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Filters, Risks and Ironies

An Inquiry between Nostalgia and Trauma

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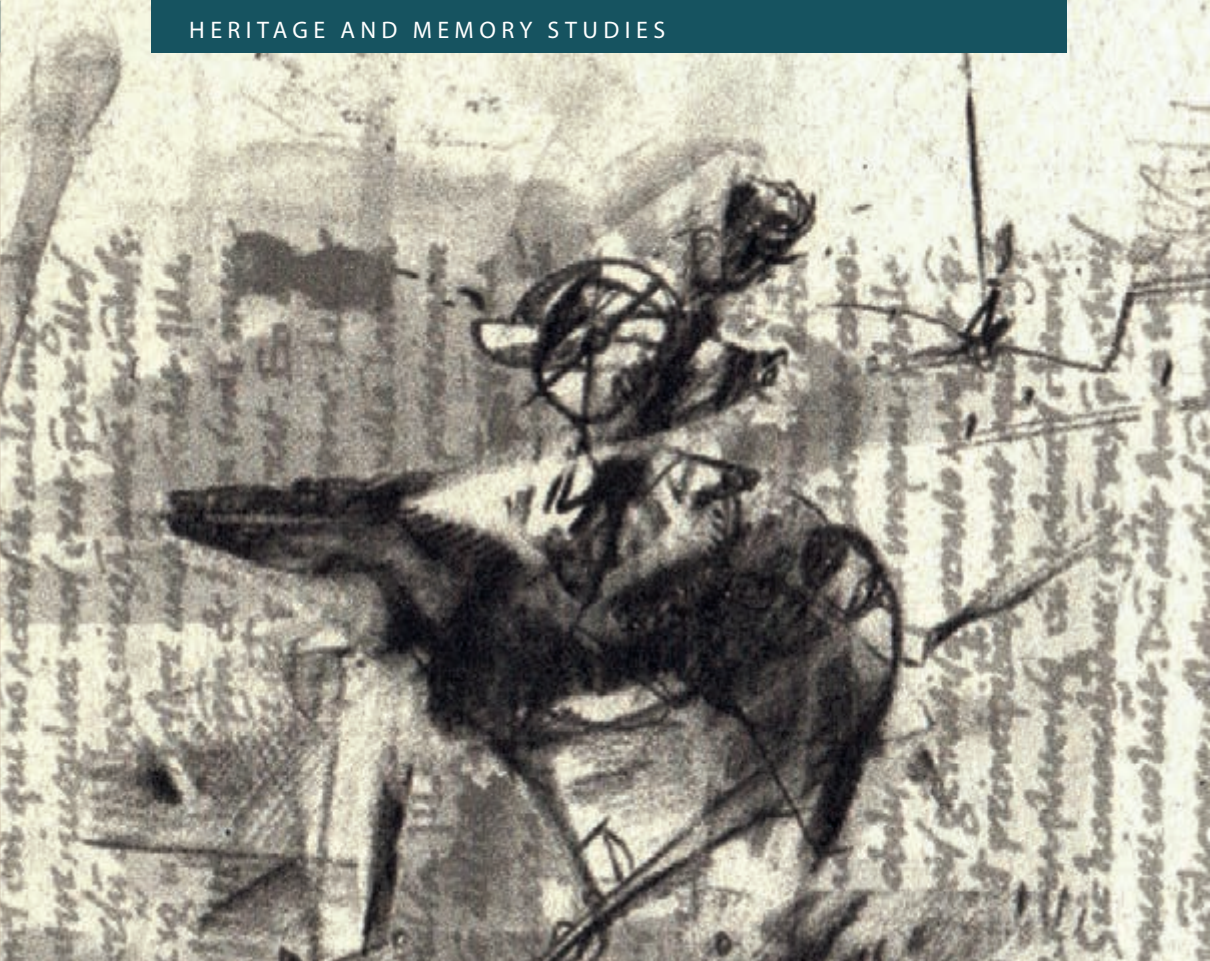
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HERITAGE AND MEMORY STUDIES



Edited by Lucien van Liere and Srdjan Sremac

Trauma and Nostalgia

Practices in Memory and Identity

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Trauma and Nostalgia

Practices in Memory and Identity

*Edited by
Lucien van Lier
and Srdjan Sremac*

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3 Filters, Risks, and Ironies

An Inquiry between Nostalgia and Trauma

Mario Panico

Abstract

This article explores nostalgia as a filtered emotion that can distort the past when used as a political tool to consolidate collective identities. When nostalgia serves as an ideological instrument, it selectively highlights aspects conducive to hegemonic goals while ignoring contradictory elements. This interaction between nostalgic and traumatic memory is evident because the longing for the past inherently seeks an idealized version, often glossing over or transforming traumatic elements. Examining cases related to the reception of former Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and the Fascist past, this chapter investigates three narrative strategies and effects: filtering, communicative risk, and irony.

Keywords: communication risk; sizing; traumatic rehabilitation; Mussolini; fascism

Introduction

The relationship that bonds nostalgia and trauma has been always a tricky theoretical problem for cultural memory studies. Considering the social forms of remembering, how can it possibly be reasonable to connect the pain of a trauma with the nostalgia's essential desire "to go back"?

Several solutions and responses to this critical question have emerged from various scholars with different epistemological backgrounds. This scholarship has examined, for instance, the common dependence on the "impossibility and necessity of repetition" (Végső 2013, 35); the shared impossibility of a cure (Horowitz 2010); the coping strategies activated by survivors in the process of remembering dramatic events like the Holocaust (Hertz

1990); the recollection and artistic processes of second- and third-generation descendants of trauma victims (Hirsch and Spitzer 2010; Horowitz 2010); the specificities of intergenerational narratives related to conflict and post-conflict contexts (Frankish and Bradbury 2012; Gobodo-Madikizela 2012); and the commodification and touristification of private lives framed by traumatic contexts, as in former East Germany or in the former Eastern Bloc (Bach 2002; Todorova and Gille 2010; Angé and Berliner 2015). This chapter seeks to expand this debate, providing a semiotic perspective on the various modalities through which nostalgia and trauma can interact at the level of narrativity, modifying the logic in which the meanings of memory are constructed and transmitted to us.

Semiotics has always been interested in the function of emotions (or passions) in the texts that are present within cultures (see in particular Greimas and Fontanille 1991; Pezzini 1991; Pezzini 1998; Del Marco and Pezzini 2012). Among these emotions, nostalgia has always played a privileged role within these academic debates, thanks above all to Algirdas Julien Greimas, who in 1986 published an essay that was destined to change reflections on this passion of temporality and memory. That year, the French semiotician published a lexematic analysis of the French word *nostalgie*, considering the various pathological states that are produced in the subject who recognizes his/her positionality in the present and feels regret for something (an experience, a person, an object, etc.) that belongs to the irreversible past. With respect to the research objective of this chapter, Greimas's analysis is particularly important because it highlights the temporal comparison that nostalgia structures between the unappreciated present and the desired past. However, since Greimas provided a lexematic reflection that takes into consideration an individual subject rather than a cultural mechanism or narrative-communicative strategies, it is essential to connect this to work conducted on a collective and cultural level (cf. in particular Boym 2001; Mazzucchelli 2012; Jacobsen 2020a).

As such, nostalgia is considered here not just as an individual emotion or as a collective one with past restorative purposes (Boym 2001), but as a threefold apparatus: (i) a filter through which trauma is "reinvented" in comparison with the present, for ideological or economic reasons, thereby intentionally affecting (Grice 1957) the memory of specific groups predisposed to nostalgia; (ii) a rhetorical risk derived from the normalized banalization of collective trauma; (iii) a phenomenon subverted, with irony, in order to "rehabilitate" the trauma itself, therefore resisting and counteracting any kind of depotentiation of history.

The specificity that underpins these pages is not whether it is possible to feel *nostalgia for a trauma* but rather *how trauma representation can be affected by nostalgia* at the level of the production of meanings in texts. Specifically, I propose a dialogue between the constructivist theory of trauma (Alexander et al. 2004a; Alexander 2012; Eyerman 2019), which considers trauma always as a socially mediated object,¹ and the “memory filtering theory” proposed by Umberto Eco (2014). Doing so, the following discussion emphasizes the ambivalence of nostalgia as an emotion and a narrative tool that, when intersecting with trauma, produces links with imagination, fakeness, banalization, and the critical defense of difficult memories. On the epistemological level, I consider the relations between trauma and nostalgia not from an individual perspective but from a cultural one. Specifically, I consider how the agenda of what is worth remembering is addressed and layered by texts (cf. Demaria 2012; Violi 2017). In other words, the main premise structuring my argument is that the dialogue between trauma-pain and nostalgia-desire is intelligible in culture through texts produced in different institutional, political, and aesthetic arenas (Alexander 2004b, 16–17).

After considering how filters can change the size of a traumatic event, using as an example the case of Italian Fascism and the contemporary reception of the figure of Benito Mussolini (the second and third sections of this chapter), I propose three different perspectives on the relationship between trauma and nostalgia. In “Nostalgia, Filter, and Comparison with the Present,” I consider the erosion of trauma when nostalgia is used as an intentional filter, devoted to edulcorating the past but always in comparison with an unsatisfactory present. In the following section, I consider how nostalgia can become a communication risk, as it is evoked by the text itself and “received” by the addressees. In the last part, before the conclusion, I provide a consideration of the role irony can play in the derision of nostalgia and, subsequently, in the reinvigoration and rehabilitation of trauma in narration. These three typologies are not to be considered as separate and exclusive; indeed, they can be found simultaneously in the same text and can overlap. Here I have chosen to examine them separately due to the main goal of the chapter: looking under the microscope at the various narrative interactions that can exist between nostalgia and trauma.

1 I adopt this theory with reference to Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic postulate, according to which reality is always mediated by signs. Thus, the idea of mediation, as it will be understood in the following pages, starts from this precise assumption: we have access to reality through a semiotic process of interpreting signs.

This chapter thus includes theoretical reflections that are supported and expanded via the analysis of case studies relating to popular culture and more ordinary things. In other words, I am less interested in the official texts of Fascism than in the “quotidian” ones we can have in relation to traumatic history. I demonstrate how common things like a political campaign in a peripheral part of Italy, a page of newspaper, a pack of pasta, a comic, or a coloring book can structure our gaze on the past, be it blindly or critically. The idea behind this approach is that cultural memory is not defined only by “high culture” but, on the contrary, is stratified and questioned at the level of the ordinary and infra-ordinary (see Perec 1997), generating “mnemonic communities” that share norms and beliefs about the past.

Filtering and Sizing

Analyzing how nostalgia affects trauma means first considering the filters that a culture uses to define its own memories (Violi 2017b). This can occur in different ways: as a mechanism that (more or less deliberately) erases certain pasts or leaves them in latency, or as one that forces a past to be reshaped or rose-tinted, in order to exist, to be expressed, or perhaps even to be the object of yearning. The concept of filtering, as I use it on this occasion, has a precise tradition that goes back to the work of Umberto Eco (1988; 2013; 2014). In it, filtering is a regulatory mechanism of cultural knowledge that allows for the “rational” assimilation of past events, enabling their coherent transmission in texts. Starting with the assumption that it would be impossible for a culture to remember everything of its own past, filtering serves to rationalize that group’s knowledge, without a dangerous “over”-accumulation leading to confusion and anarchy. There are, as Eco always says, “very useful forgettings” (Eco 2014, 85) that serve precisely to organize the information.

The object of Eco’s critical attention is thus not a “negative” filter, implying the denial and erasure of a certain historical event for political or ideological reasons, but rather the filters that are necessary in order not to overload “beyond the sustainable collective memory” (2014, 96). As Eco writes, “we need to know about the death of Julius Caesar but nothing about what his widow Calpurnia did after his assassination; it [filtering] provides precious details about the progress of the Battle of Waterloo but does not give us the names of all the participants, and so on and so forth” (2014, 85; see also Violi 2017; Pisanty 2020). This is certainly true at a general level, for an “economy of knowledge,” but it is not without ethical problems in contexts

of difficult traumas, as it does not question the *agency* of whoever possesses and controls the “power of past narrativity.” While this mechanism favors the assimilation of what has happened and the consolidation of collective identities, it is nonetheless open to forms of manipulation of past events that can deliberately omit substantial parts, fueling the oblivion and erosion of the painful past, not doing justice to the suffering of victims, and risking excessive reductions in the punishment of the perpetrators. This is possible in any context, not just in a post-conflict or post-traumatic situation, even with well-intentioned “carrier groups” (Alexander 2004b, 11).² What I call the “power of past narrativity” is not to be understood as a manipulative capacity that addresses only hegemonic and bad discourses in a strict sense, but instead as a capacity of all those subjects or institutions who, in a given historical moment, have a particular symbolic and semantic influence, building the “memorial agenda–setting” of a culture and the memorability of an event. In this regard, the mechanism of filtering is not the result of an apolitical or naïve decision. Even if a memory text is conveyed as “natural” because it is normalized inside a culture, it is the result of a “cultural cut” produced with specific agency. In this sense, filtering is not just about “what is said” but about “what is meant to be said,” therefore focusing precisely on communicative intentions that highlight not only what is “remembered,” that is, textualized, but also the purpose of that remembering, i.e., the cultural needs behind that choice.

Moreover, the filters “size” the past. They are responsible for a *qualitative evaluation* of the past precisely because the “traumaticity” or the “memorability” of the event is constructed, rewritten, and re-discussed through them. As such, within the process of filtering, it is possible to attribute specific roles and characteristics to all the subjectivities involved: victims, perpetrators, and implicated subjects (see Rothberg 2019, 2020). Filtering thus corresponds to an action of judgment that defines the boundaries between what is bad and what is good, building from that foundation the entire narrative structure that serves to communicate the past episode, moreover attributing its positive or negative features.

2 Following Alexander's definition, carrier groups “are the collective agents of the trauma process.... Carrier groups may be elites, but they may also be denigrated and marginalized classes. They may be prestigious religious leaders or groups whom the majority has designated as spiritual pariahs. A carrier group can be generational, representing the perspectives and interests of a younger generation against an older one. It can be national, pitting one's own nation against a putative enemy. It can be institutional, representing one particular social sector or organization against others in a fragmented and polarized social order” (Alexander 2004b, 11).

Expanding on the case of traumatic memory, Alexander (2004c, 202) suggests that it becomes a dramatic episode within the social-textual environment of a group: “Becoming evil is a matter, first and foremost, of representation. Depending on the nature of representation, a traumatic event may be regarded as ontologically evil, or its badness, its ‘evilness’ may be conceived as contingent and relative, as something that can be ameliorated and overcome.” This idea of “becoming” something is very provoking and challenging, because one must take into consideration the fact that there is no natural meaning of cultural memory; it is always a matter of semantic *arbitrariness* (Alexander 2004c, 202).

Every culture, according to the kind of filter it decides to adopt, has the power to decide who are the “bad guys,” whether their responsibility can ultimately be forgivable or if they must stay forever in the pantheon of “evilness,” and whether they belong to the filtering culture or if they are from outside. Here, the problem is not the factual correspondence of the text with the reality that it aspires (or claims to aspire) to represent, but how a culture defines and changes the *weight* (Alexander 2004c, 203) of it in a process of self-description. A possible question that could be posed, for example, is to ask whether a so-called evil is presented that way for ulterior motives of self-absolution or self-accusation in order to seek forgiveness or justice.

It is easy to understand how nostalgia can again alter the weight of a memory or a trauma. This process can also occur at the level of popular memory, that is, corresponding to those texts not produced for institutional purposes. This is apparent in the Italian context, for example, where the institutional-level filters that have rightly and legitimately textualized the Fascist dictatorship as a trauma have certainly not prevented the creation of countless re-filtrations of that past in the public sphere. As we will see in the following sections, within these narrations the return of Benito Mussolini and his policies are made desirable “again” in the present. Indeed, as many scholars have attested (see for example Stewart 1984; Boym 2001; Niemeyer 2014; Jacobsen 2020b), nostalgia is a matter of repetition: at a general level, it is the desire to be in connection with some space or time *once again*; at a narrative level, where this yearning is constructed and shared, it becomes an issue of *re-writing*, *re-imagining*, *re-showing*, *re-enacting*, *re-enforcing*, *re-producing*. In this replica mechanism, truthfulness takes a back seat while fakeness is made credible, enabling a distortion and filtering of pain to make that particular past desirable. In this *re-writing*, trauma can be edulcorated, banalized, or even reenforced through nostalgia—a nostalgia that is, however, fluid and positioned differently every time according to

the terms of the past's desirability: as a principal objective, as an effect generated by the text, or as an excuse to delegitimize nostalgia itself.

Less Cruel than German Nazis: A Brief Contextualization

Before entering the main part of my account, I would like to outline briefly the coordinates of the relationship between Italian culture and the memory of Fascism.

In the Italian context, the traumaticity of the Fascist dictatorship depends on the arena in which its representation is proposed. At an institutional level (i.e., the memory Italy proposes to itself and to the other countries in official ceremonies, for example), Mussolini and his politics are represented as traumatic. Take, for example, the law of June 20, 1952, no. 645, also known as the "Scelba law," which prohibits the reconstitution of the Fascist Party, or the 1993 "Mancino law," which, complementing the former, should condemn and sanction any kind of gesture or slogan connected with Nazi fascist ideology and aimed at inciting hatred and discrimination. Moreover, April 25, the day of the Italian liberation from Nazi fascist occupation, is a national holiday on the Italian calendar. These are just a handful of many other examples, but what is fundamental for this discussion is that the brutalities of Fascism have been filtered, codified, and made part of Italy's memory norms as events with a negative connotation, with a legal warning that they cannot be repeated in a civilized and democratic society.³

This is only the institutional arena, however. Indeed, the mechanisms activated differ, for example, in the political or popular ones, where many crimes committed by Fascist soldiers (in the Western Africa colonies, for example) were silenced for reasons of self-absolution (cf. Del Boca 2005), therefore causing the banalization of the past and the re-sizing of what happened in cultural memory (cf. Gundle 2013, 243). A well-known example of

3 This is not a perfect filter—there is no such thing. Of course, even in this first official version, some elements have been excluded, others underestimated or left latent. It is worth considering, for example, that after World War II, there was no equivalent of the Nuremberg Trials in Italy. In fact, many members of the Fascist Party and the Republic of Salò became members of parliament among the right wing—for example, Giorgio Almirante, who during the Fascist regime was an important exponent of the Fascist government and after the war was the founder of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (a Fascist-inspired conservative political party). Though it is certainly interesting and illustrative of the process described here, to expand further on the problematic and selective "official memory" of Fascism in Italy at a political and historical level would risk detracting from the aims of this chapter. Rather, I refer the reader to Filippo Focardi (2020).

that is represented by the collective stereotype connected to the war period “cattivo tedesco, bravo italiano” (bad German, good Italian) (Focardi 2013), shorthand for the fact that, in the public perception, the crimes committed by Fascist soldiers during WWII were less cruel than those of German Nazis, typically represented as the absolute evil capable of the most terrible actions (Focardi 2013). Prevalent across a variety of media discourses, from cinema to television (Holdaway and Missero 2018, 344–45; Roghi 2013, 258; Gundle 2013, 243; Filippi 2020, 166), this stereotype ultimately became a norm of public memory that continues to feed a form of Italianness built on the cultural acknowledgement that Italy came out of the war as a “victim,” dissociating the responsibilities of the Italian people from those of Mussolini and his *camerata*. At a public level, unlike Germany, Italy has generally articulated its Fascist past as a sad and unfortunate parenthesis⁴ of its history. This interpretation instead serves a “resistant” narrative of Italians as partisans.

Since the end of the war, this “fascismo all’acqua di rose” (rosewater fascism)—as some scholars have called it (Focardi 2004, 56), referring to its lightened representation—has provided more fuel for revisionism and the alteration of historical facts, thus enabling nostalgic yearnings for a moment that Italy has not yet engaged with properly.

This ambiguous modality of working through the past is also evident in the practices organized by groups of neo-fascist and nostalgic people in the village of Predappio, birthplace of Benito Mussolini (in northern Italy, around seventy kilometers from Bologna). Since 1957, when the dictator’s dead body was buried in the town’s cemetery, the small village has become a favorite destination for pilgrims who organize parades to honor him three times a year (on the anniversaries of the dictator’s birth, death, and the March on Rome; see for example: Serenelli 2013a, 2013b; Heywood 2019; Panico 2020a; Lowe 2020). This is made further problematic by a series of nostalgic souvenir shops along the main street of the village, Via Giacomo Matteotti. These are spaces in which it is possible to buy objects of various kinds and uses that are adorned with Mussolini’s face or phrases attributed to him. Just a few of many examples include T-shirts with the words “Molti nemici, molto onore” (Many enemies, much honor), lighters with the image of Mussolini performing a Roman salute, or calendars with monthly photographs of the dictator. In this space, Mussolini is textualized both as a pop star and

4 The reference to Fascism as a parenthesis comes from Benedetto Croce, who in 1944 wrote that the part of Italian history before the dictatorship should not be forgotten and should be respected nonetheless, despite what had happened during Fascism. This declaration of course triggered a lengthy and animated debate in historical and cultural studies.

a saint (Panico 2020b), “rose-tinting” his politics but also fetishizing the image and memory of the dictator.

Nostalgia, Filter, and Comparison with the Present

The philosopher Avishai Margalit (2009, 10–11) has argued that nostalgia

can distort reality in a morally unpleasant way. It is true that there are *soft forms of distortion* caused by nostalgia. From this point of view, distorting reality by retouching a photograph in which the wrinkles of the person portrayed are removed is a soft form of distortion: it is a harmless way of making someone look a little younger. However, there are *serious forms of distortion caused by nostalgia*, where it is not a question of removing wrinkles but of *removing the rot of a world that has passed away*. (My italics and translation)

Evoking the field of photography and photo editing, Margalit summarizes in just one example nostalgia’s capacity to beautify and remove traumatic events. His work engages in detail with what has been termed “Ostalgie,” that is, nostalgia for life under East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. This provides a textbook example of how the yearning for a bygone era—one that was nonetheless also characterized by painful and damaging experiences—can work. From this perspective, nostalgia is a filter that works like a post-production tool, devoted to correcting the imperfections of the past and making any possible conflictual dimensions latent in order to erode the memories of pain and facilitate the possibility of yearning.

As I mentioned before, cultural memory is always the result of filtering: the selection of a particular section of the past events. In this sense, the most glaring difference between the nostalgia filter and any other filter lies in the fact that it proposes a “sifting”: not only a semantic evaluation (i.e., a sort of content discrimination determining what of the event should become a text) but also a *present-past quality comparison*. Nostalgia as filter is mainly directed toward a positivization of what will be re-presented as past, stressing the irreversible aspects that are missing in the present that hosts the textualization. Therefore, nostalgia as filter is configured not only as a clipping but also as an emotional “flavor” that is given to texts and discourses.

This mechanism is quite interesting, not only as a means of intercepting those tragic aspects that remain latent but also as an invitation to consider

how the past is magnified, edulcorated, and promoted as the desirable solution for the present. What the nostalgia-as-filter proposes is an erosion of trauma, a blunting or neutralization of the aspects of the past that are not yearned for—the pain of dictatorial persecution, the emotional and economic hardships of war—which are instead overwritten, through an operation of “editing” by “the desirable” and by experiences that the nostalgic can legitimately hope to see reactivated.

The *newly* eroded trauma text created by the action of the nostalgia filter—i.e., the *new* story in its embellished version, stripped of all conflict-generating elements—enters the space of culture by being welcomed by the “predisposed”: those who accept the embellished story, for varied reasons linked to political convictions, social conditions, or a lack of information. In doing so, the predisposed activate another level of enthusiasm that is no longer linked to the internal mechanisms of textual construction, but rather to a more grounded, widespread nostalgia in the space of social cognition, transforming that emotion into a norm used to understand the present.

An example of how this mechanism can work at the public level can be illustrated through some forms of Italian everyday discourse. In spoken and digital conversations, there is a commonly used turn of phrase that anticipates the embellished translation of fascism and the figure of Mussolini. It consists of four words that, due to their usage in the last few years in neo- or post-fascist arenas, have been coded and recognized as nostalgic slogans. I am referring to “Quando c’era Lui...” (When He was here...; the “Lui” of course stands for Benito Mussolini), and the words are always followed by the description of a situation that positively compares Fascism to the present moment in which the phrase is uttered. For example: “When he was here, the trains arrived on time.” This might be uttered by a neo-fascist militant at the station while he impatiently waits and sees the delay of his train increasing on the departures board. Another example: “When he was here, there was more security on the streets,” a statement pronounced each time one reads in the newspapers about an episode of violence in neighborhoods. “When he was here, there were just male and female,” a variation uttered by someone who is irritated by the (legitimate) re-conceptualization of the gender spectrum. The iterations continue, one for each type of quotidian issue, large or small, seen as an affront to racist, homophobic, or extremely nationalist people.

At a more general level, this phrase is emblematic due to its capacity to construct new memory norms based on fakeness. Those who nostalgically filter the traumatic past do not generate in their “addressees” (who are often self-appointed) just a desire for the past. Rather, they normalize the erosion of

that past's trauma, legitimizing a false belief, and one that can even become the competing memory of the official and institutional version in which Fascism was a traumatic event. In this sense, the rhetoric of "Quando c'era Lui" proposes the production of "new regimes of truth" (Foucault 1980, 133) that endorse other points of view and make institutional memory just one of many representations, and one that is not faithful to the *new* account (cf. Lorusso, 2020). Furthermore, all this implies the production of new memory skills through which Mussolini is configured as the leader who is most capable of organizing society in the best possible way. And since he is no longer alive, he is to be yearned for and desired again.

This way of talking about Fascism in everyday life deserves to be investigated for more than one reason. Firstly, because it has now become a concrete cultural habit that in recent years has been made to function as a truth device to denounce the malfunctioning of Italian society and/or politics. Secondly, this phrase exemplifies how the filter of nostalgia works in relation to a traumatic event: it turns its gaze to the past, "cleansing" it of its negative aspects and re-functionalizing it as positive, close, and necessary in comparison with the present, within which the discontent that generates the comparison itself is nested.

Conducting meticulous historical research in order to refute the fake news that mythologizes Fascism and the figure of Benito Mussolini, Francesco Filippi (2019, 5–6) writes, "In a time of speed and fluid values, having a safe and quiet place of refuge is refreshing, even if this place is memory, even if this memory is false. Constructing lies about the past also serves, in Mussolini's case, to set up an effective and simple narrative of today, a perspective for which to strive" (my translation).

It is important to underline that "Quando c'era Lui" should not be intended just as a linguistic utterance. It can also be a textual strategy, devoted to the glorification of the former dictator and the Fascist past in relation to the present. To demonstrate this account, I will consider two contemporary political campaign advertisements, one dated from 2017 and the other from 2020. One aspect I would like to emphasize first, however, is that these texts relate to local communities and contexts, so they are not representative of official political communication. This detail is important because it helps to show how, far from the spotlight of the national mainstream political discourse, nostalgia for Mussolini's past and politics manages to reach a different level of explicitness. This does not mean that Mussolini is totally absent from the national political discourse, but rather that there is a sort of "degree of explicitness" that changes when we consider national or local communication. At a national level, Mussolini is evoked more or less only

in an implicit or veiled way (i.e., Matteo Salvini⁵ who on Facebook uses phrases like “Many Enemies Much Honor,” historically attributed to the former dictator).

The first example is located in Campania, a region in southern Italy. An association close to the right-wing party *Noi con Salvini*⁶ (*We with Salvini*) publicly affixed a poster (the content is translated into English in Table 1) that demonstrates how the filter of nostalgia acts on the construction of a past-present comparison. The poster graphically divides and semantically opposes two parts: “good fascism” on the left and “bad democracy” on the right. More specifically, the left side includes a half-length photo of Benito Mussolini in military uniform. Beneath this image are listed all the (false) good things accomplished by Fascist policy (i.e., having introduced pensions, council housing for the disadvantaged, work for all). On the right-hand side, under a photo of the politician Matteo Renzi—then secretary of the left-wing Democratic Party and outgoing prime minister—we see a list, opposed to the former, with the same benefits “rewritten” as stolen from Italian citizens using an anti-immigrant rhetoric. The poster reads:

Fascism	Democracy
He provided pensions.	He removed pensions.
He provided social housing.	He removes houses from Italians to give them to immigrants.
He made laws to protect the disabled.	He gives subsidies of €1200 per month to immigrants.
He made Italy great.	He makes disabled people pay the IMU (housing tax).
He made everyone work because there should be no parasites in the Homeland.	He is selling off Italy.

Table 1: The English translation of the content of the poster of the group *Noi con Salvini* (2017)

This is how nostalgia as filter can work practically. It is evident that nostalgic intention of this text constructs Fascism as a luminous period by leveraging nationalism, and then by emphasizing the temporal and qualitative difference between being Italian during the Fascist period and being Italian during

5 At the time of writing, Matteo Salvini is the leader of the right-wing political party *Lega*.

6 The leader and all the political parties immediately distanced themselves from this episode, with Salvini declaring publicly that he was unaware that the advertisement had been made. A photo of the poster is available at: <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/08/09/salerno-noi-con-salvini-espone-in-strada-manifesti-inneggianti-al-fascismo/3785046/> (accessed May 10, 2022).



Figure 1: The political advertising for the Amalfi Airport (photo courtesy of Fabrizio Todisco). The English translation of the message: Promised by De Luca. Realized at the time of Mussolini (1926). The dream airport. Vote social right-wing for the region.”

democracy. The aim is not only to propose a historical comparison to understand what has changed but to condemn the present in an inventive way, matching false information about Fascism with xenophobic exaggerations.

This process is further made evident in the second example, concerning another political advertisement erected near Naples in 2020 (Figure 1), on behalf of another right-wing party, Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy). The campaign was a provocation to the then president of the Campania region, Vincenzo De Luca, and the politician's plan to revive the airport on the Amalfi Coast, an area of southern Italy that attracts a large number of tourists from all over the world every year. Indeed, the issue represents a huge economic issue for the local community. The nostalgic opposition between good-past and inconsistent-present is generated with the comparison of the words “promessa” (promise) and “fatto” (realized). What is questioned is the “pragmatism of the past” and the “inconsistency of the present,” with the double aim of criticizing the left-wing administration and extolling the figure of Benito Mussolini.

In both of these cases, there is a precise nostalgic intentionality on the part of the “addresser” of the message. This relates not only to the

rewriting of the past but also to the ideological and political comparison of two temporalities: the finite past and the active but unsatisfactory present. With the notion of intentionality, I refer not only to the purely communicative level, i.e., “what is said,” but also to a more “ideological” one, linked—as Paul Grice (1957) has observed in speech act theory—to the will and agency of those who produce the message and design a precise and political “meant to say” through the text. In this misleading comparison, it is evident how the explicit references to Benito Mussolini and to the Fascist past are meant to offer (fake) solutions to fake contemporary problems. But what is important, from a semiotic point of view, is not the question of whether they speak the truth, but rather how they fabricate fakeness. Nostalgia as filter adopts a strategy that is present-parasitic: in order to be made something “credible” and “acceptable,” the proposed fascist claims use discontent in the present as the basis of argumentation. Mussolini is perceived as a man of providence not because the texts somehow demonstrate his greatness with proof; on the contrary, he is believable as a strong politician because this very rhetoric is built on the exaggeration of a present problem for which Mussolini’s past solution is proposed as still relevant and useful.

Nostalgia and Communication Risk

Nostalgia can be present in texts not only as an intentional filter that conveys an explicit and overt desire to annihilate the present but also as a “meaning-effect,” caused by an impaired representation of the past in contexts that do not typically belong to the fascist arena, or at least are not recognized as openly close to Mussolini’s ideology. In speaking of nostalgia as an “effect,” I refer to the nostalgic *impression* produced by a text, as perceived by a recipient subject who meets the proposed representation. This impression is not to be considered a mere personal evaluation linked to the specific tastes of the subject-addressee. It is at the level of manifestation—how the story is proposed in the text—that this evaluation can be generated. Unlike the previous cases, here I am not concerned with the intentions of those who produce the message but with the intentions of the text itself and of those who “receive” it (cf. Eco 1990). In this second typology, nostalgia imposes itself as *communication risk*, which impacts on subjects at the level of reception. I do not investigate the addresser’s intentions, because in this case, since there is no comparison with the present (and thus there is no explicitly proposed restoration of the Fascist past), the fascist and nostalgic

agency of those who design the communication is less intelligible from a semiotic point of view.⁷

The first example concerns one of the most important Italian dailies, *Il Corriere della Sera*, which is not considered a neo-fascist or even a right-wing newspaper. On the eve of the anniversary of Italy's liberation from Nazi fascism (the day before April 25) in 2020, the *Corriere* began a new sales initiative, allowing readers to buy a book about the history of Fascism along with the newspaper on the following days. The volume contained essays on history and critiques written by important and highly recognized authors and scholars in Italy. But what is perhaps more interesting is how the initiative was publicized, through a visual promotional campaign (Fig. 2), which generated a wide debate in Italy.⁸ The advertisement, inserted between the pages of the newspaper, presents Mussolini looking out from a balcony. The dictator is in military uniform, smiling at a large and festive crowd. The "numerosity" of the people is represented by visually placing people as the background of the image itself. In other words, Mussolini in the image is surrounded by people cheering and inciting him.

The first thing to note is that the scene represented is similar to those used in Fascist propaganda during the *Ventennio* (the two decades of Fascism in Italy) to build an image of Mussolini as "the man of the crowd." Moreover, the image of Mussolini on a balcony specifically is not unproblematic either, since the former dictator often used balconies as a platform to speak to the public. To give just two examples, both connected to painful moments of Italian Fascist history, that provide a measure of the symbolic and political value that this stage/space had for Mussolini: in 1938 he introduced the racial laws from a balcony of the town hall in Trieste, and in 1940 he declared Italy's entry into the war from the balcony of Piazza Venezia in Rome (the same one in the photo).

Most strikingly, the payoff that accompanies the photo reads: "Il Ventennio che ha cambiato l'Italia" (The twenty years that changed Italy). At the bottom of the page, to introduce the details of the books that will make up the collection, we also see: "A series of great essays to know and understand Fascism."

7 It is worth specifying here that, with this statement, I do not exclude the possibility of nostalgic intentionality in the producers of the texts considered here. Rather, I seek merely to make explicit the fact that the Fascist past is not compared to the present in these texts: they lack the "restorative" dynamic and therefore also the intention to communicate a desire to return to the past as it once was.

8 For the reconstruction of this debate, see, for example, the article by the historian Carlo Greppi (2020) "Ma perché siamo ancora fascisti?" (But why are we still fascist?).



Figure 2: The first advertisement for the history of Fascism books, *Corriere della Sera*, 2020
Source: *Corriere della Sera*

Following the release of this advertisement, the editors of the *Corriere della Sera* were accused of softening the Fascist past and communicating a nostalgic notion of the regime. Several factors support this thesis. First, at all levels of the whole visual composition, the traumatic aspect of Fascism is muted. The image of Mussolini smiling at the crowd is a critical reminder of the pre-wartime epoch when the dictator was acclaimed, popular, and loved by the majority of Italians. This image is further romanticized through the definition of the *Ventennio* simply a moment of “change,” which semantically does not correspond to a period of pain. Moreover, this ambiguity is also expressed by the description of the material: the books will help to “know and understand” Fascism, which in turn is defined as a “fenomeno politico cruciale” (crucial political phenomenon), once again dodging words like “dictatorship” or “trauma.” Of course, to speak of Fascism as a “phenomenon” is not incorrect per se, as it was certainly a political phenomenon. In terms of public communication, though, in the context of contemporary Italy, where admiration for Mussolini is growing every day, this is doubtless troubling insofar as it offers a misleading and banal historical account that risks nostalgic glorification and a legitimizing validation of neo-fascism.

Following numerous complaints, the newspaper changed the tone of its communication, “redesigning” the structure of the visual text (Fig. 3). From my perspective, this change represents an interesting event because it reveals quite precisely the most relevant aspects that generated what I referred



Figure 3: The second advertisement for the history of Fascism books, *Corriere della Sera*, 2020. Source: *Corriere della Sera*

to above as the nostalgia effect. In other words, the very operation of a “nostalgia effect correction,” that is, proposing a less glorified representation of the past, illustrates precisely how memory transmission at a cultural level is strongly dependent on the visual and verbal grammar of the text.

To reduce (somewhat⁹) the nostalgia effect of the first case, the second iteration uses “subtraction” and “pejorative rewording.” Regarding the first point, the editors eliminate certain visual elements: Mussolini on the second cover is no longer smiling. He is still in uniform but no longer wears a fez, the typical Fascist hat (today one of the most used symbols in neo-fascist contexts). He is still facing the balcony but is not happily leaning out toward the cheering crowd. In the photo, there is no longer an audience, hence erasing the symbolic link to the popularity of the dictator during his dictatorship. On the other hand, the text is reworded by changing the most ambiguous statements to present a less ambiguous judgment and a more negative qualification of the past. In the second case, the nostalgia effect is avoided, as the text takes a clear position on the past; there is no room for the glorification of the dictator, and the period of his domination is condemned as a shocking fact. More specifically still, in the payoff the

9 Though this operation is certainly corrective and reduces many of the risks of the first iteration, some elements remain problematic: in particular, the trauma of Fascism remains unrepresented. Not by chance, it seems to me, the second version still does not use the term dictator(ship).

Ventennio is no longer described as having “changed” Italy, but rather as having “sconvolto” (shocked, upset) the country.

A further instance of this same nostalgia effect, albeit with a different outcome, is found in another quotidian example. At the beginning of 2021, the global pasta company La Molisana made headlines with the description of a pasta shape named “Abissine” (Abyssinians¹⁰). The description—which originally appeared on the website and on the pasta packaging but has since been officially removed—read as follows: “In the 1930s, Italy celebrated the season of colonialism with new pasta shapes: Tripolitan, Benghazian, Assabian, and Abyssinian. Can semolina pasta become a unifier? Why not! ... The name *Abissine Rigate* certainly has a lictorian flavor (sapore littorio¹¹), but abroad the name became ‘shells.’”¹² The same emphasis is placed on another pasta format that recalls the colonialist endeavors of Fascist Italy, *Tripoline* (Tripolitan, from Tripoli): “the name evokes distant, exotic places and has a colonial flavor.”¹³

“Pasta semolina as unifying element,” “lictorian flavor,” “exotic places,” and “colonial flavor” are a group of problematic and revisionist words that elucidate the inconsistency between what should be *memorized* and what is remembered of the past instead. The Italian colonial past, never really thematized at a public level, is textualized here as an adventurous mission with a mythical atmosphere, silencing the violence and abuse of the Ethiopian and Eritrean populations at the hands of Fascist soldiers. Conquered Africa is, even in 2021, categorized as an *exotic* place, an adjective that refers to a semantic field of discovery, adventure, and curiosity and certainly not murderous violence. In addition to these obvious considerations on the unfortunate communication of the pasta company (which was defended

10 During the Italian colonialist campaign in Africa, Italian soldiers occupied the territories of Eritrea and Ethiopia, known at the time by the exonym Abyssinia.

11 The word “littorio,” used as an adjective here, refers to the *fascio littorio* (“fascus” in English), which was the symbol used by the Fascist regime (derived from ancient Roman symbolism). During Fascism it became a keyword to refer to all the things that were “purely” Fascist, for example, “gioventù italiana del littorio” (Italian “lictorial” youth, a Fascist youth organization). Moreover, Littoria was the name of a city near Rome founded during Fascism (renamed Latina in 1945).

12 This “new” pasta shape was a (temporary, following criticism) re-release, reinstating the names used, as per the description, in the 1930s. The original description in Italian is as follows: “Negli anni Trenta l’Italia celebra la stagione del colonialismo con nuovi formati di pasta: Tripoline, Bengasine, Assabesi e Abissine. La pasta di semola diventa elemento aggregante? Perché no! ... Di sicuro sapore littorio, il nome delle Abissine Rigate all’estero si trasforma in ‘shells,’ ovvero conchiglie.”

13 In the original, “il nome evoca luoghi lontani, esotici e ha un sapore coloniale.”

by many anti-fascist associations regarding the immediate accusations of nostalgia), it is also interesting to consider the normalization of the banalized trauma that enables messaging like this.

Given the ordinariness of their contexts, the examples in this section are more infamous than the political and intentional ones, as they represent the symptoms of a diffuse cultural illness that affects the representation of the traumatic past, using nostalgia as form of compensation for not having worked through it. On a theoretical level, these cases demonstrate how dangerous the trivializing reiteration of the filtered trauma can be. The stereotype of Italians as good people, to re-invoke an example cited above, is not only a form of self-representation but also a modality of understanding reality, one of the ways in which a group of people figure and pre-figure its own characteristics, legitimating both the desire to return to a so-called great moment and the unproblematic attitude to a violent past.

Nostalgia, Irony, and Trauma Rehabilitation

In a scene from the film *Le vie del Signore sono finite* (The ways of the Lord are over, 1987), directed by and starring Massimo Troisi (who gained international recognition as an actor in *Il postino/The Postman* in 1994) and set in the Fascist era, the main character, Camillo, is in a tearoom with Anita, a fervent admirer of Benito Mussolini. Anita praises Mussolini, pointing out that “Since he’s been around... trains run on time, and everything works!” The dialogue is a direct critique of and reference to contemporary stereotypes—those that I mentioned in the fourth section of this chapter. Camillo’s quick response is: “He makes the trains arrive on time, but you didn’t need to make him head of government, it would have been enough to make him station chief.” The response nevertheless causes a group of Fascists, alerted by Anita herself who was annoyed by the irony directed at her beloved Duce, to attack Camillo. This brief example is helpful, as it introduces the last narrative strategy mentioned above used in the relationship between nostalgia and trauma: that of irony. In particular, here it becomes clear how irony, on the one hand, succeeds in subverting, ridiculing, and belittling the arguments of those who profess a nostalgic desire or positively recall the years of Fascist dictatorship and, on the other, proposes a simultaneous rehabilitation of trauma as a painful event. From a theoretical perspective, I intend to examine irony here not only as a rhetorical figure based on antiphrasis, i.e., expressing a meaning with the aim of making the opposite understood, but also to emphasize

how it mentions something that has been said before in order to echo it in a distorting way (as proposed by Sperber and Wilson 1981). In my case, the “something said before” corresponds to all the stereotypical sentences and beliefs that link Fascism (and Mussolini) to a positive moment in Italian history.

In Italy, irony—and satire—about the Fascist period, its legacy, and its nostalgia can be considered a full-fledged genre, especially but not exclusively in the field of cinema. Examples of such films include *Vogliamo i colonnelli* (We want the colonels, 1973) by Mario Monicelli, *Quando c'era LUI... caro lei!*¹⁴ (When HE was here, my dear!, 1978) by Giancarlo Santi, *Fascisti su Marte* (Fascists on Mars, 2006) by Corrado Guzzanti and Igor Skofic, or even the more recent *Sono tornato* (I'm back, 2018) by Luca Miniero. Though they have different temporal settings, intentions, and production values, all these films overturn Fascist imagery and ridicule the political conviction of the Fascists and their outdated aesthetics.

Representing Fascist imagery ironically is an operation that aims to reverse the point of view in order to frame the phenomenon from an unprecedented perspective (Cadorna 2009), which can make the actions of those who declare themselves nostalgic for Fascism seem illogical and absurd, therefore unmasking the fragile argumentation underlying their form of memory and their emotional attachment to the past.

Another central feature of these examples is that irony acts as a revealing and disempowering device. By exaggerating the characterization of nostalgic fascists, irony not only highlights their anachronisms but also acts as an instrument of semantic power reduction, making nostalgic people less “fearsome” and less “dangerous” as they become laughable. In this sense, irony both reduces and relaunches as well as reformulates nostalgia as a pure delirium of memory imagination; it adds a contemporary critique of fascism as a harmful ideology.

This kind of mechanism is exemplified by an editorial phenomenon evident in the comic series *Quando c'era Lui* (2017) by Stefano Antonucci, Daniele Fabbri, and Mario Perrotta, which sold more than sixty thousand copies in Italy. The collected volume is composed of four issues that tell the story of Mussolini coming back to Italy in the present, following a Frankenstein-like scientific experiment organized by a group of neo-fascists along with a German scientist who physically resembles Hitler. Surprisingly, however—in one of the more explicit points of irony in the whole series—the

14 The title is an ironic reference of the neo- and post-fascist slogan “Quando c'era lui,” as described in the fourth section of this chapter.

resurrection operation causes Mussolini's skin to change color. Though Mussolini is now black, the neo-fascists try everything to hide this detail from the Italian population.

In addition to its representation of systemic racism in Italian culture, there are two elements of the comic book that are particularly relevant here. The first is how the comic mocks those who are nostalgic for the Duce, describing it as a sort of inconsistent fetish and sexual obsession. Second, the volume casts important light on the dramatic and negative aspects of the figure of Mussolini, thematizing, in a sort of parallel line with respect to ironic nostalgia, the rehabilitation of trauma: in spite of the comedy of the volume, the comic insists on the violence of fascism and the figure of Mussolini as a serious problem for society.

With regard to the first point, neo-fascists and nostalgic people are characterized as crazy old folks (i.e., Fig. 4), violent young men of low intelligence (Fig. 5), or politicians (of both genders) who are sexually obsessed with the body of Mussolini (Fig. 6).

Figures 4–6 provide a handful of examples of these characterizations. As the frames of the comic book show, the humor is visual (they are all grotesque caricatures of their “types”) but also contextual: for example, in Figure 5 the man auditioning is told “we’ll let you know,” playing up the general failures in the *DuX Factor*. These characterizations deliberately exaggerate the traits of the subjects, who always seem a little “drunk” and exalted in the presence of the figure of Mussolini. Both before his return and after the experiment, the nostalgic and neo-fascist characters are always represented as immersed in paradoxical situations (for example, Mussolini in white face singing in yet another televised reality contest), as having cognitive detachment from reality or easily believing the conspiracy theories that circulate on social networks (i.e., an anti-Ikea, anti-Swedish tirade), and as behaving in an entirely absurd way. The irony behind these characters emerges from the fact that they are familiar—albeit exaggerated—behaviors, claims, and images that are present in the discourses of real-life nostalgic people in contemporary Italy. By representing these characters in such a grotesque way, however, the volume undermines and blunts their ideologies.

In parallel to these more ironic representations, the comic strip also includes a very clear, negative characterization of the Duce who does not hesitate to brutally kill not only his enemies but also his own subordinates and worshippers—including the German doctor who brought him back to life. I think this is an interesting aspect of the comic, because it highlights yet another possible relationship between the representation of nostalgia



Figures 4, 5, and 6: The auditions for *DuX Factor* in *Quando c'era Lui* (issue 1); neo-fascists working through disappointment with violence (issue 1); a woman desperate to have sex with Mussolini (issue 3).

Images reproduced with the permission of the authors (Ó Stefano Antonucci, Daniele Fabbri, and Mario Perrotta) and the publishing house (Ó Shockdom).

and trauma. The laughter that “weakens” the menace of neo-fascism is also tied to a more direct and explicit reflection on violence, which is not reduced to mere caricature.

In other words, paradoxical scenes, such as when the black Duce raps against gay marriage or gender fluidity, are complemented by parts that emphasize and invite reflection on Mussolini as a ruthless man, in love only with his egoistic project of leading Italy. A clear example of this is the very bloody scene in which Mussolini (at this point having become famous again) shoots an anti-fascist girl in the head, after the young woman had been captured by Fascist militants and brought to the dictator (Fig. 7) because she posted criticism of him online. In this case, the words that Mussolini pronounces before executing the woman are emblematic:

“Sometimes I feel nostalgic, you know? I liked you better when you were hiding in the mountains and putting notes in bicycle frames.”

“Now you’re so predictable.”

“...you fight your battles on social networks, and my hierarchs can easily track you with GPS.”

“Every day you make your opinion public, you know? You practically come to me on your own.”

“There was a time when I would have simply given you castor oil, dear. But I won’t be so good to you, you know why?”

“We villains, unlike you, we study history carefully! Because it helps...”

“...not to repeat the mistakes of the past.”

“What is that you say?”

“Bella, ciao!”



Figure 7: The scenes in which Mussolini kills the anti-fascist girl (issue 4). Images reproduced with the permission of the authors (ÓStefano Antonucci, Daniele Fabbri, and Mario Perrotta) and the publishing house (ÓShockdom).

There are various levels of meaning that demonstrate the rehabilitation of trauma in this narration. The first, the most evident and obvious, corresponds to the representation of Mussolini as a violent murderer and not as idiotic, clumsy, and unintelligent, like his followers. In addition to this first level, it is important to note the way in which Mussolini describes himself as “nostalgic” before killing the anti-fascist woman. The dictator says he is yearning for the bygone times of the war when it was more “exciting” to hunt for partisans and anti-fascists to punish.

In this sense, the nostalgia of those who really lived and experienced Fascism, like Mussolini—who was its advocate and promoter, in a way its number one witness—takes on a tragic meaning, becoming no longer a somewhat naïve yearning, a desire that characterizes the foolish. In this scene, nostalgia for Fascism becomes something truly dangerous for today’s context.

Unlike neo-fascist “armchair nostalgia” (Appadurai 1996, 78), that is, the nostalgia of a past historical time felt by those without direct experience of it, Mussolini’s indexical nostalgia, based on personal experience, shows how dramatic and horrible the consequences of the restoration of fascism

could be. There would not simply be “trains running on time,” but oppression and persecution.

The logical assumption that this final part of issue 4 establishes is that the only *real* nostalgia for fascism is *just* a nostalgia for violence, a nostalgia for trauma. This scene therefore presents one of the examples in the comic in which mockery is paused to make a critical assessment of the desire for fascism: on the surface, it appears to be the stuff of “clowns,” while in reality it is structured on violent impulses and violent desires.

To conclude this reflection on the ordinary things that help to elucidate the nuances of the relationship between trauma and nostalgia, I turn to one final example that represents a different kind of irony serving to provide a more light-hearted form of satirical mockery: the coloring book entitled *Ho fatto anche cose buone* (I also did good things; Fig. 8). The coloring book, which, as the subtitle reads, “defeats nostalgia: false myths about Fascism explained to those who still believe in it,” contains black and white illustrations of the most famous clichés linked to Mussolini, such as “he introduced pensions,” “he defeated the Mafia,” “he gave incentives to industry,” “he gave a central role to women in society,” and so on. Each “good thing” on the right-hand page is accompanied on the left by a sentence that shows how these presumptions are based on false beliefs. On the cover, Benito Mussolini is depicted as a pizza maker, and instead of the Fascist motto “Credere, obbedire, combattere” (Believe, obey, fight), we find “Credere, *colorare*, combattere” (Believe, *color*, fight).

In this case, irony overturns the frame (Goffman 1974) of the semantic and interpretative background of the representation (reworded Fascist phrases, Mussolini as pizza chef) and reexamines the significance of their messages in both the source context and the “ironic” target context. The primary, “fascist” meanings of the words used on the cover are connected to the nostalgic imagery. The secondary meanings, on the other hand, which are transformed through a proposed change at the formal level—Mussolini changes from a good politician to a good *pizzaiolo*—shift the semantic field of reference. In this sense, irony functions as a desecrating rhetorical device that uses a precise system of (political) signs and allows them to take on different nuances, acquires a new meaning, albeit one that does not cancel out the previous one. On the contrary, the latter is exalted through difference: the political context of the phrases and images is not concealed or silenced; it is only pushed into the background, relegated to the space of derision.

In this case, this process provides a way of downsizing the “good things” done by Mussolini, considered of little political or social significance, at most at the level of the political utility of a pizza—so, nothing at all. Again, irony does



Figure 8: The cover of the coloring book *Ho fatto anche cose buone*.
 Image reproduced with the permission of the publishing house (ÓMagazzini Salani).

not create a situation of contradiction at the level of enunciation: good things in the culinary context work perfectly at the level of contextual coherence. This is achieved through word play: the adjective “good” functions in Italian to mean both “righteous” (as in Mussolini’s supposedly positive contributions

to Italian society) and “delicious.” What this irony does achieve is to question the cultural meanings attached to the expressions, refuting the value system of the return of fascism and the “good” politics of Benito Mussolini.

Conclusion

The various examples in this chapter demonstrate how nostalgia and trauma can be considered narrative elements that modify and alter the meaning and discourses of memory. In particular, the fundamental feature that characterizes the relationship between these two terms is linked to the *qualitative evaluation* of the event to be narrated, that is, to the emotional investment and the positive or negative judgment that a group decides to make manifest (or receive) through texts, following its own needs, wishes, and objectives at a specific moment. In this sense, the combination of trauma and nostalgia can produce different “approaches” every time to the translation of an event into text.

As in the examples proposed in this chapter, this can include an intentional nostalgia filter activated through the edulcorating of the traumatic past in a comparison with the present; nostalgia as a communication risk due to the embellishment of trauma; and the re-habilitation of trauma through the adoption of an ironic approach in the representation of nostalgic attitudes.

In this regard, the aim of the researcher interested in the dynamics and logic of memory is to understand *how*, at the level of representation, nostalgia and trauma are used and abused and *what* cultural contingencies allow or enable such textualizations in one direction rather than another. The semiotic gaze therefore operates on a double level of the archaeology of meaning: deconstructing the text, on the one hand, and defining, on the other, the attitudes and memory skills of the context in which it was produced, and those that are generated after its dissemination. In this sense, to look at texts, especially those belonging to the world of the ordinary, means to understand the silent grammars of memory, the ways of “emotional” re-appropriation of the past, and how stereotypes settle into the space of the unsuspected, translating a biased view of the past (more or less attentively and critically) into common sense.

As the case of Italian Fascism demonstrates, texts are devices through which memory is rewritten in the present¹⁵ (Lotman and Uspensky 1978,

15 In this regard, texts represent certain pasts in a specific way from the present, that is, the moment in which the action of externalization is realized. The present is the temporal dimension

213–14), producing specific consequences: the selection of which aspects of the past can belong to a community and which ones are destined or obliged to be excluded. Through the filters of nostalgia, then, a form of passion and emotional coloring is added to this mechanism of choice and evaluation, structuring an evident and problematic comparison between the regretted past and the unsatisfactory present. Investigating the combinations and intersections of trauma and nostalgia at the narrative stage reveals much about the modalities of the collective and cultural acceptance of difficult pasts and the elaboration of culpabilities linked to them.

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in which the *memorability* of an event is tested, and the cultural filters are chosen to *memorize* what is potentially *memorable* (Violi 2017a, 200). Following this account, the textualized past can say more of the cultural values of the present in which it is created than of the past events that it aims to represent.

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