

Music in Pasolini's *The Decameron*: Humour, Spirituality, (De)tabooisation and Playing with Conventional Signifiers of the Italian Musical Past

Abstract: Pasolini's controversial figure, marked by refined and revolutionary leftist ideas, is based on experimental artistic ideals that defy the establishment and conservative ideological thinking. Promoting the de-tabooing of sexuality and a more open attitude towards cultural tradition, the director turned away from mimetic, naturalistic film practices and approached biblico-mythical and ancient themes. The selection of genre and stylistically diverse musical references from *The Decameron* is, thus, in line with the geographical shift of Boccaccio's humanist ideal from the central to the southern Italian macro-region. The aim of this paper is to determine Pasolini's ambivalent and in some ways subversive treatment of religious and folkloric signifiers of the Italian musical past. Flirting with material and immaterial signifying practices encourages alternative interpretations of spirituality, class antagonisms, folkloric traditions and cleverly profiled and unusual elements of eroticism.

Key words: Pier Paolo Pasolini, *The Decameron*, Italian cinema, traditional folk songs, sacred music, religious signifiers, de-tabooing of eroticism.

Blind submission to the rule of patriarchal social norms has never been a characteristic of outstanding artists, not even of Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975). On the contrary, Pasolini's unconventional creative poetics is characterised by a highly provocative audiovisual content through which the Italian artist breaks numerous social, cultural, sexual and institutional taboos. The films of this versatile artist, critic and one of Italy's greatest intellectuals were often subject to censorship because they broke the existing normative framework of Italian civil society. In this respect, the author's last film, *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (*Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*, 1975), stands out as one of the most controversial films in the history of Italian cinema due to its violent, brutally disturbing and explicit (especially sexual) content. However, the „Trilogy of Life“—consisting of the films *The Decameron* (*Il Decameron*, 1971),¹ *The Canterbury*

1 Pasolini selected ten Boccaccio's novellas/tales, which he linked together in a diachronic and

Tales (I racconti di Canterbury, 1972) and *Arabian Nights (Il fiore delle Mille e una notte, 1974)* — is distinguished by its unique, indelible artistic imprint, with which the director picturesquely subverts the audience's expectations and transports them to the life of mediaeval Italy.² These films contain thoughtful elements of de-tabooed eroticism and religious signifiers without heavily emphasising sexual delinquency or human pathology.³ Moreover, the Italian post-Marxist intellectual insisted that his exponential eroticism represented a „warm, life-giving power for people“ and that his films were essentially anti-pornographic (Schwartz, 2017: 14).⁴ Thus, the portraits of Pasolini's marginalised characters are presented through a farcical typification that resists the stereotypical constellations between 'Us' and 'Them'/others. This is confirmed by the geographical shift of Giovanni Boccaccio's humanist ideal from the central Italian to the southern Italian macro-region, which reinforces the affection for people in an unprivileged social and cultural position.

It is worth noting that the southern part of Italy, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, was always seen as a representative example of otherness compared to the developed Italian metropolitan areas. This is the reason why Pasolini, although not resorting to the narrative strategies of neorealist masters such as Vittorio De Sica, Federico Fellini, Roberto Rossellini and Luchino Visconti, resists the naturalistico-utopian representation of its cultural-regional and mindset diversity.⁵ Thus, Pasolini's heroes and antagonists,

discontinuous manner to create a heterogeneous film narrative. Millicent Marcus thus pointed out in a sharply critical tone the vagueness in formal terms of the adaptation of the literary work, due to, among other things, sudden transitions that make it difficult to identify the beginning and the end of the episode (Marcus, 1977: 6).

2 It should be borne in mind that Pasolini shot *The Decameron* in various locations: Italy (Naples, Ravello, Rome and Caserta), western France, Yemen and Tunisia.

3 In this way, the sexual transgressions of the Pasolinian character Ciappelletto da Prato (Franco Citti) are not rigorously highlighted, but humorously undermined.

4 Furthermore, Peter Bondanella rightly points out that the film's emphasis on naïve sexuality could be interpreted as a critique of modern Western values (Bondanella, 2001: 234). Indeed, the open display of sexuality was still considered a taboo subject in Pasolini's time, when the Italian artist tried to expose the extent of the hypocrisy of the consumer society of the time. Thus, the director found no inspiration for authentic erotic expression in modern civilisation, which, he explicitly asserts, is hypocritical and oppressive and ignores Eros (Savio, 1974/2010: 53). In the face of the hypertrophy of consumption, however, Pasolini abandons his „The Trilogy of Life“, believing that even the reality of innocent bodies is disturbed, manipulated and altered by the power of consumption (Pasolini, 2015: 16).

5 Pasolini's critical departure from naturalism is well known. The Italian intellectual accused the neorealist masters of emphasising their self-contained naturalistic style (see e.g. Pasolini & Halliday, 1992: 54). According to Pier Paolo Pasolini, neorealism as a cinematic expression of resistance disappeared in the late 1950s as a result of the strengthening of the establishment, which operated on a petty-bourgeois and clerical basis (Pasolini & Halliday, 1992: 51). However, although the director correctly recognised the shift in the aesthetic and ideological paradigm in cinematic expression, Italian neorealist dramas were not yet completely extinct (at this time), as Visconti's cult film *Rocco and His Brothers (Rocco e i suoi fratelli, 1960)* confirms.

who, unlike Boccaccio's vivid characters, belong to the Neapolitan sub-proletarian world (Rumble, 1996: 107), were not presented to the film audience in the world of the margins, but treated as part of the social mainstream.

Through a critical reading of Boccaccio's text (Rumble, 1996: 108), Pasolini wanted to reconstruct the revolutionary anthem of the past as an antidote to the homologisation of consumer society (Convertini, 2020: 169). This was also confirmed by the artist himself, noting that „even the Communist Party had adapted to consumer society, leaving only the belief in ‘holy consumption’“ (Schwartz, 2017: 14). *The Decameron* can, thus, be interpreted through the ideological prism of class struggle,⁶ when Pasolini—fighting against the petty bourgeoisie, the national education system and structural inequality—tried to preserve the Italian socio-historical and cultural heritage in an almost revolutionary way. The creator's feature film projects, including the „Trilogy of Life“, are therefore mostly based on ancient and early Christian themes, whose sophisticated and enigmatic humorous charge is often complemented by the folk music landscape.

Musical component in Pasolini's The Decameron

It is fairly certain that Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (c. 1353), written at the time of the plague, was inspired by mediaeval folk tales, traditional Italian dances and secular music such as ballads.⁷ Pasolini's screen adaptation of this literary work, however, differs in both folk and musical style. The compilation soundtrack consists of various types of pre-existing music, including folkloric, sacred and popular secular themes from Italy's musical past. But both Pasolinian scholars and the audience may wonder why the director chose not to use original music. Jonathan Godsall reminds us that „the use of pre-existing music affords nonmusician filmmakers more control over the music of their films than does the use of original music“ (Godsall, 2019: 36). It seems that Pasolini explored the unique qualities of the deep cultural connotations of Italian music by harnessing the power of, to use Anahid Kassabian's term, „affiliated identification.“⁸ Most of the pre-existing songs emphasise the otherness of the various southern dialects as signifiers of Italian marginalised social groups, although this

6 Pasolini's adaptation of *The Decameron* foregrounds the characters of the working class (peasants, gardeners, labourers and musicians) against members of the wealthier bourgeoisie, who are subjected to humorous, burlesque or even satirical parody.

7 On dances and songs from Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, see Beck, 2010.

8 In contrast to original (composed) film music, Anahid Kassabian argues that pre-existing film music evokes much broader associations in the audience, favouring „affiliating identifications“ over „assimilating identifications“ (see Kassabian, 2001).

anthology film mainly addresses their economic oppression. This choice of linguistic setting, notes Chiara Cappuccio, confirms the author's departure from the aristocratic and Florentine setting of the literary work (Cappuccio, 2010: 193) or, in the words of Millicent Marcus:⁹ the transformation of „the elitist, literary source into an accessible item of popular entertainment“ (Marcus, 1993: 140).¹⁰ Accordingly, it is the different dialectological landscapes that make local musical content marvelously inventive and allow its euphony, its genuinely raw aesthetic sensibility and its noble simplicity to be recognised as prototypes of authentic traditional cultural values.

To reconstruct the Italian musical past, Pasolini, in consultation with Ennio Morricone, selected sixteen catchy pre-existing tunes. No less than five titles of folk music come from LP *Southern Italy and the Islands*, compiled by the distinguished American ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax in collaboration with Diego Carpitella.¹¹ Interestingly, the compilation soundtrack also consists of Neapolitan nursery rhyme (it. *flastrocche*), three religious mediaeval chants and two Neapolitan folk songs from the 18th and 19th centuries, especially as the romantic melodies transcend the epochal framework of mediaeval Italy. Since the music represents, alludes to, imitates, characterises or reconstructs various cinematic/literary realities, the soundtrack can be roughly divided into two categories:

- authentic secular Italian tunes of folkloric origin
- sacred chants and sequences as religious signifiers of the Italian musical past

⁹ Even though Millicent Marcus was referring to the specific cinematic episode with these words, her thought is applicable to the ideological climate of the film as a whole.

¹⁰ According to Schwartz, Pasolini wanted the stories from the *Decameron* to be told not from the perspective of the urban merchant class of the time, but from that of the Neapolitan street bard (Schwartz, 2017: 523).

¹¹ It is important to note that Pasolini took the compositions from the above LP without mentioning the names of the folk songs or the ethnomusicologists who collected them. This certainly made it difficult to identify pre-existing musical references from *The Decameron*, especially since the books by Italian scholars (such as Giuseppe Magaletta and Roberto Calabretto) who wrote about the musical aspect of Pasolini's filmmaking were not available to the author.

name	Ensemble	origin
<i>Zesa Viola/la Zita in cerca di un marito (The Maid in Search of a Husband)</i>	· vocal-instrumental arrangement · vocal arrangement	medieval Neapolitan song
<i>Canto dei portatori (Porters' Song)</i>	vocal arrangement	folkloric Positano chant
<i>Serenata popolare campana (Popular Serenade of Campania)</i>	· vocal-instrumental arrangement · vocal arrangement · instrumental arrangement	traditional Cilentan song
<i>Canto delle lavandaie del Vomero (Song of the Washerwomen of Vomero)</i>	vocal-instrumental arrangement	popular Neapolitan song
<i>Ballo del tamburo (Tambourine Dance)</i>	vocal-instrumental arrangement	<i>tammurriata</i> : the folk dance from Campania
<i>Mittit ad virginem ("To the Virgin He sends")</i>	vocal arrangement	Latin sacred chant
<i>La pampanella (The Little Leaf)</i>	vocal arrangement	traditional polyphonic singing in the Irpinian dialect
<i>Fenesta ca lucive (The Window That Used to Shine)</i>	· two different vocal arrangements · instrumental arrangement	Neapolitan Romantic song
<i>Canto delle olivare (Song of the Olive Trees)</i>	vocal-instrumental arrangement	Neapolitan folk song
<i>Veni Sancte Spiritus</i>	vocal-instrumental arrangement	Latin sacred chant
<i>La Cammesella (The Camisole)</i>	· vocal-instrumental arrangement · vocal arrangement/ unanimous whistling	Neapolitan folk song
<i>Am blim blom</i>	vocal arrangement	Neapolitan Nursery rhyme/ <i>filastrocche</i>
<i>Ninna nanna popolare campana ("Popular lullaby from Campania")</i>	vocal arrangement	Neapolitan folk song
<i>Tarantella</i>	instrumental arrangement	vivid Neapolitan dance
<i>Canti di venditori (Songs of the Street Vendors)</i>	vocal arrangement	mix of different folk songs
<i>Mass of Tournai: Kyrie eleison</i>	vocal-instrumental arrangement	medieval polyphonic mass in Latin

Table 1. Musical references in the film *The Decameron*

Since Pasolini's *The Decameron* has neither an original film score nor the recognisable works of mediaeval composers such as Giovanni da Cascia, Francesco Landini or Gherardello da Firenze, it was the director's intention to place the Italian past above the alienation of modern consumer society. In this way, Pasolini has reconstructed, in a very unusual but undoubtedly creative way, a literary work of exceptional value, which at the same time fits into the current political and ideological currents of contemporary Italian society, indoctrinated by the lure of trivial hedonism.

Treatment of secular musical references

Through folk-wise musical narratives, Pasolini enthusiastically evokes the atmosphere of colourful local Italian cultures and the prosaic customs of the Italian people. The film's opening sequence, for example, is accompanied by the traditional Neapolitan folk song *Zesa Viola* or *La Zita in cerca di un marito* [00:23-02:38]. The song, with its humorous, parodic and satirical character, is about Vincenzella's search for a husband. It is introduced into the narrative of the film in the spirit of the improvisational principles of *commedia dell'arte* (cf. Greig, 2022: 133). The narratological setting of the audiovisual space transcends the binary division of the narrative into diegetic or non-diegetic music, as the song mostly acts diegetically outside the visual frame of the film.¹² Moreover, a fragment of this Neapolitan song appears three more times in the carefully assembled cinematic soundscape [04:07-04:37, 35:50-36:07, 1:30:50-1:32:04]. The untempered sound of the trumpet brings the recognisable folk melody of the song closer to the Italian folk spirit on the one hand and distances it from elitist aristocratic sophistication on the other.

The folk song *Serenata popolare campana*, collected in Sant'Arsenio, was originally performed by a musical subject excluded from the movie image, while the Peruvian merchant Andreuccio (Ninetto Davoli) strolls happily through the streets of Casertavecchia. The musico-textual material is dynamically and dramaturgically overlaid by the sounds and noise of the city, consisting of hurried footsteps, creaking, hand clapping and shouts of passers-by. Andreuccio enters the musical diegesis in a quite rapturous mood. With a yellow flower in his mouth, he calls out musically, but discontinuously, the exclamation *va! (go!)* five times in succession.¹³ The cheerful song in the Cilentan dialect ends with a narrative cut that can be seen as a common feature of Pasolini's artistic practice, regardless of the film's mosaic structure. It is a folk-wise musical reference that appears seven times in the course of the film in different ensembles [06:40-07:47,

¹² As Guido Heldt reminds us, off-screen music refers to „any music whose source is not visible in an image frame, including sound bridges and displaced diegetic music“ (Heldt, 2013: 98).

¹³ Andreuccio looks forward to meeting the supposed half-sister, i.e. an impostor who cleverly steals his money.

57:08-57:48, 58:55-59:29, 1:05:52-1:07:00, 1:28:21-1:29:11, 1:39:27-1:39:54, 1:42:00-1:42:21],¹⁴ three of them in the vocal-instrumental version. It can be assumed that the affectively stimulating sonority of this serenade led Pasolini to incorporate it into various humorous filmic episodes without explicitly referring to its textual content, which is incomprehensible to the majority of the Italian population due to dialectological barriers. By interacting in complex ways with the diverse cinematic environment, this song nevertheless contains and conveys a certain referential knowledge that occasionally arises from the complementary or discrepant relationship between the sound and the moving image. One thinks first of the ideological critique that rejects the conventional standards of perfection of the human anatomy and its aesthetic beauty. As Stefania Parigi notes, Pasolini moves away from the clichés of a domesticated and homologised corporeality and promotes the extremely grotesque apotheosis of the ugly and deformed (Parigi, 2013: 334). One of these bodily deformities is irregular or fallen-out teeth (Ibid.) of the working class captured by the field of view of the camera lens in medium and close-up.



Figure 1. Pasolini grotesquely subverts the aesthetic clichés of physicality

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¹⁴ The last use of this musical fragment is barely audible in the scene.

In fact, the serenade appears in Morricone's instrumental arrangement at the beginning of the second part of the film, when the ride on a two-wheeler of Messer Forese da Rabatta (Giacomo Rizzo) and the talented painter, Giotto di Bondone's disciple (Pier Paolo Pasolini), is interrupted by rain. The serenade on the plucked instrument is performed by the toothless peasant Gennari, who kindly gives the Neapolitan passengers a coat to put on. An excerpt from this southern folk song has also been inserted into the narrative, while the workers in the church of Santa Chiara communicate with each other through a whistling melody which, as in the scene mentioned above, serves as a musical identifier of inner serenity and mutual social solidarity. The fragment from the serenade appears discreetly for the last time in the story of two pious Sienese friends, Meuccio and Tingoccio, shortly after the conversation between Tingoccio and his wife about sexual sin. The conversation ends, in Pasolini's sarcastic manner, with them practising sexual intercourse.¹⁵ This is truly a unique way of de-tabooing sexuality and subverting the religious notion of eroticism, when the pleasant prosaic sounds of the serenade humorously prevent a musical deepening of conservative spiritual identities. Through the conceptual musical shifts, i.e. the intersection of the fluxes of the ambivalent narrative spaces of the anthology film *The Decameron*, this folkloric musical reference uniquely expresses the visual environment of various Pasolinian characters while musically unifying their globally devalued and stigmatised *personas*.

Among the vocal musical examples in the film, *Canto dei portatori* [3:19-3:57, 1:36:18-1:37:00, 1:48:00-1:48:57] occupies a special place, introduced into the film's narrative when the devious Ciappelletto da Prato throws a corpse into the abyss.¹⁶ The song—with its mysterious and penetrating sound in a high register that is neither tragicomic nor humorous—not only melodiously contemplates the poetics of the moving image, but is given a colourful and expressive role that conveys the original depth of musical folk ritual. It is also the last musical fragment of the film, playing in the diegetic background without interfering with the visual narrative patterns, almost as if it were setting in motion a story of its own. The spoken and musical intonation refers intertextually to a sharply blurred shouting melody from *Songs of the Street Vendors (Canti di venditori)* [1:39:57-1:40:52], although *Porters' Song* ends with creaky melismatic whistles that, despite slight traces of humour, exude a dignified rural seriousness and refer indirectly to the death motif.¹⁷

15 The song is also heard during the sexual intercourse of Caterina di Valbona and Riccardo in another filmic episode, underlining their youthful erotic charge.

16 The character of Ciappelletto appears in different episodes of the film.

17 The death motif can thus be linked to this folk song at least twice in the film: in the scene where Ciappelletto viciously throws and spits at the corpse, and during the grotesque conversation between Meuccio and Tingoccio's ghost about the afterlife and sins.

Although this feature film is dominated by musical examples that conceptually capture naïve, joyful human emotions, it also contains musical references with shocking content that symbolically anticipate the loss of an acquaintance or loved one. One such example is the traditional secular song *Canto delle lavandaie del Vomero* [10:45-11:55],¹⁸ performed by street musicians playing a guitar-like plucked instrument in front of Andreuccio. The strophic song is about a washerwoman who has promised four handkerchiefs to a young man in love. In this scene by Pasolini, however, there is no explicit conceptual metaphor that would at least indirectly refer to the motif of romantic love. Rather, it is a perceptual illusion that tempts the audience—especially those who do not understand the Neapolitan dialect—to reach for the conceptualisation of incorrect musical affects. For this reason, *Canto delle lavandaie del Vomero*, whose sound is almost indifferent to the visual narrative flow, functions more as an ambient device that aesthetically enriches the cinematic environment and imperceptibly influences the mood of the film subjects involved in the diegesis. Pasolini will, however, reuse this melancholic love song in the film's seventh episode to provide a sonic background to the clandestine love affair between the wealthy Lisabetta and the young Sicilian labourer Lorenzo (Giuseppe Arrigio) [1:13:52-1:15:55]. By symbolically announcing the young man's death, the music bears witness to a complex system of class differences and conflicts whose ideological divide led to a tragic outcome.¹⁹ The mourning for lost love, though not in the form of tearful sorrow, is then explicitly underscored by the faintly audible folkloric Neapolitan lullaby *Ninna nanna popolare campana* [1:22:02-1:22:41], whose plaintive intonation also reflects the girl's emotional state.²⁰

The Neapolitan song *Fenesta ca lucive*²¹ [43:54-44:33, 47:46-48:45, 51:10-51:14] is one of the film's most expressive musical references, despite its „raw“ sound, stripped of elements of aestheticisation and artistic sophistication. This tragic love song explicitly alludes to the motif of death; its touching textual content is subjected to parodic humour. Furthermore, the lyrics are transferred to the narrative of loan sharks singing enthusiastically around each other without instrumental accompaniment. It

18 This is a composition from the very beginning of the 13th century.

19 Lisabetta's three brothers, highly interpellated by a patriarchal ideology, have decided to kill and then bury the corpse of her beloved, although the murder scene itself is not shown. Lisabetta, however, manages to find her lover's body. She secretly cuts off his head and places it in a pot of basil, where she continues to mourn him (for more information on this tale by Boccaccio, which is heavily influenced by mediaeval Italian folklore, see Marcus, 1989; and Ricketts, 2005).

20 It is worth noting that Pasolini did not fully evoke Lisabetta's inner conflicts through the visual narrative features, which also enhances the semantic and medial potential of the musical component.

21 Although this authentic Neapolitan melody appears in both the instrumental and vocal versions, neither the textual nor the musical components derive from the Middle Ages. On the contrary, the text written by Giulio Genoino dates from the seventeenth century, while the authorship of the music is (arguably) attributed to Vincenzo Bellini.

is interesting to note that Pasolini used the same song in the films *Accattone* (1961) and *The Canterbury Tales* to depict the increasing marginality of individual behaviour. In *The Canterbury Tales*, for example, elements of theatricality, artificiality and exaggeration in vocal exaltation disrupt the rhythm, intonation and continuous flow of the musico-textual fabric of the song. On the other hand, *Fenesta ca lucive* in *Accattone* often appears in a more discrete sound environment, emphasising a social order that produces violent and oppressed lower-class subjects. With this grotesque adaptation of *The Decameron*, Pasolini diachronically underpins the discrepancy between the semantics of the fictional film text and Boccaccio's mediaeval legend. Chiara Cappuccio claims that the intertextual link to Boccaccio's text was nevertheless established, among other things through the motif of death (Cappuccio, 2010: 196). The death motif is not only implied in the narrative itself, but is also interfilmically conveyed through the signifying practices inscribed in the body of the actor Franco Citti.²² Pasolini was indeed particularly creative in his portrayal of the world of society's marginal figures such as the tragically terminated pimp Accattone and Ciappelletto: murderer, thief, sex offender and vagabond who suddenly suffers from a fatal illness. In short, this Neapolitan tune lends itself particularly well to the ideological framework and discontinuous plot structure of *The Decameron*, as the collective musical interpretation is abruptly interrupted by Ciappelletto's unconsciousness. But these unrefined „raw“ vocal sounds also reinforce the longing for home (Naples)²³ when, as Ana Carolina Negrao Berlini de Andrade says, the characters are in solidarity with each other through this song (Negrao Berlini de Andrade, 2010: 93).

22 He appeared in several films by Pier Paolo Pasolini: *Accattone*, *Mamma Roma* (1962), *Oedipus Rex* (1967), *The Decameron*, *The Canterbury Tales* and *Arabian Nights*.

23 Shortly before the collective performance of the song, Ciappelletto speaks to the loan sharks that they should all love each other fraternally as Neapolitans, and then utters a shocking patriotic thought: „Naples, my Naples! Only those who lose you really love you“ („Napoli, Napoli mia! Soltanto chi ti perde ti vuol bene“) (Pasolini, 1971/2012: [47:39-47:44]).



Figure 2. The rapturous collective vocal performance of the song *Fenesta ca lucive*

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One could even argue that the act of social solidarity, which unites and relieves the collective subjects (both physically and emotionally), mitigates the complex systems of class division that hit the feudal social order of the 14th century hard, while discursively alluding to the terrifying capitalist reality.

The conceptual link between solidarity and music is confirmed by the examples that propagate the ideology of unity and are reflected, among other things, in collective dances. Some of these dances are „tammurriata“ *Ballo del tamburo* [23:54-25:03, 1:12:24-1:13:50, 1:29:12-1:30:45]—a folk dance from Positano—and *Tarantella* [1:32:11-1:36:08]²⁴—a traditional dance from Montemarano—whose point of view changes dynamically during the filmic episode. *Tambourine Dance* was named after a particular tambourine with framed rattles, although large intervallic leaps on the mouth

²⁴ The shifting sound of the *tarantella* suddenly appears and disappears during this time frame.

harp are a musical factor that initially attracts the audience's attention. The above-mentioned *tammurriata*, however, does not exclusively fulfil the function of announcing the joyous wedding gathering of peasants of different ages and sexes. For example, when Giotto's disciple has a sudden strike of creativity in the middle of a lunch break, the sounds of the mouth harp overlap with shrill male singing and whistling, while the same sounds (in a completely different episode in the film) accelerate the identification of the humorously pathological, i.e. deviant, behavioural patterns of Ciappelletto's character. Perhaps one could even argue that the mouth harp, as one of the representative folkloric instruments in Pasolini's *The Decameron*, is a conceptual signifier of Italian rural places and their inhabitants. On the other hand, the sound of the lively tarantella, enriched with sounds of accordion, tambourine and castanets, originally appears as a diegetic musical accompaniment to a cheerful peasant wedding dance and continues to echo as a muffled sound in a bizarre scene in which the fickle priest Don Gianni (Lino Crispo) attempts to have sex with his acquaintance's wife before his very eyes.²⁵ The aforementioned scene can be taken as an example of how the sounds of *Tarantella* have a completely different relationship to the moving image: in the Chionian sense,²⁶ it seems overly empathetic towards the excited wedding joy of the peasants and conspicuously indifferent towards Gemmata (Mirella Catanesi),²⁷ her husband and the devious priest.

The sixth filmic episode is dominated by the humorous Neapolitan song *Cammesella* [1:03:13-1:03:53, 1:09:10-1:09:39, 1:10:27-1:10:48]. It represents the prototype of an innocent eroticism that operates as a musical catalyst and folkloric semiotic signifier.²⁸ The sensual expressiveness of the untainted erotic charge makes this song an entirely appropriate musical background for Pasolini's *The Decameron*, with which the director, who still believed in the de-tabooing of the unbridled sexual drive, conceptually linked young lovers. In a humorous duet accompanied by a plucked instrument, the groom asks the shy bride to take off her dress, waistcoat and blouse, i.e. to do a striptease in front of him. The song of naïve liveliness and creative spontaneity appears as the diegetic background ambience of a small village feast, into whose narrative

25 In this cinematic episode, Pasolini satirically shows how far human depravity can go, even when it concerns representatives of the churches. Don Gianni, in fact, promises Gemmata that he can turn her into a mare if necessary for pragmatic reasons. He points out that this spell is only possible on condition that a special ritual is performed. The ritual, however, is nothing other than a clandestine sexual intercourse.

26 Here I apply Michel Chion's (1990/1994) well-known categorisation of empathetic and anempathetic sound in film.

27 The sounds of the folk song *Canto dei portatori* also reappear in this episode.

28 Since this Neapolitan song is one of the most important musical vehicles of eroticism, it is fairly certain that it operates as its signifier. It is worth mentioning, among other things, Robert Gordon's observation that the erotic principle in Pasolini's films functions as a signifier rather than a signified or a sign (Gordon, 1996: 213). The semantic elements of Pasolinian unique cinematic expression are also linked to his concept of the „im-sign“, which according to him has „a double nature“: It is simultaneously „extremely subjective and extremely objective“ (Pasolini, 1965/1976: 548).

the nursery rhyme *Am blim blom* [1:03:39-1:03:49] is soon inserted. The nursery rhyme is performed by five young girls, including Caterina di Valbona (Elisabetta Genovese). Caterina falls in love at first sight with a young man, Riccardo (Francesco Gavazzi), with whom she plans a romantic love encounter on the terrace of the house. Thus, *Cammesella* reinforces the intimate musical expression of ecstatic youthful love, which (unlike the sounds of the folk serenade) does not extend to other filmic episodes. The symbolic reading of a humorous secular melody comes to the fore, especially when a shocked father discovers his daughter with a lover,²⁹ with explicitly expressed elements of frontal nudity paradoxically stripped of vulgar and pornographic content. At the same time, despite Morricone's imperceptible arrangement interventions, Pasolini has clearly retained the traditional folk sound of *Cammesella*, uniquely combining an unadulterated youthful optimism with traditional features of Neapolitan culture.

Music and parody of religious signifiers

The religious spirit and poetic emphasis on the divine occupy an important place in Pasolini's cinematic and literary work,³⁰ including *The Decameron*. Despite the fact that he grew up in a deeply Christian culture, Stefania Benini reminds us that the director never belonged to the Church (Benini, 2015: 37).³¹ His films conform to the epico-religious worldview (Rohdie, 1995: 4), although the Italian intellectual often displays an extremely rebellious and subversive attitude towards religious authorities. Pasolini also departs from the usual ambience of biblical narratives when even the figure of Christ in the film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew (Il vangelo secondo Matteo, 1964)* is portrayed as a passionate orator from whom proletarian discontent springs. Although the director's beliefs were not in line with current or prevailing ideologies, some scholars such as Lada Stevanović and Dubravka Đurić consider that Pasolini advocated the transformation of religious and spiritual practices in line with modernity (Stevanović & Đurić, 2019: 92). However, given Pasolini's disdain for trivial consumerist and conformist reality, as well as his highly critical attitude towards cynical pleasure, it is fairly certain that this creator did not approve of the modern religious perspective. This explains to some extent why the Italian director returned in a fascinating way to mythical and biblico-historical themes, especially to religious semantics, which he retained in humorous adaptation, inspired by the folklore and spiritual customs of the lower classes (cf. Dunghe, 2013: 584). One cannot even say that

²⁹ At this moment in the film, the song appears in the vocal arrangement.

³⁰ Moreover, Pasolini himself confirmed that his first feature film was already religious in style and not in content (Pasolini & Halliday, 1992: 83).

³¹ Pasolini repeatedly stated that he was not a believer, but this did not prevent him from approaching Christian themes in unique ways and combining different styles (see e.g. Pasolini & Halliday, 1992: 84).

the mediaeval Christian musical themes have been modernised. Rather, the religious codes are subversively stripped of their original quality as a totalitarian signifier that enables control over the obedient bodies of the Christian pious. The aspect of hegemonic oversight is not entirely absent, however, but arises from the controversial and humorous parody of institutional religious practices and their representatives such as monks, priests, nuns and other religious subjects.

The point at which spirituality and sexuality meet in „The Trilogy of Life“ essentially belongs to the diachronic dimension of the past, as slightly subversive cinematic devices are employed to aesthetically modernise the ancient, unconventional notion of spirituality, religious beliefs and erotic experience of the body. Colleen Ryan-Scheutz claims that Pasolini makes Giotto’s disciple³² (but also Pier Paolo Pasolini in particular) „an integral part of the cultural thesis and sacred ideology“ (Ryan-Scheutz, 2007b: 100), „when frontal nudity and uninhibited sexuality“ were also appropriately on display (Ibid.). Although the compilation soundtrack is predominantly influenced by secular Italian melodies, the ceremonial parody of religious signifiers forms an important ideological backbone of the film, particularly the musical fragments in Latin: a language Pasolini considered an important link in the educational system. By using three fragments from sacred music, the Italian intellectual does not strengthen the conservative religious order, but on the contrary, deepens the moral contradictions of the pious subjects and the lack of intelligence of their representatives. Religion, however, inspired Pasolini to recognise sacred, mythical and epic elements in the most mundane, simple and banal objects and events (Pasolini & Halliday, 1992: 77). It is a different spirituality from that which adorns the works of deeply religious artists.

The interplay of religious and secular signifiers occupies a special place in Pasolini’s *The Decameron*, when secular and ecclesiastical melodies intertwine in a homogeneous sacred space. For example, the nuns sing sacred and folkloric mediaeval melodies without instrumental accompaniment and come under the influence of the „forbidden“ sensuousness and sensuality of music. This is also confirmed by the vocal adaptation of the Gregorian chant *Mittit ad virginem*, in which the nuns first sing together against the pillared walls of the convent.

32 The introduction of the figure of Giotto’s disciple through non-linear narrative means represents a departure from Boccaccio’s narrative style. In the film, this painter has the task of painting the altarpieces of the Church of Santa Chiara, while the separation of his film persona from other episodes in the film reinforces the ideological message of Pasolini himself (on the role and significance of Pasolini’s appearance in the film, see Vecce, 2018).



Figure 3. Nuns sing the chant *Mittit ad virginem*

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The sequence, written by Pierre Abelard, was often played in mediaeval Catholic parishes on the Christian feast day of the Annunciation. The nuns sing it for the first time while young men till the land, listening to a peasant's story about his physically demanding work in a nunnery [25:04-26:22]. Later, the chant is sung two more times during the cinematic episode: while two nuns [29:08-29:37] and a nun alone [34:57-35:27] walk through the green landscape. Both times, the nuns' prosaic singing is interrupted when they notice the attractive young man, Masetto of Lamporecchio (Vincenzo Amato), in nature, as if they had immediately forgotten their vow of chastity. The unusual play with biblical signifiers is also realised through the number of repetitions of the chant, with which Pasolini most likely refers semantically to the Holy Trinity. In summary, through this sacred musical reference, the director revives the Italian landscape while offering an alternative attitude to spirituality.

The only chant that combines religious and folkloric practices is *La pampanella* [27:04-28:22], sung in the old Irpinian dialect by a chorus of nuns who are visually excluded from the moving image. The melody is introduced into the film's narrative when a young man, encouraged by an old man's story about nuns with dubious morals, enters a convent and is hired as a gardener under the pretext of being mute. Inspired by Boccaccio's novella, Pasolini not only shows how the nuns nonchalantly violate religious taboos by copulating with a young gardener, but also constructs a *mise-en-scène*

that denounces the normative repression of human sexuality. By indirectly suggesting that there was a more tolerant spiritual climate even at the time of the Inquisition, the Italian director ideologically denies the spiritual power that is impeccably enforced by the ecclesiastical power structures. On the other hand, the Italian intellectual revives the biblical spiritual tradition with authentic melodies that seem to distance the musical heritage from judgmental religious practices.

A somewhat different manifestation of the parody of religious signifiers is achieved through the humorous trivialisation of liturgical musical tradition. For example, the *Kyrie Eleison* from the earliest mass, the *Tournai Mass*,³³ is used as musical accompaniment for monks playing with skulls [45:04-46:14], and later as the basis for the enthronement of Ciappelletto as a saint [55:46-57:07].



Figure 4. The enthronement of Ciappelletto da Prato

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The mediaeval church melodies, thus, serve not only to render sacred reality sonically, but also to underline trivial folk customs and human fickleness. It unveils the subversive spiritual spaces that appear strikingly sensual, presented in the spirit of Bakhtinian carnivalesque parody of sacred texts (cf. Bakhtin, 1984). This remarkable poetic trick is indeed a provocative profanation of the liturgy, whose subversive power

³³ It should be borne in mind that the composer of this mass has not been identified and that inconsistent stylistic nuances indicate that several authors worked on the composition. For this reason, Guillaume de Machaut's *Le Messe de Notre Dame* is cited in music history as an example of the first complete polyphonic mass.

lies somewhere between parody and satire. Ciappelletto da Prato, who openly delights in sins and the „realm of the material“, is declared an example of moral behaviour immediately after his death. During his last confession, this criminal lies sacrilegiously and recklessly before frivolous monks, as if mocking the „eternal abomination“ that awaits him for his sins. His confession, as well as the drinking scene, is accompanied in a subdued dynamic by the Neapolitan chant *Canto delle olivare* [46:16-46:46, 51:22-51:55, 53:10-54:06], when the vagabond cynically explains to the monks that he is still a virgin, just as he emerged from his mother’s womb. By tabooising the *Tournai Mass* through carnivalesque blasphemy, Pasolini overturns the Christian disciplining of the body in the Foucauldian sense of the word, clearly undermining the narrative logic based on a conventional spiritual understanding of the world. In this way, the director re-aesthetises prosaic dogma through the contemplative profanation of sacred spaces of music, while offering a unique critique of ecclesiastical hegemony.



Figure 5. Profanation of sacred music through the prosaic dogma

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The narrative thread of the mass seems to be of great importance to Pasolini, for it appears as a connective tissue that holistically rounds off the first part of the mosaic *The Decameron*.

On the other hand, the mediaeval sequence *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, whose authorship is attributed to Cardinal Stephen Langton (cf. Jolly, 1997: 454), is introduced by Pasolini to deepen the creative inspiration of characters with different identity profiles. It is a sequence that was processed by many prominent polyphonists of the Renaissance

and is still used today (though much less frequently) in worship. In Pasolini's film, the aforementioned fragment appears twice: during the visualisation of the image of Giotto's disciple in the church of Santa Chiara [1:00:55-1:01:39] and then in the form of a peculiar *tableau vivant* that uniquely depicts the poetic vision of heaven and hell [1:44:36-1:45:33].



Figure 6. Musical *tableau vivant* of heaven and hell

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The visionary image of paradise with the space of non-linear temporalities is characterised by its high artistic and aesthetic qualities such as expressive depth and spiritual pathos. It originates from a dream of a Giotto's disciple³⁴ in which the figure of the Virgin Mary (Silvana Mangano) appears in parodic form.³⁵ The poetic specificity, beauty and depth of the Madonna's gaze are complemented tonally by the angelic children's choir, whose divine spark continues to leap in the eye of the beholder.

34 Although it is not clearly indicated in the scene, one concludes that the dream, vision or inner dialogue still belongs to Giotto's disciple, as it significantly influences his sensory behaviour, especially his creative mood.

35 Colleen Ryan-Scheutz, however, notes that while the presence of the Virgin Mary is highly parodic, her purity and virtue remain sacrosanct (Ryan-Scheutz, 2007a: 160).



Figure 7. The peculiar embodiment of the Virgin's penetrating gaze in close-up

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There are thus no transgressive or subversive traits of sacrality in this scene, but rather an unusual cross-section of the afterlife, marked by a highly mystical spiritual climate.

A particular aspect of spirituality in the film is expressed through the sound of church bells. Although the bells represent a melodious spiritual oasis in the Christian world, in the final scene of *The Decameron* they symbolise not the echo of divine power but the triumph and irrepressible serenity of the workers, monks and sacristans in general. It is fairly certain that the prolonged sound of the church bells completes the successful conclusion of the work at Santa Chiara, even though the semantics of the bells are repeatedly woven imperceptibly into the film's narrative, occasionally assuming the function of a prosaic religious signifier. The last sentence of the film conveys a profound message: „Why complete a work [in this case a fresco] when it is so much better to simply dream about it?“³⁶ Carlo Vecce rightly observes that, from Pasolini's perspective, *The Decameron* should be read like an open work in motion, when the director invites us to consider his work as a process and an organism in the making (Vecce, 2018: 630). Thus, this anthology film, imbued with de-historicised allegorical features, can be interpreted from various ideological positions as a peculiar work of art that elicits great admiration from the engaged spectator. Contradictory critical observations would then unite the recognition of the sensual, transcendental and spiritual potential and beauty of the mediaeval and romantic musical melodies in the peculiarly aestheticised Pasolinian film world.

36 “Perché realizzare un'opera quando è così bello sognarla soltanto?” (Pasolini, 1971/2012: [1:50:59-1:51:03])

* * *

The compilation soundtrack of Pasolini's *The Decameron*, is characterised by a plethora of secular works from Italy's musical past and distinguished sacred polyphonic fragments from the Middle Ages. Their function in this anthology film is not exclusively contemplative or naturalistic, especially when they are at odds with the visual environment. However, by combining contradictory affects such as a tragic love song with humorous and light-hearted musicking, Pasolini undermines institutional markers and their conventions, showing how controversy can be achieved alongside scatological profanity in surprising ways with highly imaginative and gentle humour. By defying authority and rejecting normative moral principles, the Italian director enhances the impact of the visual and auditory uniqueness of the cinematic narrative and the dramaturgy of the scene. The otherness of regional Italian dialects ceases to function even in the world of the margins when Cilentan, Positano and Neapolitan songs are considered the paradigm of Italian mediaeval folklore heritage. Then the subversive power of music, imbued with the driving force of Eros, distorts or even abolishes material and spiritual totality.

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Muzika u Pazolinijevom *Dekameronu*: humor, duhovnost, (de)tabuizacija i poigravanje konvencionalnim označiteljima italijanske muzičke prošlosti

Apstrakt: Pazolinijeva kontroverzna figura, oblikovana rafiniranim i revolucionarnim levičarskim idejama, počiva na eksperimentalnim umetničkim idealima koji se suprotstavljaju establišmentu i konzervativnoj ideološkoj misli. Podstičući detabuizaciju seksualnosti i otvoreniji odnos prema kulturnoj tradiciji, reditelj je napravio odklon od podražavalačkih naturalističkih kinematografskih praksi, okrenuvši se biblijsko-mitskim i antičkim temama. Tako je i izbor žanrovski i stilski raznovrsnih muzičkih referenci iz *Dekameronu* u komplementaciji sa geografskim premeštanjem Bokačovog humanističkog ideala iz centralne u južnu italijansku makroregiju. Cilj u ovom radu je utvrditi Pazolinijev ambivalentan, a u izvesnoj meri i subverzivan, tretman religijskih i folklornih označitelja italijanske muzičke prošlosti. Tada i poigravanje sa materijalnim i nematerijalnim označiteljskim praksama pospešuje alternativno tumačenje duhovnosti, klasnog antagonizma, folklorne tradicije i vešto profilisanih i nesvakidašnjih elemenata erotike.

Ključne reči: Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Dekameron*, italijanska kinematografija, tradicionalni folklorni napevi, duhovna muzika, religijski označitelji, detabuizacija erotike