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FILM

Unfree Radicals

By J. Hoberman

NOTES FOR AN AFRICAN ORESTES. Written and directed by Pier Paoli Pasolini. At the Thalia, January 2 and 3.

A TRIBUTE TO LEN LYE. Fifteen short films by Lye; one documentary about his work. At the Museum of Modern Art, January 5.

More than a curiosity, but less than a fully realized work, Pier Paolo Pasolini's feature-length *Notes for an African Orestes* is an intriguing item that's almost invariably omitted from the late director's filmography. It shouldn't be. While

Orestes has a general interest for anyone curious as to how a director's mind works, it is key to an understanding of the particular Freudian-Marxist-Christian worldview that was Pasolini's.

Having recently completed versions of *Oedipus* and *Medea* Pasolini planned to film his *Oresteia* in the third world. Aeschylus's myth of the first human tribunal—with its climactic transformation of the archaic Furies into the civilizing Eumenides—had, Pasolini thought, a special relevance to the situation of underdeveloped societies in the throes of modernization. The film, however, was never made. What we have here is mainly hand-held 16mm footage apparently shot by Pasolini himself on a 1970 location-scout through Tanzania and Uganda. The director scours remote villages for possible Agamemnons, reconnoiters crowded marketplaces, and documents local rituals, all the while keeping up a running meditation on the third world and his imagined film.

Many of Pasolini's ideas are truly inspired. He uses a wounded lioness to represent the Furies and interpolates grisly newsreels of the Biafran war as Cassandra's vision. Other ploys are blithely goofy—half the film is accompanied by the Slavic anthems of the Red Army Chorus.

Although disarmingly casual, *Orestes* is far from unstructured. Parts are extensively edited and Pasolini even roughs out a few scenes. Toward the end, there's an exemplary use of creative geography where he creates a spatially coherent "Athens" out of footage taken in four different cities.

Mixed in with the African film are Rome-shot sequences in which Gato Barbieri rehearses the film's score, and others wherein Pasolini interrogates a classroom of African students. His questions are leading ones: What do they think of his idea? Do they identify with Orestes? (Unfortunately, while Pasolini's entire monologue is translated into English, the replies of the students remain in Italian.) These scenes are crucial, because they crystallize the film's problem. For all of Pasolini's progressive views, there's a subtly patronizing aspect to his project. Did he give it up when he realized that the end result of the "epic folk drama" he planned might have been something akin to a leftist's *Porgy and Bess*?

Actually, the essay form that *Orestes* takes suited Pasolini far better than his overblown glosses on Chaucer or *The Arabian Nights*. Like the Godard films of the late '60s, *Orestes* is a movie that requires an active viewer. The deconstructed nar-

ative demands that you put Pasolini's film together in your head.