

Tiresias, Oedipus, and Pasolini: the Figure of the Intellectual in the *Edipo Re**

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Critics have interpreted Pasolini's *Edipo Re* from a psychoanalytical point of view as the reenactment of Pasolini's own Oedipus complex, in which the famous director identifies himself with the Greek hero. In this paper I argue that this identification has a further dimension. Drawing on the evolution of the Oedipus character in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, Pasolini uses the figure of Oedipus as the blind sage as a symbol of his own role as intellectual/ seer in the modern world and of his isolation in contemporary 20th century Italy.

With the following words, written in a letter to Italo Calvino (*Lettera aperta a Italo Calvino: quello che rimpiango* ['Open letter to Italo Calvino: what I miss']), Pier Paolo Pasolini outlines his notion of his duty as an intellectual, to reach out to the world of the proletarian classes:

I know well, dear Calvino, how the life of an intellectual unfolds. I know it because in part it is also *my* life. ... But I, like Dr Hyde, have another life. In living this life, I must break down the natural (and innocent) class barriers. I must break through the wall of this narrow middle-class Italy, and head toward another world: the peasant world, the sub-proletarian world, and the working class world.¹

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1. Pasolini 1999, 320: "*Io so bene, caro Calvino, come si svolge la vita di un intellettuale. Lo so perché, in parte, è anche la mia vita ... Ma io, come il dottor Hyde, ho un'altra vita. Nel vivere questa vita, devo rompere le barriere naturali (e innocenti) di classe. Sfondare le*

Throughout his literary and intellectual life, the working classes were the focus of Pasolini's work as well as of his personal life.² This attention to the world of the underprivileged and the exploited was due in part to the mainstream communist ideology that was so strong in the cultural and political landscape of Italy during the 50s and 60s and in part to the sense of disillusion and disgust that Pasolini felt for the Italian middle class, for the Italian economic boom of the 1960s, and for the consequences that such an explosive and powerful economic transformation had on the culture and mentality of post-WWII Italy. Pasolini strongly condemned the new developments brought by the advent of consumerism and mass-media, whose effect was to erase political and social activism and to replace them with the individual pursuit of superficial hedonism. According to Pasolini, this new attitude eliminated individual personalities and ideas, and replaced them with standardized and impersonal needs and behavior:

In very few ... years they have become a degenerated, ridiculous, monstrous, criminal people. ... I have seen 'with my own eyes' the standardized behavior created by the power of consumer goods reshaping and deforming the conscience of the Italian people to the point of an irreversible degradation.³

As a reaction, in many essays Pasolini praises the old peasant society, where the rhythm of life was dictated by nature; this, according to him, is the real core of the Italian culture.

Closely linked to his interest in popular culture is Pasolini's interest in myth. Following an approach common in Italian post-WWII culture,⁴ Pasolini sees myth, especially classical myth, as a way to reach and to express the most basic human archetypes. Myth originated in the kind of peasant societies that fascinated Pasolini, but the attraction was also triggered by Pasolini's formal education in Italian schools and by his own personal studies. He had an intimate knowledge of ancient Greek and Latin languages and cultures, and he translated many texts from classical authors.

The most famous monuments to Pasolini's involvement with classical myth are his cinematic projects: *Edipo Re* (1967), *Medea* (1970) and the *Appunti per un'Orestiade Africana*.⁵ A distinctive characteristic of Pasolini's interpreta-

pareti dell'Italietta, e sospingermi quindi in un altro mondo: il mondo contadino, il mondo sottoproletario e il mondo operaio" [from Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari*, 'Limitatezza della storia e immensità del mondo contadino' (from *Paese Sera* with the title 'Lettera aperta a Italo Calvino: Pasolini: quello che rimpiangio', July 8, 1974)].

2. Pasolini as an intellectual figure must be understood within the context of Italian society and politics between 1950 and 1975; on the difficulties that such a figure can pose to an American audience see Schwartz 1980-81.
3. Pasolini 1999, 408: "Essi sono divenuti in pochi anni ... un popolo degenerato, ridicolo, mostruoso, criminale. ... Ho visto dunque 'con i miei sensi' il comportamento coatto del potere dei consumi ricreare e deformare la coscienza del popolo italiano, fino a una irreversibile degradazione" [from Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari*, 'L'articolo delle lucciole' (from *Corriere della Sera* with the title 'Il vuoto del potere in Italia', February 1, 1975)].
4. For example in Cesare Pavese, especially in his *Dialoghi con Leucò* (1947).
5. The *Appunti* never became a film. As a collection of preparatory materials, they include an interview with African students at the University of Rome and an audio-

tion of classical myths in the medium of film was his decision to set them in 'primitive countries', like Africa for the *Appunti* and the *Edipo Re* (the latter was partly shot in Morocco) and Cappadocia for Colchis in the *Medea*. This choice reflects Pasolini's idea of myth as an archetypal truth, better expressed by primitive societies in as much as they are closer to the state of nature than modern ones. Yet even if myth is better staged in a more primitive environment, it can still be used as an interpretative tool for understanding the modern human condition. To a far greater degree than *Medea* and the *Appunti*, *Edipo Re* weaves together classical myth and the contemporary world.⁶

The *Edipo Re* is organized into four 'movements', but the original text of Sophocles, for which Pasolini produced his own special translation, is used only in the third.⁷ The other movements consist of a re-enactment of Pasolini's very early childhood in pre-WWII Italy (first movement), the complete story of Oedipus from his finding on Mount Cytheron to the beginning of Sophocles' play (second movement), and an epilogue set in contemporary Italy (fourth movement). These movements, in which 'history' (set in Italy) embraces a core of 'myth' (set in Morocco), are closely interconnected through many visual signs and cinematic strategies.

The first movement, set in a northern Italian village in 1922, opens with a close-up on a stone road sign reading 'Thebes'; the same road sign is shown again in the second movement, when Oedipus is going to Thebes. The third and fourth movements are connected by the character of Oedipus himself (played by Franco Citti), who leaves Thebes at the end of the third and is found in Bologna at the beginning of the fourth. Other elements that unify the 'mythical' and the 'historical' parts of the film are the music and the presence of the same character (played by Ninetto Davoli) in the second, third, and fourth movements; this is Anghelos, the young boy who accompanies Tiresias and Oedipus in the second and third movements and who, in the fourth movement, becomes Angelo (the Italian translation of the Greek ἄγγελος, 'messenger'), the companion of the blind Oedipus in 1960s Italy.⁸

Many critics have correctly interpreted the *Edipo Re* in Freudian terms as a re-enactment of Pasolini's Oedipus complex and of his hatred for his father.⁹ The structure of the first movement of the film and Pasolini's own biography support such an interpretation. Pasolini had a difficult relationship with his fa-

visual documentary in Tanzania, the African setting of Pasolini's remake of Aeschylus. Cf. Viano 1993, 250-257.

6. On the 'dreamlike', 'meta-historical' features of the *Edipo Re* and Pasolini's ideas on cinematic power see White 1977.
7. Cf. Narboni 1967, Stack 1969, 126. On the second and third movements in Pasolini's film and their differences compared to the Greek story of Oedipus and (for the third movement) to Sophocles' tragedy, see Riemer 2002, 82-86.
8. On the parallels between the various movements see Noguez 1973, 101-103; Cesarino 1992, 32-34; Fusillo 1996, esp. 40, 44, 48, 60-61, 75.
9. Cf. Noguez 1973; Amengual 1976, esp. 77-78, 96-98; White 1977, 34; Brunetta 1986, esp. 389, 391; Aronica 1987; Mimoso-Ruiz 1992, esp. 58. All these readings stress in various ways the parallelism between Pasolini and Oedipus (the latter functioning as the 'archetype') and the Freudian elements in the film. The best psychoanalytic reading of *Edipo Re*, going beyond the pure autobiographical reading, and also its most thorough analysis to date is certainly Fusillo 1996, 31-125.

ther, Carlo Alberto Pasolini, a military officer and supporter of Fascism who never accepted his son's homosexuality and communist sympathies. This conflict was counterbalanced by a strong, affectionate relation with his mother, with whom Pasolini lived for many years, first in Casarsa and then in Rome once his parents separated.¹⁰ In this situation, Pasolini could identify himself with Oedipus in the most Freudian sense. In the film, such a personal identification with the Oedipus character is evident from the first movement, set in a northern Italian village where a young couple live and where the young woman has just given birth to a baby-boy. This setting is too similar to Pasolini's own past to leave room for any doubt: Pasolini was born in Bologna in March 1922 and lived in Sacile, a village near Pordenone in Friuli, around 1930.¹¹ The setting as well as the costumes of the young officer and his wife, which were made on the basis of family photographs,¹² unquestionably indicate Pasolini's autobiographical intent. If these signals were not enough, the Freudian interpretation is further strengthened by the fact that the mother of the baby-boy in movement one is played by the same actress (Silvana Mangano) that plays Jocasta in movements two and three. Pasolini himself in an interview recognized that in the *Edipo Re* he recounted 'his own Oedipus complex'.¹³ In the film, this theme is first alluded to through the words of the child's father. As in a silent film, we read the father's thoughts on the screen (a device that Pasolini uses in other parts of the film to stress important moments): "You are here to take my place in the world, to send me back into the void, and to rob me of all I have". Such hostility returns a few moments later, when the father further thinks: "And the first thing you will steal from me will be her, the woman I love ... in fact, you are already stealing her love from me".¹⁴ This is probably the key for understanding the Oedipal conflict in Pasolini's life, which Pasolini himself experienced as an initial hostility from his father. The setting of the first movement and the father's thoughts set the stage

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10. Pasolini himself recognized the Freudian type of relationship that he had with his father and his mother. See Stack 1969, 11-13, 119-120. On Pasolini's relationship with his family members (his father, his mother, and his brother Guido) see Carotenuto 1985, 43-49; Fusillo 1996, 87-88.
 11. The northern village in the film is Lodi in Lombardy, not Sacile in Friuli; however, the agricultural landscape in the Padana plain (covering Lombardy, Veneto, Friuli and Emilia) is very similar, characterized by the so-called *cascine*, farmhouses built around a square court. A *cascina*, landmark of the Padanian landscape, is indeed where the military officer and his family live in the first movement.
 12. Cf. Stack 1969, 12; Riemer 2002, 81.
 13. Cf. Narboni 1967. Pasolini also recognized the Freudian sense of his *Edipo Re* in its different movements (Pasolini 1999, 1500-1501, from 'Enigmi. Enigmi grandi...enigmi piccoli', from *Il sogno del centauro. Incontri con Jaen Duflot, 1969-1975*). This is not necessarily in contradiction with what we read in the essay 'Perché quella di Edipo re è una storia' ['Why that of Oedipus is a story'], where Pasolini seems to belittle a bit his interest in Freudian theories while making the film (Pasolini 'Perché quella di Edipo re è una storia', in Pasolini 2006, 319-320).
 14. "Tu sei qui per prendere il mio posto nel mondo, ricacciarmi nel nulla e rubarmi tutto quello che ho" and "E la prima cosa che mi ruberai sarà lei, la donna che io amo...Anzi, già mi rubi il suo amore". For a longer version, see the original script in Pasolini 2006, 356. On the meaning of these words, see Fusillo 1996, 46-47.



Fig. 1. Tiresias playing the flute in the first meeting with young Oedipus.

for the mythical story of Oedipus and allow us to read this story in an autobiographical sense throughout the second and third movements.

Yet, the very structure of the film indicates that representing the ‘standard’ Oedipus drama – the killing of the father and the marriage to the mother – is, though very important, only one of Pasolini’s goals. Already in the second movement a new element is introduced, one that belongs neither to Sophocles’ original story nor to the re-enactment of Pasolini’s own Oedipus complex. In the second movement, young Oedipus is traveling towards Thebes; it is on this journey that he meets and kills both Laius and the Sphinx. In the film, however, Oedipus has another encounter between these two episodes that departs from the traditional myth. On the way to Thebes, Oedipus hears about the Sphinx and is led to her by Anghelos, whom he has met on the road. The two reach a place scattered with bushes and rocks, where they see Tiresias (the actor Julian Beck) playing a flute (Fig. 1). Anghelos introduces Tiresias to Oedipus with simple words: “He is Tiresias, the prophet”. Oedipus’ reaction is so central to the plot that his thoughts, like those of his father in the first movement, are shown on the screen in the style of a silent film rather than simply uttered aloud by Oedipus: “Your brothers and fellow-citizens suffer, weep, seek together their salvation; and you are here, blind, alone, and you are singing”.¹⁵ In the next scene, Oedipus further thinks: “I wish I were you! You sing what’s beyond destiny”.¹⁶ After this encounter, Tiresias

15. *“Gli altri, tuoi cittadini e fratelli, soffrono, piangono, cercano insieme la salvezza ... E tu sei qui cieco e solo che canti...”*.

16. *“Come vorrei essere te! Tu canti ciò che è al di là del destino”*.

sias disappears from the film until the beginning of the third movement, when he argues with Oedipus about the plague, as in Sophocles' play.

The keys to this first encounter between Oedipus and Tiresias are the thoughts of Oedipus at the sight of the prophet-poet playing the flute and the contrast established between young Oedipus and the figure of Tiresias. Even before this meeting, Oedipus is depicted as an instinctive and violent young man who does not want to know anything about himself and his past. His massacre of Laius and his soldiers is a gratuitous and excessively violent reaction to Laius' words.¹⁷ The meeting with the Sphinx is even worse, because, in contrast to the original myth, Oedipus does not solve any riddle. The Sphinx (covered by an African mask) tells him that there is an enigma in his life and asks him what this enigma is. Oedipus reacts angrily and cries: "I do not know it, I do not want to know it".¹⁸ Then he kills the Sphinx. By refusing to understand his enigma, Oedipus loses the chance of avoiding the tragedy that will change his life. Pasolini's young Oedipus lives his life as it comes; he is utterly uninterested in knowing about himself or his past until the terrible outcome necessitates it. Pasolini himself stressed the non-intellectual qualities of his Oedipus:

... An intellectual's vocation is to seek things out; ... Whereas Oedipus is exactly the opposite: he is the person who does not want to look into things, like all innocent people, those who live their lives as the prey of life and of their own emotions ... Certainly, one could always play with the hypothesis that if Oedipus had not been so fatally innocent and unconscious, if he had been an intellectual and had first sought out the truth he might have been able to alter reality. The only hope is a cultural one, to be an intellectual. As for the rest I am consistently pessimistic.¹⁹

Blind Tiresias, quietly playing the flute (the instrument of poetry, especially elegy), can be seen as embodying this intellectual role. He is depicted as a seer and a poet, two roles that were closely connected in ancient Greece.²⁰ He is wise and sees more things than ordinary mortals; his insight is deeper than that of both common people and kings. Oedipus shows some formal respect for Tiresias (he kneels), but he cannot have any real contact with him. In his rush to find and kill the Sphinx, Oedipus limits himself to looking at Tiresias; he does not talk or ask him any question. The truth is that at this stage young Oedipus and old Tiresias do not speak the same language. In Oedipus' eyes, Tiresias lives in his own world, in his ivory tower, blissfully unaware of the reality around him and of the real problems that affect his society ("Your brothers and fellow-citizens suffer, weep, seek together their salvation; and you are here, alone, blind, and you are singing"; "I wish I were you! You sing what's

17. The length and unnecessary violence of the murder of Laius and his soldiers by Oedipus are of course very well explained in Freudian terms. Cf. Fusillo 1996, 83-90.

18. "*Non lo so, non voglio saperlo*".

19. Cf. Stack 1969, 124. On the 'anti-intellectuality' of Oedipus in the *Edipo Re*, see Fusillo 1996, 31-35, 80-81, 93-96; cf. also White 1977, 34-35, and Mimoso-Ruiz 1992, 60.

20. Cf. Dodds 1951, 64-101, in part. 81; Buxton 1980, 27-30.

beyond destiny").²¹ Though Oedipus may look at him with respect, he cannot communicate with him: the knowledge, the insight, the wisdom of Tiresias may all be admirable in and of themselves, but they are of no use for the young Oedipus. This lack of communication between the poet-prophet on one side (Tiresias), and the 'ordinary people' on the other (the young Oedipus), is essential to understanding the fourth movement of the film.

As is the first movement, the fourth part of the film is set in contemporary Italy. Oedipus, now blind after having gouged out his own eyes, is led by Anghelos/Angelo to San Petronio Square in central Bologna, then to an industrial suburban landscape, and eventually to the same meadow in the countryside where the first movement was set. It is in the fourth movement that the film makes more explicit the message foreshadowed by the first interaction between Oedipus and Tiresias. In the fourth movement, Oedipus has evolved from the proud and impulsive young king of the second and third movements to a character similar to the blind Oedipus of the *Oedipus at Colonus*. In Sophocles' play, the old blind Oedipus is actually very similar to Tiresias: Oedipus has himself become a seer, blind because blindness allows a better view.²² After his personal tragedy, Oedipus has acquired wisdom beyond mortal capability, exactly like Tiresias, who also became a seer after committing an act of hubris.²³ In *Oedipus at Colonus*, blind Oedipus becomes a hero. He speaks with authority to his daughter Ismene, his adversary Creon, his son Polynices, and his savior Theseus. He has the power to curse them (OC 787-90, 864-70, 1372-96) and to bless them (OC 1518-39); he even seems to have the power to fore-

21. The original script (Pasolini 2006, 349-449) is a bit different from the final cinematographic version. In particular, in the script the thoughts of Oedipus at seeing Tiresias express much more admiration for the poet; cf. Pasolini 2006, 397: "... Poeta! Tu, poeta, col tuo incarico di cogliere il dolore degli altri e di esprimerlo come se fosse lo stesso dolore, a esprimersi ..." ["Poet! You, poet, with your task of understanding other people's grief and of expressing it as if grief itself was talking"].
22. On the 'seeing-blindness' (OC 73-74: {ΞΕ.} Καὶ τίς πρὸς ἀνδρὸς μὴ βλέποντος ἄρκεσις; {ΟΙ.} Ὅσ' ἂν λέγωμεν πάνθ' ὀρώντα λέξομεν [Stranger: "And what help can come from one who cannot see?"; Oedipus: "In all that I speak there will be vision"]; see also OC 138) and new supernatural, 'inner' vision of the heroified Oedipus in the OC see Seale 1982, 113-143, and Segal 1999, 366-367, 372-373, 375, 384, 401, 404. On the meaning of the heroification of Oedipus see Winnington-Ingram 1980, 248-279 passim. The close parallels between Oedipus and Tiresias, now both blind, at the end of the OT and then in the OC have been noticed by many scholars. Cf. Knox 1998, 194-195; Segal 1999, 240-241, 246-247, 384; Fusillo 1996, 98 (with bibliography quoted there). The importance of words like 'seeing' and 'light', as well as their opposites, 'blindness' and 'darkness', particularly as metaphors for 'knowing' and 'not knowing', is paramount already in the OT, especially in the Tiresias scene (Il. 366-375, 388-389, 412-419, 452-460); cf. Hay 1978, passim, esp. 59-66, 73-85; Reinhardt 1979, 106-110; Buxton 1980, 23-25; Seale 1982, 215-260.
23. At least, this is the version found in two of the most important accounts of Tiresias' myth. In Callimachus' *Hymn* 5, 57-130, Tiresias loses his sight after seeing Athena bathing. The goddess, persuaded by Tiresias' mother Chariclo, compensated him with the gift of prophecy. The other famous account is that by Hesiod (Ps. Apoll. *Bibl.* 3.69-72 = Hes. Fr. 275 M.-W.), followed by Ovid (*Met.* 3, 316-338; cf. Hyg. *Fab.* 75). Here Tiresias was blinded by Hera because he revealed that women take more pleasure than men in the sexual act (nine to one, according to



Fig. 2. Oedipus now blind receives the flute from Anghelos.

tell the future, since he predicts to Polynices how he and his brother will die. Oedipus can also advise (OC 1518 ἐγὼ διδάξω, 1539: ἐκδιδασκόμενος) Theseus about important issues that will be beneficial for Athens.

Pasolini understood the connection between the blind Oedipus and the blind Tiresias in this way, as he himself explained in an interview with Jean Duflot:

A variation of the myth is that Oedipus ends up being at the same point as Tiresias: he has sublimated himself in the way that the poet, the prophet, and the exceptional individual somehow do. By becoming blind, through self-punishment, and thus through a certain kind of purification, he reaches the dimension of heroism, or of poetry.²⁴

The consecration of the blind Oedipus as a seer-poet is shown by Pasolini at the end of the third movement of the film, when Oedipus emerges from his palace, covered in blood, and receives from Anghelos the same flute that Tiresias was using (Fig. 2).²⁵ The identification of Pasolini with Oedipus, used in

Hesiod). Zeus then gave him the gift of prophecy in compensation. On these different versions of the myth of Tiresias, see Brisson 1976.

24. Pasolini 1999, 1500-1501: *“Variante del mito è che Edipo finisce per essere alla stesso punto di Tiresia: egli si è sublimato come fanno il poeta, il profeta, l’uomo di eccezione, in qualche modo. Diventando cieco, attraverso l’autopunizione, e quindi attraverso una certa forma di purificazione, raggiunge la dimensione dell’eroismo, o della poesia”* (from ‘Enigmi. Enigmi grandi...enigmi piccoli’, *Il sogno del centauro. Incontri con Jean Duflot*, 1969-1975).
25. The identification of this ‘new’ blind Oedipus with Tiresias as prophet and singer playing the same flute is also made very clear in the original script: see Pasolini 2006, 443-444.

the first two movements for the re-enactment of Pasolini's own Oedipus complex, now evolves towards a new meaning. Oedipus has, through his act of self-punishment, left behind his instinctive and violent behavior, and has reached the status of seer and poet.²⁶ Through his self-identification with Oedipus, Pasolini shares the duty of Sophocles' Oedipus in the *Oedipus at Colonus* – he can help his fellow-citizens. By seeing the poet-seer of ancient Greece as the mythical counterpart of the modern intellectual, the fourth movement reveals its intent to represent the attempts of the intellectual Pasolini (as a modern blind Oedipus and a modern Tiresias) to reach out to contemporary Italians.

The first stop of Pasolini's imaginary journey towards his fellow-citizens is San Petronio Square in Bologna. This setting was not chosen by chance. In the interview with Jean Duflot about the *Edipo Re*, Pasolini explains what Bologna, where he was a college student from 1939 to 1945, means to him:

Bologna ... is the city where I found myself naturally part of the middle class; back then, I believed I was a poet of this middle-class world, as if this world were absolute, unique, as if class divisions had never existed. I believed in the absolute of the middle-class world.²⁷

San Petronio Square is then an example of typical middle-class life in Italy, as Pasolini specifies in the original script for the *Edipo Re*: "It's one of those places where the middle class celebrates its rituals, and shows an image of its greatness".²⁸ Here Oedipus sits on the stairs at the side of the cathedral, as destitute people do, and quietly plays his tune (Fig. 3), while around him the life of the public square goes on: people walking under the *portici*, people at the news stand, a group of young students sitting at a café, some others talking next to three Fiat 500 cars (i.e. the car symbolizing the Italian economic miracle of the 1960s).

The first initiative of the blind Oedipus/Pasolini is thus directed towards the middle class, the very people who were changing so swiftly amidst the great Italian economic boom of the 1960s. Pasolini hopes that the insight and 'vision' of the intellectual/poet, symbolized by the blind Oedipus in the film, can attract middle-class people and help them to use their new wealth to achieve higher cultural and intellectual goals. The economic development should be accompanied by 'human' progress that can help the middle class – identified by Pasolini, for now, with all of the Italian society – to raise its cultural and intellectual status. Such progress can and should be led by intellec-

26. The flute is the symbol of poetry in ancient Greece and throughout the *Edipo Re*. Moreover, poets in Greece are often linked with blindness, as, for example, Homer, Demodocus, Stesichorus; see Buxton 1980, 27-28. On the relationship between blindness and prophecy see Brisson 1976, 31-35, and Buxton 1980, 28-30.

27. Pasolini 1999, 1501: "*Bologna ... è la città in cui mi sono trovato naturalmente integrato nella società borghese; allora credevo di essere un poeta di questo mondo, come se questo mondo fosse stato assoluto, unico, come se non fossero mai esistite le divisioni di classe. Credevo nell'assoluto del mondo borghese*" (from 'Enigmi. Enigmi grandi ... enigmi piccoli', from *Il sogno del centauro. Incontri con Jean Duflot, 1969-1975*).

28. Pasolini 2006, 445: "*È uno di quei luoghi dove la borghesia celebra i suoi riti, e riflette la sua grandezza*".



Fig. 3. Blind Oedipus playing the recorder on the stairs of San Petronio cathedral in Bologna.

tuals and poets. This is why the blind Oedipus sits down on the stairs of San Petronio cathedral – a masterpiece of Italian architecture – and like the old Tiresias in the second movement of the film starts to play his instrument, now a recorder. The people, however, only give a few distracted and uninterested glances at the blind player. In this beautiful urban landscape, the middle class displays with pride its new wealth and self-satisfaction, but they do not listen to blind Oedipus' tune, because – Pasolini seems to suggest – they 'do not want to know', just like young Oedipus in the second movement of the film.

Pasolini's bitterness at the irreversible change in the Italian society is well documented in the so-called *Scritti Corsari*, a collection published posthumously in 1975 gathering articles that he published mainly in the daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera* between 1973 and 1975. In these articles Pasolini strongly condemns contemporary Italian society, which he saw as the result of the 'new Fascism': the consumerist era. He takes a very polemical stand against both consumerist symbols²⁹ and the political left, which for him is nothing but a product of the same bourgeois class.³⁰ According to Pasolini, the major change that took place in Italy during the first half of the 1960s can be

29. Cf. for example Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari*, 'Analisi linguistica di uno slogan' (from *Corriere della Sera* with the title 'Il folle slogan dei jeans Jesus', May 17 1973).

30. Cf. Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari*, 'Il 'discorso' dei capelli' (from *Corriere della Sera*, with the title 'Contro i capelli lunghi', January 7 1973); 'Il coito, l'aborto, la falsa tolleranza del potere, il conformismo dei progressisti' (from *Corriere della Sera* with the title 'Sono contro l'aborto', January 19 1975). Well-known is the condemnation by Pasolini of the 1968 movement, because the 'rebel' students came exactly from the same middle class that he despised.

encapsulated in a famous metaphor: the disappearance of the fireflies,³¹ such as used to populate the countryside before the industrial revolution reached Italy in the 1960s. With the majority of Italians then still living in small villages, their culture was still characterized by the archaic, peasant values that had flourished in rural Italy for centuries and even millennia. As the pollution brought by the Italian industrial revolution exterminated the fireflies in the countryside, so the new mentality that developed as a result of economic growth eradicated the old system of values and ideals. Italian society was, for good or bad, changing from a mainly poor and agricultural society to an industrialized, capitalist, and consumerist society. In many of these essays Pasolini praises the peasant society of old with a nostalgia that even reaches out to some Catholic or, better, 'religious' traditions, which in Pasolini's view were definitely preferable to the new consumerist values:³²

The 'middle class' has radically – I would say 'anthropologically' – changed: their positive values are not pro-clerical values anymore but are the values (lived in the daily life but not yet 'named') of the hedonistic ideology of consumption and the consequent modernist tolerance of the American type. Power itself – through the 'development' of production of superfluous goods, through the imposition of a craving for consumption, fashion, the spreading of information (especially, in a massive way, television) – has created such values, cynically rejecting traditional values and the Church itself, which was their symbol.³³

This conformist culture of mass hedonism, according to Pasolini, is much worse than anything that had ever happened before, even Fascism. Through the media, and especially the recent introduction of television, this new mentality destroyed all local cultures, which were the true wealth of Italy; even worse, it 'shrank' (*ha rattrappito*) the intellectual and moral faculties of the Ital-

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31. Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari*, 'L'articolo delle lucciole' (from *Corriere della Sera* with the title 'Il vuoto del potere in Italia', February 1 1975).
 32. Cf. Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari*, 'Vuoto di Carità, vuoto di Cultura: un linguaggio senza origini' (preface to a collection of sentences issued by the Apostolic Tribunal of the Roman 'Sacra Rota', edited by Francesco Perego, March 1974); on this change in Italian society, see especially Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari*, 'Studio sulla rivoluzione antropologica in Italia' (from *Corriere della Sera* with the title 'Gli italiani non sono più quelli', June 10 1974); *ibid.*, 'Ampliamento del 'bozzetto' sulla rivoluzione antropologica in Italia' (from *Il Mondo*, interview with Guido Vergani, July 11 1974.); *ibid.*, 'Il genocidio' (Summer 1974).
 33. Pasolini 1999, 308: "I 'ceti medi' sono radicalmente – direi antropologicamente – cambiati: i loro valori positivi non sono più i valori sandefisti e clericali ma sono i valori (ancora vissuti solo esistenzialmente e non 'nominati') dell'ideologia edonistica del consumo e della conseguente tolleranza modernistica di tipo americano. È stato lo stesso Potere – attraverso lo 'sviluppo' della produzione di beni superflui, l'imposizione della smania di consumo, la moda, l'informazione (soprattutto, in maniera imponente, la televisione) – a creare tali valori, gettando a mare cinicamente i valori tradizionali e la Chiesa stessa, che ne era il simbolo" [from Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari*, 'Studio sulla rivoluzione antropologica in Italia' (from *Corriere della Sera*, with the title 'Gli italiani non sono più quelli', June 10 1974)].

ians.³⁴ Pasolini denounces such a world, without religion, without moral values, and without culture; even more, he deeply despises the new society of conformism with no differentiation:

The matrix that generates all Italians is by now the same for all ... They are culturally, psychologically and, what's most impressive, physically, interchangeable.³⁵

What is worse, this degenerate middle class is not conscious of its own degradation; on the contrary, they are proud and happy to be the way they are. Like young Oedipus contemporary middle-class Italians live on the basis of their instincts, which in turn are shaped by mass media and mass consumerism. This situation is the same as the one presented in the first meeting between young Oedipus and Tiresias in the second movement, but this time blind Oedipus takes the place of Tiresias, while contemporary Italians replace young Oedipus. The outcome is the same: no relationship is possible between the blind Oedipus/Pasolini and the Italian middle class. The mission to reach out to the middle class fails, and, as a result, Oedipus leaves San Petronio Square, led by Angelo, as Pasolini himself explained in the same interview with Jean Dufлот:

Disillusioned, then, Oedipus leaves the world of the middle class and goes more and more into the popular world, that of the workers. He goes there to sing. Not for the middle class any longer, but for the class of the exploited. Hence the long march towards the factories. Where, probably, further disillusionment is waiting for him ...³⁶

Oedipus tries to fulfill his mission by going towards the working class. In the film this is shown when Oedipus, after leaving San Petronio Square, is led by Angelo to an industrial area reminiscent of the industrial parks surrounding Milan. The urban landscape shown upon the arrival of Oedipus is depressing: this area is built to satisfy the needs not of people, but of industrial production. Yet it is in such a place that Oedipus hopes to find the remains of the old Italian culture that can be reached by his message. In fact, he hopes that poor, exploited working-class people have not yet been reached and spoiled by economic progress and that communication with them might still be possible.

34. Cf. Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari*, 'Acculturazione e acculturazione' (from *Corriere della Sera* with the title 'Sfida ai dirigenti della televisione', December 9 1973)

35. Pasolini 1999, 310: "La matrice che genera tutti gli italiani è ormai la stessa ... Essi sono culturalmente, psicologicamente e, quel che è più impressionante, fisicamente, interscambiabili" [from Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari*, 'Studio della rivoluzione antropologica in Italia' (from *Corriere della Sera* with the title 'Gli italiani non sono più quelli', June 10 1974)].

36. Pasolini 1999, 1501: "Con il disincanto, poi, Edipo lascia dietro di sé il mondo della borghesia e s'inoltra sempre più nel mondo popolare, dei lavoratori. Se ne va per cantare, non più per la borghesia, ma per la classe degli sfruttati. Di qui questa lunga marcia verso le fabbriche. Dove, probabilmente, l'aspetta un altro disincanto ..." (from 'Enigmi. Enigmi grandi ... enigmi piccoli', from *Il sogno del centauro. Incontri con Jean Dufлот*, 1969-1975). Cf. Fusillo 1996: 63.



Fig. 4. Blind Oedipus playing a Russian folk song outside the factory.

Here Oedipus, alone, plays a Russian folk song, one of the songs that Italian soldiers learned in Russia during WWII and then used as a revolutionary song in the Italian Resistance (Fig. 4).³⁷ It was a very popular tune about freedom and revolution that would remind any listener of the hope for social justice and a better future; exploited workers would be especially sensitive to such ideals. But Oedipus faces another disappointment. Workers pour out from their workplaces, but none of them pays any attention to the tune that he plays for them as they head home in a hurry. Just like the middle class, proletarians are confined within the walls of their 'bourgeois' lives disillusioned and without any further hope; Oedipus and Angelo depart from the lonely industrial landscape (Fig. 5).

Pasolini had always been drawn to the proletarian and agricultural elements in Italian society, because he thought that they had not yet been corrupted by modern society: proletarians could still live a 'real' life, following the rhythms of nature. It was to them and, above all, about them, that the intellectual could still talk. Pasolini tried to connect with these social classes and, at the same time, to portray them in his works, by reaching out to the people of the Roman slums (*borgate*). He described them in his novels (*Ragazzi di vita* of 1955, *Una vita violenta* of 1959), films (*Mamma Roma* of 1962, and *Accattone* of 1962) and in a short film (*La ricotta*, an episode of the compilation-film *Ro-GoPaG* of 1963). Nevertheless, he eventually became disillusioned with them as well, realizing that those '*Ragazzi di Vita*' ('Boys of Life') only wanted to emulate the middle class, losing all moral values and becoming deaf to anything but commercial slogans.

37. Cf. Pasolini 2006, 447, and Stack 1969, 129.



Fig. 5. Blind Oedipus and Angelo leaving the factory area in solitude.

Pasolini's sad conclusion is that in the economically thriving Italy of the 1960s no one bothers to listen to intellectuals and poets. Not the middle class, lost in their pursuit of empty materialism and deprived of any individuality, and not even the peasants and proletarians who envy the wealth of the middle class and try to emulate their behavior. The economic boom seems to have erased any difference between the two in its destruction of the old world of values:

The 'real' humanistic tradition (not the false one of the ministries, of the academies, of the law-courts and of the schools) is being destroyed by the new mass culture and by the new relationship that technology has established – with long-term prospects – between product and consumption, and the old paleo-industrial middle class is giving way to a new middle class that more and more deeply also includes the working classes, eventually aiming at an identification of the middle class with the human race.³⁸

38. Pasolini 1999, 285: "... la 'vera' tradizione umanistica (non quella falsa dei ministeri, delle accademie, dei tribunali e delle scuole) viene distrutta dalla nuova cultura di massa e dal nuovo rapporto che la tecnologia ha istituito – con prospettive ormai secolari – tra prodotto e consumo; e la vecchia borghesia paleoindustriale sta cedendo il posto a una borghesia nuova che comprende sempre di più e più profondamente anche le classi operaie, tendendo finalmente alla identificazione di borghesia con umanità" [from Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari*, 'La prima, vera rivoluzione di destra' (from *Il Tempo* with the title 'Pasolini giudica i temi di italiano', July 15 1973)].

This modern Oedipus is unable to reach even the proletarian classes, because they are only interested in 'consuming' disposable goods and Pasolini longs for a world that has ceased to exist:

I miss the immense universe of the peasant and working-class people before the start of the industrial Development.³⁹

After having failed in his mission, Oedipus can only end his journey where it began. The last scene of the fourth and final movement of the film ends in the same place as the first: the farmhouse of the northern Italian village where the baby Oedipus/Pasolini was born. Here, led by Angelo to the meadow outside the building, the blind man says:

Oh light that I could no longer see, that before was somehow mine, now you shine on me for the last time. I have arrived. Life ends where it begins.⁴⁰

In the last frame of the film the camera focuses on the trees and the meadow where Oedipus presumably is going to die.

All this recalls the final scene of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, when the blind Oedipus walks into the sacred wood of Colonus to die⁴¹ – but with one, important difference. In Sophocles' tragedy, Oedipus has moved forward, from desperation at the beginning of the play to a new, heroic status at the end. In the film, the story of Oedipus ends in failure: the blind seer does not move forward and can only go back to his origin, his own birthplace, and close the circle. Since nobody listens to him, there is no place and no future for the intellectual in modern Italy. Pasolini can look inwards in self-analysis or out at the world with a detached attitude, but the hope for a dialogue with the peasant society is lost forever:

Whether I miss this peasant universe or not remains my own business. This does not stop me at all from expressing my criticism of today's world, *as it is now*, the more clearly the more I am detached from it and the more I accept – only stoically – to live in it.⁴²

39. Pasolini 1999, 333: "*rimpiango l'immenso universo contadino e operaio prima dello Sviluppo*" [from Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari*, 'Ampliamento del 'bozzetto' sulla rivoluzione antropologica in Italia' (from *Il Mondo*, interview with Guido Vergani, July 11 1974)].

40. "*O luce che non vedevo più, che prima eri in qualche modo mia, ora mi illumini per l'ultima volta. Sono giunto. La vita finisce dove comincia*".

41. In this scene Angelo replaces Antigone, and this change led some critics to see in it a homosexual reading of the myth of Oedipus. See Fusillo 1996, 67-69.

42. Pasolini 1999, 321: "*Che io rimpianga o non rimpianga questo universo contadino, resta comunque affar mio. Ciò non mi impedisce affatto di esercitare nel mondo attuale, così com'è la mia critica: anzi, tanto più lucidamente quanto più ne sono staccato, e quanto più accetto solo stoicamente di viverci*" [from Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari*, 'Limitatezza della storia e immensità del mondo contadino' (from *Paese Sera*, with the title 'Lettera aperta a Italo Calvino: Pasolini: quello che rimpiango', July 8, 1974)].

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