PREFACE

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GLIMPSES OF A METAMORPHIC SCENARIO

The contributions collected in this section of the volume are a choice of the Culture Workshop papers originally delivered at the 28th Conference of the Italian Association of English Studies (Pisa, September 14-16, 2017). These papers provide stimulating suggestions on the many ways a 'world of words' – a semiosphere permeated with signs, codes and symbols – can help us to figure out connections, dialectical tensions, and interpretative models within a trans-disciplinary and rhizomatic network of perspectives in which the paradigms of conventionality, creativity and, most of all, complexity are often crucially addressed.

The very notion of cultural expression(s) as a non-linear "flow" which is constantly "in process" (Hannerz 1992), growing and adapting, moving across barriers and borders, is at the core of the reflections and analyses informing these articles. A keen awareness of the epistemological constraints ingrained in binary thinking, monolithic codifications and the orthodoxy which underlies a given set of established disciplines and their self-contained areas, is certainly another cornerstone of the arguments offered here. While taking stock of the multiple theoretical entryways supplied by these papers and their efforts at interlocking various conceptual nodes, the reader also gains insight into the 'post-disciplinary' afflatus of contemporary Cultural Studies, whose development has been triggered by "a dissatisfaction with other disciplines, not merely their contents but also their very limits as such" (Jameson 1993: 18), let alone the risks deriving from a rigid institutionalisation of knowledge or a crystallised elitist hegemony. Indeed, openness and theoretical versatility, alongside a mental attitude that endorses and enhances critique, have been singled out as prominent features of Cultural Studies, which is in itself "a process, a kind of alchemy for producing useful knowledge; codify it and you might halt its reactions" (Johnson 1986-1987: 38).

Differently put, the far-reaching scope, cross-cutting tendencies and "ever-changing field of cultural studies" could be compared to a promising open venture (Wolff 1999: 500, 506), whose earnest explorers take on the task of tracking the epiphenomenal routes that are continuously being shaped (see Grossberg 1993). With the progressive emergence of

a globalised geopolitical scenario, the search for a decentralised "disciplinary reconfiguration" (DeKoven 1996: 127) has become even more compelling. The motley architecture of interrelations and contingencies arching over our Global Ecumene spurs critics and intellectuals to envisage a porous space where a wide range of fields – from literacy to ethnography and social anthropology, from media studies to the post-human, from gender issues and diasporic identities to the environment – can further enter into dialogue and profitably overlap.

Against this backdrop, conventionality is of course bound to lie at the negative end of the spectrum as long as one conceives it in terms of a compliant adherence to ossified conventions and exclusionary beliefs, and therefore in stark opposition to the disrupting as well as creative force of conflations, intersections, and exchanges. At the same time, no act of re-positioning and open-ended interrogation can operate in a vacuum, and this is where a collective domain of shared values, icons, representation strategies and even stereotypes proves relevant. Novelty, dissimilarity, and non-hegemonic views are inevitably assessed in comparative and contextualised terms, that is, by marking off their territory *vis-à-vis* predictable conjoinings and canonised rules. That is why the repertoires of received ideas and internalised practices may become instrumental in throwing into sharp relief a whole grey area of asymmetries, disruptions and border zones which are potentially transformative, and sometimes radically so. As it happens, the polarisation setting in between systematic closure and innovativeness, commonsense thinking and divergence, contributes to laying the foundations for the intricate geography of polysemous productivity that is generally defined as 'complexity'. Figuratively, the flow of cultural (dis-)aggregations is seen as branching out into various directions, both at surface and subterranean levels, via random and organised linkages, and inevitably encountering different kinds of resistance from the regions it crosses, or the strongholds it eventually erodes. In order to map this propagating maze, interpreters need to observe how and to what effect a variable set of components and influences interact with a substratum of enduring, archetypal paradigms so as to create a new balance – be it towards assimilation or eclecticism, revivalism or modernisation – within a clustered system whose norms are never totally transparent.

For their part, Cultural Studies scholars aim to strike a middle course between textual/discursive analysis and political engagement, namely a concern with the complex dynamics of lived experience, social formations and practices, power relations of dominance and subordination, including the conditions of production and consumption as well as the possibilities for situated agency and intervention. Needless to say,

Cultural Studies hardly loses its hold on such focal points as ideology, pedagogy and resistance, the endorsement of a counter-hegemonic and problematising attitude, the material factors in which the generation of meaning is embedded, and a particular receptivity toward issues that have direct bearing on the present.

A large number of those tenets are brilliantly dealt with in the deeply-researched article – originally a plenary lecture – which opens this part of the volume. In "In Between Stories: Gramsci's 'Morbid Symptoms' and Changing Narratives in Cultural Studies", Roger Bromley takes his lead from one of the most memorable passages in Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* to examine the new millennium's convulsively metamorphic scenario. This globalised, fluid background shows all the symptoms of an epochal time of transition, deep uncertainty and radical change, an interregnum where the old order is disappearing into a 'post-reality' and the new one ('trans-') is still scarcely visible. This suspended condition of epistemological and socio-political in-betweenness has also thrown down a compelling challenge to the project of Cultural Studies, which, as Bromley cogently argues, has been re-organising itself around parables that subsume the intersectionality of a wider range of areas and phenomena, including emerging technologies, post-humanism theories, transnational diaspora, the Anthropocene and the resurgence of ethno-populism in the West. The need is felt for an up-to-date cartography, a vocabulary capable of re-orientating us towards these massive transformations while simultaneously remaining true to the spirit of Cultural Studies as an unsettling narrative of resistance, a destabilising, hybrid form of counter-discourse which circumvents the pillars of orthodoxy and paves the way for participation and intervention. If critical knowledge calls for a suitable shifting, this must not be done at the expense of analytical criticism's exegetic power. For Cultural Studies to maintain its intellectual productivity, oppositional force and ethical commitment to shaping the future, no room should be allowed for acquiescence or a mere free-floating in a sea of disconnected signifiers.

The articles following Bromley's chapter are grouped according to a loosely thematic and argumentative principle which expatiates on the idea of culture and border-blending, language and semantisation, the methodological approaches and reception of Cultural Studies in English and non-English academic contexts. The survey then incorporates discussions of topics related to trauma, history and ethnicity; the globalised metropolis, cyberspace and transnationality; the politics of intermediality; the multimodal rhetoric of advertising campaigns and social networking platforms. These multiple strands draw a miniature constellation of the Culture Workshop sessions into which the 2017

three-day conference had been divided: "Cultural Studies Today: An Assessment", "The House of Fiction and of Drama", "Intermedially Speaking", "Creative Spaces: Global and Transnational Approaches", "The Green Discourse", "Detections: Before Genetics, After Truth", and "Public Engagement and Memory in the Digital Age".

A reassessment of important theoretical aspects, Nicoletta Vallorani's "Rewording/Rewarding Culture: (Post)Cultural Studies and the Shame of Being 'Different'" debates the state of Cultural Studies as intended and practised today within the Italian academe. The theoretical hybridity inherent in Cultural Studies has always encouraged the students of culture to take a two-folded approach across disciplines, in light of which literary and linguistic skills have progressively been recodified within a globalised program. Seminal relevance on this point is recognised to Richard Hoggart's and Raymond Williams's adaptations of literary analysis for the interpretation of culturemes and to Stuart Hall's theorisation of the centrality of language in cultural representations. The implementation of such cognitive instruments transcends the mere selection of the right utensils from an ideally neutral tool-box. Nor does it entail the mechanical re-enactment of a pre-ordered theoretical scheme. It is rooted in historical transformations and gains momentum from cultural contingency. In this sense, mass migration is seen by Vallorani as a decisive phenomenon within current European affairs and one which necessarily brings Migration Studies to the fore along with the issue of cultural difference. In order to define her flexible approach and her understanding of how literature and culture relate, Vallorani also acknowledges her debt to Franco Moretti's argument that "[s]cientific work always has limits. But limits change" (Moretti 2000: 54). Another key connection resides in the inextricability of research and teaching, a vital cooperation which is hardly enhanced within the Italian academe. But what is more typically humanistic than Vallorani's final claim that the academe can and indeed must be emendated from the inside? By implicitly rejecting the opposite politics – the strictly technical pedagogy professed by Stanley Fish (1999), among others – she maintains that academic discourse may compete with the kitschification and marketisation of society and the consequent banalisation of our students' curricula by sticking to high political standards. Unlike Fish, she does not concede that academics are unable to shape the world, or that their messages can get heard beyond academe only when they get out of it. Although it may not be the business of the humanities to save us, as Fish famously maintained, disconfirming the efficacy of humanism does not make teachers and students more reliable citizens or better interpreters of our communal life.

In "The Disaster Selfie: Images of Popular Virtual Trauma", Anja Meyer offers an analysis of the complex relationship developing between traumatic events in history and their technological mediation in our time. Laying stress on the spectacularisation of personal experiences of victimhood, whether re-lived via photos or through social media, Meyer discusses the *Yolocaust* website project and the so-called "disaster-selfies" as part of an awkward aesthetic trend that ends up reconfiguring our relationship with trauma and death. The moral issues raised by the inappropriate pictures taken by visitors at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin have fed a lively public debate on the ethics of visuality online and the permeability of the private and societal spheres at the hands of the digital world. Joining this global forum, and in the wake of Sharpley and Stone (2009), Meyer maintains that contemporary society consumes both real and commodified death through audio-visual representation; at the same time, an ontological paradox keeps spectators at a safe distance from tragedies in which they are only involved at a superficial level. It is thus her contention that both the narcissism of contemporary culture and its necrophiliac aesthetics need re-examining within a critical frame that must go beyond any simple re-description of the epiphenomena of virtualisation, because all this crucially calls into question our vocation to stick to a sense of human communality and concrete history.

Giulia Maria Olivato, the author of "Human Inheritance, the 'DNA Journey' and Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*", illuminates the nexus concerning national history, citizenship and race by reading Evaristo's 2001 book of fiction through a lens that dismantles binary views and commonplaces on matters of ethnic 'purity'. Olivato's analysis of this brilliant novel in verse by a contemporary British writer and critic of Nigerian origin delves into the interactions between identity-construction processes, the national allegory and culture conceived as a "structure of meaning-making that cannot be abstracted from power": as a site of "intense struggle over how identities are to be shaped, democracy defined, and social justice revived as a serious element of cultural politics" (Giroux 2000: 18). The 'DNA Journey' mentioned in the title refers to a 2016 ad campaign launched by Booking Holdings' *Momondo* – an international travel fare aggregator and metasearch engine based in Copenhagen – in collaboration with American Ancestry. com. That campaign pivoted on an experiment in which about seventy people from around the world were invited to take a genealogical DNA test in order to uncover information on their ancestral relationships. Most results dramatically fell short of the participants' expectations, since many of their preconceptions and catch-all generalisations about racial purity were disproved by a test that traced an ethnically mixed

descent. This is a momentous point of departure for Olivato to expand on the metaphorical concept of a 'cultural DNA' that, rather than obeying ethnocentric or nationalistic mandates, should open up a synergistic horizon where one might finally speak of a dialectically shared inheritance. In this connection, Evaristo's half-fictional, half-historical work centred on a black British-Roman character – the imaginary daughter of Sudanese immigrants living in London during the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus, with whom she allegedly starts a love affair – assumes a particular pertinence. Olivato tracks the ways in which *The Emperor's Babe* undermines complacent platitudes and poses key questions regarding Western imperialism, the African diaspora and the ancient – one would say 'classic' – origins of multiracial realities.

In "Wandering in a Creative Space: The Construction of the Indian City in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*", Alessia Polatti directs her attention to the globalised metropolis and highlights how the city as a space of encounters, cross-pollination and border-crossing constitutes an inspiring background for Mistry's 1995 novel. Set in an unidentified Indian municipality, *A Fine Balance* reads like an intense exploration of the dimension of subalternity and of the marginalised experiences of 'postcolonial *flaneurs*'. Their wanderings in the urban context effectively counterpoint the official accounts of Indian history during the Emergency period. The subterranean awareness laboriously achieved by the wanderer eventually challenges the estranging urban and cultural structures across which he acts and to which he flexibly reacts. It is one of the insights convincingly provided by Polatti's essay that Mistry largely plays on an insider/outsider dialectic within the new Indian cities' cosmopolitanism in order to deconstruct dominant viewpoints and make the postcolonial voice more audible.

For his part, Angelo Monaco offers a poignant reminder of how in today's globalised world, with its numberless 'in-between zones' and huge waves of migration, people are often involved in a "struggle for space where identity is endlessly constructed, and deconstructed, across difference and against set inside/outside oppositions […] belonging is always problematic, a never-ending dialogue of same with other" (Bromley 2000: 5). As suggested by its title, "Globalisation into Cyberspace: Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* and the Indian Transnational Parasite", Monaco's article takes the reader on a journey through the virtual realities of computer programming (and the shattering consequences of hacking) by anatomising the grim/funny universe that Hari Kunzru, a British author of Kashmiri descent, envisioned in his 2004 novel. What is being digitally transmitted here is a destructive computer virus capable of wreaking havoc on a global scale. The non-Western origins of

the software cracker – Arjun Mehta, an Indian computer programmer – and the emerging of the United States as the first victimised country – provide Kunzru with a sort of clichéd framing-story from which he progressively moves away with a view to discarding preconceived notions and making room for a position of interstitiality and underground agency. Mehta is in fact an ingenuous young man who finds himself stepping into the shoes of the cyber-terrorist without duly pondering the magnitude of the effects. At the same time, he gets caught up in a maze of shifty and voyeuristic relationships that develop inside the very American-dream, Bollywood-movie cocoon he wished to be part of. The article carefully records the moments when Mehta's subaltern and 'parasitic' status joins ranks with a form of resistance and contestation that turns him into the elusive transmitter of scarcely glad tidings for the (ex-?) First World order. In a metaliterary sense, this state of disruption and viral infection acts as an electric shock meant to awaken us to the contradictions and pitfalls of a still largely unequal global village.

A transnational perspective and a destabilising component of critical difference are also the province of Serena Parisi's article. In "Exile as a Creative Choice: Transnationalism and Liminality in Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight*", she prompts us to observe how the polysemous and idiosyncratic revisiting of a Western literary milestone – William Shakespeare's Henriad – might visualise a tangential scenario that remains impermeable to any easy (re)assimilation and univocal interpretation. Behind, or actually by virtue of, its technical unevenness and erratic style, heavy cuts and daring concoctions, Welles's 1965 film based on his own *Five Kings* and inspired by a core of Shakespeare's history plays proceeds to excavate liminal traces and illuminate unexplored corners with regard to scenes, political resonances and characters (Falstaff in the first place). In Parisi's view, the American actor and director's intersemiotic translation should be approached as both a personal creation and a thought-provoking depiction of exilic migrancy and in-betweenness that potentially addresses a multiplicity of diasporic and dissenting subjects. Welles the "left-wing, alienated intellectual" (at that time living in exile in Europe) is shown to expose the jingoistic rhetoric of power across history, while lending an ear to a gloomy sense of loss and to those who feel somewhat out of line, out of their element, even in their home country.

Annalisa Volpone's "'Stop deef stop come back to my earin stop': Some Examples of (Tele)communication in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*" pays heed to the politics of intermediality by tracing the presence of technological devices (e.g. radio transmitters, telegraph, telephone) in Joyce's text at the level of plot and language. The linguistic aspect,

which is predictably prominent in the Irish writer's late masterpiece, affects both the morphological and the semantic manipulation of lexis by coalescing, for instance, radio devices and sexual practices with effects of irresistible humour. Joyce's style develops under particular historical circumstances and, far from polarising high and low culture, brings together life experiences and verbal representations from all spheres of linguistic or non-linguistic activities. The author does this in a way that indicates his profound involvement with technology and his instinctive pleasure in metamorphosing human into non-human elements and viceversa, as happens with the character of HCE, who morphs into a radio-transmitter in II.3. The non-human voice which is often heard in *Ulysses* and the dazzling heteronomy gaping inside Joyce's subjects in the majority of his works thus become conspicuously audible/visible in *Finnegans Wake*, whose proteiform dialectics between techno-bodies and techno-languages is aptly brought to the fore by Volpone's essay.

In "'Play. Pause. Replay': Performing Shakespeare(s) across Media", Aureliana Natale adds a further layer to the phenomenology of intermediality by opening a window on today's performative turn and the cultural bearing of 'remediation'. Hinging on a mutual contamination between new digital media and traditional ones, which thus appear to shift along a transgeneric, paradoxically "discontinuous continuum", remediation can exert an extraordinary power of transformation. When applied to literary texts, its moving-with-the-times logic may bring about different kinds of change pertaining to structural elements, fruition and reception. Natale showcases the features and strategies through which innovative visual technologies influence the reader's response and performative modes of cooperation, especially when such great 'classics' as Shakespeare are involved (as, for instance, in the BBC-production broadcast *ShakespeaRe-Told* and in Ryan North's hypermedial gamebooks enhancing the *chooseable-path adventure* format).

In his well-informed "From Oscar Wilde to Hanif Kureishi: David Bowie and English Literature", Pierpaolo Martino contends that the consummate theatricality and intimate dialogism of David Bowie's lyrics are at the same time an experiment in oral directness and a self-aware performance in literary distinction. By drawing on distant sources of inspiration and elaborating them via his multimodal histrionic shifts of identities, Bowie repeatedly redefines himself within the spectrum of contemporary popular culture while working in the face of canonical literature from Shakespeare and Wilde to Orwell and Kureishi. Of special interest, in this respect, are Martino's hints at Bowie's and Wilde's conception of the mask as an embodiment of truth, with other cultural similarities between these two major representatives of

dandyism being usefully highlighted throughout the paper. What eventually emerges from Martino's contribution is that, as Barthes (1971) put it in his classical terms, dandy culture is interpreted by Wilde and Bowie as a creative, not merely selective, act of resilience to the constraints of a commodified society.

A degree of complexity hidden in the folds of conventionality and everyday discourse is laid bare by Lucia Abbamonte and Flavia Cavaliere in their commentary on the latest advertising campaigns launched by Tesco, the well-known, leading British retailer. In "Adaptively Evolving Ecosystems: Green-Speaking at Tesco", the authors carry out a detailed analysis of the ways through which this company has chosen to enhance its corporate image and prioritise its fresh food business identity, namely by capitalising on the idea of a green and healthy economy. Resorting to the tools of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and Positive Discourse Analysis, Abbamonte and Cavaliere investigate aspects relating to the verbal messages accessible from Tesco's website as well as its videos, thus drawing attention to the primary role played by a semantic field that gravitates around catchwords like 'ecosystem' and 'sustainability' and the ethical imperatives of Reducing, Reusing and Recycling. In this paper, questions are also raised about the actual policies of the media-savvy Tesco group and the relevance of its commitment to environmental protection, charity work and social justice.

In "'The Shade of It All': Queering Academia via Twitter", Angela Zottola and Antonio Fruttaldo endorse methodological strategies that draw on Social Media Critical Discourse Studies, Multimodal Prosody and ambient affiliation/identity discourse with the aim of singling out queer academic identities and the linguistic codes used to represent the in-group in the Twitter account *Scholarly Queen*. In pursuing such a goal, they disseminate their contribution with attentive notes on the practices of the participants as social actors ('online *personae*') in the communicative stage and on the theories that stand in the background of communication via Twitter in the academic context. Adding to the dynamism and richness of the field explored by Zottola and Fruttaldo is their engagement with humour and irony as means of empowerment and of a self-defining policy by non-mainstream gender subjects vs heteronormative and binary categories. In a nutshell, this closing chapter of the Culture Session gives a further boost to the idea of reversing stereotypes while fostering new affiliations, and it shows how counter-hegemony can be articulated, or indeed performed, in provoking and protean ways.

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