

# John Di Stefano

**Je me souviens**



t i o n

Lo scandalo del contraddirmi, dell'essere con te e contro te;  
con te nel cuore, in luce, contro te nelle buie viscere;

## Deviant Translations

The photo of Pasolini's dead body. Over this image, the subtitles from the film "Teorema" advance with the urgency of a story which must be told. The words of the subtitles move forward, leaving the body behind, accentuating its immobility. If this were a movie, the image would move, Pasolini would get up. But he does not. The words advance frame by frame, telling the story of the strange visitation, the Christ-like figure of Terence Stamp in "Teorema". The words cover the corpse, but they are the wrong words. Or are they? Are the words of "Teorema" one possible commentary on the mystery of Pasolini's assassination? The words that Pasolini put in other mouths are turned away from their original purpose. They turn up, deviations, in an inappropriate place.

Parler de Pasolini. Faire parler Pasolini. Pour ce faire, Di Stefano a recours à ses archives personnelles (un scrap-book, tenu au cours de l'adolescence), à des fragments de textes et de films, et à trois langues, l'anglais, le français et l'italien. Ce sont les fragments de deux vies, celle de Pasolini, celle de Di Stefano. Di Stefano multiplie les artefacts et les langues comme il accumule les angles de vision: arrivera-t-il à mieux comprendre et à mieux déchiffrer le pouvoir qu'exerce Pasolini? Quel savoir apporte chaque tentative d'analyse, chaque nouvelle langue?

In projects reiterated and collected over the years, Di Stefano tries out different approaches to Pasolini. Who is Pasolini? A sequence of images, a sexualized gay body, shown over and over in the press, sometimes as he wanted himself to be seen, sometimes misrepresented, set up, criminalized. Pasolini is a public figure, poet, filmmaker, essayist, thinker—an influential and complex figure in Italy, who becomes the site of the culture's contradictions. Often photographed alone, he is exposed, the object of conflictual readings.

Comment peut-on "se souvenir" de Pasolini? Comment percevoir l'écran du temps, de la distance? La mémoire devient un processus de traduction, c'est-à-dire un engagement avec l'opacité du réel. Cette relation médiatisée est représentée par le titre que Di Stefano donne à sa vidéo-méditation: "Cendres de Pasolini". Le titre fait écho au poème écrit par Pasolini "Cendres de Gramsci". Dans son poème, Pasolini décrit son rapport passionné et ambivalent à la pensée de Gramsci.

Pasolini begins his creative life during the war, as a poet. His work is infused with the political issues of the post-war period: anti-Fascism, Communism. When images of Pasolini travel across the world, find themselves in the "new world" of Italian immigrants in Montreal, they slip away from this anchoring in dogma and debate. Di Stefano wants to account for the power of Pasolini. His manner is both aggressive and



oblique. He chooses the most highly-charged images, only to defuse their power through narratives which circulate round the images, adding ever widening layers of meaning. To speak of Pasolini, Di Stefano calls on three languages—the languages through which he has come to know Pasolini and which define Di Stefano's place in Quebec as an Italian immigrant. These languages circulate but do not resolve into any single identity. Pasolini is a stubborn cipher, a word in a foreign language which refuses to yield its essence. If translation is a process which destabilizes and then re-settles meaning, there is no conventional translation here. Speaking of Pasolini is to engage in an unending process of translation, one which never reaches its final term.

Il n'y pas d'image totale possible de Pasolini. La vie est trop explosive, le trajet trop varié, le discours trop contradictoire, l'engagement social et politique trop complexe. Di Stefano interroge surtout le corps de Pasolini, ce corps si souvent photographié. Il entame un dialogue avec ce corps malmené, agressé, exposé avec défiance. Alors que Pasolini adore les visages, peuple son cinéma de visages, peint son propre visage en autoportrait, Di Stefano évite de donner une trop grande importance au visage de Pasolini. Di Stefano raconte la fascination sous un mode autobiographique, montrant la fascination adolescente, l'effort persistant pour déchiffrer le message que livre le corps de Pasolini aujourd'hui.

We know the cliché: translation is loss. Di Stefano suggests that the past, too, is a language which eludes us. The death of Pasolini represents a heightened form of loss. For many reasons (political, phenomenological) we will never know the "whole" truth of his death. We are condemned to patient reconstitutions, to sticking together bits of testimony like so many fragments in a scrapbook. But there is also gain. It comes as the imaginative vision to reclaim Pasolini.

Pasolini had no single language. From the start he knew that the languages of creation are chosen. He also knew that you can choose your language, but you may have to fight for

it. Pasolini's first language of poetry was his mother's language, the Friulan dialect of northern Italy. He never lost his belief in dialects. They were places, he thought, where he could escape from the conformism of Italy. Friulano was a refuge, but also a source of critique. Pasolini loved the dialects of Rome and used them in his films. In 1974, a year before his death, he returned to writing poetry in Friulano. Dialects are forms of wealth, he thought. To lose them is painful.

Disciple de Gramsci, Pasolini a beaucoup cru aux pouvoirs de la langue, la langue de l'idéologie comme les langues naturelles, les dialectes face à la langue nationale. "Les Cendres de Gramsci" (1954) est un poème plein de douleur et de tendresse, où Pasolini rend hommage à Gramsci tout en se distanciant de lui.

**Lo scandalo del contraddirmi, dell'essere con te et contro te; con te nel cuore, in luce, contro te nelle buie viscere;**

"The scandal of contradicting myself, of being with you and against you..." the words that begin John Di Stefano's "meditation" on Pier Paolo Pasolini, repeat Pasolini's words from "The Ashes of Gramsci" (1954), addressed to his one-time idol, Antonio Gramsci. In the poem, Pasolini evokes an afternoon's stroll in the Protestant cemetery of Rome. He comes across Gramsci's grave by chance, sits down to remember Gramsci and to gaze tenderly on the evening as it descends over the workers' neighbourhoods across the Tiber. The cemetery is both inside and outside of Rome, it is "foreign soil", and Pasolini chooses this place to reflect on his desires and ideals. What you may not know from the translations is that the poem is written in terza rima, the three-line pattern used by Dante in his *Divina Commedia*. Speaking of ideology and desire, "arcane orgasm" and "animal sensuality", Pasolini writes a highly polished rhyming poem.



**Scandale de me contredire, d'être  
Avec toi, contre toi; avec toi dans mon cœur  
Au grand jour, contre toi au fin fond de mes veines.**

Les dernières strophes du poème sont pleines de tendresse. Pasolini décrit la tombée du jour de l'autre côté du Tibre. Les lumières qui s'allument, les autobus, les préparatifs du souper et les ouvriers et les soldats qui se dirigent sans hâte vers les collines et la maison. Les "adolescents sombres" sifflent sur le trottoir, les persiennes se ferment et on entend le vent dans les platanes. Pourtant le narrateur est déchiré: le scandale d'être à la fois pour et contre, entre l'idéologie et la passion. Di Stefano s'approprie ces paroles, comme il s'empare d'images tirées de la vie de Pasolini.

Voices speak at cross-purposes in Di Stefano's video. Sometimes the subtitles tell a story different from the one being narrated. The rules of translation are not respected. This is a form of deviance, of over-writing, a flouting of convention. An act of rebellion against the linguistic order of the world, where messages in different languages are meant to fall into neat symmetrical lines, where interpretations are meant to correspond with their sources. Pasolini urges us to fall out of line. After all, he says: "I've been misinterpreted...I've been mocked, humiliated and vilified. I was a genius perhaps, but perceived also as a pervert, a corrupter of youth, a subversive, a homosexual". "I am a stranger to my own time", he says.

Traduire exige le même. Et si on refuse? La traduction est une forme de régulation linguistique. Tout est pour le bien dans un univers où la traduction assure le passage tranquille entre les langues. Pasolini était différent. Diverso. Etre différent, dans son cas, c'était être contre. "Quei valori, anzi, sont intraducibili nel nostro linguaggio". Entre Pasolini et son monde, que de béances, que d'obstacles, de méfiance et de non-compréhension. Une seule langue ne peut suffire. Habiter donc l'espace de la traduction. Travailler la langue comme une matière palpable et visible.

These "misleading" subtitles are like voices which do not match the bodies of their owners, or like dubbed dialogue which is out of synch with actors' lips. Or like the captions which the Italian press used to misrepresent images of Pasolini. To turn him into a criminal. To define his difference as negative.

Pasolini est un maître de la transposition. Certaines traductions sont plus réussies que d'autres. Pour Barthes, "Salò" est un désastre. Il ne faut pas chercher à donner une représentation littérale du sadisme. Il ne faut pas chercher à rendre le fascisme fantastique. "Salò" est un choix erroné de traduction, un désir de littéralisme qui échoue totalement.

In what ways are "The Ashes of Gramsci" similar to "The Ashes of Pasolini"? Both are acts of ambivalent homage. They are separated by 50 years of history marked by the new visibility of

the gay body, the abrupt ending of Communism. Is it possible to re-enter Pasolini's world, to fully reconnect his writing with its time, his images with their readings? Language was different then. It had more weight, more physical presence. Slogans covered the walls, mots d'ordre and rallying cries filled the air.

In Di Stefano's work, words are laid out in strips. They pile up, each layer adding meaning, but addition does not necessarily lead to clarification. Each layer adds a different dimension to the question. To get to the heart of the matter isn't always to strip away layers of meaning. Sometimes it means adding. Still, all these words remain distant from the image. They do not stick. All these words, attempting to speak of a reality which cannot be seized: Pasolini in his own time, Pasolini as his work and his image speak to future generations. There are only voices which attempt, in as many languages as possible, to bring clarity. This is like the kind of subtitled done in Poland, where a monotonous voice simply says the lines of the characters as the movie plays itself out in a foreign language. Only rich countries can offer the luxury of synchronized voicing, of dubbing that fits the lips. For the others, there is de-synchronization, fracturing of time frames.

"The Paper Flower Sequence" offre cinq récits juxtaposés, cinq récits qui racontent, de différentes manières, "la même chose". Quel rapport entre ces récits? Il ne s'agit pas d'un rapport hiérarchique où un niveau expliquerait un autre, mais plutôt d'une migration de formes. Pasolini était fasciné par la migration des grands thèmes de la civilisation occidentale. Il a "transposé" un grand nombre d'oeuvres, telles le Décaméron. Il posait ainsi la grande question de la traduction: quand l'équivalent est-il le même? C'est ainsi qu'il fait voyager l'Orestie en Afrique, Saint Paul à New-York, et Saint-Mathieu en Calabre.

Consider the visual layering that Di Stefano uses in "The Paper Flower Sequence". Different narrative styles and typographies stretch out along the pages, creating a pattern which has its own logic. Which is the central event? Which one makes more sense? Pasolini is an errant, absent body. He is a sequence of narratives, moving in parallel. The narratives are strips of gauze twisted around an absent centre, the "Ashes of Pasolini".

In "Volgar Eloquio" we see the text of a poem patiently typed on a typewriter. Images of torture are slowed up, exposed as disguise and artifice. This knowledge, says Di Stefano, then infuses the typewritten words with new meaning. What seemed "real, visceral" is shown as artificial; what looks old fashioned and slow is by contrast a document of real pain.

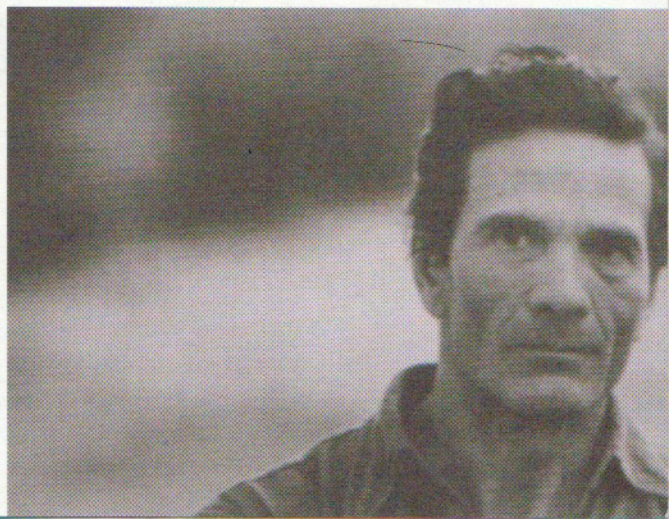
Le titre, "Je me souviens", met l'exposition sous le signe de la traduction. Mais quel est le rapport entre l'original et le texte traduit, entre l'image et la légende, entre le corps immobile et son héritage? Les mots qui défilent sur l'écran sont posthumes. Si Pasolini est mort, ses mots continuent de vivre. Ses films circulent dans le monde, dans toutes les

langues. La traduction donne nouvelle vie à l'oeuvre, selon la formule bien connue de Walter Benjamin: la traduction est survivance, réanimation, réactualisation.

Is "Je me souviens" the same as "I remember"? Surely not. In Quebec French, the phrase appeals to epics across the centuries. It's a motto fat with history. In English, the phrase is slim and innocent, an opener for some incidental anecdote. By calling his exhibition "Je me souviens", John Di Stefano directs us to the excess of certain languages, the deficiencies of others. Languages are not the same in what they can say and do. Therefore no single language will suffice. The translator has the privilege of letting their benefits pile up. For the translator, there is no need to replace one language with another: it is much more satisfying to leave all of them, to let this accumulation generate a surplus of meaning.

"Je me souviens" est sans doute un titre ironique. Comment comparer la quête collective de la presque-nation québécoise avec la quête solitaire de l'artiste pour un passé de rêve? Pasolini se souvient moins de Pasolini que de sa propre fascination avec l'image de Pasolini. Il s'agit d'une reconstitution bien plus que d'une remémoration. "Je me souviens" est davantage l'indice d'un lieu identitaire, celui de l'immigrant italo-québécois vivant une existence partagée, interpellé par les signes séducteurs d'une italianité lointaine. "Je me souviens" ne serait-il pas mieux rendu par "Amarcord" dans le dialecte fellinien?

Like Pasolini himself, Di Stefano moves across languages, choosing them for the special possibilities they offer. Languages are handwritten, spoken, projected. Languages are laid one against the other, layered and combined. Faced with these patterns, the viewer has no choice but to enter the space of translation. Once there, however, she wonders: do all these languages bring me closer to the truth or hint at what is missing?





**NOTICE BIOGRAPHIQUE**

**John Di Stefano** (BFA - Université Concordia; MFA - UCLA; Doctorat - Université Concordia) est un artiste, vidéaste, écrivain et éducateur interdisciplinaire. Il enseigne présentement à Victoria University de Wellington, Nouvelle Zélande. Son travail artistique comprend principalement la vidéo, l'installation, la photo, la performance, les livres d'artiste, les oeuvres in-situ, et l'art public et digitale. Depuis 1985, il expose régulièrement au Canada, aux E.U. et en Europe. John Di Stefano tient à remercier: Marcel Baaijens, Connie Burcheri, Connie Samaras, Sherry Simon, Bruce et Norman Yonemoto; ainsi que Art Matters (New York), le Conseil des Arts du Canada, Conseil des Arts et des Lettres du Québec.

**Sherry Simon** enseigne au département d'Études françaises à l'Université Concordia, où elle fut aussi directrice du Doctorat interdisciplinaire en sciences humaines. Parmi ses publications, on retrouve: *Hybridité culturelle* (Ile de la Tortue, 1999), *Gender in Translation* (Routledge, 1996) et *Le Trafic des langues* (Boréal, 1994). Elle entreprend maintenant un livre sur Montréal et ses "zones de traduction".

**BIOGRAPHY**

**John Di Stefano** (BFA - Concordia University; MFA - UCLA; PhD - Concordia University) is an interdisciplinary artist, video-maker, writer, curator and educator. He is presently Senior Lecturer at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. His studio work is focused primarily in video, installation, photo and time-based media, and has included performance, book-works, site-specific and public art projects as well as work in the digital realm. He has exhibited regularly since 1985 across Canada, the US and Europe. John Di Stefano wishes to thank: Marcel Baaijens, Connie Burcheri, Connie Samaras, Sherry Simon, Bruce and Norman Yonemoto; and Art Matters (New York), Canada Council for the Arts, Conseil des Arts et des Lettres du Québec.

**Sherry Simon** teaches in the French Department at Concordia University and is former director of the PhD in Humanities Programme. Among her publications: *Hybridité culturelle* (Ile de la Tortue, 1999), *Gender in Translation* (Routledge, 1996) and *Le Trafic des langues* (Boréal, 1994). In progress, a book on Montreal and its "translation zones".

n t t r a n s l a



conception graphique / design  
Yudi Sewraj  
photos : avec la permission de / courtesy of  
John Di Stefano  
impression / printing  
Les impression au point  
distribution  
ABC Livres d'art Canada / Art Books Canada  
www.ABCartbooksCanada.com

ISBN : 2-920306-30-8

John Di Stefano

Je me souviens

26 janvier - 24 février, 2002



article remercie ses membres, le Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, le Conseil des Arts du Canada et le Conseil des arts de la Communauté urbaine de Montréal. article est membre du Regroupement des centres d'artistes autogérés du Québec.

article

4001, rue Berri, #105, Montréal (Québec) H2L 4H2  
Téléphone : (514) 842-9686, Télécopieur : (514) 842-2144  
article@cam.org www.cam.org/~article  
Heures d'ouverture : du mardi au dimanche, de 12h00 à 17h00