

Italian biopolitics¹

Once upon a time, Italy was a Fascist regime ruled by the Duce. He was the first historical instance of the physical embodiment of political power in Italy. His concern with his public image is demonstrated, for instance, by the letter “M” – coincidentally the same chosen by the monster of Düsseldorf – which he had written, as a symbol of approval onto official publicity photograph portraits circulated for propagandistic purposes. As has been observed since 1922, Mussolini’s face was divided into two independent parts: from the nose up – eyes, eyebrows and forehead – and from the mouth down to his chin and his jaw. The upper part was as mobile as the face of an actor, the lower part frozen like a statue made out of stone. If the upper part can be considered romantic, the lower was classical and it was this aspect that prevailed. His omnipresence was dramatically sabotaged in 1945, when he was hung upside down in piazzale Loreto and mocked by a ferocious crowd.

With the establishment of democracy, politicians discretely renounced physicality, presenting themselves as fundamentally asexualized human beings. People retain a proverbial memory of Andreotti – immortal leader of one of the biggest Christian parties of the Western world –, of his lucidity and especially of his vast and secret archive: here, it seems that the solutions to the most tangled and obscure mysteries of the First Italian Republic are conserved. Its contents included evidence pertaining to an event of 1978 – fifteen years after John Kennedy’s assassination –, which recalled the political body in an uncanny and sinister way with the execution of Andreotti’s colleague Aldo Moro. After two months of imprisonment, the latter’s lifeless body was found on May 9th in the trunk of a Renault 4.

At the end of the Sixties, well after the era of Neo-realist cinema, the Italian writer and film-maker Pier Paolo Pasolini declared that, in his country, he found the task of finding camera-worthy faces increasingly arduous and that, finally, interesting physiognomies were a thing of the past. The sub-proletarian universe that Pasolini had found in the Roman periphery or in the South of Italy and had described in his books and movies, was in the process of disappearing forever. This population was changing under the industrialization of the urban landscape and with the spectacularization of the society of consummation and the homogenization (“omologazione”) of politics. Television, in its attempt to impose a single life model – one that was, in Pasolini’s words, “hypocritical, conformist, petit bourgeois” – was the perfect medium of this anthropological change of Italian social structure. Capitalism and liberal hedonism thus imposed themselves as dominant models, colonizing the last surviving traces of archaism in mass population. If the Italian political scene was dominated by inexpressive masks of power, Pasolini had to look elsewhere – in Palestine or in Ethiopia for instance – for the “psychological truth” that, for him, constituted the authentic feature of a face.

¹ These notes are inspired by a remarkable book by Marco Belpoliti, *Il corpo del capo*, Ugo Guanda Editore, Parma 2009.

Once the fascist model and its opposite – that defended by Pasolini – had both faded, something unexpected happened. In 1987, Cicciolina, a successful porn-star, was elected to the Italian parliament, an institution dominated by conservative white, Catholic and rapacious men. Throwing kisses at the camera, showing her naked chest (as she had already done in 1978 on Italian public television), electrifying her electors by labelling them as “cicciolini”, this redoubtable personage fiercely brought the body to the forefront of the political arena in an explicitly sexualized way. If Cicciolina’s short tenure initiated a feminization of politics, she may ultimately have contributed to the reinforcement of masculinity: an emancipated woman in a parliament was essentially seen to be no different from a whore in a temple. And if, retrospectively, her election marks an essential step in the public acceptance of pornography as a *métier* in Italy, it should be remembered that sexual winks were, at the time, pervasive, especially on the new private Italian television channels owned by Mr. B.. The best example is *Drive In* which favoured busty, scantily-clad dancers, filmed from below over the slender ethereal models promoted by classical dance. If on Sunday morning Italian families were accustomed to sit before the Altar of God listening to the priest’s homily, on Sunday evening they all sat in front of the television screen watching *Drive In* (except for more conservative parents who did not allow their children to watch such as vulgarities).

In the early nineties, our generation – that is, Stefano’s and my own – was called to vote for the first time for the new Second Italian Republic. The post-communist leader Occhetto blindly promoted his political coalition as a “joyful war machine”, so joyful that it abruptly crashed before the “new Italian miracle” of his adversary, the tycoon Mr. B.. In a post-ideological and post-political era, Mr. B. implemented a cult of personality – absent in Italian politics since Fascism – verging on megalomania, though one filtered through various commercial advertising strategies. Thereafter, the distinctions between voting and applauding, between the multitudes of voices in a demonstration and the recorded laughter in a talk show, between political arena and show rooms, between political communities and consumers in a mall were definitively blurred.

A brief look at Mr. B.’s face demonstrates this erasure of difference beyond any doubt: his visage, covered with a veneer of bronze cosmetics, is modelled by aesthetic surgery, while face lifting and hair transplants have rejuvenated his bald head. This miraculous Photoshop re-styling violates all of Pasolini’s ideals. But Mr. B.’s face possesses one distinct advantage over those of his adversaries: it is frozen in a perpetual smile. This is the time of the apostrophe of gaiety: you ought to be happy! Recalling that a right-wing politician publicly confessed to have a hard penis, it is clear that the depressing, non-telegenic faces of the Left were too chubby or too skeletal and elongated to seduce the electorate and to exert any appeal on its desires. Faces have always played a crucial role in legitimating political power, as shown by the Roman Emperor profile stamped on a coin. Today the coin has been replaced by the television screen and the idealized profile of the

Imperator by Mr. B.'s face shown through a nylon stocking placed over the camera lens in order to veil his wrinkles.

Mr. B's face has dominated Italian politics and society in the last fifteen years, ever since his *prise de pouvoir*. In Italian Facebook there is room only for his face. Or maybe there was. In the wake of an impressive and increasing succession of scandals of all sorts – financial, legal, political, sexual – a sense of finality is palpable in Italy. The decadence of the Empire is in the air and perhaps a renewed asexualized era will follow. Surprisingly, contemporary Italian artists have, so far, been mostly immune to these changes. Too unprepared, too crushed to react appropriately – like many of Italy's citizens. With his post-Mr. B. face and his “body” of works, Stefano is one of the first Italian artists to raise his head.

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