

The Cinema of Poetry

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In 1960, Pier Paolo Pasolini called upon a nineteen-year-old Bernardo Bertolucci to be his assistant for Pasolini's first film, *Accattone*. Neither knew much about filmmaking. Pasolini had written various screenplays for other directors but had little practical knowledge of how to make a film, Bertolucci was an ardent *cinéphile* but had shot only a couple of 10-minute home films. The experience, Bertolucci has often repeated, was like that of participating in the invention of cinema:

So I became [Pasolini's] assistant for *Accattone*, and what did I assist in? I assisted in and witnessed the invention of cinema: Pasolini was inventing a language. *Accattone* was very important for me because it rarely happens that you get to witness the invention of a language: what Pasolini did was truly an invention because he had no significant experience of the cinema he could draw on. At that time, the only film he really liked was Dreyer's *Joan of Arc*. It was only later that he began going to the movies more often. So, to repeat something I've said many times, the first day that Pasolini made a tracking shot, I had the feeling I was watching the first tracking shot in the history of

[Keywords] film-making, Pasolini, Gramsci, cinematic language, semiotics, sign systems, pregrammatical nature of images, oneiric physical quality of images, im-signs(signifying images), lin-signs(linguistic signs), passion, ideology, Third World, history of thoughts

film (Bertolucci 109).¹⁾

In the legend that was to gradually grow around *Accattone*, Pasolini confirmed his own ignorance of filmmaking when he made it, admitting that he did not know what a pan was and that the film lacked many of the technical devices normally used in films since his inspiration was “lyrical” and “figurative” rather than cinematographic (Pasolini 1989: 19-20). The question begs itself then of what compelled this confirmed “poet” and one of Italy’s ascendant literary figures to embark on what was to become a prolonged cinematic career. In many ways, the Italian filmmaking environment itself encouraged such a decision. It was the beginning of the unbridled *auteurism* in Italian cinema. Federico Fellini, who Pasolini had helped in scripting the dialogue for *Le notti di Cabiria* and *La Dolce Vita*, had just formed his own production company, Federiz, with the notion of promoting auteur cinema and helping *auteurs* retain a larger part of the earnings from their films. So it was natural that Pasolini should turn to Fellini, but when the *maestro* of cinematic illusionism viewed Pasolini’s first rushes of technically crude bleak realism he declared that the material “had not convinced.” The project was dropped and Fellini, “like a grand and elegant bishop,” as Pasolini later recalled, changed the subject (Schwartz 356-357). Happily another producer was

1) For similar comments see the same volume, pp.7, 32, 71, 183, 256. Bertolucci notes that Pasolini’s use of series of close-ups in *Accattone* is similar to that of Dreyer’s in *Joan of Arc* (181). Bertolucci’s initial contact with Pasolini was literary in nature. His father, poet Attilio Bertolucci, had become one of Pasolini’s dear friends, helping the author to publish his first novel and early poems in the mid-1950s. Since the Bertolucci family and Pasolini lived in the same apartment building in Rome, the younger Bertolucci had many opportunities for contact with his eventual mentor.

found, Alfredo Bini, who would collaborate with Pasolini throughout the 60s, giving the director nearly complete artistic control.²⁾

If in the beginning, Pasolini felt that the transition from literature to cinema was simply one of changing technique, it was with the benefit of hindsight that he would come to realize that the movement had been inspired by and involved something much more profound. Spurred by an historical and artistic crisis (to which we will return later), Pasolini felt he had stumbled upon the discovery of a new language (as Bertolucci attested), a language that would allow him to follow his true life's passion, his love and pursuit of reality. Pasolini summed up the process in an extended 1968 interview with Oswald Stack (pseudonym of Jon Halliday):

[A]t first I thought the shift from literature to cinema involved simply a change of technique, as I have often changed techniques. Then gradually, as I worked in the cinema and got more and more into it, I came to understand that the cinema is not a literary technique; it is a language of its own. The first idea that came to me was that I had instinctively given up writing novels and then gradually given up poetry, too, as a protest against Italy and Italian society. ... So at first I thought it was a protest against my society. Then gradually I realized it was even more complicated than that: the passion that had taken the form of a great love for literature and for life gradually stripped itself of the love for literature and turned to what it really was a passion for life, for reality, for physical, sexual, objectual [oggettuale], existential reality around me. This is my first and only great love and the cinema in a way forced me to turn to it and express only it (Stack 28-29).

2) Pasolini's move to cinema was not without controversy and gained him a fair share of opprobrium in the literary and intellectual communities, which suspected the move as being in part yet another attention-seeking device on the part of the man who was already Italy's most notorious and scandalous literary figure.

This merger of Pasolini's passion for reality and his discovery of a new language did not remain at the level of a happy but unexplored coincidence. It became instead the crux of a series of reflections on Pasolini's part during the 60s in which he turned to semiotics for a theoretical framework that would eventually lead him to a quest for grand and highly unorthodox "General Semiology of Reality."

The initial salvo was fired at the 1965 first International Exhibition of New Cinema in Pesaro, organized by Italian film critic Lino Miccich. The festival was accompanied by round-table discussions that initiated the international interest in film semiology and were attended by some of the most influential theoreticians of the period including Umberto Eco and Christian Metz. Pasolini's contribution was entitled "Il cinema di poesia" or "The Cinema of Poetry" (*Heretical Empiricism* [HE]: 167-186).

The second part of the essay is devoted to Pasolini's description of the technique of "free indirect point-of-view shot," a neologism modeled loosely on "free indirect discourse," to describe how directors such as Antonioni, Bertolucci and Godard are able to stylistically recuperate cinema's original subjective poetry. For our purposes here, however, it is the general theoretical groundwork laid out in the first part of the essay that is of most interest.

Pasolini begins his essay by noting the apparently "arbitrary" and "aberrant" status of cinema as an expressive language. Unlike literary languages, which ground their poetic inventions on the institutional base of an instrumental communicative language common to a given group of speakers, cinematic language does not appear to have any communicative "language" as its base. And yet cinema too communicates. Given this inherent paradox of cinematic language,

Pasolini notes that semiotics would seem the best inroad for a proper analysis of cinema since it moves beyond traditional notions of oral/literary language to deal with the study of “sign systems” in general (HE 167). The possibility of a cinematic language rests in fact on the hypothesis of a system of common visual signs in reality that the audience of a film is already accustomed to reading visually. In this first foray into what he will later call the language of reality, Pasolini is cautious to indicate that it is still a human visual language of gestures, facial expressions, or extensions of that human language billboards, signposts, and so forth of which he is speaking. To this he adds that there is also an entire interior world in man that expresses itself primarily through signifying images (or “im-signs”) in a way not unlike what occurs in cinema: the world of *memory* and *dreams*. Thus, Pasolini concludes, cinema can make sense because there exists already “a complex world of meaningful images both gestural and environmental that accompany the lin-signs [linguistic signs], and those proper to memories and dreams, which prefigure and offer themselves as the ‘instrumental’ premise of cinematographic communication” (HE 168).

What separates the human communicative world of linguistic signs and that of visual signs, though, is their very different stages of evolution and elaboration, for while the instrumental communication which lies at the base of poetic or philosophical communication is an already historically complex and elaborate system,

the visual communication which is the basis of film language is, on the contrary, extremely crude, almost animal-like. As with gestures and brute reality, so dreams and the processes of our memory are almost prehuman

events, or on the border of what is human. In any case, they are pregrammatical and even premorphological (dreams take place on the level of the unconscious, as do the mnemonic processes; gestures are an indication of an extremely elementary stage of civilization, etc.). *The linguistic instrument on which film is predicated is, therefore, of an irrational type:* and this explains the deeply oneiric quality of the cinema, and also its concreteness as, let us say, object, which is both absolute and impossible to overlook (HE 168-69).

The poetry of cinema is enabled by its combination of concrete physicality with dreamlike expressiveness that is inherently more primitive and originary (irrational) than traditional literary forms. In fact, Pasolini makes the claim the “oneiric physical quality” of images makes cinema incapable of the abstract so that for the present, cinema remains an artistic and not a philosophic language.³⁾

Finally, the “pregrammatical” nature of image signs as compared with linguistic signs implies a more complicated expressive process for the filmmaker. For whereas the literary author takes his signs from an essentially finite dictionary of words, the dictionary of images is essentially limitless and chaotic:

The activity of the cinematographic author, thus toponymically described, is not single, but *double*. As a matter of fact, he must (1) take the im-sign from the meaningless jumble of possible expressions (chaos), make its individual existence possible, and conceive of it as placed in a dictionary of meaningful im-signs (gestures, environment, dream, memory); (2) fulfill the writer’s function, that is, add to such a purely morphological sign its individual expressive quality.

3) If one senses, in an Italian cultural context, echoes of Vico or Croce in Pasolini’s film theory, the latter was quick to confess, in a somewhat different context, his “provincialism” in this regard (see HE 68-69).

In other words, while the activity of the writer is an aesthetic invention, that of the filmmaker is first linguistic and then aesthetic (HE 169-170).⁴⁾

If the still inchoate series of observations Pasolini had offered at Pesaro in 1965 were to raise eyebrows among professional semioticians, his contribution to the second International Exhibition of New Cinema in Pesaro the following year would prove to be semiotic heresy. Entitled "The Written Language of Realty" (HE 197-222), Pasolini's essay draws the link between cinema, or what he now also calls "audiovisual technique," and reality ever tighter, arguing that reality, or life, is in the end a sort of "cinema in nature." Responding to Christian Metz's assertion in his essay "Cinema: langue ou language?" that cinema offers only "an impression of reality," Pasolini counters baldly that cinema in fact offers "'reality' tout court"; where Metz denies cinema's status as a true *langue* because it does not possess the "double articulation" of latter, Pasolini responds that cinema is indeed a *langue*, one which forces us to broaden and perhaps revolutionize our ideas of language. Moreover, cinema does indeed possess its own sort of double articulation when we realize that the minimal unit of cinema is not the shot but the real objects that compose the shot. In this sense, and using an admittedly awkward set of technical neologisms, Pasolini posits that just as phonemes and words constitute the double articulation of linguistic/literary language, so the objects, forms and actions of reality constitute the "kinemes" ("cinmi") of the shot or moneme. Wishing to provoke with even more

4) While Pasolini admits that a kind of dictionary or convention of film images had established itself during the previous years of film, that convention is stylistic before it is grammatical. The film director must always repeat the twofold inventive process of linguistic as well as aesthetic invention.

“definitive and violent terms,” Pasolini furthers the language/cinema analogy by noting that just as oral language, in its essence as primal cry, is an existential, necessary and natural language, and written language is a convention that fixates this oral language, so cinema is the written language of action or reality itself:

It [cinema] is, therefore, nothing more than the “written” manifestation of a natural, total language, which is the acting of reality. In other words, the possible “language of action,” for a lack of a better definition, has found a means of mechanical reproduction similar to the convention of written language as compared to oral language (HE 205).

Whereas written language can only *parallel* to the reality it evokes, film language’s more direct relationship to reality consists in the fact that it “*fishes* in the Significando [signifying] that is realty” (HE 206).

The audacious and untimely linkage between cinema and reality would persist and, if anything, increase in Pasolini’s subsequent essays on cinema later included in *Heretical Empiricism*, leading him to declare that by expressing himself through cinema he could remain within the continuity of reality, or that cinema is a continuous, infinite and subjective sequence shot that ends only with our death, which effects an instantaneous montage of our lives, and that it is not a semiology of cinema that needs to be undertaken but rather a semiology of reality.

Needless to say, the semioticians were fairly intolerant of Pasolini’s coupling of cinema and reality. Emilio Garroni noted that “semiology of reality” was a contradiction in terms since “[y]ou can doubtlessly describe reality but it is really this description, and not reality, which can be studied from a semiotic viewpoint. ... Reality, insofar as it is

the condition of material presupposition of every possible code, is not a code" (Garroni 1967: 125-26 and 1968: 17; cited in Greene 104). Metz remarked that "reality does not tell stories" and accused Pasolini of a "singular semiological ingenuousness" (Metz 1974: 23; cited in Greene 104). But perhaps the most stinging remark came from Umberto Eco who, taking issue with Pasolini's "persuasion that the elementary signs of cinematographic language are real objects reproduced on the screen," noted that it is "a persuasion, we now know, of a singular semiological ingenuity, and which contrasts with the most elementary aim of semiology, which is in the end to reduce the facts of nature to cultural phenomena, and not to retrace the facts of culture to natural phenomena" (Eco 152). In response, Pasolini penned an essay "The Code of Codes," in which he notes that Eco has got it backwards, since Pasolini's General Semiology of Reality is not an attempt to naturalize culture but rather to "culturalize" nature by creating a philosophy that interprets reality as a language. Personalizing the debate and adopting a provocative stance as a rhetorical strategy for dragging Eco's lofty academism of semiotics into the Pasolinian grit of reality, Pasolini draws a grandiose picture of activity in nature as a monologue in which reality speaks with itself, and urges Eco to break through the taboo of not attempting to culturalize reality so that it can be justly posited as the very Ur-code of all other codes.⁵⁾

To fully understand the Pasolini's passionate determination to keep his theory of cinema anchored to a semiology of reality as language,

5) For an analysis of Pasolini's film theory and the debates surrounding it see Bruno, Greene (92-126), Viano (18-46).

it is important to bear in mind the context of linguistic and cultural crisis in which Pasolini embraced cinema. In 1964, one year prior to writing the “Cinema of Poetry,” Pasolini had ignited a cultural debate in Italy with the publication of his essay “New Linguistic Questions” (“Nuove questioni linguistiche”). His thesis was that the new technocratic language of the neocapitalistic revolution of the Italian boom years of the late 50s and early 60s was leveling the old Italian dualism of literary language/dialect to create for the first time a truly national Italian language, but one marked by what he called a leveling homologation. In essence, it was the beginning of the end of the possibility of literary expressiveness in Italy. But worse than this linguistic genocide was the cultural genocide that would accompany it.

At one level of his self-declared passion for the “physical, sexual, objectual [oggettuale], existential reality around me,” lies Pasolini’s passion for the street youth that he patronized (also sexually) in the poorer neighborhoods of the periphery of Rome. As early as the 1954 poem “The Ashes of Gramsci,” Pasolini was able to articulate with surprising honesty his internal contradictions. In the poem, Pasolini has made a pilgrimage to the gravesite of Antonio Gramsci in the Protestant cemetery of Rome and confesses why he cannot be fully Gramscian, that is to say, why he cannot whole-heartedly engage in Gramsci’s project to bring the marginalized subproletarian masses into history. Speaking to Gramsci, Pasolini states:

The scandal of contradicting myself, of being
 With you and against you; with you in my heart,
 In light, but against you in the dark viscera;
 Traitor to my paternal state
 — In my thoughts, in the shadows of action —

I know I'm attached to it, in the heat
Of the instincts and aesthetic passion;
Attracted to a proletarian life
That preceded you; for me it is a religion,
Its joy, not its millennial
Struggle; its nature, not its
Consciousness. Only the originating force
Of man, which he lost in becoming man,
Could give it this intoxicating
Nostalgia, this poetic light
(Pasolini 1984: 11)

In these lines we have a lucid articulation of the conflict between what Pasolini called his “passion and ideology” (“passione e ideologia”). As a Marxist, Pasolini is with Gramsci in reason, in light, and is thus a traitor to his paternal bourgeois origins; but as a decadent bourgeois intellectual he experiences the subproletariat in his dark viscera (a line that gains in significance when we recall that Pasolini practiced his homosexuality largely through furtive encounters with young male prostitutes from the Roman underclasses). His passion is aesthetic and sexual, and thus ecstatic and religious; it is a celebration of the joy and nature of this “pre” or “a-historic” people, not of its historical struggle for consciousness. In fact, it is precisely because modern, rational, historical man has lost this original force that the bourgeois aesthete views it with such intoxicating nostalgia and poetry. It is what we once were but no longer are.

From the time he wrote this poem until his murder on a Roman beach in 1975 by one of these same youths, Pasolini became an increasingly Cassandra-like figure on the Italian intellectual scene, decrying the “cultural genocide” of the subproletariat by the

homologating force of neocapitalist power, and later decriing the similar cultural genocide of Third World peoples and their cultural difference. Pasolini's first film, the 1961 *Accattone*, was a completely new sort of examination of the Italian underclasses, which eschewed neorealist naturalism for a brutally realistic yet sacred and heavily iconographic presentation of these youths. But when the film was released years later on Italian television, Pasolini wrote in scathing desperation:

Between 1961 and 1975 something essential changed: a genocide took place. A whole population was culturally destroyed. And it is a question precisely of one of those cultural genocides which preceded the physical genocides of Hitler. If I had taken a long journey and had returned after several years, walking through the 'grandiose plebeian metropolis' I would have had the impression that all its inhabitants had been deported and exterminated, replaced in the streets and blocks of houses by washed-out, ferocious, unhappy ghosts. ...

If I wanted to reshoot *Accattone* today I would be unable to do so. I could not find a single young man who in his 'body' was even faintly like the young men who played themselves in *Accattone* (Pasolini 1983: 101-02).

In Pasolini's sacred materialism, bodies themselves express their spiritual essence, and a cultural genocide is a physical one as well. Moreover, the loss of these bodies is a tragedy for Pasolini's realist cinema, for since cinema reproduces reality with reality, rather than evoking reality through arbitrary signs, the disappearance of a certain kind of body entails the disappearance of a certain type of reality and of cinema that reproduces that reality. The desperation of this historical/artistic impasse is expressed in Pasolini's final film, *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom*, in which the viewer himself is placed in the

complicit position of sadistic voyeur and perpetrator of bodily desecration.

I would like to conclude this essay with a brief mention of Pasolini's 1969 film *Medea*. Filmed in 1969, at the conclusion of Pasolini's elaboration of his semiology of cinema and reality, *Medea* is perhaps the film which most thoroughly incorporates Pasolini's ideas on the "prehistoric" reality of emarginated cultures and the "pregrammatical" reality of cinematic language.

The concern with cultural genocide is very present in *Medea* and colors Pasolini's reading of the ancient Greek legend. The centaur's education of young Jason in the film chronicles the passage from a mythic-physical view of the world as "una storia fatta di cose e non di pensieri" ("a story made up of things and not thoughts"), to a rational-historical one. The result is the inevitable loss of the originary and sacred force of our humanity.⁶⁾ The genocide itself is present not only in Medea's falling away in Corinth from her former self but is articulated in the tragic chorus of the women of Colchis: "Jason will come and pierce the sky and bring an end to our kingdom. ... We will fall like the dead upon the ground and when we open our eyes again, we will see things forever abandoned by God." This should not surprise us, for Pasolini saw the film as an analogy of the

6) In his final contribution to *Heretical Empiricism*, Pasolini notes that only the savage lives reality in a complete and non-alienating way: "The savage does not need illusions to live, that is, to express himself. But from the moment in which he begins to live reality as contemplation (from the first glimmer of this), and therefore begins to invent its succession and spatiotemporality, he discovers history, that is, illusion. From that moment on he will always need it, and will therefore base on this, and only on this, the absence of authenticity: the alienation, first of the peasant, and later of the petit bourgeois" (HE 297).

contemporaneous cultural genocide being enacted in the Third World:

In my historical films I have never had the ambition to represent an era which is no more: if I have tried to do that, I did so by means of an analogy, that is, by representing a modern era which was somehow analogous to the past. ... There are tragedies of the inadaptability of a Third World person to the modern world: it is this persistence of the past into the present that can be represented objectively... the past becomes a metaphor for the present: in a complex relationship because the present is the figurative integration of the past. ...

Medea could also very well be the story of a Third World people, of an African people for example, who experienced the same catastrophe when they came into contact with Western, materialistic civilization. Moreover, Jason, in his irreligiousness, in his lack of any metaphysics, reaches the point at which he himself becomes the link with our modern history. ...

He is the irresolute “technician” whose search is exclusively aimed toward success (Pasolini 1989: 133-34).

The casting itself reflects this vision of the integration of past and present and the importance of the body as vessel of culture and spirituality. On Maria Callas as Medea, Pasolini wrote: “This barbarian deep inside [Callas], who emerged through her eyes, her shape, does not manifest itself directly, on the contrary, the surface is almost smooth. Overall, the ten years [Medea] passes at Corinth are a bit like the life of Callas. [Callas] came out of a peasant world, Greek, antique, and then had a bourgeois formation. Thus in a certain sense, I tried to concentrate in her character that which she is, in her total complexity” (Pasolini 1970: 13-24; cited in Schwartz 554). For the part of Jason, Pasolini chose Giuseppe Gentile, an Italian sports icon who had set two world records in the men’s triple jump in the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. He was chosen for his body as icon and as

a representative of what Pasolini saw as the new type of young middle-class Italian youth. The acting style of Jason and the other argonauts is not that of Greek heroes but of beautiful, carefree bourgeois youth being groomed for power in what Pasolini called the “homologating” consumeristic culture of contemporary Italy. They are beautiful young technocrats.

Medea also serves as a vehicle for Pasolini’s ideas on the semiology of cinema and reality. Nor is this fortuitous, since for Pasolini the cinema’s pregrammatical and oneiric qualities have much to do with his “religious” love for reality (HE 229) and with his feeling that “being” is not “natural” but “miraculous, mysterious, and if anything absolutely unnatural” (HE 240). For Pasolini, the poetry of cinema reproduces reality’s mysterious, sacred nature. In its most fundamental moments, film is simultaneously realistic and oneiric, and always antinaturalistic. One of Pasolini’s complaints against Italian neorealism (of the De Sica variety in particular), was its pretense to a type of naturalism that “blends with it an ideology of resigned, kind-hearted, or crepuscular ‘acceptance’” (HE 227). The infinite sequence shot of cinema in nature shares nothing for him with the trick and manipulation of the sequence shot in a naturalist film: “That is why I avoid the sequence shot: because it is naturalistic and therefore . . . natural. My fetishistic love of the “things” of the world makes it impossible for me to consider them natural. Either it consecrates them or it desecrates them violently, one by one; it does not bind them in a correct flow, it does not accept this flow. But it isolates them and adores them, more or less intensely, one by one” (HE 227). The sacred gaze of the cinema is equivalent to that of the pre-rational, pre-historical human gaze. Man before he became historical man. Just as Pasolini had railed against the cultural

genocide, so did he against what he called the “rape” of the sacred force of the cinema of poetry by the narrative demands of commercial and complacent cinema, which chose instead to express reality in a naturalistic way, forcing “all of cinema’s irrational, oneiric, elementary, and barbaric elements below the level of consciousness” (HE 172). We find similar sentiments in what the centaur Chiron utters to his young charge Jason concerning the loss we incur when we move from a mythic, sacred (truly cinematic) relationship with reality, to a rational and naturalistic one: “Everything is holy, everything is holy, everything is holy. There is nothing natural in nature, my boy, bear that in mind. When nature will seem natural to you, everything will be finished and something else will begin.”

With sadness I must report that in many years of teaching undergraduate courses on Italian cinema, *Medea* holds first place among the majority of my students as the film they like the least. Many have chosen not to articulate this dislike beyond the always damning critique that the film is boring. Others though have pointed to what they see as the basic flaw in the film’s composition: its narrative inability to articulate a comprehensible and engaging story on its own, and the attempt to rectify this inability with an arid, “talking-heads,” non-narrative exposition of its thematic and intellectual concerns, the primary talking head being of course the centaur Chiron himself. This critique is in many ways accurate, I feel, and relates back to Pasolini’s own ideas on the cinema of poetry. Much of *Medea* is shot in an attempt to capture a sacred approach to reality. Pasolini noted, “to me, everything seems invested with an important light, special, which is best defined as sacred. And this determines my style, my technique” (cited in Schwartz 555). Much of that technique in *Medea* consists of

emphasizing a static presence of being, similar perhaps to Benjamin's notion of "aura"; it begins with the opening shot of the sun on the horizon and continues throughout in hieratic shots of faces, costumes, bodies, and dismemberment with an emphasis on dreams and the oneiric (also at the collective level). The film is scored with a music that is ritualistic and unintelligible (to most Western ears at least). A pregrammatical, antinaturalistic "sacred" cinema, a cinema we no longer understand except as a trace, an oneiric memory. The limit of this cinema of poetry, as Pasolini himself states, is that unlike literary or philosophical language, "the linguistic world of the filmmaker is composed of images, and images are always concrete, never abstract (only if one looks thousands of years into the future can one foresee image-symbols which undergo a process similar to that of words, or at least roots which, originally concrete, through the effects of repeated use have become abstract). For now, therefore, cinema is an artistic and not a philosophic language. It may be a parable, but never a directly conceptual expression" (HE 172). And thus we have the talking heads, who express the film's abstract and philosophical concepts, its "storia di pensieri," or history of thoughts. This linguistic-cinematic dichotomy and resulting discursive duality is likewise inscribed in the film, in the same figure of the centaur, when he appears to Jason in his dual manifestation as mythological creature and rational human being. When Jason asks what is the function of the mute old centaur and of the loquacious new centaur, who has substituted the other but without causing him to disappear, our talking head responds: "Nothing can stop the old centaur from inspiring feelings in you, and me, the new centaur, from expressing them."

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Abstract

This essay explores the theories of Italian poet and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini on the language of cinema. In essays such as “The Cinema of Poetry” and “The Written Language of Reality” composed during the 1960s, Pasolini argues for the special status of film language as “pre-grammatical” and links it to visual signifying processes such as dreams and memories. He also views cinema as the inroads towards a general semiotics of reality since, for him, the basic unit of film language is not the shot but those objects of reality that constitute the *mise-en-scene* of the shot, hence cinema is posited as the written language of reality whose minimal units of articulation are the very objects of reality itself. Accused by semioticians such as Umberto Eco of semiotic ingenuousness in trying to reduce the facts of culture to nature, Pasolini responded by arguing that he was trying to do the opposite, that is to say, to culturalize nature by examining it as a language. Against the constructed naturalism of both commercial and neorealist films, Pasolini argued for the creation of a poetic cinema able to exploit its constitutional pregrammatical, oneiric and sacred relationship with the world. The essay concludes with an analysis of the film *Medea* in which Pasolini’s attempt to restore a sacred vision of reality merges with his concerns over the cultural genocide of traditional and emarginated peoples at the hands of neocapitalist homologation.