

Document Citation

Title	Peter Whitehead sees Pasolini's parable of the contemporary family...
Author(s)	Peter Whitehead
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	38
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Teorema (Theorem), Pasolini, Pier Paolo, 1968

THEOREM

Peter Whitehead sees Pasolini's parable of the contemporary family

Directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini. Produced by Franco Rossellini. Original screenplay by Pier Paolo Pasolini. Director of photography, Giuseppe Ruzzolini. Music, Ennio Morricone. Distributed by Eagle. Italian. English subtitles. Original title, *Teorema*. Colour. Cert X. 100 mins.

The Visitor, TERENCE STAMP; *Lucia*, SILVANA MANGANO; *Paolo*, MASSIMO GIROTTI; *Odette*, ANNE WIASSEMSKY; *Emilia*, LAVRA BETTI; *Pietro*, JOSE CRUZ; *Messenger*, NINETTO DAVOLI.

The equation is simple. There is a family as perfect in form as one of Plato's proofs . . . father, mother, son, daughter, maid. The family institution, self-contained in its house, its home, is the private body politic in which the individuals should—so we have been educated to believe—derive the security they need to free themselves from their mythological beings—free as individuals, whenever necessary, to transcend the confines of the family, to become good social people, fearlessly taking their place in the more harrowing politics of the institutions of the world. Their guest, a beautiful, quiet young man, arrives and, quite passively, is used by each of them to sublimate their unconscious, repressed needs. He is the catalyst they use to confront in themselves that 'self' which has been denied fulfilment by their family social situation. For a brief moment, each one is gathered into the artifice of eternity . . . they experience fulfilment of their *entire* beings. The

young man seduces them all, loves them all, and leaves . . . slowly, and inevitably, the desert in each of them is now laid bare to their conscious minds. To escape this void, they know they must now transform themselves, as individuals, for they are no longer protected by the bourgeois myths they used to keep themselves going before the visitation of the young man.

The lack of any sense of meaning, religious or otherwise, is compensated for, in each of them, by perilous, private crusades . . . each must seek the existential solution to his own spiritual needs. The common denominator of the theorem is the desert, the void (Karl Marx assured us we would breed, in the concentrated centres of our society, our capitals, the alienation with which Capitalism would destroy itself) and each member of the splintered group fulfils his private suffering . . . the daughter becomes catatonic, as inert as an arithmetical proof; the son transfixes himself on the cultural calculus of nihilistic painting; the wife surrenders to the decimation of promiscuity, picking up prime numbers on the boulevards in her mini-car; the maid seems to evolve an algebraic solution to the problem of gravity and starts to fly, a number which gets her a sainthood, until she buries herself in the virgin soil of Mother earth; and the father, abandoning his factories

to the workers, takes the irremediable step of publicly defacing his social persona, forever, stripping himself literally of all his illusions . . . and the film closes with the harrowing image of the castrated Patriarch, crucified by his shame, naked in his crusade across a real desert . . . of volcanic dust. Finally, the brief images of desert, which flash into the narrative of the film, like commercials for the present, have become the desert which is the only continuity into the future we seem able to imagine.

The Greeks invented the geometry with which they knew, by faith, that one day man could answer all the questions; one day, with the perfection of his mind, he would solve the riddles of the ideal, and he would be equal to the Gods. If men, even then, were 'Gods in ruins' what have we become now? What possible hope is there for us to solve the theorem now?

The Greek word for 'theorem' was an idea as ideal and as perfect as a circle, a theory which had to do with the perfection of seeing . . . in time it was corrupted and became, logically, the word for 'theatre', and eventually 'aesthetics'. For the fantastic. The unreal. These two fractions of the whole were never to re-unite. Plato could praise the mind which could invent an ideal geometry, even to prove the existence of God; but it was Aristotle who was left to direct our senses and seeing into the religion of scientific observation . . . Ideas or Things? . . . Religion or Science? . . . It is Aristotle's world we live in, built on the blind faith of objects. Between the two 'plays', the one of ideal forms that were faithfully translated into religion, and the other the world which we were supposed to order and control with scientific materialism, there is a small frightened animal crouching in the shadows, in the wings of the theatre, dressed up in the costumes of sensuality, the actor in us all who does all our lusting and sinning for us. (Thank heavens the beast in us all does not exist!—is 'disproved' by the mathematical perfection of our rationally ordered minds and its image—our peaceful society!)

The only theorems ever evolved to explain the tragic insult that we resemble mere animals, fornicating and doing dirty things at night in bed for years and years and years, goddammit, were evolved by two sets of people . . . those who admitted to emotions as they are, the artists, and those admitted to them, by default as it were, in negative . . . the Church. To the theatre and the Church we confess our sins, and are supposed to attain sublimation and catharsis of our mostly repressed instinctual mythological needs. Their failure is our tragedy. Sex and its taboos are the shifting sands of the desert in which both were bred. Only unconsciously are their two split souls united. Thank God they thrived as well as they did.

Terence Stamp as the Visitor who is used by each member of a family to sublimate their unconscious, repressed needs, in Pier Paolo Pasolini's 'Theorem'



The sex taboos, based as they (and all culture) seems to be, so say the structuralists, on the incest taboos, are the basis on which we transformed the deserts of isolated selves of our ancestry into those groups which became the family and tribe and the institutionalised units that are now the fundamental structures in, and of, our society. The dialectical struggle between the individual self and his need to have some identity with some group or groups is the most fundamental existential theorem which mystifies us all; and the void, the literal psychic void, between private and social self, is the one we fill with the 'solutions' we see the characters in this film enact for themselves. Pasolini as a Communist would claim that this void is less in the Communist 'commune' than in a Capitalist 'cell', where the individual has more demands made of him.

It was the Catholics who tried to invalidate Protestantism by ridiculing the Reformation as the sexual fantasies of Luther who wanted to marry a Nun. From then on Protestantism and Capitalism grew up together, got married and triumphantly gave birth to a series of abortions (mental cancer, a proliferation of Reason). With no need of God, and faith in Aristotle's Reason and his defunct scientific sensuality, they imposed free will and free enterprise around the world like sacraments—this was bread you could eat, wine you could sin with!

However, the Catholic Church, left in the lurch, got fed up of its habit of imitating a Nun (who only got lusted after by alienated Romantics in flight from wilful Protestantism anyway) and started openly courting the biggest other master-builders—the Communists.

Which is why, finally, the film gets the Venice Catholic Award. But Communist Pasolini, tried for obscenity in the courts, must have wondered what Luther would say now . . . if he thought that the Catholic Church would court a homosexual! Poetic justice after all. Which is also why the Pope had to ban the Pill . . . he wants his Church and the Communists to conceive pretty quickly before American Free Enterprise aborts the whole love affair.

If you go deep enough into the myths and taboos of any individual mind, you go through all time and reach the equations of mystery and fear that will never, never be solved. We shall always be individuals, yet we shall always need to build institutions to protect us from our Godless solitude. Clearly the present solution, for the privileged few, who we see here in this film, or for the under-privileged many who have politics as their religion, is not the right one. So deeply moving and pessimistic is this film, showing as it does that we project our inner need of God only so briefly on to the world, having so little faith to keep it alive, for such a short time. I can only speculate that the Catholics who voted Pasolini his well-deserved prize (it deserves all the prizes) must have said, 'If this won't drive them in, then nothing will.' Nothing . . . will.