

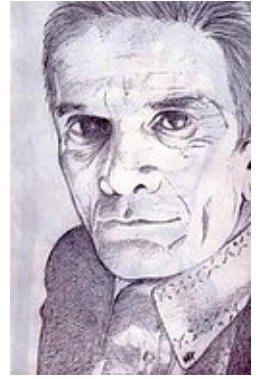


Pasolini, Pier Paolo (1922-1975)

by David Ehrenstein

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Poet, essayist, journalist, playwright, and sociopolitical lightning rod, Pier Paolo Pasolini is unquestionably one of the most important cultural figures to emerge from post-World War II Italy. But it is with film that he made his greatest impact.



A drawing of Pier Paolo Pasolini.
Image by Wikipedia: Italy contributor Provola.

Born in Bologna in 1922, Pasolini grew up in Friuli. While openly gay from the very start of his career (thanks to a gay sex scandal that sent him packing from his provincial hometown to live and work in Rome), Pasolini rarely dealt with homosexuality in his movies.

The subject is featured prominently in *Teorema* (1968), where Terence Stamp's mysterious God-like visitor seduces the son of an upper-middle-class family; passingly in *Arabian Nights* (1974), in an idyll between a king and a commoner that ends in death; and, most darkly of all, in *Salo* (1975), his infamous rendition of the Marquis de Sade's compendium of sexual horrors, *The 120 Days of Sodom*.

None of them are the sort of work to inspire GLAAD awards. But then Pasolini never saw himself as a "gay artist." Indeed, he explicitly rejected the assimilated gay middle-class he saw emerging just prior to his untimely death in 1975. And it is his death, apparently at the hands of a hustler (although there have been allegations of political assassination in which others were involved), that has frozen Pasolini's image in the popular imagination.

In a way, his was a terribly banal sort of death. As far as the heterosexual status quo is concerned, Pasolini, a wealthy, older, and therefore "corrupt" man was killed by a poor and therefore "innocent" youth "disgusted" by his "advances." But, as every gay man knows, this homophobic scenario is never really the truth.

Pasolini's death (which involved the killer or killers driving over the artist's head with his own car) was a gay-bashing as certainly as was that of Matthew Shepard. The difference is that in 1975 the cultural climate was not as sympathetic to the spectacle of the death of an intellectual as it proved to be in 1998 with the death of a gay college student.

[In 2005, following the recantation of the confession by the man convicted of Pasolini's murder 30 years previously, Italian officials opened a new investigation into Pasolini's death, raising anew the possibility that he may have been assassinated.]

Still, no cultural context, past or present, would be amenable to Pasolini, whose commercial success as a filmmaker is as remarkable as it is ironic. For he was not a conventional "entertainer," and he despised the bourgeois intellectuals who were his most receptive viewers.

In the 1950s Pasolini's novels of Roman slum life *Ragazzi di Vita* (1955) and *Un Via Violenta* (1959) marked him in the minds of Italian moviemakers as an "expert" on worlds they were chary of entering.

He began his career as a scriptwriter on such films as Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria* (1956) and Bolognini's *La Notte Brava* (1959). When he broke out on his own as a writer-director with *Accatone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962), he was apparently styling himself after the masters of Italian neo-realism, especially Roberto Rossellini.

But in 1964 he found his moviemaking "voice" with *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. With a non-professional cast and a quasi-documentary shooting style, Pasolini retold the familiar story of the life of Christ in the simplest, least-Hollywood-like style imaginable.

While its musical score was fairly avant-garde, featuring as it did excerpts from the African "Missa Luba," Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky*, and Mahalia Jackson singing "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," the movie was accessible to audiences of all kinds.

In fact, for a time a Christian fundamentalist film distributor had the rights to the film in the United States and successfully exhibited it to church groups. One wonders how receptive the fundamentalist audience would have been to the movie had they known that its maker was a gay, atheistic communist.

Gospel was followed by *The Hawks and the Sparrows* (1966), a comic fable about the adventures of a Chaplinesque father and son team, played by the great Italian star Toto and Ninetto Davoli, a young former lover of Pasolini's who was to appear in many of the filmmaker's works.

Not one to stick to the "expected," Pasolini next turned to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (1967), presenting the drama as a fable set in the wilds of North Africa and modern Rome, acted by a cast that included Franco Citti, Sylvana Mangano, Alida Valli, Carmelo Bene, and the Living Theater's Julian Beck.

After that came *Teorema* (1968), one of Pasolini's most controversial works, in which a sexual "exterminating angel" (Terence Stamp) has his way with an entire Italian family.

Porcile (1969), which like Faulkner's *Wild Palms*, presents two contrasting stories, left audiences scratching their heads over what the adventures of a mute cannibal (Pierre Clementi) has to do with the melancholia of a bourgeois youth (Jean-Pierre Leaud).

More questions were raised when Pasolini cast Maria Callas in his rendition of *Medea* (1970), a film in which the legendary diva was not required to sing a note.

But a sudden turn of popular fortune came when Pasolini made *The Decameron* (1971), *The Canterbury Tales* (1972), and *Arabian Nights* (1974). They are as uncompromising as any of his films, but their comic spirit, frequent sexual interludes, and abundant nudity pleased moviegoers as no Pasolini work had done before.

And then came the posthumously released *Salò*. Most of the critics responded as though the horrors displayed in the film came directly from the gay Italian's feverish imagination. But all Pasolini did was extract selected passages of Sade and reset them in the last days of the fascist republic of Salò, the state-within-a-state established in the twilight of Mussolini's Italy.

His most visually elegant and dramatically reserved work, *Salò* offers Sade's vision of old, wealthy, evil authorities (politicians, lawyers and bishops) having their way with nude and compliant youths and maidens of the lower classes as simply standard operational procedure for the powers that be.

Despite the outrage of some critics who complained of the director's decadence and depravity, the film actually presents a scrupulous version of the everyday reality of man's inhumanity to man.

It is noteworthy that Ninetto Davoli does not appear in *Salò*. The embodiment of comic exuberance in so

many of Pasolini's films, Davoli has no place in *Salo*, where he would be obliged to play either a victim or an executioner. And Pasolini could see his beloved friend as neither, even after the young man married and began a family of his own.

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About the Author

David Ehrenstein is author of *The Scorsese Picture: The Art and Life of Martin Scorsese* and *Open Secret: Gay Hollywood 1928-1998* and has contributed to numerous journals, newspapers, magazines, and television shows.