

What Did Annarella See? “Il bisogno di conoscere con ogni medium” and the Hermeneutics of the Gaze in Carlo Damasco’s “Un paio di occhiali”¹

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Quella della Ortese è una scrittura molto visiva, piena di immagini e di sguardi, di punti di vista: cose, queste, che hanno molto a che fare con il cinema, arte dello sguardo.²

Anna Maria Ortese’s “Un paio di occhiali,”³ the short story that opens the collection entitled *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, has both the inaugural force of an archetype and the revisionary power of an adaptation. It is set in Santa Maria in Portico, one of the slums of Naples, in the fictional “Vicolo della Cupa.” The time is identified as “l’anno che il re era andato via,” namely, 1946, when the monarchy was abolished in Italy. The protagonist is ten-year old Eugenia, who lives in a squalid basement apartment of a tenement building with her parents, Peppino and Rosa Quaglia, her two younger siblings, Pasqualino and the newborn Teresella, and Peppino’s unmarried sister, Nunziata. Two of Eugenia’s older sisters, Carmela and Luisella, have left the home for the convent and are about to become nuns. With balconies opening onto an inner courtyard, the building’s floors host multiple social groups: on the top floor lives stingy Marquise D’Avanzo, who owns the building and makes a profit by renting out the lower floors and exacting services from the Quaglia family. In the middle, one finds Cavalier Amodio and the Greborio sisters, with their servant Lina Tarallo. Moving down the social ladder and towards the Quaglias’ cave-like dwelling, one meets Mariuccia, the diminutive doorwoman with Rapunzel-like hair. As Lucia Re points out, “In the different floors and corresponding social levels of the building, [Ortese] portrays a microcosm, a stratified cross-section of the vast reality of Naples’ infamous *vicoli* or

¹ I am grateful to Gian Maria Annovi (USC), Lucia Re (UCLA), and Cosetta Seno (University of Colorado, Boulder) for their insightful feedback on an earlier version of this essay.

² Carlo Damasco, “Un paio di occhiali,” in *Anna Maria Ortese: Cinema*, ed. Matilde Tortora and Catherine McGilvray (Atripalda: Edizioni Laceno, 2010), 85–86, 85.

³ Ortese wrote “Un paio di occhiali” in May 1949, in Naples. Under the original title of “Ottomila lire per gli occhi di Eugenia” [Eight Thousand Liras for Eugenia’s Eyes], the short story appeared in the journal *Omnibus*, and was then included as the opening story of the volume *Il mare non bagna Napoli* (1953). For a detailed analysis of the publication history and critical reception of both the short story and the volume as a whole, see Lucia Re, “Clouds in Front of My Eyes: Ortese’s Poetics of the Gaze in ‘Un Paio di occhiali’ and *Il mare non bagna Napoli*,” in *Anna Maria Ortese: Celestial Geographies*, ed. Gian Maria Annovi and Flora Ghezzi (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 2015), 35–77. In “Clouds,” Re provides a skillful reading of the imagery of vision in *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, and in “Un paio di occhiali” specifically. Re demonstrates how “Eugenia’s blurred, imprecise vision [...] becomes metatextual, a metaphoric key to the writer’s non-realistic visionary poetics, a deliberate act of an alternative vision that seeks to bring authenticity, intimacy, and physical proximity back to the centre of human relations: nearsightedness, thus, becomes a cognitive force” (Flora Ghezzi, “Introduction,” in *Anna Maria Ortese: Celestial Geographies*, 3–31, 15). I am indebted to Re’s analysis in my own reading of Damasco’s short film, particularly in light of Re’s suggestion that nearsightedness is both literally and metaphorically “not an endured disability, an incurable condition that causes pain and embarrassment and is only worsened by time; it is instead a choice, a deliberate ‘act’ of nearsightedness [...] Only this renewed, humble act of looking up close can restore authenticity and humanness to vision” (Re, “Clouds,” 68).

alleyways, focusing on the life of the exploited poor and those who are, literally and figuratively, above them.”⁴

The short-story’s positioning, at the outset of Ortese’s collection, speaks of points of origin and privileged beginnings, and sets the tone for all the stories that follow.⁵ However, in doing so, “Un paio di occhiali” also harks back to a space that predates its own origin, making it dependent on and yet subversive of other foundational narratives, or hypotexts. In accordance with Edward Said’s reflections on the notion of beginning, “Un paio di occhiali,” is, then, “the first step in the intentional production of meaning” as the creation of difference out of preexisting traditions.⁶ As a complex beginning—one that both announces and challenges its own originality—“Un paio di occhiali” also authorizes subsequent texts, inviting them to come to terms with what preceded them. Italian director Carlo Damasco’s short film, “Un paio di occhiali” (2001), is one those texts⁷—an adaptation of the third degree, so to speak, one that uses the cinematic medium to comment on the mediated knowledge afforded by multiple acts of storytelling, each of them constituting “the point at which, in any given work, the [artist] departs from all other works.”⁸

Originality, in this perspective, exists as a measure of the interpreter’s engagement with a repository of narrative sources awaiting activation and transformation, in a relationship of “either continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both” (Said, 3). In a 2008 conversation with Adolfo Fattori entitled “Il bisogno di conoscere con ogni medium,” Damasco replied to Fattori’s question about his indebtedness to Ortese with these words:

Il problema della fedeltà al testo nella trasposizione da un linguaggio all’altro, in questo caso dalla narrativa al cinema, non mi è mai interessato. Il racconto della Ortese è stato da me molto rimaneggiato, sono state tagliate scene, personaggi, aggiunti altri e, soprattutto, cambiato il finale. Eppure credo che il senso profondo del racconto, l’insopportabilità della realtà, sia tutto lì.⁹

Damasco defines adaptation as a “need to know” (*bisogno di conoscere*) and positions himself as the de-coder and re-coder of a “deep meaning”—the unbearable of reality—that circulates below the surface variations from one adaptation to the next. Damasco argues against surface fidelity as the practice that evaluates an adaptation in terms of its likeness to the original—its closeness to the precursor text. However, rather than refuting the fidelity argument altogether, Damasco seems to support a notion of “deep fidelity,” which comes with the belief that a work

⁴ Re, “Clouds,” 54.

⁵ Re notes that the story “is more than just a beginning, constituting rather a sort of musical *ouverture* through which some of the major recurrent themes of the book and of Ortese’s poetics are introduced [...] The overall meaning and aesthetic significance of the book can only be grasped [...] in light of this inaugural story” (“Clouds,” 35).

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention & Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 5. In Said’s words: “beginning is *making* or *producing* difference; but [...] difference which is the result of combining the already-familiar with the fertile novelty of human work in language” (Said, *Beginnings*, xvii).

⁷ Carlo Damasco (b. 1956) is an author, actor, director, and translator. He wrote scripts for and directed numerous documentaries and short films, including “Un paio di occhiali.” Produced by Thule and distributed by Bananafish, the short film was presented in the series “Corto Cortissimo” at the 2001 Venice Biennale.

⁸ Said, *Beginnings*, 3.

⁹ Adolfo Fattori, “Carlo Damasco, il bisogno di conoscere con ogni medium,” *Quaderni d’altri tempi* 16 (2008): 1–2, 1.

may contain an “originary core” or a “kernel of meaning” that the skilled adapter unearths and preserves while still engaging in a plethora of auteurish interventions and creative variations.¹⁰

Rather than placing an essential meaning as immanent to the text, I will argue that Damasco’s understanding is in and of itself a *production* of meaning that does not preexist his hermeneutical engagement and results from his situated encounter with Ortese’s short story. In other words, Damasco’s adaptation activates one of the potential articulations of Ortese’s narrative as it intersects with its own hypotexts and as it confronts Damasco’s own interpretive efforts of both “masking and unveiling” his sources.¹¹ And if Damasco chooses the trope of the “insopportabilità della realtà” as the connective tissue between Ortese’s narrative and his own cinematic adaptation, this trope generates different options of “being in the world” (Heidegger’s *In-der-Welt-sein*) for Eugenia and Annarella, the respective protagonists of short story and film. It is upon this contextualized and historicized notion of being in the world that Damasco’s adaptation generates a powerful reflection on Ortese’s estranged and estranging gaze and the revolutionary, if veiled, knowledge it envisioned.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle famously discussed the notion of “plot” as defining “the structuring of events” in a narrative. A tragic action is always “complete and whole” and the whole is that which has “a beginning, a middle, and an end.”¹² In its essential structure, the closed plot of “Un paio di occhiali” conforms to the post-Aristotelian notions of the unity of place, time, and action. Eugenia’s compressed story “begins at sunrise, and takes place in less than twenty-four hours.”¹³ In accordance with the function of “peripety,” as the “change to the opposite in the action being performed, as stated, and this [...] in accordance with probability or necessity,”¹⁴ Eugenia’s coveted gift, the prescription glasses that promise to reveal that “il mondo, fuori, era bello, bello assai,”¹⁵ turn out to be instruments of horror and disillusionment, as they show a world steeped in abjection and poverty. The Aristotelian recognition, which is the result of peripety, “a shift from ignorance to knowledge,”¹⁶ engenders the opposite result of what was desired.

Drawing from Re’s essay, which pointed out that Ortese’s “narrative style and [...] carefully constructed Aristotelian structure [...] imbue the story of simple, apparently insignificant and common people with the moving intensity and pathos of an ancient tragedy about noble heroes,”¹⁷ I move to consider Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* as one of the foundational narratives that Ortese subverts in her short story. In *Oedipus Rex*, King Oedipus fears that the prophecy claiming that he would kill his father and sleep with his mother may prove to be true. The old messenger who has come to Thebes thinking that he will reassure the king eventually brings about the recognition that Oedipus has indeed fulfilled the awful prophecy and broken the taboos of incest and parricide. Oedipus’ clear vision of his past actions produces the sense of guilt and horror that prompts him to blind himself.

In “Un paio di occhiali,” the spectacles and the insufferable knowledge they afford similarly create a sense of stunned rejection in both Eugenia and Annarella. However, the essential nodes

¹⁰ Robert Stam, “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation,” in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 54–76, 57.

¹¹ Keith Cohen, “Eisenstein’s Subversive Adaptation,” in *The Classic American Novel and the Movies*, ed. Gerald Peary and Roger Shatzkin (New York: Ungar, 1977), 239–256, 255.

¹² Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcom Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 13.

¹³ Re, “Clouds,” 55.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 18.

¹⁵ Ortese, “Un paio,” 19.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 18.

¹⁷ Re, “Clouds,” 55.

of Ortese's story also underscore the eloquent variations included in her masterful orchestration of the tragic paradigm. With these variations, questions begin to push against the limits of the archetypal plot. What is the taboo that Eugenia breaks, unbeknownst to herself? What is she guilty of? There is no incest, real or symbolic, in Eugenia's tale. Transitioning from the realm of myth to that of history, the taboo that Eugenia breaks with the aid of her aunt Nunziata consists, more modestly, of her failing to respect socio-economic boundaries. This is the rule of the "ognuno nel suo rango" as expressed by Marchesa D'Avanzo, whom Eugenia innocently sees in "un aspetto maestoso e benigno che [la] incantava"¹⁸ but who charges the family three thousand liras for "quel terraneo dove tutti si erano ammalati" (20).

The outlandish expenditure of "ottomila lire vive vive" ("Un paio," 16) to purchase the spectacles is the infraction that causes the "beguilingly innocent" Eugenia to fall from Eden.¹⁹ Upon being thrust into the realm of history, Eugenia comes to understand the difference between good and evil, wealth and poverty, justice and exploitation. While, in the face of the wounds of history, Ortese emphasizes the role of community and compassion in the final choral scene of "Un paio di occhiali," Damasco instead focuses on a new way of being in the world for Annarella, one that points to the role of art as the space to transcend the limits of the Self toward a novel way of understanding reciprocity and attaining knowledge.

In his short format (the film runs for about sixteen minutes), Damasco enhances the tragic unity of Ortese's short story. He essentializes and condenses the plot even further than Ortese, eliminating a number of characters and episodes. The short film removes Eugenia's interactions with Marchesa D'Avanzo, and her trip to Don Vincenzo, "il tabaccaio," to buy candies for her siblings, Teresella and Pasqualino. Damasco also cuts Eugenia's encounter with the boy Luigino, who has skipped school to enjoy the sunshine. These are the episodes in Ortese's story where Eugenia has a sense, albeit perceived through the clouds of her myopia, of a different world outside of the *basso* where she lives:

Alzando in alto i suoi occhi sporgenti, scorse quel bagliore caldo, azzurro, ch'era il cielo, e sentì, senza però vederla chiaramente, la gran festa che c'era intorno. Carretti, uno dietro l'altro; grossi camion con americani vestiti di giallo che si sporgevano dal finestrino, biciclette che sembrava rotolassero. In alto, i balconi erano tutti ingombri di cassette fiorite, e alle inferriate penzolavano, come gualdrappe di cavallo, come bandiere, coperte imbottite gialle e rosse, straccetti celesti di bambini, lenzuola, cuscini e materasse esposti all'aria, e si snodavano le corde dei canestri che scendevano in fondo al vicolo per ritirare la verdura o il pesce offerto dai venditori ambulanti. Benché il sole non toccasse che i balconi più alti [...] e il resto non fosse che ombra e immondizia, si presentiva là dietro, l'enorme festa della primavera. E pur così piccola e scialba, legata come un topo al fango del suo cortile, Eugenia cominciava a respirare con una certa fretta, come se quell'aria, quella festa e tutto quell'azzurro ch'erano sospesi sul quartiere dei poveri, fossero anche cosa sua.²⁰

¹⁸ Ortese, "Un paio," 20.

¹⁹ Sharon Wood, "Anna Maria Ortese and the Art of the Real," in *Italian Women's Writing, 1860–1994* (London: Athlone, 1995), 170.

²⁰ Ortese, "Un paio," 23–24. The same "festa" is captured by Eugenia's gaze as she looks toward the Via Roma from the optometrist's shop window. The corrective lenses allow her to focus for the first time on the world outside. In this case, Eugenia is an outsider, a mere spectator, gazing in wonder at a parade of opulence and magic: "Sul marciapiede passavano, nitidissime, appena più piccole del normale, tante persone ben vestite: signore con abiti di

Unlike Ortese's story, Damasco's short film, shot in black and white, provides no escape into the colorful world beyond the tenement's inner courtyard. With the exception of Annarella's trip to the optometrist, which focuses only on the stylized interior of the store, the film's *mise-en-scène* and camera work limit themselves to the rendition of the courtyard, which is cramped and confining. Ortese's cinematic style, with a descriptive language often opening paragraphs resembling long pans on jubilant spaces marked by light and color, emphasizes the juxtaposition of interiors and exteriors, darkness and light, lack and abundance. Damasco operates in more essential strokes: his compositions are simple and his settings bare, yet eminently staged.²¹ While the plot moves relentlessly forward to the final peripety, the recurrence of identical shots adds a sinister fatality to a denouement that comes to appear inevitable, thus enhancing the protagonist's subjection to a prefigured outcome.

The film opens on a subjective camera, capturing the world as seen through Annarella's myopic eyes. We see a sequence of blurry close-up shots, rendered with an ethereal bluish filter, as they fade in and out, adjusting but never fully focusing on the faces of Annarella's sleeping relatives (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Close-ups of sleeping family, *Un paio di occhiali*, dir. Carlo Damasco, 2001, Thule / Bananafish (all subsequent stills reproduced in this article come from the same film).

seta e visi incipriati, giovanotti coi capelli lunghi e il pullover colorato, vecchietti con la barba bianca e le mani rosa appoggiate sul bastone dal pomo d'argento; e, in mezzo alla strada, certe belle automobili che sembravano giocattoli, con la carrozzeria dipinta in rosso o in verde petrolio, tutta luccicante; filobus grandi come case, verdi, coi vetri abbassati, e dietro ai vetri tanta gente vestita elegantemente; al di là della strada, sul marciapiede opposto, c'erano negozi bellissimi, con le vetrine come specchi, piene di roba fina, da dare una specie di struggimento; alcuni commessi col grembiule nero le lustravano dall'esterno. C'era un caffè coi tavolini rossi e gialli e delle ragazze sedute fuori, con le gambe una sull'altra e i capelli d'oro. Ridevano e bevevano in bicchieri grandi, colorati. Al disopra del caffè, balconi aperti, perché era già primavera, con tende ricamate che si muovevano, e dietro le tende, pezzi di pittura azzurra e dorata, e lampadari pesanti d'oro e cristalli, come cesti di frutta artificiale, che scintillavano. Una meraviglia" (ibid., 17). On the "prospettiva infantile della rassegna" and the catalogue of disparate objects as seen through the "innocenza di uno sguardo che scandaglia con sospensione una scena inattesa," see Andrea Baldi, *La meraviglia e il discincanto. Studi sulla narrativa breve di Anna Maria Ortese* (Casoria: Loffredo, 2010), 20.

²¹ In this sense, Damasco is indebted to Ortese's narrative strategy, as she "organizes our vision of the spectacle of her characters' world in and around this courtyard, as if it were a stage" (Re, "Clouds," 54).

The close-ups restrict the perceptive field, as do the lack of light and depth of vision, and Damasco enhances this visual sense of entrapment by having Annarella indicate the passing of time by marking chalk lines on the wall, in the prison-like bedroom she shares with the rest of her family. The cadenced sound of dripping water creates an aural correlative to this sense of confined recurrence, day in and day out, signaling the slow unraveling of an unchanging life script that binds generations together in this Neapolitan slum.

Subjective camera shots abound in the film, as Annarella focuses on disjointed items that she does not assemble under a unifying gaze. Even when she goes to the optometrist (on the central Via Roma in Ortese's story) and is provided with the lenses that correct her vision, Annarella's point of view remains both partial and mediated. It is partial, as Annarella sees sequences of details in extreme close-up: the optometrist's face, his beautiful assistant's smiling mouth, her pearl earrings, carefully painted fingernails, eyes, and the store's shiny crystal chandelier (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Close-ups (optometrist's sequence).

Contrary to the totalizing gaze, typically elevated from the standard field of vision, which captures the entirety of a scene (typifying the subject's ability to hold and tie everything together in what Jean Starobinski called "a massive simultaneity"),²² Annarella's gaze focuses on details connected by mere sequentiality rather than by an interpretive skill tying disparate parts into a meaningful whole. A camera that favors low angle shots, defining a verticality of subjection

²² Jean Starobinski, *Montaigne en mouvement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 39.

rather than control, also marks Annarella's subject position, in an apt rendition of the socio-biological perspective of the protagonist, who sees things "dal 'basso' (quello in cui abita e quello della fanciullezza)."²³

Annarella's gaze is also mediated because Damasco superimposes cinematic tropes over Annarella's point of view, requiring the viewer's gaze to intersect with and comment upon Annarella's naïve perspective. The optometrist scene evokes the style of *telefoni bianchi*, the escapist Italian cinematic genre of the 1930s and early 40s, depicting the glamorous lifestyle of the wealthy bourgeoisie. Damasco favors high-key lighting here, and the set provides a reassuring, non-threatening abundance of white, from the optometrists' coats to the décor. At the same time, as noted before, notions of power and hierarchy are never forgotten, as the optometrist looms, albeit while smiling, over Annarella, in a low angle shot from Annarella's point of view.

This *mise-en-scène* receives further commentary via the background song, Gilberto Mazzi's *Mille lire al mese*. Produced in 1938, the song evoked the aspiration of bourgeois success, granted by either "un modesto impiego" or, more fancifully, by the "eredità di uno zio lontano, Americano." The titular *mille lire* represented the longing, in a country ravaged by war, to purchase bourgeois well-being ("una casetta in periferia") and conventional happiness ("una mogliettina giovane e carina"). The rose-colored dreamland of the song, replacing the protagonist's present (that of a young man "sempre in bolletta") with the hypothetical existence with a salary of one thousand *lire*, makes the "ottomila lire vive vive"²⁴ for Annarella's glasses seem an outlandish expense, well beyond any sanctioned and standard middle-class desire. For these dejected slum dwellers in 1946 Naples, the purchase of the glasses is as symbolic as that of the "casettina" for Mazzi's young man. Rather than supporting the bourgeois code, however, the symbolism here points to a fundamental infraction of that very code. Nunziata is guilty of breaking the protocol of thrift and the taboo of crossing social lines and spending beyond what is practical and reasonable.

In spite of the chronotope of lower-class 1946 Naples evoked in the film, there is nothing documentary-like in Damasco's cinematography. The *mise-en-scène* in the courtyard is eminently theatrical in both setting and lighting. Damasco favored tightly framed shots lit in high contrast, with carefully designed shafts of light and depths of gloom emphasizing a sense of confinement. As he describes it in a short text included in *Anna Maria Ortese: Cinema*, "tra le tante possibili Location, ne ho individuate due: un Esterno (il cortile in cui vive la bambina) e un Interno (il negozio di occhiali), dove però il Fuori rappresentato dal cortile è in effetti un mondo 'Chiuso,' claustrofobico."²⁵ High angle shots capture the characters from above, making them seem trapped and powerless. This is a self-enclosed world, blocked within the confines of Damasco's rigid camera set-up. Significantly, the first shot of the courtyard defines an extraordinarily closed form, as the viewer's gaze naturally traverses the space only to crash against the corner created by the courtyard's interior walls (fig. 3). This shot is repeated twice in the short film, acting as a sort of visual refrain, an almost sarcastic counterpoint to Mazzi's song. If the explicit "ritornello" of the song opened the present up to a land of desire and wish fulfillment, this visual refrain emphasizes the viewer's sense of entrapment. This is a sealed

²³ Silvia Contarini, "Tra cecità e visione. Come leggere *Il mare non bagna Napoli* di Anna Maria Ortese," *Chroniques Italiennes* 5 (2004): 1–13, 11.

²⁴ Ortese, "Un paio," 16.

²⁵ Damasco, "Un paio," 86.

world, an upside-down garden of Eden, made even more idiosyncratic and impenetrable for the general viewer as the characters speak in Neapolitan rather than standard Italian.²⁶



Fig. 3. The courtyard.

If Ortese's narrative unlocked vistas of plenty outside of the basso, Damasco's characters instead imply that the "outside" is always dangerous: "Là fora ce sta brutta gente, brutta assai" says Don Peppino to his wife Rosa as she gets ready to venture out, hinting that his abject garden is, after all, better than the Hell beyond the tenement's gate. And if Ortese's short story maintained a utopian thrust towards an elsewhere of potential redemption, Damasco's characters emphasize on the contrary a fatalistic anticipation of imminent, if unnamed, danger, which is also rendered by the haunting score and sound effects. In the exchange between Don Peppino and Donna Rosa, the "bad weather" becomes a sign of "malaugurio" that only a "terremoto" could possibly rival (a reference, perhaps, to the 1944 "terremoto" and eruption of Mount Vesuvius).²⁷ As in Edgar Allan Poe's stories, Damasco's aural references to water dripping, or a heart beating, acquire a sinister tone; rather than evoking life-giving imagery, they point to the merciless recurrence of the same and the anticipation of horrors to come.

Recurring actions, at once ordinary and emblematic, imply a sense of predestination. Annarella's father is often captured off to the side, repeating the same task of rhythmically hammering on a metal surface. Don Peppino is a humble realist, a pragmatist engaged in simple mechanical tasks, such as trying to fix something that "doesn't work." In a back-and-forth exchange with his neighbor, Don Luigi, Peppino excitedly exclaims: "O' sole, o' sole, e' uscito o'sole!" Luigi responds that the sun has been out all day, and Peppino replies that if he doesn't see the sun, he doesn't believe in it. Acting and camera work, however, contradict Peppino's purported realism, the literal horizontality of the "seeing is knowing" paradigm. Peppino's slow,

²⁶ On the use of Neapolitan as strategy of "estrangement" in Ortese's narrative, see Cosetta Seno, *Anna Maria Ortese. Un avventuroso realismo* (Ravenna: Longo, 2013), 117.

²⁷ On Ortese and utopia, see Cristina Della Coletta, "Scrittura come utopia: La lente scura di Anna Maria Ortese," *Italica* 76/3 (1999): 371–88, and by the same author, "Biographies of Displacement and the Utopian Imagination: Anna Maria Ortese, Hanna Arendt, and the Artist as 'Conscious Pariah,'" *Italica* 94/4 (2014): 714–34.

rhythmical hammering becomes the aural counterpoint to the growing sliver of sunshine that penetrates into the *basso*, at which point Don Peppino gets up and staggers towards center stage. Here he meets the sun's rays, arms outstretched, in a mock-ceremony of purification (fig. 4; contradicted by the neighbor's words as he exits the frame: "Don Peppino, this place is full of shit."). A minor Hephaestus/Vulcan in a fallen tribe of a diseased and chthonian world, Peppino evokes mythical scripts only to have them derailed and "brought low" by the realities of dialogical context and physical setting.



Fig. 4. Don Peppino greets the sun.

In contrast with Don Peppino's literal perspective, Annarella's myopic gaze transforms the dust from the rugs being shaken from the upstairs balcony into shimmering stars descending towards her sunlit face (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Annarella's myopic view of rugs being shaken out.

In Damasco's own words: "[lo] sguardo Impreciso e assolutamente Soggettivo della giovane protagonista [...] tende a ricreare la realtà facendo diventare [...] la polvere che cade giù da un tappeto sbattuto con foga, un magico formicolio argenteo attraversato da un raggio di sole che taglia il cupo e claustrofobico cortile."²⁸ Underscored by the use of the bluish filter reminiscent of the opening shots, the young girl's disability opens up an alternate way of seeing and being in

²⁸ Damasco, "Un paio," 85–86.

the world, one that activates a utopian vision uncharacteristic of the pragmatic, hardened gaze of the adults.

Metaphorical knowledge is transformative, rather than reflective, of the real, and yet it does not provide a holistic script. Based on substitution and analogy, it stands against the linear knowledge of the archetypal narrative, that which has a “beginning, middle and end.” Damasco visualizes Annarella’s type of knowledge with the scraps of printed paper that, like the dust specks from the shaken rugs, come down, flying like butterflies toward Annarella from the floors above (fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Annarella’s myopic view of scraps of paper.

Annarella, who can’t read, brings the scraps close to her eyes, and her playful vision is fragmentary and in close-up, neither legible nor unifying. As Damasco observes, “Il mondo di Annarella è fatto di Dettagli, di Primi Piani, di frammenti di realtà che possono forse contenere pezzetti di verità anche se scollegati l’uno dall’altro” (Damasco, 86). Annarella’s Eden predates the logocentric script, where, in cinematic terms, the Logos stands for the site of representational unity—the subject-place where the contents of experience become unified via perceptual categorizations and linguistic expression. Witness to a reality “made of details,” silent and illiterate throughout the film, Annarella defines an alternate way of being in the world, one that discloses the power of metaphorical seeing—her utopian wisdom. This wisdom, however, is a measure of her Edenic innocence, an innocence that will be inevitably lost with age, with the children bound to become “tali e quali a noi,” as Mariuccia comments in response to Nunziata’s statement that “il mondo è meglio non vederlo che vederlo.”²⁹

Annarella lives in a pre-verbal or non-verbal space. After the optometrist tells her that she must “tenere pazienza e aspettare un altro poco” for the lenses to be ready, Aunt Nunziata, in a fit of frustration, orders Annarella to be quiet (“muta”), as another week must pass for the glasses to be ready for pick up. The reiterated use of the word “muta” is absurd, as Annarella never speaks a word; in fact, it draws attention to Annarella’s silence throughout the short film. As the tenement’s residents wait for Donna Rosa to return from her trip to the optometrist with Annarella’s glasses, Rosaria provides a summary of the situation, explaining that the delay is caused by the fact that “i gradi so’ assai, e peccio’ ci vuole tanto tempo.” Later on, when Annarella does not respond to her invitation to confirm the accuracy of her statement, Rosaria asks mockingly whether Annarella has a tongue in her mouth, and adds that Annarella’s silence must be the result of having “fatto un fioretto.” Mariuccia, more caringly, intervenes by saying that Annarella is silent because she is “preoccupata.” From one of the windows looking onto the courtyard, another tenant (a character who was not included in Ortese’s short story) pronounces

²⁹ Ortese, “Un paio,” 18.

the gnomonic line: “Dulore che non vide, dolore che non sai.” This character is a bald man wearing a dress, seen as he is about to put on a woman’s wig. Hinting at the Neapolitan cultural presence of the *femminiello*, and the practice of cross-dressing and the stage, this character connects knowledge and language with pain, as he explains that Annarella’s silence results from the fact that she cannot know, and therefore cannot articulate, what she cannot see.

The dizzying camera work, and cacophonous soundtrack that accompany Annarella’s wearing her glasses for the first time reflect the nausea of seeing the basso in all its merciless detail.³⁰ This is the only time in which Annarella sees a complete picture: “VEDE per la prima volta l’orribile mondo in cui vive nella sua interezza, sottolineato dall’unico Totale del film.”³¹ This unique moment of representational unity is the visual counterpart to the logocentric script where “I see” equals “I understand”—where the spectacle or vision (as in the Greek *theoria*) generates full knowledge. This knowledge, in turn, is underscored by the reciprocity of the gaze: Annarella looks towards the family members who, like an audience at the theater, watch her put her glasses on, and burst into applause (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Family applauds as Annarella wears her glasses.

At this point, the film seems to return to its beginning, with a sequence of close-ups on the sleeping faces of Annarella’s family members. But there is no magical bluish filter coloring Annarella’s vision this time around. Reality is documentarily factual: black-and-white, in full focus, showing, as Ortese writes, “quel gruppo di cristiani cenciosi e deformi, coi visi butterati dalla miseria e dalla rassegnazione.”³² It is this realism, created by “[i] due cerchietti stregati degli occhiali” (Ortese, 33) that Annarella rejects as she throws her glasses into the muddy manhole in the middle of the courtyard. A hint of the color red by her feet in the otherwise black-and-white shot suggests, in Damasco’s words:

³⁰ Monica Farnetti reads “Un paio di occhiali” as a “racconto di formazione.” She speaks of the “shock oculare” caused by the corrective lenses, and of Eugenia’s “handicap” as a “modalità d’elezione” against the crude knowledge resulting from her visual initiation (*Anna Maria Ortese* [Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 1988], 142–43).

³¹ Damasco, “Un paio,” 86.

³² Ortese, “Un paio,” 33.

lo strappo [...] avvenuto [...] lo svelamento improvviso che cambia profondamente e per sempre la natura della persona: ormai niente più può essere come prima. È una perdita dell'innocenza, un passaggio di stato definitivo, come per una bambina le prime mestruazioni che stabiliscono l'abbandono dell'infanzia.³³



Fig. 8. Annarella's "coming of age."

By connecting Annarella's subjection to the totalizing vision of the patriarchal script with the notions of a break and a loss, Damasco echoes the archetypal script that connects knowledge, woman, and sin with the loss of a state of grace, a fall from Eden: "oramai niente può essere come prima" (Damasco, 86). In Ortese's story, the acquisition of this knowledge causes "meraviglia" in the Neapolitan meaning of a powerful astonishment that "threatens to obscure the mind and interfere with one's sanity."³⁴ As Eugenia, "pallida come una morta," is overwhelmed to the point of almost losing consciousness, her family unites around her in a redemptive gesture of shared suffering and compassion as Donna Rosa's "sorriso finissimo tra compassionevole e meravigliato [...] improvvisamente rischiarò le facce di tutta quella povera gente."³⁵ In Ortese's story, this humble catharsis provides a dignified closure to the tragic plot.³⁶

Unlike Eugenia, Damasco's Annarella overcomes the passive state of *meraviglia* by choosing to act against her newly acquired knowledge, her reached maturity. Annarella throws her glasses away and opts to stay true to her blurred and partial vision. Unlike Oedipus', hers is not an act of guilt-ridden self-mutilation, but one of willful estrangement—the embracing of an active state of wonder. Rather than forcing herself to see no more, or reacting to the fear of being robbed of her eyes (like Nathaniel in E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann*) Annarella opts to

³³ Damasco, "Un paio," 86.

³⁴ Re, "Clouds," 44.

³⁵ Ortese, "Un paio," 34.

³⁶ See Re, "Clouds," 50.

continue to see *differently*, notwithstanding the push of the real, the subjection to time, and the recurring prejudice of the patriarchal script.

Damasco's act of homage to Anna Maria Ortese in his cinematic rendition of "Un paio di occhiali" rests in his re-opening of the archetypal narrative. Annarella, whose name is reminiscent of Ortese's own first name, is a portrait of the artist as a young woman. As such, she places herself, as Flora Ghezzeo notes, "decisively outside of the great *logos* of Western civilization, but also outside the *phaos*—the principle of a clarity of sight that corresponds to and enables a clarity of vision." Ortese thus deconstructs, Ghezzeo continues, "the ontological categories of the physical and the metaphysical, of identity and alterity, as well as those literary 'laws' that set mimetic representation up against fantastic and visionary imagination."³⁷ Annarella realizes that clarity of vision and the reciprocity of the gaze are transfixing and paralyzing, as they imply subservience to binary logic, to the dichotomy of Self and Other, and to a separate and controlling subjectivity that fixes and judges from outside the Self. That subjectivity is exemplified by the optometrist's patronizing tone as he comments on Nunziata's complaints about the cost of those "two pieces of glass": "Ecco quanto so' ignoranti. E mettetececi due vetri e poi mi direte se ci vede meglio: signo' c'ha nove diottrie da una parte e dieci dall'altra: è quasi cecata." Against this diagnosis, Annarella allows herself a choice: to look or not to look, to become the recipient of the commanding gaze or to carve a margin of independence from that gaze. If, upon wearing her glasses, Eugenia in Ortese's story asked, *attonita*, "Mammà dove stiamo?"³⁸ Annarella offers a non-verbal reply to this very question by crafting a distinctive way of being in the world through the filter of her "clouded" vision, the thin veil (Ortese's "velo sottile") of a magmatic knowledge, and an alternative ownership of the gaze.

Responding to "il bisogno di conoscere con ogni medium," Damasco's adaptation seems to argue that art provides a form of understanding that exceeds the bounds of identity, essence, and substance— notions that have long framed the practice of adaptation into the essentialist or categorical arguments that see the "precursor" text as the source of an absolute meaning that must be imparted upon its derivative copy. As he embraces this understanding, Damasco also evokes a state of being in the world marked by a measure of solitude and isolation—one that the biographical experience of Anna Maria Ortese may have inspired. If art transforms the merely contingent and empirical³⁹ into the magical and estranging world that Annarella saw, Damasco's film suggests that the hermeneutical dialogue inherent in the adaptive process has the power to overcome this isolation in "una modalità d'elezione, un'etica, e non meno una poetica" that may define and orient the role of the artist in society.⁴⁰ Resting on the ability to see "with"—to empathize—adaptation breaks the bounds of the solipsistic Self and promotes the kind of compassionate community that Ortese evoked in her fiction with utopian hope and ever-renewed longing.

³⁷ Ghezzeo, "Introduction," 7.

³⁸ Ortese, "Un paio," 34.

³⁹ Discussing Ortese's writing, Contarini talks about "un risultato di straniamento, ottenuto mediante spostamento del campo ottico fuori dal perimetro della rappresentazione mimetica" ("Tra cecità e visione," 9).

⁴⁰ Farnetti, *Anna Maria Ortese*, 142–43.