Sacralizing Reality

Throughout the 1960s, a variety of cinematic new waves sprung up in countries all over the world. From Britain, to France, to Japan and beyond, new filmmakers were taking centerstage, introducing their own styles and ideologies to global audiences. Italy played a major role during this era with the development of the international art film. A largely auteur-driven enterprise, Italian art cinema was built on a foundation of deeply personal works, comprised of films that not only challenged models of traditional filmmaking but concurrently challenged established institutions. The state of the nation was a pressing issue for these Italian directors, therefore their films often commented on undesirable aspects of Italian life, with the Roman Catholic Church being an especially prominent area of concern. The Catholic Church boasts a long history of extraordinary influence over Italian citizens, but it was during this decade that a multitude of directors arrived at the forefront of the film industry and expressed their increasing wariness. Pier Paolo Pasolini, the Italian poet, filmmaker, and intellectual, remains one of art cinema’s most vocal and unique dissenters of the Catholic Church. He questioned the Church’s authority while simultaneously admiring the sublime gospels that Catholicism claimed to center around. Pasolini’s early films thus alternate between a Marxist-inspired condemnation of the Church and a genuine reverence for Christian ideology. By creating a reality that’s plagued by
societal issues, yet not devoid of divinity, Pasolini deviates from his Italian peers and creates a reality that’s sacred in and of itself.

Pasolini possessed a complicated relationship with religion, to say the least, but he wasn’t alone in creating religious subject matter. Many Italian directors working during this era were prolific in the amount of Catholic-related content they produced. A majority of these films focus on specific criticisms of the Church, from its infatuation with mystic superstition to its secular activities in politics. But even more so than blunt disapproval, these films question the nature of the relationship between reality and the fantastic. In speaking about these Italian directors, Victoria Surliuga defines the “fantastic” as a narrative or figurative structure that “represents in a recognizable way an unexplainable series of events and thereby creates a sense of displacement. Here, the borderlines between emotion, imagination, and reality are often crossed” (220). While these directors were by no means fans of the Church and its ecclesiastical hierarchy, they did seem to submit to the notion that there is a higher, more spiritual power that the Catholic Church could represent. This is evident in the way that some art films tend to separate a grounded reality from a more dreamlike one. Surliuga goes on to identify several Italian filmmakers of this era and describe their portrayals of the fantastic. The films of Marco Belloccchio, for example, often present miraculous episodes in a divine light before immediately reprimanding them. Belloccchio’s *In the Name of the Father* (1972) contains a scene in which a young lady claims to witness an apparition of the Virgin Mary, resulting in a nearby tree to grow and blossom. The film’s main character proceeds to cut the tree down and tell the woman to get a job. The Catholic director Ermano Olmi deserves a spot in this discussion as well, with early works such as *A Man Named John* (1965), but perhaps the most notable director of fantastic Catholicism around this time is Federico Fellini. From *La Dolce Vita* (1960) to *8½* (1963), Fellini’s films often invoke a
sense of confusion regarding what is real and what is imaginary. *La Dolce Vita*, for example, at one point depicts an otherworldly, flying angel statue, and at another point recounts a fraud concerning sightings of the Blessed Virgin. As Surliuga writes, “in Fellini’s work the fantastic continually operates like a pendulum, swinging from the secular and back again to the spiritual” (223). Fellini’s work makes it difficult to distinguish between these secular and spiritual worlds, and while it seems as though he would like to believe there are supernatural goings on, he’s hesitant to make such a claim. Pasolini, on the other hand, disagrees with this blurred line separating reality and the fantastic.

For Pasolini, demarcating the secular world and the spiritual one in such an ambiguous manner comes off as far too optimistic. While Pasolini does not necessarily object to depictions of the fantastic, he sees films like *La Dolce Vita* as being conformist and uncritical. Pasolini writes specifically about *La Dolce Vita* in a piece titled, “The Catholic Irrationalism of Fellini.” In this article, Pasolini labels *La Dolce Vita* “the highest and the most absolute product of Catholicism of these last years” (70). Although he admires Fellini as a filmmaker, the Rome that has been created onscreen appears overly rosy and shallow, with a divine, albeit naïve, grace that seems to make everything okay. For Pasolini, these characters possess an unfailing purity and joyousness that only confirms Fellini’s acceptance of the Church and State. It’s important to keep in mind that Pasolini was a Marxist, and as such he railed against the petit bourgeois class that he claimed “squirms in this parvenu, scandalous, movieland, superstitious, and fascist Rome” (71). Pasolini saw a plethora of problems plaguing Italy, and unlike Fellini, his own work would not lack such criticism.

Following the releases of his first two films, *Accattone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962), Pasolini directed the short film *La Ricotta* (1963). This film follows a cynical director and an
impoverished extra as they both participate in an Italian production of the Gospel. Pasolini created a scathing indictment of society with this film but was also heavily condemned by the Catholic Church for it. Many critics called it an “attack on religion” and denounced all of its sacrilegious themes. What Pasolini was attempting to do, however, unlike Fellini, was break down any distinction between a real world and a fantastic one. Spiritual segments may be hard to discern in other Italian art films, but in La Ricotta, everything occurs on the same plane. For instance, most of the film is in black and white with only the Gospel scenes shot in color, and even though it seems like these are two distinctly separated realms, they’re nonetheless unified through the audience’s knowledge that this is a film. Before cutting to a sumptuous frame of Jesus on the cross, we can clearly hear the director, played by Orson Welles no less, yell “action,” indicating that this is all based in reality. Reality, after all, was a “driving force in all [of Pasolini’s] work, especially his cinema… He considered cinema to be the ‘written language of reality’” (Carlorosi 260). This interest in what’s real makes sense considering that many of the problems Pasolini wanted to address exist inside the real world. There’s no room for the uncritical optimism of Fellini when one is attempting to point out society’s flaws.

Here in the real world, a major issue that demands attention is economic inequality. Following World War II, Italy experienced rapid economic growth and development, launching the country forward but leaving many of its own citizens behind. The State mainly collaborated with the Bourgeoisie in this economic miracle, leaving a majority of the lower classes and the South to become severely impoverished (Mugnai 438). As a fervent Marxist, Pasolini addresses the financially poor proletariat in La Ricotta through the character of Stracci. Stracci is a film extra playing the part of the penitent thief on set, but he’s constantly hungry and ignored by higher ranking individuals. When he finally gets a chance to eat some ricotta cheese, he’s
surrounded by a group of mocking actors and elites who force feed him for their own amusement. Stracci dies upon the cross while delivering his solemn lines. Instead of giving to the poor through goodwill alone, Pasolini comments on how the upper class only engages in charity because of the pleasure they derive from it.

Since this all occurs on the set of a Gospel film, that produces some serious ramifications concerning the work of Catholics. The State may have neglected its own citizens, but Pasolini has a history of condemning the Church for its disregard of the poor as well. After the death of Pope Pius XII in 1958, for example, Pasolini wrote a poem for the deceased titled, “To a Pope.” In this text, Pasolini compares the death of the pope with the death of a lower-class laborer. The pope knew nothing about this poor man who was run over by a streetcar, just as he “knew nothing of thousands of other poor bastards like him.” The pope, and by association the Church, could have helped the poor, but instead they did nothing. Pasolini ends his poem by telling the pope “there was no greater sinner than you” (24). Both the Church and the State are to blame for the living conditions of the masses, and Pasolini sternly rebukes them for their ignorance in La Ricotta. Orson Welles even says during the film that the bourgeoisie are “the most ignorant of Europe.” Although this short film certainly delivers some harsh critiques, its message seems to have been lost by the scandal it caused. Because of this film, Pasolini was sentenced to four months in prison, though he was pardoned later (McGill 38). The reality depicted here was obviously too harsh, therefore it became necessary for Pasolini to drastically alter his approach.

Following his work on La Ricotta, Pasolini directed the feature film, The Gospel According to St. Matthew (1964). This film would be far less extreme than La Ricotta, keeping in line with what Pasolini called his “mandatory challenge.” In order to relay his criticisms to audiences in a tolerable way, Pasolini challenged himself to create a ‘philological representation
of Jesus, seen through the eyes of an atheist Marxist” (Mugnai 439). Pasolini reached the goal he set out for himself considering how well-received *The Gospel* was. In particular, audiences seemed to appreciate the neorealist features that were attributed to Jesus’ life. The International Catholic Film Office described it as “far superior to earlier, commercial films on the life of Christ. It shows the real grandeur of his teachings stripped of any artificial and sentimental effect” (qtd. in Mugnai 437). Unlike *La Ricotta*, Pasolini broke through with *The Gospel*, creating a realistic, respectful depiction of the book of Matthew while still staying true to his Marxist principles. Pasolini places heavy emphasis on specific teachings of Jesus that align with his own views. For example, the Jesus featured here is very concerned for the poor, saying, “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” It was through the mouth of Christ that Pasolini was able to safely “denounce the hypocrisies of all the powers: the State, the Church, and the Bourgeois” (Mugnai 441). Surely the Church wouldn’t disagree with the son of God, so Pasolini used that to his advantage.

Pasolini also used *The Gospel* as an opportunity to sacralize reality. Although he achieved this subtly in *La Ricotta* by melding the fantastic and the real, he took sacred reality even further through the life of Jesus. For Pasolini, a neorealist depiction of Jesus performing miracles and speaking out against institutionalized evil endows humanity with a sacred quality not apparent in other Italian art films. That which is sacred doesn’t exist in another realm, but here on earth among men. Pasolini has even said regarding his view of Jesus, “I do not believe that Christ is the son of God… but I do believe that Christ is divine: that is, I believe that in him humanity is so high, rigorous, and ideal, that he goes beyond common terms of humanity” (qtd. in Mugnai 442). Pasolini has often been cited as a Marxist Catholic, and this quote makes that evident. In *The Gospel*, Jesus still walks on water and he still feeds five thousand, but he’s still
just a man, a man who has come “not to bring peace, but a sword.” Throughout this film, Jesus always exists on the plane of reality, and that plane is always divine. According to Pasolini, “the motivation that unites all of my films is to give back to reality its original sacred significance” (McGill and Cousins 39).

While La Ricotta almost sent Pasolini to jail, The Gospel According to St. Matthew received a standing ovation at the Venice Film Festival (Mugnai 446). This change in reception is interesting considering that Pasolini never changed his Marxist stance, only the strategy employed for conveying it. And regardless of the strategy, Pasolini’s films differ significantly from other Italian filmmakers of the era. This illustrates how even within a specific film movement like Italian art cinema, further distinctions can be drawn. Like his contemporaries, Pasolini challenged the Church with films of religious subject matter, but he did so in a very different way. The realm of reality and the realm of the divine are not separate in Pasolini’s early films. In accordance with his Marxist stance on the poor, everybody onscreen lives in one sacred reality.


