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## Reconfiguring Shame: Poverty, Eroticism, and the Sacred in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Ragazzi di vita* and *Teorema*

**Abstract:** This article examines the role of shame in Pier Paolo Pasolini's novels *Ragazzi di vita* (1955) and *Teorema* (1968), focusing on its intersections with poverty, eroticism, and the sacred. Drawing from theoretical perspectives by Ewa Kosowska, Giorgio Agamben, and Guy Hocquenghem, the study positions shame as both a tool of societal control and a catalyst for resistance. In *Ragazzi di vita*, the marginalized *borgatari* experience shame through economic deprivation and social exclusion, yet they also reclaim it as an act of defiance. In *Teorema*, an enigmatic visitor disrupts bourgeois stability, exposing repressed desires and existential crises, leading to the characters' psychological disintegration. Pasolini's narratives reveal shame as both oppressive and transformative, dismantling dominant cultural structures and redefining subjectivity. By linking shame to class struggle, queer identity, and spiritual rupture, this article argues that Pasolini reconfigures shame as a paradoxical force—both destructive and redemptive—in a critique of modern consumerist society.

**Keywords:** Shame, Pasolini, Poverty, Eroticism, Sacred

### Introduction

Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–75) is a central figure in twentieth-century European intellectual and cultural history, renowned for his critique of modernity and its sociopolitical consequences. As a poet, novelist, cultural theorist,

and filmmaker, Pasolini condemned postwar Italy's industrialization and the rise of consumer capitalism, which he described as a cultural "genocide carried out by the bourgeoisie towards [...] sub-proletarians or certain colonial populations".<sup>1</sup> In his 1975 text "L'articolo delle lucciole" ("The Article of Fireflies"),<sup>2</sup> he used the metaphor of the "disappearance of fireflies" for the ecological and societal collapse caused by industrial capitalism.<sup>3</sup> Pasolini lamented that consumerism has distorted the Italian consciousness into an "irreversible degradation".<sup>4</sup> Naomi Greene notes that "under his scrutiny, everything—fashions, advertising slogans, gestures—became a sign of the 'anthropological revolution' and the 'new' fascism that were devastating Italy".<sup>5</sup>

Shame has emerged across Pasolini's literary and cinematic works since his earliest Friulian writings,<sup>6</sup> functioning as both a personal and collective force that structures experiences of marginalization, eroticism, and social exclusion. In *Ragazzi di vita* (1955),<sup>7</sup> Pasolini portrays the subproletarian youth of postwar Rome, a community ostracized from Italy's economic prosperity. Shame, in this context, is imposed through poverty and social stigma, yet it also becomes a means of defiance. In *Teorema* (1968),<sup>8</sup> Pasolini depicts a family whose seemingly stable world is shattered by the arrival of an enig-

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<sup>1</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Il genocidio," in *Saggi sulla politica e sulla società*, eds. Walter Siti, and Silvia De Laude (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), 511. Unless otherwise indicated or directly cited from an English edition, all translations from the original Italian are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Il vuoto del potere in Italia," *Il Corriere della Sera*, February 1, 1975. Reprinted as "L'articolo delle lucciole" in *Scritti corsari* (Milan: Garzanti, 1975). Subsequently included in *Saggi sulla politica e sulla società*, eds. Walter Siti, and Silvia De Laude (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), 404–411.

<sup>3</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, "L'articolo delle lucciole," in *Saggi sulla politica e sulla società*, eds. Walter Siti, and Silvia De Laude (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), 405.

<sup>4</sup> Pasolini, "L'articolo delle lucciole," 408.

<sup>5</sup> Naomi Greene, *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Cinema as Heresy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 179. On the anthropological revolution, see: Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Studio sulla rivoluzione antropologica in Italia," in *Saggi sulla politica e sulla società*, eds. Walter Siti, and Silvia De Laude (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), 307–312.

<sup>6</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini's first book of poetry, *Poesie a Casarsa*, written in Friulian—his mother's dialect—was published in 1942.

<sup>7</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1955 novel *Ragazzi di vita* has appeared in English under various titles, including *The Ragazzi*, *The Hustlers*, *The Street Kids* (translated by Ann Goldstein in 2016), and *Boys Alive* (translated by Tim Pars in 2023). For the purposes of this article, all quotations are taken from the original Italian version.

<sup>8</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1968 novel *Teorema* began as a poem and developed into both a fictional narrative and a film in the same year. It was later published in English as *Theorem*, with translations by Stuart Hood released in 1992 and 2023. For the purposes of this article, all quotations are taken from the original Italian version.

matic visitor. Here, shame operates as an existential rupture, exposing the hypocrisy of bourgeois morality while revealing the transformative potential of repressed desires.

Scholars have often interpreted shame in Pasolini's work as a dynamic force that juxtaposes taboo sexual desires with broader socio-political critique. In *Atti impuri* (*Impure Acts*),<sup>9</sup> the autobiographical narrator Paolo is tormented by guilt over his homosexuality and his fear of corrupting the boys he loves".<sup>10</sup> However, the uninhibited and spontaneous sexuality of these young men – free from societal shame – offers him fleeting moments of liberation.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in *Petrolio*, Pasolini's unfinished novel, shame is linked to class anxieties, as the protagonist Carlo's bourgeois upbringing manifests in a self-destructive cycle of desire and humiliation.<sup>12</sup>

While these interpretations illuminate the pervasive role of shame in Pasolini's work, they often overlook its broader implications as a site of cultural resistance and redefinition. This article bridges this gap by examining how Pasolini's engagement with shame in *Ragazzi di vita* and *Teorema* disrupts conventional power structures. Using a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that draws on Ewa Kosowska's spheres of shame, Giorgio Agamben's concept of *bare life*, and Guy Hocquenghem's queer theory, I argue that Pasolini reconfigures shame as a paradoxical force – both oppressive and redemptive. Through his narratives, he reveals how marginalized identities and taboo desires resist dominant structures, transforming shame from a mechanism of social control into a space for subversion, survival, and alternative subjectivities.

## Shame as a Cultural Construct

In cultural studies, shame can be understood as a psychosomatic phenomenon that shapes cultural behaviors and – following Eugeniusz Jaworski

<sup>9</sup> Published posthumously in 1982, *Atti Impuri* originated from the autobiographical material in Pasolini's *Quaderni Rossi*, his diaries from the years 1946-47, which remain unpublished in their entirety. The novel's unfinished status is thus attributed to the impossibility of publicly and candidly expressing homosexual desires. See Laurence Hooper, "Riacquistare la Casarsa Buona": Exile, Realism, and Authorship in Pasolini's *Atti Impuri* and *Amato Mio*," *Italian Studies* 68, no. 1 (March 2013): 140–56, <https://doi.org/10.1179/0075163412Z.0000000037>.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Hardt, "Pasolini Discovers Love Outside," *Diacritics* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 113–114, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2009.0036>.

<sup>11</sup> Hardt, "Pasolini Discovers Love Outside," 115.

<sup>12</sup> Armando Maggi, *The Resurrection of the Body: Pier Paolo Pasolini from Saint Paul to Sade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 203.

– “an important factor in the creation of cultural facts”.<sup>13</sup> Mateusz Szubert defines shame as “a response to one’s ‘imperfect self’”,<sup>14</sup> emphasizing its subjective and internalized nature. This perspective aligns with the work of Silvan Tomkins, psychologist and personality theorist, who described shame as an affective reaction to perceived inadequacy, often triggered by failure to meet social or personal expectations.<sup>15</sup> Szubert identifies multiple sources of shame, including physical appearance, professional identity, social background, religion, sexual preferences, and health status.<sup>16</sup> These elements indicate that shame is often externally imposed through cultural norms and expectations, reinforcing social hierarchies and power dynamics.

Shame is closely linked to taboo, intimacy, embarrassment, stigma, and guilt.<sup>17</sup> Szubert argues that shame’s proximity to taboo has led many researchers to dismiss it as unworthy of serious study.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, neglecting taboos reinforces social exclusion and silences marginalized identities. This dynamic is particularly evident in gendered experiences of shame. According to Judith Butler, women and queer individuals often experience shame as a tool of social control, with their identities and behaviors policed through cultural and institutional mechanisms.<sup>19</sup> The intersection of shame and power becomes especially visible in cases where marginalized individuals are shamed for their sexuality, economic status, or non-conformity.

Cultural anthropologist, Ewa Kosowska makes a distinction between individual and collective shame; individual shame affects how people perceive themselves and interact with others, while collective shame is experienced by a community, nation, or social group in response to past actions or historical injustices. Although both forms of shame may arise from similar circumstances, their manifestations often diverge.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Eugeniusz Jaworski, “Wstyd jako kategoria typologiczna,” in *Wstyd w kulturze. Zarys problematyki*, ed. Ewa Kosowska (Katowice: Śląsk, 1998), 50.

<sup>14</sup> Mateusz Szubert, “Wstyd w dyskursie kulturowym,” *Ethos* 30, no. 2 (118) (2017): 51, <https://doi.org/10.12887/30-2017-2-118-05>.

<sup>15</sup> See Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness. Vol. II: The Negative Affects* (New York: Springer, 1963). See also: Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, eds. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Adam Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Szubert, “Wstyd w dyskursie kulturowym,” 51.

<sup>17</sup> Szubert, “Wstyd w dyskursie kulturowym,” 51.

<sup>18</sup> Szubert, “Wstyd w dyskursie kulturowym,” 56–57.

<sup>19</sup> See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> Ewa Kosowska, “Wstyd. Konotacje antropologiczne,” in *Wstyd w kulturze. Zarys problematyki*, ed. Ewa Kosowska (Katowice: Śląsk, 1998), 60.

Kosowska notes that shame manifests across various spheres, including *scarcity* (shame of hunger and poverty), *abundance* (excessive consumption or having some physical characteristic), *aspiration* (shame of one's body, origins, family, or name), *competence* (feelings of failure or inadequacy in skill or knowledge), and *display* (public scrutiny, visibility, or exposure).<sup>21</sup> Pasolini's *Ragazzi di vita* and *Teorema* engage with these spheres by portraying characters whose experiences of marginalization and transgression expose broader mechanisms of societal control. Moreover, Pasolini's own experience of societal condemnation and legal persecution over his homosexuality and radical artistic vision further illustrates how shame is culturally constructed and deployed as a tool of repression against those who challenge dominant norms.

### Poverty, Marginalization, and Shame in *Ragazzi di vita*

Pier Paolo Pasolini's debut novel, *Ragazzi di vita*, serves as both a literary and socio-political intervention, illuminating the precarious existence of the *borgatari* – the marginalized youth of Rome's postwar *borgate* (slums).<sup>22</sup> Far from a conventional social-realist narrative, Pasolini's text critiques the systemic neglect of Italy's subproletariat, a group systematically excluded from mainstream cultural and political discourse. In an interview with Marc Gervais, Pasolini expressed his frustration with Italian society's erasure of the subproletariat, noting that

[e]veryone – critics, the bourgeoisie, even the communists – were convinced that the subproletarian world didn't exist any more. And what was I supposed to do with these twenty million subproletarians? Put them in a concentration camp and destroy them in the gas chambers? The attitude towards the subproletariat was almost racist, as if it were made up of people who belonged to a world that didn't exist any more. They were thought of as a closed book. Yet, poor devils, they really did exist.<sup>23</sup>

This widespread refusal to acknowledge the *borgatari* mirrors broader socio-political trends that positioned these communities as vestiges of a past that modern Italy sought to forget.

The novel formally enacts this exclusion by resisting assimilation into bourgeois literary conventions. By employing Roman dialect without trans-

<sup>21</sup> Kosowska, "Wstyd. Konotacje antropologiczne," 59.

<sup>22</sup> See David Forgacs, *Italy's Margins: Social Exclusion and Nation Formation since 1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>23</sup> Marc Gervais, *Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Paris: Éditions Seghers, 1973), 13–14. Quoted in David Ward, *A Poetics of Resistance* (London: Associated University Press, 1995), 59.

lation, Pasolini immerses readers in a linguistic environment that denies them interpretive authority, thereby mirroring the societal marginalization of the *borgatari*.<sup>24</sup> Pasolini himself acknowledged the estranging effect of this decision, stating in his introduction that while a glossary is provided, it is “hardly necessary”.<sup>25</sup> Rather than facilitating comprehension, the novel forces an outsider audience into a position of alienation, reflecting the very exclusion it seeks to critique.

Pasolini rejects the conventional omniscient narrator.<sup>26</sup> Instead, *Ragazzi di vita* employs an embedded narrative structure that denies the reader a stable interpretative framework, reinforcing barriers between the *borgatari* and the dominant social order. These barriers are not merely linguistic or social but biopolitical – aligning closely with Giorgio Agamben’s concept of *bare life (homo sacer)*. Agamben theorizes that sovereign power produces *bare life* by creating states of exception, in which individuals are stripped of political agency and rendered vulnerable to power without legal protection.<sup>27</sup> Within this framework, the *borgatari* occupy a liminal space – both included in and excluded from the political order. As Agamben writes, “the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power. *It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power*”<sup>28</sup> – a paradox that *Ragazzi di vita* formally enacts by withholding interpretative authority from readers, just as society withholds political and cultural inclusion from its marginalized protagonists.

This exclusion is particularly visible in the economic structures of Italy’s so-called *miracolo economico* (economic miracle), which celebrated rapid industrialization while simultaneously relegating the *borgatari* to the city’s peripheries. The *borgate*, described as “garbage dumps”<sup>29</sup> where buildings are “not yet finished and already collapsing”,<sup>30</sup> serve as visual metaphors for sovereign abandonment. In this context, Agamben’s analysis of the camp as the biopolitical paradigm of modernity becomes relevant, as the *borgate*, much like Agamben’s *campo*, do not exist outside power but rather function as expressions of sovereign control through exclusion.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Dawid Ward, *A Poetics of Resistance* (London: Associated University Press, 1995), 64.

<sup>25</sup> Ward, *A Poetics of Resistance*, 62.

<sup>26</sup> Ward, *A Poetics of Resistance*, 64–65.

<sup>27</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>28</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, “*Ragazzi di vita*,” in *Romanzi e racconti*, eds. Walter Siti, and Silvia De Laude, vol. 1 (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), 619.

<sup>30</sup> Pasolini, “*Ragazzi di vita*,” 524.

<sup>31</sup> Alison Ross, “Agamben’s Political Paradigm of the Camp: Its Features and Reasons,” *Constellations* 19, no. 3 (2012): 424.

Pasolini dramatizes the material consequences of this abandonment through moments of violence and deprivation. The deaths of Riccetto's mother and his friend Marcello, when a repurposed school building collapses exemplify the tangible effects of this exclusion; their deaths are not merely tragic accidents but manifestations of a political system that has failed them. Similarly, Riccetto's theft from a blind man – "Riccetto waited for a moment when no one was passing, grabbed a handful of money from the hat, and took off"<sup>32</sup> – should not be read as moral failure but as a survival strategy dictated by economic instability. The novel underscores the precarious nature of this existence through a cyclical structure, in which Riccetto himself becomes a victim of theft: "While they did what they had to do, and Nadia held the boy tight in her arms with his face sunk between her breasts, she slowly slid one hand along his pants hanging on the wall, stuck it in the back pocket, took out the bundle of bills, and put it in her purse (...)"<sup>33</sup> This pattern of theft and counter-theft illustrates the impossibility of economic security for the *borgatari*, whose survival depends on constant negotiation between exploitation and resistance.

Beyond economic precarity, the novel also interrogates the role of shame in the lives of the *borgatari*. Public humiliation recurs as a motif, particularly in scenes of punishment. When Riccetto is caught stealing cheese, his captor, "feeling he was fully within his rights, punched him twice, knocking him around (...)"<sup>34</sup> The physical violence is compounded by public exposure, further entrenching Riccetto within a cycle of shame and disenfranchisement: "his face wan, brooding vague thoughts of revenge and swallowing his bitterness with the blood from his gums".<sup>35</sup>

While Agamben's theory of *bare life* provides a compelling framework for interpreting the juridical and material abandonment experienced by the *borgatari*, it often privileges a reading of political passivity. In contrast, James C. Scott's theory of "everyday resistance" offers a critical counterpoint by foregrounding the agency of marginalized actors. In *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott contends that subordinate groups frequently resist domination through informal, small-scale acts – "foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance [...]"<sup>36</sup> – which, although easily overlooked, cumulatively destabilize hegemonic systems. These tactics, he

<sup>32</sup> Pasolini, "Ragazzi di vita," 533.

<sup>33</sup> Pasolini, "Ragazzi di vita," 564.

<sup>34</sup> Pasolini, "Ragazzi di vita," 670.

<sup>35</sup> Pasolini, "Ragazzi di vita," 671.

<sup>36</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 29.

notes, “require little or no coordination or planning”<sup>37</sup> yet collectively form “a political and economic barrier reef”<sup>38</sup> that impedes elite control.

In this context, Riccetto’s theft, along with the quiet transgressions enacted by others in *Ragazzi di vita*, should not be read as isolated episodes but as paradigmatic instances of what Scott terms the “weapons of the weak” – resistance strategies that reject overt rebellion in favor of subversive acts rooted in survival. These thefts, along with scenes of linguistic defiance and spatial appropriation, belong to what Scott identifies as the “hidden transcript”: “a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant”.<sup>39</sup> Such practices reveal the *borgatari* not merely as passive victims of structural violence but as agents engaged in informal yet meaningful forms of cultural and political contestation.

This framework also illuminates communal episodes such as the response to Begalone’s mother’s supernatural visions:

The three brothers, the four sisters, and all the neighbors were preoccupied with getting rid of the spell. They had found in the pillow belonging to Bégalo’s mamma feathers twisted into the shape of doves, crosses, crowns, and had immediately boiled them: they had also dropped some pieces of iron into boiling oil and then thrown them in cold water, to see what shapes emerged, and for two or three days the only thing you could hear in the house was the sound of the metal hitting the floor in order to make circles around the one under the spell, who did nothing but plead and complain.<sup>40</sup>

While such rituals may appear irrational, they reflect a shared symbolic economy that affirms subcultural identity and social cohesion. As Scott argues, the conflict between dominant and subordinate groups is not limited to material struggle but includes “a struggle over the appropriation of symbols, a struggle over how the past and present shall be understood and labeled, a struggle to identify causes and assess blame [...].”<sup>41</sup> These practices, though embedded in everyday life, contribute to what Scott terms “the quiet and anonymous welter of peasant action”,<sup>42</sup> a dispersed but potent form of resistance that undermines hegemonic power without direct confrontation. In Pasolini’s novel, such vernacular rituals function as epistemological counterpoints to bourgeois rationality, generating an oppositional symbolic order that is both affective and political.

<sup>37</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, 29.

<sup>38</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, 36.

<sup>39</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), xii.

<sup>40</sup> Pasolini, “*Ragazzi di vita*,” 706.

<sup>41</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, xvii.

<sup>42</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, xvii.

Pasolini ultimately portrays the *borgatari* as suspended between sovereign abandonment and vernacular resistance. While Agamben's notion of *homo sacer* elucidates their legal and political invisibility, Scott revives their agency through acts that may appear inconsequential but acquire political significance through their cumulative force. Pasolini captures this dialectic with remarkable precision: the *borgatari* are excluded and imperiled, yet never entirely defeated. Their survival strategies do not reflect mere endurance but enact a quiet, persistent refusal to disappear.

### Shame, Erotic Desire, and the Sacred in *Teorema*

While *Ragazzi di vita* portrays shame as a mechanism of economic oppression – binding Rome's subproletarian youth to cycles of poverty, exclusion, and neglect while paradoxically enabling defiant survival – *Teorema* reconfigures shame as an existential rupture that fractures bourgeois subjectivity. It exposes the fragility of social conventions and the repressed desires lurking beneath wealth and respectability. In *Teorema*, shame arises not from external deprivation but from an internal confrontation with the self. The arrival of the enigmatic visitor – an ambivalent figure functioning both as an allegorical deity<sup>43</sup> and an “impossible nonobject of desire”<sup>44</sup> – plunges each member of the bourgeois family into an identity crisis, culminating in either self-destruction or transformation.

Shame in *Teorema* transcends its conventional role as a punitive mechanism reinforcing social norms; instead, it becomes a transgressive rupture that dismantles identity and exposes the subject to new modes of being. As Pasolini himself noted, “*Teorema* touches on the subject of taboo, the transgression of sexual prohibitions”.<sup>45</sup> This transgressive nature of desire aligns *Teorema* with Pasolini's broader critique of modernity, capitalism, and the loss of the sacred. Throughout his oeuvre, he lamented the disappearance of the sacred in contemporary society, arguing that consumer capitalism has displaced religious transcendence with materialist ideology. He explicitly stated that “[t]he bourgeois civilization has lost [the sacred]. And what has it substituted for this sense of the sacred after its loss? An ideology of wealth and power”.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Entretiens avec Jean Duflot* (Paris: Éditions Gutenberg, 2007), 124. On allegory in *Teorema* see: Sandro Bernardi, “Pasolini e l'uso dell'allegoria in ‘Teorema’,” *Studi Novecenteschi* 31, no. 67/68 (June–December 2004): 109–119.

<sup>44</sup> Damon Ross Young, “*Teorema*’s Death Drive,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema*, eds. Ronald Gregg, and Amy Villarejo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 336.

<sup>45</sup> Pasolini, *Entretiens avec Jean Duflot*, 104.

<sup>46</sup> Pasolini, *Entretiens avec Jean Duflot*, 109–110.

The loss is not just historical but ontological. According to Stefania Benini, Pasolini envisioned the sacred not as transcendental but as *immanent*, rooted in the body and in the flesh.<sup>47</sup> “The sacred does not belong to a transcendental horizon but, rather, pertains to a *hic et nunc* corporeal dimension,”<sup>48</sup> she writes, locating sacred in “its scandalous finitude”<sup>49</sup> and “its *eros* and [...] *thanatos*”.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, the visitor in *Teorema* is a figure of “hierophany” in Eliade’s term,<sup>51</sup> but unlike traditional divine figures, he manifests a sacred that is corporeal, erotic, and self-annihilating.<sup>52</sup>

Pasolini’s sacred is not mediated by the Catholic Church, which he believed had become complicit in bourgeois repression. As he asserted, “I defend the sacred because it is that part of man which offers the least resistance to profanation by power and is most threatened by Church institutions”.<sup>53</sup> This statement highlights a central paradox in Pasolini’s thought: although the sacred constitutes a fundamental dimension of human existence, its continued vitality depends on its preservation within realms untouched by bourgeois ideology – realms increasingly marginal to the institutions that once claimed custodianship over the sacred.

In *Teorema*, then, the sacred is not found in doctrinal structures or symbols but in the very collapse of those systems. The visitor’s departure leaves the bourgeois family fragmented, but in that fragmentation, Pasolini locates the potential for a new, flesh-centered ethics. As Benini notes, “Pasolini’s understanding of the sacred as a heretical vision [...] focuses specifically on the mystery of the Incarnation as a foundational model”,<sup>54</sup> not in its salvific promise, but in its tragic finality – “the only possible fate is the cross”.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, shame and the sacred are not merely coexistent but structurally interdependent in *Teorema*: shame signifies the disintegration of bourgeois identity, while the sacred emerges precisely within the void that follows. Central to this dynamic is the disruption of normative social order by homo-erotic longing, which functions as both a destabilizing force and a revelation of suppressed desires. Pasolini’s representation of such tensions resonates

<sup>47</sup> Stefania Benini, *Pasolini: The Sacred Flesh* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 11.

<sup>48</sup> Benini, *Pasolini: The Sacred Flesh*, 8.

<sup>49</sup> Benini, *Pasolini: The Sacred Flesh*, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Benini, *Pasolini: The Sacred Flesh*, 8.

<sup>51</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963).

<sup>52</sup> Benini, *Pasolini: The Sacred Flesh*, 8–9.

<sup>53</sup> Pasolini, *Entretiens avec Jean Duflot*, 105.

<sup>54</sup> Benini, *Pasolini: The Sacred Flesh*, 9.

<sup>55</sup> Benini, *Pasolini: The Sacred Flesh*, 9.

with Guy Hocquenghem's claim that "[t]o the public, homosexuality is the concentrate of the shameful little Oedipal secret" and "is no longer a relation of desire, but an ontological standpoint".<sup>56</sup> This transformation of desire into ontology becomes particularly evident in the character of Pietro, the bourgeois son, whose attraction to the visitor initiates a profound internal rupture. The visitor, embodying a sublime or hierophanic form of eroticism, exposes Pietro to a desire he cannot assimilate, thereby confronting him with the impossibility – and necessity – of self-recognition. Shame, in this context, is not a reactive emotion but a constitutive force, one that renders visible the fractures within bourgeois subjectivity and reveals the sacred as an experience of radical otherness.

Pietro's experience of shame is vividly articulated through his perception of the visitor's uninhibited demeanor: "naturally (...), without the slightest feeling of shame."<sup>57</sup> This moment of contrast underscores the central tension in *Teorema*—between liberated desire and internalized repression. Unlike the visitor, whose bodily presence exudes ease and nonchalance, Pietro is unsettled by his own emergent desire. Pasolini describes how Pietro's "pale-ness increases (...), his brown eyes become petty and a little miserable",<sup>58</sup> suggesting that his shame does not stem from his attraction *per se*, but rather from the socio-cultural taboos that render homoeroticism unintelligible or deviant. Notably, the visitor's gaze – marked by "maternal confidence (...) understanding and sweetly ironic" – does not explicitly shame Pietro. Instead, it is Pietro's inability to reconcile his feelings within the normative codes of bourgeois masculinity that precipitate a collapse into self-referential shame. His breakdown – "crying, he throws himself on his bed and buries his head in the pillow"<sup>59</sup> – reveals how shame functions not only as a symptom of repression but as a critical moment of self-recognition.

If shame operates as a mechanism of queer abjection, it also possesses the potential to function as a site of subject formation. José Esteban Muñoz theorizes shame as a performative rupture, arguing that it can serve as a form of *disidentification*—a process through which queer subjects negotiate their relationship to dominant cultural scripts without fully assimilating

<sup>56</sup> Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Daniella Dangoor, with a new introduction by Michael Moon and a preface by Jeffrey Weeks (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 88.

<sup>57</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Teorema," in *Romanzi e racconti*, eds. Walter Siti, and Silvia De Laude, vol. 2 (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), 913.

<sup>58</sup> Pasolini, "Teorema," 914.

<sup>59</sup> Pasolini, "Teorema," 919.

or rejecting them.<sup>60</sup> Rather than simply reinforcing heterosexual hegemony, queer shame can become a tool through which subjects create new ways of existing. Pietro's experience exemplifies this paradox. His shame is not only an expression of guilt but a moment of disidentification, where he neither fully embraces nor entirely repudiates his bourgeois conditioning. His retreat into art following his breakdown does not offer him liberation but instead renders his own crisis visible.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, Pietro's father, Paolo, undergoes a repressed homoerotic crisis, one that culminates in an existential dissolution rather than a moment of queer world-making. In an intimate yet silent moment, Paolo and the visitor drive through the countryside together – a scene laden with unspoken desire. While the visitor remains composed, Paolo is visibly disturbed.<sup>62</sup> His final self-exile into the desert – a space deeply coded within Christian theology as one of purification and trial – symbolizes his failed attempt at renunciation. If Pietro's shame leads to a moment of creative expression, however futile, Paolo's shame annihilates him entirely, leaving him in a liminal state between existence and disappearance.

Pietro and Paolo may not find resolution, but their shame shatters their previous identity, opening up new (albeit painful) possibilities. Pietro's retreat into art could be seen not as failure, but as an act of queer world-making. Unlike Paolo's erasure, Pietro's shame pushes him into self-exploration, leading him toward an alternative, creative identity.

While *Teorema* is often discussed through the lens of homoerotic repression and bourgeois collapse, the female characters, Odetta and Lucia, embody a different – but equally revealing – dynamic of gendered shame, sexual transgression, and patriarchal control. Whereas Pietro and Paolo's shame manifests as crises of masculine identity, Odetta and Lucia experience shame as a form of submission, hysteria, and paralysis, illustrating how patriarchal structures dictate female subjectivity through shame's disciplining force.<sup>63</sup> However, their trajectories, while seemingly reinforcing bourgeois expectations of women as passive subjects of desire, also suggest a potential for disruption. Their respective breakdowns – Odetta's descent into catatonia and Lucia's compulsive sexual transgressions – can be understood not only as collapses but as refusals to participate in the bourgeois order they previously inhabited.

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<sup>60</sup> See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>61</sup> Pasolini, "Teorema," 1011.

<sup>62</sup> Pasolini, "Teorema," 956.

<sup>63</sup> See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Routledge, 2004); Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

Odetta, the daughter, experiences shame through erotic hysteria, obsessively fixating on the visitor without being able to act on her desire. Unlike Pietro, whose shame propels him toward artistic self-exploration, Odetta's desire renders her immobilized. Pasolini describes her reaction: "She throws herself on the bed, presses her face against the pillow. It is not clear if she cries or does it as a joke".<sup>64</sup> This moment of ambiguity –where pleasure, shame, and suffering collapse into one another – suggests that Odetta's crisis is not simply psychological breakdown, but a refusal to exist within the limits imposed upon her as a bourgeois daughter. Pasolini offers no resolution for Odetta – not marriage, not romance, not even self-destruction in the dramatic sense. Instead, she remains suspended in the in-between space of catatonia where non-participation becomes its own form of rebellion.

Lucia, the mother, presents a different trajectory of shame and desire. Whereas Odetta's response to the visitor is paralysis, Lucia's is excess – she actively seeks sexual transgression in a desperate attempt to recapture the intensity of her encounter with the visitor. "Suddenly she clenches the dress in her fist and throws it beyond the parapet (...) Now Lucia is naked: *she has forced herself to be*".<sup>65</sup> This moment – where Lucia exposes herself – is deeply paradoxical. While on the surface, it might appear to be an act of liberation, the phrase "*she has forced herself to be*" suggests that Lucia's transgression is not entirely self-determined. She is not freely embracing her sexuality; rather, she is attempting to force desire into existence, to reconstruct the rupture left by the visitor's departure. Her journey, however, does not lead to liberation but intensifies her alienation and disorientation.

Thus, both Odetta's catatonia and Lucia's compulsions reveal the gendered limits of shame's disruptive potential. While *Teorema* suggests the possibility of queer world-making for Pietro, the fates of its female characters remain ambiguous, neither entirely repressive nor wholly liberating. Pasolini leaves them in states of suspension in a world structured by shame, repression, and rare moments of transgression.

## The Ambiguity of Shame

Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Ragazzi di vita* and *Teorema* reveal shame as a complex phenomenon that extends beyond personal guilt or moral judgment, instead functioning as a deeply embedded cultural force with the potential to both oppress and transform. By applying Ewa Kosowska's spheres of shame,

<sup>64</sup> Pasolini, "*Teorema*," 992.

<sup>65</sup> Pasolini, "*Teorema*," 924.

this study has demonstrated how Pasolini's narratives configure shame within distinct yet interrelated dimensions: economic deprivation, erotic transgression, and the destabilization of bourgeois subjectivity.

In *Ragazzi di vita*, shame is linked to the sphere of scarcity, where material deprivation and social exclusion shape the identities of the *borgatari*. Their existence on the periphery of postwar Italy's economic miracle situates them in a space of structural abandonment, echoing Giorgio Agamben's notion of *bare life*. Yet rather than being solely subjected to shame, the *borgatari* reclaim it in acts of defiance, turning their marginalization into a countercultural identity.

By contrast, *Teorema* embeds shame within erotic desire, exposing the fragility of bourgeois identity when confronted with transgressive longing. The enigmatic visitor disrupts the family's carefully maintained order, forcing each member to confront their repressed desires. While patriarchal structures condition the female characters to experience shame through paralysis and submission, the male characters undergo radical shifts – either creative reinvention or self-destruction. This contrast reflects Pasolini's Marxist critique: the bourgeoisie experience shame as a confrontation with their inauthenticity, while the subproletariat experience shame as an imposed social condition that they attempt to resist.

Ultimately, Pasolini does not offer a redemptive resolution to shame but instead exposes the contradictions of capitalist modernity, where economic injustice, sexual repression, and spiritual emptiness remain in unresolved tension. By situating shame at the intersection of class struggle, queer identity, and the sacred, Pasolini does not only critique dominant cultural structures but also reimagines shame as a paradoxical force – one that can destroy but also liberate.

This study contributes to broader discussions in cultural studies, affect theory, queer studies, and critical theory, highlighting the dual function of shame as both a tool of subjugation and a site of resistance. Moreover, the themes explored remain acutely relevant in contemporary contexts. Economic precarity, sexual repression, and the disruptive potential of shame continue to shape social struggles, from LGBTQ+ rights to economic inequality and critiques of neoliberalism. In this light, Pasolini's exploration of shame not only transcends its historical setting but also provides a critical lens for interrogating the persistence of systemic exclusion and envisioning possibilities for radical transformation.

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## **Przemiany wstydu: bieda, erotyzm i sacram w *Ragazzi di vita* i *Teorema* Piera Paola Pasoliniego**

**Abstrakt:** Niniejszy artykuł analizuje rolę wstydu w *Ragazzi di vita* (1955) i *Teorema* (1968) Piera Paola Pasoliniego, koncentrując się na jego powiązaniach z biedą, erotyzmem i sacram. Korzystając z perspektyw teoretycznych Ewy Kosowskiej, Giorgio Agambena i Guya Hocquenghema, badanie ukazuje wstyd zarówno jako narzędzie kontroli społecznej, jak i czynnik oporu. W *Ragazzi di vita* zmarginalizowani *borgatari* doświadczają wstydu w wyniku biedy i wykluczenia społecznego, lecz jednocześnie odzyskują go jako akt buntu. W *Teorema* tajemniczy gość zakłóca stabilność burżuazyjnego świata, ujawniając tłumione pragnienia i egzystencjalne kryzysy, co prowadzi do psychologicznej dezintegracji bohaterów. Narracje Pasoliniego ukazują wstyd jako opresyjny, jak i transformacyjny, rozbijając dominujące struktury kulturowe i redefiniując podmiotowość. Łącząc wstyd z walką klasową, tożsamością queer i duchowym kryzysem, artykuł dowodzi, że Pasolini rekonfiguruje wstyd jako paradoksalną siłę – zarówno destrukcyjną, jak i odkupieńczą – w krytyce współczesnego społeczeństwa konsumpcyjnego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wstyd, Pasolini, bieda, erotyzm, sacram

## Neukonfiguration der Scham: Armut, Erotismus und das Heilige in Pier Paolo Pasolinis *Ragazzi di vita* und *Teorema*

**Abstract:** Dieser Artikel untersucht die Rolle der Scham in Pier Paolo Pasolinis *Ragazzi di vita* (1955) und *Teorema* (1968) und analysiert ihre Verbindungen zu Armut, Erotismus und dem Heiligen. Aufbauend auf den theoretischen Ansätzen von Ewa Kosowska, Giorgio Agamben und Guy Hocquenghem wird Scham sowohl als gesellschaftliches Kontrollinstrument als auch als Katalysator des Widerstands betrachtet. In *Ragazzi di vita* erfahren die marginalisierten *borgatari* Scham durch wirtschaftliche Not und soziale Ausgrenzung, doch zugleich nutzen sie sie als Mittel der Auflehnung. In *Teorema* destabilisiert ein rätselhafter Besucher die bürgerliche Ordnung, bringt unterdrückte Begierden ans Licht und führt die Figuren in existenzielle Krisen. Pasolinis Erzählungen zeigen Scham sowohl als unterdrückende als auch als transformative Kraft, die dominante kulturelle Strukturen aufbricht und Subjektivität neu definiert. Durch die Verknüpfung von Scham mit Klassenkampf, queerer Identität und spirituellem Umbruch argumentiert dieser Artikel, dass Pasolini sie als paradoxe Kraft – sowohl destruktiv als auch erlösend – rekonstruiert, um eine Kritik an der modernen Konsumgesellschaft zu formulieren.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Scham, Pasolini, Armut, Erotismus, Heiliges