II Pasolini's *Teorema*: The halfway revolution

"I CONSIDER MY FILMS realist compared with neorealist film," Pasolini told Oswald Stack in 1968, the year of the release of *Teorema*. "In neorealist films, day-to-day reality is seen from a crepuscular, intimistic, credulous, and above all naturalistic point of view. . . . In neorealism, things are described with a certain detachment, with human warmth, mixed with irony—characteristics which I do not have. Compared with neorealism, I think I have introduced a certain realism, but it would be hard to define it exactly."[1] Hard indeed! For a filmmaker who abhors naturalism, who reconstructs everything, who is wedded to mythic archetypes, dreamwork and wish-fulfillment fantasies, it is difficult to fathom Pasolini's logic in designating himself a realist.[2] Three years earlier, in the famous essay, "The Cinema of Poetry," Pasolini had only complicated matters by calling himself a "mythic realist"—a label so anomalous that the adjective and noun virtually cancel each other out, emptying the phrase of any critical usefulness whatsoever.[3] Indeed, if Pasolini's claim to realism is to have any meaning at all, it must be considered in the con-

This chapter is a considerably revised version of an essay entitled "Pier Paolo Pasolini's Poetics of Film," *Yale Italian Studies* 1 (Spring 1977), 184–94.

[1] See Oswald Stack, *Pasolini on Pasolini* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 109.

[2] Ibid., p. 132. The filmmaker is quite vocal about his hatred of naturalism. Also see ibid., p. 133.

[3] Pasolini calls himself a mythic realist in a coy reference to his influence on Bertolucci, "whose structural realism" is "derived from Rossellinian neorealism and the mythic realism of some younger master." Bertolucci was Pasolini's assistant director in *Accattone*. See "The Cinema of Poetry," in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Nichols, p. 554.

text of his criticism of neorealism. "Literary revolutions," Robbe-Grillet once wrote, "have always been made in the name of realism" even when the style that provokes the reaction is itself avowedly realist.[4] Nor is Pasolini the first to claim credit for the passage from neorealism to realism in the cinema, for this had been Aristarco's strategy in defending Visconti's *Senso* against its neorealist detractors in 1954. Unlike Aristarco, however, Pasolini does not invoke Lukács or the nineteenth-century models of critical realism as correctives to the limitations of neorealist practice. In fact, it is precisely such links to the cultural past that Pasolini deplores in neorealism, seeing in it a stylistic throwback to prewar cultural modes. "I remember criticizing neorealism for not having sufficient intellectual strength to transcend the culture which preceded it," Pasolini told Stack, faulting its aesthetics for being naturalistic in the manner of Verga, crepuscular in the manner of Gozzano, subjective and lyricizing in the manner of the prewar arts in general.[5] "So neorealism is a cultural product of the Resistance as regards content and message but stylistically it is still tied to pre-Resistance culture."[6]

To liberate the cinema from its complicity with prewar modes, Pasolini posits an antinaturalist style which gives his images a mythic, quasi-sacred quality by replacing the deep fields and long takes of the neorealists with flattened planes, frontal shots, a static camera, and a fetishistic attachment to the photographic object.[7] What entitles this style to the realist label is not a theory of history, as it was in the case of Visconti, nor a theory of phenomenology, as in the case of Fellini, nor again a psychological approach as in the case of Antonioni, but a semiotic theory, a theory of cinematic

[4] Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel*, p. 158.

[5] Stack, *Pasolini on Pasolini*, p. 42.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Pasolini talked frequently of the "need to restore an epic and mythological dimension to life, a sense of awe and reverence to the world." Quoted in Stack, *Pasolini on Pasolini*, p. 9. On Pasolini's camera style, see ibid., p. 132, and Micciché, *Il cinema italiano degli anni '60*, pp. 168–69.

signs, which makes Pasolini a conscious manipulator of the cinema's built-in powers of realist representation. Far from the notion of an Aristotelian mimesis, which Pasolini explicitly repudiates when he disowns any tendency toward naturalism, this theory argues that the lexicon of film images, or "im-segni" coincides with the infinite number of significant images that make up the real world, as well as the world of memory and dream. Unlike linguistic signs, or "lin-segni," which are finite elements in a code, these "im-segni" are countless, uncodified, and pregrammatical. As such, they give film an oneiric quality "by reason of the elementary character of its archetypes (that is, once again, habitual and consequently unconscious observation of environment, gestures, memory, dreams) and of the fundamental pre-eminence of the pre-grammatical character of objects as symbols of the visual language."[8] Even the most conventional narrative film has this "subfilm" of irrational, elementary, and barbaric imagery, "a naturally hypnotic monstrum," which is responsible for the considerable power and appeal of the medium.[9]

Whereas the writer's is a purely stylistic task in that he or she need only select words from an already established lexicon, the filmmaker's is a double task—first linguistic and then

[8] "The Cinema of Poetry," p. 547. It should be noted here that Pasolini's theoretical attempts are highly problematic, "often as ambitious as they are generously confused." See Sandro Petraglia, *Pasolini* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1974), p. 78. His semiotic theory is particularly problematic. Though he sides with Christian Metz in arguing that film is a language without a code, this position invites Umberto Eco's criticism that the "universe of action depicted by the cinema is already a universe of signs." Quoted in Antonio Costa, "The Semiological Heresy of Pier Paolo Pasolini," in *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, ed. Paul Willemen (London: British Film Institute, 1977), p. 40. As Costa astutely points out, Pasolini's theorizing is very much at the service of his filmmaking (p. 34). Since Pasolini considers history, language, and literature to be bourgeois institutions, his antibourgeois stance produces a cinema that avoids such mediations in its approach to the real (p. 41). For a comprehensive criticism of Pasolini's semiotics of film, see Teresa De Lauretis, "Language, Representation, Practice: Re-reading Pasolini's Essays on Cinema," *Italian Quarterly* 21–22 (Fall 1980–Winter 1981), 159–66.

[9] "The Cinema of Poetry," p. 547.

stylistic, for the elements must be selected from the infinity of possible images offered by the real and placed in a lexicon before the cinematic process can even begin. Because film language is a direct transcription of these primal, pregrammatical images, it bears a special relationship to reality that no codified language enjoys. Since cinema is "a system of signs whose semiology corresponds to a possible semiology of the system of signs of reality itself,"[10] it is therefore "the written language of reality" whose referentiality is entirely independent of symbolic or conventional mediations.[11] Those filmmakers who honor the cinema's direct semiotic relation to the real, without hiding the "mystic and embryonic" subfilm beneath a rational, narrative surface, are the quintessential cinematic realists, in Pasolini's sense of the term.

In light of his criticism of neorealism, and his semiotics of cinematic signs, Pasolini's claim to a superior realism begins to make some sense. If his cinema is a reaction against the prewar cultural influences on neorealism, especially those of naturalism and crepuscularism, on the one hand, and against those filmmakers on the other hand who deny the oneiric, pregrammatical nature of cinematic signs by imposing a conventional narrative superstructure on them, then Pasolini's answer to both criticisms will be an antinaturalistic style that acknowledges the raw, brute nature of film images by showing how arbitrary the stylistic overlay really is. In *Teorema*, Pasolini achieves this double ambition by purifying his cinematic language of any pretensions to naturalist representation and then making explicit his own, idiosyncratic principles of style. Unlike the storyline of a conventional film, which gives the illusion of the self-sufficiency and inner necessity of its narrative progress, the plot of *Teorema* is completely ar-

[10] *Pasolini on Pasolini*, p. 29.

[11] See "La lingua scritta della realtà," in *Empirismo eretico* (Milan: Garzanti, 1972), pp. 198–226. "When I make a film," Pasolini told Stack, "I am always in reality, among the trees and among people like yourself; there is no symbolic or conventional filter between me and reality, as there is in literature." Stack, *Pasolini on Pasolini*, p. 29.

bitrary and unmotivated, depending upon a mechanism external to the narration to keep it in motion, as Pasolini's title, taken from the discipline of mathematics, immediately suggests. The plot is thus manipulated by an abstract logic, the logic of the theorem, which imposes its own rigid, alien structure on the events of the storyline. Put another way, this obtrusive architecture makes "narrative structure itself the subject of the film, rather than anything it chose to relate" so that the "formal parallelisms create a self-enclosed world where everything has an assigned place in a predetermined structure whose very precision turns the film into a formal creation or, to use Pasolini's words, an 'object' rather than a representation of reality."[12]

In summary form, the plot reveals the schematicism and geometric rigor which amply fulfill the promise of its title: a mysterious visitor enters the life of an upper middle-class family in Milan and makes love to each member of the household, beginning with the servant Emilia, then the artist son Pietro, the mannequin-perfect mother, Lucia, the Oedipally repressed daughter, Odetta, and finally, the industrialist father, Paolo. Midway into the film the guest leaves as mysteriously as he came, and each member of the family proceeds to self-destruct in a way consonant with his or her particular relationship to the visitor. The theorem thus operates with harsh inevitability as the first half of the film sets out the patterns of disintegration to follow.[13] The disappearance of the guest at the exact center of the film creates a perfect bipartite division of the plot, each half of which is subdivided into five equal parts, or corollaries, as the family members act out their individual destinies. When the telegram arrives announcing the guest's departure, an interlude

[12]Naomi Greene said this with regard to *Sparrows and Hawks* but it well applies to the aesthetics of *Teorema*. See "Art and Ideology in Pasolini's Films," *Yale Italian Studies* 1 (Summer 1977), 322 and 323.

[13]Thus Adelio Ferrero attributes to the film a "visceral fatalism that runs through it from the first to the last image." See *Il cinema di Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Venice: Marsilio, 1977), p. 102.

follows in which the family members individually confess the totality of their love for him. The order of confession precisely mirrors the order of seduction, and as if this were not symmetrical enough, Pasolini sets each character's self-revelation in the exact location of his previous lovemaking with the guest. Nor do the household members interact with one another, but only with the mysterious visitor who stands detached, and remains opaque, as he brings first joy and then despair into the lives of the five protagonists.

The remoteness of the guest, and his ability to generate a series of similar responses in a number of very different individuals, suggest that he is himself the theorem, the abstract law governing a subset of diverse phenomena. The fact that he is somehow the key to the logic of the film is made visually explicit in two dinner-table scenes. Before his arrival, we see the family of four seated at the table in a disturbingly unbalanced pattern: the father is seated at the head of the table, to his left are two people, to his right is only one. The camera is centered on the father in a way that emphasizes the imbalance of the composition. When the servant Emilia enters with a telegram announcing the arrival of the guest, the suggestion is that his advent will complete the symmetry of the family unit. In fact, the next time we see them at dinner the guest provides the perfect balance of the group, as the father is now flanked by a man and a woman on either side. But the symmetry is soon to be broken, as another telegram is brought into the dining room to be read this time by the guest. He opens it, and utters his only line of dialogue in the entire film: "I have to leave, tomorrow." The physical symmetry provided by his presence is matched by the narrative symmetry of the two telegrams; one anticipating the arrival which will complete the family unit, and one announcing the departure, which will destroy it.

The entire film works on this pattern of mathematical precision. The motif of narrative repetition, of serial seduction,

and serial self-destruction, is reflected in the landscapes and cityscapes that Pasolini selects as his cinematic setting. His camera is attracted to endless vistas of tree-lined roads, of factory barracks, of columns and arches, while the family villa is a marvel of classical composition. The mathematical rigor of the camera eliminates any softness, any imperfection, any deviation from the theoretical norm.[14]

But the theorem is more than a formal, stylistic property of the film determining its narrative structure, imagery, and photography. Indeed, its most consequential operations are metaphysical; namely, the systematic way in which the guest elicits each character's most secret desires. During the course of each seduction, he is made privy to his partner's own idealized self-image as expressed in a cluster of images that externalizes the character's hidden longings. When he departs, and the family is bereft of its perfection, each member proceeds to decompose in a parody of the ideal shared with the guest. This is the deepest and most telling pattern of the film, and it unites all the protagonists in a metaphysical theorem of wish-fulfillment and destruction. The guest crystalizes their innermost desires, but without him, these can no longer be satisfied. He has shown the family a dreadful and irresistible truth, and has left them devoid of the means to attain it.

Emilia, the servant who has come into the city from her modest farm in the provinces, is the first to realize her attraction to the young man. She is mowing the lawn as he is sprawled in a lounge chair, reading Rimbaud. Unable to tear her eyes from him, Emilia performs a bizarre series of actions, running back and forth from lawn to house in a crazed and compulsive way. In between these sprints, she stops to look in her bureau mirror, and contemplates her reflection amid postcards of virgins and saints. Pasolini has presented

[14]On the geometric precision of Pasolini's camerawork, see Noel Purdon, "Pasolini: The Film of Alienation," in *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, ed. Willemen, p. 47.

her ideal self-portrait in these few images, and her fate as religious martyr is thus inexorably sealed. In strict obedience to the theorem, the guest's departure frees her to pursue this destiny, which includes a return to her native farm, a lengthy vigil in its courtyard, a fast broken only by the eating of nettles, and the performance of several miracles. She cures a leprous child, is levitated above the roof of the farmhouse in cruciform posture, and is buried alive in a construction site, leaving behind her a fountain of tears. This sublime conclusion to Emilia's story suggests her superiority over the middle-class dramatis personae of the film, and exemplifies once more Pasolini's well-known sympathy for the "subproletarians" of the urban shanty towns and the Third World, as well as for the peasant population itself.[15]

Pietro, the artistically inclined son, is the next to succumb. He and the guest must sleep in the same room, due to overcrowding, and end up sharing a bed. Pietro's walls are cluttered with paintings, and the boy's ambitions become explicit as he and the guest lovingly leaf through a catalogue of modern art. Pasolini's camera lingers on several gruesome works by Francis Bacon—animaloid studies for his crucifixion, and decomposing bodies clasped in a lovers' embrace. The last is prophetic of Pietro's destiny, as he repeatedly fails in his attempt to re-create his adored friend through art. He begins by painting frantic portraits, using a predominance of blues, which are the chromatic leitmotif of the guest (blue-eyed and celestial). But as Pietro continues to paint, the realization of his loss overwhelms him, and his art becomes an outpouring of despair. Anger and self-hatred motivate him to acts of violence and desecration as he stands over a blue canvas to urinate. In his final surrender to absurdity, Pietro abdicates all responsibility for his art, closes his eyes, dumps a can of blue paint on a waiting canvas, and hangs it on a

[15] On Pasolini's privileging of Emilia, see Bondanella *Italian Cinema*, pp. 281 and 283.

wall, allowing gravity and chance to govern the resulting design.[16]

It is easy to read into this artistic suicide a self-reflexive Pasolini. Not only does Pietro's name alert us to his autobiographical significance,[17] but so too does his homosexuality, which constituted so important a part of Pasolini's sense of difference. When the guest reveals to Pietro his true sexual inclinations, it is this, as much as his desire for absolute artistic freedom, which prompts the boy to abandon the family as the cornerstone of "straight" bourgeois respectability.[18] But it is in his artistic pretensions that Pietro's autobiographical meaning is most obvious, for he represents a possible alternative for the filmmaker who has contained his own tendencies toward chaos by means of a highly measured, controlled style. When Pietro discovers painting on glass, the celluloid art is not far away. To further the case for an autobiographical reading of Pietro's vocation, it is Giuseppe Zigaina, Pasolini's lifelong friend in politics and the pictorial arts, who is the actual author of the boy's glass painting experiments.

Lucia, the exquisitely wrought mother, is the third to fall. The guest elicits in her a powerful hybrid response, at once maternal and erotic. She is the only family member who is explicitly seductive, presenting herself nude to the guest in the family recreation room. The image complex that triggers Lucia's desire is scattered articles of men's clothing which

[16] As Alberto Moravia puts it "the boy, who is a painter, derails in the direction of the most capricious sterility masquerading as avant-garde art." See *Al cinema* (Milan: Bompiani, 1975), p. 107.

[17] In fact, Purdon finds autobiographic or symbolic meanings in all five of the names. See "The Film of Alienation," p. 44.

[18] Accordingly, Ben Lawton argues that the family is the preferred target of Pasolini's antibourgeois polemic and that sex is the prime weapon with which he wages his campaign. See "The Evolving Rejection of Homosexuality, Sub-Proletariat, and the Third World in Pasolini's Films," *Italian Quarterly* 21–22 (Fall 1980–Winter 1981), 168.

someone has always recently cast off. Her own first stirrings of passion for the guest are subtly suggested by a change of expression as she contemplates his clothes strewn about the room. Lucia looks at them first with the amusement of a mother who enjoys the carelessness of her child, and then with burgeoning passion for the man that child has become. When the guest departs, Lucia is doomed to parody this incident again and again as she picks up and seduces several young men. The first tryst momentarily elicits the combination of maternal tenderness and sexual passion that the guest had aroused in her. But as she notices the clothes strewn about the shabby apartment by her youthful lover, her complacent expression quickly turns to one of panic and loss. Compulsion takes hold of her, and she later picks up two unsavory youths, who lead her to a ditch before an abandoned country church and enjoy her in turn. Lucia's frantic attempt to recover the guest degenerates into an endless series of sordid sexual exploits.

Odetta, the adolescent daughter who is frozen in Oedipal love, finally relinquishes her fixation after the long and grave illness of her father. The guest, who has kindly ministered to the sick man throughout his crisis, becomes the new object of Odetta's obsessive passion. This switch of allegiances takes place one day as the two of them sit quietly on the lawn, attending the father in his convalescence. Odetta suddenly runs into the house, produces a camera, and proceeds to photograph the guest with a compulsion bordering on madness. She then takes him by the hand, and leads him to her monastic bedroom where she reveals to him her Bible—an album of photographs dedicated to her father. When the guest leaves, Odetta devotes herself exclusively to this cult of the past, permanently inhabiting her museum of memories. In her despair, she pores over the treasured album, stops at the new pictures she has taken of her young lover, traces his image with her right hand, and then clenches it in a fist never to be loosened. She falls on the bed in a catatonic fit, making

11. *The guest (Terence Stamp) relieves Paolo's discomfort by supporting the sick man's legs on his shoulders in imitation of a passage from Tolstoy.*

her body itself a frozen image, like the moments of the past that she refuses to release.

The father, Paolo, is the most resistant to the powers of the guest, but his long illness, emblematic of his own inner pathology, finally opens him to the forces of change. Paolo's destiny is contained in a story by Tolstoy, which is read aloud at his bedside, and which he and the guest enact. The passage describes the ministrations of a young peasant, Gerasim, to his ailing master, Ivan Ilich, who can only find relief from his pain when the servant raises his legs and supports them on his strong, young shoulders. The guest performs this rite for Paolo, and the therapy proves effective. After the young man's departure, Paolo experiences an ideological conversion of such intensity that it impels him to relinquish his factory to the workers' control. As further proof of his new antimaterialist stance, he divests himself of all his worldly goods in the train station of Milan, where he takes off his clothes to the amazement of rush-hour crowds.

The theorem is now complete, as each character fulfills the destiny implicit in his or her encounter with the guest. But we have yet to identify this catalytic figure or to explain his power to motivate radical change in the life of this Milanese household. "I made Terence Stamp into a generically ultraterrestrial and metaphysical apparition," Pasolini said in an interview on BBC television. "He could be the Devil, or a mixture of God and the Devil. The important thing is that he is something authentic and unstoppable."[19] In the very vagueness of his gloss, Pasolini authorizes any number of possible interpretations of the supernatural figure, whose Christological resemblances constitute one obvious aspect of this eclectic divinity.[20] There is an annunciation scene when a postman named Angelino heralds the visitor's arrival, there

[19] In Stack, *Pasolini on Pasolini*, p. 157.

[20] Accordingly, Ferrero calls *Teorema* a "miracle play" (*Il cinema di Pasolini*, p. 96). On the guest as Godhead, see Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 282.

is the assumption of cruciform postures by the visitor throughout the film, and there is Odetta's final photograph of him that bears a pronounced likeness to a deposition scene. If the guest is, among other things, a *typus Christi*, then Pasolini is taking the doctrine of the Incarnation to its logical extreme in making this character's earthly ministrations primarily sexual ones. Since God embodies his spirit in the flesh to make palpable the abstract operations of divine truth, Pasolini makes such truth accessible to human sensibility in the most intimate of all possible ways. Dante explains that transcendent principles must be given corporeal expression according to the theory of accommodation, by which "Scriptures condescend / to your faculties, and feet and hands / attributes to God, while meaning something else" (*Par.* IV.43–45).[21] Pasolini has given more than hands and feet to his incarnation of divine truth, but in so doing, he is adhering to the tradition which predicates human cognition on sensory perception. Pasolini's God commits the ultimate act of *caritas* by offering himself to man's senses through carnal love.

Not only is the theory of accommodation taken to its logical extreme in *Teorema* but the language of mysticism as well. Union with the divine has been figured in erotic terms throughout the history of Christian thought. Thus by making sexual passion a metaphor for mystical union, the Biblical exegetes were able to transform the frankly erotic Song of Songs into an allegory of divine love, and Dante could establish a continuity between his earthly desire for Beatrice and his longing for the celestial vision made possible through

[21] "La Scrittura condescende / A vostra facultate, e piedi e mano / Attribuisce a Dio, ed altro intende" (*Par. IV.43–45*). Purdon, who sees Pasolini's combination of geometric structure and moral concerns in *Teorema* as an allusion to Spinoza's *Ethics*, notes the special relevance of the philosopher's Proposition XIV—Of the Means by which Eternal Things are Known. "We can see that it is above all things necessary to us that we should deduce our ideas from physical things or from real entities." See Purdon, "The Film of Alienation," p. 46.

her agency. Boccaccio parodies the Christian allegorization of eros by reversing the movement from flesh to spirit which typifies the tradition. Rustico's consignment of the devil to Hell through sexual intercourse (*Decameron* III.x) is a prime example of this carnalization of Christian doctrine. Like Boccaccio, Pasolini gives flesh to the disembodied language of mysticism, but the filmmaker's strategy suggests piety, not parody, as he suffuses the sexual act with divine significance.

Yet the analogy between the guest and Christ remains incomplete, for the guest is Christ unresurrected, the Saviour who remains on the cross and whose death is not followed by rebirth into eternal life. This half-realized *imitatio Christi* explains the destructive effect of the guest on the members of the household. While he motivates conversions, urging his disciples to abandon the old way and follow him, these conversions are partial. The guest completes only the first half of the conversion process: that of the *askesis*, and departs before indicating how his converts can remake themselves in his image. He leaves them without a prescription for change, without anything to replace their discarded selves. Lacking a guide, suddenly bereft of sanctifying grace, the family flounders and fails.

A second pattern of allusion gradually emerges. Throughout the film, Pasolini has intercut images of a desert amid the cityscapes of Milan, although it has no place in the physical context of a story about malaise in the urban upper middle classes. Eventually, the motif of the desert gains a cumulative force as it recurs each time a character makes the fateful decision for freedom. The desert becomes the desert of Exodus, and the destiny of the family becomes typologically that of the Jews who wander for forty years in quest of the promised land.[22] As the Jews left Egypt, and relinquished social structure for an unknown salvation, so Pasolini's fam-

[22] Pasolini makes this Scriptural allusion explicit in the epigraph to the novel *Teorema*, which contains the quote "God made the people turn, therefore, by way of the desert." Exodus 13:18.

ily has rejected the old norms and opted for change. But this modern Exodus does not have a happy ending, and these Milanese pilgrims are doomed to fail. There seems to be no promised land, and surely no Moses to lead them there. This family remains in the desert, unable to turn back, and unable to arrive.

Pasolini has used both Old Testament and New Testament typology to demonstrate the sorrow of incomplete conversion. The partial Exodus and the partial Atonement both dramatize his anxiety about a contentless freedom. What good is it, he asks, to leave behind the old order only to face a future of infinite alternatives when there is no way to choose among them, no models to imitate, and no guidelines to follow? On the eve of the 1968 upheavals, Pasolini's anxiety in *Teorema* was to be prophetic of the position he would soon take with regard to the protest movement that spread throughout Italy in the aftermath of the uprising in France. He was to see student activism not as a valid extension of "the Maoist cultural revolution by which it was supposedly inspired, but a disguised revolt of the bourgeoisie against itself" and he was to take the side of the police, "sons of the poor" against the spoiled, middle-class perpetrators of revolt.[23] He was to call the young protesters the "unfortunate generation" whose ignorance of cultural tradition doomed them to relive the old mistakes rather than to create the new and vital next chapter that only a dialectic reading of history could authorize.[24]

What is Pasolini's notion of the relationship of the work of art in general, and of *Teorema* in particular, to this world on the brink of violent social change? Is *Teorema* a committed film in the neorealists' sense, or does it constitute a withdrawal from sociopolitical concerns into an art-for-art's sake

[23]Enzo Siciliano, *Pasolini: A Biography*, trans. John Shepley (New York: Random House, 1982), pp. 325 and 326. On Pasolini's application of the label "falsa rivoluzione" to the events of 1968, see Brunetta, *Storia*, p. 661.

[24]Siciliano, *Pasolini*, pp. 348–49.

formalist position? Just as the plot forces us to go beyond the literal level in our quest for an interpretive key, so too does the ideological content of the film compel us to look elsewhere for the source of its logic—this time to the two textual models (Scriptures and the Tolstoy novella) that Pasolini explicitly invokes. What both allusions suggest is that Pasolini is indeed appropriating the exemplary status of these two texts, so that his film will bear witness to a revelation, according to the Biblical paradigm, and will implicate the public in its teaching, according to the Tolstoyan one. For *The Death of Iván Ilich* is very much a parable on the morally appropriate and inappropriate "readings" of life experience. The story is as much about the other characters' refusal to accept their own mortality as it is about Ivan's desperate attempt to do so. The fact that the first part of the narration is filtered through the perspective of a friend who succeeds in suppressing the grief that Ivan's death brings him, and the fact that what interests Tolstoy in Ivan's dying is the series of cognitive relationships that it generates—Ivan's relationship to his fatal disease, his wife's relationship to her husband's slow demise, his friends' and co-workers' relationship to it, and so on—reveal that this is a cautionary tale, full of admonitions about our own relationship to the textual example. When Paolo acts on the knowledge that has come to Ivan too late—"everything which you have lived by is a lie, a deception, which conceals from you life and death"[25]—he proves to be an ideal reader of Tolstoy, one who takes seriously the moral truth that Ivan's wife and friends so strenuously deny. Indeed, *Teorema* too is a parable, and hence it too makes a moral claim on the viewers to take its teachings to heart.[26] But the film stops short of the neorealists' *impegno* by refusing to prescribe the new order that will re-

[25] Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Iván Ilich*, in *The Complete Works of Count Tolstoy*, vol. 18, trans. Leo Wiener (Boston: D. Estes & Co., 1904), p. 77.

[26] The filmmaker argues this in Petraglia, *Pasolini*, p. 15.

place or regenerate the old.[27] The last sequence of the film shows Paolo stranded in the desert, suspended in the betwixt and between state that was Pasolini's political dwelling place. "For the present," writes Naomi Greene, "all that an Italian intellectual such as himself could do was to bear witness, through the 'pain' within him, a pain born from the struggle to renounce past culture and the impossibility of creating a new one, to a period of unhappy transition."[28]

If we were to accept Pasolini's problematic assessment of himself as a realist, we might qualify the term by calling him a "reactive realist"—that is, one whose style is a reaction to the limitations of neorealism in particular, or to any cinema that denies its semiotic source in the primal images of the real world, the world preceding the codified lexicon of man-made signs. To fulfill the terms of this "reactive realism" Pasolini must continue to experiment with cinematic form, never allowing his language to rigidify into manner or to slip into a conventional mode which would detract from his imagistic source in the real. Though his aesthetic restlessness has been seen as an attempt to reconcile the conflicting ideological and cultural impulses within him,[29] it could also be interpreted as his linguistic response to the realists' mandate to keep renewing the quest for a style which only through constant evolution and self-scrutiny could do justice to the true origin of cinematic discourse. Only then could the cinema assume its proper function as "the written language of reality." Paradoxically, it is by means of his reverential, mythic

[27]Or, as G. C. Ferretti put it, "Pasolini posits in substance the problem of superseding the old 'commitment' by means of an awareness of those *new facts* (and in particular of those ferments of antibourgeois revolt often not embraced or rejected by the organized movements that explicitly claim kinship with Marxism)." Cited in Ferrero, *Il cinema di Pier Paolo Pasolini*, p. 87.

[28]See Greene, "Art and Ideology," p. 318.

[29]See Oswald Stack's introduction to *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, ed. Willemen, p. 1.

approach to film images, rather than the naturalistic approach of the neorealists, that this realists' mandate, as Pasolini saw it, could be fulfilled. Like Paolo at the end of *Teorema*, the realist filmmaker must remain in the desert, ever seeking, but never achieving, the promised land of stylistic and ideological certainty.

Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism

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