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Title: Film Review: *Te lo dico pianissimo* by Pasquale Marrazzo

Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 7 (2020)

Author: Cosetta Gaudenzi

Publication date: February 2021

Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy, "Reviews"

Permalink: <https://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/31-te-lo-dico-pianissimo>

Keywords: Film Review

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Te lo dico pianissimo (I Will Whisper It to You). Directed by Pasquale Marrazzo. N.O.I., 2018. 90 minutes.

Pasquale Marrazzo's *Te lo dico pianissimo* is, according to the director's own description, "a romantic comedy," which aims at entertaining the audience while also encouraging it to form its own opinion on same-sex partners who are faced with the choice of starting a family.¹ Giuseppe, played by Stefano Chiodaroli, and Nikolas, played by Pietro Pignatelli, have been living together for more than fifteen years. When Giuseppe's ex-wife, Dolores, dies, the widower receives full custody of their seventeen-year-old twins, Sara and Matteo. Giuseppe's three sisters, Giuditta (Lucia Vasini), Norina (Corinna Agustoni), and Silvana (Tatiana Winteler) move into Giuseppe and Nikolas' apartment, on Giuditta's orders, to monitor the gay couple and protect their nephew and niece from possible immoral behavior. Giuditta, in particular, tries to undermine the long-standing relation between Giuseppe and Nikolas, complaining about phallic symbols decorating the apartment (actually just cacti) or earrings adorning Nikolas's ears. Threatened by his sister and fearing a visit from social services, a conflicted Giuseppe asks Nikolas to temporarily move back to his father's apartment so that he can smooth out the living situation. The movie is primarily theatrical, with creative use of a few surreal scenes, such as Nikolas' and Giuditta's dreams and the appearances of Dolores' ghost (Cinzia Marseglia). The deceased wife/mother materializes on several occasions in the bathroom and speaks to most of the family members: to Giuseppe, with whom she has two-way conversations; and to Nikolas, Sara, Matteo and Giuditta, whom she addresses in monologues of a sort. These conversations also introduce the audience to relevant information about the past.

In *Te lo dico pianissimo*, Marrazzo's perspective on the topic of family, which amusingly juxtaposes both conservative and progressive ideas, is also political, particularly in light of the bill on civil unions passed in Italy in 2016, after the removal of its adoption rights clauses (*legge Cirinnà*). By playfully depicting characters through comic and melodramatic elements the director implies that human behavior and human relations cannot be adequately described with a simple binary framework of good and evil, which would end up endorsing a world built on prejudices. Accordingly, "freedom" is a word that appropriately portrays the ideological accent of Marrazzo's film: freedom from a conservative family model, as supported by the Catholic Church (represented by a rather insecure Don Paolo), freedom from the traditional Italian matriarchal society (embodied in the film by Giuditta), and freedom from static language about social roles.

Most importantly, Marrazzo suggests that a static system of signs may lead to a lack of liberty, which can be illustrated through a discussion of the director's portrayal of the character Giuditta. In *Te lo dico pianissimo*, Giuditta is not depicted simply as Giuseppe's sister. In the second half of the film, during a session with a psychologist, we learn that after a family accident, Giuditta became a sort of mother for Giuseppe. Her role in her brother's life had grown so dominant that, she avows, she even chose his bride to be. While on the one hand Giuditta's confession to the psychologist appears, as an attempt to legitimize her own domineering behavior towards her brother, on the other hand, the confession also conveys two of the director's major reflections on Italian society and culture. First, Giuditta's authoritarian actions can be read in light of a long-standing Italian matriarchy drawing power from Catholicism and preventing males from reaching appropriate independence and maturity (the so called *mammoni*). Second, Marrazzo insightfully hints at the paradox of stable family linguistic categories like father, mother, sister, and brother. In fact, it can be socially acceptable for an older

¹ Giacomo Aricò, "Te lo dico pianissimo—Intervista a Pasquale Marrazzo: 'Evviva l'amore e la libertà contro ogni pregiudizio,'" September 12, 2018, <https://www.cameralook.it/web/te-lo-dico-pianissimo-intervista-a-pasquale-marrazzo-evviva-lamore-e-la-liberta-contro-ogni-pregiudizio/>.

sister to become a substitute mother to a younger brother if his female parent dies. Hence, we might reason: why should society not be able to take steps forward towards a less static and more inclusive semantic structure wherein, for example, the love of two male partners for their children can substitute for the love of a traditional father and mother? In the final analysis, Marrazzo's *Te lo dico pianissimo* seems to assert that what is most important for a family is not a set of traditional, conservative and official laws, deciding, for instance, the sex of parents, but rather love and the desire to help one another and to build something together. Indeed, in the film's finale, the director provides a beautiful surprise which will totally overthrow the audience's previous understanding of family by redrawing the meaning of the word "father."

The movie's final section is the most captivating and compensates for some general problems within the film narrative (such as abrupt movements from one scene to the other). Most of *Te lo dico pianissimo* takes place inside Giuseppe and Nikolas' apartment, an appropriate setting for a movie discussing family and emotions. The camera suitably focuses on characters and their reactions with many close-ups, which are paired by a generally melodramatic soundtrack containing scores by Andrea Tosi and various Neapolitan songs providing a familiar, classical, and romantic heterosexual context for Giuseppe and Nikolas' love story. Worth mentioning on the subject of sound is the closing cover of Umberto Bindi's "Il nostro concerto" (a singer-songwriter marginalized because of his homosexuality), as the movie's main characters are all portrayed singing the same song with the same voice, all symbolically contributing to the concert of life. This powerful and positive finale points audience members towards a path of understanding and equality, so that in the future they might perhaps accept the possibility of two male partners having a family. For this reason, Marrazzo's *Te lo dico pianissimo* is quite ground-breaking. Although the movie has not received broad recognition, attributable at least in part to a lack of extensive distribution, it is certainly worth considering as an innovative work which has opened the doors to future films on the topic of same-sex couples and adoption, including Ferzan Özpetek's recent *La dea fortuna / The Goddess of Fortune* (2019).

COSETTA GAUDENZI
University of Memphis