

**A HOMAGE
TO PASOLINI'S
FILM THEORY**

**A VIDEO BY
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*Ma io mi domando,
perché realizzare un'opera
se è così bello sognarla
soltanto?*

Pier Paolo Pasolini

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Introduction

The video which is going to be presented aims at making you reflect upon the moving image and its techniques.

The video is based on the work by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975), considered one of the best known Italian artists and intellectuals and one of the most controversial personalities ever to appear on the scene of modern Italian society from the Post-Second World War period until now.

He was one of the cleverest and bravest analysts of Italian society. He was an unorthodox Marxist, homosexual, and a nonbeliever steeped in Catholicism; all reasons for his isolation by mainstream Italian society.

Pasolini wrote several essays and articles about cinema and audio-visual language, which have been collected in the book *Empirismo Eretico* (1972). These writings should be placed in the context of the mid-1960s semiotics studies. In that period, Pasolini's theory raised a big debate with semiologists, and even if intellectuals like Umberto Eco and Christian Metz strongly criticised it, they also admitted that Pasolini is a seminal figure in the evolution of film and language theory.

The video is the result of the attempt to illustrate and interpret Pasolini's film theory, which is explained and defined in these essays, which constitute the basis and the inspiration of this piece of moving image.

The video is structured in four distinct and autonomous parts. Each one refers to four different key-concepts I have defined in my research.



Kinemes

Pasolini believed that cinema was the written language of reality, which is the language of actions that cinema reproduces.

The entire life, in the frame of all its actions, is a natural and living cinema. It is the same that the oral language in its natural and biological moment. [1]

Cinema is 'the "written" moment of a natural and total language, that is the acting of reality.' [2]

All this implies that cinema and reality share the same code and the same structure. They speak the same language. Thus, Reality is a language, whose words are things.

Before he reached this radical point, Pasolini tried to define the features of the language of cinema (considered as the langue - system, according to the definition by Saussure) by comparing it with the verbal language by using a semiotic approach. He thought that the language of cinema was double articulated like the natural languages. Phonemes and morphemes (the signifier and the signified) characterise the verbal language, like the objects, forms and real acts do in the shots. Pasolini named them "kinemes" and "monemes", respectively.

'The minimal unit of the language of cinema are the different real objects that compose the shot.' [3]

Pasolini's theory about cinema as a double articulated language gave birth to many critics. Umberto Eco [4] defines Pasolini's linguistics theory as insubstantial, because he does not distinguish between the sign, the signifier, the signified and the object to which they refer; he considers kinemes as phonemes even though they have meaning, unlike the phonemes; he considers the shot as a moneme, but it is more like a sentence than a sign in a language.

On the other hand, Christian Metz [5] stated a different opinion about this subject. In his early works, he was trying to find out whether the cinema was a *langue*-system or *langage* (language). He realised that it was a language without a system, and the reasons lie in the several disanalogies he found in comparing cinema to the verbal languages. For instance, cinema lacks the equivalent of the arbitrary linguistic sign, because the relationship between the signifier and the signified is motivated.

The video *Kinemes* consists of three of the experiments I have done in order to achieve the purpose of isolating distinctively the objects, acts, and people in the frame during the time in a sequence from *I Fiori delle Mille e Una Notte* by Pasolini (*A Thousand and One Nights/Arabian Nights*, 1974).



Modes of Qualification. Analysis of a Sequence.

As well as the spoken-written language, the audio-visual language has got its grammar, that fishes kinemes out of reality in a vertical flow.

According to Pasolini, the “cine-grammar” is characterised by different ways: *reproduction*, *substantiation*, *qualification*, and *verbalisation*, which he used to analyse sequences from movies by Antonioni, Bertolucci and Godard, with the purpose of proving his theory that cinema is the written language of reality.

In the video *Modes of qualification*, I tried to envisage the kind of analysis Pasolini did by only considering a specific way of film qualification: the distance between the camera and the things in the shot frames, which is usually described with the “shot scale” that goes from extreme close up to extreme long shot.

The film sequences shown are from *Uccellacci e uccellini* by Pasolini (*The Hawks and the Sparrows*, 1966).



Order and Meaning. Long Take versus Editing.

Pasolini imagined cinema as an endless sequence shot, a “diffused” and “continuous” vision, a reproduction of reality as unbroken and fluid as reality.

The sequence shot is widely considered one of the most realistic ways to represent reality, even though it can also reveal the insignificance of life as life.

According to Pasolini, the typical *plan séquence* is a subjective shot that represents just one point of view.

In order to clarify his idea, Pasolini gives the example of JF Kennedy’s murder [6]. He wrote that we can have numerous versions of that event which come from the people who were present at that moment. The “multiplication” of presents created by these different points of view, becomes a source of relativity, unreliability, and ambiguity until it finds a narrator who coordinates it in a coherent manner. By giving things a shape and a meaning, the narrator also transforms the present into past.

Pasolini compared the long take to life - an undetermined stream - because it is always in the present time like the reality.

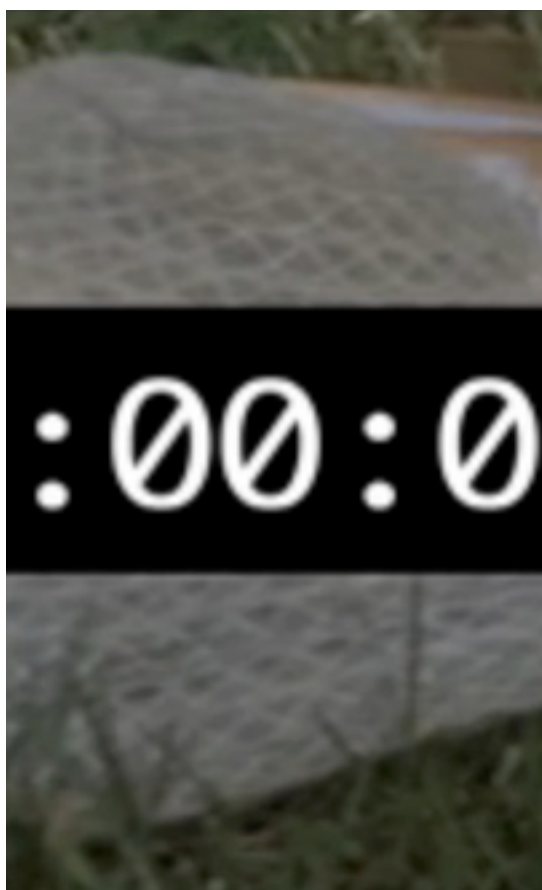
By contrast, the editing is like death because it makes the present become past by a process of coordination which has been created by a narrator.

It is absolutely crucial that we die, because, as long as we are alive, we lack meaning.

Death makes a rapid editing of our life: it chooses the crucial moments (that will never be modified by other possible opposite moments), and it puts them in order, making our endless, unstable and uncertain present (..) a clear, stable, certain past. [7]

At the beginning of this video, the same story is told in three different ways. In the first two sequences the order of the narration has been changed. These sequences are edited versions of the long take (shown as a third in order to leave the viewer free from prejudice about the real story) from *The Passenger* (1975) by Michelangelo Antonioni (Pasolini never shot a long take in his life) and they have the purpose of showing the power of the narrator in shaping meanings.

At the end a direct comparison of the long take and the edited version which respects the order of the events told in the sequence shot will be shown, with the aim to point out the differences in the time, and in the perception of it.



Splices

In the analysis of cinema, one has to consider the spatial rhythm, which concerns the space in the frame and the relationship of the space of a shot to the spaces of the shots it precedes or follows. This spatial examination should also be thought of in temporal terms (both the duration of the shots themselves and the duration of the shots in relation to the others).

Pasolini imagined a sort of graph in which it is possible to describe synthetically all the durations - of the shots and of the relationships among them - and the “negative durations” - the splices - in a film. In the process of editing, the editor-narrator attaches the shots to each other with “splices”.

It is in this incalculably minimal fraction of time that we should calculate “negative durations”, that is, *those which do not exist*; either as audiovisual material representation or as mathematicorhythmic (sic) abstraction.[8]

To sum up, splices are ‘spatial- temporal exclusions between spatial- temporal inclusions’ (the shots). [9]

With the sequences shown in the last video I tried to make splices visible by using different means.

NOTES

[1] and [2]

Pasolini, P.P. (1972), *Empirismo Eretico*, Milano: Garzanti.

Quotes from Barnett, L.K. (ed.) (1984), *Heretical Empiricism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 206.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 202.

[4]

Eco, U.

(1967), 'Sulle articolazioni del codice cinematografico', in *Il nuovo cinema: venti anni dopo*, Pesaro 1984. *Per una nuova critica: i convegni pesaresi 1965-1967*, Marsilio, Venezia 1989.

[5]

Metz, Christian (1966), 'Considerazioni sugli elementi semiologici del film', in *Il nuovo cinema: venti anni dopo*, Pesaro 1984. *Per una nuova critica: i convegni pesaresi 1965-1967*, Marsilio, Venezia 1989.

[7]

Pasolini, P.P. (1972), *Empirismo Eretico*, Milano: Garzanti.

Quotes from Barnett, L.K. (ed.) (1984), *Heretical Empiricism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 241.

[8] and [9]

Ibidem, p. 287.

