

Framings, or mind the décalage!

punctum.gr

BY: Sara Nocerino

ABSTRACT

The article discusses framings as a theoretical interdisciplinary tool for investigating the circulation of discourses over time, space, and media. Specifically, framings are introduced to tackle the preliminary challenge of developing a functional diachronic approach to a composite semiotic network. In further developing the meta-historical perspective of Verón’s latest work, framings are defined as ‘intermediate spaces’ where producers and receivers negotiate the codification of reality ‘here and now.’ Using examples from modern painting to performative arts, the paper elaborates on three essential features – liminal responsiveness, historical plasticity, and cultural meta-representativity – revealing framings as highly flexible devices that, nonetheless, maintain a consistent heuristic efficacy toward the ever-evolving semiotic network. Another example examined is two short story collections dating to the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of their multi-medial framing devices reveals the long-lasting paradigm, tracing its roots back to Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, of Western meta-discourse over storytelling. The cases examined demonstrate that framing devices represent a powerful interdisciplinary tool to outline the functioning pattern of “the mediation of mediations as a general process” (Averbeck-Lietz 2021: 76), through which we can grasp the meta-history of our ever-evolving semiotic network.

ARTICLE INFO:

Volume: 09

Issue: 02

Winter 2023

ISSN: 2459-2943

DOI: 10.18680hss.2023.0022

Pages: 123-142

Lic.: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

KEYWORDS:

Framing

Metarepresentation

Semio-pragmatics

Short story collection

COVID-19

1. A few questions

When questioning ‘how’ social and cultural discourses travel over time and through different geographies, encoding themselves in an increasingly complex semiotic network, namely when investigating how the semiotics of circulation (Verón 1987) happens, one is working with a very tricky core query. Indeed, adopting the verónian socio-semiotic, or semio-pragmatic approach means moving from “the analysis of the concrete mediation of meaning in a certain time-space setting” (Averbeck-Lietz 2021: 76) to a diachronic understanding of cultural objects as composite ‘knots,’ resulting from a continuous historical dialectic between contextual rules of production and reception of meanings. According to Traversa (2018), this diachronic approach entails a meta-historical perspective that, if properly equipped, could lead semiotics to outline the history of how the increasingly complex “sapiens’ capability of semiosis” (Verón 2014: 163) fabricated reality. Or rather, a shared and thoroughly organized perception of the world, starting from “the indexical level [...] by the use of the forefinger” (Verón 2014: 163) up to the most complex contemporary semiotic systems in which the verbal, visual, and auditory levels overlap.¹ Namely, from this perspective, “the mediatization of mediations as a general process” could be told (Averbeck-Lietz 2021: 76). Yet, here arise certain theoretical questions that must be addressed. For example, whether we are working with literary texts, pictures, performances, or everyday interactions, where are the signs of this meta-history found in cultural objects? Further, how can we develop a functional meta-historical approach, allowing us to interpret the diversity of products of a composite and increasingly complex semiotic network? Namely, how can a diachronic approach be prevented from becoming a mere juxtaposition of incomparable synchronic analyses?

The present article proposes framing devices² as a valuable tool for tackling these preliminary yet fundamental issues. Indeed, if properly ‘calibrated,’ it allows for high flexibility in navigating the multifaceted morphology of the semiotic network while maintaining a solid heuristic efficacy in interpreting its unfolding over time. Namely, framing devices appear as interdisciplinary tools, serviceable both in a diachronic and multimedial perspective. Accordingly, the following paragraphs attempt the proper fine-tuning of such a ‘transversal’ tool by discussing three main features – liminal responsiveness, historical plasticity, and cultural meta-representativity – defining its functioning mechanism and, most importantly, enabling the development of the functioning meta-historical approach advocated by Verón. In

¹ For an overview of the *querelle* concerning the definition of mediatization as a modern phenomenon or, as per Verón himself, a non-linear tough long-term historical process cf. Scolari and Rodríguez-Amat (2018) and Rodríguez-Amat, Scolari and Fernández (2021).

² From this point forward, I will alternatively use the form “framing devices” or its shortened version “framings”.

this sense, some attention must be drawn to the fact that Verón himself was quite familiar with the work of Gregory Bateson, the father of frame analysis studies, who profoundly influenced his theory. Not surprisingly, Pedemonte and Artigau (2018) pointed out that Bateson's evolutionary and relational approach to concepts such as information and mind, as well as his outlining of a meta-level, were identified by Verón himself (1999) as the basis for his attempt at bridging pure theory and the concrete analysis of semiotic processes. In conclusion, Verón developed his historical or, along with Traversa (2018), metahistorical approach to mediatization through the meta-analysis he learned from Bateson. As such, framing as a tool to tackle socio-semiotics' core questions is a natural, consecutive step.

Side note: although addressing these preliminary questions is crucial, theoretical paragraphs dedicated to framing devices' features also draw on examples from modern painting to performative arts. This simultaneously aims to show this tool's interdisciplinary applicability and helps mitigate excessive abstraction throughout the theoretical elaboration. Nonetheless, based on the author's background in literary studies, the last paragraph of the article also provides a quick example of application by analyzing framing devices from two short story collections published during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, this last paragraph focuses on how the analysis of their multimedial framing devices reveals a long-lasting paradigm for Western meta-discourse over storytelling, tracing its roots back to Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

2. Semio-pragmatics feat. Framings

In his last essay, Verón contends that semiotic research should focus on understanding how mediatic phenomena establish a shared “contract of reading” of reality. Or rather, in his own words, how the “exteriorization of mental processes under the form of a given material device” (2014: 164) resulted in a shared narration of the world.³ In this respect, while direct access to every socio-individual system may be considered a utopic objective, it's not impossible to develop a tool to track the signs of historical processes shaping culturally rooted modes of reception and codification of reality. In my understanding, this is precisely what the analysis of framings would allow.

Indeed, framings represent the materialization of culturally formed meta-concepts, known as frames, which “help to select (or construct) phenomena as forming a meaningful whole and therefore create coherent areas on our mental maps” (Wolf and Bernhart 2006: 5). Therefore, frames essentially work as abstract hints to interpret

³ Contrary to Luhmann, Verón argues that the semiotic processes in consciousness and communication are isomorphic. In his research on neurotic individuals, he described them as strictly relying on their own “contract of reading” of reality which is almost impossible to narrate to others whose interpretation of reality is culturally and socially rooted.

our experiential world, broadly understood as the totality of personal everyday interactions, literature, art, science, etc. Not coincidentally, pivotal works in frame analysis originated from attempting to understand how reality is construed through playful interactions between animals (Bateson 1955/1972) and self-presentation within human individuals (Goffman 1974).⁴ And though he was mainly preoccupied with individuals' everyday interactions, Goffman himself didn't fail to point out how his work on frameworks and keyings (what we currently refer to as frames and framings) could lead to a better understanding of cultural and social meaning-making and coding mechanisms. In Goffman's own words: "taken all together, the primary frameworks of a particular social group constitute a central element of its culture" (1974: 27). In this sense, expanding upon Fontana and Fournel's study on *Piazza, Corte, Salotto, Caffé* (1986) as spatial articulatory instances between reality and its semiotic representation, framing devices can be generally understood as intermediate spaces where cultures negotiate the codification of reality 'here and now.' As such, the synchronic outcome or, as Verón puts it, the resulting "contract of reading" is built on historical, social, and cultural factors that draw upon the "grammars" (Verón 1987) of meaning production and reception shaping our shared "encyclopedia" (Eco 1979). Thus, more specifically, framings can be defined as threshold devices exhibiting high responsiveness to shifts within their semiosphere,⁵ resulting in a plastic morphology and a meta-representative function that aims to portray the cultural negotiation about the codification of reality in a given space-time and medium. In this perspective, analyzing the transformation of framing devices across time, space, and media results in a meta-representative 'map' of the *décalages* underlying "the transformation of meaning via technically mediated communication" (Averbeck-Lietz 2021: 76). However, how does analyzing framing devices provide a practical solution to our primary challenge? Specifically, addressing the need for a practical diachronic and meta-historical approach toward the constantly evolving and increasingly complex semiotic network whose diverse products seemingly demand unique (and possibly incomparable) analyses. To answer this question, it is necessary to delve into this definition, unpacking some of its implications. More specifically, we need to focus on the three main characteristics that, in my understanding, allow for its transversal application. In so doing, the article aims to establish some theoretical foundations for demonstrating the applicability of this tool from both diachronic and interdisciplinary perspectives.

⁴ Winkin and Leeds-Hurwitz (2013) pointed out how, in writing *Frame Analysis*, apart from challenging phenomenological sociology, Goffman was gliding through the turf of James and Merleau-Ponty's perception phenomenology as well as Grafinkel's ethnomethodology (66).

⁵ As is known, the concept of semiosphere describes the space within which all the semiotic systems of a given culture – literature, art, science, language, media, and so on – co-exist and interact, either making discourses circulate and/or generating new meanings (Lotman 1990).

2.1. Liminal responsiveness (and a modern painting example)

As threshold devices, framings mark the boundary and mediate the passage between referential universes.⁶ Namely, they draw the limit between the so-called reality and its encoded representations. In Lotman's words, they outline the borders of "a finite model of an infinite universe" (1977: 210) with its own semiotic rules. This border-marking function is fundamental, especially when working from a diachronic perspective. The regulation of the "permeability" of this limit and the directions in which it can be crossed relies on the cultural perception toward the possibility of trespassing or even 'overlapping' between the so-called reality and the semiotic system encoding it. That is, the permeability of framings is a matter of cultural awareness toward the fabricated nature of reality. A second consequence of framings' liminality is their reactivity to the shifts in the semiosphere in which they are conceived and received. Namely, as devices deputed to represent how a given culture regulates its relationship with the construction of reality in a broad sense, framings strongly depend on the sense-making and decoding strategies active in their time-space. In this respect, it is interesting to point out how the tendency to strain and blur the limits between referential universes massively increased over time in direct proportion to the cultural awareness towards the semiotic, thus construed nature of reality. Insofar as that, art scholars coined the concept of "augmented frame" (Ferrari and Pinotti 2018) to describe the expansion of material frames to the point they have come to embrace both the user and her/his reality as an almost unlimited representational space.⁷ As such, the conceptual and even material overlapping between the actual frames and the concept of framing devices becomes blatant as frames are increasingly consciously employed as conceptual thresholds on which different forces, coming from both the context of production and fruition, merge. Therefore, observing cultures deal with this limit over time casts light on their relationship with the idea of mediatization itself. In conclusion, it can be argued that, regardless of their semiotic form, framing devices do not represent only the codification – or mediatization – of a particular discourse. Instead, they appear as the materialization of a cultural meta-discourse over the various strategies historically "activated by the socio-individual systems to [...] assure their own self-organization" (Verón 2014: 171).

⁶ Alongside Wolf and Bernhart (2006), as well as Genette's works on textual *seuils* (1982, 1987), I am focusing on framing borders. Nonetheless, scholars also worked on 'internal' framings. For instance, Caw (1985) analyzed framing within fiction.

⁷ According to Ferrari and Pinotti (2018) the first step toward this cultural tendency, massively accelerated from the XIX century, is to be found in the *Madonna del Libro* (1457) by Vincenzo Foppa.



Figure 1. Pere Borrell del Caso, *Huyendo de la crítica* [Escaping criticism], 1874.

In this regard, a pivotal example comes from modern painting.⁸ In 1874, the Spanish artist Pere Borrell del Caso painted his most renowned work, *Huyendo de la crítica*,⁹ firstly emblematically titled *Una cosa que no puede ser*. Borrell employed a somewhat reversed *trompe l'oeil* technique to blur the limit with our reality by handling perspective and chiaroscuro so that his bi-dimensional *muchacho* looks like he is trespassing the material and symbolic border of the golden frame to access the viewer's referential universe. In so doing, the viewer is not able to discern the representational space from reality, as it is with the traditional use of *trompe l'oeil*, in which bi-dimensional objects are painted as if they were tri-dimensional and so part of the environment. In addition, the viewer cannot tell where she/he belongs or what

she/he is 'made of.' In a nutshell, the viewer is questioning what reality is and where the limit from its representations – if there is any – must be drawn. As for the responsiveness of the framing devices, Borrell did not accidentally choose a golden frame for his character to cross. Golden frames represent one of many devices – such as omniscient narrators for literature – symbolizing the idea, well rooted in Western culture until the whole XIX century, of a sound limit between the 'real' world and its reproductions. Hence, by setting his foot (almost) out of a golden frame, Borrell's *muchacho* challenges a cultural mode of construction and rationalization of reality dating back to the Renaissance and, more specifically, to the introduction of perspective by Brunelleschi.¹⁰

2.2. Historical plasticity (and a couple of performative examples)

As previously anticipated, framings' high responsiveness results in their morphological plasticity. Framing devices are patterned after the norms of the semiotic system to which they pertain and the rules of composition and reception of their originating semiosphere. Further, this plasticity must be attributed to the metarepresentative function of framing devices, which, as we will see in the next paragraph, is directed toward the representation of the dialectic between the external referential universe and the specific semiotic rules of its encoding into a broader network. As such, it is clear how their morphology

⁸ Due to its history, tightly intertwined with that of material frames at least since the XII century, art was the first discipline to deal with the problem of conceptualizing frames and framings as theoretical tools. For an introduction to the theories of frames and framings developed in the context of art history, theory, and semiotics cf. Ferrari and Pinotti (2018).

⁹ Pere Borrell del Caso, *Huyendo de la crítica* (*Una cosa que no puede ser o Muchacho huyendo de un cuadro*), 1874, oil on canvas, 75,7 x 61 cm, Colección Banco de España.

¹⁰ In this respect, cf. Alfano (2010).

cannot be fixed, and together with their general meta-representative nature, framings appear as both transmedial and plurimedial devices. Namely, as Wolf and Bernhart (2006) pointed out, framing devices can be found in all media and interactions. Further, depending on the complexity of the semiotic network governing the meaning production and reception rules after which a given object is patterned, they may consist of more than one medium. In this latter case, the resulting framing device appears as a composite and multilayered object in which visual, textual, and acoustic signs overlap, as is the case we will analyze hereafter of the exhibition created by Grace Ndiritu (FOMU 2023).

For instance, one could think of *Twentytwo Less Two*, performed by Michelangelo Pistoletto during the open ceremony of the Biennale di Venezia in 2009. The Italian artist installed twenty-two golden-framed mirrors, which he lately proceeded to crash with a hammer. In this way, visitors standing in front of the mirrors witnessed the creation of “gestural photography” (Pistoletto 2010) in which their reflections, framed by the same symbolic device Borrell employed, crashed and revealed their representational nature.



Figure 2. Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Twentytwo Less Two*, 2009.

More recently, in the context of a twenty-year research practice analyzed in her monograph *Healing the Museum* (2023), the British-Kenyan artist Grace Ndiritu re-designed the collection of the Foto Museum of Antwerp (FOMU) in *Grace Ndiritu Reimagines the FOMU collection* (2023).¹¹ To provide a new meaning to the whole concept of experiencing art in a museum, she built an augmented framing device by using her installation, *A Quest For Meaning: Painting as a Medium of Photography* (2014). Ndiritu even materially manipulated the very structure of the museum; for instance, she designed a wooden structure and a textile path for users to walk barefoot.



Figures 3a & 3b. Grace Ndiritu redesigning Antwerp's Foto Museum.

¹¹ For an overview of Ndiritu’s project for FOMU, cf. <https://fomu.be/en/exhibitions/grace-ndiritu>. About Ndiritu’s diverse practices, cf. <https://gracendiritu.com/> from which are also taken the pictures of the FOMU exhibition.

2.3. Cultural metarepresentativity

As it is clear from the examples discussed so far, the objects falling under the label 'framing device' are inherently diverse and may seem impossible to compare. Set before this diversity, one may ponder how to identify framing devices. Just a quick spot-check from the field of cultural artifacts shows the concept we are handling as a broad one, primarily due to its strong interdisciplinary vocation, which makes it both risky and appealing from a theoretical perspective. Not surprisingly, scholars like Tannen (1993) and Wolf and Bernhart (2006) highlighted how concepts such as 'frame' and 'framing' have become umbrella terms encompassing media studies, discourse analysis, narratology, cognition theory, AI, sociology, and art history, to name a few. If not correctly handled, such expansive scope risks dissolving the concept's heuristic potential within specific fields.

In this respect, the metarepresentative function of framing devices represents a critical feature that can turn this variability into an advantage. Indeed, when interrogating framing devices, one should not be concerned with the morphological variety per se but rather focus on the general function it serves. As Wolf pointed out, framings "depend on a period's *épistémè*, norms, conventions, and the totality of the 'frames of reference' [...] as 'basic units' of semantic integration" (Wolf and Bernhart 2006: 4). Hence, the variability of framing devices directly stems from their threshold nature, making them highly responsive to changes within their semiosphere that the objects they frame should represent. Regardless of their specific form, framing's general function remains consistent: to portray the cultural endeavor of encoding reality 'here and now' within a continuously changing semiosphere with particular rules of meaning production and reception. Despite, or perhaps because of, their morphological flexibility, these devices exhibit enduring stability in functionality toward their reference cultural system. As such, this variability emerges as a 'natural' response provided to contextual changes. This chameleonic nature allows these devices to perform the same function at different times and geographies and within increasingly complex semiotic networks. In this respect, it can be argued that one of the most significant advantages of framing as a tool is that its morphological flexibility is directly proportional to its transversal stability in terms of functionality within different media and, more generally, toward its originating cultural system. Therefore, framing devices are shaped according to the synchronic rules of production and reception of their semiotic nature. This means they are also testable using the disciplinary tools specific to their form. Nonetheless, considering their metarepresentative function, it is possible to compare framing devices developed in different historical moments, places, and media.¹²

¹² Caw's study (1985) in reading fiction's frame went in this direction although it was mostly concerned with framing "within" fiction rather than framings "of" fiction, as is the case with Genette's study of paratexts (1987), Wolf and Bernhart's investigation of framing borders (2006), and the present article itself.

Yet, what is this metarepresentative function about? Considering framings as culturally rooted orientational devices, their metarepresentativity can be generally understood as the operational result of an intrinsic metarepresentational capacity of human communication. As Sperber (2000) pointed out, this metarepresentational capacity revealed “no less fundamental than the faculty of language” (6) in answering a human constitutive need to rationalize the perception of the world. Accordingly, human metarepresentational capacity grew in complexity, alongside cultural awareness toward the construed semiotic nature of reality. In this context, drawing upon jargon from ‘hard’ sciences, a metarepresentative function can be described as aiming to depict the rules regulating the relation between the domains of reality and the codomain of its representations. In Verón’s terminology, this metarepresentative function helps us systematize the answers historically provided by “socio-individual systems [...] to assure their self-organization” (Verón 2014: 171). Thus, the resulting framing devices add to a multimedial and epistemological map of the contracts of reading Western culture stipulated over time. This constitutive perception-organizing need first translates into the abstract mental maps I formerly described as frames, which then materialize into different framing devices, some of which become social and cultural structuring elements. For instance, framing objects such as maps, windows, and material frames – as the one (almost) trespassed by Borrell’s *muchacho* – shaped the Western “conventional mode of appropriation of reality” (Frow 1982: 29),¹³ in terms of both codification and recognition.

In light of this, unlike Wolf and Bernhart (2006), the metareferential character and the metarepresentative function of framing devices are essential elements for its definition. Indeed, Wolf and Bernhart’s framing typology (2006) identifies framings’ main functions based on “the predominant relation of a framing element to one out of five constituents of the discursive exchange” (27). As such, the resulting framing device can be shaped into sender-, text-, receiver-, context-, or sometimes self-centered.¹⁴ The latter is “often transmitted through defamiliarized framings [...] and therefore especially frequent in experimental or metatextual artworks and/or texts” (29). They argue that “all of these functions can be combined with, or imply, a self-referential or even

¹³ The long-lasting history of how Western culture materialized or, in Verón’s terms, mediated its perception of the world can be traced back through the development of some of these framing devices and it is linked with the history of its scopic regime, namely a culturally rooted modality of “seeing” the world. For a brief introduction to the topic, Cf. Nocerino (2023, partic.: 48-50).

¹⁴ After Noth (2007), Wolf defined reference and self-reference as follows: “‘reference’ as designating the relation between sign and referent must not be restricted to the world ‘outside’ the sign or sign system but also apply to elements, or the entirety, of the sign (system) in question itself [...] If we broaden ‘reference’ in this way, the term becomes a hypernym, encompassing two basic variants: self-reference and ‘heteroreference’ (or, as Noth calls it, “alloreference”) [...] *Heteroreference* denotes the narrower linguistic sense of the term [...] self-reference can be defined as a usually non-accidental quality of signs and sign configurations that in various ways refer or point to (aspects of) themselves or to other signs.” He also distinguished an “extra-compositional self-reference” – that occurs within the “entire area of the media [...] but outside the work or text” – and an “intra-compositional self-reference” – that pertains to the limits of “the work one is confronted with” (2009: 17-20).

a meta-referential function” (30). Therefore, this typology appears very beneficial when describing framings’ anchoring mechanisms to their semiosphere.

Nonetheless, it also diminishes the primary meta-cultural necessity that framings perform as coding of a socially and culturally rooted meaning-making behavior. The perspective should be overturned as framing’s metarepresentative function encompasses each of the primary five identified by Wolf and Bernhart (2006). A specific framing device relying more evidently on the message than the context, or vice versa, will depend on the sense-making rules according to which the framing and the framed object are conceived. Instead, it can be argued that the level of ‘blatancy’ of the framings’ meta-referentiality depends on the degree of cultural awareness toward the metarepresentational potential (Sperber 2000) associated with human communication.

In conclusion, associated with their flexibility deriving from the puri- and transmediality, the metarepresentativity provides framing devices with functional stability that conclusively adjusts the transversal, yet accurate, the tool we were looking for. Indeed, through the “materialization of sense-making” (Averbeck-Lietz 2021: 80) strategies, framings post up a signal on the doorway of social and cultural artifacts as if to warn us to “mind the *décalage!*” Accordingly, analysis of framing devices of a given discourse in history could result in a map of that semiotic process of meaning reconfiguration – which comes from the continuous motion of discourses among producers and receivers (which in turn become producers), geographies, and media systems – that ultimately resulted in a historical, social, and cultural mode of reality construction. As such, somewhat paraphrasing Verón’s terminology, one could also define framings as ‘meta-mediatic phenomena.’ Namely, Framing devices represent the materialization of the cultural process, which led to the stipulation of the reading contract according to which we narrate our reality.

That said, let’s take an additional step in this direction and see how these features of framing devices appear and how they work with analyzing the (framed) history of the Western meta-discourse over storytelling. Methodological side note: in this paper, I focus on the theoretical refinement of framing devices as a tool for developing a meta-referential and interdisciplinary approach advocated by Eliseo Verón. Accordingly, expanding on the case studies I provided to exemplify each of the characteristics discussed above, in this paragraph, I will use a literary case study to offer a broader perspective of how these features can be found (and studied) together to analyze the circulation of a specific discourse in the semiotic network. The general issue of the relationship between framing devices and short story collections is a complex one. It stems from the prevailing tendency in literary studies to rigidly separate history and theory, and it has remained largely unaddressed, with exceptions being Duyck (2014) and, partially, the unpublished Ph.D. thesis of Timothy Alderman (1982). Such oversight also contributes to the misunderstanding and consequent misinterpretation of the meta-narrative nature inherent in short narrative collections. Following an extensive elaboration on Short Story Collection

Theory, I delve into the specificity of this issue in the second part of my forthcoming Ph.D. thesis, where I will also include a broader diachronic analysis of framing devices from Italian short narratives ‘collectors,’ such as proper short story collections but also magazines, anthologies, etc. from Boccaccio up to contemporary examples.

3. “...and other such -amerons”¹⁵

December 31, 2019. After a worldwide circulation of terrifying, memorable videos that showed hundreds of people collapsing in the streets, Chinese health authorities notified the emergence of a pneumonia outbreak in Wuhan. March 11, 2020: the extreme gravity and the vast spread of the disease caused the World Health Organization (WHO) to announce a pandemic.¹⁶ The time of COVID-19 had begun, carrying along isolation, distance, and fear. But also “the time of storytelling” (Kumagai and Baruch 2021). As the virus swept the world, numerous *Decameron*-related narrative projects sprouted worldwide. Of course, this *Decameron* revival is not surprising, even if we were to limit our observations to a ‘superficial’ level. The resemblance between the shadow of the Black Death looming over Boccaccio’s work and the one threatening our reality is more than blatant; it “speaks to the appeal of history in times of crisis” (Downes and Römhild 2022: 46). Insofar as it has been argued that pandemic fiction represented a trauma response, allowing people to deal with the tragic contingency (Downes and Römhild 2022, Angeletti 2023). Nonetheless, as for our purpose, the most interesting effect of all the *Decameron*-ish experiences is that they brought the essential role of its *cornice* to light.

Due to what could be labeled as a critical misconstruction, the *cornice*’s long-lasting effects, in terms of cultural structuring effects, have been increasingly underrated over time (Bardini 2020, Mendrino 2022). In 2019, Amedeo Quondam even claimed the historical ‘defeat’ of the paradigm set by Boccaccio, arguing that the overarching tale of the *lieta brigata* knew no actual heirs in the Western tradition. Admittedly, the *cornice* represents a one-time device that masterfully pulls all the strings in the work: diegetic, thematic, visual, and material. For instance, Cursi (2007) and Nocita (2015) showed how, in the last autograph copy of the *Decameron* (Hamilton 90 codex), Boccaccio designed a thorough system of capital letters – distinguished by heights, colors, and decorations – to mark diegetic and logic thresholds visually and materially. In so doing, he provided readers with an actual map to navigate through his work. In this sense, there is no doubt the *Decameron* is “un libro senza eredi” (Bausi 2017: 173) that has rightfully been identified as “something of a *summa* [...] of late-medieval culture and its various storytelling forms and traditions” (Bausi 2017: 178).¹⁷

¹⁵ Barth, John 2005. *The Book of Ten Nights and A Night. Eleven Stories*. Boston-New York: First Mariners Book Editions, p. 3.

¹⁶ The end of the pandemic was notified on May 5, 2023.

¹⁷ My translation.

Moreover, those storytelling practices Boccaccio puts at the center of a cultural and social issue: how to (re) construe reality after the chaos in which the Black Death plunged contemporary society (Alfano 2014, Marafioti 2018, Lavaggetto 2019). As such, the framing device in which the story of the *lieta brigata* is integrated constitutes a space where, as Alfano (2006) puts it, “the shape of the relation between the ‘real’ world, to which the reader belongs, and the ‘virtual’ one, she/he is about to access, is established” (62).¹⁸ Yet, rather than strictly focusing on its morphology – that, as it is clear from our theoretical considerations, must change for framing devices to perform their metacultural function – we should focus on this metarepresentative feature. In this metarepresentative practice, whose components add up to a multilayered metarepresentation of its cultural mode of (re)codifying the reality, or instead of its underlying contract of reading (Verón 2014), the *cornice*’s cultural and historical legacy must be identified.¹⁹ Thus, let’s move some steps further in this direction.



Figure 4. Vincenzo Morelli’s *Quarantena. A Digital Decameron* (2020).

3.1. Quarantena. A Digital Decameron²⁰

Perhaps less popular compared with the NYTimes’ venture I will introduce in the last paragraph, and yet worth mentioning in our argument is the crowd-funded project born from Vincenzo Morelli’s social walls.²¹ In March 2020, Morelli started posting about the difficulties of quarantine. Against the sense of solitude and isolation, he put his mailbox at the disposal of anyone “who felt the need or the desire to turn inward in order to walk outside” (Morelli 2020). One big difference, as the back cover reads: “Contrary to Boccaccio’s ten youths, who escaped the plague in the Florentine countryside, where eye to eye they told each other stories, my senders have no face, and they told their stories *standing alone behind a screen*.”²²

Shortly after Morelli started posting, social media spread the word. Morelli received so many stories he decided to turn them into a collection for which money was required. Hence, flanked by a team of talented friends, Morelli created a crowdfunding campaign for which he devised an exciting framing device. In short

¹⁸ My translation, emphasis in the original.

¹⁹ Although in this article I am not dealing with the short story collection form per se, I would like to stress how, through this definition of framing, the single stories or novellas appear as small windows opened on the possible forms in which reality can be shaped in a given time, space, and medium. Framing devices offer a map to understand our cultural way of moving in and even building the world around us, whether strictly separated from fiction or overlapped with it.

²⁰ Link to the Instagram page (from which also the picture is taken): <https://www.instagram.com/digitaldecameron/>.

²¹ As one would expect, Facebook as well as YouTube and Instagram, hosted a large number of storytelling projects during the pandemic. In this respect, cf. Mendrino (2022).

²² Translation and emphasis mine.

order, the project landed on Instagram, where posts alternated brief quotes to one of the tailored illustrations designed by Gaetano Di Dio. Then, it was time for YouTube, where short clips gave users a way to listen to some excerpts taken from the stories to come.²³ Finally, *Quarantena. A Digital Decameron* was hosted in an episode of the Spotify podcast *Campania Felix*. The creator invited listeners to contribute to the project, whose donations were partially destined for Banco Alimentare, an Italian national work of charity collecting and distributing unsellable edibles.²⁴ In mid-May 2020, the book came out thanks to its forthcoming readers' donations. The most interesting thing is that this vast intermedial framing device – made of texts, images, and voices scattered on different platforms – stood in a narrative void for a long time. Precisely as the isolated narrators sending out their stories to Morelli's mailbox, prospective readers of the *Digital Decameron* were standing alone in fear and confusion. As such, they sought refuge in and even funded a virtual communal space to sit in and wait to hear stories that, maybe, could have been able to frame and, in so doing, find a meaning to their reality.

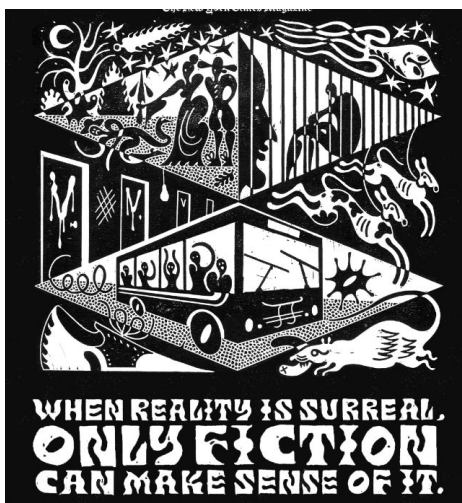


Figure 5. *Stories from Quarantine* (2022).

3.2. The Decameron Project²⁵

During the first wave of COVID-19, the New York Times editors asked twenty-nine authors “to write new short stories inspired by the moment.” Indeed, drawing on the suggestion of writer and essayist Rivka Galchen, the project aimed to “help the readers to understand the present moment” (Roper 2022: vii). On July 7, 2020, the “all-fiction issue” entitled *The Decameron Project. 29 Stories from the Pandemic* was launched online. Later, the project was also published in two paperback editions (November 2020 and March 2022); the latter redesigned the cover, changed the title to *Stories from Quar-*

antine, and even rearranged the stories' disposition. Nonetheless, the most interesting object for our argument is represented by the online version (which is still accessible under subscription). Here, the reader is welcomed by the gothic animated illustrations and lettering, both realized by Sophie Hollington, stating: “When reality

²³ YouTube also hosted a similar reading initiative organized by the Italian Fondazione Erri De Luca: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9JV8ALu_exWLD_mIcPM73evFLSvQy3Rd.

²⁴ Also “Come Vite Distanti”, a collective comic project, was aimed at fighting against the problems raised by the pandemic. Indeed, all the profits were destined for INMI “Lazzaro Spallanzani”. Link to the project here: <https://arfestival.it/covid/> (and many thanks to Dr. Giorgio Busi Rizzi who introduced the project to me).

²⁵ Link to the online version: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/07/magazine/decameron-project-short-story-collection.html>.

is surreal, only fiction can make sense of it." A short caption introduces the rules of the 'game'²⁶ that follows, immediately capturing the eyes. Indeed, the stories' visual setup recalls the well-known board game *Memory*, which aims to match corresponding images by flipping one card at a time and remembering their position. So much so that when interacting with a 'story card,' each one displaying the author's name automatically turns upside down, revealing a short quote from the story or an illustration. According to Wolf and Bernhart's typology (2006: 15; 25), this kind of framing device is classified as context-based (or recipient-based, if one looks at it from a processual or performative perspective), heteromedial (concerning the 'media consistency' of the framed object which, in this case, is a collection of texts while the framing device is mainly visual), total, and overt. Of course, the reference to *Memory* suggests associations among the stories, but even more interestingly, I believe the primary function of this visual framing is the metarepresentative one we are looking for. Indeed, not only are there no duplicates to pair, but each of the quotes or illustrations on the cards, rather than strictly relying on the story's plot, seem to hint at generic situations anyone had to experience during COVID-19. For instance, the 'Etgar Keret' card reveals the image of two people interacting at a long distance. Similarly, the 'Paolo Giordano' card displays a man standing alone in a space. This hypothesis also seems to be upheld by the 'Surprise Me' card, located in the last position on the virtual board, which allows the reader to mix up the original disposition of the stories. Indeed, by playing the 'Surprise Me' card, the reader accesses a random story and, in so doing, undercuts the game's *ratio*, which is based on the spatial positioning of the cards. As such, the entire framing device appears painfully anchored in the context of its readers, suggesting that the actual cards' duplicates are to be found in their personal experience of social distancing, physical and mental isolation, anxiety, and so on. By 'blurring' into the readers' contingency, the framing of *The Decameron Project* accomplishes its metarepresentative goal. Indeed, it shapes the new contract of reality reading the pandemic calls for, which must be 'drafted' according to synchronic historical contingencies and the grammars of production and recognition of our increasingly complex semiotic network. As such, this new contract of reading calls for a high level of intermediality and requires the blurring of any threshold separating fiction from 'reality,' whose construed nature is stressed by the counterintuitive statement claiming that only fiction could make sense of our experience. Only fiction could re-construe an acceptable reality for us to live in.

²⁶ "As the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world, we asked 29 authors to write new short stories inspired by the moment. We were inspired by Giovanni Boccaccio's "The Decameron," written as the plague ravaged Florence in the 14th century. Read Rivka Galchen's essay on that book here. And read the stories in our all-fiction issue below:"

But to what reality is the lettering precisely referring? In this respect, not only the printed version of the project lost the visual framing but also the powerful effect of its interactivity. Besides, as I anticipated, it also reorganized the stories' order. Of course, such rearrangements – which, in this case, were already partially implied by the “Surprise Me” possibility – exceptionally impact collections as meaning structures in general terms. As for the specific order of *The Decameron Project's* stories, the editorial rearrangement of the anthology somehow hindered the outreach of the sense-making device the collection aimed for. For instance, the online version of *The Decameron Project* used to open with *Impatient Griselda* by Margaret Atwood (in the 8th position of the book). The short story is a rewriting of *Decameron* 10 (X). The *novella*, initially told by Dioneo, narrates about the “crudele e iniquo e bestiale” Marquis of Saluzzo, who spends a decade testing the patience and loyalty of the peasant Griselda, “volendoti insegnar d’esser moglie” (Boccaccio 2013: 1720),²⁷ insofar as he fools her to believe (for thirteen years) that he had their children killed. In Atwood’s dystopian rewriting, an alien appointed to entertain humans in exodus re-tells Griselda’s story through his gender-fluid and feminist-filtered lenses. As such, it empowers Griselda to the point that, along with her impatient sister, she murders her husband: “Then the two sisters performed an act of bodily affection, and then they ate the Duke all up – bones, brocaded robes, and all” (Atwood 2020: 75). Set before the protest of his hearers, the narrator provides a significant answer through which the whole collection’s meaning expands:

Excuse me? What is WTF? Sorry, I don’t understand. Yes, Madam-Sir, I admit that this was a cross-cultural moment. I was simply saying what I myself would have done in their place. But storytelling does help us understand one another across our *social, historical, and evolutionary chasms, don't you think?* (Atwood 2020: 76, my emphasis)

Hence, the opening offered by *Impatient Griselda* and the project’s introductory gothic caption seems to expand beyond the pandemic era of the ‘surreal reality’ the collection aims to make sense of by trying to figure out how to construe reality. Or, given the specific tragic contingencies, which are not necessarily limited to the pandemic, how can we reconstrue a reality we can keep living in?

Drawing on the grammar of production and recognition of our highly complex semiosphere, both *The Decameron Project* and the *Digital Decameron* built a multi-medial and (partially) interactive space. Morphologically speaking, the resulting

²⁷ “pitiless and wicked and brutal”; “wanting to teach you to be a wife,” my translations.

framing devices could not be more distant from the original formal paradigm set by the *Decameron's* cornice. Nonetheless, they highlighted a long-lasting cultural tendency, taken to its extremes by the contingent situation created by the pandemic, to build up devices to surround our experiential world to construe its meaning. Indeed, it is clear how, despite the shifts that profoundly modified the cultural and social reference system, along with the semiotic rules through which encoding it, the core question stays the same. Whether dealing with storytelling framing practices, the use of the framing technique in the media, or even a particular use of space, all these devices make us catch sight of the functioning mechanisms through which the codification of meaning, or rather the construction of our reality historically happened and still happens. The traces they left behind result in a map of our way of signifying the world.

4. Framings, or mind the *décalage*!

Transpassable gilded wood frames, unique manipulations of objects or public spaces, interactive frame-tale stories, and diffused digital environments. In conclusion, what are framing devices? Most importantly, how do they provide a valuable tool for the meta-historical approach to the circulation of discourses we aim for?

The analysis of framing devices' main features revealed them as a flexible yet accurate, interdisciplinary tool for navigating the complexities of our semiotic network from a diachronic perspective. More specifically, liminal responsiveness and historical plasticity enable adaptation to the diverse products of an ever-evolving semiotic landscape. Besides, cultural metarepresentativity ensures functional consistency toward a comprehensive interpretation of "the transformation of meaning via technically mediated communication" (Averbeck-Lietz 2021: 76). In this respect, the examples analyzed throughout theoretical paragraphs have been discussed to build up a meta-representative space depicting how cultures shape their attitude toward the codification of reality 'here and now.' Drawing on synchronic grammars of meaning production and recognition, these framing devices add up to the "materialization of sense-making" (Averbeck-Lietz 2021:80) strategies on which a synchronic "contract of reading" (Verón 1987, 2014) is stipulated. Further, the analysis of the transformation of the *cornice* – from Boccaccio up to "the time of storytelling" (Kumagai and Baruch 2021) initiated by COVID-19 – carried through these theoretical features, resulted in a multifaceted yet coherent map of the Western meta-discourse over storytelling.

The article concludes by explaining how analyzing the transformation of framing devices across time, space, and media results in a meta-representative 'map' of

the décalages through which the multimedial and interdisciplinary meta-history of “the mediatization of mediations as a general process” (Averbeck-Lietz 2021: 76) could be told. Namely, a map that helps us reconstrue the history of our narrative about reality ‘here and now.’

References

- Alderman, Timothy C. 1982. *The Integrated Short Story Collection as a Genre*. Ph.D. Thesis, Purdue University.
- Alfano, Giancarlo 2006. *Nelle maglie della voce. Oralità e testualità da Boccaccio a Basile*. Napoli: Liguori.
- Alfano, Giancarlo 2010. *Paesaggi, mappe, tracciati. Cinque studi di letteratura e geografia*. Napoli: Liguori.
- Alfano, Giancarlo 2014. *Introduzione alla lettura del Decameron*. Roma and Bari: Laterza.
- Angeletti, Valerio 2023. From plague to plague: COVID-19 and the New Decameron(s). *Int Soc Sci* 1-12, DOI: 10.1111 / issj.12434.
- Atwood, Margaret 2020. Impatient Griselda. In: The New York Times. *The Decameron Project: 29 Stories from the Pandemic*. New York: Scribner, 72-76.
- Audet, René 2000. *Des textes à l'oeuvre. La lecture du recueil de nouvelles*. Québec: Nota bene.
- Averbeck-Lietz, Stefanie 2021. Eliseo Verón's Semio-anthropological Concept of Mediatization: Its Relevance for a Historical and Systematic Approach in the Field of Communication Theory. In: Rodríguez-Amat, J.R, Scolari, C. A. and J. L. Fernández (eds.) *Mediatization(s). Theoretical Conversations between Europe and Latin America*. Bristol-Chicago: Intellect, 72-86.
- Bardini, Marco 2020. *Boccaccio pop. Usi, riusi e abusi del Decameron nella contemporaneità*. Pisa: ETS.
- Barth, John 2005. *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night. Eleven Stories*. Boston and New York: First Mariners Book Editions.
- Bateson, Gregory [1955] 1972. A Theory of Play and Fantasy. In: *Steps to an Ecology of Mind. Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bausi, Francesco 2017. *Leggere il Decameron*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Boccaccio, Giovanni 2013. *Decameron*. Milano: BUR.
- Caws, Mary Ann 1985. *Reading Frames in Modern Fiction*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Corti, Maria 1975. Testi o macrotesto? I racconti di Marcovaldo. In: Corti, Maria. 1978. *Il viaggio testuale. Le ideologie e le strutture semiotiche*. Torino: Einaudi, 185-200.

- Cursi, Marco 2007. *Il Decameron: scritture, scriventi, lettori*. Roma: Viella.
- Dennet, Daniel C. 2000. Making Tools for Thinking. In: Dan Sperber (ed.) *Metarepresentations. A Multidisciplinary Perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press, 17-30.
- Downes, Stephanie and Juliane Römhild 2022. Pandemic Fiction as Therapeutic Play. *Thesis Eleven* 169(1), DOI: 10.1177/07255136211069417.
- Duyck, Mathijs 2014. Continuity and Generic Implications. In: D'Hoker, Elke and Bart Van den Bossche (eds.) *Cycles, Recueils, Macrotxts: The Short Story Collection in Theory and Practice*. Special issue of *Interférences littéraires/Littéraire interferences* 12: 75-86.
- Eco, Umberto 1979. *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Fernández Pedemonte, Damián and Ana Inés Jorge Artigau 2018. Thinking pencils: a merging foundation between Gregory Bateson and Eliseo Verón. *Annals of the International Communication Association* 42:2, DOI: 10.1080/23808985.2018.1446351.
- Ferrari, Daniela and Andrea Pinotti (eds.) 2018. *La cornice. Storie, teorie, testi*. Monza: Johan & Levi.
- Fiorilla, Vincenzo (ed.) 2020. *Quarantena. A Digital Decameron*. Independently published.
- Fontana, Alessandro and Jean-Louis Piazza Fournel 1986. Corte, Salotto, Caffè. In: Alberto Asor Rosa (ed.) *Letteratura italiana*. Vol. 1: Le questioni. Torino: Einaudi, 635-686.
- Frow, John 1982. The Literary Frame. *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 18(2): 25-30.
- Genette, Gérard 1982. *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*. Paris: Seuil.
- Genette, Gérard 1987. *Seuils*. Paris: Seuil.
- Goffman, Erving 1974. *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ingram, Forrest L. 1971. *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century. Studies in a Literary Genre*. Paris and The Hague: Walter De Gruyter.
- Kumagai, Arno and Jay Baruch 2021. Stories in the Time of COVID-19. *Academic Medicine* 96(8): 1095-6.
- Lavaggetto, Mario 2019. *Oltre le usate leggi. Una lettura del Decameron*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Lotman, Jurij 1977. *The Structure of the Artistic Text*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Lotman, Jurij 1990. *Universe of the Mind. A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Marafioti, Martin 2018. *Storytelling as Plague Prevention in Medieval and Early Modern Italy. The Decameron Tradition*. London: Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9781315610887
- Mendriño, Luca 2022. Boccaccio e covid: la riscoperta del 'Decameron' su Facebook. In: Mendriño, L., Nicoli, R. and B. Stasi (eds.) *Fakebooks: Osservatorio su Letteratura e Social ai tempi del covid*. (FOLES) 0(0), DOI: 10.1285/i9788883051883.

- Morelli, Vincenzo (ed.) 2020. *Quarantena. A Digital Decameron*. Independently published.
- Nocerino, Sara 2023. Scrivere l'ascolto: "[...] è questa la parola?". In: Giuseppe Andrea Liberti (ed.) *Le forme della voce: l'immaginario acustico nel secondo Novecento italiano*. Milano: Franco Angeli, 43–58.
- Nocita, Teresa 2015. Boccaccio, the Decameron, and the Hamilton 90 Codex. In: *Spolia*, 1 July, 1-19.
- Nöth, Winfried 2007. Self-reference in the media: The semiotic framework. In: Nöth, Winfried and Nina Bishara (eds.) *Self-Reference in the Media*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 3-30.
- Quondam, Amedeo 2019. La vittoria del «Novellino» nella tradizione delle forme narrative brevi. *Carte Romanze* 7(1), DOI: 10.13130/2282-7447/11201.
- Rodríguez-Amat, J.R, Scolari, C. A. and J. L. Fernández (eds.) 2021. *Mediatization(s). Theoretical Conversations between Europe and Latin America*. Bristol and Chicago: Intellect.
- Roper, Caitlin 2020. Preface. In: *The Decameron Project: 29 Stories from the Pandemic*, edited by New York Times Magazines. New York: Scribner, vii-x.
- Santi, Mara 2014. Simul stabunt... Note per una teoria politestuale della raccolta di narrativa breve. *ALLEGORIA* 69–70: 85–104.
- Scolari, Carlos Alberto and Joan-Ramon Rodríguez-Amat 2018. A Latin American Approach to Mediatization: Specificities and Contributions to a Global Discussion about How the Media Shape Contemporary Societies. *Communication Theory* 28 (2): 131–54.
- Sperber, Dan (ed.) 2000. *Metarepresentations. A Multidisciplinary Perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tannen, Deborah (ed.) 1993. *Framing in Discourse*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- The New York Times 2020. *The Decameron Project: 29 Stories from the Pandemic*. New York: Scribner.
- Traversa, Oscar 2018. L'origine et le changement dans l'œuvre d'Eliseo Verón. *Communication & Langages* 196: 39-54. DOI: 10.3917/comla1.196.0039.
- Verón, Eliseo 1987. *La Sémosis sociale. Fragments d'une théorie de la discursivité*. Vin-cennes: PUV.
- Verón, Eliseo 1999. *Efectos de agenda*. Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Verón, Eliseo 2013. *La Semiosis social, 2: ideas, momentos, interpretantes*. Buenos Aires: Paidós.
- Verón, Eliseo 2014. Mediatization theory: a semio-anthropological perspective. *Mediatization of communication* 21: 163-174.
- Wilson, Deirdre 2000. Metarepresentation in Linguistic Communication. In: Dan Sperber (ed.) *Metarepresentations. A Multidisciplinary Perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press, 411- 448.

- Winkin, Yves and Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz 2013. *Erving Goffman: A critical introduction to media and communication theory*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Wolf, Werner and Walter Bernhart (eds.) 2006. *Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.
- Wolf, Werner (ed.) 2009. *The Metareferential Turn in Contemporary Arts and Media: Forms, Functions, Attempts at Explanation*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.

AUTHOR

Sara Nocerino Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Humanities (University of Naples Federico II, Italy) and the Department of Literary Studies (UGent, Belgium).

