binoculars' effect on the gaze is twofold, both magnifying and subjectivizing the image. The former implies mastery of the gaze by watching the action unfold. Like a zoom, the lens draws us closer to an "objective" image of bodily violence. At one point, the Duke inverts the binoculars to see the scene in full. This gesture underscores the excess of bodies accumulated under the image's control. Simultaneously, the libertines' voyeurism originates from a subjective distance. Separated by the binocular's lenses, their spectatorship comes only because each libertine does not recognize himself in it. Identification from the point-of-view of the libertines has not to do with their own position but the imposition of their fantasy. The language of the libertine's reality, both spoken and visual, is perversion: of law, of body, of imagination. Such is the essence of excess.

### **Fine**

"Death lies not  
in not being able to communicate  
but in no longer being understood."

—Pier Paolo Pasolini, "A Desperate Vitality"

Across Pasolini's filmed works, the body is filmed with rigorous precision and raw physicality, even at the heights of its vulgarity. His subjects, no matter how distanced or debauched, are never presented innocently. Over his brief filmmaking career, tragically cut short by his murder weeks prior to *Salò*'s release, Pasolini traced the decaying bourgeois class with a

heavy-handed nihilism and self-awareness that transcends the decades in which he worked. In part, the attachment he held to his “exquisite flowers of the bourgeoisie” reflected his own bourgeois standing in his chosen protagonists. Despite being “analogous to him in culture, language, and psychology,”<sup>53</sup> they were from a class he loathed yet could not free himself from. Identifying openly as gay, Marxist, Catholic, and an intellectual, Pasolini was in no way exempt from the criticisms his works proffer. Theorizing alone was not enough to reconcile his bourgeois background—“The Cinema of Poetry” had to be put into practice. And practice he did. Indeed, one hears the likeness in the name of *Teorema*’s father figure, Paolo, with his own. Some might even compare his violent death to the demise of *Salò*’s victims, itself being rumored that he was killed by one of his young cast.<sup>54</sup>

While his films prove that the body itself may not last, its sign prevails. Pasolini’s aesthetics of eroticism are profoundly felt generations after his own: Bertolucci, Waters, Fassbinder, Breillat, Haneke, Dumont, Noé. While perversion today may far exceed the bounds of imagination fifty years prior, the body remains its eternal subject. In Pasolini’s own words, “today the degeneration of bodies and sex organs has assumed a retroactive character...if *today* they are human garbage it means they were potentially the same *then*.”<sup>55</sup> Only in recognizing the body’s absent origin can we make sense of the excess that pervades the present.

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<sup>53</sup> Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism* 185

<sup>54</sup> Rhodes, “Watchable Bodies” 454

<sup>55</sup> Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters* 50

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