

Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Arts

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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THE ICONOGRAPHY OF PIER PAOLO PASOLINI'S CINEMA

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Orsolya Serkédi:
The Iconography of Pier Paolo Pasolini's Cinema
Theses of Doctoral Dissertation

Scope of dissertation

The topic of the dissertation links two fields: it approaches the study of Pasolini's cinema from the angle of art history. Its general aims are to reconstruct the complex course of Pasolini's filmography, with a focus on its iconography, and to follow the evolution of the visual language in Pasolini's films, screenplays and theoretical works. The paper concentrates on the interactions of cinema and painting in Pasolini's films, which is a scarcely researched field both from the point of view of cinematographic studies and from the approach of art history.

The dissertation argues that a chain of visual metonyms constitutes the iconographic basis of Pasolini's "poetic cinema" inside of which the elements of painting occupy a central position. This supposition rests on the relation between painting and cinema. It also leads to a consequence not encountered in earlier research on Pasolini's cinema: the aforementioned icons are objective reflections of the characters' psychology.

While proving this hypothesis I review the works that focus on the visual language of Pasolini's cinema. However, they contain only a few statements relevant from the point of view of my research. In order to verify my supposition, I studied Pasolini's screenplays, theoretical works and self-reflections, and I traced the level of consciousness in terms of the application of the pictorial citations. When the intervisuality was carried out upon the author's instruction, I investigated the author's method of insertion in the visual texture, the allusive functions attributed to the given icons or citations and the potential interaction between the cited image and the receiving context. The aim of such a train of thought was to prove that Pasolini consciously applies the elements of painting in the visual texture, and the icons function as the visual reflections of the characters' psychological mechanisms.

Structure and methodology

The first section of the dissertation aims at the elaboration of the theoretical frames and those of the film history. It focuses on the overall relationship of cinema and painting and discusses the theoretical and aesthetical questions that might arise from this correlation. It approaches the genre of film from such an angle that considers cinema the synthesis of the previous manifestations of visual arts (photography, painting etc.), and it analyzes the problems that derive from this aesthetical change. The dissertation departs from the Italian perception of Eisenstein's theory, and based on the Italian Ragghianti's thesis it considers the genre of film as one belonging to the category of fine arts, which is to be analyzed by the means of art history. It categorizes the films that are concerned with the relation between cinema and painting, and in terms of Pasolini's films it examines the semiotic problems of the "painted effect".

The second section attempts to display Pasolini's affiliations with figurative arts, describing the origins of this interest and providing an overview of the visual sign system he applied. The third section includes the individual analyses of the films that are relevant from the point of view of the relation between cinema and painting in Pasolini's oeuvre. These single analyses attempt to trace each and every reference to painting, and to present the

presumable relation between the visual references and the “syuzhet” as well as the interaction between the iconographical elements and the characters’ psychology. Through the analyses of individual films, the paper associates each iconographical element with a value of reflection. On the basis of the single consequences, the paper attempts to draw general conclusions about Pasolini’s film language in the last chapter of the dissertation.

Major points

- I. The dissertation has pointed out that contamination is the principal figure of speech through which the aesthetical quality of Pasolini’s films is deciphered. It consists in the mixture of various cinematic, visual and spoken languages on an aesthetical level. Therefore, in terms of Pasolini’s cinema, we can talk about the contaminations of literature, music, painting and film, and the encounter between the different layers of the spoken language. As a result, the paper has arrived at the conclusion that Pasolini’s film language is an innovative cinematic coding as well as a linguistic hybrid.
- II. The dissertation is the first to focus on the citations of painting in the whole course of Pasolini’s cinema. This enables the analysis to draw a more detailed picture of Pasolini’s film language and its theoretical background than before (to date, the most thorough scholarly examinations of the subject are Alberto Marchesini’s and Francesco Galluzzi’s monographs).
- III. The dissertation has traced all the citations of painting in relation to Pasolini’s complete cinematography. The paper states that the iconography of Pasolini’s cinema was most prevalently influenced by Giotto, Masaccio, Piero della Francesca, Caravaggio, the Mannerism, and the elements of the contemporary (Futurist, Formalist, Cubist) painting. Their impact upon Pasolini’s cinema is detectable either in the realization of a fresco (that is, in the phenomenon of the so-called “tableaux vivants”) or in the insertion of an image in the film language (identified as the motif of the “painted effect”).
- IV. Through the presentation of the “painted effect” (as Antonio Costa introduced the term), the dissertation sheds light on the ways that the iconic, intervisual representation is able to take part in the film language and it investigates how the iconography is able to contribute to the elaboration of the “syuzhet” and to the character representation. Pasolini’s first films follow the path of the Italian Neorealism, although they strike out in a new direction. While the Neorealist films aimed at a documentarist reproduction of reality with the precision of photography, Pasolini’s cinematographic debut extended artistic practices in Italian film insofar as it added the elements of poetry and the analysis of the psychological processes into the film language which still aimed at the authentic reproduction of reality. This is the point where Pasolini brings a new approach to Italian film history, and simultaneously, this is the point where an iconographical approach is able to provide the research of Pasolini’s oeuvre with new results.
- V. Based on the analyses of the single films, it can be concluded that Pasolini’s cinema is an attempt to minimize verbalization and maximize visualization. In other words, in this cinema it is not the word but the imagery that conveys the deeper significance, the

“syuzhet”. It is a cinematographic concept which departs from Christian Metz’s idea stating that cinema is a “language” without a “langue”, that is, a language without a code (*A Semiotics of the Cinema* 21). This theory is applicable to Pasolini’s cinema inasmuch as in his films the verbal communication-interaction between the characters is minimized. What is further developed in this thesis by Pasolini is the fact that his filmic “langue” is not only deprived of a “language” but it is also a code which returns to the communicative archetypes. In other words, Pasolini’s film language appears as one without a real basis, a code exempt from a communicative logic. However, as cinema is a channel of communication, we need to suppose that it is based on such “natural communicative archetypes” as motion, sounds and a visual sign system. By motion we mean the body language, the gestures and the mimicry of the diction. The sounds include their presence in the form of poetry, musical citations or compositions made directly for the given topic. However, they are also meant by their lack in the form of silence or the problem of the inability of communication. This is what takes place in *Medea* (1969) or *Teorema* (*Theorem*, 1968) where silence is the channel of communication. Moreover, Pasolini’s film language has a prevalently visual texture which communicates through visual signs, such as the visual metonym of the desert in *Edipo re* (*Oedipus Rex*, 1967) and *Porcile* (*Pigsty*, 1969), or that of the space in *Teorema*. In consequence, it is stated that Pasolini’s film language is an objective, impersonal and deformed “language”, similar to mathematical coding, in which visual signs validate the communication in lieu of verballity.

- VI. The dissertation also ascertains that the application of the natural communicative archetypes and the tendency to return to the myths and the archaic rites create the cinema of poetry in Pasolini. This cinema is based on the production of a complex world of linguistically significant images. These pictures derive from the environment through the practice of gestures or from the memories of personal experience or from the evocation of images which were created by others. This latter experience has been identified as the visual solution of inserting a painting in the film and rendering it a part of the new visual context. This is the phenomenon which defines the poetry of the film’s deep structure and it manifests itself in the form of an expressive violence and an oniric phisicity. Therefore, the bases of this film language are constituted by irrationality, oniric and elementary qualities, poetry and an antinarrative tendency. As a result, Pasolini’s cinema appears as a mythic hypnosis which is superior to the narrative process.
- VII. A further conclusion of the iconographic investigation is that the linguistic technique that Pasolini called “free indirect speech” in *Empirismo eretico* is applicable to Pasolini’s cinema as well. When Pasolini investigated the element of the “free indirect speech” in terms of Dante’s poetry, he referred to two observations. One is the phenomenon of “plurilingualism”, which means the co-presence of various linguistic variations, such as slang, jargon, dialects in the same text. The other remark concerned with the application of the elements of spontaneous speech. Pasolini dedicated two studies to the analysis of this stylistic and linguistic model, as a reaction to Gyula Herczeg’s book entitled *Lo stile indiretto italiano: La volontà di Dante a essere poeta* (*Dante’s Poetic Intention*) and *La mala mimesi* (*The bad mimesi*) which were later published in *Empirismo eretico*. On the basis of these studies we conclude that the technique of “free indirect speech” is adaptable to Pasolini’s cinema by altering the term “free indirect speech” to “free indirect subject”. By doing so, we can prove that the “free indirect subject”, thus the subjective and lyrical self of the author is able to

enter the narrative structure of the film and it is capable of identifying with the characters' inner processes both at a psychological and a linguistic level. This psychological identification with the characters is facilitated through the application of the pictorial allusions, thus, through the phenomenon whose analysis constitutes the focus of the present study. In one of the most significant results of this study, we have proved that the analysis of the iconographical elements provides a better understanding of the psychological mechanisms of the film characters. Therefore, the iconography in Pasolini's cinema is a part of the film language and the pictorial allusions appear as its organic elements. They result in a means of communication by the help of which human experiences can be better understood.

- VIII. We can conclude that the elements of iconography have attributes of three major functions. First of all, they desacralize the sacred and sacralize the everyday, simple contents. Regarding this function, the phenomenon of the technical sacredness is observed. It means that the simplicity and the humbleness of the characters are ennobled and sacralized through the allusions of classical music, Christian icons and literary references. This thesis is proved by the analysis of the socially concerned *Accattone* (1961), *Mamma Roma* (1962) and *La ricotta* (1963). Through the analysis of these films it is observed that the "sacred" is only a technique which has an aesthetical function inasmuch as it dissolves cruel reality in sublime unreality. As a second function of the elements of iconography, we pinpoint that they render the topic more apparent in a physical sense. From this point of view, we suggest that the dramatic circumstances and the calvary of the characters are made explicit by the picturesque and musical references. As a third function of the elements of iconography, they reflect on the psychological cycles of Pasolini's film characters. It means that the cited images and the icons serve as mirrors in the film which reflect on the inner mechanisms of the characters. From this point of view, one can conclude Pasolini's film characters generally have no real personalities; and instead they are the reflections of the author's intentions and coding. In consequence, the elements of iconography are frequently the visual and objective projections of the author's ideology.
- IX. The dissertation, in general, relies extensively on the Pasolini Archive of the Film Library of Bologna (Cineteca di Bologna, Biblioteca Renzo Renzi) and occasionally on the Marco Gromo Library of Turin (Museo Nazionale del Cinema di Torino, Biblioteca Mario Gromo). I gratefully acknowledge the privilege of being granted access to these collections.

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The author's most significant publications in relation to the dissertation:

- 1.) Iconography in Pier Paolo Pasolini's Films – An Analysis in the Context of the Hungarian Cinematography. *Első Század Online* 2012.
<http://elsoszazad.elte.hu/serkedi-orsolya-iconography-pasolin>
- 2.) Pasolini és a festészet *A Máté evangéliuma* tükrében ("Pasolini and the Painting: *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*"). In: Oszetzky Éva, Bene Krisztián (eds.): *Újlatin filológia 5.: Újlatin kultúrák vonzásában*. Pécs: MTA Pécsi Területi Bizottsága Romanisztikai Munkacsoport, 2012. pp. 251-257.
- 3.) Pasolini és a futurizmus ("Pasolini and the Futurism"). *Helikon Irodalomtudományi Szemle* 2010/3: pp. 407-411.
- 4.) Gli elementi iconografici nei film di Pier Paolo Pasolini ("Iconographical Elements in Pasolini's Films"). In: Szkárosi Endre, Nagy József (eds.): *Dal testo alla rete: Letteratura, arte, cultura e storia in nuove prospettive*. Budapest: ELTE, 2010. pp. 296-301.

The author's conference presentations related to the dissertation:

- 1.) 18 October 2013: Citazioni pittoriche, letterarie e musicali attraverso il film *Accattone* di Pier Paolo Pasolini ("The Quotations of Painting, Literature and Music in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Accattone*"). (Jagiellonian University, Kraków: "Italy and the European Culture")
- 2.) 6 May 2012: Iconographical Elements in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Decameron*. (Budapest, Eötvös Collegium: Eötvös Conference)
- 3.) 10 November 2011: Pasolini and the Painting: *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. (University of Pécs: *The Actual Questions of the Neolatin Philology in the 21st Century*)
- 4.) 24 April 2010: Iconographical Elements in Pier Paolo Pasolini's Films. (Budapest, Institute of Italian Culture: ITADOKT International Conference for PhD students in Italian Studies)