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La rabbia: Pasolini's Color Ecstasy¹

Nicola Perugini, Francesco Zucconi

Although situated in a variety of disciplines and theoretical approaches, the literature on Pier Paolo Pasolini's work and his relationship with colonized, formerly colonized, and decolonizing countries often struggles to understand his political and intellectual stance on the major historical processes of the last century. Some important commentaries have focused on the relationship between Pasolini and "alterity" and on his "heretical Orientalism," to use Luca Caminati's apt expression (2007); on Pasolini's "Southern response" to the colonial question (Casarino 2010); on cultural issues that emerged in formerly colonized countries after independence (Verdicchio 1999); and on the critical rethinking of the relationship between race and nation-state that Pasolini stages in his films (Greene 2014). However, more than forty years after his death, our understanding of the modes of expression through which Pasolini defined his position toward decolonization processes remains incomplete.

This lacuna is tied to two factors. In the first place, his work in the period of decolonization has never been historicized, and there has been no real reflection on or contextualization of some his most interesting explorations of the African and Asian worlds in the process of

¹ The authors acknowledge equal contribution and conceived the entire article together. Nicola Perugini composed the introduction and section 'Editing Worlds and the Ecstasy of Color.' Francesco Zucconi composed sections 'Pasolini's *Rage*' and 'Poetic Rage and the Temperature of Survival.' Nicola Perugini acknowledges the generous support of the funding from the Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in Italian and Middle East Studies at Brown University (2014-2016) and the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme-MSCA-IF-2015-703225. Francesco Zucconi acknowledges the generous support of the funding from the Lauro de Bosis postdoctoral Fellowship at Harvard University.

liberation, as he first encountered them – places that became favorite settings for many of his later works. Secondly, there is the complexity of Pasolini's gaze on what even today is still called, problematically, "the Third World" or "the world's South" – a gaze marked by a radical critique of modernity that at times led him to search for the remains of premodernity. This pursuit risked lapsing into naive forms of primitivism with the potential to reproduce some of the interpretive and imaginative grids of non-Western worlds dear to many of the forms of knowledge that fueled colonialist thought. Hence, the thorny tractability of what we here call the "decolonial Pasolini." In the wake of Walter Mignolo's theorization of the decolonial option as a simultaneously epistemic and political option, we use the expression in this article to refer to the literary and cinematographic works of Pasolini with the capacity to grasp and express a *liberating energy*. This is energy, writes Mignolo (2011: 46), that "is translated into *decolonial projects* [and critiques] *that, as a last resort, are also constitutive of modernity.*"

If, on the one hand, it is difficult to place Pasolini's travels and poetic explorations outside Italy within a framework of internationalist, anti-colonialist militancy similar to that of other contemporary intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Genet and Gillo Pontecorvo, on the other hand, it is impossible to ignore the fact that in a film like *La rabbia* (1963), and in other works from the early 1960s, the outlines are clearly discernible of a political position in solidarity with decolonialization movements, especially those in Africa and the Arab world.

Our aim is hardly to reclassify the Pasolini of the early 1960s as the "intellectual of Bandung" – in reference to the Afro-Asian conference held in Indonesia in 1955 that promoted an acceleration of the decolonialization process. That would be a forced interpretation and a philological and political distortion. Nonetheless, it cannot be ignored that the international push toward decolonization and the historical events in the transition between the 1950s and 1960s did not go unnoticed by Pasolini, nor that for some years they played a central and very

fertile role in his thinking. Along with this, the anti-colonial, intellectual fervor of some of his Mediterranean colleagues, the emergence of an African, Asian, and South American liberation thought, and the circulation of writings and ideas on the self-determination of peoples, attacking the racist modernity imposed by European countries, recur continually and forcefully in Pasolini's journalistic statements and artistic production.

What were the modes, then, by which Pasolini apprehended and framed the African, Asian, and American liberation struggles? What heuristic keys and techniques of the imagination did he employ to develop his understanding of the exceptional historical transformation produced by decolonialization? What type of relationship did he perceive between the transformations overseas and the transformations in Europe and Italy during the post-World War II period?

To answer these questions, we will focus our inquiry on a film that still remains little known and studied: *La rabbia*, usually translated "The Anger" in English, to which we prefer the more accurate "Rage." By reconstructing the circumstances of its production and analyzing some of its most significant sequences, we can gain insight into several important aspects of Pasolini's legacy as well as rethink the relationship between his concept of film montage, his poetic discourse, and his political positioning. Engaging with these issues may also contribute to opening up a broader path of inquiry, one that still largely remains to be conducted, into the political thought and positions of Italian intellectuals on the historical phenomenon of decolonization.

Pasolini's *Rage*

Pasolini was at work on the film *Rage* during one of the most intense times of his life, both personally and intellectually. The period was between 1962 and 1963 and he was being prosecuted for "insulting the state religion" with the film *The Ricotta* (1963). Pasolini had

returned a few months earlier from his first trip to India, which led to his interest in “the Third World.”² As early as 1962 this took him to sub-Saharan Africa and found artistic expression, at the very least, in *Notes for a film on India* (1968) and in *Notes toward an African Orestes* (1970).³ He shot *Love Meetings* (1965) and worked on the script of *The Savage Father*, a movie that was never made, on the relationship between a Western teacher and his class of African students immediately after independence from colonialism. Meanwhile, the production machine that led to his filming *The Gospel According to Matthew* (1964) was already underway.

With only a handful of copies distributed in the spring of 1963, *Rage*, produced by Salvatore Gastoni, went largely unnoticed. It was Pasolini himself (1999a: 1326-1327) who blocked and limited its circulation until it was completely withdrawn from the market, after discovering that the producer had conceived of the film as a “cine-match” between his part and the other directed by a writer, Giovannino Guareschi, whose political views and aesthetic tastes were far removed from Pasolini’s. It was not until the restoration of Pasolini’s and Guareschi’s film in 2007, and the production of *La rabbia di Pasolini* (2008) by Giuseppe Bertolucci—an attempt to reconstruct the original project as conceived by Pasolini before the involvement of Guareschi—, that an opportunity arose to reflect once again on this complex and original work.

Pasolini (1999b: 1327) speaks about *Rage* in an interview with Jon Halliday in 1968:

It’s a strange film as it is made entirely with documentary material; I have not shot a single frame. It is mostly made up of bits of newsreel, obviously completely trivial and completely reactionary. I chose some sequences taken from newsreels of the late Fifties, and I put them

² Here we are using Pasolini’s expression, while aware of the problematization to which the notion of Third World has been subjected by postcolonial and other critical studies.

³ See Pasolini 2001a: 2677-2686.

together in my own way: they mostly refer to the war in Algeria, the pontificate of Pope John, there were some minor events, such as the return of our prisoners of war from Russia.

Pasolini's own words express the originality of *Rage* and the historical and critical interest it arouses. First, in the Italian intellectual and artistic context of the era, the film is an early manifestation of an ethical and political sensitivity toward struggles for independence from colonialism and the international revolutionary ferment that in those years united the African, Asian, and South American situations. It would be three years before Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) – one of the few models from the scant Italian production of anticolonial, intellectual films – would address the decolonization of Algeria in militant, Fanonian terms. Second, the originality of *Rage* consists in the experimental method that was used: its montage. *Rage* is a “collage film” entirely based on film footage, anticipating the aesthetics of found footage and the “intermedial” aesthetics that were to explode simultaneously with the “rediscovery” of Pasolini's experiment.⁴ The film montage of news reports from different parts of the world allowed Pasolini to combine revolutionary energies of self-determination that were to be established on a global scale, leading to the emergence of new discursive horizons.

For many years historians viewed *Rage* simply as a minor cinematic experiment—for instance Ferrero (1994: 49-51)—and it should be noted that even major studies (Caminati 2007; Maraschin 2002: 169-207; Riva and Parussa 1997: 237-265) on Pasolini as a Third-Worldist have mostly failed to take the work into consideration. Taking this relative lack of interest as a

⁴ The theoretical development of the “cinema of poetry” gave montage a major role; on Pasolini's ability to conceive of it as a theoretical and critical act, see Pasolini (1973: 237-241). Beyond Pasolini, as a general reference on found footage and intermedial aesthetics, see for example Wees (1999), Blumlinger (2009), Montani (2010), and Bertozzi (2012).

starting point, we will argue that it was precisely the experimental aesthetics of the collage film that furnished Pasolini with the methodological tools to diagnose and analyze with precision and clarity the ethical, political, and historical reach of the decolonization process – in contrast with the Orientalisms and exoticisms that sometimes held sway in his subsequent productions.

Essentially, we maintain that *Rage*'s "color ecstasy" in black and white was also what drew Pasolini into the debate on Negritude: he produced a critique of racism; he expressed his support of the Manifesto of the 121, signed by Sartre and other intellectuals who in 1960 called for the decolonization of Algeria; and he declared his disdain for the silence of Italian intellectuals on the struggle for self-determination (Pasolini 1999c: 738-739). In the limited space of our contribution, we will attempt to bring to light the twofold value of this political positioning. First, *Rage* represents an intermittence in the Italian intellectual context – a context in which no block of hegemonic, anticolonial thinking had ever emerged with force. Second, *Rage* is an example of sophisticated montage with the power to reignite a dormant force of survival at the intersection between struggles for self-determination and a pacified post-war Europe.

Editing Worlds and Color Ecstasy

A new problem breaks out in the world.
It's called color.
The new extension of the world
is called color.
One has to admit the idea
of thousands of black and brown children,
black-eyed infants with curly hair.
One has to accept endless multitudes
of real lives that,
with innocent ferocity,
want to enter our reality.
Other voices.
Other glances.
Other dances.

Everything will become familiar
and expand the earth!⁵

(2001b: 371)

These are the opening words of the two non-consecutive sequences of *Rage* explicitly dedicated to the struggle for independence from colonialism. While the montage alternates images and music from different parts of the world, the “voice of poetry” read by Giorgio Bassani introduces the key concept of Pasolini’s interpretation of decolonization and struggles for liberation: color as an expansion of the world and therefore a revolutionary planetary motion. All the passages of the sequence numbered as XXIV in the screenplay relate thematically and rhetorically to this concept: “They are the days of joy, / the days of victory. / People of color, / Tunisia lives its liberation” (ibid., 372). And once again, “Joy after joy, / victory after victory! / People of color, Tanganyika is free” (ibid.). Addressing the Congo, the voice returns with the same formula: “Joy after joy, / victory after victory! / People of color, another nation / of Africa is independent!” (ibid., 373), and a little later, referring to Central America, “Joy after joy, / victory after victory! / People of color, Cuba is free” (ibid.).

From Tunisia to Tanganyika, Togo to Cuba, right up to Algeria, the verbal anaphora “People of color” underlies a montage capable of holding together events that are geographically distant and distinct but united historically by their scope. The “visual anaphora” – identifiable in the device of the parade that is repeated in the film footage of the various revolutionary events – seems instead to foreshadow the fact that “The price of victory will be terror” (ibid., 374) and that “A change in history is on the way / leading perhaps to regression and corruption.” (ibid., 372)

Also linked to the montage of *Rage*, several passages dedicated to other current events follow, such as the election of Pope John XXIII and the death of Marilyn Monroe, but the

⁵ All translations are by the authors unless otherwise noted.

“question of color” returns as the conclusion to the long sequence on French politics of the 1950s and the struggles for independence in Algeria:

Joy after joy,
victory after victory!
People of color,
Algeria is restored to history!
People of color,
Live the most beautiful days of their lives!
Never will the light in their eyes be more pure
never will gestures of happiness be more dear!
People of color, these are the days of victory
of all the partisans in the world!
People of color, it is in the joy of victory
that the Resistance plants roots and founds the future!”
(ibid., 395-396)

The long sequences of *Rage* dedicated to the struggle for decolonization thus appear to be an essential step in an analysis of Pasolini’s thinking about the “Third World,” echoed in numerous poems, articles, and interviews from the same period in which Pasolini attempted to rethink Antonio Gramsci’s reflections on subalternity within the intellectual debate on colonialism⁶. It was in that same period, between the beginning and middle of the 1960s, that Pasolini came into contact with the anti-colonial group of the Manifesto of the 121, wrote the preface to an anthology on *Negro Literature*, and published news articles in which his aesthetic and political observations go so far as to suggest a rapprochement between the survivors of the Holocaust and decolonized peoples, almost as if he glimpsed the nexus, suggested by Hannah Arendt and the Negritude writers like Aimé Césaire, between colonialism and Nazi

⁶ On Pasolini’s reelaboration of the Gramscian legacy and how he “catapulted Gramsci’s engagement with the southern question at once in the planetary as well as in the sexual arenas—thereby tying together these different realms of power and resistance in ways that I believe make him an inescapable figure for the current and ongoing dialogues between the disciplinary fields of queer theory and postcolonial studies” see Casarino (2010: 675) and (2008: 121-143).

totalitarianism.

Significantly, Pasolini hints at this nexus through color. In the summer of 1960, as he was developing the poetic anger that finds expression in the film, while marching to the stadium for the opening ceremony of the Olympics in Rome, Pasolini (1998: 1527) got lost in the midst of foreign visitors: “Around me, a whole new crowd was walking calmly, and almost in silence: the clothes both brighter and more modest than ours, the faces and bodies less beautiful but healthier, smiles without irony and without vulgarity, but also a little lifeless.” This lifeless beauty evokes in him the image of the concentration camps: “No hunks, no stereotypes: they're all a bit anonymous, Finnish, or Israelis, or Americans, or Tunisians. They look slightly like those deported to Buchenwald or Dachau: this is why I like them, and I've never watched an event in such reassuring and fraternal company.” (ibid.) In Pasolini's view, this “colorful vision,” this “parade full of color” appears as the embodiment of a world “in the last instant of its historical being” (ibid.) in which the skin color of the new free men – former-slaves, formerly-colonized, formerly-underprivileged, formerly-interned – irrupts into history.

Pasolini's writing, ably combining juxtapositions and poetic summaries of the news, anticipates the montage dynamics that would later feature in a film like *Rage*. In his concluding essay as the editor of Pasolini's complete works, Walter Siti remarks that in the first half of the 1960s, the director had already developed a certain skepticism about the revolutionary potential of the Italian subproletariat and his own ability to represent it.⁷ In our opinion, the collage film provides an antidote to this nihilism. In *Rage*, the inability to produce a direct representation of the people in the changing and “mutating” society of Italy in the 1960s is replaced by the attempt to compose a constellation of subaltern/subproletarian populations and instances through

⁷ On the rift in the relationship of “complementarity between Poet and the humble which was based on the recognition of common identities and the identification of a common enemy” in Pasolini's thought during the mid-1960s, see Siti (2003: 1931).

montage.

Despite being based on “entirely trivial and completely reactionary” clips from newsreels (Pasolini 1999a: 1326), the angry montage emerges as a means of connecting worlds in revolt and as an analytical method. Following a dynamic that culminates in the Algerian sequence “People of color, these are the days of victory / of all the partisans of the world! / People of color, it is in the joy of victory / that Resistance plants its roots and founds the future!” (2001b: 395-396) through the montage color becomes separated from the skin, losing its ethnic connotation and becoming a permanent revolutionary pathos able to re-activate the energies of resistance that had been pacified in France and Italy during the post-war period. The “color ecstasy” interprets a political example of the radical criticism of racism and the survival of the force of resistance that had dwindled in post-fascist, pacified Europe.

The irruption of the question of color does not simply cause a broadening of the “color range”: it demands a rethinking of humanism within the context of a critique of colonial modernity and industrial civilization, as much in the colonies and former colonies as in European cities. A thread binds them. As Pasolini (1961: XXIII) takes the opportunity to emphasize in his introduction to *Negro Literature*, the political and ethical potential of the struggles for independence of the African continent can be expressed only if we understand that “decolonization begins on the outskirts of Rome, includes our South, part of Spain, Greece, the Mediterranean States and the Middle East. Do not forget that in Turin there is graffiti that reads *Away with Terroni = Arabs.*”⁸ In this sense, the notion of “Africa” includes the world of the underclass as “consumer” in opposition to capitalism as producer: the world of under-government, under-cultures, and pre-industrial civilization exploited by industrial civilization.

⁸ “Terrone” is a derogatory term for southern Italians, mainly used by northern Italians.

Poetic Rage and the Temperature of Survival

A fundamental question needs to be answered at this point. What is this “rage” and what results does it produce in the aesthetic and political spheres? The brief analysis we have carried out thus far on Pasolini’s film and his standpoint during the mid-1960s seems to define the features of a permanent militancy. Primarily, it is a fear of the political vacuum that tends to occur in times of peace as a result of the act of resistance and revolution.⁹ In the “Treatment” of *Rage*, Pasolini (2001c: 407) writes:

What happened in the world after the war and the post-war period? Normality. Yes, normality. In the state of normalcy you do not look around: all around is as ‘normal’; devoid of the excitement and emotion of the years of emergency. Human beings tend to fall asleep in their own normality, they forget to reflect, they lose the habit of self-judgment, they no longer know how to question who they are. It is then that a state of emergency should be created artificially: it’s up to the poets to create it. Poets, the eternally outraged, these champions of intellectual rage, of philosophical fury.

Cinematographic montage therefore served as the instrument through which it became possible to develop a form of visual and audiovisual understanding of events that were redefining the relationships between the colonizing and the colonized. At the same time, it offered an opportunity to keep the political discourse open beyond the terms of the historical process of normalization of political life in the West.

Rage – a “montage of worlds” acquired through cinematographic montage – is to all intents and purposes an *atlas of images and sounds*: a visual form that is at the same time narrative and synoptic, through which an attempt can be made to analyze and understand the ethical, cultural, and political depth of the current historical processes:¹⁰ decolonization as a set of political and

⁹ On the differences between “revolution” and “rebellion” in Pasolini, see Didi-Huberman (2013: 68-77).

¹⁰ The essential reference on the cognitive and critical potentialities of the “atlas form” is Aby M. Warburg’s model *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (2012). As an analytical study and continuation of Warburg’s work, see Didi-Huberman

military initiatives that occur on a large scale; gestures of resistance and liberation that can be understood and valued only through the creation of a *comparative* and *differential* model. By creating an atlas of the geopolitical and cultural transformations of Africa, Asia, and the Americas in the early 1960s, with this film Pasolini performs a decentralization with respect to the categories of Western discourse: montage produces an ecstasy of the color to the extent to which it is capable of placing side by side *elsewhere* and *here*, the anti-colonial struggle and European civil life, without merging or equating them. The irruption of colors causes the state of emergency to re-emerge in the midst of the normalcy of the pacified West (expressed in the film in the sequence showing Sofia Loren in the midst of eels) but also with regard to some of the forms of Pasolini's search for an archaic purity that typifies his poetic work.

Several studies on Pasolini as a Third-Worldist – which leave out an analysis of the 1963 film and its originality, however – have lucidly pointed out that starting from his first trip to India, and in particular beginning with the reportage *The Scent of India* from 1962 (Pasolini 1992), “Pasolini's text lights up with tones and tonalities (stylistic elements) that would be (and are) embarrassing from the point of view of a ‘post-colonial’ analysis, if we were not to underline its provocative ingenuity and calculated candor” (Riva and Parussa 1997: 253). Similarly, as Luca Caminati (2007: 71) points out in his study on Pasolini's “heretical Orientalism” when referring to several completed and uncompleted episodes for the project *Notes for a Poem on the Third World*, “the instant one acts outside of Western schemas, the selection process must now take into account the orientalist expectations of the gaze. In the Third World, Pasolini does not seek real faces and bodies, but projections of faces on which he has already imprinted the image created by his Oriental readings.”

While Pasolini's ethnography will thus be able to avoid the risks of Orientalism and cultural

(2011).

colonialism only by becoming “autoethnography,” which is to say, by making explicit the stereotypes that encumber his staging of alterity, the comparative and differential montage of *Rage* does not seem to pursue the survival of Western iconographic and sociological, pre-industrial or premodern models in the “Third World.” It seems clear to the Pasolini who made *Rage* that, to quote Aime Césaire, Negritude and the other forms of the irruption of colors into history are not a revival of what existed before colonialism: “This we leave to those who go in for exoticism,” writes Césaire in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1972: 22).

The Pasolini of *Rage*, but also of the never completed film project *The Savage Father*, seems to be well aware that decolonization and self-determination are dialectical processes arising out of the colonial encounter. In essence, *The Savage Father* is a work entirely focused on the ambivalences of this encounter – both for the colonizer (or the former colonizer) and the colonized (or formerly colonized) – and of the processes of poetic and physical rage that derive from it. In this process, color is transformed, or rather, it produces a transformation. Indeed, the maker of the 1963 film is ultimately a “decolonial” Pasolini who understands and anticipates the *postcolonial*. In his work during the early 1960s that we have mentioned, color changes its status and stops being a discursive mechanism and an oppressive matter. Color is no longer the most powerful epistemic grid through which the subjugation and physical administration of colonized subjects is organized along racial lines. The color of “people of color” is ecstatic: it issues outside itself. It makes itself Other, it turns into “temperature” and becomes a poetic form of liberation. It is therefore with decolonization that color becomes an agent for the transformation of the global moral order – nothing will be like it was before – and at the same time starts to bring with it all the tragedy of the decolonized world, inasmuch as it is a radical opening of a new political phase in which the colonial legacy will find new new articulations in the independent states and former metropolises.

With *Rage*, Pasolini's poetic montage does not therefore fall into the mistake of celebrating decolonialization as a generic "virtuous fever." Rather, it captures what many other Italian intellectuals would never be able to reveal or even perceive: a decisive moment of ecstatic color that turns itself into a liberating force. Both *Rage* and *The Savage Father* generate a survival that is neither a crystallization of what existed before colonial modernity nor a return of identity. Rather, what he calls "the problem of color" is an attack against normalcy that reveals the temperatures of survival, or rather the *survival of a rebel temperature* able to cross over bodies, territories, and specific identities: the survival, therefore, of an instance of universal, antiracist liberation that is continuously regenerated on a global scale.

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