

Burning Memories to Retrieve the Past.  
Contaminations of Bodies and Histories in Pasolini's *Medea*

Ella oppone l'impeto con cui il mare  
davanti alla stupida e pericolosa Atene  
erge come cazzi azzurri i suoi Dei.  
(Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Coda alle cose successe ecc.")

This essay will question some issues related to Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Medea*, trying in particular to address the themes of encounter and contamination as they are raised and substantiated in the movie. However, I will start by referring to Pasolini's poetry and to two short poems included in his 1971 collection *Trasumanar e organizzar* devoted to the political situation in Greece in the immediate aftermath of the 1967 *coup d'état*. In these poems, titled "Cose successe forse nel '20" and "Coda alle cose successe ecc." respectively, Pasolini passionately interrogates the current political events opposing an open, dialogic idea of history and tradition, filtered through the evocative and opaque language of poetry, to the fascistic propaganda expressed by Greek military junta of 1967-1974, whose blatant summoning of tradition was a brutal attempt at conveying a Greek (and, to some extent, also European) layered and heterogeneous past into a univocal trajectory, strongly marked in terms of nationalistic identity.

If, on the one hand, Pasolini is seduced by the archaism envisaged in Grecian legacy, and its controversial relation with a mythic past embodied in the East, where Medea's origins can be traced, on the other hand, it is contemporary Greece that represents an urgent challenge.

*Medea* originates in poetry – it is clearly indebted to the dramatic language of Euripides – but at the same time entwines the strenuous search for a poetical cinematic language with a complex and unceasing questioning of historical reality, and the extent to which reality can be grasped and portrayed. Pasolini found a possible escape from the ongoing debate on the opposition between formalism and realism by referring to the Third World realities as places in which a new 'geography' of knowledge and a new articulation of language and languages could be possible. In his essay on Pasolini's "third world cinema", referring to Pasolini's choice of portraying the subaltern reality of the Third World in most of his movies, Luca Caminati states:

<sup>1</sup> Luca Caminati, *Orientalismo eretico. Pier Paolo Pasolini e il cinema del Terzo Mondo* (Milano: Bruno Mondatori, 2007), 47, my translation.

According to Pasolini, Gramsci's ashes, by now useless among the proletarian and sub-proletarian in Europe, are still alive in the Third World's revolutions.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, Pasolini's interest in Greek culture, and the choice of Maria Callas for the role of Medea, are no less significant, from a political

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perspective, than his concern for the revolutionary character of certain Asian or African regions. Greece represents a crucial ‘contact zone’, in which east and west, present and past, history and poetry confront each other, in mutual interrogation.

The poem “Coda alle cose successe ecc.”, whose final verses I have quoted in the exergue, plays upon a strict opposition between ‘voi’ (you) and ‘ella’ (she). No clear explanation is given of the actual meaning of these two pronouns, and, nonetheless, it does not seem difficult to infer that the myths of Greece, or Greece as a myth, is referred to by Pasolini, and is paralleled by an analysis of the current political condition of Greece, which was experiencing the ferocity of military dictatorship at that time.<sup>2</sup> Pasolini’s attitude is a provocative one: in *Medea* he demonstrates that tradition as such (as well as “nature” as such) has never existed, since it is but a sum of different and contradictory elements and fragments layered over the centuries. The poem insists on the contrast between the fascist ideology of tradition and what the mysterious and emblematic “Ella” mentioned in the poem embodies. Nationalism offers a conservative, museumized idea of tradition and an obtuse celebration of the past, as if it were possible to summarize history in a monological and sequential line of events aimed at constructing a closed and defined identity. On the contrary, Greece for Pasolini displays the countless nuances expressed by Medea, her tragic and suggestive mutability, but also the complicated net of contaminations and crossing-routes from which the very character of Medea (and the possibility of conceiving her tragedy as well) springs.

Past and present merge in Pasolini’s construction of Greece as a space where politics and aesthetics can be configured. The only possible tradition consists of contaminations, and the rhetorical (and cultural) stance from which *Medea* can be read and understood is the ‘tropos’ of contamination: Medea contaminates and is contaminated, Greece itself contaminates while being contaminated. *Medea* epitomizes the relationship between Pasolini and the tradition/modernity dyad: they are not simply set one against the other, but stay in an open, mutual interrogation – archaism interrogates modernity and compels it to reflect upon itself.

### *Medea* between nature and reality

With *Medea* Pasolini confronts his spectatorship with a series of contradictions and oppositions difficult to grasp completely: European (and, in a broader sense, western) tradition and its legacy, as epitomized by the character of Jason and his rational and authoritative attitude, is opposed to the barbarian and primitive world where Medea belongs, dominated by magic and by mysterious forces hidden in nature, impossible

<sup>2</sup> In the same collection there is a poem dedicated to Alexandros Panagulis, the Greek anarchist who organized the assassination attempt against general Georgios Papadopoulos.

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to control according to given epistemic and logical grids. This primitive world is emblematically designed as the Other of western civilization, a place whose value, according to Pasolini, was not only symbolical but actual and political, since, as I have hinted before, in those very years he was devoting his attention to the third world as the only possible alternative – cultural, political and, to some extent, even linguistic – to a western reality increasingly dominated by the brutal laws of capitalism and consumerism.

The movie is an almost faithful transposition of the Greek tragedy. Medea is a priestess and a magician, daughter of Eeta, king of Colchis, and granddaughter of the Sun; she falls in love with Jason when he arrives in her kingdom in order to steal a golden fleece and, after helping him in his attempt, decides to follow him to Greece. Once in Corinth, she is repudiated by Jason, to whom she has born two sons; he has decided in the meanwhile to marry Glauce, daughter of the king of Corinth. Medea takes her revenge by killing her own sons and Glauce, thus leaving Jason alone and completely powerless, deprived of his former (male) roles of courageous warrior and authoritative husband.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In her recent book *Orrorismo, ovvero della violenza sull'inerte* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2007), Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero broadly discusses Medea as an archetypal myth, relating her story to the ethical and biopolitical questions of violence and vulnerability.

The episodes related to Medea, to the tragedy she lives and that will drive her to desperation and to her dramatic resolution, start one hour after the beginning of the movie; the first part is devoted to Jason and his ventures, and enucleates the main themes around which the remainder of the story revolves.

The first thematic question we are confronted with is the opposition between reality and non-reality, which is an open reference to the aesthetical problems raised by Pasolini concerning the poetics of cinema and cinema as poetry. In a famous essay, Pasolini discusses the “cinema of poetry”; according to this perspective, the relation between cinema and reality is problematized by the use of formalistic strategies necessary to shoot movies that will be articulated as “poetical prose”:

The establishment of a “language of cinematic poetry” offers the opportunity to create pseudo-novels, written in a poetical language; the opportunity, I mean, to conceive something like a poetical prose, lyrical pages that make use of free indirect subjectivity, in order to preserve their subjective character. It would be a kind of writing strongly focused on stylistic aspects.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Empirismo eretico* (Milano: Garzanti, 1972, 2000), 185, my translation. See also Robert S. C. Gordon, *Pasolini: Forms of Subjectivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), for an in-depth analysis of the *soggettiva* (point of view shot) in Pasolini's movies.

Furthermore, the opposition between what can be termed as real and what cannot is also an anticipation and a problematic counterpart of a long series of oppositions – history and myth, rationalism and the power of irrationality, logos and the pre-verbal (and pre-symbolic) dimension – that mark the story of Medea.

When Jason is still a child, completely unaware of the heroic enterprises he will attempt, the Centaur who educates him declares:

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Everything's sacred,  
everything's sacred.  
Remember, my boy:  
there's nothing natural in nature.  
When it seems natural to you,  
it'll be the end.<sup>5</sup>

Natural, real, and sacred: these are the chief polarities continually assembled and interrogated, connected and interrupted, joined and fractured throughout the movie, and that radically question both the supposedly 'neutral', idyllic settings in which the facts take place, and the equally supposedly neutral gaze of the spectator, as it is controversially filtered through and replicated by the cinematic eye and the movie camera.

There is nothing natural in nature – Pasolini's words are aptly ventriloquized by the Centaur – and there is nothing natural in the gaze that observes nature and asserts its own objectivity and impartiality. This is why the Centaur goes on saying "Maybe you think that besides being a liar, I'm also too poetic": poetry seems the only way available to the sacred in order to upset the alleged naturalness of nature, allowing what is uncontrollable (and, as such, impossible to manage and fully envisage) to emerge. Here, the Centaur traces the first, significant divide between archaism and modernity, crucial to understand the subtle contradictions that characterise *Medea*:

But for ancient man, myths and rituals  
are concrete experiences,  
which are even included  
in his daily existence.  
For him, reality  
is a totally perfect unit.

Medea embodies the power of magic, an archaic and primitive dimension in which myth and reality were almost identical and overlapping conceptual categories, as the Centaur suggests – and nevertheless, he clearly speaks of "man", leaving the space of femininity completely untouched and threateningly off-screen and off-narration.

Let us consider, once again, Pasolini's poems, so precious to an in-depth reading of the movie and its slightest nuances. In the poem I quoted in the exergue, he attacks the Greek regime by opposing to it a primitive and seductive female figure, which represents the emergence of a disturbing and unmanageable force capable of disrupting the authoritative power of nationalism and its continuous and ideological references to an alleged monological tradition. He writes:

Ella oppone a tutto questo  
La completezza inaccessibile di una vita

<sup>5</sup> For dialogues from *Medea*  
I have used the English  
subtitles of the DVD  
edition.

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Ch'è una lotta interrotta dagli stupori  
Per la sua quotidianità.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini,  
*Trasumanar e organizzar*  
(Milano: Garzanti, 1976),  
195. ("She opposes to all  
that / The unattainable  
integrity of a life / That, in  
its daily routine, / Is a  
perennial fight of  
wonders", my translation)

Back to *Medea*: the uncanny power of femininity, obscurely addressed in Pasolini's verses, seems to display its strength. The ambiguity of his words is disclosed, and, to some extent, made clear or at least decipherable: "she" could be Greece, the ferocious beauty of its mythical past and its controversial and articulated history, but "she" is, at the same time, Medea herself, the stranger, the radically Other of the European and male epistemic subject; the disturbing aspect of femininity that is charged, during the movie, with an increasing and threatening power impossible to manage. As Borgerson points out:

Medea serves as an allegory of a linguistic community in which an individual makes an attempt, a heretical attempt, to mean something beyond what the archetype or paradigm makes available to her.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Janet L. Borgerson,  
"Managing Desire:  
Heretical Transformation in  
Pasolini's *Medea*",  
*Consumption, Markets and  
Culture* 5.1 (2002), 61.

The first part of the movie, as stated, depicts the idyllic life of Jason when he is still a child and is educated by the Centaur in a close relationship with nature. Nature does not propose a metaphysical *locus* made tangible, nor is it the symbolic place of a primeval and untouched dimension destined to be lost in Jason's adulthood. It is rather the critical (and, in Pasolini's perspective, political) configuration of archaism, a dimension in which symbol and ideology cannot be separated, and are meant as a compact, though controversial, unity. Reality is the term preferred by Pasolini to name this kind of unity, which, rather than being a simple instance of a nostalgic 'golden age' represented by primitivism, stands as a problematic interrogation addressed to the normative power of logos. In this sense, the doubts raised by Pasolini seem to anticipate a critique of rationalism that was to common in later postmodern philosophical speculation. When, after framing the limpid sky and sea in which Jason's infancy is absorbed and fused, Pasolini goes on to portray the early life of Medea, priestess in Colchis, with its barbarian and cruel habits, the ideological contradictions on which the movie hinges are fully displayed. Enzo Siciliano argues:

Pasolini, through Medea's desperation, represented his own cultural desperation. A myth was chosen to instance this desperation, which was also characterized by that particular outdatedness typical of any decadent representation. All the more, Pasolini's interest in bricolage is plainly visible in his choice of landscapes: Turkey and the island of Grado; ancient Christian cells with their Byzantine frescoes, and then Pisa. Besides this: cannibalistic rites or Hellenic usages that he totally invented. And, finally, the visage and the magnetic presence of Maria Callas.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Enzo Siciliano, *Vita di  
Pasolini* (Milano:  
Mondadori, 2005, 1<sup>st</sup>  
edition 1978), 379, my  
translation.

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Pasolini is urged by the necessity of giving a body and a voice to the Other, to what menaces, disturbs and contaminates the perfect, Apollonian unity of Jason's world.

Nevertheless, the disturbing power of this 'other', paradoxically, lies in its substantial and uncanny symmetry with the dispossessed self: the radical otherness instanced by Medea, achieved also through deliberate, blatant infractions of historical facts, shows an unexpected and, to some extent, disquieting analogy between Jason and Medea, who have always been configured as diverse and opposed characters. They both experience the passage from a mythical reality to a rationalistic and logic one – Jason in his adulthood, Medea through marriage. The paradigm of otherness traditionally ascribed to Medea seems to be questioned, since her existential trajectory does not seem so different from Jason's. The narrative and aesthetic choices made by Pasolini reinforce this troubled sameness; cannibalism stands for the utmost experience of barbarian primitivism, exemplarily opposed to the quiet and serene peacefulness of Jason's infantile world, but, on the other hand, both the pastoral scenes portrayed by Pasolini and the rural world, which Medea inhabited before her departure, present striking similarities with a more familiar and proximate reality, namely the rural dimension of southern Italy, often chosen by Pasolini as a setting for his movies (*Il Vangelo secondo Matteo*, for instance, was shot in Basilicata).<sup>9</sup>

The boundaries between the familiar and the foreign, which Pasolini had never considered as stable and definite, are continually undermined through an unceasing and subtle play with anachronisms and crossed references to domestic scenes portrayed as foreign, and vice-versa.

There is one more opposition essential to understanding the movie, the one played on the realism-naturalism dyad. The questions raised about the 'natural' as an epistemic category, strongly criticized because of its neutral and positivistic meaning, is shifted by Pasolini onto the plane of aesthetic and linguistic choices. According to him, cinema cannot be 'naturalistic', nor it can lay any claim to an objective and true-to-life depiction of reality, thus moving counter to what was implicit in the mainstream Italian cinematography of the immediate postwar period.

The supposed objectivity of naturalism risks amounting to a kind of sociology, which implies a de-historicized and universal narrative of events, captured and envisaged through the impossible perspective of a panoptical and detached gaze. Marxism represents, for Pasolini, a major hindrance to this attitude toward cinema. In his aesthetical and semiotic reflections on cinema, which form a large part of his critical writings and reflections, he argues against the very possibility of conceiving and representing something like reality "as such". This is the reason why the problem of reality is, for Pasolini, strictly connected with an apparently

<sup>9</sup> Enzo Siciliano, *Campo de' Fiori* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1993), 94-104.

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distant notion, that of sacredness, a crucial category that Pasolini opposes to the 'natural'. It, notably, implies a process of historical and metahistorical decoding of events.

As Luca Caminati states in his recent book on Pasolini's cinema:

Reality is produced and codified by a complex layering of cultures and differentiated perspectives on the world. ... Pasolini has no doubt ... that the filmmaker must show this fragmentation through images, using the movie camera and the editing as means to sound reality.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Caminati, *Orientalismo*, 37.

In *Empirismo eretico* Pasolini widely discusses technical aspects of cinematic language, insisting particularly on his aversion to the fixed shot as a stylistic device largely used by Neorealist filmmakers. The idea that the long take is the aptest way to portray reality is firmly disapproved by Pasolini, who prefers in its place an articulate and refined technique of editing; this purely stylistic controversy clearly overlaps with the wider question of the commitment to the real as the chief aim of cinema. Pasolini writes:

... the long take ... is a naturalistic technique. That is the reason why I do not like it: it is naturalistic, and, definitely, natural. But because of my fetishistic love for the "worldly things", I cannot see them as natural. I can only consecrate or violently desecrate them. I cannot accept the quiet fluidity proper to the long take, since I need to isolate things in order to worship them, more or less intensely, one by one.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Pasolini, *Empirismo*, 231.

These words echo the apodictic sentences uttered by the Centaur on the notions of nature and sacredness quoted above, and foreshadowed in this 1966 essay.

In *Medea*, Pasolini often lingers, as he does in most other of his movies, on static images and close-ups, extensively used to focus on immobile landscapes or sleeping bodies (usually male ones, such as Jason's), so as to detach them from any actual and immediate context, restoring them to unexpected and uncanny frames. This is a mechanism that, to some extent, properly renders Pasolini's idea of sacredness and of poetry, and their capacity of envisaging *another* reality besides and beyond the most cogent and tangible one. The cinematic eye, for these reasons, is the most appropriate way to render the theme of contamination, central in *Medea*, narratable, precisely because of its unstable and vacillating viewpoint – a perspective that is continually undone and decentered, that continually slips, characterized as it is by unceasing movement.

The rapidity of some passages (as in the first part of the movie, when a human sacrifice is represented and rendered with a pressing speediness) elicits a clear contrast with the search for the absolute pureness of the image, which, in some scenes, is isolated by its framework and rendered

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self-eloquent. The immobility of certain scenes in *Medea* is the necessary reverse of the instability that characterizes the whole movie, in both a stylistic and thematic sense. The eye that captures images is continually moving, and its gaze arrests single instants that are immediately turned into static images. The quasi-iconographical representation of the faces of his characters, extremely common in Pasolini's other movies (for instance in *Uccellacci e uccellini*) is less evident in *Medea*; however, the importance ascribed to the iconic rendering of the faces in *Medea* acquires a different, and probably more complex meaning. The fixity of Medea's or Glauce's close-ups, for instance, expresses the process of radical and traumatic collapse of identity they both undergo, the former when becoming aware of her loss, the latter on realizing that she has monstrously turned into a replication of her enemy. The final scene, a violent and exacerbated dialogue between Jason and Medea once she has achieved her revenge, is perfectly rendered in its furious hastiness through the mechanism of shot-reverse shot, which is used as a cinematic version of *stichomythia*, a technique employed in Greek classical dramaturgy to render a dialog between two people, in which each sentence runs for the length of a single verse.

### Medea and Maria: facing the other, voicing the otherness

It is undisputable that with *Medea* Pasolini himself is confronted with another kind of problematic 'otherness', instanced by his tormented descent to the depths of femininity through both the archetypal construction of the female (as the) other, as it is epitomized in Euripides' tragedy, and, on the other hand, his personal, and controversial, relationship with Maria Callas.<sup>12</sup>

Euripides questions, through Medea, the problematic role of the stranger who, after abandoning her native land, sacrifices everything to her love for Jason. As Julia Kristeva reminds us, the experience of foreignness was, in ancient Greece, first of all a female experience: "It is noteworthy that the first foreigners to emerge at the dawn of our civilization are foreign women – the Danaïdes."<sup>13</sup> Later on, arguing about the relationship between foreignness and violence, Kristeva insists on the question of sexual difference, and on the role it played in the definition of kinship:

Strangeness (or foreignness) – the political facet of violence – would underlie elementary civilization, be its necessary lining, perhaps even its font, which no household cistern – not even, to start with, that of the Danaïdes – could permanently harness. Even more so, the foreign aspect of the Danaïdes also raises the problem of antagonism between the sexes in their extramarital alliance, in the amatory and sexual "relation".<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> This theme is discussed in Colleen Marie Ryan, "Salvaging the Sacred: Female Subjectivity in Pasolini's *Medea*", *Italica* 76.2 (Summer 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 42.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.



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Medea jealously preserves her foreignness, but, at the same time, the value she ascribes to it is ambivalent: she is fully aware of being a stranger when, after her flight from Colchis, she realizes that the earth and the sun are, now, dumb to her. Her desperation explodes, and she shouts aloud:

Earth, talk to me!  
Let me hear your voice!  
I no longer recall your voice.  
Sun, talk to me!  
Where is the place  
in which I can hear your voice ?  
Earth, talk to me! Sun, talk to me!  
Perhaps you're disappearing!  
I no longer hear what you say!

Finally, she recognizes the drama of her condition: she is “a vessel full of knowledge that is not mine”, both as a woman and as a stranger. The encounter with Greek/European rationalism is the most immediate corollary of her marriage; she accepts the power of male supremacy over her body and her life but, at the same time, she loses her magic powers and enters the rational realm of civilization, experiencing the reality of a world definitely subtracted from the power of magic and dominated by rules and norms created by men.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> In Euripides' tragedy the husband is clearly defined by Medea as the master and the owner of the body (δεσπότην σώματων) of his wife.

But the disquieting power of femininity was, for Pasolini, a personal as well as an intellectual experience, since he was intimately involved in a problematic relationship with Maria Callas: as Enzo Siciliano reminds us, their relationship was something more than a friendship: “Maria Callas revealed to Pier Paolo what the fear of femininity actually was”,<sup>16</sup> a circumstance in which Pasolini experienced the descent to the “chthonian depths” of femininity.

<sup>16</sup> Siciliano, *Vita*, 383.

The mysterious character of her simplicity fascinated Pier Paolo – the fascination of femininity, in which the echo of the symbolic Mother could be heard, of the repressed woman, kept at the margin of civil and urban life.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

Private motives intersect with aesthetical and ideological ones. Maria Callas embodies the uncanny realm of femininity, capable of threatening the consolidated structures of Pasolini's homosexual desire and exposing them to an unexpected and overwhelming power – and, on the other hand, Medea's strength lies in the same unpredicted and ungovernable force.

Over the whole movie, Medea and Maria continuously overlap and exchange their roles. Medea's frailty, her complete abandonment to her passions and to her love for Jason, seems to foreshadow Maria's complex and shady temper. It is Pasolini himself who declares the contradictory

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aspects of the passion shared with Maria in his poems, written before the shootings of *Medea*. Both Medea and Maria – in similar, parallel contexts (both filmic and autobiographical) “know something” that other people do not know, as he suggests in the poem “Il sovrano che non vuole avere compagno”:

La Significazione è in quello sguardo o mormorio;  
ed è ricordo di una storia vera –  
Ma tu, cantando contro i fastigi coperti di nebbia buia,  
tu sai qualcos'altro, ed è una pazzia non capire  
che, qualcun altro, ciò che tu sai non sa;  
c'è una Storia di Donne.<sup>18</sup>

Medea's and Maria's power lies in their capability of going beyond the rigid mechanisms of signification, and, in this respect, the value ascribed to Callas, to her voice and to her body, her very actual, physical (maybe sexual or sexualized) presence, is equated by Pasolini to the magic embodied by Medea, and charged with the same problematic, mysterious “de-signifying significance”.

But Maria Callas represented for Pasolini, besides an unexpected experience of femininity, also a new approach to melodrama. In a beautiful poem, “Timor di me”, he writes

La lietezza esplode  
Contro quei vetri sul buio  
Ma tale lietezza, che ti fa cantare *in voce*  
È un ritorno alla morte.<sup>19</sup>

It is noteworthy that Pasolini had despised melodrama until a few years previously, as noted by Enzo Siciliano:

Pier Paolo's passion for melodrama increased in the last years, as had happened before with Pound. Maria was the protagonist of that passion. Years before Pier Paolo used to say, to Bertolucci, to Bernardo, to me, even to Moravia: “Only fags like Verdi and melodrama”.<sup>20</sup>

His relationship with Maria Callas, thus, is not a mere piece of biographical information, since it represented a turning point in his intellectual *Bildung*, all the more significant if we consider Pasolini's commitment to Gramsci, whose reflections upon the ‘popular’ character of melodrama seem to be broadened and extended to aesthetic and ideological implications that are totally new and unknown.

Let us return to the construction of Medea as a filmic character. Sexuality and gender, which, as I have shown, acquired the utmost value for Pasolini because of his problematic relationship with Maria Callas, are confirmed in their importance by *Medea's* symbolical texture. Jason and Medea had

<sup>18</sup> Pasolini, *Trasumanar*, 171. (“Signification is in that gaze, in that whisper / It is the recollection of a true story. /But you that sing against the *fastigia*, covered in a dark mist, / You know something more, and it's foolishness / Not to understand /That someone doesn't know what you do know: /It is a Story of Women.”, my translation)

<sup>19</sup> Pasolini, *Trasumanar*, 167. (“The joy explodes / Against those panes, in the dark / But this very joy that makes you sing *in voce* / Is a return to death”, my translation)

<sup>20</sup> Siciliano, *Campo*, 143, my translation.

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shared, as I have suggested before, the same personal experience of a “mythical” past. What makes a radical difference is their reaction to the encounter with a reality by now completely deprived of any magical and mythical accent. Jason is perfectly at ease in this ‘brand new’ world; on the contrary, the experience of a world in which magic plays no role at all, and the lucid stance of rationalism is the only perspective from which reality can be envisaged, is traumatic for Medea. This difference, pivotal to the understanding of the movie, can be interpreted in terms of gender: the entrance to the (Lacanian) symbolic, a dimension in which language is neatly compartmentalized in terms of signifier and signified, amounts to the entrance into the “law of the father”, and the abandonment of the semiotic/symbiotic dimension of complete osmosis with the maternal body. Medea is *the* mother essentially for this reason: she instances perfect union with the whole body of nature, and, when she is compelled to face Jason’s rationalism and the rigidity of its rules (including the rules of kinship and inheritance, which both have a central position), she realizes that she cannot cope with them, giving herself over to desperation.

It is only at the end of the movie that Medea acquires her power again. She decides to take her revenge on Glauce, and gives her own wedding dress to her as a present. Glauce wears Medea’s clothing; then, she looks at her own image reflected in a mirror and starts screaming, without any apparent reason. Driven crazy, she runs away from her palace, and takes her life by leaping from the peak where the royal palace is built. This is the most noticeable difference from Euripide’s tragedy, in which Glauce is killed by wearing Medea’s wedding dress, previously poisoned by Medea herself; in the movie, this passage is a mere reverie of Medea, when she tries to figure out the death of her rival. Pasolini’s choice is significant inasmuch as the power of Medea is entirely conveyed through the symbolical strength of her own person and the astonishing force of her image. When Glauce looks in the mirror, it is actually Medea that she sees; she is literally transformed into Medea. This considerable divergence from Euripide’s text reinforces the role ascribed to Medea and to her power, which lies in her capability of annihilating existing boundaries of identity; Glauce goes crazy when she realizes she is not herself anymore, and when the reassuring certainties provided by the dogma of identity, strongly supported by the logical norms that reinforce the very definition of identity, appear no longer to be working.

### Domestic lands and foreign maps

Reflecting upon the ‘use’ Pasolini makes of Greece and Grecian mythical and symbolic legacy means to question the role he ascribes to classical

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culture, and its position in the fragmented and discontinuous trajectory of a hypothetic western and European tradition. The history that Pasolini traces, through his patient as much as anarchic assembling of episodes, landscapes and characters belonging to mythical narratives, is composed of swarming and chaotic multitudes, from which contaminated bodies are singled out. From the very beginning of *Medea*, nothing is nor has ever been 'pure', nothing can be grasped in its essentiality or in its reconfigured identity, since the very notion of identity is a metaleptic (or, in a jargon more familiar to Pasolini, ideological) construction that unavoidably fails to notice the complex process of stratification lying at its own bases. Classical Greece plays a pivotal role in his attempt – which is a difficult, to some extent a dramatic one – to deconstruct the alleged homogeneity of a received tradition. What kind of Greece was Pasolini thinking of? What kind of relation can be traced between Greece and the 'quest for otherness', which was of the utmost importance for Pasolini in the last years of his life?<sup>21</sup>

Greece is a place charged with multiple significances. It is the land in which East and West meet, but it is also, in Pasolini's perspective, the 'gateway' to the third world, to a rural and archaic dimension still untouched by western capitalism and consumerism. Pasolini's interest in Asian and African countries, particularly vivid in those years, started from Greece.<sup>22</sup> It is through the evocation of a mythical past, embodied but at the same time critically reviewed and reconsidered, that Pasolini tries to reconfigure the maps of knowledge of western tradition, and to subvert the traditional and conventional ideas about tradition, and their authoritative and fascistic ideological counterparts.

In a poem of 1965, *Alì dagli occhi azzurri*, Pasolini suggests a possible, personal geography of the Mediterranean, in which peoples coming from northern Africa and from the south of Italy are evoked in a quasi-mythical encounter, described in a way that recalls some scenes of *Medea*:

Alì dagli Occhi Azzurri  
uno dei tanti figli di figli,  
scenderà da Algeri, su navi  
a vela e a remi. Saranno  
con lui migliaia di uomini  
coi corpicini e gli occhi  
di poveri cani dei padri  
sulle barche varate nei Regni della Fame. Porteranno con sé i bambini, e il pane e il formaggio, nelle carte gialle del Lunedì di Pasqua. Porteranno le nonne e gli asini, sulle triremi rubate ai porti coloniali.<sup>23</sup>

And, in the end, Pasolini stresses the revolutionary turn that such a vision can acquire, capable of assaulting the solid and threatening edifices of both the existing political power and historical tradition:

<sup>21</sup> See Borgerson, "Managing Desire": "Geographical specificity in this film establishes a cultural specificity providing the viewer with a lexicon to understand Pasolini's elaborately filmed rituals" (57).

<sup>22</sup> "... his films in this period were generally more involved with non-Christian mythological materials, as ... his two adaptations of classical plays attest. Yet there is another contrast: his *Oedipus* and *Medea* are passionate, even overwrought works while *Teorema* has most often been seen as cold, harsh, theoretical, and even mathematical." (Bart Testa, "To Film a Gospel ... and Advent of the Theoretical Stranger", in P. Rumble and B. Testa, eds., *Pier Paolo Pasolini. Contemporary Perspectives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 198.

<sup>23</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Alì dagli occhi azzurri* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1965), 490. ("Blue eyed Alì, / One of the countless sons of sons, / Will arrive from Algiers, / on rowing and sailing boats. / With him, thousands skinny men, / their eyes like dogs' eyes – like their fathers' eyes, / on the boats launched in the Kingdoms of Hunger. / They will take their children with them, and some bread and cheese wrapped in the yellow paper of Easter Monday. / They will take their grandmas, and the donkeys, on triremes stolen in colonial harbors.", my translation).

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distruggeranno Roma  
e sulle sue rovine  
deporranno il germe  
della Storia Antica.  
Poi col Papa e ogni sacramento  
andranno su come zingari  
verso nord-ovest  
con le bandiere rosse  
di Trotzky al vento...<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 492. ("They will  
destroy Rome / and on its  
ruins they will deposit the  
seed / of Ancient History. /  
Then, with the Pope and  
his sacraments, / They will  
go to the north, like  
gypsies, / With Trotzky red  
flags waving in the wind."  
– my translation.)

The Mediterranean as the place of the encounter plays an important role in Pasolini's new mapping of peoples and places, and reinforces the idea that civilizations cannot be subsumed under the perspective of an uninterrupted and linear continuity, but, on the contrary, are the offshoot of intersecting, often traumatic and violent, processes.

Similarly, interesting suggestions about the possibility of reconfiguring the space of the Mediterranean as the starting point for a new geopolitics are delineated by Iain Chambers:

The Mediterranean is set adrift to float towards a vulnerability attendant on encounters with other voices, bodies, histories. This is to slow down and deviate the tempo of modernity, its neurotic anxiety for linearity, causality, and 'progress', by folding it into other times, other textures, other ways of being in a multiple modernity.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Iain Chambers, "The  
Mediterranean. A  
Postcolonial Sea", *Third  
Text* 18-5 (2004), 428.

Chambers stresses the importance of 'vulnerability' in his discourse upon the possibility of a geographical (and cultural) route alternative to the one provided by tradition. Medea's vulnerability, too, is an unforeseen aspect of the power of the encounter. Being vulnerable represents for her the most intimate way through which the uncanny power of femininity is revealed; it is, at the same time, her capacity to renounce her very self and her knowledges in order to plunge into new ones. This is opposed to Jason's need for the definition of a role and a position in the social and political system. The idea of 'folding', suggested by Chambers, is, in this sense, emblematic; a convincing way to describe, at the same time, Medea as a dramatic character – her psychic fragility, but also the baroque attire in which she is dressed, the 'foldings' of the clothes that will be the very cause of Glauce's death – and the tormented detours she follows in order to reach Corinth, only encouraged by her love for Jason. She is completely 'adrift' – as Chambers says – and, nevertheless, animated by a tender but strenuous passion, which turns out to be completely self-destroying in the end.

But the encounter realized through, and displayed by, the very actuality of Medea's body is also an encounter with the past, with a primeval force that her new status seems to have totally subdued, and which, on the contrary, reemerges in its terrible and destructive aspect.

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Chambers again:

The post-colonial theme of re-writing and re-presenting the past in order to re-configure the present is threatening to become a fashionable orthodoxy, yet in revealing the disquieting stubbornness of a yesterday that refuses to disappear into the stillness of the ordered archive it remains imperative.

Such a return of the repressed clearly offers far more than a series of additions to fill in the gaps in the already established historical mosaic. The forgotten do not complete the picture, rather they query the frame, the pattern, the construction, and advance what the previous representation failed to register. For this is not simply to propose the heroic space of the counter-narrative that offers the promised homecoming of an alternative history, identity and autonomous sense.<sup>26</sup>

Medea gives a body and a voice to “the forgotten [that] do not complete the picture”, since her function in the narrative and symbolical economy of the movie is to swerve the authoritative force of logocentric utterance, as it is expressed by Jason, towards unexpected and threatening directions, marked by the archaic and unpredictable force of nature and magic.

Her power to resort to the forces of nature, and to an obscure strength that annihilates everything, stands for the return of the repressed as it has been theorized by psychoanalysis, and which Chambers highlights as one of the crucial traits of postcolonial strategy and poetics. Once again, the very idea of a tradition inherited and epitomized by the authoritative word of institutionalized power is interrupted and problematized, and what was initially conceived as a neutral merging of a (presumed) barbarian and primitive voice into the powerful and authoritative one, now turns out to be a point of crisis, the moment in which the structure and the meaning of the encounter are rendered unstable and traumatic, and the encounter itself acquires unpredicted, unsettling nuances.

Shifting from the quasi non-historical past evoked by Pasolini to the present, in a recent book Antonio Negri comments on a possible new configuration of Mediterranean geography:

The Mediterranean represents a gateway towards the East and the Middle East, but it is a contradictory one, since Middle East is a place characterized at the same time by political instability and by the exportation of labor.<sup>27</sup>

The act of crossing the sea is now resignified by different, but not less problematic, questions. The routes followed by migrants nowadays, to some extent, replicate Jason and Medea’s journey, and disclose the same, unsolved, problems. What is interesting in Pasolini’s work is the importance given to the migratory theme as a central one in the process of defining territories and belongings, a political and ethical avowal that leads us to consider migration as a question crucial to the definition of geopolitical territories and socio-economic relations, and not merely accidental circumstances. As

<sup>26</sup> Id., “Off the Map: A Mediterranean Journey”, *Comparative Literature Studies* 42-4 (2005), 318.

<sup>27</sup> Antonio Negri, *Goodbye Mr Socialism* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2006), 85, my translation.

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Negri argues: “Migration fluxes bring about the crisis of traditional institutions [i.e. Nation-State, organized unions], showing their reactionary nature”.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 95.

Pasolini resorts to Medea and to the mythical story of the Argonauts in another significant moment of his artistic production. *Petrolio*, the posthumous novel published in 1992, dedicates thirteen of his 133 drafts (“appunti”) to Jason and the ventures he and his companions were involved in while searching for the golden fleece. But in these circumstances, his voyage towards the east acquires at least two noteworthy significances. On the one hand, it envisages the Mediterranean geography in a totally new way, since the Mediterranean becomes, in Pasolini’s spectral evocation, the postcolonial sea described by Iain Chambers: a new map of power and knowledge that appears to be crossed by multiple routes and differentiated trajectories. It is, at once, the sea where new and unexpected encounters take place, and, for that reason, Pasolini broadens its geographical and geopolitical spectrum to involve the extreme limits of Eastern Africa (the former Italian colonies) and Iran, crucial to understand the complexity of Jason’s travel and his routes.

On the other hand, all the Mediterranean portrayed by Pasolini in *Petrolio* is the ‘petroleum sea’, the territorial and political space that needs to be crossed in order to reach the Near East, where petroleum is produced and sold to Western countries: an ideal ending of the imaginary travel of the Italian bourgeoisie in the 1960s. Another passage from one of Chambers’s essay on the Mediterranean is useful in understanding this question:

The overall project of *Solid Sea* considers how the Mediterranean basin is rapidly being transformed and “solidified” through the impositions of frontiers, controls and the increasing rigidity of identities tied to specific forms of passage: touristic, mercantile, military. Off the map, hidden from the cartography of permissible routes are the unauthorized itineraries of illicit passage. These invariably turn up under the heading of illegal migration and the rarely reported tragedies that accompany their movement across the Mediterranean.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Chambers, “Off the Map”, 324.

Pasolini criticizes the Italian regime of the postwar period in his terrible and disquieting ‘novel of petroleum’: the very same bourgeoisie that had supported fascism was by then deeply absorbed in a neo-capitalistic project aimed at the reinforcement of its financial power. The axes along which power seems to display its strength – industrial economy, political authoritarianism, sexual repression – are configured anew in Jason’s mythical enterprise towards East.

At the beginning of “Appunto 36” Pasolini writes “Mythical journey to the East, rewriting of Apollonius of Rhode”, and then states “to be entirely written in Greek”.<sup>30</sup> He was thinking of interpolating passages from *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes in his novel, juxtaposing them to his writing. The digressions from the Greek text are noteworthy: among

<sup>30</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Petrolio* (Torino: Einaudi, 1992), 139, my translation.

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the places visited by Jason and his comrades Pasolini lists Isfahan (151), Dubai (144), Basra (145), Damascus (148), Asmara (151), Tel Aviv, Cairo, Nicosia, Jerusalem, (153). Parallel to his journey, the quest for oil marks the routes followed by Jason: “Meeting with Ethiopian authorities – Object: oil search along the coast”.<sup>31</sup> Medea makes her appearance in the Appunto 36c: “... diplomats’ wives boast about their familiarity with Medea”.<sup>32</sup> Once again, Pasolini entwines mythical narrations with the story outlined in the plot of the novel. Once articulated through the filter of neo-capitalistic power, the Mediterranean acquires the sinister aspect of a net or a trap, capable of catching the bodies that are crossing it and, at the same time, evokes the fluency of the narrative evoked and traced.

### Burning paper

What is left of Medea after her tragic destiny has been accomplished? After killing her children and Glauce, she is aware that she will leave Corinth, and be a stranger again. Her past is definitely lost, and is now something that she will probably attempt to retrieve for the remainder of her life as an exile.<sup>33</sup> At the end of the movie, Medea sets on fire the royal palace where she lives. Against the backdrop of the burning palace, she addresses Jason:

Why do you try  
to pass through the fire?  
You can't do it!  
It's useless to try!

and then, after he pleads with her to be allowed to bury his children, she harshly answers

Don't keep insisting! It's useless!  
Nothing is possible any more!

While arguing about ‘nature’ and ‘naturalism’ in cinema, Pasolini writes:

... the fear of naturalism is ... the fear of the Being, or, to put it differently, the fear of the lack of naturalness, proper of Being. This is one of the terrible ambiguities that characterize reality. It has nothing to do with naturalism: to make cinema is like writing on burning paper.<sup>34</sup>

Memory is no longer possible, nature is no longer conceivable. For Pasolini, cinema is the attempt to defy the flames lit by history and reality, the ultimate effort of a desperate challenge against destruction. Through Medea, and through Maria Callas, he decided to give a body and a voice to this challenge.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 143. Another similarity between *Medea* and *Petrolio* can be found in the Appunto 103c, titled “Il prato sotto la torre di Pisa”, a brief paragraph in which Carlo observes young students lying on the lawn. The same setting is chosen by Pasolini for Corinth in *Medea*.

<sup>33</sup> “Medea tracks movement from the communal to an individual attempt to break out – the poetic, heretical act – and, ultimately under Pasolini’s direction, back to the communal. The poetic act inspired by sexual desire brings about a transformation that marks the end of one era and brings forth a new age.” (Borgerson, “Managing Desire”, 61).

<sup>34</sup> Pasolini, *Empirismo*, 245.