

# Narrative Catastrophe and its Aftermath: On the Potentiation of Notation as a Form of Negative Virtuality in Pier Paolo Pasolini's Work

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## Titre / Title / Titolo

Después de la catástrofe narrativa: la potenciación de la notación como forma de virtualidad negativa en la obra de Pier Paolo Pasolini

Après la catastrophe narrative: la potentialisation de la notation comme forme de virtualité négative dans l'œuvre de Pier Paolo Pasolini

Dopo la catastrofe narrativa: la potenzializzazione degli appunti come forma di virtualità negativa nell'opera di Pier Paolo Pasolini

## Resumen / Résumé / Abstract / Riassunto

Desde la década de 1960 y hasta su muerte, Pier Paolo Pasolini elevó la notación a paradigma formal central de su obra, con el objetivo de desafiar y subvertir las convenciones literarias y cinematográficas de la modernidad europea. Tomando como referencia las observaciones del escritor y pensador afroamericano Frank B. Wilderson sobre la catástrofe narrativa, el artículo sitúa el uso de la notación por parte de Pasolini en el marco más amplio de su reflexión sobre las posibilidades de la narración en la era de la descolonización y el capitalismo tardío globalizado. Esboza el desarrollo de la nota y su ascenso a la prominencia en la obra de Pasolini como una forma de que el autor occidental renuncie a su autoridad y al ejercicio del poder narrativo. De manera crucial, el artículo ilustra cómo, en contraste con los supuestos frecuentemente sostenidos sobre la anotación como una forma inacabada subordinada a un producto potencialmente acabado, Pasolini concibe y potencia la anotación como una forma de virtualidad negativa que no se atiene a la lógica de la finalidad positiva.

Depuis les années 1960 et jusqu'à sa mort, Pier Paolo Pasolini a élevé la notation au rang de paradigme formel principal de son œuvre, dans le but de défier et de subvertir les conventions littéraires et cinématographiques de la modernité européenne. S'inspirant des observations de l'écrivain et penseur afro-américain Frank B. Wilderson III sur la catastrophe narrative, l'article situe l'utilisation de la notation par Pasolini dans le cadre plus large de sa réflexion sur les possibilités de la narration à l'ère de la décolonisation et du capitalisme tardif mondialisé. Il décrit le développement de la note et sa montée en puissance dans l'œuvre de

Pasolini comme un moyen pour l'auteur occidental de renoncer à son autorité et à l'exercice du pouvoir narratif. L'article montre surtout comment, contrairement aux idées reçues sur la notation comme forme inachevée subordonnée à un produit potentiellement fini, Pasolini conçoit et potentialise la notation comme une forme de virtualité négative qui n'obéit pas à la logique de la finalité positive.

From the 1960s and until his death Pier Paolo Pasolini elevated notation to his work's central formal paradigm, with the aim of challenging and subverting the literary and cinematic conventions of European modernity. Taking its cue from the African American writer and thinker Frank B. Wilderson's observations on narrative catastrophe, the article situates Pasolini's use of notation within the broader framework of his reflection on the possibilities of narration in the age of decolonization and globalised late capitalism. It outlines the development of the note and its rise to prominence in Pasolini's work as a way for the Western author to relinquish his authority and the exertion of narrative power. Crucially, the article illustrates how, in contrast to frequently held assumptions about notation as an unfinished form subordinated to a potentially finished product, Pasolini conceives and potentiates notation as a form of negative virtuality that does not abide by the logic of positive finality.

Dagli anni '60 e fino alla sua morte, Pier Paolo Pasolini ha elevato la notazione a paradigma formale fondamentale nella sua produzione, con l'obiettivo di sovvertire le convenzioni letterarie e cinematografiche della modernità europea. Prendendo spunto dalle osservazioni dello scrittore e pensatore afroamericano Frank B. Wilderson III sulla catastrofe narrativa, l'articolo situa l'uso della notazione da parte di Pasolini nel quadro più ampio della sua riflessione sulle possibilità della narrazione nell'epoca della decolonizzazione e del tardo capitalismo globalizzato. Delinea inoltre lo sviluppo della notazione e la sua ascesa nell'opera pasoliniana come uno strumento che permette all'autore occidentale di dismettere la propria autorità e l'esercizio del potere narrativo. In particolare, l'articolo illustra come, in contrasto con le ipotesi spesso sostenute sulla notazione come forma incompiuta subordinata a un prodotto potenzialmente finito, Pasolini concepisce e potenzia la notazione come una forma di virtualità negativa che non si attiene alla logica della finalità positiva.

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## Palabras clave / Mots-clé / Keywords / Parole chiave

Pasolini, notación, cine, poesía, transmedialidad, forma, descolonización, virtualidad negativa.



Pasolini, notation, film, poésie, transmédiatité, forme, décolonisation, virtualité négative.



Pasolini, notation, film, poetry, transmediality, form, decolonization, negative virtuality.



Pasolini, notazione, film, poesia, transmedialità, form, decolonizzazione, virtualità negativa.



## 1. Introduction: A Catastrophe for Narrative

In several passages of *Afropessimism*, Frank B. Wilderson III explains how the Black experience, the violence to which Black people are exposed, cannot be described and explained with the help of logical categories. This violence does not obey to any intelligible causality. Rather, for Wilderson it constitutes the basis for the category of the human per se, i.e. for the very possibility of causality or causal logic in the realm of the human, from which Black people are excluded. Therefore, the Black experience escapes the possibility of a closed narrative. Wilderson takes this idea to the extreme as follows:

At the heart of my argument is the assertion that Black emplotment is a catastrophe for narrative at a metalevel rather than a crisis or aporia within a particular narrative. To put it differently, social death is aporetic with respect to narrative writ large (and, by extension, to redemption writ large). (226f.)

This narrative catastrophe or catastrophe of the narrative can be dealt with in many ways, and it determines first and foremost the magmatic form of *Afropessimism* itself. However, it also bears broader aesthetic consequences, which, I maintain, come to the fore in Pier Paolo Pa-

solini's work from the perspective of the master (rather than of the slave) as a result of the encounter with the colonized space and decolonial struggles. The catastrophe that lies at the core of modern narrative forms demands a move into a negative virtuality where it never reaches its completion, at least not as long as the current socio-political conditions persist.

At the beginning of the 1960s, Pasolini is known as the novelist and director who gives voice to the Italian sub-proletariat in neo-realist works, and whose poems are also characterized by a distinctly narrative flow. The novels *Ragazzi di vita* (1955), *Una vita violenta* (1959) and the films *Accattone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962) present closed narratives of the lives of individual characters. For Pasolini, the fact that these characters are socially and politically marginalized figures in an Italian society undergoing a staggering economic development does not change the fact that their story can be told by an empathetic and sympathetic outsider, even if it is the story of their downfall.

Then, however, Pasolini's oeuvre undergoes a rupture that had already announced itself in the transition from writing to film, but which only began to have a drastic effect on Pasolini's certainties regarding the formal design of his works in the context of the preparation of the *Gospel according to Matthew* in 1963. Pasolini, as I will illustrate in what follows, falls into a mimetic crisis, a crisis of representation and representability, which is based on the realization that colonial and capitalist violence cannot be narrated with conventional figurative means. In Wilderson's formulation, "what we have is a situation that resists retelling" (89). The European, bourgeois author must abandon the claim to authority and renounce the sign of authorial sovereignty par excellence, namely the setting of a conclusion. After this point, the novel is no longer closed in the conventional sense.

Pasolini's novel *Teorema* (1968), which tells the story of the dissolution of an upper middle-class family through an encounter with a divine-human figure of Eros, must be read together with the film of the same name, which was released in the same year, as the two complement each other in many respects. The allegorical dimension of the

two works, which in the film is embedded in a visually realistic aesthetic framework, cannot be easily resolved. The numerous films that Pasolini made until the end of his life are mostly adaptations of literary classics (*Oedipus Rex*, 1967, *Medea*, 1969, *The Decameron*, 1971, *The Canterbury Tales*, 1972, *Arabian Nights*, 1974), which are updated and estranged in peculiar ways. In these cases the ending is already predetermined and the director can devote himself entirely to the details of the – sometimes very free – realization in order to visualize the material and expose its contradictions (cf. Gragnolati).

However, during the last decade of his life the frequency with which Pasolini employs the term *appunti* (notes) is particularly striking, pointing to a dramatic shift in the central aesthetic tenets that underpin his work. The notes, I argue, become the site where Pasolini develops a form of narration that is mindful of the position of its author in the face and as an agent of colonial violence. Sealed into a definitively unfinished stage rather than subordinated to a future finished product, Pasolini's notation unfolds in the aftermath of the narrative catastrophe of colonial modernity as a form of negative virtuality to which there is no potential positive referent inside the work itself. Carla Benedetti has noted that, in Pasolini's later work,

la forma-progetto implica che tutto il materiale venga iscritto nella *modalità del possibile*. Anche il pezzo [...] viene [...] presentato nel suo stato potenziale, cioè non come pezzo effettivo dell'opera futura, ma solo come suo pezzo possibile. (2022, 164)

the project-form implies that all the material is inscribed in the *modality of possibility*. Also the piece [...] is presented in its potential state, i.e. non at as a real piece of the future work, ma only as its possible piece.

Following on this reflection, Benedetti also refers to the “virtuality of the text”. In contrast, I wish to distinguish between potentiality and virtuality, and engage in particular the adjective's optical use. Pasolini's “virtual texts” are akin to the image reflected on a convex mirror, which seems to emanate from a “virtual focus” lying behind it. Similarly, the virtual text is tied to an authoriality that is virtual, the authority of which is exposed as such.

## 2. Notation: Between “Intimate Scoop” and the Unmaking of Form

Notes usually remain in the private writing space of their authors, only to be made available to the public after their death. This is famously the case for Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg's *Sudelbücher*, Giacomo Leopardi's *Zibaldone*, Franz Kafka's *Oktavhefte* or Paul Valéry's *Cahiers*. In his last seminar on *The Preparation of the Novel* (1978-1980), Roland Barthes defines notation as a short fragmentary form that precedes the novel. The note is a “scoop intimiste” (intimate scoop, 198), which surprisingly reveals something new to the writer. This is kept in the private space of the notebook and is not intended for publication. In this framework, according to Barthes, the notation is subordinate to the completed form of the novel.<sup>1</sup> In turn, truth is more likely to be found in notation than in the novel, which stems from a lie (232). According to this view, the entanglement of novel and note consists in the fact that the note is not yet a novel, the novel is no longer a note, and this state of affairs is essential for both types of text. For Barthes, the note cannot (ever) define itself independently of the novel and thus assert itself autonomously. Accordingly, they are often difficult to decipher and require advanced hermeneutic tools in order to be made accessible (e.g. dealing with manuscripts or critical editions). Yet notes are also, as Karin Krauthausen has succinctly put it, “recording practices beyond finality” (15).

Pasolini refutes all previous explanations of the note by exploiting its conventional characteristics while breaking with them at the same time. Indeed, from the beginning of his artistic career Pasolini too is indebted to the notation as a “scoop intimiste”. In his essay “L'opera rimasta sola” Walter Siti, the editor of Pasolini's complete works, observes the following on the basis of archival findings:

<sup>1</sup> “Dans la Notation (telle que je la conçois), il y a condensation de *Notare* et de *Formare* : le seuil positif de la *Notatio*, c'est de concevoir (imaginer, feindre, fictionner) une phrase (bien faite).” (213) “In Notation (as I conceive it) there is a condensation of *notare*, to annotate, and *formare*, to give shape: the only positive aspect of *notatio* is conceiving (imagining, simulating, making into fiction) a (well made) sentence.” Unless stated otherwise, all translations in the present article are mine.

[Pasolini] non butta mai via niente di quello che scrive: nell'abbozzo, o nell'appunto, c'è un'ansia di senso che l'opera finita non esaurisce e che può sempre fecondare scritti futuri. (1913)

[Pasolini] never throws away anything of what he writes: in the sketch, or in the note, there is an anxiety of meaning that is not exhausted in the finished work and that can always fertilize future writings.

However, over the course of the 1960s and up until his death, the *appunti* become a central, autonomous form in Pasolini's oeuvre, challenging the literary and cinematic conventions of European modernity across different media. Once kept out of reach in the author's workshop, the notation now appears as a "pratica del non-finito", a "praxis of the unfinished", as Siti calls it, in prominent positions in the titles of poems and films, and explicitly becomes a fundamental component of Pasolini's late novels.

With regard to the state of the estate in this period, Siti notes that Pasolini begins dealing in a less circumspect and orderly manner with his materials, and that "la soglia che divide il pubblicabile dal non pubblicabile si fa meno netta" ("the boundary between what can be published and what cannot be published becomes less sharp", 1935). The "invasion of the workshop" by the "outside", Siti continues, has broken "a happy unity, a good conscience of oneself as the Creator" ("come se [...] avesse infranto un'unità felice, una buona coscienza di sé come Creatore", 1935). Like Barthes, Siti also treats Pasolini's handling of the notation as "un problème [...] de type psychostructurel" (a psychostructural problem, 48), as a narcissistic mortification that is countered in a narcissistic way:

Pasolini negli ultimi anni non fa altro che scoperchiare il laboratorio, esibire alla vista e al giudizio del pubblico quelle ambizioni che se di solito restano segrete non è solo per pudore estetico (risparmiare ai lettori la bruttezza), ma anche per un perbenismo psichico e politico (nascondere al pubblico i 'panni sporchi' di inconfessabili pulsioni e sociopatia che è normalmente insita nella letteratura). (1908)

In his last years Pasolini keeps taking off the laboratory's lid, to display in front of the public's gaze and judgment those ambitions that usually remain secret not only for reasons of aesthetic modesty (to spare ugliness to the readers), but also out of psychic and political respectability (to hide from the public the 'dirty laundry' of unspeakable instincts and sociopathy that is normally part of literature).

But this shift from private to public can also be understood differently, as Benedetti suggests with regard to the unfinished and posthumously published novel *Petrolio*, which consists mainly of *appunti*. Immediately after its first publication in 1992, she contended that Pasolini did not make use of the *appunti* as a genre purely out of a desire to experiment or to engage in a formalistic game. The intention was rather aesthetic and political in nature, and was oriented towards opening up new ways for art to escape the logic of globalized late capitalism. Instead of defending himself against the intrusion of the outside, Pasolini's writing attempts, according to Benedetti, "to bring reality, this 'inadmissible' outside, with all its impurity, back into play" (1995, 11) in order to explore alternative possibilities for literature. Benedetti's insight touches on both the aesthetic and the political dimensions of Pasolini's work and rightly emphasizes their inseparability (2020, 21; cf. also Desogus). I will further radicalize this observation and extend it to the development of Pasolini's use of the *appunti* as a revolutionary genre in the context of the narrative catastrophe described by Wilderson.

### 3. A Turning Point: Location Scouting and the Author as Annotator

In the summer of 1963, Pasolini traveled through Israel/Palestine to the sites of Jesus's life in order to look for scenarios and actors for his film on the Gospel of Matthew. As is well known and documented (Halliday, 73-76), Pasolini did not find what he was looking for. Instead of the already industrialized and modernized Holy Land, he preferred to shoot in the still pre-modern South of Italy. However, during this location scouting Pasolini was followed and filmed by a cameraman who had been commissioned by the production company to collect visual material. It is the first surviving film recording that shows Pasolini on a location scouting visit. Initially intended for internal use only, the *Sopralluoghi in Palestina per il Vangelo secondo Matteo* was edited and shown to the public in 1965, a year after the release of *Il Vangelo*. These are the first visual recordings to come from Pasolini's own workshop, even if they were





Fig. 1-5. Stills from *Sopralluoghi in Palestina per il Vangelo secondo Matteo*.

not shot by him personally (which would later be the case). Luca Caminati has observed that the “output of the years to come will be an elaboration of this first experiment”, and that Pasolini would develop an outright “aesthetic of the location scouting” (54). For Fernando González García, who has devoted particular attention to Pasolini’s “notes for films to be made”, “the great discovery of *de Sopralluoghi in Palestina* is the discovery of [the] double structure that allows to safeguard the images’ autonomy as well as their integration through an oral discourse.” (2015 [2], 72)

More importantly, the *Sopralluoghi* allow both the audience and Pasolini himself to observe Pasolini in the act of taking notes (*prendere appunti*).

In numerous scenes, Pasolini appears in the frame bent over a white notebook, which is now kept in the Archivio Bonsanti at the Gabinetto Vieusseux literary archive in Florence and is still unpublished. There too Pasolini describes himself taking notes,<sup>2</sup> so that written description

<sup>2</sup> I had the chance to go through the notebook and will discuss its content in detail in a forthcoming publication.

and filmic reproduction mirror each other several times and sharpen the perception of the function and role of note-taking. In the *Sopralluoghi*, Pasolini sees himself writing, dressed in the elegant suit of a European man on that contended soil shaped by colonial experiences. Only much later, in the context of *Petrolio*, will Pasolini return to this self-portrayal as a writer and have himself photographed at his desk by the young photographer Dino Pedriali, with the intention of including these images in the novel (cf. Bazzocchi; Giovannetti, 38). This is no coincidence. A thread connects those first shots taken while taking notes, which were unplanned, with these last ones, which, on the contrary, are subordinated to a clear plan, even though the pictures were not included in the existing, posthumous editions of *Petrolio*.

In 1963, Pasolini experienced a mimetic crisis, a crisis of representation and representability, which primarily concerned him as a writer. González García reads *Sopralluoghi* as a “highly interesting intertextual and intermedial proposal” by “someone who does not believe in verses

as the sole form of poetry anymore” (2015, 36). But this mimetic crisis is based fundamentally on the realization that colonial and capitalist violence cannot be narrated using conventional figurative means. The European, bourgeois author must abandon the claim to authority and renounce the sign of authorial sovereignty par excellence, namely the setting of a conclusion. In “Black Resistance”, a foreword that Pasolini wrote for a collection of “Black poetry” in 1961, he declared as a matter of principle:

L'appoggio alla loro lotta [dei popoli pre-industriali] non deve essere solo sentimentale o tattico: un momento “fiancheggiatore” della generale lotta politica: deve essere, ora, io credo, il momento centrale di tale lotta. (1999, 2354)

The support of their struggle [of pre-industrial people] should not be solely sentimental or tactical: a “supporting” moment of the general political struggle: it must now be, I believe, the central moment of that struggle.

Hence, after this point, the novel (the film, the poem) can no longer be closed, finished in the genre’s conventional sense. It equally needs to avoid the potentiality of an end that is implicitly determined by the author. Instead, it has to linger in a state of negative virtuality where the end is entirely beyond the author’s reach and cannot even potentially be represented. In this sense, Pasolini’s use of notation is more than a “negative style” employed as “a form of strategic resistance against the homogenizing system of mass culture” (Annovi, 150).

As Caminati has observed, Pasolini “does not want to be an Orientalist” (24). According to Cesare Casarino Pasolini should rather be considered, alongside Edward Said and Frantz Fanon among others, “an inescapable figure for the current and ongoing dialogues between the disciplinary fields of queer theory and postcolonial studies” (681). Nonetheless, Pasolini’s literary and filmic production on the global South have often been criticized for ultimately “[operating] within the very colonial logic that his text seeks to expose and resist” (Welch, 631; cf. also Annovi, 151; Trento, 2012, 70). Highlighting Pasolini’s formal decision in favor of notation as the disruption of finality rather than concentrating mainly on

the (controversial) content of his works contributes to a more nuanced assessment of his understanding of and contribution to the struggle for decolonization.

Moreover, Barthes’s observation that the note enables “un retour (en spirale) au réalisme littéraire” (“a return – in spiral form – to literary realism”, 48) in the sense of a “conception plus large du réalisme” (“broader understanding of realism”, 48) comes into play in this context. The note, Barthes claims, “accepte de se placer sous l’instance de la réalité même comme leurre” (“accepts to place itself under the rule of reality itself as a lure”). The “instance du Leurre-Realité” (“principle of the Lure-Reality”, 48), reality in its manifestation as lure or decoy, remains the guiding principle for Pasolini in the expansion of formal possibilities in the direction of the paradoxical, finished *non-finito*.

#### 4. Cinema: Notes for Films to Be Made

In 1967 and 1968-69 respectively, Pasolini shot the *Notes for a Film on India* and the *Notes for an African Orestes*, both of which were shown to the public as such, in their supposedly unfinished state. The films that are announced there were never realized. In a short text entitled “L’Atena bianca” (“The White Athena”), Pasolini wrote with regard to his African *Oresteia*:

Attraverso la stessa tecnica da “appunto per un film da farsi” (già usata nel mio documentario sull’India) sceglierei le facce del possibile Agamennone, tra alcuni capitribù, delle possibile Clitennestra, della possibile Elettra, del possibile Oreste. (1202)

By the same technique of a “note for a film to be made” (already used in my documentary on India), I would choose the faces of the possible Agamemnon among the tribal leaders, of the possible Clytemnestra, of the possible Electra, of the possible Orestes.

At this stage, the “note for a film to be made” has already become a technique in its own right. It is also described accordingly in the films themselves.

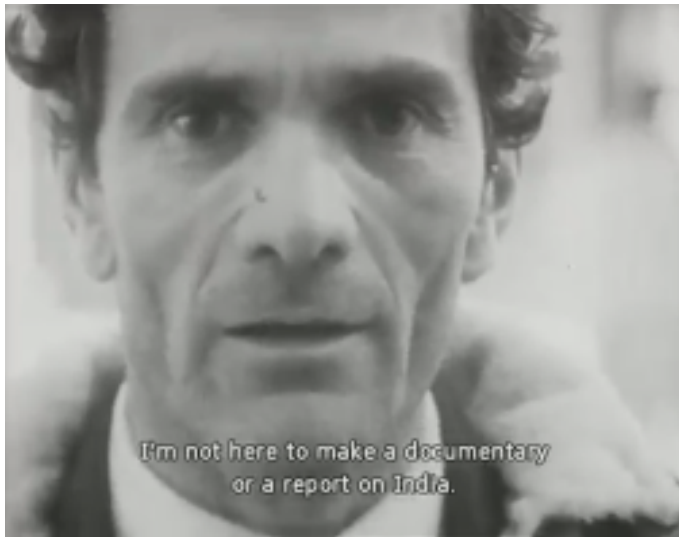


Fig. 6-7. Stills from the beginning of *Notes for a Film on India*.

These two works are often referred to as documentaries,<sup>3</sup> although this categorization does not acknowledge their explosive potential in relation to the narrative content of conventional cinema. As Gian Maria Annovi has argued, this designation contradicts Pasolini's own statements at the beginning of the two films (149). In the very first shots of the *Notes for a Film on India*, Pasolini makes it very clear, with a close-up of his own face, that this is *not* a documentary film.

This immediate banishment into negativity of a specific filmic genre is followed by the explanation that the meta-level is at stake instead. It is, in fact, a “film about a

<sup>3</sup> Cf. for example Fusillo (185f), and Vighi, who, according to Gian Maria Annovi, “doesn't problematize the notion of documentary” (224). For a contextualization of Pasolini's relation to India cf. Mazzini.

film about India”, which shifts the possibility of realizing the completed film into virtuality. Pasolini formulated it even more pointedly a year later at the beginning of *Notes for an African Orestes*, of which the opening panel states that it is “[a] film written and shot by Pier Paolo Pasolini”.

Both films begin similarly, albeit in reverse order one with respect to the other. In the first we see Pasolini's face, in the second the back of his head, in the first we are looked at directly while receiving an oral explanation, in the second we look along. By watching Pasolini reflected in the shop window, we (or the Italian audience of the time) are not only shown “what is in front of the video camera and what is behind it at the same time” (Annovi, 149) but we also, and more significantly, mirror ourselves.

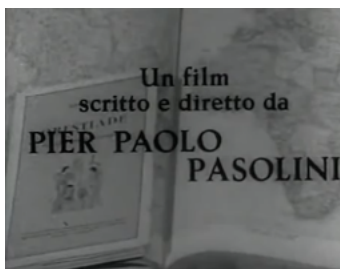


Fig. 8-11. Stills from the beginning of *Notes of for an African Orestes*.





Fig. 12-14. Still from the end of *Notes of for an African Orestes*.

This setting of the camera and the intradiegetic commentary, which then becomes an extradiegetic voice,<sup>4</sup> is directly related to the fact that in these movies Pasolini's gaze turns towards the Global South in the process of decolonization, and that he is looking for possibilities of representing the unmaking of (t)his gaze within the framework of a temporally limited form. This elevation of the supposedly unfinished form to the ultimate state of creative work is intended, I argue, to demonstrate the impossibility of applying pre-existing narrative patterns to colonial contexts of capitalist exploitation, since the former are complicit in the latter. The “undoing of the plot” is, to borrow Saidiya Hartman's poignant formulation, necessary to counter the “plot of her undoing”. As the opening scenes testify, this strategy sabotages the director's own neocolonial desire for a narrative imposed from a European point of view.

This attitude is summarized by Pasolini's commenting voice in the final, highly symbolic scene of the *Notes for an African Orestes*, where Black men and women are plowing a field while the socialist revolutionary song *Whirlwinds of Danger* is playing in Russian in the background.<sup>5</sup> These final notes within the notes are crucial in order to understand the notation's role and its political thrust in Pasolini's work. He asks and answers: “Ma come concludere? Ebbene, la conclusione ultima non c'è, è sospesa. [...] Il

lavoro di un popolo non conosce né retorica né indugio.” (“But how to end? Well, there is no final end, the end is suspended. [...] The labour of a people knows neither rhetoric nor hesitation.”)

Manuele Gagnolati has observed that

the idea of synthesis is at the same time challenged in the movie itself – first of all by the idea that a ‘final conclusion’ is actually missing [...] here it expresses the idea that synthesis is a hope rather than a certainty. (127)

Yet the word *fine*, end, nevertheless concludes the film, as it should, giving up the illusion of being able to grasp the liberation struggle of a people within its boundaries. Instead, the film sustains and exposes the contradiction of ending the notes, this practice “beyond finality”, so that the story, another story, might eventually be continued and written by others, in other ways. The word *fine* stands over the book and the map, two powerful instruments of the colonial exercise of power. It is their end that the film announces. If, as is stated at the film's end, “il lavoro di un popolo” (“the labour of a people”) knows no rhetoric, then the highly charged rhetoric of the *translatio* of a foundational mythical event such as the *Oresteia* to a contemporary context is also inappropriate with respect to the events that are unfolding.<sup>6</sup> Rather than “stag[ing] its own failure” (Gagnolati, 131), the *Notes* critically illus-

<sup>4</sup> On the relation of image in voice in *Notes for a Film on India* cf. González García, 2015 [2], 88f.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. González García, 2015 [2], 119-123. González García (136) considers *Whirlwinds of Danger* as the “theme of the choir” throughout the film.

<sup>6</sup> It is therefore also, but not only “through the scenes with the African students” that “the movie deconstructs the colonializing move of attempting to use the Greek myth as a universal model to look at contemporary Africa.” (Gagnolati, 130)





Fig. 15. Final shot of *Notes of for an African Orestes*

trate and expose the fundamental inadequacy of the tools at hand in the face of narrative catastrophe.

Both the *Notes for a Film on India* and the *Notes for an African Orestes* should have been part of a broader project consisting of a total of five sections called *Appunti per un poema sul Terzo Mondo* (*Notes for a Poem on the Third World*), each devoted to a region of the world that allegedly fell under this label. The film would have represented a “direct revolutionary intervention” (*Per il cinema II*, 2681), but all that remains of it is the description of its various parts. From this, however, we learn that “the formula: ‘a film about a film to be made’” (“la formula: ‘un film su un film da farsi’”, 2681) would have been decisive.

## 5. Poetry on/of Waste

The list of poems written by Pasolini that contain the word *appunto* or *appunti* in their title is long. They are mainly found in the late collections *Trasumanar e organizzar* (1971) and *La nuova gioventù* (1975). There are an *Appunto per una poesia in terrone* (*Note for a Poem in Southern Italian*, 501f.), *Appunto per una poesia in lappone* (*Note for a Poem in Lappish*, 496f.), *Appunti per un'arringa senza senso* (*Notes for a Meaningless Speech*, 151, followed by the *Rifacimento dell'arringa*, the *Remake*

*of the Speech*), *Appunti per un romanzo sull'immondezza* (*Notes for a Novel about Waste*), among many others.

Written in 1970, the *Notes for a Novel about Waste* (*Tutte le poesie II*, 363) are particularly interesting because the text allows three different genres to collide: notation, novel, and poem. The verses are free, but the breaks, the numerous assonances and internal rhymes, among other stylistic details, reveal the poetic form of the text. Like the two films mentioned above, it also begins in the first person singular and with a conditional: “Vorrei dirvi” (“I would like to tell you”). In a previous version, the first verse was preceded by the words: “I (no other can speak)” (*Tutte le poesie II*, 1588).

The fairly conventional narrative flow is soon interrupted three lines later when the street sweepers themselves take the floor. Unlike the films, however, where numerous elements point to their provisional nature, there is no obvious formal reason in this, as in the other note-poems, for calling it a note, nor is it clear how a novel about garbage is to emerge from this already closed unit (there is a period at the end, the narrator has taken the floor again).

However, the poem makes it clear that the focal point is not the transition from the unfinished to the finished, from the provisional to the final. The note form, elevated to the rank of an independent genre, points to the impossibility of realizing such a novel about the “working people” of the Italian capital, and also emphasizes the reason for this, which is explained by the street sweepers themselves:

il nostro interprete sa tutto di noi, l'unica  
differenza sta nel fatto che lui –  
Chi parla per noi si trova davanti al fatto inesprimibile,  
ch'essere scopino è un gran mistero. (*Tutte le poesie II*, 363)

our interpreter knows everything about us, the only  
difference is that he –  
He who speaks for us stands before the unspeakable fact  
that being a street sweeper is a great mystery.

This statement is followed by verses in Roman dialect, then eleven verses in Latin, which – as in the previous examples – contain an authorial self-description and demonstrate the insurmountable linguistic distance



Fig. 16-21. Stills from *Strike of the Waste Collectors*.

between the artist and the people.<sup>7</sup> The end is again in standard Italian, more specifically in a marxist jargon (“è giorno di sciopero: l’Ordine degli Scopini / è entrato nella storia”, “it is a day of strike: the Street Sweeper’s Union / has entered history”) mixed with religious terminology (“è giorno di Rivelazione”, “it is a day of Revelation”). The mixture has an irresistible ironic and comic effect, which exposes the fact that in this discourse too the Lumpenproletariat is made the object of someone else’s speech.

The problem that lies at the heart of the decision to use the note as a genre is the question of narrative authority, which was still unshaken a decade earlier in Pasolini’s dealings with the inhabitants of Rome’s popular neighborhoods. It is now necessary to recognize the contradiction

<sup>7</sup> Another poem from the same collection, *Come parlare con un sottoproletario?* (*How to talk with a member of the Lumpenproletariat?*, 331) articulates explicitly the same predicament: “Dai ghetti il mondo appare un ghetto / dove son relegati i relegatori / Non manca spesso la buona volontà / ma non si può parlare una lingua sconosciuta” (“From the world’s ghettos a ghetto appears / where those who relegate are relegated / Often there is no lack of good will / but one can’t speak an unknown language”, vv. 1-4). Without being defined explicitly as a note, this poem bears its characteristics. For example, it is hardly punctuated and ends abruptly.

that those who, due to their social position, possess the knowledge and have the refined language of poetry and other learned disciplines at their disposal, have no experience of what they are describing, and that those who, in turn, make this experience, lack the words, their speech falters and starts again somewhere else – “what we have is a situation that resists retelling”.

The poem refers to a real event and should have been used to accompany a film about the Roman street sweepers’ strike, for which Pasolini filmed the material on 24 April 1970. Contrary to what Siti claims in his commentary to the poem,<sup>8</sup> the silent footage of this film, which Pasolini did not realize after all, has survived and is preserved at the *Archivio Audiovisivo del movimento operaio e democratico* (Audiovisual archive of the democratic work-

<sup>8</sup> “Nel 1970 Pasolini girò un episodio per un documentario a più mani intitolato *Lo sciopero degli spazzini*, prodotto da Unitelefilm per il Comitato cineasti italiani contro la repressione; il materiale girato non risulta più reperibile. Il nostro testo è con tutta probabilità il ‘commento in versi’ del documentario in questione.” (Siti, “Note e notizie sui testi”, 1588)

ers' movement).<sup>9</sup> The footage is almost an hour and a half long, and a significant part of it shows the street cleaners during a gathering and while they speak. Since the sound is missing, we don't hear the workers' voices. Against the backdrop of the *Notes for a Novel about Waste* that refer to the same event, the footage showing the street cleaners as they move their lips without emitting any sound turns into an eerie illustration of the situation's structural aporia, of narrative catastrophe. Under the current narrative circumstances, in which also the power to tell is unequally distributed, the street cleaners' voice remains unheard. This is further underscored by the insistence of Pasolini's gaze on the workers' mouths through recurrent close-ups, filmed with a restless hand-held camera, as they speak.

The heaps of garbage on which the camera lingers attentively in the footage's second half become an allegory of notation itself, which absorbs the disparate and the discarded, reprocesses and reutilizes it. It shows, without any words, what a "letteratura impura", an "impure literature", literally looks like. The choice of the less common word "immondezza" instead of the more frequent "spazzatura" in the poem's title explicitly points to the deliberate, programmatic impurity (*im-mundus*) of this art. This suits a time that historian Marco Armiero has named Wasteocene, namely "one of the manifold manifestations of capitalist ecologies producing the contemporary crisis." (10) Sensitive to the "socio-ecological relations at its core [of Wasteocene]" (11), Pasolini engaged with those charged with sanitizing our cities. He documented their story

<sup>9</sup> Cf. <http://patrimonio.aamod.it/aamod-web/film/detail/IL8600001941/22/sciopero-netturbini-roma-24-aprile-1970.html?startPage=0&idFondo>. Accessed 24 June 2024.

and their demands, but halted before integrating them in his own authoritative, closed and coherent narration. The *Notes for a Novel about Waste* are the multilingual enactment of this negative virtuality, in the framework of which no novel, no film should emerge to reaffirm hegemonic forms of narration.

Amidst the garbage, the eye meets what appears to be a crate with the word "bellezza" (beauty) written on its side. The irony of this unexpected encounter will not have escaped Pasolini. In notes, meaning flashes by unexpectedly, and Beauty is preserved as an item that was once in use and is now discarded.

## 6. Prose: A Third Form, or a Novel in Fragments

In *The Preparation of the Novel*, Barthes imagined a form that was neither entirely a note nor entirely a novel:

Mais il ne faut pas exclure que l'on puisse imaginer une tierce forme qui serait par exemple un *Roman par Fragments*, un *Roman-Fragments*. Sans doute en existe-t-il. Je n'en sais rien. (48)

But it cannot be excluded that a third form can be imagined, that will be for example a *Novel in Fragments*, a *Fragments-Novel*. It certainly exists. I know nothing of it.

This third form, of which Barthes claims to know no example, was actually developed by Pasolini a decade earlier. Pasolini's two late novels, *La Divina Mimesis* and *Petrolino*, consist mainly of notes. Pasolini worked on *La Divina Mimesis* – nothing less than an actualized rewrit-



Fig. 22-25. Stills from *Strike of the Waste Collectors*.

ing of Dante's *Comedia* – since the mid-1960s, but the volume was published only a few days before his murder in November 1975 (cf. Patti). The last edition of this peculiar text is thus available, and the arrangement of the heterogeneous material corresponds to Pasolini's will. Silvia De Laude, the editor of *Petrolio*, has noted that “*La Divina Mimesis* è solo il caso eclatante di una programmatica assunzione del non-finito come forma espressiva.” (“*The Divine Mimesis* is only the striking case of a programmatic assumption of the unfinished as form of expression”, 42) In the *Note Nr. 1* the book's author/narrator shares the text's formal premises. They summarize programmatically Pasolini's thinking on notation:

Alla fine il libro deve presentarsi come una stratificazione cronologica, un processo formale vivente: dove una nuova idea non cancelli la precedente, ma la corregga, oppure addirittura la lasci inalterata, conservandola formalmente come documento del passaggio del pensiero. E poiché il libro sarà un misto di cose fatte e di cose da farsi – di pagine rifinite e di pagine in abbozzo, o solo intenzionali – la sua topografia temporale sarà completa: avrà insieme la forma magmatica e la forma progressiva della realtà (che non cancella nulla, che fa coesistere il passato con il presente ecc.) (1998, 1117)

At the end the book should present itself as a chronological stratification, a living formal process: where a new idea does not erase the previous one, but corrects it, or even leaves it unaltered, preserving it formally as the document of thought's passing. And since the book will be a mixture of things made and things to be made – of finished pages and drafts, or only intentional pages – its temporal topography will be complete: it will have the magmatic an progressive form of reality (that erases nothing, that has past and present coexist with one another etc.)

The editorial situation is different with *Petrolio*, which Pasolini was still working on at the time of his assassination, and about which there has been much speculation as to whether it would actually have been printed as it has in the various editions that have appeared on the market since its posthumous first publication in 1992. However, there is now a consensus among researchers that the more than 130 *appunti* that make up the novel, some of which contain no text at all, are part of its conceptual basis (cf. Stigliano; Chiesi, 228; and the interesting roundtable on “I capitoli mancanti di *Petrolio*”).

The narrative sections are not linked to each other in a stringent manner, either spatially or temporally, but they repeatedly return to the figure of Carlo Valletti, an engineer employed by the energy company ENI, “un ‘topos’ del potere” (“a ‘topos’ of power”, *Appunto 20*, 99). He undergoes a development and is placed in realistic situations that point to the political machinations and neocolonial mechanisms of exploitation in which Carlo is actively involved (cf. for example *Appunto 54*, 212). At the same time, however, he also experiences mutations and events that go beyond any causal-logical framework (most prominently, his doubling and change of gender, cf. *Appunto 51*, 207). Significantly, as Alessandro Fiorillo has observed, Carlo never speaks in the novel, neither in direct nor indirect speech. Fiorillo provides the following explanation for Carlo being “deprived of speech” (199):

Compiere una mimesi dell'universo borghese attraverso la lingua dei borghesi, per Pasolini, è [...] qualcosa che lo ripugna e medesimo è il sentimento che l'autore prova nei confronti del protagonista che ha immaginato per il suo romanzo. (200)

Carrying out a mimesis of the bourgeois universe through the language of the bourgeoisie is, for Pasolini, something that disgusts him. This is also what the author feels for the protagonist that he imagined for his novel.

Pasolini, or the first-person narrator of these *appunti*, justifies the systematic destruction of the novelistic form rather abruptly in the theoretical notes. As I already mentioned, Benedetti has noted that this is not done purely out of a desire to experiment or as a formalistic game, but with the precise aesthetic-political intention of opening up new paths for art in times of globalized late capitalism to elude its logic. Understood in this way, the note becomes an instrument of resistance, “a counter-hegemonic prose” (Desogus, 249). It turns mainly against those Western, bourgeois narrative norms that are closely interwoven with the history of capitalism and colonialism. Two passages from the 99th note, which bears the phenomenologically tinged and allusive title “The Epochè: History of a thousand and one figure”, articulate this point quite bluntly:



Non volevo questo comodo dualismo chisciottesco e borghese. Non volevo la contraddizione comodamente superata da una sintesi, e il pacifico procedere, sia pure ‘a schidionata’ lungo il processo unilineare della storia. No, no, ripeto, lo storico non può coincidere mai col vissuto, a meno che *non vogliamo mentire a noi stessi*. [...] Le cose sono molto più ordinate (progettate) e confuse (superiorità del progetto su se stesso) di così. (417)

I did not want this comfortable, bourgeois and Quixotesque dualism. I did not want the contradiction comfortably overcome in synthesis, and the peaceful progression, even if in the form of a ‘spit’, along the unilinear process of history. No, no, I repeat, the historical can never coincide with the lived, unless *we want to lie to ourselves*. [...] Things are much more ordered (planned) and confused (superiority of the project in relation to itself) than that.

The modern bourgeois novel is the realization of a dialectical synthesis and as such a cover-up of the prevailing socio-political circumstances, a lie. Cultivating this form is tantamount to complicity. It must therefore be boycotted, but from within its own (historical) development. Where linearity begins to set in, once meat is accumulated on the spit, one must stop. The narrator continues even more clearly:

Nel progettare e nel cominciare a scrivere il mio romanzo, io in effetti ho attuato qualcos’altro che progettare e scrivere il mio romanzo: io ho cioè organizzato in me il senso o la funzione della realtà; e una volta che ho organizzato in me il senso e la funzione della realtà, io ho cercato di impadronirmi della realtà. Impadronirmene magari sul mite e intellettuale piano conoscitivo o espressivo: ma ciò nondimeno, in sostanza, brutalmente e violentemente, come accade per ogni possesso, per ogni conquista. (419)

In planning and beginning to write my novel, I actually did something other than plan and write my novel: I organized in myself the meaning and function of reality; and having organized in myself the meaning and function of reality, I tried to become master of reality. To become its master perhaps on the gentle and intellectual level of cognition and expression: but nevertheless, in essence, in a brutal and violent way, as happens with every appropriation, with every conquest.

The use of the verbs *attuare*, which I have translated here as ‘to implement’ but also means ‘to enact’, *organizzare* (to organize) and *impadronirsi* (literally, ‘to become

master of’ and thus to gain possession, to conquer) are particularly significant, as they belong to the context of modern colonial and generally biopolitical discourses (cf. Foucault, 1966; 2004). It is imperative, for Pasolini, not to conquer the “instance de la réalité” (“instance of reality”, Barthes, 48), not to take possession of it by discursive (or other) force. As Pasolini explicitly states in his essay “Il cinema impopolare”, cinema and literature must become unpopular in order to do justice to the people, but not to the point where viewers and readers can no longer participate in and carry on these works.

In *The Preparation of the Novel*, Barthes asks:

[...] comment passer de la Notation, donc de la Note, au Roman, du discontinu au flux (au nappé) ? C’est un problème pour moi de type psychostructurel, puisque cela veut dire passer du fragment au non-fragment, c’est-à-dire, dans mon cas, changer mon rapport à l’écriture, à l’énonciation, ou encore changer le sujet que je suis. (48)

[...] how is it possible to move from notation, so from the note, to the novel, from the discontinuous to the flux (to the covered)? This is a psychostructural problem for me, because it means moving from fragment to non-fragment, that is to say, in my case, changing my relationship to writing, to enunciation, or even changing the subject that I am.

Had Barthes been acquainted with Pasolini’s use of notation, he would not have conceived of the note as the mere preparatory stage of the novel. The “sujet que je suis”, “the subject that I am”, must indeed change. But from Pasolini’s viewpoint, it must change radically and fundamentally, and notation is the chosen formal instrument to this end. Pasolini’s use of the *appunti*, according to which his entire work can be reassessed in a way that transcends categories of genre, strives for a non-hegemonic subjectivity. By using the note as an independent genre, Pasolini disturbs and disrupts traditional (narrative) hierarchical relationships. After becoming aware of narrative catastrophe, he turns the note into a negative virtuality in which nothing is erased, but nothing is definitively, deterministically fixed either. The dismantling of authorship as the *locus* of authority and exclusion contributes to creating space for other narratives, told by others.

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