

A black and white photograph of Pier Paolo Pasolini standing in a jewelry store. He is wearing a light-colored trench coat over a dark shirt and tie, and dark sunglasses. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. To his left, there are various jewelry displays, including a large necklace with a dark, textured pendant, and several small figurines on a shelf. In the background, there are shelves with more jewelry and a sign that reads "BUTONI ITALIAN FOODS". The store has a classic, somewhat cluttered feel with many small items on display.

Pier Paolo Pasolini: Subversive Prophet

edited by Patrice Giasson

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essays by Mónica de la Mora Kuri

Patrice Giasson

Paula Halperin

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Neuberger Museum of Art
Purchase College, SUNY
Purchase, New York

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Introduction

Pier Paolo Pasolini (Italian, 1922–1975) is widely known in Europe for his prolific work as a poet, writer, and film director. A true humanist, his interests encompassed literature, art, history, classic tragedy, psychoanalysis, and politics. For Susan Sontag, Pasolini was “indisputably the most remarkable figure to have emerged in Italian arts and letters since the Second World War. Whatever he did once he did it, had the quality of seeming necessary.”¹ Outspoken and subversive, Pasolini made no concessions and at times deliberately provoked his contemporaries,

through his challenging political articles and his provocative films. Violently murdered in 1975 under enigmatic circumstances that shocked Italy and intellectual circles worldwide, Pasolini

Pier Paolo Pasolini with
Richard Avedon in his studio,
New York, 1966. Photograph
by Duilio Pallottelli.
© L'Europeo RCS/ph.Duilio
Pallottelli

¹ Quoted on the back cover of *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Poems*, ed. and trans. Norman MacAfee with Luciano Martinengo (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996).

left three decades of artistic production full of complex and rich themes that are as relevant today as they were then: the dangers of capitalism; growing inequality between poor and rich; the relegation of the underprivileged to the outskirts of the city; hypocrisy and corruption in the social and political spheres. Pasolini had a prophetic vision of where the Western world was heading. Before anyone else, he warned Italians of the universal homogenization of society due in part to the arrival of television, which imposed a new way of life dominated by what he called a “hedonistic culture” of frenetic consumption.²

The goal of this exhibition is to give American audiences the chance to discover his work. Pasolini is not well-known in the United States, or other parts of the Americas, except in intellectual or cinephile circles. Nevertheless, Pasolinian studies have continued to grow worldwide, and as Greg Taylor notes in his essay in this book, while Pasolini has long been controversial, “Today’s vantage point provides the opportunity not to be overwhelmed by Pasolini’s contradictions and difficulty, but to face and appreciate them head on.” Along with providing an overview on Pasolini’s oeuvre, the project also explores his reception in other parts of the Americas, including Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico.

² See “11 luglio 1974: Ampliamento del ‘bozzetto’ sulla rivoluzione antropologica in Italian,” in *Scritti Corsari: gli interventi più discussi di un testimone provocatorio* (Milan: Garzanti, 1975). An English translation can be found at: <https://libcom.org/files/Corsair%20Writings%20%E2%80%93%20Pier%20Paolo%20Pasolini.pdf>

In her essay “Pier Paolo Pasolini and Cinema in 1970s Brazil,” Paula Halperin explains how Pasolini’s cinema shared similar concerns with the Brazilian cinema of the ’60s and ’70s, addressing themes of “center and periphery, the urban and the rural, the First and the Third Worlds—all unavoidable tropes in Latin American political cinema and conspicuous in Brazilian Cinema Novo.” She observes that “nowadays, films as distinct as those of Cláudio Assis and Hilton Lacerda demonstrate the everlasting influence of the Italian filmmaker.” Mónica de la Mora, in her essay “The Reception and Influence of Pasolini in Mexico,” explains that although the director’s work suffered censorship in Mexico and most of his films were screened clandestinely, “he became an obligatory reference for the countercultural movement.” Her exploration of the work of the contemporary artists Yoshua Okón, Julián Hernández, and Pablo Vargas Lugo reveals that Pasolini’s “ideas and works retain their power, and today his ideas are even stronger, in a world... that needs his lucidity and provocation.”

The exhibition showcases original works by two contemporary artists born in Latin America: the Chilean, New York-based artist Alfredo Jaar, and the late Uruguayan artist Antonio Frasconi (a former Purchase College professor). Both artists pay tribute to Pasolini’s outstanding work and denounce his assassination in 1975. Frasconi’s artist’s book *In Memoriam, Pier Paolo Pasolini: Una Disperata Vitalità* (1993) explores his tragic death, juxtaposing woodcut images of Pasolini’s living and dead body with fragments of articles dated from 1975



Antonio Frasconi.
In Memoriam, Pier Paolo Pasolini: Una Disperata Vitalità, 1993. Artist's book, pages 14-15.
 Collection Miguel Frasconi.

that broke the news of Pasolini's murder. The short film *The Ashes of Pasolini* (2009), one of six works by Jaar on view, consists of a eulogy to Pasolini that incorporates documentary footage of Pasolini, including from his funeral, during which the celebrated Italian writer Alberto Moravia proclaimed: "Italy has lost a poet, and real poets are rare in any society. Only three or four poets are born every century." Jaar's photographic print *Untitled (PPP)* (2010) features a sheet of fictitious stamps of Pasolini's image (see opposite page), raising the question of why Pasolini, one of the most important figures of twentieth-century Italian culture, has never received a national tribute.

Also on view is a series of remarkable black-and-white images by Duilio Pallottelli—the photographer who accompanied Pasolini during his first trip to New York in 1966—featuring the director walking in the

Alfredo Jaar.
Untitled (PPP), 2010.
 Courtesy Studio Stefania Miscetti, Rome, and the artist, New York.

streets of the iconic city of New York. Some of these works are printed at a very large scale, in a way that seem to bring Pasolini to life (e.g., see pages 22–23).

A second part of the exhibition is devoted to the wide-ranging creativity of Pasolini, featuring his poetry and novels, and exploring his interest in art history. As a student at the University of Bologna, Pasolini studied art history with the renowned professor Roberto Longhi, who had a profound impact on his cinema. Pasolini once admitted that his “cinematographic taste is not of cinematographic origin but of figuration. What I have in mind for vision, for visual landscape, are the frescos of Masaccio, of Giotto....”³ Pasolini always chose carefully the places for the settings of his films. He traveled around the globe, to the Middle East, to Brazil, to India,⁴ and to Africa, where, apart from fulfilling a desire to better understand the “Third World,” he found the proper landscapes for his historical films and those based on ancient tragedies, including *The Gospel According to Matthew*, *Medea*, and *Oedipus*, and for the precious footage in *Notes for an African Orestes*—a sort of guideline for a film that, unfortunately, he never made.⁵ The costumes for Pasolini designed by Danilo Donati at Farani Sartoria Teatrale were all created

³ Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Diario al registratore, 1962,” in *Album Pasolini* (Milan: Oscar Mondadori, 2005), 226 (my translation).

⁴ See Pasolini’s short novel *L’odore dell’India* (Milan: Longanesi, 1962).

⁵ See Daniel Garrett, “Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Notes for an African Orestes: Intellectual Responsibility and Imagination,” *Off Screen* 13, no. 4 (April 2009), https://offscreen.com/view/pier_paolo_pasolini.

with period-accurate materials, echoing Pasolini's interest in faithful rendering and historical authenticity. In his essay on costumes, Luigino Piccolo recalls that both Donati and Pasolini "had studied art, and it was art that united them and allowed them to talk for hours." Examples of these exquisite costumes—lent by Farani's tailoring house in Rome—are featured in this exhibition, including the one worn by Pasolini in *The Canterbury Tales*, in which he played the role of Geoffrey Chaucer, author of the book that inspired the film.

Pasolini's artistic sensibility was also expressed in his own practice as a visual artist. In a way, remarks art critic Mario De Michelli, by making art he allowed himself "a vacation," adding, "this was in sum a game, a divertissement, but also a moment of truth."⁶ Pasolini's drawings and paintings—examples of which are reproduced in the exhibition and herein—are precious testimonies of the people he admired, including his professor Roberto Longhi. Another subject of several sketches, with whom Pasolini developed a great friendship after she played the role of Medea in his film, is Maria Callas (see pages 26-28). Pasolini's artworks attest to an exercise in introspection, and at times, the mirror turns toward himself, as in the numerous self-portraits that he did at different ages (see pages 30-31), and—most clearly—in an image of Narcissus staring at his reflection in the water (see page 32). In these drawings, Pasolini the

⁶ See Mario De Michelli, introduction to *Pier Paolo Pasolini: i disegni, 1941/1975* (Milan: V. Scheiwiller, 1978), n.p. (my translation).

poet looks at himself, in a moment of solitude. Because he practiced art mostly as a private occupation, he worked with freedom, away from the constraints of public opinion.

This exhibition will offer the visitor an opportunity to discover the wide scope of Pasolini's rich artistic and intellectual legacy. We also hope that the objects and the texts provided here will allow visitors and readers to connect with the voice and sensibility of a true humanist, who dedicated his life in making this world a better place to live.

Pages 22-23: Pier Paolo Pasolini
in New York, 1966, Photograph by
Duilio Pallottelli. © L'Europeo RCS/ph.
Duilio Pallottelli

Pages 24-25: Pier Paolo Pasolini
in Richard Avedon's studio,
New York, 1966. Photograph by Duilio
Pallottelli. © L'Europeo RCS/ph.
Duilio Pallottelli

Pages 26-27: Pier Paolo Pasolini
with his mother, Susanna, and Maria
Callas at Grado (Gorizia, Italia),
1969. Photograph by Mario Nodari.
© RCS Archive/ph.Mario Nodari

Left: Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Ritratto
di Maria Callas (Portrait of Maria
Callas)*, 1970.
Courtesy of Gabinetto
G.P. Viesseux.
© Pasolini Estate

Pasolini's Misérables

Patrice Giasson

A remarkable novelist, an intense director, an amateur visual artist, an engaged columnist, and occasionally an actor,¹ Pier Paolo Pasolini was also, foremost, a poet. Pasolini started to write poetry when he was a child and never abandoned that form of expression. He published his first book of poetry in 1942.² Dedicated to his father, *Poesie a Casarsa* featured poems written in Friulan, his mother's dialect from northern Italy. Challenging the standardization of a single Italian language, these poems expressed the profound beauty and poetic grandeur of a vernacular and transformed the history of Italian poetry.³ The book gained Pasolini the immediate attention of

Alfredo Jaar

Pier Paolo Pasolini,
Teorema, 1985.

Courtesy of Studio
Stefania Miscetti,
Rome, and the
artist, New York

¹ Apart from appearing in some of his movies—like *The Decameron* (1971) and *The Canterbury Tales* (1972)—Pasolini also appeared in the Spaghetti Western *Requiescant* by Carlo Lizzani, where he played the role of the pacifist priest called Don Juan (1967).

² Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Poesie a Casarsa* (Bologna: Libreria Antiquaria Mario Landi, 1942).

³ *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Poems*, ed. and trans. Norman MacAfee with Luciano Martinengo (New York: Farrar, Strauss and

literary critics, opening a path to a prolific career as a poet. He is recognized today as a leading figure of twentieth-century poetry.⁴

Pasolini remained a poet—even when he touched upon politics or addressed issues related to cinema, to politics, or to art. In an essay dedicated to the language of cinema, in which he recalls the importance of semiotics in the making of films, he concludes that, for him, “the language of cinema is fundamentally a ‘language of poetry.’”⁵ Conversely, in his writing, he reflected on cinema and on his media explorations (including the novel and painting). In a letter to Alberto Moravia that accompanied the first pages of *Petrolio*—Pasolini’s unfinished novel alluding to corruption in Italy and its intersection with the international oil industry—he wrote: “And here is the advice I’m asking: is what I have written enough to express in a worthwhile and poetical way, what

Giroux, 1996). See also Norman MacAfee, “The Poems of Pasolini,” letter to the editor (in response to “The Passion of Pasolini”), *New York Review of Books*, November 8, 2007.

⁴ The book was immediately noticed and reviewed by Gianfranco Contini in the essay “Al limite della poesia dialettale,” published in the newspaper *Ticino*, April 24, 1943. Recognizing the linguistic qualities of *Poesie a Casarsa*, Contini emphasizes Pasolini’s use of the dialect “di ca da l’aga” (on this side of the water), spoken by those who lived on the west side of the Tagliamento River: “a type of Friulian that creates its own poetic koine, born from the needs to write a language which was only spoken until that moment.” “Poems in Casarsa,” <http://www.centrostudiopierpaolopasolinicasarsa.it/en/pasolinis-itinerary/casarsa/poems-in-casarsa/>.

⁵ From “Il cinema di poesia, 1966,” in *Album Pasolini* (Milan: Oscar Mondadori, 2005), 255.

I wanted to express?”⁶ Pasolini thought poetically, and even in his personal notes one can hear the voice of the poet: on the afternoon of May 3, 1962, while working on a film set, he wrote: “The sun, so poetic and filled with memories from this morning, is gone. Some boring clouds, futureless, without rain, arid, inert, have blocked the sun and are impeding us from working.”⁷

While preparing this exhibition, I was reading Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. Many similarities with Pasolini’s work unfolded. Both Hugo and Pasolini were interested in several things along with poetry: prose, theater, and drawing (Hugo left hundreds of drawings). Both men were also politically committed and boldly expressed their views. Hugo and Pasolini also shared a similar interest in ordinary people, a tendency to scrutinize society by following specific, sometimes antagonistic characters, whose actions would in the end offer a panoramic view of the social structure and its dysfunction, its injustices.

In Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, we find characters like Fantine, a mother whose life gradually develops into a terrible nightmare. Pregnant and abandoned by her partner, she must leave behind a bourgeois life style and give up her young daughter, Cosette, to a family that will exploit the poor child. We see the transition from a happy life in the city—inside a privileged urban Parisian setting—to a life on the road, with continuous misery,

⁶ Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Letter to Alberto Moravia,” in *Petrolio*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Pantheon, 1997), xii.

⁷ *Album Pasolini*, 220 (my translation).

humiliation, and loneliness. Pushed to prostitution, Fantine slowly dies, never to reunite with her daughter. A plot such as this, and characters like Fantine and Cosette may be seen as counterparts to characters in Pasolini's early movies, such as *Mamma Roma* (1962). The story of the eponymous main character is of a prostitute who travels with her teenage son, Ettore, from their rural town to Rome, hoping to provide a better life for him. Falling in with a group of local troublemakers, Ettore is arrested for stealing and dies alone in an Italian prison.⁸ Similar figures and tragic endings appear in *Accattone* (1961) and later films, including *Theorem* (1968) and *Medea* (1970). Pasolini's compelling close-ups of individuals in his movies also bring to mind depictions of subjects in Hugo's novels *Les Misérables* and *Quatre-vingt-treize* (*Ninety-Three*, 1874). In the culmination of complex events, of crisis, the figure of a mother suddenly appears, and we become the witnesses of true maternal love. In both Hugo's and Pasolini's work, the presence of children is also the catalyst of a realization. When these children become the victims, like Ettore in *Mamma Roma* or Cosette in *Les Misérables*, the viewer or reader will automatically ask, "Have we gone too far?" Their presence, for that same reason, heralds a sense of hope, of possibility. An astonishing photograph captures Pasolini walking on the streets of New York and turning to engage with a happy young boy, perhaps two or three years old. Extremely busy on this first trip to the Unit-

⁸ See Elizabeth Orlandini's synopsis of *Mamma Roma* as well as Pasolini's other films in the present book.



Pier Paolo Pasolini in
New York, 1966.
Photograph by Duilio
Pallottelli.
© L'Europeo RCS/ph.Duilio
Pallottelli

ed States, Pasolini still found a moment to turn his gaze upon a lively child, full of joy, heading toward life.

Like Hugo, Pasolini also brings opposing social realities head-to-head in confrontations that allow the contradictions to emerge: the center of the city vs. the slums of the peripheral outskirts; poor vs. rich; urban vs. rural; the industrial world vs. the rural countryside; the universe of the worker vs. the world of the bourgeois; the premodern sacred world vs. the secular and consumeristic modern world. It is through these conflicts that Pasolini's and Hu-

go's social engagement works most directly. In 1969, in response to an interviewer's question—what modern key should one use to understand his *Medea* (based on Euripides' tragedy)—Pasolini affirmed that all his films had the same goal:

I am in fact an author who always does the same movie, in fact, am always doing the same movie, at least for a long period of his life, like a writer who always writes the same poetry. But it also has to do with variants that are profound at the same time. The theme, as in all my movies, is always the same: it deals with

innocent as young goats at the slaughterhouse,
troubled indeed as victims;
one must state louder than ever one's scorn
for the bourgeoisie, scream against its vulgarity,
spit on the unreality it has chosen as reality,
never let up, in word or in deed,
in one's total hatred of these things, its police,
its courts, its television stations, its newspapers.¹¹

Pasolini witnessed the years of Italian Fascism under Mussolini and was outraged to see the continuation of neo-fascist attitudes in certain circles. He was also angered by contemporary political corruption and the collusion between political leaders and the mafia. The subversive images and language the Italian poet uses in some of his works are metaphors designed to challenge the anarchy of power and its domination over people, by showing and saying the *unseen* and the *unspoken*.

At times, Pasolini's works took the form of formidable and angry cries, similar to those of writers like Antonin Artaud, whose Theater of Cruelty was aimed at shocking the world with spectacles that would leave no one indifferent. Pasolini's final movie, *Salò, or The 120 Days of Sodom*—the first part of his never completed *Trilogy of Death* and released after his death—must be understood as a response to the horrors of fascism and the absolute control it exercised on the body of human

¹¹ In *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Poet of Ashes*, ed. Roberto Chiesi and Andrea Mancini (Pisa: Titivillus; San Francisco: City Lights, 2007), 29.

beings. *Salò* should also be understood as a rejection of the commercialization of his previous *Trilogy of Life*. He believed that *Salò* would be so forcefully scandalous that no one would think of marketing it.

A few years ago, while working on the exhibition *Teresa Margolles: We Have a Common Thread* (Neuberger Museum of Art, 2015), the Mexican artist told me about her admiration for Pasolini. I now understand her reasons more clearly; both shared the desire to go to the margins of society, and to create works that would show the *unseen*, in order to bring society to a point of saturation that would oblige it to face its reality and, perhaps, through this harsh spectacle, repair it in some way. Margolles went to the morgue, from where she pulled out bodies and substances that she brought into the museums and public spaces in order for people to see the consequences of drug wars, corruption, addiction, and their sad consequences on society. In the same way, Pasolini had gone to the outskirts of the city and scrutinized the backstage of politics in search of elements, subjects, attitudes, and actions to bring to the surface.

Through art and poetry, Margolles and Pasolini are able to



Teresa Margolles, detail of *La huella (The Imprint)*, 2015. © Teresa Margolles. This performance featured the blurring of the windows of the Neuberger Museum with a fabric that had previously been dragged at the site in Staten Island where Eric Garner, the victim of an NYPD choke hold, had died.

address profound and crucial social matters, which would have otherwise remained in the shadow. In a way, their poetic impulse follows the path to social engagement that Victor Hugo had opened a century before Pasolini. In his preface to *Les Misérables*, Hugo wished to remind the reader of the true intention behind works of that nature:

So long as there shall exist, by virtue of law and custom, decrees of damnation pronounced by society, artificially creating hells amid the civilization of earth, and adding the element of human fate to divine destiny; so long as the three great problems of the century—the degradation of man through pauperism, the corruption of woman through hunger, the crippling of children through lack of light—are unsolved; so long as social asphyxia is possible in any part of the world; —in other words, and with a still wider significance, so long as ignorance and poverty exist on earth, books of the nature of *Les Misérables* cannot fail to be of use.¹²

One might wonder whether, had Hugo known cinema, he would also have made the decision to adopt the camera as a formidable tool to engage with the world, to challenge it, as did Pasolini, brilliantly, when filming like a poet.

¹² Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* (1862), trans. Isabel F. Hapgood, <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hugo/victor/lesmis/index.html>.