

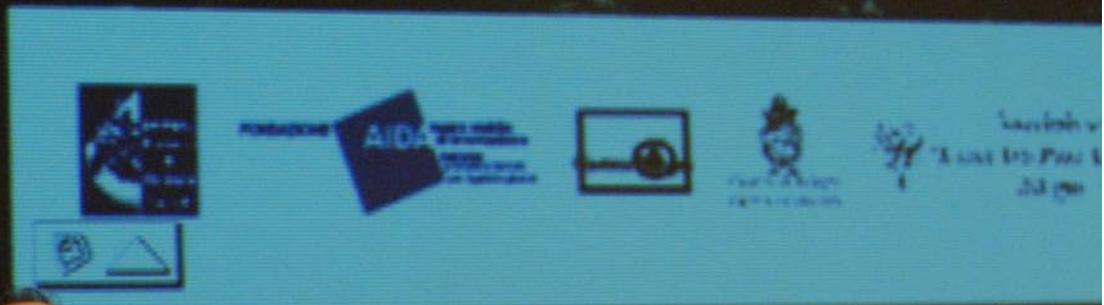
Interview with Roberto Chiesi  
on Pier Paolo Pasolini

by Rainer J. Hanshe

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**HYPERION:  
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS**

**HERETICAL EPIPHANY  
THE CINEMATIC  
PILGRIMAGES OF  
PIER PAOLO PASOLINI**



**Interview with Roberto Chiesi on Pier Paolo Pasolini  
Conducted December 2007**

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# The Gospel of a Heretic:

## The Sacred Atheism of Pier Paolo Pasolini

### Introduction to an Interview with Roberto Chiesi on Pasolini

“

It has been said that I have three heroes: Christ, Marx and Freud. This is reducing everything to formulae. In truth, my only hero is Reality. If I have chosen to be a filmmaker as well as a writer it is because, rather than expressing this reality through those symbols that are words, I have preferred the cinema as a means of expression—to *express reality through reality*. . .

—Pasolini

“

I don't believe in a transcendental God, but since reality is a divine apparition, *then reality itself is God*.

—Pasolini

“

Death—the Death of which I speak to you—is not the one that will follow your fall, but the one that precedes your appearance on the wire. It is before climbing onto it that you die. The one who dances will be dead—bent on every beauty, capable of them all. When you appear, a pallor—no, I am not speaking of fear, but of its opposite, of an invincible audacity—a pallor will cover you. . . . But be careful to die before appearing, so that a dead man dances on the wire.

—Jean Genet



We think of spiritual life as beauty and peace and escape from violence. But truth is violent, too. In fact, it is the only violence there is. The only power that exists is the power of that torrent, because it creates the world of the senses. . . . What we call violence is what happens when we hold on to fixed ideas and the violent power of reality is blocked.

—Peter Kingsley

“I am,” Pasolini declared in “Poesie Mondane,” a poem from *Bestemmia* [Blasphemy], “a force of the past. Tradition is my only love. I come from the ruins, and churches, and altarpieces, the abandoned villages on the Appennines or on the Prealps, where brothers have lived. Like a madman I wander on the Tuscolana, on the Appia like a dog without master.” In this proclamation, Pasolini situated himself against his time in the most radical sense, yet, in that stance against his time, he was utterly for it. History, tradition, ancient culture, religion, forsaken villages, and scientific investigation, these are but some of the passions of Pier Paolo Pasolini, and his fidelity to them would aid the perspicuous critique he made of his times. Heretic of heretics, Pasolini set fires in both sacred and profane temples. Out of its ashes, in various modes of expression, he gave birth to poetry impassioned and fierce.

In his time, at least to some, Pasolini’s stance was not untimely in a positive sense but anachronistic if not reactionary, yet, beneath its mask of radicalism, such criticism betrays conformism, the thinking of rigidified caricatures clawing at a bird that refused to soar with its own flock. Each flock thought Pasolini was of its fold when he was a changeling that could not be captured. The flocks were doctrinaire in their thought and Pasolini found such systematicization of thinking anathema; he had as much contempt for dogmatic Marxists as he did for dogmatic atheists. To those who see in his adherence to tradition conservatism, that adherence, if one can refer to it as such, was protean and metamorphic; out of tradition, he was truly innovative whereas others were beset with *ressentiment* in their empty rebellion against form and tradition. In his fiercely chameleonic nature, in his continual reassessment of himself and his work, he differed enormously from any conservatism, which would not undergo such striking revolutions, or permit such rigorous self-reflexivity. Though communist, Marx was not his master, nor in his refusal to believe was atheism; instead, he wandered like a madman and a dog without master, committing blasphemies not only against the papacy, but against cinema, literature, and Marxism, too. What other ‘communist’ artist could boast not only of radicalizing Christ in a cinematic work, but of simultaneously being condemned and praised by the Vatican? In his diversity, in creating works out of Greek myths, a Gospel, Arabian folk tales, and the Marquis de Sade,

there is evidence of a rare intelligence. Like the main character of Rachilde's *The Juggler*, or like the tightrope walker in Genet's *Fragments of the Artwork*, Pasolini's dexterity was born of danger, of surmounting boundaries and exceeding limits, or he was dangerous because of his very dexterity, of his honorable inability to remain within staid boundaries. "I have," he said elsewhere, "no authority on my shoulders except that which paradoxically comes from not having any or not having wanted any, from having placed myself in the condition of having nothing to lose, and therefore of being faithful to no pact other than that with a reader whom I consider worthy of every most scandalous search." The title of his book is fitting and characteristic. If one must call Pasolini anything, *blasphemer* may be the most appropriate *nom de guerre*.

The occasion for this interview, conducted via email, was the event *Pier Paolo Pasolini—The Ashes Poet*, a citywide celebration organized by the Italian Cultural Institute of New York and Fondazione Aida in collaboration with several other Italian organizations. *Heretical Epiphanies: The Cinematic Pilgrimages of Pier Paolo Pasolini* was the Film Society of Lincoln Center's contribution to the event, which included poetry recitations, lectures, theatrical performances, master classes, and dialogues with artists and scholars. Is this not an apposite time for a celebration, or, far more pertinently, an *invocation* of Pasolini and his radical spirit? Our promise, if we have any, is in the future. For now, the legacy of Pasolini is a spur, prodding us to think during an increasingly decadent and nihilistic epoch. Pasolini was a poet in the original Greek sense of the word: one who makes, creates, produces, composes, writes, and the events were a testament to his multifarious talents; above all, it is poetry that marks or infuses each of Pasolini's endeavors. A poetry of transfiguration that urgently sought to surmount ideology. The gospel of a heretic, the sacred atheism of a wandering madman with no master. Is this urgency not to be heeded?

Roberto Chiesi was born in Bologna, Italy, where he lives today. He received his degree in Modern Letters [Literature] at the University of Bologna. He is the curator of the Centro Studi—Archive Pier Paolo Pasolini, Cineteca [film library] Bologna, where he has worked since 2004. The Centro Studi was founded by Laura Betti, a close friend and—after his death—a staunch and persistent defender of Pasolini. She acted in many films, including several works by Pasolini, as well as in films by Rossellini, Bertolucci, the Taviani brothers, and Marco Bellocchio. One of her last screen appearances was as Contessa Celi Sanguineti in Tonino Cervi's *Il Quaderno della spesa*. She is the author of *Teta Veleta* among other works and conceived and edited *Pier Paolo Pasolini: A Future Life*.

As a cinema critic, Chiesi has written for the magazines *Cineforum*, *Segnocinema*, *Cinecritica*, and *Cinemasessanta*. He is the author of numerous

books on cinema including *Jean-Luc Godard*, (Gremese, Roma, 2003), *Alain Delon* (Gremese, Roma, 2002), and *Gérard Depardieu* (Gremese, Roma, 2005). He has contributed essays to *Pasolini und der Tod [Pasolini and Death]* (Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, 2005), *Pasolini O sonho de uma coisa* (Cinemateca Portuguesa—Museu do Cinema, Lisbon, 2006), and *Progetto Petrolio* (Clueb, Bologna, 2006). In addition, he edited the monographs *Hou Hsiao-hsien—Cinema delle memorie nel corpo del tempo* (Le Mani: Recco, 2002), *Marcello Mastroianni, attore di teatro* (Cineteca di Bologna-Le Mani, 2006), and *Pasolini, Callas e “Medea”* (FMR—Franco Maria Ricci, Bologna, 2007).

I would like to thank Cecilia Cinelli and Eleonora Pasqui for their navigating this interview and the initial translation of the following questions into Italian and Mr. Chiesi’s answers into English. Further extensive gratitude is due to Marcella Tarozzi-Goldsmith for carefully refining the translations, and to Mattia Riccardi for perfecting them. Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to Roberto Chiesi for taking the time to engage in this cross-continental interview.

**Nietzsche Circle:** *The modern inferno that Pasolini chronicled with such perspicacity in his work is still with us; although it would be excessive to equate our times with the fascist era, the fundamental problems that Pasolini critiqued remain our problems: neo-capitalism, mass consumerism, the loss or elimination of autochthonous cultures, etc. It is a fitting, if even crucial, time to honor Pasolini. What led to the development of Pier Paolo Pasolini: Poet of Ashes? Why this celebration now?*

**Roberto Chiesi:** The phenomena you mention are crucial in the last phase of Pasolini's work and are, no doubt, the reasons for his continuing relevance. Actually, Pasolini believed that the 'leveling' produced by mass consumerism was the expression of a new form of fascism, which the old political terminology was unsuitable to describe. (For example, Pasolini used the expression 'technocratic fascism,' to refer to the indiscriminate cult of technique.) In fact, Poet of Ashes is not supposed to be a celebration but rather a useful opportunity to analyze in depth some aspects of Pasolini's work and thought, and to rediscover his films, and reread his texts. Therefore, rather than a celebration, this is a retrospective, a second reading, a return to Pasolini's universe, 32 years after his death.

**NC:** *In Notes for an African Oresteia, Pasolini noted that problems are not crises that one solves, but rather crises that one lives, thinking of problems in their philosophical dimension. The maxim that informs Aeschylus' trilogy, páthei máthos, 'learning through suffering,' is a significant theme that is perhaps characteristic of or central to Pasolini's thought, especially if one thinks of suffering as a passion, like the passion of Christ, or, to speak of the primordial passion, the passion of Dionysus. In this return to, or meditation on, Pasolini's work, what, according to you, can it say about existential problems? For instance, how to live with the problem of the new type of fascism, born with mass consumerism, or how to live with the problem of being an 'atheist' in a world that is becoming increasingly fundamentalist in all its dimensions?*

**RC:** I think that in the closing words of *Notes for an African Oresteia*, Pasolini wanted to avoid a consoling optimism, in order to stress the necessity for the African States, newly formed, to live with these problems, that is, to face them without deluding themselves through thinking that they can be solved quickly. Obviously this logic can be applied also at the individual level. Pasolini's

work and thought show the constant signs of a dialectic between reason and the 'bowels,' passion and pain, that can be met, according to Pasolini's own words, only 'by living' with 'partial truths, day after day,' but 'without hope,' because the word 'hope' is meant as an 'alibi.' In brief, it is the 'desperate vitality' that has become by now a sort of cliché, but that, in its deep meaning, is full of 'nuances' and contradictions.

As regards life during the 'years of the new fascism' and the worsening of religious fundamentalism, I believe that Pasolini expressed his ideas in his latest works: with an analysis of the present times through a critique that does not allow any mitigating circumstances, neither for other people nor for oneself, and where reason constantly faces the power of the passions (and vice versa). Thus one must constantly disobey those who want to impose rules and coercive codes.

I therefore think that Pasolini believed it necessary to maintain a constant and inflexible critical mind (acting, then, accordingly) and that any form of 'new order' imposed from above should be rejected without submitting oneself to it. A refusal that does not involve any violence but relies on the arms of dialogue.

**NC:** *While Pasolini sought to refuse or resist violence and use "the arms of dialogue" instead, dialogues or polemics can be agonistic and instigate or lead to 'violence.' I think there is an implicit danger in Pasolini's dialogue given its intensity, a necessary and positive danger, for it can lead to the disruption or shattering of ossified structures that are oppressive and hegemonic. In dismantling religious or political structures, one is forced to confront truths that have seismic power. The destruction of such ancient edifices, essentially the edifices of language, which are the girders of our realities, is a 'violent' act, although one that can lead to transformation. It is very difficult for most people to endure such insights, since they often lead, as Nietzsche diagnosed, to nihilism. The necessary metamorphoses that must follow take a long time to enact, if people are capable of enacting them. Is this not the reason why writers and artists such as Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Pasolini, etc. are feared by the state? Pasolini may have fought against physical violence, but what he was opening up with his thought had to be known to him.*

**RC:** The dialogue, even polemical, that Pasolini took upon himself against the society of his times aimed at exposing the damaging changes triggered by social processes. He didn't want to dismantle the state and destroy its institutions but he wanted to make them better and make them more civilized and more attentive to the conditions of the poor. Some tentative contacts with the advanced Catholic fringe have their origin here, even though Pasolini called himself a Marxist. Put simply and to summarize, Pasolini was one among the artists and among those Italian intellectuals who defended and supported Italian society's development and a communist model (surely in

a European and Italian vision that has nothing to do with the Soviet model) against the continuity of the fascist regime and demo-Christian party regime. His interventions became more bitterly polemical when he understood that an indiscriminate triumph of consumerism had been appropriated by the demo-Christian regime and that the idea of the “people,” the same idea for which he had fought for a long time, no longer existed because the “people” had been swept away (even better had been homologated) by the lower middle class, which had become the only way to be human. So in the last years, Pasolini fought for the defense of limited realities, like the survival of rural Italy, the popular Italy, even though he was perfectly aware that it was from the start a lost war. There wasn’t any violence against the society of his time in Pasolini’s polemic; on the contrary, he sided with reason against consumerism and neo-capitalism’s barbarism and violence.

**NC:** *With the recent republication of Pasolini’s short stories, novels, and poetry in English, it’s clear that we are in the midst of a new and vigorous invocation of his work. Heretical Empiricism, his book of essays on film (first translated and published in English in 1988) was reprinted in 2005, while, in commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of Pasolini’s death, Pasolini and Death, which you contributed to and worked on as an editor, was published. The occasion for this interview is of course the most recent invocation of Pasolini, for which, among other things, you edited and contributed to Pier Paolo Pasolini Poet of Ashes. Clearly, you have devoted yourself to disseminating the works of Pasolini. What can you tell us about the last two volumes you worked on and about your involvement with Pasolini’s work?*

**RC:** In actuality, I’m not one of the editors of *Pasolini and Death*, I only wrote an essay included in that volume. The trusteeship is by Bernhart Schwent and Michael Semff of Munich Picture-gallery. My contribution is about an important aspect of Pasolini’s works: namely, the visionary aspect, the oneiric dimension, and therefore visionary as a way for rethinking his individual past (I am referring to some poems where Pasolini evokes his own “inner life”), and for showing the phenomena that happen nowadays (cfr. *Petrolio*). Instead, the volume *Poet of Ashes*, which has received a fundamental contribution from Pasolini’s cousin, Maria Grazia Chiarcossi, is an anthology of Pasolini’s texts and essays about every aspect of his work (poetry, narrative, theatre, cinema, literary essays) that offers to the American reader an idea of the wealth and complex themes of Pasolini’s works. It’s like a small guide that should stimulate the reader to penetrate Pasolini’s works, to read his books (the few books that unfortunately have been translated in the United States) and to watch his films. In general, I believe that the interest so evident all over the world (and recently, particularly in the U.S.A.) is a sign, another proof of the great vitality of Pasolini’s works and of his strong, intense “untimeliness.” Untimeliness because he has been the poet of a world that doesn’t exist anymore (that is, the ancient pre-consumer world); and the more that world

becomes estranged from us, the more it becomes necessary to recover it in Pasolini's words and images, as a cultural memory and fundamental poetics for the conscience of every person.

**NC:** *In Pier Paolo Pasolini Poet of Ashes, the book you edited with Andrea Mancini, Paolo Volponi declared that Pasolini's works and life "are the light and the substance our culture needs for the construction of our democracy." Did Pasolini's life and work act as a force for building democracy in Italy, and are they still acting in that way?*

**RC:** Yes, Pasolini's works were a fundamental contribution for Italian culture. I think, in reality, that they had the most significant effect on thousands of young people who today, like yesterday, are discovering him, reading him, studying him with interest and passion. As I could ascertain, the discovery of Pasolini has important effects on their formative ambit, not only cultural but also social and human.

**NC:** *Has Pasolini's work remained a provocative and so to speak somewhat dangerous force in Italy? Or is it now 'respectable,' an instilled part of the cultural establishment, or something that has been appropriated by the consumerism he vigorously sought to resist?*

**RC:** Pasolini himself was aware that part of his works would have been "used" and "commercialized" by the cultural industry. This happened several times during his life. But he was also aware that an essential part would remain untouched by such "normalizing" processes. There are aspects of Pasolini's work that resist any such attempts, for example his film *Salò*. The attempts on the part of successors of his enemies (neo-fascists, and the right in general) to "take possession" of Pasolini soon betray the bad faith, the approximation, and the incompetence of those who make these attempts.

**NC:** *In regard to socio-political issues, opinions on Pasolini have often been controversial; both the right and the left criticized and claimed his work and continue to do so to this day. Does his work truly lend itself to both sides? Or is the right's appropriation of Pasolini myopic, a partisan reading that wants to correspond to their positions? Do you find his views on such issues ambiguous enough to allow this to occur, or are they self-reflexive enough to resist such interpretations?*

**RC:** I definitely don't believe that Pasolini's views are ambiguous. I think they are complex and so are often contradictory. Besides, consistency doesn't belong to reality and Pasolini was deeply rooted in the concrete reality of phenomenon. Pasolini's thought, just because it is complex, cannot be classified according to simple "right" or "left" labels. His thought was unconventional, so it didn't submissively obey ideologies. His positions on the student movement, on abortion, and on the homologation of Italians

(those seemed to many people as “right wing” positions), in reality, they present nuances too complex if compared to the banalizations (more or less convenient) of which they have been the target.

**NC:** *To the dismay of many Marxists, Pasolini found, or understood, that mythology was of crucial importance to life; like Nietzsche and Bataille, Pasolini had an urgent concern for the ‘sacred,’ configuring a new mode of the ‘sacred’ in the aftermath of the death of God. If through ‘the arms of dialogue,’ monotheism, for instance, is eviscerated of meaning, out of that crisis, we must invent “festivals of atonement” and “sacred games” as Nietzsche said, for atheism is only a transitory stage to be overcome. How according to you can Pasolini’s works respond to this crisis?*

**RC:** I believe that Pasolini identified in the sacred those irrational aspects that belong to reality. The sacred was also part of the ancient, pre-middle class cultures that Pasolini loved, suffering their death as contrasted to the victory of a secularism that coincides with consumerism. I think that, on the one hand, his strong interest in the sacred had to do with reasons of poetic inspiration and, on the other hand, it came from his total love (ideological but also sensual and physical) for the people—thought of as an archaic reality, whose culture is based also on irrational elements, such as religion, for example.

**NC:** *“Literature,” Deleuze wrote, “is the attempt to interpret, in an ingenious way, the myths we no longer understand.” At that moment of non-comprehension, when we lost the ability to dream or to reproduce myths, Deleuze believed we created literature. Cinema, or, better, cinema such as Pasolini’s, functions similarly, but Pasolini also used, besides many ‘classic’ texts, actual mythological texts to interpret the contemporary world. Do you believe that Pasolini gave us an interpretation of myths with his cinema, that for many it replaces mythology as Deleuze claims literature once did, or that it interprets what many can no longer comprehend or are estranged from?*

**RC:** Yes, Pasolini’s cinema also had that meaning. It has been a vehicle for making the contemporary public/spectator confront past myths. The ancient world, evoked in a fantastic way in some movies, reflects itself upon the contemporary world, illuminating some phenomena (as the fall of the sacred or the triumph or prosaic values) which, in movies such as *Oedipus the King* or *Medea*, have to be deciphered. It’s revealing that precisely the movies which at the time appeared most arduous, like *Medea* (1969), have since then become increasingly important.

**NC:** *Werner Herzog has spoken of what he refers to as “the inadequate imagery of today’s civilization”; our images, he believes, are “worn out,” “abused,” “useless,” and “exhausted.” In all this he feels that “something dangerous” is emerging. For him, the lack of adequate imagery—and “adequate” is surely too weak an adjective—is a danger of the same*

magnitude” of nuclear power, of the over-crowding of the planet, and the destruction of the environment. “If we do not develop adequate images,” he concludes, “we will die out like the dinosaurs. We need images in accordance with our civilization.” Do you believe that Pasolini’s films offer us vital and energetic images, images that in their mythic quality are protean enough to engender new interpretations and annul the fate that Herzog professes we might suffer?

**RC:** Yes, of course. I think the drama mentioned by Herzog (expressed in a somewhat apocalyptic language) concerns today’s cinema, the present imaginary. It seems to me that this kind of thinking recurs regularly every 10 years. I believe that today also there are authors who make or evoke pregnant and vital images. Now, the most pressing danger is in my opinion that images become flooded or ignored by the global cinema’s banal pictures, maybe more powerful than yesterday, because it is an emanation of television, which is immensely more powerful than it was 40 years ago.

**NC:** *What is at hand for you in the future? Are there other Pasolini publications you are now working at? Or other related material?*

**RC:** I’m working on a book dedicated to *La rabbia* [*The Anger*], which Pasolini made in 1963. It’s a very particular film because it is entirely based on the assembly of material footage (newsreels of the ’50s/’60s), commented on by a “lyric” and a “political” text (sometimes in a pamphlet style) that analyzes Italian (but also international) society at the time of the Cold War.

It’s Pasolini’s first important experiment of a poetic essay in the form of cinema. The Film Library of Bologna has recently restored it and in the next few months we will assemble a series of documents, texts, interviews, and critical essays in order to study in depth the film’s issues and its stylistic originality, as well as the strange distribution (the film disappeared after a few projections). *La rabbia*, actually, included two films: Pasolini’s film and also a film by Giovanni Guareschi, the author of *Don Camillo*. His movie had a completely different style from Pasolini’s, who reacted with violent disdain at the showing of Guareschi’s movie, considering it racist, heavy, gross, and fascist. The book, which will be published by the Film Library of Bologna, will include texts and interviews on this film and also critical essays that will analyze its history and its stylistic and thematic character.

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