Teoria e pratica in un "tempo devastato e vile"

Maurizio Vito, Wesleyan University
Hey, everyone. This conference could not come fast enough, for many different reasons. Since January, when I started organizing the material for my talk, so many things happened, both in Italy and, si parva licet, in my own small world, that it was almost impossible to keep up with the changes and be still on my original topic. Thus, I became more creative by the day. Eventually, tired of the twists the Italian cultural and social mess was imposing over my talk, I adopted Umberto Eco’s theory that a title should not explain the content it refers to, and I stopped adjusting it. The title of my talk, then, only partially reveals the content I am going to deliver today. "Stat Roma pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus." (Bernardo di Morlay, De contemptu mundi).

The Idea of Italy, then. Many speakers have already talked about a garden-variety of compelling, remarkable aspects of this one-hundred-fifty-year-old idea. I’ll use a combination of images and literariness, so to speak, to convey one more idea of Italy, one that has to do with ethics and politics or, differently said, vizi privati e pubbliche virtù. This crossroad, almost a chiastic pattern, will heretofore be under my scrutiny throughout my presentation.
adds that nello spazio sempre piú ampio che si apre tra presunto benessere e fatica quotidiana del vivere crescono l'invidia, i rancori, le intolleranze.”

SLIDE 3

No, Italy is more similar to what the Corte dei Conti tells us, year in and year out. For example, in one single year, the 2010, charges of corruption against public officers increased a sound 30%. It is bad enough, but [CLICK] it pales if compared to the previous year. In the 2009 there was a whopping 229% increase in charges. These numbers are appalling, only a well-oiled propaganda machine can deflect attention over such a pressing issue. Revelli mentions envy, wrath, and we could easily add many other deadly sins.

SLIDE 4

Arrogance, Lust, Greed… Contemporary Italy appears to have taken only baby steps, if any, since Hieronymus Bosch’s age. The 1990s have been years of civil and political unrest after corruption had reached arguably unprecedented, massive magnitude.

SLIDE 5

In the very same years that prosecutor Falcone, first, and Borsellino, later were killed by Mafia, another pool of prosecutors was finalizing the investigation which became known as Mani Pulite, a massive intervention against corruption and extortion that had spread all over the country. The unparalleled symbol of such a national decadence, is portrayed in the picture below. Former Prime Minister Bettino Craxi is mocked by a large crowd. Coins – monetine – are thrown to him as he exits from his Roman residence, the Hotel Raphael. The protesters gathered outside the location were chanting “Vuoi anche queste, Bettino vuoi anche queste?” on the rhythm of the popular tune
**Guantanamera**, the day after the parliament denied the Milanese prosecutors the necessary authorization to put on trial the politician. Infamously, Craxi would flee the country and will die in exile in Hammamet, Tunisia.

Quite predictably, the institutional debacle has carried over and into the XXI century, as **IL BEL PAESE** has been under the degrading heel of **berlusconismo (the late phase of Craxismo one may say)**, a wide-ranging non-cultural view that thrives on polarization, immorality, and disregard for Italian anti-fascist legacy. It is hardly deniable that Italians have undergone an anthropological mutation in the past 30 years, since commercial TV has dismantled the old imaginary and recreated a distorted, disciplined new one. From Pasolini on, the concept that language, lifestyle and thinking of Italians have undergone a radical change is no longer questioned. So much so that some media analysts characterize public Italy in this way:

**SLIDE 6**

Actually, the captions are mine. Anyway, bear with me for a minute, as I’d like to call your attention on the woman on the left (right side of the central figure, Mister B).

She appears to represent the idea of Woman that average Italian male considers, nowadays, the good one (the one on Mr. B.’s left is, of course, totally evil…). Not only that: on her back, this right, good lady has painted a soccer flag. Finally, miss Nicole Minetti, the young lady I am pointing at you in this photoshopped picture, sits in the Regional Council of Lombardy, as a political member of PDL (Mr. B’s party). Sex symbol, sport fan, politician: she has it all…

All jokes aside, painting with brush strokes and sweeping statements the Idea of Italy would be obviously inaccurate. What has been said in the previous session is of
course also part of the large picture. Yet, why almost everything that is said and written in Italy today involves Mr. Berlusconi? Why is it almost impossible to even think of Italy without calling into the picture this man, whose international reputation is definitely astonishing and spectacular, albeit not exactly for the reasons one would like to be labeled as such?

**SLIDE 7**

I believe the reason is that, because of his boundless economic empire, mostly concentrated in the media but not only, Mr. B. turned himself in THE MASTER NARRATOR who has been very busy in attempting to silence every other non-aligned, critical voice. If you combine his Master Narration with the anthropological mutation I mentioned earlier, the results are devastating and its effects are clearly visible on things and people: the latter make up an army of so called **berlusconi**, individuals who think and behave as if they were Mr. B. I said, at the beginning of my talk, that berlusconismo thrives on polarization (liberism vs. communism has been berlusconi’s mantra since his infamous “discesa in campo”); moreover, rejection of the anti-fascist legacy post-Resistance, supremely embodied by the Italian Magna Charta, the Constitution, is also a tactic used time and again. This procedure has been so relentless that has contaminated and spread over the **berlusconi**.

Let me give you some recent examples.

**SLIDE 8**

In January 2011, a post-fascist politician, Raffaele Speranzon, in charge of the culture department of Venice Province, decides that some authors’ books must be taken off-shelf, because, in 2004, they signed a petition PRO-Cesare Battisti, a terrorist-turned-writer.
We do not have time to go deep into the Battisti case here, I will just assume that everyone has a more or less clear idea of the question (we can come back to this during the Q&A session, in case).

Among the authors censored by the post-fascist politician, Valerio Evangelisti, Massimo Carlotto, Tiziano Scarpa, Nanni Balestrini, Daniel Pennac, Giuseppe Genna, Giorgio Agamben, Girolamo De Michele, Lello Voce, Pino Cacucci, Christian Raimo, Sandrone Dazieri, Loredana Lipperini, Marco Philopat, Wu Ming, Antonio Moresco, Carla Benedetti, Stefano Tassinari. Of course, Speranzon was soon joined by similar DEFENSORES SAPIENTIAE, like Elena Donazzan.

SLIDE 9

Whom you can see in this recent picture, in the circle, as she pays her respect to the everlasting cultural values carried forward by the DECIMA MAS. Elena Donazzan is not merely a nostalgic young lady. She is also Assessore all’istruzione della Regione Veneto

SLIDE 10

A politician who, for example, distinguished herself through the spending of taxpayer’s money in order to buy Holy Bibles for the entire body of students of the Regione Veneto. Not to let her soul mate Speranzon alone in his holy crusade, she claimed that she would ask all the headschools of Veneto to “non diffondere tra i giovani le opere degli autori messi al bando.”

In so doing, these two ineffable figures claimed the right to ban books and authors, as if Italy’s today were Hieronymus Bosch’s Europe. And on account of this last inexcusable scheme I shall deny any more time to these assessori henceforth, and close here my pars
destruens. I just wanted to point out the absurdity of allegedly cultural and political operators whose main device is censorship and whose cultural background is highly suspect, to say the least. Nihil Novum Sub Soli, perhaps.

Let’s go back to the archetype, the master narrator, this contemporary Sheherazade who keeps his empire alive and kicking by means of uncorroborated tales. How can the Unique Narration, so pervasive of the Italian airwave, bookstores, newsstands, be countered? Libero, Il Giornale, Rai and Mediaset programs: an unmatched artillery that wages a daily war to difference. Yet, people are getting both angry and ingenious by the day.

SLIDE 11

For example, after the nth attack by the so-called “mudslinging machine,” on March 25 2010, journalists and other intellectuals have taken their talent on the internet and promoted a web event, called “Raiperunanotte,” that streamed live performances as well as political news and commentary over critical issues such as unemployment, outsourcing, defunded research institutions, social justice, corruption, and, of course, censorship. Throwing my own two cents on the table, I will tap the last, vast territory of the literary, wherein I will wander for the rest of my talk, all of the next five minutes that is. To begin with, let us provide with a literary definition of Mr. B.’s dysfunctional attitude, a mindset that spread around and influenced heavily Italy’s imaginary: Mr. B’s literary dysfunction is to be called, I believe, BOVARISM, from Marcel Flaubert’s masterpiece, a concept that describes an imagined and unrealistic vision of oneself. Today’s Italy – the Italy ensnared in and portrayed by the media, the same Italy I
attempted to unveil in my talk – is an embodiment of Emma. Franco Moretti, drawing on Jules de Gaultier, writes that

SLIDE 12

Bovarism, “grows ‘in accordance with the development of civilization’ […] it thrives on a division, on the ‘gap that exists in each individual between the imaginary and the real […] (88) ‘Being an attempt to reform collective reality according to the individual’s dreams, Bovarism entails the principle of failure’. It cannot succeed – at least one hopes, I am afraid we have to add.

And here it is where BAD FAITH (DEFINED BY Jean-Paul Sartre as “the art of forming contradictory concepts which unite in themselves both an idea and the negation of an idea”) comes also into the picture. [by the way, *GOOD FAITH, according to Cicero’s De Officiis, is what the Pirate, the enemy of all, lacks].

SLIDE 13

Moretti goes on saying: “Everything would be much simpler if we could dismiss Julien’s words as mere lies. […]. Imaginary life […] provides refuge for those values that have been repressed in public […]. Bad faith, in other words, is a way of living with the clash, which the modern era has greatly intensified, between professed and actual values.”

At this passage, the words GOP, “Family Day” and democristiani kept popping up in my head…

Bad faith, lies, imaginary life, professed and actual values: exchange Julien’s words with Today’s Public, Imagined Italy, and I believe the equation will ring true nonetheless.

At the beginning of my talk I mentioned the distich “vizi privati e pubbliche virtù” as a
crossroads upon which I would shed some light. When they are so far apart, as it seems to be the case here, we are undoubtedly facing a large number of issues. In particular, we seem to be staring at a quite worrisome case of waning social contract, a vanishing that concerns each and every institution, individual, subject. Thus, CHE FARE? What can we, as intellectuals, do to turn this tide? For starter, stop delegating to others what we ought to take into our own hands, stop thinking that it is NOT our responsibility to change the course of this tempo devastato e vile. Because it is. Not only ours for sure, but ours too nonetheless.

SLIDE 14

There are many facets that I consider noteworthy about the so-called neoepic, the critical and literary movement labeled by Wu Ming ABOUT 3 years ago. For example, the return of a literature that long ago would be labeled engageè, a literature that takes on “ardore civile” and why not? “Collera”, because sometimes getting angry at people simply is tantamount to display a glimpse of dignity and self-respect. Another encouraging factor that the neoepic movement shows is the return of authors who, beside writing engaged works, are also involved in literary criticism and, more importantly, political activism broadly defined, such as those who protested outside of a public library in Preganziol, Treviso, after the local administration threatened to burn books or take them off the shelf in the wake of the Battisti quarrel I have mentioned earlier.

SLIDE 15

Moreover, remarkable is also the emergence – better still, the return – of a hybrid genre, whose acronym is UNO, which stands for Unidentified Narrative Objects. The most famous prototype of UNO is Roberto Saviano’s Gomorrah. Babsi Jones’ Sappiano le
*mie parole di sangue* is also often mentioned when speaking of UNOs. Neither fiction nor any other consistent form of writings, these hybrid works employ different narrative strategies.

**SLIDE 16**

Finally, especially notable is the practice of collective writing. However, here I have to add a disclaimer for the purpose of clarity. As far as enlisting collective writing as neoepic, I stand in splendid isolation, so to speak, for nobody else does it, to my knowledge. Yet, I stubbornly insist that this practice is, by hooks and by crooks, neoepic. In fact, not only does collective writing remind the dawn of this heroic genre, when stories of love and war were told by multiple, anonymous tellers.

**SLIDE 17**

It also dovetails with the historical novel, a genre that has made a striking comeback in the years we are looking at. Collective writing and historical novel mirror one another as authors and pioneers of the web-based system “*Scrittura Industriale Collettiva*” Gregorio Magini and Vanni Santoni have recently stated. By way of his makeup the historical novel can be considered the closest form to epic. The writing by a Multitude represents, I argue, an unassailable anti-virus against possible threats such as moral corruption and dishonesty, which will open the door to the deadly sins shown earlier. Collective writing, in this tempo devastato e vile, shields authors and readers from the risk that those living imaginary lives are inevitably prone, as Moretti says: “the risk of ridiculousness.” THANK YOU.

PASOLINI: *L’inferno sta salendo da voi.*
Non ridere, non piangere, non esecrare, ma comprendere.

The death of the Italian Author/Intellectuals (and it concerns ALL of us in this business:)
Book Bloc, SIC, WM, Scrittori Precari, PolifoNIE, Convergence Culture


http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1ovwz8XVBM&feature=player_embedded

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gtw6t9VC5ZU&feature=player_embedded

Luttazzi, Raiperunanotte, parte 1 (6 minuti circa)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdQ4jpB4fHY

Comandante ANPI a Preganziol 27 gennaio 2011

http://tribunatreviso.gelocal.it/multimedia/2011/01/27/video/preganziol-reading-anti-censura-28010889/1