

## FILM REVIEW

### Children of the Night: Abel Ferrara's *Pasolini*



Still from *Pasolini*, directed by Abel Ferrara (2014, 2019, 84m)

The image that circulated with the initial release of Abel Ferrara's *Pasolini* in 2014 ignited in me a deep cinephilic fascination. In the image (above), Willem Dafoe as Pasolini leans against a silver Alfa Romeo 2000GT, possibly cruising for sex. This car was an essential aspect of a successful night of gay sex for Pier Paolo Pasolini in the mid-seventies. When asked why a Marxist would own such a car, Pasolini stated that it was a good way to pick-up the young men he cruised in the Roman quartiere around Stazione Termini. They simply liked his car. Pasolini was known among that crowd as “il vecchio frocio” (the old faggot) who often came around looking for sex. The Dafoe image continues to impress me in its raw intensity and because it opens up a liminal zone between two very distinct visions of the night: the Roman nights of Pier Paolo Pasolini and the Italian-American grind/arthouse nights of Abel Ferrara's New York City. Today, Ferrara is no longer working from the iconic NYC of his early films. He lives and works in Rome, and *Pasolini* is about this experience of transplantation.

What makes the film *Pasolini* so fascinating, and so misunderstood, is its profound liminality. *Pasolini* is not as a standard biopic: it straddles both the

internal life of an artist during the last day of his life and Ferrara's own vision as a filmmaker. Ferrara, like Pasolini, has been interested in the children of the night from the beginning of his career. Martin Scorsese's neo-noir/western of New York nights in *Taxi Driver* (1976), with its darkly psychotic character Travis Bickle (Robert DeNiro), had a profound impact on Ferrara's career and vision. In his second film, *Driller Killer* (1979), Ferrara himself (credited under his porn pseudonym of Jimmy Laine from his first feature released in the summer of 1976) plays creature of the night Reno Miller, a struggling artist in New York's Greenwich Village who goes crazy and begins to kill people with a power drill to boost his creativity. To quote a famous cinematic vampire: "Children of the night, what music they make!"

Ferrara is in the midst of his own prolific creative phase. His scathing depiction of former International Monetary Fund head Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who was charged for sexual assault in 2011, in *Welcome to New York*, premiered at Cannes on 17 May, the same year *Pasolini* premiered in Venice on 4 September 4. With performances by Gérard Dépardieu and Dafoe that recall the stark portrayals by Christopher Walken in *King of New York* (1990) and Harvey Keitel in *Bad Lieutenant* (1992), the 2014 films are quintessential Ferrara, circulating as they do around the intensity of a major actor. But they are also present the viewer with disturbingly unflinching themes of the night so important to Ferrara's work.

*Pasolini* begins with the titular filmmaker finishing the French dub of his final film in Paris, based on the work of another artist of the night, the Marquis de Sade. (The French version of *Salò, or 120 Days of Sodom* is the only version actually finished by Pasolini. The Italian version was finished by Laura Betti after Pasolini's death.) A French reporter asks Pasolini in French if sex is political, and Dafoe's Pasolini responds in English: "Of course. There's nothing is that isn't political," and finishes the interview in Dafoe's broken French. Contextually, this movement between languages speaks to the history of financing from multiple national sources in Italian cinema of the period, resulting in the characteristic dominance of dubbing. Pasolini believed that dubbing another actor's voice added a third dimension to a performances that ran in excess of realism, a practice that derived from his interest in Italian art forms such as mannerism. In one such characteristic move, Pasolini (in)famously dubbed his Jesus, played by Enrique Irazoqui, in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), with a famous actor, Enrico Maria Salerno, whom Italians know as the voice of Clint Eastwood in the Italian versions of Sergio Leone's "Dollars Trilogy."

In *Pasolini*, Willem Dafoe also speaks Italian in the film with a pronounced accent, and there is no attempt to hide this, as it speaks to Ferrara's present reality living in Rome. Dafoe, too, is living in Rome with his partner, filmmaker Giada Colagrande (*Padre*, 2016), who plays Pasolini's assistant Graziella in the film. I can relate to this position with language as the son of Southern Italian immigrants who, like Ferrara (and Scorsese, too) speaks and understands Italian, but has not mastered the language. This lingual liminality is a key aspect of a general in-betweenness that permeates this film about the experience of the migrant who has returned to the mother country. Thematically, it speaks to Pasolini's own aesthetic mixing of realism and mannerism, both visually and musically. In his first film *Accattone* (1961), for example, Pasolini almost reverentially depicts the life of a street pimp to the strains of J. S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, a major departure from the stark tenets of observing reality that Neorealism made famous in post-World War II Italy.

Ferrara's *Pasolini* inhabits the aesthetic vicissitudes of Pasolini's creative work as the film moves in and out of scenes from both Pasolini's unfinished novel, *Petrolio*, and the new script he was working on at the time of his death, *Porno-Teo-Kolossal*. To evoke the latter project, Ferrara hired Ninetto Davoli, a Calabrese youth whom Pasolini met hanging around the set of "La ricotta" in the portmanteau film *Ro.Go.Pa.G* in 1963. Davoli, who was married and had a child at time, became Pasolini's lover and favourite actor, and "La ricotta" landed Pasolini in court for blasphemy against the religion of the state—one of approximately 33 court cases that would plague Pasolini's life as a transgressive artist. In Ferrara's film, Davoli plays Epifanio, who follows a star, like the Magi in the tale of Jesus, that lands him in a feast where gays and lesbians have sex with each other in ritual orgiastic style worthy of the sublime excesses of the Biblical Sodom and Gomorrah. Ferrara's scene is reminiscent of Pasolini's Boschian grotesqueries in *The Canterbury Tales* (1972), which also landed him in court for blasphemy against religion. But rather than Pasolini's mannerist style, Ferrara unleashes in this scene the more excessive style that characterizes the vampiric debauches during the post-PhD eating frenzy of his 1995 film, *The Addiction*.

Davoli's Epifanio in *Pasolini* speaks the Roman dialect of the working classes that fascinated Pasolini and made him famous prior to his filmmaking with his first novel, *Ragazzi di vita* (1955). With *Accattone* (1961) the director brought this violent world of thieves and hustlers to the big screen using mostly non-professional actors, a practice he would continue throughout his career. For the scene leading up to Pasolini's murder, Ferrara chooses

Riccardo Scamarcio to play Ninetto Davoli. In this scene, Ferrara cuts to the night of November 1, 1975, where Pasolini asks Davoli to be in *Porno-Teo-Kolossal*, the film Ferrara has just re-imagined for the spectator. Pasolini is enjoying his last meal at his favourite restaurant Al Pomodoro (which still exists, and by my accounts still serves one of the best carbonaras in the city), in the San Lorenzo district of Rome, where tourists do not visit.

And, as Pasolini did with Davoli, Ferrara finds a non-professional to play Pasolini's murderer, Pino Pelosi (Damiano Tamilia), who was the only person convicted for Pasolini's murder. The murder in *Pasolini* plays out like an early Pasolini film, such as the beating up of Ettore Garofolo in *Mama Roma*, another non-professional that Pasolini paired up with Anna Magnani in 1962. Following the thesis that Pasolini's murder was planned and executed by the Italian right, Ferrara's film features three men who show-up on the beach of Ostia, and pulverize Pasolini with a two-by-four, holding him and kicking him in the groin, shouting: *frocio!* Like a character from Pasolini's own fictional world, Pasolini's Alpha Romeo is driven over his prostrate body, leaving him for dead.

In keeping with film's aesthetic liminality, Ferrara then cuts to Epifanio, played by Ninetto Davoli, who is still looking for his guiding star. There is a quick cut to the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana in Rome, the symbol of Italian fascism par excellence, and a cut to Pasolini's home as Laura Betti (Maria de Medeiros) announces the news to Susanna (Adriana Asti), his mother. Susanna breaks down in an operatic performance worthy of the person heard on the soundtrack in this moment, Maria Callas, who also played the lead in Pasolini's *Medea* (1969). Ferrara holds nothing back in this shattering and devastating ending of Pier Paolo Pasolini, an artist who can be said to have "lived the night," in-between his art and life. In an act of both homage and empathy, and working through his own transplantation from the nights of New York City to the ones of Rome, Ferrara conjures an unconventional biographical film that evokes Pasolini's liminal style and existence.

— Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare

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**Abel Ferrara**, born in the Bronx, began making exploitation films in the streets of New York City, which made him a cult director. Apart from the films mentioned in the review, Ferrara made, *Ms .45* (1981), *Fear City* (1984), *China Girl* (1987), *Cat Chaser* (1989), *Body Snatchers* (1993), *Dangerous Game* (1993), *The Funeral* (1996), *The Blackout* (1997), *New Rose*

*Hotel* (1998), *R Xmas* (2001), *Mary* (2005), *Go Go Tales* (2007), *Chelsea on the Rocks* (2008). *Napoli, Napoli, Napoli* (2009), *4:44 Last Day on Earth* (2011), and *Tommaso* (2019), among others.

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