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Send in the clowns! Humour and power in Italian political, social and cultural life

Editorial

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In January 2013, in the midst of the electoral campaign, former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi made an appearance on *Servizio Pubblico*, a popular talk show hosted by journalist and *anti-berlusconiano* Michele Santoro on the independent channel La7. During the show, Berlusconi asked the journalist, ‘Santoro, ma siamo per caso a *Zelig*?’,¹ and performed a comic sketch of his own: after emulating and almost parodying the reading of Marco Travaglio’s weekly letter, he returned to his chair – which had been occupied by Travaglio during the reading of his own letter – and wiped the chair clean in a theatrical way, before sitting down. Whistled at by the audience, Berlusconi replied: ‘Non sapete nemmeno scherzare’.²

The following day, journalist Maria Volpe of the *Corriere della Sera* interviewed *cinepanettone* actor Massimo Boldi, who briefly met with the *Cavaliere in the studio of La7*, before Berlusconi’s ‘battaglia’ with Santoro:

Volpe: È vero che prima della diretta avete fatto un vecchio sketch che lei proponeva al *Derby* di Milano?

Boldi: Sì, era il mio cavallo di battaglia. Facevo il mobiliere della Brianza. Lui sapeva tutte le battute a memoria, a distanza di 35 anni.

Volpe: E la scenetta di Berlusconi che pulisce la sedia di Travaglio?

Boldi: Cabaret puro. Del resto lui continuava a dirlo che si divertiva come fosse a *Zelig*.³

Theatrical techniques, neo-television, and what Giovanna Cosenza has termed *SpotPolitik* (politics filtered through different discursive genres and in particular the comic genre)⁴ clearly emerge from Boldi’s interview. It is precisely this union

¹ *Zelig*, the title of which was taken from the famous Woody Allen movie, is a successful comedy show aired on one of Berlusconi’s commercial channels, Mediaset.

² Various recordings of Berlusconi’s act are available on YouTube. For an analysis of this performance see F. Zucconi, ‘Berlusconi Travaglio Santoro’, *Lavoro culturale*, January 12, 2013, www.lavoroculturale.org/berlusconi-travaglio-santoro/ (last accessed November 10, 2014).

³ M. Volpe, “‘Ho fatto una sorpresa a Silvio: era felicissimo’”, *Corriere della sera*, January 12, 2013, www.corriere.it/politica/13_gennaio_12/ho-fatto-una-sorpresa-a-silvio-volpe_6d143de8-5c9a-11e2-bd70-6c313080309b.shtml (last accessed November 9, 2014).

⁴ U. Eco, *Sette anni di desiderio*, Bompiani, Milano, 1983; G. Cosenza, *Spotpolitik. Perché la ‘casta’ non sa comunicare*, Roma, Laterza, 2012.

between politics and humour, between power and performance and the implications of this union for Italian society, that we wish to focus on in this special issue.⁵

Send in the clowns!

That humour and politics are closely related also became evident from the performance of Boldi's colleague, Beppe Grillo,⁶ during that same electoral campaign. Grillo fuelled indignation in the Italian piazzas, drawing however on a very different school of thought and on equally different professional collaborations: from Franca Rame and Dario Fo's *teatro impegnato* to the popular *teatro di narrazione* wave represented by Marco Paolini;⁷ from the collaboration with left-wing icon Michele Serra to that with Antonio Ricci, the creator of Mediaset's satirical show *Striscia la notizia*. If Berlusconi is the political *istrione*, the biography of Grillo seems more similar to that of a chimera, the mythological creature whose body is composed of parts from different animals.

In a paradoxical inversion, while the showman Grillo concluded his rallies in the historical – for the Italian Left – piazza San Giovanni, the Democratic Party, whose victory was taken for granted in these elections, concluded its electoral campaign with the iconic film director Nanni Moretti in the Ambra Jovinelli theatre, an important Roman venue for left-wing comedians.⁸ These developments, as well as Berlusconi's comeback at the elections, led *The Economist* to comment on the outcome of the elections with a collage of Grillo and Berlusconi on its front cover, accompanied by the title 'Send in the clowns'.⁹

However, we do not wish to fuel the too easy stereotype of Italy as the usual 'exception' and must acknowledge the presence, on an international level, of various performances by more or less professional actors, such as Ronald Reagan and also John Paul II, a semi-professional actor and playwright. In France – which was very recently shaken by the Dieudonné case¹⁰ – the comic actor Coluche decided to run for President in 1980, gaining the support of philosophers Deleuze and Guattari and, according to a survey, of 16% of the French population. Eventually, the Italian-born Coluche withdrew his candidature and continued to work as an actor, agreeing to perform together with Grillo in the movie *Scemo di guerra*, some years later. We could, then, state that this is politics in the age of the *société du spectacle*.

⁵ We would like to acknowledge the editorial contribution of Clare Watters – in an initial phase – to this special issue.

⁶ See for a biography of *grillismo*, O. Ponte di Pino, *Comico & politico*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina editore, 2014.

⁷ P. Antonello, 'New Commitment in Italian "Theatrical Story-Telling": Memory, Testimony and the Evidential Paradigm', in: P. Antonello & F. Mussnug (eds), *Postmodern Impegno. Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2009, pp. 233-257.

⁸ The Ambra Jovinelli theatre was directed by Serena Dandini for almost ten years. Dandini is the front woman of a group of iconic left-wing satirical actors that had risen to fame ever since the popular *La tv delle ragazze* (1988-89), *Pippo Kennedy Show* (1997) and *L'ottavo nano* (2001). A prominent role in this group was covered by the Guzzantis (especially Corrado and Sabina, two of the most successful satirical and disputed actors in Italy today), children of Paolo Guzzanti who is one of the founders of *Forza Italia* and a collaborator of Silvio Berlusconi.

⁹ The full title of this edition of *The Economist* was 'Send in the clowns. How Italy's disastrous election threatens the future of the euro'. March 2, 2013.

¹⁰ Dieudonné is a comic actor and activist who, in the past, has campaigned against racism, ran twice against the French neo-fascist party *Front National* and rose to fame thanks to his anti-racist shows written with the Jewish playwright Élie Semoun. In recent years, his work has however been interpreted as racist and anti-Semitic, in particular as a result of the invention of a gesture, the 'quenelle', seemingly a variation of the Nazi salute.

If such a phenomenon is not limited to Italy,¹¹ there is no doubt that in the Italian cultural climate it assumes the form of an uncontrolled paroxysm of laughter, with significant political repercussions. The entry onto the political stage of Beppe Grillo as well as the increasing visibility and prominence of political satire and the role (new) media play in this context have only further accentuated the strong relationship between humour and power in Italian political, social and cultural life. Nevertheless, this special issue aims to go beyond the Grillo phenomenon by exploring the presence of humour in a much longer tradition.

The spectacularization of politics and the politicization of satire

When, in 1997, Dario Fo was awarded the Nobel Prize, this was motivated by Fo's unique ability to emulate 'the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging authority'.¹² In Italian, the word satire is indeed often associated with the verb 'dissacrare': to 'bring down', to attack what is considered 'sacred' and untouchable, because it is powerful and authoritative. But what happens to political satire when political power is no longer authoritative, sacred or legitimised? Is there still anything left for satire to 'dissacrare'?

In a special issue of *Comunicazione politica*, dedicated to 'Lo stato della satira', Edoardo Novelli explains how at the end of the 1970s the comic actor 'passa dall'intrattenere e divertire ad una più forte critica e denuncia dei mali e delle disfunzioni della società, politica inclusa'.¹³ Francesco Amoretti, in the same issue, explains that nowadays 'il potere politico eleva la comicità a cifra distintiva del proprio linguaggio e delle proprie azioni'.¹⁴ In other words, we could say that we have moved from political satire to a politics that is already intrinsically comic.¹⁵ A brief historical analysis of humour in Italian cultural society shows us how, through the decades, political power and forms of authority have lost their aura, and consequently, satire has lost its social force and role: in Aldo Grasso's words, it is 'la saturazione della satira'.¹⁶

We can see then a double movement in the complex and more general process of hybridization of discursive genres: the spectacularization of the political sphere,¹⁷ and the politicization of satire. On the one hand, politicians 'in ossequio alla popolarizzazione della politica [...] accettano il confronto con comici e conduttori',¹⁸ and the rhetoric styles of some political leaders (from Berlusconi's 'jokes' to Bersani's idiomatic expressions, such as the famous 'smacchiare il giaguaro') are transformed into comedy. On the other hand, public interventions by comedians – from Benigni's endorsement of *L'Ulivo* on the last day of the 2001 electoral campaign, in Enzo Biagi's *Il fatto*, to the weekly live performances by Maurizio Crozza and Luciana Littizzetto – can affect the political agenda. Within this social

¹¹ See for example A. Day, *Satire and Dissent. Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate*, Bloomington-Indianapolis, Indiana UP, 2011.

¹² Anonymous, 'Dario Fo - Facts'. *Nobelprize.org*, www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1997/fo-facts.html (last accessed December 2, 2014).

¹³ E. Novelli, 'Satira, politica e televisione in Italia', in: *Comunicazione politica*, 4, 1 (2012), pp. 57-72, p. 66.

¹⁴ F. Amoretti, 'Introduzione. Lo Stato della Satira in (trasform)azione', in: *Comunicazione politica*, 4, 1 (2012), pp. 5-18, p. 12.

¹⁵ See F. Boni, *Il corpo mediale del leader. Ritualità del potere e sacralità del corpo nell'epoca della comunicazione globale*, Roma, Meltemi, 2002; M. Belpoliti, *Il corpo del capo*, Roma, Guanda, 2009; M.P. Pozzato 'Il corpo del leader carismatico: una prospettiva semiotica', in: M.P. Pozzato (ed.), *I testi e la memoria. La costruzione politica dei fatti*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2010, pp. 87-111; M. Belpoliti, *La canottiera di Bossi*, Roma, Guanda, 2012.

¹⁶ A. Grasso, 'La saturazione della satira', in: *Comunicazione politica*, 4, 1 (2012), pp. 133-138.

¹⁷ See S. Mazzoleni & A. Sfondini, *La politica pop*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009.

¹⁸ E. Novelli, 'Satira, politica e televisione', cit., p. 70.

tendency, the most important example is clearly that of Beppe Grillo, the leader of the most important opposition movement currently active in Italy: he is the ultimate comedian-turned-politician (although he himself refuses to be identified with politicians), who has entered Parliament and is governing important Italian cities and regions.¹⁹ It seems that what has been at stake in the Italian political sphere for several years now, and in the 2013 electoral campaign in particular, is the transformation of the spectator into a voter, of laughter into a vote, and the emotions generated by spectacle into the ultimate means of affecting political institutions.²⁰

Oliviero Ponte di Pino points to another element behind the great importance of humour and satire in contemporary Italian society: truth-telling. It is common knowledge that freedom of speech, in Italy, is seriously compromised by the duo/oligopolistic regime in the media market, as the country's yearly ranking in the freedom of press index proves (even if *Reporters without frontiers* recently observed a clear improvement in the situation).²¹ However, the satirical actor can challenge the limitation of the freedom of press, protected as s/he is by the 'diritto di satira' (though not always, as the case of Daniele Luttazzi has demonstrated).²² This explains why so often a critical monologue by Littizzetto or Crozza can hit the headlines and re-define national agenda-setting, but also why new, less controllable modes of information where people can speak their minds, such as social media, are so successful.²³

Indeed, a double tendency seems to characterize the current situation, involving both stand-up comedians and new media and thus reflecting a growing desire to make one's voice heard, either through the puns of the professional comedian or more directly, via Twitter or Facebook. On the one hand, we observe the use of the internet and social media, where different *cult* phenomena – such as Grillo's blog (one of the top ten blogs in 2008, according to the *Observer*) or the satirical blog Spinoza.it – are increasingly popular;²⁴ on the other, the return of (televised) theatre, most notably *Crozza's weekly one-man show Crozza nel paese delle meraviglie*, the already mentioned *teatro di narrazione*, and satirical theatre, in all its different forms and uses.

Reading political and cultural life through the lens of humour

Considering the developments described above, we feel this special issue offers a timely investigation into the role humour has played in Italian culture, society and politics over the past thirty years. It does so by applying a 'humorous framework', in an attempt to understand how this affects political discourse. As such it offers a novel and interdisciplinary approach to a phenomenon that has so far received limited attention in academic research.

¹⁹ For a history of *Movimento 5 stelle* and *grillismo* P. Corbetta & E. Gualmini (eds), *Il partito di Grillo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2013.

²⁰ For a semiotic analysis of V-days (*vaffanculo* days) and for the use of emotions in such spectacular and political events see S. Saleri & S. Spinelli, 'Grillo, chi era costui? Costruzione di un'identità politica, tra pratiche argomentative e intersezione degli spazi', in: *Versus*, 107-108, pp. 177-195.

²¹ Out of 179 countries, Italy was ranked 61st in 2012, 57th in 2013 and 49th in 2014. Reporters without Frontiers, 'Biggest rises and falls in the 2014 World Press Freedom Index', *rsf.org*, <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-index2014.php> (last accessed December 2, 2014).

²² In 2002 Berlusconi banned Luttazzi from public television – together with Michele Santoro and Enzo Biagi – with the so-called 'editto bulgaro'.

²³ Without forgetting that the latter can seriously jeopardize the quality of the given information.

²⁴ See on satire on the Internet C. Cepernich, 'La satira politica al tempo di internet', in: *Comunicazione politica*, 4, 1 (2012), pp. 73-88; n.a., 'e-politics. La satira politica in rete', in: *Comunicazione politica*, 4, 1 (2012), pp. 177-186.

The articles that have been gathered here address a select number of areas for discussion of political humour in stage performance, television, cinema, music and the internet. Francesco Ricatti opens the special issue with an exploration of the cultural politics of emotions in the works of Paolo Villaggio and Roberto Benigni, arguing that the focus of these comedians on specific emotions (humiliation in Villaggio, love in Benigni) serves to deconstruct the false dichotomy between heroes and cowards and promote a cultural, social and political resistance and change. The following three articles focus on different forms or genres of humour: parody, satire and the grotesque. Giacomo Boitani offers a comparative approach to the mockumentary television series *Boris*, aired on Sky Italia from 2007 to 2010. Using Linda Hutcheon's theorization of 'modern parody', he discusses the humorous framework in which Italian television's transition from a duopoly to a larger offer of entertainment is critically commented upon in the mockumentary. Nicolino Applauso, next, takes the rock band *Gli Squallor* as an example to explore the use of satire in the Italian musical tradition and its function as an iconic symbol of dissent. Linde Luijnenburg applies a postcolonial perspective in her comparison of two films by Ettore Scola produced in two very different time periods, *Riusciranno i nostri eroi a ritrovare l'amico misteriosamente scomparso in Africa?* (1968), and *Gente di Roma* (2003). In both films the use of the grotesque unveils an underlying political, postcolonial critique of the concept of the 'other' in Italian society and culture. Paola Bonifazio moves us into gendered territory as she analyzes the performative strategies by which Luciana Littizzetto deconstructs post-patriarchal representations of femininity and womanhood in contemporary Italian popular culture, drawing on the films *Ravanello pallido* (2001) and *Se devo essere sincera* (2004). Maria Pia Pozzato's contribution, finally, offers an insight into the relation between contemporary politics and humour by focusing on the impact of social media and on the role of humour in the success of political leaders like Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Renzi.

Naturally we are aware that these contributions cover a select range of the potential topics of analysis in this area, but we hope that this collection will encourage further explorations of the relationship between humour and Italian political and cultural life at large.

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