COMMUNICATION AND “THEATRALIZATION” OF THE ITALIAN CRISIS IN THE DIALECTIC BETWEEN DARIO FO, BEPPE GRILLO AND GIANROBERTO CASALEGGIO

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ABSTRACT

In the last 20 years, during berlusconismo period, a new form of politics and new reality of the “MoVimento 5 Stelle”, created by Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio (1954-2016), have risen in Italy, reaching an essential role after the 2013 election. Aim of this paper is to show how, with Grillo’s activities, the teatro della politica has become a teatro della crisi in the use of a theatrical language and contemporary dramatic expression. From a theatrical perspective, Nobel laureate Dario Fo (1926-2016) has become a noble father of the movement. Following Fo’s sample, Grillo, entertainer and activist, has theatricalized the crisis with one-man shows and theatre happenings, where the performance was essential. The dialectic between Fo and the two founders of the movement is developed in the book Il Grillo canta sempre al tramonto, constructed as a theatrical play where the chapters are similar to acts, the sub-chapters to scenes.

Keywords: Italy, political communication, elections, Dario Fo, Beppe Grillo, Gianroberto Casaleggio, MoVimento 5 Stelle, political crisis, theatre.

INTRODUCTION

In the last 20 years of Italian political history, political language has changed in a fast and not a gradual way, due to two main reasons: first of all, the use of different kinds of media, from the massive use of television since 1994 onwards with the “discesa in campo” of Silvio Berlusconi, to the use of the Internet and of blogs in order to create an alleged e-democracy; secondly, a change in the figure of the politician, no longer a real professional of politics, or, more precisely, no more a politician whose only profession is politics, but people who come from a different environment and for a wide range of reasons, mainly of expediency, they enter the political arena.

Without dwelling on the “Berlusconian” use of television, even if not limited to Berlusconi’s activity, my purpose is to focus specifically on the case of Beppe Grillo, underlining a fundamental paradox in his way of doing politics: on the one hand, the

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use of new media, apparently used in innovative ways, such as blogs in order to outline the guidelines of “MoVimento 5 Stelle” and to carry out an e-campaign for the movement – for specific bibliography on “MoVimento 5 Stelle” see the reference list; on the other hand, at the same time, a return, in the language used by Grillo, to a dialectic that is purely theatrical. Examples of this are Grillo’s speeches during political rallies, where he employs techniques of theatre monologues, in the tradition of one-man shows, in a style more American than Italian. With some differences in location and audience, this way of “acting” is similar to that of Lenny Bruce, who, among other things, stated: “The truth is what is, not what it should be. What should be is a dirty lie”. And then: “Satire is tragedy plus time. If you wait long enough, the audience and the reviewers will help you to make satire of it. And it is rather ridiculous, if you think about it” (see Cohen 1967, Bruce 1984, Thomas 1989, and Collins-Skover 2002).

These sentences by Lenny Bruce could be very well attributed also to Grillo. In his relationship to theatre, politics and political communication, it is necessary first to investigate Grillo’s possible precursors.

**FO-GRILLO: a possible parallelism?**

In the article Per una drammaturgia transmediale della crisi italiana ovvero perché i clown vincono le elezioni (2013) which appeared in the monographic section of Culture Teatrali 2013, under the overall title “Realtà della scena: Giornalismo/Teatro/Informazione”, Oliviero Ponte di Pino analysed, in a pseudo-profound way, the relationship between comedians, theatre and politics in Italy, from Gabibbo in the TV program Striscia la notizia to Maurizio Crozza, focusing, obviously, on the figure of Beppe Grillo. In particular, in one paragraph, he specifically identifies a prototype of the Genoese comedian in Dario Fo, drawing a series of parallels between them:

“I parallelismi tra le carriere di Grillo e Fo sono diversi, a cominciare dall’atto che inaugura le loro “seconde vite”, quando entrambi godevano di una fama costruita prima nei teatri e poi amplificata dalla televisione dove erano protagonisti di trasmissioni di successo. [The parallels between the careers of Grillo and Fo are several, starting with the event that launched their “second lives” when they both enjoyed a fame constructed first in theatres and then enhanced by television, where they were the protagonists of successful shows]”. (Ponte di Pino 2013: 56)

Ponte di Pino refers to Canzonissima, presented by the duo Dario Fo-Franca Rame in 1962, and to Fantasico 7, in 1986, which resulted in Grillo's long exile from television, but was also the prime reason for his emergence into the arena of political activism. In the case of Fo-Rame: “All'improvviso i conduttori abbandonarono la trasmissione per ‘divergenze artistiche e ideologiche’ con i dirigenti della Rai. La causa del clamoroso dissidio fu uno sketch dove si parlava di infortuni mortali sul lavoro”. [“Suddenly the presenters abandoned the show because of ‘ideological and artistic disagreements’ with RAI managers. The cause of the dramatic disagreement was a sketch where they spoke about work-related fatalities”]. (56)

Then referring to Beppe Grillo, he added: “In una barzelletta, ironizzava sul viaggio in Cina della delegazione di socialisti italiani guidata da Bettino Craxi e Claudio Martelli: con vari pretesti venne di fatto allontanato dai teleschermi per anni”. [“In a joke, he satirized on the Chinese journey of the delegation of the Italian Socialist Party led by
Bettino Craxi and Claudio Martelli: with various pretexts, he was effectively removed from TV screens for years"]. (56)

This exclusion from TV for both artists, in reality more for Grillo than for Fo in the view of Ponte di Pino, has as a consequence led to their increased presence in theatres, especially in the alternative circuits: Fo used to play in factories, case del popolo (clubs linked to the PCI), cultural associations and occupied premises; Grillo staged his shows in stadiums, piazzas and auditoriums. Ponte di Pino added: “Per entrambi, l'esilio catodico si è rivelato una traversata del deserto prima della terra promessa, una lunga marcia verso la trasfigurazione finale: per Dario Fo è stato il Premio Nobel nel 1997, per Beppe Grillo è stato il trionfo elettorale del 2013”. ["For both, the cathodic exile has been a journey through the desert before reaching the promised land, a long march to the final transfiguration: for Dario Fo it was the Nobel Prize in 1997, for Beppe Grillo it was the electoral triumph of 2013"]). (56)

In fact, although Fo has to be considered as a constant influence in Grillo’s political career, as is evident in the participation of the Nobel Prize laureate in "MoVimento 5 Stelle” events and the writing of the book Il Grillo canta sempre al tramonto. Dialogo sull'Italia e il MoVimento 5 Stelle (2013), he is not present in the same way in Grillo’s career as a comedian, artist and theatre practitioner. Grillo’s prototypes have to be found in other performing traditions, for instance the already mentioned Lenny Bruce’s shows, and a typically American tradition of one-man shows, transformed by Grillo into a loud-mouthed, no-holds-barred performance-harangue in the piazzas of Italy.

It is true that there was in Fo, after a period in late ‘50s and early ‘60s that could be called “bourgeois” (although this is a term to be used cautiously), a clear ideological awareness and overt criticism of the system through explicitly political theatre, but it is also true that in Fo there is in addition a clear theatrical architecture and a plot, although these elements became progressively thinner and eschewed the rules of logic. In Fo, as pointed out on several occasions by Joseph Farrell, the shows ended with a “third act”: “Dal ‘68 e durante i primi anni ‘70, il teatro di Fo era apertamente un comizio, dove ogni recita finiva con un ‘terzo atto’, una discussione con il pubblico sul significato della commedia e delle sue implicazioni per la loro vita”. ["From ‘68 and in the early ‘70s, Fo’s theatre became openly a political rally, when each performance ended with a ‘third act’, a discussion with the audience about the meaning of the play and its implications for their lives"]). (Farrell 2015: 35. See also Farrell-Scudieri 2000, Farrell 2001, and Farrell 2014)

The discussion in Fo took place at the end of the play and the use of the play to serve as a “prologue” to the political rally establishes a gulf between Fo and Beppe Grillo, in which speech and performance seem to be the same.

In reality there is a point of contact among them as regards one aspect not sufficiently noted by critics, for example by Ponte di Pino. Farrell notices how Dario Fo can be regarded as a political revolutionary and, at the same time, a theatrical conservative. This definition is probably the one that, most of all, can link Fo and Grillo. The latter is even more explicitly revolutionary and political, but has overall remained conservative and loyal to himself in his communication and artistic practice, even if he no more appears only in piazzas or auditoriums, but prefers to use the web as a forum.

With Grillo, the result is a clear “theatralization” of politics and political communication, a process that emerged as a point of contrast to the direct political
address which Berlusconi, with his control of TV, was able to develop for his own purposes. On the figure of Silvio Berlusconi, Dario Fo wrote one of his most significant play of the last decade, L’anomalo bicefalo (2004), a text of satire and political counter-information.

**Il Grillo canta sempre al tramonto by Fo, Grillo, and Casaleggio: the theatrical dialectic of the crisis.**

From a general point of view, and not only in Fo and Grillo, the relationship between theatre and politics has always been very close, as highlighted by Ida Libera Valicenti:

"[...] l’equazione politica-teatro, ovvero la natura drammaturgica della politica, fa parte della sua stessa storia. La rappresentanza richiama, inevitabilmente, la rappresentazione e la concrete messa in scena della volontà popolare da parte dei suoi rappresentanti. Le aule parlamentari e lo stesso spazio pubblico mediatisato divengono luoghi di messa in scena della politica. Da sempre, coloro che governano ricorrono alla teatralità. La teatralità è uno degli strumenti per comunicare e, dunque, per fondare la propria legittimità e per segnalare la propria distanza dai governati, tanto nelle monarchie, quanto nelle democrazie moderne. [...]the equation of politics-theatre, or the dramatic nature of the politics, is part of the history of both. Political representation recalls, inevitably, theatrical performance and the actual staging of the popular will by its representatives. The halls of Parliament and the media-friendly public spaces become sites of political productions. It has always been the case that those who govern have recourse to theatricality. Theatricality is one of the instruments to communicate and, therefore, to establish its own legitimacy and to mark out its distance from the governed, both in monaracies and in modern democracies."

In this perspective, it is surprising how Oliviero Ponte di Pino, although focusing on the relationship between Dario Fo and Beppe Grillo, mentions only briefly Il Grillo canta sempre al tramonto, written in dialogue form by the two actors with Gianroberto Casaleggio, and even at that he considers it a mere electoral book. (Ponte di Pino 2013: 82)

The book does include some elements that bring out clearly the idea of the dramatization and “theatralization” of the Italian political crisis not only in the choice of themes for discussion and the way these themes are addressed, but also in the structure of the book, an element that should not be underestimated.

I will start with this latter aspect. Il Grillo canta sempre al tramonto is written as a dialogue involving three main “characters”. Dario Fo, who is also author of the “Prologo” (not an introduction, but a real prologue, using in this case a common theatrical term), leads the dialogue and sets the tone for the entire volume. He establishes the subject for the speeches and dialogues, and he divides the book into chapters and then sections: “Censure e pregiudizi. Dalla Grecia antica alla rete” (“Censure and prejudices. From ancient Greece to the network”); “L’invenzione delle parlamentarie” (“The invention of parliamentary primaries”); “I problemi sociali: carcere e immigrazione” (“Social problems: immigration and prison”); “E qui comincia la rivoluzione” (“And here begins the revolution”); “La democrazia diretta” (“Direct democracy”); “La cultura in piazza” (“Culture in the piazza”), “Nella rete del
MoVimento” (“In the network of the MoVimento”), “Cambio di prospettiva per fermare la crisi” (“Change of perspective to stop the crisis”), “Tappa finale” (“Final stage”). In addition, there is a conclusion, not in form of a dialogue, entitled “Qui ad Atene noi facciamo così” (“Here in Athens we act in this way”).

Beyond the issues discussed by the authors, indicated by the title of the different chapters, the construction of the dialogue has an architecture that is almost dramatic and performative, due primarily to the idea of movement: the three authors/characters are travelling through Greece, taking as a pretext the trip described by Lucian of Samosata – Lucian was also subject of Fo’s monologue Fabulazzo osceno (1982) –, with the intention of creating a metaphor for a long journey and for the madness of the Italian political condition, as stated by Dario Fo in his prologue.

The chapters are not similar to the acts of theatre play (there would be nine, too many when compared to the standard two or three act format), but rather to tableaux in the theatrical sense of the term, with as many scenes as the number of paragraphs that compose each chapter.

This theatricality of the text emerges from two other elements. The first is the presence in the dialogue of “lines” that give an idea of dramatic action as well as stage directions or other kinds of instructions. One example:

GC Prima si parlava dell’uso delle parole, di come i nuovi concetti passino attraverso un linguaggio diverso. Noi abbiamo cercato di ridefinire il linguaggio politico. Ci hanno accusato di aver utilizzato appellativi offensivi per definire i nostri politici. Noi applichiamo la corruzione sarcastica delle parole alla politica incrociando volutamente campi espressivi diversi.

DF (indicando davanti a sé, al lato di un grande bosco) Oddio, dove siamo qua? D’accordo che sono tanti anni che non vengo nel Peloponneso, ma quell’enorme teatro non me lo ricordavo.

GC Accidenti, è davvero grande, con quella cascata di scalinate così ripide: dev’essere Epidauro.

DF No, Epidauro è almeno a 100 chilometri da qui. Forse è Astanasos, un teatro del IV secolo restaurato dai Romani.

BG Ci stanno lavorando ancora, guarda quei camion che entrano nell’emiciclo.

DF Ma cosa trasportano?

BG Immondizia, rifiuti…

GC Eh già, stanno trasformando un teatro in una discarica.

[GC Before we were talking of the use of words, how new concepts are conveyed by a different language. We have tried to redefine the political language. We were accused of using offensive nicknames to define our politicians. We apply the sarcastic corruption of words to politics, deliberately mixing different kinds of expression.

DF (pointing straight ahead, to the side of a large wood) Oh God, where are we? I agree I haven’t been in Peloponnese for ages, but I did not remember that huge theatre.

GC Oh, it really is huge, with that cascade of steep steps: it must be Epidaurus.

DF No, Epidaurus is at least 100 kilometres far from here. Maybe it is Astanasos, a theatre of the IV century restored by the Romans.

BG It must be still a work in progress, look at those trucks going into the hemicycle.

DF What are they carrying?
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BG Garbage, waste ...
GC Yeah, they are transforming the theatre into a landfill].
(Fo-Casaleggio-Grillo 2013:11)

The excerpt, almost at the beginning of the book, gives an idea of the key elements of the dialogue between the three characters, and of the constant presence of a theatrical element in their speeches and discussions. At a deep level, there is some sort of juxtaposition of purpose and horizon. Fo frequently switches the focus to theatre authors and subjects, from Greek drama to Ruzzante and to his own plays (he specifically mentions Lo Santo Jullàre Francesco, 1999), as though to emphasize the crucial role that theatre has played in the cultural evolution of mankind and in the critique of society, as carried out by the “giullare”.

Grillo and Casaleggio, respectively frontman and theoretical leader of the “MoVimento 5 Stelle”, focus instead on the political issues addressed by the movement, as well as on the new media and new ways of communication used by them.

The three characters start a real game (or play), a tug of war in which everyone tries from time to time to bring the interlocutor in his own area: the theatre for Fo; politics and communication for Grillo and Casaleggio.

Different cultural prototypes are referred to: Pericles, Eratosthenes, Leonardo, Ruzante for Fo; Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams, authors of Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything (2008), or Karl Polanyi of the classical The Great Transformation 1944, recent edition 2001) for Grillo and Casaleggio.

Stage directions or captions are scattered throughout the volume, for instance:
(In quel momento il cielo ellenico è solcato da un jet luminoso).
BG Ah, ci mancava un caccia della Nato! Le nostre splendide ali di protezione.

[(At that time a jet crossess the Greek sky).
BG All we needed was a NATO fighter! Our magnificent wings of protection].
(Fo-Casaleggio-Grillo 2013: 19)

And then:

(Altri jet sfrecciano in senso opposto e più in basso un gruppo di elicotteri si alza in volo).
BG Oh, che bel traffico!
GC Beppe, questi ce l’hanno tutti con te, ti hanno inquadrato coi radar.
BG (saltellando qua e là fra le piante che delineano la strada) Fate come me. L’unico modo per uscire dal loro controllo è portarsi sotto le piante. Ecco, hai visto? Se ne vanno, ci hanno perso di vista.
DF Ma a nostra volta abbiano perduto anche il filo del discorso. Di che si parlava?
GC Dei Greci! Il loro esempio, da Pericle in avanti, può essere letto con riferimento alla rete.

[(Other jets whiz in the opposite direction and further down a group of helicopters lifts off).
BG Oh, what lovely traffic!
GC Beppe, they're after you, they've got you on their radar.
BG (hopping here and there among the trees plats that line the street) Do the same as me. The only way to escape their control is to hide under the plants. There, you see? They're away. They've lost sight of us.
DF But we also have lost the thread of our conversation. What were we talking about?
GC About the Greeks! Their example, from Pericles forward, can be read with reference to the network.
(Fo-Casaleggio-Grillo 2013: 11)

The second clearly theatrical element is, instead, the introduction of some secondary characters. An example is the man with the container (“l'uomo della tanica – UT”), who joins the protagonists Dario Fo (DF), Beppe Grillo (BG) and Gianroberto Casaleggio (GC), in the paragraph/scene “La storia falsificata di Ipazia” (“The falsified story of Hypatia”) at the end of the chapter/tableau “L'invenzione delle parlamentarie” (“The invention of the parliamentary primaries”):

La storia falsificata di Ipazia

BG Scusate, ma lì c'è una fonte, fatemi bere un attimo.
GC Questa è una buona idea, anch'io ho bisogno di bere.
DF E io mi metto in coda.
GC (indicando la stele che incornicia la fonte) Guardate un po' qua, c'è una dedica sulla trabeazione. Purtroppo è in greco.
DF Ma tu non lo conosci il greco, così colto che sei?
GC Qualcosa, ma questo è greco moderno, chi ne capisce...
(Si avvicina l'uomo della tanica [UT]).
UT Io lo conosco il greco!
DF Oh, un italiano!
UT No, io sono greco, però ho vissuto quindici anni in Italia. Ho lavorato in un sacco di città del Veneto e della Lombardia. Ecco, qui c'è scritto, ve lo traduco direttamente in italiano, “Ipazia, la tua vita è stata chiara e onesta come quest'acqua. Fa' che chi viene a dissetarsi alla tua fonte impari dal tuo sacrificio il significato di libertà”.
DF Bello! Ipazia? Vuoi vedere che si riferisce alla famosa scienziata greca di qualche secolo dopo Cristo?
UT Sì, è lei.
BG Venne massacrata da cristiani di un movimento fanatico.
UT Ho visto uno spettacolo che hanno messo in scena laggiù ad Astanasos. L'attrice che interpretava la martire era giovane e bellissima. Ipazia era una maestra di non so cosa.
GC Sì, era una filosofa, rappresentante del pensiero neoplatonico pagano. Ci hanno fatto perfino un film ultimamente, brutto, pieno di effetti melodrammatici. E hanno pure falsificato la sua storia.
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[...]
UT Scusatemi, purtroppo ho dei clienti che aspettano l’acqua fresca.
BG Clienti?
UT Sì, gestisco un’osteria laggiù. Se prima di proseguire nella vostra passeggiata scendete a farmi visita per me sarà un piacere.
BG, GC, DF (in coro) Senz’altro, grazie.
[...]
(Cosi discutendo i tre si incamminano verso l’osteria. Entrano, ordinano qualcosa da mangiare e continuano nel loro dialogo).

[The falsified history of Hypatia]

BG Sorry, but there’s a fountain, give me a moment to get a drink.
GC Good idea. I need a drink too.
DF And I’ll join the queue.
(In front of the fountain, a man is filling a container with water. When he sees us arriving, he nods asking us to sit down. Beppe thanks him, with a “very kind”, and bends over the fountain to quench his thirst).
GC (pointing the structure that frames the fountain) Look here, there is an inscription on the entablature. Unfortunately, it is in Greek.
DF Don’t you know Greek. And you’re supposed to be so cultured!
GC A bit, but this is modern Greek. Who knows that? ...
(The man with the container – UT – approaches).
UT I know Greek!
DF Oh, an Italian!
UT No, I’m Greek, but I have lived in Italy for fifteen years. I’ve worked in a lot of cities in Veneto and Lombardy. Here, it says, I will translate directly into Italian, “Hypatia, your life has been clear and honest like this water. May those who come here to drink at your fountain learn from your sacrifice the meaning of freedom”.
DF Beautiful! Hypatia? Maybe it refers to the famous Greek scientist who lived a few centuries after Christ?
UT Yes, it’s her.
BG She was massacred by Christians of some fanatical movement.
UT I saw a show staged there in Astanasos. The actress who played the martyr was young and beautiful. Hypatia was a teacher, but I don’t remember of what.
GC Yes, she was a philosopher, a representative of pagan neo-Platonic thought. Recently, they even made a movie, ugly, full of melodramatic effects. And they also falsified her story.
[...]
UT Sorry, unfortunately I have customers waiting for the fresh water.
BG Customers?
UT Yes, I run an inn there. If, before continuing your walk, you will come and visit me, for me it will be a pleasure.
BG, GC, DF (chorus) No doubt, thank you.
[...]
(Continuing their discussion, the three walk towards the inn. They enter, order something to eat and continue their dialogue]).

(Fo-Grillo-Casaleggio 2013: 40-43)

The quoted passage is of particular interest for understanding the theatrical practice of the dialogues between Fo, Grillo and Casaleggio. There are some elements that are clearly dramatic: the “coup de théâtre” of the Greek who speaks Italian, thus allowing the dramatic action to continue, and the final stage direction. In this perspective, it should be noted that the “La storia fasificata di Ipazia” is the last paragraph/scene of the chapter/tableau “L’invenzione delle parlamentarie” and this dialogue facilitates the entrance into the next chapter/tableau and the raising of other issues.

**CONCLUSION**

The dramatization of the political crisis, triggered by Grillo through his speech-performances in public rallies, such as “V-Day” or the “Tsunami Tour”, finds in *Il Grillo canta sempre al tramonto* its most complete form. Grillo’s political rallies become, thanks to the architecture given by Dario Fo and the dialogues with Gianroberto Casaleggio, a real theatrical script.

In this sense, it is evident that the revolution advocated by the “MoVimento 5 Stelle” is given added strength by the use of a traditional theatrical style that characterizes the dialectic between the three, who can be considered not only as authors but also as characters of the text. The result is one of the most structured versions of the identification between politics and the theatre of politics.
REFERENCES


