

József Pólik  
**THE BOURGEOIS OF THE DESERT**

“I did not come here to die but to cry.”<sup>1</sup>

Emilia in *Theorem*

There was a period in the history of the modern European art film when directors considered feature films as *direct* authorial and even *political* texts, that is visual and verbal polemic treatises, which could trigger social changes. It was the era of political modernism, which lasted from about 1967 to 1975, until the beginning of the postmodern age. In this period directors created so-called “counter-films” investigating the dysfunctions of the *capitalist* system in Western Europe and those of the *socialist* one in Central and Eastern Europe. These films can be divided into two groups basically. On the one hand, the openly political, *activist* narrative flourished (Godard, Costa-Gavras, Straub-Huillet); on the other hand, there were films in which symbolic shapes, sometimes surreal and absurd elements carried the author’s critical message. This was the *parabolic* narrative. The advocates of the latter “did not intend to get involved in the daily problems of politics, but they discussed the *general ideological issues* of the bourgeois society, alienation, consumerism, etc. Buñuel, Pasolini, Ferreri, Jancsó, Angelopoulos, and Makavejev were some of the main examples of this trend. Their ideological position was clear from their films, but due to the parabolic form, the authorial discourse was not aggressive – unlike in the political activist version –, and sometimes it became enigmatic.”<sup>2</sup>

1

---

One of the most important and perhaps the most enigmatic films of the parabolic trend of political modernism is *Theorem* by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975). My aim in this article is to give a possible interpretation of this unique film starting from the premise that every time I saw this movie, I always remembered Nietzsche, who was driven to state at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that “the history of the next two centuries” would be “the advent of nihilism”: “I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*. This history can be related even

---

<sup>1</sup> “*Non sono venuta qui per morire, ma per piangere.*”

<sup>2</sup> Kovács András Bálint: *A modern film irányzatai* [The Trends of Modern Cinema]. Palatinus Kiadó, Budapest, 2008, p. 384–390. “[...] nem a politika napi kérdéseibe kívántak beleszólni, hanem a polgári társadalom, az elidegenedés, a fogyasztói társadalom stb. *általános ideológiai kérdéseit* tárgyalták. Bunuel, Pasolini, Ferreri, Jancsó, Angelopoulos és Makavejev voltak a legfőbb példái ennek az irányzatnak. Filmjeik ideológiai irányultsága egyértelmű volt, de éppen a parabolikus forma miatt a szerzői diskurzus nem volt agresszív, mint a politikai aktivista verzióban, és időnként rejtélyessé is vált.” Paraphrased in English by J.P.

now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs [...].”<sup>3</sup> Those who are familiar with Nietzsche’s writings know that “the first perfect nihilist in Europe” (as he described himself) pondered a lot on the causes of the “modern eclipse” (“*verdüstierung*”), and since he was also a poet, he sometimes used metaphors in his diagnoses. For example, he called nihilism (“the will of nothingness”) an expanding “desert” or “a guest at the door”. I call attention to this because both metaphors can be found in the “vocabulary” of *Theorem*: on the one hand, the image of a barren, *arid landscape* constantly interrupts the flow of the story, and on the other hand, the plot, which is interwoven with cultural references and constructed with geometric precision, is centered on the figure of a *mysterious stranger* who subverts his hosts’ life.

*Theorem* is a philosophical ideological “theorem”, or rather an attempt to present a train of thoughts in a poetic way: an *essay film* meant to be a *parabole* that demonstrates the possibility of overcoming nihilism and, at the same time, within the same story, the impossibility of doing so: just like Nietzsche in his writings, where he simultaneously sets forth the end of nihilism and its expected further spread.

Pasolini’s “poetry written in the form of a desperate cry” is said to have been inspired by two things by his own account: the poetry of the Beat Generation rebelling against welfare society (Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, and Kerouac) on the one hand, and the 1968 student revolts that broke out at American and French universities on the other.<sup>4</sup> Although *Theorem* was made at the peak of the nineteen-sixties that brought about radical social and cultural changes, we cannot see either striking workers, students occupying a university, police officers marching on the streets and pelted with cobbles, “flower children” rebelling against their parents, or anarchists preparing for bomb attacks. We can only see a grand bourgeois family whose members do not suffer any shortage. Apparently. Because in this open, tolerant, calm community, however, a “revolution” breaks out that changes the fate of every family member. Pasolini, like Milos Forman in *Taking Off* in 1971, reveals the significance of 1968 in his film fluctuating between an eschatological and apocalyptic tone through the story of the disintegration of a family. The former (the hope of social renewal) is represented in *Theorem* by Emilia and partly by Pietro; the latter (the

---

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich: *The Will to Power. An Attempted Transvaluation of All Values*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann, Vintage Books, New York, 1968. p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Naldini, Nico: *Pasolini, una vita*. Einaudi, Torino, 1989. Hungarian edition: *Pasolini*, trans. by Judit Gál, Európa Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2010. p. 366–367. For further reading other biographies are available in English: Schwartz, Barth David. *Pasolini: Requiem*. New York: Pantheon, 1992 and Siciliano, Enzo. *Pasolini: A Biography*, translated by John Shepley. New York: Random House, 1982.

possibility of continued decadence) by the fate of the other three family members: Odetta, Lucia, and the father.

It is worth noting that Pasolini had a low opinion not only about the “consumer” capitalism that pushed people to frantic consumption, preserved privileges and social injustices and eroded ancient traditions,<sup>5</sup> but he also criticized socialism. His early post-neo-realistic films depicting the sufferings of social pariahs – *Accattone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962) – provide evidence of his anti-capitalism, just as some other later works – *Theorem* (1968), *Pigsty* (1969) and *Salò* (1975) –, which analyze the worldview and mentality of the bourgeois elite.

Understandably, he gave voice to his skepticism about “communist collectivization” less frequently, since he had only sporadic experience of life in socialist countries. However, his article, *Civil War*, testifies that he perceived the social problems of the socialist systems: “In Czechoslovakia, in Hungary, and in Roumania [*sic*] I lived among intellectuals”, he says in 1966, “and therefore it was through them, through their restlessness, their malaise, that I felt the restlessness and the malaise of those countries; I believe one can schematically and summarily indicate their cause in the fact that *‘the revolution did not continue’*, that is, the State was not decentralized, did not disappear, and the workers in the factories do not truly participate in nor are responsible for political power and are instead dominated – who doesn't know and admit it by now? – by a bureaucracy that is revolutionary in name only. And naturally calls ‘petit-bourgeois revolutionaries’ those who instead still think that the ‘revolution must continue’”.<sup>6</sup> (Highlighted in bold by J.P.)

How to start or continue a revolution? How to create a society where there is not only *freedom* but also *equality*? A society that would be the *synthesis* of the virtues of capitalism and socialism? *Theorem* gives a parabolic response to these questions. This film belongs to the group of the *1968 films* that reflect the events of the 1968 revolutionary tide. Just like *Weekend* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1968), *If* (Lindsay Anderson, 1968), *The Confrontation* (Miklós Jancsó, 1968), *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), *Ecstasy from 7 to 10* (András Kovács, 1969), *Zabriskie Point* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1970), or the above mentioned *Taking Off* (Milos Forman, 1971). In the same way, *Pigsty*, the sister film of *Theorem*, shot by Pasolini in 1969 to verify the correctness of the “theorem” set in *Theorem* a year later, at a time when the revolutionary tide was subdued.

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Frei, Norbert: *1968: Jugendrevolte und globaler Protest*, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, Munich, 2008. Hungarian edition: *1968. Diáklázadások és globális tiltakozás*, trans. by László Győri, Corvina Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2008. p. 154–163.

<sup>6</sup> Pasolini, Pier Paolo: “Civil War”, *Paese Sera*, November 18<sup>th</sup> 1966, in answer to a letter from a reader. In: *Heretical Empiricism*. Trans. by Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett, New Academia Publishing, Washington, 2005. p.142.

### Monologue on the “monstrum”

What does it mean that *Theorem* is like a “poem”? This question can be answered if we take a look into Pasolini’s film theory, in which the concept of “cinema of poetry” (*cinema di poesia*) plays a central role.

Pasolini distinguishes two different directions in the linguistic development of cinematography. One is the *narrative film*, which is correlated to the “narrative prose language” and historically “shows a naturalist and objective direction”; the other is the “subjective” direction of the tradition, the *poetic film*. This does not necessarily deny the narrative (such as the avant-garde film), but “it lacks one fundamental element of the ‘language of prose’: rationality.”<sup>7</sup>

4

---

Pasolini points out that from the two traditions “the linguistic tradition of the film prose narrative”, that is the narrative or classical film is more popular – despite the fact that “the language of cinema is fundamentally a ‘language of poetry’.”<sup>8</sup> ‘Poetic’ here means inherently *oneiric*, and in its dreamlike quality, it is inherently *concrete*.<sup>9</sup> The “specific and surreptitious prose”<sup>10</sup> of narrative films is the suppression of this concrete oneiric quality, – the “irrational basis of the film” – and its rationalization as a narrative: the inherently “almost animal-like”<sup>11</sup> language of cinematographic communication, Pasolini says, “[...] underwent a rather foreseeable and unavoidable rape. In other words, all its irrational, oneiric, elementary, and barbaric elements were forced below the level of consciousness, that is, they were exploited as subconscious instruments of shock and persuasion. That narrative convention which

---

<sup>7</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini: “Cinema of Poetry”. In: *Heretical Empiricism*, op.cit., p.172.

<sup>8</sup> Op.cit., p.172.

<sup>9</sup> “[...] film is fundamentally oneiric because of the elementary nature of its archetypes (which I will list once again: habitual and thus unconscious observation of the environment, gestures, memory, dreams), and because of the fundamental prevalence of the pregrammatical qualities of objects as symbols of the visual language.”, op.cit., p.171.

<sup>10</sup> Op.cit., p.172.

<sup>11</sup> “[...] while the instrumental communication which lies at the basis of poetic or philosophical communication is already extremely elaborate – it is, in other words, a real, historically complex and mature 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 [...]. 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 [...]”, op.cit., p.168–169.

has furnished the material for useless and pseudocritical comparisons with the theater and the novel was built on this hypnotic ‘monstrum’ that a film always is.”<sup>12</sup>

In Pasolini’s view the purpose of the “cinema of poetry” is to *release* the oneiric nature: to sweep away the prose language (which rationalizes all and puts everything in a cause–consequence relationship) in order to restore the nature of cinema related to the realm of dream and the reality of conscious memory<sup>13</sup> (as it happens in Buñuel’s *Le chien andalou*, in which “the poetic quality of the language is manifested very clearly.”<sup>14</sup>). In order to achieve this goal, Pasolini proposes the application of “subjectively free indirect discourse” in cinematography. This image-creating mode, as he writes, “[...] is pretextual. It serves to speak indirectly – through any narrative alibi – in the first person singular. Therefore, the language used for the interior monologues of pretextual characters is the language of a ‘first-person’ [that of the director’s], who sees the world according to an inspiration which is essentially irrational. Therefore, to express themselves they must make recourse to the most sensational expressive devices of the ‘language of poetry.’”<sup>15</sup>

5

---

The film of poetry, therefore, is a radical type of authorial film, which considers the feature film as the author’s “inner” – subjective, dreamlike, concrete (naturalist), if necessary, or symbolic and mythological (parabolic)<sup>16</sup> – “monologue”, and a work of art that “[i]n fact, it causes it to free the expressive possibilities compressed by the traditional narrative convention through a sort of return to the origins until the original oneiric, barbaric, irregular, aggressive, visionary quality of cinema is found through its technical devices. In short, it is the ‘free indirect point-of-view shot’ which establishes a possible tradition of the ‘technical language of poetry’ in cinema.”<sup>17</sup>

This also applies to *Theorem*, where naturalist and symbolic (mythological) elements create an unparalleled unity – for example, Emilia, floating with spread arms above the houses; Pietro, urinating on the image of God; the cramping Odetta frozen into motionlessness; Lucia making love in a ditch next to the chapel, or the figure of the

---

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit., p.172.

<sup>13</sup> “oneiric nature of dreams and of the unconscious memory”. Op. cit., p.174.

<sup>14</sup> “The purity of film images is exalted rather than obfuscated by a surrealist content – because it is the real which surrealism reactivates in film.” Op. cit., p.174.

<sup>15</sup> Op. cit., p.185.

<sup>16</sup> In his poetic films, Pasolini combined the naturalist style of his post-neo-realist films with a peculiar ornamental style based on mythological sources – Greek mythology: *Oedipus Rex*, *Medea*, Christian mythology: *The Gospel According to Matthew*, *Theorem*, and literary texts rich in metaphors: *A Thousand and One Nights* (also known as *Arabian Nights*), *Decameron* by Boccaccio, *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, *The 120 Days of Sodom, or the School of Libertinage* by Marquis de Sade.

<sup>17</sup> Pasolini, Pier Paolo: “Cinema of Poetry”. In: *Heretical Empiricism*, p.178.

father, stripping naked at the railway station. *Theorem* is a “prose poem” – “a pretended narrative written in the language of poetry” – where a concrete and yet symbolic *image*, a *gesture* within the image can be attached to each character of the story. These “crude”, “oneiric”, “barbaric” images and gestures express Pasolini’s (internal, monologic) “vision” about the bourgeois society, its present and future in a condensed way.

### Sex with a god

What is *Theorem* about? As Pasolini considers it, “[i]t is a story of a religious object: a beautiful, young, glamorous, blue-eyed God arrives in a bourgeois family. And from the father to the maid, he loves everybody. Immediately afterward, a series of additional elements follow and the film is done.”<sup>18</sup> In another interview, he states: “*Theorem*, as its title implies, starts from a hypothesis which then gives *per absurdum* its mathematical evidence. The question is the following: what would happen if a god, let it be Dionysus or Jehovah, would visit a bourgeois family?”<sup>19</sup>

The film, the structure of which is divided into three distinct parts, gives a parabolic response to this question. The first part (which also includes a prologue) introduces the members of the family, and the second part represents the relationship between them and the fascinating stranger. The third part discusses what happens after the epiphany: how the family members process the “trauma” of having met god.

‘Encounter’ specifically means that the family members have *sexual* contact with their guest. This is evident in the case of the housekeeper and the mother. Emilia, her skirt raised, and Lucia, undressed, make love to the stranger. So does the daughter and the son, that is Odetta and Pietro – though Pasolini is modest at this point: in Odetta’s case he is satisfied with a single kiss, and for Pietro, an allusion to the guest’s sexuality seems to be enough: Pietro folds up the blanket to watch his roommate’s naked body, more specifically, his “masculinity”.

The situation is different with the father who, by the way, has no name in the film. More precisely, he has one but it is the name of a literary character whom the father refers to when he tells his guest that he is sick. The extremely wealthy industrialist father identifies himself with Ivan Ilyich, the main character in Leo Tolstoy’s novella, and the stranger is compared to the “fresh” and “young” Gerasim, who takes care of the dying Ivan Ilyich. This comparison is noteworthy because it sheds light on the substance of the stranger’s identity as Pasolini means it. According to this, the stranger is a person who is characterized by pure, honest openness and generosity. Pasolini also refers to this concept when he notes that the story is about people, who have created a “false image” of themselves, about people, who live “insincerely”.

---

<sup>18</sup> Naldini, op.cit., p.358.

<sup>19</sup> Naldini, op.cit., p.358.

Since “sincerity and insincerity cannot connect to each other at the level of the linguistic communication”, says Pasolini, the stranger will not attempt to talk to his hosts, “but starts a love relationship with all of them”.

In fact, the father is a sort of exception. The stranger approaches the father as an understanding friend, and in the illness scene, as an empathetic healer: he sits on the edge of the bed, on which the anxious man, perhaps with panic disorder, lies, and lifts his feet to his own neck. Physical contact between them is limited to this bizarre relaxation posture.<sup>20</sup>

The continuation and the dramaturgical counterpoint of the scene is the episode of the rural excursion. The father, recovered from his illness, again in his full strength,

---

<sup>20</sup> The guest plays the role of a catalyst in the story: he is the key figure (in the second part), who destroys the family members’ false (nihilist) identity. As the father says: “It’s sure you came here to destroy. In me, you have caused a devastation that could not have been more total. You simply destroyed the image of myself in me. Now I don’t see anything in the world that could give back my identity.” Compassion, sensual seduction, relentless destruction – it is clearly visible that the characteristic features of Eros, Yahweh and Jesus are mixed in the character of the stranger, that is Pasolini has created his figure on the basis of the ancient Greek, Jewish and Christian religious traditions. The variety of the features originating from the different cults create a special unit in the figure of the guest, acted by Terence Stamp: he has a mysterious identity, which distinguishes him from all his three prototypes. His figure is the corollary of a philosophical concept, according to which it is not worth waiting for one of the old gods to return, because they cannot help us: they could not shake us up or put us back on the right track – only *our* god can redeem us. So, when Pasolini was to conceive the figure of the guest, he started from the hypothesis, which can be regarded as scandalous from the point of view of the reigning religious cults, that all eras in world history need a specific and *different type* of god, who is not related to other gods and who cannot offer “redemption” to everyone, only to *contemporaries*. I use the concept of “redemption” in a special sense here – as does Pasolini. The god with “blue eyes” in *Theorem* does not redeem his “followers” – the use of the quotation mark is particularly important here because the guest has no followers or disciples due to the lack of transferable teachings and narratable miracles – of a kind of “debt” or the “burden” of a sin or death but of a *condition*, which is designated by the concept of alienation in Hegel and Lukács, despair in Kierkegaard, decline in Heidegger, and nihilism in the already mentioned Nietzsche. So, the stranger subverting the life of a family is the *redeemer* of this condition, that of *alienation* – however, since he can redeem only one person at a time, since he passes on the knowledge or rather, the *urge* to overcome alienation personally, since the “redeemed” do not cherish his memory in the form of a ritual or celebration, since they regard him only as the origin of their new, non-alienated life, which they need to move away from, we can consider the mysterious guest as a *physician* or a *teacher* as well. If we look at him in this way, he is most similar to *Socrates*, that is a *midwife*. A midwife helps to give birth, which means that she goes to a house, where there is something to give birth to. This something to give birth to is virtue according to Socrates, truth according to Kierkegaard, and according to Pasolini it is the *sense for sacrality* that was once owned by humans, however, got lost in the era of modernity.

sits in the car and takes his guest to a lake. There, the sentences that Pasolini borrowed from the Book of Prophet Jeremiah are uttered by the father. These sentences no longer describe the stranger as a pure-minded man, but as a violent, seductive “god”. “You’re not Gerasim”, says the father on the main road. “It’s hard to tell who you are.”<sup>21</sup> A bit later, he continues on the lakeshore: “You seduced me, Lord, and I let myself seduced; you violated me and prevailed.”<sup>22</sup> While these sentences are pronounced, we do not see the father’s face, but the barren, arid landscape mentioned already – for neither the first nor the last time in the film.

### Landscapes of violence

What does the image and symbol of the wasteland refer to? It is easier to determine what it does not refer to. The desert is not the world of enlightened, humanistic, rationally minded people, who are educated for compassion and solidarity. This world is “all but not western”, writes Mihály Vajda about the nature and social picture of *Oedipus Rex*: here “all is wild: the natural landscape as well as the environment created by man, ‘gods, temples, priests, festivities, games, poets, thinkers’, the sovereign, the council of the elders, the assembly, the army, the polis [...] and the deeds of man are violent.”<sup>23</sup>

In Pasolini’s films built on the topos of the desert, violence is raging. Its mildest and spiritual form can be seen in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, where Satan tries to tempt and, thus, to destroy Jesus in an abandoned, barren landscape. Before Satan appears in the figure of an intelligent but rough-faced man, the camera pans over the landscape twice: the arid, inhumane location of the spiritual duel is presented, where only a god can preserve his faith. The other extremity of violence is *Oedipus Rex*.

Pasolini adapts the play by Sophocles faithfully, however, his version is spectacularly different from the original text at two points: firstly, when Oedipus stabs the sphinx instead of an intellectual duel, and secondly when he kills his father and his retinue. What is slightly more than an accident in Sophocles’ tragedy becomes a long and bloody massacre, a relentless revenge in Pasolini’s film: it is not an offended man acting upon a sudden impulse who takes the life of a Laios but a

---

<sup>21</sup> The father says this sentence in the Hungarian dubbed version of the film. In the original, we hear the father saying “È difficile raffrontarti”, that is, “It is hard to compare you to anyone.”

<sup>22</sup> Cf. “O Lord, thou hast seduced me, and I was seduced; thou wert stronger than I and hast overcome me.”, Jeremiah 20:7.

<sup>23</sup> “[...] minden, csak nem napnyugati. [...] minden vad: a természeti táj éppúgy, mint az ember által teremtett környezet, »az istenek, a templomok, a papok, az ünnepek, a játékok, a költők, a gondolkodók«, az uralkodó, a vének tanácsa, a népgyűlés, a hadsereg, a polis... az ember tettei pedig erőszakosak.” Vajda Mihály: *Oedipus* (Heidegger and Pasolini). In: *A posztmodern Heidegger [Postmodern Heidegger]*. T-Twins Kiadó–Lukács Archivum–Századvég Kiadó, 1993, p.100. Paraphrased in English by J.P.

cruel and systematic murderer and even *serial killer*, who seems to enjoy what he is doing. In the world, which the desert represents, there is no forgiveness, no mercy, no respect, and no love. This is the world of wild passions turning into a frenzy, of raging “instincts of liberty” and of uncivilized desires. *Pigsty* is another example of this, where the protagonist – a beautiful, angelic-faced man – wandering in the desert, hungry, ready to devour anything, murders a soldier pulled away from his mates. He does not kill him during a fight, but when his opponent surrenders and begs for his life. Nonetheless, there is no mercy: the soldier’s severed head vanishes in a fuming crater and his flesh disappears in the cannibal protagonist’s throat.

Temptation, murder, cannibalism, fornication, rape – anything can happen to humans in the desert, which is a metaphor of *barbarism* in Pasolini’s film poetry. It is a metaphor for an ancient, pre-modern world where there is consciousness already but there is no common sense yet, there is law already but there is no conscience yet: “this world before the 5<sup>th</sup> revolution”, says Mihály Vajda referring to the Socratic “revolution” bringing around rationality and conscience, “incites the feeling of creepy homelessness in us: a world from which there is no continuous passage leading to our modern western world.”<sup>24</sup> Or is there?

### A pigsty in the desert

9

---

At this point, *Theorem* and *Pigsty* must be compared with each other. There is a relationship between the two films at the level of their motifs and structures. The two most important motifs are the house and the desert. The house, a villa in *Theorem* and a mansion in the *Pigsty*, is the home of people who behave as if they were “dead alive”. What I mean here is that they have a superficial relationship with everything and everyone. They are only interested in wealth and power and in nothing else. Their mental and spiritual lives are endlessly bleak. Although, they could do anything because they are free and smart. Yet, they are unfriendly and indifferent: nothing and no one can touch them.

In both films, the house is the symbol of modern alienation in bourgeois society. And the desert is that of the barbarism mentioned already, which stems from the lack of culture (pre-modernity) and, in the case of culture, from alienation (modernity). Pasolini’s imagination was intrigued by both possibilities: *Oedipus Rex* and *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* analyze the barbarism of a pre-modern society, while *Theorem* analyzes the modern version of the same. The view of history in *Pigsty* is the most extensive and at the same time the most pessimistic: here barbarism pervades the past as it does the present.

---

<sup>24</sup> “a hátborzongató otthontalanság érzetét kelti bennünk: egy világ, amelytől a mienkhez, a napnyugatához, a modernhez, nem vezet folyamatos út.” Op.cit., p.101. Paraphrased un English by J.P.

In *Pigsty*, the desert is a narrative space: the venue for bloody and cruel events.<sup>25</sup> In *Theorem*, it is a symbolic space: a “spiritual landscape”, which symbolizes the inner – hidden – emptiness of the family members. Pasolini uses the volcanic landscape as a cutaway shot to fragmentize the narrative and also to provide the opportunity for parabolic reading (the desert denotes the “visible” meta-level of the story). In *Pigsty*, we see a narrative fragmentation rather than a symbolic one. It is because Pasolini tells two stories simultaneously. The interpretation of the *desert* and the *mansion* story is linear on the one hand and reflective on the other: the motifs of the two stories rhyme with each other at certain points. In contrast, the narrative of *Theorem* is circular: the story explains the prologue why the father handed over the factory to his workers. The prologue, that is, the first scene in the film, is chronologically related to the last scene in the film. In other words it is its immediate antecedent: that is, *Theorem* is like a long flashback that illuminates how the father comes to take the vow of poverty.

The role of the desert is reevaluated only in the final scene of *Theorem*: the symbolic space is transformed into a narrative space. The spatial change is signaled by a bold – “poetic” – cut: we see the father at the train station undressing and then going naked in the hustle: the camera shows his feet in an extreme close-up. Then comes the cut: we can still see his feet, but now in the sand of the desert, then the father is shown in a wide-angle shot, and finally in a close-up as he suddenly cries out, just as Oedipus did when he committed the murders.

These motifs and structural solutions serve a single purpose: to give an insight into the bourgeois society in order to show its “crisis”. This constat or diagnosis, though similar, differs in one aspect in the two films: while *Theorem* sees hope to overcome the “desert” in the person of Pietro, who becomes an artist, and Emilia, who improves to become a saint – so it seems that religion and art can still save men from alienation – while *Pigsty* wipes out that hope (as does Pasolini’s last, most pessimistic film, *Salò*).

*Pigsty* is a more disillusioned motion picture than *Theorem*. This is proved by the fact that Julien, the protagonist of the mansion story, commits suicide at the end of the film: he lets the pigs dilacerate him on a sow farm. The reason for Julien’s action is explained in the conversation with his girlfriend, Ida when she announces that she is going to marry another man. Then Julien tells Ida his “terrible dream” (“these are the most realistic things in my entire life”, he says, “there is no other way to face reality”). The dream is about a “young” pig that bites off the boy’s four fingers

---

<sup>25</sup> In concrete terms, the desert in *Pigsty* and in *Theorem*, is a barren, volcanic landscape. Barren here means a landscape where one loses measure: one ceases to be a social entity clinging to moral values. Why? Because otherwise one cannot survive. In *Pigsty*, hunger – the instinct for survival – extinguished morality and humanity from the man wandering in the desert.

“cheerfully”: “There was no blood as if I were made of rubber”, says Julian. Then he looks at Ida and says with a smile on his face: “Might I be a martyr?”.

A martyr is a person who is ready to sacrifice his life for what he believes in. What does Julian believe in? In that cynicism is a sin. Cynicism is the world-view of Julian’s father, the factory owner Klotz. Klotz is a *Nazi*. This is evidenced by his physical appearance (his hair is combed to one side and he wears a Hitler mustache), by his anti-Semitism, and mainly by his relations dating back to World War II: he does business with people who contributed to the Jewish genocide, but wriggled out of responsibility by changing their names and faces (with the help of plastic surgery). Klotz’s hands are not stained with blood, but it is only due to his luck. He knows well whom he does business with and knows also that it is unethical. Yet he does nothing: because of the possibility of material gain, he turns a blind eye to Mr. Herdhitze’s past. Julian’s martyr death is a message to the father: cynicism is a poison that destroys everything – even the lives of those who belong to the environment of the cynic, such as his family.

However, Pasolini is pessimistic. In the last scene of the film he leaves no doubt that the sacrifice for the purification of the family was futile: when uninvited guests, peasants arrive at the magnificent party organized for the occasion of the merge of the Klotz and Herdhitze companies, Klotz entrusts the “strong” of the new firm, the Nazi Herdhitze, to receive the delegation. So he is absent when the peasants say that Julian has been eaten up by the pigs. When Herdhitze, who has previously accused Julian of perversion and rape of pigs, learns that nothing was left of the boy’s body and clothing – not even a button –, he puts his forefinger in front of his mouth, thus signaling to the peasants that they cannot talk about what happened on the sow farm. Herdhitze decides that for the future of the company, Klotz will not know what happened to his son, so he cannot learn a lesson from the tragic case.

How does Julian’s story fit into the other story, that is, into the one about the cannibal boy? First and foremost, we must see that the narrative of the desert story and that of the mansion story is different: the desert story is characterized by an extreme action and minimal verbalism, the mansion story is characterized by the opposite: minimal action and extreme, baroque verbiage. Although the narrative techniques of the two stories differ, they reflect on each other just as *Pigsty* does on *Theorem* (deepening its social image).

The reflection points are as follows.

Both are stories of *sins*: the protagonist of the desert story commits murder and eats human flesh without doubting the correctness of his actions. In addition, as a leader of a cannibalistic horde, he also encourages others to murder and to eat humans. The protagonist of the mansion story, Julian, is not a criminal. His father, however, behaves unethically: in his cynicism, he does business with people who have

acquired their wealth by killing innocent people. Instead of disguising them, or at least refusing to cooperate with them – Herdhitze blackmails Klotz by leaking evidence of his son's bestiality – and sets up a joint company with them exclusively in his own interests.

Both are stories of *conscience*: the protagonist of the desert story apparently has no conscience. Seemingly, because when he is caught, he is not opposed to it at all – but gets completely undressed like the father in *Theorem*. Then suddenly, for the first time in the film, he says something: “I have killed my father. Eaten human flesh. And I am trembling with joy.” He repeats these statements with an ever-increasing vehemence. His sentences prove that he is aware of the horror he has done and that he must now be punished for it according to his own conscience as well. The issue of the social and existential role of conscience also prevails in the mansion story. Klotz enters into a business without hesitation with the unscrupulous Herdhitze, and Herdhitze withholds without remorse what happened to Klotz's son. Only Julian behaves in a way that gives off that he knows the difference between good and bad. He can see what his father's principles are, and he cannot forget them. His father's notion of life makes him feel shame and disgust; however, he cannot give voice to his feelings. In a scene, he behaves like Odetta in *Theorem*: he freezes stiff as if he were some sort of a “saint”, as his mother puts it.

Finally, both are stories of *punishment*: the protagonist of the desert story is caught, condemned, and then torn by dogs in the desert – on the site of his horror. The protagonist of the mansion story condemns himself to death. Julian's body is not devoured by dogs but by pigs. Julian sees these creatures cleaner and more honest than human beings.

### Solution attempts

In *Theorem*, we do not see a scene where family members care about or at least communicate with each other. They live in the same house, but all alone, as if trapped in themselves: it is no accident that when the father wants to make love with his wife – before the illness scene –, Lucia refuses his approach. Surprisingly, the family members communicate exclusively with the guest: they form a sensual and emotional bond with him. They cannot resist his attraction, although they have never met him before.

The second part of *Theorem* consists of two phases: first, we see five temptation scenes, and after the announcement of the guest's departure, five farewell scenes. There are four monologues in the five farewell scenes – since Emilia stays silent: she says goodbye to the god by kissing his hand and carrying his suitcase out of the house. The four monologues – Pietro, Lucia, Odetta, and finally the father's speech – revolve around the same topic. This topic is the recognition of the inability to maintain their former identity. “I don't know myself”, says Pietro. “Because what

made me like the others has been destroyed. I was like everyone else... You have made me different. You have grabbed me out of the natural order of things... What will I do now? My future is that I live with myself who has nothing to do with me.” Lucia says, “Now I realize that I’ve never really been interested in anything in my life... I don’t understand how I could live in such an emptiness, though I lived in emptiness... You have brought real and deep interest in my life.”

The family members experience the trauma of the unexpected disruption of their bond with God as an *existential turning point* – as a crisis. However, Emilia is again an exception in this: her story is not about the crisis or about seeking a solution out of it, but about *enlightenment*. This enlightenment is fast and fundamental. That is why she learns how to talk all of a sudden – which the imbecile postman is surprised at – and that is why she leaves the house first.

After Emilia, the others also “disappear” from the house: Odetta, Pietro, Lucia, and finally the father leaves. This is not always concrete but in certain cases, it is a symbolic event. Odetta is taken by the ambulance (concrete departure), Pietro moves away (concrete departure), Lucia ends up in a chapel (symbolic departure) and the father in the desert (symbolic departure). The concrete and symbolic departures are the answers, that is the solution attempts to the crisis experience narrated in the four monologues. On the one hand, for each of the five characters these attempts aim at restoring the broken bond with god, and on the other hand, they are radically *different* from each other – although there is a relationship between the “reaction” or “solution” of a character at the level of motifs and symbols: Odetta becomes a *patient*, Pietro becomes an *artist*, Lucia becomes a *slut*, the father becomes a *hermit*, and Emilia will be a *saint*: someone (a human god) who can do miracles (healing by faith, flying, bringing forward water from rocks), defying the laws of Nature.

While in the second part the guest is the key character, in the third part it is partly Emilia: hers is the longest plot and it is her whom the most mysterious things happen to. It is compared to Emilia that Pasolini tells the story of all the other characters’ period of reflection at the level of the montage structure. All the family members are assessed and compared with reference to Emilia. This means the concrete comparison of two characters – forming a reaction pair – at the level of the montage structure. A pair where one of the characters is always Emilia. But it is the changing, evolving Emilia, who is always on a new level with her new identity. Emilia and Odetta, Emilia and Pietro, Emilia and Lucia, Emilia and the father – these four episodes alternate with Odetta’s, Pietro’s and the father’s stories being *cross-cut* (strictly with reference to Emilia’s story). But Pasolini narrates Lucia’s story *in one block*: the first shot of Lucia’s story, in an unconventional way, is the last shot of Pietro’s story (and the last one is the continuation of Emilia’s story).

Lucia’s story, therefore, starts with the end of Pietro’s story, and it is not by accident. Pasolini refers to the similarity of Lucia’s and Pietro’s “solution” attempts with this

structural solution. The reflection point is denial. The painter Pietro denies the former principles and rules of artistic creation (he wants to find and follow his own principles and rules) and Lucia, who makes love to unknown men, denies the moral principle that a woman is virtuous and respectable if she is loyal to her husband (regardless of the fact whether they still love each other or not). Pietro behaves like a revolutioner in Art, Lucia in sexuality: they both shake off the outdated or hypocritical norms of the bourgeois society and culture.

Their rebellion (as well as Odetta' and the father's reaction) is motivated by the same thing: they want to experience again the shocking meeting – reunion – with the young, glamorous, blue-eyed god. It is in vain because the reunion is not repeatable: Pietro cannot paint a picture of god's representation, that is "memory", and Lucia cannot meet and make love with a man with whom she could go through the same ecstasy as with the one-time guest of the house. That's why they are both "unfortunate", "remembering" individuals – as Kierkegaard would call them. It is no coincidence that Pietro urinates on the image depicting god, and Lucia, as a modern repentant Magdalene, "converts" and runs to pray in the chapel, next to which she used to love two men at the same time in the ditch.

If we examine the cause and the extent of the difference between the existential and moral "solution attempts" for the termination of the bond with god not at the level of the montage but at that of the structure of motifs (and symbols), we get to another schema. In this case, it is not Emilia, the key character having the longest plot at the level of the montage structure, who is the measure and the point of reference. In this case, at the level of motifs and symbols, Emilia and Odetta, Pietro and Lucia, and finally Emilia and the father form a reaction pair. Emilia and Odetta are bound together by the *static waiting*, Pietro and Lucia by the above-mentioned *elevated, creative, hysterical experimentation*, and Emilia and the father by the motif of *ascetic sacrifice*. This relationship can also be observed at the level of objects and objectified symbols. In Emilia's and Odetta's cases, the place of the inward-looking waiting is a *bench* and a *bed*, respectively, where both freeze into immobility. In Pietro's and Lucia's case, the means of experimentation to express desires are the *paint* and *canvas*, and the human body that is *eroticized* in both cases: Pietro recognizes eroticism in religiously motivated art, and Lucia recognizes art in religiously motivated eroticism. Finally, in the case of Emilia and the father, the scene of ascetic sacrifice is, on the one hand, a desperate, *deadly and barren desert*, which symbolizes futile sacrifice, and on the other hand, the *source* created by faith on a construction site, the "desert" of a modern metropolis.

However, Emilia's role should not be devalued at the level of the motif structure either, because she is connected with each member of the family with a motif. She shares the *introspection* with Odetta, the *asceticism* with Pietro, the *floatation (ecstasy)* with Lucia, and the motif of a *victim* with the father. However, these motifs mean something different on one side and the other: Odetta's turning inward is

*sickness (madness)*; Pietro's asceticism is *determined artistic creation but with dubious results*, Lucia's ecstasy is an *instant orgasm followed by repentance*, and the father's sacrifice is *a vain atonement in a place where one can only die or be morally destroyed* (as it can be seen in *Pigsty*). Only in Emilia's story do these motifs receive a positive (not nihilistic) meaning.

Emilia is the "solution" offered by Pasolini for the illness of nihilism in *Theorem*. The others are only possible "attempts" which, according to Pasolini's parable, cannot save Western culture from the threatening modern barbarism. So, Pasolini comes to a different conclusion than Nietzsche, who saw the solution in the new, tragic, non-nihilistic art, and who would surely have said that Pietro could be the key to the solution and by no means Emilia, who clings to the "ascetic ideal". Nevertheless, if we consider that Emilia's character offers a solution to nihilism in a *feature film*, it can be concluded that ultimately, Pasolini had a solution in art *as well*, otherwise he would not have shot *Theorem* or would not have even made any film. Therefore, after rethinking the deciphering of the film, maybe we can say as a final conclusion that Emilia and the *sacredly motivated art* meant the solution for Pasolini because he had been striving for such art.

However, I still have not answered a question: if Emilia is the solution, as Pasolini puts it forward, why does the film end with a sequence of the father's wandering and atavistic roaring in the desert? Why does not it end with Emilia's source scene? Emilia's story suggests a new discovery of the *sense of sacrality* lost in modernity and a recognition of its socio-cultural significance, the poetic expression of the need for a "revolution", namely *a mental revolution*, without which the social revolution, which is also needed, cannot be successful. The ending of the film does not discredit this proposition – the "theorem" of the film –, it just puts it between a quotation mark. The ending of the film is the sign of Pasolini's honest pessimism: as Nietzsche does not say that Übermensch (Beyond-Man) was born, Pasolini does not claim that Emilia *exists*. Emilia's "miracle" is just a "poetic" opportunity. The reality is the *pain* and *despair* of the god-seeking father who wanders in the desert, who cannot and does not want to believe what the bourgeois of the desert are saying: that God died, and this is the best thing that could happen to us, modern people.