

Cinematic Transformations of Poetic Language: Pasolini's

Mamma Roma

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*Pasolini's films, especially his early films and writings, are marked by a distinct focus on style and ideology expressed through the use of dialect. In the 1965 essay 'The cinema of poetry', "Il cinema di poesia" Pasolini endeavours to provide a theoretical framework for the expressive aesthetic intuition demonstrated by filmmakers, including Pasolini himself. Pasolini discusses the formal character of shot composition and construction in films of the time and labels such stylistic filmmaking 'poetic'. Utilising the constructs of 'im-signs' and 'free indirect subjectivity' as derived by Pasolini in his essay, this paper provides a discussion of Pasolini's own 'poetic cinema' as foreshadowed in his second directorial feature *Mamma Roma*, made in 1962.*

Keywords: Pasolini, cinema, language, aesthetics, ideology, Renaissance, representation

Pier Paolo Pasolini was a writer, poet, theorist, journalist (for magazines and newspapers including the prominent Italian daily *Il corriere della sera*), scriptwriter, philosopher, public intellectual, painter, actor, filmmaker and arguably one of the most polemic public figures of his time.¹ Pasolini was already an established poet and writer before venturing into filmmaking, and embraced cinema as more than just a different literary technique. Cinema for Pasolini was a new expressive medium, a unique language, a trans-national language that allowed him to abandon the formal Italian language imposed upon Italy under fascist rule.

Pasolini was renowned for his investigations into the lives of the *sottoproletariato* "sub-proletariat" class consisting of thieves, pimps, prostitutes, thugs, the impoverished and other such outcasts living at the lowest margins of society. Inspired by his observations of life in the *borgate* "commission housing on the very periphery of the city" near his home in Rome (where he initially lived for a period in the home of an uncle after fleeing Casarsa on January 28, 1950 with his mother),

¹ Many conspiracy theories circulate surrounding his brutal death. Pasolini's body was found on November 2, 1975 on a beach in the Roman suburb of Ostia. Pasolini left an indelible legacy on Italian society as evidenced by the re-release of his films, re-mastered versions his films, re-prints and translations of his novels, poems and writings. There is a continuing interest in the life and works of Pasolini as demonstrated by the numerous films about him which include Marco Tullio Giordana's *Who Killed Pasolini? (Pasolini, un delitto italiano;* 1995), the animated feature *Pasolini Requiem* (Mario Verger 2005), *Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Ivo Barnabò Micheli 1995), and *Pier Paolo Pasolini and the Reason of a Dream (Pier Paolo Pasolini e la ragione di un sogno,* Laura Betti and Paolo Costella 2001).

Pasolini's novels *Ragazzi di vita* (The Ragazzi 1955) and *Una vita violenta* (A Violent Life 1959) marked the beginnings of his engagement with exploring Rome's *sottoproletariato*.

Pasolini's films, especially his early films and writings, display a distinct focus on style and ideology expressed through the use of dialect.² He opposed how capitalism was facilitating the gradual disappearance of dialects and supported the continued use of dialects. His first published work was the collection of poems *Poesie di Casarsa* (Poems of Casarsa 1942) written in Friulian, which Pasolini considered to be an old language and not a dialect. This publication was self-financed and the poems were about peasants and the Friulian landscape and they demonstrated the influence of Giovanni Pascoli, on whom Pasolini later wrote his graduation thesis. In 1952, Pasolini together with Mario Dell'Arco published an anthology of dialect poetry, *Poesia dialettale del Novecento* (Dialect Poetry of the Twentieth Century) and in 1955 he published his first novel *Ragazzi di vita* (The Ragazzi), written in a mix of Italian and Roman dialect. In 1959 Pasolini published *Una vita violenta* (A Violent Life), for which he was awarded the Premio Crotona in the same year.

As an established writer and poet, Pasolini embraced cinema as an innovative form of expression, and following experiences working with directors including Mario Soldati, Luis Trenker, Federico Fellini, Mauro Bolognini, Cecilia Mangini, Franco Rossi, Florestano Vancini, and Gianni Puccini, Pasolini made his directorial debut with *Accattone* (The Scrounger) in 1961 (with Bernardo Bertolucci as his assistant director). *Accattone* and his subsequent film *Mamma Roma* (1962) were cinematic continuations of the investigation into the lives of the *sottoproletariato romano* "Roman sub-proletariat class" explored in Pasolini's previously mentioned novels, and are distinct for Pasolini's distinct 'alternative'-realism (distinctly drawn from neo-realism) which addressed Pasolini's agenda of highlighting the plight of 'others' and 'otherness'. His sympathetic depictions of socially subversive characters was considered as a critique on the ostensibly consumerist capital culture characteristic of modern Italian society.

In the 1965 essay *Il cinema di poesia*, "The cinema of poetry" Pasolini endeavours to provide a theoretical framework for the expressive aesthetic intuition demonstrated by filmmakers, including Pasolini himself. He initially delivered his credo "The cinema of poetry" during a round-table discussion at the inaugural Pesaro Film Festival of 1965.³ This forum has been credited as having

² See Stack, *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack*, 1969.

³ Since the festival of 1965, the Pesaro Film Festival has provided a forum for the introduction, debate and development of cinematic theories (see Muscio and Zemingnan). Following Pasolini's presentation at the 1965 Pesaro Film Festival, his essay was published as *Le "cinéma de poésie"* in *Cahiers du cinéma* 171, 1965. It was subsequently published in *Uccellacci e uccellini* (Milan, Garzanti 1966), *Marcatrè* 19-22, April 1966 and in *Empirismo eretico*, a book of Pasolini's collective essays first published in 1972 in Milan by Garzanti (167), with subsequent editions published in 1977 and 2000.

initiated international interest in filmic semiology and many influential theorists were also present, including Umberto Eco, Christian Metz and Galvano Della Volpe. In his essay Pasolini discusses the formal character of shot composition and construction in films of the time (including films by Michelangelo Antonioni, Bernardo Bertolucci and Jean-Luc Godard)⁴ and labels such stylistic filmmaking ‘poetic’ as distinct from the traditional way of filmmaking, which he calls cinema of ‘prose’ for the emphasis on narration devoid of what he considers pure cinematic expression. Utilising the constructs of ‘im-signs’ and ‘free indirect subjectivity’ as derived by Pasolini in his essay, this paper provides a discussion of Pasolini’s own ‘poetic cinema’ as foreshadowed in his second directorial feature *Mamma Roma*, made in 1962.

The main theoretical issues raised by Pasolini in his essay were the proposition of a cinematic language composed of what he calls ‘im-signs’⁵ and the suggestion of ‘free indirect subjectivity’ rendered visible by the stylistic elements of a film that ultimately comprise cinematic ‘poetry’. Pasolini postulated that stylistic liberty, which often equated to the breaking of established cinematic codes, constituted ‘poetic cinema’ which facilitated a dual vision including the basic narrative, but also an overarching expression circumscribed by the style of the film.

Given that cinema has the capacity to communicate to a broad audience, Pasolini rationalised that like other communicative mediums, cinema must possess some base on which its procession of meaning is founded (167). He suggested that the cinematic image was the key constituent of cinema as ‘language’ and likened the cinematic process of meaning production (signs and signification) of a given sequence of images to that of dreams and memory, and hence he called such images that formed the basis of cinematic language ‘im-signs’ (image-signs). As one scholar who has written on Pasolini, Naomi Greene, explains “cinematic signs are rooted not in logical, rational discourse but in memory and dream: whenever we try to remember something, a series of “significant images” (or “im-signs”) passes through our mind” (111). Thus as words are the basic building blocks of language, so are im-signs to cinema. However, Pasolini makes the fundamental distinction that im-signs cannot be codified, contained or indexed like words in a dictionary. Im-signs defy the restrictions of

⁴ Pasolini focuses his discussion on Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Deserto rosso* (The Red Desert 1964), Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Prima della rivoluzione* (Before the Revolution 1964) and the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard as illustrative examples. However, Pasolini clearly states that his suggested analytical constructs could also be appropriately applied to the works of many other filmmakers including the works of Glauber Rocha, Milos Forman and virtually all of the filmmakers present at the Pesaro Film Festival of 1965 where Pasolini initially presented his credo “The cinema of poetry”.

⁵ *Im-segni*. See Pasolini, 170.

rationality and thus, drawn from chaos, images offer infinite possibilities⁶ and so as Pasolini states, the filmmaker has two critical roles:

I) He must take the im-sign from chaos, render it possible, and presuppose that it is systemised in a dictionary of significant im-signs (mimicry, ambience, dreams, memory); II) then carry out the function of the writer: that is to add to that purely morphological im-sign an individual expressive quality

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When Pasolini refers to the filmmaker's individual expressive quality he hints at the notion of cinema's dual nature as expressed through what he later suggests is made possible by 'free indirect subjectivity'. Pasolini's notion of 'free indirect subjectivity' integrates content and style as a cinematic equivalent to literary free indirect discourse and postulates the existence of a dual vision, that of the protagonist and that of the camera as stipulated by the filmmaker. Given the infinite possibility of shots at the filmmaker's disposal, the choice of shots ultimately constitutes an articulated style.

Pasolini considered writing and directing to be rather equivalent experiences (Greene 18) and he often reiterated his commitment of filmic 'poetics' in his theories of cinema. He considered cinema to be a language of reality, in the sense that "cinema changed our idea of reality in the same way that writing changed our perception of oral language" (Viano viii). As Maurizio Viano explains, Pasolini believed that "audiovisual technology (what Benjamin called "mechanical reproduction")⁸ made us realise the extent to which everyday reality is a spectacle" (ix). In making a distinction between the roles of writer and filmmaker Pasolini states, "whilst the operation of the writer is an aesthetic invention, that of the cinematographic author is first linguistic then aesthetic"⁹ (170). When Pasolini describes the role of the cinematographic author as linguistic, he means that it is linguistic in a cinematographic sense, as the filmmaker must consider what 'im-signs' to utilise and then how to infuse the chosen sequence of 'im-signs' with an expression of style.

Style is an essential characteristic of 'free indirect subjectivity' and circumscribed in the style of a film is another film, a film enabled by the filmmaker's stylistic freedom that "betrays an

⁶ See Pasolini, 169.

⁷ "I) egli deve prendere dal caos l'im-segno, renderlo possibile, e presupporlo come sistemato in un dizionario degli im-segni significativi (mimica, ambiente, sogno, memoria); II) compiere poi l'operazione dello scrittore: ossia aggiungere a tale im-segno puramente morfologico la qualità espressiva individuale" (Pasolini 170). [Translations are my own unless otherwise stated].

⁸ See Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968. 219-53.

⁹ Mentre l'operazione dello scrittore è un'invenzione estetica, quella dell'autore cinematografico è prima linguistica poi estetica.

obsessive relationship with reality even as it breaks with the conventions of film syntax” (Greene 120). The technical praxis of cinema facilitates a return and rediscovery of cinema’s original qualities: “dreamlike, barbaric, irregular, aggressive, visionary”¹⁰ (179), as Greene explains “Pasolini defines poetry in terms of its primitive or prerational nature, it is precisely the irrational and oneiric qualities of cinematic images that render the language of cinema essentially poetic” (112). Thus films that adopt an avant-garde approach can be classified as ‘poetic’ on the basis of aesthetics achieved by challenging established cinematic codes and often the presence of the camera is apparent and is necessary in achieving the desired ‘poetic’ effects.

Pasolini credits the emergence of literary free indirect discourse to naturalist writers such as Giovanni Verga (1840-1922) and subsequently *i crepuscolari* “twilight poets” (176). *I crepuscolari* expressed a sense of disillusionment, anxiety and loss of faith in the contemporary state of being. Similar to what can be called Pasolini’s epistemological project of using poetry as a unique form of knowledge to facilitate a return to the past (for Pasolini this was often childhood) and a necessary journey to understand one’s being, *i crepuscolari* retreated to the past by rejecting social, political and cultural problems of the time.¹¹

Similarly, Pasolini’s use of dialect in his films and writings also privileges a return to the past by embracing regional dialects as languages representative of the past, and is demonstrative of his rejection of bourgeois ideals linked to the upward mobility, fuelled by the ‘economic miracle’, overtaking Italian society at the time. In *Mamma Roma* an aging prostitute, Mamma Roma (played by Anna Magnani), attempts to remove herself and her estranged son Ettore from Guidonia and the world of the sub-proletariat class. After years working the streets, Mamma Roma is released by her pimp and purchases an apartment for her and her son in a more respectable (albeit working-class) area of Rome with upward aspirations of integrating into the world of the petit-bourgeois. Pasolini considered the petit-bourgeois to be “a signifier of both idealism and narrow-mindedness, a signifier, above all, of contradictions” (Viano 9) and the character of Mamma Roma is represented as an embodiment of such contradictions. Although Mamma Roma is trying to escape her past life as a prostitute she cannot help but retreat back to her old ways. For example, when Ettore falls in love with Bruna (a young girl who has intimate relations with several of the local boys), Mamma Roma procures the help of Bianco Fiore (who is an old friend still working the streets). Mamma Roma gets Bianco Fiore to spend a night with Ettore to help him forget Bruna and focus on finding a job.

¹⁰ Onirica, barbarica, irregolare, aggressiva, visionaria.

¹¹ Guido Gozzano is perhaps the most renowned of *i crepuscolari*. His major works include *La via del refugio* (Road of the Shetler 1907), *I colloqui* (The Colloquies 1911) and *Verso la cuna del mondo* (Journey Toward the Cradle of Mankind 1917).

Mamma Roma attempts to adopt bourgeois ideals by attending mass on Sundays, sending Ettore to school, buying him a motorbike, finding him a respectable job and telling him to speak a more standardised form of Italian, “You have to speak like your mother. Not like those hicks downstairs”. Thus dialect in *Mamma Roma* is used as a linguistic marker in the representation of the sub-proletariat class of the impoverished *borgate*. The authenticity of Pasolini’s representations of the sub-proletariat class was aided by his friendship with Sergio Citti¹², who was the dialogue consultant for *Mamma Roma* and helped Pasolini with the dialect.

Pasolini’s representation of such marginalised characters is unique for the way in which the constructs of the Italian filmmaking tradition of neo-realism (such as the use of non-professional actors to present ordinary people and their lives) are inverted in the creation of Pasolini’s ‘alternative’ realism in the representation of extra-ordinary protagonists. The cast was composed of widely non-professional actors with the notable exception of Anna Magnani in the role of Mamma Roma. Magnani has been inextricably linked to the legacy of neo-realism for taking on the role of Pina in Roberto Rossellini’s *Roma, città aperta* (Rome, Open City 1945).

In *Mamma Roma*, Magnani’s character mainly uses standard Italian to mark her aspirations of moving up in society. Like her screen character, Magnani was born in Rome and raised in an impoverished area, and thus was familiar with the dialect used in the film. Magnani was already a renowned diva of Italian cinema at the time the film was released and her upbringing and background was well publicised. Thus Italian audiences were aware of Magnani’s knowledge of roman dialect and could identify similarities between Magnani and her screen character. Roman audiences easily identified the use of their regional dialect in the film (albeit there are slight differences in the dialects spoken in the various suburbs of Rome), and Italian audiences could distinguish roman dialect from standard Italian. Given the public knowledge of Magnani’s rise from poverty to stardom, Pasolini’s choice to cast Magnani in the title role provided for an eloquent analogy between Magnani and the protagonist Mamma Roma. Magnani was able to transcend her humble beginnings, overcome the limitations of poverty, master the Italian language and raise her social standing. Thus Mamma Roma’s inability to make similar upward progress is suggestive of Pasolini’s views about the exclusion of the underprivileged from capitalist society.

¹² Citti was from the Roman suburb of Fiumicino and spoke the dialect of that area. Citti had a profound influence on Pasolini and his brother Franco was cast in the leading role of Pasolini’s debut feature *Accattone*. Citti was illiterate and working as a labourer when he first met Pasolini and subsequently worked for Pasolini as a dialogue and script consultant, an assistant director and eventually went on to work as a filmmaker in his own right.

Pasolini was an uncompromising critic of capitalism and the consumer culture it generated amongst the bourgeoisie. In *Empirismo eretico* Pasolini explains how the use of standardised Italian, as used by the mass media, was manipulated to function as a language of capitalism. He was especially critical of the way in which the language of capitalism simplified and dehumanised linguistic expression. The predominant acceptance and usage of standardised Italian by the bourgeois spawned an association between language and social class. This had a negative influence on Italian regional dialects, which were associated with lower social classes.

Pasolini firmly believed in the conservation of dialects, as they allowed for variations in linguistic expression and in *Mamma Roma*, Pasolini's cinematic language provides an interesting contrast in the representation of protagonists. Many shots of protagonists seem to recreate various Renaissance paintings, which works to persuade the spectator to judge protagonists in a similar manner to which they would evaluate a work of renaissance art. Pasolini's calculated shot composition and framing can be interpreted as 'im-signs' that are indicative of his belief in the importance of diversity in linguistic expression, similar to his understanding of dialects as enriching languages which allow for unique, genuine and humane expression. For Pasolini, the language of a film is "a universal language in which individuals, that is, directors, create their own grammar, their own lexicon and syntax, by the way they manipulate 'im-signs'" (Greene 115). This representation of protagonists pertaining to the lowly sub-proletariat class in what can be interpreted as a type of homage to high-art, works to privilege the art of linguistic expression that is dialect and urges the spectator to reconsider the value of dialects.

Poetic cinema as postulated by Pasolini, is a cinema that emphasises the individual style of the filmmaker, or as Viano has neatly suggested, it is a cinema that "better highlight[s] the director's subjactivity" (54). Pasolini's 'subjactivity' is a marked point of differentiation from the convention of naturalistic minimalism in neo-realist cinema. The "neorealists believed in minimising the filmmaker's intervention so as to let viewers perceive the whole picture and not be guided by the director's choices" (Viano 88), whereas in *Mamma Roma*, Pasolini's attention to shot selection and composition reveals the role and intention of the director. Thus the evident style of the filmmaker is "the fundamental characteristic"¹³ (Pasolini 183) of 'free indirect subjactivity' and this can be used as an investigative tool into the intention of the filmmaker by analysing the filmmaker's stylistics and aesthetics. In an interview with biographer Oswald Stack, Pasolini described the poetic nature of cinema in the following way:

¹³ La caratteristica fondamentale.

The cinema of poetry is the cinema which adopts a particular technique just as a poet adopts a particular technique when he writes verse. If you open a book of poetry, you can see the style immediately, the rhymes and all that: you see the language [*lingua*] as an instrument, or you count the syllables of a verse. The equivalent of what you see in a text of poetry you can also find in a cinema text, through the stylemes, i.e. through the camera movements and the montage. So to make films is to be a poet.

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Thus, in *Mamma Roma*, Pasolini's 'poetic' cinematic signature is his detailed shot composition, the tendency to dwell on faces in framing shots so as to capture expression, the use of short-takes and the figurative filtering of shots. An example of a shot allusive to a Renaissance painting is the shot of Ettore restrained in prison. He is lying on his deathbed in a manner that appears to be a filmic recreation of Andrea Mantegna's *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (*Compianto sul Cristo Morto*, c. 1490).¹⁴ Mantegna is considered as an artist of the Renaissance, which is an artistic period distinguished for the development of linear perspective. Perspective allowed for more effective representations of figures in relation to one another and to the ground and thus art of this period effectively illustrates how figures are affected by gravity.

Religion is a common theme of Renaissance art, and as is evident in the works of some artists in representations of deity, contrasts in the weight, solidity and the hold that figures have on gravity are techniques used to distinguish human figures from those of gods. The art historian Joseph Manca explains that "solidity and *gravitas* of stance echoed the firm character or grave personhood of the figure represented, and lack of *gravitas* revealed the opposite" (51). Given the focus on Christ's body in Mantegna's depiction, the figure of Christ is represented as more human than divine. The body occupies close to the entire frame and the strong perspective has the effect of reducing the significance of his spiritual being, as emphasised by the holes in his hands and feet. The weeping Virgin Mary and Saint John can be seen in the top left corner, with emphasis on their facial expression and their hands similar to Pasolini's framing of the facial expressions of his protagonists.

Manca has argued that "artists used weight, stability and firm stance to convey a sense of goodness or virtue, and they also did the opposite, having weakness of stance or instability connote moral weakness" (51). Thus, Pasolini's presentation of Ettore on his deathbed is rather ambivalent in that although Ettore is represented as solid given the framing of his body as a whole, he lacks *gravitas* as he is lying down, displaced and unable to support himself in the world as his feet are not on the ground. As Ettore is strapped down, Pasolini seemingly suggests that Ettore is unable to control his moral wrongs and that he is ultimately bound to his place in the subordinate sub-

¹⁴ Andrea Mantegna's *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (*Compianto sul Cristo Morto*) is currently housed at the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan, Italy. It is a 68 × 81cm tempera on canvas.

proletariat world. Mantegna is renowned for his use of “stance as moral marker” (Manca 65) and Pasolini draws on this marker in his representation of Ettore as a victim of his attempts to enter into the world of the petit-bourgeois.

Another scene allusive to Renaissance paintings is the opening scene, which is the banquet scene at the wedding of Mamma Roma’s former pimp, Carmine and his bride. The mise-en-scene seemingly takes from representations of the last supper such as Domenico Ghirlandaio’s *The Last Supper (L’ultima cena)*, 1480. In Ghirlandaio’s representation, the figure of Judas is notably isolated and appears as somewhat ambiguous given the view of his back and only one side of his face. This is representative of Judas’ imminent betrayal of Christ and in Pasolini’s recreation the figure of Judas is initially represented by pigs and then by Mamma Roma, who eventually betrays Ettore who is the figure she worships most in her world.

Similarly, the scene in which Ettore is working in the restaurant is a recreation of Caravaggio’s *Boy with a Basket of Fruit (Il fruttaiuolo)*, c. 1593. Pasolini explains how he saw Ettore Garofolo (who plays Ettore) waiting at the restaurant *Da Meo Patacca* one evening, “exactly as I showed him in the film, carrying a bowl of fruit just like a figure in a Caravaggio painting” (Stack 51). The influence of renaissance paintings, as expressed through figurative recreations and allusions, achieved through the careful composition of shots, which comprises the individual expressive element of Pasolini’s poetic cinema. *Mamma Roma* has been described as a film “shot in the language of poetry” (Viano 98) for the “bivalent quality of the images, their capacity to openly express the vision of the author, who moulds a character into being a perfect vehicle for his vision” (98). Given that ‘The cinema of poetry’ was delivered subsequent to *Mamma Roma*, Pasolini’s theory of cinema poetics can be understood as an articulation of ideas explored and developed during the production of *Mamma Roma*.

In *Mamma Roma* the contrasting portrayal of protagonists like Ettore in both a figurative light and in the realist characterisation of Ettore as sub-proletariat by way of his actions and alternate use of dialectic and standard Italian reflect the transience of his moral conscience. This ambivalent characterisation is a cinematic transformation of literary double articulation, which ultimately portrays Ettore as living between worlds. Ettore and Mamma Roma are between words, with their alternating use of dialect and standard Italian and without a defined language they lack they means to get ahead. Ultimately, the protagonists live in a type of limbo between the worlds of the sub-proletariat and petit-bourgeois classes. They are situated within a subordinate world of their own, where all roads present an impasse that prevents them from entering into the wider world of bourgeois society that they desperately wish to access.

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