

Picturing Pasolini

Notes from a Filmmaker's Scrapbook

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Like many children, I kept a scrapbook. Even before I knew who he was, had read any of his poetry, or had seen any of his films, I collected in it images of Pier Paolo Pasolini. Pictures of Pasolini were abundant in the Italian language magazines and newspapers that were lifelines to my parents' native country, to their native language and culture. These publications served the same purpose for me. Between the mid-sixties and well into the seventies, magazines such as *Gente*, *L'Europeo*, *Oggi*, *Epoca*, *Amica*, *Panorama*, and newspapers such as *Il Messaggero*, *La Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera*, were passed around, read, and then piled up in corners all around our house.

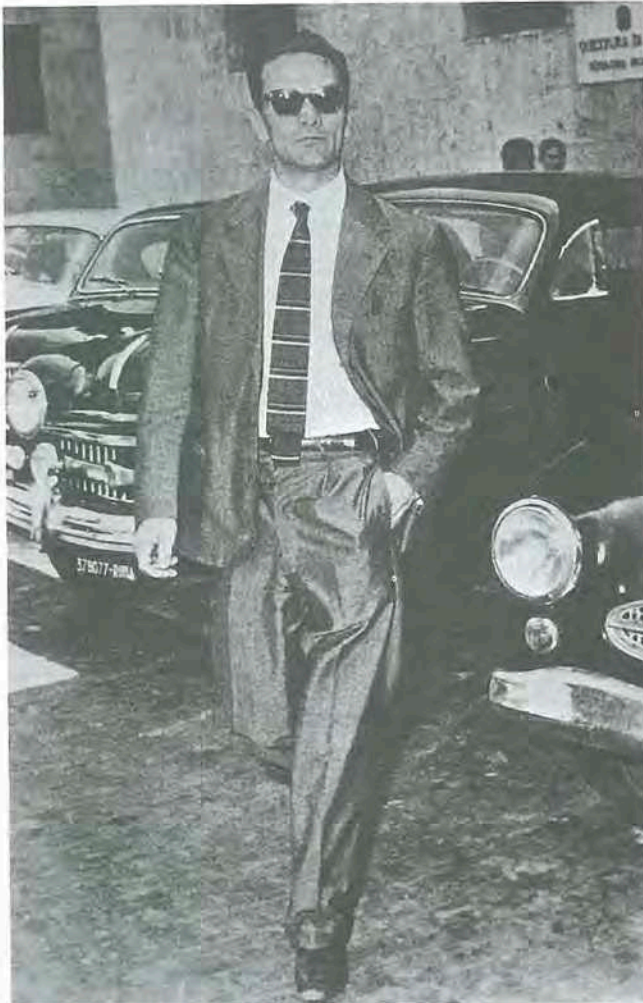


FIG. 1 Pasolini on his way to court, Rome.

The first image I remember clipping out with great care showed a handsome Pasolini wearing a viscose suit. It fascinated me not only because I found the man physically beautiful, but because I read his stride and attitude as the essence of confidence and strength. He seemed invincible, this man in the shiny suit (*fig. 1*).

Many years later I came across this same image again, while studying at the University of Rome. It had been a paparazzi photo taken in the early sixties as Pasolini made his way to one of his many court appearances. Pasolini was charged—and acquitted—thirty-one times in his lifetime with allegations ranging from obscenity to the corruption of minors. The Italian press systematically recycled images like this to sensationalize the hearings. But as a student in Rome, I read this photo of Pasolini as the image of someone who seemed above it all, mocking the spectacle, almost enjoying the farce of these ridiculous accusations. Just as I had as a child, I perceived this image of Pasolini as one of empowerment.

I have kept this photograph with me for more than twenty years. Aside from yellowing, it remains intact, yet my understanding of it changes the more I accumulate facts, details, and anecdotes about it. Over time I have scrutinize it in the hopes of uncovering some subtle and telling details that had previously escaped my attention: his scuffed shoe; the tension in his chin; the proportions of his body; the opacity of his sunglasses. Recently I read that Pasolini was very nervous and distraught on that day. Tension had made him ill that morning. He had not slept well the night before.

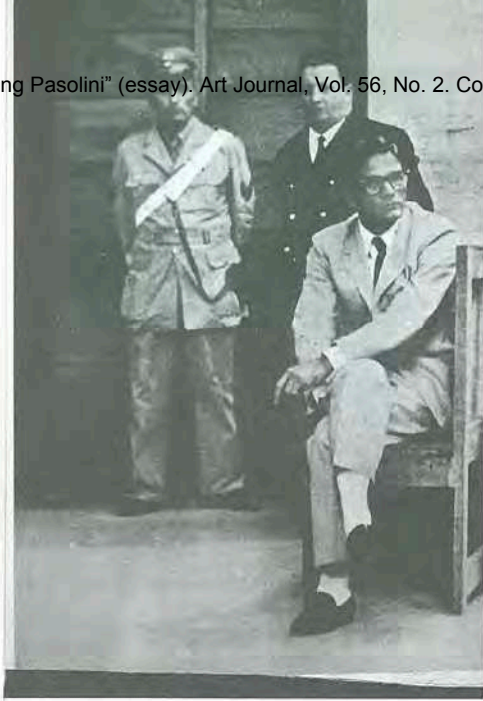


FIG. 2 Pasolini on the witness stand.

Pasolini's outspokenness as a poet, filmmaker, and essayist made him an easy target for those who opposed him, but his homosexuality was an even greater reason for attention. Photographs portrayed him as a subversive, a troublemaker, a pervert, a corrupter, a homosexual, all words that overshadowed other terms like poet, filmmaker, critic, novelist, screenwriter, intellectual. Images like this one lynched Pasolini over and over, continually heightening the picture of the "monster" they helped to portrayed. The actual appearances of Pasolini in court, positioned him (visibly) against the dominant order, who asked him continually to justify himself and his work, and by extension, his identity and reason for existing (fig. 2). This continuous blemishing of his public image made the mere mention of his name synonymous with scandal, difference, and marginality. His authority as an artist and intellectual was always at stake. It was a public brainwashing of sorts.

There is a series of images taken of Pasolini in 1961, at the premiere of his first film, *Accattone*. One of these in particular was widely reproduced in the Italian press. It shows Pasolini in a scuffle, fist and jaw clenched, defending himself from attack by neofascists (fig. 3). *Accattone* was extremely controversial when it was released and was the first film in the history of Italian cinema that was restricted to viewers over the age of eighteen. The film was deemed "too vulgar" in its depiction of the Roman subproletariat; it was believed to validate the petty crime in Roman slums. In the early sixties Italy was in a full postwar boom period, rebuilding itself and quickly becoming a consumer society. This was the time of Fellini's *Dolce vita*. All images and unsightly vestiges of anything that might have recalled the peasant roots of Italian society were disavowed and met with fierce resistance and, at times, violence. Informed by his leftist political beliefs, Pasolini's film fell within a tradition of neorealist filmmaking but was bleaker than most neorealist films that preceded it. With *Accattone*, Pasolini went beyond the limits of how Italian society was then willing to see itself.



FIG. 3 Pasolini being assaulted at the premiere of *Accattone*, 1961, Rome.

More than a decade later *Accattone* would be hailed as a masterpiece of the Italian cinema for its unflinching honesty and courage. It was telecast on Italian state television (RAI), and Pasolini wrote an essay about the irony of *Accattone's* acceptance into the Italian canon, as that very acceptance was a denial of the initial violent resistance to it. He wrote about how this cultural "amnesia" was a convenient alibi.

SENSAZIONALE INCHIESTA DEI CARABINIERI SU UN EPISODIO SCONCERTANTE

Denunciato per tentata rapina Pier Paolo Pasolini ai danni dell'addetto a un distributore di benzina

Lo scrittore accusato del reato da un operaio ha negato l'addebito pur ammettendo altre circostanze - Le indagini si sono però concluse con il suo deferimento all'Autorità Giudiziaria



FIG. 4 Pasolini as he appeared in *Il Tempo*, Rome, November 30, 1961.

On November 30, 1961, a short time after the *Accatone* incident, the rightist Italian daily newspaper, *Il Tempo*, published an article with the following headline: "Pier Paolo Pasolini accused of attempted armed robbery and damages to gas station operator." The headline was accompanied by a photograph showing Pasolini holding a machine gun (fig. 4). What *Il Tempo* failed to indicate to its readers was that the image was a publicity photograph for the 1960 Carlo Lizzani film *Il Gobbo*, in which Pasolini had a small role. The "montage" of this image with the sensationalistic and inflammatory headline in a reputable and widely circulated daily is an example of the virtual vendetta out on Pasolini and his public image. Did *Il Tempo* intend for this production still to stand in for a "typical" representation of Pasolini the poet and filmmaker? How was the reader to make sense of this image in this context? And how are we to understand the editor's choice to run this particular photograph, rather than any other of the scores he must have had at his disposal?

Like most Italians, Pasolini loved soccer. Many photograph show him on the field, in both informal and more official capacities. These sent two conflicting messages: while soccer legitimized Pasolini, it also denounced him. Pasolini is often shown undressing after a game, his muscular torso and fit body singled out for display, examination, and scrutiny. Pictures of Pasolini on the soccer field expounded on the notion of his "vital" body. Caught somewhere between revulsion and fascination, Italians developed an obsession with Pasolini's body. In Italy soccer is the marker of (male) normalcy, virility, and vitality. In Pasolini's case this vitality was somehow questioned by the media and by conventions and strategies of representation. Pasolini is usually shown playing with younger boys, thus linking him to pedophilia and/or to the fact that he must play with those younger (read: weaker) than himself in order to be "equal." When shown wearing the quasi-sacred blue uniform of the Italian national team, *gli Azzurri*, he is shown alone, not playing with the other ("real") men on the team (fig. 5). In the context of team sports, he is isolated and consequently compromised. This isolation positions him as the outsider, the "other" who is trying to become "one of us," who is trying to break the ranks, to infiltrate, but who is ultimately denied the privilege. Pasolini is the odd man out. No team accepts him into its ranks.



FIG. 5 Pasolini in the uniform of the Italian national soccer team, *gli Azzurri*.

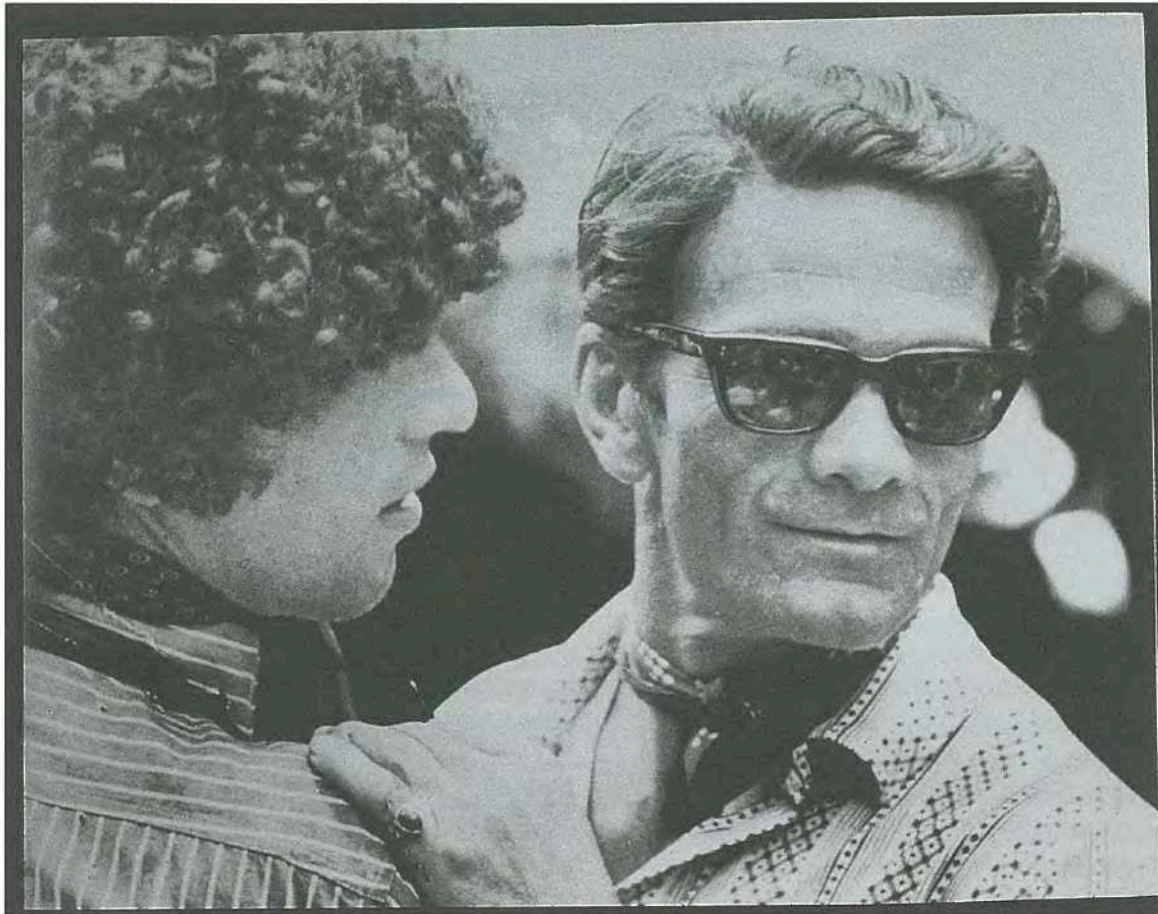


FIG. 6 Pasolini with Ninetto Davoli.

Pasolini was often photographed with Ninetto Davoli, who appeared in many of his films (*fig. 6*). Davoli, much younger, was a dear friend and for a time Pasolini's lover. In Pasolini's films, Davoli usually represents the image of vitality and innocence. Press images often focus on the difference in their ages, showing Pasolini as the "teacher" of the younger Davoli.

Dressed alike, the two men are captured in a moment of affection. This image reifies a stereotype of an older "daddy" attempting to look desirable for his younger partner. It is both disturbing and moving. Pasolini was in love with Davoli, but Davoli was unsure about his own sexuality. Pasolini was confronted with the reality of his emotional needs, the difficulty of meeting those needs, the threat to his professional career posed by his public image as an "out" homosexual, and his unrequited love for Ninetto Davoli.

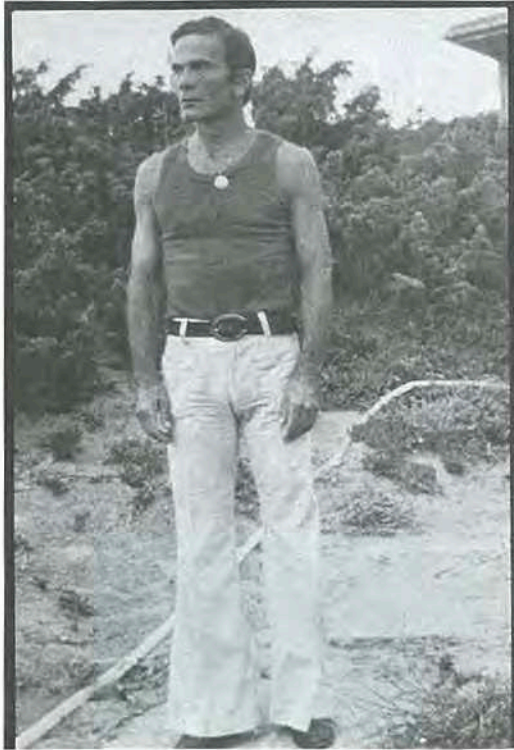


FIG. 7 Pier Paolo Pasolini.

The photograph with Davoli also exposes Pasolini's resistance to aging. In other images his *atteggiamento* (attitude or mannerism) calls attention to the body of a middle-aged Pasolini wearing cloths that were considered inappropriate for a man of his age (fig. 7). Pasolini refused the stereotype of the (gay) intellectual who does not acknowledge his body, but his own resistance began to make his body look awkward and slightly ridiculous. He resisted conforming to the model of older homosexuals of the Italian intelligentsia (like the filmmaker Luchino Visconti) who were closeted. His (gay) body seemed no longer able to sustain him as it had in the past.

The older Pasolini got, the less frequently he was shown with others. There is a marked shift in the published photographs toward distancing. They represent Pasolini as withdrawn and hardened, his body finally showing signs of wear after having been continuously attacked. Pasolini is now the aging homosexual, alone, isolated, his body in decay, turned ugly. His youthful vitality, once so salient, has now become ineffectual.

In October 1975, two weeks before his death, Pasolini asked the photographer Dino Pedriali to make some nude photographs of him. No one was to know about them. Pasolini told Pedriali that the images were to become part of a larger project that also involved the publication of a manuscript he was writing, already over six hundred pages long. Pasolini knew what he wanted the photographs to convey: they had to show him nude as if he was being secretly observed. The series was to end with Pasolini "discovering" the photographer looking at his body (fig. 8).

In the photographs, Pasolini lies alone in his bedroom. He reads a book that is both a prop to direct attention away from his sex and a marker of his intellectuality. Here Pasolini is the sexualized intellectual, becoming a fetish object himself. We, the viewers, look through a window, forced into the role of voyeur. As the sequence progresses and the narrative unfolds, we are in turn "discovered" by the Pasolini himself, caught looking at him. He makes no attempt to cover himself. At that moment, the narrative ends, before any type of encounter can be realized.

In Pedriali's images, Pasolini satirizes the very notion that his (gay) body is separable from his intellect, or that the (gay) body perverts the mind of an otherwise brilliant poet and filmmaker. The boldness of these images is complemented by their shocking humanity.



FIG. 8 Dino Pedriali, *Nudo di Notte* (7), 1975.

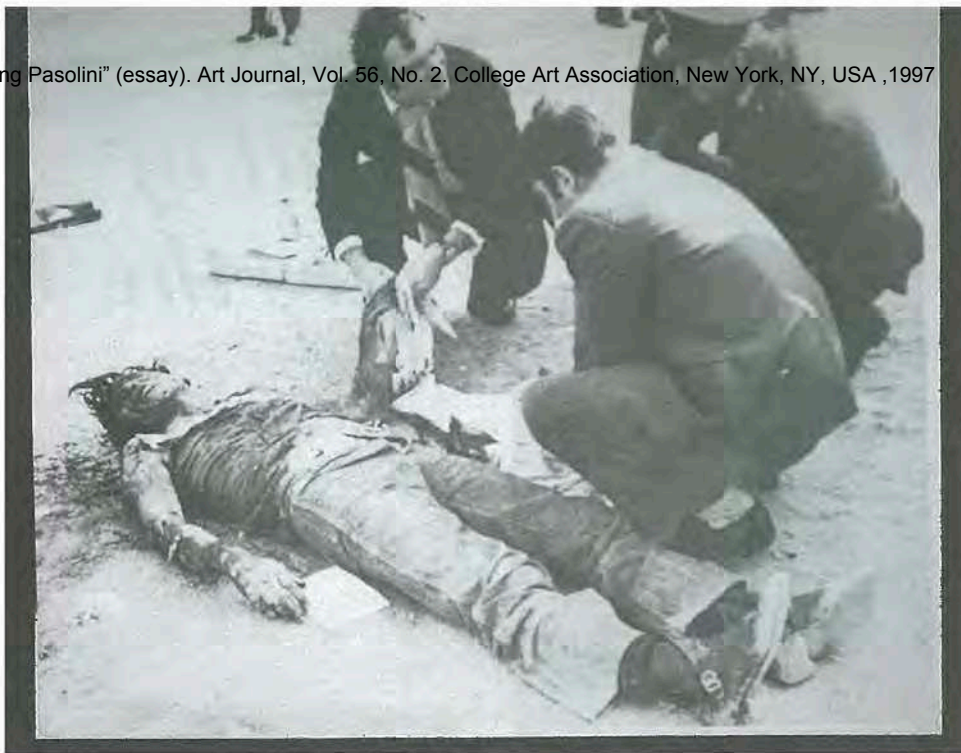


FIG. 9 Pasolini's corpse at the site of his murder in Ostia, Italy, November 2, 1975.

On November 2, 1975, the police provided the final image of Pasolini's body (fig. 9). It was meant to give closure to Pasolini, *il diverso* (the different one.) This image of Pasolini's beaten and crushed corpse, of his destroyed body, was doubtless intended as proof that the (gay) body cannot survive in this society, and that Pasolini's body has been squelched. The gruesomeness of this image and the fact that it was even considered fit to print sent a profound and horrific message to anyone who dares challenge the order and assert his or her difference. This image legitimizes gay bashing. It glorifies and warrants violence. It celebrates hatred. It is a testimony to the fears of a society. This is the last image we have to "remember" Pasolini by. But despite the insensitivity of the police for releasing it and of the press for publishing it and thereby trivializing his murder, for many it transcends the initial horror and has become an image of resistance much like the widely circulated photograph of Che Guevara's corpse.

Pasolini once wrote: "I put my body at stake." This was no cliché. It described the situation Pasolini had to face every day as an "out" public figure. That body, and what it represented, met hostile opposition that ultimately led to his murder. Pasolini was a homosexual, but there was no precedent for the *type* of homosexual he embodied, nor the version of masculinity he proposed. Pasolini challenged the traditional notions of (heterosexual) masculinity that were the cornerstone of Italian society. Pasolini's body was not passive precisely because he inscribed it with a specific sexuality. It thus threatened Italian machismo by offering an alternative to the stereotype of the effete and cowering homosexual.

Pasolini's work was controversial partly because his political views confronted capitalist ideals. His politics were consistent throughout his life, and his unwavering courage in pointing at, and naming corruption made his a voice to be reckoned with. He often referred to this drive as

his search for the "truth," and his work was ultimately about uncovering this elusive truth. As a homosexual in a homophobic society, Pasolini's "outness" became an extension, a personification, of that "truth." Not to lie, not to cover up, not to hide, not to submit to shame were the ways he practiced that truth. What to most Italians of the time was a *disonore* (dishonor, disgrace), was to Pasolini quite the opposite. Pasolini's (sexualized) body became the physical manifestation of his truth.

Note

This is a much abridged and modified excerpt from a performance script entitled *The Ashes of Pasolini*. A videotape based in part on this script is currently in production.

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