PETRONIUS' SATYRICON AND ITS CINEMATOGRAPHIC TRANSPOSITION

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Abstract*: Petronius' ancient text,* The Satyricon, *is a literary masterpiece famous for its imagery and complex significances, despite its fragmentary form. When Frederico Fellini directed Petronius' Satyricon in 1969, he attempted to recreate the burlesque imagery of the Latin novel by means of his distinctive visual style. The aim of our paper is to highlight the modernity of the Latin novel and the originality of Fellini's cinematographic vision which is as memorable as the classical text.*

Keywords*: visual, burlesque, surrealism*

Two great masterpieces remote in time, *The Satyricon* of Petronius and Fellini's *Satyricon*, question human nature revealing its quest for an ideal within a rotten and corrupt society that leaves no chance for spiritual survival.

Although the present analysis is concerned with two works representing different art forms, a series of common elements may justify a comparative approach to these creations. In this sense, it may be worth considering that Fellini depicts the tribulations of the characters that form the first love triangle in Petronius' novel, that is, a tumultuous love affair involving homosexual characters: Encolpius, his boyfriend Giton and Encolpius' rival, Ascyltos. The film also illustrates Petronius' classical ideal of beauty and youth, the Italian director choosing actors such as Martin Potter (Encolpius), Hiram Keller (Ascyltos) and Max Born (Giton), whose appearance incarnates the ancient representation of physical beauty: harmonious features, perfection of proportions, and slim sculptural bodies. For instance, Fellini's Giton is a replica of Petronius' hero, the ancient writer describing him as "a boy about sixteen years of age, curly headed, a minion, handsome" (*Sat*., XCVII). As to the other characters, the film-maker reinforces the contrast between Encolpius and Ascyltos conceiving the former as an angelic hero and the latter as a diabolical nature, whose malevolent intentions are indicated by his permanent mocking smile (Ascyltos betrays Encolpius' trust and hurts his feelings when he steals Giton and sells him to Vernacchio, the actor; then he competes with Encolpius for Giton, asking the boy to choose between them).

Another significant similarity between the film and the book resides in their fragmentariness. The structure of the novel consisting of small, disconnected and incomplete parts lies at the basis of Fellini's conception of structuring its own film, which displays a sequence of powerfully evocative frescoes whose unifying element is Encolpius, the protagonist. Many of these sequences render key episodes from the novel into outstanding filmic images such as, for instance, the brothel scene. The film-director finds in Petronius' brief, but vivid, description of the brothel a powerful source of inspiration:

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> While Ascyltos was telling me of his bad luck, who should come up again but this same very respectable looking person, in company with a woman not at all bad looking, and, looking at Ascyltos, he requested him to enter the house, assuring him that there was nothing to fear, and, since he was unwilling to take the passive part, he should have the active. The woman, on her part, urged me very persistently to accompany her, so we followed the couple, at last, and were conducted between the rows of name-boards, where we saw, in cells, many persons of each sex amusing themselves in such a manner) that it seemed to me that every one of them must have been drinking *satyrion*. On catching sight of us, they attempted to seduce us with paederastic wantonness, and one wretch, with his clothes girded up, assaulted Ascyltos, and, having thrown him down upon a couch, attempted to gore him from above. I succored the sufferer immediately, however, and having joined forces, we defied the troublesome wretch. (*Sat*., VIII)

By painting a memorable picture of debauchery, physical deformity, and decrepitude in body and soul, Fellini's vision of the brothel stands out in sharp relief. The rich imagery characterizing the scene (make-up on faces, strange sounds, nude bodies, and figures in close-up) suggests voluptuousness and decadence in a multitude of grotesque forms, bearing the mark of the film director's unique style.

The brothel scene is anticipated by remakable shots in which the surrealistic placement of colour spots and symbolic objects within the frame attracts the viewer's attention: Brâncuși's monument (*The Gate of the Kiss*) seems to be suspended in the air, being doubled by a red door signalling the entrance to the brothel, while, in the bottom right-hand corner of the frame, two old people (a man and a woman) serve as guides to the realm of carnal pleasures. Symbolically speaking, *The Gate of the Kiss* and the elderly couple may evoke the contrast between art and life, beauty and ugliness, youth and senescence. Equally significant is the fact that the characters, Encolpius and Giton, are outside observers of the world, their wanderings being suggested by the slow movement of the camera first to the right, and then to the left of the frame. As Joanna Paul states, "the camera tracks Encolpio and Giton walking along, rather than through, the city, passing a series of weird and wonderful sights that allows us to look at but never to enter into the scene" (2009: 213).

As in the novel, the characters continue their odyssey together until Giton leaves Encolpius for good preferring Ascyltos' company. Giton's choice is a crucial plot element because it leads to the break-up of the first love triangle. Broken-hearted, Encolpius finds refuge in an art gallery where he encounters Eumolpus, another major character in the book. In contrast to the previous scene showing Encolpius and Giton as spectators of erotic depravity in the brothel, the art gallery bears great significance in both works. By placing Encolpius in an elevated environment, Petronius skilfully shifts from reality to the symbolic level of art, plunging his hero into a fascinating world of mythological representations of unhappy love, the portraits beeing painted "so skilfully that one could think that they were alive" (*Sat*., LXXXIII). In keeping with Petronius' vision, Fellini creates impressive images which suggest that art has the power to purify feelings and clean the mind.

As far as Eumolpus is concerned, he plays the role of a lucid commentator on different aspects of the age. Fellini keeps the characteristic features of the ancient hero who, in the novel, is described through the eyes of Encolpius, the narrator:

> a white-haired old man entered the picture-gallery; his face was care-worn, and he seemed, I know not why, to give promise of something great, although he bestowed so

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> little care upon his dress that it was easily apparent that he belonged to that class of literati which the wealthy hold in contempt. (*Sat*., LXXXVII)

In Eumolpus' speech, the society of the time is condemned from the position of a cynical wanderer, with no fixed roots, who considers poverty a moral virtue and a geniune basis for artistic creation. As he embodies critical consciousness, Fellini prefers using the character's words *ad litteram*, his statements having the value of universal truths: "love or art never yet made anyone rich" or "Poverty is the sister of Genius." (*Sat*., LXXXVIII)

Resorting to contrasting techniques for character delineation as Petronius did, Fellini portrays Trimalchio, another memorable charater in the novel and in the film, as a negative counterpart of Eumolpus in the famous dinner scene which, as in the case of the ancient text, represents a grotesque exposure of moral decay, vain appearances and decadence. Eumolpus symbolizes the genuine poet and thinker, whereas Trimalchio, a former freed slave who became enormously rich, arrogates to himself the status of man of letters feeling entitled to call Eumolpus his "brother and colleague". The comic reaches its peak when his intellectual pretentions are obviously contradicted by errors revealing his poor knowledge about philosophy and literature. The authors' satirical arrows are evident in both works, but they differ according to their artistic views. If in Petronius' book Trimalchio is described as "a bald-headed old fellow" (*Sat*., XXII), baldness being a distinguishing sign of freed slaves, in Fellini's version the character no longer bears this social stigma as the film-maker's focus is on exaggerating his delusions of grandeur. Thus, Fellini replaces the descriptive details from the text, such as "the scarlet mantle" and the "napkin having a broad purple stripe and a fringe that hung down all around" (*Sat*., XXXII), with an imperial crown and a golden *fibula* to turn Trimalchio's emperor-like affectations into ridicule.

The two artists' satirical intentions meet again in the hyperbolic scene presenting Trimalchio's dinner. Both of them mock vulgarity, falsehood and ostentatious display of wealth by treating the event in a comic manner which mingles excess with caricature, and the grotesque with the burlesque. Fellini creates a mosaic of remarkable sequences in which the superabundance of food and drink evokes satiety up to nausea. The same focus on insatiable appetite and fleshliness can be noticed in Petronius' description of the dinner:

> A tray followed them, upon which was served a wild boar of immense size, wearing a liberty cap upon its head, and from its tusks hung two little baskets of woven palm fibre, one of which contained Syrian dates, the other, Theban. Around it hung little suckling pigs made from pastry, signifying that this was a brood-sow with her pigs at suck. It turned out that these were souvenirs intended to be taken home. When it came to carving the boar, our old friend Carver, who had carved the capons, did not appear, but in his place a great bearded giant, with bands around his legs, and wearing a short hunting cape in which a design was woven. Drawing his hunting- knife, he plunged it fiercely into the boar's side, and some thrushes flew out of the gash. fowlers, ready with their rods, caught them in a moment, as they fluttered around the room and Trimalchio ordered one to each guest, remarking, "Notice what fine acorns this forest-bred boar fed on", and as he spoke, some slaves removed the little baskets from the tusks and divided the Syrian and Theban dates equally among the diners. (*Sat*., XL)

It should also be noted that both the novel and its cinematographic version intend to parody Plato's *Banquet* if we take into consideration the fact that, instead of

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Plato's philosophical debates on beauty and androgyne love, Trimalchio delivers an insubstancial ridiculous speech in the presence of low-status guests, whereas the genuine scholars, Eumolpus and Encolpius, are mute observers of his performance. The key moment of the dinner is the mock funeral which changes the guests' mood as Trimalchio forces them to take part in his imaginary death, an opportunity for the two authors to remarkably make use of the motif of the play within a story/film. The gigantic dimensions of Trimalchio's funeral monument tastelessly decorated with rich bas-reliefs, or the guests' mourning signalled by melodramatic gestures and strident lamentations stand as proof that their art of exaggeration reaches its climax. In Fellini's version, which emphasizes human greed, the custom of offering freedom to slaves becomes a grotesque scene in which the domestic participants struggle hard to grab the valuable objects that their master offers them as gifts.

Other major narrative sequences that Fellini shares with Petronius refer to several important stages of Encolpius' journey, namely the episode presenting his embarkation on Lichas' boat, his traumatic experience of losing virility after having sexual intercourse with a nymphomaniac and particularly the cannibalistic scene that follows Eumolpus' death and the reading of his will. The cinematographic transposition of these events sheds light not only on the ancient writer's critical view of life, but also on the artistic creed of the Italian director who, seeing humanity as degraded to its basic instincts, describes it in baroque and surrealist images that create the atmosphere "of a dream world" (Winkler, 2001: 260)

In order to express his personal vision of the world, Fellini reused Petronius' novel as well as many other old sources. As numerous commentators on his work have stated, such assimilation constitutes "a melange of ancient texts – and images, ideas, people, events (Winkler, 2001: 207), which the film director "invents, blends, reworks, and borrows" (Dick, 1981: 151). The composite material of the film is mostly based on the following ancient literary works: from Juvenal's *Satires* (3.193 – 196), he borrowed the description of the collapse of the tenement block; Martialis' report on "the executions and mutilation on stage in mythological and historical playlets" (Sullivan, 2001: 262) was employed in the mutilation scene performed during Vernacchio's show; and in Martialis' *Epigrams* (1.21), he found "the motif of Mucius Scaevola, the Roman hero who defied the besieging Etruscan king Porsenna by burning his right hand in a blazing fire" (Winkler, 2001: 270). Moreover, Fellini drew inspiration from Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* for the battle between Encolpius and the Minotaur in front of a laughing crowd during the Festival of Mirth, this scene being a filmic reinterpretation of Lucius' magical fight against imaginary foes. On the other hand, Fellini made use of historical events that became emblematic images in his film. Thus, "the haunting sequences of the suicides of the handsome upper-class couple in their ornate villa" are related to "the deaths of Thrasea Paetus, the Stoic opponent of Nero, and his wife" (Sullivan, 2001: 262), whereas the image showing "a monstrous effigy of an emperor's head dragged through the streets is based on the death of Vitellius in A.D. 69" (Sullivan, 2001: 262), or it may as well refer to a new political change symbolized by the figure of "Caesar, dignified and soldierly, marching on Rome" (Sullivan, 2001: 263). Another notable sequence refers to the marriage of Lichas to Encolpius, the episode being based on "certain anecdotes about Nero's mock marriages to his freedmen Doryphorus and Pythagoras, pruriently detailed by the imperial biographer Suetonius and also by the historian Tacitus" (Sullivan, 2001: 263). Encolpius' submissive and humble attitude during the matrimonial ritual turns the ceremony itself into ridicule emphasizing the idea of desacralization of matrimony. But, in spite of the

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borrowings mentioned above, it is Petronius' text that forms the basis of Fellini's complex and impressive images.

Apart from the similarities between the novel and the film, a series of episodes and several characters underwent adaptations to become part of "a cinematic flight of fantasy" (Paul, 2009: 199). For instance, Eumolpus, who is a prominent figure in the third part of the novel, accompanies Encolpius and Giton on their journey. Instead, Fellini brings Ascyltos to the fore by turning him into Encolpius' permanent companion, while Giton becomes an episodic character who vanishes at some point in the story. Another significant change regards the embarkation scene. In Petronius' novel, Encolpius and Giton board the ship voluntarily and disguise themselves as slaves of Eumolpus so as not to be recognized by Lichas and Tryphaena, whereas in Fellini's film, after being arrested, Encolpius and Ascyltos are forcefully taken to Lichas' ship. The alterations made to the ancient text enabled Fellini to create a new story according to his own vision by combining neo-realism with fantasy and dream. As Solomon argues, the Italian film director offers the viewers "one of the cinema's most provocatively individual approaches to the ancient world" (Solomon, 2001: 274).

Moreover, the female characters that Encolpius encounters on his journey suggest significant differences between the two works. If in the novel it is Circe who plays the part of the nymphomaniac that causes Encolpius' impotence, in the film she is replaced by "Ariadne", who seems to be a kind of carnal reward for the hero after his humiliating fight in a walled arena at the Festival of Mirth. The hero's desperate attempts to escape the Minotaur while the audience is making fun of him, his ignominious defeat as well as the fact that he discovers his impotence while forced to have intercourse with Ariadne in full view of the cheering people reveal Fellini's intention to lay stress on the non-heroic side of the protagonist's adventures, an aspect which is characteristic of the novel, too. To overcome his physical weakness, Encolpius leaves for the Temple of Pleasures, a realm of sensual experience where ritual mingles with symbolism in remarkable images. As the hero's new experiences in the Temple have no curative effect, the last chance for him is to find the sorceress Oenothea, the Earth Mother who stands for the power to resurrect bodily instincts. In contrast to the novel where she is depicted as an ugly old woman that forces the hero into a state of drunkenness to prepare him for the orgiastic ritual, the Italian director transforms her into an unstable figure that connotes the Priapic fire able to regenerate the hero's manliness. These mythological reinterpretations are "free adaptations of Petronius' classic" (Zapponi, 1970: 34) that Fellini employs skilfully to paint his own picture of the world.

Numerous scenes contributing to the complex architecture of the film are worthy of our attention. One of them is "the graffiti-covered wall that opens the film" (Dick, 1981: 146), a memorable image that provides the background for the monologue of Encolpius who is angry and disappointed by Giton's betrayal. The chaotic drawings spread all over the wall may suggest either a blurred reconstruction of the ancient world, which can be perceived only as bits, fragments and unclear inscriptions on ruins, or a glimpse into the new adventures that the future has in store for the hero. Other sequences, such as those presenting Vernacchio's show or the brothel visited by Encolpius and Giton, stand out as they offer Fellini the opportunity to depict, by means of various filmic techniques, a broad picture of the ancient world: manners, beliefs, rituals, customs, social and political attitudes. Masks, thick make-up on faces, lascivious bodies and obscene gestures accompanied by discordant sounds convey the film

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director's vision of a past in which the viewer may recognize the signs of vanity of his own time.

The set, which is greatly evocative, should be taken into consideration too. The abstract geometrical forms of an ancient bathroom, which often looks strange due to some symbolic oversized objects, serve as a suggestive environment for Encolpius' confrontation with Ascyltos over Giton. The contrast between light and dark, and the chromatic variation from neutral grey to vivid colours create a dream-like atmosphere as seen, for example, in the subsequent episode in which Encolpius looks for Vernacchio to claim his right over his young lover, Giton. In these scenes, and in many others, the film director proves to be a skilled painter of an artificial, even unearthly, interior space, populated by "grotesque characters or «freaks»" (Stubbs, 1993: 62) that challenge the viewer's expectations. Such an artistic approach represents, as Stubbs points out, Fellini's particular way of "illustrating his belief that life is «mysterious and ineffable» by «defamiliarizing the material presented and […] exceeding boundaries»" (1993: 62).

In addition, the exterior world with its bizarre sunsets and landscapes acquires a symbolic value. When associated with Encolpius' arrival at Crotona, the set becomes a vast barren land representing a visual metaphor for sterility and absence of life, which, once again, demonstrates that Fellini's insertion is an ingenious rewriting of the ancient story. Unlike Petronius' dramatic change of set (after Lichas' ship is wrecked because of a terrible storm, the heroes safely reach the shore of Crotona), the film director places his protagonists, Encolpius and Ascyltos, in a strange, indefinite environment that seems to be a kind of desert or an arid rocky-like stretch of land. Enduring thirst and exhaustion, they struggle hard to cross it while carrying the dying hermaphrodite oracle that they kidnapped from the temple, the entire sequence being in fact another interesting insertion into the ancient storyline. As to the inhabitants of Crotona, the legacy-hunters, Petronius regards them as a product of the acute moral decay of society leading inevitably to biological extinction and spiritual death. In Fellini's film, the people and the space they live in stand not only for the extinction of the pagan world but also for "a progressive dissolution of the modern world" (Zanelli, 1970: 43). Thus, his poignant images constitute the director's particular warning addressed to humanity.

It is also significant to mention that in both works the tragedy of human eschatology leaves room for the grotesque cannibalism in the final scene which, according to J.P. Sullivan, serves as a parody of the Last Supper (2001: 264). Being based on an old belief and ritual, the satire reaches its climax at the end of Encolpius' odyssey, because, after Eumolpus' will is read, the legacy-hunters, with the exception of Encolpius, overcome their disgust and devour pieces of Eumolpus' corpse, hoping to become beneficiaries of his fortune.

Nevertheless, the open ending of Fellini's film suggests that his protagonist, Encolpius, may begin a new journey towars self-knowledge. Leaving Crotona and the fortune hunters behind, he is ready to go out to sea in the company of a group of young people. This optimistic tone is visually emphasized by the immense serene sky and blue sea as well as by the hero's wish to reach a remote green island. The fact that the characters of the film become part of an old story is remarkably conveyed in the final frames which show them as figures in a fresco on the wall of a ruin. As Winkler states, they represent "the last glimpse of his anti-heroes frozen in a framed faded fresco of Pompeian colours." (2001: 213).

In conclusion, by recreating Petronius' world according to his particular view of humanity, Fellini completes "the fragmentary state of our knowledge of antiquity" (Wyke, 1997: 189) and makes us ponder over man, society and history.

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