

**A Further Explanation of My Last Error**  
**By Pier Paolo Pasolini**

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**I: My Genealogy**

On June 15, 1975, I wrote a short article repudiating my *Trilogy of Life*. As in a movie by Godard, the world and I had reached our limits together. During my life, I had been forced to renounce my actions more than once, by both the communist party and the capitalist state, but in this article I did it freely, though I did so with the irony required by such an occasion. The *Trilogy* should be understood as a genealogy of potential pre-capitalist sexualities, denaturalizing the erotic practices of the early 1970s in order to open the life-worlds of my audiences. In the *Trilogy* I tried to expose the lines of historical force that alter sexual imagination over time, depicting potential sexualities as differential shifts. I wanted to transvalue sexualities, as if I were as Nietzschean as Michel Foucault. Using the movements of bodies and props, I traced the modes of economic circulation that produced each of my source texts, linking erotic situations to forces of production. I historicized sexualities in order to create a virtual rupture in the lived experience of my audience, opening them to the potential for new practices, for example when I presented myself as a slave, a young girl, at auction. I picked a young boy to buy me. I gave him my money. I told him to get us shelter. We fucked there. He didn't know how to fuck. He was so very young he did not know how to fuck. Soon he figured it out. No: I showed him. I was a great artist. I told my new boyfriend to sell my art but not to a white man, because the white man will separate us. My intervention in the life-world of my audience depended on an accurate analysis of that world, but it was changing more rapidly than I could grasp when I began. Nevertheless, I had found a way to speak as a poet of what I hadn't experienced.

**II: The Catastrophe**

In 1973 the capitalist economy had reached its peak and its growth rate began to decline. The economic crisis had particularly strong effects on an already precarious Italy, bringing the country close to sovereign default. In the previous decade a dramatic increase in world trade had just the effect it was supposed to: in classical fashion, it helped make possible the accelerated economic expansion of advanced capitalist economies by means of the growth of the international division of labor. Due to such precipitous growth in world trade, without warning new producers began to supply radically increased fractions of the world market, supplanting long-ensconced incumbents. Producers from earlier-developing and later-developing blocks ultimately entered into intensified international competition, which, by bringing about stepped-up downward pressure on prices, made it impossible for large swathes of already existing fixed capitals to valorize themselves. The ensuing over-capacity made for sharply falling profitability system-wide; the collapse was focused in the international manufacturing sector and engulfed the private Italian economy. The outcome was, in a breathtakingly short time, to propel the world economy from long boom to long downturn. The onset of the secular downturn changed our lives. Increased competition among capitalists for limited resources intensified both the brutalization of Italian labor and the commodification of proletarian and subproletarian bodies. Suddenly, we all saw ourselves when we looked at the whores and pimps of the borgata. In every phase of development, capitalism lacerates and sells bodies, but the conditions emerging in the early

70s foreclosed any other possibility. It was no longer a matter of rising social antagonism, but of society as pure conflict. An avalanche of crimes submerged the country, and there was no longer a break between those who were technically criminal and those who were not. Curfews rendered the night deserted and sinister as it was in the darkest previous centuries. Television and compulsory education degraded all the youths and boys into becoming fussy, second-class petit bourgeois. Sexual liberation came to mean the right to turn oneself into a sexual commodity and, rather than bringing lightness and happiness to the youth and boys, made them unhappy, closed, and consequently stupid.

### **III: Fading Aesthetics**

My theoretical writings from 1970 to 1973 employ the rhetoric of “art,” yet even in this period the opposition between art and its outside, which I call “life,” began to fall apart. Like Rimbaud, I already knew that one can also write or read poetry merely by living. The *Trilogy* itself escapes the closure separating art from life. I emphasized this at the end of each film. *The Decameron* ends with Giotto’s best student, a role played by me, as he walks away from a fresco he has just completed and goes out into the world. *The Canterbury Tales* ends with Chaucer, also played by me, bringing his narration to a close and joining peasants in their revelry. *The Arabian Nights* ends with a dreamer awakening. Each film ends with a figure of a creator passing from an artwork into life. In the *Trilogy*, art historical citations from the eras in which the films are set function as traces of material culture, not as actively aesthetic works. The citations comprise historical series rather than a group of sealed, completed individual projects. In the *Trilogy*, I rewrote aesthetics in the past tense, as it were. Obviously, the films do not throw attention and pleasure in sensation onto history’s landfill—the traces of material culture that refer to economies which produce sexualities and subjectivities solicit affects sharable by my spectators, yet those affects cannot be separated from historical potentials. The *Trilogy’s* genealogical work depends on its violation of aesthetic closure. If I persisted in writing the word “art” in the early 70s, it is because I had not yet seen the concept trampled by the catastrophe; the word does not appear in the *Repudiation*.

### **IV: The Time of Semiotics**

Prior to the catastrophe, I published film theory articles that conceived of lived reality in terms of Umberto Eco’s Code of Codes, capable of revealing the rhythms and cadences of all human behavior. At that time life still seemed to me capable of rhythms and cadences; lived experience seemed differentiated enough for me to describe it musically. I had at the time a garden in EUR with a small oak tree: it was part of reality that spoke; it encoded. Our relationship was direct. I could speak to another of this oak and thus employ the written-spoken medium. In a general semiology of reality languages would occupy the place of one of reality’s many elements, yet humans have always dissociated written-spoken languages from reality. The oak in my garden was not a signified, but another sign. I thought that written-spoken languages translate the language of reality by evocation; audio-visual languages (cinema) translate by reproduction. The language of reality is as polyvalent as any other, in part because of the idiosyncrasies and mental blocks of the decoder. A boy might seem attractive to me but not to another for whatever reason. The boy or the oak move in time, even if they are still, their presence in front of me or another is a duration. Our decodings are successions which follow the happening of things such as the “stroke” of the telluric existence of a stone or of an inextricably complex political event such as 9/11. In order to translate the sign and its duration into the language of a film, I must create a virtual subjectivity specified by the other signs in the film. It is this virtual subjectivity that allows

the free indirect of which I wrote in the 1960s and which made me think that I could produce potential non-capitalist subjectivities through pre-textual free indirect images built from the traces of material culture in different historical periods and other places.

### **V: The Death Of Semiotics**

Despite my arguments for a secularized book of life, in order to translate reality into a film, like any author, I had to exercise freedom, which I could only define as an autolesionistic assault on self-preservation. True creation can only emerge from dialectical class conflict within which an author must take on external violence as violence he perpetrates against himself. From the very beginning, I exposed myself to the danger that would become universal at the end. I knew that an author can only be a foreigner in hostile land and the feeling he excites is a more or less strong feeling of racial hatred. Only whoever believes in nothing (even if he is under the illusion that he believes in something) can love life (the only real love, I say, which can only be completely disinterested); it is therefore obvious that an author loves life. But this love has only a few common and recognizable traits—common and recognizable traits explained by the fact that he was at that time a petit bourgeois among petit bourgeois, and often he, too, has the petit bourgeois illusion of the reality of the world and history, and therefore duties to obey out of loyalty. I wanted potential sexualities in the *Trilogy* to undermine that loyalty. But whether he knows it or not, in reality he does not believe in anything; that is, he believes in the contrary of life, and it is this faith that he expresses by lacerating himself with the wounds of his testimony. And the disinterested love for life which he derives from this total pessimism of his (however masked at times by petit bourgeois idealism) can only have obscure and unrecognizable traits that spread around him a condition of uneasiness and panic, which can be overcome only because in the end all men are potential authors, endowed, that is, with an unknown and un-confessed instinct for death—by definition, an instinct for anti-self-preservation. In the early 1970s I figured filmmaking, authorship, as catastrophic. I thought of it as an act through which something unknown is chosen in the place of something quotidian and known (life).

### **VI: The Cinema Of Poetry**

By the early 1970s these reflections and my travels, particularly to the United States, had taught me carefully to distinguish my Cinema of Poetry from what others called the Art Cinema and from the Underground Cinema. The cinema of poetry, the films of Godard, Straub, Rocha and my own among others was meta-linguistic, and we all sought to negate cinema as language system with our concrete creations. We were all filmmakers of extremist scandal. Our defeatist vitality could not be separated from our didactic self-exclusion. Our attempts to destroy cinema in favor of films that live in the world caused us to ban ourselves from the protection of the institution, a ban that constituted the law of cinema by betraying the limits of its code—a ban in the sense later to be developed by Giorgio Agamben, who played Philip the Apostle in my *Gospel According to Matthew*. Very quickly and clearly, Agamben understood that our exile enacted the basic operation of legal Power and of all codes. He knew that whatever criterion the critical judgment employs to measure the reality of the work of art will only have laid out, in place of a living body, an interminable skeleton of dead elements. We did not want to be artists in that sense. We wanted our films to intervene in the life-world through pedagogy, through a theatrical and monstrous refusal of editing, or pro-filmic provocation. Our problem was how to be an extremist without being a fanatic or a terrorist. The terroristic destruction of the code towards which we tended led on the one hand to a nostalgia for the code manifest as a reification of Art Cinema as in Fellini,

Visconti and the supposedly new American cinema. On the other hand, it encouraged underground filmmakers to abandon the code totally so that they crowded together into a concentration camp which they then, as happens, transformed automatically into a ghetto. Where everything is transgression, there is no more danger. Neither Art nor Underground cinema had the capacity to intervene. Power, any power, is evil, whether it preserves institutions or whether it founds new ones. If a power which is “less worse” than others is conceivable, this could only be a Power that, in preserving or reconstituting the norm also took into account the appearances or reappearances of reality. Perhaps even such a power cannot intervene in the life-world. Our failure was the failure to consider that possibility.

### **VII: Yesterday**

By the time I had finished the *Trilogy of Life*, the economic crisis in Italy had made it impossible to recognize social differentiation with anything but hatred. The bodies of Italian youths and boys had provided the raw material for my genealogy. I had only been able to invent potential non-capitalist sexualities by freely setting their bodies and sexual organs in another time and space within which they became different sexes and semantemes than they were in the setting where I found them. My ability to reinterpret them and to offer this interpretation to my audience was not only the result of an ineluctable code, but also a result of the “freedom of my message.” After the secular downturn, my freedom as an interpreter was mutilated; like everyone else’s, my inhibitions became stronger than my capacity for judgment. Any creation, aesthetic or genealogical, made of these bodies became an error—a wrong. Previously, the degenerating present had been compensated for by the objective survival of the past and, therefore, by the possibility of evoking it. But after the downturn, the degeneration of the bodies and of the sexual organs assumed a retroactive value. If those who had been *then* thus and so had been able to become *now* thus and so, it meant that they were potentially such already then. They could not furnish the material for genealogies of potential sexualities because the present reduced their virtuality from polysemic potential to its own mere possibility. If the youths and boys of the Roman subproletariat were now human garbage, it means that they were possibly such also then. The collapse of the present implies the collapse of the past. Commodification in the present had transformed the youths and boys of my films: they had become imbeciles compelled to be adorable, squalid criminals cast as likable rascals, vile good-for-nothings compelled to be saintly innocents. Like everyone else, I collapsed with my films and could no longer recognize the extreme characteristics of psychological diversity of anyone whose life experiences differed from mine. I could only try to make them mine by seeking substantial analogies—almost as if experiences other than this weren’t conceivable. I had begun to belong to my class deterministically; there was no discontinuity between me and a police chief or an executioner in a concentration camp. The reflection of the economic catastrophe within me had made the true free indirect, on which my genealogical films depended, impossible. There was a desire to kill in Italy after the downturn. And this desire tied us together as sinister brothers of the sinister failure of an entire social system. I felt I had become, along with the educational system, television, and the pacifying newspapers, a gatekeeper of this horrendous order founded on the concept of possession and the idea of destruction. I seemed to be happy when you could tag a murder with its own beautiful descriptions. Since we couldn’t prevent certain things from happening, we found peace in constructing shelves on which to keep them. And so I adapted to the degradation and accepted the unacceptable. I maneuvered to rearrange and then end my life. I forgot how things were before the collapse. The beloved faces of the time before yellowed. Before me—little by little without further

alternatives—loomed the futureless present, as it still does before you. I readjusted my commitment to future legibility and made *Salò*. In *Salò* human male sexual desires, especially homosexual and sadomasochistic desires, are raised both within the film and in the film's audience at the same time as I show the close connections between these desires and fascism. Because the state had become fascistic, sexual desire had become totally rationalized and totally separated from caring. This is great for a pornographer to say. Meanwhile, genealogy continues to be genealogy of the present.

### **VIII: Today**

Today, in your present, when I am happy no longer to be able to act, when the death of cinema not only as code but as institution has come and gone, you can no longer dream of a cinema of poetry capable of intervening in your life-world. A certain coincidence between living and struggling provides your only dream, a coincidence that is never given without simultaneously requiring its construction. Because each time one of these terms ends up separated, however it happens, from the other, your efforts degrade and derail. If the moment of living becomes unilateral, it becomes the ghetto. The grim quagmires of the "Alternative," whose specific task is to market the Same in the guise of difference, prove this. Most occupied social centers in Italy clearly show how simulated exteriority provides a precious tool in capitalist valorization. If the moment of struggle is hypostatized we degenerate into an *army*. All militant communities, all terrible communities have survived their own extinction in this petrified form. You have no hope except in movement, in movement, even hindered, even imperceptible, in movement following its propensity for increased power. For movement ensures that the power struggles diverting it never settle into power relations.

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