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# Contemporary Perspectives on the Sacred in Pasolini's *La ricotta*<sup>1</sup>

Gregory Smith

## Introduction: a civic idea of the sacred

Pasolini's concept of the sacred followed a trajectory that started with the peasants of Friuli, moved through his passion for Rome's sub-proletariat, and from the early 1960s onwards projected its way to Africa and developing countries.<sup>2</sup> A chief source of inspiration for Pasolini's thinking was certainly Ernesto De Martino, whom he applauded as being the master of the Italian school of religious studies.<sup>3</sup> De Martino (1908-1965) was Italy's most prominent scholar of religion in the postwar period, a professor of religion and ethnology at the University of Cagliari, where he was surrounded by a host of students who would later become leading figures in the Italian academic world. His most influential books are concerned with magical practices in the Italian South and elsewhere and include *Il mondo magico*<sup>4</sup> and *Morte e pianto rituale*.<sup>5</sup> De Martino was torn between an idealist heritage associated with Benedetto Croce and a desire to appease the intellectual arm of the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI), creating a body of work that provides ample opportunity for divergent interpretations.<sup>6</sup> De Martino, in any case, had the merit of bringing respectability to the study of religion seen from a position sympathetic, in most historical periods, to the Italian Communist Party.<sup>7</sup> Formally an advocate of historicist ethnology, De Martino was part of a group of intellectuals associated with the Italian Ethnological Center, which included prominent figures like Cesare Pavese, Alberto Maria Cirese, Vittorio Lanternari, and others.<sup>8</sup> Although evidence shows that Pasolini never interacted directly with De Martino, he was engaged with the Italian Ethnological Center, no doubt prompted by his interest in the Roman underclass and the idea of the sacred he found to imbue this culture.<sup>9</sup>

De Martino's intellectual heritage had many dimensions, deriving in part from his interest in both promoting and refuting writers associated with the French ethnological school.<sup>10</sup> He was instrumental in having these works translated and published in Italy, yet he was simultaneously at pains to reject the validity of their premises. De Martino's own intellectual orientation often contained manifest contradiction. Consider that one of his key works, *Il mondo magico*, has been described as his most unorthodox Crocian work,

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<sup>2</sup> Barbato in this connection speaks of a *terzomondista* yearning. To a certain extent Pasolini finds—and in part creates—this *terzomondo* within his own country. Alessandro Barbato, *L'alternativa fantasma: Pasolini e Leiris, percorsi antropologici* (Padova: Libreria Edizioni, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ernesto De Martino, *Il mondo magico: prolegomeni a una storia del magismo* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1978 [1948]).

<sup>5</sup> Ernesto De Martino, *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico: dal lamento pagano al pianto di Maria* (Turin: Einaudi, 1958).

<sup>6</sup> Placido Cherchi and Maria Cherchi, *De Martino: dalla crisi della presenza alla comunità umana* (Naples: Liguori, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Pietro Angelini, Introduction to Cesare Pavese and Ernesto de Martino, *La collana viola: lettere 1945-1950*, ed. Pietro Angelini (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Tommaso Subini, *La necessità di morire: il cinema di Pier Paolo Pasolini e il sacro* (Rome: Roma EdS, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Barbato, *L'alternativa fantasma*, 265-66.

<sup>10</sup> Angelini, Introduction, 22.

nevertheless it marked a return to Crocianism written during a period when he was concerned about his isolation from the PCI.<sup>11</sup> Notwithstanding this abundant paradox, he had the sizeable merit of bringing writings on religion to the attention of a relatively large reading public, especially when he joined forces with Cesare Pavese in launching the famous *Collana Viola* as an Italian showcase for Europe's most important figures in ethnological and religious studies.<sup>12</sup>

An important ethnologist, whose work was both promoted and stigmatized by De Martino, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, also seems to have contributed in different ways to Pasolini's writings.<sup>13</sup> Lévy-Bruhl is most famous for his contention that "primitives" had a completely different thought system from moderns, different inasmuch as they denied the law of non-contradiction: "The primitives show themselves insensitive to contradictions that we judge flagrant. [...] this indifference is one of the traits by which their mental habits contrast most visibly with our own."<sup>14</sup> This idea of absolute alterity could be extended from the "primitives" described by Lévy-Bruhl to the peasants and urban underclass, which occupied most of the famous poet's writing. For Pasolini, the Roman sub-proletariat was radically different from the bourgeoisie, creating an "anthropological" divide that complemented the spatial contrast between the center and the periphery of Rome. This latter distinction is well known in the academic literature, for Pasolini essentialized the spatial difference between center and periphery in a highly publicized way, which had lasting impact on the modern perception of the city. The artificial character of the contrast has been established by Agnew<sup>15</sup> and Martinelli,<sup>16</sup> but represented for Pasolini a compelling narrative setting, which justified its invention.<sup>17</sup> The overlaying of social and spatial features rooted in a particular set of historical circumstances generated a unique ontological force that was fundamental in Pasolini's narrative structures.<sup>18</sup> This spatial and anthropological construction was rooted in a romantic vision of the contemporary world, calling forward an untrammelled primitive Other, far removed from the corrupting force of modern existence. This romantic vision was shared by Cesare Pavese, who developed a keen interest in anthropological writings in the early 1950s. The noble savage given life by selected ethnological works provided soothing respite from the gripping concerns of early postwar Italy.<sup>19</sup> The Friulian peasant, like the Roman sub-proletarian, was a variant of the noble savage, epitomized in *La ricotta* by the sub-proletarian hero *Stracci*, or "Rags."

Lévy-Bruhl's radical alterity projects onto the Other a mysticism that, however, only became explicitly evident in Pasolini's later works. Barbato reports that the screenplays for films like *Teorema* and *Medea* contained extensive hand-annotated references to Lévy-Bruhl.<sup>20</sup> Some of these later films also showed Pasolini's strong interest in Mircea Eliade, to

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<sup>11</sup> Cherchi and Cherchi, *De Martino: dalla crisi della presenza*, 151-154.

<sup>12</sup> Angelini, Introduction, 9-13.

<sup>13</sup> Barbato (*L'alternativa fantasma*, 258-59) discusses the influence of Lévy-Bruhl on Pasolini. Pasolini would have found ample reference to the French scholar in De Martino (e.g., *Il Mondo Magico*, 239-242). These references are chiefly to a volume by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl published in Italian as *L'anima primitiva* (Turin: Einaudi, 1948).

<sup>14</sup> Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *La Mythologie primitive* (Paris: Librairie Alcan, 1935), xi.

<sup>15</sup> John Agnew, *Rome* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Franco Martinelli, *Le società urbane: problemi e studi* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1988).

<sup>17</sup> Gregory Smith, "Narrative in Place: Perspectives on Pasolini's Rome," in *Public Space in Rome through the Ages*, ed. Gregory Smith and Jan Gadeyne (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 277-99.

<sup>18</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989), 12.

<sup>19</sup> Angelini, Introduction, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Barbato, *L'alternativa fantasma*, 259.

whom *Medea* was dedicated.<sup>21</sup> Eliade had a distinct mystical vein and believed that religion possessed the power to salvage humankind from the existential void, which threatened its existence.<sup>22</sup> In these later films, mysticism is positively contrasted with bourgeois rationality. An excellent example of peasant mysticism is evident in the scene of the film *Teorema* when the servant soars off into the sky, supported solely by the force of magical thought. Yet the contrast between rationality and mysticism is complex, and this scene, according to Barbato, does not serve to celebrate the value of irrationality, but instead demonstrates the limits of bourgeois rationality.<sup>23</sup> In later years, Pasolini would even reject the idea of a presumed bourgeois rationality, seeing irrationality as permeating all levels of human experience. This is the idea contained in the poem *Callas*:

La tesi  
 e l'antitesi convivono con la sintesi: ecco  
 la vera trinità dell'uomo né prelogico né logico,  
 ma reale. Sii, sii scienziato con le tue sintesi  
 che ti fanno procedere (e progredire) nel tempo (che non c'è),  
 ma sii anche mistico curando democraticamente  
 nel medesimo tabernacolo, con sintesi, tesi e antitesi.<sup>24</sup>

(The thesis  
 and the antithesis coexist with the synthesis:  
 this is the true trinity of man neither pre-logical nor logical  
 but real. Be scientific in your syntheses  
 which make you proceed (and progress) in time (which does not exist),  
 but be also mystical in nurturing, democratically,  
 in the same tabernacle, synthesis, thesis and antithesis.)<sup>25</sup>

As this 1969 poem states, the fundamental issue is not the contest between the mystical and the rational, but the nature of what is “real.”<sup>26</sup> The idea of a possible “real” foundation for thought takes us closer to a notion of the sacred expressed in earlier films like *La ricotta*. The notion seems to be grounded in the writings of De Martino, but with clear distinctions. De Martino’s system of thought was largely concerned with the idea of “presence” as the rational expression of human value in historically constituted society, and it identified magic as the function maintaining this presence in conditions of stress.<sup>27</sup> Magic for De Martino served the fundamental purpose of rescuing the individual from a crisis of “presence,” when human suffering exceeded the limits of rational tolerability. De Martino rejected Lévy-Bruhl’s characterization of magic as a kind of “delirium”<sup>28</sup> and criticized “ethnology” as

<sup>21</sup> Luca Carbone, “Pier Paolo Pasolini: Tempi, corpi, mutamento sociale,” in *Altre sociologie*, ed. Mario Aldo Toscano, 401-42 (Milan: Angeli, 2011), 402. Discussion of the importance of Eliade in Pasolini’s thought is also found in Giuseppe Conti Calabrese, *Pasolini e il sacro* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1994), 10.

<sup>22</sup> Nicola Gasbarro, “Sacralità come éthos del trascendimento,” in *Pasolini e l’interrogazione del sacro*, ed. Angela Felice and Gian Paolo Gri (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2013), 39-53.

<sup>23</sup> Barbato, *L’alternativa fantasma*, 252

<sup>24</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Callas,” in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Bestemmia, tutte le poesie*, Vol. IV, ed. Graziella Chiarossi and Walter Siti (Milan: Garzanti, 1996), 738.

<sup>25</sup> All English translations are by the author.

<sup>26</sup> Yet the tension between Western rational culture and primitive thought based on irrational religion finds its way through various pieces of Pasolini’s work. See Carbone, “Pier Paolo Pasolini: tempi, corpi, mutamento sociale,” 420.

<sup>27</sup> De Martino, *Il mondo magico*, 104-5, 185-188, 255-258.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.



trying to fit paranormal facts into our nature, cultivating “the murky idolatry of the lost paradise of magic.”<sup>29</sup> The “impotence of ethnology”<sup>30</sup> when faced with magical thought was contrasted with his own rationalist approach, claiming that magic entailed a human crisis that recourse to magic attempted to ward off. Magic expressed “a dominant aim voluntarily pursued,” the aim to maintain a rational presence in society.<sup>31</sup> De Martino’s idea of “presence” posited the self as an expression of coherent intellectual consciousness, a socially grounded response to historically determined threats to human existence.<sup>32</sup>

The tension between rationality and irrationality, and its relationship with religion, is a common trope in sociological studies. One of the master efforts to root this tension in the “real” bedrock of our social condition was Émile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.<sup>33</sup> Durkheim was a social realist, rejecting the idea of a psychological foundation for social phenomena. Yet a paradox in his system of thought was the psychological foundation of his social realism, positing a rational purpose for religious “delirium,” which sought to ensure social order.<sup>34</sup> Pasolini was familiar with Durkheim’s work, and one of his early theater pieces, *Orgia*, was inspired by *Suicide*, a work in which Durkheim’s social realism is clearly expressed.<sup>35</sup> In sociological thought, Durkheim paved the way for the idea that religion can express a social principle without any theological element, or for what has been called civil religion.<sup>36</sup> As an extension of this idea, we can speak of a civic sacred, a sacred that both expresses and promotes our integrity as social agents. This notion is closely related to ideas pursued by De Martino and Pasolini.

The idea that the sacred has as much to do with society as with theology helps us unravel central features of the Italian cultural debate in this early Cold War period. According to this argument, religion has no necessary link with spiritual beings—and far less with the inherent irrationality of primitive peoples. Instead, religion is a practical expression of humankind’s social condition. Seen in these terms, we can speak of the sacred as an expression of conscious or unconscious civic engagement. This civic idea of the sacred is identifiable in *La ricotta*, but with a particular nuance.

For Pasolini, the sacred expressed a socially embedded human quality often contrasted with religion understood as a set of ideas about the sacred.<sup>37</sup> This conception of the sacred shared features with De Martino’s “crisis of the presence” and, perhaps, even elements of Durkheim’s civic sacred. But it reached out to a deeper idea, a response to the “crisis of presence” that Pasolini identified as resulting from the domination of technical and economic logic over value rooted in social exchange. True value only existed for Pasolini when it possessed a social origin.<sup>38</sup> Pasolini’s sacred denoted a spontaneous human condition that had the power to ward off the danger of the “entropy of civilization” posed by the triumph of consumerist economics in modern society.<sup>39</sup> The sacred was an expression of our historically specific social condition, yet paradoxically it was not limited by that condition. Indeed,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 64; Cherchi and Cherchi, *De Martino: dalla crisi della presenza*, 117.

<sup>33</sup> First published in 1912, this work was translated into Italian as *Le forme elementari della vita religiosa* (Milan: Edizioni La Comunità, 1963).

<sup>34</sup> Steven Lukes, *Émile Durkheim, His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), 480.

<sup>35</sup> Carbone, “Pier Paolo Pasolini: Tempi, corpi, mutamento sociale,” 402.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 3.

<sup>37</sup> Gasbarro, “Sacralità come éthos del trascendimento,” 39.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 40.

Stracci has a clear link with the workers around him but no awareness of their shared identity. In this connection, Passannanti notes that the name Stracci makes literal reference to the Marxist idea of a lumpenproletariat (“rag proletariat”), denoting proletariat with no class consciousness.<sup>40</sup> Stracci is completely marginalized by the dominant system of economic and social control, and it is precisely his marginality that makes him, like the other sub-proletarians of Pasolini’s early films, an expression of the universal dignity of humankind.<sup>41</sup> The sub-proletariat was beyond the reach of the modern system of economic and social control; it continued to represent an archaic civilization, somehow closer to humankind’s pristine origins: that is what made it sacred.

The idea of a civic sacred rooted in humankind’s spontaneous social condition is an idea that permeates the religious debate in the 1960s and was a chief focus of the Second Vatican Council. Catholic practice was not only about remote sacramental values, but had immediate relevance for the people who supported the belief system. The Christian Democrats were an ostensible expression of this orientation, embracing an effort to wed civic commitment to faith, which found strong expression in progressive Catholics.<sup>42</sup> If we wish to look further afield, we also find contemporary movements that aimed explicitly to bring together Catholics and Marxists, most notably Liberation Theology, which had its roots in the 1960s and was soon dismissed by the Vatican hierarchy as a dangerous hybrid contrary to the fundamental tenets of the Church.<sup>43</sup>

Pasolini was not alien to this debate, for fascination with Catholicism was one of the distinguishing features of his thought.<sup>44</sup> Pasolini was brought up as a Catholic, but not within the framework of the Church.<sup>45</sup> In *Il sogno del centauro*, he states that his father had been an atheist, but went to church as a way of expressing support for the established order.<sup>46</sup> His mother embodied what Pasolini called natural religion, sharing peasant faith in the supernatural. He instead abandoned religion at the age of 14, which coincided with his discovery of Shakespearian theatre. The force of life was not God, but a classically inspired idea of fate. Pasolini was an atheist, in short, but religious at the same time—if religion can be taken to be the mysterious and sacred quality of life, far removed from any concept of divine intervention.

Though differently expressed in successive periods, religion finds its way throughout the entire corpus of Pasolini’s work, starting already in the 1950s with *La religione del mio tempo*. In his films, the theme of religion receives its most explicit treatment in *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo*. Reference to the sacred is also found in other films, such as *Teorema*, where spontaneous peasant faith is contrasted with the hypocrisy of bourgeois society. Potent religious references are prominent in the film *Porcile*, where the main figure wanders in the desert and trembles with joy at having killed his father and eaten his flesh in a grotesque parody of the Eucharist. Lisa El Ghaoui notes that even in the film *Medea* a concern with spirituality is found when the Centaur comments that there is nothing natural in nature.<sup>47</sup> The sacred is the immediacy of the natural world expressed in a spontaneous human community,

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<sup>40</sup> Erminia Passannanti, *Il Cristo dell’eresia: rappresentazione del sacro e censura nei film di Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Novi Ligure: Edizioni Joker, 2009), 30.

<sup>41</sup> Fabio Vighi, “Pasolini and Exclusion: Žižek, Agamben and the Modern Sub-Proletariat Theory,” *Culture and Society* 20, no. 5 (2003): 99-121, 102.

<sup>42</sup> Andrea Riccardi, *Le politiche della Chiesa* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 1997), 144-6.

<sup>43</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Orbis Books, 1988).

<sup>44</sup> Ezio Golino, *Tra lucciole e palazzo: il mito di Pasolini dentro la realtà* (Palermo: Sellerio Editore, 2005), 70.

<sup>45</sup> Dacia Maraini, *E tu chi eri? Interviste sull’infanzia* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1998), 325.

<sup>46</sup> Jean Dufлот, ed., *Pier Paolo Pasolini: il sogno del centauro* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1989), 20-21.

<sup>47</sup> Lisa El Ghaoui, “L’Enfer d’un monde sans religion: les derniers textes de Pasolini,” *Cahiers d’Études Italiennes* 9 (2009): 105-114.

a theme that runs throughout Pasolini's work. Yet though concerned with religion, Pasolini's work is far from religious, as he repeatedly notes. In connection with *Il Vangelo* he was asked if he believed Christ was the son of God, to which he responded, "Obviously not."<sup>48</sup>



Fig. 1. Pier Paolo Pasolini with Orson Welles on location, courtesy of The Kobal Collection at Art Resource, NY.

### **The film: *La ricotta***

*La ricotta* was Pasolini's third experience in filmmaking. A refinement of his ongoing civic commitment, Pasolini's film production was partly a product of his conviction that images had by the 1960s begun to replace words as a poetic device.<sup>49</sup> A chief focus of his poetic endeavor, under whose heading he would include film,<sup>50</sup> was the effort to critique the rise of technical culture over poetry, which was rooted in a conventional community where oral tradition was still strong. Poetry had a sacred character inasmuch as it was the direct expression of a natural world unmitigated by modernity.<sup>51</sup> Modernity and progress brought material well-being, but also the loss of a spontaneous poetic capacity, which Pasolini saw as being characteristic of the marginal rural classes of his day—as well as of the urban underclass.

*La ricotta* is part of a collectively authored film entitled *Ro.Go.Pa.G.*, which included the distinguished directors Roberto Rossellini, Ugo Gregoretti, and Jean-Luc Godard. Though a mere 35 minutes, Pasolini's segment is generally considered a complete film in its own right.<sup>52</sup> The story is straightforward. Stracci is the hero, an extra playing the good thief in a

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>49</sup> David Ward, *A Poetics of Resistance: Narrative and the Writings of Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Ontario: Associated University Presses, 1995).

<sup>50</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, trans. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2005), 172.

<sup>51</sup> In *Heretical Empiricism*, Pasolini theorized a distinction between spoken and spoken-written languages, where the former represented a direct relationship with nature, and the latter an instrumental and expressive relationship with work and society. This distinction, for Pasolini, marked the difference between what he interpreted as Lévi-Strauss's contrast between a prehistoric and a historic phase of human society. The ghost of spoken language, which persisted in spoken-written language, revealed elements of an earlier period of civilization. These pristine notions persisted in later periods as survivals in a continuous process of stratification. Among these primitive survivals we find notions of the sacred. See Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 58-61.

<sup>52</sup> Tommaso Subini, *Pier Paolo Pasolini: 'La ricotta'* (Turin: Lindau, 2009), 7.

filmic representation of the crucifixion of Christ shot in a peripheral part of Rome. Stracci is too poor to feed his family and gives his bag lunch to his wife and kids. Later on the same day, he comes into some money by selling the dog belonging to the film's diva. With the proceeds of the sale, he buys an abundant quantity of ricotta and bread. While feasting on this peasant fare in an isolated grotto, the film crew appears and serves him up a mocking banquet taken from the scene representing Christ's last supper. Shortly later, Stracci is hoisted up on the cross to shoot the crucifixion scene, where he truly dies of indigestion amidst the reproach of the assembled film crew, director, and film producer. In the society of spectacle, the Crucifixion becomes the ultimate gag at a cocktail party.

The film represents an intensely personal statement, often in deliberate polemic with the established authorities of the time. For instance, Pasolini calls the journalist in the film—the symbolic representation of base bourgeois values—by the name of a magistrate who had previously indicted Pasolini for immorality in earlier works.<sup>53</sup> Not surprisingly, this caused the film to be sequestered by the same magistrate. As always, the film puts at the forefront Pasolini's well-consolidated public identity as a rebel and an iconoclast. The film starts with a statement on-screen signed and read by Pasolini in which the director anticipates criticism of the film and claims personal authorship. This is not just any statement decrying the contemporary status of the sacred; it is *Pasolini's* pronouncement. This filmic device is a polemic against the then-fashionable structuralist ideas about the death of the author.<sup>54</sup>

Produced in 1963, *La ricotta* continues the transition from his first, rather lyrical film, *Accattone*, to his more symbolic *Mamma Roma*. It thus extends the move away from the celebration of sub-proletarian culture found in his novels.<sup>55</sup> Rather than present an aesthetically enhanced view of the underclass, *La Ricotta* represents a clearly articulated critique of contemporary society. Its message is almost pedagogical in character, revolving around an indictment of an idea of the sacred that the director associates with the Vatican. While in earlier writings, such as *La Divina Mimesi*, in which he speaks of a future without religion, in later works he asks explicitly if it is possible to imagine a church without the Vatican.<sup>56</sup> He associates the decay of religious thought with the Vatican, rather than with the community of the church itself. This rejection and simultaneous embrace of religion may seem contradictory, yet the contradiction hinges on the definition of the phenomenon. Identifying the Vatican as responsible for the corruption of a powerful Western religious message cannot be misunderstood: it is an attack on Italy's official religion, as defined in the Lateran Treaties, which must (and did) result in inevitable criminal prosecution. In historical terms, the very purpose of the film was to challenge the legitimacy of state religion in Italy, but the kind of religion challenged was already under indictment within progressive religious circles themselves.

Pasolini's artistic production is entirely contemporary, and even prophetic, however it also expresses continuity with the past. This is the meaning of the words from his poem *Poesie Mondane*, published in the written version of *Mamma Roma*, and read out in a central scene of *La ricotta*:

Io sono una forza del passato.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>54</sup> Carla Benedetti, *Pasolini contro Calvino: per una letteratura impura* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998), 11-12.

<sup>55</sup> Subini, *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, 114.

<sup>56</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari* (Milan: Garzanti, 2008).

Solo nella tradizione è il mio amore.<sup>57</sup>

(I am a force of the past.  
My love is only in tradition.)

Pasolini here expresses his appreciation for the classical forms of Italian literature and art. Perhaps the strongest expression of continuity with the great traditions of Italian literature is found in his use of Dante's *terza rima* in the poem *Il pianto della scavatrice* (The Tears of the Excavator). This poem is a key for understanding the film explored here, not only because of its celebration of a classical poetic style, but also for its characterization of the periphery of Rome as a place of delight.<sup>58</sup> The filmic statement, as well as expressing aesthetic continuity with the past, may also allude to an impossible return to a pristine past. From the opening scenes of the film, the life of Christ is represented as a true story, the truth of which is supported by biblical quotations, by direct statements formulated by the filmmaker, and by reference to two of Pasolini's favorite masterpieces of Italian religious painting.<sup>59</sup> As we shall see better in the next sections, explicit reference to selected religious paintings is supported by the implied sacred character of the Roman landscape, which is a backdrop for key scenes of the film.

Yet for all of its serious intent, the film makes abundant use of irony and humor. The showing of the crown of thorns against the backdrop of urban sprawl represents a form of bitter irony, as does the choice to situate a sacred landscape within view of the speculative growth of post-war Rome. In one scene, Orson Welles, impersonating Pasolini, states that the film is about his archaic Catholicism, and does so with an ironic smirk. There is a playful quality in the scene, where the actor playing Nicodemus in *The Deposition* picks his nose, forcing the director to interrupt the shot and start again. In another moment, actors echo in turn the call for a new scene to be shot; among those calling out, "Make the other scene!" is a German shepherd dog that mouths the words, with obvious humorous intent. Stracci sells the Diva's dog, and his race to the ricotta stand is shown in fast-forward motion, accompanied by music one might find in a Charlie Chaplin movie. He pauses briefly to give thanks to a shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary and on his way passes a group of runners who have stopped on the roadside to perform a mocking rendition of calisthenics. In another scene, the journalist passes *carabinieri* who are collecting flowers; they say they have nothing better to do. The film thus employs a rich array of narrative techniques to convey its message. It also makes abundant use of metafilmic elements, especially found in the visual imagery and the music.

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<sup>57</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, "La Ricotta," In *RO.GO.PA.G.* (Rome: CENERIZ [Film], 1963). Sequence 7. For a list of film sequences see Subini, *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, 87-91. The original poem is from Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Poesie Mondane." In *Poesia in Forma di Rosa* (Milan: Garzanti, [1964] 2012), 23-24.

<sup>58</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Le ceneri di Gramsci* (Milan: Garzanti, 1957), 91-112.

<sup>59</sup> Fabien S. Gerard, "Ricordi figurative di Pasolini," *Prospettiva* 32 (1983): 32-47.



Fig. 2. Pontormo's *Transport of Christ* with its explosion of desperate vitality, courtesy of Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

## Painting and film

Italian filmmaking has a long tradition of borrowing from painting. Visconti's *Senso* is perhaps the most illustrious example, where the camera frame reproduces images drawn from Italy's rich heritage of painting: but Pasolini is in a special class.<sup>60</sup> His well-known inexperience in filmmaking is undercut by the use of painting for the creation of a new visual universe. In this particular film, devotional painting is put at the forefront, in harmony with interests explored in the screenplay. Not only do the individual frames reflect this but so does their combination into a complete visual statement. Masaccio was the source of inspiration for his early cinematic imagery.<sup>61</sup> *Quattrocento* religious painting in Pasolini's interpretation is a composite of close-up facial images combined in such a way to create a mood and tell a story, such as we find in Masaccio's *The Tribute Money*, where facial images render the intense humanity of the scene.<sup>62</sup> The importance of the face is already seen in *Accattone*, whose establishing shot is nothing more than a close-up portrait of a laughing face. *La ricotta* also dwells at length on portraiture, creating a mood, telling a story—and establishing a direct link with “real” humanity.

Much of the visual imagery of *La ricotta* is rooted in the apparent simplicity of the *Quattrocento*, where the link between the image and the viewer is presumed to be direct and unmediated. The artistic devices used to render the images in a realistic way are removed from the viewer's conscious attention. This approach inspires a large part of the film's visual imagery. Another part, however, is more powerfully polysemic, inviting the film to be read on different levels. Most obviously this is a story about the Passion of Christ, but it is also a critique of the way the story is conventionally told. This layering effect constitutes the narrative's chief structuring device, especially its rendering as a story within a story. In order to create a polysemic effect, and draw the viewer into an assessment of the filmic message,

<sup>60</sup> Antonio Del Guercio, “Modelli pittorici in *Senso*: sentimento lombardo e composta naturalezza toscana,” in *Il cinema dei pittori: le arti e il cinema italiano 1940-1980*, ed. Francesco Galluzzi, 55-60 (Milan: Skira Editori, 2007).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Gerard writes that it was indeed the visual inspiration of the Brancacci Chapel in Florence, containing the *Tribute Money*, which allowed Pasolini to develop a technique aiming to “sacralize” the bodies and the places captured in cinematic reproduction. Gerard, “Ricordi figurativi di Pasolini,” 45.

Pasolini borrows from two of the most celebrated altarpieces of Tuscan Mannerism. Subini notes that Mannerism, for all of its historical distance, was inspired by some of the same principles as Pasolini's modernism.<sup>63</sup> The choice of Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino as the two tableaux on which to hang the filmic story serves various artistic needs. The work of both of these artists was being reassessed in the years when Pasolini made his film. Subini tells us that a recent volume on Pontormo, published under the inspiration of Roberto Longhi, was on the set at the time *La ricotta* was being shot.<sup>64</sup> It is evident that Pasolini drew inspiration from it, not only for the individual shot compositions, but also for the film's narrative framework. An empathy factor may also have played a role; the two Florentines were *artisti maledetti* in their day, just as Pasolini was in his. Nigro notes the philological sophistication of this choice, bringing two *Cinquecento* Florentine *Dioscuri* into creative harmony with Pier Paolo Pasolini and his impersonator in the film, Welles, another renegade artist.<sup>65</sup>

Pasolini acted as a modern-day Pontormo, transporting the rebellious spirit of the Tuscan Mannerists into modern times. What is especially striking about Pontormo's *The Deposition from the Cross* (1526 ca.) is the liquid splendor of his colors, or what Nigro calls an explosion of "desperate vitality."<sup>66</sup> In *La ricotta*, this vitality is accompanied by the desecrating attitude of the actors who realize the altarpiece in a *tableau vivant* mirroring the debased use the Vatican makes of Scripture. The contrast between the splendor of the altarpiece and the cavalier representation associated with the Vatican is the film's strongest indictment of the Church. In order to signpost the film's symbolic construction, only the scenes associated with the altarpieces—both Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino—are shot in color. The rest is shot in black and white: a vivid contrast between the pretentious pomp of the Vatican and the drab reality of the everyday sacred.

The choice of music contributes richly to the film's multilayered quality, completing the metalinguistic interaction provided by references to the two altarpieces. The music alternates between the sacred and the profane. On the one hand, we find sacred music by Scarlatti and Gluck and the *Dies Irae* by Tommaso da Celano. On the other, we find the *Eclissetwist* by Giovanni Fusco, the *RoGoPaG twist* by Carlo Rustichelli, and a band version of the aria "Sempre libera" from Verdi's *La traviata*.<sup>67</sup> These are often combined in humorous ways, with the profane music being mistakenly played during the film's presumed sacred moments. The interlocking visual and musical contrast is so strong that the dichotomy between filmic and civic sacred cannot escape even the most casual viewer.

The compositional scheme of Pontormo's masterpiece, *The Deposition*, also echoes in visual form the semantic transformations rendered in the film. Like the film, Pontormo's composition is deliberately iconoclastic, it is both citing and refuting Michelangelo's idea of a *pietà*. In his rendering, Pontormo not only separates mother and child but also engages the viewer in a more complex relationship. Michelangelo suspends disbelief and invites the viewer to admire the scene as an objective portrayal of reality. Pontormo instead forefronts a complex interplay of viewing frames, which forces the viewer to critically recognize the relationship between the artist's intentions and the viewer's experience of the artwork. *The Deposition* is not a simple portrayal of the historic scene; it is a multilayered rendering of it. Ostensibly, *The Deposition* is a modified deposition, in which all the standard characters are present. Yet the scene spills out from the canvas into the space occupied by the viewer. At the most obvious level, Christ is held lightly by two angels in the process of transporting him to a

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<sup>63</sup> Subini, *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, 152.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>67</sup> Roberto Gerardo, "Musica nei film di Pasolini," *Pier Paolo Pasolini: pagine Corsare*, [http://www.pasolini.net/6tesimy\\_capitolosecondo01.htm](http://www.pasolini.net/6tesimy_capitolosecondo01.htm).

point where his body can be deposited on the altar located just below the painting. Christ is not only in the painting but is about to appear in the space occupied by the modern viewer, thus juxtaposing the idea of a remote sacred scene with the immediacy of ordinary life. This proxemic tension is also enacted in *La ricotta*.

Another layer in the relationship between *The Deposition* and the viewer is found in the image of God the Father, once located at the entrance to the chapel.<sup>68</sup> While standing in the chapel, the viewer cannot fail to note that the eyes of the angels who bear Christ's body are directed outside the picture frame, gazing out at the image of God the Father, located behind the viewer. The viewer is once more drawn into the represented scene, the integrity of which is secured by the gaze of women mourners fixed on the image of the bereaved Virgin located within the painted frame. The viewer is thus outside the image, but repeatedly drawn into it. Likewise *La ricotta* portrays a scene so constructed as to represent multiple narratives within the single story of Christ's passion, forcing the viewer to take an active role in appraising the scenes portrayed.

The most remarkable feature of the altarpiece, however, is the contrast between the void on which the painting is centered and the surrounding context of the chapel. One of the Marys holds in her hand a cloth with which to cleanse the wounds of a now-absent body of Christ. This is in contrast with the cloth held by God the Father, a spiritual complement to the bodily ministrations shown in the canvas.<sup>69</sup> Here spirit and body are mirrored, furnishing two different registers from which Christ can be apprehended. This complements the two different perspectives from which *La ricotta* can be viewed. On the one hand, we find the disembodied passion of the filmic enactment and on the other, we view the salvific passion of human suffering that is beyond the reach of modern capitalist society. The latter brings Christ outside iconic representation and into the company of ordinary men.

Multilevel seepage and polysemic permutation characterize Pontormo's altarpiece, much as they do our film. An obvious contrast is between the visible author of the filmic sacred, Welles, and its invisible creator, Pasolini. The cross itself is portrayed in multiple ways. The profane cross of the banquet table contrasts strikingly with the true cross of the civic sacred. The latter is the cross of the sub-proletarian extra, Stracci, who the aims of the fictional sacred and truly dies. Multiple layers are also found in the symbols of Christ's passion, especially the crown of thorns, woven around visible and invisible narrative elements. The scene in which Stracci is pelted with food in a mocking parody of the Last Supper is a perverse representation of the modern Magi of Vatican charity.<sup>70</sup> Throughout, the austere value of true human existence is contrasted with the colorful spectacle of the sacred. In Pasolini's eyes, the Vatican leveraged aesthetic tools to beguile and mislead: genuine human suffering needs no aesthetic commentary. This is an expression of Pasolini's conscious move away from his own aesthetic portrayals of urban marginality. The aesthetically rendered portrayal of *Accattone* gives ways to an unequivocal critique of the established order. Even the quotation from the Gospel of St. Matthew in the projected text that precedes the film references the interplay between visible and invisible.<sup>71</sup> Matthew says, "He that has ears to hear, let him hear."<sup>72</sup> This is the way every parable ends, for the kingdom of God represents a truth that can only be grasped indirectly. In parable fashion, *La ricotta* constructs meaning using elements known to all viewers. This truth is beyond words and beyond the deceptive value of Vatican posturing. This quote from the Gospel denounces the other worldly sacred in order to bring the sacred back to the world.

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<sup>68</sup> Nigro, *L'orologio di Pontormo* (Milan: Bompiani, 2013), 71.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Alessandro Cappabianca, *Il cinema e il sacro* (Genoa: Le Mani, 1998), 71.

<sup>71</sup> Subini, *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, 100.

<sup>72</sup> Matthew 11:15 King James 2000 Bible.



Rosso Fiorentino's stunning altarpiece *Descent from the Cross* (1521) instead operates on a different plane, although it is still complementary to the aesthetic aims of *La ricotta*. Once more the vivid color provides a dramatic contrast to the black and white scenes of everyday life. But more important is the unusually rough painting technique and strongly stylized rendering of human figures. This is perhaps best seen in the unnatural inclination of the Virgin's head, an expression of suffering dramatically rendered with a few brushstrokes. The crude quality of the brush stroke seems to mirror the cinematic technique that Pasolini had already adopted in *Accattone*. The departure from the polish of representational technique invites viewers to consider their own perspective in viewing the artwork, seeing the image not as *the world in itself* but as a representation of the world. The artist foregrounds artistic subjectivity, inviting viewers to consider their own subjective response to both the scene and its representation. Neither suspends disbelief, reminding the viewer that any point of view is a human construct.

### Sacred and profane landscapes

In Renaissance painting, the landscape began to acquire special narrative value around 1470. The landscape in painting was "humanized," giving "sustenance to the physical needs and spiritual yearnings of the men who inhabit it."<sup>73</sup> In the hands of such painters as Giovanni Bellini and Giorgione, landscape helped establish the mood of a painting. Light played a special role, often contrasting the haze of the landscape in the background with the crisp quality of foreground figures. Landscape moved from being an ornamental addition to being part of the narrative. The figures and the landscape fused into a single narrative event, where the divine nature of humanity became such in a divine natural setting.<sup>74</sup> Pasolini makes similar use of "sacred" landscape in his films, redefined according to his own poetic needs. Giorgione's *The Tempest* uses lightning to create an intense mood, not unlike the thunder and lightning employed to create tension in *La ricotta* in the moments preceding Stracci's death on the cross.

In the hazy background that accompanies *La ricotta*, we find the pristine rolling hills that one might expect to see in Giovanni Bellini's *Saint Francis in Ecstasy*. The sparse buildings emit a sacred aura nestled within a sacred landscape. The trees are those of the sacred landscapes in Renaissance painting, scattered amongst the umbrella pines (*pinus pinea*) that are so typical of the *campagna romana*. This is the subject of repeated long panning shots, accompanied by music of a grave and sacred quality. But equally present in these shots is the circle of the city's modern urban growth. This is part of a modern cityscape that could stand for the uncontrolled development of the outskirts so typical of Rome in the 1950s and 1960s.

The bucolic mood of Renaissance painting was rooted in the rediscovery of classical antique pastoral poetry, set in the hills and groves of rural Italy, far removed from the commerce and politics of the urban world.<sup>75</sup> This landscape was the *locus amoenus* of the classical Arcadian poets. Poetry also inspired Pasolini's landscape, but in a very distinct manner. His *locus amoenus* expressed a different kind of delight: not associated with untouched nature, but with the harsh reality of the Roman *borgata*. Pasolini's celebration of these underprivileged urban areas was most famously evident in a poem published in the late

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<sup>73</sup> Richard A. Turner, *The Vision of Landscape in Renaissance Italy* (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>74</sup> David Rosand, "Giorgione, Venice, and the Pastoral Vision," in *Places of Delight: The Pastoral Landscape*, ed. Cafritz, Robert, Lawrence, Gowing and David Rosand (Washington, D.C.: The Phillips Collection, 1988), 63-66.

<sup>75</sup> Rosand, "Giorgione, Venice, and the Pastoral Vision," 67-73.

1950s, *The Tears of the Excavator*.<sup>76</sup> There he reversed the classical tradition of the ode dedicated to an antique ideal of aesthetic purity and wrote instead a hymn on modern human suffering, i.e., his own idea of the sacred. Pasolini reached this new aesthetic understanding by departing from the classical canon, which Rhodes summed up in the idea of a “stupendous miserable city.”<sup>77</sup> Yet the two aesthetic standards needed not be mutually exclusive. On the one hand, Pasolini was part of the classical tradition in his visual rendering of the landscape around Rome. This tradition was given particular impetus around the turn of the 20th century, when the city of Rome—the new capital of a new nation—began to experience unprecedented growth. Italian landscape painters fled from the city, repelled by its urban sprawl.<sup>78</sup> They documented in artistic form a landscape that was still recognizable in *La ricotta*. Sprawling growth also played a role in Pasolini’s experience of the city, paradoxically more as a force of attraction driven by his love for the Roman sub-proletariat, than as a force of repulsion, since he ultimately denounces it. Indeed, *La ricotta* manages to reconcile two different visions of the sacred landscape, one historic and one modern.

Pasolini’s sacred was drawn from a vision brought forward through Renaissance painting and modernized in his own iconoclastic poetic creations. In this transformation, the sacred acquired a timeless quality, regenerated in successive historical expressions. The real downfall of modern society for Pasolini was capitalist speculation, a force which united the modern Italian bourgeoisie with the Vatican. As Pasolini suggested in his filmic statements, human existence had no autonomous value in the world of capitalist production. True human value in this film is expressed visually in the continual return to the sacred landscapes invented by Giovanni Bellini, symbolizing the sacred value of the human condition in a lost yet not forgotten past.



Fig. 3. *Stracci on the Cross*, courtesy of The Kobal Collection at Art Resource, NY.

## Vatican II and the politics of the sacred

Pontormo was himself a renegade from a religious standpoint: this is most strikingly seen in his now lost “Last Judgment” painted for the San Lorenzo chapel in Florence, where the figure of Christ was placed above the figure of God the Father. This was a heretical choice, referring perhaps to the then-fashionable Waldensian heresy.<sup>79</sup> It placed a human figure at the center of religious attention—a this-earthly orientation contrasting with the canonical idea of a sacred beyond the reach of ordinary human agency. Like Pasolini, Pontormo projected his

<sup>76</sup> Pasolini, *Le ceneri di Gramsci*, 91-112.

<sup>77</sup> John David Rhodes, *Stupendous Miserable City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

<sup>78</sup> Renato Mammucari, “I XXV” della Campagna Romana: *pittura di paesaggio a Roma e nella sua campagna dall’Ottocento ai primi del Novecento* (Velletri: Edizioni Tra 8 & 9, 1990).

<sup>79</sup> Nigro, *L’orologio di Pontormo*, 31-34.

idea of the sacred into the community of the living. But Pasolini, unlike Pontorno, was able to state his iconographic program explicitly, positioning himself with respect to a debate that was a critical feature of religious life in the early 1960s.

In a key contextualizing scene, Pasolini has a journalist, the emblem of bourgeois mediocrity, ask the director, Welles, four questions. These four questions and their relative answers establish Pasolini's political orientation.

TEGLIESERA: [...] [C]he cosa vuole esprimere con questa sua nuova opera?

REGISTA:[...] [I]l mio profondo, intimo, arcaico cattolicesimo.

TEGLIESERA: [...] [C]he cosa pensa della società italiana?

REGISTA: [...] Il popolo più analfabeta, la borghesia più ignorante d'Europa.

TEGLIESERA: [...] [C]he ne pensa della morte?

REGISTA: [...] Come marxista, è un fatto che io non prendo in considerazione.

TEGLIESERA: [...] [Q]uale' la sua opinione [...] sul nostro grande Federico Fellini?

REGISTA: [...] Egli danza!<sup>80</sup>

(JOURNALIST: What do you wish to express with this new film?

DIRECTOR: My profound, intimate, archaic Catholicism.

JOURNALIST: What do you think of Italian society?

DIRECTOR: The most illiterate people and the most ignorant bourgeoisie of Europe.

JOURNALIST: What do you think of death?

DIRECTOR: As a Marxist it is not something I take into consideration.

JOURNALIST: What is your opinion of our great Federico Fellini?

DIRECTOR: He dances!)

The term "profound, archaic Catholicism" references the idea of a Church without the Vatican, a topic addressed in *Scritti corsari*. Is it possible to imagine a sacred expressed in the everyday human condition outside the political and administrative functions of the Vatican State? Pasolini's comment on the backward quality of the Italian bourgeoisie is a familiar topic, indicting its complacency in a period of declining human value. When Welles apostrophizes the journalist, he calls him "an average man" and thus a colonialist, a slave-driver, a person without values (i.e., *qualunquista*). He is a colonialist, not only in the *terzomondista* acceptance, but also by spectacularizing the sacred and separating humanity from the representation of its own condition. Welles goes on to note that the journalist does not even exist, for as a worker he is the mere instrument of capital and exists only to the extent that capital wishes him to exist. The journalist, true to his bourgeois character, laughs foolishly, agreeing with the words but missing their deeper meaning. At that point, Welles turns his back on the journalist in a gesture that measures his inability to communicate to the symbol of bourgeois mediocrity the tragedy of his condition.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, "La ricotta," in *Ali dagli occhi azzurri* (Milan: Garzanti, 2005), 473-474.

<sup>81</sup> "Lei non ha capito niente perché lei è un uomo medio: un uomo medio è un mostro, un pericoloso delinquente, conformista, razzista, schiavista, qualunquista. Lei non esiste [...] Il capitale non considera esistente la manodopera se non quando serve la produzione [...] e il produttore del mio film è anche il padrone del suo giornale. [...] Addio." Pier Paolo Pasolini, "La ricotta."

(You have not understood anything because you are an average man: an average man is a monster, a dangerous criminal, a conformist, a racist, a slave-driver, a person without values. You do not exist. [...] Capital does not

The idea of archaic Catholicism not only defends the centrality of the sacred but continues the film's opening statement, where Pasolini states that the Gospel is the greatest story of the Western tradition. His position is further reinforced by his statement that, as a Marxist, death is not something he takes into consideration. The story of Christ is not of the other world; it is of the here and now. The final remark about Fellini is a favorite trope in what Rhodes has described as Pasolini's Oedipal reaction against the masters of Italian postwar filmmaking.<sup>82</sup> In this case, it also expresses Pasolini's rejection of the use of film as an aesthetic exercise in favor of the critical approach to contemporary society with which he experimented in this film.

Pasolini's effort to assert the presence of a sacred *in* rather than *beyond* the world was a fundamental feature, not only of his works, but of debate in religious circles in those years. Not by chance was Pasolini close to significant discussion within the church community, especially associated with the community of Civitatis Cristiana.<sup>83</sup> These were the years when John XXIII's encyclical *Peace on Earth* was issued, with its powerful statement that "laws and decrees passed in contravention of the moral order [...] can have no binding force on conscience."<sup>84</sup> This moral order was the social order divinely mandated. What better invitation to civil disobedience? These were also the years of Aldo Moro's first experience in a center-left government marked by the so-called parallel convergence of Catholic and Marxist cultures. Moro's political experience was possible owing to the ongoing debate on the worldly status of the sacred associated with the Second Vatican Council. According to the Council, the sacred was not only remote sacramental efficacy; it was the brotherhood of Christ in this world. Similarly, putting a worldly Christ ahead of a transcendental Almighty was what Pontormo did in his lost masterpiece and what Pasolini enacted in *La ricotta*.

These progressive ideas persist in contemporary Italy, almost four decades after Pasolini's death. Key members of the Civitatis group included Luigi Ciotti, the founder of the antimafia association Libera, and Enzo Bianchi, an important contemporary critic of Berlusconi. These were also the ideas of Giorgio La Pira, which found later expression in another progressive Catholic mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, the new hope of a political party that fuses together Catholic and Marxist strands of the postwar Italian political heritage. Internationally speaking, this was also the position of Liberation Theology.

## Contemporary debate

In another contextualizing scene, the film script creates an exchange between the cinematic Christ representing the Vatican and the real Christ represented by the real human, Stracci. As they are nailed to their respective crosses waiting to be hoisted up on Calvary Hill, Stracci turns to the filmic Christ to remark that he, Stracci, is so hungry he feels like swearing. The former says jokingly he will excommunicate Stracci for this profanation and then comments on the paradox that a deadbeat (*morto di fame*) like Stracci should vote for the bourgeois party, meaning the Christian Democrats. To this Stracci retorts that the party of the filmic Christ, implicitly the PCI, is not much better; political parties, he states, are all the same (*ammazza ammazza è tutta una razza*). Stracci's position voices Pasolini's own disappointment with the failed revolutionary aspirations of the PCI. But Stracci's voice is also that of a lumpenproletariat far removed from the centers of political debate.

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consider labor to exist unless it serves its own productive needs [...] and the producer of my film is also the owner of your newspaper. [...] Goodbye.)

<sup>82</sup> Rhodes, *Stupendous Miserable City*, 151.

<sup>83</sup> Subini, *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, 60.

<sup>84</sup> Angelo Roncalli, *Pacem in terris* (Vatican, 1963),

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_11041963\\_pacem\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem_en.html).

The Second Republic reduced the historic dialectic between Catholics and Communists to an important but peripheral part of the Italian political debate. Both subcultures experienced decline in the 1980s, as politics moved away from occupying a defining role in local community identity and shifted forcefully to the plane of media representation. While the Communist subculture was strongly undermined by geopolitical changes in the 1980s, the persistence of Catholic identity was assured by the continuing influence of the Vatican.<sup>85</sup> Change in the Italian Second Republic appears to be slow, ironically in contrast to recent change in the Vatican, which seems to have accelerated with the elevation of Francis I to the papal throne. His accession to the papacy may indeed rekindle the debate explored here. The shift in papal orientation was best seen in Francis's reception of the inventor of Liberation Theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, in the first audience he was granted after decades of isolation.<sup>86</sup> This shift may support the hope that the Church can indeed exist without the Vatican, or within a Vatican, which is closer to civic ideals than to political ones.

Perhaps the most enduring message contained in *La ricotta* is the hope that past and present, rational and irrational, can be reassembled in a way that represents genuine human value. Barbato puts it nicely when he states that Pasolini enacts the silent apocalypse obliterating the separation of the rational from the irrational, past from present, the self from the other.<sup>87</sup> This idea was radical in the 1960s, and still today we find desertifying effects that this separation entails. The contemporary citizen must go beyond the surface of spectacle to reappropriate a truly human language rooted in a genuine human condition. This is the essence of the sacred: the poetics of everyday existence. Not by chance Pasolini celebrates imperfection in his late poetic creations and decries the poetic polish of bourgeois writers.<sup>88</sup> For him, the sacred is found in the musicality of language but, more importantly, in opposition to bourgeois culture, which aims to dominate and instrumentalize our human condition for material aims. If for Pasolini the sacred is a shifting position rather than a fixed content, a purpose whose aim is to defend the integrity of the human condition, then his message was as radical in the 1960s as it is compelling today.

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<sup>85</sup> Alberto Melloni, "The Politics of the 'Church' in the Italy of Pope Wojtyła," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 12, no. 1 (2007): 60-85.

<sup>86</sup> Francis Rocca, "Under Pope Francis, Liberation Theology Comes of Age," *Catholic News Service* (September 13, 2013) <http://www.catholicnews.com>.

<sup>87</sup> Barbato, *L'alternativa fantasma*, 255.

<sup>88</sup> Benedetti, *Pasolini contro Calvino*, 15-16.

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## Illustrations

Figure One. Pier Paolo Pasolini with Orson Welles on location. Courtesy of The Kobal Collection at Art Resource, New York.

Figure Two. Pontormo’s *Transport of Christ* with its explosion of desperate vitality. Courtesy of Erich Lessing / Art Resource, New York.

Figure Three. *Stracci* on the Cross. Courtesy of The Kobal Collection at Art Resource, New York.