

***REALLY FANTASTIC!* INTERTWINEMENTS, EXCHANGES, AND DISCORDANCES BETWEEN REALISM AND THE FANTASTIC IN ITALIAN CULTURE**

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In a moment when reality is constantly changing on a global scale, and not always for the better, recurring to the fantastic might seem like tempting, though pure escapism. However, the fact that our perception of reality is also a matter of imagination, and, on the other hand, that fantasy has firm roots in rationality, puts in question such hasty judgments.

This issue of the journal *Notes in Italian Studies* sheds light on the literary, visual, and historical encounter between realism and fantastic elements, in order to highlight the overlaps and the differences between the broad categories of realism and the fantastic in Italian culture. In particular, this issue aims to showcase critical and aesthetical perspectives that problematise the persistent, albeit outdated, pseudo-dichotomy between realism and the fantastic.

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 assessing 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 could not be considered as a mediating, and therefore 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, when they represent in a non-realistic manner the 'fantastic' events of worlds utterly different from ours, yet in constant dialogue with it. Remo Ceserani also

demonstrated that both fantastic writings and those who appear as *mimetico-realistiche* share roots and traits with fairy-tales and fables: often, realistic novels dissimulate their fairy-tales features under the veil of normality, while fantastic narrations emphasise them. If seen through this, as well as other perspectives, realism and the fantastic might not be as distant as they could appear at first.

The fantastic, in its largest senses, sometimes reaches its goal with the help of scientific imageries, as in the case of *Scapigliatura*, whose insistence on premature death later inspired a supernatural, macabre and phantasmagorical imagination, as happen in some popular novels where mysterious atmospheres, ghosts and buried alive people are involved. But also, fantastic writings make use of mythologies, the supernatural, folklore (a field recently explored with the name of *orrore popolare*) and even fabulous features. This is the case, for instance, of Carlo Collodi's *Le avventure di Pinocchio*, where the author sparked life to a chunk of wood, thus creating a successful metaphor for the human condition, as well as the citizens' condition in newly born Italy. Besides, the coexistence of real with fantastic elements is also present in the allegorical work of Dante, who created a "parallel" universe of the earthly Florence and its society through the medium of the otherworldly visionary journey.

In the 20th century in particular, the compenetration of realism and the fantastic presupposes or implies a political view, in a broader sense. Emblematic, for this discourse, is the apparently stark contrast between Cesare Pavese's *Dialoghi con Leucò* and his realist production; or the significance of Italo Calvino's interest for the fairy tale, which coincides with his refusal of active political work in the ranks of PCI. Calvino and Pavese, however influential, do not obviously exhaust the possibility of the approaches shown by Italian intellectuals towards 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 work today. On the one hand, in recent years the use of fantastic images, mythological language, and symbolical 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 in the literary and philosophical fields), hypermodernity, and of the debate they generated, reactivated in the 21st century both traditional and new political connotations of realism.

Arguably, much of contemporary Italian literature cannot be easily comprehended by neither of these labels and remains partially uncharted. Therefore, one of the questions that we ask to the readers of this issue concerns the question of realism and the fantastic as labels: that is, whether challenging the validity of such remarks and categories is necessary in order to provide a better map of the current cultural situation. Eventually, what do we, as readers, make of the fantastic and realism in Italian culture?

The notes in this second issue of *Notes in Italian Studies* shed some light on these questions, positing answers that cross the centuries, starting from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Giulia Depoli's article probes an under-researched topic in the history of the *novella di beffa* across the 14th and 15th centuries. Through a critical comparison that encompasses both Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Masuccio Salernitano's *Novellino*, and lesser-known texts written by Sabadino degli Arienti and Cesare Nappi, Depoli elucidates a rhetorical shift in the depiction of supernatural and fantastic elements in the tradition of early modern Italian *novella*, corroborated by a theoretical framework drawing from Francesco Orlando, Todorov, Freud and de Certeau.

Moving from necromanticism to neuroscience, Enrico Meglioli reflects on how folklore might suit storytelling practices and bibliotherapy and takes into consideration contemporary migrations and trans-cultural dialogues as a particular case study. Starting from an overview on the differences between 'reality' and 'fiction' and the theoretical debate around the 'fantastic', Meglioli focuses on the project *Stories in Transit/Storie in transito*, showing that far from being two incommunicable worlds, the real and fantastic one, seem to intertwine and support each other in new and promising interdisciplinary fields, such as those of medical humanities and neuroaesthetics.

The blurred boundaries between reality and the fantastic also emerge from Luca Tognocchi's note, which analyses Giuliano Scabia's play, *Fantastica visione*, revolving around the problem of fruition and perception of reality, and defining three different categories through which reality can be understood: realism, the fantastic and the 'infernale'. By pursuing a close reading of the text, Tognocchi's essay compares Scabia's work with current literary and critical trends, such as those on the 'fantastic' and the *weird*, and hypothesises a parallel with *Faust's* Mephistopheles.

Moving on to the 20th century and to contemporary literature, Maria Collevocchio's article focuses on how the fantastic and realism overlap in two plays by Luigi Pirandello, *Lazzaro* and *La nuova colonia*. While investigating the aesthetical significance of such a literary move, rich of

religious and social connotations, Collevocchio also provides a significant reconstruction of the intertextual memories sparked by Pirandello's texts, from Giuseppe Antonio Borgese to Victor Hugo.

Virginia Benedetti's note also focuses on the 20th century and, in particular, on the work by Italo Calvino. In her contribution *Italo Calvino e gli strumenti del fantastico*, Benedetti offers a new interpretation of Calvino's collection *Sotto il sole del giaguaro*, by analysing the writing tools that belong to the fantastic and that can be traced in Calvino's stories, and by interpreting Calvino's use of the fantastic within a broader understanding of his fiction as an intellectual, as well as civil, aesthetic effort.

Bringing us back to the present, Niccolò Amelii dedicates his note to the contemporary author Tommaso Pincio. By analysing the uncanny aspects, the dystopic dimension, and the fantastic visions of his works through the analysis of authors such as Mark Fisher and Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, Amelii highlights how Pincio's fiction displays traits of the Freudian *unheimlich*, making it a prominent example of the so-called New Italian Weird.

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