

Mass Media, Mass Culture and Contemporary Italian Fiction

Virginia Agostinelli

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Reading Committee:

Albert Sbragia, Chair

Susan Gaylard

Jennifer Bean

Leroy Searle

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**Abstract**

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Virginia Agostinelli

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:  
Associate Professor Albert Sbragia  
Italian

This dissertation examines the pulp literary trend that developed in Italy from mid 1990s. By analyzing the historical, socio-economical and cultural changes that Italy went through after World War II, I clarify the process by which the traditional elitist literary scene radically transformed into a mass cultural movement targeting young generations of readers. Television plays a key role in the development of this new pulp genre that incorporates its language and, in some cases, even its format. During the period of the Second Republic (1992-2012), also known as the Berlusconi era, the connection between television and politics became so tight that one forged the term “videocrazy” in reference to Italy. I examine the pulp trend as an active response from the Italian literary world aimed to generate socio-political awareness; in this way, one avoided that Italians were relegated to the passive role of spectators or *telespettatori* with respect to the

transformations the country was/is going through. The body of texts that can be grouped under the umbrella term “pulp” is vast. The use of case studies is employed to illustrate more specifically two points: first, the way in which contemporary pulp writers are redefining the task of the intellectual (fiction writer, historian and investigative journalist); second, the legacy interwoven by the new generation of writers with Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975). Pasolini’s last novel *Petrolio* (1992) epitomizes the pulp writers’ notion of novel as a historically investigative unfinished sketch: an unidentified narrative object. In an epoch of deep financial and political crisis in Italy, the literary and cultural scenario offers a vibrant response to social anxieties. The pulp trend intuited that in order to overcome the present challenges that Italy is experiencing and to look at the future, one must come to terms with the shadowy past. The pulp trend transformed the book into an instrument of attack for a mass revolution that Italy never really experienced. In the light of this, despite the current general sense of crisis across Europe, the outlook for Italy seems more positive than ever before.

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*To Marco.*

## Introduction

In 1993, on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the creation of *Gruppo 63*<sup>1</sup> and due to the interest of Italian publishing houses in scouting new talents, a convention was held in Reggio Emilia in order to identify new authors to launch on the market. The title of the convention was “Ricerca: il laboratorio di nuove scritture” (“Researching: a Laboratory for New Writings”). Among the group of young writers that were selected following this event were Silvia Ballestra, Aldo Nove, Tiziano Scarpa and Niccoló Ammaniti whose mode was clearly detaching from the more classic Italian literary production of the past and developing in a way that critics would struggle to categorize or assess. Since then, Italian literature has continued to generate an innovative body of literary texts often grouped under the umbrella of “Italian pulp.” Seen by some as a mere para-literary trend or popular culture sub-genre, the pulp phenomenon in Italy is far from being outmoded as it has successfully carved out a literary space that is targeting mostly younger generations of readers. Due to the rather disturbing lexicon and the ultra sanguinary simulation of reality which the tales so vividly depict, the definitions and labels that have been appointed to this new group of writers by academics, journalists and literary critics run from “nuovi freak” (Paolo Di Stefano) through “cattivisti”, “maledettisti” and “tremendisti” (Goffredo Fofi) to Roberto Cotroneo’s definition of them as authors of “pulp trash fuck and virtual insanity”. The limitation, or what I might call the myopia, of some Italian literary critics regarding the current pulp trend makes an academic study that

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<sup>1</sup> An Italian avant-garde literary movement of the 1960s that started in Palermo. The group wanted a radical break from the conformity of the traditional Italian society of the time. Umberto Eco and Edoardo Sanguineti were among its founders.

evaluates such writers within their proper historical and cultural context all the more urgent, compelling and productive.

The narrative proposed by the new Italian writers emerges from a self-imposed assimilation of film, media, television and even commercial ads. Literature can no longer maintain any real contacts with ethics and morality, but rather it ought to simulate its displacement. Whereas the idea of pulp fiction is strictly linked to a marketing and commercially oriented literature (thus seemingly escaping the Gramscian intellectual *impegno*), it is precisely because of the ‘contaminated’ narrative that the Italian pulp carries out a sociological denunciation. To emphasize the sense of phagocytation of goods and images, the phrase “young cannibals” seems the most appropriate appellation for a movement that is, in fact, incongruent in style and content. Aldo Nove et al.<sup>2</sup> published an anthology of stories in the *Stile Libero* (Free Style) series by the influential Turin-based publisher Einaudi in 1996. The term “cannibali” derives from the title: *Gioventù Cannibale. La prima antologia dell’orrore estremo*. (Cannibal Youth. The first anthology of extreme horror). Therein, the cartoonish reproduction of reality is constantly intertwined with the media, both in terms of the language adopted and horrific situations described. Just as in a David Cronenberg film, the *cannibali* have elaborated a narrative, which questions the role of imagination in a society in which we constantly rehearse parts that have been written for us by the media industry. Fragmentation and irrationality aim to mirror the process of annihilation that, the *cannibali* implicitly contend, the human mind is undergoing (Sinibaldi 32). Aldo Nove is cognizant of this operation, as he claims that “every form of contemporary art departs from the market...there is no

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<sup>2</sup> Tiziano Scarpa, Simona Vinci, Silvia Ballestra, Carlo Lucarelli, Niccolò Ammaniti and Luisa Brancaccio, Isabella Santacroce, Daniele Luttazzi and Matteo Galiano.

communication that does not utilize objects which become elements of the market itself” (qtd. in Antonello 52). From this point of view, the strategy employed by the *cannibali* is promptly unveiled: aware of the process of commodification that their work will undergo, the *cannibali* exploit the market and optimize its resources in order to reach a wider audience while at the same time escaping, or at least resisting, the inevitable cooptation of their works and figures.

The explosion of popularity and the exaggerated interest from its ‘consumers’ have sealed the success of this literary and cultural operation. The Italian Generation X, to which the *cannibali* belong, has successfully carved out a cultural, multi-media space for their works as a result of their numerous television appearances, blogs, social networks, movies and television shows through which they promote themselves *and* their products as appealing commercial goods. The mainstream criticism that was initially skeptical has been forced more recently to acknowledge the new literary generation in an attempt to historicize a phenomenon whose borders are still indeterminable. Criticism, however, has also generated a terminological confusion due to a forced categorization of a narrative whose variables are unpredictable.

The first chapter of this dissertation (“Mass Media, Mass Culture, and its Historical Discourse in Italy”), provides the historical background from which the phenomenon arose: when looking at the history of pulp and crime fiction more specifically, one must note that the genre appears to prosper in times of crisis and anxiety, when ideologies require a somewhat drastic reformulation. Several questions arise: what is the cultural and socio-political phase that coincides with the rise of Italian crime fiction? Does the unprecedented popular success the *pulp* novels are enjoying

represent a more complex metaphor of the changing Italy? It is in fact in the 1990s that the country's post-war political class was brought down by the investigation *mani pulite* (clean hands), a nationwide judicial investigation on political corruption which led to a radical redrafting of the major political parties, the rise of fringe movements and new political alliances. Be that as it may, the term "pulp" and the connotation that the word assumes within the context of contemporary Italian literature and culture, is a relatively new idiom that entered the language after the introduction of Quentin Tarantino's cult movie *Pulp Fiction* and it became so popular that caricatures of "scrittori pulp" (pulp writers) started to flourish on many television shows in the 1990s. Unquestionably, this literary phenomenon has been entrenched in popular culture since its inception. Often times one tends to associate pulp with gangster stories and with detective fiction at large (perhaps an error induced from Tarantino's work itself). However pulp, at least in its original denotation, was not restricted to a singular literary trend; on the contrary, the label "pulp" encompassed a large variety of genres and subgenres (horror, noir, fantasy, etc.).

The second chapter ("What Color is "Giallo"? Italian Detective Fiction between Tradition and Innovation") looks more closely at Italian popular fiction and the way in which it has been able to overcome the confines of an apparently static formula ultimately establishing its own space in a number of publishing houses. The latter have developed series entirely dedicated to the *pulp* despite (or because of?) adverse critical response. In fact, while challenging established cultural and literary conventions, this narrative trend has been supported by publishing giants, such as Einaudi and Mondadori, whose marketing techniques have rendered this product accessible to a larger and more

diverse audience. The second chapter also includes a brief history of the *noir* genre in Italy, a variation of the detective formula that is closer to the pulp trend than the classical whodunit of the British tradition. In fact, another term that is used to group the numerous works appeared in Italy during the past two decades is also “*neonoir*”, the prefix of which underlines, yet again, the novelty and original twist that the Italian variation assumed because of the peculiar history of the country presented in a nutshell in the first chapter of the dissertation. Because the *noir* genre was considered to be a mass genre, (hence belonging to low-brow culture), during the late 1960s, Italian graphic novels started employing the *noir* while creating series completely dedicated to anti-hero figures and dark ladies (drawn on the image of the *femme fatale*), some examples of which are also discussed.

The way in which the *cannibali* envision spectacular violence, could be paralleled to the way in which the Italian-American director Quentin Tarantino crafted a new aesthetic of violence in the cult movie *Pulp Fiction*. Significantly, *Pulp Fiction* was released just a year before the appearance of the *cannibali*/pulp writers and ignited one of the most provocative symposia of the 1990s in Italy: “Narrating after Pulp Fiction”, promoted by the “Holden” school of creative writing in Turin directed by Alessandro Baricco. During this three-day symposium, scholars, journalists, writers and directors discussed the influence of the “Tarantino phenomenon” on contemporary Italian culture. Tarantino’s film was defined as the *Iliad* of our times and its influence led critic Filippo La Porta to observe: “*Pulp Fiction* marked a major moment of fracture in the history of western narration”. Arguably, the model of the pulp/*giallo* narrative that has flourished in

Italy since the mid 1990s also marks a drastic rupture and a point of no return in the history of Italian literature.

The third chapter (“Pulp Fiction in the Age of “Posts” or the New Italian Epic”) focuses the body of literary texts that are not necessarily dealing with either *noir* or detective fiction, but rather are creating a new narrative form that, one can state, overlaps with the hyper-real mass and popular culture; Italian collective writer Wu Ming defines this “nebula” of texts as the New Italian Epic. Ennio Flaiano once affirmed that “Italian is the language that leans the most toward survival in a world that is moving toward vulgarity, because it is more willing to adopt novelties and it employs them immediately”. Just as Flaiano observed, the spectacularization of absurd violence, sex and heavy metal rock occurs in the texts produced during the last two decades in Italy through the modernization of static literary codes; one can finally affirm that Italian literature is undergoing a process of transformation so as to simulate more vividly the psychological (post?) postmodern condition. Ultimately, what Leopardi claimed was the very limit of Italian literature—i.e. the gap between the “beauty of narrating” and practical things and thoughts—undergoes constant revision through the innovative use of language intrinsic to the pulp trend. High and lowbrow idioms converge in this stylistic creation that exploits different sorts of popular genres in order to create its own. This *filone* (specific Italian idiom for cycles, currents or trends) resists any clear definition; thus, instead of defining the phenomenon in generic terms, I suggest throughout this dissertation a discursive understanding of a disjointed literary production that refuses to be a passive object of study and criticism, and instead stands for an active critique of the tendency to hastily frame literary currents. In his “Letter to Pulp”, Tiziano Scarpa (one of

the writers on whom I most closely focus in the third and fourth chapter), laments the critical misperception of his works; Scarpa claims that critics solely focus on the question of whether or not contemporary texts still fall under the category of “cannibali.” In the same letter, Scarpa interacts directly with his readers (the text under discussion appeared on the writer’s personal blog), unveiling the confusing role that he, writer, editor, journalist, real and fictitious character, pretends to embody. Once the relationship among reader, writer and text has undergone such a process of decentralization, Italian writers can finally operate toward the creation of a *giallo* in a broad sense, where the ideas of central and peripheral collide and/or coincide.

The fourth chapter (“Pasolini’s Influence on Contemporary Italian Culture”) explores the reasons that make the rediscovery of Pier Paolo Pasolini coincide with the explosion of the new pulp literary phenomenon (yet not exclusively literary as I attempt to demonstrate). In fact, the contemporary pulp writers recognize Pasolini’s figure as their only valid fatherly model. As critic Filippo La Porta notices, whereas Tarantino’s literary roots are easily traceable, those of Italian pulp writers are not particularly evident, since they lack literary forefathers. La Porta bases his assertion on the absence of any explicit literary antecedents in the Italian tradition to which the *cannibali* writers could connect. Italy has in fact never had a solid tradition of horror, science or detective fiction because of the Fascist cultural protectionist policies which came into effect shortly after the introduction to the Italian market of a series devoted to crime stories (*I Libri Gialli*, 1929). After the Second World War, Italian intellectuals devoted themselves to recounting first the catastrophic social and existential conditions after the conflict, then

the dark side of progress and urbanization, but following a format that had little in common with the classic detective fiction.

While moving away from the conventional canon, the young pioneers of the new 'non-genre' (that is not limited to the literary sphere but which also includes the cinematic and media domain) continually look back at the cultural product Pier Paolo Pasolini (Baranski's term).<sup>3</sup> Hence, the needs to further investigate the connection between the explosion of the new Italian pulp trend and the recuperation of Pasolini, two phenomena that occurred concomitantly. The role that Pasolini assumed within the Italian cultural context of the 1960s and 1970s echoes the task that young writers and directors often assume in the contemporary Italian cultural scene: a role of total contestation ("contestazione totale")<sup>4</sup> that would revolutionize the very function of the intellectual who must exploit all of the means that the system provides. Eschewing every sort of limitative etiquette, one must represent tensions and contradictions of the strangely familiar (hyper)reality, without necessarily providing reconciliation through a

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<sup>3</sup> Baranski, Zygmunt. "Pier Paolo Pasolini: Culture, Croce, Gramsci" in Z.G. Baranski and R. Lumley, eds. *Culture and Conflict in Postwar Italy. Essays on Mass and Popular Culture*, 139-59. London: MacMillan, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Contestation is at the core of Pasolini's poetics of/for change and it defines precisely the role that he assumed within the Italian (and western) intelligentsia. In order to be significant, such contestation "must be large, major and total, "absurd" and not in a good sense; it cannot merely be on this or that point." (<http://www.leftcurve.org/LC30WebPages/Pasolini%27s%20Last%20Interview.html> ). Pasolini's debate with Oriana Fallaci on the legalization of abortion stands as a good example of Pasolini's idea of a total contestation. Surprisingly, in fact, Pasolini opposed the legalization of abortion, suggesting instead that the real problem of modern society was heterosexual copulation in that it was the origin of procreation, whereas survival depended on non procreating ("I am traumatized by the legalization of abortion because I consider it, as do many, a legalization of homicide."). Pasolini may seem to contradict himself (as had already happened when he took the side of the policemen during the revolts in 1968). However, in a homologated society where even the intellectual sphere has taken the parts of a hypocritical liberalization, Pasolini *had* to go against the mainstream and face an argument (i.e. sexuality) which the puritan Italian society of the time did not dare to discuss. Paradoxically, it is a further attack upon the family, the most sacred institution of a philo-Catholic (thus patriarchal) and philo-capitalist society. Once again, with the use of the taboo of sex, Pasolini breaks the monotony of the cultural scenario, dangerously inclined to conventionality and homologation.

constructive critique of self-alienation and social life. The idea of a mere fictional writer is ineffective to eventually provoke not a moral judgment of the portrayed event but a reflection on the spectacularly violent representation itself of social problems. In order to do so, one must blur the boundaries among different analytical fields: journalism, history, literature, cinema and television ought to be intermingled in shaping an artistic product whose indiscernible nature is mirrored in the author himself. Thus, Pasolini had already embodied this kind of intellectual figure, whose public identity stood at the very border of fiction and reality. The ambiguity surrounding both Pasolini's persona and his *oeuvre* fosters the attraction of this newer generation of writers and film makers.

If one looks at the production of movies, documentaries and texts that dealt with the so-called *caso Pasolini* during the mid 1990s, it is obvious that one is witnessing a movement away from the dominant myth of this uncomfortable and controversial personage and toward an investigative analysis of his mysterious death. The fact that renewed attention to the case influences the inception of the literature of the young cannibals is of particular interest for the purpose of this study. As Robert Gordon also notices, in *Caro Diario* (1994), Nanni Moretti glances through the newspapers and magazines of the days following Pasolini's murder and then takes the viewer towards Ostia to the exact site of the poet's death. The numerous close-ups on the ruined monument by Mario Rosati, which simply states "from Rome to Pier Paolo Pasolini" stand as a point of departure for the recuperation of the significance of Pasolini as a key contemporary cultural figure within the Italian panorama. In fact, Moretti appears as himself in the movie: a well-known director in deep intellectual crisis. He refuses to follow the new national and global cinematic tendencies and instead tracks down the only

valid model precisely in Pasolini. Likewise, director Aurelio Grimaldi has combined real and fictive elements in *Nerolio* (1996), a film that exploits Pasolini's use of sexuality as a means of critiquing the bourgeois hypocritical (a)morality. In the final sequence of the film Grimaldi, like Moretti, takes us to Ostia; here the camera captures the ghostly atmosphere that hovers about the site and generates a call to arms for a new investigation of a murder case that both the state and the press dismissed.

In 1995, Marco Tullio Giordana also attempted to recuperate the poet's figure with a book and a documentary on the mysterious murder, mingling fiction and reality. "Pasolini: un delitto Italiano" (Pasolini: an Italian Crime) had such a strong impact on the Italian public opinion that the phrase "un delitto italiano" has since entered the vocabulary "to evoke the illicit public mechanism at work beneath the surface of Italy's modern history" (Gundle 158).

The new Italian novel has developed a current that exploits pulp, splatter and trash fiction to unveil misrepresentations and distortions of true historical events. The detective formula which is employed, thwarted, deconstructed and reformulated by contemporary Italian writers has contributed to their national and international fame. The "cannibals" and pulp writers more generally are reinventing themselves not only as writers of fiction (too limitative of a categorization in the postmodern era), but also as investigative journalists *and* historians.

Just like Pasolini who, from the late 1960s onwards, increasingly used his newspaper columns and, to a lesser extent, his films to redefine his public image as the "wild man" of Italy the new cannibals are achieving their notoriety and fostering their shocking image via the media, and in this process they are putting at stake the role of the

intellectual. The “cannibali” look back at the figure of Pasolini who has always been contested because of the “extravagantly interdisciplinary”<sup>5</sup> nature of his *oeuvre*. The novelty about the new Italian writers is the manifested lack of answer and the constant provocative questioning which, as Italian pulp writer Lucarelli noticed, generates a turmoil that Italians have always tended to avoid.

The fourth chapter concludes with an analysis of Simone Sarasso’s *Confine di Stato* (2007). This novel is a particularly noteworthy example, as it is constructed on two distinct levels that render it stylistically unique: the written text and the visual. Sarasso subtitles the novel “an Insane Sketch” emphasizing the ambivalent nature of his work which he “writes and directs,” as is clearly pointed out on the cover of the novel. Sarasso incorporates elements of cinema, graphic novels and comics, fashioning a new *modus operandi* that clearly strays from the familiar and the conventional. In this way, the author is able to depersonalize and objectify the scene in which the reader/viewer is drowned and create spectacular violence that is both disturbing and attractive. Boldly tackling the domestic mysteries of Italy’s recent past (the so-called *Anni di Piombo* or the leaden years of terrorism) through the use of the *giallo*, Sarasso, like the *cannibali* who had preceded him, quickly abandons the purely detective filament of the plot in favor of a historical and journalistic investigation of political machination and doubtful historical events, a project that had already been initiated precisely by Pier Paolo Pasolini with his last novel, *Petrolio* (1992), published posthumously and concurrently with the rise of the pulp phenomenon.

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<sup>5</sup> Pasolini, Pier Paolo. “The Written Language of Reality” in *Heretical Empiricism*, 197-222. Washington DC: New Academia Publishing, 2005.

## Chapter I

### Mass Media, Mass Culture and its Historical Discourse in Italy

One fact is certain, in any case; that it is necessary to work on these problems, together or alone, with competence or with anger, but it is necessary to work. It is necessary to create an ideology; it is necessary to destroy ontology. Audiovisual techniques are in large measure already a part of our world, that is, of the world of technical neocapitalism, which moves ahead, and whose tendency it is to deprive its techniques of ideology or to make them ontological; to make them silent and unrelated; to make them habits; to make them religious forms. We are lay humanists or, at least, non-misologist Platonists, and we must therefore fight to demystify the “innocence of technique” to the last drop of blood.

(Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 221-222)

Television is like a movie theater you can go to right at home.

(François Truffaut, *Shoot the Piano Player*, 1960)

### History, Politics and the Culture Industry: Italian Society through Cinema

On December 6, 2010 the Italian National Statistical Institute (Istat) published a rather optimistic study on readers in Italy. Today, 46.8% of Italians aged six and up (26.4 million) read at least three books per year. Despite a rise of 7.7 points since 1995 (5.5 million), Italy still remains a country of few readers by comparison with most European nations. In fact, just 15.1% of the readers consume more than 12 books per year (4 million), and they represent only 7.1% of the total population of more than six years of

age.<sup>6</sup> A slow but constant growth of the reading public notwithstanding, Italy has always had a “problem” with reading, as Forgacs and Gundle put it in *Mass Culture and Italian Society* (2007), with respect to a large variety of printed artifacts (books, comics, newspapers). The development of popular cultural and literary genres was harshly affected by the non-existence of a broad reading public until unification in 1861, and in truth, until the mid 1960s. Delayed industrialization (compared with other European countries such as Great Britain and France), a high level of illiteracy (the minimum school leaving age was raised to 14 only in 1962), the relatively high cost of books, the limited distribution of printed newspapers outside of major towns and the scarce number of public libraries (in 1927 only 13% of villages had one), contributed to the postponement of the economic and social developments necessary for mass cultural and literary production.

The break between social and cultural realities was evident also at the beginning of the twentieth century, when “the young and strong *Futurists*” (Marinetti’s terms), while repudiating the cult of the past and the old political and artistic tradition, engaged in the creation of a movement that was, in fact, an abstract idea and not an intellectual undertaking that reflected real social change. Accordingly, *Futurism* remained restricted to the cultural elite and failed to penetrate the masses as a whole.

It was only during the Fascist era (1922-1943) that a crucial recognition of the masses as potential consumers of their own unique cultural productions occurred. However, this recognition ultimately contributed to manipulation of the people and not their empowerment. The emergence of a modern Italian mass society originated

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<sup>6</sup>[http://www.aie.it/SKVIS/News\\_PUB.aspx?IDUNI=gziaidvraxsf54e3fqrrv0i07550&MDId=6368&Skeda=MODIF102-1269-2010.12.4](http://www.aie.it/SKVIS/News_PUB.aspx?IDUNI=gziaidvraxsf54e3fqrrv0i07550&MDId=6368&Skeda=MODIF102-1269-2010.12.4), Accessed on January 7, 2011.

simultaneously with a more vigorous authoritarian national government that inculcated into the masses the belief that war was the only collective purpose indispensable for the future greatness of the newborn country. Enrico Corradini (1865-1931), an Italian novelist, essayist, playwright and also spokesman for the Nationalists argued that “the war was the only possible path to ‘national redemption’; it was a ‘moral order’, a way of creating ‘the inexorable necessity of a reversion to the sentiment of duty’” (Duggan 186).

It was during the Fascist era that the importance of mass media as a powerful consensus-shaping instrument was recognized and consequently, the Fascist regime created the first mass society of our times. Aside from the creation of the Italian Academy in 1926 and the imposition of the oath of loyalty for university faculty, which sanctioned (at least officially) a compliance between the regime and the intellectual elite, Mussolini reinforced the control of the populace through cultural indoctrination with the creation of the Government Press Agency (which in 1935 became the Ministry of Press and Propaganda), the school reforms in 1926 and 1935, and the creation of a para-militaristic organization as well as the Cultural Fascist Institute. Furthermore, the new media of mass communication were subject to a rigid institutionalized monopolization emphasized by the construction of the Film Studio L.U.C.E. (*L’Unione Cinematografica Educativa*) in 1926, the creation of a film-city on the outskirts of Rome (Cinecittà) flanked by an Experimental School of Cinematography, and later with the unique conception of the Ministry of Popular Culture in 1936. Interestingly enough, because the Ministry of Popular Culture had originated from the Government Press Bureau and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and in view of the fact that the first under secretary of state for Press and Propaganda was Count Galeazzo Ciano (a foreign service officer and

Mussolini's son-in-law), the Ministry of Popular Culture was paradoxically better equipped to furnish propagandistic material in foreign languages than in Italian.<sup>7</sup> The Ministry, with its monopolistic and ambitious propaganda system, created a form of cultural provincialism and restricted access to culture, customs and industrial visions of other modern Western societies.

After the war and the liberation of Italy by the Allies, there was a compelling need to redefine a national identity in the context of both the Fascist repression and the new ethical and political tensions. The process of cultural indoctrination regimented by the Fascist regime had kept at bay every source of information that was at odds with the state ideology. After the war, in an attempt to reframe and even come to terms with the repression of the previous era, the movement of "Neorealism" offered a constructive response to the (neo)definition of Italianness. The literary and cinematic movement reacted by telling stories of individual courage and heroic resistance of many Italians who were in fact rebelling against the oppression of Fascism. While targeting the same public that had been fed propaganda through the new forms of visual media, Neorealism represented a reappropriation of the cinematic medium by the people who were now welcoming, despite their poverty and personal tragedies, stereotypes and myths from other Western countries.

In Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di Biciclette* (1948), the scene of the theft of the bicycle takes place as Antonio Ricci puts up a poster of *Gilda* (1946). The protagonist smiles ambiguously either out of happiness and satisfaction with his new job or perhaps because he admires the new imported American idea of female beauty.

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<sup>7</sup> Cole, Taylor. "The Italian Ministry of Popular Culture" *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 2.3 (1938) 425-34.



*Ladri di Biciclette* (1948)

The quasi-Gramscian position in which the Neorealist directors found themselves (called on to educate and guide audiences) linked film production in Italy to a left-wing political ideology. Creating a relationship with the Americans who “provided the Italians with benchmarks and some technical know-how, as well as an organizational model”<sup>8</sup> proved to be critical to the Italian cinema industry. In the years following the war, the Italian film market was engulfed by a high number of foreign films (a majority of them American), whose goal was the re-education of the populace while possibly distracting it from a potentially threatening Marxist bent in Neorealist films. As a case in point, let us consider the number of movies released in Italy in 1945: 28.7% of films were Italian, while 71.3% were foreign films. The introduction of foreign films in the Italian market continued to increase in the following years, reaching a height of 88.6% in 1947 (Forgacs 125).<sup>9</sup>

With the help of American financial aid, Italy experienced in little more than a decade an unprecedented process of recovery, known as the “Economic miracle” or “Economic boom” of the 1950s, which radically transformed the nation into a developed

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<sup>8</sup> Forgacs, David; Gundle, Stephen. *Mass Culture and Italian Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007, 127-28.

<sup>9</sup> Forgacs and Gundle look at Lorenzo Quaglietti’s figures (in *Storia Economico-Politica del Cinema Italiano 1945-1980*. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1980, p. 289). According to Quaglietti, there are no reliable data in regards of the percentage of foreign films in Italy between 1943-46 and in 1947. Particularly for 1947 there is no available breakdown by country of the non-Italian percentage of film that Quaglietti provides.

country. Between 1943 and 1948, it is estimated that Italy received about 2 billion dollars of assistance from the United States, with an additional 1.5 billion under the Marshall Plan over the next four years.<sup>10</sup> The grave concern that Italy (as well as France and Czechoslovakia) would fall to the communists was regarded as a real possibility, hence the enormous amount of money that was poured into the country and the subsequent intrusion of the Vatican and the US during elections, with strong financial support for the more conservative and philo-catholic party of the Christian Democrats (*Democrazia Cristiana*, DC). From 1946 to 1994 (year of the first Berlusconi government) the DC dominated the political scene and became and remained the largest party in the parliament. Most Christian Democrats joined Berlusconi's new party *Forza Italia* after the 1992 investigation *Mani Pulite* (Clean Hands) uncovered the corruption practices inside the DC party. Nowadays *Forza Italia* includes most ex-DC members.

As aforementioned, the new economic prosperity of the 1950s allowed Italy to develop an industrial economy while readjusting urban and social structures. Many farmers from the underdeveloped south abandoned jobs in the declining agricultural sector and ventured north towards larger cities in search of an improved standard of living. In effect, the outcome was twofold: firstly, one witnessed the decline of peasant culture and traditions, a phenomenon that Carlo Levi had already started to narrate with a certain sense of nostalgia in 1943-44 in his novel *Cristo si è fermato ad Eboli* (*Christ stopped at Eboli*). Nostalgia for a simpler past is even more evident in Francesco Rosi's film adaptation of the novel for the Italian national television Rai in 1979. Secondly, the extensive and rapid influx of southerners in the northern towns triggered the need for urban development and resulted in architectural reshaping of Italy's major cities. Since

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<sup>10</sup> Duggan, Christopher. *A Concise History of Italy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 52.

the construction industry was one of the driving sectors of the postwar economy,<sup>11</sup> the government opted for a silent political maneuver, which ultimately allowed real-estate speculation in private sectors at the very origin of the peripheries, segregation and (hence) the creation of a new lower-middle class.

From Neorealism to Fellini (with the opening sequence of *La Dolce Vita* in 1960), the Roman “borgate”, the disproportionate growth of the population in the immediate postwar period (Rome doubled in size in about 30 years, reaching its peak in the 1960s with more than 2 million inhabitants), and the consequent housing problem were at the center of Italian film directors’ study.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Rhodes, John David. *Stupendous, Miserable City*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Population of Rome since the Unification (1861) according to the available censuses.

([http://www.laboratorioroma.it/Banca%20dati/res\\_censimenti.pdf](http://www.laboratorioroma.it/Banca%20dati/res_censimenti.pdf) Accessed on February 5, 2011)

Year	Population	Average annual increment	City Surface in hectares	Density inhabitants/ hectares
1871	212,432	-	213,688	0.99
1881	273,952	2.53	213,688	1.28
1901	422,411	2.13	210,612	2.01
1911	518,917	2.05	207,462	2.50
1921	660,235	1.93	198,492	3.18
1931	930,926	3.86	198,492	4.69
1936	1,403,307	4.18	150,760	7.07
1951	1,651,754	2.36	150,760	10.96
1961	2,188,160	2.79	150,760	14.51
1971	2,781,993	2.39	150,760	18.45
1981	2,840,259	0.21	150,760	18.84
1991	2,775,250	-0.23	149,874	18.52
2001	2,546,804	-0.86	128,530	19.81



The Roman periphery in the 1950s. On the left, Pier Paolo Pasolini in a shot by Neapolitan photographer and journalist Federico Garolla.

Rome is a case in point in this sense, since it was the very core of the cinematic life of the time and the city's function was far from being a passive scenario; on the contrary, Rome, with its abrupt and disorderly urban transformations became a real protagonist in film, reaching its apex with Pasolini's closing sequence of *Mamma Roma*. In this film, one is presented with two new neighborhoods that apparently seem to be a triumph of modern architecture and yet, in substance, they clearly have not improved the lives of their inhabitants. In effect, these neighborhoods have contributed to the corruption and martyrdom of its residents who have been forcefully deported to the new quarters (consider the 'deposition' of Ettore in *Mamma Roma*, as he invokes his mother's help). In the last sequence of *Mamma Roma*, after having learned about her son's death, the mother runs toward her apartment in Tuscolano II. As she opens the window, possibly to attempt suicide, she is stopped by her co-workers from the market who have followed her. As *Mamma Roma* calms down, she stares terrorized at the sight of the new quarter Cecafumo as if it were (as Pasolini implies) the real cause of her disgrace. The camera shifts back to the four characters, who are by now stunned, then again to an extreme long shot of the apartment blocks in Cecafumo.



Fig.1



Fig.2

The final shot (fig. 1) and counter shot (fig. 2) in the last sequence of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* (1962)

Whereas Pasolini in his early works focused mostly on the poorer victims of postwar social transformation, such as thieves (*Una Vita Violenta*, 1959; *Ragazzi di Vita*, 1955), pimps (*Accattone*, 1961), and prostitutes (*Mamma Roma*), one can already observe the changes and the economic improvements of part of the population in the films of Nanny Loy and Gianni Puccini at the end of the 1950s. *Il Marito* (The Husband, 1958) represents an interesting example of a Pasolinian subproletarian who is able to escape his living conditions precisely thanks to property speculation in the Roman suburbs that he can carry out as long as he is under the protection of local politicians. Once married to a well-educated bourgeois woman, Alberto (Alberto Sordi) believes his social ascent is complete and thus he rejects his own family, who is still living in the slums and struggling to survive. With its sharp sense of humor and a meticulous portrait of reality,

the film is, in truth, a comedy. Significantly, *Il Marito* was released the same year as Mario Monicelli's *I Soliti Ignoti (Big Deal on Madonna Street)*, which is widely considered to have ushered in 'Commedia all'Italiana' (Italian-style Comedy) and with it, the golden decade of Italian cinema, due to "its artistic quality, its international prestige, or its economic strength so consistently high".<sup>13</sup>

As Éric Rohmer noticed, Italian cinema provided a sharp depiction of Italian society and eventually "raise[d] [it] to a level of aesthetic dignity."<sup>14</sup>

The portrayals of Italian life provided by Italian directors underline the radical economic changes that by the 1970s led to the development of a capitalist society, as Pasolini himself acknowledged in "La forma della città", a short documentary aired on national television in 1974.<sup>15</sup> The Italian poet argued that Italians had witnessed within the past decades a transformation, a homologation and a process of de-acculturation as if in a state of passive trance, and were now (perhaps) waking up after a nightmare, realizing that there was no turning back. With a critique that was purposefully gloomy and exaggerated, Pasolini brought up a sore point: mass society was the direct consequence of a general betterment of economic conditions, which in turn allowed for a period of cultural stagnation. Accordingly, it can be argued that it is not mass media or mass literary product per se that transforms individuals into masses, but rather deeper economic forces.<sup>16</sup> The new modern society of mass consumption accelerated production speed and the distribution of literary products, which also led to the creation of

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<sup>13</sup> Bondanella, Peter. *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*. New York: Continuum, 2001, 142.

<sup>14</sup> Hiller, Jim ed., *Cahiers du Cinema: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1985, 42.

<sup>15</sup> Edited by Paolo Brunatto and aired on February, 7 1974; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6ki-pleW2o> January 24, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Ballonchi, Giovanni. *Televisione come Cultura*. Naples: Liguori Editore, 1995, 1-6.

paperbacks and affordable editions. As Forgacs and Gundle demonstrate in their study *Mass Culture and Italian Society* “even at the quantitative level” it is very difficult “to get a clear picture of the amount of reading taking place in Italy at any given time” because reading for a large number of people was intended as synonymous of “*looking at*” textual material, either alone or with other persons without being necessarily able to understand it (Forgacs 37). Forgacs and Gundle’s analysis aptly tones down (without ever denying) the general conception that in the years following the Second World War everybody had more leisure and recreational time by focusing on the socio-economic situation in the most remote areas of the Italian Peninsula. Nevertheless, it is important to notice that the gap between the underdeveloped southern regions and the rest of the country diminished over the years (even though at a slower pace) and helped create a more uniform nation. Be that as it may, if one looks at the experimental candid cameras by Nanni Loy (1925-1995) in the mid 1960s, as well as at the more cunning episode by Alberto Lattuada in *L’Amore in Città* (*Love in the City*), one realizes that there was a climate of drastic revitalization occurring among the general population thanks to better education and higher disposable incomes. People therefore could spend money on going to the cinema, and participate in the broadly accessible forms of cultural diversion (with all of their Western capitalistic connotations and implications)

Based on the American format, Nanni Loy, a successful director and intellectual, introduced for the first time on Italian television in 1965 the concept of candid camera.

During an interview, Loy claims:

Io ho accettato per ragioni di sperimentazione tecnica, perché è molto suggestivo per un regista...annullarsi come regista, cioè tentare proprio di trovare dei

documenti, *tranche de vie*, pezzetti che senza la mediazione del falso, cioè dell'inventato, dello scritto prima a tavolino e poi recitato dagli attori, [facciano] recitare inconsapevolmente gli uomini della strada.<sup>17</sup>

In Loy's sketches one can paradoxically perceive a different form of neorealism, where the incipit is the only simulated form of reality from which a plethora of spontaneous reactions arise. In one of the episodes of *Specchio Segreto*, Loy pretends he is afraid of taking the elevator and therefore asks for help. The setting is a busy and crowded mall, where posters hanging from the ceiling promote "vacations" ("vacanze"), a brand new concept until that point for the low and middle class. Shortly after, Dino Risi will capture the new mass phenomenon in his comedy-drama *L'Ombrellone* (literally the 'beach umbrella', also known as *Weekend Italian Style*) in 1966 starring Sandra Milo and Enrico Maria Salerno. The movie is an explosion of colors, songs (mostly pop music from the '60s), chaos and disorder. The vacations, as interpreted by the new-born social classes, provide a meta-temporal and meta-spatial dimension, in which everything is permissible. It is clear that leisure time is no longer a prerogative of the rich (as it was, for instance in Antonioni's *L'Avventura*, 1960), but a well-affirmed mass trend whose protagonists are soon to be transformed into a copy of the criticized higher class.

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<sup>17</sup> "I accepted this task for reasons of technical experimentation, because it is very suggestive for a director to annul oneself as a director, that is trying to find some documents, *tranche de vie*, little pieces that without the mediation of the false, i.e. of that which is invented, of that which is first written and then enacted by the actors, made persons from the street act unknowingly." (My translation) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dul1hPfMM30&feature=related> January 26, 2011.



Fig.1



Fig.2

Fig. 1: The overcrowded beach in Dino Risi's *L'Ombrellone* (1966)  
Fig. 2: Nanni Loy in *Specchio Segreto* (1965). The economic miracle is complete; urban space and traditional ethic, religious and social values are also undergoing a drastic change.

As David Rhodes points out in *Stupendous, Miserable City* (2007), the experimental project of a video-magazine named *L'Amore in Città* (*Love in the City*, 1953) stands for yet another symbolic study of the change that the population experienced. Alberto Lattuada's closing segment, "Gli italiani si voltano" ("Italians turn around") is particularly noteworthy in the sense. If one considers *L'Amore in Città* as an anthropological analysis during the years of the economic recovery, one can notice the rising concerns of the intellectuals who started wondering about the consequences of the turn around. The sketch is quite comical, and even though it appears to be a sort of candid camera, we should not forget that carefully hiding a film camera of massive dimensions was, simply put, an impossible task. In the clip, girls of Junoesque beauty walk nonchalantly through the streets of Rome. As they pass, Italians (italiani stands both for Italians male and female but also, and more specifically, for male Italians) turn around, astonished by their perfect figures and, in truth, a bit curious. Following one of these girls, we are brought to the outskirts of the city, a surreal white space that Lattuada captures on the screen as an implicit reminder of urban and/hence social transformations. The director does not offer any answers either about where the nation headed or reveal

any eventual risks that it may encounter. Lattuada's gaze at what Edward Soja would later label as "thirdspace" (i.e. a space that is concurrently geographical, historical *and* social)<sup>18</sup> is without a doubt particularly significant since among the many Italian directors he was the only one who had a degree in architecture. Thus, his diagnostic approach was not merely focused on the sociological alteration but it inevitably incorporated a pragmatic grasp of the sudden urban transformations *and* their consequence on the behaviors of the inhabitants of the city. Ultimately, Lattuada urges critics and spectators alike to revision space and social spatiality while at the same time continuing to redefine a mode of theoretical understanding of cinematic space. Accordingly, one can state that *Gli italiani si voltano* articulates a meta-theoretical discourse which also incorporates, but is not limited to, a socio-historical analysis of the retrograde condition in the Roman suburbs, whereas the so called "economic boom" collides with a harsh reality that has not yet been completely transformed. The action of "looking back" then (*voltarsi*), assumes a metaphorical significance: where was the country headed and what was it leaving behind?

Lattuada's concerns, which he shared with most Neorealist writers, directors, and theorists, would soon prove to be well-grounded. The Italian government demonstrated itself inefficient in mediating the social changes that arose from exponential economic

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<sup>18</sup> Harking back to the theories of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, Edward Soja delineates the concept of Thirdspace, an interdisciplinary idea that combines spatiality, historicity and sociality. Thirdspace, as Soja put it, is "an-Other" way of (politically) understanding and possibly modifying the spatiality of human life through the critical awareness generated by a re-balanced/restructured meta-philosophical trialectics. Soja's radical postmodern perspective of "thirthing-as-othering" will later open up a new "real and imaginary" critical space where issues of race, class and gender can be addressed concurrently. To metaphorically envisage thirdspace, Soja resorts to Jorge Luis Borges' "The Aleph" (1949). Soja's concept of thirdspace recalls that of good distance (*la bonne distance*) epitomized by the French anthropologist Lévi-Strauss according to which to analyze a phenomenon in a scientific manner, one ought to have the right detachment in order to be able to see it from the best perspective. (Soja, Edward W. *Thirdspace: journeys to Los Angeles and other real and imagined places*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996.)

growth, and while disregarding the country's new needs it contributed to the creation of a climate of tension and social anxiety, which eventually led to acts of terrorism.

In 1973, during the Middle East crisis which caused a shortage of oil and gasoline, the Italian government headed by Prime Minister Mariano Rumor (1915-1990) launched a plan of “economic austerity” that consisted of a reduction of street and commercial illumination, the prohibition of circulating by car on Sundays, the earlier end of TV programs and the construction of nuclear reactors with the help of *Enel* (Ente Nazionale Energia eLettrica), Italy's state-owned monopoly energy provider (privatized in the late 1990s even though the largest shareholders remain the Italian Ministry of Economy & Finance, 13.9%, and the state-run bank *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti*, 17.4%).<sup>19</sup>

Prime Minister Rumor was himself subject to a violent terrorist attack in 1973 but was able to escape alive, while 4 people died and 45 were injured. Gianfranco Bertoli, who had organized the bombing, was arrested shortly after and declared that he was acting as an anarchist. Bertoli's ideological orientation was fomented by a sense of collective discontent that was expressed in Italy during the 1970s through the rise of anti-governmental groups. These independent political cells, driven by extremist political creeds, accentuated a deep fracture between the institutions and the (by now autonomous) masses. At the same time, the violence perpetrated by left and right wing groups was also

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<sup>19</sup> In *Televisione Come Cultura: I Media Italiani tra Identità e Mercato* (Napoli: Liguori Editore, 1995), Giovanni Bechelloni argues that it is precisely the energy crisis of 1972-73 that highlights, for the first time, the importance of a national political position whose focal point is the rising media and its subsequent energy demand. Framed in these terms, this particular event and its historic socio-political development plays a key role in the cultural transformation that the country would undergo/is undergoing. As Bechelloni puts it: “E, infatti, dalla prima crisi energetica del '72-'73 che il tema energia è esploso entrando in un'associazione perversa e ineluttabile con una variegata gamma di cornici interpretative a sfondo allarmistico che rendono oltremodo problematica la copertura informativa sui fabbisogni energetici e sulla politica energetica...I media – in tutta la loro gamma- giocano un ruolo sempre più importante , ancorché talvolta in modo del tutto inconsapevole, nel *definire le situazioni*, nell'articolare il clima di opinione che fa da sfondo e da cornice alla elaborazione e alla realizzazione delle politiche. Quando si parla di 'impatto culturale dei media', perciò, si intende parlare di media che svolgono una *funzione rituale* ben più rilevante e complessa di quanto ipotizzato da una semplicistica concezione 'trasmissiva' del loro ruolo” (133-35)

tangible proof of the incapability to change the current state of the country with an effective and productive political agenda.

The murder of former Prime Minister Aldo Moro (who had succeeded Mariano Rumor) on March 16, 1978 by the Red Brigades marked the inception of the group's dissolution, as the choice of killing such a popular public figure was harshly condemned both by the members of the Communist Party (PCI, whom Moro was seeking to include as a minority together with the Christian Democrats in the so called *Historic Compromise*) as well as by formerly imprisoned leaders of the RB themselves; the Red Brigade would be almost completely dismantled in the following decade.

Following the *Years of Lead (Anni di Piombo)*, one witnessed the collapse of radical ideologies, the loss of idealism and political engagement that had characterized the '70s. The government, however, continued to be unable to suppress organized crime, ultimately weaving an intricate and delicate web in which political corruption and delinquency merged.<sup>20</sup> The aforementioned scandal of *Mani Pulite* in the early 1990s (often also referred to as *Tangentopoli*, "bribesville"), stood as legitimate confirmation of a system that generated widespread popular distrust. The general skepticism towards the government at large and its inefficiency was accompanied by the conviction that the situation was irreversible. The atmosphere of cynicism and apathy that affected the country in the 1980s resulted in part in hedonistic consumerism which discovered a new and effective expression in the growing commercial television market.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Nicola Transfaglia has talked extensively about the relationship between the Italian institutions and organized crime in *Mafia, Politica e Affari nell'Italia Repubblicana* (Bari: Laterza, 1991); also see Gundle, Stephen; Rinaldi, Lucia; *Assassinations and Murder in Modern Italy: Transformation in Society and Culture*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

<sup>21</sup> Moliterno, Gino; *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Italian Culture* New York: Routledge, 2000, p.8.

## Mass Culture and Television: From Democracy to *Videocracy*?

In the article “The Media”,<sup>22</sup> Christopher Wagstaff points out the three-fold function of television: information, culture and entertainment. Whereas in the United States broadcasting is “a commercial enterprise carried out by private companies for profit” and in Britain it is intended as a system both of public and commercial service, in Italy “it used to be controlled by the political party holding a majority in parliament (before the Second World War by the Fascist Party and after by the Christian Democrats)” (294). In 1976 the Constitutional Court ruled that the state broadcaster RAI (Radiotelevisione italiana) had an absolute monopoly over national broadcasting, thereby freeing local broadcasting from the previous strict restrictions. The Milanese entrepreneur Silvio Berlusconi, who owned several television stations, decided to simultaneously air the same shows by having the tapes delivered to the studio via his own trucking company. In 1982, Prime Minister and close ally of Berlusconi, Bettino Craxi, issued a decree which sanctioned the ultimate deregulation for private broadcasting companies and thus brought about the end of the state monopoly over programming and distribution.<sup>23</sup> Since competition was quickly growing, Rai was now forced to vie for the same advertising revenue and adapted its content to meet the demands of the market. It is this implicit process of passive objectification of the viewers that I intend to discuss here and its contribution in molding Italian mass culture. As Wagstaff aptly put it:

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<sup>22</sup> in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Italian Culture*. Ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański and Rebecca J. West. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001, 293-309.

<sup>23</sup> Eli, Noam. *Television in Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, 149-161; Giuseppe Richeri, “Hard Times for Public Service Broadcasting: The Rai in the Age of Commercial Competition,” *Culture and Conflict in Postwar Italy*. ed. Zygmunt Barański. New York: St Martin’s Press, 1990, 255-269; Mauro Wolf, “Italy from Deregulation to the New Equilibrium” *The New Television in Europe*. ed. Alessandro Silji. London: Libbey, 1992, 51-64.

Viewers who watch commercial programming believing that they are ‘buying’ the information, culture or entertainment that they choose by purchasing the goods advertised are deluding themselves. They are, it is true, involved in a marketing operation; but it is not the programme that is being sold to the viewer, it is the viewer that is being sold to the advertiser. Viewers and the meeting of their needs are not the end and goal of the whole enterprise; rather, the meeting of the broadcaster’s need for revenue is the end and goal of the enterprise, and he meets this need by selling to the advertisers the viewers he attracts with his programming. The viewer is a ‘means’ to his ‘end’. (295)

Arguably, one is dealing with a broader movement of globalization of the media that is not uniquely Italian but that extends to different countries.<sup>24</sup> Even so, the Italian response to the intensification of mass media and the absorption of its message brought about the legitimization of the consumer society and a radical cultural transformation. It is in this sense that I focus on the figure of Berlusconi. In so far as politics and institutional laws are strictly linked within the context of Italy to the life of the media, the latter are also accountable for the alteration of both high and low brow culture as well as for broad social changes.

In 2009 the Swedish-Italian director and journalist Erik Gandini, made the documentary *Videocracy* that reflected the impact of Italian television on the nation’s culture and politics, inevitably discussing the role played by Berlusconi. The movie per se represents an interesting case in point of the issues I have raised. In fact, after gaining international attention at the 66<sup>th</sup> Venice Film Festival, the trailer for the film was banned

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<sup>24</sup> Philip Shlesinger “The Berlusconi Phenomenon” *Culture and Conflict in Postwar Italy*. ed. Zygmunt Barański. New York: St Martin’s Press, 1990, 269-285.

by most Italian television broadcasters because “it conveys an unequivocal political message that criticizes the government”<sup>25</sup> and because Rai and Mediaset argued that by watching this movie “one may be inclined to think that through television the government could uncannily orientate the convictions of the citizens, influencing them in their favor and gaining their consent” (my translations).<sup>26</sup> Such an idiosyncratic assertion biases the existence of a claimed pluralistic ‘reality’ of the media, given the competition of different realities in the same marketplace and simultaneously. Be that as it may, Gandini’s investigation sheds light on the daunting power of the image over society. In a country where 80% of the population considers television as the primary reliable source of information, and where the circulation of newspapers is the second to the last in Europe only followed by Greece (Wagstaff 299), the pedagogical function of the media inexorably modifies not only human social interaction, but also the political and cultural scenario. In this sense, *Videocracy* is far from being a mere attack on politics, as has been accused by the Italian broadcasting companies, rather it represents a psychological and gimlet-eyed theory of mass media, power and society. Gandini ultimately claims that what Italy is caught in is a lack of ideology, endorsed during the 1980s by the penetration of the world of television into contemporaneity. In the course of a few years, the radical political engagement of the 1970s - supported by increased university enrollment and the

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<sup>25</sup> Maria Pia Fusco. “La Rai rifiuta il trailer di Videocracy” *La Repubblica*. July, 9 2009.

<http://www.repubblica.it/2009/08/sezioni/politica/rai-videocracy/rai-videocracy/rai-videocracy.html?ref=search> Accessed on February, 20 2011.

<sup>26</sup> It is interesting to notice that even at the Venice International Film Festival, there was some attempt to play down the film by the organizing committee, as Gandini explains during an interview on July, 8 2010: “... We were supposed to have a theatre for a press screening which usually have around 400 journalists but they gave us this small room with about 40 seats. Then they came up with this order from the fire department where they had to remove 20 seats for security. So, you know, there was a whole feeling of having something that people were really interested in but that the festival was afraid of showing up too much.” (<http://www.puremovies.co.uk/interviews/erik-gandini/> Accessed on February 21, 2011).

rise of workers' unions - transformed into the disintegration of ideologies with an outlet in the hedonism of consumerism.

### **Neorealism meets Neocapitalism: Maurizio Nichetti's *Ladri di Saponette***

With more than 40 films in 40 years, director Ettore Scola (1931- ), has been portraying the drastic changes in Italy in the Post-World War II era. Scola's approach derives directly from the school of the "commedia all'italiana" (comedy Italian-style) that is widely considered to have started by Mario Monicelli (1915-2010) in 1958 with *I soliti Ignoti* (Big Deal on Madonna Street). Neorealist cinema had offered such a harsh depiction of the period following the war that the politician Giulio Andreotti was concerned about portraying an unfavorable image of Italy to the world. Andreotti, the vice minister in the De Gasperi cabinet at the time, said that "dirty laundry that shouldn't be washed and hung to dry in the open," referring to Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D.* (1952) with a remark that remains famous. In other words, Andreotti implies that one should have filtered (yet not ignored) the socio-economical condition of the population, in order to possibly induce Italians themselves to improve their condition.

Comedy is a genre that lends itself more difficultly to critiques and is consequently able to denounce injustices more effectively and more freely violate social conventions and taboos. In a semi-conservative environment that tended to restrict and tone down any attempt to comment on the current status of the nation, comedy proved to be the ideal means of communication between the socially-minded filmmakers and the public. Fears, anxieties and concerns were addressed in relation to the changing socio-

economical panorama of a society that was quickly moving from one of the poorest countries in Europe to one of the world's top economic powers. Since this transformation was taking place in the arc of few decades, it was inevitably also bringing along a sense of nostalgia for traditions, customs, dialects and moral values that were being lost. By the late 1960s, the comparison with the simplicity and genuineness of the “primitive” world that was represented by the Italian countryside (particularly in the southern region, but also in the less developed northern region of the Veneto and by the farmers of the Emilia Romagna), belonged to Africa.

In a film with a rather provocative title (*Riusciranno I Nostri Eroi a Ritrovare l'Amico Misteriosamente Scomparso in Africa?* 1968)<sup>27</sup>, director Scola depicts a rich industrialist played by Alberto Sordi (an actor who embodied the middle-class Italian with a ubiquitous tragicomic twist) that is about to implode in his chaotic bourgeois life. As the rich editor-in-chief of a well-known publishing house, Fausto Di Salvio (Alberto Sordi) is trapped in a capitalist life that offers him everything but annihilates human relationships. His wife, son, and family friends have become mere objects in his life: there are no contacts with them and yet they still need to exist in order for him to maintain his social role and lifestyle. He has no time to talk with the secretary or to impart orders to his employees and he is forced to leave them recorded tapes as he moves around Rome with his accountant (Bernard Blier). Fausto hopes to bring back his brother in law, Oreste Sabatini (played by Nino Manfredi, another key Roman actor in the *Commedia all'italiana*) from Africa, where he “mysteriously disappeared”. Oreste will choose to stay in Africa and to abandon forever what Rome (and Italy) had become.

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<sup>27</sup> *Will our heroes be able to find the friend that mysteriously disappeared in Africa?* (My translation)

Fausto will eventually return alone after he attempted to follow his brother-in-law but is stopped by his accountant.



Fig.1



Fig.2

Fig. 1: the film poster portraying the two industrialists and their wives in the villa. In truth, it is an image that appears only in Fausto Di Salvio's (Alberto Sordi) imagination.

Fig. 2: Fausto and Oreste as they are returning to Rome. Oreste will jump shortly off the ferry and return to the Africa. Fausto will emulate him but will be stopped by the accountant.

The reference to Africa as a primitive world that continues to carry on the values lost in the Western world is one that was also employed by Pasolini in 1969, just a year after Scola's film. In *Appunti per un Orestide Africana*, Pasolini looks at African tribes with a similar sense of nostalgia for a way of life that was in effect lost. Pasolini's study is particularly interesting because it includes an interview with African students at the

Università La Sapienza in Rome, who immigrated to Europe and are now part of “the sinister failure of the [Western] social system”.<sup>28</sup> In the arc of a decade, the country will find itself immersed into a neocapitalist culture that no longer allows for any nostalgic comparison with archaic reality as it has already moved and affirmed itself in the opposite direction. In an apparatus that is utterly dependent upon commerce and the commercial, art and cinema are trapped into a financial system that (attempts to) modify them in its favor. Let us think about Federico Fellini, who regarded television (which by the 1980s had long surpassed cinema as a national pastime) as a medium of banality and reduction. Television, in fact, had the potential to destroy cinema as it gives the spectator, thanks to the *telecomando* (remote control) the power to decide what he should/should not watch. Framed in these terms, the director could not present to the spectator the significant problems that he/she should be considering. As Fellini states:

[television] has become an electric domestic servant and we, seated in armchairs, armed with remote control, exercise a total power over those little images, rejecting whatever is unfamiliar and boring to us... Thus, a tyrant spectator is born, an absolute despot who does what he wants and is more and more

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<sup>28</sup> The quote is part of Pasolini's last interview to Furio Colombo in 1975, issued just a few hours before his death.

PPP:...Have you ever seen those marionettes that make children laugh so much because their body faces one direction while their heads face another? I think Totò was quite adept at such a trick. Well, that's how I see that wonderful troop of intellectuals, sociologists, experts and journalists with the most noble of intentions. Things happen here, and their heads are turned in the opposite direction. I'm not saying that there is no Fascism. What I'm saying is: don't talk to me of the sea while we are in the mountains. This is a different landscape. There is a desire to kill here. And this desire ties us together as sinister brothers of the sinister failure of an entire social system. I too would like it if it were easy to isolate the black sheep. I too see the black sheep. I see quite a lot of them. I see all of them. That's the problem, as I said to Moravia: given the life I lead, I pay a price... it's like a descent into hell. But when I come back--if I come back—I've seen other things, more things.

(The complete interview can be found at:

<http://www.leftcurve.org/LC30WebPages/Pasolini%27s%20Last%20Interview.html> Accessed on Oct, 6 2011)

convinced that he is the director or at least the producer of the images he sees.

How could the cinema possibly try to attract that kind of audience!<sup>29</sup>

And yet, despite his objections, Fellini had himself directed a number of television commercials, including one for Barilla and Campari, two major Italian companies.



A frame from the first commercial made by Fellini in 1984 for Campari. On board of an old fashion train, a young woman and a bohemian dressed gentleman travel together in the passenger coach. Interestingly enough, the woman holds a *telecomando* (remote control) and nervously changes channels from the “small screen” (the window). Images like the Egyptian pyramids, the Grand Canyon and even the moon seem to be too boring for her, as she chews her gum and snorts. Then, the gentleman takes the remote control and switches to a shot of the leaning tower of Pisa which vaguely precedes the bottle of Campari that is slowly illuminated. At this point, the waiter enters the coach and the woman seems to be finally happy. “Campari”, a oneiric voice whispers; the first and last words pronounced throughout the commercial which relies entirely on images, gestures and the music of Nino Rota.

Both Federico Fellini and Ettore Scola had been active promoters of a series of unsuccessful law suits against private channels, which broadcasted movies with abrupt commercial interruptions and consequently, as the directors claimed, disrupted the grandeur and power that cinema originally had over the spectator. The cultural and ideological conflict between Italian cinema and television (in which Silvio Berlusconi’s private television empire played and plays a major role) encouraged a new generation of

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<sup>29</sup> qtd. in Bondanella, Peter. *The Cinema of Federico Fellini*. Princeton UP, 1992, 220.

film directors, whose works are strongly politicized, and have therefore been referred to as “neo-neo-realist”<sup>30</sup> because they have

re-deployed many of the cinematic and political strategies of previous generations of neorealist directors like Rossellini and De Sica in dealing with perennial themes like corruption, Mafia violence, and the brutalization of contemporary Italian life where greed and conspicuous consumption are the governing factors and public and social institutions are too corrupt, indifferent, and self-serving to function humanely. (14)<sup>31</sup>

In many respects, after the investigation of “mani pulite” (clean hands)<sup>32</sup> that had put an end to the First Republic and its intrinsic corruption, Silvio Berlusconi and his blue-ribbon party “Forza Italia”, named after a soccer slogan and run like a multimedia entertainment venture appeared to be able to run the country successfully as he had his AC Milan football team and his media empire. As the British journalist Ed Vulliamy suggested in *The Guardian Weekly*

In many ways, Berlusconi is the natural man for the job. Everything he stands for epitomizes the changes that have transformed Italy from a backward, corrupt but paternalistic society to a tawdry, self-obsessed, materialistic but incompetent society at the end of a sudden economic boom, its icons, the cell-phone, Berlusconi’s girls, fast cars and colossal private wealth. (qtd. in Mitchell 14-5)

In the post-“clean hands” Second Republic, Berlusconi and his media empire revolutionized the way of doing and talking about politics, which started to revolve

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<sup>30</sup> Some of the directors of this “new Italian cinema” are Carlo Mazzacurati, Francesca Archibugi, Marco Risi, Nanni Moretti, Antonio Capuano, Daniele Luchetti, Ricky Tognazzi and Gianni Amelio.

<sup>31</sup> Mitchell, Tony. “Berlusconi, Italian Television and Recent Italian Cinema: Re-viewing *The Icicle Thief*” *Film Criticism*. 21 (Fall 1996) 13-33.

<sup>32</sup> see page 5.

around advertising, as it became, to a certain extent, a product to be marketed and sold.

The era of “Berlusconismo”, a term that started to appear in recent years, brought to power actors, show girls, and singers, and it relies heavily on “neo-television” (as Umberto Eco calls it), commercials and mass media. After the deregulation of Italian television in 1976, Eco ironically coined the term “neo-television” to indicate an increasingly self-referential TV:

Neo-TV talks about itself and the contact that it establishes with its own public. It does not matter what it might say, or what it might be talking about (now more than ever, since the public, armed with remote control, decides when to let it speak and when to switch channels). Neo-TV, in order to survive this control, seeks to hold the viewer by saying to him: “I am here, it’s me, I am you”<sup>33</sup>

Like Fellini, Scola and many other intellectuals, Eco is cynical about the viewers’ capacity to decode the contradictory and falsified messages of neo-television, which ultimately offers no freedom of choice but almost always presents the same images. In effect, according to Italian critic Morando Morandini, the increasing influence of television and the drastic drop of cinema attendance as well as interest in other arts, was due to the incorporation of films into a Babelic-broadcast (to paraphrase Eco) which caused a record drop (by 60%) of cinema attendance in the 1980s, the highest in Europe (which at the time had an average drop of 40%).<sup>34</sup>

With 5,000 films per year being aired on the eight national television channels (Morandini, 21), cinema is now absorbed by the small screen, which ends up interrupting the film every eleven minutes with commercial spots (a method particularly employed on

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<sup>33</sup> Eco, Umberto. “A Guide to the Neo-Television of the 1980s.” *Framework* 25, 1984, 19.

<sup>34</sup> Morandini, Morando. “Paradiso Lost”. *Sight and Sound*. June, 1991, 21.

Berlusconi's private channels). If Fellini had ironically excused himself with the spectators because his film was interrupting the commercials, director Maurizio Nichetti embeds the commercials themselves into his movie, *Ladri di Saponette* (The Icicle Thief, 1989), which is itself a parody of a classic Italian neorealist film, *Ladri di Biciclette* (The Bicycle Thieves, 1948). Nichetti, a comic actor and an animator as well as a former television producer of commercials and children's programs, was able to finance his movie thanks to Berlusconi's production company Reteitalia. *Ladri di Saponette* is a satirical celebration of television and consumption. The film "zaps" among four different levels of narrative: the Milanese television studio (where Berlusconi's TV stations are based as opposed to the national television RAI based in Rome) where the director is invited to present and discuss his film-within-the-film; the commercials that interrupt the TV program and the film every 11 minutes (a technique employed by Berlusconi's channels); the film *Ladri di Saponette* itself (where Nichetti himself plays the role of Antonio Piermattei, his version of De Sica's Antonio Ricci); finally, a family of "telespettatori" (literally: "tele-spectators") that sits on the couch and inattentively watches the first three narratives on TV. During an electricity blackout, the four different "realities" end up intersecting themselves: an American model from a commercial enters the black-and-white "neorealist" film; Bruno and Maria (son and wife of Piermattei) enter different commercials and the director is forced to enter his own film, trying to re-establish the order. Meanwhile, the family is often distracted; only the children, Francesco and Anna, will briefly interact with Bruno as they watch TV, who is in a chewing-gum commercial after leaving the film.



Fig.1



Fig.2

Two frames from Nichetti's *Ladri di Saponette* (1989).

Fig. 1: Maria is acting in a TV commercial and has no intention to return to the original film-within-the film. The director is therefore forced to enter the commercial and trying to convince her to return to his film.

Fig. 2: the film critic Claudio Fava inside the television studio is introducing Nichetti's film, the images of which are projected in the background. As he unveils the plot and discusses the film with Nichetti himself, the family mutes the television because it is too boring and it will spoil the element of surprise.

The plot is intricate and one should add that there is another important figure to be included, the film critic Claudio Fava, who seems bored and distracted by Nichetti's movie. Interestingly, Fava presents *Ladri di Saponette* to the audience not as a parody but as "an act of love towards Italian cinema." Nichetti's portrayal of the distracted family is further proof of Fellini and Scola's idea of a tyrant spectator, to whom conveying a message and presenting a problem is almost impossible. Not only is the family "corrupted", in a manner of speaking, but so are the characters of the film-within-the-film itself, once they come into contact with the neocapitalist world. In fact, Maria and Bruno will be able to return from the future but with six shopping carts filled with every sort of goods (a sequence that recalls Italo Calvino's story of *Marcovaldo al Supermercato* written in the 1950s). The model, who was at the beginning happy to finally meet Nichetti, ("You are the director! I always wanted to meet an Italian director! I just love your movies in black and white!"), vows to return to advertising because "in film people

suffer too much”. Once order is restored and the family is ready to go to bed, the director is stuck “in” the television and despite screaming for help and knocking on the glass will be staying inside the screen as the television is shut off, resembling the gold fish in the fish bowl that lies next to the TV.



At the end of the film once order is almost restored, the director is trapped inside the television screen and despite his attempt to capture the attention of the family for help, the television will be shut off. The credits will run shortly after on the left side of the frame.

On the one hand, Nichetti’s work unveils the superficiality of television and the effects and drastic results of contamination among genres and media. On the other hand, despite the apathy and indifference of the audience, unable and unwilling to receive any type of thoughtful message, Nichetti proves that a film shot in those terms will suffer no interruptions by the “real” commercials, because they will intermingle with the rest of the film once it is broadcast on television. Perhaps, it is in these terms that the critic Fava refers to the film he is introducing as an homage to Italian cinema, as it continues to explore and present reality combining comic gags from the *commedia all’italiana* with the populist film genre that De Sica started in the 1940s and to which he returned in the 1960s after his neorealist period. In this sense, both *The Bicycle Thief* and *The Icicle Thief* share the criticism of historical contrast in social, economic and political values

## **Politics, Culture and the Mass Media in the Age of *'Berlusconismo'***

Among western countries, Italy has the lowest average level of education and the largest cultural gap between the youngest and the oldest generation (Bull 151). Furthermore, Italy is the western country in which linguistic homologation has occurred more recently and in great part because of television. Many have learned to write, read and think through the television (during the 1950s and '60s, there were numerous basic educational programs on RAI). Thus, television is not simply a means of communication but also an element of collective identity. What makes the Italian case peculiar is the relationship between politics and the mass media, particularly television. Ultimately, television is a strong tool of political information. According to the 43<sup>rd</sup> report on the Social Situation in Italy published by CENSIS (2009), an institute for statistics and research, during election times 69.3% of Italians receive their political information from TV and only 25.4% from reading the newspaper. In this context, television is without a doubt the most influential source affecting the way in which one will vote. Moreover, the study carried out by CENSIS in 2009, demonstrates how the tendency to perceive television as primary source of information varies significantly among individuals with a low level of educations (76%), housewives (74.1%), pensioners (78.7%) and elderly (81.8%). These data become even more relevant if one considers that a week prior to the election only 27% of Italians know how they will vote, while the remaining 73% will decide at election time (CENSIS, 2009). The political manipulation of media is certainly neither new nor limited to the Italian case. However, given that the political scenario in Italy has been dominated by the flamboyant figure of Silvio Berlusconi from 1994 to 2011, a man who concentrates

economic, mediatic and political power, it can be argued that politicians can “manufacture consent” (qtd. in Kovàcs 77) for their political agenda by altering the intensity of media coverage of a given issue. Consequently, the public’s perception of social issues varies according the pattern that is set by the media through political influence. Berlusconi enjoyed large consent and support during the first elections after the *mani pulite* investigation in 1994. With the creation of a new political party (*Forza Italia*), Berlusconi appeared on the political arena as a new kind of politician, a self made man who would change the corrupt games of powers of the First Republic. After an unprecedented marketing campaign (every Italian family received by mail a colorful biography of the new candidate including several of his family pictures), Berlusconi redefined the lexicon of politics, speaking a language that was literally easier to comprehend. To some extent, the 20 years of *Berlusconismo* that followed (with few sporadic and brief exceptions during which the center-left coalition was in power), were based around Berlusconi’s personal cult. The political debate rotated around the personal and judicial agenda of the Prime Minister, from the conflict of interest of his enterprises to the “bunga-bunga” parties. The structural problems of the country shifted in a secondary place and substantial reform were never touched. The Cabinet ministers, some of whom were previous models, actors and show girls from Italian television, proved to be in the end at the personal service of Berlusconi, who significantly referred to them as “traitors”, once they voted against his budget plan in November 2011. The budget law, which passed with only 308 votes, marked the end of the parliamentary majority of Mr. Berlusconi as well as the termination of his political career. What brought Berlusconi to

resign was the external pressure by world markets, the EU and the IMF who asked for immediate reforms to stabilize both the national and international economy.

The country is currently facing a tangible decline the roots of which go much deeper than the appearance of Berlusconi, who, on the other hand, is the product of a combination of conditions: unveiling of a corrupt political system (the First Republic) that had ruled the country for over 40 years, strong demand for change, and powerful mediatic support. The epithet of Italy as “the sick man of Europe” seems more than appropriate in the current historical moment because of its unsolved issues and long term problems. During the commemoration of Italy’s 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary (1861-2011), the sense of nationhood was still hard to perceive, despite the economical effort put in ostentatious celebrations. In *Italy Today* (2010), Andrea Mammone and Giuseppe Veltri notice how “[t]he ruling elites do not seem ready to cope with the crisis of Italian society and politics” (2). According to LUISS University of Rome, the non-meritocratic system (deeply felt by the population) is costing each Italian citizen between 1,080 and 2,671 Euro each year (Mammone 2), strongly contributing to the economic decadence of the Nation. In this regard, whereas it is true that Italy has one of the lowest levels of press freedom in Europe (along with Turkey, it is one of the two Western nations to be classified by the organization Freedom House “partly free countries”)<sup>35</sup>, it is also true that one cannot merely associate Silvio Berlusconi with the lack of media freedom. If anything, one should recognize the tendency of Italians to passively search for a ‘holy

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<sup>35</sup> On the 2009 Global Press Freedom Rankings, Italy holds the 73<sup>rd</sup> position and the 49<sup>th</sup> position among Western countries (Ragnedda 71). On January 25, 2012 the *Corriere della Sera* published an article according to which Italy was further downgraded in 2011 with respect to the freedom of press, falling to the 61<sup>st</sup> position, whereas most European countries had seen a considerable improvement, possibly as a direct consequence of the outraises in the Arab world. [http://www.corriere.it/politica/12\\_gennaio\\_25/rsf-classifica-liberta\\_9b1a1948-474b-11e1-8fa7-b2a5b83c8dfe.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/politica/12_gennaio_25/rsf-classifica-liberta_9b1a1948-474b-11e1-8fa7-b2a5b83c8dfe.shtml) Accessed on February 9, 12.

savior' to act on their behalf and solve the nation's long-standing problems. This attitude harks back to the fascist era; it extends to Bettino Craxi, and to some extent, is recognizable in the months following Berlusconi's resignations.



A comic that appeared online during the end of 2011. On January 13, 2012, the tragedy of the *Costa Concordia*, the largest cruise ship to be built in Italy, will represent for many the symbolic sinking of a system that stayed miraculously afloat for decades. The images of the vessel that ran aground and is now leaning on its side are difficult ones to dissociate with the current socio-political and economical state of the nation.

The technocratic government led by Mario Monti, a well respected economist and former EU commissioner, which took charge in November 2011 (following a bright and delicate political maneuver of President Giorgio Napolitano, who indirectly maneuvered the appointment of Monti), was acclaimed by a vast crowd of Italians outside of the *Quirinale* (the official residence of the President of the Italian Republic). People invaded the streets of Rome, newly hopeful after the end of the Berlusconi era; a Hallelujah chorus was performed by an improvised orchestra in the presidential square. Italians seem to have delegated once again solely on Monti's shoulders the responsibility to liberate the country from its chronic malaise. The harsh reforms that are currently being

implemented by the Monti government are indicative of the drastic political, social and economic conditions in which the country is set. An effective strategy for economic growth, for the reduction of youth unemployment (Italy's rates are among the highest in Europe), and for the implementation of vital sectors as research and education, is still unclear. The famous ending of Giuseppe Lampedusa's novel *Il Gattopardo* (The Leopard, 1958), is appropriate to describe the (fictitious) passage between the First and the Second Republic: "If we want everything to stay as it is, everything has to change." In the novel, Lampedusa is referring to the period when the Sicilian Aristocracy was losing power over the newly unified Republic, while writing during the years following the Second World War. Whereas the phrase is appropriate to describe the era of *Berlusconismo* vis-à-vis the First Republic, it is still too early to analyze with the just historical perspective the Monti period and to talk about the beginning of a Third Republic. Even so, the Italian contemporary cultural sphere developed an active response to the commonly perceived political and economic decadence of the nation. Since the mid 1990s, Italian fiction produced a "nebula" of novels that evolves around the pulp and *noir* genre but at the same time it moves in a direction that makes it uniquely Italian. The definition of *neonoir* or New Italian Epic (as suggested by Wu Ming 1) to describe such a movement contributes to the idea of an innovative, unprecedented literary style targeting, for the most part, younger generations of readers. The idiosyncratic international success that this "pulp fiction, Italian-style" enjoys (and on which the following chapters will focus), makes the Italian case particularly worthy to review and interesting to study.

## Chapter II

### What Color is “Giallo”? Italian Detective Fiction between Tradition and Innovation

“Quando vai in pensione puoi metterti a scrivere dei romanzi”... “Scriverei certamente dei romanzi gialli. E non vale la pena... I romanzi gialli, da una certa critica e da certi cattedratici, o aspiranti tali, sono considerati un genere minore, tant’è vero che nelle storie serie della letteratura manco compaiono.”<sup>36</sup>

Il Commissario Montalbano

“So what are you saying, May? You saying you challenge the whole moral structure of everything?”

“What moral structure? Is that the kind of nonsense you use on your pupils?”

“Do you not find human impulse is basically decent?”

“Is basically nothing.”

...

What are you saying, May? There is no morality anywhere in the whole world?

“For those who want morality there is morality. Nothing is handed down in stone”

*Crime and Misdemeanors* (1989)

### Making Sense of the Present: The Challenge of Historicizing an Ongoing Cultural

### Phenomenon

In the article “Modernity and Postmodernity: A Cultural Change Seen from the Italian Perspective” (1994), Remo Cesarani argues that

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<sup>36</sup> [“When you retire you can write novels”... “I’d certainly write crime fiction. And it’s not worth it... Mystery novels are considered a minor genre by certain critics and by certain academics or would-be academics. In fact, in serious histories of literature they are hardly mentioned” *La Gita a Tindari* 261]

...one of the great transformations that have affected [Italian] cultural life has come from the enormous expansion of the media and the enlargement of the public, which is no longer distinguishable in categories such as high-brow, low-brow or middle brow, but has been transformed into an undifferentiated mass of consumers of cultural products. In such a situation there is no room anymore for phenomena like Kitsch or Camp, or, for that matter, even for phenomena such as Baudelaire's "hypocrite lecteur" or the avant-garde artist. (374)

Cesarani points out the contradiction of Italy as a country that has been so "ready to adapt to the new mood and has contributed so eagerly to fashion it" (375) and yet some Italian historians of culture and literature are still reluctant or, at least very cautious to acknowledge the pop-cultural movements that are present in the nation. Simply put, because of the inclination of the new writers to combine and parody all sorts of styles and genres, Italian literary critics are reluctant to accept new literary tendencies as they could potentially obliterate more classical literary codes. The suspicion and general mistrust of the critics notwithstanding, since the mid-1990s Italian literature has continued to generate an innovative body of literary texts often grouped under the umbrella names of "gialli" (an Italian term for detective fiction) or "pulp". Seen by some as a mere para-literary trend or popular cultural sub-genre, the pulp phenomenon in Italy is far from being outmoded, as it has successfully carved out a literary, cultural and multi-media space that is targeting mostly younger generations of readers. As Cesarani himself notices, change *has* taken place and one cannot succeed in undoing, one can only try to study and understand it (383).

Before moving any further, keeping in mind the historical frame from which this trend springs described in the previous chapter of this dissertation, it is important to understand that Italian detective fiction or the “giallo” has little in common with the more classical idea of crime stories of the Anglo-American tradition. Nonetheless, this popular genre has absorbed different elements from the British classical models, the American hard-boiled genres, as well as the French *noir*. Elisabetta Mondello, one of the most prolific academics on this phenomenon, has argued that the most accurate etiquette for this new trend is *Neonoir* (“Il Neonoir. Autori, Editori, Temi di un Genere Metropolitano”).<sup>37</sup> Be that as it may, the prefix “neo-” recognizes the element of novelty of the contemporary literary current, whereas the reference to the “noir” genre refers to a darker, more dramatic and less organic development of the detective formula. The *noir* is not predicated upon the same impeccable logic and faith in the investigation as a clearly defined process that moves towards the re-establishment of order, but aims instead at revealing the underlying chaos of human existence. Finally, it should be added that to assess, study and historicize a phenomenon that is still in the making is a very difficult task because one is at the same time “spectator” and “protagonist” of that particular historical frame. The difficulty to single out a sole label to refer to the “pulp” movement (a term that does not even have a direct translation in Italian) is indicative of this still evolving and (therefore) amorphous literary phenomenon.

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<sup>37</sup> [http://www.romanoir.it/pdf/Mondello\\_Il%20Neonoir.pdf](http://www.romanoir.it/pdf/Mondello_Il%20Neonoir.pdf) Accessed on 12 October 2011.

## A Brief History of the *Noir* and its Development in Italy

According to Italian literary critic Franco Ferrini, the *noir* is more than a specific genre, “it designates a general tone, a number of motifs, and an ensemble of subgenres” (qtd. in Giovannini 13). Despite the numerous and divergent opinions on the definition of “noir”, one can state that the *noir* phenomenon is one that has been open to contaminations since its inception, as it developed on the wave of the American hard-boiled novels of the 1920s-early 1940s. During the years following the Second World War, American cinema was adapting many of the hard-boiled novels to the big screen, often times working with screenplay writers that were in fact *noir* authors. The association of images to the popular fiction genre noticeably contributed to the success of Raymond Chandler’s and Dashiell Hammett’s novels such as *The Big Sleep* (1939) and *The Maltese Falcon* (1930). The connection between literature and cinema is also fundamental in coining the term “noir” itself. The American hard-boiled novels translated and published in France during the post-war period, appeared in the collection “Série Noire.” The black cover of the books soon became a distinctive trait and started to be associated to this literary current. In 1946, French critics, Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier, published two articles in which they used the label “noir” specifically to define American detective films. The fact that the term “noir” was coined in Europe in connection to a genre that developed in the United States and that Hollywood had rendered even more famous, is significant. The novels and films that captured the attention of readers and viewers alike were not a direct product of a school promoting a specific formula. The ‘movement’ was born because of the external observation of texts and films which seemed to have common traits and were

therefore grouped under the name of “noir.” Fabio Giovannini (one of the founding fathers of the Neonoir literary circle in Italy in the 1990s, as we shall see in the following section), defines “noir” as a tendency of the collective imagination. In this sense, one might talk about the “noir” as a “concept”,

un'etichetta elastica che può coprire tutte le storie violente, cupe (ma non soprannaturali) e con personaggi centrali ambigui o negativi, spesso prive di lieto fine. (9).<sup>38</sup>

Broadening Giovannini's definition, one can argue that the “noir” mirrors a sense of social anxiety, a general malaise, and a gloomy national attitude. After all, it employs a literary style that is closer to reality both in terms of its visual depiction and in terms of the language and structure spoken by the characters. In the opening line of “The Simple Art of Murder” Raymond Chandler declares that the work of art has to say something about reality and actuality in order to be defined as such.

For instance, let us consider Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930). Therein, one realizes how the socioeconomic changes in the America of the late 1920s had influenced human relationship, ultimately generating a lack of trust and sympathy among people (Cassuto 47). In fact, Hammett's novel reflects upon the economic and anthropologic collapse the United States underwent during the Great Depression. Hammett, who lived during those changes, was able to elaborate them in terms of the effect on present and future society. In this sense, *The Maltese Falcon* and the new “though-guy” detective, Sam Spade, embody a historically realistic consciousness of

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<sup>38</sup> an elastic label that can cover all sorts of violent and dark stories (but with no supernatural [elements]) and with central characters who are ambiguous and negative, often with no happy ending. (my translation)

America's present (Cassuto 49) and, Chandler would argue, the novel elevates the hard-boiled genre to a valuable style alongside what was categorized as 'high literature'.

In the episode in which Sam Spade turns in Brigid O'Shaughnessy with whom he (*thinks* he) has fallen in love, one perceives a sense of distrust which could have been dictated by the years of the Great Depression. In fact, there are two main reasons why he must have her arrested: firstly, she is the murderer and justice must be done by the detective himself, if not by corrupted institutions; secondly, had Spade not turned her in, she would have had "something on [him] that [she] could use whenever [she] happened to want to." Spade's concern is not "to play the sap" for her, as he keeps repeating constantly in the final passage of the novel. The detective's explanation of why he *has* to turn her in emphasizes his blurred sense of duty not only towards the profession he represents, but towards the detective *business* at large. As Sam Spade put it:

When a man's partner is killed he is supposed to do something about it. It doesn't make any difference what you thought of him. He was your partner and you are supposed to do something about it. Then it happens we are in the detective business. Well, when one in your organization gets killed, it's bad business to let the killer get away with it. It's bad all around- bad for that one organization, bad for every detective everywhere. Third, I'm a detective and expecting me to run criminals down and then let them go free is like asking a dog to catch a rabbit and let it go...it's not the natural thing (214)

Nonetheless, Spade struggles to hide his sympathetic feelings towards Brigid; he still wishes he could trust her. But he is in business and letting her go is bad business. In the end, there is no distinction between public and private institutions, business and feelings,

social and individual. In such an impersonal money-driven world, the detective can only fulfill his duty by arresting the villain whenever possible, even though it is not a guarantee for the restoration of law and order.



A scene from *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) by John Huston. In the shot, Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) and Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Mary Astor). The latter is the quintessential *noir* figure of the *femme fatale*: a mysterious, duplicitous, subversive, gorgeous, and manipulative woman.

In Italy, the term “noir” is sometimes used as a synonymous of “giallo”, as Giovannini also points out in his *Storia del Noir*: “[il *noir*] può tramutarsi in sinonimo di “giallo” per la critica italiana meno a proprio agio con le sottigliezze dei generi” (9)<sup>39</sup>.

As Giovannini argues, the “noir” genre in Italy followed a different historical path because of the fascism (as we shall see) and especially because of Italian critics, who have paid little attention to literature of genre, demoting it to secondary low-brow mass culture. Giovannini writes:

Le responsabilità per questa tardiva (o mancata) nascita del *noir* italiano sono diverse. Il fascismo agì negativamente, facendo più danni del moralismo cattolico post-bellico. Ma le colpe maggiori vanno addebitate a una cultura prevalente,

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<sup>39</sup> [the term “noir”] can change into a synonymous of “giallo” for the Italian critique, who feels less confident with the delicate distinction of the genres. (my translation)

accademica e critica, che nelle analisi della nostra letteratura ha portato a sottovalutare gli autori italiani di genere, se non ad eliminarli. (138)<sup>40</sup>

First, let us start by focusing on the influence of Fascism on the development of detective fiction as a necessary premise for the appearance of the *noir* phenomenon. In Italy, the notion of detective fiction did not exist until 1929 when Mondadori first published a collection of British mystery novels and introduced it to the Italian market. After having been censured during the fascist era, detective fiction was relaunched together with the American hard-boiled classics after WWII. The genre was considered corrupting and misleading in its representation of Italian culture and society. Hence, the Ministry of Popular culture decided initially to restrict and regulate the content of those detective novels which were being published. No Italian should have figured as the criminal and every case must have been solved. However, the censorship became more severe and the regime decided to ultimately confiscate and forbid every detective novel regardless of the authors' nationality. By this point, (July 1941), Mondadori had published 266 volumes, among them the same Fascist Regime had ordered that a minimum quota on the publisher's list must have been of Italian authors. Mussolini decided to prohibit and eventually confiscate the "gialli" because two young Milanese students had committed a robbery and had declared, after the arrest, that they were fan of the popular genre. The "gialli" (for the most part translations of British and American hard-boiled novels) were banned so that "the italic youth" could be saved from corruption. Just two years later, in

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<sup>40</sup> The responsibilities for this late (or missed) development of the Italian *noir* are different. Fascism acted negatively, making more damages than the post-war catholic morals. But the worst fault is to be attributed a prevalent culture, academic and critic, which in the analysis of our literature has always tended to undervalue Italian writers of genre, if not to eliminate them. (my translation)

1943, Luchino Visconti adapted Cain's *The Postman always rings twice* without citing the novel in the opening credits of his *Ossessione*.



A frame from Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943).

The interest in this narrative genre was still vibrant, despite that Fascist censure. The reaction of the regime to Visconti's first feature film was so harsh that Vittorio Mussolini was personally committed to disapprove of Visconti's movie. As cinema critic Jean Gili points out in the documentary *Elio Petri: Appunti su un Autore* (2005), Visconti opened the door to neorealism while forming (and thus, strongly influencing) neorealist director Giuseppe De Santis. In De Santis's *Riso Amaro* (Bitter Rice, 1949), a film that is also referred to as "capitalist neorealist" because of the considerably high production budget, will also tend to the representation of hard-boiled/*noir* elements explicitly imported from the North American tradition. Starring Italian actress Silvana Mangano (a negative representation of the *femme fatale*), the film takes place among the rice weeders of Vercelli, in northern Italy. Silvana embodies the Italian take of a philo-American *noir* female character, which De Santis implies, is a model that should be avoided. Silvana plays American music on her gramophone, dances boogie woogie, chews gum, reads *Grand Hotel* (a weekly magazine), and dreams of moving to America: "è tutta elettrica" ("It is all electric!"). Her lover, Walter, a criminal escaping from the police, with his hat

and mysterious look resembles a character from a 1920s Hollywood gangster movie. In the end, after killing Walter, Silvana will commit a suicide. De Santis' political implication is that Silvana was killed by the seductive American-inspired mirage of a better, wealthier and more individualistic life, embodied by Walter, the criminal. If De Santis employs components that are reminiscent of the hard-boiled and *noir* genre, so does another Italian director, Elio Petri, who developed his cinematic knowledge flanking precisely De Santis.



Giuseppe De Santis' *Riso Amaro* (Bitter Rice, 1949). The film poster portrays the 18 year old actress Silvana Mangano standing in the rice fields and dressed in a very provocative manner: shorts and a tight blouse. It was the Italian take on the American sex appeal.

In 1970, Petri's film *Indagine di un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto* (Investigation of a citizen above suspicion) will contribute the most to the Italian *noir*. In the film, a chief of police (interpreted by Gian Maria Volontè) commits an absurd and terrible murder of his lover (played by Florinda Bolkan), knowing that nobody would ever suspect him, due to his high ranking position. Petri's film (winner of the Academy Award for best foreign film in 1970) was so popular in Italy when it came out, that for the first time in the country's history cinemas had to start the screenings even after midnight.

Italians were convinced that the movie would be censored and stood in lines for hours curious to watch this controversial film. The popular success of Petri's film revealed an incredible interest from the part of the public to unveil the power structure. At the same time, the narrative and cinematic techniques that Petri employed once again demonstrated that the *noir* had an enormous audience in Italy, despite the different historical development of the genre during the Fascist era. After all, during the 1960s the Italian critics had paid little or no attention to the "giallo" and its variations, denigrating it to "para-literature". The works of Giorgio Scerbanenco, muted under Fascism and who was analyzing the cultural and social changes in Italy during the years of the economic "boom" through the *noir* genre, were never fully embraced by the critics, despite (or better, because of) their enormous popular success. The phenomenon of mass culture or the so called culture of consumption is one that the "real" high-brow writers should have avoided. Accordingly, in order to be "legitimized" many writers, directors and actors were forced to publish under different names, generally American names, underlining the foreign origin of the genre. Franco Enna for instance, a well known Italian writer of the after war period, adopted the names of Lewis Allen Scott, Thomas Freed, or Herbert Masson. Even directors as Sergio Leone and Mario Bava (and, in fact, even actor Gian Maria Volonté) used several American pseudonyms (Giovannini 144) in order to avoid, or at least postpone a possible association with the "giallo"/*noir*. The existence of the *noir* trend in Italy during the mid 1950s and 1960s continued to develop but had to move through different channels, because of its exclusion from the "official" publishing market. Numerous pulp novels started to appear in the newsstands, reaching a wider mass audience also thanks to the lower cost of the product. In addition to the pulp "noir"

novels, many comics employing precisely the *noir* genre: *Diabolik*, *Kriminal*, *Satanik*,“ just to name a few.<sup>41</sup>



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Fig. 1: inspector Ginko on the top of the shot asks Diabolik, “We are about to die. And...this is the moment of truth...Diabolik, who are you?”. “I don’t know who I am,” the anti-hero replies.  
 Fig. 2: A cover from Diabolik, wearing his black mask and acknowledged as “The king of terror” (“Il re del terrore”).

*Diabolik* is currently one of the most successful series of comics ever realized and, after more than fifty years, it still continues to fascinate Italian audiences, perhaps also thanks to the beautiful Eva Kant who helps him in his criminal endeavors. None of the physical features of Diabolik have changed during the years, neither has the format of the page or the typical scheme of the narration: using special masks that allow him to change his features, Diabolik moves with his Jaguar around the city of Clerville. With Eva’s help, he is able to commit the crimes (for which he has carefully prepared a detailed plan). In the end, evil triumphs: Diabolik escapes the police (and the melancholic inspector Ginko), and passionately kisses the beautiful Eva. Director Mario Bava brought on the screen a

<sup>41</sup> From *Diabolik*, *Kriminal* and *Satanik* two different movement developed in the Italian comics tradition. The first one was inspired to *Diabolik*, the anti-hero always wearing a black mask or a costume more generally: *Demoniak*, *Fantax*, *Genious*, *Infernal*, *Sadik*, *Zakimort*. The second one, was converted into the erotic and, with a few exception, even in the pornographic: *Biancaneve*, *Gesebel*, *Isabella*, *Jolanka*, *Lucifera*, *Jacula*, *Yra*, *Zora* (Gallo 119).

successful representation of *Diabolik* in 1968, and it is significant to note that the film was shot in English for an American audience. Whereas the American tradition of the post WWII era had opted for the representation of a superhero such as *Superman*, who stood for truth and justice, Europeans and particularly Italians tended to be suspicious of the new system of power that was put in place. In this sense, *Diabolik* is a direct product of the common skepticism towards the political class and the structure of the State. The reader is an accomplice of the anti-hero, who is also frustrated at the way in which the State is managing their finances. In an episode also represented in Bava's film, *Diabolik* demonstrates the inefficiency and the incapability of the political class to properly spend and administer the citizens' taxes. Accordingly, *Diabolik* manages to destroy with a choreographic explosion the Ministry of Treasure. The citizens of Clerville (as well as the reader) will quite explicitly approve the logic behind *Diabolik*'s gesture: if one is not able to manage a "treasure", one does not deserve it. Later on, *Kriminal* and *Satanik* bring the idea of violence to the extreme and will ultimately break the taboo of sex (initiating the so called "fumetti neri-porno," black-porn comics, Restaino 291).



Mario Bava's *Danger: Diabolik* (1968) played by John Phillip Law.

The fact that Mario Bava (who was later to become a master of the horror genre) directed one of the most successful representations of comics on the big screen is noteworthy. In the same years director Dario Argento was about to begin his career with *L'Uccello dalle Piume di Cristallo* (The Bird with the Crystal Plumage, 1970) starring Tony Musante and Enrico Maria Salerno, a thriller that was still linked to the detective/*noir* tradition.

Interestingly, in 2008, Argento will direct a film the title of which refers explicitly to the Italian detective genre: *Giallo*. In the film, the detective, grown up in Manhattan, is a killer himself. He murdered his mother's killer as soon as he returned from New York and was then "saved" and "reeducated" by the chief of police. Because of his own criminal mind, the inspector of *Giallo* is assigned the most intricate cases of brutal murders and serial killer.

In the film, the only clue that one has on the murder is the fact that he is physically "yellow" ("giallo") due to a liver disease. Yellow is also the color that is employed the

most in the shots: yellow roses, yellow walls, yellow dresses, yellow carpets. Despite the fact that the entire story takes place in Turin (also thanks to the extraordinary effort that the Turin-Piedmont Film Commission had put in the promotion of the city as an ideal settings for film productions), the settings are reminiscent of an American city. The characters themselves are not Italian: the victims are exclusively foreigners (a Japanese student, an American model, a Russian girl); the detective is a native Italian but soon sent to the States where he lived with his uncle in Manhattan; one of the victim's sister is an American flight attendant who will accompany the detective in the search of his sister. Argento's *Giallo* is a mix of genre: a thriller, a traditional detective story, a horror film (the assassin brutally disfigures and tortures his victims before killing them while reading Japanese Manga comics). Ultimately, Argento demonstrates that "giallo" is a peculiar Italian label the definition of which is still vague and certainly non-linear. The choice of the word "giallo" is also ambiguous its objective correlative in the story itself is impossible to identify. Furthermore, likewise Tarantino, Argento connects the literary nature of the "giallo"/*noir*/pulp genre to cinema. At the same time, the connection that Argento establishes bring to the attention both the trans-mediatic and trans-cultural nature of the *noir* phenomenon, one that has no geographical boundaries and that therefore has potential for an unprecedented mass consumption and mass communication.

Among the intellectuals who started to recognize the importance of the *noir*/"giallo" trend particularly in relation to the image is Umberto Eco, who published in 1964 *Apocalittici e Integrati* a collection of essays that included critical studies on the comics. Eco was also to employ the "giallo" genre in his first and best selling novel *Il Nome della Rosa* (The Name of the Rose, 1980). Besides from Eco's attempt to introduce the "giallo"

within the highbrow national literature, the 1980s saw the mysterious (and very successful) production of Alan D. Altieri and Marc Saudade. Alan Altieri (whose real name was actually Sergio) later came to be known as the “Italian Chandler”<sup>42</sup>; it was most likely thanks to his foreign pen name that he was able to reach a wide popular success: his novel, *Città Oscura* (Dark City, 1981), was able to sell more than 30,000 copies. Marc Saudade instead, was the pseudonym used by Furio Colombo for three novels and a short story the first of which was originally written in English and later translated into Italian to try to find a publisher (*Bersagli Mobili*, 1984; *L’Ambasciatore di Panama*, 1985; *El Centro*, 1987; *Trappola a Hong Kong*, 1987). When Mondadori finally published the novels, one was led to believe that they were translations from English and Spanish and one insisted that the real identity of the writer was to remain secret. The speculations were numerous: rumors had it that behind Saudade there was Pérez de Cuéllar, at the time secretary general of the UN. Furio Colombo was a journalist (the last to interview Pasolini a few hours before his murder, as we shall see in the fourth chapter of this dissertation), a university professor in Bologna and at Columbia University, president of the FIAT USA and more recently a deputy at the European Parliament. Colombo’s character touched upon controversial themes such as terrorism, prostitution and corrupted institutions and was subsequently praised by Eco himself in an article “Il Caso Saudade” (*L’Espresso*, August 2, 1987). However, Colombo was to abandon the *noir* genre by the end of the decade after the little attention on the part of critics and following the harsh criticism that his work had generated.

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<sup>42</sup> Gatti, Roberto. “Chandler all’italiana: l’ingegnere Milanese che scrive thriller dalla California” *L’Espresso* August 4, 1995.

## **“Giallo”/ Pulp/ (Neo)noir: The Explosion of the 1990s and the Search for a Name**

In the last two decades, entertainment literature (horror, adventure, science fiction, detective fiction) seems to be the preferred genre for the Italian audience, which in addition appears to prefer contemporary texts, according to CENSIS, an institute for statistics and research.<sup>43</sup> The Italian national Institute for statistics ISTAT, which makes a more detailed distinction between “gialli, *noir*”, “fantasy, horror” and “science fiction”, likewise confirms the readers’ preference for the first two categories. The publishing industry has therefore been accused of following a market made by degenerated *voyeurs* of the horrid, and paying little attention to the quality of the texts, produced in great numbers with the sole purpose to keep up with consumer demand. Since the mid 1990s, when the publishing industry started to pay more attention to the pulp genre (Einaudi, the well-known publishing house from Turin even dedicates to the new writers an entire collection: “Stile Libero”, Free Style), one has attempted to encapsulate the phenomenon by coining numerous labels; horror writers, cannibals, splatterpunk, “cattivisti”, “orroristi”, “noiristi”, pulp, black literature; the list is just a sample of the most common names attributed to the writers of this genre.

The idea of pulp fiction suggests a sense of “trash and transitoriness: magazines and paperbacks, produced from poor-quality wood-pulp whose contents are formulaic and sensationalist”<sup>44</sup>. The term “pulp” is a relatively new idiom in Italian that entered the language after the introduction of Quentin Tarantino’s cult movie *Pulp Fiction* (Sinibaldi

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<sup>43</sup> from a study by Alessia Risi, qtd in Elisabetta Mondello *La Narrativa Italiana degli Anni Novanta*. Meltemi: Roma, 2004, 179-98..

<sup>44</sup> qtd. in *Pulping Fictions*. Ed. by Cartmell Deborah, I.Q. Hunter, Haidi Kaye and Imelda Whelehan. Chicago: Pluto Press, 1996, 1.

39) and it became so popular that caricatures of “scrittori pulp” (pulp writers) started to flourish on many television shows in the 1990s.



Italian comedian Bebo Storti from a popular TV show of the 1990s., *Mai dire goal!* (Never Say Goal) After the success of Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Storti played several sketches with the caricature of a Pulp writer whose famous cue was “pulp, very pulp, maybe too much pulp!”

Unquestionably, this literary phenomenon has been entrenched in popular culture since its inception. Often times one tends to associate pulp with gangster stories and with detective fiction more broadly (perhaps an error induced from Tarantino’s work itself). However, pulp, at least in its original denotation, was not restricted to a singular literary trend; on the contrary, the label “pulp” encompassed a large variety of genres and subgenres (horror, *noir*, fantasy, etc.). The central focus of this study is the development of the innovative semi-independent “giallo”/*neonoir* current in Italy that coincides with the explosion of another ground-breaking literary trend, or better a *pastiche* of trends, known more broadly as pulp. Critic Filippo La Porta views pulp as “that literary and visual production which uses popular and/hence low-brow materials strictly linked to genres (detective fiction, horror, comics etc...), but with a postmodern ironic sense of awareness that renders it a variegated and unpredictable new original trend”.<sup>45</sup> The concept of literary “pastiche” helps explain the stylistic confusion generated by

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<sup>45</sup> *La Nuova Narrativa Italiana: Travestimenti e Stili di Fine Secolo*. Torino : Bollati Boringhieri, 1999, 261 (my translation)

contemporary Italian pulp fiction. The Italian-American director Quentin Tarantino crafted a new aesthetic of spectacular violence in the cult movie *Pulp Fiction*, while at the same time mixing the literary and the cinematic media, by providing a dictionary definition of the term pulp at the very beginning of the film in white letters on a black screen. Popular cinema, Tarantino seems to imply, can offer the same sensation of mass market fiction, and his film may signify the ultimate incorporation (destruction?) of the book by visual media.

*Pulp Fiction* was released just a year before the appearance of the *cannibali*/pulp writers and ignited one of the most provocative symposia of the 1990s in Italy: “Narrating after Pulp Fiction”, promoted by the “Holden” school of creative writing in Turin directed by Alessandro Baricco. During this three-day symposium, scholars, journalists, writers and directors discussed the influence of the “Tarantino phenomenon” on contemporary Italian culture. Tarantino’s film was defined as the *Iliad* of our times and its influence led critic Filippo La Porta to observe: “*Pulp Fiction* marked a major moment of fracture in the history of western narration”. Arguably, the model of the pulp/“giallo” narrative that has flourished in Italy since the mid 1990s also marks a drastic rupture and a point of no return in the history of Italian literature. The link between Tarantino’s cult film and the popular mass genre that developed in the Italian publishing market is an essential one, insofar as it underlines the renewal of the Italian literary panorama as it responds to the techniques from mass medium cinema by absorbing them within itself. In other words, the younger generation of Italian writers actively responds to and regenerates a literature that seemed to be of no interest in the new high speed capitalistic society. Visual and textual can effectively collide and

cooperate in the creation of a mass genre that employs cinema, web, cartoons and television within the written page.

Significantly, the term *neonoir* that Elisabetta Mondello adopts and advocates as the most correct label for the literary trend in examination derives itself from an interesting event which took place precisely in the same years as Tarantino's film. In the summer of 1994, a group of directors, journalists, writers, critics, and screenplay writers, decided to form a literary circle that would meet in the Roman district of Trastevere under the direct supervision of horror film director Dario Argento. The group was called "*Neonoir*", a term that, if truth be told, derived from a doctoral dissertation by Maitland McDonagh, a student at a university in New York at the time. McDonagh coined the term in order to describe Dario Argento's cinematic style. The Roman group "*Neonoir*" decided to adopt the term because they shared with Argento a narrative point of view that is often subjective, and that belongs, more often than not, to the murderer himself (also referred to as "Cain's point of view"). *Neonoir* started to produce (sometimes even in collaboration with one another) novels, anthologies, theatrical plays, and radio shows. Shortly afterwards, the group members intensified their critical interventions in newspapers, magazines, web-magazines and online blogs; *Radio Città Aperta* started airing *Appuntamenti in Nero* (Black dates), a radio program whose texts were written by the group and a theatrical play was produced with great success (*Il Vampiro di Londra*), inspired by the real confessions of John Haigh, a serial killer of the 1940s. Several small, independent publishing houses (Datanews, Stampa Alternativa, I libri dell'Altritalia) gave immediate credit to the Roman group and in the arc of a few years a vast number of anthologies and collections poured into the market: *Neonoir. 16 Storie e un Sogno*

(1994), *Neonoir. Deliziosi raccontini con il morto* (1994), *Giorni Violenti. Racconti e Visioni Neonoir* (1995), *Cuore di Pulp. Antologia di racconti Italiani* (1997), *Italian Tabloid. Crimini e misfatti nel cuore dello stato* (1997), *Bambini Assassini* (2000), *Grande Macello. Racconti di Horror estremo* (2001), *L'orrore della Guerra. Racconti estremi di autori Italiani* (2003).<sup>46</sup>

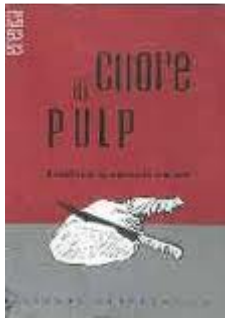


Fig. 1

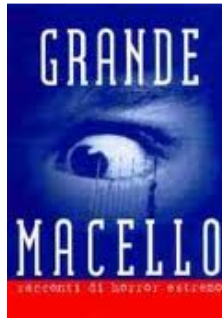


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Fig. 1: the collection of short stories *Cuore di Pulp*, which phonetically plays with the well known marketing motto of a popular ice-cream made by Algida, entrenched within the popular culture since the 1960s (“Cuore di Panna”).

Fig.2: The cover of *Grande Macello*, that recalls the logo of a famous TV show in Italy and in Europe, “Grande Fratello” inspired by George Orwell’s novel *1984* (1948). Ten contestants are constantly being watched by cameras, the eyes of “the Big Brother”. The anthology does not have the eye of the camera on the cover (as the program logo does), but a real human eye pierced by needles (an image from Dario Argento’s *Opera*, 1987). From the three covers shown above, it is obvious that the phenomenon of “neonoir”, to use Mondello’s definition, is deeply entrenched with the mass culture and employs all of its popular symbols in order to attract the public/ultimate consumers.

Fig. 3: the cover of the collection *Neonoir. Deliziosi raccontini con il morto*. It also plays with another popular product made by Perugina, “I Baci” (chocolate kisses). Both the colors and the title (which also plays phonetically with the word “raccontini” short stories and “cioccolatini,” chocolate candy) resemble the famous desserts.

<sup>46</sup> This brief list which is meant to give an idea of the number of “neonoir” works which appeared in Italy during the past two decades is quoted by Elisabetta Mondello in *La Narrativa Italiana degli Anni Novanta*. (Roma: Meltemi, 2004).

Despite several proclamations of the “*Neonoir*” as a “non-movement movement”, Fabio Giovannini, one of the theorists of the group, is able to distinguish at least four fundamental characteristics that the writers share in common, their diverse background and approach notwithstanding.

- 1) Innanzitutto, per le narrazioni neo-noir l’assassino e’ la figura centrale. In questo, uno dei riferimenti principali può essere individuato in alcuni aspetti del cinema di Dario Argento. Il neo-noir guarda il mondo dal punto di vista di Caino.
- 2) Il neo-noir “riscrive” i generi: il giallo, il noir, la spy story, l’horror e infine il cyber. E usa per questo fine un approccio multimediale, che intreccia letteratura, cinema, fumetto, ipertestualità, ecc.
- 3) Il neo-noir si installa nella sovrapposizione tra cronaca nera e immaginario. Il punto di partenza quindi e’ il reale, ma per oltrepassarlo con le armi della fantasia: si tratta di un’interzona transrealista.
- 4) Il neo-noir privilegia le situazioni estreme, ma sapendo che queste possono presentarsi anche nella normalità quotidiana dei rapporti interpersonali segnati dalla violenza. Non è mai rassicurante, e perciò rifugge dal “perbenismo” che certi giallisti di successo perorano.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Giovannini, Fabio. “Postfazione. Neo-noir: il movimento che non c’è” in *Giorni Violenti. Racconti e Visioni Neonoir*. “Foreste Sommerse” Ed. Roma: Datanews, 1995, 118-9.

- 1) First of all, in neo-noir narrations, the killer is the central figure. One of the principal references to this can be found in the cinema of Dario Argento. Neo-noir looks at the world from “Cain’s point of view”.
- 2) Neo-noir rewrites genres: detective fiction, noir, spy story, horror and finally cyber. And to achieve this objective it uses a multi-media approach that combines literature, cinema, comics, hypertextuality, etc.
- 3) Neo-noir fits within the superimposition of crime news and imaginary. The starting point, therefore, is in reality, but [only] in order to go beyond it with the weapons of fantasy: it deals with a transrealistic interzone.
- 4) Neo-noir privileges extreme situations, but cognizant that these situations can happen also in the daily normality of interpersonal relationships marked by violence. It is never reassuring, and therefore it eschews the “respectability” that some successful detective writers advocate. (My translation)

Giovannini, whose intent is far from writing a manifesto, highlights the common denominators of the neo-noir trend, which must be intended as an active political response of literature to a world in which the imaginary is forged by mass-media and therefore transforms reality into a pastiche of fiction and truth. Experimenting with, or as Giovannini puts it, “rewriting” the genres allows for the creation of an alternate, more subjective and paradoxically more realistic depiction of the (post?) postmodern world. It is the same task (though employing very different means) that Calvino had longed for literature in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988). “Preferiamo una letteratura dura che apre gli occhi sulla realtà e che sonda le tensioni profonde degli individui”<sup>48</sup>(10), declared Giovanni and Tentori in their introduction to *Cuore di Pulp* (1997). This new trend, which cannot be analyzed with the study of individual texts and authors, must be envisioned in its totality and cannot be relegated to a mere category of books or films. It is a tendency of the imagination (“una tendenza del’immaginario”) and as such it can navigate through genres and subgenres and discard once and for all the reductive epithet of “category.”

### **Cannibalizing the Media: Aldo Nove and Television**

During an interview for *Il Manifesto* in May 1996, Aldo Nove observed that a short story by his “cannibal” colleague Niccolò Ammaniti, is no more violent than an evening of watching commercial television (“Non credo che un racconto di Ammaniti sia piu’

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<sup>48</sup> We prefer a hard literature, that opens its eyes on reality and that investigates the profound tensions of individuals. (my translation)

violento di una serata su Canale 5”).<sup>49</sup> With this statement, Nove’s purpose was two-fold: he was defending the Roman writer from the accusations of excessive violence after the publication of *Branchie* (1994), a collection of short stories, and he was also commenting on his own book, *Woobinda e altre Storie senza Lieta Fine* (1994) which launched him onto the Italian literary scene. *Woobinda* (later edited and republished by Einaudi as *Superwoobinda* in 1998) presents a world in which the mass media have burst the boundaries of the collective imagination and have permeated into ordinary life.

In the first story of *Superwoobinda* the character confesses he killed his parents because they used a body wash called “Pure & Vegetal”<sup>50</sup> and that it was not his favorite brand, “Vidal”, a product that the killer always associated with the idea of freedom due to a commercial he used to watch as a child (representing a horse that runs freely). In another story, a middle aged woman fantasizes about an affair with Giancarlo Magalli, an Italian host who vaguely resembles her husband, but he is famous because is on television.

There are numerous other television icons that ignite the rest of the stories (Cecchi Paone, Maurizio Costanzo, Emilio Fede, Alberto Castagna). Cult TV programs (*Non è la Rai*, *Complotto di Famiglia*, *I Fatti Vostri*), commercial brands and national supermarkets dictate human behaviors and desires, ultimately destroying reality in favor of a hyperreal dimension, which (as Baudrillard might argue), gives the world a new structure and a new substance.

Since television is an integral part of both the characters and the readers, *Superwoobinda* as a book is arranged as a visual media. In other words, the reader frenetically “zaps” through the chapters as if they were television channels. Hence, the

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<sup>49</sup> qtd. in Mondello, Elisabetta. *In Principio Fu Tondelli: Letteratura, Merce, Televisione nella Narrativa degli Anni Novanta*. Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2007, 65.

<sup>50</sup> “Ho ammazzato I miei genitori perchè usavano un bagnoschiuma assurdo, Pure & Vegetal”

stories are interrupted in the middle of a word, a sentence, an action. As on television, it seems that because of so many choices that are offered, there is more to read/watch, and yet one is looking at/reading the very same images.



The cover of *Superwoobinda* by Aldo Nove. Several televisions seem to float on a greenish liquid background. The televisions appear as mere objects and are shut off. Or are they?

The language employed in Nove's *Superwoobinda* is moreover the language of television ("scrivere televisivamente", Nove will later confirm), in the sense that the characters irrupt on the page as they would in a talk-show or a quiz-show. There is no punctuation and there are commercials promoting the same goods that the reader (and the writer) has already consumed or will at some point consume.

Il mio scopo dichiarato era appunto quello di riportare il ritmo dello zapping in letteratura, scrivere televisivamente, ciò che è breve, veloce, spezzato. E' stato un misto di scelta letteraria e di...come dire...gratificante comodità, perchè così si vive e così si parla ....La scelta del micro-racconto è stata quasi obbligata: era la forma più congeniale al genere, quella letteraria televisiva di cui si diceva prima...mi è capitato durante la lavorazione del libro di mettermi davanti alla

televisione e di segnarmi le frasi e i modi di dire tipici, particolarmente vuoti.

Vuoti però significativi, drammaticamente efficaci.<sup>51</sup>

If in earlier denouncements of American-style consumerism in Europe, as for instance in Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle* (1958), television had played the part of an ambiguous object, in the 21<sup>th</sup> century television is more than a passive appliance. It modifies social habits and customs, language and imagination. The connection between television and culture in Italy is so close that even written texts strive to adjust to the new mode of narration. Nove's provocative "televisional literature" opens the door to an intellectual response that revolutionizes Italian static literary codes.<sup>52</sup>

In "Spice Girls, I love you!", an article that appeared in *L'Espresso* on November 20, 1997, Nove eulogizes the famous English band of the 1990s because, he states, they are the quintessential representation of our times: "they are at the same time everything and nothing. And even the mythical Hegel (teacher of the great Marx) said that everything and nothing are equivalent". Nove's exaggerated enthusiasm for the band is an ironic tool used to criticize Italian classical literature and justify/prioritize new models and forms of literary experimentation that are closer to contemporaneity and its changed needs.

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<sup>51</sup> From *Now Generation*. Aldo Nove. An interview with Claudia Bonadonna in *Pulp*. 2, 1996.

My declared goal was that of translating the rhythm of zapping into literature, writing televisually, what is brief, fast, and fragmentary. It has been a mix of literary choice and...how can I put it...gratifying comfort, because that is how we live and that is how we talk...the choice of the micro-story was almost obligatory: it was the most congenial form to the genre, to the televisional literature that I mentioned earlier....As I was working on the book, I happened to sit down in front of the television and jot down sentences and typical spoken expressions, particularly empty. Empty but significant, dramatically effective. (My translation)

<sup>52</sup> On the relation between television and culture in Italy see also Aldo Grasso; Cristina Buondonno et al. *Storia della Televisione Italiana*. Milano: Garzanti, 1992; Grasso, Aldo; Scaglioni, Massimo. *Che cos'è la televisione: Il piccolo schermo fra Cultura e Società*. Milano: Garzanti, 2003.

Anche la letteratura italiana avrebbe bisogno di imparare molto da[le Spice Girls]. La spiceliteratura che non c'è. Spicedante. Spicefoscolo. Spiceleopardi. Ne dovremmo calibrare le strategie di marketing assoluto, dolce, per applicarle a noi in un recupero ultimo di umiltà e grandezza, al servizio del ritmo vitale cosmico americano commerciale fantastico umanitario.<sup>53</sup>

The article appeared in the art section of *L'Espresso* (which is a peculiar collocation per se), together with an article on Calvino's *Six Memos* that carried a title that sounds as much as a provocation as Nove's piece: "*Lezioni Americane in Scena: Balla con Calvino*". Nove does indeed "dance with Calvino," adopting a literary genre that is re-written for an audience which shares a drastically new linguistic and expressive modality, and is, therefore, closer to this audience than ever before.

In 1996 Daniele Brolli, editor of the anthology *Gioventù Cannibale: La Prima Antologia Italiana dell'Orrore Estremo* ("Cannibal Youth: The First Italian Anthology of Extreme Horror"), affirmed in the introduction to the short stories of "the cannibal writers,"<sup>54</sup> that the new narrative forms and linguistic changes were indispensable in that they were the only instrument capable of representing the collective imagination of the new epoch. He added that the moralism employed by Italian authors until that point (with the exceptions of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Federigo Tozzi, Enrico Morovich, Giorgio Scerbanenco and Beppe Fenoglio) was insufficient to represent the "products of the new social scene" (*Gioventù Cannibale* vi). The fortune of the Italian narrator, Brolli claimed, was linked to

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<sup>53</sup> Italian Literature would also need to learn a lot from [the Spice Girls]. The spiceliterature that does not exist yet. Spicedante. Spicefoscolo. Spiceleopardi. We should calibrate the strategies of absolute, soft marketing and then apply them to ourselves in a final attempt to recuperate humility and grandeur at the service of the vital cosmic commercial fantastic humanitarian American rhythm. (141, my translation)

<sup>54</sup> More specifically Niccolò Ammaniti, Luisa Brancaccio, Alda Teodorani, Aldo Nove, Daniele Luttazzi, Andrea G. Pinketts, Massimiliano Governi, Matteo Curtoni, Matteo Gializzo, Stefano Massaron, and Paolo Caredda.

the clear expectations that the audience had from the author and which s/he kept on bestowing. As Brolli put it:

[Dal narratore italiano] ci si aspetta che racconti storie di vita e che ne faccia merletto con l'uncinetto di una sintassi elaborata, ma il sangue deve essere ommesso, come se il suo apparire decretasse lo scivolare del romanzo verso la cronaca. La cronaca è sicuramente fonte di storie, e quelle macabre, nere e sanguinose sono sicuramente le più affascinanti, con la loro capacità di organizzarsi da sole componendosi in un intreccio misterioso. Ma la tradizione del racconto italiano non le ammette nell'ambito della letteratura se non accompagnate da un'interpretazione morale e ideologica. (*Gioventù Cannibale* vi-vii)<sup>55</sup>

By acting outside of the classical literary conventions (*Gioventù Cannibale* viii), the new generation of writers does not simply imitate reality by incorporating the new words from television and an altered syntax (with respect to Italian literary language), but rather it incorporates, devours, cannibalizes reality through a linguistic structure so innovative that it eliminates the last remainders of “literature” as originally intended.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> One expects [the Italian narrator] to tell everyday life stories while adorning them with a crochet-hook and to make a lace of elaborated syntax but blood must be omitted, as if its appearance decreed the change from novel to news. The news is always sources of stories, and the gruesome, dark and bloody one is for sure the most fascinating, with their capacity to organize themselves on their own creating a mysterious plot. But the Italian novel by tradition does not admit it within literature unless it comes with a moral and ideological interpretation. (my translation)

<sup>56</sup> La scrittura [dei giovani cannibali] è vorace e, inesausta, fagocita tutto, inghiotte pure se stessa. Ne risulta un corpo narrativo squassato, che si diffonde attraverso gli squarci, pronto a germinare nuove narrazioni prive di strutture costrittive. E' un linguaggio che si spinge costantemente oltre e che, in questo “andare oltre”, si libera del passato scoprendo nuovi territori che fanno piazza pulita degli ultimi avanzi di “letteratura” (*Gioventù Cannibale* ix)

The writing of the [young cannibals] is voracious and non exhaustive, it devours everything, it swallows even itself. The result is a narrative body violently shaken, that spreads through its lacerations, ready to sprout new narrations with no constrictive structures. It is a language that pushes itself constantly beyond

The new language without compromise (*Gioventù Cannibale* x) that is adopted by the “cannibal writers” is at the same time both an instrument of investigation of reality (and in this sense, it is a continuation of Calvino’s vision of the literature of the new millennium) and a contemplation of our transformed society, as if we were watching yet another TV channel.

### **Calvino’s Legacy: *L’ultimo Canale TV***

Originally published in *La Repubblica* (3 January 1984), now included in *Prima che tu dica ‘Pronto’* (Milan: Mondadori, 1993, 294-302), *L’Ultimo Canale TV* (The Last TV Channel) is one of Calvino’s last short stories that focuses on the relationship between television and the individual. The main character is obsessed by television and by constantly changing channels. He wanders around the city with a remote control feeling “the constant need” and “the sudden impulse” (294) to push its buttons and “zap” through what he sees. The remote control is an integral part of his body, the character tells us. The doctors have never encountered a condition of this sort and have no cure aside from removing television from the patient’s room. In truth, the continuous “zapping” is a search in itself and it has nothing to do with the fact that the character is not able to focus his attention for more than a few minutes on a coherent succession of images:

La prima idea sbagliata che [i dottori] si sono fatti di me è...che la mia mente riesca a captare solo frantumi di storie e di discorsi senza un prima né un dopo, insomma che nella mia testa si sia spezzato il filo delle connessioni che tiene

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and that in this “going beyond” frees itself of the past while discovering new territories that eliminate the last bits of “literature” (my translation)

insieme il tessuto del mondo. Non è vero, e la prova che portano a sostegno della loro tesi – il mio modo di stare immobile per ore e ore davanti al televisore acceso senza seguire nessun programma, costretto come sono da un tic compulsivo a saltare da un canale all'altro – può ben dimostrare proprio il contrario. Io sono convinto che un senso agli avvenimenti del mondo ci sia, che una storia coerente e motivata in tutta la sua serie di cause e di effetti si stia svolgendo in questo momento da qualche parte, non raggiungibile dalla nostra possibilità di verifica, e che essa contenga la chiave per giudicare e comprendere tutto il resto. (295)<sup>57</sup>

The character's obsessive condition is due to a desperate search for *another* channel which is broadcasting the *real* program (296; Calvino's emphasis) on a parallel frequency and that, if one does not find it, could be lost in space. In this respect, the images that frenetically appear on the screen are superfluous and deceitful:

...il programma che cerco io è un altro, e io so che c'è, sono sicuro che non è nessuno di questi, e questi li trasmettono solo per trarre in inganno e scoraggiare chi come me è convinto che sia l'*altro* programma quello che conta....C'è una stazione sconosciuta che sta trasmettendo una storia che mi riguarda, la *mia* storia, l'unica storia che può spiegarmi chi sono, da dove vengo e dove sto andando. Il solo rapporto che posso stabilire in questo momento con la mia storia è un rapporto negativo: rifiutare le altre storie, scartare tutte le immagini menzognere

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<sup>57</sup> The first mistake [the doctors] made in their diagnosis was that...my mind can only capture fragments of stories and arguments without a beginning or an end, in short that the connecting thread that holds the fabric of the world together had snapped in my head. It's not true and the proof they brought forward to support their thesis – the way I sit motionless in front of the TV for hours and hours without following a programme, obliged as I am by a compulsive tic to switch from one channel to another- can perfectly well be used to demonstrate the contrary. I am convinced that there is a sense in the happenings of this world, that a coherent story, explicable in all of its series of cause and effect, is going on somewhere at this very moment, and is not beyond our capacity to verify, and that this story contains the key for judging and understanding everything else. (translated by Tim Parks in *Short Stories in Italian*. Ed. by Nick Roberts. London; New York: Penguin Books, 1999, 45-7).

che mi si propongono. Questo pulsare di tasti è il ponte che io getto verso quell'altro ponte che s'apre a ventaglio nel vuoto e che i miei arpioni non riescono ad agganciare: due ponti discontinui di impulsi elettromagnetici che non si congiungono e si perdono nel pulviscolo d'un mondo frantumato. (296-97)<sup>58</sup>

The idea of a fragmented world and the apparent pessimism of finding the “*real program*” are compensated by the short story itself: the novel is an encyclopedia, a method of knowledge and a connecting net among individuals, facts and earthly things (*Six Memos*). Literature still provides a potential map of the labyrinth in which we are trapped. In *L'Ultimo Canale Tv*, Calvino anticipates a social scenario that would necessarily modify the ways in which literature looks at the world. Television does offer an apparent multiplicity of images and the illusory possibility to look at “reality” in its totality. But since television encompasses everything while providing precisely images and not real stories, writers are forced to point the remote control towards their windows and look differently at the world that surrounds them, in the same way that the character of Calvino’s short story did: “E’ stato quando ho capito questo che ho cominciato a brandire il telecomando non piu’ verso il video ma fuori della finestra, sulla città” (297).<sup>59</sup> The different paths that the young cannibal writers have initiated after the publication of their first anthology (*Gioventù Cannibale*), follow precisely Calvino’s

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<sup>58</sup> ...they’re not the programme I’m looking for; I know it exists and I’m sure it’s not one of these, and that they only transmit these programmes to deceive and discourage people like myself who are convinced that is the *other* programme that matters....there is an unknown station transmitting a story that has to do with me, *my* story, the only story that can explain to me who I am, where I come from and where I’m going. Right now the only relationship that I can establish with my story is a negative relationship: that of rejecting other stories, discarding all the deceitful images they offer me. This pushing of buttons is the bridge I am building towards that other bridge that fans out into the void and that my harpoons still haven’t been able to hook: two incomplete bridges of electromagnetic impulses that fail to meet and are lost in the dustclouds of a fragmented world. (*Short Stories in Italian* 47-9)

<sup>59</sup> “It was when I realized this that I stopped waving the remote control at the screen and started pointing it out of the window” (*Short Stories in Italian* 49)

suggestion: one did look closely at television while elaborating a new language and experimenting with new narrative styles. However, once this process had been accomplished they “came back to the world”, pointing their remote control toward the city rather than the television screen.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Let us think about Niccolò Ammaniti’s *Come Dio Comanda* (As God Commands, 2009), Tiziano Scarpa’s *Stabat Mater* (2009), or Aldo Nove’s *La Vita Oscena* (The Obscene Life, 2010) which follow a less drastic form and content compared to their original productions of the mid to late 1990s.

## Chapter III

### Pulp Fiction in the Age of “Posts” or The New Italian Epic

“Ma la vera password è una sola, suini.  
COMUNICARE! Non importa come o cosa, suini!  
Non importa neppure se la comunicazione avviene o  
non avviene realmente! Comunicare! Comunicare!  
Comunicare! Sempre! Comunque!”

Giuseppe Caliceti, *Battito Animale* (2001)

“I bei tempi non ci sono mai stati.”

*Il Mio Nome è Nessuno* (1973)<sup>61</sup>

#### Password: Communication

The decline of the phenomenon of the young cannibal writers and their extreme attempt to radically transform the narrative language and syntax of Italian literature can be traced back at the end of the 1990s. By then, Nove, Ammaniti, Scarpa & Co. developed a less radical narrative, at least in terms of the structure of their novels, toward the turn of the millennium. Television seems to play a less drastic role in the stories they narrate, while Italian history continues to provide the perfect background for crimes and mysteries. The “cannibals” who so harshly criticized critics and intellectuals are now less reluctant to be absorbed by that very system, as their works have become a part of “the canon”. Tiziano

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<sup>61</sup> [But the real password is only one, you swines. COMMUNICATE! It doesn't matter how or what, you swines! It doesn't even matter if the communication takes place for real or not! Communicate! Communicate! Communicate! Always! No matter what! From Giuseppe Caliceti's *Animal Beat* (my translation)]

[Good times never existed. From *My Name is Nobody* Dir. Tonino Valerii (my translation)]

Scarpa with *Stabat Mater* (2009) was the winner of the Premio Strega, the most prestigious Italian literary Prize that Ammaniti had received only a few years earlier with *Come Dio Comanda* (As God Commands, 2007). For a few years, the dilemma of Italian critics and journalists was whether they could talk about cannibals or non-cannibals, pulp or non-pulp. It is Scarpa who observes in his provocative “letter to Pulp”:

Per una imperscrutabile congiuntura astrale, quattro anni fa (1996) il mio primo romanzo è stato inserito in uno pseudo-movimento letterario. Il risultato è che tutto ciò che ho scritto (e che scriverò) in seguito non veniva (non verrà) valutato così: “È bello? È brutto?” ma così: “È ancora cannibale? Non è più cannibale?”.<sup>62</sup>

But if it is true that the “new wave” of Italian writers declared itself since its inception a movement-non-movement (or a pseudo-movement, as we read in Scarpa’s letter) that had no manifesto but rather a number of common themes, such questions are unfounded and continue to remind us about the unsolved “conflict” between criticism and literature. Are the structure and the content of the “post-cannibal” literature less drastic or have *we* as readers become used to it? Have the violent pulp stories been attenuated or are they not as shocking as they were in 1996? In other words, has our sense of acceptable and normality changed? Finally, what is it then that the pulp trend has *really* meant for the Italian literary code? Let us try to examine and answer those questions. First of all, it is thanks to the young cannibals that the term “literature” itself has been put at stake. Just as Tarantino offers a dictionary definition of the written word “pulp” and invites us to think

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<sup>62</sup> <http://www.sparajurij.com/tapes/deviazioni/TizianoScarpa/HASCRITTOSUletteraapulp.htm> Accessed on 28 October, 2011.

[For an inscrutable astral conjunction, four years ago (1996), my first novel was put in a pseudo literary movement. As a result, everything that I wrote afterwards (and that I will write) was not (and will not be) evaluated in this way: “Is it good? Is it bad?” but in this way: “Is it still cannibal? Is it no longer cannibal?” (my translation)]

about it both in relation to the term “fiction” and to the movie that one is watching (entitled precisely *Pulp Fiction*), the merit of the Italian pulp writers is their invitation for us to think differently about what we consume. The written text intermingles with the media that surrounds our daily life: radio, television, and internet. In Italy, one has arrived to a point where the national collective imaginary has been/is being forged by the means of mass communication so rapidly that the transformation of traditional ‘worthy’ and ‘classical’ writing seemed to be suddenly turned into trash. Literature did ultimately become, as Tiziano Scarpa put it in *L’Espresso* (March 2007), “un varco per tutti...un posto dove all’improvviso un ignorante che ti dice come stanno le cose, ti racconta il suo contronovecento crudelissimo e assurdo, che fa piangere dal ridere e dalla commozione”<sup>63</sup>

The idea of an “ignorant” (in Italian, a term mostly used in its negative connotation) literary author is not inaccurate, insofar as Scarpa is alluding to the young age of a writer, and to the fact that a writer, after all, does not have to be an intellectual or highly educated in the humanities. A former student of biology who never finished his studies (i.e. Ammaniti, for instance) can very well be a best-selling writer of literature, who is able to reach an audience much larger than ever before. Scarpa (who admits that despite being reductive, the label “cannibal” was a selling point for his generation) brings up a sore point: are publishing houses able to maneuver the public while conducting persuasive marketing campaigns? If so, is the book just *another* product? Elisabetta Sgarbi, editor in chief of the Bompiani publishing house and an art producer, individuated the main criteria that must be followed in order to select a book for

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<sup>63</sup> “A breach for everybody...a place where all of a sudden an ignorant person tells you how things are and recounts to you his very cruel and absurd counter 1900, that makes you cry from laughing and commotion” (my translation).

publication: “qualità, vendibilità, appartenenza alle linee di svolgimento e di crescita delle forme letterarie attuali, ‘popolarità’ dei temi, incidenza storico-sociale della scrittura.”<sup>64</sup> Therefore, quality remains the first criterion to be followed, and even if one must look at the public and its demands, one should always keep in mind that “a book is not a statistic”: “il discorso sulla qualità [deve] prescindere da questi fattori” (qtd. in Mondello 72).<sup>65</sup> Talking about “trash” (an idea often linked to the pulp genre) is anachronistic and should make us wonder about the use of the word: what is it that we can define as “trash”? Is “trash” the genre, the book, the style, or what they make us reflect upon? In short, did *reality* become trash just as if it were an unpleasant TV program? Are we still watching *and* acting in Calvino’s “last TV channel”?

Presenting *Casablanca* (1942), Umberto Eco noticed that Michael Curtiz’s cult film is recalled by its fans in a discontinuous manner: images, fragments, characters, cues are extrapolated and introduced in the private world of the spectators, “a world about which one can make up quizzes and play trivia games so that the adepts of the sect recognize through each other a shared expertise” (446)<sup>66</sup>. In a country in which daily life is deeply influenced by television, to the point where the country itself is run by a television magnate, it is a plausible and founded hypothesis that the wave band of reality, in a manner of speaking, is disrupted by interferences coming directly from the wave band of (trash) television. Pulp fiction, the genre of genres par excellence, has been an invitation to look at, be cognizant of and possibly react to such a world where the

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<sup>64</sup> Mondello, Elisabetta. *La Narrativa Italiana degli Anni Novanta*. Roma: Meltemi, 2004, 171.

[quality, saleability, belonging to developing and growing current literary forms, ‘popularity’ of the topics, historical and social impact of the writing. (my translation)]

<sup>65</sup> [The discussion of quality [must] set aside these factors (my translation)]

<sup>66</sup> ‘Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage’, in *Travels in Hyperreality*. reprinted in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory* (London: Longman, 1988) 446-55.

individual and his/her space are annihilated. In the article “Gli Alchimisti del brutto”, Scarpa observes:

La televisione sta diventando sempre più autistica. È come se si guardasse da sola. Si applaude, ride, si denigra, si scandalizza di sé stessa, si autoassolve, si coccola. Fa tutto da sé. Soffre di delirio di onnipotenza. Quando la guardo, mi sembra di assistere a un caso clinico. Un elettrodomestico ormai completamente psicotico. La tivù è pazza. Non sarebbe ora di assecondarla, abbandonandola completamente a sé stessa, lasciando che se la spassi da sola?<sup>67</sup>

The character of Calvino’s story acts in a way dangerously similar to the television portrayed by Scarpa, as if the latter were by now an animated being: television is autistic, psychotic, crazy. The cannibals with their experimental literary style and the pulp trend that they developed in Italy carry at their core an invitation to their public: let us live in such a reality provided that one is cognizant of what it is and what it represents. It is only by reading, studying, and knowing reality, in other words, by swallowing it, by cannibalizing it, that we can avoid losing control of it. After all, we are “telespettatori a tutti i costi” (viewers; in Italian, literally, tele-spectators at all costs), because the Italian law establishes it so, as Scarpa reminds us:

Qualche settimana fa anch'io, come moltissimi italiani, ho ricevuto una lettera dalla Rai. L'ho aperta, e dalla busta è saltato fuori un uomo in tunica scura con uno spadone in mano. Era la Legge. "Ti nomino telespettatore", mi ha detto

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<sup>67</sup> [http://www.ilprimoamore.com/testo\\_40.html](http://www.ilprimoamore.com/testo_40.html) Accessed on October 30, 2011.

[Television keeps on becoming more autistic. It is as if it were watching itself. It applauds itself, it laughs at itself, it denigrates itself, it is scandalized by itself, it self-absolves, it cuddles itself. It does everything by itself. It is affected by a delirium of omnipotence. When I watch it, it seems to me that I am witnessing a clinical case. An appliance by now completely psychotic. TV is crazy. It would be about time to comply with it, abandoning it completely to itself, letting it have fun by itself (my translation)]

toccandomi il cocuzzolo e le spalle con la lama pesante.

"Ma come? Io non ho il televisore!", ho risposto.

"Non importa, secondo le mie disposizioni del 1938, possiedi un apparecchio atto o adattabile alla ricezione delle trasmissioni televisive."

"E quale sarebbe questo apparecchio?", ho chiesto sempre più intimidito.

"Il computer. Perciò pagami l'abbonamento".<sup>68</sup>

Italians are asked to pay an annual tax, which partially finances the national public television RAI. Even if one does not own a television but is in possession of a computer (hence, possibly of a TV card that can be installed on the computer and provides access to the television), the government assumes that one is a viewer of the programs aired on its channels. Scarpa's definition of a telecratic regime with regards to both Italian and global society, seems the most appropriate to describe a deceptive system that offers us no other option but being a (tele)spectator. Scarpa concludes:

Pur di sfuggire al regime telecratico della nostra epoca, dopo aver rinunciato al televisore getterò via anche il mio computer, tornando a pestare sui tasti della vecchia Olivetti. Poi un giorno comprerò un frigorifero e riceverò dalla Rai l'ingiunzione di pagamento del canone tv.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> [http://www.ilprimoamore.com/testo\\_374.html](http://www.ilprimoamore.com/testo_374.html) Accessed on October 31, 2011.

[A few weeks ago, I, as many Italians, received a letter from Rai: I opened it, and from the envelope a man with a dark tunic with a giant sword in his hand jumped out. It was the Law. "I nominate you television viewer" he told me touching my head and my shoulders with the heavy blade.

"But how can that be? I have no television!", I answered.

"That does not matter, according to my provisions of 1938, you own a device that is able or can be adapted to receive television programs."

"And what would this device be?", I asked increasingly more intimidated.

"The computer. Therefore you have to pay the subscription" (my translation)]

<sup>69</sup> [Just to escape the telecratic regime of our epoch, after renouncing television, I will dispose also of my computer, I will go back to tapping the keys of my old Olivetti. Then, one day, I will buy a refrigerator and I will receive an invitation from Rai to pay for my TV subscription (my translation)]

In the age of fusion and globalization, literature is able to keep pace and continue to live on only if it too incorporates other media, (thus) languages, styles, and genres.

Paradoxically, pulp fiction, the genre of genres, has the potential to become an organized and structured pastiche, which even provides a logical thread to the enduring transformations of our (post-postmodern) epoch. The extreme distortion of form and content in Italian narrative during the past two decades has been an effective intellectual, cultural and anthropological response that writers provided. In short, the young Italian writers' search for an identity (in the end successful) coincided with the search for a new national identity, which was indispensable in order to come to terms with contemporaneity; by consuming reality (in the sense of devouring it in a cannibalistic gesture) one can avoid being passively consumed by it. In 2009, with a (brief) historical sense of perspective, critic Alberto Asor Rosa (1933- ) reflected on the phenomenon of the young pulp writers and their role and merit in Italian literature:

...a me pare che la generazione dei trentenni (o, se si preferisce, dei sub-quarantenni) rappresenti oggi uno stacco abbastanza preciso rispetto persino alla generazione immediatamente precedente (quella dei quarantenni, ovvero, ora dei sub-cinquantenni) ed esprima in qualche modo un'ambizione auto-identitaria (si può dire?) che in precedenza non esisteva o esisteva di meno. Ad aprire la strada a questa ricerca di identità, esattamente su quel medesimo, iniziale confine generazionale, si colloca una serie di scrittori, che s'erano assunti il compito storico davvero rilevante di ricostruire, dopo una squassata bufera, le condizioni stesse dell'agire letterario.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Asor Rosa, Alberto. "Ritorno in Provincia: Le Cento Italie dei Giovani Scrittori" *La Repubblica* [Roma] 15 Dec 2009, p. 60.

Asor Rosa defines the young writers as “explorers of magma”, a matter whose color is significantly red, in the same way that red is the primary ingredient of the new narratives, the blood. “Il sangue come materia di un orrore fondamentale, come verifica della soglia tra la vita e la morte”, as Brolli reminded us in the introduction to *Gioventù Cannibale*, “molto, molto sangue...” (viii-ix). Red is a color of alarm that tells us that there is something wrong, something dangerous. It is a color that invites us to stop, to think, to observe. In this sense, pulp fiction is the only valid means of exploration (implicit in the narrative vocation, as Asor Rosa also points out), denunciation and regeneration of the “agire letterario” (literary action). The harsh criticism to which the pulp trend was exposed at its inception has also been put into perspective and eventually reevaluated:

La critica è prevalentemente un lavoro fotografico, che contempla le zoomate quando si crede di scoprire un particolare interessante. Interessante per chi? Ma ovviamente per chi lo vede. Tuttavia spetta agli altri spettatori decidere se non era meglio guardare da un'altra parte.<sup>71</sup>

After the continuous popular success of the pulp genre which is now by far the most dominant on the market in Italy (the section “gialli” is the largest and, more often than not, the most crowded one in Italian bookstores), the “other spectators” have indeed

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[...it seems to me that today the generation of thirty year olds (or, if one prefers, of the less than forty year olds) represents quite a distinct break even when compared to the generation that immediately preceded it (that of the forty year olds, i.e. by now of the less than fifty year olds) and it expresses in a way an ambition of self-identity (can one say that?) that did not exist before, or existed to a minor extent. To initiate this search for an identity, precisely on that very same, initial generational border, can be found a number of writers, who had taken on the historic and very relevant task, to reconstruct, after a devastating storm, the very conditions of literary action. (my translation)]

<sup>71</sup> [Criticism is, for the most part, a photographic work, that one contemplates the zooms when one thinks that s/he has found an interesting detail. Interesting for whom? But obviously for the one who sees it. However it is up to the other spectators to decide whether it was better to focus on something else. (my translation)]

decided that the pulp offered a better grasp that could have not been possible, Asor Rosa adds, if the pulp writers did not have a clear notion of what it means to narrate well:

...cioé [una nozione] di cosa significhi svolgere un'operazione che si sa e si vuole come "letteraria". "Scrivere bene"- cioè scrivere in modo non trasandato, non verisimilistico, non banalmente documentario, non, in senso restrittivo, giornalistico- torna ad essere un valore.<sup>72</sup>

The cannibals initiated a literary operation that with the introduction of a plurality of languages (from comics, commercials, television shows, etc), questioned different forms of knowledge. Significantly, Scarpa declares in an interview that one of his masters is Alberto Savinio, Andrea De Chirico's brother, who in his *Nuova Enciclopedia* [Edizioni Adelphi, 1985] "assemblava voci proprio importanti a voci apparentemente meno importanti, voci come *amore, europa, dio*, affiancate a voci come *abat-jour, zampironi...*"<sup>73</sup> What makes sense, the Venetian cannibal writer further explains is "interrogare tutti i saperi, convocarli tutti e di conseguenza poi riversarli in linguaggi plurimi"<sup>74</sup> The languages which Scarpa references are also visual languages, that literature tries to "translate" and incorporate within its body. In this new manner of writing "c'è un apparente cinismo che invece, secondo me, è una specie di vestito antipopulista, che è poi uno dei modi per criticare in maniera efficace le caratteristiche sociali della psiche dell'identità nazionale, dell'identità collettiva, di quella individuale..."

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<sup>72</sup> [...that is [a notion] of what it means to engage in an operation that one knows to be and wants to be "literary". "To write well" – i.e. writing in a way that is not shabby, not verisimilar, not uninterestingly documentary-like, not, in a restrictive sense, journalistic- it is once again considered a value (my translation)]

<sup>73</sup> <http://www.sparajurij.com/tapes/deviazioni/TizianoScarpa/INTERVISTAlinguaggiometormenta.htm>  
Accessed on November 1, 2011.

[“assembled important terms with terms that were apparently less important, terms such as *love, Europe, god* next to terms as *lamp, fumigator*” (my translation)]

<sup>74</sup> [“to interrogate all forms of knowledge, to summon all of them and then consequently pour them into multiple languages” (my translation)]

(Scarpa).<sup>75</sup> The idea of an apparent cynicism reaffirms literature as an effective instrument of social critique, a role that literature struggled to maintain in past decades in Italy, as the country underwent radical political and socio-economical transformations. Thanks to the young writers' linguistic inventions, as well as the experimental transitions through which fiction has passed in the past two decades, one has finally reached a more stable phase. Television, comics, and Italian history with its numerous unsolved mysteries, have found a graphic, phonetic and literal way to successfully combine and enrich classical literary styles. The idea of a pulp fiction book has strayed from the notion of the absurd and/or the bizarre: it too is now *normal*; in fact, it has become the New Italian Epic.

### **Wu Ming and the NIE**

The Wu Ming Foundation, generally known as Wu Ming, is a pseudonym for a group of Italian cultural activists who started working together in Bologna in January 2000. When the group was originally founded in 1994, it adopted the pseudonym Luther Blissett (for reasons that are still unknown, it was named after a British soccer player of the 1980s of Afro-Caribbean origins). While the group was experimenting with new forms of authorship, and “sharing” the identity of Blissett, their works appeared not only in Bologna but throughout Europe, Canada and the United States. After publishing the historic novel *Q* (which had great success and was soon translated into more than thirteen languages) in 1999, five members of the group decided to commit a symbolic *seppuku*

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<sup>75</sup> [there is an apparent cynicism that instead, in my opinion, is a sort of anti-populist dress, which is also one of the ways to criticize effectively the social characteristics of the psyche of national identity, of a collective identity, of an individual one...(my translation)]

(samurai ritual suicide) and carry on their projects with the name of Wu Ming. The five group members, whose real names are known, decided to present themselves to the public as Wu Ming 1 (Roberto Bui), Wu Ming 2 (Giovanni Cattabriga), Wu Ming 3 (Luca Di Meo), Wu Ming 4 (Federico Guglielmi), and Wu Ming 5 (Riccardo Pedrini). The word “wu ming” comes from Chinese and it means both “anonymous” and “five people”. At the same time, “wu ming” is also a common byline among Chinese dissidents who demand democracy and freedom of speech. Wu Ming has been particularly active on the Italian cultural scene in the last decade and the group has published several successful books both independently and as a collective (*54* in 2002, *Manituana*, in 2007, *Altai* in 2009 are just a few of their best selling novels).



Fig.1

Fig. 1: The official portrait of Wu Ming since 2008 when Wu Ming 3 left the group.



Fig.2

Fig. 2: the “faceless” revolution of the quintet. It was the official picture on the Wu Ming Foundation official website from 2001 to the spring of 2008.

During a seminar on contemporary Italian literature held at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, in 2008, Wu Ming 1 suggested the definition of New Italian Epic (or NIE) to describe the body of literary works that had appeared in Italy since the mid 1990s, after the end of the First Republic. It is yet another interesting label which recognizes the drastic shift in Italian narrative, but NIE is an epithet which immediately started being used in conferences, conventions, newspapers because it encapsulated the epic endeavor of the young authors who challenged mainstream literature and ultimately changed for good the direction in which it was headed. If in the classical epic the success or failure of the hero determines the fates of the people or nation, then the cannibals/neonoirists/pulp writers continue to fight against and, as Calvino would put it, to challenge the labyrinth. One should defeat the literature of “*surrender to the labyrinth*” (“*resa al labirinto,*” 96)<sup>76</sup>: what is important is the perseverance of experimentations of the heroes/writers; as Giuseppe Caliceti put it in *Battito Animale* (2001), the battle cry is “Comunicare! Comunicare! Comunicare!”.

The New Italian Epic has been able to communicate with its audiences, who continue to confirm the great success of their works, and it has also been able to overturn some of the critiques that had originally been made by literary critics, who now appear – at least in some cases – less adverse to the new popular genre (e.g. Asor Rosa).

When Wu Ming 1 published an essay online on the New Italian Epic (the group is a supporter of the “copyleft” ideology)<sup>77</sup>, he used the term “memorandum” as opposed to

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<sup>76</sup> Calvino, Italo. “La Sfida al Labirinto” in *Una Pietra Sopra: Discorsi di Letteratura e Società*. Torino: Einaudi, 1980, 82-97. Italics in original text.

<sup>77</sup> The term “copyleft” is a play on the word “copyright” to describe a form of licensing that grants the right to distribute and make copies (and modified copies) of a work as long as they maintain the same “copyleft” conditions of the original work. In essence, it is a form of making a given work free and available while facilitating its distribution. Canadian activist and filmmaker Brett Gaylor explores issues of copyright and copyleft in the age of information technology in his documentary *R.I.P.: A Remix Manifesto* (2008). The

the misleading term “manifesto”. The complete title of the first draft of the essay (later revised and extended on their website and marked “2.0” and finally published by Einaudi in 2009) is *New Italian Epic. Memorandum 1993-2008: narrative, oblique gaze, return to the future*. The word “memorandum” as De Mauro’s title reminds us means “documento, foglio, fascicolo in cui sono esposti per sommi capi i termini di una questione”<sup>78</sup>. Wu Ming 1 then suggested a possible comparative reading of the works published in Italy since the end of the First Republic. He points out common patterns and reflects on the similarities that these works (at times involuntarily) contain. Pulp fiction writer Carlo Lucarelli, whose works were included by Wu Ming 1 in “his” essay, embraces the challenge that Wu Ming 1 launched and, as most writers that Wu Ming 1 mentioned, positively accepts the idea of a New Italian Epic. Lucarelli writes in *La Repubblica* (May 6, 2008):

raccolgo con entusiasmo ed enorme interesse le riflessioni dei Wu Ming sulla Nuova Epica Italiana, riconoscendomi praticamente in molte delle loro considerazioni. Praticamente, dico, nel senso di una prassi letteraria, di una ricerca fatta di libri e di romanzi che da parte mia e da quella di altri colleghi cerca di raccogliere il fascino della frontiera, della sfida con un nuovo far west. Una nuova frontiera che non è soltanto fisica (nuove ambientazioni, nuovi mondi da creare ed esplorare), e non è soltanto narrativa (nuove trame, nuove avventure, diverse tecniche di montaggio, temi ed emozioni estreme) ma è anche stilistica (parole nuove, nuove costruzioni, nuove costruzioni in quelli che i Wu Ming chiamano i romanzi mutanti). Una narrativa di ampio respiro per raccontare e

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documentary itself does not have a final edited version, as it is available for re-editing by its viewers on the website [www.opensourcecinema.org](http://www.opensourcecinema.org).

<sup>78</sup> “document, paper, file in which the terms of a given question are generally explained ” (my translation)

interpretare il mondo, con un linguaggio nuovo e concreto, come a suo tempo fecero gli scrittori del Grande Romanzo Americano per raccontare le contraddizioni e le trasformazioni del loro paese. Anche attraverso la storia, che per noi italiani non essendo mai passata è sempre attuale e presente....E' una sfida che personalmente ho raccolto con passione. Una corsa nella prateria di un nuovo far west che si apre con possibilità entusiasmanti ed infinite.<sup>79</sup>

Lucarelli's allegory of the exploration of new forms of narrative as a discovery of new frontiers cannot set aside history, which becomes a key element for the "exhilarating and infinite" possibilities that open up for Italian narrative. Italian history with its numerous unsolved mysteries has, as Lucarelli notes, never really ended. The past is entrenched with the present, and as such it must be at the core of the narration. Given the conquered centrality of history and the (finally) renovated linguistic and stylistic frontier, the possible narrative outcomes are endless, and whoever decides to explore the allegoric "far west" will contribute in an equally relevant manner to the recovery and enrichment of Italian cultural and literary production. As Lucarelli concludes in the aforementioned article in *La Repubblica*, "Noi, Scrittori della Nuova Epica": "E chiunque, dal più intimo

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<sup>79</sup> [I accept with enthusiasm and with great interest the reflections of the Wu Ming on the New Italian Epic, recognizing myself practically in many of their considerations. I say practically, because of a literary praxis, of a research project consisting of books and novels that, from my point of view, and from that of other colleagues, aims at capturing the attraction of the frontier, the challenge of a new far west. A new frontier that is not only physical (new settings, new ways to create and explore), and that is not only narrative (new plots, new adventures, different editing techniques, themes and extreme emotions), but that is also stylistic (new words, new constructions, new constructions in what the Wu Ming call the mutating novels). A wide-ranging narrative to recount and interpret the world, with a new and concrete language, as in the past the Great American Novel did to recount the contradictions and the transformations of their country. It is also through history, that for us Italians has never really been past but is always tangible and present...it is a challenge that I personally accept with passion. It is like running in the prairie of the new far west which opens up infinite and fantastic possibilities. (my translation)]

minimalista al giallista più classico, se scrive con sincerità, è altrettanto utile e importante.”<sup>80</sup>

Once again it was Asor Rosa who praised Wu Ming 1 and “his” observations on the literary phenomenon that blossomed in the country since the mid 1990s. In *La Repubblica* (December 15, 2009), Asor Rosa observed:

Di tutto si può disputare e dubitare meno che dei dati certi. E i dati certi sono che in Italia c'è stata negli ultimi anni un' impetuosa fioritura di giovani autori di narrativa. In quali direzioni, con quali tratti comuni (ammesso che ce ne siano)? Com'è noto, fino a qualche decennio fa ragionamenti critici di tendenza e ricerca creativa crescevano il più delle volte di conserva e si aiutavano a vicenda. È un dato certo oggi anche la scomparsa pressoché totale del primo elemento dell'endiadi (la critica) [...] Volgendosi intorno, l' unico tentativo recente di sistemazione teorico-letteraria di tale materia degno di questo nome è *New Italian Epic*. Letteratura, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro di (dei?) Wu Ming (Einaudi, Stile libero, 2009), altamente meritorio per il solo fatto, - raro, ripeto, - di entrare nel merito.<sup>81</sup>

The New Italian Epic finally offers both the “oblique gaze” of society (which Calvino had offered in *Palomar*, 1983) and the organic grasp on reality that Pasolini had

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<sup>80</sup> [and anyone, from the most intimate minimalist to the most classical of the detective fiction writers, if s/he writes sincerely, is just as useful and important (my translation)]

<sup>81</sup> [We may question and doubt everything except what is clearly established. And it is established that in recent years Italy has seen an impetuous blossoming of young novelists. What are their directions? What are their common features (provided that they exist)? It is well known that, until a few decades ago, critical reflection and creative research used to grow together and help one another, but nowadays the former (ie literary criticism) has almost vanished [...] When we look around, the only recent attempt at a theoretical-literary systematization of the recent output was *New Italian Epic: Literature, Oblique Gaze and the Return to the Future* by Wu Ming (Einaudi, 2009), which deserves praise, if only for the fact that it goes deeply into the matter. (My translation)]

attempted with *Petrolio* (1992). Significantly, Pasolini's last novel was a depiction of the country's darkest years in a narrative with both language and content that were also an exploration of new frontiers. Fiction and non fiction, reality and fantasy, are fused in the creation of a new epic genre, which aims not necessarily to present simple answers but rather to formulate questions. In the memorandum, Wu Ming 1 clearly states: "E' bello – ed epico- formulare le domande. E' questa la vera guerra, quella che, finche' saremo sul pianeta, non avra' un 'dopo'" (29)<sup>82</sup>

The New Italian Epic includes a body of works that is first and foremost unpredictable, unstable, and oscillating, because it has not yet reached a point of conclusion and it keeps on developing under our very eyes. In short, it is an attempt to construct an anterior future ("stiamo costruendo il futuro anteriore", Wu Ming 1 concludes) as a way of reading the present, a constant flow with no beginning or end. If Gabriel García Márquez had included past, present and future in the famous incipit of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967),<sup>83</sup> Wu Ming 1 suggests that contemporary narrative can only follow that same pattern. The essay itself on the New Italian Epic is a premise, a flow, and a postil ("premesse, flusso, postilla"). History too then must be re-examined and illustrated as it intermingles with the present: it is only through a revision of this sort that art and literature can help us imagine a way out of the intricate labyrinth Calvino so insistently depicted:

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<sup>82</sup> A complete version of the "memorandum" is available for download on the Wu Ming's official website. [http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/WMI\\_saggio\\_sul\\_new\\_italian\\_epic.pdf](http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/WMI_saggio_sul_new_italian_epic.pdf) Accessed on November 10, 2011.

[It is nice –and epic- to formulate questions. This is the real war, that which, as long as we are on the planet, will never have an 'after'. (my translation)]

<sup>83</sup> "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice."

Per troppo tempo l'arte e la letteratura hanno vissuto nella fantasmagoria, condividendo le pericolose illusioni dello specismo, dell'antropocentrismo, del primato occidentale, della rinuncia al futuro che riempie la terra di scorie. Oggi arte e letteratura non possono limitarsi a suonare allarmi taradivi: devono aiutarci a immaginare vie d'uscita. Devono curare il nostro sguardo, rafforzare la nostra capacità di visualizzare. Non c'è avventura più impegnativa: lottare per estinguerci con dignità e il più tardi possibile. (59-60)<sup>84</sup>

After four years since the introduction of the abbreviation NIE, not only have the writers embraced the challenge that Wu Ming 1 launched, but so has the audience and just as was the case for the “cannibals” in 1996, the youngest generations are the ones who most recognize the NIE's writers as the new canon. The online magazine “Camilla”, with whom many NIE and pulp writers collaborate, published a few interesting pictures of the student protests in Rome in 2011. Demonstrating against the cuts to education and against a scholastic system that cannot keep the pace with the job market, students hold symbolic signs, which quote canonic texts, from Dante to Orwell, from Goethe to Hugo. Among those signs, many books of the NIE's writers were included and the movement decided to define the event as the Nobel prizes of the streets. In other words, the students had recognized those texts as part of a larger educational framework, possibly confirming that the NIE texts had indeed affected the national collective imagination.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> [For too long art and literature have lived in a phantasmagoria, sharing the dangerous illusions of categorization, anthropocentrism, the western primate, the renunciation of the future that is filling the earth with scum. Today, art and literature cannot limit themselves to ring late alerts: they have to help us to imagine ways out. They have to cure our gaze, reinforce our capacity to visualize. There is no other adventure that is more compelling than this one: to fight in order to extinguish ourselves with dignity and as late as possible (My translation)]. From: Ming, Wu. *New Italian Epic: Letteratura, Sguardo Obliquo, Ritorno al Futuro*. Torino: Einaudi, 2009.

<sup>85</sup> <http://www.carmillaonline.com/archives/2011/01/003747.html> Accessed on November 4, 2011. (“New Epic Bloc: tre anno dopo il primo “memorandum” sul NIE. Primi aggiornamenti 2011”)



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Among the signs (Fig. 1, 2) one can recognize novels by Blissett and Silvia Ballestra (Fig. 1).

## **Historical Memory, Collectivity, and the Power of the Word: A Hypothesis on the New Italian Epic**

After the publication by Wu Ming 1 of the “memorandum” and thanks to the introduction of the acronym NIE, the Italian literary and cultural scene entered a new epoch. By defining a “nebula” and grouping under a vast umbrella the numerous works published in Italy during the last two decades, the collective author Wu Ming reinvent a coherent body of works that, until then, had been seen as disjointed, chaotic and, to some extent, even illogic. Ultimately, NIE is a temporal space in which numerous writers feel compelled to act: one must engage the Italian public for a better social and political understanding of the present. In order to accomplish such a task, one must interrogate the historical national past; it is only in this way, that one can achieve a sense of collectivity and thus, of national identity, a task that Italians have never been able to realize. The discourse of the New Italian Epic, in this sense, is not limited to contemporary literature but it concerns, first and foremost, contemporary Italian history and society. Interestingly enough, Wu Ming 1’s “memorandum” in 2008 subverts the general conception of Italy as a country in socio-cultural regress (an idea that was brought to the extreme in the age of *Berlusconismo*); on the contrary, the theoretical analysis of Wu Ming 1 sheds light on a period that has been and still is vibrant under the literary point of view. Seen from this angle, the subject(s) of NIE represent a compelling case study with regards to both the innovative literary style that its works employ, and in relation to the renewed political *impegno* of Italian writers.

The adjective “epic” was erroneously interpreted by the critics, who intended the term in its literal connotation (as opposed to the term “novel”). The term “epic”, as Wu Ming 1 reveals during an interview with Maurizio Vito in 2011,<sup>86</sup> was used as a reference to the musical (sub)genre of “*em*” (i.e. epic metal). As Wu Ming 1 puts it: “E’ roba sovente pacchiana, a tratti anche destrorsa, ma non si può negare che sia di grande effetto”<sup>87</sup> An important feature of the “epic metal” is the strong connection with the fans (“forte legame comunitario coi fan”), an element that the works of the NIE share with the musical genre. In fact, during student protests in Italy in the past years, students formed the so-called “book-block” against the “attacks” of the police. The concept of a “book-block” harks back to the ancient Roman army and their defense technique known as *testudo*.<sup>88</sup> The metaphoric shields that Italian students use have become the books themselves; significantly, they opt for works included by Wu Ming 1 in the NIE. Thus, contemporary Italian texts are not only metaphorical but also physical arms; the books, literally, acts as a barricade and an element of political opposition. The books of the NIE are chosen by the younger generations because they establish a tight connection with the readers, possibly also thanks to the stylistic and linguistic regeneration of the Italian literary language. One can talk about a renewed trust in the written word (“rinnovata *fiducia nella parola*,” NIE 24) that can help us recuperate our communitarian dimension. Wu Ming 1’s “memorandum” and his identification of a body of literary texts that can/are slowly beginning to have historical, social, cultural *and* political consequences in Italy

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<sup>86</sup> The interview is available for download at [http://works.bepress.com/maurizio\\_vito/](http://works.bepress.com/maurizio_vito/) (Accessed on February 12, 12).

<sup>87</sup> “It is often cheesy stuff, at times even regular, but one cannot deny that it is of great effect.” (My translation)

<sup>88</sup> A siege device used by Roman troops for protection against attack from above, consisting of overlapping shields held by the soldiers over their heads.

because of their impact and deep connection with readers, represent a point of no return from the (more passive) postmodernist tradition. The English Marxist theorist Terry Eagleton in *After Theory* (2003) ironically argued that “Postmodernism is too young to remember a time when there was [so it was rumored] truth, identity and reality and so feels no dizzying abyss beneath its feet” (58). Wu Ming 1 interprets Eagleton’s assumption as a clear “presa di posizione e assunzione di responsabilità” (“standpoint and assumption of responsibility,” *NIE* 23): postmodernism is concluded and it is evident that one can (and is) developing new narrative form, which subverts the conception of a “debilitated” literature (with respects to the fast pace, image and media based contemporary world).

The UNO (Unidentified Narrative Objects, as the NIE defines them), that Italian literature has produced since the mid-1990s, call to mind *Petrolio* (1992), Pier Paolo Pasolini’s attempt in the mid-1970s to produce an innovative novel, both under the linguistic and stylistic point of view, and with respects the content (history, poetry and fiction intermingles in the narration). The New Italian Epic, as we shall see in the following chapter is a continuation of Pasolini’s work, left unfinished after the poet’s murder. During late October of 1975, Pasolini asked a young photographer, Dino Pedriali, to take a series of pictures, possibly to be used as illustration for *Petrolio* itself.<sup>89</sup> The catalog that came out for the first time on March, 17 2011 (*Pier Paolo Pasolini. Fotografie di Dino Pedriali*. Verona: Johan & Levi Editore), include a few shots of Pasolini taken inside the castle of Chia that are particularly significant. The shots were

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<sup>89</sup> [http://www.corriere.it/cultura/11\\_marzo\\_14/vigano-fotografami-qui-sara-scandalo\\_a6b4c554-4e2d-11e0-992a-dbfddd704513.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/cultura/11_marzo_14/vigano-fotografami-qui-sara-scandalo_a6b4c554-4e2d-11e0-992a-dbfddd704513.shtml) Accessed on February 15, 2012; [http://www.corriere.it/gallery/cultura/03-2011/Pasolini/1/ultimo-scatto-pasolini\\_a900868c-50ac-11e0-9bca-0ee66c45c808.shtml#1](http://www.corriere.it/gallery/cultura/03-2011/Pasolini/1/ultimo-scatto-pasolini_a900868c-50ac-11e0-9bca-0ee66c45c808.shtml#1) Accessed on February 15, 2012.

taken during the night between October 28 and October 29 1975; Pasolini never saw them. The poet appears naked sitting on his bed. The camera “spies” him from outside, as per Pasolini’s request. Thus, the writer seems to offer not only his work but also his physical body, perhaps to be “devoured in spicy sauce” (as the crow reminds us at the end of *Uccellacci e Uccellini*, 1966).<sup>90</sup> The New Italian Epic, that includes the experiment of the “cannibal” writers, makes it its central point to absorb, to devour history, mass media, and the great literary masters. Dino Pedriali’s picture complete Pasolini’s testament to the future generations: the New Italian Epic, as Wu Ming 1 reminds us, draws and continue what Pasolini had already initiated with his prototypical UNO, *Petrolino*.



Dino Pedriali’s shot of Pasolini at the castle of Chia on October 29, 1975.

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<sup>90</sup> “I maestri si mangiano in salsa piccante” (“masters should be eaten in spicy sauce”, my translation)

## Chapter IV

### Pier Paolo Pasolini's Influence on Contemporary Italian Culture

Uno studio specifico su Pier Paolo Pasolini, poi, potrebbe scoprire le influenze del noir sui suoi romanzi dedicate ai giovani delinquenti della periferia romana: del resto, Pasolini ha avuto la vita più "noir" di tutti gli scrittori italiani del dopoguerra, tra scandali e processi (anche per rapina) fino alla tragica morte.

(Fabio Giovannini, *Storia del Noir*, 166-67)<sup>91</sup>

Sometimes culture can produce feelings so strong that they are like the feelings produced by nature.

(Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack*, 127)<sup>92</sup>

### Literature vs. History: *Petrolio* as UNO (Unidentified Narrative Object)

On March 2, 2010, Italian Senator Marcello Dell'Utri, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's senior advisor and a well-known bibliophile, announced that he had come into possession of a note (appunto) from Pier Paolo Pasolini's last novel, *Petrolio* (Oil). The manuscript was left unfinished after the poet's murder in 1975 and was finally published by Einaudi in 1992 as a series of notes which very generally outline the plot of the novel. "I have started on a book that will occupy me for years, perhaps for the rest of my life. I don't want to talk about it....; it's enough to know that it's a kind of 'summa' of all my

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<sup>91</sup> Then, a detailed study on Pier Paolo Pasolini, could single out the influences of the noir genre on his novels dedicated to the young gangs of the roman periphery: after all, Pasolini had the most "noir" life of all the Italian writers of the post-war period, between scandals and trials (even for robbery) until his tragic death. (my translation)

<sup>92</sup> Pasolini, Pier Paolo; Stack, Oswald. *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1969.

experiences, all my memories,” Pasolini said in early 1975. The manuscript was found in a folder on the poet’s desk and it consists of 521 pages, about one fourth of the 2000 that were originally intended. It is a work that is not a novel in the traditional historical and linear sense, as Pasolini insisted, but rather a “poem”, a form that consists of “something written”. In a letter to Alberto Moravia that was found together with the manuscript, Pasolini claims that *Petrolio* represents “a testament, a testimony of the little knowledge that one has accumulated and is completely different from what one expected” (xiii). The note that was secretly handed over to Senator Dell’Utri by an unknown source is supposed to unravel secret and controversial information on the Italian multinational oil and gas company Eni, Italy’s largest industrial corporation, partially owned by the Government. Many scholars and Pasolini’s close friends had always been convinced about the existence of this excerpt because of the numerous references to it throughout the text. Yet, no proof was ever found and the infamous chapter “Flashes of Light on Eni” remains a blank page.

Both the Italian press and the media showed an exaggerated interest in the news: suddenly, it seemed possible to many that perhaps behind Pasolini’s murder there may have been a more rational motive and that perhaps Pasolini had not been killed because of the inappropriate sexual advances he had made to a young Roman boy - a theory that was never particularly persuasive, but that nonetheless remains the official judicial version. It seemed possible and yet not obvious, since the note which could have (and most likely would have) revealed the truth behind the murder has already disappeared without anyone having read it, other than Senator Dell’Utri, who defined it “a disquieting

text”.<sup>93</sup> If truth be told, Pasolini’s case had already been re-opened in May 2005, after an interview released by Pino Pelosi on the national television RAI 3. 30 years later, Pelosi declared his innocence and accused three “unknown” men of committing the crime. Be that as it may, Pasolini’s figure is currently witnessing a long overdue exculpation and is finally regaining its critical dissenting power, which was at the very core of his poetics of/for change. Contestation defines precisely the role that Pasolini assumed within the Italian and western intelligentsia at large. In order to be significant, such contestation had to be necessarily major, total and/hence “absurd” (as the Pasolini himself states in his last interview with Furio Colombo, “We are all in danger”, a few hours before his death). From the mid-1990s, one is moving away from the dominant myth of Pasolini toward an investigative analysis of his mysterious death. As Robert Gordon also notices, in *Caro Diario* (1994), Nanni Moretti glances through the newspapers and magazines of the days following Pasolini’s murder and then takes his scooter and his camera towards Ostia to the exact site of the poet’s death. The numerous close-ups on the ruined monument by Mario Rosati which simply quote “from Rome to Pier Paolo Pasolini” stand as a point of departure for the recuperation of the significance of Pasolini as a key contemporary cultural figure within the Italian panorama. In fact, in the movie, Moretti is acting as himself, a well-know director in a deep intellectual crisis. He refuses to follow the new national and global cinematic tendencies and instead tracks down the only valid father figure precisely in Pasolini. Likewise, director Aurelio Grimaldi has combined real and fictive elements in *Nerolio* (1996), a film that exploits Pasolini’s use of sexuality as a means of critique of the bourgeois hypocritical (a)morality. Grimaldi reenacts the

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<sup>93</sup> <http://nelloschisano.wordpress.com/2010/03/03/dell'utri-pasolini-e-il-giallo-di-“petrolio”/> Accessed on August 2, 2012.

contentious note 55 from *Petrolino*, blending the fictive narration with the plausible speculation that we may be dealing with one of Pasolini's life experiences (Grimaldi founds the ambiguity on Pasolini's description of *Petrolino* as “*summa* of all [his] experiences and memories”).

In 1995, Marco Tullio Giordana also attempted to recuperate the poet's figure both with a detailed and meticulous book on the crime and with a documentary which mingles fiction and reality. “Pasolini: un delitto Italiano” (Pasolini: an Italian Crime) had such a strong impact on the Italian public opinion that, as Robert Gordon notices, “the phrase ‘un delitto italiano’ has since then entered the vocabulary to evoke the illicit public mechanism at work beneath the surface of Italy's modern history.” (cfr. *Assassination and Murder in Modern Italy*, Ed. by Stephen Gundle and Lucia Rinaldi. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, 158).

Literary critic and scholar Carla Benedetti, who has written extensively on Pasolini, noted in an article for the weekly *L'Espresso* on March 29, 2010 how the missing “appunto” that was never exhibited at the Fiera del Libro Antico in Milan (as Dell'Utri had initially announced) has some similarities with the private letters of the American author J.D. Salinger (1919-2010). In Salinger's case, however, despite the attention of the media, the letters were displayed at the Morgan Library in New York as promised; “but in Italy things take different directions”,<sup>94</sup> Benedetti significantly concludes. In recent years, both the figure of Pier Paolo Pasolini and *Petrolino* (posthumously and, because of its incompleteness, controversially published in 1992), have witnessed an increased interest and have become points of reference for a number of

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<sup>94</sup> “ma in Italia le cose vanno diversamente”

[http://www.pasolini.net/vita\\_gialloPasolini\\_CarlaBenedetti.htm](http://www.pasolini.net/vita_gialloPasolini_CarlaBenedetti.htm) Accessed on November 12, 2011.

contemporary authors. Given the unconventional nature of *Petrolio* in form and content (a novel that, as quoted in the text itself, “has no beginning” or a narrator to tell a story, but rather an author developing the project of a novel yet to be written), a number of writers of the New Italian Epic consider it as a typical example of an “unidentified narrative object” (UNO). In other words, Pasolini’s *Petrolio* is incorporated in the experimental body of literary works that are “*fiction and non-fiction, prosa e poesia, diario e inchiesta, letteratura e scienza, mitologia e pochade*”<sup>95</sup>, a category of (experimental) narration which the pulp/neonoir genre also exploits and that eschews every label and/or refuses to be pigeonholed (NIE 42).

Tiziano Scarpa has also suggested that *Petrolio* can be considered an antecedent of the UNO for all intents and purposes.<sup>96</sup> Scarpa shifts the attention on *Petrolio* in terms of the linguistic and stylistic narrative innovation that the unfinished novel represents. In this sense, Pasolini’s denunciation against the devastating consequences of neo-capitalism is no longer at the core of contemporary literary investigation. In fact, as journalist Davide Oliviero aptly points out in *La Repubblica* (January 30, 2009), the current young generation of writers grew up within that very neo-capitalist culture that Pasolini believed would sweep away every hope of a positive regeneration. In the documentary “Pasolini e...La Forma della Città” (“Pasolini and...The profile of the city”), which aired on national television on February 7, 1974, Pasolini had made this point clear: the reality that he aimed to capture was rapidly moving towards the neo-

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<sup>95</sup> Wu Ming. *New Italian Epic: Letteratura, Sguardo Obliquo, Ritorno al Futuro*. Torino: Einaudi, 2009, 42.

[*fiction and non-fiction, prose and poetry, diary and inquire, literature and science, mythology and pochade* (my translation)]

<sup>96</sup> In “Wu Ming/Tiziano Scarpa: a face off” p. 19

[http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/outtakes/Wu\\_Ming\\_Tiziano\\_Scarpa\\_Face\\_Off.pdf](http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/outtakes/Wu_Ming_Tiziano_Scarpa_Face_Off.pdf) Accessed on November 10, 2011.

capitalist homologation (a key word in *Scritti Corsari*), and it was monstrously transforming into a collective identification. The new consumerist Power<sup>97</sup>, Pasolini continued, was generating a technique of domination that would ultimately destroy the pure and sacred culture of the lower social classes. As Pasolini nervously walked on the dunes of Sabaudia (an ideal fascist town, in terms of architecture), he sadly concluded that at that point “non c’ [era] più niente da fare” (“nothing more could be done”).<sup>98</sup>

Pasolini’s apparent pessimism and skepticism towards the future is overturned by Oliviero’s assumption that the New Italian Epic is indeed a direct descendent and a continuation of Pasolini’s intellectual thought. In the aforementioned article in *La Repubblica*, Oliviero writes:

[Il New Italian Epic] è figlio diretto dell’*Io so* e di *Petrolio* di Pier Paolo Pasolini che forse mai avrebbe sperato che una generazione cresciuta in mezzo alla pop-culture- che lui vedeva come una mareggiata che avrebbe lasciato solo macerie- avrebbe invece adottato.<sup>99</sup>

The new pulp writers, authors of a “nebulosa” (“nebula”, Wu Ming’s definition) of “narrative unidentified objects“, are by no means clones of Pasolini (a term that La Porta had employed for contemporary writers in relation to the Calvino model). They share with Pasolini the constant search for truth, the social commitment and pedagogical task of the writer, the continuous stylistic and linguistic experimentation. At the same time, as Scarpa makes clear,

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<sup>97</sup> “I write Power with the capital ‘P’ because I do not know what this new Power is. I simply acknowledge its existence” (*Scritti Corsari*, 58).

<sup>98</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6ki-p1eW2o> Accessed on November 10, 2011.

<sup>99</sup> “[The New Italian Epic] is the direct son of *I Know* and of *Petrolio* by Pier Paolo Pasolini, who might never have hoped that a generation grown up within pop-culture – which he saw as a sea storm that would leave behind only rubble- would in fact embrace.” (my translation)

...constatare che oggi molti autori si muovono in quella direzione non significa sostenere che si cerchi di riscrivere o di portare a termine *Petrolio*, né che tra questi autori vi sia un nuovo Pasolini (chisseneffrega, poi? Non mi viene in mente concetto tanto inutile quanto ‘nuovo Pasolini’). (Wu Ming/Scarpa: A Face Off 20)<sup>100</sup>

Struggling to affirm the originality of their works, contemporary Italian writers do not deny a legacy with the two opposite (and yet complementary) models of postmodern narrative (i.e. Calvino and Pasolini)<sup>101</sup>. If anything, they maintain that they constantly improve and regenerate those models, ultimately achieving a unique narrative mode, which is more adequate for our days and time. Accordingly, during an interview for the blog “Litteratitudine” by Massimo Maugeri, Wu Ming acknowledged that the symbolic book of the New Italian Epic constitutes the missing pages of *Petrolio* (qtd. in Wu Ming/Scarpa: A Face Off 20). In this way, Wu Ming establishes both an inescapable connection with Pasolini and particularly with *Petrolio* (a work that was directed toward future generations), and the innovative character of the epic contemporary narrative. The latter does not merely draw upon Pasolini’s example, but rather it continues (to complete) it. The adjective “epic” that Wu Ming introduced in the well known ‘memorandum’ is thus explained precisely in relation to Pasolini’s opus:

Un’opera davvero epica non si conchiude, non si esaurisce mai, ci trovi uno scarto ogni volta che rinnovi il contatto, e ogni volta ti perturba, è un gioco tra come ti

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<sup>100</sup> ...to claim that today many authors are moving in that direction does not mean maintaining that we are trying to rewrite or finish *Petrolio*, nor [does it mean that] among these authors there is a new Pasolini (who cares? I cannot think about a more futile concept than ‘new Pasolini’). (My translation)

<sup>101</sup> cfr. Benedetti, Carla. *Pasolini contro Calvino*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998.

ricordavi l'opera e come quest'ultima si muove per sorprenderti. (The New Italian Epic 3.0 73)<sup>102</sup>

Given that *Petrolino* is a fragmented reconstruction of the (hi)story of Italy since the years of the resistance, it constitutes further proof of the incessant necessity to continue to explore the national (hi)story. Past, present and future converge in this “epic” effort, the goal of which is one that Italians have always struggled to achieve: a national identity. Literature provides a key instrument in this effort, because of its ability to communicate with readers in a way that goes beyond any geographical and historical boundaries. It is in the light of this consideration that Wu Ming can indisputably allege the contemporariness of Pasolini's *Petrolino*, a work that must continue to be written, improved, revised, (re)considered by contemporary Italian literature and culture:

Oggi sono passati trentatré anni dalla morte di Pasolini e diciassette dall'uscita di *Petrolino*. Più passa il tempo e più questo libro ci parla. Più ci addentriamo in questa seconda repubblica (che potrebbe sfociare in una terza ancora peggiore), e più il libro si fa attuale.

Chiunque tentasse di scriverne le parti mancanti per produrre un “oggetto narrativo” complementare, anche fallendo miseramente nel tentativo andrebbe a mettere le mani su una materia ancora viva e pulsante. Il “senno di poi” potrebbe interagire con quell'opera in modi davvero interessanti. (Wu Ming/Scarpa: A Face Off 20)<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> A real epic work does not have a conclusion, it never exhausts itself, you can find a disparity every time you renew contact with it, and every time it perturbs you, it is a game between how you remembered the work and how the latter shifts in order to surprise you. (My translation)

<sup>103</sup> Today thirty-three years have passed since Pasolini's death and seventeen since the release of *Petrolino*. The more time passes, the more this book talks to us. The further we go into this second republic (that could lead to an even worse third one), the more the book becomes current.

Wu Ming makes it clear that the “narrative objects” (paradoxically, an accurate definition of the works published since the mid-1990s) currently produced, are “complementary” to Pasolini’s text, even if some of them have “failed miserably”. What Wu Ming suggests is an open narrative experimentation in form and content. It is only by pushing creativity to the extremes (and beyond) that one can develop an ideal narrative style, while fully embracing the role of the author: the search for (a historical) truth. Because the subjects that Pasolini treated in *Petrolio* are still “alive and pulsing”, one must continue to question them, even if there seems to be no resolution in sight.

Literature has the advantage of imagination because it is able to instill in the mind of the readers few key hints that will allow each one of them to envision a certain event in different ways. The fact that in Italy, as Elisabetta Mondello points out, the explosion of a “nebula” of texts (which she grouped under the umbrella of the “neonoir”) is strictly connected to recent national history indicates that there is a collective tendency of the imagination pointing towards an interrogation of the past. The “neonoir” is the literary genre that best serves such a purpose because of its re-examination of national history and its invitation to distrust, hence rethink the present. The relation between history and literature becomes one that cannot be set aside inasmuch as “I fatti storici contribuiscono a spiegare una discontinuità...nella letteratura italiana” (“historical facts contribute to explaining a certain discontinuity in the Italian literature” Wu Ming/Scarpa 12).

Significantly, as Wu Ming and Scarpa continue their debate on the New Italian Epic and as they focus their attention precisely on the binomial history/literature, they once again take Pasolini’s *Petrolio* as a case in point. Wu Ming writes:

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Whoever should attempt to write the missing parts [of the book] in order to produce a complementary “narrative object”, even if s/he failing miserably in such an attempt, would touch a matter that is still alive and vibrant. “Hindsight” could interact with [Pasolini’s] work in really interesting ways. (My translation)

La letteratura, come il potere, è innervata nel corpo sociale. Non è possibile né auspicabile “scollare” la stesura/pubblicazione di un libro dal contesto in cui essa avviene...Non mi basta sapere che nell’anno X è stato scritto il libro Y: voglio sapere dopo quali complesse sollecitazioni, all’incrocio di quali flussi e per quali motivi quel libro è stato scritto proprio in quel momento. Non mi basta sapere che un libro scritto nel 1972-75 è uscito postumo e incompiuto nel 1992, ha avuto un impatto “sotterraneo” su alcuni scrittori in erba ed è stato compreso nella sua importanza solo nel decennio successivo. Voglio sapere *perché*, uscendo nel 1992, quel libro ha suscitato quelle reazioni; voglio capire se, uscendo cinque o dieci anni prima, ne avrebbe suscitate di diverse e- ancora una volta- perché.

(13)<sup>104</sup>

A book cannot be separated from the context that produced it and from the social and historical reality that receives it. In the case of *Petrolio*, a text characterized more by what it is absent than by what it is present, the reactions that the book caused had radical consequences in Italy when it came out. The year 1992, in fact, coincided with the judicial investigation of “Mani Pulite”(Clean Hands), which led to the end of the First Republic and to a drastic restructuring of the socio-political scene Through the example of Pasolini and more specifically of *Petrolio*, present-day Italian writers foster

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<sup>104</sup> Literature, like power, is part of the social body. It is not possible or desirable to “detach” the drafting/publication of a book from the context in which it takes place...It is not enough for me to know that in the year X the book Y was written: I want to know after which complex solicitations, at the intersection of which streams and for what reasons that book was written precisely in that moment. It is not enough for me to know that a book written in 1972-74 that came out posthumously in 1992 had an “underground” impact on some budding writers and was understood in its full importance only in the following decade. I want to know *why*, coming out in 1992, that book caused those reactions, I want to understand if, coming out five or ten years before, it would have caused different reactions and- once again- why. (My translation)

scritture che non hanno timore di interrogarsi sulle cause...Scritture che, per usare un'espressione di Carlo Lucarelli, si fanno le domande cattive che gli altri tacciono. Dobbiamo prenderne atto (con una certa soddisfazione): queste domande oggi se le pongono in molti. E non solo fra chi fa cultura, ma anche fra chi ne fruisce. (36)<sup>105</sup>

Giancarlo De Cataldo's invitation (Italian judge and neo noir writer) to "become conscious" of the changes that have/are occurring in the Italian cultural and social panorama reiterates the fact that an unavoidable shift has happened in Italy since the 1990s, and to paraphrase the writer, it did not happen by chance, but out of necessity:

Chiamiamolo neo-neorealismo. Chiamiamolo New Italian Epic. Le etichette lasciano il tempo che trovano...Le lucciole sono tornate ma sono ancora pochine. Per il momento convivono con le mille luci che ne ostacolano l'accoppiamento, cercano strategie di sopravvivenza, e intanto riprendono il proprio posto nelle notti di fine primavera. Ci sono, e questo conforta...Così come negli scaffali delle librerie fra lividi pamphlet contro tutto e contro tutti, manualistica della seduzione fai-da-te, agiografie di veline e velinari e barzellette sulla castroneria nazionale, da anni ormai campeggia il nucleo "hard-core" di una letteratura "non identificata" che si danneggia l'anima per afferrare i contorni troppo spesso indecifrabili dell'Italia, il mutamento antropologico del suo presente e le

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<sup>105</sup> De Cataldo, Giancarlo. "Raccontare l'Italia senza avere paura di sporcarsi le mani". *La Domenica di Repubblica*. June 8, 2008.

[writings that are not afraid to inquire into the causes...writings that, to use an expression by Carlo Lucarelli, ask themselves hard questions that others keep silent on. We must take note of this (with a certain satisfaction): today, there are many who ask these questions. And not only those who produce culture, but also those who use/consume culture.] (My translation)

ossessioni del suo eterno e inattaccabile spessore reazionario. La partita è appena cominciata. E l'esito, tutt'altro che scontato. (37)<sup>106</sup>

### Corsair Writings and Rewritings

Questi potenti per metodo, abitudini, impudenza, giocano distrattamente alle potenze occulte, manovrano capitali per imprese balorde, si inseriscono di forza nelle cabine di comando e dettano inclinazioni, rotte, velocità, tempi, finalità, approdi, come corsari sulla filibusta.<sup>107</sup>

(Giorgio Steimetz, *Questo è Cefis: L'Altra Faccia dell'Onorato Presidente*, 1972 p. 64)

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<sup>106</sup> Let us call it neo-neorealism. Let us call it New Italian Epic. Labels are temporary...the fireflies are back but there are still only a few. For now, they live together with the thousands of lights that block their couplings, they are looking for survival strategies, and in the meantime they take back their own place during the late spring nights. They are here, and this consoles us... Likewise on the bookshops' shelves, among ashen pamphlets against everything and everybody, the do-it-yourself seduction manuals, the hagiographies of show girls and show girls' lovers and jokes on national stupidity, for years now there has been the "hard-core" nucleus of an "unidentified" literature that is going crazy in order to grasp the too often indecipherable contours of Italy, the anthropological change of its present and the obsessions of its eternal and unassailable reactionary heft. The game has just began. And the outcome is anything but given. (My translation)

The metaphor of the fireflies is a reference to Pasolini's article "Il Vuoto del Potere in Italia", "The Lack of Power in Italy" that appeared in the *Corriere della Sera* on February 1, 1975; after the disappearance of fireflies, Pasolini discussed the environmental pollution and the radical industrial changes the country was going/had gone through.

<sup>107</sup> These influential individuals by methods, habits, and impudence, play absent-mindedly with the hidden powers, they maneuver capitals for slow-witted companies, they enter the engineer's cab by force and dictate inclinations, directions, speeds, times, finalities, landings, as corsairs [or] buccaneers. (my translation). *Questo è Cefis* functioned as an outline for Pasolini's *Petrolio*. The book contains secret and controversial information on the Eni director Antonio Cefis, about Italian politics on energy and petrol and hidden influential powers at work during the first republic. Published by a rather enigmatic author named Giorgio Steimetz (probably a pseudonym for Corrado Ragozzino) in 1972, *Questo è Cefis* was printed by the Agenzia Milano Informazioni thanks to the financing of Graziano Verzotto, one of Mattei's most trusted men as well as an informer of the journalist of "Ora" Mauro De Mauro, mysteriously killed by the mafia in 1970. De Mauro at the time was collecting information precisely on Mattei's case for the director Francesco Rosi, who wanted to shoot a movie/documentary on his shadowy death in a plane crash. The book was retired from the market and the public libraries shortly after its publications for reasons that remain unknown. A rare copy of *Questo è Cefis* was present at the Mostra del Libro Antico in Milan in 2010 instead of Pasolini's note 22 from *Petrolio* that Senator Dell'Utri had announced would be showed. Gianni D'Elia argues that Pasolini's "Scritti Corsari" ("Corsair Writings"; a collection of articles that appeared in the daily *Corriere della Sera* between 1973 and 1975) is a direct response to the "acts of pirating" that were being committed by "these powerful individuals". Possibly, both the "Scritti Corsari" and *Petrolio* led to Pasolini's killing.

In 2009 in Milan, the President of the Italian Republic Giorgio Napolitano celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Piazza Fontana Bombing, a terrorist attack at the Banca dell'Agricoltura (National Agrarian Bank) that took place in Milan on December 12, 1969. During his speech, Napolitano invited Italians “to continue to look for fragments of truth”. Simone Sarasso’s novel *Confine di Stato* (2007) begins a few moments before the bombing with victims and survivors describing why they were about to enter the Bank of Agriculture. After a brief, fragmented “prologo” (“prologue”), within the opening credits of the novel, Sarasso inserts a visual depiction of Milan and the terrorist, entering the bank with the explosive suitcase as establishing shots. Afterwards, the novel moves back to the “genesis” (“Genesi 1948-1951; 1953-1957”) and harks back to (fictitious) evidence and documents of (real) historical events. Sarasso’s novel (analysed in the last section of this chapter), captures a series of fragmented episodes throughout the history of the First Republic, from the early 1950s to the early 1990s. As the narration moves forward, a common thread starts to link the events, and it becomes clear that, in order to achieve a tentative (and plausible) truth, one should look at *history* in its totality.

The invitation of President Napolitano, the head of State and most respected institution in Italy, to “look for fragments of truth”, sounds unsatisfactory, as poet Gianni D’Elia points out:

non vorrei apparire sgarbato se vorrei aggiungere che più che frammenti di verità,  
dopo quarant’anni noi vorremmo il quadro intero. Noi dal potere politico, da  
quello giudiziario, dalle istituzioni vorremmo l’intero quadro perchè sono passati  
troppi anni. E allora io ho una piccola richiesta non da poeta ma da

cittadino...perchè infondo chiunque fa il suo mestiere ma tutti noi siamo  
*cittadini*...come ha detto recentemente Saramago...nel discorso per il Nobel: “Io  
sono uno scrittore e un cittadino”. Ecco, allora da cittadino io chiederei: togliete il  
segreto di stato.<sup>108</sup>

D’Elia’s modest proposal, in a manner of speaking, was presented during an interview by  
director Roberto Olla and inserted in the documentary for RAI television entitled *Nero  
Petrolio* (*Black Petrol*, 2011). Therein, Olla also attempts to reconstruct Italian history as  
a sort of jigsaw puzzle: several mysterious murders (from Matteotti to Mattei, from De  
Mauro to Pasolini) are drawn together with the purpose of creating a unitary historical  
portrayal. Once again, the search for a historical truth, that the “citizen” is called on to  
verify and question, cannot set aside Pasolini’s case. If one wants to achieve a sense of  
peace (“pacificazione”), D’Elia continues, one must first reach a complete knowledge of  
the truth.

The adjective “complete” is essential in order to comprehend the role of the New  
Italian Epic/ Neonoir/ Pulp genre: as De Cataldo argues, it is not the label that is  
important; what matters is that something has changed in the literary and social  
panorama. A complete knowledge of truth can only be such if one understands that there  
are three different *and* complementary kinds of truths: “verità letteraria e/o giornalistica;  
verità storica and verità giudiziaria” (D’Elia)<sup>109</sup>. It is up to the citizen to nourish the  
historic truth with the hope that the judicial truth will be attained and this can only be

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<sup>108</sup> “I don’t want to seem impolite but I would like to add that rather than fragments of truth, after forty  
years we would like the whole picture. From the political power, from the judiciary and from the  
institutions, we would like the whole picture because too many years have passed. So, I have a small  
request not as a poet but as a citizen...because, after all, we all have our professions but we all are  
*citizens*...as recently Saramago pointed out...in his speech for the Nobel prize: “I am a writer and a  
citizen”. Well, then, as a citizen I would like to ask: abolish the State secret.” (my translation); D’Elia,  
Gianni. *L’Eresia di Pasolini*. Milano: Effigie, 2005; *Il Petrolio delle Stragi*, Milano: Effigie, 2006.

<sup>109</sup> “literary or journalistic truth, historic truth, and judicial truth” (my translation)

done with the cooperation of literary and/or journalistic truth.<sup>110</sup> It is up the citizens to find the perfect alchemy among those elements, because such knowledge of truth, first and foremost, belongs to them (a concept that, in point of fact, was already present in Socrates' philosophy with the invitation to the Athenians to understand the historical truth). It is in the light of D'Elia's observations that the dominant myth of Pasolini, which construed him as the damned and scandalous poet, "author" of his very death, is slowly being dismantled by the current generation of citizens/writers. Despite the massive coverage that the news received back in 1975, the journalistic investigation was relatively toned down. What is more is that one attempted to explain the death using characteristics of the life and works of the victim itself. As a case in point, let us think about the headline in the *Corriere della Sera* on November 3, 1975: "Pasolini killed where he would have shot the film of his own death." Elsewhere Pino Pelosi was compared to one of Pasolini's *ragazzi di vita*, linked to homosexuality, prostitution, violence. Ultimately, Pasolini had not only plotted his own 'scandalous' death, but had also announced it in his final interview with Furio Colombo for *La Stampa*, which took place on November 1, 1975, between four and six pm, just a few hours before he was murdered. When asked if he wanted to give a specific title to the interview, Pasolini answered: "Here is the seed,

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<sup>110</sup> "Esiste una verità storica che noi stiamo cercando per la storia dell'Italia...questo e' legittimo, perchè ci sono un sacco di ombre, un sacco di depistaggi. Questa verità storica, che la dovrebbero cercare gli storici, però è anche dei cittadini, o no? Io credo di sì...Da una parte la verità storica. Poi c'è la verità giudiziaria che noi speriamo arrivi. Ora, come può essere nutrita questa verità storica verso una verità giudiziaria? Dalla verità letteraria, che è quella che pratichiamo noi scrittori, anche giornalisti, che non vuol dire letteraria finta, falsa, fasulla, ma vuol dire aderente al vero" (D'Elia)

[There is a historical truth that we are still looking for in the history of Italy...this is legitimate, because there are many shadows, much sidetracking. But this historical truth, which the historians should be searching for, also belongs to the citizens, doesn't it? I think so...On one side lies the historical truth. Then there is the judicial truth, which we hope will come. Now, how can this historical truth be nourished towards the achievement of a judicial truth? Thanks to the literary truth, which is the one that we, as writers, practice, as well as the journalists; literary does not mean fake, false, forged, but it means adhering to the truth.] (my translation)

the sense of everything. You don't even know who, right at this moment, might be thinking of killing you. Use this as a title, if you like: 'Because, we are all in danger.'

The new wave of neonoir writing in Italy has become *the* new investigative historiographical instrument, and to this end, it often uses the figure of Pasolini to regenerate a literary and socio-political commitment. As D'Elia argues during the interview in *Nero Petrolino*, one must energize a strong sense of civic passion ("dobbiamo caricare la passione civile"). It is legitimate to affirm, that starting with the publication of *Petrolino*, Italian literature has embraced the challenge that Pasolini launched with his corsair *oeuvre*. "Cannibals" and "post-cannibals" have successfully reinvented themselves not only as fiction writers (too limiting a category in the postmodern era), but also as investigative journalists *and* historians.

Just as Pasolini, who from the late 1960s onward increasingly used his newspaper columns (and to a lesser extent his films) to redefine his public image as the "wild man" of Italy, the new cannibals are achieving their notoriety via the media and fostering their image through the media; in this process, they are highlighting the role of the intellectual. In a January 2003 episode of *Blu Notte* and in a follow-up book in 2004 (*Nuovi Misteri d'Italia*), Italian pulp writer Lucarelli explored Pasolini's case in an attempt to establish a legacy and to pay tribute to the "intellettuale impegnato" (engaged intellectual), which he and his followers aim to emulate. On March 31, 2010, in the national newspaper *La Repubblica*, Lucarelli published an article that harshly attacked those who were still skeptical about the motive behind Pasolini's death. In so doing, Lucarelli offered a sociological analysis of Italian society. He writes:

Però so una cosa. Che in Italia, in questa nostra strana Italia, le domande hanno sempre fatto più paura delle risposte. Perché dopo la risposta magari le cose si rimettono a posto come è sempre successo, ma la domanda provoca un sisma che non si sa come andrà a finire...E un omicidio, dalla nostre parti, è sempre stato un segnale molto usato. Insomma, non so se *Petrolio*, con il suo capitolo scomparso, avrebbe rappresentato un pericolo mortale, ma solo il fatto di scriverlo, di ricevere informazioni da alcuni contro altri, di entrare involontariamente in una guerra segreta combattuta su altri fronti, già sarebbe un buon motivo per essere ammazzato.<sup>111</sup>

Through the cultural product Pasolini (Baránski's terms),<sup>112</sup> Lucarelli brings up a sore point. As Leopardi observed, Italians do not know what to do with truth; actually, they even see it as harmful. Therefore, they have always been presented a fragmented reality jarringly at odds with the entire mosaic that the intellectual was supposed to depict, in order to reveal, and eventually denounce, the moral degradation and deterioration into which the society had fallen. Contemporary writers are far from suggesting the idea of a pseudo-innocent intellectual who justifies and attenuates the (hyper)reality he depicts.

Contemporary Italian writers proclaim their indifference to the canon with the exception of Pasolini, who has always been contested by the traditional literary institution

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<sup>111</sup>If there is one thing that I know, it is that in Italy, in our strange Italy, questions have always terrified us more than answers. Because after an answer, things may fall back into place as has always happened, but the question generates an earthquake whose end we cannot anticipate...And a homicide here has always been a very used signal. In other words, I don't know if *Petrolio* with its vanished chapter would have represented a mortal danger, but just the fact that it was written, that information was received by someone against someone else, that a secret war fought on other fronts had been involuntarily entered, would already have been a good reason to get murdered (My translation)

<sup>112</sup> Baránski, Zygmunt G.; Lumley, Robert, ed. *Culture and Conflict in Postwar Italy: Essays on Mass and Popular Culture*. New York: St. Martin Press, 1990.

because of the extravagantly interdisciplinary nature of his *oeuvre*.<sup>113</sup> The novelty about the new Italian writers is the manifest lack of answers and the constant provocative questioning, which as Lucarelli notes, generates a turmoil that Italians have always tended to avoid.

If during the 1970s and early 1980s, as Gianni D'Elia observes in the TV documentary *Nero Petrolio* (2010), one believed in Italy that “a revolution” would have been possible only by the means of politics, Pasolini intuited that a truly radical change was achievable only through culture. In *La Poesia della Tradizione* (The Poetry of the Tradition),<sup>114</sup> Pasolini denounces the ineffectiveness and the consequences of a struggle (“lotta”), that was in fact complicit with its opponent. Pasolini refers to the “unlucky generation” that believes in the illusion of a political and social change. In truth, the protests organized to fight the “System” are a pure instrument of control by the System itself. Pasolini writes:

...Oh, generazione sfortunata!  
Arriverai alla mezza età e poi alla vecchiaia  
senza aver goduto ciò che avevi il diritto di godere  
e che non si gode senza ansia e umiltà  
e così capirai di avere servito il mondo  
contro cui con zelo “portasti avanti la lotta.”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> The expression “extravagant interdisciplinary” is Pasolini’s and it is taken from the 1966 essay “The Written Language of Reality” (qtd. in *Heretical Empiricism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988, 197).

<sup>114</sup> in *Transumanar e Organizzar*. Milano: Garzanti, 1971. The poem is also available in Italian online at [http://www.pasolini.net/letturePPP\\_poesiatradizione\\_trasumanar.htm](http://www.pasolini.net/letturePPP_poesiatradizione_trasumanar.htm) Accessed on November 26, 2011.

<sup>115</sup> ...Oh, unfortunate generation,  
you’ll become middle-aged, and then old  
without enjoying what you had the right to enjoy  
and can’t be enjoyed without anxiety and humility  
and thus you’ll realize you’ve served the world

D'Elia also invites the younger generations to understand that in order to achieve radical changes, one cannot set aside culture. The authors of the so-called “nebulosa”, to use Wu Ming’s definition, whose significant texts date back to the years following the publication of *Petrolio*, have revised the concept of “lotta”, no longer applicable in such a diverse context, and have made their objective the search for truth and justice, as well as to provide a detailed description of reality. Furthermore, with a revised narrative, the form of which is highly experimental, contemporary writers have also taken on Pasolini’s invitation to look at reality in its totality, rather than deconstructing it in disconnected fragments. As D’Elia explains:

Pasolini ha scritto nelle *Lettere Luterane* e in *Scritti Corsari*, che noi, per forma mentale, siamo abituati a separare i fenomeni. E lui dice: “io invece in tutta la mia vita ho lottato contro la separazione dei fenomeni. Cioé,” e spiega, “per esempio voi parlate del palazzo e non parlate del paese. Pensate che sia diverso? Invece palazzo e paese sono legati. Non solo. Parlate del presente e non parlate del passato. Invece passato e presente sono legati.” Allora contro la separazione dei fenomeni significa anche che il delitto Mattei, il delitto De Mauro, il delitto Scaglione, il delitto Pasolini, le stragi sui treni, alla stazione di Bologna dopo anni...[sono connessi]...[Si è] voluto impedire che si trovasse una sintesi di questa opposizione italiana: hanno ammazzato Moro, hanno ammazzato Pasolini e hanno ammazzato Mattei, cioè hanno ammazzato l’economia, la politica civile e la cultura. Questi sono delitti fondativi; è importante che noi non separiamo i

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against which, so zealously, “you carried on the struggle” (translated by Norman MacAfee. *Pier Paolo Pasolini Poems*. New York: Random House, 1982, 215)

fenomeni, che capiamo che c'è una linea precisa di poteri occulti che ha voluto impedire che l'Italia fosse un Paese normale.<sup>116</sup>

Whereas it is difficult to interpret and define the term “normale” as intended by D'Elia, there is instead an evident connection that D'Elia is trying to trace among areas such as economics, civil politics, and culture, that only when looked at with a unitary gaze can perhaps provide a consistent depiction of reality. Ultimately, solving the mystery of Pasolini's death is a matter of national conscience and identity. The interest of contemporary writers in Pasolini's case is an indispensable and necessary step in the process of creating a new cultural and literary national canon. After all, as Robert S.C. Gordon observes: “canons are formed on the basis of myths, models and figures, and on the penetration of these within the institutions that disseminate literary culture” (96)<sup>117</sup>

To conclude, I would like to bring attention to a curious yet interesting article by father Nicola Spadaro that appeared in the Jesuit magazine *La Civiltà Cattolica* in April, 1997: “La letteratura dell'orrore estremo tra ‘pulp’, ‘splatter’ e ‘punk’” (The literature of extreme horror among ‘pulp’, ‘splatter’ and ‘punk’). The long-overdue exculpation of Pasolini's figure does not only come from the literary, judicial, and public world, but apparently also from more conservative Catholic circles; what is interesting is the relation that is suddenly traced between Pasolini and the young pulp writers. In 1997, the

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<sup>116</sup> Pasolini wrote in the Luteran Letters and in Corsair Writings, that we, because of our forma mentis, are in the habit of separating phenomena. And he says: “I, instead, have fought all of my life against the separation of phenomena. In other words,” and he explains, “You, for instance, talk about the castle and don't talk about the town surrounding the castle. You think that it is different? Castel and town are connected instead. What is more, you talk about the present and don't talk about the past. On the contrary, past and present are connected” Then against the separation of the phenomena also means that Mattei's murder, De Mauro's murder, Scaglione's murder, Pasolini's murder, the attacks on the trains, at the train station in Bologna years later...[are connected]...People have tried to prevent anyone from finding a synthesis in this: they killed Moro, they killed Pasolini and they killed Mattei, that is they killed the economy, civil politics and culture. Those are foundational murders; it is important that we do not separate phenomena that we understand that there is a precise line of hidden powers that wanted to prevent Italy from becoming a normal Country. (My translation)

<sup>117</sup> qtd. in “*Pasolini contro Calvino: culture, the canon and the millennium*” *Modern Italy*, 3:1, 87-99.

“cannibals” had just published their first anthology and the images of extreme horror and violence had initially shocked many critics and readers alike. Father Antonio Spadaro’s reaction is an invitation to the young pulp writers to look back at the Pasolini of *Salò, or 120 Days of Sodom* (a film that, just like his last novel *Petrolio*, was released posthumously on November 22, 1975, a few days after his murder). According to father Spadaro, in Pasolini’s last film, there is a level of moral tension that seems to be lacking in the young pulp writers’ works:

Viene in mente...un paragone spontaneo con la violenza e le aberrazioni descritte da Pasolini nel suo film estremo *Salò o le Centoventi Giornate di Sodoma*, e da lì gli autori pulp avrebbero molto da imparare sul livello di tensione morale nella rappresentazione di un cannibalismo estremo. Pasolini ha cercato infatti di rappresentare “il cuore della violenza” con freddezza e lucidità anche maniacali. Quando violenza banalità, orrore, sangue si intrecciano in una folle anarchia del potere da parte di un male dai tratti assoluti, si compone una struttura infernale dantesca, che è grido, in un mondo in cui Dio è proibito, a una umanità umile e sana. Il film di Pasolini si chiude infatti con un’apertura alla speranza che risorge dalle ceneri, con una fiducia nella capacità dell’uomo di ricominciare, affrancata dalla tenerezza, sentimento che gli autori *pulp* sembrano aver perso di vista.(60)

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<sup>118</sup> qtd. in Spadaro, Antonio “La letteratura dell’orrore estremo tra ‘pulp’, ‘splatter’ e ‘punk’” *La Civiltà Cattolica* 1997 II 53-60.

Here comes to mind...a spontaneous comparison with the violence and the aberrations described by Pasolini in his last extreme film *Salò or One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* and from there the pulp writers would have a lot to learn on the level of moral tension in the representation of an extreme cannibalism. In fact, Pasolini tried to represent “the heart of violence” with an almost maniacal detachment and lucidity. When banal violence, horrors, and blood intermingle in an insane anarchy of powers thanks to a pure evil [force] with absolute traits, one has an infernal Dantesque structure that is a call, in a world in which God is forbidden, to a humble and healthy humanity. Pasolini’s film ends in fact with an opening towards hope

Spadaro argues that literature requires a “responsabilità e adesione personale” (“responsability and a personal commitment”, 55); instead, what the pulp writers are creating is a vortex of images that “registers” the chaos of contemporary life and with all of its violence, “ma alla fine esprim[ono] soltanto un distacco anestetico che ‘gira a vuoto’, non comunica, non coglie il senso, non dà ragione, lasciando paradossalmente il gusto amaro e leggero dell’artificio retorico” (57).<sup>119</sup>

The problem of the moral responsibility of literature is also faced by the well known Italian writer Susanna Tamaro (1957- ), who during an interview with Radio Vaticana on February 16, 1997, takes the “cannibals” as the (negative) example of a literature that “non vuole comprendere o capire ma solo distruggere...[e] che agisce con il pregiudizio, quindi [si tratta] non di una cultura di crescita ma di distruzione”.<sup>120</sup> Tamaro’s popularity in Italy in the early 1990s (where she is also referred to in jest as “our lady of the best seller”), was characterized by a narrative that is only apparently at odds with the provocative language and content of the new best selling pulp authors. The “cannibali” initiated a revolutionary trend that Tamaro accused of being a negative influence for the youngest generation of readers. At the same time, the short story “Love” by the same Susanna Tamaro (collected in *Per Voce Sola*, 1991) contained passages that have been defined by critic Gianluca Nicoletti as quintessentially “pulp”. Even if “Love” did not have a great success among readers, it was the short story that brought Tamaro to

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that rises again from the ashes with a trust in the ability of man to begin again, freed by tenderness, a feeling of which the pulp writers seem to have lost track. (my translation)

<sup>119</sup> “but in the end [they] express only an anesthetic detachment that “gets nowhere”, it does not communicate, it does not grasp the sense, it does not prove right, paradoxically leaving the bitter and light taste of the rhetoric artifice.” (my translation)

<sup>120</sup> qtd. in “Giovani Scrittori ‘Cannibali’ Susanna Tamaro non vi ama”. *La Repubblica*. February 16, 1997, p. 31.

“does not want to comprehend or understand but only destroy...[and] which acts with prejudice, therefore [it deals] not with a culture of growth but of destruction” (my translation)

the attention of the critics significantly because its moral content is pushed beyond the boundaries of “social tolerance”. “Ho utilizzato un solo racconto ma avrei avuto ampia scelta”, Nicoletti continues, “neppure i cosiddetti cannibali sono arrivati a descrivere di un adolescente che strappa il cuore ad un bambino e se lo mangia, come avviene a pagina 115 del libro [della Tamaro]”.<sup>121</sup> As Nicoletti implies, it is evident that the “cannibal” literature with its supposed lack of moral responsibility has a number of antecedents in the national literary history that has finally encountered the requests and needs of the reading public. Antonio Spadaro, who interestingly relates contemporary writers of the “nebula” (to which the cannibal belongs, as per Wu Ming 1’s definition) to Pier Paolo Pasolini, is unclear with regards to a definition of “moral tension” applied to a literary text. Likewise, Tamaro suggests that morality is the greatest limit of contemporary literature and yet, she does not elucidate such a concept.

Do Tamaro and Spadaro refer to the problem of salvation in the postmodern and post-postmodern age? If so, with their constant search for a historical truth, with their invitations to act, know and come to terms with the past, with their formal and linguistic experimentalism, aren’t contemporary writers looking for a mode of ‘salvation’? The contradictions that both Tamaro and Spadaro raise are several. In the first case, Tamaro (in truth, an antecedent for the cannibals with her own texts) releases an interview with Vatican Radio, breaking her pledge not to talk to the press; more importantly, she is doing so to attack and harshly criticize a group of writers whose narrative, after all, shares several similarities with Tamaro’s early pulp literary debut. In the second case,

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<sup>121</sup> qtd. in “I Cannibali a lezione dalla Tamaro” *La Repubblica* February 23, 1997, p. 32.

“I have used only one short story but I had a much wider choice...not even the so-called cannibals went so far as to describe a teen-ager who pulls out the heart of a child and eats it, as it happens on page 115 of [Tamaro’s] book.” (My translation)

Antonio Spadaro harks back to a model (Pasolini) that, he claims, the young writers will not be able to emulate and let alone overcome. Nevertheless, the re-evaluation of Pasolini's *oeuvre* with its ideal level of moral tension is temporary and, in truth, generic. In fact, during a recent interview on October 12, 2011, when asked if he appreciates Pasolini, Father Spadaro answers:

Ritengo che sia incomprensibile senza San Paolo. Mi riferisco al progetto di Pasolini per un film sull'apostolo, ambientato ai nostri giorni, e che tuttavia doveva restare fedele alla realtà storica, per sostenere che San Paolo è qui oggi...Vi appare tutta l'attenzione dello scrittore per il santo.<sup>122</sup>

If Pasolini's work is "incomprehensible" how can it function as a proper model for the pulp writers? Moreover, assuming that Pasolini's "last extreme film" (Spadaro's terms) was able to embed a moral tension while contemplating a possibility of salvation (a concept that can be questioned and discussed at length), weren't the pulp writers since the very beginning attempting to achieve such a salvation with the unhinging of moral codes, forms and expressions of power? (*Gioventù Cannibale* vi). Daniele Brolli, editor of *Gioventù Cannibale*, opens the anthology with a brief essay that is, in fact, an attack on all forms of morality as applied to literature: "Le Favole Cambiano" he entitled it, literally "fables change/are changing" but the term "fables" can also be given a broader interpretation of "things", "approaches", and more generally "literary texts". Brolli writes:

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<sup>122</sup> <http://www.gesuitinews.it/2011/10/12/tempi-il-cielo-in-una-pagina-12102011-roma/> Accessed on November 25, 2011.

"I believe that he is incomprehensible without Saint Paul. I am referring to the project that Pasolini had for a film on the apostle, set during our times, and that nonetheless was to remain faithful to the historical reality, in order to argue that Saint Paul is here today...[Therein] all of the attention of the writer for the saint is evident." (my translation)

...il moralismo è quella pulsione sadica che spinge chi ne è vittima a conservare i propri cadaveri negli armadi altrui. Ed è anche l'unica forma di perversione socialmente ammessa, capace di relegare tutte le altre comparse sul palcoscenico degli atti proibiti...[accusa] gli altri di una volontà nociva per le persone e per l'intero complesso sociale. (*Gioventù Cannibale* v)<sup>123</sup>

Contemporary Italian writers have abolished every kind of pact or implicit contract with the reader and the critic in order to start forging a kind of “laboratory writing” (“scrittura laboratorio” *Gioventù Cannibale* viii) that refuses compromises and exceeds the limits of the national collective imagination as Italians knew it. The goal is the creation of a new tendency of the imagination that in the end invites us to rethink *and* re-evaluate the ethics and aesthetics of literature. Ultimately, one alters the question of whose responsibility it is to search for (historical) truth. “Io so perchè sono uno scrittore” (“I know because I am a writer”), Pier Paolo Pasolini argued in the famous article “Che cos'è questo golpe?” (“What is this coup?”, *Corriere della Sera*, November 14, 1974). And we, as readers, can no longer hide behind the protective shield of the writer as a mythical figure: “Lo scrittore non è l'albatro di Baudelaire, capace di grandi voli nel cielo, ma goffo, con le sue ali, sul ponte della nave” (194)<sup>124</sup>. We all have the responsibility to continue writing and reading the missing pages of *Petrolio*, a cardinal text for the epic achievement, at last, of a national Italian identity. In the light of this observation, the connection between the literary “nebula” of texts appeared in Italy

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<sup>123</sup> ...moralism is that sadistic instinct that urges whomever is its victim to keep his/her own skeletons in somebody else's closets. And it is also the only form of perversion socially accepted, able to relegate all of the other figureheads on the stage of prohibited acts....it accuses the others of a harmful will toward people and toward the entire social group. (My translation)

<sup>124</sup> Wu Ming, *New Italian Epic*. Torino: Einaudi, 2009.

[The writer is no longer Baudelaire's albatross, able to accomplish great flights, but he is clumsy, with his wings, on the deck of the boat] (My translation)

during the past two decades and the reassessment of Pasolini's figure that took place concurrently in the country, is finally explained: "noi siamo i posteri di Pasolini, quelli venuti dopo a cui [*Petrolio*] era indirizzato, e lo abbiamo ricevuto a brandelli, ma quei brandelli parlano di noi" (Wu Ming/Scarpa 20).<sup>125</sup>

In 1992, Einaudi opted for an all white cover for *Petrolio*, a rather unusual choice due to the fact that "they get dirty and yellow easily", as writer and literary critic Marco Belpoliti (1954- ) points out<sup>126</sup>; however, such a peculiar choice aimed to emphasize the nature itself of Pasolini's last novel: the book is a(n) (open) space, which one tries to fill with a sketch, an outline which, in this case, will not find a conclusion. *Petrolio*, that in its turn draws heavily on another text (*Questo è Cefis*), is a palimpsest and/or, as Wu Ming 1 simply puts it, an unidentified narrative object. It continues to be re-used, re-elaborated and possibly concluded. "The game has just started." De Cataldo wrote in the weekly magazine *La Domenica di Repubblica* (June 8, 2008) "And the outcome is anything but taken for granted". In the essay "Why Literature?" (*The New Republic*, May 14, 2001, p. 31-6), Spanish-Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa (1936- ) argues that "literature is always subversive, unsubmitive, rebellious" (34). Italian literature embraced precisely those characteristics since the inception of the Second Republic the beginning of which significantly corresponds to the publication of Pasolini's *Petrolio*.

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<sup>125</sup> We are Pasolini's descendents, those who came after those to whom [*Petrolio*] was addressed, and we have received it in shreds, but those shreds talk about us. (My translation)

<sup>126</sup> qtd. in [http://www.pasolini.net/narrativa\\_petrolio.htm](http://www.pasolini.net/narrativa_petrolio.htm) Accessed on November 30, 2011.



The white cover of *Petrolio*.

### **The Book as an Open Space: The Case of Simone Sarasso**

Simone Sarasso (1979- ) a young native from Novara appeared on the Italian literary scene in 2007, with the publication of *Confine di Stato* (which roughly translates to “State Limits”). Sarasso began writing noir fiction in 2004 for television, film and comics. Even though his name is not associated with a specific literary group (such as the Wu Ming,

the cannibals, the neo-noirists etc...), his novels often call to mind Quentin Tarantino's films. About Tarantino, Sarasso says that

...ha rivoluzionato la "comunicazione in nero", ha cambiato il linguaggio della crime fiction. Ha reso, pur stigmatizzandoli, killer e dark ladies molto più umani di quanto non lo fossero vent'anni fa. Anche i cattivi parlano di cose banalissime "sul lavoro". E ci può scappare il dialogo sul quarter pound cheese prima di un'ammazzatina. Questo cambio di prospettiva, questo sdoganamento del basso verso l'alto ha influenzato la generazione di scrittori che mi ha preceduto (in realtà ha stravolto l'intera cultura pop). Prescindere da Tarantino è impossibile.<sup>127</sup>

Sarasso draws a line between the previous generation of writers (i.e. Lucarelli, Ammaniti and the cannibals) and *his* generation, one which carries on the experimental mixing of genres and techniques initiated two decades earlier. The connection with Tarantino and the recognition by Sarasso that it is impossible to separate his cinema from contemporary Italian literary production is a poignant one. If Tarantino had absorbed fiction itself within his film *Pulp Fiction*, Sarasso's novels act in the same manner, yet in reverse. This time, it is cinema that is projected in literature: the page is a screen, just as the screen was turned into a black page at the beginning of Tarantino's movie with a dictionary definition of the term "pulp". After all, a movie starts from a written page, the script, and Sarasso plays with the visual and textual aspects of a story, up until the point where the novel is (also) a drawing. And in fact, Sarasso subtitles *Confine di Stato* as "an insane

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<sup>127</sup> <http://www.sherlockmagazine.it/notizie/2996/> Accessed on November 5, 2011.

[...he revolutionized "noir communication", he changed the language of crime fiction. He rendered killer and dark ladies, even if stigmatizing them, more human than they had been twenty years ago. Even the evil ones talk about very futile things "on the job". And there can even be a dialogue on a cheese quarter pounder before a little murder. This change of perspective, this clearance from the bottom to the top influenced the generation of writers who came before me (in truth, it turned upside-down the entire pop culture). One cannot ignore Tarantino. (My translation)]



Sarasso will find an interesting solution to incorporate the music of Fred Buscaglione in his second novel, *Turkemar*, 2007).



Fig. 1

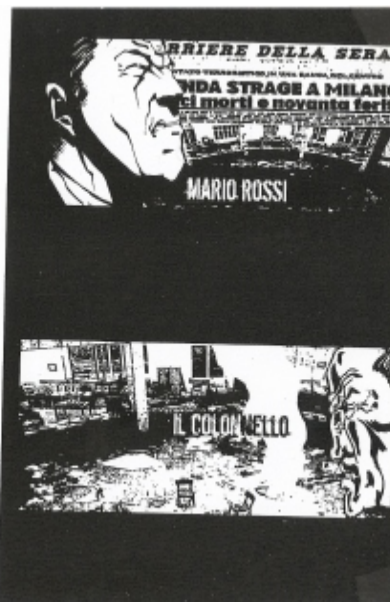


Fig. 2

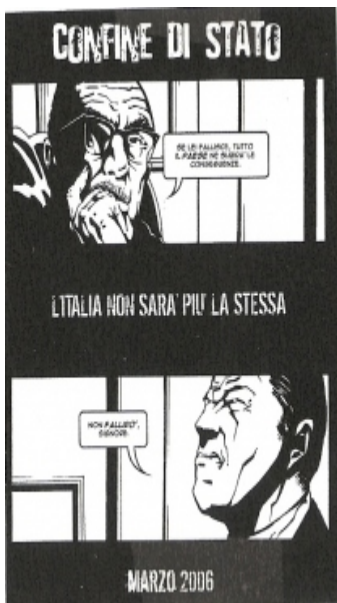


Fig. 3

Three graphic frames from Sarasso's *Confine di Stato*.

Fig. 1: the establishing shot of Piazza Fontana; Fig. 2: the news of the bombing of Piazza Fontana on the newspaper and the inside shot of the bank, where the bomb just exploded; Fig. 3: Italian politicians worried about the possibility of a coup.

The graphic frames (Fig. 1, 2, 3), which slowly transport the reader into the novel, function both as opening credits and as a trailer, which successfully captures the attention

of the audience. The idea of a “booktrailer” (which originally came from the publishing house *Marsilio*) is an alternative marketing instrument that strongly contributed to the success of Sarasso’s book. At the “Salone del libro,” a launching pad for young writers, Sarasso decided to project the images from his novel on his laptop. The short clip attracted many people and after it was uploaded on youtube,<sup>128</sup> it became a popular channel to broadcast the book. Italian history of the first republic (1948-1994) is at the core of the novel. The Piazza Fontana Bombing (December 12, 1969), a terrorist attack in Milan at the Banca Nazionale dell’Agricoltura (National Agrarian Bank), is the main historical event around which the plot evolves. Stories of prostitution, murder, national politics and personal dramas are entangled in a narration that fluctuates between fiction and non fiction, all in an organic attempt to shed light on one of the darkest periods of Italian history. In order to do so, Sarasso also exploits the “noir” genre, while further improving a narrative technique that incorporates not only textual but also visual elements from the comics, cinema, and television. The idea to explore history, after all, and to focus on the Piazza Fontana Bombing (a massacre that continues to raise questions and that was never completely solved) comes directly from television; more specifically, Sarasso recounts that he decided to “re-open” the case after an episode of Carlo Lucarelli’s *Blu Notte*. Sarasso remarks:

Q: Tu che sei giovane, quando hai sentito parlare per la prima volta della strage di Piazza Fontana?

A: Probabilmente a scuola. Ma non devo aver prestato troppa attenzione. Mi ricordo, invece, della puntata di *Blu Notte* di Lucarelli. Lo vedi cosa intendo dire?

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<sup>128</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2VB81NLqU8> Accessed on November 5, 2011.

Letteratura (e tv) di un certo genere possono davvero stimolare qualcuno sotto i trent'anni a studiare la storia del paese.<sup>129</sup>

The connection between television and literature is a potentially positive and fruitful one, according to Sarasso, to the extent that one deals with “a certain genre”, a certain kind of TV and literature. The goal is to regenerate an investigative interest in the reader/viewer, who will then look into historical crimes that remain unsolved. In this sense, the writer becomes politically and socially engaged, as his/her work provides that necessary motivation for the readers to examine the past, better understand the present and once s/he has come to terms with it, only then will it be possible to look into the future. Italian neo noir as a (new) genre lends itself more naturally to this type of task:

Credo che il tipo di letteratura nera che si fa oggi nel nostro paese abbia una grande valenza socio-politica. In fin dei conti, se scrivo quel che scrivo e sono andato a leggermi le duecento pagine della commissione stragi è grazie ai libri di Lucarelli, dei Wu Ming, di Genna...sono convinto che il noir storico à la Ellroy possa stimolare la conoscenza della storia nel lettore. Pur senza avere pretese documentarie. E anche quest'ultimo punto mi sembra fondamentale: di mestiere non facciamo gli storici ma i *novelists*. E' bene non dimenticarselo.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> <http://www.paradisodegliorchi.com/cgi-bin/pagina.pl?Tipo=intervista&Chiave=37> Accessed on November 6, 2011.

[Q: You are young, when did you first learn about the Piazza Fontana Bombing?

A: Probably in school. But I did not pay a lot of attention, probably. I remember, instead, the episode of *Blu Notte* by Lucarelli. Do you see what I mean? Literature (and TV) of a certain genre can really stimulate someone under thirty [years old] to study the history of the country. (my translation)]

<sup>130</sup> <http://www.paradisodegliorchi.com/cgi-bin/pagina.pl?Tipo=intervista&Chiave=37> Accessed on November, 6 2011.

[I believe that this kind of dark literature that one writes in our country today has great social and political importance. After all, if I write what I write and I have been reading the two hundred pages of the massacre commission, it is thanks to the books of Lucarelli, Wu Ming, Genna...I am convinced that the historic noir à la Ellroy can stimulate the knowledge of history in the reader. Even without having any documentary pretensions. And also this last point seems fundamental to me: our job is not to be historians but *novelists*. We should not forget that. (my translation)]

Thus, the writer turns history into fiction (he is a *novelist* by profession, in the end) while concatenating a series of events that the reader is eventually asked to verify. In *Confine di Stato*, the Bombing of Piazza Fontana is connected to the controversial 1953 Wilma Montesi affair (Ester Conti in the novel). Montesi was a young woman who was mysteriously killed outside of Rome and whose death uncovered sensational allegations of drugs and sex, involving the political and upper class Roman milieu. Furthermore in Sarasso's novel, behind the fictional character of Fabio Riviera, it is possible to recognize the AGIP<sup>131</sup> commissary Enrico Mattei, who died in an enigmatic plane crash in 1962. Mattei was attempting to dismantle the oil oligopoly of "the seven sisters" while negotiating oil concessions that did not benefit the big oil corporation. Finally, behind the figure of "l'editore" (the editor), one can easily recognize Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, the left-wing publisher and political activist who was suspiciously found dead at the foot of a high voltage power pylon near Milan in March 1972. History is interconnected with its political machinations and its unsolved cases. Literature, television, films and other media also seem to converge into a cohesive narrative that flutters only apparently between fiction and reality: the last two are also possibly linked; it is up to the reader to synthesize the fragmented portrait the narrator presents. The novel is nothing but a sketch, an outline, a rough draft, hence a pastiche of divergent and fragmented components, and yet it blends into an organic wide-ranging univocal novel. Furthermore, one can talk about continuity in Sarasso's opus, in that his novels (*Confine di Stato*, 2007; *Turkemar*, 2007; *Settanta*, 2009; *United We Stand*, 2009; *Slittamenti Progressivi della Rai*, 2010) share some of the same locations ("la taverna degli artisti" in via Margutta for instance), characters (Fred Buscaglione and Andrea Sterling just to name a few), and

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<sup>131</sup> Azienda Generale Italiana Petroli - General Italian Oil Company.

historical events. The temporal distance from the narrated facts plays to the advantage of the writer, who is able to offer a more complete and cohesive view of the historical past; at the same time, fiction blends the boundaries of reality, reminding the reader that it is still literature. The cinematic technique that is entrenched in Sarasso's literary style gives the ability to the reader (whom Sarasso always thanks with a direct message at the end of each one of his novels and on whose side the "writer/director" stands) to imagine the plot more clearly:

La nostra narrazione sta dalla parte del lettore. Si esprime in modo leggero e veloce. La pagina non può essere invasa dalle parole. Parole e immagini devono bilanciarsi per arrivare al cuore della vicenda.<sup>132</sup>

Daniele Rudoni, the comic book creator who collaborated with Sarasso on *United We Stand (UWS)*, refuses to limit the page to a river of words. A page must contain both images and words in order to get to the core of the story. Rudoni's idea generates a literary project that is neither literature nor cinema, but a graphic novel of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (*UWS* 172), in which we incorporate ourselves into characters, even the writers themselves.

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<sup>132</sup> Sarasso, Simone; Rudoni, Daniele. *United We Stand*. Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 2009, 172.

[Our narrative is on the side of the reader. It expresses itself in a light and fast manner. The page cannot be invaded by words. Words and images must balance themselves in order to arrive at the heart of story (my translation)]



A frame from *United We Stand* (2009). The character of the photographer strongly resembles that of Sarasso.

Sarasso's innovative (graphic and semi-graphic) novels set off a number of meta-literary reflections on the current political and social conditions of Italy, while exploiting once again the neo noir genre.

In the introduction to the anthology *Italian Tales* (New Heaven, CT: Yale UP, 2004), Massimo Riva suggests that the attention to more visual elements in Italian contemporary narrative is nothing but a perfectly logical consequence of a culture “that is so sophisticated in matters of vision and representation” (xxii). The production of narratives that “focus on the paradoxes of representation and vision” is due to the challenge that contemporary Italian literature had to face as a consequence of “more powerful representational and visual technologies” (xxii). With his experimental narrative – a direct derivation from the post-Tarantino wave – Sarasso incorporates all of the representational and visual technologies (even the Internet, where the stories continue to develop on his blogs after the pages have ended), which at the center have the written word (or, at least, a hybridization of the latter). The attention to time and history that one finds in contemporary Italian literature is also explained by Riva when he argues that

it seems equally appropriate that a culture traditionally characterized by a hyper sense of time and history, memory and identity, would, at the end of the century

in which history has betrayed all expectations, produce narratives that focus on lost identities or a buried past. (xxii)

In an epoch *and* in a country in which one seems to have a highly fictional sense of reality due to the powerful influence of mass media generally and television more specifically, Sarasso's *oeuvre* stands at the crossroads between fiction and non fiction (or metafiction), as he revisits the past while observing the present and envisioning the future (e.g. the graphic novel *United We Stand* moves back and forth from the 1960s to 2013, the year when a coupe takes place in Italy after the left wing party wins the elections). Sarasso's last published novel *Slittamenti Progressivi della RAI* (2010) not only visually integrates television (whose images open the narration), but the entire action takes place inside a television studio. As the characters are kidnapped and locked in a dark room, they struggle to understand whether they are in a reality show or if the action is "really" taking place. While in the room, the group discusses Italian national television, reconstructing its decadent history from a cultural point of view. The political instrumentation of RAI is also discussed and it is suddenly clear that the characters themselves, as employees of the national television, have contributed to the manipulation of the nation. Once again, the younger generations (that the novel targets) are directly involved in the discussion, also because as the characters continue to converse, they are convinced that they are being videotaped for a reality show, whose audience is for the most part constituted by younger viewers. They *too* must be cognizant of what television has become, as the RAI security guard tells a young employee:

Ma guardi che io parlo proprio per voi. Per rispetto a voi giovani io me la prendo *co'* quelle persone che hanno avuto accesso a ruoli direttivi *esclusivamente* per

ragioni politiche...Queste persone, signorina bella, hanno trasformato l'azienda nel teatro dei loro giochi di potere, sissignore, facendola uguale uguale alla *tivvù* commerciale, mettendo in secondo piano l'obiettivo primario. Che poi sarebbe quello di produrre cultura, dico CUL-TU-RA, attraverso tutti i generi televisivi. (46-7)<sup>133</sup>

Italian television has/had the potential to contribute to the national culture, but it has betrayed its initial purpose because of its transformation into some sort of commercial television. The accusations against RAI move even further, in the sense that RAI ended up producing *trash* programs that are so well done that they became quality shows (“*è trash ma è fatto così bene che diventa qualità*” 68, Sarasso’s emphasis). Sarasso’s metafictional reflection on television raises several questions: it is true that “it unified Italy more than Garibaldi did” (102), but the costs were devastating. The influence of the media is so strong that not even the fictional Pirandellian-like characters are able to recognize what their “reality” is: “Non so più niente. Che cosa è falso. Che cosa è vero. Forse è questo lo scopo del merdoso gioco: perdere la ragione. L’ultimo che rimane sano si porta a casa cento mila euro” (102).<sup>134</sup> As the novel ends, with the main character (lost between fiction and reality) announcing on national TV that Italy is now under a dictatorship following the coupe, so does the program: “Fine delle trasmissioni”, “end of the transmissions”, the author concludes. In this context, the novel moves in a space that is parallel to that of a broadcasting show. It includes its linguistic codes and format,

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<sup>133</sup> [But I am talking precisely for you. Out of respect for you, youth, I am mad at those people who have had access to managerial positions *exclusively* for political reasons...These people, my pretty lady, have transformed the company into a theater for their games of power, yes indeed, making it just like commercial TV, and shifting the primary objective, which would be that of producing culture, CUL-TU-RE I say, through all of the television genres. (my translation)]

<sup>134</sup> “I don’t know anything anymore. What is false. What is true. Perhaps this is the goal of the shitty game: to loose one’s reason. The last person to stay in his/her mind takes home one hundred thousand euro.” (My translation).

ultimately leaving its audience with an invitation to know, to investigate and to act, otherwise the outcome depicted in the novel would be an allegorically plausible one.



The cover of Sarasso' *Slittamenti Progressivi della Rai* (2010)

Critic Filippo La Porta's characterization of the new Italian writers as "the cloven Calvino" (alluding to the Calvino's tale *The Cloven Viscount*, 1952), is a definition that ought to be revised in light of the original linguistic and literary identity that contemporary Italian writers have been able to cut out. In the past two decades, pulp authors have "washed their linguistic rags" not in the Arno River (a metaphor for Manzoni referring to the Florentine dialect), but in the global media world that surrounds us. Furthermore, the "national-popular" language of television has reduced the gap that existed between spoken and written Italian, and that caused literature to be isolated over time. The pulp genre lent itself as the ideal instrument of incorporation of visual and literal elements, in order to create a remarkable and innovative hybrid, yet an original

genre in the age of “posts” and or “semi-posts.”<sup>135</sup> At last, it can finally be stated that the stereotype about Italians being poor storytellers is debunked.

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<sup>135</sup> . <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/davis/semi-post-postmodernism5-15-10.asp> Accessed on November 9, 2011.

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## VITA

Virginia Agostinelli has a Laurea in Foreign Languages and Literatures, with an emphasis on English and German studies, from the University of Chieti-Pescara, and a Master of Arts in Italian Studies from the University of Washington. In 2012 she earned a Doctorate in Philosophy in Comparative Literature at the University of Washington.