

**PROMOTING THE “MINOR:” A FIGURAL PRACTICE IN ITALIAN
LITERATURE AND FILM**

by

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Per Simona

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Chapter I

Introduction

il non riconoscibile, che è presente ma invisibile, dentro ogni oggetto o ambiente familiare
Julio Monteiro Martins

When literary scholars define literature as “minor,” they usually refer to a literary output that exists at the margins of a nation’s major literary production and that is produced by authors who belong to a certain minority. In their seminal work *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1989), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari strongly reinforce such conceptualization of “minor” when they claim that “A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (16). Their discussion focuses on how Franz Kafka, a Czech-speaking Jew living in Prague, exploited the German language, which was Prague’s major, “vehicular language” (Deleuze and Guattari 25).

In *Dialogues* (1991) Deleuze further explores the concept of “minor” and states that “We must be bilingual even in a single language, we must have a minor language inside our own language, we must create a minor use of our own language ... Not speaking like an Irishman or a Rumanian in a language other than one’s own, but on the contrary speaking in one’s own language like a foreigner” (4-5). Deleuze, thus, complicates the notion of “minor” and suggests that it can also be used to refer to what an author constructs in his/her native language by becoming a foreigner in it.

By drawing on the Deleuzian thought, I want to detach the notion of “minor” from an author’s background and from the “official” standing of her/his work. I will explore the “minor” as a process by which a writer manages to become estranged from his/her own language, as a *writing practice* that unveils the foreignness inhabiting even the most familiar verbal constructs and brings to the foreground the arbitrariness of certain definitions and linguistic usages. In this dissertation, I will extend my investigation to film by exploring both verbal usages *and* ways of looking at the image. As I will show, it is possible to explore the “minor” also as an *image-making* practice that reveals the unfamiliar even in the most familiar visual constructs. It is clear that I conceive of language as an interplay between verbal and visual components, which I will investigate based primarily on Jean-François Lyotard’s notion of “figural.” The exploration of minor practices from a figural perspective will allow me to link literature and film in a new way, not thematically or biographically, but as mediums showing common spaces of foreignness that defy structured signification. I will not establish connections based on common issues, themes, or genres, or the author’s background, which, it seems to me, are the most common bonds established between literature and cinema. Rather, I offer a *transversal* tool of analysis that transcends the often constricting categories separating these two disciplines.

My discussion will also be instrumental for challenging the “minor” as a discriminating tool between the canon and texts excluded from it as well as the principles on which such separation and exclusion are based. Such analysis requires me, first of all, to discuss the ideas that underlie canon-formation and foster it. With specific reference to literature, critic Romano Luperini explains that the canon contains two separate and yet

intertwined “accezioni ... Nella prima il canone è ... l’insieme di norme (retoriche, di gusto, di poetica ecc.), tratte da un’opera o da un gruppo di opere omogenee che fonda una tradizione e che perciò determina l’elaborazione di una serie di altre opere.” In its second “accezione”

il canone è considerato dal punto di vista dei lettori e del pubblico ... [esso] indica la tavola dei valori prevalente ... il canone riflette, e nello stesso tempo aggiorna ininterrottamente, la memoria selettiva di un popolo ... mira a stabilire ... l’identità culturale della comunità che in ess[o] si riconosce.

Luperini clarifies that the canon entertains crucial links both with the present and the past, as it reflects a given historical moment and mirrors what the national community has decided to remember about itself. Since “memory, remembering, is not ... innocent,” as Tujia Parvikko claims, it becomes clear that the inclusion/exclusion criteria are never culturally or politically neutral. Indeed, they reflect

vere e proprie strategie di identificazione culturale, finalizzate a legittimare anche politicamente l’esistenza di alcuni soggetti collettivi (la nazione, la cultura) e a cancellarne o ad escluderne altri (la letteratura prodotta dalle donne, la letteratura delle culture subalterne, della migrazione. (Sinopoli 31)

There are currently debates over what place should be assigned to migration literature within the Italian literary panorama, a rather thorny issue due to the fact that these texts are produced by immigrants in the Italian language. These debates are the most recent versions of long-standing and in some cases still unresolved discussions over the “status” of literary works that, despite being written in Italian by Italian writers, are regarded as “minor” (where minor, in this case, means “marginal” or being produced within a certain minority) and, thus, excluded from the canon. Women’s literature or the literary works by Italian authors of Jewish origin, for example, have been, and to some extent still are, defined minor in this sense.

Italo Calvino himself, an author firmly established in the Italian canon, shows a certain uneasiness about the separation between canonical and non-canonical texts when he confesses that “La biblioteca ideale a cui tendo è quella che gravita verso il fuori, verso i libri ‘apocrifi’, nel senso etimologico della parola, cioè i libri ‘nascosti’. La letteratura è ricerca del libro nascosto lontano, che cambia il valore di quelli noti” (*Una pietra sopra* 203). I share Calvino’s notion of literature as pursuit of hidden texts that compel a reevaluation of the works that are regarded as “noti.” In Calvino’s ideal library, the “value” of a text is not set permanently, but is negotiated and fluctuates depending on the “apocritical” books with which it manages to communicate. Such exchange will inevitably cast new light on the texts that we think are by now known and fully explored. Minor practices, by bringing to the foreground the foreignness inhabiting what we deem as familiar, might be regarded as avenues for the kind of pursuit envisaged by Calvino, which I wish to engage.

For the sake of my analysis, I will extend Calvino’s notion of “literature” to incorporate a heterogeneous collection of works. His “biblioteca ideale” does not appear, after all, as a clearly bound and organized space, but, rather, as a varying agglomeration of texts constantly striving to encounter hidden ones. The term “lontano” implies that such pursuit will make it possible to discover texts that might be remote or kept at a distance; this ideal library relies, in fact, on a

scaffale ancora improbabile, con libri che non si è abituati a mettere l’uno a fianco all’altro e il cui accostamento può produrre scosse elettriche, corti circuiti ... una situazione letteraria comincia ad essere interessante quando si scrivono romanzi per persone che non sono lettori di romanzi, quando si scrive letteratura pensando a uno scaffale di libri non solo di letteratura. (*Una pietra sopra* 159-160).

It is not far-fetched to assume, I believe, that this unstable, *in fieri* shelf could include, besides literary and non-literary works, even texts other than books, such as films.

Alliances of texts

In this dissertation, I create clusters, “accostamenti” of texts that are not commonly grouped together, texts that are not “affiliated” and that, instead, show similar, comparable minor uses of language, through which they can function together. By “affiliated” I am calling into question and problematizing the notion, implied in Luperini’s explanation, that texts generate other texts in a sort of “filiation,” made possible by certain homogeneity among them. If we recall, Luperini talks about “opere omogenee” that determine “l’elaborazione di una serie di altre opere.”

In challenging the notion of homogeneity, I will rely on another crucial Deleuzian concept, that of “alliance.” In *Dialogues* the author contends that “It is never filiations that are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind” (69). As he further remarks “It is not a question of imitation, but of conjunction ... of co-functioning” (32). I am interested in creating alliances of texts that are attracted to each other and co-function by virtue of similar ways of foreignizing language, that is, verbal and visual practices that splinter the unity of language and that constitute “minoring practices.”

Each chapter of my dissertation constitutes an alliance of texts in the Deleuzian sense. Chapter II includes *Lessico familiare* (1963) by Natalia Ginzburg and *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (1962) by Giorgio Bassani, two Jewish writers from, respectively, Turin

and Ferrara. Chapter III is devoted to two films, namely *Amarcord* (1973) by Federico Fellini and *La vita è bella* (1997) by Roberto Benigni. Chapter IV provides, instead, a combination of literary and filmic texts and includes *La parola ebreo* (1997) by Rosetta Loy, the film *Concorrenza sleale* (2001) by Ettore Scola and *Lezioni di Tenebra* (1997) by Helena Janeczek, a German-Jewish writer who immigrated to Italy in 1983.

These texts hold very different positions within the Italian literary and filmic panorama. Among the novels, *Lessico familiare* and *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* are by now ascribed to the classics of Italian literature even though they do not figure, for example, among the texts that according to Luperini make up the Italian canon of the twentieth century. *La parola ebreo* is a rather well-known text that is commonly assigned to Holocaust literature; *Lezioni di Tenebra* fits both this latter category and migration literature. As for the films, *Amarcord* is one of the landmark films in Italian cinema and Federico Fellini is firmly established in the Italian film canon. *La vita è bella* was a box-office hit and an Oscar-winning film that has earned Roberto Benigni worldwide recognition as well as a leading role among contemporary Italian filmmakers. Ettore Scola is one of the major Italian directors and *Concorrenza sleale*, though not one of his most famous films, was well received and is regarded as providing a valuable exploration of the Italian Holocaust.

In *Language, Counter-Memory and Practice* (1980), Foucault discusses the resistance some critics showed to the methodological approach he adopted in *The Order of Things* (1966) in which he placed several authors next to each other, “in defiance of the most readily observable family resemblances” (114), as the author condenses the objection. Foucault replies that “I had no intention of forming a family; I wanted to

determine ... the functional conditions of specific discursive practices” (124-125). By creating such heterogeneous clusters, my intent is precisely *not* to create families. By exploring the “functional conditions of” minor practices, I will attempt to foster a textual approach that defies the “filiations” that still inform the way in which texts are grouped together or separated, both within the same field and across disciplines.

The inclusion of both novels and films in my alliances provides fertile ground for such an analysis but also requires me to state the terms in which I envisage such combination. This entails a discussion of what I mean by language in cinema and what aspects of cinematic language I am going to discuss as cinematic language encompasses, besides the visual, also the aural and the verbal components.

Methodological approach

A short methodological note regarding the structure of this dissertation is now in order as one might wonder why the first two chapters create a separation between the novels and the films. By this choice I do not mean to imply that an analysis of written language is completely different from an investigation of the multi-faceted language of film. My chapters are porous in that they allow exchanges and influences between the novels and the films in a way that, as I will try to show, begs some reflections on the all too clear separation between literature and film. As evidence of this complementarity, Chapter IV includes two novels and a film.

In the last few decades, film theory has been greatly informed by the influential works of Christian Metz and, as critic Steven Shaviro puts it, “has largely been concerned with understanding film on the basis of a notion of signification ultimately grounded in

linguistics” (270). It is on the notion of signification and on how linguistics defines it that I wish to concentrate because it is here that I find a crucial connection between literature and cinema. More specifically, the practices that I will identify in my texts all share the effect of disrupting the chain of signification and the relationship between sign and referent. A discussion of how filmic language exceeds the linguistics-based notion of signification and cannot be reduced to it also sheds light, I argue, on the limitations of such approach when exploring literary texts.

Metz’s focus on signification is evidenced by his seminal text *Film language; a semiotics of the cinema* (1974). Metz starts from the assumptions that, first, cinema has as one of its primary goals signification and, second, that signification is structured on linguistic models. Although Metz warns that “The concepts of linguistics can be applied to the semiotics of the cinema only with great caution,” he finds in “the methods of linguistics” such as, the “strict distinction between the significate and the signifier” (107) key elements to understand the workings of cinematic text. That is why, according to Metz, cinema, while not being a “language system,” is a “language” (105) in which verbal language is just a component. The basic dynamics he sees at work in a film are informed by the special relationship between “significate and the signifier” that he sees underlying the cinematic image. In filmic images, Metz contends, there is a more direct and less arbitrary and artificial relation between these two terms than in verbal language:

The image is first and always an image. In its perceptual literalness it reproduces the signified spectacle whose signifier it is; and thus it becomes what it shows, to the extent that it does not have to *signify it* (if we take this word in the sense of *signum facere*, the special making of a sign). There are many characteristics to the filmic image that distinguish it from the preferred form of signs – which is arbitrary, conventional, and codified. (75-76)

In the filmic image, Metz sees a symbiotic bond between signifier and signified which leads to a sort of fusion: “A visual spectacle entails a joining of the signifier to the signified, which in turn renders impossible their disjunction” (Metz 64). It is based on this indissoluble link that the signifier/signified relationship serves the mechanism of representation and even goes beyond them. In fact, according to Metz, an image exceeds signification (and representation) as a mechanism that requires the construction of a sign, which suggests that he sees signification as somehow inherent, “natural” to it. In other words, to Metz, the image does not need a sign, because it is itself a sign, that is both and at the same time, signifier and signified. From this perspective, signification, as well as representation is the same as the image. By arguing that the image “becomes what it shows,” Metz implies that the barrier between signs and referents dissolves in cinema, which confers on cinematic images a sort of ontological presence. Famous is his claim that “The image is *always actualized* ... A close-up of a revolver does not mean ‘revolver’ ... it signifies "Here is a revolver!" It carries with it a certain kind of *here* (66-67). Metz presupposes a presence *in absentia*, an idea that, as I will discuss, can be exploited for certain propagandistic purposes (this was the case, for example, with certain images portraying Mussolini) in order to create the illusion of a physical presence of the object/person captured in the image.

When, from an analysis of individual filmic signs, which he clearly distinguishes from linguistic ones, Metz proceeds to explore larger film units like sequences, he sees a well-structured articulation and narration underlying the filmic text. That is why, Metz contends

The cinema is certainly not a language system (*langue*). It can, however, be considered as a *language*, to the extent that it orders signifying elements within

ordered arrangements different from those of spoken language ... Filmic manipulation transforms what might have been a mere visual transfer of reality. (105)

By stating that cinema offers a narration of events, Metz believes that a film abides by certain rules in order to structure and deliver a message. More specifically, he takes sequences as the basic elements of narration and argues that these elements are linked along a temporal chain according to specific rules of “orderings.” For this reason, Metz claims, it is possible to relate chunks of a film to “syntagms” in verbal language, an idea based on which he introduced the notion of “the large syntagmatic category of the image track (i.e. the codified and signifying orderings on the level of the large units of the film, and ignoring the elements of sound and speech)” (119-120).

Metz’s conceptualization of film language presupposes, therefore, a sort of system, a signifying, ordered system in which an image signifies and stands for something that it, therefore, represents. Through my analysis, I will challenge these assumptions and show that images can defy signification, representation, as well as ordered narration. Some of the images that Fellini, Benigni, and Scola shows us do not lend themselves to being “read” through the parameters of linguistic signification and narration, thus showing the limitations of Metz’s notion of signification and “grande syntagmatique.”

The figural as an asignifying, sense-oriented force

The limitations of such an approach can be fruitfully explored by adopting a *figural* perspective. By figural I specifically refer to Jean-Francois Lyotard’s notion of figural that he develops within his discussion – and contamination – of the relationship

between word and image. In the book, the title of which reflects the two poles of his focus, namely, *Discourse, Figure* (1974), Lyotard discusses the figural as that space of non-signification that cannot be broken down and interpreted based on the structures of discourse. As for the former term, discourse, Lyotard contends that the figural challenges “the grid in which the men of language have confined all meaning” (*Discourse, Figure* 12) and, as N.D. Rodowick aptly points out, “the inability to comprehend the problem of meaning other than linguistic” (4). The shift to a non-linguistic meaning occurs in Lyotard by recourse to the concept of “figure,” which is that further “space” (52) that discourse carries within itself and that is concealed by well-structured linguistic forms. This figure form is that “spatial manifestation that linguistic space cannot incorporate without being shaken, an exteriority that it cannot interiorize as signification” (13). As Elena Soetje elaborates on this point, Lyotard aims at

opporre al predominio del linguaggio che significa lo spazio della figura, (ove per figura non s'intende tanto la rappresentazione figurativa, quanto l'immagine visibile che “fa vedere”), che designa, mostra avendo come suo specifico il darsi come non legato, libero, non strutturato. (3)

The figural, by contaminating the separation between the verbal and the visual, provides a common ground for exploring the practices developed in the novels and in the films.

The “space” that Lyotard mentions is comparable to a field of forces that can become manifest through an image or a word, without, however, being limited to them. As Paolo Bertetto reminds us

Il figurale è quindi una concezione della forza, dell'energetico e del fantasmatico nel film (nel quadro o nel testo letterario) ... È una concrezione della forza che rende visibile, sensibile quello che altrimenti non lo sarebbe. La realizzazione di un'immagine figurale implica in ogni modo un lavoro particolare di figurazione/de-figurazione che nella letteratura richiede un intervento nel linguaggio, e nella pittura e nel cinema deve essere realizzata innanzitutto nel

visibile e quindi attraverso la configurazione/de-figurazione dell'immagine. (186-187)

Even in a literary text, where the figural is channeled through – and eventually exceeds – the word, there is a “configurazione/defigurazione,” in the sense that the configuration that the word assumes is temporary as it soon dissolves, thus challenging the signifying process. “Discourse is thick,” Lyotard continues, “movement resides within it as a force that overturns the table of significations” (14). The figural is, thus, a transgressive, deforming force that opposes structures, defined forms, order, thus challenging the idea of representation itself: “Il figurale è quello che nella rappresentazione ci fa capire che c'è qualcosa che non può essere rappresentato, un altro dalla rappresentazione. Il figurale è legato all'irrapresentabile, è qualcosa di irrapresentabile” (Bertetto 184).

The figural impels not only to move beyond the literal or indexical level of a word or image, but it also defies the “stand for” relationship between signifier and signified. For this reason, it differs from figures of speech like metaphors or symbols that despite exceeding the literal/indexical level are sustained by this relationship. I wish to provide an example by reformulating Metz's own example involving the image of a revolver that, as he claims, “does not mean ‘revolver’ ... it signifies ‘Here is a revolver!’ It carries with it a certain kind of *here*.” By remaining at the indexical level, Metz refers to a handgun possibly connected to a referent e.g. an actual handgun; if we were to interpret the word/image “revolver” metaphorically or symbolically we could propose that it stands for a violent person or dangerous object or for violence itself. The figural cannot be defined by these mechanisms and it requires a different approach able to part from these terms. We should not ask: “What does it mean?” or “What does it stand for or represent?” The questions that the figural compel us to ask are: “What hides beneath the word or the

image? From a figural perspective, the word/image “revolver” allows me to envisage what exceeds it and is concealed by it. Words and images, if opened up, can provide access to those forces that transcend them but also need them in order to be summoned and apprehended. The figural requires us to investigate the evolution of a sign and what, in the process, has been omitted or emphasized. New questions arise: Why has the word “revolver” come to be interpreted as signifying a particular object? To what extent does the verbal owe its acquired signification to visual interpretation? What is the cinematic process behind the construction of the image of a revolver? To what extent do images owe their effectiveness to established signification-oriented reading practices? What happens, ultimately, when I free the word and the image from the fetters of signification and representation? It is with these questions in mind that I approach the texts of my project, with particular emphasis on their political valence.

Michel Foucault argues that “power relations are exercised, to an exceedingly important event, through the production and exchange of signs” (338), what he also refers to as “relationships of communication” (*Power* 339). The signifier/signified relationship constituting signs and underlying the signification process as well as representation are two pillars on which political categories are built and power relations are contingent. “Jew,” “immigrant,” “Italian” are signifiers that correspond to a whole set of signifieds and can produce various meanings. The factors underlying and determining what meanings and modes of representation become dominant are political because they stem from a particular historical moment; they are political because they can bear political consequences. They can, in fact, become an integral part of a political agenda; they can become a “problem” to be solved through political measures.

The figural, by running counter to both structured signification and representation, is then a political tool because it destabilizes the very foundation on which signs like “Jew,” “immigrant,” “Arab” or any other signs referring to a particular group of people, can be exploited as categories buttressing a certain political program and discriminatory forms of power.

The choice of the period of time is not arbitrary and it is not by chance that the particular minoring practices that I will discuss are at work in texts that came out and/or deal with specific historical moments (Fascism, the *Shoah*, and, in the last novel, the relationship between the Holocaust and recent immigration to Italy). In these historical moments, in fact, language – both verbal and visual – is a crucial component in the battle over power and for exercising power. In every society, Foucault claims, there are power relations and antagonisms of power strategies that can be appropriated, extended, and exaggerated, as was the case for Fascism, a “diseas(e) of power ... that extended mechanisms already present in most other societies ” (*Power* 328). In the same way, there are practices and strategies “already present” that can be “appropriated, extended, and exaggerated” to counter persecution and oppression, often within the same power mechanisms used to perpetrate them.

By saying “counter” I do not mean to imply that minoring practices just resist the tools through which discrimination is carried out and are merely oppositional. These practices unleash transformations that go beyond resistance and engender what I wish to term *re-activation*. In discussing the ways in which resistance occurs through literature, Mary K. DeShazer stresses that “It is important that the term resistance be defined as an active quest for justice ... not merely as a reactive phenomenon created in response to

power and its abuses” (2) but, rather, as a process that “challeng[es] oppressive governments, policies and institutions but often g[o] beyond mere opposition” (2). *Re-activation* encompasses acts of resistance in the way conceptualized by DeShazer, but goes beyond them by initiating a process of growth and re-creation. These practices tap on the potential and force inherent in language that institutions of power extinguish by fostering the myth of univocal signification and representation. They do not just resist, but they enliven and activate a *force*, a figural force that had been made *inactive*. This figural potential recalls Frederick Nietzsche’s distinction between *active* and *reactive* forces in *The Will to Power*. Nietzsche explains this difference by asking “What is active? Reaching out for power (347) ... what is passive? To be hindered from moving forward – this is an act of resistance and reaction” (348). The re-activation of forces, therefore, can set the ground for moving beyond resistance and allowing dormant forces to become once again revived.

The concept of power in Nietzsche, in particular the *will to power*, has been often misinterpreted and misappropriated, most notoriously by the Nazi regime. What the author means by it is the force, the creative energy that any body, any living thing, tries to extend and discharge over its surrounding space and through which it strives to advance. Every specific body is caught in an interplay of active and reactive forces, which are engaged in a constant battle. It might well happen that reactive forces detach active force from its thriving potential – “from what it can do,” as Deleuze paraphrases it (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 57) – by stifling a part or all of its power. It is similarly possible, however, that reactive forces become active again. Minor practices show this latter possibility by revealing that within the same discriminatory, verbal and visual tools, re-

activation can be triggered, thus converting reactive forces into active ones that bring language to the condition of performing “what it can do.”

The pursuit of the figural creates conditions for testing what verbal and visual language is able to perform. The minoring practices I explore draw on the figural potential in two major ways: either by subtraction and understatement and/or by exaggeration, that is, they adopt either a bareness or abundance of language. In both cases, the effect is alienation and estrangement from language, which comes from a lost familiarity and relationship with signification and from the discovery of hidden potential and possibilities. Some of my text use humor to activate the figural, which does not equal poking fun at the subject matter – which is an extremely delicate and controversial issue when dealing with the Shoah. Rather, by virtue of its camouflaging and yet revealing effects, humor is a channel that makes it possible to tap into the potential of what exceeds representation. Silence is another powerful tool conducive to the figural in that it underscores the immensity that cannot be conveyed through a word or image. Silence “ci fa capire che c’è qualcosa che non può essere rappresentato, un altro dalla rappresentazione,” as Bertetto would put it.

Structural organization

In the first chapter I explore the novels *Lessico familiare* by Natalia Ginzburg (1963) and *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* by Giorgio Bassani (1962) and the several ways in which the Italian language can be rendered “bilingual” or “multilingual” i.e. how its unity is challenged and destabilized. By showing the untenability of fixed, univocal meaning through a contamination of the signifier/signified relationship, Ginzburg and

Bassani manage to liberate the creative, expressive, and multiplying forces inherent in language, which significantly challenges the notion of one, well-shaped and cohesive mother tongue and national language. *Lessico familiare* and *Il giardino* provide crucial insights into the ways in which literature can become a tool for challenging certain assumptions about language that serve to buttress univocal notions of identity, in their particular case, of *italianità*, and the exclusion of others. By becoming strangers to their language, they are able to show the foreignness residing in one's native language and the equivocation concealed beneath the veneer of clear and univocal meanings. Their practices are figural in that they tap into forces that exceed the forms and structures imposed on language. By drawing on this destabilizing, deforming potential, they cast doubts on the possibility of ever possessing a language.

In her discussion of literary texts produced by immigrants to Italy, Graziella Parati uses Jacques Derrida's concept of "non possession of language" in order to explain how the clear and often assumed separation between Italian native speakers and immigrants has to be revisited because of a multilinguism or "otherness" inherent in the Italian language. Parati contends

It is in the shared space of otherness *vis-à-vis* national language that native speakers of Italian and migrants who acculturate themselves in Italian meet ... The 'impossible property of language' in Derridean terms uncovers the familiarity of the familiar language. (56)

Lessico familiare and *Il giardino* provide fertile ground to explore the potential triggered by unveiling the unfamiliar in the familiar and show, as Derrida notes, that "We never speak only one language" (7). Italian is Ginzburg and Bassani's native language but they detach from it in their writing. In Deleuzian terms, they become minor in it, which is what makes possible for Italian writers and migrants to "meet" in a "space of

otherness.” What Parati claims exemplifies my notion of “minor” as a process of estrangement that transcends biographical and identitarian definitions.

Becoming minor is therefore triggered by a creative process able to devise ways of making language work multilingually; it implies and embraces *invention*. Derrida highlights the power of invention when he exhorts: “invent in your own language if you can or want to hear mine; invent if you can or want to give my language to be understood” (*Monolingualism of the Other* 57). The creation of a “minor,” foreign language within one’s own, which makes it possible to speak *like* a foreigner, can be perhaps regarded as the best avenue for speaking *to* the foreigner. This might explain why Ginzburg and Bassani’s texts channel and reflect experiences that are utterly “foreign” to their biographical background and personal stories.

The reader holds a crucial role and responsibility in this process. As Umberto Eco reminds us “Il lettore come principio attivo dell’interpretazione è parte del quadro generativo del testo stesso” (*Lector in fabula* 7) in that “un testo è un meccanismo pigro (o economico) che vive sul plusvalore di senso introdotto dal destinatario ... Un testo vuole che qualcuno lo aiuti a funzionare” (52). The verb “funzionare” aptly conveys the relationship that it is necessary to foster in order to establish the sort of connections among texts that I described above. In fact, the hidden potential inherent in any text would remain trapped if readers did not help it function by *activating* it and extrapolating the dynamics operating within texts. Alliances of texts are not just there and can only be forged through an engagement and openness to finding but also creating foreignness as a connecting thread. Eco’s idea of a sense that is “introduced” in the text by the reader

underscores, I think, the great importance of creation and invention in any reading experience.

Lessico familiare precedes *Il giardino* because the latter provides an extension and a larger perspective to the issues raised by the former. Both these novels revolve around family languages: while Ginzburg's novel concentrates on the language of a single family, Bassani's text provides a larger spectrum of linguistic usages that extends to a whole community, the Ferrarese Jewish community, which incorporates the particular way of speaking of the Finzi-Continis. Together, *Lessico familiare* and *Il giardino* create the framework of analysis supporting my entire dissertation, by providing a synthesis of the "minoring" strategies that I will flesh out in my selection of works. First, they show the fragmentation and the unfamiliarity of the mother tongue resulting in a contamination of dominant discourses on national identity. Derrida shows that a non-possession of language reflects and unveils a "disorder of identity" that destabilizes the rational behind "linguistic oppression" (23), which is significant *vis à vis* the role that Fascism attached to language in support of its ideology. Derrida contends:

contrary to what one is often most tempted to believe, the master is nothing. Because the master does not possess exclusively, and naturally, what he calls his language, because, whatever, he wants or does, he cannot maintain any relations of property or *identity* that are natural, national, congenital or ontological, with it, because he can *give substance* to and articulate [dire] this appropriation only in the course of an unnatural process of politicophantasmatic constructions, because language is not his natural possession. (*Monolinguisism of the Other* 23)

Through a clever contamination of some meanings and interpretations circulated by the Fascist regime, Ginzburg and Bassani manage to deconstruct its claims on Italian identity and race. In particular, they challenge a clear example of "politicophantasmatic" act of "giving substance" to something that is utterly constructed, namely, the creation of

racially-based “natural” differences between Italians and Jews, which lies at the basis of the Racial Laws that the Fascist regime passed in 1938. Secondly, they also “remove substance” from their narration by denying visibility to some aspects of Jewish persecution in order to counter the forced and discriminatory display of Jewishness brought about by the laws. Such invisibility also serves to evoke the ordeal of persecution and its tragic consequences as well as to underscore its unrepresentability. They draw on a figural potential because their words and accounts on the Holocaust hint precisely at its unrepresentability, at the “altro dalla rappresentazione” that Bertetto discusses. This practice, as we will see, taps on one of the most controversial issues regarding the Shoah, that is, the extent to which it is possible to recreate in art the death camp experience. Third, they engender reflections on the public significance of a text and in a way of narrating events through a private language that strays from the standard/hegemonic one, which begs reflections on the relationship between public history and private stories. In *Il giardino* I also identify a figural, visual practice that plays a special role in the other novels and in the films. In a key passage, Micòl, the female protagonist, through a penetrating, enquiring look, deforms the perfection that the narrator perceives when contemplating an object. Such look can be taken as the springboard for exploring the ways in which the directors and writers mar and dissolve the perfectly-composed visual constructs created by institutions of power in order to convey a particular message or discriminate against a group of individuals.

In Chapter III I analyze *Amarcord* and *La vita è bella* and discuss the figural practices that, by building on a deforming process, cast doubts on the representational relationship between images and the referents they invoke. They disrupt the relationship

between sign and referent and the illusion of physicality they often provide. The chapter begins with *Amarcord* because this film creates a bridge between *Lessico familiare* and *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* and the texts that follow. First of all, *Amarcord* contributes to countering the ideal of standardization fostered by Fascism. Secondly, Fellini further explores Bassani's visual practice by deforming the images that the Fascist regime constructed to support its propaganda, especially those portraying Mussolini himself and focusing on his body. Through this figural approach, Fellini develops a metacinematic technique which lays bare the artifice implied in the construction of images and eventually leads to their "disembodiment." *La vita è bella* is grounded on a similar premise, as it foregrounds the artificiality inherent in the creation of the concentration camp we see in the film. Benigni, I argue, does not attempt to create a verisimilar concentration camp and challenges precisely the principle of verisimilitude that has come to dominate cinematic portrayals of the Shoah. *La vita è bella* underscores the impossibility of representing the Shoah and the need to preserve the distance from the event. The fact that Benigni does not try to show the horror of the camps and enshrouds it in silence is a way to acknowledge this irremediable gap.

Rosetta Loy, Ettore Scola, and Helena Janeczek in, respectively *La parola ebreo*, *Concorrenza sleale*, and *Lezioni di tenebra* adopt a similar approach and use silence in order to evoke the horror of the Shoah and denounce any attempt to circumscribe the event in a concrete and tangible form. Moreover, their works contribute to contaminating the clear-cut distinction between the verbal and the visual by showing the subtle effects and the arbitrariness of some images associated with certain words: not only "the word Jew," but also "Italian," "immigrant," and "German." In *Concorrenza sleale*, Scola also

accentuates the effects of the Fellinian metacinematic technique by transforming his film in a sort of “theatrical stage” in which everything takes place against the same, constructed backdrop (the Cinecittà-built Roman street Settimiano). Finally, these texts complement the preceding ones in contaminating the dominant narration of events and conceptualization of history by injecting private, family stories.

Before *Concorrenza sleale* and as a sort of premise to it, Ettore Scola shot, in 1997, the short film “43-97.” This film creates a strong connection between the Shoah and foreign immigration to Italy and raises the issue of how the present is linked with the past. More specifically, it calls for an investigation of current events within a larger frame that incorporates not only the past, but makes the past an integral component of our understanding of the present. In this way, past and present cease to be discrete categorizations of time and can become part of a common realm of dialogue and constant exchange. *La parola ebreo* and *Concorrenza sleale* combine looking back with moving forward, as they explore the time before as well as after the passing of the Racial Laws. While the former attempts to look at the time after deportation only to encounter an insurmountable silence, the latter stops well before that moment, and leaves the fate of the protagonists enshrined in complete silence. Also, *Concorrenza sleale* entertains deep links with another Scola film, the 1977 *Una giornata particolare*, which explores the discrimination against homosexuals and the marginalization of women carried out by the Fascist regime concomitantly with Jewish persecution, although to a much more limited and less conspicuous extent. In this way, a connection is established with *Lessico familiare* and *Il giardino*. As they revolve and delve into a particular moment in history, all these texts call into the picture and open up to several related issues and perspectives,

thus becoming part and parcel of an extended “project” that by far exceeds and transcends their specific realm and the confines among chapters.

Such “openness” is also fostered by the autobiographical novel *Lezioni di tenebra* by the German-Polish writer Helena Janeczek, which also appeared in 1997. This novel confronts the present of the author’s immigration to Italy against the past of her parents’ Holocaust experience. Janeczek appropriates and reverses Scola’s perspective as she starts from 1997 in order to go back to the 1940s and, in the process, she also makes her difference resonate with other types of otherness, thus reinforcing the extended and far-reaching perspective of the works that precede it.

The minoring strategies at work in these texts manage to set free the creative, expressive, and multiplying forces inherent in language. They trigger a process that inevitably undoes even the most familiar verbal and visual constructs. In order to initiate a discussion on the multifarious effects of minoring practices, it is therefore necessary to explore the notions of proliferation and deformation that are at the basis of the figural potential unleashed by them. The figural proliferates and disperses signification by deforming the relationship between signifier and signified and the distinct separation between the verbal and the visual.

Lessico familiare and *Il giardino* provide fertile ground for beginning such an investigation because they revolve around words and expressions that are incessantly reproduced and deformed, which not only produces marked linguistic effects, but also carry political implications.

Chapter II

Proliferation, deformation, silence: the language of *Lessico familiare* (1963) and *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (1962)

In my analysis of the novels *Lessico familiare* (1963) and *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (1962), I will explore the strategies through which Natalia Ginzburg and Giorgio Bassani become foreigners in their own native idiom as well as the potential inherent in such process. The events that Ginzburg and Bassani recount in their novels are inextricably linked with their biographical experience of Jews who lived during World War II and personally faced discrimination and persecution during the Fascist era. My purpose, however, is not to identify a Jewish way of writing as arising from their personal experience as Italian Jews. Rather, I intend to explore how the strategies that Ginzburg and Bassani employ in order to estrange themselves from the Italian language transcend their biographical condition of Jewish writers and evolve to become the signs and revealers of forms of otherness and social exclusion that undermine the idea of Italian identity. In her discussion of the relationship between Judaism and writing, Laura Quercioli Mincer argues that “è possibile leggere il legame che unisce ebraismo e scrittura, non certo sancito solo da nascita e ascendenti” (11). Mincer is trying to make sense of a provocative and intriguing argument by Paul Celan who claims that “Vse poet zydy,” that is, “All poets are Jews,”¹ by which Celan wants to stress, as Mincer explains, “l’assonanza fra destino ebraico e destino dell’artista, entrambi caratterizzati da una

¹ Qtd. in Quercioli Mincer, Laura. Introduction. *Per amore della lingua*. Roma: Lithos, 2005. 11.

vocazione perpetua all'esclusione e all'esilio, oltre che da un concreto bando da parte delle società totalitarie”(11). Ginzburg and Bassani's writing is certainly determined by the “exclusion” and discrimination they suffered during Fascism, but it also reflects their condition as artists. It allows them to exile themselves from their mother tongue as a weapon to denounce such “ban.” It is so that their Jewishness becomes the channel through which this foreignness is expressed and brought to the foreground. Since “the Jews have always represented the epitome of Otherness” (Girelli-Carasi 195), Jewish writers have always had to deal with this issue, which acquires particular emphasis when discussed against the background of the Holocaust. That is why, in exploring how Ginzburg and Bassani convey and recount their personal experiences, it is possible, I argue, to find powerful ways in which prejudice and othering can be engaged and challenged. By contaminating the principles on which the Fascist regime grounded their linguistic policies advocating purity and buttressing discrimination, these two authors develop strategies that can be then appropriated for challenging other types of dominating rhetoric, other binaries that attempt to establish clear-cut and fixed separation between Italians and others. In other words, Ginzburg and Bassani's particular uses of Italian, rather than just an expression of their being Jewish authors, can also be regarded as *writing practices* that can become instrumental for destabilizing any major and univocal construction of identity as an avenue for gaining power and perpetrating exclusion. It is not by chance that their writing grows to incorporate other differences that transcend their Jewishness: while Ginzburg raises the question of her being a woman and a female writer, which is still a biographical component, Bassani embraces a type of diversity that

does not involve him personally, namely, homosexuality, as the character of Athos Fadigati in his 1958 novel *Gli occhiali d'oro* epitomizes.

I will start my discussion with *Lessico familiare* and continue with *Il giardino* because the former has guided me through a particular reading of the latter which consists in adopting the lens of “family language” and the awareness and the pursuit of the unfamiliar even in what appears to be the most intimate aspects of one’s language. The imbrication of a family language with history is the main source of unfamiliarity that I will explore, which will beg reflections on the dominant conceptualization of history.

The several languages emerging in the two novels give rise to “minoring” practices that connect to the other texts of this dissertation, thus raising questions on the ways in which texts function together. The exploration of the unfamiliar in the familiar, which activates the figural potential of language, occurs in different and yet intertwined ways: the incessant proliferation and destabilization of meaning as a way to challenge and contaminate dominant and dominating discourses on identity, sense of belonging, and clear-cut separation between I/Other; the emphasis on the indissoluble link between the verbal and the visual and its perverse instrumentalization for discriminatory purposes; and the power of reticence or silence as a tool of denounce as well as an inexhaustible source of expression and communication.

Lessico familiare: the family sayings “ripetute infinite volte”

Lessico Familiare by Natalia Ginzburg recounts the story the Levi family, a Jewish family living in Turin, from the early years of Fascism to Jewish persecution running through the post-war years, thus covering a span of thirty years. As the title suggests, the

focus of the book is the particular language the Levis use among themselves, which is made up of several unusual sayings that each family member uses on particular occasions. This private idiom does not reflect the family's Jewish background, it does not contain words pertaining to Jewish cultural or religious life. Rather, it thrives on neologisms, odd combinations or farcical reformulations of literary texts. The father, for example, expresses himself in a bizarre, colorful and idiosyncratic way. Exemplary are his admonition to his children not to have bad manners "Non fate malagrazie!," "Non fate sbrodeghezzi!," "Non fate potacci!," or the onomatopoeic "babare," "ciaciare," "ciuciottare" (all meaning "to chat"), expressions recurring incessantly and obstinately in the text. These expressions do not exist in proper Italian and are even unknown to the Piemontese parlance; they are unrecognizable and yet render visible a family solidarity and shared language. Ginzburg confesses:

Quando ci incontriamo possiamo essere l'uno contro l'altro, indifferenti o distratti. Ma basta fra noi una parola. Basta una parola, una frase: una di quelle frasi antiche, sentite e ripetute infinite volte nel tempo della nostra infanzia ... Una di quelle frasi e parole ci farebbe riconoscere l'uno con l'altro, noi fratelli, nel buio di una grotta, fra milioni di persone. (30)

The linking power of these terms and expressions stress the possibility of not conforming to the major language, of making a minor, clandestine use of it by repeating them "infinite volte." This repetition is not just a simple reiteration and make words "worn out" until they become sorts of "passwords." They function, indeed, as passwords by awakening and granting access to a universe that to the outside world is unknown and that the family members are able to preserve throughout time and despite geographical distances.

Quelle frasi sono il nostro latino, il vocabolario dei nostri giorni andati, sono come i geroglifici degli egiziani o degli assiro-babilonesi, la testimonianza di un

nucleo familiare che ha cessato di esistere, ma che sopravvive nei suoi testi, salvati dalla furia delle acque, dalla corrosione del tempo. Quelle frasi sono il fondamento della nostra unità familiare, che sussisterà finché saremo al mondo, ricreandosi e risuscitando nei punti più diversi della terra. (28)

These passwords re-activate a family experience and unity that external forces had cause to dissipate – “la furia delle acque” probably refers to the difficult years of Fascism; they manage to render once again active forces and energy that had been smothered. Just like a Phoenix, which turns to ashes only to rise again, this family language gathers a creative and regenerative power through its sayings. This inner, figural force, which stems from continual recurrence and exaggeration, contrasts and illuminates the paucity and aridity of language that Fascism had brought about. Ginzburg explains “Romanzieri e poeti avevano, negli anni del fascismo, digiunato, non essendovi intorno molte parole che fosse consentito usare” (173). After World War II: “Era necessario tornare a scegliere le parole, a scrutarle per sentire se erano vere o false, se avevano o no vere radici in noi, o se avevano soltanto le effimere radici della comune illusione” (173). In an article entitled “Chiarezza” the author defines this return to words as regained freedom and she confesses that “fra tutti i beni che con la morte del fascismo ci sono stati restituiti, il maggiore e più prezioso sia forse la possibilità di un ritorno alla chiarezza nei suoi aspetti molteplici e vari;” she also points out, however, the difficulty of “liberarci di tutti i veli e tenebre dentro i quali ci siamo nascosti per tanti anni ... io credo che il primo atto da compiere sia questo: ritrovare noi stessi: ricondurci alle forme più elementari e spontanee della parola” (1)². It is from her most basic and spontaneous language that she begins, from the family sayings into which she plunges the reader from the very start of the book:

² The article *Chiarezza* first appeared in *L'Italia libera* 2, 198 (11 December 1944). Quoted in Angela M. Jeannet and Giuliana Sanguinetti Katz, eds. *Natalia Ginzburg. A Voice of the Twentieth Century*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000. 231.

“Nella mia casa paterna, quand’ero ragazzina, a tavola, se io o i miei fratelli rovesciavamo il bicchiere sulla tovaglia, o lasciavamo cadere il coltello, la voce di mio padre tuonava – Non fate malagrazie!” (9). The text is interspersed with similar expressions that recur incessantly and suggest the possibility of rekindling the “reproductive” potential of language even after a “starvation” period.

In discussing how language was “repressed” and became a key instrument of power during the Nazi regime, George Steiner claims that the poet is “he who guards and multiplies the vital force of speech” (34), which mirrors what Ginzburg’s writing is accomplishing. Through her family sayings she initiates a process of proliferation, which acts on and contrasts the rigidity and ideological foundation of the linguistic policies carried out by the Fascist regime. In particular, it is its emphasis on order and discipline within language that Ginzburg challenges. In an article that appeared in the journal “Il Secolo” on July 23, 1923, Giuseppe Prezzolini, a Fascist sympathizer, argues that “La disciplina e la gerarchia politica sono gerarchia anche letteraria” and wonders “quale è la pagina gerarchica, disciplinata, tradizionale, dove le parole stanno al loro posto ossequianti alla legge, rispettose della natura di ciascuno di esse, contenta dell’aver ognuna di quel che le spetta?” (48).³ *Lessico familiare* brims with examples of unruly and “jumbled” words that do not know their place and do not abide by any limiting law. Very common in the book are the unusual and farcical combinations that belong to poems invented by the family. From Natalia’s poem comes

Viva la Grivola
se mai si scivola.

³ Qtd. in Gianni Eugenio Viola. *Gli anni del futurismo: la poesia italiana nell’età delle avanguardie*. Roma: Studium, 1990. 52.

Viva il Monte Bianco,
Se mai se stanco.

and

La vecchia zitella
Senza mammella
Ha fatto un bambino
Tanto carino. (35)

Ginzburg shows that words do not stay still and that are caught in a flow that knows no discipline of order and meaning. Some of the family sayings are, in fact, not only meaningless, but also extremely flexible and malleable. When Mario, one of the brothers, is in a good mood, for example, he uses the expression “Il baco del calo del malo,” which “ripeteva insaziabilmente. – Il baco del calo del malo. Il becho del chelo del melo. Il bico del chilo del milo” (44). Mario’s multiple and nonsensical combinations recall the deterritorialization that Deleuze and Guattari see in Kafka’s use of German, in particular the rendition of pure sound that he is able to achieve. They note how

This language torn from sense, conquering sense, bringing about an active neutralization of sense no longer finds its value in anything but an accenting of the word, an inflection ... it is now sound itself that will be deterritorialized irrevocably, absolutely. A language of sense is traversed by a line of escape – in order to liberate a living expressive material. (21)

Mario’s language becomes pure, irrevocably deterritorialized sound, which is caused by “undisciplined” forces inhabiting language. In this way, Ginzburg is able to show that language can be rejuvenated and set free through unruliness, which further challenges the ideas of Prezzolini for whom, as the historian Walter L. Adamson argues, “discipline ... meant a “renewal” (*rinnovamento*) that was simultaneously personal ... spiritual ... social ... and military” (31-32).

Prezzolini’s conceptualization of discipline, as Adamson contends, informed to a great deal the language that characterized Fascism, in which notions of regeneration,

wholeness and societal well being played a key role. Gianni Eugenio Viola points out that the Fascist vocabulary was “correlato alla fisiologia (con la positiva connotazione data ai lemmi quali maschio, possente/Potenza, poderoso, veemente, intrepido, impavido, rifiorire, rigenerare)” (53). The “lessico familiare” is all these things, its words are powerful, vehement, intrepid, valiant. This language sprouts and regenerates itself and, in so doing, it shows the blurredness of such terms and their applicability to other contexts, thus mocking the Fascist ideology underlying them.

“Gerarchia” is a key concept in this respect. In fact, the Fascist regime attempted to make Italian the only language spoken in Italy, which meant that all other antagonistic idioms able to undermine such supremacy had to be eradicated. As Viola explains “il plurilinguismo significava riconoscimento di pari dignità a varie lingue concorrenti, concetto inaccettabile” (49). Viola identifies three main traits in this battle against plurilinguism, that is “l’antidialectismo, la lotta contro le lingue delle minoranze, il rifiuto delle parole straniere” (53).

The Levis’ family language thrives on pluringuism and condenses many idioms: it is first of all a language that, though not manifestly, stems from a Jewish family, it relies on dialect expressions and sporadically also on foreign ones. A good example is the word to “ski,” which in standard Italian is “sciare” and that, as coined by Natalia’s father, becomes “skiare.” Ginzburg maintains the same spelling throughout the book, even in sentences that do not refer to her father, thus proving the pervasiveness and resilience of her family sayings. She sometimes even conjugates the verb according to the rule of Italian grammar as in “lui skiava” (77), which ideologically is a rather powerful combination: not only did a word like “ski” not succumb to the linguistic cleansing

pursued by the regime, but it even gave rise to a hybrid and further idiom by “exploiting” standard Italian.

As for the regime’s struggle against dialects, it should be pointed out that during the Fascist era regionally based parlances were still for many people the “native” language, with standard Italian as an unknown or hardly used idiom. This situation was a result of Italy’s century-long political fragmentation that the 1861 unification process did not resolve and that in part lasts to this day. The issue of linguistic fragmentation of the peninsula is, thus, long-standing and, in this respect, the reference in *Lessico familiare* to Dante’s *De Vulgari Eloquentia* is poignant and needs to be explored. Ginzburg recounts that

Si faceva ... a casa nostra, questo gioco. Il gioco consisteva nel dividere la gente che si conosceva in minerali, animali e vegetali ... La Paola diceva che questo gioco era stato lei ad inventarlo, ma qualcuno le aveva poi detto che una suddivisione di questa sorta l’aveva già fatta Dante nel *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. Se fosse vero, non so. (100)

The game that the family plays and the linguistic categories it creates is linked to Dante’s treatise, which carries out an evaluation and a discussion of the various regional vernaculars of Italy (*vulgari*) and brings up the thorny issue of the lack of a nationally-shared language. It can therefore be argued that Ginzburg’s reference to Dante’s treatise invites reflections on the notion of national language itself and on the significance of writing in a private lexicon.

A categorization in Paola’s terms does not appear in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. In the book, there are, however, two crucial passages in which Dante makes some key distinctions. In the first passage, Dante distinguishes between “quod vulgarem locutionem asserimus quam sine omni regula nutricem imitantes accipimus” [that which

we call *volgare* and that we learn by imitating our wet-nurse without any rule] and the language that “quam Romani gramaticam vocaverunt” [that the Romans called “grammar”] (I,i). Dante then proceeds to define the *volgare* as “nostra vera prima locution ... tum quia naturalis est nobis, cum illa potius artificialis existat” [our first true language ... it is for us natural, while the other one is artificial] (I, i). It is worth noting that among the inferior *volgari* he includes “quod unius solius familie proprium est” [that which is spoken by just one family] (I, xix). In the second passage, Dante stresses the need to discern words carefully: “Nam vocabulorum quedam puerilia, quedam muliebria, quedam virilia ... sentimus” [we feel some words as childish, some feminine, some masculine] and admonishes the reader to consider “actente quantam ad exaceranda egrégia verba te cribrare oportet” [carefully how necessary it is to choose in order to find high words] (II, vii).

By renouncing a high register and by opting for the language spoken by just her family, which brims with “low” words and idiosyncratic expressions, Ginzburg breaks these rules and shows the potential of this idiom to function as a public and literary language. After all, this is also something that Dante himself discovered, which led him to breach his own linguistic prescriptions. In fact, he wrote the *Comedia*, the work he produced while in exile and deeply imbricated with Florence’s and Italy’s public and political life, in the *volgare*. The Tuscan parlance becomes for Dante the language that denounces his being banned from Florence and even those elements that in the DVE were described as not worthy of being used are recaptured and employed strategically to respond and act on the external situation of exile. Dante rehashes, for example, words like “mamma” e “babbo” that he had previously rejected “propter sui simplicitatem”

[because of their simplicity] (*De Vulgari Eloquentia* II, 7). Placed in a very strategic part of the *Comedia*, at the beginning of Canto XXXII of *Inferno*, these words contribute to creating “rime aspre e chioce,” that is, imbued with asperity and harshness, thus losing all the innocence and family warmth that are usually associated with them. In the same way, the Levis’ family language, brimming with simple and homey words, evolves to become the revealer of external situations that are all but comforting. Such transformation occurs by virtue of the figural potential inherent in words, even in those commonly thought as simple and easily graspable. I do not agree with critics who see this family language as completely detached from Italy’s political life and according to whom, like Carlo Prospero claims, Ginzburg “prende nettamente le distanze da ogni deleteria confusione di linguaggio, da ogni indebita commistione di poesia e politica” (63). It is precisely a “commistione” that the author is creating, a contamination of her writing with politics or, rather, a contamination of politics through her writing.

In a passage describing the meager life Natalia and her kids are leading after the war and the death of her husband Leone Ginzburg,⁴ it is the familiar, nurturing figure of the “balia” – wet nurse, a woman who in former times was employed to breastfeed the baby – that allows the woman to fathom the precariousness of her situation.

quella balia, grande, con quei grembiali tutti ricamati e le maniche a sbuffo, mi ricordava la precarietà della mia situazione e mi ricordava che ero povera, e che non avrei mai potuto senza il soccorso di mia madre tenere una balia; e mi sembrava di essere, nei Divoratori, Nancy, quando guarda dalla finestra la sua bambina camminare per mano alla sontuosa balia sul viale, e sa intanto che hanno perduto al casinò tutti i loro denari. (151)

Ginzburg strips the word “balia” from the domestic realm and collocation and shows its different sides, opens it up and endows it with multiple meanings. As Eugenia Paulicelli

⁴ Leone Ginzburg was arrested and tortured to death by the Germans in 1943 in the Roman prison Regina Coeli because of his subversive political activity.

notes about the language of *Lessico Familiare*, “She calls the reader to think and *rethink* continuously the meanings of the words used ... She seems to suggest that it is exactly ... in the *familiar*, that mystery and shadow fall” (199). It is significant that in the above passage it is the the wet-nurse, a figure that Dante characterizes as being the model for one’s “real” and most intimate language, that evokes the precarious situation in which Natalia and her family find themselves. Just like Dante’s Florentine idiom becomes the language that gives away the suffering caused by exile, Ginzburg’s familiar idiom is by now imbued with the “shadow” of history; the distance she now perceives from the “balia,” which is suggested by the glass pane and is augmented by a recollection of visual distance, underscores the distancing from the nurturing side of her “lessico familiare.” History and the Levi’s private realm fuse into a “commistione” that is not clearly definable: “la balia arrivò, ma proprio nei giorni in cui i tedeschi avevano invaso il Belgio, per cui eravamo tutti angustiati e poco inclini a dar retta ad una balia” (150). At this point it is unclear what is familiar and what is alien: the wet-nurse is commonly a familiar figure in one’s family, but this particular one has just arrived and is a stranger while Belgium is both a foreign country and the place that shields Natalia’s father. That is why the Levis’ language cannot be easily labeled as a separate language, as “la lingua di una tribù” (72) as Carlo Prospero calls it. It has shifted; it has moved to become something else. It will always be the building blocks through which the family unity can be rebuilt, but, nonetheless, it resonates with and encapsulates other meanings, meanings drawn from history that turn it into the tool to denounce it.

The common assumption that *Lessico Familiare* is a novel dealing with simple, “domestic” themes has led some critics to relegate it to a minor literature, and by minor

I here mean of lesser literary value. As Rebecca West explains “Although she is undoubtedly seen as an eminent author, it is often the case that the ‘domesticity’ of her thematics is excused rather than extolled . . . Ginzburg’s production has had negative connotations for certain sectors of the patriarchal cultural, critical, and literary network” (5). Ginzburg takes a stand *vis à vis* these negative judgements by giving voice to some of her own mother’s sayings that address and confront authors and works belonging to patriarchal literary tradition.

In *Lessico familiare* there are, for example, references to Proust’s *Le Recherche du temps perdu*, which Lidia, the mother, incorporates into her sayings in a quite original way. Natalia recounts how “Mia mamma aveva letto Proust e lei pure, come Terni e la Paola, lo amava moltissimo e raccontò a mio padre chi era, questo Proust, uno che voleva tanto bene alla sua mamma e alla sua nonna” (110). This daring and outrageous privatization of Proust, which stresses his almost oedipical attachment to his mother and grandmother, extols, rather than excuses, the private and domestic side of one of the most eminent male authors. It also calls into the picture a maternal lineage that is often left silenced by a patriarchal discussion on the production of literature. Ginzburg creates what Graziella Parati calls “gynealogies” (12), or “braided genealogies” (*Public history, private stories: Italian women’s autobiography* 10). In analyzing the autobiographical texts of Italian women from different time periods, Parati discusses how the authors construct a female identity based on a personal and familial past that incorporates both paternal and maternal traces. As Parati shows, these “gynealogies” greatly inform these authors’ construction of their public role and manage to problematize the dichotomy between the public as male and the private as female (5).

A braided genealogy also links Proust's work to Ginzburg's own literary achievement. In a further appropriation of Proust, the mother asks Natalia "Quando esce la tua traduzione di Proust?" and adds "Io Proust non lo rileggo più da tanto tempo. Però me lo ricordo, bellissimo! Mi ricordo Madame Verdurin! Odette! Swann" Madame Verdurin doveva essere un po' come la Drusilla!" (206). The mother's reading of Proust is now coupled with the literary achievement of Natalia not only as a female writer, but also as a translator. It is a woman writer, therefore, who will disseminate the French author's work, which gives rise to a crossed and hybrid product that, as Homi Bhabha would put it, is "neither the One ... nor the Other.... *but something besides*, which contests the terms and the territories of both" (41). By providing examples of how the figure of Proust is revisited by Natalia's mother, Ginzburg crosses literary territories that are often conceived as sealed and impermeable. The "besides" emerging through this "alliance" interrogates the categories that separate texts and the notion of direct "filiation" that deeply informs these categories. Ginzburg shows that major and minor works can come together and produce something new, thus triggering a process of mutual rejuvenation.

Lidia is described as having a creative vein and enjoys inventing poems. Although these poetic creations never made it to the public realm, they do however, via Ginzburg's mediation, cross over to the territory of literary tradition. One of Lidia's poems, for example, reads as follows:

Salve o ignoranza,
Al tuo pensier mi cessa il mal di panza!
Salute regna ove tu sei, lasciam lo studio ai maccabei!
Beviam, danziam e non pensiamo, Facciamo festa!
Or tu Musa ispirami un concetto,
Dettami tu quel che mi dice il cuore,

Dimmi tu che il filosofo è molesto,
Nell'ignorante trovasi l'amore. (23)

Lidia appropriates many of the terms of poetic tradition such as “Salve,” “salute,” “Musa,” “Dettami,” but mixes them with down-to-earth and rather comical terms like “mal di panza.” Instead of celebrating knowledge and the figure of the “filosofo,” she extols ignorance and provides an invitation to careless celebration. These traits and their poking fun at established texts make this poem comparable to satires. In this particular case, the invocation of the Muse does not only parody traditional poetic language, but also the very position from which such invocation is performed. In fact, it is usually a male poet who calls on the Muse for inspiration, whereas here a woman relies on another woman for creativity. Lidia appropriates but does not imitate male models, not even when she indirectly “quotes” some eminent male authors. The line “Dettami tu quel che dice il cuore” recalls Dante’s poetic “manifesto” expounded in Canto XXIV of Purgatory, in which he claims “I’ mi son un che, quando / Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo / ch’è ditta dentro vo significando.” Lidia’s poem is an affirmation of the possibility that it could be “una” to register what love dictates, which initiates a “gynealogy” of literature that contributes to creating a hybrid and highly destabilizing literary realm.

The hybridity characterizing Lidia’s poem also derives from their being braided with history, which mirrors the relationship that the entire text entertains with historical events. Natalia recounts that “Si recitava, in casa nostra, *La figlia di Iorio*. Ma si recitava soprattutto, la sera, intorno alla tavola, una poesia che sapeva mia madre e che ci aveva insegnato. The first lines of the poem run as follows:

Eran parecchi giorni che si tremava tutti!
Ed i vecchi dicevano: “Madonna santa, i flutti
Ingrossan d’ora in ora!

Date retta figlioli; partite con la roba!” (135)

The fact that the family prefers the mother’s poem over Gabriele D’Annunzio’s *La figlia di Iorio* (1903) is not only significant because D’Annunzio is a male author belonging to Italian literary tradition, but also because the two works adopt different approaches to the narrated events.

La figlia di Iorio, a tragedy set in Abruzzi, narrates the protagonists’ story against pastoral life of the past, with its traditions, beliefs, and patriarchal system, and is dedicated “alla madre, sorelle, padre, esule, ai morti” (1). To D’Annunzio’s mother, who embodies the tradition and past of Abruzzi, Ginzburg opposes her own mother, her family tradition and herself as a female writer. *Lessico familiare* could also be interpreted as a tribute to Natalia’s mother, grandmother, father; the crucial difference is that Ginzburg’s novel is not set against an a-historical backdrop like timeless Abruzzi, but against the “present” of Fascism. The historical contextualization of the warning to escape because of the menacing waters occurs just a few lines later “Erano i primi anni del fascismo” (35). Some of the “Tante robuste spalle / [che] Sono là per difendere quella povera valle” (33) are Natalia’s family members and friends: Mario and Alberto, two of Natalia’s brothers, Leone Ginzburg, and Filippo Turati, a Socialist intellectual involved in anti-Fascist propaganda. The particularly gripping way in which she tells us about their political activity is by maintaining the “familiarity” of these figures and by showing how the “political” was deeply imbricated with the “domestic.”

Ginzburg describes Filippo Turati as follows:

Di Turati mio padre diceva che era un ingenuo; e mia madre, che non trovava che l’ingenuità fosse una colpa, annuiva, sospirava, e diceva: - Povero mio Filippèt -. Venne una volta, a quell’epoca, Turati a casa nostra, essendo di passaggio a Torino; e lo ricordo, grosso come un orso, con la grigia barba tagliata in tondo,

nel nostro salotto. Lo vidi due volte: allora, e più tardi, quando dovette scappare dall'Italia, e abitò da noi, nascosto, per una settimana. (36)

Ginzburg expands the figure of Turati – similarly to the way in which Lidia describes Proust – to show the many identities hiding beneath it: this man is an “orso” in Natalia’s memories, he is an “ingenuo” to the father’s eyes and becomes, as a term of endearment, “Povero mio Filippè” for the mother who even makes him her own, as suggested by the possessive adjective “mio.” Even Turati’s political activity cannot be detached from the Levis’ domestic realm. In fact, he was able to escape from Italy and, thus, certain arrest by Fascist police, because he found help and shelter within the walls of the family’s house. In this way, Turati as a public and historical figure becomes inextricably intertwined with the Levis’ private domain; the discovery of Turati’s private side illuminates a space that is usually overshadowed or neglected by official history.

Ginzburg’s style

In *Lessico familiare* Ginzburg adopts a simple and completely unadorned style, which allows her, however, to tell and convey the ordeal of the war and of the Italian Holocaust. The way in which George Steiner describes the potentialities of Kafka’s bare German to echo the tragedy of the Holocaust, provides crucial insights into Ginzburg’s use of language. Steiner argues:

The live nakedness of his style takes no syllable for granted ... Listening to the mystery of language with more acute humility than ordinary men, he heard the jargon of death growing loud inside the European vulgate ... In short, Kafka heard the name Buchenwald in the word *birchwood*. (50)

Ginzburg’s naked style is also meant to make us hear how the “jargon of death” is appropriating the Italian language, i.e. how language is imbricated and resonates with the

terrible fate awaiting Italian Jews. Kafka's barren style stems from his writing in a foreign language, while Ginzburg's basic Italian derives from her becoming a stranger in her mother tongue and from tapping into the figural potential that this process unleashes.

Her style is also characterized by bareness and "nakedness;" her own Italian syntax, so basic and simple, is full of paratactic sentences, silences, and repetitions, which render the whole texture fragmented and impeded. The language is such that it vaguely recalls the unfamiliarity with an idiom that a non-native speaker might have. Eugenio Montale himself stated that "Il linguaggio di *Lessico familiare* sta addirittura al disotto del livello medio del nostro standard di conversazione. As Angela M. Jeannet argues, this style responds to a particular notion of history telling, to the idea that "history cannot be told in a sequential, lucid discourse; it causes *stammerings*, a series of flickers of recognition (66).

By stammering in her own language, Ginzburg creates a strategy for telling history that does not derive its sharpness from plenitude, but, rather, from gaps and lacunae. Bearing in mind the "fasting" language resulting from Fascism, this stylistic choice is strategic and subversive: not only does Ginzburg's language show the signs of that mutilation through a limping and impeded language, but is also instrumental for recovering from that "digiuno." Ginzburg turns this paucity into a powerful weapon: in "making do" with little elements, she manages to say volumes by refusing to explain. In other words, she conjures up the unexpressed, unstructured, unverbilized space hiding beneath her words and entrusts it with the task of communication. There are several passages in which the author omits explanations, leaves a lot of information unsaid and

just implied, which is for the reader to retrieve. Similarly to Kafka who “took no syllable for granted,” Ginzburg makes even punctuation marks pregnant with meaning.

The passage in which she first mentions the passing of the Racial Laws in 1938 in Italy exemplifies such strategy: “Avevo avuto, nella mia adolescenza, tre amiche. Le mie amiche erano chiamate, in famiglia, ‘le squinzie’. ‘Squinzie’ significava nel linguaggio di mia madre, ragazzine smorfiose e vestite di fronzoli” (138). In the long description of them, Ginzburg provides readers with clues as to the fact that they are Jewish; she explains that the father of two of the friends used to prepare “complicati piatti ebraici” (139) and that he did not allow the maid to enter the living room “per via dei lumi ebraici che potevano rompere” (141).

After describing them, the author is ready to state: “Quelle tre mie amiche erano ebreo. Cominciò in Italia la campagna razziale, ma loro, frequentando quegli ebrei stranieri si erano inconsciamente preparate ad un futuro incerto. Andavamo, loro e io, all’università” (143). This passage is characterized by an impeded, stammering language in which the reader is confronted with bits and pieces of information that lack syntactical connections. These girls are first referred to through one of the family sayings, then their Jewish identity is hinted at through references to their father whose being Jewish is also inferred. Then, finally, comes the statement that dispels any possible remaining doubt, namely, the reference to discrimination against the Jews. Between “Quelle tre mie amiche erano ebreo” and “Cominciò in Italia la campagna razziale” there is a vast political background that is omitted through a silence that accentuates the extent of the tragedy that befell on the Jews. In the book, we only find sporadic and indirect references to deportations. She explains that in July 1943, while she was hiding in a little village in

Abruzzi, her husband Leone sent her a letter “in cui mi diceva di lasciare il paese immediatamente perchè là era difficile nascondersi e i tedeschi ci avrebbero individuato e portato via” (158). Although it is clear where the Germans would have taken her and her children, she does not verbalize it and leaves it unsaid. She and her children managed to escape to Rome with the help of the village inhabitants, while others “vennero presi, ammanettati e caricati su un camion, e scomparvero nella polvere della strada” (159). Ginzburg maintains the same bare style even when dealing with people she knew personally, like the parents of her sister-in-law Miranda: “I suoi genitori erano stati presi dai tedeschi ... Miranda ebbe notizia che si trovavano nelle carceri di Milano ... sepp[e] poi che tutti gli ebrei di San Vittore erano stati fatti partire per destinazione ignota” (174). After these veiled and yet extremely eloquent references to deportations, Ginzburg swiftly moves on to her life after the war. The entire extent of the mass murder of six million Jews, which included many Italian Jews, remains implied and hidden in these two isolated passages.

Through huge gaps in her narration, Ginzburg forfeits a linear telling of history and hints at a “hole” existing in the way Italian history had been narrated until then. It is very interesting to note that the 60s were still a time in which, as Franco Girelli points out, a “Jewish discourse” in Italian literature was not yet present and, especially, a discourse on the Shoah (193). A literary case that exemplifies such unpreparedness is Primo Levi’s 1947 novel *Se questo è un uomo*, which was rejected for publication by Ginzburg herself, who at the time was working at the publishing house Einaudi. When the novel was finally published in 1959 the public received it very well and the same happened with Levi’s second novel and sequel to *Se questo è un uomo*, *La tregua*,

published in 1963. Notwithstanding such success, as Joan Cannon points out, “attention to Levi’s work remained at the level of the classroom and of newspaper and magazine reviews and did not include sustained scholarly attention” (38). Ginzburg’s sporadic and yet powerful references to the Shoah through her stammering language represents, I believe, one of the first attempt to acknowledge a gap in Italian literary discourse, a gap that she had contributed to creating and reinforcing. The fact that *Lessico familiare* came out seven years after the re-publication of *Se questo è un uomo* and in the same year as *La tregua*, coupled with her personal involvement in Levi’s work allows to read the above excerpts in *Lessico familiare* against the literary environment of the sixties. Ginzburg, as well as Bassani, as we will see, opens a narrative space which includes the Italian Holocaust, which will be fully engaged and recognized as part of Italian history only in the 1980s. Through this inclusion, the two authors challenge the notion of linear history, which is one on the tenets on which the nation and national identity lie.

Benedict Anderson has famously argued that the nation and national identity heavily rely on the construction of a notion of time that is “homogeneous and empty” (12) a linear time that ensures continuity between the past and the present. This particular point is taken up and explored by Homi Bhabha who sees an act of narration at the basis of the nation and nationalism; that is why he talks specifically about a national narrative, which excludes and marginalizes certain individuals like “the colonized and women” (217). Ginzburg is a woman and a Jew and belongs to a group of people that during Fascism were excluded from the Italian national narrative. Also, through her work, she attempts to challenge a patriarchal literary system that tends to exclude literature produced by women and revolving around “domestic” issues. Yet, she refused access to

Levi's camp autobiographical account, to a writer who was bringing up the horror of Auschwitz, which should have found in Ginzburg a willing listener and supporter. As Cannon remarks, Ginzburg was "a reader who would seem to have been uniquely qualified to appreciate its merit" (30). Ginzburg's refusal seems so difficult to understand because we start from the assumption that her writing and the strategies she employs in it are solely determined by her biographical background. If it is undeniable that *Lessico familiare* draws on her personal experience of Jew and woman, the text is not limited to it; it is modeled on and informed by certain practices that were taking hold and beginning to channel the "foreignness" of the Shoah. Ginzburg steers her language in such a way as to incorporate such foreignness, shows her estrangement from it, and yet, stresses the need to acknowledge it. In so doing, Ginzburg calls for a revisiting of history that forfeits linearity and is instead open to constant revision and inclusion of marginalized voices. By recapturing a discourse on the Shoah, the author disturbs the neatness of the timeline between past and present; she insinuates her voice and doubles the telling of history by "coughing up" elements that render the time of the national narrative double or even multiple. Within a colonial context, Bhabha talks about a supplementarity, a supplemental time that insinuates itself and "that may disturb the calculation. As Gaschè has suggested, 'supplements ... are pluses that compensate for a minus in the origin' [in a] metonymic, iterative temporality" (222). Ginzburg provides supplemental histories and historical times; her metonymic narration, in lacking completion and linearity, bears evidence to the repression and silencing of voices by literary institutions. By so doing, she manages to set an ineludible "precedent" and practice for challenging any univocal way of narrating history. Ginzburg's approach can be appropriated by other groups and in

other circumstances in order to unveil the supplemental, multiple histories silenced and hidden behind the veneer of one and clearly-bounded national history.

In *Lessico familiare* the untenability of such conception of history emerges from her narration, which is not only metonymic, but also incessant, with an ending always deferred to a later time. In this way, it becomes ungraspable and unstoppable, in other words, “undisciplined.” Not just single words and sentences, but the entire text does not “stand still” and knows no clear boundaries. There is a powerful passage in which what is not said and is purposefully deferred to a later time leaves narration hanging and ready to sprout in myriad directions. It once again a reference to Jewish persecution that allows Ginzburg to create this effect, which as before, is dependent upon an abstinence from language. Two friends of the Levis’ are Cesare Pavese, of whom the book provides a very personalized description, and Rognetta, “un nostro amico che a quel tempo vedevamo spesso ... Rognetta diceva che la Germania avrebbe invaso tra poco non solo la Francia e anche certo l’Italia, ma tutto il mondo” (151). These words raise concern in Lidia but Rognetta “baciandole la mano, le disse che però si poteva sempre andare, forse, nel Madagascar. – Perché proprio nel Madagascar? – chiese mia madre. Rognetta rispose che un’altra volta glielo avrebbe spiegato” (151). The fact that Rognetta defers to a later time the explanation, an explanation that will never be provided, is indicative of the kind of reading that needs to be performed. A reading propelled by the question “what could it mean?” This seemingly non-sensical statement about Madagascar as a possible land for sheltering the family fits into place if the reader is privy to the fact that one of the earliest possibilities envisaged by the Nazi regime in order to solve the “Jewish question” was to send all of European Jews to the African island. The idea was soon discarded because of

its practical unfeasibility. Ginzburg's paucity of language and stammering evokes that figural space that is not expressed and yet is conveyed through her words. Here lies the great weapon of her minor use of her native idiom, the potential that arises from a self-mutilation and self-disabling. It is through this self-imposed exile from her mother tongue, through this vacuum of words that she espouses, that Ginzburg is able to make her language the beacon of historical tragedy. Through just a single period as the separation between the three friends and the racial campaign, she is able to illuminate the presence and the plight of all Italian Jews; by postponing to "another time" the explanation of the allusion to Madagascar, she calls into the picture once again what actually happened after the failure of the Madagascar's plan, as well as the need to look for other ways of reading history beyond the official ones.

The fact that the book starts and ends in *media res* attests to this stammering, stretchable, and unfixable narrative time, which is also shown by the format of the text. In its being totally devoid of any separating elements such as chapters, it conveys a flow of becoming, of words that transform and become other words, in an amass that will never find a static and permanent structure. The ending reinforces this effect. The book ends with the mother's telling a story about one of her uncles (nicknamed Barbison) and with the father's curt remark "Ah non cominciamo adesso col Barbison! ... Quante volte l'ho sentita contare questa storia! (228). The story of Barbison is one of the first anecdotes we encounter in the book and not only does Ginzburg repeat the same information about him, but also the wording is almost the same. Here is the key: *almost*. It is an imperceptible difference, but it is there and it is extremely significant for its showing a transformation, a becoming of the family sayings into something else. I do not agree with

those critics that see the “lessico familiare” as an entrapping, monotonous, and arid language that repeats itself dully and that in the end “cessa di rinnovarsi e di arricchirsi, limitandosi a ritornare circolarmente su se stesso ... Esso ha ormai perso ogni estro inventivo, ogni espressività e tende a riprodursi in forme meccaniche” (Prosperi 65). Rather, I see it as inaugural in the sense discussed by Jacques Derrida when he claims that “If writing is inaugural, it is ... because of a certain absolute freedom of speech, because of the freedom to bring forth the already-there as a sign of the freedom to augur” (*Force and Signification* 13). In *Lessico familiare*, the only book, as Ginzburg confesses, “che io abbia scritto in stato di assoluta libertà”⁵ what has been restated “ripetute volte,” grants the freedom to augur a new language that does not “cessa di rinnovarsi e arricchirsi.” A language that, rather, finds in the already-said renewal and makes it possible to invent new ways of telling. In other words, the family sayings do not limit or stifle the author and her language in their being reproduced identical; they are, instead, the tool that allows to rejuvenate its force. The strategies underlying this repetition can be seen, once again, as an “iterative metonymy,” to refer back to Bhabha. The story of the Barbison we heard the first time lacked what is now recalled by the second repetition, which, in turn, will lack what the next repetition will contain. As Derrida would put it

Something is missing in the grammar of this repetition ... this lack is invisible and indeterminable ... and yet all meaning is altered by this lack. Repeated, the same line is no longer exactly the same ... Something is missing that would make the circle perfect. (*Force and Signification* 373)

⁵ Qtd. In Luigi Fontanella. “A Reading of *Le voci della sera* and *Lessico familiare*.” *Natalia Ginzburg: a voice of the twentieth century*. Ed. Angela M. Jeannet and Giuliana Sanguinetti Katz. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000. 32-45. 42.

What would seem to provide Ginzburg's book with perfect closure – the anecdote that starts and ends the book – does, in fact, signal a slippage that makes it difficult to envisage clear, well-defined limits for the family sayings and the language of the book.

Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini: Micòl's deformed and deforming language

In Giorgio Bassani's *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (1962) the boundaries of the text are even more manifestly stretchable; in fact, the novel "spills over" and becomes deeply connected with the other five novels that Bassani eventually grouped together in *Il romanzo di Ferrara* (1980). As Roberto Cotroneo argues in the introduction to this work⁶ "In fin dei conti, Bassani è l'autore di un solo libro ... quel grande libro che egli scrive e riscrive per non ammettere una volta per tutte che non c'è nulla da aggiungere, e che poi intitolerà *Il romanzo di Ferrara*" (XVI). In my analysis, I will make some references to *Gli occhiali d'oro* because such comparison/juxtaposition allows me to see how some of the practices Bassani adopts in *Il giardino* have a pretext in *Gli occhiali d'oro*, in which two types of otherness meet: the Jewishness of the narrator, the same as in *Il giardino*, and the homosexuality of Dr. Athos Fadigati, who will end up committing suicide.

Il giardino spans from the early years of Fascism to 1943 and, similarly to *Lessico familiare*, a private story becomes deeply imbricated with history. The narrator, whose name is never explicitly stated, is recollecting his youth – during the 1930s – and, in particular, the close links he established with the family of the Finzi-Continis, especially with Micòl, the daughter, with whom he will eventually fall in love. The Finzi-Continis, aristocratic and rather snobbish, live aloof not only from the Ferrara community, but also from the city's Jewish community: they have their own temple, they home-school their

⁶ I am referring to the 1998 edition of *Il Romanzo di Ferrara*. Milano: A. Mondadori, 1980.

children, and rarely leave their mansion, the “magna domus” (23). This aloofness is partially relinquished with the passing of Racial Laws in 1938, which imposed several prohibitions on all Italian Jews indiscriminately. The Racial Laws made no distinctions as to social class, cultural level, type of religious school, or compliance with traditions (Sarfatti 95). The first contact the narrator is able to establish with the family is when he is invited to the magna-domus to play tennis; Jews, including aristocratic and wealthy Jews like the Finzi-Continis, were in fact forbidden from practicing sport in public clubs.

The structure of the book, differently from *Lessico familiare*, is neatly divided into a prologue, ten chapters, and an epilogue. The Prologue, however, embraces a vast, extended time. It begins as follows:

Da molti anni desideravo scrivere dei Finzi-Contini – di Micòl e di Alberto, del Professor Ermanno e della signora Olga – e di quanti abitavano o come me frequentavano la casa di corso Ercole D’Este, a Ferrara, poco prima che scoppiasse l’ultima guerra. Ma l’impulso, la spinta a farlo veramente, li ebbi soltanto un anno fa, una domenica d’aprile del 1957. (3)

The “impulse” that triggered the narration stemmed from the Etruscan cemetery of Cerveteri, near Rome, which Bassani visited together with some friends on a Sunday afternoon in 1958. It is here that the Etruscan tombs make the narrator go back “con la memoria agli anni della mia prima giovinezza, e a Ferrara, e al cimitero ebraico posto in fondo a via Montebello ... e come se l’avessi addirittura davanti agli occhi, la tomba monumentale dei Finzi – Contini” (8). As the author explains, this tomb has been constructed by an ancestor in order to house the entire family but “non vi è stato sepolto che Alberto, il figlio maggiore” while the rest of the family “deportati tutti in Germania nell’autunno del ’43, chissà se hanno trovato una sepoltura qualsiasi” (8). The prologue provides a clear chronological framework of the particular story encapsulated in the

novel, which begins “poco prima che scoppiasse l’ultima guerra” and which ended with the deportation of the Finzi-Continis to a concentration camp in 1943. This story, however, is set within a much larger context that is deeply embedded in history and is ungraspable in its totality. The “chissà” that introduces the narrator’s speculation that the Finzi-Continis might have found some sort of burial place, an uncertainty compounded by the adjective “qualsiasi,” hints at the impossibility of telling the complete story of the family. Through this simple sentence, by leaving narration hanging, Bassani creates a landmark writing practice for dealing with the Shoah, that is, the strategy of leaving to silence, to the unsaid, the task of conveying the incommensurable horror of the camps. While in *Lessico familiare* Ginzburg adopts a general silence with respect to the Jewish predicament during World War II, Bassani anticipates the far-reaching debate over how to represent or portray the atrocity that people had to endure inside the death camps. Although *Il giardino* revolves around the time before and during persecution and does not venture beyond, as was also the case for *Lessico familiare*, it does, however, create a narrative space for raising this issue. Bassani concentrates on the social and political factors that led to deportations, which all originated from the constructed racial separation between Jews and non-Jews.

The issue of separation is introduced in the prologue, when a little girl, at seeing the Etruscan tombs, innocently asks: “Nel libro di storia, gli etruschi stanno in principio, vicino agli egizi e agli ebrei. Ma senti papà: secondo te, erano più antichi gli etruschi o gli ebrei?” (5). The blurred distinction between Etruscan, Jews, and Egyptians and the reference to history books provide meaningful clues for reading the story of the Finzi-Continis. Bassani’s strategy of contaminating the distance between these groups that

according to the girl “stanno vicino” challenges the different levels of separation that Italian Jews, the Jewish community of Ferrara, and the Finzi-Continis will suffer or elect. The girl’s appealing to history books as an authoritative source for her claim suggests that the private story recounted in *Il giardino* is strictly connected and deeply imbricated with history. In Bassani’s novel, as in *Lessico familiare*, language, deterritorialized and splintered in family languages, constitutes a powerful tool to contaminate the policies carried out by the Fascist regime and the notion of history it fostered.

In the text, not one but two languages are carved out from the major language, thus producing a sort of “Russian doll” effect, as the second idiom is extrapolated from what is already a minor use of Italian. First, we have the language of the entire Jewish community and then the particular, unique way of speaking of the Finzi-Continis. The former is epitomized by the narrator’s family who is rather “assimilated” in the city’s community. Differently from the Levis’ “lessico,” this language is interspersed with Hebrew words. Not only does Bassani omit translations, but he also grafts the Hebrew words onto the Italian syntax. Exemplary are sentences like “mio fratello stava sempre lì ad imitarmi come fossi che gran “hahàm”” (54), “il momento finale della *berahà*” or grammatical variations of the same Hebrew word in agreement with the Italian sentence: “avvolgersi nel gran *taled* di lana bianca!” (28), “tutti i figli sarebbero stati raccolti sotto i *taletòd* paterni” (30).⁷ Read against the linguistic campaign fostered by Fascism, this mixture serves as a way to dispel the myth of purity. In this respect, the contamination of Italian with Hebrew words is effective at two different levels: first, it counters the Fascist regime’s ban of foreign words and, even more powerfully, it retains evidence of a

⁷ *Hahàm* means wise man, the *berahà* is the blessing marking the end of the religious service, whereas *taled* (pl. *taletòd*) is the shawl worn by men in synagogue.

presence, the Jewish presence, which the Racial Laws wanted to eradicate. While in *Lessico familiare* it was possible to glean the meaning of the family sayings, here the sentence remains obscure if the reader is not conversant with these Hebrew words. So, why omit translations? What is the strategy behind such omission? Bassani seems to be confident that readers will eventually figure out and become conversant with the meaning of the untranslated terms. The author's bilingualism is somehow based on the assumption that the Hebrew words could become familiar, thus making it difficult to determine clear boundaries between languages and worlds. The rationale behind discrimination and persecution stems from the belief that there are clear-cut, insurmountable differences with the group in question. The "linguistic" trap that Bassani sets for readers who are beguiled into familiarizing themselves with the Hebrew terms in order to make sense of what they are reading is to show that it is possible to become the other, to become-minor. Readers are "dragged" into a minor becoming, a "Jewish becoming" that is nothing but a series of multiple transformations, an unceasing flow. Through these examples it becomes clear that Bassani is engaging a writing practice that stems but eventually detaches from his Jewishness as he initiates a process by which all readers could be involved in this becoming. We have the impression of never being able to "grasp" and contain language: once we partly access one idiom we immediately find out the presence of other and more "specialized" ones. As soon as we have become a little conversant with the parlance of the Ferrara Jewish community, we encounter yet another way of speaking, namely the family language of the Finzi-Continis. This idiom reflects the family's aloofness from the outside world, the Jewish community included. The narrator explains that "Questa particolare, inimitabile, tutta privata deformazione dell'italiano era la loro *vera* lingua. Le

davano perfino un nome: il finzi-continico” (37). This idiom is created “spiccando le sillabe di certi vocaboli di cui essi soli sembravano conoscere il vero senso, il vero peso, e invece scivolando bizzarramente su quelle di altri, che uno avrebbe detto di importanza molto maggiore (37). Micòl’s language is a further sub-category and specialization of this extremely limited language and as Bassani himself noted “Micòl contraddice a tutti gli altri, e contraddice nella misura in cui parla in un modo assolutamente diverso” (qtd.in Cotroneo XVIII). The girl’s idiosyncratic way of speaking partly derives from the special emphasis she accords to some words. An example is the way in which she stresses the adjective “bravo” to indicate the functionality of an object as in the phrase “la mia brava scala a pioli” uttered by Micòl “scandendo le sillabe di ‘mia brava’ nel suo solito, orgoglioso modo” (38).

The concept of “deformazione” is crucial in order to understand what potential is set free or let go “berserk” by her minor use of Italian. The deforming character of the finzi-continico, does not stem from inventing and using new words, as was the case with the Levis, but from placing emphasis on syllables that are usually “neutral.” In so doing, the finzi-continico subverts the importance assigned to particular words to the detriment of others. Contrasting and even playing with the ideal of unity and discipline – it is worth recalling Prezzolini’s emphasis on the notion of “disciplinato” – the girl manages to set words free from the constraints commonly placed on them. The indefinite pronoun “uno” indicates something to which one, people, they, in other words the majority of people, have become accustomed to and, thus, perpetuate.

Micòl’s language is also multilingual because she actually resorts to foreign words and expressions for achieving a particular effect. For example, Micòl addresses the

narrator as “dear friend” (109) and in one instance she comments on his self-understatement in terms of physical appearance by telling him “You’re fishing for compliments” (182). The narrator himself, when interacting with Micòl, often draws on non-Italian terms, as if the Italian language were too common and neutral to characterize her. For example, he writes her a postcard reading “All lost nothing lost” (186), as a sign of his willingness to detach from her emotionally. Micòl’s recourse to foreign words often constitute references or direct quotations from novels in French or English, which she reads avidly in clear defiance of the ban imposed on foreign literature by the Fascist regime. She quotes, for example from Baudelaire; she mentions among her favorite novels *Les enfants terribles* by Cocteau and some works of American literature. She has a special predilection for Melville, and in one instance she compares the narrator to “Bartleby,” a character she particularly appreciates and in whom, as the narrator recounts, “si era messa ad esaltare ‘l’inalienabile diritto di ogni essere umano alla non-collaborazione’, cioè alla libertà” (174). This statement could well be Micòl’s manifesto: she, like Bartleby, embraces complete freedom and seems to firmly believe in the inalienable right not to comply with rules.

In response to one of her remarks about Bartleby, the narrator notes that “Di Melville ... conoscevo soltanto Moby Dick, tradotto da Cesare Pavese” (173). Micòl also translates from the English, especially poems by Emily Dickinson on which she is writing her degree thesis. The combination of her translation ability with the reference to Pavese is very significant if we bear in mind that Pavese, estranged from the intellectual environment of Fascist Italy, explored the wealth of American literature and translated into Italian some of the most renowned American novels. Micòl employs Italian as the

vehicle for disseminating foreign texts – which were also banned – thus creating a literature that is “neither the One ... nor the Other,” neither American nor “purely” Italian. She “de-forms” these defining categorizations, violates them and gives rise to a “hybrid” literature that complicates the notion of what is a “national” and, at that time, Fascist literature and art. If Ginzburg takes a stand *vis à vis* the patriarchal literary establishment by contaminating the public and the domestic/feminine realm, Bassani raises the problematic notion of “national” literature and its role in the affirmation of national identity.

Micòl’s language does not only deform and undo the boundaries imposed on language and literature that strive to contain them, but also unveils the imperfections that are concealed behind the veneer of what seems perfectly formed. The deformation that she engenders in language evolves to become a visual practice, as epitomized by one of the key passages involving Micòl and the narrator. The girl has allowed the narrator to visit the garden, including the most secluded part, the place where an old carriage is kept. The narrator congratulates the girl because the carriage looks like “nuova” (94) and Micòl, almost irritated, replies that “alla luce naturale non c’è niente da fare, infinite magagnette saltano subito all’occhio (95). Through the particular angle that Micòl adopts and through the light effects she is able to find, she spots the “magagnette” in something that seems perfect, thus showing how perfection is just a matter of perspective. In this particular passage, Bassani is engaging not only a writing practice but also a visual one, which relies on the unveiling of the “magagnette” that are hidden beneath the façade of an image and that emerge if the right angle is found. In this passage we find a powerful example of the alliance between the verbal and the visual and get a glimpse of the figural,

transgressive force that cannot be contained by fixed forms. As Cotroneo contends “Un mondo visivo ... prima ancora che narrativo, sta alla base dei racconti e dei romanzi di Bassani” (XIX) and, with specific reference to *Il giardino* “C’è nel libro un tempo quasi filmico” (XXXIV). By “tempo filmico” Cotroneo refers to “il modo di raccontare” that takes reader “dove, da solo, non avrebbe saputo come muoversi” (XXXIV). The adjective “filmico,” however, can also be applied to the images that Bassani creates or reproduces in the novel. These images are not static, they seem to evolve, just like the carriage appears different if no light effects are employed.

From a theoretical perspective, the practice of de-forming challenges the myth of purity fostered by the regime and inherent in the antisemitic legislation. The provision banning marriage between Jews and non-Jews underlies precisely the intent of creating perfectly “formed” couples that would avert the danger of racial contamination. In this respect, it is poignant that Micòl’s deformation of the Italian language through foreign words and expressions is mostly applied to the realm of love or, more specifically, illicit love and transgression.

Micòl’s transgressions: her amorous and linguistic alliances

Despite the fact that Micòl is close to the narrator, her feelings for him do not develop beyond friendship. One night she invites him to her bedroom and, at his attempts of intimacy, Micòl is finally honest with him. She tells the narrator that she will never envisage them as a couple, but only as friends, despite the fact that to the eyes of the Jewish community they would appear “belli ... degnissimamente assortiti” (181). The girl even confesses that during her college years she has had many “morosi,” who were

Catholic, and not “judim” and that however, were nothing but “flirts” (183). Micòl continues:

Nemmeno i flirts, anche quelli piccoli, sono cose che si imbastiscono con degli amici ... e perciò a parlarti di amici, devi riconoscere che ti mentivo fino a un certo punto ... Sono anche io come tutte le altre: bugiarda, traditora, infedele ... Aveva detto “infedele” spiccando al solito le sillabe, ma con in più una specie di amaro orgoglio. (184)

The expression “spiccando le sillabe,” stressing the syllables, is what, as we recall, renders the finzi-continico “una deformazione dell’italiano” consisting in conferring emphasis on certain syllables over others commonly more stressed. The “deformed” sound of the word “infedele” can be read as meaning that speaking the “finzi-continico” is a sort of unfaithful and irreverent act comparable to her “flirting” with Catholic men. One of these flirts is Giampiero Malnate, a man from Milan and a good friend of Alberto’s, Micòl’s brother, who often frequents the magna domus to play tennis. Eventually Micòl’s bond with Malnate becomes more ambiguous and at the end of the book the narrator is rather confident that they have developed an amorous relationship. This realization marks his complete detachment from the girl. By choosing Malnate over the narrator, Micòl is renouncing a union that would be “bella” and “degnissimamente assortita,” harmonious and not spurious like her “interracial” union appears to the eyes of Fascist society. There is a parallel, almost an overlap, between Micòl’s attitude to language and her concept of love unions. In fact, she is “unfaithful” to the ideal of a “pure” language *as* she breaches the rules meant to preserve “racial purity,” which is suggested by the word “flirts.” She contaminates the Italian language through an English word that reveals her predilection for mixed unions. Micòl’s impure language is the lens through which we can explore the ambiguities implied in the ideal of purity and

particularly its associations with the notion of beauty as deriving from a racially acceptable combination. The girl refutes the idea that “bello” is what perfectly matches and conforms to the other elements and contributes to creating a harmonious ensemble. She equivocates the equation “beautiful” / perfectly “assorted” and, more specifically, the constructedness of notions of beauty, order, and purity, which always requires the silencing and purposeful oblivion of destabilizing and contaminating forces. She is like a painter who can see deformities and imperfections and, instead of concealing them, retains and uses them as proliferating tools, as fruitful and dynamic forces that can give rise to many other forms. In illuminating these blemishes she trains us, as if we were apprentices, to look for them and not to be deluded by the rhetoric of the perfect form.

The finzi-continico does not merely deform the Italian language, but is itself contaminated by other “deformations” of Italian, such as dialect. This becomes clear in a passage in which Micòl interacts with farmers who work for her family or when she explains to the narrator the different kinds of plants these farmers grow.

Me ne parlava di quelle umile piante domestiche ... tirando spesso fuori il dialetto ... Così le mele erano i “pum”, i fichi “i figh”, le albicocche “i mugnàgh”, le pesche “i pèrsagh”. Non c’era che il dialetto per parlare di queste cose. Soltanto la parola dialettale le permetteva, nominando alberi e frutta, di piegare le labbra nella smorfia fra intenerita e sprezzante che il cuore suggeriva. (86-87)

The connection between dialect and a deformed face expression like a grimace has a precedent in *Gli occhiali d’oro*, in which, however, it resulted from an act of discrimination and derision. Confronted with a daring question about his sexual preferences, Dr. Fadigati’s face “Come se fosse stata colpita all’improvviso da uno schiaffo potentissimo ... si deformò sotto in nostri occhi in una smorfia dolorosa” (244). This passage is linked with a previous one in which the narrator explains that “talvolta,

come succede a parlare di argomenti indecorosi, e dell'inversione sessuale in inspecie, c'era chi ricorrenva sogghignando a qualche parola del dialetto, che anche da noi è sempre più cattivo in confronto alla lingua dei ceti superiori" (224).

If Fadigati succumbs to the defamatory question by deforming his face into a grimace just like, as we infer, he is targeted with discriminatory epithets in dialect, Micòl appropriates these tools and uses them to her advantage. Her "smorfia" is not the result of an offence, but stems from the satisfaction of linguistic transgression through the adoption of dialect.

The conversation in dialect between Micòl, the speaker of a language of extremely limited circulation, and the farmers is also significant because it establishes complicity between speakers of "minor" idioms, which further challenges the "unity" of the Italian language. The intimacy with Malnate also constitutes a linguistic bond in these terms. In fact, the man conveys his attachment and nostalgia of Milan by often expressing himself in the Milanese parlance. Also "da buon Milanese, la sua grande passione era il Porta" (211). Carlo Porta is regarded as the major poet in the Milanese dialect and Malnate frequently and proudly quotes from his works. He, too, like Micòl, fosters cultural interests that were criminalized by the Fascist regime and is therefore a transgressor. Similarly to Ginzburg's writing in her family language, output in dialect raises questions on the acceptability of a minor and non-standard idiom as a public and literary language. The notion of national literature as representative of all Italians is therefore challenged as dialects attest to the fragmentations marking Italian society.⁸

⁸ A thorough discussion of the significance of literary output in dialect and its relationship *vis à vis* canonical texts would require a more in-depth investigation than I can provide in this dissertation. I have, nonetheless, referred to Porta's work because it is a further and powerful example of Micòl's minorization process.

What emerges from Micòl's linguistic exchanges are alliances in the Deleuzian sense of the word, bonds that by defying "filiations" and "lines of descent" functions like, "contagions, epidemics, the wind" (69). Micòl allies with Malnate who does not share her Jewish background and descent. Moreover, when interacting with her servants, Micòl abandons the language that marks her filiation – the "finzi-continico" perpetuates the last name of the family and its "line of descent" – and becomes "infected" by and at the same time "infects" dialect.

In another significant passage Micòl converses with the wife of one the farmers:

Fummo ricevuti dalla moglie del vecchio Perotti, la Vittorina, una scialba *arzdòra* di età indefinibile ... "E allora quand'è che torni ad invitarmi a mangiare la minestra di fagioli?" chiedeva intanto alla Vittorina, in dialetto" ... "Devi sapere" aggiunse, rivolta a me, "che la Vittorina fa delle minestre di fagioli *mostre*. Con la cotica di maiale, naturalmente" Rise. (88)

The context in which she adopts dialect is also an occasion for non-compliance with the Jewish culinary rule not to eat pork, which marks a further break away from her descent. In fact, this contamination does not merely affect the language that emerged within her family, but also the Jewish tradition that her parents, grandparents, and ancestors have so unfailingly preserved and upheld.

After the "naturalmente," which is a way to express that disobedience is what one should expect from her, the girl laughs. Laughter is the response that follows another instance in which Micòl breaks the same culinary rule. When the narrator is invited to the Finzi-Continis to play tennis, he is served a beverage that Micòl and the other call the Skiwasser:

Oh, lo Skiwasser! Nelle pause di gioco, oltre ad addentare qualche panino che sempre, non senza ostentazione di anticonformismo religioso, sceglieva tra quelli al prosciutto di maiale, spesso Micòl tracannava, a piena gola un intero bicchiere

del suo caro “beverone”, incontrandoci di continuo a prenderne anche noi “in omaggio” – diceva ridendo – “al defunto Impero austro-ungarico.” (71)

The reference to the “defunct Austro-Hungarian empire” to which she ironically proposes a toast with a beverage bearing a German name, is worth exploring considering the historical events linked with the collapse of the empire, namely the ascent to power of Adolf Hitler. More specifically, the sentiment and the social malaise that followed the end of W.W.I, the defeat of Germany, and the dismembering of the empire were instrumental for Hitler to gather support and eventually acquire power. What is there to laugh about? *Why is Micòl laughing?* One could read it as a way to mock and thus belittle and ignore, in some way, the development of historical facts that eventually led to the passing of antisemitic legislation. After all, non-acceptance of history and pretending not to see what was happening around them is a common behavior of the Finzi-Continis. For example, right after the passing of the racial laws and after receiving a letter of expulsion from the tennis club, Alberto calls the narrator to invite him to play tennis at his house. During the conversation, “Non accennò a nient’altro che al puro piacere di rivedersi, dopo tanto tempo, e di godere assieme, in barba a tutti i divieti, quanto di bello restava di godere della stagione” (59). There are however other “layers” behind the girl’s laugh; there is a subversive potential that goes beyond the making fun or the refusal to see reality: it is an act aimed at establishing complicity and solidarity and it is a way to show the absurdness of the historical situation. In both the passages above, Micòl does not laugh alone or, rather, she laughs because she is not alone and her laugh is her way to ally with the people around her. It should be pointed out that Micòl is the only character that is laughing about the whole situation. The narrator and his family show concern for the political situation, while the other members of the Finzi-Contini family opt for silence.

The girl is instead making her voice heard, but she resorts to an unusual channel, laughter, which is in line with the way in which her private language works. Even here, she is emphasizing something – the hilarious aspect she finds in the collapse of the empire – to which the others characters, because of its aftermath, react in a somber way. Her laugh is very powerful in conjuring up the presence of other Jews who like her are segregated and discriminated, not just her circle of friends but also a much larger collectivity. The double facet of Micòl's laughter that reveals the tragic context from which it stems is able to evoke the collective tragedy befalling on the Jews.

Micòl transgresses the common boundaries of laughter and decides what is impervious to laughing and what is not. As she continues to talk about the Skiwasser, the girl adds that:

Ad ogni modo, prendessimo ben nota, aveva aggiunto con comica enfasi ... i chicchi d'uva, "importantissimi!", era stata lei, di propria iniziativa, a introdurli nella classica ricetta tirolese. Era stata un'idea sua: e ci teneva, c'era poco da ridere. Rappresentava, l'uva, il particolare contributo dell'Italia alla santa e nobile causa dello Skiwasser, ovvero di esso, più esattamente, la particolare "variante italiana, per non dire ferrarese, per non dire eccetera, eccetera." (72)

The girl does not approve of her friends' laughing about the variation she made to the beverage, which would seem like a very petty thing. What is more, she proceeds to adopt a political jargon, completely ironical and out of place, in order to comically turn the addition of grapes into a national cause "il contributo dell'Italia alla santa e nobile causa dello Skiwasser." Read against the backdrop of the political situation that saw Italy making a considerable contribution to the German cause by joining the war as its ally, Micòl's farcical tone acquires a strong subversive potential. In particular, Micòl's mimicry serves to dismantle the pompous Fascist rhetoric supporting sacrifice on the part of the population for the "santa e nobile" Italian fatherland. The idea of "holiness"

appears, for example, in the speech that Benito Mussolini delivered on October 23, 1932 in Turin when he stated:

Camerati torinesi, questa veramente magnifica comunione di spiriti, per cui noi in questo momento siamo un solo cuore e una sola anima, non potrebbe non concludersi senza rivolgere un pensiero pieno di profonda devozione alla maestà del Re ... che rappresenta la continuità, la vitalità, la santità della Patria.

If an Italian holy and noble cause can be also what you add to a simple drink, what is the significance underlying the concepts of “santa e nobile” as put forward by Mussolini?

Micòl’s use of these adjectives displaces them from their common and politically loaded connotations and collocations that figured preeminently in Fascist rhetoric. It should be pointed out that the idea of “holiness” is combined with the notion of “comunione,” which is another key and recurring concept. It plays a central role, for example, in the speech that the Duce delivered on September 23, 1938 in Verona before an immense crowd. Mussolini proudly stated that “Queste moltitudini ... dimostrano a tutti, dico a tutti, che mai come in questo momento fu totale, intima, profonda la comunione fra Fascismo e popolo italiano.”

What in the first excerpt was a communion of spirits becomes in the above lines the communion and wholeness of the entire Italian people. What Mussolini meant by adjective “italiano” did not, however, include the entire Italian population. It excluded, among other individuals, women and Jews. The use of “italiano” by Micòl, a woman and a Jew, serves to call into the picture other, repressed meanings implied by “italiano;” it illuminates, for example, the simplistic and univocal way in which Fascism conceived of the “italiane,” primarily as wives and mothers. Micòl strongly deviates from such an ideal. First of all, she is often described against backgrounds that are not at all homey and domestic. In the passage described above, for example, she is playing tennis, a sport, as

Douglas Radcliff-Umstead points out, that bears association with ideas like struggle, pugnacity, and ferocity. The author notes how Micòl is very skilled at tennis and faces this sport with a sort of military attitude in that she works “with the destructive force of an artillery shot to attain victory” (99). Micòl is not a domestic woman, but is in her own way a “warrior” who conceives of love as a struggle: “l’amore (almeno così se lo figurava lei) era roba per gente decisa a sopraffarsi a vicenda, uno sport crudele, feroce, ben più crudele e feroce del tennis!” (180). Throughout the novel she is presented as not cut for matrimony and childbearing; Radcliff-Umstead explains that her very name encapsulates the idea of barrenness as it “comes from the biblical Michal, David’s first and sterile wife” (111). Moreover, not only is she a woman, but she is also Jewish. It is paradoxical that the speech in which Mussolini boasted the “comunione tra Fascismo e popolo italiano” came just two months before the passing of the Racial Laws that officialized a huge rupture in the Italian people, a “solco profondo” (240), as Bassani himself describes it.

What is even more paradoxical is that before the Racial Laws the Italianness of Italian Jews was unquestioned, as evidenced by how they fought in W.W.I. A 1915 article published on the first page of the journal *Vessillo Israelitico* on the occasion of Italy’s entry into World War I underscores Jews’ patriotic feeling towards Italy: “We Jews will give ...ourselves to our country. We will give our sons, our possessions, our lives” (qtd. in Gunzberg 223). Mussolini himself, in 1932, had stressed that “Italian Jews have always been good citizens and as soldiers they have fought bravely” (qtd. in Gunzberg 233). The narrator of *Il giardino* recounts that his own father had been a “volontario di Guerra (29). Because of this undeniable inconsistency, the Fascist concept

of “italiano” is proven ambiguous and arbitrary, which challenges the idea of a firm sense of identity. Micòl’s sentence “particolare variante italiana, per non dire ferrarese, per non dire eccetera, eccetera” conveys a continuous and irreversible “shedding” of layers that configurations and constructions of identity undergo. What is Italian is also Ferrarese and what is Ferrarese is going to crumble irrevocably into several others variations in an unstoppable flow of becoming and transformation.

The ambiguity of identity terms

Bassani offers a strategic and equivocating example of such variation within the Jewish community in that “italiano” both implies a distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish Italians and refers to a group of Jews belonging to a specific religious denomination. For example, Moisè Finzi-Contini, Micòl’s deceased great grandfather “Grande proprietario terriero, ‘riformatore dell’agricoltura ferrarese,’” is extolled for his “meriti di ‘italiano e ebreo’” (9), as his tombstone reads. “Italiano,” however, also serves to designate a particular type of religious rite identified as “Scuola italiana” (55). When the narrator sees the Finzi-Continis “fare il loro solenne ingresso a Scuola italiana dopo *ben* cinque anni di sdegnoso isolamento in quella spagnola” (55), he wonders “Che cosa c’era di comune fra loro ... e la platea distratta, bisbigliante, *italiana*” (29). The latter instance of the adjective “italiano” does not quite fit with the former as it blurs the description of Moisè Finzi-Contini as Italian and Jew.

In a never-ending variation and reformulation, such separateness is complicated by the commonality that the narrator feels with the Finzi-Contini by virtue of their shared Jewishness:

nei miei rapporti con Alberto e Micòl c'era sempre stato qualcosa di intimo ... Che cosa propriamente? Si capisce: in primo luogo eravamo ebrei, e ciò in ogni caso sarebbe stato più che sufficiente ... a noi ragazzi non sarebbe occorso niente di più perché ritrovandoci altrove, e soprattutto in presenza di estranei, passasse subito nei nostri occhi l'ombra o il *riso* di una certa, speciale complicità e connivenza. (25)

This passage recalls the way in which Ginzburg describes the complicity and special, impenetrable understanding linking her to her siblings, which just a single word of the their “lessico familiare” is able to rekindle. Central in both cases is the “complicità” and union that can be established even in the presence of strangers. What in *Lessico familiare* is limited to a family, in Bassani's novel is extended to all Jews, the Finzi-Continis included. In fact, as the political environment grows increasingly hostile, the family gives up the space that they had so jealously preserved intact. It is through the narrator that we witness the various degrees of openness, as he first is allowed into the tennis course, then to the garden and the *magna domus*, the Finzi-Continis' grand house, and, finally, to Micòl's very bedroom. Such complicity will not suffice to save the family members from Auschwitz; nonetheless, it serves to create a space of autonomy in which they all share a “language” that will never be breached and deciphered by outsiders and is endowed with an ever-renewable potential. The “riso” that signals complicity underscores the effects of Micòl's previous instances of laughter.

The notion of intimacy used by the narrator to characterize his relationship with Micòl and Alberto and with other Jews complicates the “intimità” that appears in Mussolini's speech. There, the adjective “intimo” is meant to reflect the kind of sharedness envisaged between Fascism and the Italian people. What sort of “intimità” is Mussolini referring to? Not only is the term “italiano” problematic, because it implies a totality and homogeneity that the Jewish presence contributes to problematizing and

challenging; “intimità” itself reinforces and reveals a multiplicity. The duce’s words are proven empty if we think that his concept of intimacy inevitably stumbles upon other, impenetrable intimacies and private worlds that render it just wishful thinking.

Il giardino challenges the ideology and policies fostered and carried out by the Fascist regime in other strategic ways. If it challenges the idea of homogeneity in the Italian people, so does it question the monolithic view of the Jews fostered by Fascist legislation. Primo Levi, in the preface to *La Tregua*, notes that “Esistono molti modi diversi di essere ebrei: dalla piena osservanza delle regole religiose e delle tradizioni, fino alla indifferenza totale, ed alla accettazione del modo di pensare della maggioranza” (5). In *Il giardino* one can find several examples of the different groups making up the Ferrarese Jewish community and the social difference that adherence to a particular school marks. Besides the aforementioned Italian and Spanish synagogues, he mentions, for instance, “Quelli di via Vittoria,” a group of Ferrarese families who attended the exclusive synagogue called “danese” or “levantina.” Bassani also raises the question of assimilation and non-distinctiveness of Italian Jews that Levi posits and underscores the paradoxical prejudice that results from it. The narrator of *Il giardino*, who defines his own family as “molto normale, noialtri, anzi addirittura banale nella sua normalità” (137) claims that “Una delle forme più odiose di antisemitismo era ...lamentare che gli ebrei non fossero abbastanza come gli altri, e poi, viceversa, constatata la loro pressoché assimilazione all’ambiente circostante, lamentare che fossero tali e quali agli altri” (137).

“Gli altri,” the others, is here a problematic expression because it suggests a homogeneous collectivity just like “ebrei.” After all, the term “goim” is applied to denote any non-Jewish individual. But are the others all the same? We might pose the same

question with respect to Natalia's grandmother in *Lessico familiare*, who feels a "ribrezzo" for whomever is not Jewish. Ginzburg explains that "Provava, per quelli che non erano ebrei come lei, un ribrezzo come per i gatti. Era esclusa da questo ribrezzo soltanto mia madre: l'unica persona non ebrea alla quale, in vita sua, si fosse affezionata" (16). "Gli altri" and "quelli che non erano ebrei" are comparable umbrella terms; they denote a certain prejudice of Jews towards non Jews based on a-specificity. The example from *Lessico Familiare* also shows the arbitrariness of such categorization as the grandmother makes an exception for Lidia without any particular reason. Moreover, the expression "quelli" is rather ambiguous as it serves to refer to anybody who is not Jewish in *Lessico familiare* and to a particular group of Ferrarese Jews in *Il giardino*. "Quelli," then, is also found in a passage of *Gli occhiali d'oro*, in which it is a derogatory term to mean "homosexuals:" "Bastava anche dire che Fadigati era 'così,' che era 'di quelli'" (224). If we set all these usages next to each other, the derogatory potential of this expression is weakened because it lacks any univocal use and no specific group can be targeted with precision. Even the narrator's confident claim that only a Ferrarese Jew "sarebbe stato in grado di fornire precisi ragguagli intorno a 'quelli di via Vittoria?'," is challenged, as under the general term "quelli di via Vittoria" several sub-groups might be concealed.

Particularly poignant about the relationship with non-Jews is that both Ginzburg and Bassani show how "the others," "those who are not Jewish" are defined through a reference to another group of people who during Fascism were "othered" and discriminated against, namely black people. "Gli altri" are often referred to by the epithet "negro." The narrator's father in order to refer to non-Jewish Italians and their ignorance

of Jewish life laments: “Povere anime! A questo proposito non erano da considerarsi che degli esseri semplici e rozzi condannati a ... abissi di ignoranza ... ‘negri goim’” (27).

We find a similar usage in *Lessico Familiare*, in which one of the most common sayings used by the father is “negrigure:”

Ogni atto o gesto nostro che stimava inappropriato, veniva da lui definito una negrigura ... un negro era per mio padre, chi aveva modi goffi, impacciati e timidi, chi si vestiva in modo non appropriato, chi non sapeva andare in montagna, chi non sapeva le lingue straniere. (3)

These two private, “minor” uses of “negro” acquire an even more destabilizing effect considering the political context in which the novels are embedded. Set against the political background of the propaganda celebrating the white, pure, Aryan race, such minor uses are not neutral and underlie a subtle ideological intent. The meaning of “negro” constructed within the major language in which it already had a specific referent, a black person from Africa⁹, causes detachment from – and at the same time involvement with – those who, including Fascists, discriminated against colonized people. Being used by two Jews, who were associated with black people in the 1938 *Manifesto della Razza*, it almost acquires a grotesque effect. Nonetheless, by displacing the word from its dominant collocation and repeating it in a totally different context, such usages show the interchangeability of “negro” and, therefore, neutralize its derogatory force.

⁹ It is precisely the term “negro” that Lidio Cipriani, director of the Fascist publication *Difesa della Razza*, uses to refer to people belonging to “l’Africa nera” and to talk about their unsurmountable inferiority and inability to progress. In 1932 he states “Per chi conosce l’anima *negra* suscita il riso soltanto ricordare l’utopia di certuni per cui il domani dovrebbe sorprenderci col sorgere di eserciti di terra e di mare, di tribunali, di università o di officine come frutto del lavoro del cervello dei *negri* ... Nelle razze *negre* l’inferiorità mentale della donna confina spesso con una vera e propria stupidità.” Qtd. in Bruno Mantelli. [Scienza, cultura e razzismo in Italia 1870-1938. Le premesse “scientifiche” del razzismo e dell’antisemitismo fascisti.](http://www.alteracultura.org/outputtris.php?ID=130) 18 March 2003. 5 Aug. 2006.
< <http://www.alteracultura.org/outputtris.php?ID=130>>

The multiplicity that Bassani shows in terms like “negro”, “ebreo,” and “italiano” by opening and splintering these words contribute to reactivating forces in language that had been dormant and repressed by institutions of power. The effect is similar to the proliferation and rejuvenation that Ginzburg engenders by drawing on her family’s sayings and on the expressive possibilities of her naked style. *Lessico familiare* and *Il giardino* show that literature can become a tool for challenging certain assumptions about language that serve to buttress univocal notions of identity, in their particular case, of *italianità*, and warrant discrimination against the Other. The language of the text, which stems from family languages, also contaminates the boundaries between “major” and “minor” literature and between the private and the public. By telling a private story embedded in historical events and illuminating the proximity of the public to the private and vice versa, these two novels also bring to the foreground the inextricable link between language and historiography and call for a new way of conceptualizing history able to incorporate “minor” voices and relinquish linearity.

As I have discussed, Bassani augments the deforming effects of his linguistic contamination through a visual practice that challenges the belief in the perfect form and purity at the basis of Fascist ideology. By turning now to *Amarcord* and *La vita è bella* we will see how this figural practice can be fleshed out and turned into a powerful and destabilizing cinematic practice. In *Amarcord*, deformation leads to dis-embodiment; it stifles the “stand for” relationship underlying the association of Mussolini’s body with the ideas of strength and virility and severs the direct relationship between images and referents. This referential de-anchoring is central in Benigni’s *La vita è bella*. By presenting a concentration camp that is clearly artificial and lays bare its being a

cinematic product, the film underscores the need to acknowledge our physical distance from the event and the impossibility of representing the concentration camp experience.

Chapter III

Beyond representation: a-signifying practices in Federico Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973) and Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella* (1997)

Federico Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973)

Federico Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973) is set in Fellini's home town of Rimini, a town situated near the Adriatic sea and part of the Emilia-Romagna region, in 1930s Fascist Italy. In the Romagnolo dialect *Amarcord* means "I remember." The film captures the life of a little community and the myths and dreams that keep it together. Among these myths are American films playing at the local Fulgor cinema and the symbols created and circulated by the Fascist regime, such as the ocean liner Rex, which was supposed to convey the regime's technological prowess.

Images of Mussolini himself became an integral part of the fascist visual campaign. The Duce was well aware of the power of visual media for propaganda purposes and, as film scholar Gian Piero Brunetta points out, "per vent'anni sarà il Divo capace di dominare l'immagine degli italiani" (87). Portrayals of Mussolini emphasized his virility, omnipresence and power, which became the constitutive components of his public persona. The duty of indoctrinating society was entrusted not so much to films as to documentaries, the so-called "cinegiornali" 'filmed newsreels,' which were produced

by the Luce institute.¹⁰ The image of Mussolini that dominated cinejournals is, as Brunetta posits, “un’immagine che aspira all’incarnazione di tutti i ruoli e di tutti i modelli umani possibili” (33). The choice of newsreels over cinema¹¹ was meant, I believe, to stress the “reality” of what was being shown and to “incarnate” the Fascist idea through the Duce’s body and flesh.

In his exploration of the crucial role played by newsreels in Nazi propaganda, Siegfried Kracauer argues that

To keep the totalitarian system in power, they [the Nazis] had to annex to it all real life. And since, in the medium of the film, the authentic representation of unstaged reality is reserved to newsreel shots, the Nazis ... were forced to compose from them their fictitious war pictures. (303)

Through newsreels, Kracauer further explains, “The Nazis ... counterfeited life ... they used life itself to construct their imaginary [world] ... To this end, people as the incarnation of life must be transported in both the literal and the metaphoric sense of the word” (300).

The Luce documentaries constructed the myth of the Duce and of his Fascist way of life while providing the illusion of unstaged reality. Mussolini personally engaged in a campaign aimed at showing (off) his strong muscular body and attempted to convey, both literally and metaphorically, the Fascist ideology of power and virility.¹² With specific

¹⁰ Brunetta notes that the LUCE institute “diventa subito uno dei pilastri fondamentali di quella che Dino Biondi ha chiamato la ‘fabbrica del Duce’” (*Cinema italiano fra le due guerre* 32), that is to say, the mediatic apparatus that forged and disseminated images of Mussolini.

¹¹ Cinema was not the preferred and primary channel for disseminating political ideas. As Jacqueline Reich points out, it is not correct to talk about a “Fascist cinema” because “Italian Fascism never had a far-reaching and all-encompassing control over the film” and “the *ventennio*’s cinematic production did not reflect an open agenda of ideological saturation via cinematic images” (7).

¹² Gori points out, for example, the great extent to which Mussolini overtly displayed his body in sports activities, and how he “exhibited himself as experienced in horse-riding, fencing, swimming, gymnastics, tennis and boxing. He had himself photographed running with soldiers, skiing down the Terminillo Mountains, swimming in the Adriatic sea and harvesting grapes or reaping corn together with farmers. He also displayed his bare chest without embarrassment” (16).

reference to the idea of “incarnation” underlying Fascist propaganda, literary scholar Gigliola Gori claims that “[t]he exaltation of the virile body as a metaphor for the fascist creed was common to all fascist movements” but stresses the fact that “its materialisation in the body of the Duce was a peculiar Italian phenomenon” (18).

Radio was another key propagandistic channel through which Mussolini attempted to be physically in touch with Italians; the frequent broadcasts of Mussolini’s speeches earned him the epithet of “la voce” ‘the voice.’ The self-image that the Duce projected thrived on a strategic combination and exposure to his words and body.

Fellini deconstructs both Mussolini’s voice and body and invites a reflection on the staged aspect of the alluring images of Fascism that the media propagated. He calls viewers to pursue and discover the artifice behind these images. As Dorothee Bonnigal argues

Amarcord establishes the basic fact that a vision which does not avow its constructedness and artificiality is potentially deceiving and manipulative. This admission that the sense of immediacy and truth produced by cinema is fundamentally illusory resonates critically with the political regime it represents as a perpetrator of mystification and as a manipulative system. (145)

In *Amarcord*, we perceive in full the “constructedness and artificiality” of the images of Fascism; the unmasking of cinematic artifice allows Fellini to de-form the perfectly composed and “solid” portrayals of the Duce and the symbols of the regime circulated by the newsreels. Fellini manages to contaminate the association between these images and the ideas of power, virility, and omnipresence. He undermines the dynamics through which the Duce and the Fascist symbols were “transported” from a literal into a metaphoric sense and thus imbued with these ideas. Since, as Kracauer notes, this transfer was central to the illusion of “incarnation of life,” then Fellini’s operation is highly

destabilizing as it undermines the foundations on which the regime relied to provide substance to the messages it delivered. Fellini stifles the relationship between the signifiers created by Fascism and the signified attached to them, thus raising the question of representation.

It is in this particular sense that I interpret Fellini's anti-fascism, which strays from the strong political overtones that characterize some of the landmark Italian films on the subjects released in the 1970s.¹³ With *Amarcord*, the director opts for a "minor" way of telling the event that relies on the potential of cinema as cinema, as art and artifice. By revealing us the "behind the scenes" of his filmic construction, the director spurs us to evaluate the film for what it is and not for what it is supposed to mean and represent. A figural analysis reveals that Fellini goes beyond representation and opens up a space (or rather, multiple spaces) in which cinema develops for its own sake, without pursuing an external referent. In this way, cinema is freed from meanings and messages imposed on it from the outside. The unmasking of cinematic art and the freedom it grants counter the staged and constructed image of Mussolini circulated by the media in those years. A way of engaging with politics emerges that does regard cinema as the vehicle to convey certain messages and that, rather, finds in the very act of filmmaking (and also film viewing) the possibility of not conforming to dominating ideology. By acquiring a figural perspective, it is possible to explore how Fellini, from the position of director, revisits himself as a spectator in the 1930s and, in a subtler way, how he engages the question of representation. That is why, although Fellini is "un autore dichiaratamente impolitico" (Kezich 302), *Amarcord* can be well read for its marked political implications.

¹³ I am thinking about films such as Bernardo Bertolucci's *La strategia del ragno* (The Spider's Strategy, 1970) or Franco Rosi's *Cristo si è fermato ad Eboli* (Christ stopped at Eboli, 1979).

The deforming potential of the Romagnolo dialect

Mussolini was born in Predappio, which is very close to Rimini and shares with it the same vernacular. The way in which Italians knew his “voice” bears none of the traces of his regional parlance. This polishing was in line with the linguistic policies of the regime aimed at creating one, national language able to overcome Italy’s linguistic fragmentation. Regional vernaculars and dialects were particularly targeted because for many people they were, and to some extent still are, the most intimate and largely spoken language. The regime attempted to eradicate all of the other antagonistic idioms that could undermine the unity of the Italian language and, and as Gianni Eugenio Viola explains “il plurilinguismo significava riconoscimento di pari dignità a varie lingue concorrenti, concetto inaccettabile” (49).

In this regard, the use of the Romagnolo dialect in *Amarcord* is strategic as it is the “weapon” through which Fellini challenges the unity of the Italian language and, thus, of Fascist culture. From the very start, Romagnolo is identifiable with anti-Fascism, as suggested by the fact that Aurelio (Armando Brancia), one of the main characters of the film and a Fascist opponent, expresses himself mostly in the vernacular. Aurelio does not hide his beliefs, to which local Fascist authorities are privy. In one key sequence he is accused of committing a public anti-Fascist act and is taken to the local police station. What is striking in this sequence is that Aurelio manages to switch to standard Italian and temper out his Romagnolo accent and even sound more “neutral” than many Fascist characters. The sound of Fascism created by Fellini is not homogeneous, but is made up of several and often contradictory sounds that stand in counterpoint with Aurelio’s rather “unblemished” Italian. For example, the first officer who addresses Aurelio immediately

gives away his Tuscan origin by his pronunciation of the “c.” His “c” is velar fricative, almost as a guttural “h,” one of the most typical and noticeable traits of the Tuscan vernacular. After he is forced to drink castor oil, also because of the accusation not to greet “romanamente,” the camera shifts to a blind officer in a wheel chair who seems frustrated at the punishment he is witnessing. He claims “È questo che ci addolora. Questa ostinazione a non voler capire. Ma perché?” The pronunciation of “perché,” which loses the “r” and double the “c” reveals his Neapolitan provenance. One cannot help but wonder: does this mélange of dialectical expressions match Mussolini’s voice? Does it comply with the regime’s emphasis on standardization? Not quite. There is, therefore, a discrepancy between theory and practice, ideology and actual implementation of such ideology. In other words, the attempt to create a “major,” national language fails because of practical unfeasibility, because of forces that trigger a “minorization” process. The officers that supposedly should uphold the linguistic façade of Fascism and propagate the Duce’s “voce,” are instead caught in a “minor” becoming that leads them to use their vernacular. This process suggests that the attempt to establish a standard, unblemished Italian is somehow a dead letter, just like the Tuscan and the Neapolitan officers do not comply with Fascist ideology by “suppressing” some letters in their vernacular-tainted speech. It is paradoxical that it is Aurelio, an anti-Fascist, who manages to refrain himself from using Romagnolo, and thus, to sound more Fascist than Fascists themselves. Such “mismatch” underscores the constructedness of the Fascist linguistic policies.

The regime did not solely attempt to create one national language, but also to create a *male*, dominant one. Viola claims that the Fascist vocabulary was “correlato alla

fisiologia (con la positiva connotazione data ai lemmi quali maschio, possente/Potenza, veemente, intrepido, impavido ... rigenerare)” (53). The Romagnolo dialect counters the idea of linguistic maleness and virility, as emerges from Aurelio’s use of the vernacular to express his rage about the way he is mistreated by the Fascists. After being asked several questions, including “vuoi fare un brindisi alla vittorie del fascismo?” Aurelio is forced to drink castor oil, with an ensuing incontrollable diarrhea. When he arrives home and after his wife helps him wash, he gives vent to all his fury. He starts shouting and, directing his voice at the upstairs room, where his brother-in-law Pataca (Nando Orfei) is sleeping, the person he thinks told him off, Aurelio cries out half in Italian, half in dialect: “Se quello che ha fatto la spia, è quello che dico io è meglio che cambia continente perche’ *me ai magn la tésta, ai magn i quaioun!*”¹⁴ ‘If I find out who told me off, he’d better move to another continent because *I am going to eat his head, I’m going to eat his balls!*’ The uses of the very colorful dialect expression of eating the spy’s head (tésta) and testicles (quaioun) is worth exploring *vis à vis* the previous occurrence of the corresponding words in standard Italian, “testa” and “coglioni.” Rather than just a menace, the reference to the person’s head and testicles in dialect unleashes a subversive force that destabilizes and distorts the Italian “pre-texts” “tèsta” and “coglioni,” which occur in two key sequences of *Amarcord*.

The first time we hear the word “coglioni” in Italian is during the Fascist rally organized on occasion of the visit to the town of the *federale*, a high-ranking Fascist official. In the parade three figures stand out, namely, the officer who will eventually interrogate Aurelio at the police station, the local school’s math teacher, and Pataca. After the proud declarations of both the officer and the teacher, who extol the deeds of the

¹⁴ The phrase in Italics is in dialect.

regime, Pataca blurts out “Per me Mussolini ha due coglioni così,” a sentence accompanied by a gesture of his hands aimed at conveying the extraordinary size of Mussolini’s testicles. The highlight of the parade is an effigy showing Mussolini’s head, which is slowly raised from the ground and comes to dominate the scene. In both cases, Pataca extrapolates a metaphorical meaning from a literal one: in his intentions, the word and the gesture concur to convey Mussolini’s strength and great “moral” stance. The magnificence of the effigy, which depicts the *duce*’s head, is meant to provide a visual rendition of such grandness.

Pataca’s exclamation and the great visual impact produced by the effigy provide the pretexts to Aurelio’s use of the dialect words “testa” and “quaionun.” We have to wonder: What variation does the dialect engender? What happens in their transformation, in the *variation* from an image into a sound (for “testa”) and from an Italian into a dialect term (for “coglioni”)? Eating “the head” implies consuming, and thus turning to pieces, something that earlier on appeared in all its grandeur, stateliness, and power. There is, therefore, a stark discordance in the “collocation” Aurelio constructs, which is even more powerful if we bear in mind the context is that of the castor oil treatment and Aurelio’s ensuing bodily response. Even the use of “coglioni” is discrepant with Pataca’s as one of the male symbols *par excellence* is turned into something that can be easily torn to pieces and consumed. The Fascist’s sentence “Mussolini has balls this big” is thus deprived of its manhood, “castrated” and thwarted in its attempt to stand for a strong, male language able “to regenerate” itself.

Such imagined act of cannibalization has also to be read against the obsession with – and the profound hatred for – the Duce’s body that arose and developed after the

assassination of the Socialist exponent Giacomo Matteotti in 1924. Such criminal act epitomized the Fascists' conceptualization of a political struggle that was, as historian Sergio Luzzatto posits, "regredita più indietro che la pugna virile: non scontro di corpi ma annientamento, smembramento, addirittura consumo di corpi" (6). Luzzatto reports a song that some Fascists sympathizers allegedly sang after the assassination, "Della carne di Matteotti/noi faremo salsicciotti" (6), which underscores the macabre desire to consume the human flesh of the most influential political opponent. A rumor, eventually proven wrong but extremely long-lived, had it that Matteotti's testicles had been removed from his body, which creates an inescapable scenario against which Aurelio's sentence has to be interpreted.¹⁵

A further example of castration of the Fascist man is provided by a particular occurrence of the verb "toccare" during the Fascist rally sequence. As the *federale* is marching by the exultant crowd, Gradisca, (Magali Noel), the town's object of lust, almost in an erotically-induced euphoria, cries out "Fatemelo toccare, fatemelo toccare," which suggests the longing for a woman-man union, for a "maschio." The woman's wish, however, cannot be implemented; the almost desperate stretching out of her arms and her body movements do not find completion in the actual action of touching the official. Her desire and action are dispersed, deferred. Moreover, even if she had managed to touch the official, she would not have touched a powerful man. The official is a sort of caricature, a midget and, therefore, the exact opposite of the image that these words evoke. He is an "aberration" of the ideal of the powerful man.

¹⁵ The attacks on Mussolini's corpse during its display at Piazza Loreto in Milan on April 29, 1945, which dismembered it and literally reduced it to pieces, convey Antifascists' despise and disgust for the corporeal and physical make up of the Duce.

In the end, Gradisca does find a man. One of the final sequences of *Amarcord* shows her wedding with a “carabiniere,” a policeman. It is interesting to point out that one of the guests comments on the wedding by saying that “la Gradisca ha trovato il suo Gary Cooper. Gary Cooper è un cowboy, Matteo è un carabiniere, ma l’amore è l’amore.” The reference to Gary Cooper is worth exploring because the actor was one of Hollywood’s most powerful symbols of masculinity. The fact that Gradisca’s husband is nothing but an ersatz of the American movie star, establishes a contrast between the illusion of “physical presence” implied in cinematic images and their actual lack of physicality, which can only be “filled” by a replacement.

There is a sequence that clearly epitomizes this illusion. Some people are at the Fulgor theater and are watching an American film, which we infer is a western. They do not sit still, but they move according to what they see on the screen, thus physically replicating the actors’ movements. Their involvement with the film is such that they have the illusion of being in physical touch with the film’s environment and characters and of bridging that gap that the above commentator underscores between Matteo and Gary Cooper.

Physical vs. evanescent: Fascists and the Socialist Internazionale

In the Fascist creed, the ideas of physicality and physical presence were central, as evidenced by how the Duce’s physical body was overly present in Italians’ imagery. Fellini appropriates and challenges these ideas. In their castrating effect, the desegregation of “testa” and “coglioni” undermine, as we have seen, the physical intactness and sturdiness of the male, virile body.

Besides resorting to dialect, Fellini challenges physicality and its related idea of presence through further aural components, such as music and other types of sounds, of which we ignore the exact physical source. This is the case, for example, with the “Internazionale,” the Socialist hymn that in a sequence we hear playing from what we later discover is a gramophone placed on the bell tower of the town. Music, especially hymns, played a key role in the regime’s attempt to create a sense of national unity. Fascist songs were often included in cinejournals and complemented the Duce’s body and voice. Also, they were sung in unison during marches, thus underscoring a sense of unity and communal belonging to the Fascist state. Music contributed to creating the Fascist alluring spectacle by reinforcing the “ornamental” quality of images created by the regime. In fact, it created harmony and regularity, which were meant to reflect the ideas of order and discipline fostered by the regime and stir up patriotic feelings and consensus.¹⁶

Fellini’s use of the “Internazionale,” one of the transnational musical pieces *par excellence*, which, as suggested by its very name, defies national confines, contrasts the idea of national unity and order. The lyrics of the “Internazionale” have been translated into several languages and there exists an Italian translation. In this regard, Fellini’s choice of plain music with no lyrics, suggests, I believe, the willingness not to anchor this musical piece to any national context. To a type of music and singing in accordance and unison with the regime and, thus, contained and controlled by it, Fellini opposes the fleetingness of the *Internazionale*, which defies constraints and underpinnings. Even

¹⁶ By “ornamental” I am referring to Siegfried Kracauer’s notion of “mass ornament.” Applied to politically-inspired parades, rallies, and exercises, the term refers to the “regularity,” which “was considered a means to an end; the parade march arose out of patriotic feelings and in turn aroused them in soldiers and subjects” (*The Mass Ornament* 77).

though for a few seconds we do seem a man on the bell tower who resembles Aurelio, the identity of the doer will not be overtly revealed.

The music starts as a group of Fascists is leaving a local bar. One of them soon condemns and denigrates the music as “l’inno dei sovversivi.” In this particular instance, Fellini strategically employs the type of discordance between sound and image that Gilles Deleuze defines as one of the major shifts that marked the passage from silent cinema to sound cinema. Due to this watershed, music was liberated from the “obligation to correspond to the visual image ... When cinema develops sound and talking, music is in a sense emancipated, and can take flight” (*Cinema 2* 238). The sound and the visual are interdependent, but they do not necessarily “move” along the same track. “There is certainly a relation, but it is not an external correspondence nor even an internal one which would lead us back to an imitation; it is ... an interaction independent of any common structure” (Deleuze *Cinema 2* 239). In the sequence of the “Internazionale” Fellini exploits this lack of correspondence. The Socialist hymn is in a “certain relation” to the visual image of the Fascists walking on the street, but it is an “interaction independent” of any commonality, which marks the refusal to belong, to be a part of the whole. This “discordance” between the visual and the sound components is also reinforced by the fact that while we clearly see the Fascists, we only get a quick glance of the man playing the gramophone.

When they first hear the music, they are puzzled – they ask themselves “Ma dov’è? Da dove viene? Dove ti nascondi, miserabile? Vigliacco, fatti vedere, vigliacco!” We, spectators, are also puzzled because we are not offered a visual image that we can associate with the music. For some time we are left in a “liminal” space, as we cannot

determine if the music lingers somewhere within the shot or pervades the elsewhere of the out-of-frame. Even when we eventually discover that the bell tower is the place from which it stems, the exact location remains unknown. We are given no visual certitude and assurance as to the point of origin.

In an interview with Rita Cirio, Fellini himself confessed the uneasiness he felt towards music, which

conditions me, makes me nervous ... music ... with a stern voice tortures me by reminding me of a dimension of harmony, of peace, of completeness from which I am excluded, exiled. Music is cruel ... when it's ended I don't know where it has gone. I know only that the place is unattainable. (193)

After one of the Fascists shoots at the gramophone several times, the instrument breaks and falls down, thus causing the music to stop abruptly. What follows, for a few seconds, is complete silence and the fact that, as Fellini says, we “don't” know where it has gone” and that “the place is unattainable” leaves us with a sense of emptiness and loss. The silence following the breaking of the gramophone is soon filled by one of the most popular Fascist songs “All'armi siam fascisti” that the group of Fascists begins to sing in unison, while marching away in a regular rhythm. Sound/no clear image of the doer as well as dispersion of space (the Internazionale) contrasts with sound (and words)/corresponding image and defined place (Fascist song). This correspondence recalls the way in which, during the Fascist rally, the participants run *in accordance* with the music being played. One of the ways in which Fellini renders cinematically opposition to Fascism is, thus, through subtraction. He chooses a musical piece that lacks the elements that were central to the image and sound of Fascism, particularly the sense of order and solidity created by the ornamental harmony between these elements. The emphasis on order and discipline underlying the regime's linguistic policies is also

reflected by the regularity with which the social space was organized and arranged through sounds and images. The Socialist hymn, instead, brings total disarray because it engenders a deterritorialization of space. Moreover, in opting for a non-verbalized piece of music, Fellini espouses a lack of language, a sort of aphasia that dramatizes the evanescence and dispersion that he contrasts with the tangibility of Fascism.

The “avvocato” and the chain of signification

A similar contrast between seen/heard and heard but not seen is identifiable in one of the sequences centered on the *avvocato*, ‘lawyer.’ The *avvocato* is a mixture between a character and a voice-over narrator in that he is part of the narrative of the film, but he provides spectators with information about the people and events of the little town by directly looking at the camera. He functions as the element that strives to preserve the linearity and the linkages of narration, with particular emphasis on the connection between the present and past of the Romagna people. The first explanation he provides is the following: “Le origini di questo paese si perdono nella notte dei tempi ... La prima data certa è il 2680 A.C. quando divenne colonia romana.” As soon as he utters these words, we hear a voice coming from a balcony saying “Avvocato,” the pronunciation of which is deformed and becomes something to the effect of “avocheto.” Afterwards, the unseen heckler even blows a raspberry. The lawyer attempts to counteract the uncanny feeling of these sounds by turning them into a constitutive part of his narration and claims that this sound is indicative of “il carattere beffardo di tale popolazione, la quale ha nelle vene sangue romano e celtico.”

The lawyer's visual and audible presence is contrasted by a person that is not visible, but perfectly audible. The lawyer's twisting of his head from right to left upon hearing the above sounds shows the puzzlement implied in something that is "there" but we don't know where, "elsewhere." His reaction recalls the Fascists' sense of bafflement at hearing the Socialist hymn. In the case of the lawyer, we have a variation with respect to what usually happens for the voice-over-narration, "the voice which evokes, comments, knows, endowed with and omnipresence or a strong power over the sequence of images" (Deleuze *Cinema 2* 236). This voice, "reflexive and not interactive" (Deleuze *Cinema 2* 236) usually inhabits the out-of-frame, whereas the lawyer, the source of this voice, is in the center of the image and fights against noises from the out-of-frame. The visual fullness both enhances this power - we hear his comments as we see him - but also weakens it; in fact, the lawyer is disturbed by them, is led to interact with them as they interrupt his narration and mock it.

The content of the lawyer's explanation has strong political overtones because the claim that the people of Romagna have Roman blood in their veins is in line with the regime's propaganda about the Roman origin of the Italian people. This concept is proudly stressed during the rally organized for the official's visit. After the official cries out in front of an exulting crowd "Camerati, Saluti al Duce. Saluto di Roma Imperiale che ci addita la via del destino dell'Italia Fascista," the math teacher enthusiastically declares: "È meraviglioso questo entusiasmo che ci rende giovani e antichissimi allo stesso tempo!" Not only is the lawyer's voice an integral part of this ensemble, but it provides closure to it. He explains

Oggi ... 21 aprile ... si festeggia la nascita di Roma città eterna. Che cosa significa? Significa anche ... che bisogna rispettare tutti i monumenti, i ruderi, le

centre che la civiltà di Roma ci ha lasciato. Cosa che io sto facendo da qualche tempo, sopportando il dissenso di qualche stornellatore notturno.

The lawyer reinforces the main idea that emerges from the proud statements of the people who speak before him, namely, that ancient Rome stands along a continuum with Fascist Italy, so that ancient Romans and Fascists can be regarded as fused together (“giovani e antichissimi allo stesso tempo”) and one with one another (“sangue romano”). This sequence exemplifies the Fascist conceptualization of history and the attempt to “telescope” past and present, as Claudia Lazzaro defines “[t]he efforts at linking the past with the modern in Fascist Italy aimed not only to emphasize the continuity between them but also to ... fuse ... different periods by eliminating everything extraneous that had accrued over the centuries and by focusing exclusively on common elements” (40). It is so that ancient Rome becomes the direct antecedent and the fore grounder of Fascism, which, in turn, ensures that Rome can be born again in Fascist Italy.

The linear, direct relationship established between ancient Rome and Fascist Italy exemplifies the homogeneous, horizontal and empty time that Benedict Anderson sees as central in the ways in which the nation is narrated in order to create “imagined communities.” Such linearity on which the lawyer “lectures” while taking part in the ceremony can also be explored according to how Homi Bhabha, reading Anderson, further elaborates on the dynamics at work in such narration. Bhabha argues that “In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative” (209). The way in which the regime attempted to narrate a Fascist nation includes both a pedagogical and a performative component, as exemplified by the role played by the lawyer during the rally. In fact, he is engaged both in a didactic role by

providing information to spectators and in a performative one, as he performs during an event intended as the transposition of his words into action.

The lawyer's explanation also hints at the fact that the pedagogical and the performative concur to construct a particular hegemonic interpretation of events that smother all other possible ones. In fact, central in his didactic and performative act of narration is the verb "significa." The lawyer aims at establishing a clear, irrefutable connection between the founding of Rome and a moral obligation for the present time. Within this context, then, the Fascist rally of April 21 is viewed as an event that creates "signification" and reinforces the particular meaning that one should assign to the legacy of Rome's civilization.

Historian Claudio Fogu has studied the ways in which, on grounds of this alleged continuity, history was made "present" and turned into a "presence" in Italians' lives. By elaborating on one of the famous Fascist motto forged by Mussolini, namely, "Il Fascismo fa la storia, non la scrive," which was echoed by Giovanni Gentile's distinction between "history belonging to the past" and "history belonging to the present,"¹⁷ Fogu contends that

Gentile's polarization of the notions of "history belonging to the past" and "history belonging to the present" reified and ontologized the discursive distinction between the idea of historicalness, meaning simply "belonging to the past," and historic-ness, inscribed since the dawn of modern historical culture in expressions such as "historic speech," "historic site," and "historic event." Historicness refers to the perception of an eventfulness that not only opens a new history but also signifies the past retroactively ... Merging the related notion of eventfulness (event), unmediated presence (site), and signification (speech) elicited by the notion of historic-ness, the idea of making history attributed to Fascism agency that acted on historical facts, representations, and consciousness. (34)

¹⁷ Qtd. in Claudio Fogu. "To Make History Present." *Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy*. Ed. Claudia Lazzaro and Roger J. Crum. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005. 32.

In this passage Fogu stresses the self-referentiality of Fascism; the regime as incarnated by Mussolini interpreted its deeds (the “events,” “historic sites,” and speeches it constructed as well as the meanings attached to them) as living, tangible, and present evidence of history being made, of a past become present. Fogu’s analysis suggests that the Fascist regime wanted to turn Italians into spectators of the making of history. They were supposed to witness the spectacle of an *in fieri* endeavor, as history as a work in progress, with Mussolini as history maker. The above sequences of the rally and of the *avvocato*’s historical “explanation” clearly show the kind of “merging” that Fogu discusses. The “event” of the rally and the parade is imbued with the “unmediated presence” of the Duce by means of the placard, which the *avvocato*, through his speech, interprets as bearer of a special meaning, as the term “significa” implies. The lawyer aims at establishing a clear, irrefutable connection between the founding of Rome and a moral obligation for the present time. Within this context, then, the Fascist rally of April 21 is viewed as an event that creates “signification” and reinforces the role that one should assign to the legacy of Rome’s civilization. Translated into semiotic/linguistic terms, we could say that he considers this date as a signifier that corresponds to a signified shared by Rome and Fascist Italy.

The unseen heckler thwarts, however, the lawyer’s attempt to establish a chain of signification; through his “dis-senso” he stifles the “sense” that the *avvocato* wants to associate with the event. A similar “dissenso” also arises from some images of Fascism that are central in *Amarcord*, which can be fruitfully explored by relying on the concept of the figural.

With specific reference to the cinematic image, Pierluigi Basso Fossali contends that the figural corresponds to a “messa in prospettiva del materiale discorsivo che ne enfatizza le relazioni interne, soprattutto in termini di tensione tra elementi plastici e figurativi” (*Confini del cinema* 29). In *Amarcord* Fellini creates this tension in order to impede the delivering of those messages and meanings that were crucial to Fascist propaganda and that relied on univocal signification. The effigy of Mussolini is a clear example of how this friction is rendered. This image is, as we have seen, imbricated with the linguistic transformation of the word “testa,” but also contains a further level of interpretation. The images of the Duce circulated by the media aimed at “fissare una morfologia di Mussolini ... [e] qualificare il duce con gli attributi o con l’aura’ della onnipotenza e dell’ onnipresenza” (Brunetta *Cinema fra le due guerre* 33). Fellini manages to undo the Duce’s morphology and, more specifically, the physiognomy of his face, which is worth exploring considering the impact and the centrality that the human face holds within the filmic text. Bela Balazs has studied the expressive and revealing potential of the human face, as particularly evident in close-ups. Balazs argues:

In close-ups every wrinkle becomes a crucial element of character and every twitch of a muscle testifies to a pathos that signals great inner events. The close-up of a face is frequently used as the climax of an important scene ... [through close-ups] the magnifying glass of the cinematograph brings us closer to the individual cells of life in its concrete detail. (44)

Mussolini’s effigy is the climax of the parade and Fellini provides a close-up of it. The image is, however, not only a replacement of the Duce’s human face, but a blatantly fake substitute. Fellini appropriates the potential of the close-up discussed by Balazs, but uses it to “bring us closer to the individual cells of” *counterfeit, fabricated* “life” in “its concrete detail.” Through the detailed vision we are granted of the effigy, we focus on its

“concrete,” tangible, and plastic materiality, rather than on the metaphorical qualities of almightiness and power it is meant to convey.

The effigy is also a figure that is meant to provide a presence of the Duce: the plastic dimension of the effigy – its being an ensemble of colors, lines and shapes – is meant to bring to the scene a political figure and thus assure a presence *in absentia*. The effigy is supposed, therefore, to *re-present* Mussolini. Frank Beaver claims that “once Fellini moves ... to self-reflexive filmmaking he also moves from representation to signification” (*Fellini in Context* 23). Fellini, I argue, even manages to move a step further and shift from signification (from that “significare” that was so central in the *avvocato*’s narration) to an incessant deferral of meaning. By foregrounding the obvious discrepancy between the plasticity of the effigy, its being constructed of cardboard and adorned with pink flowers, Fellini hints at the artificiality of the effigy and, thus, at the constructedness of the myth of omnipresence. Fellini does not draw on the images that the mass media circulated and rendered official but provides his own personal and “minor” version of them. Instead of fixing an image, he subjects it to “undoing” forces and shows how this image can spawn further, deforming images.

Fellini draws on a figural force, a type of force that, as Rodowick claims “deconstructs not only discourse but also the figure as recognizable image or proper form ... Figural ‘form’ is without unity” (15-16). In this particular instance, Rodowick is referring to the imbrication of the figural with the dream-work, the Freudian *Traumarbeit*, which Lyotard specifically addresses. What fuels the dream-work is desire, a primal phantasy and the figural acts precisely as desire, or rather, it is desire as an inhibited, unbridled, destabilizing force. It is a “force of transgression [that] express[es]

itself in disordered forms and hallucinatory images” (Lyotard 13). In *Amarcord*, there is a moment in which Mussolini’s face undergoes a drastic deformation as propelled by the uncontained force of desire and precisely during a dream sequence.

Ciccio, one of the schoolboys participating in the Fascist rally, daydreams about getting married with his sweetheart Aldina in front of Mussolini’s face. In his dream, the duce’s fake mouth suddenly deforms and turns into a talking mouth that utters the words to celebrate and officiate the marriage. The voice is also deformed and it sounds mechanical and fake, just like a recording, thus colliding with the clear and sturdy voice that Italians associated with the Duce.

The artificiality of Mussolini’s deformed voice and face, which stems from mediatic filtering, invites a reflection on the wide circulation of Mussolini’s image through radio and documentaries. Such aberrant incarnation of the Duce produces a tension between the obvious fakeness of the effigy and the political figure they are supposed to embody. This slippage compels us to engage in a meta-cinematic interpretation of *Amarcord*.

As clearly emerges from the de-humanized face of Mussolini, exaggeration is one of the tools that Fellini employs in order to bring cinematic artifice to the foreground. Another excellent case in point is the Rex episode. The Rex replicates the grandiose ocean liner built by the Fascist regime to connect Italy with America at record speed and aimed at conveying the regime and the Duce’s ubiquity and almightiness. With this episode, Fellini achieves the highest level of what Bonnigal, with specific reference to *Amarcord*, calls “foregrounding the artificiality of cinema’s reconstruction of reality” (145). The ship is revealed as just a cardboard ship, as a prop, and the sea is obviously a

sea made out of plastic. In this particular instance, Fellini distorts the relationship between the plastic and the figurative components of the image in that the lines and color making up the ship cannot be fully transposed to a figurative level. The explicitly-shown material of which the Rex is made calls attention to itself and lures spectators to focus precisely on its being a fake, cardboard ship. So, perhaps, we should reformulate Peter Bondanella's claim that the Rex is a "symbol of the Fascist regime" (126). The association of ideas that a cinematic prop is supposed to foster and the figurative, symbolic meaning it is meant to create, is in *Amarcord* thwarted. Spectators find it difficult to see it as symbolizing the power of the regime and are bound by the plastic sea, to the plastic level. The Rex, therefore, cannot fulfill the task for which it had been built, "as a kind of 'advertisement' for Fascism" (Burke 211) and just advertises cinema's ability to construct reality. The town's people who gather at night and wait a long time for the Rex's arrival can be split into two signs: at a more obvious level, they are characters who embody the perfect recipients and "consumers" of the products "advertised" by the regime. They are also, however, the ideal spectators of Fascist cinema. The reaction of the town's people to this obviously fake ship, before which they remain mesmerized and astonished, suggests a kind of gullible and rather childish attitude towards what Fascism constructed. According to this perspective, we, today's film audience, can interpret several other instances in the film, other collective moments in which we are called to see what the crowd "buys." One of such instances is the rally, in which everybody shares the enthusiasm for the deeds implemented by the regime. In an interview with Valerio Riva and to the question "Ha un posto particolare in 'Amarcord' l'episodio della visita del official?" Fellini replies:

Mi pare sia l'episodio centrale, insostituibile, indispensabile ... l'elemento che più caratterizza l'episodio dell'ufficiale, cioè il condizionamento buffonesco, di teatralità, di infantilismo, la soggezione ad un potere burattinesco, a un mito ridicolo, e proprio il centro del film. Il fascismo è stato un modo di guardare la vita da un punto di vista ... collettivo. (101)

In *Amarcord*, the official is indeed a kind of buffoon, a clownish figure who hieratically repeats all the steps dictated by the regime for public appearances. He is a sort of puppet of the regime who feeds a crowd of puppets, the people of the town. The various phases of the rally are marked by theatricality that appear solemn to the onlookers and that, instead, we perceive as ridiculous. Crucial is Fellini's comment that Fascism was a collective way of looking at life. I wish to concentrate on the words looking and collective. In this collective Fellini includes himself and the term looking also refers, I believe, to a cinematic way of looking.

In the same interview quoted above and in response to the question "Com'è visto il fascismo da lei?" Fellini replies "Non è un fascismo visto ... con un atteggiamento ... giudicante. Cioè dal di fuori ... La provincia di *Amarcord* è quella dove tutti siamo riconoscibili, autore in testa, nell'ignoranza che ci confondeva" (101). His own inclusion in the province in which everybody is recognizable suggests that *Amarcord* is a re-vision of that collective moment, which was characterized by ignorance and unawareness. From the position of director and spectator, Fellini detaches himself from the collectivity and *spectatorship* that drew a particular "sense" out of the images of the regime and that contributed to created "con-sensus." By showing us what can be constructed through filmmaking, Fellini deconstructs that "way of looking," which was his own as well, and offers us the tools to challenge it. In *Amarcord*, Fellini recreates the ideal spectator of the Fascist show: the people of the town, who are enthralled by the spectacle set up by the

regime (the rex, the rally), images that they receive and accept without elaborating them. At the same time he uses his filmmaking in order to evoke a space beyond such limited and blurred view. Fellini summons a larger, more complete and imperfect world that might have been perceived and that, instead, remained dormant and was repressed. By revealing cinematic artifice, by presenting props as props, he calls our attention – today’s spectators – to the constructedness of the “reality” offered by Fascist visual constructs. In this way, any anchoring to an external referent is thwarted and cinematic images becomes self-referential. Their potential of recalling, figuratively, the grandeur of regime is thus impeded. Through *Amarcord*, Fellini redeems cinematic images from the exploitation they suffered during Fascism; he calls for a spectator that differently from the ideal Fascist spectator does not comply with that limited, undeveloped and immature view of the world. Fellini uses his own filmmaking in order to re-become a spectator and unveil what at that time he could not grasp. In this sense we could perhaps claim that *Amarcord* is autobiographical and make sense of the “I remember” of the film title.

The Grand Hotel and the myth of cosmopolitanism

Amarcord invites a reflection on another spectacle that dominated the townspeople’s collective imagination, that is to say, the “dominating,” alluring films coming from America. In a way that recalls their engagement with Fascism, the townspeople assimilated uncritically the cinematic images of American movies and drew on them in order to interpret and make sense of their local reality. For example, the owner of the Fulgor cinema is referred to as Ronald Colman, Gradisca is enamored with and

dreams about Gary Cooper, as suggested by the above reported comment during her wedding.

Fellini's inclusion of the Grand Hotel, a "landmark of Hollywood mythology" (Hay 20) calls into question this cultural influence and, in particular, the way in which it reflected the public image the regime intended to project. James Hay contends that "The Grand Hotel is, for the provincial community, its touchstone with a more cosmopolitan set ... it is the locus in the town for romance and sentimental affection" (36). Since, as Hay continues, the regime cherished the desire to acquire a modern and slightly cosmopolitan image (38), one can argue that Fellini's use of the Grand Hotel is a way to address such desire. The very fact that the hotel is assiduously frequented by Pataca, a strong Fascist sympathizer who exalts the Duce, is indicative of the role played by the Grand Hotel in the film. At first, Fellini plays with our expectations because he does indeed present the Grand Hotel as the international locus for romance and sentimental affection with Pataca as the protagonist. He shows us the foreign, "cosmopolitan" guests with whom Pataca has love affairs, like the Nordic female vacationers. The fact that Pataca is so at ease and successful with the Grand Hotel guests, could potentially suggest that the Fascist man is easily projected towards abroad and perfectly able to attract and dominate foreign beauties. It is not by chance that it is the lawyer who introduces the Grand Hotel sequences and attempts to make them part of his unifying and "forming" narration.

A later sequence, however, disturbs this narration and collides with the image of the Grand Hotel created by Pataca. It is the dream sequence featuring Biscein (Gennaro Ombra), the town's pin wheeler, which stands between reality and fiction. One day, an

Emir with thirty concubines arrives at the Grand Hotel. Later than night, Biscein is passing by the hotel with his cart and suddenly sees that some of the concubines are throwing a sheet rope at him, a clear invitation to join them. Biscein accepts the invitation and as he climbs on the rope he repeats ecstatically in dialect “a so que, a so que, bambeini” ‘I’m here, I’m here, girls.’ In the next shot he is looking at the thirty women, enraptured and thrilled at such a sight. The lawyer is once again the one who narrates the story, but he casts doubts on the authenticity of Biscein’s account. Paralleling Pataca’s proud extolling of his ability to obtain “intimità posteriore” from Nordic tourists, Biscein boasts, as the *avvocato* recounts, the fact that “ne ha fatte fuori ventotto.” If we actually see Pataca dancing with a blonde woman, we only see Biscein looking at the concubines, from a distance, as if he were contemplating a spectacle. They do, indeed, put up a spectacle as they start dancing to the tunes of the music Biscein plays on his flute. Music provides the only link between the man and the women. The concreteness of Pataca’s blond woman stands in counterpoint with the evanescence of this connection, as we cannot determine if they are real or just a figment of Biscein’s imagination. What earlier reached towards the outside - an outside that the *mise-en-scène* underscores by actually presenting the characters enjoying themselves on a beautiful terrace - is here projected inwards and deformed according to a private, dream vision that takes places in an unknown place inside the Grand Hotel. Moreover, Biscein’s referring to the concubines with the dialect expression “bambeini” creates a further detachment from an international realm toward the local one.

Similarly to the Rex sequences and to Ciccio’s dream involving Mussolini’s effigy, the image cannot be transposed to a figurative level and does not cater to the

regime's desire for a cosmopolitan image. At this point, then, we should slightly modify Hay's claim that the Grand Hotel is a "locus" for romance and say that it consists of multiple, innumerable loci created by deforming forces, as exemplified by Biscein's experience. It is not a locus with clear contours and closed doors but rather a dimension that can be continuously entered and appropriated. Poignant in this respect is Deleuze's comment that Fellini "became increasingly concerned with entering into a new element and multiplying entrances. There are geographical entrances, psychic ones, historical, archeological etc" (*Cinema 2* 88). In this particular case, the Grand Hotel appears as a fictional hotel, something that cannot possibly be real. We cannot accept Biscein's experience as realistic and even less the fact that an Emir would come to a small, provincial Italian town like that of *Amarcord*. These sequences are revealed exactly for what they are, namely, as creations that owe their existence to cinematic artifice.

The juxtaposition of Pataca and Biscein, as well as the fakeness of the Rex and the talking effigy of Mussolini denounce the ways in which Fascism counterfeited life and presented itself visually. By relying on the potential of cinema as cinema, Fellini suggests that by creating a world that is manifestly fake, it is possible to free cinematic images from the fetters of representation, which was central in the Fascist visual propaganda. *Amarcord's* political significance lies in its ability to reveal and debunk the mechanisms by which Fascist images buttressed the regime's power. The ways in which Fellini disanchors the images of Fascism from an external referent, thus dispersing the meanings attached to them promotes a minor way of approaching cinema that finds in the very act of filmmaking and filmviewing a space for non-compliance with hegemonic

ideology and modes of representations. *La vita è bella*, to which I now turn, counters dominant approaches to the portrayal of the Shoah in a similar fashion.

***La vita è bella* by Roberto Benigni (1997)**

In *La vita è bella*, Benigni adopts several strategies in order to counter Fascist ideology and, in this particular case, Jewish persecution. He, too, like Fellini, draws on the destabilizing potential of dialect, namely, *toscano*, particularly on the discrepancy between its comic façade and its underlying gloomy layer. This serves to denounce the discrimination, persecution and eventually deportation of the Jewish minority. Also instrumental to the same end is Benigni's strategy of hiding the protagonists' Jewishness for a long stretch of the film, thus countering the forced and discriminatory "display" of Jewishness imposed by the Fascist regime on Italian Jews through the Racial Laws. A similar approach underlies Benigni's choice of concealing the horror of the camps through the figural channel of humor and transforming the ordeal of deportation into a game for the sake of his son Giosuè. In *La vita è bella*, like in *Amarcord*, it is possible, in fact, to identify a figural tension between visibility and invisibility, which gives rise to minoring practices of understatement, like the ones described above, or of exaggerated display. Similarly to the way in which Fellini manipulates images, Benigni unmasks the artifice behind the construction of his *univers concentrationnaire*, thus alluding to the impossibility of representing the horror of the camps.

Benigni's overall approach counters the major mode of representation of the Holocaust that refutes a humoristic treatment of the subject matter and is based on the principle of verisimilitude. Through a strategic combination of "unsaid" (and "unshown")

and overstatement, Benigni does not only denounce and convey the extent of discrimination and persecution against the Jews, but he also casts doubts on the acceptability of a dominant, “major” way of portraying the Shoah (or any event).

Jewish persecution is filtered through the eyes and experiences of the protagonists themselves. Guido Orefice (Roberto Benigni) is an Italian Jew who falls in love with Dora (Nicoletta Braschi), a non-Jewish woman who is betrothed, unwillingly, to a high-ranking Fascist supporter. After several ups and down, the two get married and from their union Giosuè (Giorgio Cantarini) is born. The appearance of the boy marks the inception of the second of the two distinct parts into which the film is divided. The first part is set before 1938 and the passing of the Racial Laws, while the second one takes place a few years afterward (Giosuè is already a five-year old boy when we see him) when deportations of Jews have already started.

The borderline scene between these two parts, which sets the ground for Guido and Dora’s union, takes place in the Grand Hotel in which Guido is employed as a waiter. Similarly to Biscain who disrupts the Grand Hotel as the locus for Fascist romance, Guido fulfils his dream of kissing Dora in the Grand Hotel in which the woman’s fiancé has organized a lavish engagement party. Even here, like in *Amarcord*, the scene of transgression that sees the intruder (Biscain/Guido) enter this space, happens between dream and reality. In Benigni’s film, the Grand Hotel is a condensation and materialization of Fascist ideology, a true *universe fasciste* filled with objects aimed at symbolizing the regime’s power. Emblematic is the cake prepared for the engagement party bearing a fake ostrich with a giant egg on its head, a clear reference to regime’s African campaign. For the first portion of the film, Guido is subordinate to this place – he

is, after all, the waiter serving the Fascist guests – and his presence does not affect its compactness. During the party, instead, Guido rebels and takes control, quits his job, “steals” Dora from the officer and takes her away on Eliseo’s horse. The Fascist space is now functional to the fulfillment of Guido’s dream and thus crumbles, as visually suggested by the egg that accidentally falls and crushes on the officer’s head.

The appropriation of this “self-contained, hermetically sealed world” (Marcus *Me lo dici babbo che gioco è* 157) anticipates the revisiting of the concentration camp universe, which Guido transforms, yet temporarily and through his imagination, in a fun park for the sake of his son Giosuè. He thus undoes the fixed parameters and coordinates that dominate this space in Holocaust representation.

“Il silenzio è il grido più forte:” The power of the unexplained

The first part of the film, set in Arezzo in 1936, sees the two Jewish characters, Guido and his uncle Eliseo, lead a normal life, which is only rarely marred by signs – more and more explicit as the film progresses – of the antisemitic sentiment that eventually led to the passing of the Racial Laws.

In the first sequence that introduces us to the “otherness,” yet unspecified, of the protagonists, Guido arrives at his uncle’s house and finds him on the floor. Eliseo has suffered some sort of physical attack by some youths, “barbari, barbari,” as the old man calls them, who are running away. When Guido asks his uncle why he has not screamed for help, the uncle replies “Il silenzio è il grido più forte.” Silence does, indeed, characterize the uncle’s interaction with Guido over an implied but never clearly stated crucial question in the film, i.e. the characters’ Jewishness. The reason for the assault on

Eliseo's house and person lies, as we infer, in the fact that the uncle is Jewish and in the widespread antisemitic sentiment of the time, but we understand this only in hindsight. We discover it only forty-five minutes into the film when someone paints Eliseo's horse green and writes on it "Achtung, cavallo ebreo." This is the moment when we are informed that also Guido is Jewish. The latter tries to discard the whole things as a light act by saying "L'hanno fatto per," by which he implies that it was just a joke. The uncle, instead, by now aware of reasons behind such act, repeats "Non l'hanno fatto per, l'hanno fatto *per*." By omitting the verb that would make explicit the malevolent intent of vandals but by repeating the preposition "per" with an extremely stern voice tone, he denounces, silently, such act. Similarly to Micòl's special emphasis placed on certain syllables and words, the way in which Eliseo stresses "per" reveals that he has understood the dreadful consequences laying ahead. Indeed, he predicts: "Cominceranno anche con te, ti ci dovrai abituare." The repetition of "L'hanno fatto per," an expression that only at first glance is the same, recalls the strategy that Ginzburg uses with her family sayings "ripetute volte." In *Lessico familiare*, such strategy served the purpose of rejuvenating a linguistic force that Fascism had extinguished, to augur a new language, in the Derridean sense of the word. In *La vita è bella*, it does introduce us to a new language, but to one that is a vehicle for discrimination and oppression. Similarly to Ginzburg's mode of expression, then, Eliseo's "stammering" tells volumes about the political situation without actually explaining. The entire film relies on the potential of evoking, both in its verbal and, as we will see, in its visual component. This evoking, as epitomized and introduced by Eliseo's truncated sentence, is juxtaposed with an explicit institutional language that is meant to segregate and eventually persecute Jews. This language implies and establishes negative

association for the term “Jew,” as epitomized by “Achtung,” which suggests a danger that Jews and even their possessions may cause. In this regard, the silence surrounding the characters’ Jewishness subverts this mechanism.

In an interview, as summarizes the plot of *La vita è bella*, Benigni recounts: “Ad un certo punto, si scopre che sono di origine ebraica, oso dire ebreo” and then he explains that before the Racial Laws “Non c’era bisogno di dirlo direttamente.” Benigni implies that it was not crucial to stress the difference because difference was not an issue, as there was a commonality between Jews and non-Jews. Many Italian Jews considered themselves Italians before they saw themselves as Jewish. As Maurizio Viano argues: “*Life Is Beautiful* intentionally conceals Guido’s Jewishness for about 45 minutes ... Benigni's choice emphasizes an uncontested historical reality: the ‘Italian-ness’ of the Jews, their participation in Italian history at all levels.” Primo Levi himself stated that he discovered his Jewishness through prejudice and that, as one can read in the first page of *Se questo è un uomo*, “Sono diventato ebreo in Auschwitz. La coscienza di sentirmi diverso mi è stata imposta”(4). As Italian critic Cesare Cases recounts “Come mi disse una volta Primo Levi, noi non ci saremmo mai accorti di essere ebrei se non ce lo avessero dimostrato in modo alquanto persuasivo.”

As indicative of a situation in which Jewishness did not stand out unless “imposed” and then “persuasively demonstrated,” in *La vita è bella* the concept and word “ebreo” becomes manifest only in incidents underlying a discriminatory purpose. In the second part of the film, there is a sequence that epitomizes such discriminatory demonstration. Guido and Giosuè are walking on a street. The boy sees a cake through the window of a store and suggests enthusiastically “Babbo, la compriamo per la

mamma?” Guido, in reading the sign “Vietato l’ingresso agli ebrei e ai cani” concocts the excuse that the cake is fake. Giosuè, however, also notices the sign and reads it. The following dialogue ensues:

[Giosuè] Perché gli ebrei e i cani non possono entrare?

[Guido] Eh, loro gli ebrei e i cani non ce li vogliono. Là c’è un negozio in cui non vogliono gli spagnoli e i cavalli.

[Giosuè] Noi però facciamo entrare tutti!

[Guido] Allora da domani lo mettiamo anche noi il cartello. A te chi ti è antipatico?

[Giosuè] I ragni. A te?

[Guido] I visigoti. Allora domani ce lo scriviamo: vietato l’ingresso ai ragni e ai visigoti. M’hanno proprio stufato ‘sti visigoti!

Benigni’s linguistic strategy succeeds in debunking the dyads ebreo/italiano and ebreo/ariano on which the antisemitic legislation was based by creating additional combinations. In other words, the addition of Spanish people and Visigoths to “ebrei” challenges the role of primary enemy and scapegoat that Italian Jews came to embody in Fascist Italy. Moreover, by making his son believe that the sign against Jews was the result of a personal disliking, Guido’s remark deprives the separation of Jews and Italians of that racially-based *essentialism* that buttressed it. It suggests that a sign to the same effect could be quickly and easily forged with any constituting component, as suggested by how Guido and Giosuè create one on the spot, almost out of a whim. The fact that Guido resorts to the Visigoths, to a people no longer existing, stresses even more the artificiality of this division, which is foregrounded by the association of the sign with the fakeness of the cake.

The way in which the characters’ Jewishness is on the one hand forcibly revealed by authorities and on the other only alluded at recalls Fellini’s strategy of opposing the conspicuousness of Fascism to the non-descriptiveness and evanescence of anti-Fascist

forces (the Socialist Internazionale). Benigni's opting for a lack of language counters and denounces the "panoptical" mechanism put in place by the Nazi and Fascist regimes, which assured that Jews were under constant surveillance, so as to avert the "danger" they allegedly posed. In the sequence above, the camera movement reproduces and provides a powerful example of such mechanism. The frontal shot showing Guido and Giosuè walking away from the store is juxtaposed with a backward shot capturing the characters from behind and "stalking" them, which conveys the sort of forced visibility imposed on Jews. With *La vita è bella*, Benigni challenges the "major" gaze that antisemitic legislation created by refusing to be a spectator of – and therefore a participant in – in this discriminatory display. A sequence highlights this strategy. As he is getting ready to go home with Giosuè and Dora, Guido pulls down the shutter of his bookstore, where the writing "Negozio ebreo" becomes visible. When the shutter was pulled up, only the two letters "N" and "O," the two ends of the sentence, were there to see. Guido does not see or pay attention either to the two letters or to the complete sentence, which recalls the unawareness of what occurs behind his back in the sequence I analyzed earlier. On the one hand, this omission signals that Guido has not "seen the writing on the wall" and is not aware of what lies ahead; on the other, however, it indicates Benigni's unwillingness to share that visual "spectacle" intended for a large audience. The shutter serves, in fact, as a screen for the display and dissemination of the warning message, which begs reflections on the visual artifice that supported anti-Jewish propaganda.

Such arbitrariness also emerges in the sequence in which Guido, in order to meet and impress his *principessa*, Dora, a school teacher, pretends to be the minister who is

supposed to deliver a speech on the purity of the Italian race to a class of elementary school students. He appropriates some key racial concepts like “ariano” and “italico,” for example, which he uses to describe some parts of his body. He thus creates improbable collocations for these terms as in the following excerpt of his speech: “Questa si chiama piegatura di gamba ariana con movimento circolare del piede italico caviglia etrusca su stinco romano ... in Belgio se la sognano!” It has often been noted, and aptly so, that the subversive potential of this scene lies in the fact that it is a Jew who is delivering a speech on the purity of the Italian race. The fact, however, that at this point in the film there is nothing yet that unequivocally conveys Guido’s Jewishness cannot be neglected and strongly contributes to the effect of the spoof. I believe that the strong destabilizing potential of this sequence lies in its wide applicability, i.e. in the fact that emphasis on notions like “ariano” and “italico” and the way in which they were instrumentalized by the Fascist regime would sound ridiculous and affected *no matter who* were using them. Here again, non-descriptiveness seems to be the key to denouncing.

Humor and the role of *toscano*

As epitomized by the above two scenes revolving around Guido’s fake identity, humor is an integral component of *La vita è bella*. Such approach to dealing with the Shoah has earned Benigni harsh criticism by critics who feel that humor is not acceptable when portraying the tragedy of the Holocaust. Benigni does instead show that humor can become a powerful tool for evoking and denouncing it. With *La vita è bella*, Benigni carves out a minor mode of expression both within the major and widely accepted approach to Holocaust portrayal grounded on the principle of verosimilitude and within

the cinematic language that characterized his previous work. The films that precede *La vita è bella* starring and directed by Benigni like *Il piccolo diavolo* (1988), *Johnny Stecchino* (1991), and *Il mostro* (1994) are comic films that have typecast him as a comic actor. Some of the accusations against *La vita è bella* spring from the perception that Benigni continued this tradition by making a comic film about the Holocaust and, therefore, treating the event as a laughing matter. As Vincenzo Cerami¹⁸ commented on such misconception during the TV show *Pinocchio* “Lo si percepisce un film comico per via di Benigni.”

The pervasive use of *toscano* in *La vita è bella* strongly contributes to the comic façade of the film. Benigni’s prior films heavily relied on the Tuscan parlance for their comic effect. As Millicent Marcus notes “La toscanità has been a staple of comic film production throughout the 1990’s, ‘dal Nuti di ieri, ai Benigni, Benvenuti, Virzi e Pieraccioni di oggi,’ observes Claudio Fava” (*Me lo dici babbo che gioco è* 161).

The *toscano* constitutes an important substratum of *La vita è bella* but, breaking away from the filmic tradition traced by Marcus, is not a vehicle for the comic. Rather, it grows to acquire a gloomy, somber side. In a similar way, sequences that produce laughter as an immediate initial reaction soon reveal their bleak side if set against the background in which they are embedded. The episodes of the breakless car and of Guido’s racial charade, for example, lead us to laugh, but one soon realizes that laughter is contingent and stems from an ominous political situation. The first scene I described signals to spectators, swiftly but unambiguously, with a simple hand gesture, that the political setting is the Fascist era, while the second one confronts us with the racial campaign that is being perpetrated. Similarly to how the Levis’ family language in

¹⁸ Vincenzo Cerami co-scripted the film together with Benigni.

Lessico familiare acquires a gloomy side, these apparently comic elements turn into what Emanuela Martini calls “segnali fastidiosi e inquietanti”¹⁹ that show the reverse side of laughter and stifle its free development. As Bettina von Jagow puts it “It is this abrupt shift from inhibited to inhibited laughter that illustrates Benigni’s intention not to just make a comic movie” (*Representing the Holocaust* 81).

Another key sequence dramatizes even more “this shift from inhibited to inhibited laughter.” Guido is talking with his friend Ferruccio’s employer, whose Tuscan accent is much more marked than that of the protagonist himself. The man immediately appears to be rather gullible and subject to Guido’s witty tricks, by which he always manages to steal his hat. The *toscano* that accompanied Guido’s deeds is rather soft compared to the man’s marked, almost disturbing parlance. The typical traits of *toscano*, like the fricative “c” for example, are exaggerated and make Guido’s accent seem rather “soft.” This scenario recalls the discrepancy between Aurelio’s rather standard Italian and the heavy-accented speech of the Fascists who interrogate him (among whom was, if we recall, even a Tuscan). This parallel is warranted by the fact that Ferruccio’s employer is manifestly a Fascist, what is more, a Fascist who also does not hide his support for Hitler. After Guido tells him that he plans to apply for a permission to open a bookstore, as we learn in the following sequence, the man warns him to be “bravi ragazzi, perché questi sono tempi brutti, ma brutti brutti.” Intrigued by what clearly is a politically inspired statement, Guido asks: “Ma Lei come la pensa politicamente?” The man, distracted by his two sons who are bickering on a nearby sofa, hollers “Benito, Adolfo, state boni!” thus implicitly providing a well too clear answer to Guido. By offering an exaggeration

¹⁹ Qtd. in Vito Leone, ed. *Cinema e Shoah: 95 testi per infinite riflessioni*. Bella (Potenza): Centro di Documentazione Pietro Pintus, 2005. 351.

of *toscano* in such direct juxtaposition with Guido, this early sequence sets the ground for the role that Tuscan parlance plays in the film. By straying from the tradition of *toscanità*, the *toscano* of *La vita è bella* conceals a serious side, as the man's bad omen that "questi son tempi brutti, ma brutti brutti" epitomizes. By being uttered by a Fascist, it warns us that something is awry, that we are no longer in a context in which this accent accompanies funny and cheerful situations. In this way, Benigni's minor use of *toscano* becomes the beacon for the tragic events that we will witness.

Such minor use, and its destabilizing potential, also characterizes the sequence in which Guido and Giosuè, newly arrived at the concentration camp, first enter the barrack to which they have been assigned. A German sergeant bursts in and asks for an Italian who can speak German and, thus, translate the orders he is going to deliver. Guido raises his hand and volunteers although he does not know a word of the German language. He distorts the officer's instructions about the dire life in the camps in two crucial ways. First, he subverts the content of the instructions by turning them into the rules of the game sustaining his fictionalized world; second, he does not speak the language that the sergeant "hires" him to translate, namely, "Italienisch" by opting for a regional variation of it. Neither the sergeant, it should be noted, speaks a common and neutral German but rather, a "lagerjargon" (Marcus *Me lo dici babbo che gioco è* 161), a distorted variety of German spoken, understood, and sensical only among the people who populated the camps. Guido's act of translation, then, allows a shift from two minor linguistic usages and the *toscano*, in being so discrepant with the lagerjargon, brings to the foreground its utter brutality and aridity. This disparity is also contingent on auralty and on the difference between the warm character of the Tuscan parlance and the strident and harsh

quality of the sergeant's angry German. As von Jagow further comments on this particular sequence "A discourse split paradoxically, two sequences of utterances meant to be semantically equivalent, but in reality utterly different" (84).

This discrepancy provides fertile ground for distinguishing between the comic and the humorous. Luigi Pirandello's notion of "umorismo" is centered on this distinction, which Marcus appropriates in order to explore the "serious humor" of *La vita è bella*, as the title of her article reads. Marcus notes that "While the comic, for Pirandello, resides in the 'avvertimento del contrario' (135) – the awareness of disparate perspectives – the humorous resides in the 'sentimento del contrario' (135) – the concomitant philosophical reflection on the meaning of that disparity" (162). Applying such distinctions to the specific context of *La vita è bella*, Marcus distinguishes between "the inner audience (Giosuè), [who] laughs at the avvertimento del contrario ... [and] we [who] laugh at its sentimento. And it is this doubling that endows Pirandellian humor with its philosophical and ethical *gravitas*" (162).²⁰

By fostering a deep and "speciale attività della riflessione," the humor sustaining *La vita è bella* does carry with it "philosophical and ethical gravitas." The "doubling" of the *toscano*, its comic façade concealing a tragic side creates two different audiences and contributes to the emergence of the "sentimento del contrario."

Pirandello's association of "gravitas" with humor sheds even more light on the workings of *La vita è bella* if we relate it to Italo Calvino's discussion of humor in "Leggerezza," one of the memos for the next Millennium. Calvino defines "la leggerezza" as "La gravità senza peso" (*Lezioni americane* 25), thus suggesting that

²⁰ Due to space limitations, I have summed up Marcus's argument and only sketched out Pirandello's complex and multifaceted notion of humor.

there is a way in which “gravità” maintains its inner potential even when it is lightened up from a burden. Not completely removed of the burden, just relieved from it a little; as Paul Valery contends, “Il faut être léger comme l’oiseau, et non comme la plume.”²¹ Humor, for Calvino, equals the comic that has lost some “pesantezza,” more specifically “Lo humour è il comico che ha perso la pesantezza corporea” (*Lezioni americane* 25). Benigni’s humor is, indeed, characterized by “gravitas,” as Marcus suggests, but by a “gravità senza peso,” by a lightness able to evoke and communicate without having to resort to physicality.

In explaining why he appreciates and values *La vita è bella*, film critic Morando Morandini underscores precisely the “leggerezza” on which the film is based and that “gli dà l’acqua della vita, una leggerezza che è anche un’arte del togliere e dell’alludere.”²² The humor of *La vita è bella* draws its “gravitas” from what it “takes away,” from its relinquished burden of having to *show* and represent the horror of the Shoah.

Theater actor and playwright Moni Ovadia, an Italian Jew of Bulgarian origin, also draws on humor – and he uses precisely the term “umorismo” – in his treatment of the Shoah. He explains:

c’è tutto un repertorio di storielle sulla Shoah. Proprio nate anche nei lager. Perché non è un ridere, né il ridere di un deridere. È il riso dell’estrema intelligenza sull’orlo dell’abisso. Noi abbiamo delle visioni schematiche e stereotipate, come guardiamo per esempio il fenomeno del ridere o il linguaggio umoristico. Ci sono certi linguaggi seriosi, noiosi, paludati che sono molto più offensivi del mio linguaggio umoristico. (225)

²¹ Qtd. in Italo Calvino. *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*. Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1993. 20.

²² Qtd. in Vito Leone, ed. *Cinema e Shoah: 95 testi per infinite riflessioni*. Bella (Potenza): Centro di Documentazione Pietro Pintus, 2005, 351.

At the end of one of the play *Dybbuk*, “che era uno spettacolo tragico, era un lungo grido, un urlo” (225), Ovadia tells a humorous story, as suggested to him by one of his colleagues, Mara Cantoni, who explained that “Noi dobbiamo fare capire che dietro l’umorismo c’è tutto il resto” (qtd. in Ovadia 225). Ovadia and Cantoni’s comments shed light on the way in which Benigni’s humor works: his humor is not “un ridere, nè un ridere del deridere” and powerfully draws its force and evokes “tutto il resto” from which it shies away. Benigni does not laugh at the Shoah, but shows us laughter *within* it as an extreme reaction to the abyss that defies representation.

Laughter plays a vital role not only at the extradiegetic level, but it also fulfills a diegetic function as it becomes instrumental for Guido in order to cover the inferno that surrounds him. In a crucial sequence, Guido desperately clings to laughter – by actually laughing at and pretending to make fun of Giosuè – in order to shield “all the rest” that is so close to surfacing. It is the only instance in the film in which laughing is not a reaction on the spectators’ part – it is actually one of the gloomiest – and is used by a character in order to relate and interact with an interlocutor. It is a despairing laugh, an obviously forced and affected one that represents the last hope for keeping up the fable and outwit the boy’s stern and serious expression. When he arrives at his barrack after an extenuating work day at the anvil factory, Guido recounts, as usual, his day to Giosuè by filling it with invented pleasant activities. The boy is silent and then blurts out: “Con noi ci fanno i bottoni e ci bruciano nel forno.” Guido starts laughing but Giosuè does not change his expression and gloomily repeats: “Ci bruciano nel forno.” It is at this particular moment that Guido’s laugh turns raucous, harsh and full of despair. The man has to resort to all of his witty inventiveness in order to salvage the situation and claims:

Giosue, ci sei cascato, ci sei cascato un'altra volta ... eppure ti facevo un ragazzino vispo, furbo, intelligente ... i bottoni e il sapone con le persone, ma sarebbe il colmo dei colmi. Ma ci pensi? Domani mattina mi lavo le mani con Bartolomeo, una bella insaponata, m'abbottono con Francesco e poi, oh, m'è caduto Giorgio [showing a button that has fallen off his jacket] Ti sembra una persona questo?

There are two powerful linguistic strategies at work in this passage: first, Guido provides the items with a name, an identity and, second, he plays on the absurdity of the literal meaning of these expressions, which was actually the way it really made sense in concentration camps. As for the first strategy, the act of providing buttons and soap with proper names, thus implying “full-fledged identities” (Marcus 162), counters the process of dehumanization that the Nazis carried out with the camp inmates. Before the actual macabre transformation of human bodies into utilitarian objects, such process occurred at a linguistic level. Levi himself recounts, for example, that the word “men” was banned from the lagerjargon and replaced with “Häftlinge” (prisoners) (71) and that “fressen,” which indicates animal eating erased “essen,” the general term for human consumption of food (*I sommersi e i salvati* 77). In this respect, Guido’s reference to Bartolomeo, one of the two inmates that the man actually talks to among the group of nameless prisoners, in an attempt to make the equation soap/person seem totally absurd, emphasizes this aim.

The absurdity of such process is rendered even more strongly by Guido’s relying on an actual object to make his point. When he asks “Ti sembra una persona questo” he attempts to make Giosuè wary of the indexical power/potential of the sentence “Con noi ci fanno i bottoni e il sapone,” which the boy, as he himself tells his father, has learned, from “un uomo che piangeva.” Guido presents the indexicality of such sentence as this man’s attempt to discourage him from continuing the game, thus implying that the boy has to learn how to read between the lines and forsake a literal reading in favor of a

figurative one. When the boy repeats, once again, “Ci bruciano nel forno,” Guido keeps laughing forcibly and Giosuè, seemingly immovable, repeats for the fourth time “Ci bruciano nel forno.” At this point, perhaps fearing the collapsing of his fable, Guido highlights the boy’s naiveté and gullibility at stopping at the literal level : “Ma a te te le fanno bere proprio tutte. Il forno a legna l’ho sentito ma il forno a uomo non l’ho mai sentito!” Guido succeeds in his endeavor and in the end Giosuè breaks into a smile. Cerami’s statement that “Abbiamo giocato sui paradossi” could not emerge more clearly than in this sequence. Guido plays on what sounds like a paradoxical expression and leads his son to ponder about its constitutive elements. By relying not only on his common sense but also on his linguistic consciousness, the boy acknowledges them as weird and untenable collocations. Imbued with “il sentimento del contrario,” instead, we, as spectators, are compelled to reflect on what truly happened in the camps, outside of the fable that we are watching, which has to be dramatically taken at a literal level. As Alvin Rosenfeld claims about the poem “Smoke” (1956) by Jacob Glatstein, the title of which refers to the actual smoke produced by the incineration of dead bodies, “we must disown the figurative use of language ... and interpret literally: the Jew has become smoke” (26). Captivity in the camps was thus reflected by the lagerjargon, which entrapped speakers by keeping them “segregated” to the literal level.

By “disowning” and not conniving with this perverse literal sense in order to shield his son from the surrounding horror, Benigni also manages to assert a minor use of the dominant currency of common, familiar words like “bottoni” and “forno” within the camp environment. The deep influence that the camps exerted on language, on *any* language, and not just on German, was that everyday words like oven, smoke, and

chimney came to acquire specific, camp-related meanings that extinguished all the others. Levi uses the expression “zeit – und - ortsgebunden” (*I sommersi e i salvati* 76) to indicate this specificity. Marie Orton contends that “The ‘new’ language created by the Lager is a kind of universal dialect understood by all nationalities within the camp, a language that has meaning only within the hermetic world of the Lager and that could communicate only about the life in the camp” (310). Guido’s attempt to shield his son from the horror of the camp also lies in preserving the innocent language that the boy speaks. He is trying to ensure that for Giosuè words like buttons and ovens remain free of the macabre sense and associations they acquired “within the hermetic world of the Lager.”

Primo Levi seems to hint at the potentially-evolving character of the lagerjargon when he contends that, had the lagers lasted longer, a new language would have been born. The author claims:

Come questa nostra fame non è la sensazione di chi ha saltato un pasto, così il nostro modo di avere freddo esigerebbe un nome particolare. Noi diciamo ‘fame’, diciamo ‘stanchezza’, ‘paura’, e ‘dolore’, diciamo ‘inverno’, e sono altre cose. Sono parole libere, create e usate da uomini liberi che vivevano, godendo e soffrendo, nelle loro case. Se i lager fossero durati più a lungo, un nuovo aspro linguaggio sarebbe nato. (*Se questo è un uomo* 119)

Guido contrasts this possible evolution by keeping “free” words that otherwise would have been contaminated. He relies on words and expressions that are absolutely removed from the camp experience – the rules of the game, the need to overcome the temptation of “volere la mamma” and “la merenda” – thus managing to prevent his language from becoming a vehicle for such experience. In other words, Guido is not contributing to the spreading and reinforcement of the lagerjargon and to the possibility that his words might come close to rendering – and thus conniving with – the situation that created it. Marcus

defines “the subversion of the translation process” as “an act of resistance” (160). We should wonder, however, what kind of resistance it is or, perhaps, if his strategy goes beyond resistance. What is at work, it seems to me, is more a process of “re-activation” because Guido rekindles the home-related meanings of words like chimney and oven that had been repressed and smothered by the camp dynamics. Benigni adopts a strategy that recalls, yet in inverted terms, Ginzburg’s treatment of domestic words. Ginzburg shows the foreignness inhabiting words commonly regarded as simple and domestic, while Benigni restores the domesticity of terms that the lagerjargon had replaced with macabre associations. Both of them, however, revive and show language’s inexhaustible linguistic potential for growth and proliferation; they bring about a rejuvenation of language that by virtue of its constructive and transformative and not just oppositional traits goes beyond resistance.

The fable of *La vita è bella*

Guido’s difficulty in describing and even verbalizing what he sees emerges very clearly when, as he walks back to his barrack while holding Giosuè, finds himself suddenly surrounded by fog. Giosuè is asleep but Guido still addresses him and claims: “Forse è tutto un sogno per davvero, forse domattina viene la mamma, ci prepara il latte con i biscotti, e io ci faccio l’amore due o tre volte, se ce la fo.” As before, Guido resorts to the kind of language that typifies Giosuè’s world, centered on his mother and on soothing breakfasts of milk and cookies, which so far has allowed him to construct his fable. In this particular instance, however, the man overtly casts doubts on the reality of what he witnesses. The term “sogno” denotes precisely the crossing to a different

dimension that, differently from the “gioco,” is not carefully orchestrated. Now that the recipient of his constructed universe is asleep and that invention is no longer necessary, Guido finds himself confused and displaced, as suggested by the fog. This is a crucial sequence in the film because we are allowed to see Guido outside of the parallel universe that he himself creates and is constantly engaged in consolidating. It is one of the few instances in which Guido allows himself a space for asking questions and raising doubts. The man realizes that he is in a linguistic vacuum and his reference to the fact that “forse è tutto un sogno” invokes another dimension that might cover, this time for his own sake, the inexpressible horror in which he is immersed. This scenario recalls the sequence in *Amarcord* in which Aurelio’s father, on the way home, loses his bearings because of fog. If Guido cannot tell for certain if he is awake or just having a bad dream, the grandfather is so puzzled that he wonders if he is alive or dead. To his own remark “Se la morte è così non è un bel lavoro” he retorts, in dialect, “Te cul! ‘Up yours!” His final refusal of the possibility of his being dead, is uttered in dialect and in a rather defiant fashion, which conveys the anguish and sense of loss that the old man experienced in the preceding moments. Even in *La vita è bella*, it is a dialect expression, namely the Tuscan “fo” instead of “faccio” that reveals the extent of the ordeal, through which Guido wonders if he would be still able to make love to his wife two or three times. Such expression evokes that which he has not expressed, “all the rest.” Guido probably hints at the lack of physical strength that he feels, which is of course due to the inhuman conditions of life in the camp, and hints at the indescribable physical suffering that Levi refers to. Through this simple expression, Benigni evokes – and alerts us to always bear in mind – the life not visible but nonetheless, present *in absentia*, as it is the

raw material that continuously merges, yet drastically revisited, into the fable. The use of *toscano* and its stifled and marred comic effect is the in-between that reminds us of the double-facedness of the fable we are watching and of the presence/absence of “all the rest.”

There is only one instance in which we *see*, or rather, we get a glimpse of the reality that is just evoked throughout the film. As he is talking to Giosuè asleep and keeps walking in the fog, not exactly knowing where he is going, Guido suddenly finds himself in front of a pile of dead bodies. What follows is silence. Guido looks horrified and terrified but cannot utter a single sound at that terrible sight. Before an unimaginable horror, Benigni chooses not to attempt to verbalize or portray it. The image of dead bodies does he betray such attempt. What we are see are blatantly fake, stylized bodies that make the whole image appear as a drawing, just like the Rex in *Amarcord*. Similarly to Fellini, Benigni relies on a figural strategy; if the figural is, as Paolo Bertetto notes, what allows us to understand that there is something that cannot be represented or reproduced, then this pile of dead bodies encapsulates it. In fact, these corpses underscore that any attempt aimed at reproducing the corporeal dimension of death in the camps is going to fail. As the Rex’s make up cannot stand figuratively for the regime’s power, this pile of bodies cannot be taken as a representation of the actual bodies of Jews killed in the camps. Commenting on this specific scene, Marcus observes: “In this brief, wordless scene, Guido is confronted with the ultimate signified of the Holocaust, the referent that all his machinations have sought to mask” (155). If Guido might indeed face “the referent” that he has attempted to mask, Benigni seeks instead to detach from it and interpose between us and the referent the image of fake

bodies. In this way, he unmasks the distance existing between what we might use as a signifier of the Holocaust and “the ultimate signified.”

Like Fellini, Benigni draws on the potential of cinema as cinema and reveals the cinematic artifice implied in the construction of his children’s version of the concentration camp life. In so doing, he challenges a whole cinematic tradition that is instead based on verisimilitude and that finds its most eminent exponent in Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993), which has become a landmark, canonic Holocaust films. Molly Magid Hoagland talks specifically about the film’s “recent canonization” (34). *Schindler’s List* provides us with very vivid and graphic images of persecution, killings that abound with details. Gad Lerner’s comment that the film “non ti risparmi niente” is extremely fitting. Two sequences exemplify Spielberg’s approach: the liquidation of the Lodz ghetto, which is extremely graphic in showing SS soldiers killing crowds of people and the shower room sequence. In the latter, women prisoners, horror stamped on their face, expect lethal gas coming out of the showers and are eventually ecstatic and cry with joy at seeing actual water. These are faithful and verisimilar reconstructions but can they really convey the horror? Moni Ovadia recounts that he watched the film with some survivors and he reports that at the end of the screening one of them blurted out: “Non c’è nemmeno un attimo della mia angoscia” (220). *La vita è bella*, instead, was well received by many survivors, both in Italy and abroad. Romeo Salmoni, a Roman Jew, goes as far as to claim that “Il film mi ha entusiasmato.” What accounts for such a reaction? There must be a way in which Benigni’s film manages to convey, to express without showing the ordeal that these people have experienced. I believe that the key lies in laying bare the cinematic artifice that has allowed the director

to create a fable, a fable that in many aspects defies historical data. In arguing this, I am countering all those negative responses to the film that regard the non-adherence to historical facts as a serious and misleading choice on Benigni's part. Exemplary of these extremely critical responses are David Denby's reviews that appeared twice on the New Yorker in 1998. With respect to the film's relationship to history, Denby contends "Surely Benigni knows that any child entering Auschwitz would be immediately put to death, and that at every camp people were beaten and humiliated at random. He shows us nothing like that ... Benigni wants the authority of the Holocaust without the actuality" (96). Denby implies that only films or works of art that "show" violence and comply with the principle of actuality are eligible to acquiring authority on a specific subject. On the contrary, I contend that if *La vita è bella* has come to be regarded as a landmark film on the Shoah is precisely because it disowns actuality in favor of fable. Benigni makes it immediately clear to spectators what they should expect, as the voice-over narration that opens the film, that of adult Giosuè, explicitly states: "Questa è una storia semplice, eppure è difficile raccontarla. Come una favola c'è dolore e come una favola è piena di meraviglia e di felicità." In an interview Benigni confirms that "Non c'è niente di reale ... è un film fantastico, di fantascienza, non si capisce cos'è" (Nel sogno di Benigni). Viewers clearly perceive the artificiality of the concentration camp and of the story and they cannot possibly believe that the course of events in the film is realistic. Apart from the overall fable-like structure of the film, there are sequences that lay bare their being fantastic and constructed. An example will suffice. Guido is driving a wheel barrel inside which Giosuè is hidden under a sack, which in itself is highly improbable. He passes by an office where he sees a microphone connected to a megaphone, a system obviously used

to impart orders on the prisoners. Preoccupied for Dora, who is also in the camp, having willingly joined the fate of her family, Guido decides to take advantage of the megaphone in order to let the woman know that he and Giosuè are alive and well. He greets her with his usual “Buon giorno, Principessa,” while the child cries out “Mamma” and tells her “Ci divertiamo! Da morir dal ridere!” Just like the sequence in *Amarcord* featuring Biscain and the concubines, which cannot be possibly taken as realistic, even this sequence in which the fairy-tale elements are exaggeratedly emphasized, as the “principessa” and the “morir dal ridere” suggest, signals that something is awry. The wide and easily-perceived discrepancy between what we are shown and how it really happened reveals the impossibility of strictly adhering to actuality when making a film on the Holocaust. Benigni lays bare cinema’s inability (and inability in general) to represent the Shoah and his “unusual code,” as Viano defines it, in colliding so strongly with the notion of verisimilitude, leads us to reflect and question the validation that this principle enjoys.

Let’s take once again *Schindler’s List*, which is regarded as one of the most realistic and faithful films on the subject and has achieved the status of a document of the Holocaust. No matter how Spielberg tries to faithfully reproduce the camp experience, he only succeeds in providing an approximation of it. The actors impersonating inmates, for example are obviously too fat compared to the real walking skeletons that appear on photographs or footage of the camps. This point was famously made by writer and comics artist Art Spiegelman who, in explaining why he deems *Schindler’s List* as a “failure,” contends that in the film

there’s a kind of ersatz, an attempt to create verisimilitude that couldn’t help but fail. It’s stupid just to complain the actors were too well-fed, but it’s something

one has to contend with. An actor does not normally look like a skeleton. You cannot starve actors for two years before letting them appear on the screen, and yet it leads to problems. (Interview)

It is ironic that Spiegelman was one of the critics who flayed *La vita è bella* on grounds of its inappropriate portrayal of the Holocaust. This criticism suggests that despite his suspicion of any pursuit of verisimilitude, he is equally wary of any approach that strays too much from it. This is even more ironic considering that he, too, was criticized for his treatment of the Holocaust in *Maus*, a graphic novel in which Germans and Jews are depicted, respectively, as cats and mice. Moreover, as much as Spiegelman would abhor any parallel between his work and Benigni's, the pile of stylized bodies in front of which Guido stops, appalled, does bear some resemblance with some of Spiegelman's rendition of corpses in *Maus*.²³ Benigni, like Spiegelman, renders manifest his refusal to "attempt to create verisimilitude," thus spurring spectators to question the non-reality disguised as reality. Benigni has commented precisely on "[la] lunghezza dei capelli, [la] larghezza delle orecchie ... [la] rotondità della pelle" of the actors of *La vita è bella* in order to underscore the fable-like character of his film. (Nel sogno di Benigni). When we see a film like *La vita è bella* in which a five-year old boy survives deportation and the camps while all other children are killed – which Guido explains by telling Giosuè that they are all hiding in order to mislead him and have a better chance at winning the tank at the end of the game - we perceive in full the discrepancy between reality and fiction and the inability of the latter to match the former. As Remi Lanzoni puts it "It is explicitly the combination of what Benigni reveals and what is known to go on outside of the frame,

²³ I am thinking, for example, about the drawing showing a pile of dead bodies meant to recall the 100,000 Hungarian Jews killed in 1944 (*Maus II* 43).

between what occurs and what Guido pretends is occurring that renders *La vita è bella* cautiously disquieting (132).

There is another way in which what is not revealed vs. the fable-version we are allowed to see produces extremely “disquieting” effect on spectators, that is, the lack of specificity of the concentration camp in which Guido and Giosuè are interned. One of the “evidence” of lack of historical foundation of the film was the sequence of the liberation of the camp by American troops. It was actually Soviet soldiers who liberated Auschwitz on January 27, 1945. Benigni, though, never explicitly states that it is at Auschwitz that the story takes place; this is only what spectators and critics commonly assume. There is a sort of codification of expectations about cinematic representations of the Shoah, which is due to the fact that Holocaust movies are by now a sort of genre, a genre in which Auschwitz is the concentration camp *par excellence*. In an interview with Silvia Mauro, Benigni claims that “Abbiamo dato tante cose per scontate perché è un genere, come nei western che si sa che c’è lo sceriffo con le stelle appuntate.”²⁴ At a first glance, it seems that Benigni assimilates and fully complies with this genre and, thus, fosters its “crystallization.” He does indeed create a camp environment constellated by key elements that are immediately associated with this genre: the pulling up of the trains into the concentration camp, the watchtower immediately visible upon arrival are elements that unfailingly appear in films on the subject and that have come to be immediately associated with Auschwitz-Birkenau. In *La vita è bella*, Benigni repeats

²⁴ It is poignant that the same comparison with western films and sheriff’s stars appears in an episode of the television series “Sorgente di vita,” which deals with Italian-Jewish life. The section of the episode entitled “Film e Shoà” deals precisely with the issue of cinematic representation of the Shoah and focuses on the issues involved in such a portrayal. One of the “risks” that the commentator points out is the “rischio di cristallizzazione,” that is, the possibility that the Shoah might be represented according to fixed patterns. As the commentator further remarks: “C’è il pericolo che la stella gialla diventi come la stella da sceriffo nei western.”

these sequences and images but does so with a crucial difference, thus carving a minor “language” out of a major and mainstream representation mode. Lanzoni’s comment that “*La vita è bella* is different from mainstream contemporary films” (131) lies not only in the use of humor and in the fable-like structure of the film, but also in how the director appropriates the tools offered by these mainstream films (like Spielberg’s film) and subverts their use and interpretation. As Federico Chiacchiari puts it “la sequenza dell’arrivo del treno è un altro meraviglioso furto, allo Spielberg di *Schindler’s List*, film impossibile da evitare-ignorare.”²⁵ It is indeed a theft, but a partial one that soon reveals Benigni’s own take on it. In the sequence following the arrival, Guido is allowed a freedom of movement that would have been unimaginable for the actual prisoners. He jumps back on the train in order to obtain a better view of the camp and attempt to spot Dora, which he manages to do. This totally unrealistically freedom epitomizes Benigni’s approach towards the genre of Holocaust movies: he adopts the same elements, but with the freedom to distort them, thus succeeding in freeing them from their static and univocal use. The fact that we do not know the name of the place where Guido and Giosuè have been deported works to the same end. In fact, it leaves us with a sense of displacement that lays bare and calls into question the fixedness of certain representations of the Shoah and of space in general. Benigni transforms the Holocaust into something that cannot be congealed in images or words and liberates the event from a static condition (the Holocaust was...) and compels it to disperse and become something indefinable and unfathomable. It is in this immense and yet ungraspable

²⁵ Qtd. in Vito Leone, ed. *Cinema e Shoah: 95 testi per infinite riflessioni*. Bella (Potenza): Centro di Documentazione Pietro Pintus, 2005, 353.

figural potential that I see one of the best examples of the lightness and “gravitas senza peso” discussed and extolled by Calvino.

By becoming minor in their own language and carving out a minor language from a major mode of expression, Benigni and Fellini challenge the ways in which institutions of power exploit verbal and visual language, often with a discriminatory intent. Through figural strategies, both directors convey that there are certain limits to cinematic representation that need to be acknowledged and rendered manifest; in so doing, they show the extraordinary communicative and evocative potential that cinema can trigger when it is relieved from the fetters of representation.

Fellini and Benigni also urge us to challenge what is regarded as verisimilar and direct representations of events, both past and present and, ultimately, they shed light on the inextricable link between verbal and visual constructs and the conceptualization of history. Similarly to Ginzburg and Bassani, they call for a new way of conceiving history that revisits the linear relationship established between the present and the past.

The issue of representation and its ties with historiography also takes central stage in the three works that I will analyze in the next chapter, namely, *La parola ebreo* by Rosetta Loy, *Concorrenza sleale* by Ettore Scola, and *Lezioni di tenebra* by Helena Janeczek. The encounter between the Shoah and migration to and from Italy provides fertile ground for exploring new ways of connecting past and present. These texts apply and further develop many of the minoring practices that emerged in the preceding chapters and extrapolate new “weapons” from the figural potential they engage.

Chapter IV

The Shoah and foreign immigration: *La parola ebreo*, *Concorrenza sleale*, and *Lezioni di tenebra*

The year of the release of *La vita è bella*, 1997, was marked by other works dealing with the Shoah, such as the novel *La parola ebreo* by Rosetta Loy and the short film “43-97” by Ettore Scola. Scola’s short film links the year 1943, more specifically, October 16, the day on which the SS rounded up and arrested over a thousand Roman Jews for deportation, to the phenomenon of recent immigration to Italy. “43-97” is inextricably linked with, by being the premise for, the 2001 film *Concorrenza sleale*, which, in turn, entertains deep links with *Una giornata particolare* (1977), in which Scola explores the discrimination carried out by the Fascist regime against homosexuals and women.

In 1997, the autobiographical novel *Lezioni di tenebra* by German-Polish writer Helena Janeczek was also published. This novel confronts the present of the author’s immigration to Italy against the past of her parents’ Holocaust experience. Janeczek appropriates and reverses Scola’s perspective as she starts from 1997 in order to go back to the 1940s and, in the process, she makes her difference resonate with other types of otherness. As they revolve and delve into a particular moment in history, these texts call into the picture and open up to several related issues and perspectives. In this way, they

become part of an extended “project” that by far exceeds their specific realm and that connects to the other clusters/chapters analyzed so far.

Rosetta Loy’s *La parola ebreo* (1997)

io vedevo le stesse cose che vedevano i miei familiari con un’ottica diversa. Con gli occhi di bambina. Occhi ignari e incantati prima, che si soffermavano a scoprire il mondo nei colori, nei suoni, negli sguardi, poi man mano occhi più consapevoli e disillusi fino a diventare coscienti di ciò che stava succedendo intorno.²⁶

An article entitled “Come chiudemmo gli occhi” that appeared in *L’Espresso*

Local states that in *La parola ebreo*, Rosetta Loy

racconta ... quel senso d’estraneità ... nei confronti di persone che ... avevano fatto parte d’una normalità quotidiana condivisa e che, per decreto-legge, diventavano talmente alieni da essere considerati infidi nemici.

Similarly to Benigni, Loy juxtaposes a “sense of estrangement” with “daily normality,” thus challenging the “becoming alien” of the word “ebreo.” While in *La vita è bella* Benigni does not reveal explicitly the characters’ Jewishness for a good portion of the film, Loy, who is not Jewish, traces the various phases of the transformation of the word “ebreo” in Fascist Italy and the corresponding political events that led to the mass deportation of Italian Jews in 1943.

Her narration starts in 1936, when Loy was a young child, belonging to a wealthy Catholic family from Rome, and she first encountered “la parola ebreo.” Throughout the book, “che non è un saggio ma nemmeno un libro di fantasia,” as Loy herself claims (149), the child’s private view of her Jewish neighbors is constantly set in counterpoint with – but also complemented by – public, historical facts. The two separate and yet

²⁶ Qtd. in Liliana Treves Alcalay. *Con occhi di bambina* (1941-1945). Firenze: La Giuntina, 1994. 11.

intertwined strands of narration find expression into two narrating voices: the child narrator, who is unaware of what happens around her and understands the word Jew through the filter of her domestic and familiar realm, and the adult narrator, who attempts to fill the child's lacunae through historical research. When discussing the implications of looking at Jewish persecution through a child perspective, Aglaia Viviani argues that such approach "offre la possibilità di esaminare la storia da un punto di vista che non è quello dominante. Né la storia né la Guerra sono uguali per tutti. Nelle pagine della storia ... le donne e i bambini ... affondano senza misericordia. (145) With *La parola ebreo*, Loy recaptures her own child view that had "drowned" and juxtaposes it with official history.

In investigating the role of childhood in Loy's work, Giuliana Minghelli argues:

In *La parola ebreo*, Loy ... grants the world and the language of childhood an equal standing with adult historical discourse. The search for the word Jew constitutes the possibility of a critical confrontation between these two apparently irreducible points of view ... It is from the point of view of childhood ... that Loy interrogates History. (162-163)

In combining "these apparently irreducible points of view," Loy not only "interrogates History," but, similarly to Ginzburg, she contaminates it through her "lessico familiare." Through her own way of interpreting the word "Jew," she challenges the official currency of the word. The analysis of *La parola ebreo* in connection with *La vita è bella* and with the other films, namely, *Amarcord* and *Concorrenza sleale*, is also warranted by the fact that Loy, despite using the medium of the novel, also formulates her investigation and denouncing in visual, and I would argue, cinematic terms. In order to recapture "the point of view of childhood," Loy is compelled to return to her position of a naïve spectator in order to rectify it and recapture what

before remained in the “out-of-frame.” Loy re-becomes a spectator of the situation she witnessed as a child in order to include, and denounce, what was left out of her viewing range. Like Fellini, but also like Benigni, Loy deploys figural strategies that show that the word cannot be disentangled from the image. In particular, her cinematic approach reveals that the word “ebreo” is a hybrid element that carries with it a particular way of seeing/ looking. Loy shows how such figural hybridity, which cinema helps to bring to the foreground, can be appropriated and manipulated for exercising power. In other words, she shows that a cinematic approach can be exploited in order to take advantage of such hybridity and she reveals the artifice implied in the construction of images of the “Jew” through the avenue of the word “Jew.” In this way, not only does her work connect to *Amarcord* and *La vita è bella*, but also serves to create far-reaching links between literature and cinema, links that contribute to understanding – and provide the tools for challenging – the ways in which power is exercised.

The visuality of power

In his analysis of the figural and its relationship with power, Rodowick makes several references to Foucault’s concept of power and to the ways in which power is circulated. Rodowick points out that “Foucault remarked only infrequently on the cinema and indeed is often considered a historian of discourse rather than of visual culture” but espouses a different view, famously supported by Deleuze, who saw “Foucault [as] a philosopher of the visible as well as the discursive” (172). As Deleuze suggests, continues Rodowick, Foucault showed how power is highly dependant on “the emplacement of audiovisual regime: changing articulations of the visible with respect to

the expressible – modes of seeing and ways of saying – that organize knowledge, power, and subjectivity in distinct historical eras” (172). Loy shows that “ways of saying” the word Jew were deeply connected to “modes of seeing” it and that the latter deformed and manipulated the former. Her analysis provides a magnifying lens through which it is possible to explore and challenge other forms of power exercised through this relationship.

The text opens with a perfectly “normal,” daily scene from 1936, when the adult narrator recounts the first time she heard the word “ebreo.”

Se vado indietro nel tempo e penso a come la parola “ebreo” è entrata nella mia vita, mi vedo seduta su una seggiolina azzurra nella camera dei bambini ... nell’appartamento al di là della strada ... c’è una festa ... da poco è nato un bambino ... “Un battesimo?” chiedo. No, mi dice ... Annemarie, la mia Fräulein. Sono ebrei aggiunge ... loro i bambini non li battezzano, li circoncidono. Ha detto “beschneiden” con una *smorfia* di disgusto. (3)

The very beginning of the book is framed in cinematic terms: Loy, now an adult, is recapturing her child’s view and what she saw from the “screen” of the window, as suggested by “mi vedo.” She goes back to that moment in time in which, while seated on a chair in her bedroom, she enjoyed the “spectacle” of what was happening in front of her. The boundary between the present of the adult looking back and the past of her child self soon blurs and we are plunged into the “film,” thus becoming coterminous and contemporary with it. Loy creates an overlap between the “watching eye/camera” and the child who is “watched,” as suggested by how in the above passage the present tense is split into two temporalities. While the initial “mi vedo” is a present tense proper referring to adult Rosetta, “c’è,” “chiedo,” “dice,” and “aggiunge” function as both a present tense (in the timeframe of the “film”) and as historical present. Moreover, the use of the present perfect “Ha detto” interjects a further temporal line, which displaces the preceding lines

to a past perspective, though not remote but rather proximal. The elaborate interviewing and overlap between past and present, as exemplified by the use of historical present, compels a reflection not only on the functioning of personal (and collective) memory, but also on the relationship between memory and history and, in particular, on how this relationship is engaged in literary texts and works of art in general.

Minghelli claims that it is from the point of view of childhood that Loy interrogates history. The notion of interrogation is worth exploring in this regard because it plays a crucial role in the attempts to gain historical “knowledge” on particular events. More specifically, a cross-examination of sources is what lies at the basis of modern historiography. As historian Ann Rigney notes, modern historiography is based on a “critical engagement with sources,” regarded as “witnesses,” which turns the historian into a “judge who evaluates and collates the evidence ... The implication behind these legal metaphors is that once the historian has come to some sort of judgement as to the reliability of the witness, he or she can be dismissed from the courtroom” (22). Rigney defines such approaches as “‘*interrogate* and dismiss’ ... ‘unpack-and-throw-away’” (22). In recent years, however, as Rigney continues, there has been a reevaluation of such approaches with an ensuing questioning of the irrefutable evidence provided by sources, which are no longer seen as “transparent ‘documents’ reporting on particular events, but as ‘texts’ which reflect, and reflect on, their subjects in complex ways” (22). A source is therefore “a complex utterance” and

it may sometimes be difficult, if not impossible, to go beyond the source text to certain evidence, since the certainty may be irrevocably qualified by the nature of the utterance from which it is extracted ... When seen from this perspective, sources are not see-through windows on the past ... they are opaque windows of frosted glass which both reveal and conceal what is on the other side. (22)

Literary sources, as Rigney shows in her analysis, are particularly instrumental for bringing to the foreground the self-referentiality and the opaqueness of the complex utterances that constitute official documentary documents, as is clearly suggested by *La parola ebreo*. Rosetta and Annemarie are both looking at what is happening in the house through the window. While for Rosetta the spectacle is not clear, thus being spurred to ask questions, for the nanny, the window functions as a “see-through” lens that reveals individuals that she knows are Jewish and perform the “disgusting” practice of circumcision. The fact that she does not know anything of circumcision and interprets it based on fallacious assumptions surfaces when Rosetta asks her for clarifications:

La parola [beschneiden] è incomprendibile ma contiene quello “schneiden” che conosco bene. Cosa? mormoro incredula. Gli tagliano via un pezzettino di carne, risponde sbrigativa. “Mit der Schere ...? mormoro. Vedo il sangue, un mare di sangue che bagna il porte-enfant. La spiegazione è vaga ma agghiacciante, Annemarie accenna a qualcosa sul corpo mentre il suo sguardo scruta severo attraverso i vetri. “Vielleicht mit der Schere, ja, das wei_ ich nicht.“ (4)

Annemarie’s approach to the scene she is interpreting is “sbrigativa,” which partly reflects the “‘interrogate-and-dismiss’ or unpack-and throw-away attitude to sources” that Rigney discusses. I say partly because she admits a margin of doubt, but she is not spurred to re-evaluate or broaden her view because of it. Instead, she retains and further reinforces Rosetta’s macabre and fallacious associations of circumcision with gory images of blood shedding. The fact that Loy interrogates history from the position of her child self stresses the urgency to acknowledge doubt and uncertainties when engaging with the past and to be less confident in the possibility of attaining historical knowledge.

Rigney explains that another recent development that marks a break away from modern historiography is the

explosion of activity in the field of cultural history. This has meant, among other things, that history's range has been considerably extended into domains where sources are particularly characterized by their opacity ... into hitherto marginalized areas of the past: the practice of everyday life, long-term patterns of thought about private as well as public affairs, the experience of the dispossessed. (23)

Loy does interrogate history from a position characterized by opacity, as child Rosetta does not see things clearly, but, nonetheless, she is able to suggest a larger "range" than that adopted by Annemarie. What also emerges in the above abstract is the emphasis placed on the reproduction of personal experience. Loy revives her macabre association of circumcision with gruesome images of blood pouring out of the baby's body in order to underscore the effects of Annemarie's tendentious and vague explanation. Loy's attempt to share her child feelings and state of mind with readers not only visually but also emotionally underlies the willingness to re-enact the past as vividly as possible. In fact, the sort of contemporaneity that Loy conveys through the use of historical present and the resuscitation of her sensations allow the reader to "experience" the past. Loy is not a historian, she is a novelist, but, as Rigney suggests, literature has played a significant role in the recent development within historiography. She speaks about a "longing for history," by which she means the "fissures" that literary texts can create in official history. For example, she quotes from Sir Walter Scott's "Lay of the Last Minstrel" (1805), which by "simulating ancestral voices" is able to "recreat[e] the past 'as it was' ... the past can be said to be re-enacted in the present, with the audience being put in the position of medieval listeners" (26). Loy, too, opens a "window" in which she recreates the past as it was, which make us not only listeners, but also spectators of that past time as well as spectators to those spectators. *La parola ebreo* reinforces the idea that the verbal cannot be disentangled from the visual as these two components

complement each other in the creation of a certain discourse. This multi-layered intertextuality recalls and allies with the split that Fellini creates in our viewing experience in *Amarcord*, as epitomized by the Rex sequence. We do, indeed, witness the enthusiasm and naiveté with which the *borgo* people welcome the arrival of the ocean liner. Similarly to Fellini, Loy creates a space in which she can re-enact her past view and pleads for our “imaginative engagement with the past,” as Rigney defines the role that Scott’s poem forges for the reader. In particular, the potential of this poem “to evoke the past is ... linked with ... the imaginative engagement of the reader who fills in the gaps. As the phrase ‘to evoke the past’ suggests, what is at stake here is the subjective feeling of being in touch with the past, and not any objective correlation between the reader’s image of the past and the actual past” (31) The child’s viewing experience is, of course, mediated by the writing self and we should not lose sight of the fictionality of this recollection. However, the reconstruction of this hybrid space in which she is both the spectator and once again the actor in the “spectacle” allows us to *see*, *hear*, and *feel*, if we accept this imaginative commitment, the effects of Annemarie’s distorted view and explanation on child Rosetta. In this way, Loy insert a “minor” and yet destabilizing voice in the major Antisemitic rhetoric circulating during the Fascist era and embodied by Annemarie.

Annemarie’s clinical gaze

The concession that the act might be brutally carried out with scissors with the ensuing mental imagery created by Rosetta draws on a long-standing antisemitic imagery that depicted Jews as potential blood-thirsty assassins. Annemarie scrutinizes the scene

she is witnessing, as if she wanted to find out the details of that “sick” and diseased practice. Her gaze is “severo,” which indicates the severity of the “problem” she is witnessing and it remains so even when “si fissa ... su una cameriera che va in giro con un vassoio. Forse nascosto tra le tazze del tè c’è il pezzetto tagliato via a quel neonato. Un ditino, un lembo di pelle. (4) The figure of Annemarie and the role she plays in Rosetta’s life helps to see how “modes of saying” and “modes of seeing” contributed to the emplacement of Fascist ideology. In fact, she embodies one of the innumerable individuals who significantly reinforced the power structures through “articulations of the visible with respect to the expressible.” A key word in the above passage is “sguardo” ‘gaze,’ a concept that is central in Foucault’s conceptualization of power dynamics.

One of the areas in which Foucault develops this concept is medicine. In *The Birth of the Clinic. An Archeology of Medical Perception* (1973) Foucault traces the transformations that occurred in the medical field in the eighteenth century when disease became subject to new rules of classification thanks to a “rejuvenation of medical perception” (xii). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, doctors began to “describe phenomena that for centuries had remained below the threshold of the visible and expressible” (xii). It is so that “An alliance was forged between words and things, enabling one to see and to say.” (xii). The gaze that Annemarie directs at the family across the street and the judgement that she passes over circumcision can be explored, I would argue, based on such alliance. She is just a nanny, she is not a doctor but she assumes a medical gaze in her perception, verbalization, and explanation of the surgical practice of circumcision. Her clinical visual approach is particularly relevant in that it is set against the Fascist racial campaign, which was based on specific hygienic and medical

measures to be adopted. Annemarie can be regarded as a constitutive part of the far-reaching visual campaign that the Fascist regime fostered: she buttresses the attempt to visually degrade the Jews and to forge spectators that would comply with it.

Mussolini made explicit references to the importance he attached to the figure of the doctor. On the occasion of the inauguration of the “Congresso Nazionale dei sindacati medici fascisti,” for example, the Duce stated that “La missione del medico, specie nei tempi moderni, è di importanza eccezionale e diventa sempre più delicata e complessa. (qtd. in Mignemi 68). Adolfo Mignemi, in elaborating on this point, claims that “Era una vera e propria investitura che connetteva abilmente la professione medica con la progettualità politica del fascismo” (68). Annemarie epitomizes not only a Fascist perspective, but also a Fascist clinical perspective; she expresses her “disgusto” for a medical procedure that sanctions a person’s belonging to Judaism, and, therefore, to a “race” from which the Italian race must be defended and sanitized. The aberrant character of the Fascist medical perspective emerges from Annemarie’s twisted account of the practice of circumcision, which comes off as a macabre, amputating procedure. It also surfaces from the ways in which her “sguardo” strays from the typical medical observation. In Annemarie’s case, we could talk about a distorted clinical gaze, which is not aimed at reaching an evaluation based on existing elements, but on confirming a previous, arbitrarily acquired vision of Jews.

In describing the development of the gaze in clinical practice, Foucault claims that

The observing gaze refrains from intervening: it is silent and gestureless ... The correlative of observation is never the invisible, but always the immediately visible ... The gaze will be fulfilled in its own truth and will have access to the truth of things if it rests on them in silence, if everything keeps silent around what it sees. The clinical gaze has the paradoxical ability to *hear language* as soon as it *perceives a spectacle*. (107-108)

Foucault stresses the importance of silence preceding language: the gaze concentrates only on what it is visible and is followed by silence. Poignant is the fact that Foucault calls it the perceived “spectacle,” which suggests a link between filmic images and a clinical gaze. In this respect, Stephanie Brown Clark, who works on medical history, contends that

The pre-eminence of the visual in medical culture in the nineteenth century anticipates the birth of cinema at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Cartwright has noticed, both the cinematic gaze and the medical gaze are directed at seeing bodies as spectacles of life ... What has been less noticed is the strange kinship between the medical and the cinematic focus upon the explicitly and floridly abnormal or monstrous body. (131-132)

Annemarie combines a medical and cinematic look to present circumcision as an abnormal, monstrous, and utterly inhuman procedure, as the association with blood shedding and amputated body parts suggests. Annemarie is not describing to Rosetta just a “spectacle of life,” but a “spectacle” of what will be an “aberrant life.” Since circumcision is the practice that marks the initiation of a male child into his Jewish community, then its “aberrant” characters can easily be taken as indicative of a deviant condition affecting Jewish people.

Such disgust for circumcision needs to be situated also within Fascism’s cult of the body and, as far as the male body is concerned, of virility. Gigliola Gori notes that

Fascism exalted the cult of classical masculine beauty, as it fitted very well into the plan to make Italian men virile by means of special attention to physical sturdiness and eugenics. The virility of the masculine body was essential to the representation, in a modern key, of the ancient and bellicose Italian “race.” (18)

By being a procedure that is performed on the penis, circumcision carries heavy association with the idea of castration, as famously argued by Sigmund Freud. It is

understandable, therefore, that such practice was abhorred by Fascists and fueled anti-Jewish sentiments.

In a footnote to the case of Little Hans, a five-year-old boy he was treating for a phobia, Freud established a direct relationship between circumcision and antisemitism. In this footnote “that would become the basis for the psychoanalytic understanding of antisemitism” (Geller 357), we read that

The castration complex is the deepest unconscious root ... of antisemitism; for even in the nursery little boys hear that a Jew has something cut off from his penis ... and this gives them a right to despise Jews ... The circumcised Jew is often represented as a mutilated person ... An uncanny feeling is said to exist in some to whom a Jew is a reminder that one can be castrated. (36 n1)

In conveying precisely the idea of “something cut off” from the boy’s penis, as suggested by the mental image of “un lembo di pelle” that her words create in Rosetta’s mind, Annemarie reinforces the idea of mutilation and castration. In this way, she epitomizes once again the Fascist clinical gaze that “diagnoses” Jews as deviant and aberrant people because of their thwarted masculinity and virility. The idea of castration thus consolidates the assumption that Jews are an inferior race. Freud’s reference to the nursery in order to stress the wide circulation of the association between circumcision and castration is reflected by the nursery-like situation in which Rosetta first comes across this concept, “nella camera dei bambini” and via her nanny.

Particularly poignant in Foucault’s discussion of the relationship between the visual and the verbal component in the clinical gaze, is the “teaching domain,” which emerges, distorted, in Annemarie’s attempt to indoctrinate Rosetta. The nanny fulfils a didactic role but the pedagogical function of her description is thwarted, as it does not convey

clear explanations. Her “spiegazione” is “vaga” and based on hints, as suggested by the verb “accenna.” In this way, she increases the intended impact and effects of the clinical gaze she assumes, thus exploiting what was already a tool for power and control. Fascism appears as an aberration and as a further instrumentalization of a way of seeing that became institutionalized in order to create, define, and thus dominate categories of people (the diseased, the abnormal, the sick, etc). Foucault’s claim that Fascism was a “diseas(e) of power ... that extended mechanisms already present in most other societies ” (*Power* 328) is extremely to the point and pungently paradoxical: what was deemed as state of the art medical practice (as suggested by Mussolini’s reference to “tempi moderni”) was nothing but a “diseased” thought.

By virtue of the connection with *Amarcord*, it can be argued that the nanny fulfils a similar role as the lawyer, who is also involved in providing explanations that underlie a didactic purpose and are clearly aimed at supporting a univocal way of seeing and interpreting facts. It underscores the key role played by the pedagogical in the creation of a major, dominant narration of history.

Similarly to the lawyer, however, who is disturbed by contrasting sounds and voices, Annemarie’s account is soon juxtaposed with the voice of child Rosetta, who recounts:

Anche la signora Della Seta è ebrea. Abita accanto a noi ... Adoro la signora Della Seta, anche se è ebrea. Al piano di sopra abitano i Levi ... Anche loro, dice Annemarie, sono ebrei ... Qualche volta Giorgio Levi suona alla porta e chiama mio fratello per andare a giocare a pallone. (4)

The dialectical relationship between child Rosetta’s view and Annemarie’s indoctrination starts here to take shape. In response to Annemarie’s acrimony towards Jews, Rosetta herself finally begins to formulate her own personal take on the term “ebreo” and

becomes increasingly alienated from what she has so far assimilated. Once again, the merging of the child's perspective with the adult's one, which erases the gap between the past and memory of the past, constructs a space not only of resistance, but also of active sprouting and proliferation of a different view. The influence that the nanny has exerted on her, as evidenced by the concession "anche se è ebrea," is overshadowed by the girl's attachment to "signora Della Seta," by her look at the party from her own room as well as by her memory of Giorgio Levi. These images stress the familiar, "inside" view of her Jewish neighbors who are about to be turned into "infidi nemici."

Loy's familiar distance with the Shoah

Loy recaptures the familiar relationship to her Jewish neighbors who populated her domestic sphere as a child and "avevano fatto parte d'una normalità quotidiana condivisa" with her family. This concept of "familiar" can be linked with the notion of "familiarization" with the Shoah as discussed by Eva Hoffman who alerts us to how "the sheer quantity of production around this atrocity, the familiarization of horror through the reiteration of images and formulaic phrases, makes it available for increasingly glib perceptions and representations. (171)

These overly repeated "images and formulaic phrases" and "the familiarization of horror" not only lead to "habituation to horror," (178) but also create the illusion of directly knowing the event. Loy adopts a minor, *unfamiliar* approach to dealing with the Holocaust: she holds – and explicitly reveals – her indirect relationship to the event and states her utter "unfamiliarization with horror" of the camps. The author has not been in the camps and, being Catholic, she did not experience any prejudice, discrimination, or

persecution. Even the personal stories of Jews found in the book are second hand since Loy herself reports them. I believe that it is precisely by virtue of this indirectness that we should regard *La parola ebreo* as a valuable source of testimony in that, as Hoffman argues, “we need to acknowledge the distance at which we stand from events – and from which we have to start if we want to further the reach of our knowledge” (180). We need to acknowledge the opaqueness of the seemingly clear sources on the Holocaust, which is what Loy does by starting from her distance, from the familiar distance that characterizes her relationship with the Shoah as a child and as an adult. She goes back and explores the familiarity and closeness to her Jewish neighbors resulting from that shared “normalità,” but she lays bare the space that separated and still separates her from them and from all the victims of the Shoah. The adoption of the child’s perspective for a significant portion of the text puts readers in the position of opaqueness and of partial blindness. And yet, such nearsightedness is instrumental for revealing a more collective blindness or, rather, neglect and indifference on the part of non-Jews.

Rosetta’s blindness and a collective purposeful forgetfulness

In *La parola ebreo* Loy provides a detailed list of all the prohibitions imposed on Italian Jews starting from 1938. Then, the focus shifts to child Rosetta who, though unaware, witnesses the implementation of some of these prohibitions in her private realm, within the Levi family:

La mamma di Giorgio Levi ... si è messa a dare lezioni di inglese. Da lei possono venire solo studenti ebrei ... Giorgio frequenta una scuola allestita dalla comunità ebraica a Trastevere e la mattina molto presto parte in bicicletta ... Qualche volta, ancora assonnata, lo vedo dai vetri del piccolo autobus che ci porta a scuola. (98)

This rather fleeting and blurred view of Giorgio Levi, whom she sees through the window and “assonnata,” epitomizes the naïve view that she had as a child. Similarly to her first visual experience of the word Jew from the window of her room, this “shot” of Giorgio Levi reflects partiality and incompleteness. The term “assonnata” recalls the sleepy view that the people of the little town in *Amarcord* have of the Rex. When the ocean liner passes by, it is deep into the night and some of the onlookers have just awakened. The people’s infantile and immature view mirrors Rosetta’s childish viewing experience. Just like the Amarcordians do not realize that the Rex is a plastic ship, in the same way Rosetta cannot understand that the separation established between her and Giorgio, as epitomized by the prohibition of attending the same school, is artificial and constructed.

Giorgio’s image progressively fades away in Rosetta’s mind and by October 16, 1943, which for the child is primarily the second day of school, it is just a “pale,” remote memory: “i Levi sono stati portati via dalle SS quella mattina ... Ma i Levi ... si erano già impalliditi nel mio ricordo (122). Rosetta has a similarly pale memory of Mrs. Della Seta, as suggested by the very last time she sees her:

In quell’afa ... la signora Della Seta in piedi regge un piatto di metallo su cui è adagiata una spigola lessa ... I tratti del viso si cancellano nella grande luce di luglio, si perde il contatto delle sue mani e il timbro della sua voce nel grande silenzio che la circonda. Questa è l’ultima volta che la vedo ... Nessuno ancora sa che un interrogativo smisurato nascerà dalla sua immagine muta mentre ci consegna quel pesce ... In quella giornata di luglio la sua immagine si è dissolta lasciando nella memoria un’impronta quasi fosse stampata in trasparenza su una garza, senza che sia possibile, mai più, ritrovarne il corpo che intercettava la luce o il movimento di quando si sedeva in salotto. (107-108)

Even more explicitly than with her description of Giorgio Levi, Loy formulates her memory of Eva Della Seta in cinematic terms. She returns once again to her position of

spectator who could not see clearly and was blind to the situation, as suggested by how the light effects of “la luce di luglio” covered and veiled “i tratti del volto.” Rosetta is a spectator to a mute image that has irremediably lost any acoustic component and is surrounded by silence. There is a figural strategy at work in this particular passage: in describing what she retains of Eva, which is comparable to a transparency, Loy conveys what has gone irremediably lost and cannot be represented. In fact, similarly to a transparency, which is a mere ersatz of the physical object that produced the imprint, Loy’s memory is just a substitute of Eva’s body: her facial traits are erased and so is any contact with her voice. This “progressive dematerialization” (Marcus *Italian Cinema in the Shadow of Auschwitz* 25) suggests the unbridgeable distance between what we can project and reproduce of the horror of deportation and the people who personally and physically experienced it. This reflects and reinforces Benigni’s strategy of depriving his images of the camps of any physicality. The pile of dead bodies before which Guido stands silent and appalled are like prints that have no contact with the actual bodies of the Jews killed in the camps. Loy is also countering and denouncing the attempt to represent the Shoah.

Loy’s recapturing of her child experience manages to disclose the wider “range” that many could grasp but decided not to retain. For example, when she recounts how she progressively lost the memory of Giorgio, she admits that “Neanche mio padre e mia madre, che di sicuro avranno provato pietà per il destino dei Levi, hanno dimenticato per un giorno ... la carne e il pane, le uova” (121). Rosetta’s increasingly looser connection with the Levis is juxtaposed with that of her parents who, contrary to their child, were perfectly aware of the situation. The parents knew and felt pity, but their daily concerns

and priorities were not shaken. Loy's denouncing does not stop at her family and extends to a whole collectivity, a collective lack of action, from which the Catholic Church, embodied by Pope Pious XII, emerges most vehemently. After condemning the fact that "Nessuno ha fermato i camion che si allontanavano con uomini e donne, bambini svegliati orrendamente dal sonno," (136) Loy harshly denounces the fact that

Pio XII non è comparso bianco e ieratico alla stazione di Trastevere per mettersi davanti al convoglio fermo sul binario e impedirne la partenza ... I vagoni sono stati piombati e quel treno è partito senza incidenti, il fischio della locomotiva lungo via Salaria. (136)

The emphasizing on what Pious XII did not do is the most tragic example in the book of that adopted "blindness" or limited viewing range of many bystanders that is refracted through child Rosetta's view. Despite the fact that on October 16, 1943 the child had only a pale memory of the Levis and despite the fact that Rosetta's parents could not forget their own concern for food, Loy stresses above all else the Pope's refusal to see and to act humanely by underlining the physicality of his cowardly reaction. In this way, she establishes an extremely powerful contrast between the evanescence of the images of the deported Jews and the physical component of Pope's lack of action. Poignant is the expression "Pio XII non è *comparso* bianco e ieratico alla stazione di Trastevere," which lends itself to being analyzed at a visual, and more specifically, cinematic level. From this perspective, "comparso" both indicates that the Pope did not appear physically on the scene of the trains leaving for the concentration camps, and refers to his role as a "comparsa," as an extra, to the whole persecution of the Jews, when instead he could have been one of the "protagonists." The Pope is not a spectator with a limited view, but a conniving one who, by staying out of the picture, contributes to its successful circulation. Such attitude is confirmed by the comment that "Pio XII è rimasto chiuso

dietro le finestre della sua stanza” (136). By virtue of the association window/screen adopted so far, the Pope’s behavior can be seen as a purposeful rejection of the possibility of seeing.

Testimony and silence. The example of Giorgio Levi and Eva Della Seta

In recapturing the past, Loy maintains the combination private/public, private/historical, with the difference that her personal voice serves now to give visibility to several private stories of Jews who either survived or perished during the war. This is the case, for example, with how Loy recovers Giorgio Levi’s story and in a way regains that closeness and familiarity that she had lost. Loy contends: “la storia del ragazzo dei Levi la conosco bene perché ... ho potuto vederla attraverso gli occhi di una ragazza che era con lui la mattina che vennero a prenderlo” (137-138). Loy claims that she knows Giorgio’s story well because she has been able to *see it through* the eyes of Alberta, Giorgio’s cousin, who that morning miraculously managed to hide despite living in the same apartment with the boy and his family. Loy links knowledge with an act of viewing, which is indirect as Giorgio’s story is “screened” through Alberta’s eyes. Such indirectness spurs Loy to move beyond Alberta’s account. Through historical “verifiche” – the author cites for example Liliana Picciotto Fargion’s seminal work *Il libro della memoria* – she finds out that the boy “Ad Auschwitz-Birkenau arrivò la notte del 22 ottobre ... È morto in un luogo ignoto, le sue tracce si perdono il 29 dicembre 1943” (147). These historical sources can only, however, provide a partial view, as also emerges from her recollection of Eva Della Seta’s story. Loy recounts that “A lungo ho cercato di conoscere la sorte della signora Della Seta ... Alla fine, quando non ci speravo più, l’ho

ritrovata” (144). Differently from Giorgio’s story, in this case “Non ci sono superstiti a raccontare” and the only certain thing she knows is that

In quell’ottobre del ’43 Eva Della Seta si era rifugiata assieme al fratello in una villa che avevano a Chianti, in provincia di Pisa ... Qualcuno in paese li ha traditi, o forse venduti per intascare quelle poche migliaia di lire che valeva la loro vita ... Il 20 aprile del 1944, presumibilmente all’alba, sono stati prelevati e portati in carcere a Firenze. (144)

The compliance with facts is undermined by doubt, as evidenced by the adverbs “forse” and “presumibilmente and, as with Giorgio Levi, doubt and uncertainty marks the circumstances of her death. Loy has been able to find out that Eva was on the train that “è partito da Firenze il 16 maggio” but of what came afterwards nothing can be stated with certainty. Based on a statement that a SS soldier who traveled with the arrested Jews and was present at Auschwitz at their arrival, Loy can only speculate: “Eva Della Seta è presumibilmente entrata nella camera a gas appena scesa dal treno il 23 maggio 1944” (147).

Giorgio Levi and Eva Della Seta, whose stories emerge only thanks to Loy’s words, recall Primo Levi’s account of Hurbinek, the little speechless boy the writer met at Auschwitz. Nobody knew who the boy was, where he came from – “era un nulla, un figlio della morte, un figlio di Auschwitz” (*La tregua* 166); one of the inmates named him Hurbinek. Levi recounts: “Hurbinek morì ai primi giorni di marzo 1945, libero ma non redento. Nulla resta di lui: egli testimonia attraverso queste mie parole” (*La tregua* 167). Levi, however, challenges the idea of *testimoniare*, even survivors’ testimony, when he contends that:

non siamo noi, i superstiti, i testimoni veri ... Noi ... siamo quelli che ... non hanno toccato il fondo. Chi lo ha fatto, chi ha visto la Gorgone, non è tornato per raccontare ... sono loro ... i sommersi, i testimoni integrali. (*La tregua* 64)

Although he personally experienced the camps, Levi does not feel entitled to calling himself a complete witness because he has touched the “bottom,” la Gorgone. Not even his personal experience of seeing Hurbinek suffer and die can fill the irremediable gap that mars that bearing witness “attraverso queste mie parole.” What Levi suggests is that he too is faced with a partial seeing that is irremediably deficient of that unique, “privileged” visual experience. Loy’s relationship to the “sommersi” is a further, enormous step removed from Giorgio Levi and Eva Della Seta; it presents a further level of indirectness because the boy can testify through her words only after his story has been filtered through Alberta’s eyes. In the process of recapturing her relationship to Giorgio Levi, Loy moves from a condition of nearsightedness, almost blindness (epitomized by the “assonnata” and blurred view of Giorgio and her dissolved image of Eva) to one of reported language that borders on silence (as suggested by “le sue tracce si perdono il 29 dicembre 1943” and the recurrence of “presumibilmente”). Through her work, Loy bears witness because she evokes that space that cannot be reached and verbalized by whomever has not drowned.

In reflecting upon his personal engagement with this silence, Giorgio Agamben remarks:

Prestare ascolto ad una lacuna non si è dimostrato un lavoro inutile ... l’autore si riterrà pago della sua fatica se nel tentativo di identificare il luogo e il soggetto della testimonianza ... avrà ottenuto che alcuni termini con cui è stata registrata la lezione decisiva del secolo siano rettificati, che alcune parole siano lasciate cadere e altre comprese in modo diverso. (*Quel che resta di Auschwitz* 10)

La parola ebreo starts with Loy listening to the lacuna of her unawareness as a child, which leads her to explore a more collective silence and indifference, as epitomized by the Pope’s silence and inaction. In a similar way, the novel ends with the author

listening to the lacuna that lies beyond what she could gather, through personal recollections and research, of Giorgio and Eva's life. The evocation of the past, to quote Rigney once again, does not provide an "objective correlation between the reader's image of the past and the actual past" but conveys a "subjective feeling of being in touch with the past." From this perspective, the past is not an archive to be sought for evidence, but, rather, a flow to be constantly engaged with imaginative engagement. With *La parola ebreo*, Loy has shown the new vision made possible by allowing a dialogue between "official" sources and minor, imperfect views. This exchange contaminates the notion of source itself and, thus, a univocal narration of history. By adopting a "minor" approach that strays from the overfamiliar rhetoric with which the Shoah is so vividly told and against which Hoffman warns, Loy stresses the need to reinterpret what is deemed as known and familiar through the lens of an incommensurable distance with the event.

This fuzzy connection with the past is not at all sterile; in fact, Loy manages to foster that attention to and reevaluation of words to which Agamben aspires. Also, she underscores the need to keep in mind that what is reported through words comes with it a particular way of seeing and visually representing an event. Loy's eye functions like the eye of a camera, which selects elements to the detriment of others and shows the ways in which institutions of power can tame and redirect our gaze to fit such shots. Similarly to Micol, however, who trains readers to look for "magagnette" in what they saw, Loy offers the tools to counter such visual indoctrination: as she goes back to her blindness as a child, she unmask the workings involved in covering up or ignoring to see, thus making readers alert and urging them to be skilled spectators.

Ettore Scola's *Concorrenza sleale* (2001)

Ettore Scola's *Concorrenza sleale* also looks at the Shoah within an extended temporal perspective. The film entertains crucial links with the 1977 film *Una giornata particolare*, which focuses on a very "special day" for the Fascist regime, namely May 6, 1938 celebrating Hitler's visit to Rome. On this day, Antonietta, a frustrated housewife, is compelled to remain at home while her husband and children attend the mass celebration for the Führer because of the multiple chores to which she has to attend. She so meets Gabriele, a former radio announcer who has been dismissed from his position because of his homosexuality and is also excluded from taking part in the rally. Their encounter brings together two different and yet very similar forms of otherness and exclusion. *Concorrenza sleale*, instead, covers the entire year 1938, which is notoriously "special" for Italian Jews because of the promulgation of the Racial Laws. Besides Hitler's visit, the film covers the passing of the Laws and its provisions that increasingly limited Italian Jews' freedom and life conditions.

The "unfair competition" that inspires the title of the film refers to the business relationship between Umberto and Leone, respectively, a Christian and a Jew, who run two clothing stores located next to – and competing with – each other. Their rivalry is undercut by their sons, Pietruccio and Lele, who are very good friends. The story is told from the viewpoint of Pietruccio, Umberto's son, whose voice-over and drawings provide an insightful commentary to the events portrayed in the film.

Umberto's ideas for attracting more customers, which he advertises with signs posted on his store window, are appropriated and exploited by Leone, who builds and expands on the message of Umberto's ads. Next to Umberto's sign that reads "Per uomo"

(clothes for men), Leone posts a sign on his window announcing “Anche per bambini;” Umberto’s sign “Tutti al mare” advertising his new summer merchandise finds in Leone “a godersi le onde chiare” a fine and clever completion. When Umberto confronts his competitor, he gives vent to his frustrations and claims “Se tolgo il mio cartellone, il vostro ‘anche’ non significa niente.” Also “a godersi le onde chiare” would be meaningless without the first part supporting it. Leone’s creativity somehow rehashes the prejudice of the Jew who, eager for money, succeeds in manipulating and taking advantage of the gullible Christian. From a theoretical point of view, however, it is greatly significant. What emerges from Leone’s inventiveness is a mutual dependency because after this coming together in order to create meaning, even Umberto’s signs would be incomplete if Leone closed down his store. His signs would be partial, deficient because whatever writing they would bear, even though apparently self-standing, would spur a pursuit for something beyond them. Such complementarity indicates interdependency and suggests that the Other is needed in any construction of the self. This powerful idea transcends the specific context of the film to reflect more theoretical issues and indicates a belonging together of the Christian and the Jew, which stands in stark opposition with the rupture that the Racial law created. It also serves as a springboard for reflecting on all types of othering and stereotyping of people. The ways in which prejudice, discrimination, and persecution of Italian Jews are portrayed and challenged in *Concorrenza sleale* have to be read as minoring practices through which other differences are engaged. When we watch the Fascist parade that celebrates the alliance between Italy and Germany, which will dramatically change the fate of Italian Jews, we need to recall that on that day other “outsiders” were being ostracized and

marginalized from Italian society, like homosexuals and women. We also need to bear in mind that social exclusion and marginalization still plague Italian society. Like in *Lessico familiare* and *Il giardino*, even here the Jewish condition becomes the revealer for other forms of otherness and a channel through which such othering can be countered.

In her analysis of the portrayal of fascism in *Una giornata particolare*, Millicent Marcus finds crucial links between the 30s and 40s and 1977, the year in which the film was released. Marcus claims “As with all fictions of historical reconstruction, *Una giornata particolare* displaced onto the past its own current preoccupations, offering a rereading of Fascism as, among other things, a hotbed of misogyny and homophobia” (“Un’ora e mezzo particolare” 37). In an interview Scola stated that initially he thought of setting Antonietta’s story in the present and making her a housewife who remains home while her husband and sons go to the Sunday soccer game. The reason for which he decided to set the film in the Fascist era is that it could become

più emblematico se fosse ambientato in un preciso momento storico quando certe convinzioni prendevano valore di legge. Quanti comportamenti maschili con le donne, con gli omosessuali, con i diversi, per razza, colore o natura, sono ancora oggi altrettanti momenti di razzismo? In ognuno di noi, forse, c’è un minuto di fascismo ogni giorno. (141)

Like Fellini, Scola seems to be interested in interpreting Fascism as a psychological attitude, as a mode of seeing and behaving rather than as a historical period that emerged and fell during the “ventennio.” The expression “ogni giorno” suggests precisely the unbounded and continuous recurrence of that mode of seeing and dealing with the other. From this perspective, the persecution of Italian Jews portrayed in *Concorrenza sleale* can be regarded as emblematic of the prejudice and discrimination

that “still today” stigmatize people conceived as “diversi,” like, for example, foreign immigrants.

“43-97:” the Shoah encounters foreign immigration

The link between the Shoah and foreign immigration in contemporary Italy is made explicit in a short film that Scola shot in 1997, “43-97,” which anticipates *Concorrenza sleale*. In this short film, a young Jewish boy manages to escape the Nazi round-up of October 16, 1943 by hiding first under a mattress and then, once out of the house, in a movie theater. In just a minute, fifty years of Italian cinema are represented on the screen, from Roberto Rossellini’s *Roma Città Aperta* (1945) to Francesco Rosi’s *La tregua* (1997) with *Amarcord* in-between. The lights go on again: it is 1997 and the boy is now an older man. He turns around and he sees a black man bursting into the cinema completely out of breath. The old Jewish man and the immigrant look at each other and then the screen is turned on again. This short film allows me to read *Concorrenza sleale* as an opportunity Scola takes to bring the Shoah, so to speak, into the current debates on Italian identity triggered by the phenomenon of immigration. The repetition of the same storyline of the movie theater that becomes a sanctuary for persecuted individuals in 1997 just like in 1943 should not be taken, however, as a circular return, which would be simplistic and misleading. The look that the protagonists exchange stems from two temporally defined and yet blurred positions – the old man and the black boy are in the present, but the connection that emerges between them is grounded both in present and in past events and in the expanse of time between the two. The condensation of fifty years in just one minute suggests the need to adopt a more flexible notion of historical time.

Moreover, the fact that the passage of time is marked by film excerpts and the hiding place for both characters is a movie theater, installs film as a privileged channel for exploring history and historical events from a new perspective, which perhaps can “rescue” us from the dominant conceptualization of history.

In *Concorrenza sleale*, Scola blurs the binary immigrant/other by reminding Italians of their past as emigrants. It is through the character of Hans, a Lithuanian Jew, who migrated to Italy in order to escape discrimination and persecution in his native country that this past is illuminated. Hans strongly believes in the myth of Italians as kind, warm and law-unabiding people and is confident that the racial laws will never take effect. Despite being a Jew and a foreigner, he feels safe because, as he tells Lele’s grandfather, “Sai che nel mondo girano più italiani emigrati che ebrei? Per questo italiani non possono considerare illegale nostra presenza in loro paese come succede in Germania.” Hans’s comment about Italian emigrants scattered throughout the world is perfectly applicable even today: although the reasons for and the ways in which Italians have been leaving their native place have changed throughout the years, a resettlement of Italians into a different place has been a constant of Italian history since the late nineteenth century. As Hans’s logical conclusion eventually fails, the openness one would expect from Italians because of their otherness as migrants clashes with the prejudice and racism towards foreign immigrants in contemporary Italy.

The question of visibility

Similarly to *La vita è bella*, *Concorrenza sleale* engages the tension between visibility and invisibility *vis à vis* the characters’ Jewish identity, which emerges very

surreptitiously. In *Concorrenza sleale*, the historical events leading up to Jewish persecution are revealed through what Gianni Canova defines “filtrazione indiziaria,” that is, through “dettagli e particolari epifanici per sollecitare nello spettatore l’attivazione delle sue conoscenze pregresse” (78). The Della Roccas’ Jewish identity is indeed disclosed through “epifanic details.” If Benigni reveals that Guido is Jewish through the writing “Achtung cavallo ebreo” on Eliseo’s horse, Scola entrusts an element of the mise-en-scène, namely a menorah, with the function of disclosing the Della Roccas’ Jewish identity. First out of focus in the background of the shot showing Lele’s sister Susanna playing the piano, the seven-branched candelabrum, one of the oldest symbols of the Jewish faith, becomes more clearly visible among the guests of the party that Lele’s family throws at their house. Afterwards, for a good portion of the film, the characters’ Jewishness lays dormant and references to Lele’s family occurs through implicit allusions.

In one sequence, for instance, Umberto is complaining to Matilde about Leone’s witty signs, which he regards as the result of a collective effort: “Quelli lì sono un branco, sono compatti, sono spietati!” The expression “quelli lì” is vague because it is difficult to determine if he is just referring to Leone and his family or to Jews in general; what is evident is the derogatory nature of such expression. An even more defamatory and first overt reference to Leone and his family’s Jewishness comes during the confrontation, both verbal and physical, between Umberto and Leone as they finally give vent to their mutual anger and antagonism. When Umberto discovers that his brother in law has bought a suit from Leone’s, he goes, enraged, to his store and after an escalation of spiteful remarks, the former calls the latter a “mascalzone.” The two come to blows and

continue to throw insults at each other, while their respective families gather around them in an attempt to stop the fight. While Leone limits himself to repeating “Armadio,” which hints at Umberto’s heavy built, the latter starts with “nasone,” continues with “romano, romano” and ends with the vitriolic remark: “Un ebreo resta sempre un ebreo.” At this sentence, Leone and both men’s family members freeze and become silent because of what they obviously perceive as a true gratuitous remark. Even Leone looks astonished and bewildered and is only able to utter “Embè,” as if to stress how his Jewishness is totally unrelated to the incident. The position of the characters in the shot, who are divided into two groups, the Melchiorres and the Della Roccas, translates into spatial terms the separation that the new laws, by associating negative connotations with “the word Jew” created in society. It is a powerful visual rendering of the “solco profondo” that Bassani saw between Gentiles and Jews as a result of the new legislation. The way in which the camera circulates within this space creates a sense of discomfort and makes us feel ashamed of Umberto’s racist slur. After a close-up of Pietruccio, obviously uncomfortable and ashamed, the camera follows his head movement as he looks up and reproaches Umberto with his gaze. It then covers the space separating the two groups and settles on Leone, who is looking down at Lele and smiling in an attempt to belittle the incident. The camera insists on the visual effects and deformations that the word “Jew” as used derogatorily by Umberto produces on the characters’ faces. It is as if the violence inflicted on Jews, which was both mirrored and caused by a perverse use of language, transformed into a violent, *figural* force able to act on the characters’ bodies. Although the figural is not representational, “it can be apprehended in that the force of transgression acts on space” (Rodowick 13) and, in this case, the camera becomes a

vehicle for this force deforming the space of the shot and the characters' bodies contained in it. Their facial expressions are different from Micòl's proud grimace or from Annemarie's frown when looking at Rosetta's Jewish neighbors. All the characters, including Umberto, who looks uncomfortable but also puzzled, as if he did not understand the serious implications of his sentence, are deeply impacted and "wounded" by the utterance, as suggested by the aphasia that temporarily affects them. The camera movement signals the discrepancy and yet the specularity between the two sets of father-son: Pietruccio's looking up to his father is juxtaposed with Leone's looking down to his son, two reversed but nonetheless parallel movements. The word "Jew," so far tacitly implied, is verbalized as a severe, destructive blow. It marks, however, a turning point in the relationship between Umberto and Leone as it triggers a radical change in the way in which Umberto looks at his competitor.

As it emerges from the very beginning of the film, Umberto has no strong political convictions and accepts and assimilates what happens around him, as his brother, a professor with antifascist ideas, often rebukes him. Uttered by him, politically inspired comments sound like slogans, like verbal reproductions that uncritically buttress the antisemitic images circulating on Fascist press and depicting Jews with a big and hooked nose. The Fascist comic strip "*Il Giornalissimo*," for example "esercita il massimo della sua virulenza sui nasi degli ebrei: carnose escrescenze proboscidali ... in bilico tra uomo e bestia" (Pallottino 24). Scola acts on and counters such propaganda by his strategic choice of actors. Leone, played by Sergio Castellitto, is not small-nosed, but this trait does not stand out. Much more conspicuous instead and certainly not easy to overlook is Matilde/Sabrina Impacciatore's nose. So, paradoxically, the woman, who is

such a fervent supporter of the policies adopted by the regime and who pleads with Umberto in order to have “Negozio ariano” displayed on the window of the store, shows a trait that is so visibly non-Aryan.

“Loro chi?:” the anomic condition of language

The practice of making visible to passersby that one’s store was “Aryan,” thus averting the daunting possibility of “passing” for a Jewish shop, was one of the correlates inspired by the provisions of the Racial Laws. In the particular context of *Concorrenza sleale* and at this point of the film, the Della Roccas have suffered some restrictive regulations, such as the prohibition for Jews to listen to radio and the ensuing obligation to leave their radio sets with the local police authorities. As the sign posted on a store window denying entrance to Jews and dogs renders clearly in *La vita è bella*, some stores refused entry to Jews, which seems to be what Matilde would like Umberto’s store to implement. When Mrs. Di Veroli, a Jewish lady running a perfume store, asks Matilde for some fabric to make a *chemisè*, the assistant replies her quite rudely “di trovare un altro negozio.” When Mrs. Di Veroli, quite dejected, is about to leave, Umberto enters the conversation and kindly shows her a beautiful piece of cloth, for which he even offers a discounted price. When the lady leaves, Matilde, quite enraged, initiates the following dialogue with Umberto.

[Matilde] Sono tutti disfattisti *loro*.

[Umberto] Loro chi?

[Matilde] Sconti così, nei *loro* negozi, *loro* non ne fanno. E poi a una così, a una disfattista.

[Umberto] Chi vi dice che la signora di Veroli sia una disfattista?

[Matilde] Perché non l’avete sentita? È per una *chemisè*. Si dice camiciotto. E poi si sa. *Loro* sono tutti mezzi disfattisti.

Matilde vehemently insists on “loro” and cannot bring herself to saying “ebrei,” continuing to use it even when Umberto asks her “loro chi?” After Umberto’s slur centered on the twofold repetition of the word “ebreo,” it is as if Matilde were prevented from using the word Jew in an explicitly derogatory way, thus compelling her to a rather vague and hazy expression. The vagueness of such usage augments if we compare it with a crucial instance of “loro” in *Una giornata particolare*. While talking to the man he loves, Gabriele laments “è tutto così assurdo, secondo loro dovremmo sentirci in colpa.” Even in this case, “loro” is meant as a defamatory expression, with the crucial difference that it refers to Fascist supporters, which counteracts and contradicts Matilde’s usage.

After this conversation between Umberto and Matilde there are only sporadic, uses of “ebreo.” While Leone and his father are waiting at the police station to turn in their radio set, for example, they overhear the commissioner commenting upon two anonymous graffiti, namely “Starace chi legge” and “Qui abita un ebreo.” While the commissioner orders to erase the former, he acclaims the latter as “anonime manifestazioni di consenso alle recenti norme restrittive.” The derogatory potential inherent in this usage of “ebreo” is juxtaposed with a similar linguistic strategy that transforms the name of one of the leading Fascist party official into an insult. This slogan is an anonymous and manifest refusal to share the consensus over the Racial laws and shows the making of an opposite and destabilizing sense. The visual “spectacle” provided by the antisemitic writing, which fulfils a similar role as “Negozio ebreo” in *La vita è bella*, finds a counterpart in “Starace chi legge,” which mimics the communicative mechanisms underlying such graffiti.

Another key use of “ebreo” is uttered by Susanna during a heated argument with her boyfriend Paolo, Umberto’s son. Frustrated and annoyed by the jokes on Jews that Paolo’s friends constantly crack, Susanna angrily asks:

[Susanna]: Perché si sono messi a parlare così davanti a me? Perché non lo sapevano. Perché non glielo hai detto?

[Paolo]: Detto che?

[Susanna]: Che sono *un’ebrea*.

[Paolo]: Non gliel’ho detto proprio perché [he hesitates] per me non significa niente.

[Susanna] Di questi tempi significa.

[Paolo]: Tu per me sei come tutti gli altri.

[Susanna]: [After a few moments of silence] Anche tu per me sei come tutti gli altri.

Paolo imposes invisibility on Susanna by hiding her Jewishness either because he is ashamed or because he fears he could be prejudiced as well. Faced with such constriction, Susanna proudly states her identity, which, as she suggests, “Di questi tempi significa.” In this particular instance, visibility is set in counterpoint with another sort of visibility. In the face of conspicuous manifestations of Antisemitism – the jokes of Paolo’s friends, the graffiti – Susanna states not only that she is Jewish but that she is *a Jew*. She affirms both her belonging to the Jewish people and her singularity among them, as evidenced by the use of the indefinite article “una,” when “ebrea” would have made the point. In this way, she responds and counters all those processes by which Jews were singled out with a discriminatory intent. Susanna’s “una ebrea” counteracts not only “un ebreo” of the Antisemitic graffiti but also “un ebreo” in Umberto’s slur.

On the one hand, such affirmation of identity conveys a sense of empowerment, which is suggested also by the *mise-en-scène* arrangement, with Susanna speaking from above the stairs and looking down to Paolo. On the other, however, it reveals the extent to which the girl has assimilated the perverse mechanisms of the “state of exception”

characterizing Fascist Italy. Worth exploring are the sentences “Di questi tempi significa” and “Per me non significa niente,” which refer to the importance of stating one’s Jewishness. The verb “significa,” however, also lends itself to being investigated in terms of linguistic signification. In fact, it underscores the crucial role that signification plays in the creation of social and political categories, often with the purpose of buttressing discrimination and persecution. “Ebreo” was made to signify differently from before: new, perverse and discriminatory signifieds were attached to the signifier “Jew” that overshadowed and silenced all others. What was the exception became the rule and acquired force of law. In *Stato di eccezione: Homo Sacer II*, Giorgio Agamben traces the emergence and the development of the “state of exception,” a concept famously explored by Walter Benjamin. The state of exception is governed by violence, the law is no longer applied and it is violence itself that is interpreted as a logical application of the law. The state of exception thrives on a permanent state of emergency and presents itself as “la forma legale di ciò che non può avere forma legale;” it is a “fictio iuris” (52). In the Nazi regime Benjamin saw the most effective instance of the state of exception in which violence and law are indistinguishable and operate within what Agamben defines “una zona di anomia in cui agisce una violenza senza alcuna veste giuridica” (76-77). It is interesting to note that “anomia,” literally, without norms, also refers to a medical condition characterized by the inability to name objects or people. From this perspective, Matilde’s incapability of naming Leone and his family properly and resorting repeatedly to “loro,” as if “Jews” were a dreadful and awful word to utter, can be regarded as a by-product and a sign of the state of exception and “diseas(e) of power” (Foucault *Power* 328) characterizing Fascism.

The one and only encounter between Umberto and Leone that is a real conversation and not a confrontation – and the last time we see them together – provides a temporary “suspension” of the realm of signification forged by the Fascist regime. Umberto visits Leone, who is ill from what we discover is a psychosomatic ailment. Leone is lying in bed and is wearing a necklace bearing the star of David as a pendant. This shot recalls one of the last sequences of Vittorio De Sica’s *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (1970) in which the protagonist visits Micòl, who wears a similar necklace and is positioned in a similar fashion as Leone. At this point in the film, Micòl and his family are about to be deported, while Leone and his family will soon move to the ghetto. The Star of David, the most common symbol of Judaism, marks Micòl’s and Leone’s Jewish identity, but their being Jewish is not the central issue at this particular time. If the menorah in the early sequences of *Concorrenza sleale* served precisely to convey to spectators the characters’ Jewishness, the Star of David does not signify in the sense meant by Susanna. It signifies as it did before the Racial Laws, in the time of “normalità” mentioned by Loy when, as Benigni claimed, there was no need to stress or underscore one’s Jewishness. In this particular sequence, Micòl is *not* first and foremost a Jewish girl but, rather, a girl who does not reciprocate the protagonist’s love and is about to break his heart. In the same way, Leone is not principally a Jew, but a man with whom Umberto establishes, yet temporarily, a relationship that is far removed from the “unfair competition” of the beginning. The use of the familiar “tu” as a form of reciprocal address replacing the more formal “Lei” employed up until now signals the acquisition of a sort of intimacy and complicity, as suggested by how they both laugh at a rather comical accident involving Umberto’s fascist-sympathizing brother.

Other diseased forms of signification

If Matilde's "loro" remains hanging in a limbo of indefiniteness, Umberto's "romano, romano" used as an insult conceals a subversive potential. In fact, Umberto does not realize that by using it as an offence, he makes a minor use of the major currency of the word in the Fascist era, which celebrated the myth of "romanità" as the model on which Italianness was based. A regular customer of Umberto's, a count who strongly supports the regime and epitomizes such ideal, claims that "Tutto quello che c'è di bello è romano." Thus, even Leone, a Jew born and raised in Rome, who speaks like a Roman, should be seen as sharing this beauty. Leone and his family's "romanità" are underscored for example by the Lithuanian Jewish immigrant, who sees them primarily as Romans, rather than Jews. The old man tells Leone's father "Che fortuna avete ad essere romani! Se c'era il vostro bel sole nei nostri paesi, forse non c'era tanta brutalità!" Although Hans's comment reveals a total naiveté in believing that good weather is a warranty against evil, it serves, however, to render Roman Jews part of that commonly shared "bel sole." It also denotes a conceptualization of Italy and Italians informed by a sort of picturesque, tourist view, as also emerges from the fact that Hans believes Italians to be unruly and disorderly.²⁷ The man is confident that antisemitic laws will never take effect in Italy because, as he tells Pietruccio's grandfather "Non conosci gli italiani? Non rispettano nessuna regola?" and as he thanks him for some money, "Voi italiani non siete come loro [i tedeschi]. Voi siete un'imitazione." His confidence in Italians' unlikeness to

²⁷ Although it is beyond the scope of my analysis, it is interesting to point out that the century-long representations of Italy and Italians based on the picturesque aesthetics deformed foreigners' view of the Fascist regime, which appeared less repressive than other totalitarian regimes. Luisa Passerini notes that "Fin dalla metà degli anni Venti i resoconti di viaggi in Italia ... cominciano a includere tra le curiosità locali accenni a Mussolini. Oltre al quadro di Napoli vecchia, gli scavi di Pompei, Venezia e Frascati, la visita in Italia prevede, a Roma, la fontana di Trevi, il Papa e Mussolini ... Molti autori si prodigano a dimostrare che i recenti cambiamenti politici non riducono il piacere del viaggiatore" (*Mussolini immaginario* 135).

Germans probably derives from the false promise that a Fascist high-ranking officer makes him: in return for a large sum of money, he tricks Hans into believing that the local authorities will help him obtain all the necessary documents to leave for America. As Leone informs Umberto during the above-mentioned conversation, Hans has been deported “in un campo di lavoro in nord Italia.” The myth of Italian as good people and mere imitation of the evil Germans collapses irremediably.

Hans’s picturesque image of Italians, which reflects a stereotypical and constructed view from the “outside,” parallels the arbitrary and essentialist constructions of Italianness from the “inside.” The commissioner to whom Umberto and Leone are taken after their quarrel offers a clear example of such notions of “italianità.” He does nothing to hide his antisemitic prejudice and after dismissing Leone quite briskly, he submits a form to Umberto. On this form, as we infer, Umberto could elaborate on the incident by indicating Leone’s “racial” origin as the major cause and state, instead, his “italianità inequivocabile, assoluta e ... storica,” as the commissioner informs him.

Understanding, perhaps, the gravity of his antisemitic slur in the political environment that the commissioner embodies, Umberto refuses to fill out the form. For the first time, Umberto thinks critically and takes a firm stand. He is not conniving with the exclusion of Jews based on their alleged non-Italianess, which is revealed as just an artificial and “formal” construct. The three adjectives with which the officer defines what “italianità” should be, “inequivocabile, assoluta, storica,” which are obviously aimed at reinforcing this idea, actually backfire. “Italianità” cannot be “inequivocabile” because the previous inclusion of Jews in it, now defined as having a different racial origin, irremediably “equivocates” it. For the same reason, “italianità” cannot be defined as

“assoluta” and “storica.” In fact, any historical analysis would reveal that different periods of time spawned different concepts of Italian. When the Della Rocca family returns the radio set to the police, Leone’s father, enraged, proudly boasts his participation in WWI, which also won him some national recognition. The way in which the commissioner shuns him and “kindly” invites to remain silent undermines his very use of “storica.” Similarly to Ginzburg, Fellini, and Loy, Scola contaminates a univocal telling of history by laying bare the tendentious links established by the regime between past and present and the convenient silencing of some crucial moments and minor voices.

It is through Pietruccio that Scola renders most visible how the exclusion of Italian Jews from Italian history was a purposeful and misleading omission. Pietruccio records and reports all the changes that occur within his family and between his and Lele’s family because of the Racial Laws. Scola confesses that “Mi ha sempre appassionato il confronto tra la storia degli individui e quella ufficiale dei grandi eventi. Eventi lontani, che irrompono dentro le nostre case, nei nostri sentimenti, nei rapporti di amicizia, di amore” (quoted in Bisturi 38). It is not just a simple “confronto” that Scola is carrying out, but rather, as Ennio Bisपुरi argues, a “rivoluzione copernicana che fa derivare la storia dal personaggio e non il personaggio dalla storia” (34). After each key moment in the film in which his life or relationship to his Jewish neighbors is altered by historical events, Pietruccio offers a summary, which is complemented by his drawings. Scola dramatizes the sort of visual distortion that child Rosetta effects *vis à vis* her surrounding as Pietruccio turns his family, Lele and Lele’s family members into “characters” of a parallel (his) story line. Pietruccio’s deformations, challenge and

contaminate official history, thus begging reflections on the truth(s) on which it is allegedly based.

The theatricality of the Fascist show

Povera Roma mia de travertino!
T'hanno vestita tutta de cartone
pe' fatte rimirà da n'Imbianchino!
(Trilussa)²⁸

In “43-97,” the two protagonists hide in a movie theater, which is not a neutral choice as it underscores, I believe, cinema’s potential to rescue from biased and misleading visual constructs. The fact that the series of clips includes *Amarcord*, more specifically, the passing of the Rex, further supports this idea and has to be read against Fellini’s foregrounding of cinematic artifice. Scola, too, aims at making spectators wary of the “reality” of what some images supposedly reflect and purport to represent.

Concorrenza sleale opens with Pietruccio seated at his table, which is located next to a window. As he is drawing something on his notebook, he situates the film historically by explaining that “Oggi è il 12 febbraio, 1938,” by which he reveals his role as the voice-over-narrator. In the next shot, the point of view is from inside a street car passing by on the street below the boy’s apartment. The camera fits the contours of one of the window and, through a long-shot, captures the two adjacent stores that are the cause of the “unfair competition.” In the following shot, it is again a window that the camera crosses. From Pietruccio’s bedroom, where it has returned, it smoothly and

²⁸ As Tullio Kezich and Alessandra Levantesi explain in their essay “Vademecum per la visione,” included in the anthology *Una giornata particolare. Incontrarsi e dirsi addio nella Roma del '38*, which is epigraphed by these verses by Trilussa, “In questi versi clandestini, attribuiti al poeta Trilussa, l’Imbianchino (der Anstreicher, così chiamato in varie poesie di Bertold Brecht) era uno dei soprannomi di Hitler in Germania” (138).

seamlessly, with no cut, escapes through the window, only to enter Umberto's store. It is a claustrophobic camera longing for "fresh air," eager to escape the constraints of a suffocating environment. There is, however, no outlet. Even when it leaves indoor places, it finds no way out and remains trapped within the same, hermetically sealed environment of via Settimiano. The film employs unity of space as everything happens against the same *mise-en-scène* composed of the street, with its stores, the street car repeatedly passing by and St. Peter's Basilica in the background (a visual rendition of the Pope's lack of action and purposeful non-involvement denounced by Loy). Not a single scene was shot in a real location – via Settimiano does not exist - and the *mise-en-scène* was entirely reconstructed at Cinecittà, which augments the effects of "un cinema abbastanza teatrale – un cinema di personaggi e di psicologie," as Scola defined his own filmmaking in an interview. Because of the quasi- theatrical settings of his films, as Ennio Bispuri claims, Scola "potrebbe apparire quasi orientato a rinunciare alle infinite potenzialità del mezzo cinematografico. (124) Bispuri aptly uses the conditional "potrebbe" as Scola is actually taking advantage of all the potentialities offered by the cinematic medium in order to reveal *Concorrenza sleale* for what it is, just art. The limited camera movements, which are confined to a very restricted point of view, contribute to highlighting cinematic artifice.

Considering that the reconstructed *mise-en-scène* replicates a 1938 Roman street and becomes the setting of several manifestation of Fascist consensus, it can be argued that Scola's theatrical background is meant to recall the "theatricality" implied in the construction of the Fascist spectacle. In this sense, Scola is fleshing out and magnifying the "teatralità" that according to Fellini characterized Fascism, as epitomized by the

federale's visit. The potential of Scola's strategy in *Concorrenza sleale* becomes even more evident if we call into the picture its pre-text *Una giornata particolare*, which is based on the opposition or rather, on the seemingly-existing opposition between the real footage of Hitler's visit to Rome and the "theatrical setting" of Antonietta's house. In *Concorrenza sleale*, Scola blurs the distinction between the "real" and the "invented" by parting completely with the official narration of the event and inventing an "other," minor language. By constructing a fake background as the setting for the parade, Scola invites spectators to explore the fakeness of the environment in which the "real" parade took place as well as the coverage provided by newsreels. Trilussa's reference to a Rome that has been clothed with cardboard hints at the way in which the city was actually turned into a stage. Many Roman sites, including historical ones, were drastically modified to make the city more suitable to the event. In discussing Mussolini's "city planning" project, Andrea Giardina notes that "Bisognava ricreare scenografie aperte, spazi grandi e solenni nei quali giganteggiassero edifici imponenti" which required large quantities of Roman ruins to be removed and disposed of. (qtd. in Kezich and Levantesi 118).²⁹ Not only did Rome become a grandiose stage, but the people for whom such transformation had been implemented also turned into actors with a part to play. Not only Fascists, but also Nazis.

In his essay "Hitler in Italia," Dario Fertilio recounts the event through the eyes of Paul Schmidt,³⁰ the Minister for External Affairs and interpreter who accompanied the Führer on that occasion. On various passages, Fertilio refers to Schmidt's impression that

²⁹ As Kezich and Levantesi lament "Gli sbancamenti, determinati dalla smania di creare nel minore tempo possibile un'arteria destinata alle grandi parate propagandistiche come quella per la visita del Führer, alterò irreparabilmente la topografia originaria dei Fori" (168).

³⁰ Based on the autobiographical text "Statist auf diplomatischer Bühne 1923-1945."

what he was witnessing had been carefully staged, which in turn required the members of the German delegation to sustain a role for the whole duration of their visit. Right before their arrival in Rome, Schmidt wondered if “poteva essere vero che tutta quella messa in scena, quei travestimenti teatrali fossero una specie di recita in maschera?” (34). This speculation found confirmation in his first impression of Rome: “Una cosa incredibile, eppure a suo modo eccessiva, insopportabile, persino angosciosa. Assomigliava a un’enorme rappresentazione teatrale” (37).

The Minister’s impressions and comments provide crucial insights in order to understand the potential of Scola’s theatrical approach. In *Concorrenza sleale*, what we see of that “special day” is a theatrical-like reconstruction of what was *already* the result of a staged, fictionalized and non-authentic event. There is no real event and the film is no less real than what and how the Luce documentaries chose to show. The historical moment, which was narrated and visually presented as the embodiment of a destiny, as an alliance based on sharing the same Aryan race and ideals, owes its existence, just like the film, to cinematic reconstruction. In this self-unmasking potential, foregrounded by *Una giornata particolare* and *43-97* and fleshed out in *Concorrenza sleale*, lies Scola’s confidence in the salvific character of cinema, in cinema’s ability to denude itself in order to denounce how it is often exploited and confined to an external referent.

This “message” also emerges from Scola’s refusal to portray the time after 1938. Like Benigni and Loy, Scola opposes attempts to create verisimilitude in dealing with the horror of the camps, but goes even further as he espouses *total* silence. We do not know what will happen to the Della Rocca family. In the end, the family is compelled to leave the store and the neighborhood and to move to the ghetto. The very last sequence of the

film shows the members of the family on a carriage, on which all their belongings have also been placed. As they are leaving and eventually dissolve into the out-of-frame, the Melchiorres are left standing on the street and impotently leave their neighbors to their destiny. We do not know if the family will be deported, which is most likely, or will manage to survive. The unanswerable questions that both Bassani and Loy raise about the circumstances of their protagonists' deaths, encompass here several more interrogatives. The out-of-frame that engulfs the Della Roccas leaves spectators completely clueless and disoriented, with the only disquieting certainty that the family will suffer severe persecution.

The sense of disorientation is augmented by the lack of a definite closure and by an ending that is deferred indefinitely. As Bispuri notes, Scola's films "non si concludono mai con una fine sicura e rigorosa, ma rimandano a un dopo e a un oltre cui il film ... allude e che possiamo solo immaginare" (125). It is an "imaginative engagement with the past" that *Concorrenza sleale* fosters as imagination is our only key to facing the unknowingness conveyed by the out-of-frame. Listening to a lacuna, as Agamben reminds us, is not at all a useless endeavor and interrogating the silence that enshrouds the Della Roccas' fate, as we are inevitably led to do, translates into an act of bearing witness.

Instead of concluding with a freeze-frame of Pietruccio, the director lets the camera roll while the child actor is waiting for a hint from the director that the film is over. This hint doesn't come and the child actor stands still, obviously uncomfortable, and we still see him while the credits start appearing. The resulting image is traversed by figural forces; we see an "immagine ibrida, mista, impura," as Bertetto defines one of the

possible manifestations of the figural in film (196). In a powerful example of the intertwining of the visual and the verbal, the image of the child is contaminated by the forceful “invasion” of the credits, which gives rise to a hybrid and heterogeneous element. The boy’s uneasiness is a psychological reaction to the breaking in of violent forces that deform the image and put him on an indefinable limb, at the threshold between a character and an actor. Repressed throughout the film within the “stage” of via Settimiano, the figural erupts vehemently at the end and disrupts the suffocating and structured space within which the camera had remained trapped. It is a moment of freedom and deliverance that opens the filmic text to an unbounded beyond. This transgressing of the boundaries of the text recalls the strategies used by Ginzburg, Bassani, and Loy, which rendered the ending to their work flexible and porous with no definite boundaries. Such non-closure suggests that the diegesis of a film as well as the pages of a book cannot contain all the figural forces channeled or triggered by them. From this perspective, we should not regard “43-97” as an attempt to frame the events between two specific years. Rather, these two years serve as springboards for exploring the porosity and overlaps among events and for challenging history as a linear and clearly definable progression.

Helena Janeczek’s *Lezioni di tenebra* (1997)

The autobiographical novel *Lezioni di tenebra* written in Italian by German-Polish writer Helena Janeczek, who migrated to Italy in 1983, provides fertile ground to investigate such unboundedness. The novel is specular to “43-97” in terms of the timeframe adopted. In fact, *Lezioni di tenebra* was published in 1997, but Helena’s story

is inextricably linked with the Shoah because she is the daughter of two Auschwitz survivors. It is significant that the novel appeared in the same year as *La vita è bella* and *La parola ebreo*. It is a year, or more precisely a moment in time, in which dealing with the otherness and diversity that Jews have always epitomized became urgent *vis à vis* the social and political situation of Italy. Fabio Girelli Carasi notes that in the 1990s books on Jewish themes began to grow exponentially, which raised “the tantalizing question ... why the phenomenon is taking place at this particular juncture in Italian history.” In order to account for such phenomenon, Girelli-Carasi formulates a hypothesis that

takes into consideration the major social changes that have taken place recently in Italy, the most relevant of which has been the arrival of immigrants. In this context, I contended, Italians began interrogating themselves about the myths and the truths of their proclaimed tolerance and antiracist nature in view of particularly hideous episodes of violence and widespread attitude of intolerance ... My thesis was that Italy was witnessing the birth of the discourse of diversity and that within that discourse ... the Jewish discourse could be articulated (195).

It is certainly not by chance that Girelli-Carasi put forward this hypothesis in 1998, as he specifically claims, during a time in which propaganda on mass-media alerting people to the threat posed by immigrants became particularly virulent (Dal Lago 44). *Lezioni di tenebra* combines both diversities: her being a daughter of Auschwitz survivors is what determines and defines her migration to Germany and, in turn, her link with Germany determines the way in which she is perceived as an immigrant in Italy. Helena is not the typical German and she is not the typical immigrant. With *Lezioni di tenebra* she disturbs and shows the constructedness of the images that Italians have of both by impeding the customary associations attached to the words and images “tedesco” and “immigrato.” She also adopts a figural perspective along the lines of Loy’s approach as she plays on the ambiguity of the images that certain words and verbal expressions spawn. By displacing

and dramatizing the disparity between sign and referent, not only does Janeczek stress the multifacetedness of identity terms, but also calls into question the notion of identity itself.

In the text, “tedesco” is a complex term and is the result of her being the daughter of two Polish Jews who survived Auschwitz.

Tutte e due abbiamo il passaporto tedesco, quel passaporto che gli immigrati d'altri paesi così spesso non riescono a ottenere dopo uno o più decenni di lavoro, tasse e contributi, e che non viene neanche dato ai loro figli, se sono figli di immigrati, per una legge tedesca che non cambia, la legge dello jus sanguinis.
(27)

As the protagonist explains, the reason why her parents managed to obtain this passport is the

Persecuzione registrata e risarcita in versamenti liquidi, fatti all'istituto preposto alla “riparazione”, e ripagata anche con la valuta della cittadinanza, quasi che con tutto il sangue versato – “versato” si fa per dire – i miei avessero acquisito un diritto alla legge del sangue. Siamo tedesche, c'è scritto sul nostro passaporto.
(27)

Helena and her mother are German citizens because citizenship is the concession that Germany grants as an attempt to mend the past and “reimburse” them for their suffering. This passage raises the issue of representation. Janeczek shows that German authorities are attempting to make persecution quantifiable, thus countering the idea of the incommensurability and unrepresentability of the horrors of the Shoah. In fact, the currency, the “valuta,” of citizenship is established as the material counterpart of the Shoah, which produces a reification of the event. In appropriating and reproducing such legal language, in becoming mottled in it, Janeczek is able to dispel such objectification and evoke the immensity of the horror. By camouflaging in legal language, she manages to extrapolate the ominous bureaucratic precision with which the extermination was carried out. Persecution is “registrata”– just like it was during the Nazi regime when the

mass killings were painstakingly organized and implemented. Janeczek strategically plays with the noun/adjective “versamento” and “versato:” the “versamenti liquidi,” the reimbursement in cash that the institution set up to repay Holocaust victims is supposed to reflect and match the “sangue versato” that warrants such reimbursement, which is probably an expression used by German legislation. With “si fa per dire” Janeczek reveals the inappropriate and misleading character of this expression. She also denounces the terrible death that million of Jews suffered in the concentration camps, which in most cases did not entail any blood shedding as it occurred in the gas chambers or through starvation. “Si fa per dire” tells volumes about an event that is repressed and silenced and disperses the terms used to circumscribe it. Janeczek allies with Loy in fulfilling a re-evaluation of “alcuni termini con cui è stata registrata la lezione decisiva del secolo,” as Agamben calls for. It is interesting to note that both Janeczek and Agamben resort to the word “registrata,” which hints specifically at the attempt to bind the event to some sort of concrete and tangible form. The use of the impersonal expression alludes at the commonality and widespread circulation of such purposefully imprecise language, which is aimed at covering up and denying visibility to the crimes of Shoah.

Janeczek also warns us, however, about the “deviant” ways in which visibility can be exploited, as emerges from the very first beginning of the book:

L'altra sera in televisione una tizia sosteneva di essere la *reincarnazione* di una ragazza ebrea uccisa in un campo di sterminio. Me l'ha detto il mio amico Olek, al telefono da Roma, e parlando con me continuava a seguire le tappe ricostruite non si sa come di quella vita precedente ... Si vedeva una donna sulla trentina ... spiegava al pubblico di quel programma e a casa, vasto e invisibile, il senso ricavato da quell'esperienza. (9)

We are no longer dealing with an attempt to create verisimilitude, but with an attempt to re-create the physicality of the event, as the term “reincarnazione” suggests. The

concreteness that underlies any constructed image of the event – as is the case with any sequence in *Schindler's List* depicting killings or life in the camp – is here brought to extremes. The image that Helena has in front of her is that of a woman in flesh and blood who claims that she literally and not just metaphorically *embodies* a girl killed in an extermination camp. This claim is based on a daring assumption, that is, that the “vast and invisible” audience is witnessing a woman who *was* and has re-become a camp victim. There is an attempt to move past re-presentation and, in semiotic terms, to bridge the gap between sign and referent, signifier and signified. This woman is implying that she is both the signifier and the signified of a Holocaust victim. In this regard, the impression that Helena's mother had of *Schindler's List* needs to be explored: “ha apprezzato *Schindler's List*, trovandolo un po' americano nel finale, che io invece ho difeso. Discussioni estetiche, come si vede” (102). In the final sequence of Spielberg's film the actors and the actual survivors saved by Schindler, whom they played, walk together in a Jerusalem cemetery and place rocks on tombs, according to a Jewish religious practice. This documentary-like scene was probably meant to add further verisimilitude to the events recounted in the film, but, I would argue, it actually undermines it. In fact, we perceive and see in full the physical discrepancy between the actors and the Jews saved by Oskar Schindler, which leads us to cast doubt on the realistically-intended images of the film. Janeczek's statement “Discussioni estetiche, come si vede” underscores that we are dealing with an aesthetic construct that lack any substance, as “one can see” from the “ending.” Thus, the mother's appreciation of the film has to be examined in aesthetic terms, and not in the correspondence between the images and the actual, flesh-and-blood Jews who perished in concentration camps. The

reference to this specific sequence in *Schindler's List* serves to debunk the mechanisms underlying the “reincarnazione” that the woman on the TV purports to show. Helena herself, who is so deeply connected and related to the victims, having close relatives that were killed, lacks any physical contact with them. She does not even possess any objects that belonged to her relatives and fills her Munich house with substitute items. In discussing this aspect of *Lezioni di tenebra*, Stefania Lucamante claims that “siamo di fronte alla più ampia reificazione del nulla, dell’assenza di una trasmissione di affetti” (144). This reification serves to fill the emotional void that the death of the loved ones left for the mother and Helena, but can also be perversely appropriated and exploited to achieve certain effects.

The way in which the mother refers to the Shoah counters the process by which the event is often reified. When explaining to Helena why, notwithstanding their legal status, they are not German, the woman

qualche volta spiegava i fondamenti del suo principio diceva che non eravamo tedeschi e che non volevamo esserlo, non solo per “quello che è successo”, ma anche perché la tipica mentalità tedesca si era dimostrata incompatibile con la loro convivenza pacifica. (29)

“Quello che è successo” is a vague expression that has the potential of countering the specificity with which authorities circumscribe the Shoah. The indefinite pronoun “quello” conveys the indefinites and incommensurability of the Holocaust and the ensuing inability to fix “what happened” in words.

In a passage, the mother enlists other reasons why she states her non-Germanness:

Noi al bar non paghiamo il nostro caffè, noi lo offriamo perché noi non siamo tedeschi; noi invitiamo gli amici a casa e cuciniamo un pranzo più che abbondante perché noi siamo ospitali in quanto non siamo tedeschi ... noi non distinguiamo sempre il “mio” dal “tuo” perché noi non siamo tedeschi. Noi non pensiamo che

un figlio a diciott'anni sia adulto, perché i figli sono sempre figli, perché noi non siamo tedeschi. (29)

The “repetition of “we don’t do this and that” because “we are not German” confers language a sort of accruing potential and, at every repetition, negation acquires more emphasis, becomes stronger and almost annoying in its being reproduced always the same. It is, indeed, a repetition that makes narration impeded and not pleasant to the ear, almost cacophonous. The disturbing effect she is able to produce in the Italian, by repeating something that she could have well rephrased to make her style more elegant, serves to echo her mother’s hatred for the Germans for “quello che è successo.” Similarly to Ginzburg, who becomes a stammerer in her own native language and repeats words until they become passwords, Janeczek also makes language “worn out.” This logorotation of language conveys ongoing displacement and dislodgement of any identity constructs, not only those aimed at stating who one is but also the ones intending to define who one is not. Even absolute negation is impossible. The expression “noi non siamo tedeschi” is set in counterpoint with the fact that both Helena and her mother are in possession of a German passport, something that supposedly is granted by virtue of an intimate belonging.

In the above passage describing the circumstances of the acquisition of the German passport, it is tragically ironic that the *jus sanguinis*, what one supposedly is by blood, is exchanged as a commodity and is granted people who were persecuted and killed based on the assumption of their *not* belonging to the same blood. In this particular passage, Janeczek is extremely shrewd in making the term “blood” ambiguous. What blood are we dealing with? Isn’t it ironic that Jews through the blood they – primarily metaphorically – shed became part and parcel of a law that made them German?

Similarly to Benigni, Janeczek shows how the horror of the Shoah can emerge by exploring the ways in which signification was exploited and distorted. If Guido spares Giosuè the macabre transformation of human bodies in utilitarian objects by disavowing a literal meaning, Janeczek warns us about the subtle implications of attempting to convert a metaphorical sense into a literal one. In both cases, we are witnessing figural strategies that dislodge words from the referential images that institutions of power establish and circulate (the “to stand for dynamic” is disturbed.)

The discrepancy between “siamo tedesche,” as officially sanctioned by the law, and the guiding principle of the family members according to which “noi non siamo tedeschi” shows the “mobility” and ambiguity of identity terms, including those used to define national identity. Helena adds that “Non volevo diventare tedesca nemmeno io. Così non lo sono diventata” (29-30). The writing on the passport “siamo tedesche. C’è scritto” implies a permanent condition, which collides with the fluidity suggested by “non lo sono diventata.” Any attempt to define what the protagonist and her mother are is immediately and irremediably undermined: the “mantra” “noi non siamo tedeschi” does not match the official writing on the passport, which in turn is displaced by Helena’s affirmation that she does not want to become German.

Language and the mother

This alienation from Germanness is refracted by her relationship with her German nanny Cilly, to whom she never managed to become close. Helena recounts:

Non è stata mia mamma a crescermi, almeno non lei sola. Da quando sono nata a casa nostra c’era un’altra donna che mi cambiava i pannolini, mi dava il latte, mi metteva a letto ... Era orfana di guerra, nella sua famiglia erano rimaste solo le

donne, lei, sua madre, sua sorella minore ... il padre, arrivato chissà dove con la Wehrmacht, caduto sul fronte orientale o disperso e mai più tornato. (192)

The way in which Janeczek characterizes her nanny and the particular expressions she associates with her such as “crescermi” and “mi dava il latte” echo the figure of a wet-nurse. Janeczek provides an intriguing reformulation of the role that Dante attached to the “nutricem” as expounded in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, to which I wish to briefly return. As we saw earlier, Dante distinguishes between the vernacular, the language that we learn without rules by imitating our wet nurses and “gramatica,” the language we acquire by assimilating rules and structures. As Gary P. Cestaro argues, for Dante and his predecessors and contemporaries, grammar, “a rational discipline” (54) could take hold and be firmly established only through a detachment from the mother, through “exile from maternal nurturing and mother tongue” (61). In other words, on the one hand, Dante reserves a special place to the role of the “nutricem” as the one that initiates a baby to language; on the other, he sees the mother body and its corporeal fluids like breast milk as contaminating agents, as ties that need to be severed for linguistic discipline to develop. What is more, as Cestaro aptly points out, Dante himself gives away his doubt on the whole question of primordial language because by his word choice, he undercuts “the natural primacy” of the volgare; “always, already fallen, the imitation of an imitation (nutricem imitantes)” (55). It is in a pre-history realm, in Eden, that Dante identifies an original language, as spoken by Adam, a man who knew neither mother nor milk (vir sine matre, vir sine lacte) ... “To the extent that the grammarian would now forge a new

motherless, milkless tongue, he in direct violation of the poet's initial lacteal enthusiasm" (59).³¹

The way in which Helena describes her relationship to Cilly, which is both resonant and discrepant with the type of relation described by Dante between a baby and a wet-nurse, sheds light on the concept of mother tongue, more specifically, on her lack of a mother tongue. "Dare il latte" is a misleading expression that despite conjuring up immediate images of breastfeeding, refers in reality to artificial milk. Helena has never tasted breast milk, she is a "mulier sine lacte:" as she ponders how she is able to connect untimely with her mother's Holocaust experience, she wonders "se è possibile trasmettere conoscenze e esperienze non con il latte materno, ma ancora prima, attraverso le acque della placenta, o non so come, perché il latte di mia madre non l'ho avuto" (10). Helena hints at a preverbal stage, at the stage in which she acquired knowledge in absence of language, through the mother's body but without the mother tongue. That is to say, she is not "sine matre" but she skipped the special connection that breast milk would have granted her. Helena was, however, exposed to "gramatica," to a language that supposedly marks the detachment from her mother." It is Cilly, however, the quasi-wetnurse and mother figure, who imparts it to her: "mi guardava i compiti, l'ortografia dei temi in tedesco" (193). Janeczek contaminates the distinction between the domestic and the public realm, between a mother's or female language and a male, official one.

In this particular regard, *Lezioni di tenebra* "allies" with and complements what Ginzburg initiates through her writing in her familiar language. The former does not make explicit references to the Fascist era, but the contamination of the above-mentioned

³¹ I have briefly sketched out Cestaro's analysis in order to further my discussion on Helena's relationship with the mother tongue. For more details, see Gary P. Cestaro. *Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003, in particular Chapters I and II.

separation contributes to challenging the ideology underlying the linguistic policies carried out by the regime. Janeczek, like Ginzburg, counters the notion of linguistic discipline. In the specific case of *Lezioni di tenebra*, the “hybrid” character of Cilly, the quasi, artificially-feeding wetnurse who corrects Helena’s essays according to grammar rules blurs the clear-cut distinction between the mother’s unruly linguistic realm and the public, orderly one. Thus, it calls into question the idea that, to quote Cestaro once again, discipline could only be firmly established through a detachment from the mother, through “exile from maternal nurturing” (61).

In this regard, it is significant to bear in mind an aspect of Fascism that is rather controversial and often paid scarce attention. In fact, Fascism, despite stressing the idea of a clear separation between men and women and relegating the latter to the role of wives and mothers, did actually exploit the idea of motherhood, including breastfeeding, for its political purposes. Luisa Passerini notes that “the feminine was appropriated in the construction of the image of the dictator, which recruited the figure of the mother in particular to the leader’s strategies of legitimation” (Interview 159). In fact, Passerini argues that

Mussolini, and the propaganda system around him ... tried, in a perverse way to perform an operation of connection between male and female. This operation was reserved for only one exceptional figure, the dictator himself ... Only he had the prerogative of uniting the two spheres, being “mother” to the nation and yet standing as an epitome of virility. (Interview 160-161)

It is significant that motherhood also served the purpose of reinforcing the idea of the Roman origin of the Italian people. It was through a clear reference to suckling that this was achieved. Claudia Lazzaro points out that among the emblematic images that were taken over by Roman antiquity and mass produced in order to make “the past a living

heritage” was the she-wolf that suckled the babies Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome (16). An example of the pervasiveness of this visual imagery is the fact that, as Lazzaro notes, children joining the Fascist youth groups set up by the regime, “became ‘sons and daughters of the she-wolf,’ and could easily identify with the suckling twins in the omnipresent visual images” (16). Concomitantly with images reproducing this ancient symbols, there circulated other contemporary images “of mothers breastfeeding their babies, surrounded by their other young children” (Gori 63). Gori also reports that “a wetnurse, Antonietta Girolamo, became popular when the press claimed that she could produce about 2.5 liters of breast milk every day” (63). The act of breastfeeding through which Fascism celebrated the Italians’ Roman descent was concomitant with the celebration of an act that was extremely private, but came to acquire a public, *national* role. In fact, the pro-motherhood campaign set up by the regime, which celebrated prolific mothers, established a clear connection between the role as mothers and that of servers of the nation. As literary scholar Jacqueline Marie Musacchio notes “Mussolini equated childbearing with fighting for the country ... Motherhood was idealized as a woman’s duty to the state” (146). Motherhood and breastfeeding served the nation and, we could argue, they created and nurtured individuals who would eventually become Fascists and entered a different realm of “motherhood” and maternal nourishment. It is as if a communal breastfeeding mother in the body politics replaced the detachment from “maternal nurturing” and the mother’s body that occurred through weaning. By serving as “mother” to the nation, Mussolini allowed Italians to (re)-discover their original mother in ancient Rome. Thus, discrimination against women did not lie merely in their relegation to the domestic sphere, but in the appropriation and exploitation of a womanly

prerogative for a totalitarian, male-dominated agenda. Women had to stay home and commit fully to motherhood, of which breastfeeding is a crucial component. At the same time, however, a womanless motherhood was created at the national level, thus contributing to buttressing the notion of a Fascist national identity.

A motherless, dispersed mother tongue

In *Lezioni di tenebra*, Janeczek plays with the ideas of motherhood and breastfeeding, thus raising the issue of a speaker's relationship to the mother tongue, as discussed earlier. She complicates the terms to such an extent that she challenges the notion of mother tongue itself. Helena's linguistic itinerary is first marked by a preverbal condition, later on by the acquisition of German while what lies in between, what would correspond to an intimate language is never defined as a mother tongue proper. Helena confesses "credo di avere una madre lingua che non conosco, ma vallo a spiegare a qualcuno" (76). Helena is suggesting that somewhere, in this in-between space, lies her mother tongue, which, however, is unknown to her.

The closest language to this mother tongue is probably the language that Helena speaks with her mother, a familiar and yet foreign language. Such familiarity imbued with foreignness emerges in the way in which she calls her mother, whom she addresses by

mamma, non in italiano, bensì in tedesco ... "Mammi"... che ricorre nella sua forma più ortodossa solo quando si bisticcia o c'è il rischio. Altrimenti, perde una emme e la vocale si fa più lunga e dolce, sicché "mami" arriva quasi a confondersi con "mame", mamma in yiddish ... e poi matka, matusia, matu_ka, mamusia, mamuniu. (72-73)

The reference to Yiddish as an integral component of Helena's familiar and yet estranged language is worth exploring, as Yiddish is a foreign language even when it is the native tongue. This idiom, as Franz Kafka notes:

Non ha grammatica ... lo jiddish viene parlato senza sosta, e non trova pace ...
Esso si compone solo di parole straniere. Queste però non riposano nel suo seno,
ma conservano la fretta e la vivacità con cui sono state accolte. Lo jiddish è
percorso da un capo all'altro da migrazioni di popoli. Tutto questo tedesco,
ebraico, francese, inglese, slavo, olandese, rumeno e perfino latino che vive in
esso è preso da curiosità e da leggerezza, ci vuole una certa energia a tenere unite
le varie lingue in questa forma. (1001-1002)

Yiddish is energy, intensity, movement; it is, perhaps, the language that can best convey the figural force exceeding linguistic structures. It has no grammar, as Kafka explains. In Helena's idiom, even the German she acquired through the discipline of grammatical studies is carried away by the ebullience of Yiddish. In the same way, any language, even what we identify as the mother tongue, could become part of a "migration" and, thus, escape our firm hold on it.

Moreover, the "intimate" relationship between Yiddish and German, not only per se – the two languages are very similar – but as building blocks that complement each other in Helena's language, has profound implications considering the Holocaust background against which the story is told. Yiddish, as spoken by Eastern European Jews, was to the eyes of the Nazi regime the language of the "enemy." In Helena's language, instead, not only is there no antagonism between Yiddish and German, but German fuses and mingles with Yiddish when the situation is peaceful, "in tempi di pace e di tranquillità." It is not a simple coexistence, but it is a much deeper connection that clearly shows how one can actually become the other and give up itself – just like the word "mammi" loses an "m." In this process I see what Deleuze calls "epidemics" when

he claims that “It is never filiations that are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind” (69). In the above passage, Yiddish contaminates German, but this gives rise to an “alloy,” Helena’s language, which defies the strict notions of filiations. In this respect, Helena’s confession that “credo di avere una madre lingua che non conosco, ma vallo a spiegare a qualcuno” (76) underscores the lack of a direct and primary relationship with one’s mother tongue. Just like Helena has no univocal way of calling “mother,” in the same way she disperses the notion of “mother” as an original, primordial language. She calls into question, for example, the common assumption that there exists a mother-child relationship between German and Yiddish, a view upheld by Kafka himself:

Non si può ... tradurre lo jiddish in tedesco. I rapporti tra lo jiddish e il tedesco sono troppo delicati e significativi perché non si spezzino immediatamente non appena si riporti lo jiddish alla sua matrice tedesca, vale a dire che quello che si riporta non è più jiddish, ma alcunché di inanimato. (1004)

There are two crucial concepts in this passage, that of “matrice” and “spezzarsi.” The word “matrice” suggests that Kafka conceives of German as the “mother” tongue from which Yiddish originates and with which, however, it cannot reconcile. From this perspective, Yiddish appears like a child that acquires energy and stays alive only by becoming alienated from its mother. According to Kafka, Yiddish refuses a filial relationship with the German mother or, better said, this filial-type relationship is only possible if the two idioms are kept separate. Kafka believes, therefore, in closeness maintained through distance. In Helena’s language, instead, these two languages co-exist and dwell in proximity: Yiddish alternates with German within her family according to the situation at hand. Janeczek challenges the assumption that confronting the two idioms would necessarily “sever” the relationship or, rather, that their proximity will necessarily

lead to confrontation. In *Lezioni di tenebra*, Janeczek shows us that not only can they be close, but also that one can slip into the other, that the boundaries between the two are porous and flexible. Moreover, the filial relationship suggested by Kafka's use of the word "matrice" becomes redefined through the notion of the alliance. It is not closeness preserved through distance and it is not a mother tongue that cannot reconcile with its offspring. It is, rather, a fusion that renders the whole concept of mother, original language fleeting and ungraspable. The verb "confondersi" is indicative of this process because it signals a con-fusion, a reciprocal action that affects both German and Yiddish.

Janeczek's dispersion of the notion of mother tongue is even more significant if we consider that she is writing as the daughter of two Auschwitz survivors, of two people who were persecuted based on an ideology in which the myth of the mother tongue played a key role. Christopher M. Hutton has studied the relationship between linguistics and Nazi ideology and argues that one key tenet "to be found within National Socialist thought was that of the mother tongue," which served

as an anti-Semitic ideology. For Jews were held to lack a sense of loyalty to their mother tongue, and were therefore regarded as having an "unnatural" relationship to language. Jews lived in many countries and spoke many tongues; they were rootless nomads with loyalty only to their race. (37)

In light of Hutton's words, the fusion between the two idioms in Helena's language is a strategy aimed at challenging and "undoing" the ideology that warranted persecution and discrimination. It is a strategy that mirrors Bassani's contamination of the term "italiano" by showing that its contours could be expanded to contain also "ebreo." She confuses German and Jew and shows that the German language can become a "rootless nomad" and temporarily settle and ally with the "enemy" language, next to "many tongues."

The dispersion of the notion of “mother,” which highlights the lack of a well-defined and knowable mother tongue is worth exploring also within Helena’s relationship to Italian, which for her is a foreign language. Helena explains that notwithstanding her being a foreigner, she has a “*pronuncia mimetica*,” which allows her to produce a perfect, native-sounding enunciation of Italian: “*apprendo facilmente qualsiasi accento e locuzione vernacolare ... È possibile che abbia imparato a parlare senza accento perché in casa circolava quella lingua privata che in segreto imitavo, rimasticando le parole ignote*” (77-78). This passage echoes the terms in which Dante casts the relationship between an infant and vernacular, which becomes even more vivid through Janeczek’s reference to “*vernacolare*” and “*imitavo*.” Helena claims that she is capable of learning Italian vernaculars through imitation. The crucial difference is that Italian, and even less so, vernaculars are acquired idioms for Helena. This second-ness further illuminates the contradiction that Cestaro identifies in Dante’s phrasing of the acquisition of vernacular, that is, the “*always, already ... imitation of an imitation*” (52) inherent in such act. The fact that Helena can perfectly imitate and reproduce other people’s vernacular parlances, which are customarily regarded as the province of natives, casts serious doubt on the intimate and primordial relationship that is established between speaker and language. Since one’s native language, as Magda Strojinska contends, “*is so closely intertwined with all aspects of our identity, that it might seem inseparable from it*” (97), then questioning the very existence of such bond leads to a corrosion of fixed and essentialist notions of identity definitions.

“*Rimasticando*” ‘re-chewing’ words over and over again refers to a specific “*training*” that Helena undertakes in order to sound Italian, which recalls the sort of

rehearsing that actors undergo in preparation for a part. Janeczek underlines the “theatricality” of identity construction by showing the staged aspects that lead to the construction of national identity, which also appears as a theatrical performance. Helena’s mother, for example “fa la figura della *grande dame*: conosce varie lingue, ha viaggiato, vive in una splendida metropoli europea, viene dalla prospera Germania, il paese dove tutto funziona sempre e tutti lavorano, ha ... battute di spirito e senso dell’umorismo” (82). “Fare la figura” describes the way in which the mother appears in front of others, as if she were on a stage, which is implied in the term “figure” itself, which comes from the Latin verb “*figere*.” The theatricality of the mother’s appearance is also underscored by “battute di spirito:” without the addition “di spirito,” the term “battute” indicates, in fact, actors’ lines. The mother’s appearance as a sophisticated German is ultimately just a part she plays.

Identity can also be an imposed role, as is the case with Helena’s friend Guido Levi, a Catholic Italian:

Si chiama Levi, Guido Levi. Mi ha detto di aver trovato qualche pezzo di carta con su scritto “sporchi ebrei” nella cassetta delle lettere ... È cattolico, lo era diventato già suo nonno o bisnonno e per nascita lo è tutta la parte femminile della famiglia ... Guido Levi non fa più testo, né per il rabinato, né per le leggi razziali. Gli resta quel nome che gli impone la parte dell’ebreo. (68)

In *Lezioni di Tenebra*, “italiano” is a trait that is implied, not emphasized as Guido Levi is solely identified by the role – “la parte dell’ebreo” – that he is made to play because of his last name of Jewish origin. One cannot help but wonder: who is Guido Levi? He is insulted with an epithet that makes him Jewish, but he is not Jewish for the Racial Laws that were promulgated to discriminate against the Jews, nor for the rabbinate that supposedly is an authority in determining someone’s Jewishness. Moreover, he is

Catholic and probably the Catholic church would claim so. Then, who is right? This inevitable question, to which no definite answer can be provided, reveals the fleetingness of identity constructs.

Helena further complicates the ambiguity “endemic” in Guido Levi’s name by highlighting the total multiplicity dissipating the unity of her proper name:

Non mi importa che il mio nome sia diventato Elena, con l’H davanti per chi lo scrive, e muta nel parlato. Io stessa mi chiamo Elena in Italia, Helena in Germania e prontamente in inglese mi pronuncio con la elle ingolata e l’aspirazione, in francese con l’accento sull’ultima sillaba ... qualcuno ... mi chiama Elèna o Helène o Jelena ... Non mi sono mai chiamata come mi chiamo davvero. (70-71)

This chain-proliferation caused by the deformation of the proper name, of the sound Helena that is “deterritorialized irrevocably, absolutely,” as Deleuze and Guattari would say (21), as it is appropriated by Italian, German, French and supposedly by any language that it will encounter, succeeds in corroding certainties about identity definitions. Since, as Parati claims, “Un nome sembra poco, ma significa l’identità di qualcuno” (*Un altro premio letterario* 37), then innumerable, supplemental names correspond to as many possible, countless identity constructs, engaged in a constant mutation and becoming. The deterritorialization of her proper name reflects an incessant proliferation of “selves” that dramatically and irremediably complicates the notion of identity, what one supposedly *is*. Spatially, this incessant growth translates into innumerable possibilities of performing an identity depending on the context. In fact, Helena assumes a different behavior according to different situations.

Nessuno mi ha mai insegnato quando fare la tedesca, la polacca, l’italiana. Ho imparato da sola, benissimo, anche meglio dei miei. Già a dodici anni in giro con un gruppo di ragazzi in montagna, uno mi chiede, ma tu sei di Milano? No, sono tedesca. Heil Hitler. E non mi venivano le parole per chiarire il malinteso. (83)

Just like Guido Levi has a role to play, in the same way Helena had to self-learn when to “use” a certain identity: in both cases, identity is something that one acquires, not something that one is born with. It is also interesting to note how terms denoting national identities are unclear and often convey ambiguous messages. First of all, Helena uses “tedesco,” thus providing a piece of information that is in itself confusing: she is a German citizen, but she does not feel and she does not want to become one. Secondly, to Helena’s Italian listener, “tedesco” automatically excludes Jews. This false assumption accounts for the remark celebrating Hitler, a comment that would have never been made if Helena had revealed her biographical background. The fact that the girl cannot find the right words to clarify the misunderstanding suggests the insurmountable impossibility of clarifying what identity specifically is. The term “tedesco” both reveals and hides Helena’s Jewishness: it does not render it explicit, but inevitably encapsulates it as it is through “quello che è successo” that Helena has access to it. Because of “what happened” and because of what being Jewish meant during W.W.II, Helena’s mother constantly reminds her “se ti chiedono se sei ebrea, dici di sì, altrimenti perché dovresti dirlo?” and, as Helena adds, “Nessuno mi ha mai detto che bisognava nascondere il fatto di essere ebrei, e nessuno avrebbe mai ammesso che fosse così, perché nessuno lo aveva stabilito” (82).

In Italy Helena does not have to hide nor make herself visible and associates her “venuta in Italia” with “la normalità di una vita in cui non c’è più bisogno di distinguersi” (130). In this way, she counters the image that Italians commonly attach to the notion of “immigrant,” which implies an individual who is immediately visible. In a study dealing specifically with immigrants’ visibility and with Italians’ criteria in recognizing

foreigners, Maria Paola Faggiano, Antonio Fasanella, and Antonio Regano note that “i nostri intervistati hanno affermato nella maggioranza dei casi (37,4%) di riconoscere gli stranieri immigrati dalle caratteristiche fisiche. Da una quota altrettanto consistente di studenti (32,6%) è stata segnalata la lingua” (42). These two criteria rely, respectively, on sight and hearing, and are equally applied to identify an immigrant. Helena eludes both “tests,” as neither by sight nor by hearing (because of her “pronuncia mimetica”) can she be spotted as an immigrant, thus producing “un certo sgomento negli italiani veri” (78).

The strategy of affirming her non-distinction is very powerful in that she challenges the separation that her being a Jew and an immigrant is commonly thought of creating. The “sgomento” that she engenders among “true Italians” recalls “una delle forme più odiose di antisemitismo” identified by the narrator of *Il giardino*, which consists in “lamentare che gli ebrei non fossero abbastanza come gli altri, e poi, viceversa, constatata la loro pressoché assimilazione all’ambiente circostante, lamentare che fossero tali e quali agli altri” (137). As I discussed, “gli altri,” just like any other term used to categorize people, is a problematic expression that lacks any univocal referent. The clear line between Jews and non-Jews that underlies the above passage in *Il giardino* is complicated by the fact that the “others” can actually be Jews like Helena. In discussing the way in which Italian Jews relate to Jews of foreign nationalities, Italian-Jewish journalist Elena Loewenthal notes that “L’ebraismo italiano sta gradualmente valutando il proprio rapporto con queste comunità ‘esterne’ ... Per certi versi ha del paradossale questa strenua e concitata difesa della propria ‘italianità’ nei confronti di tali gruppi” (151). Loewenthal suggests that “italianità” is boasted in order to mark separateness from foreign-born Jews. As Helena’s complicated status shows and as emerges, in different

contexts and yet with similar effects, from the works of Ginzburg, Bassani, Benigni, Loy and Scola, the defense of “italianità” is truly “paradossale;” Helena’s expression “italiani veri” should then be taken as ironical and provocative. In fact, the term “italiano,” given its flexibility, has multiple applications and can even be used by a long-settled minority to detach from new minorities that could potentially be perceived as similar.

The fragmentation in the term “italiani” also emerges from the historical perspective from which *Lezioni di tenebra* is told. Similarly to Loy and Scola, Janeczek adopts an extended timeframe that situates her narration along an unbounded time; as Ursula Bavaj notes, “un luogo vivo della storia che partorisce l’‘onda lunga’ che attraversa e condiziona nel bene e nel male il tempo del ‘dopo’ e lo congiunge al ‘prima’: *lezioni di tenebra* appunto” (73). In Milan, where she lives, Helena is often a witness to prejudice against “terroni” (200), a derogatory term used by Northern Italians to refer to Southern Italians. If Scola called into the picture Italian emigrants abroad, Janeczek illuminates the migratory phenomenon from the South to the North of Italy and the North-South divide still affecting Italian society. When interacting with Italians, Helena often omits to clarify certain aspects of her life, “Per esempio, che non siamo proprio tedeschi ... E nemmeno proprio polacchi,” and confesses that

non ho aperto bocca tutte le volte che mi capitava di sentire la famosa frase che i terroni non hanno voglia di lavorare. E nemmeno quando la frase diventava “i terroni non hanno voglia di lavorare, ma noi sapremmo come farglielo imparare”. Solo due o tre volte, già quasi adulta, ha farfugliato una specie di tiepida protesta. (81)

Similarly to Scola, Janeczek reminds Italians that they have been and still are immigrants, thus blurring the clear-cut separation established between the two terms. Janeczek shows how discrimination against foreign immigrants parallels the ongoing prejudice against

Southern Italians. Even in the case of *Lezioni di tenebra*, a form of discrimination becomes the lens to reveal and explore different and yet similar forms of prejudice and othering.

Helena is not the typical immigrant to Italy, she is in a rather privileged position and she is not discriminated against. As her mother reminds her “tu sei cittadina europea, hai il il codice fiscale e la residenza, sei sposata con un italiano e paghi anche le tasse” (32). Thanks to her German citizenship, for example, she does not need a visa and she only goes to the consulate for matters relating to her passport. On one of these visits,

Bisognava aspettare perché c’era una sola impiegata per due sportelli: passaporti e visti. Dalla parte dei visti si era formata una lunga coda, doveva esserci sempre tanta gente, perché avevano introdotto una macchina per i numeri, come quelle dei banchi salumeria nei supermercati. C’era qualche arabo e qualche russo, ma la maggior parte di quelle persone si scambiava informazioni in una lingua slava della quale capivo solo qualche brandello: il serbo-croato ... Mentre io aspettavo per la faccenda del passaporto, invitata di tanto in tanto con formale gentilezza ad aver pazienza, due uomini se ne erano andati bestemmiando, tre giovani donne avevano lasciato lo sportello in lacrime o trattenendole a stento. (35)

Helena is well aware of her privileged status of being “una cittadina tedesca che parl[a] così bene l’italiano” and confirms that “con me sono stati gentili anche quando ho chiesto informazioni a uno sportello che non era quello giusto” (37). Through her experience of privileged immigrant, however, Helena brings to the foreground the precarious situation and the discrimination faced by immigrants of other nationalities.

What also emerges from this passage is that immigration is a foreign and yet familiar phenomenon in Italy, as suggested by expressions like “una lunga coda, doveva esserci tanta gente,” as symbolized by the “macchina per i numeri” that resembles those found in supermarkets. In theoretical terms, this passage suggests there is an extremely fine line between the familiar and the foreign and reveals that what is deemed as

absolutely other resides within what is regarded as simple and known. This passage, in counterpoising Helena with immigrants of other nationalities further stresses this idea, as it shows the various degrees of otherness set in place by Italian society as well as the arbitrariness of these terms. Helena is the other, as she is an immigrant, but she is less other than the Arabs or Russians waiting in long lines. Helena is presently a German immigrant, but this current condition is in a multifarious and complex relationship with the past of the Shoah.

Lezioni di tenebra, as the other texts of my dissertation, underscores the need to look at any historical moment, as epitomized by 1997 and the years of Fascism and the Shoah, not as measurable events constituting fixed points along a line, but, rather, as thresholds that illuminate the “inbetween” past and present. Janeczek’s text allies with with the other novels and with the films and further complicates many of the issues they raise: the foreignness residing in language, even in the mother tongue, which in Helena’s case is even unknowable; language’s inexhaustible potential for proliferation and transformation; the inextricable link between the verbal and the visual and the political implications of this relationship; the issue of representation, and the problematic notion of identity.

Chapter V

Some theoretical implications of my textual analysis

In this chapter I will attempt to flesh out some theoretical implications of the textual analysis I have carried out in this dissertation. This is not meant to be a concluding section and I will not attempt to provide closure to my project. In fact, such an attempt would run counter to some key ideas that emerged in my investigation of the novels and films. Thus, in the following pages, I open up a dialogue, rather than concluding one, on the minor as a practice and on the questions that such concept raises. The foreignness residing even in what we deem as most familiar triggers a far-reaching discussion on notions of identity, in particular on national identity and its connections with national history, and on the power exercised through language and representation. Also, the make-up of the chapters, which constitute heterogeneous agglomerates of both novels and films that hold very different positions within the literary/filmic panorama, raises questions about the criteria that are set in place for categorizing texts and disciplines

Beyond Identity: Towards “belonging itself”

It is widely accepted among scholars from different disciplines that identity is constructed and is always in progress and evolving. It seems to me, however, that the

notion of identity runs counter and is incompatible with the ideas of change and becoming. Identity is, indeed, constructed, fictional and always contingent on performance or theatricality. However, it is not identity that is in flow, or in progress, but rather, it is the process by which the various constructions crumble and are built anew that is ongoing. In fact, the term identity, which encapsulates the Latin root “idem,” ‘same’ hints at fixity, at a permanent condition that unequivocally defines someone or something. The minoring practices that I analyzed debunk precisely such defining mechanisms: the ways in which terms like “italiano,” “ebreo,” and “tedesco” are deprived of a definite and univocal referent makes it impossible to determine unequivocally who they refer to and whom and what they should represent. It is therefore necessary, perhaps, to move past the notion of identity itself and convey sharedness without resorting to the idea of sameness.

A good starting point for my discussion is the concept of “qualunque” which is central in Giorgio Agamben’s *La comunità che viene* (1990). In this book, Agamben develops a conception of community no longer based on claims of identities (political, religious etc.) as the necessary building blocks of communal life. The book starts with the statement that “L’essere che viene è l’essere qualunque” (1). In order to clarify the notion of “qualunque,” Agamben refers to the corresponding Latin form “quodlibet ens” and claims that “qualunque” has to be understood in terms of “l’essere tale che comunque importa” (1). The fact that this being is just “any” being and that it is important “no matter what” means that irrespective of the position, name or category assigned to it, the possibility of becoming an integral part of the “coming community” is not precluded. Agamben further explains that despite showing and maintaining “l’appartenenza a questo

o a quell'insieme, a questa o a quella classe (rossi, i francesi, i musulmani),” this being is now projected to the “appartenenza stessa” (2). What does “belonging itself” mean and how does it differ from the categories of belonging based on political, national, or religious identities? Agamben suggests that the coming community will be a type of union that does not deny, preclude, or hide such categories but is able to transcend them and find a novel way of “belonging” beyond them. It seems to me that this new belonging is “always already” present and inherent in the kinds of affiliations that are validated by “questo o quell'insieme, questa o quella classe.” The real challenge is, thus, to unveil it.

In proposing how such hidden potential might be discovered and drawn upon, Agamben recalls the parable of the messianic Kingdom recounted by Walter Benjamin whose protagonist, a rabbi, claims that “per instaurare il mondo della pace non è necessario distruggere tutto e dare inizio ad un mondo completamente nuovo; basta spostare solo un pochino questa tazza o quest'arboscello” (36). This parable suggests that newness does not come from overthrowing the old world, but by repeating the old one “con un piccolo spostamento” (36).

The figural strategies I have explored throughout this dissertation engender a small and yet powerful shift, or better said, a slippage in the chain of signification, which underlies and fuels the myth of identity. In fact, the clear relationship that is often established between a signifier (word or image) and the signified, what they supposedly represent, is based on an “idem” dynamic. This is exemplified, for example, by how “la parola ebreo,” the word “italiano” or “immigrato” or certain images were/are made to refer univocally to a convenient signified, thus purporting to convey what they *are*. “A slight shift” is however enough to disturb this relationship and to produce far-reaching

effects. The strategies that are at work in the texts I analyzed manage to insert a foreign element not by destroying the existing order or envisaging a completely new one, but, rather, by appropriating and subtly converting it to a different use. Was it not a small and yet powerful shift that which Ginzburg produced by adopting a bare language and making it resound with the persecution the Fascist regime carried out? Or the way in which Benigni used the same concentration camp “format” and transformed it, yet temporarily, into a playground for the sake of Giosuè? Such a small shift shows us how the foreign is so extremely close to the familiar. It is the discovery of this proximal foreignness that constitutes the building block for finding the “*appartenenza stessa*” that Agamben calls for. A sort of belonging that builds and thrives on foreignness, rather than identity, on the overcoming of the notion of identity itself in favor of an acceptance and pursuit of that slight powerful “slippage” that shows my closeness to the foreign and the other. It is necessary to stress that this belonging does not reside in a utopian, separate world but can be found within the same categories that are used to construct one’s social, cultural, and political identities.

This seems to be the idea that underlies Julia Kristeva’s exploration of the ideas of “foreigner” and “foreignness” with specific relation to the discovery of the “strangeness within” ourselves. She contends that in order to start a real dialogue with the foreigner, it is necessary to initiate a process by which we open ourselves to the possibility that we ourselves are foreigners. This type of journey forges a shared space that allows, as Kristeva puts it, “not to reify the foreigner, not to petrify him as such, not to petrify us as such. But to analyze it by analyzing us” (290). Such self as well as mutual analysis is a necessary first step for finding “belonging itself.” In fact, despite maintaining links with

our being “red, Muslim, French,” we need to understand that it is not by clinging to “petrifying” categories that we can belong with the other. Rather, this belonging itself can only be found by shaking the belief in the clearly definable and structured positions that such categories strive to construct and preserve.

In *Lezioni di tenebra*, Helena’s complex relationship to her multiple “identities” and to her language shows quite clearly the collapse of any self-definitions. She resorts to terms like German, immigrant, Jew, or Polish in an attempt to “position” herself, which however irremediably fails. She speaks a language that is inextricably linked with her mother’s realm, but reveals the lack of a mother tongue. Helena’s case underscores the possibility to retain and yet to *become* distant and move beyond the origin that we think *identifies* us.

“L’essere qualunque” presupposes, I believe, a process of becoming “qualunque,” *vis à vis* the identities that we use to position ourselves. This becoming “qualunque” can be regarded as the precondition for experiencing the belonging itself with another individual. Many of the passages/sequences I analyzed suggest the centrality of such becoming in any encounter with the Other. The relationship that Umberto and Leone develop in *Concorrenza sleale* show this type of transformation. Umberto will always fit the category “italiano,” but eventually he becomes estranged from the notion of “italianità” circulated by the Fascist regime, as epitomized by his refusal to fill out the form that the Fascist commissioner urges him to complete. Umberto comes to inhabit a space of foreignness in which he can become closer to Leone, a space to which he belongs neither by virtue of his being Italian, nor by relinquishing the category “italiano.” Umberto becomes “qualunque” and discovers the “qualunque” in Leone, who is no

longer identified as a Jew while obviously remaining one. The same process underlies the way in which Leone manages to transcend the categories through which he had “congealed” Umberto into his sworn enemy.

The togetherness that comes to be created and the particular aspect that they temporarily acquire is not indifferent, but is definitely not informed by their belonging to or deriving from a “red, French or Muslim” national or ethnic origin. What matters is precisely their coming together and their becoming “as such” they appear in that particular moment of their becoming.

The (be)coming community of texts and its readers

The notion of “belonging itself” can be fruitfully employed to discuss the dialogic relationship among texts beyond the categories that commonly identify them. My alliances of texts are made possible by similar minoring practices, which reveal deep and powerful connections that eschew the terms in which their belonging is determined through genres, authors’ backgrounds and in my specific case, media.

This belonging is not determined by fixed, identifying traits but takes different shapes as the becoming of a text intersects and affects/is affected by the becoming of other texts. This flow allows communication, “dialogue,” constant exchanges; its potential does not arise from sameness but from difference and foreignness. I am not implying that we should reject and eliminate classifications like migration literature or Holocaust literature. What I hope it has emerged from my analysis is that it is possible, “con un piccolo spostamento,” to shift texts to a parallel realm in which they can belong together as just texts, that is, belong in themselves.

The bond I created between *Lessico familiare* and *Il giardino*, for example, which are very similar in terms of authors' backgrounds, genres, and themes, may build on but eventually transcends these "affiliating" traits. It is this process that makes it possible for novels by Italian writers to ally with a migrant text like *Lezioni di tenebra*, an alliance that defies any sort of literary descent. By deconstructing the seemingly indissoluble tie between a speaker and her/his mother tongue, Janeczek shows that, as Parati contends, "It is in [a] shared space of otherness *vis-à-vis* national language that native speakers of Italian and migrants who acculturate themselves in Italian meet."

As I showed in my analysis, novels and films also meet "in a shared space of otherness." Novels are often combined with films in several didactic contexts, but the assumption is maintained that they *belong* to and are affiliated with separate and distinct realms. The connections between these two disciplines are mainly established at a content-based level, i.e. on grounds of the themes they deal with or the issues they raise. We have seen, instead, how *Amarcord* allies with *Lezioni di tenebra* in displacing the idea of embodiment and representation as an instrument of power. The constant interplay and imbrication of word and image, which I have explored through the figural, compels me to bypass the categories that define them primarily as a novel and a film, and to transpose them into a common realm in which we can see them as texts that complement each other in achieving a particular effect.

Even in this case, we can reiterate Kristeva's notion that a true bond with the other is possible by becoming aware of the potential foreignness inherent in us, a foreignness that needs to be summoned. "It is good to think" – Gayatri Spivak claims about solidarity-building among women – "that women have something in common when

one is approaching women with whom a relationship would not otherwise be possible” (191). In the same way, it is good to think of a commonality among texts that otherwise might not have any possibilities of encounter. It is, therefore, an imaginative, creative leap that we are called to implement, an act that allows us to envisage bonds that are just “accidental,” arbitrary, and provisional. A vital and active process that brings to the foreground the power of *invention* in creating connections with what appears foreign, thus opening up infinite possibilities for finding the foreignness within ourselves.

Italo Calvino, if we recall, underscores the key role played by invention when he envisages his ideal library, which “gravita verso il fuori, verso i libri ‘apocrifi’, nel senso etimologico della parola, cioè i libri ‘nascosti’. La letteratura è ricerca del libro nascosto lontano, che cambia il valore dei libri noti, è la tensione verso il nuovo testo apocrifo da ritrovare o da inventare” (*Una pietra sopra* 203). Calvino’s remark that literature as the pursuit of hidden texts, to be discovered or invented, is a tension towards “il fuori” deserves some investigation in the context of my analysis. This tension renders quite vividly the projection towards the hidden potential of texts triggered by minoring practices; it is also significant in connection with my discussion of the be-coming community of texts and its readers. “Fuori” is, in fact, a central concept of “la comunità che viene” envisaged by Agamben that I have appropriated and explored. Agamben notes that “fuori”

in molte lingue europee ... [è espresso] da una parola che significa ‘alle porte’ ... in Greco vale letteralmente ‘alla soglia’. Il fuori non è un altro spazio che giace al di là di uno spazio determinato, ma è il suo varco, l’esteriorità che gli dà accesso ... il suo volto, il suo eidos. (*La comunità che viene* 46)

Agamben’s notion of “fuori” redefines the idea of belonging itself by linking it to the spatial concept of the threshold, which helps to envisage the realm in which this form of

belonging can occur. If belonging itself emerges past identifying categories, it does not, however, entail the crossing to a completely separate space. Rather, it occurs “fuori,” at the threshold that grants access to the foreignness as it blends with the familiar. In fact, as Agamben further notes “la soglia è ... l’esperienza del limite stesso, l’esser-dentro un fuori” (*La comunità che viene* 46). By projecting texts and ourselves “fuori,” we will have the opportunity to realize that the limit can cease to be a barrier and *become* a transit zone to the place of the other, be this a text or an individual. Here again what supposedly is (the limit) can become and transform into an undefined, permeable realm (the threshold).

The notion of “soglia” is the spatial manifestation of the coming community and of the becoming that it entails. We can conceive of such a community as a constellation of thresholds, in which we do not part completely from what “identify” us but we face and border on what is different and other. In my dissertation, I have explored the potential inherent in the threshold as a familiar and yet unknown realm; I have inhabited the threshold between canonical and non-canonical texts, the verbal and the visual as well as between past and present. This latter relationship, to which I now turn, bears significant implications as it involves the conceptualization of history. In disrupting the notion of identity as a defining and circumscribing tool, minoring practices and the alliances to which they give rise challenge the ways in which national time is conceptualized and narrated, in particular the dominant view of history as a linear, chronological progression.

Beyond linearity and chronology: Towards an in-between, unbounded time

My alliances of texts build on but eventually transcend a linear, chronological order. The latter is only the most superficial connection, which is constantly subverted both within the texts themselves and in the context of the relations they entertain with each other. In *La parola ebreo*, for example, historical events as reported in official documents are undercut by child Rosetta's experience of those events as remembered and re-enacted by the author. Her private memory is flexible and malleable and the ever-shifting temporalities at work in the text challenge the belief that history follows a linear and easily-traceable path and is composed of separate and discrete categories. In certain passages of *La parola ebreo*, Loy makes the past re-become present, as clearly exemplified by the use of historical present, thus blurring the confines between the two. Such contamination also occurs in *Amarcord*, in which Fellini re-becomes a spectator to past events in order to revisit and challenge the way in which national history was narrated at the time of his adolescence. The same flexibility emerges when looking at the "minor" connections among the various texts, which, together, trace a historical trajectory that is not linear. By dispelling the notion of filiation, minoring practices transcend the succession implied in such notion and, rather, work by lines of flight that can be activated at any point in a text and toward any contact point in an earlier or later text.

The concepts of present and past appear then to be problematic and, perhaps, we should think in terms of an in-between temporality in the sense explored by Homi Bhabha in connection with the notion of "foreign." According to Bhabha, the "foreign" element is what is able to disclose "the interstitial" and investigate the "in-between" space, which he sees as the precondition for bringing "newness into the world." (*The*

Location of Culture 44). The strategies at work in the texts of my dissertation do indeed allow to acquire a novel perspective. In fact, they help to conceive of time as an “indeterminate temporality of the in-between” precisely because they foster connections based on the foreignness they reveal in what seems most familiar. It is so, for example, that Ginzburg’s or Bassani’s “foreign” language becomes the element of linkage to the other texts, an “unstable” link that propels to look for more, innumerable connections. The separation between my chapters, then, has to be seen as an interstice, and not as a barrier, as an interstitial terrain inserted within the indeterminate temporality traced by my selection of texts. All together these texts delineate a temporal trajectory that knows neither boundaries nor confines as it represents just a provisional moment along a much larger temporal expanse.

Since a conceptualization of history as linear progression has often served as an instrument of power, as exemplified by how the Fascist regime exploited it, the challenging of linearity holds far-reaching implications. Linearity, as Ann Rigney aptly points out, “makes it impossible to relate more than one event at a time, even events that took place at the same time; but, by the same token, events may be presented and articulated in the narrative in a new order different from that of mere chronological sequence” (17). This possibility allows one to assume a new look at things because it shifts attention away from “the events ‘themselves’ to the later act of representing them” (*The Rhetoric of Historical Representation* 17). The texts of this dissertation reveal the illusion of finding truth in events and show the constructedness of some historical interpretations and representations. By escaping the mechanisms on which representation is based, these texts are delivered from the constraining fetters of historical linearity.

In *Infanzia e storia* (2001), Agamben speaks precisely of freedom when he discusses such possibility. In exploring the development of the conceptualization of history as linear progression, from which he urges a detachment, Agamben contends that

La storia non è infatti, come vorrebbe l'ideologia dominante, l'asservimento dell'uomo al tempo lineare continuo, ma la liberazione dell'uomo da esso: tempo della storia è il cairos in cui l'iniziativa dell'uomo coglie l'opportunità favorevole e decide nell'attimo della propria libertà. (117)

In the Greek world, "cairos," was one of the two terms denoting time, the other being "chronos." While the former referred to sequential time, the latter conveyed a time in between, a moment of undetermined period of time in which

"something" special happens ... While chronos is quantitative, kairos has a qualitative nature. Kairos refers to the right time, the opportune, seasonable time. It cannot be measured. It is the perfect time, the qualitative time, the perfect moment, the "now." (Freier 2)

Instead of a "cronologia," Agamben calls for a "cairolgia," that is, "una mutazione qualitativa del tempo" (111). This cairolgia can replace "il tempo vuoto, continuo e infinito" that is implicit in the idea of linearity.

In its not being quantifiable, the time implied by the cairos is discrepant with the concept of time through which the nation is predominantly narrated. I have often referred to Benedict Anderson's famous claim that the national time is a homogeneous, concrete, and empty time that ensures its consistency and linear progression. The time narrated by Fascism is a perfect example of a strategic exploitation of this idea, as epitomized by the *avvocato* in *Amarcord*. The continuum the lawyer establishes between the Fascist present and the Roman past produced, indeed, a condition of repression and enslavement, as Agamben suggests by the term "asservimento." It is crucial to note that the attempt to establish linearity is accompanied by endeavors to provide a concrete, tangible form to

such linearity by fueling the illusion of unmediated presence/present and of history being made anew in the present. The concept of “cairos” defies such illusion and veers us away from a view of history and historical events in quantitative, measurable terms.

The illusion of physicality inherent in representations of the concentration camp experience underlies an emphasis on eventfulness and measurability. Representations of the death camp experience might be seen as attempts to provide “fullness,” i.e. substance and tangibility to the Shoah. The creation of certain images, like those offered by *Schindler’s List*, which can be regarded as the apex of the “familiarization with horror” discussed by Hoffman, contributes to providing the illusion of being able to physically reproduce the horror of the camps. The several strategies through which the authors/directors I discussed counter such eventfulness consign the Holocaust to the incommensurability to which it belongs. Such approach also begs reflections on the exploitation to which eventfulness can be subject and to the domesticating effect it can produce. If we recall, the German legislation discussed by Janeczek equated the Shoah to monetary assets with a clear intent of reducing it to a fixed, tangible form and perhaps, of limiting the scope of responsibility.

At this point I should discuss how the attempt to recreate and reenact the past situates within this conceptualization of history. Both Loy and Fellini endeavor to make us experience their past through the images they forge, as vividly exemplified by Loy’s use of historical present or by Fellini’s “film” within a film. Loy actually tries to resuscitate her feelings and emotions and to make us “feel” them. One might wonder: how does this differ from the intent to recreate physicality that underlies, for example, *Schindler’s List*?

Ann Rigney, as discussed earlier, calls for an “imaginative engagement of the reader” able to produce “the subjective feeling of being in touch with the past, and not any objective correlation between the reader’s image of the past and the actual past” (31). Such key distinction suggests that it is possible to be in touch with the past and transpose it into a “now” without falling prey to the illusion that what we *see* or *hear* corresponds to and represents the past. Once again representation is challenged and what is suggested is, rather, an act of re-presenting that renders the past vivid and living notwithstanding the awareness of our physical, unbridgeable distance from it. In this act lies, perhaps, the “fullness” that Agamben sees in cairological time, which he defines as “un tempo pieno” opposed to “il tempo vuoto” of a linear and chronological conceptualization of history. A sort of plenitude that does not stem from the possibility of measuring time, but from a different, qualitative relationship with it. That is, a new experience of historical time that is not confined to a “before” and an “after” the present but, rather, expands and dilates the notion of present itself.

Agamben contends that it is a “scarto” between “diacronia” and “sincronia” that offers the possibility of escaping chronological time, thus granting deliverance from the enslavement of linear, empty time. From this perspective, then, our experience – and memory of – historical facts is altered qualitatively. The Shoah, Fascism, recent immigration to Italy are not just past or present events belonging to obviously connected and yet discrete categories. There are certainly parallels between the current phenomenon of recent immigration to Italy and the past years of the Shoah. But the link between them is not a direct, diachronic line connecting past with present. Nor are these two events limited within a synchronic context. Scola’s “43-97,” for example, appears to set history

along a sequential, right line as established by two specific and quantifiable points, 1943 and 1997, with fifty years in-between. There is a clear connection between the young black kid who hides in the cinema and the young Jewish boy who found rescue there fifty or so years before. And yet, it would be too simplistic to state that the two characters are *directly* connected. What veers us away from such interpretation is the darkness that enshrouds the Jewish boy when the lights go off, from which the black boy emerges once the theater is once again lit. This clearly conveys, I believe, the rupture and the discontinuity between the two moments, which irremediably interrupts the linear connection that we are tempted to draw. We understand that Jewish persecution cannot be explored only from a synchronic perspective (the concomitant persecution, for example, of homosexuals and the discrimination against women); nor can it be solely studied in relation to what happened before and after it. Much more fruitful is, rather, to adopt an approach that looks at it from that “gap” between these two different temporalities, from the in-between perspective of those few seconds of darkness. Such perspective allows us to embrace the complex relations among events, which a rectilinear, sequential time is not able to account for and to render. We can interpret the years 1943 and 1997 as two “nows” in which something special happens, as opportune moments for bringing to the foreground this unbounded, in-between time.

The discovery of the foreignness residing in the familiar through the figural “force” inhabiting words and images and the alliances that can arise might turn the reading experience into a source of cultural, social, and political change. The idea of belonging itself, with its far-reaching implications for identity and culture as well as a

cairological conceptualization of historical time can inspire, I believe, new bonds and ways of relating to the “other,” new relationships that welcome and thrive on foreignness. On these premises, a community of foreigners will perhaps emerge; as Kristeva would describe it, “a paradoxical community made up of foreigners who are reconciled with themselves to the extent that they recognize themselves as foreigners” (294.) Such act of reconciliation will give rise to a “paradoxical” bond: what before created ruptures and boundaries, has now the potentiality to unite and bind together. And foreignness, which before separated, could now become an integral and intimate component of this “coming community.”

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