TONDELLI AND THE 1980S: FOUR KEYWORDS FOR A REASSESSMENT

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Abstract: This article challenges the interpretation of the 1980s in Italy as a period in which a large section of the population and, especially, the younger generation, turned away from politics and retreated into the private sphere after the revolutionary ebullience of the 1960s and 1970s. The discussion centres around the figure of Pier Vittorio Tondelli whose collection of short stories *Altri libertini* (1980) inaugurated a new understanding of the cultural role of literature, and a new relationship between authors and readers. While devoid of the ideological preoccupations that characterized the protest movement(s) of the previous decades, Tondelli's work, it is argued, is anything but escapist and rather seeks to provide a sensitive and thoughtful account of the transformations taking place in Italian society and culture during a critical decade in which Italy, like other mature Western societies, was precipitously projected into the post-Fordist phase of contemporary capitalism. From this vantage point Tondelli's opus demonstrate the constant and sustained engagement of its author with a disorienting new world in which the contradictions between personal and collective desires and aspirations are increasingly mobilized to fuel the "society of spectacle" Guy Debord had foreseen. It can hardly be questioned that Tondelli's struggle raises ethical issues, but it is important to see that this ethical dimension is inherently connected with a political horizon, albeit a politics of desire that traditional Marxist approaches have some difficulty identifying as politics, let alone as revolutionary politics. In order to appreciate fully the significance of Tondelli's cultural contribution and disentangle it from the debates that it originated, the author proposes a fresh approach. Mindful of Raymond Williams's eminent example (*Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 1976), the analysis focuses on four keywords that can help us traverse Tondelli's work and identify its strengths as well as some of its weaknesses. Affect, Commitment, Postmodernism, and

Theory are intersecting vectors in a reassessment that through Tondelli reopens the discussion on an entire decade, and its aftermath.

In Italian literature, the 1980s are Pier Vittorio Tondelli's decade. The dates of publication tell a compelling story: in January 1980, Tondelli's first work *Altri libertini* caused a scandal that assured immediate national attention to the young writer from Correggio; and in 1990 Tondelli's last major work *Un weekend postmoderno: cronache degli anni Ottanta* provides a first, timely and empathetic assessment of a period in Italian cultural history which most Italian critics of all stripes love to hate.¹ The issue, however, is not mere chronology but rather the fact that, throughout his brief career, Tondelli staked a claim over contemporaneity as his proper preserve: he saw himself as a generationally privileged observer of the 1980s and, as a result, his literary project was inherently connected to giving a voice to the preoccupations that mark that decade. Indeed, one of the persisting problems in Tondelli criticism has been the more or less subterranean way in which the critical assessment of the decade has coloured the estimation of the author and vice versa: Tondelli's 'quotation' on the Italian literary stock market has stayed above that of the 1980s and has saved the decade from wholesale condemnation, but at the same time the generally negative assessment of the 1980s has effectively prevented Tondelli (especially as an author) from gaining the wide critical attention that he deserves, and that some recent scholarship is beginning to recognize (e.g., Mondello, *In principio fu Tondelli*). The fact of the matter is that Tondelli and the 1980s constitute a single constellation and whether the point of entry is one or the other — the author or the decade — the issues that the critic must confront are ultimately strictly related, two sides of the same cultural coin. And this coin has lacked critical currency as a result of the insistent 'bad press' the 1980s have had in Italy for a variety of cultural and socio-political reasons (e.g., the rise of 'neo-televisione' [neo-television]² and TV *spazzatura* [rubbish] or *pattumiera* [garbage bin]; the Craxi regime and *tangentopoli* [bribesville]) and in spite of the early canonization of the writer from Correggio (the two-volume

¹ As is well known, Tondelli died of AIDS in December 1991 and the last year of his life was marked by a return to the Catholic faith. The circumstances and literary consequences of such a return have contributed significantly to the controversies surrounding his legacy as a writer and an intellectual in which this article seeks to intervene.

² Eco launched the debate on the evolution of Italian television in the 1980s in "TV: la trasparenza perduta."

critical edition by Panzeri published by Bompiani in 2000). In this context, a full discussion of Tondelli and the cultural conjuncture of the 1980s in Italy would entail a wide-ranging study, encompassing the whole of Tondelli's oeuvre as well as a detailed revisitation of ten years of the country's cultural history. Such a task cannot reasonably be accomplished in a single article and as a result my objectives must be humbler. Rather than providing a comprehensive reinterpretation, I will single out a set of issues that can function as signposts for a reassessment not only of Tondelli's work and legacy as a writer and intellectual, but also of a decade that has been consistently dismissed when in fact it constitutes a crucial moment in the development of contemporary Italian literature — a crucial moment, I should add, and here the provocation I intend becomes clearer, of a predominantly productive and potentially positive nature. Following Raymond William's example, I have organized the discussion, which is of necessity fragmentary, around four keywords which will allow me to zero in on fundamental interpretive problems and challenges: affect, commitment, postmodernism, theory.

Affect

At the very beginning of his career, Tondelli candidly identified one of the central tenets of his poetics:

La mia letteratura è emotiva, le mie storie sono emotive; l'unico spazio che ha il testo per durare è quello emozionale; se dopo due pagine il lettore non avverte il crescendo e si chiede: "Che cazzo sto a leggere?", quello che capisce niente mica è lui, cari miei, è lo scrittore. Dopo due righe il lettore deve essere schiavizzato, incapace di liberarsi dalla pagina; deve trovarsi coinvolto fino al parossismo, deve sudare e prendere cazzotti, e ridere, e guaire, e provare estremo godimento. Questa è letteratura.

"La letteratura emotiva è una letteratura di potenza." Questo diceva un grande sballato di centocinquant'anni fa, Thomas De Quincey, che soleva distinguere in *literature of knowledge* e *literature of power*: la prima, la 'letteratura di conoscenza', che insegna; la seconda, la 'letteratura di potenza', che commuove. (Tondelli, "Colpo d'oppio," *Opere* II: 779)³

³ The translations of Tondelli's texts provided in the notes are mine.

[The literature I write is emotional, my stories are emotional; the only space in which a text can endure is emotive; if after two pages the reader does not feel the crescendo and asks himself: "What the heck I am reading for?", it's not him who is not getting it, dear friends, it's the writer. After two lines, the reader must be enslaved, unable to pull himself away from the page; must find himself involved to the point of paroxysm; must sweat and want to get into fisticuffs, and laugh, and whimper, and feel intense pleasure. This is literature.

"Emotional literature is a literature of power." This is what Thomas De Quincey, a great eccentric of one hundred and fifty years ago, used to say and he distinguished between a 'literature of knowledge' and a 'literature of power': the former, the 'literature of knowledge', teaches; the latter, the 'literature of power', moves.]

Stylistically reminiscent not only of *Altri libertini*, but also of Gianni Celati's early fiction, this statement was immediately registered by the critics and provides an almost canonical interpretive standpoint since the publication of the first book-length study on the writer from Correggio: Roberto Carnero's *Lo spazio emozionale: guida alla lettura di Pier Vittorio Tondelli*. The emphasis on 'emotion', however, is potentially a trap and needs to be reconsidered.

The meaning of the passage is more ambiguous than it may seem. The problem lies in the last word 'commuove' which, more than its English equivalent 'move', steers the discussion in the direction of sentiment, therefore raising the spectre of sentimentality. And yet De Quincey's formulation is anything but sentimental. In the eccentric British essayist, the opposition is between knowledge and power; on a careful reading, the article in question seeks to distinguish between writings of a scientific or didactic nature (the clearest example mentioned is Newton's *Principia*) and literary works of art (a wide range of examples is given spanning from classical Greek tragedy to the poetry of Wordsworth). In the end, then, De Quincey's distinction is less between two forms of 'literature' (as we understand the term today) than between literature proper and what we could term expository writing: "But all literature *properly so called* — literature cat ex-och'n — for the very same reason that it [the Literature of Power] is so much more durable than the Literature of Knowledge, is [...] more intense and electrically searching in its impressions" (De Quincey; my emphasis). Tondelli appropriates this distinction for his own purposes and without much philological scruples since

he, unlike his source, clearly does want to distinguish between different kinds of literature (in the contemporary sense). Still, one point of contact with De Quincey remains essential: the central characteristic of the emotional space Tondelli evokes is not one of sentimental self-indulgence. Rather it is a space created by the power to ‘move’ in the more literal sense of forcefully (and perhaps even *forcibly*) taking the reader somewhere else through the mechanism of empathetic engagement. Emotion here is not at all cosy sentimentality, it is a mobilization of and a challenge to desire.

Such a vigorous and full-bodied understanding of emotion is rooted consciously or unconsciously (perhaps partially both in Tondelli’s case) in a philosophical tradition that can be traced back to Spinoza. In Spinoza’s *Ethics*, *conatus* and *affectus* are the driving force of desire, attraction and repulsion. The intellectual link between Tondelli and the Dutch Jewish philosopher is less difficult to establish than one may think. One of the most influential revivers of Spinozism in the second half of the twentieth century was Gilles Deleuze whose work with Félix Guattari, especially their *L’Anti-Cedipe* and *Mille Plateaux*, played a crucial role in shaping the imaginary of the student movement of the 1970s and beyond, i.e., of Tondelli’s generation. And indeed, in the text mentioned at the beginning of this section, Tondelli explicitly uses terminology (‘discursive drifts’ and ‘flows’) that was popularized by the two French philosophers: “i personaggi sono derive discorsive nella corrente, fluxus del linguaggio” [characters are discursive drifts in the stream, flows of language] (Tondelli, *Opere* II: 782). Furthermore, in his “Letter to a Harsh Critic”, Deleuze makes a suggestive reference to De Quincey, which invokes an ‘intensive’ re-reading of Kant (quoted in Lundgren 11). While it is unlikely that Tondelli read this text by Deleuze, the emerging intertextual field confirms a convergence on the concept of emotion, and once we understand this genealogy, Tondelli’s ‘spazio emozionale’ [emotional space] can be more accurately characterized as a ‘space of affect’.

This clarification of the meaning of emotion in Tondelli leads to a further observation. Brian Massumi, a leading Deleuzian scholar, has focused his attention on the concept of affect elaborated in Deleuze and Guattari’s work. Massumi argues that, unlike feeling or emotion, affect is neither personal/biographical nor social, but rather “a non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential” (Shouse). Massumi’s claims are typically extreme and may have to be qualified but they are nonetheless suggestive. In particular, it is useful for our purposes to reflect on the notions of ‘intensity’ and ‘unformed and unstructured potential’.

The quotation from Tondelli's "Colpo d'oppio" discussed before describes the power of literature as the experience of an intense engagement with the text: the reader must feel 'enslaved', 'incapable of pulling himself away', 'drawn in to the point of paroxysm', etc. These metaphors articulate a poetics that stakes everything on the moment of proximity and the abolition (albeit, provisional) of critical distance — an affectively inflected version of Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" (ch. 14, 216).⁴ What is even more interesting, however, is that, in Tondelli's description, such an intensity is a bodily state not yet anchored in a specific emotional content, not yet clearly labeled as anger, fear, etc. This is indeed affect as Massumi defines it, a flow of desire still too embodied, too full and present to be objectified in the language of feeling or emotions. It is in this moment of unformed and unstructured potential that literature can 'move' the reader, transport her or him somewhere he or she has not been before. Massumi also helps us understand that this kind of textual power is not based on an appeal to the self (feeling) or to a social identity (emotions) but to embodiment as a form of life or species being.⁵ What moves and is moved is a capacity for connection, attraction and repulsion, which provides the material basis for affect in all forms of life. The work of socialization and individuation is a secondary process which literature simultaneously exposes and produces.

Let me be clear: I am not claiming that Tondelli ever did or would have articulated the theory of affect that I have barely sketched out here. Rather, my claim is that in examining the affective dimension of Tondelli's work, we should keep this theory firmly in mind and this for two reasons. First, in Tondelli's entire oeuvre, the exploration of affect has absolutely nothing to do with a sentimental involution, a narcissistic indulgence in 'personal' feelings. The danger of making this mistake is especially strong in *Camere separate*, witness the fact that even an experienced and careful critic as Angelo Guglielmi fell into this trap and then had the intellectual and moral honesty to reverse his position.⁶ Second, the interpretive

⁴ On this point, see also my discussion in "A Scandalous Intimacy: Author and Reader in Pier Vittorio Tondelli's *Camere separate*."

⁵ The concept of "species being" or *Gattungswesen* is developed by Marx (*Theses on Feuerbach* 243–45).

⁶ Initially critical of Tondelli's last novel, which he considered heavily contaminated by the rhetoric of sentimental literature, Angelo Guglielmi eventually recanted: "In realtà *Camere separate* va fortemente rivalutato, contro la lettura affatto superficiale e troppo sufficiente che noi

suggestion I would like to make is that in all of Tondelli's work affect is explored as a challenge to established conventions of all kinds (ethical, cognitive, aesthetic, etc.) and brings the characters and the reader into a space of creative ambiguity and potentiality. The case of *Camere separate* is again especially important because in Tondelli's last novel the dominant affect is a negative one but, significantly, one that cannot be given a name (cannot be socialized), as well as one that, at the personal level, hovers ambiguously between pleasure and pain, between longing for life and longing for death (a point made disturbingly clear toward the end of the novel in the sado-masochistic episode in the New York 'back room'). The struggle to come to terms with this intensity, to fulfill its creative potential is at the heart of the novel, as I began to argue (admittedly in somewhat different terms) in my second article on Tondelli's *Camere separate*.⁷

The important contribution that a different theory of affect can make to a reassessment of Tondelli's work can be readily understood, but within the framework of this discussion a further question begs to be asked: what can such a theory contribute to a reassessment of the 1980s? The answer is here less obvious though, upon reflection, it is not too difficult to identify the path of cultural analysis that this line of enquiry opens. One of the common places about the 1980s is that they were a period of relentless superficiality and insensitivity — among the myriad sources, I will cite a rather unusual one, Franco Berardi's introduction to the new edition of Nanni Balestrini's *Vogliamo tutto* published by DeriveApprodi in 2004: "quegli anni Ottanta che trasformarono l'Italia in un paese dominato dai sarti e dai parrucchieri [...] in un mondo luminosamente idiota" [those 1980s which transformed Italy into a country dominated by tailors and hairdressers [...] into a radiantly idiotic world] (7–8). And yet Bifo should know better given that Spinoza and Deleuze are fundamental points of reference in the intellectual milieu in which he circulates (e.g., Toni Negri and Michael Hardt have both made

stessi facemmo al tempo in cui uscì" [In truth, *Camere separate* should be significantly revalued, reversing the quite superficial and insensitive reading for which we were ourselves responsible when it first appeared] (58). It should be noted that Guglielmi was not alone in criticizing the emotional dimension of *Camere separate*. Gianni Turchetta entitled his largely negative review in *l'Unità* "Camere rosa", an allusion to the 'romanzo rosa' [pink novel] or sentimental romance; and Filippo La Porta spoke of 'qualche intenzionale concessione a certo *Kitsch* sentimentale' [a few intentional concessions to a sort of sentimental *Kitsch*] (48).

⁷ See Bolongaro, "Leo's Passion."

essential contributions to Spinozian and Deleuzian scholarship).⁸ Against such dismissive assessments of the decade, I would suggest that one of the central issues to emerge in the 1980s (and this was an important element of continuity with the creative wing of the 1970s ‘area dell’autonomia’)⁹ was precisely the role of affect in social and political theory and practice. The aggressive yuppie culture that dominated the period is regularly explained as a generalized surrender to American-style capitalism after yet another failed revolution (after the Risorgimento and the Resistance, that of the protest movement of the 1960s and 1970s). The problem is not that such an explanation is wrong but rather that it only broaches an horizon which then should be explored in detail. The real question is why a robust individualism, a privileging of the economic moment over the political moment, an uninhibited passion for popular rather than élite cultural products, etc., gained currency and appeal. And the answer does not lie in the alleged retreat into the private sphere, as a reaction to the social activism of the 1970s. Indeed, the 1980s were years of great mass events, from Alfredo Rampi’s case at Vermicino and the Italian victory at the soccer world championship in Spain, to Craxi’s campaigns and governments and the fall of the Berlin Wall. If anything, the decade witnessed an intensification of public life and a spectacularization of politics, which represent a dramatic departure from the deadly serious but also exhausted and deadening rituals administered by the old political elites. What came into the foreground was not a return to the solid old bourgeois values that had been challenged in the 1960s and 1970s but rather a longing to break away from conventional pieties (both of the right and of the left, but especially of the left whose discourse had become increasingly barren, distant, and conformist, as well as utterly joyless).¹⁰

⁸ ‘Bifo’ is the pseudonym generally used to refer to Franco Berardi. Toni Negri began his career as a scholar of Spinoza (*L’anomalia selvaggia: saggio su potere e potenza in Baruch Spinoza*), while Michael Hardt was a student and then a scholar of Gilles Deleuze (*Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy*). Since the publication of *Empire* (2000) Negri and Hardt have collaborated in developing a neo-Marxist reading of late capitalism deeply indebted to Spinoza and Deleuze.

⁹ Cf. the illuminating article by Carlo Infante on “L’ultima avanguardia: dalla creatività molecolare e disgregata alla mutazione post-umanista.” Infante revindicates the ‘desiring’ and creative component of the ‘anni di piombo’ and establishes a clear link between the Movimento del 77 (and its discourse) and the subsequent decade.

¹⁰ The impatience of the young generation with the desolate discourse of the institutional left (i.e., primarily the PCI) has been well represented in Guido Chiesa’s excellent film *Lavorare con*

Rather than as a period of retreat and involution, the 1980s might be better approached as a period in which desire and affect sought to break out of the containment channels that had been laboriously built and jealously guarded by a decrepit political class committed to stagnation. Craxi could speak to affect but only to manage it, and contain it through a well-orchestrated but outrageously unethical and disastrously uneconomical spectacle. And yet, he would have an heir in the 1990s, as is well known, and the difficulty in confronting affect (especially in relation to sexual desire) and mobilizing it for positive and progressive ends is an enduring and grave issue in contemporary Italy — an issue which a re-energized and sanguine reading of Tondelli would help to bring into focus.

Commitment

In a recent study, which hopefully will soon be made more widely available to the scholarly community, Sciltian Gastaldi has made a compelling argument that Tondelli must be considered a committed intellectual (“Pier Vittorio Tondelli: Letteratura minore e scrittura dell’impegno sociale”). Gastaldi’s basic argument is that Tondelli’s œuvre is centrally inspired by the project of giving a voice to marginal communities among which of primary importance are sexual minorities. Tondelli’s steadfast engagement with difference (especially, sexual difference) constitutes a rejection of traditional ideologies (both of the right, such as Catholicism, and of the left, such as Marxism) and can be seen as a rejection of the notion of ‘politics’ which those ideologies defined and implemented in the post-World War II Italian party-centred system. For Gastaldi, it is a grave error to interpret such a rejection of ‘conventional’ politics as a retreat in the ‘private sphere’ and a rejection of commitment. Gastaldi’s central thesis is important and sound, but needs to be reformulated and situated in a wider historical and intellectual context before it can release its full potential, not only in relation to Tondelli but also in relation to the decade with which the writer from Correggio is so closely identified.

It is well known that the question of ‘commitment’ is central to the Italian as well as the European literary and cultural scene in the years that followed the end of World War II. In the Italian context, it is important to remember that the discussion was heavily influenced by Gramsci whose theory of the ‘organic’ intellectual converged with the notion of ‘commitment’ debated in France (where

lentezza (2004). The impasse reached by the left-wing thinkers and activists closest to the protest movement is examined in detail by Steve Wright (*Storming Heaven* 212–23).

Sartre's *What Is Literature* sparked the discussion) and in Germany (where the controversy between Adorno and Brecht prolonged the 1930s polemics about expressionism).¹¹ For our purposes in this context, it is sufficient to stress that, in spite of significantly different inflections (especially on the exact meaning of Gramsci's use of the adjective 'organic'), the vast majority of progressive post-World War II Italian intellectuals agreed that 'commitment' meant (a) playing an active role in the battle of ideas led by political parties and their supporting organizations; and (b) taking the side of the proletariat. The 'call to arms' famously sounded by Elio Vittorini in "Per una nuova cultura", his 1945 editorial inaugurating *il Politecnico*, was therefore two-fold: not merely the logical injunction to be political and get involved by supporting a political party (thus rejecting the 'autonomy' and *au-dessus-de-la-mêlée* stance claimed, according to Gramsci, by 'traditional' intellectuals), but also the ideological injunction to be on the side of socialism (and therefore of the Italian Communist Party which under Togliatti effectively hegemonized the Italian Left). All of this is well known but bears restating in order to clearly identify the genealogy and significance of the shift which Tondelli represents.

However, before we reach Tondelli and the 1980s, we must consider another moment of transition, the protagonists of which were Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco.¹² The 'orthodox' view of commitment that emerged in the immediate post-World War II period began to erode almost immediately. In 1945–1946, the notorious polemics between Togliatti and Vittorini established an uneasy truce between leading left-leaning intellectuals and the PCI, but by the end of the 1950s, the cultural hegemony exercised by the party was collapsing. In 1959, Vittorini launched *il Menabò*, a journal that he conceived as vehicle for a reassembling the progressive Italian intelligentsia. While the apprehended ideological splintering of the intellectual Left could not be averted, an important and healthy clarification was facilitated by the debates instigated by Vittorini's project. For our purposes, it is the discussion hosted in 1962 in the fifth issue of *il Menabò* that is especially

¹¹ Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature* was published in 1947 and appeared in English as *What Is Literature* in 1967). For an extremely useful introduction to the debate about expressionism and its relation to the post-WW II controversy about commitment in the German-speaking milieu see Ernst Bloch.

¹² It is one of the great merits of Gastaldi's work to have identified in the first chapter of his dissertation the crucial importance of Eco, especially, but also of Calvino in the development of Tondelli's conception and practice of commitment.

significant. The central question in the issue was the role of literature (and thus of the writer as intellectual) in the 'affluent' society emerging in the West under the leadership of US capitalism. The spectrum of opinion was wide but the affinity of the positions taken by Calvino in "La sfida al labirinto" and Eco in "Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà" is striking, especially in retrospect. Calvino and Eco represented different generations and their literary sympathies differed significantly (the former being very suspicious of the neo-avant-garde movement of which the latter was an early protagonist), but their interventions on this occasion converged in redefining the relation between politics and literature. It was clear to both authors that literature had to remain 'political' in the sense of continuing to pose a challenge to the status quo (in this regard Eco's use of the term 'impegno' is quite explicit, as well as deliberately provocative; Calvino's term 'sfida' is also eloquent). But it was just as clear to both Calvino and Eco that such a challenge operated at the level of artistic elaboration (i.e., not at the level of a direct and explicit support for a particular party platform or even a narrowly defined political ideology). It is the work on language (Calvino) and on form (Eco) which defines the writer's commitment: a work oriented to cognition and driven by an ethico-political impulse which is essential to cognition but also relatively open-ended ideologically. Marxism and socialism still defined the horizon (albeit, a receding one) within which Calvino and Eco moved, but the mapping out of the landscape required in their view the removal of blatant ideological biases.¹³ The concept of commitment emerged from these reflections significantly reformulated. The intellectual did not remove him/herself from the battle of ideas but brought to it her/his specific contribution as an artist (i.e., a writer) who was struggling to understand the world and represent it in the fullest and richest way possible. That meant that the artist would naturally focus on those realities that dominant discourses had marginalized (thus Eco's interest in mass culture and its products) or even silenced (thus Calvino's interest in forms of life such as animals). The very notion of what constitutes the 'political' was changing: the narrow definition of politics as reducible to the life of parties and their ancillary organizations was being replaced by a more encompassing notion that included the social and cultural dimensions of the life of the polis and granted these dimensions a relative autonomy from narrow political action. In sum, intellectuals were not the cultural

¹³ Calvino's position is elaborated further in his 1978 article "Usi politici giusti e sbagliati della letteratura"; the implications of Eco's discussion are worked out in many of the essays published in the anthology *Apocalittici e integrati*.

infantry of the party, nor the watchdogs of ideological correctness. In relation to political organizations, they were fellow travellers whose contribution was directly proportional to their commitment to a sincere and rigorous dialogue about the means and ends of the political struggle.

Tondelli enters the Italian cultural scene in 1980 after a few years at the DAMS in Bologna where he came into contact with the teaching of Eco and Celati. He is a witness of the movement of '77, which will peak in the summer of that year in Bologna, but remains by his own admission at the margins of the protest. Gastaldi insists on Tondelli's consistent rejection of the political ideology of the protest movement, and locates in such a rejection the basis for Tondelli's reputation as a representative of the post-'77 reaction against politics and retreat into the private sphere. Gastaldi astutely points out that a deep dislike for political posturing also earned Tondelli sharp criticism from activists who are disappointed by his lack of militancy for gay rights. As a result, Gastaldi chooses to speak of Tondelli's 'social' rather than 'political' commitment. However, this concession risks 'throwing the baby out with the bath water': it is the concept of what constitutes the 'political' that needs to be challenged. We have seen how such concept had begun to expand in Calvino and Eco's reformulations of commitment. Now we can go a step further.

Tondelli belongs to the generation who experienced on its own skin the emergence of feminism and the concrete meaning of the famous slogan 'the private is political'. Even as a witness, rather than a protagonist, Tondelli could hardly be unaware of the fact that the dissolution of Lotta Continua, the most important political organization within the protest movement, was due to its inability to come to terms with the agenda that slogan encapsulated. Issues of sexuality and gender, of desire and affect (which, as we have seen, are central preoccupations in Tondelli's work), could not find a satisfactory place in a communist ideology which was becoming increasingly abstract, abstruse and rebarbative. Tondelli's notorious comment "solo a udire la parola comunismo mi viene il mal di pancia" [just hearing the word 'communism' gives me a stomach ache] (*Opere* II: 785) and his claims to be "infantilmente apolitico" [naively apolitical] (*Opere* II: 990) must be understood as a rejection of the kind of politics which had exhausted itself in the 1970s, i.e., a politics which remained unable to overcome the dichotomy between organization (party, strict ideological line, etc.) and dis-organization (anti-hierarchical autonomy, creative archipelago, etc.). However, as Gastaldi compellingly demonstrates, Tondelli's entire career is characterized by a cultural

activism that recalls a figure like Vittorini: from the chorus of marginalized voiced in *Altri libertini*, to Leo's struggle to find a language in which to speak and share his mourning in *Camere separate*, through the project Under 25 which fostered the emergence of a new generation of young writers, and the attentive witnessing of contemporaneity in *Un weekend postmoderno*, Tondelli spared no energies in the attempt to make a difference, intervene, stimulate. Perhaps the transition for which Tondelli is responsible can best be named by referring to a terminological oscillation: the Italian term 'impegno' can be translated as 'commitment' (the most common solution) or 'engagement' (as a French derivation might recommend). In English, the two terms have significantly different inflections and in the case at hand it seems useful to talk about a movement from 'commitment' to 'engagement': Tondelli engages with the world around him but without committing to a specific ideological horizon. There are limits, serious ones, to this strategy, as we shall see in the last section of this article; but there are also advantages especially when the most cumbersome obstacle to cognition is a stultifying Marxist vulgate (one is reminded of the raving Red Brigades communiqués) rather than naïve empiricism. In the end, then, Tondelli provides an important insight and a valid indication for a refreshingly different take on the 1980s when he states:

Perché anche negli anni Ottanta, che molti si affrettano incautamente a vituperare, sono emersi valori e comportamenti assolutamente non trascurabili. Innanzi tutto un ritorno della solidarietà — non più di classe ma più generalmente civile — di fronte alle emergenze sociali, come l'immigrazione dai paesi extracomunitari, la criminalità mafiosa, i sequestri di persona, la cura e il recupero dei tossicodipendenti. Il ritorno degli studenti medi in piazza per chiedere più efficienza all'apparato scolastico, l'occupazione delle facoltà universitarie per salvaguardare la ricerca e lo studio. La stessa, improvvisa e sorprendente fine dei regimi comunisti dell'Est europeo sta rilanciando una nuova tensione politica e ideale nel segno dell'Europa. (Tondelli, *Opere* II: 841)

[Even in the 1980s, which many people are incautiously rushing to revile, values and behaviours have emerged that are anything but insignificant. First of all, a revival of solidarity — not class based but more generally among citizens — in confronting social emergencies

such as immigration from countries outside the European community, organized crime and the mafia, kidnappings, the care and rehabilitation of drug addicts. Middle-school students have taken again to the streets to demand more efficiency in the school system, and in university faculties have been occupied to safeguard study and research. Even the sudden and surprising collapse of the communist regimes in the Eastern Bloc is reviving political ideals and aspirations for Europe.]

It would be easy to point out how naïvely ‘reformist’ and even ‘petit bourgeois’ the political agenda described in this passage is: the talk of a ‘citizen’ rather than ‘class’ solidarity; the focus on sectorial problems such as ‘immigration’, ‘organized crime’, and ‘drugs’; the demand for ‘greater efficiency’ in the school system; etc. But this would miss the point. Tondelli is registering realities which need to be confronted and not swept under the carpet of a generalized dismissal of the 1980s. Tondelli does not and perhaps cannot provide a subtle political analysis of these events, but others can, especially others who can profit from some historical distance and who are serious about their own engagement/commitment as intellectuals. Tondelli’s enduring merit is to have engaged thoroughly and passionately with his times, without surrendering to euphoria or disdain and with an unfailing flair for key developments in the world around him.

Postmodernism

In her book *Il dibattito sul postmoderno in Italia*, Monica Jansen has meticulously and exhaustively retraced the Italian reception of postmodernism as a historical and cultural category. Two elements in Jansen’s discussion are especially significant in this context: first, in Italy the debate on postmodernism only began in earnest in the 1980s (i.e., rather late in comparison to other Western countries such as the US, France and the UK) with the publication of works of fiction such as Calvino’s *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* (1979), Eco’s *Il nome della rosa* (1980), as well as the anthology of theoretical essays *Crisi della ragione* (1979) edited by Aldo Gargani and *Il pensiero debole* (1983) edited by Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti. Jansen also shows that the more specifically literary debate took even longer to develop and when it did in the 1990s it focused on the literary production of the 1980s, which, in Italy, are the quintessentially ‘postmodern’ decade. Second, the extreme reluctance, particularly among literary critics,

to adopt the term postmodern and its derivatives manifests a fundamentally negative assessment — even Ceserani, often cited as the Italian champion of postmodernism, is always at pains to make clear that the point is not to approve or disapprove but to recognize a fact, i.e., the ‘postmodern’ is a cognitive category that helps us understand a historical and cultural conjuncture. Only once we have recognized it, we can intelligently criticize it, if we so wish.¹⁴

In the discussion about postmodernism, we encounter familiar elements: the importance of the 1980s is hotly debated and, even if eventually recognized, it is immediately assigned a predominantly negative value. Among the changes brought against the decade, not the least one is that it was the period in which Italy became ‘postmodern.’ What role does Tondelli play in this configuration? The writer from Correggio is one of the few Italian literary figures to have embraced the label ‘postmodern’ and the rather fluid sensibility that such a term encompasses. The term ‘sensibility’ is key here: Tondelli is not a theorist (and we will begin a reflection on this point in the last section of this article), and he does not attempt to conceptualize the ‘postmodern’ philosophically. Rather, he uses the term to refer to his experience of contemporaneity. His last major work, *Un weekend postmoderno*, realizes the project of providing the richest and most detailed landscape possible of the 1980s, or “l’unica storia possibile” [the only possible history] of the decade as Tondelli lived it and his final legacy to future generations.¹⁵ The book is a major achievement but its significance and impact have been reduced by its characterization as a collection of heterogeneous material rather artificially organized within a single volume. Heterogeneity is indeed the hallmark of the work but what is at stake is the interpretation of such heterogeneity. My suggestion is that *Un weekend* should be re-read in parallel with *Rimini* which also seeks to map out the 1980s but through the use of a ‘traditional’ narrative form. The comparison would show that there is a great deal more ‘artificiality’ in *Rimini* than in *Un weekend*. This observation can serve as the point of departure for a reassessment of the importance of the latter work. I would go so far as to

¹⁴ One must recognize that occasionally Ceserani’s position is not quite so ‘value neutral’. For example, in *Raccontare il postmoderno*, the comparison of De Lillo’s *Libra* with Balestrini’s *L’editore*, which Ceserani uses to differentiate between experimental modernism (Balestrini) and postmodernism (De Lillo), clearly suggests that the US author’s work is more important than the Italian’s precisely because De Lillo grapples with the postmodern while Balestrini does not.

¹⁵ I am quoting the title of Panzeri’s thorough and largely enlightening introduction to *Un weekend*.

suggest that *Un weekend* is Tondelli's most sustained and successful attempt to develop a different storytelling strategy capable of accounting for the condition of postmodernity without concessions either to formulaic readability or to experimental distancing. *Un weekend* may well be the great 'realist (anti)novel' of Italian postmodernity and as such it can be seen as the foil to *Camere separate*: the deeply personal story of Leo and Thomas is ensconced within the historical, social and cultural universe which *Un weekend* explores in details; the heterogeneity and breadth of *Un weekend* is the counterpart to the focused intensity of *Camere separate*. *Un weekend* should also be examined as an anticipation of that blurring between documentary and fictional modes of representation which has become one of the most interesting features of contemporary Italian narrative literature and film: from the Wu Ming collective to Roberto Saviano, from Mario Martone to Daniele Gaglianone. At the heart of this investigation should be not only the nature of the material narrativized, but also on the form of address which Tondelli develops in *Un weekend*: the scope and mood of focalization, and its oscillations. The horizon opened by these suggestions entails a significant re-evaluation of the 1980s as the decade in which some of the most exciting trends in contemporary Italian culture must be rooted. Now that the term 'postmodern' is no longer fashionable, it may be possible to revisit Ceserani's suggestion about the cognitive value of the category without fears of losing the critical distance that enables us to judge what was destructive and nefarious but also what has been useful and productive in the experiences of the 1980s. Tondelli's archaeology of the decade is an invaluable resource in this effort.

Theory

I have stated earlier that Tondelli was not a theorist. The observation may seem innocuous enough: not all writers are literary critics and even fewer are literary theorists. As an intellectual, Tondelli is primarily a cultural activist, his writings even when focused on artistic works maintain a journalistic tone: they are aimed at widening the readership of those works rather than at developing thoroughgoing interpretations of them. When delivering conference papers or directly addressing the critics, Tondelli never speaks in an academic vein and keeps a wider audience firmly in mind — usually, his primary interest lies in telling certain stories in which works of art, authors, critics and 'ordinary' people all have an important role to play. Finally, in Tondelli's interviews, the author's reflections upon the state

of Italian letters, his own trajectory, the role of cultural and literary criticism, etc. are always interesting and often acute but never develop a well thought out theoretical stance. Two questions arise, then, which I find intriguing. First, is Tondelli's a-theoretical attitude indicative of a more general 1980s phenomenon? Second, what are the issues that such an attitude raises in relation to Tondelli and in relation to the 1980s?

A full answer to the first question would require a much more extensive discussion than is possible in this context. It is interesting, however, to reflect even preliminarily on the relationship between the 1980s and 'theory'. One of the stories often told about the development of contemporary Italian literature is that narrative went into eclipse as the student protest movement got under way in the 1960s and was replaced by the essay as the dominant focus of intellectual debate, especially among younger intellectuals who, if they were reading fiction at all, turned to foreign authors, while the local neo-avant-garde production continued to lose touch with the reading public. It was only in the late Seventies that 'serious' literature (re)discovered that pleasure in narrative, on the one hand, and cognitive and aesthetic value, on the other hand, were not mutually exclusive. And it took another decade before Italian narrative literature began to reconquer a wide audience. Does this mean that the return of narrative sent the essay, i.e., criticism and theory, into eclipse? My initial impression, which of course needs to be verified, is that while literary criticism did go into decline in the 1980s, the fate of theory was more mixed at least in the sense that a great deal of stimulation was provided by some Italian (e.g., Eco's semiotics) and foreign sources, especially French post-structuralism. Foucault, Deleuze, Habermas, just to name some of the obvious figures, certainly made their voices heard this side of the Alps. And indeed we hear echoes of them in Tondelli (as in the above citation from "Colpo d'oppio"). Yet the echoes are faint, perhaps because the theoretical debate in Italy still seems to revolve around the collapse of Marxism and the emergence of post- and non-Marxist philosophers such as Vattimo, Cacciari, Severino whose influence remained rather narrowly sectorial. It would seem that in the cultural discourse of the 1980s the demand for theory was as weak as it is in Tondelli:

È una vecchia questione, la solita, che mi porto dietro fin dai tempi dell'università. Il professore diceva che una ricerca si fa costituendo un orizzonte teorico da convalidare con i fatti. Per me invece solo dai fatti, dalla ricerca sul campo, dai testi reperiti, era possibile riferirmi

a una teoria. In effetti non sono diventato un ricercatore, ma credo di aver conservato un atteggiamento antidogmatico verso il mio lavoro. Molte volte sono andato a vedere per poi riferire. Altre volte ho preferito il racconto delle superfici all'indagine profonda ritenendo che le cose parlassero da sé. Ora credo di aver bisogno di interpretare. (Tondelli, *Opere* II: 989)

[It is an old issue, a familiar one, that has been dogging me ever since my university years. The professor used to say that research should be carried out by establishing a theoretical horizon, which the facts must validate. In my view, on the contrary, it was only from the facts, from research in the field, from the texts encountered, that I could relate to a theory. As a matter of fact I did not become a researcher, but I believe that I maintained an anti-dogmatic approach in my work. On many occasions, I went to see first and then told about it. On other occasions, I preferred stories that remained on the surface to in-depth investigations, believing that things spoke for themselves. Now I think I need to interpret.]

The passage is taken from the long conversation that took place between Tondelli and Panzeri in 1989–1990 surrounding the publication of *Un weekend*. It is a late statement by the writer from Correggio and contains a clear acknowledgment of his suspicion of theory and his preference for what is essentially an empiricist position. The passage also gives us some hints as to the roots of this suspicion. Tondelli disagrees with ‘il professore’, and it is not hard to imagine who this university professor might be: the same Umberto Eco who gave Tondelli a 29/30 after the discussion of the latter’s graduating thesis on wine.¹⁶ The disagreement is not so much a matter of ‘theory’, however, as a matter of sensibility: a child of the protest moment, after all, Tondelli does not want to adopt the position of authority that the professor embodies and attempts to reproduce in the student. Tondelli wants his curiosity to run free, unconstrained by a precise theoretical framework; and this desire is a challenge to the professor (a world re-

¹⁶ In the Italian university system, the highest grade that a student could obtain at the end of a course (usually after an oral examination) is 30 cum laude. Therefore Eco gave Tondelli a good grade (roughly the North American equivalent of an “A-”) but was not wholly impressed with the latter’s work._

nowned semiotician) but also points to the rejection so often voiced by Tondelli of the injunction to produce, exhibit and defend a political ideology (Gastaldi, “Pier Vittorio Tondelli”, Thesis: 102–122). For Tondelli, who grew up in the 1970s, the notion of ‘theory’ is inextricably linked to ‘Marxism’ and his aversion to theory is a short hand for his aversion to Marxist ideology. Tondelli’s attitude, then, is representative of the disenchantment of his generation with the dominant ideology of the previous decades. But it is important to reflect on the fact that this disenchantment does not take the form of a theoretical debunking of Marxism, but rather of a refusal to engage in a sustained confrontation which would ultimately lead to a different ideological commitment. It is precisely the desire to avoid such a commitment that leads to the devaluing and avoidance of, as well as impatience with, theoretical discourse *tout court*. And yet, interestingly, the last sentence of the passage also suggests that, toward the end of his life, Tondelli was beginning to revise his position and feel the need of a transition to a more interpretative (and possibly more ‘theoretical’) moment. This belated admission leads to a further question: what moved Tondelli to such a revision? Was he becoming aware of the price that he and the 1980s had paid for their rejection of theory?

It is clear that my goal is to promote a positive re-assessment of the 1980s and of Tondelli, a period and a writer which in my view are still widely misunderstood and significantly underestimated. However, it is not my intention to suggest that all criticism of Tondelli and of the decade of which he was the protagonist is unfounded. Remapping the cultural landscape of the 1980s will also lead to identifying important failures, one of which clearly is the rejection of theory just noted. Tondelli’s work suffers from an insufficient theoretical elaboration that becomes increasingly evident after *Pao Pao*, when the compass of his work widens without the support of a deepening vision. In *Rimini*, the artificiality of the end product is directly related to an insufficiently developed theoretical/conceptual grasp of the ‘postmodern’ phenomena Tondelli is grappling with; in *Un weekend* the fragmentary nature of the text does not succeed in hiding a growing sense of confusion and bewilderment before the spectacle of the 1980s; and even in *Camere separate* the struggle to find a language adequate to the experience remains raw, ungovernable, subject to sudden slippages, and the resolution is postponed to a merely adumbrated future. Death interrupted that future, foreclosing the possibility of a deeper, more mature interpretative stance.

In a similar vein, the aversion to theory might be considered one of the most destructive legacies of the 1980s to the ensuing decades. Though I should hasten to add that a problematic relation to ‘theory’ is hardly the prerogative of

the 1980s and should be studied as a *longue durée* issue in Italian cultural life — a very complex matter indeed. Still, the ‘radiant idiocy’ of the 1980s (Balestrini’s stigmatization in his 2004 introduction to *Vogliamo tutto*, cited earlier) is a phenomenon that can be usefully explored in relation to an aversion to theory, which, however, needs to be investigated both in its positive and in its negative impact. The latter seems more evident today, but even a clear manifestation such as the ‘crisis of literary criticism’ needs to be carefully unpacked: the crisis cannot be cured by a nostalgic return to defunct and indefensible theoretical positions and philosophical horizons (such as garden variety Marxism, idealism or, least of all, Catholicism). The crux of the matter is the decline of critical thought and the deterioration of public discourse in Italy from the 1990s onward. Such phenomena are not uniquely Italian but they take a distinctive form in the country that has been ruled by Berlusconi for the last two decades. And that form can only be fully understood through a nuanced and sensitive understanding of the 1980s.¹⁷

Conclusion

For Harvey (*The Condition of Postmodernity*) and Jameson (*Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*) one of the key elements of the ‘postmodern’ is a changed attitude towards time and history. The acceleration and globalization of daily life has sapped the historical consciousness that emerged in and largely defined modernity, reaching its high water mark in the philosophical systems of Hegel and Marx. Jameson’s famous exhortation “historicize, always historicize” (*The Political Unconscious* 9) could have little purchase within the new cultural configuration. And yet, in more recent years, Jameson’s work on artistic form and dialectics has revised somewhat the author’s earlier position on the perception of time and history.¹⁸ The classic Marxist project of historicization has returned. In Italy, Luperini, in *La fine del postmoderno*, has seen in this movement

¹⁷ It should be pointed out that the 1980s were heyday of ‘theory’ in American universities and the cultural impact of this moment is extremely controversial. However, in the US academy, the term ‘theory’ has acquired a meaning that is significantly different from the more traditional one used in this essay. This seldom acknowledged terminological divide would merit a detailed exploration.

¹⁸ Cf. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005); *The Valences of the Dialectic* (2009); *The Hegel Variations: On the Phenomenology of Spirit* (2010); *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (2011).

less a dialectical development than an outright rejection of the ‘postmodern moment’ — a long-overdue rejection, as far as the Italian critic is concerned, and one he registers with a little too much satisfaction. It is true that after the obsession with ‘endings’ (the end of ‘history’, ‘ideology’, ‘politics’, as well as the never-ending end of ‘art’ and ‘the novel’) and ‘epochal changes’, the contemporary mood has shifted toward a more sober recognition of continuities and therefore toward a renewed interest not only in historical dialectics (as per Jameson) but also, for example, in the archaeological and genealogical method inaugurated by Michel Foucault.¹⁹ In sum, history is back on the agenda but if we do not want to fall into the trap of banalizing this movement as a return to the safe (?) house of historicism and realism (Ferraris 2012), we must confront with an open mind and finely attuned sensibility both the contemporary theoretical work on history and historiography, and the decade in which the ‘modern’ perception of time was challenged and radically reshaped, if not liquidated as some thought. The 1980s are that decade and in it can be found the key to grasping much that is essential in the contemporary predicament. I have argued that Tondelli can and should play a crucial role in this renewed engagement with the 1980s and, conversely, that a more subtle and complex grasp of that decade would lend new energy and scope to the assessment of Tondelli’s artistic achievement and contribution to the development of contemporary Italian literature and culture. The keywords I have presented in this essay provide, I hope, rich access to a landscape that needs to be significantly reconfigured. The intelligibility of the present and the possibility of its immanent critique crucially depend on such a reconfiguration.

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¹⁹ Cf. Foucault, *L’Archéologie du savoir* and “Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’histoire.”

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