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Pasolini's Laugh: Joyful Ignorance in the Decameron

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In this paper, I discuss Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* and its 1971 film adaptation by Pier Paolo Pasolini. To be more precise, I focus on the fifth *novella* of the sixth day, the one about Giotto and Forese, and its audiovisual re-elaboration, which can be seen as a very brief and at the same time very vivid example of Pasolini's ideas on society, language and communication.

Let us start with the original *novella* (VI, 5). This tale perfectly fits in the Florentine and bourgeois setting of the sixth day (Luperini and Cataldi 342), while at the same time, according to Vittore Branca, it belongs to a long medieval tradition of jokes about great artists' ugliness (736). In the *novella*, Messer Forese da Rabatta and Giotto meet while travelling from Mugello - where they both have their estates and country-seats - to Florence. Boccaccio describes both Forese and Giotto as ugly, but he also notices that Giotto "may deservedly be called one of the lights that compose the glory of Florence, and the more so, the more lowly was the spirit in which he won that glory". At the same time, "while he yet lived, the master of others, yet did ever refuse to be called their master" (*The Decameron*)¹.

Suddenly, heavy rain starts falling from the sky, and the two men are forced to take cover in a farmer's house, who gives them old and shabby cloaks so they can resume their journey. Boccaccio then concludes his story with Forese's joke and Giotto's witty reply:

And Messer Forese, as he rode and hearkened to Giotto, **who was an excellent talker**, surveyed him sideways, and from head to foot, and all over, and seeing him in all points in so sorry and scurvy a trim, and recking nought of his own appearance, broke into a laugh and said: "Giotto, would e'er a stranger that met us, and had not seen thee before, believe, thinkst thou, that thou wert, as thou art, the greatest painter in the world." Whereto Giotto answered promptly: "Methinks,

¹ "(...) [M]eritamente una delle luci della fiorentina gloria dir si puote; e tanto piú, quanto con maggiore umiltà, maestro degli altri in ciò, vivendo quella acquistò, sempre rifiutando d'esser chiamato maestro." (*The Decameron*)

Sir, he might, if, scanning you, he gave you credit for knowing the A B C." (*The Decameron*. Emphasis mine)².

The same episode is also portrayed in Pier Paolo Pasolini's film version of the *Decameron*, with several and significant changes in how this story is told.

The first important one is that the protagonist of the story is not Giotto, but Giotto's pupil, played by Pasolini himself. This pupil still does not want to be called "maestro", as we learn from Forese, who also adds that he is the best painter in the country, and not the entire world. All these elements lead us to think that "the artist is demythologized and humanized through Pasolini's very features" (Blandeau 64). This humanization acquires autobiographical traits, since even the journey is different from the *novella*: the pupil comes from Northern Italy and he is heading to Naples, not unlike Pasolini himself, a Northern Italian who decided to shoot a film in Naples (Greene 186). This change also implies that any bourgeois connotation of the original tale is now lost, since it is unlikely that Giotto's pupil has any estate (Marcus 177). Finally, the most important change between the *novella* and the film: when Forese jokes about what Giotto's pupil is wearing, Giotto's pupil does not retort any witty reply, but he simply laughs.

In my opinion, this joyful laugh is the key to understanding the difference between Pasolini and Boccaccio's works, and the subversion enacted by the former on the work of the latter. Throughout his film career, Pasolini sought "to interpret past text or myths in terms of the present" (Rumble 8), and *The Decameron* is no exception. While Boccaccio's *Decameron*, as Pasolini acknowledged, helped establish Italian bourgeois culture (Greene 184), Pasolini strongly believed that bourgeoisie and mass culture were annihilating the genuine Italian folk and sub-proletarian culture, a social class to which Pasolini was deeply devoted (*Terza B Facciamo l'Appello*).

² "E messer Forese, cavalcando e ascoltando Giotto, il quale bellissimo favellatore era, cominciò a considerarlo e da lato e da capo e per tutto, e veggendo ogni cosa così disorrevole e così disparuto, senza avere a sé niuna considerazione, cominciò a ridere e disse: 'Giotto, a che ora venendo di qua allo 'ncontro di noi un forestiere che mai veduto non t'avesse, credi tu che egli credesse che tu fossi il miglior dipintor del mondo, come tu se'?' A cui Giotto prestamente rispose: 'Messere, credo che egli il crederebbe allora che, guardando voi, egli crederebbe che voi sapeste l'abici'." (*The Decameron*)

In other words, in his *Decameron* "Pasolini shed a favorable light on the working class, the only one he saw as still endowed with the vitality necessary for a salutary renewal of society" (Blandeau 74-5). The film only features stories of lowborn people and merchants, completely excluding the aristocracy (Blandeau 75; Lawton 400). But the filmmaker accomplishes something even bolder: the original framing of the *Decameron* - the Florentine and bourgeois merry brigade - is completely ignored and partly replaced, not coincidentally, with the story of Giotto's pupil, which is an expansion of the original tale. In fact, we subsequently see the character played by Pasolini arriving in Naples and painting the fresco. In Pasolini's own words: "(...) You did not find the characters of Boccaccio, because I reduced each to a schemata and then filled them out with the reality of Naples, of a sub-proletarian world, and not a bourgeois one" (Rumble 107). Pasolini portrayed a marginal world not colonized by a central culture which Boccaccio contributed to establish.

Giotto's proverbial ugliness, in addition to the ugliness of his clothes, in this sense is very appropriate for Pasolini's goal. According to Millicent Marcus, "[Giotto's pupil] constitutes a rejection of all the middle class behavioral ideas embodied in Boccaccio's *brigata*. The young people's attention to property in dress, meals, and diversion is utterly disregarded by the painter who is at home in a peasant's mantle, wolfs down his food and obviously cares nothing for appearance" (177). Since Pasolini often struggled during his life between his bourgeois origins and his longing for a more genuine human experience, Giotto's pupil acquires yet another autobiographical connotation.

The rejection of the middle class behaviour is linked to the moralism of bourgeois society: and in fact Pasolini's *Decameron* is a re-telling of ten of the most erotic and lively tales written by Boccaccio. Pasolini's intent was to reconcile himself with life (Greene 181-2). Therefore, the explicit representation of sexuality - and the hints to homosexuality - becomes a political protest "against the reification and alienation imposed by modern capitalism" (Greene 183).

And that is partly why, in my opinion, Giotto's pupil laughs with Forese about his ugliness: they do not laugh at each other, but they simply express empathy and genuine happiness. However, I would like to go beyond this first, evident meaning: in my opinion, we should also pay attention to what Pasolini's laugh replaces, that is Giotto's witty comment in which he compares Forese's shabby aspect with illiteracy. The replacement, again, is not casual in my opinion. In fact, the social subversion enacted by Pasolini has also linguistic and, especially, semiotic consequences.

In the scene from the film the protagonists are speaking in Neapolitan dialect. This choice has to do with the complicated *questione della lingua*, the language issue that for centuries has been a problem not only for artistic reasons, but also for cultural ones, especially concerning the Italian "nation-building" process. Italy was not a unified country until 1861, and for centuries the Italian language - based on the literary Tuscan dialect used by Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio - was only used by intellectuals and cultural elites. The idioms that were used in everyday life by common people were the local dialects, including the Neapolitan one. Only at the time of Pasolini Italian started to be spoken by the vast majority of the population, because of the spread of education, of the greater ease to travel, and especially of mass media, like television. Because of media predominance, the Italian language became more impoverished and simplified, while dialects are now properly spoken only by a small percentage of the population (Luperini and Cataldi 1085-6).

Dialect has always been an important part of Pasolini's art. Not only because of his personal life (his earliest poems were written in Friulan, the dialect of the region his mother came from) but especially because his strenuous defense of folk and sub-proletarian culture against the homologation of modern, middlebrow Italian language (*Nuove Questioni Linguistiche*). Pasolini's choice to rely on the colorful Neapolitan dialect in *The Decameron* can be seen as yet another reaction to this homologation, a reaction that appears to be even stronger, since it undermines, even from a linguistic point of view, one of the foundational texts of the Tuscan linguistic hegemony (Blandeau 52, 75; Marcus 176).

However, the main feature of Giotto's pupil is not his idiom, but his silence. Unlike Boccaccio's Giotto

he does not appear to be an "excellent talker" at all. In fact, we hardly hear him speaking: we saw him laughing - not using a witty reply - and for the rest of the episode he is seen working on his fresco, or looking for inspiration in the streets of Naples.

Pasolini portrays himself as a painter within the story he is creating, and even in the process of creating the very story that unfolds in front of us (Greene 186). The entire visual of the film is inspired by Giotto's art (Greene 185) - Pasolini admitted that his cinematic taste is figurative, not cinematographic (Rumble 16) - and the physical presence of painting is connected with the idea of getting closer to the physical reality (Greene 186). This same idea of cinema as reality can be found in Pasolini's contradictory but still groundbreaking opinions concerning semiotics and film theory, which are included in his collection of essays *Empirismo Eretico (Heretical Empiricism)*.

In his 1965 essay *The Cinema of Poetry*, Pasolini tries to define how cinema communicates from a semiotic point of view. He argues that films are a communicative form of art because they rely on gestural signs, which are already used to complement oral language. In addition to this, memory "expresses itself primarily through signifying images" which Pasolini defines as "im-signs". These im-signs are the "instrumental premise to cinematographic communication", which makes film communication as something "extremely crude" and "irrational" (*Heretical Empiricism* 167-9). Since there is no dictionary of images, the activity of the filmmaker "is first linguistic and then aesthetic" (*Heretical Empiricism* 170): in other words, the filmmaker has to find objects from reality - which already possess "an intense pregrammatical history" - and give them "a grammatical history invented in that moment" (*Heretical Empiricism* 171). Therefore, cinema can be defined as a language of poetry, in which im-signs have both an objective and subjective quality (*Heretical Empiricism* 172-3).

The following year, in *The Written Language of Reality*, Pasolini proposed an even more radical interpretation of cinema as a language, by stating that "reality is (...) nothing more than cinema in nature" and that "the first and foremost of the human languages can be considered action itself" (*Heretical*

Empiricism 198). Pasolini contradicts himself by theorizing a subversion in the relationship between written-spoken languages and action, in which the former is a mere integration of the latter (*Heretical Empiricism* 199). For this very reason, film can be seen as "an international or universal language, the same for anyone who uses it" (*Heretical Empiricism* 202; Rumble 7; Blandeau 51).

In these essays - as well as in *The Decameron* - Pasolini tries to reconcile the contemporary audiovisual age with the necessity to avoid a complete disengagement, hence the "heretical" result (Rumble 11). From this point of view, it is now easier to understand why Pasolini defined *Trilogy of Life* as his most ideological film project (Rumble 21).

With the writings of *Heretical Empiricism* in mind, let us now return to our analysis of Giotto's pupil and his activity, which is more evidently a reflection of Pasolini's own activity. In fact, "both the fresco cycle and the film narrate through visual images, thus potentially reaching a much broader, more democratic audience than literature can" (Marcus 178). In creating a more democratic language, Pasolini is inspired by Giotto's medieval style. As Patrick Rumble pointed out, Giotto's frescoes do not have a single viewpoint, because Giotto "seems to appeal to a collective audience rather than to a single viewer whose perspective would organize the composition" (44-45). By recreating Giotto's art on screen, Pasolini rejects the bourgeois impositions both in vision and in behavior, thus identifying the audience with a pre-Renaissance and un-bourgeois aesthetics and comportment (Rumble 45).

In conclusion, Pasolini's laugh - as well as Pasolini's silence - is not simply an example of candid and liberating happiness, but especially the utopic foundation of a new, universal language. Giotto's original reply - making fun of Forese because he looks like he does not know "the A B C" - does not make any sense to Pasolini, both because the Italian spoken by Giotto and Forese is less lively than the Neapolitan in the film, and because it is less effective and less democratic than visual and audiovisual arts.

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