

Pasolini and Exclusion

Žižek, Agamben and the Modern Sub-proletariat

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There's no lunch or dinner or satisfaction in the world
Equal to an endless walk through the streets of the poor,
Where you must be wretched and strong, brothers to the dogs. (Pasolini, 1984:
213)

ANYONE EVEN slightly acquainted with the work of the Italian poet, film-maker and intellectual Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–75) will know that his lifelong attachment to the underprivileged, from the Roman sub-proletariat to the African peasants, has always been the true catalyst for his political concerns. No other Italian (left-wing) intellectual has striven so obstinately to understand and bring to the heart of public awareness the existence of those unacknowledged netherworlds inhabited by the abject subjects of our Western geopolitical universe, whose inconspicuous lives unfold away from our gaze, outside what we commonly know as civilization. In this sense, it is certainly accurate to hold that Pasolini's critique, especially from the 1960s onwards, bears extraordinary significance in today's global constellation as, despite being conceived during the Cold War years, it is essentially founded on a pressing concern with the universalization of our liberal-democratic and late-capitalistic experience. Pasolini's social outcasts, in other words, are *today's* social outcasts.

Yet, one thing is to state that Pasolini was 'the poet of the poor', quite another to investigate the political dimension of his attachment. Although doubting the authenticity of his commitment would clearly be inappropriate, critics have often cast more than a sceptical glance at the political force of his passionate attachment. The present article is an attempt to examine the ideological relevance of Pasolini's approach to the sub-proletariat, by

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focusing specifically on his first feature film, *Accattone* (1961). To substantiate my argument, I shall refer to a number of theoretical perspectives concerning the politicization of the transnational sub-proletariat recently developed by contemporary thinkers Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek. On the one hand, Agamben's notion of *homo sacer* is perhaps the most politically significant concept to emerge from within the bulk of his wide-ranging philosophical investigations, and can be fruitfully incorporated into a critical evaluation of Pasolini's well-known insistence on the 'sacredness of the sub-proletariat'. On the other hand, Žižek's insight into the fundamental political role played by the Lacanian Real *qua* symptomatic breaking-point of any socio-symbolic network, seems to provide the key theoretical instrument necessary to unlock the full ideological potential of Pasolini's troubled engagement with Italian Communism and Marxism in general.

From a methodological point of view, therefore, my work firmly advocates the centrality of theory in the general context of contemporary cultural studies and, more specifically, in the separate discipline of film studies. To be more precise, the strategy behind my extended recourse to theory in this article lies in developing a reading of Pasolini's *Accattone* which explicitly challenges today's typically postmodern assumption that the analysis of cultural products (including film narratives) should not be related to radical politics. From this angle, the seemingly digressive critical elaborations on Agamben and Žižek in the first half of the article are meant to convey my profound scepticism towards the de-politicizing trends currently favoured within the field of cultural studies. As it will become apparent in the course of the inquiry, in fact the fundamental reason why both Agamben's and Žižek's theories of the subject can be fruitfully incorporated into the analysis of Pasolini's representation of the sub-proletariat is that they both reject the postmodern proliferation of radically de-politicized approaches to subjectivity (New Age spiritualism, Habermasian intersubjectivity, deconstructionism, cognitivism, *inter alia*). Instead, theirs are theories suggesting that cultural criticism should never be separated from the sphere of the political, insofar as they are intimately motivated by the need to address, in Žižek's words, 'the burning question of how to reformulate a leftist, anti-capitalist political project in our era of global capitalism and its ideological supplement, liberal-democratic multi-culturalism' (Žižek, 2000a: 4). More precisely, what makes Žižek and Agamben particularly compelling for my critical discussion is that their approach to subjectivity implies the rehabilitation of the political notion of universality. By focusing on *Accattone*, I aim to give an account of Pasolini's class-related apprehension of subjectivity through that very reference to universality.

To Lacan and Back: Identifying Universality with the Point of Exclusion

Thomas Hammar's definition of 'denizens' as residents who are denied the fundamental rights of citizenship (Hammar, 1990) allows us to outline a politically useful description of Pasolini's favourite fictional as well as

non-fictional subjects. According to Pasolini, the anti-social condition of non-participation which, for example, typified the Roman sub-proletariat of the 1950s was a proper status to be upheld and promoted insofar as it implied a radical opposition to the codified, institutionalized order of Italian bourgeois society. In other words, Pasolini's protest was founded on his protracted defence of, and identification with, those social groups that had not yet been co-opted into the specific socio-symbolic order defined politically by the liberal-democratic ideology, and economically by capitalism.

As I will try to illustrate in the second part of this article, Pasolini's first feature film, *Accattone*, is in this respect a crucial work, in that it offers a particularly powerful representation of the Italian author's long-lasting alliance with the sub-proletariat, depicted as a kind of endangered foreign body at the heart of Italy's late-capitalist modernization. In accord with its literary predecessors (the novels *Ragazzi di vita*, 1955, and *Una vita violenta*, 1959) *Accattone* functions as a clear example of Pasolini's '*imperterrita dichiarazione d'amore*'¹ (unflinching declaration of love) for the sub-groups of the Roman slums (*borgate*), which he describes through an emphatic endorsement of their social, linguistic and psychological experience. What I would like to stress here is how this act of mimetic identification with the social outcasts, which remains a unique phenomenon in the traditionally elitist scene of Italian letters, seems to represent well what Žižek has identified as the leftist political gesture *par excellence*:

The leftist political gesture *par excellence* (in contrast to the rightist slogan 'to each his or her own place') is thus to question the concrete existing universal order on behalf of its symptom, of the part which, although inherent to the existing universal order, has no 'proper place' within it (say, illegal immigrants or the homeless in our societies). This procedure of identifying with the symptom is the exact and necessary obverse of the standard critico-ideological move of recognizing a particular content behind some abstract universal notion, that is, of denouncing neutral universalities as false ('the "man" of human rights is actually the white male property-owner . . .'): one pathetically asserts (and identifies with) *the point of inherent exception/exclusion, the 'abject', of the concrete positive order, as the only point of true universality*. (Žižek, 2000a: 224)

This definition of 'true universality' has more recently been revisited by Žižek in his essay 'Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!', where the Slovenian philosopher distances himself from the position of fellow political theorist Judith Butler:

I perceive the shadowy existence of those who are condemned to lead a spectral life outside the domain of the global order, blurred in the background, unmentionable, submerged in the formless mass of 'population', without even a proper particular place of their own, in a slightly different way from Butler. I am tempted to claim that this shadowy existence is *the very site of political universality*: in politics, universality is asserted when such an

agent with no proper place, 'out of joint', posits itself as the direct embodiment of universality against all those who do have a place within the global order. (Žižek, 2000b: 313)

In the light of these radical assertions regarding the precise socio-political location of universality, I would argue that the most palpable evidence of Pasolini's leftist stance, at the time of his cinema debut, is to be found in his scandalous, one would be tempted to say *fundamentalist* identification with the constitutional 'other' of the hegemonic bourgeois order. Rather than just fighting for the socio-economic and cultural improvement of unprivileged social subjects (the sub-proletariat) and neglected social space (the Roman slums), Pasolini took a much more radical step by way of, in Žižek's words, '*identifying universality with the point of exclusion*' (2000a: 224). The political force of this identification lies in the uncompromising challenge it poses to the liberal-democratic, late-capitalist hegemony: it does not say to the sub-proletariat 'I will fight for your rights to be recognized by the existing hierarchy' (liberal leftist); but rather it says 'You, the displaced and exploited, are the universal measure of progress insofar as you are excluded.' My point is that only this second perspective does truly disturb the foundations of late-capitalist hegemony.

With this in mind, it seems plausible to suggest that the whole of Pasolini's artistic and intellectual production should be regarded as an unrelenting defence of the universal dignity of human kind by granting it as a prerogative of the dispossessed, the exploited, the segregated. In other words, what is universally valid for him is not the neutral ideals of the Enlightenment inherited by liberal Europe, through which one must comply with social order; rather, in a significant twist, what matters is the concrete existence of the 'excremental' subject, the subject who contradicts social order by being denied its privileges, exposing as a result the weakness of its abstract foundations. What the Italian ruling class perceived as a danger to be removed was precisely Pasolini's 'fanatic' over-identification with this 'shameful' remainder of the country's late-capitalist modernization. As is widely acknowledged, Pasolini's persistence in his limit-position turned him, especially from the 1960s, into the target of a strategy of permanent persecution (see Betti, 1978).² What the establishment could not digest was Pasolini's fundamentally anti-liberal accusation of the system's inherently racist structure:

The most detestable and intolerable thing, even in the most innocent of bourgeois, is the inability to acknowledge experiences of life that are different from their own, which means conceiving all other experiences as substantially analogous to their own. [. . .] Those bourgeois writers, no matter how virtuous and dignified, who cannot recognize the extreme psychological difference of another human being from their own, take the first step towards forms of discriminations that are essentially racist; in this sense they are not free, but they belong deterministically to their own class: fundamentally, there is no difference between them and a head of the police or an executioner in a concentration camp. (Pasolini, 1995: 89–90)³

The Lacanian point to be noted, here, is that Pasolini's radical condemnation of the bourgeois order is inextricably linked to what he perceives as the only political gesture that can break through that order and open up an authentically alternative vision: the full endorsement of the 'other' of capitalist hegemony *qua* the repressed universal around which the false positivity of such hegemony is constructed. What is distinctively Lacanian about this view is the notion that a genuinely subversive act requires the over-identification with the repressed/symptomatic dimension. As Žižek reminds us time and time again, Lacanian psychoanalysis theorizes how the constitution of a given socio-symbolic field is decided by way of a primordial exclusion, whereby the existence of a pathological antagonizing excess is fundamentally foreclosed. More precisely, it is only through the repression of this fundamental antagonism that the field of social reality can emerge as the empty battlefield for hegemonic struggle (see Žižek, 2000b: 110–11). In order to challenge radically a given socio-symbolic network, it is therefore necessary fully to assume its repressed point of exclusion.

This notion of identifying universality with the symptom is an immensely fruitful one if we are to grasp the emancipatory character of Pasolini's cinema, and of his work in general. What critics have often refused as Pasolini's deep-seated irrationality,⁴ his purely pathological inclination towards the poor, acquires a totally different meaning if only we filter it through the theories on symbolization developed by Lacan in the second phase of his career, starting from the late 1950s. Essentially, we are engaging here with the so-called 'Lacan of the Real', who refers to 'the Real' as the . . . impossible/ahistorical limit of the process of symbolization, the limit which, in Žižek's words,

reveals the ultimate contingency, fragility (and thus changeability) of every symbolic constellation that pretends to serve as the a priori horizon of the process of symbolization. (Žižek, 2002a: 221)

Paradoxically, then, those who lamented the scandalous character of Pasolini's intellectual propositions were absolutely right: Pasolini was scandalous, insofar as we understand his 'will to scandalize' as the Lacanian act proper, consisting in the subject's full endorsement of the impossible limit of the socio-symbolic field, whose re-emergence radically interferes with the smooth functioning of the field itself. The fundamental scandal of Pasolini's position originates precisely in his universalization of the sub-proletariat, in view of his conviction that 'the elements at play in the psychology of the object, the poor, the sub-proletarian, are always in a certain way pure and essential', in that 'they exist outside the historical conscience, and, more specifically, the bourgeois conscience' (Pasolini, 2001: 2846). What bothered most of his contemporaries (including many fellow leftists) was not so much his defence of the excluded as underprivileged, but rather his determination to refer to the excluded as the universal human beings. However, far from acting as the proverbial Romantic who defends the

wholeness of 'primitive' cultures, or the postmodernist who speaks up for the pluralization of narratives and discourses of otherness, Pasolini intervened from the standpoint of the repressed structuring principle in order to attack the hegemonic field at its very basis.⁵ His 'shocking' solidarity, in other words, was an intrinsically political one.

To radicalize the argument a step further and grasp its full political implications, we should refine the Lacanian approach by noting that the point of exclusion of any symbolic field coincides with universality *only insofar as universality is an abyssal void*, that void repeatedly defined by Lacan as the impenetrable kernel of the Real. More to the point, the survival or collapse of a given symbolic configuration is decided precisely *in the void of the Real*, inasmuch as it is either the repression or the assertion of its traumatic, non-symbolizable content that determines the condition of symbolic (im)possibility. Now, the radicality of Pasolini's operation lies in *making thematic*, that is in filling with anthropological substance, Lacan's Real: in identifying the Roman sub-proletariat first, and later the modern, transnational *lumpenproletariat*, with universality *qua* the *unacknowledged* remainder of the socio-symbolic order. This is why Pasolini's abject subject is not only excluded, but also completely released from the traditional notion of class consciousness, which the author sees as inevitably overdetermined by the liberal-democratic logic. Rather than playing the game of the endless, contingent re-signification of the liberal-democratic context, by then pervasively controlled by late-capitalist ideology, Pasolini assumed the impossible and yet properly political risk of forcing a radical break with that context, opening up the space for a new historical configuration.

At one point in *Uccellacci e uccellini* (Hawks and Sparrows, 1966), often considered Pasolini's cinematic masterpiece, we are offered a concise, understated and yet somewhat literal definition of the author's strategy. To our great surprise, we are made aware of the fact that the streets walked by the two sub-proletarian protagonists are named after totally unknown people with revealing epigraphies such as 'unemployed', or 'run away from home at 12 years of age'. The crucial point, here, is that the sub-proletariat becomes a true political agent the moment its presence at the heart of the symbolic network (street names) is emptied of all directly ideological contents and frozen into the impossible field of pure nominalism *qua* (symbolic) death. The signifying field occupied by the term 'sub-proletariat' overlaps with the abyss of a linguistic definition which *speaks nothing but its own void*, its own non-verbality and absence, the impossible limit of signification itself. This is why Pasolini's cinematic representation of the historically existing social outcasts (typically, through long-held, anti-naturalistic close-ups on poor people's faces) is always pervaded by what he himself defined his '*estetismo funebre*' (Pasolini, 1976: 154), a 'funereal aestheticism' which, ultimately, reveals nothing but the overlapping of the historically excluded subjects with the ahistorical dimension, which confers on them a truly political potential. Pasolini's sub-proletariat, functioning as

the dislodged structuring principle of the liberal-democratic order, is precisely the name for this abyssal subject.

From Sub-proletariat to *Homo Sacer*

Perhaps today's most likely successors of Pasolini's (anti-)heroes are to be found in hybrid social subjects such as the immigrant and the refugee. Commenting on a 1943 article by Hannah Arendt entitled 'We Refugees', Giorgio Agamben (2000: 15) writes that Arendt 'turns the condition of countryless refugee – a condition she herself was living – upside down in order to present it as the paradigm of a new historical consciousness'. What is of particular interest in Arendt's article is precisely how a refugee is described as someone who has lost all rights and yet refuses to be assimilated in a new national culture. Essentially, the 'new historical consciousness' we are dealing with here is defined by the subject's refusal to assume a fixed, institutionalized identity. Agamben's crucial insight lies in his acknowledgement of the possibility that we might have to abandon the traditional ways in which the subject of the political was identified (citizen, sovereign people, worker, etc.) in order to 'build our political philosophy anew starting from the one and only figure of the refugee' (2000: 16). In a manner which is reminiscent of Pasolini's uncompromising radicalism, Agamben shifts the coordinates of the struggle on to the fundamentally excluded field, identifying the universal political subject with the hybrid figure of the refugee: 'Inasmuch as the refugee, an apparently marginal figure, unhinges the old trinity of state–nation–territory, it deserves instead to be regarded as the central figure of our political history' (2000: 22). This attempt at universalizing the figure of the socially displaced subject is further developed in the following passage, which strikes one for its similarity to Žižek's reading of the Lacanian Real as the limit of any process of symbolization:

The refugee should be considered for what it is, namely, nothing less than a limit-concept that at once brings a radical crisis to the principles of nation-state and clears the way for a renewal of categories that can no longer be delayed. (Agamben, 2000: 23)⁶

The above politicization of the refugee ties in smoothly with Agamben's warnings against the dangers of identity politics. Typically, his position on the latter issue appears suspended between irredeemable pessimism and utopianism, as the following excerpt from his *The Coming Community* testifies:

[. . .] the planetary petty bourgeoisie is probably the form in which humanity is moving toward its own destruction. But this also means that the petty bourgeoisie represents an opportunity unheard of in the history of humanity that it must at all costs not let slip away. Because if instead of continuing to search for a proper identity in the already improper and senseless form of individuality, humans were to succeed in belonging to this impropriety as such, in

making of the proper being-thus not an identity and an individual property but a singularity without identity, a common and absolutely exposed singularity [...] then they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects. (Agamben, 1993: 65)

With particular reference to the last quotation, we should observe that Žižek's approach complements Agamben's in underlining the political role played by the estranging, traumatic encounter with the Real of authentic otherness. Or how else are we to think of Agamben's passage from identity and individual property to 'a singularity without identity, a common and absolutely exposed singularity'? According to Žižek's psychoanalytic reading, the dimension of the act proper is always governed by the death-drive, which signifies nothing but the necessity for the subject of the act to experience the symbolic breakdown of its own subjective economy. Precisely because of the weight it puts on symbolic trauma, Žižek's critique calls for a radical challenge to the very foundations of liberal-democracy, whereas Agamben's recent intervention in the field of political philosophy seems more steadily regulated by a messianic vision potentially disengaged from the problematic of the re-articulation of the existing socio-symbolic order. In his latest work, Žižek has commented on Judith Butler's reading of Agamben's notion of *homo sacer* by underlining how this significant notion:

[...] should not be watered down into an element of a radical-democratic project whose aim is to renegotiate/redefine the limits of in- and exclusion, so that the symbolic field will also be more and more open to the voices who are excluded by the hegemonic configuration of the public discourse. [...] This (mis)appropriation of Agamben is just one in the series of cases which exemplify a tendency of American 'radical' academia (even more illustrative than Agamben here is the case of Foucault): the appropriated European intellectual topos, with its emphasis on the closure of every democratic emancipatory project, is reinscribed into the opposite topos of the gradual and partial widening of democratic space. (Žižek, 2002b: 98–100)

It is my conviction that Pasolini's thesis of the universalization of the sub-proletariat can be productively integrated into both Žižek's and Agamben's critical approaches, which I shall therefore consider here for their concomitant political potential. Essentially, as I will try to show by focusing on Agamben's concept of *homo sacer*, the drive to 'identify with the point of exclusion' means, for both thinkers, to fully assume the 'impossible zero-level of symbolization' (Žižek, 2002b: 99), the utopian dimension which estranges the subject to its own established identity, thus disclosing the inner antagonism of the social totality. In a similar vein, the thesis of the sacredness of the sub-proletariat asserted by Pasolini calls into question both the Lacanian 'fullness of a void', which functions as the (im)possible Real of the symbolic order, and a utopian space populated by a community to be thought of as absolute potentiality. What I believe remains absolutely

significant, especially when confronted with today's trend in postmodern politics to replace the notion of class essentialism with the enervated politicization of what Wendy Brown (1995: 61) aptly defined the 'multiculturalist mantra' (race, gender, sexuality, etc.), is Pasolini's insistence on universality as a notion inextricably related to a specific social class in a specific historical moment.

Accattone as *Homo Sacer*, or: The Vicissitudes of Naked Life

One of the most obvious in the long series of Pasolinian 'contradictions' is the seemingly paradoxical conflation of the themes of *wretchedness* and *sacredness*, which runs through his entire *oeuvre*. The dynamic aspect of this oxymoron can be discerned by considering Agamben's well-known notion of *homo sacer*. As Agamben reminds us (2000: 3), the ancient Greeks used to oppose *zoe*, the biological fact of life common to all living creatures (naked life), to *bios*, which instead indicates 'the form or manner of living peculiar to a single individual or group'. Agamben observes that the problem with the concept of 'human being' promoted by the 1789 Declaration of Human Rights is that it does not leave any autonomous space for the notion of *zoe*, by way of dissolving it completely into the juridical and political order. As soon as a human being is born, naked life vanishes into the notion of *bios* as the condition of belonging to a given national identity: 'Rights, in other words, are attributed to the human being only to the degree to which he or she is the immediately vanishing presupposition (and, in fact, the presupposition that must never come to light as such) of the citizen' (2000: 21). The obvious outcome of this repression of the 'pure human' is that modernity, at least since 1789, has consistently identified the status of man stripped of citizenship with the notion of *homo sacer*, 'in the sense that this term used to have in the Roman law of the archaic period: doomed to death' (2000: 22). It is from this vital definition of *homo sacer* as today's disfigured, alienated version of the 'pure human' that Agamben develops his insightful critique of late capitalism, which in turn allows us to elaborate the parallel with Pasolini.

Taking his cue from both Marx and Guy Debord, Agamben notes that today's universalization of capitalism under the 'sacred' aegis of the spectacularization (and depotentiation) of life has forced capitalism to face its own state of permanent crisis as the ultimate truth about its doctrine. The immediate result is that the very instability which:

[...] constitutes the internal motor of capitalism in its present phase [...] demands not only that the people of the Third World become increasingly poor, but also that a growing percentage of the citizens of the industrialized societies be marginalized and without a job. (2000: 132)

It is precisely in the light of this description of the increasingly expropriating power of capital that the notion of *homo sacer* emerges as politically meaningful to Agamben. The context of absolute impotence this notion

refers to, the void to which it is confined, is to him none other than *the one and only space from which the political must be resigned*:

Politics is that which corresponds to the essential inoperability [*inoperosità*] of humankind, to the radical being-without-work of human communities. There is politics because human beings are *argos*-beings that cannot be defined by any proper operation – that is, beings of pure potentiality that no identity or vocation can possibly exhaust. (Agamben, 2000: 141)

As previously anticipated, perhaps the closest Pasolinian version of *homo sacer* as ‘the pure human’ who is ‘doomed to death’ for the simple reason of not belonging to the civilized congregation is Accattone, the quintessential beggar (‘beggar’ is what *accattone* means in Italian) of his eponymous film. This is of course by no means the only Pasolinian *homo sacer*, as his entire production is marked by the unignorable presence of an utterly displaced, abject humanity.

On first impression, the film does not seem directly political. Accattone (beggar) is a pimp of the Roman outskirts who desperately struggles for survival after his woman, the prostitute Maddalena, is thrown in jail. Initially, he turns to his ex-wife Ascenza for support; after she has rejected him, he falls into utter despair until he accidentally meets Stella, a young girl who instantly wins him over with her naivety and candour. Despite being attracted to her, Accattone plans to turn Stella into a prostitute, a replacement for Maddalena. However, he is eventually overwhelmed by a mixture of love and remorse, and resolves to take her off the streets. To provide for Stella, Accattone, for the first time in his life, decides to look for work. Yet, his first day’s experience as a *manovale* (a labourer) is enough to make him change his mind and quit his job. In the meantime, Maddalena, still in jail, is informed about Accattone’s new girl, and reports him to the police in revenge for his betrayal. Finally, out of work and with his woman to support, Accattone decides to turn to thieving, like many of his friends from the Roman slums. On his first mission with Balilla and Cartagine, he tries to steal a load of meat from an unguarded truck. The police, however, who had been keeping an eye on Accattone’s moves, are ready to intervene on the scene of the theft. As he is being arrested, Accattone tries to escape on a random motorcycle, but he is crushed in an accident and dies.

The most obvious reading of the film reflects quite literally the previously illustrated politicization of the sub-proletariat: Accattone is the miserable leftover of the booming Italian society of the 1960s whom Pasolini transposes into a sacred, universal dimension in order to disclose capitalism’s fundamental flaw. Yet, we only need to take a closer look at the cinematic rendering of this scandalous association of the sacred and the profane, to realize that, far from constituting a self-evident political position, it involves a specific theoretical apprehension of subjectivity. My contention here is that Pasolini’s treatment of Accattone compels the viewer to focus on the character’s specific psychological experience, to the extent that it is

only by observing the development of Accattone's self that we are given an insight into the authentic meaning of Pasolini's identification with the sub-proletariat.

This perspective would imply a surprising reversal of the obvious materialistic reading of the film: Accattone is not only mediated by the socio-political structure, but he also mediates reality *tout court*, he functions as a sort of Hegelian self-consciousness, whose inner developments help us understand the truth about external events. The fascinating ambiguity of the film, I would argue, arises from the interplay of its materialistic and idealistic overtones. On the one hand, we could say that Accattone's subjectivity is determined precisely by the social circumstances that cause his segregation: he is an outcast, a pimp, a thief and eventually dies because Italian society ostracizes him, denying him a viable alternative. Accattone's only way out of his destitute existence in the Roman slums is to sell his labour as a *manovale*, the lowest rank in the productive machine. When, indeed, he gets a taste of class-exploitation, he determines immediately to go back to his desperately anarchic existence by hinting, hyperbolically, at the complicity of capitalism and nazi-fascism: '*Ma che siamo a Buchenwald qua?*' (Are we at Buchenwald here?). However, such an interpretation is evidently compromised by the formal configuration consciously given to the narrative, more specifically by the predominance of the lyrical-introspective register over the sociological one. It is enough to observe the widely acknowledged mimetic pathos that qualifies Pasolini's focused study of the leading character, reinforced by the sacred musical comment accompanying his *via crucis*, to realize that, more than just the Lukácsian characterization of the typical, Accattone is seen *sub specie aeternitatis*: a universal, Christ-like subject representative of humanity as a whole.

To clarify this fundamental aspect of the film, it is worth noting that Accattone is estranged even among his fellow sub-proletarians, as his devouring anxiety is unmistakably at odds with the atavistic indifference that presides over the self-enclosed universe of the Roman slums, or, for that matter, the close-knit gang of Neapolitan pimps, whose power over people and events is as sinister as it is overwhelming.⁷ The crucial question that we should ask therefore is: **what is it that qualifies Accattone's universalized self?** Or, more to the point: what are we supposed to understand from Pasolini's emphasis on the process of self-individuation?

On closer observation, we could maintain that Accattone's uniqueness lies in a sort of masochistic attitude, or more precisely in his determination to face what Georges Bataille (1988: 6–9) calls the impossibility/insufficiency at the heart of inner experience. Žižek's theorization of subjectivity is in this sense very close to Bataille's, in that it postulates, via Lacan, the presence of an impenetrable 'leftover', a hard kernel, which resists symbolization: 'The leftover which resists "subjectivation" embodies the impossibility which "is" the subject: in other words, the subject is strictly correlative to its own impossibility; its limit is its positive condition' (Žižek, 1992: 209). The crucial point is that Pasolini's deep-seated political claim

rests on the shifting of the notion of 'leftover', analogous to that of symptom, from the sub-proletariat as a social body to Accattone as a subject/body of the sub-proletariat. According to Žižek, it is only through this shift to subjectivity that an accomplished account of materialism can emerge:

True materialism does not consist in the simple operation of reducing inner psychic experience to an effect of the process taking place in 'external reality' – what one should do, in addition, is to isolate a 'material' traumatic kernel/remainder at the very heart of 'psychic life' itself'. (Žižek, 2000b: 118)

This reading of materialism as a non-codifiable kernel located at the heart of subjective life is also extremely useful for redeeming what I think is the driving notion in Theodor Adorno's dialectical method. Adorno's defence of objectivity presupposes precisely the existence of a non-subsumable, hard 'otherness' as the true target of thought. In fact, it is only through its ability to reach out for the dense core within the object that, according to him, thought achieves its full potentiality.⁸ In both Adorno and Žižek, therefore, the main emphasis is on the subject's traumatic encounter with the impenetrable kernel of the object, which determines, first, the loss of subjective consistency, and consequently its radical transformation. This concept should be regarded as the driving force of Adorno's most ambitious project, *Negative Dialectics*, where the author produces a significant theoretical effort to show that 'a cognition that is to bear fruit will throw itself to the objects *à fond perdu*. The vertigo which this causes is an *index veri*' (Adorno, 2000: 33). Much more than is generally acknowledged, Adorno's dialectics, as well as his reading of Hegel, are centred on the recognition that the traumatic vertiginousness resulting from the subject's daring over-identification with the hard kernel of the object is the only way to break the spell of reified consciousness.⁹

On Being Doomed to Death . . .

Accattone's opening scene immediately allows us to identify the theoretical force of Pasolini's representation of subjectivity. Here we are thrown into a seemingly facetious conversation between Accattone and his unoccupied friends from the *borgate*. Despite the typically light and mordant exchange of remarks in Roman dialect, the central issue is a serious one: death. Fulvio has just returned from his new job and Alfredino, leisurely sat at a bar table, sarcastically addresses him thus: 'Aren't you dead yet? Strange, they told me that work kills people!' Fulvio, out of frame, replies: 'At least it's an honest death', and immediately adds: 'You all look as if you've just come out of the morgue!' At this stage, Accattone cuts in to make his own point on death. With his distinctively anguished aggressiveness, he claims that their friend Barberone's drowning in the river was caused by exhaustion rather than indigestion. Giorgio, however, relying on medical erudition, calmly explains that swimming with a full stomach causes a failure in the digestive system, which eventually leads to drowning. It is at this point that

Accattone makes the decisive wager: if they buy him a meal, he will dive into the river with a full stomach to prove them wrong, which is exactly what happens in the next scene.

What is significant in this *incipit*, culminating with Accattone's prodigious dive from the top of a tall bridge, is precisely the nature of the character's absurd challenge. While Fulvio's perception of death is redeemed by work (he is an honest flower vendor), and Giorgio's is neutralized by scientific knowledge, Accattone is the only one who dares to take on the titanic challenge that the idea of death poses to the preservation of the ego. To be more precise, he is the one who metaphorically, through the assimilation of the potentially lethal meal, hints at the internalization of death, making it therefore an integral part of his own subjectivity.¹⁰ As a counter-argument, we could of course hold that Accattone is forced into the wager by his destitution: it is, after all, a trick that gets him a free meal! However, Pasolini's widely acknowledged stylistic choices in the scene of the dive (the iconic idealization of Accattone through long-held close-ups and low-angle shots, the marble angels flanking him on the bridge, the sacred symbolism, etc.) undoubtedly confer a mythical resonance on the character's confrontation with death.

By inscribing death into Accattone's self, in other words, Pasolini confirms from the start what Alberto Moravia (1961) called 'Accattone's unconscious death-drive', which in my opinion is the film's central theme (see also Pasolini, 1986: 28–9). As the narrative progresses, the incidence of Accattone's death-drive becomes increasingly pervasive. Not only is he constantly tempted by suicide (in the police headquarters, he tries to jump out of the window; later, drunk, he threatens to throw himself off a bridge; he repeatedly calls on death as the only solution to his suffering), but he also cannot help fantasizing about his eventual demise: first, when he witnesses, as if spellbound, the procession of a mysterious funeral in the emptiness of the *borgata*; and later when, after his first day of work, he dreams of attending his own funeral.

Given its permeating presence in the narrative, Pasolini's recourse to the death-drive can be interpreted according to the previously identified materialistic-idealistic double measure: both as a denunciation of social oppression (it is bourgeois society that causes the death of the sub-proletariat and the disappearance of the *borgate*, see Pasolini, 1998: 1460) and, at a deeper level, as a metaphorical injunction, in Lacanian terms, to acknowledge the constitutional lack that informs individuation. This second reading, I would argue, is by far the more productive, and indeed complements the first one. What Pasolini seems to suggest is that the process of subjectivation can be properly accomplished only if the subject comes to terms with its own kernel of constitutive negativity. Abolishing from subjectivity the fundamental antagonism posited by the death-drive is, in Žižek's words, 'precisely the source of totalitarian temptation: the greatest mass murders and holocausts have always been perpetrated in the name of man

as a harmonious being, of a New Man without antagonistic tension' (Žižek, 1992: 5).

Accattone's intimate refusal of subjective stability is therefore a key narrative factor. Ultimately, it is this very refusal that assumes a self-unifying, universal value, bringing us back to both Agamben's argument for the necessity to tear apart the phantasmatic semblance of self-identity, and, as is clear from the following passage, to Žižek's critique of Althusser's notion of 'subjective interpellation':

[. . .] far from emerging as the outcome of interpellation, the subject emerges only when and in so far as interpellation liminally *fails*. Not only does the subject never fully recognize itself in the interpellative call: its resistance to interpellation (to the symbolic identity provided by interpellation) is the subject. (Žižek, 2000b: 115)

What Pasolini highlights in Accattone's parable, therefore, is the centrality of the negative act of dis-identification from the symbolic network, a 'Hegelian' gesture that Žižek locates at the heart of political behaviour. According to Žižek, Hegel's critique of Kant's transcendentalism is achieved by shifting Kant's non-conceptual deadlock (the Noumenon, or *a priori* Idea) from an external/transcendental position to an internal one, hence the notion of 'absolute immanence'. In Kant, the ineffable Noumenon is external to the smokescreen of contingency, whereas in Hegel it becomes inherent in it, part of its own nature. If Kant states that the struggle for knowledge implies a transcendental movement, Hegel's reply is that there is nothing outside immanence, and that the encounter with the non-conceptual deadlock beyond rationality (absolute negativity) is a fundamental step for the attainment of a truly rational relationship to external reality (absolute knowledge).

It is important here to underline how Žižek's reading of Hegel unconditionally favours the disruptive potential of negativity over synthesis and reconciliation (panlogicism), and is, therefore, extremely consistent with our interpretation of subjectivity in *Accattone*.¹¹ Far from affirming the notion of identity as a non-contradictory whole, as positive reconciliation of opposites, the final synthetic movement of Hegel's triad (thesis–antithesis–synthesis), according to Žižek (1993: 122–4), implies the internalization of the lack which is already constitutive of both thesis and antithesis. Refusing to read Hegel's engagement with negativity as a means to reach positive identity, in other words, Žižek seems once again close to Adorno, who, despite often criticizing Hegel's compulsion to identify (see Adorno, 2000: 158–61), aimed at rescuing in him a dialectical method based on the primacy of the non-subsumable other, that which escapes the domination of instrumental reason (see Adorno, 1993).

It is at this point of the analysis that we can introduce the argument that Hegel's triadic movement is metaphorically represented in Accattone's struggle for subjectivation. As we have seen, impossibility is from the outset

the condition of Accattone's self: on the one hand he cannot find a stable identity within his own displaced socio-economic space (slums), on the other he refuses to enter the hegemonic space (bourgeois society). Accattone embodies negativity both as a member of the sub-proletariat, and as a prospective member of the working class. The significance of Pasolini's position with regard not only to the sub-proletariat, but also, more insightfully, to political participation as such, is decided by the step his character takes in trying to resolve the tension between the two (negative) poles. Rather than postulate the humanistic notion of self-appropriation through social identification, thus possibly affirming a (sub-)proletarian positivity *vis-a-vis* bourgeois order, Pasolini concludes, synthetically, that negativity (lack) is the constitutive element of free subjectivity (identity): Accattone chooses freedom as '*libertà di scegliere la morte*' (Pasolini, 1995: 269), freedom to choose death. This stage of the subjectivizing process is tellingly visualized, first, by Accattone's dream, and finally by his real death.

. . . And Dreaming About It!

After his first day of work Accattone returns home exhausted, half-dead (having also been involved in a fight with some fellow sub-proletarians), but determined to stick to his duty as the repentant breadwinner who wants to spare Stella from prostitution. Lying in bed, he conceives the dream which, in my opinion, constitutes the most poetic as well as theoretically profound moment of the film. Essentially, Accattone dreams about attending his own funeral. First, however, he witnesses the death of the Neapolitan pimps, in which we can read the collapse of his previous identity. This is reinforced when his Roman friends, calling him by his real name (Vittorio, as if a new individual was born from the ashes of the old Accattone), give him the news of his death. We then see him following the hearse to the gates of the cemetery. Whilst everybody else proceeds inside, the guardian orders him to remain outside. Alone, bewildered, he looks around and then resolves to climb over the cemetery wall. Once inside, he encounters an old man intent on digging a grave in the shadow. As Accattone realizes that it is his own grave that is being dug, he asks the old man, deferentially, whether he could move a few yards down, into the sunny part of the cemetery. As the old man agrees to restart his work, the camera pans out on the hilly countryside basking in sunshine, and the dream vanishes.

This is of course when Žižek's reading of Lacan becomes useful. According to Lacan, the subject regulates its relationship with the non-rational, non-discursive kernel of the Real through fantasy, an imaginary construction that allows the subject to keep at bay the potentially explosive encounter with the Real.¹² The main point in Lacanian analysis is of course that behind fantasy there is nothing but the emptiness constitutive of subjectivity as such, a void which, more significantly, is also the truth-content of the symbolic order.

Now, what is Accattone's dream if not a powerful visual representation of the Lacanian 'going through the fantasy' (*la traversée du fantasme*) aimed

at disclosing the void around which the process of symbolization/subjectivation is structured? The very position occupied by the dream in the narrative (after Accattone's first day of work) seems to confirm such an interpretation, as through this dream we witness the radical effacement of the symbolic networks challenged by the subject: it is a dream that not only explodes Accattone's old identity (pimp), but effectively annihilates his attempt to stabilize his new identity and consequently his position in society. Not surprisingly, Accattone will immediately quit his job to fall back on thieving.

The traumatic content of the dream can be isolated in what is, symbolically, the most revealing part of this 'narrative within the narrative': the moment Accattone, disobeying the guardian's injunction, climbs over the wall of the cemetery. Apart from symbolizing Accattone's ascension to heaven (there are two cherub-like, naked children just outside the cemetery), the episode seems to call into question the subject's psychic economy. A fairly straightforward Freudian reading tells us that the guardian is Accattone's ego, whose injunction is clearly self-protective, a warning against the dangers of facing the unconscious death-drive. We need Lacan, however, to explain Accattone's transgression. Accattone's decision to overcome the wall that separates the ego from the id (or, in Lacanian terms, the symbolic order from the Real), is in fact nothing but the Lacanian act proper: the act which disturbs the symbolic field by forcing the subject to come to terms with what is 'in him more than himself' (see Lacan, 1998: 263–76), what is within its subjective economy and yet remains a hard, impenetrable kernel.

This notion of becoming intimate with the Real *qua* death-drive, that is of acknowledging the fundamentally political significance of the non-conceptual dimension of reality, is absolutely crucial if we are to grasp Pasolini's intellectual stature, and indeed it constitutes the theoretical core of his essay-collection *Empirismo eretico*. Death, to Pasolini, is the idea that contradicts everything, the subversive notion *par excellence*, and at the same time 'the only thing that gives true dignity to Man' (in Magrelli, 1977: 59). This crucial approach to death is suggestively developed in relation to the following definition of freedom:

'Freedom'. After giving it considerable thought, I have realized that this mysterious word only means, after all, in its deepest connotation . . . 'freedom to choose death'. This, no doubt, is a scandal, because to live is a duty: on this point both Catholics (life is sacred as it is a gift of God) and Communists (one must live as it is a duty towards society) agree. Nature also agrees: and, to help us to be lovingly attached to life, it provides us with the 'conservation instinct'. However, differently from Catholics and Communists, nature is ambiguous: and to prove its ambiguity it also provides us with the opposite instinct, the death-drive. This conflict, which is not contradictory – as our rational and dialectic mind would like it to be – but oppositional and as such non-progressive, unable to perform an optimistic synthesis, takes place in the depths of our soul: in the unfathomable depths, as we all know. But 'authors'

have the responsibility to render this conflict explicit and manifest. They are tactless and inopportune enough to reveal, somehow, that they 'want to die', or else that they want to disobey the conservation instinct: or, more simply, disobey conservation as such. Freedom is, therefore, a self-damaging attack against conservation. Freedom can only be expressed through martyrdom, either an insignificant or a substantial one. And each martyr martyrs themselves through the reactionary executioner. (Pasolini, 1995: 269)

As is apparent in the above excerpt, Pasolini's conception of the antagonistic potential of freedom calls into question subjectivity as the *locus* of radical negativity. As with his Accattone, martyrdom, or the endorsement of the death-drive, means exposing the false positivity of subjectivity by embracing its negative underside, by identifying with its fundamental lack.

Not surprisingly, therefore, after his dream Accattone grows increasingly disaffected with his previous attempt to integrate into the wider society through work. Instead, Accattone chooses thieving. With a couple of layabouts (Balilla and Cartagine), he organizes an expedition into Rome's city-centre. It is at this stage that the spatial dimension becomes clearly significant, as the movement from periphery to centre implies the contamination of the bourgeois universe, also emphasized by the three characters' exchanges about Cartagine's smelly feet. Yet, even more significant is the fact that this potentially subversive movement is constantly monitored, and eventually neutralized, by the panoptical gaze of the police (after Maddalena's denunciation, the narrative is regularly punctuated by extreme close-ups of a policeman's eyes). The swift intervention of the police as soon as the trio manage to carry out their first theft, in fact, could be seen as a perfect illustration of the Foucauldian notion of articulation of power through 'permanent visibility' (Foucault, 1977: 201). However, what is symptomatic at this stage is Accattone's reaction to the arrest. While his friends do not put up any resistance, since after all it is a common event in their lives, Accattone surprisingly jumps on a random motorbike and tries to escape. We then hear the noise of an accident, screams and, in the background, the leitmotif from Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. Everyone now runs to the scene of the accident only to hear Accattone's last words: 'Ahh, now I'm fine . . .'. In a nutshell, Accattone's self refuses to be defined by the hegemonic gaze.¹³ By choosing death, rather, he fully assumes the void of freedom, an act that disturbs the socio-symbolic totality and spares him compulsive identification with it.

According to our interpretation, the political significance of this second and definitive death,¹⁴ the ultimate accomplishment of the character's suicidal tendency, is all in the paradoxical positivity encapsulated in Accattone's last words. These words not only allude to Accattone's release from a life of utter misery but, more importantly, they sanction the engraving of negativity into self-consciousness. Accattone's death, therefore, retains a positive value in two ways: it signals the end of his suffering and,

on a deeper level, it claims that the struggle for emancipation must pass through a radical displacing of the self.

To develop this second perspective, I would argue that, despite the initial Dantean allusion to his ascension into heaven,¹⁵ Accattone dies like Hegel's Christ: behind his death there is no suprasensible bliss, no transcendental salvation, but rather the universalization of humanity through the sublation of negativity (see Hegel, 1977: 779–85). As Žižek (1993: 50) notes, the death of Christ reverses the logic at work in the Kantian Sublime, as what we get is divine essence shining through a 'wretched "little piece of real"', the 'counterpart [. . .] of pure spirituality'. What we should not underestimate is that, in Hegel, the death of Christ essentially designates the death of God as an abstract essence, pure externality. By accepting his own death, that is, Hegel's Christ rejects the transcendental wholeness of his divine father. Accattone's 'Christ-like' sacrifice is significant precisely because it fully endorses negativity as immanent substance, quite differently from the Christian dogma of transcendence and sublimation (see Pasolini, 1995: 252).

The very last shot is, in this respect, emblematic: Balilla's awkward failure to reproduce the sign of the cross must be read as a displaced Catholic cipher, indicating that the sacredness of the sub-proletariat must be located in immanence, not in transcendental reconciliation. Once again, what must be stressed is the politicization of such a reading of negativity. Accattone, a sub-proletarian, is the universal historical subject because he endorses antagonism as the constitutive and abyssal split that cuts across subjectivity as well as the social. Only in this sense can Pasolini see him as the saviour: his mere presence as universal antagonistic substance restores true dialectics against the positivity of the hegemonic order.

Conclusion

Having started by questioning the ideological nature of Pasolini's relationship to the sub-proletariat, we are now in the position to evaluate its political significance. Our Lacanian approach to Pasolini's attachment to the under-privileged social classes *qua* inherent point of exclusion of the capitalist universe has laid open the specific strategy that informs the author's leftist engagement. For him, identifying universality with the point of exclusion essentially implies the endorsement of the repressed kernel around which the socio-symbolic space is structured. It is this shocking, scandalous over-identification with the repressed 'other' of the symbolic universe that, in Žižek's words, exposes the ultimate failure of 'the ideological function of providing a neutral, all-encompassing space in which social antagonism is obliterated, in which all members of society can recognize themselves' (Žižek, 2000b: 113). In the context of 1960s Italy, Pasolini 'bets' on the sub-proletariat as he believes that the latter is the anthropological breaking-point (the symptom) that can cause the short-circuit of capitalist ideology. To Pasolini, it is worth betting on the sub-proletariat precisely because it has not yet been neutralized, or deterritorialized, within late capitalism's

all-encompassing movement, and can therefore, by its very 'indigestible' presence, restore a true notion of social antagonism. The emergence of social antagonism or, in more appropriately political terms, class struggle, is therefore strictly dependent on the resolution to identify universality with the social dimension that is radically excluded from the hegemonic field. This is precisely the position Pasolini defended throughout his life, for which he was invariably attacked by both the establishment and fellow leftist intellectuals. However, this is not yet Pasolini's conclusive stance.

With *Accattone*, Pasolini adds a fundamental turn to his main argument by shifting its focus from external reality to the question of subjectivity, the sphere of psychic life itself. Against vulgar materialism, as well as historical relativism, his film focuses on a subject that is not entirely determined by the objective, external circumstances of his existence. On the contrary, *Accattone* tells us that *the subject is already its own externality*, insofar as the (im)possibility of identity is guaranteed by the activation/repression of the hard kernel of impenetrable matter situated at the heart of any subjective configuration. The character of Accattone is therefore portrayed as the universal subject precisely because he fully assumes the radical split that cuts across the subjective field, the very antagonistic tension that allows him to break out of ideology. Accattone's 'sacredness' does not designate a condition of positive fullness outside the social contract, the ideal status of a modern-day *bon sauvage*, but, quite differently, the non-symbolizable fracture constitutive of both subjectivity and the socio-symbolic network (in Lacanian terms: of both the 'barred subject' and the 'big Other').

It is therefore clear that Pasolini's own identification with the sub-proletariat prefigures a subject position founded on the concrete possibility to reformulate radically the content of the subjective field. Ultimately, this is the idea of subjectivity promoted by Žižek in his interpretation of Hegel: not the Kantian subject blinded by a pre-given, external and non-conceptual substance, but the absolute subject who posits that obscure, traumatic substance as constitutive of its own self, and is ready to confront it so as to open up a radically new vision, in the awareness of the unresolved antagonism thus engendered.¹⁶ To Žižek, the political act proper always originates in the antagonistic abyss of the subject, the point where a contingent situation overlaps with the vertiginous openness of decision-making:

[. . .] an Act is always situated in a concrete context – this, however, does not mean that it is fully determined by its context. An Act always involves a radical risk, what Derrida, following Kierkegaard, called the *madness* of a decision: it is a step into the open, with no guarantees about the final outcome – why? Because an Act retroactively changes the very co-ordinates into which it intervenes. (Žižek, 2002b: 152)

My reading of Pasolini's *Accattone*, as well as of his defence of the sub-proletariat, suggests that it is precisely within the space of the (im)possible encounter with what throws the subject 'out of joint' that the true struggle

for historical change takes place. As is shown in my critical analysis, the author's identification with the excluded social class is fully reflected in Accattone's decentred subjectivity, in his drive towards the non-symbolizable other.

The notion of the traumatic encounter with the excluded other is a crucial one if we want to grasp the political underpinnings of Pasolini's cultural discourse, in as much as it tells us that his idea of culture would be utterly unthinkable without reference to class dialectics. One of Italy's most influential post-war intellectuals, Pasolini constantly strove, in true Gramscian fashion, to demonstrate how culture is always inextricably indebted to class politics. In this context, my references to Žižek and Agamben are motivated precisely by their desire for a radical re-politicization of contemporary cultural studies. In both Žižek and Agamben we have clear reminders that the task lying ahead of yesterday's 'intellectuals' and today's 'cultural critics' necessarily involves the re-appropriation of the utopian urge inherent in what Lacan called '*destitution subjective*' (see Lacan, 1966), substanceless subjectivity, a frame evacuated of all pathological contents. Assuming the impossible/repressed kernel of subjectivity, the dimension 'where you must be wretched and strong, brothers to the dogs', essentially implies the belief in the re-articulation of our socio-symbolic order from the point of view of the excluded subjects.

Notes

1. Pasolini used the expression in his essay 'Il metodo di lavoro' (see Pasolini, 1958) to define his attachment to the Roman sub-proletariat.
2. Žižek writes: 'The fear of "excessive" identification is therefore the fundamental feature of the late-capitalist ideology: the Enemy is the "fanatic" who "over-identifies" instead of maintaining a proper distance towards the dispersed pluralities of subject-positions' (Žižek, 1993: 216).
3. All translations from Pasolini are mine.
4. See Pasolini's defence of his use of the term 'irrationality' in Pasolini (1960) and Magrelli (1977: 80).
5. Furthermore, one finds in Pasolini certain recurrent, seemingly tautological definitions such as '*reality only speaks to itself*', or 'one cannot escape reality, because reality speaks to itself, and we are enclosed in its circle' (Pasolini, 1995: 238 and 246), which seem to match quite faithfully the Lacanian notion of the kernel of the Real as the non-discursive, unfathomable and antagonistic foundation of every process of symbolization/subjectivation.
6. With Pasolini's films and late 1960s essays in mind, it could be argued that cinema's political potential is to be found in its ability to evoke the traumatic presence of the Real, in the form of a symptomatic limit-image/concept entrusted with the power to disturb and debunk a given symbolic field. To give an example from a more contemporary source, we find a similar kind of limit-image, typically Pasolinian, in Nanni Moretti's *Aprile* (1996), when a decrepit and yet strangely appealing cargo-boat crammed with Albanian immigrants is shown as about to land on Italy's southern coast. The ambiguous, disturbing spectrality evoked by the arrival of the first boat of illegal immigrants from Eastern Europe (a phenomenon

that we now see on a daily basis in our TV bulletins) is Real insofar as it disturbs the narrative and forces us to question the symbolic consistency of our European identity, at a time when increasingly draconian measures are being taken to try and keep at bay the influx of extra-communitarian immigrants – while of course xenophobic reactions are on the rise.

7. Salvatore is the boss of the Neapolitan pimps. At the beginning of the film he arrives in Rome to vindicate his friend and colleague Ciccio, who has been turned in by the prostitute Maddalena, now under Accattone's protection. Maddalena is indeed mercilessly beaten up. The contrast between the Neapolitan pimps' overpowering ego and Accattone's despair is most evident in the taverna scene, where eventually Accattone collapses in a drunken delirium.

8.

Thinking is no mere subjective activity but, as philosophy at its height recognized, essentially the dialectical process between subject and object in which both poles first mutually determine each other. [...] The moment called cathexis in psychology, thought's affective investment in the object, is not extrinsic to thought, not merely psychological, but rather the condition of its truth. Where cathexis atrophies, intelligence becomes stultified. [...] Opinion sees logical consistency as a merit, whereas in many ways such consistency is the lack of what Hegel called 'freedom toward the object', that is, the freedom of thought to lose and transform itself in its encounter with the subject matter. (Adorno, 1999: 109–10)

9. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno (1984: 80) uses the term 'mimesis' to specify further the significance of this act of over-identification, 'the nonconceptual affinity of a subjective creation with its objective and unposited other'.

10. It should be noted, here, that the metaphor of 'life as ingestion-assimilation' is a recurrent one in Pasolini, reinforcing his understanding of reality as an endless process of change rather than as a static structure. A similar situation occurs in *La ricotta* (1963), Pasolini's third film, where the sub-proletarian Stracci dies of indigestion on the cross. Metaphorical treatments of the act of eating are also central in films like *Il vangelo secondo Matteo* (1964), *Uccellacci e uccellini* (1966), *Porcile* (1969) and *Salò* (1975). The Pasolinian metaphor of life as a process of endless ingestion–assimilation–renewal is suggestively summarized in a 1960 autobiographical observation:

I love life with such violence and such intensity that no good can come of it. I am speaking of the physical side of life: the sun, the grass, youth. It is an addiction more terrible than cocaine. It does not cost anything and it is available in boundless quantity. I devour it ravenously. . . How it will end, I don't know. (in Accrocca, 1960: 205)

As for Pasolini's relationship to structuralism, see the following declaration: 'I disagree with the French structuralists however much I admire someone like Lévi-Strauss. And in fact the conclusion of my article was to abandon the word "structure" completely and use the word "process" instead, which implies the word "value"' (in Stack, 1970: 152).

11. See for example Žižek's reading of Hegel's famous discussion of the

revolutionary Terror in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as well as of his interpretation of Christ's emergence as a *skandalon* that asserts negativity rather than peace and harmony (Žižek, 2000a: 90–8). Žižek's argument that Hegel achieved maturity 'when he became fully aware that the only path to true concrete totality is that in every direct choice between abstract negativity and a concrete whole, the subject has to choose abstract negativity', seems to tie in well with Pasolini's endorsement of agonistic negativity not only in *Accattone*, but also in the famous cinematic representation of an 'angry' Christ (*The Gospel According to Matthew*) and in his recurrent use of concepts such as 'myth' and 'barbarism' (see Gerard, 1981).

12. This is also what Žižek (1992: 11–53) identifies as the secret mechanism orchestrating the relationship between the modern subject and the commodity.

13. The dynamics of absolute and decentred vision in *Accattone* are acutely investigated by Maurizio Viano (1993: 76–8).

14. See Chapter 4 of Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, entitled 'You Only Die Twice' (Žižek, 1992: 131–49). Here, Žižek elaborates on Hegel's theory of repetition in history to examine the connection between the death-drive and the symbolic order.

15. I refer here to the Dantean quotation that prefaces the film: 'The angel of the Lord took me and Satan / cried out: why do you rob me? You take / for yourself the eternal part of him for / one little tear which takes him from me.'

16. As we have seen, the question of responsibility, however latent, is crucial to the development of Accattone's consciousness, as his love for Stella redeems her from prostitution, from the status of a commodity.

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