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| Pasolini, Pier Paolo (1922-1975) |
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| Known mainly as a provocative filmmaker in North America, Pier Paolo Pasolini (March 6, 1922- November 2, 1975) is also celebrated in his native Italy as a significant poet, novelist, essayist and public intellectual. Pasolini left a rich body of work that has grown in stature since his ignoble death at the hands of a hustler in 1975. Born in Bologna to lower-middle class parents—career military officer, elementary school teacher—Pasolini’s biography is replete with scandal (charges of “obscene acts”, all-but-open homosexuality) and accomplishment (innumerable awards, including one from the Vatican itself). Noted early in his career for his poetry in dialect rather than standard Italian, Pasolini’s writing, or, really, his “discursive production,” is often more important for how things are said than for what is said. Particularly valuable is his theory of a “cinema of poetry,” developed both on paper and celluloid: cinema that stresses the “felt presence” of the director (for instance with hand-held camera work or clearly personal choices in framing). |
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Particularly valuable is his theory of a “cinema of poetry,” developed both on paper and celluloid: cinema that stresses the “felt presence” of the director (for instance with hand-held camera work or clearly personal choices in framing).  Pasolini entered the film business as screenwriter, and after successfully collaborating on a number of popular films, he began his career as a director with the brutal account of a violent street pimp, Accattone (1961)—the first of many Pasolini motion pictures to incur the wrath of censors. Accattone is shocking for its violent content and for the way it recasts Italian neo-realism in decidedly unsentimental terms. It inaugurated a career in which filmmaking served to articulate cultural criticism and to reflect on the medium of the cinema. Pasolini’s second film, Mamma Roma (1962), like Accattone, is both an example of neo-realism (revisited) and a sustained, theoretically rich investigation of it. As scholars have pointed out, the attempt to reconceptualize the meaning and importance of realism, and, by extension, of reality itself (seen in linguistic terms), is a core concern in Pasolini’s work.  Il Vangelo second Matteo (1964) (The Gospel According to Matthew) is both an adaptation of scripture and a manifesto on representations of Christian doctrine by example. As the holder of passionate Marxist beliefs, Pasolini crafted The Gospel According to Matthew to assert the radicalism of Christ’s teachings. He continued to function as a filmmaker/intellectual throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, with features that were in some ways closer to theorems (the title of one of his most characteristic mid-career films) than to narrative dramas. Edipo Re (1967) (Oedipus Rex) is as much an interrogation of Freud’s theories of the Oedipus complex as it is an adaptation of Sophocles’ play. As The Gospel, Oedipus Rex, and Medea (1969) indicate, Pasolini used canonical texts for their ability to apply time-tested wisdom to contemporary issues, such as the crisis of communism in the “Christian” west and the operations of power and violence in heterosexist institutions. Pasolini’s “Trilogy of Life,” his most popular work and also based on pre-existing literary texts—Il Decamerone (1971) (The Decameron), I Racconti di Canterbury (1972) (The Canterbury Tales), Il fiore delle mille e una note (1974) (Arabian Nights)—vividly conveyed the loss of traditional, localized cultures under what would eventually be defined as globalism.  Before suffering his untimely death in a sordid episode not unlike some scenes from his first film, Pasolini completed Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma (1975) (Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom), celebrated and reviled as one of the most shocking feature films commercially released. Updating from pre-revolutionary France to Fascist Italy a long-banned novel by the Marquis de Sade, this art film in the guise of what would later be defined as “torture porn” features a group of powerful men and women who sexually assault, torture, and eventually murder a group of abducted teenagers. Long thought of as an embarrassment to the suddenly dead director’s legacy, it seemed indefensible even to Pasolini’s staunchest partisans. More recently, however, it has come to be celebrated as an uncompromising and prophetic allegory of power (and film spectatorship) as sadism realized.  Ultimately something of a contradiction, a Marxist/Catholic/homosexual who created densely intellectual work in a popular format, Pasolini stands as one of the most fascinating figures in mid-twentieth century political modernism. Select Filmography Accattone (1961)  Mamma Roma (1962)  ‘La ricotta,’ short episode of compilation-film, RoGoPaG (1963)  Comizi d’amore **[**Love Meetings**]** (1964)  Il Vangelo secondo Matteo **[**The Gospel According to Matthew**]** (1964)  Uccellacci e uccellini **[**Hawks and Sparrows**]** (1966)  Edipo re **[**Oedipus**]** (1967)  Teorema [Theorem] (1968)  Porcile **[**Pigsty**]** (1969)  Appunti per un’Orestiade africana **[**Notes for an African Oresteia**]** (1970)  Medea (1969)  Il Decameron **[**The Decameron**]** (1971)  I racconti di Canterbury **[**The Canterbury Tales**]** (1972)  Il fiore delle mille e una notte **(**Arabian Nights**)** (1974)  Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma **[**Salò, or the Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom**]** (1975) |
| Further reading:  (Greene)  (Maggi)  (Pasolini)  (Rohdie)  (Ryan-Scheutz)  (Schwartz)  (Siciliano)  (Viano) |