

Jenn Smith

*Divine Ventriloquism*

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Pasolini was once very interested in St. Paul. He devoted many years of his life to creating a film depicting Paul's life, although it never came to fruition and remains just a screenplay and collection of notes. How could someone so clearly against the Catholic Church make films with direct and obsessive references to religious and ideological figures? In discussing St. Paul's role in the film Pasolini unironically writes, "this does not mean that I want in anyway to tamper with or alter the very letter of his preachings... none of the words pronounced by Paul in the film's dialogue will be invented or reconstructed by analogy."<sup>1</sup> To Pasolini, Paul specifically outlined a duality that was both repulsive and intriguing. He distinguishes between the Paul the saint and Paul the priest, very clearly separating the divine and the system of the church. What is also important about Passolini's screenplay is his need to recontextualize Paul's life in the contemporary. Drawing analogical connections between events and places, he allows the audience to not only better understand Paul's lifetime, but to better understand one's own contemporary. The screen play was to start in the ending years of the Second World War, drifting between Paris, London, Barcelona, New York and so forth.

I begin with this discussion of Pasolini because it outlines a main theme in *Divine Ventriloquism*. Jenn Smith's paintings, like Pasolini's film, lure the past into the present in order to discover new recontextualizations. What better way to compare St. Paul to the present than with the megastructures of midwestern Churches, or rather the landscape in which these rural structures reside.

Søren Kierkegaard is someone who is fundamentally distrustful of the clergy, but firmly believes in the word of God. However, Kierkegaard does not believe in the poetics of existence, things just are. He is cynical towards the poet as he writes, "the poet does not become silent in the silence of the lily and the bird, and why not? Simply because he reverses the relationship and makes himself into something more important... even imagining he is meritorious for having, as is said, lent words and speech to the bird and the lily."<sup>2</sup> Here to learn is to forget, to simply exist as the birds of the air do or as the lily of the field does. To be silent before God.

The divine is a tricky subject; do we embrace it, do we question it, do we have means to even understand it? While Kierkegaard provides us with a rather underwhelming choice to embrace the divine through

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<sup>1</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *St. Paul: A Screenplay* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2014)

<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Lily of the Field and The Bird of the Air* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016), 34.

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mundanity, Smith's paintings shed a new light. Perhaps we are not able to understand the divine, but we must then question it, explore it, ignore it, debase it.

Finally, Mary Hayes provides us with a more in-depth analytical approach to divinity's human counterparts. The clergy and the power structures fitted to them provide a structure of anxiety and deceit surrounding God's voice. Hayes points to a few other examples in literature of God's voice being spoken through human means, "such as a churlish lay person's anus that uttered divine speech through a fart; and actors on stage, who ventriloquized Christ's word spoken at the Last Supper in dramatic reenactments of that event. Simply put, the essence of each of these ventriloquial acts is that they relocate the voice from its conventional source in the speaker's mouth."<sup>3</sup>

What is important about Haye's argument from the use of God's voice is that it was appropriation that took the forefront. Appropriation and reuse a revival to the period of the Roman Empire that Christianity was born to—and importantly vital to Christianity. There are a plethora of examples of the Romans recurring portraits, taking spolia, or symbols. However, the idea of Christian reuse is not entirely as clear. The first uniquely Christian work of art did not surface for two hundred years or so until after the death of Christ. But, there is a case to be made for the repurposing of Roman images to fit Christianity.

One prime example of Christian use of Roman objects is the early Christian garment. Christian garments made for the worship by a lay person, as opposed to the clergy.<sup>4</sup> These objects become antithetical to the clergy's power as it homogenized who could speak to God. Affordable image-laden garments would be worn to help communicate with specific saints or God, to ultimately circumvent the Church's apparatus. To have a personal medium that would accomplish the same, if not more, as attending the Church. On these garments, images are often repeated, not only because the loom technique allowed for easily reproducible images, but also because these images would gain more power the more they were incited. Weavers would have the opportunity to make vague images that were both applicable to pagans and Christians. Obviously, the Church would not have this and banned these garments, only allowing for the clergy to wear more sophisticated and appropriate ones.

I bring this idea to mind as it again ties nicely with Smith's paintings. The idea of appropriation/reuse or the double entendre allow for the expansion of meaning. One could read these paintings in direct and analogous relationships to God and the dissemination of God through human means. But there is also the great and accessible possibility of dissecting these paintings through a lens not attached to, or departing from, religion. To expand upon or recreate our current faculty for knowledge and image making, in order to better understand, or at least document, our contemporary moment.

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Hayes, *Divine Ventriloquism* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Maguire, "Magic and the Christian Image" in *Byzantine Magic*, ed. Henry Maguire (Washington, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1995), 54

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*And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:1-2)*