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Sacra. 2006, vol. 4, iss. 2, pp. 34-50

ISSN 1214-5351 (print); ISSN 2336-4483 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/118415>

Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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Pasolini and the Bible. A film analysis of *La Ricotta* and *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo*

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1. Introduction

In this essay I would like to suggest a combined reading of two movies by Pier Paolo Pasolini. There are many connections between them and I think it is very rewarding to take them both into account.

I will begin this essay with a short interpretation of the main motifs of Pasolini's *La Ricotta* (1963).¹ This will not be a general analysis of this short film, but will rather be focused on its connection and relation to *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* (1964).²

There were (and maybe still are) discussions about whether *La Ricotta* and/or *Il Vangelo* are to be considered 'heretic', but in my view these discussions are redundant. Furthermore, very often unanswerable questions are their basis (e.g. whether Pasolini was a believer in the end or whether his motives were sincere and honourable). Only because they played a big role in the general reception and reviewing process of both movies I will take up this topic and give my personal impression.

La Ricotta, a movie about a Bible-movie (a "meta Bible movie"), already highlights some problems that a director of a Jesus-movie has to face. One crucial point is definitely the role of the movie-director, that Pasolini impersonates himself in real life in his follow-up project *Il Vangelo*. From this perspective I will look at the dialogue between director and journalist that takes place in the last third of the movie. Since *La Ricotta*, due to its brevity and conciseness, might confuse ordinary watching habits, it can easily be subject to superficial interpretation by inattentive watchers, which I would like to bring up in Chapter 2. A second dialogue analysis shall bring to light *La Ricotta's* political dimension, since this is another interesting feature to be looked at in relation to *Il Vangelo*.

I shall look at the real bible-movie, *Il Vangelo*, in the historical context of its genesis. Of course, this context is partly shared by *La Ricotta*, which is in a way a preliminary thought to the Gospel picturisation. Also, this sketch of the historical context is especially interesting since a process of myth-making³ has started regarding *Il Vangelo*. Another question that I would like to raise in this scope is why Pasolini chose to picturise of all Gospels Matthew. From Chapter 3.2 on my

¹ Internet Movie Database: "La Ricotta" in: "Ro.Go.Pa.G.". <<http://imdb.com/title/tt0056171/>>.

² Internet Movie Database: "Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo". <<http://imdb.com/title/tt0056171/>>; in the following only referred to as *Il Vangelo*.

³ Two of these myths in short sketches:

1. Pier Paolo Pasolini finds the Bible on his bedside locker at a seminary in Assisi. He reads six pages (sic!) and suddenly wants to picturise the Gospel according to Matthew.
2. When the Spanish student Enrique Irazoqui comes to visit Pasolini, he suddenly knows (enlightened?): this is my actor for the role of Jesus.

interpretation focuses on the movie itself and tries to highlight important themes and motifs alongside a sequential analysis in Chapter 3.3. In the final Chapter I shall give a short sketch of the often praised aesthetics of *Il Vangelo*.

2. La Ricotta

Like mentioned above, I vote for interpreting *La Ricotta* and *Il Vangelo* together, since the relations between them enrich both and show them in a different light. Furthermore, *Il Vangelo* seems to me the logical follow-up of Pasolini's cultural and anti-capitalist criticism in the framework of a Bible movie and the practical application of a theoretical concept already developed in *La Ricotta*. I will restrict my interpretation of this short movie to those parts that seem relevant in connection to *Il Vangelo*. I will commence this Chapter with an analysis of the texts that are shown in fades to black in the very beginning of the short movie. After this, two major dialogues shall be considered.

I would read the first Bible quote, which is Mark 4:22–23,⁴ in the context of Isaiah's prophecy,⁵ shown at the very end of *Il Vangelo*. This direct message to the audience expresses on the one hand Pasolini's respect for the Holy Scripture,⁶ on the other hand the request to watch the following in its interpretation of the source most carefully. One could argue that this respect for the Bible is based on his humanistic education, acknowledging the Holy Scripture as one of the most important texts of occidental tradition. But it seems he also wants to draw the attention of an audience that maybe, even though being mainly catholic, has not read the text,⁷ to the Gospel and inspire them to re-consider and re-contextualise it. In *La Ricotta* itself one could connect the 'hidden' mentioned in Mark 4:22 with the 'hidden' passion of Stracci.

The second Bible quote, John 2:14–16,⁸ easily relates to *Il Vangelo* as well. In the Gospel according to Matthew⁹ (and also in *Il Vangelo*, of course) we find a rather aggressive rendering of Jesus driving the merchants and moneychangers out of the temple. I would dare to interpret this as a critique of conventional Hollywood

⁴ Mark 4:22–23: *For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.* – All quotations from the Bible are taken from the New International Version (*The Holy Bible. New International Version*. London: Hodder and Stoughton 21979). The rather unusual edition Pasolini used for *Il Vangelo* – an Italian edition by Pro Civitate Christiana – was not accessible to me, so I chose a rather widespread translation.

⁵ Matthew 13:14–15: *You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them* (These verses are referring to the prophecy found in Isaiah 6:9–10).

⁶ Regarding Pasolini's respect for the Bible and Pro Civitate Christiana before *La Ricotta*, see Steimatsky 2003: 246–247.

⁷ See Viano 1993: 133.

⁸ John 2:14–15: *In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!"*

⁹ Matthew 21:12–13: *"Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, "My house will be called a house of prayer," but you are making it a 'den of robbers.'"*

Bible picturisations – so-called ‘holy pics’.¹⁰ Furthermore, the choice of this Bible quote could also be related to anti-capitalist criticism, which would not be unusual or surprising, keeping in mind other movies by Pasolini or some of his writings. In *La Ricotta* you might find this criticism most explicitly in the words of the director, impersonated by Orson Welles – most ironically himself a director of many movies (and of course a famous actor) – that I will try to interpret at a later stage. In *Il Vangelo* Pasolini’s anti-capitalist attitude is present in many aspects, namely the choice of film location, using lay-actors mostly from the film locations and the low production costs in general.

In the third text that is presented before the actual start of *La Ricotta*, Pasolini says in his own words that he is well aware of the fact that this is a provocative movie. His intention is to express his respect for the Passion of Christ and the texts that narrate it. This declaration completes the Bible quotes in a way and presents Pasolini’s concern very clearly.¹¹ To sum it up: *La Ricotta* is in my interpretation (1) an anti-capitalist criticism and (2) a critique of hitherto existing Bible picturisations, (3) an expression of respect towards the Bible and its texts and (4) a call to the audience to reconsider the Gospel.

2.1 Dialogue: Journalist – Director

One of the most important and significant (although not most clear or direct) scenes in *La Ricotta* is the dialogue between the journalist (Vittorio La Paglia) and the director (Orson Welles). Since the dialogue seems to be very ambiguous at the surface I will present a short sketch of the dialogue, trying to confront different levels of interpretation.

The first question of the journalist is: “What do you wish to express in your new movie?”, to which the director answers (cynically or smirkingly?) smiling: “My intimate, profound, archaic, Catholic belief.” This attribute combination is almost an oxymoron – apart from ‘archaic’ all attributes to ‘belief’ are on a scale from neutral to positive. This answer could be part of *La Ricotta*’s inherent Hollywood-critique. In this case the response of the director would mean that the motives of Hollywood directors are not sincere or honourable (in a Catholic sense), because they are not real believers but hypocrites. If we interpret it as a distorted mirror of Pasolini’s own cliff-hanging situation – not personally believing in the Bible or Jesus Christ but still feeling the urge to produce a picturisation¹² of this story – we suffer less contradiction with the rest of the dialogue.

The journalist takes notes and continues his interview: “What do you think of the Italian people?”¹³ And Orson Welles replies: “The Italians are the most illiterate, ignorant people of Europe.” Looking only at the surface Pasolini continues to portray the toffee-nosed, capitalist director who is not interested in the people living in his

¹⁰ See Viano 1993: 135–136.

¹¹ I am aware of the fact that my interpretations of the Bible quotes and Pasolini’s personal declaration are based and already focused on the relation between both movies. I think that this interpretation is not just a meaningful one, but it alludes to the historical, socio-cultural environment of both *La Ricotta* and *Il Vangelo* and connects them in order to show them in a broader scope.

¹² This picturisation of course being *Il Vangelo*.

¹³ Of course he asks this question because Orson Welles impersonates an *American* director.

film location and whose only goal is a 'box-office-hit'. This interpretation would also be supported by Pasolini doing the exact opposite in *Il Vangelo*: the majority of his actors are from Apulia or Calabria. Another possible meaning would be a self-critical presentation of his cynical self.

The third question to the director: "What do you think of death?", is answered by a short: "Being a Marxist, I don't bother." Here the dialogue starts to be contradictory if we stay on the surface, because of the director's answer to the first question. Another perspective shows that the issue of this dialogue could be a (an exaggerated) representation or burlesque of Pasolini himself, highlighting his (contradictory?) proximity to Catholicism as well as Marxism.

The fourth and last question refers to Federico Fellini,¹⁴ by the way a friend of Pier Paolo Pasolini – the reporter asks for his opinion on Fellini. The short answer: "He dances. He dances." Then follows a longer quotation of a poem published in Pasolini's script to *Mamma Roma*.¹⁵ The journalist obviously does not understand the poem and the director starts to bluster: "You have not understood anything, because you are a mediocre man. A mediocre man is a monster, a dangerous delinquent, a conformist, a racist, a slave-trader, a politically uninterested. You do not exist, because for the capitalist only workers exist and your newspaper is owned by my producer." After this rage against the journalist the director finally turns away from him. In the first part what the director declares could be Pasolini's own opinion. Orson Welles attacks and incriminates all 'mediocre' men and women who are not interested in politics and just follow ideologies without reflecting on them. In the final sentence he renders capitalism as an ideology that only concedes existence to working and producing individuals. The exclusive existence of manpower or labour is also noticeable towards the ending of the movie when Stracci hangs dead on the cross and the director comments the scene: "Poor Stracci, he had to die this way to show that he existed."

Finally I would say that Pasolini with the director creates a cynical, kind of exaggerated *alter ego* of himself.¹⁶ Moreover, there are several parallels between the two characters that support this interpretation: Pasolini himself was a poet, a film director, a Marxist and was at least in touch with Catholic Christianity, all of these being attributes also claimed by the fictional *La Ricotta* film director Orson Welles.

2.2 Dialogue: Jesus – Stracci

The dialogue between Stracci¹⁷ and Jesus, both recumbent on their crosses on the ground clearly refers to (or is a parody of) Luke 23:39–43.¹⁸ The connection to *Il Vangelo* is not established through the Bible as a source, because there is no

¹⁴ If you take a close look at the mouth of the journalist pronouncing "Federico Fellini" you can see that he is actually saying "Pier Paolo Pasolini".

¹⁵ Internet Movie Database: "Mamma Roma" <<http://imdb.com/title/tt0056215/>>.

¹⁶ See Fantuzzi 2003: 104.

¹⁷ 'Stracci' in Italian literally means 'rags'.

¹⁸ Luke 23:39–43: *One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."*

equivalent to Luke 23:39–43 in the Gospel according to Matthew.¹⁹ Still this dialogue reflects on similar topics that occupied Pasolini in his later movie and continues the conversation of journalist and director in its political dimension.

Stracci – ironically being the ‘good thief’ – starts to lament about being hungry (“I’m hungry, I could curse!”) and is on the spot drastically rebuked by Jesus: “[If you curse] Then I will kick out your teeth.” So when Stracci asks why he is not allowed to complain, Jesus answers that in this case he would not take him along to heaven. Stracci replies that he is fine on the earth which Jesus thinks is just because Stracci’s party is in power. To the question whether his party would be better, Jesus responds: “You always starve, but you are everything for the bosses that let you starve.” Stracci concludes the dialogue by claiming that some may be born for this job, but his job is to starve to death.

In this dialogue there are definitely motives like social injustice (of the bosses against the Stracci) and the relation between religion and politics. Neither religion nor politics can hold their promises and Stracci, because born to starve to death, is the living proof that they failed.

3. Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo

3.1 Historical context

As I have mentioned above, it is important for my interpretation to give at least a short analysis of the historical context. *Il Vangelo*²⁰ seems to me a lot more rooted in its historical and socio-cultural context than *La Ricotta*.

The background of the movie is Italy of the 1960’s. *Il Vangelo* is not coincidentally dedicated to Pope John XXIII,²¹ who died on the 3rd of June, 1963. One possible reason for this dedication could be that John XXIII, who is generally held to be a courageous reformer, ended the almost militant anti-Marxism of the Catholic church. He could have been a figure of hope for Pasolini, who himself was in tension between both. This dedication and a close-reading of *La Ricotta* show to me a very clear image of Pasolini’s ‘honourable motives’ (in a Catholic sense) for both movies. Especially regarding *La Ricotta* this was questioned and doubted a lot by church and public opinion and even sanctioned.²² The very opposite happened after the release of *Il Vangelo*, for which he received a prize in Venice by the OCIC (Organisation Catholique Internationale du Cinema).²³ Furthermore it is important to mention

¹⁹ Although there is no equivalent in the strict sense, the two criminals/thieves are mentioned in Matthew 27:38 and 27:44.

²⁰ According to the opening credits Pasolini used for his film the Bible edition of Pro Civitate Christiana.

²¹ Quote from the opening credits: “Alla cara, lieta, familiare memoria di Giovanni XXIII” (In dear, joyous and intimate memory of John XXIII).

²² Pasolini was sentenced to prison because of heresy, but did not have to serve the sentence. See Viano 1993: 134.

²³ Since 2001 the OCIC and “Unda” (being an equivalent of the OCIC, but for radio and TV) have been merged to “Signis – l’association Catholique Mondiale pour la Communication” (<<http://www.signis.net>>). Unfortunately the archive of the OCIC film prizes is not online anymore.

that *Il Vangelo* was financed by “Pro Civitate Christiana”,²⁴ a progressive Catholic association from Assisi. I would doubt that this is the reason for the rather modest film budget but rather explain this fact with Pasolini’s attitude towards previous Bible-movies.²⁵ Also his choice to employ lay-actors from his film locations²⁶ is rather connected to the political dimension of *Il Vangelo* than to a question of budget. The question why Pasolini chose Matthew out of four different Gospels seems quite crucial to me. I will try to make some suggestions in the following text.

3.1.1 Why Matthew?

The Gospel according to Matthew stands in the context of an early Judeo-Christianity, dealing with tensions between tradition and law.²⁷ These tensions are of course caused by modifications in traditions of other Judaic streams of the time. The figure of Jesus in this Gospel is not just a loving salvation-prophet but quite battlesome. To foster this as an important reason for Pasolini to choose Matthew, I would like to state that he almost completely and literally quotes Matthew 23 (“Seven Woes against the Pharisees”).²⁸ Furthermore the voice of Jesus-impersonator Enrique Irazoqui was replaced by the famous Italian Enrico Maria Salerno.²⁹ Whereas Irazoqui’s voice was supposedly revealing his young age, Salerno’s timbre is a lot more mature. It provides Pasolini’s Jesus with a dimension of experience and determination that outreaches the actual age of the actor. And to make one more point in this chain of arguments, Pasolini himself understood his movie³⁰ in the context of Matthew 10:34,³¹ which he considered to be the most crucial verse.

Inasmuch it seems quite comprehensible that some interpreters think Pasolini chose Matthew because it is the most ‘revolutionary’ of all four Gospels.

3.1.2 The film location

Another aspect that stands firmly in the context of the socio-cultural environment of the genesis of the movie is the choice of film’s location. I would like to outline why I think he did not choose to shoot in Palestine as he originally intended and which would have been quite suitable for a neo-realist film project.

²⁴ Website of Pro Civitate Christiana di Assisi: <<http://www.cittadella.org/cittadella/procivitate/prociv.html>>.

²⁵ See Chapter 2.

²⁶ Definitely not from the film locations: Jesus (personified by the Spanish student Enrique Irazoqui), the Apostles (personified by people without marks of physical labour; maybe most prominently as Philippus the philosopher Giorgio Agamben) and Mary, mother of Jesus (personified by Pier Paolo’s own mother, Susanna Pasolini).

²⁷ The tension between tradition and law is expressed through phrases like “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago [...] but I tell you that”. They are found a lot for example in Matthew 5:21–43.

²⁸ The crucial phrase of Matthew 23 (another good chance for Pasolini to show an enraged Christ): *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!*

²⁹ Enrico Maria Salerno was in the very same year also the Italian dub-voice for Clint Eastwood in Sergio Leone’s Western classic “Per un pugno di dollari” (A Fistful of Dollars). He was therefore easily recognizable for Italian native speakers.

³⁰ See Viano 1993: 133.

³¹ Matthew 10:34: *Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.*

Shortly after Pasolini found the Bible on his bedside locker and decided to make a movie about the Gospel – actually being at a seminar with Pro Civitate Christiana about his movie *Accatone*³² – he went on an expedition to Palestine on behalf of his project. Don Andrea Carraro of Pro Civitate Christiana accompanied him as advisor. The evidence we have today is a documentary called “Sopraluoghi in Palestina”,³³ which is the result of this expedition. It is only sporadically set to music, chronological, 55 minute long and in black and white. Pasolini’s disappointment of what he expected to be an aesthetic revelation is to be found in the soundtrack to the *Sopraluoghi*:³⁴

The first impression was of a great modesty, a great smallness, a great humility. ... The area is frightfully desolate, arid. It seems one of those abandoned places in Calabria or Puglia. And down over here is the Sea of Galilee, tranquil under the sun. What impressed me most is the extreme smallness, the poverty, the humility of this place. And for me – who was expecting this place, this Mountain of the Beatitudes, to be one of the most fabulous places in my film and in the spectacle that Palestine would have offered me – it has been an incredible impression of smallness, I repeat, of humility. A great lesson in humility. After all, I am thinking that all that Christ did and said – four small Gospels, preaching in a small land, a small region that consists of four arid hills, a mountain, the Calvary where he was killed – all of this is contained in a fist.

The fact that he finally chose to shoot his film in a few small places in Southern Italy³⁵ might surprise at first sight. I think if you take a closer look at his method of transferring and transforming the Gospel with cinematic means, his decision seems very suitable, almost suggesting itself.

3.2 Relation text – motion picture

Since this is not an essay about the texts of the Bible themselves but about one particular picturisation I will not discuss issues like the genesis of the Gospel according to Matthew. Nevertheless, the text that Pasolini is referring to in his movie plays an important role. I will try to show what kind of reference relates *Il Vangelo* to the Bible. To quickly highlight the importance of interpreting the relation between the two I’d like to compare the conventional Hollywood model of referring to the Holy Scripture with Pasolini’s. Most ‘holy pics’ tried to be ‘realistic’ and convince the audience that “this is how it actually happened”. So we can say that their modus of referring to the Bible was a historically reconstructing one.³⁶ This approach differs very much from Pasolini’s, although a superficial reading of *Il Vangelo* could imply he is trying to be realistic – in the end Pasolini is a Neo-*realist*, right? Instead I strongly vote for an understanding that interprets the relation between the text and the movie

³² Internet Movie Database: “Accatone”. <<http://imdb.com/title/tt0054599/>>.

³³ Internet Movie Database: “Sopraluoghi in Palestina per il vangelo secondo Matteo”. <<http://imdb.com/title/tt0059741/>>.

³⁴ Quoted from Steimatsky 2003: 247–248.

³⁵ The most important locations in Southern Italy in Apulia and Calabria: Jerusalem: old town of Matera; Bethlehem: Barile; Kafarnaum: Massafra and a village near Crotone. See Steimatsky 2003: 251.

³⁶ Even nowadays we find these attempts to display the texts of the Bible in a (pseudo-)realistic light, e.g. in Mel Gibson’s “Passion of the Christ” where this effect is being evoked through people speaking dead languages like Aramaic, Latin, Hebrew and Assyrian Neo-Aramaic. “The Passion of the Christ”, Director: Mel Gibson. Producers: Bruce Davey, Mel Gibson, Stephen McEveety and Enzo Sisti. USA: 2004.

as analogy.³⁷ That analogical reading of the Bible is not Pasolini's invention can be easily shown by mentioning the methods of Bible-exegesis developed by Origenes or Augustinus.³⁸ This means that one can consider allegorical and analogical reading of the Bible as legitimate – at least in Catholic tradition.

Now I would like to return to the main theme of Chapter 3.1.2 – the choice of film location – to illustrate analogy in the context of *Il Vangelo*. Although Pasolini's expedition to Palestine was not what I would call a complete success he took the *Sopraluoghi in Palestina* as quasi-relics back to Italy that could serve to make his film locations 'terra sancta'.³⁹ This transfer can be explained through a comparison with holy places not being in the direct radius of the Bible but liturgical acts, like the Stations of the Cross: they share the holiness of the historical places through analogy. The locations of Apulia and Calabria are very suitable for serving as metaphors for the holy land. Like Palestine in Christ's times Southern Italy in the 1960's was in a way a rather poor colony⁴⁰ being exploited by Rome. Furthermore both colonies do not seem to have been touched in first place by the modernity of the oppressors. This transfer of holy land is visible in the movie through the landscape, but also in a few scenes slightly modifying the biblical original. For example we could look at Matthew 12:1–8.⁴¹ These eight verses short narrative is being adapted in analogy: the apostles do not eat heads of grain but instead buy and eat olives. What makes this scene eye-catching apart from the olives themselves is that it lasts for around 40 seconds. I would interpret the stressing of this usually rather unimportant pericope as focus on the analogical relation to the Bible that shall become obvious for the audience. A possible interpretation of 'realism' – in opposition to historically reconstructing realism – in this context could be that it enables the viewers to think about *their* reality (or about references of the movie's/Bible's reality to their own). The time-barrier of historical reconstruction is being dismissed in favour of the movie's contextuality. Since the context of the movie is being updated constantly the horizon of interpretation changes with it. What seems problematic about contextuality is the fact that comprehension and association-horizon of the viewer might not align the movie's horizon anymore resulting in the audience not understanding the movie anymore.

The fidelity to the Biblical text has been stressed by many, even the most superficial readings of *Il Vangelo*,⁴² but this 'source-fidelity' can only be understood in

³⁷ See Viano 1993: 136–140; or Steimatsky 2003: 248–251.

³⁸ One thing that should be mentioned though is that Origenes' and Augustinus' concepts only considered church authorities (like themselves) to be allowed to use the higher levels of interpretation like analogy and allegory. Also see Gürses 1996: 33–35.

³⁹ Steimatsky 2003: 250 top.

⁴⁰ "In an exchange with Jean-Paul Sartre, Pasolini explained the implications of this analogical mode by drawing a comparison between his choice of the Italian south and what Algeria as a location for a film of the gospel would mean to a French audience" (Steimatsky 2003: 252).

⁴¹ Matthew 12:1: *At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them.*

⁴² E.g. on the German Arthaus DVD edition of *Il Vangelo* you will find the mystifying sentence: „Kein herkömmlicher Jesus-Film, sondern ein formal wie geistig individuelles, cineastisches Meisterwerk, das sich eng an die Bibelvorlage hält – Pasolini drehte mit einer Bibel anstelle eines Drehbuchs.“ (Italic accentuation: S.S.). Of course the claim that Pasolini did not have a script is not true – it has been published 1991 by the Garzanti publishing house in Milano (Pasolini 1991). Another example for this

the context of analogy. Otherwise one easily succumbs to the fallacy that *Il Vangelo* is a direct, uninterpreted cinematic picturisation of the Holy Scripture. Although a direct, uninterpreted transfer of a text into a different medium (such as film) is impossible in my view, the claim of Pasolini's extreme 'source-fidelity' and direct picturisation will not disappear from uninformed interpretations, because he did not add any spoken word: all the dialogues from *Il Vangelo* are taken from the Bible verbatim. One important point about 'source-fidelity' is definitely the many reorganisations of the texts in the movie that I am going to deal with in the following chapter in a sequential analysis.

3.3 Sequential analysis

The reorganisations of the biblical original in the movie, the omissions of pericopes and – where possible – their interpretation will be the main concern of this chapter. I will follow the structure of sequences.⁴³

Il Vangelo is very close to its source in the beginning and very end of the movie, as one can easily see in the list of sequences, so I will look at the most interesting modifications in between.

The first breach with the Gospel is constituted in *sequences 12 and 13*, where Matthew 10 and Matthew 8:2–4 are inserted. I would argue that this insertion has to be interpreted in the context of the "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5; *sequence 14*). *Sequences 12 and 13* could be seen as an extended (in content) replacement of Matthew 4:23–25 ("Jesus Heals the Sick") – which is in the Bible right before the "Sermon on the Mount" – that is not represented in the movie. This hypothesis can be supported by the argument, that Matthew 4:23–25, with its over-viewing character and because it has no dialogues,⁴⁴ is not very practical for picturisation.

The biggest leap happens right after the "Sermon on the Mount" in *sequence 15*. Matthew 8 and 9 are omitted almost completely. Matthew 8:1–4 ("The Man with Leprosy") is shown in *sequence 13* and Matthew 8:19–22 ("The Cost of Following Jesus") in recourse in *sequence 25*. Such a big omission brings up the question to the curious why Pasolini was not interested in (the content of?) Matthew 8 and 9 so much. All in all these two texts are narratives of healing and miracles with two exceptions, one being Matthew 9:14–17 ("Jesus Questioned About Fasting") and the other being Matthew 9:35–38 ("The Workers Are Few"). The only other miracles apart from Matthew 8:1–4 shown in *Il Vangelo* are the famous Matthew 14:13–21 ("Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand") and Matthew 14:22–33 ("Jesus Walks on the Water") in

widespread notion are the English and German Wikipedia entries for *Il Vangelo* (the German one even quoting the Arthaus-claim indirectly):

- It remains one of the more faithful cinematic adaptations of any biblical book, as Pasolini felt that "images could never reach the poetic heights of the text." Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gospel_According_to_St._Matthew_%28film%29> [30.10.2006].
- Pasolini, der die Bibel als Drehbuch benutzte und nur wörtliche Zitate von Matthäus verwendete, verzichtete vollständig auf professionelle Darsteller, alle Mitwirkenden sind Laiendarsteller gewesen. Source: <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Das_1._Evangelium_%E2%80%93_Matth%C3%A4us> [30.10.2006].

⁴³ The sequence list is found in the Appendix. A very clearly arranged list of sequences can also be found in Viano 1993: 331–333.

⁴⁴ As mentioned before, Pasolini did not invent any dialogues. When trying to represent Matthew 4:23, he maybe would have had to.

sequences 16 and 17. There are at least two possible interpretations for this lack of healing and miracle-scenes in Pasolini's movie. First the low budget or the low technical opportunities of the production could be a good reason to omit many healing stories (e.g. Matthew 8:23–27: “Jesus Calms the Storm”) for they would have been rather expensive. But harking back to the earlier argument I would vote against the low-budget hypothesis and for Pasolini's intention to omit the miracles and healing stories to contrast the ‘holy pics’.⁴⁵

The leap from the end of the “Sermon on the Mount” to Matthew 11:25–27 could be based on two motivations. The first being the omission of miracles as pointed out above. The second being the opportunity to literally let Jesus and the apostles “descend from the Mount of the Sermon” and through this round off the narrative of Matthew 5 cinematically. The continuation with Matthew 11:28–12:21 seems to fit perfectly.

The chronological position of the above mentioned miracles in *sequence 16* and *17* seems to me very hard to interpret and explain.

In *sequences 18, 19* and *20* the movie follows the structure of the Bible again. Their relation to *sequence 21* – that is, by the way, definitely Pasolini's invention and in content the third repetition and stressing of Matthew 12:46–47⁴⁶ – seems particularly interesting. This issue will be looked at in detail in the next chapter.

The next bigger omission is in *sequence 22*. The parables in Matthew 13:1–53 do not seem to have been interesting for Pasolini, because they are not shown at all.⁴⁷ In contrast he continues with Matthew 13:54–57 (“A Prophet Without Honor”).

There are quite a few modifications in *sequences 23, 24* and *25* so I will try to summarize them to give an overview. Between *sequences 23* and *25* – that are both dealing with ‘following Jesus’ (Matthew 19:16–24 and Matthew 8:19–22) – stands Matthew 14:6–12 (“John the Baptist Beheaded”). *Sequence 24* forms – metaphorically speaking – a bracket with *sequences 16* and *17*. The words to Jesus' succession are stressing an aspect that has been quite consequently omitted earlier in *sequence 22*: concrete instructions on how to act.

A few instructions are also shown in *sequence 26* that is the fitting sequel to *sequence 25*. Furthermore there are the three predictions of Jesus' suffering and death; they form a climax in the movie, because they are much closer to each other than in the Bible. One more thing to be mentioned about this sequence is the omission of most of Matthew 20. The omitted parts are again stories of healing and parables.

In comparison to the source *sequences 27* to *42* are highly chronological. Only some apocalyptic texts and again parables – which is the entire Matthew 24 and 25 – are not shown. The fade to black with Matthew 13:14–15 (Isaiah's Prophecy) at the end of *sequence 42* is definitely very important. I would like to refer to my interpretation of this quote in Chapter 2 in the context of *La Ricotta*.

⁴⁵ See Chapter 2 above.

⁴⁶ As shown in the list of sequences in the Appendix Matthew 12:46–47 is shown twice in *sequence 20*. Matthew 12:46–47: *While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.*

⁴⁷ The only parable shown in *Il Vangelo* is Matthew 18:12–14 (“The Parable of the Lost Sheep”).

*Sequences 43 and 44*⁴⁸ represent the end of the movie as well as of the Gospel according to Matthew in the Bible. This means that the movie ends with some optimism (at least for Catholic believers): the saviour has risen and declares again – this time smiling mildly – his message to Christians.

3.4 A few motifs

In this chapter I would like to discuss a few interesting motifs in *Il Vangelo*.

One important result of the sequential analysis was the position of the invented *sequence 21* in the movie. This sequence brings up a very autobiographical perspective on *Il Vangelo*, mainly because Mary, Mother of God is impersonated by Susanna Pasolini,⁴⁹ Pier Paolo's own mother. A possible strategy of interpretation – that I would only like to suggest in this paper without actually elaborating it – could try to analyse the motif of repulse of the mother in combination with Pasolini's biography,⁵⁰ generally speaking a psychoanalytical perspective. The influence of Pasolini's homosexuality in his film-making can be found in many interpretations. A protagonist of this interpretation – who also sees this influence in *Il Vangelo* – is Maurizio Viano. He suggests that this picturisation “discloses yet another reality inside Christ's story: its phallocentrism” (Viano 1993: 142). He grounds his thesis on the role of women and in *Il Vangelo*. For example “[t]raditionally conceived with the sluggish sensuality of cinema's biblical royal courts, Salome has always represented an unquestionable sign of erotic appeal” (Viano 1993: 143).⁵¹ According to his argument Salome is the femme fatal that enchants Herod and makes him demand the head of John the Baptist. In contrast, Paola Tedesco⁵² has a virginal figure and performs an asexual⁵³ dance with grace and levity. A further argument that Maurizio Viano brings up regarding his ‘phallocentrism-thesis’ is the absence of Mary of Magdala⁵⁴ in the movie, who is usually the main embodiment of sexuality. Instead there is Mary of Bethany, impersonated by 48 year old writer Nathalia Ginzburg. My argument against Viano's reading is that in Pasolini's concept of biblical analogy⁵⁵ there was simply no way to include Mary of Magdala, who is mentioned only thrice in the whole Gospel according to Matthew (Matthew 27:56; Matthew 27:61; Matthew 28:1). How

⁴⁸ As the very end of *sequence 44* and the whole movie Maurizio Viano (1993: 333) mentions Matthew 27:45–49. I could not verify this on the Arthaus DVD-Version of the movie that I obtained. This could be the result of a later cutting and editing, but at least to me Matthew 27:45–49 makes no sense at this point of the narration.

⁴⁹ Susanna Pasolini seems too old for a ‘realistic’ Madonna.

⁵⁰ Or alternatively to his biography just an element of the same, like suggested by Maurizio Viano, e.g. “Pasolini's Freudian understanding of the homosexuality discourse” (Viano 1993: 145).

⁵¹ The only movie I personally can confirm this claim is “King of Kings”, Director: Nicolas Ray. Producer: Samuel Bronston. USA: 1961. In this movie Salome is impersonated by charming Brigid Bazlen.

⁵² Very young Paola Tedesco impersonates Salome in *Il Vangelo*.

⁵³ The antithesis to Viano's reading of Salome's dance in *Il Vangelo* was brought up in one of the discussions I had with colleagues about this movie: Salome's dance is quite sexual, in fact sexualized and displays the “old salivating lecher who desires the virgin”.

⁵⁴ In *La Ricotta* the actress performing as Mary of Magdala (Maria Bernadini) strips in front of the crew in breaks of the shooting.

⁵⁵ This implies that he could not just invent dialogues for her.

should he have shown her as 'seductive' when in this Gospel she only accompanies Mary, Mother of God without saying a single word.

3.5 Aesthetics

There are foremost two aesthetic aspects that I would like to deal with in this chapter. First some parallels between *Il Vangelo* and Italian Renaissance painting and second some allusions to Christian iconography.

The notion that *Il Vangelo* is a very static movie is a fact that no attentive viewer can overlook. This becomes obvious in rather sparsely scoring of 'nature' (like wind or water). Other sounds – that could possibly distract the audience from more important things going on (like the sound of footsteps) – are not heard at all. Basically there are two elements that fight against silence in the movie: it's the score and the voice of Jesus, that is very insistent in its timbre. But *Il Vangelo* is not only static on the acoustical but also on the visual level. The sky is a cloudy and motionless plain most of the time. And the most impressive story concerning the sea – Matthew 8:23–27 ("Jesus Calms the Storm") – is not shown. Taking into account Pasolini's own words about his plans regarding aesthetics, all this points towards achieving one important effect: to make the movie-scenes look like paintings. This had consequences even on a very technical level, e.g. in choice of the camera-lens (Steimatsky 2003: 257–258). Instead of landscapes, Pasolini wanted to have backgrounds for the figures to move and act. His most important references in Italian Renaissance painting are Duccio, Giotto, Masaccio (whom he once mentioned as his prime pictorial referent [Steimatsky, 2003: 258]) and Piero della Francesca. The position of the figures in a perspective system is especially important for all of them. One good example for this is Masaccio's "Adoration of the Magi" (see fig. 1a). The mountainous landscape (or better: background) with just a small stripe of sky just suggests an anticipation of three-dimensionality. For comparison see a similar still from *Il Vangelo* (see fig. 1b). Comparing Masaccio with how the whole sequence works, one can see that everything behind the acting figures is just 'background', almost like (two-dimensional) stage design.⁶⁶ Another comparable scene in this sequence is when the Magi descend from the hilly background, because there is only this small stripe of sky like in Masaccio's painting. Of course one further step towards Masaccio's paintings is the use of the CinemaScope⁶⁷ that flattens the picture even more and makes it, regarding width-to-height ratio, more similar to the assumed 'original'.

As a second example for pictorial reference I would like to mention Piero della Francesca's "Madonna della Misericordia" (see fig. 2a). There is some similarity between Piero's Madonna and Holy Mary in one of the opening scenes (see fig. 2b).

⁶⁶ Comparing *Il Vangelo* with *La Ricotta* in this aspect, we can see that Pasolini already ventured on this aesthetics of paintings in his earlier movie. In two scenes he (very obviously) stages two famous paintings, both showing the deposition from the cross. One is Rosso Fiorentino's "Deposizione di Cristo" (1521), the other is Pontormo's "Deposizione" (1526–1528). In both scenes the actors break out in laughter (because instead of the correct background music a twist is being played) and someone behind the camera screams 'heretics' et cetera. In my opinion this shows that even though 'holy pics' tried to be pictorial (by the way in very bright colours, being another contrast to *Il Vangelo*) they never succeeded in making worthy pictures.

⁶⁷ CinemaScope was first used in a Bible-movie eleven years before of *Il Vangelo* – that was in the same year when the first CinemaScope movie ever was released. "The Robe", Director: Henry Koster. Producer: Frank Ross. USA 1953.

The arch that acts as a frame for Mary rather suppresses spatial depth. This flatness or verticality⁵⁸ unifies many dimensions in *Il Vangelo*: it connects heaven and earth. Moving on from this aspect, a comparison with Christian icons does not seem devious anymore, not based on the aesthetic similarity but on their functionality. Through avoiding spatiality very consciously, icons are not focussed on something *behind them* but in fact *in front of them*: the devout.

To conclude these aesthetic considerations, comparing *Il Vangelo* to paintings and icons, I would like to state that the movie tries to consecrate the profane – in its looks as well as in its function. Or as Pasolini put it himself:

If I had reconstructed the history of Christ as he really was I would not have produced a religious film because I am not a believer [...] But [...] I am not interested in deconsecrating: this is a fashion I hate, it is petit bourgeois. I want to re-consecrate things as much as possible, I want to re-mythicize them.⁵⁹

This concept of reconsecrating highlights not only the artistic but also the *religious* quality of *Il Vangelo*.

Appendix

Sequences 1–11

All in all these sequences follow the structure of the Gospel, containing Matthew 1:18–4:22 with only a few omissions (Matthew 1 without the genealogy of Jesus, Matthew 2 and 3 are completely shown, Matthew 4 without Matthew 4:23–25 [“Jesus Heals the Sick”]).

Sequence 12

In this sequence we find the crucial text Matthew 10:34 in the original context of Matthew 10:1–39 (“Jesus Sends Out the Twelve”).

Sequence 13

The Man With Leprosy (Matthew 8:2–4) is shown before the “Sermon on the Mount”.

Sequence 14

The “Sermon on the Mount” is shown in single, frontal shots of Jesus. Matthew 5:13–7:14 with small omissions and with slightly modified chronology.

⁵⁸ See Steimatsky 2003: 261.

⁵⁹ See Stack 1969: 82–83.

Sequence 15

Here is a big leap from Matthew 7:14, which was the end of the last sequence, to Matthew 11:25–30 (“Rest for the Weary”), then Matthew 12:1–14 (“Lord of the Sabbath”) and Matthew 12:18–21 (“God’s Chosen Servant”).

Sequences 16–17

Matthew 13 (the parables) is being omitted almost completely. The movie continues with Matthew 14:15–21 (“Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand”) and in sequence 17 with Matthew 14:22–31 (“Jesus Walks on the Water”).

Sequences 18–20

Here he goes back to Matthew 11:2–19 (“Jesus and John the Baptist”) and Matthew 11:20–23 (“Woe on Unrepentant Cities”). Naturally Matthew 11:25–12:21 are being omitted (they were shown in sequence 15), so he continues with Matthew 12:23–50 (“Jesus and Beelzebub”, “The Sign of Jonah”, “Jesus’ Mother and Brothers”).⁶⁰

Sequence 21

This sequence is Pasolini’s invention. Jesus and the apostles walk past Holy Mary’s house. She comes out of the house, Jesus looks at her, but they continue on their path without stopping by. Mary looks quite hurt, almost crying. This sequence is in content a repetition of Matthew 12:46–50, as mentioned above.

Sequence 22

Matthew 13:54–57 (“A Prophet Without Honor”)

Sequence 23

The movie leaps forward to Matthew 19:16–24 (“The Rich Young Man”)

Sequences 24–25

In these sequences Matthew 14:6–12 (“John the Baptist Beheaded”) is being inserted. In content sequence 25 is a follow up on sequence 23, showing Matthew 8:19–22 (“The Cost of Following Jesus”).

Sequence 26

Then the movie continues – omitting Matthew 19 completely – with Matthew 16:13–24 (“Peter’s Confession of Christ”, “Jesus Predicts His Death”), Matthew 17:22–23 (“Jesus predicting his death a second time”), Matthew 18:1–14 (“The Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven”, “The Parable of the Lost Sheep”), then Matthew 18:21–22 (“The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant”) and finally Matthew 20:18–19 (“Jesus Again Predicts His Death”).

⁶⁰ As mentioned before Matthew 12:46–47 is being shown twice here.

Sequences 27–42

In general these sequences follow the Bible very closely, Matthew 21:1–27; 21:49 (but without Matthew 24 and 25). In sequence 42 Matthew 13:14–15 (“Isaiah’s Prophecy”)⁶¹ is being shown in a fade to black and spoken.⁶²

Sequence 43

Matthew 28:5–8.

Sequence 44

Finally Pasolini shows Matthew 28:18–20 (“The Great Commission”).

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⁶¹ See Chapter 2.

⁶² Supposedly Pasolini speaks this and all other voices from the Off.



Fig. 1a
Source: artchive.com.



Fig. 1b
Still of *Il Vangelo* (11 min. 10 sec.): Simon Steinbeiß.



Fig. 2a
Source: artchive.com.



Fig. 2b
Still of *Il Vangelo* (2 min. 38 sec.): Simon Steinbeiß.