

Raffaello Palumbo Mosca

Novel *against* Television

«*Ma in che mondo vive?*».

«*Credevo in un mondo civile*».

«*Lasciamo stare la civiltà, ché è meglio*», *conclude il Conduttore*.

(Luca Doninelli, «Talk Show»)

[“But what world are you living in?”/ “Well, I thought in a civil one.”/ “Best we leave ‘civility’/civilization aside,” concluded the Program Host.]

In today’s literature, TV, understood as an emblem of contemporary mass-communication society, has gained a central role: it is thematically discussed, frequently evoked in order to define the text’s mood, and even more frequently ironically criticized. G. Simonetti has noted that from a formalistic and structural point of view, the prominent heritage of visual culture in literature has to do with the time of narrative: many recent novels try to reproduce the fragmentary, fast montage of videoclips; we find short, juxtaposed paragraphs mimicking videoclips' horizontal, a-syntactic logic, as if the readers were channel surfing. This is certainly true in authors like Aldo Nove, Isabella Santacroce, Enrico Brizzi, among others. It appears to me, however, that the most interesting novels of today work in a different, if not opposite, way, showing the cracking of such a simplifying model. One thinks, for example, of *Campo del sangue* by Affinati e and Plinio Perilli, and their trip to Auschwitz. Affinati immediately writes that they strove to «gain a delay» which is indispensable for reflection:

Nessuno di noi ha mai pensato di raggiungere il lager in un giorno solo, come qualsiasi treno ci avrebbe permesso: abbiamo voluto conquistare un ritardo che ritenevamo indispensabile, a costo di far sembrare incongrue certe piccole fatiche. La zona magnetica necessaria per cercare di comprendere lo sterminio novecentesco è nata negli interstizi quotidiani, attraverso le domande e i tentativi di risposta che si formavano di pari passo col nostro viaggio. (Affinati 1997, 9).

[None of us ever thought of making it to the camp in a single day, as any train would have allowed us to do: we wanted to win a delay we considered indispensable, even if it meant making certain small efforts seem incongruous.

The magnetic zone needed for trying to understand 20th-century extermination was born in the insterstices of the day-to-day, through the demands and efforts at response that took shape in pace with our voyage.]

In *Peregrin d'amore* as well, Affinati counterbalances 'quick' trips and much slower ones: long walks through Rome, or evoking the most meditative of Italian authors (Petrarch) climbing Mont Ventoux. He frequently rests, and it is clear that these stops serve the purpose of slowing down the narrative and investigating - as if the novel were an essay - an author, a place, an emotion. We find here the exact opposite of the «excited novel» Simonetti spoke about. Readers are induced to stop, and think along with the author.

Franco Arminio's texts, from *Viaggio nel cratere* up to *Terracarne*, work in the same way: Arminio's character is a *flâneur*, and his gaze is directly opposed to the gaze of the TV camera («questi sono luoghi in cui mai si accendono le telecamere che vanno alla ricerca del pittoresco») ["these are places that know no turning on of telecameras looking for the picturesque"]. He recounts and cogitates on minimal life-events. But these minimal and daily events are, in Arminio's words, «fundamental ways in which we experience life,» and can be noted and recognized only if we stop, if we reject today's fast way of perceiving reality. At the end, the fascination of Arminio's texts lies in their anti-modern quality, in their ability to make us stop and, echoing Leopardi, mirror ourself in nature:

Lo sguardo trova pace solo quando sale in alto e incrocia qualche uccello. Perfino la sagoma del Vulture da qui non mi conforta perché si vede l'arrembaggio urbanistico di Rionero. Forse per questo ci succede raramente di affacciarci ad ammirare i paesaggi. Ieri sera leggevo un saggio che parlava dell'affacciarsi di Leopardi, un gesto che ricorre più volte nei canti. Oggi l'uomo non si affaccia e quando si distrae dal suo dentro è per infilarsi nel buco catodico. A nessuno viene in mente di scrivere: «O graziosa luna, io mi rammento...» e invece delle «vaghe stelle dell'orsa» osserviamo i finti litigi dei politicanti che si sforzano di mostrare differenze che non hanno. (Arminio 2011, 29-30). [The gaze finds peace only when it ascends and comes across some bird. Even the form of the Vulture here is of no encouragement to me, since we see the urban boarding of Rionero. Perhaps for that reason we rarely find ourselves confronted with landscapes we admire. Last night I was reading an essay that spoke of Leopardi's gazing, a gesture that recurs in his "canti." Today, man doesn't gaze out, and when he is distracted from being inside himself, it's to stuff himself into the cathode hole. No one would think of writing "O gracious moon, how I recall...", and instead of "Ursa's bright stars" we watch the fake feuds of politicians trying to show differences they really don't have.]

I stop here, but could offer many more examples, from Albinati's *Maggio selvaggio* to Franchini's *Signore delle lacrime* and Pellegrino's *Cade la terra*; I could also consider some

author from the previous generation, such as Gianni Celati (i.e. *Verso la foce* and *Vite di pascolanti*) or Raffaele La Capria.

In today's literature, TV mainly works as an example of 'bad, or evil, fiction.' A type of fiction that speciously falsifies reality, smoothing down life conflicts thanks to an «irresponsible optimism bordering on idiocy.» Walter Siti spoke about this in his novel *Troppi paradisi*, underscoring that when athletes, singers, and even so-called intellectuals appear on TV they don't demonstrate their abilities, but simply testify to a (fictional) incorruptible «pleasantness of life.»

In a similar way, David Foster Wallace reflected on the crucial difference between art and entertainment in a famous essay of 1993. Here he underlines that art needs to be, put in Adorno's words, also *appearance*; that is: art, as opposite to entertainment, should show, and make us reflect on, different aspects of reality. While art should disturb, it must reveal what we had not known before; entertainment aims at reassuring its audience, indulging it with the already known. But removing the new and the unexpected means removing the possibility of experience, since experience, as John Dewey has noted, derives exactly from facing what is out of our power and surprises us. This is why, as we read in *The Anatomy of a Moment* Javier Cercas, TV seems to «turn into unreality/fantasy all that it represents»: because it reduces complex events into stereotypes. This is the case of the 1981 coup at the core of Cercas's novel, which has been reduced to [«]the brag spewed out of the poisoned brain of a mediocre imitator of Luis Berlanga.»

As a matter of fact, today's flourishing of novels blurring the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, bordering on the genre of reportage, responds to, and tries to overcome, the 'false' and degraded knowledge promoted by the mass media. It seems that in today's «society of communication» the roles of informative nonfiction and novel writing have been turned almost upside down: mass-media communication has indeed appropriated two main qualities of the novel, the emotional and the fictional. If, as Cercas states, each and any historical event is turned

by mass-media communication into a «collective romance,» the socially aware writer cannot, and should not, add another fiction to the already fictionalized story of the mass media but, more unassumingly, must «discover what is the real story and scrupulously report it» (Cercas 2010, 21,22).

Is this a step back, a belittlement of the genre? Quoting the first of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, the Italian critic Andrea Cortellessa polemically affirmed that «humankind cannot bear very much reality» (see Cortellessa, November, 2008). I think, however, that today's problem is exactly the opposite, and the question we should be asking is rather: How much more exoticism and inaccuracy can we still bear? Advocating for a novel that discusses real social and historical problems means neither reducing it to a simple chronicle of events, nor endorsing the idea of the novel as *ancilla historiae*. At this point it is necessary to distinguish between *documentary novels* and what I propose to call *hybrid novels*. Whereas the former simply aim to chronicle facts in order to check their truth and eventually rectify vulgate interpretations of them, hybrid novels start off by chronicling historical facts yet transcend mere facts in order to convey a deeper, archetypal, meaning of human history. Such novels dare to have it both ways: on the one hand they respond to reality, and therefore can be read as history books, on the other hand, they do not abandon responding to the novelistic genre: as Javier Cercas has written, they «are not *completely* novels» but still want to be read *also* as such (see Cercas 2010, 23-24). In the end, any discourse on the question of fiction and history ends up reformulating, whether one agrees with it or not, the ninth book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, where he argues that «poetry rests on a more theoretical basis and is more important than history because poetry speaks of universals and history of particulars» (9, 51b).

But today the constant tension between reality and fiction that one finds in the novel has little to do with verisimilitude. Many of the texts in question here claim to present things not as «they could take place» (9, 51b) but as they have actually taken place. Nonetheless, when the

documents are manifestly insufficient to illustrate some deeper truth, the novelist turns to imagination while conferring upon it the status of truth by deploying a variety of «reality effects.» My discourse seems to suffer here a paradoxical *impasse*: the novelist would indeed *imagine a fact that has truly happened*. The oxymoron, or aporia, vanishes if we consider that in this context *imagination is not opposed to reality, but to brute fact* (and the emphasis is on the adjective). To imagine here means to shape the facts so that a deeper truth can emerge from them. Danilo Kiš saw this better than anyone else: the novelist can go as far as imagining a historical document, but he cannot invent/imagine history; he can falsify his proofs but only to «identify again, through his imagination, an historical reality.» The appendix of documents therefore becomes «the frame and the recipient» of the novel, but the imagined part of it is never arbitrary. Instead it represents a *plus* of beauty and critical thinking (Kiš 2009, 342).

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