

“Quando si ama qualcuno lo si ama per qualcun altro”: Francesca Comencini’s Retelling of Svevo’s *Zeno*

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After completing two documentary films in 1997, *Elsa Morante* and *Shakespeare a Palermo* (about dramatist Carlo Cecchi), Francesca Comencini made a turn toward dramatic narrative, following in the pathway of her father Luigi, renowned director of *commedie all’italiana*.¹ The film she then made, *Le parole di mio padre* (2001), was an adaptation of two chapters of Italo Svevo’s *La coscienza di Zeno* (hereafter *Zeno*).² During her eighteen years in France (1982–2000), Comencini reconnected with her native Italy by reading the classics of Italian literature, and *Zeno* struck a particular chord. She was especially drawn to the chapters, “La morte di mio padre,” and, “La storia del mio matrimonio,” which center on Zeno’s relationship with his father, his father’s death, Zeno’s self-introduction to Triestine businessman Giovanni Malfenti, his decision to marry one of the Malfenti sisters, and his precipitous and error-prone relations with Ada, Alberta, and finally Augusta Malfenti, whom he marries. As readers of the novel know, it is (with the exception of the one-page “Prefazione” written by Dottor S.) ostensibly the diary of Zeno Cosini, which Zeno has delivered to Dottor S., his psychoanalyst. The text is organized by topics (smoking, the death of his father, his marriage, his mistress, his business life, psychoanalysis) and therefore does not follow a consistent narrative chronology.

In the film inspired by *Zeno*, Comencini does not aim for a faithful mimetic adaptation of the novel but provides a deeply personal response to a book she had studied at some length. A study of the film based solely on its status as an adaptation of a literary work, therefore, would be of limited interest.³ As a creative expansion of certain key themes that attracted Comencini in *Zeno*, *Le parole di mio padre* is a film largely about feelings, in particular the difficulty and elusiveness of love, whether for a mate or a father. The film presents the father both as he is in reality and as a totem of what the child aspires to achieve and cannot. Thus, it deals with experiences of failure, recognition, reconciliation, and the reformulation of one’s goals after disappointment.⁴ The two fathers in the film are essentially opposites: Zeno’s father—who is

¹ *Elsa Morante*, directed by Francesca Comencini (1997; France 3: Paris, France) and *Shakespeare a Palermo*, directed by Francesca Comencini (1997; ARTE TV: Strasbourg, France).

² Italo Svevo, *La coscienza di Zeno*, ed. Bruno Maier (Milan: Dall’Oglio, 1976). The actors portraying the characters discussed in this paper are Fabrizio Rongione (Zeno), Chiara Mastroianni (Ada), Mimmo Calopresti (Giovanni), Claudia Coli (Alberta), Viola Graziosi (Augusta), and Toni Bertorelli (Zeno’s father). *Le parole di mio padre*, directed by Francesca Comencini (2001; Rome, Italy: Cecchi Gori Home Video, 2002) DVD.

³ Comencini’s film is not a period piece like Sandro Bolchi’s 1988 telefilm, *La coscienza di Zeno*, set in early 20th century Trieste. *La coscienza di Zeno*, directed by Sandro Bolchi (1988: Rome, Italy, RAI 2). *Le parole di mio padre* is set in Rome in the current day and, as I explore in this essay, not only restricts itself to a small portion of Svevo’s text, but takes considerable liberties in reimagining, reinventing, and expanding the key characters.

⁴ See “Cinema: Comencini, il mio *Zeno* forte e moderno,” *AdnKronos*, last modified May 7, 2001, http://www1.adnkronos.com/Archivio/AdnAgenzia/2001/05/07/Spettacolo/Cinema/CINEMA-COMENCINI-IL-MIO-ZENO-FORTE-E-MODERNO_180300.php: “Io ho cercato di non fare un film psicologico—dice la regista—. Ho sempre visto questi padri come dei totem. Sono irraggiungibili, la loro assenza crea un disfacimento, la loro presenza una serie di impossibilità” [“I tried not to make a psychological film—the director says—. I always saw

dead but returns as a phantom in memory—is enclosed in his illness and hostile toward his son. The father of the Malfenti girls, Giovanni, is well spoken, good humored, and vital, projecting himself forward into life. Nevertheless, for the Malfenti daughters, their father remains a formidable model to which they must measure up and a reflection of their fear of failure.

While there are a number of direct citations from *Zeno* in the film, the mode of diegesis is radically changed: the internal dialogue of the narrator in *Zeno*, with its alternating levels of remembering and narrating, is replaced by a filmic narration in which Zeno is represented externally along with the other characters, with only occasional voice-over internal monologues.⁵ With respect to the plot, Comencini begins the film with the death of Zeno's father, which occurs at the end of Chapter 4, "La morte di mio padre," then intercuts earlier scenes from that chapter throughout the film, which follows the general timeline of Chapter 5, "La storia del mio matrimonio." Comencini invents a number of episodes and plot lines concerning Ada, Alberta, and Augusta Malfenti, involving their relationships with their father and Zeno. These scenes complement Zeno's cultivation of a filial relation with Giovanni, who assists him in his entry into the working world—as he does in the book—but also serves as a mentor and friend. In this latter respect, Giovanni is quite distinct from the overweight and cunning *commerciante* in *Zeno*.

As he does in Svevo's novel, Zeno hastily decides that he will marry one of Giovanni's daughters (not knowing which) and proceeds to court the eldest, Ada, considering her to be his great love. When this is eventually unsuccessful, he turns to Alberta and asks her to marry him; when she refuses, he proposes to Augusta, whom he marries at the end of the film. While this general schema is present, virtually everything else is changed. In *Zeno*, the protagonist's serial encounters with the sisters are caricatural and viewed solely through the filter of Zeno's narration. In the film, the sisters are fully developed characters interacting with one another, Zeno, and their father. Thematically, one could say that the cognitive and aesthetic pursuits of the characters reflect those of the director, who, in formulating a filmic enunciation about the difficulties of love, devises a most original and appropriate cinematic technique.

As the narrator in *Zeno*, Zeno Cosini controlled the story autocratically, shifting from present to past and back, lying to himself and to others, obscuring historical events, confusing relationships. Though Comencini preserves certain aspects of Svevo's protagonist—his uncertainty and awkwardness—she eliminates his rhetoric of self-sabotage and solipsism. In Comencini's view, Zeno is a universal character of modernity, a man in pursuit of his identity through self-analysis, a process that ironically tends to block him from acting: "Chiunque viva quest'epoca è infatti alla ricerca della propria identità, sente il bisogno di una autoanalisi, vive una soggettività quasi ipertrofica che impedisce l'azione: tutte queste cose sono il fondamento del carattere dell'uomo moderno" ["Actually anyone living in this epoch is in search of their own

these fathers as totems. They are unreachable, their absence creates an undoing, their presence a series of impossibilities"].

⁵ Regarding Svevo's language in *Zeno*, see Giacomo Devoto, *Il linguaggio d'Italia* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1977), 321: "Per ragioni di contenuto, investì [...] i problemi dei piani del racconto, con la differenza però che alla alternativa del narrato e il dialogato, propria del Verga, sostituì la alternativa fra il narrato e il ricordato, fra la 3^a e la 1^a persona, con un avvicinamento epico-lirico che non ebbe in Italia altri confronti" ["As regards content, he invested in the problems of the levels of the story, with the difference being that he substituted for the alternatives of narration and dialogue, proper to Verga, the alternatives of narration and memory, between the 3rd and 1st persons, with a rapprochement between epic and lyric that had no comparisons in Italy"].

identity, feels the need for self-analysis and lives an almost hypertrophic subjectivity that impedes action: all these things are the foundation of the character of modern man”].⁶

As Comencini undertakes to represent this alienation, one of her most successful strategies is the juxtaposition of narrative and non-narrative elements. Given that the narrative (including episodes taken from Svevo and those invented by the director) is fairly scant, there are numerous opportunities to explore non-narrative elements, which largely concern the emotional lives of the characters. These affective elements are produced by the atmosphere and texture of the film, its color, mood, and tone. Comencini generates these affects with techniques such as long tracking shots, close-ups (especially of hands and faces), interior scenes without dialogue, asynchronous montage, and a pronounced use of the negative spaces of silence and darkness. The integration of narrative and non-narrative elements is also facilitated by the leitmotif of artmaking. Each of the characters is involved in the practice and appreciation of art. Giovanni Malfenti owns a contemporary art gallery where Zeno is briefly employed. Zeno is a translator, fluent in Russian, and keeps a journal. Ada is an actress. Alberta is a photographer. Augusta is a potter. Anna displays her creativity by throwing a masquerade party for her friends. By foregrounding these aesthetic endeavors, Comencini makes the spectator conscious of the film’s own status as a self-referential artwork, or enunciation.

The abstract art works in Giovanni’s gallery do not function merely as background for the narrative; rather, these images are foregrounded, competing with the *mise-en-scène* when Zeno’s arrested gaze is reflected by the picture glass. Ada’s work on her role as Olga in a production of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* consumes her energy throughout the film, making it hard to distinguish between her problems and those of Olga, and rendering the theater itself less a dramatic site than one of internal conflict and reconciliation. When Augusta’s hands fumble at the potter’s wheel, the ruined project represents her failure to master the medium, but it is also a sign of the interruptive and erratic structure of the filmic narrative. When Augusta rushes into her father’s office with her latest painting, hoping for his approval (which she does not receive), one is reminded of the arduousness of the artistic process. If Zeno’s “art” is presumably that of writing (we see him in one scene writing in his journal in a café), far more prominent is his silent figure moving through dark and solitary spaces, as if in search of the light. It is in this latter, non-discursive capacity that Zeno is the clearest indicator of Comencini’s style, which avoids conventional narrative formulations in order to place into relief the filmic enunciation.

To speak of filmic enunciation is to address the work’s identity as a text, as “the traces within a cinematic discourse of the act generating that discourse.”⁷ By singling out the enunciatory quality of a film, one is able to distinguish style and technique from narrative; also, the communication between enunciator and enunciatee is distinguished from that between the narrator and narratee. In *Le parole di mio padre*, the enunciation is especially apparent in the non-narrative elements I have listed. If the plot unfolds via a realistic cinematic lexicon and *mise-en-scène*, this dramatization is regularly interrupted by unrealistic shots, often having a turbulent oneiric syntax. The effect of these segments is to create uncertainty in the spectator and

⁶ “Incontro con Francesca Comencini,” by Andrea De Candido, *Kinematrix.net*, accessed April 28, 2016, www.kinematrix.net/testi/int_comencini.htm.

⁷ Francesco Casetti, *Inside the Gaze: The Fiction Film and Its Spectator*, trans. Nell Andrew with Charles O’Brien, pref. Dudley Andrew, intro. Christian Metz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 135. See *ibid.*, 137: “The four figures involved in the enunciative act [are] enunciator, enunciatee, narrator, narratee.”

promote identification with the emotional experiences of the characters, notably the feelings of fear, (self-)doubt, and ambivalence. By foregrounding the enunciatory and non-narrative elements of the filmic discourse, therefore, Comencini succeeds in arriving at perceptual equivalents for what are essentially inennarable conditions or manifestations of the unconscious.

In order to consider the significance of this deviation from conventional narrative discourse, I will draw on Jean-Francois Lyotard's theory of the "acinema," where "a-" has a privative value, making it the opposite of current, productive cinema.⁸ According to Lyotard, by foregrounding the material of the cinema, the practitioner of "acinema" rejects the lulling effects of commercial cinema and presents a "propagative" (as opposed to "sterile") libidinal economy. Specifically, the filmmaker places into relief the "skin" of the film—the "*pellicule*" or "specular wall" —in order to counter the industrial standard of a discursive cinema that engages in libidinal repression.⁹ In contrast to a purely representational cinema, acinema is indeterminate, an auroral or figural mode in which the screen becomes a privileged place for libidinal cathexis.

It would seem that *Le parole di mio padre* satisfies these criteria in a number of ways, beginning with its foregrounding of the filmic enunciation. This is already apparent in the opening titles, where Zeno is seen walking at night in the rain through blurred images of reflected lights, accompanied by the soundtrack of Bob Dylan's 1989 song, "Series of Dreams."¹⁰ The darkly oneiric tone that is established continues in the opening scenes, which present the antefact of the film through flashbacks of Zeno's father's illness and death. These and later scenes in the Cosini home establish Zeno's struggle to reconcile himself with his father. The dark and cluttered rooms constitute a place of recollection and mourning, an analogue for the unconscious. Not coincidentally, the home is also the site of Zeno's erotic encounters with Ada and Alberta, which become examples of what Lyotard refers to as the "jouissance" of acinema.¹¹

Significantly, the film's title—*Le parole di mio padre*—is drawn from a scene in the novel, set in the Cosini home, where a conversation in which Zeno's father spoke of himself as a man of great experience with much to convey to his son, were he only able, takes place: "Io non so perché non abbia chiamato subito il dottore. Invece debbo confessarlo con dolore e rimorso: considerai *le parole di mio padre* come dettate da una presunzione ch'io credevo di aver più volte constatata in lui" ["I don't know why I didn't call the doctor immediately. Instead, with sorrow and remorse, I must confess that I considered my father's words dictated by presumption, something I thought I'd observed in him several times"].¹² While this scene is not represented in the film, its sense of incommunication between father and child is a tangible motif, not simply in Zeno's struggle but in those of the Malfenti sisters as well. As the film develops, the meaning of its title—"the words of my father" —extends beyond the experience of one character and loses its sense of remorse, signifying by film's end a nonjudgmental and loving relationship between parent and child.

In support of the theoretical position outlined above, I would cite a number of episodes from the film. In the first of these, Giovanni Malfenti has asked Zeno to help him buy a birthday

⁸ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Acinema," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen, trans. Paisley N. Livingston in collaboration with the author (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 349–59.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 355.

¹⁰ "Series of Dreams," by Bob Dylan, *Oh Mercy*, Columbia Records, 1989.

¹¹ Lyotard, "Acinema," 350–51.

¹² Svevo, *Zeno*, 62. My emphasis. Trans., *Zeno's Conscience*, 42.

present for Augusta. He is considering a watch, but Zeno advises against it (saying, “Non è femminile” [“It’s not feminine”]) and suggests a framed lithograph of a young woman in Victorian dress. Giovanni follows Zeno’s suggestion, but he also buys the watch and gives it to Zeno as a gift, telling him he will need it for his work in Giovanni’s art gallery (Fig. 1).

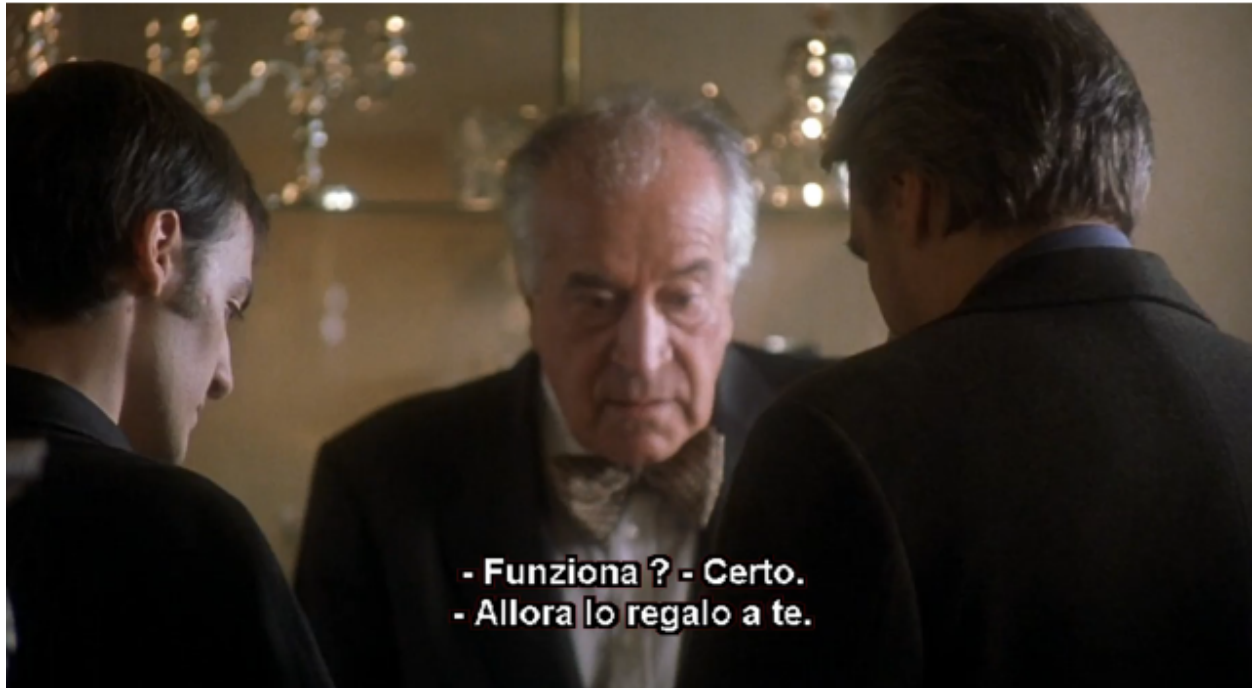


Figure 1. Giovanni Malfenti purchases a watch for Zeno. *Le parole di mio padre*, 2001; Rome, Italy: Cecchi Gori Home Video, 2002.

In this gesture Giovanni assumes the role of surrogate father figure for Zeno. The watch is a symbol of the measured time of the workday, of efficiency and practicality, that contrasts with the interior time of the conscience, the oppressive subjectivity that at this early point in the film is afflicting Zeno and separating him from meaningful relations with others.

The next day, Giovanni tells Zeno how Augusta’s birthday dinner went and describes his four daughters. As he does so, images of the young women appear on the screen, but not their faces. The viewer will see their faces only when Zeno sees them later that day when he arrives at the Malfenti house for dinner, having been invited by Giovanni. Zeno arrives early and is greeted by Anna, the youngest sister, and Augusta, the second oldest. When Zeno sees Augusta in her threadbare sweater, he thinks to himself, “Com’è vestita male” [“How shoddily she’s dressed”]. But his aversion is also a kind of attraction to Augusta’s homeliness. Indeed, as Augusta tells Zeno, she already feels familiar with him, having heard her father speak about him for years. A close-up of the slightly younger sister Alberta in this scene suggests that Alberta’s over-relaxed nature is hiding something troubling, perhaps a disturbed inner life. Then Zeno meets the eldest, Ada, to whom he is immediately attracted. Ada is an actress who has just returned from rehearsal where, as noted, she is playing the role of Olga in *Three Sisters*. Seen as self-confident by her sisters, Ada is deeply insecure. At the basis of her crisis is her relation with her father, from whom she feels an undue pressure to succeed.

Zeno tells Ada at dinner that he can help her retranslate Chekhov's text, as he knows Russian. She is working hard on the opening monologue in which Olga remembers her father's death a year earlier. The parallel with Zeno's situation is obvious, and the particular speech, which we see Ada rehearse and later perform, is emblematic of her suffering and anxiety over her relationship with her father. After attending one of Ada's rehearsals, Zeno realizes he is in love with her. When the two next meet, at the Cosini home, Ada tells Zeno, "Mio padre mi ha parlato tanto di te" ["My father has spoken to me often about you"], at which point the two embrace and make love; after this, Ada confesses that she was afraid of Zeno long before meeting him, that she is unable to act properly in life, and that she is driven by the desire to err. In subsequent scenes, we see Zeno coming to call on Ada on three separate occasions and being turned away each time. He will persist, however, until the decisive scene of the soirée in the Malfenti home (discussed below). In terms of the theoretical position taken above, the entire sequence of Zeno and Ada's coming together, their lovemaking, and Ada's subsequent avoidance of Zeno, occurs on the 'skin' of the film, largely in dark spaces and without the benefit of diegetic explanation.

In the following sequence, Zeno establishes a friendship with Alberta, beginning with a chance evening encounter at a café. Alberta, too, is an artist—a photographer with a history of psychological problems. As she tells Zeno, she had begun photographing as part of her therapy but has now burned all her photographs but one: a self-portrait with her father, which she holds up for Zeno to see. In the saved image one has an emblem of Alberta's desperate desire to please her father, an emotion Zeno clearly understands; as he stares silently into her eyes, we are reminded us of his continued brooding over his father's death.

Alberta is jealous of Ada; she senses that she is the daughter her father did not want. Alberta conveys to Zeno her theory of photography, which is that when a photographer addresses a subject through the lens, she is always looking for someone else: "cerchi sempre un altro." The same impulse, she says, is true of love: "quando ami qualcuno lo fai per qualcun altro." A propos of this observation, Alberta accuses Zeno of falling in love with Ada because she resembles her father; she reminds Zeno that she, too, is the daughter of Giovanni Malfenti, implying that Zeno is also compensating for his failure to measure up to his father's expectations.

Alberta's rivalry with Ada will come to a head after Ada's dress rehearsal. After the performance to an appreciative crowd (that includes her father), Ada is warmly congratulated in the dressing room by Augusta and Zeno, but Alberta attacks her, saying she lacks sincerity and has no relationship with her character, Olga (Fig. 2). Shortly after this bitter fight, Alberta has a breakdown, takes an overdose of pills, and is rushed to the hospital. When Alberta has later returned from the hospital, she pays a visit to Zeno at the Cosini home. She lets herself in as he is sleeping, but soon they are embracing in a scene reminiscent of Zeno's erotic encounter with Ada. As with Ada, the lovemaking occurs only once. Shortly after this episode, Alberta apologizes to Ada about having insulted her, confessing that she has been sinking into depression, which she calls "la malattia di mio padre" ["my father sickness"]. As in the sequence concerning Zeno and Ada, here too a turbulent series of images take on the quality of a filmic enunciation.



Figure 2. Alberta criticizes Ada's portrayal of Olga. *Le parole di mio padre*, 2001; Rome, Italy: Cecchi Gori Home Video, 2002.

The stage is now set for Zeno and Augusta to come together. Though she was the first of the sisters to appear to Zeno (other than the young Anna), she has remained in the shadows, being more reserved and timid than her sisters. Augusta, too, practices an art form—ceramics—but in the one scene where we see her at the pottery wheel, the wet clay spins out of control: it is clear that the nurturing and supportive Augusta has another calling. Now that a year has passed since Zeno's first visit to the Malfenti home, it is again time to celebrate Augusta's birthday. She has asked her father to invite Zeno to the party, and Zeno has purchased a wristwatch as a gift (recalling Giovanni's gift to him a year earlier).

Augusta's party may be considered the culminating scene of the film. Here, Zeno insists on speaking to Ada privately (undeterred by the presence of her fiancé, Guido Speier); when he confesses his love for her, Ada replies that he is crazy and should leave her alone. Zeno then speaks to Alberta and asks if she could love him; she too refuses, saying that the two of them are too much alike. Finally, Augusta intervenes and confesses her love for Zeno, to which he replies, "No, ti prego. Stai scherzando" ["No, please. You must be joking"]. Whereas in *Zeno* it is Zeno Cosini who proposes marriage to Augusta, in *Le parole di mio padre*, it is Augusta Malfenti who has acquired agency and takes the lead; her action indicates that she has surmounted the challenges posed by the father figure that stands at the center of this film. In the next scene, the wedding day has arrived and Zeno is donning a tuxedo. As a sign of his having overcome the Oedipal struggle (his father, after all, had struck him violently as the final gesture of his life), he has a vision of his father walking down the street. Unlike the other memories and dreams of him that Zeno has had, all within the confines of the family home, now his father is outside, happy and free. Then, in the film's final scene, Zeno and Augusta are ascending a staircase to their wedding (Fig. 3), accompanied by Zeno's voice-over statement that he has realized love will

always be accompanied by doubt, and that is how it is meant to be.

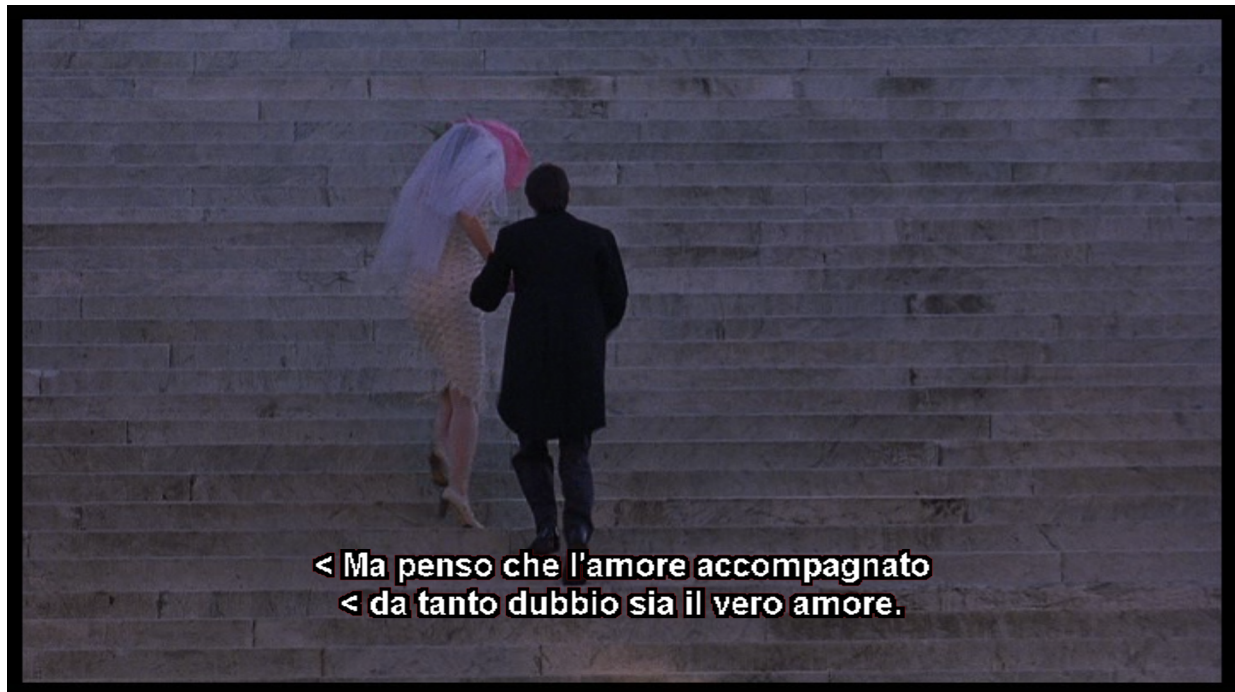


Figure 3. Augusta and Zeno on the way to their wedding ceremony. *Le parole di mio padre*, 2001; Rome, Italy: Cecchi Gori Home Video, 2002.

As is apparent from this analysis, the film's plot is fairly skeletal. This is appropriate for a film whose greater novelty lies in the richness of its non-narrative, atmospheric, and emotional components. If we recall that a filmic enunciation is successful when its textual nature is manifest to the enunciatee (who distinguishes between the enunciation and the narrative), the success of that process will depend on the efficacy of the cinematographic technique. In essence, this technique amounts to a privileging of negative space and avoidance of those conventional mimetic practices that guarantee narrative economy and lack of ambiguity. A clear indicator of this enunciatory technique is the persistent darkness of the film; even in its daytime scenes, the viewer is inside, in semi-lit interiors. These are epitomized by the heavy draperies of Zeno's father's apartment, which serve as an analogy for Zeno's inability to free himself of his grief and guilt. This setting is also the site of the two erotic encounters. Other such indicators are the lack of establishing shots, the use of blurring and close-ups, and the asynchronous montage that periodically interrupts the flow of chronological time. Lastly, there are numerous art-related props, from the theatrical stage set to the burned photographs to the paintings on display in Giovanni's gallery, that serve to reinforce the soul work that goes on during the artistic process. As noted above, this artistic work is undertaken in earnest, if often with less-than-satisfactory results. Insofar as the characters' pursuit of art and other *métiers* is undertaken for personal, even spiritual, reasons shrouded in mystery, the external signs of those labors tend to reflect Comencini's own artistic process and adoption of an oblique, non-discursive filmic language characterized more by interruption than continuity. Within this purview, the props and *objets*

d'art that cross the screen are emblems of the filmic enunciation, visual signs in which the psyche and libido are freed from the rigid structures of realistic representation.

As I have argued, the issues confronted by Comencini in adapting *La coscienza di Zeno* are multiple: they concern the selection of restricted segments of a long, complex novel and an expansion of certain dramatic nuclei in those chapters in a way that departs from the original text. The adaptation involves updating the setting to the present and relocating it to a different city, expanding the *dramatis personae* other than Zeno to the status of full characters, and using cinematic methods to convey the dramatic involvement of the characters in one another's lives, with special attention paid to the resolution of problems with the father figure. From the opening titles until the final scene, the use of sound and image is subjective and impressionistic, constituting a narrative syntax that is at once realistic and oneiric, that registers the minimal events of quotidian existence and the cathectic impulses of the characters.¹³

An apt description of this sort of cinematic dynamic and use of the moving image has been provided by film theorist Yvette Biro. Writing about the "turbulence" and "flow" that characterizes film time, Biro notes that while the "visual and narrative aspect" of films has received much study, far less attention has been paid to temporality, to the "rhythmic design" of the film, and the relation between film and music.¹⁴ Viewed in this light, film time is analogous to musical time in its departure from normal cause-and-effect logic. Such a departure is accomplished by the speeding up and slowing down of film time. Comencini's creative expansion of selected portions of *Zeno* is characterized by precisely such alterations of homogeneous chronological time, as perceived and shared by the characters. Not coincidentally, the catalysts that induce these subjective sequences of turbulence and flow in the film are related to cathectic and libidinal impulses, and to the production of art, as art offers an alternative temporality and logic to that of productive, bourgeois existence.

Le parole di mio padre is a film that repeatedly draws one into the darkness, into the closed spaces of the psyche in order to feel, to empathize with, and to participate in the search for identity, and ultimately to grasp the opposite of these negative impulses. This process is evident in the film's conclusion when the spirit of Zeno's father walks smiling through the Roman streets, and Zeno and Augusta move upward toward the light. In marrying Augusta, Zeno has recognized a warmth and familiarity that he earlier denied, a homeliness that dilutes his pain and recognizes his inherent goodness. *Le parole di mio padre* does not resolve itself in a tidy or concise ending, but it does posit the great potential of love. In *Zeno*, it is the elderly Zeno who looked back ironically at the uncertainties of love:

—Chissà se l'amo?

È un dubbio che m'accompagnò per tutta la vita e oggi di posso pensare che l'amore accompagnato da tanto dubbio sia il vero amore.

[“I wonder – do I love her?”

¹³ As a student of the cinema, Comencini is aware of the great revolution marked by neorealism and its offshoots, including a director like Federico Fellini whose blending of realism and the oneiric was less a break from neorealism than an actualization of a potential it clearly contained.

¹⁴ Yvette Biro, *Turbulence and Flow in Film: The Rhythmic Design*. trans. Paul Salamon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), xi.

This is a doubt that has accompanied me all through my life, and today I can believe that when love is accompanied by such doubt, it is true love.”¹⁵

In Comencini’s film, it is a still-young Zeno who makes this voice-over statement as we see Zeno and Augusta climb the stairs to their wedding:

“Chissà se l’amo?” mi chiedevo e mi chiedo ancora. Ch’è un dubbio che mi accompagnerà forse per tutta la mia vita. Ma oggi penso che l’amore accompagnato da tanto dubbio sia il vero amore.

[“I wonder – do I love her?” I asked myself and I still ask myself. This is a doubt that will perhaps accompany me all through my life. But today I believe that when love is accompanied by such doubt, it is true love.”]

The use of the future tense (“accompagnerà”) is critical, as love’s prospects are unhindered by the presence of doubt and are extended indefinitely into the future.¹⁶

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¹⁵ Svevo, *Zeno*, 166; trans., *Zeno’s Conscience*, 141.

¹⁶ Speaking of her film in 2000, Comencini saw Svevo as a father figure for her generation. See “Comencini: il mio Zeno è un manifesto politico,” interview by Maria Pia Fusco, *La Repubblica*, November 17, 2000, <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2000/11/17/comencini-il-mio-zeno-un-manifesto-politico.html>: “L’avevo studiato a scuola, i racconti soprattutto, adoravo ‘L’ultima sigaretta’. Poi, a Parigi, ho avuto un desiderio di letteratura italiana, ho letto tutti i suoi libri e me ne sono appropriata, è come se ne avessi fatto una cosa mia. Vedo Svevo come una figura di padre, per me e per la mia generazione. Con questo film vorrei consegnarlo alle generazioni di oggi” [“I had studied him in school, especially the short stories, I loved ‘The Last Cigarette’. Then, in Paris, I had a desire for Italian literature, I read all his books and appropriated them, it’s as if I had created from them something of my own”].

Filmography

Elsa Morante, directed by Francesca Comencini. 1997; France 3: Paris, France.

La coscienza di Zeno, directed by Sandro Bolchi. 1988: Rome, Italy, RAI 2.

Le parole di mio padre, directed by Francesca Comencini. 2001; Rome, Italy: Cecchi Gori Home Video, 2002. DVD.

Shakespeare a Palermo, directed by Francesca Comencini. 1997; ARTE TV: Strasbourg, France.