

OF MUD AND MEN: SPECTRES OF PASOLINI IN CANADIAN THEATRE

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Abstract

While we find no trace of Pasolini's plays being staged in Canada, his spectre haunts the work of two Canadian artists: Sky Gilbert and Gaétan Nadeau whose plays mostly depict the Italian figure as a piece of mud for a few men to play with.

Di fango e uomini: spettri di Pasolini nel teatro canadese

Non vi è traccia di messa in scena dei testi di Pasolini in Canada, però il suo spettro perseguita il lavoro di due artisti canadesi: Sky Gilbert e Gaétan Nadeau, nei cui spettacoli l'autore italiano è generalmente rappresentato come un pezzo di fango con il quale giocano gli uomini.

Quanto al resto,
seguirete come potrete le vicende un po' indecenti
di questa tragedia che finisce ma non comincia –
fino al momento in cui riapparirà la mia ombra.
(Pier Paolo Pasolini. *Affabulazione. Pilade*: 9).

In 1979, reviewing a series of public readings of contemporary French plays, among which René Kalisky's *La passion selon Pier Paolo Pasolini*, Montreal critic Gilbert David wondered: «But who, here, is interested in Pasolini? The play is too 'culture': 'It's good for Europeans', people whispered during the intermission...»¹ (84). The comment may not be surprising inasmuch as, in the 70s, the province of Quebec vibrates to the beat of the Quiet Revolution and a certain emancipation from a Culture which too often rhymes with colonialism. The comment is quite surprising however when applied to Pasolini, knowing that he advocated a «struggle for separatism [that] is nothing but the defence

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¹ Every time we quote a work whose title is not in English, the translation into this language is ours.

Oltreoceano. Pier Paolo Pasolini nelle Americhe, a cura di Alessandra Ferraro e Silvana Serafin, 10 (2015).

of cultural pluralism, which is the reality of a culture» (Buratti s.p.) (let's not forget that in 1979, René Lévesque's government is preparing the first referendum on Quebec's sovereignty).

A few years later, to mark the tenth anniversary of Pasolini's death, young director Denis Marleau worked with choreographer Daniel Léveillé and poet Paul Chamberland to adapt the movie "Teorema" into a dance-theatre production, *Théorème 1985*, which opened at the small Théâtre de Quat'Sous, in Montreal, in January 1985. Some twenty years later, in 2004, Montreal-born composer Silvio Palmieri signed *Elia*, a chamber opera in one act whose libretto was an assembly of poetic texts he wrote himself, including those of Daniele Pieroni, Pasolini, as well as excerpts from the Bible.

These examples all take place in Montreal, which may be explained by the «singular» connection linking Quebec and Italy that Carla Fratta and Élisabeth Nardout-Lafarge explored in *Italies imaginaires du Québec*:

a connection in which we can imagine are playing, in varying proportions, the taste for the arts which is common to all cultured circles no matter where they are from, the former adherence to Catholicism with Rome embodying its center, and the experience, especially in Montreal, of a long established immigration (7).

What may not be explained, though, is why there are so few examples – these are the only ones that we came across – of representations of Pasolini's work in theatre in Canada. As for his plays, the conclusion is even darker: we found no trace of a single production throughout the country. Is his theatre too Italian, as David suggested, so that it cannot speak to the local audiences? Was the spectre haunting Europe too European for Canada?

Pasolini's rare appearances reveal the way his absence haunts not only this foreign land, but also the queer territory of two Canadian playwrights in particular. In "Pasolini/Pelosi, Or The God in Unknown Flesh: A Theatrical Enquiry into the Murder of Filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini" (1983) and in "In Which Pier Paolo Pasolini Sees His Own Death in the Face of a Boy: A Defacement in the Form of a Play" (1991), Toronto-based Sky Gilbert stages the death of Pasolini or «God», as he calls him. He does so in a time when the (gay) male body was vanishing due to of the HIV-AIDS epidemic. Gilbert's works embody Pasolini-the-disgusting-and-disturbing/ed figure depicts a need to reintroduce waste as an ecology of a (queer) creation. On the other hand, Québécois Gaétan Nadeau, in his intimist solo performance *Personal Jesus* (2009), stages himself in Rome and its harbour Ostia, precisely where Pasolini was killed. In this play, the Italian artist is disembodied, immaterial, purely spectral. Nadeau goes beyond the body in order to render to Pasolini his status as a creator.

By studying the influence of Pasolini onto these two Canadian artists, we want to put his work in line with a tradition of the queer body, one queering the body and the other queering the medium. The former needs to damage the body, to exceed it through excrement, waste, violence, and eventually death, in order to kill the figure («God») on stage and grieve before making him a spectral, haunting figure. As for Nadeau, he has a more introspective vision of the Maestro.

A strange attraction to mud

What is it about excess that is so threatening on the one hand, and yet so titillating, even seductive, on the other? ...Although excess is historically and culturally contingent, parallel discourses of excess have developed in different contexts, geographical locations, and historical movements (Skelly 2).

Sky Gilbert is a writer, academic, performer and drag queen. He was the artistic director of Buddies in Bad Times, a LGBT theatre company he founded in 1978 with Matt Walsh and Jerry Ciccoritti to promote queer theatrical expression. Throughout his prolific career, Gilbert wrote two plays about Pasolini, in which the Italian figure clearly appears as the central character. They are part of a book called *This Unknown Flesh*, a title that refers to Pasolini's own words. In both "Pasolini/Pelosi, Or The God in Unknown Flesh", first produced in 1983, and "In Which Pier Paolo Pasolini Sees His Own Death", which premiered in 1991, Gilbert stages the death of Pasolini as a recurring obsession. In "Pasolini/Pelosi", Gilbert stages Pasolini-the filmmaker at work with Laura Betti and his actors (the Boys) with whom he flirts, tries to have sex and discusses politics. In the second act, we find Pasolini in a mental institute trying to cure his «strange attraction to mud» (52), the mud symbolizing his ex lover with whom he is obsessed. Then arrives Pelosi who, through a very anti-gay dialogue with the other Boys, announces the violent death of the Master. In "In Which Pier Paolo Pasolini Sees His Own Death in the Face of a Boy", the action takes place after the death of Pasolini and the fantasies that have created his sexual, if not pedophile and scatological myth. The two characters (Pasolini-the homosexual and a seventeen-year-old Boy, whose name will remain Boy while he is clearly Pelosi) explain their own version of the murder and try to justify it: Pasolini promised pizzas to the Boy in exchange of his excrements, proposition that provokes a violent and fatal reaction.

In his work, Gilbert challenges a repressive society by confronting it to its fears. In line with a Pasolinian and, before him, a Sadian tradition, the Canadian playwright places body fluids and excretions (feces, blood, sperm) at the

core of his political aesthetic. Putting Sade, Pasolini and Gilbert into conversation – even though they evolved in different contexts – allows us to trace a genealogy of a refusal of a spectral body and a need to flesh and dig into the body in order to exceed it and destroy it. Destroying the body to recreate and sublimate it. In his plays, Gilbert questions his character’s “strange attraction to mud” in order to criticize and challenge a sterilization of modern bodies and minds, a single mindset, a uniform, politically-correct mode of thinking:

So you come home with me and you eat and drink as much as you like and you’ll probably feel like farting that’s okay you fart in my face I don’t mind and you feel like taking a big shit well go right ahead. You don’t have to go to the toilet if you don’t want to. You can just take a dump right on me (“In Which Pier Paolo Pasolini”: 135).

Pasolini begs the Boy to use his body as a receptacle for his lower fantasies. Here, we use the term *lower* in reference to Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of *lower senses* developed in his chapter “The Material Bodily Lower Stratum”, in *Rabelais and His World*, regarding Renaissance French author François Rabelais and his carnivalesque, scatological aesthetic. As Bakhtin writes:

This downward movement is inherent in all forms of popular-festive merriment and grotesque realism. Down, inside out, vice versa, upside down, such is the direction of all these movements... Debasement is the fundamental artistic principle of grotesque realism; all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum or else combined and mixed with its images (370).

According to the Russian semiotician, the «lower senses» are fundamentals to the creation of a counter-political and aesthetic discourse – complex tension between abjection and pleasure that Julia Kristeva discusses in her essay *Powers of Horror* where she explains how the abject is everything that disturbs identity, social system and, more generally, order. Her idea of a feared and fantasized *elsewhere* (2) is precisely what Gilbert, Pasolini and Sade have in common: a complex attraction-repulsion relationship to mud, dirt, and abjection that could be linked to an impossibility for them to recognize the limit between the Self and the Other.

Spectres of the law, spectres of pleasure

Following this idea, Pasolini uses the materiality of the body (excrements) to condemn a totalitarian society. In their essay *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer studied the relationship between

libertines and the law by linking the libertine system to the totalitarian regime occurring at the time. While Michel Foucault used, in *Discipline and Punish*, the term “disciplinary”, Adorno and Horkheimer talked about a ‘totalitarian’ eroticism: «fascism, they write, which by its iron discipline relieves its people of the burden of moral feelings, no longer needs to observe any discipline» (67). Adorno and Horkheimer remind us that there is no political organization in fascism, since the leader *is* the law and can eliminate his subordinates. In Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom* (as in Pasolini’s “Salò”) there is a double relationship to the law: on one hand, the libertine man who, thanks to his status, posits himself in opposition to the usual social (sexual, political, religious) codes and then tries to fight the law or, at least, to challenge it; on the other hand, rules that are crucial for the libertines in order to gain pleasure. The law is a constraint that regulates pleasure; the limit stimulates pleasure.

This idea of a stimulating limit is also present in Gilbert’s work and, particularly, in the sentence «You can use me» (“In Which Pier Paolo Pasolini”: 135) repeated several times by the protagonist throughout “In Which Pier Paolo Pasolini Sees His Own Death”. By saying this again and again, the anti-hero is looking for control. The new rule authorizing the lover to fart or ‘take a shit’ on him shows a desire to not simply revoke or destroy the rule but, on the contrary, to impose and follow new rules. This is not a desire for a lack of rule, as rules and the very idea of a limit are a source of sexual excitation for the protagonist: «Just thought you might be interested in the Eleventh Commandment: *do not under any circumstances loosen your sphincter*» (137). Here, using both the legal and religious – or even military – word *Commandment*, Gilbert responds to Pasolini’s totalitarian era, and interdictions/regulation of the body.

What would happen if these rules were to be broken? ... Don’t you see? It’s not your asshole, it’s not your shit. It’s all that stuff back there that says you’re merely a human crouched on the ground gathering sticks making great giant farts that everybody can hear. So as you can see, I perform a public service. In a way. I help the boys, because their assholes are so *tight*, those boys, I help them to release their sphincters. It is up to me. It is my God-given mission (137).

Like Pasolini, Gilbert shows how boundaries, traditional or those of theatrical performance, can be crossed. Social barriers, at least temporarily, need to matter. «Within his rhetoric of the theatrical (image, gesture, voice, gait), the borders that usually distinguish art from life grow blurry» (15), suggests Robert Wallace in his “Introduction” of *This Unknown Flesh*.

Rules are also what dictate the use of bodily wastes and feces, which, in a Sadian perspective, implies, for Gilbert, a need to transgress the hygienic law

of intimacy², while allowing a creation of a queer desire through a queer body. If dirt attracts sperm and enables pleasure, the use of feces also diverts Catholic/bourgeois moral and order:

One wonders, when one is in a bourgeois reflective mood, one tends to wonder what might happen if the sphincters of the world ever loosened up. Would it be diarrhea as so many fear or would it be instead the fine firmly packed feces of an adolescent: gleaming and immoral, proud and bursting with yesterday's lunch ("In Which Pier Paolo Pasolini": 136).

What is unacceptable in the diarrhea is the loss of something we should own or should keep on owning. Bourgeoisie and diarrhea do not get along.

Sade, Pasolini and Gilbert all posit excrement as 'property', a term that etymologically means, in French, both 'clean' and 'own' (*propre*). The feeling of cleanliness is then associated to the feeling of ownership. In their essay *Economimesis*, Jacques Derrida and Richard Klein explain the limit between taste (*goût*) and disgust (*dégoût*) by showing how it is possible to idealize the horror in art but not the disgusting. Disgust is the limit: «A single 'thing' is unassimilable. [...] That is the *disgusting*» (22). For Derrida – and Immanuel Kant before him –, there is a possibility of a 'negative pleasure'. Quoting Kant, Derrida and Klein write: «There is only one kind of ugliness which cannot be represented in accordance with nature without destroying all aesthetical satisfaction and consequently artificial beauty which excites disgust» (22). Derrida and Klein take the example of vomit that they link to joy and not to pleasure, and that they then associate to the un-representable: «Vomit is related to enjoyment, if not to pleasure. It even represents the very thing that forces us to enjoy – in spite of ourselves. But this representation annuls itself, and that is why vomit remains unrepresentable» (22). They conclude by writing that there is «something more disgusting than what disgusts taste. The chemistry of smell exceeds the tautology taste/disgust» (25). As for excrements, vomit cannot be digested, assimilated. It will automatically be rejected, thrown out by the reader/viewer. Sade, Pasolini and Gilbert have this in common in that they represent this notion of disgust in the same way as do these playwrights. Interestingly, this 'unassimilable' object that is disgust can also define the queer body, since 'queer' is an anti-bourgeois discourse that refuses heteronormative rules and perception of society. When, in "In Which

² Georges Vigarello, throughout *Le propre et le sale*, explains how, in 18th Century Europe, restrooms became a private (bourgeois) space that created a new relationship to both the collective and the individual. According to the historian, modern individuals are, in part, created in the isolation of toilets.

Pier Paolo Pasolini Sees His Own Death”, Pasolini asks: «What would happen if these rules were to be broken» (137), he creates a queer philosophy/literature, he investigates the slippery terrain of queer sex where not only gender roles, but also sexual behaviours, social rules and limits are mutable, unfixed, open.

Malheureux qui, comme Nadeau, a fait un beau voyage³

In 2009, the underground artist Gaétan Nadeau presented, at La Chapelle in Montreal, the first version of *Personal Jesus*. One of the first lines is «The parenthesis that I live here in Rome is a suspended time in my existence⁴», revealing in his solo performance, as he lays fainting on a couch holding, the biography of Pasolini by Nico Naldini. With his desire to go against the notion of speed, Nadeau is left with the pleasure of looking at the Earth rotating on itself, wondering where to drink his cappuccino, or wanting to pick the most beautiful seashell on the beach of Ostia.

Nadeau’s thoughts «pile up on top of one another, forming a sort of humus» (Nadeau), he explains by quoting Pasolini who added, as we know, that in this humus he «lost the feeling for what was real, for whatever gives measure and resignation (as well as hypocrisy)» (quoted by Zigaina 26). By multiplying layers of sense and by assimilating the words – of Pasolini, that is, but also of Marguerite Yourcenar and of his mother –, Nadeau constantly questions his origins; the *ti-cul de province* (little provincial shit), like the Italian intellectual, «keeps returning to his childhood [in one case Neuville – located 30 km away from Quebec City –, in the other case Friuli], on his first awakenings to male desire and his first steps into the world of Literature» (Nadeau). Artistic initiation(s) and sexual one(s) walk hand by hand. For Nadeau, it all started in his small town thanks to the «rural and itinerant encyclopaedia» *Grolier*, a «ragbag of culture and eroticism» full of «arousing» drawings of bacchanals and «legions in short skirts suggesting a muscular calf or wearing a breastplate shaped like in a Nautilus Plus [a popular North American gym network]» (Nadeau).

This investigation of a legacy through the (de)construction of a certain representation of the body is in line with the queer philosophy, which focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. «Queer locates and exploits the

³ In English: *Unbappy who, like Nadeau, had a great trip*. For sure we refer here to Joachim Du Bellay’s famous poem “Heureux qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage”.

⁴ The text, written in French, has not been published but its author has generously provided us with the manuscript.

incoherencies in those three terms which stabilize heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any 'natural' sexuality... (queer) suggests that traditional models have been ruptured» (Jagose 3). Gaétan Nadeau, as well as Sky Gilbert, work in opposition to dominant ideologies of feeling and affect, using substituting imaginative, theatrical responses.

Indeed, *Personal Jesus* is all about *travestissement*, as the play of gender is most visible through Nadeau's constant cross-dressing: his hairy and stocky body, strangely (un)covered, keeps putting at risk the social norms of identity; sewing is central to the show with Angelina di Bello, «an exacting seamstress and an exuberant mistress of haute couture» (Hustak s.p.) who entered thousands of Canadian households through television to teach housewives – and some of their sons, like little Gaétan – the art of the seam, word that, pronounced in English, can be heard as 'seem', meaning the appearance. It is, after all, a problem with bad seams that caused Nadeau's newest slip to make him look like a «coiled sausage» (Nadeau); these Roman underwear seem to be made for the Vatican statues with their marble limb covered by a fig leaf that «suggests more than it shows» (Nadeau).

In that sense, *Personal Jesus* is much less graphic than Sky Gilbert's work. When the latter first presented "Pasolini/Pelosi" at the Buddies in Bad Times in 1983, doctors at the Institut Pasteur in France were about to report they had isolated a new virus, which they suggested might be the cause of AIDS. It was also a critical moment in the prevention campaign, with the newly emerged evidence that AIDS might be spread through blood clotting factor and through blood transfusions that tremendously helped to prevent the spread of HIV or, at least, helped to understand how to build an efficient prevention campaign. If this discovery did not immediately change the daily life of HIV patients – it took ten more years before the creation of an efficient treatment –, a change of discourse emerged. Indeed, scientific discourse and data were used in order to attack the social and religious discourse effective at the time in the mass media. AIDS was no longer solely about guilt, shame or a Divine intervention against the so-called sinful homosexual community. It was grounded in scientific explanation and terminology. The acceptance of AIDS as a medical issue and, consequently, its detachment from the religious damnation as the only possible narration that built the discourse around AIDS, allowed a shift in the representation of the gay (viral) body; a shift that was not only visible in the media but that also became visible on stage.

Twenty-five years later, Gaétan Nadeau's show can be read as a quest of the (national) body through the figure of homosexuality, the gay body therefore becomes a mere medium. If the author of *Mémoires d'Hadrien* is the «disconcerting mirror» (Nadeau) of his mother, is it only because she wears, in

an interview that Nadeau once watched, a raincoat and rubber boots, dressed as if she was going to milk the cows; in fact, the kid always thought that «[his] natural parents must have had left [him] there, in Neuville, with the *Habitants*, while [his] mother, the real one, was partying at the Académie française» (Nadeau). Here the filiation is intellectual and echoed by the voice-over of Yourcenar telling one of the unknown tale from the *One Thousand and One Nights* in which God, after being warned by the animals that Man would make the world go wrong, still sent an angel on Earth to gather some mud to create Man; the Earth did not want to provide the angel with any mud, claiming that Man would be a disaster for the environment; but God was apparently stubborn... In this omen, mud is not a product – which means the result of a consumption, and therefore of a destruction – but the original clay from which Man is sculpted. Yet the mud is also the ground composing the rectangular estates that Nadeau sees when his plane starts its landing, and which looks like a handmade quilt – evoking the rustic, not to say the vulgar aspect of his world... – dropped on a crying children’s bed. The aesthete is sadly back at his birthplace only to hear his mother’s litany that «[he] spent [his] money», that «[he’s] back with nothing» (Nadeau).

It is about time, thus about style⁵

Nadeau’s attraction to mud is everything but strange. Following Yourcenar, he sees mud as linked to the origins; for Gilbert, mud is the incarnation of Pasolini’s violent, fantasized lover, and of his tireless search for the lower senses. Mud is for him a refusal to adapt to a bourgeois representation of sexuality and to social conducts. This idea of a scorned bourgeoisie might be where Gilbert and Nadeau coincide, in their use of Pasolini as a counter-bourgeois figure, even though, ironically, one of the Boys in Gilbert’s “Pasolini/Pelosi” calls Pasolini a “bourgeois communist”:

Boy 1: Oh yeah, you big Communist with lots of money. Communists always have money, if you’re so goddamned concerned about the peasants why don’t you go out and fucking do something about it, eh?

Pasolini: Culture in Italy is still bourgeois.

Boy 1: And you’re still bourgeois – What have you ever done for politics, just this stupid movie about poor peasants – You’re a fake. You’re just a fucking intellectual (45).

⁵ We are paraphrasing Didi-Huberman (“Les formes survivent: l’histoire s’ouvre”: 24-40).

The legacy of Pasolini has undeniably a more complex relationship to bourgeoisie than a simple binary right/wrong, poor/rich discourse; the Italian poet was indeed a bourgeois and intellectual communist, rather conservative about certain things (the local traditions, for instance), but a communist nonetheless. For Derrida, communism, this «spectre haunting Europe» (*Spectres de Marx*) establishes a philosophy of responsibility, and one of critique. Using mud in order to talk about higher society is radical in every time period but it was especially radical in the after-war Europe for Pasolini and within the queer community for Gilbert. Nadeau's position towards bourgeoisie, far from being as radical as is Gilbert's, is rather a lyrical critique; for his mother, the encyclopaedia is nothing more than a dust-gatherer, while outside of the house, the smell of the grass freshly cut mixing with the exhalations of the pool chlorine, the baloney sandwich full of Miracle Whip and the colourful sponge cloth outfits quickly put us in contact with many symbols that depict the typical Québécois bourgeois way of living. Nadeau also multiplies the references to a certain order: the flight of a «mathematical precision» (Nadeau) – such as a theorem? – of the starlings over Rome in winter, the allays of perfectly aligned trees or stores... just like rosaries, a recurrent image Nadeau's world who puts, starting with its title – inspired from the English pop group Depeche Mode hit heard from a horde of Romans' SUV spitting speakers –, religion at the foreground of the entire show, always in a mingle of veneration and ecstasy as with the recumbent Santa Cecilia or the magnificence of (Pasolini's) Saint-Matthew.

A corpse, not a corpus

To conclude this analysis, we could certainly write, inspired by Derrida's *Spectres de Marx*, that *Rabelais qui genuit Sade qui genuit Pasolini qui genuit Sky Gilbert*, as we could use a similar formula to draw Gaétan Nadeau's filiation. While the Italian bad boy is definitely a ghost haunting a few figures of Canadian history of theatre, his queerness makes us wonder if it is possible to talk in terms of influence, even of presence in the greater genealogy considering the fact that both Gilbert and Nadeau represent figures of exception. Two displaced artists in the theatre landscape of this country, they are queer cases in all senses of the expression. We could have started to speculate on the reasons of why Europe and the United States are fascinated by the man as much as his work, where in Canada it is the man and not the playwright that seems to intrigue: the different figures portrayed by Gilbert and Nadeau may prove that here, Pasolini is mostly a piece of mud for a few men to play with, a queer (re)creation.