

MATTHEW ZUNDEL

“QUALCOSA DI SCRITTO”: SEX AND AFFECT IN *PETROLIO*

We only know that sex has its properties of excitation, frustration, even panic, and also restlessness, or else anguish, which dramatize—in tragic or comic mode—everything that is related to it.

Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Deconstruction of Sex*

If the present is not at first an object but a mediated affect, it is also a thing that is sensed and under constant revision, a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now whose very parameters (when did the present begin?) are also always there for debate.

Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*

Abstract: *Petrolio* was Pasolini’s final written work; left incomplete at the author’s death in 1975, it was not published until 1992. This article begins by considering *Petrolio*’s immediate public and critical reception, which heavily focused on the pathological sexual subject matter as linked to Pasolini’s impending death and a sign of the work’s low literary merit. This essay rejects those early readings that characterize the novel as sexually pathological and joins the conversation opened by queer investigations of form and politics in Pasolini. It argues that Pasolini suffuses sexual encounter with affective language, and that such language dramatizes the subjective process of the novel’s characters by conflating grammar, subjectivity, and history. The first section develops a reading of affective language as linked to sexual encounter in the novel. The second demonstrates that, through such affective language, Pasolini refashions his classic *topos* of the *corpo popolare* as schizophrenic body, an emptied or voided-out corporeal form. The final section lingers on questions of indeterminacy and narrative incompleteness, reading the novel’s expressive form as a reflection of the problem of historical transformation (which is also the problem of subjective transformation)—and more pointedly the historicity of what Pasolini refers to as Italy’s “anthropological mutation.”

Keywords: Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Petrolio*, sex, affect, body, power.

Introduction: Sexual Pathology, Queer Form¹

Towards the end of October 1992, *L’espresso* published a series of excerpts from Pier Paolo Pasolini’s famed, final, unfinished novel, *Petrolio*, in anticipation of its forthcoming release with Einaudi. Given his notorious reputation for illicit

¹ I would like to thank Rebecca Falkoff, David Forgacs, and Ara Merjian, for their invaluable feedback on early drafts of this article. I would also like to thank Joe Perna and Rebecca for the opportunity to discuss the ideas developed in this essay during the reading group they ran on *Petrolio* at Brooklyn’s Center for Fiction in the Fall of 2021.