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Thinking and Narrating Eroticism in Italy in the Sixties

“Enjoy it without restraint!” “Forbidden to forbid!” “Make love not war!”. These are some of the best-known and most emblematic slogans used during the 1968 demonstrations in Italy. They reflect the centrality assumed in those years by erotic desire and a sexuality freed from taboos. What took place in those months was the climax of a long questioning process of the Catholic-bourgeois mentality and its main institutions (the family), which began to take hold in Italy at the end of the 1950s and continued throughout the following decade.¹ During the 1960s, the attempt to modernise customs was accompanied by a genuine process of eroticisation of the Italian cultural system. Advertisements and magazines began to show sexualised bodies in skimpy clothes; niche publications were also created, almost exclusively, for a male audience, such as “Playmen” and “Kent”.² Television and cinema established themselves as the “means of communication that contributed most to the eroticisation of the media system in our country”.³ At the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, in fact, artistic productions based on sexual and erotic themes multiplied, including everything from popular cinema to the sub-genres of Italian entertainment, auteur cinema (Bertolucci, Tinto Brass, Pasolini), and pornography, this last being launched in those years,⁴ thus breaking free from a censorious mentality which, in previous decades, had considered sexuality and its representation as a taboo. This process of liberalisation of social mores aroused in many Italian intellectuals the need to question it theoretically and critically, leading to discussions and the re-thinking of certain reflections on eroticism and sexuality that had spread or were spreading internationally in those years. We are referring to texts such as, to name a few, those by Wilhelm Reich (*Die Sexualität im Kulturkampf*, 1945; *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 1946, translated into Italian only in the 1960s), Herbert Marcuse (*Eros and Civilization*, 1955; *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 1964), Georges Bataille (*L'érotisme*, 1957), René (Men-

1 In fact, this process would come to fruition after 1968 with the acquisition of some important civil rights (in 1970, the Workers' Statute and the divorce law, and in 1978, the “Basaglia” law and the abortion law). See Crainz, 2003; Castronovo, 2006; Magagnoli, 2019.

2 See Maina 2019; Rigola, 2021.

3 Rigola 2021, 29.

4 See Ortoleva 2002 and Ortoleva 2008; Maina/Zecca, 2014.

songe romantique et vérité romanesque, 1961). This attempt to theorise and take a position on such a powerful and delicate subject gave rise to a heated debate which took place mainly in magazines (“Nuovi Argomenti”, “La fiera letteraria”, “Paragone”) and newspapers (“L’Unità”, “Il Corriere della Sera”), and which many authors would later assimilate in their literary writing. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide an account of the main theoretical elements around which the debate on eroticism was built in Italy in the 1960s. On the one hand, we will try to understand how Italian thinking interacted with international theoretical reflection and, on the other, we will observe how some reflections on sexuality and eroticism were transposed at a narrative level by many of the authors who took part in this critical debate. Our focus will be on some of Luciano Bianciardi’s texts (*I sessuofili*, *La solita zuppa*), which show the author’s perspective on eroticism and the instrumentalisation of sexuality in vogue in those years.

1 Against Repressive Morality

In Italy, the debate on the symbolic function of desire in society developed in response to an international trend that had already been placing sexuality at the centre of the public and sociological debate. An example of this is the two Kinsey reports⁵ on the sexual behaviour of American men and women, written between the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, which were followed by similar studies carried out in England and France.⁶ It was not until the 1960s that Italy tried to tackle the question of sexuality from both a sociological and a theoretical-ideological point of view,⁷ as demonstrated by the proliferation of enquiries into the relations between eroticism and cinema and literature at the beginning of the decade.⁸ The starting point for many of the reflections on eros and sexuality in Italy and abroad is Freud. The father of psychoanalysis was the first to link the concept of repression to the development of civilisation, in addition to emphasising the centrality of the sexual element in personal development and

5 Kinsey 1948 and 1953.

6 Chesser 1956; Rémy Woog 1960.

7 See Pasolini’s *Comizi d’amore* (1965), or the inquiry made in 1969 by “Novella 2000” about the sexual behaviour of Italian women.

8 See *Inchiesta “Sesso e letteratura”*, edited by Luigi Capelli, “Corriere Lombardo”, 1961, no. 11–12 and 18–19; *Otto domande sull’erotismo in letteratura*, “Nuovi Argomenti”, July–October 1961, no. 51–52; *Inchiesta L’erotismo nel cinema*, edited by Luigi De Marchi, “Film selezione”, 1962, no. 9, 10, 11, 12.

the presence of sexuality from earliest childhood. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), he argued that human progress always comes at the cost of repressing or sublimating instincts, i. e., their distorted satisfaction. In the struggle between the 'pleasure principle' and the 'reality principle', the latter prevails, resulting in the identification of civilisation and neurosis. This dualistic perspective, which creates a profound separation between the sexual and cultural dimensions, is compounded in Italy by the influence of religious morality, which has a significant impact on the way people experience sexuality and think about eroticism. Indeed, in those years, many reflections by intellectuals pointed at the centrality of Catholicism in the development of a repressive and sexophobic mentality in Italy. The enquiry of "Nuovi Argomenti", for example, addressed as many as four questions out of eight to issues related to the influence of Catholicism in the current perception of eroticism and in the past. They included the concept of sexual taboo and sin in relation to carnal acts, the changes in the representation of eroticism before and after the advent of Christianity, and the opposite relationship that science and religion establish with sex, one including it in the cultural system as an integral part, the other excluding it drastically. The intellectual Luigi De Marchi described how the conception of sexuality changed in relation to religion. In *Sesso e civiltà: dalla crisi della sessuofobia alla riforma sessuale* (1960), he provided a history of sexuality in the Western world, identifying the transition from the ancient to the Christian world as decisive, the transition from the ancient to the Christian world, insofar as it is characterised by the introduction of a sexophobic conception of sex creating a split in the individual "between ethical existence and psychophysiology",⁹ between the erotic psyche and morality.

Later, George Bataille, one of the main theorists of eroticism, conceived sexual desire in relation to the concept of forbiddance. In his essay *L'Érotisme*, he explained eroticism by using the concept of *interdiction*. According to Bataille, during the centuries, Western societies developed their own idea of civilisation from a set of paradigms and prohibitions whose purpose was to control and exclude violence from civil life, the first of which is the prohibition of incest. As stated by Lévi Strauss, incest can be considered as the first truly great interdiction in human history, leading man from a state of nature to a state of culture. However, the presence of a prohibition, whether on an individual or collective level, invariably produces in the individual the desire to break it, so that eroticism is developed precisely "from the inextricable association between sexual

⁹ De Marchi 1960, 47.

pleasure and prohibition”,¹⁰ and the sexual life of humans should be brought back into the sphere of the illicit rather than the licit. This oppositional dimension between eroticism and reality, inherent in Bataille’s conception, was observed in all its destructive power by Moravia. In his interview with Jean Dufлот *Qu’est-ce que l’érotisme?* the Italian writer captured the mystical dimension of this vision of eros: “Erotism and mysticism reject the world of values by annihilating them in ecstasy; but religious ecstasy leads to self-obliteration, erotic ecstasy to the obliteration of the other. [...] Eroticism seems to be a form of knowledge that destroys reality as it discovers it. In other words, it is possible to know reality through eroticism; but at the price of the complete and irreparable destruction of reality itself”.¹¹ In the same interview, Moravia explained his own conception of eroticism, which can be seen in many of his novels, and which is at odds with Bataille, who sees eros not as opposed to reality but rather as the most natural means “of reaching reality, [...] the bridge that a being in despair throws between the world and himself, wildly”.¹²

Parallel to this “existentialist-religious” perspective, other schools of thought were also gaining ground in Italy, attempting to merge Freud’s conception of eros with Marxism. The theories of Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich were quite popular in those years. Although they were formulated in the 1930s, they had a disruptive diffusion only in the 1960s and 1970s, thanks to the Italian translation of Reich’s books (*L’irruzione della morale sessuale coercitiva*, 1932 and *La rivoluzione sessuale* 1936, were translated into Italian in 1972 and 1963). Luigi De Marchi, Reich’s main advocate, also contributed to the dissemination of his thought.¹³ Starting from Freud’s latest reflections, Reich made a ruthless critique of capitalist societies, responsible for the neurosis and unhappiness of the masses because based on a morality that negates sex and represses all sexual impulses. The ultimate expression of these patriarchal and authoritarian societies is the institution of the family, founded on monogamy and governed by the law of the father (master). For the Austrian psychoanalyst, this condition of repression is perpetuated through an oppressive form of education based on guilt, which transforms amorous pleasure into anguish. Since sexual activity is at the centre of man’s psychic functioning, this coercive mechanism hinders the development of the individual’s personality, making the masses subservient to those in power. According to Reich, the only way to free humankind from this oppressive condi-

¹⁰ Bataille 1957, 289.

¹¹ Moravia 1970, 102. See Moravia 1969, 252–255.

¹² Moravia 1970, 102.

¹³ Reich’s thought had a controversial reception in Italy, and was criticised by many intellectuals; See Marzuoli 1963; Bini 1966.

tion is to bring about a revolution based on freedom from sexual moralism and religious mysticism, abolish marriage as a coercive sexual relationship, and recognise the natural right to satisfy the need for carnal love. According to De Marchi, Reich's perspective was the starting point for interpreting the process of liberalisation of customs and sexual expression. Although the Italian psychoanalyst profoundly criticised the repression caused by a sexophobic education, he was lukewarm about judging the massified eroticism of those years in a positive way:

I would like to make it clear that it is obviously not the case that we should rejoice at the often anaffective and serialised forms that [the erotic explosion] so often takes. Observing this form, whether at the level of the sexual freedom of certain juvenile circles, or at the level of the press and mass entertainment, one is often struck by the fear that the traditional split between spirit and flesh risks perpetuating itself in a new form, merely changed in sign: devaluation of the spirit and exaltation of the flesh in a purely physiological sense, by the same rampant mechanistic materialism.¹⁴

Against this split between morality and body, which does nothing but perpetuate a repressive morality and which had already been criticised in the volume *Sesso e civiltà*, De Marchi imagined, in line with Reich's thought, a future where sexuality can be free from any form of coercion or taboo. In order to reach this goal, it is necessary to educate people to freedom and abolish repressive judgments:

As far as I am concerned, I am certainly not an advocate of a certain mechanistic and perverse eroticism that prevails today, but I believe that in this, as in any other field, freedom (i. e. responsibility) can be educated only in freedom. Not the indiscriminate and pathogenic repression, but the decanting of morbid elements, the evocation, even partial and occasional, of emotional participation, can initiate the individual to the reconquest of natural sexuality, which – as I said at the beginning – is unitary in its psycho-physical components, limits aggressiveness, makes us brothers and is poetic.¹⁵

Another philosopher extremely influenced by Reich's thought was Herbert Marcuse, whose theories became very widespread in Europe and the United States as well as Italy. One of the pivotal points of his reflection is the concept of "repressive desublimation", formulated in *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, which gave an interpretation of the new relationship established by power between the principles of pleasure and reality:

14 De Marchi 1970, 39.

15 De Marchi 1970, 42.

The range of socially permitted pleasures has been greatly expanded, but through them the pleasure principle is reduced and deprived of those instances which are irreconcilable with the established society [...] The loss of consciousness due to the freedoms of gratification granted by an unfree society gives rise to a happy consciousness that facilitates the acceptance of the misdeeds of this society [...] In light of the cognitive function of certain forms of sublimation, the “desublimation” that spreads so rapidly in advanced industrial society reveals its truly conformist function.¹⁶

According to Marcuse, a refined and evolved form of authoritarianism and social control would be accomplished under the guise of increased tolerance and freedom (in the erotic field, but not only). Its tendency to serialise and conform the behaviour of the masses would prevent the maturation of the individual personality, which is essential in the development and evolution of its impulses. The eroticisation of society and the liberalisation of customs should therefore be interpreted as a strategy implemented by power to perpetuate its authoritarian dominance.

Marcuse’s point of view would later be assimilated and critically reworked by many Italian intellectuals, especially Marxist. One of these was Franco Fortini, who, in a “Nuovi Argomenti” survey, expressed a conception of eroticism very close to Marcuse’s thought in relation to the coercive dynamics of capitalism. Defining eroticism as “the most vulgar and accessible of taboos” (Fortini, 1961, 38), Fortini emphasised that the attention paid to the sexual question in those years was not a symptom of a liberalisation of customs; he rather maintained that it was a front for a deeper and more stratified exercise of power acting at the economic level and not destined to change:

Every relatively rigid society probably tends to establish a “scale of visibility” of prohibitions; and therefore, only if sexual-eroticism has been made the scapegoat or the most visible taboo of a society, can the latter pretend to fear, for its own institutions, the “unrestraint” o freedom. [...] Let’s not deceive cinema or advertising, nor let’s mistake some limited sectors (such as the upper middle class or artistic environment) for the reality of a productive society. In offices and factories, at least in Italy, the public removal of the erotic and its repressive containment in the sphere of the private life make truly archaic forms of sexual-erotic tension persist [...]. Anything but freedom or reasonableness [...]. The relationship between social-economic repression in the world of profit [...] and apparent non-repression and apparent freedom, is actually invigorated, in the world of erotica. All the official and clerical prudery, the censorship and its farces, are an elementary and even crude stratagem, a rear-guard skirmish in which the men of “progress” have allowed themselves to be caught up, thus complicit. And today, for me, those who preach sexual freedom are little less than reactionaries. Substantial tolerance in matters of sex is made possible by

¹⁶ Marcuse 1968 94–95.

the certainty of the effectiveness of the true taboos, the economic-social ones. For me, there is no desirable “freedom” or “reasonableness” other than those that help to read sexual prohibitions from an economic-social perspective.¹⁷

Fortini’s clearly criticises the optimistic attitude of those considering eroticism as a disalienating and subversive possibility for society; this presumed freedom of eros is impossible, because it does not act at all social levels and is not associated with a real economic-political change. Roberto Roversi and Giovanni Scalia followed this same line of thought in their answers to the inquiry *L’eroismo nel cinema* published in the magazine “Film Selezione”. When asked about the possible reasons for the spread of eroticism in cinema and the arts (which De Marchi connects either to a possible reaction to sexophobic morality or to a product of the neo-capitalist “liberalism” of those years), the two intellectuals agreed that the phenomenon of liberalisation of customs taking place in Italian society was not the expression of real freedom, hiding instead a new and deeper exercise of power; “eroticism is [...] the expression of the will for power of a ruling class, it represents the confirmation of its a-morality, its economic hunger, the plurality of its ramifications, its mimetic abilities, its lack of scruples, of courage”. Eroticism is encouraged ‘as a spectacle’ by the very economic forces above us; it is the new bread thrown into the circus”.¹⁸ Parallel to this observation, Scalia’s reflection on the effects produced on the individual by the media, with this hyper-exposure of sexuality and eroticism, introduced the concept of “emotional, aesthetic and intellectual underconsumption”; a slow but inexorable process of disempowerment and “limitation of the transformative and creative freedom of the immense sexual heritage”,¹⁹ which ends up by conditioning even the private life of the individual. Anticipating some elements of the Lacanian “discourse of the capitalist”,²⁰ Scalia argued that the overexposure of sex in the media produces a gradual weakening of its symbolic value within the individual imagination. Cinema contributes to this process of devaluation in the first place, but so do art and literature.

¹⁷ Fortini 1961 38–40.

¹⁸ Roversi 1962, 36. Understanding contemporary eroticism in this way would lead Roversi to declare to be paradoxically in favour of censorship, as the only true instrument to show the new generations a “clash of powers, a momentary demystification of an alliance, an exhibition of contradictions” (Fortini 1961, 38–40).

¹⁹ Scalia 1962, 41.

²⁰ Lacan 1972, 40–51.

2 From Theory to Text

Besides the public debate, many of these reflections on eroticism and the liberalisation of sexual customs found expression in the literary works of several authors. As an example, Moravia's narrative reserved a central role for erotic desire and sexuality (*Agostino, La romana, Io e lui, La cosa e altri racconti*); in *La noia* (1961), sex is experienced by the protagonist as a dimension that alienates him from everyday life against the tedium that makes him indifferent to things. In this novel, eroticism is narrated and perceived as an *interdiction*, a different dimension incompatible with Dino's (bourgeois) social condition. It is no coincidence that the object of his desire is a girl much younger than him who is from a lower social class. A novel in some respects very similar to Moravia's is Buzzati's *Un amore* (1963). Here too, in line with Bataille's conception, sexuality and eros continue to be experienced as forbidden dimensions and excluded from the protagonist's social reality. For Buzzati, it is as if Dorigo's belonging to the bourgeoisie prevented him from fulfilling his sexuality within his milieu; only with a young proletarian prostitute will he be able to freely realise his desire. Besides this dynamic, the novel faithfully reproduces the Girardian theory (formulated in those years) of the triangular desire,²¹ where the arrival of a potential competitor in the relationship between the protagonist and Laide deeply shakes Dorigo, arousing in him an unbridled jealousy that will transform his love into a burning obsession.

An interesting transposition of the theoretical reflection on eroticism into a narrative form was made by Luciano Bianciardi in his "erotic" short stories,²² written between 1961 and 1971, where he criticised the cultural system of the 1960s and warned of the controversial effects of the sexualisation of society. While writing these stories, he collaborated with various non-conformist magazines ("Playmen", "ABC", "Kent"), siding in favour of the great civil battles for

²¹ In *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (1961), Girard defines the very nature of desire as mimetic, i.e., rooted in the imitative principle that is at the basis of every relationship between individuals. According to Girard, one always desires what is desired by others. The very existence of desire is determined by the presence of two human beings who desire the same object; the relationship between the desiring and the desired is therefore not linear but triangular, since desire is not conveyed by the intrinsic qualities of what is desired, but by the fact that another person (whom Girard defines as a "mediator") also desires the same thing and attempts to possess it. See Girard, 1961.

²² Among the numerous tales written by Bianciardi (published posthumously), those of an erotic nature are: *Il peripatetico* (1961); *I sessuofili* (1963), *La solita zuppa* (1965), *La pillola* (1966), *Il complesso di Loth* (1968), *Il ritiro e Il prete lungo* (1971).

sexual freedom and against censorship.²³ One of his most interesting articles was *Una lettera di Luciano Bianciardi*, published in “Kent” in March 1968, in which he took a clear position in favour of the abolition of Law 528 against censorship, at a time when the director of the magazine Francesco Paolo Conte had been sentenced to three months imprisonment for the production and distribution of obscene material. Emphasising the paradox of a verdict condemning “anyone who, with a series of images and other expressive means, offends the common feeling of decency”,²⁴ while however excluding works of art (because otherwise museums, libraries and churches would have to be closed), Bianciardi considered the concept of decency itself, defining it as “an irrational way of standing in front of the representation of an aspect of reality that our conscience refuses to accept”.²⁵ Starting from this definition, he used irony to criticise the principle according to which this feeling should only be applied to the sexual sphere and not others, such as that of death. Declaring his thanatophobia, Bianciardi lamented the fact that this form of decency does not meet with the same reactions in politics and public opinion as sexuality does:

but if all thanatophobes like me can obviously protect their feelings of decency, I don't understand why sexophobes couldn't do the same thing. You don't want to look at naked women? Don't look at them. Don't buy men's magazines. Don't go to the beach. Don't buy *Historie d'O* or *Sexus*. [...] I therefore see no other way out than the abolition, pure and simple, of 528 and all the other articles that deal with this matter. Look, I do not agree with what *Kent* says. I do not regret, as you do, that we have tried to lump everything together. I do not say no to bad taste and yes to good taste. Because in this way censorship is re-established, shifting it to aesthetic arguments, and therefore highly debatable. What I am saying is that pornography must be (and always has been) a literary genre, and as such its legality must be recognised.²⁶

Bianciardi concludes the article by clearly reiterating his opposition to any form of censorship and emphasising its dangers and future drifts. If, as Rinaldi has noted, one of the distinctive features of his work is the pastiche and intertextuality between his writings (Rinaldi 1985), the same formula could be used to describe the profound relationship between his narrative and essayistic-journalistic

23 Several other intellectuals wrote on “Playmen”, such as Giorgio Bassani, John Dos Passos, Allen Ginsberg, Alberto Moravia, Alain Robbe – Grillet, Jean – Paul Sartre, Luchino Visconti and Cesare Zavattini, while authors such as Mario Soldati, Gian Carlo Fusco and Gianni Brera wrote on “Kent”.

24 Bianciardi 1968, 1259.

25 Bianciardi 1968, 1531.

26 Bianciardi 1968, 1533.

activity. This paradoxical and ironic way of analysing reality is also found in the “erotic” section of his stories, based on the dynamics of semantic reversal. For instance, in *Il peripatetico*, a story written in 1961 in parallel with *La vita agra*²⁷ and Miller’s translations, the shift can already be seen in the title. The term “peripatetic” is used by the author to identify the protagonist, a wealthy owner of an antiquarian bookshop in Milan and a regular frequenter of prostitutes, who force him to wander restlessly around the city, ironically making him a peripatetic (at the time, a term used to refer to a prostitute). In the tale, Bianciardi inserts essay extracts to address themes publicly debated in those years, such as the polemic against unsafe natural contraceptives, like the Ogino-Knaus method,²⁸ which were the only ones not condemned by the Church. These parts are often marked by a biting irony,²⁹ used to reveal the hypocritical respectability of the bourgeois world, perfectly embodied by the protagonist, a “whoremonger but a ‘good family man’, and an atheist very careful to have his children baptised”.³⁰

“However, in *I sessuofili* and *La solita zuppa* the reappropriation and narrativisation of some of the theories on eroticism are most effective and convincing.” The first opens with an essayistic-theoretical insert where the narrator traced the origins of sexophobia in the culture of those years, also affecting the intellectual class, whose names are specifically provided:

In short, think of St Angela of Foligno, to say the least, who applied embers to her genitals to extinguish the fire of lust with fire. Or think of the rules of St. Columbanus: two hundred

27 Part of Chapter IV of this novel is also dedicated to a personal advocacy of greater sexual freedom. See Bianciardi 1962, 614–617.

28 The same theme would in fact return in a minor story of 1966, *La pillola*, published in the magazine “ABC”.

29 For instance: “Physiological method, also known as rhythmic method, or Ogino – Knaus method (named after the two scientists, a German and a Japanese, who discovered it). Once it has been established that a woman has periods of fertility and periods of sterility every month, one tries to identify the rhythmic sequence of the former and abstains from sexual intercourse when they occur. It is a method that even the ecclesiastical authorities tolerate (without, of course, welcoming excessive publicity) and it is also, theoretically, the healthiest. Theoretically: in practice, ovulation (this is how the ‘fertile period’ is defined) varies greatly from person to person, is influenced by external and internal factors—such as the changing seasons, body temperature, even moods—and there is nothing to prevent it occurring not once but twice in the same month. Some witty gynaecologists, I forget whether they are American or Swedish, would even like to name the maternity ward of their clinic after Ogino and Knaus, in order to show how many newborns owe their good fortune to these famous scientists. My son Augusto, who was born in 1948, is part of the team”. Bianciardi 1961, 1587–1588.

30 Varotti 2017, 222.

lashes on the buttocks for anyone who, in the absence of trustworthy witnesses, so much as spoke to a woman. These are our cultural roots: on the one hand the Greek-Roman civilisation, on the other the Mazdean-Judeo-Christian civilisation, the most formidable creator of sexophobic taboos. Thus, over the centuries, they have forbidden us, at meals, to offer chicken thighs to the ladies, and they have imposed on us, in bed, a shirt of coarse cloth closed at the neck and feet, with only a hole for carnal union.

We may think we have evolved, but if we look at the panorama of contemporary fiction, here is the squalor: ranging from the coitus-vomit of Alberto Moravia to the infantilism of Cesare Zavattini, the sadistic aggressiveness of Curzio Malaparte, the programmatic chastisement of eroticism of Vitaliano Brancati. Cassola and Pasolini are best left alone, for heaven's sake. With the possible exception of the Calabrian Rèpaci, it is all a procession of more or less conscious sexophobes.³¹

In this sexophobic setting, Gianni's story tells of a young man from a good family, married to Olga, a young woman who is a former prostitute with whom he fell in love in a brothel. Although the protagonist's sex life is basically fulfilled, he is deeply jealous of his wife and the fact that she has had sex with other men before him, a possessive instinct "typical of a patrilineal society such as ours".³² In an attempt to overcome this obsession, Gianni begins to associate with a group of activists working for the "liberation of sexophobic taboos", including monogamy, so much so that he decides to found a group of sexophiles who freely experience love and sex beyond the limits the couple. The word "sexophiles" was coined from the antinomian term "sexophobia", which was used by the more progressive wing of public opinion in the 1960s and which recurs very frequently in the text in association with other terms ("sexophobic block", "sexophobic taboo", "sexophobic civilisation", "rigidly sexophobic morality", etc.). As noted by Varotti, however, this continuous reiteration of terminology ends up by "taking on ridiculous traits, making the adjective a sort of desemantised *flatus vocis*".³³ The narrative also abounds with explicit quotations to Wilhelm Reich's theories, which are borrowed by sexually oriented groups as a theoretical basis. There is a reference to Malinowski's studies, taken up by Reich, on Trobriand Island communities experiencing a collective and polygamous sexuality free from Western taboos. The author also makes references to the connection between neurosis and repression, "orgone energy" and "orgone accumulator", terms that Reich explained in his *Teoria dell'orgasmo* (Bianciardi 1963, 1651–1655). According to Bianciardi, precisely because they are spread by hearsay and without being examined in depth, these theories become pure chatter that empties them

³¹ Bianciardi 1963, 1645.

³² Bianciardi 1963, 1647.

³³ Varotti 2017, 224.

of their original meaning. In fact, it is no coincidence that the author's irony is aimed at the protagonist's three sexually addicted friends, who camouflage their substantial sexual frustration under the guise of theory and technicalities, so much so that they brand Gianni as sexophobic just because he refuses to take part in this idea of "common sexophilia" and share his wife with them. However, criticising the various commonplaces spread about eroticism does not make Bianciardi a 'sexophobe', quite the contrary. In spite of his irony towards contemporary chatter, the author included in his stories explicit positions in favour of a substantial liberation of sex from retrograde taboos, as shown by his reflection on prostitution in relation to sexophobia and gender inequality: "A woman also sells herself out of need, I know, but don't think that eliminating economic need will make prostitution disappear. Two other things are needed: the recognition of women's dignity as equal to ours, and the liberation from sexophobic taboos".³⁴

A similar critical mechanism is staged in *La solita zuppa*. In this story, Bianciardi used paradoxical reversal to transpose the sexual taboo into a food taboo. The protagonist narrates in the first person how he lives in a world in which all the restrictions that used to be about sex now refer to food. There is no such thing as a monogamous marriage but, upon turning eighteen, every individual must choose only one food that they will eat for the rest of their lives (the protagonist chooses semolina). While sex is practised freely and promiscuously (people can go "out for sex"), any food other than the one chosen is consumed secretly and with a sense of shame, as demonstrated in the beginning of the story, when the protagonist secretly visits a flat (a transposition of a brothel)³⁵ to have a Florentine steak. Whereas everything related to the alimentary sphere is subject to prohibition and strict control (there is "divorce", "food annulment", "consensual fasting"), the sexual sphere is freely experienced; the protagonist and his wife have several lovers, children masturbate in front of their parents and practice masturbation in school, sex toys are sold as gifts on birthdays and holidays, and so on. The alienating effect of the text is mainly due to the process of linguistic inversion of the two areas (sex and food); "gastrography" is used in place of pornography, "food-appeal" replaces sex-appeal, "food attraction" replaces sexual attraction, and a novel has a "gastronomic background" instead of a sexual background. Even in advertising, the vocabulary used to describe a product and encourage sales is no longer sexual, but food-related:

³⁴ Bianciardi 1963, 1646.

³⁵ The text explicitly refers to the Merlin law, which had decreed the closing of brothels and introduced the offences of exploiting and aiding and abetting prostitution. Obviously, in this case, the Merlin law applies to food and not sex.

“Appetising, succulent, peppery, meaty, crunchy, these are the adjectives used to sell a car”.³⁶ Through this process of inversion, Bianciardi does indeed show the absurdity of sexophobic morality, but also its elementary principle, namely that the more something is forbidden, the more it is desired and talked about (and the more it becomes part of the public discourse). As in the previous story, the author makes explicit references to Reichian theories on eroticism and the relationship between neurosis and repression. References to anthropological studies on the eating (and non -sexual) habits of the peoples of the Trobriand Islands return, and De Marchi is cited as one of the main Italian intellectuals fighting for “food liberalisation”. *Cibo e civiltà* and *La rivoluzione alimentare* (which refer to Reich’s *La rivoluzione sessuale* and Marcuse’s *Eros e civiltà*, and also De Marchi’s *Sesso e civiltà*) are mentioned as fundamental works, in which he theorises how “an abundant but above all varied diet has positive consequences for man’s physical and psychological health, while the consequences of the food taboo, the negative ones, are very evident, for those with eyes and minds, in every aspect of our so-called civilised life”.³⁷

With a writing style continually mixing narrative and essayist speculation, irony and paradox, Bianciardi succeeds in representing the risks of a fictitious clearance of erotic discourse. Although arguing in favour of modernising customs, he deeply criticises the public the public trivialisation of theories on eros turning them into commonplaces and empty speeches. While in his articles the essay is used as a clear stance against the sexual taboos in vogue, in his stories this form becomes a parodic tool to represent false progressive fashions. If in those years authors such as Buzzati and Moravia transpose and integrated some of the theories on erotic desire into narrative, Bianciardi rather opts for for an alienating staging of the discourse on eroticism, using style to represent the contradictions and hypocritical postures of the society of the time. A society that, as later argued by intellectuals like Lacan, Deleuze and Foucault, would increasingly exploit and control eros in the years to come, transforming it into a veritable instrument of power.

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