

Humiliation and love Villaggio, Benigni and the cultural politics of emotions

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A counter-emotional thread

This article examines the cultural politics of emotions, as performed by Paolo Villaggio and Roberto Benigni, two Italian comedians who became famous respectively in the 1970s and 1980s.¹ There are numerous differences between them, including their age, their geographical provenance, the nature of their involvement in politics, their comic or satirical styles, the distance between the characters they have impersonated and their public personas, and the media they have privileged for their work. They have in common, though, their fame, their central role in Italian popular culture, and their involvement in politics. Furthermore, both of them are authors of many films, gags, and comic texts. Also, their political conviction is to the left of the political spectrum. Most importantly, this article focuses on their works because they have consistently focused on a specific emotion: Villaggio on humiliation, and Benigni on love. The aim of the article is to reflect on the relationship between the centrality of specific emotions in their work, and their positioning within the Italian cultural, political and ideological landscape. My intention, to be clear, is not to establish a superficial causality between the political convictions and aims of these two artists and the representation of certain emotions in their works. Rather, the article considers the political, ideological and cultural implications of certain emotions, as embodied, spoken, expressed and performed by these comedians, also taking into consideration their political beliefs.

From the late 1950s and early 1960s, Italian comedians, whose work was repressed and censored during Fascism and the early years of the Italian Republic, played a fundamental and extraordinarily popular role in the political and cultural development of the nation.² Silvana Patriarca illustrates the central role played by Alberto Sordi in reinforcing a bitter yet lenient idea of the average Italian man, *mammone*, *arrivista* and *qualunquista*.³ As Patriarca correctly argues, the construction of the *italiano medio* in these comedies has had important political implications, contributing to the image of Italy as an individualistic and conservative country, whose citizens are, for the most part, constantly critical of their political and social system, yet lack the maturity, moral rectitude and political will that make social and political change possible and desirable. This ‘imagined community’ of

¹ For a brief history of Italian comedians in the 1970s and 1980s see A. D’Aiola, ‘Risate di piombo: Comici italiani dalla TV al cinema negli anni ’70 e ’80’, in: *Biancoenero*, 575 (2013), pp. 20-29.

² M. Comand, ‘Tondi o aguzzi comunque contro. Intrecci fra comico e politico nel cinema italiano degli anni ’30 e ’60’, in: *Biancoenero*, 575 (2013), pp. 8-18.

³ S. Patriarca, *Italian vices: nation and character from the Risorgimento to the Republic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 216-226. One should avoid the risk to conflate this recurring character with the whole, complex, multifaceted and ambiguous history of the *commedia all’italiana*.

italiani medi has played a central role in building a hegemonic conservative idea of the nation, its history, its present, and its future. First of all, it has minimised the need to deal with the legacy of Fascism, colonialism and the war, by suggesting that Italians are *brava gente*.⁴ According to this *vulgata*, Italians are sentimental people who did not take Fascism seriously, not because of their moral or political concerns, but due to their individualistic and sentimental temperament. Furthermore, this imagined community of *italiani medi* has reinforced the idea that profound social and political changes in the country are illusory, and destined either to be constantly postponed or to succumb to ideological disillusionment and the tricks of *trasformismo*.

Stefano Jossa recently argued that Italy, in contrast to other countries such as England and France, has not been able to transform literary characters into national heroes.⁵ He argues that the most important Italian literary characters, in the last two centuries, have been too complex, realistic and individualistic to succumb to any attempt at 'monumentalising' them and transforming them into rhetorical emblems of the Nation. Jossa importantly suggests that there is a civic value to be recognised in a culture so strongly characterised by its lack of heroes. Heroes are unrealistic and quasi-religious constructions of the imagination which tend to absolve normal people from their own responsibilities, as the exceptionality of the hero legitimises the cowardly attitudes of the common person. From this perspective, we should reject the dichotomy between the hero and the coward, and recognise the civic potential of certain non-heroic characters.

The argument I will make in this article is that, at least since the 1970s, a number of Italian comedians have made a counter-emotional attempt to construct a different image of Italians, which precisely escapes such dichotomy. One that does not deny the characteristics of the *italiano medio*, but at once is not completely and uncritically informed by such stereotype. I call this a counter-emotional attempt because many of these comedians, including the two I consider here, have strongly focused on a specific emotion, and have tried to produce an emotional substrate that could result in cultural, social and political resistance and change; an imaginary world of characters whose emotional intensity demystifies the false dichotomy between heroes and cowards, and therefore any conservative and reactionary construction of Italian national identity. The counter-emotional threads apparent in the work of these comedians, together with their large and persistent success, suggest an innovative perspective from which to consider the complex relationship between humour, emotions, and power.

Emotions and cultural politics

This article is to be framed within the recent development of an emotional, or affective, turn in Social Sciences and the Humanities, and more specifically in History.⁶ Within the specific context of Italian political history, a fundamental contribution to the development of a focus on emotions has come from Alberto Mario

⁴ For critical and historical reflections on the myth of *italiani brava gente* and more in general the absolving attitudes of Italy's public memory about the country's historical responsibilities see D. Bidussa, *Il mito del bravo italiano*, Milan, Il Saggiatore, 1994; A. del Boca, *Italiani brava gente? Un mito duro a morire*, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, 2005; F. Focardi, *L'immagine del cattivo tedesco e il mito del bravo italiano: la costruzione della memoria del fascismo e della seconda guerra mondiale in Italia*, Padova, Rinoceronte, 2005; R. Gordon, *Scolpitelo nei cuori: l'Olocausto nella cultura italiana (1944-2010)*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2013; E. Perra, *Conflicts of memory: the reception of holocaust films and TV programmes in Italy, 1945 to the present*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2011.

⁵ S. Jossa, *Un paese senza eroi. L'Italia da Jacopo Ortis a Montalbano*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2013.

⁶ For more information on this important trend in contemporary historiography see the introduction to P. Morris, F. Ricatti & M. Seymour (eds), *Politica ed emozioni nella storia d'Italia*, Roma, Viella, 2012.

Banti, who has convincingly argued that mass consent for Italian unification was achieved through cultural productions that linked the idea of the Italian nation, in which almost exclusively the elites were interested, to emotionally charged tropes such as sanctity, honour, and family, which were shared by the majority of Italians.⁷ Additionally, Mark Seymour has effectively argued that the Italian nation has been imagined and constructed through attempts to make certain affective repertoires, and certain emotional styles, hegemonic; meanwhile alternative understandings of emotions, and the ways they were experienced, performed and expressed, were marginalised further still.⁸ These and many other recent studies make a very strong case in favour of the centrality of emotions in Italian political history, and therefore the need to further investigate the cultural politics of emotions in Italian history.⁹

When studying the role of emotions in politics, the focus tends to be on the fact that the political sphere is often emotionally charged, that a certain kind of emotional bond might be required in the development of social and political movements, and that certain politicians and political movements have exploited emotions such as pride and fear to gain, retain and manage power.¹⁰ While these are fundamental concerns, from a cultural and historical perspective it is apparent that research should also investigate the highly political nature of emotions themselves, in so far as they connect ‘the individual and the social, [...] norms and experiences, performances and discourses [...] body and language, and other such dichotomies’.¹¹ In particular, the way certain emotions are named or silenced, expressed, performed and contested is in itself highly political. This is because, as Ahmed has argued, ‘emotions are not “in” either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects’.¹² Thus, it is precisely at the intersection of the social and the individual that emotions emerge and become highly political, for their ability to embody and orient specific political values and ideologies. Ute Frevert further suggests that emotions are ‘lost and found’ in different historical contexts; in other words the presence or absence of certain emotions, and their centrality within a specific social group, are in themselves politically charged.¹³ Specific emotions come to play different roles in different historical and political contexts. The description,

⁷ A. M. Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento. Parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell’Italia unita*, Torino, Einaudi, 2000.

⁸ M. Seymour, ‘Emotional arenas: from provincial circus to national courtroom in late nineteenth-century Italy’, in: *Rethinking History*, 16, 2 (2012), pp. 177-197. See also M. Seymour, ‘Contesting masculinity in post-unification Italy: the murder of Captain Giovanni Fadda’, in: *Gender & History*, 25, 2 (2013), pp. 252-269.

⁹ S. Ferente, ‘Storici ed emozioni’, in: *Storica*, 15, 43-45 (2009), pp. 371-392; L. Riall, ‘Nation, “deep images” and the problem of emotions’, in: *Nation and Nationalism*, 15 (2009), pp. 402-409; Morris, Ricatti & Seymour (eds), *Politica ed emozioni*, cit.; P. Morris, F. Ricatti & M. Seymour (eds), ‘Emotions’, special issue of *Modern Italy*, 17, 2 (2012); R. Petri, ‘Sentimenti, emozioni. Potenzialità e limiti della storia culturale’, in: *Memoria e ricerca*, 40 (2012), pp. 74-91; C. Duggan, *Fascist voices: an intimate history of Mussolini’s Italy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013. Of particular interest for this article is the work of Dario Pasquini on emotions in political print satire (see D. Pasquini, ‘La satira e la storia delle emozioni. Una relazione privilegiata?’, in: *Diacronie*, 11, 3 (2012), http://www.studistorici.com/2012/10/29/pasquini_numero_11 (last accessed November 6, 2014)). Pasquini suggests that there is evidence of the ability and intent of satirical artists to create ‘emotional communities’ around their work.

¹⁰ See for instance S. Clarke, P. Hoggett and S. Thompson (eds), *Emotion, politics and society*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006; N. Demertzis (ed.), *Emotions in politics: the affect dimension in political tension*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

¹¹ B. Gammerl, ‘Emotional styles - concepts and challenges’, in: *Rethinking History*, 16, 2 (2012), pp. 161-175; p. 162.

¹² S. Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotions*, London, Routledge, 2004, p. 10.

¹³ U. Frevert, *Emotions in history - Lost and found*, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2011.

experience and performance of love, for instance, position and orient the embodied subject within certain groups and communities, and therefore have a political value and impact, as is apparent in such questions as ‘do you love your country, your parents, your partner(s), or even your football team?’. A certain concept or idea of love can itself become a strong marker of identity.¹⁴

Ahmed further argues that ‘being emotional’ in itself ‘comes to be seen as a characteristic of certain bodies and not others’.¹⁵ Who can be emotional? When, how, why, and towards whom or what? What does an excess or lack of emotion signify, mean or signal? The answers to such questions, but also the experience and performance of emotionality in itself (being emotional or not), position and orient bodies within specific political and historical landscapes.¹⁶ For instance, gender and queer studies, feminist history, and the history of psychiatry have all emphasised how hegemonic constructions of masculinity have been produced not simply by gendering certain emotions as typically masculine or feminine, but also by assigning emotionality itself, and emotional excess in particular, to the category of the feminine.

Within this theoretical and methodological framework, in the next two sections of this article I will consider the central role that humiliation and love have played in the work of Paolo Villaggio and Roberto Benigni. My argument is that the emotional excess embodied by these two very popular comedians is in itself a fundamental tool in creating comic characters that challenge the dichotomy between the hero and the coward, and attempt to create a new and paradoxically more authentic space in which the complexity of Italian identity can be explored, reoriented, and reinvented within and beyond the stereotype of the *italiano medio*. Furthermore, I will illustrate how the specific emotions embodied by the two comedians play a key part in the ideological and political structuring of their comic works.

Humiliation - Paolo Villaggio¹⁷

Paolo Villaggio’s most famous character, Fantozzi, is the quintessential modern Italian mask of physical pain and moral humiliation. Importantly, the audience is not invited to empathise with such pain and humiliation (that is, to identify with the main character and therefore feel humiliated). On the contrary, through comic expedients, a sapient use of language, especially by the voice-over, and the constant recurrence of characters, episodes and formulaic expressions, the audience is invited to laugh freely at Fantozzi, while at the same time receiving an uncanny, grotesquely exaggerated reminder of the inhumane and alienating nature of capitalism, bureaucracy, and consumerism.

For a long time Villaggio has openly declared his leftist political inclinations, having been a member of the Italian Communist Party, and later a candidate for *Democrazia proletaria* at the 1987 elections. He recently declared his vote for Grillo

¹⁴ See for instance L. Passerini, *Love and the idea of Europe*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn, 2009. For a more specific example of the role of love in Italian political history see M. Schwegman, ‘In love with Garibaldi: romancing the Italian Risorgimento’, in: *European Review of History*, 12, 2 (2005), pp. 383-401.

¹⁵ Ahmed, *The cultural politics*, cit., p. 4.

¹⁶ On a similar point see also Frevert, *Emotions in history*, cit.

¹⁷ Paolo Villaggio was born in Genoa in 1932. The literary and cinematic character to whom he owes his fame is Ugo Fantozzi, a clerk accountant vexed by his colleagues and bosses and extremely unlucky. The character, created by Paolo Villaggio himself, begun developing in 1968 and evolved for more than 30 years through different media, initially TV, and then weekly magazines, books and finally movies (from 1975 to 1999). The focus here is on Fantozzi as a cinematic character, especially in the early movies (*Fantozzi*, 1975, directed by Lucio Salce; *Il secondo tragico Fantozzi*, 1976, Lucio Salce; *Fantozzi contro tutti*, 1980, Neri Parenti; *Fantozzi subisce ancora*, 1983, Neri Parenti). Villaggio also co-authored the screenplay for these movies.

and aligned with more populist positions, in reaction to the widespread corruption of the Italian political system, but his work has been largely informed by a leftist and libertarian perspective.¹⁸ How can we then explain Villaggio's constant invitation to the viewer to remain untouched, and in fact be amused, by Fantozzi's pain and humiliation? Fantozzi's extraordinary success in Italy is a social response to the guilt generated by the fact that 'the pain of others is continually evoked in public discourse, as that which demands collective as well as individual response'.¹⁹ The Italian political context was for decades dominated by two political parties, namely the Christian Democrats and the Communists, who made sensibility towards the pain of others the core of their respective ideologies.²⁰ At the same time both political parties played a pivotal, if different, role in the development of a modern capitalist society based on individualism, voyeurism, and hedonism. The anxiety and guilt originating from the apparent contradiction between Catholic and Communist ideologies on the one hand, and the development of a modern capitalist society on the other, is essential in understanding the pivotal role of Fantozzi in Italian popular culture. This character offered audiences a liberating chance to admit that they did not care about the pain of others. At the same time, Villaggio's body and voice-over are the comic devices that, by projecting an exaggerated manifestation of pain and humiliation, reveal the object of Villaggio's ridicule: the ideological nature of Italian capitalism and consumerism emerging from the economic miracle of the post-war period. Here it becomes fundamental to emphasise the peculiar use of Villaggio's voice in the films about Fantozzi. Villaggio's voice functions at once as the embodiment of pain and humiliation (the voice of the character Fantozzi), and as a counter-ideological reminder (the voice-over of the external, omniscient, detached narrator). This unique double function of Villaggio's voice is therefore his most original and significant contribution to Italian cinema, and is the core of the political function of his movies.

Fantozzi is strongly characterised as a white-collar member of the lower middle class (*il ceto impiegatizio*). However, he does not offer a realistic representation of the average Italian, as is usually the case with the majority of standard characters in the *commedia all'italiana*. While he is the quintessential weak and mediocre comic character who experiences an incredible series of physical and psychological abuses and humiliations, his world is of an exaggerated, at times surreal and often grotesque nature, and his painful and humiliating, yet stubborn, survival is comparable to that of a comic character in a children's cartoon. His constant humiliation therefore, while allowing the audience a liberating laugh, also constitutes a strong political reminder: humiliation is not the result of the main character's numerous shortcomings, but rather of the ideology that structures capitalism, bureaucracy and consumerism.

In the typical *commedia all'italiana*, it is the individual man who is the object of criticism and bitter laughter, as a mediocre *arrivista*, a *mammone*, a coward, etc. The Italian society is thus only criticised (and then largely absolved) as the sum of similarly mediocre individuals. Villaggio, instead, shifts the blame onto the superstructures and the ideology that informs society and makes life ridiculously unfair. Furthermore, Fantozzi's misfortunes, physical accidents and public

¹⁸ See for instance his recent interview about politics in C. Rizzacasa d'Orsogna, 'Villaggio: mi tocca difendere B.', in: *Italia oggi*, 300 (2012), http://www.italiaoggi.it/giornali/stampa_giornali.asp?id=1803468&codiciTestate=1&accesso=FA (last accessed January 4, 2014).

¹⁹ Ahmed, *The cultural politics*, cit. p. 21.

²⁰ Here I am not discussing the complex topic of the ideological origin and nature of the Welfare State in Italy, but simply referring to the ethical, cultural and emotional rejection of individualism in both the Catholic and the Communist ideologies of the time in Italy.

humiliations also operate at a higher, existential level: he is the main character in the tragicomedy of life, one who takes life and human society seriously while constantly confronted with its absurd and sadistic nature.

This is also where his distance from the most common character of the *commedia all'italiana* is significant. The latter, personified in numerous interpretations of Alberto Sordi, constantly tries to adjust to the social context in which he is immersed; his avoidable yet rarely avoided failure is largely by his own making. Through its alleged realism, the *commedia all'italiana* therefore offers a reactionary representation of Italian consumerist society through the eye of a mediocre individual who is moulded by his society and yet is not 'strong' or smart enough to take advantage of this generalised mediocrity and corruption, and therefore ends up being a loser.²¹ These movies represent Italian society as structured around the constant tension between *furbi e sfigati*. And this is precisely where any social and political criticism in the *commedia all'italiana* usually becomes an indulgent justification to political conservatism and populism. Fantozzi, on the contrary, takes the typical character of the *commedia all'italiana* to extremes. His stubborn resistance to all the pain and humiliation inflicted by the social system - mostly revealed by the voice over and by the central role of a series of objects (*l'orrido puff, la poltrona di pelle umana*) - acquires political and existential value in so far as it reveals the tragicomic nature of ideology, and perhaps of life itself.²²

Love - Roberto Benigni²³

The central emotion in Benigni's work and public persona is constantly and consistently love. Omer Bartov observed that the authenticity of Benigni's most famous movie, *La vita è bella* (1997), lies 'in its insistence on the power of love to transform reality'.²⁴ Such authenticity is not realistic, yet it is the compulsion to love, and its power even in the most unimaginable circumstances, that constitutes the actual subject of the film. A large part of the debate on this film has been structured around the (im)possibility of representing the Holocaust, the (im)morality of a comedy about the Holocaust, and the accuracy of the representation of the historical context, with particular references to the responsibilities of Italians and the Italian government.²⁵ These are all aesthetically, politically and historically

²¹ As stated earlier, this prevailing character does not exhaust the complexity of *la commedia all'italiana*. For instance Roy Menarini has analysed a large production of comedies in which the main characters are monstrous and grotesque (R. Menarini, 'Le bestie umane. Cavernosa, grottesca, mostruosa. Quando la commedia diventa scorretta', in: *Biancoenero*, 575 (2013), pp. 58-67). However, it is this rather mediocre, frustrated and impotent character who has become the quintessential representation of the vices and virtues of the average Italian. On this, see especially the fundamental analysis of Maurizio Grande in *Il cinema di Saturno. Commedia e malinconia*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1992; and M. Grande (edited by O. Caldiron), *La commedia all'italiana*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2003.

²² On the central role of objects in Fantozzi's movies see S. Baschiera, 'Il basco di Fantozzi. Cultura materiale e commedia italiana', in: *Biancoenero*, 572 (2012), pp. 39-47.

²³ Roberto Benigni was born in Manciano La Misericordia (Castiglione Fiorentino) in 1952. He is an internationally renowned actor, author and director. His 1997 film *La vita è bella* (*Life is beautiful*) was awarded three Oscars in 1999 (best music, best actor and best foreign movie). He has authored, directed and interpreted some of the most popular films in the history of Italian cinema, including *Il piccolo diavolo* (1988), *Johnny Stecchino* (1991), and *Il mostro* (1994).

²⁴ O. Bartov, *The 'Jew' in cinema: from the Golem to don't touch my Holocaust*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2005, p. 123.

²⁵ See the chapters in Section 2 of Russo Bullaro (ed.), *Beyond Life is beautiful*, cit., pp. 179-321. See also R. Ben-Ghiat, 'The secret histories of Roberto Benigni's *Life is beautiful*', in: *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14, 1 (2001), pp. 253-266; C. Celli, 'The representation of evil in Roberto Benigni's *Life is beautiful*', in: *Journal of popular film and television*, 28, 2 (2000), pp. 74-79; B. Diken & C. B. Lausten, 'The ghost of Auschwitz', in: *Journal of Cultural Research*, 9, 1 (2005), pp. 69-85; H. Flanzbaum, "'But wasn't it terrific?": A defense of liking *Life is beautiful*', in: *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14, 1 (2001),

relevant concerns, and yet, as many of the academic authors who have discussed the film have more or less explicitly and enthusiastically conceded, this is also, and perhaps primarily, a film about love. This is in fact a political film not because it is about the Holocaust, but rather because it is about love and the Holocaust. Flanzbaum quotes a letter to the *New Yorker* from a Holocaust survivor, who defended the film stating that 'I too am a child survivor who was saved by her mother's love and cleverness'.²⁶

From this perspective, *La vita è bella*, while it occupies a peculiar position in the cinematic production of Benigni, is consistent with his previous and subsequent filmography. In fact, during his career, Benigni has rendered love as a compulsive emotion that neither the characters he has interpreted, nor Benigni himself (as a public persona), could resist. Yet such compulsion is also the engine of his characters' agency, making love itself a powerful political emotion, in so far as it allows Benigni's characters to become involved in, and respond to, important social and political issues. It is through this apparent contradiction that Benigni's characters challenge the established dichotomy between the hero and the coward. He is mainly concerned with love as a desire, both erotic and the need to be loved and to love more generally. As Carlo Celli noted, Benigni's movies often relate to major shifts in Italian society, such as 'the decline of peasant culture, [...] the decline of Catholic culture, [...] the anti-mafia struggle, [...] serial killing and Berlusconi-spoofing'.²⁷ These shifts are read and interpreted by Benigni through love stories (in cinema) or more immediate, explicit and exaggerated manifestations of erotic and puerile love on television.

Of all emotions, love is the one that can most easily be idealised, the one most difficult to attack, criticise, and confront. This is where its political discursive power, as well as its danger, lies. Ahmed reminds us that hatred is constantly constructed as love, for instance by fascist groups who declare to act out of love for their group or their nation. This strategy allows them to be associated with positive feelings and values, so that it becomes much harder to attack them and to reveal the hatred at the core of their political actions.²⁸ Ahmed therefore argues that 'we do not simply act *out of love*' and that 'love comes with conditions however unconditional it might feel'.²⁹ From this perspective, there are two aspects of Benigni's performances and representations of love that need to be addressed. Firstly, what kind(s) of love are his cinematic characters and his public persona representing and performing, and what are the conditions for this love to become possible? And secondly, how does this love acquire a cultural and political influence? What does this love idealise? To what political and ideological views is this love offering a powerful rhetorical and emotional tool? In addressing these questions, two central elements of Benigni's obsession with love must be considered: first, the consistent representation throughout his career of the impossibility of love being to be fulfilled; and secondly, the gradual transformation over the years of the representation and performance of love from a carnal, embodied and sexualised desire, to a wordy, lyrical, rhetorical and sentimental celebration.

pp. 273-286; R. Gordon, 'Real tanks and toy tanks: playing games with history in Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella/ Life is beautiful*', in: *Studies in European Cinema*, 2, 1 (2005), pp. 31-44; G. Lichtner, 'The age of innocence? Child narratives and Italian Holocaust films', in: *Modern Italy*, 17, 2 (2012), pp. 197-208; J. Sherman, 'Humour, Resistance, and the Abject: Roberto Benigni's *Life is beautiful* and Charlie Chaplin's *The great dictator*', in: *Film & History*, 32, 2 (2002), pp. 72-81.

²⁶ Flanzbaum, 'But wasn't it terrific', cit., p. 284.

²⁷ C. Celli, 'Preface', in: Russo Bullaro (ed.), *Beyond Life is Beautiful*, cit., pp. 11-13.

²⁸ See Ahmed, *The cultural politics*, cit., pp. 122-124.

²⁹ Ahmed, *The cultural politics*, cit., p. 141.

When love comes into existence in Benigni's films, it is for the most part by confirming, rather than denying, its own impossibility. In *Johnny Stecchino* (1991), for instance, the protagonist Dante can only experience love as a look-alike of the anti-hero Johnny, while Johnny, who could have access to love, is disgusted by its manifestations (for instance his wife's kisses). When Johnny dies, the impossibility of love between Dante and Johnny's wife is also revealed. In *La vita è bella*, the relationship between the protagonist Guido Orefice and his wife does not survive the tragedy of the Holocaust, while paternal love reveals itself in the rejection of reality (the game played with the son in the concentration camp), and as an act of fatherly sacrifice. The impossibility of love is also central to his most recent film *La tigre e la neve* (2004), as in his most famous televised reading of Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*, that of *Canto V*, about Paolo and Francesca, in which both the power and the impossibility of love are revealed.³⁰

There are many other instances of this constant thread in Benigni's work. Yet while the realisation and survival of love seems impossible, the desire for love is for him the engine of everything good and worthwhile in our society, and this is where Benigni's understanding and representation of love shows most effectively its political nature by challenging, as I have argued, the dichotomy between the hero and the coward that so often structures the typical *commedia all'italiana*. At the same time, however, it is also important to emphasise how the gradual disappearance, over the years, of strong erotic and carnal references in Benigni's work, has also resulted in a weakening of the radical implications of its cultural and political intervention.

Benigni's public persona (his participation in TV shows as Roberto Benigni) and his cinematic characters (who have proper fictional names) often overlap, and one of the main characteristics they seem to share is an urgency to express love. Moreover, in most of the movies Benigni has interpreted and directed over the last twenty-five years, the character with whom he falls in love has been interpreted by his partner in real life, the actress Nicoletta Braschi. While we should not confuse the 'real', private Benigni with his public persona and its cinematic characters, the intertextual blurring of boundaries between the private, the public and the cinematic is significant of the centrality of love in Benigni's own life, as well as in his intellectual projects as an actor, author and director. Apart from the constant presence of love as the central element of all his cinematic plots, love has been often the main subject of his TV monologues, as attested for instance by his participations in 2002 and 2011 in the quintessential Italian TV show and song contest, *Il Festival di San Remo*. In both instances, the specific topic of his monologue was love. Furthermore, he shows an awareness of the political nature of his comic representation of love, as he reveals in this statement he made during his participation at the 2002 Festival:

I am here truly as an act of love [...] because comedians are imbued with love [...] They are the most beautiful thing, they break rules, do what they please, are spoilt like children, are rich in love [...] they would let themselves be killed because they love everything [...] they have the power to make one cry and laugh, which is more than Hitler and Stalin had for they could only kill. Comedians on the other hand make one cry and laugh, and this is the greatest power in the world. One has to kiss them, care for them, as it's a matter of love.³¹

³⁰ Broadcast in 2007 on the public TV channel RAI 1, as part of *Tutto Dante*, a theatrical and TV show in which Benigni declaimed and commented on Dante's *Commedia*.

³¹ Translated by and cited in V. Montemaggi, "Perché non ho scritto la *Divina Commedia*? Perché non c'ho pensato": Dante's *Commedia* and the comic art of Roberto Benigni', in: G. Russo Bullaro (ed.), *Beyond Life is beautiful*, cit., pp. 113-134, p. 116.

Central to such a representation of love is a profound contradiction: love is represented by Benigni at once as an embodied, erotic, at times openly sexual, compulsion, as well as a romantic, poetic, innocent, almost childish sentiment. While sexual desire is manifested and often celebrated in his work, sex itself is rarely, if at all, shown. Over his career, his representation of erotic desire has also gradually become more restrained, less physical and sexual, and more sentimental and childish. Referring to his 1994 film *Il mostro*, William Van Watson argued that Benigni ‘uses the Bakhtinian grotesquerie of lower body humour to undermine the pretension of an increasingly mechanised consumerist society’.³² This is also true for many of his earlier films and performances, in which fundamental shifts in Italian society were read through corporal expressions of love and desire. One might think for instance of films such as *Berlinguer ti voglio bene* (1977 directed by Giuseppe Bertolucci) or *Il Piccolo Diavolo* (1988), or of his constant corporal references in his early TV shows and participations, or of the way in the 1980s he used to farcically assault TV celebrities such as Pippo Baudo and Raffaella Carrà, in an exaggerated manifestation of love or erotic desire. Yet this component has gradually weakened, leaving space to a more literary, nationalistic, and rhetorical discourse about love, whose manifestations are increasingly less satirical and corporeal.

The fundamental themes of sexual impotence and the impossibility of love on the one hand, and the gradual weakening of corporal references in his work on the other, have significant cultural and political implications. An apparent parallelism emerges between the transformation of Benigni’s public persona and his TV interpretations, and the transformation of the Italian Left, to which he has always remained openly and happily close.

The character interpreted by Benigni in most of his early TV shows and movies was a peasant from the countryside of Tuscany, close to the Italian Communist Party, and with an extroverted erotic desire that openly challenged the conservative and religious cultural hegemony of the Italian nation.³³ Even during the 1980s, the desecrating nature of his TV appearances was often targeted at important institutions and authorities, including the pope. He has since evolved into a ‘pop-intellectual’. His much less provocative TV presence is now largely devoted to the reading, explanation and promotion of the quintessential literary text of the Nation, Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. And his monologue at *San Remo* in 2011 had as its main subject not simply love, but more specifically, love for the fatherland. There is a striking difference between this discourse and much earlier physical expressions of love and erotic desire, such as his embrace of the Communist leader, Enrico Berlinguer, or the putting of a bottle of Coca Cola in his pants to fake priapism, in the film *Berlinguer ti voglio bene*. Even his songs exemplify a similar shift, from the provocative *Inno del corpo sciolto* in 1979 to the sentimental *Quanto t’ho amato* in 2002. This transformation has been gradual, and it mirrors the transformation of the Italian Left, which has gradually increased its neo-liberal, middle-class oriented and Catholic ideology, to the detriment of a more popular, libertarian, and working-class oriented approach to life, society and politics. Almost in parallel to this transformation, Benigni has evolved into a national celebrity, whose representations of erotic desire and love have become less corrosive, carnal, uncompromising and honestly popular, and more sentimental, rhetorical, poetic, childish, and with ambiguous Catholic and nationalistic undertones.

³² W. Van Watson, ‘The Italian Buster Keaton? Benigni’s *The Monster* and the comic machine’, in: Russo Bullaro (ed.), *Beyond Life is beautiful*, cit., pp. 66-90, p. 84.

³³ See in particular the character Mario Cioni, interpreted first at theatre and then in the TV shows *Onda libera* (also known as *Televacca*, Rai 2, 1976-1977), and *Vita da Cioni* (Rai 2, 1978).

Consideration of the desire and need for love as the central engine for change in his cinematic plots, yet also the substantial impossibility of this love to become real and impose itself in a mature relationship, evokes reflection on the similar nature and destiny of the Italian left in the Berlusconi era. In different forms, both the Right and the Left in Italy over the last twenty years have responded to the alleged crisis of masculinity through representations of impotent desire; yet as a reaction to the hyper-sexualised and voyeuristic nature of Berlusconi's response to such crisis, the left has attempted to impose a more rational, controlled and sentimental image, losing sight of the importance of embodied passion in challenging the hypocrisy of a conservative and misogynistic, yet also perverted and voyeuristic, morality.³⁴

Concluding remarks

In this article I have discussed the political nature and relevance of the emotions named, portrayed and performed by two of the most popular Italian comedians. Emotions are political not only because political movements need to bond people emotionally, but also because emotions are in themselves political. From this perspective, the article has illustrated the attempt by two important Italian artists to counter the prevailing emotional substrate on which Italian national identity has been constructed. Such substrate has been characterised by an emotional dichotomy between heroes and cowards, in which, besides significant attempts of building mythologies of national heroism, the characterisation of Italians as essentially cowards has also gradually emerged. The characters embodied by Benigni and Villaggio in their most innovative works have challenged this dichotomy, through an almost exclusive focus on love and humiliation. These two emotions have made possible to create characters who, while quintessentially Italian, are in fact neither heroes nor cowards. As I have suggested in this article, Villaggio and Benigni's works have therefore offered a counter-emotional representation of the typical Italian, with significant cultural, social and political implications. At the same time, it is also apparent how their works have progressively lost such strong counter-emotional power, and moved towards an increasingly superficial commercialisation in the case of Villaggio, and an increasingly traditional and nationalistic rhetoric in the case of Benigni. Such involutions have run parallel to the Italian Left's inability to counter the emergence of the Berlusconi's era.

On a more general level, this article has also suggested the need for further investigation into the relationships between humour, emotions, and power. While many studies have been emerging on the role of comedians in the political life of the Italian nation, and a body of literature on the role of emotions in politics and political history is also developing, there is a need to bring these two fields of enquiry together. It is at the intersection of individual and collective emotions that a

³⁴ On the *longue durée* of such alleged crisis, and its strong political implications already in the post-war years, see S. Bellassai, 'L'autunno del patriarca. Insicurezze maschili nel secondo dopoguerra', in: Morris, Ricatti & Seymour, *Politica ed emozioni*, cit., pp. 191-210. On Berlusconi's hypertrophic heterosexuality see F. Ricatti, 'Obscene fantasies of hypertrophic heterosexuality: reframing Berlusconi from a Queer Theory perspective', in: M. Ball & B. Sherer (eds), *Queering paradigms II: interrogating agendas*, Bern, Peter Lang, pp. 227-243. It is to be noted that the crisis of masculinity, represented cinematically through erotic voyeurism and desire on the one hand and the impossibility of the sexual act on the other hand, is a typical element of the erotic comedy of the 1970s and 1980s first, and the so called *cinapanettoni* from the 1990s onwards. Thus Berlusconi's influential response operates within established narratives and visual representations of voyeurism and impotence.

laugh can become the catalyst for realisation of the incredibly serious, yet often tragicomic, nature of politics.³⁵

Keywords

cinema, emotions, politics, Paolo Villaggio, Roberto Benigni

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RIASSUNTO

Umiliazione e amore: Villaggio, Benigni e la politica culturale delle emozioni

La forte dicotomia emotiva fra eroismo e codardia ha svolto un ruolo importante nella costruzione ed evoluzione dell'identità nazionale italiana. Questo articolo considera le opere più influenti di Paolo Villaggio e Roberto Benigni, e il loro ruolo nello sviluppo di una alternativa emotiva a tale dicotomia. I loro film si concentrano principalmente su una singola emozione: l'umiliazione nel caso di Villaggio, e l'amore nel caso di Benigni. È attraverso questa attenzione ad una singola emozione che questi autori e interpreti sono riusciti a costruire dei personaggi che, pur tipicamente italiani, non possono essere facilmente ricondotti né alla categoria dell'eroe né a quella del codardo. L'articolo sostiene l'importanza politica di questa alternativa emotiva, e nota come il suo progressivo indebolimento sia coinciso con l'incapacità della sinistra italiana di elaborare una risposta efficace alle politiche fortemente emotive di Berlusconi. L'articolo dimostra l'importanza di studiare i complessi rapporti fra comicità, emozioni e politica nella storia culturale e politica italiana.

³⁵ I would like to thank Andrea Hajek, Daniele Salerno and the anonymous reviewer for their insightful and generous comments, which greatly contributed to improving this article.