



# *Mediating culture in the Italian literary field, 1940s-1950s: an introduction*

Article

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## **Introduction**

Mediating Culture in the Italian Literary Field 1940s-1950s

La mediazione culturale nel campo letterario italiano negli anni Quaranta e Cinquanta

### **Abstract**

This introduction lays out the scholarly and methodological context where to situate the contributions to this special issue. By combining a rigorous scrutiny of hitherto untapped archival sources with a re-examined application of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture within the field of periodical studies and publishing history in Italy (1940s-1950s), the studies illuminate the complex ways in which journals, periodical editors, and the connected publishing houses negotiate cultural practice in a literary field increasingly dominated by the polarization of political discourse.

Questa introduzione delinea il contesto critico e metodologico nel quale situare gli articoli di questo numero monografico. La metodologia di ricerca utilizzata dagli autori coniuga una analisi rigorosa di documenti d'archivio inediti con una rivisitata applicazione della sociologia della cultura di Pierre Bourdieu nel campo della storia dell'editoria e delle riviste letterarie in Italia negli anni Quaranta e Cinquanta del ventesimo secolo. Gli studi illuminano le complesse strategie adottate dalle riviste letterarie, i loro direttori, e le case editrici ad esse collegate nel negoziare la pratica culturale in un campo letterario dominato dalla polarizzazione del discorso politico.

**Keywords:** Literary Journals; Publishing Houses; Intellectual networks; Archival turn; Pierre Bourdieu

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The contributions gathered in this special issue are the result of a scholarly dialogue between literary and cultural historians of the twentieth century that was enabled by the AHRC-funded project *Mapping Literary Space: Literary Journals, Publishing firms, and Intellectuals in Italy: 1940-1960* (2012-2015). The project intended to shed new light on the relationship between local and national intellectual networks and platforms of cultural dissemination such as publishing houses and literary journals. Building upon the ‘ability to articulate the mediating ground between textuality and social history, symbolic value and material production’ (McDonald 1997, 20) developed by application of Bourdieu’s theory of practice (Bourdieu 1990 and 1996) in periodical studies and publishing history, recent scholarly work has produced analyses of aesthetic and organizational practice in specific instances and institutional contexts in the cultural sphere of France (Sapiro 1999), East Germany (Parker-Philpotts 2009), and Great Britain (McDonald 1997, Thomson 2010). The articles collected in this special issue adapt the methodological framework developed in other national contexts and exploit often untapped archival resources to investigate the unstable alliances between intellectual networks, journals, and publishing firms in the period encompassing the fall of the Fascist regime, the resistance, and the creation of the Republic—a period characterised by the extraordinary interference of the field of power on the intellectual field. The archival turn helps mitigate the often perceived deterministic outlook of a pure Bourdieusian framework by showing the complex gestation and the often dramatic intersection of personal and group narratives affecting the relationship between networks and institutions.

Chronologically, this special issue examines the period spanning the 1940s and the 1950s, and intends to offer an integrated image of Italian cultural politics by combining insights into

the institutional organization of a number of periodicals and publishing houses with a diverse geographical distribution (Florence, Milan, Naples, Rome, and Turin) and different life-spans (ranging from a few months to several decades) with a reassessment of the contemporary public discourse promoting cultural renewal. The case study approach enables the scholars to examine in greater depth the forces shaping the intellectual *habitus* - intended as a set of 'principles which generate and organize practices and representations' (Bourdieu 1990, 53) - and influencing the metamorphosis of many agents into cultural operators promoting narratives of change or upholding values of continuity, all reacting dynamically to the pressures exerting from the field of power.

In the collection's first, wide-ranging essay, Charles Leavitt identifies and evaluates five key metaphors utilised by intellectuals aligned with different political blocs (the Liberals and the Azionisti revolving around Benedetto Croce, the Socialists and the Communists, and Catholic militants) to describe the process of national recovery. By highlighting the similarities and differences of usage, Leavitt shows the problematic relationship between intellectuals and the Fascist past while suggesting a historical and discursive context in which to situate the subsequent inquiries.

Next, Daniela La Penna's article focuses on the short-lived journal *Aretusa* (1944-1946), hailed by many as the first literary journal of liberated Italy. The aim is to evaluate how the two main editors, Francesco Flora and Carlo Muscetta, interpreted their role in relation to the call for renewal and how they sought to distinguish their *habitus* from the source of political and aesthetic legitimation of the review, Benedetto Croce.

Mila Milani and Anna Baldini likewise focus on notions of *habitus* in order to explore aspects of the most significant Italian journals in the aftermath of the Second World War, Milan's *Il Politecnico*, published from 1945 and 1947 and edited by Elio Vittorini. Baldini looks at the intellectual network surrounding this journal, charting its relationship with both

the Einaudi publishing house and the PCI, and focusing in particular on the political ramifications of the journal's look and layout. Milani's contribution also focuses on a journal supported by Einaudi which, like *Il Politecnico*, exploited the intellectual network revolving around the PCI: the Rome-based monthly *Risorgimento*. While *Risorgimento*'s demise has traditionally been attributed to Einaudi's decision to move resources to *Il Politecnico*, Milani's careful interrogation of untapped archival sources shows instead a more complex picture, with various factors affecting the viability of two vulnerable cultural enterprises.

Michele Sisto's study on the small Milan-based publishing firm Rosa e Ballo charts the foundation of this distinguished firm, which sported a diversified portfolio spanning series in history and politics, literature, and art catalogues. By focussing on the German presence in the theatre series, Sisto's study focuses on an example of ground-breaking interdisciplinary mediation, thus nuancing our understanding of the reception of German culture in Italy between 1944 and 1950, as well as demonstrating how this in turn engendered long-lasting reconfigurations of high-end literary taste and artistic practices.

If Rosa e Ballo's interdisciplinary vocation comes to an abrupt close in 1947, the similarly broad mission of the Florence-based journal *Paragone* was characterised instead by a long-lasting trajectory, one that continues even to the present day. Billiani's essay explores the debate around realism as it unfolded in the journal's literary issues edited by Anna Banti, by contextualising it in relation to the contemporary discussion in the PCI's Cultural Commission in the 1950s. By shedding light on how Banti's *Paragone* sought to exploit the increasingly relaxed boundaries between notions of aesthetic autonomy and politically engaged forms of art, Billiani contributes to our understanding of the Italian literary field during the Cold War.

Together, the articles in this special issue show how publishing outlets and institutions reacted to the transformational experience of political engagement as it developed during the

resistance and in reconstruction politics. Exploring the role of institutions in facilitating intellectual exchange and reflection on the alignment of aesthetic statements, artistic practice, and political allegiances, the articles here assembled may well help to reconfigure the cultural narratives of *impegno* that developed in the period under scrutiny, engendering new ways to conceptualise the intersection between cultural practice and personal convictions.

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