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# **POST-TRUTH NARRATIVE**

## **Narrative Trends, Cultural Agency and Political Commitment in Italian Literature in the Age of Post-Truth**

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Italian Studies

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## **~ DECLARATION ~**

This thesis is the candidate's own work except where it contains work based on collaborative research, in which case the nature and extent of the author's individual contribution shall be indicated. This thesis has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

## ~ ABSTRACT ~

This study examines the topics of cultural agency and literary commitment against the backdrop of the cultural and social developments of post-truth – a definition that entered public discourse after the Oxford English Dictionary chose it as its word of the year in 2016. In my research, I identify in this term the signs of an epochal shift that began at the end of the last decade and has now reached its culminating phase. After outlining the general terms of the subject and describing the theoretical aspects involved in the study of the post-truth phenomenon, I analyse in detail its political, social, and cognitive transformation, as well as the effects that the digital revolution had in modifying contemporary cultural paradigms. This is followed by a survey of the Italian literary debate, which in the last decades has been particularly attentive to matters concerning the role of culture and fiction within the changing contemporary political climate. After examining some of the central theories of the Italian critical framework – also related to realism, postmodernism, and hypermodernity –, I propose new models of cultural agency and literary commitment that adapt to the post-truth turn. I go on to identify, through textual analysis, the main features of what I provisionally define as post-truth narrative. In particular, I highlight these narrative traits by examining texts that fall into two categories in which the confrontation with key aspects of ongoing political and cultural change is particularly pronounced, namely novels that focus on historical events of the past, and novels that address social issues concerning the present time. I conclude by considering that of post-truth narrative as a theoretical model that well frames the relationship between politics and fiction in the current scenario, and which can also be applied outside the boundaries of Italian literature.

## ~ INTRODUCTION ~

### *What We Talk About When We Talk About Post-Truth*

The notion of post-truth entered public debate in 2016. In that year the Oxford English Dictionary registered a 2000% spike in the usage of the term ‘post-truth’ in newspapers and academic journals. As a consequence of this sudden popularity, the dictionary named it the word of the year, defining it as an adjective ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’.<sup>1</sup> However, neither the adjective nor the definition given were entirely new: both have been circulating since at least the early 1990s. Steve Tesich, in a 1992 article entitled ‘Government of Lies’ published in *The Nation* magazine, used the term to describe the propensity of the general public to believe misleading institutional information during the First Gulf War: ‘we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world’.<sup>2</sup> We find a second, instance in an emphatically-titled 2005 book, *The Post-Truth Era*, in which Ralph Keyes anticipated some of the arguments that were to be raised in the following years.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the same year of Keyes’ text, the American comedian Stephen Colbert coined the neologism ‘truthiness’, meaning ‘the belief in what you feel to be true rather than what the facts will support’,<sup>4</sup> underlining a tendency among the public to rely on emotional stances rather than on data or fact-based evidence when making political decisions, ten years before the OED triggered the debate on post-truth.

Taking all of this into account, it is worth asking why the notion of ‘post-truth’ suddenly became so widespread. As scholars such as Matthew D’Ancona and Steve Fuller point out,<sup>5</sup> the surge in interest in post-truth and the connotation attributed to the term by the OED can be connected to some major political events of 2016, namely Brexit and Donald Trump’s

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<sup>1</sup> <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/> (accessed on 13 February 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Steve Tesich, ‘A government of lies’, *The Nation*, 6 January 1992, pp. 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (New York: San Martin Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Ben Zimmer, ‘Truthiness’, *The New York Times*, 13 October 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/17/magazine/17FOB-onlanguage-t.html> (accessed on 18 April 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Matthew D’Ancona, *Post-truth. The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (London: Ebury Press, 2017).

Steve Fuller, *Post-truth. Knowledge as a Power Game* (London: Anthem Press, 2018).



presidential campaign. In Italy, parallel to these events, the debate on the constitutional referendum was taking place, with very similar dynamics to the other two events.<sup>6</sup> In all these circumstances, disinformation and emotional propaganda played a key role and campaigners deployed effective communication strategies with the intention of distorting the truth, spreading misleading information, and influencing voters by appealing to their emotional reactions. These political attitudes have been identified by Fish and Suiter as a peculiar trait of a new form of political practice called ‘post-truth politics’, i.e. a particular set of strategies and techniques adopted nowadays by a large number of political parties and social movements in order to vehiculate political messages that are altered and better in line with their needs.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding the fact that the above definition clarifies some of the characteristics that pertain to the notion of post-truth when used in the political sphere, especially in the period immediately following 2016, its meaning was still rather vague. As scholar Anna Maria Lorusso points out, the OED’s choice of the word post-truth ‘ha saturato i dibattiti’ – both in Italy and elsewhere –, even though ‘[essa] è utilizzata spesso per intendere cose molto diverse’.<sup>8</sup> On the basis of this consideration, I believe it is worth distinguishing at least between two macro-contexts in which the term is applied. The first is in the field of journalism and everyday life communication. In this framework, as Lorusso shows, the word is used to indicate deliberately false and misleading information, i.e. fake news created for the most varied purposes; or a sort of quintessential relativism whereby any theory is valid regardless of evidence – ‘un’orwelliano bipensiero: un’attitudine, dunque, per cui qualsiasi cosa va bene, e si può aderire a una posizione e al suo contrario senza disagi’.<sup>9</sup> This kind of interpretation leads observers to interpret the current state of affairs in negative terms. Matthew D’Ancona, giving the term connotations similar to those just mentioned, describes post-truth as:

[...] a new phase of political and intellectual combat, in which democratic orthodoxies and institutions are being shaken to their foundations by a wave of populism. Rationality is threatened

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<sup>6</sup> The link between post-truth politics and the Italian referendum is suggested by Benedetta Brevini in an article published on *Opendemocracy*: Benedetta Brevini, ‘Post-truth politics and the Italian referendum’, *openDemocracy*, 8 Dicembre 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/post-truth-politics-and-italian-referendum/> (accessed 12 September 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Jane Suiter, ‘Post-Truth Politics’, *Political Insight*, 7 (2016), 543-47.

Will Fish, ‘Post-Truth politics and Illusory Democracy’, *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 14 (2016), 211–13.

<sup>8</sup> Anna Maria Lorusso, *Post-verità* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2018), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Lorusso, *Post-verità*, pp. 5-6.

by emotion, diversity by nativism, liberty by a drift toward autocracy. More than ever, the practice of politics is perceived as a zero-sum game, rather than a context between ideas.<sup>10</sup>

As I will discuss in chapter one, these elements are central to the contemporary socio-cultural framework – populism, autocratic drift, the weakening of political and cultural institutions, the emotional nature of information and political communication –, yet assessing post-truth on this basis only is both restrictive and problematic. The risk is to consider post-truth as an adjective to be attached to speakers and messages which do not align with our personal view. Therefore this attitude, as Ferraris warns, easily leads to believe that ‘la postverità sono gli altri’.<sup>11</sup> Alessandro Baricco expressed a similar concern when he wrote that post-truth reads as ‘il nome che noi élites diamo alle menzogne quando a raccontarle non siamo noi ma gli altri’.<sup>12</sup> The writer’s statement emphasises a crucial aspect to which I will return several times in this research: post-truth is an antithetical and often paradoxical concept that can hardly be reduced to a univocal interpretation. Dealing with it requires a predisposition for self-analysis and the propensity to apply fluid arguments that challenge established certainties.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, examining post-truth by relying on OED’s definition can be misleading: on the one hand, it produces a vicious circle from which it is difficult to escape; on the other hand, the dictionary has deduced the meaning of the word from a scan of mainly journalistic and daily-use texts, so the definition is quite simplistic.

In the light of these considerations, I believe it is more fruitful to take into account the debate that took place in the academic sphere. Since 2016, scholars published a very extensive number of studies on this issue, in various disciplinary fields.<sup>14</sup> Such a high level

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<sup>10</sup> D’Ancona, *Post-Truth*, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ferraris, *Postverità e altri enigmi*, p. 158.

<sup>12</sup> Alessandro Baricco, ‘La verità sulla post-verità. Perché questa definizione è infondata’, *Robinson di Repubblica*, 30 April 2017, pp. 13-14.

<sup>13</sup> Not by chance Maurizio Ferraris’ essay concludes with a remark on the importance of self-assessment before reaching any kind of judgement or conclusion on the current social and cultural condition; Ferraris, *Postverità e altri enigmi*, p. 158.

<sup>14</sup> To give an idea, to the list of texts mentioned so far I add: Julian Baggini, *A Short Story of Truth: Consolation for a Post-Truth World* (London: Quercus, 2017); Gabriele Cosentino, *Social Media and the Post-truth World Order: The Global Dynamics of Disinformation* (Cham: Palgrave, 2020); Brett Nicholls and Rosemary Overell (eds.), *Post-Truth and the Mediation of Reality* (Cham: Palgrave, 2019); Giuseppe Caterino and Giuseppe Veltri, *Fuori dalla bolla. Politica e vita quotidiana nell’era della post-verità* (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2017); Ignas Kalpokas, *A Political Theory of Post-Truth* (Cham: Palgrave, 2019); David Block, *Post-Truth and Political Discourse* (Cham: Palgrave, 2019); Bruce McComiskey, *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2017); Stuart Sim, *Post-Truth, Scepticism & Power* (Cham: Palgrave, 2019).

of interest indicates that, according to scholarly research, the notion of post-truth encapsulates a broader societal transformation. In other words, the post-truth turn is not just a transitory trend, as it reflects the complexity of the mutation that started in the second half of the last century. Steve Fuller aligns with this thesis by claiming that the phenomenon of post-truth ‘is here to stay’.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, this interpretation is corroborated by the prefix ‘post-’. According to the OED the latter identifies a trait that ‘has become increasingly prominent in recent years’, i.e., to refer to a period that comes ‘after a specified event or situation’, as in ‘post-war’ or ‘post-match’. Following this assumption, post-truth means ‘belonging to a time in which the specified concept has become unimportant or irrelevant’.<sup>16</sup>

With regards to this study, the OED definition puts forward at least two key elements. On the one hand, the statement highlights an intellectual struggle to portray contemporary historical and cultural changes as they are lived. In fact, after the Second World War we can track a sequence of labels which attempt to define the contemporary age: post-modernity, late modernity, liquid modernity, hypermodernity. Similarly, the prefix, ‘post-’, has been used to distinguish more circumscribed transformations regarding specific aspects of political and social development: post-democracy, post-industrial, post-ideology, post-human, post-capitalism, post-colonialism, post-feminism, post-Fordist. As Bhabha convincingly puts it in his book *The Location of Culture*:

Our existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the ‘present’, for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix ‘post’: postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism...<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, the term post-truth implies the final attempt to make sense of historical transformations while still living on the edge of the present, but at the same time to be well aware that such a process is not yet accomplished nor assessable.<sup>18</sup> Once again Lorusso well summarises the argument:

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<sup>15</sup> Fuller, *Post-Truth*, p. 181.

<sup>16</sup> The quotations are taken from the ‘Oxford Languages’ section of the Oxford English Dictionary, which also explains the reasons for choosing the that particular word on the year 2016: <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/> (accessed on 12 July 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> This aspect is well framed by an article written in 1997 by Alfonso Berardinelli, in which the scholar describes ‘la pioggia dei termini come post-industriale, post-naturalismo, post-neoavanguardia, post-storia, post-fordismo: ecco. Era nata con ogni evidenza l’Epoca del Dopo’; Alfonso Berardinelli, *Casi critici. Dal postmoderno alla mutazione* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2007), p. 16.

L'allarme con cui si parla oggi di post-verità ci dice che stiamo vivendo un fenomeno nuovo: non ci sono più ampi e condivisi quadri di riferimento e quelli che ci sono, sono talmente controversi, talmente moltiplicati, talmente individualizzati, da perdere la forza di un quadro collettivo.<sup>19</sup>

This brings us to the second aspect which, on the other hand, concerns the always problematic use of the word 'truth'. As already put forward by Baricco, it is possible to read between the lines of the OED definition a judgemental stance. In fact, according to McIntyre, 'post-truth' is a normative definition concerning those 'who care about the truth'. This prompts a very interesting question: 'what about those who feel that they are merely trying to tell the "other side of the story" on controversial topics?'.<sup>20</sup> By posing this question, the scholar exposes the paradoxical nature of the debate on post truth, which makes it a very divisive one. As Fuller points out, being able to establish what is true and what is not has always been a source of control and empowerment in human history.<sup>21</sup> Bringing this argument back into the current context means addressing two key factors. One can agree with Jasanoff and Simmet in claiming that true facts are very important since our democracies can only function if people share 'a common factual basis'.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, it is important to be aware that questioning the truth is an emancipatory exercise. In this respect, Jayson Harsin has adopted Foucault's terminology to state that regimes of truth and post-truth have constantly coexisted in human civilisation.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Fuller asserts that post-truth 'has always been with us' and draws on Vilfredo Pareto's distinction between foxes and lions, to argue that human societies have historically staged the conflict between two sides: those defending and maintaining the status quo (lions); and those trying to subvert and overthrow such a state of things (foxes).<sup>24</sup>

With this theoretical framework in mind, one of the aims of chapter one of my work will be to warn against a simplistic and sectarian definition of post-truth as a negative element *tout court*. On the contrary, I will adapt it to the current political and cultural context,

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<sup>19</sup> Lorusso, *Postverità*, p. 21.

<sup>20</sup> McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2018), p. 6

<sup>21</sup> Fuller, *Post-Truth*, pp. 1-8.

<sup>22</sup> Jasanoff and Simmet, 'No Funeral Bells', p. 752

<sup>23</sup> Jayson Harsin, 'Regimes of Post-Truth, Post-Politics, and Attention Economies', *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 8 (2015), 327-33.

<sup>24</sup> Fuller, *Post-Truth*, pp. 1-2.

characterised by extremely blurred boundaries. My belief is that, even though it is appropriate to perceive truth as a social asset to protect and restore, it is equally important to appreciate that to question ‘the truth’ is to undermine the hegemonic force it represents, in a revolutionary impetus. This type of considerations has led me to consider the role of cultural activities and, more specifically, that of narrative – which I discuss in chapter two – as a crucial element in such an endeavour. Literature and fiction are in fact an ideal platform for getting to the bottom of these ambiguities and understanding them, without necessarily trying to resolve them in any way.

The contradictory and multifaceted nature of the term, post-truth, from a theoretical and terminological point of view does not preclude a higher degree of accuracy in identifying the political, social and cultural aspects of what will be referred to in this thesis as ‘the post-truth condition’. With regard to this, scholars call the attention to a vast range of cultural, social and economic transformations occurring in contemporary societies. In chapter one, I will examine some of the most relevant, such as the decline of the power of political institutions, as well as of the systems of production and distribution of wealth; the failure of capitalism and globalization to fulfil their promises and the consequent rise of populism; the new impulses generated by technological innovations and digitalization processes; the rapid modification of cultural and epistemological models. By surveying recent studies on such matters it is possible to define the contemporary one as a condition defined by a general malaise, in which the ability to critically evaluate reality is compromised (Jasanoff and Simmet and Lewandosky and others),<sup>25</sup> the faith in democracy is vanishing (Mishra and Mendieta),<sup>26</sup> the value of truth has been undermined (McIntyre),<sup>27</sup> and the collective capacity of designing the future has been debilitated and replaced by more selfish quests and desires (Augé).<sup>28</sup>

In reviewing and collating these views, I considered it essential to establish provisional time limits that would define the era of post-truth. As these phenomena are still ongoing, it

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<sup>25</sup> Sheila Jasanoff and Hilton R. Simmet, ‘No Funeral Bells: Public Reason in a “Post-Truth” Age’, *Social Studies of Science*, 47 (2017), 751-70.

Stephen Lewandosky and others, ‘Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the “Post-Truth” Era’, *School of Psychological Science*, 6 (2017), 353-69.

<sup>26</sup> Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (Milton Keynes: Allen Lane, 2017).

Eduardo Mendieta, ‘Post-democracy: From Depoliticisation of Citizens to the Political Automata of Perpetual War’, *Juncture*, 22 (2015), 203-09.

<sup>27</sup> McIntyre, *Post-truth*.

<sup>28</sup> Marc Augé, *The Future* (New York: Verso, 2015).

is not possible to imagine a climax or to predict the next turning point. However, it is necessary to identify a moment of initiation in the past. There is no consensus among scholars on this aspect, but nevertheless some convincing hypotheses can be attempted. Taking my cue from what seems to me the most persuasive thesis put forward by Caterino and Veltri,<sup>29</sup> I detect in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis the moment in which many of the phenomena related to post-truth intensified or took origin. This position is also backed by the theses recently developed by scholars such as Paul Mason, Marc Augé, and Slavoj Žižek.<sup>30</sup> It was in that moment that trust in politics and institutions reached its lowest point and the certainties of the hyper-liberal economic structure and globalisation system cracked, also in common people's perception. As a response to the effects and consequences of the crisis different elements evolved: the development of populist political style; the mistrust of democratic paradigms; the quest for alternative sources of information. Moreover, since the end of the 2000s, the spread of new digital technologies has definitely entered a new phase: by the end of the decade, the internet and broadband were taking root especially in the more developed countries, social media such as Facebook and Twitter went viral all over the world, and the first smart phones made their appearance on the market.

As I will argue in the second part of chapter one, in trying to decipher the new elements of the post-truth turn, it is important to bear two factors in mind. The first is that digital technologies have played a fundamental part in changing our political and cultural processes, as well as the very way in which we experience the world. The second is that trying to grasp the nodes of this transformation from a strictly theoretical point of view, given also the synchronic proximity to the phenomena in question, is an extremely complex task. Therefore, I will prefer to complement this approach with a more a practical and pragmatic

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<sup>29</sup> Caterino and Veltri, *Fuori dalla bolla*, p. 14

<sup>30</sup> Paul Mason brought to light the extent to which the financial crisis of 2007-08 challenged the current neoliberal and capitalist economic model. According to the scholar, the event both highlighted the need to initiate a process of transition towards different economic forms; and triggered a strong sense of discontent in public opinion, not only in the West; Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism: A Guide to our Future* (London: Allen Lane, 2015).

Similarly, Marc Augé insisted on the long-term processes that the financial crisis has set in motion. In his words, 'The planetary crisis now under way has a deep dimension that transcends economics. It is not simply financial. It is not simply political or social, and it is not of recent origin. The year 2000 passed, accompanied by overblown fears, but it still is not out of the question that future historians may speak of a Hundred-Year Crisis in connection with the period we entered quite some time ago now', in Augé, *The Future* pp. 89-90. Finally, Žižek dedicated some pages to the psychological effects caused by the crisis and dwelt on the political upheavals that resulted from it. In particular, according to the scholar, our way of conceiving politics and imagining the future has been heavily compromised: Slavoj Žižek, *The Years of Dreaming Dangerously* (London: Verso, 2012).

one that also takes into account the impact that new technologies have had on both the individual and the collective sphere.

### ***Post-Truth and the Italian Literary Debate***

Defining the temporal coordinates and main features of the post-truth turn is essential to give my research a distinct outline and identity. However, this is not its main focus. The central issue in my work is to examine how the world of culture, with literature and fiction at the forefront, fit within the new scenario. In formulating this research question, I decided to assess their role on the basis of a twofold consideration. On the one hand, I envisage that literature and art in general as ideal arenas for investigating the present, i.e. for examining its political aspects and cultural dynamics and for highlighting its problems. Considering the ambiguous and paradoxical nature that characterises the post-truth era, I am convinced that this is even more evident today, since fiction (intended in a broader sense and not necessarily connected to literature) is capable of embracing and bringing together these contradictions, without necessarily claiming to settle them in a final manner. On the other hand, literature and fiction absorb and reflect the changes of the present and are shaped by them. I will analyse these elements in the last section of chapter two, offering both general observations and specific remarks through the examination of narrative texts.

In doing so, I will pay attention to the Italian environment and such decision is motivated by mainly two reasons. Firstly, post-truth is a global trend which regards Italy as well. Although the debate was sparked mainly in the Anglo-American context, its implications affect the world as a whole. As highlighted in two recent studies respectively by Quattrociocchi and Vicini and by Caterino and Veltri,<sup>31</sup> the socio-political elements associated with post-truth – increase of populist political rhetoric, disinformation campaigns, challenges related to the economic crisis – are very significant in Italy. Furthermore, in the Italian context of the last few years, a lively debate on the subject has developed in both academic and journalistic circles.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Walter Quattrociocchi and Antonella Vicini, *Liberi di crederci. Informazione, Internet e post-verità* (Turin: Codice Edizioni, 2018); Caterino and Veltri, *Fuori dalla bolla*.

<sup>32</sup> The number of essays published on the subject in the Italian context alone is a clear indicator of this. Here is a short list in addition to those already mentioned: Gabriele Cosentino, *L'era della post-verità. Media e populismo dalla Brexit a Trump* (Reggio Emilia: Imprimatur, 2017); Luciano Conti and Liliana Dell'Osso, *La verità della menzogna. Dalle origini alla post-verità* (Pisa: ETS, 2020); Claudio Gili and Giovanni Maddalena, *Chi ha paura della post-verità? Effetti collaterali di una parabola culturale* (Genoa: Marietti,

The second reason is that in Italy an intense debate on the relationship between literature and politics has taken place since the second half of the 2000s. The terms of this discussion go beyond the boundaries of mere literary criticism and touch on numerous topics and raise questions that I consider as essential within the contemporary cultural context. Furthermore, Italian scholars including Carla Benedetti, Pierpaolo Antonello, Romano Luperini and Raffaele Donnarumma have posed problems that are central to this work: how to give a name to an elusive and undefined time,<sup>33</sup> how to redefine the gatekeeping role exercised by artists and intellectuals,<sup>34</sup> how it is possible to faithfully portray reality and convey ethical messages through fiction in the era of media representation.<sup>35</sup>

In the wake of this lively controversy, Italian critics have put forward interrogatives that closely address the post-truth condition. As matter of fact, in 2015, a few months earlier than the nomination of post-truth as word of the year, the academic journal *Between* devoted an interesting edition to topical issues in this regard. The editors of the volume, in the introduction entitled “‘Avverare la realtà’ Letteratura e orizzonte politico’, wondered:

Come si può esercitare una funzione politica e di critica culturale se è impossibile collocarsi fuori rispetto al sistema, se il tardo capitalismo, come suggerisce Jameson, ha annullato qualunque distinzione tra struttura e sovrastruttura e dunque l’ideologia (ovvero l’unica rimasta: il mercato) è la forma stessa della realtà, l’unico modo in cui la realtà diventa pensabile ed esperibile? Come si può sostenere e praticare il «ritorno alla realtà» in un mondo che produce una sistematica commistione tra vero e falso, dove è la tecnologia, come ha scritto Don DeLillo, che «fa avverare la realtà», un mondo tanto appassionato del reale quanto incapace di cogliere (ed eventualmente decostruire) lo statuto proprio di miti e finzioni? Non sarà solo un comprensibile

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2017); Gianluca Gardini, *La regola dell’informazione. L’era della post-verità* (Turin: Giappichelli, 2017); Giuseppe Riva, *Fake News. Vivere e sopravvivere in un mondo post-verità* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018); Luciano Canova, *Galileo Reloaded. Il metodo scientifico nell’era della post-verità* (Milan: Egea, 2018). In addition to this, I will mention an interesting series of articles on the topic of post-truth by scholars, writers, and journalists such as Chiara Cappelletto, Gianfranco Marrone, Nello Barile and Nunzio La Fauci, which can be found on the site of the literary blog Doppio Zero at the link: <https://www.doppiozero.com/speciale/post-verita> (accessed on 14 November 2021).

<sup>33</sup> Carla Benedetti, *Disumane lettere. Indagini sulla cultura della nostra epoca* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2010), p. 61.

<sup>34</sup> This is the subject of two books published a few years apart and taking almost opposite positions: on the one hand, Romano Luperini professes the need to return to a strong idea of the figure of the intellectual as an authority on collective cultural and social life; Romano Luperini, *La fine del postmoderno* (Naples: Guida, 2005). On the other, Pierpaolo Antonello affirms the need to abandon the outdated notion of the intellectual-legislator; Pierpaolo Antonello, *Dimenticare Pasolini. Intellettuali e impegno nell’Italia contemporanea* (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Raffaele Donnarumma, ‘Nuovi realismi e persistenze postmoderne: narratori italiani di oggi’ in ‘Ritorno alla realtà? Narrativa e cinema alla fine del postmoderno’, ed. by Raffaele Donnarumma, Gilda Policastro, Giovanna Taviani and Daniele Vicari, *Allegoria*, 57 (2008), 26-54.



ma velleitario wishful thinking? Non cadremo di nuovo nei tranelli mimetici di un organismo astuto e darwiniano, che muta alcune forme superficiali per adattarsi alle circostanze?<sup>36</sup>

I believe it is safe to state that these matters take on a more cogent urgency against the backdrop of the post-truth turn. In my opinion, it is legitimate to reflect on how the current transformations and the awareness of the shift in cultural conditions affect the appraisal of the elements at stake. In other words, it is vital to tune these kinds of enquiries to the current climate and to reflect the question, as Nele Wynants does, on what the role of literature or fiction might still be

[a]t a time when fake news, alternative facts, and infotainment undermine the integrity of politics and the media? What is the place of the imagination in how we understand and create the reality around us? What is the notion of truth that underlines this work?<sup>37</sup>

In chapter two, I will deal with these matters, taking into account one decisive factor: the proximity to the elements under examination and the very premise of a post-truth condition require a cautious attitude that takes into account the overwhelming contradictions at stake. More precisely, this requires a propensity to address aspects concerning the political role of literature and narrative without giving in to overly judgmental stances.

Finally, considering Italy as a relevant case study to examine the room for literary commitment and cultural agency in the age of post-truth allowed me to fulfil a double task. On the one hand, as I do in the second part of chapter two, it permits me to proceed in a centripetal manner and to assume a connection between the particular Italian case and the global one. More specifically, the aim is to propose formulas that allow fiction to stimulate both emotional and intellectual participation in readers. With my work, I seek to underline the importance of a cultural bottom-up approach, of confronting new technologies, of coming to terms with a different and less elitist conception of the cultural and publishing industry, and with the now clear signs of a new anthropological revolution. From this point of view, scrutinising post-truth helps to better understand the terms of the model of ‘impegno

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<sup>36</sup> Silvia Albertazzi, Federico Bertoni, Emanuela Piga, Luca Raimondi, and Giacomo Tinelli, “Avverare la realtà” Letteratura e orizzonte politico’, *Between*, 10 (2015), p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> Nele Wynants (ed.), *When Fact is Fiction. Documentary Art in the Post-Truth Era* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2020).

3.0' formulated by Antonello.<sup>38</sup> In this case, it is not a matter of somehow emphasising a rather dubious centrality of 'Italianness' in a now definitively globalised context, as Kate Willman reproaches Italian authors such as Wu Ming of doing.<sup>39</sup> Rather, it means acknowledging that today's interconnectedness is flattening the barriers between the centre and the periphery, as far as cultural dynamics are concerned. Hence, a marginal environment such as the Italian one can still become representative for examining the wider scenario.

On the other hand, this approach brings me to step – as I do in the first part of chapter two – into the more circumscribed framework of the Italian debate mentioned above, in order to deal with issues pertaining mostly to the literary domain. In reviewing the positions expressed in some texts that are central to it – I would add Donnarumma's seminal *Ipermodernità* to those already quoted so far –,<sup>40</sup> I identified and tackled some topics that are crucial to recent Italian criticism and extremely pertinent within the post-truth context. The most compelling one concerns the renewed interest to realism and the hybridisation of narrative forms belonging to fiction and non-fiction, in an attempt to investigate the social world through literature. At the end of the 2000s, in fact, labels were being accumulated in Italy to group together texts characterised by this type of impetus: they ranged from the 'neoneorealismo' coined by Giancarlo De Cataldo to the 'realismo allegorico' of Alberto Casadei, from the 'realismo liquido' by Gregorio Magini and Vanni Santoni to Vittorio Spinazzola's 'New Italian Realism'.<sup>41</sup> Donnarumma has effectively summarised and further expanded on these concepts in his aforementioned essay *Ipermodernità*. By doing so, the scholar illustrates the tendency of contemporary narrative to use hybrid forms that mimic the style of essayistic genres to scrutinise reality in a context where we only access it in a mediated form. However, his work manifests at least one flaw: he postulates – also drawing on the theses of Charles and Lipovetsky –<sup>42</sup> that history has entered a new phase called

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<sup>38</sup> Pierpaolo Antonello, 'Impegno 3.0. Verso una critica partecipativa?', *Between*, 10 (2015).

<sup>39</sup> Kate Willman, *Unidentified Narrative Objects and the New Italian Epic* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2019), p. 29.

<sup>40</sup> Raffaele Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità. Dove va la narrativa contemporanea* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014).

<sup>41</sup> The genesis of these labels can be traced in the following books and articles: Giancarlo De Cataldo, 'Raccontare l'Italia senza avere paura di sporcarsi le mani', *La Repubblica*, 8 June 2018, <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2008/06/08/raccontare-italia-senza-avere-paura-di.090raccontare.html> (accessed on June 2020); Alberto Casadei, 'Realismo e allegoria nella narrativa italiana contemporanea', in *Finzione, Cronaca, Realtà. Scambi e prospettive nella narrativa italiana contemporanea*, ed. by Hanna Serlowska (Massa: Transeuropa, 2011), pp. 3-22; Gregorio Magini and Vanni Santoni, 'Verso un realismo liquido', *Carmilla*, 3 June 2008, <https://www.carmillaonline.com/2008/06/03/verso-il-realismo-liquido/> (accessed on June 2020); Vittorio Spinazzola (ed.), *Il New Italian Realism* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2010).

<sup>42</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005); Sébastien Charles, *L'ipermoderno spiegato ai bambini* (Acireale: Bonanno editore, 2009).

‘hypermodernity’. As I will show in chapter two, this inference raises quite a few doubts. With relation to this aspect, I will make a key point: accepting that post-truth represents a real epochal transition requires questioning the scholar’s theory and deconstructing its foundations.

The second topic I will focus on is the attention paid by critics to matters of historicization. Probably more than elsewhere, Italian intellectuals have endeavoured to define the contemporary era. In this respect, many have decreed the end of postmodernism and tried to understand what followed that cultural period. Before Luperini’s 2005 essay, Alfonso Berardinelli had already written in 1997 on ‘la fine del postmoderno’ and on the entrance into a new era called ‘l’età della mutazione’.<sup>43</sup> What interests me most, in any case, is that often such an approach has led scholars to confront this transitional phase in retrospective rather than prospective terms, i.e. favouring the return to the past rather than making an effort to imagine potential future developments. As stated by Luperini, ‘se il postmoderno non è un’epoca nuova, ma una fase estrema della modernità, non vedo perché ci si debba sorprendere del ritorno di tematiche neomoderniste o tardomoderniste’.<sup>44</sup> A comparable notion is evident in *Allegoria* issue 57’s title itself, ‘Ritorno alla realtà’. Even more clearly Giulio Ferroni claimed in *Dopo la fine* that in our posthumous condition ‘ritrovare in quel passato esaurito una “luce” essenziale per capire e vivere autenticamente il presente, può “salvare” gli aspetti “illuministici” della modernità, il progetto di una vita “civile” razionale e responsabile [...]’.<sup>45</sup>

This tendency to seek shelter in the past brings to the fore another set of remarks that are relevant to my object of study, as the reflection on the ‘end of postmodernism’, which, besides emphasising a certain nostalgia for the paradigms of modernity, also has other revealing implications. At the core of Luperini’s and Donnarumma’s theories lies the idea that the end of postmodernism implies the end of ‘rinuncia alla scrittura politica’ and so the recovery of the notions of ‘impegno’ and ‘militanza’.<sup>46</sup> This inclination among a number of Italian critics to consider postmodernism and political engagement as being at odds with each other has generated an intense debate. Already in a 2009 essay, Florian Mussnug and

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<sup>43</sup> Berardinelli, *Casi critici*, p. 33.

<sup>44</sup> Luperini, *La fine del postmoderno*, p. 11.

<sup>45</sup> Giulio Ferroni, *Dopo la fine. Una letteratura possibile* (Rome: Donzelli, 2010), pp. 137-38.

<sup>46</sup> Donnarumma, ‘Nuovi Realismi’, p. 43.

Pierpaolo Antonello rejected this premise and showed its biased and ideological character;<sup>47</sup> while a few years earlier Berardinelli – who is certainly not an admirer of postmodern principles – stated that ‘non dovrebbero esserci dubbi perciò che il postmoderno non è stata l’invenzione peccaminosa e frivola di alcuni, non è stata una poetica che ha liquidato la serietà angosciata dei moderni per sostituirla con il consumo ludico di forme effimere’.<sup>48</sup>

In chapter two, I will touch on these issues with the purpose of stressing three major points. Firstly, as Kalpokas suggests, post-truth marks a clear break with the paradigms of modernity and requires us to come to terms with this fact.<sup>49</sup> In the light of these considerations, it would be unwise to follow Donnarumma’s theory and linking current age – hypermodernity – to the trajectory of modernity. Secondly, in an era marked by great imbalances and paradoxes, defiance of political and cultural institutions, distrust over the repressive potential of truth, proliferation of means of altering the experience of reality, and in which engaging in meaningful exchange of views is increasingly complex, some of the dogmatic pillars of postmodernism still represent prerequisites for constructive commitment. To put this in the words of Antonello and Mussgnug postmodern ‘pluralism and discursive openness are not an obstacle to progressive politics but its enabling condition’.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, since post-truth regards not only the collective but especially the individual sphere,<sup>51</sup> it is necessary to conceive literary commitment as a shared practice that entails the author-reader relationship, both within and outside the text. In this perspective it is important to pay attention, as I do in chapter two, also to the aspect of circulation and diffusion of editorial products and the mechanisms of text reception. In the latter case it is necessary to place emphasis on the theories coming from the field of cognitive literary studies – in Italy this element has recently been raised by Alberto Casadei and Stefano Calabrese.<sup>52</sup>

In the light of these considerations and recent social and cultural developments, I am confident that undertaking a critical approach that takes up some of the issues that have

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<sup>47</sup> Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug, ‘Introduction’, in *Postmodern Impegno: Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture*, ed. By Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 1-30 (pp. 9-11).

<sup>48</sup> Berardinelli, *Casi critici*, p. 11.

<sup>49</sup> Kalpokas, *A Political Theory of Post-Truth*, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> Antonello and Mussgnug, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> Guy Neave, ‘Foreword: A Vision Unspeakable’, in *Post-Truth, Fake News: Viral Modernity & Higher Education*, ed. by Michael A. Peters, Sharon Rider, Mats Hyvönen, and Tina Besley (Singapore: Springer, 2018), v-xi (p. vii).

<sup>52</sup> Alberto Casadei, *Biologia della letteratura. Corpo, stile, storia* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2018); Stefano Calabrese, *La Fiction e la vita. Lettura, benegraphyossere, salute* (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2017).

emerged within the Italian debate in order to revise them and adapt them to the post-truth developments proves a very productive intellectual enterprise.

### *Towards the Post-Truth Narrative*

In his essay, Ferraris asserts that post-truth is a ‘real social object’, representing the ‘essence of our epoch’.<sup>53</sup> Sharing this standpoint, I am convinced that its dynamics have influenced – and are still influencing – not only the critical debate on literature but also narrative writing practice itself. These are obviously long-term transformations, but it is already possible to detect some significant signs of renovation. In the attempt of grouping them together I coined the label ‘post-truth narrative’. With regards to this, some preliminary clarifications are necessary.

Firstly, post-truth narrative does not represent a specific category or genre of narratives, but rather a deliberately precarious and provisional definition of poetics that seeks to synchronously capture a set of trends and attitudes still in their doing. While it is important to show awareness that many of these may soon change or be abandoned, it is equally relevant to emphasise that they represent the first unsystematic attempts to address far-reaching and tangible changes in our political, epistemological and cultural patterns. Given this, I find it fruitful to engage in a fluid reconstruction, being aware of its fragmentary and incomplete quality. On this respect, I am less interested in the field of historicization and more concerned with aspects more properly related to the domains of literary theory and the sociology of literature.

This choice generates two main consequences in terms of selecting texts that are worth of attention. To start with, it entails following a chronological principle and therefore identifying a time span to be taken into account. Having established that the post-truth era began after 2007, I decided to examine texts written since the 2010s, with a greater focus on those published in the second half of the decade. However, it is obvious that not all books published within that period can be regarded as post-truth narratives. Bearing this in mind, I will employ, formal and thematic criteria. Furthermore, – but I will come back to the first in the following paragraphs –, considering the weight that economic and political instability have had in shaping the conditions of post-truth, I have included them in the range of topics

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<sup>53</sup> Ferraris, *Post-verità e altri enigmi*, p. 10.

under scrutiny. This decision is corroborated by the proliferation in recent years of texts on such subjects. As Stefano Adamo and Tiziano Toracca point out, after the 2008 crisis the number of narrative works focusing on economic decline increased exponentially:<sup>54</sup> their interest ranges from the collapse of manufacturing industry to the general condition of financial instability, to the problems within the world of finance, to job market insecurity. Therefore, the texts investigated in my research touch on corruption within political and economic elites (*Resistere non serve a niente* by Walter Siti);<sup>55</sup> the similarities between current populisms and political ideologies and those from the past (*M. Il figlio del secolo* by Antonio Scurati and *Mio padre la rivoluzione* by Davide Orecchio);<sup>56</sup> the collapse of the capitalist, paternalistic and western-centric model (*Roma negata* by Igiaba Scego and *Flashover. Un incendio a Venezia* by Giorgio Falco);<sup>57</sup> and the investigation of the impact of communication practices on the political sphere (*Veleno. Una storia vera* by Pablo Trincia);<sup>58</sup> the role of technological revolution, news manipulation and disinformation campaigns in shaping contemporary cultural environment (*The game* by Alessandro Baricco, *Q di Qomplotto. QAnon e dintorni. Come le fantasie di complotto difendono il sistema* by Wu Ming 1, and *Gridalo* by Roberto Saviano).<sup>59</sup>

In addressing these arguments, post-truth narratives will perform a twofold task. On the one hand, they will seek to reveal the truth about historical and current events, provoke emotional and intellectual reactions, and stimulate ethical thinking. On the other, they will unmask the artificiality of political discussions, and deconstruct the mechanisms underlying the current information system, fostering scepticism towards the notion of truth and strong ideological orientations.

Inevitably, my approach reveals a prescriptive component, i.e. it does not hide the attempt to put the emphasis on narrative practices that in my opinion best suit the post-truth scenario. At the same time, this aspect is counterbalanced by deploying a descriptive stance that puts texts at the forefront and tries to draw insights from novels themselves. As the concept of

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<sup>54</sup> Stefano Adamo and Tiziano Toracca, 'Introduzione', in 'Letteratura e economia nell'Italia degli anni Duemila', *Narrativa*, 42 (2021), 7-24 (p. 7).

<sup>55</sup> Walter Siti, *Resistere non serve a niente* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2012).

<sup>56</sup> Antonio Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo* (Milan: Bompiani, 2018); Davide Orecchio, *Mio padre la rivoluzione* (Rome: Minimum Fax, 2017).

<sup>57</sup> Igiaba Scego and Rino Bianchi, *Roma città negata. Percorsi postcoloniali nella città* (Perugia: Futura, 2014); Giorgio Falco, *Flashover. Un incendio a Venezia* (Turin: Einaudi, 2020).

<sup>58</sup> Pablo Trincia, *Veleno. Una storia vera* (Turin: Einaudi, 2019).

<sup>59</sup> Alessandro Baricco, *The game* (Turin: Einaudi, 2019); Wu Ming 1, *Q di Qomplotto. QAnon e dintorni. Come le fantasie di complotto difendono il sistema* (Rome: Edizioni Alegre, 2021); Roberto Saviano, *Gridalo* (Milan: Bompiani, 2020).

post-truth narrative represents a very nuanced and still developing one, I am convinced that, in order to delineate it, is essential to start from textual analysis and then formulate a theory rather than the other way around.

Finally, when scrutinising the texts to be included in this work, I ended up mostly choosing works by male and white authors. This fact should not lead to the conclusion that post-truth narrative replicates the conditions of cultural hegemony. This problem, as Kate Willman very correctly pointed out with regard to Wu Ming's *New Italian Epic*, marks a long-standing deficiency in Italian fiction that reflects an uneven and unequal situation.<sup>60</sup> On my part, this aspect depends on totally unconditional choices dictated by a practical point of view. The choice fell on male and white authors probably because they make up the vast majority of the authors present on the Italian narrative scene, and therefore in some way my work has also ended up absorbing this disparity. Since the post-truth narrative is not a genre and does not refer to a specific group of authors but to a fluid range of narrative and stylistic strategies born in relation to the surrounding political and cultural framework, it is by its nature transversal in all respects. My interest in this work was to outline a working method and to find a set of parameters that would translate into practice the notions I have elaborated at a conceptual and theoretical level.

### ***Structure and Organization***

The term post-truth narrative was functional to me because it contains *in nuce* both the main elements around which my research revolves and that I have discussed up to this point: the signs of an undercurrent epochal turns and a typology of literary texts. Bringing these two elements together demands a broad critical perspective and an interdisciplinary approach. Therefore, especially in chapters one and two of this research, I engaged with different disciplines in the attempt to account for a wide range of phenomena that are undoubtedly interlinked but whose connections are yet to be understood and further explored. In setting up this argument I have accepted and established two basic premises. The first is that, as I have already repeated several times, post-truth is more than a word for the dissemination of false and fictitious claims: it is the apex phase of a long-term restructuring process of global political and cultural arrangements. The second is that the

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<sup>60</sup> Willman, *Unidentified Narrative Objects*, pp. 11-12.

novel, more than many other cultural objects, is the suitable tool to deal with this changing state of things. In advancing this latter consideration I start from Guido Mazzoni's claim that novel is

[...] il genere in cui si può raccontare qualsiasi storia in qualsiasi modo. Si può narrare la molteplicità illimitata delle forme di vita reali o possibili, interne o esterne alle coscienze, e al tempo stesso si può adottare qualunque stile, dispiegando così la varietà dell'immaginazione soggettiva.<sup>61</sup>

With this in mind, it is legitimate to assume that narrative has endeavoured to digest and deconstruct the great upheavals taking place in the last decade.

In chapter one of this work, I deal with circumscribing post-truth and its related features. In the first part, I deal with the more political aspects that have generated the current climate of mistrust and dissatisfaction. The double crisis affecting democratic processes and the system of capitalism has paved the way for a transitional phase that is still continuing today and is far from coming to a resolution. Drawing on recent studies in economics, political science, philosophy and sociology, I show that the premises of relentless growth advanced by globalisation and the capitalist system were not fulfilled. As a consequence, the uncertainty about the future, the lack of trust in institutional truths, and traditional gatekeepers has found very fertile ground. This has caused the spread of the populist political style and the practices of post-trust politics that I discuss in the second section. In the current context, the use of disinformation and emotional political campaigns have become widespread strategies in the world – including Italy.

In the third section, I look in more detail at the contradictory aspect that constitutes post-truth, suggesting the need for a neutral and detached standpoint when tackling it. In doing so, I give space both to the position of those who see in the current political developments the sign of a possible authoritarian decline and the suppression of pluralism, and others who instead envisage the emancipatory property that is implicated in the questioning of the status quo. In addition, in this section I compare two theoretical approaches: the one of those who look with regret at the dismantling of the paradigms of modernity and those who instead foresee positive future outcomes.

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<sup>61</sup> Guido Mazzoni, *Teoria del romanzo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), p. 29.



In order to overcome this diatribe, in the last two sections I propose a pragmatic reading of the post-truth turn. In the first, I exploit findings in communication studies and media studies to examine the effects that new technologies have today over all aspects of collective and individual life. In the second, I investigate – adopting theories from the fields of cognitive studies and psychology – how the latter interact with our cognitive system and mental biases and produce a far-reaching anthropological turn.

Once I have clarified what elements are at stake in relation to post-truth from a social standpoint, in Chapter two I address the factors more closely pertaining to the sphere of literature. As already mentioned, this step entails a narrowing of focus: more general and transnational analyses have been carried out here alongside the examination of the literary debate and narrative production in the Italian context. Hence, I dedicate the first section of the second chapter to retracing the fundamental stages of the Italian debate on narrative commitment, the social role of intellectuals and writers, the new forms of narrative realism, and the way in which writing itself interacts with the mediatic landscape of the third millennium. In doing so, I have selected a number of key texts that well represent the crucial nodes of the ongoing discussion, including those by Raffaele Donnarumma, Wu Ming, Carla Benedetti and Pierpaolo Antonello.

Among these, I pay particular attention to Donnarumma's *Ipermodernità*, since in this essay the scholar engages with a triple effort that is very significant in the framework of my research. First, he historicizes the literary shifts of the last decades – not only from an Italian perspective – in order to periodise the postmodern phase and finally suggest its ultimate overcoming. Second, he produces a sociological reading that examines narrative production against the backdrop of recent political renovations. Finally, he offers a catalogue of more specifically stylistic and formal traits, evaluating them on the basis of their ethical and political function. This kind of approach and also the conclusion that leads it to decree the passage to a new historical and cultural phase – hypermodernity –, although with substantial differences in the initial premises, reveals many points of contact with my research aims and methods. The idea that emerges is that Donnarumma's critical findings are still a good place to start for examining the role of narrative in the political setting of post-truth. However, in the lights of recent developments it is fundamental to revise and readjust those conclusions.

The third section outlines a model of cultural and literary agency that is functional to the post-truth era. It involves bottom-up forms of engagement that focus on the relationship between author and audience and the need to encourage scepticism about both easy political assumptions and truths conveyed by media.

In the last two sections I sketch, through the examination of a significant range of texts, some of the key features of the post-truth narrative. By looking at recent novels by Giorgio Falco, Pablo Trincia, Igiaba Scego, Daniele Zito,<sup>62</sup> I give an idea of the crucial elements through which political commitment is effectively developed today. Among the various writers, particular attention is given to Roberto Saviano and his latest work *Gridalo*. This is because, Saviano being a leading figure in the national and international discourse on committed literature and its possible formulas, the way in which he alternated between hybrid and purely fictional forms of fiction in his career is particularly meaningful: it offers an interesting overview of the forms in which political and social discourse and analysis can be conducted using the devices of literature.

The last two chapters proceed along the same path and deepen the reflection on the post-truth narrative through the close and more detailed reading of narrative works. In making my selections – clearly discretionary – my choice fell on two macro-categories, including three novels in each of them. The first chapter takes into account texts dealing with historical truths using the reconstruction of past events as a key to interpret the present. The rationale that led me to include Wu Ming's *La banda dei sonnambuli*,<sup>63</sup> Antonio Scurati's *M. Il figlio del secolo*, and Davide Orechio's *Mio padre la rivoluzione* is determined by the fact that these three texts and authors, when examined together, propose a mixture of stylistic devices, thematic choices and theoretical reflections that are in perfect harmony with the idea of bottom-up cultural commitment proposed in chapter two.

The three authors revise, each in their own way, the notion of historical novel and move away from mimetism and verisimilitude that were typical traits of the genre's tradition. Rather than restoring an unambiguous truth about the past, the three authors endeavour to deconstruct its previous attestations. In *La banda dei sonnambuli*, Wu Ming use historical material mould through fiction to offer alternative scenarios. In doing so, the collective produces a form of writing that suggests political considerations about the contemporary political condition, but at the same time attenuates its peremptoriness through irony, metafiction and fluid focalization. In *M. Il figlio del secolo* Antonio Scurati recounts the years of fascism. By making the unusual choice of adopting Mussolini's point of view, he creates a destabilising effect in his readers: the author creates identification with the protagonist, while at the same time, through an ironic subtext, he exposes the dangers

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<sup>62</sup> The titles of the novels in question have been mentioned above, with the exception of Daniele Zito, *Robledo* (Rome: Fazi, 2017).

<sup>63</sup> Wu Ming, *La banda dei sonnambuli* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014).

inherent in this behaviour. Finally, with *Mio padre la rivoluzione*, Davide Orecchio deconstructs and reassembles, through a dystopian use of historical sources and sophisticated narrative and intertextual stratagems, the meaning and values of the October Revolution. The ethical and political tension of the text is balanced by an alienating and contrastive narrative style.

The fourth and final chapter examines texts that use first-person narratives to address contemporary political issues. In doing so, I opted for *Resistere non serve a niente* by Walter Siti, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* by Giorgio Falco,<sup>64</sup> and *Reality. Cosa è successo* by Giuseppe Genna.<sup>65</sup> The logic informing this decision lies in the importance of the stratagems through which these writers take the floor to make judgement on topical issues, in a world that is progressively losing faith in the mediating role played by intellectuals. In other words, these first-person narratives employ sophisticated narrative devices to disguise overt stances when conveying political messages and considerations. Testimony and direct experience, in the texts under review, do not function as a safeguard of truth and reliability to the facts, but rather encourage doubt and scepticism, both towards the events narrated and the narrator. As I show in chapter two, this attitude is closely confronted with the very dynamics of the post-truth world.

In order to achieve the effects just mentioned, Walter Siti stages a dialogue between his fictitious alter ego and an invented character who is informed about the way relations between the worlds of politics and economics work. The book offers the reconstruction of real facts, but in doing so it declares its unreliability and the partiality of its own conclusions. Giorgio Falco creates an autobiographical work in which he describes the employment market in Italy starting from his subjective point of view and personal experience. If the text paints a precise picture of the working condition in Italy, this is only possible by renouncing the aseptic dialectic of journalistic language and by establishing an emotional and individual exchange with his readers through narrative. Finally, Giuseppe Genna uses fiction to dismantle from within the mechanisms through which the media describe real events within today's society of spectacle. In *Reality*, he recounts in the first person the events concerning the Covid-19 pandemic. In doing so, however, he nullifies the testimonial value of the narrative voice, which is confined to commenting on pieces of discourse produced by the media.

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<sup>64</sup> Giorgio Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* (Turin: Einaudi, 2017).

<sup>65</sup> Giuseppe Genna, *Reality. Cosa è successo* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2020).

A close reading of these texts reveals two key elements with regard to the post-truth poetics. It illustrates a series of thematic choices and rhetorical and stylistic devices that constitute it – from irony to metafiction, from the use of shifting or unusual points of view to the downplaying of the function of narrator and narrative itself. In addition, it outlines a possible critical methodology through which to engage with narrative texts when the aim is to assess their political relevance within the paradoxical cultural framework generated by post-truth.

With this extensive layout and an interdisciplinary approach ranging from political science to literary and textual analysis, the aim of this research is to capture the extent of a rapid and vast cultural change by examining it in the light of its impact on narrative. Furthermore, by focusing on the way this evolution has been introjected and processed by Italian literary criticism, I will suggest a revision and a renewal of the parameters that the latter one has adopted in recent decades. Finally, in doing so, I lay the foundations for a contemporary scholarly approach that can be extended to other narrative strands and domains other than the purely literary one.

## ~ CHAPTER ONE ~

### **Political and Cultural Implications of Post-Truth**

Post-truth is a very complex term and difficult to interpret unambiguously. As already pointed out in the introduction to this research, it is used in everyday language as an adjective to designate false or manipulated pieces of information. In academic circles, on the other hand, the term is applied to condense a wide range of political and cultural transformations that have profoundly affected previous social arrangements and will have enormous consequences in the future. In this chapter I will analyse in more detail the substance of this framework, taking a closer look at the changes that affect ongoing political and economic processes, as the restructuring of democratic dynamics, the relationship between post-truth and postmodernism, and the impact of new technologies on our cognitive and epistemological models. The rationale behind this approach is that the scope of this socio-cultural restructuring is such that it affects all fields of human relations, including art and literature. Broadly speaking, then, this chapter lays the foundations for many of the considerations that will follow in the subsequent chapters.

#### ***Cracks in the Castle of Glass: Failures of Democracy and Capitalism***

From a political and economic perspective, contemporary political structures look less solid and prosperous than they seem at first glance. The end of history that according to Francis Fukuyama followed the fall of the Berlin wall is far from being accomplished.<sup>66</sup> Democratic systems are cracked not only by the devious use of new propaganda methods by political parties: the decline of democracy is also due to the concentration of power in the hands of few influential elites. In addition, capitalism and globalization have failed to fulfil

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<sup>66</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

their promises of perpetual economic growth and fair distribution of wealth. In the next lines, I will expand on these topics, briefly surveying the current situation in which democracy and economic expansion stand side by side with their nemeses.

In 2015 Eduardo Mendieta recovered the concept of ‘post-democracy’ elaborated by Colin Crouch ten years earlier.<sup>67</sup> Crouch argued that liberal democracies (globally, even though he primarily focuses on Western countries) are experiencing an unprecedented form of perversion: in many States, while the system of government is still formally democratic – in the sense that parliamentary representatives are appointed through free elections and political programs are decided by public polls – it is actually manipulated by external agents strong enough to penetrate any nook and cranny of policy-making.<sup>68</sup> A similar thesis was also advanced by Zygmunt Bauman when he claimed that power has now sailed away from the street and government to the ‘extraterritoriality of electronic networks’ or to global elites able to escape local commitments and avoid considering local necessities.<sup>69</sup>

According to Mendieta, the pillars of Crouch’s theory are still valid today. In his view, four elements cooperate in weakening democratic mechanisms around the world: the spread of global firms and the creation of strong and powerful economic monopolies; the disappearance, in post-industrial societies and service economies, of social classes and social struggle; the transformations occurring inside political parties, corrupted by highly pressure groups; the commercialization of citizenship, which moves citizens’ attention away from political activities.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, to put it in Dussel’s terms, the link between *potentia* (the capacity of people to operate instances of sovereignty) and *potestas* (the concrete manifestation of that potential) has been slowly dismantled.<sup>71</sup> Ultimately, the main effect is to render democratic systems unfit for purpose: democracies wholly failing in their principle to ‘to create the conditions for happiness’.<sup>72</sup>

This chain of factors has huge political consequences. Slavoj Žižek claimed that it creates a diffused and chronic political disengagement, whereas in Appadurai’s and Castell’s view, the capacity of people respectively to aspire and invent their future has been dramatically reduced.<sup>73</sup> A similar opinion is also shared by Pankaj Mishra, who highlights the importance

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<sup>67</sup> Eduardo Mendieta, ‘Post-Democracy: From the Depoliticisation of Citizens to the Political Automata of Perpetual War’, *Juncture*, 22 (2015), 204-209.

<sup>68</sup> Colin Crouch, *Post-democracy* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2004).

<sup>69</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 40.

<sup>70</sup> Mendieta, ‘Post-Democracy’.

<sup>71</sup> Enrique Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 17.

<sup>72</sup> Augé, *The Future*, p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as a Cultural Fact* (London: Verso, 2013).

Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

of *ressentiment* as a distinguishing trait of the twenty-first century. According to Mishra, at the core of contemporary citizen's relation with their time stands the idea that the present order has been built 'on force and fraud' more than on equality and justice.<sup>74</sup>

Moving to the issue of economic imbalance and inequality, it is worth referring back to the economic crash of 2007-08. As suggested by Veltri and Caterino, the subprime mortgage crisis and the recession that followed it bolstered the current populist rhetoric (as I will discuss in the next section) and nourished the kind of emotional politics described in the introduction to my work.<sup>75</sup> In many ways, this episode represents a decisive point in contemporary political history, shaping the years to come. However, it is essential to recognise that it was the tip of the iceberg: the almost inevitable climax in an already unstable course of events. The French economist Thomas Piketty opens his essay *Le Capital au XXie siècle* stating that in Western economies the distribution of economic resources in the last thirty years has been extremely uneven and therefore the gap between the wealthy and the less wealthy has widened considerably.<sup>76</sup> The scholar shows that in the richest and most industrialized Western countries, inequality of incomes in 2010 had returned to the level of disparity seen in 1920.<sup>77</sup> Piketty's findings are supported by another capital study undertaken recently by the Serbian-American economist Branko Milanovic; the result of his work is a scheme better known as the 'elephant chart'. Milanovic's research clearly illustrates that the vast majority of income generated from 1988 to 2008 was concentrated in the hands of a small minority of the population: the richest 1%.<sup>78</sup> This concentration of financial growth has fed privileged elites, further increasing their capacity to compromise the functioning of democratic systems.

The figures given above demonstrate that the economic development of the past three decades produced a very small number of real winners and a vast multitude of subjects who are condemned to play the role of losers, or who are excluded from the game entirely. Bauman had already described this gloomy social panorama almost two decades ago, when he adapted Pierre Bourdieu's definition of 'precariousness'. In Bauman's view a social context such as the current one, in which the quality of life is disproportionately dependent

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<sup>74</sup> Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger* (London: Penguin, 2017).

<sup>75</sup> Caterino and Veltri, *Fuori dalla bolla*, p. 14.

<sup>76</sup> Thomas Piketty, *Le Capital au XXie siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2013). I will quote the book from the Italian edition: Piketty, *Il capitale del XXI secolo* (Milan: Bompiani, 2016), pp. 45-48.

<sup>77</sup> Piketty, *Il capitale del XXI secolo*, p. 48.

<sup>78</sup> Drew Desilver, 'Chart of the week: how two decades of globalization have changed the world', *Pew Research Center*, 24 January 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/01/24/chart-of-the-week-how-two-decades-of-globalization-have-changed-the-world/> (accessed on 14 October 2021).

on an inaccessible financial stability, drives more and more citizens to assume a materialistic approach to things.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, in a period characterised by a high unemployment rate and economic recession, this sense of precarity and existential apathy is perceived as a pervasive circumstance, as an article by the director of Global Economic Attitudes at the Pew Research Center, Bruce Stokes, demonstrates.<sup>80</sup>

This sense of anxiety, frustration, and anger, among the people has set the mood for contemporary political communication and shaped a paradoxical situation in which democratic practices pave the way to undemocratic conditions. More in detail, the attempt to generate inclusiveness and to voice people's frustration has often been turned into a strategy for silencing open-minded, pluralistic and constructive debate, with some political parties using the current state of frustration to their advantage.<sup>81</sup> In the following paragraphs I will discuss what probably is the most notable sign of such a trend, and consequently a predominant element within the frame of post-truth politics: the spread of populist political attitudes.

### ***Populism as the Endemic Feature of Post-Truth Politics***

In a recent essay, Benjamin Moffitt identifies the initial part of the new millennium as 'the time of populism',<sup>82</sup> based on the fact that a conspicuous number of political actors – dubbed 'populists' – have entered the political scene *en masse* in the last years. Even limiting our scrutiny to the European landscape such a rise is outstanding: between 2010 and 2020 populist parties such as UKIP in United Kingdom, the Front National in France, Podemos in Spain and the Lega and the Five Star Movement in Italy all dramatically increased their number of seats in parliament and expanded their influence over national policies. In

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<sup>79</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *La società individualizzata* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2002), p.186.

<sup>80</sup> Bruce Stokes, 'Europe's Unemployment conundrum', *Pew Research Center*, 31 May 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/05/31/europes-unemployment-conundrum/> (accessed on 11 May, 2021).

<sup>81</sup> To provide some evidence of such an eruption of anger and frustration among people, it is possible to make a brief and inconclusive list of some of the social and political movement that recently thrived from the actual state of things: Occupy Wall Street in the US; Podemos in Spain; the 'Vaffa Days' in Italy (Fuck off days), which eventually evolved into the Five Stars Movement; Syriza in Greece with its strong protests against European austerity.

<sup>82</sup> Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), p. 1.

Sven Engesser and others make similar observations in 'Populism and Social Media: How Politicians Spread a Fragmented Ideology', *Information Communication and Society*, 20 (2017), 1109-26 (p. 1109).



addition, in 2016, the success of the Brexit campaign and the election of Donald Trump highlighted an increasingly powerful demagogic element in political debates all around the world. As a consequence, Ilvo Diamanti and Mark Lazar noted that the words ‘populism’ and ‘populists’ ‘si sono affermate un po’ ovunque nel mondo’.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, the rise of populisms embodies a deep and extensive change of habit in the way the sphere of politics is perceived, interpreted and practised. As claimed by Diamanti and Lazar, populism stands in between the current democratic crisis and the total refusal of politics (‘antipolitica’). In virtue of this, populism is, ‘espressione e vettore di metamorfosi forse fondamentali delle nostre democrazie, quantomeno in Europa’.<sup>84</sup>

This seems to me the right juncture in which to make the key point as to why it is worth paying some attention to the phenomenon of populism within my research framework. On the one hand, populism is a symptom of a progressive political, social and economic decline; on the other, political actors defined as populists have in a sense fuelled the cultural context that we now refer to as post-truth. It is therefore essential to examine the phenomenon in order to highlight its complexity and wide-ranging effects.

One of the crucial problems when investigating populism is that the label refers to political actors and movements that are very different one from the other, in terms of political agenda, system of beliefs and historical background. As a matter of fact, it is employed to designate the Tea Party and Donald Trump in America, the Podemos movement in Spain, Victor Orban in Hungary, the Front National in France, the Five Star Movement in Italy, to give some instances.<sup>85</sup> On such grounds, trying to present a definitive picture that applies to all of its forms could easily turn into an arduous endeavour that would go beyond the purpose of this research. Nonetheless, it is possible to outline some common traits. A recent study by Groshek and Koc-Michalska suggests that populist movements tend to rely on charismatic leaders, sensationalistic political speeches and antagonistic rhetoric, oversimplification of social issues, and a devious use of means of communication for propaganda purposes.<sup>86</sup> By exploiting these resources, populist actors draw on people’s anger and frustration in order to build up successful narrative strategies. One of the most

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<sup>83</sup> Ilvo Diamanti and Marc Lazar, *Popolocrazia. La metamorfosi della nostra democrazia* (Bari: Laterza, 2018).

<sup>84</sup> Diamanti and Lazar, *Popolocrazia*, p. 8.

<sup>85</sup> Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, pp. 10-11.  
Diamanti and Lazar, *Popolocrazia*, pp. 65-83.

<sup>86</sup> Jacob Groshek and Karolina Koc-Michalska, ‘Helping Populism Win? Social Media Use, Filter Bubbles, and Support for Populist Presidential Candidates in the 2016 Election Campaign’, *Communication and Society*, 20 (2017), 1389- 1407 (pp. 1401-02).

effective strategies is to exacerbate polarization within today's societies, by portraying social relationships as a struggle between binary forces: the good vs the evil, insiders vs outsiders, 'leavers' vs 'remainers', pro-Trump vs anti-Trump. In fewer words they tend to dichotomically group social differences into a *us vs you* or *us vs them* scheme.<sup>87</sup> This interpretation of social relations serves to produce a symbolic narrative in which populist players are portrayed as champions of the people, protecting them from the technocratic elite.<sup>88</sup> they speak and act on behalf of the abused majority defending it from the abusive minority. Ultimately, these strategies cut off intermediators from public debate: old-style political leaders, traditional institutions, intellectuals, journalists, scientists, and academics are portrayed as part of the corrupt and technocratic elite that orchestrates against the will of the people.<sup>89</sup>

In relation to our concern with post-truth, it is essential to emphasise that the spreading of subjective and emotionally overcharged politics is facilitated by contemporary information systems. As Moffitt stresses, today's dissemination of populism is to locate within 'the shifting of global media landscape'.<sup>90</sup> In fact, as pointed out by other scholars in the field, new communication technologies – in particular social media – are designed to facilitate the dissemination of this type of oversimplified and biased content.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, they offer several advantageous features: they make it easy to reach vast numbers of voters; they discourage the activation of fact-checking or any other screening process; they facilitate the emergence of new opinion leaders; they create the illusion of a direct link between political stakeholders and common people.<sup>92</sup>

On the broader effects of the communication revolution, I shall say more in the following sections, for now it will suffice to assert that populism is not *per se* a part of the post-truth landscape, as it constitutes a permanent element in modern politics. It is a 'political style', which, as Moffitt further explains, includes 'the repertoires of embodied and symbolically mediated performance made to audience that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to

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<sup>87</sup> Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, p. 44.

A similar point is raised in Kirk A. Hawkins and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, 'The Ideational Approach to Populism', *Latin American Research Review*, 52 (2017), 513-28 (p. 514).

<sup>88</sup> Engesser and others, 'Populism and Social Media', p. 1122.

<sup>89</sup> Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, pp. 45-47.

<sup>90</sup> Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, p. 12.

<sup>91</sup> Patrick R. Miller and others, 'Talking Politics on Facebook: Network Centrality and Political Discussion Practices in Social Media', *Political Research Quarterly*, 68 (2015), 377-91.

Groshek and Koc-Michalska, 'Helping Populism Win?'

<sup>92</sup> Engesser and others, 'Populism and Social Media', p.1122.

everyday life'.<sup>93</sup> Following this line of thought, I maintain that the novel element in the post-truth age is the extent to which populist practices have spread across the entire spectrum of current politics, becoming an endemic state. To put it again in Moffitt's words, populism emphasises the 'empirical shift in how politics operates in the contemporary world', namely in a context that is progressively becoming 'more "stylised" and "spectacular" as a result of the pressure of mediatization'.<sup>94</sup> More and more political parties have faced the challenges of this social and cultural shift, in which voters have switched from being 'clients' or 'consumers' – according to economic theories of democracy by Schumpeter and Downs – to 'spectators' who expect to be entertained and amused'.<sup>95</sup>

Despite the rapid acceleration brought about by the current economic and social difficulties, as well as by new media, this transition did not happen overnight. As Sara Ahmed has already shown, the political information system of the last decades has been imbued with sensationalist statements that focus on the emotional side of the audience.<sup>96</sup> Ahmed examined a number of political advertisements and articles from different countries and all kinds of political movements, noticing a widespread tendency to rely on sentimentally charged utterances that eclipsed the facts behind a curtain of dramatic and angry outbursts. In her view, this strategy aims to affect the audience's perception of reality, forcing it 'to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous'.<sup>97</sup>

The trajectory of Italian politics over the last three decades aligns with the picture described above. As Diamanti and Lazar argue, the Italian case is marked by the political activity of the entrepreneur Silvio Berlusconi and his 'discesa in campo' in 1994, when – taking advantage of the Tangentopoli scandal that had swept away the vast majority of the protagonists of the so-called 'Prima Repubblica' – he created his own party, Forza Italia.<sup>98</sup> At the turn of the century, Berlusconi's original form of populism reshuffled Italian politics and catalysed the attention of public opinion, dividing it into rivals and supporters: in this merely oppositional configuration of social pattern, the only truth that matters is the one aligned with one's beliefs. By doing so, Berlusconi paved the way for future epigones.<sup>99</sup> In the final stage of Berlusconi's political career, new actors entered the scene like the Lega and the Five Star Movement, following the trail blazed by Berlusconi, adapting and

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<sup>93</sup> Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, p. 44.

<sup>94</sup> Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, p. 44.

<sup>95</sup> Diamanti and Lazar, *Popolocrazia*, p. 82.

<sup>96</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

<sup>97</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 3.

<sup>98</sup> Diamanti and Lazar, *Popolocrazia*, p. 83.

<sup>99</sup> Diamanti and Lazar, *Popolocrazia*, p. 83.

upgrading his formula to the digital era, finding new enemies and new – and more powerful – media outlets and communication strategies to spread their messages across the Italian electorate.<sup>100</sup> They found new foes to blame and to stand against: immigrants and the European Union in the case of Lega, and ‘the casta’<sup>101</sup> in the case of Five Star Movement.

This brief and fragmentary reconstruction serves to make the point that today, a clear-cut separation of populist from non-populist players is impossible, as the whole system and the same applies to other countries – is now permeated by this new political style.

### *The Paradox of Being ‘Beyond Good and Evil’*

The two aspects dealt with in the two previous sections – the economic and social crisis marking the first decades of the twenty-first century and the spread and final assimilation of the populist style in the political mainstream. converge, as we have already seen, in raising the alarm about the current state of democracy. Opinions expressed in academic literature form two contrasting poles, which are once again well summarised in Moffitt’s study: on the one hand, there are those who see populism as ‘a dangerous “outside” of democracy’, i.e., as a disturbing element which threatens social stability and political harmony; on the other hand, there are those who envisage in populism a political movement aiming to change things for the better.<sup>102</sup>

Scholars of the former orientation share the idea of populists as a dangerous force, leading ‘uncontrollable crowds’ that are to be ‘viewed with fear and concern’.<sup>103</sup> As a result, some academics tend to associate populism with the rise of totalitarian political movements. For instance, Anne Applebaum shows that authoritarianism is on the rise in the Western world, as more and more illiberal parties are winning elections with political programmes and communication campaigns that explicitly target minorities and ethnic groups. The main

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<sup>100</sup> The link between the political style born after Tangentopoli and the forces defined as populist in Italy today is highlighted by Bertjan Verbeek and Andrija Zaslavski in ‘Italy: A Case of Mutating Populism’, *Democratization*, 23 (2017), 304-23.

The new form of populism introduced in Italy by the Five Star Movement, which has managed to replace the propaganda opportunities offered by the old media with those generated by new technologies, has been analysed by Loris Caruso in ‘Digital Capitalism and the End of Politics: The Case of the Italian Five Star Movement’, *Politics & Society*, 45 (2017), 585-609.

<sup>101</sup> This label came into common use in Italy after being used by journalists Sergio Rizzo and Gian Antonio Stella to designate a corrupt political elite indifferent to the problems of ordinary people: Sergio Rizzo and Gian Antonio Stella, *La casta. Così i politici italiani sono diventati intoccabili* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2007).

<sup>102</sup> Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, p. 139.

<sup>103</sup> Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, p. 139.

strategy of these parties is to use deceit and foment anger, in order to build consensus and sideline political opponents.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, Federico Finchelstein underlines the *trait d'union* that binds modern populism to fascism, through an attentive historical scrutiny and a globe-wide investigation.<sup>105</sup> Finchelstein is also careful to stress some crucial differences between the two: unlike fascism and socialism, populists' vision legitimises power not by mythical foundations, but rather through electoral procedures. Therefore, Finchelstein concludes that 'historically located somewhere between fascism and liberalism, populism, when it finally became a regime, constantly drew on the residue of the former to challenge the latter. At the same time, it continued to engage in democratic electoral processes'.<sup>106</sup>

On the contrary, academics of the second orientation mentioned above envisage in populism a positive phenomenon. As Thomas Piketty claims in *Vive le populisme*, 'Le populisme n'est rien d'autre qu'une réponse confuse mais légitime au sentiment d'abandon des classes populaires des pays développés face à la mondialisation et la montée des inégalités'.<sup>107</sup> The scholar understands populism as the catalyst for the resentment caused by the unfair implementation of democratic practices – and this sentiment is particularly widespread among the populations of wealthier, more democratic countries. In fact, as Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels explain, drawing on the findings of the 2014 World Values Survey, there is a big gap 'between attachment to democracy as an ideal and perception of democratic reality'.<sup>108</sup> At the same time, the Achen and Bartels acknowledge that part of the problem lies in a lack of interest on the part of voters; they draw on statistical data to show that 'a majority of citizens pay little attention to politics' turning elections into 'random events'.<sup>109</sup> On this basis, the idea of populism as a positive force for the well-being of democracy seems quite solid: by making politics more attractive and bringing it closer to the people, it becomes 'a way to enfranchise' and engage them.<sup>110</sup> This scholarly conception

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<sup>104</sup> Anne Applebaum, *The Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020). In her essay, together with the striking cases of Victor Orbán in Hungary, Donald Trump in the United States, and Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, the scholar also mentions the case of the Lega in Italy – which at the time she wrote the essay was part of the Italian government coalition.

<sup>105</sup> Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

<sup>106</sup> Finchelstein *From Fascism to Populism*, p. 249.

<sup>107</sup> 'Populism is nothing more than a confused but legitimate response to the feeling of abandonment of the working classes in developed countries in the face of globalisation and rising inequality', [translation from French is mine]: Thomas Piketty, 'Vive le populisme!', *Le Monde*, 17 January 2017, <https://www.lemonde.fr/blog/piketty/2017/01/17/vive-le-populisme/> (accessed on 24 April 2021).

<sup>108</sup> Christopher M. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 6.

<sup>109</sup> Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>110</sup> Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, p. 137.

of populism is aligned with the theoretical model referred as the ‘populist idea of democracy’,<sup>111</sup> according to which political procedures belong to the citizens, who are ultimately the central cog of the whole political machine.

These two contrasting lines of research on the relationship between populism and democracy encapsulate well the argument standing at the heart of post-truth theories. On the one hand, lies the normative position according to which both populism and post-truth represent threatening elements. This idea is expressed by Yasha Mounk, who sees in Trump’s election the last nail in the coffin of democracy, after years of anomalies.<sup>112</sup> In the scholar’s view the election, in what was for years considered the world’s largest democracy, of a man so openly at odds with basic constitutional norms seems to be a sign of a definitive breakdown.<sup>113</sup> On the other hand, authors such as Thomas Piketty stress the positive potential of these phenomena, bearing in mind that we are living after all in a period of long-term crisis. In this regard, it is impossible to ignore the additional danger posed by the ecological crisis and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic – together with the resulting economic imbalance and general political insecurity – to our long-established systems, already on the verge of collapse.

It is my opinion, therefore, that the discourse on populism is a useful example that summarises a much larger conceptual problem. The preceding paragraphs make it clear that trying to draw definitive conclusions in such an intricate social and political context is a demanding enterprise in all respects. My research operates on the premise that intellectuals and cultural actors must engage with the complexity of a multifaceted socio-political framework by putting categorical standards and strong ideological postures aside. Adapting to the world of post-truth means being willing to navigate outside the known routes, to imagine a future not yet explored, rather than regretting the past. In this sense, I agree with David Runciman who, in a recent speech, stressed the importance of focusing on the

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<sup>111</sup> Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, p. 3.

<sup>112</sup> Yasha Mounk, *The People Vs. Democracy: Why our Freedom is in Danger & How to Save It* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>113</sup> During the final drafting of this work, Donald Trump failed to be appointed for a second mandate and his presidential ticket was defeated by John Biden and Kamala Harris. However, before leaving office, the former president engaged in a vicious attempt to deny and overrule the outcome of the polls, refusing to concede. The final stage of such a campaign was the instigation, proffered during a public speech and addressed to his supporters, to assault Capitol Hill on the day of signature. The provocation ultimately led to a violent attack and a civil riot that shocked the American public and the rest of the world.

question of ‘how’ to deal with today’s political issues, rather than trying to establish once and for all ‘what’ these issues are.<sup>114</sup>

Taking all of these elements into consideration, the idea informing the next section of this work is that the post-truth condition is as much connected to two separate political spheres. In the first I collocate electoral and policy-making processes that forge representative democracies; in the second the broader values that are fundamental to democracy, such as open debate, pluralism of opinions, free thought and information, shared knowledge, and mutual trust. In this regard, it is safe to say that the post-truth condition arises from the intertwining of epistemological, technological and anthropological developments that have radically modified the way people coexist, relate and cooperate. In this sense, post-truth is – as I will show in the next sections – ultimately the result of a set of paradoxes. The first is that the implementation and dissemination of democratic political models has led to an escalation in tribalism, segregation, intolerance, authoritarianism, polarization, and anti-democratic behaviours. A second paradox is that the overabundance of information, narratives, interpretations, points of view, in lieu of more democracy and knowledge, have promoted ignorance and closed-mindedness.

### *Another ‘Post-’: Beyond truth, Postmodern, and Modernity*

As seen in the previous section, arguments about the post-truth condition are closely linked to the reshaping of socio-political structures that has taken place in recent decades. The twenty-first century has brought about profound adjustments in terms of redefining political agendas, balances of power, and communication mechanisms. However, it is impossible to ignore that post-truth also entails changes in epistemological setups, i.e., in the way knowledge is attained, validated, and finally transmitted. Emphasising the word ‘truth’ – putting it in brackets, or indicating it as an outdated concept through the use of the prefix ‘post-’ – has an impact on human intellectual structures.

Scholars have recently approached this issue from a number of different angles. Some, such as Filippo Ferrari and Sebastiano Moruzzi, have addressed it from a purely

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<sup>114</sup> The speech is entitled ‘How to Fix British Democracy’ and was recorded for the podcast series he directs called *Talking Politics*, produced in partnership with the *London Review of Books*. The episode was released in January 2021 and can be found at the link <https://www.talkingpoliticspodcast.com/blog/2021/297-how-to-fix-british-democracy> (accessed on 16 May 2021).

philosophical standpoint. In their work, Ferrari and Moruzzi retrace the logical and ontological bases according to which true statements can be considered as such.<sup>115</sup> My research adopts a different attitude: I will examine the concept of truth from a practical and pragmatic point of view, paying attention to its broader political value. In this sense, truth is understood here both as the result of a constant social negotiation and as the set of shared beliefs and information that are crucial for human coexistence and the conduct of democratic processes. Based on this view, the latter can only flourish in a context where truth is constantly discussed and redefined through well-defined shared and transparent procedures. Furthermore, I will adopt Ignas Kalpokas' argument that post-truth is 'embedded in everyday practices and developments' and the problem today consists in the progressive blurring of the 'distinction between truth and lies'.<sup>116</sup> This condition has arisen as a result of cultural and technological innovations that have accelerated the creation of an 'alternative epistemology' that stands outside the criteria of evidence.<sup>117</sup> Consequently, in the second part of this chapter, much attention will be given to the concrete effects of these transformations and the role they are playing in restructuring the 'struggle for power, of which knowledge and the concept of truth have always been an intrinsic part'.<sup>118</sup> Accepting a more practical point of view has three advantages: it narrows the field of observation and anchors analysis to the specific reasons for what is seen as the malaise of post-truth; it allows for the emergence of contradictions within the very notions of truth and democracy themselves; and it links the purely intellectual side of the discourse to its more specifically political counterparts.

Before moving on analysing the outcomes of the digital revolution though, it is worth touching on some more theoretical issues in order to clear up some major misunderstandings: namely, the relationship between post-truth and postmodern epistemological pillars. Already in 2005, Ralph Keyes claimed that post-truth was a derivation of postmodernism, as 'the idea that truth was chimerical has seeped out from classrooms' into society.<sup>119</sup> More recently, this idea has been supported by authors such as Matthew D'Ancona and Maurizio Ferraris. D'Ancona links post-truth to postmodern relativism and the related theories of truth as a construction of language;<sup>120</sup> Ferraris further

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<sup>115</sup> Filippo Ferrari and Sebastiano Moruzzi, *Verità e post-verità. Dall'indagine alla post-indagine* (Bologna: 1088 Press, 2020).

<sup>116</sup> Kalpokas, *A Political Theory of Post-Truth*, p. 2.

<sup>117</sup> Lewandowsky and others, 'Beyond misinformation', p. 13.

<sup>118</sup> Lewandowsky and others 'Beyond misinformation', p. 37.

<sup>119</sup> Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era*, p. 267.

<sup>120</sup> D'Ancona, *Post-truth*, pp. 91-96.



expands this line of thought. In fact, Ferraris is very categorical in stating that post-truth is ‘un frutto del postmoderno’, or rather derives from the conservative faction of postmodernist thinkers: extreme polarisation, the propensity to ridicule every aspect of life, and the habit of putting truth in brackets are all results of that philosophical practice. Thus, in order to turn the tide, it is essential to start by rejecting Nietzsche’s stipulation that ‘there are no facts, only interpretations’.<sup>121</sup>

Despite the fact that some of the assumptions by D’Ancona and Ferraris are evidently accurate and there is a correlation between post-truth and postmodern theories, they do raise some concerns. Firstly, according to John Corner these scholars probably overestimate the extent to which academic controversies actually have an impact on everyday life.<sup>122</sup> Indeed, the influence of postmodern theories on the post-truth condition should be re-evaluated in the light of a deeper interpretation of the cultural and social dynamics at play in the twenty-first century.<sup>123</sup> Secondly, the position expressed by D’Ancona and Ferraris falls into the realm of prescriptive and normative speculation, which combines the definition of the term with prejudicial stances: if post-truth is linked to the nihilistic posture inherent in right-wing postmodern intellectual movements, then the whole thing is *ipso facto* negative.

This line of thinking, however, raises two kinds of problems. To begin with, it overlooks the fact that postmodernism has produced a multifaceted and never-ending debate, which has not yet produced any definitive closure. As Brett Nichols comments, in relation to Jordan Peterson’s theses, postmodernism is often used as an empty signifier to embody the ‘phantom threat’ presented by any discourse which may conflict with that upheld by the speaker.<sup>124</sup> Therefore, reducing postmodernism to ‘dogmatic relativism’ is also an argument for conservative theorists to defend traditionalist views and reactionary (and in Peterson’s case, patriarchal) social ideas. This leads to the second question conveyed by in Ferraris and D’Ancona: to repudiate relativism inevitably implies, for it to be a meaningful gesture, a clear idea of what truth is, or at least of the practices necessary to achieve it. Post-truth, in contrast aims to unmask the incessant struggle for power that any notion of truth carries with it. Finally, scholars who consider post-truth and postmodernism as speculative elements run the risk of missing one of the cruxes of the matter; as Julian Baggini reveals, our problem

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<sup>121</sup> Ferraris, *Postverità e altri enigmi*, pp. 19-27.

<sup>122</sup> John Corner, ‘Fake news, post-truth and media-political change’, *Media, Culture and Society*, 39 (2017), 1100–07.

<sup>123</sup> Ultimately, Ferraris shows that he is aware that a direct juxtaposition between postmodernism and post-truth is problematic. On the contrary, in both D’Ancona and Keyes arguments in support of postmodernism are not taken into account.

<sup>124</sup> Nicholls and Overell, *Post-Truth and the Mediation of Reality*, pp. 69-78.

with truth is not ‘with what truth means but *how and by whom* truth is established’.<sup>125</sup> In a global, digitised and interconnected world, we must finally come to terms with the fact that our parameters for recognising what is true versus what is not must be revised and renewed. I agree with Baggini that postmodern cynicism and scepticism towards universal truths are fundamental tools in the contemporary cultural environment.

As I will argue in the following pages, the condition of post-truth presupposes a willingness to make compromises in order to generate open and constructive public debates. For example, the necessary trade-off between unconditional faith in economic and technological progress and the urgency of revising those certainties in order to address pressing issues such as global warming, the environmental crisis, or – more recently – the social and economic consequences of a global pandemic. This requires people from different cultural and social backgrounds to agree on the most effective exit strategies, in a context where experts are very often seen as co-responsible – and not always wrongly so – for some of the problems the world is going through. Thus, in such a context, emphasising the role of truth with a capital ‘T’ is not necessarily a successful strategy: in the current era people have not stopped believing in truthful notions, they simply can no longer find common ground to decide what the criteria for defining them are.<sup>126</sup>

Finally, I will emphasise one last theoretical aspect concerning the link between postmodernism, post-truth and modernity. In this regard, while the linguistic root of postmodernism and its derivatives clearly draw attention to the unfinished endeavour to overcome modernity – the prefix ‘post’ reveals an attempt to liquidate and go beyond modern postulates –, post-truth is in fact a symptom of a real crossing of modern boundaries. As a matter of fact, by prefixing the word ‘truth’, it definitively calls into question the relationship between scientific investigation, careful observation, and objective knowledge that lies at the heart of modern epistemology. As Kalpokas points out, post-truth marks the end of the epistemic outlet derived from the Enlightenment and modern heritage, e.g. the idea that rational thought leads to transparent and frictionless truths, as well as linear historical development.<sup>127</sup> The same idea is reinforced by Overell and Nicholls as they clearly state that ‘modern rationality has been dangerously discarded and replaced by a

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<sup>125</sup> Baggini, *A Short Story of Truth*, p. 12 (*italics* in the text).

<sup>126</sup> Baggini, *A Short Story of Truth*, pp. 90-91.

<sup>127</sup> Kalpokas, *A Political Theory of Post-Truth*, p. 1.

strange form of powerful irrationality, in which is difficult to distinguish the illusory from the real'.<sup>128</sup>

At this point, I will adopt Umberto Eco's distinction between 'apocalittici e integrati'<sup>129</sup> to distinguish two hypothetical kinds of reactions over this epochal shift. Those belonging to the first group – such as D'Ancona, Ferraris, or Lewandowsky and others – would draw attention to the dangers of a society without authority and well-defined reference points, in which everyone is free to arbitrate on what is right and wrong. Since democratic procedures require a clear deliberation on true values, post-truth tendencies are blamed for dismantling the internal structure of the contemporary social order. The incongruity of this position is that 'post-truthers'<sup>130</sup> do not practice a postmodern circumspection over truth at all. On the contrary, they claim for themselves the right to establish what is the truth, in an attempt to disarm the threats of today's liquid society in which promiscuity and relativism are on the rise. In the world of Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, Matteo Salvini, Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, Victor Orban or Jordan Peterson, there is no room for postmodern openness and praise of uncertainty. This is more evident than ever in the current wave of chauvinism, racism, nationalism, authoritarianism and new strong ideologies described in recent works such as those by Andrea Mammone and Anne Applebaum.<sup>131</sup>

On the other hand, those in the ranks of the 'integrati' emphasise that questioning the pillars of post-Enlightenment society is also a way of revising the Eurocentric, patriarchal, colonial and capitalist order that emerged from the floods of the modern era,<sup>132</sup> i.e. a way of creating a more inclusive cultural and political environment.

This seems to me the right juncture to reiterate that many of the assessments put forward on the post-truth condition carry with them arbitrary choices – for example, establishing who plays the 'lion' or the 'fox' within each social conflict. Following this rationale post-truth becomes, as Fuller, McIntyre, or Nicholls all propose, just another name in the long battle for power that has always taken place in human history. For this reason, I consider it more advantageous to pursue an alternative approach, one which positions the specific cultural events of this era against the backdrop of developments in the fields of new communication technologies, the digitisation of finance and production systems, information strategies, and

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<sup>128</sup> Nicholls and Overell, *Post-Truth and the Mediation of Reality*, p. 1.

<sup>129</sup> Umberto Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati. Comunicazione di massa e teorie della cultura di massa* (Milan: Bompiani, 2001).

<sup>130</sup> The term is used very convincingly by Steve Fuller in *Post-truth*, p. 41.

<sup>131</sup> Andrea Mammone, *Transnational Neofascism in France and Italy* (New York-Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Applebaum, *The Twilight of Democracy*.

<sup>132</sup> Fuller, *Post-Truth*, p. 181

media apparatuses. By exploring findings from media studies, political science and cognitive science, it is possible to shift the focus to how facts and information are mediated, disseminated, and manipulated, rather than continuing to question what credentials are required for a given position to be considered true in its own right.

Finally, in choosing this *modus operandi*, I fully agree with Neave:<sup>133</sup> it is only by tracking the effects and functioning of this instrumentality that the post-truth circumstances can be productively tackled, not least because it is precisely by focusing on the importance of the individual and the impact of his or her personal choices that one can fully understand the political weight that culture, art, and fiction have today – which is, after all, the main purpose of my work.

### ***Post-truth as a Technological Turn: The Effects of the Digital Revolution***

Technological innovations and scientific discoveries have always shaped cultures and civilisations and shaken the foundations of human history. Gutenberg's movable type printing, the Galilean scientific method, steam engines, and the assembly line all facilitated the transition from the pre-modern to the modern economic and cultural state. Similarly, mass media, the evolution of transport systems, post-Fordist production mechanisms and the advent of the computer in the world of finance marked the transition to postmodernity. By the same logic, understanding post-truth as an epochal turning point implies interweaving cultural and epistemological changes with the recognition of technological revolution that has occurred in the last three decades. As Kevin Kelly points out – in a book emblematically entitled *The Inevitable*, which deals with the way technology is influencing our future – recent innovations will re-shape modern historical footprints.<sup>134</sup> The world we inhabit, which Kelly dubs the 'technium',<sup>135</sup> has been generated by the digitalisation of economy, production of goods and human relations, the expansion of social media and Internet-based activities, the remodelling of the information system, and the rise of network technologies. The final outcome of these processes is 'a new social organization'.<sup>136</sup> Although these

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<sup>133</sup> Neave, 'Forward: A Vision Unspeakable', p. vii.

<sup>134</sup> Kevin Kelly, *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces that will Shape our Future* (London: Penguin, 2016).

<sup>135</sup> Kelly, *The inevitable*, p. 25.

<sup>136</sup> Kelly, *The Inevitable*, p. 475.

Similarly, Neave defines the one we live in as the 'post-truth society': Neave, 'Forward: A Vision Unspeakable', p. vii.

economic and political shifts originated in the twentieth century, it should be noted that it is only recently that they have taken a steep turn. As Neave explains, some of these innovations – such as social media – have evolved at an unprecedented speed and have affected institutions without giving them time to adapt and find countermeasures.<sup>137</sup> It is for this reason that I insist on claiming that we cannot meaningfully understand the post-truth without associating the emergence of new epistemic models with the technologies that contribute to shape them. To remain with the examples considered in the sections on political implications: the recent electoral success of the populist political style and propaganda, growing social polarisation and the spread of disinformation, must be seen in relation to the ‘growing complexity and instability of globalised and networked communication systems’.<sup>138</sup> In particular, as many scholars have pointed out, social networks have played a crucial role in this development. Siva Vaidhyanathan is adamant in stating that against the promises of fostering dialogue and connection between people, social networks – Facebook above all – ‘foster the deterioration of democratic and intellectual culture around the world’.<sup>139</sup> Gabriele Cosentino shares the same opinion when he writes that:

The general optimistic expectations on the role of network technologies and digital media in enabling new forms of organization, collaboration and political action spread as an integral part of the broader globalization rhetoric, as the features embedded in web 2.0 appeared to be conducive to both democratic empowerment and new entrepreneurial opportunities. However, lack of knowledge of the long-term and structural impact of the Internet on society and politics, and a certain degree of naïve enthusiasm, led many to embrace uncritically or too optimistically the advent of the new media era as the dawning of a period of liberating direct democracy and of a McLuhanesque ‘global village’. During the past years, it has become evident that the very set of incentives that have turned social media into successful and pervasive global missionaries of digital communicative capitalism has also had troubling consequences in the way they affect citizens’ discussion of public affairs, their interaction with politicians, their processes of political identity formation and their access to information on domestic or global affairs.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Neave, *Post-Truth, Fake News*, p. vi

<sup>138</sup> Cosentino, *Social Media and the Post-truth World Order*, p.11.

<sup>139</sup> Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 14-20.

<sup>140</sup> Cosentino, *Social Media and the Post-truth World Order*, p. 13.

With these words, the scholar highlights the failure of the Internet pioneers to fulfil the premises of a more open, connected, and free society. On the contrary, the web seems to have favoured closure, antagonism, and segregation in public debate.<sup>141</sup> Such a turn of events is a symptom of yet another paradox connected to the post-truth shift: increased access to information and distribution of knowledge seems to have damaged rather than improved democratic processes. To substantiate this claim, it is essential to take a closer look at the complex architecture of the algorithms through which web 2.0 works, as they are largely responsible for the present condition.

In 2011, activist and entrepreneur Eli Parisier coined the term ‘filter bubble’<sup>142</sup> to illustrate the state of isolation to which web algorithms subject users. This is the biggest downside to having turned social networks and search engines into tools for collecting data on users’ tastes, interests, and political leanings in a ‘race to know as much as possible about you’.<sup>143</sup> Accessing this data rests on generating interest among users and encouraging them to interact with digital platforms. This is also the result of a new economic model that scholars call the ‘attention economy’.<sup>144</sup> This business paradigm is based on the assumption that human attention is a scarce commodity. Therefore, companies competing for it are interested in rewarding ‘users with more of what they tell the companies they want’ and to create ‘echo chambers of reinforced beliefs’.<sup>145</sup> Bringing the focus back to post-truth, this has two consequences that are of particular interest in my study: on the one hand, it implies that the messages most likely to circulate among users, according to clickbait logic, are the most divisive, exciting and emotionally charged;<sup>146</sup> on the other hand, it generates a form of ‘algorithmic gatekeeping’, subordinating the circulation of information to criteria that are elusive and totally beyond the grasp of traditional cultural operators.<sup>147</sup>

The effects of this revolution are many and varied. One of the most relevant consequences is certainly the spreading of dubious, incomplete, or totally false information. In 2013, the World Economic Forum placed, in its annual report, misinformation at the top of the list of

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<sup>141</sup> Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

<sup>142</sup> Eli Parisier, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

<sup>143</sup> Parisier, *The Filter Bubble*, p. 9.

<sup>144</sup> Claudio Celis, *The Attention Economy: Labour, Time, and Power in Cognitive Capitalism* (London: Rowan & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017).

<sup>145</sup> Vaidhyathan, *Antisocial Media*, p. 6.

<sup>146</sup> As shown by Vaidhyathan, Facebook – but the same applies to all social media – is ‘engineered to promote items that generate a strong reaction’. In virtue of this, it adds that ‘content that hits strong emotional registers, whether joy of indignation, making very easy for whoever wants to pollute public debate with nonsense or to deviate political discourse to do so’. Vaidhyathan, *Antisocial Media*, p. 5.

<sup>147</sup> Caterino and Veltri, *Fuori dalla bolla*, pp. 41-42.

the most dangerous and urgent social threats in a hyper-connected world.<sup>148</sup> In Kelly's opinion 'the major new challenge in reporting news is the new shape of truth', which 'is no longer dictated by authorities, but is networked by peers. For every fact there is a counterfact. All those counterfactuals and facts look identical online, which is confusing to most people'.<sup>149</sup> To expand further the topic, it is worth starting by distinguishing two concepts that are similar but not entirely overlapping: misinformation and disinformation. Nicole Cooke suggests that misinformation refers to information that is incomplete due to a genuine lack of background knowledge or that is 'uncertain, vague, or ambiguous'.<sup>150</sup> Disinformation, however, is defined as the 'dissemination of deliberately false information', which happens especially when information is spread on the Internet.<sup>151</sup> Following this rationale, the Collins Dictionary chose 'fake news' as word of the year in 2017,<sup>152</sup> identifying it as 'false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting'.<sup>153</sup> In McIntyre's view, the use of fake news falls into the latter sphere.<sup>154</sup> In most cases, fake news is a precise strategy to belittle political opponents, manipulate public opinion, and gain consensus. In addition to that, fake news are produced by hackers who aim to profit from the number of clicks produced by shocking headlines. Either way, the recent proliferation of the phenomenon displays the exceptional metamorphosis that the world of information is going through. In this environment, separating true evidence from blatant fabrications has become an increasingly complicated task that not everyone is equipped to carry out.

A second key effect of the revolution in communication technologies is its impact on traditional news reporting. Forced to share revenues with other sources of content and news

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<sup>148</sup> The report in question can be found on the official website of the World Economic Forum at the following link: <https://reports.weforum.org/global-risks-2013/risk-case-1/digital-wildfires-in-a-hyperconnected-world/> (accessed on 10 October 2021).

<sup>149</sup> Richard Grey, 'Lies, Propaganda and Fake News: A challenge for our Age', *BBC Future*, March 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20170301-lies-propaganda-and-fake-news-a-grand-challenge-of-our-age> (accessed on 11 October 2021).

<sup>150</sup> Nicole A. Cooke, *Fake News and Alternative Facts. Information Literacy in a Post-Truth Era* Chicago: Ala Editions, 2018), p. 30.

<sup>151</sup> Cooke, *Fake News and Alternative Facts*, p. 30. The scholar here quotes the definition of disinformation from the OED.

<sup>152</sup> It is worth noting here that the term has recently become so popular also because of its equivocal use: on the one hand, it is employed to label false information that is not supported by facts; on the other hand, it is adopted to belittle news or information sources that are not in line with one's views. Typical of this second instance is the case of Donald Trump who has repeatedly resorted to the term to discredit media outlets such as the New York Times or the Washington Post that are notoriously opposed to him: Michael M. Grynbaum, 'Trump Discusses of "Fake News" and their Impact. With New York Time Publisher', *New York Times*, 1 February 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/01/business/media/donald-trump-interview-news-media.html> / (accessed on 12 July 2020)

<sup>153</sup> The definition is accessible on the Collins Dictionary website, at the link: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/fake-news> (accessed on 23 October 2021).

<sup>154</sup> McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, p. 105.

that often pay no attention to fact-checking, traditional newspapers also succumb to clickbait pressure and the rules of the attention economy. Having to compete with increasingly sensationalistic and emotionally charged forms of storytelling, they had to adapt to new standards in order to survive. As a result, ‘they have altered their editorial decisions and strategies to pander to the biases inherent in Facebook algorithms’, which means that ‘[e]ditors and publishers spend much of their working days trying to design their content to take flight on Facebook’.<sup>155</sup>

Finally, as far as information consumers are concerned, being inundated with narratives, dossiers, and news reports of all kinds and being confronted with a plethora of different positions has reduced the space for critical thinking and the accurate assessment of facts and evidence. The success of fake news and ‘bullshit’ requires an audience that is not overly curious, open, and engaged, while the predominant appeal to ‘pathos (at the expense of logos)’ requires the absence of persistence and accountability.<sup>156</sup> The outcome is the ‘constant and alarming undermining of public trust in expertise and the possibility of rational deliberation of debate’.<sup>157</sup>

A revolution as far-reaching as the one instigated by the entry of the Internet into our lives cannot but have effects that go far beyond those described above. Although I am not interested in covering all of them, I think it is important to mention a few other changes introduced by the advent of the Internet in order to underline the individual – and not only collective – dimension that these phenomena have – and by doing so to prepare the ground for some of the observations that will be made in the following chapters. A good reference point is presented by Neil Postman’s essay *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, in which the scholar noted that the entry of the television literally into every home on the planet had already profoundly changed the way of conceiving public life and the relationship with others.<sup>158</sup> We can say that the same is true in recent decades of computers and digital devices, which imposed original political, economic, and cognitive paradigms.

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<sup>155</sup> Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, p. 8.

<sup>156</sup> Bruce McComiskey, *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* (Boulder: Utah State University Press, 2017), p. 39.

<sup>157</sup> Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, p. 11.

<sup>158</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (London: Penguin, 2005).



It is fair to say that apps and interactive social accounts – in short, web 2.0 – have generated a real Copernican revolution: consumers have in fact been turned into commodities themselves. As Jerome Lanier observed, this means that ‘[w]hen developers of digital technologies design a programme that requires you to interact with a computer as if it were a person, they ask you to accept in some corner of your brain that you might also be conceived as a program’.<sup>159</sup>

This conception of technology also involves another major change. Maurizio Ferraris states that in the contemporary era people’s free time has been converted into unpaid work, as customers, by interacting with increasingly sophisticated software unconsciously produce resources upon which tech companies make money.<sup>160</sup> Large technology corporations now collect huge amounts of data in order to sample the tastes and predispositions of communities. The accumulation of data is then monetised through its use in advertising, marketing, or even in polling and political propaganda. Shoshana Zuboff calls this economic model ‘Surveillance Capitalism’: people’s behavioural patterns, ideas, attitudes, and even their daily routines are constantly monitored, in order to serve as both a resource and a means of control.<sup>161</sup> This allows the tech giants – which are after all private companies – to have an influence on what is relevant and what is not within our lives and public debates, or to determine which events deserve media attention and which do not. It is therefore not surprising that the same companies are also able to shape the way politics and political communication are conceived and implemented. Already the subject of scholarly attention, the long-term effects of this shift on people’s lives, both socially and personally, are enormous and yet to be understood.

Clearly, this matter also has important implications on a more strictly political level. In 2017, the University of Oxford launched a research project on the newly defined phenomenon of computational propaganda. The project, supervised by Professor Philip Howard, aimed to analyse ‘how bots, algorithms and other forms of automation are used by

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<sup>159</sup> Jaron Lanier, *You are not a Gadget: A Manifesto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), p. 11.

<sup>160</sup> In his research, Ferraris also highlights another crucial aspect in regards with these topics, namely the disruption of the capitalist system based on the production of material goods. Since the latter have been definitively replaced by totally immaterial and social objects such as documents the whole model has entered a phase of readjustment: Ferraris, *Post-verità e altri enigmi*, pp. 87-114. This theme has been expanded and further explored in another recently published essay: Maurizio Ferraris, *Documanità. Filosofia del nuovo mondo* (Bari-Roma: Laterza, 2021).

<sup>161</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affair, 2019).

political actors in countries around the world'.<sup>162</sup> The findings of this project were made public in 2019, with the overall conclusion that '[w]hile it is true that social media are significant platforms for political engagement, crucial channels for disseminating new content, and the primary media over which young people develop their political identity, they are also – and perhaps in part because of these affordances – vessels for control'.<sup>163</sup> Using cutting-edge quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, the authors were able to demonstrate that new technologies provide political groups with very effective means of distributing their messages across in the political debate and thus influencing public opinion. The deployment of 'algorithms, automation, and human curation' allows them to 'manufacture consensus' by essentially contaminating the public debate with misleading information that is able to 'change people's mind and, ultimately, behaviour'.<sup>164</sup> These mechanisms operate in combination with the aforementioned natural tendency of social media and other digital platforms to favour certain topics in order to make them viral. As Veltri and Caterino show, two aspects play a key role here: on the one hand, the logic of clickbait, which tends to reward the most catchy, easy, and emotionally overloaded entries; on the other hand, 'network gatekeeping', according to which a few influential individuals are able to spread their messages through vast multitudes of peers – by virtue of either bottom-up (cascades of information) or, more often, top-down processes.<sup>165</sup>

In recent years, there has been no lack of practical examples to validate these positions. Recently, some journalistic investigations have shed light on the weight of these mechanisms during key political campaigns such as the Brexit referendum or the 2016 US presidential election. In 2018, a sensational scandal revealed how a British political company called Cambridge Analytica illegally collected the data of millions of Facebook users and then reused it for political purposes. With this information at their disposal, political strategists such as Dominic Cummings and Steve Bannon were able to devise highly sophisticated propaganda approaches capable of reaching potential Brexit or Trump supporters with advertisements explicitly shaped to suit their political views and fuel their anger.<sup>166</sup> As Carol Cadwalladr made clear in a seminal public speech, the greatest danger

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<sup>162</sup> The initiative was carried out with the support of the Oxford Internet Institute and therefore the main results and objectives can be found on the Institute's website at the link: <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/projects/computational-propaganda/> (last accessed on 24 August 2021).

<sup>163</sup> Philip N. Howard and Samuel C. Woolley (eds.), *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 241.

<sup>164</sup> Howard and Woolley, *Computational Propaganda*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>165</sup> Caterino and Veltri, *Fuori dalla bolla*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>166</sup> These kinds of strategies are described by some of the authors already mentioned in this work: Howard and Woolley, *Computational Propaganda*, pp. 188-89; Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, p. 55.

posed by these new propaganda methods is that political advertising can now take place in the private space of technological platforms and through micro-targeted ads accessible only to those who have been selected as recipients. This allows campaigners to spread countless fake news and so to pollute the political debate, without being noticed by either watchdogs or political opponents.<sup>167</sup>

As a practical example, the Italian party La Lega, under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, spent millions of euros building the perfect propaganda machine, dubbed ‘La Bestia’ (‘The Beast’ – the name was taken from Barack Obama’s campaign). As Milena Gabanelli and Simona Ravizza explain, under the supervision of Luca Morisi, La Bestia has been able to increase Salvini’s consensus by flooding Italian news feeds and social accounts with posts, images, stories of daily life and news that serve his interests and promote his political agenda.<sup>168</sup>

In the light of these considerations, the reasons for advocating a pragmatic approach alongside a purely philosophical and epistemological one become more evident. The post-truth era cannot be interpreted or understood without bringing into the equation the reshuffling effect that technological innovations have introduced into our lives. Examining the social consequences of the disjunction of truth from the real world from a purely theoretical and philosophical basis – while a valid approach for certain reasons – would miss a key detail: separating what is true and real from what is not is a very difficult exercise when people filter reality through the screens of their devices and get information by scrolling through their Facebook walls.<sup>169</sup> Citizens all over the world are constantly bombarded with posts and news of all kinds, from all kinds of sources, to an extent that eventually allows

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<sup>167</sup> The speech I am referring to was given at an event organised by TED Talks in 2019 and can now be found at the link:

[https://www.ted.com/talks/carole\\_cadwalladr\\_facebook\\_s\\_role\\_in\\_brexit\\_and\\_the\\_threat\\_to\\_democracy](https://www.ted.com/talks/carole_cadwalladr_facebook_s_role_in_brexit_and_the_threat_to_democracy) (accessed on 23 June 2021). The journalist has devoted a lot of attention to these topics in recent years and was one of the first to discover the role played by Cambridge Analytica in the two political events mentioned. In her articles, she clearly shows the extent to which new technologies are undermining the mechanisms of democracy: Carole Cadwalladr, ‘The great British Brexit robbery: how our democracy was hijacked’, *The Guardian*, 7 May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/07/the-great-british-brexit-robbery-hijacked-democracy> (accessed on 23 June 2021).

<sup>168</sup> Milena Gabanelli and Simona Ravizza, ‘Mateo Salvini e la “Bestia”’: come catturare 4 milioni di fan sui social’, *Corriere della Sera*, 20 October 2019, <https://www.corriere.it/dataroom-milena-gabanelli/matteo-salvini-la-bestia-come-catturare-4-milioni-fan-social-facebook-twitter-instagram/a00069d2-f33f-11e9-ad64-4488d500d2a2-va.shtml> (accessed on 15 March 2021).

<sup>169</sup> Current research shows that Facebook and social media are becoming an increasingly important source through which world citizens gather news and information about the political situation and the world. Some numbers about this growth can be found in the accurate reports of the *Pew Research Center*: Katerina Eva Matsa and Mason Walker, ‘News Consumption Across Social Media in 2021’ *Pew Research Center*, 20 September 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/09/20/news-consumption-across-social-media-in-2021/> (accessed on 21 October 2021).

theM. very often unconsciously – to cut the external reality to their own measure and choose the world they want to live in. As they do so, they find themselves in a bubble, surrounded by other individuals who share similar beliefs and theories, so that false evidence translates into true reports and vice versa. It is therefore impossible to meaningfully assess contemporary democratic structures without taking into account the shifts effected by changes in communications technology. This becomes even more urgent given the way its offshoots interact with our biological and cognitive patterns, which will be the topic of the next section.

### *The Cognitive and Biological Aspects: Post-Truth C'est Moi*

In the previous sections I have shown that taking a comprehensive look at the phenomenon of post-truth is an arduous and convoluted task – not least because of the number of elements it implies. In this section, I will present readers with an Oedipal twist along this tortuous path of investigation. In Sophocles' masterpiece, the king of Thebes, after a long search for his father's murderer, discovers that he himself is the culprit. Similarly, those who analyse post-truth must realise at some point that its evolution is largely determined by our own cognitive behaviour. Therefore, I will dwell on the fact that, in many respects, the human neurological and psychic architecture is itself responsible for the emergence of post-truth politics, filter bubbles, and the disinformation mechanisms mentioned so far. This step is essential for two reasons: firstly, because it complements the theoretical framework concerning post-truth; secondly, because – as I shall discuss in the next chapter – a certain attention to neuro-cognitive aspects is now also indispensable in the field of literary and cultural criticism.

To begin with, as Walter Quattrociocchi and Antonella Vicini argue, the fact that human beings tend to put more emphasis on the emotional side of information than the rational one should not come as much of a surprise: humans have never been as rational as they like to believe.<sup>170</sup> Discoveries in neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and the behavioural sciences in recent years have undermined the notion that we make choices based on logical and rationally informed discrimination. In 2017, cognitive neuroscientist Sebastian Dieguez published a seminal short article entitled 'Post-Truth: The Dark Side of the Brain' in which

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<sup>170</sup> Quattrociocchi and Vicini, *Liberi di crederci*, p. 31.

he maintained that our brain is not ‘as concerned with objectivity as one might think’.<sup>171</sup> Building on Mercer and Sperber’s argumentative theory, Dieguez claims that our cognitive efforts are mostly determined by ‘our need to be right and to convince’, and by our very basic attitude to ‘accept and retain information that suits us and reinforces our beliefs’. Such tendency is better known as ‘confirmation bias’.<sup>172</sup> Similar conclusions were reached by Jonas Kaplan and Micah Edelson, who revealed that being exposed to ideas that invalidate our personal beliefs triggers self-preservation responses. When people receive information that goes against their views, a specific area of the brain, linked to our ego representation, is activated and makes changing our mind so painful that we seek to avoid doing so at all costs. Put in biological terms, accepting that we are wrong is limited by the combined intervention of the amygdala and the hippocampus on the frontal cortex.<sup>173</sup>

Further studies in neurology and psychology show that confirmation bias is a biological tendency related to the processing of new information in everyday life. This aspect has been stressed by Lee McIntyre, who referred to classic findings in the field such as Leon Festinger’s ‘cognitive dissonance’ theories or Solomon Ash’s ‘social conformity’ to conclude that people ‘seem prone to form their views outside the norms of reason and good evidence, in favour of accommodating their own intuitions or those of their peers’.<sup>174</sup> That is to say that, as people desperately try to maintain their emotional stability or strive to be in conformity with those around them, anything that conflicts with their beliefs or disturbs this harmony tends to be automatically ignored. Additionally, when we are presented with evidence that threatens our inner convictions, instead of changing our minds we are likely to further strengthen our initial opinions. This effect is called the ‘backfire effect bias’.<sup>175</sup> Taking these factors into account, it is clear why we are comfortable within our filter bubbles, or why social media can so easily activate our built-in biases, giving us a sense of protection, camaraderie, and cognitive satisfaction.

Regarding this latter element, it is crucial to consider another angle of scrutiny: avoiding uncomfortable social circumstances is not the only case in which our mental shortcuts play a crucial role. These neurological habits also regularly activate in decision-making processes or when critical judgements are called for. Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler clarified that

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<sup>171</sup> Sebastian Dieguez, ‘Post-Truth: The Dark Side of the Brain’, *Scientific American Mind*, 18 (2017), 43-48 (p. 45).

<sup>172</sup> Dieguez, ‘Post-Truth: The Dark Side of the Brain’, p. 45.

<sup>173</sup> Dieguez, ‘Post-Truth: The Dark Side of the Brain’, p. 45.

<sup>174</sup> McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, p. 42.

<sup>175</sup> McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, p. 48.

the human brain switches between automatic and reflective systems of reasoning. While automatic reasoning is ‘rapid and [...] instinctive’, our reflective reasoning system ‘is more deliberate and self-conscious’.<sup>176</sup> Since no one can afford to spend too much time carefully analysing everything we are presented with in our busy lives – especially in an age such as ours where we are subjected to so much input – we resort to biases and ‘heuristics’ to alleviate the task. These, through criteria such as anchoring, availability and representativeness, elaborate the information received on the basis of previous experience, familiarity, or stereotypes.<sup>177</sup> All this often leads us to misinterpret important issues and come to the wrong conclusions. However, Sunstein and Thaler make it clear that one of the reasons why our subconscious continues to employ these involuntary mechanisms is that according to evolutionary logic they are effective. This closer look at the workings of the brain really helps to put things in perspective, highlighting once again the point where social dynamics and individual propensities intersect.

This brings us to two crucial points. Firstly, stigmatising the emotional side of decision-making practices and the use of mental shortcuts in a categorical way – following a fully normative approach to post-truth – is futile and misleading. We have seen that this is a default practice embedded in the human brain, developed over years of evolution and adaptive readjustment: it is practically oriented and serves the purpose of facilitating and accelerating cognitive procedures. In recent years, cognitive sciences have pointed out the importance of emotions in our mental processes. For example, Cooke shows – drawing on the studies of Knud Illeris and Char Booth – how the affective dimension is an essential component of learning processes. More precisely, learning requires an internal effort in which new knowledge is adapted and related to existing knowledge, and an external effort in which information is shaped by social background. Thus, learning embraces three different contexts: ‘the cognitive domain of knowledge acquisition, the psychological dimensions of emotions and motivation, and the social domains of communication and cooperation’.<sup>178</sup> These theories are supported by Booth’s findings on the importance of memory, prior knowledge, and motivation in shaping our learning patterns: new information is accepted or rejected depending on mental patterns that are shaped by pre-existing erudition or by physical and mental components such as anger or hunger. Not to mention

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<sup>176</sup> Cass Sunstein and Richard H. Thaler, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (Michigan: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 19-20.

<sup>177</sup> Sunstein and Thaler, *Nudge*, pp. 22-31.

<sup>178</sup> Cooke, *Fake News and Alternative Facts*, p. 32.

the primary role of motivation in accepting or rejecting new knowledge: being emotionally involved facilitates the acquisition of new pieces of information.<sup>179</sup>

Secondly, media outlets, mass media agents, and marketing strategists have always taken advantage of the affective nature of our brain and have been ‘no strangers to controversy and manipulative tactics’ long before terms such as clickbait and the attention economy were coined.<sup>180</sup> Thus, the sentimental tone, the use of entertainment and the deployment of emotionally oriented factors have been key elements of information and communication techniques since their origins. As Daniel Cohen reminds us, ‘sensationalism has always been part of news.’<sup>181</sup> This is particularly evident in the cases of crime journalism, jazz journalism, and tabloid TV, which have always resorted to overly dramatic and shocking headlines and content. The same theory can be applied to the political sphere and the exercise of democracy: it has never been uncommon for political messages to be adapted to the emotional expectations of voters. As Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis put it, ‘emotions have always been a key factor in politics and media.’<sup>182</sup>

In short, there are good reasons to agree with Dieguez’s comment that ‘there is nothing new or “post” under the sun’.<sup>183</sup> People and voters have always given a lot of weight to sentimental evaluations in their choice of information sources and political affiliation. What has really changed with recent social, political, and technological developments is the way and extent to which these mechanisms are exploited and put into practice. In this respect, post-truth is the name that scholars and journalists have given to this sudden upsurge, the scope of which – with both positive and negative consequences – only now they start to grasp.

The considerations made so far in this chapter have delineated the characteristics of the post-truth era with the twofold aim of situating theoretical reflections both in a practical context and in continuity with the past. In this last section, I will explore a few more consequences of the recent technological and cognitive revolution, which will prepare the ground for the subsequent analysis of how the world of culture and literature has dealt with these challenges.

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<sup>179</sup> Cooke, *Fake News and Alternative Facts*, p. 32.

<sup>180</sup> Cooke, *Fake News and Alternative Facts*, p. 22.

<sup>181</sup> Daniel Cohen, *Yellow Journalism: Scandal, Sensationalism, and Gossip in the Media* (Brookfield: Millbrook, 2000), p. 8.

<sup>182</sup> Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis, ‘The Affective Politics of the “Post-Truth Era: Feeling rules and networked subjectivity’, *Emotions, Space and Society*, 27 (2018), 75-85 (p. 75).

<sup>183</sup> Dieguez, ‘Post-Truth: The Dark Side of the Brain’, p. 45.

First of all, I will note that new technologies and web 2.0 have transformed the core set-up through which information and news are conveyed. Whereas traditional media – newspapers, television, radio – operated from the top down, the Internet has facilitated a kind of peer-to-peer interaction in which everyone has the opportunity to take active part. In this new global arena, physical and verbal exchanges have been translated into virtual and symbolic ones – which take the form of likes on Facebook, hearts on Instagram, reposts on Twitter. As noted by Veltri and Caterino, social networks have introduced into our complex societies methods of communication that were typical of simpler civilisations.<sup>184</sup> This has inevitably modelled the way we relate to one another and to the external world. Bolter and Davis suggest that the term ‘networked subject’ gives an account of ‘the extent to which digital media and its apparatuses are increasingly formative of [...] relationality for increasing numbers of people’.<sup>185</sup> At the root of this statement is the recognition described above that when we relate to others or to the world around us, we now do so predominantly in a setting that is digitally mediated and regulated by complex algorithms. As Cooke has stressed, we live in a context in which disintermediation takes over in the field of information, politics and culture: news, storytelling, personal assessments, snap reactions spread instantly without being filtered by gatekeepers of any kind other than cold computational criteria.<sup>186</sup> However, to quickly jump to conclusions and discard this in toto would be to miss – once again – the contradictory character of the elements at stake. After all, by facilitating the circulation of information and the exchange of ideas among peers, new technologies create inclusiveness, which is ‘un valore fondamentale per la democrazia’.<sup>187</sup> According to Veltri and Caterino – echoing the theories of Manuel Castells –, they also solve one of the main problems of traditional media, which are unable to cope with the fragmentation of groups within the ‘network society’: social media satisfy a need for complementary information that old-fashioned media could not provide.<sup>188</sup> The bottom line is that not all political messages that go viral on social media or display emotionally predominant postures are negatively disruptive in terms of political perspective, just as not all forms of intermediation produce legitimate content.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Caterino and Veltri, *Fuori dalla bolla*, p. 34.

<sup>185</sup> Bolter and Davis, ‘The Affective Politics of the “Post-Truth Era”’, pp. 82-83.

<sup>186</sup> Cooke, *Fake News and Alternative Facts*, p. 13.

<sup>187</sup> Ferrari and Moruzzi, *Verità e post-verità*, p. 12.

<sup>188</sup> Caterino and Veltri, *Fuori dalla bolla*, p. 31.

<sup>189</sup> During the Arab spring of 2011, political protesters used social networks to circulate counter-informative news in an attempt to overthrow totalitarian governments and call for democratic institutions; the ‘Fridays for future’ movement, originated by climate activist Greta Thunberg, made social media a key tool in their political agency and a vehicle to raise public awareness on the important issue of climate change; and finally,



Secondly, the advent of digital technologies has further accentuated what had already been referred to in previous decades as the ‘narrative turn’, namely the tendency to perceive, formulate and shape every aspect of human experience in narrative form. In fact, social networks have emphasised this aspect in a very significant way. In this respect one might agree with Zizi Papacharissi’s description of social networks as ‘storytelling infrastructures’, since everything on social media is channelled into a narrative form, from news to travel reports, from public announcements to real-time digests. Being surrounded daily by so many narratives – often also developed in combination with visual materials – produces a sense of ‘immediacy that makes us feel that we are *there*, wherever *there* may be’.<sup>190</sup> In other words, people’s cognitive perception of the world and their sense of participation are profoundly altered by the very style of communication that constantly confronts users with a situation in which real and non-real (or virtual) overlap. Although Papacharissi admits that the traditional media were not immune to this tendency and also allowed people to mentally construct their own distorted image of the world, she indicates how this process now operates on a totally different scale. Similarly, Kalpokas adopts the terminology coined by Mike Wadhera, pointing out that the new millennium marked the transition from the age of information to the ‘age of experience’, in which ‘affective relations with the world dominate, enabling snap decisions on any piece of information’.<sup>191</sup>

Finally, the mix of elements mentioned so far – i.e., ubiquitous storytelling, the creation of personalised environments, disintermediation, distrust of authorities, and paranoid gaze – has enabled the spread of increasingly sophisticated and seductive conspiracy theories. This phenomenon deserves a special mention for two reasons: on the one hand, it is closely related to post-truth and the cascade of disinformation and misinformation that it is associated with the term; on the other, it is very relevant to the social function that the world of art, and literature in particular, can perform in this regard. According to Cass Sunstein, conspiracy theories are ‘all around us’.<sup>192</sup> Nowadays, they have become an ingrained feature of political debates. The reasons for their success are many and varied, but I will only mention those that are significant for this chapter. To start with, as Karl Popper argued, they

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the videos and images circulated through the web ignited the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement with its strong demand for civil rights. I believe these are cases give an idea of how dynamics of interaction offered by new digital technologies have been used to support emancipatory and pro-democracy political causes.

<sup>190</sup> Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technologies, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 4 (*italics* are in the text).

<sup>191</sup> Kalpokas, *A Political Theory of Post-Truth*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>192</sup> Cass Sunstein, *Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2014), p. 33.

suggest a secularised teleological view, as conspiracy theorists link all social and political fallout to an intentional design.<sup>193</sup> Conspiracy theory builders try to bring the complexity of events under control in an artificial way, at the expense of accuracy and truthfulness. This method is very effective, not least because, as mentioned above, people tend to follow cognitive heuristics that lead them to reject ‘non-arbitrary stories’, disregarding the ‘possibility that an outcome arises from either spontaneous order or random force’.<sup>194</sup> Paranoia plays a big part in this process: if we already suspect that institutions are acting against the interest of the population it’s easier to believe in unorthodox theories. Finally, in a polarised society where resentment is deeply rooted and the populist political style has become predominant, and where media facilitate segregation, foster cognitive biases, and circulate false and fabricated information, conspiracy theories constitute another key weapon in the battle to secure more clicks.

Regardless of the logic behind them, the attractiveness of conspiracy theories depends on their narrative potential and entertaining appeal. Certainly, they contribute to further dividing society and political factions, an aspect which became clear in the years following the election of President Donald Trump. The QAnon conspiracy movement gathered thousands of followers in local forums, blogs, social media, generating a wave of baseless allegations that attracted wide public attention: accusations of paedophilia and sexual abuse supposedly perpetuated by prominent figures such as Hilary Clinton, Barack Obama, George Soros and Bill Gates.<sup>195</sup> Similarly, Italian public debate is not immune to these kind of narratives; Massimo Bordin and Massimo Teodori have summarised many of the creative theories produced over the years by political blocs of all kinds, from the radicals to M5S and the DC to the Communist Party.<sup>196</sup>

By analysing the post-truth era from a social, political and technological perspective over the course of this chapter, I have demonstrated that it stands as a historical moment of transition. I have explored how the post-truth era poses considerable threats, but also

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<sup>193</sup> Karl Popper, ‘The Conspiracy Theory of Society’, in *Conspiracy Theory: The Philosophical Debate*, ed. by David Coady (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), pp. 13-17.

<sup>194</sup> Sunstein, *Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas*, p. 48.

<sup>195</sup> The Italian writer Roberto Bui, alias Wu Ming 1, has dealt extensively with this topics. Apart from writing various articles in politically oriented magazines such as *Internazionale*, he has also recently published an enquiry book that investigates the rise and popularity of the QAnon movement: Wu Ming 1, *La Q di Quomplotto*.

The article mentioned above is titled ‘Il mondo di QAnon: come entrarci, perché uscirne’, *Internazionale Online*, 2 September 2020, <https://www.internazionale.it/reportage/wu-ming-1/2020/09/02/mondo-qanon-prima-parte> (accessed on 21 October 2021).

<sup>196</sup> Massimo Bordin and Massimo Teodori, *Complotto! Come i politici ci ingannano* (Milan: Marsilio, 2014).

numerous opportunities to redesign and correct the course of things. Specifically, this chapter has emphasised the shift from traditional, top-down methods of news diffusion to a more public form of interaction based on peer-to-peer connections and the importance of narrative appeal. In this context, I believe the role of writers and literary specialists acquires a new pertinence. And while it is certainly not their duty to propose solutions to issues pertaining to the sphere of public life,<sup>197</sup> they possess a crucial capacity to influence individual cultural opinions and engagement, something I consider as fundamental in the post-truth era. Taking the Italian context into consideration and focusing on a range of examples, the following chapters will offer a detailed examination of the particular opportunities and challenges presented to the literary field by the post-truth epoch and the various strategies writers and critics have adopted in response to it.

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<sup>197</sup> While issues such as data protection, information control, the enhancement of democratic practices, economic reconstruction are all matters of absolute urgency, they are tasks that concern the political sphere, which this thesis is not concerned with, as they are the responsibility of institutions and politicians in the strict sense of these terms.

## ~ CHAPTER TWO ~

### **Cultural Agency, Political Commitment and the Italian Debate**

In December 2018, the Pulitzer prize winner and president of PEN America Jennifer Egan wrote an article entitled ‘We Need Writers Now More Than Ever. Our Democracy Depends on it’.<sup>198</sup> In this text, Egan raised the alarm about some of the cultural and political transformations discussed in the first chapter of this work: the spread of falsehoods and fake news that distort public information, the mass media’s oversimplification of public debates, the malfunctioning of democratic institutions, the undermining of scientific and journalistic approaches based on the careful analysis of facts and evidence. In this context, Egan emphasised the corrective role of literature, suggesting that, unlike journalism, it can operate outside the ‘mediasphere designated for spectacle’ and yet interact with it. Moreover, since it is intrinsically built on the plurality of ideas, literature rejects oversimplification and promotes empathy and contradictions: a feature which, according to the author, render it ‘the blunt antidote to the blunt distortions that are so easily exploited by those who wish to manipulate us’. What appeals about Egan’s stance is her clear connection of the potential of storytelling with the social and cultural framework of post-truth, which echoes many of the risks and opportunities described in the previous chapter. Secondly, being both a successful novelist and the president of the PEN Association, she combines the roles of writer and political activist; her position is especially relevant for this thesis, given that one of my primary intentions is to show how these two functions can overlap in a context of political crisis and cultural transformation. Additionally, while focusing on the positive effects of reading works of fiction, Egan does not dwell on any particular genre, trend or narrative technique. Her broad and deliberately vague definition of fiction, on the one hand, allows those who wish to address the issue in more detail to step in; on the other, she praises the intrinsic value of literature regardless of specific critical frameworks. Finally, I find it very

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<sup>198</sup> Jennifer Egan, ‘We Need Writers Now More Than Ever. Our Democracy Depends on It’, *Time*, 11 December 2018, <https://time.com/5475490/writers-truth-democracy-jennifer-egan/> (accessed on 13 July 2020).

interesting that Egan has placed the question of democracy at the heart of her concerns. This is because, as I have said many times so far, the resilience of democratic values is probably the main element at stake when it comes to examining the post-truth turn from a strictly political perspective.

Echoing Egan's stance in many ways, the main aim of this chapter is to examine the junctures where politics and narrative intersect within the current political and cultural scenario. I will be looking at the theories developed by various scholars in different fields on how to counterbalance the technological, media and political currents linked to post-truth. I will then focus more specifically on the functions and potentialities of narrative fiction, examining the Italian context and a specific set of works and authors.

### ***The Italian Debate: Commitment, Realism, and Postmodernism***

In Italy, the debate on the relationship between politics and literature has been central since the second half of the twentieth century. Since the Second World War, and in particular since the publication of Antonio Gramsci's *Quaderni dal Carcere*, critics have continually returned to this topic and produced a terminology and a body of theoretical benchmarks that are archetypical in Italian literary circles. To begin with, the definition of the term *impegno* has some very peculiar characteristics that differentiate it from its counterparts in other European languages and cultures – even in those countries that shared with Italy similar historical and political trajectories. As Alan O'Leary points out, the Italian term, unlike English 'commitment' or French 'engagement', contains a foundational nature:<sup>199</sup> it stands at the core of the process of shaping national identity and constitutes one of the pillars for the definition of Italian intelligentsia. Alberto Asor Rosa defines the devotion to the values of *impegno* as the sacrifice of individual autonomy and the personal quest for artistic distinctiveness to a bigger political cause.<sup>200</sup> This attitude was particularly relevant in the post-fascist era. As the historian and philosopher Norberto Bobbio explains, the revolutionary spirit of the Resistance, quickly drained in the political sphere, survived and lived on in the cultural one.<sup>201</sup> Without retracing the debate on *impegno*, it will suffice here

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<sup>199</sup> Alan O'Leary, 'Marco Tullio Giordana, or the Persistence of Impegno, in *Postmodern Impegno*, pp. 213-32 (p. 221).

<sup>200</sup> Alberto Asor Rosa, *Storia europea della letteratura italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009), p. 384.

<sup>201</sup> Norberto Bobbio, 'Profilo ideologico del Novecento', in *Storia della letteratura italiana*, ed. by Emilio Cecchi and Natalino Sapegno (Milan: Garzanti, 2001), p. 215.

to highlight two key elements. Firstly, the discourse on political engagement in fiction is still ongoing. In recent years, the theme has been revived and is now a central element of the literary debate. Consequently, to speak of commitment, in the Italian literary sphere, is to indicate a pre-existing framework in which to place broader critical and theoretical aspects. These include the representation of reality and the confrontation with historical and political truth – hence the theme of realism. the circulation and disappearance of postmodern theoretical and literary practices, and the link between literature and surrounding social changes. Secondly, to examine the political potential of fiction against the backdrop of post-truth is to radically re-examine the way the myth of *impegno* has been articulated, perpetuated, and revisited. The ultimate goal – which also represents the initial prerequisite – of this operation, is to unburden the concept from the debris it accumulated over the years. As I pointed out in the previous section, confronting the fast-paced world of post-truth requires intellectuals to resort to lighter and more flexible theoretical criteria. For this reason, I prefer to use the more neutral English word ‘commitment’. This will allow me to consider it as a constant within the various historical phases and artistic tendencies, without resorting to the all-Italian tendency to evaluate it as a practice that is switched on and off, depending on the literary and philosophical movements under review. *Impegno* has often been taken as the criterion for weighing the quality of literary artifacts, and I am keen to avoid these connotations of the term, preferring instead to formulate a notion of commitment that is fluid and adapted to present-day conditions.

Before delving into the issue of the post-truth narrative, it is worth retracing some of the key turns of the critical debate of the 2000s on which my reflections have inevitably drawn. In selecting the essays most worthy of mention, which are dealt with in order of publication, I have followed three guiding criteria: selecting those which best determined and described the path leading from the supposed end of postmodernism to the threshold of post-truth; those in which the scrutiny of the possibilities and outcomes of a political use of narrative holds a prominent position; the authors who better than others have, in my opinion, outlined the traits of what I now call post-truth narrative.

According to the guidelines just listed, I will start from the ground-breaking essay by Romano Luperini published in 2005, *La fine del Postmoderno*. In this work, Luperini suggested that the de-realising techniques, language games, ironic and meta-textual devices typical of postmodernism were running out of steam, and that in Italian literature – as well as European and international writing – from the 90s onwards, there was a revival of narrative practices that sought to understand, narrate, and analyse social reality. In such a

context, the attack on the World Trade Center on 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, are to be taken as a turning point in political, cultural, and literary terms.

The latter theoretical argument is more convincingly developed in issue 57 of the journal *Allegoria*, entitled ‘Ritorno alla realtà? Narrativa e cinema alla fine del postmoderno’, and edited by Raffaele Donnarumma, Gilda Policastro, Giovanna Taviani, and Daniele Vicari. In the article more specifically focused on the narrative scene, entitled ‘Nuovi realismi e persistenze postmoderne: narratori italiani di oggi’, Donnarumma reiterates some of Luperini’s points. Sharing the idea of 9/11 as a symbolic moment, the author observes in some of the works published in the run-up to that date and immediately after – including, for instance, texts by Giuseppe Genna, Walter Siti, Nicola Lagioia, Mauro Covacich, Vitaliano Trevisan, Laura Pugno, Marcello Fois, Aldo Nove – some common and original features: ‘il bisogno di storie utili’ that interact with the social world, the elaboration of new forms of realism recovering the aesthetic motifs of modernism, the search for stories that claim for truthful accounts of facts.<sup>202</sup> Specifically, Donnarumma points the attention to works of autobiography or auto-fiction in which the perception of the world is filtered through the narrator’s gaze; to those that transform political events into narrative plots that absorb the reader, as in the case of noir; or finally to texts mixing elements of fiction and non-fiction, with the dual purpose of staging reality and at the same time offering a commentary on it.

The issue of *Allegoria* attempts to synthesise and categorise some key narrative trends that have continued to develop during the embryonic phase of post-truth. At the same time, it brings to the fore factors that are at the centre of recent Italian critical analyses. For this reason, in the years following its release, many authors (in varying degrees of agreement and in disagreement) found themselves citing the positions expressed in issue 57 of *Allegoria*.<sup>203</sup> Two emblematic cases are *Poetiche dell’Irrealtà* by Arturo Mazzarella, in which the author strives to play down the prominence given to literary realism and the search for truth, in an epoch in which facts are the result of the mediatization process exerted by visual means of communication,<sup>204</sup> and, at the opposite pole, Vittorio Spinazzola’s edited

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<sup>202</sup> Raffaele Donnarumma, ‘Nuovi realismi e persistenze postmoderne’, pp. 44-45.

<sup>203</sup> In 2011, the scholar Margherita Ganeri offered a detailed account of the critical reactions to the *Allegoria* issue; Margherita Ganeri, ‘Reazioni allergiche al concetto di realtà: Il dibattito intorno al numero 57 di “Allegoria”’, in *Finzione, Cronaca, Realtà*, pp. 51-68.

<sup>204</sup> Arturo Mazzarella, *Poetiche dell’irrealtà; scritture e visioni tra Gomorra e Abu Ghraib* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2011).

collection *New Italian Realism*. In Spinazzola's volume, ideas on new narrative experimentalism centred on realistic trends are accepted and enhanced – by authors as Gianni Turchetta, Bruno Falchetto, Paolo Giovannetti, as well as Spinazzola himself.<sup>205</sup>

Without detracting from the arguments offered by Donnarumma and Luperini, I believe it is necessary to pinpoint a few weak passages. To begin with, both scholars, connect the lack of political commitment with postmodern cultural posture – often confusing, as Remo Ceserani reproaches them of doing, between 'postmodern' and 'postmodernism'.<sup>206</sup> This attitude is common among certain factions of Italian critics, who consider commitment and postmodernism to be at odds with each other. According to this view, the years of the neo- and trans-avant-gardes and the economic boom, hence the 1970s and 1980s – were years of light-hearted playfulness and the suspension of all possible forms of commitment to literature.<sup>207</sup> This crucial stance tends to associate, in the wake of the neorealist experience, literary political gaze with realistic narrative practices. In the following sections, I will explain how this kind of conceptual approach is irreconcilable with the latest narrative developments. For the moment, let me raise two main caveats. Firstly, it should be borne in mind that, on a more general level, postmodern cultural temperament carried with it from the outset the seeds of a political counter-discourse. In this sense it is fruitful, as Carlo Tirinanzi de Medici suggests,<sup>208</sup> not to linger in an overly literal reading of Frederic Jameson's thesis that postmodern represents the essence of capitalism.<sup>209</sup> On contrary, as Tirinanzi de Medici points out it is useful to engage with Linda Hutcheon's ground-breaking essay that strongly advocates the political character of postmodernism.<sup>210</sup> Secondly, even within the narrower area of Italian studies, many have argued that postmodern Italian authors cannot be accused of being disengaged. Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug make it clear that considering an interest in political facts and postmodernism as mutually exclusive habits it is only possible when one has a conception of engagement that is monolithic and subordinate to a predetermined political vision.<sup>211</sup> In fact, such a conception of commitment

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<sup>205</sup> Spinazzola, *Il New Italian Realism*.

<sup>206</sup> Remo Ceserani, "La maledizione degli -ismi", *Allegoria*, 65-66 (2011), 191-213 (p. 196).

<sup>207</sup> This critical stance is shared and expressed, among others, by Berardinelli in *Casi Critici*; but also by the collective Wu Ming in *New Italian Epic. Letteratura, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro* (Milan: Einaudi, 2009).

<sup>208</sup> Carlo Tirinanzi de Medici, *Il romanzo italiano contemporaneo. Dalla fine degli anni Settanta a oggi* (Rome: Carocci, 2018), p. 153.

<sup>209</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, The Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>210</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>211</sup> Antonello and Mussgnug, 'Introduction', p. 8.



had already been disputed by both Carla Benedetti<sup>212</sup> and Jennifer Burns<sup>213</sup> – albeit on different sides and taking separate critical paths.

Another text that has profoundly influenced Italian literary debate and narrative production is *New Italian Epic* by the Wu Ming collective. Published in 2009, this volume comprises two co-written texts entitled ‘New Italian Epic’ and ‘Sentimento Nuovo’ that are built around the ‘Memorandum’ – released in 2008 by Roberto Bui (Wu Ming 1) on the collective’s blog –, plus one additional piece by Bui himself, ‘Noi dobbiamo essere genitori’, and one by Giovanni Cattabriga (Wu Ming 2), ‘La salvezza di Euridice’.<sup>214</sup> The book shares *Allegoria*’s emphasis on the end point of Italian postmodernism, targeted as the act of ‘buttarla in vacca’ when it comes to tackling serious political issues.<sup>215</sup> Wu Ming, like the contributors to *Allegoria*, regard 9/11 as a catalyst for the emergence of a new cultural and literary climate. According to Wu Ming 1, since the beginning of the 2000s, ‘nelle lettere italiane sta accadendo qualcosa:’<sup>216</sup> the emergence of a new literary current he calls the ‘New Italian Epic’ (NIE).

There are some considerations about NIE that are particularly relevant here. As already mentioned, Wu Ming describe a widespread albeit unsystematic attitude of Italian writers to return to important political issues, abandoning the ironic detachment that was typical of postmodernism and showing instead a strong interest in the ethics of narration. The main characteristics common to this type of writings are the research into archives and historiographic sources; the oblique gaze and therefore the choice of anomalous points of view; the allegorical aspect of the narrative; the subversion of language. In addition, there is a concern for the ethics of literature, the future, and a strong faith in the redemptive power of writing. On a more practical level, the unrestricted combination of these features results in what Wu Ming dub as ‘Unidentified Narrative Objects’ (UNO), which transcend literary and media genres by bringing together elements of a heterogeneous nature. These works draw on genre fiction, though grafting non-fiction elements such as journalistic reportage, diaries, memoirs and historiography. Moreover, they often take the form of trans-media texts

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<sup>212</sup> Carla Benedetti, *Pasolini contro Calvino. Per una letteratura impura* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998).

<sup>213</sup> Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno; Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative* (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2001).

<sup>214</sup> Wu Ming, *New Italian Epic*.

<sup>215</sup> Wu Ming, *New Italian Epic*, p. 64.

<sup>216</sup> Wu Ming, *New Italian Epic*, p. 10. The collective emphasise that change is also afoot on an international level.

that move from one media channel to another: using audio-visual media or blogs. Typical examples are Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra*,<sup>217</sup> caught in between a fictional or autobiographical account and a journalistic chronicle, or Giuseppe Genna's *Dies Irae* and *Assalto a un tempo devastato e vile* – on which I will say more in chapter four.<sup>218</sup>

Wu Ming's theoretical efforts, despite accusations of being 'dilettantesco',<sup>219</sup> have aroused much interest among critics and authors. Proof of this is the lively debate that followed the publication of the 'Memorandum' on the collective's blog Giap, and the plethora of publications and essays it inspired, many of which were direct responses.<sup>220</sup> However, it is not only for this reason that *New Italian Epic* is central to my research. Though Wu Ming's conclusions proved to be unstable and short-lived – a few years after publication, the authors suggested that the experience of the New Italian Epic was already over and the production of UNO not as consolidated as they thought –,<sup>221</sup> they anticipated some of the questions posed by reflections related to the notion of post-truth. According to Willman Wu Ming's observations, despite failing to fulfil their premises, offer very significant insights on the narrative paths undertaken Italian authors in recent years.<sup>222</sup> I agree with Willman on this point: they identified important aspects of the relationship between the cultural, literary, and social spheres within what would later be labelled the post-truth era. My impression is that the flaws in their arguments are due to the fact that the critical gaze is retrospective rather than prospective. In addition, Wu Ming seem to have inherited an inclination to distinguish narrative ethical aspirations as incompatible with the practices of postmodernism. The consequence is therefore to evaluate literary forms that mix fiction and non-fiction in light of their degree of realism, which is considered synonymous with attention to social issues. Here, it is useful to bear in mind the studies of Elizabeth Wren-

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<sup>217</sup> Roberto Saviano, *Gomorra. Viaggio nell'impero economico e nel sogno di dominio della camorra* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006).

<sup>218</sup> Giuseppe Genna, *Dies Irae* (Milano: Mondadori, 2014); Giuseppe Genna, *Assalto a un tempo devastato e vile* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002). The last of the two texts has been expanded over the years and republished with additions, eventually reaching its latest version in 2020 entitled: *Assalto a un tempo devastato e vile 4.0* (Rome: Minimum Fax, 2020).

<sup>219</sup> Ceserani, "La maledizione degli -ismi", p. 12.

<sup>220</sup> Many of the web pages where this debate took place are now no longer accessible. In any case, there is a trace of it in the blogs of those who took an active part in that debate, such as Giuseppe Genna, who mention it and the importance it held in Italian literary debate of those years: Giuseppe Genna, "La svolta narrativa: NEW ITALIAN EPIC di Wu Ming 1", 30 April 2008, <https://giugenna.com/2008/04/30/la-svolta-narrativa-new-italian-epic-by-wu-ming-1/> (accessed on 12 July 2021). Another important account of the debate generated by the Memorandum is given by Kate Willman in her recent essay on the Unidentified Narrative Objects: Willman, *Unidentified Narrative Objects*, p. 2.

<sup>221</sup> Simone Brioni, 'Postcolonialismo, subalternità e New Italian Epic: intervista con Wu Ming 1', in *Subalternità italiane. Percorsi di ricerca tra letteratura e storia*, ed. by Valeria Deplano, Lorenzo Mari and Gabriele Proglia (Rome: Aracne, 2014), 275-90.

<sup>222</sup> Willman, *Unidentified Narrative Objects*, p. 15.

Owens, who shows that in authors such as Leonardo Sciascia and Antonio Tabucchi, the ethical dimension is perfectly reconciled with narrative techniques steeped in postmodernism.<sup>223</sup>

The other important aspect to highlight in these approaches is a certain persistence, from Luperini onwards, in considering 9/11 as an epoch-making event. In reality, I believe that, after a few years, it was clear that the shock wave of that event had not reached the scale that critics had predicted. Remo Ceserani also maintains that the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center holds no grounds for being considered as a turning point in recent history.<sup>224</sup> To this I would add that not only 9/11 but the wider phenomenon of terrorism, has not been experienced in the same way even in single Western states. It is extremely implausible that that threat to individual life perceived ‘salendo su un treno della metropolitana’<sup>225</sup> in countries hit by fundamentalist terrorism, such as Spain or the United Kingdom, is similar to that experienced in countries that have not been victims of that sort of attacks, such as Italy. Also, ought we not to distinguish between countries that sent conspicuous military contingents to support the invasions that followed the collapse of the twin towers and those that did not, or sent only a few troops? And yet, the idea of 9/11 as a defining moment reverberated in Italian criticism for almost a decade. My idea is that there was a need to hastily put an end to a trend – that of postmodernity associated with the expansion of late capitalism. experienced with much discomfort. I am also inclined to believe that there was a desire to draw parallels with the immediate post-war period and Italian neorealism: the need to highlight a real historical event that was felt as a profound and real experience, but also as a moment of collective self-recognition.

The roots of this necessity are illustrated well in Daniele Giglioli’s essay *Senza Trauma. Scrittura dell’estremo e narrativa del nuovo millennio*<sup>226</sup> and Antonio Scurati’s *La letteratura dell’inesperienza. Scrivere romanzi al tempo della televisione*.<sup>227</sup> Giglioli shows how the lack of real experience of trauma translates into the search for shocks that are experienced indirectly, through the media or even literature. Written five years earlier, Scurati’s text had already underlined the fact that the traumatic aspects of collective human

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<sup>223</sup> Elizabeth Wren-Owens, *Postmodern Ethics: The Re-appropriation of Committed Writing in the Works of Antonio Tabucchi and Leonardo Sciascia* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007).

<sup>224</sup> Ceserani, “La maledizione degli -ismi”, p. 195.

<sup>225</sup> Luperini, *La fine del postmoderno*, p. 20.

<sup>226</sup> Daniele Giglioli, *Senza Trauma. Scrittura dell’estremo e narrative del nuovo millennio* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2011).

<sup>227</sup> Antonio Scurati, *La letteratura dell’inesperienza. Scrivere romanzi al tempo della televisione* (Milan: Bompiani, 2006).

existence – such as war, for example – have been ejected from our daily lives in the West, and yet they return in the form of images and television representations. This means that no real experience of the world is possible and that tragic events have become ‘osceni’, i.e., condemned to remain ‘fuori dalla scena’, excluded from our social gaze. To come to terms with all this, to be able to write novels that have something to say about the political and social state of affairs, is, according to Scurati, increasingly difficult for contemporary storytellers.

My position on this particular issue is ambivalent. On the one hand, I am determined to dismiss a certain propensity of critics to turn to the past when seeking valid theoretical guidelines. As I have stated above, I believe that this kind of attitude constitutes a setback when it comes to assessing the sudden – and in this case very far-reaching – changes in the present. On the other hand, I think it is safe to say that the 9/11 tragedy and its aftermath have done little to shape our habits and our understanding of politics and social dynamics in comparison to the long-term transformations that have taken place in the field of information technology, in the way we consume and exchange information, and in economic models. From this point of view, as claimed in the Introduction to this work I find more appropriate to envisage the end of 2007 as a cut-off date.

Before moving on to an analysis of other authors, I want to focus on the last section in *New Italian Epic*, ‘La salvezza di Euridice’ by Wu Ming 2. It is the chapter of the book that has received the least critical attention to date, and yet it is perhaps the most astute in anticipating some of the arguments of the post-truth debate. When Cattabriga refers to the ‘febbre narrativa’ that is afflicting contemporary culture and when he identifies the traits of a gradual but radical ‘cataclisma simbolico’ characterised by collective idiocy, the disappearance of facts, compulsory fabulation, and the inflation of the imagination he seems in fact to be alluding to the early stages of the post-truth turn.<sup>228</sup> Another particularly interesting aspect of this essay is its basic question of how to produce effective discourses about the world in a context where reality is always given and perceived in the form of a narrative. In his attempt to answer this question, it is significant that Cattabriga takes his cue from George Lakoff’s studies on narration as a cognitive tool through which humans make sense of things around them. Cattabriga uses Lakoff’s hypotheses to introduce a set of considerations regarding the role of literature which are extremely in tune with the issues tackled by my thesis. For instance, quoting Annette Simmons, he argues that people are

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<sup>228</sup> Wu Ming 2, ‘La salvezza di Euridice’, in *New Italian Epic*, pp. 132-133.

constantly searching for stories to believe in, in order to piece together and give coherence to the sheer quantity of information they are exposed to. In the light of these assumptions, he defines storytelling as ‘veleno e antidoto’, fully grasping the duality of its nature: it is simultaneously a way to manipulate public discourses, simplify issues and conceal facts *and* a means to introduce alternative perspectives, stimulate reflection, and shed light on events within the context of today’s information overload. Hence, language and narrations make it possible to ‘mettere in crisi il mondo e immaginarne uno nuovo’.<sup>229</sup> As these few lines show, Cattabriga’s discourse seems to anticipate by a decade Jennifer Egan’s considerations detailed at the start of this chapter.

Carla Benedetti addressed similar questions in an essay published shortly after *New Italian Epic* entitled *Disumane lettere. Indagini sulla cultura della nostra epoca*. Benedetti’s approach is especially interesting here because of the way it deals with these two apparently distinct fields of investigation: sociology of culture and literary criticism. Regarding the former, Benedetti’s inquiry seems to me to be the most comprehensive of the works I have outlined thus far. She seeks to define how humankind – with particular attention to the literary establishment – can respond to the enormous challenges it faces in the present time, including phenomena such as the technological revolution and the effects of climate change. The issue of climate change is, in her view, the most urgent: by forcing humanity to come to terms with the real possibility of its end, it obliges it to radically rethink its way of being in the world. While it should be noted that many of the proposals made by Benedetti already seem outdated, the author grasps extremely well some of the questions that are still unanswered today – questions I am addressing in my research – and foresees the political and social problems that would become crucial a few years later. To give some specific examples: in chapter 3, very emphatically titled ‘Epoca senza nome’, Benedetti points out that the phase we are living through ‘appare sospesa sulla contingenza di un tempo paurosamente aperto’, caught between the end of the postmodern and the irreversible overcoming of the modern legacy.<sup>230</sup> It is very significant that the author resists, in these pages, the temptation to provide universal solutions or definitions and instead focuses on deconstructing the interpretations put forward so far – especially in the Italian context – and

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<sup>229</sup> Wu Ming 2, ‘La salvezza di Euridice’, 127-203 (p. 184).

<sup>230</sup> Benedetti, *Disumane lettere*, p. 59.

analysing the fundamental steps that have brought the world of culture to this impasse.<sup>231</sup> I am therefore convinced that in a way, the discourse on post-truth is related to these tangled knots and develops the discourse initiated in Benedetti's study.

As far as literary criticism is concerned, it is very interesting how the author on the one hand professes the need for literature and the humanities to take an active part in ongoing political and cultural processes while on the other refuses to simply look back at the formulas of commitment pursued in the past. She regards with suspicion theories of a return to reality that 'immiserisce l'invenzione della scrittura'<sup>232</sup>; the 'ritorno al moderno', which can only be a 'retrocessione';<sup>233</sup> the separation of 'narrazione di genere e genere Letteratura', appearing essentially to reject the separation of highbrow and lowbrow;<sup>234</sup> the rigid distinction between fiction and non-fiction, defined as 'separazione barbara';<sup>235</sup> or the end of postmodernism, highlighting its assimilation into new and original stylistic currents.<sup>236</sup> Therefore, if one must notice that Benedetti agrees with the authors mentioned above in identifying *Gomorra* as the perfect example for this new literary trajectory as Saviano can be considered the contemporary Italian author who more than others has strived to assert the fact that 'i libri agiscono. Non raccontano la realtà ma la modificano'.<sup>237</sup> Unlike Donnarumma or Wu Ming though, she refuses to adopt rigid genre categories, or to resort to the dichotomy fiction and non-fiction, and perceives *Gomorra*'s generic hybridity as a purely personal authorial choice: a way of trying to tell the truths that the current media are no longer able to convey.

Benedetti's arguments are thus worthy of being revisited and integrated in this work, especially considering that her ultimate goal and mine are not so dissimilar. We both aim to put forward an idea of literary engagement that embraces the challenges and potentials of the present and yet is oriented towards future outputs and alternative perspectives. In this sense, Benedetti's interest in the opportunities offered by the Internet and blogs is also very interesting: both are tools that encourage the participation and horizontal involvement of

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<sup>231</sup> Benedetti, *Disumane lettere*, pp. 61-89.

<sup>232</sup> Benedetti, *Disumane lettere*, p. 99.

<sup>233</sup> Benedetti, *Disumane lettere*, p. 73.

<sup>234</sup> Benedetti, *Disumane lettere*, pp. 109-110.

<sup>235</sup> Benedetti, *Disumane lettere*, p. 112.

<sup>236</sup> Benedetti, *Disumane lettere*, p. 65.

<sup>237</sup> Benedetti, *Disumane lettere*, p. 115 (italics are in the text).

The argument regarding political agency of Saviano's texts has also been developed very convincingly by Luca Poggi in a recent article. In this work, the scholar deploys J.L. Austin's theory of language to show how the utterances made by the writer are not only constative but also performative, i.e. they not only describe a given situation, but also perform the act of trying to change it: 'Io So, a Reading of Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra*', *MLN*, 126 (2011), 224-244.

users and foster the spread of counter-information. One of the problems of our time, according to the scholar, is precisely ‘la trasformazione di informazione in opinione, cioè il suo svincolamento da ciò che le dà forza e verità’.<sup>238</sup> This last quote in particular sounds very familiar to those concerned with post-truth. However, it shows precisely the need to reinterpret these readings in the light of contemporary developments, taking into account, for instance, that – as seen in the previous chapter – these tools, instead of countering the spread of misinformation, promote it.

At first glance, an essay published by Pierpaolo Antonello in 2012 – one year after *Disumane lettere* – seems to take a very different stand, contending that the humanities do not need to introject issues that pertain to politics in order to fulfil their social function. The title chosen is very meaningful and gives a good indication of the positions expressed in the book, *Dimenticare Pasolini. Intellettuali e impegno nell’Italia contemporanea*. One of the key aims is to revise the myth of Pasolini, i.e., the all-round intellectual following the Gramscian paradigm. The book takes up and expands, a few years later, on the arguments put forward in the introduction to *Postmodern Impegno*, relating them to the cultural and social scene at the turning of 2010s. Antonello seeks to overcome a certain Italian provincialism and its elitist vision of literature and culture, with its ‘ideologizzata’ and ‘totalizzante’ conception of literary commitment. By rejecting the apocalyptic mood that has prevailed within Italian critical debate, Antonello undermines the understanding of postmodernism and political commitment as mutually opposed. This approach has some fundamental consequences: the definitive dismissal of the modern/non-modern dialectic; the acceptance of postmodernism as a cultural dominant – borrowing a very apt insight from Jameson – in which networks proliferate that are simultaneously real, discursive, and collective; a conception of literary engagement that focuses more on the individual and on micro-politics than on the ‘massimalismo delle macro politiche’.<sup>239</sup>

Another reason Antonello’s arguments are significant for this thesis is that his analysis soon assumes a more properly sociological dimension. And it is here, I believe, that Antonello initiates a discourse – without clearly being aware of it – concerning the relationship between culture and the political condition of post-truth. Taking up Stuart Hall’s

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<sup>238</sup> Benedetti, *Disumane lettere*, p. 122.

<sup>239</sup> Antonello, *Dimenticare Pasolini*, p. 144.

theories on the post-hegemonic era, the author once again advocates a liquid idea of literary agency. Antonello acknowledges without any compunction or nostalgia both the demise of the figure of the ‘intellettuale-legislatore’ – so sorely lamented by key figures in Italian criticism, foremost by Luperini – and the disappearance of ‘progetti organici’ holding the political and cultural spheres together.<sup>240</sup> Such elements have been replaced respectively by ‘intellettuali-esperti’ or ‘intellettuali-intrattenitori’, and by forms of horizontal and grassroots activism.<sup>241</sup> This is to say that the role of writers and scholars is now to encourage ‘meccanismi riflessivi di presa di coscienza e di capacità d’azione’,<sup>242</sup> recovering fragments of understanding within political structures that have become centripetal. It seems fair to say that this position still holds true a few years later.

Finally, the scholar devotes a lot of attention to the cultural results of the mediatic landscape forged by new technologies like the Internet and social networks. These have resulted in a democratisation of cultural practices, integrating traditional top-down processes with bottom-up dynamics and forms of upstream engagement. As already discussed in the previous chapter, pursuing traditional standards of gatekeeping, in such context, is a complicated and sometimes vain effort. Consequently, Antonello suggests that intellectuals are better positioned as part of the star-system, mastering and deploying new means of communication and information, as well as engaging with sophisticated and mainstream artistic forms.

Scrutiny of these works thus reveals several points of contact between Antonello’s and Benedetti’s studies. But it is actually possible to find, among all the essays discussed in this section – even if they arrive to different conclusions –, a common attitude to rethink the relationship between politics and literature in virtue of recent historical-political developments.

### ***Revisiting Raffaele Donnarumma: From Hypermodernity to Post-Truth***

The selection of critical texts presented so far gives an indication of the great drive in Italian literary studies to interpret new narrative trends and above all to redefine the relationship between politics and literature. A further sign of this dynamism is the

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<sup>240</sup> Antonello, *Dimenticare Pasolini*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>241</sup> Antonello, *Dimenticare Pasolini*, p. 90.

<sup>242</sup> Antonello, *Dimenticare Pasolini*, p. 18.



publication, in the last decade, of numerous wide-ranging essays that aim to contextualise, historicise and catalogue contemporary Italian literature, such as *Raccontare dopo Gomorra* by Paolo Giovannetti, *La letteratura circostante* by Gianluigi Simonetti and *Il romanzo italiano contemporaneo* by Carlo Tirinanzi de Medici – all published between 2011 and 2018.<sup>243</sup> However, Raffaele Donnarumma's 2014 essay *Ipermodernità* is probably the most interesting out of this wave of works in the context of my research. This text, which brings together a series of articles written over ten years, follows three main research streams. Firstly, Donnarumma engages with literary history and makes an effort to give an accurate picture of what has happened in Italian narrative since the 1970s. In *Ipermodernità*, he takes up many of the themes already developed in *Allegoria*, focusing in particular on the way postmodernism has been absorbed into new artistic trajectories in the second half of the last century. Within this framework he discusses authors such as Calvino, Pasolini, Arbasino, Celati, the Cannibali, and literary movements, such as the Gruppo 63 or Italian trans-avant-garde.

The second path is the one I will perhaps refer to most – even indirectly – over the following pages. Commenting on recent narrative developments, Donnarumma makes crucial observations that belong to the field of literary theory. From this point of view, he is able to capture and summarise very effectively the key features that distinguish contemporary Italian fiction today (slightly weaker are his references to the international scene). However, where my analysis and his will diverge is in the employment of narrow and particularly ideologised critical categories – which are very much in evidence in *Ipermodernità* and which I will strive instead to avoid. It is precisely these categories, for example, which cause Donnarumma to dismiss hastily certain postmodern practices which I believe are still central today, particular from the perspective of political agency. Despite these divergences, I consider his essay a central text for anyone wishing to investigate Italian fiction in recent years, with the caveat that in order to produce conclusions that are still valid today, his work must be revised and corrected in light of current developments.

This brings us to the third strand of Donnarumma's investigation, which focuses on the sociological dimension of literature and constitutes the most original aspect of his work. In the years following the publication 'Ritorno alla realta?', the author sought to systematise

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<sup>243</sup> Paolo Giovannetti (ed.), *Raccontare dopo Gomorra. La recente narrativa italiana in undici opere (2007-2010)* (Trezzano: Edizioni Unicopli, 2011); Gianluigi Simonetti, *Letteratura circostante. Narrativa e poesia nell'Italia contemporanea* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018); Tirinanzi De Medici, *Il romanzo italiano contemporaneo*.

his analyses and situate the literary transformations he observed within a more defined framework. The essay upholds the thesis of 9/11 as a cut-off date, but this consideration is now framed in a broader context of historical transition. Following Virilio, Charles and especially Lipovetsky,<sup>244</sup> Donnarumma names the era at the beginning of the third millennium ‘hypermodernity’. According to his interpretation, the new phase has several features in common with the preceding one but differs considerably in many other respects. In particular, hypermodernity represents a ‘congedo dal postmoderno’,<sup>245</sup> caused by the return of social conflicts – cultural clashes, postcolonial issues, social and political protests such as those by the No-global and Occupy Wall Street movements. This change demands an effort on the part of intellectuals and historians who must find new and original responses to present-day challenges, going beyond the postmodernist theories that insisted on an ironic and detached recovery of what had already been said. Notwithstanding the fact that hypermodernity outruns postmodernism, it does not restore the modern faith in progress, as the prefix ‘-iper’ ‘depone ogni possibile sfumatura celebrativa e rivela il suo carico ansiogeno e intimidatorio: l’iper è il dover essere della contemporaneità, la sua ossessione prestazionale’.<sup>246</sup> According to the author, both postmodernity and hypermodernity ‘sono atti dello stesso dramma’,<sup>247</sup> i.e., they are both passages of modernity, which has not come to an end – and here the interpretation aligns with the arguments by Jürgen Habermas.<sup>248</sup>

This change of posture, as Lipovetsky has already pointed out, must lead to a new kind of humanism, since the degree of anxiety brought about by the new threats compels scholars and artists to take a stand and to address their implications. This attitude, in Donnarumma’s view, is particularly visible in literature, in the works of David Foster Wallace, Roberto Bolaño, Walter Siti, Jonathan Littel, Michel Houellebecq, Giuseppe Genna and Antonio Moresco. As previously mentioned, I am convinced that the emergence of post-truth requires a revision of Donnarumma’s conclusions. It is precisely with the intention of further refining these his that, before moving on, I will endeavour to highlight their strengths and aporias.

Regarding literary history (in any case of secondary interest here), suffice it to say that Donnarumma’s efforts are focused on the historicization of postmodernism within the literature and culture of the twentieth century. In doing so, the author backdates its beginning

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<sup>244</sup> Paul Virilio, *From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond*, ed. by John Armitage (London: SAGE, 2000); Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*; Charles, *L’ipermoderno spiegato ai bambini*.

<sup>245</sup> Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, p. 99.

<sup>246</sup> Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, pp. 104-105.

<sup>247</sup> Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, p. 105.

<sup>248</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Il moderno, un progetto incompiuto*, ed. by Leonardo Ceppa (Turin: Nuova Trauben, 2019).

to the 1960s, making it coincide with the avant-garde, and then, like many critics, finds its terminal moment at the end of the 1990s.<sup>249</sup>

Of greater interest are his considerations regarding literary analysis, namely the way in which Donnarumma theorises the coexistence of two opposing tendencies: on the one hand, the search for reality, for true stories, for civic sensibility; on the other, the struggle to get to the essence of political dynamics in a time in which social interactions are simulated and occur in a mediated way. The first tendency, according to Donnarumma, fosters the attempt of contemporary writers to recover realism and return to forms of commitment (as discussed in *Allegoria*). Instead, the second trend engenders a mitigating and remodelling of the same practices, in order to adapt them to a situation that has now radically changed. Starting from this argument, the essayist investigates recent Italian narrative texts in order to isolate the most effective ways of dealing with this issue. In the cases of Moresco, Covacich, Siti, Albinati, Sortino and Affinati – to name but a few – recourse is made to ‘scritture dell’io’,<sup>250</sup> i.e., biographical, autobiographical or autofictional forms in which the fractured and splintered post-modern subject is recomposed and offers itself as a source of truthful accounts. Building on Giorgio Agamben’s reflections on the figure of the witness and therefore interpreting the latter’s task as ‘pronunciare un giudizio’ instead of ‘dire la verità’, Donnarumma argues for a ‘realismo testimoniale’ that ‘non reclama tanto la sua fedeltà alle cose come sono andate, quanto la necessità di dire un vero che esorbita dai limiti dell’empiricamente accaduto’.<sup>251</sup> By doing so, hypermodern trends overcome postmodern scepticism regarding truth to fully restore ‘i suoi diritti’.<sup>252</sup> This attitude is epitomised by Saviano in *Gomorra* – cited in the introduction to the book as an example for fictional efforts of this kind.

Donnarumma’s analysis moves on to explore the transformations of literary genres and categories that have taken place in this theoretical context, especially in the ‘modi in cui si recuperano le tradizioni realistiche’.<sup>253</sup> The most significant feature, he suggests, is the grafting of fiction and non-fiction formats into hybrid writings, that he also defines as ‘faction’ – the influence of *New Italian Epic* here is openly proclaimed. In a sense, hypermodern narratives abandon the very distinction between fiction and non-fiction as it

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<sup>249</sup> This is clearly stated also by Linda Hutcheon in the afterword to her 2002 re-edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism*.

<sup>250</sup> Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, pp. 129-34.

<sup>251</sup> Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, p. 126.

<sup>252</sup> Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, p. 126.

<sup>253</sup> Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, p. 165.

has been hitherto perceived. According to Donnarumma, the partition into these two ‘super-generi’ originates in postmodernism, which sees fiction as the realm of invention and non-fiction as discourse that ‘rende conto delle cose’.<sup>254</sup> In other words, hypermodern authors are committed to describing reality and revealing the truth, even though they know that all discourses about the world are artificial and constructed. This is the essence of the new realism: it is ‘documentario’ when it displays its sources and provides criteria for verification, but then overrides them by asking the reader to suspend disbelief and enter into a pact of trust in the same way that fiction does; on contrary, it is ‘testimoniale’ when proof is offered by a narrator that proposes itself as witness.<sup>255</sup> Similarly, the ‘personal essay’ combines the recounting of verifiable facts with personal impressions, freely mixing objective considerations with subjective opinions. Finally, as far as subject matter is concerned, Donnarumma sheds light on a hypermodern need for ‘storie vere’, with the emergence of a new realm of socially focused themes, starting with those regarding the job market and labour precariousness.<sup>256</sup>

The most attentive reader will surely have already sensed how pertinent these claims are to the philosophical questions and cultural problems of post-truth. When Donnarumma quotes Rorty and Engel to say that ‘la situazione in cui viviamo è insieme di sfiducia nella verità e di bisogno di verità’ and when he says that we seek this truth not in the sciences but ‘nei racconti’, I believe he is talking about the condition described in the initial pages of this work.<sup>257</sup> For this reason, it is imperative to include some of the traits he identifies within an analysis of today’s committed fiction. In fact, the feature he outlines can be found in the recent works of Falco, Scurati, Siti, and Genna: an original use of authentic materials, ‘marche di realtà’,<sup>258</sup> and historical sources; the constant oscillation of points of view; discursive techniques to involve readers; the use of an uncertain first person and markedly unreliable witnesses. The main difference is that, as I now move into the context of post-truth, I am cautious not to yield to the temptation to dismiss postmodernism too conclusively. For instance, in my interpretation, the use of irony and metanarrative features still plays a central role in today’s fiction. As I will show in the next sections, trying to tell the truth

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<sup>254</sup> Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, p. 173.

<sup>255</sup> This distinction between two forms of realism in Donnarumma’s essay is highlighted by Giacomo Tinelli in his review: Giacomo Tinelli, ‘Realismo. Quale Ritorno?’, *Between*, 8 (2014), p. 2.

<sup>256</sup> Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, p. 201.

<sup>257</sup> Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, p. 178.

<sup>258</sup> Carlo Tirinanzi De Medici uses this syntagma throughout his essay to refer to textual elements that emphasise the referral to aspects external to the text and therefore belonging to reality: Tirinanzi De Medici, *Il romanzo italiano contemporaneo*.

without taking oneself too seriously or unmasking the functional nature of stories are indispensable approaches when it comes to engaging an audience in the present era. For this reason, I also avoid falling into what Ceserani has called ‘la maledizione degli -ismi’:<sup>259</sup> the twentieth century compulsion to find broad and stark labels seems to me very ineffective. Florian Mussgnug seems to share this idea when he states that scepticism towards postmodernism seems nothing more than ‘una scelta di stile’,<sup>260</sup> as does Giacomo Tinelli when he disputes the conception “‘verificazionista” e referenziale del linguaggio’ entrenched in the formulation of realism provided by Donnarumma.<sup>261</sup>

On the subject of the relationship between literature and reality, the theories of Gianluigi Simonetti and Carlo Tirinanzi De Medici seem to me in some ways more convincing. The two authors agree with Donnarumma on certain aspects such as the interest in true stories, the return to historical and social themes, and the use of documents and first-person accounts in contemporary Italian novels. But they also show substantial differences. Although Simonetti presents a terminological similarity by retaining the word ‘realism’, he clearly assumes that understanding realism as a privileged epistemological tool is a largely Western habit. With this in mind he theorises the ‘realismo dell’irrealtà’<sup>262</sup> developed by contemporary authors: in a scenario in which new media, new communication devices proliferate, and the interaction with reality takes place primarily through media, narrators combine ‘materiali sociali e mediatici’ to create an ‘effetto di realtà’ which cannot produce univocal meanings. Interpreting Simonetti thoughts, it is possible to claim that recent narrative, rather than investigating reality itself, focuses on the language through which today’s society constantly filters it. The scholar echoes Walter Siti’s observations made in the booklet *Il realismo è l’impossibile* – like the famous exclamation made by Picasso when confronted with Gustav Courbet’s *The Origin of the World*. According to Siti, realism is a matter of style, in which the author ‘secolarizza il mondo ma solo per re-incantarlo’.<sup>263</sup> The writer does not produce accurate reproductions of reality but restores its conflictual nature. It seems evident to me, therefore, that in a context such as the one we live in, where conflicts become a matter of posture, literature concerned with reality cannot but adapt to this.

Even more convincing is Tirinanzi De Medici’s analysis, which regards with suspicion the use of realism when talking about recent fiction. The author defines realism as one of

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<sup>259</sup> Ceserani, ‘La maledizione degli -ismi’.

<sup>260</sup> Florian Mussgnug, ‘Su Ipermodernità di Raffaele Donnarumma’, *Between*, 8 (2014), p. 5.

<sup>261</sup> Tinelli, ‘Realismo. Quale Ritorno?’, p. 4.

<sup>262</sup> Simonetti, *Letteratura circostante*, p. 89.

<sup>263</sup> Walter Siti, *Il realismo è l’impossibile* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2013), p. 59.

the many codes used to talk about the facts of the world, emphasising it only works if employed in combination with others.<sup>264</sup> Agreeing with the idea of engagement expressed through hybrid narrative forms that combine elements of fiction and non-fiction, Tirinanzi De Medici proposes a more neutral distinction between texts ‘a bassa’ and ‘alta finzionalità’.<sup>265</sup> The effect of this approach is to use the adherence to real things as a purely classificatory gradient. At one end of the spectrum are works in which the typical structures of journalism, essays, or reportage predominate, set in a fictional context; at the other, we find narratives in which recourse to invention and the construction of worlds prevails over the description of true facts. According to this scheme, the 2000s are marked by the diffusion of texts with a low level of fictionality – such as autofiction, the testimonial novel, the fictional biography – which nonetheless employ techniques of hybridisation between fiction and non-fiction. This seems to me a very convincing way of highlighting the interest of recent texts in political and civil questions without stepping into twentieth century critical categories.

Ultimately then, I think that one of the points where Donnarumma’s theory needs to be reconsidered is precisely this. If one accepts that, as Federico Bertoni argues, realism is the cultural dominant of the modern era,<sup>266</sup> it is easier to understand why Donnarumma feels so strongly the urge to resort to it. We have already seen that one of the central theses of *Ipermodernità* is that the current era is a new stage in the modern parabola. Thus, while not naively attempting to restore the positivist climate of the late nineteenth century, the critic adopts the typically modern trait of realism to sideline its main antagonists: modernism and postmodernism. In so doing, he is able to recover certain aspects of modernity, such as the belief in progress and the faith in accessible truths to contextualise them in today’s cultural setting. I find this step particularly problematic when it comes to the conditions of post-truth. Indeed, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, one of the consequences of the post-truth is the undermining of modern cultural and epistemological cornerstones. Thus, the fundamental need for the cultural and literary milieu to come to terms with the present requires a degree of critical elaboration that goes beyond that enacted by Donnarumma.

Before moving on to the next section let me raise one last concern, which is related to the juncture where Donnarumma brings together literary and cultural analyses with historical and sociological ones. His decision to embrace Lipovetsky’s theories of hypermodernity as

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<sup>264</sup> Tirinanzi de Medici, *Il romanzo italiano contemporaneo*. p. 192.

<sup>265</sup> Tirinanzi de Medici, *Il romanzo italiano contemporaneo*. p. 187.

<sup>266</sup> Federico Bertoni, *Realismo e letteratura. Una storia possibile* (Turin: Einaudi, 2007), p. 34.

a category for describing the present raises two sets of questions. From a sociological point of view, the difficulties are due to chronological reasons. Published in 2004, Lipovetsky's foundational book certainly captured some of the trends animating Western societies: excessive consumption, the emergence of anxiety about the future, as well as the need for certainty and the use of the media as a means of emancipation.<sup>267</sup> Nonetheless, it was too early for Lipovetsky to foresee the impact of the new technologies, or the way in which such anxiety would be used as a tool for consensus, or even how attention to the future would be channelled into totally fragmented forms in total opposition to one another. Nor could he predict today's level of subjectification of truth, political polarisation, or threats posed to the resilience of our democratic systems. It is emblematic that the scholar, in his final lines, adopts an optimistic tone intended to dispel the risks of 'rebarbarization' or the transformation of democracy into pseudo-democracy.<sup>268</sup> In fact, it is exactly in relation to these risks that post-truth analysts and intellectual such as Egan sound the alarm today. This is why Lipovetsky's text is useful for understanding the present, but only if one is able to appreciate its strengths while recognising its inevitable limits.

Finally, in his closing remarks Donnarumma proves he is aware of a certain hazardousness in his theoretical approach. He is aware that the category of hypermodernity had not yet established itself in sociology books. At the same time, he highlights that, when looking at the present, the observer should make personal choices and recur to generalisations.<sup>269</sup> In other words, the scholar is perfectly conscious of the subjective nature of his conclusions. But it remains a point of great significance. If the category of hypermodernity applied to literature is frequent in the Italian context – it is one of the consequences of Donnarumma's admirable interpretative effort – it is in no way so in other national contexts. Therefore, in order to produce research with a broader perspective – as both Donnarumma and I intend to do – this category should be discarded today. In short, if hypermodern narrative is a purely Italian fact, I do not think it is possible to use it as a label when trying to relate literary practice to the broader framework of global political developments. While I credit to Donnarumma's critical effort, which is very informative about ongoing trajectories in Italian literature, his reading has to be uprooted from its theoretical framework and placed in the current context.

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<sup>267</sup> These theses lie at the heart of the scholar's text: Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*.

<sup>268</sup> Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>269</sup> Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, pp. 225-240.

### *The New Cultural Environment: Opportunities and Challenges*

The extensive overview of the previous section aimed to summarise the main schools of thought in recent Italian criticism, but also to evidence the general dilemmas in cultural and artistic activities today. I will now elaborate on these aspects by considering how the post-truth context is affecting the world of culture and striving to identify its responses, focusing primarily on the products and the protagonists of the literary industry. It is worth specifying that cultural confrontation with the social sphere can take one of two forms: *retroattiva*, that is, capturing the way in which art and culture respond to external transformations, such as technological ones; or proactive, when a response anticipates and foresees new possible scenarios, tracing an original path. Another methodological clarification to be made is that as far as literary research is concerned, this section will be inspired by the approach of the sociology of literature. In doing so, I fully agree with Daniele Maria Pegorari when he maintains that such disciplinary component is indispensable today, since ‘un contemporaneista non può non essere anche un sociologo della letteratura’.<sup>270</sup> Thus, I will once again uphold an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing on the fields of sociology and information science as well as cognitive studies and narratology.

When talking about the relationship between political ambitions and literary-cultural creations, Egan’s article, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, is once again very useful. In addition to touching on the various ways in which literature confronts the worlds of politics and information, the writer clearly exposes the paradoxical nature of contemporary cultural activities of any kind. Whereas a great deal was said in the first chapter about the contradictory quality of the dynamics inherent in the world of post-truth from a political and social standpoint, I only touched briefly on the cultural aspect. Now is the time to expand on this issue, as it is central to the analysis of narrative in the post-truth era. More specifically, addressing issues concerning artistic and literary production from a sociological perspective means considering how economic, technological, and social changes have affected the cultural industry, as well as the mechanisms of distribution and reception of creative and cultural content.

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<sup>270</sup> Daniele Maria Pegorari, *Letteratura liquida. Sei lezioni sulla crisi della modernità* (Lecce: Manni, 2018), p. 33.



To start with, as both Benedetti and Antonello point out, contemporary critics must come to terms with the fact that literature has lost the status that it had in the post-war years. I have already mentioned in chapter one how the technological and economic transformations within today's historical phase have jeopardised democratic and information processes, not so much by suppressing or paralysing them, but on the contrary by intensifying them beyond control. The ideals of total, decentralised, and direct democracy, or the myth of free and open information, clash with a technological apparatus that leaves room for manipulation and disturbance. The alarms raised regarding post-truth come in the wake of a progressive weakening of core institutions and poles of power. Similar problems are also faced by the world of art and culture, which has seen an exponential increase in the number of communication channels, leading players, and intermediary agents. The fact is not only that the narrative objects have lost their 'aura' and their distinctive role in comparison to other consumer goods, but also that the whole mechanism leading to their creation and promotion has been radically transformed. The consequences and causes of this are many. One could start by accepting that, in today's advanced capitalism, everything is assimilated within marketing and market dynamics and regulated by the same laws of profit. Pegorari devotes a few pages of his essay to this aspect and explains how the artistic impulse inevitably bends to economic logic. Thus, the effort of cultural operators is to bring together 'due nuovi ordini di interesse, quello venale e quello cognitivo' and this means being able to preserve the 'aesthetic capital' and the 'cultural capital' described by Pierre Bourdieu, in a context in which visibility necessarily depends on the ability to entertain and appeal to the public.<sup>271</sup>

Going further, this course of action progressively flattens differences between artistic artifacts as books and reveals the definitive impracticability of the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow literature. With reference to the latter element, Simonetti's work *La letteratura circostante* highlights this inclusion, within the paradigms of literary criticism, of those products that were until recently considered 'paraletteratura'.<sup>272</sup> The scholar also includes in his investigation texts whose evident purpose is to increase publishers' revenues, and which are symptomatic of the current cultural climate. With regard to the first aspect, Lorenzo Marchese finds that many of today's literary and narrative trends – such as the popularity of non-fiction novels – are modelled according to the logic of the cultural industry, in pursuit of public's preferences.<sup>273</sup> The implications of this analysis are

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<sup>271</sup> Pegorari, *Letteratura liquida*, pp. 103.

<sup>272</sup> Simonetti, *Letteratura circostante*, p. 230.

<sup>273</sup> Lorenzo Marchese, *Storiografie parallele* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019), p. 282.

considerable: narrative inclinations, such as the proliferation of docufictions, non-fiction novels, and biopics, rather than being just the result of political and cultural reflections, are also the consequence of publishing strategies focused on financial gain.<sup>274</sup>

The principle according to which the highest degree of democratisation corresponds to the highest rate of standardisation also applies to the cultural industry. Therefore, while Scurati complains in his essay that capitalist society, by its very essence, tends to narrow the diversity of cultural experiences,<sup>275</sup> Asor Rosa makes it clear that this is entangled with democracy itself, as it is by definition ‘livellatrice e mediocrizzante’, in that for any value to be established it must be shared by large masses of citizens or consumers.<sup>276</sup> Likewise, Guido Mazzoni claims that novel’s success, at its origin, was due to the fact that it served the purpose of giving voice to masses that were previously excluded from literary representation.<sup>277</sup> This led to a widening in the range of themes, narrative situations, and characters, as well as an enlargement of the potential audience.

An important and paradoxical point follows from these preliminary assessments: safeguarding the democratic capacity of culture – especially now that democratic practices have reached their zenith – means defending and promoting a broader definition of culture. Practising principles of inclusiveness, in this respect, is crucial on the part of intellectuals and cultural agents, both in terms of the themes they deal with and the level of artistic sophistication in addressing them. To quote the incipit of Walter Siti’s *Troppi Paradisi* they must also ‘occupar[si] di sciocchezze e chiamare sciocchezze le potenze che non controll[ano]’.<sup>278</sup> To some extent, this feeds into the responses of those who see the value of literary art diminished by its increased democratisation. The proliferation of titles, authors, promotion channels and cultural agents involved can only result, according to this apocalyptic vision, in a ‘pathological’ situation in which everything becomes similar and nothing has any distinctive meaning. This position is expressed well by Alfonso Berardinelli in the short introduction to *Non incoraggiate il romanzo*. According to Berardinelli, the quantity of contemporary publishing products is ‘soverchiante’, and criticism today ‘impossibile’:

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<sup>274</sup> In Italy, this analysis is corroborated by the editorial success of this type of works, or by the proliferation of publishing houses and book series totally focused on this type of products. To give some examples the ‘Contromano’ series created by the publisher Laterza; or the ‘Stile Libero’ series created for Einaudi by Severino Cesati and Paolo Repetti to specifically include and promote narrative texts of a hybrid nature.

<sup>275</sup> Scurati, *La letteratura dell’inesperienza*.

<sup>276</sup> Asor Rosa, *Storia europea della letteratura italiana*, p. 581.

<sup>277</sup> Guido Mazzoni, ‘I nomi propri e gli uomini medi. Romanzo, scienze umane, democrazia’, *Between*, 10 (2015).

<sup>278</sup> Walter Siti, *Troppi paradisi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2006), p. 3.

La democrazia letteraria di massa, potenziata dall'uso del computer, vanifica l'autorità della critica e crea letteratura senza forma e senza confini, che nel suo insieme si sottrae a ogni definizione. Smettiamola perciò di processare i critici e di stilare piccoli canoni. Legga chi vuole quello che vuole. Un'altra epoca si chiude: quella dei giudizi.<sup>279</sup>

This passage reveals a striking contrast between the author's purely pessimistic overall vision and a certain sense of acceptance for a non-negotiable situation. In fact, notwithstanding his acrimony, Berardinelli acknowledges that the time of old school literary critique is coming to an end and it is futile trying to revive them. In this sense, it is possible to read, between the lines, a caution to those who are still attempting to dust off critical models and recycle the dominant cultural stances.

With these premises, Berardinelli's discourse can be compared with the reflections of Benedetti and Antonello, and his tone reversed from 'apocalittico' to 'integrato'. As mentioned in the previous section, these two scholars – in slightly different ways – responded to the issue of refreshing literary criticism by stressing the role and potential of new technologies and communication channels. Through the use of blogs, social media and new information portals, it is possible to revitalise the meaning and impact that literature and its actors have on society. This implies, as stated above, overcoming a rather elitist and restricted vision of literary practices. In Antonello's opinion, contemporary intellectuals must accept the 'anarchicità' of today's communication systems, also because it is, in the end, 'la forma più democratica di partecipazione' available today.<sup>280</sup> Dialogue with the new media, entering the 'star-system', learning to entertain one's audience by stimulating unpredictable reactions, are the essential areas of action in today's age.<sup>281</sup>

This last note introduces the seminal study written by Henry Jenkins, back in the late 2010s and cited in the most salient paragraphs of *New Italian Epic*. In the introduction to his essay Jenkins welcomed the

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<sup>279</sup> Alfonso Berardinelli, *Non incoraggiate il romanzo. Sulla narrativa italiana* (Venice: Marsilio, 2011), p. 11.

<sup>280</sup> Antonello, *Dimenticare Pasolini*, p. 68.

<sup>281</sup> Antonello, *Dimenticare Pasolini*, pp. 90-94.

[c]onvergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways.<sup>282</sup>

In this context of prolonged transition shaped by new technologies and the opportunities for interaction offered by web 3.0, publishing media and their main actors are compelled to make peace with new modalities of engaging audiences and disseminating cultural products. In the years since the essay was published, some answers have already been found, and other questions have arisen, but Jenkins' theses essentially corroborate the points made in my work. Firstly, they reinforce the value of a pragmatic and sociological approach when it comes to analysing the relationship between the world of the arts and the political and civil spheres. The aim here is to understand how narrators undergo and introject the changes resulting from the post-truth turn. Secondly, the focus of my research is on the reciprocal exchange between narrative and different media and means of communication, in an attempt to undermine and overcome the obstacles posed by the post-truth condition: the prevalence of emotional modes of communication, the manipulation of public discourse, the scarcity of attention in the audience, and the input and information overload. Not by chance, Antonello echoes Jenkins, claiming that

[a]llo stesso modo, e contestualmente con l'aggiornamento tecnologico e mediale dell'ultimo mezzo secolo, molti autori contemporanei hanno integrato le forme espressive tradizionali (giornalismo culturale, pamphletismo, generi letterari highbrow), con forme, mezzi e generi fra i più vari come la televisione, la narrativa di genere, il documentario, i blog, la scrittura collettiva, i graphic novels, in questo senso conformandosi a quella che è stata definita da Henry Jenkins come una 'convergence culture', dove le forme discorsive non possono più essere considerate in 'isolamento' ma costantemente attraversate da una 'miscelazione' intermediale, ed è solo l'artificialità delle distinzioni disciplinari che continua a produrre delle 'cecità' interpretative a riguardo.<sup>283</sup>

Among the strategies adopted by contemporary authors, one of the most notable is undoubtedly the use of social networks to engage in a form personal storytelling, to create

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<sup>282</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), p. 2.

<sup>283</sup> Antonello, 'Impegno 3.0', p. 6.

playful and sarcastic virtual alter egos, or to expand the content expressed through their literary work. In a sense, critics must devote attention to these activities because they are part of the writers' broader artistic and cultural projects. For instance, the blog's editorial team *Le parole e le cose* has recently interviewed a number of contemporary novelists, asking questions about their relationship with Facebook, but more generally with the Internet and its resources. The contributions of authors such as Giuseppe Genna, Helena Janeczek and Aldo Nove – who are among the writers most committed to exploring new technologies – are quite illustrative. Although the three use social media profiles in varying ways and interpret their inner dynamics differently, they all share the idea that cyberspace offers an opportunity to experiment with new mechanisms of militancy, entertainment, and commitment. Novels, elaborate and well-structured reflections on blogs, impromptu comments on socials, videos and photos on Instagram, sudden outbursts on Facebook: all become fragments of a polycentric and polymorphic discourse, which functions precisely because of its circularity and fluidity. As summarised by Nove, the confrontation with such new platforms produces '[u]na grande opportunità [...] Si tratta di guardare oltre il proprio naso e giocare a mettersi in gioco. Sarà un processo lungo, ripeto, ma credo irreversibile'.<sup>284</sup>

Finally, I will introduce one last point, more specifically linked to the issue of cultural and political commitment in an era of post-truth. Returning to Egan, a primary task for cultural agents today is to encourage constructive forms of public debate. In accordance with Daniel Bell, democracy is intended here as 'the socio-political system in which legitimacy lies in the consent of the governed'.<sup>285</sup> In light of this, I will ask whether democracy really function when institutions are continually delegitimised, and citizens constantly exposed to the manipulation of information, and an overload of data they cannot effectively process. It is therefore a matter of putting into practice Bauman's call to repopulate the public Agora that has been almost totally evacuated,<sup>286</sup> i.e., to offer a space where the exchange of opinions can take place in a productive way, not least because art and literature should be seen as the sites where the future can be imagined. In the words of Richard Rorty humanity today finds itself having to replace 'the quest for certainty with the demand for

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<sup>284</sup> The series of interviews has been edited by Andrea Lombardi for the literary blog *Le parole e le cose* and is entitled 'Scrittori e Facebook'. The ones related to the three writers in question can be found at the following links: Giuseppe Genna, <http://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=22227>; Aldo Nove, <http://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=22921>; Helena Janeczek, <http://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=22460> (accessed on 8 August 2021).

<sup>285</sup> Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), p. 14.

<sup>286</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *La solitudine del cittadino globale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2008), p. 22.

imagination’;<sup>287</sup> or, as and Arjun Appadurai puts it, to return to painting the future as a blank page full of possibilities, thus favouring cultural and collective renewal.<sup>288</sup>

How, though, is it possible to achieve this? We have established that we live in a post-hegemonic era in which institutions and gatekeepers have lost their guiding function, and that in order to have any palpable political effect, cultural actors need to be able to mix top-down approaches with upstream and grassroots ones. If, on the one hand, in the world of fake news and conspiracy theories, it is essential to reconcile the degree of truth of political discourse with its correspondence to the facts, it is also true that achieving this objective through procedures acceptable to all is not a straightforward endeavour. The challenge is to stimulate the audience as much as possible to active participation without ever imposing messages and content. We have observed the shortcomings of those who see realism as the perfect panacea for our world of encapsulated truths. And yet, understandably, this view continues to be prevalent. Matthew D’Ancona, for example, locates in the pervasive relativism of our time a key cause of the current cultural malaise, suggesting that the return to objectivism promoted by Massimo Ferraris’ ‘New Realism’ marks the way for a positive change.<sup>289</sup> It was in 2014 that Ferraris had expressed the need for philosophy to return to the hard core of reality and its undeniable truths by applying the methods of ontological research, arguing that ‘it is a matter of bridging the divide between science and common sense, between what we think (or what scientists think) and what we experience’.<sup>290</sup> In the light of the claims by D’Ancona and Ferraris the central tasks for writers, intellectuals, and journalists concerned with the current state of politics and democracy, are the faithful reporting of fact, the fact-checking, and the debunking of the countless hoaxes that flood the news channels today. As a matter of fact, in recent years, numerous blogs, websites, and institutional projects have been created with the aim of recognising and exposing malicious disinformation campaigns.<sup>291</sup> The most significant measure in this respect was the fact-

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<sup>287</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), p. 34.

<sup>288</sup> Appadurai, *The Future as a Cultural Fact*, pp. 285-299.

<sup>289</sup> D’Ancona, *Post-truth*, pp. 142-145.

<sup>290</sup> Maurizio Ferraris, *Positive Realism* (Hampshire: Zero Books, 2015), p. 33.

<sup>291</sup> In 2016, in Buenos Aires, took place the third global conference of fact-checkers. As a result of the event in Italy was founded the ‘Factcheckers’ association whose official website is accessible at the link <http://factcheckers.it/>.

In 2015, the Fact-Checking Network was launched with the scope of ‘promoting the best practices in the field’ of debunking fake news. In Italy the news organization *Pagella Politica* entered the Network and in the last years has been engaged in the task of spotting disinformation operations in Italian newspapers and media outlets. Information about their activities is available on the website <https://pagellapolitica.it/progetto/index> (accessed on 11 October 2021).

checking initiative launched by Facebook in 2018. The social network implemented a set of measures to limit the spreading of false information on its pages.<sup>292</sup>

Notwithstanding the political relevance of Ferrari's reflections and the valiant efforts of the fact-checkers,<sup>293</sup> I do not believe the value of literature lies in the pursuit of a pure 'truth'. Anna Maria Lorusso's reflections in *Postverità* are key here:

Se ragioniamo in termini di bugie, la soluzione al problema sta nel ristabilire la corrispondenza ai fatti. La logica che stana la bugia è quella della corretta corrispondenza: esistono informazioni corrispondenti alla realtà e affermazioni non corrispondenti, che sono le bugie. Ma se assumiamo il criterio della corrispondenza il compito si fa difficilissimo: come possiamo sempre sapere qual è lo stato dei fatti? [...]

Il *fact-checking* vuole per lo più inseguire l'attualità; ma questo programma è sensato? Pensiamo davvero che una verifica dei fatti possa competere con la velocità di diffusione on line (di notizie false, tendenziose, imprecise, verosimili e talvolta vere)?<sup>294</sup>

In Lorusso's opinion, rather than fact-checking, it would be appropriate to focus on 'fact-building', since the most important task today is not at all to 'verificare la corrispondenza ai fatti, ma bensì quello di identificare la logica ingannevole di una storia'.<sup>295</sup> She advocates a greater efficacy, in our context, of 'discourse checking' and 'word checking' techniques, as it is now irrefutable that truth 'non è riflesso, immagine corrispondente alla realtà, ma costruzione, elaborazione adeguata'.<sup>296</sup> Finally, Lorusso underlines the relevance of semiotic theories and in particular those formulated by Umberto Eco in regards to realism and truth. According to Eco, reality is always a matter of negotiation, and any statement requires trust in order to be declared true: it never depends simply on how close an account comes to the facts of the world, but has more to do with the quality of the discourse or the reliability of the speaking subject. Lorusso's conclusion is convincing and thought-provoking:

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<sup>292</sup> Information on the initiative can be found on the Facebook Journalism Project website at the link: <https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/programs/third-party-fact-checking/how-it-works> (accessed on 3 November 2021).

<sup>293</sup> In developing his theories on hypermodern narrative and the return to commitment, Donnarumma drew on Ferraris' theses developed in: Maurizio Ferraris, *Manifesto del nuovo Realismo* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2014).

<sup>294</sup> Lorusso, *Postverità*, p. 55 (italics in the text).

<sup>295</sup> Lorusso, *Postverità*, p. 61.

<sup>296</sup> Lorusso, *Postverità*, p. 58.

Raccontare e costruire storie significa essenzialmente far identificare e coinvolgere, su base emozionale, i propri destinatari. Significa persuaderli per via più emotivo che cognitiva. Significa offrire loro una proiezione in cui sentirsi coinvolti, non un oggetto su cui riflettere a distanza.<sup>297</sup>

The scholar's analysis offered above condenses many of the elements that are central to my research. In addition, it highlights the importance of the individual reader, both as a recipient for literary discourse and as the main agent for change. From the point of view of literary criticism, this is aligned with the idea of upstream engagement described by Antonello. Taking up a claim by Margherita Generi, the scholar claims that engagement 'comincia sul sé', in the involvement of the individual in matters of micropolitics.<sup>298</sup> From a more political standpoint, it connects with Paul Mason's and Manuel Castells' theories. They argue, in turn, that ordinary people are the most important factor for any change to take place,<sup>299</sup> and that real power resides in people's minds, as any attempt at shaking the socio-political condition must begin with individual subjects.<sup>300</sup>

Among the main advantages of bottom-up practices described by critics is the fact that they are more effective in engaging individuals, neutralising key distrust factors, and cognitive biases such as confirmation bias or the backfire effect. For instance, Veltri and Caterino emphasise the importance of nudges and re-framing in conveying political messages in the post-truth context.<sup>301</sup> That of nudges, according to Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler, is a compelling method of introducing objections to political arguments without activating cognitive reactions and instinctive repulsion.<sup>302</sup> With reference to the latter element, Caterino and Veltri pinpoint the powerful effect of deconstructing problems and re-proposing them in another form. In this respect, it is worth mentioning a 2014 article by the sociologist William Davies, in which he described an experiment by the social think tank 'British Future'. The organization asked a representative selection of the British population to comment on immigration and collected several negative remarks on the phenomenon. Then, they offered people quantitative information – data and statistics – on

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<sup>297</sup> Lorusso, *Postverità*, p. 70.

<sup>298</sup> Antonello, *Dimenticare Pasolini*, p. 144.

<sup>299</sup> Mason, *Postcapitalism*, p. 217.

<sup>300</sup> Manuel Castells, *Another Economy is Possible: Culture and Economy in Time of Crisis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), p. 273.

<sup>301</sup> Caterino and Veltri, *Fuori dalla bolla*, pp. 51-54.

<sup>302</sup> Sunstein and Thaler, *Nudge*, 2008.



the positive impact of immigration: very few changed their minds. When people were finally provided with qualitative information in a narrative form, i.e., the stories of some immigrants and what they went through to get to the UK, more than half of those interviewed changed their mind.<sup>303</sup> This kind of reaction to a story has been examined for years in the field of cognitive literary studies. As Keith Oatley's research shows

fiction is a set of simulations of social worlds that we can compare, as it were stereoscopically, with aspects of the everyday world, it suggests insights we might not achieve by looking with the single eye of ordinary perception. Recent findings indicate that those who engage in such simulations, readers of literary art, which is mostly fiction, have better understandings of other people than those who do not.<sup>304</sup>

According to current research in this field, fiction plays a primary role in stimulating ethical reflection in readers, without activating mechanisms of defence and distrust. Vera Nünning maintains that reading encourages us to empathise with others and make judgements based on feelings such as compassion and sympathy.<sup>305</sup> By indirectly allowing us to live other people's experiences, fiction trains us to practise our 'mind-reading skills' and thus discourages us from making snap and irrational judgements, especially when it comes to our peers. This is achieved mainly by means of narrative devices such as focalisation, first person narrative, psycho discourse, or free indirect speech. In addition, according to Nünning, 'the perspective potential of fiction counters "similarity biases" and reduces stereotypes.'<sup>306</sup> It is evident how functional these aspects are in a context where emotions prevail over objective evaluations, in order to promote purposeful and civilised public debates.

From a literary point of view, Nünning's additional considerations are also very pertinent to my study. For example, she finds that fiction has a greater capacity to trigger ethical and empathic mechanisms when it generates pleasure or when it leaves enough gaps for readers to make their own inferences and come to their own conclusions. As Oatley also argues,

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<sup>303</sup> William Davies, 'How statistics lost their power – and why we should fear what comes next', *The Guardian*, 19 January 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jan/19/crisis-of-statistics-big-data-democracy> (accessed on 5 August 2019).

<sup>304</sup> Keith Oatley, 'Fiction: Simulation of Social Worlds', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 20 (2016), 618-28.

<sup>305</sup> Vera Nünning, *Reading Fictions, Changing Minds: The Cognitive Value of Fiction* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014).

<sup>306</sup> Nünning, *Reading Fictions, Changing Minds*, p. 218.

these types of narrative devices are indispensable as they call on readers to ‘take a role in making the meaning’.<sup>307</sup> As we will see, many of the works I consider to be post-truth narratives implement these devices in a variety of ways: the most sensitive and capable contemporary authors are well aware of the difference in terms of outcome between imposing meanings from above and bringing out nuanced interpretations by mobilising readers on the grassroots level. After all, the importance of a more reader-oriented critical apparatus and a literary approach that took into account the decoding processes of the public has already been claimed in the Italian context. Burns, in her contribution to *Postmodern Impegno*, suggested that political commitment in literature is only conceivable when critics bring readership into the equation, which implies recognising the importance of the element of pleasure. By being appealing to more people, books will reach a larger audience, but more importantly they will serve the scope of keeping readers involved, without overly demanding ethical and provoking instinctive reactions.<sup>308</sup>

The argument concerning the use of a bottom-up and reader-oriented approach, as opposed to the more traditional writer-oriented and top-down approach, other than being essential in today’s critical debate, also implies – albeit in a very subtle way – embracing a certain amount of postmodern scepticism in contemporary culture vs. the outright rejection of it. As this thesis will demonstrate, I believe there is a need for artists and intellectuals to maintain some of the postmodern inclinations celebrated by Linda Hutcheon: to be ironic about overly firm positions, to constantly reveal the inevitable paradoxes of the contemporary world, and finally, to use meta-textual elements with the intention of exposing the processes through which facts are collected and narrated.<sup>309</sup>

These are the elements that I put at the centre of the post-truth narrative and through which I evaluate the primary texts. The central idea is that in the age of post-truth, stating what is true has become as necessary as it is compromised and contradictory. For this reason, literature and novels can function as testing grounds for our ability to rethink, adapt and respond to our new condition. Thus, I agree with Lorusso in stating that the main aim of the world of art and culture today should not be to reaffirm the status and prestige of truth and the objectivity of facts. Rather, it is to encourage scepticism and promote distrust of easy answers: to see truth as an ongoing process, as an endless exercise rather than a *fait accompli*.

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<sup>307</sup> Oatley, ‘Fiction: Simulation of Social Worlds’, p. 622.

<sup>308</sup> Jennifer Burns, ‘Re-thinking Impegno (Again): Reading Ethics and Pleasure’, in *Postmodern Impegno*, 61-80 (pp. 73-76).

<sup>309</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 63

This kind of bottom-up engagement, in the words of Foucault, will help cultural agents to understand and communicate that ‘the task of speaking the truth is an infinite labour: to respect it in its complexity is an obligation that no power can afford to short-change unless it would impose the silence of the slavery’.<sup>310</sup>

### ***On Post-Truth Narrative: Core Features and Trends***

In the previous section I was concerned with proposing a model of cultural agency and literary criticism that is in keeping with the changes taking place in the current era. In doing so, I proposed methods and strategies that seemed particularly effective within the post-truth turn. In the last sections of this chapter, the focus will be more specifically on literary and formal techniques and solutions, as well as on textual analysis. The aim is to outline post-truth poetics and post-truth narratives. I have already commented on the provisional nature of this definition in the introduction to my study. On that occasion I also pointed out that, since I am examining a phenomenon that is still in progress, it seems appropriate to infer its main characteristics through the scrutiny of some emblematic texts. This is what I will do in the following paragraphs. Among the other criteria I will adopt a theme-based one, in the sense that some texts will be mentioned precisely because of the attention given to social and cultural typical of the post-truth era. For example, the impact of new technologies (Baricco), the political weight of conspiracy theories and disinformation (Wu Ming 1), the questioning of hegemonic discourses (Scego, Falco), the economic and labour crisis (Zito), the capacity of the media to modify the narrative of reality (Trincia). Despite this, the thematic component is subordinate to the central factor, which consists in analysing the techniques and stylistic strategies that determine the poetics of post-truth: among these are the use of intermediality, the confrontation with new media, writerly rhetorical traits, hybrid form, the use of irony and metafictional devices.

I will start this intellectual endeavour by mentioning a text in which the technological evolution brought about by post-truth is in the foreground as Alessandro Baricco’s *The game*. The volume, with its non-fiction slant, is in some ways a sequel to *I barbari. Saggio sulla mutazione*<sup>311</sup> and provides a chronological description of the inventions that have

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<sup>310</sup> Michael Foucault, ‘The Concern for Truth’, in *Foucault Live. Collected Interviews 1961-1964*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer (London: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agent Series, 1989), p. 308.

<sup>311</sup> Alessandro Baricco, *I barbari. Saggio sulla mutazione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2013).

radically transformed the world since the 1980s: from the invention of the PMS protocol to Tim Berners-Lee's conception of the web, through Jeff Bezos' founding of Amazon and Sergei Brin and Larry Page's creation of Google to the first smart phones and Spotify. As in his previous work, the writer captures the crucial nodes of this relentless technological development, without ever surrendering to a catastrophic view. His main goal is to bring to light the positive potentials of the new world system forged by digital technology.

Unlike *The Game*, Wu Ming 1's recent work, *Q di Qomplotto. QAnon e dintorni*, has much more apocalyptic and alarmist tone.<sup>312</sup> The author investigates, through the description of the specific case of the QAnon phenomenon, how conspiracy theories are generated and take root (as discussed in chapter one). The non-fiction novel is full of detailed information collected through archival research that Wu Ming blends with autobiographical and fictional episodes. At the heart of the investigation is the way in which a theory posted by a mysterious anonymous character, 'Q', quickly spread among Internet users and became embellished with increasingly far-fetched details. What is particularly striking is that Wu Ming 1 combines this true story, with some of his own conjectures, further complicating the case for his readers. Employing self-referentiality and copious irony, the author imagines that the conspiracy theory was born with the intention on the part of its anonymous creator to ridicule the supporters of ultra-right movements. Wu Ming 1 even supposes that the anonymous joker chose this name inspired by Luther Blisset's first novel (Luther Blisset was the former name of the Wu Ming collective) which was entitled *Q* and was based on a massive conspiracy occurring during the years of the Counter-Reformation. With *Q di Qomplotto*, Wu Ming 1 emphasises how a certain use of new technologies can lead to political phenomena with completely unpredictable outcomes. The most significant aspect in this respect is that a theory which was spread with the aim of revealing the arrogance and wickedness of men of power was quickly co-opted by those in charge and used precisely to maintain their power.<sup>313</sup> In this double game I envisage exactly the paradoxical character of post-truth that has been discussed at length in my work.

The text also underlines the pervasiveness and virality with which conspiracy theories appeal to public opinion, quickly escaping the control of analysts. Together with this it

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<sup>312</sup> Wu Ming 1, *Q di Qomplotto*.

<sup>313</sup> The fact that Donald Trump has more or less openly sought the support of the QAnon movement during the years of his presidency is well known to the media. In a detailed article for Rolling Stone, journalist EJ Dickson traces the interactions that the former president had with the movement in recent years: EJ Dickson, 'A Timeline of Trump's QAnon Presidency. How President Trump spent four years in office pandering to conspiracy theorists', *Rolling Stone*, 27 October 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/qanon-trump-timeline-conspiracy-theorists-1076279/> (accessed on 1 November 2021).

highlights how their narrative format and the fascination they engender in the audience allows them to penetrate various filter bubbles and make these theories a powerful political tool.

Finally, *Wu Ming 1* aims to warn his readers of the risks of these phenomena, to which no one is immune. But he does so in an implicit and peculiar way. Rather than simply unveiling the truth and revealing the details uncovered through his investigations, he prompts his audience to make individual assessments. The latter is not an easy task as the writer keeps misleading them and confusing real facts with fabricated assumptions. In this way, the text produces a bottom-up involvement that pushes readers to make their own judgements. In other words, it discloses the mechanisms through which today's media misinformation takes hold of public opinion by replicating it in fictional setting through use of an ironic tone and meta-fiction devices. In this way, *Wu Ming* seems to follow Lorusso's suggestions and combines fact-checking and fact-building in a very effective way, generating a work of great political and cultural impact in the post-truth scenario.

*Wu Ming's* text brings us to another central aspect of the critical discourse on Italian fiction, already addressed several times in this work, namely the way in which real problems are transposed through the medium of fiction. Although I do not intend to call it realism for the reasons outlined in previous sections, it is necessary to bear in mind that in post-truth novels the confrontation with reality remains a central aspect. However, as we have seen with the case of *Wu Ming 1*, this confrontation is always filtered through the use of very effective narrative techniques that stimulate the reader and encourage their active participation. Among the narrative strategies implemented to expand the dialogue with the reader both within and outside the narrative text I would point out the importance of intermediality and transmediality.<sup>314</sup> Many of the novels examined here revolve around these techniques, be it in the form of re-mediation, i.e. the re-adaptation of the same content for different media, the grafting of materials and content from different media into the

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<sup>314</sup> For the definition of the two terms, I refer to the two articles by Irian O. Rajewsky, 'Intermediality, Intertextuality and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality', *Intermédialités*, 6 (2005), 43-64; and 'Percorsi transmediali. Appunti sul potenziale euristico della transmedialità nel campo delle letterature comparate', *Between*, 16 (2018).

In these studies, Rajewsky distinguishes between intermedial transposition (when a novel is translated into an audiovisual product), medial combination (when two or more media are combined together, for instance in comics or sound art), and intermedial references (when a different medium is evoked or quoted within another one).

Furthermore, the scholar offers a definition of intermediality as opposed to transmediality: 'laddove l'intermedialità mira a interazioni o interferenze mediali e quindi a relazioni *between* media, la transmedialità si concentra su fenomeni che si manifestano o sono osservabili *across* media' (italics in the text).

narrative, or implicit or explicit reference to other texts, which aims to create a dialogue with other artists. The final aim is always to stimulate the reader's proactive and emotional participation, inviting them to go beyond the boundaries of the singular text and to ask questions that are never clear-cut or easy to answer.

To give some illustrative examples, in her work *Roma Negata. Percorsi postcoloniali nella città*, Igiaba Scego combined writing and photography – with the support of photographer Rino Bianchi – in the attempt to provide a clearer picture of Italian colonial past. The author investigates Rome's topography and toponymy, looking for signs that recall that period of oppression and despotism, which seems to have been erased or at least obscured by Italian national narratives. By integrating detailed historical accounts with the emotional power of images, Scego doubles the effect of her descriptions and pushes the reader towards a deeper level of participation. In collaboration with Bianchi, she decided to anthropomorphise the otherwise aseptic photographs of monuments that bear witness to Italian brutality towards the colonies: they frame people who indirectly suffered Italian abuses in the photographed urban setting. This choice steers the reader to a more direct emotional engagement. Hence, the authors aim to rationally deconstruct the myth of 'italiani brava gente', while at the same time exposing a void in collective memory; readers are both informed about their forgotten past but also politely and gently reprimanded, accused of negligence and indifference. The text, through this combination of the narrative and the visual elements, seeks ultimately not to expose the true history of a forgotten historical fact, but rather to invite individuals to recognise and relate to a past that, although unacknowledged in public discourse, continues to be embedded in Italian public identity.

This dialogue between the written text and the visual was also fundamental to Giorgio Falco's body of work. On the one hand, as Andrea Cortellessa states, Falco's writing suggests 'un pensiero fotografico' and is expressed in visual framings that – for example in the short stories of *L'ubicazione del bene* –<sup>315</sup> relocate the human subject in an urban and everyday context that suddenly appears alienated and alienating.<sup>316</sup> In *Condominio Oltremare*,<sup>317</sup> Sabrina Ragucci's photographs complement and counterpoint the textual account; the visual and the textual develop in parallel and act as epitexts of each other. Each of the two languages cooperate in conveying the sense of desolation and malaise of the

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<sup>315</sup> Giorgio Falco, *L'ubicazione del bene* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009).

<sup>316</sup> Andrea Cortellessa, "Epica e fotografia. Giorgio Falco con Sabrina Ricucci", *Doppio Zero*, 15 September 2015, [https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/antepreme/epica-e-fotografia#\\_ftn3](https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/antepreme/epica-e-fotografia#_ftn3) (accessed on 26 September 2021).

<sup>317</sup> Giorgio Falco and Sabrina Rigucci, *Condominio Oltremare* (Rome: L'Orma, 2014).

contemporary individual, trapped within the crumbling structures of our capitalist world. Once again, we are presented with a text which does not seek primarily to expose the true story of a forgotten historical fact, but rather to put individuals in relation to a past whose explicit significance passes over their heads but continues to concern them closely.

Falco's mixture of writing and photography has recently reached a further stage of sophistication. In *Flashover. Incendio a Venezia* the dialogue between the two arts has become semantically and semiotically more elaborate.<sup>318</sup> On the first level, this book recounts an event from the recent Venetian past: Enrico Carella, the owner of a company involved in the restoration of the theatre La Fenice, who was behind schedule and heavily in debt, set fire to the theatre, in order to obtain an extension in the delivery of works. The text – halfway between a journalistic investigation and a novel – reconstructs the investigation and the declarations following the event and dwells on the personal circumstances and torments of this 'personaggio non personaggio', as Mario Barenghi put it.<sup>319</sup> On a second level, however, this story of a personal failure that turns into vandalism against the community stands as a metaphor for the collapse of the economic model that sustains micro-capitalism in north-eastern Italy: the pursuit of profit and personal wealth is slowly going against collective interests instead of serving them.

Finally, on a third and deeper level, the book offers broader reflections on the historical period in which we are living and the cultural and social decay of the contemporary subject: 'una degradazione umana e civile in cui Falco legge i segni di un'immane apocalisse'.<sup>320</sup> This effect is achieved, on the one hand, through explicit comments made by the narrator; and on the other, and of greater significance here, through the media combinations and intertextual references. The latter perform two functions: firstly, they invite readers to play with the meta-textual and intertextual layers of the book, forcing them to make an effort in reconstructing and decoding the encrypted messages between its lines; secondly, they set in motion – or more aptly, they 'ignite' – mechanisms for personal reflection and evaluation that open up the ethical dimension of the text. This effect is also achieved by means of intertextual references that encourage readers to create connections that go beyond the pages of Falco's book: the mentioning of Jannis Kounellis's verses; the recollection of Antonioni's films: the parallels with Yukio Mishima's *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*. The last

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<sup>318</sup> Falco, *Flashover*.

<sup>319</sup> Mario Barenghi, 'Giorgio Falco, Nicola Lagioia: i neristi', *Doppiozero*, 23 December 2020, <https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/giorgio-falco-nicola-lagioia-i-neristi> (accessed on 26 September 2021).

<sup>320</sup> Barenghi, 'Giorgio Falco, Nicola Lagioia: i neristi'.

reference to Mishima is particularly significant: as Barenghi notes, ‘Mishima è anche l’autore di *Confessioni di una maschera* [e] Venezia è la città del Carnevale’, therefore ‘l’intero libro può valere come lo smascheramento del mitizzato moderno Nord-est, oltre che come il resoconto del suicidio inconsapevolmente rituale d’una intera civiltà’.<sup>321</sup> Ragucci’s photos, in my opinion, invigorate such a strategy. They portray the author in different poses and against a variety of backdrops, but always wearing a white mask. In doing so, they seek to remind readers of the alienating effect that the cult of money, the uselessness of material goods, the commodification of feelings have on them every day. Yet the mask, reminiscent of that worn by the neo-Guy Fawkes in James McTeigue’s film *V for Vendetta* – ultimately adopted by ‘Occupy Wall Street’ political movement and the hacker group Anonymous –, ironises the chances of redemption and renovation. Even though we are aware that no *deus ex machina* will come to rescue us and we are accountable for our future, yet we prefer to masquerade and escape our responsibilities.

The most interesting aspect in the context of post-truth lies in the way Falco employs detective game to draw in the reader, but also encourage them towards a profound self-evaluation and greater political awareness. The ethical implications of narrative as a game, in which the reader has to decipher the clues left by the author in order to connect the dots and extract meaning, have discussed in depth by Burns in relation to Antonio Tabucchi’s *L’oca al passo*.<sup>322</sup> I believe that today authors committed to the process of understanding political and social events have gone even further. By combining the description of real facts with intermedial grafts and through interplay with external cultural artifacts, contemporary works such those by the Falco and Scego aim to strengthen the relationship with the reader, to reinforce the role they play in interpreting and making sense of literary works.

When considering the various methods used to reach and involve contemporary readership, another approach which stands out is the recourse to intermedial transposition, or re-mediation. There are many examples of storytelling crossing the boundaries of the original medium and flowing into other modes of representation, the most common being when books are adapted, with the contribution and support of their authors, into audio-visual forms, for the cinema or the small screen. The most celebrated case is probably the aforementioned *Gomorra*, which had been made into a film, a theatrical production by Mario Gelardi, and most recently into TV series. But in the Italian panorama there are other similar

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<sup>321</sup> Barenghi, ‘Giorgio Falco, Nicola Lagioia: i neristi’.

<sup>322</sup> Burns, ‘Re-thinking Impegno (Again)’, pp. 69-70.

Antonio Tabucchi, *L’oca al passo. Notizie dal buio che stiamo attraversando* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2006).



cases: *Romanzo Criminale* by Giancarlo De Cataldo; *L'Amica Geniale* by Elena Ferrante; *Anna* by Nicolò Ammaniti; or *Suburra*, by De Cataldo with Carlo Bonini.<sup>323</sup>

However, there is one recent work that deserves particular attention here for its implications in the context of post-truth and for the rather unique course its re-adaptation followed: *Veleno. Una storia vera* by Pablo Trincia. The product was initially a podcast series ideated by Trincia for *La Repubblica*, in collaboration with Alessia Rafanelli. After a career as a talented journalist and then as a correspondent for some famous television programmes – including *Le Iene* and *Chi l'ha visto?* –, the author ran into a case that shocked the Modena province between 1997 and 1998. Dario, ‘il bambino zero’, after being temporarily separated from his family and sent by local social services to an institution called Il Cenacolo Francese, revealed stories of abuse, sexual violence inflicted by his parents, and forced participation in satanic rituals. The child named other adults involved in the case and other child victims. A judicial investigation was promptly opened, called ‘I diavoli della bassa modenese’ which led to the arrest of dozens of alleged paedophiles and the removal of many children from their families. The communities of Massa Finalese and Mirandola were horrified as newspapers revealed stories of a sect of Satanists performing nocturnal rituals in their small villages.

More than twenty years later, Pablo Trincia returned to this episode, patiently interviewing some of the protagonists, reviewing testimonies, judicial acts, footage and audio recordings of the interviews the psychologists and investigators conducted with the children. Little by little, the story began to collapse. Trincia and Rafanelli raised the suspicion that the whole narrative was based on an initial lie. However, what is most noteworthy is the way in which this happened through storytelling, i.e., the way the truth is first assembled and then progressively dismantled. From a judicial point of view, the case was almost over, and many verdicts had been delivered. In this sense, it is no coincidence that the subtitle to the book was ‘una storia vera’. Yet the authors find many flaws in the way the investigation was carried out. They point out inconsistencies in the evidence collected, suspicious coincidences, absurd and unlikely features – such as the fact that no one in the two villages had ever noticed anything strange, despite the fact that they were

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<sup>323</sup> *Romanzo Criminale* is also film directed by Michele Placido and a TV series created by the author in collaboration with Vinicio Marchioni and Alessandro Roma.

*L'amica geniale* inspired the TV series directed by Saverio Costanzo.

Nicolò Ammaniti has readapted his book *Anna* (Turin: Einaudi, 2017) into a TV series which was ideated and directed by the writer himself.

Also *Suburra* (Turin: Einaudi, 2017) underwent a double adaptation an film and transposed both into a film directed by Stefano Sollima and as a TV series, created by Daniele Cesarano and Barbara Petronio.

municipalities of a few souls – as well as various oddities in the method by which the psychologists carried out their investigations. In short, *Veleno* shifts from being an accurate account of what really happened in the province of Modena at the end of the 1990s to describing how a certainty is shaped and spreads in public opinion. Like ‘un veleno’, the truth- takes root in people’s minds and settles there, regardless of its accuracy. Very interesting in this regard are the parts of the book devoted to the psychological processes through which it is possible to manipulate memory, instilling what is called ‘falso ricordo’,<sup>324</sup> and the pages concerning the effect that newspapers and the sensationalising of news have on our understanding of real circumstances.<sup>325</sup>

*Veleno* investigates some essential aspects of post-truth. Moreover, in its three versions – podcast, book and TV series – *Veleno* reassembles the various fragments of reality in such a way as to create anticipation, suspense, interest, and identification. In other words, the work runs the risk of falling into the same trap it claims to reveal, conditioning the reader towards a specific thesis. Trincia’s way of overcoming this problem is to emphasise his own presence and direct attention to the staging process itself. The use of narrative devices of self-representation and self-reflection serves to neutralise any potential audience indoctrination; readers are once again expected to be vigilant and attentive, to put the pieces together, and create their own thesis, in the consciousness that a passively absorbed truth is always problematic. In doing so, *Veleno* takes on a double political dimension. On the one hand, it brings public attention back to a drama that has destroyed the lives of many people and tries to heal its wounds. After the publication of the book, the "zero child" Dario, whose real name is Davide Tonelli, found the courage to come forward and reveal the falsehood he had fabricated twenty years earlier that engendered all that came afterwards. On the other hand, this transmedia story presents a series of considerations on the controversial relationship that humans have with the truth. This can be broken down and reassembled using simple techniques; Pablo Trincia alerts his audience to these methods and their risk by employing them and drawing over attention to them.

The examples offered in the previous paragraphs not only manifest different forms of intertextuality but also reinforce that it is important for post-truth narratives to create fascination in readers. This effect is achieved not only by appealing to their empathic side, but also by calling them to actively decode the messages contained in the text. Learning to

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<sup>324</sup> Trincia, *Veleno. Una storia vera*, p. 208-217.

<sup>325</sup> Trincia, *Veleno. Una storia vera*, p. 68.

recognise what is false or non-linear is a fundamental skill today, perhaps even more so than being informed about the actual course of events surrounding a given phenomenon.

This seems to me to be the right stage in which to reiterate some crucial points. In post-truth narratives, realism and documentary techniques – although they are present to a certain extent – take a marginal position, since authors are now increasingly aware that finding new ways to tell the facts is no longer enough in order to deliver stories that are politically ‘utili’. Contemporary readers who pay attention to these kinds of narratives are too savvy to accept a handover of truth. The techniques of representing reality highlighted by Wu Ming and Donnarumma – already highly sophisticated and attentive to how facts are staged today through the media – have further evolved, as shown in these pages, to adapt to the current context. In the novels I’ve cited as examples here, intermediality, ironic and metafictional components, compelling plots, and non-fiction passages are used to establish an open dialogue with readers, initiating a reflection not only on how certain facts should be interpreted, but also on the very criterion of truthfulness.

In the light of these considerations, it therefore seems appropriate to say that the approach and narrative solutions derived from postmodernism continue to be crucial today. For instance, postmodern texts were often designed to test the scepticism of their readers or their resistance to easy assumptions, while at the same time shedding light on the seriousness of the issues at stake. A similar attempt was recently carried out by Daniele Zito with his novel *Robledo*. The author deals with the particularly pressing civil issue of employment and job insecurity: illegal work, unpaid jobs, and work-related accidents remain a social and civil disgrace in Italy. Instead of opting, like Michela Murgia or Vitaliano Trevisan,<sup>326</sup> to simply recount his personal experience, Zito creates a highly elaborate game of literary devices and allusions. The book is presented as an edition of the ‘quaderni’ by Michele Robledo, a controversial journalist who has devoted his work to the investigation of the underground organisation LPL (‘lavoro per il lavoro’). This subversive movement – which in the text is several times associated with 1970s terrorism. brings together women and men referred to as ‘ghost workers’: people who have decided to sneak into various work environments to perform unpaid tasks before committing suicide there. The material for the investigation was found after Robledo started investigating a number of suspicious deaths in the workplace. Workbooks and diaries in which the discovery of these incidents is recounted and processed

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<sup>326</sup> Michela Murgia, *Il mondo deve sapere. Romanzo tragicomico di una telefonista precaria* (Milan: Isbn, 2010); Vitaliano Trevisan, *Works* (Turin: Einaudi, 2016).

are collected by an anonymous curator who is referred to only by the initials A.B. The volume also contains an afterword signed by the author— who is actually a fictional alter ego of Zito. In his introduction, the editor informs readers that the manuscripts are accurately presented in their final version, even though the original was lost due to a formatting problem in the reporter’s laptop (all except the last one in which Robledo talks about himself). However, the editor’s statements are denied in Zito’s final remarks, as he claims that the texts are actually forgeries – these are probably the work of the secret services, whose aim is to discredit Robledo. However, as claimed by the author in the afterword, everything in Robledo’s life and work bears the signs of both truth and mystification:

Per quanto ciò possa sembrare strano, lui investigava la realtà attraverso la falsificazione. In essa, egli trovava quel candore che la realtà nuda e cruda incessantemente spingeva ai bordi della propria estensione. *Ghost Class Heroes, Iniziazioni*, sono tutti esempi di questo suo incessante indagare i bordi della verità. Nessuno di essi è nato a partire da un’esperienza reale; tutti però, con alterne fortune, hanno contribuito a plasmare la realtà, a deformarla fino a renderla simile alle parole di Robledo.<sup>327</sup>

The LPL organisation itself may in fact have come into being under the direction of Robledo, or be inspired by his writings. In this sense, knowing what induced what is a very difficult exercise. As in today’s scenario, real facts and the journalistic and media narrative are inseparable, as one constantly shapes the other. Similarly, the reader is not able to identify whether Robledo really discovered the existence of a tragic social phenomenon, or whether this very phenomenon was as a consequence of the journalist’s attempt to describe it.

Furthermore, *Robledo* bears the signs of explicitly self-reflexiveness: the main character and the real author Daniele Zito are specular, as both work with deceptions and falsifications, metaphors and allusions. And yet both are driven by a deep need to denounce social injustice and an increasingly unsustainable condition. As Monica Jansen points out, Robledo is in a way an alter ego of the actual Daniele Zito, who is a precarious researcher seeking in writing an instrument of redemption, and in the falsification of reality a mean of sabotaging current economic mechanisms.<sup>328</sup> Moreover, with its sophisticated display of narrative devices, the

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<sup>327</sup> Zito, *Robledo*, p. 351.

<sup>328</sup> Monica Jansen, ‘*Robledo* o la “bufala” dei *ghost class heroes*: investigare la precarietà attraverso la falsificazione’, in ‘Letteratura e economia nell’Italia degli anni Duemila’, 165-78 (pp. 175-76).

book succeeds in achieving two objectives that are central to understanding post-truth narratives. On the one hand, it highlights how the denunciation of social problems is only possible today if readers are mobilised to become active participants in the creation of meaning:

Agirei nell'ombra. Devo soltanto selezionare i casi più discussi, quelli che non possono smentire la mia versione, e costruirci attorno un teorema. I lettori faranno il resto. Ognuno getterà nel calderone la propria esperienza, cercando da sé i collegamenti con tutto quello che c'è già. Devo puntare tutto sull'immedesimazione. Con un po' di fortuna dovrei farcela.<sup>329</sup>

On the other hand, it uses literature to indirectly point out how difficult it is to create credible and truthful discourses in the current circumstances, i.e., in a polarised and emotionally mobilised social context. In fact, Robledo's critics – quoted by the editor – are divided into ardent supporters and fierce detractors, with no interaction between these two sides. This situation perfectly mirrors the world of post-truth as I have described it, and as Daniele Zito, once again through a narrative subterfuge refers to: one of the notebooks is integrated with a false bibliography of critical texts on Robledo, including one by a non-existent M. Martorana, entitled *Marxism vs Post-Verità*.<sup>330</sup> The final message seems to be clear: in this world, the truth can be revealed through falsification, just as the false can be conveyed by telling real facts. This is the central issue that the post-truth narrative is dealing with today and will also deal with in the future.

### ***An Exemplary Case Study: Gridalo by Roberto Saviano***

Assessing the cultural and political challenges brought about by the internet and digital technologies is among the main goals of Saviano's *Gridalo*. In my opinion the hybrid nature of the book, the range of themes covered, and the peculiar way in which it builds a bond with the readership – already evident from the imperative of the title – all make it an important example of a post-truth novel. In addition to this, the stature of its author, considered by critics – as repeatedly stressed – the leading exponent of contemporary

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<sup>329</sup> Zito, *Robledo*, p. 60.

<sup>330</sup> Zito, *Robledo*, p. 352.

committed Italian fiction, make of this text an important case study within this work. This is even more true if one considers Saviano's literary trajectory as a whole, i.e., the way his various texts interact with each other. Over the years, Saviano has carried out various literary experiments in an attempt to establish 'la parola' as a means of 'scardinare equilibri, concedere nuovi squarci, risultare temibile per il solo fatto di dire nuove ipotesi di verità, di trovare prove a ciò che non potrebbe mai essere provato pur essendo vero'.<sup>331</sup> His first book, *Gomorra. Un viaggio nell'impero economico e nel sogno di dominio della camorra*, shook the Italian literary scene not just because of its content but because of the way in which that content was organised.<sup>332</sup> One of the most striking aspects in this sense was the urgency with which Saviano wrote about the impact of organised crime on politics and the economy, his desperate need to reach out to readers and to connect with them.<sup>333</sup> He merged journalistic investigation, eyewitness testimony, and fictional invention to induce the reader to physically and not just intellectually participate in the events narrated: truths known to all were re-revealed, in a more authentic way precisely because they were re-envisioned by the writer's gaze.<sup>334</sup> His second book, *Zero Zero Zero*, focused on international cocaine trafficking and shares the use of biography and direct testimony, albeit less effectively than *Gomorra*.<sup>335</sup> Eventually, Saviano came back to the topic of camorra, in order to recount the events that afflict his homeland, but he chose to deal with them this time through pure fiction, publishing *La paranza dei Bambini* and its sequel *Un bacio feroce*, which tell the story –

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<sup>331</sup> Roberto Saviano, 'Scrivere sul fronte meridionale. Lettera agli amici indiani', *Nazione Indiana*, 17 April 2005, <https://www.nazioneindiana.com/2005/04/17/scrivere-sul-fronte-meridionale/> (accessed on 14 March 2020).

<sup>332</sup> It is not by chance that Paolo Giovannetti considers the publication of *Gomorra* as a turning point in recent in Italian narrative: Giovannetti, *Raccontare dopo Gomorra*.

<sup>333</sup> One of the most striking elements in Saviano's book lies in the way he re-negotiated the pact with his readers. Carla Benedetti describes three implicit statements made by the author in the text to legitimate the truthfulness of his narrative accounts: 'l'enunciato di intimità con il territorio', 'l'enunciato del raccontare come ribellione', and 'l'enunciato della necessità del dire'. By resorting to such statements Saviano has been able to circumvent traditional narrative paths, instituting his own trajectory. Therefore, according to the Benedetti, the 'patto inusuale che instaura con il lettore' differentiates *Gomorra*, from the other books written at that time, but also collocates the novelist 'oltre il postmoderno e la sua perdurante ideologia. E anche oltre il moderno di ritorno dei tanti fautori del Nuovo realismo e del ritorno al reale'; in Benedetti, *Disumane lettere*, pp. 116-18.

<sup>334</sup> As asserted by Daniele Giglioli 'l'impatto di *Gomorra*' does not depend on the 'perspicacia delle analisi sulla Camorra: i dati erano noti, la reazione affettiva ed etica che suscitano, già ampiamente codificata'.<sup>334</sup> Therefore, the reason for its success does not lie 'nell'accuratezza del suo realismo' but more specifically in his ability of touching 'una corda profonda del nostro vivere associato', in Daniele Giglioli, 'Lui c'era al posto mio', *Alias*, 28 October 2006, also in *Narratori degli anni Zero*, ed. by Andrea Cortellessa (Rome: Ponte Sisto, 2011), p. 526.

<sup>335</sup> Roberto Saviano, *Zero Zero Zero* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2013).

inspired by real events – of a group of Neapolitan boys who have turned into a camorra clan.<sup>336</sup>

Within this framework, it is possible to interpret *Gridalo* as a return to the non-fiction novel and hybrid narrative, even if it exhibits very different traits from Saviano's early works and shows signs of the influence of the post-truth world. Saviano's penultimate work consists of various stories,<sup>337</sup> mostly about real contemporary figures, framed in short chapters and then collected into sections – from Jamal Khashoggi to Martin Luther King, from Dafne Caruana Letizia to Emile Zola, from George Floyd to Robert Capa. These stories, as the author himself reveals, constitute a map to orient ourselves in the historical era in which we live – which is why in the index the various titles are arranged in the form of a planisphere. Yet he immediately alerts readers of two crucial aspects. Firstly, the map offered by literature is not in itself sufficient to find the correct route; rather, it aims to save us the trouble of taking dead-end paths:

La cartina non ti salva dalla fatica di attraversare il guado, non ti ripara dalla sterpaglia fitta, che dovrai strappare, e soprattutto nessuna cartina ti impedisce di perderti lungo il cammino; forse te lo rende più sicuro, mostrandoti dove stai andando: certamente ti evita di sprecare tempo a percorrere strade che non conducono da nessuna parte.<sup>338</sup>

Secondly, even if the narrative is centred on true facts, their being such does not dispense the writer from making an effort of personal and sentimental reconstruction, an intervention of his imagination that can connect the dots: '[...] quell'immaginazione è solo una prova di verità che mette insieme i palpiti di quel muro'.<sup>339</sup> Readers are then invited to do the same: they are confronted with a series of scattered fragments, and pieces of narratives which mirror the world of today, and left to navigate their own course to make sense of them. The book can in fact be read in a non-specific and non-linear order, leaving the audience free to jump from one chapter to another, from one section to another according to their preference.

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<sup>336</sup> Roberto Saviano, *La paranza dei bambini* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2016); Roberto Saviano, *Un bacio feroce* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2017).

<sup>337</sup> A few months before the completion of this thesis, Roberto Saviano published his last book *Sono ancora vivo* (Milan: Bao Publishing, 2021). It is an autobiographical graphic novel made in collaboration with Asaf Hanuka, which recounts what being an intellectual under protection programmes looks like.

<sup>338</sup> Saviano, *Gridalo*, p. 11.

<sup>339</sup> Saviano, *Gridalo*, p. 15.

These devices clearly have a metafictional function and open up broader reflection on narrative practice, yet they conceal a crucial aspect of Saviano's literary evolution. The fifteen years separating 2006 and 2021 create a larger gap than might appear at first glance. Post-truth readers find themselves in a very different cultural condition from those of the first decade of the third millennium. For this reason, Saviano employs more sophisticated strategies to engage them, reworking those implemented at the beginning of his career. Alongside the deployment of multiple and deceptive points of view, Saviano displays an original use of the second person singular, addressing readers in a direct way. Right from the title, the book is full of exhortations, phatic formulas, advice, warnings, suggestions, afterthoughts, which serve the purpose of triggering an honest and frank dialogue between sender and receiver. All this is made even more intricate by Saviano's recourse to another narrative stratagem: the 'you' to whom the writer openly addresses himself is actually the writer himself, or rather a different and younger version of him that is now embodied by the reader. Through this admission of fellowship – Saviano is well aware that he is mainly dealing with people aligned with his views – he touches both the emotional and the rational side of the audience.

Like Saviano's other works, the most remarkable aspect of *Gridalo* is the relationship the author establishes with the truth. Now, however – as I have already mentioned – this relationship is reconfigured by the employment of novel solutions. To begin with, the writer does not draw on direct experience, since many of the themes he deals with are already part of the collective memory: media and the internet made those stories already available to everyone. On the other hand, some topics need time to be fully understood and require in-depth research, which the author keeps track of both through annotations made by the narrative voice and by a small bibliography offered at the end of each chapter, in which sources for further study are cited. However, both the paratext and the narrative voice urge the reader to be doubtful, to double-check every piece of information, to be wary of questionable sources of information, to be suspicious of oversimplified arguments and never to take anything for granted. To reinforce these warnings, each chapter ends with a capitalised exhortation directed at the audience ('GRIDALO CHE NON CREDERAI IN UN'IDEA SOLO PERCHÉ TI RASSICURA',<sup>340</sup> 'GRIDALO CHE TU IMPARI DA CHI PENSA QUELLO CHE NON PENSI').<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Saviano, *Gridalo*, p. 189.

<sup>341</sup> Saviano, *Gridalo*, p. 40.



In Saviano's work the relationship between the text and unknown truths is redefined: it teaches us to see what we think we know from a different perspective. Where the two phases of the writer's career differ is that in the present one this aspect is taken further. *Gridalo* is in fact an investigation into the sense of truth itself in the contemporary context, i.e., in a world full of overlapping voices and images, in which subjects look at social phenomena through a kaleidoscope of inputs. For this reason, the typical themes of Saviano's narrative, such as political corruption, the misdeeds of mafia associations, the arrogance of power, the failures of the capitalist system, the denunciation of injustice, are here spanned by another predominant theme: the weight and challenges of the search for truth today. The examples given – both of real events and real people of present and past times – are intended to warn of the difficulties encountered on the road to definitive and objective truth: '[...] quando si tratta di accogliere la verità scoprirai che ogni visuale si uniforma, si mescola in un unico lievito madre, perché quando si tratta della verità, ogni strada si assomiglia. Ogni strada è la tua'.<sup>342</sup>

A careful observer will immediately notice that these allusions are self-referential and metaliterary, since through them the author is referring to himself and his career, as well as to his idea of the function of literature. But it is through the irony that pervades the whole book that this aspect is really pushed forward. Clues in the text show that the dialogue with readers overlaps with the writer's monologue in which he is addressing himself. This is because the author and his audience share the same fate, as they both run the same risks of being misled every time they browse the Internet or use social networks by disinformation and the manipulation of facts, the spread of populism, the algorithms that determine our lives.

In conclusion, I interpret *Gridalo* as a guidebook for the citizens of the twenty-first century, which addresses the unique and unprecedented nature of the challenges that await them. The aim of the book is to portray the problems that plague our post-truth era and, without being overly prescriptive or authoritarian, to suggest ways of dealing with them.

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<sup>342</sup> Saviano, *Gridalo*, p. 120.

## ~ CHAPTER THREE ~

### **On Post-Truth narrative and Italian Novels on Historical Events**

In this and the next chapter, I will bring forward the course of analysis I began in the previous sections, aiming to elaborate the notion of post-truth narratives in the Italian context through close readings of particularly significant novels. More specifically, this chapter concentrates on texts dealing with historical events, while the next chapter considers narratives that focus on contemporary political issues.

It should be made clear from the outset that, in line with the theoretical approaches implemented thus far, I will avoid using the definition of ‘historical novel’ *strictu sensu*, to favour a more flexible and dynamic terminology over traditional labels, one that can be easily readjusted to evolving cultural conditions such as those in which we currently live. Firstly, I will follow Margherita Ganeri’s claim that the historical one is more a ‘narrative mode’ – and therefore as a general tone of discourse – than a proper genre.<sup>343</sup> Secondly, by detaching the selected texts from both the genre and the tradition, it is possible to circumvent some of the theoretical problems concerning the classification of historical novels that Boscolo and Jossa point out. The two scholars maintain that ‘[s]iamo troppo abituati a chiamare romanzo storico qualsiasi tipo di narrazione parzialmente d’invenzione che rimandi a una realtà conosciuta e riconoscibile [...] come se parlare di storia autorizzasse automaticamente l’entrata nell’orbita della tradizione del romanzo storico’.<sup>344</sup> Finally, contextualising the issue to the present chapter of my work adds a further reason to avoid the definition of historical novel in a narrow sense. If it can in some way be applied to the narrative of Wu Ming, it would be out of place to refer to it in the case of Antonio Scurati and Davide Orecchio. As I will show through the texts of the authors analysed here, one of

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<sup>343</sup> Margherita Ganeri, *Il romanzo storico in Italia: Il dibattito critico dalle origini al postmoderno* (Lecce: Piero Manni, 1999).

<sup>344</sup> Claudia Boscolo and Stefano Jossa, *Scritture di resistenza. Sguardi politici della narrativa contemporanea* (Rome: Carocci, 2014), p. 18.

the main characteristics of their writing consists in the way the recount of historical events is hybridised with other forms and genres of writing.

Within the framework of this research, the decision to examine authors who have tried to read contemporary phenomena through the narration, recollection or re-enactment of historical facts is supported by at least three sets of considerations. Firstly, as argued in chapter one, post-truth ultimately puts under stress many of the paradigms of the past: the modern conception of the univocal relationship between facts and truth, the notion of history as endless progress, democracy as an ideal and just political model. In such a context, fiction serves as a privileged mean to investigate such a transition and its political turns by putting in contact the present and past.

Secondly, the theoretical discussion on the historical novel – especially in Italy – intertwines with that on political commitment. On the one hand, it touches on the topics of the representation of reality and the relationship with postmodern narrative practices that I analysed in chapter two in relation to the debate on *impegno*. On the other hand, novels that focus on history possess a genuine inclination towards political reflection. As Hanna Serkowska states, the moralistic and didactic character of this type of narration makes it ‘idoneo ad accogliere forme di impegno o attenzione verso il mondo extraestetico’.<sup>345</sup>

Finally, as Kate Willman puts it, the novel of history has had unprecedented success in the twenty-first century.<sup>346</sup> This is relevant for two reasons. The first is that the focus on history is linked to contemporary man’s difficulty in making sense of the present. In the words of Daniele Giglioli, novelists look to the past to trace the causes ‘del fallimento del presente’.<sup>347</sup> The second point – the most important in my research – is that in novels dealing with historical events, more than elsewhere, the account of facts is replaced by reflection on the artificiality of the account itself. In other words, so-called historical writers are particularly inclined to think about the possibilities of experiencing the world in real terms, even when the world can only be approached in a mediated form. According to Peter Boxall, in novels that have history as their object it is possible to envisage the struggle between ‘the political desire for historical realism and the self-reflexive aesthetic engagement with the limits of narrative in capturing experience’.<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> Hanna Serkowska, *Dopo il romanzo storico. La storia nella letteratura italiana del '900* (Pesaro: Metauro Edizioni, 2012), p. 16.

<sup>346</sup> Willman, *Unidentified Narrative Objects*, p. 80.

<sup>347</sup> Giglioli, *Senza Trauma*, p. 23.

<sup>348</sup> Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 81.

The above quotation highlights the problem of how authors manage to stage factual truth objectively through language, which is by its very nature subjective, which I believe is central in post-truth narrative. In this sense, I believe that the distinction offered by Boscolo and Jossa to distinguish between the traditionally understood historical novel and ‘finzione metastorica’ is particularly useful.<sup>349</sup> Through this definition, the two authors condense some key elements of the critical debate on the historical novel of the last century – and on literature in general –<sup>350</sup> and pave the way for the analyses that follow. In fact, one of their crucial intuitions has largely informed this section of my work:

[...] di fronte alla verità di un’egemonia culturale che è fatta di silenzi, sospetti, asserzioni indiscusse e arbitrarie ricostruzioni, molti scrittori hanno espresso la necessità di ulteriori indagini e approcci diversi. Non tanto una controstoria, come troppo spesso da più parti si va dicendo, ma un altro modo di fare storia e rappresentare i fatti.<sup>351</sup>

In elaborating their distinction, the two authors, have also drawn on the theories on ‘metahistorical romance’ by Amy J. Elias and ‘historiographic metafiction’ by Linda Hutcheon. The first scholar emphasises that after the 1960s – during the postmodernist wave – historical novels revealed, through the use of metanarrative devices and ironic distancing, the inaccessibility of the ‘historical sublime’, and thus effectively equated historiographical accounts with literary discourse.<sup>352</sup> The second scholar describes the way in which postmodern texts have attempted to redefine – through writerly devices, irony and intertextual references – the concept of historical truth.<sup>353</sup> According to Hutcheon, narrative texts related to history display their fictitious and fictional status through metafictional literary devices.

In the light of the examination of these twentieth-century theories Boscolo and Jossa outline the tendency of today’s narratives to expose the constructed nature of historical

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<sup>349</sup> Boscolo and Jossa, *Scritture di resistenza*, p. 18.

<sup>350</sup> With reference to the importance assumed by the theories of metafiction in the twentieth century, I will limit myself to citing a capital text that inspired Boscolo and Jossa’s reflection: Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

<sup>351</sup> Boscolo and Jossa, *Scritture di Resistenza*, p. 16.

<sup>352</sup> Amy J. Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).

<sup>353</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988).

accounts, as to proliferate points of view and to open up to different alternative interpretations. To put it better in their own words, such devices are used today

[...] per parlare di un'esperienza narrativa che dalla storia parte ma attraverso la storia s'interroga poi sulle proprie possibilità di senso e sul proprio statuto di verità: riflettere sulla finzione a contenuto storico e riflessione sulla storia raccontata nella narrativa non si possono separare, se è vero che, come vedremo, il problema della realtà rappresentata e della ricerca della verità è un problema di scrittura prima che di riflessione critica e filosofica.<sup>354</sup>

The connection between novels about history and the post-truth narrative framework emerges in *Storiografie parallele*, by Lorenzo Marchese. The essay offers a detailed and in-depth survey of recent Italian fiction tackling historical facts and real events. In general, the text is part of the debate on the new realism and the need for literary commitment. Thus, it reflects on the many attempts made in recent years to produce texts that investigate reality by eschewing the features of literary fiction to instead employ elements belonging to the modes of non-fiction or journalism. Marchese shows the conceptual limits of hybrid narrative forms which, in their attempt to avoid at all costs the lie of literary invention, end up fulfilling neither the requisites of fiction nor that of non-fiction. Through precise arguments and analysis, the scholar reveals the contradictory nature of some of these attempts, which strive for historiographical accuracy but then exploit the hybrid form to remove the burden of verification and present only partial reconstructions.<sup>355</sup> In his opinion – and I would agree with him. it is more productive to abandon claims of objectivity and openly reveal one's fictitious nature in order to establish a more honest and active dialogue with readers. Furthermore, Marchese openly claims that the advent of post-truth has transformed the relationship between truth and fiction, as well as complicated the way in which of constructing a fruitful literary pact with readership:

[...] come credere a una verità dei fatti che sembra passare per un 'patto di compassione' e per una narrazione suggestiva e coerente, ma non per la dimensione dell'esattezza, più fredda ma in fin dei conti più affidabile? Come crederci, tanto più in un'epoca in cui appare incolmabile la divaricazione tra il puntiglioso fact-checking delle scritture giornalistiche su Internet (ma talvolta più ideologiche,

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<sup>354</sup> Boscolo and Jossa, *Scritture di Resistenza*, p. 17.

<sup>355</sup> Marchese, *Storiografie parallele*, p. 277.

dietro la loro apparente neutralità, da inchieste dichiaratamente di parte) e la post-truth dei discorsi di politici e opinionisti che ogni giorno alimentano narcisisticamente la discussione pubblica con rappresentazioni libere affrancate dal giudizio di vero/falso, accomodanti e approssimative?<sup>356</sup>

In line with these considerations, Marchese proposes a conception of non-fiction that despite everything ‘si schiera dalla parte della letteratura’.<sup>357</sup>

Despite the high number of books on historical events recently published in Italy,<sup>358</sup> I narrowed down my selection to three books: *La banda dei sonnambuli* by Wu Ming, *M. Il figlio del secolo* by Antonio Scurati, and *Mio padre la rivoluzione* by Davide Orecchio. The reasons supporting my choice are many. Firstly, I rely on thematic aspects, since the three texts tackle the ideology of revolution, albeit in different ways and inspired by different historical events: Wu Ming set their story during the French Revolution, Scurati describes the rise of fascism, while Orecchio evokes the October Revolution and its consequences. The focus on the political potential of past revolutions is particularly significant if examined against the backdrop of the post-truth political scenario. As claimed in chapter one, the desire for change and renovation, the sense of anger and frustration, and the anxiety about a different future create today the conditions for new forms of ideologies to flourish. These, unlike in the past, no longer embrace every aspect of social living, but focus on narrower issues to generate mobilisation and gain consensus. As in Finchelstein’s theory mentioned in chapter one, we have now moved from fascism to the spread of populist movements. The three works I examine here employ fiction to deconstruct the great ideologies of the previous era and examine them with a focus on the present political developments.

Secondly, by focusing on the chosen novels, I provide concrete examples of how authors put into practice narrative devices and strategies that I consider essential within the post-truth poetics. These include: innovative mechanisms of emplotment, strange and anomalous

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<sup>356</sup> Marchese, *Storiografie parallele*, p. 276.

<sup>357</sup> Marchese, *Storiografie parallele*, p. 279.

<sup>358</sup> I will only mention here some of the texts on historical events shortlisted as finalists to Italian literary prizes in recent years: Antonio Pennacchi, *Canale Mussolini. Parte prima* (Milan: Mondadori, 2010); Helena Janeczek *La ragazza con la leica* (Milan: Guanda, 2017); Francesco Pecoraro, *La vita al tempo di pace* (Florence: Ponte alle Grazie, 2013); Paolo Di Paolo, *Mandami tanta vita* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2014); Elena Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta* (Rome: Edizioni E/O, 2014); Marcello Fois, *Nel tempo di mezzo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2012); Emanuele Trevi, *Qualcosa di scritto* (Florence: Ponte alle Grazie, 2012); Claudia Durastanti, *La straniera* (Milan: La nave di Teseo, 2019); Rossella Postorino, *Le assaggiatrici* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2018).

narrative perspectives, the ingenious blending of fictional and archival sources, different ways of practising the hybridisation of genres and styles, self-reflexive, ironic and writerly techniques. The fact that the authors, in doing this, pursue their own goals and come to different conclusions is particularly meaningful. Each novel adds an important bit to the attempt of building a provisional theoretical structure.

Finally, the three books – though in different ways – address the problem of historical truth. In particular, they present the question of how to reveal the truth while knowing that any attempt to unravel it is still the result of a partial and therefore personal interpretation. In trying to solve this dilemma, all three writers, although following quite different paths, converge on the need to use the specific functions of fiction to draw the reader in and make him participate in the process of constructing meaning.

### **La banda dei sonnambuli by Wu Ming**

The career of the Wu Ming collective is not only relevant for the purposes of this chapter – considering that their narrative production consists mainly of novels on historical events –, but more generally for the discourse developed in my research on new forms of literary commitment and cultural agency. As Emanuele Piga states, they were among the first in Italy to adapt the models of ‘agire politico’ developed in the twentieth century to the ‘scenario telematico e interattivo dei giorni nostri’.<sup>359</sup> Over the years, the collective has developed innovative forms of interaction with the media and publishing systems.

This activity began in the middle 1990s, when the authors were part of the Luther Blissett Project. The movement, as Marco Amici explains, was ‘una creatura multiforme’, very active ‘nei circuiti dell’underground e nelle reti telematiche amatoriali, poi nel mondo della cultura e sulle cronache dei quotidiani’.<sup>360</sup> Under the pseudonym, different cells of activists used to carry out a series of media ‘guerrilla’ operations, aimed at spreading false news, hoaxes, and invented stories that would disrupt the media and information system. The phenomenon quickly spread to Europe and North America.<sup>361</sup> On the web, Luther Blissett

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<sup>359</sup> Emanuela Piga, ‘Comunità, intelligenza connettiva e letteratura: dall’open source all’opera aperta in Wu Ming’, in *Transmedia: storia, memoria e narrazioni attraverso i media*, ed. by Clodagh Brook and Emanuela Piga (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2015), 55-77 (pp. 56-57).

<sup>360</sup> Marco Amici, ‘La narrazione come mitopoiesi secondo Wu Ming’, *Bollettino di Italianistica*, 1 (2006), 184-97 (p. 185).

<sup>361</sup> A comprehensive description of this outbreak is offered in Irene Capopardi, ‘De Luther Blissett à Wu Ming: d’une culture de la réception à une culture de la participation’, *Cahiers d’histoire*, 141 (2019) 121-40.

was presented as a ‘folk hero’, even though no website really shed light on his identity or genealogy, which remains fluid and elusive still nowadays.<sup>362</sup>

In 1999, some members of the Bologna unit of the project published in Italy a novel entitled *Q* that was an immediate success with both the public and critics.<sup>363</sup> The identity of the authors remained unknown for a short time. A few months after the book’s release, the four authors revealed their identities: At that point they performed an act of suicide and symbolic catharsis, abandoning the pseudonym Luther Blissett to become known as Wu Ming.<sup>364</sup>

Already from this brief reconstruction of their formative years, two key aspects emerge that make the Wu Ming’s activity a significant model within post-truth cultural practices and their paradoxes. Firstly, their initial conception of the web and the network society as tools that could foster both anonymity and a sense of collective belonging, in a way anticipates the risks and potentialities that have emerged today with the development of digital technologies. If, as pointed out in chapter two of my study, the Internet has now fostered segregation, partial information, and the emergence of filter bubbles, at the dawn of the web, the members of the collective still saw the potential for emancipation and the proliferation of an alternative culture. Secondly, as Amici argues, through the construction of false and invented narratives Luther Blissett attempted to re-appropriate the media narrative, in order to unhinge the power it wields.<sup>365</sup> Thus, the circulation of falsehoods and invented stories had a mythopoetic and strongly libertarian value according to the collective. Something similar is happening today with the spread of conspiracy theories and the creation of virtual communities proposing alternative political and social theories. My position is that, having grasped that the spread of the Internet, blogs, and social networks would alter the subversive power of guerrilla media strategies, the Wu Ming entrusted fiction with the political task of producing myths and alternative political interpretations. From the moment when, the Internet became a mainstream channel, the narrow and increasingly peripheral space of literature appeared to them as the ideal territory for underground cultural practices.

Since taking on the new name Wu Ming, the collective has moved in the direction of marginalising the role of literature and was confronted with the problems related to this

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<sup>362</sup> Among these, the most interesting and detailed instance is accessible on the website <http://www.lutherblissett.net/> (accessed on, news 30 July 2020).

<sup>363</sup> Luther Blissett, *Q* (Turin: Einaudi, 1999).

<sup>364</sup> It is no coincidence that this connection was identified and explored by Wu Ming in *Q di Qomplotto*, which I discussed in chapter two.

<sup>365</sup> Amici, ‘La narrazione come mitopoiesi secondo Wu Ming’, p. 195.



change of perspective. Hence, in developing their new model of cultural agency and literary commitment they dealt with the issues of anonymity, participatory and collective activity, free dissemination of contents, and interaction with forms of intermediality and multimediality. The way they have interpreted these aspects over the years has made them, as Medaglia and Willman claim, a real ‘nuova avanguardia 3.0’. At the same time, however, according to the scholars, it has generated ‘molteplici contraddizioni’.<sup>366</sup> The choice of the new *nom de plume* is very indicative in this sense. In Chinese Mandarin Wu Ming has two possible meanings, namely ‘five names’ or ‘no name’. As Kate Willman reveals, this aspect, together with their decision not to be photographed or participate in TV shows, is a sign of their resolve to ‘undermine the figure of the author, as a celebrated personality and as an isolated genius working alone’.<sup>367</sup> In addition, this attempt to dismantle the social prominence of the figure of the artist and the intellectual generates a sort of rebound effect that also provokes the opposite outcome. As highlighted by Beniamino Della Gala, in an environment now accustomed to the cult of the media image, the absence of recognisable faces or names works as a marketing strategy capturing the public’s attention and creating an hype around their activities.<sup>368</sup> Thus, the practice of collective writing and anonymous cultural activity, on the one hand, points to an extra-textual dimension and initiates ‘una pratica contestativa’ of the publishing and media system; but on the other hand, it transforms the author into a brand.<sup>369</sup> Furthermore, some contradictions also pertain to their idea of copyleft as an autonomous and unrestricted distribution strategy that entrusts the web with the task of putting their work in contact with its readers.<sup>370</sup> In Piga’s opinion, the copyleft protocol reflects the principle of ‘libero accesso alla conoscenza’ and open source codes that shaped the ideals of the Internet pioneers.<sup>371</sup> In doing so, however, as Medaglia and Willman point out, the risk is to create nothing more than a different ‘marketing strategy’.<sup>372</sup> In my opinion, however, these antitheses and observations, instead of reducing the political value of Wu Ming’s commitment, enrich it; especially if one reads them in the backlog of the

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<sup>366</sup> Francesca Medaglia and Kate Willman, ‘Wu Ming: Tra collettivo e individuo’, *Fermenti*, 5 (2013), 51-59 (p. 52).

<sup>367</sup> Willman, *Unidentified Narrative Objects*, p. 2.

<sup>368</sup> Beniamino Della Gala, ‘La “funzione autoriale” tra lotta politica e branding. Alcuni aspetti dei casi Wu Ming e Scrittura Industriale Creativa’, *Altre Modernità*, 19 (2018), 77-91 (pp. 86-87).

<sup>369</sup> Della Gaia, ‘La “funzione autoriale”’, (p. 81 and p. 86).

<sup>370</sup> An indication of the principles governing Wu Ming’s idea of copyleft is given by the collective on their blog Carmilla: Wu Ming, ‘Note inedite su copyright e copyleft’, *Carmilla*, 6 November 2005, <https://www.carmillaonline.com/2005/11/06/note-inedite-su-copyright-e-copyleft-2005/> (accessed on 01 August 2020).

<sup>371</sup> Piga, *Comunità, intelligenza connettiva e letteratura*, p. 66.

<sup>372</sup> Medaglia and Willman, ‘Wu Ming: Tra collettivo e individuo’, p. 51.

recent era, in which knowing how to navigate seamlessly among conflicting interests has become a fundamental trait for writers and intellectuals.

The contradictions that have just been brought to the fore are the result of a willingness to engage with technological evolution and to exploit its opportunities, has remained unchanged in the transition from Luther Blissett to Wu Ming. The collective uses the web not only as an extraliterary tool, but also to supplement their narrative work. In fact, their literary products are extended with additional and interactive materials offered on website pages. This is for instance the case of the novel *Manituana*,<sup>373</sup> set during the American Civil War. The authors have enriched the text with visual and audio materials that readers can access on the web<sup>374</sup> As Melina Masterson suggests, this expansion of the paratext beyond the borders of the book increases participation on the part of readers and offers them ‘more rhetorical power while diminishing [...] that of the author’.<sup>375</sup>

As I will shortly show in analysing *La banda dei sonnambuli*, Wu Ming’s transmedia practice is capable of operating even within the boundaries of the text itself. This book encapsulates many of the collective’s thematic and poetic elements and, in a sense, constitutes their epitome. As the authors themselves have stated on their blog, ‘*L’armata dei sonnambuli* conclude una fase della [loro] storia di narratori e romanzieri’.<sup>376</sup> On that occasion, the collective also indicated that it represents ‘il nostro romanzo migliore’, because it encapsulates the summa of their narrative strategies.

Taking these aspects into account, I established that *L’armata dei sonnambuli* sums up well the elements of Wu Ming’s writing practices that bring them closer to post-truth poetics, but also make them a model of contemporary literary commitment. As Federico Bertoni puts it Wu Ming’s fiction recounts the past to address the problems of the present. Furthermore, the scholar underlines some of the elements of their literary tendency, that I envisaged as emblematic within my study:

[...] uso del mito, una certa idea di narrazione in quanto fabulazione mitopoietica, e anche la ricerca di allegorie intese come motivi metastorici che possano parlare al presente. A un livello più

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<sup>373</sup> Wu Ming, *Manituana* (Turin: Einaudi, 2007).

<sup>374</sup> These materials are collected on the site: <https://www.manituana.com/section/74> (accessed on 1 August 2020).

<sup>375</sup> Melina Masterson, ‘Towards a Collective Intelligence: Transmediality and the Wu Ming Project’, *Between*, 8 (2014), p. 15.

<sup>376</sup> Wu Ming, ‘Well done. Due parole su #L’armatadeisonnambuli’, *Giap*, 15 April 2014, <https://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/2014/04/well-done-due-parole-su-larmatadeisonnambuli/> (accessed on 3 August 2020).

specifico, mi sembra intrinsecamente politica anche un'altra opzione formale di molti lavori dei Wu Ming, cioè la costruzione del personaggio e l'assunzione del punto di vista dei subalterni, di chi è stato marginalizzato rispetto al corso della master fiction.<sup>377</sup>

Published in 2015, the novel is set during the years of the Jacobin Reign of Terror, which followed the French Revolution. The book's prologue presents the execution of Louis Capet through the perspectives of five main characters: Marie Nozière, a dressmaker from the faubourg Sainte-Antoine; Léo Madonnet, a street actor from Bologna who moved to Paris at a young age; Orphée D'Amblanc, a doctor who is an expert in mesmerism; the 'man called Laplace', another mesmeriser whose real name is 'cavaliere d'Yvers'; and finally, a sort of collective entity that personifies the people of Paris. After the prologue, the novel recalls the episodes that happened to the main protagonists between the years 1793 to 1795.

Each chapter of the book is narrated from the perspective of one of the main five characters. The main plot recounts how d'Yvers tries to assemble an army of sleepwalkers in an attempt to liberate Capet's son and restore the monarchy. After a long series of twists and turns, D'Amblanc foils this attempt, with the help of Madonnet and Nozière. Within this major storyline, various subplots emerge, including the civil war of the Montagnards in which Nozière took part in the ranks of the Jacobin women's club, asserting the right of women to take part in political debates; the vicissitudes of Madonnet who, disguised as Scaramouche and armed with a club, chastises the traitors against the revolution; and Dr D'Amblanc's investigations into the mysterious sleepwalking case in the Auvergne region. Each of these episodes exhibits certain characteristics typical of other literary genres, ranging from horror stories to science fiction, from graphic novels to social novels. The fictional plot is interspersed with the representation of real circumstances, such as the execution of Louis Capet, the assassination of Marat, the civil war, the capture of Robespierre, and the end of Jacobin power.

The plot summary immediately shows Wu Ming's intention to produce a narrative in which fictional facts and real history not only coexist but complement each other. The reader is faced with the difficult task of distinguishing the two components. Moreover, if in *Manituana* paratextual elements had been dislocated on a web page, in *L'armata* it is included between the pages of the book itself. For instance, original documents are

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<sup>377</sup> Federico Bertoni and Emanuela Piga, 'Tavola rotonda con Wu Ming', *Between*, 5 (2015), p. 3 (italics are in the text).

interpolated between the various chapters with the double purpose of acquainting the reader with the historical setting and substantiating some of the episodes narrated. This feature is common to many Wu Ming's novels. As Dimitri Chimenti points out, the authors establish a 'rapporto dialettico tra archivio e rammemorazione', which emerges when 'all'interno della narrazione sono inserite una quantità di citazioni da testi riconducibili ad un tempo estradiegetico'.<sup>378</sup> In *L'armata* a case in point is given by the quotation from an eighteenth-century French journal dealing with the moral deviation of middle-class male capitalists and the revolutionaries' strategies to overcome them:

«JOURNAL DE LA REPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE»

di Marat, l'Amico del Popolo

deputato alla Convenzione nazionale

*ut redeat miseris, abeat fortuna superbis*

Dal n. 113 del lunedì, 25 febbraio 1793

È incontestabile che i capitalisti, gli aggiogatori, i monopolisti, i commercianti di lusso, i nobilastri, gli oppositori, sono tutti, chi più chi meno, servitori dell'antico regime, che rimpiangono gli abusi dei quali profittavano per arricchirsi sulla pelle della nazione. Come potranno contribuire, dunque, alla fondazione del regno dell'uguaglianza e della libertà? Nell'impossibilità di cambiare il loro cuore, visto che i mezzi impiegati finora per richiamarli al dovere sono risultati vani, e disperando di vedere il legislatore prendere grandi misure per forzarli, non vedo che la distruzione totale di questa genia maledetta, che possa dare tranquillità allo stato, perché costoro non cesseranno di tramare finché saranno in piedi [...]

Lasciamo perdere le misure repressive della legge; è fin troppo evidente che queste sono sempre state e sempre saranno senza effetto. Le sole efficaci sono le misure rivoluzionarie. Ora io non ne conosco altra che possa adattarsi alle nostre deboli concezioni, se non quella di investire il comitato di sicurezza generale del potere di ricercare i principali accaparratori e di sottoporli a un tribunale dello stato, formato da cinque membri, scelti tra gli uomini più integri e sinceri, per giudicarli come traditori della patria.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> In this passage, the scholar's remarks are referred to Wu Ming's 2005 novel written with Vitaliano Ravagli, *Asce di guerra* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005). Yet the narrative features they refer to remain crucial in the collective's production until the mid-2010s; Dimitri Chimenti, 'La vita postuma delle parole. Note su un uso narrative dell'archivio in *Asce di Guerra*, di Wu Ming', in *Finzione, Cronaca, Realtà*, 321-34 (pp. 322-23).

<sup>379</sup> Wu Ming, *L'armata dei sonnambuli*, pp. 47-48.

On another occasion, Wu Ming retrieves parts of a report on mesmerism in the eighteenth century from historical archives:

*Estratto dal*

*RAPPORTO SEGRETO SUL MESMERISMO*

*Redatto da Bailly*

*[...] Il trattamento magnetico non può che essere pericoloso per la morale. Proponendosi di guarire malattie che richiedono lunghe cure, si eccitano emozioni piacevoli e care, emozioni che poi si rimpiangono, che si cerca di ritrovare perché esse hanno un fascino naturale per noi e contribuiscono fisicamente alla nostra felicità, ma moralmente non sono meno condannabili e sono anzi ancor più pericolose, perché è più facile prendervi una dolce abitudine.*

*Fatto a Parigi, l'11 agosto 1784.*<sup>380</sup>

Wu Ming's free use of real materials and their grafting onto the narration is even more sophisticated in the text's final appendix. This section of the book also showcases Wu Ming's use of metafictional devices, as they provide authentic information as well as commentary on how it has been collected and evaluated. If some of the events recounted are well-known historical facts, such as the revolt of the people of Paris in 1795,<sup>381</sup> some other ones are nothing more than rumours found in unofficial records. For example, those about the attempts to rescue the son of Louis Capet

[...] da più di due secoli circolano voci, leggende e teorie del complotto sull'evasione del delfino di Francia e sulla sua sostituzione con un altro ragazzino. Queste storie, nate dalla fantasia popolare, non sono suffragate da nessuna prova, a parte le solite strane coincidenze che si citano in certi casi.<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> Wu Ming, *L'armata dei sonnambuli*, p. 134.

<sup>381</sup> Wu Ming, *L'armata dei sonnambuli*, p. 761

<sup>382</sup> Wu Ming, *L'armata dei sonnambuli*, p. 782.

In another passage the authors make some remarks on the little historical evidence backing their description of the sleepwalkers army:

se nella prima fase del potere termidoriano, confusa nella variopinta folla della Jeunesse Dorée, fu attiva una banda controrivoluzionaria che ricorreva a tecniche di controllo mentale, nei documenti sono rimaste poche tracce.<sup>383</sup>

Based on these examples, two further points emerge. Firstly, despite exhibiting narrative hybrid features and bibliographic references, Wu Ming refuse both the standards of realism and the genre of non-fiction novel, as they constantly highlight the fictitious nature the events narrated. By displaying their original sources they do not put forward any claim for an higher standard of objectivity or factual accuracy. On the contrary, as claimed by Chimenti, the collective rivendicates the freedom to reshape and re-adapt authentic materials as well as to use history as a basis for a purely fictional narrative.<sup>384</sup> Secondly, the political value of Wu Ming's texts lies in their use of fictional inventiveness to build truths that transcend reality.

In doing so, the authors manage to re-contextualise their subjects and establish connections between the past and the current political context. Reading between the lines of the examples given in the paragraphs above, historical documents often refer to contemporary social and political conditions. For instance, the passage taken from the *Journal de la République Française*, by commenting on the eighteenth-century transition also denounces economic and political inequalities that still persist today. This use of historical parallelisms is in line with the notion of the 'romanzo neostorico' elaborated by Ganeri, when she claims that history cannot be objectively construed, as *cliches* are embedded in our vision of the past. Therefore, historical narration reacts or looks back to the past with the intent of creating new meanings.<sup>385</sup>

Furthermore, Wu Ming interpret historical archives no longer as a collection of real objects, but as a set of linguistic artefacts. By scrutinising original materials, they deal with endless series of historical interpretations and fragments of chronicles, in order to remix and harmonise them through fiction. As Daniele Giglioli puts it, the archive in Wu Ming's text

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<sup>383</sup> Wu Ming, *L'armata dei sonnambuli*, p. 788.

<sup>384</sup> Chimenti, 'La vita postuma delle parole', p. 322.

<sup>385</sup> Ganeri, *Il romanzo storico in Italia*, p. 121.

‘non è un catalogo di fatti ma un catalogo di racconti, una combinazione di enunciati’. Therefore, the scholar dissociates the writers’ work from the ‘primato dell’esperienza diretta’, stressing that their novels are set in the past with the intention of forging ‘tempi ed esperienze che non si sono vissuti’.<sup>386</sup> These interpretations are reinforced by Wu Ming 4’s claims that:

[...] il romanzo storico ti consente di fare una cosa che lavorare sulla contemporaneità rende più difficile: quando scrivi un racconto ambientato qui e ora tante cose sono scontate perché sei qui, parli di cose che sono consuetudini, è il nostro mondo, la nostra epoca; quando guardi indietro devi ricostruirlo, c’è questa componente di creazione di mondo, di creazione di un universo letterario che rende il lavoro di romanziere storico molto simile a quello di uno scrittore di fantascienza, o di fantastico, perché poi tu lo vai a ricostruire ma sulla base di un principio di verosimiglianza, di tenuta della narrazione stessa, non tanto di mimetizzazione storica, non è che devi essere realistico, devi essere coerente [...].<sup>387</sup>

The statement above offers an account of authors’ method to tweak the historiographical narrative through the inclusion of fictional elements. This method serves two purposes: the first is to overlap the analysis of historical facts with present-day ones; the second is to create the conditions for involving readers and calling for their active participation, as they are not only required to make conclusions, but also to emotionally interact with the narrative.

Another narrative element employed by Wu Ming that contributes to shaping the model of post-truth poetics consists in the weakening of the third person narration impartiality: for instance, by describing the same scene from different points of view or by adopting unusual perspectives. In the ‘Overture’ the authors divide the sequence depicting the beheading of Lucius Capetus into a series of episodes, each from a different character’s perspective. Yet none of the cases provides readers with a full picture of the narrated circumstances. Each of the characters, for different reasons, either misses the capital execution that changed the history of France or is unable to take a clear look at it.<sup>388</sup> Finally, when one of them manages to see the execution, her vision is all but clear and univocal.

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<sup>386</sup> Beroni and Piga, ‘Tavola rotonda con Wu Ming’, p. 11.

<sup>387</sup> Wu Ming 4, ‘Tavola rotonda con Wu Ming’, p. 15.

<sup>388</sup> Marie is in the crowd and her view is obstructed by the people in front of her; Léo is blocked by the guards before setting foot on the square in which the execution is taking place; D’Yvers is distracted in the effort of coordinating an attempt to save the monarch; D’Amblanc turns his back on the guillotine and heads towards one of his patients; Wu Ming, *L’armata dei sonnambuli*, pp. 6-28.

Il re stava dicendo qualcosa. Altroché stava parlando alla folla. A Marie parve che tutti drizzassero le orecchie per afferrare quelle ultime parole e lo stesso fece lei. Udi la parola ‘accusa’. Udi la parola ‘Francia’. Ma il boia Sanson e i suoi aiutanti strattarono il re verso la panca e lo distesero per lungo.

– Che ha detto? – chiese Marie a quelli più avanti.

Una cuffia ruotò. Sotto la cuffia, una donna né giovane né vecchia.

– Che non si è pentito, maledice chi lo scana e il suo sangue schizzerà su di noi.

– Fin qua non credo, – aggiunse un gecco poche teste più in là.

– Avete i tarli nelle urecchie? – sibilò un altro. – Ha detto sono innocente, il mio sangue è il sangue della Francia...

– Silenzio! Il re ha detto che ci perdona tutti, altroché! – sentenziò un terzo.

Perdono o no, il collo del re era ormai nel buco.

Marie sentì di nuovo tirare la sottana.

– Prendimi su, prendimi su!

Il ragazzino fece per arrampicarsi. Lei gli mollò uno scappellotto.<sup>389</sup>

Therefore, the first few pages already make clear that readers cannot rely on the narrator’s interpretation to access the novel’s meanings. The construction of the initial sequence first denies them a full insight into the events narrated and then only provides them with a blurred and elusive report. Hence, decoding the historical circumstances is a task that falls entirely on the readership and its ability to come to an arbitrary synthesis of various possible interpretations.

Another way, typical of Wu Ming’s fiction, of complicating the relationship between documentary accuracy and invention resides in the way they play with characters’ identities, in order to make them look instable, polymorphous, and multifaceted. *La banda dei sonnambuli* offers no exception in this respect. For instance, the main antagonist is referred to as ‘l’uomo chiamato Laplace’ for several chapters – before readers discover he is actually called ‘cavaliere d’Yvers’. Even more revealing is the case of Léo Madonnet, who encapsulates multiple identities right from the start. His real name is Leonida Madonnesi, an Italian actor who has taken refuge in France under a false name and earns his living by playing divers roles. Furthermore, after the collapse of the

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<sup>389</sup> Wu Ming, *L’armata dei sonnambuli*, pp. 18-19.



monarchy, he masks himself as Scaramouche and becomes the idol of the crowds and the leader of the popular uprising. Moving from the stage to the real theatre of politics, this mediocre actor gives the best performance of his career.

Era magnifico, pensò Léo. Grande senso della scena e del patetico, ogni uomo e donna presente era attore e spettatore al tempo stesso. Eccolo il Nuovo Teatro della rivoluzione. Come sarebbe stato possibile tornare a recitare un vecchio copione al chiuso di una sala, quando il teatro si era fatto storia sotto il cielo di Francia?<sup>390</sup>

The construction of Scaramouche's character in the novel allows two interesting hypotheses. The first is that through the similarity between theatre and revolution, the Wu Ming propose a general political consideration that well applies to the current era. The sphere of politics coincides with that of entertainment, and political actions are in fact comparable to dramatic recitals. The second is that the character has a strongly self-referential function. In a social context in which the world of entertainment and the world of politics are sides of the same coin, artistic performance acquires a strong civic and revolutionary relevance. Therefore, it is difficult not to trace in the novel a reference to the collective's own activity. Scaramouche in some ways symbolises the 'folk hero' represented by Luther Blissett and its attempts to sabotage established media narrative. Years later, those attempts moved from the world of telematic networks to the pages of fiction. Artists and writers, operating in the anonymity and far from the media spotlight, can still suggest valid models of cultural action and propose an alternative reading of the political situation.

The allegory that confronts politics and theatre with each other is one of the novel's central motifs and is reiterated in numerous passages.<sup>391</sup> These include an extract in which Léo Madonnet openly reflects on the cultural shift that has taken place with the revolution:

Léo ebbe la sensazione di aver intuito da tempo quella verità: i parigini non erano più interessati al vecchio teatro. Certo i vecchi teatri erano ancora pieni di gente, e alcune

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<sup>390</sup> Wu Ming, *L'armata dei sonnambuli*, p. 323.

<sup>391</sup> In this regard, it must be mentioned that the whole book is subdivided as if it were a play script and its various sections and chapters are named as 'atti' and 'scene'.

rappresentazioni facevano scalpore, se ne parlava ovunque, ma non era più per le doti di un attore o per la magia di un testo. Il motivo era solo politico.

I parigini erano sempre interessati al teatro, ma il teatro era diventato grande quanto Parigi. I migliori oratori della Convenzione prendevano lezioni da attori consumati e la gente andava ad ascoltarli ed applaudirli come se stessero sulla scena. Gli spettacoli più emozionanti erano quelli dove la gente perdeva la testa per davvero, i cannoni tuonavano e poteva capitare, da un momento all'altro, che gli spettatori si trovassero a recitare.<sup>392</sup>

The excerpt introduces another consideration that links the novel's contents to the condition of post-truth, namely that political activity is not merely represented by a series of material practices and deeds; it possesses a linguistic, emotional and immaterial dimension. Throughout the book, the political transformation, following the deposition of the monarchy, blend into social as well as linguistic terms. Indeed, the new order imposed by the Jacobin regime entails a number of symbolic and terminological changes: the new calendar, the ban on personal titles, the veto on formal appellations, the use of addressing everyone as 'cittadino'. The counter-evidence of the importance of the language aspect is given by the fact that the 'muschiatini' – i.e. the young bourgeois who opposed the revolution – decide not to pronounce the letter 'r', because it is the initial of the word 'rivoluzione'. Their refusal for the new political order translates into a linguistic choice.

In chapter two, I discussed Anna Maria Lorusso's theory that analysing the methods and strategies through which facts are conveyed and transformed into discourses carries more political weight than the supposed realism of their impartial and objective analysis. Wu Ming's choice to focus on the linguistic and symbolic transformation that accompanies political change aligns, in my opinion, with the scholar's interpretation. In fact, in another passage of the text, another parallelism between theatrical performance and political events underlines the role played by art and narrative in such a cultural framework. The extract in question is presented as a double *mise en abyme*. On an initial intradiegetic level, the novel narrates the effort made by the inmates in the Bicêtre asylum, where d'Yvres has confined himself after the failed attempt to save the monarch – of staging of Marat's funeral in order to unfold its actual meaning:

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<sup>392</sup> Wu Ming, *L'armata dei sonnambuli*, p. 249

sapeva che non solo Molière, ma molti matti di Bicêtre amavano mettere in scena i fatti di cronaca più eclatanti, per sentirsi partecipi dei grandi avvenimenti che scuotevano la Francia. Il funerale di Marat aveva occupato le pagine dei giornali, i discorsi degli inservienti e i racconti dei visitatori, e si conoscevano talmente tanti dettagli di quella giornata, da poterla riprodurre in ogni particolare.<sup>393</sup>

On a second, extradiegetic level, this scene functions as a manifesto with which the authors make clear their idea of political writing. Reading between the lines, it is possible to perceive the message that literature in proposing an ekphrastic interpretation of reality is able to initiate a reflection on the true meaning of events. At the end of chapter four, I will show that a similar argument is also advanced by Giuseppe Genna. In a political context of overlapping narratives, literary fiction can only offer its own partial, imaginary and subjective synthesis. The political value of the latter can only really be unleashed with the collaboration and participation of readers.

### **M. Il figlio del secolo by Antonio Scurati**

From the point of view of cultural agency, the figure of Antonio Scurati presents several differences with respect to that of Wu Ming. On the one hand, he too has reflected throughout his career on the social and cultural role played by the media and new digital technologies in contemporary political environment.<sup>394</sup> On the other hand, however, he interacted with changes in the communication system in a less active way and mainly through his activities as a critic and writer. In any case, through his contributions he has become one of the central figures in the recent Italian literary debate – as well as in my research. In chapter two, I referred to Scurati's theories on how the media have altered our way of experiencing reality. I will also return to this aspect in chapter four. In this section, I will focus more on his narrative production and his conception of literary commitment. My

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<sup>393</sup> Wu Ming, *L'armata dei sonnambuli*, p. 343.

<sup>394</sup> Scurati, *La letteratura dell'inesperienza*; Antonio Scurati, *Gli anni che non stiamo vivendo* (Milan: Bompiani, 2010); Antonio Scurati, *Dal tragico all'oscuro. Raccontare la morte nel XXI secolo* (Milan: Bompiani, 2016).

assumption is that, put in relation to the other texts examined here, some features of his recent fiction are of great interest within the discourse on the poetics of post-truth.

To begin with, as Willman says, Scurati ‘raises questions over the writer’s role on society and what literature can do’ from the early stages of his career.<sup>395</sup> Consequently, he imbued his narrative works with a strong component of political reflection. This applies both to texts that invent or recall present day affairs and to texts that draw on historical events.<sup>396</sup> According to Giuliana Benvenuti, the writer’s main aim is ‘attribuire alla letteratura una nuova funzione’ relating to both genres ‘per mezzo dell’innesto in essi di una vena saggistica e/o metanarrativa’.<sup>397</sup>

Nonetheless, in the scholar’s view, Scurati’s attempt to revitalise literature and make it a method of analysing the surrounding cultural context is grounded on an apocalyptic view of the anthropological mutation taking place in recent decades.<sup>398</sup> Similarly to Wu Ming, the author is aware that the space for action reserved to literature is shrinking, pushed to the margins by ‘un’immaginario [che] ha assunto un nuovo statuto di realtà’.<sup>399</sup> Unlike the collective though, Scurati experiences the current situation with a strong vein of pessimism.<sup>400</sup> According to him, literature produces little effects in a world characterised by the ‘egemonia dell’immagine’.<sup>401</sup>

The most interesting aspect for the purpose of my research is that Scurati has recently revisited and repropounded some of the key contents of his 2006 essay *La letteratura dell’inesperienza*. In a 2017 article he states that in our society ‘dell’informazione, dello spettacolo, delle televisioni, dell’immagine elettronica, digitale, virtuale’ the possibility of actually knowing the world regresses and risks disappearing.<sup>402</sup> Commenting on the contemporary condition in which ‘l’avvento dei media elettronici’ has made ‘accessibili in tempo reale esperienze di vita violenta’, Scurati underlines the advent of an era in which

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<sup>395</sup> Willman, *Unidentified Narrative Objects*, p. 90.

<sup>396</sup> The first category includes texts such as *Il sopravvissuto* (Milan: Bompiani, 2007); *Il bambino che sognava la fine del mondo* (Milan: Bompiani, 2009). To the second category belong texts such as: *Il sordo rumore della battaglia* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), *Una storia romantica* (Milan: Bompiani, 2007); *Il tempo migliore della nostra vita* (Milan: Bompiani, 2015).

<sup>397</sup> Giuliana Benvenuti, ‘Eros e bios: «Il sopravvissuto» di Antonio Scurati’, *Between*, 3 (2013), p. 1.

<sup>398</sup> Benvenuti, ‘Eros e bios’, p. 3.

<sup>399</sup> Antonio Scurati, *Letteratura e sopravvivenza. La retorica letteraria di fronte alla violenza* (Milan: Bompiani, 2012), p. 18.

<sup>400</sup> Benvenuti, ‘Eros e bios’, p. 4. The vaguely resigned tone mentioned above has only been abandoned by the author in recent years, notably in a text that came out a few months after the delivery of my research paper: Antonio Scurati, *La fuga di Enea. Salvare la città in fiamme* (Milan: Solferino, 2021).

<sup>401</sup> Flaviano Pisanelli, ‘Il “Magma lucido” di *Petrolio* di Pier Paolo Pasolini: Romanzo, Narrazione, Realtà’, in *Finzione, Cronaca, Realtà*, 121-34 (p. 122).

<sup>402</sup> Antonio Scurati, ‘Letteratura dell’inesperienza. Il romanzo della Dopostoria’, *Le parole e le cose*, 21 June 2017, <https://www.leparoleele cose.it/?p=28081> (accessed on 9 September 2020).

witnesses have become spectators.<sup>403</sup> In the article, he defines our era as ‘dopostoria’, where the past and the present find themselves squashed against each other, memory has finally lost its collective function, and media produce a ‘mitologia euforizzante’.

Certainly, the context to which the writer refers is that of post-truth, of which he offers a bleak and disconsolate reading. And yet, precisely because of this vision, which seems to leave no room for the reliance on historical memory, it seems to me particularly relevant that the writer has recently embarked on the task of recounting the twenty years of the fascist regime started with *M*. This decision, made in spite of the recognition of the scarce attention given to literature today, seems to contribute substantially to the arguments advanced in this chapter. Indeed, the stylistic solutions adopted by Scurati to cope with these two conflicting impulses – the awareness of the marginality of literary narrative and the trust in its ability to have a social impact – are extremely revealing in the context of post-truth narrative.

*M. Il figlio del secolo* is the first step in a very ambitious narrative enterprise and the first episode of a tetralogy that will give an account on two crucial decades in recent Italian – and European – history.<sup>404</sup> More specifically the projects will narrate the years from Benito Mussolini’s creation of fascism in 1919 to fascism’s collapses after Mussolini’s death in 1945. The first volume – which is the only one I will focus on in this work – gives an account of the events of the dictator’s life from the time he founded the political movement of the *Fasci italiani da combattimento* and the newspaper *Il popolo d’Italia* – of which he was also editor – to the years following the assassination of the socialist parliamentarian, Giacomo Matteotti. The events that took place during that period are well known: the reformation of the *Fasci*, together with two hundreds ex-soldiers – called the *arditi* –, the Fiume roundup and the relationship with the poet Gabriele D’Annunzio; the disastrous elections of 1919, the strikes of the red years and the violent attacks against the socialists; the elections of 1921 in which fascism increased its seats in parliament tenfold, the march on Rome and the seizure of power; the new electoral law and the full control of parliament; up to the kidnapping and assassination of the great enemy of fascism, Matteotti. The book ends with Mussolini’s address to the Italian parliament on 3 January 2025, in which he reassures the nation after the turmoil following a parliament member’s death. In that circumstance, ‘il Duce’ – as the

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<sup>403</sup> Scurati, ‘Letteratura dell’inesperienza. Il romanzo della Dopostoria’.

<sup>404</sup> Initially the work was conceived as a trilogy, but after the publication of the first volume Scurati announced that he wanted to add a further segment. At the time of writing, only the first two volumes have been published. In addition to *M. Il figlio del secolo*, only the second book has been released: Antonio Scurati, *M. L’uomo della provvidenza* (Milan: Bompiani, 2020).

leader of fascism was called – firmly gained control of Italian politics: his rise to power was by then complete and all potential opponents were overpowered.

The narration of the facts is interspersed with authentic materials that the writer found in the historical archives. As Alessandra Tedesco points out, Scurati researched all kinds of documents to substantiate the accuracy of the story, among them ‘stralci di discorsi del Duce e articoli di giornale’.<sup>405</sup> Notwithstanding the writer’s effort, a few months after the book’s release, the historian Ernesto Galli della Loggia harshly criticised it for its glaring flaws, accusing the writer of ‘ritoccare la storia’ on many occasions.<sup>406</sup> According to Galli della Loggia, Scurati was not entitled to adjust real events when talking about history – even though he acknowledges the importance of literature in representing the past.<sup>407</sup> Scurati reacted to the accusations by claiming that *M* is not really a historiographical essay but a novel, and therefore it aims to achieve different objectives by implementing different narrative strategies.<sup>408</sup>

The discussion summarised above highlights an interesting contradiction in Scurati’s interpretation of the historical novel. On the one hand, the book revendicates the accuracy of the facts recounted and the closeness to reality.<sup>409</sup> On the other, the writer claims the need for the narrative to reshape events for them to make sense today.<sup>410</sup> According to Gianluigi Simonetti, also because of these conflicts *M* embodies ‘lo spirito del tempo (letterario)’.<sup>411</sup> Scurati himself, in the years immediately preceding the drafting of the novel, summarised

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<sup>405</sup> Alessandra Tedesco, ‘Il Premio Strega Scurati: “L’obiettivo di *M. Il figlio del secolo*?” Riportare a terra il fascismo’, *Sole24Ore*, 7 July 2019, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/il-premio-strega-scurati-l-obiettivo-m--figlio-secolo-riportare-terra-fascismo-ACsDFAX> (accessed on 11 August 2020).

<sup>406</sup> Among the shortcomings exposed by Ernesto Galli Della Loggia is the fact that Scurati wrongly attributes the label ‘great proletarian’ to Giosuè Carducci rather than to Giovanni Pascoli, who actually coined it; or the fact that he refers to the defeat at Caporetto with an incorrect date; Ernesto Galli della Loggia, ‘M di Antonio Scurati. Il libro che ritocca la storia’, *Corriere della Sera*, 14 October 2018, [https://www.corriere.it/cultura/18\\_ottobre\\_13/m-antonio-scurati-romanzo-che-ritocca-la-storia-1055c170-cf09-11e8-a416-b8065213a278.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/cultura/18_ottobre_13/m-antonio-scurati-romanzo-che-ritocca-la-storia-1055c170-cf09-11e8-a416-b8065213a278.shtml) (accessed on 18 September 2020).

<sup>407</sup> Ernesto Galli Della Loggia, ‘Galli della Loggia a Scurati. “La licenza creativa non autorizza a tradire la verità della storia”’, *Corriere della Sera*, 17 October 2018, [https://www.corriere.it/cultura/18\\_ottobre\\_17/antonio-scurati-m-bompiani-polemica-galli-della-loggia-c2697a1c-d23a-11e8-9cd8-6bfe110c11f0.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/cultura/18_ottobre_17/antonio-scurati-m-bompiani-polemica-galli-della-loggia-c2697a1c-d23a-11e8-9cd8-6bfe110c11f0.shtml) (accessed on 18 September 2020).

<sup>408</sup> Antonio Scurati, ‘Scurati replica a Galli della Loggia: raccontare è arte, non scienza esatta. Lo storico: la verità non va tradita’ *Corriere della Sera*, 29 October 2018, [https://www.corriere.it/cultura/18\\_ottobre\\_17/antonio-scurati-m-bompiani-galli-della-loggia-b67a02f0-d233-11e8-9cd8-6bfe110c11f0.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/cultura/18_ottobre_17/antonio-scurati-m-bompiani-galli-della-loggia-b67a02f0-d233-11e8-9cd8-6bfe110c11f0.shtml) (accessed on 18 September 2020).

<sup>409</sup> On the book’s back cover we read the definition of ‘romanzo documentario’; Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*.

<sup>410</sup> In defence of this position, Scurati cites Paul Ricœur’s thesis according to which time only becomes truly comprehensible to humans when it is represented through a narrative frame; Scurati, ‘Scurati replica a Galli della Loggia’.

<sup>411</sup> Gianluigi Simonetti, ‘Scurati, un Mussolini pieno di cliché’, *Sole24Ore*, 4 March 2019, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/scurati-mussolini-pieno-cliche-AE0VJNdG> (accessed on 20 September 2020).

the traits of ‘il romanzo dell’inesperienza’, which in order to talk about history nowadays mixes ‘ossessione documentaria’ and ‘finzionalizzazione, focalizzazione libera, egotismo’.<sup>412</sup> As I will show in the following paragraphs, these are all elements that represent the essence of *M*.

One of the aspects that distinguishes this novel from other recent attempts to narrate fascisms stands in Scurati’s choice to adopt the point of view of the leader of Italian ‘fasci da combattimento’. As Maddalena Carli points out, in the novel ‘Mussolini parla [...] in prima persona, direttamente e senza intermediari’.<sup>413</sup> However, if events of those years are mainly presented from Mussolini’s perspective,<sup>414</sup> Scurati uses a third person narrator and employs the free indirect speech, with the intention of preventing complete identification with the main character:

Poi però il paese ricade nella depressione e lui pure. Il Nuovo governo ha deciso di abbandonare il protettorato d’Albania, una delle poche conquiste rimaste all’Italia dalla Prima Guerra Mondiale, una Guerra pagati al Prezzo di ventimila morti. Tutto crolla. Tutto è poltiglia fangosa, borghesia e proletariato, governo e governanti. In quella miserabile terra di leggi tribali, di febbri quartane, di tifo e malaria, i Soldati italiani avevano solcato strade, avevano marciato contro i guerrieri serbi ridotti a fantasmi, scheletri vaganti, nutriti di erbe, abbeverati nelle pozzanghere infettate da carogne e cadaveri [...]

[...] I peggiori sono i ricchi borghesi. Si sentono perduti. S’informano sulla data della rivoluzione per sapere se ci si può fidare a recarsi ancora per un’estate in campagna. Di nuovo si diserta la storia e ci si reduce alla cronaca. I capi servizio hanno già pronto il solito pezzo sulle ferie d’agosto.<sup>415</sup>

The extract above shows that the use of literary devices makes it more difficult for readers to understand whether the judgements present in the text belong to Mussolini or to the writer himself. Furthermore, in other episodes of the book, such ambivalence acquires even more profound implications:

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<sup>412</sup> Scurati, ‘Letteratura dell’inesperienza’.

<sup>413</sup> Maddalena Carli, ‘Le fascisme in prese directe. Autour du dernier roman d’Antonio Scurati, *M il figlio del secolo*’, *Politika*, 5 (2019), <https://www.politika.io/fr/notice/fascisme-prise-directe> (accessed on 18 September 2020) [translation from France is mine].

<sup>414</sup> This a choice is somehow similar to that of other authors such as Jonathan Littel and Giuseppe Genna: Jonathan Littel, *Le benevole* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014); Giuseppe Genna, *Hitler* (Milan: Mondadori, 2009).

<sup>415</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 369, Apple ebook.

Li accusano di portare la violenza nella lotta politica. Lui lo ha detto chiaro e tondo: I fascisti sono violenti tutte le volte che è necessario esserlo. Punto. Non c'è altro da aggiungere. Loro sfasciano, distruggono, incendiano tutte le volte che sono costretti a farlo. Ecco tutto. A lui pare che sia una formula soddisfacente. Anche la conclusione del dibattito parlamentare sull'eccidio di Bologna sembra avergli dato ragione. Nonostante la denuncia di quel Matteotti, che inutilmente cercava nel fascismo un alibi all'incapacità rivoluzionaria dei socialisti, l'aula di Montecitorio ha confermato la piena fiducia a Giolitti. Il che significa che è passata la tesi della violenza contrapposta a violenza, che i moderati pensano ai fascisti come a un agente patogeno virulento ma necessario alle supreme ragioni di sopravvivenza dell'organismo sociale. Una sorta di vaccino inoculato sottopelle contro il socialismo.<sup>416</sup>

The risk implicit the choice of using Mussolini's point of view is that the text may sound as an apology for fascism. and the novel has been accused of that.<sup>417</sup> However, I believe that such a reading does not fully appreciate the deeper implications that are in place in Scurati's writing. By adopting the internal focalization, the author circumvents any retroactive reading of history, so to suggest that the events could have gone differently. The ultimate aim is to inspire anti-fascism by recurring to bottom-up practices: limiting any moralistic, fatalistic or ex post facto interpretations to a minimum and emphasising that a different turn of events could have taken place. For instance, in describing the frantic hours leading up to the March on Rome, the writer asserts that the enterprise was indeed deemed to fail. Quoting Badoglio's words, the narrator declares that “al primo fuoco tutto il fascismo crollerà”.<sup>418</sup> Then he reiterates the concept a few lines later “[n]on c'è dubbio che, se l'esercito aprisse il fuoco, il commando fascista verrebbe travolto in pochi minuti”.<sup>419</sup> By doing so, Scurati lets alternative scenarios emerge from the narration of historical events itself rather than imposing his authorial solutions or creating narrative ‘what if’.

This aspect is enhanced by another key trait of *M*: the author narrates historical events by using the present tense of journalistic reporting. As Robert Gordon says, Scurati ‘tracks history in real time’. In doing so, he rejects ideological and retrospective angles in favour of synchronic and flexible interpretations of the facts narrated. The reader is called upon to take

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<sup>416</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 560, Apple ebook.

<sup>417</sup> Giuseppe Carlito, ‘Antonio Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*’, *Allegoria*, 80 (2018), <https://www.allegoriaonline.it/1213-antonio-scurati-m-il-figlio-del-secolo> (accessed on 20 September 2020).

<sup>418</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 943, Apple ebook.

<sup>419</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 957, Apple ebook.



a stand ‘driven by character, scene and event, rather than by structure or ideology’.<sup>420</sup> The effect is to transform the historical novel into a kind of docufiction,<sup>421</sup> in which the fictional element is dominant. The illusion of a synchronous narrative is also achieved by using deictic formulas as ‘lassù’, ‘li’, ‘questi’, ‘quelli’, ‘adesso’: ‘La luna adesso regna in un cielo sfavillante di stelle. Il mare risplende. Le onde s’infrangono dolcemente sul porto’.<sup>422</sup> The final outcome is to connect the readership to the flow of events but also to confront it with the familiar kind of language they experience in their daily lives. In this sense, the book aims not only to bring readers closer to the time of the historical events, but rather to establish a parallelism between history and the present, between the fascism of the past and the anti-democratic drifts of today. This central aspect is captured by Simonetti when he describes how ‘tra materia storica e rinvio alla cronaca non c’è contraddizione ma complementarità’ and this is even more evident ‘quando un fantasma del passato – come appunto il fascismo – torna a visitare l’agenda della comunicazione di massa’.<sup>423</sup>

The fact that Scurati’s recounting of history expresses a political interest in the present rather than a mere desire for erudition is evident from the outset. As the writer himself declared in an interview, what really matters to him is not to disclose any unrevealed truth – as everything has already been said and discovered on the subject – but to re-frame the narrative of fascism, because

[s]e Mussolini non lo raccontiamo noi, noi figli di una formazione antifascista e democratica, con grande cautela, con grande scrupolo di coscienza, lo racconterà qualcun altro. Lo stanno già facendo e lo racconteranno in tutt’altro modo. Non possiamo lasciare il campo ai mestatori per non correre il rischio che qualcuno ne resti affascinato.<sup>424</sup>

Following this line of reasoning, what interests Scurati most is to confront readers with a nonetheless partial and subjective account of the Fascist years rather than condemning their exploits through historical accuracy.

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<sup>420</sup> Robert Gordon, ‘Mussolini on the March’, *TLS*, 2 July 2021, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/m-son-of-the-century-antonio-scurati-review-robert-gordon/> (accessed on 23 October 2021).

<sup>421</sup> Carlito, ‘Antonio Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*’.

<sup>422</sup> To point out all the passages in which these formulas are used in the text would be impossible. I have therefore only mentioned one particularly significant example. Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 752, Apple ebook.

<sup>423</sup> Simonetti, ‘Scurati, un Mussolini pieno di cliché’.

<sup>424</sup> Tedesco, ‘Il Premio Strega Scurati’.

The latter element can also be found in the way Scurati deploys historiographic sources. As repeatedly pointed out here and also stressed by Lorenzo Pavolini, ‘i documenti sono la spina dorsale della narrazione’.<sup>425</sup> Like Wu Ming, also Scurati opens many of *M*’s chapters with first-hand documents of various kinds: from newspaper articles to private letters, from official parliamentary minutes to personal diaries, from political manifestos to recordings of public speeches. As when he reports the telegram sent to Giolitti by the prefect of Milan:

Ricevuta visita di Mussolini che mi ha dichiarato fascisti e nazionalisti essere fermamente decisi opporsi con ogni mezzo anche più violento contro intemperanze partiti estremi che portano Italia alla rovina [...] Si dichiara pronto con i suoi a osservare ordine e legalità qualora governo faccia rientrare ordine pubblico funzionari caso contrario non sarebbe risparmiato alcun eccesso.

Telegramma del prefetto di Milano a Giovanni Giolitti

17 ottobre 1920<sup>426</sup>

Or when the text reports the depiction of Mussolini given by the ‘ispettore generale di pubblica sicurezza’*s*, in order to introduce the character to readers:

Mussolini è di forte costituzione sebbene sia affetto da sifilide. Questa robustezza gli permette un continuo lavoro. Riposa fino a tarda ora del mattino, esce di casa a mezzogiorno ma non rientra prima delle 3 dopo mezzanotte e queste quindici ore, meno una breve sosta per i pasti, sono dedicate all’attività giornalistica e politica. È un sensuale e ciò è dimostrato dalle molte relazioni contratte con svariate donne – È un emotivo e impulsivo. Questi caratteri lo rendono suggestivo e persuasivo nei suoi discorsi. Pur parlando bene, però, non lo si può definire propriamente un oratore [...].<sup>427</sup>

As shown in the examples above Scurati manipulates and shapes original materials according to the purposes of fiction. In one of the book’s passages, the writer quotes an article by Mussolini from the *Popolo d’Italia*, in which the fascist leader reflects on the form of his political movement: ‘[...] A mio avviso, il problema va risolto in questi termini:

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<sup>425</sup> Lorenzo Pavolini, ‘Antonio Scurati. *M. Il figlio del secolo*’, *L’indice*, 1 December 2018, <https://www.lindiceonline.com/letture/narrativa-italiana/antonio-scurati-m-figlio-del-secolo/> (accessed on 20 September 2020).

<sup>426</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 422, Apple ebook.

<sup>427</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 21, Apple ebook.

bisogna costituire un partito così solidamente inquadrato e disciplinato, che possa, quando necessario, tramutarsi in un esercito capace di agire sul terreno della violenza'.<sup>428</sup> Only a few pages earlier, however, Scurati had already embedded this consideration into the storyline elaborating on it by mean of the free indirect speech:

Ora il vero dilemma non è più tra movimento o partito, il vero dilemma è questo: si costituisce un partito o si fa un esercito? Il nodo gordiano come al solito va tagliato; meglio un partito ma capace di tramutarsi in esercito, di trasmutare immediatamente i suoi iscritti in soldati pronti a lottare sul terreno della violenza. Un partito convertibile, un partito-milizia. Anche una cosa del genere, d'accordo, non si è mai vista ma i tempi sono nuovi, incerti, il domani è misterioso e impensato.<sup>429</sup>

Thus, Scurati confuses his own vision with that emerging from the original journalistic text written by Mussolini, in such a way as to make it difficult for the reader to discern whether the dilemma in question concerns the author or the character. Moreover, the novelist alludes to the idea of fascism as a movement evolving according to new historical conditions, which entails at least two further elements. Firstly, a historical evaluation: fascism must have originated from somewhere and is the product of its own era. Many of the excerpts point to this aspect when the author highlights the faults of socialist leaders ('Ma la rivoluzione, ancora una volta, non viene. I dirigenti socialisti decidono, ancora una volta, di rimandarla'<sup>430</sup>, 'Come Mussolini aveva previsto, il trionfo elettorale del socialismo ha aperto la sua crisi interna, accentuando la divisione in fazioni [...]'),<sup>431</sup> or the carelessness of Italian people ('"E l'Italia, disonorata per sempre davanti al mondo, non leverà un grido? Non alzerà una mano?" Ma l'Italia è a tavola per il pranzo di Natale e non leva nessun grido se non per i brindisi di rito').<sup>432</sup> Secondly, an attentive reader might recognise a premonition: history is capable of repeating itself and we should not take our social stability for granted. This corroborates the thesis according to which Scurati does not present authentic documents to the audience in the attempt of validating his historical reading. On the contrary, he insinuates doubts and ambivalent opinions, inviting readers to question and to compare the contents of the text.

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<sup>428</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 711, Apple ebook.

<sup>429</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 708, Apple ebook.

<sup>430</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 384, Apple ebook.

<sup>431</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 318, Apple ebook.

<sup>432</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 500, Apple ebook.

Another narrative device adopted by Scurati to prevent any univocal reading of the novel lies in his resort to popular myths, vox populi, and uncertain rumors. *M* is full of ‘circola voce’, ‘si dice che’, ‘pare però’, ‘si racconta’, ‘la leggenda vuole’, as if the external narrator were just ‘retelling history as history’.<sup>433</sup> By doing so, he minimises the privileged position of the writer and of the narrator, who do not seem to be perfectly acquainted with the narrated facts (‘Qualcuno vocifera che quando la bomba esplode nella folla, chiunque l’abbia armata, chiunque ne sia stato falciato, l’ultima vittima è sempre la sinistra proletaria’).<sup>434</sup>

This last set of considerations allows me to advance a further hypothesis about the novel. In contrast to Simonetti, who emphasises the ‘rinuncia a qualsiasi sforzo di decostruzione sperimentale’ to the benefit of the ‘componente documentale’,<sup>435</sup> I envisage the metafictional quality of Scurati’s writing. In my opinion, the author’s interest often departs from the reconstruction of facts to focus on the whys and hows of historiography itself. On the one hand, Scurati gives readers an insight into his historiographic methods (‘Le cronache parlamentari non registrano una replica di Matteotti ad Aldo Finzi. Quello stesso giorno, invece, Giacomo Matteotti scrive a sua moglie [...]’);<sup>436</sup> on the other hand, he downplays the efficacy of historiography as a whole and its search for the truth, through the deployment of sophisticated metaphors, symbolisms and unexpected citations:

[i]nutile chiedersi il perché. Le ragioni sono tante e nessuna. La sfinge della storia siede muta, inamovibile, su ciò che è stato. Che sarà, che avrebbe potuto essere e che invece resterà per sempre increato.<sup>437</sup>

Si scatena di nuovo il putiferio. Interruzioni, rumori, ingiurie. Vigliacco, bugiardo, provocatore. Ingiurie, rumori, interruzioni. Provocatore, bugiardo, vigliacco. Matteotti le respinge: lui professa la fede nei meri fatti. Si sta limitando a elencare i fatti:

‘Volete i singoli fatti? Eccoli: a Iglesias il collega Corsi stava raccogliendo trecento firme e la sua casa è stata circondata...’

Voci dalla destra: ‘Non è vero, non è vero!’

Bastianini: ‘Questo lo dice lei!’

Carlo Meraviglia: ‘Non è vero. Lo inventa lei in questo momento!’

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<sup>433</sup> Gordon, ‘Mussolini on the March’.

<sup>434</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 587, Apple ebook.

<sup>435</sup> Simonetti, ‘Scurati, un Mussolini pieno di cliché’.

<sup>436</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 738, Apple ebook.

<sup>437</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 976, Apple ebook.

Farinacci: 'Va a finire che faremo sul serio quello che non abbiamo fatto!'

Matteotti: 'Farete il vostro mestiere!'

Nemmeno il crescendo di rabbia che culmina nelle minacce di Farinacci lo scoraggia. Il deputato socialista, sedati per un istante i rumori, riprende l'elencazione dei soprusi. Lui espone i fatti – ribadisce ostinato. Solo i fatti. I fatti o sono veri o sono falsi, non dovrebbero provocare rumori.<sup>438</sup>

The last passage is particularly relevant to the metafictional reading of the novel for its intricate constructedness, as it expands on several symbolic levels. At the first level, the reader is presented with an episode that occurred in the Italian Parliament narrated by a heterodiegetic narrator through a mimetic style. At the second level, however, the understanding of the event is complicated by the fact that in the final lines the narrator adopts an internal focus centred on Matteotti. On a final level, the author suggests his own position, speaking directly to his audience, as if, in a kind of metalepsis, Matteotti was addressing us – the readers – rather than his parliamentary colleagues. If so, the speech in question functions both as a general political message, emphasising that our political positioning influences the very way we perceive facts, as well as a metafictional consideration that there is no neutral reconstruction of the truth.

Finally, Scurati's use of irony also hinders a linear and documentary reading of historical events. In many passages of the text, a strong contrast emerges between the seriousness of the facts narrated and the irreverent and almost mocking tone with which they are presented:

[a]lle 15.00 in punto, spaccando il secondo, preceduto dal presidente della Camera Enrico De Nicola, seguito da tutti i ministri del suo governo, scortato dal generale Diaz, ministro della guerra e 'duca della vittoria' sugli austriaci, entra l'onorevole Mussolini. Tutti i deputati, tranne i rappresentanti della sinistra, si alzano ad applaudirlo. All'ovazione si associano le tribune del pubblico. L'Italia, comunque la si rivolti, è in luna di miele con quest'uomo che entra in parlamento con passo trionfale, tanto sollevato da terra che, pur camminando, dà l'impressione di entrare a cavallo.<sup>439</sup>

In the lines above, the incongruity between the triumphalism of the text and the writer's dismay at what he considers a catastrophic surrender could not be more jarring. Again,

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<sup>438</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 1232, Apple ebook.

<sup>439</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 1001, Apple ebook.

Scurati achieves this effect through presenting the clash between the internal focus – which assumes Mussolini’s point of view – and the heterodiegetic narrator’s focus which offers the final remark. On other occasions, Scurati uses irony to play with serious issues, such as the contribution of the middle class to Mussolini’s political rise:

Bisogna precipitare gli eventi. Tutto qui. Può darsi che il Nuovo anno ti chiami ad arbitrare il match. Di questo passo, la rivoluzione non la faranno i comunisti, la faranno i proprietari di due camere e cucina in condominio di periferia.<sup>440</sup>

The analysis offered in this section reveals Scurati’s contribution to my argument about post-truth poetics. He weaves an analysis of history that presents both a summary of facts and an investigation into historiographical method, particularly pertinent for my discussion on post-truth narrative. Nevertheless, we must say more about Scurati’s choices of theme and method. As emerges from the debate with Galli della Loggia, *M* raises essential questions about literature’s right to interfere with history, but also about how cultural products should use their creative potential to re-imagine reality. On the one hand, a danger exists that leads to indiscrimination and the lack of reference points. On the other hand, this way of doing reinforces the emancipatory potential of questioning established narrations.

From this point of view, I will note that in writing a book on the rise of a totalitarian movement Scurati is referring to current time. On this point, I share Simonetti’s claim that *M* is ‘un libro sul fascismo storico e insieme sul presente’.<sup>441</sup> As the scholar points out, in discussing the rise of Mussolini and the success of his rhetoric of the common man, Scurati also comments on the current emergence of populism and post-truth politics. Offering a not too veiled comparison between history and the present through literature has the double advantage of extrapolating the discourse from the biased and emotionally charged mechanisms of everyday communication; while at the same time not imposing any interpretation from above, leaving readers to come to their own conclusions. In the words of Scurati himself:

[i]o credo nell’intelligenza e nella maturità dei lettori. Voglio che l’attualità di ciò che accade all’epoca sia dedotta dai lettori. Ciò che disse Mussolini in quella frase era paradossalmente vero. Il

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<sup>440</sup> Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo*, p. 513, Apple ebook.

<sup>441</sup> Simonetti, ‘Scurati, un Mussolini pieno di cliché’.

movimento dei Fasci di combattimento in principio era tutte quelle cose, ma era anche un movimento oscurantista, reazionario, violento, brutale, antidemocratico, antipopolare perché diede vita a una dittatura che sottrasse del tutto il potere politico al popolo. Era il risultato di queste due contraddizioni. Nasce sulla spinta di una polemica contro l'élite della vecchia classe dirigente, parole come la “casta” vennero coniate da D'Annunzio nel 1919, parole come “antipolitica” e “antipartito” vennero coniate da Mussolini negli stessi anni. E però quella spinta che sarebbe potuta essere di emancipazione si trasformò in una spinta reazionaria, antidemocratica e antipopolare. I profeti del rinnovamento, dello svecchiamento, dei diritti dei popoli contro le élite, spesso, non sempre ma spesso, diventano poi i peggiori oppressori.<sup>442</sup>

### **Mio padre la rivoluzione by Davide Orecchio**

The profile of Davide Orecchio presents many differences when compared to the other two included in this chapter, especially in terms of his popularity and impact in the contemporary critical debate. However, since his debut almost ten years ago, the writer has established himself as ‘uno dei più arditi scrittori italiani contemporanei’.<sup>443</sup> The relationship with history and the evocation of key episodes of the twentieth century are central to his work. In doing so, he broke the barriers of the historical novel to engage in the production of hybrid texts that ‘sono sempre un passo avanti rispetto a una possibile definizione d’insieme’.<sup>444</sup> A historian by training, Orecchio mixes in his narrative production detail from historiographical sources with literary invention and artifice. According to Andrea Rondini, his texts ‘esprimono una poetica di tipo ipermoderno della quale è stata subito colta e valorizzata la mescolanza di storia e invenzione, a vantaggio – fino a un certo punto – della prima’.<sup>445</sup> This interpretation, clearly inspired by Donnarumma’s theses, identifies the strength of Orecchio’s literary parable in its non-fiction nature. In fact, the scholar emphasises the writer’s departure from ‘artificio ludico di derivazione postmoderna’ in favour of a search ‘ragioni profonde, e vere’ of historical

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<sup>442</sup> Tedesco, ‘Il Premio Strega Scurati’.

<sup>443</sup> Filippo Polenchi, ‘Davide Orecchio – *Mio padre la rivoluzione*’, *L’indice*, 15 March 2018, <https://www.lindiceonline.com/letture/narrativa-italiana/davide-orecchio-mio-padre-la-rivoluzione/> (accessed on 4 October 2020).

<sup>444</sup> Marco Mongelli, ‘Riscrivere la storia per non dimenticarla: su “Mio padre la rivoluzione”’, *La balena bianca*, 8 March 2018, <https://www.labalenabianca.com/2018/03/08/riscrivere-la-storia-non-dimenticarla-mio-padre-la-rivoluzione-davide-orecchio/> (accessed on 4 October 2020).

<sup>445</sup> Andrea Rondini, ‘Delirio di immobilità. Gli *Stati di grazia* di Davide Orecchio’, *Ticontrè*, 10 (2018), 257-75 (p. 257).

events.<sup>446</sup> Although, the use of the incidental reveals Rondini's attempt to tone down the peremptory nature of his statements, it appears to me that he misses some crucial aspects of Orecchio's narrative style. While it is true, as Cortellessa says, that Orecchio's novels do not exhibit 'un mero *divertissement* postmodernista fuori tempo massimo',<sup>447</sup> it is also accurate to say that the use of metafictional, ironic, and intertextual techniques is an integral part of his understanding of the political aspect of literature and narrative. In the course of his career as a writer, he has developed sophisticated storytelling strategies that replace the 'distanziamento prospettico'<sup>448</sup> with an emotional and subjective reading of history and a figurative juxtaposition of past and present times. Signs of this narrative process are particularly evident in the more recent novels and in *Mio padre la rivoluzione*, which I felt was therefore very illustrative, both in the way it fits into the analysis of the post-truth narrative and in the way it complements the other two texts examined in this chapter.

The elements just mentioned were less pronounced in the earlier narrative works although narrative hybridity has been present since his debut book, *Città distutte: sei biografie infedeli*.<sup>449</sup> The novel has been defined as biofiction, for it forges – as the title suggests – six imaginary and fictional biographies, by rooting them on real and historically authentic models.<sup>450</sup> The text already shows some aspects that will also be decisive in the author's future works. In particular, it highlights Orecchio's tendency to question history in order to suggest doubts and political insights rather than answers or certainties. In doing so, the writer openly reflects on the function of the historiographic method today, i.e. the possibilities for contemporary subjects to relate to and fully understand the past. As Patrizia Farinelli points out, Orecchio's book marks the start of 'una riflessione sovra-individuale' that brings to light 'la parzialità di quanto si conosce'.<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>446</sup> Rondini, 'Delirio di immobilità', p. 257.

<sup>447</sup> Andrea Cortellessa, 'Davide Orecchio, ci vuole un secolo', *Le parole e le cose*, 19 January 2018, <https://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=30727> (accessed on 4 October 2020), (italics are in the text).

<sup>448</sup> Patrizia Farinelli, 'Indietro tra le rovine del sogno "rivoluzione". Brani di storia e di storie del '900 riletti da Davide Orecchio', *Horizonte – Nue Serie*, 5 (2020), 158-72 (p. 159).

<sup>449</sup> Davide Orecchio, *Città distutte: sei biografie infedeli* (Rome: Gaffi, 2012).

<sup>450</sup> The characteristics of biofiction have recently been summarised, in the Italian context – taking inspiration from the French and Anglo-American elaborations – by Riccardo Castellana, 'La *biofiction*. Teoria, storia, problemi', *Allegoria*, 71-72 (2015), 67-97.

Taking his cue also from the aforementioned study, Mongelli has drawn up a definition that seems to me particularly suitable for defining Orecchio's work: 'Il termine "biofiction" indica quindi che anche la tradizionale biografia di un personaggio noto scritta da terzi può essere investita dalla fiction e dalle sue leggi. Nei casi in cui questo avviene, la ricostruzione biografica, anche se operata attraverso documenti referenzialmente esatti, non sfugge all'immaginazione di chi la racconta e, in definitiva, la riscrive'; Marco Mongelli, 'Osservare e dire le vite altrui: Breve introduzione alla biofiction', *Le parole e le cose*, 4 July 2016, <https://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=23591> (accessed on 12 March 2020).

<sup>451</sup> Patrizia Farinelli, 'Le bio-bibliografie immaginarie di Bolaño e le biografie infedeli di Orecchio come approcci letterari alla verità della storia', *Ars & Humanitas*, 11 (2017), 127-38 (p. 134).



While *Città distrutte* resembles more a collection of short stories, his second novel, *Stati di Grazia* has the look of a novel.<sup>452</sup> The book is set between Argentina, where the dictatorship of the 1970s was taking place, and southern Italy, from where a wave of migrants was leaving for South America. The various characters in the book create a choral narrative that gives an insight into the events of those years. According to Rondini, the central theme of the text is the need for agency, expressed by the protagonists, and the acknowledgement of the impossibility of its actual realisation.<sup>453</sup> The perception is that the author depicts revolutionary actions set in a different era and on a distant continent, in order to awaken a need for political participation that is, in fact, current.

This last element also constitutes the backbone of *Mio padre la rivoluzione*, that I consider as the most original, in terms of narrative techniques, rhetorical strategies, and hybrid solutions.<sup>454</sup> With this book, Orecchio evokes a key moment in the twentieth century, which determined the political structures of the years to follow: the October Revolution and the raise of the communist regime in Russia. Whereas in the previous novels history was fictionalised but at the same time faithfully revisited, in the third novel it becomes the starting point for a series of digressions that go beyond it. Furthermore, Orecchio's book differs greatly from Scurati's one. Although the two authors share the desire to evoke the revolutionary and destructive spirit of the twentieth century, Orecchio's literary venture produces results that are very different from Scurati's. *M* is a biography of Mussolini told from an unorthodox and, in some ways, implausible angle with the intention of encouraging readers to familiarise themselves with and evaluate the historical circumstances recounted. *Mio padre la rivoluzione* is instead a collection of heterogeneous short-stories all centred on the theme of revolution, often transfigured into myth and allegory.<sup>455</sup> As Polenchi points out, the texts that make up *Mio padre la rivoluzione* are counterfactual narratives 'che attraversano il vuoto [...] dando vita a possibilità, a deviazioni, a ricombinazioni, secondo una logica probabilistica'.<sup>456</sup> In Orecchio's novel history functions as a reservoir of inspiration that the author seizes and freely reworks, producing narrative deviations of various kinds.

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<sup>452</sup> Davide Orecchio, *Stati di Grazia* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2014).

<sup>453</sup> Rondini, 'Delirio di immobilità', p. 268.

<sup>454</sup> Orecchio, *Mio padre la rivoluzione*.

<sup>455</sup> As the author points out at the end of the various chapters, many of the stories that compose *Mio padre la rivoluzione* had already been published in blogs and literary magazines. In 2017, the author decided to edit them and assemble them into a single book.

<sup>456</sup> Polenchi, 'Davide Orecchio – *Mio padre la rivoluzione*'.

The book is made up of twelve chapters, each of which reworks the theme of revolution in its own way, featuring different characters and touching on various literary genres and styles. Mongelli states that the novel generates an alternative universe in which information about history is meticulously collected and then disguised and falsified, using stylistic registers proper of ‘fantastico onirico e della fantascienza politica’, blending them with ‘un registro epico’.<sup>457</sup> In fact, *Mio padre la rivoluzione* brings together the narrative genres of science fiction, fantasy, and cosmological and mythological references. The texts feature real and imaginary characters and range across various genres, from travel diaries to dystopian fiction, from a catalogue of non-fiction quotes to alternative biographies and ‘what if’ accounts.<sup>458</sup>

As already mentioned, the text presents numerous elements that are of considerable interest in the context of post-truth narrative. Firstly, Orecchio’s style and the seamless method of rewriting history and projecting real characters into a dystopian dimension that disorients readers precisely because of the lack of textual elements marking this translation.

E l’anno cinquantasei assicura che a marzo il Vecchio non fosse arrabbiato, al contrario che fosse felice, e diceva (ad alta voce, in realtà per nessuno) che la storia infine gli dava ragione, e progettava di tornare al suo libro sulla vita di Stalin, e architettava un saggio dopo il cataclisma, e per la rivoluzione, perché riprendesse la vita col cammino del proletariato, per fare la summa del terrore, della storia sbagliata, del disastro di Stalin, per offrire rimedi o anche la storia, col dargli ragione, gli consentiva d’essere ascoltato da tutti di Nuovo e, seppure Chruščëv non l’avesse mai citato, sebbene la commissione Pospelov non lo chiamasse in causa, anche nel silenzio e nell’indifferenza di Mosca il Vecchio a marzo si sentiva rinascere.<sup>459</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> Mongelli, ‘Riscrivere la storia per non dimenticarla’.

<sup>458</sup> In the first story – which is also the longer and probably the most significant of all – the key element is given by the ‘what if’ formula and the imagination of alternative history. The protagonist is Trotsky, who miraculously survived Mercader’s attempt to kill him and now observes the events that followed Stalin’s death – as Kruscev appointment to power, the invasion of Hungary and the protests in Budapest – and is writing about them. In the second story, we read about Abraham Plotkin, a Jewish-American unionist who moved to Germany in order to learn about their Welfare State, but ended up witnessing Hitler’s rise to power and the burning of the Reichstag.

In addition to these two longer stories, the book features shorter narratives such as the revised biography of ‘Zimmer Man’ – a pseudonym for Bob Dylan – who is said to have decided to become a singer only after reading a book on Trotsky’s life; or the parallelism between Orecchio’s trip to Mexico in 2006 – when popular protests against Obrador’s alleged electoral fraud were underway – and that of Sergio Pitlor – a Mexican writer – in the Soviet Union; or the dystopian world in which an experiment has generated Iosip Alfred Vissarionovič – a hybrid creature who fuses the two figures of Stalin and Hitler – in the ‘sprawl between Moscow and Berlin’.

<sup>459</sup> Orecchio, *Mio padre la rivoluzione*, p. 144, Kindle ebook.

In the passage above, Orecchio evokes real figures and events, (Kruscev, Stalin's death, the Pospelov commission), but presents them to readers from the perspective of a person who was supposed to be dead according to the real course of events (Trotsky). This technique allows for the disentanglement of textual observations from historiographic evidence. By doing so, rather than portraying real events, the author seems to aim to provoke reader's speculation faculty. Furthermore, through the use of the literary device of 'what if', Orecchio interpolates a subjective and personal interpretation. As in Trotsky's mind, the October Revolution overlaps with the Hungarian rebellion ('Perché parlo di Pietrogrado se devo dire Budapest?'),<sup>460</sup> in the author's perspective of the past parallels the present time.

To emphasise this aspect even more, Orecchio's narrations refuse a fixed focus, but prefer shifting points of view, even within the same chapter and subplot. For instance, in the chapter 'Plotkin', the voice of the main protagonist pairs often with a 'Chorus', which comments on and explores the background to the story:

Plotkin però non sembra convincersi e dall'insonnia cava bruciori, domande gastralgiche che in una foresta rivolge poi a Plettl il sindacalista: se Hitler farà questo come reagirete?, se Hitler farà quest'altro cosa risponderete?, e nel bosco Plettl è calmo e sorride: "abbiamo valutato, tutti gli scenari, ogni possibilità, siamo preparati, in caso di emergenza, la grande macchina del sindacato, saprà reagire, entro un'ora, l'intera organizzazione, in ogni parte della Germania reagirà, ma non si preoccupi, non ci sarà una dittatura, Hindenburg non lo consente".

– Coro –

*L'ingenuità di Plettl svetta sulle conifere, sradica persino l'edera. Tra due settimane il Reichstag brucerà. Tre mesi e mezzo e il sindacato terminerà. Tre mesi e mezzo e arrestano Plettl il candidato.*<sup>461</sup>

On the one hand, the chorus seems to play its typical narrative function: as for Greek tragedies, it recapitulates and anticipates the narrative episodes. On the other hand, it calls on readers to identify with it and emulate its functions, i.e. to foresee the fate to which the main characters might incur. Orecchio employs this narrative device in conjunction with

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<sup>460</sup> Orecchio, *Mio padre la rivoluzione*, p. 55, Kindle ebook.

<sup>461</sup> Orecchio, *Mio padre la rivoluzione*, p. 96, Kindle ebook.

other strategies to engage his readers, such as first person plural narrative voice – for instance in Chapter five, titled ‘Iosip Adolf Vissarionovič’.

Siamo stanchi, consumati dalla storia di noi, non riusciamo più a leggere l’elenco interminabile dei nomi espectorato con un rictus, in una flemma da Iosip Adolf Vissarionovič in persona quando disse a questi la morte; né ci aiuta l’elenco, i suoi caratteri sono minuscoli, l’elenco è un virtuoso del non farsi leggere, eppure fu obbedito alla lettera, eppure dobbiamo sforzarci di ricordare, eppure preferiremmo scordare, noi siamo nella fucina eugenetica della sterilizzazione, siamo nel lager, siamo le SS di Heydrich, difendiamo la purezza del sangue, siamo i medici che vigilano sulla purezza del sangue [...].<sup>462</sup>

In my opinion, in the above extract ‘noi’ refers specifically to a group of SS, but also points allegorically to the whole of humanity that allowed the Holocaust to take shape and still tends to remove such a dramatic occurrence from its memory.

The way in which Orecchio chooses and rearranges historical themes highlights how, already at the level of the plot, the author conceives historical truth as an open-ended project, the meaning of which also depends on the observer’s perspective. Therefore, the writer signals the constructedness of the narrated topics and their emplotment. By doing so, Orecchio’s writing oscillates between ‘saggismo e letterarietà’, inviting readers to reflect ‘sugli usi della memoria storica’ and the role it plays today.<sup>463</sup> Therein lies the writer’s ability to produce ‘pagine di eccellente metarrativa’,<sup>464</sup> creating a meta-discourse of history, which also inquires into the ways that present narratives can comprehend and convey past events.

Another remarkable aspect of the novel from the perspective of my research, along with the deployment of writerly and metanarrative devices, lies in the intertextual dialogue that the author produces with other texts and historical sources. In fact, Orecchio constructs some of the stories featured in the book by deconstructing and recomposing other narratives, i.e. by quoting or reframing textual references – sometimes real, sometimes fabricated from scratch.<sup>465</sup> Farinelli describes this process as ‘una scrittura mediata, di seconda mano [che]

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<sup>462</sup> Orecchio, *Mio padre la rivoluzione*, p. 1382, Kindle ebook.

<sup>463</sup> Mongelli, ‘Riscrivere la storia per non dimenticarla’

<sup>464</sup> Farinelli, ‘Le bio-bibliografie immaginarie’, p. 135.

<sup>465</sup> They range from the fourth chapter – the one on Iosif Adolf Vissarionovič – in which the narrator quotes passages from the *Breve corso* first edition; to the revisitation of the *Odyssey* in a modern key – in particular the return to Ithaca and the fight against the suitors; from the story of a Kim, an imaginary character – a symbol of partisan commitment – to whom Calvino dedicated *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*; to the rewriting of Gianni Rodari’s diaries written during his trip to Russia, on the occasion of the centenary of Lenin’s birth.

riprende fra l'altro diari, lettere, biografie, saggi, manuali di storia e si chiede che cosa i loro autori abbiano visto o voluto vedere in ciò che quell'anno epocale lasciò dietro di sé'.<sup>466</sup> This use of secondary sources and materials in *Mio padre la rivoluzione* is not concealed in any way but rather openly manifested. In some cases the author does this through direct interventions in the text: 'Le frasi tra virgolette «...» contengono citazioni a volte da me rielaborate dei quattro articoli scritti da Rodari'.<sup>467</sup> On other occasions, Orecchio uses bibliographical notes, placed at the end of the various chapters and the paratext to indicate their role in the book. Yet the abundance of detail, instead of providing an unambiguous interpretive key, offers readers a range of possible readings. They are free to decide whether to connect the narrated facts to the extra-diegetic world or to interpret them within the confines of the text, on a purely symbolic and subjective level: 'se il lettore vuole credere alla storia, sappia che vi fu una sola edizione del Breve Corso. Ma se vuole credere a questo racconto, il lettore sappia che vi furono tre edizioni del breve corso, e altre ne seguiranno'.<sup>468</sup>

On some circumstances, the similitude between Orecchio's intertextual technique and postmodernist practices – such as that of pastiche –, is quite remarkable. In the fifth chapter titled 'Cast', the writer generates a long series of quotations from various (mostly non-fictional) manuscripts, which focus on the socialist revolution. These pages, consisting solely of shreds of texts assembled together, further disprove the interpretations of those who – like Farinelli for example – had seen Orecchio's hybrid writing as a technique divorced from postmodernist inflections. On the contrary, the author adopts forms of postmodern experimentalism to argue that any historical reconstruction is first and foremost a matter of language and a re-editing of documents and discourses originating elsewhere.

This commitment to techniques close to postmodern poetics is also evident in the book's openly self-reflexive passages. In one of them Orecchio depicts 'il Vecchio' Trotsky – who survived to his murderer – while collecting information about Soviet Union and planning with the purpose of writing some articles on the revolution aftermaths. Here, I envisage a statement of intent by the author, as I believe the figure of Trotsky symbolises an alter ego of the author. Both the character and the author are engaged in the same mission of recalling and evaluating through writing an event which is very important to them and which ended up with outcomes far from their expectations. In one passage of the chapter, the old man dreams of a woman who tells him:

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<sup>466</sup> Farinelli, 'Indietro tra le rovine del sogno "rivoluzione"', p. 160.

<sup>467</sup> Orecchio, *Mio padre la rivoluzione*, p. 1174, Kindle ebook.

<sup>468</sup> Orecchio, *Mio padre la rivoluzione*, p. 1194, Kindle ebook.

[...] non essere stupido. È Vecchio soltanto chi non ha prospettive per il futuro e non lotta per i suoi scopi, questo non sei tu, Lev Davidovic, riprendi il dominio su te stesso, torna al lavoro, se lo farai, avrai già cominciato a curarti; e il Vecchio le risponde Hai ragione, è così che farò, sono un rivoluzionario, domani scriverò della rivoluzione, prometto, la mia fede nell'avvenire è ancora accesa [...].<sup>469</sup>

The woman's words make it clear that for both Trotsky and Orecchio the idea that no change for the better is possible or that the revolutionary spirit is destined to disappear from our history books is unacceptable and problematic. Later, this concept is taken even further, to the point of suggesting – even with a hint of irony – that writing is already a valuable way of expressing political resistance: ‘la scrivania dove il Vecchio ora siede con un sospiro ha ancora la penna spezzata di ieri, un sangue d’inchostro’.<sup>470</sup> Here, the image of the broken pen and the bleeding ink serve as obvious metaphors indicating that words as the main weapon in fighting for our ideals.

The previous example highlights the role that the emotional dimension plays in the book. The real protagonist is the revolutionary spirit, which the author is unable to detect in the contemporary world. The emotional value it has for Orecchio is declared by the title itself. As Cortellessa rightly revealed, the mother of all revolutions is here declined in the masculine form in order to generate contact with the father Alfredo Orecchio.<sup>471</sup> It was from him that the writer drew his interest in the socialist revolution and antifascism, as well as his attraction to the history of the twentieth century.<sup>472</sup> This aspect provides a key through which to read the book, but also Orecchio’s work as a whole: the collective macro-history and the events of the past are linked to individual micro-histories, composed of subjective sentiments and interests, but no less significant for that.

To further stress the importance of this aspect, the book closes with a similar note. In the final chapter, in which he describes his Mexican journey, the writer finds himself supporting the protests against the newly elected president Obrador, accused of electoral fraud. In the

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<sup>469</sup> Orecchio, *Mio padre la rivoluzione*, p. 71, Kindle ebook.

<sup>470</sup> Orecchio, *Mio padre la rivoluzione*, p. 442, Kindle ebook.

<sup>471</sup> Andrea Cortellessa, ‘Il rosso e il nero, la cenere e l’oro. Davide Orecchio, corpo a corpo con il Novecento’, *Le parole e le cose*, 25 October 2021, <https://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=42650> (accessed on 8 November 2021).

<sup>472</sup> Orecchio recently wrote on this aspect of his life in a book in which his relationship with his father plays a key role: Davide Orecchio, *Storia aperta* (Milan: Bompiani, 2021).

political passion of the crowd, Orecchio envisages the signs for a political change that is still possible in the current era. The political sense of Orecchio's work and the heart of his literary commitment is thus condensed in those pages. The author hopes that the book will generate in readers an emotional attachment to the subject it evokes, and in so doing evoke a desire for revolution and redemption. Hence the writer entrusts literature with the task of passing the baton of historical message between generations. In this sense, Polenchi states, Orecchio's literature represents 'la difficoltà dolorosa di dar conto della "relazione emotiva" con un passato che non abbiamo vissuto ma che ci può commuovere nonostante la retorica, e che faticiamo a raccontare perché "prigionieri dello sprawl del tempo presente"'.<sup>473</sup> In agreement with these observations, the novel ends with a message in a bottle left for readers who know how to grasp it between the lines:

Nell'ultima pagina del *Viaggio di Sergio Pitol* lessi che Sergio Pitol è appena bambino quando muore la madre, quando la nonna gli regala un libro perché s'impadronisca nella lettura, e nella prima pagina trova una mappa di volti, la pagina ha per titolo *Razze dell'uomo*, mostra disegni di fanciulli che vengono da tutti i posti e le etnie del pianeta, uno di loro è con le labbra grosse, gli zigomi sporgenti, un berretto di pelle lo copre fino alle orecchie, ha un aspetto animalesco e in calce al disegno Sergio Pitol legge Ivan, bambino russo, e tra tutti i bambini raffigurati sceglie di identificarsi con Ivan, così ricordai che io da bambino mi identificavo con i vietnamiti, indossavo un cappello a cono di paglia, mi armavo di canne di bambù antiamericane, in un'isola della Sicilia sotto il sole di luglio combattevo al fianco dei vietnamiti, e queste certo sono rammemorazioni che passano, appartengono al cono acquatico, moriranno con me molto presto, senza lasciare una traccia, e non serviranno a nessuno, neppure a me quando scenderò sul fondo delle montagne acquatiche e calpesterò la pergamena del tempo fino a incontrare mio padre la rivoluzione [...] ma spero che un giorno questa lettera torni al futuro (chissà, in una capsula del tempo adeguata, se mai qualcuno la inventerà).<sup>474</sup>

The critical path proposed in this chapter of my work has examined the work of three very significant authors in the contemporary Italian literary climate, starting from some basic premises. The first is that, to quote Balicco, 'la cultura contemporanea occidentale immagina il futuro con molta difficoltà' and therefore tends to imagine it as a catastrophe.<sup>475</sup> From this

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<sup>473</sup> Polenchi, 'Davide Orecchio – *Mio padre la rivoluzione*'.

<sup>474</sup> Orecchio, *Mio padre la rivoluzione*, p. 536-37, Kindle ebook.

<sup>475</sup> Daniele Balicco, 'La fine del mondo. Capitalismo e mutazione', *Between*, 10 (2015), p. 1.

inability to engage with the time to come stems a consequent need to come to terms with the past as well. This attitude also reflects on literary habits. As Farinelli points out, in the last two decades ‘la narrativa si è votata in gran parte alla storia’.<sup>476</sup> Furthermore, according to the scholar in recent years authors have loaded narratives on historical events with ‘una finalità informativa’, which was in opposition to the postmodern tendency to focus on deconstructing the mechanisms through which culture interprets the past.

The second point raised in this chapter, in line with my definition of the poetics of post-truth. From a literary theory perspective, the analysis of Wu Ming, Scurati, and Orecchio showcases that in their work – even if the three are engaged in different forms of writing – the informative intent coexists with metahistorical and metanarrative features. More specifically, in the texts analysed in the sections above, I have highlighted both the attempt to recover the meaning of past events, but also the attention given to interrogating the languages and methods through which history can be still interpreted today. In this sense, the three texts – scrutinised under the lens of the post-truth narrative – reveal the combined effort of investigating documentary sources while questioning any possible truth deriving from them.

Finally, by integrating a perspective of sociology of literature, the above analysis placed the writing about history in relation to the complex cultural setting in which we live today. Chimenti effectively defined the central problems concerning this condition, for he highlighted the paradox of the present time, in which the impossibility to forget alters the value of memory itself. In the words of the scholar: ‘Internet e i sistemi di archiviazione hanno reso le informazioni a portata di mano, ma ci hanno anche posto nella condizione di dover gestire, organizzare, e interpretare un archivio il cui valore sembra risiedere sempre meno nella relazione che vincola l’informazione a un significato e sempre più nelle possibilità di immagazzinamento’.<sup>477</sup> In this context, fictional works by Wu Ming, Scurati, and Orecchio acquire a political value not only for their capacity to retrieve the truthfulness of facts, but also for their ability to reveal the intimate, subjective and emotional relationship we need to establish with them.

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<sup>476</sup> Farinelli, ‘Indietro tra le rovine del sogno “rivoluzione”’, p. 158.

<sup>477</sup> Chimenti, ‘La vita postuma delle parole’, p. 321



## ~ CHAPTER FOUR ~

### **On post Truth Narrative and Italian First-Person Novels on Political Issues of the Present**

In the introductory article to the issue 5 of *Between* I quoted in the introduction, titled ‘Avverare la realtà. Letteratura e orizzonte politico’, the editors summarise some of the central questions to my research. In short, they ask how ‘un ritorno alla realtà’ is possible in a social and cultural environment that produces ‘una sistematica commistione tra vero e falso’ and ‘dove è la tecnologia che [...] fa avverare la realtà’.<sup>478</sup> This remark seems pointing to the post-truth conditions described throughout my work, in which representing the world through literature presents a different enterprise compared to the past. In the same issue of the journal, Daniele Balicco addresses these matters from a more strictly political perspective and reflects on the fact that, in the ‘presente microelettronico’ characterised by a profound state of crisis, our ability to imagine the future has been compromised.<sup>479</sup> His point of view sounds similar to Homi Bhabha’s position when he describes the current era as ‘the beyond, i.e. as a years dominated by ‘a sense of disorientation’ and ‘a disturbance of direction’.<sup>480</sup>

In the second chapter of this work, I paid close attention to the crucial passages of the debate that took place in Italy on these themes. By doing so, I proposed a paradigmatic shift with regard to the idea of critical and literary commitment, and I identified some of the ways in which forms of cultural agency can be effectively carried out today, in light of the post-truth implications. Instead, this chapter – like the previous one – aims to engage with textual analysis, showcasing the narrative devices and techniques through which contemporary writers have attempted to politically impact on the social world in which they live. If chapter three considered the forms of writing that interrogate the present by pointing to the past, this one turns to texts that place the events of the present at their core. Here, I will narrow my focus to a specific category of novels: first-person narratives. Before turning to the texts, I

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<sup>478</sup> Albertazzi and others, “‘Avverare la realtà’” Letteratura e orizzonte politico’, p. 6.

<sup>479</sup> Balicco, ‘La fine del mondo. Capitalismo e mutazione’, p. 3.

<sup>480</sup> Bhabha, *The location of culture*, p. 2.

first discuss the reasons why these texts are worthy of particular attention within the framework of the post-truth narrative. In doing so, I will touch on some more general observations about committed fiction in the current cultural and political conjuncture.

One of the main problems confronting contemporary fiction focused on contemporary political topics is undoubtedly the impossibility for today's subjects to experience reality in an unmediated way. This theme has often re-surfaced within the Italian critical debate of the last decade. Luca Somigli summarised convincingly some of the predominant assumption related to it. Starting from Antonio Scurati's seminal text *La letteratura dell'inesperienza*, Somigli highlights the supposed fracture between 'padri postbellici' and 'figli postmoderni': whereas the former lived in a culture governed by a 'principio della verticalità, della profondità, della trasmutazione dell'esperienza in testimonianza che a sua volta diventava autorità'; the latter live in 'un presente che è invece all'insegna dell'orizzontalità, dello scorrere da un immagine all'altra, da un evento al successivo, senza alcuna elaborazione critica'.<sup>481</sup> Therefore, contemporary writers face the task of representing 'l'assenza di un mondo',<sup>482</sup> or rather its transformation into a series of superficial images forged by television. In other words, they must come to terms with the fact that the way we experience reality today is always indirect. In his article, Somigli also focuses on *Senza Trauma*, in which Daniele Giglioli notes how the television format neutralises and turns traumatic events into objects of entertainment. As a consequence of this, media fiction has become extremely relevant 'nella strutturazione dell'esperienza'.<sup>483</sup> In short, narrative fictions replace real traumas with simulated ones, which strengthen the effect of de-realisation.

Although both Scurati and Giglioli base their positions on sound premises, it should be noted that their conclusions appear biased. Firstly, it seems far-fetched to assume that the perception of tragic events in a mediated form inevitably generates disengagement and emotional indifference.<sup>484</sup> As Somigli emphasises, certain pathos-filled images generate a

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<sup>481</sup> Luca Somigli, 'Negli archivi e per le strade: considerazioni meta-critiche sul "ritorno alla realtà" nella narrativa contemporanea', in *Negli archivi e per le strade. Il ritorno alla realtà nella narrativa di inizio millennio*, ed. by Luca Somigli (Rome: Gaffi, 2013), pp. i-xxii (pp. ix-xii).

<sup>482</sup> Scurati, *La letteratura dell'inesperienza*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>483</sup> Somigli, 'Negli archivi e per le strade', p. xi.

<sup>484</sup> The example illustrated by Scurati and repeatedly quoted in subsequent critical texts refers to the passive state in which the events of the First Gulf War were received by the television audience, capable of watching 'una serata di morte comodamente adagiati sul divano del salotto, sorseggiando birra fresca'; Scurati, *La letteratura dell'inesperienza*, p. 62.

Re-reading these lines today suggests a parallel with the images coming from the Mediterranean Sea, in which hundreds of thousands of migrants have lost their lives in the attempt to reach Europe. But even in this case to conclude too firmly that media exposure has stripped the events of all their emotional weight would be inappropriate. In many cases, it was precisely the television coverage that revealed to European citizens

strong ethical involvement and empathic responses.<sup>485</sup> With an argument that is in line with the theses of my work, the scholar places the burden of producing an ethical message on the recipients, rather than on the event or the medium that broadcasts it: ‘sta a noi fruitori del prodotto che essa ci pone imparare a distinguere tra reality e realtà, tra immagini di Guerra di un film e immagini di guerra dall’altro capo del mondo’.<sup>486</sup> In this sense, I agree with Alberto Casadei when he states that the loss of experience is ‘un mito (post)moderno: sono state perdute, certo, alcune specie di esperienza diretta, e ne sono state introdotte molte di conoscenza indiretta, ma ciò rientra ancora in una forma di percezione complessiva della realtà [...]’.<sup>487</sup>

This passage introduces the second element – which Somigli also argues –<sup>488</sup> that a part of Italian criticism focuses too much on the anthropological mutation caused by television. This looks now as an outdated and limiting approach. In some ways, this tendency distracted Italian intellectuals to focus on the effects of a second revolution that has now entered its advanced stage: that of the web and digital technologies. It is no coincidence that some of the scholars mentioned in the previous chapters have insisted on the fact that recent innovations call for a renewal of critical perspective – Benedetti and Antonello are undoubtedly among theM. and others highlight the impact of these new developments from the outset. If Casadei makes the importance of this issue clear from the subtitle of the essay just cited – ‘critica e scritture nell’era del web’ –, Kate Willman in a chapter of her book dedicated to the relationship between literature and experience addresses the topic of how to represent reality ‘in the digital age’.<sup>489</sup> Similarly, I put the impact of digital technologies

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the human drama that was taking place hundreds of kilometres away and about which they might otherwise never have known anything.

To give an example – which does not directly concern African migration routes but is nonetheless emblematic of mediatic depictions of recent migrations – Turkish journalist Nilüfer Demir’s photograph of Aylan Kurdi’s dead body found on the beach in Bodrum in 2015, shocked public opinion to the point of prompting the European Union to intervene, allocating large sums of money to alleviate the suffering caused by those desperate exoduses.

<sup>485</sup> The example used by Somigli to support this thesis – in some ways similar to the one just presented in my previous note – concerns Richard Drew’s famous photo, *The Falling Man*. It depicts the body of a man in free fall, after having thrown himself from one of the two towers of the World Trade Center. With a very well formulated argument, the scholar doubts that this image can be universally perceived in a de-realised manner, i.e. by dissociating the visual beauty of the picture from the sense of death and despair it conveys; Somigli, ‘Negli archivi e per le strade’, p. xii.

<sup>486</sup> Somigli, ‘Negli archivi e per le strade’, p. xiii.

<sup>487</sup> Alberto Casadei, *Letteratura e controvalori. Critica e scritture nell’era del web* (Rome: Donzelli, 2014), p. 64.

<sup>488</sup> In the same pages in which he describes the importance of Richard Drew’s photo, Somigli questions the idea that television is a medium in which we are all immersed, stating that ‘questa pare una visione già un po’ antiquata nell’era di internet che pone altri e diversi problemi’; Somigli, ‘Negli archivi e per le strade’, p. xii.

<sup>489</sup> Willman, *Unidentified Narrative Objects*, p. 114.

at the forefront in my research. Furthermore, to refer to the question of the relationship between experience and reality, I turn again to Kalpokas and Wadhera, who defined the one we live in as ‘the age of experience’. As the broader analysis offered in chapter one also makes clear, this is one of the central paradoxes of the post-truth condition. On the one hand, we experience the world indirectly, through the mediation and narration provided by TV and especially the web. On the other hand, the amount of inputs, information, and stimuli we are exposed to has been amplified and, in fact, throughout our everyday lives we access and come into contact with greater number of facts, events, and real circumstances.

These considerations already serve to motivate this chapter’s focus on first-person narrative. The advantage of this decision is twofold. Firstly, this type of texts has been at the centre of the Italian critical debate on political commitment, and so it has generated spin-off reflections on the relationship between experience and narration, new realism, the UNOs, the non-fiction novel and, more generally, the return to ‘*storie utili*’ and ‘*storie vere*’. Making it the subject of a close reading and an emblematic case of post-truth fiction means once again engaging with that debate, while at the same time withdrawing from it and proposing new decisive solutions.<sup>490</sup> Secondly, through analysing some key texts belonging to this category, it is possible to develop enhanced arguments on the way contemporary novelist engage with current political issues and produce meaningful political messages.

Conceiving the last two chapters in connection with one another, I will emphasise a difference between the typology of the texts of the first and the second, in the way they establish a relationship with reality. The texts focusing on historical events need to exhibit – this is particularly evident in Wu Ming and Scurati – the presence of archival evidence to suggest a relationship between narrated and real circumstances. On the contrary, texts by Walter Siti, Giorgio Falco, and Giuseppe Genna, which I have included in this chapter, access reality by referring to direct experience. In other words, the former group of authors exhibit the reference to real documents, to integrate them into the story and bend them to their own purposes. The latter group creates narrative situations that are themselves presented as documents. For instance, Siti employs the expedient of the first-hand witnessing

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<sup>490</sup> I have already discussed the attention given by Italian critics to autobiographical and autofictional texts in chapter two, in particular with reference to the theories of Wu Ming and Donnarumma. I would like to point out that some interesting insights on the topic have also been given by Daniele Giglioli and Alberto Casadei, respectively in Giglioli, *Senza Trauma* and Alberto Casadei, *Stile e tradizione nel romanzo italiano contemporaneo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007).

Furthermore, Lorenzo Marchese offered a convincing reflection on these issues in two essays: Lorenzo Marchese, *L'io possibile. L'autofiction come paradosso del romanzo contemporaneo* (Massa: Transeuropa, 2014) and Marchese, *Storiografie parallele*.

of verisimilar but nonetheless fictional occurrences; Falco instead gives an account of his life vicissitudes in a sort of memoir and autobiography; and Genna gives a real-time account of events in which he is participating. Furthermore, the three authors aim to reflect on current and urgent themes such as political corruption, the unfair nature of hyperliberalism, job insecurity, and the consequences of catastrophic events, such as the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Simultaneously, however, their texts openly repudiate the terms of realism. This aspect, as I shall demonstrate, is particularly prominent in Genna's text.

In particular, the three novels offer an insight on innovative ways to manufacture truth through the instrument of narration, while – more or less explicitly – declaring such intention to readers. This interpretation aligns with the positions expressed by Raffaele Palumbo Mosca in *L'invenzione del vero*. The scholar argues that narrative offers an ideal means of understanding reality because of its ability to evade verification of truth. This claim implies considering fiction capable of transforming experience into knowledge, since it 'aiuta la realtà ad apparire reale, e la verità ad essere verosimile'.<sup>491</sup> While elaborating on his theses, Palumbo Mosca affirms that some forms of contemporary narration stage the relationship existing between 'una (impossibile) rappresentazione oggettiva del reale e una differente, che parte dal reale per manipolarlo in vista di un'interpretazione'.<sup>492</sup> I believe this definition well applies to the novels by Siti, Falco, and Genna examined here.

At this point, it is worth making a further point: the use of first-person narrator is particularly effective in the post-truth age. According to Marjorie Worthington these forms of narration – but mostly autofiction – moving in the liminal space between pure fiction and non-fictional genres of memoir and autobiography, generates an ironic counterpoint that 'keeps readers guessing'.<sup>493</sup> In the scholar's opinion autofiction constitutes one of the fundamental traits of the contemporary novel, in 'an age in which objective truth seems not accessible'.<sup>494</sup> Moreover, drawing on studies by Yagoda and Kluger, Worthington claims that first-person narrative is able to strike an emotional chord with its readers in a way that other narrative forms are unable to emulate. Moreover, it manages to 'portray truths that non-fiction cannot'.<sup>495</sup> Indeed, by simply staging an experience in a subjective and personal form, autofictional narratives and first-person narratives are able to generate a 'higher level

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<sup>491</sup> Raffaele Palumbo Mosca, *L'invenzione del vero* (Rome: Gaffi, 2014), p. 48.

<sup>492</sup> Palumbo Mosca, *L'invenzione del vero*, p. 66 (italics in the text).

<sup>493</sup> Marjorie Worthington, 'Fiction in the "Post-Truth Era": The Ironic Effects of Autofiction', *Critique*, 55 (2017), 471-83.

<sup>494</sup> Worthington, 'Fiction in the "Post-Truth Era"', (p. 474).

<sup>495</sup> Worthington, 'Fiction in the "Post-Truth Era"', (p. 481).

of interest' and to entice readers to connect with 'a particular version of the truth', rather than truth 'with a capital T'. In any case, Worthington's text also underlines that this connection is only possible based on the condition that writer and reader agree on some crucial points: language is never limited to conveying a message but rather constitutes that message; and the importance of constantly question the writer's privileged epistemological position, as well as the relationship between author and character.<sup>496</sup>

In addition to Worthington's theses, the importance of first-person and especially autofiction novels in stimulating reader's attention is supported by recent research in the field of neuro-cognitive studies. For instance, according to Vera Nünning, the most effective techniques for stimulating readers include: the use of special focalisers so to recount events from the character's point of view, psycho narration, free indirect speech, and – above all – the use of first-person narrator. The aforementioned narrative strategies foster empathic sharing and perspective-taking. In doing so, they also generate meaningful assessments of the narrated world, minimising the impact of stereotypes and prejudices. According to Nünning, for this to happen certain narrative conventions, such as explicit commentary by the narrator or the sharing of certain key information in implicit form, are indispensable.<sup>497</sup> Post-truth authors not only deploy the narrative devices just mentioned, but also make them essential for new forms of political commitment in literature – as I will show in the following paragraphs.

Up to this point, this introductory section has served to support the decision to pay particular attention to first-person narratives. Before moving on to close reading the texts, however, it is necessary to say a few more words about why I chose the texts by Siti, Falco, and Genna. Firstly, the decision was determined by the fact that such text addressed political themes that are central both within the Italian discourse on literary engagement and within the larger framework of the political implications of post-truth. *Resistere non serve a niente* by Walter Siti and *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* by Giorgio Falco are concerned with the economic crisis, precarious work, and the decline of the capitalist and hyper-liberal model. The importance of these issues in generating the state of frustration and resentment that has exacerbated the conditions of post-truth has already been discussed in chapter one. Furthermore, in the Italian context, both writers and critics have paid close attention to these

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<sup>496</sup> Worthington, 'Fiction in the "Post-Truth Era"', (pp. 476-78).

<sup>497</sup> Nünning, *Reading Fictions, Changing Minds*, pp. 199-218.

topics in recent years.<sup>498</sup> On the contrary, while Giuseppe Genna's *Reality. Cosa è successo* also presents a subtly veiled critique of the current economic model, the work more closely reflects on the issues discussed at the beginning of this chapter: how to experience reality in a world that metabolises traumatic events into a mediatic and entertaining spectacle. In the novel, Genna seems to suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic that broke out in 2020 could be an epochal event similar to the World Wars of the twentieth century: the very high stakes made us contemplate the significance of a truthful and accurate representation of facts. Indeed, right from the title, Genna plays with such claims as he ironically puts them into question.

Secondly, I have selected these three texts because – although they differ vastly from one another – they share some remarkable features. One particularly significant trait they have in common lies in the fact that the three authors, in their works, demonstrate signs of a possible surrender in the face of what appears to be an almost irreversible epochal crisis. The three characters-narrators emanate a negative and apocalyptic note throughout the novels, concerning not only their individual destiny but also the collective one. In this sense, all three authors use various ironic tricks, to reverse their posture towards contemporary crises from apocalyptic to integrated. In this way, although written at different times, the three texts seem to be in conversation with each other, as if they were different comments in a communal discourse.

### **Resistere non serve a niente by Walter Siti**

Walter Siti is one of the authors most committed to the genre of autofiction within the Italian literary framework.<sup>499</sup> As Gilda Policastro argues, Siti reinvents autofiction's

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<sup>498</sup> The themes of economic crisis and precarious labour have recently inspired several novels in Italy. To give a few examples: Murgia, *Il mondo deve sapere*; Aldo Nove, *Mi chiamo Roberta, ho quarantanni, guadagno 250 euro al mese...* (Turin: Einaudi, 2006); Alberto Prunetti, *108 metri. New working class hero* (Bari: Laterza, 2018); Trevisan, *Works*.

Also, in Italy scholars have paid attention to these topics. I will add to the list of titles already mentioned in my studies: Silvia Contarini (ed.), 'Letteratura e azienda. Rappresentazioni letterarie dell'economia e del lavoro nell'Italia degli anni 2000', *Narrativa*, 31/32 (2010); Paolo Chiurumbolo, *Letteratura e lavoro. Conversazioni critiche* (Savenia Mannelli: Rubettino, 2013); Silvia Contarini, Monica Jansen, and Stefania Ricciardi (eds.), *Le culture del precariato. Pensiero, azione e narrazione* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2015); Natalia Dupré, Monica Jansen, Srećko Jurisic, and Inge Lanslots (eds.), *Narrazioni della crisi, Proposte italiane per il nuovo millennio* (Florence: Franco Cesati Editore, 2016).

<sup>499</sup> This is particularly evident in the first three novels, *Scuola di nudo*, *Un dolore normale*, *Troppi paradisi*, written between 1994 and 2006 and now collected in the overall volume: Walter Siti, *Il dio impossibile* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2014).

narrative technique, contributing to make it a widespread and common practice among Italian writers.<sup>500</sup> In the first phase of his career, Siti employed this narrative form to portray the symptoms of a new anthropological mutation taking place both in Italy – during the of Berlusconi’s years – and, more generally, in Western society.<sup>501</sup> According to Donnarumma, Siti overcomes the crisis of the subject typical of postmodernism and gives voice to an ‘io’ that embodies and reflects the transfiguration undergone by present-day men. All his novels present a protagonist, who depicts a contemporary everyman, displaying the narcissism, the desire for the most ephemeral commodities, and the cult of the image that exemplify the human subject of the third millennium.<sup>502</sup> This homogenization of the individual narrator with the surrounding society is particularly evident in the last novel of the trilogy, *Troppi paradisi*, and in its famous incipit: ‘Mi chiamo Walter Siti, come tutti. Campione di mediocrità. Le mie reazioni sono standard, la mia diversità è di massa. Più intelligente della media, ma di un’intelligenza che serve per evadere’.<sup>503</sup>

This quotation shows the sharp irony that runs throughout the writer’s texts. The half-autobiographical, half-fictitious character, instead of being an advocate of change and a promoter of social redemption, proposes himself as a champion on the downside. In a way he shares the same flaws that we all have in common. Herein is another of the noteworthy characteristics of his work, with respect to my research: between the lines of the novels’ lines, Siti subtly includes a reflection on the way literature is to act in relation to the world, on the possibilities of literary engagement, and on literary realism.<sup>504</sup> Among all, Siti’s

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<sup>500</sup> Gilda Policastro, ‘Letteratura e impegno. A partire da “Contro l’impegno di Walter Siti’, *Le parole e le cose*, 14 May 2021, <https://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=41590> (accessed on 19 November 2021).

The spread of the autofiction genre in Italy in the late 1990s and early 2000s has been described in detail in: Valentina Martemucci, ‘L’autofiction nella narrativa italiana degli ultimi anni. Una rassegna critica e un incontro con gli autori’, *Contemporanea*, 6 (2008), 159-88.

<sup>501</sup> Two recent essays have focused on Siti’s work, with particular attention to its political value.

In her work, Silvia Cucchi describes the oppositional tension that is typical of Siti’s narrative, whose protagonists struggle between the search for the absolute and the eternal frustration provoked by such an endeavour; Silvia Cucchi, *Teologia della frustrazione. L’opera letteraria di Walter Siti* (Florence: Franco Cesati Editore, 2021).

Valentina Sturli examines the way Walter Siti interprets the cultural and political transformation occurring in recent years. By comparing Siti’s works with the novels by Michel Houellebecq, the scholar identifies in their writing an attempt to investigate and represent the outcomes of the current neoliberal system; Valentina Sturli, *Estremi occidentali. Frontiere del contemporaneo in Walter Siti e Michel Houellebecq* (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2020).

<sup>502</sup> Raffaele Donnarumma, ‘Constructing the hypermodern subject: *Troppi paradisi* by Walter Siti’, *The Italianist*, 35 (2015), 440-52 (pp. 442-43).

<sup>503</sup> Siti, *Il dio impossibile*, p. 689.

<sup>504</sup> In the years following the publication of the book, Siti expanded on these topics in the non-fiction book *Il realismo è l’impossibile*.

And on the theme of commitment in literature Siti recently returned in *Contro l’impegno. Riflessioni sul bene in letteratura* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2021).



works, *Resistere non serve a niente* presents these elements most explicitly. In a way, the text shows signs of a turning point in the writer's career. Although the novel has many traits in common with the previous books, it also shows signs of an evolution in the writer's literary trajectory: the narrator's voice takes on a more de-centralised and almost accessory position, the technique of autofiction becomes more sophisticated and articulate, the paratext takes on a more central function, and the relationship between narrated and true facts becomes much more prominent.

Additionally, if the theme of commodification of life has been at the forefront of his literary production from the very beginning, with *Resistere non serve a niente*, the author takes a step forward.<sup>505</sup> Siti takes the advanced phase of financial capitalism and the crisis that followed as symbols of a new anthropological mutation. By establishing a dialogue between the writer's text and the theories of Byung-Chul Han, Matteo Moca describes it as the transition from *homo electronicus* to *homo digitalis*. For this new type of humanity forced to self-segregate in front of the screen of technological devices, 'l'economia di mercato' becomes a 'collante nella costruzione dei rapporti sociali'.<sup>506</sup> For this reason, even though it was written in 2012, *Resistere non serve a niente* begins to encompass and to explore some of the narrative and socio-cultural dynamics that would be further shaped by Siti in the following years.<sup>507</sup>

The author structures the novel as a frame narrative, in which several stories intertwine with each other. At a first glance, the first-person narrator addresses readers and offers them some information about the narration's context. In line with the conventions of autofiction – in a manner closely reminiscent of Bret Easton Ellis in *Lunar Park* –<sup>508</sup> Siti's narrator offers credible details about the genesis of the book. Furthermore, in order to emphasise the novel's autobiographical accuracy, the narrative voice refers to certain real facts and figures.

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<sup>505</sup> In a recent article, Cristine Baron states that money is the key element of the book. According to the scholar, Siti's characters in the novel interpret human relationships mainly in terms of their economic and financial value; Cristine Baron, 'Valore del racconto e racconto del valore. *Resistere non serve a niente* di Walter Siti', in 'Letteratura e economia nell'Italia degli anni Duemila', 51-64.

<sup>506</sup> Matteo Moca, 'Narcisismi. L'opera di Walter Siti e i paradigmi di Byung-Chul Han', *Between*, 8 (2016), p. 16.

<sup>507</sup> In this regard, I shall add that, as the aforementioned article by Moca does not fail to point out, these themes stand at the centre of Siti's reflection of the following years. For instance, the author has expanded on them in: Walter Siti, *Pagare non pagare* (Milan: Nottetempo, 2018).

<sup>508</sup> In a similar way in Bret Easton Ellis' *Lunar Park* the narrator's voice – belonging to the author himself – offers readers a credible account of the personal and editorial events that preceded the writing of the book; Bret Easton Ellis, *Lunar Park* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

Mi scuso per l'inizio balbettante, prima il corsivo e poi il tahoma; ma non era questo il romanzo che avevo in testa. La condanna di Antonio Franchini (l'editor della Mondadori) a proposito del mio ultimo era stata esplicita, lapidaria nella sua rozzezza: «sei tornato a scrivere un libro per froci». Così m'ero proposto di non deludere più nessuno, avrei espulso l'erotismo omosessuale dal mio orizzonte letterario.<sup>509</sup>

The passage mentions to the two excerpts that precede the actual opening chapter of the book: the first (in 'corsivo') describes a Mafia-style execution; the second (in 'tahoma') is instead a scientific article about the difference between real and perceived prostitution. The excerpts in question point readers' attention to the book's main themes and narrative strategies, from the outset. The first one is an extradiegetic passage, told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator; while the second – intradiegetic – is an article written by the fictional character and homodiegetic narrator. Following this 'inizio balbettante' the author moves to the main plot of the novel, which ultimately revolves around the relationship between the narrator and Tommaso, a young yuppie who is making his way in the sphere of finance and who wants to write a book about his life.<sup>510</sup>

Halfway through the book, the narrator breaks the fourth wall again, to address readers with an 'Intermezzo' in which he warns that the narration of Tommaso's life cannot go ahead. In that occasion, the narrator also reveals that Tommaso was never actually interested in his biography written.<sup>511</sup> His goal was to divert the attention of public opinion and cover up his true identity. Therefore, the subsequent pages of the book report Tommaso's confession, as he reveals his secrets to the narrator: who the people he works for really are, the hidden mechanisms of financial trading, the functioning of money laundering, and how investments can destabilise politics. This part of the novel is presented by Siti as a fictitious but faithful description of political and economic events of present day.

The novel's composite plot already brings several elements to the fore. In a similar way to the authors discussed in the previous chapter, along with the investigation of economic and political trends, Siti triggers a reflection on the narrative strategies used to represent

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<sup>509</sup> Siti, *Resistere non serve a niente*, p. 19.

<sup>510</sup> Tommaso grew up in a poor family on the outskirts of Rome: his father has been in and out of prison and his mother struggles to support herself and her only child. His poor economic conditions soon led him to forget his frustration by eating junk food, condemning himself to an even more difficult adolescence as an obese young man. However, the introverted and reclusive boy was particularly good at maths and his father's friends later offer him a career in finance. It later turns out that Tommaso actually works as a broker for the organised crime.

<sup>511</sup> Siti, *Resistere non serve a niente*, pp. 165-70.

them. The use of metanarrative devices and paratext allows the writer to put into practice his idea of ‘realismo gnostico’,<sup>512</sup> i.e. a form of realism in which the truth of narrative facts is affirmed and denied at the same time. In the disclaimer found in the closing pages, Siti makes clear the ambiguity of the events narrated, which are only true outside the criteria of verifiability:

I riferimenti ad aziende, partiti politici o amministrazioni locali sono da ascrivere al registro del verosimile e non del vero; Morgan è un nome finto ma appartiene alla medesima classe (nomi di pirati seicenteschi) a cui appartiene il nome empirico. Gli episodi penalmente rilevanti di cui sono venuto a conoscenza li ho depistati e distorti; questa era la condizione che dovevo accettare se volevo che tali episodi mi venissero raccontati. Dovendo scegliere tra giustizia e verità, ho preferito la seconda (pur presentandosi la verità in forme indigeste, settarie e non trasmissibili).<sup>513</sup>

Hence, autofiction allows the author to craft truth through the dialogue established between characters that are half real and half fictitious. As Donnarumma argues in *Ipermodernità* – and as mentioned in chapter two – this kind of testimony goes beyond the edges of observed events to tell a truth that lies beyond the real.<sup>514</sup> Furthermore, Donnarumma points out that Siti establishes a flexible pact with his readers as he simultaneously shows the unreliability and artificial nature of the facts he recounts while also ‘request[ing] that his ideas be wholly believed’.<sup>515</sup> The writer considers this attitude as the most effective to weaken the boundary between the media image and the empirical counterpart, so that events are only accessible in their embellished and amended version. In this cultural setting, the degree to which facts are true is inversely proportional to its appearance.<sup>516</sup> Acting against the conventions of realism and in tune with the dynamics of the post-reality world, Siti inverts the terms of the equation between truth and falsehood: fiction fabricates its true account – as the aforementioned Palumbo Mosca argues – and

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<sup>512</sup> Siti, *Il realismo è l'impossibile*, p. 59.

<sup>513</sup> Siti, *Resistere non serve a niente*, p. 319.

<sup>514</sup> Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, p. 126.

<sup>515</sup> Donnarumma, ‘Constructing the hypermodern subject’, p. 441.

<sup>516</sup> Siti defines this aspect in another paratextual extract, this time placed at the beginning of *Troppi Paradisi*: ‘Gli avvenimenti veri sono immersi in un flusso che li falsifica; la realtà è un Progetto, e il realismo una tecnica di potere. Come nell’universo mediatico, anche qui più un fatto sembra vero più si può stare sicuri che non è accaduto in quel modo [...] All’opposto di quanto accade nei romanzi-a-chiave, dove i fatti veri sono attribuiti a personaggi “in maschera”, qui a persone reali, indicate con nome e cognome, si attribuiscono fatti esplicitamente fittizi. Così funziona la post-realtà, nel regno dell’immagine, dove il prezzo da pagare per la notorietà è di essere trasformati in personaggi quasi-veri, condensatori di fantasmi’; Siti, *Il dio impossibile*, p. 690.

transforms factual elements into empty words. However, *Resistere non serve a niente* belongs to an era in which the domain of post-reality has developed further. As Moca suggests, Siti believes that the definitive entry of the internet, digital technologies, and hyper-connection into our societies have led individuals to a further epistemological anaesthetisation and increased the mechanisms at their disposal for shaping reality.<sup>517</sup>

In *Resistere non serve a niente*, readers soon realise that the testimony offered by Siti cannot be judged according to the normal criteria of truth and falsity. The ironic and metafictional narrative devices used by the author contribute to render any judgement particularly problematic. Among these the various ways in which the author presents the text's characters. Some of them, like Tommaso, belong to the category of imaginary characters based on verisimilar models. Other, like the aforementioned Franchini, are real personalities who are credited with actions that have no counterpart in reality. Finally, in some cases, the author describes real characters whose deeds are easily identifiable as corresponding to reality, but nonetheless he conceals their identity through the anonymous '\*\*\*' formula.<sup>518</sup> Therefore readers cannot make obvious connections to read the plot in a seamless way.

Another aspect that complicates the relationship between truth and imagination consists in the dialogue the narrator establishes with both readers and the character of Tommaso. In various passages of the text, the narrator pauses to reflect on crucial turning points in the plot, or to explain the choices he has made to tell the story we are reading. In one of these passages, he marks the transition from the first-person narrative to a third-person biography of the broker's life. In order to do so, the narrator declares that he must 'cancellarsi del tutto':<sup>519</sup>

[s]tavo a Firenze, in non so quale circolo Arci, e assistevo a uno spettacolo di burattini per adulti: a un certo punto il burattinaio in scena ha protestato «i maligni insinuano che dietro di me ci sia un tizio che mi fa parlare... sappiate che non è vero, sono io che faccio parlare lui». Il burattinaio infatti

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<sup>517</sup> Moca, 'Narcisismi', pp. 12-14.

This view is also supported by certain exclamations in the text itself: 'L'economia e la tecnologia sono così veloci in questi anni che la psicologia fa fatica a tenergli dietro...'; Siti, *Resistere non serve a niente*, p. 233.

<sup>518</sup> The first pages of the novel offer an example of this narrative trick: 'La tribù dei televisivi è imperniata sulla \*\*\*, la conduttrice dei contenitori pomeridiani potentissima, lacrima perenne sul viso e risata contagiosa'; Siti, *Resistere non serve a niente*, p. 24. This page's striking feature lies in the strong contrast between the use of '\*\*\*' to disguise the 'potentissima conduttrice, who sounds like the well-known TV anchor Maria De Filippi and, just a few lines later, the reference with onomastic rigour to 'Carlo Conti' and his unfortunate racist joke.

<sup>519</sup> Baron, 'Valore del racconto e racconto del valore', p. 56.

s'è presentato alla ribalta col suo faccione e ha ammesso «così mi sento nudo, non so cosa dire». Dunque, ora congedatemi come Prologo di teatro, che si affardellerà di some reali (tipo il denaro, o peggio) per arrivare a una verità ma senza più comparire; in scena ci saranno solo maschere. Oggi 3 giugno 2011, in questo pomeriggio bollente, faccio quel che dovrebbero fare gli occidentali in Afganistan: mi ritiro.<sup>520</sup>

As previously mentioned, however, this Tommaso's biographical account is eventually interrupted. After the metalepsis in which the narrator warns reader that 'il patto cambia',<sup>521</sup> Tommaso's confession about 'the truth' of his life and profession begins. As Nora Moll states, this part of the book presents a series of 'inserti sociologici' in which 'viene a cadere la focalizzazione interna adottata lungo gran parte del racconto, per introdurre in esso un'oggettività che colpisce profondamente proprio perché appare inattaccabile come frutto di studi approfonditi nel "settore"'.<sup>522</sup> According to the scholar, the final part of the book has an informative and documentary purpose. In fact, this statement is only partly true, as Siti combines the objective account of actual facts with ironic comments on the text's reliability. In doing so, the author aims to mislead his readers.

Siti counterbalances the punctuality of the references to the real political context and the precision of the lexicon, rich in financial technicalities<sup>523</sup> with metafictional devices and paratextual elements that overturn the idea of a transparent representation of the world. This generates a shifting pact that Siti makes with his readers, who are called upon to believe and doubt what they read at the same time. The terms of this implicit agreement are already established in Graham Greene's quotation in the exergue: 'la narrativa è più sicura: tanti editori avrebbero paura a pubblicare saggi su questi temi'.<sup>524</sup> Through this, Siti asserts the capacity of literature to bypass editorial and political censorship and to get to the bottom of things, to report what is not allowed to be released in journalistic and official communications. However, the very reason why this is possible casts doubts on the trustworthiness of literature: fiction stands outside the criteria of verification and therefore in the realm of conjecture. Siti reinforces this idea in other passages of the text, where the

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<sup>520</sup> Siti, *Resistere non serve a niente*, p. 51.

<sup>521</sup> Siti, *Resistere non serve a niente*, p. 211

<sup>522</sup> Nora Moll, 'Rappresentare il nuovo: Walter Siti e il lavoro', in *Il lavoro raccontato*, p. 173.

<sup>523</sup> Damiano Sinfonico discusses the language of the novel in: Damiano Sinfonico, 'Un'archeologia del virtuale: sull'ultimo romanzo di Walter Siti', *Enthymema*, 8 (2013), 400-04 (p. 401).

<sup>524</sup> Siti, *Resistere non serve a niente*, p. 7.

author entrusts one of his characters with the task of further sharpening it. According to Tommaso the only way to tell the truth today is to play the role of the crook:

[...] l'unica è farmi passare per un contabile megalomane, uno che vanta collegamenti e protezioni che non ha... uno che addirittura si propone come protagonista di un libro, un millantatore malato di narcisismo.<sup>525</sup>

In this case Tommaso undoubtedly works as a mouthpiece for the author, who ultimately has no intention of promoting either the social role of literature or any claim to objectivity. On the contrary, the author constantly questions literature's political potential. Siti appears to purposefully create a book full of declarations of intent, ironic comments on his own narrative choices, on the possibilities of fiction to be factual and impersonal, but also on any grandiose and ideological considerations of its status:

[e]ccomi qua, con questo progetto di 'narratore onnisciente' che mi ha sempre fatto arrossire, onnisciente sarebbe solo Dio se esistesse. Per proporti come onnisciente, o devi presumere tanto da te stesso o richiedere splendore alla tua epoca. Ma agisco per salvare il mio appartamento, di cui vedo pulsare le bolle dell'intonaco come se fossero vene – o cicatrici, la mia casa è più viva di me; sarò lo strumento retorico attraverso cui passano i fatti per depurarsi e acquistare senso, deformarsi: un pagliaccio al servizio delle cose.<sup>526</sup>

Siti's irony deprives his narrative alter-ego, of the possibility of claiming any kind of ethical choice and by doing so raises doubts on his own actual political motivation. Just as the narrator is pushed by the reward promised by Tommaso, with which he could protect himself from the risk of eviction, the real author could be animated by futile motivations.<sup>527</sup> Hence, the choice of autofiction and first-person narrative plays a fundamental part in prompting a broader reflection on the role of the writer today: a rhetorical tool and a clown at the service of 'powers he cannot control'.

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<sup>525</sup> Siti, *Resistere non serve a niente*, p. 226.

<sup>526</sup> Siti, *Resistere non serve a niente*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>527</sup> There are plenty of passages in the book in which revolutionary spirit is openly ridiculed: 'Uscendo dal corridoio verso il foyer m'imbatto in una specie di clown, non capisco se maschio o femmina, con le maniche argentate a sbuffo ed enormi ponpon rossi – alza le dita a V, le guance e le sopracciglia impiastriate di glitter, "hasta la victoria siempre". Come no? E la bellezza salverà il mondo'; Siti, *Resistere non serve a niente*, p. 224.

This controversial attitude, predominant in *Resistere non serve a niente*, is a telling sign of Siti's adaptation to the current cultural transition. Indeed, the novel accomplishes two opposite actions at once – and it does so precisely by using the tricks offered by literature. On the one hand, it confronts readers with an investigation into the world of finance and a very strong denunciation of a system perceived as corrupt, cruel, and unfair.<sup>528</sup> On the other hand, by giving insights on Tommaso's and the narrator's twisted psychologies, Siti casts doubt on their authority and legitimacy to speak out against any complaint – and thus also that of the author himself. The same contradiction is evident in the way the novel deals with truth as an elusive and rhetorical concept whose value is relative and context-dependent.<sup>529</sup> If, therefore, the second part of the book appears apodictic and peremptory, this element is balanced by the author's claim that literature's need to be deceitful and counterfactual to give readers a meaningful account on facts.

Qualsiasi raggio attraversando una lente cambia direzione: Dio è una lente potentissima, se vuoi che la tua vita gli appaia dritta devi offrirgliela spezzata.<sup>530</sup>

Throughout this novel, the atypical idea of realism put into practice by Siti takes hold and Moca is adamant in linking this inclination to the new dynamics of today's cultural environment. In our world, the 'finanzocapitalismo' and the digital revolution '[hanno] sconfitto la realtà', giving everyone the chance of creating one as they please.<sup>531</sup> Siti uses his narrative to deconstruct the steps of this process, demonstrating that

[...] il mondo rappresentato in un racconto è sempre il frutto di una selezione. Il verosimile nasce da questa necessità di selezione: è il repertorio di tutte quelle parti di realtà a cui il lettore può credere senza inciampo perché assomigliano a cose che ha già sperimentato.<sup>532</sup>

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<sup>528</sup> In the second part of the book, Siti provides his readers with two diagrams called 'tables': the first shows the connections between today's most influential mafia families and the second the financial network through which their financial capital flows. In both cases, reference is made to real names and companies; Siti, *Resistere non serve a niente*, pp. 274-275.

<sup>529</sup> 'La verità. Da vecchio matematico, Tommaso è più familiare a concetti come dimostrabilità, esattezza, probabilità; la verità dipende dalle condizioni al contesto, dagli assiomi che uno accetta all'inizio [...] la verità detta agli altri è pura follia, è come mettergli nelle mani il bastone con cui ci bastoneranno. Il problema nasce, certo, quando il sistema deve misurarsi con contraddizioni interne'; Siti, *Resistere non serve a niente*, p. 198.

<sup>530</sup> Siti, *Resistere non serve a niente*, pp. 265-66.

<sup>531</sup> Moca, 'Narcisismi', p. 11.

<sup>532</sup> Siti, *Il realismo è l'impossibile*, p. 23 (italics are in the text).

The entire novel can thus be understood as both a political statement and a profession of poetics. The reader might arrive to this understanding through picking up on the ironic dichotomy between the title and the content of the book: the supposed surrender ('resistere non serve a niente'), which Baron interpreted as aporia and resignation,<sup>533</sup> indicates instead the only way to redemption. The apocalyptic tone presented already from the book's title is to be interpreted in an etymological sense, and thus as a revelation on the new condition and on how to adapt to it. In his reading of the ironical stance pervading Siti's work, Francesco Chianese describes this attitude as 'una nuova dimensione della scrittura come impegno che si offre al mondo che è sopravvissuto al crollo delle autorità e vi ha apposto la distanza postmoderna, assuefatto al nichilismo e alla passività che sono stati il prodotto delle ideologie che l'hanno caratterizzato'.<sup>534</sup>

The contribution of Siti's work to the post-truth contest lie in having accepted to deal with such a renovated cultural order, in which literature and alternative moralistic postures look like 'cose del passato'.<sup>535</sup> Through the use of irony and metafiction – which are more reminiscent of postmodernist practices than of any new realism., Siti creates the conditions for establishing an ambivalent dialogue with its readers. By doing so he also creates a different model of literary commitment, finally post-ideologic and post-hegemonic: one that 'risiede nel restituire la capacità di mettere a fuoco concetti opposti e tuttavia entrambi validi, senza imporre una verità egemonica'.<sup>536</sup>

### ***Ipotesi di una sconfitta* by Giorgio Falco**

Giorgio Falco's novelistic production is generally very different from Walter Siti's, less crossed by forms of thematic and formal experimentalism. Yet, it is my opinion that he too, especially with the novels of the last few years, gives an important contribution to my attempt to define the poetics of post-truth. Giorgio Falco began his writing career in 2004, with the collection of short stories, *Pausa caffè*. According to Daniele Giglioli, this book

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<sup>533</sup> Baron, 'Valore del racconto e racconto del valore', p. 59.

<sup>534</sup> Francesco Chianese, 'Teorizzare un umorismo ipermoderno: il caso Walter Siti', *Between*, 6 (2016), p. 4.

<sup>535</sup> Baron, 'Valore del racconto e racconto del valore', p. 63.

<sup>536</sup> Chianese, 'Teorizzare un umorismo ipermoderno', p. 5.



contributed to launching the thread of the ‘romanzo del precariato’.<sup>537</sup> In fact, some of the main themes, which will characterise his future works, were already evident from the start. These themes include: the description of the world of tertiary employment; an eccentric perspective of the world; the failure of liberalism to keep its promises. Commenting on *Pausa caffè*, the novelist Aldo Nove defines Falco as ‘l’attuale poeta epico del lavoro precario’. The use of the adjective, precarious, is supported by the fact that the text first and foremost presents

l’inventario dei fatti o, meglio, delle divagazioni, che a partire da un mondo, dà un’idea narrativa di mondo, lo saziano fino a dargli una forma che non ha centro, perché è un mondo e diviene. Un po’ il contrario del romanzo tradizionale, dove è la retta che conduce la narrazione a delineare il tragitto, e nella fine si dispiega e congeda fissandosi.<sup>538</sup>

Falco’s following book, *L’ubicazione del bene* – written in 2009 – further extends the narrative traits mentioned above in a more organic and less fragmented format: nine short stories of suburban life, all set in the fictional town of Cortesforza, located in a suburb of Milan. These nine stories frame the ‘disorientamento epocale’ of contemporary subjects, who face the inexorable deteriorating of social bonds, the reification of their aspirations and a sense of alienation.<sup>539</sup> Moreover, as Giacomo Raccis points out, while the previous book’s setting consisted solely of the company’s internal space, in this second one the perspective also encompasses the anonymous and depersonalised external space of the urban periphery.<sup>540</sup> In any case, Falco’s stories offer some brief glimpses into aspects of everyday life set in a symbolic space with no specific identity. According to Franco Tomasi, the text’s descriptive elements provide an allegorical description that prevents readers from locating

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<sup>537</sup> Daniele Giglioli, ‘Soggetto lavoro, precarietà. *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* di Giorgio Falco’, *Le parole e le cose*, 28 January 2018, <https://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=30835> (accessed on 11 November 2021).

Such definition is adopted by Nicole Siri, in the article ‘Cos’è il lavoro oggi. “Works” di Vitaliano Trevisan e “Ipotesi di una sconfitta” di Giorgio Falco’, *Le parole e le cose* <https://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=33580> (accessed on 12 November 2021): In contrasts, on the same literary blog, Daniele Giglioli adopts the definition ‘il romanzo del precariato’.

The examples just given show how the terminology on these issues is still not well defined; Daniele Giglioli, ‘Soggetto lavoro, precarietà’.

<sup>538</sup> Aldo Nove, ‘Pausa caffè’, *Nazione Indiana*, 8 May 2004, <https://www.nazioneindiana.com/2004/05/08/pausa-caffe/> (accessed on 15 November 2020).

<sup>539</sup> Tirinanzi De Medici, *Il romanzo italiano contemporaneo*, pp. 240-43.

<sup>540</sup> Giacomo Raccis, “Il lavoro è ovunque”: forme del racconto e forme del potere nella narrativa di Giorgio Falco’, *Ticontre*, 12 (2019), 389-401 (p. 394).

the actual setting.<sup>541</sup> If *L'ubicazione del bene* is the 'storia di un luogo', such location can only belong to the category of contemporary non-places, amorphous and without any territorial identity.<sup>542</sup> In this sense, the surrounding space shares – and reflects – the same fate as the characters that populate it.

I focused on this collection, which precedes the novel analysed here by almost ten years, for two reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates many links with Walter Siti's work. Secondly, the book foreshadows many of the basic themes of Falco's narrative that are also present in *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* – and in many respects these two points coincide. Like Siti's ones, Giorgio Falco's characters also move within the framework of a dominant hyperliberalism, which reifies the desires and aspirations of individuals.<sup>543</sup> If actions affect the protagonists of *L'ubicazione del bene*, they are defined as 'misteriose, opache, trasparenti, circondate dalla luce appiccicata al plexiglas'.<sup>544</sup> Considering this opacity, I read between the lines to find a similarity that Falco's work share with Mark Fisher's theories proposed in *Capitalist Realism*. According to Fisher, today's cultural and existential practices have been consumed and de-sacralised by an indiscriminate economic and social system that does not allow anything to exist outside of it.<sup>545</sup> Therefore, for both Siti and Falco, the only way to resist this form of cultural domination is to stand outside of it, in the seemingly estranged and powerless space represented by literature. The previous section of the chapter examined the importance of the theme of consumerism in Siti's work, while in this I will foreground the emergence of these topics in Falco's 2017 novel.

*Ipotesi di una sconfitta* is not a collection of short stories but 'un romanzo vero' in which the episodes narrated are linked and the narrator-protagonist acts as the main 'collettore'.<sup>546</sup> Despite this, the book maintains some similarity with a short fiction collection. The plot is

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<sup>541</sup> Franco Tomasi, 'La megalopoli padana nell'Ubicazione del bene', in *La geografia del racconto. Sguardi interdisciplinari sul paesaggio urbano nella narrativa italiana contemporanea*, ed. by Davide Papotti and Franco Tomasi (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2014), 91-111 (p. 95).

<sup>542</sup> Falco, *L'ubicazione del bene*, p. 163, Kindle ebook.

Another passage in the book is also significant in this respect: '[...] ma non sembra nemmeno di vivere a Cortesforza, Cortesforza è qualsiasi luogo, la distanza da Milano, diciotto, diecimila, un milione di chilometri, non ha senso', p. 1055, Kindle ebook.

<sup>543</sup> Tirinanzi De Medici, *Il romanzo italiano contemporaneo*, p. 240.

<sup>544</sup> Falco, *L'ubicazione del bene*, p. 518, Kindle ebook.

<sup>545</sup> This concept is expressed by Fisher through the parallelism with John Carpenter's film *The Thing*: capitalism is described as 'a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolising and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact'; Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative?* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2008), p. 6.

Giacomo Raccis has already hypothesized and argued effectively for an influence of Fisher's theories in the work of Falco and Siti; Raccis, "Il lavoro è ovunque", p. 391.

<sup>546</sup> Raccis, "Il lavoro è ovunque", p. 395.

Nevertheless, the transition from short fiction to novel had already occurred in the previous work; Giorgio Falco, *La gemella H* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014).

divided into short chapters, each functioning as a stand-alone episode and focusing on a particular work experience carried out by the protagonist. Therefore, in this sort of memoir, the narrator only concerns himself with sharing memories around labour and employment. In an interview about the book, Falco himself stated that his intention was not to write a book about ‘il precariato’, but rather to use the element of work as the paradigm for a much deeper and more important geopolitical and existential change, regarding Italy – but also the entire world.<sup>547</sup> Following this perspective, labour works as a synecdoche that encapsulates the sense of human life, the ways in which contemporary subjects adapt to the transformations taking place in liquid modernity – to refer to Bauman’s definition.<sup>548</sup>

The book begins with a chapter focusing on the life of Falco’s father – a man born in the first half of the twentieth century and so belonging to a different generational timeframe. The section functions as a stand-alone narrative unit that recounts the vicissitudes of the author’s father from the time he left Sicily to move to Milan, to his job at the Atm (the transport company of the municipality of Milan) as a bus driver, to his retirement, and finally to his death. With the father’s passing also the values he embodied, associated with the twentieth century vision of the world and ideals from the industrial era, have disappeared. Both inside and outside the narrated realm, the precarious and uncertain reality of our post-industrial age follows the father’s life.<sup>549</sup>

The following chapters of the book are centred on the protagonist and his professional experiences: from his seasonal employment in a factory – where he spent an entire summer when he was still a student – to his occupation as a door-to-door salesman of local newspapers; from his work as a shop assistant to his position as a seller of Yugoslav brooms.

The author-narrator keeps switching jobs, moving from one fiasco to another, apparently without showing any sign of despair or breakdown, until he is finally hired by a large telephone company. He works there for years, suffering numerous mobbing attempts by his employers and frustrating reductions in role and salary. Finally, the last chapters narrate the

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<sup>547</sup> Matilde Quarti, ‘Uso il lavoro per scrivere dell’Italia: Giorgio Falco si racconta’. *Il Libraio*, 15 November 2017, <https://www.illibraio.it/news/dautore/giorgio-falco-intervista-685704/> (accessed on 11 November 2020).

<sup>548</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.

<sup>549</sup> Falco had already reflected on the theme of the epochal and generational transition embodied in the difference between his life and vision of the world and that of his father in a previous book of a more hybrid and nonfictional nature; Giorgio Falco, *Sottofondo italiano* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2015).

A few years earlier, two important books on the same subject were published by emerging Italian writers: Paolo Di Paolo, *Dove eravate tutti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2013); Paolo Cognetti, *Sofia veste sempre di nero* (Rome: Minimum Fax, 2012).

years following ‘la fine del lavoro’,<sup>550</sup> in which his activity as a writer allows him to start the activity of gambler – which he sees as a form of entrepreneurship. In doing so, he redirects his so-called free time to an activity that is also economically profitable.

Unlike Siti, the first-person narration employed by Falco is much less convoluted: there are no interludes or interruptions and there are no interactions between the points of view of different characters. The text reads like an autobiography of real-life excerpts told by a homodiegetic narrator. In other words – as is evident from artist Sabrina Ricucci’s picture on the cover, which depicts a close-up portrait of the author against a red background – the storyteller, offers his testimony as a document, while he covers the role of guarantor between the readers and the truth of the stories narrated.<sup>551</sup> Yet this autobiography of actual events, which closely resembles autofiction – because at various points it is difficult to separate adherence to facts from potential invention and readers cannot call on any element to do this – offers little mimetic or documentary quality. But this identification can only take place through a silent synecdoche that is never openly declared: the time of collective life, of shared values and experience, belonged to the past, and today only the negation of that remains.<sup>552</sup> Stretching the observation just offered, I believe that according to Falco the only form of common belonging is possible today through compassion, that is to say, through the fact of sharing a common suffering.<sup>553</sup> This opinion is corroborated by pronominal and verbal lapses that Falco adopts in the book with the purpose of calling readers into question:

[...] comprare soldi per comprare soldi prima ancora delle cose, delle rate, semplici segni, promesse future, ipotesi di vita, di giorni e di mesi divenuti sostanza, non tanto di ciò che avevamo davanti, quanto di ciò che le cose valevano, proiettate lontano da se stesse in un mondo alieno, gestito da regole che tracimavano e ritornavano ai nostri gironi di vita, assegnavano loro un senso.<sup>554</sup>

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<sup>550</sup> Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 4048, Kindle ebook.

<sup>551</sup> ‘This interpretation is corroborated by the words of the author himself, who declared that ‘è un’autobiografia, scritta, come dice Sabrina Ragucci, seguendo i canoni della fotografia documentaria. Questa è la grande differenza con l’autofiction. Io, Giorgio Falco, nel libro, non sono un personaggio: sono un documento, a cominciare dall’immagine di copertina’; Quarti, ‘Uso il lavoro per scrivere dell’Italia’.

<sup>552</sup> Carlo Baghetti, ‘Da “Vogliamo tutto” a “Io non voglio niente”’. Rappresentazioni letterarie del lavoro e impegno politico da Balestrini a Trevisan’, in *Il lavoro raccontato. Studi su letteratura e cinema italiani dal postmodernismo all’ipermodernismo*, ed. by Carlo Baghetti, Alessandro Ceteroni, Gerardo Iandoli, and Romano Summa (Florence: Franco Cesati, 2020), p. 54.

<sup>553</sup> Raccis also seems to be in line with this line of interpretation; Raccis, ““Il lavoro è ovunque””, p. 398.

<sup>554</sup> Giorgio Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 4505, Kindle ebook.

In questo, effettivamente ero come un drogato: anche il drogato si assegnava un target, quello di trovare la propria dose, ma non si glorificava. Forse, qualunque sia il target, non possiamo vivere senza, perché siamo tutti drogati.<sup>555</sup>

However, this allegorical correspondence between the narrator and his contemporaries is never overstretched. On the contrary, the effect is often reduced by emphasising the singularity of the events and the individual details:

Ero uscito dallo showroom un'ora prima del dovuto, avevo acceso la Fiat Uno, infilato una musicassetta nella radio, oltrepassato la guardiola dei vigilantes e sentito la tensione andarsene. Mi era sembrato di guadagnare qualcosa. Avevo un po' di soldi in tasca, lo stipendio incompleto. Guidavo l'auto di mio padre. Ero ancora un ragazzo.<sup>556</sup>

Yet, in a manner reminiscent of Siti, Falco suggests that his life transcends the boundaries of the individual '[...] non dovevo temere di essere felice, ero l'Occidente, vivevo di possibilità e di pace [...]'.<sup>557</sup> Therefore, recounting the story of a single individual sheds light on a wider social situation. As the author has pointed out, describing his personal work experiences functions as a way of reporting on Italy and, more broadly, on the failure of politics to adapt to new economic and social conditions, fuelling a sense of discomfort and frustration<sup>558</sup> ('L'Italia era un'apparenza approssimativa, un rimbalzo di cose pagate sempre troppo in rapporto alla qualità'; 'Ma non avevo un problema con l'alcol o l'hashish: ne avevo uno con l'Italia').<sup>559</sup>

Falco describes his generation – as well as those that follow – as being forced into a loop, observing the relentless deterioration of their living conditions. According to the writer, there is no clear way out of this situation, no better future around the corner. That is why the reflection on generation gaps proposed in the book plays a very important role. Observing the differences between his own life and that of his father, the narrator brings to the fore the

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<sup>555</sup> Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 4454, Kindle ebook.

<sup>556</sup> Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 2586, Kindle ebook.

<sup>557</sup> Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 1497, Kindle ebook.

<sup>558</sup> 'Ho usato il lavoro per scrivere dell'Italia. Parto dal lavoro per poi allargare lo sguardo a luoghi, spazi, desideri. Come sempre, del resto, dato che 'l'Italia è il mio guinzaglio'. *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* è un romanzo politico, ma non un atto d'accusa. Ho attraversato questi brevi decenni e selezionato alcuni fatti della mia esistenza'; Quarti, *Usa il lavoro per scrivere dell'Italia*'.

<sup>559</sup> Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 2948, Kindle ebook.

effects of an epochal shift, which now seems too wide to be healed. In his father's lifetime, having a job as a bus driver at Atm was crucial in defining his identity: being part of the 'Azienda' was somehow a revealing aspect of who his father was ('L'Atm lo escludeva da qualsiasi mansione, lui reagiva indossando la divisa in ogni circostanza. Andava nell'orto, al bar, al supermercato, dal parrucchiere indossando sempre e solo la divisa dell'Atm').<sup>560</sup> In fact, he worked for the same company all his life – even after falling ill with cancer and risking death. In contrast, in Falco's experience, work is an elusive entity, both in the sense that he is no longer a permanent aspect of life, so you move from one position to another; but also because, even within the same company, operational tasks are increasingly volatile. Joining a new company or starting a new career no longer conveys any sense of belonging or integration.

To build on the sense of fluidity just mention, Falco adopts aesthetic features that assert this change in professional culture. He writes in the linear tense of the *imperfetto*, which gives the impression of a cyclical order of things. Therefore, Falco assimilates the crisis of work, values, and economic stability with another crisis, that of culture and language. Throughout the novel, Falco also examines the changes in cultural praxes that have taken place over the years. In many parts of the text, he analyses the way in which the relationship between signifier and signified is increasingly blurred in today's communication as a result of media and marketing strategies:

[...] la frase finale, preannunciata dal solito linguaggio della meteorologia italiana, era la vertigine in cui l'immediato futuro era già proiettato al passato, la frase tombale mi rimbombava nella testa tutto il giorno: era il tempo previsto per la giornata di oggi.<sup>561</sup>

Le risate registrate e gli applausi registrati, non a caso, erano un prodotto inventato da un ex militare statunitense, Charles Douglass. Questo ingegnere del suono, rientrato dalla Seconda guerra mondiale, aveva inventato la laff box, la macchina delle risate registrate, utilizzata negli show e nelle sit-com statunitensi a partire dal 1950. L'Italia sarebbe stata colonizzata da quel sortilegio solo trent'anni dopo. Una risata mimetizzata negli interstizi del tappeto sonoro, che come la risacca si infrangeva sul picco di una battuta, di un'allusione predisposta ogni dieci, venti secondi, in attesa di estorcere una risata, il nostro applauso, il consenso possibile grazie al contagio, il ritorno improvviso al breve stato di quiete, prima di una nuova iniezione vocale. Confrontata con il pasticciare, l'applauso

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<sup>560</sup> Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 246, Kindle ebook.

<sup>561</sup> Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 1128, Kindle ebook, (*italics in the text*).

di Douglass era il correttore di acidità, lo stabilizzante, l'emulsionante dell'industria alimentare, parte essenziale del cibo, imponeva una linea di gradimento standard, indirizzava il gusto e suggeriva il momento in cui ridere e applaudire, cosa dovevi leggere e ascoltare, di cosa dovevi parlare a scuola o a casa, e sebbene l'origine della risata rimanesse oscura, forse piaceva proprio per questo.<sup>562</sup>

The narrator seems to indicate that the means of expression reverberate today in an empty space: they converge towards the same focal point, unable to express any meanings. Furthermore, as I said in the opening of this section, commodities are the real object of desire in the realm shaped by capitalism and liberalism.<sup>563</sup> In the end, all forms of narrative exist only within the artificial box manufactured by the market, as all aspects of human life have been inexorably transformed into merchandises:

Difficile immaginare che nella vita esistesse qualcosa, oltre le rate. Le rate erano una necessità del presente e la sola forma di fiducia per il futuro, l'unica narrazione rimasta. Ogni gesto finiva per essere conteggiato in una griglia statistica, che determinava un punteggio, il credit scoring.<sup>564</sup>

Falco's interest in the way that economic processes impact the cultural and affective sphere is significant in the context of post-truth. This is even more relevant considering the writer's focus on the importance that new technologies play in framing our emotional and sentimental experiences. After his father's funeral, Falco goes to his father's old workplace in the attempt to emotionally reconnect with the memory of him. However, the visit has no effect, and the mourning process remains unfinished. Shortly afterwards, he makes another attempt, only this time using the virtual duplicate of reality offered by Google Street View:

[m]a come capita spesso in Google Street View, le immagini della stessa via possono avere due date differenti: quelle al termine della strada a fondo chiuso erano state catturate nell'ottobre dell'anno precedente, tre mesi prima della morte di mio padre, otto mesi prima della chiusura del deposito Atm. Inutile ritornare indietro di poche decine di metri con il cursore: di fronte all'ex deposito Atm,

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<sup>562</sup> Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 1182, Kindle ebook, (italics in the text).

<sup>563</sup> Baghetti writes on the importance of the element of criticism of the social and cultural model of hyperliberalism in Falco's work: Baghetti, 'Da "Vogliamo tutto" a "Io non voglio niente"', p. 57.

<sup>564</sup> Giorgio Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 3315, Kindle ebook, (italics in the text).

Google Street View mi avrebbe spinto avanti di dodici mesi e mostrati ancora i quattro autisti fantasma dell'azienda privata [...].

A parte il cielo grigio e la bottiglia di birra vuota ancora integra, c'era quanto avevo raccontato nel giorno di sole ottobrina in cui avevo davvero salutato mio padre, anche se in fondo alla strada, nello schermo, appariva il mondo già postumo, l'ottobre grigio tre mesi prima della morte di mio padre, e il cursore stava sulla soglia di ciò che era stato da così poco e ciò che tra così poco sarà, le diverse scansioni del tempo si illudevano di coesistere – attraverso l'immagine – in una mediazione, un unico e ultimo punto: quello della scrittura. Non è sempre adesso il luogo del morire? Il funerale del presente. E sì, io lì non ci sono.<sup>565</sup>

Through this narrative passage, Falco succeeds in effectively describing the way technology alters the way we come into contact with reality. In the scene just quoted above, Google Street View creates a temporal dispersion, compressing the before and after into a single image.

At this point, let me return to the central topic of the representation of reality in Falco's novel. In the interview with Matilde Quarti a few years ago, the author reveals his intention to accurately describe the actual condition of labour in Italy.<sup>566</sup> However, the way in which this will is put into practice does not fall into the category of documentary narrative. For instance, as in *L'Ubicazione del bene*, also in *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* the representation of space is not clearly defined. Although the text offers some clues on the geographic areas in which the protagonist lives and work – the suburbs of Milan, Veneto and Rome – no specific details are ever given. In fact, throughout the novel names are not named and companies are not openly indicated: when he recounts the years in which he works in Omnitel, the company is simply referred to as 'azienda telefonica'. The effect is even more striking when compared to the first part of the novel, where the company in which the father used to work is named with its actual name 'Atm'.

The last set of observations allow me to raise a few fundamental points. Firstly, the comparison between the way the author refers to the company he worked for and the company his father used to be part of, further underlines the signs of the epochal and irreversible transition that has taken place in recent decades. Whereas people of the last century counted on a number of certainties, such as those offered by their jobs - to determine

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<sup>565</sup> Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 663, Kindle ebook.

<sup>566</sup> Quarti, 'Usò il lavoro per scrivere dell'Italia'.



their identity; nowadays, in the midst of the transition to the post-truth world, the contemporary subject cannot count on these securities and his personality is fragmented and schizophrenic, often duplicated in a series of clones and incomprehensible acronyms.

Tutto il processo produttivo immateriale si svolgeva all'interno del mio corpo: piedi, orecchie, testa, voce. Avevo ripetuto le solite frasi di presentazione, era stato magnifico non udire il cliente dall'altra parte. Silenzio. Be', quasi silenzio. Sentivo Gandhi dal vivo, al mio fianco; le sue parole rimbalzavano nelle mie orecchie anche attraverso la telefonata tra il mio cellulare e me stesso ZZGFA 1.<sup>567</sup>

While the father identified himself through his work uniform, Falco has lost even his own name, to become an acronym or a username 'ZZGFA 1' and 'GFALCO'.<sup>568</sup> This means that entering today into the mechanisms of production means being sucked into them to the point of being dispossessed of one's own personality. It is in this aspect that, according to Gilda Policastro, Falco's pessimism differs from that of many writers who deal with the same themes – such as Vitaliano Trevisan – in his ability to accept the new situation and introject it, transforming it into 'un'esperienza solitaria, soggettiva, innominabile'.<sup>569</sup>

The second point concerns Falco's writing practice. For instance, the detached and cynical tone with which he describes the events. If the author declares to reject irony – that he recognises as an attribute of postmodernism,<sup>570</sup> this claim is in fact partially contradicted by his writing style. In fact, a sense of detachment and inversion of sense emerges in *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* throughout the whole text. For instance, the more the protagonist denigrates the deterioration of social and working relationships, the more he allows himself to be absorbed by them. In the author's view, irony marks a form of rejection that is expressed by resignation. In this way, Falco tries to erode the structure of this new order from within. According to Daniele Giglioli, the writer does not adopt the notes of the picaresque, because in this narrative genre the picaro knows that his cleverness can still lead him to a happy ending, while in Falco redemption is denied from the start and his irony allows him to show that 'il peggio [...] non consiste tanto in minori retribuzioni o maggiori angherie, ma nel fatto che a ogni giro di vite l'ingiustizia si sente più giustificata, affina il suo linguaggio,

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<sup>567</sup> Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 3544, Kindle ebook.

<sup>568</sup> Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 3502.

<sup>569</sup> Policastro, 'La letteratura precaria nel nuovo millennio', in *Il lavoro raccontato*, p. 35.

<sup>570</sup> Quarti, 'Usò il lavoro per scrivere dell'Italia'.

coopta le resistenze'.<sup>571</sup> Following this line of thought, the adoption of the device of irony activates an effective bottom-up mechanism of awareness, through which the writer brings readers closer to the subject matter. The same rhetorical device is used – in combination with metafictional stratagems – to open up a reflection on the relationship between life and literature, with the latter always being downsized because of comparison ('Resistere non significava vincere, non sapevo cosa significasse. Forse volevo cristallizzare quel periodo della mia vita, come a volte capita durante la scrittura').<sup>572</sup> The most significant extract in this regard is the one in which the writer uses the sporting metaphor of 'garbage time' to indicate the political value of fiction. The term refers to the final phase of basketball games, when the result is assured and the bench players are free to display their skills with no care for the score.

Uno spettatore distratto può pensare che durante il tempo spazzatura la qualità del gioco cali, in verità è come se la moneta fresca appena immessa luccicasse contraffatta, svelasse tutta l'impalcatura menzognera non solo di se stessa, ma dell'intero sistema. I ritmi del tempo spazzatura sono accelerati, i giocatori obbediscono all'ordine di far scorrere il tempo fagocitando più azini possibili, più titi, per un vertiginoso falso aumento di produzione, che genera solo l'incremento dei rifiuti.

Anche il calcio vive il tempo spazzatura e lo chiama melina, e si basa sul processo inverso: un rallentamento esasperato dell'azione. In entrambi i casi, il risultato è il medesimo: giocare fuori ritmo svela la parte più oscura e oscena, rimanda a un'altra circostanza la fabbrica di cose ed eventi, in modo da avvalorare e rendere memorabile il prossimo prodotto, la prossima moneta, quella ritenuta migliore, dimenticando come le stesse azioni considerate eccellenti possano diventare, la settimana seguente, spazzatura.<sup>573</sup>

From the remarks presented in the above extract, emerges the underlining feature of the whole novel. As stated elsewhere in this section, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* must be read as an imperfect *Bildungsroman*. The path of the protagonist through the novel follows two distinct and separate trajectories: the first consists in the failure of the protagonist as employee and the second in his success as a writer. Through this dichotomy the author communicates a pivotal message: to become a writer is a form of emancipation and freedom from the rules imposed by economic and market laws. However, it implies betraying the ideals of the father

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<sup>571</sup> Giglioli, 'Soggetto lavoro, precarietà'.

<sup>572</sup> Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 3725, Kindle ebook.

<sup>573</sup> Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 2607, Kindle ebook (italics in the text).

and giving up on becoming like him. In a way, giving up work means to Falco giving up life itself ('Ecco il motivo per cui ripetiamo e ripetiamo mondo del lavoro, diamo per scontato che sia un mondo a parte, dove ogni crudeltà è possibile proprio perché è lavoro e non ciò che prende gran parte della vita, tanto da ridursi a essere la vita').<sup>574</sup>

As in the case of *Resistere non serve a niente*, also in *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* the title embodies the contradiction that lies at the heart of the text. The 'defeat' mentioned in the headline suggests three interpretations. Firstly, it is the defeat of the protagonist who was unsuccessful in the world of work and called himself out of the productive mechanism, in order to engage in an apparently unproductive activity such as literature. Secondly, is the defeat suffered by the contemporary subject who is incapable of regenerating the constructive models of the past. Finally, it is the defeat of the author, who tried to disrupt the dominant economic and political paradigm and ultimately failed in his purpose. It is up to the reader to choose the most correct interpretation. Instead of guiding them in this operation, the author seems to want to confuse them further through the destabilising element in the title: the noun hypothesis insinuates a degree of doubt and calls into question the very meaning of the syntagm, thus increasing the number of possible understandings. After all, literature may be the only way to oppose the prevailing narrative of hyper-capitalism. Ultimately, to choose literary activity over labour, represents both a gesture of surrender and act of resistance.

Following the reasoning proposed above, I agree with Baghetti when he identifies an element of rupture with the old models of commitment in favour of an attitude 'postideologica e, a tratti, anti-ideologica' in the novel.<sup>575</sup> Instead of proposing solid collective alternatives and an impetus for redemption from above, the book claims acceptance of a situation that is too complex to be dealt with univocally and therefore prefers to operate from within and from below. However, I do not share the negative note with which the scholar closes his essay. The integrated attitude of authors like Falco and Siti does not translate into a renunciation to change things, but rather shows the awareness of how this is a daring process full of paradoxes. The same awareness that the world of post-truth requires.

At this point, I believe it is safe to argue that Falco implements a narrative strategy that establishes an open, empathetic, and cognitively stimulating dialogue with the reader,

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<sup>574</sup> Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 1369, Kindle ebook.

<sup>575</sup> Baghetti, 'Da "Vogliamo tutto" a "Io non voglio niente"', p. 60.

suggesting uncertain and contrasting paths. Therefore, readers' contribution is essential for literature to activate its political and social potential. The metafictional device and the *mise en abyme* that Falco produces at the end of the book perfectly encapsulate this consideration. In the last chapter, the narrator recounts of that one time in which he was writing the story of a man with no particular qualities ('L'uomo di Lenhart'). Unfortunately, the file he was working on at the computer is irreparably damaged due to a technical fault. After negotiating an extension with the publishing house, the narrator starts drafting a new story from scratch:

Nel pomeriggio ci sarebbero state le corse, la competizione vera, questo era solo l'allenamento e ammutoliva, non sapevo bene cosa fare: rimanere, partire, scommettere su un evento sportivo dall'altra parte del mondo, scommettere per la prima volta sul dolore dei cavalli alle mie spalle; o forse dove solo arrendermi, scrivere il libro che avete appena letto.<sup>576</sup>

### ***Reality. Cosa è successo* by Giuseppe Genna**

Giuseppe Genna's writing differs both from the models of autofiction developed by Walter Siti and from the autobiographic narrative offered by Giorgio Falco. One of the most significant aspects that the three authors have in common, however, is the search for an ethical and political tension in their writing, even though they are aware of narrative's peripheral role in today's cultural landscape. From this point of view, Giuseppe Genna is undoubtedly one of the most eclectic and interesting novelists more in recent Italian milieu. According to Eugenio Bolongaro, through his highly original work, Genna has contributed to rethinking the link between ethics, history, and politics.<sup>577</sup> Despite the fact that the scholar also underlines – a few lines after – the fact that critics do not pay enough attention to him, I still consider Genna's narrative endeavour central in my analysis of the post-truth narrative. Indeed, beyond the effort he has made to combine literature and politics, one of the aspects that particularly interests me is the way he has openly evaluated – both inside and outside his texts – the social function of literary writing and its relevance in the new cultural and technological context. In this sense, both his observations on the subject just mentioned and his literary experiments are – even more so in the light of my research – extremely

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<sup>576</sup> Falco, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, p. 4678, Kindle ebook.

<sup>577</sup> Eugenio Bolongaro, 'Giuseppe Genna's *Hitler* and the ethics of (Re)presentation', *Italian Studies*, 73 (2018), 305-20 (p. 305).

remarkable. For instance, in one of his novels, he states that ‘il romanzo non coincide più con il veicolo della narrazione’, because it has become

[...] un canale alienativo, e lo diventa maggiormente quando l’élite intellettuale ne richiama la tradizione, che è quella di uno strumento efficace nell’interpretare la realtà. Ciò non è più vero, in quanto il romanzo è accettato soltanto per la sua componente algebrica: se è un’equazione, se giunge a comprensibilità presso il lettore, allora è assimilabile, va a porsi nell’armamentario dell’autoespropriazione umana.<sup>578</sup>

If the writer believes that novels are no longer the appropriate medium for producing narratives that aim to investigate and reveal reality, he has no choice but to look for other ways of conveying ethical and political contents. In this respect, Giuseppe Carrara maintains that Genna’s writing and rhetorical experimentalism seek to constantly liberate problematic and contradictory meaning as a response to a situation in which ‘il racconto è ormai stato neutralizzato dall’intrattenimento di massa’ typical of the post-reality society.<sup>579</sup> From a textual point of view, Genna achieves this by disrupting the storytelling and by replacing it with a representation of the world that lacks any intelligible plot. In his novels, he accumulates ‘immagini e riflessioni’ that break the reader’s process of identification with the story being told.<sup>580</sup> Instead, from the narratological standpoint, this results in expanded and intermedial artifacts.<sup>581</sup> In works such as *Italia De Profundis* or *Fine impero*,<sup>582</sup> Genna

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<sup>578</sup> Giuseppe Genna, *Italia De Profundis* (Rome: Minimum Fax, 2008), p. 95, Kindle ebook.

<sup>579</sup> Giuseppe Carrara, ‘L’Italia transmediale di Giuseppe Genna’, in *Nuova opera aperta. L’intertestualità ai tempi dei nuovi media*, ed. by Emanuele Broccio, Silvia Contarini, and Roberto Lapia, Roberto (Florence: Casati, 2020), pp. 135-42 (p. 136).

<sup>580</sup> Carrara, ‘L’Italia transmediale di Giuseppe Genna’, p. 138.

<sup>581</sup> In an interview given to Sara Chiappori in November 2020, for the programme release to the internet broadcast Zone K and entitled @Reality, Genna expressed a strong position on these issues, denouncing the inadequacy of the book device today and its inability to portray reality in a way that is meaningful to most contemporary readers. Hence the need to pour this representation onto several devices, in a sort of ‘iperoggetto’, which is hyperreal in itself. On that occasion he states: ‘ho l’impressione che la scrittura letteraria in questo momento sia qualcosa di non collettivamente riconosciuto come latore di una verità’. Besides the statement’s importance in highlighting the relationship that Genna’s writing establishes with the concepts of truth and reality – especially since the second half of the 2000s – I am particularly interested in dwelling on one specific element: I believe it is quite safe to assert that the use of the deictic ‘in questo momento’ refers precisely to the technological and cultural turn that marks the condition of post-truth. The interview can be accessed on the writer’s blog at <https://giugenna.com/2020/11/30/reality-a-zona-k/>, (accessed on 15 October 2021).

<sup>582</sup> Giuseppe Genna, *Fine Impero* (Rome: Minimum Fax, 2013).

integrates the book device with other media outlets, producing contents that flow from one platform to another, complementing each other.<sup>583</sup>

Through the joint recourse to an uncommon stylistic grammar, the fragmentation and decomposition of the plot into minimal sense units, and transmedial experimentation Genna attempts to reinvigorate literary practices while simultaneously producing comments on the contemporary world that can still produce political impact. According to Carrara, Genna implements a form of transmediality that ultimately absorbs the methods of mass communication, in order to showcase the otherness of artistic texts and their purpose to ‘mostrare le contraddizioni del presente, individuale e collettivo’.<sup>584</sup> Moreover, in his specific use of transmedial methods, I detect Genna’s clear effort to deal with a communicative and cultural context *in fieri*, caught in the phase of transition between the era of television and that of the Internet. In this sense, Donnarumma was right when he claimed a few years earlier that Genna’s novels work as narrative devices that, by emulating the dynamics of the web, ‘riassorbono nella fiction immagini di ogni genere, in un’ininterrotto bisogno di dire la propria, svelare storture, alzare la voce’.<sup>585</sup>

In this respect, another interesting aspect includes the relationship that Genna establishes with the new technologies and the new epistemological landscape outside the practice of fictional writing and thus in his wider cultural activity. If, in David Ward’s opinion, Genna embodies ‘the tech savvy’,<sup>586</sup> Donnarumma considers him as one of the Italian writers who, together with Wu Ming, has engaged most intensely with the new mediatic sphere. Donnarumma bases this idea on the fact that Genna is not only a novelist but also ‘blogger, fondatore o partecipe di siti e riviste elettroniche’.<sup>587</sup> Indeed, Genna clearly does not consider literature as only means through which it is possible to influence political life and surely not the most important one. In this sense, his profile seems to perfectly fit into the model of

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<sup>583</sup> *Italia De Profundis* is complemented by a series of short audio-visual booktrailers, in which sounds and images are edited according to an emotional and connotative register. They create clues and cross-references, without fitting into a plot and without producing any denotative effect. These videos are now available on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKTawrbtlYY&ab\\_channel=GiuseppeGenna](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKTawrbtlYY&ab_channel=GiuseppeGenna); [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s8r2KTkyTQ&ab\\_channel=GiuseppeGenna](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s8r2KTkyTQ&ab_channel=GiuseppeGenna) (accessed on 17 November 2021).

In the case of *Fine Impero*, Genna has created a tumblr page that offers the public a site full of articles and video contents that enhance the suggestions produced in the book. Once again, the links between the various elements are verging on the unintelligible and prevent a linear and structured fruition, in favour of an emotional and allegorical one. This page can be found at: <https://fineimpero.tumblr.com/> (accessed on 16 November 2021).

<sup>584</sup> Carrara, ‘L’Italia transmediale di Giuseppe Genna’, p. 142.

<sup>585</sup> Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, p. 71.

<sup>586</sup> David Ward, *Contemporary Italian Narrative and 1970s Terrorism. Stranger than Fact* (Madison: Palgrave, 2017), p. 3623, Kindle ebook.

<sup>587</sup> Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, p. 71.

‘impegno 3.0’ proposed by Antonello<sup>588</sup> and enhanced and discussed in chapter two of my work as an essential trait in the post-truth framework.

Together with these aspects, which concern more Genna’s cultural activity in a broad sense, his narrative production also contains numerous points of interest from a more specifically textual point of view. His trajectory as a writer has led him to experiment with various genres and narrative models. As Ward recalls, Genna began his career as author of thrillers,<sup>589</sup> such as *Catrame* and *Nel nome di Ishmael* – centred around the investigation of Inspector Lopez.<sup>590</sup> Nonetheless, for the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on those texts in which Genna has deployed forms of first-person and autofictional narrative, achieving results that are extremely original within the Italian scene – even because some of the traits are, in some respect, a constant in all Genna’s books irrespectively from the genre.<sup>591</sup> However, the purpose here is not to provide an in-depth overview of the various texts, but to highlight a few relevant elements they have in common, which are also present in *Reality*.

To begin with, Genna’s deployment of the techniques of autofiction and the oblique gaze<sup>592</sup> is unparalleled, at least among Italian writers. His style also differs significantly from the those of both Siti and Falco. While the latter two writers adopt narrative voices that actively participate in the events described and turn experiences into a source of information and testimony, Genna’s texts presents a narrator who performs ‘una dissoluzione e liberazione del sé’.<sup>593</sup> As a result, the narrator in *Reality* acts as a pure and non-corporeal gaze. In other words, the writer eschews traditional forms of writing including the denotative use of language, in favour of a connotative montage that is made of snapshots and suggestions. As David Ward affirms, in the author’s autofictional books, the plot gets ‘denser, more impenetrable, problematic and opaque’.<sup>594</sup> This prevents the reader from a transparent reading of the facts narrated, as well as any form of seamless identification.

The second aspect I will scrutinise is the relationship that Genna’s writing establishes with reality and truth. In novels such as *Dies Irae* or *Assalto a un tempo devastato e vile*, the

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<sup>588</sup> Antonello, ‘Impegno 3.0’.

<sup>589</sup> Ward, *Contemporary Italian Narrative and 1970s Terrorism*, p. 3567-3580, Kindle ebook.

<sup>590</sup> These first two novels, written between 1999 and 2001, have been joined by three others over the following years, namely *Gotha*, *La grande madre rossa* and *Le teste*. These five texts are now included in the collective volume: Giuseppe Genna, *Romanzo Nero. Cinque indagini per l’ispettore Lopez: Catrame, Nel nome di Ishmael, Gotha, La grande madre rossa, Le teste* (Milan: Mondadori, 2019).

<sup>591</sup> These include: *Dies Irae*; *Assalto a un tempo devastato e vile*; *Italia De Profundis*; *Fine impero*.

<sup>592</sup> Claudia Boscolo, ‘The Idea of Epic and the New Italian Epic’, *Journal of Romance Studies*, 1 (2010), 19-35 (p. 28).

<sup>593</sup> Carrara, ‘L’Italia transmediale di Giuseppe Genna’, pp. 139.

<sup>594</sup> Ward, *Contemporary Italian Narrative and 1970s Terrorism*, p. 3641, Kindle ebook.

writer already implemented a narrative practice that is also central in *Reality*. The narrator's gaze and voice do not capture and reproduce the real, but rather re-semanticise and re-fictionalize il 'già visto',<sup>595</sup> i.e. the media material through which it is still possible to experience the world today. Therefore, instead of focusing on the investigation of facts 'lo scrittore-intellettuale proposto da Genna, semplicemente mostra le condizioni di esistenza dell'evento per noi, che sono appunto mediate'.<sup>596</sup> In doing so, it is possible to define the political substance pervading his writing and typical of post-truth narrative. In a way that follows Anna Maria Lorusso's theories on the importance of fact-building, the writer 'sceglie di interrogarsi sui meccanismi con cui la menzogna è costruita, ponendole domande' rather than reporting an eyewitness veracity.<sup>597</sup>

Finally, an aspect that is prominent both in Genna's previous production and in the most recent novel, lies in the metafictional dimension of his narrative. To describe this element, Chimenti use the adjective 'metateorico' which seems particularly pertinent. This entails both the way he exposes the imaginative and fictional grain of narration and the literary techniques through which he deconstructs the mechanisms of the novel from inside. As the writer himself declared in the aforementioned interview to Zona K, the novel and literary language as we know them may no longer serve in the future.<sup>598</sup> As I will show in the next paragraphs, there is an ironic and self-referential note in his writing that, in the words of Caroline Zekri, 'continuously interrogates the form of the novel' to question its relevance and its ability to effectively engage with the representation of reality.<sup>599</sup>

The aspect analysed in the paragraphs above all emerge in *Reality. Cosa è successo*. At a first glance, this work looks to be a live recording of the unprecedented circumstances and the tragic events that followed the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. In the initial pages, the first-person narrator drives a vespa around the deserted city of Milan, witnessing the impact of the contagion on people's life behaviour.<sup>600</sup> After a sort of preliminary chapter in which readers are introduced to the object of narration, the book takes the form of journal. Each chapter begins with a date and a count of the number of people who, on that date, were Covid positive or had died from the virus, in Italy. The author scours the places that have been

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<sup>595</sup> Dimitri Chimenti, 'Lo spessore memoriale del presente. *Dies Irae* di Giuseppe Genna', in *Roma Noir 2010. Scritture nere: narrative di genere, New Italian Epic o post noir?*, ed. by Elisabetta Mondello (Rome: Robin, 2010), p. 152.

<sup>596</sup> Boscolo and Jossa, *Scritture di resistenza*, p. 28 (italics are in the text).

<sup>597</sup> Boscolo and Jossa, *Scritture di resistenza*, p. 32.

<sup>598</sup> <https://giugenna.com/2020/11/30/reality-a-zona-k/> (accessed on 16 November 2021).

<sup>599</sup> Caroline Zekri, 'Effetto reale, effetti speciali: "de-finzializzare" la realtà per tornare al reale', in *Negli archivi e per le strade*, pp. 195-213, (p. 202).

<sup>600</sup> Genna, *Reality*, p. 47, Kindle ebook.



dramatically affected by the pandemic, such as prisons, hospitals, and nursing homes, patrols the empty streets of the metropolitan area, talks to people of all sorts. He also reports the reaction of politicians, describes broadcasted events – such as the *angelus* by Pope Francis I, given in a deserted Saint Peter’s Square –,<sup>601</sup> but also recounts political announcements and newspapers headlines and recalls powerful mediatic images – like the photo of a young nurse, exhausted and asleep on a hospital desk, still in her work clothes, that circulated through Italian television channels and social media in March 2020.

The writer–character in the novel thus presents himself as a kind of war correspondent in devastated and disrupted areas.<sup>602</sup> He accesses seemingly inaccessible venues and reveals apparently unrevealed truths to readers. Nonetheless, the testimony offered by Genna lacks any actual documentary value. Firstly, the figure of the author-character tends to dematerialise for long stretches of the novel, becoming absolute and depersonalised gaze:

Vedo: Le videocamere di sicurezza ai pali della luce o dei semafori hanno le spie led che pulsano nel giorno che acceca. Non c’è nessuno e pulsano. Inquadrano il luogo sempre uguale, non passa nessuno, il frame non si modifica. Riprendono il nulla.<sup>603</sup>

Non vedo: i morti. Bisogna vedere i cadaveri, è urgente sapere come li trattano, come li malnutriscono.<sup>604</sup>

The anaphoric and obsessive repetition of the verb, ‘vedere’, contrasts with the insignificance and indefiniteness of the images reported, to which the narrator is often unable to attribute any meaning (‘mi sento un testimone, non so di cosa’).<sup>605</sup>

Secondly, many of the narrated circumstances are extremely implausible – such as the claim made by the narrator to have entered intensive care units.<sup>606</sup> The description is, nonetheless, possible because the author reassembles stories, images, videos and announcements with which people have been bombarded since the beginning of 2020.

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<sup>601</sup> Genna, *Reality*, p. 2806, Kindle ebook.

<sup>602</sup> It is no coincidence that the back cover of the book draws a parallel with the journalist Svjetlana Aleksievič, famous for documenting the war in Afghanistan or the Chernobyl disaster.

<sup>603</sup> Genna *Reality*, p. 132, Kindle ebook.

<sup>604</sup> Genna *Reality*, p. 142, Kindle ebook.

<sup>605</sup> Genna, *Reality*, p. 105, Kindle ebook.

<sup>606</sup> Genna, *Reality*, p. 313, Kindle ebook.

L'immagine che rappresenta al meglio il tempo: la vediamo, la scegliamo, è abbastanza pulita, la accettiamo, ci euforizziamo per un attimo osservandone la verità, profonda o superficiale che essa sia, la accarezziamo, e le organizziamo attorno un'economia dell'istantanea, con l'ansia da scoop e la dose minima di estetica che secondo noi sono necessarie a istoriare la tragedia del momento. Infine eccola, l'immagine perfetta: un'infermiera, schiantata dal sonno subitaneo sulla scrivania, ripresa di spalle, riversa con il capo contro la tastiera di un personal computer, in un momento di cedimento nel corso del turno proibitivo.<sup>607</sup>

Very often – as in the case of the nurse picture described above – Genna's writing is ekphrastic: rather than describing reality, it engages in the re-interpretation of visual signs and visual resources taken from other media outlets. Therefore, readers are encouraged to perform two different tasks. They have to question the mediatic storytelling by looking at the documents he offers from a different perspective. Furthermore, they are asked to re-experience, through narrative, traumatic circumstances for the second time. The writer employs this type of approach towards traumatic events to underline an endemic characteristic of our present condition ('Come stiamo ripetendo tutto! come tutto è una ripetizione! Un secolo plagia l'altro e nulla andrà bene, è tutto soltanto un perdere ciò che si ama').<sup>608</sup>

In passage above, an explicit use of 'we' is also striking, as it has two main functions: on the one hand, as suggested by Stefano Montefiori, it adds a new chapter to the story about the city of Milan that Genna has sketched in his books:<sup>609</sup>

Sogniamo luxury. Siamo un intero sistema produttivo. Ci sviluppiamo esuberando, annoiati, nei ritmi nervosi che ci impongono le camere di commercio unite, le blockchain che sogniamo, siamo in sviluppo perenne, tiriamo la corda che non si spezzerà mai, abbiamo risorse di flessibilità inimmaginabili, ritmi impensati, è la nostra età dell'oro, nostra e non loro. Questo siamo noi, Milano.<sup>610</sup>

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<sup>607</sup> Genna *Reality*, p. 1607, Kindle ebook.

<sup>608</sup> Genna *Reality*, p. 2058, Kindle ebook.

<sup>609</sup> Stefano Montefiori, 'Inimmaginabile, eppure reale Viaggio nell'apocalisse Covid. Giuseppe Genna racconta i giorni più tragici e sconvolgenti della pandemia in Italia', *Corriere della Sera*, 30 July 2020.

<sup>610</sup> Genna *Reality*, p. 396, Kindle ebook.

On the other hand, the writer introduces some more general comments on the economic and moral decline of which the pandemic has become an allegorical catalyst. In a sense, the spreading of Covid-19 and the measures taken to contain it have exposed glitches in the hyper-liberal model – the malfunctioning of which has contributed to fuelling the post-truth environment. Thus, Genna reads the spreading of virus as the consequence of the constant exploitation of the earth resources by human endeavours. This observation brings about a fundamental message to humanity as a whole: we have to reduce our impact on the planet, to behave responsibly, and to be aware of our activities' effects ('Come stavamo andando di fretta e distratti! Ci sembrava di essere tritutati. Il mondo da anni non mi piaceva più, tutto era eccessivo. E ora ci viene tolta ogni cosa, tranne forse la poesia').<sup>611</sup>

In addition to this, Genna presents the pandemic as a means to make other implicit considerations about the Italian socio-cultural state – but this feeling could also be applied outside the national borders of Italy. Such evaluations, although without explicitly vocalizing them, are in line with the definition of post-truth itself. In other words, they showcase today's tendency to make political claims on the basis of our emotions and personal perceptions, rather than on the basis of evidence:

La pandemia italiana è questa: un Paese sotto fortissima dispercezione (gli immigrati in Italia sono il 7 per cento, ma due terzi degli italiani credono che siano il quadruplo) e che alimenta la dispercezione stessa in un'esperienza di caos virale, di patologia ormai congenita – una malattia sociale profonda, forse irrimediabile.<sup>612</sup>

In another passage Genna describes the new technological revolution and the recent anthropological shift. These two phenomena have accelerated the process of spectacularisation of events and dismantled the paradigms of traditional politics:

A fine degli anni Ottanta del secolo scorso il filosofo Guy Debord osservava proprio alle latitudini italiane la nascita di una forma peculiare di società dello spettacolo, fondata su caratteristiche specifiche: il continuo rinnovamento tecnologico, la fusione economico-statale, il segreto generalizzato, il falso indiscutibile e un eterno presente. Sembra una descrizione filologica dell'attualità, di ciò che è accaduto fino a quando il virus lo ha sospeso in un'ipotesi, non più

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<sup>611</sup> Genna *Reality*, p. 1400, Kindle ebook.

<sup>612</sup> Genna *Reality*, p. 1359, Kindle ebook.

accettandolo come una realtà scontata e acquisita per sempre. La storia si è incaricata di confermare questa diagnosi e il panico da contagio di esemplificare una situazione in cui la politica si è trasfigurata in caotica.<sup>613</sup>

Like in the example given above, the text offers many comments that openly reveal the author's political assumptions. Furthermore, the text shows other stylistic solutions that inform the description of post-truth narrative outlined so far in my research. For instance, the book's central point appears to present hypotheses about the way we perceive, transmit and make sense of facts, as well as about the function of literature in this setting. As in the cases of Siti and Falco, the title here already provides a clear interpretative key. Indeed, the word, 'reality,' would not sound like the English equivalent of the word 'realità' to an Italian audience. On the contrary, the use of the English term immediately evokes 'reality shows', i.e. tv programmes that openly simulate supposed real-life moments. Hence Genna, through a subtle irony, puts in contrast the ambivalent meaning of the title with the apparent peremptoriness of the subtitle to alert the most attentive readers of the spirit that informs the book. In describing contemporary events – and even one of such great and weighty scale – literature cannot but intensify its unrealistic and mediated effect. Hence, fiction cannot escape the flow of narratives of which contemporary news are made, but only interact with them from the inside.

Therefore, for both the writer and the inhabitants of contemporary era, truth appears to be an inhibited and contradictory concept. Genna does not endeavour to uncover any unknown detail, or to disclose new information on the pandemic. Seemingly, he refuses to consider his presence and participation to the narrated facts as a mark for an objective account. In fact, in Genna's opinion, truth itself is absent in the circumstances he contemplates:

[...] io ero lì, sono sempre dove succede qualcosa, vedo tutto da quaggiù e mi guardo bene dal riportare con fedeltà quanto ho scrutato, perché nella cronaca non c'è mai stata la verità e solo distorcendo dà corpo a una febbre che è vera testimonianza.<sup>614</sup>

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<sup>613</sup> Genna, *Reality*, p. 1347, Kindle ebook (italics are in the text).

<sup>614</sup> Genna, *Reality*, p. 193, Kindle ebook.

This form of ‘realismo gnostico’ that ‘può solo puntare al cuore dell’essere, senza afferrarlo, ma lambendolo e perciò scoprendolo’ is what makes *Reality* a significant text within today’s narrative frame.<sup>615</sup> In order to understand the political value embedded in such an approach, one has to abandon the traditional notion of literary realism. It is not by chance that Donnarumma, with reference to Genna’s works, questions the fact that ‘la volontà di partecipare alla vita civile e farsi storico del presente possa trovare spazio in strutture narrative che, per loro stessa declinazione postmoderna, assumono una sfumatura derealizzante’.<sup>616</sup> In fact, writing in the post-truth era means confronting a context in which the means of mass communication and digital technologies have already de-realised reality and called into question the very status of truth.

In order to counteract the state of things just described, Genna employs postmodern narrative devices overcoming any form of scepticism toward them. Among them, he also deploys conspiracy theories. As David Ward points out, they have been a constant element in Genna’s fiction since the beginning of his career.<sup>617</sup> In *Reality*, the function of suggesting alternative interpretations of the facts is performed by the character of the ‘capomastro’. Being a former member of the secret service – this is a common trope in Genna’s detective novels – he has access to information that is not at the disposal of the general public. For instance, he anticipates that the measures taken after the discovery of ‘patient one’ of Codogno – where the pandemic seemed to have started in Italy – were to become signs of an attempted ‘coup d’état’ performed by the state itself. As Chimenti suggested with regard to other authors’ books, here too the conspiracy theory does not serve as a ‘dispositivo di smascheramento’ but as a ‘dispositivo di automascheramento’.<sup>618</sup> This is because, in the words of Boscolo and Jossa, the truth ‘non sta né nel racconto ufficiale, né nel suo capovolgimento complottistico, ma solo nello smontaggio costante dei meccanismi che inscenano la loro verità’.<sup>619</sup> If conspiracy theories are – as discussed in chapter one – a key elements within the condition of post-truth, in *Reality* Genna aims to defuse their effect, rather than to linger on it:

[s]appiamo tutto. Non sappiamo niente. È un precipitarsi a vuoto. Capomastro e i suoi girano a vuoto, si aggirano nel vuoto [...] Una scienza inesatta che riteneva di essere precisa e implacabile, la

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<sup>615</sup> Boscolo and Jossa, *Scritture di resistenza*, p. 31.

<sup>616</sup> Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, p. 71.

<sup>617</sup> Ward, *Contemporary Italian Narrative and 1970s Terrorism*, p. 3575, Kindle ebook.

<sup>618</sup> Chimenti, ‘Lo spessore memoriale del presente’, p. 151.

<sup>619</sup> Boscolo and Jossa, *Scritture di resistenza*, p. 32.

disciplina investigativa, rincorre la trama che si dipana di ora in ora, sempre più prevedibilmente imprevedibile. La noia fibrillante è lo sfondo. Il sentimento di inutilità è un periodo ipotetico del secondo tipo: impossibilità nel presente.<sup>620</sup>

Therefore, as maintained by Ward, also in *Reality* the conspiracy does not offer the consoling and satisfying effect usually accorded it in traditional detective novels, but rather leaves a sense of dissatisfaction and incompleteness.<sup>621</sup>

The last aspect I will focus on concerns the way Genna uses the devices of irony, metafiction, and self-referentiality to comment on his own status as a writer and on his own literary activity. From this point of view too, Genna presents the reader with contrasting and opposing readings. On the one hand, he claims the need for writers and intellectuals to comment on political circumstances. ('E io sono sveglio, sono uno dei custodi, trovo il prossimo agitando il legno acceso tra gli ex voto accanto a me. Perché veglio? Uno deve vegliare, dicono. Uno deve essere presente').<sup>622</sup> On the other hand, the book questions the social responsibility of literature itself. While wandering across the uninhabited streets of Milan, Genna is stopped by a policeman:

[...] il comandante mi chiede perché sono in giro e io rispondo che lavoro e domanda che lavoro e io dico lo scrittore e lui risponde che non è un lavoro, non è un 'lavoro ufficiale', che devo andare a casa, devo andare a sottopormi al tampone, questa tosse che ho è criminale, sono 260 euro di multa, rischio tre mesi di reclusione perché sto facendo lo scrittore.<sup>623</sup>

With the extract above – similarly to Siti and Falco – Genna trivialises the function of literature within the ranks of today's social order, but – like the other two writers – he suggests that the narrative's relevance lies in marginality after all. In this sense, the three writers seem conscious of the fact that the contemporary cultural condition urges intellectuals to take a stance on the unsettling political scenario to which they bear witness. Nevertheless, they are also perfectly aware that the public distrust in their social role continues to grow

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<sup>620</sup> Genna, *Reality*, p. 193, Kindle ebook.

<sup>621</sup> Ward, *Contemporary Italian Narrative and 1970s Terrorism*, p. 3587, Kindle ebook.

<sup>622</sup> Genna, *Reality*, p. 1398, Kindle ebook.

<sup>623</sup> Genna, *Reality*, p. 128, Kindle ebook.

[i]o sono lo scrittore, cosa ci faccio qui?, l'ospite incongruo, embedded a questa meglio gioventù che straparla a contratto nasale, il tono aziendale milanese approdato alla noia lenta, alla dissuasione nei confronti di ogni ragione di vita sensata.<sup>624</sup>

Ma non va detto nulla, la scrittura diminuisce quel momento, se si distende con i suoi effetti, con le retoriche prive di preghiera. La letteratura è uccisa dagli scrittori, ma lo spirito non è ucciso dagli spirituali.<sup>625</sup>

If, as Genna claims also in the aforementioned interview to Zone K, the demand for literary works will run out in the future, the present still represents a transitional phase in which literature produces its own form of paradoxical, incongruous and liminal resistance.

These observations are even more evident in the last section of the novel, titled '*Oltre la fine*'. In the last pages, through the portrayal of a funeral parade, Genna symbolically represents the burial of all the Italian victims of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the final paragraphs the author portrays the anonymous mass of survivors as people returning to their own lives, working through their grief, ready to leave the tragedy behind their back, and to throw themselves into the future. Yet, their desire to move forward is impeded by the fact that no one seems to have really grasped what happened. The concluding lines imply that no one, nor media sources, nor those who suffered from the pandemic, nor writers, can render this trauma more intelligible. In such a context, the least that narrative can do is act as a trigger for the process of decoding to take place:

soltanto allora, nessuno escluso, tutti cominciarono a chiedersi l'uno con l'altro cosa è successo.<sup>626</sup>

Analysing the three texts in question undoubtedly reveals several differences, both in the way they interpret the narrative device of first-person narration and in the way they use

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<sup>624</sup> Genna, *Reality*, p. 369, Kindle ebook (italics are in the text).

<sup>625</sup> Genna, *Reality*, p. 2601, Kindle ebook.

<sup>626</sup> Genna, *Reality*, p. 3305, Kindle ebook.

fiction to describe and comment on social problems of a certain magnitude. Nevertheless, these works also have some interesting points in common. While I touched on the thematic component in the introduction to the chapter, I will here refer predominantly to the texts' stylistic aspects. As emerges from the close reading offered in the lines above, all three authors employ literary rhetorical devices in various ways: through metafiction, the breaking of the fourth wall, and the display of the status of fiction, they stimulate the reader's cognitive participation and invite the questioning of the facts represented. Thus, in these novels, the use of the first-person narrator serves to create a flexible understanding of truthfulness.

Unlike in Saviano's autofiction, the narrator-character in these cases does not act as guarantor of any truth external to the text. Siti uses the writerly expedients and the paratext to blur the line separating reality and fiction. Moreover, through the trick of Tommaso's confession, he creates an additional filter between himself and the truth of the facts. Falco reduces his existence to the sole element of work and offers himself to the reader as an exemplary case through which to observe the social aspect of labour precariousness, only to declare in the finale the irrelevance of his own narrative. Genna meanwhile, makes explicit his desire to shed light on an event perceived as a possible epochal turning point, in order to proclaim the failure to achieve this goal at the end of the book. In other words, through their narrative devices, the three texts are rooted in the paradoxes of our time, without solving problems, but rather letting readers play their part in deciphering them.



## ~ CONCLUSIONS ~

In this research work I have come to terms with a very compelling assumption: the age of post-truth is a fact, as it involves radical and lasting changes in our political and cultural assets. Since my aim is to analyse literary commitment and cultural agency in the present time, this position opens up three research perspectives: the historicising one, the sociology of culture and the theory of literature. The first is undoubtedly the most hazardous: photographing the present from too close implies focusing on some matters and omitting others. In order to avoid this risk, I have been less concerned with this aspect and when I have been, I have made manifest the discretionary nature of my statements. Despite this, it is possible to draw the line at some of the more obvious concepts, based on the findings in the chapters of this work. To start with post-truth is a further step within postmodernity, which does not recover but distorts and partly liquidates the paradigms of the modern era: the faith in constant progress, the confidence in rationality as the gateway to truth, the search for totalising theories. The recent phase of technological evolution and the advent of digital technology has marked a radical turning point in human history, as well as an anthropological revolution. As Byung-Chul Han argues, the era of collective spaces and institutions is over and has given way to a highly individualised society, inhabited by the new strain of ‘homo digitalis’.<sup>627</sup> In this sense, it sounds like we are able to fulfil Linda Hutcheon’s task and find a name to the unknown cultural trend generated by electronic development. In the Epilogue to her essay, the scholar suggested that ‘postmodernism needs a new label of its own’ and she left her readers with the challenge ‘to find it and name it for the twenty-first century’.<sup>628</sup>

In accepting Hutcheon’s challenge, I have argued that post-truth is the most effective label to define the first decades of the new millennium. In my work, I also claimed that intellectuals and the world of culture reacted to this new state of affairs in a twofold way. On the one hand, those who – like Luperini or Egan – have detected a condition of decline to address and halt; on the other hand, there are those who, like Casadei,<sup>629</sup> see the drive for positive change.

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<sup>627</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Nello sciame. Visioni del digitale* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2015), pp. 22-30.

<sup>628</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 181.

<sup>629</sup> Casadei, *Letteratura e controvalori*, p. 129.

In this sense, I believe that post-truth shall be thought as an apocalyptic paradigm, in the double meaning of the term. In the first, the adjective is understood in the biblical sense derived from the Johannine text, and therefore as an event of destruction and palingenesis that bears dramatic and menacing connotations. In the second, following the etymological meaning of ‘revelation’, we can interpret it as the discovery of a wide range of transformations already operating beneath the surface of our social environment and with which we must coexist with.

These reflections bring us closer to the field of sociology of culture and literature. As I stated in the introduction to this work, it is hard to imagine that the technological, political, and social transformations taking place in the post-truth turn would not force us to rethink the way in which we disseminate and receive culture and knowledge. For this reason, I have examined the way they impact the spheres of art, literature, scholarship, and cultural industry. The contemporary era is still going through an adjustment phase, and this involves paradoxes that also affect the domain of culture and its circulation. According to Casadei, the new Internet dimension creates the ‘nuovo-nuovo’, which the inhabitants of the new millennium have to come to terms with. By the same logic, literary and cultural criticism itself must be able to evolve and adapt, to find ‘ampiezza e velocità’.<sup>630</sup> The web has brought the accumulation of narratives and information to an entirely unprecedented scale. In this scenario, applying – as Italian cultural and literary critics, for instance, continue to do – the top-down paradigms typical of the previous era, in which TV and newspapers were the main means of communication, is extremely ineffectual. The advent of the Internet has produced two antithetical effects. On the one hand, it has definitively democratised culture and knowledge, making them accessible to all and realising the dream of completely free information; on the other, it has trivialised the dialectic between the parties and the quality of the contents, in order to simplify and facilitate their circulation. This implies the need for intellectuals and artists to adapt and operate according to perspectives appropriate to the times. Firstly, they must accept, as Antonello suggested a few years ago – referring to Hall’s theories –, that they are operating in a de-ideologised and post-hegemonic context.<sup>631</sup> In the age of post-truth, new digital devices, web algorithms, and social media favour the diffusion of ready-made micro-ideologies, hence trying to oppose this compartmentalisation of worldviews with new totalising and programmatic metanarratives would make little sense.

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<sup>630</sup> Casadei, *Letteratura e controvalori*, p. 132.

<sup>631</sup> Antonello, *Dimenticare Pasolini*, pp. 62-63.

As suggested in my study, it is much more profitable to adopt communication approaches that operate according to a participatory and bottom-up logic. This means adopting methods that absorb contemporary communication dynamics and deconstruct them from the inside. Secondly, the new cultural model poses the problem of reception and of reaching an audience. In the words of Giuseppe Genna, embracing the logic of today's media with the aim of revealing its ethical flaws is confronted with the risk of exclusion from the public arena and so the difficulty of reaching a wide audience.<sup>632</sup> In a general sense, this requires a predisposition to engage with the new means of communication, creating hybrid and transmedia cultural products, and coming to terms with the now non-elitist character of the world of art and knowledge. From the literary perspective, this attitude entails being aware, as Boscolo and Jossa suggest, of the marginality that is inherent to the realm of literature.<sup>633</sup> With this in mind, the prototypical post-truth writers and critics presented in this paper analyse the political value of literary artefacts in the light of individual rather than collective criteria. That is to say that the political substance of a narrative – and more generally of literary texts – is expressed in their ability to produce empathy, raise questions and doubts, and stimulate political awareness at an individual level, rather than in their capacity to propose definitive answers and collective solutions.

The last and most conspicuous study perspective proposed in my work finally concerns the field of literary theory, the aim of which was to determine, through critical and textual reading, the essential features of the poetics of post-truth. The descriptive and prescriptive component of this intellectual effort has allowed me to trace in the work of some recent Italian authors the signs of an adaptation to the current shift; but at the same time, it has enabled me to underline and suggest the most relevant features by examining them against the backdrop of the post-truth condition. Furthermore, in engaging in this twofold task, I have touched on some of the theoretical aspects that took root in the fertile debate around the relationship between politics and society that has interested Italian scholars. These certainly include the issues of realism and the ethics of narration. With regard to the former, scholars have recently identified in the emergence of new forms of realism at the threshold of the 2010s the overcoming of postmodernist nihilism and the return to the seriousness of narration. The various labels that emerged in Italy – which I have mentioned in the course of this work from the introduction – sought to capture this aspect. However, there was still

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<sup>632</sup> I already mentioned Genna's interview with Sara Chiappori on chapter four.

<sup>633</sup> Boscolo and Jossa, *Scritture di resistenza*, p. 9.

the problem of how to satisfy this ‘reality hunger’<sup>634</sup> through literature, when media culture was eroding the boundaries between the real and the unreal. Among the solutions put forward by narrators and appreciated by critics figured the hybridisation of fiction with other forms of writing such as those of essayistic genres or journalistic reports. In my research I have exposed the limits of this position by showing its ideological character. However, the central point of my study was to emphasise that post-truth has dispelled any doubts about the need for a change of perspective. If realism is, as Hanna Serkowska says, ‘il modo di plasmare il materiale di un’opera conformemente alla maniera in cui viene intesa e definita la verità sul reale in una determinata epoca’<sup>635</sup> the advent of the Internet, web 3.0, and post-truth condition marks a watershed in this respect as well. Within a framework in which reality and truth take on ever more elusive and paradoxical traits, I believe that the most appropriate distinction is that drawn by Alberto Casadei when he distinguishes between ‘realismo ristretto’ and ‘realismo allargato’.<sup>636</sup> In the scholar’s conception, while the former type is still too tied to concepts of faithful representation of the world, the latter freely elaborates reality on the basis of personal biological-cognitive, and historical-cultural assumptions. My interpretation is that the changes brought about by the post-truth era push the limits of realism even further, to encompass a now virtual reality, composed of heterogeneous narratives, languages, and materials.<sup>637</sup> Therefore, I have identified in the texts included in this work the traits of a narrative endeavour that addresses reality outside both the unsatisfactory canons of the realism intended as mimetic and documentaristic representation, and the forms of nonfictional narrative attentive to facts that was highly considered among Italian intellectuals. In other words, the post-truth narrative has already accepted the challenge of how to narrate post-reality – or perhaps even post-post-reality – which led it to articulated and interesting solutions that will depart from the past – which has not been completely surpassed yet.

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<sup>634</sup> The expression refers to the title of an essay in which David Shield identified the spread of hybrid forms of writing, halfway between essay and fiction, as the most important feature of the contemporary literary scene. It is a position that has had a certain influence on Italian critics, as well. For instance, Donnarumma draws on Shield’s theories in *Ipermodernità*; David Shield, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2010).

<sup>635</sup> Hanna Serkowska, ‘Introduzione’, pp. xiv-xv.

<sup>636</sup> Casadei, *Letteratura e controvalori*, pp. 85-88.

<sup>637</sup> This reading seems to be endorsed by Casadei himself in the pages of a more recent essay in which he dismisses, in the age of the Internet, the political weight of mimetic-realist literature that has to give way to texts that incorporate the plurality of languages and experiences offered by the web; Casadei, *Biologia della letteratura*, pp. 173-96.

The second aspect is linked to the one just discussed and concerns the propensity – very evident in critics such as Donnarumma or Luperini – to make the ethics of narration coincide with adherence to truth. This interpretation overlaps with a view of literature that once again brings it closer to the logic of non-fiction and journalism. It is not by chance that Boscolo and Jossa ask whether literature should go ‘contro il giornalismo e la politica?’.<sup>638</sup> Clearly such a question works as a starting point for reflection on political engagement in fiction. In my work, however, I have adopted a point of view that does not see ethics and factual truth as strictly interlinked. As Palumbo Mosca has already claimed, the political and ethical value of fiction lies in its faculty to invent its own truths.<sup>639</sup> To this vital consideration the post-truth narrative adds other equally important principles. Taking into account the individual characteristic of ethical thinking, the authors I have analysed put into practice strategies of reader empowerment that exploit the potential of perspective-taking, empathic processes, sceptical thinking, and the deconstruction of media discourses, to generate highly political contents and reflections. Post-truth narrative thus suggests an idea of literary commitment that, on the one hand, abandons the -isms and ideological approaches linked to tradition, especially Italian one; on the other, it generates very relevant political reflections without renouncing the questioning of the very status of literature. In so doing, by investing in the individual relationship with the reader, these texts raise questions rather than provide answers, they put dominant narratives under stress without giving way to uncritical and superficial interpretations, and they hone the capacity for self-assessment. These aspects, as emerges from the social and cultural survey conducted in my study, are politically highly relevant in the post-truth condition. From the point of view of literary techniques, as emerged from the close reading of the texts, these effects are achieved through the use of writerly narrative solutions – for example the exhibiting of sources and the use of paratext –, the employment of postmodern traits such as irony and metafiction, or intertextual and intermediary strategies. In general, the poetics of post-truth is less interested in a careful reconstruction of facts than in dissecting and deconstructing the very means by which facts are mediated and transformed into political discourses.

Finally, in developing my argument on the post-truth narrative, I made discretionary choices that were functional to my intentions. I have therefore chosen a series of texts in which the above-mentioned elements are clearly present and which are grouped into two

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<sup>638</sup> Boscolo and Jossa, *Scritture di resistenza*, p. 15.

<sup>639</sup> Palumbo Mosca, *L'invenzione del vero*, p. 66.

categories, determined by criteria that are neither exclusively formal nor thematic. On the one hand, novels whose subject matter was history: what interested me from this point of view was to take into consideration a typology of texts in which, by statute, the confrontation with the transformation of real events into discourse is a peculiar trait. In addition, I was interested in texts dealing with contemporary political phenomena and written in the first person. In this latter case, the motivation was to examine the way in which writers construed direct experience of reality. Moreover, another feature common to all the selected texts is the hybrid aspect whereby narrative and nonfictional elements coexist, but without sacrificing their ultimately fictional nature.

This research pathway exhausts many of the issues examined and answers many questions. In any case, it represents only an initial attempt to grasp a literary trajectory that is still in its initial stage. Other choices could have been made and will be made in the future: for example, it will be important to verify how the same questions have been answered by works in the field of audio-visuals – which, as Casadei states, is now dominant over literature;<sup>640</sup> or to open up to comparison with the results obtained and the strategies put into practice in other national literary contexts. In addition to these slightly more distanced instances, there are other potential lines of research within the Italian scene. As is now evident, the social and cultural dynamics within the post-truth turn exhibit an emancipatory and destabilising quality. As revealed through the texts examined – and especially highlighted in the analysis of *Roma negata* by Igiaba Scego and *Flashover* by Giorgio Falco – one of the characteristics of post-truth poetics is to critically question dominant discourses acting in a thoroughly post-hegemonic perspective. At this stage, I have not found – except in a few cases – works that put this aspect at the heart and that, at the same time, display the technical and formal characteristics that I had identified as distinctive of post-truth narrative. As I did not want to adopt purely thematic selection criteria - which I felt did not serve my purposes – I discarded the idea of focusing exclusively on texts that questioned the patriarchal, Eurocentric, and anthropocentric view of the world. Nevertheless, I am convinced that texts of this kind will emerge in the near future, offering further challenges and research stimuli that will serve to further enrich the findings that I have reached in my work.

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<sup>640</sup> Casadei, *Letteratura e controvalori*, p. 141.

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