

Be cool: come nasce un'icona culturale

a cura di Andrea Bernardelli ed Eduardo Grillo

Repetition, Recognition, Remediation Or Benito Mussolini *after* Benito Mussolini

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Abstract

The main goal of this contribution is to investigate the way in which a figure of memory, the image of a person linked to an event of the past, symbolically travels in a specific culture. Investigating the role of recognition and repetition, I will reframe the modality of remembering the traumatic past through remediation. In particular, the analysis of an emblematic example from the contemporary Italian semiosphere, Benito Mussolini, allows me to focus on the creation of a common heritage of knowledge that is synthesized in a single person, culturally defined as a synecdoche of specific beliefs and values.

Keywords

Cultural memory; Symbol; Repetition; Benito Mussolini; Travelling memories

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1. Introduction

These pages focus on one particular mechanism of the transmission of cultural memory: the technical reproducibility of stereotypical images of people, linked – in a positive or negative way – to traumatic moments of the history of the twentieth century.

Che Guevara, Anne Frank, Nelson Mandela and Antonio Gramsci are just some examples that come to mind when considering historical figures linked to global memory. Somehow, they have transcended their biographies to become examples of the more complex values that the culture has attributed to them. Typically shared in the most diverse contexts, the passport photos of these real-life men and women have influenced so many political movements, processes of elaboration and traumatic situations, that they have become an integral part of the pantheon of values of many social groups.

On this occasion my aim is not to justify or criticise this kind of intervention that transforms human beings into pure symbolic synecdoches.

This is not the occasion to understand if these kinds of processes are to be considered morally correct or not, if they tend to de-responsibilise what happened and transform it into a popular phenomenon. Rather, in these pages I will be interested in the impulse that every single reproduction of these images produces in the semiosphere.¹

In particular I start from the idea that a single text could be considered as generator of meanings, which relies on dialogue with other texts to be understood. The main feature of these images is that they have a strong diachronic and dialogical power because their textualisation not only challenges the representation of the past but moreover it produces forms of self-representation into which a given culture “puts itself into texts”. In other words, through the use of images with a strong power, i.e. with a degree of recognition and synthesis, cultures show their ways of elaborating and narrating a traumatic past. To textualise a person or an event, as a figurative synthesis of what has happened, means to produce a Lotmanian translation as well as to generate new and semiotically dense narrativity. From that moment on, with the consolidation of an image linked to an event, the references will become more and more direct, with the natural consequence of seeing it remediated in different contexts. What interests us in these pages is to see what are the modalities that are activated by the diffusion and sharing of certain images, and by their translation into material supports such as souvenirs, consumer objects and means for protests.

1 The concept of the semiosphere was coined by Russian semiologist Juri M. Lotman. It refers to a semiotic space divided by boundaries (which are fluid and porous) that separate it from an extra-semiotic surrounding. The term Semiosphere was conceived in relation to Vladimir Ivanovič Vernadskij's concept of the biosphere. Just as the biosphere is necessary for human life to function, Lotman's semiosphere is the only space in which semiosis is possible. According to the Russian scholar, the semiosphere is a continuum that is organized in relation to the modalities of centre/periphery. Although it is defined as a unique environment, there can be more than one semiosphere. Therefore, it is possible to speak of a semiosphere referring to the whole space of signification or when, with a more local gaze, I refer to a smaller reality.

This has led to the transformation of these figures into real phenomena, socially recognized and often uncritically used, with the ever-increasing risk of simplifying the events of the past. This translation – sometimes euphoric, others dysphoric – leads to a dangerous, syntactic banalization that transforms memory into stereotype. In this respect, the sense of what happened is the result of different stories that are written around an image that a culture has decided to use as a synthetic element of traumatic representation.

Furthermore, this allows these icons to create a common heritage of knowledge through images that develop collective and social identities, as well as precise forms of self-representation that create value priorities and forms of power.

This use of the term icon does not follow the classification proposed by the American semiotician and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. In particular, Peirce has distinguished three types of sign: the icon, the index, and the symbol. In the words of the philosopher:

There are three kinds of signs which are all indispensable in all reasoning; the first is the diagrammatic sign or icon, which exhibits a similarity or analogy to the subject of discourse; the second is the index, which like a pronoun demonstrative or relative, forces the attention to the particular object intended without describing it; the third [or symbol] is the general name or description which signifies its object by means of an association of ideas or habitual connection between the name and the character signified. (Peirce CP 1.369, c.1885)

The icon is a sign that establishes a relationship with what is signified through a reason or through imitation. For Peirce

There may be a mere relation of reason between the sign and the thing signified; in that case the sign is an icon. Or there may be a direct physical connection; in that case, the sign is an index. Or there may be a relation which consists in the fact that the mind associates the sign with its object; in that case the sign is a name. (Peirce CP 1.372, c.1885)

The index, on the other hand, «shows something about things, on account of their being physically connected with them» (Peirce 1998 [1894]: 5).

Through the index and the thing there is a clear relation of continuity. The third kind of sign is the symbol, that could be culturally associated with the object it represents.

While recognizing the value of this type of classification, on this occasion I try to provide another point of view on the study of cultural icons, considering them semiotic objects with a symbolic connection that is culturally entrusted with an event of the past. Therefore, the term cultural icon refers to the mechanisms through which an image, recognized as publicly popular, exceeds the bounds of its original production, traveling in the semiosphere and symbolically feeding the creation of myths.

To demonstrate this, I will adopt a semiotic approach in the field of cultural memory. In particular, the theoretical references from which I will start to

understand how cultural dynamism affects the processes of interpretation of an event of the past will be taken from the work conducted by Jurij Lotman.

I refer to a chapter of the book *Universe of the Mind* (1990), “The Symbol in the Cultural System”, in which the semiotician focuses his attention on the ability of the symbol to travel within a given culture. I will consider what Aby Warburg would have called “mnemonic energy” of certain types of people-cum-symbols, which shift from a biographical identity, the idem, that is the immutability of identity, to the ipse, to quote Ricoeur’s concepts (1991). All of this occurs thanks to the power of mediation. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Shandler have written mediation

does not simply reproduce or transfer its subject; instead, it produces something related to the source but also different – a new work (or practice or experience). Mediations also create new relationships: between the creator of this new work and its subject and audience, as well as between the new work and other works. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Shandler 2012: 7)

2. Starting with the Notion of Symbol by Lotman

According to Russian semiotician Jurij Mihajlovič Lotman, there are three ways in which a culture can change: to increase its knowledge through contamination with other cultures; to redistribute what it already knows, proposing adjustments, strengthening and weakening according to the case; and – more drastically – to forget.

On this occasion I will deal with the second mode, the one that changes the «weight of things» (Lorusso 2010) and that allows the texts that cross the spaces within the confines of a given semiosphere to follow movements that – depending on the historical moment – can occupy peripheral or central places, always changing. The process that is activated is that of resemantisation, the change of meaning, with a consequent and proportional shift in the (real or potential) semiotic relations that the text itself maintains with the context in which it is inserted.

Considering the processes of memorial transformation, this means taking into account how some elements belonging to the past are redefined, inevitably tracing new paths towards the future.

In relation to that process, Lotman wrote:

a symbol never belongs only to one synchronic section of a culture, it always cuts across that section vertically, coming from the past and passing on into the future. A symbol’s memory is always more ancient than the memory of its non-symbolic text-context. (Lotman 1990: 103)

Lotman deals with this type of modification starting from the definition of symbols, conceiving of them as «important mechanisms of cultural memory, they can transfer texts, plot outlines and other semiotic formations from one level of a culture’s memory to another» (Lotman 1990: 104).

From this definition, it is easy to understand how Lotman interprets the symbol as a sign phenomenon that, thanks to its recognizable characteristics, is always part of the encyclopedic baggage of a culture. It is certainly a «stable element» (Lotman 1990: 104) as it preserves a stability of meaning that resists any cultural shock, but it is certainly not immobile, because the symbol, just like all the other signs in the semiosphere, responds to the movements produced by culture. The difference is that even being in the peripheral areas of a culture, it is still recognizable, even if not culturally legitimized as when it assumes a central position. The symbol then migrates, travels, «like a reminder» (Lorusso 2010) that activates and deactivates meanings and brings up some values of the past while narcotizing others, persevering and preserving certain specific qualities that define it as such. Another central characteristic of the symbol is that it must be repeated, i.e. it must be inserted into a serial production mechanism that makes it evergreen. In *Universe of the Mind* (1990), again, Lotman investigated that aspect of repetition in relation to the innovation and changeability that this mechanism points out:

[...] symbols reveal their duality: on the one hand, by recurring throughout a culture's history a symbol shows its invariancy and its repeatability. A symbol stands out as something different from the textual space that surrounds it, like an emissary from other cultural epochs (or from other cultures), a reminder of the ancient (or eternal) foundations of that culture. On the other hand, a symbol actively correlates with its cultural context, transforms it and is transformed by it. Its invariancy is realized in variants. And the changes which the "eternal" meaning of the symbol undergoes in the given culture highlight the changeability of the context. (Lotman 1990: 104, my emphasis)

This definition raises a number of issues relating to the way in which the cultural memory of oblivion is transmitted through texts. Symbols play a fundamental role because they become the fertile ground on which to invest certain «semantic valency» (Lotman 1990: 104), and they also activate a stereotyped and simplified mode of culture. They also generate forms of forgetfulness, leaving out certain things in that «reminiscence, reference, quotation» (*ibidem*).

Moreover, following Lotman (1980), these elements are defined as met-alanguages that «should provide a simplifying and unifying level, capable of re-establishing a link at the risk of tearing» (Sedda 2008: 13, my translation), giving a precise definition of the social order and of the modes of self-representation that a given culture elects as its own. In fact, when conceived as a cultural sign that can provide a certain type of unity within a culture, the symbol obviously ends up imposing a form of thought that, as Sedda has written in his work on the medieval symbol-seal, ends up building a collective form instead of simply uniting a culture.

These new and innovative texts impose themselves within a process of simplified re-articulation, enclosed in a single individuality of a more complex system of values, clothes and beliefs. This process of synthesizing into a singularity makes it possible to give value to a complexity that otherwise could not be expressed.

Returning to the example of Anne Frank, evidently a series of values are condensed within her person, including martyrdom, the tragedy of the Holocaust, the trauma of Nazism; complex values that are nonetheless organized within a single person, but involve an emptying of the signifier because the reproduced image becomes only the totality it should represent. In this process of stratification and symbolic imposition, the biography of these people elected as general representatives of certain values is summoned only on the basis of the questions they bring to bear in culture.

In the field of Cultural Studies and Memory Studies there are many concepts that echo with what Lotman wrote. In particular, Jan Assmann, working on the theory of collective memory proposed by Maurice Halbwachs, speaks of «figures of memory». The figures of memory refer to a concrete event or character, which although textualized, must not lose its original reference to time and place, in other words an anchorage to a specific past, as well as a symbolic relevance for a group. The memory figures are different from the reality of experience because they have the characteristic of being repeated, ritualized and recombined in different contexts from the original ones, altering their meaning. They are constantly reconstructed figures, which support the impossibility that the past could consider itself unaltered. With respect to this, Assmann writes:

Any group that wants to consolidate itself will make an effort to find and establish a base for itself, not only to provide a setting for its interactions but also to symbolize its identity and to provide points of reference for its memories. (Assman 2011: 25)

With the necessary methodological adjustments, these characteristics refer to what the Yale school of sociology has defined “iconic power” (cf. Alexander, Bartmanski, Giesen 2012), that is, an energy that allows a community to recognize – even with discordant value judgments – a precise material form as iconic. Like forms of memory and Lotman’s symbols, the icons studied by Alexander and his group of researchers focus on the catalyzing capacity of these types of signs, which become significantly representative and also move into the mainstream because they are spread in a repetitive way, becoming a semantic closure (cf. Solaroli 2015) of much more complex events.

3. Recognition and Repetition

The movement that transports a figure of memory from the periphery to the centre of a semiosphere, and vice versa, takes shape through repetition. When an image that has become known within a culture is inserted into different contexts, this produces a serialization that increases the meanings linked to the image itself and to the event/person it represents, changing the social perception of the event to which it originally referred.

In the same way, however, this repetition allows the memory figure to become a character, as Ricoeur (1992) defines it: the set of distinctive elements of an individual that allow its collective recognition.

Speaking of remix culture, it is useful to reflect on the very studied case of the image of Anne Frank (cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Shandler 2012).

Having become recognized and recognizable on a global level, Frank's image has been used as a metonymy and synecdoche of a precise traumatic historical moment and become an iconic and collective expression of the victim's subjecthood. It therefore becomes a paradigm through its reproducibility and its transposition into contexts and an imaginary are not closely related to the Second World War or the extermination of Jews in the Nazi concentration camps. For the collective imagination, thanks to (or because of) the different remedial practices, the Jewish girl who lived hidden in Amsterdam has a semiotic and representative power that goes beyond her personal history, becoming a sort of mark of memory, to be cited and recalled whenever imaginaries linked for example to innocence or lightheartedness are evoked in difficult contexts.

The media repetition of a memory figure ends up by constructing plural meanings around it that are mainly linked to their biography but which, in their transposition into other expressive substances, are reworked and made more complex. This particular type of memory figures strongly recalls those that Lotman in 1985 described as «characters» who embody specific semiotic personalities, «in other words, actors who cross discursive configurations and textual worlds as if they were compressible and expandable matrices at different times and through different substances of expression or different media platforms» (cf. Marrone 2003, my translation).

Moreover, this type of practice allows us to widen the encyclopedia through invention practices that give the remediated sign the possibility to be used in different contexts and therefore to come into contact with spaces that would not classically belong to its form of life. Therefore, it is fundamental that repetition should be thought of as one of Walter Benjamin's concepts, as a differential relationship between «Fore-history» and «Post-history», that is, in the space between what happened and what is represented and disclosed where the process of remediation takes place.

This dialectical movement always creates a liminal situation between before and after in the interpretation of an historical movement:

[E]very dialectically presented historical circumstance polarizes itself and becomes a force field in which the confrontation between its fore-history and after-history is played out. It becomes such a field insofar as the present instant interpenetrates it. (Benjamin 1999: AP, N 7a, 1)

The repeated sign is used as a matrix and unit of measure to set up worlds that are different but somehow connected and inspired by what the sign comes from. In this process, the loop sign balances with the reality to which it refers, generating particular, recurrent semantic traits of isotopy, which are not only elements of "recognizability" but real rewritings, «guides – that are intelligible and sensitive at the same time – to how we 'grasp' the social, to our life within it. Real, meaningful paths through it» (Sedda 2008: 13, my translation).

This type of process is also fed by reconstructions of the sense of departure, because when a sign changes context it must inevitably refer to its original essence, compromising it, narcotizing some of its characteristics but inevitably generating others. It is a dynamic process, in which dominant characteristics clash and remain unchanged as they help to make the subject recognisable, and contribute to its semiotic stabilisation within a culture, activating new meanings and make the image attractive and usable.

The repeated sign imposes itself as a precise grammar that can be used again and again. This happens in a time which becomes a loop, increasingly emptying meaning, transforming it – when it comes to photographs of events or victims of traumatic events, for example – into tropes of memory.

Moreover, the semiotic relationship between what is recognizable and repeated, and the context of arrival is constantly modified. The starting meaning of the images becomes a visual stereotype, it solidifies and is reinforced by the recomposition it undergoes, rather than being altered. The recognizable figures of memory – which are evidently also those that work best, in the sense that they install a domino effect of meanings and more intense and usable text-replicas – stand out against a «precise encyclopedic background that is always potentially reactivable» (Dusi and Spaziante 2006: 12, my translation).

This recognition depends on a precise encyclopedic knowledge, on cultural skills that are already deposited. In other words, in order to recognise the meanings that the Lazio FC fans attribute to Anne Frank when they use her as a mockery of their Roma FC opponents, it is necessary to know at least the general coordinates relating to the figure of the child. This means ideologically cutting out a story, magnifying some of the virtues of the sign (often only the best known, those that have passed the filters adopted by a semiosphere), narcotizing others (cf. Eco 1979) that are equally important but do not support the work of bricolage (cf. Floch 2006). In this case, Lazio supporters selected and mobilized those features of the young, Jewish girl who lived in Amsterdam in their patchwork, offensive mockery.

The example of Anne Frank also returns in Jeffrey Alexander's reflection on the construction of cultural trauma, as he explains the basis «for psychological identification and symbolic extension on a mass scale, laying the foundations for the influx of books, television shows and films» (Alexander 2012). The symbolism of a character in memory is such that a series of narratives and representations are built around it, which make it possible to deliver her/his biography to an increasingly wide audience. This repetition generates a connection between different types of enunciations and re-enunciations that each time produces a *débrayage*² of the subject of memory, producing an indefi-

2 As Algirdas J. Greimas and Joseph Courtés wrote in *Semiotics and Language. An Analytical Dictionary* (1979, en. tr. 1982), *débrayage* literally means “shifting out” or “disengagement”. Specifically, they wrote: «We can try to define disengagement as the operation by which the domain of the enunciation disjuncts and projects forth from itself, at the moment of the language act and in view of manifestation, certain terms bound to its base structure, so as thereby to constitute the foundational elements of the discourse-utterance. For example, if we take the domain of the enunciation as a

nite number of interpretations that can coexist while being contradictory. The identity of these memory figures is therefore «eminently textual» (Spaziante 2016) in the sense that their essence is marked by the texts they produce within the semiosphere.

4. Benito Mussolini after Benito Mussolini: An Example

Although more than seventy years have passed since the fall of the fascist regime and the Second World War, the body of the former dictator of Italy, Benito Mussolini, continues to be used as a political and cultural battlefield.

For example, on the 31st of December 2017, the Roman newspaper “Il Tempo” put on the front page the face of Benito Mussolini, of course over a black background, under the words “L’uomo dell’anno” [Man of the Year]. This was relevant for that year as much as it was an omen for the following one: throughout 2018 the image of Mussolini was heavily disseminated, re-mediated and resemantised in the Italian semiosphere. The image was compared to the Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, mentioned in the media in the demonstrations against migrants, it came back to life in the popular film *Sono tornato* by Luca Miniero (2017), it was also the protagonist and the voice of the book *M. Il figlio del Secolo* by the Italian writer Antonio Scurati (the book, published in 2018, the following year won the “Premio Strega” a prestigious award for Italian literature).

How is Mussolini still in fashion? What means have been used to spread the resurrection of this figure of memory of Italian fascism? What does Mussolini mean today? What messages does his body communicate? What values does his face convey? Why does his image continue to be reproduced – in a critical and religious sense – despite the fact that seventy years have passed? How is it taken into account by the political leaders of the right who, while not explicitly citing him, use his words and ways of “being with the people”?

In other words, this is not another article about Mussolini, but rather about the contemporary Italian reception of the ex-Duce’s image and imaginary. It is a paper about the narratives surrounding the image of Mussolini, about Mussolini after Mussolini. This temporal connotation is important because I do not focus on the construction of the fascist personality myth during the Ventennio, nor the historical events that defined his life (cf. Gundle, Duggan and Pieri 2013).

In the last years, Benito Mussolini came back to the centre of the Italian semiosphere. I could even refer to the “resurrection” of a cultural icon, because, following the emergence of nationalistic and extreme right-wing parties across the globe, public debate has looked at Mussolini, investigating his figure in a comparative way with contemporary politicians. As such, Mussolini came back as a character (cf. Ricoeur 1983) but not only to feed a neo-fascist imaginary, as it would be easy to believe.

syncretism of ‘I–here–now’, disengagement, as one of the constitutive aspects of the primordial language act, will consist in inaugurating the utterance by articulating at the same time and as an implicit consequence the domain of the enunciation itself» (débrayage – disengagement, *ad vocem*).

Mussolini's body has also been remediated to convey anti-fascist messages, proposing a different narrative grammar, in which the body-message becomes a dead body, hanging upside down. As I will show, in these practices, the dictator's body serves to convey messages of mockery, with a clear and explicit reference to the events of Piazzale Loreto.

In this case, the interesting aspect is that anti-fascist culture has adopted Mussolini as a figure of recognizable memory, but it has inserted a new piece alongside the previous iconic codes. A new sign function has been created, which is evidently stored by an anti-fascist local encyclopedia.

In the reversed Mussolini, the enunciator fishes in the encyclopedia that s/he shares with her/his reader in order to construct an effect of coherence, in which the inverted body of Benito Mussolini refers to the controversial episode of Piazzale Loreto, in which the already dead body of Benito Mussolini, Claretta Petracchi and three other fascists were vilified. This positioning of the dictator's body creates a variable that is recognizable through a deposit of consolidated knowledge that is re-summoned into the text.

The image of Mussolini upside down was used, for example, on 25 April 2019, the day that commemorates the Liberation of Italy from Nazi-fascism thanks to the Partisans of the War of Resistance (1943-1945). The citizens of Turin found the image posted on the walls of the city, in an advertising campaign that depicted Mussolini upside down, in a pink uniform and over a pink background, with the slogan «Non fare il salame, rifiuta il fascismo» [Don't be a salami, refuse fascism] (Fig. 1). In Italian, this plays on the double semantic channel of the word "salami": it is a meat that is "hung up" while being cured, but also "to be a salami" is a derogatory way of describing someone not very smart, who, in this case, might support a fascist ideology.

On the same day, anti-fascist activists in a Roman suburb posted images depicting the "hanged man" tarot card, i.e. a man hanging upside down from his foot, only this time with the unmistakable square jaw of the ex-Duce (Fig. 2). An even more famous example is the cartoon of Mussolini and Claretta Petracchi hung upside down that was drawn and posted on Twitter by the American actor Jim Carrey, alongside the sentence «If you are wondering what fascism leads to, just ask Benito Mussolini and his mistress Claretta» (Fig. 3).

As it is easy to imagine, the representation of Mussolini upside down stands in contrast both to the mythologisation of the Duce's body, and to all the fascist values that this particular body carries behind it. Though the events of Piazzale Loreto were highly criticized – so much so that in 1945 Ferruccio Parri called it a «macelleria messicana» [Mexican butcher shop] – its staging and its representation here in the form of an image convey the symbolic defeat of both the leader's body and the fascist party.

New forms of subjectivity emerge from this kind of enunciation, in which anti-fascist subjectivities regain possession of the discourse expressed through the figure of Mussolini's body. I do not necessarily refer to real subjectivities, but to those which are instead simulated in the text through discursive strategies.



Figure 1. “Non fare il salame. Rifiuta il fascismo” campaign by Andrea Villa. Source: “Il Corriere della Sera” (Corriere Torino, 25 April 2019, online).



Figure 2. Mussolini “L’appeso”. Source: “La Repubblica” (29 April 2017, online).

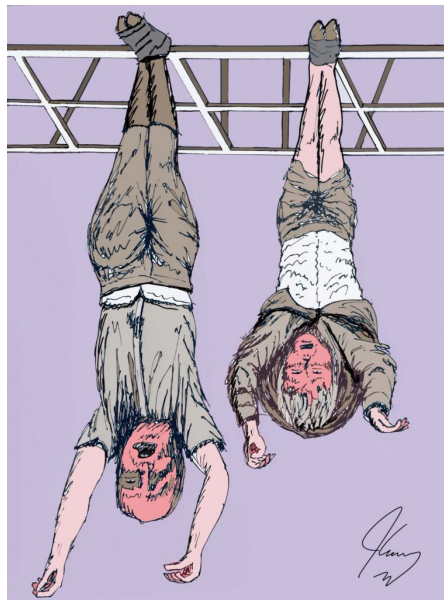


Figure 3. Image by Jim Carrey. Source: Jim Carrey’s Twitter Account @JimCarrey.

The mechanism that is created is interesting: the body of Mussolini, while maintaining its typical figurative characteristics and especially its recognizable square face, changes its semantic space, it being assigned an upside-down position that stands for values and messages related to the fight against fascism or otherwise the anti-fascist positioning of those who produce this type of speech.



Figure 4. Sign in a protest against Salvini. Source: “Milano.zone” (29 Aug. 2018, online).



Figure 5. Anti-Salvini graffiti. Source: “Corriere della Sera” (10 Sept. 2018, online).

The topological position of Mussolini becomes, therefore, itself the iconic mark of the anti-fascist discourse, which transforms the upside-down into a powerful anti-fascist code to be used against political adversaries. In fact, in various left-wing student manifestations, protesters and street artists refer to Piazzale Loreto and the upside-down position as a trope when denouncing other leaders of the extreme right, such as Matteo Salvini (Fig. 4, Fig. 5).

In the neo-fascist field, on the contrary, the replicability of the figure of Benito Mussolini is characterized as a contemporary and unusual form of mythopoiesis, that is not devoted to the creation of a new myth, but to the rejuvenation, to the (nostalgic) restoration of youthful vigour of the iconic body of the dictator. Mussolini for the neo-fascists is exactly the man seen in photos of the regime. The virile masculinity displayed in an almost sclerotic way by the former Duce of Italy is not altered at all. These are images we are accustomed to seeing of Benito Mussolini: proud, extending his right arm in a Roman salute; not altered, but repositioned. The reproductions of Benito Mussolini’s body portray him alive and grandiose. Indeed, neo-fascist movements almost always use repertory images, rather than original designs, as though to justify reproducibility without inventiveness. In other words, although the image of the former Duce of Italy is serialized, what is reproduced is effectively a photographic image, in black and white, that endows it with a testimonial – and therefore authentic – quality.

These contexts reactivate a kind of figurativeness that is typical of the myth of the masses, with a statuesque, solid body that is still living. This continuous *débrayage* of Mussolini not only enabled the re-semanticisation of the body in souvenir shops, in newspapers, in Italian cinema, but it also fed a new narrative identity for the ex-Duce, turning “zio Ben” (as some of his supporters call Mussolini) into a mediatic/fashion/ideological icon, in a different semiosphere to that of the 1920s. Today the remediation of the body of Mussolini does not seek to glorify the Fascist Party, but to perpetrate a specific nostalgic imaginary, using a nationalistic and consumerist narrative. Examples here are the calendars bearing photos of Benito Mussolini, so popular in recent years that their sales have exceeded those of equivalents featuring famous saints, like St. Padre Pio (Fig. 6), or the kitchen apron with the image of the Duce available on Amazon.it for 12,50€ (Fig. 7).



Figure 6. 2019 Calendar of Benito Mussolini. Source: <Ebay.it>.



Figure 7. Apron featuring Mussolini. Source: “LaPresse” via “Corriere della Sera” (15 September 2017, online).

5. Travelling Memories

To fully understand this «reconstruction of circumstance» (Recchia Luciani and Vercelli 2016) of the image of Mussolini, I can return for a moment to the theories proposed by one of the thinkers that Memory Studies has elected as the founder of the discipline. I refer to Aby Warburg ([1929] 2002) who, working on the transcultural processes of memory and artistic objects as early as the twenties, has investigated at length the concepts of movement, migration and travel, so as to discuss the significant changes that memory objects underwent when they were catapulted into other cultural and political contexts.

It was Astrid Erll, a leading scholar in the field of Memory Studies, who, departing from Warburg’s idea, metaphorically spoke of «travelling memory» in reference to the constant and continuous way that historical events suffer in the digital age in which we live. The German scholar writes:

The current age of accelerated globalization has brought forth global media cultures, in which historical novels are quickly translated, movies dealing with the past are screened simultaneously in different corners of the globe, and worldwide TV-audiences can have mass-mediated experience in real time (as, for example, in the case of “9/11” or the inauguration of the American president Obama). But as Warburg’s work reminds us, it is actually since ancient times that memory lives in and through its movements, and that mnemonic forms and contents are filled with new life and new meaning in changing social, temporal and local contexts. (Erll 2011: 11)

The engine that gives life to these journeys of memory – in our case, itinerant transmissions of nostalgia with the almost utopian objective of claiming identity roots, political roots, protecting borders through religious or consumer practices – is certainly reproducibility. In the serial reproduction of Benito Mussolini’s face, rhythm is always dictated by a serial repetition of its own structures.

MacCannell identifies repetition as the main factor in the construction of identity through the tourist object, reversing the direction proposed by Walter Benjamin on the aura of the original work of art. According to the American anthropologist, and also from my point of view, it is precisely the seriality of these objects, their being expressly reproduced copies, that constitutes the value for those who buy them. The mechanism of identification is allowed by the fact that the tourist owns the same object as another. The loss of uniqueness creates the aura of tourist appeal. MacCannell writes: «Reproductions are the aura, and the ritual, far from being a point of origin, derives from the relationship between the original object and its socially constructed importance» (MacCannell 1976: 47–48).

Mussolini's image and fascist imagery, for example in the souvenir shops of Predappio, are commodified, following a logic of consumerism which is characteristic of modern global capitalism. Mussolini is converted into a pop icon (Spaziante 2016), continuously débrayed in the texts, allowing his statuesque image to live in other universes, namely, those of consumption. It should be noted that the masculinity of the former duke of Italy is not altered or de-virilized at all.

This is the umpteenth declension of the corporal obsession for the «body most loved by Italians» (Luzzato 1998). Benito Mussolini is presented as a rock star, adding an important piece to the classification proposed by Ernst Kantorowicz (1957) on the bodies of kings which, from two, become three. In the case of Benito Mussolini in Predappio, a reproduced body is added to the natural, mortal body, victim of the passing of time, and to the political body, which survives the former, becoming an ideology and representation of perpetual power. The former dictator undergoes yet another corporal resurrection, transformed into a mediated body, an artefact, a marketable spectrum, the trademark of an ideology.

Mussolini, the head of Italian fascism, who has imposed his political career on a precise corporal narrative through cinema and photography (Gundle, Duggan and Pieri 2013) in his life beyond life, in his being Mussolini after Mussolini, continues to be body-everything, body devoted to multimedia and technical reproducibility. A media body during the Twenty Years of fascism, a “total icon” as the Italian historian Nicola Porro has defined it, Mussolini evolves in the shops of Predappio to become a replica body, or rather, a replica, remediated and proposed on objects in a serial and compulsive way (Fig. 8). Mussolini's body becomes a sign of itself. The corporal charisma around which he built his political career is replaced by a fetishization that makes everything artificial and consumable. According to Mario Isnenghi,

[...] the body of the Duce – alive, portrayed, spoken and written – loomed visible, intrusive and ubiquitous. Nothing discreet, mysterious and placed in this modern kingdom of the masses: nothing that remains in the shadows, if anything, the risk of over-exposure [...] The Duce knows, sees everything. He provides for everything personally. And it is in every place. (Isnenghi 1996: 411, my translation)



Figure 8. Souvenir of Mussolini for sale in Predappio. Source: “La Stampa” (11 July 2017, online).

I would add: it is in every object, becoming body-support.

In this way, the «system of signs of the Duce’s body», as Italo Calvino defined it in 1995, becomes even more complex, it becomes body-merchandise. When I talk about goods, I mean the semiotic-Marxist tradition that sees Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1968) as one of its most interesting exponents. For the semiotician, «goods are goods, rather than mere products, because they are messages». Mussolini’s body becomes economically significant because it is loaded with exchange values. The value of the lighter with Mussolini’s face in use is overshadowed, it becomes the corollary of a more complex message made up of fetishism and nostalgia for the body, which here is still loaded with yet another meaning. The paradigm of possession comes into play, that of bringing home an image of the body that in the tomb is only suggested. The unattainable desire to re-have a body, not just any body but specifically that of Mussolini, halfway between an erotic and Christological conception, is anaesthetised by buying and selling.

However, the risks of this translation, of transforming politics into consumption are considerable and should not be overlooked. «The burden of the past» (Lorusso 2010) can be assimilated in a reductive way, shaping a sort of *reductio ad spectaculum*, in which the economic drift has contributed to a standardised image of Benito Mussolini. This empties it of meaning, leaving the political meanings that have characterized his living life in the shadows, increasingly, in favour of a pure praise of expression whereby Mussolini reflects himself as a body that presents itself and shows itself, not as a political body. Mussolini is then translated and sold to the consumer who does not limit himself to a simple thematic role but responds to a mechanism of generation and coagulation of new meanings put in place by the enunciation in which he is the protagonist. This is not without perverse consequences that turn it into a pop phenomenon like Che Guevara, Frida Kahlo or Andy Warhol. This leads to what Agamben (1998), working on the elaboration of the Holocaust, has

defined as a shift towards simplification and the stereotype that is created in the space between things as they were there and things as they are represented by the current imagination, fed by books, films and approximate myths (cf. Sanchez 2012).

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