

The Author Re-codified: Pasolini between Giotto and Boccaccio

Boccaccio's preoccupation with the representation of authorship in the *Decameron*, as narrative projection of the empirical author's image, has been amply debated by scholars and has been recently re-framed in the wider context of the writer's concern with the materiality of the book artefact as an expression of textual ownership.¹ Conscious of his role as the initiator of a written narrative tradition in the Tuscan vernacular, Boccaccio strived to establish "un principio forte di autorialità"² through tight control over the transcription of his manuscripts, principally in the autograph known as "B" (ms. Hamilton 90, Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz), which stood in opposition to the variability of oral production and to the textual tradition manipulated and interpolated by copyists.³

Boccaccio's fascination with authorship dates back to the Neapolitan years and became extremely apparent in the level of detail displayed in the

¹ For a recent bibliography on this topic, see Alfano 2014, 203–04.

² In the introduction to Boccaccio 2013, 32.

³ See Alfano's observations on this point: "If Boccaccio lived in a time of active traditions, when the interpolation and textual manipulation from the reader was a normal occurrence, it is all the more interesting that the Florentine writer (possibly following Dante's model) established a strong principle of authorship [*autorialità*] and, to this purpose, he used the image of the book in its materiality of crafted object" (Alfano 2014, 31–32. My translation). Boccaccio's ultimate purpose was to be part of a "constellation of authors" which could not yet be considered a tradition due to the relatively recent invention of a vernacular literature. His attempt to legitimize his own work by establishing the authority of a vernacular tradition of authors in the Chigi Codex has been most recently illustrated by Martin Eisner 2013. According to this scholar, who is also a follower of the new "material philology"; "Just as Boccaccio uses lyric poets to defend himself in the Introduction to Day Four of the *Decameron*, his attempt to authorize a lyric tradition in the Chigi aims to legitimize his own work by producing a space in which he can situate his late transcription of the *Decameron* in Hamilton 90" (Eisner 2013, 8).

Decameron, both in terms of the authorial mark detectable in the manuscripts and in the author's performance as it is "staged" in the complex narrative structure of his main work.⁴

As regards the actual image of the author as represented in the *Decameron*, we are all aware that the Author addresses his audience of female readers, or *lettrici*, in the Proem, and he reappears in the Introduction to Day Four and in the Author's Conclusion. If it is quite obvious that the empirical author Boccaccio manifests his intentions and attempts to direct the reception of his book through the creation of this authorial persona, we cannot neglect the presence of another important channel of the author's voice: the ten narrators of the young *brigata* who give life to the *Decameron's* frame-story.⁵

My aim in this article is to explore what happens to Boccaccio's idea of authorship when the *Decameron* falls into Pasolini's hands and is turned into a movie some six hundred years after its completion. This is a topic that has not yet received a great deal of scholarly attention, despite the fact that a sizeable number of comparative analyses of Boccaccio and Pasolini's frame-stories have been produced ever since Pasolini's cinematic adaptation came out in 1971.⁶ In dealing with this topic, I will first explore how authorship is re-codified in Pasolini's film. For this purpose, I will analyze the significance of the characters employed by Pasolini to express his concept of authorship. After careful consideration of the reasons behind Pasolini's linguistic choices in his cinematic adaptation, which I will compare with Boccaccio's choice of the vernacular as the "language of women," I will attempt a reading of Pasolini's reception strategy from a gender perspective.

In Pasolini's *Il Decameron*, the concept of authorship is expressed on two different and intersecting levels. Firstly, we have Pasolini expressing Boccaccio's idea of authorship by transferring and re-codifying the *cornice*

⁴ Through a thorough analysis of samples taken from Boccaccio's Neapolitan production, Alfano demonstrates how the writer intended to establish a link between the existence of the book as a material object, and the author's role, which Boccaccio was striving to create within the vernacular tradition. Boccaccio's aim was to "leave behind the more modest masks of *scriptor*, *compilator* and *commentator* and to finally become an *auctor*" (Alfano 2012, 29. My translation).

⁵ For a detailed bibliography on Boccaccio's *cornice*, see Alfano 2014, 201–02.

⁶ One of the first, if not *the* first, comparative study to devote great attention to the two frame-stories is Marcus 1980, which poses many interesting research questions and opens up the debate to Moroni 2004 and Villani 2004. Though not focusing exclusively on the two *cornici*, an extensive discourse on this topic is built in Blandeau 2006, 76–81. For a detailed analysis of the *Decameron* in the context of the three movies composing the *Trilogy of Life*, see the fundamental chapter in Viano 1993, 263–93.

in the movie. Secondly, and most importantly, Pasolini's idea of authorship interacts with Boccaccio's idea of authorship to express a new self-conscious and self-referential — Carla Benedetti would call it “impure”⁷ — subjectivity of the director-author-actor Pasolini embedded in the movie.

Needless to say, the two levels are deeply intertwined, and one of them — the first — is more widely known than the other. However, for the sake of clarity I will summarize how Boccaccio's idea of authorship is translated into the movie. As noted by Marcus:

Boccaccio's figure of the artist suffers considerable change in the hands of Pasolini. Though the medieval author internalizes himself within the text as the isolated defender of the humanities against his Philistine attackers in the introduction to the fourth day and again in the conclusion, it is in the ten framestory youths that he most importantly incarnates the figure of the artist.⁸

Pasolini does away with Boccaccio's *cornice* of the *allegra brigata* and replaces it with two key figures emerging from two *novelle* — the *novella* of Ser Ciappelletto (*Dec.* 1.1) and that of Giotto and Forese (*Dec.* 6.5) — which are dismantled, segmented and rewritten so that Ser Ciappelletto's *novella* frames the first half of the movie and Giotto's *novella* the second half.

Pasolini visualized the film plan as follows⁹:

First Part

First segment of the story-frame of Ciappelletto
Andreuccio da Perugia (*Dec.* 2.5)
Second segment of the story-frame of Ciappelletto
Masetto (*Dec.* 3.7)
Peronella (*Dec.* 7. 2)
Ser Ciappelletto (*Dec.* 1.1)

Second Part

Giotto and Forese (*Dec.* 6.5)
Caterina da Valbona (*Dec.* 5.4)
First segment of the story-frame of Giotto
Lisabetta da Messina (*Dec.* 4.5)
Second segment of the story-frame of Giotto

⁷ On Pasolini's conscious contamination of the sacred space of literature with the “impure” presence of his performance as an artist, see Benedetti 1998. A fundamental starting point to explore the mechanisms of self-construction and self-representation implemented by Pasolini in his work is Gordon 1996 and 1999.

⁸ Marcus 1980, 177.

⁹ It is worth noting that the plan was originally longer in the treatment and in the screenplay. See Pasolini 2001, 3141–44.

Gemmata (*Dec.* 9.10)

Third segment of the story-frame of Giotto

Tingoccio and Meuccio (*Dec.* 7.10)

Fourth segment of the story-frame of Giotto

If the two *novelle* of Ser Ciappelletto and Giotto are, as Pasolini himself declares, the space in which the author's stamp is made explicit (as they represent "my free intervention as an author"),¹⁰ it is worthwhile trying to understand what these two characters signify and how they relate to Boccaccio's idea of authorship. To these two characters we must add a third who is also part of Ser Ciappelletto's *novella-cornice*: an old storyteller used by Pasolini to tell a tenth *novella* (*Dec.* 9.2) who is also, I will argue, an expression of authorship.

Ser Ciappelletto represents the untrustworthy narrator, duplicitous and ambivalent. Through his story, Pasolini introduces the concept of the reliability of the narrator as storyteller and also the concept of performativity: Ciappelletto the storyteller becomes so engrossed in the performance of his "speech-act"¹¹ that he ends up "almost" believing in it himself. In doing so, he dies and becomes "other": San Ciappelletto.

Is Pasolini trying to warn his audience against the subjectivity and untrustworthiness of narration in general and, in doing so, explaining the reasons behind his choice of dispensing with the ten storytellers altogether? Is he also, through the "speech-act" of Ciappelletto, warning his audience — as Boccaccio had done in the Introduction to Day Four and in the Author's Conclusion — against the unwanted perlocutionary effects of the *novelle*?¹² Let us leave this hypothesis to one side and return to Pasolini's story-frame. An important role in the representation of Ciappelletto and his performance as storyteller is played by a character who is also an integral part of Pasolini's *cornice* and represents, in my opinion, another avatar of the author: the old man who appears in the second segment of Ciappelletto's story,

¹⁰ See the letter addressed by Pasolini to the filmmaker Rossellini, now published in Pasolini 2001, 3141–42.

¹¹ Austin 1975.

¹² The obvious reference here is to the Author's Conclusion: "No corrupt mind ever understood a word in a healthy fashion" (Boccaccio 2004, 764). According to Austin, perlocution is the third important dimension of the speech-act, after locution and illocution. As explained by Loxley, "If illocution denotes the function performed *in* saying something, then perlocution denotes the effect I produced *by* issuing the utterance. [...] whereas the work of the illocutionary is accomplished in the saying of whatever is said, that of the perlocutionary is more a matter of the contingent consequences or effects that might or might not follow the issuing of a speech act" (Loxley 2007, 18). On Ciappelletto as a cypher of that strategy of "obfuscation" pursued by Boccaccio as he "confuses his multiple readers through elaborate textual doubling," see now Milner 2015, 87.

which features Ciappelletto stealing money from a man's pocket to give to a young boy whose sexual favours he is presumably buying.

Involuntarily assisting Ciappelletto with his crime, for the mere fact of providing entertainment and distraction to the crowd of listeners, the old storyteller is an element of the frame-story as he acts as one of the few identifiable narrators portrayed by Pasolini. However, he is also an externalization of the author's intentions as he expresses Pasolini's ideology about the adoption of the Neapolitan dialect in *Il Decameron*.

At the beginning of his performance, the old storyteller suddenly switches from Tuscan to Neapolitan in an attempt to gain the attention of his audience. Before switching from one language to the other, the performer reads from a book — an old printed version of Boccaccio's text — the opening lines of *Decameron* 9.2:

You must know, then, that there was once in Lombardy, *where there are those who speak Tuscan*, a convent, very famous for sanctity and religion. Among the other nuns who lived in that convent, there was a young lady of noble birth and gifted with marvellous beauty.¹³

As has been noted by a number of scholars,¹⁴ the original text is interpolated with two additional sentences written by Pasolini. The most notable for my argument is that which also illustrates Pasolini's reasons behind the "translation" of Boccaccio's Tuscan vernacular into the Neapolitan vernacular of the movie.

As a matter of fact, it is quite obvious that nobody in Lombardy spoke Tuscan during Boccaccio's time. Thus, the interpolation needs to be read as a reference to Pasolini's times, with the adoption of the Neapolitan dialect in the movie as one of many steps in Pasolini's campaign against the capitalistic and consumerist Italo-centrism that had its propulsive centre in Lombardy.¹⁵ By opposing the polycentric and multicultural use of dialects

¹³ Boccaccio 2004, 629. My italics. The original Italian text quoted by Pasolini in the movie reads as follows: "Sapere adunque dovete in Lombardia dove ce stanno quelle che parlano toscano essere un famosissimo monistero di santità e di religione, nel quale tra l'altre donne monache che v'erano v'era una giovane di sangue nobile e di maravigliosa bellezza dotata." For the English version, I have followed Ó Cuilleanáin's translation, except for Pasolini's interpolation, which I have translated.

¹⁴ In particular by Marcus 2004, 175–76 and also, more recently, by Vecce 2012.

¹⁵ "No arguments with Florence: by now, Florence, as a leading linguistic centre, is finished. The leading linguistic centres of Italy are the private companies located in Milan and Turin [...] I did not choose Naples to have a go at Florence. I chose it to have a go at all the shitty neo-capitalistic and TV-oriented Italy: no linguistic Babel, then, but pure Neapolitan tongue. However, it is not a vernacular movie. Neapolitan is the only Italian language which is spoken internationally" (Pasolini 2009, 1652–53).

against the artificial use of an Italian language codified by the widespread use of television, Pasolini was continuing the battle initiated thirty years or so prior to the filming of *Il Decameron* in favour of Dante's plurilingual realism.¹⁶

If we consider him in this light, the old storyteller may be seen as the first and most important avatar of the author. He is Pasolini's response to Boccaccio's young *brigata* — an old, toothless, obscene narrator “of dubious gender”¹⁷ — who is also fulfilling a meta-narrative role, since he is briefly dramatizing, by way of his own performance, the author's rationale for choosing a certain language over another. In a sense, because of this meta-discourse revealing the author's intentions, the old storyteller can be put on a par with Boccaccio's intervention in the Proem, the Introduction to Day Four and the Author's Conclusion.¹⁸

Another important point we need to highlight, before moving on to analyze the character-author of Giotto, is Pasolini's concern with the audience. If the old storyteller is what is left of Boccaccio's young *brigata* and is also a self-conscious expression of authorship, where is his audience? Where are his *lettrici*, implied and empirical readers of the *Decameron*?¹⁹ They are

¹⁶ Pasolini's fascination with Contini's theories on plurilingualism and expressionism is revealed in his essays, as well as in his experimentation with Friulian language and Roman dialect across literary genres and media. A discussion on this topic can be found in Ferrara 2014. On Boccaccio's plurilingualism as an example of Contini's transhistorical expressionism, alongside an Italian literary tradition which dates back to Dante and stands in opposition to the monolingual and monostylistic tradition of Petrarch and his followers, see Branca 2004, xvii–xxxix. In light of the *Decameron's* plurilingualism, of which Pasolini was well aware, it is difficult to subscribe to Marcus' statement that Pasolini's choice of the Neapolitan language over Tuscan was a “critique of Boccaccio's text” as a “model of linguistic decorum” (Marcus 1980, 176).

¹⁷ Marcus 1980, 176.

¹⁸ The old storyteller might also be seen as a role model for the sinner Cepparello, who will in turn deceive the priest on his deathbed and will manage to turn his “Self” into “Other”: San Ciappelletto.

¹⁹ Studies on the topic of the *Decameron's* reception can be traced back to Branca's codicological analyses, leading to the thesis that Boccaccio's work, from its publication to the fifteenth century, was read mainly by the Tuscan middle class of merchants and traders (see Branca 1991). Based on palaeographical evidence, Cursi challenges Branca's traditional view and argues that Boccaccio's manuscripts were not read and transcribed by merchants who became *copisti per passione*, but rather by paid copyists, or *copisti a prezzo* (Cursi 1998 and 2007). Following Cursi's path, Daniels combines material philology and reader-response methodology, and declares: “provided that Boccaccio proposed a reader for his manuscripts, if, in other words, he copied his works with publication in mind, it is possible to use the material and paratextual elements of his exemplars as indications of his intended readership” (Daniels 2009, 17).

certainly not in the crowd gathered in front of the storyteller, which is made up of men from different age groups and only a handful of women, and in which the camera emphasizes especially the presence of young, corruptible boys. The quasi-absence of women can be read in many different ways and could be, arguably, an element of realism which ties in with the representation of a medieval male-centric and hetero-norming society — the society usually portrayed in the *novelle* of Boccaccio's *Decameron*.²⁰ However, it should be pointed out that Pasolini's concern (or lack thereof) with the female audience is an important deviation from Boccaccio's representation of authorship, a deviation that will make sense when we move on to analyze the character of Giotto as an expression of Pasolini and Boccaccio's authorship.

As is well known, Giotto (or Giotto's pupil),²¹ a famous painter well known for his ability to capture the image of reality in his frescos, is the character chosen by Pasolini to represent the concept of authorship. The interpretation of this character is complicated by the fact that, as a last-minute decision, due to the unavailability of Sandro Penna, Pasolini himself decided to act in the role. Leaving to one side this overlapping of the author-director's identity with the acting *persona* of the author, we will strive to understand first of all what choosing Giotto as an image of authorship means in relation to Boccaccio's idea of authorship. We will then proceed to explore how this choice serves as the real connector between the two levels of analysis mentioned at the beginning of this article, because it emphasizes the function of the "visual" in both Boccaccio and Pasolini's language of realism.

As noted by Ricketts, in the Author's Conclusion Boccaccio "defends his literary art by likening it to painting, which enjoys less censorship in spite

²⁰ My reference is to the absence of women as readers and storytellers, whereas Pasolini's female characters in the *Decameron* may instead be seen as the key figures through whom Pasolini constructs his own subjectivity in the context of gendered discourse. On this topic, see Ryan-Scheutz 2000. On Pasolini's marginalization of women readers in his adaptation of the *Decameron*, see Ricketts: "Whereas Boccaccio's book concentrates on stories addressed to marginalized, lovesick women, Pasolini's frame displaces the narrative agency entirely away from those circumstances, and [...] the overriding concern for the 'oziose donne' in Boccaccio's book is removed and replaced with a dynamic whose fulcrum is male community" (Ricketts 1997, 154).

²¹ Following Ricketts, I will not go into the debate as to whether or not Pasolini chose Giotto or Giotto's apprentice to incarnate his concept of authorship. I will refer to the character as Giotto, based on the screenplay's convention (see Ricketts 1997, 178).

of its similar content.”²² In particular, Boccaccio mentions the liberty allowed to religious painters in the representation of their themes as a justification for his own linguistic license in the adoption of a realistic everyday language:

And what is more, we may reflect that no less freedom should be accorded to my pen than is conceded to the brush of the painter, who incurs no criticism (or at least, no just criticism) when he not only depicts St Michael smiting the serpent with sword or spear and St George striking the dragon exactly where he wants to, but also depicts Adam as male and Eve as female, and attaches to the cross — sometimes with one nail and sometimes with two — the feet of that Man who chose to die there for the salvation of the human race.²³

Given this subtext, which calls into question the whole idea of realism and representability of the real in a work of art, Pasolini builds his own meta-discourse through the character of Giotto by making it not only a symbol of the author *per se*, or Boccaccio’s idea of authorship, but of his own idea of the supremacy of cinema and cinema authorship over literature for their ability to capture reality. It will suffice to mention Pasolini’s definition of cinema as the language of reality and reality as “cinema in nature”:

Cinema does not evoke reality, as literary language does; it does not copy reality, as painting does; it does not mime reality, as drama does. Cinema *reproduces* reality, image and sound! By reproducing reality, what does cinema do? Cinema expresses reality with reality. [...] Cinema was necessary for me to understand an enormously simple thing which, however, no man of letters knows. That reality expresses itself with itself, and that literature is nothing more than a means of allowing reality to express itself with itself *when it isn’t physically present*.²⁴

In exploring this topic — which leads us to the second level of my analysis, i.e., how Boccaccio’s idea of authorship interacts with Pasolini’s idea of authorship — we must note that the identification between Giotto the painter and Pasolini the author-director is made clear in the second segment of Giotto’s story-frame, when the character is seen gazing at the crowd and peering through a rectangle that he has formed with his index and middle fingers, which works as a rudimentary viewfinder. In addition, Pasolini’s repeated assertions that his lack of technical training as a cinema director was replaced by his apprenticeship as an art critic with his academic mentor, Longhi, seal this identification.²⁵

²² Ricketts 1997, 94.

²³ Boccaccio 2004, 763.

²⁴ Pasolini 2005, 133–35. Pasolini’s italics.

²⁵ See, for example, Pasolini 2009, 781–82.

Thus, if we understand the story-frame of the second half of the movie as a meta-discourse on Pasolini's concept of cinema as a technique to capture and reproduce reality versus storytelling (which is featured in the first half of the movie through the deceitful character of Ciappelletto), we can definitely infer the superiority of the painter-director over the storyteller from Giotto's ability to channel Ciappelletto's destructive energy and sublimate it into the creation of powerful works of art. Giotto's frescos, like Pasolini's movies, are intended for the masses and not for a middle-class elite that must be addressed in a deceitful and inauthentic Italian language, leading to failed communication and unwanted perlocutionary effects, as demonstrated by Ciappelletto's *novella*.

From this point of view, we can say that Pasolini's choice of the language of cinema over the language of literature can be likened to Boccaccio's revolutionary choice of the Tuscan vernacular over Latin. Rather than an audio-visual technique, and in comparison to literature or poetry, cinema is understood by Pasolini as a fully-fledged language:

I have said a few times that I would like to change nationality, give up the Italian language and adopt another language; this is how I was struck by the idea that the language of cinema is not a national language, but rather what I would define as a "transnational" and "transclassist" language.²⁶

In a sense, then, Pasolini's choice of the Neapolitan dialect for the *Decameron*, as the only other language of Italy which is spoken internationally, ties in with his adoption of the transnational language of cinema, which overcomes national and social boundaries.

Moving one step forward in this explanation of the fundamental criteria underpinning Pasolini's choice of the Neapolitan dialect, we may even speculate that if the Tuscan vernacular was a gendered language (the language of women) and philogyny was adopted by Boccaccio "as part of a rhetorical strategy to build vernacular authority within shifting textual communities,"²⁷ Pasolini's Neapolitan may well be read as the expression of a gendered gay choice within the writer's concept of dialect as a language that

²⁶ This is my translation of the original Italian text. See Pasolini 2009, 1302.

²⁷ Olson 2012, 54. Olson's essay on Boccaccio's gendered history of the vernacular illustrates how Boccaccio consciously employed the "language of women" in the *Decameron*, though he was aware that the gendered nature of the spoken vernacular could be a disadvantage for the establishment of his authority in a literary world dominated by Latin male readership. In Olson's words: "Apprehension of a feminine vernacular is not simply a matter of a misogynist trend in emerging humanist thought, but seems indicative of the theory that vernacular production could be seen as 'feminizing its audience'" (Olson 2012, 65).

“fulfils a deep need for difference.”²⁸ And it should be considered that the terms “different” and “difference” were Pasolini’s preferred labels “to point to his sense of indefinite otherness with respect to bourgeois society,”²⁹ as opposed to the term “homosexual” or “homosexuality.”³⁰

In this context, there is a lot more to Pasolini’s choice of having the concept of authorship expressed by the character of a painter-director (Giotto or his best pupil) and impersonated by an actor who had to be a gay poet.³¹ What Pasolini does is to bring to the table the issue of gender, or what Judith Butler would call “performativity” of gender.³²

If the gay director Pasolini projects his subjectivity onto the character of Giotto to the point of lending his acting body to it, will the audience expect to watch a gay *Decameron*? Is Pasolini creating a certain “horizon of expectations”³³ in his audience? And who is the “implied” audience of Pasolini’s

²⁸ Translated from the original text which reads “un bisogno profondo di diversità” (Pasolini 1999, 259).

²⁹ Duncan 2006, 95.

³⁰ For a reconstruction of Pasolini’s interpretation of the Friulian language as the language of the “closet,” and the subsequent adoption of the Roman dialect as a mark of his gendered identity, see Ferrara 2014, 103–15 and 142–52.

³¹ That the character of Giotto had to be impersonated by a gay poet/writer is an absolute certainty when we look at the chain of events that led to Pasolini’s sudden decision to perform in the role of Giotto after both Sandro Penna and Paolo Volponi declined the offer. As noted by Ricketts: “There is considerable evidence that Pasolini created the character of ‘Giotto’ as a homosexual. [...] Pasolini avoided using actors in his films and instead preferred to cast people he thought in ‘real life’ were most like the character he wanted represented. [...] As it turns out, all of the poets he wanted to play the part were gay, Italian men” (Ricketts 1997, 189).

³² “Gender reality is performative, which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed. It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core of identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way” (Butler 1990, 278–79).

³³ The term “horizon of expectations” and the concept of “implied” reader are pivotal elements of Reader-Response literary theories, or Reception theories as described, among others, by Jauss: “A literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of that which was already read, brings the reader to a specific emotional attitude, and with its beginning arouses expectations for the ‘middle and end,’ which can then be maintained intact or altered, reoriented, or even fulfilled ironically in the course of the reading according to specific rules of the genre or type of text” (Jauss 1982, 23).

Decameron? Also, what does this choice tell us in relation to Pasolini's apparent neglect of the question of the *lettrici*, which was so important for his medieval counterpart?

To attempt to answer these questions, I will undertake a quick digression into Pasolini's juvenile autobiographical narrative *Atti impuri*, the text in which Pasolini recounts his first amorous and sexual encounters with some Friulian boys during the mid-1940s. In Derek Duncan's words, "Pasolini's text brings homosexuality into being by the performative nature of their narration, a performance that imitates the stilted articulations and resonant silences of the closet."³⁴ It is important to mention that this autobiographical text was not published when Pasolini was alive, though there is evidence that he intended to reorganize the text for publication.

In describing the cultural and festive meetings with his friends during voluntary confinement in the village of Versuta through the war years, Pasolini relates the pastiche of stories, music, dance, theatre and poetry rehearsed and exchanged during these meetings to the encounters of the *Decameron's allegra brigata*:

How sweet were the Sundays we spent during that winter and that spring thanks to the Friulian poetry and P.'s music! [...] We used to get together in my room, or in the small room at the back of the Cicutos' kitchen, where our friends were lodged, or even, as a last choice, in the barn that I used as a school. Nobody would now take out of my mind that that was our *Decameron*, or more concretely, the temporal epiphany of that inner hermitage in which we took refuge, which was not even reached by the echo of those terrible blasts that were shaking the earth in the day and the night. We talked about music and poetry. Though, with extreme gaiety, much laughter and many interruptions to gossip about our common bourgeois friends from C.³⁵

Like the original ten youths of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Pasolini's friends and students are able to escape threats of death, in the shape of the plague in one case and the bombs of World War II in the other, by finding refuge

³⁴ Duncan 2006, 99–100.

³⁵ My translation. The original Italian text is as follows: "Ma che dolcissime Domeniche passammo quell'inverno e quella primavera in grazia della poesia friulana e della musica di P.! [...] Ci si riuniva nella mia camera, o nel piccolo retro cucina dei Cicutos, dove erano alloggiati i nostri amici, o, da ultimo, nel casello in cui facevo scuola. Nessuno mi toglie ora dalla mente che quello sia stato il nostro *Decamerone*, o, più concretamente, il temporalizzarsi di quell'eremo interiore dove sapevamo rifugiarci, e dove non giungeva neppure l'eco di quei tremendi scoppi che notte e giorno scuotevano la terra. Discutevamo di musica, di poesia; ma con estrema gaiezza, con molte risa, con molte interruzioni per fare della maldicenza sui nostri comuni amici borghesi di C." (Pasolini 1998, 151).

in this “inner hermitage” where the act of telling stories as a cathartic and entertaining exercise is still possible. However, the real fear Pasolini has to deal with is that his “difference” — as he liked to call it — his homosexuality or “prephallic, androgynous pansexuality” as David Ward defined it,³⁶ is found out and exposed. The juvenile diaries are dominated by this fear. In this sense, the metaphor used by Pasolini to refer to the meetings, “our *Decameron* [...] that inner hermitage in which we took refuge,” can be widened to include the amorous stories of the text *Atti impuri* for which, however, the author Pasolini will not be able to find a reader. As a matter of fact, *Atti impuri* would not be published during its author’s lifetime.

Twenty-five years later, when the director Pasolini was producing his own filmic version of the *Decameron* and expressing the concept of authorship through the character of Giotto, impersonated by a gay poet, the same issue must have come to the fore. Could homosexual love be brought to the screen, and the stories young Pasolini did not dare tell his *brigata* of readers finally be told? And if the stories cannot be told, what is the performative function of the gay author on the screen?

Pasolini thought that the gaining of visibility by the gay community, so that homosexual relationships could be tolerated by the hetero-norming society, would only increase the power of a consumerist and capitalist society: it would widen the mass of consumers by reinforcing the power of those (middle-class, right-wing, males) who defined the identity of the consumers, the scope of the market and the type of goods to be consumed.

As Peggy Phelan stated some twenty years after Pasolini’s *Il Decameron*:

Visibility is a trap [...] it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession. Yet it retains a certain political appeal. [...] The production and reproduction of visibility are part of the labor of the reproduction of capitalism.³⁷

Against this binary relationship where the power of visibility and the impotence of invisibility are opposed, Phelan sets the power of the “unmarked,” the “invisible,” the unspoken and unseen. This logic would seem to be the same as that adopted by Pasolini.

In Pasolini’s *Il Decameron*, a gendered homosexual discourse is only alluded to; its invisibility, its unmarkedness are emphasized by the abundance of tales of heterosexual love.³⁸ Even though the identity of Pasolini as

³⁶ Ward 1995, 28.

³⁷ Phelan 1992, 6–11.

³⁸ As argued by Viano, homosexuality in the *Decameron* is portrayed as sinful (Ciappelletto) and ultimately denied and “sublimated into the dream of pure art” through the

a gay director creates a certain “horizon of expectations” — which is further emphasized by the representation of the author through the frame-story characters of Ciappelletto and Giotto,³⁹ — this “horizon of expectations” remains unfulfilled. It is clear, however, that Pasolini chooses not to display homosexual love or intercourse on screen; he alludes to it and plays with it through the representation of images of male camaraderie surrounding Giotto in the second part of the movie, but decides against making it visible.

Seemingly, it is not the issue of the type of love which is represented, or is representable, that is at stake in Pasolini’s *Il Decameron*. Rather, it is the issue of visibility itself that is made central. By projecting the author’s subjectivity in the character of Giotto, Pasolini makes the issue of visibility and the act of representing the “real” central to his *Il Decameron*, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, and art in general.

Significantly, Pasolini’s performance as Giotto continuously emphasizes the act of looking or gazing.⁴⁰ Though, as Phelan argues:

character of Giotto. The “unmarked” homosexual discourse of the frame-story is juxtaposed to a portrayal of heterosexual love in which Pasolini’s ideology of a return to natural sex, generally exploited in the *Trilogy of Life*, is contradicted by its portrayal as a “rough and ready” act. In Viano’s words, “A most definite drawback for someone declaring the intention of liberating the screen, Pasolini’s image of sexual encounters is framed by and within the gesture of compulsive sexuality consummated quickly. The characters in *Il Decamerone* rush to do it, with a heaviness which symbolizes the dead weight of male bodies throwing themselves on stereotypically lustful females” (Viano 1993, 279–80). On this topic, see also Blandeau 2006, 79–81.

³⁹ I remind readers that Ciappelletto is explicitly said to be a gay paedophile, while the sexual identity of Giotto is alluded to through the overlap between the actor Pasolini and the fictional character of the painter-director Giotto. The close link between the characters of Ciappelletto and Giotto as generators of a gendered discourse is emphasized, among others, by Moroni, who makes an interesting reference to the practice of confession, the absence of which would set Giotto’s representation of gay gendered identity aside from that of Ciappelletto. Following Moroni’s logic, which ties in with my hypothesis about Pasolini’s choice in favour of the “unmarked,” “the theme of homosexuality, however, remains intact, in the sense of not ‘confessed,’ and therefore not offered to the institutional device of confession” (Moroni 2004, 462). On the topic of Ciappelletto’s confession as a “narrative sacrament,” a seminal reference is Ó Cuilleánáin 1984, 148–76. Within Ciappelletto’s *novella*, Ó Cuilleánáin’s study highlights “the inherent fictional potential of confession as the narrative sacrament, the necessity of deception under certain pastoral conditions, and the inherent extremism of the literary-religious convention of hagiography within which he has chosen to operate” (Ó Cuilleánáin 1984, 173).

⁴⁰ The centrality of the act of gazing has been read in a gendered perspective by Ricketts, who examines Giotto/Pasolini’s behaviour as an example of the homosexual “cruising gaze” (Ricketts 1997, 118–64).

Within the psychic and aesthetic economy of the Western gaze, the visible image of the other necessarily becomes a cipher for the looking self [...] until the image of the other can be other-than a cipher for a looking self, calling for greater visibility of the under-represented will do nothing to improve the quality of our political or psychic imaginations.⁴¹

The key question here is not “What is Giotto/Pasolini looking at? What is his field of vision?” The question is to be reversed and reformulated as: “What is it that Giotto/Pasolini doesn’t look at and doesn’t make visible?”

Giotto/Pasolini’s gaze does not work to widen the field of what is visible, but rather to allude to what is left invisible, the “under-represented,” the “unseen” — the gay audience which would be the equivalent of Boccaccio’s *lettrici* — an audience that cannot be included in the story-frame but can be alluded to through its absence. The final symbolism of the white panel, the third panel of the fresco at the end of the *Il Decameron*, could, in fact, hint at the power of the “unseen,” the blank space challenging the dynamics of power established by a male-heterosexual-dominated society.⁴² As the gay audience is “unseen,” so are Boccaccio’s female readers and storytellers, whose presence in the medieval *Decameron* — Pasolini seems to suggest by choosing their absence — rather than increasing their visibility in Boccaccio’s times, ultimately served the purpose of reinforcing the power dynamics of male-dominated politics and desire.⁴³

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⁴¹ Phelan 1992, 26.

⁴² According to Ryan-Scheutz, “the blank panel makes reference to the oppressed status of female figures in traditional narrative representations, wherein they are identified as inscribable only by desiring male subjects” (Ryan-Scheutz 2000, 372).

⁴³ Some interesting considerations on Boccaccio’s philogyny as a strategy to reinforce male control over literature and society are made by Suzuki 1993 and Olson 2012. A wide appreciation of this topic can be gained by consulting Psaki and Stillinger 2006.

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