

Pasolini: Fireflies in the Synagogue of The Iconoclasts. Affective Materialism and Poetics of Community in Apocalyptic Times

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Abstract

By fleshing out and historicizing the Pasolinian category of the firefly (*luciolà*), this essay suggests an interpretation of *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* as a meta-cinematographic locus of political subjectivation and epistemic production that critically and affectively interpellates the ideological materiality of *a world in crisis*. Under this premise, I attend to an important corpus of interests, politico-poetic repertoires, and theoretical inscriptions inherent to Pasolini's creative endeavors: from Dantean semiotics to the intersection between heterodox Marxism, vernacular Christianity, Latin American literature, and poetry cinema (*cinema di poesia*).

Para Dana,
por esa luz que nos mantuvo de pie
ante nuestras ciudades arrasadas

Para Mariuxi,
por los años.

In un debole lezzo di macello
vedo l'immagine del mio corpo:
seminudo, ignorato, quasi morto.
E' così che mi volevo crocifisso,
con una vampa di tenero orrore,
da bambino, già automa
del mio amore

Pier Paolo Pasolini, *L'ex vita*

A face at the end of the day
A cradle in the day's dead leaves
A bouquet of naked rain
Every sun hidden
Every spring springs in the water's depths
Every mirror of broken mirrors
A face in the scale of silence
A pebble among pebbles
For the fronds of the last glimmers of day
A face like all the forgotten faces.

Paul Eluard, translated by David Gascoyne,
Beauty and Resemblance

Pasolini told us [...] there must be some kind of sympathy,
that is, there must be a certain resonance between the perception
of the room by the camera and the perception of the room
by the character, the beginning of a certain resonance.
And at the same time, there has to be a transformation
from one to the other, yes, since the perception of the room
by the camera will raise it to a certain poetic level.

Gilles Deleuze,
Cinema: The Classification of Signs and Time

Cirio, candil,
farol y luciérnaga.

La constelación
de la saeta. (...)

y en la aurora se mecen
cruces superpuestas.

Cirio, candil,
farol y luciérnaga.

Federico García Lorca, *Noche*

In 1941, a young Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote, while being a student in Bologna, a letter to his friend Franco Farolfi, in which the poet narrated the discovery of “an immense number of fireflies” during an expedition with his companions. The flickers moved him to meditate on the incandescence of friendship and, at daybreak, to ritualistically dance in honor of the surfacing sun. What follows is a very sensual fragment of that letter (today broadly considered a fundamental *écriture* expedient when identifying *the origins* of Pasolini’s critical idiosyncrasy):

In the complete darkness we climbed up towards Pieve del Pino – we saw an immense number of fireflies which made clumps of fire among the clumps of bushes and we envied them [...] because they were seeking each other with amorous flights and lights. [...] [W]e drank the last drop from our bottles of wine. The sun was like a green pearl. I stripped off my clothes and danced in the honour of the light – I was all white, while the others wrapped up in their blankets like *peones* [Spanish peasants] trembled in the wind. (Didi-Huberman 2018: 156-184)

As Mariano Maresca and Juan Ignacio Mendiguchía have exhaustively examined, the *firefly* (*lucciola*) will turn, during the Post-War period, into a potent *category* within the Pasolinian speculative lexicon. In *Survival of the Fireflies*, a book that ripened into a philosophical hallmark on the matter, George Didi-Huberman outlined the trajectory through which this came to be. Pasolini decided to subvert the symbolic implications of the eighth bolgia in Dante’s *Inferno*, the bolgia of those “evil political counselors” surrounded by the *luciole*, enclosed by “the miserable glory of the damned: not the brilliance of well-earned celestial joys but rather the small, painful glimmer of wrongs” (Didi-Huberman 2018: 85-100). It goes without saying that Pasolini writes his letter in a moment in which fascism asserts itself as undisputable: the abject politician is on the spotlight, he controls both shadow and absolute luminosity. The intermittence of the firefly, its discrete *Kairós*, thus becomes a precarious but obstinate form of resistance: a lacunary *image* of the future and not a *cosmic horizon* of salvation (731). Didi-Huberman reexamines the 1941 letter to underscore that “Pasolini’s entire body of literary, cinematographic, and political work seems to be shot-through with such moments of exception” (189). Moments in which human beings *become* fireflies through a subjectivizing yet contingent *surplus*, through an affective plethora that resides in the core of creative, ethical, and politico-epistemic encounters.

It bears mentioning, however, as Alfonso Berardinelli has done several times, that the image of the *lucciola* is part of a Pasolinian metaphoric assortment eventually captured by Italian journalistic discourse, in which it assumes a proverbial pliability. An archive of worn-out tropes (*The Palace of Power*, *The Democrat-Christian Process*, etc.) whose meaning has been almost exhausted (Berardinelli 2006: 22). But what interests me here (in order to ascertain the organic nature of a community-to-come) is to evaluate how this complete inversion of the Dantesque relationship between *luce* and *luciole* entails

what Kriss Ravetto-Biagoli (2014: 103) has coined as Pasolini's materialism. If we accept Didi-Huberman's contention that "[Pasolini reads *The Comedy*] less for its imagination of celestial entities than for its descriptions of earthly things and human passions" (Didi-Hubermann 2018: 278), we should infer that the Italian author draws his diligent search for a capacity of historical, therefore political, *resistance* (and, in that sense, his quest for "the anthropological work of *survival*", *ibid.*), from Auerbach's assertions in his classic *Dante, Poet of the Secular World*:

The perception of history and immanent reality arrived at the *Comedy* through an eschatological vision, flowed back into real history, filling it with blood of authentic truth, for an awareness had been born that a man's concrete earthly life is encompassed in his ultimate fate and that the event in its authentic, concrete, complete uniqueness is important for the part it plays in God's judgement. (Auerbach 2007: 178)

The proto-theological and yet *materialist* itinerary that goes from History to eschatological inscription, from concrete earthly life to God's judgement, delineates the ideological undertones of this essay. Suffice it to recall, at this point, that Pasolini's idiosyncratic materialism finds its semantemes, its ethic-historical potentialities, in popular culture. Though sometimes romanticized, this cultural *otherness* implies an energetic register not yet subsumed by the industrial consumerist pattern that the poet labels *post-war repressive tolerance*, or by the teleological notion of progress informing both leftist partisan politics and bourgeoisie neo-capitalism. Vernacular religiosities, peasant and sub-proletarian dialects, mythical renderings, sexuality as somatic truth and political episteme... All these are *vital* dimensions of an alterity that resists (or could resist) moral reification. In the words of Ravetto-Biagoli (2014: 94): "Rather than posit otherness as a defining negativity (as psychoanalytic and postcolonial theories often do), he presented otherness as an intense set of relations -an encounter between the senses, embodied perceptions, and material realities that produces a radical (...) affirmation of life".

This sense of *alterity*, *vitality*, and popular *survival* invites us to ruminate on the specific materialist traditions within which Pasolini is or could be *now* inscribed. Let us highlight that this author has not escaped, for instance, the current post-anthropocentric turn: some insightful scholars have recently referred to Pasolini's "political animism" (Federico Luisetti) or have proposed a "Pasolini for the Anthropocene" (Karen Pinkus), inasmuch as "climate change and the environmental crisis belong to the same epistemic landscape of *Petrolino's*¹ cosmic-pornographic visions" (Luisetti 2018: 211). But beyond these undeniably relevant gestures of political and epistemic refurbishing, it is indispensable to reassess Pasolini's heretic liaison to Marxist materialism, a polemic rendering that opposed the role of instincts and sexuality to the *materialist truth*

¹ *Petrolino* is the book project on which Pasolini was working at the moment of his death, in 1975.

cyphered by traditional Marxism in the secular struggle between consciousness and false consciousness (Ravetto-Biagoli 2014: 99). This ideological *imprint*, as we know, brought the poet bitter discrepancies with the Italian Communist Party, from which he was expelled in 1949 due to “moral transgression” and “bourgeois decadence”.² We could entertain, in that regard, that the Italian filmmaker oscillates between the Sadean *scélérate* and the Dantesque *scelleratezza*: villainy, moral commotion; whether when criticizing the obscene political obliteration of the body (*Saló*), or when celebrating *flesh* as a privileged locus for a de-alienating re-theorization of mythological (and mythical) sovereignty (*The Trilogy of Life*). Pasolini is a Marxist-*scellerato* in the sense of creating, through his mere critical presence, a vortex that discloses the inner contradictions of an entire moral materiality (see Cuesta Abad 2015).

From the sixties on, all this underwent a Christian metamorphosis. When Pasolini was planning his film *Bestemmia* (Blasphemy) – a movie that was never shot – he referred to Christ as a harbinger of Marx and yearned for a Jesus that should be materially truthful (*materialmente vero*): a Jesus who speaks with the word of the *Flesh* (*che parla con le parole della Carne*; see Rivista Sileno 1999). In a stimulating essay titled *Exposure: Pasolini in the Flesh*, Michael Hardt (1997: 581) alludes to one of the Pauline epistles according to which, in Christ, God “did not regard his divine equality as a precious thing to be exploited. Instead, he *emptied himself* by taking the form of a slave and being born like other human being”. Hardt goes on to convey that

From one perspective this abandoned being might seem precarious, foundationless, cast over the abyss, but really this abandonment testifies instead to the fullness of the surfaces of being. The self-emptying or *kenosis* of Christ, the evacuation of the transcendental, is the affirmation of the plenitude of the material, the fullness of the flesh. [...] Incarnation means that the absolute oneness of all being, infinite and eternal, coincides completely with the constant becoming-different of the modalities of existence. [...] *The pain of the crucifixion does not fall back into a private language of isolated individuality, but rather opens up to a common language.* (581-585, emphasis mine)

Such a figure of communality took contour and density in *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (1964). I contend that the film offers (even beyond its *guerrilla-Christ*) a poetics of community whose ideological axis activates – in Althusserian terms³ – prolif-

² The official document of expulsion states: “La federazione del Pci di Pordenone ha deliberato in data 26 ottobre l’espulsione dal partito del Dott. Pier Paolo Pasolini di Casarsa per indegnità morale. Prendiamo spunto dai fatti che hanno determinato un grave provvedimento disciplinare a carico del poeta Pasolini per denunciare ancora una volta le deleterie influenze di certe correnti ideologiche e filosofiche dei vari Gide, Sartre e di altrettanto decantati poeti e letterati, che si vogliono atteggiare a progressisti, ma che in realtà raccolgono i più deleteri aspetti della degenerazione Borghese”. (Ravetto-Biagoli 2014: 93)

³ The Pasolini-Althusser critical kinship is the subject of a relatively recent book: Agon Hamza’s *Althusser & Pasolini. Philosophy, Marxism, and Film* (2016). The following fragment shows to what extent the Al-

erous forms of affective *and* materialist interpellation. Let us take a moment to examine this idea a little closer. The second thesis of Althusser's famous essay on ideology and the ideological state apparatuses affirms that ideology does not have an ideal (*idéale, idéelle*) or spiritual existence, but a material one (Althusser 1998:1265-1266). "[M]atter is discussed in many senses" or, more precisely, it exists in different modalities (1266). For Althusser, these modalities enmesh, in a neo-Aristotelian fashion, a set of dissimilar and heterogeneous *intensities*: during prayer, for example, the reticular materiality of the voice inaugurates a circuit that links its spiritual/ideological tremor to the temple, to any given topography/architecture, to a gathering of bodies, etc. It is my intention to underline here a sort of *affective stream* that constitutes the antithesis of any hard-core modern ideological apparatus (from fascism to televised consumerist capitalism...), to render ethically visible a poetics of community drawn from the *concrete life struggles* of people who knew how to imagine, create, resist, theorize, and love even in the face of the most abject civilizational devastation. Any affective interpellation that could originate from that stream depends on acknowledging those different intensities: the volatile intermittence, the flesh of the *lucciola*. In other words, it is indispensable to measure the potential impact that these discrete, precarious, unwarranted, and yet incandescent *presences* had (or could have) on the larger *substance* from which any given social world is molded, beyond a plain emotive revisionism or conformism. Exceeding the realm of the *moral/emotional* ("oh, poor people, how they suffered!"...) to disembark on the field of the *political* (what is their legacy for the *here-now*). This is what ascertaining the organicity, the *flesh* of a community-to-come, really means.

In that vein, aiming to truly ponder the meta-cinematographic effects of such *concrete life struggles*, it is crucial to gesture towards the theoretical Pasolinian matrix itself. When explaining his concept of poetry cinema (*cinema di poesia*), the filmmaker recurs, as a quintessential example, to Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963):

[...] the film opens with Godard reading the credits while we watch the main character, Michel Piccoli, being filmed. This camera consciousness is supplemented by the casting of Fritz Lang in the part of an embittered director forced to comply with demands of a Hollywood producer who is solely concerned with marketing. The role of Lang comments not only on Lang's experience in Hollywood, but also on Godard's own bitterness caused by the producers who forced him to make the film more accessible and to film Brigitte Bardot in the nude. (Ravetto-Biagoli 2014: 104)

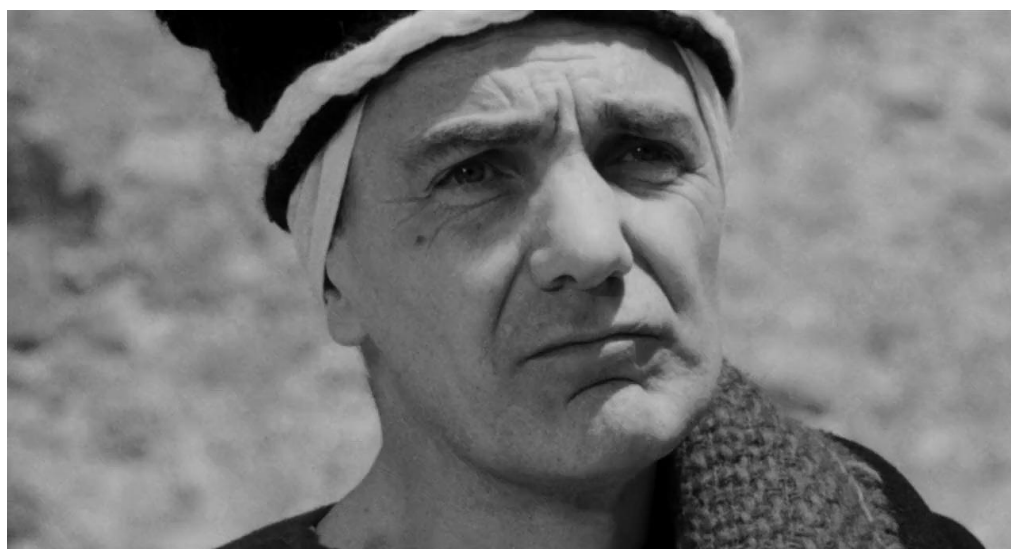
thusserean intellectual endeavor coincides with some Pasolinian political/theological predicaments (in other words: what Hamza affirms here about Althusser could be applied to Pasolini's epistemic persona): "the structure of Althusser's theological writings can be compared to Marx's famous statement: [T]he criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of the earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law* and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*. [...] [The] structure of this thesis is materialized in Althusser's own theological writings: his criticism of fear, the proletariat of fear or of human condition, the status and the structure of Church, and so on. Arming ourselves with these concepts, the second part of [this] book attempts to construct *The Gospel According to Althusser*". (8)

The notion of *cinema di poesia* encompasses, then, the cinematic formalism that produces “camera consciousness”, a self-critical reflection on the conditions of possibility of cinema itself. In *La Ricotta*, an extraordinary short-film of the same year of *Le Mépris*, Pasolini evokes the Godard-Lang bicephalous device by casting Orson Welles as a film director who utters some of the fieriest philosophical and political beliefs expressed by the Italian author in his essays. But what Pasolini offers in *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* is a *beyond-the-cinematographic* ensemble of fireflies that illuminates the ethical prospects for a critical community, vis à vis a state of cultural and sociopolitical affairs assumed as *anthropological catastrophe*.⁴ Under this (decisive) light, the constellation of names that I’m about to present emerges not as a mere extra-cinematographic anecdote *a propos* the film, but as a *congregation* of bellicose subjectivities grounded on the movie’s raw visuality, its ethical/ethnographical approach to the face, its radical Messiah emerging from the Basilicata black and white landscape.⁵

I call this community the *synagogue of the iconoclasts*, borrowing the expression from Juan Rodolfo Wilcock’s book that narrates the imaginary life of thirty-three bizarre characters: eccentric men and women, feverish inventors, utopic theoreticians... We could connect this fascination for heterodox communities – for the community against the grain – with a suggestive moment of “creative association” in Wilcock’s own life: the moment in which he accepted to participate as an actor, portraying Caiaphas, in *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*.

⁴ Pasolini does this even *malgré lui même*. To put it in another way: I do not imply, of course, that the filmmaker was calculating the critical corollaries hinted in the gesture of casting such biographically, creatively *charged* individuals. Especially if one considers that he didn’t know what the intellectual or ideological outlook of some *proper names* was going to be (Agamben, for example, was not yet *Agamben*). But when we take into account that Pasolini thought of casting Jack Kerouac, Evgueni Evtushenko, Luis Goytisolo, and Allen Ginsberg for the role of Christ, we see that the procedure through which he reunites middle class, urban literati with, for instance, peasant-amateur actors, surpasses a mere *with a little help from my friends* kind of approach. He was seeking to make some sort of Gramscian statement, hitherto perhaps just intuitive (I’m tempted to say *unconscious*), about the nexus between contemporary intellectuals and popular communality.

⁵ Stefania Benini (2015) meticulously explains the theological-political connotation of the cinematographic language articulated in *The Gospel*: “Shot with a 300 lens, flattened and at the same time suffused with the aura of a documentary typical of a bike race finish, as Pasolini tells us, images become more and more expressionistic and in a certain sense excessive, as they give life to the expressive magma Pasolini announces as a new technical mythology, ‘less religious and more epic, less hieratic and more modern, less romantic and more impressionistic-expressionistic’. [...] Yet the final result of the style, so openly extreme, is a smooth, level flow of images with ‘magmatic, expressionistic, casual, arbitrary asymmetrical points, all... editing freedoms, all... irregularities: even the quotations from Dreyer and Ejzenštejn or memories of Mizoguchi’ [...] appear fused in a continuum with no interruption. Pasolini wonders why ‘evocation now strangely prevails on representation. Chaos has found an unforeseen technical and stylistic equilibrium’. [...] To portray transgressive subjects as if they were images of Christ in primitive painting worked wonderfully in movies like *Accattone* or *Mamma Roma*, but to portray Christ Himself in the same style means producing a popular holy image”. (73-74)



Caiphas holds both a privileged stand in the Jerusalem Synagogue and a wretched dwelling in the Dantesque circle dedicated to the hypocrites. Pasolini's beyond-the-cinematographic synagogue emplaces a different affective topography. Wilcock belongs to *this* radical circumscription: it seems like the Argentinian novelist partially traced the inverse trail of Benvenuto Terracini, the Italian linguist whose work contributed to the Pasolinian critical views on the political coefficient of popular *dialectism*. Diego Stefanelli (2017) points out that Terracini endured “the sadly common trauma of many European scholars of Jewish origin: because of the Fascist [...] Race Laws, he was forced to leave Italy in 1938, going into exile in Argentina, where he taught *Lingüística románica* and *Lingüística general* at the University of Tucumán (1941-1946)”. For his part, Wilcock also undertook a geographical, linguistic, and aesthetic re-territorialization: he established himself in Italy (1957), started to write in Italian, and abandoned the neo-romantic modes of his Argentine years for an *avant-garde* literature in which the grotesque and the cruel blend to expose the absurd, the appallingly nonsensical reverse of both organized and “spontaneous” violence (as Pasolini would do, some years later, with *Saló*). In a 1973 commentary on *La sinagoga de los iconoclastas*, the Italian filmmaker declares:

Wilcock sabe, [...] desde siempre y para siempre, que no hay otra cosa que el infierno. No se plantea ni siquiera sueña remotamente que pueda haber alguna manera, incluso ilusoria, de no sufrirlo o, por lo menos, de ignorarlo. Entonces, ¿qué es lo que distingue a Wilcock de la mayoría silenciosa? Está claro, aunque sea terrible: él *acepta* el infierno, como la mayoría silenciosa, pero, contrariamente a la mayoría silenciosa, *no* forma parte de él y por lo tanto *lo reconoce*. He aquí delineada una condición de “extrañamiento”. El aceptar un hecho por pura y simple objetividad, y no formar parte de éste aún reconociéndolo, obliga a Wilcock a mantener con este hecho una relación trágica de extrañidad: [...] Cuando la tragicidad se reduce a carecer tan completamente de ilusiones, no puede sino transformarse en comicidad. Visitan-

te-condenado del infierno, Wilcock, ardiendo entre las llamas o debatiéndose en la brea hirviente, observa a los otros condenados: pero, pese a sufrir —como es natural— de manera salvaje, en este observar suyo los encuentra ridículos. (Pasolini 1997: 27-32)⁶

Pasolini is reading Wilcock's contention on violence and suffering through the heretic Dantesque lens that transversally marked his own creative endeavor. The poet applauds the distinctive *critique of torture* formulated by the Argentinian novelist, at a moment when not many people were doing so. It is relevant to indicate that, during his Italian years, Wilcock assumed a heterotopic, *firefly-like* position: he practiced a literature *sans concession*, very far from what the exoticizing, telluric horizon of expectations was demanding from a "Latin-American" author (a type of exoticism that Pasolini saw incarnated in *Cien años de soledad*). The Argentinian author also endorsed such a position in biographical terms; he lived both on the margins of the *lettered city* and the Roman city (in a cottage) and knew how to respond to the affective interpellation of a sort of heterodox *care/kinfolk* drive: although a lonely man, Juan Rodolfo adopted a child, Livio, who grew up to be an important translator of Jorge Luis Borges and Virginia Woolf. It is also resonant, along those lines, how Wilcock's *infernal* writing and Pasolini's understandings of it concomitantly echo and problematize Hardt's reflections on *the Christian flesh* as potential common language, as the evacuation of the transcendental:

Torture forces us out of the flesh. It forces us to separate from our bodies, to make ourselves other. The experience of torture is a form of exile, at the most intimate levels of being -an exile from living. Torture makes impossible the exposure of the flesh, even when paradoxically our torturers try to strip us naked. [...] The miracle of Christ is to take flesh back from the soldiers of empire who nailed him to the cross. [...] The critique of torture does not require that we should live in such a way as to avoid all violence and all pain -that would be a life without intensity, always already separated from the violence of experience. (Hardt 1997: 584-585)

The circuit *torture – flesh – intensity – experience* situates the critical image of the firefly between two poles of exceptionality: the *moment of exception* understood as subjectivizing surplus, and the *state of exception* as biopolitical cruelty. Hardt's essay opens with

⁶ "Wilcock knows, [...] from the beginning and forever, that there is nothing other than hell. He does not propose or even remotely dream that there may be some way to avoid suffering it or, at least, to ignore it. So, what is it that distinguishes Wilcock from the silent majority? It is clear, even if it is terrible: he *accepts* hell, like the silent majority, but, contrary to the silent majority, he does *not* form a part of it and therefore *recognizes it*. I have here outlined a condition of "estrangement." Accepting a fact out of pure and simple objectivity, and not forming part of it even while acknowledging it, forces Wilcock to maintain a tragic relationship with this fact as a stranger: [...] When tragedy is reduced to being so completely devoid of illusions, it cannot but transform itself into comedy. As a condemned visitor from/to hell, Wilcock, burning in the flames or floundering in the boiling pitch, observes the condemned others: but, despite suffering—as is natural—savagely, in his observation he finds them ridiculous".

a dedicatory: “to Giorgio Agamben”. It is precisely a very young Agamben (later responsible for establishing the notion of *state of exception* as politico-hermeneutic paradigm) another of the nonprofessional actors recruited by Pasolini; in this case, for the role of apostle Phillip.



Both intellectuals will be “accused” of sharing, in the years to come, an apocalyptic vision, expressed by Pasolini when he publishes a text titled *The Power Vacuum in Italy* (1975), in which the allegorical expedient of the *luciole* is recast to equate the extinction of the *real* fireflies (in the Italian countryside) to the unescapable destruction of vernacular episteme[s] by what the poet hyperbolically calls “cultural genocide” (“Televisual Neo-Capitalism”). It is the same tone that we find in Agamben’s *Infancy and History* and *Means Without Ends* concerning an alleged widespread *poverty of experience* (in Benjaminian terms) as an incontrovertible mark of late, spectacle-driven capitalism. But it is crucial to acknowledge what Pier Paolo Pasolini also stressed: “if, along with the apocalyptic vision and the anxiety that it provokes, there weren’t also a bit of optimism in me, I would very simply not be here” (Didi-Huberman 2018: 453). This is what Franco Fortini has called Pasolinian contradiction *at work*. Strictly speaking: the apocalyptic tenors in Pasolini’s thought should not be mistaken for any of those current images of destruction that turn out to be comfortable in their both dreadful and spectacular repetition. We could say that the Italian author vigorously responds to one of Ferlinghetti’s entreats: “If you would be a poet, create works capable of answering the challenge of apocalyptic times, even if this means sounding apocalyptic” (Ferlinghetti 2007: 3-4). That’s why Alessia Ricciardi (2011) interprets “Pasolini’s most paradoxical propositions as signs of his refusal to adopt the cynical, postmodern stance of ironic detachment”, and connects this anti-cynical temperament to Agamben’s philosophical efforts:

If it cannot be granted that Pasolini was a consistent voice for the future, he certainly was relentless in his scrutiny of the contemporary. In [a book] dedicated to the topic, Agamben defines the contemporary as: [...] “the person who perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him... To perceive, in the darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but cannot -this is what it means to be a contemporary. As such, contemporaries are rare. And for this reason, to be contemporary is, first and foremost, a question of courage” (2009: 45-46). [...] It is telling that what distinguishes the contemporary in Agamben’s eyes is a potential for illumination that is missed or fails to reach us, at least within the bounds of historical time. Yet by the same token precisely this anachronism or untimeliness gives urgency to the engagement of the contemporary with the obscure conditions of the present, thus making possible the very glimpse of the light traveling toward us through the darkness. (13)

The critical courage of the contemporary comes across adumbrated by the discrete, precarious albeit resilient materiality of the firefly: the stubborn ethical body that prevails – as we will fully comprehend at the end of this essay – beyond torture, incarceration, agony, persecution (beyond contagion, isolation...). The courage of a latent community *in spite of* Historical abjection. In that perspective, and according to Didi-Huberman, Agamben “[l]ike Pasolini, [...] is a great *profaner* of things that the general consensus deemed ‘sacred’. And like the filmmaker, the philosopher attempts to rethink the anthropological paradigm contained in the very long history of the word *sacer*” (Didi-Huberman 2018: 980). If the *homo/femina sacer* is, following Agamben’s well-known definition, the ill-fated subject *included* in a given juridical or moral system just to emphasize *exclusion* as an opaque category, and if we assume here such a subject as a vector to galvanize any ethical topography in the face of cultural and political devastation, we should then highlight Pasolini’s election of novelist Natalia Ginzburg for the role of Mary of Bethany, the woman who interrupts the Last Supper and anoints Jesus’ head. Joan Acocella recollects:

[...] one critic said that she looked more Inca than Italian. [...] One can sense her embarrassment at being in a movie, and in a slightly naughty role. The woman with the jar of ointment has often been said to be a prostitute; the disciples object to her presence at their gathering. But Ginzburg’s Mary is blunt, not seductive. (Acocella 2019)

It is intriguing to see how that sort of ethnographic and ethical concentration on the *ancient* gesture allows, in this case, an archetypal (even stereotypical) transition from Italian peasantry to Amerindian indigeneity (perhaps, in the mind of the critic, sketching out a Pasolinian journey towards some allegedly more popular, more “truthful” South). But we should go further: in the slang of Pasolini’s Bolognian days, the term *lucciola* designates both the prostitute and the *usherette* equipped with a small flashlight to

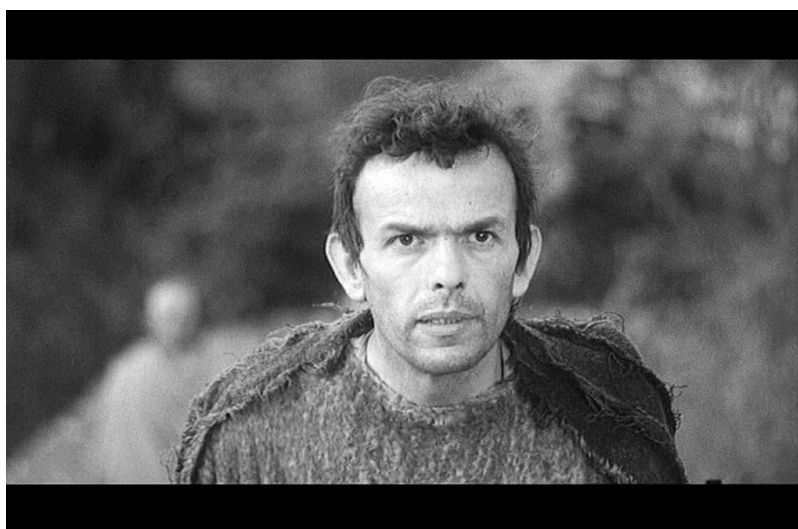
guide the spectator among the seats in the old movie theaters. The Bolognian letters show, of course, no bravado or youthful macho infatuation with prostitution and its objectifying exploitation, but a pattern of organic solidarity with those *luciole* of flesh and blood as part of the sub-proletarian, vernacular, trans-national, *southern* episteme: “slang, tattoos, laws of silence, mannerism” (Didi-Huberman 2018: 278). The same with the *usherette*: the discovery of cinema as what Pasolini called *language of things* (this is, in the abovementioned terms proposed by Auerbach, “the event in its authentic, concrete, complete uniqueness”). Natalia Ginzburg, the impromptu actress, is the *femina sacer*, the ethical firefly *par excellence*: she suffered fascist violence as Jewish, as a leftist resistant, as a woman. Her husband, writer Leone Ginzburg, was incarcerated, tortured, and assassinated by Mussolini’s regime. The story goes that the last phrase of Leone to his family was: *be brave* (embrace the *courage* of perilous contemporariness). After the war, Natalia became an intellectual strongly committed to the public sphere while struggling to conceptualize, in her writing, the coordinates for a *Family Lexicon* (the title of one of her most important novels). In that regard, and as in Wilcock’s case, an unfathomable *care drive* constituted a poignant affective interpellation: she combined her public persona with the raising of the children conceived with Leone. Among them, we count Carlo Ginzburg, one of the most important European historians of the last thirty years and the forerunner of microhistory, an interpretative paradigm which – in alignment with Pasolini’s shimmering ethicality – favors the peripheral, apparently extraneous detail to harvest significant historiographical analysis. Natalia’s gaze challenging Judas Iscariot in *The Gospel* is a truly beautiful, *minor* moment; it uncovers an ethical inscription of the *human face* that Ana Amado (2020) – once again, building upon Agamben’s work – has eloquently emphasized:

[...] Agamben se encuentra con Pasolini sobre esta apariencia de la apariencia, que dice la verdad del rostro y en este caso por la misma mediación fílmica, su posibilidad y su fragilidad a la vez (25). [...] [D]esde allí es posible afirmar la verdad de los rostros pasolinianos: que no parece poder devenir el principio de unidad del filme más que aceptando perder sus rasgos: (“el primer plano del rostro es a la vez la cara y su borramiento”, dice Deleuze). Pero insisto en citar a Agamben en este punto: tomar la verdad del rostro significa aprehender no su parecido sino la simultaneidad de caras, la potencia inquieta que “los mantenía juntos y (como pueblo) los unía”. (26)⁷

⁷ “Agamben encounters Pasolini over this appearance of appearance, which tells the truth of the face and, in this case, through the same filmic mediation, its simultaneous possibility and fragility (25). [...] [U]nder that light, it is possible to affirm the truth of Pasolinian faces: that the principle of unity in the film does not seem to be able to arrive except through the critical gesture of accepting the loss of its features: (‘the close-up of the face is both the face and its effacement’, says Deleuze). But I insist on citing Agamben at this point: to take the truth of the face means to apprehend not its resemblance but the simultaneity of faces, the restless affective drive that ‘kept them together and (as a people) united them’”.



Against this backdrop, two other *firefly-like* figures come into sight: Alfonso Gatto and Mario Socrate. The former plays apostle Andrew, the later, a fervent John the Baptist.



An adventurous, multifaceted man, Gatto was, like Pasolini, also a *dissenting* communist. Imprisoned during the fascist regime, he later became a pivotal figure among the hermetic Italian poets. When asked about how he felt lending Pasolini a hand to make *The Gospel*, he responded: *I'm lending him my feet, this is a long path*.⁸ After Alfonso's death (in a car accident, one year after Pasolini's murder), Eugenio Montale forged a verse now carved on Gatto's burial chamber: *"Ad Alfonso Gatto per cui vita e poesie furono un'unica testimonianza d'amore"*.⁹ On the other hand, in order to talk about Mario Socrate, we have to travel back to the arduous days of the occupation: on April 7 of 1944, due to the unbearable food scarceness *dictated* by the war, a group of women stormed a Roman furnace where bread for German and Italian fascist soldiers was being produced. Ten of them ended up apprehended and shot.¹⁰ A month later, during a similar uprising, the police murdered Caterina Martinelli, mother of six: she fell on the pavement with her daughter in arms. Socrate, who had been a member of the *Resistenza*, carved – like Montale – compassionate words on stone, which, for years, could be read on the façade of a house in Via del Badile 16:

Il 2 maggio 1944 in questo luogo durante un assalto al forno per cercare il pane per i suoi figli venne uccisa dalla violenza fascista Caterina Martinelli: "io non volevo che un po' di pane per i miei bambini non potevo sentirli piangere tutti e sei insieme".¹¹

Within this historical context, Socrate attained prestige, like Gatto, as a very important writer. Labeled "The poet of Neo-realism", he was also known as a scrupulous translator of Antonio Machado and Federico García Lorca. When inquired about his dealings with Lorca's poetry, Mario rejoined: *it is an act of love*. Here, the terms *poetry* and *love* resonate with *dissident vitality*; politics, with *courageous affective episteme*. It comes to mind that, during a 1975 conversation with *Revista de Occidente*, Pasolini acknowledged to what extent Spanish poets were as (or even more) influential to him as Ungaretti or Quasimodo, and he recognized preferring Machado over Lorca. It makes sense, if one considers that Machado was the *prototypical* popular poet, and, in that respect, he paralleled Pasolini's *attempt to reinvigorate the language of the people* (a kind of semiotic memento of a critical, even insurrectionary, anthropology). But it is Lorca with whom the *réalisateur* shares the incandescence of the firefly. The coincidences are well-known: their role as civil poets, their sexual dissidence, their outrageous assassination, a consequence of a putrid moral order that couldn't tolerate their *Word*, and which can be now philosophically expounded – heeding Hardt's ethical syntagm – as their torturers effort to ex-

⁸ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1rqZTt3Z-4>

⁹ "To Alfonso Gatto, for whom life and poetry were the same testimony of love."

¹⁰ Clorinda Falsetti, Italia Ferracci, Esperia Pellegrini, Elvira Ferrante, Eulalia Fiorentino, Elettra Maria Giardini, Concetta Piazza, Assunta Maria Izzi, Arialda Pistolesi, Silvia Loggreolo.

¹¹ "On May 2, 1944, in this place, during an ambush searching for bread for her children, Caterina Martinelli was killed by fascist violence: 'I just wanted a piece of bread for my children, I couldn't hear the six of them at the same time'."

ile them from the flesh.

Barry Schwabsky (2020) remarks that “In the immediate aftermath of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s murder on November 2, 1975, the Italian press published articles comparing the poet, novelist, filmmaker, and polemicist with a whole canon of contrarian prophets, talismans and *poètes maudits*”, among which Federico García Lorca stood out. The very same words of the Spanish poet condense the eschatological kernel of Pasolinian Incarnation as described above: ethical exposure of the flesh, with no residual transcendence, in which “Christ’s body testifies to the scandal” (Hardt 1997: 584). In his poem titled, precisely, *Carne [Flesh]*, García Lorca uses, as an epigraph, these verses from Lope’s *Auto de los cantares*: “Qué bien os quedasteis / galán del cielo, / que es muy de galanes / quedarse en cuerpo”;¹² to what he adds: “Es tu carne vencida, rota, pisoteada, / la que vence y relumbra sobre la carne nuestra”.¹³ This Incarnation as metaphysical excrescency, as ravaged but illuminated flesh, befalls under a heterodox depiction of the Holy Trinity: “Por el nombre del padre, roca luz y fermento, / por el nombre del Hijo, flor y sangre vertida, / en el fuego visible del Espíritu Santo”.¹⁴ But something is missing in this Christian *interjection*: the mother. The same mother that Socrate brings into the ethical scandal by means of an anti-fascist emblem of the *Mater dolorosa*. Let us not forget that, for *The Gospel*, Pasolini cast his own mother, Susanna, as Mary, and that in his poem *Supplica a mia madre* he simultaneously asserts and implores (with a Lorquean hue): *We survive [...] I pray to you: do not desire to die... Mother, Mater, Matter, Memory, Survival... Pasolini’s desideratum relies on the ethical awareness not only of a passion susceptible of being communicated, but of a passion inhabited in heterodox communality.*



¹² “How well you remained / gallant Lord from heaven, / it suits fine gentlemen / to *bodily* stay”.

¹³ <https://trianarts.com/federico-garcia-lorca-carne-de-odas/#sthash.JCbmAo7t.dpbs> “It is your flesh, defeated, shattered, trampled, / the one that overcomes and shines over ours”.

¹⁴ “To the name of the father, stone, light, and ferment, / to the name of the Son, blossom, shed blood, / in the visible fire of the Holy Spirit”.

I would like to finish this essay with a digressive gesture (maybe inevitable) of critical actualization. As is largely known, in his attempt to find the *truth of the flesh* by revisiting the Gospels (as well as archaic mythographic content, even though he would end up “abjuring” such an exertion), Pasolini became one of the contemporary adapters of *The Decameron*. The plot of Boccaccio’s work is broadly recognizable: a group of aristocrats leave Florence, in the XIV Century, to escape the Black Death. While waiting, they share tales that constitute an inventory of the human condition: from morbid hilarity to eschatological treachery, from envy to tenderness. Agnès Blandeau calls Pasolini’s *Il Decameron* (1971) a “proletarianization” of Boccaccio’s original, insofar as the director’s “vulgarized” adaptation made the stories “accessible to all, not only the educated audience familiar with ancient myths (Petrossiants 2020). As I write these lines, a world pandemic has officiated – for more than two years now – a harrowing gesture of *subtraction*: In many places around the globe, the necropolitical effect of what Derrida (2006: 159) called *escamotage* (the *subterfuge* of making the most *sensible* body disappear) has been consummated in ways that, perhaps irrevocably, damaged the fabric of community and its constellation of affects: not too long ago, millions were agonizing in isolation from the people closest to them. On the other hand – that of sustaining *daily life* –, “social distance”, mediated by the technological gadget, intensified the remembrance of a tight hug, of a word spoken close (we found ourselves, thus, grappling with our own intimate archeology of nostalgia). But beyond reclaiming any metaphysics of presence, various questions arise if we hope to conceive of any “imagined community,” any *human contact* for what is to come (drawing, as Pasolini showed us half of a century ago, both from the political and the libidinal economy). What regime of affects is now interpellated? What are *the erotics* that virtually reconcile or will reconcile us with the world (*an-other world, the flesh of the World...*)? What cosmopolitical paths does this critical horizon offer; what will be its discursive, ideological, and aesthetic refractions? In this sense, how do we create forms of affective and ethical (re)production in order to identify the zones where the boundaries between poetics and politics, desire and episteme, theory and struggle, are undone?

Among many other things, the pandemic revealed once again Dante’s universe completely inverted. Hell was out in the daylight, its crooked politicians, of course, overexposed: Trump, Bolsonaro, the “VIP vaccinated” State officials [even in so called *national-popular* governments] or the corrupted hospital employees speculating with oxygen tubes all around the world... Simultaneously, we saw the response emanated from *the people*; the *affective proletarianization* of the way the tale is recounted: in Bogotá or Minneapolis. Against the murder of Indigenous social leaders from Cauca or of a black man in the hands of a police officer. Despite contagion. Despite pessimism... The metaphor of the *luciole* is not exhausted (or, paraphrasing Simone Weil, it is relentlessly becoming *matter*). To the tremor of Apocalypse, Pasolini’s revisited (and reloaded) intellectual matrix opposes an iconoclastic synagogue with no temple or, better say, with a temple *qua*

contingent strand of precarious but resilient *illuminations*, mighty in their lability (the term synagogue experiences, hence, a re-territorialization in its etymological circumscription: it goes from the Hebrew בית כנסת, *beit kneset*, “house of assembly”, to the Ladino: אשנוגה, *esnoga*, “bright as fire”). At the same time, Pasolini’s condition of *scellerato* – his personal policy of zero tolerance regarding any ritual of self-indulgence – bears witness to the plea of remaining excruciatingly critical towards any naïve, wishful thinking idea of emancipation that doesn’t truly disparage the sociopolitical maquila where consumerist/extractivist/depredatory subjectivity is manufactured. As asserted above, inside this *potential* synagogue, in the core of this heterodox tabernacle, *poetry* and *love* resonate with *dissident vitality*; politics, with *irrepressible affective episteme*. This potentiality echoes Anne Dufourmantelle’s (2018: 1-2) meditations on the risk of living, according to which some *affective notions* have “the fierce nobility of a wild beast: [...] courage, astonishment, vulnerability. Existing in the margin of concepts patrolled by the grand history of thought”. Beyond those margins established by the metaphysics of power and the sclerotic light of transcendence, a bundle of fireflies unremittingly lingers as a counterpoint to the abject stratum of History. It shines as exposed flesh, as a beloved face, or, more accurately, as *the simultaneity of faces, the courageous drive that keeps us together and (as a people, as lovers, as an incandescent community-to-come) unites us*.

*Guayaquil – New York- Pittsburgh,
Winter of 2020 / Fall of 2021, years of the plague.*

*Last revision:
Buenos Aires, Spring of 2022,
the year of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s 100 birthday.*

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