

Ride The Lightning

Pete Wheeler & Antoine Aguilar

ArtBrussels (2016)

*'Once life is finished it acquires a sense, but up to that point it has not got a sense, its sense is suspended and therefore ambiguous [...] For me, death is the maximum of epicness and myth.'*¹

The above statement by Italian filmmaker, poet and philosopher Pier Paolo Pasolini was made in 1969, just six years before his brutal murder on the beach of Ostia, Rome. Pasolini's understanding of death was linked to his long-standing interest in history and its relation to socio-political issues, particularly the mark of fascism left behind in the wake of Benito Mussolini's regime and the Second World War.

In a documentary series of 1974, Pasolini is seen walking through the sand dunes near Sabaudia, a city to the South of Rome, which was built on reclaimed marshland under the orders of Mussolini. Facing back towards the city, Pasolini notes his surprise at no longer seeing the fascist-built architecture as unreal. He asks how to explain, "a ridiculous, fascist city that seems so charming to us?"² Pasolini thinks that the passing of time has altered the perspective on the city. Replete with its original 'lictorial' qualities, he thinks the city now takes on a form somewhere in between the

¹ P.P. Pasolini, in O. Stack (ed.), *Pasolini on Pasolini*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1969, pp. 55-56.

² P.P. Pasolini, 'Pasolini on consumeristic civilization', Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bipWHxTi-3c>. Originally appeared in: *I and* [documentary series], Italian National Broadcasting Company, 1974.

metaphysical and the realistic. That is to describe, in a sense, the space between the city's vile origins and the charm of its honest modern inhabitants who have made it their own.³

It is within this space between the metaphysical and the realistic, between the abstract and the figurative, between representation and the real; and between the past and the present that the work of Pete Wheeler and Antoine Aguilar can be seen to operate. In fact, Aguilar's *Humus, Lampi Sull Eni* (2014) engages directly with Pasolini's posthumously published novel, *Petrolio* – a novel which recounts the story of Carlo I, a wealthy engineer, and his lower-class double Carlo II, set within the tumultuous political climate of 1970s Italy. Aguilar has spread multiple copies of the controversially censored final chapter of *Petrolio* across the floor space, inviting us to walk through a landscape of once-hidden, unsanctioned knowledge. In some sense, the facsimiles of Pasolini's final chapter could be considered individually as particles, constituting a greater meaning when taken as a whole and offering an analogy to the sand of Ostia where the writer took his last steps.

While not directly referencing the work of Pasolini, Pete Wheeler's series of paintings share much with the central ideas and motivations of Pasolini's philosophy. Each painting is supported, or perhaps grounded, by casts of the most recognizable symbol of mortality in Western culture – the skull. In effect, the skull returns the narrative monumentality of the paintings back to Earth – bridging the gap between reality and the metaphysical. However, at the same

³ *ibid.* Pasolini uses the term 'lictorial' metaphorically as a reference to minor officials in Ancient Rome who would clear the way for political leaders.

time, this series works to resist such didactic interpretations. Moreover, the paintings work to conjure up the ambiguities of a Western cultural and political history that is still being written – and, in that sense, present more questions than they do answers.

What can be characterized in Wheeler's series are the figures portrayed, each taking on the significance of a common type or symbol as opposed to individual, particular subjects. In effect, as Lorenzo Bruni has pointed out, Wheeler's 'portraits' function more accurately as 'presences'.⁴ For instance, in works such as *How To Slay The Dragon* (2016) and *Ashes And Fire* (2016), the eye of the falcon looms large, before a kind of Gestalt Switch in the composition shifts the emphasis to the fluorescent, almost kitsch, abstraction of the oil stick. In other works such as *Angel Duster* (2015), the weight of history is brought to the fore, and here we see a presence of a young soldier, perhaps a representation of the subproletariat – the lowest of the working class. In the 1970s, Pasolini saw this class as having the potential for political emancipation in the future, if not tarnished by the 'new fascism' of consumerism.

'To ride the lightning' can be considered as a bi-directional motif, in one sense the lightning striking down as a wake-up call to the political consciousness, while paradoxically also threatening death. Produced with the blinding repetitious machine light of the photocopier, Aguilar's expansive floor installation speaks to Pasolini's insightful philosophy, as much as it does to

⁴ L. Bruni, 'Pete Wheeler and the sublimation of the western world's sense of guilt', in *Pete Wheeler: Paths of the destroyer*, Galleria Poggiali e Forconi, 2011, p. 1.

the ongoing politics of production and consumption. So too, Wheeler's monumental series questions the values on which Western culture is founded, and exemplifies the proliferation and divergence of these values. Both artists reference history through their own subjective understanding of the present and invite the audience into a similar dialogue. Perhaps only after death does knowledge acquire a greater sense, through what is left behind for the interpretation of those in the future.

– Andrew Ward