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ADAPTATION AS HETEROCENTRALIZATION

Giuliano Montaldo's Film Version of Giorgio Bassani's *Gli occhiali d'oro*

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Giuliano Montaldo's 1987 film version of Giorgio Bassani's novella *Gli occhiali d'oro* opens with an overhead panning shot of the river Po. As the peasants descend to investigate what has happened below, the camera does as well, gradually pulling to a tight close-up of Athos Fadigati's gold-rimmed eyeglasses barely distinguishable against the muddy riverbank. The sequence seems to observe that superiority of position does not necessarily imply omniscience. Certain things are perceived only in close proximity. Radcliffe-Umstead, in his study of Bassani's novel notes that «[s]pace in Bassani's world shields people [...] and intimate contact bears with it the danger of betrayal»¹. As mediating consciousness in recounting the story of Athos Fadigati and Eraldo Delilieri, Bassani's fictive narrator provides a balance between the ostensible omniscience of third-person hindsight and the insight made possible only through the dangerous intimacy of interaction, the direct interaction with Fadigati and Delilieri which the narrator's father fears will taint his son's reputation. Radcliffe-Umstead has characterized «the narrator [...] as both observer and experiential center for filtering the hero's movement»². In film, it is the camera which provides this filter, this balance between omniscience and subjectivity. For example, following the unfettered camera of the opening sequence, in the second scene the camera performs a classic act of suture by first identifying Fadigati in close-

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¹ Radcliffe-Umstead 1987, 81.

² *Ivi*, 77.

up and then immediately cutting to a subjective camera from Fadigati's point of view as the doctor greets his neighbors during one of his strolls. The camera as «observer and experiential center for filtering the hero's movement» thus actually makes Bassani's fictive narrator narratively, if not thematically, redundant and unnecessary. To compensate, Montaldo and fellow screenwriters Nicola Badalucco and Antonella Grassi, have invented a life for Bassani's narrator far beyond the ruminations present in the novel. By dubbing the narrator «Davide» Montaldo individualizes him, abdicating the omniscience inherent in the narrator's anonymity in favor of the ostensible anonymity and potential omniscience of his camera. The film can thus contain a number of scenes between Fadigati and Delilieri where the narrator is not present. By doing this, Montaldo effectively enters the closet of this transgressive relationship.

However, Montaldo stops at the threshold. In fact, this pedestrian and generally unremarkable film participates in the same complacent, conformist *perbenismo* which Bassani attacks in his *Il Romanzo di Ferrara*. Critical reviews of the film praised its «tatto», its «discrezione»³ and its «delicatezza»⁴. However, such «tact», «discretion», and «delicateness» also mark this film as a cinema of evasion, at least as far as homosexuality is concerned. Accordingly, other critics spoke of the film's «inesattezza»⁵, its «pressappochismo», and its tendency towards «approssimazione»⁶. Other critics more accurately diagnosed the film, faulting its «stile cinetelevisivo»⁷ and its «cadenza da sontuoso sceneggiato televisivo»⁸. As a commercial medium, television aims at a broad demographic, a sort of tyranny of the masses analogous to that of Fascism in its eager effort to cater to the lowest common denominator. The critic for *La Stampa* assesses this degenerative process in Montaldo's work: «Montaldo sa bene cosa piace agli spettatori e quali ritmi narrativi riescono più familiari, e come si devono semplificare o enfatizzare i sentimenti»⁹. Like Ettore Scola in *Una giornata particolare* (1977), Montaldo perhaps aspired to *cinema d'impegno*, to make a film which championed the humanity of homosexuals confronting an increasingly brutal Fascist politics. However, like Scola before him, who in flagrant

³ G.L.R., *Gli occhiali d'oro*, *Il Tempo*, 27 settembre 1987.

⁴ n. a., *L'Eco di Bergamo*, 21 ottobre 1987.

⁵ Mino Argentieri, *Rinascita*, 17 ottobre 1987.

⁶ Vittorio Spiga, *Gli occhiali d'oro*, *Il Resto del Carlino*, 25 settembre 1987.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ S. R., Noiret si perde per amore, *La Stampa*, 3 ottobre 1987.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

disavowal of his protagonist's sexual preference, merely catered to heterocentrist audience expectations by proffering Sophia Loren and Marcello Mastroianni in yet another cinematic encounter, what Montaldo perpetuated was simultaneously, if not mostly, a cinema of evasion. Accordingly, Montaldo largely avoids the sort of obsessive subjectification of experience which characterized Aschenbach's pursuit of Tadzio in Luchino Visconti's *Morte a Venezia* (1971). Instead, Montaldo gravitates toward a more neutral and discreet treatment of Fadigati's relationship with the young Eraldo. Espousing a behavior «pieno di rispetto e attenzioni nei confronti di un rapporto d'amore»¹⁰, Montaldo reduced the entire physical relationship between doctor and boxer to a close-up of Fadigati's finger gently grazing Eraldo's hand as they picnic by the water, an image that invokes God's distinctly asexual creation of Adam as rendered by Michelangelo, rather than anything overtly sexual. However, Montaldo demurs even further from this rather inhibited moment of man-on-man hand touching by immediately cutting to Carlotta as she accosts a sleeping Davide on the beach with a playful embrace. In her book *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has effectively argued, «The closet [was] the defining structure for gay oppression in [the twentieth] century»¹¹. By purporting to 'respect' the privacy of Fadigati and Delilier's physical relationship, Montaldo effectively respects the closet itself, and maintains its very closure, even as he promises to enter it and throw it open. Having directed film versions of Ennio Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere* (1989) and of the lives of *Sacco and Vanzetti* (1971), Montaldo has not shied away from controversial material, but his televisual sensibilities definitely accommodate heterocentricity in *Gli occhiali d'oro*. Prior to Montaldo, both Valerio Zurlini and Vittorio De Sica had hoped to make a film version of the novel, but to no avail.

Montaldo has attempted to defend his directorial choices, claiming, «Scene di sesso però non ce ne sono, ma non per pruderie ma perché non ce n'era bisogno»¹². However, in this film supposedly based upon a story about a homosexual relationship, he includes a three minute long, explicitly nude, heterosexual love scene between film stars Valeria Golino and Rupert Everett. Both were hot film commodities at the time, Golino for having won the Coppa Volpi at only age twenty at the Venice Film Festival the previous year for Francesco Maselli's *Storia d'amore*

¹⁰ Mori 1987, 23.

¹¹ Sedgwick 1993, 3.

¹² Manin 1987.

(1986) and Everett for the immense success that he had enjoyed in Italy in particular for his performance in Mike Newell's *Dance with a Stranger* (1985), so that their star power, their narrative, and especially their loves scenes far overpower those of the middle-aged Philippe Noiret as Fadigati and the relatively unknown Nicola Farron as Delilieri. Shot in a heated red chiaroscuro before a fireplace that throws their intertwined bodies into high relief, more than just the nudity, Golino and Everett's sex scene arguably contains the most extensive shared close-up and shot-countershot close-up sequences in the entire film. As such, the scene constitutes a blatant heterocentrist attempt to compensate for the original narrative's otherwise homosexual subject matter. The scene includes teasing pans of writhing torsos, pumping buttocks, and a foregrounding Golino's breasts. The placement of this scene within the overall structure of the screenplay is especially symptomatic, tellingly situated as it is between a scene wherein Fadigati sees a naked Eraldo in the shower and one wherein the boxer is shown driving the doctor in his new gift, an Alfa Romeo convertible. In other words, the screenplay at this point thus deflects the nascent homosexual relationship between Fadigati and Eraldo into a heterosexual love scene between Davide and his invented girlfriend, Nora.

While homosexuality had technically been criminalized by the Codice Rocco as early as 1927, Mussolini largely left the policing of such personal and venal matters to the Catholic Church, in accord with Italian tradition. Actual incarceration for homosexuality remained fairly nominal until after the composition of the Manifesto della Razza in 1938, as Mussolini mimicked Hitler's own racial policies. The adoption of the pseudo-science of eugenics in both countries, aimed at the genetic improvement of the overall populations, labeled both homosexuality and Jewish ethnicity as genetically degenerate. The increasing persecution under the Fascist regime of the Ferrarese Jews as in the *Romanzo di Ferrara* thus parallels that of Fadigati in *Gli occhiali d'oro*. Furthermore, the cinematic addition of the character of Nora to the narrative of Basani's original novel is not without its thematic benefits, however, specifically highlighting as it does the function of the closet and the politics of passing. In one scene, the Jewish Nora contemplates the foresight of her father in not naming her Judith or Sara, or Esther. She examines her distorted facial features in the reflection of a piece of silver plate, commenting: «Non si può proprio dire che il mio profilo sia ariano». Upon the death of her father, Nora forsakes both Davide and her Jewish heritage, marrying a local Fascist dignitary, ingratiating herself into

Ferrarese society, and even converting to Catholicism, all in an effort to 'pass' for Aryan. She confronts Davide with her imminent baptism on a cold, oppressively dark night in an isolated piazza before a church. The ominous *mise-en-scène* foreshadows the failure of her attempt to pass, as Montaldo's closing titles will inform us that Nora died in childbirth, her Jewish womb apparently refusing to nurture the (Fascist) Aryan seed. Biology remains destiny. While such a concept of destiny sidesteps the sociopolitical implications of Bassani's novella, Nora's effort to closet her Jewish heritage reverses the process of Fadigati's own tentative steps outside the closet. Interestingly, insofar as both characters negotiate this dynamic of closeting their identity and or passing for something other, they are the first to interact in the film.

The closet constitutes a patriarchal strategy of containment of limited permissiveness. Radcliffe-Umstead assesses Fadigati's closeted existence in the displacement of doctor's sexual drives into a diluted hedonism. Taste, sound and smell attempt to compensate for the deprivation of the sense of touch so integral in actual participatory sexual experience:

Dr. Fadigati longs to construct a private enclosure for powerful aesthetic and sensual stimulation in life. His profession as a medical specialist for the ear, nose and throat indicates his concern for those parts of the body most responsible for sense stimulation [...]. An individual attempting to mask homosexual inclinations has to find other outlets for his passionate receptivity to physical stimulation. Thus, the repressed Fadigati responds with a Gidean *disponibilité* to [...] olfactory experiences [...]. Music more than any other art arouses the physician's hyperrefined sensitivity to beauty.¹³

Again, in stark contrast to Visconti's use of Mahler in *Morte a Venezia*, Montaldo fails to exploit his protagonist's affinity for music in either the film's score or in its subject matter. Fadigati listens to an opera recording in only one scene. He describes the pointedly soaring soprano voice to the predatory Signora Lavezzoli as «sublime», a telling word given its function as a form of sublimation for Fadigati's repressed sexuality. Wayne Koestenbaum accounts for the phenomenon of the opera queen, the sublimated attraction of the homosexual, noting that «[opera] portrays masochisms, abjections and fulfillments that sober art won't risk»¹⁴. Locus of his sexual repression, opera certainly constitutes a sort of masochism for Fadigati. In Bassani's novella, the doctor character-

¹³ Radcliffe-Umstead 1987, 79-80.

¹⁴ Koestenbaum 1993, 220-221.

izes Florentine production of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* as «un lungo lamento d'amore» leading to an inevitable «ewige Nacht», the eternal night of death¹⁵. As an ear, nose and throat specialist, Fadigati attends to a part of the anatomy involved in creating the masochistic sublimations of opera. In this context, Koestenbaum's study provides yet another provocative dimension to the repressed sexuality inherent in Fadigati's profession: «The throat, for gay men, is problematized: zone of fellatio, anterior eroticism, nongenitality»¹⁶. Accordingly, perhaps both as a physician and as a homosexual, Montaldo's Fadigati confides to Davide that he primarily thinks of cigarettes only in terms of the damage they may cause the throat. In fact, when Fadigati first smokes at Eraldo's insistence, he breaks out into a surprised cough.

For Fadigati, the closet entails not only sublimation of sex through the senses, but also invisibility, the 'nascondersi' which Nora advises Davide to pursue. In the novella, Fadigati hides himself by sitting among the riffraff of the platea at movie theatres rather than with his own class in the gallery. The narrator speaks of the Ferrarese looking for «il tipico luccichio che i suoi occhiali d'oro mandavano ogni tanto attraverso il fumo e l'oscurità»¹⁷. The gold-rimmed eyeglasses serve as Fadigati's synecdoche, revealing his presence even as he attempts to remain invisible during his nocturnal escapades. As emblem of Ferrarese petty bourgeois bigotry, Signora Lavezzoli claims not to fault Fadigati's behavior during the summer so much because of his homosexuality, but because of his willingness to «esibirsi». Similarly, Goretti and Giartosio note that, with regard to Fascist punishment of homosexuality, «L'omosessualità veniva colpita quando diventava troppo visibile – cioè quando diventava visibile», but also concedes that «la soglia di visibilità 'ammessa' era arbitraria»¹⁸. Montaldo deploys Signora Lavezzoli as the policing Fascist gaze in the film, out to enforce gender normativity, and also to punish Fadigati, whom she deems as a «così bell'uomo» for his failure to desire her. When Fadigati and Eraldo are on the Adriatic coast and out upon the water in a row boat, rather than suturing his camera into the empathy-inducing «languidi sguardi» of the gay gaze between physician and boxer as described by Signora Lavezzoli, Montaldo's camera again maintains his (dis)respectful distance. At this juncture, he quite literally

¹⁵ Bassani 1980, 176.

¹⁶ Koestenbaum 1991, 207.

¹⁷ Bassani 1980, 175.

¹⁸ Goretti-Giartosio 2006, 44-45.

prefers the Fascist point of view, taking his shot instead from Lavezzoli's voyeuristic surveillance, the double iris of her binoculars underscoring the simultaneously alienated and alienating third-person subjectivity. Later, while at cards she even expresses her censure of Fadigati, warning him that they are not playing as partners, but as «nemici».

In her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey asserts: «[T]he male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist self»¹⁹. Despite Mulvey's heterocentrist conclusion, the politics of the gaze among men proves fully operational in a film with a homosexual narrative. When Eraldo is first seen in the gym, it is as an object of desire from Fadigati's point of view. The voyeuristic alienation of the moment and Eraldo's seeming unattainability are both emphasized by Montaldo's use of a physically realistic long shot and by the window panes which separate Fadigati from the world of athletic male bonding down below. The last time Eraldo appears in the film, it is as a lost object of desire, again from Fadigati's distanced point of view, again through a window, specifically the window of a cafe, and again with Fadigati once more left out in the cold alone. Throughout the entire film, the Adonis-like Eraldo functions as object of the gaze, recurrently *en deshabillé*; he is shirtless in bed when his mother awakens him in the morning and in his boxing shorts when at practice in the gym and during boxing in a match. However, he is almost always shown from a 'discreet' and 'respectful' distance by Montaldo's camera, which rarely sutures itself to a closer psychological shot more empathetic to Fadigati's desire, and herein lies much of the cinematic weakness of the film in the portrayal of their relationship. In stark contrast, Montaldo seems to encounter no difficulty using more intimate shooting strategies for the asexual relationship between Fadigati and Davide, who alternate numerous close-ups in their shared scenes. While Bassani's rougher *Delilieri* taunts Fadigati with the prospect that he might ruin his face in a boxing match, Montaldo's more visually vain Eraldo, on the contrary, narcissistically tells Davide: «Mi piace essere guardato». An overt exhibitionist, Eraldo is very much aware of the scrutiny under which Ferrara holds him during his first summer vacation on the *costa romagnola*. While Fadigati displaces sexuality into the sound, smell and taste of the ear, nose and throat, Eraldo's affinity for exhibitionism displaces his sexuality into the politics of vision and his

¹⁹ Mulvey 1985, 810.

avocation as boxer allows him to revel in the direct physical contact of the sense of touch. Eraldo thus functions as Fadigati's complement, as sight and touch are the two senses which the doctor's occupation does not address. Montaldo's Eraldo describes boxing in terms verging on subliminal homosexuality: «Eppure costringe gli uomini a conoscersi, in pochi momenti, senza bisogno di parlare... Si fanno a pezzi senza nessuna pietà, e poi si abbracciano». The description echoes Brian Pronger's discussion of the easy slippage between homosocial orthodoxy and homosexual gender heresy in such physically charged performances of masculinity. Pronger notes:

In both well-matched sports and homoerotic fucking, masculine power meets masculine power; men play with each other's masculinity, paradoxically probing the places where masculinity can be undermined, painstakingly bringing each other to the edge of masculine dissolution [...] competitive athletes are actually erotic accomplices.²⁰

One of Eraldo's school companions even comments on the homoerotic aspects of boxing by using English to call it a «noble art» in an effeminate voice and accompanied by a limp-wristed gesture. Through its punching and bloodletting, boxing recreates the «bloody wounds» of imaginary female castration, metaphorically vaginalizing the males in the ring. As self-constructed object of the gaze, Eraldo very much recognizes that masculinity, like femininity and the effeminate, is performed. The hyper-masculine performance of what Pronger calls «stylized aggression», of the sport attempts to erase this textual effeminization of the male, but its subtext remains. Inviting Fadigati to watch him box, Eraldo metaphorically invites him to watch him have sex with his 'erotic accomplice', his challenger. In any case, Montaldo again fails to exploit the homoerotic potential of the scene, keeping his camera at an uninvolved distance, failing to suture his camera either to Eraldo or Fadigati. In this context, Martin Scorsese's meticulously masochistic camerawork in the boxing sequences in *Raging Bull* (1980) stands in stark contrast. Only when Eraldo is finally declared champion does Montaldo cut to Fadigati's point of view from down below. The doctor again remains separated from his object of desire, this time by the ropes of the boxing ring. Here Montaldo's film strongly recalls Visconti's *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (1960), a film which had influenced Scorsese's *Raging Bull*, as Fadigati follows Eraldo downstairs to congratulate him, only to discover him at the turn of a

²⁰ Pronger 1990, 181.

corner fully nude in the shower. The moment lacks the invasive proximity Visconti had used in his corresponding scene, but Montaldo's camera does present the integral male nude that Visconti's camera could not show a generation before. The naked Eraldo confirms his exhibitionism by receiving Fadigati's gaze with a smile. In the tradition of Lola-Lola in Von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel*, Eraldo may be object of the gaze, but as such, he is neither passive nor controlled, but rather active and controlling. It is Eraldo who drives the car, Eraldo who rows the boat, Eraldo who at will accompanies or neglects Fadigati during their summer vacation in Riccione, and Eraldo who, in a self-affirming display of aggressive masculinity, punches Fadigati outside the Grand Hotel.

In his hyperaggressive behavior, Eraldo pays homage to an ethos of masculinity dating back to ancient Rome: «The passive homosexual was not judged for his homosexuality, but for his passivity»²¹. Such ancient gender paradigms regarding homosexuality carried forward into Mussolini's Fascist Italy and Bassani's Ferrara, wherein the crime of «visible» homosexuality accrued mostly to the effeminate homosexual male. Goretti and Giartosio observe that for gender Fascism «l'omosessuale attivo non rappresenta un pericolo, è semplicemente la vittima (guaribile) del contagio»²². Furthermore, they argue, «Il maschio passivo, infatti, è assimilato alla femmina, passiva per definizione»²³. In such a configuration, then, the passive male functions both as *faux* woman and as the carrier of gender contagion, being passive and masculine. Any dissent from hetero-normative gender ideology was constructed by Fascism as a sort of social disease against which Mussolini as political leader also served as «master hygienist»²⁴. In addition, most strikingly archaic, being both outwardly masculine and sexually passive, or outwardly effeminate and sexually active was considered inconceivable, and anyone who performed both active and passive roles was truly a «depravato» beyond imaginable gender categorization²⁵.

Eraldo's tendency to strike recumbent positions and his willingness to accept the traditionally feminine role as object of the gaze argue for passivity on his part, for which his violence attempts to compensate. Spackman notes that «an obsession with virility is one of the distinctive

²¹ Veyne 1987, 30.

²² Goretti-Giartosio 2006, 121.

²³ *Ivi*, 91.

²⁴ Spackmann 1997, 147.

²⁵ Goretti-Giartosio 2006, 82.

traits of fascist discourse» even to the extent that the term *viricoltura* was disseminated by the Fascist regime ²⁶. Eraldo's «corpo da statua greca» ²⁷, both because of and despite its being object of the gaze, comes to embody the Fascist ideal of «perfected (politicized) erotic power» ²⁸ admired by «la maggiore parte degli astanti, dagli uomini come dalle donne» ²⁹. Furthermore, because Fadigati, though cultured, is not particularly effeminate, Eraldo feels compelled to assign him this role publicly by default, by punching him and leaving him with the «bloody wound», however imaginary, real, or symbolic it may be read by Fascist Ferrara. While Eraldo briefly ascends to the role of power icon, Fadigati descends to the role of Girardian scapegoat of Ferrarese Fascist repression. In essence, Fascist patriarchy is shown to accept, at least outwardly, violence as something of a substitute for sexual preference as proof for its construction of masculinity. As victor in an ideology whose only morality is power, Eraldo's literal crimes of assault and theft, as well as his personal crime of betrayal of trust, go unquestioned and unpunished. At this point Montaldo's dialogue replicates Bassani's text:

Davide: Perché non denunciarlo alla polizia?
Fadigati: Denunciarlo? Ma le sembra possibile? ³⁰

In the film *Fadigati* naively claims that he and Eraldo «always shared everything», but Bassani's narrator clearly identifies the relationship between Fadigati and Delilieri as one of «uno carnefice, l'altro vittima» ³¹. Sexual historian Andre Béjin has described the democratization of sex as a peculiarly recent contemporary phenomenon ³². Instead, the homosexual relationship described by Bassani's text belongs to what Italian gay critic Giovanni Dall'Orto calls «[un] modello arcaico di omosessualità [che] rifiutava di prendere in considerazione come partner gli altri omosessuali» ³³. Thus, to be seen as a desirable partner even by Fadigati, Eraldo must uphold the myth of his heterosexuality, flirting and driving off with girls, despite what individual sex acts he may or may not perform with or without Fadigati on any specific occasion. Accord-

²⁶ Spackmann 1998, 3.

²⁷ Bassani 1980, 192.

²⁸ Schneider 1986, 95.

²⁹ Bassani 1980, 198.

³⁰ Cfr. *ivi*, 220.

³¹ *Ivi*, 234-235.

³² Béjin 1987.

³³ Dall'Orto 1990, 162.

ing to the «modello arcaico di omosessualità» described by Dall'Orto, Eraldo must be conceived of as a masculine *other* to appeal to Fadigati. Such a hierarchical power based on the dynamics of difference, on what Pronger calls «the myth of opposite power», lies at the very core of the patriarchal value system itself, and even more adamantly so under the rabid Fascist patriarchy³⁴. On one hand, Eraldo offers beauty, youth, energy, virility, and sexuality, while on the other, Fadigati offers wealth, social connections, and a beach vacation. While their relationship is most decidedly an exchange, this exchange is neither reciprocal nor symmetrical. Pronger notes, «[R]eciprocal fucking represents the ideal of [...] liberation; it is an attempt to change the myths of gender», and as such, it must be closeted³⁵. If there was any actual reciprocal fucking in Fadigati and Delilier's relationship, it had to remain hidden, the socially incomprehensible acts of the «depravati». Their relationship instead falls into what Sedgwick categorizes as those «whose potential for exploitive-ness is built into the optics of the asymmetrical, the specularized, and the inexplicit»³⁶. Still elsewhere, Sedgwick has observed that «Western men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homosexual blackmail»³⁷. Given the imbalance of their desire and the asymmetry of their relationship, Eraldo perpetuates just such a blackmail of specular-ity on the formerly discreet and closeted Fadigati by insisting on their shared Adriatic summer vacation, not merely because he has been denied this his entire life, but also because all of Ferrara will be there to see them, or at least, as Signora Lavezzoli puts it, all of Ferrara «che conta».

The cinematic correlative to Pronger's «reciprocal fucking» is the shot-countershot formation which binds film characters together in a mutual gaze. Such a method of shooting constitutes a sort of visual egalitarianism freed from the alienating power dynamics of classic voyeurism, and increases audience empathy. Montaldo's film generally fails in encouraging such empathy for the Fadigati-Deliliers relationship, in part because the intrusion of Davide-Nora subplot disrupts their story, and in part because Montaldo limits himself in the number of shot-countershot sequences he is willing to devote to the boxer and physician. In the film, Fadigati and Eraldo's first conversation occurs during a lunch shared with a number of the Ferrarese students. In this sequence, a carnation

³⁴ Pronger 1990, 135.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 135.

³⁶ Sedgwick 1993, 80.

³⁷ Sedgwick 1985, 198.

centerpiece functions as linking object between alternating shots of Eraldo and Fadigati in close-up, as they discuss the virtues and vices of boxing. However, this linking object also serves to separate them, a constant visual reminder of the distance the table puts between them. The presence of their dining companions also inhibits any intimacy. In fact, the only shot-countershot sequence of Fadigati and Eraldo where other people are not present occurs during their aforementioned picnic, but even here the dynamic lacks any real charge, as Fadigati leans nonchalantly against a tree in seated position and Eraldo lies recumbent, literally at Fadigati's feet. Throughout the sequence any gaze shared between them is averted, as Montaldo oddly defers their interaction to Eraldo's hand as he touches Fadigati's shoe. Their first shot-countershot encounter in the film was equally out of kilter, stressing the unevenness of their relationship, with Eraldo lying down on the luggage rack above Fadigati in the train. Leaning over into the intimacy of a close reciprocal gaze, Eraldo's upside-down face plays upon the Freudian concept of homosexuality as inversion. At this point, Montaldo emphasizes an undercurrent of both eroticism and power by having Eraldo get a light for his cigarette and then blowing the smoke into Fadigati's face in a provocative manner. Montaldo ensures that his audience notices this moment by including the reaction shots of both Fadigati and Eraldo's travelling companions. Nevertheless, such a moment is a far cry from the abrasive scene on the train in Bassani's novel when Delilieri asks the throat doctor in the presence of the other students to accompany him to the toilet and examine his crotch in an explicit allusion to fellatio. Bassani's Delilieri has no investment in the cautious conformism that shapes both Montaldo's characterization of Eraldo and limits the shooting style of his film. Bassani's narrator may advocate Ferrarese discretion: «Bastava anche dire che Fadigati era 'così', che era di 'quelli'»³⁸, but Delilieri does not hesitate to use slang and call Fadigati «un vecchio finocchio»³⁹. Bassani's demonized Delilieri is very much the «angelo nero»⁴⁰ described by film critic Mino Argentieri or the «ideal torturer»⁴¹ delineated by Radcliffe-Umstead. Bassani's Delilieri «lasciò cadere su Fadigati un'occhiata piena di disprezzo»⁴², «lo guardò come si guarda uno scarafaggio»⁴³, yelling at

³⁸ Bassani 1980, 174.

³⁹ *Ivi*, 181.

⁴⁰ In *Rinascita*, 17 ottobre 1987.

⁴¹ Radcliffe-Umstead 1987, 81.

⁴² Bassani 1980, 189.

⁴³ *Ivi*, 193.

him and humiliating him before the other students.

Deliliers' virulent homophobia predictably reveals his own latency. Near the end of the novel, Nino Bottechiari receives a letter from Deliliers not from France, as was expected, but from a nearby town where Deliliers is now «alle costole di qualche nuovo facoltoso finocchio»⁴⁴. Deliliers' internal struggle between self and other, ego and alter ego, homophobe and homosexual, finds its cinematic correlative in Montaldo's use of the mirror shot. This dynamic has already been discussed in reference to the distorted features of Nora's would-be Aryan alter ego reflected in the silver plate. In the relationship between Fadigati and Eraldo, this motif is introduced when the doctor first gazes upon Eraldo in the gym. Self-consciousness of the fixity of his gaze causes him to turn from Eraldo to Eraldo's reflection in the gym mirror, and from Eraldo's ego as performer of aggressive masculinity to Eraldo's alter ego as latent homosexual. In one of the most visually peculiar moments in the film, Eraldo and Fadigati share a mirror shot sequence in which neither notices his own reflection or that of the other, though both the characters and their reflected images are in full view of Montaldo's camera. The scene arguably reveals the function of the alter ego in an environment, namely the public space of an open street, which demands that their ego, or social self, be in charge. The moment involves a power exchange in the form of money, as Eraldo returns to Fadigati the wallet he has dropped in the restaurant. Montaldo justly provides a close-up of this wallet, as it is money that will determine much of their relationship. In contrast to the affluent Fadigati whose Venetian origins, failure to marry, and socially repressed homosexuality all contribute to his relative isolation in Ferrara, Eraldo's lower class status prevents him from negotiating a place among the local society «che conta». As Schneider rightly notes, «Deliliers too is an outsider»⁴⁵, part French, part orphan, not long an inhabitant of Ferrara, and all poor. Montaldo's film creates a hierarchy of vehicles, as Eraldo, seemingly without a bicycle, must catch a ride to the train station from a girl willing to pedal his extra weight. Fadigati passes through this group of bicycling youths in a car, foreshadowing his later compensatory purchase of the Alfa Romeo convertible for previously bicycle-less Eraldo. This gift catapults Eraldo on the vehicle hierarchy beyond the level of his bicycle-owning classmates, even as his new wardrobe catapults him from the adolescence of hand-

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, 225.

⁴⁵ Schneider 1986, 93.

me-down winter woolen knickers to the adult affluence of linen summer trousers and fashionable jackets. After all, Eraldo is a student, an *alumnus* in Latin. The ancient Roman role of the *alumnus*, to whom «paying court meant naming a figure»⁴⁶, entailed rendering services for material remuneration. This role places Eraldo in an untenable subordinate position, subject to his benefactor, surrogate patriarch, and potential ravisher. Mario Mieli has claimed that the Italian male prostitute «soddisfaceva i suoi bisogni sessuali facendosi pagare, dando così una giustificazione economica alla sua frocciaggine»⁴⁷. Fadigati paradoxically rescues Eraldo from financial impotence only to implicate him in the symbolic castration of a homosexual relationship. When fiscal compensation fails Eraldo as phallic compensation, he punches Fadigati in an overdetermined display of hypermasculinity. Mieli's assessment of the psychosocial dynamics of the murder of Pier Paolo Pasolini at the hands of a male prostitute (and probably others) proves eerily appropriate to the situation in Bassani. Mieli notes, «Picchiando, punendo Pasolini, il ragazzo era convinto inconsciamente di punire e ricacciare indietro la sua omosessualità»⁴⁸. In punching Fadigati, Eraldo insists upon their gender differentiation into the categories of active and passive, masculine and effeminate, with a vengeance, thus physically contradicting Fadigati's assertion that their relationship was somehow 'shared'.

Eraldo breaks only one lens of the doctor's gold-rimmed eyeglasses, shown in close-up in Montaldo's film. The two lenses argue for a duality of vision, that of the self and the other, the ego and the alter ego, the open homosexual and the closeted homophobe. When the glasses are broken, the vision of the open homosexual is impaired. From this point on in the film Fadigati can see only through the lens of his own internalized homophobia. In accord with the dictates of eugenics, in the late 1930s and early 1940s Italian homosexuals were increasingly sent into internal exile on various remote islands of the south, literally left in isolation. Only «la denuncia anonima» was necessary to prompt the trial of a homosexual that could result in a five-year prison sentence⁴⁹. However ominous such a prospect might have been for Fadigati, it is not his homosexuality, but his acquiescence to the petty bourgeois and Fascist Ferrarese value system, that condemns him to suicide. He is no potential island survivor, as other

⁴⁶ Veyne 1987, 33.

⁴⁷ Mieli 1977, 153.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ Goretti-Giartosio 2006, VII.

internally exiled homosexuals were. He tells the narrator: «Dopo ciò che è accaduto l'estate scorsa, non mi riesce più di tollerarmi [...], certe volte non sopporto di farmi la barba davanti allo specchio»⁵⁰. Fadigati can no longer accept the mirror image of the alter ego of his open homosexuality, but neither can he return to the former invisibility of the closet.

Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D.* (1952) concludes with its isolated protagonist looking for the dog that has been his only point of connection, his only source of affection throughout the film. This poignant metaphor prompts Gilberto Perez to argue, «No other work so chillingly conveys the mood of suicide»⁵¹. Montaldo's *Gli occhiali d'oro* visually echoes De Sica's masterpiece when Fadigati searches for the dog that once befriended him and has now abandoned him. This intertextual connection with De Sica's work further alludes to Fadigati's own 'mood of suicide'. Montaldo's film and Bassani's novella thus conform to the heterosexually determined paradigm whereby homosexuality has been considered an unlivable condition. Vito Russo even concludes his landmark study *The Celluloid Closet* with a necrology of 39 homosexual characters from major films who die ideologically predictable – but often narratively bizarre – deaths⁵². Fully a third of these commit suicide, and only one survives to old age. In traditional cinema, then, heterocentric constructs of gender have dictated that «the only good homosexual is a dead homosexual», or at least an invisible and/or inactive homosexual. In its own virtually invisible treatment of homosexual intimacy, Montaldo's overly 'discreet and delicate' film is ultimately impaired by the same strategy of containment that Fascism pursued and that Bassani's novella, despite its conformity to a heterosexist narrative paradigm, does indict in the death of Fadigati.

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⁵⁰ Bassani 1980, 234.

⁵¹ Perez 2000, 79.

⁵² See Russo 1987, 347-349.

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