

## FAILURE AS AN AUTONOMOUS PRACTICE PASOLINI'S ROMAN TRILOGY

Noi non siamo cristiani.

Peasants of Gagliano  
in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (1945)

Ho dovuto sputà er sangue pe' potè arrivà ar punto de  
portarte a casa con me a fa' 'na vita da cristiani,  
assieme.

Mamma Roma in Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* (1962)

Future is a risky currency: it is a concept that many people find themselves emotionally invested in, and yet, not many see that investment returned. What is more – rather than being merely an element of life, future has metastasized into an expectation of success. On levels ranging from the societal (through all sorts of modernization and progress narratives, as well as future-oriented utopias), to the individual ('careers', 'winners', 'losers', etc.), there seems to be an expectation today that people, groups and societies move forward, succeed, aspire. Historically, the expectation of future success has been characteristic not only of financiers and liberal elites, but also of grand utopian ideologies of liberation, concerned more with social bonds than individual profits – Christian, Saint-Simonian and Marxist projects have been future-oriented almost by definition. Can, then, a rejection of the future serve to liberate people? What is the role of failure in the rejection of the future? What are the political implications of a refusal to succeed? In this article, I will examine the idea of failure as an anti-futurist stance. Looking at Pier Paolo Pasolini's first three films, the so-called Roman Trilogy (*Accattone*, *Mamma Roma*, *La Ricotta*<sup>1</sup>), I will delineate the mechanisms of non-adaptation and resistance.

An interesting point in post-future studies has been brought up by Franco Berardi, who argues that a particular development took place in the nineteenth century, a period 'that trusted in the future':<sup>2</sup> beginning with the Futurist Manifesto of 1909, the twentieth century saw both the rise and the demise of the belief in future. The latter, whose beginning Berardi dates back to the 1970s and the explosion of the punk culture, has prompted a sentiment of dystopian despair and fear. Declaring that the future, at least as a mode of perception, is over, Berardi traces the origins of the myth of the future to the development of modernity and modern capitalism. The only possible response to the expectation of future, then, is an attempt to 'stop the machine', which may be understood both individually (as a personal, libidinal reorientation from the future to the present) or socially (as, for instance, through the general strike).

Discussing the related notion of resistance to future, the anarchist thinker Hakim Bey

---

1 Quotations in the article come from the screenplays as published in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Alcun dagli occhi azzurri* (Milano: Garzanti, 1965). Discrepancies between the published screenplay and the film are indicated in footnotes. *Accattone*, dir. by Pier Paolo Pasolini (Waterbearer Films, 2003); *Mamma Roma*, dir. by Pier Paolo Pasolini (Criterion Collection, 2004); *La Ricotta*, dir. by Pier Paolo Pasolini (Criterion Collection, 2004).

2 Franco Berardi, *After the Future* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011), p. 17.

distinguishes between a revolution and an insurrection: while the former is heavily based on the idea of the future, carrying an expectation of permanent change, the latter is a temporary event by definition: its result is a Temporary Autonomous Zone, i.e., a sphere of liberation which is both site- and time-specific. Because of the realization that revolutionary ideas are bound to be lost in the field of repressive tolerance, Bey contends that ‘realism demands not only that we give up waiting for “the Revolution” but also that we give up wanting it’.<sup>3</sup> He goes on to suggest that faced with the social spectacle, refusal to partake in the simulation of the state may be the most radical gesture. Insurrection, unlike revolution, depends on its ability to break away from the temporal permanence: ‘If History IS “Time,”’ Bey argues, ‘then the uprising is a moment that springs up and out of Time, violates the “law” of History. [...] insurrection is the forbidden moment, an unforgivable denial of the dialectic’, he concludes.<sup>4</sup> The Temporary Autonomous Zone, created by the act of insurrection, is thus a volatile space of liberty, a temporary glitch, if you will, where life seems to briefly evade the workings of the larger social systems.

Pasolini's own position is complicated here. One could say that he shares with Berardi and Bey only a disbelief in the future – after all, his diagnosis of the bourgeois disease (*malattia borghese*) leaves little hope for a survival of resistance in the future. The young generation, he wrote in ‘Apologia’ in 1968, can already barely perceive the bourgeoisie as another class:

the bourgeoisie is triumphing, transforming workers on the one hand, and ex colonial peasants on the other, into the bourgeois. In short, through neo-capitalism, bourgeoisie is becoming the human condition. Whoever is born in this entropy, can in no way, metaphysically, exist outside of it.<sup>5</sup>

In his later writings, Pasolini referred to the social and cultural transformation of the time between *Accattone* and 1975 as a ‘genocide’ of the subproletariat.<sup>6</sup> Writing almost a decade after ‘Apologia’, he referred to the process in his column in *Corriere della Sera*, comparing it to the disappearance of the fireflies (*luciole*)<sup>7</sup> in the sixties. The terms Pasolini used to describe the phenomenon were definitive in their mourning of a lost world and a ‘whole population’, which was ‘culturally destroyed’.<sup>8</sup>

And yet, despite Pasolini's tone of despair, his films abound in examples of localized, temporary resistance. In the interpretation of Georges Didi-Huberman, to believe that the world of the *luciole* is completely lost,

is to see only the black of night or the blinding light of the projectors [of power]. It is to act like defeated, on the assumption that the machine accomplishes its work without rest or resistance. It is to see but the whole. It is, therefore, not to see the space – however interstitial, intermittent, nomadic and improbably situated it might be – of openings, of the possible, of glimmers, of the nonetheless, the in-spite-of-everything.<sup>9</sup>

---

3 Hakim Bey, *The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, n.p. <<http://hermetic.com/bey/taz3.html>> [accessed 25 April 2014]. Italics in the original.

4 Bey. Capitalization in the original.

5 ‘La borghesia sta trionfando, sta rendendo borghesi gli operai, da una parte, e i contadini ex coloniali, dall'altra. Insomma, attraverso il neocapitalismo, la borghesia sta diventando la condizione umana. Chi è nato in questa entropia, non può in nessun modo, metafisicamente, esserne fuori.’ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Empirismo Eretico* (Milano: Garzanti, 1972), p. 162. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian and French are mine.

6 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Lettere luterane* (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), pp. 154–55.

7 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari* (Milano: Garzanti, 1975), p. 161.

8 Pasolini, *Lettere luterane*, p. 154.

9 ‘C'est ne voir que la nuit noire ou l'aveuglante lumière des projecteurs. C'est agir en vaincus: c'est être convaincus que la machine accomplit son travail sans reste ni résistance. C'est ne voir que du tout. C'est

One striking feature of Pasolini's diagnosis that needs to be addressed is the conflation of the national and the global level: in one broad sweep, workers are put together in one category with postcolonial peasants. This issue, part of the bigger question of the problematic nature of Pasolini's approach to the South both at home and abroad, has been subject to a number of critiques. Perhaps most controversial is the way Pasolini essentializes difference in his descriptions of the South. Of course, on the one hand, as a concept, it is defined by Pasolini in a dialectical fashion, i.e., in contrast to the preconceptions about the region of the Northern elite. When Oriana Fallaci, interviewed in *Comizi D'Amore* about the sexual freedom afforded to the Italian proletariat, smirks and calls Calabrian subproletariat 'another planet',<sup>10</sup> Pasolini cuts to the shot showing precisely this: an empty, moon-like landscape of the South, with a peasant working in the field. There is another side to Pasolini's characterization of the concept of Southern alterity, however. As the director proceeds to give voice to the people in the image, he does so with a distinct interpretation of his own:

The North is modern but its ideas about sex are confused. They are scraps of an old ideology, which is unable to understand and judge reality as a whole. The South is old, but it is intact: woe to impudent women! Woe to cuckolds! Woe to who will not kill for honor! These are laws of a poor, but real people.<sup>11</sup>

Even if Pasolini seems entertained by the idea that Fallaci has no clue as to what the 'other planet' looks like, he perpetrates a very similar concept himself: the 'modern and confused' versus 'old and real' distinction is much like his observation in *Lunga strada di sabbia* that one feels in the South as if 'outside of the law, or at least the culture of our world'.<sup>12</sup> In addition to, or perhaps going beyond, the Foucauldian argument about the discursifications of sexuality brought about by contemporary culture, Pasolini presents the South as mythical, untranslatable, essentially different.<sup>13</sup>

In Didi-Huberman's view, this mythical component is justifiable insofar as myth is part of the original revolutionary energy of the miserable and the subaltern.<sup>14</sup> While this argument may perhaps apply to the Italian South, the question whether it can be extrapolated to the global South remains highly contestable. Pasolini's likening of Indians and Italians in *L'odore dell'India* and Algerians and Calabrians in 'Profezia' has earned him the label of a 'eurocentrist' from Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt,<sup>15</sup> and a much more lenient one, of 'transnational universalism', from Cesare Casarino.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Pasolini's position, in its universalizing tendency, is hard to defend with regard to the global stage. Its

---

donc ne pas voir l'espace – fût-il interstitiel, intermittent, nomade, improbablement situé – des ouvertures, des possibles, des lueurs, des malgré tout.' Georges Didi-Huberman, *Survivance Des Lucioles* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 2009), p. 36.

10 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Comizi d'amore* (Tartan Video, 2007).

11 'Il Nord é moderno ma le idee sul sesso sono confuse. Sono dei rottami di un'ideologia vecchia, che non é più in grado di capire e di giudicare l'intera realtà. Il Sud é vecchio, ma é intatto: guai alle svergognate! Guai ai cornuti! Guai a chi non sa ammazzare per onore! Sono legge di gente povera, ma reale.' *Comizi d'amore*, dir. by Pier Paolo Pasolini (Criterion Collection, 2004).

12 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. by Walter Siti (Milano: Mondadori, 1998), p. 1511.

13 Interestingly enough, Foucault picked up the theme in his somewhat essentializing comment that the street, where most of the interviews in the film take place, is 'the most spontaneous form of Mediterranean conviviality' ('la forme la plus spontanée de la convivialité méditerranéenne'). Michel Foucault, 'Les Matins Gris de La Tolérance', *Le Monde*, 23 March 1977, p. 24.

14 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Survivance Des Lucioles* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 2009), p. 28.

15 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), p. 128.

16 Cesare Casarino, 'The Southern Answer: Pasolini, Universalism, Decolonization', *Critical Inquiry*, 36 (2010), 673–96 (p. 675).

application in the Italian context, however, allows for a partially hopeful and politically suggestive reading of Pasolini's diagnoses of degradation wrought by the *malattia borghese*.

In his Lacanian analysis of *Accattone*, Fabio Vighi applies Žižek's definition of a 'leftist political gesture par excellence' to show Accattone's 'intimate refusal of subjective stability',<sup>17</sup> which can be understood as curbing the subjectivity that is moving the future forward. In the spirit of this argument, I would like to devote the rest of this article to the three sub-proletarian subjects of Pasolini's Roman Trilogy, whose different degrees of failure exhibit, in my opinion, political stances of non-defiant opposition, creating, through their non-adaptation, volatile shelters of resistance, or in Didi-Huberman's terms, conditions for the temporary survivals of the *luciole*.

In that light, Pasolini seems to have much more sympathy for Accattone than he does for Mamma Roma. Unlike the former, the latter sets off on her way of adapting to the middle-class life that is offered in the consumerist world created by industrialization and urbanization. Her hardships and efforts seem to be paying off – at least for a certain amount of time. 'I had to sweat blood to [...] make a decent living (*'na vita da cristiani*) together', she tells her son reproachfully.<sup>18</sup> Her aspirations are clear: a decent living, '*na vita da cristiani*', echoing the antagonist phrase, 'we're not Christians', uttered by the inhabitants of Gagliano in Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli*,<sup>19</sup> indicates Mamma Roma's wish to adapt to the petit bourgeois lifestyle of her new surroundings. The desire to join the rituals of the bourgeois, however, is, as has been noted by Baschiera, 'rendered impossible by the strenuous resistance of the body to the shaping of social class'.<sup>20</sup> This is well manifested in the 'Flower of shit' stanza of a serenade sung by Mamma Roma in the opening scene, in which she proclaims her own liberation from the hands of her pimp:

O, flower of shit,  
I freed myself from the noose  
Now it's another's turn  
To be his servant!  
No hard feelings, dear bride! I'm free, I'm free!<sup>21</sup>

Mamma Roma's song can be thus read to sound ironically, especially in hindsight: a surrender to the temptations of the bourgeois life, offered by the newly built Roman suburbs, clearly does not bring her liberation.

In a contrast to Mamma Roma, Vittorio, as his street name suggests – the Italian word *accattone* denotes a beggar – does not even have a prospect of social redemption: forever a beggar, he is acutely aware of his restricted social mobility. When out drinking with Salvatore and his friends, Accattone breaks down and tells his companions, crying: 'We're all a bunch of rejects, we're used-up men! [...] They can't look at us even in jail! We're used-up men!'<sup>22</sup> Accattone identifies his social position as essentially that of a *homo sacer*, whose life is not recognized legally even by the state's punitive system.

In a later scene, responding to Stella's suggestion that he get a job to improve his

17 Fabio Vighi, 'Pasolini and Exclusion: Žižek, Agamben and the Modern Sub-Proletariat', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 20 (2003), 99–121 (p. 112) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/02632764030205005>>.

18 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Alì dagli occhi azzurri* (Milano: Garzanti, 1965), p. 372.

19 Carlo Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Milano: Mondadori, 1987), p. 15.

20 Stefano Baschiera, 'The Embodiment of the Bourgeoisie: Body and Social Class in Pasolini's Mamma Roma and Fassbinder's Martha', in *Pasolini, Fassbinder and Europe: between utopia and nihilism*, ed. by Fabio Vighi and Alexis Nouss (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Pub., 2010), pp. 65–82 (p. 65).

21 Fiore de merda, |io me so' liberata da 'na corda, |adesso tocca a 'n'altra a fà la serva! | A sora sposa, senza invidia! So' libbera, so' libbera!' Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Alì dagli occhi azzurri*, p. 366.

22 Semo tutti 'na massa de disgrazziati, semo omini finiti! [...] Pure in galera nun ce ponno vede più! Semo omini finiti!' Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Alì dagli occhi azzurri*, p. 260.

overall situation, Accattone says, 'But what for? To give my blood to others? No one will drink my blood!'<sup>23</sup> Stella's advice is the only offer that the bourgeois society can extend to Accattone. It is a promise of social ascent through work; a false promise in the eyes of Pasolini, one that brings not only exploitation and death, but also a conversion of sorts – to the all-encompassing consumerist culture spread along with the *malattia borghese*. When Accattone tries to get a job moving iron wire, he tells his working companion, exhausted: 'What is this, Buchenwald?' and quits his job soon thereafter.<sup>24</sup> By the reference to the Nazi camp, Accattone sees through the offer of social redemption through work, pointing to its exploitative aspect and refusing to partake in what Pasolini would later call, in his famous so-called *Lucciole* article, 'Christian-Democratic fascism' (*fascismo democristiano*),<sup>25</sup> a social formation of post-War Italy, existing in a continuum with the historical fascism of Mussolini:

In this world the 'values' which counted were the same as for fascism: the Church, fatherland, family, obedience, discipline, order, frugality, morality. These 'values' (as during the fascist era) were 'also real': they belonged to specific and concrete cultures which constituted the archaically agricultural and paleoindustrial Italy. But the moment they were assumed as 'national' values, they couldn't help but lose their real character, turning into the ugly, stupid, and repressive conformism of the state: the conformism of fascist and Christian-Democratic power.<sup>26</sup>

After the disappearance of the *lucciole*, Pasolini contends, these values became useless, even in their false, 'national' dimension. The apocalyptic and uniformly dismal spirit of his vision depicted here, similarly to the tone used in 'Apologia', gives no hope for any future resistance. However, to think that, after the *lucciole* disappear, what remains is only the blinding light of the reflectors of power, is an unnecessarily holistic view. As Didi-Huberman argues, only a religious perspective is capable of providing such a total redemption and salvation.<sup>27</sup> Otherwise, we need to give up the search for a *total* redemption and a *final* resurrection. That will allow us to notice that destruction isn't ever absolute either. If we dare to refuse the futurist drive and promise of redemption, the temporary sites of survival will allow for a degree of freedom otherwise unimaginable, and thus unavailable. The literary tradition of non-reproducible failure, perhaps best represented by Melville's *Bartleby* and his 'I would prefer not to', is a rejection of the future – but a rejection which does not lapse into a disinterest in politics or nihilism. What this line of characters and texts suggests is that a very powerful form of resistance can be found, slightly paradoxically perhaps, in a non-power gesture of a non-actant figure, and yet a gesture endowed with a strong political significance.

Viewed in the light of this reading, going somewhat against the spirit of Pier Paolo Pasolini of the 1970s, but arguably closer to the director of *Accattone*, the protagonist of the film represents the position of real failure, understood as a rejection of the futurist drive, both on the social and the individual plane. Accattone is not interested in developing his subjectivity, nor does he show any interest in taking arms against anything. His is not a

23 'Ma a che fa'? A da' er sangue mio all'altri? Er sangue mio nun se lo beve nessuno!' Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Alì dagli occhi azzurri*, p. 332.

24 'Ma che siamo a Buchenwald qua?' Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Alì dagli occhi azzurri*, p. 350.

25 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, p. 160.

26 'In tale universo i "valori" che contavano erano gli stessi che per il fascismo: la Chiesa, la Patria, la famiglia, l'obbedienza, la disciplina, l'ordine, il risparmio, la moralità. Tali "valori" (come del resto durante il fascismo) erano "anche reali": appartenevano cioè alle culture particolari e concrete che costituivano l'Italia arcaicamente agricola e paleoindustriale. Ma nel momento in cui venivano assunti a valori nazionali non potevano che perdere ogni realtà, e divenire atroce, stupido, repressivo conformismo di Stato: il conformismo del potere fascista e democristiano.' Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, p. 162.

27 Didi-Huberman, pp. 71–72.

defiant, heroic stance of opposition, a Sisyphus-like devotion to lost causes. Rather, through his passive and dispassionate resistance he tampers with the binary opposition of actant, heroic spirit and passive body: Accattone's refusal to redeem himself socially denies that divide by assuming a non-actant position with regard to a larger machinery of alienated work. Importantly, it is a gesture whose significance is only temporary and localized; and because it has a rejection of the future at its core, it is non-reproducible. Finally, in a good Nietzschean spirit, it is a position that, far from being burdened by monumental history, remains devoid of fetishism of the past.

*La Ricotta* provides a glimpse at the other side of the social equation, the part of society that basks in the blinding light of the reflectors: the bourgeoisie. In a remark somewhat resembling Gramsci's tirade against the indifferent in *La città futura*,<sup>28</sup> the director in the film, played by Orson Welles, calls the not particularly bright journalist 'a mediocre man [...] A monster! A dangerous delinquent. Conformist, colonialist, racist, slaver, an indifferent man (*qualunquista*)!'<sup>29</sup> Going further, he tells the journalist: 'You do not exist. The capital does not acknowledge the existence of labor if it does not serve production.'<sup>30</sup> At the same time, it seems that Pasolini also matches his hatred of the bourgeoisie with a moment of self-criticality when he makes the director-figure Welles point out that both he and the journalist work for the same proprietor. In combination with the comment on the nonexistence of the journalist, the scene seems to voice Pasolini's tacit acknowledgement of his own complicity in the culture of the *malattia borghese*. The only difference between the director and the journalist, the bitter suggestion seems to be, is that the former serves his proprietor better.

The figure of the journalist serves therefore as an example of a life invisible in the larger narrative of history. And yet, there is a difference between the invisible lives of Mamma Roma, Vittorio, and Stracci and the invisibility of the journalist. As a mercenary of the capital, he lives a life of indifference. The director's use of the word *qualunquista* gestures towards a post-War Italian political party, Il Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque (The Common Man's Front), whose program ('qualunquismo') was organized around the doctrine of postulated apolitical, non-biased, and technical governance.

The observation that the journalist does not exist can also be read as a key to the final scene of *La Ricotta*, as it distinguishes between those who receive recognition and those who do not. When the excited crowd of bourgeois visitors to the film set quiets down for the last take, something cracks: Stracci does not say his part. With a motionless face, the director remarks, 'Poor Stracci. Dying [...] he had no other way of reminding us that he too was alive.'<sup>31</sup> By saying that Stracci could only die to remind the world about his existence, the director points to the limited field of vision of the capital, which indeed does not acknowledge Stracci's existence until he becomes instrumental in the process of production.

The logic of (in)visibility is further accentuated in the editing of the final scenes: shots showing the social elite of Rome, coming from the city, which is hovering in the background, are montaged with what the incoming crowd sees: the director and his crew, standing in front of the three crosses. A close-up on the faces of the socialites shows them waving toward the camera. The scene is cut to the close-up of Stracci in agony, dying on

28 Antonio Gramsci, *La città futura*, ed. by Sergio Caprioglio (Torino: Einaudi, 1982), pp. 13–15.

29 'Un uomo medio, [...] un mostro! Un pericoloso delinquente. Conformista, colonialista, razzista, schiavista, qualunquista!' Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Alì dagli occhi azzurri*, p. 475.

30 'Lei non esiste. Il capitale non considera esistente la mano d'opera, se non quando serve la produzione' Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Alì dagli occhi azzurri*, p. 475.

31 The screenplay in *Alì dagli occhi azzurri* does not include these lines. *La Ricotta*, dir. by Pier Paolo Pasolini (Criterion Collection, 2004).

the cross. And yet, there is no dialogue between the two gazes. Stracci's death goes unseen, as no one watches him – that is, until he fails to say his line and interrupts the production of the film. Through this final instance of non-adaptation, *La Ricotta* takes the gesture of failure to its extreme: the resistance of the body, ending in death, is the only temporary zone of liberty available to Stracci.

Failure, as practiced in Pasolini's first three films, is not a disinterested removal from the world. Rather, these moments depict examples of productive (but not reproductive) failure, moments of temporary existence of a culture. As examples of survivals, these gestures testify to Pasolini's belief in the idea of the last vestiges of the 'other angle', a point of view from which one can perceive the bourgeoisie as another social class. His later writings would suggest that these are but singular historical formations, wiped away forever by the blinding lights of consumerism. But if Didi-Huberman is right about the unnecessarily holistic character of Pasolini's thinking, one could be more hopeful about temporary survivals. What we are faced with, perhaps, is a certain cyclical situation, where there is always a survival, a failure to succeed, possible – perhaps localized and micro-scale, but nonetheless non-adaptive, able to work against the current regime of success ('the system', 'the machine'). The localized and non-teleological vision of cyclical failure might be a politically more effective legacy of Pasolini than the vision of the procession of the Algerians 'to the West and North/with the red banners of Trotsky in the wind.'<sup>32</sup>

What is, then, the legacy of temporary autonomous zones of freedom and survivals? A possibly useful piece of advice comes from Simon During, writing on Levi and the current political investment of literary scholars and critics. Rather than exhibiting their good will and moral concerns, During believes they should forgo all hope of social redemption.<sup>33</sup> Instead, like Carlo Levi with regard to the citizens of Gagliano, During suggests, we should try to guard and celebrate the volatile moments of liberty, exhibited through failure as a social and individual practice of sanity.

Krzysztof Rowiński  
(University of Massachusetts Amherst)

---

32 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *The Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini*, trans. by Stephen Sartarelli, A Bilingual Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 375.

33 Simon During, 'From the Subaltern to the Precariat', *Wenyi Lilun Yanjiu*, 32 (2012), 72–89.