

The Soundscape of Pier Paolo Pasolini's THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW (1964)

ABSTRACT

IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO (THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW, IT/FR 1964), by the Italian film director Pier Paolo Pasolini, is one of the most interesting and widely acclaimed film representations of the life of Jesus. Its reception in the Catholic world has reflected the alternating fortunes of Pasolini himself, but over the years critics have come to fully appreciate its merits. While the director made faithful use of the dialogue in the Gospel, he constructed a new – but plausible – imagination, or “architecture of reality”, based on an intertextual code with intersecting pictorial, architectural, biblical and sound references. This essay aims in particular to employ a semiotic approach to analyse the musical motifs in the film and the way in which they convey precise meanings and values to the viewer about the figure and life of Jesus. Songs and musical compositions are leitmotifs that punctuate the narrative, interweaving with the visual component to form a full-blown language in its own right.

KEYWORDS

Pier Paolo Pasolini; THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW; Musical Leitmotifs; Intertextuality; Audio-visual Syntax

BIOGRAPHY

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PASOLINI'S CINEMATIC APPROACH TO CHRISTIANITY

Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), writer and journalist, poet and film director, was one of the most influential Italian intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s. Initially quite closely aligned with the Italian Communist Party, Pasolini explored the period of the Italian economic boom in great detail, describing it as a genuine “anthropological revolution of the Italians”,¹ the thematic core of his incomplete work.²

A year before shooting *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO* (*THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW*, IT/FR 1964), he contributed, together with three other directors, to the *RO.GO.PA.G.* film project (Roberto Rossellini, Jean-Luc Godard, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Ugo Gregoretti, IT 1963) with the short *LA RICOTTA*. The scene depicting the crucifixion of the thief, considered to be irreverent, led to his being charged with public defamation of religion. Pasolini's film career was littered with acts of censorship and charges like this, which made his decision, just a year later, to embark on a new film about Jesus even more unexpected.

The Gospel text is just the point of departure for Pasolini's film, which also has its own context, in some ways no less complex than that of the Gospel.³ During the 1960s Italy was deeply riven by opposing political and social forces. Despite the victory of the Allies and the end of the civil war with the fall of Mussolini, the post-war situation was very troubled. A long process of industrial and economic transformation began in this period, reaching a peak in the 1970s.

The newly established Italian Republic had to come to terms with the new global settlement, split between the influence of the United States (NATO pact of 1949) and that of the Soviet Union. Significantly, the Italian Communist Party was the largest of its kind in Europe outside the Warsaw Pact. In opposition from 1947, it prompted the strong stance against the left-wing parties taken by Alcide De Gasperi, prime minister from 1945 to 1953. The Italian Communist Party also had to compete with the Christian Democrat Party, which enjoyed the support of the Catholic Church and was the majority party for the whole of the First Republic, despite its decline in the 1980s.

As for the Catholic Church, in the 1960s Pope John XXIII announced the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, one of the most important moments for the modern church. The *Pro Civitate Christiana*, a Catholic association based in Assisi, became a linchpin of the renewal proposed by the council, attracting the participation of Catholic and non-Catholic intellectuals alike. One of its initia-

1 Pasolini 1975, 39.

2 Pasolini 1992.

3 For a succinct overview: France 2007; Honoré 1968; Runesson 2008.

tives was an annual film festival, to which Pier Paolo Pasolini was invited in 1962, exactly when the pope was visiting Assisi.

According to testimony gathered by Tommaso Subini,⁴ in his room in Assisi Pasolini found and read Matthew's Gospel and was greatly struck by its aesthetic and expressive beauty.⁵ This experience marked the beginning of a journey that resulted in *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO* in 1964. The final product was, however, the outcome of a long creative process. Subini charts the relations between Pasolini and Pro Civitate Christiana, providing evidence of their affinities and divergences.⁶ The original screenplay preserved in the Fondo Caruso in Florence bears witness to a long process of negotiation, especially regarding the expressive form of certain scenes and references to events in the news at the time. These underlying dynamics need to be kept in mind at all times, distinguishing the author (Pasolini the director) from the collective construction of the screenplay.⁷

This distinction proved difficult for critics, as was the reception of the work. Despite criticism from more conservative quarters in the Catholic world, the film won the *Grand Prix* of the Office Catholique International du Cinéma, and the most perceptive and favourable comments came from the *Osservatore Romano*, Vatican City's daily newspaper. Pasolini's film was deemed to have captured the "spirit" of Matthew's Gospel, despite sacrificing the historic dimension. The left-wing press, for example *L'Unità*, received the work with a certain mistrust, though it did highlight the revolutionary features of Pasolini's Jesus.

Over time Catholic intellectuals and critics have given greatest attention to the movie, even at times contradicting previous positions.⁸ Professor Andrea Oppo, who teaches aesthetics at the Pontificia Facoltà Teologica of Sardinia, has described it as "an almost philological work of *restitutio* of the gospel text, a *perfect translatability* of Matthew's Gospel into images",⁹ a judgement in line with the last reviews of the *Osservatore Romano*.

This reception should not come as any surprise as *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO* is a complex work, especially in terms of its internal architecture and directorial choices. Musical, narrative and iconic references are interwoven throughout the film.

4 Subini 2006, 159.

5 Oppo 2015, 2.

6 Subini 2006.

7 Pasolini 1991.

8 Fantuzzi 2004.

9 Oppo 2015, 1.

INTERTEXTUAL APPROACH

The purpose of this article is to deconstruct Pasolini's cinematic representation to provide evidence of certain semiotic elements (signs) that carry specific meanings. The approach used here is that of Louis Hjelmslev's "glossematics",¹⁰ with its distinction regarding processes of signification. More specifically, this analysis aims to deconstruct the form of expression, starting with the narrative units; these units are not fragmented elements in a textual magma but instead are organized into distinct hierarchical levels of sequences, scenes and so on. Examining the pattern of expressive markers at these levels permits identification of logical and content-related connections that stretch beyond individual scenes.

We are dealing here with two distinct representations of the Gospel. While Matthew's text can be considered the "original" and Pasolini's film just its representation, if we reason in semiotic terms we simply have two different types of "text".¹¹ In other words, if we assume that these collections of signs (verbal, iconic, auditory, etc.) have a multilevel narrative structure, both Matthew's Gospel and the film can be defined as "representations",¹² in that they re-present the same content in a narrative.¹³

The intersection between multiple forms of representation in Pasolini's films – which we define as *intertextuality* – is precisely what offers us the coordinates to pinpoint specific semiotic markers. Every film is conceived and realized to be seen by a viewer, with whom communication is established. Roman Jakobson has described the structure of this communicative interaction: the film constitutes the message transmitted by the addresser (the director Pasolini) to the addressee (the viewing public collectively).¹⁴ Physically, the communication occurs through auditory and visual channels, which Jakobson calls *contacts*.¹⁵ This article explores the semiotic value of the sound contact in Pasolini's film.

Music plays an important role in Pasolini's cinematography, at one with the images and infused within them to introduce plays of meaning into the scenes. This is what Vittorelli calls "audio-visual syntax".¹⁶ *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO* is no exception. Indeed, Pasolini took personal charge of the film's soundtrack, assisted by the composer and musician Luis Bacalov.

10 Hjelmslev 1961.

11 Marsciani/Zinna 1991, 133.

12 Leone 2005, 351–353.

13 Having noted this common definition, for the sake of ease during the analysis we will talk of a "Gospel narrative" and a "film representation".

14 Jakobson 1963, 185–190.

15 Jakobson 1963, 188.

16 Vittorelli 2007.

Individual musical works recur many times during the film, prompting us to talk in terms of *consonant* scenes. But this affinity on a musical plane is never casual; rather it generates logical continuity within the film, in leitmotifs which for the director are markers of significance. We will see what these are by analysing each of the motifs, considering both their role in the film and some of the characteristics of the works themselves. Here too, as in relation to the Gospel, we are dealing with narrative structures,¹⁷ albeit very different from those to which we are accustomed.

MUSICAL THEMES AS SEMIOTIC LEITMOTIFS

Pasolini chose his music with great care, requiring us in turn to consider contexts of origin attentively, comparing them with their position in the film and the series of consonant scenes thus formed. Although this approach in itself brings out many of the meanings associated with the musical motifs, we also need to conduct a broader analysis of the image (pictorial references, geographical places, props, costumes) to complete the whole. The link between image and sound that was Pasolini's constant goal must always be kept firmly in mind.

With the exception of one motif, the whole soundtrack is extradiegetic: it falls outside the plane of reality of the characters in the film, heard only by viewers. The sole exception is a piece entitled “Tre fronde, tre fiori” (“Three fronds, three flowers”), composed by Bacalov for the scene containing Salome's dance. The theme accompanies the dance of the young girl, and the music, which has a simple rhythm, is performed on flutes and tambourines by an inconspicuous group of musicians in Herod's court. The piece takes its name from the flowering fronds with which Salome partially conceals her face during her performance.

THE GLORIA

Moving on to the more numerous extradiegetic pieces, the first musical motif is perhaps the best-known one of the whole film: the Gloria from the *Missa Luba*, a collection of songs for the Latin Mass performed in styles traditional to the Congo. The piece was first performed in 1958 by a choir from the city of Kammina, in the Katanga region. It was composed by a Belgian friar, Father Guido Haazen, who involved the Troubadours du Roi Baudoin, an adult and children's choir, in recording a number of musical compositions in various local styles. It would be an exaggeration to say that Father Haazen was the composer of the *Missa* given that none of the songs were transcribed into notation.

17 Buttitta 1979, 101.

The Gloria literally introduces the film, accompanying the title, a strategic choice that immediately highlights the importance of the piece. In the film proper, it is used as a motif in four scenes. The first comes immediately after the revelation of the Angel to Joseph in a dream, while he is returning to Mary. The Gloria is accompanied by another sound element, the citation of the prophet's words in Matthew 1:23. The second is when Jesus and his disciples approach a deformed man, referred to in Matthew 8:2 as a "leper". The Gloria marks the healing of the leper, whose face returns to its normal state when Jesus speaks in the first explicit miracle. Even though we have witnessed a miracle in the previous scene, no words are spoken. The cries of the possessed, accompanied by a musical motif especially composed by Bacalov, are gradually stilled until silence indicates that sanity has returned. The leper, by contrast, has been healed through the spoken word, with all the value known to be attributed to the *logos* in Christianity.

The third time the Gloria occurs within the film is when Jesus enters Jerusalem amidst the festive crowd, and the last occasion, which extends over three scenes, is when the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb falls away and the empty shroud is revealed, an episode that covers all the final part of the last sequence, through to the foreground shot of the risen Jesus. The motif continues during the credits, mirroring the introduction. The Gloria theme thus accompanies those moments that confirm Jesus's divine identity, his extraordinariness and the highpoints of his time on earth. Everything might be summed up by Matthew 28:18, with which the final dialogue of the risen Jesus begins: "All power is given unto me in heaven and earth. Go, ye and teach all nations, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, teaching all things I have commanded. I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."¹⁸

"SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD"

The second musical theme is "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child", in the version by the African American singer Odetta Holmes. The roots of this spiritual song date to the time of slavery in the United States, when black families deported from Africa were often split up and sold in different areas as a strategy of social control. The song has long been part of the traditional repertoire of spiritual and blues music, and the version chosen by Pasolini is just one of many. Odetta Holmes was a leading figure on the folk-music scene in the 1950s and 1960s. She was also an important supporter and representative of

18 The passage is quoted here as it appears in the English subtitles of the film, reflecting that the author originally quoted the dialogue as in the movie. See also note 21, where the same is true.

the American civil rights movement whose political and social commitment was not lost on Pasolini.¹⁹

In the film the song is the motif of two scenes: the visit and adoration of the Magi, and the preaching of John the Baptist. They have in common a search for and attempt to achieve saintliness and to receive a sign of grace. The Magi embarked on a long journey from the East to find the Son of God, and “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” renders the intensity of the distance that is finally closed. For the scene involving John the Baptist, we know from Matthew 3:5 that people came to the River Jordan from Galilee and Judaea, making a long pilgrimage to be baptized by the prophet. The spiritual motif again expresses the quest for a sign of grace, the yearning to no longer feel like orphans of a far-off God.

“THE 13TH CENTURY”

The motif “The 13th Century” derives from a totally different context, just as it bears a very different role in the film. It comes from Sergei Prokofiev’s soundtrack for the film *АЛЕКСАНДР НЕВСКИЙ* (ALEXANDER NEVSKY, Sergei M. Eisenstein, USSR 1938), a masterpiece of Russian cinema. The subject of the film is the Battle on the Ice (Lake Peipus) in 1242, between the Teutonic Order and the Russian army. The piece has powerful resonances that represent the dramatic situation at the dawn of the 13th century. During this historical period, following the death of Genghis Khan, many peoples migrated and settled in Asia. The new geopolitical situation put pressure on the Russian kingdom of Kiev, which was also threatened by the expansion of the Teutonic Order in Estonia. The hagiography of Alexander casts him as an ideal defender of Russia against the Teutonic invaders, who during the Second World War were increasingly associated with the Nazis.

Prokofiev’s piece marks two scenes in Pasolini’s film: the Massacre of the Innocents and the beheading of John the Baptist. Violence undoubtedly unites the two moments, but this feature alone does not explain the repeated musical motif – the seizing of Jesus and the driving out of the merchants from the temple are also marked by violence, for example. But two further aspects enter into play here, one linked to those who ordered the violent act, the other to the victims. In each case the killing is ordered by a member of the Herod family, first the father and then the son, Antipas. The violence is perpetrated at the wishes of the tetrarch of Palestine and legitimated by his authority. It is the violence of rulers, of those with a monopoly on power, which, recalling Max Weber’s definition, is the State itself. The victims are characterized by their blamelessness

19 In 1963, a year before Pasolini’s film was released, the singer took part in the great civil rights march on Washington organized by Martin Luther King, who was an admirer of Odetta Holmes.

and are “innocents” by definition. Or rather, the innocence of the children is attributed to John the Baptist precisely through this musical theme, creating a narrative continuity.

BACH’S COMPOSITIONS: FROM THE CONCERTO IN C MINOR BWV 1060 TO THE ST. MATTHEW PASSION

The Adagio from the Concerto in C minor BWV 1060 by Johann Sebastian Bach is another musical motif. Pasolini had a great liking for Bach, whose compositions appear in various of his films, including his very first one, *ACCATTONE* (IT 1961). Here we might cite, for example, Andante in D minor from the second Brandenburg Concerto or the aria “Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder”, to which we shall return.

Once again we have a pair of consonant scenes, this time the second announcement to Joseph in a dream and the multiplying of the loaves and fishes. Both are characterized by this tranquil, almost playful theme and in both an obstacle is overcome thanks to a miraculous sign. In the first case the announcement of the Angel enables the family to return to Galilee; in the second people are fed as a result of the miracle of the multiplication. And in both one can note gestures of affection – Joseph embracing his son, Jesus feeding the hungry crowd.

There is also a further piece by Bach, from a Mass that is stylistically far removed from the *Missa Luba*. It is taken from the Mass in B minor BWV 232, specifically the final piece of the fourth movement (“Dona nobis pacem”). The internal structure of this sung Mass deserves separate analysis for its compositional richness and geometry, together with the influences of Catholic and Lutheran theology. We will instead limit ourselves here to indicating the scenes in which it appears, namely the healing of the paralysed man and the arrival of the children in the Temple courtyard. In both there is a run-in between Jesus and a group of Pharisees over orthopraxis. The theme crops up in relation to the miraculous healing of the paralysed man, which was performed on the Sabbath, and the arrival of children and the sick in the Temple after the traders had been driven out. In both cases the rules of the priests are broken and replaced with new teachings, and both represent gestures of challenge which on the one hand demonstrate Jesus’s superior power and on the other pose a threat to the Pharisees.

A stepping up of this challenge occurs in concomitance with the Adagio from Bach’s Concerto in D major for violin BWV 1042. The second of three movements, it is distinguished by a ground bass which expressively marks a progressive darkening of mood. The theme is present in three scenes of *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO*: the sermon at Capernaum (Matthew 12:30–31), the view of Jerusalem (Matthew 21) and the condemnation of the Pharisees in the Temple (Matthew 22:14). All three are quite close to the middle of the film, and in them the characters take up positions in two quite distinct and opposing camps: that

of Jesus and that of the priests. What emerges from the dialogues is an awareness of a clear separation, expressed in reciprocal condemnations and verbal criticisms and in a very polarized division. This musical theme signals the increasingly tense confrontation between the two sides.

The next two musical motifs can be dealt with together, as they are from the same work by Bach, the St. Matthew Passion BWV 244, which sets the final part of Matthew's Gospel to music. The pieces in question are the arias "Erbarme dich, mein Gott" (Have mercy, my God!) and "Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder" (We sit down in tears). The theme of intertextuality is particularly prominent here: we have a film representation which, in order to transpose Matthew's Gospel narrative, draws on a musical transposition of the same text. Given what we know about Pasolini's passion for Bach, it was inevitable that this work would find its way into the film, and indeed the second aria had already been used in ACCATONE.

Though Bach's work was certainly not the only Baroque transposition of the Passion, it is particularly interesting for its compositional care and choral accompaniment. The text on which Bach based his work was Luther's translation of the Gospel, while the vocal parts were written by Picander, one of the most important librettists of Bach's works.²⁰

The first aria, "Erbarme dich, mein Gott", is, as the title says, a plea for mercy. It is one of the most moving pieces in the film, marking five scenes according to different meanings of "mercy". The first is found in the 10 scenes characterized by Jesus addressing the disciples. With respect to all the others, it is the only one of the ten with a musical theme, and the textual reference is Matthew 6:25–34 (when Jesus talks about the lilies). Jesus invites reflection on the mercy of God, which is dispensed freely to those who believe in him. But if here it is a gift, in the second scene it becomes a request. The rigid and implacable behaviour of the Pharisees places the Law of Moses before what is good, as in Matthew 12:7. In the encounter with the rich young man, Jesus is moved to mercy by the man's inability to forego material goods, by how shackled he is to his own wealth. The fourth scene takes place on the Mount of Olives, where Jesus predicts that Peter will forsake him and then goes to pray. Mercy returns here as a request and in the behaviour of Jesus towards the physical and spiritual weakness of his disciples. Finally, linking back to the previous scene, the last person to ask for mercy is Peter, when he runs away having denied his master.

In the opening credits, the Gloria is followed by another theme, "Wir setzen uns mit Tränen". For those who know Pasolini's work well, this is nothing

20 A pseudonym of Christian Friedrich Henrici (1700–1764), who after studying law began to write poetry and compositions. He worked together with Bach at least from 1725, after the latter moved to Leipzig, becoming his trusted librettist.

new given that it is a full-blown leitmotif in ACCATTONE. In IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO it links two moments almost at opposite ends of the film. The first is in the scene with Herod and the Wise Men, when the king learns of Jesus' birth. The second coincides with the capture of Jesus and the kiss of Judas. It is not easy to find an underlying meaning linking these two episodes, but perhaps it is precisely their relative distance, as two end moments, that offers a common theme. In both a prophecy is fulfilled, in the first case Isaiah's regarding the birth of the Messiah, in the second case the three prophecies Jesus himself made about his capture and death (Matthew 16:21; 17:22; 20:17). As with the citations of the Old Testament, the musical theme is a marker of fulfilment.

Also from Bach, in this instance the *Musikalisches Opfer* BWV 1079, but in an arrangement for orchestra by Anton Webern, is "Ricerca a sei". Webern was one of the leading pupils of Arnold Schoenberg, the theorist of the twelve-tone system. He put his master's teachings into practice by creating the school of integral serialism. The expressive form of the passage, the fugue, is particularly well suited to the scene of the temptations in the desert. The exchanges between Jesus and Satan almost follow the rhythm of the music, just as the desert view of Etna is well suited to the delicacy of "Ricerca". This comparison returns in the second scene, where Jesus curses the barren fig tree. The tree becomes the symbol of Judas, the only interlocutor of his master for the whole scene, in whom the teaching of Jesus does not bear fruit, just like the fig tree.

MOZART'S MAURERISCHE TRAUERMUSIK

Moving on finally to another composer, let us look now at W.A. Mozart's *Maurerische Trauermusik* in C minor K 477. The composer, who made no secret of being a member of the Viennese Freemasons, wrote the piece in 1785 to commemorate two brothers of the order. It is a work that stands out from among Mozart's other output as in a single movement it combines the tempo of a march with a Gregorian melody.

The *Maurerische Trauermusik* is associated with the most important scenes in the whole film. The first is the baptism in the River Jordan, where Jesus appears as an adult and begins his mission on earth. This first manifestation is rendered even more solemn by the voice – this time diegetic – that speaks from the sky, and it marks the spiritual consecration of Jesus, a transformative and transitional moment. The Mozart piece returns as the theme after the presentation of the apostles, when Jesus talks about his mission, although a different passage of the work is used. The teachings concern the dangers of death and of the persecution of believers and suffering and death as temporary moments on the path to true life. A radical change of perspective is proposed, which we also find in the crucifixion and death scene. These scenes are linked by a continual

theme, which seems to halt at the invocation of the Father, but then resumes with greater force in the final cry (Matthew 27:50).

With these elements we are in a position to give a more precise meaning to the “dark” sequence of the crucifixion, with this very particular citation: “Hearing you shall hear and not understand, seeing, shall see and not perceive, for the people’s heart is waxed gross and their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears” (Matthew 13:14–15).²¹ From a Christian perspective, only those who have faith and do not reason with the body can grasp the sense of the crucifixion: not a definitive death, but passage to a new life, and indeed the highest moment of this transformation, which leaves the dead and now useless body behind it. The scene with the collapsing houses, earth tremors and fires is nothing other than the visual transposition of the bodily “collapse”, just as on various occasions Jesus spoke of himself as a building (the true Temple). From this point of view, Mozart’s composition marks this change of perspective in accordance with the Christological doctrine.

“DARK WAS THE NIGHT, COLD WAS THE GROUND”

The next musical theme is a blues song by Blind Willie Johnson, “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground”, which evokes the same melancholy as “Motherless Child”. Johnson’s songs often have religious themes associated with American Baptist culture. “Dark Was the Night” is the theme for two scenes: first, when the paralytic man clumsily approaches Jesus, and second, for the belated contrition of Judas. The notes of the song draw the two situations closer, with both featuring a “sick” man. But while the physical defect of the paralytic can be resolved with a miracle, it almost seems as if even Jesus is powerless to treat Judas’ spiritual illness – a bitter association that fits well with the text and rhythm of the blues song.

TWO RUSSIAN FOLK COMPOSITIONS: “OH YOU, WIDE STEPPE” AND “YOU FELL VICTIM”

The next two musical motifs have a great deal in common, starting with their context of origin. Both are Russian compositions with a popular origin. The first is “Oh You, Wide Steppe” (Ах ты, степь широкая), a folk song sung by the Red Army choir, and it accompanies Jesus at the beginning of his journey through Galilee and during the calling of the first disciples. It has powerful sonorities,

²¹ Once again, I have cited the passage as it appears in the film. The citation is present in Matthew’s Gospel, but it comes from a prophecy attributed to Isaiah and Pasolini does not complete it with verse 16.

accentuated by the choral voices and the pressing rhythm of the scenes. It is therefore at odds with the scenes of the conspiracy of the Sanhedrin, in which the subdued tone of the song almost seems to add a parenthesis to the words of Caiaphas. Finally, the piece recurs in the deposition of Jesus' dead body, with the same charge as the first one, drawing a parallel between the beginning and end of Jesus' mission on earth.

This piece, like the following one, also undoubtedly refers to the failure of the revolutionary design. The major point bearing this out lies in the long speech to the crowd against the priests and Pharisees, under the threatening gaze of the soldiers. In these scenes the background to the words of Jesus is "You Fell Victim" (Вы жертвою пали), a funeral march of the Russian revolutionaries which was subsequently adopted by the Soviet Union and was incorporated into Shostakovich's Symphony no. 11 in G minor. The Russian composer's work concerns events that took place in 1905, including Bloody Sunday, when the army fired on defenceless demonstrators outside the Winter Palace. The soldiers' violence also returns in the scenes of *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO* when arrests are made and people captured to disperse the crowd around Jesus.²²

THE KOL NIDRE

The final motif is *Kol Nidre*, a very elusive theme that has only rarely been recognized. It is a piece in Aramaic performed in the Jewish context before the liturgical service of Yom Kippur. Its name comes from its opening words, as many Jewish texts do. *Kol Nidre* means "all vows", and its origin is more that of a legal declaration than of a prayer as such. It is an introduction to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement in the Jewish religious calendar and the last in a series of 10 days of fasting that begins with Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year. With the recitation of the *Kol Nidre* all the vows and promises made during the previous year are annulled. Even more interestingly, up until the final destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, part of the ritual of Yom Kippur involved the offering up of two goats (Leviticus 16:7–10), one of which was sacrificed to God, while the second was left alive as atonement – the so-called scapegoat. All this takes on a particular meaning when related to Pasolini's film, where the *Kol Nidre* is the musical theme of just one scene: Jesus' last supper and the establishment of the Eucharist. The connection here is fairly clear, given the Christian symbolism of the lamb offered in sacrifice for the remission of sins. Just as the Jewish prayer provides release from the weight of vows and oaths in anticipation of

22 In the Gospel of Matthew no mention is made of the presence of soldiers or of arrests. The only passage speaking about the crowd is in Matthew 23:1, when Jesus begins to list the wrongs of the Pharisees. In the film all this is rendered visually as a people's assembly with disorder and riots.

the atonement of Yom Kippur, so with the first Eucharist Jesus announced the deliverance of humanity from the burden of their sins, shouldering them himself and sacrificing himself for definitive atonement. The *Kol Nidre* is a historic act that must be repeated each year; the Passion of Christ is an unrepeatable meta-historical event which breaks the cyclical nature of Jewish time.

These musical motifs clearly do not make up the entire soundtrack of Pasolini's film. They are, however, the most important semiotic elements on this level (together with the dialogues), and the ones most closely woven into intertextual relations as the result of precise aesthetic and expressive choices on the part of the director.

AN EXAMPLE OF AUDIO-VISUAL SYNTAX

By way of conclusion, it is worth looking at the scene of the Massacre of the Innocents as an example of audio-visual syntax. Here we find a general association between the musical theme, the film *ALEXANDER NEVSKY*, Piero della Francesca's fresco *Battle between Heraclius and Chosroes* and the representation of the bodies. The soldiers on horseback, lined up in a row on the ridge of the hill in their armour recall the Roman knights of Heraclius in Piero's fresco in Arezzo. Some of the hats, especially the hemispherical ones, echo that model. But the great variety of helmets framed one by one is not an aesthetic whim on Pasolini's part, but a visual element in line with Prokofiev's musical motif. The same kind of shots and the same variety of helmets can be found in the opening scenes of Eisenstein's film about the Battle on the Ice. Furthermore, there are similarities between the spatial arrangement of the knights in Piero's fresco and the initial charge of the Teutonic knights, a static visual relationship that extends here onto the sound plane and that of the bodies, creating a multiple contacts marker.

Continuing with the scene, the acceleration of the foot soldiers, as they chase and slaughter the children, is another type of visual indicator. This new semiotic element is introduced by a modification of state, not by a change of form (e.g. the aging of Mary). The speeded-up film and the shots of a broad, fixed field with scenes of violence are reminiscent of Fascist newsreels from the war, an impression that becomes even more powerful when we look at the soldiers' clothing. It is as obvious as it is necessary to say here that all the bodies in the film are dressed: they are covered bodies, but this expressive masking is a revelation of content, significant insofar as it is a *sign-of*. The costumes, the clothes, are the communicative code with which viewers gain access to the characters, another semiotic cluster linked to the visual and audio elements. Unlike the knights, the foot soldiers are a visually coherent group, with the same uniform

consisting of a fez and a large black band across the chest. Given the parallels drawn in ALEXANDER NEVSKY between the Teutonic knights and the Nazis, it is not so very unlikely that Herod's soldiers represent a Fascist squad.²³

This kind of syntax, used by Pasolini throughout the film, renders the scenes consonant with each other; in other words, it creates chains of meanings that obey internal compositional rules. This is not a question of a simple, absolute and functional arrangement of the elements, as in the work of some Russian Formalists (Alexander Veselovsky, Viktor Shklovsky, Alexander Afanasyev), but of their reciprocal relationship within wider schemes, which relates to the lessons of structural linguistics.

Ties to external and to some extent objective references are not necessary because the director composes his own code to communicate with the viewer: the narrative structures within the film provide an architecture of reality, making the representation self-sufficient by relying on audio-visual leitmotifs. This architecture is developed not in a casual or indifferent manner, but along valorizing semantic axes, which distribute a whole series of significances and values (including moral ones) to characters and situations. In other words, the director's message, encoded around recurrent and organized combinations of sounds and images, permits the implicit attribution of "positive" and "negative" values (for example) to a given character. So, for instance, Herod and his retinue are perceived as antagonists of Jesus by associating the theme "The 13th Century" with them.

In this way, in an almost spontaneous and implicit manner, the spectator absorbs and learns the director's code and is able to interpret the film and receive the communicative content. Only through a process of deconstruction *a posteriori* can we break down the audio-visual continuum into individual semiotic markers, going beyond the "reality effect" of the film. Obviously this analysis of IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO is incomplete and does not consider, for example, all the references to the extra-cinematographic context, such as the historical context in which the director lived. In this article I have favoured an internal perspective focusing on audio semiotic markers, elements able to generate structures of sense through auditory contact and agreement with other markers of a visual kind.

The director's objective – and ultimately the purpose of any film – is not just to tell a story, but to communicate with the viewer through an architecture of reality, which has two aspects, one morphological and the other teleological. The former involves the generation of semantic axes, logical sequences correlated principally with an audio-visual syntax; the latter is the presence of one or more metanarrative levels, introduced by the director to transmit precise ide-

23 Subini 2006, 163.

logical, moral and aesthetic messages. The intertextual richness and complexity of this film, the result of carefully crafted direction, have made *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO* one of the most important and widely acclaimed Christological representations of the 20th century.

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