

The Seventies? A parallel universe

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Abstract

Seen from today, the Seventies seem inscribed in a paradox. On the one hand, they don't pose problems of periodization, being unanimously identified with the span of years between 1968 and 1980, with an almost perfectly overlapping chronology in Europe and the U.S. On the other hand, however, the temporal frame marking out the decade as different from what came before (the Sixties) and after (the Eighties) does not coincide to any conceptual closure. Instead, the safe chronological enclosure is disrupted by the conceptual field of forces, play of ideas, social tensions that did define the experience of the Seventies but were not contained, resolved or exhausted within its temporal frame. This special section of *Enthymema* presents a first, tentative reconnaissance of what has remained that decade in contemporary poetics and theoretical discourse.

Parole chiave

Seventies, participation, collective groups, sign, power

Contatti

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1. The Seventies? A Parallel Universes

This is how guitarist and music scholar Lenny Kaye calls the Seventies in the interview recorded by Cristina Garrigos and Roberto Soler for this special issue of *Enthymema*. He also adds, referencing the New York music scene of the time, «It's not so much counter-culture in the sense of rebelling, in the sense of the main society does this, so we do the opposite. It's more that it's a parallel universe.»

Seen from today, the Seventies seem inscribed in a paradox. On the one hand, they don't pose problems of periodization, being unanimously identified with the span of years between 1968 and 1980, with an almost perfectly overlapping chronology in Europe and the U.S. On the other hand, however, the temporal frame marking out the decade as different from what came before (the Sixties) and after (the Eighties) does not coincide to any conceptual closure. Instead, the safe chronological enclosure is disrupted by the conceptual field of forces, play of ideas, social tensions that did define the experience of the Seventies but were not contained, resolved or exhausted within its temporal frame. The Seventies — a parallel universe below or above, but in any case irreducible to, the linear succession of events that for about 12 years spread across most Western democracies an unprecedented amount of social energy — begun in Paris, in May 1968, and ended in Italy, in October 1980.

The event of May 1968 and the contagious chain of progressive, transformative effects it triggered on every aspect of life in France and in Italy, started from the students' protest, and extended to workers, to women, and to wider and wider strata of the social body. It marked the debut of a new kind of massive participatory politics that called into

question all kinds of institutional power, forms of subjection and the erection of social boundaries, that tried to dismantle the reproduction of economic and social segregation in every domain of social life, and that brought to the fore of the political scene new subjects: students, workers, the young and women. This contagious movement of ideas and bodies cut across cultures, class and gender lines, often converging or teeming up with feminism, environmental movements, and art collectives. It carried a profound democratic impulse, which brought to the political agenda a number of questions repressed or simply downplayed within the formal structures of parliamentary democracies, and ignited a profound process of revision of social relations. It addressed, first of all, the gap between individual, personal self-realization and happiness and the logic of social and institutional structures of power and subjectivation; second, it posed the question of the protection, extension and concrete actualization of democratic principles in every aspect of affective, personal, and social life; third, it claimed the protection of individual freedom and self-determination and of the individual right to choose over against the arbitrary and intrusive power of the state. The project of radical democracy that eventually emerged from the struggles of the Seventies entailed the redefinition of individual and collective identities in relation to the private and public dimensions of historical experience, and implied that differences of gender, class, and culture had to be rethought accordingly. This project ended in Italy in 1980, marked by two events that symbolically closed in the decade, engulfing its many contradictions and hidden stories. First, the explosion of a bomb at the railway station in Bologna, killing 85 people and injuring over 200 on August 2; second, «the March of the 40.000» in October of the same year, bringing 40.000 FIAT car factory white collars to protest against the blue collars' on strike, thus returning one of the protagonist subjects of the decade, the workers, back to the marginal social role from where they had come, and symbolically reestablishing the property of social hierarchy.¹

In the U.S., the beginning of the Seventies was punctuated by three events, which — unlike what happened in Europe — marked the end of the progressive social mobilization of the Sixties and sanctified the role of television as the main national medium.² First to come, in January, was the Tet offensive, in Vietnam, which brought on the TV screens of American households the contradictions between public political discourse and military action, and exposed to the majority of Americans the lies their government had propagated about Vietnam and the role of the U.S. in that war. Second, on April 4,

¹ There is a significant agreement among historians, political scientists, and historical witnesses to situate the beginning of the Italian Seventies on December 12, 1969, when a neo-fascist bomb exploded in the building of the National Bank of Agriculture, killing 16 people and injuring over 80. That explosion marks the beginning of what has been called 'tension strategy', a series of mass murders of neo-fascist matrix connected to the secret services and to deviant state-apparata, aimed at creating a popular demand for a strong government. The lack as of today of a historical and political and judiciary truth about *stragismo* and mass-murdering in the Seventies has made the fabrication of a shared memory about that decade a cultural and political problem in Italy. On this see De Luna (2009); Moro (2005); Crainz (2003). While I understand this line of thinking, I find it problematic, especially as it implies that there has been in Italy a «moment» of the Sixties, which never was. See, for instance, the catalogue of the exhibition, curated by Paola Nicolin *Addio Anni 70. Arte a Milano 1969-1980*. (Mousse e Paola Nicolin, 2012).

² In her essay "La 'gravità' dei Settanta: reticolarità e dissidenza in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) di Thomas Pynchon" included in this special section, Pamela Mansutti provides a more detailed reconstruction of the shift between the Sixties and the Seventies in the U.S.

came the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., the third political murders of the Sixties followed, on June 5, by the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy, then candidate to the nomination for the Presidential elections. These events affected deeply the relation between institutional powers and official culture, and citizens. TV exposed the nexus between the media and representation, and the gap between representation and reality, further intensifying the tide of skepticism toward the supposed neutrality of language, the reliability of information and the institutions of power. Distrust and skepticism about the government only increased in the course of the Seventies, with the emergence of the Pentagon Papers, of the Watergate and of secret power centers outside the control of democratic institutions. The abrupt ending of a season of civil action and mass movements led to the escalation of conflict, which radicalized and led to the organization of radical and sectarian forms of social protest and to the creation of militant organizations such as the Weathermen Underground and the Black Panthers.³ The closing curtain of the decade in the U.S. was drawn by the Islamic revolution in Iran and the ensuing Teheran Embassy prisoners crisis, which resulted in an international debacle of American diplomacy and with the beginning of a long economic crisis that invested the American power through the 1980s and brought Ronald Reagan to the White House as the first Republican President after Richard Nixon.

2. Imagination and Power

In spite of the note of disillusionment on which they closed, the Seventies ignited a series of transformations and reforms of decisive political, social, and cultural impact, whose effects far exceeds the limits of historical periodization, and whose assessment remains problematically suspended between a sense of crisis and a sense of accomplishment. Even though they have been recorded as the epoch of the first oil crisis, of the hardest economic recession of the second half of the Twentieth century, as the decade of sectary violence succeeded by intense state repression, and by the penetration of accessible heavy drugs in oppositional cultures, the Seventies are also defined by a long list of progressive social reforms that probably outbalances their negative asset. Italy, France, and the U.S., for instance, passed laws regulating issues of great social impact, such as abortion, divorce, healthcare, workers' rights, and instituting conscientious objection, affirmative action, environmental protection agencies.

But no lists of accomplishments and failures and no timeline of historical events can explain the phenomenal mass participation to the organization of public life that characterized the historical experience of the decade. The demand for direct management of political, cultural, and social life, and the tensions between regressive and progressive social forces that defined the political antagonism of the Seventies are scarcely imaginable, today, within the narrow set of terms with which we have grown progressively accustomed to describe the social environment, articulate political discourse, and imagine individual and collective futures. As has been claimed, the lack of a conceptual vocabulary suited to the description of the Seventies leaves the past it comprises suspended in a cloud of ideological overdetermination that forecloses the elaboration of a public, shared memory and precludes a much overdue historical processing of the irreducible contradictions between individual and social expectations and political and economic contrap-

³ See Bailey and Farber (2004); Schulman (2001); Bergamini (2010)

tions.⁴ The lack of a concept of the Seventies prevents the formulation of a comprehensive hypothesis about the relation between historical experience and the logic of its articulation among the different forms of social life. Explanations tend to remain split between historical-political and theoretical-methodological descriptions of the decade. It is with the desire to retrieve some of the connections between the conceptual and the social forms that emerged in the Seventies and to observe the logic of their returns, their continuities and discontinuities with the present, that we issued the call for contributions from which this first, tentative work of reconnaissance begins.

But the difficulty in identifying a historical concept proper to the Seventies may be related to the awareness that the series of questions opened up during that intensely theoretical decade have changed the ways of conceiving the relation between social experience and its representation, and between representation and action, and yet, they remain unresolved — if not altogether repressed — today. Those were questions asked about the status of knowledge, its institutional function in the interest of the reproduction of political and economic powers and social segregation, and about the role of the intellectual vis-a-vis society and institutional power.

Language was central to the process of critical and creative dismantling of stabilized discourses and practices and to the production of militant action that marked the (counter) cultural impulse of the Seventies. From an instrument of representation, language became action, as a 1968 graffiti claims: «L'insolence est la nouvelle arme révolutionnaire» (Rohan 108), and once the role of language in the interest of politics and power was disclosed, then the study of its operations in the construction of normative and scientific or pseudoscientific discourses, epistemic regimes and institutional regulations became urgent. Michel Foucault's genealogical project, from the early *Folie et déraison* (1961), to the archeological texts of the Sixties, to the full articulation of *Surveiller et Punir* (1975), is rooted in this new understanding of language as code and action. Uncovering the emergence of the human sciences by describing their relation with norms, tests, examinations, and institutions and forms of power became the focus of Foucault's work in the Seventies. But, as Diego Melegari discusses in his essay "Lampi di Possibili Tempeste", at that stage of his intellectual project, Foucault's temporary aversion from literary and pictorial references was aimed at reorienting his genealogical method toward a non-strategic criticism able to affect the subject and change the self below the level of discourse, even though its effects would emerge as a practice of resistance to power only indirectly.

But even outside the project of genealogical criticism initiated by Foucault, the analysis of power was ubiquitous to the theoretical discourse of the Seventies, whether in explicit relation to language, to the body, to the unconscious and to desire, to social structures, to the production and circulation of images and objects, to narrativity, and to the

⁴ See for instance, Giovanni Moro (2005). Recurrent attempts to elaborate series of keywords that would process and help clarify the conceptual and historical terrain of the Seventies should also be seen, I think, as symptomatic of the lack of a comprehensive hypothesis about the relations between different forms of social life in the Seventies or, to use Fredric Jameson's expression, of the still missing availability of a concept of history that would let the relations among philosophical, aesthetic, cultural, economic forms emerge. (Jameson 1988). The website of the editorial project *Doppiozero* directed by Marco Belpoliti and Stefano Chiodi has dedicated significant efforts to the project of mapping the Seventies by ways of essays, shorter and longer interventions, elaborations of concepts and keywords, and the promotion of public lectures (www.doppiozero.com)

articulation of subjectivities. The study of the effects of power — institutional, political, familiar, affective, educational — on social and individual bodies and its function in processes of subjectivation provided the ground for psychiatrist and analyst Elvio Fachinelli's elaboration of a «psychoanalysis with social purposes»⁵ (Fachinelli, “Psicoanalista posizione” 17), which could only arise — as Alessandra Diazzi illustrates in her essay — from a confrontation with the crucial questions of the Seventies: personal and subjective freedom, female emancipation, sexual liberation, the attack to the family as a bourgeois institution of repressions and matrix of dysfunctions, the struggles against authoritarian powers, class conflict, and so many other. The example of Fachinelli also helps explain the centrality of the analysis of ideological structures and the investigation of the relation between capitalism, the production of desire and reification that had such a prominent part in the theoretical project of the Seventies. Not unlike language, criticism was also configured as militant action toward the creation of an oppositional force crucial to building a more democratic, a more free society of savvy, alert, informed, and self-conscious citizens.⁶

The double articulation of critical cultures of the Seventies, simultaneously attending to the material effects of institutional power and to the discursive fabrication of the social world underlies the attention to the incarnated, fabricated, and built dimensions of cultural phenomena and emphasizes the continuity between the factory and the atelier, and between the worker and the artist, equal protagonists on the social scene, as the hyper-used term fabrication reveals.⁷ It also attests to the convergence, especially in artistic and literary actions, of the two parallel philosophical traditions that have defined aesthetic experience and its relation to meaning throughout the twentieth century: phenomenology and structural linguistics. Both phenomenology and structural linguistics entered aesthetics discourse at the time of high modernism, but only in the 1960 and 1970s did their mutual tensions start to be explicitly assumed by visual artists as the subject of aesthetic projects and critical interventions, and at only about the same time a theoretical discourse that specifically addressed those tensions as its object of analysis was formulated around the concept of «sign». Semiotics as the science of signs described in their systemic relations and phenomenological and cultural functions emerged as the methodological point of convergence of these two bodies of thought between the late Fifties (Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* was published in 1957) and the first half of the Seventies. In

⁵ «psicoanalisi socializzata nei fini»

⁶ The crucial reference, here, is obviously Louis Althusser, whose immensely influential essay “L’Idéologie et les Appareils idéologiques d’Etat” (1969) was translated in Italian in 1970 and in English in 1971. Althusser, his former student Pierre Macherey (*Pour une Théorie de la Production Littéraire*, 1978), Jean Baudrillard (*Pour une critique de l’économie politique du signe*, 1972. Translated into Italian in 1974 and in English in 1981); *L’échange symbolique et la mort* (1976), published their most important works between the late Sixties and early Seventies, while Roland Barthes had already started in the late Fifties. The almost simultaneous availability of their works on the Italian market, accounts for the continuity between the theoretical scene in the two countries. In the U.S., on the contrary, some of these works were translated and started to circulate only around the early to Mid-Eighties, or even in the Nineties.

⁷ The emphasis on the notion of fabrication and the rediscovery of the body in the Seventies is documented in Fernanda Fedi's essay, “Collettivi e Pratiche Sociali dell'arte a Milano”. The catalogue of the exhibition *Addio Anni 70. Arte a Milano 1969-1980* also offers a quick but well documented textual and pictorial reference to this issue. Of great interest in this respect is also the catalogue of the exhibition *In Pubblico. Azioni e idee degli anni Settanta*. (Fochessati, Piazza, and Solimano 2007)

analogy with other militant critical practices of the decade, however, as Paolo Desogus' essay "La teoria critica di Umberto Eco. La critica dell'ideologia e la guerriglia semiologica" discusses in relation to Umberto Eco's work of the Seventies, semiotics was not simply a descriptive methodology, but an instrument of critical guerrilla aimed at disarticulating ideologies by means of the analysis of signs. A war of signs against signs.

The renewed interest in the materiality of experience and culture and the pressure of feminist movements contributed to reinstall the body at the center of political and aesthetic discourses and aligned the works of visual artists with the feminists' demand of a politic of the gendered body and gendered difference. It also and cemented the collective praxis of social groups.⁸ The textual reinscription of the body -- especially the female body -- within the politics of discourse and in aesthetic practices has certainly served politically progressive and emancipatory purposes, as in the series of Exploitation films from the 1970s and early 80s discussed by Jenny Platz in her essay, "Return to the Grindhouse: Tarantino and the modernization of 1970s Exploitation". Those films, she recalls, were the first ones to allow women to actively control the narrative and course of events in a film, and Tarantino's attempt to modernize them, failed precisely on ideological grounds.

But the body did not necessarily surface on the textual and inscriptional substrata of the Seventies as anthropomorphic image, or to evoke a hidden space of inner consciousness. Instead, it appeared as/in the presence of objects and in relation to language. Bodies, signs, objects, textual objects became the key figures of a micro alphabet around which the notions of subject and subjectivity were recast — within the frame of psychoanalysis and outside it — as the results of contingent determinations of language, social structures and material forces. In this lot, language and imagination were still cast as the main sources of difference, keeping open lines of flight away from the repetition and reification of expressions, desire, and subjectivity. In this perspective, Matteo Martelli discusses the conditions of emergence of a «lateral,» «minor subjectivity» as an effect of intertextual practices aimed at escaping the normative power of language and at disengaging the text from the repetitive logic of knowledge production within three relevant examples of Italian narrative of the Seventies. On a related line — Danilo Mariscalco, in his essay "«A/traverso' la transizione. Le pratiche culturali del movimento del '77 e il paradigma artistico», extends the analysis of mutant subjectivities theorized within the students' movement at the end of the Seventies to include non-literary militant poetics and critical practices — radio broadcasting, especially, but also public performances — and their methodological strategies (especially tactical reappropriation and reuse and détournement), in order to highlight the aesthetic originality of the movement vis-a-vis historical avant-gardes.

The emphasis on the interconnectedness of the poetical and political elements in all forms of communication that both essays emphasize helps exemplify the chiasmic relation inscribed in much aesthetic and political imagination of the Seventies as the manifestation of the political in the poetical — as, for instance in the programmatic title of the exhibition *Un Po-poetico, un Po-politico* (Fedi 84) — and the poetical in the political — as for instance in the immensely popular and overcodified feminist slogan, *the personal is political*. This rhetorical figure carries a logical principle that replaces epistemologically secure

⁸ References here would be encyclopedic. Fernanda Fedi documents the local dimension of this mixing of feminist groups with art collectives and other oppositional groups.

foundations and works to reorganize signification. The seeds of this dislocation by means of which a rhetorical figure works as a foundation of knowledge and generates truth effects, should be located, as we have already hinted, in the constellation of conceptual ruptures that punctuated the late 1960s and early 1970s. Jacques Derrida's notion of «logocentrism,» Jacques Lacan's concept of the «split subject», Louis Althusser's critique of ideology, and Michel Foucault's reading of history as a succession of «epistemic breaks» undermined the epistemological foundations of Western humanism by deconstructing the unity of the self, the linearity of history, the stability of the written text, the objective neutrality of knowledge. As Susan Suleiman aptly summarizes, «what seemed to be involved was an enterprise of rereading that would change not only our view of the past but also our sense of the future». (Suleiman 1014)

Re-reading entailed different notions of writing and reading, of the relation between the author, the text, and signification and, in more general terms, of the logic of aesthetic experience. As Desogus' essay emphasizes, Umberto Eco's work in the Seventies was strongly invested in the subversion and reformulation of the hierarchical structures in relation to which the relation between sender and receiver (and author and reader) was conventionally projected by communication theory and literary theory alike. No longer conceived as the manifestation of the autonomous and self-sufficient object, but as either as a cooperative dialogue or as a systemic process of feedback loops in the cultural sphere and in society at large, communication -- and aesthetic praxis in general -- foregrounded a renewed understanding of art in which the burden of aesthetic attribution and evaluation shifted from creation to process, from object to performance, and from author to cooperative (or oppositional) action.

The theoretical production of the Seventies was vastly focused on the reformulation of the principles presiding to textual and extra-textual production of meaning, while the relation between producer and user (artist and audience; author and reader) was renegotiated in relation to every aspect of social life. Thus, it comes as no surprise that most of the essays discussing the literature of the Seventies in this collection engage with the problem of the relation author/reader and with the strategic framing of points of dissidence to linguistic and cultural structures within the rhetorical organization of the text. The two essays on Italo Calvino discuss -- in very different terms -- the sophisticated rhetorical operations by means of which Calvino negotiates the relation between the author as an effect of discourse, or a writing machine, and the function of the reader as the eye that attends to literary life by reconnecting the text to an expanding universe (Calvino 1967). Paolo Giovannetti's essay "Faccio delle cose coi libri". Calvino vs. anni Settanta" deconstructs the strategy by means of which Calvino surreptitiously reinscribes the figure of the author as the governing director of textual performativity in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (*If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*), while Sabrina Ovan in her "Names, Travelers, Transindividuality" reconnects more directly Calvino's strategic use of names/naming to operative definitions of authorship and collectivity.

Perhaps the concept of the Seventies to come will one day deliver the closest historical form we may aspire to have to the notion of postmodernism. Even in literature postmodernism has never named a movement, but an operative horizon in which formal experimentation — allusions, puns, parody, allegory, mises-an-abyme, fragmentation, pastiche — and criticism are always intertwined. The rupture of the notion of art as an autonomous field of meaning and its dispersion across « an expanded field of culture that was largely textual in nature» (Foster, *The Return* 71), and its combination with mass cultural signs marked the ascendancy of postmodernist aesthetics. It is in this perspective

that we should situate Andrea Chiurato's recuperation of Oreste del Buono's novels of the Seventies. Similarly, it is within this conceptual horizon that Pamela Mansutti reads Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). The grotesque encyclopaedism and hyper-referentialism the novel mobilizes across all zones of mass culture points to the criticism of surveillance and total subjective control that were part of the Seventies semantics, but it does so by way of uncontainable farce. The question about the status of language as a tool for social action and criticism is bypassed, in Pynchon, by the notion that once capital has colonized every aspect of social experience, every sign can be exchanged with every other sign. From a different register, the semiotic status of language, the semantic instability it generates and the problematics it opens to the possibility of documenting history and bearing witness to its traumatic ruptures takes the center of Cinzia Scarpino's reading of Joan Didion's fictional and non-fictional writings in the 70's in the essay "The Implacable I: Joan Didion e la scrittura testimoniale". On the Italian side of the literary elaboration of historical trauma, Federica Colleoni analyzes the role of the traumatic experience of terrorism in the formation of contemporary Italian identity and collective subjectivity by discussing a group of recent novels that deal with the autobiographic or pseudo-autobiographic reconstruction of that experience.

The erosion of autonomous discursive domains and the questioning of cultural and political hierarchies promoted a renovation of the rules of artistic and media communication. In TV and film cultures – no less than in literary cultures – this process of renovation entailed a fierce critique of modernist avant-gardes and the elaboration of alternative avant-gardish aesthetics marked by media contamination, by the erosion of genres, and by the strategic use of pastiche and citations. The transformation of book shows on French TV in the Seventies is part of this process of cross-fertilization among different media and discourses, as Frédéric Delarue explains in his essay, "Les années 1970 en France au prisme de la médiation littéraire au petit écran". On the cinematographic end of the discussion, the waning of the progressive impulse of the Sixties and early Seventies is the focus of Peter Andrew Novick's essay «Silent Majority, Violent Majority: the Counter-revolution in Seventies Cinema», which discusses how the counterrevolution that brought conservative tendencies in American Cinema in the Seventies by introducing or reinforcing in film production topics such as violence and race in the city, revenge against 'liberated women', and fear and loathing of homosexuality, failed nonetheless to expunge the 'revolutionary spirit' of the era, but contributed to disseminate a culture of renewed individualism.

In the late Sixties and early Seventies the importance of language as a system of signs and the tension between the autonomy of the artistic sign and its dispersal, decomposition and contamination across a universe of mass-mediated signs and cultural forms became crucial to the arts, where a thorough rethinking of the relation between the subject and object of aesthetic action and an equally radical rethinking of the roles of the artist and the viewer or the audience occurred. Early in the Seventies language was conceived as a tool for changing the world, and as a subversive instrument of criticism, particularly when used in association to photography, performances, and in art installations to subvert the viewer's expectations, as in the printing on the white silhouettes used by the *Collettivo Lavoro Uno* (Work Collective One) for the installation against the abrogation of the law legalizing divorce: «Donna non sei un robot» («Woman you are not a robot»). (Fedi 58). A similar principles underpins the production of an aesthetic of alternative expression in Vincenzo Agnetti's poetics as discussed in Laura Mouhre Cecchini's "Rage against the Machine: Vincenzo Agnetti's Critique of Industrial Alienation". The belief in

the militant function of language is inscribed in the onomastic choices of the art collectives, as the Milan collective, *Laboratorio di Comunicazione Militante* (Militant Communication Laboratory). But the fragmentation, pulverization of signs and their reactivation and cooptation in every social and market domain revealed the vulnerability of critical practices, their total exposure to the operations of capitalism that thrives on reification and fragmentation. This concern, as Gino Gini forcefully expresses in the closure of this session, and as Elizabeth Mangini demonstrates in her essay "Form as Social Commitment: The Art of Giovanni Anselmo during the Anni di Piombo", reoriented Giovanni Anselmo's work in the second part of the Seventies toward an intensification of formal research and the elaboration of a notion of form as social commitment in order to escape as far as possible the seductive and cooptative, normalizing force of a omnivorous market.

Perhaps the Seventies are much more than a parallel universe...

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