Pasolini’s Hope Against Hope

A Thesis submitted to the faculty of
San Francisco State University
In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree

Master of Arts

In

Political Science

by

Nick Thacker

San Francisco, California

December 2022
Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read Pasolini’s Hope Against Hope by Nick Thacker, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Political Science at San Francisco State University.

__________________________________________
James Martel, Ph.D.
Professor,
Thesis Committee Chair

__________________________________________
Katherine Gordy, Ph.D.
Professor
Abstract

In the journalistic writings he published toward the end of his life, Pier Paolo Pasolini concluded that the possibility of transcending capitalism was foreclosed. It should come as no surprise, then, that he was particularly critical of the 1968 generation of new left radicals who acted as though revolution was imminent. However, he also placed little stock in the current iteration of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) which, under the historic compromise, sought a reformist path to socialism through forming an alliance with the hegemonic Christian Democratic party. There was no progressive political project, Pasolini felt, which did not also comprise a unity with the project of capitalist development. Through reading his work as political theory, I argue that Pasolini developed a non-reactionary alternative to the progressive political project and that, in doing so, he holds open the possibility for a future redemption of revolution and the communist project. In other words, by abandoning hope in the political dead-ends of the present, Pasolini allows us to access a transcendent hope which, in Franz Kafka’s words, is “not for us.”
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I am indebted to my two readers, James Martel and Katherine Gordy, for their mentorship as well as their friendship. The countless hours of generous discussion I spent with each of them transformed my hunch that Pasolini could speak to us today into firm belief. While not one of my official readers, I am also indebted to Ramsey McGlazer. This thesis would not be possible without his mentorship, scholarship on Pasolini, and fervent critique of progress. Ramsey’s chapter on Pasolini, which you can find in his book *Old Schools*, is required reading for anyone considering a first-time viewing of *Salò*. My time at SFSU has been personally engaging and intellectually transformative. It has also coincided with times of unexpected grief, pain, and loss in a personal as well as a global sense. I have my husband, Kevin Steen, to thank most of all for keeping me in good working order, as well as my brother Brandon Thacker, my grandmother Mary Ellen Knoop, my dad Cory Thacker, and my tía Melina Knoop. Politics and theory are necessarily collective ventures. Countless friends, teachers, and comrades have contributed to the thinking in these pages: an incomplete list includes Justin Gilmore (who encouraged me to apply to SFSU in the first place), Daniel Tutt, Rane Stark, Ana Landis Velazquez, Spencer Adams, Nicole Watts, Kurt Rohde, Tim Allen. My title comes from the dedication in Christopher Lasch’s *The True and Only Heaven*. This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mom, Melissa Catherine Huff, whose love is bigger than death. It is also bigger than words, which usually fail me. As Pasolini wrote in his poem “Prayer to my mother,” *I’m here, alone, with you, in a future April…*
Table of Contents

Introduction: Ugly Verses 1

Chapter 1: From Mass Party to Mass Culture 8
   What is Culture? 10
   Origins of the Anthropological Revolution in Italy 11
   Collapse of the Subproletariat 12
   Collapse of the Bourgeoisie 13
   Dangers of a New Fascism 14
   Corsair Politics 15
   Pasolini’s Critique of Populist Progress 16
   A Church Without Purpose 19
   A Country Within a Country 23
   Speculative Political Strategy in *Scritti corsari* 25
   Politics in a Different Register 27

Chapter 2: Unacceptable Inevitabilities 29
   Communist Agency in the 1970s 31
   Hostile Circumstances 33
   Development and Progress 35
   Dissociated, Coincidental Realities 40
   “Something” Happened: The Article on the Fireflies 43
   A. Before the disappearance of the fireflies 46
   B. While the fireflies were disappearing 47
   C. After the disappearance of the fireflies 50
   Conspiracy and Inevitability 52

Chapter 3: Hope Against Hope 57
   *The Trilogy of Life* and *Salò* 59
   Abjuration and Adaptation 60
   A Pilgrimage to the Land of Regret 70
   A Tailor’s Hope 74

References 80
Introduction: Ugly Verses

Pier Paolo Pasolini is known across the world for his films and, to a lesser degree, for his novels and poetry. He is also remembered in Italy as a public intellectual, one whose interventions in public discourse are associated with controversy and provocation. One intervention is remembered more than others. In the wake of the Battle of Valle Giulia, a 1968 confrontation between student militants and the police, Pasolini wrote in a poem titled “The PCI to the Young!!” that his sympathies were with the police.

I begin with the uncomfortable notion that Pasolini sided with the police over the students for two reasons. First, it allows me to clarify at the outset that Pasolini had no love lost for the police. Second, lingering with this incident teaches us how to read him. Pasolini intended to provoke. However, he was only interested in provocation insofar as it served the higher purpose of revolution against the bourgeoisie rather than to civil war.

To begin with the lines of interest,

When yesterday at Valle Giulia you fought with policemen,
I sympathized with the policemen!
Because policemen are the children of the poor (Pasolini 2005, 150).

He goes on to say that “[at] Valle Giulia, yesterday, we have thus had a fragment of class conflict; and you, my friends (even though on the side of reason), were the rich, while the policemen (who were in the wrong) were poor” (Pasolini 2005, 151). If we read these lines at the level of provocation, reacting only to their immediate content, we find Pasolini taking the side of the poor over the rich, and identifying the police with the former and the students with the latter. Thus, it appears that Pasolini holds an essentialized view of class conflict. The police, even
though they fight on the side of the capitalist status quo, are the children of the peasants and the working class; the students, on the other hand, are “spoiled children” who “belong to the other social class.” If we are provoked, it is because Pasolini, a middle-class person himself, forgoes solidarity with the students, who are at least nominally on the side of revolution and therefore on Pasolini’s side. Instead, it seems, he clings to an economistic conception of the working class—the young police officers are on the side of the working class insofar as they come from working class backgrounds.

However, if we read beyond the lines so often quoted against him, Pasolini writes to the students that “[we] obviously agree against the police as institution” (Pasolini 2005, 151). In fact, at the time he composed this poem, Pasolini had faced “four arrests, 16 charges and eleven trials, in addition to three assaults by neofascists” as well as “a police search of his apartment, to look for firearms.” At the hands of the police, he faced incessant “hearings that dragged [him into] courtrooms countless times, even several times a day, through humiliations and oppression” (Wu Ming 2016). As Wu Ming suggests in the title to their essay, “The Police vs. Pasolini, Pasolini vs. The Police,” Pasolini was opposed to the police at the level of political principle, and the police were opposed to Pasolini at a personal level. Further, by the end of the poem, its title is revealed as an imperative rather than a declarative statement. Pasolini’s poem is not about what the current iteration of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) says to the young students through its strategy and political analysis. Instead, it implores the students to take the reins of the PCI from its current leadership, which is comprised of “gentlemen in double-breasted suits, bocce fans,
lovers of litotes\(^1\), bourgeois contemporaries of your stupid fathers” (Pasolini 2005, 153). Pasolini meant to provoke the students. However, the nature of this provocation was ultimately to push them toward a different kind of political action, one which participated in a broader class conflict rather than the “fragment” they found in their clash with the police.

The poem was later published along with an addendum titled “Apology.” It begins:

“[what] are ‘ugly verses’ (as presumably these of “The PCI to the Young!!”)? It’s even too simple; ugly verses are those that are not sufficient alone to express what the author wants to express” (Pasolini 2005, 154). Pasolini’s verses are ugly in the sense that they provoke a reaction, and they do so by not saying everything outright. On the one hand, this is evident of the respect he affords his readers (often the general public). On the other, it a risky venture as it leaves him particularly vulnerable to uncharitable readings. He says that his “ugly verses are, yes, understandable—but to understand them goodwill is necessary” (Pasolini 2005, 154).

Therein lies the risk: in the absence of goodwill, these particular ugly verses are read in service of reactionary politics rather than revolution. I do not mean to say that we readers necessarily owe Pasolini goodwill in every case. However, if we do not grant him goodwill, we will miss out on the fullness of what he means to communicate. Whether what he means to communicate in its fullness is of value to revolution is another question entirely.

The key to reading Pasolini appears in this addendum. He writes: “[therefore] let it be clear that I wrote these ugly verses on several registers at the same time” (Pasolini 2005, 154).

\(^1\) The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the litote as an “understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of the contrary.” A common example is “you won’t be sorry,” said in place of “you will be pleased.” One possible implication Pasolini means to invoke is that the “gentlemen in double breasted suits” who lead the PCI speak with the distanced and manipulative language of advertisement.
He references the apparently contradictory appearance of his interventions. He condemns the youth as petit-bourgeois, yet he implores them to take control of the PCI. He sympathizes with the police as the lost youth of the peasant world, yet he is clearly against the police who are clearly against him. Pasolini’s provocations hold deeper tensions that draw readers of goodwill in for further clarification. However, I want to suggest that we read Pasolini in two registers in another sense, one which he may not have implied in his “Apology.” Rather than read him simply a provocateur who commented on the political events of his time, I argue that we can also read Pasolini at a higher level of abstraction. That is, we can also read his work as theory. Implicit in this assertion is the claim that, when abstracted from their immediate content and concrete political context, Pasolini’s political writings have the capacity to speak beyond the time and place in which he lived. At stake is the relevance of his thought, in varying degrees, to contemporary politics, nearly 50 years after his brutal murder and beyond the Italian context.

Making a case for Pasolini the political theorist is one of my objectives in this thesis. My other is to explicate what precisely is relevant to us today when we read him as such.

Chapter 1, “From Mass Party to Mass Culture,” lays the ground for reading Pasolini as a theorist by placing his interventions into their immediate context. Pasolini’s primary insight was that Italy had undergone what he called an “anthropological revolution” (or “mutation” in its literal translation). Before the advent of this process, Italy’s national boundaries collected a plurality of cultures and subjectivities, some of which predated capitalism and even Christianity. The most ancient “worlds,” those of greatest interest to Pasolini, existed on the margins of Italian life, both in the rural areas of the peasantry and the urban areas of the subproletariat, an underclass excluded from consistent access to the wage. All national identity was superficial and
masked this plurality before the anthropological revolution. After the anthropological revolution, however, Italy finally became a nation, albeit one whose nationhood was based on a homogenous consumer and petit-bourgeois subjectivity. For Pasolini, this development, the loss of what he called the separated world, was the death-knell of the communist project. His prescience was even more remarkable when we consider that it came during the period where the PCI reached its electoral apex. In other words, Pasolini identified the conditions pointing to the PCI’s demise during its greatest successes. Reading Pasolini in register of commentary means reading him as engaging in a live discourse. The chapter closes with an attempt to construct a speculative political strategy which the PCI might have extrapolated from his analysis.

The second chapter, “Unacceptable Inevitabilities,” finds Pasolini dashing the hopes of any speculative political strategy we attempted to draw from him. When we read Pasolini at a level of abstraction beyond provocation and commentary, we find he that calls revolutionaries to embrace humility in the face of political foreclosure and failure. However, he does not do this because he has personally abandoned revolution, but because from the standpoint of the present revolution has been foreclosed. I claim that Pasolini’s recognition of revolutionary foreclosure, rather than serving to passively accept the status quo, preserves the notion of revolution that leaves behind capitalist social relations once and for all. Pasolini is often labeled a “not very orthodox communist” (Pasolini 1983, 19). However, I claim that his engagement with Marxism serves to emphasize the all-encompassing destruction that capitalism brings upon the past. Pasolini, who once wrote “I am a force of the Past/My love lies only in tradition” (Pasolini 2015), preserves the memory of past revolutionary hopes that were destroyed by capitalism. He does this by, as Rei Terada suggests, “sorting the dead from the nonexistent” (Terada 2017, 146).
Another of my claims is that Pasolini charted a non-reactionary route through non-progressive politics. Unlike the voices of right-wing reaction, Pasolini does not seek to raise the dead or return to an imagined past. Instead, he seeks to preserve the idea of the revolution to come through a contradictory abandonment of all hope in immanent revolution.

Chapter 3, “Hope Against Hope,” takes on the notion of hope in Pasolini’s thought directly. It reads some of Pasolini’s last works, namely his essay “Repudiation of the Trilogy of Life” and his final and most infamous film, Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom, in concert with a broader array of thinkers, specifically Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin. His final works are often read as examples of pessimism or bitterness. However, in my reading, what comes across as such is Pasolini’s rejection of what I call immanent hope. Immanent hope is hope broadly defined. This kind of hope holds open the possibility of some result based on future projections. With this kind of hope, the only remaining question is whether one is optimistic (if the result seems likely) or pessimistic (if the result seems unlikely). Pasolini rejects this kind of hope entirely because, from his historical position, there are no futures left. When immanent hope is dashed it appears untimely at best and unfounded at worst. However, the rejection of immanent hope is the first step to accessing what I call transcendent hope. Immanent hope is constrained by the possible. The idea of the possible is structured by our historical conditions and the social relations in which we live. Transcendent hope is a hope for the coincidence across time of our own dashed hopes with future events that appear to redeem them. In a much-quoted line, Franz Kafka wrote to his friend Max Brod that in the world there is “plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us” (Benjamin et al. 2005, 798). Transcendent hope is "not for us” in the sense that it is not afforded to us by the structural conditions that organize our idea of the
possible. However, accessing transcendent hope is a complicated venture. It is only apprehended with a backward glance from the future at the dashed hopes of the past.

Pasolini the theorist leads us to a hope that is not immanent but rather “not for us.” He rejected the idea of liberal progress and argued that all alleged manifestations of progress (the notion that living standards should continue to rise indefinitely) are only incidental to capitalist development. The idea of progress structures and constrains the way that we conceive of the past as well as the future. Thus, it necessarily structures our hopes. Pasolini’s transcendent hope offers an alternative to the idea of progress and preserves the notion of revolution which it appears to reject. We must read him in two registers at once, silencing the surface noise of immanent hope and accessing transcendent hope at its much higher frequency.
Chapter 1: From Mass Party to Mass Culture

The Italian political consensus appears to us in an ever-present state of flux. Today, Giorgia Meloni’s neofascist Fratelli D’Italia party is the ascendant force. Yesterday, Matteo Salvini’s natalist Lega party dominated the conversation and, the day before that, the populist and anti-political Five Star Movement held up successive coalition governments with both liberal and conservative parties. This condensed summary accounts only for the last few years. The consensus, in other words, looks more like a non-consensus. From the end of World War II to the 1990s, however, the forces at the heart of the political consensus in Italy were nothing if not consistent. The Christian Democrats (DC) headed nearly every government from the end of World War II until the party’s dissolution amidst scandal in 1994. The opposition party during the same period was also a consistent force. The Italian Communist Party (PCI) was the largest communist party in western Europe, boasting over 2 million members at its height. In 1976 the PCI nearly became the largest party in parliament when it took 34% of the vote (Wertman 1977).

At the subjective level, PCI support relies on ways of orienting oneself within society which are entirely different than supporters of the parties that make up Italy’s current political consensus. PCI support recognizes a fundamental opposition between a wage-dependent class and a capitalist class that lives off their labor. Using Marco Revelli’s framework in The New Populism, contemporary populist support recognizes a pure undifferentiated people in opposition to a small and powerful elite. Insofar as widespread PCI support was replaced with populist support, we might say that Italians have passed from one “particular conception of political conflict” to another (Revelli 2019, 15). How and when did this happen?
I argue that Pier Paolo Pasolini identified the transition from one conception of political conflict to another when no one else could see it. His prescience was even more remarkable when we consider that he came to this conclusion during the ascent of the PCI toward its electoral peaks in 1975 and 1976. Pasolini identified the conditions for the demise of the PCI against the backdrop of its greatest successes. He did not bury these insights in allegory or metaphor within his creative work. Rather, Pasolini identified this monumental shift, which he called the anthropological revolution, in the pages of Italy’s largest newspapers. In the last years of his life, Pasolini wrote a regular column for the *Corriere della sera*. Pasolini later collected selections of these articles in *Scritti corsari* and *Lutheran Letters*. On June 10, 1974, Pasolini reported that a “qualitative leap” had occurred in Italy. In its wake, the many and varied ancient cultures within Italy’s borders dissolved into a single Italian consumer subjectivity. It also mutated political power. Where power once resided squarely within institutions like the Vatican or the DC party, it now resided in the market—and perhaps also in places that evade description entirely, as we will see in subsequent chapters. Writing after the occurrence of this qualitative leap, Pasolini wrote that “[power] has no use for the church” or any other single institution for that matter (Pasolini 1975, 50). Though the “sincere smiles” of the DC ministers were still seen on television, Pasolini argued that the market and capitalist development were now the decisive forces in history.

Pasolini’s articles found him working out complex ideas through public discourse in real time. Unfortunately, his brutal (and still unsolved) murder in 1975 prevented him from developing his analysis further. For now, we must follow his imperative from the introduction to *Scritti corsari*, which asks the reader to “organize [its] contradictory moments in search of their
essential unity” (Pasolini 1975, 1). What follows in this chapter is a preliminary step toward that end.

In “Acculturation and Assimilation,” one of the earliest articles in Scritti corsari, Pasolini wrote that the culture of Italy’s economic center had come to displace “all the peripheral cultures” whose “[ways] of life [were previously] safe, and essentially free” (Pasolini 1975, 13). This is the first mention of what Pasolini goes on to call the anthropological revolution. To summarize what Pasolini meant by this: the anthropological revolution homogenized and upended the multiple and simultaneous pre-capitalist ways of life with a new unified consumerist subject. In this chapter, I chart the origins, cultural implications, and political consequences of the anthropological revolution. In closing, I construct a speculative political strategy that might have countered the oncoming populist consensus.

**What is Culture?**

Pasolini uses the terms “culture” and “cultural models” throughout Scritti corsari. Before the anthropological revolution, Italy’s national borders contained a plurality of cultural models; since the anthropological revolution, the plurality has been displaced by a single culture of consumerism. Since I focus on this particular paradigm shift, I will attempt to define culture as Pasolini understood it. Culture, for Pasolini, was not simply shared tastes or proclivities. Rather, culture refers to longstanding and resilient ways of life. The vanished cultures with which we are concerned grew from pre-capitalist (and even pre-Christian) modes of production and persisted beyond the advent of capitalism, thanks to Italy’s backward development among western European countries. Notably, he refers to the marginal cultures of the peasantry and the urban
poor. As we will see, before the anthropological revolution, Pasolini saw all national unity in Italy as purely superficial in the face of the ancient differentiations within Italy’s borders.

**Origins of the Anthropological Revolution in Italy**

The anthropological revolution originates from capitalist development. Development is another name for economic progress. The coincidence of these terms, as we will see in subsequent chapters, lies at the core of the political quandary Pasolini identifies. For now, it is helpful to name the specific manifestations of development in Italy which are directly relevant to the anthropological revolution. On the one hand, physical infrastructure (new highways and means of transport) brought the occupants of the peripheries physically closer to the economic centers. Pasolini wrote that “[highways], cars, etc. have today strictly united the periphery with the Center by abolishing physical distance” (Pasolini 1975, 13). With travel from the periphery to the center now commonplace, residents of the periphery gained physical access to the new consumer culture emanating from the economic center. On the other hand, Pasolini wrote that “the revolution of the information systems has been even more radical and decisive.” Here, Pasolini refers to the near universal advent of television in Italy. He comes close to laying the blame squarely at the feet of television. “By means of television the Center has assimilated the whole country, which was historically so differentiated and rich in original cultures” (Pasolini 1975, 13). That said, we should take care to avoid identifying it as the determining force. Here we might take inspiration from Walter Benjamin’s search for the origin of the Paris arcades, which he locates “in the economic facts.” However, the relationship between political economy and the Paris arcades is not one of simple cause and effect. Instead, political economy “[gives] rise to the whole series of the arcade’s concrete historical forms, just as the leaf unfolds from
itself all the riches of the empirical world of plants” (Benjamin 2002, 462). In a similar way, we might think of the anthropological revolution as having unfolded from the economic fact of capitalist development, through all its “concrete historical forms,” which include (among other things) innovations in infrastructure and media.

Though the anthropological revolution manifested through consumer acceptance of television, Pasolini is clear that the anthropological revolution was not a result of bottom-up consumer trends or desires. Rather, they were imposed “in accordance with the norms of Production that are bringing prosperity” (Pasolini 1975, 13). In other words, it was a result of the capitalist mode of production reaching a certain stage of development and ubiquity. To the previous statement, Pasolini adds that, rather than just bringing prosperity, these norms of production were “saving [Italians] from poverty” (Pasolini 1975, 13). Thus, he identifies the impetus for embracing the new culture as a negative bulwark against poverty. By recognizing the negative character of the shift toward this new culture, Pasolini reveals the anthropological revolution as at once a collapse of peripheral ways of life and a collapse of existing class self-identity. Before naming the political implications of the anthropological revolution and determining how Pasolini might have answered the question “what is to be done,” I want to dwell on the collapse of class self-identity for the subproletariat and the bourgeoisie.

**Collapse of the Subproletariat**

Pasolini identified one manifestation of the anthropological revolution as a newfound self-consciousness or self-hatred among subproletarians—a catch-all term that encompasses the peasantry as well as the precariously employed urban poor. Subproletarians, Pasolini argues, once had many and varied cultures which were separate from the bourgeois and proletarian
cultures of Italy’s urban centers. This separateness manifested in an ironic distance on the part of subproletarians from the petit-bourgeoise. Subproletarians, Pasolini wrote, “viewed with a certain arrogant scorn the ‘spoiled brats,’ the petit-bourgeoise, from whom they dissociated themselves” (Pasolini 1975, 14). Now that the barriers between the plurality of subproletarian cultures and bourgeois culture have been breached, subproletarians have become “ashamed of their ignorance.”

One of the problems presented by the anthropological revolution is its transparency. No one seems to recognize that anything has changed. Pasolini apprehends his knowledge of the anthropological revolution not primarily through a material or Marxist analysis of Italian political economy, but through subjective feelings and experiences of what he will later call degradation. His emphasis on the self-consciousness of the subproletariat is one example of this. If Pasolini can be called an unorthodox Marxist, the importance he places on feeling as a method of understanding the present is surely part of his unorthodoxy. As Benjamin (another Marxist accused of chronic unorthodoxy) writes in The Arcades Project, Marx’s project “lays bare the causal connection between economy and culture.” The nature of this project is as follows: “[it] is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture” (Benjamin 2002, 460). Similarly, Pasolini’s emphasis on the connection between history and subjective feeling presents to us the expression of the economy in feeling.

**Collapse of the Bourgeoisie**

The homogenizing force of the anthropological revolution acted upon the bourgeoisie as well as the subproletariat. “If the sub-proletariat have become bourgeoisified, the bourgeoisie have become sub-proletarianized” (Pasolini 1975, 14). For the bourgeoisie, the loss of separation
manifested in a newfound anti-intellectualism or, in Pasolini’s words, a “stifling of their intellectual and moral faculties” (Pasolini 1975, 14). As we will see, since the anthropological revolution appears as a process of undifferentiation in Italian society, Pasolini’s positive political strategy necessarily addresses the need to reassert the lost separation. Before extrapolating a speculative politics from Pasolini, we must first address the stakes of passively accepting this new homogenization.

**Dangers of a New Fascism**

Before the anthropological revolution, Pasolini wrote, “Catholicism was, in fact, formally the only cultural phenomenon that ‘homogenized’ Italians” (Pasolini 1975, 13). Catholicism reached across cultural models, but it only created a unified and Italian Catholic subjectivity in a superficial sense. He develops this idea further in a later article: “In the world of the peasants, Christ was assimilated to one of the thousands of Adonises or Persephones that existed in the rural areas” (Pasolini 1975, 53). For Pasolini, the peasantry may have gone to mass on Sundays and been compelled by their parish priest to support Mussolini’s fascists and later the Christian Democratic party, but their Christ was not necessarily the Christ of the Vatican. To put it another way, the Vatican was unsuccessful in displacing the culture of the peasantry.

Like the Vatican, Mussolini’s fascism displaced the separated world of the peasantry in only a superficial sense. “The various particular cultures (peasants, sub-proletarians, workers) carried on undisturbed and continued to live in accordance with their age-old models: repression was limited to obtaining their verbal support” (Pasolini 13). Only later, in the qualitative leap of the anthropological revolution, did the world of the peasantry finally collapse. For Pasolini, the danger of a new and potentially much more successful fascism begins here. With the
displacement of a plurality of cultures with a homogenized consumer subject, reactionary movements of the future have at their disposal a unified culture to mobilize.

Pasolini’s fears of a new and more pernicious fascism are reinforced by recent theorizations of populism. Specifically, if we look at the formal distinctions between left and right populism the danger of a slippage between the two is immediately apparent. John B. Judis, who Revelli quotes in *The New Populism*, notes that both left-wing and right-wing populism are predicated on a pure conception of “the people” against a small and powerful elite. Left-wing populism takes this precise form. Right-wing populism, on the other hand, introduces a third group: some “other” which the elite serves at the expense of the people (Revelli 27). By identifying the danger of a new fascism in the “centralism of consumer civilization,” Pasolini anticipated this later theorization of left-wing and right-wing populism. Since both models share the core conception of conflict between an undifferentiated people and the elite, left-wing populism includes the potential for right-wing populism.

**Corsair Politics**

The outlook is rather bleak at this point in the story. A revolution with wide reaching consequences has destroyed the old cultural models, imbued daily life with a new self-consciousness, and opened the door to a truly totalizing fascism. Further complicating things, the subject that drove the anthropological revolution is not even embodied in a fixed institutional entity that can be attacked and, even worse, no one seems to notice anything has changed in the first place. Optimism is in short supply for anyone drawing up a balance sheet of the situation. Evan Calder Williams writes that Pasolini’s late writings showed “an accelerating bleakness of perspective, a lonely pessimism that he himself called ‘apocalyptic’” (Williams 2019, 131).
Indeed, Pasolini’s tone in *Scritti corsari* and *Lutheran Letters* is bleak. However, we risk missing more interesting readings if we accept the image of late Pasolini as an increasingly isolated pessimist. To what extent can we say that *Scritti corsari* speaks to the political moment defined by the anthropological revolution in such a way that could be of use to contemporary political actors? If we read closely, perhaps, hope is not completely lost—at least at the time of Pasolini’s writing. Since the PCI still existed, the new consumer subject within Italy’s borders was not yet completely homogenized. In the article “The Novel of the Bombings” Pasolini identified the PCI as a “humanistic country within a consumerist country.” Indeed, for Pasolini, the PCI was the only countervailing force of differentiation against the near total undifferentiation of the anthropological revolution.

In what follows, I proceed under the (admittedly large) assumption that Pasolini’s articles were directed in some sense at the PCI. Reconstructing a speculative Communist politics from Pasolini’s articles requires that we reach beyond what he said about the PCI directly. He devoted multiple articles to the Vatican and how it might proceed since “power has no use for the church.” Before extrapolating from Pasolini’s advice to the Vatican to supplement his texts that address the PCI directly, we begin with the critique of progress that he began to develop for the era that follows the anthropological revolution.

**Pasolini’s Critique of Populist Progress**

Before contesting the new and more pernicious fascism of the anthropological revolution, one must first acknowledge that something fundamental has changed. This meant thinking critically about the notion of progress. If power resides solely in the market, is progress possible? Is there one definition of progress? Toward what end are we progressing? Any politics that seek
to check the new, slippery power of the market must account for these questions. The replacement of multiple, coincidental cultures with a single consumer subject had wide-reaching implications for what constituted progress. For one, peripheral regions were measured against the level of development in the economic center rather than on their own terms as separate cultures with lineages that reached deeper in history than the advent of industrial capitalism. This was true for those within the peripheries, now “ashamed of their ignorance,” and those in the economic centers with opinions about the peripheries. In this regard, Pasolini warned self-identified progressives of the unintended consequences of their calls for an end to austerity in the peripheries.

Many people complain (in these times of austerity) of the inconveniences caused by the lack of an organized social and cultural life outside of the “bad” Center, in the “good” peripheries (seen as dormitories without services, without autonomy, without real human relations). This is merely a rhetorical lament. If the things that are said to be lacking in the peripheries were to exist, they would in any case be organized by the Center (Pasolini 1975, 13).

Calls for an end to austerity reveal themselves as “rhetorical lament[s]” alone through the construction of a good-bad paradigm that can only subject the periphery to the superiority of the center. Even though progressives might see the peripheries as good, the paradigm indicates a shared measure of what constitutes “good.”

Further, progressive calls for development mistook different human relations for a lack of human relations. As a result, the less developed peripheries took on the negative character of lacking something—development—rather than positively embodying a pre-existing way of life. In this way, the newfound shame and self-consciousness of the subproletariat mirrored the political strategy of nominal progressives. Progressives also mistook different ways of life for mere subservience to the center. This is not to say that the peripheries were not exploited by the
economic interests of the center. The point is rather that the anthropological revolution imbued the word “progress” with a specific conception of progress—that is, economic development in the urban and industrial centers. As Pasolini put it in “Development and Progress,” “the left wants ‘progress’ and therefore ‘development.’” He continues, writing that there is only “the development of bourgeois economic and technical expansion” (Pasolini 1975, 110). To put it another way, under the social relations imposed by contemporary capitalism, progressives do not have the liberty of choosing a different, non-capitalist development.

Identifying the total subsumption of the category of progress under the category of development is one part of Pasolini’s emphasis on correct interpretation after the anthropological revolution. In other words, Pasolini believed that the relationship between signifier and signified had changed. Perhaps the most important capacity that partisans of Pasolini’s positive politics must develop is the ability to divine the new, mutated political content hidden beneath the surface of the signifier. Since Pasolini’s articles addressed the issues of the day, the makings of this particular insight come from his articles on the questions of divorce and abortion in contemporary Italy. In 1974, Italians voted overwhelmingly to keep divorce legal. Before the anthropological revolution, when power was contained within institutions, a forceful showing of support for divorce might have constituted, to some degree, a victory against those institutions of power (the Christian Democrats and the Vatican). The PCI was opposed to the Christian Democrats and the Vatican as the institutions that preserve the capitalist order in Italy. The PCI might therefore have called such a victory “progress.” After the anthropological revolution, these institutions ceased to be the active agents of power, which came to reside in the market. Therefore, the result of the divorce referendum was not a victory against the capitalist order
because it was not a victory against the market. While divorce once signified progress, it no longer had the same one-to-one relationship in a changed context. As Pasolini wrote: “My opinion is that the fifty-nine percent who voted ‘No’ [on the question of repealing divorce laws] does not miraculously prove a victory for secularism, progress and democracy” (Pasolini 1975, 23).

Pasolini’s message was not that Italians—or the PCI—should have supported the repeal of divorce laws. Rather, he called on partisans against the existing order to adjust their interpretive frameworks beyond the antiquated progressive-conservative paradigm. He criticized the PCI not for supporting divorce, but for initially opposing the referendum itself on the grounds that it might have instigated a “war of religion” and alienated PCI support among Catholics. In other words, the PCI thought it was living in a world where the values of the church had yet to be displaced by the values of the market. In this sense, the PCI made the same interpretive error as the Vatican and the Christian Democrats, who wanted to hold the referendum for the same reason—they thought the official values of Catholicism still predominated and that Italians would therefore overwhelmingly vote to strike down divorce. Pasolini writes, “Italians have proven to be infinitely more modern than even the most optimistic communist could have imagined. Both the Vatican as well as the Communist Party were mistaken in their analyses of the ‘real’ situation in Italy” (Pasolini 1975, 22).

A Church Without Purpose

Pasolini devoted several articles to the position of the Vatican after the anthropological revolution. The first, “The Historical Speech at Castel Gandolfo,” arrived on September 22, 1974. In the article, Pasolini recounted a recent speech delivered by Pope Paul VI at the papal
summer residence. Before proceeding with the content of the speech we should note that the article contains no direct quotes or substantiation that the speech ever took place, and that Pasolini describes all newspaper references to the speech as “brief and vague.” In the speech, the holy father exhibited the clearheaded analysis of contemporary life which had thus far escaped nearly everyone else Pasolini criticized in his articles. The Pope admitted that something had changed and that the church therefore needed to reevaluate its position. Pasolini calls the speech “historic,” because it broke with “the whole course of the history of the Catholic Church” (Pasolini 1975, 47). Pasolini summarized the Pope’s message as follows:

Paul VI has explicitly admitted that the Church has been left behind by the world; that the role of the Church has suddenly become uncertain and superfluous; that the Real Power no longer needs the Church and has therefore abandoned it to its own devices; that social problems are resolved in a society in which the Church no longer has any prestige; that the problem of the “poor” no longer exists, that is, the essential problem of the Church, etc., etc. (Pasolini 47).

The Pope also acknowledged that the Vatican played a role in securing fascist continuity in Italy—first with Mussolini’s fascists and then with the period of Christian Democracy—and that its support was no longer needed by the new agent of political power. The church no longer had a role in resolving the “social problems” of the day, such as the question of divorce. Further, not only had its political power and relevance waned, but its stated operating principle—serving the poor—became irrelevant. Since preexisting social categories collapsed at the level of self-identification, the poor ceased to exist in a subjective sense. It sounded as if the Pope had been reading Pasolini’s articles. Pasolini wrote that the Pope’s words were not “all that different” from his own (Pasolini 1975, 48). Unfortunately, the only solution the Pope proposes is “prayer.” Pasolini is not satisfied with this solution because “it is clear that this world, precisely, will not
‘pray’ anymore. Therefore, the Church is reduced to ‘praying’ by itself” (Pasolini 1975, 49).

How should the Church face this existential threat?

Pasolini hinted that the church still had a future when he wrote it had been “abandoned to its own devices.” In other words, the Church was free to chart its own course. Before identifying Pasolini’s advice for the Church, we must pose the question: who or what abandoned the church? Before the anthropological revolution, the Church was bound to two entities: the Italian state and the now collapsed world of the peasantry (Pasolini 53). Up to then, the actions of the Church were dictated by the need to maintain a symbiotic relationship with the Italian state and preserve the Vatican’s influence over populations operating within the cultural models of the peripheries. I argue that Pasolini devoted so much space to the Vatican because he saw the potential for it to play a positive role after the qualitative leap2.

Pasolini noted two “future possibilities” for the church. First, he implored the Church to separate itself from the state once and for all. Where the church once served the state, Pasolini called for the Church to exist in open opposition to the aspects of state that cannot be reconciled with the teachings of Christ. Specifically, he wrote that the Church had exactly the wrong interpretation of Christ’s teaching “Give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s” (Pasolini 1975, 52). Pasolini wrote “[they] made a saying of Christ’s seem moderate” (Pasolini 1975, 53). He mocked the Church’s bad-faith interpretation of the teaching, recapitulating it as follows: “[don’t] get worked up about things that don’t concern you, don’t

2 In “The PCI to the Young!!” Pasolini writes: “A redeemed bourgeois must renounce his rights, and banish from his soul, forever, the idea of power” (Pasolini 2005, 152). My tentative response to the question of the future role of the church, as Pasolini saw it, was that it should serve the project of bourgeois self-renunciation and banishment from power. I look forward to developing this idea in a future project.
look for political scandals, just stick to the down-to-earth social life and the absolute of the religious life, just try to keep your head above water and keep your nose clean, etc” (Pasolini 1975, 53). Instead, since power has use for the Church, the Church can put a more faithful interpretation of the teaching in practice. To do so means to “[distinguish] between Caesar and God.” This means recognizing that the “and” implies “two universes that do not communicate with one another,” which are in fact “irreconcilable” (Pasolini 1975, 53). Pasolini called on the Church to “join the ranks of the opposition” against the new form of power. Why should the Church listen? Because the new power “is completely irreligious” and itself hostile to the Church, seeking to transform it into “a mere relic of picturesque folklore” (Pasolini 1975, 49). In other words, if the Church passively accepted its new irrelevance it would persevere only as a harmless holdover from a previous age, when it was a fundamental component of subjectivity and bound up in everyday life.

Second, Pasolini told the church to extricate itself from the world of the peasantry in favor of its true flock—the urban bourgeoisie. To Pasolini, Catholic teachings were to some degree irreconcilable with the culture of the peasantry. The peasants merely “[assimilated] Christ to its old mythic models” (Pasolini 1975, 53). The Church “always accepted this ambiguity” because “it could not exist without the peasant masses” (Pasolini 1975, 53). Because of the Church’s imperative to serve the capitalist state, it needed to maintain influence among key demographics of support for the capitalist state. Since the rural areas were assimilated into consumerism and “have ceased to be religious,” this imperative no longer existed. Importantly for the next phase of the Church’s existence, “[the] city, on the other hand, is starting to become religious” (Pasolini 1975, 53). The Church’s now smaller sphere of influence comprised only the
bourgeoise or, using a term from the populist framework, as Pasolini wrote, “the elites of the ruling classes” (Pasolini 1975, 53). However, the Church could seize this as an opportunity since the urban elite, unlike the peripheral subproletariat, “is infinitely more capable of accepting the model of Christ than any peasant religion” (Pasolini 1975, 53). The path forward for the Church, that of joining the ranks of the opposition, required that it “reconquer the faithful” who gave themselves over to the new consumer subjectivity. Pasolini identified these new consumer subjects as having “a ‘new’ need for faith” (Pasolini 1975, 49). In this sense, the Church could play a role in reasserting differentiation within the bourgeoise, who have been proletarianized or, in other words, homogenized in such a way that stifled their moral and intellectual faculties.

To fulfill these future possibilities, Pasolini wrote, the church must “negate itself” (Pasolini 1975, 49). That is, it must rid itself of the spectacle and ideas that would otherwise become “picturesque folklore.” Without doing so, the Church was destined to merely “accept a power that no longer wants it: that is, commit suicide” (Pasolini 1975, 49).

Pasolini’s directives for the Vatican were not necessarily universal. However, one possible interpretation of Pasolini’s articles on the Vatican is that they were meant to be of use to the PCI. I invoke this interpretation to construct a speculative Pasolinian politics in closing. However, Pasolini did address the PCI directly in Scritti corsari. What can we glean from these articles?

A Country Within a Country

As long as the PCI was still around, the hope for resisting the results of the anthropological revolution was still alive. In “The Novel of the Bombings,” Pasolini identifies the PCI as the opposition to the new form of power. He wrote, “[in] Italy this opposition is so
large and so strong that it is a power in itself: I am referring, naturally, to the Italian Communist Party” (Pasolini 1975, 56). He continued, calling the PCI the “salvation of Italy and its wretched democratic institutions” (Pasolini 1975, 56). If Italians were homogenized into undifferentiated consumer subjects, how could Pasolini find hope in a party predicated on the fundamental opposition between the working class and the bourgeoisie? As already stated, at the time of his writing, Pasolini did not think that the anthropological revolution had yet completely assimilated Italy. The world of the peasants and the bourgeoisie may have collapsed; the working class, however, the true “flock” of the PCI, still comprised “a humanistic country within a consumerist country” (Pasolini 1975, 56). Importantly, Pasolini asserted the fundamental separation of the country of the PCI from the country of Italy, writing that, over the years, it had become “an island” (Pasolini 1975, 57). At the time, the PCI was pursuing what party leaders deemed the historic compromise. In short, the historic compromise sought to create a situation where the PCI could bring itself into government in partnership with the Christian Democrats. I will not discuss the motivations for pursuing the historic compromise in detail here. Suffice to say, they were varied and complex—one being the fear that, if the PCI were to win an election outright and form a government, it might meet the same fate as the Chilean government of Salvador Allende in 1973 (Berlinguer 1974). The cocktail of domestic far-right violence in the late 1960s and open international hostility toward the PCI from figures like US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger indicated the existence of a base for undermining Italian democracy should the PCI form a government (Ginsborg 1990).

In “The Novel of the Bombings,” Pasolini seemed to recognize the imperative of the historic compromise, writing that the “realistic ‘compromise’ […] might save Italy from total
collapse.” However, “this ‘compromise’ would really be an ‘alliance’ between two neighboring States, or between two States, one of which is embedded in the other” (Pasolini 1975, 57). That said, even if he acknowledged the imperative behind the historic compromise, Pasolini felt the PCI made a fundamental interpretive error by believing it would work. Insofar as the PCI comprised a country within a country—a party whose membership constituted a real communist subjectivity rather than a consumerist subjectivity—its world was irreconcilable and fundamentally separate from the country it existed within. However, it was also the primary party of opposition in parliament. Pasolini wrote, “[considering] the opposition as a Country within the Country, the opposition identifies with another power: a power that, nevertheless, remains a power.” In other words, the world of the country within which the PCI country existed was the domain of the new slippery power of the market. “Consequently,” Pasolini writes, “the politicians of such an opposition can only act like men of power.” The country within a country still existed, but its officials were forced to act as if it never existed in the first place. All of that said, there were no easy answers: the PCI was in a bind. What would Pasolini have had them do?

**Speculative Political Strategy in *Scritti corsari***

The degree to which Pasolini’s journalistic writings contain the hope for a political solution to the problems is underestimated in the scholarship. We forgo more interesting readings of the texts when we accept the premise that Pasolini simply thought all was lost and therefore wrote his articles for no one. I don’t mean to say that Pasolini offered a manifesto that the PCI could have simply picked up in the 1970s and used to change the course of the 20th century in Italy, thus negating the quandaries of Italian politics in our own time. However, his analysis of
the anthropological revolution, the changed position of the Vatican, and the PCI’s historic compromise-era bind intervened in the popular political discourse of his time.

What implications might political actors reading have drawn from Pasolini’s articles? First, Pasolini’s articles foregrounded the need for a clear-eyed and honest interpretation of political conflict that recognized the irreconcilable interests of the PCI and the forces of the market. Pasolini centered this need in his articles on divorce in *Scritti corsari*. He did not reprimand the PCI for supporting divorce, but rather for celebrating victory for divorce as a victory for the PCI and, by extension, victory against capitalist hegemony. He did not write that the PCI should have opposed divorce. Instead, he warned them against falling victim to a conception of progress that adhered to the logic of the market. We might commandeer Pasolini’s call for Vatican to adjust its practical understanding of Christ’s teaching “Give unto Ceasar what is Ceasar’s and unto God what is God’s.” Pasolini could have told the PCI, “Give unto the Market what is the Market’s and unto the PCI what is the PCI’s.”

Second, Pasolini called for an active, confrontational approach that puts interpretation into practice, lest the PCI succumb to the existential threat of a shifted conception of political conflict. Pasolini applauded Pope Paul VI for stumbling onto the correct interpretation of the contemporary political context. As Pasolini wrote, the Pope’s speech “followed the logic of reality” (Pasolini 1975, 48). However, he criticized the Pope for proposing “prayer” as the only solution. In his words, though the Pope recognized the true situation of the church based on the correct analysis of “the outside,” his proposed solution was “formulated ‘from within’” (Pasolini 1975, 49). In other words, prayer was a pre-existing solution that would not confront the true irreconcilability of the Church with the market. If prayer was the only solution, the Vatican was
doomed to passively accept its fate or, in Pasolini’s words, “commit suicide.” I propose that we adapt this message for the PCI. To maintain its important position as a source of differentiation in Italian life, a country within a country, the PCI would have needed to formulate a solution “from within.” Due to the nature of the PCI, this solution would have accepted class as the fundamental terrain of political conflict. However, over a decade following Pasolini’s assassination, the PCI did precisely the opposite, passively accepting its fate dictated by the changing subjectivity of the anthropological revolution. They deployed a solution not “from within” but rather from the outer world of the capitalist state. In 1991, the PCI liquidated itself as a mass party with nearly 2 million members into the Democratic Party of the Left, one Italian party among the others, with no membership (Ginsborg 2003). Pasolini identified the advent of the populist conception of political conflict toward the end of his life. However, “the pure people” of the homogenized consumer subject was not fully actualized until after his death, when the country within a country ceased to exist.

**Politics in a Different Register**

As I suggested in the introduction, Pasolini’s remark that his writing should be read in “several registers at the same time” is imperative to understanding his politics. So far we have only listened to his writings in one register. That is, we have read Pasolini as a commentator on the events of his time. Pasolini the provocateur exists on this level. However, if we constrain ourselves to this level, we are limited to speculation. On the day that he died, an interviewer asked Pasolini to consider a hypothetical scenario: “one little gesture and everything that you detest disappears” (Pasolini 2010, 233). Engaging this “magic thought” is similar to a continued engagement with Pasolini’s journalistic writings as commentary alone. Perhaps the PCI could
have taken something of value from Pasolini’s writing and shaped the political reality after the anthropological revolution rather than passively accepting it. Perhaps.

In the chapters that follow, I read Pasolini in a register that works at a higher level of abstraction. Put simply, we leave behind Pasolini the commentator in favor of Pasolini the theorist. The implication of this move is double: first, on some level, we still live in Pasolini’s time; second, Pasolini can still speak to us if we transpose his writing an octave above the concrete discourse of his time.
Chapter 2: Unacceptable Inevitabilities

“I am adapting myself to the degradation and I am accepting the unacceptable,” writes Pasolini in 1975, near the end of his life (Pasolini 2005, xx). How can one accept what cannot be accepted? The contradiction at the heart of his statement gestures at a political impasse. What Pasolini finds unacceptable in contemporary life has prevailed and he accepts its victory. Elsewhere, Pasolini writes of the “necessity to talk and act in concrete terms” (Pasolini 1983, 11). One has no choice but to live within reality, and whatever is objective in reality is there whether we face it or not. But what, more specifically, does Pasolini find to be unacceptable? Here Pasolini mourns the death of very idea of a political exit from capitalism. The anthropological revolution, which we have detailed in the previous chapter, has destroyed the possibility of a political solution to the problems of what Pasolini calls “Neocapitalism.” The reality which Pasolini faces is shaped by an uncontested—and perhaps uncontestable—mutated form of fascism which he refers to only in vague terms. The new power is “something” (Pasolini 1975, 80). It evades even the concrete language to which Pasolini commits himself.

In the previous chapter, we read Pasolini as a commentator on the political events of the day and extrapolated speculative political interventions that the PCI could have taken from his articles. For our purposes going forward, Pasolini’s acceptance means that political institutions, most notably the PCI, will not put his wisdom to use. Or rather, even if they did, it would be of little consequence. Just as the Vatican will not “Give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s,” thus severing itself from the Italian state once and for all, the PCI will not recuperate its status as a country within a country and stave off the new power through a reassertion of class war.
This chapter finds Pasolini calling for humility in the face of political failure. The question of agency, I argue, is fundamental in Pasolini’s late political thought. In other words, the rubric of Pasolini’s political critique concerns the ability of political formations to determine the quality and quantity of their agency to affect a given political reality. Pasolini, moving to accept the unacceptable, looks out at contemporary Italy and decides that he—and the left in general—is all out of agency. Marx wrote, famously, that “[men] make their own history but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances already existing” (Marx 1852). The PCI and all self-identified progressives find themselves within “already existing” circumstances which all but foreclose an exit from capitalism in its consumerist iteration and fascism in its mutated form. As we will see, Pasolini’s condemnation of the PCI and other historical actors is less than total. The writings I consider are haunted by the specter of inevitability. For example, Pasolini undermines his short critique of Soviet industrialization by ending it with a shrug: “besides, [Stalin] had no choice” (Pasolini 1975, 110).

This chapter takes seriously Pasolini’s recognition that failure and inevitability are the only possible points of departure for communist politics in the 1970s. First, I summarize Pasolini’s critique of the two primary left formations of his time—the PCI and the militants of 1968—through the lens of political agency. Second, I summarize Pasolini’s critique of the idea of progress to uncover, as he saw it, the origin of the inevitability to which he resigns himself. Third, following his critique of progress, I develop Pasolini’s concept of dissociation which, I argue, is the fundamental insight into the politics of his time. Not to be confused with false consciousness or a mystification of concrete reality, dissociation names the embodiment of two
coincidental yet distinct ideological experiences of reality within a person, political formation, or society. Fourth, I summarize Pasolini’s account of the “degradation” to which I referred earlier through the lens of dissociation. Degradation is what happens in the gap between dissociated realities, concealed underneath an appearance of unity.

The outlook of this chapter is bleak and, indeed, one is hard pressed to find anything resembling hope in Pasolini’s late writings—at least not a hope that we might recognize as such. In the passages from *Scritti corsari* referenced below, we find Pasolini performing a kind of exorcism of hope. But the hope which Pasolini wants to save himself from is a false hope. It is a belief in progress which is not what it appears to be. In the third and final chapter I argue that abandoning this particular kind of hope is the first step towards accessing a hope that preserves the idea of revolution. It is a hope that, in Franz Kafka’s words, is “not for us.”

**Communist Agency in the 1970s**

In this section, I argue that the question of agency is primary in Pasolini’s critique of fellow partisans of the left. Pasolini reminds his readers to take seriously both halves of Marx’s formulation “[men] make their own history but they do not make it as they please” (Marx 1852). There are situations in which revolutionary actors might intervene to shape the course of history, and others in which interventions are foreclosed. Telling the difference between the two is, for Pasolini, of greatest importance.

The PCI, in Pasolini’s analysis, exhibited a desire to adapt itself to the existing circumstances rather than to contest them. On July 15, 1973 he wrote that the PCI wished to “integrate itself into the new world” (Pasolini 1975, 15). The new world which Pasolini referenced is the world of the anthropological revolution. It is the world in which multiple,
simultaneous ways of life were subjected to a “genocide” and replaced with a unified consumerist subjectivity. Pasolini seems to oppose this reality with every fiber of his being. It should follow, one thinks, that the PCI’s desire for is not a wish that Pasolini condones. However, his condemnation of the PCI was not total. In the same article, Pasolini wrote that “the PCI realistically took account at that point of the inevitable nature of the new historical course of capitalism and its ‘development’: and it was probably during those days that the idea of the ‘historic compromise’ began to take shape” (Pasolini 1975, 15). In other words, the course charted by the PCI leadership is grounded in a correct analysis of the historical situation. We will return to Pasolini’s emphasis on “development” shortly. For now I want to pause with his use of the word “inevitable.” Whether one finds in the historic compromise a sound strategy or a betrayal, Pasolini does not see much room for revolutionary maneuvering. In fact, when juxtaposed with the militants of the 1968 generation, the PCI came out quite well in Pasolini’s summation.

“In 1968,” Pasolini wrote, “the rallying cry that resounded throughout Europe […] was the word ‘Marxism’” (Pasolini 1975, 15). He continued, writing that “[those] who gave voice to this cry did not want—rightly—to accept the unacceptable” (Pasolini 1975, 15). With the use of the modifier “rightly,” Pasolini undermines his condemnation. Rather than simply decrying the inability of the young militants to face reality, he acknowledged the righteousness of denying a reality which forecloses the very possibility of revolution. Just as it was inevitable that the PCI sought integration into the new world, the 1968 generation inevitably acted as if revolution was immanent. The 1968 generation “desperately lived this long outcry, which was a kind of exorcism and a farewell to Marxist hopes” (Pasolini 1975, 15). The “rallying cry” of the word
“Marxism” was not an incantation that could have called revolution into existence. It was precisely the opposite: the constant assertion of immanent revolution where one didn’t exist served only to “exorcize” any possible revolutionary spirit.

In sum, the PCI recognized the limits of its agency; the 1968 generation exaggerated their own. On the one hand, the PCI sought integration into the world of consumerist capitalism and, on the other hand, the left alternative to the PCI rejected integration in favor of immanent revolution. For Pasolini, the PCI’s strategy was grounded in reality, and the partisans of immanent revolution refused to face facts. While Pasolini would have surely welcomed revolution, it would be naïve to forecast one on the horizon where none existed. Pasolini writes that “[there] is no rationality without common sense and concreteness. Without common sense and concreteness rationality is fanaticism” (Pasolini 1975, 15). It would appear, in Pasolini’s analysis, that the PCI here represents “rationality” where the militants of 1968 represent “fanaticism.”

Hostile Circumstances

While the PCI had a cogent view of its own agency, its members failed to see that the reality to which they sought adaptation was hostile to their own project. The party was trapped. They recognized their lack of agency, saw adaptation as inevitable, but mistook their inevitable adaptation for progress toward a truly democratic and socialist Italy. “Berlinguer\(^3\) and the Italian

\(^3\) Enrico Berlinguer served as PCI General Secretary from 1972 until his unexpected death in 1984. He led the party through its pursuit of the historic compromise. Under the strategy of the historic compromise, the PCI sought to bring itself into government in partnership with the DC, thus neutralizing the most anticommmunist elements of its rival party. Former Prime Minister Aldo Moro represented the faction of the DC most amenable to partnership with the PCI. When Moro was kidnapped and murdered by the Red Brigades in 1978, the idea of the historic compromise died with him. The PCI and Berlinguer then sought a recommitment to worker militancy but would never again reach the electoral heights of 1976.
Communist Party have also proven that they have a deficient understanding of what has happened in our country over the last ten years… Italians have proven to be infinitely more modern than even the most optimistic communist could have imagined” (Pasolini 1975, 22). The terrain on which Italians have “proven to be infinitely more modern” was the divorce referendum of 1974. The triumph of the “no” vote preserved the legality of divorce in Italy—much to the chagrin of the DC and to the surprise of the PCI. The PCI, though in favor of divorce, feared that the referendum would spur a “war of religion” and divide its bases of support into secular and Catholic factions. The result of the referendum, however, laid bare the decline of traditional Catholic values. The PCI, in other words, feared a lingering and ubiquitous backwardness within their voting bloc. In this case, their analysis was incorrect: Italy had already entered the modern world. Following the result, Pasolini wrote: “The Italian Communist Party, however, pretends that it made no mistakes and is rejoicing over its unexpected victory” (Pasolini 1975, 22). The analytical error is a lesser crime than the rejoicing. Put differently, the modern world, into which the backward have advanced, is not a world amenable to the socialist mode of production. Pasolini went so far as to count the PCI, along with the Vatican and DC, among those who faced “defeat” in the referendum. While “defeat” for the Vatican and DC “resounds in its full, literal and objective meaning, the same word used with reference to the PCI has an infinitely more subtle and complex significance” (Pasolini 1975, 43).

The changes in Italy which Pasolini chronicles came in the wake of or, rather, coincide with the ongoing expansion and development of the capitalist mode of production. Following the years of Italy’s “economic miracle” of the late 1950s and early 1960s, capitalist development offered Italians
a material transformation which can only be called a profound liberation. For the first time the majority of the population had the possibility of living decently, of being warm and well clothed, of eating good food, and could bring up their children without fear of their being malformed or malnourished… The wall which had separated town and countryside, South and North, mass deprivation and relative prosperity, had been breached – not in the way that the Communists or even the Catholics would have liked, but breached it had been (Ginsborg 1990, 249).

While development demonstrated a capacity to increase living standards and, thus, generate what some would label “progress,” how should revolutionaries orient themselves to the positive trappings of development? The left is against capitalist development and against poverty, but by the looks of it, the former decreased the latter. How does Pasolini say the left should think about this quandary? A specifically capitalist development is not the only means of achieving progress. However, there is no other kind of development at hand. Pasolini offered a surgical analysis of the terms “development” and “progress” to highlight the problem of their complex relationship.

**Development and Progress**

Are development and progress distinct phenomena? Pasolini dedicated an entire article to the analysis of the two terms as signifiers. He used this analysis to develop what I will argue is a foundational concept in his thought: dissociation. “Progress,” Pasolini finds, is one of two “key words” in his articles. The other key word was “development” (Pasolini 1975, 109). He sets out to discover whether these terms describe a single phenomenon or, he asks, “if they are not synonymous, do they indicate two distinct phenomena that nonetheless necessarily comprise a single whole?” In other words, are development and progress one and the same? Can you have one without the other? Pasolini meditates on both terms, analyzing their cultural significance (or “network of references”) and real, material significance.
Development signifies the project of capital from the perspective of capital. For the industrialist, development signifies growth and capital accumulation. Its “network of references” comprise what Pasolini identifies as “an undoubtedly right-wing” context. By this he means that those in Italian society who identify themselves as proponents of development are industrialists—those whose interests within capitalist social relations are diametrically opposed to those of the proletariat. He continues, writing that it is the industrialists who positively desire development in its full right-wing network of references. “And because ‘development’ in Italy is this development, it is in this case precisely the industrialists who produce superfluous goods” (Pasolini 1975, 109). As a signifier, development mirrors the manifestation of development in the material world. In other words, for the industrialist, development represents growth and capital accumulation and is growth and capital accumulation. However, for consumers, development signifies “social advancement and liberation” (Pasolini 1975, 109). Pasolini clarifies that “this ideology is only lived existentially… This does not mean that this choice is decisive, triumphalist and whole hearted” (Pasolini 1975, 109). Industrialists positively affirm and seek development; consumers affirm development through their pursuit of advancement and liberation from the prior “models” or ways of life which included “poor people” and “workers,” among others. For industrialists, development represents one thing (growth) and is that thing; for consumers, development represents another thing (liberation) and is another (growth). In this case, industrialists are free of dissociation and consumers are not.

Progress, for the working class, signifies liberation from poverty. It operates under a different “network of references.” It is not, by and large, industrialists who positively affirm progress. Instead, “[t]hose who have immediate interests that can be satisfied by way of
‘progress’ are the ones who want it: the workers, the peasants, and the left-wing intellectuals want ‘progress’” (Pasolini 1975, 110). That is, these people vocalize a desire for progress in what Pasolini calls a “decisive, triumphalist and wholehearted sense.” Pasolini writes that there may well be individual industrialists who sincerely affirm progress “but this case is the exception to the rule” (Pasolini 1975, 110). Progress is “an ideal (social and political) notion” where development “is a pragmatic and economic fact” (Pasolini 1975, 110). The distinction between ideal notions and economic facts sets up the concept of dissociation, which is the reality of the working class in Italy. The working class holds the ideal notion of progress, which coincides with the economic fact of development.

The “network of references” associated with development are not universal. Development has a different network of references in pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary contexts. After defining development and progress in the Italian context, Pasolini considers Lenin in the wake of the 1917 revolution. He writes that development was “the watchword that Lenin promulgated almost immediately after the victory of the revolution” (Pasolini 1975, 110). Unlike the industrialists of modern Italy, who sought capital accumulation for its own sake, Lenin sought development as a necessity to meet the immediate needs of an underdeveloped country. He also notes that the Bolshevik victory in the revolution was a struggle for “progress.” Extending Pasolini’s earlier definitions, that makes the victorious revolution “an ideal (social and political) notion” and the political-economic needs of the post-revolutionary Soviet Union “a pragmatic and economic fact.” Like the working class in Italy, the Soviet project embodies an ideal notion of progress which, after the revolution, coincides with the economic necessity for development. Though within the context of the post-revolutionary society development
represents something other than capitalist development it is, within a global context, de facto the same development which is the project of industrialists in Italy.

Pasolini then criticizes the Soviets in a manner which echoes his not-quite total condemnation of the PCI. He first says that struggling for development in a post-revolutionary society “is not an obligatory condition for applying revolutionary Marxism and bringing about a communist society.” There are other roads to communism. One might not necessarily follow traditional Marxist temporality and pass through an industrial period before getting there. What’s more, “[industrializing] a communist country [that is, a non-ideal and newly post-revolutionary society] of peasants entails entering into competition with the already industrialized bourgeois countries” (Pasolini 1975, 110). While socialist “development” is of a different character than development in capitalist societies, it does not happen in a vacuum. That is, it happens in the context of an increasingly globalized and capitalist world economy. The “already industrialized bourgeois countries” will, as proponents of development, always have the advantage. So, the post-revolutionary country chooses to industrialize and Pasolini sees this choice as foolhardy. “Entering into competition with the already industrialized bourgeois countries” is “just what Stalin did” after the death of Lenin. Post-revolutionary industrialization is different than bourgeois industrialization, though its “character has been formed and established in the context of bourgeois industrialization” (Pasolini 1975, 110). However, Pasolini ends his short meditation on socialist development by writing, unexpectedly, “And besides, he had no choice” (Pasolini 1975, 110). He builds our expectations that he is going to unequivocally condemn the idea that post-revolutionary societies should industrialize and then, just at the end, undermines his condemnation by saying industrialization could not have been avoided. Just as the PCI’s choice
to pursue the historic compromise was grounded in the “inevitable nature of the new historical
course of capitalism” (Pasolini 1975, 15). Stalin’s pursuit of development was also inevitable.
Like the PCI’s aspirations to integrate itself into the world of consumer capitalism, the Soviet
Union’s choice to industrialize was not simply a betrayal of revolution but contained a rational
kernel.

Pasolini then returns to Italy, where “[no] revolution has been victorious.” In Italy, “the
left that wants ‘progress’ and therefore ‘development, must accept precisely this kind of
‘development’: the development of bourgeois economic and technological expansion” (Pasolini
1975, 110). The working class in Italy—whose “immediate interests” can be satisfied by
progress—is in a historical bind. Here Pasolini means not only the rank-and-file members of the
PCI but rather its entire electoral base, the “millions of citizens” who vote or might potentially
vote PCI. Among these Italians, one might live “Marxist ideology in his consciousness and as a
result, among his other values, he lives the idea of ‘progress’ in his consciousness” (Pasolini
1975, 111). Progress is an idea which represents liberation and a rising standard of living.
However, “at the same time, he lives the ideology of consumerism in his existence, and as a
result, a fortiori, the values of ‘development’” (Pasolini 1975, 111). In other words, there is only
one kind of progress available: that which results from the “pragmatic and economic fact” of
capitalist development. The proponents of this development have interests which are opposed to
those of the workers. Workers want progress, but the progress they get is the progress of
Dissociated, Coincidental Realities

In this section, I develop Pasolini’s concept of dissociation and argue that it is fundamental to his mode of analysis. Dissociation is for Pasolini the primary characteristic of the working class in Italy. However, dissociation is not unique to the working class. The concept is a motif throughout Pasolini’s work, which includes his journalistic writing (and with which we are primarily concerned), but also runs through his films and novels. I will not give a comprehensive account of dissociation across Pasolini’s diverse body of work. My goal is to grasp and develop the idea of dissociation into a lens through which we can better understand the historical bind which leads Pasolini to “accept the unacceptable.”

Stefano Rosatti provides a concise account of dissociation within the context of Pasolini’s discourse on development and progress: “The problem is that, in present society, those who support progress experience the ‘progress idea’ in their [consciousness], but, at the same time, they experience the consumerist ideology, the ‘development idea’, in their existence (Rosatti 2009, 260). The dissociation to which we refer is the dissociation between coinciding “ideas” in consciousness and experience. It would be easy to read the idea in consciousness as a false, immaterial idea compared to the real, material idea of experience. However, Pasolini does not see consciousness as something that can be easily dispensed with or changed. Consciousness is,

---

4 An early manifestation of dissociation in Pasolini’s work appears in the 1969 film Medea. The film portrays the story of Jason and the Argonauts as well as the later betrayal of Medea, adapted from the play by Euripides. Jason, who is mentored by a centaur in his youth, encounters the centaur after a long period of travel, only to find it paired with a double. When Jason insists that he knows “only one centaur,” the centaur replies: “No. You’ve known two: a sacred one when you were a boy and a desecrated one when you became a man. But what was sacred is preserved within the new desecrated form” (Medea 1969). This example concerns the meeting of two dissociated realities across time, a concept which is central to my argument in chapter three. While I do not provide a comprehensive account of dissociation across Pasolini’s work here, doing so will be imperative to the development of my work on Pasolini in the future.
like experience, real. We get a sense of this conviction in a line from *Lutheran Letters*:

“[feelings] cannot change: they are historical” (Pasolini 1983, 11). The problem of dissociation is not merely one of false consciousness that masks the actual, material situation.

Rather, the problem, to which Rosatti alludes, arises from mistaking “the progress idea” in one’s consciousness for the “development idea” that is observable in one’s existence. As we have already noted, living standards did improve for much of Italy in the wake of development (Ginsborg 1990, 249). Those who favored this turn of events and those whose lives were materially affected—that is, progressives and those who stand to benefit from progress—looked out at the world and saw the progress idea in their consciousness coinciding with the development idea in existence. As Agamben writes about the law, “inasmuch as it simply coincides with reality, [the law] is absolutely unobservable” (Agamben 2005, 105). We might adapt Agamben’s formulation as follows: inasmuch as progress coincides with development, progress is absolutely unobservable. That is, what we actually observe is development in existence coinciding with the idea of progress in consciousness. That said, progress coinciding with development reinforces a very real consciousness for those who want progress and those who benefit from progress. From the perspective of those who benefit from progress, it is difficult to hold these two ideas at once: (1) people can live decently and clothe and feed their children, and (2) this same phenomenon is ultimately a project of working class immiseration. The idea of progress has, in this sense, a material basis, in so far as it coincides with development in existence. However, the idea of progress, because it only coincides with development rather than results from it, may one day no longer be reflected in development. In the context of real increases in living standards, progress is mistaken for development and
progressives in turn believe that they have observed progress. Thus, when progress slows or ceases, the project becomes one of a return to progress, which is to say a return to development. In the context of capitalist society, the phenomenon which appears to be progress (immediate material liberation from poverty) is in fact an instance of development coinciding with progress in appearance.

Christopher Lasch, in his history of the idea of progress in America, echoes Pasolini’s warning that progress both upends traditional ways of life and severs our connection to historical memory. In *The True and Only Heaven*, he writes: “[t]he assumption that our standard of living (in the broadest meaning of that term) will undergo a steady improvement colors our view of the past as well as our view of the future… It makes the past a foreign country, as David Lowenthal puts it. It obscures the connections between the past and the present” (Lasch 1991, 14). Under the sway of the idea of progress, the future is necessarily the horizon of development: the project of growth and technological development in the name of capital accumulation. One result of this, Pasolini argues, is that the past is radically separated from the present. Another result is that, when existence no longer reflects the idea, dissociation masks the splitting apart of coincidental realities.

In sum, at the outset, the idea of progress in consciousness coincides with the idea of development in existence. Later, the dissociated realities diverge, and progress no longer coincides with the reality of development. However, thinking that they have previously observed progress rather than development (when the two realities coincided), progressives are unable to see this divergence. In the widening gap between fact and feeling, the progressive historical narrative—the idea that we move continually onwards and upwards—hides the destruction and
regression wrought by development. Pasolini provides an account of the regression that happens under the surface of the idea of progress, which I will turn to next.

**“Something” Happened: The Article on the Fireflies**

The idea of progress ascribes a certain direction to history: onwards and upwards. Instances of stagnation or regression are merely aberrations and not indicative of deeper or structural issues. That said, the progressive historical narrative—that living standards should continue to rise indefinitely—has a basis in reality. We have already asserted that the idea of progress, a reality of consciousness for the progressive, coincided with (in Agamben’s terms) the absolutely observable reality of development. Progressives have a deeply felt experience of progress, and feelings “cannot change: they are historical” (Pasolini 1983, 11). If we follow Pasolini’s premise that the condition of dissociation is the coincidence of two realities—one in conscience and one in existence—then the progressive historical narrative is, at the level of consciousness, a reality. Elsewhere, Pasolini has said that his writing is meant to speak in “several registers at the same time” (Pasolini 2005, 154). While the historical narrative of progress sounds at the level of consciousness, another historical narrative hums underneath in existence. Pasolini’s “Article on the Fireflies” is an attempt to listen to this other historical narrative—this undertone—by looking back and reconstructing it. While one story sings along in the key of progress, another hums underneath in the key of development.

Pasolini’s article begins as an intervention into left intellectual (which is to say progressive) discourse. The dominant left intellectual position he engages is that the postwar political consensus in Italy is not a rupture with Mussolini’s fascism but its continuation under a different guise. Pasolini’s intervention is to say that the historical shift of most relevance to today
is not the shift from the first iteration of fascism to the second, but rather a nefarious other shift which took place during the postwar period. He responds to an article by communist intellectual, Franco Fortini. Pasolini agrees with Fortini that Mussolini constitutes “nominal fascism” where the Christian Democrats constitutes “objective fascism” (Pasolini 1975, 80). In other words, Mussolini’s fascism was nominal in the sense that it named itself fascist. The fascism of Christian Democracy is objective because it is in continuity with Mussolini’s fascism, Pasolini and Fortini assert, in every meaningful sense besides its name. However, he writes, it “is neither pertinent nor relevant for our times” (Pasolini 1975, 80). The relevance of the distinction between fascisms ceased ten years previously when, Pasolini writes, “something” happened. After this “something” occurred, the fact of fascist continuity can be passed over in silence. “The real confrontation between ‘fascisms,’” he writes, “cannot therefore be a ‘chronological’ confrontation between fascist fascism and Christian Democratic fascism, but rather between fascist fascism and a radically, totally, unpredictably new fascism that was born from that ‘thing’ that happened about ten years ago” (Pasolini 1975, 81). The process of transformation, which is something other than the transition from nominal to objective fascism, was “not foreseeable” before it began or “even while it was happening” (Pasolini 1975, 80).

Without naming the “something”—which stands in for the incomprehensible new agent of power after the anthropological revolution—Pasolini asks the reader’s permission to “provide a definition of a literary-poetic nature” (Pasolini 1975, 81). He lends the name “the disappearance of the fireflies” to the process in which “something” happened.

Pasolini’s metaphor of extinction is central to what Rei Terrada identifies as his project: “sorting the dead from the nonexistent” (Terada 2017, 146). For example, Italian democracy is
nonexistent. It was not betrayed by the “objective fascism” of Christian Democracy; due to fascist continuity, it never existed in the first place. Therefore, democracy cannot (and should not) be mourned. On the other hand, like the disappearing firefly, the separated concrete cultures of the old world were extinguished in the anthropological revolution. They are dead and won’t be resurrected. Pasolini mourns them here.

The deployment of the firefly is apt for another reason: in the same period that “something” happened, firefly populations declined. “During the early 1960s, due to air pollution and, especially in the countryside, water pollution (of the rivers and the lakes), the fireflies began to disappear” (Pasolini 1975, 81). Both the destruction of the old ways of life and the disappearance of the fireflies find their origin in capitalist development. Even though this process was “not foreseeable” while it was happening, Pasolini calls it “explosive and riveting” (Pasolini 1975, 81), again highlighting the difficulty of seeing history unfold within dissociation. Even the most fundamental transformations go undetected as they happen and are often grasped only in retrospect. After the disappearance of the fireflies, the radical break with the past from the present which Christopher Lasch named is apparent. Pasolini writes that an “old man who remembers [the firefly] cannot recognize himself as a young man in the young people of our time, and therefore can no longer experience the beautiful feelings of his lost past” (Pasolini 1975, 81). By lingering with the subjective experience of the disappearance, Pasolini highlights the power of deep tradition to hold the past in the present. If Pasolini’s project is to sort the dead from the nonexistent, the firefly is dead, and dead seems to be an objective category. However, the stratified subjective experiences of the two generations are so extreme that the firefly—
objectively dead—is effectively nonexistent for the new generation which has no living memory of it.

Pasolini’s account of the disappearance is split into three periods: before the disappearance of the fireflies, while the fireflies were disappearing, and after the disappearance of the fireflies.

A. Before the disappearance of the fireflies

In his meditation on the first phase, which lasts from the end of World War II until the disappearance of the fireflies, Pasolini asserts the lack of historical memory on the part of progressives and the dissociation of the peasant world and the Catholic church.

In this first phase, “the continuity between fascist fascism and Christian Democratic fascism is total and absolute” (Pasolini 1975). Pasolini notes that this continuity has a literal basis in the era of Christian Democracy in a failure to expel fascists from government posts, the preservation of fascist laws, continuity in the regime of policing, and disregard for the constitution. Looking back at this period from the present, the left opposition believes that its current analysis of fascist continuity—epitomized by Fortini’s article—was already present and developed during this first period. From the vantage of 1975, the purely formal character of postwar democracy is “clear and unequivocal.” However, “at that time foolish hopes were nourished by the intellectuals and the opposition… that formal democracy would finally mean something” (Pasolini 1975). Here Pasolini names another instance of dissociation. In their conscience, the left opposition lives the democracy promised by the new Italian constitution, whose first line reads: “Italy is a democratic Republic founded on labour” (Constitute Project n.d.). However, in existence, they lived in a reality of fascist continuity and formal democracy.
Italian democracy in this period, Pasolini argues, was only formal because it was based on “a totally repressive regime” of Catholic values. “[The] ‘values’ that counted were the same as under fascism: Church, fatherland, family, obedience, discipline, order, thrift, morality” (Pasolini 1975, 81). These values had such purchase within the population because they also “belonged to the particular, concrete cultures that constituted an archaically agrarian and paelo-industrial Italy” (Pasolini 1975, 81). So, the Catholic church too was dissociated: the relationship of Catholic values with the values of the old world was one of coincidence. In other words, these values were not seeded in the particular cultures but rather, conveniently for the Vatican, coincided with those that already existed. After the replacement of these cultures with a homogenous consumerist culture, the values lose their influence and the “totally repressive regime” loses its capacity for repression.

Before the disappearance of the fireflies, dissociation is invisible. That is, the two coincidental realities—one observable in existence, the other not—still appear as one in the same. It is only when the two realities begin to diverge that dissociation can become legible.

**B. While the fireflies were disappearing**

The interim period, while the fireflies were disappearing, is marked by transition and the incomplete process of regression which is still in motion. Though the two dissociated realities begin to break apart and their relationship is less and less one of coincidence, it is still difficult to see the disappearance as it is happening.

The left opposition is unable to see the “explosive and riveting” phenomena as it takes place. “In this period the distinction between fascism and fascism posited [by Fortini] was still valid. For neither the vast nation that was taking shape within the country—that is, the working
class and peasant masses organized in the PCI—nor the most advanced and critical intellectuals, noticed that ‘the fireflies were disappearing’” (Pasolini 1975, 82). These two forces—the PCI and the left intelligentsia—were completely unable to see that their project for progress and the continued improvement of living standards for the working class was not only friendly to capitalist development, it actually is capitalist development. “No one could have expected what the immediate future would have in store for them; nor could they have ascertained that what was then called ‘prosperity,’ which allegedly went hand in hand with the ‘development’ that was then seriously underway in Italy for the first time, would be identical with the ‘genocide’ that Marx spoke of in his Manifesto” (Pasolini 1975, 82). Thus, in his exegesis on the interim period, Pasolini insists that his project of sorting the dead from the nonexistent is in keeping with insights of Marx and Engels on the transformative capacities of capitalism.

Pasolini’s insistence that Marx anticipates the “genocide” he describes in modern Italy is curious and others have detected a hint of disingenuousness. Evan Calder Williams notes that Pasolini makes this same assertion “in six different texts and interviews, although he never once specifies which passage.” In another article, Pasolini writes “In Marx’s Manifesto there is a passage that clearly and precisely describes the extremes of genocide that are carried out by the bourgeoisie with relation to certain strata of the ruled classes, above all the classes that are not working class, but sub-proletarian or various colonial populations” (Pasolini 1975, 139). If Pasolini is not simply making something up, what in the Manifesto might he be referring to?

Marx and Engels also use violent analogy when discussing the homogenizing capacity of capitalist social relations. In a particularly evocative passage, Marx and Engels write that “[t]he bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic
relations… [it] has *drowned* the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation” (Marx and Engels 2008, 37; emphasis added). Marx and Engels do not use the word genocide, but they do use another murderous word, “drowned,” in a figurative manner. On the one hand, capitalism demonstrated a great capacity to destroy feudalism and throw people off the land—a concrete and material destruction. However, Marx and Engels use the force of violent analogy here not when discussing the destruction of concrete feudal social relations, but to emphasize the destruction of cultural realities.

One effect of Pasolini’s heavy handed analogy is, perhaps, to emphasize that, as it continues to spread and develop, capitalism continues the process of destroying tradition. That is, he sorts what capitalism destroys into the category of the dead, lest his readers believe it never existed in the first place. In the famous passage that comes soon after the one quoted above, Marx and Engels write: “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind” (Marx and Engels 2008, 38). The destruction of “ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions” continues in Pasolini’s time. It is perhaps too strong a word to say that Marx was prophetic, but this reading of the Manifesto through Pasolini emphasizes that Marx was also writing about future sweepings away and not only those which had already happened at the time he wrote the Manifesto. Further, Pasolini emphasizes that these concrete cultures actually existed and exist no more. That is, they are dead, unlike Italian democracy which never existed in the first place.
C. After the disappearance of the fireflies

In the third and final phase, the capacity for the traditional repressive power of the Italian state is finally undermined and replaced by the repressive power of the market. Pasolini writes that “[the] nationalized and therefore falsified ‘values’ of the old agrarian and paleo-capitalist world were suddenly mortally undermined” (Pasolini 1975, 82). These values belonged to the “particular, concrete cultures” of pre-industrial Italy and overlapped with the “totally repressive regime” of the Vatican. The values of the particular concrete cultures, for Pasolini, were real in the sense that they were grounded in actual traditions and ways of life. The “nationalized” values of the state were “falsified” in the sense that they concealed the superficial nature of Italian national identity and were actually the values of the particular concrete cultures in disguise. When the particular concrete cultures evaporate, so does the power of the state to wield influence using the values of “[church], fatherland, family, obedience, order, thrift, and morality,” which “no longer mattered” (Pasolini 1975, 82).

Pasolini’s primary case study to this end is surely the divorce referendum. On the one side, the Christian Democrats and the Vatican thought that the old values would consolidate a conservative voting bloc against the forces of progress; on the other side, the PCI feared the continued existence of the old values would divide their working class base of support into progressive and conservative camps. Both sides failed to see that these values only “survived in marginalized clerical-fascism” but no longer mattered among the wider population (Pasolini 1975, 82). In other words, there will always be aberrations and some marginal reactionaries will continue to assert the old values. However, these instances are exceptions rather than symptoms of a larger trend within the project of capitalist development.
The result of this mutation is an “irreversible degradation” (Pasolini 1975, 83). Pasolini comes to the realization that something fundamental has changed through the fact that he “loved the Italian people.” He writes that “in order to understand the changes that people undergo, you must love them” (Pasolini 1975, 83). Here we might detect an underhanded swipe at the left intellectuals who, Pasolini seems to imply, did not love the peasant and subproletarian Italians whose concrete ways of life disappeared. He continues, saying that among the Italians he loved were those “outside the milieus of power (or rather, in desperate opposition to them)” and those “outside of the populist humanitarian milieus” (Pasolini 1975, 83). Those in the first category, outside the milieus of power, surely included the PCI and its members, which had been intentionally excluded from government for the entire postwar period while serving as the primary opposition to the Christian Democrats—the party of fascist continuity.

Those in the second category, perhaps, included the urban subproletariat and the rural poor, those who lived on the periphery of capitalist development. Now, there is no periphery left—that is, as Pasolini notes, there is no more peripheral consciousness. By nature of his “real love,” Pasolini has “seen, ‘with [his] own eyes’, the coercive ways of the power of consumerism transform and distort the consciousness of the Italian people… something that never happened under the regime of fascist fascism” (Pasolini 1975, 83). For all of its violence and physical coercion, the fascism of the Mussolini period, Pasolini asserts, did not reach the consciousness of these Italians. During that period, “conduct was completely dissociated from consciousness” (Pasolini 1975, 83). That is, the Italians which Pasolini loved lived a non-fascist peripheral consciousness while living out their physical existence within fascism. “The fascist ‘models’, Pasolini writes, “were nothing but masks that one could put on and take off” (Pasolini 1975, 83).
Previously, the totally repressive regime of fascism in existence coincided with the values of the old world. Now, the diffuse repression of capitalist development coincides with the idea of progress. With it, hopes for liberation are tied to the project of capital accumulation and endless growth. Unlike the residents of the peripheries in their masks of fascism, modern Italians are consumers through and through.

**Conspiracy and Inevitability**

Before the disappearance of the fireflies, political power was tangible and located within the repressive institutions of the Italian state—first under the guise of Mussolini’s nominal fascism and second as the objective fascism of postwar Christian Democracy. After the disappearance of the fireflies, power is more difficult to comprehend. It is both more diffuse and more pernicious. As we have already noted, Pasolini matches the incomprehensibility of power with vague language—something. Then, surprisingly, toward the end of his article, Pasolini makes an ambiguous gesture at the role of conspiracy in the disappearance of the fireflies by naming a specific firm.

He begins his conclusion by writing that the DC, for its part, is completely unaware that the fireflies have disappeared and that the power it wields is false and serves the “real power.” This “real power” has “[dispelled] the prospect of the participation in the government of the vast communist nation that has been born from the disintegration of Italy” (Pasolini 1975, 85). That is, the “real power” which Christian Democracy serves has conspired to keep the PCI out of government. The sudden intrusion of conspiracy reminds us that capitalist development is not only an abstract process which plays out according to the laws of motion outlined by Marx in *Capital*; the social and political reality in which Pasolini finds himself is also the result of real
agents making interventions to steer the course of development. In other words, Marx’s famous
adage “men make their own history but not under circumstances of their choosing” applies
equally to both sides of the class struggle. The working class makes revolution by intervening
within a given context; the bourgeoisie consolidates power and capital through interventions
within a given context. I read the last two confounding sentences of “The Article on the
Fireflies” as further developing the unity of abstract processes and individual agency in capitalist
development.

He first writes: “We have abstract and basically apocalyptic images of this ‘real’ power:
we cannot imagine what ‘forms’ it will assume if it directly replaces its servants with a simple
‘modernization’ of techniques” (Pasolini 1975, 85). In this first sentence he refers to the inability
of the state to drive the course of history. Images of power can only be “abstract” because the
concreteness of the “totally repressive regime” has been lost and replaced with the abstract
repression of the market. The market is a fundamentally abstract power because, while it sets the
terms of decision making for individual firms, it is not comprised of a literal central authority
which enacts decisions in the world. The same images are also “apocalyptic” in the sense that the
development which, in the short term, gifts Italians with a stark increase in the standard of living,
also points toward cataclysm. That is, development leads to the literal disappearance of the
fireflies and, as it “replaces servants with a simple ‘modernization’ of techniques,” will
eventually depress the stead of workers and the leverage of traditional industrial union
organizations. The abstract power of the market tends toward these regressions while it delivers
progress.
He then writes, in the final sentence: “[in] any event, as for me (if the reader is at all interested), the situation is clear: even if it is a multinational, I would give all of Montedison for a single firefly” (Pasolini 1975, 85). Pasolini would give up all the trappings of development (namely, the increase in living standards) to glimpse one firefly. He isn’t bartering for the return of the species—that is, to raise the firefly from the dead—but rather for a glimpse at a single insect. He doesn’t want to reconstruct something that has been broken. Rather, he longs, like the old man he has already mentioned, to “experience the beautiful feelings of his lost past.” By the end, Pasolini wants his readers to know that the firefly, and the feelings which accompany it, are lost and we cannot count on historical conditions to emerge in the future which will give them some basis to return.

But what of “Montedison,” a specific firm which stands in for development in the final sentence? Montedison is a petrochemical firm which resulted from the 1966 merger of the Montecatini and Edison firms (Ginsborg 1990, 284). In his history of contemporary Italy, Paul Ginsborg writes that the merger was “bitterly opposed on anti-monopolistic grounds by the PCI and by the Lombardi Socialists, gave Montedison control of nearly 80 per cent of the Italian chemical industry and 15 per cent of the European market” (Ginsborg 284). Eugenio Cefis was the president of Montedison at the time of Pasolini’s invocation. Cefis engineered a violent takeover of Montedison while president of ENI, the largest oil company in Italy.

While president of ENI, Cefis began secretly buying up shares in the Montedison company. By 1968 he exercised effective control, and three years later he left ENI to become president of Montedison… By the early 1970s he stood at the head of a considerable empire, which stretched from Montedison through the ownership of major newspapers, to the financing of political parties and close links with the secret services” (Ginsborg 284-5).
Pasolini has thus far insisted on an abstract and vague conception of development—why does he invoke a concrete name? Pasolini’s insistence on abstraction is clear enough. We risk losing the plot if aberrant “clerical-fascist” holdovers from the Mussolini period come to stand in for the new power which operates not by a “totally repressive regime” but through capitalist development. Pasolini has already asserted that the anthropological revolution has extinguished the basis for collective politics—we are all consumers now. The subjective experience of being an individual is, in Pasolini’s words, a “feeling” which is “historical.” The future of collective political projects is constrained by this inevitable feeling which unfolds from history. While a working class collectivity is now seemingly unable to assert itself in the class war against the bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie will continue to participate and consolidate power among itself and against the working class which can no longer see itself as such. Bourgeoisie power is at once concrete and abstract. Pasolini’s movement between vagueness and naming concrete actors is operating in two keys at once. The power of development is abstract. However, unlike the working class, bourgeois actors, like Montedison and Cefis, still have agency after the disappearance of the fireflies.

If the 1968 generation’s rallying cry of “Marxism” served only as an unintentional exorcism of Marxist hopes for immanent revolution, Pasolini’s journalistic articles serve to intentionally exorcise progressive hopes. There is no progress which is not the progress of development; the basis for working class counterpower no longer exists; the “real power” is incomprehensible, without center, and succeeds where fascism failed. Where the “absolutely repressive regime” of the state could benefit from the coincidence of its own values in existence with the old values in consciousness of the periphery, the new power reaches and mutates
consciousness itself. Pasolini’s acceptance of the unacceptable is a rejection of temporal hope in the future. What comes after hope? In the next chapter, I argue that Pasolini’s rejection of temporal hope clears the way for a transcendent hope that preserves the idea of revolution in the face of failure.
Chapter 3: Hope Against Hope

What comes after hope? Pasolini’s acceptance of the unacceptable leads us to this question. After the loss of the separated world all existing political institutions are unable to act as agents of power. A power, we remember, which now presents itself as a void, a “something.” As we have already noted, Pasolini wrote that all hope for progress had been subsumed into the project of capitalist development. Progress is, for those who believe in it, the belief that living standards should continue to improve. It is a hope for a real, material liberation from the constraints of poverty. However, as previously quoted, Pasolini wrote that “the left that wants ‘progress’ and therefore ‘development’, must accept precisely this kind of ‘development’: the development of bourgeois economic and technological expansion” (Pasolini 1975, 110). I propose that we rewrite this statement to say something about the kind of hope which underlies the belief in progress. Those who are looking for political hope—the assertion that things might be otherwise—must accept precisely this hope: the only hope we have access to—the hope of bourgeois economic and technological expansion. This hope is the hope which Pasolini has dispensed with. What comes after this hope?

The running hypothesis that animates this final chapter is that dispensing with the immanent hope of progress and development, the only hope to which we have access, might lead us to a transcendent hope which is not for us. Before searching for this other hope in Pasolini’s work, I want to introduce a possible example of transcendent hope that comes from one of Pasolini’s contemporaries.

Lucio Magri, like Pasolini, had a complex relationship with the PCI. Magri, along with his comrade Rossana Rossanda, was expelled from the party in 1969 after founding the dissident
communist newspaper, *Il Manifesto*. Magri and Rossanda would both rejoin the PCI in the 1980s. After the dissolution of the PCI, Magri wrote a history of the party titled *The Tailor of Ulm*. The book takes its name from a true story, popularized in a poem by Bertolt Brecht. Magri uses the tailor’s story as a framing device for the story of the PCI, a party whose hopes for a different Italy were not redeemed. The real-life tailor, Magri writes, was

A German artisan who became obsessed with the idea of building a machine that would enable men to fly. One day, convinced that he had succeeded, the tailor took his device to the ruling bishop and said: ‘Look, I can fly!’ The rule challenged him to prove it, but when he finally took to the air he crashed to the pavement below. And yet centuries later—Brecht concludes—human beings did learn to fly (Magri 2018, 1).

The tailor’s belief that humans could fly may well have emerged from individual naïveté or delusions of grandeur. However, the kind of hope I am looking for does not follow from the will of individuals. In fact, following Kafka, a hope that is “not for us” necessarily exists independently from any particular person. Instead, I want to emphasize the structure of this chain of events. The tailor believes that man can fly. The masses and institutions of his time do not hold this belief. The tailor’s belief is not supported by the material conditions in which he exists and, in fact, is falsified by his own death during his attempt to prove it. Yet, years later, mankind flies. The hope which we can draw from the structure of the story is one which we are prevented from seeing by the historical narratives in which we live. Specifically, returning to Pasolini, our lack of historical sight is limited by dissociation. As we have already acknowledged through our exegesis on dissociation, escape from the conundrums of our own consciousness and existence won’t come from individual will. Our consciousness is the realm of historical feeling which cannot change. How can we access a hope which is not for us while existing in the here and now? More importantly, how should those who want to create a different world think about
hope? How can we be certain that the hope we feel is not *this* hope but rather the hope embodied by the world we have yet to create in our realm?

To answer these questions, I start with the essay which serves as the culmination of all Pasolini’s writings we have looked at so far: “The Repudiation of the Trilogy of Life.” This essay is where Pasolini fully accepts the unacceptable and, I argue, opens himself to a hope which is not for us (or for him).

*The Trilogy of Life and Salò*

“The Repudiation of the Trilogy of Life” is the textual prologue to Pasolini’s infamous final film: *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*. *Salò*, which would not be released until weeks after Pasolini’s brutal murder, was a departure from his three previous films in several ways. A short introduction to the films is necessary to ground discussion of Pasolini’s “Repudiation.”

The three previous films—*The Decameron*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *Arabian Nights*, known collectively as *The Trilogy of Life*—were commercially successful adaptations of the texts from which they take their titles. The source material, however, served as a means for Pasolini’s preoccupation with the periphery, the outside to capitalism which had vanished in the anthropological revolution. As he often did, Pasolini cast nonprofessional actors who themselves came from the rural or urban subproletariat. In each film, sex features prominently and nearly always as a means of undermining existing power structures. In other words, sex is a means for subproletarian pleasure and conspiracy against the upper classes and the continuation of the separated world.

*Salò* could not be more different. Using the Marquis de Sade’s novel *The 120 Days of Sodom* as its source material, *Salò* depicts the kidnapping of six girls and six boys from the
underclasses by four fascist aristocrats. The setting of the film is the town of Salò, the seat of Mussolini’s short lived Italian Social Republic near the end of the war. Pasolini thus sets his film in the twilight of Italian fascism. This is the context of the brutal repression and torture depicted in the film: the end of fascism rather than its ascent or hegemony. Sex plays a much different role in Salò. In the Trilogy sex was a means of conspiracy; in Salò, sex in its many and varied manifestations is a means only for satisfying the desires of the four fascist libertines.

To use a phrase of his own, “something” happened to Pasolini between making Arabian Nights (the final film of the trilogy) and Salò. As we (and Pasolini) have already noted, the anthropological revolution happened well before the culmination of the Trilogy. Arabian Nights was made well after the fireflies had disappeared, though Pasolini had not yet realized it. The “something” that happened which motivated the production of Salò was not the disappearance of the fireflies, but Pasolini’s project of making it legible. We have thus far chronicled these projects through his journalistic writings. Aside from Salò, Pasolini’s “Repudiation” is the culminating document of this process.

**Abjuration and Adaptation**

“The Repudiation of the Trilogy of Life” reveals the films it repudiates as deeply personal ventures. In other words, the repudiation (or, literally, “abjuration”) of the films is also a self-repudiation. However, in much the same way that he has already criticized the PCI and the industrialized Soviet Union, Pasolini’s self-criticism is less than total. Pasolini takes care to clarify that he does not “repent having made” the trilogy (Pasolini 2005, xvii). If, as I have previously claimed, Pasolini seeks a non-reactionary alternative to non-progressive politics (that is, neither progressive nor reactionary), here he offers his readers wisdom on avoiding reaction at
the deepest and most personal level. In sum, one must act in accordance with one’s “historical” feelings. Pasolini repudiates his *Trilogy* because it was the product of his being compromised by the overpowering conformism associated with power in its new guise. This manipulation, however, was inevitable. At the beginning of his repudiation, Pasolini models how we might think about our actions before we execute them, and then as we look back in evaluation.

He writes that before one acts “one must never, in any case, fear being manipulated by the power of the establishment and its culture” (Pasolini 2005, xvii). This is a striking statement for all who claim a political project that is in opposition to the establishment and its culture. However, for the current reality, in which there is no outside or area which is peripheral to capitalism, there is no safety from manipulation. Pretending that one can act from an autonomous or pure position puts at risk fidelity to one’s feelings. “One must behave,” Pasolini writes, “as if this dangerous eventuality did not exist. What counts are first of all the sincerity and the necessity of what one has to say. One must not betray them in any way, least of all by remaining silent on principle” (Pasolini 2005, xvii).

After acting, “one must realize how much one has been manipulated, in any case, by the power structure” (Pasolini 2005, xvii). In other words, we should not let ourselves off the hook for our own manipulation. It is inevitable, yes, but we must be able to see it for what it is, all while recognizing that—precisely because there is no longer an outside—purity is no longer possible or desirable. The backward glance, however, does not only look for manipulation, it also means to gauge the fidelity to one’s feelings. Pasolini writes that “if one’s sincerity or necessity have been subjugated and manipulated, I think that one must have the courage to repudiate them” (Pasolini 2005, xvii). Without sincerity or necessity, there is nothing to repudiate.
The remainder of the “Repudiation” is structured as follows: First, Pasolini interrogates his own sincerity through three “historical and ideological justifications” which undergird it. Second, he enumerates the three subjugations which correspond to the three preceding justifications. Third, he offers three “delaying elements” to keep him from arriving at where repudiation ultimately leads him: adaptation, or the ultimate acceptance of the unacceptable.

Pasolini’s “historical and ideological justifications” account for the historical feelings from which *The Trilogy* emerged. Here we find Pasolini, in other words, justifying the sincerity of his actions. First, he writes that the *Trilogy* emerged from the context of the “right to self-expression” and “sexual liberation” which the progressive movement pursued. While Pasolini has spilled much ink criticizing the progressives, he recognizes that does not exist outside of the idea of progress. He too was dissociated. He thought that the false tolerance of capitalist development he saw in his existence was actually the right to self-expression and sexual liberation of the progressive consciousness. Second, he writes that in the face of the anthropological revolution, “the ‘innocent’ bodies, with the archaic, dark, vital violence of their sexual organs, seemed to be the last bulwark of reality. From his subjective view, the occupants of the periphery—the youth in particular—existed outside of reach of capitalist development. Third, Pasolini writes that he was drawn to “the representation of Eros” in these peripheral contexts. There, sex might reach back to something more ancient than sex which exists within the context of the modern fight for liberation and tolerance.

With regret, Pasolini writes that since the genesis of *The Trilogy*, “everything has turned upside down” (Pasolini 2005, xvii). He then tells of how the three ideological justifications have been subjugated. First, the progressive struggle for sexual liberation “has been brutally surpassed
and thwarted by the decision of the consumerist establishment to concede a vast (but false) tolerance” (Pasolini 2005, xviii). Here he gestures at dissociation. The progressive lives the idea of sexual liberation in their consciousness while existing within the reality of consumerist false tolerance. Second, the “innocent” bodies have been “violated, manipulated, tampered with by the consumerist establishment” (Pasolini 2005, xviii). Third, “private sexual lives” including Pasolini’s “have undergone the trauma of both false tolerance and physical degradation, and that which in sexual fantasies was pain and joy, has become suicidal disappointment, shapeless sloth” (Pasolini 2005, xviii). There are a few points to make about this final subjugation. It is the most personal in nature of the three. It should serve as a reminder that, for even the most dedicated historical materialist, deep historical shifts such as the anthropological revolution have subjective reverberations. It is sometimes at the most personal level—sexual fantasy—that they are felt. We will return to the notion of physical degradation in due course. For now it must suffice to say that the suicidal disappointment and shapeless sloth, the death of fantasy, comes from the realization that he no longer loved the Italians.

Pasolini recognizes that he was wrong. That is, at the time he made his Trilogy the ideological and historical justifications on which it was based were already subjugated. The fireflies were already gone, only he yet to notice. He clarifies, however, that “those who, annoyed or scornful, criticized the Trilogy of Life, should not think that [his] repudiation leads to their ‘duties’ (Pasolini 2005, xviii). Here he refers to the voices of reaction, those who are opposed to the progressive causes of sexual liberation and self expression. Pasolini, by opposing himself to reactionaries, gestures at a third political space: one which is not guided by the idea of progress or a reactionary opposition to progressive causes. The point for Pasolini is not an
opposition to progressive causes but rather the recognition that progressive victories are not actually borne out in the context of capitalist development.

Where does Pasolini’s repudiation lead him, if not to reaction? Pasolini resists concrete terms. In an echo of his name for the new agent of political power in the contemporary age—something—Pasolini writes that his repudiation “leads to something else” (Pasolini 2005, xviii). However, he is “terrified of saying it” and therefore searches “for delaying elements” (Pasolini 2005, xviii). As with his justifications and subjugations, there are three delaying elements.

The first element is a reflection on the reality of his current feelings. It is the basis the necessity and justification for his future work. He writes that “even if I wanted to continue making films such as those of the Trilogy of Life, I could not because by now I hate the bodies and the sexual organs” (Pasolini 2005, xviii). This hatred is another historical feeling—one which Pasolini experiences afterward and which has been “manipulated” by history into something else. Reading of Pasolini’s hatred, we think of the old man he describes in “The Article on the Fireflies” who cannot recognize himself in contemporary youth which have not experienced the firefly in the night sky. As we have already quoted, “in order to understand the changes that people undergo, you must love them” (Pasolini 1975, 83). We might now adapt this statement as follows: you must love people to hate them. An imagined critic then objects, saying that “To tell the truth, in the Trilogy you did not represent contemporary bodies and sexual organs, but those of the past” (Pasolini 2005, xviii). Pasolini responds, writing that “The degenerating present was compensated both by the objective survival of the past and, therefore, by the possibility of evoking it. But today the degeneration of the bodies and the sexual organs has assumed a retroactive value” (Pasolini 2005, xviii). In other words, the critic suggests that Pasolini might be
able to get around his repulsion by depicting the Eros of the past—which he had done in the Trilogy. Pasolini responds that in the “degenerating present” (or, while the fireflies were disappearing) “the objective survival of the past” still allowed him to evoke it. “But today the degeneration of the bodies and of the sexual organs has assumed a retroactive value” (Pasolini 2005, xviii). The fireflies and with them the past have now disappeared. They can no longer be evoked through historical reenactment. “The collapse of the present implies the collapse of the past. Life is a pile of insignificant and ironic ruins” (Pasolini 2005, xviii-xix). If we can no longer find hope in the present, it may mean that the hope we had in the past was a false hope.

Previously, the ruins which persist in the present may have once been significant. The insignificant and ironic ruins of the present are one with the shapeless sloth which Pasolini has already mentioned. They provide nothing of use to political agents of the present.

The second delaying element is directed at the progressives—those whose projects or “duties” “concerned the fight for progress, improvement, liberalization, tolerance, collectivism” (Pasolini 2005, xix). “They did not notice that the degeneration occurred precisely through a falsification of their values” (Pasolini 2005, xix). Pasolini again asserts the dissociation of the progressives. They mistake the progressive values of their consciousness for the falsely progressive values of development in existence. They don’t notice that what they condone in their consciousness—the repression which emblematizes the legacy of fascism in Italy coincides with the concrete existence after the anthropological revolution. Pasolini writes that “They do not notice that in Italy there actually is a curfew, that the night is as deserted and sinister as it was in the darkest centuries of the past” (Pasolini 2005, xix). Further, “They don’t notice that sexual liberalization, rather than bringing lightness and happiness to youths and boys, has made them
unhappy, closed, and consequently stupidly presumptuous and aggressive; but they absolutely refuse to deal with this because they care nothing for the youths and boys” (Pasolini 2005, xix).

The third delaying element is a short meditation on the subjective experience of class after the anthropological revolution. It describes the conditions of the foreclosure of collective class-based politics. It turns out that the anthropological revolution came late to Italy and succeeded in the more “developed” countries earlier, “especially in France” (Pasolini 2005, xix). “For the French bourgeoise the masses are made up of Moroccans, or Greeks, or Portuguese, or Tunisians. All these poor folks need to do is to adopt the behavior of the French bourgeois as soon as possible” (Pasolini 2005, xix). In other words, for the French bourgeois, the masses are no longer the proletariat, who now no longer think of themselves as such. Class relations have not necessarily changed; only consciousness has changed. The legible terrain of political conflict can only be national or ethnic in nature. However, those othered (at least those othered by the French bourgeois) need only assimilate. Pasolini’s final delaying element is thus a prescient insight into the passage from a class-based conception of political conflict to politics in the populist idiom which persists today.

Just as Pasolini came to his acceptance of the unacceptable after moving through the three films of the Trilogy, he arrives where his repudiation leads him after running out of delaying elements. “It leads me to adaptation” (Pasolini 2005, xx). We now know what he meant by something else. But what is the nature of his adaptation? To what does Pasolini adapt himself?

Pasolini notes that he is writing on the day of the 1975 regional elections, elections which brought significant gains for the PCI. As with the outcome of the divorce referendum, victory in
the regional elections resounds in two keys at once. At the surface level, victory is simply victory. At a deeper level, victory is really a defeat—or rather it is the manifestation of a deeper and much more troubling defeat. This defeat will demonstrate two developments: first, “the unification of a modernized Italy; second, “that Italy—except, naturally, for the traditional communists—is by now, as a whole, a depoliticized country, a dead body whose reflexes are purely mechanical” (Pasolini 2005, xx). Italy, previously a container of differentiated and ancient ways of life, will emerge as a nation of homogenous consumers, no longer capable of conceiving of themselves in terms of class. Thus, the victory of the PCI heralds its ultimate defeat. “Italy, in other words, is merely living a process of adaptation to its own degradation, from which it attempts to free itself only nominally” (Pasolini 2005, xx). Adaptation, then, is a process of the degradation becoming visible. The disappearance of the fireflies was nearly impossible to grasp while it was happening. After it happened the scale of the catastrophe was visible—though only to those who remembered the experience of seeing the fireflies before they disappeared. And the experience of this memory, lest we forget, is visible only in the eyes of the youth who have never seen a firefly and in which the old man cannot recognize himself. Pasolini, like the old man, recognizes the adaptation of Italy through his experience of the youth, in whom he can no longer see himself or his dreams. Instead, Pasolini sees “kidnappings, robberies, capital punishments, the millions of bag-snatching and thefts”5 (Pasolini 2005, xx).

5 Lest we read this and accuse Pasolini of having been “tough on crime,” we should note that this statement was directed specifically at the left-wing intellectuals who see the absence of fascist curfews in contemporary life as evidence of progress. Pasolini undermines their satisfaction by pointing out that they still stay home at night. They did so under fascism because of curfew, and they do so in the 1970s out of fear of the poor.
Adaptation is an inevitable reaction, one which cannot be suppressed. We get a better sense of Pasolini’s adaptation from a TV interview which aired after his death. In response to the question “Don’t you accept [conformism] too?” Pasolini responds with a double negative: “Yes, but critically (as you can see I am prepared). That is, I cannot not accept it.” The adaptation of the progressives looks different that Pasolini’s adaptation. Theirs comes in the form of “refusing to notice anything or by ineptly rendering the news less dramatic.” Though, he admits, “having noticed, or having dramatized [the news], does not protect at all from adaptation or acceptance” (xx). Adaptation happens to us. We cannot stop ourselves from adapting, but we can have a clear-eyed view of the ways in which we change. The hope that Pasolini implores us to forgo is also the hope that we might, individually, resist adaptation. However, rather than simple acceptance, we must—through the kind of stock taking he engages in his repudiation—not-not accept it. The double negative creates space for something other than simple acceptance. In Pasolini’s usage, the anti-anti-acceptance of consumerism preserves the assertion that consumerism is a reality of contemporary life but was not always so. That is, consumerism is not a transhistorical phenomenon but rather one which emerged from quite recent historical conditions. As I will argue later, this critical acceptance (rather than passive acceptance) is key to accessing transcendent hope.

Pasolini’s conclusion is as beautiful as it is confounding. I suggest reading it, as with the rest of his writing, in two registers at once.

Therefore, I am adapting myself to the degradation and I am accepting the unacceptable. I am maneuvering to rearrange my life. I am forgetting how things were before. The beloved faces of yesterday are beginning to yellow. Before me—little by little, slowly, without further alternatives—looms the present. I readjust my commitment to a greater legibility (Salò?) (Pasolini 2005, xx).
First, to address the surface level content of the conclusion: the outcome of Pasolini’s acceptance is a maneuver toward rearrangement. No longer will he seek hope in the beloved faces of yesterday. The fireflies can no longer be evoked. Nor can the liberatory content of subproletarian sexuality on the margins. Sex is no longer a flight from capitalist development; it has been fully subsumed into it. The yellowing and beloved faces of yesterday—those depicted in The Trilogy—are still available for viewing in the films. But they are “beginning to yellow.” He is forgetting what it meant before their images yellowed. That is, they are on the pile of insignificant ruins to which Pasolini has already alluded. What lies before Pasolini is not the future but the present, the period after the disappearance of the fireflies, a point he has arrived at “slowly.” Hope in the past has been foreclosed, along with hope the future. There is only the catastrophe of the present. The foreclosure which Pasolini diagnoses appears to be final and non-negotiable.

The final sentence offers a way into reading the conclusion in a different register by calling the finality of all it has said so far into question. We might read this sentence as a simple commitment to accurate depictions of the present, and the parenthetical “(Salò?)” an assertion that his forthcoming film was created toward this end. However, the parenthetical “Salò?” is a question rather than a full stop. As Ramsey McGlazer writes, the parenthetical question “lingers, remains unresolved; far from effecting, it enigmatically prevents the achievement of closure and the abandonment of what’s come before” (McGlazer 2020, 121). In what sense does Pasolini undermine the foreclosure which appears to be non-negotiable? Does claiming that he has this power ascribe an agency to Pasolini that, as we have already asserted, none of us have? McGlazer continues, writing that “[although] the ‘Abiura’ would seem to give up on the belief in
the past’s persistence, the text everywhere betrays an ongoing attachment to all that it says that it forswears, and sustains the past that it would leave behind” (McGlazer 2020, 122). Pasolini has given up his own personal hope that the past projects of liberation and self-expression might be genuinely realized the future. However, he recognizes that his own perspective is limited. This is the takeaway from the “Article on the Fireflies.” The present is only arrived at “slowly” and historical shifts are often invisible to us by nature of our existence within them. What I am claiming is not that Pasolini hides a secret optimism that the messiah will come in the future, and maybe things will be alright in the end. Rather, the future is not legible and, as McGlazer claims, the takeaway from Salò is that, sometimes, the past does persist.

A Pilgrimage to the Land of Regret

Salò is a brutal film. One is hard pressed to find anything resembling hope within the walls of the mansion in which the events of the film take place. However, we will not look to Salò to depict or evoke hope drawn from the past or projected into the future. As we have already quoted, Pasolini is “forgetting how things were before” and, alternatives foreclosed, it is not the future that looms but only the present. However, as Pasolini said of the film, Salò was “conceived as a rite” (qtd. in McGlazer 2020). The content of the film exists to put its viewers through a ritual that might change consciousness. This ritual cure does not depict hope. Rather, Pasolini’s rite challenges progressive historical narratives—those in which we are perpetually immersed—and thus opens its viewers to a hope which is not dependent on progress or individual consumer subjectivity.
As McGlazer writes, *Salò* is “set in a past that, by most accounts, was never to be repeated, that was supposed to have been left behind” (McGlazer 117). The past persists on a number of levels in *Salò*. I will highlight two of them.

First, the film asserts the position of fascist continuity. This is the view with which Pasolini engaged in his critique of Fortini’s article. *Salò*, as we have already noted, is situated in the transition from what Pasolini has called nominal fascism to objective fascism. Salò the town is the seat of the Italian Social Republic, Mussolini’s short lived final outpost at the end of the war. The demise of their political project is immanent. The four fascist elites thus execute the ritual torture of the film’s youth on a threshold. As McGlazer points out, we the viewers cross the threshold from nominal fascism to objective fascism at the end of the film. After moving through its various circles of hell, the film culminates in a trip through the final circle—the circle of blood. It ends with the brutal murder of a number of the kidnapped youth. However, the final image is not one of murder. Rather, *Salò* ends with a dance:

> Cutting short the choral music, with words in Latin, that has accompanied the torture and is here shown to have been diegetic, the guard, named Claudio, looks pleased to find a much lighter, mid-tempo, instrumental piece. Now *this* is music to dance to, and it is familiar to the viewer, too, reprised from the film’s opening credits. Smiling, Claudio asks his compagno if he knows how to dance (McGlazer 2020, 135).

The crossing of the threshold is thus a superficial turn of the radio dial. The bad past of fascist Italy isn’t past after all.

Second, on a formal level, one of the film’s rituals forces its viewers to consider the recurrence of pasts that were meant to have been left behind. During an early scene in which the victims are gathered in an assembly at which a fascist associate, Signora Vaccari, instructs them on libertinage through stories of her past exploits. During her storytelling, one victim tries to
escape by throwing herself out of a window. “Guards stop her, and we see her struggling as they carry her away” (McGlazer 2020, 129). The assembly soon breaks for lunch. After a return to the main hall, “a sign is given, these wings, painted to look like curtains, open to reveal the would-be escapee, now dead. Two later shots show that the girl’s throat has been cut, but Signora Vaccari quickly resumes her storytelling” (McGlazer 2020, 130). Vaccari paces the room as she instructs the victims. “The dead body disappears from view, then reappears, is alternately covered and uncovered by Signora Vaccari’s dress” (McGlazer 2020, 130). The bad past, the murder of the young girl, which we the viewers forget during lunch perpetually disappears and reappears. “The victim’s intermittent visibility instantiates the return of the bad past that Salò stages.

McGlazer likens the model of return that Salo embodies to one he extrapolates from Ernesto DeMartino’s La terra del rimorso, or The Land of Regret. I read this model—the bad past that returns—in concert with the story of the tailor of Ulm to arrive at the non-progressive conception of hope which I argue Pasolini’s work opens onto.

DeMartino’s text is an anthropological study of tarantismo, a collection of pre-modern rituals and beliefs that have been present in Italy’s Puglia region for centuries. Tarantismo concerns the symptoms and ritual cures that follow from supposed spider bites. The victims of these bites, or “tarantate,” are almost entirely female. The venomous spiders, perhaps driven by “a demon or [a] god,” bite and, allegedly, re-bite the tarantate. However, Martino’s primary interest is the ritual cures for these bites which, it turns out, “imitate symptoms so closely as to be indistinguishable from them” (McGlazer 2020, 127). Using the frame of dissociation, we might say that the symptoms, embodied in consciousness, merely coincide with the ritual cures in existence. Importantly for our purposes, DeMartino’s work concerns another ritual—
pilgrimage—which has implications for us in the present, after the disappearance of the fireflies, radically separated from the past and without political future.

DeMartino writes that “Today we know that the ‘prick’ of remorse is not the attack of a demon or of a god, but the bad past that returns” (qtd. in McGlazer 128). In other words, from our vantage, we look back at tarantismo and see the dissociation which was not visible in its time. However, the outcome of this backward glance is not a bolstered argument for the idea of progress. It would be easy to acclaim the ignorance of the tarantist practitioners in comparison with the enlightened present. But this misses the point. DeMartino continues, writing that “precisely because we know these things—and the contemporary world has offered us too much of this bitter knowledge—tarantismo activates our interest once again and becomes a live question that concerns us intimately” (qtd. in McGlazer 128). The “bitter knowledge” which reveals tarantismo as humanly ordained (rather than divinely or supernaturally ordained) is the product of a visit to the past from the present. DeMartino’s thinking has great implications for how we readers of Pasolini should think about the past as we search for a politics which is neither progressive nor reactionary. What is at stake for DeMartino is not the superiority of the present or evidence that the future tends toward enlightenment. Nor does he assert the superiority of the past which might be evoked or superimposed on the present. Instead DeMartino and his researchers—whom he calls “pilgrims” (qtd. in McGlazer 128)—see dissociation in action. Through a backward glance at a concrete example DeMartino (read in concert with Pasolini) helps us to see that, no matter where we exist in history, the phenomena we think we observe may very well be something else entirely. For the tarantists, ritual cures appear to coincide with recurring demonic spider bites. Just as the recurring bites and their symptoms are really the ritual
cures, progress may just be development. The encounter between the phenomenon of tarantismo and pilgrims from the modern world constellates into what Walter Benjamin calls a dialectical image. As Benjamin writes, “while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent” (Benjamin 2002, 462). Thinking the image as the product of this ritual encounter is apt because images are objects external to their beholders. It is not that there is a direct link in terms of content between the dissociation of the tarantist and the dissociation of the modern progressive. Rather, the meeting of these differently dissociated peoples enables pilgrims to grasp dissociation from the outside. In other words, dissociation, usually invisible, is made legible. When legible, dissociation can be weaponized against the idea of progress.

In sum, DeMartino elevates the past as a site of pilgrimage which we can visit to cure ourselves of progressive historical narratives. In McGlazer’s words, the land of regret is one “that doesn’t know itself” (McGlazer 2020, 128). The ritual of pilgrimage enables us to see that ours too might be a land of regret, albeit one which does not yet know itself as such.

A Tailor’s Hope

DeMartino’s is an example of a dialectical image that results from the constellation of the what-has-been (that which Pasolini categorizes as dead) with the now. In closing we return to the example of the tailor of Ulm, where we find an image that results from a different kind of constellation: the what-has-been with a transcendent future, viewed through the lens of the present. It is this constellation, which we have arrived at through Pasolini’s exorcism of progressive hope and assertion of the past’s persistence, that leads us to a necessarily alien hope—a hope which is not for us. This strange hope, which I will call transcendental, is a hope
for the redemption of the past. We should take care to note that, as Pasolini does not to seek to bring back what is dead in the past, redemption is not a return. What-has-been is not necessarily what-will-be. The nature of the redemption in question is illuminated by Brecht’s telling of the tailor’s story in his poem “Ulm 1592.” What Magri leaves out in his synopsis of the story is the form poem, which allows the reader to assume the role of DeMartino’s researchers and travel on a pilgrimage to the tailor’s time. The poem is narrated by a witness to the tailor’s death and its aftermath. As a contemporary, the narrator is enmeshed in the perfectly reasonable view that humans cannot and will not ever fly. The last of the poem’s three stanzas finds the narrator reflecting on the tailor’s fall and untimely death.

The tailor’s passed away
Said the people to the bishop
We should have known
His wings are torn to tatters
And his body lies shattered
On the town square’s hard hard stone
Let the bells ring from the steeply
It was just a big fat lie
We men are not birds
Mankind will never fly
Said the bishop to the people (Brecht 2019).

We, the readers, complete our pilgrimage and arrive at the tailor’s time in the penultimate line of the poem: “Mankind will never fly.” But we, the pilgrims, know that mankind does fly. The dialectical image constellates here, where the radical separation between our time and the tailor’s time is most visible. The fact of the impossibility of human flight is final. The narrator (via the bishop) does not say man “cannot yet fly,” but rather that he “will never fly.” From the vantage of the tailor’s contemporaries, the advent of human flight is conceivable only as a messianic or revolutionary break rather than the result of steady human ingenuity and progress.
That the tailor’s insistence was “just a big fat lie” reveals a belief that, should it have been successful, the tailor’s flight would have been something of a magic trick or evidence that he possessed special powers. That he now “lies shattered” frees the townspeople from a temporary delusion. Thus, the narrator seems to imply, good riddance. However, we pilgrims can see into the narrator’s future. Mankind now flies every day. Our ritual trip to the past thus has the effect of reminding us how limited our sight is by our own position within history. It also reminds us that what we see as impossible won’t necessarily stay impossible.

Returning to Magri’s use of the tailor’s story for a moment, he felt the tailor could teach us something about hope in the face of defeat and political foreclosure. The dissolution and reconfiguration of the PCI into a liberal party is the backdrop of his book. The PCI’s vision of a socialist Italy was, like the tailor, shattered. Mankind will never fly. What does Magri mean to imply? Simply that the communist project was premature in the 20th century and may well be redeemed in the future? With Pasolini’s help, we can pull something other than a naive optimism from the tailor’s story. In closing, we arrive via the tailor of Ulm and Pasolini at transcendent hope. The point here is not to name the hope which the tailor subjectively held and attempt to evoke it in our present. Instead, I am interested in the hope which we pilgrims can glean from a ritual trip to the tailor’s time.

The tailor was dissociated. In his consciousness, he lived a reality in which the capacity for human flight already existed as a fruit of his own individual labors. For him, this reality in consciousness coincided with the reality in existence, one in which the capacity for flight unequivocally did not exist in the world. The tailor’s belief in human flight was, undoubtedly, premature. How did he come to this position? Several possibilities exist: prophecy, narcissism,
schizophrenia. There are surely others. In any case, the tailor’s uncontainable belief in flight was a personal reality rather than the result of structural or societal conditions. Pasolini writes of the example of a man who might be “middle class, Catholic” or alternatively “even potentially a fascist” who, through a conscious or unconscious “anxiety to conform, makes a decisive choice and becomes a progressive, a revolutionary, a Communist” (Pasolini 1983, 20). On the face of it, the example of the tailor has nothing in common with this example of revolutionary voluntarism—the latter of which Pasolini seems to scorn insofar as it results from the “conformism of the system.” However, there is an affinity in one particular sense. Just as the tailor’s belief in flight and the middle-class person’s assumption of a communist identity are both animated by some individual impulse. Both impulses are, in their own ways, accidents of history in that both men seem to contradict their position, respectively, in history or class-hierarchy. If we can speak of the tailor’s hope, it was a hope that was very much not for him. If he was not under the influence of whatever impulse led him to believe he could fly, he would see, extrapolating from his own position in history (as his contemporaries did) that the conditions for human flight did not exist. The tailor could not help but follow what we have already called his historical feeling. It resulted in his death and universal derision by his fellow townspeople. With the benefit of hindsight, however, the tailor’s untimely hope seems to find redemption. Again, by describing the tailor’s subjective hope, I do not mean that revolutionaries living at a time of revolutionary foreclosure should look to him for a model of revolutionary hope. The tailor’s story is not one that we should necessarily seek to follow. It is not as if the tailor was the reasonable one in a context of mass delusion or reaction. This would make the tailor into some progressive hero of enlightenment. The opposite is closer to the truth. Rather, the story of the
tailor is pedagogical and enables us to grasp what stuff a non-progressive (and non-reactionary) hope might be made of.

The pilgrimage across time is, once again, instructive. Looking across time, the tailor’s belief in flight seems to coincide with our contemporary belief in human flight. However, these beliefs are not the same thing. The tailor’s belief in flight was—using Agamben’s formulation once again—absolutely unobservable. Ours, on the other hand, we live in our existence. The tailor’s flight and modern air travel bear no concrete relation to one another. The relationship between the tailor and modern flight, to use a helpful phrase from the journalist Jeet Heer, is one of a transcendental allegiance rather than historical allegiance (Heer 2022). The tailor’s innovations are not present in the innovations which led to human flight as we know it today. There is no obvious causality between the tailor and modern flight. However, through our pilgrimage from the age of flight, the tailor’s naivety is redeemed through its coincidence across time with the reality of human flight in our present.

The hope that is not for us is a hope for trans-temporal coincidence. This coincidence is the form of redemption to which I alluded earlier. It is a hope that does not depend on a subjective assertion of optimism. The hope for coincidence across time was certainly not asserted by the tailor. Rather, if anyone is to positively assert a hope that is not for us, it looks more like what Walter Benjamin would call endowing the future with a “weak messianic power” (Benjamin 2006, 390). This non-progressive hope does not contradict the recognition of political foreclosure. It can coexist with the pessimism that comes with the recognition of defeat and foreclosure without being defeated by it. But what are the possible objects of this hope? In other words, what precisely might a hope that is not for us redeem?
As I hope is clear by this point, Pasolini was not a reactionary. He does not seek a return to a past that no longer exists. Responding to the claim by Italo Calvino that he longed for a return to “little Italy,” Pasolini wrote “everything that I have done and everything I am, excludes by its very nature the idea that I could be nostalgic for ‘little Italy’” (Pasolini 1975, 29). This is the primary insight I glean from Terrada’s assertion that Pasolini’s task was sorting the dead from the nonexistent. To return to a prior example, Pasolini does not seek to raise the fireflies from the dead. As McGlazer writes of the “Repudiation,” through the confounding parenthetical at the end of the piece, Pasolini “enigmatically prevents the achievement of closure and the abandonment of what’s come before” (McGlazer 2020, 121). The possibility of a night sky lit by the firefly is foreclosed. What Pasolini preserves instead are “the beautiful feelings of [a] lost past” which the old man cannot recognize in the faces of young people who have never seen a firefly (Pasolini 1975, 81). Here, Pasolini’s tone is more elegiac than nostalgic. The fireflies and the beautiful feelings they brought up are effectively dead. Pasolini’s elegy saves them both from nonexistence. The fireflies are preserved so that they might serve as fodder for transcendent hope. Pasolini’s elegy thus holds open the possibility that the lost beautiful feelings of the old man might coincide across time with beautiful feelings of a redeemed future.
References


