

“We are all in danger”

Pier Paolo Pasolini Interviewed by Furio Colombo

L'Unità, 1st November 1975

We are publishing the text of an interview to Pier Paolo Pasolini by Furio Colombo that appeared on the “Tuttolibri” supplement of the daily *La Stampa* on 8th November 1975. This interview took place on 1st November 1975, between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m., a few hours before Pasolini was killed. The title of the interview was provided by Pasolini himself. At the end of this conversation that found us on different positions and with diverging points of view, as it often happened us in other cases as well, I asked him if he wanted to choose the title for this article. He thought about it for a little while, then said it didn't matter and changed subject. But something else brought us back on the main topic that continuously appears in the following answers. “This is the very essence, the final meaning of everything – he said – You do not even know who, in this very moment, is thinking about killing you. If you want, give this title to the feature: *Why we are all in danger*”.

Pasolini, in your articles and writings you provided us with different definitions to describe the things you hate. You started a fight, by yourself, against a lot of things - institutions, beliefs, people, powers. To facilitate our interview, I will simply say “the situation” and you will know that I intend to talk about what you are fighting against. So my first point is the following objection: the “situation” with all the bad things that it implies, basically allows you to be who you are, Pasolini. What I mean is, you have the talent and the merit for saying specific things, but what about the topics? The topics are basically offered to you by this “situation”, so the publishing or the film industry, the political situation or even simple objects. Let's pretend that you had a magic wand, and you had the power of saying something and of making disappear all the things you hate. Wouldn't you end up alone with no topics to tackle anymore, with no topics to fight against, I mean...

Yes, I do understand what you mean. Well, I'm not just trying to pretend I do have that magic wand, but I do believe I have it and not in a mediumistic sense. Because I do know that harping on the same subject can eventually demolish it. The exponents of the Radical Party provide us with a little example: they are just very few people but they shook the conscience of an entire country (and you perfectly know that I often do not agree with them, but at the moment I'm getting ready to go to their convention). **History provides us with more famous examples: refusal has always been a very important act carried out by saints, and hermits but also by intellectuals. The very few people who made history are those ones who said no, not the courtesans and the cardinals' assistants. Therefore, an act of refusal must be total and not partial, in a nutshell it must not focus on this or that nor it must be dictated by wisdom.** Eichmann, my dear friend, was very wise, but what did he lack? He didn't know how to say no at the very beginning, when the only thing he dealt was the ordinary administration, the bureaucracy. Maybe he told to friends, I do not like Himmler that much. He may have muttered and grumbled, as you do in a publishing house, in the office of a newspaper, among the people forming the *sottogoverno*

(subgovernment) or on television. Maybe he objected because this or that train stopped once a day to allow the people who were being deported to go to the toilet or to have some bread and water, when two stops along the line would have been cheaper and more practical. Yet he never tried to stop the power machine. So there are three points to take into consideration here: what is “the situation”, as you call it, why you should stop it or destroy it and in which way (...)

In your opinion, what is power, where is it, where does it live and in which ways do you take it out into the light?

Power is an educational system that divides us into those who subjugate and those who are subjugated. But be very careful: that same educational system forms all of us, from the people in the so-called establishment to the poorest social classes. This is the main reason why we all want the same things and behave in the same ways. Members of the establishment may use a board of directors or a stock exchange manoeuvre; people from more disadvantaged classes may use a metal bar. You essentially use a metal bar to violently obtain what you want. But why do you want it? Because they told you that wanting something is a virtue and you are therefore exercising your right-virtue. So you're a murderer, but you're essentially good.

They said you are not able to distinguish between politics and ideology anymore, that you are not able to detect the profound difference between those among the young people who are fascists and those who aren't fascists.

This is actually the reason why earlier on I mentioned you the railway timetable. Have you ever seen those puppets that make kids laugh because their body faces one direction and their heads another? I think that Totò¹ managed to recreate such a trick. Well, this is how I see all those intellectuals, sociologists, experts and journalists full of their noble intentions: with their body here and their minds somewhere else. I'm not saying there is no fascism. I'm just saying stop talking about going to the beach if we're on the mountains since we are dealing with a different kind of landscape here. There is a sort of desire to kill here and this desire binds us like sinister brothers in the sinister failure of an entire social system. I guess it would be easier to isolate the black sheep. I do see the black sheep. In fact there are quite a few ones around and I can see all of them. As I told Moravia, this is the problem: I'm paying a price for the life I lead...It's as if I were descending into Hell. Back from my journey – if I ever came back – I would have experienced other things, more things than other people. I'm not saying that you would have to believe what I recounted you after my journey, but you would have to keep on changing topic to avoid facing the truth.

But what is the truth?

¹ Note of the translator: Antonio De Curtis, better known by his stage name Totò, was an Italian comedian, film and theatre actor, writer, singer and songwriter. The heir of the Commedia dell'Arte tradition, he was famous for mimicking the body movements of a puppet in some of his performances. He also starred in some of Pier Paolo Pasolini's films such as *Uccellacci e Uccellini* (The Hawks and the Sparrows, 1966).

I'm sorry I've used this word. I wanted to say "evidence". But let me put some order into things. The first tragedy we live is one shared, compulsory and wrong education that pushes us to own everything at any price. We are pushed and pulled around like a strange dark army, some of us fight with the heavy artillery, others with just a metal bar. As it usually happens, the group gets divided and some decide to fight with the weak ones. But I think that, in one way or the other, we are all weak because we are all victims. And we are all guilty, because we are all ready to play at slaughtering each other, as long as we are able to own everything at the end of the slaughter. **In a nutshell, the education we received can be summarised with these words - having, owning and destroying.**

But let me go back to my first question. You magically abolish everything, but your job is writing books and you need people who read them. Therefore you need educated consumers for your intellectual products. You make films and therefore you need not only a large audience (in fact you often manage to achieve popular success, so you are avidly "consumed" by your audience), but you also need a great technical organisational, industrial machine in between. If you make all this disappear with a sort of early Catholic or early Chinese magic monasticism, what will you be left with?

I will be left with everything. Indeed, I will be left with myself; I'm alive, I'm in this world, I can see, I can work, I can understand. There are hundreds of ways to tell stories, to listen to languages, reproduce dialects and create a puppet theatre. The others will be left with much more. They, educated or ignorant like myself, will be able to stand up to me. The world will become a larger place, everything will be ours and we won't need the Stock Exchange, the Board of Directors or the metal bar to steal from each other. You see, in the world that many of us dreamt about (I'm repeating it to you: read last year's railway timetable or read the timetable of many years ago) there was the evil master with the top hat and the pockets full of dollars and the emaciated widow with her children, asking for justice. In a nutshell, Brecht's beautiful world.

And you miss that world.

No! I miss the poor and genuine people who fought to abolish that master without turning into him. Since they were excluded from everything, nobody had managed to colonise them. I'm scared of these slaves in revolt because they behave exactly like their plunderers, desiring everything and wanting everything at any price. This dark obstination leading to total violence is not letting us see who we are. Whoever is taken dying to the hospital is more interested – if there is still some life left in them – in hearing what the doctors will tell them about their chances to live, than in what the police will tell them about the dynamics of the attempted murder perpetrated against them. I'm not putting intentions on trial and I'm not interested in the cause-effect chain, or in spotting who did this or that first and who is the guilty head of the gang. I think we have defined what you call "the situation". It is a bit like when it rains and the manhole covers are blocked: the innocent rain water rises and, even though it doesn't have the fury of the sea or the rage of a river, for a very simple reason, it doesn't go down, but rises. It is the same rain water that appeared in so many children's poems and songs about "singing in the rain". Yet it rises and drowns you. If we have reached this point I would like to add

let's not waste time to label things, but let's see how we can let water drain away before we drown.

So, for this reason, you would like all people to be ignorant and happy shepherds with no compulsory education.

It sounds very stupid putting things like this. But compulsory education creates by force desperate gladiators. Like desperation or rage, the crowd gets bigger. So let's say I made a provocation (even though I don't think I did). But tell me another thing: it's obvious that I regret the genuine and direct revolution of the oppressed masses whose main aim is freeing themselves and become their own masters. My best thoughts may even inspire me one of my next poems, but, surely, what I know and what I'm seeing at the moment will not inspire me. What I mean is, **I go down to Hell and I discover things that do not bother other people. But be careful: Hell is rising and it's coming at you.** It is true that it dreams its uniform and (sometimes) its justification, but it's also true that its desire of hitting with a metal bar, of attacking, of killing is strong and random. And this won't remain for a long time the private and risky experience of those ones who have "experienced violence". Do not delude yourself. **Together with school, television, and the calmness of your newspapers, you are the great preservers of this horrid order based upon the idea of owning and destroying.** Blessed are thou who are happy when you can put on a murder a label. This looks to me like another of the many mass culture operations. Since one cannot stop certain things from happening, one finds peace in pretense.

But abolishing surely means to create as well, if you don't consider yourself a destroyer. Your books, for example, what's their final aim? I don't want to become like those ones who get anxious more about culture than about people, but these people that you save can't behave like primitives anymore (this is an accusation that is frequently moved against you) in your vision of a new world and, if we do not want to use the "most advanced" forms of repression...

Which makes me shiver.

If we do not want to use commonplace definitions, we must still give out some indications. For example, in sci-fi, like in Nazism, books are often burnt as a sign of initial extermination. If we close schools and we close television stations, how will you keep your vision alive?

I think I have already explained myself with Moravia. **To "close down" in my language means to change. And we must dramatically and drastically change things to reflect the dramatic and drastic situation we are living in.** What is not allowing me to have a real debate with Moravia and above all with Firpo², for example, is that we seem not to be able to see the same scene happening around us, or not to know the same people or not to hear the same voices. You as a journalist may think that something happens only when it appears written down and titled on the pages of a newspaper. But what's behind this piece of news? I think we are missing the surgeon analysing the fact and then stating:

² Note of the translator: Alberto Moravia (1907-1990) was an Italian writer; Luigi Firpo (1915-1989) was an Italian historian and politician.

ladies and gentlemen, this is not cancer, it's just a little piece of news. What is cancer? It's something that changes all the cells, that makes them grow at a crazy rhythm, without respecting any previously established logic. So, is the ill person who dreams about his previous health a nostalgic, even though before the illness struck he was a stupid and a wretch? So, first of all, we will have to make an effort to have the same vision. I listen to the politicians - all the politicians - with all their little presumptions and I turn into a mad man as they prove they do not know which country they are talking about, they are as far away as the moon. And together with them there are the men of letters, the sociologists and the experts in any kind of field.

So why do you think that for you some things are clearer?

I don't want to talk anymore about myself, maybe **I have already said too much.** Everybody knows that, as a person, I do pay for what I say. But there are also my books and my films that end up paying for me. Maybe I'm wrong after all, but I keep on thinking that we are all in danger.

Pasolini, if you see life in this way – and I don't even know if you will accept this question – how do you think you will avoid danger and risk?

It was late and Pasolini hadn't turned on the light, so it became difficult to take notes. We leafed through my notes. Then he asked me to leave my questions with him. "There are some bits that sound a bit too definite. Let me think about them, let me go through them and let me think about a conclusion. I do have something in mind to reply to your question. **I find it easier to write than to speak.** I will give you back the notes I'm adding tomorrow morning". The day after, on a Sunday, the lifeless body of Pier Paolo Pasolini was in the morgue at Rome's police headquarters.

Translation by Anna Battista