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**Article:**

Ng, Jenna (2007) Poetry of Squalor: Exploring the borgata in Pier Paolo Pasolini's Accattone. *Opticon* 1826. ISSN: 2049-8128

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POETRY OF SQUALOR:  
EXPLORING THE *BORGATA* IN PIER PAOLO  
PASOLINI'S *ACCATTONE*

—  
By Pei-Suin Ng  
—

[P]oetry also has the responsibility to sear the retina the way a laser beam carves a diamond rock. And this transformative potential—of not merely changing what we see by illuminating them, but perhaps to also surgically change the way we see, I located only in poetry—that fistful of harmless, impalpable gunpowder.  
~ Alfian Sa'at<sup>1</sup>

Don Marquis once wrote a poem about a fly who argued that he was 'a vessel of righteousness scattering seeds of justice' by helping to rid the world of alcoholics and the iniquitous who succumbed to the germs he carried to them.<sup>2</sup> In justification stretched to absurdity, Marquis makes the point that grime, poverty and squalor do not constitute attractive subjects—surely it is easier to be enticed by bright lights and beauty, more tempting to revel in glitz, glamour and grandeur.

Yet Pasolini's Rome as depicted in his early films centers precisely on such wretchedness: set predominantly in the urban periphery, Pasolini's camera determinedly avoids the more pleasant sights of the Pantheon or the Trevi Fountain, preferring instead the grimness of the *borgate* or the wilderness in the city outskirts. This essay focuses on Pasolini's cinematic representation of the Roman slums, or the *borgate*, in *Accattone* by analysing on various levels its significance as a specific topographical space. My primary argument is that Pasolini's alternate take on the *borgate*, replete with myth, utopian idealism and ideological ambition, nonetheless remains a flawed striving of romanticism,

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<sup>1</sup> 'Letter from a young poet to an older one', 10 April 2002, <http://alfian.diaryland.com/children.html> (visited 16 February 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Don Marquis, 'a spider and a fly' in *araby and mehitabel* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 40.

whose redemption remains out of reach, and whose doom is inescapable.

Analysing Space: Aesthetic, Metaphor and Spatial Paradigm

*Beauty and Ugliness, Beauty in Ugliness: Estetismo del Lercio*

Shot in the slums of Pigneto, the *borgata* in *Accattone* is not pretty: a place of tremendous poverty and decrepitude, its landscape is of peeling shacks, crumbling walls, rusted barbed wire-fences, rubbish-strewn wastelands and shabby rooms. Life is generally either made up of crime, violence and exploitation, or the daily grind of menial toil. Poverty is a constant preoccupation and hunger is never far away.

Yet through various means, the *borgata* is filmed by Pasolini as a place of beauty and, more importantly, sanctity. P. Adams Sitney highlights the hagiographical model of *Accattone*, pointing out, among other arguments, 'Gospel allusions ranging from the farfetched—*Accattone's* meal and his dive into the Tiber wearing gold ornaments as a parody of the Temptations in the desert—to the blatant—his death in the company of two thieves'.<sup>3</sup> The setting of J.S. Bach's *St Matthew Passion* to the sordid details of the *borgata* is another obvious device of Pasolini's *sacralità tecnica*.<sup>4</sup> beyond the accompaniment of the music's intrinsic beauty to the ugliness of the slums, as one of the most inspired musical treatment of Passiontide the score also lends the sacredness of Christ's pain to *Accattone's* own afflictions. Imbued in such symbolism, the *borgata* is thus no longer the rathole of the *ragazzi* (youths), but a place of sacredness, whose squalor is a sacrosanct suffering.

The grace of the *borgata* is further dignified by Pasolini's frequent allusions to art and literature, a technique which pertains to his style of '*contaminazione*'. First identified in his linguistic studies,<sup>5</sup> Pasolini's

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<sup>3</sup> P. Adams Sitney, *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), pp. 176-7.

<sup>4</sup> Though I personally felt the choice of a *Passion* by Bach rather odd, given Pasolini's Catholic (and Italian) sensibilities: not only was Bach a Lutheran, he also set *St. Matthew Passion* in his native German (Passions written in German being a phenomenon which came about only during the Reformation).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, 'New Linguistic Questions', 'Comments on Free Indirect Discourse' 'Dante's Will To Be A Poet' and

notion of ‘contamination’ calls for a pastiche of styles whereby ‘high brow’ culture interlaces with the ‘low’, resulting in a creative combination of mutually traversing humility and splendor. Hence, the use of the culturally prestigious *St Matthew Passion* effectively counter-points the ‘low life’ elements of the *borgate*, as does the quotation from Dante which opens the film, or the shots of Accattone framed and lit like a Mannerist saint. Art is indeed a frequent reference: Sitney describes *Accattone* as proceeding through ‘a series of gestural moments, consciously modeled on the fresco panels of the great Florentine masters of the early Renaissance.’<sup>6</sup> In these ways, the landscape of poverty in the *borgate* is vicariously enriched by the glory of religious art, literary resonance and musical grandeur.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the sacredness of the *borgata* is also enhanced by the film’s cinematic style. Pasolini describes his crafting of *Accattone’s* aesthetic:

[T]he lenses were [...] lenses that render the materials heavy, exalt the modeling, the chiaroscuro, give weight and often an unpleasantness of worm-eaten wood or porous stone to the figures, etc. Especially when one uses them with ‘stained’ lighting, backlighting [...] that hollows out the orbits of the eyes, the shadows under the nose and around the mouth [...]. Thus was born, in the ensemble of [*Accattone*], in its figurative machinery, that ‘grave aestheticism of death [...].’<sup>8</sup>

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pp. xviii-xix in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Sitney, *Vital Crises*, p. 180.

<sup>7</sup> At this point it might be interesting to note Noa Steimatsky’s argument that ‘contamination’ also recalls ‘Erich Auerbach’s analysis of the Gospel of Mark in terms of a mingling of voices’ (‘Pasolini on *Terra Sancta*: Towards a Theology of Film’, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 11.1 (1998), pp. 241-2). According to Steimatsky, Pasolini shows knowledge of Auerbach’s text in his book, *Les dernières paroles d’un impie: entretiens avec Jean Dufloy* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1981), pp. 140-41. Not being able to read French, I have not consulted the reference, though I note that Pasolini specifically states in an interview with Oswald Stack that he is not in deliberate pursuit of a stylistic formula but simply for ‘the degree of intensity to which I bring the contamination and mixture of the various styles’ (*Pasolini on Pasolini* (London: British Film Institute, 1969), p. 28), making it slightly suspect just how much one should pursue the content or substantial significance behind Pasolini’s style of *contaminazione*.

<sup>8</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, ‘Confessioni tecniche’, *Uccellacci e uccellini* (Milano: Garzanti, 1966), p. 44.

In terms of shot composition, Pasolini, using the telephoto lens, frequently adopts a flat, frontal *mise-en-scène*, such as the shot of Accattone poised on the bridge, ready to dive into the Tiber. According to Steimatsky, such a ‘frontal assault’ on the profilmic ‘evokes the gilded vertical surface of the icon receptive to the incarnation of a divine [...] figure’, where ‘figure and background converge in a static ceremonial composition, designed for veneration.’<sup>9</sup> Pasolini’s camera is also usually static (indeed, Pasolini deliberately fixed his Arriflex camera by removing its up/down lever),<sup>10</sup> and movement is often subdued with slow pans rather than cuts.<sup>11</sup> Long tracking shots are favoured, keeping the characters in a constant relation to the frame for minimal disruption, resulting in an elegiac and measured style appropriately underpinning the film’s cinematic aesthetic of gravitas, consecrated beauty, even reverence.

However, beyond a certain point the value of style empty of substance has to be questioned. Pasolini’s partiality to emotive response rather than content is emphatic: ‘[...] what counts is the depth of feeling, the passion I put into things; *it isn’t so much the novelty of the content* [...] [my emphasis].’<sup>12</sup> But what is the worth of sentiment *sans* substance? Accattone at the end of the film dies as a thief caught in a freak accident while trying to escape. How can this figure be read as one exalted? He is no saviour; living a life of crime and exploitation he has neither nobility nor honour. He dies without virtue or transfiguration—his career change from pimp to thief (though apparently a ‘promotion’ in Pasolinean terms) is hardly a major elevation on any objective basis, nor his half-hearted attempt to make an honest living, abandoned after one day, in any way a saving grace.<sup>13</sup> No matter the stylistic sophistry, without

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<sup>9</sup> Steimatsky, ‘Pasolini on *Terra Sancta*’, pp. 247 and 249.

<sup>10</sup> Sam Rohdie, *The Passion of Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 8. As a tangential point, this does compare interestingly to an oppositional stylistic aesthetic of the roving *flâneur*, or wanderer, in other ‘city’ films like *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*, whereby urban milieu is mapped and visual culture examined precisely by the *flâneur’s* itinerant activity.

<sup>11</sup> As Pasolini himself noted, ‘nothing is more sacred, technically, than a slow parorama.....’: ‘Confessioni tecniche’, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> Stack, *Pasolini*, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> In this regard, it might be worthwhile comparing *Accattone* to Pasolini’s novel, *Una vita violenta*, also set in the *borgate*, where it has been commented that Tommaso at least ‘gains some knowledge, vague though it is, of his proper place in history and politics’ (Ian Thomson, ‘Pasolini’s Rome’, *London Magazine*, July 1986, p. 46). I also disagree with Stephen

content reaffirming its redemption, in my opinion the *borgata* remains the habitat of Accattone—thief, pimp, layabout—and his ilk, unredeemed, unremorseful, unrepentant.

### *Utopia: Myth, Memory and Melancholia*

*A utopia is [...] no laughing matter.*  
~ Adolf Behne<sup>14</sup>

Topography in Pasolini's works frequently points to a utopian yearning associated with myth and nostalgia: Casarsa, for example, where by all accounts Pasolini spent an idyllic childhood and later a key inspiration to his output of Friulan poetry, is described as a 'hallowed locus of reminiscence quite untarnished by the modern world'.<sup>15</sup> Fabio Vighi likewise asserts that 'Pasolini's elaboration of space consistently exploited a utopian perspective'.<sup>16</sup>

In this section, I will discuss the utopian qualities of the *borgate* on the basis of two ideas: firstly, the signification of the *borgate* as a vision of a romantic past, where nostalgia carries hope and innocence salvation; and secondly, the mythical resonance of the Roman youth in the *borgate*, expressed in *Accattone* as Pasolini's celebration of the *borgataro's* (inhabitant of the slums) savagery and martyred death.

*We are returned [...] to the deserted layers of our time [...]*<sup>17</sup>

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Snyder's reading of *Accattone* as 'a story of growth' (*Pier Paolo Pasolini*, Boston: Twayne, 1980, p. 33). Snyder argues that 'Accattone dies as a thief, but also as a person who has developed the capacity to love' (p. 25). But how has he shown this 'capacity to love'? True, he refrains from sending Stella to the streets, but when Accattone dies he shows no signs whatsoever of being transfigured by love, only tremendous relief that he is able to die and therefore be 'alright now'.

<sup>14</sup> Adolf Behne, 'Zur Einführung' in Manfred Scholösser (ed.), *Arbeitsrat für Kunst, Berlin, 1918-1921* (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1980), pp. 92-3.

<sup>15</sup> Thomson, 'Pasolini's Rome', p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> Fabio Vighi, 'Adorati Toponimi: Tracking Ideological Space in Pier Paolo Pasolini', <http://www.cf.ac.uk/euros/newreadings/volume5/vighi.pdf> (visited 2 January 2007), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989), p. 317.

Pasolini's nostalgia for mythic pasts, stemming from his attachment to the Italian peasantry and its associated pastoral world and culminating in his later films such as *Edipo Re* and *Medea*, is well-documented. In *Accattone*, this nostalgia can be seen to be manifested topographically in the accentuation of various ruins and abandoned architectural spaces scattered throughout the *borgata*, such as the shot of Accattone peering through the half-crumbled house in Ascenza's neighbourhood.<sup>18</sup> More obliquely, the *borgata* also acquires a certain sense of antiquity through Pasolini's representation of the Roman subproletariat as a primitive, prelapsarian figure, a phenomenon stranded in the present from a distant past: '[...] *le caratteristiche del sottoproletario sono preistoriche, sono addirittura precristiane* [the characteristics of the subproletariat are pre-historical, they are even pre-Christian.]'<sup>19</sup> Sam Rohdie describes Accattone in a similar vein: 'Though existing in modern society, he was outside it, or at the edge of it, an archaism, an ancient shard, left-over in the present.'<sup>20</sup> In the limbo of a mythic past projected into a modern present, the spectacle of the slums, like the visual equivalent of Eliot's auditory imagination, elicits a consciousness of the prehistoric, a memory 'sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back'.<sup>21</sup> In this way, Pasolini delivers the utopian promise of the ruined *borgata*: a mythic, prehistoric topography, though grounded in a damning modern present, claims an untainted, Edenic state of purity in its recovery of an innocent past.

Some, however, are skeptical of the logic of Pasolini's 'backward-looking romanticism':<sup>22</sup> John Foot and Franco Fortini, for example, question the historical and/or empirical credibility of this myth of proletarian culture as projected by Pasolini.<sup>23</sup> While these are valid

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<sup>18</sup> This nostalgia for ruins can also be seen in the poem by Pasolini which was read by Orson Welles in *Mamma Roma*: 'I am a force of the Past. Tradition is my only love./ I come from ruins, from Churches,/ from altarpieces, from forgotten/ villages of the Apennines and the Prealps/ where my brothers lived.'

<sup>19</sup> Leonardo Fioravanti, Omar Zulficar and Nazareno Natale, 'Una visione del mondo epico-religiosa', *Bianco e nero*, 6:19, (1964), p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Rohdie, *Passion*, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 119. See also Francis Otto Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

<sup>22</sup> Stack, *Pasolini*, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> See John Foot, *Milan Since the Miracle: City, Culture and Identity* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), pp. 21-3, and Franco Fortini, *Attraverso Pasolini* (Torino: Einaudi, 1993).

arguments, it should also be borne in mind that historicity was not the explicit aim of Pasolini's endeavour: as Sam Rohdie writes, '[t]he past was gone; Pasolini never thought to revive it.' Crucially, Rohdie adds: '[Pasolini] wanted, instead, to revive *a sense of sacredness* [my emphasis].'<sup>24</sup> Thus, the issue that has to be identified is the direction of Pasolini's undertaking not as a historical project but, as Rohdie puts it, 'a poetic idea'.

Having said that, nonetheless I argue that the *methodology* of Pasolini's 'poetic idea' is flawed, and to that extent agree that his proposition ultimately fails. Tempting as it is to assert a permanent state of memory, the process of continual nostalgia places culture in a timeless, ahistorical void. Yet culture cannot be ahistorical—the transmission of culture itself is a historical act. By trying to maintain a utopian scheme sustained only by nostalgia, the 'poetic idea' risks what has been termed 'intellectual corruption': tradition becoming indefensible dogma, justification deemed superfluous and change designated as heresy.<sup>25</sup> A coherent vision, even a poetic one, cannot be maintained solely by perpetual memory; it has to be anchored in a realistic historical context. In the absence of that, Pasolini's utopian vision ultimately fails.

### The Roman subproletariat

*[B]asically Rome is a bureaucratic, administrative and tourist town, almost a colonial town. What I did have here, which was an extremely traumatic and a sociologically very vital experience, was contact with the Roman subproletariat.*  
~ Pier Paolo Pasolini<sup>26</sup>

In *Accattone*, Pasolini's depiction of the Roman youths rides on two dominant ideas: the vitality of the *ragazzini*, and their romanticism as '*giovenetti martirizzati*' (martyred youth).

The *borgata* of *Accattone* is charged with the energy of the *ragazzini*: throughout the film it is difficult to ignore the characters' sheer spontaneity and vivacity, such as Accattone's prompt acceptance of the dare, or his spirited pursuit of Stella. More controversial, however, is Pasolini's indulgence of the Roman youth's

life of crime and violence, such as the numerous fist fights, the beating of Maddalena, the constant thievery and exploitation. This savagery, according to Pasolini, is the truth of the natural man before he was cultured by bourgeoisie values, whose artifice Pasolini detests above all.

The idea of virtue in a natural/violent state is not new: Montaigne's apologia for the 'natural man' is well-known, as is Rousseau's defence of the 'noble savage':<sup>27</sup> to that end, the natural man represents the shepherd of normal pastoral, indicating corruption and degeneration in the civilized world. Pasolini is clearly striving for the same innocence in his portrayal of the *ragazzini* in the Roman '*zozzo mondo*' (slob world), though patently in an entirely different value system: in the *borgate*, choices carry no ethics because they are amoral and corruption is non-existent because it is inherent—'in a completely subproletarian world[...] when a boy found out that his mother was a whore he gave her a gold watch so that she would make love to him.'<sup>28</sup> Such is the virtue of Pasolini's *borgate*, where the existence of purity is simply in the non-existence of moral consciousness.

However, Accattone does not always demonstrate such a guileless lack of conscience. His apology to his son ('forgive me, I know I'm a louse') for stealing the latter's necklace indicates a damning awareness of moral consciousness—if his natural state is truly without an ethical basis he would not have to seek justification. More particularly, after meeting Stella Accattone is clearly cognizant of his moral state: by agreeing to work he implicitly acknowledges the moral choices of laziness and exploitation; by his violent outburst the next day he shows the keen humiliation in his abject failure to make an honest living. The issue is not with the violence *per se*, but the mental and moral consciousness of the character which accompanies the violence. In that sense, I argue that the portrayal of the *borgata* in *Accattone*, as a space of innocence in the strangely untainted amorality of its youths, is thwarted.

Alternatively, the Roman youth may win his reprieve in death, for in Pasolinian terms death is the only element which renders meaning to life: 'It is[...] absolutely necessary to die, *because, so long as we live, we have no meaning* [...]'<sup>29</sup> The motif of death is everywhere in the *borgata*—Fulvio funereally holding out a bunch of flowers to Accattone in the opening shot of the film,

<sup>24</sup> Rohdie, *Passion*, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> H. Patrick Glenn, *Legal Traditions of the World: Sustainable Diversity in Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> Stack, *Pasolini*, p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> See Michel de Montaigne, 'Of the Cannibals' in *Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1993); and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality* (London: Penguin Books, 1984).

<sup>28</sup> Stack, *Pasolini*, p. 53.

<sup>29</sup> Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, p. 236.

the boys' conversation about Accattone's death while the latter eats his potatoes, Accattone's attempt to die by going through with the dare, his dream of his death, and finally Accattone's actual death itself. In that sense, the *borgata* may therefore also be noted as a place of salvation in its omnipresent possibility of deliverance through death.

However, the issue once again lies with the depiction of Accattone's death in the film. According to Pasolini, death in its finality ends the 'chaos of possibilities' of life and therefore resolves the 'search for relations and meanings'.<sup>30</sup> But what meaning does Accattone's death resolve? Only that he died a thief, that he died without having really done anything, except die. In his dream, Accattone shed tears and seemed penitent—two elements which, vividly recalling the quotation from Dante in the beginning of the film, potentially promise his salvation. However, during his actual death, Accattone expressed nothing but visible relief: '*mo sto bene*' ('Now I'm ok'). There is no remorse, no penitence and certainly no tears, only a gratified smile. There is nothing Accattone can claim credit for. Hit by a truck, he did not even (directly, at least) effect his own death.

### ***Law and the Individual: Relations of Power in the Borgata and the City***

Although much has been made of *Accattone's* religious and mythical overtones, in contrast there has been little discussion of the more secular issues in the film. In this section, I will examine the *borgata*, via a comparison with the city, as a socio-legal space mediated through the role of law as an institution of control and order.

Given the amount of violence and crime in the *borgata*, the presence of law enforcement in the area is surprisingly scarce. Although Accattone and his friends, going about their lives of crime, are constantly wary of the police, nonetheless the existence of the latter in the *borgata* is almost without corporeality, present usually only in conversation or as a hazard to look out for. They are awkward and inept, their fallibility glaringly obvious as Maddalena, when called to identify her attackers, deliberately picks out the wrong man, an error which everybody (including the viewer) is aware of but them. When the police, in a rare appearance, try to drag Accattone from the streets to take part in the identification parade, the viewer's sensibility is that their power is merely statutory—they are depicted as inept,

as Accattone firmly refuses ('I'm not going anywhere, I'm fine here') and helpless, as they vainly appeal to Accattone's friends to help convince him. Although Accattone eventually gives in, it is he who pushes them apart and marches ahead, leaving the policemen to follow him in his wake.

Things change, however, once Accattone moves into the city. Followed by a policeman, the (omni)presence of the law not only becomes menacing and ominous, but, more significantly, unrelenting in its pursuit. The ubiquity of the law zeros in on Accattone like an inexorable fate; indeed, in the most literal sense the police prove to be a harbinger of death. Pasolini's frequent inter-cutting of close-ups of the policeman's eyes (a jarring divergence from his hitherto neo-realist style) also emphasises the panoptic oppression of the law in the city, conveying a scrutinised subjugation under an invisible but relentless police surveillance.

By comparing the role of law in these two spatial paradigms, the *borgata* emerges as a space reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of an 'autonomous zone', to which individual 'bodies-in-becoming' flee to escape from 'apparatuses of capture' regulating a given social field.<sup>31</sup> Hence, the *borgata* can be seen as a space of relief and liberation; the city in comparison is akin to a repressive regime, over-scrutinised and overwhelmingly dominated by autocratic institutional control.

While this reading—where the absence of law in the *borgata* is celebrated as freedom from an establishment of repressive rules—might fit within the general matrix of Pasolini's socio-political sensitivities, I argue, however, that this is an over-simplistic picture. The law is not merely about rules; it also confers rights and powers: power, for example, to justly effect retribution on a person who has committed an assault against the individual, or the right to be free from harassment, both of which were denied to Maddalena and Ascenza respectively, contributing directly to their plights. In that sense, the absence of law in the *borgata* does not simply articulate it as a space of escape, but also marks its flaws as a place of injustice and defenceless vulnerability.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>31</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

## *Topophilia: 'stupendous, miserable city'*<sup>32</sup>

[I]n nessuna città italiana il fatto presenta aspetti così impressionanti, complessi, direi grandiosi, come a Roma. [In no Italian city 'the fact' presents such impressive, complex and, I would say, grandiose aspects as it does in Rome.]

~ Pier Paolo Pasolini<sup>33</sup>

Finally, this section proposes to examine the significance of the *borgate* in a different paradigm: not as a physical territory in the film but as, in Pierre Nora's words, 'les lieux de mémoire'<sup>34</sup>—'a space in memory'—of the film-maker, whereby physical geography is translated into the abstraction of memory, experience and topophilia: 'Home is no longer a dwelling but an untold story of a life being lived'.<sup>35</sup>

Having fled to Rome after facing scandalous accusations in Casarsa, Pasolini, unemployed and poor, was thrust directly into the desperation and grimness of the *borgate*, first in the Jewish ghetto of Piazza Costaguti, then Ponte Mammolo. Remembering that difficult period, Pasolini later remarked: 'For two years I was a desperate person out of work, like those who wind up killing themselves.'<sup>36</sup> Yet the times spent in the *borgate* were also a transformative life experience for Pasolini. Writing to Silvana Mauri, Pasolini describes life in Rome: 'Here I am in a life that is all muscles, turned inside out like a glove [...] Rome, ringed by its inferno of *borgate*, is stupendous right now [...]'<sup>37</sup>.

The significance of Pasolini's experiences in the *borgate* can be taken further in other ways. In a process akin to associative creativity (linking, to use Coleridge's term, 'the hooks-and-eyes of memory'<sup>38</sup>),

the *borgate* became a crucial inspiration to Pasolini's creative output in Rome—his first novels, *Ragazzi di vita* and *Una vita violenta*, which finally won him literary acclaim and success, were set in the world of the *borgate*, as was *Le ceneri di Gramsci*, a major collection of poetry, and, of course, his first films, *Accattone*, *Mamma Roma* and *La Ricotta*. On a personal level, the *borgate* were also significant for Pasolini in light of the ambivalence he had harboured of his homosexuality ('this "dragon with a thousand heads"')<sup>39</sup>—in the 'pagan sensuality' of Rome, the slums became a place for, by all accounts, numerous erotic adventures with the *borgate* youths, encounters which Pasolini apparently continued throughout his life. Even though Pasolini eventually moved to the more genteel Monteverde Nuovo, his reminiscences of the *borgate* remain 'so fresh I never thought I'd see /them old' and tinged with affection: '[...] days at Rebibbia /which I thought lost in a light /of need and which I know now were so free!<sup>40</sup>

Yet, if the *borgate* was the fount of an inspirational life, it was also the site of Pasolini's death. Taking his biography to its *finis historiae*, Pasolini was apparently murdered in the shanty town of Idroscalo at Ostia by a boy from the *borgate* in an encounter gone awry.<sup>41</sup> Even in its biographical significance, the *borgate* remains once more a topography trapped in an exercise of idealistic romanticism—passionate, blind, even amnesiac: for in 'the heat of the instincts and aesthetic passion',<sup>42</sup> Pasolini forgets (overlooks?) the bloodshed of violence, the desperation of poverty, the extreme reality of hunger, despair and brutality. The horror of the *borgate* is thus shown not just in art but also in life—not in the contradiction of his poetry but in the poet slain.

<sup>32</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'Il Pianto della Scavatrice', in *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Selected Poems* (London: Calder, 1984).

<sup>33</sup> As written in *Vie Nuove*, a Marxist periodical: Thomson, 'Pasolini's Rome', p. 36.

<sup>34</sup> The French title of Pierre Nora's book, *Realms of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, as cited in Iain Chambers, 'Maps, Movies, Musics and Memory' in David B. Clark (ed.), *The Cinematic City* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 230.

<sup>36</sup> Luciano de Giusti, *I film di Pier Paolo Pasolini*, Rome: Gremese, 1983, p. 28, as cited in Naomi Greene, *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Cinema as Heresy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Lettere* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), p. 491.

<sup>38</sup> See John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.,

1927). For more on the process of creativity, see also Margaret Boden's fascinating account in *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1990).

<sup>39</sup> As cited in Greene, *Pasolini*, p. 16.

<sup>40</sup> Pasolini, 'Il Pianto della Scavatrice', *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> There is still great controversy surrounding Pasolini's death—alternative theories range from political conspiracy to mob attack to suicide to self-defence: see in particular *Who Killed Pasolini? (Pasolini: un delitto Italiano)* and *Nerolio*, two relatively recent films which deal with the subject. For more bizarre theories on Pasolini's death, see the articles 'A Revolutionary Alternative' and 'Pasolini and Death', both by Giuseppe Zigaina, at [http://www.karaartservers.ch/p.p.pasolini/cultural\\_death/te\\_xts.html](http://www.karaartservers.ch/p.p.pasolini/cultural_death/te_xts.html) (visited 2 January 2007).

<sup>42</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Le ceneri di Gramsci* (Milano: Garzanti, 1957), p. 49.

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*'I made all these films as a poet.'*  
~ Pier Paolo Pasolini<sup>43</sup>

As Sa'at writes in the opening quote, the basis of poetry—as which Pasolini has claimed to have made his films—is the unveiling of hidden truths and beauty, to 'change the way we see'. To that extent, it is entirely possible that Pasolini's poetic quality and passion for the Roman slums ultimately do remain unflawed, for his cinematic efforts converted the ugliness of the borgate into something he found beautiful. Perhaps poetry, after all, does not lie in the beauty of what he found, but simply in that he had found them beautiful.

Yet my aim throughout this article is to refute any virtue attributed to Pasolini's representation of the borgate: it is a place which is neither utopian nor just, whose misery is harshly and viciously real. To that end, in terms of the transmuted vision of poetry and the recast passions of poetic sentiment, my goal points to a different path: perhaps, then, the greatest truth is not to simply see idealised beauty *per se*, even as an alternative vision to ugliness, sin and transgression; but, rather, the interconnection and correlation of beauty and blemish, both deeply and inexplicably moving, in a world that possesses sufficient complexity to encompass its myriad qualities.

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PhD 3, *Italian (Film Studies)*

### Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Drs John Foot and Lesley Caldwell for their help and advice in the writing of this article as well as Dr Eleanor Chiari for her assistance with the translations.

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### Filmography

*Accattone* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italy, 1961).  
*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt)* (Walter Ruttmann, Germany, 1927).

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<sup>43</sup> As cited in a press release for *Mamma Roma* by Milestone Film & Video, [http://www.milestonefilms.com/pdf\\_press/mamma.pdf](http://www.milestonefilms.com/pdf_press/mamma.pdf) (visited 2 January 2007).

*Edipo Re* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italy, 1967).  
*Mamma Roma* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italy, 1962).  
*Medea* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italy, 1969).  
*Nerolio* (Aurelio Grimaldi, Italy, 1996).  
*La Ricotta* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italy, 1965).  
*Who Killed Pasolini? (Pasolini, un delitto italiano)* (Marco Tullio Giordana, Italy, 1995).

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