

Painted Politics

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In the Spring of '77, in the midst of violent demonstrations, nihilistic happenings were staged in various cities, especially Bologna and Rome. Their existence was short-lived but the inventiveness of the Metropolitan Indians, their diffidence of radical rhetoric, their use of simulation and parody as political weapons were not forgotten by the Movement.

The term "Metropolitan Indians" is an invented one. The press describes them as the illegitimate child of a clandestine mother and a traditional Marxist father. The detailed physical description presents them with marks painted on their faces as a group whose decisions are not very trustworthy (more than once they have made arrangements for demonstrations that never occurred) and which is unable to participate in public assemblies with sensible speeches. The press conceals the fact that they habitually break into shops and appropriate useless goods (record albums, liquor, sports clothes). They also frequently appear at the most elegant movie theaters in groups of about thirty people, naturally after visiting the most expensive restaurants where they obviously did not pay.

The press often prefers to occupy itself with the marks on the group's faces, with their songs and dances, with their paradoxical slogans, relegating the "expropriations" to the "semi-clandestine independents" who are on the verge of acquiring the clandestine character of the Bunker.

The press has good reason to invent differences and to be concerned. Whoever paints his face taking the marks as an arbitrary characterization of a future people; whoever appropriates in an exhaustive way all possible terms and treats language as a science of imaginary solutions; whoever refuses to explain himself

and, despite this omission, doesn't stop robbing, nor in fact engages in any collective practice — such a person is the agent of subversions which have great significance. Every element in the subversion of a system must be of a superior logical order.

Let us try to get an overview of the scene. The industry involved in the transmission and elaboration of signs is ranked third in the world on the basis of sales. Consider a hypothesis: the diffusion of the sign as the general equivalent of all things and the transfer of the productive intelligence to machines may involve some radical innovations in the social forms of language and thought and in the forms of legal and juridical control. Consider this further hypothesis: the creation of a social intelligence which has been rendered useless and polyvalent may have given rise to the social possibility of simulation or, better, to the production of signs beyond the laws governing property and the forms of control incarnated in signs.

We are convinced that this entire situation is connected with the development of the unforeseen, absurd and paradoxical behavior that is improperly called "the phenomenon of the Metropolitan Indians."

Since all the "real contents" (the referents of production, affect, signification) that ballasted the sign with a kind of useful force of gravity are no longer effectively communicated, the signs are now exchanged among themselves without any commerce with some object in reality. For a social subject, on the other hand, a subject that is diffuse and forced into a relation with fluctuating and indeterminate wages (and the question of wages, by definition, is the general referent of all signs), the "pangs of conscience" and discourses on "political economy" are completely useless; one can not struggle against transience and dispersion with the blows of purpose and conscience.

Thus the social conditions of simulation and of the arbitrary come into being: there arises a social subject that is not reducible to one precise identity, that arbitrarily invents one for itself and at the same time hangs on the thin thread of its own precarious language, suspended between absolute power and total absurdity, waiting without fear for some other determination of identity at its ineluctable opening: that of derision.

If we investigate this development, moving from the March, 1977 demonstrations to an interpretive model which succeeds in comprehending them, it will not be difficult for us to trace this semantic openmindedness, these mechanisms of simulation, to the highest levels of formal languages. The nonsense argument is the basis of logical, mathematical reasoning and the constitutive model of music and the game as well. The analysis and introduction of transgressive and uncontrollable variables into collective systems (which are fictional and sympathetic) form part of every good project in the industry of the spectacle.

We hypothesize, then, the coming of an era which replaces the bearers of truth divided unions, political groups with their identifying signs and their banners) with intelligence and shrewdness. This era will be based on the social possibilities of falsehood, on the technological possibilities resulting from the destruction of rules, on the free exchange of products, simulation, the game, the nonsense argument, the dream, music.

If we now want to retrace the steps that legitimize this hypothesis in the events which have already occurred, we must relate a few scenes, as in a film, even if we all know that the best gags can not be related. Let us begin with a title: "COSSINO ASSASSIGA." This slogan was written in Campo dei Fiori, and it attributes the epithet "murderer" (*assassino*) to Cossiga, the Minister of the Interior. Yet what is anathema here is not the insult, but the anagram. Saussure was right: political economy has its own discourse, and the very mutation that strikes linguistic signs when they lose their referential status also strikes the categories of political economy; the same process occurs in both directions. In writing, an

anagrammatic sign has dispensed with order: the poetic pleasure comes directly from violating the fundamental laws of human language, from subverting the discipline of their valorization. The anagram in this case is the mark of an antagonistic form, a language without expression, now beyond laws and the purposes that linguistics assigns it.

But let us leave the explanation of this anagrammatic title to describe a few scenes which, in their balanced dimensionality and inexplicable silence, allude to feelings so violent that they brush against certainty (as happens in every well-made film).

Imagine the University of Rome, always seen from above, with a periphery wall that detaches it from the neighborhood of San Lorenzo and emphatically characterizes it as a place delegated for institutional functions. Imagine the entrance to the paths that consolidate the power of a huge truck, a portable place delegated for whoever has pretensions to speak, even in unknown languages; in fact, the truck is equipped with powerful loud-speakers, and it is followed by hundreds of union members enlisted to maintain law and order: it is the day for the meeting of the CGL's secretary general¹ at the University of Rome.

War is always anticipated by the visual function of the parade; in fact, war is the coherent development of the parade. In our case, the action was the introduction of "the union line at the university" — terms that are perhaps careless, but undoubtedly consistent.

It is again at the semantic level that the group's provocation organizes the encounter: the dancing Metropolitan Indians actually carry a hanged puppet of the union secretary dangling before them like a destroyed image, and this action unleashes the anger of the union's law-and-order guard. The escalation of weapons is rather singular: the Metropolitan Indians throw bags filled with water; the unionists respond with the sprays of fire extinguishers. The Indians charge, dispersing and terrorizing the union apparatus, literally destroying everything; but they do not take over the platform on the truck, and they do not seize the microphone.

This day will long be remembered in Italian political history; from that day will gush rivers of speeches on the new needs of the youthful strata of the population; on that day hundreds of self-critical and remorseful discourses will be made, yet only the Metropolitan Indians will remain silent.

Many other things happened, the most important of which were the attacks on the armories in March (to steal not merely guns, but tennis racquets and fishing rods as well), the very violent clashes with the crowd, the arrests, and the armed interventions. But the second important scene is not the battle. It lies precisely in the place of discourse.

Every place delegated for political discourse has a structure that is quite similar to the Panopticon described by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. Such places are designed with a central point situated to maintain the least distance from the other points and, at all events, to preserve the power of controlling with one's gaze every other point of the place in which one is positioned. It is generally a question of high platforms (such as the truck mentioned earlier), located in circular places (squares or halls with sloping tiers of seats).

In September, the Movement of 77² or, if you prefer, the Metropolitan Indians launched a mass meeting in the city of Bologna. More than a hundred thousand people responded to the call. The second part of our screenplay on the Metropolitan Indians is concerned with analyzing the structure of this scene with the hundred thousand extras.

The disposition of men and things is always the result of strategies for war and control. Most European cities maintain the architectonic structure of military

camp and medieval fortresses.

At the meeting in September against repression, there was a superimposition of two groups of people and two different cities of language. One part of the Movement chose as its own territory a circular location with sloping seats that surrounded a central platform. It was a sports arena, a place designated for athletic (*agonistiche*) events (*agonism* etymologically derives from *agon*, the war song that Greek combatants sang dedicating themselves to death.) This part of the Movement, about 8000 people, was divided and clashed among themselves, smashing chairs over one another's heads and failing to arrive at any solution (generally, a political solution is represented by a written motion approved by a majority). Another part of the Movement, the majority, entered the city, sleeping anywhere in the streets, under porticoes, creating an enormous curtain, exploiting a few upright sculptures in a small square, conveying furniture and chairs outdoors, conducting discussions and seminars in thousands of small groups, passing out the little illegalities that had been produced for the occasion (fake train tickets, drugs, keys to open telephone coin boxes and traffic lights, etc.).

Thus a very interesting situation was created. One part of the Movement sought the establishment — in the order of signs and discourse — of a city fortress (the sports arena), the "new" bastion of the future people, in reality the mark of an old passion for collecting imported practices. The majority or, rather, the remaining part of the Movement chose not to establish a city; they decided to continue being nomads, but at the same time enter the city of the enemy's language — a city that is always strengthening its fortifications — even if only to remain silent, sitting around, smoking, sleeping. We have termed them nomads, but perhaps it is more correct to call them sophists, in a position to simulate, to enter and leave the walls, to master diverse languages as the situation demands, in a position to play-act, falsify, create paradoxes, sabotage, and disappear once again. This type of sophist is a figure who can intervene in languages with an exact and distinct action, without taking them as a despotic and unyielding totality. This gift is of course not innate; it is a consequence of the relation to wages (wages' general equivalence with the rest of things, exactly like language).

The Metropolitan Indians have stopped using the metaphor of wages, because their enterprise is no longer producing metaphors for institutions, but rather effecting the metamorphosis of them. They wanted to compel Italian youth to reckon with wages, but also to force them all to realize that the Movement is tired of reckoning merely with money. And this break in the scope of the struggle is at once a break in language and the forms of the encounter.



For a brief time, the irreality, the displacement, the revolution of existing relations is no longer the prerogative of capital and its accumulated intelligence. An unforeseen variable has been created in the Italian political scene: a social sector which is illegal more in its behavior than in its relation to wages, and which is at the same time not clandestine, even though clandestine groups can float around within it. This sector is not reduced and not reducible to the productive order; it is intersected and made labyrinthine so as to be rendered indefinable, but even before this, it is subjectively not obligated to any determination of identity.

We can foresee that the forms of the organization, corresponding to whoever leaves his own distinctive marks, will not be precisely symbolic. Rather, they will be and are formations which can be constructed as the need arises and dissolved immediately after, not bound to the criteria of professionalism, notwithstanding all the Leninism of those who bide their time. The immediate steps to be taken by those the press has dubbed the Metropolitan Indians is the production of projects in the field of simulation, falsification, and paradox. The program which guides and will guide the Movement aims at giving their projects the same precision as a knitted work, the same collective participation as a common home, the same rhythmic breathing as that we find in our own lives and in the phases of our collective study, the same range as our journeys, the same organization as our emotional relations, as always illegal but never clandestine.

What is left for us to do before concluding is finally to forget about the Metropolitan Indians and once again prevent a Movement from becoming a fetish, a hypostasis, shortcircuited by the media's diffusion. There will always be animal reserves and Indian reservations to conceal the fact that the animals are dead, and that we are all Indians. There will always be factories to conceal the fact that production is dead, and that it is everywhere and nowhere. We follow the momentum of our projects with our song and occupy ourselves with other things.

Translated by Lawrence Venuti

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III/1-2 Photos: Marion Scemama

