

Pasolini's Words and Action:  
How Pier Paolo Pasolini extended the work of the Vienna Actionists

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To cut a cloth from the coats of fascists six feet deep and hand it to the delinquent artists following in their gosesteps is to plea for a countercultural revolution of shock, though perhaps those very artists prefer nakedness to the cloth. Pier Paolo Pasolini is a writer and a director whose oeuvre is as vulgar and sexualized as it is beautiful and poignant, dealing with subjects deemed controversial in his native Italy. Stripped of its elegance, Pasolini's later work resembles that of the Vienna Actionists who, in Otto Muehl's company, disgruntled the sensible masses of Austria within their controversial films, deviant lives and a prominent public display of indecency. Beyond the latter, because his art would carry a boyish aptitude for exquisite, as opposed to the Actionist's rotten attitude towards their bodies, Pasolini and Muehl were kindred spirits in delivering provocative yet ultimately human works of art to the masses, with Pasolini picking up from where Muehl left off as soon as the Actionists disbanded. Upon understanding how Pasolini and Muehl's Actionists were pushing the same agenda to the same envelope by virtue of their political motives, their sexual indecency and their aim to disrupt social order, one will grasp the affinity between post-World War II extremist movements as being intent on inciting the same social reform as one another. Pasolini's "expressiveness was constituted by artistic analogies of realities he felt reason had lost" (Rohdie 53), thereby enabling him, in his surrealism, to embrace his neorealist forbearers with the employment of his lovers and non-actors in roles as explicitly explorative of nudity as the Actionists were keen on. Whilst Alfred Hitchcock believed "actors were cattle" (Lyons 7), Pasolini and Muehl explored the vast possibilities in actors as moving sculptures of intelligence and emotion, who could bear "so much fury in [their] soul / against a love that was so chaste" (Pasolini 1973).

The paradox of Pasolini as a rebellious authoritarian, in contrast to the fascist libertarianism of Muehl, meant their work was more penetrative of sympathetic politically, in spite of their oft vulgarity, than their contemporaries, and thus were kindred in their political agendas pushed within their generally extremist art. “He sought the Authority feared by his mother / not the Authority exerted by his father – a fascist” (Greene 5) spoke Pasolini in third-person reference to himself, even declaring “I followed the only two paths that could take me to anti-fascism: that of hermeticism... and decadentism” (Greene 10). Pasolini was a secular communist who sought authority to follow, as evidenced by his sympathy toward law enforcement officials, and consistently addressed the preservation of Italy’s numerous dialects in his work. Muehl was a fascist who founded the Friedrichstof Commune, an authoritarian sect in which Muehl’s widespread sexual abuse of minors took place, for which he was sentenced to seven years in prison. Pasolini’s magnum opus, *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975), depicts a libertine authority extending Mussolini’s fascism in a commune where teenagers that they have kidnapped were subjected to four months of violence, sadism and sexual, as well as psychological, torture. *Salò* essentially commits the barbarity of Muehl’s Friedrichstof Commune to the screen whilst correlating it with Mussolini’s fascism. As a compassionate man of letters, Pasolini was able to adapt Biblical scripture for *The Gospel According to Matthew*, citing his approach as “rhetorical [...] I threw over all my technical preconceptions [...] [because] I, a non-believer, was telling the story through the eyes of a believer” (746). Pasolini’s sense of sacredness allowed him to instill character of Jesus Christ within the movie to exist as one of substantive psychological torment because of Pasolini’s disconnection with the Church and genuine approach to the source

material. He retrospectively spoke of the film as “a reaction against the conformity of Marxism. The mystery of life and death and of suffering — and particularly of religion ... is something that Marxists do not want to consider. But these are and have always been questions of great importance for human beings” (Wakeman 747). The Vienna Actionists were similarly not intent on blasphemy in spite of being blasphemous, and with their art unblemished by slights at religion, their extremist acts against their bodies remained ideologically pointed. Pasolini and Muehl’s frustration was with the social conservatism of Italy and Austria respectively; both nations were timid, existing in fugue of their fascist pasts. Pasolini, an unabashed homosexual and proud communist, was intent on freeing social order from its correctness, which he viewed as fascist in and of itself, as did the Vienna Actionists, but Muehl remained a fascist at heart, proudly so before and after his tenure with the Actionists.

“To portray the actionists simply as (auto-) therapists would be to miss the point entirely... they had too much destructive glee, too much verve and downright humor [...] to be passed off as mere social workers” (Grossman 179) wrote Malcolm Green of the Actionists. Although Pasolini and Muehl were respectively enamored with psychoanalysis, the former “[a]n avid reader of Freud” (Greene 4) and the latter “cannot approach Reich with humor” (Grossman 199), their film work was never an attempt at psychologically or sexually deconstructing their subjects; it was a case of presenting human beings in all their nakedness and how they fit into a society to audiences much like them. Pasolini confessed “[u]ntil the time I was thirty I longed for my childhood and I narcissistically relived it... Because it was the most heroic period of my life” (Greene 4), which would explain his fixation on sexuality innocence and awakening in his film,

*Arabian Nights* (1974). Involving a slave girl who seduces a young man, played by Franco Merli, who Pasolini discovered at age 16 and noted him as “a boy from Corleone who has the innocence of his sixteen years in the physique of an eighteen-year-old” (Schwartz 603), and chooses him as her master, *Arabian Nights* explores the sexuality of youth in the same vein much of Pasolini’s later films do. The film’s most iconic scene involves Pasolini’s lover at the time, Franco Merli, shooting an arrow tipped with a golden phallus into his love interest’s vagina as they part. This wholly original slapstick approach to sexuality within cinema defines much of both Pasolini and Muehl’s oeuvre, perhaps a condition of their sexual penchant for youth. “Sexuality is an exceedingly positive energy. It brings us together. It is no original sin, nor does it soil; one should not damn it as the church does” (195) said Muehl in regards to the sexual education taught to children within his commune. In spite of Muehl’s heinous boasts that a “great many women were fixated on [him] and wanted to have children with [him] [...] [as he] fell in love with a 14-year-old”, he genuinely thought “adolescents still need to experience infatuation to overcome their fears of sexuality” (198). As if he were referring to Pasolini himself, Muehl confided that although he “had at first avoided homosexuality [...] [Muehl has] homosexual friends with whom [he can] get along very well. The artist has a large feminine component” (Grossman 199). With an oeuvre consisting of films as profane as *On Sensibility* (1970), which involves a nude woman humping a duck, one can deduce that Muehl and the Actionists achieved a level of pure extremist creativity bested only by Pasolini’s films in its surreal provocativeness. “I almost regret that you’re not a psychoanalyst,” (Greene 4) quipped Pasolini, as though he sought the attention Muehl could provide, which alongside Pasolini’s propensity to play subject to authority, Muehl

and Pasolini are the id and the superego, the brutish and the elegant forever drawn to one another.

Pasolini was a man of words whilst Muehl was a man of action. In dismantling social order, both Pasolini and the Actionists brutally disparaged the norms of their day. Günter Brus, who shot many of the Vienna Actionists' films, was sentenced to six months in prison after masturbating in public while smearing his body with his own feces and singing the Austrian national anthem. A member of the autonomist *Lotta continua* movement, Pasolini was a relatively privileged member of society and in spite of the numerous lawsuits filed against him, notably for his participation in communist protests, homosexual liaisons with minors and obscenity with his written work such as his novel, *Ragazzi di Vita* (1955), he remained in good standing with the law throughout his life. Pasolini became truly notorious shortly after his assassination at the hands of 17-year-old hustler, Pino Pelosi, who, after they sat together for lunch, clubbed Pasolini to death and ran him over with his own car after Pasolini "threatened to shove a wooden stick up his rectum" (Gumbel 1995) though, because of the brutality of the violence inflicted to Pasolini, this was thought to be a politically motivated assassination. In 1975, only *Salò* was more grotesque than Pasolini's corpse in how it bestowed the public with an understanding of the monstrous power their authority holds. *Salò*, even more than Brus' public and cinematic work or his film, *Mamma Roma* (1962), which deals with an ex-prostitute's son turning to petty and being imprisoned after discovering his mother's past, reveal how men and women react to the sting of reality's oppressive truths cutting through them. Unlike Brus' display of overt physical reaction to his country's oppressiveness weighing down on him, Pasolini's *Salò* ends with a shot of two young

male soldiers, who bore witness to the atrocious sexual and psychological torment committed by the fascist authority of the commune against the captive teenagers, dancing a gentle waltz together. If Pelosi's account of Pasolini's murder at his hands holds true, Pasolini was unaware that *Salò* would be his final opus. However, Pasolini could not have mustered a better reflection on the resentful attitudes he held towards fascism, which he despised in his father growing up, and the wretched authority, which would molest and rape youth they enslaved for their own selfish pleasure, than what he created with *Salò*'s ending, because in spite of the ugliness Pasolini and the soldiers see in their life, the tender embrace two souls can share in genuine love undoes the tumult behind their backs.

Once one has understood the correlation between the works of Pasolini and the Vienna Actionists through their shared determination in communicating their respective politics into reality, the sexual openness and extremism which permeates through their art and the public havoc their controversial words, images and lives have wreaked, the post-war political progression to a liberalized social order can be plainly understood through their artwork alone. Political ideologies can be compartmentalized into two slots: authoritarianism and libertarianism. Muehl sought to operate and dominate within his own created order by the former while Pasolini was positively a libertarian with loose ends who felt equal to the rest of Italy's proletariat class. Muehl "publicly apologized in 2010 for his actions" as founder of the Friedrichshof Commune and in 2002, Muehl asserted, "I enjoy confounding people [...] that is my big idea. I have nothing more" (Fox 2013). Unlike Muehl, who sought to dominate and upset the status quo alongside the Vienna Actionists, Pasolini was selfish. Pasolini wanted nothing more than to

understand himself and as he uncovered the darkness that shrouded his innocent heart, he wiped the muck that clouded the prudish perception of his time so that we may be made warm by his compassion.

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