



URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-101325 - Publisher: Igitur publishing  
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Anno 26, 2011 / Fascicolo 1 - Website: [www.rivista-incontri.nl](http://www.rivista-incontri.nl)

## Redefining readership as a subtle form of self-leadership

Review of: Pierpaolo Antonello & Florian Mussnug (eds.),  
*Postmodern Impegno: ethics and commitment in contemporary Italian culture*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2009. ISBN: 9783034301251

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Re-reading 'impegno' in the light of postmodernity, is first and foremost asking what postmodernity represents. For the authors of this book, postmodernity serves as an umbrella concept which includes in itself a broad variety of aspects and prominent socio-political and cultural transformations. These changes happened over time and did not *per se* signify radical breaks with what we call modernity. Non-radicalness, here, opens up room for possibilities in the form of ambiguity rather than antagonism.

The examined texts are all produced in this 'postmodernized' world: they often include its characteristics, while simultaneously offering a reflection on this world. The cultural and the political frequently overlap, which broadens the perspective on what types of engagement are possible. In opposition to this 'opening up of spaces' - not directly related to ideology or hegemony - the book asserts that the complex world needs micro politics rather than macro politics. Political ideas should be understood from a specific perspective, channelled through a specific object, highlighting the individual's experience. The emphasis lies on the new spheres in which political engagement may be recognized: the domestic, the romantic and others. 'Impegno', then, for this book's authors is conceptualized as a 'thick relationship': the constitution of a relation with the other, the near and dear instead of the collective. The relationship between the author and the reader may be an example of such a 'intimate' connection.

Change or, at least, thought must come from critical thinking internalized in the 'home' and through personal experience, and can be externalized from there on. Moreover, in the Italian context, art has been *par excellence* one of the areas that, in contrast to politics and the media, can offer a view on the rights and wrongs of the status quo. In the recent years, literary works and a broad variety of other texts

have reacted to a public demand to know, see and experience reality. This desire is based on the awareness that there is no escaping a confrontation with the changed landscape. This type of understanding with the help of cultural objects is, as the editors of the book explain clearly in the introduction, realized best through a bottom up approach. This means that we can only achieve significant comprehension, if we 'read' culture step by step, while keeping in mind that the whole of society has changed, has become 'postmodernized' and, in Bauman's terms, 'liquid'. It is quite a task, but the texts in this book demonstrate how both cultural artefacts and the interpretations of these works can attain such an ambitious goal actually (also) by means of ambiguity.

### **The strength of ambiguousness**

The book is divided into three parts. The first part discusses a (re)interpretation of 'impegno' through a focus on the role of the intellectual, the meaning of dialectics within or beyond postmodernity and the potential ethics of pleasure. Part two contains theoretical discussions of 'impegno', while the third part focuses on analyses of different genres.

Remo Ceserani, with a somewhat ironic undertone, briefly examines what role and influence postmodern intellectuals may or may not have. His conclusion is that the role itself is very hard to define, as it articulates itself through very diverse aspects. Intellectuals find themselves in between areas of interest, classes and roles. Monica Jansen sheds an interesting light on the way (mainly) Luperini, Tabucchi and Belpoliti have thought (the end to) postmodernity, by discussing the place of dialectics within their ideas. Jansen's essay deals with the almost notorious significance of oppositions and the question as to whether an end should mean a desire for a return to the old or, on the contrary, may yield change. What is, in my view, very fascinating is that this text demonstrates how oppositions do not always imply that the existence of one concept is dependent of the other (there is only black, if there is white). It can also mean that they are different articulations of the same or similar underlying structure. This latter statement refers to the subtle differences between dialectics and ambiguity: it may be more difficult to use such understanding as fuel for political action, but it does signify a type of critical position that may be required in this world.

Jennifer Burns relates the experience of pleasure to possible new ways of posing ethical questions: what are the ethics of pleasure? Burns interprets Tabucchi's *L'Oca al passo* (2006) referring to the role of a certain game that may be embedded in cultural texts. What comes in mind here, is the question of power. 'Playing' a game produces a pleasure feeling, partly because you experience a certain sense of power. The reasons for this feeling of power are a central component of the ethical sides of pleasure. With respect to Italy, a sentence that, in my view, illustrates (implicitly) the importance of pleasure and the political/ethical side of it, is Giorgio Gaber's well-known observation: 'Ciò che mi preoccupa, non è Berlusconi in sè, ma Berlusconi in me'. The cult of Berlusconi's personality can be seen as an extreme form of 'pleasure politics', a hedonistic lifestyle promoted by him and desired by many, which can (and must) be questioned. Game as a keyword returns more often in

the book reviewed here. The term can be used to connect formalities and content to the reader's effort, pleasure and activity in reading a text and taking a position with respect to the questions raised in the text. This reader-oriented approach opens up quite a lot of opportunities for future research.

Part two, as I have already mentioned, contains several theoretical readings of discourse surrounding the notion of 'impegno', with an emphasis on the relative rather than the absolute. Giuseppe Stellardi's discussion of Vattimo's 'pensiero debole' is elucidating and well written. He explains how Vattimo's philosophy may function as an indicative way of socio-political thinking. Nonetheless, the essay still leaves a lot of practical questions open (but, it is this openness that characterizes Vattimo's thought in the first place). What is striking, for me, about Alessia Ronchetti's text, is its critical reading of theory that literary scholars have come so accustomed to. Ronchetti illustrates, in reaction to post structuralism, that before the woman as a subject can be deconstructed at all, it should first and foremost exist as a subject. The body is, as Ronchetti points out, an important argument to start this approach. Attilio Motta's essay on autobiographical writing is very relevant today as this type of texts is undergoing an immense rise in popularity. Motta posits the model of the biography intelligently as indicative for specific characteristics of postmodernity and its future forms. Orsetta Innocenti's essay 'La trasformazione dell'intimità' connects the individual to the collective by exposing the similarities between intimacy within personal relations and democracy within the social field. The 'give and take' structure and continuous negotiation within interpersonal contact, based on autonomy of both partners is, in fact, very eloquent. With our eyes on the 'romanzi di formazione' such analogies demonstrate how we can understand youth as symptomatic for a particular type of (postmodern) being in the world.

### **From the 'I' to the 'We' and vice versa**

In part three of *Postmodern Impegno*, (again) intimacy is a term that is revised often, directly and indirectly. Intimacy falls under the realm of the emotional, of immediacy and individual stories. One essay that relates to these arguments in a way that made me rethink my own interpretations of cultural objects, was Rosa Barotsi's and Pierpaolo Antonello's discussion of Nanni Moretti's works. The essay combines theory and Moretti's personal sayings and beliefs in a very fluid way in order to combine 'big' issues and individual thought. Moretti 'embodies', so to speak, a confluence between the social and the personal. He represents the type of intellectual and artist who talks to and about the people and politics, but remains very critical and aware of the contemporary social context, using the possibilities of both content and form to express or induce consciousness.

Alan O'Leary's study, who highlights the political layers of sentimentality and melodrama, just as Innocenti's essay in the second part of the book, also refers (implicitly) to Vattimo's 'weak thought': sentiments, intimacy and empathy are part of the personal realm, the relative and the discussable. I do wonder how one should interpret Richard Sennett's 'tyranny of intimacy' in the light of the ideas expressed in *Postmodern Impegno*. Sennett regards intimacy in our society as the reason why we have narrowed down our living environment, reducing our political or social

consciousness, rather than reinforcing it. Perhaps, specifically cultural objects can make a 'translation' from the intimate to the 'greater cause'.

Then, we have the subject of memory: trying to remember and understand memories from one's own perspective and context is comparable and indispensable to critically understanding culture. In postmodernity, memory is more 'a memory of a memory'. The question how postmodern texts remember the Shoah forms the basis of Robert SC Gordon's essay. Memory, like reality, becomes more fragmented and layered. Gordon also takes in consideration the distribution, reception and production of the texts in relation to the notion of 'impegno'. The question as to whether kitsch can be politically committed is somewhat similar to Burns discussion of the ethics of pleasure and Ronchetti's mentioning of the concept desire, as they all emphasise on the possible ethical sides of what we often consider to be 'superficial'.

Sergia Adamo's contribution links justice to the relation between law and literature, as the latter may articulate the personal experience of injustice. The individual experience and notion of justification is comparable to Richard Rorty's ideas on the relative nature of the truth and his pragmatic preference for what is justified or not in a particular situation, for a particular person. Rorty is also mentioned in reference to Moretti: more of the philosopher's ideas overlap with the underlying messages of this book. Giuliana Pieri contributes a great deal by explaining that 'gialli' may be narrations about the social and political status quo in Italy, but the intentions that lie beneath these writings and their reception may not always enclose forms of engagement. Raffaello Mosca has written about a subject that cannot be denied in the light of Italian postmodernity: the meeting point between literature and journalism. Here, the notion of objectivity, comparable to its role in Pierpaolo Antonello's thought provoking and, for me, eye opening piece on theatrical storytelling and memory, becomes 'problematic'. By this I mean that it can actually be seen as part of the private experience that 'nonetheless might have a common reach and meaning' (p. 235).

### **'Impegno' individualized**

Certainly not all the findings of this work have been mentioned. Postmodern art is in itself very diverse and impossible to place into a certain category. Yet, this fragmented nature demonstrates how society and ethical-political questions must be re-configured upstream. To try to draw a bigger picture from scratch or 'simply' based on earlier formulated ideas would undermine the complexity. This, in its turn, would undermine the reader's role and 'character' today. As always, arguments regarding engagements leave the question how direct political action may be realized open to some extent. Yet, reading, seeing, experiencing and creating are the activities that ask attention and commitment, at least in the objects discussed in this book.

Nevertheless (or precisely because), it seems to me that it will not be an easy project to engage people and artists in political and ethical re-thinking - has it ever been? The contradictory aspects of the world addressed in this book may make this even more complicated. On the one hand there is a public demand to know reality,

on the other hand we are dealing with different types of reality. Postmodern society's fluidness renders it ungraspable. Postmodern society concerns everyone and everything, while focussing almost obsessively on the 'I'. This book demonstrates how an analysis of cultural expressions created within this mosaic may be done, offering both theoretical and 'practical' approaches. The contributing scholars both stress the importance of the transformed world and the need for methods, but do not lose sight of the historical context, referring often to Calvino and Pasolini. Italy is a country characterized by paradoxes long before postmodernity, defined by a constant struggle for identity and, so to speak, non-identity as identity. Therefore, taking into account cultural memory as well as a part of the complicated levels of self-awareness and political engagement, is crucial.

Lastly, I would like to add that some of the questions raised in the book prompted me to rethink 'known' concepts and the way I stand in and perceive the world. Literature has proven itself to be a space in which such questions can be addressed, but I think the question in itself which other spaces (in relation/combination with literature) may also yield such potency can function as the beginning of a re-evaluation of our environment and behaviour. Jennifer Burns who interprets 'impegno' in an interdisciplinary manner as 'lying within this network of multi-media cultural production deeply embedded in contemporary society, associated with a readiness to immerse oneself in contemporary society and its modes of understanding, explaining and communicating itself' (p. 62), could not be more precise. Now that readers and spectators have many more tools to express their thoughts and gain information, the intellectual's awareness of these possibilities must grow as a response. Reception must be taken seriously so that the reader takes the world created in these narratives seriously. This can help them to conceptualize their individual notion of 'impegno'. One of my understandings of a postmodern 'impegno', based on the book I have reviewed, is that the author or narrator may debate with the reader, through the text, so that readership may possibly be defined as a subtle but effective form of self-leadership.

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