



📷 Comizi di non amore (Francesco Vezzoli, 2004, photo: Matthias Vriens, courtesy Fondazione Prada, Milan)

Comizi di Non Amore: Francesco Vezzoli Revisits Pasolini through Reality TV

👤 Francesco Spampinato © December 2015 📌 The Legacy of Pier Paolo Pasolini 📖 Issue 77

Translated in English as *Love Meetings*, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Comizi d'amore* (1964) should have been better translated literally: "Debates About Love." The feature-length documentary, often referred to as an Italian example of *cinéma-vérité*, sees Pasolini travelling through Italy, from north to south, from beaches to cities to rural villages, interviewing people of different ages, social classes and cultural backgrounds, on sex-related topics like virginity, prostitution, homosexuality, and sex education. What emerges is a "debated" and contradictory portrait of a country showing emancipated points of view on one side, and conservative and ignorant assumptions and beliefs on the other.



Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Comizi d'amore*, Poster, 1964

Forty years later, Italian visual artist Francesco Vezzoli realized a project inspired by *Comizi d'amore* for his solo exhibition at the Fondazione Prada, Milan, curated by Germano Celant. *Comizi di non amore* (2004), a one-hour video performance filmed in a Rome TV studio, read the social *vérité* of Pasolini through the lens of popular coeval reality shows produced by Berlusconi's TV networks, like *C'è posta per te* (*You've Got Mail*) and *Stranamore* (*Strangelove*), and it is hosted by an actual TV showgirl of Italian television, the German Ela Weber. Celebrities like Catherine Deneuve and Antonella Lualdi were guests of the pseudo-pilot, and they were invited to choose from among candidates who try to seduce them. After each couple is formed, the audience moves on stage to debate.

Tracing a comparison with Pasolini, Vezzoli says: "People's reaction to certain subjects has remained pretty much the same."¹ Vezzoli's *Comizi*, however, shows that notable cultural changes have occurred between 1964 and 2004: people feel more comfortable expressing their views in front of a camera, preferably on the TV stage. As a scripted performance not meant to be broadcast, this metalinguistic production uses TV as both the form and the content for an anthropological analysis on the impact of TV entertainment on society at large, and Italian society in particular. It outlines the actuality of Pasolini's approach and at the same time opens it up to a larger critical discourse that involve art as well as media theory.



Comizi di non amore (Francesco Vezzoli, 2004, photo: Matthias Vriens, courtesy Fondazione Prada, Milan).

Pasolini filmed *Comizi d'amore* between March and November 1963, the year Pope John XXIII died and John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated. At that point he had already written and directed *Accattone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962), both focussed on underclass life in Rome, and put together *La Rabbia* (1963), juxtaposing a recited text with found footage and photographs of World War II. At the same time, he assembled *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* (*Location Hunting in Palestine*, 1963-64) in preparation for his major project *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel of St. Matthew*, 1964), a biographical drama on Jesus Christ inspired by the Gospel of the apostle Matthew.

Comizi d'amore consists in interviews on the sentimental and sexual habits and beliefs of the Italians, that Pasolini structure around a set of dichotomies that includes: North/South; Men/Women; Adults/Youth; Divorce/Marriage; Prostitution/Fidelity; and Heterosexuality/Homosexuality. The questions are addressed to both random passers-by and writers, academics and friends of Pasolini including: Alberto Moravia, Cesare Musatti, Oriana Fallaci, Adele Cambria, Peppino di Capri, Giuseppe Ungaretti, and Antonella Lualdi. The film is shot in Napoli, Palermo, Cefalù, Roma, Fiumicino, Milano, Firenze, Viareggio, Bologna, Venezia, Catanzaro, and Crotone.



Comizi d'amore (Pasolini, 1964).

The questions that Pasolini candidly poses to his interviewees are never provocative and never assume a specific point of view. Rather, they try to investigate taboo topics with an objective approach. “Is sex a very important issue in modern life?” he asks a fashionable thirty-something woman, or “Are you shocked by sexual abnormalities?” he inquires of an old-fashioned man wearing the hat of either a police officer or train conductor.² Questions are posed to men and women, elderly and children, poor and rich, schooled and ignorant, at work and on vacation, in cities and in the countryside. Young girls seem to be Pasolini’s preferred interlocutors, some of whom offer hints that clearly anticipate the imminent feminist revolution.

However, most of the answers show hypocritical and backward points of view, expressed either with shyness or confidence. A teenager on the beach of Crotone says that if a wife cheats on her husband, is better for the husband to kill her rather than ask for a divorce, because even after divorce he would remain a “*cornuto*” (“cuckold”). They reflect Catholic conditioning and a patriarchal society, full of taboos, where homosexuality is considered an inversion, women are confined to the domestic sphere, and men feel justified by their masculine nature to be unfaithful.



Comizi d'amore (Pasolini, 1964).

These views contrast with those of the famous interviewees like the journalist Fallaci and the writer Moravia, more objective, emancipated and up to date with the positions on similar issues assumed by intellectuals in other parts of Europe and United States. Talking about homosexuality, a topic that has always been debated by Pasolini, the poet and writer Giuseppe Ungaretti comments: “Every man is made in a different way, in his physical structure I mean. But he is also made differently in his spiritual combination. Thus all men are in their way abnormal. All men are in some way at odds with nature [...] The act of civilization, that is an act of human arrogance on nature, is an act against nature.”³

Inspired by *Chronique d'un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*, 1960), a representative example of French *cinéma-vérité*, by filmmaker Jean Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin, Pasolini's *Comizi d'Amore* is less an inquiry on the sexual attitudes of 1960s Italians, than an investigation on whether or not is possible to act sincerely in front of a camera. In his preparatory notes, Pasolini wrote that he wanted to make a "therapeutic film".⁴ His goal was to make people aware of the extent to which their points of view were hypocritical through viewing the film. However, the film was prohibited to minors – paradoxically forbidding many of its "actors" from seeing it – and had a very limited distribution, preventing it from achieving the goal at that time. Nonetheless, it has become popular over the decades as a mirror of Italian society in the 1960s, and as such it is frequently broadcast by contemporary television in its entirety or as separate clips.



Chronique d'un été (Rouch/Morin, 1960)

Comizi d'amore was not meant for TV broadcasting, but influenced the future of television, which became more and more a psychoanalytic machine of introspection for a country under a massive process of economic and cultural change. Newscasts, variety shows and game shows understood they could benefit from the direct participation of real people, a participation that people were happy to offer. Taken to the extreme, this logic will lead to reality shows in the early 1990s. Reality TV turned certain aspects of *cinéma-vérité* into spectacle, transforming the naïveté and authenticity of people into products.

Early examples of reality TV are the celebrity-based programs realised in the 1980s by Andy Warhol, a major influence for Vezzoli. Warhol is also the author of the popular quote “everybody in the future will be famous for fifteen minutes.”⁵ The sentence denotes a change in how mass media work but also in how people react to them, namely looking for chances to appear, driven by the narcissistic desire to see themselves on the screen.



Andy Warhol's TV on *Saturday Night Live*, 1981

Today we deal with a more advanced mechanism of media production of our selves, if we think of “selfies” and the possibilities for the modification and dispersion of our own image offered by the Internet and prosumer technologies. But for about 10 years, between the early 1990s and early 2000s, tens of thousands of media selves took shape within reality shows, of which Italian television, particularly Berlusconi's Mediaset networks, was a prolific producer.

Vezzoli realized his *Comizi di Non Amore* in 2004 when reality shows were at the peak of their popularity. However, more than the panoptical model of the *Big Brother*, the artist focused on the sentiments-based programs like *Stranamore* and *C'è posta per te*, where sentimental drama of common people are exposed to the audience in the studio and at home, within an entertaining spectacle that comprehends sensual dance interludes and live comments from the audience both in the studio and from home, which denote similar stereotypes to those emerged from Pasolini's *Comizi*. Both *Stranamore* and *C'è posta per te* were built around a declaration of love, love between a couple for the former or between members of the same family or friends for the latter.



Stranamore, Canale 5, 1994

Sponsored by Prada, Vezzoli commissioned the making of *Comizi di non amore* to Einstein Multimedia, a major Italian TV productions agency who had worked for public and private TV networks in Italy including Berlusconi's. Audience, host, dancers, set, lights, sound: the whole apparatus was real and put together to create a pilot that could have potentially ended up in a real broadcasting. In a conversation on the book that accompanies the exhibition, Celant says to Vezzoli that Pasolini "carries out a critical and ideological operation that develops through this verbal commentary. Your 'Meetings' are at the other extreme, because they appear to be a real television program, shown without an objective or critical approach [...] It is clear that your generation has rejected moral indignation and polemical reflection." ⁶

Ela Weber, an actual and popular showgirl of Mediaset shows, plays the host. She enters the stage on the back of a motorcycle, removes her helmet, kneels down on the floor and recites: "Life is a gift, happiness is an achievement, everybody has to take decisions, to make choices, to test himself, the most difficult choice is the choice of love, welcome to the non-love meetings." ⁷ The statement is followed by an interlude made of a series of pink and red roses blossoming on the screen and a close-up on a woman's eye as she winks. Longer interludes which include choreographic dances create a consistent rhythm along the show.

The whole show consists of four meetings. Each sees a celebrity having to choose among three seducers: Catherine Deneuve, Antonella Lualdi, Terry Schiavo, and Marianne Faithfull, with a cameo by Jeanne Moreau, as if she had arrived late to the show. An undisputed fan of Warhol, most of Vezzoli's works are built around female celebrities – from singer/TV host Iva Zanicchi to supermodel Verushka, from actress Anita Ekberg to popstar Lady Gaga – with references to male intellectuals and artists – from Luigi Pirandello to Gore Vidal, from Dalí to Pasolini. The invitation of celebrities to the pseudo-show reflects Vezzoli's style but also the habit of TV networks to pay big fees to celebrities – regardless of their real artistic achievements, and only in view of their status as media stars, in order to increase the audience share.

Each meeting has sexual connotations, whether the seducers strip for the guest or the couple formed has something “unusual” and somehow perceived as “transgressive” (e.g. a threesome is formed instead of a couple; one of the seducers is a transgender etc.). The first seducer of Deneuve, Maurizio, is the stereotypical “Latin lover”, he takes his shirt off, kneels down and sings a song to the actress, although audio cannot be heard and a disclaimer appears on the screen informing that the highly erotic content of the lyrics is inappropriate to a television audience. Maurizio is followed by a professional stripper and a Cuban dancer, who is the one Deneuve chooses in the end.



Comizi di non amore (Francesco Vezzoli, 2004, photo: Matthias Vriens, courtesy Fondazione Prada, Milan).

The studio audience is invited to go on stage to make comments. A woman makes a series of aesthetic comments, using the word “*palestrato*” (“hefty”) at least five times. We hear people laughing loudly or screaming “bravo!” to endorse one or the other point of view expressed on stage. A last comment says: “where were the sentiments? I only saw three people who wanted to appear in front of the camera.” Many audience members stand up applauding, and at that point Weber intervenes, confessing: “It is very difficult to express an emotion on stage, both for professionals and random people.”⁸ Is this a way to justify the untruthfulness of the spectacle, which means that everybody is fake in front of a camera because it is difficult or rather impossible to be ourselves in TV?

What emerges from Vezzoli’s *Comizi* is that Pasolini’s lesson had not been learned. Pasolini, as mentioned before, wanted his *Comizi* to be a therapeutic film, in the hope of making people aware of their hypocrisy and building a more open society, at least open in terms of acknowledging equality between men and women. Vezzoli highlights how Italian society, through television, has not only not improved in this sense but has even become worse, having been turned into a spectacle. One of the seducers of Antonella Lualdi, the second guest, who was also in Pasolini’s *Comizi*, says: “I remember your words ‘I love talking about sex’ so I’d like to show you my body,”⁹ reducing Lualdi’s original feminist statement to a vulgar sexual desire.



Comizi di non amore (Francesco Vezzoli, 2004, photo: Matthias Vriens, courtesy Fondazione Prada, Milan).

The most embarrassing series of stereotypes, however, comes from those members of the audience who are invited on stage to debate at the end of each meeting. Their comments and behaviour reflect an Italian society that not only has not changed from the time Pasolini made his *Comizi*, but whose genuine shyness in front of the camera has been turned into confrontational self-confidence as a consequence of decades of the pervasive intervention of mass media into daily life – to be precise, Vezzoli’s *Comizi* come four decades after Pasolini’s

The topic of homosexuality is the one that raises the harshest responses. One of the seducers of Terry Schiavo, the third guest, is not a man but a woman named Michela who instead of dancing, singing or stripping makes a speech focused on the freedom of a woman to seduce another woman, a speech that, despite the egalitarian vibe, turns into another provocative gesture when she opens her shirt to show off her breasts to Schiavo. A particularly aggressive lady from the audience comments with indignation: “If this is trendy, you’d better kill yourself in my opinion.”¹⁰

Vezzoli himself, who usually participates in his own video performances playing himself or imaginary characters, here plays the role of another member of the audience who expresses his thoughts with regard to homosexuality: “For me Michela has been truly sincere,” he says, “This is what I wanted to highlight.”¹¹ For the final audience of the video performance – that is, people who are aware they are looking at a contemporary artwork, who probably recognise Vezzoli in the video as both an artist and a queer – this moment is a sort of break of that suspension of disbelief that supposedly surrounds the pseudo-pilot TV show. Both Michela’s and Vezzoli’s statements present queer identity as a more truthful model in comparison with the stereotypical pretend identities of the others on the screen.



Comizi di non amore (Francesco Vezzoli, 2004, photo: Matthias Vriens, courtesy Fondazione Prada, Milan).

If the content has not changed, the mode of expression has certainly changed, as have the context and the medium. Vezzoli's *Comizi* shows, as Celant commented, the artist's rejection of "moral indignation and polemical reflection,"¹² but Vezzoli's spectacle is also made so as to show the manner in which the mass media create situations where people are forced to express themselves, to take position, to choose amongst existing models rather than develop a critical but rational dialogue.

In other words, Vezzoli exposes the mechanism through which TV produces consensus. The artist achieves that through a tactic of displacement typical of contemporary art. As Italian art critic and philosopher Marco Senaldi writes, Vezzoli's *Comizi* can be characterised as "a televisual sample, a proper readymade [...] a work of art within the art system."¹³ Despite Vezzoli's declared "dream" of broadcasting the pseudo-pilot on real television, the project was clearly conceived and developed through a metalinguistic approach that, in the end, mocks real television and exposes its silently coercive mechanism.



Comizi di non amore (Francesco Vezzoli, 2004, photo: Matthias Vriens, courtesy Fondazione Prada, Milan).

Pasolini's *Comizi d'Amore* was a metalinguistic production too. Indeed, on one side Pasolini appears himself in public spaces posing questions to anonymous people. On the other side, we see him conversing with cultured friends, sitting on a terrace as he reflects with writer Alberto Moravia and psychoanalyst Cesare Musatti on the nature of his film. "What can be the meaning of an inquiry like the one I've begun?" wonders Pasolini.¹⁴



Comizi d'amore (Pasolini, 1964)

Hence, we can say that both Pasolini's and Vezzoli's *Comizi* use forms of media entertainment to reveal the mechanisms of fiction and representation hidden behind entertainment itself. Vezzoli achieves this revelation through displacing a potentially real TV pilot into the art world. Freed from the obligations and paradigms of the art world, however, Pasolini goes even further because he confronts a generic audience, using culture to develop a primordial sense of awareness that would hopefully trigger a slow but more efficient and permanent therapeutic impact on society.

While the reach of Vezzoli's *Comizi* is limited by the context in which it is seen (that is, the art world), Pasolini's *Comizi* aimed to have a much stronger impact on society: it was meant, as Pasolini suggested, as "a kind of crusade against ignorance and fear. To sum up, these are the terms, more or less, of a desecration."¹⁵ We should then conclude that Vezzoli's approach to Pasolini is more an homage and an acknowledgment of his legacy as a model of both artistic experimentation and social inquiry, and it is that makes Pasolini's entire output so crucial in understanding Italian art and society in both the 20th and 21st centuries.

Endnotes

1. Francesco Vezzoli in conversation with Germano Celant in Germano Celant, *Francesco Vezzoli* (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2004), p. 269 [↗](#)
2. Transcription from Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Comizi d'amore*, 1964 [↗](#)
3. Ibid. [↗](#)
4. Pier Paolo Pasolini and Laura Betti, *Pier Paolo Pasolini: A Future Life (A Cinema of Poetry)* (Roma: Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1989), p. 51. [↗](#)
5. Andy Warhol in Andy Warhol, Stockholm: Moderna Museet and Cologne: Kasper König, 1968. [↗](#)
6. Celant, *Francesco Vezzoli*, *op. cit.*, p. 274. [↗](#)
7. Transcription from Francesco Vezzoli, *Comizi di Non Amore*, 2004. [↗](#)
8. Ibid. [↗](#)
9. Ibid. [↗](#)
10. Ibid. [↗](#)
11. Ibid. [↗](#)
12. Celant, *Francesco Vezzoli*, *op. cit.*, p. 274. [↗](#)
13. Marco Senaldi, *Arte e Televisione: Da Andy Warhol al Grande Fratello*, Milan: Postmedia Books 2009 p. 96. Own translation. [↗](#)
14. Pasolini, *Comizi d'Amore*, *op. cit.* [↗](#)
15. Ibid. [↗](#)

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