

# DEATH & CINEMA

by Jason M. Jones

"In the end, Pasolini was a victim of his own characters."

—Michelangelo Antonioni

*Like Alejandro, I have a tendency to become obsessed with artists I admire. I have the good fortune to understand the fundamental difference between fantasy and reality, but I've always been curious about what would happen if I didn't. "Death & Cinema" is the result of that curiosity.*

A few men had talked about it—a heavy metal musician even claimed he'd do it at a concert that past Halloween—but only one person had the guts to stage his own death, and that was Alejandro's hero, Pier Paolo Pasolini. Maybe no one could prove he staged it, but that's why the act was so brilliant: he'd elevated suicide to the level of theater and made it art. Some claimed a hustler had killed him, but how could it be murder if he wanted to die?

"You were a lot more fun when your favorite filmmaker was Woody Allen," Tony told him.

"He might not be funny," Alejandro replied. "But Pasolini's real."

And that's what mattered these days—not humor, which in the past had got him laid—but integrity, vision. "He knows about human nature."

But most of his friends, including Tony, couldn't understand how someone once smitten with *Annie Hall* now admired *Salò*, which many critics claimed was the most immoral film ever made. They also found it odd that Alejandro now wore horn-rimmed sunglasses and adopted Pasolini's vocal inflections, but he was obsessive and he'd been that way as long as they'd known him.

That afternoon, Alejandro and Tony were having lunch at a diner. Both were first-year film students at the city college, and they were arguing about Alejandro's beloved Italian auteur again.

"But don't you see that we're all fascists at heart? We're all these violent creatures!"

"I don't need a movie to remind me."

*"All kinds of crazy shit  
about murder and rape  
and deprivation."*

Tony's mother had been killed two years before in a robbery, but Alejandro was too self-involved to remember. While working the jewelry counter, she'd been shot in the chest, but his friend was more interested in fiction, and Tony didn't mention it.

"See Saló, that's real depravity, that's the darkness in everyone."

Tony had seen the film once, and he didn't need to see it again. In it, a few Italian noblemen take underage boys and girls to a castle and make them perform obscene sexual acts and eat feces. It wasn't exactly Citizen Kane—in fact, it was terrible—but then, in the past five months, Alejandro had become anti-canon and his esteem for a movie grew with the number of broken taboos.

"Could you at least take those shades off if you're gonna bark at me all afternoon?"

"I'm not barking. I just tell it like it is."

"Like it is? Can you honestly tell me you like to see kids screwed up the ass and people eating shit?"

"People eat shit everyday. Maybe not literal shit, but metaphorically..."

"Christ, do you hear yourself?"

"Don't take the Lord's name in vain..."

In addition to being homosexual, Pasolini was Roman Catholic, and Tony couldn't help but laugh.

"Since when do you care about that type of thing?"

"I've always been religious."

"Okay, we have to get the check," Tony said. "I don't know how much more of this I can take."

But Alejandro didn't smile once.

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Tony and Alejandro had grown up on the same street, and they'd been friends since they were three years old. They went through every rite of passage together—getting drunk and stoned for the first time, learning to drive—and though Tony had sex before Alejandro, his boy wasn't too far behind him. The two were like brothers, and Alejandro's behavior made Tony concerned enough to tell his dad at dinner.

"Honestly, I think Al might have cracked," he said over meatloaf. "You should hear the things he's sayin'."

"What kind of things?"

"All kinds of crazy shit about murder and rape and deprivation. I can't keep up with him. You know how he is. He's into this filmmaker, and he tries to do everything the guy did. He wants to be just like him."

"The boy's always been off."

"Not like this..."

"Remember as a kid when he used to write his favorite stars? He didn't write short notes about how much he loved their work. He wrote them long detailed letters about his family and his dog and his cats, and nothing ever came of that. Or remember that time he saw Karate Kid and wore his ninja pajamas all summer long? He's always had a vivid imagination. What makes this different?"

"It's almost like, he doesn't admire the man, Dad. He wants to be him. It's scary. The guy was a Roman Catholic, a Communist, and a homosexual, and he was murdered."

"You know, mental illness runs in that family..."

"What?"

"His uncle's schizophrenic."

"He never told me that."

"He was probably scared of what you'd think."

But this didn't sit right. Why would Al hide his family's history?

"If you can't share it with your brother," Tony said, "who can you share it with?"

"You're not his brother."

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On Wednesday nights, Alejandro and Tony got together with some of their fellow students for a film club. They'd watch a classic movie, and afterward, discuss how it was shot or how the images told the story, and this was where Al had first encountered Pasolini. While many left the room during Saló's scenes of torture, he was riveted. He studied every angle of every frame, and asked its owner if he could take the disc home to watch the documentaries included in the extras. "Pasolini this," he'd say, or "Pasolini that," like a boy in grade school infatuated with an older, cooler friend.

Tony hadn't seen Al after Sunday's lunch, but this meeting was the kind of thing he wouldn't miss. His girlfriend Maxine would be there, and they'd been inseparable since March. She called him "a genius," and that was the kind of thing his ego couldn't resist.

Tony scanned the room, but Al was nowhere in sight.

"Maxine!" he yelled when he spotted her. It was early and the club was having pre-movie drinks and appetizers. "Have you seen Al?"

She shook her head.

"We broke up last week."

"What? He didn't mention..."

"That's not surprising," she said.

"There's a lot he keeps to himself lately."

"What happened?"

She was hesitant at first.

"It's all that Saló shit."

He nodded.

"No, I don't think you get it, and if you repeat a word of this, I'll cut your balls off."

Tony smiled, but she didn't.

"He wanted to reenact scenes from the movie. You know...in the bedroom and everything."

"Holy shit..."

"It's one thing to like the film, but it's another to choke me while we're having sex. And I'm not into anal. I said that up front."

"At least he didn't try to make you eat shit."

But this made her quiet.

"Really? He tried that too? Oh man, the boy's lost his mind..."

"At first, I just thought it was kind of odd—a bit funny maybe—but there's really something wrong with him. I'd be worried if it didn't freak me out so much, and I can't be near him. I had to break it off."

"I don't blame you. I'm surprised you showed up tonight."

"He won't be here. He's above us now...at least, that's what he said."

"I didn't realize things were that bad. I'm gonna get out of here and see if I can find him. Try not to worry. I'll talk to him."

"Oh, I'm not worried. I might have been worried before, but after that fiasco, I'm done."

"I understand."

He left before the film, but he couldn't find Al in his dorm or any other spot he was likely to frequent. When Tony went to bed that night, he lay awake and wondered how to help his friend without pushing him further away. Considering what Maxine told him, it might be too late.

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When Alejandro was twelve, he developed a fascination with martial arts and believed he'd learned its se-

crets from watching Ralph Macchio win a tournament in *The Karate Kid*. He wore his ninja pajamas all summer, and in early August, challenged one of the neighborhood's toughest kids to fight at the playground. Tony knew that Al didn't stand a chance, but Al wouldn't listen and he set the match for three o'clock when their day camp let out.

*"But you're not gay.  
It's Pasolini. He's  
the homosexual."*

The kids whose parents hadn't picked them up gathered around the chain-link fence to watch Tyree Jenkins pummel Mr. Miyagi. It was hot, and though the sun blared on the blacktop, Al was dressed in his white belt and black robes. At first, Tony worried he might have to jump in if the fight got out of hand, but Tyree, dressed in jeans and t-shirt, didn't seem to take it seriously. He pushed Al and tussled, but he didn't use force or hit the smaller boy with a fist. About five minutes into the brawl, however, Tyree pushed Al against the fence, and instead of rushing back, Al picked up a broomstick he'd hidden on the sidelines and broke it across Tyree's back. He held the pointed end at Tyree's chest, and before Tony could intervene, Tyree landed a right hook on Al's nose. From his position, Tony saw the cartilage slide and heard a crack, but everyone, no matter where they were standing, could see the blood flow. It streamed down Al's chin and disappeared into the dark black fabric of his ninja outfit. Al staggered for a moment before falling down.

"Oh shit! You see that?" one of the boys yelled, but most ran, worried they'd get in trouble for being there. Tony rushed to help him, but Al shrugged him off and walked away alone.

The next time Tony ran into Alejandro was on campus where Al was handing out pamphlets for the Communist Party.

"What are you doin'?"

"Handing out information."

"For the Communist Party? Al, no one's a Communist anymore. The Russians aren't even Communists."

"Just because it failed in a few countries doesn't make it worthless."

"That's exactly what makes it worthless. Listen, we need to talk. Do you have a minute?"

They sat down in a nearby café.

"I think you might be taking this Pasolini thing a bit too far."

"What do you mean 'this Pasolini thing'?"

"Don't play dumb."

"He's my favorite filmmaker. Aside from that..."

"Aside from that, you mimic everything he does: the clothing and the glasses, the Communist Party and your sudden interest in Catholicism. Maxine even told me what you tried to do with her before she broke up with you..."

"Yes, Maxine. That was sad."

"Sad? She loves you, and you tried to make her eat shit."

"That's what she told you?"

"That's what she told me..."

"It's not the truth."

"Really? It's not? Then why don't you enlighten me? Why did you break up?"

"I'm a homosexual."

"You're a homosexual? Don't you mean to say, you're gay?"

"They're the same thing, Tony."

"I know they're the same thing. It's just the way that you said it..."

"I know it's hard to accept, but..."

"It wouldn't be hard to accept if it was true. We've been friends our whole life, Al, and if you were gay, I wouldn't give a shit. But you're not gay. It's Pasolini. He's the homosexual."

"Pasolini and I share a few traits."

"Get the hell out of here! Have you lost your fuckin' mind? Jesus Christ, Al! Do you even know who you are anymore?"

"Sometimes friends grow apart. I knew you'd have problems with this, but if you can't handle it, I guess there's nothing more to say."

"No, I guess not."

He'd always stuck by Al, and maybe he was going schizophrenic, or turning schizophrenic—however, one put it—but Tony was pretty sure he wasn't gay. It would have made him uncomfortable—he'd lied about that—but it wouldn't have ended their friendship. Right then, he would have preferred homosexuality to mental illness.

Over the next few weeks, he missed Alejandro. They took some of the same classes, but Al stopped showing up, and this drove home the fact that they used to sit next to one another and share jokes. He tried to be aloof, but who could be aloof when it came to his best friend? He sat at his computer and stared at his friend's profile on a social networking site—the lists he'd made of likes and dislikes, comments from mutual friends—and he realized that Alejandro, who used to update this information every day, hadn't touched it since the Pasolini business began. It was the only window he had into Al's life, and he clung to it for as long as his eyes could stand the text.

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That Saturday he got a distressed call from Maxine.

"It's Al," she told him. "He's in a hotel room somewhere in Jersey, and he says he's planning to kill himself tonight."

"Did he say where?"

"Hoboken. The Red Roof Inn."

Tony searched for the address and brought it up on his computer.

"You sure he'll really do it?"

"He sounded serious."

She started to cry.

He hung up and called a cab. Al had cracked, and if he couldn't save him, he'd at least be there when it went down. The cabbie came, and he gave the driver the Inn's address. He didn't know what room his friend was staying in, but he'd find out.

When Tony got to the Inn and Al opened the door, he could tell his friend was drunk. The place was a mess, and up against the wall was a dresser where Al had placed a suitcase and piled some of his clothing.

"Planning to stay long?"

"I knew she'd send you."

"She would have come herself, but you scared the shit out of her."

"I'd rather talk to you."

"Did you set this up?"

Al shrugged. He sat back on the bed, and Tony took a seat in the corner.

"So what's going on?"

"I'm planning to kill myself..."

"Yeah, Maxine told me. But why?"

"Of all people, you should understand."

"But I don't. I don't understand at all."

"Look around you," he cried.

"The world's not worth living in..."

"Does this have to do with Pasolini?"

The bathtub was running and steam floated from the door.

"If you're gonna do it, you should use cold water."

"Don't make light of this!"

His face was so serious that Tony knew he'd made a mistake.

"I'm sorry. It's just...I don't want to see you do this. How can I help you?"

"You can't. No one can..."

"But you wouldn't have called if no one could help."

On the nightstand was a nearly empty bottle of whiskey.



"Could I have a drink?"

Tony poured himself a small glass.

"Cheers," he said, and raised the drink toward Al, who took a swig from the bottle.

"We're nothing," he said.

"Who's nothing?"

"We are. All of us..."

"I don't think you're nothing."

"But what does that mean in a world like this?"

"What's wrong with the world?"

"It's like your mother..."

"I think you should leave her out of this."

"...consumerism, the human as commodity."

"That's not the type of life I've lived."

Al tottered to his feet.

"I don't think that's true. Look what happened to your mother..."

Tony stood.

"I told you to leave her out of this."

"I know," Al continued. "It's a sensitive subject. But what if she didn't have to work for the rich? They only needed her to sell diamonds culled from African mines where every day the people suffer. She never would have died."

Tony grew tense when Al came closer.

"It's just like Pasolini says..."

"Enough about Pasolini!" he yelled. "He was one man with a little bit of talent and a few half decent ideas!"

But Al stood glued to his spot.

"What did you say?"

"I said, fuck Pasolini. For Christ's sake, you've taken this whole thing way too far, and it has to stop. You're scaring the shit out of everyone who loves you."

"You've always been a conformist."

"I'm a conformist because I love my friends and family? I'm a conform-

ist because I don't agree with that hack you love so much that human beings are commodities? You don't think that believing everything one man says, no matter how anti-establishment, is just as bad? You've become Pasolini's lapdog. And he's been dead for thirty-eight years..."

"What did you call him?"

Al got in Tony's face.

*"Your mother was dirt,  
a speck of dust, someone  
to step on and use."*

"What did you call Pasolini?"

"I called him a fuckin' hack!"

Alejandro grabbed Tony and pulled him to his feet while Tony pushed his friend back against the wall. He could hear water from the tub lapping at the floor.

"You forgot to turn the water off," he said.

Al started toward the bathroom, but before he got there, he turned back, charged, and pushed Tony back into his seat. "Your mother was dirt, a speck of dust, someone to step on and use. You don't understand that, but I..."

With all his strength Tony struck Al's crooked nose. He fell, slammed his head on the dresser, and flung the loose pile of clothing aside. When he hit the floor, he didn't move, and Tony crouched above him:

"Are you okay? Say something for Christ sake!"

But Al wasn't breathing.

Tony rushed to call an ambulance, but as he did, he caught sight of the camera that Al had buried beneath his pile of clothing. He took it in his hands and turned it over to find that the night's events were on record.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said, confused but growing calmer, and he picked up the phone.