

The Long Shadow of the Violent Seventies

The Seventies, commonly linked with the Years of Lead and the strategy of tension, or, on the contrary, remembered as a season of liberation of countercultures and sexual emancipation of youth and women, are also a decade of reforms and innovations that restructured the entire social fabric of Italy.

From the Workers' Statute of 1970 to the reform of family law (1975), from the penitentiary reform of 1975 to the "Basaglia law" (1978), which shut down mental asylums, up to the democratisation of the police forces, a process started in 1969 and that became law (n. 121), in 1981. Furthermore, the passing of the legislation on divorce and voluntary interruption of pregnancy was confirmed with two referendums in 1974, adding to the key reforms introduced in the Seventies that established solid foundations for future changes while triggering the elaboration of memories able to project alternative paths into the future.

In the 1970s, the coexistence of parallel and contrasting realities finds its representation in an imaginary in which the climate of political and social violence predominates, characterised on screen by a political and militant vein and a seemingly hedonistic and uncommitted genre – the commedia all'italiana (comedy Italian style) – capable of documenting in grotesque forms the customs and vices of Italians. Overall, cultural productions (cinema, theatre, narrative, poetry, graphic novels, music etc.) reflect different conceptions of social and political conflict and transmit antagonistic memories, mediated in turn by the post-memory of subsequent generations. They often tend to interpret the past in terms of trauma and defeat in solidarity with the victims of terrorism or heirs of the utopias of countercultures or in the hope of being able to renew the memory of the revolutionary moment in contexts of protests similar to those of the 1970s.

A recently renewed critical interest has ignited coinciding with a succession of anniversaries, ranging from the dream of 1968 to the age of terrorism and movements of 1977 to the kidnapping of Aldo Moro in 1978. Here, we would like to mention some of the most recent publications in the field of Italian studies, including two volumes, a book edited by Silvia Contarini and Claudio Milanese and a special issue of the journal «Écritures» edited by Christophe Mileschi and Elisa Santalena.

The first, entitled Controculture italiane, is dedicated to the «Long 1968»¹, a temporal extension specifically related to Italian activism whose socio-cultural impact reverberates well into the Seventies and its countercultures with which our present is still fully dealing. We share the ambition to return to the “violent Seventies” to «explore what remains, what has really had an impact»² with this collection of essays; hence the metaphor of the shadow that extends over the present, an image that is also found in some essays in the form of the spectre that continues to visit our political subconscious.

The second volume is Anni Settanta: la grande narrazione³, a multidisciplinary approach with which we feel in tune. It reflects on the myth and disillusionment of the Seventies with a multiplicity of contemporary and subsequent perspectives.

We would also like to mention here a special issue (n. 11) of the journal «Écritures», Repenser les années 1970, which collects the critical fruits of the Nanterre conference of 2017. The symposium should have taken place in the Library of the Chamber of Deputies in Rome but was cancelled at the last minute, possibly because it was non-compliant with the “stringent criteria” that Italian institutions apply to protect the memory of Aldo Moro. The conference was thus held in Paris and titled Aldo Moro: Research, Politics, History. It covered various topics, shifting the discussion to less studied aspects of the statesman’s life and activities to analyse

¹ *Controculture italiane*, edited by S. Contarini and C. Milanese, Firenze, Franco Cesati Editore, 2019, p. 11.

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Anni Settanta: La grande narrazione*, edited by S. Contarini and C. Milanese, Firenze, Franco Cesati Editore, 2024.

*their impact on the present*⁴. Among these under-researched topics are those related to the Italian prison system, a matter of ongoing interest to which this monographic issue dedicates a series of interviews with authors, artists, and activists who have a direct experience of a (partially and unsatisfactorily) reformed penitentiary at the centre of the socio-political-cultural upheavals of the Seventies. The interviews with Mary Gibson, Patrizio Gonnella, Amir Issaa, Dacia Maraini, and Maria Giustina Laurenzi, conducted and edited by Elena Bellina (New York University) and Matteo Brera (Università di Padova / Seton Hall University), testify to how the riots, the violence, and the consequent attempts at reform implemented since the first half of the Seventies left us a prison system that the legislator has never been able to modernise fully, except in the face of emergencies such as the Covid crisis and acts of rebellion by prisoners linked to chronic overcrowding⁵.

The essays dedicated to culture, literature, and cinema demonstrate how people, moments, and events of the 1970s cannot be separated from their impact on individual and collective paths of the present in the eyes of critics and historians. For a political and aesthetic definition of the concept of revolutionary violence in social movements in the 1970s, the volume opens with contributions by Carlo Baghetti (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifiques) and Gerardo Iandoli (Aix-Marseille Université), who focus respectively on the revisitation of the poetics of Nanni Balestrini by the author himself and other writers (Tommaso di Ciaula and Antonio Pennacchi). Baghetti and Iandoli offer us the textual tools to conceive violence at a thematic level, as a topos in strikes and workers' demonstrations, and, at an aesthetic level, as an element inherent to the structure of artistic works, respectively. The two scholars' studies stem from the weakening of the imagery of violence created by Balestrini in the 1980s and 1990s and its re-elaboration in *La nuova violenza*

⁴ *Repenser les années 1970*, «Écritures», 11, 2019 edited by C. Mileschi and E. Santalena. Another collection of essays on Aldo Moro is *Il caso Moro. Memorie e narrazioni*, edited by L. Casalino, U. Perolino and A. Cedola, Massa, Transeuropa, 2016.

⁵ See, on the latter topic, S. BASILISCO and M. JANSEN, *Narrating COVID and Captivity in Italy: 'No Prison' Writings and the Restorative Potential of the Penitentiary*, in «Modern Italy», 2024, pp. 1-14.

illustrata, a text published posthumously in the footsteps of *La violenza illustrata* (1976).

Remaining in the (neo-)avant-garde field, Stefano Magni (Aix-Marseille Université) explores the techniques of collage and political activism with which the Gruppo 70 interpreted and represented the violence of the rallies with a commitment no less revolutionary than that of the more famous Gruppo 63.

Anna Taglietti (Università di Padova) shifts the focus towards the political positioning of intellectuals outside the scope of countercultures. In her essay dedicated to the “First International Congress for the Defense of Culture,” held in Turin (1973), the scholar examines documents produced during the conference entitled “Intellectuals for Freedom”, thus allowing us to observe the fortunate season that right-wing culture experienced in Italy mainly thanks to the involvement of intellectuals such as Giuseppe Berto, Julius Evola, Marino Gentile, and Armando Plebe.

A non-ideologically aligned position is that of Natalia Ginzburg, whose sacred and pre-political configuration of women takes shape outside of feminist movements, as Andrea Rondini (Università degli Studi di Macerata) demonstrates by analysing, among other things, the positions taken by the writer and intellectual on abortion in 1977. According to Ginzburg, only a mother should have the right to decide about her own pregnancy.

The generational dimension of the violence of those years is elaborated in the Bildungsroman *Piove all'insù* by Luca Rastello, published in 2006, at a time when the testimonies of terrorism of the second generations also gained a voice⁶. While Giulia Falistocco (Università degli Studi di Perugia) interprets the text in light of the struggles for work of the 1977 Movement, which prefigure the precariousness of work in the present, Andrea Brondino (The University of Manchester) compares it with the

⁶ On the post-memory of the victims of terrorism, see R. GLYNN, *The ‘Turn to the Victim’ in Italian Culture: Victim-centred Narratives of the Anni di Piombo*, in «Modern Italy», 18, 4, 2013, pp. 373-90; *Era mio padre. Italian Terrorism of the Anni di Piombo in the Postmemorials of Victims’ Relatives*, edited by S. Gastaldi and D. Ward, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2018.

horror novel *Le venti giornate di Torino* (1977) by Giorgio De Maria and the autobiographical *Città sommersa* by Marta Barone (2020), the latter dedicated to the memory of the author's father Leonardo, a young doctor unjustly convicted for being affiliated with terrorists and then acquitted. Adopting the ghost story as a means of representation, these novels offer a paradoxically realist lens through which to address the complexities and contradictions of an era that still lingers upon us.

Maria Bonaria Urban (KNIR-Reale Istituto Neerlandese di Roma / Universiteit van Amsterdam) also dedicates her essay to *Città sommersa* and, by relying on the critical toolkit of cultural memory studies, highlights the impact of violence on the hidden stories of the Seventies that tell of humanitarianism based on solidarity – and not on politics – that could mobilise into a transformative force also in the present. Since Leonardo's story is told by his daughter, the essay examines, in particular, how the generational dimension influences the type of memory mediated by the novel.

David Ward (Wellesley College) analyses *Il tempo materiale* by Giorgio Vasta (2008) and reveals to readers the impact of the violence of the terrorists' communiqués. These documents become – in the infantile mental deformation and on the outskirts of Palermo – a deviant form of «mythopoetic» expression capable to expose the harmful relationship between ideology and language.

The above essays on literature and the intellectual positioning of writers pave the way to three contributions that focus on cinema to discuss some key aspects of the history and memory of the Seventies: imprisonment, the role of the bourgeoisie, and a child's point of view.

Studying three films placed at different points on the genre spectrum – *L'istruttoria è chiusa, dimentichi* (D. Damiani, 1971), *Detenuto in attesa di giudizio* (N. Loy, 1971) and *Farfallon* (R. Pazzaglia, 1974) – Matteo Brera observes how the prison films produced in Italy in the years immediately preceding the prison reform of 1975 propose themselves as mirrors and interpreters not only of the ongoing cultural debate, but also and above all as witnesses of the long-standing shortcomings of a penal system still deeply rooted in the fascist Ventennio.

Monica Jansen (Universiteit Utrecht) discusses the transposition of the novel Un borghese piccolo piccolo by Vincenzo Cerami (1976) into the homonymous film by Mario Monicelli (1977), and analyses how the temporal moment coincides with the worsening of everyday violence and with the public positioning of Pier Paolo Pasolini and Italo Calvino who warned against the cultural mutation in progress and a fading of “humanism” in the capitalist bourgeoisie of the economic Boom.

Finally, Rachelle Gloudemans (KU Leuven) analyses how the use of a child’s point of view in three films of the 2010s (La prima cosa bella by Paolo Virzi, 2010; La kryptonite nella borsa by Ivan Cotroneo, 2011; and Anni felici by Daniele Luchetti, 2013) allows us to thematise the (im)possibility of going beyond discourses and images of political-social violence at the basis of the cultural memory of the Seventies.

For lay people, critics of various backgrounds, and according to the collective memory of the Italian post-war period, “violence” is a distinctive trait of the Seventies. The cultural products examined in the essays presented in this special issue analyse the multifaceted characteristics of those years in relation to the countercultures of the (neo) avant-garde, to the political, non-political, and ideological positions of writers and intellectuals of the time, and through the mediation of memories of the generations that followed.

In these essays, there are frequent and recurrent metaphors that refer to a dimension inaccessible to understanding, such as the infantile perspective, to hidden truths, such as the submerged city belonging to Italo Calvino’s imagery, to a past that continues to haunt the present – and in this regard see the “phantomisations” that Brondino speaks of in his contribution.

This monographic issue stands out in that it is a collection not only of studies on artistic productions and public interventions but also of dialogues with the experiences and points of view of observers who have witnessed firsthand the reality on which they are questioned, in case of history, (failed) reforms, distortions, and potential of the Italian prison system from the 1970s to this very day.

The combination of types of knowledge and the intertwining of levels of experience allow us to conclude that the memory of the “violent seventies” should not be imagined as a static and immutable archive crystallised in time but rather as the long shadow of a dynamic and transformative repertoire (textual, but also experiential and testimonial) that moves within time and opens new perspectives on the present and the future.

Finally, heartfelt gratitude goes to Leonardo Casalino and Ugo Perolino, without whose invaluable intellectual contributions this collection of essays would not have seen the light.

Matteo Brera and Monica Jansen