

REALLY FANTASTIC!

3 December 2021
SIS PG Colloquium
2nd Online Edition

*Intertwinements,
exchanges,*

*and
discordances
between*

*realism and the
fantastic in*

Italian

culture

Roundtable with:
Prof. Francesca Billiani
(University of Manchester)
Prof. Fabio Camilletti
(University of Warwick)
Prof. Morena Corradi
(CUNY)
Prof. Robert Gordon
(University of Cambridge)

THE SOCIETY FOR
S I S
ITALIAN STUDIES


WARWICK
THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

CALL FOR PAPERS

**Really Fantastic! Intertwinements, Exchanges, and Discordances Between
 Realism and the Fantastic in Italian Culture.**

Keynote speakers for the roundtable:

Prof. Francesca Billiani (University of Manchester),

Prof. Fabio Camilletti (University of Warwick),

Prof. Morena Corradi (CUNY),

Prof. Robert Gordon (University of Cambridge).

In this global moment of harsh reality, resorting to the fantastic might seem like escapism. However, the fact that our perception of reality is deeply related to our imagination, and at the same time, that fantasy has firm roots in rationality, puts in question such hasty distinction between what relates to reality and what pertains to the imagination.

The Colloquium sheds light on the literary, visual, and historical encounter between realism and the fantastic, in order to highlight overlap and difference between these broad categories in Italian culture. The Colloquium thus welcomes the contributions of PG students and PGRs who focus on one of the two poles of the dichotomy, or explore the fusion and cross-fertilisation of the two (i.e., magical realism, fantastic realism, and related concepts). In particular, the Colloquium aims to problematise realism and the fantastic by either blurring the lines between them, challenging definitions and the polarisation they create, or, otherwise, insisting on their specificities.

A plethora of definitions has been provided for the study of realism and the fantastic in secondary literature. While French and English both have umbrella terms to define non-realistic genres (*littératures de l'imaginaire*, 'fantastic literatures'), Italian arguably lacks such unequivocal and broad formulas. Despite the variety of approaches, one could start by acknowledging that realism self-knowingly appeared under the label of *naturalisme* in France, which then became *verismo* in Italy. Its original aim was to faithfully portray the world as it is, as if language were not a mediating and distorting tool. On the other hand, the fantastic traditionally represents impossible events that take place in 'our' world, and therefore challenge the reader's perception of the real, as well as of its epistemological boundaries. Genres such as fantasy and sci-fi further complicate the scenario, as they represent in a non-realistic manner 'fantastic' events of worlds other than ours, yet in constant dialogue with it. Ceserani also demonstrates that both fantastic writing and that which appears as *mimetico-realistico* share roots and traits with fairy-tales and fables: often, realistic novels dissimulate their fairy-tale features under the veil

of normality, while fantastic narrations emphasise them. If seen through this perspective, as well as others, realism and the fantastic might not be as distant as they first appear.

The fantastic, in its widest sense, can reach its goal with the help of scientific imageries, as in the case of *Scapigliatura*, whose insistence on the theme of premature death later inspired a supernatural, macabre and phantasmagorical imagination, as is the case in certain mainstream popular literature in which we find mysterious atmospheres, ghosts and the buried alive. But also, fantastic writing makes use of mythology, the supernatural, folklore (a field recently explored with the name of *orrore popolare*), and fabulous creatures. This is the case, for instance, for Carlo Collodi's *Le avventure di Pinocchio*, where the author gives life to a block of wood, thus creating a successful metaphor for the human condition, as well as that of the citizen in the newly born Italy. Moreover, the coexistence of real and fantastic elements is also present in the work of Dante, in which his Florence and its society are allegorised through the medium of the otherworldly, visionary journey.

In the 20th century in particular, the interaction between realism and the fantastic often implies a political view. A clear example is the apparently stark contrast between Cesare Pavese's *Dialoghi con Lencò* and his realist work; likewise, the significance of Italo Calvino's interest in the fairy tale coinciding with his refusal to engage with the political activism within the ranks of *PCI*. These authors, however influential, of course do not exhaust the array of approaches used by Italian intellectuals towards addressing the question. Still, they can be taken as exemplary cases of the aesthetic and political tensions that can emerge between realism and the fantastic.

A similar tension is still at play today. On the one hand, in recent years the use of fantastic images, mythological language, and symbolic tropes has been legitimized even in historical narrative (e.g., Wu Ming, Giuseppe Genna). On the other hand, the emergence of new realism (a renaissance which takes on different connotations whether in the literary or philosophical field), hypermodernity, and the debate they generate, has reactivated both traditional and new political connotations of realism in the 21st century.

Perhaps, much of contemporary Italian literature cannot be fully understood through these labels. One of the goals of the Colloquium is to question realism and the fantastic as labels: to challenge the validity of such categories in order to provide a better map of the current cultural landscape. What are, in the end, the fantastic and realism in Italian culture? How are they definable in relation, as well as in opposition, to one another?

Although highly literary in its focus and origins, the debate on realism and the fantastic bear significant implications in other fields. The breadth of the topic encourages the participation of PG students working on relevant topic from a wide range of disciplines and backgrounds, such as: medieval

studies, Renaissance studies, *dantisti*, *ottocentisti*, postcolonial studies, migrant literature, *contemporaneisti*, art historians, film studies, historiography.

Potential paper topics include but are not limited to:

- The incursion of fantastic themes/images in realist works of fiction (and vice versa)
- Definitions of realism/the fantastic
- Continuities/discontinuities between theoretical discussions of the topic and aesthetical outcomes
- Discussion of the topic in specific linguistic/geographical/political contexts
- The role of the author/reader in the creation and reception of realist/fantastic works
- The pervasiveness, as well as the implications of the question, in fields other than fiction
- Fantastic imageries and objects of study within historiography
- Magical realism in Italy
- The politics of the debate around realism in the Italian context
- *Impegno* in realism/the fantastic
- Myth and realism
- Folklore in Italian culture
- Gothic, phantasmagoria, spectres, ghosts and zombies in Italian culture
- Fairy tales and fables in Italian culture
- Dante and *fantastico*
- New Realism
- Interdisciplinary approaches to the study of realism and the fantastic

Postgraduate students and doctoral students in Italian Studies departments in the UK and abroad are highly encouraged to send their proposals. Proposals from postgraduate students and PhD candidates who are not based in Italian Studies departments and who are working on Italian-related topics are very welcome.

The Colloquium will be held via **Microsoft Teams** (instructions to follow) on the **3rd December 2021** and will involve a promisingly rich **roundtable** on the topic of the Colloquium through the dialogue between the four keynote speakers. This year a **professional development session** on post-doc fellowships, run by ECAs, will also take place during the course of the day (panelists t.b.c.).

Abstracts (300 words + key words) and a brief bio-note (200 words) should be sent to Andrea Brondino (A.Brondino@warwick.ac.uk) and Simona Di Martino (S.Di-Martino@warwick.ac.uk) by the **30th September 2021**.

Contributors could be invited to publish an article based on their papers presented at the Colloquium in the peer-reviewed journal *Notes on Italian Studies*.

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