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# Pasolini for the Future<sup>1</sup>

Alessia Ricciardi

Although “the future” may represent an ever hazier notion in the cultural and political imagination, public figures in Italy lately have invoked the concept with increasing frequency. Since their rift with the governing coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi, the members of Gianfranco Fini’s right-wing party have taken to calling themselves “the Futurists” (i futuristi) and have established the “MakeFuture Foundation” (Fondazione Farefuturo) to propagate their ideological views. Berlusconi himself recently has declared the intention of renaming his own party from “Let’s Go, Italy” (Forza Italia) to the more progressive-sounding “Forward, Italy” (Avanti Italia).

At the same time, it appears that loss of hope regarding the future has become integral to our sense of our own late modernity in the field of critical thought. Among only the most current examples, the French anthropologist Marc Augé has announced that he is about to publish a book with the telling title *Where Did the Future Go? (Ou est passé l’avenir?)*.<sup>2</sup> The Italian strain of the attitude may be traced back at least to Giacomo Leopardi, who in the nineteenth century identified the narrowing down of life to the present tense as one of Italy’s most problematic tendencies, a trait that led him to characterize the nation as “without the prospect of a better sort of future, without occupation, without purpose.”<sup>3</sup> Reflecting from the vantage point of the early twentieth century on Italy’s responsiveness to the weight of its long history from classical Rome to the present, Antonio Gramsci contended that among his compatriots the future always is passively expected “as it seems to be determined by the past” (2005, 201).

The literary, critical, and cinematic *auteur* Pier Paolo Pasolini may not look at first glance exactly like a figure who was galvanized by the future. An outspoken critic of the changes that were taking place in Italy during his lifetime, he embodied a melancholic devotion to the past that was tempered only partially by a dialectical, modern attitude. In a poem that Orson Welles famously recites in Pasolini’s short film *La Ricotta*, the Italian director defined himself as “a force of the past” (una forza del passato) who paradoxically also views himself as “more modern than all the moderns” (più moderno di tutti i moderni). However, some readers—and on this score I think particularly of Andrea Zanzotto—have interpreted his fascination with the past and his insistence on a simpler

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the symposium “Pier Paolo Pasolini and the Multiplicity of the Italian Language” at the University of Chicago in October 2010. I would like to thank Armando Maggi in particular for inviting me to contribute to the proceedings. I also would like to express my appreciation to the students who attended my graduate seminar at the University of California Berkeley in the spring of 2010, especially Rossella Carbotti, Viviana Cois, Tinley Ireland, Jennifer Mackenzie, Marina Romani, and Iulia Sprinceana. Their lively discussion inspired much of the thinking in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> According to an interview in *L’Unità* of October 7, 2010 with Flore Murard-Yovanovitch, Augé will analyze the emergence of what he calls “non-time” analogous to the idea of non-places that he introduced in his book *Non-lieux* (1992), a non-time that ultimately would coincide with an eternal present.

<sup>3</sup> “Or la vita degl’italiani è appunto tale, senza prospettiva di migliore sorte futura, senza occupazione, senza scopo e ristretta al solo presente” (1991, 52).

agrarian or sub-proletarian vitality as rhetorical or encoded ruses for speaking of a new beginning.

On the other hand, Georges Didi-Huberman lately has criticized Pasolini's supposedly apocalyptic tone in what is, in my opinion, a beautiful if fundamentally "incorrect" book, *The Survival of the Fireflies* (2010; *La survivance des lucioles*). Didi-Huberman's title is a nod to Pasolini's controversial opinion piece in *Il corriere della sera* of February 1, 1975, "The Void of Power in Italy" (Il vuoto di potere in Italia). Pasolini's treatise subsequently was re-titled "The Article of the Fireflies" (L'articolo delle lucciole) for the volume *Corsair Writings*, as if to identify its future poetic legacy with a single synecdoche. In the essay, he dates the beginning of the end for Italy in anthropological and cultural terms to the contemporary disappearance of fireflies from the Italian countryside due to the advancing ecological crisis produced by industrialization: "In the first years of the '60s, because of pollution in the air and, in the country, particularly of the water, the fireflies have started to disappear. The phenomenon has been sudden and traumatic. After a few years, there were no more fireflies. They are now a rather crushing souvenir of the past."<sup>4</sup>

Yet as a tiny, frail, and fleetingly luminous natural phenomenon, the firefly, as I argue in my own book *The Ends of Mourning*, also may be viewed as an emblem of Pasolini's "spectropoetics," an art that he practiced in poems such as "The Ashes of Gramsci" and in his films, where he sought to reinvent his chosen media in ways that allowed him to envision past and future at once.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, we might argue in a broad sense that Pasolini's very determination to pursue a career as a filmmaker after having achieved early success as a poet and novelist bespeaks his commitment to an experimental, multimedia creative ethos that resists nostalgia for the artistic ideals of the past and turns decisively to the horizon of the future for inspiration. Accordingly, I wish to reflect in what follows on the particularities of Pasolini's ethical engagements with the future. Although Pasolini's later works often strike an apocalyptic note, I am not convinced that our focus on this tendency should be taken to its bitter, logical conclusion à la Didi-Huberman.<sup>6</sup>

On this point, I follow in the wake of Carla Benedetti, who interprets Pasolini's most paradoxical propositions as signs of his refusal to adopt the cynical, postmodern stance of ironic detachment (1998). What is at stake in this reading is nothing less than the recognition of what it means today in the heyday of the society of spectacle, when we confront the perpetual present of mass media on a "24/7" basis, to engage critically with the future. Of course, it is important as well to recognize that, while Pasolini may have been preoccupied with the future, he was not in the slightest way hopeful about it. He in fact disparaged hope itself as a form of hypocrisy that under certain circumstances encourages our emotional blackmail. According to his view, as he expressed it in his weekly column "Il Caos" in 1968, every régime of power including Nazism mantles itself in the alibis of faith and hope, which, however, turn "monstrous" when divested of

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<sup>4</sup> "Nei primi anni sessanta, a causa dell'inquinamento dell'aria, e, soprattutto in campagna, a causa dell'inquinamento dell'acqua . . . sono cominciate a scomparire le lucciole. Il fenomeno è stato fulmineo e folgorante. Dopo pochi anni le lucciole non c'erano più. Sono ora un ricordo abbastanza straziante el passato. . . ." (1999, 405). The English translation is mine.

<sup>5</sup> See "Heretical Specters" in Ricciardi (2003, 123-165).

<sup>6</sup> There are other readers as well who have raised questions about Didi Huberman's project. See in particular Fai (2010) and Naze (2009).

charity (1999, 1122). Pasolini thus ought to be perceived as wishing not for a hopeful future but rather for a charitable one, in keeping with what Filippo La Porta describes felicitously as an overriding concern for “the fragility of the present.”<sup>7</sup> Although unconvinced of his regard for the future, La Porta calls attention to Pasolini’s fierce dedication to uncovering the meaning of an ongoing or “eternal” present. For La Porta, it is this unwavering devotion that makes Pasolini our contemporary (2002, 93).

First of all, we ought to observe how, from the early days of his artistic and intellectual career onward, Pasolini drew visionary inspiration from the future. We well might note, for example, that his magisterial poem “The Tears of the Excavator,” which was published in 1956, culminates with the ringing assertion that “the light of the future does not cease for even an instant to wound us” (la luce del futuro non cessa un solo instante di ferirci). This is a light that the poet claims “burns in all of our daily deeds” (che brucia in ogni nostro atto quotidiano), including the “Gobettian impulse” of solidarity with the workers around us who “silently raise . . . their red rag of hope” (1996, 52-53; che muti innalzano . . . il loro rosso straccio di speranza). The elegiac outlook of *The Ashes of Gramsci*, the volume in which “Tears of the Excavator” initially was collected, is counter-balanced by the forward-thinking vitality of the city, which runs like an undercurrent throughout Pasolini’s poetry, most especially in his depictions of the sub-proletarian boroughs that he viewed as nerve centers of erotic and political energy.

Moving from the 1950s to the 1960s, Pasolini increasingly pinned his hope of a brighter future on the liberation movements in Africa, a continent that he invokes in the poem “Fragment on Death” (Frammento alla morte) in the collection *The Religion of My Time*, with the apostrophic outcry “Africa! my only alternative” (1993, 580; Africa! Unica mia alternativa). The outlines of an apocalyptic, redemptive metaphysics in Pasolini’s thought indeed may be derived from his historical optimism toward non-western cultures, which moved him to shoot a number of films outside of Europe including *The Gospel According to Matthew*, *Notes for a Film on India*, *The Walls of Sana’a*, *Arabian Nights*, and *Notes for an African Orestes*.<sup>8</sup> In the last of these productions, he reinterprets the transformation of the Furies into the Eumenides in *The Oresteia* as an allegory for the fulfillment of the future through the synthesis of “Africa antica” with a “new Africa.” This new Africa, according to Pasolini, is “modern and independent, free,” and its spirit is best exemplified by an intellectual and political figure such as that of Léopold Senghor (2001, 1:1194). *Notes for an African Orestes* ends with a wedding scene that seems designed to evoke Pasolini’s earlier documentary *Love Meetings* (*Comizi d’amore*). As the scene unfolds, a narrator intones in voiceover: “A new nation is born, and its problems are infinite, but problems cannot be solved, should be lived. And life is slow. Proceeding toward the future is a continuous task. The work of

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<sup>7</sup> La Porta thinks that his investment in the fragility of the present in the end rendered Pasolini insensitive to the “warmth” of the future. If we take our cue from Pasolini himself, however, we might conclude that the future implies the possibility of a rebirth, which also ultimately means the future’s annihilation, as he pointed out in Appunto 84 of *Petrolio* (2002, 52, 68).

<sup>8</sup> For a nuanced but not always convincing interpretation of Pasolini’s cinematic orientalism, see Caminati (2007). Gian Maria Annovi links Pasolini’s interest in North African cultures to his alleged “immaginario mediterraneo pasoliniano” (2010). Giovanna Trento takes up the topic of Pasolini’s relation to Africa within a specifically postcolonial critical framework in *Pasolini e l’Africa, l’Africa di Pasolini* (2010).

a people knows neither rhetoric nor hesitation. Its future is in its anxious anticipation for a future; and its anxiety is a great patience.”<sup>9</sup>

Pasolini makes something of a concession to the critical trends of the day in the collection *Heretical Empiricism* (2005). In these writings, he affirms his admittedly melancholic preference for the future anterior as a way of criticizing the linear temporal logic of conventional historicism, thus taking up a problem made famous by Lacan in psychoanalysis and Lyotard in philosophy. It is particularly in the celebrated essay “Observations on the Sequence Shot” that Pasolini elaborates on his own terms the idea of the future perfect as a projected recognition of the itinerary of becoming. Here he asserts that “death effects an instantaneous montage of our lives.... It chooses the truly meaningful moments and puts them in a sequence, transforming an infinite, unstable, and uncertain present into a clear, stable, certain, and therefore easily describable past. It is only thanks to death that our life serves to express ourselves” (2005, 236-237). According to Didi-Huberman, however, Pasolini’s impatience with precisely the “infinite, unstable, and uncertain” play of the present and bias in favor of the perfect hindsight of retrospection comprise one of his worst lapses in reasoning, a blunder that Giorgio Agamben allegedly recapitulates: “There is with these two thinkers a very great impatience with the present, but it is forever bound up with an infinite patience for the past. In this, they are necessary for us, since they regard the contemporary world with a violence always buttressed by a profound searching into the thickness of time” (Didi-Huberman 2009, 92).<sup>10</sup> The advantage of this attitude in other words is its ability to offer a three-dimensional, layered view of our modern-day culture, a “thick description” in anthropological and philosophical terms.

This perspective definitely helps to produce what Didi-Huberman calls a “not incorrect diagnosis” when it comes to the society of the spectacle and its all too literal incarnation in Italy (ibid., 86). Yet he nevertheless accuses the two thinkers of depriving us of a cultural afterlife, a *Nachleben*, in order to attain for their reasoning the irrefutable status of a final, apocalyptic truth (ibid., 87). However, I wish to take issue with this idea that Pasolini had no patience for the present. The evidence of his writings and films indicates, if anything, that he was mesmerized by his time and, under the influence of the philosopher and anthropologist Ernesto De Martino, undertook in his last years to become a sort of anthropologist of the present. Simply put, to accept such a calling often meant to come to grips with the realities of his day as the symptoms of a cultural emergency, to embrace ferociously the devastated circumstances in which he lived, to be heard.

After repudiating the cinematic aesthetics that he developed in *The Decameron*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *Arabian Nights* between 1969 and 1972, a change of heart that he recounts shortly before his death in 1975 in the essay “Disavowal of the Trilogy of Life” (Abiura dalla Trilogia della vita), Pasolini seems to have relinquished any claim to dialectical method in order to face more directly the contemporary disaster that, at

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<sup>9</sup> “Una nuova nazione è nata, i suoi problemi sono infiniti, ma i problemi non si risolvono, si vivono. E la vita è lenta. Il procedere verso il futuro non ha soluzioni di continuità. Il lavoro di un popolo non conosce né retorica né indugio. Il suo futuro è nella sua ansia di futuro; e la sua ansia è una grande pazienza” (2001, 1: 1196).

<sup>10</sup> “Il y a chez ces deux penseurs une très grande impatience quand au présent; mais elle est toujours liée à une infinie patience quant au passé. En cela, ils nous sont nécessaires puisqu’ils regardent leur monde contemporain avec une violence toujours étayée par d’immenses recherches dans l’épaisseur du temps.”

various times, he referred to as the “anthropological mutation” or “cultural genocide.” The upheaval that he chronicled in his articles mostly for *Il Corriere della sera* and *Il mondo*, which subsequently were collected in *Corsair Writings* and *Lutheran Letters* (1983) apparently revealed itself to him as an apocalypse without palingenesis or “eschaton.” The line of investigation leading to this awareness can be traced back in a genetic sense to De Martino, who published an article entitled “Apocalypses Cultural and Apocalypses Psychopathological” in a 1964 issue of the literary magazine *Nuovi argomenti*, which was founded by Alberto Moravia and featured Pasolini among its editors.<sup>11</sup>

To understand Pasolini’s increasingly dire sense of historical calamity in his later years, in other words, we should look more closely at De Martino’s work of the 1960s. In an essay from *Corsair Writings* titled “Gli uomini colti e la cultura popolare,” Pasolini laments that De Martino’s investigations have produced an anthropology focused strictly on agrarian or “peasant” culture at the expense of the urban, clearly hinting that he saw his own contributions in some way as a complement to De Martino’s.<sup>12</sup> Of particular importance for Pasolini would have been De Martino’s idea of a “cultural apocalypse,” which the anthropologist identified as the uniquely contemporary manifestation of an older mode of historical cataclysm that already encompassed theological, post-colonial, and Marxist varieties (2002, ix). As De Martino observed, the traditional Christian notion of apocalypse established by John in the Book of Revelation coincides with an unveiling of the future, with the end of the human world at the advent of the New Jerusalem. In his eyes, however, what is peculiar to the modern form of apocalypse is its severe restriction of any hope of regeneration, its dismissal especially of the prospect of a future shaped by communal human intervention (2002, 479). For De Martino, the withering of faith in the idea of a cultural homeland and the resulting impossibility of social reintegration deprive present-day narratives of catastrophe of any redemptive promise. The cultural apocalypse that has emerged in the most recent epoch, then, threatens to be a radical crisis for human nature. (2002, 471).

According to this view, to belong to a culture means to possess a structuring ethos, the loss of which dooms humanity to being plunged into social disarray and thus marks the end of the world as a historically specific domain (2002, 475). Given Pasolini’s familiarity with the anthropologist’s work, it seems likely that he was thinking of De Martino when he proposed in his later writings the concept of “anthropological mutation” to describe the spread of social and intellectual conformism under the pressure of Italy’s spectacular brand of consumerism. It is worth noting, in this connection, that Pasolini went so far as to characterize this transformation in *Lutheran Letters* as an “apocalyptic picture” (1983, 15; quadro apocalittico). Interestingly, however, De Martino dedicated a

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<sup>11</sup> Pasolini was familiar with De Martino’s contributions to *Nuovi argomenti* and in fact made several references to them. For example, he mentions De Martino’s work in some of the essays collected in *Scritti corsari* such as “Limitatezza della storia” and “Gli uomini colti e la cultura popolare.” In “Il caos,” the weekly column that he wrote for *Il tempo*, he mentions De Martino to support his view that drug use was a response to the feeling of loss of “presence” (1999, 321, 469, and 1168).

<sup>12</sup> “Non poteva evidentemente essere altrimenti, e quindi non è il caso di recriminare: ma è veramente un peccato che De Martino anzichè occuparsi della cultura popolare della Lucania non si sia occupato della cultura popolare di Napoli. Del resto nessun etnologo o antropologo si è mai occupato, con la stessa precisione e assolutezza scientifica usata per le culture popolari contadine, delle culture popolari urbane” (1999, 469).

large share of his attention to studying literary and creative representations of the apocalypse and took pains to identify several modern-day authors of such works, including Sartre and Camus among the French and Pavese and Moravia among the Italians—but not Pasolini.<sup>13</sup> This omission begs the question to what extent was Pasolini truly an apocalyptic thinker, in the nihilistic sense that the term conveys today?<sup>14</sup> All of his gadfly pursuits—his tireless editorial interventions in Italian newspapers, his deliberately provocative ideas and controversial artistic productions, his condemnation of the *Democrazia Cristiana*, and his meticulous critical attention to the anthropological mutation of life in Italy—all of these vital engagements with his time would seem to point toward an anti-cynical temperament and a rejection of fatalist thinking.

Yet there is no denying that Pasolini at times adopted a strident and unforgiving tone. On this score, it is helpful to consider his recurring use of the theme of genocide in his writings. In his essays, for example, he refrains neither from depicting the materialism of Italian society as the “real, immense genocide of the new fascism” (*immensi genocidi del nuovo fascismo*), and thus in a serious sense anticipating Agamben’s designation of the camp as “the ‘nomos’ of the modern,” nor from comparing the young people of Italy, who in his eyes have become incapable of smiling or laughing spontaneously, to “Fascist emissaries of concentration camps” (*inviati fascisti di un Lager*).<sup>15</sup> In a retrospective discussion of his 1961 film *Accattone*, he claims along similar lines that between 1961 and 1975 a “genocide” took place that transformed the young boys of the working class into “Hitler SS” who are deprived of all meaningful values and social models (1983, 101-102; 1999, 676). In his most extensive and despairing elaboration of this view, he invokes Marx as a witness to earlier attempts to exterminate the proletariat and invites his ideological patron to abandon all belief in progress in favor of acknowledging what he defines as the apocalyptic “*fait accompli*” that has taken hold in Italy (1983, 104; 1999, 680). His skepticism toward the possibility of social communion even through sex reaches a masochistic level of disgust that prompts him in the “Disavowal of the Trilogy

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<sup>13</sup> In his book, De Martino dedicates a large share of his attention to what he calls the crisis of bourgeois society and the consequent loss of a “cultural homeland.” De Martino maintains that modern literature is dominated by the idea of apocalypse, albeit an apocalypse without eschaton. According to his view, two antithetical terrors inform the modern age: the fear of “losing the world” and the fear “of being lost in the world.” In this context, De Martino regards it as unsurprising that Sartre is obsessed with nausea or Moravia with the so-called “malady of objects” or that Pavese desperately tries to renew the “domesticity of the world” (2002, 466-479).

<sup>14</sup> In what follows, I will use the term “nihilistic” or “nihilist” to refer to the modern attitude of resistance to the idea that life has intrinsic meaning or value. Nihilism often is associated in the cultural domain with the radical skepticism toward social convention expressed in the nineteenth-century Russian novel, notably Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* (1862), and in the philosophical domain with Nietzsche’s espousal of “the transvaluation of all values” in *The Antichrist* (1895) and emphasis on perspectivism throughout his *oeuvre*. Properly speaking, the nihilist outlook ought to be distinguished from an apocalyptic way of thinking insofar as apocalypse is an overtly religious concept that originates in the Christian eschatology articulated by John in the Book of Revelation.

<sup>15</sup> For the two quotes from the essay “Unhappy youths” (*I giovani infelici*) see respectively 1983 (16, 14) and 1999 (547, 545). For the argument behind Agamben’s definition of modernity, see “The Camp as the ‘Nomos’ of the Modern” (1998, 166-180). It is interesting in this regard to note Pasolini’s contempt for the Italian youth of 1968. Their acceptance of the culture of consumption on the one hand and “purely verbal” progressivism on the other represented in his eyes a “loss of values” (*una perdita di valori*) so extreme that it made young people look to him like “the *proletarian* troops of the SS” (*le truppe proletarie delle SS tedesche*) (1983, 56; 1999, 608).

of Life” to declare, “I now hate bodies and sex organs” (1983, 50; 1999, 600: ormai odio i corpi e gli organi sessuali). He thus gives voice to a sentiment that may be understood to achieve its fulfillment in *Salò*, his searing vision of murderous, Sadean cruelty under the fascist régime of the Republic of Salò, the German-occupied puppet state that was established in Northern Italy toward the end of Mussolini’s reign.

We well might note that Pasolini also found the logic of mass violence useful in explaining not only the workings of Italian social relations but also the political and economic relations between western and non-western societies. In one of his most prophetic interventions, a long sequence of pedagogical epistles entitled “Gennariello,” he relates the exploitation of the people, historical monuments, and natural resources of North Yemen by the Chinese and European corporations who represent the global forces of modernity, a predicament that he witnessed in 1970 while scouting locations for *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*:

Yemen is still only a small, even pathetic market for [these] industries. Thus it is despised and even ridiculed. The fact that it requires a renunciation by the Yemenis seems quite natural to the German and Italian speculators: the Yemenis needs to be completely complicit in their own genocide: cultural and physical ...as in the concentration camps.<sup>16</sup>

Yet out of this starkly pessimistic view of the plight of the Yemenite poor, he managed at the same time to make a positive historical difference by shooting the fourteen-minute documentary *The Walls of Sana’a*, which vividly exposed the destruction of the medieval architecture of North Yemen’s capital city to make way for the modernization required by “neocapitalist policies.” The film ends with a poignant sequence of shots panning across the ancient walls of Sana’a, while Pasolini’s voice intones a plea to the United Nations to take action: “We call upon UNESCO in the name of the true, if also unexpressed, will of the Yemenite people. In the name of simple men whom poverty has kept pure. In the name of the grace of obscure centuries. In the name of the scandalous revolutionary force of the past.”<sup>17</sup> With this call to conscience, Pasolini enlists the memorial power of film, its ability to evoke “the revolutionary force of the past,” as a means of holding the current institutional order accountable to the promise of the future. In this sense, *The Walls of Sana’a* powerfully exemplifies what I have called in *The Ends of Mourning* the director’s “spectropoetics” (Ricciardi 2003) and, more broadly, his critical and political concern for the future. In fact, it was not until 1986, some fifteen years after the release of the film and eleven years after Pasolini’s death, that UNESCO granted the city of Sana’a status as a World Heritage site.

In many ways, Pasolini reserved his most apocalyptic rhetoric for his discussions of Italian culture. He was quick to concede that in the representative urban centers of other

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<sup>16</sup> “Gli yemeniti devono essere del tutto consenzienti a proposito del loro genocidio: culturale e fisico, anche se non necessariamente mortale, come nei Lager” (1983, 32; 1999, 572).

<sup>17</sup> “Ci rivolgiamo all’UNESCO, in nome della vera, seppure ancora inespressa, volontà del popolo yemenita. In nome degli uomini semplici che la povertà ha mantenuto puri. In nome della grazia dei secoli oscuri. In nome della scandalosa forza rivoluzionaria del passato” (2001, 2: 2110).



capitalist nations—say, in New York, or Paris, or London—the people could take comfort from the effective operation of at least some of their institutions, as the industrialization and acculturation of these societies had occurred in ways that were very different from what was happening in Italy (1983, 104; 1999, 680). The author and editor Pier Giorgio Bellocchio places an illuminating emphasis on the role that Pasolini played in his native milieu by describing him in an introduction to the volume *Essays on Politics and Society* (1999; Saggi sulla politica e sulla società) as “desperately Italian” (1999, xiii-xxxix; disperatamente Italiano). In this context, it is worth reflecting on the resonances and implications of a *cri de coeur* that Pasolini voiced in an article in *Il corriere della sera* of September 28, 1975, just a few days before his murder, in which he ardently declares that Italians want to know what the limits of the new culture are and “what future it has in mind.”<sup>18</sup> If we consider this challenge to his readers in light of his published proposals in the same year to eliminate the state school system and television from Italian pedagogy altogether, the impulse behind his thinking seems more Rousseauvian than nihilistic.<sup>19</sup>

In “Two Modest Proposals for Eliminating Crime in Italy,” he introduces an almost pragmatist tone into the essays collected in *Lutheran Letters*, a volume whose very title more sharply suggests the need for a sober reformation inspired by an intellectual who refuses to traffic with worldly interests and “courtiers” than for some convulsive upheaval (1983, 105-108; 1999, 687-692). And in “Drugs, an Italian Tragedy,” which was published initially in the *Corriere*, Pasolini relates the increase of drug addiction in Italy to the “great phenomenon” of moral and cultural loss resulting from the expansion of the neo-fascist order of corporate and governmental power. He adds in summation that “one needs a great deal of vitality to love culture,” thus re-deploying in a hortative register a key term that he already had adopted as a kind of credo or emblem, albeit with a more paradoxical twist, in the title of his celebrated poem, “A Desperate Vitality.”<sup>20</sup> Far from inciting his reader to embrace the Dionysian excess of consumerism in a nihilist gesture of welcome to the apocalypse, Pasolini painfully diagnoses in his last works the demise of grace and style, indeed of a way of life, from Italy’s overall social ecology. Culture, he adds, does not belong to the elite but expresses “the knowledge of a way of life, of a country in its totality” (il sapere e il modo di essere di un paese nel suo insieme) (1983, 60; 1999, 613).

In “Gennariello,” as I noted earlier, he experimented with pedagogy, thus adopting a rhetorical strategy that by definition addresses the future of the younger notional reader. He sets out, in this series of didactic letters, to identify how the future itself in some ways has changed as a class concept in Italy, while suggesting there is still the basis for a version of solidarity: “Vitality is always a source of affection and candor. In Naples both

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<sup>18</sup> “Gli italiani vogliono ancora sapere che cos’è, che limiti ha, che futuro prevede, la ‘nuova cultura’ . . .” (1983, 98; 1999, 672).

<sup>19</sup> In an interview about television with Arturo Gismondi published in *Vie Nuove*, Giulio Sapelli reminds us that Pasolini decried contemporary society’s tendency to encourage young people to forget the present and to pay no attention to the future (2005, 85).

<sup>20</sup> “Perchè la cultura—in senso specifico o, meglio, classista—è un possesso: e niente necessita di una più accanita e matta energia che il desiderio del possesso” (1999, 612). More broadly, see (1983, 58-62, and 1999, 611-617).

the poor boy and the middle-class boy are full of vitality.”<sup>21</sup> He observes that before the arrival of the anthropological mutation, which may be seen to coincide with the economic boom following World War Two, the poor wished for “a different future,” but that the “future [was] slow in coming,” so that tomorrow wound up being for them very much like today: the product of a “lazy revolution.”

After the mutation, however, the very tempo of change has accelerated to the point that the future threatens simply to renew class conflict, arriving as a universal and unbearable shock: “The right of the poor to a better existence had a counterpart which has ended by degrading them. The future is imminent and apocalyptic.”<sup>22</sup> Pasolini concludes his lesson by observing that his talk is not a panegyric to the past, which, he slyly adds, he did not much like when it was the present. “They are talks,” he asserts, “in which conservation and revolution no longer have meaning” and concludes in parenthesis “so you see I am modern too.”<sup>23</sup> The attitude surely is a familiar one; as Carla Benedetti has remarked, striking a note reminiscent of Zanzotto, Pasolini generally claimed to examine the past only in order to criticize the present (2006-7, 141-151).

As an index of the rapid alteration of Italy’s social fabric, Pasolini noted not only the disappearance of the fireflies but the “loss” of another highly visible phenomenon: church icons of Madonnas were no longer weeping at election times, as they had in past decades. The secularization of society, in other words, had made it impossible for conservative Catholic politicians to drum up support among superstitious voters, particularly in campaigns against the Communist Party, through the carnival trick of a staged miracle (1983, 46; 1999, 593-596). It is evident in this case that Pasolini does not exactly mourn the passing of a somewhat ludicrous Italian political custom. When taken together with “The Article of the Fireflies,” however, what becomes evident is how much attention he dedicated to looking for signs of change in the prevailing forms of cultural and political life—signs that in fact ranged from the sublime in the case of the fireflies to the bathetic in the case of the weeping Madonna icons.

Contiguous with his efforts as a filmmaker and poet to deconstruct à la Derrida the relation between the specters of the past and those of the future, there appears an aspect of Pasolini’s overall project that may be defined as an attempt to trace the emerging anthropology of the contemporary or, borrowing Paul Rabinow’s expression, to “seize the ratio of modernity.” According to Rabinow,

The ethos of the contemporary contrasts with that of the modern; it is not fascinated by the new per se but concerned with the emergence and articulation of forms within which old and new elements take on meaning and functions. Today there is no doubt that one site of such problem is: how might we forge a way of life that does not make a sharp and brutal

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<sup>21</sup> “La vitalità è sempre fonte di affetto e di ingenuità. A Napoli sono pieni di vitalità sia il ragazzo povero che il ragazzo borghese” (1983, 18; 1999, 553).

<sup>22</sup> “Il diritto dei poveri ad un’esistenza migliore ha una contropartita che ha finito col degradarla. Il futuro è immimente e apocalittico” (1983, 36; 1999, 579).

<sup>23</sup> “Sono discorsi diversi da tutto ciò che oggi da parte di un uomo della mia età si possa dire; discorsi in cui ‘conservazione’ e ‘rivoluzione’ sono appunto parole che non hanno più senso (come vedi sono, dunque, moderno anch’io)” (1983, 37; 1999, 580).

separation between what used to be called nature and culture. (2007, 24-25)

In the late writings that are gathered in *Corsair Writings* and *Lutheran Letters*, Pasolini tries very hard to understand the new political phenomenology and its articulation of old and new: from the failure of the so-called “historical compromise” that was intended to unite the Italian Communist Party and the Christian Democracy, to the crimes of the old Christian Democracy party, the new operations of the church in a consumer society, and even the procedures of referendums and elections. Far from being hopeless in outlook, he was frantic to take in the whole picture. If it cannot be granted that Pasolini was a consistent voice for the future, he certainly was relentless in his scrutiny of the contemporary.

In another recent book dedicated to the topic, Agamben defines the contemporary as

the person who perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him....To perceive, in the darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but cannot—this is what it means to be contemporary. As such, contemporaries are rare. And for this reason, to be contemporary is, first and foremost, a question of courage. (2009, 45-46)<sup>24</sup>

It is telling that what distinguishes the contemporary in Agamben’s eyes is a potential for illumination that is missed or fails to reach us, at least within the bounds of historical time. Yet by the same token precisely this anachronism or untimeliness gives urgency to the engagement of the contemporary with the obscure conditions of the present, thus making possible the very glimpse of the light traveling toward us through the darkness. In his view, what is contemporary is inscribed in the present and always already marks it as archaic, so that only someone who can discern the indices and signatures of the archaic in the latest phenomena can be truly contemporary (2008, 21; 2009, 50). The coexistence of the archaic with historical becoming, like an embryo that encompasses the shape of the mature organism, is certainly a vision that Pasolini would have embraced.<sup>25</sup>

As has been well established, Pasolini had a taste for what in art history is known as the technique of the *non finito* or unfinished. This predilection surfaces in a recurring impulse to assign the title of *appunti* (notes) to certain films (*Appunti per un film sull’India*, *Appunti per un poema sul Terzo Mondo*, *Appunti per un’Orestide africana*). His penchant for the *non finito* appears as well in the chaotic, fragmentary style of the novel *Petrolio*, which he left incomplete at the time of his death, his unfinished

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<sup>24</sup> “Colui che percepisce il buio del suo tempo come qualcosa che lo riguarda e non cessa di interpellarlo.... Percepire nel buio del presente questa luce che cerca di raggiungerci e non puo farlo, questo significa essere contemporanei. Per questo i contemporanei sono rari. E per questo essere contemporanei e innanzitutto una forma di coraggio” (2008, 15-16).

<sup>25</sup> Agamben thus may be of help in assessing the philosophical resonances of the archaic in Pasolini’s work. For a more general exploration of this issue, see the chapter “Archaic: Pasolini on the Face of the Earth” in Steimatsky (2008, 117-165).

modernization of the first four cantos of Dante's *Inferno* entitled *La divina mimesis*, and ultimately in the body of unrealized film concepts that he accumulated over a span of more than thirty years including his scenarios for a film on Saint Paul and for the sprawling allegory *Porno-Teo-Kolossal*. Pasolini himself appears to recognize in his own fascination with the *non finito* a form of devotion to the ideal of intellectual work as process when in 1963 he gives one of his most celebrated and emblematic poems the title *Progetto per opere future (Plan of Future Works)*.<sup>26</sup> As Carla Benedetti has pointed out, his attachment to the notion of a work that ought to be kept in a state of potentiality is an important key to understanding Pasolini's last endeavors in particular.<sup>27</sup> One might well notice that Pasolini's interest in the poetics of potentiality finds a philosophical counterpart in Agamben's thought, where the concept plays a pivotal role.<sup>28</sup> Although this is not the place to pursue an in-depth comparison between the two authors' poetic and philosophical interpretations of potentiality, the topic clearly reflects a shared concern that could provide the basis of a discussion of Pasolini's and Agamben's aesthetic and political affinities with each other, beyond the all-too-reasonable criticism à la Huberman of their mutual tendency to apocalyptic rhetoric.

At the moment of his death in 1975, Pasolini left behind an unfinished scenario for the film project titled *Porno-Teo-Kolossal* that propounds a surprisingly comic vision of apocalypse, an image of the end time that finally is most remarkable for its sweetness and, to invoke a Pasolinian term, charity.<sup>29</sup> Armando Maggi helpfully calls attention to the fact that the director may have taken the idea of a "porn-theology" from an article by Gilles Deleuze entitled "Pierre Klossowski et le corps-langage" that was published in *Critique* in March 1965 (2007, 111).<sup>30</sup> Not only was Pasolini well acquainted with Deleuze's work, but he listed Klossowski's *Sade, mon prochain: Le philosophe scélérat* in the "Essential Bibliography" for *Salò* that he incorporated into that film's opening title sequence. By appending the term "Kolossal" to the concept of a porn-theology in the title, the filmmaker amusingly underscores the grandiose rhetoric of the society of spectacle that conventional, Hollywood movies adopt in their recounting of historical events. The adjective puts a clownish exclamation point on the philosophically ponderous valences of the title, ultimately reframing the notion of revelation that seems implicit in the expression "porn-theology" as an overblown and somewhat grotesque spectacle.

According to Gian Carlo Ferretti, Pasolini intended to shoot *Porno-Teo-Kolossal* immediately after *Salò* and before *Saint Paul*, the other unfinished project that was in the

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<sup>26</sup> See particularly the section "Ideas, Subjects, Treatments" (Idee, Soggetti, Trattamenti) in 2001 (2: 2585-2757).

<sup>27</sup> See "La forma—progetto" in Benedetti (1998, 158-170).

<sup>28</sup> See Agamben's *Potentialities*, especially the essay "Bartleby, or on contingency" (1999, 243-275). For a superb analysis of the concept of potentiality as a running *fil rouge* in Agamben's work, see Leland de la Durantaye (2009).

<sup>29</sup> For a perceptive close reading of Pasolini's scenario, see the chapter "The Journey to Sodom and Gomorrah and Beyond: the Scenario *Porn-Theo-Colossal*" in Maggi (2009, 107-157).

<sup>30</sup> Maggi elucidates Deleuze's motivating question, "Is the theology that becomes a total art a prodigious theo-pornology?" (Est-ce la théologie qui devient un art total, une prodigeuse théo-pornologie?), in terms of the French philosopher's insistence on "the linguistic nature of the body" in the essay on Klossowski and adds that Pasolini may be viewed along similar lines as interested in "the image of a body miming the 'gesture' lying at the center of its life."

planning process when he died (2005, 34).<sup>31</sup> The surviving scenario recounts the picaresque wanderings of an aging Neapolitan Magus named Eduardo (played by the well-known Neapolitan actor and playwright Eduardo de Filippo) and his younger Roman servant Ninetto (played by Ninetto Davoli) as they pursue a quest to find the newborn messiah after witnessing the appearance of a comet in the sky. In the first scene of the film's prologue, which is set in Naples, Pasolini situates Eduardo and Ninetto "in the darkness and silence of the heights of the cosmos" (2001, 2:2697; nel buio e nel silenzio delle altezze cosmiche). The logic of Pasolini's fantasy, however, soon compels our two protagonists to leave home on their journey through a succession of allegorical dystopias beginning with Sodom, an entirely gay version of 1950s Rome that appears to be an enlightened metropolis of tolerance and democracy, but that eventually is destroyed by violence. Eduardo and Ninetto then proceed to Gomorrah, a brutal Milan that threatens to crush diversity, where a naked homosexual man is hooked to a helicopter in front of the Duomo and shot while lifted into the air in a macabre parody of the opening of Fellini's *La dolce vita*. Like Sodom, Gomorrah meets with an abrupt and devastating end. The next episode in the two characters' travels takes place in Numanzia, which is to say Paris, a socialist city on the verge of being occupied by the fascists. The city collectively and "democratically" decides to commit mass suicide rather than surrender (2001, 2:2741).<sup>32</sup>

In the final segment, Eduardo and Ninetto, who now have been given the theologically resonant names Epifanio and Nunzio, finally arrive in the Middle Eastern city of Ur in a jumbo jet, still in search of Jesus. As it nears its conclusion, the narrative becomes increasingly comical and surreal until finally Epifanio is told in a Kafkaesque epilogue that too much time has elapsed since he first set out on his mission, which means that the Messiah is now dead and forgotten. Desperate at this news, Epifanio takes his last breath and dies, only to reawaken in the afterlife to the discovery that Nunzio has become "a true and proper angel of the Lord" (2001, 2:2751; un vero e proprio Angelo del Signore). The two protagonists, reunited as disembodied souls, set out for Paradise: "The two, increasingly happy, climb up and up through the cosmic expanses (the same in which our poem started)" (2001, 2:2752-2753; i due, sempre più felici, salgono di buona lena su su, per gli spazi cosmici (gli stessi in cui era cominciato il nostro poema).

After losing patience as the pair cannot find their destination and exclaiming "I cannot take this anymore" (non gliela faccio più), Epifanio gradually begins to listen attentively to the voices, noises, and chants emanating "from the world map" (2001, 2:2751; dal mappamondo). The playful choice of "mappamondo" rather than a more pompous word for the earth in Pasolini's scenario bespeaks the Chaplinesque absurdity of his characters as they fulfill their apocalyptic fates in the hereafter. What follows in the final moments of the tale continues in this gently ludicrous vein, as Epifanio arrives at the realization that "it is only through illusion that, in the world, he has been able to know

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<sup>31</sup> To Ferretti's testimony, Maggi adds that of the writer Uberto Paolo Quintavalle, who was one of the four libertines in *Salò* (2007, 109).

<sup>32</sup> According to the critic Laura Salvini, the three cities stand respectively for the past, the present, and the future, but I find this neat partition to be questionable in light of the end of Numanzia. The most convincing of these analogies is between Gomorrah and the present (the Italy of the 1960s and 1970s), which highlights the kind of heterosexual conformity, terrorist attacks, and quotidian violence that Pasolini also examined in his unfinished novel *Petrolio* (2004, 73).

reality” (ma è stata quell’illusione che, del mondo, gli ha fatto conoscere la realtà) while he pauses “to take a piss” (2001, 2:2753; si mette a pisciare).

Although he recognizes that, like all such would-be divine miracles, their *cometa* or guiding star has turned out to be a “load of crap” (stronzata), Epifanio gazes at the world “with sympathy” (con simpatia). Unexpectedly, he finds himself moved to “certain mysterious tears of gratitude” (certe misteriose lacrime di gratitudine) for having known life on the earth, from which he can hear the growing sounds of revolutionary struggle: “From down below arrive confusedly the voices and noises of daily life—chants of poor people, fashionable chants, and finally revolutionary chants.... The chants, the revolutionary chants down below become increasingly sharper.”<sup>33</sup> In response to Epifanio’s disquiet, Nunzio delivers the Beckettian final lines of the drama: “Let’s wait. Something will happen” (2001, 2:2753; Aspettamo. Qualche cosa succederà). In Pasolini’s disenchanting epic, which distills the apocalyptic voices of modernity from Cervantes to Kafka and Beckett, the two unlikely heroes appear at the end to have found, if not Paradise, then at least a shared space of gratitude and perhaps even of mercy.

The scenario may be said to recur to the original etymology of the word “apocalypse” in Saint John, which according to André Chouraqui connotes contemplation rather than the punishment of the sinful.<sup>34</sup> If Epifanio can do no more than listen from afar to our worldly clamor, thus resembling the poet of “Plan of Future Works” (Progetto di opere future) who declares that “the revolution is now just a sentiment” (la rivoluzione non è più che un sentimento), *Porno-Teo-Kolossal* nonetheless imagines the apocalypse as a domain where contemplative gratitude for humanity’s noisy activity is privileged over the punitive task of judgment (1996, 202-203).<sup>35</sup> Pasolini’s narrative thus challenges the conventional wisdom that apocalyptic visions must always necessarily be greeted with enlightened, rational skepticism. Both Pasolini and Agamben in this sense raise an important ethical question for readers: must we always reject the apocalyptic manner in works of art and thought as a means of giving voice to irrational and politically irresponsible views (granted that in Agamben the mode sometimes verges on messianism), albeit with occasional protestations of sympathy as in Didi-Huberman’s case?<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> “Da laggiù arrivano—confusi tra le voci e i rumori della vita quotidiana—canti di povera gente, sciocchi canti di moda, e, infine, canti rivoluzionari....I canti—i canti rivoluzionari—laggiù si fanno sempre più nitidi” (2001, 2:2753).

<sup>34</sup> For an extended discussion of the meaning of apocalypse according to Chouraqui, see his *Un Pacte neuf* (1977). Cf. Derrida’s comments on Chouraqui (1993, 119).

<sup>35</sup> My interpretation of the scenario on this point diverges from Armando Maggi’s more pessimistic conclusion: “The end of *Porn-Theo-Colossal* alludes to a renewal, which is apocalyptic in that it manifests an eternal waiting. The two enlightened men are ‘out of this world,’ and the revolution seems something perennially announced but never realized” (2007, 155).

<sup>36</sup> On Agamben’s interpretation of messianic time in relationship to the apocalypse, see *The Time That Remains* (2005). Agamben regards Saint Paul’s interpretation of messianic time as the fundamental one of the messianic tradition. The messianic in this light becomes a figure not related to the naïve idea of a future to come, but rather to the present time or “the time of the now.” On this reckoning, Paul faces all the contradictions of the “remaining time” that represents the real messianic time. Indeed, the temporal experience to which messianic time gives access seems based on a reversal of the relationship between past and future. Although my rapid synopsis cannot do justice to the intricacy and complexity of Agamben’s argument, I wish to note that the Italian philosopher has written an original genealogy of apocalyptic and messianic time that repositions hope in a new temporal economy of past and future. As messianic hope

On this question we may find it useful to turn to Derrida's essay, "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy" (D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie), the title of which alludes to Kant's "On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy" (Von einem neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie) (1796) (1993, 117-171).<sup>37</sup> As a way of examining more closely "the hypothesis or the program of an intractable demystification," Derrida calls on us to "nuance the praise" that readers reflexively give to Kant for having the audacity to "denounce a *manner* of giving oneself airs" that coincides with the apocalyptic tone in philosophy (1993, 156, 123). According to Derrida, Kant's criticism of this "tone" is grounded in a suspicion that "the oracular voice" of apocalyptic thought "covers over the voice of reason," which is to say that the prophetic view mistakes "the *Geheimnis* of practical reason, the sublimity of moral law" for the inspirational "mystery of vision and contact, whereas the moral law never gives itself to be seen or touched" (1993, 131-133). Yet such a debate is doomed to remain confined within the terms of phallogocentrism, as both sides, in their fear of castration, bind themselves to the same movement of reason, of the mastery of presentiment.

On this score, there is no metalanguage to which we may have recourse to mediate the question of eschatology, because "each of us is the mystagogue *and* the *Aufklärer* of an other" (1993, 142). To the extent that the oracular impulse itself represents a "desire for clarity and revelation," Derrida points out, Kant's attempt "to demystify or, if you prefer, to deconstruct apocalyptic discourse" in the name of *Aufklärung* must be understood as itself apocalyptic (1993, 148). As the French philosopher aptly puts it, "The question remains and comes back: what can be the limits of demystification" (1993, 159)? Derrida's observations are especially pertinent to taking stock of a certain genre or regimen of criticizing apocalyptic thinkers such as Pasolini and Agamben. Although it may be productive and necessary at times to call into question the rhetoric of the uncompromising and the unreasonable, the critics who undertake such a line of attack too often leave us with the impression that they operate ultimately in the name of a conservative wish for mastery.<sup>38</sup> Precisely with the danger of this wish in mind, Derrida concludes his essay by asking a last question that comes close to ventriloquizing the voice of reason itself: "To what ends do you want to come when you come to tell us, here now, let's go, come, the apocalypse, it's finished, I tell you this, that's what's happening" (1993, 168).

It may be said, then, that many of Pasolini's more demystificatory or skeptical readers have not succeeded in resisting the self-regarding enjoyment of their own principles. In so doing, they have refused to see the Pasolini who, *malgré lui*, stood for the future, albeit for a future achieved through apocalyptic lucidity, through a refusal to accept complacently the given state of affairs, through the repudiation of indifference. Moreover, such readers have failed to recognize that, if there is one Italian intellectual of the twentieth century who may claim to have had a "future," it is Pasolini. From Nanni Moretti to Roberto Saviano, the most courageous minds in Italy have dedicated their own

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does not address an indefinite future, but the time of now, the time that remains, the urgent critical pathos of Agamben's thought is not necessarily in contradiction with his interpretation of messianic time.

<sup>37</sup> Derrida's lecture was first delivered in 1980.

<sup>38</sup> "Shall we thus continue in the best apocalyptic tradition to denounce false apocalypses? . . . Nothing is less conservative than the apocalyptic genre" (Derrida, 159).

works to Pasolini in the years that have followed his death.<sup>39</sup> A Gennariello for our times, Saviano may even have been thinking of *Porno-Teo-Kolossal* when he gave his celebrated denunciation of Neapolitan organized crime the fittingly Pasolinian title *Gomorra*.

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<sup>39</sup> Pasolini also continues to inspire a steady series of critical titles in Italy. Two of the most recent additions that are worth considering are Marco Belpoliti's *Pasolini in salsa picante* (2010), which attempts to emphasize the question of Pasolini's queer identity while downplaying his more traditional political engagements, and Giorgio Galli's far-more convincing *Pasolini comunista dissidente* (2010).



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