



*The brutal,
mysterious
murder of
Pier Paolo Pasolini,
one of Italy's
greatest directors,
has tormented
Stefano Maccioni
for 16 years.*

*Is he any closer
to the truth?*

*By Marianna Giusti
Portrait by Eleonora d'Angelo*

His heart exploded on the night of November 2 1975.

His pleas of “Mamma! Mamma!” had done nothing to stop the Alfa Romeo from running over him. When it sped away, his body lay prostrate on a dirt football pitch, under a moonless sky. A frigid wind howled through the surrounding hovels of Ostia and, not far behind, the river Tiber slow-flowed, black and dense like crude, into the sea.

He’d sustained fractures on his breastbone, left jaw, 10 of his ribs and all the fingers on his left hand. His liver was torn, as was the nape of his neck. His slim, muscular arms were speckled with obsidian bruises. A long strip of small, red marks ran over his pale spine, in a symmetrical pattern that matched the Alfa’s tyre treads. The hair on his head was kneaded with earth, blood and oil, his nose flattened to the right, his left ear almost entirely detached.

Even so, all those who saw the body the next morning knew exactly who he was. Onlookers could still make out the elegantly sunken cheeks, the diamond-shaped cheekbones and the long eyebrows, straight and serious under a pensive forehead. They all knew it was Pier Paolo Pasolini.

The 53-year-old director had achieved global celebrity with Cannes Grand Prix-winning films that blended tales of Roman sex workers and biblical heroes, contemporary squalor and classical myth. But Pasolini had been immune to the flatteries of fame. No single art form or creed could contain his uncompromising, exquisite intelligence, and he seemed to take pleasure defying categorisation. He sided with the poor but opposed compulsory education. He contested sexual bigotry but wrote against abortion. He was a critic of “the dictatorship of consumerism”, but he couldn’t resist expensive sports cars. And he made no secret of being gay in a country bountiful in homophobia.

By the time of his murder, the fil rouge tying Pasolini’s oeuvre together was his mounting disgust with the modern world, softened by compassion for Italy’s underclass, which he thought capitalism was rapidly corrupting. After Pasolini’s murder, filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni remarked that his contemporary had become “the victim of his own characters.”

According to the account of that night, which became what is known in the Italian legal system as *verità processuale*, or trial truth, the killer was a teenager. Giuseppe Pelosi, 17, had confessed mere hours after the crime. He was barely fluent in standard Italian and, with his thick, unruly locks and lopsided smirk, he looked like he’d stepped right out of a Pasolinian fantasy, another smug, shoeless loafer roaming postwar Rome’s hunger-stricken suburbs. That night, Pasolini had picked him up from Termini station, where Pelosi and other youths habitually sold sex, and had driven him to Ostia. A dispute over the nature of the sex being paid for had turned violent and then lethal. Pelosi had acted in self-defence.

Nicknamed Pino by friends and The Frog by the press, on account of his bulging eyes, Pelosi became famous overnight. As he was escorted out of a police station the day after the murder, shouts rose above the gathered crowd: “Go Pino!” “Well done, Pino!” “Ah Pino! Stay strong!” This kind of adulation for the admitted killer of one of Italy’s greatest artists would endure until his recantation of the entire story decades later. But on the day of his arrest, an unperturbed passerby in central Rome placidly explained to reporters: “A faggot died. So what?”

“Open your mouth.”

Stefano Maccioni opened his jaws wide and looked up at the ceiling. A young officer gently brushed his gums with a cotton swab. Maccioni winced. The officer removed the swab, looked intently at the saliva clinging to the cotton bud, opalescent and bubbly, then screwed a pen-shaped container closed around it. He double-checked the personal details in Maccioni’s file: criminal defence lawyer, born in Pieve a Nievole, 44 years old, married.

Honeyed Roman sunshine spilled into the examination room in the headquarters of RIS, the Italian criminal forensics agency. The agency needed a DNA sample to exclude Maccioni from the suspects list, in the event he left any biological traces on the material evidence he was about to look over. It was May 2010, and Maccioni was two years into what would become a 16-year-long search for the truth of what really happened the night Pasolini was killed. After the swabbing, he waited impatiently for an officer to come and escort him to the sterile room where the evidence boxes for the case had been in storage since 1975.

At the time of Pasolini’s murder, Maccioni was a 10-year-old boy, growing up in a traditional rural Italian family: football until dusk, Mass on Sundays. Although his family were of modest means, Maccioni hadn’t picked law to elevate his status. “If I charged my clients by billable hours like the Americans do,” he liked to joke, “I’d drive a Ferrari.”

From the start, Maccioni’s career was defined by some of the country’s most high-profile criminal cases. In 1997, he was appointed to defend Karl Hass, a former Nazi officer being tried for his role in the Ardeatine massacre, during which 335 civilians were murdered. Maccioni, who could not by law refuse the job, navigated the assignment by steering clear of historical revisionism, unlike other attorneys defending war criminals. He tried to show, he told journalists at the time, “the utmost respect for the victims”. After the case, which ended with Hass being sentenced to life in prison, Maccioni had only worked on behalf of victims.

In June 2008, he was at a conference in Cyprus when a colleague casually mentioned she thought that Pasolini was Italy’s most intriguing cold case. In 1979, Pelosi had been sentenced to nine years in prison, despite copious unanswered questions and unexamined forensics. Over the decades, a number of theories of the crime, ranging from plausible to highly imaginative, had proliferated. Other lawyers and magistrates had petitioned successfully to reopen the case, but were never able to solve it. Then, during an explosive 2005 television appearance, Pelosi – by then 47 years old and a free man – declared himself innocent. His confession and ensuing three-decade silence, he claimed, had been extorted with death threats made by unnamed figures.

It wasn’t the Pasolini affair’s high melodrama that intrigued Maccioni; it was the glaring injustice. His charitable instincts had only deepened after recently becoming a father and, in his early forties, Maccioni knew himself well enough to admit that he was an idealist, with a romantic vision of justice. Back in his small office in Rome, he began researching the case.

Maccioni started by refamiliarising himself with the trial truth. Pelosi’s confession went like this: he had met the director for the first time that night at Rome’s Termini station at about 10pm. The two went for dinner, then Pasolini drove them to Ostia, some 18 miles away, in order to have sex.

On the dirt pitch, where Pasolini’s body was later found, they argued. Pelosi claimed the director assaulted him, shouting, “I’ll kill you.” Pelosi fought back, picking up a wooden slab from the ground and beating Pasolini until he couldn’t move. Pelosi then got into the Alfa and ran Pasolini over. “I was alone,” he concluded.

Maccioni could immediately see there were problems with this account. For one, Pelosi claimed he was “dripping with blood” when he got into the car, but the Alfa had been found with a mostly clean interior. Pelosi also said he hadn’t noticed running over the body, although Pasolini’s autopsy showed he’d been run over multiple times. Per the trial truth, Pelosi was stopped by police in Ostia for speeding at 1.30am. But law enforcement told his family that Pasolini’s car was recovered on via Tiburtina, 25 miles from Ostia. Why police had related two contradictory versions of where and how the Alfa was found had never been explained.

Maccioni was working alone in his office late one night, snacking on chocolate biscuits, when he dug out the Pasolini case’s first-instance ruling, from April 1976. In Italy, criminal trials are a multistage legal process, during

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Previous page: Stefano Maccioni in his office earlier this summer

Opposite: the cover of the November 3 1975 edition of Il Corriere della Sera with Pasolini’s murder as its top story

Left: Pasolini in Rome, 1950, photographed by Toti Scialoja

which each case is reviewed by different courts and justices. It’s uncommon for the first-instance judgment, the findings of the initial phase of this process, to change as drastically as it would in the Pasolini case.

As he read, Maccioni felt the hairs on his neck stand. The first-instance ruling not only found Pelosi guilty of murder “in collaboration with unknown others”, but also raised serious doubts about his confession. The court’s chief justice noted it was “impossible” that Pelosi could have emerged from the fight he described unbruised, and that his mostly clean clothes were “irreconcilable” with Pasolini’s autopsy findings. In another major discrepancy, the alleged weapon did not match Pasolini’s wounds.

When the legal process came to its ultimate conclusion three years later, Pelosi was found guilty again. But this time there was no mention of “unknown others”. He was eventually sentenced and, as far as the Italian judiciary was concerned, the case was closed.

Maccioni stood and paced up and down his office, turning the rulings over. Why had the murder of a genius received so little scrutiny? Why had Pelosi’s flawed confession become the foundation of the final verdict? What happened between rulings to alter the outcome of the trial? He looked over at his desk, the mess of files in sharp focus under the solitary banker’s lamp, and felt as if he’d just crossed an invisible line.

A few months later, Maccioni read about the release of *Deep Black*, a book by Giuseppe Lo Bianco and Sandra Rizza, reporters specialising in mafia- and terrorism-related cases. The black in the title was a reference to the colour of fascist military shirts, which earned far-right Italian terrorists the nickname *neri*. The book was the first to properly place the Pasolini case in its historical context.

Italy in the 1970s was a hotbed of political murder. These were the country’s Years of Lead, as historians would come to call them, during which defenestrations, train derailments, kidnappings and terror attacks claimed more than 400 innocent lives. All over western Europe, local intelligence agencies and Nato’s “stay-behind” operations – secret paramilitary units created after the second world war – attempted to curb far-left activity, by means of psychological warfare and false-flag exercises. Much of the violence in Italy was perpetrated by rightwing groups, trying to keep the most viable communist party in Europe in check.

Pasolini’s politics were complicated. A self-professed Catholic Marxist and staunch anti-fascist, he belonged to the communist party until 1949, when his membership was reportedly rescinded after a gay scandal involving young men. By the 1970s, politics had begun to monopolise the director’s attention. In 1972, he started penning long, impassioned editorials for



Right: Pasolini on the set of 'Les mille et une nuits' (Il fiore delle mille e una notte)

Opposite: sunglasses from the scene of the murder, one of the many pieces of evidence re-examined and tested for DNA by Maccioni

Corriere della Sera, the influential national newspaper. Three years later, they infiltrated his filmmaking in *Salò, or The 120 Days of Sodom*, by far his most political work. His 25th and final film is a period drama portraying a sadistic sexual dystopia in the Italian Social Republic, the Nazi puppet state set up in Salò, near Brescia, after the 1943 German invasion.

To Maccioni's surprise, *Deep Black* argued that Pasolini's murder was politically motivated. The book detailed the collisions of Italy's political and industrial establishment in the 1960s and 1970s, starting with the mysterious death in 1962 of Enrico Mattei, the chief executive of energy giant Eni. *Deep Black* reported that a 10-year inquiry by a magistrate named Vincenzo Calia suggested that the plane crash that had killed Mattei was orchestrated by the American Cosa Nostra. Pasolini, the book explained, had been investigating Mattei and his successor at Eni for his unfinished book, titled *Petrolino*.

In March 2009, Maccioni filed a request to reopen the Pasolini case. Under Italian law, anyone can petition the public prosecutor to reopen an archived murder case by presenting overlooked evidence. If both prosecutor and judge grant the request, the prosecution starts re-investigating the case. Maccioni urged officials to put the evidence through modern forensic examinations, especially DNA testing, and to consider a political motive, which he supported by attaching excerpts from Calia's inquiry. A year later, his request was granted.

Maccioni covered his mouth with a face mask, tied the mint-green surgical scrubs, slipped on a turquoise hair net, blue nylon shoe covers and thick plastic gloves. Pacing the antechamber of RIS, en route to the unexamined evidence, he looked like an astronaut. After completing the sterilisation process that precedes access to criminal exhibits, Maccioni walked past a glass wall partition and closer to the truth. If, as he suspected, the DNA evidence suggested Pelosi and Pasolini weren't alone that evening, the 1979 trial truth would come tumbling down like a house of cards.

RIS staff worked in silence, in full surgical gear, their movements coordinated and celestial. One by one, 29 exhibits were extracted from the

boxes. While an officer hung some of the exhibits on a whiteboard, clipping them to a nylon thread, another carefully laid the rest on a desk coated in synthetic blue cloth. Each exhibit was numbered with a large cardboard tag. Some were placed next to rulers, for size reference. All textile evidence with traces of organic matter was cut into small samples and sealed into plastic bags to be sent for testing.

An officer with a DSLR camera photographed everything, a flash and loud shutter snap punctuating each shot. Pasolini's black briefs. Click-zzh. Pasolini's maroon socks. Click-zzh. Pasolini's Lois jeans, stained with blood above the groin. Click-zzh. Pasolini's keys. Click-zzh. Pasolini's press card. Click-zzh. Pasolini's pristine chocolate-coloured cowboy jacket, with tartan patches on the hems and shoulders. Click-zzh. Pelosi's sweater. Click-zzh. Pelosi's T-shirt. Click-zzh. Pelosi's red letterman jacket. Click-zzh. A map. Click-zzh. A comb. Click-zzh. A broken wooden slab that Pelosi said was the weapon. Click-zzh.

Some of the everyday objects were so disarming in their ordinariness that Maccioni felt a deep unease. Even drenched in blood, Pasolini's Missoni shirt was a beauty. Made of fine, knitted cotton, its pattern was a sea of undulating stripes. Maccioni imagined Pasolini, bare-chested on the last morning of his life, picking it from his wardrobe.

The extraordinary objects that came out of the boxes were worse. Foremost among them was a ring owned by Pelosi. Propped on a tiny pedestal on the laden desk in front of him, its disproportionately large glass stone, oval-shaped and crimson, looked at Maccioni like an evil eye.

Back in the 1970s, it had been this ring that had held the trial truth together. After his arrest, Pelosi had insisted police look for his favourite possession. Although it fitted tightly on his little finger, he claimed to have lost the ring. It was later found next to Pasolini's body and supposedly confirmed Pelosi's presence at the scene of the crime.

Maccioni looked back towards Pasolini's belongings. His specs, with large ombre fly-eye lenses encased in tortoiseshell, evoked the coolly cultivated image of the late director. Anyone who'd so much as glanced at a picture

of Pasolini had seen those glasses. He'd sported them for cocktail parties and black-tie screenings, and while directing films across Europe. Maccioni knew that many people had dismissed the frames as an affectation but that those closest to Pasolini knew them to be a security blanket, an "emotional crutch," that helped him carry around the weight of an extraordinary sensitivity, according to a close friend.

That Pasolini's life had been punctuated by trauma was never contested. At the age of 19, he left Bologna with his mother Susanna and younger brother Guido, to take refuge from American bombing in Casarsa. Guido adored Pier Paolo for his intellect and revolutionary ideals, and Pier Paolo knew he had, in a way, radicalised his brother. It was Pier Paolo who took Guido to resistance meetings. It was Pier Paolo who gave him a gun. It was Pier Paolo who took him to catch a train to the front in 1944. Not long after, Guido was killed by Yugoslav nationalists while fighting with the partisan resistance.

Pasolini grappled with his responsibility for Guido's death for the rest of his life. Alone and bereaved, Pasolini and Susanna only grew closer. But in April 1976, the Pasolini family withdrew "without acrimony or arrogance" from the murder trial. By then, Susanna had begun showing signs of dementia and, after losing her second child to a violent death, she retreated behind a veil of silence until she died in 1981.

Maccioni, who has only met a member of the family once, often wondered how they were not moved by the case's absurdities, the endless unanswered questions and contradictory testimonies. He sometimes thought that they had left him to carry on the inquiry into Pasolini's murder on their behalf. Now, he was responsible for the biggest development in the case since 1975, testing the evidence for DNA. Click-zzh. An officer photographed the sunglasses and moved on.

A balmy, September night was descending on Venice. Four years had passed since the reopening of the investigation. Although Maccioni wasn't privy to all of the confidential inquiry's developments, he was still convinced its conclusion would rewrite the truth of what had happened the night Pasolini was killed.

He was standing alone, fidgeting impatiently in his best black suit, outside the Palazzo del Cinema. He watched in silence as celebrities emerged from lacquered-wood motorboats, wearing designer tuxedos and couture mermaid dresses. They were here for the 71st Venice Film Festival and the premiere of *Pasolini*, directed by Abel Ferrara and starring Willem Dafoe. The new biopic also purported to show the truth of Pasolini's final hours.

Ferrara, a 63-year-old neo-noir auteur known for controversial films such as the relentlessly graphic *Bad Lieutenant*, arrived with great pomp. Pasolini's self-appointed biographer was waving to the crowd, in a loose unbuttoned shirt, and holding hands with his 20-year-old partner, dressed in sequins. He looked self-satisfied, Maccioni thought.

A few weeks prior, Ferrara had shown up at Maccioni's office, with a translator and an assistant trailing. The lawyer offered them espressos and supermarket jam tarts, and briefed them at length. Pelosi, he said, had not only retracted his confession, but also admitted, in his 2011 autobiography, that he and Pasolini had been dating since early July 1975. If true, that significantly undercut the accepted cultural interpretation of the crime as the moral consequence of immoral sex.

Maccioni asked Ferrara what version of the murder he intended to show. "If this isn't the country of mysteries," he replied, shaking his head. "You Italians are incapable of solving your own murders!" (Ferrara disputes Maccioni's account of the meeting.)

Maccioni knew Ferrara was right, but he feared the director was ignoring crucial cultural context, including the historical rigidity of Italians' sexual attitudes. Women had been legally liable for adultery until 1968 and, at the time of Pasolini's murder, if their husbands killed them, "passion" was an acceptable mitigating circumstance. At the time of Pasolini's murder, divorce had only been legal for five years.

Pasolini's enemies had fixated on his open homosexuality his entire life. Their fixation, albeit voyeuristic, was widely condoned because of Pasolini's involvement

with much younger men. In 1949, he was accused of "public lewdness and corruption of minors", following a controversial episode allegedly involving boys younger than 16. Eventually, all charges were dropped, although he hadn't denied them. Following the accusations, Pasolini moved from Friuli to Rome where, over the years, he would be cited in 33 legal actions - for "pornography", for "blasphemy" - and acquitted 33 times.

In 1964, Pasolini sounded out Italian public opinion in a documentary titled *Love Meetings*. Shot all over the peninsula, the film featured a casually dressed, 41-year-old Pasolini asking Neapolitan children and Florentine club-goers questions about gender equality, sex education, divorce and homosexuality. His curious, gentle disposition pierces the screen, and his serenity never wavers, even when interviewees describe their "terror" and "repugnance" of homosexuals, not knowing they are speaking to a gay man.

The homophobia Pasolini captured weighed heavily in his murder case. According to professor Carla Benedetti, a leading Pasolini scholar, Pelosi's 1975 confession - with its lewd details - triggered a mass revision of Pasolini's life and work through the prism of "pathologic" gay sex. The grimy murder involving a near-illiterate underage sex worker invalidated all of Pasolini's political columns. Conveniently for the revisionists, the unfinished *Salò* depicted sado-masochistic torture.

It didn't matter, Benedetti noted, that sexual abuse in *Salò* was intended as a Marxist critique of "capitalism's commodification of the body". After Pelosi's confession, the director's entire artistic legacy was pilloried as a cover story for his prurient desires. In the end, the sexual motive had not only satisfied the country's unquenchable thirst for gossip, it had allowed trial truth to neatly coincide with public opinion.

All this had been lost on Ferrara, Maccioni thought, watching *Pasolini* from his fourth-row seat, the cheapest he could find. Dafoe's resemblance to the late director was uncanny: same diamond cheekbones, same unperturbed composure, same penetrating eyes. But the film's story was, Maccioni believed, was a plodding recital of the trial truth in which Pasolini was a sick, depraved and dangerous communist. This was precisely the narrative Maccioni had spent years trying to refute.

Reached by telephone, Ferrara rejected Maccioni's interpretation of the movie. "My film," he said, "is a poetic evocation about what might have happened that night. [It was] absolutely not based on the trial truth. [It was] based on our research and our imagination. I made my movie, and I stand by my movie."

When Maccioni left the palazzo, the mild evening felt pleasant on his skin. He decided to walk to the port. It felt strange to be returning to a poorly lit, cheap hotel room when Venice was all chiffon gowns and Campari-fuelled festivity. But Maccioni had nothing to celebrate. People would see *Pasolini* and believe the trial truth. To cheer up, he reminded himself of the ongoing investigation in Rome. He had slowly begun to develop a taste for Pasolini's films and enjoyed watching them alone in the evenings, eating biscuits with Nutella. To hell with Venice, Maccioni thought. He was certain

some of his leads had the potential to irreversibly refute the trial truth.

The high-speed night train shot forward like a bullet in the dark. It was November 2015, and Maccioni was returning from Livorno, some 200 miles north of Rome, where he'd been working on a case. Beneath the fluorescent glow of the overhead light, he tried to concentrate on his reading.

The past few months had been difficult. After separating from his wife, Maccioni had moved out of the home they shared with their two children. Losing them had been the hardest thing he had ever gone through. But working on the Pasolini case was something of a salve. Then, in May, the official investigation was closed.

Maccioni had spent five years unearthing and supplying the public prosecutor with new leads. In addition to the DNA, he had tracked down eyewitnesses who had never been heard in court. Their accounts supported the theory that multiple people had seen the murder take place and challenged Pelosi's account in numerous other ways.

To Maccioni, few victims seemed more defenceless. Pasolini had been abandoned by the people he had loved after his murder and, worst of all, his killing was weaponised as part of a crusade to annihilate his artistic legacy



The results of the DNA analysis showed that the boxed evidence contained traces of five distinct genetic profiles, rather than two. The carabinieri's investigations unit heard testimony from a dozen new witnesses. And yet, the magistrate's report inexplicably concluded that "all evidence led to define the Pasolini murder as an assassination tied to a context of prostitution and perpetrated solely by Pelosi". It dismissed as irrelevant all the elements unearthed by Maccioni suggesting a political motive.

As the night train rattled along the coast, Maccioni looked out his window. It was as dark as it must have been that November night, he thought. Later, as he absentmindedly scrolled through the news on his phone, an article about a new film caught his eye. *The Ploy*, written and directed by Pasolini's former collaborator, David Grieco, planned to challenge the trial truth.

A few minutes later, Maccioni was dialling Grieco. He stood up and walked down the corridor to the loudest place on the carriage, by the doors, next to the toilet. He didn't want anyone to overhear.

"David? Stefano Maccioni speaking. I'm the lawyer working on the Pasolini case."

"Ciao, Stefano. I know who you are."

Grieco's voice was silken and reassuring. He had been an actor, screenwriter and director who'd worked with the likes of Franco Zeffirelli and Bernardo Bertolucci. Grieco had also been a Pasolini protégé and close friend. In 1976, Grieco had drafted the speech the director's family read when withdrawing from the criminal case. In a way, he was family too.

The day after the murder, Grieco told Maccioni, was etched in his memory. His girlfriend had woken him at about 7am, sobbing. "They killed Pasolini," she said. "I heard it on the radio. They say he was found on a dirt pitch in Ostia."

Grieco recalled driving his motor-scooter all the way to Ostia that day, under a curtain of drizzle, where he found a "surreal scene, straight out of a Fellini film". His friend's body lay on the dirt pitch, unprotected from swarming onlookers. "There were even kids playing football," he said. Occasionally, the ball flew too close to the body and policemen sent it back with a kick.

Ferrara, Grieco continued, had asked him to write the screenplay for *Pasolini*. But they disagreed in fundamental ways. (Ferrara disputes Grieco's account.) Grieco explained that he wrote *The Ploy* shortly after. He and Maccioni continued talking, like brothers reunited after a long war, until the train reached the terminus.

In early 2016, Grieco showed Maccioni his movie.

The Ploy is an elegant if tangled noir, spinning a web that attempts to connect Pelosi, Italy's ruling class, far-right criminals and the secret services. For all intents and purposes, the film is a work of fiction, but Maccioni appreciated that it incorporated evidence he thought magistrates and prosecutors had overlooked for years.

The Ploy was never distributed in Italian movie theatres, but it was screened in parliament, where MPs helped set up the first parliamentary commission of inquiry into the murder. They invited Maccioni and Grieco to speak in the house of representatives. "I would never have imagined, when I started in 2008, that I would end up seeing a parliamentary commission of inquiry," Maccioni said in his gentle Tuscan accent.

He was speaking in an austere, wood-panelled press room, opposite rows of concentric, circular benches. Maccioni politely pretended not to notice the seats were half empty, as he proceeded to list examples of legal malpractice in the aftermath of the murder. The original tape of the evening news, first broadcast at 8.30pm on November 2 1975, featured extensive excerpts of Pelosi's confession, Maccioni said. "Besides the obvious fact that broadcasting a confession is a breach of preliminary investigation proceedings' confidentiality," he explained, the news segment could help those who'd been involved in the crime by "instructing them on what to say in official depositions".

Grieco took the floor after him, noting that "when [Pelosi's] confession was broadcast, Pasolini's body was still warm". Then he proceeded to list the obstacles he faced trying to get *The Ploy* distributed in Italy. "We have been hidden in every way possible," Grieco said. "The censorship office

initially wanted to put a 14-plus age restriction on my film - something unseen, even in porn!" Attendees at the press conference only half suppressed their laughter.

A few weeks later, hoping to capitalise on political momentum, Maccioni and Grieco filed another request with the public prosecutor to reopen the case. But by December, the parliamentary commission was dissolving, along with the Renzi government which had helped set it up. The following summer, Pelosi died of cancer and, a few months later, prosecutors rejected Maccioni's request.

Maccioni couldn't pinpoint the exact moment in which his fascination with Pasolini, the intellectual, surpassed his interest in Pasolini, the cold case. He had never known the director. Yet he defended him with no less fervour than Grieco, who'd met him as a child and could recall the last time he saw him alive in vivid detail.

Pasolini's romantic celebration of pre-industrial rural Italy transported Maccioni back to his childhood in Tuscany. The director's intimate, archaic Catholicism resonated deeply with Maccioni, who was moved by the same Christian values Pasolini had so powerfully portrayed in his 1964 biblical epic, *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Pasolini's bellicose, uncompromising integrity, which lit up his writing, evoked in Maccioni the same sentiments that inspired him to pursue his career. "I became a lawyer," he often said, "to defend those who can't defend themselves."

Few victims seemed to Maccioni more defenceless than Pasolini. He had been abandoned by the people he had loved after his murder and, worst of all, his killing was weaponised as part of a crusade to annihilate his artistic legacy. Sometimes, poring over court papers late into the night, Maccioni almost heard his voice: *The truth is in here, somewhere*. Grieco only half-jokingly called this "Pasolini fever".

Eventually the fever broke. By then, Maccioni's 10th anniversary on the case had come and gone, and his resolve, weakened by consecutive rejections, was further curbed by two years of pandemic. Grieco and Maccioni were still friends, although they hardly ever spoke about Pasolini anymore. But one evening in 2022, as the two were dining out together, Grieco sensed Maccioni wasn't entirely finished with the case. He suggested his friend write a book. "Get a recorder, lock yourself in a room and tell the whole story out loud," Grieco told him, in between mouthfuls of *suppli*. "It will all come flowing out of you. You'll feel better. You'll see."

Maccioni decided to cancel all his meetings the following Monday and bought an old-style, hand-held voice recorder. He took home heaps of unwieldy box files and binders, containing rulings, newspaper clippings and tribunal records documenting 47 years of juridical history. He stuffed some in his moped's trunk and put the rest in a large bag propped precariously between his feet. Speeding through Roman traffic, the idea of summarising it all in a relatively small number of pages seemed ludicrous.

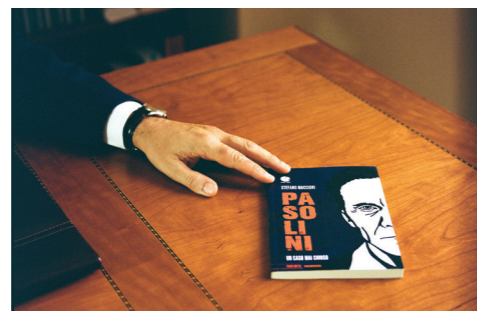
Monday arrived. Outside the French windows of Maccioni's kitchen, a crisp winter sun peeked through the large green leaves of the plane trees opposite the second floor balcony. His cappuccino-haired dog Thea napped, as she did whenever he worked from home, on the chair next to him.

Maccioni took out a pack of biscuits. He filled his espresso machine with lukewarm tap water, inserted a coffee pod under the lever and pressed the button. The coffee machine buzzed loudly, and the aroma of espresso filled the room. He took a large sip of coffee, picked up the recorder and began to speak.

He continued talking, without interruption, for the next five hours. He walked circles around the kitchen table - a witness statement in one hand, the recorder in the other and a newspaper article sandwiched like a baguette under his armpit. Then, he did laps up and down the corridor, occasionally running back to the kitchen to fetch a document.

When he played the tape back later, Maccioni could hear his voice dart about the room, untying knots, sketching profiles, drawing diagrams.

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Left: Pasolini in Rome, 1959, photographed by Henri Cartier-Bresson

Opposite: Maccioni with a copy of his book

And he realised, with disarming clarity, it was also the story of his life. He saw his colleague's face when she first uttered Pasolini's name in Cyprus, the heinous stare of Pelosi's ring, Ferrara looking around his office, and the train compartment where he first heard Grieco's voice. Maccioni understood that his pursuit of the case had planted the seeds for his divorce.

Mamma!, he thought, it's been 14 years. Fourteen years of gathering evidence. Fourteen years of drafting documents, conducting interviews, filing requests. Fourteen years believing the truth was in reach. Who had it all been for? For Pasolini? For himself? For Italy? He didn't know.

In October 2022, Maccioni received a call from his doctor. A blood test had come back positive for colon cancer. Two weeks later, he underwent segmental resection to remove the cancer. Due to Covid regulations, he wasn't allowed to have visitors in hospital, so he spent his days alone, unable to walk or sleep, next to a haemorrhaging patient in the oncology ward. In the aftermath, Maccioni felt a deep-seated need to keep going.

In December, Maccioni was resting at home, trying to put on weight and walk without crutches, when he received a message from Grieco, with a link to a news article that dragged one of the most intriguing and under-investigated theories of what happened the night of Pasolini's murder back into their lives.

In the summer of 1975, a highly unusual set of film reels vanished from the freezers of a visual effects company in Rome. They had been carefully selected among miles of film, a spokesperson told the press, and they were immensely valuable because they contained directors' chosen scenes for the final cuts of their unreleased films. The reels contained negatives from Pasolini's *Salò*, Federico Fellini's *Casanova* and Damiano Damiani's *A Genius, Two Partners and a Dupe*, produced by Sergio Leone. The episode came to be known as "the theft of the 'pizzas,'" because of the reels' flat, disc-like shape.

It was also the first and only time in the history of cinema that film reels were stolen for ransom. The thieves demand 2bn lira, the equivalent of €20m at the time, in exchange for their safe return. Pasolini's *Salò*, especially, stood to suffer, since there were no copies of its stolen negatives.

Before he'd even read the story, Maccioni thought of Sergio Citti, *Salò's* co-writer, who had tried to be heard by magistrates about the pizzas' theft for 30 years. In 2005, feeling ignored by authorities and terminally ill, Citti

told an Italian newspaper that Pasolini had an appointment to retrieve the stolen pizzas close to Ostia and that Pelosi was going with him. Citti claimed to have negotiated the exchange with a gangster, who corroborated Citti's story in a police interview in 2011.

Now, via Grieco's message, Maccioni learned that another gang member had confessed to Italy's anti-mafia commission that he had taken part in the theft of the *Salò* reels. He had not, he said, been involved in the murder, but was available to collaborate with the authorities on the Pasolini case.

Maccioni immediately called Grieco and downloaded the report of the anti-mafia commission. They had first spoken about the possibility that Pasolini was killed either attempting to retrieve the pizzas or that the exchange was a ruse in order to assassinate him. Suddenly, there was enough evidence to pursue both theories.

In March 2023, Maccioni and Grieco filed another request to reopen the investigation, urging the prosecutor to hear the mobster who had made himself available and carry out further DNA testing. In a statement, the prosecutor said the elements did not "directly concern the homicide, but regarded episodes in its background". Their request was denied.

The first time I spoke with Maccioni was on a video call from London, two days after his 2023 request was rejected. In a freshly starched suit, sitting at his desk in Rome, he could barely bring himself to talk about what the latest denial meant. I would realise weeks later, visiting his office, that the space behind his monitor is dotted with the relics of years working on the Pasolini case: framed photos, a signed poster, piles of books.

When we started talking, his posture was stiff, his voice feeble. After a few questions, he started moving his arms as he talked, his voice warmed and he began to digress. Eventually, he made a joke. Something in him, hardened by 15 years of dead-ends, softened again in front of a captive, interested audience.

Before saying goodbye, Maccioni told me: "Many times, over the years, I've tried my best to put this case away and get on with my life. But every time I try, a new person or an unprecedented event appears from nowhere and drags me straight back into it." I understood he was referring to this article. **FT**

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