

Gramsci and the graphic novel

Gramsci's literary criticism as a form of commemoration in *Cena con Gramsci* by Elettra Stamboulis and Gianluca Costantini

Rachelle Gloudemans

With his *Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935), Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) not only articulated a critical reflection on fascist politics and society, but he also contributed significantly to the debate on the definition of literature and its social and political functions.¹ Over the years, Gramscian perspectives on cultural hegemony and popular culture have become part of a 'travelling theory' that has been adapted and further elaborated by, for example, postcolonial literary scholars, discourse analysts and cultural theorists.² Scholars such as Marcus Green, Eric Hobsbawm and Tony Bennett have insisted on a (re)turn to Gramsci's Marxist roots and their implications for the study of the relations between, and within, political and cultural forces.³ The various rereadings and appropriations of Gramsci's 'philosophy of praxis', in a wide range of studies, demonstrate the vitality of his ideas in a contemporary setting. More importantly, though, by recovering, adapting or redirecting the use of Gramsci's concepts, these scholars contribute to a counter-narrative to contemporary socio-political tendencies that have either claimed Gramscian theory for right-wing nationalist purposes or attempted to consign Gramsci to public oblivion.⁴ The present paper investigates a literary effort to revitalise Gramsci's memory and philosophy in response to these contemporary dynamics. It does so by looking at the representation of Gramsci's literary criticism in the graphic novel *Cena con Gramsci* (Dinner with

¹ This essay will focus on Gramsci's literary criticism as expressed in the fifth of his *Prison Notebooks*: A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere 5, Letteratura e Vita Nazionale* [6th ed.], Torino, Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1966, and in translation: D. Forgacs & G. Nowell-Smith (eds.), *Selections from Cultural Writings, Antonio Gramsci*, transl. W. Boelhower, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2012. All translations from Italian to English are mine, unless otherwise stated.

² See for example: E.W. Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 236; E. Laclau & C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* [2nd ed.], London-New York, Verso, 2001.

³ M.E. Green, 'On the Postcolonial Image of Gramsci', in: *Postcolonial Studies*, 16, 1 (2013), p. 90; T. Bennett, C. Mercer & J. Woollacott (eds.), *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, Milton Keynes-Philadelphia, Open University Press, 1986, pp. xi-xix; E. Hobsbawm, 'Introduzione', in: A. Santucci (ed.), *Gramsci in Europa e in America*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1995, p. ix.

⁴ R. van Kranenburg, 'Whose Gramsci? Right-wing Gramscism', in: *International Gramsci Society Newsletter*, 9 (1999), p. 15.

Gramsci; adapted from the homonymous theatrical text by Davide Daolmi),⁵ written by Elettra Stamboulis and illustrated by Gianluca Costantini.⁶

Gramsci in the attic of Italian collective memory

Strikingly, while Gramsci's influence as an intellectual is acknowledged worldwide, his memory and philosophy occupy a somewhat uncomfortable position within Italian culture, politics and society. In his home country, Gramsci is above all seen as a political actor, known especially for being a founding member of Italy's Communist Party, and as a martyr of historical antifascism.⁷ Because of his ties to communism and antifascism, Gramsci has become a key figure in the socio-political debate on Italy's 'divided memory'.⁸ John Foot and Filippo Focardi, amongst others, recognise in Italy's memorial landscape a 'cultura di compensazione' (a culture of compensation), in which every attempt to construe the past by the political Left is countered by a claim by the Right (and vice versa), and in which forgetting, rather than remembering, has been proposed as a common ground for commemoration.⁹

Attempts to dismiss Gramsci's memory can be understood in the light of the crisis of communism after 1989, and the development of a 'post-fascist' political landscape after 1992, led by actors such as Silvio Berlusconi and Gianfranco Fini. These shifts in the political landscape have opened up a public space for a tendency towards historical revisionism, which aimed at creating consensus on the collective memories of the past. While a critical revision of the past is a necessary and important asset of history writing, historical revisionism – as it has affected Italian society since the 1990s – should be interpreted as the propagation of a new series of historical narratives that intend to delegitimise previous interpretations of the past.¹⁰ In this way, an anti-communist and anti-antifascist memorial narrative has developed, sustained by interpretations of historians such as Renzo de Felice and Ernesto Galli della Loggia. Not only has this narrative questioned the legitimacy of left-wing interpretations of the past, but it has also made an effort to deprive Italian collective memory of its antagonistic character, by actively forgetting the memory of its own historical key figures, including that of Gramsci.¹¹

The phenomenon of New Italian Epic emerges as a reaction to the debate on Italian memory politics and is considered a literary tool which enables the reader to take active part in the revision and reevaluation of forgotten, or falsified, cultural

⁵ D. Daolmi, 'A cena con Gramsci', in: R. Rampi (ed.), *Nino: appunti su Antonio Gramsci 1937-2007*, Milano, Infoarte, 2007.

⁶ E. Stamboulis & G. Costantini, *Cena con Gramsci*, Padova: BeccoGiallo 2012.

⁷ R. Rampi, 'Il segno Gramsci', in: Stamboulis & Costantini, *Cena con Gramsci*, cit., p. 9; G. Vacca, 'Gramsci studies since 1989', in: *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 16, 2 (2011), p. 184; A. Catalfamo, *Antonio Gramsci; una critica integrale. Giornalismo, letteratura e teatro*, Chieti: Solfanelli, 2015, p. 7.

⁸ J. Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 2.

⁹ F. Focardi, 'Antifascism and the Resistance: Public Debate and Politics of Memory in Italy from the 1990s to the Present', in: H. Garcia et. al. (eds.), *Rethinking Antifascism, History, Memory and Politics, 1922 to the Present*, New York, Berghan Books, 2016, pp. 268-269.

¹⁰ S. Prezioso, 'Did Revisionism Win? Italy between Loss of Historical Consciousness and Nostalgia for the Past', trad. G. Ash, in: H. Garcia et. al. (eds.), *Rethinking Antifascism: History, Memory and Politics, 1922 to the Present*, New York, Berghan Books, 2016, pp. 241-242. For a comprehensive history of the term 'revisionism', see also: B. Bongiovanni, 'Revisionismo: storia e antistoria di una parola', in: *Passato e presente*, XXI, 60 (2003), pp. 17-28.

¹¹ See: R. de Felice & P. Chessa (ed.), *Rosso e nero*, Milano, Baldini e Castoldi, 1995; E. Galli della Loggia, *La morte della patria. La crisi dell'idea di nazione tra Resistenza, antifascismo e Repubblica*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1996. The emergence of an anti-antifascist narrative of the past has been observed by many scholars, including: A. Mammone, 'A Daily Revision of the Past, Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and Memory in Contemporary Italy', in: *Modern Italy*, 11, 2 (2006), pp. 211-226; and: S. Luzzatto, *La crisi dell'antifascismo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2005.

memories.¹² In the issue of the *Journal of Romance Studies* (2010) dedicated to this 'literary hypothesis', Claudia Boscolo observes that 'the role of fiction in this process [of critically reflecting on the past, ed.] arises from the sense that the Italian mass media have failed to fulfil their duty of providing transparent information on Italian politics and social issues'.¹³ In their *Memorandum 3.0*, Wu Ming outline the characteristics of New Italian Epic that favour the establishment of a renewed critical relationship between literature and socio-political issues, such as the representation of a plurality of voices, a preference for popular genres, transmediality and the confusion of literary and non-literary narrative devices.¹⁴ New Italian Epic, of which *Cena con Gramsci* is an example, generates complex works of art that transcend traditional genre categories and activate the reader's capacity to decipher allegorical effects and connotations.¹⁵

The emergence of New Italian Epic as a critical reflection on the debate on Italian memory politics from the 1990s onwards, coincides with the introduction of the graphic novel as a literary genre in Italy.¹⁶ The present study will bring these three phenomena together by identifying the representation of elements of Gramsci's literary criticism in the graphic novel *Cena con Gramsci*, and by relating Gramsci's criticism to the position of the graphic novel within contemporary Italian literature and society. Whereas Cristina Papa and Alexander Koenler argue that the legibility of this graphic novel and its references to contemporary popular culture help to introduce Gramsci to a broad public,¹⁷ this article wants to examine *Cena con Gramsci* as a dynamic and layered work of art that attempts to engage with those critical voices that – in a Gramscian manner – 'propose a repositioning of literature at the centre of the social life of a community'.¹⁸

Gramsci emphasises the historical embeddedness of literature and literary criticism, and underlines the fact that one should not interpret a return to prior concepts as an artificial restoration, but rather as a critical translation of these concepts, carefully considering their varying temporal and spatial contexts.¹⁹ This research will show that, in the same way, *Cena con Gramsci* insists on the exemplariness of Gramsci's literary criticism and relates it to the position of the graphic novel in twenty-first-century Italy. The analysis will focus on the representation of two key concepts that are fundamental to Gramsci's literary criticism, and which can be found in the graphic novel: cultural hegemony and the interdependency of content and form. The first part will investigate how the graphic novel by Stamboulis and Costantini translates the concept of cultural hegemony into the twenty-first century in order to explain, and counter, the strategies of remembering and forgetting exploited by revisionist journalism and mass media. The second part hypothesises that – not only through its attitude, but also through its narrative techniques – *Cena con Gramsci* can be considered an example of New Italian Epic, which proposes a Gramscian interpretation of the interrelatedness between

¹² E. Stamboulis, 'Il Graphic Journalism in Italia. Analisi del giornalismo disegnato in un Paese a sovranità disinformata', in: *Pagine Inattuali*, 7 (2017), p. 98.

¹³ C. Boscolo, 'The Idea of Epic and New Italian Epic', in: *Journal of Romance Studies*, 10, 1 (2010), p. 27.

¹⁴ Wu Ming, *New Italian Epic, Letterature, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro*, Torino, Einaudi, 2009, pp. 22-26; 32-34; 41-45.

¹⁵ Boscolo, 'The Idea of Epic and New Italian Epic', cit., p. 27.

¹⁶ F. Vergari, *Politicomics: raccontare e fare politica attraverso i fumetti*, Latina, Tunué, 2008, p. 23.

¹⁷ C. Papa & A. Koenler, 'Che cosa richiede il cambiamento? Percorsi post-gramsciani per un'etnografia politica della contemporaneità', in: *Lares*, 81, 2/3 (2015), p. 407.

¹⁸ M. Amici, 'Urgency and visions of the New Italian Epic', in: *Journal of Romance Studies*, 10, 1 (2010), p. 15.

¹⁹ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere* 5, cit., pp. 5-6; Forgacs and Nowell-Smith (eds.), *Selections from Cultural Writings*, cit., p. 91.

content and form. In doing so, the present research aims at gaining insight into the way the representation of these Gramscian concepts in *Cena con Gramsci* revitalises Gramsci's memory and engages with his philosophy.

Cultural hegemony: The meta-historical allegory as a vehicle for reviving Gramsci's memory

The protagonist of *Cena con Gramsci* is Jacopo, a student at the University of Turin, just like Gramsci in his days. Jacopo experiences isolation and a general disinterest from a consumerist society, when he proposes a thesis on Gramsci and his 'philosophy of praxis'. While solitarily contemplating the relevance of his academic work, Jacopo imagines two human figures who engage closely with Gramsci's life and thought, and who drag the protagonist into a narration of Gramsci's life. Jacopo, similarly to Ugo Foscolo's disillusioned protagonist Jacopo Ortis, whom he symbolically bears the name of, finds himself in conflict with the socio-political reality in which he lives, and is continuously confused by the blurred boundaries between the narration of his life in the present and Gramsci's life in the past.²⁰ The graphic novel starts with a careful reconstruction of the contextual conditions in which the narrative is placed; *Cena con Gramsci* emphasises Gramsci's divided memory by creating a tension between its ambitious protagonist and society's disinterest in the subject of his thesis. The idea of divided, or opposing, memorial attitudes is not only textually embedded in the graphic novel, for example when Jacopo laments that he lives 'nelle contraddizioni' (within contradictions); it is also visually represented by the images of Jacopo walking alone through the city.²¹ The image of the opposition that Jacopo faces is allegorically strengthened by the stark contrast between Jacopo and his immobile and disapproving thesis supervisor; these two figures always act in opposing panels, distinctively separated by the white gutter, thus representing their inability to communicate effectively on the topic (Fig. 1). In order to undermine the disinterest of society, then, Jacopo follows Gramsci's rejection of 'intellectualism' as an attitude that is too far removed from engaging with socio-political issues, and renounces the project of his thesis.²² Stating that he could not possibly add to the millions of words written about Gramsci, he explores instead other cultural forms to reactivate the memory of his Sardinian hero.²³



Figure 1 - Stamboulis and Costantini, *Cena con Gramsci*, cit., p. 53.

By taking on a critical stance on the state of Gramsci's memory, the plot of *Cena con Gramsci* responds to the scholar's concept of cultural hegemony. Gramsci

²⁰ In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci recalls Foscolo for his strong engagement with Italian history, and for the rhetorical articulation of his political aims: Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere 5*, cit., pp. 71-72.

²¹ Stamboulis & Costantini, *Cena con Gramsci*, cit., p. 35.

²² See Angelo D'Orsi's analysis of Gramsci's attitude as a student in Turin, and his early thoughts on intellectualism, in: A. D'Orsi, 'Lo studente che non divenne "Dottore", Gramsci all'Università di Torino', in: *Studi Storici*, 40, 1 (1999), pp. 39-40.

²³ Stamboulis & Costantini, *Cena con Gramsci*, cit., p. 69.

articulated the concept of hegemony as a reflection on, and resistance to, fascist society, but stressed that the concept can be understood within specific, albeit varying, historical contexts. In his conception, hegemony is not a universal concept that can be applied endlessly, but a tool that adapts its distinct meaning to the relational and contradictory forces of the historical present.²⁴ Antonio Catalfamo explains Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony as 'an educational relationship, based both on force and on consent, in which a social group becomes dominant, not only through the use of coercive and repressive tools, but also through the direction of moral and intellectual practises of kindred and antagonistic groups'.²⁵ T.J. Jackson Lears adds that, for Gramsci, hegemonic culture is not achieved through the 'brainwashing of the masses', but through the creation of a public discourse that favours certain experiences and worldviews, while neglecting or oppressing others.²⁶ In terms of collective memory, this means that hegemony is built up by prioritising certain interpretations of history over others.²⁷ In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci observed that mass media, schools and conventional journalism are the primary actors in the diffusion of a hegemonic discourse.²⁸

Cena con Gramsci uses the concept of cultural hegemony to critically reflect on Italian society as it developed from the 1990s onwards. As briefly outlined above, a new public discourse emerged during the transition from the 'first' to the 'second' Republic, which aimed at liberating the narration of Italian history from the recurring cultural tension between fascism and antifascism, and at undermining the uncomfortable presence of both communist and neo-fascist politics. Through the exploitation of the country's main mass media, primarily those owned by Silvio Berlusconi, this revisionist tendency seemed to have gained significant cultural influence and affected the worldview and cultural memory of the masses.²⁹ The graphic novel suggests that Jacopo's socio-political delusions, and the culturally inflicted impossibility to write about Gramsci, may be considered an allegory of these 1990s tendencies.

In the graphic novel, Gramsci himself is metafictionally framed as the object of a cultural hegemony, silenced in both the past - by Fascism - and the present, by historical revisionism. This is made explicit not only textually, but it is also visually represented through the depiction of a closed chest (Fig. 2), from which two human figures appear; they represent Gramsci's life and thought. The impossibility of these figures to communicate with characters other than Jacopo underlines the idea that Gramsci's thought remains hidden and unable to reach a wider public. This representation of the present is paralleled with the depiction of Gramsci as not being able to communicate in his own time; Gramsci's philosophy is never textually represented, but remains implicit and for the reader to grasp throughout the narration. When Jacopo opens the chest, however, the graphic novel not only 'releases' Gramsci's philosophy in the twenty-first century, but more specifically, it criticises the oppressed status of Gramsci as a historical key figure, buried 'in the attic' of Italian collective memory.³⁰ By employing a contemporary interpretation of Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, *Cena con Gramsci* demonstrates the topicality of Gramscian

²⁴ T.J. Jackson Lears, 'The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: problems and possibilities', in: *The American Historical Review*, 90, 3 (1980), p. 568.

²⁵ Catalfamo, *Antonio Gramsci*, cit., p. 240.

²⁶ Jackson Lears, 'The Concept of Cultural Hegemony', cit., p. 577.

²⁷ B. Molden, 'Resistant pasts versus mnemonic hegemony: On the power relations of collective memory', in: *Memory Studies*, 9, 2 (2016), p. 128.

²⁸ Jackson Lears, 'The Concept of Cultural Hegemony', cit., p. 577.

²⁹ Prezioso, 'Did Revisionism Win?', cit., p. 249.

³⁰ Van Kranenburg, 'Whose Gramsci?', cit., p. 15.

thought for a critical reflection on the recent past, and at the same time creates a space for a commemoration of Gramsci in twenty-first-century Italy.



Figure 2 - Stamboulis and Costantini, *Cena con Gramsci*, cit., p. 23.

The image of the chest, with its two geraniums in 'different shades of red', not only evokes the image of a coffin in which Gramsci's memory is buried, but refers—more specifically – to the description of Gramsci's grave in Pier Paolo Pasolini's poem *Le ceneri di Gramsci* (*Gramsci's Ashes*).³¹ This poem, through which Pasolini had already attempted to revive Gramsci's memory and philosophy in the 1950s, is cited in the graphic novel, some pages ahead:

e, presso l'urna, sul terreno cereo, diversamente rossi, due gerani. Lì tu stai, bandito e con dura eleganza non cattolica, elencato tra estranei morti: Le ceneri di Gramsci...³²

beside the urn on softened ground, two geraniums a rather different shade of red. And you, here, banished with your hard, un-Catholic grace, registered among the dead foreigners: Gramsci's ashes...³³

The graphic novel presents Pasolini, himself a controversial figure because of his connection with Marxism and the Italian Communist Party, as the narrator of Gramsci's memory, and therefore engages with the leftist intellectual's previous attempts to overcome the controversial position of Gramsci within Italian culture and society. Through the act of recalling the poem, the graphic novel adds a third dimension to Pasolini's lament regarding Gramsci's exile; while the poem refers, first, to Gramsci's exile in prison and, second, to his anonymous burial in the 'English Cemetery' in Rome, as if he were a foreigner, the graphic novel furthermore suggests that Gramsci's memory and philosophy remain exiled under the hegemony of revisionism. It thus responds to the idea that Gramsci has indeed 'travelled the world' yet encounters public and political disinterest in his home country.

By presenting Gramsci on multiple temporal levels, that is, in his own time, in Pasolini's work, and in Jacopo's mind, *Cena con Gramsci* ties in with Gramsci's conception that – through the interplay between the narrative of the past and that of

³¹ P.P. Pasolini, *Le ceneri di Gramsci*, Milano, Garzanti 1993. Translation: S. Sartarelli (ed.), *The Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini: A Bilingual Edition*, Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 2014.

³² Pasolini, 'Le ceneri di Gramsci', as cited in: Stamboulis & Costantini, *Cena con Gramsci*, cit., p. 27.

³³ Sartarelli, *The Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini*, cit., p. 173.

the present – literature is able to reflect on itself and on its socio-political context.³⁴ The graphic novel creates a meta-historical allegory that implies the interpretation of cultural hegemony as a historical recurrence. In order to strengthen such an interpretation, the graphic novel proposes a narrative scheme that purposefully confuses the narration of past and present. The narration of Gramsci's biography is inserted within, and abruptly alternates with, that of Jacopo's struggles. According to Claudia Boscolo, this 'juxtaposition of flashes of different times of history, either moving from past to present or sliding through different time periods without any metadiscourse on the sliding itself, is a characteristic of NIE'.³⁵ Similarly, Elisabeth El Refaie notes that 'the spatial nature of the comics medium also makes it possible to juxtapose (and overlay) past and present and future moments on the page'.³⁶ Through this narrative technique, inherent to the comics medium and exemplary for both New Italian Epic and Gramsci's conception of the interplay between past and present, *Cena con Gramsci* disrupts the idea of history as a linear movement and constructs a narration in which 'each fragment is a vehicle for allegory'.³⁷

Through the alternation and merging of different historical time frames, the graphic novel subtracts Gramsci from the past and places him in the narrative of the present, aiming not only at repairing his memory, but also suggesting the continued relevance of his concept of hegemony. This twofold objective is represented visually through the use of colourfully edited, historical photographs for the narration of Gramsci's life. If black-and-white photography normally emphasises the historical character of an image and risks anchoring the depicted scene in the past, colour adds a contemporary layer to the image that – in Gianluca Costantini's words – not only simply 'dusts off' the old, grey photographs of Gramsci's life in a remote past,³⁸ but also suggests the possibility of a contemporary interpretation of both Gramsci's biography and his literary concepts (Fig. 3-4).³⁹ The overlay of past and present within a single image, enacted by this technique, metaphorically releases Gramsci from his historical exile, while at the same time dragging Jacopo into the narration of the past. Figure 4 shows how Jacopo is projected into Gramsci's prison cell, ultimately blurring the perception of past and present, and symbolising Jacopo's feeling of imprisonment by the reality of public disinterest and historical revisionism. Thus, through the creation of a meta-historical allegory, the graphic novel operates on two narrative levels: it retraces Gramsci's biography for educational and commemorative aims; more importantly, it suggests that Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony can be read as a relevant issue in contemporary Italian society and politics.

³⁴ Green, 'On the Postcolonial Image of Gramsci', cit., p. 90.

³⁵ Boscolo, 'The Idea of Epic and New Italian Epic', cit., p. 27.

³⁶ E. El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2012, p. 95. See also: H. Chute, 'Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative', in: *PMLA*, 123, 2 (2008), p. 453.

³⁷ Boscolo, 'The Idea of Epic and New Italian Epic', cit., p. 27.

³⁸ Gianluca Costantini as cited in: N. D'Agostino, 'Cena con Gramsci. Intervista al disegnatore, Gianluca Costantini', in: *Comicsblog*, <https://www.comicsblog.it/post/7874/cena-con-gramsci-intervista-al-disegnatore-gianluca-costantini> (6 November 2019).

³⁹ For an interpretation of historical photography and the implications of black-and-white photography, see, amongst others: J. Chapman, *Issues in Contemporary Documentary*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2009, and: S. Sontag, *On Photography*, New York, Rosetta Books, 2005.

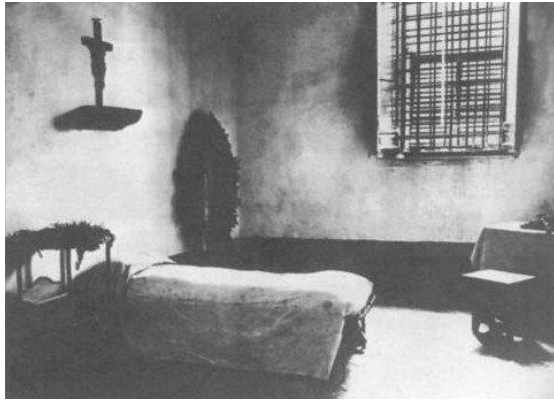


Figure 3 - 'Turi, Antonio Gramsci's prison cell'⁴⁰



Figure 4 - Stamboulis and Costantini, *Cena con Gramsci*, cit., p. 78.

Content and form: The graphic novel as a meta-reflexive form of literature

Gramsci's literary criticism is rooted in the premises of cultural hegemony, and goes back to his idea that historical moments are never homogeneous, but rather subjected to contradictory forces in society.⁴¹ For Gramsci, literature ideally represents the variety of voices history is made up of, or is at least able to voice the tendencies suppressed by a hegemonic culture. The difference between a literature produced by a hegemonic or oppressed culture lies in its political aims; while the first struggles for the 'refinement of culture', the latter 'struggles for its right to live'.⁴² In Gramsci's understanding, then, both content and form are inseparable from the writer's attitude towards society, since form – defined as 'a particular language' – is political insofar as 'every language contains the elements of a conception of the world'.⁴³ Due to its emphasis on the interdependency between the content and the form of the narrative, Gramsci's literary criticism is defined as a 'critica integrale' (inclusive criticism), which considers form to be politically and historically embedded, rather than merely esthetical.⁴⁴ As a result, content and form are subjected to a dialectic relation that changes according to its socio-political context. This idea of the historical changeability of the relation between content and form questions any a priori definition of the concept of literature, and consequently leads to the impossibility to define literature outside of its historical context. William Boelhower therefore concludes that Gramsci's notion of literature undermines a distinction between 'poetry and non-poetry', or between Literature – with a capital L – and popular culture.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ 'Turi, cella di Antonio Gramsci, 1950 ca', in: *Fondazione Gramsci*, <http://www.fondazionegramsci.org/antonio-gramsci-2/> (6 November 2019).

⁴¹ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere* 5, cit., p. 6.

⁴² Forgacs & Nowell-Smith (eds.), *Selections from Cultural Writings*, cit., pp. 93-95.

⁴³ W.Q. Boelhower, 'Antonio Gramsci's Sociology of Literature', in: J. Martin (ed.), *Antonio Gramsci: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers*, London-New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 201; Gramsci, as cited in: Jackson Lears, 'The Concept of Cultural Hegemony', cit., p. 569.

⁴⁴ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere* 5, cit., p. 61.

⁴⁵ Boelhower, 'Antonio Gramsci's Sociology of Literature', cit., p. 202.

Gramsci's preoccupation with contemporary popular culture stems from the idea that newer literary forms are able to respond to the hegemonic, bourgeois influences in traditional journalism.⁴⁶ As a founder of the communist newspaper *L'Unità*, Gramsci's criticism on journalism is twofold; the Sardinian philosopher wishes to understand the mechanisms and politics of the bourgeois press, while at the same time trying to organise a Marxist conception of journalism, one that was previously absent from Italian society. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci criticises the convergence between politics, financial stakeholders and the bourgeois press, as a result of which journalism fails to develop the interests of a mass democratic movement.⁴⁷ The graphic novel, like the works to be considered expressions of New Italian Epic, has similar aims; it exposes the opacity of revisionist media when reporting on important memorial issues, while making an effort to mobilise a broad group of readers to become contemporary witnesses of (forgotten) historical events.⁴⁸ Federico Vergari argues, for this reason, that the graphic novel has never been a form of entertainment, but that the genre arises more recently during the socio-political crises of the 1990s.⁴⁹ The graphic novel can be considered a politically engaged form of opposition to the tendency of historical revisionism, to the opacity of journalism when it comes to dealing with collective memory, and to the Berlusconi exploitation of mass media.⁵⁰ Gramsci's quest for a 'new literary form' that undermines the hegemony of traditional journalism, and responds to the dynamics of its socio-political context, might then have found its contemporary equivalent in the genre of the graphic novel.

The aims and narrative characteristics of the Italian graphic novel show overlap with the novels considered within the category of New Italian Epic, most importantly the (Gramscian) notion of the use of all possible literary and non-literary devices for the (socio-political) purpose of the narration.⁵¹ Goffredo Fofi emphasises that the Italian graphic novel shifts away from the 'postmodern hyper realistic' use of images, concluding in fact that, because of the way it 'returns to reality' in order to engage with society, one could consider the graphic novel the 'only form of art that is a child of our time'.⁵² In this observation, Fofi seems to consider the Italian graphic novel a political form not only because it specifically reacts to revisionism, but also because the graphic novel questions the relation between content and form in a way that is inherent to the contemporary quest for interdisciplinarity and the integration of popular culture into 'the literary'.⁵³ With its associations to 'lowbrow' comics, the graphic novel is exemplary of the transposition from 'literature' to the broader term 'culture'.⁵⁴ In fact, the tension between text, grammatextuality and visual representation, and the continuous mediation between fiction and non-fiction in the

⁴⁶ Forgacs & Nowell-Smith (eds.), *Selections from Cultural Writings*, cit., pp. 386-387.

⁴⁷ Ivi, pp. 387-389.

⁴⁸ Boscolo, 'The Idea of Epic and New Italian Epic', cit., p. 27.

⁴⁹ Vergari, *Politicomics*, cit., p. 23. Vergari situates the origins of the Italian graphic novel both in the alleged failure of journalism and in the 'psychological elaboration' of pre-literary political cartoons, largely associated with leftist magazines such as *BeccoGiallo* in the 1920s and *Il Male* in the 1970s; the latter undermined and criticised their own political environments through satire. See also: V. Spinazzola, 'L'Adolescente a fumetti', in: V. Spinazzola (ed.), *Tirature '12: Graphic Novel. L'età adulta del fumetto*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2012, p. 16. Although the term 'graphic novel' was coined by Will Eisner in 1978, to market his work *A contract with God* (Baronet Books, 1978), generally Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (Pantheon Books, 1991) is considered one of the first examples of the graphic novel in terms of a distinctive genre.

⁵⁰ Vergari, *Politicomics*, cit., p. 108.

⁵¹ Stamboulis, 'Il Graphic Journalism in Italia.', cit., pp. 98-99. Wu Ming, *New Italian Epic*, cit., p. 12; Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere 5*, cit., p. 11.

⁵² G. Fofi, 'L'unica forma d'arte figlia del nostro tempo', in: V. Spinazzola (ed.), *Tirature '12: Graphic Novel. L'età adulta del fumetto*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2012, pp. 10-11.

⁵³ J. Moran, *Interdisciplinarity*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, pp. 76-77.

⁵⁴ Ibidem.; P. Widdowson, 'Literature', in: J. Drakakis (ed.), *The New Critical Idiom*, New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 38.

graphic novel, have put the boundaries between what is considered ‘high’ and ‘low’ literature under pressure.⁵⁵ In this light, *Cena con Gramsci* explores – in a meta-reflexive way – how the graphic novel as a narrative form might renew the very conception of literature in order to engage with Gramsci’s memory.

Cena con Gramsci can be read as a meta-reflexive form of transmedial storytelling, that is exemplary for the practices of contemporary popular culture and that can be found in the novels considered within New Italian Epic.⁵⁶ As a creative continuation of a narrative initiated in a theatrical text and performance, and as a part of the larger (online) project *Nino, Appunti su Antonio Gramsci*, the graphic novel by Stamboulis and Costantini complies with Henry Jenkins’ definition of transmediality as ‘the flow of content through multiple media platforms’.⁵⁷ The web project, initiated by Roberto Rampi and Marta Galli on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of Gramsci’s death in 2007, served to collect various voices and perspectives on Gramsci’s philosophy and persona, distributed through different media outlets, amongst which the earlier mentioned play, two exhibitions and a collective volume.⁵⁸ The graphic novel, published five years after the original project, is not merely an adaptation of the theatrical text, but can be read as a spin-off that continues and extends the narrative on the necessity to commemorate Gramsci, proposed by the earlier project, through a different artistic language. What is more, though, is that *Cena con Gramsci* twists Jenkins’ definition of transmedial storytelling and internalises transmediality as a part of its plot. It diffuses the narrative of Gramsci’s life and thought over various forms of media from within. This becomes clear in the metafictional quest for the appropriate form through which Gramsci’s memory is to be revived. The graphic novel rejects any given definition of form and purposefully confuses fictional and non-fictional genres in order to create a narrative in which Gramsci is ‘updated’ to the present day. *Cena con Gramsci* questions the possibilities of traditional literary forms; in order to undermine the revisionist tendency that makes it impossible for Jacopo to write academically about Gramsci, the protagonist relies on music and song texts to re-engage with Gramsci’s memory. However, closing the transmedial circle, the protagonist eventually proposes to perform a play in Gramsci’s honour, stating that ‘[a] play is the memory of an event through an action. A ritual, capable of reproduction tomorrow and after tomorrow as well’.⁵⁹ When proposing, and rejecting, various forms to guarantee a return of Gramsci’s memory, the graphic novel becomes a meta-reflexive work of art that seems to implicitly propose itself as a form potentially capable of re-engaging with Gramsci’s literary criticism.

As a hybrid literary genre that relies on text and image, fiction and non-fiction, and on a creative mixture of (auto)biographical, testimonial and novelistic genres, the graphic novel challenges traditional notions of the definition and function of

⁵⁵ The term ‘grammatextuality’ refers to the idea that words, their font, and their position, are to be considered images. See: J. Baetens & H. Frey, *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 152-153.

⁵⁶ Wu Ming, *New Italian Epic*, cit., pp. 44-47; M. Jansen, ‘Laboratory NIE: Mutations in Progress’, in: *Journal of Romance Studies*, 10, 1 (2010), p. 102.

⁵⁷ H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York, New York University Press, 2006, p. 2.

⁵⁸ The project, realised in collaboration with ArteVOX, amongst others, comprised of the earlier mentioned play by Davide Daolmi, the web site ‘www.gramsci2007.it’, the exhibitions ‘Nino 7047’ and ‘I luoghi di Nino’, curated by Elena Lah and Anna Bodini, and the collective volume AA. VV. *Nino, Appunti su Antonio Gramsci*, Milano, Infoarte, 2007. See: R. Rampi & M. Galli, ‘Nino, Appunti su Antonio Gramsci: il progetto’, in: *Gramscipop*, <http://www.gramscipop.it/> (6 November 2019).

⁵⁹ Stamboulis & Costantini, *Cena con Gramsci*, cit., p. 73.

literature.⁶⁰ This is furthermore sustained by the fact that *Cena con Gramsci* continuously negotiates between fictional and non-fictional devices. The graphic narrative is framed by a non-fictional paratext; the story is accompanied, both at the beginning and at the end, by an introduction into Gramsci's life and a glossary with his main philosophical concepts. According to Cristina Greco, the addition of an essayistic paratext is an integral part of the narrative, and distinguishes the graphic novel as a genre from the traditional comic genre.⁶¹ While this sliding from non-fiction to fiction – and vice versa – blurs the boundaries of fiction, it also confuses the objectives of the graphic novel; as we have seen above, *Cena con Gramsci* aims to engage the reader in an active, memory-making process based on the interpretation of an allegorical fictional story, and at the same time offers the non-fictional educational tools to guarantee such an interpretation. The blurring boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are integrated into the form of the graphic novel as well. Through the use of the 'factual', historical photographs and archival material within the narrative, covered by a 'fictional layer' in colour (Fig. 3), *Cena con Gramsci* reflects on the possibilities and limits of both fiction and non-fiction. Through this technique, *Cena con Gramsci* comments on the idea that fiction is not fully able to grasp the historical factuality of Gramsci's life; on the other hand, it confirms that fiction is the most effective way to re-engage with Gramsci and his philosophy within the hegemonic culture of revisionist memories, as proposed by various forms of (non-fictional) journalism and mass media.

It becomes clear that *Cena con Gramsci* manifests itself as a response to Gramsci's call for the use of all possible literary and non-literary devices to represent a plurality of voices, without distinguishing between 'high' and 'low' culture. By borrowing from, and mixing up, literary and non-literary traditions, the graphic novel re-engages with the Gramscian idea that literature should include the variety of voices history is made up of. The references to Foscolo, Pasolini and Dante (Fig. 5), on the one hand, and to rock music and graffiti artists, on the other, are complementary and meant to layer the significance of the narration. The reference to the song *Rosa di Turi* (1996) by the Bari-based musical group *Radiodervish*, for example, is meant to direct the reader to the poem of the same name, written by Gramsci in one of his letters from prison. This popular attitude, which adds to the narrative complexity of the work, is a characteristic of New Italian Epic, and aims at involving the reader in an active, meaning-making process.⁶²

⁶⁰ Dimitri Chimenti observes that, in a way similar to the graphic novel, the literary works considered under the category of New Italian Epic 'destabilize the order of the novel genre, causing turbulences and fluctuations around its borders. They could be defined as polycentric systems that generate forces expanding from within, and thus occasioning a crisis in the distinction between inside and outside, literary and extra-literary'. In: D. Chimenti, 'Unidentified narrative objects: notes for a rhetorical typology', in: *Journal of Romance Studies*, 10, 1 (2010), p. 38. Hillary Chute insists that the graphic novel is necessarily hybrid, and paradoxically describes the graphic novel as 'a rich work of non-fiction', which borrows its storytelling techniques from traditional comics, cinema and the Bildungsroman. Cristina Greco adds to this that the graphic novel tends towards the creation of an 'effetto di realtà' (reality effect), through the creative reworking of the form of the testimony, the historical novel, and the autobiography, resulting in a work of art that transcends the traditional notion of genres. See: Chute, 'Comics as Literature?', cit., p. 452; And: C. Greco, *Graphic novel. Confini e forme inedite nel sistema attuale dei generi*, Roma, Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2014, pp. 16-21.

⁶¹ Greco, *Graphic novel*, cit., p. 16.

⁶² Wu Ming, *New Italian Epic*, cit., p. 17.; Stamboulis, 'Il Graphic Journalism in Italia.', cit., pp. 100-101.



Figure 5 - Stamboulis and Costantini, *Cena con Gramsci*, cit., p. 40.

In order to represent different voices, the graphic novel – similarly to the works considered within the category of New Italian Epic – uses different styles and techniques.⁶³ Rather than to delegitimise them in a revisionist manner, *Cena con Gramsci* manages to present various voices as diverse opinions and contrasting worldviews. Not only does *Cena con Gramsci* use different coloured backgrounds to express and distinguish the voices, moods and ideas of the individual characters; it also uses distinctively different drawing styles and (digital) techniques in order to engage with various cultural modes of expression. As we have seen, the graphic novel employs archival material (Gramsci's fingerprints, for example), (historical) photographs and digitally edited ink drawings, but also adopts the propagandistic style of fascist and communist film posters in order to sustain the narrative (Fig. 6). Moreover, according to Cristina Greco, the expression of a variety of voices in graphic novels often happens through overlap.⁶⁴ In *Cena con Gramsci* this type of overlap occurs quite literally, and is realised through the creation of an a-synchronic relation between text and images, that is, when the text does not correspond to what is shown in the image - and vice versa.⁶⁵ Shifting between different historical periods, *Cena con Gramsci* presents an image of Dante and Beatrice in conversation, but suggests that the text balloons belong to Gramsci and his wife (Fig. 5). In these ways, the graphic novel recreates a plurality of voices, both in the present and in the past, and is able to give them a (renewed) space in literature that confuses and extends beyond traditional literary genres.

⁶³ Ivi, p. 100.

⁶⁴ Greco, *Graphic novel*, cit., p. 259.

⁶⁵ See for example: P. Giovannetti, 'Il graphic novel sperimentale. Scisso, enigmatico, metanarrativo', in: V. Spinazzola (ed.), *Tirature '12: Graphic Novel. L'età adulta del fumetto*, Milano, Il Saggiatore 2012, pp. 29-34.



Figure 6 - Stamboulis and Costantini, *Cena con Gramsci*, cit., p. 24.

Gramsci specifically criticises the traditional Italian genre of the novel for its failed attempts to represent various voices, particularly the voice of the working class, and the impossibility to do so in the standardised Tuscan dialect.⁶⁶ By engaging with this criticism of the traditional novel, then, the graphic novel manages to undermine language through the creative use of its inherent double track between verbs and visuals. As Elettra Stamboulis explains, the graphic novel is wary of explicative notes, and its use of images allows it to undermine the density of a language that is inherent in pre-existing literary traditions.⁶⁷ The ability to narrate without verbal explanations facilitates the co-existence of various interpretations of the visual narrative, and ultimately confirms Gramsci's hypothesis of form as a political device. Not only does the absence of words in certain scenes in *Cena con Gramsci* evoke highly emotive scenes, but this technique also undermines the 'censorship' of revisionism. The strong contrasts between the abstract image of Jacopo and the colourful picture of Turin are exemplary of this idea. The graphic novel suggests here not only that Jacopo's confusion is induced by the society he faces; more importantly, it exposes the discrepancy between this society and the protagonist and proposes the conflict itself as the subject of the scene (Fig. 7).



Figure 7 - Stamboulis and Costantini, *Cena con Gramsci*, cit., p. 21.

Not only does the graphic novel move beyond the novel genre by relying on the visual techniques of the comic, the genre of the graphic novel, and *Cena con Gramsci* in particular, is characterised by the deconstruction of the conventions of the

⁶⁶ Forgacs & Nowell-Smith (eds.), *Selections from Cultural Writings*, cit., pp. 386-387.

⁶⁷ Stamboulis, 'Il Graphic Journalism in Italia.', cit., pp. 101-102.

traditional comic genre. Literally and symbolically rupturing the conventional symmetrical structure of the comic, *Cena con Gramsci* stretches out dialogues over multiple panels (Fig. 5) and presents ‘splash pages’.⁶⁸ These page-large images, whose borders are omitted, create intimate scenes that metaphorically expand beyond the borders of the graphic novel, placing the reader in the position of the testimony.⁶⁹ This is the case, for example, when *Cena con Gramsci* represents Gramsci’s death, stating that his funeral was attended by only two of his relatives. Through the splash page, the graphic novel enables a direct confrontation between the image and the reader, and asks the reader to symbolically become a witness of Gramsci’s funeral (Fig. 8). Rather than proposing a postmodern, ironic attitude towards genres, these deconstructions of genre conventions serve the memorial scope of the graphic novel, and confirm the interdependency between content and form.

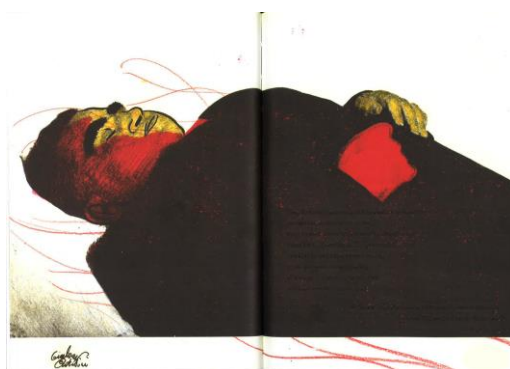


Figure 8 - Stamboulis and Costantini, *Cena con Gramsci*, cit., pp. 50-51.

Conclusions

Cena con Gramsci reintroduces Gramsci into the twenty-first century through a contemporary representation of the scholar’s literary concepts. The analysis of the two Gramscian concepts of cultural hegemony and interdependency of content and form has shown that the function of Gramsci’s philosophy, in the graphic novel by Stamboulis and Costantini, is twofold: (1) the representation of cultural hegemony becomes a tool in reviving Gramsci’s memory in Italy after his metaphorical exile; (2) Gramsci’s conception of the interdependency of content and form is used – on a metafictional level – to reflect on the graphic novel as a critical genre within the Italian literary landscape. By using different techniques and narrative devices, which are similar to those found in the literary production of New Italian Epic, the graphic novel shifts away from the traditional notions of literature that Gramsci denounced and reflects on the scholar’s observations on journalism, in order to criticise contemporary mass media for acting as a vehicle for revisionist worldviews. Hence, while *Cena con Gramsci* formally engages with Gramsci’s literary criticism, symbolically speaking, the exploration of a variety of forms becomes the very condition for the return of Gramsci’s memory and philosophy in contemporary Italy. As Roberto Rampi writes on the cover, *Cena con Gramsci* shows that ‘[f]or the role it assigns to active citizenship, Gramscian thought calls loudly for a rediscovery’.⁷⁰ As opposed to recent debates that question the contemporary relevance of the concept of hegemony – and propose to move beyond Gramsci to explore post- or non-hegemonic discourses –

⁶⁸ Baetens & Frey, *The Graphic Novel*, cit., pp. 238-239.

⁶⁹ Elettra Stamboulis attributes the testimonial involvement of the reader through the subversion of language and style to the influence of New Italian Epic: Stamboulis, ‘Il Graphic Journalism in Italia.’, cit., pp. 101-102; See also: Greco, *Graphic novel*, cit., p. 16.

⁷⁰ Rampi, ‘Il segno Gramsci’, cit., p. 7.

this paper has demonstrated that *Cena con Gramsci* re-discovers Gramscian concepts in order to rethink current Italian socio-political issues.⁷¹ More attention may be given, in addition, to other hybrid narrative forms that engage – critically and creatively – with Gramsci’s thought.

Keywords

Cena con Gramsci, graphic novel, memory politics, cultural hegemony, Gramsci

Rachelle Gloudemans studied Italian Literature and Culture (MA) and Literary Studies (rMA) at the University of Amsterdam. She is currently a PhD candidate at KU Leuven (Belgium), where she works on translingualism and identity in Italian-language writers of Jewish origin. Her research interests include cultural memory, the Italian graphic novel, and the cinematic representation of the Seventies in Italy.

Faculteit Letteren
KU Leuven Campus Brussel
Warmoesberg 26
1000 Brussels (Belgium)
rachelle.gloudemans@kuleuven.be

RIASSUNTO

Gramsci nel graphic novel

La critica letteraria gramsciana come forma di memoria in *Cena con Gramsci* di Elettra Stamboulis e Gianluca Costantini

In seguito alla crisi del comunismo e al diffondersi del revisionismo storico dagli anni Novanta in poi, Gramsci è diventato in Italia una figura chiave nel dibattito sulla ‘memoria divisa’. L’avvio di tale dibattito in Italia, a sua volta, si è trovato a coincidere con quello sul New Italian Epic e con l’introduzione del graphic novel come forma letteraria che mette in discussione i limiti della letteratura tradizionalmente intesa. Nella presente ricerca si esplora la correlazione fra i tre fenomeni attraverso l’analisi della rappresentazione della critica letteraria gramsciana in *Cena con Gramsci* (2012). Nella prima parte si ipotizza che questo graphic novel scritto da Elettra Stamboulis e disegnato da Gianluca Costantini presenti un’allegoria metastorica in cui Gramsci stesso – prima oppresso dal fascismo e dopo dal revisionismo storico – è rappresentato come oggetto dell’egemonia culturale. Nella seconda parte si analizzano invece le strategie narrative attraverso cui *Cena con Gramsci* entra in dialogo con la critica letteraria gramsciana sull’interdipendenza fra contenuto e forma, proponendo il genere del graphic novel come forma in grado di rispondere alle dinamiche socio-politiche che interessano l’Italia contemporanea. Si conclude che, grazie alla riscrittura di questi concetti della teoria gramsciana, il graphic novel di Stamboulis e Costantini può essere considerato un atto di memoria metariflessiva che critica il revisionismo storico e, nello stesso tempo, crea uno spazio culturale per la commemorazione di una figura a lungo rimasta in ombra.

⁷¹ See for example: R. Day, *Gramsci is Dead. Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*, London: Pluto Press, 2005; J. Beasley-Murray, *Posthegemony. Political Theory and Latin America*, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 2010. And for an overview of the debate: M. Briziarelli & S. Martínez Guillem, *Reviving Gramsci: Crisis, Communication, and Change*, New York-London, Routledge, 2016.