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Interview conducted by e-mail in May 2019

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THE “*BE PART AND TAKE PART*” ISSUE IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN SPECULATIVE FICTION. AN INTERVIEW WITH FABIO DEOTTO BY NICOLA COSENTINO

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY E-MAIL IN MAY 2019

Fabio Deotto¹ is an Italian fiction writer whose last novel, *Un attimo prima* (2017), explores the life of an ordinary man in a futuristic Milan by using a psychoanalytic subplot.

In the fictional universe where Deotto sets the story of Edoardo Faschi, the world has changed after a revolution ignited by an Occupy Movement’s cell. In the “new West” risen from the ashes of the 2008 crisis, citizens are assisted by the State for all their needs, from food to medical care, provided that a strict health regiment is followed. The only ones who are not protected by this system are the so-called “pre-citizens”, mainly immigrants, who live in the outskirts of the city. Forced by military droids, they perform the most humble tasks, hoping to build themselves a better and more dignified existence. In this context, the protagonist accepts to undergo an experimental psychological treatment of “memory reconstruction” in order to grieve for the death of his brother Alessio, a revolution’s leader and inspirer.

If the story were not set after the year 2030, we could say that it just tells us about the attempt of the main character to work through the trauma of his brother’s death. However, the book, published in Italy at the dawn of a keen interest in dystopias and speculative fiction, is valuable material for both cultural studies and literary criticism. In the first case, because of the way Deotto imagines the society of tomorrow. In fact, the future depicted in *Un attimo prima* is dominated by deep division in the structure of

¹ Fabio Deotto was born in Vimercate (province of Monza and Brianza, Lombardy, Italy) in 1982. His first novel, *Condominio R39*, was published in 2014 by Einaudi. As a cultural journalist, he contributes to several newspapers and magazines (*Il Corriere della Sera*, *Il Tascabile*), focusing on politics and the relationship between science and culture.

citizenship and strongly influenced by the consequences of the 2008 crisis, to the point that money does not exist anymore and it is replaced by a system of welfare credits. In the second case, because through the use of fictional devices the novel itself exemplifies the theoretical question about the relationship between utopia and dystopia. Deotto's "new Milan" includes spores of both, depending on ideas, social situation and perspectives of the characters. As Gordin, Tilley and Prakash rightly synthesized, "despite the name, dystopia is not simply the opposite of utopia [...]; rather, it is a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society. [...] Every utopia always comes with its implied dystopia" (Gordin *et al.*, 2010: 1).

The issue of the "segments", perspective and marginalization is central to *Un attimo prima* and to most Italian dystopian fiction from the same period. As previously mentioned, Deotto's novel represents in Italy the first step of a new wave of interest in speculative fiction. Whilst Italian literature is quite rich in novels belonging to the sphere of the sociological science fiction, there is no denying that the genre has recently become more aware of its potential. As Valentina Fulginiti (2012) wrote a few years ago, the Italian "literary panorama of the 2000s breaks quite radically" with its past,

and it does so in two different ways. First, writing novels about the future is no longer an exclusive commitment, entailing marginality and disrespect. [...] Secondly, and most importantly, authors no longer feel the need to disguise their invention by picking English pseudonyms for themselves and exotic locations for their literary creatures. Without abandoning the traditional Asian and North-American locations, Italian locations such as Genoa, Rome or in Milan have also emerged as possible sites of dystopian imagination.

In addition to Fabio Deotto, a new round of Italian writers – including Michele Vaccari,² Tullio Avoledo, Bruno Arpaia, Violetta Bellocchio, Davide Longo, Tommaso Pincio and Laura Pugno, among others – is now experimenting courageously with the genre. Their "dystopias" address a great variety of themes, most of them geared towards exploring issues connected with citizenship and otherness,³ along with

² Vaccari, in particular, founded *Altrove*, the first book series entirely dedicated to dystopian scenarios, edited by Chiarelettere publishing house.

³ It is interesting to note how the otherness' issue is addressed by most of these authors: it runs on a double track where the concept of "other" breaks down to propose a deeper reading. On the one hand, there are the "barbarians" and some groups of "generic bad guys" that sow terror and devastation among the peoples, and are perceived as deeply different from the main characters. On the other hand, there are the minorities to protect, especially migrants and refugees, in some cases represented in a metaphoric shape – the mermaids in Laura Pugno's *Sirene* (2017). Lastly, it is not uncommon that in the same novel the line between "host" and "guest" is very thin, like in Tommaso Pincio's *Cinacittà* (2008) and Davide

subjects such as job insecurity, sexuality, loneliness, technology, gender and ecological issues. Furthermore, the concept of “border” plays a crucial role in the most part of these authors’ work: whether it represents a wall to climb to run away or the exact opposite, a metaphoric door through which to welcome someone, narrative use of the *confine*⁴ shows how contemporary Italian fiction does not intend to ignore the matter of migration and asylum.

The following interview will focus on the social issues raised by the novel and on Deotto’s idea of Speculative Fiction as a way to represent the real and the contemporary.

Nicola Cosentino (NC): We could start by discussing the connection between utopia, dystopia and citizenship. In your novel *Un attimo prima*, all three of these issues are strongly intertwined. Can you explain the idea behind the social category you call *precittadini* [pre-citizens]? Why did you feel the need to problematize citizenship while sketching Italian futuristic scenarios?

Fabio Deotto (FD): I spent years trying to figure out how I could set a story in a world where the idea of money, intended as an accumulable currency, had been overcome, and every time I tried I had to face the same hurdle: overcoming our idea of money would not just mean to find a different currency that could replace it, but also reconceive our idea of possession, the relationship we establish between work and identity. A world without money had to be so radically different from ours that it would have been necessary to set it very far ahead in time. I wanted to avoid such a break, I wanted the future of the novel to be a linear projection of the “shadow of the present”, to quote Primo Levi, so I devised a non-accumulable currency based on healthcare that would still allow for some arbitration but prevented the accumulation of wealth and power. A similar system could ideally be implemented within the perimeter of a city – Milan, in the novel –, but it couldn’t possibly act as a cornerstone for an entire state system. I wanted this social system to seem efficient until the frame remained confined to the city walls, so that its unsustainability would appear evident once the field of observation widened. In this sense, with regard to my novel, dystopia and utopia represent two mutually influencing angles on the same subject that reflect what often happens in our very reality: the same system can be the best possible for an official citizen, and a social nightmare for an immigrant, just think about all the people who live

Longo’s *L’uomo verticale* (2010), in which the resident is destined to become an unwelcome visitor. However, it is rare to read about terrorism: in this list, only Michele Vaccari wrote about a massacre, in his novel *Un marito* (2018), with little interest towards the question “Who did it?”.

⁴ “Border” in Italian.

as semi-ghosts, with their bodies exploited – on a productive level, but also as an electoral leverage – and their rights methodically obscured, who pay taxes but do not vote, who are automatically subject to all the duties of a citizen but must endure a Kafkaesque journey to have the rights. People who live in the so-called “Western” world benefit from a false abundance, which in fact is the product of centuries of exploitation of other people and the unbridled consumption of environmental and energy resources. The citizens of *Un attimo prima* lead a satisfying life without the obligation to work, and they manage to do it without ever realizing how much that illusory abundance is made possible by non-citizens who are instead forced to work with the prospect of access to that same false abundance. Italy, and Milan in particular, is a perfect example of this selective blindness: we tell ourselves that we are not a racist country, that we are ecologically aware, that we have a development model that attracts thousands of immigrants every year, but in fact our wealth is also based on the exploitation of people and resources; we simply never dealt with it.

NC: The matter of “*Being part vs Taking part*” is central to your novel. And, in this case, I am not referring only to citizenship but also and most importantly to participation, both emotional and intellectual. Probably it would be more accurate to talk about political awareness, whose “awakening” represents the lowest common denominator among the vast majority of dystopian novels. Why do you think notions such as “class”, “uprising” and “inclusion” are so crucial in Science Fiction?

FD: I think that if you write a kind of speculative fiction that tackles social issues you end up bringing to the surface – often exacerbating them – the underground tendencies of which most people see few and dissociated manifestations. If you increase the contrast of the image you are picturing, iniquities become more apparent. Some can also decide to write a dystopian novel because they are interested in the exotic or dramatic side of this type of narrative, but when they decide to root their character’s conflict in such a scenario they must take pains to analyse the social dynamics of the world in which this protagonist is acting. Usually, in dystopias, we have protagonists who, willing or unwilling, find themselves questioning the world in which they lived on to that point and come into conflict with it: it is valid for *1984* as well as for the *Matrix*, in these stories the first stage of the hero’s journey – traversing the threshold to an unknown world – implies, more than a change of place or situation, a change of view on the same world. If to have a story we need a conflict, in dystopias conflicts must also be social. Crises are often the product of tension and social tension is always the

product of iniquities. If the conflicts of the protagonists were simply personal, their “awakening” could barely take place. In dystopias the personal and social conflict inform each other, and the novel marginalization of those who were previously integrated necessarily reverberates that of those who were already on the edge.

NC: Still on this subject, I would like to talk about “part” as partial quota or, if you prefer, “minorities”. The future Milan where the story is set sums up the critical thinking about utopias and closed societies:⁵ the “perfect pattern of a perfect social order”⁶ suggested by Plato in the *Republic* collided with reality and came true in the shape of twentieth century’s authoritarian regimes. People’s welfare that comes from collectivisation and standardisation scenarios is obtuse enough to get the same people nostalgic for unhappiness, as Aldous Huxley pointed out in *Brave New World* (1932). The case of your novel is very interesting because it is halfway between utopia and dystopia, on a very shaded dividing line. “Just as one person’s freedom fighter is another’s terrorist, one person’s utopia is another’s dystopia. Dystopia, in other words, rather than being the negation of utopia, paradoxically may be its essence”. I am pretty sure you will agree with this phrase by Gregory Claeys (2013: 15). So, what is this about? Different perspectives or, once again, class?

FD: I think it has to do with our way of imagining the future: on the one hand we like to chase distant and ideal horizons, identify what we need in absolute terms – the abolition of poverty, the end to all wars, the “solution” to climate change, the overcoming of our introjected xenophobia –, and this often leads us to lose sight of the dynamics that hinder us when we decide to follow these vanishing points. Utopias point at wonderful places on a distant horizon, dystopias project the shadow of today’s problems onto a near horizon. At a certain point I realized that the two processes were rarely managed in parallel by authors. Of course, we need to imagine a better world, at the same time we need to work on the problems affecting the one we are living in; most of the time we focus on one thing or another, what I wanted was to work simultaneously on both. I could not just imagine a world in which we had freed ourselves from the scams of money and wage labor, I also had to show how this new type of society could also turn out to be unfair. It is not just a matter of setting the right goals, it was also a matter of tracing the right paths: if we eliminate money from the equation without having worked on our accumulative, consumerist mentality based on

⁵ See on this point Popper (2013 [1945]) and Mumford (2017 [1922]).

⁶ See Lodge (2000 [1947]: 262).

the obnoxious mirage of growth at all costs, we can manage to create environmentally sustainable cities and eliminate poverty, but we could still find ourselves dealing with inequity and prevarications similar to those from which we are trying to get away.

NC: Let us imagine writers like mediums or megaphones of social imagery. There is undoubtedly a connection between fictional and real feelings of a given society or generation. This connection can be proven by several types of analysis: for example, by measuring sales data or the interest shown by publishers, journals and newspapers, or even by making a comparison between books closely related in terms of language, issues explored and release date. Based first on what you read, and then on what you write, what do you think Italy is afraid of? What are the urgencies which fiction is giving voice to?

FD: I am fairly convinced that fiction has the faculty – not the duty – to shine a light onto shady corners of reality and to allow us to do it with angles that a traditional journalistic approach would preclude: we can imagine potential developments starting from the state of the art in the field of artificial intelligence, climate adaptation, cultured meat etc., but to add specific weight to these projections we need to fill in the gaps with fiction. For instance: there is enormous scientific literature investigating the potential repercussions of innovations such as connected autonomous vehicles (CAVs) or universal basic income, but there are aspects that can only be explored by creating an immersive context, such as a narration that allows readers to immerse themselves into a realistic – albeit simulated – context in which these innovations have already taken root. This aspect of active involvement is a typical quality of literature, and I believe that many authors, in a more or less conscious way, come to terms with this: what kind of world do I want to project readers into? Judging by recent fiction, it appears that most Italians are afraid to see their carriage transformed into a pumpkin at the stroke of midnight: because of course, there is the fear of job, economic and existential precarities that are becoming the norm, the fear of new fascisms and populisms, the fear of terrorist attacks and so on; but if we think about it, all these fears are linked to a wider one: to discover that the world in which we have learned to feel protected and comforted is actually an illusion, that “progress” is a mirage we have been sold for decades to keep our eyes constantly fixed on the horizon, that our lifestyle depends on the exploitation of dwindling resources and people on the margins, that all this is overturned and exposed by a climate change that is now impossible to ignore. I believe that, more than single fears, it is this end-of-run anxiety that fuels the projections of today’s fiction.

NC: In your opinion, what was the turning point or the historic event which led Italian writers to this consciousness and to this interest in contemporary fears? For example, the future society depicted in *Un attimo prima* seems “shocked” by the 2008 crisis. Does that look like a credible year zero for this kind of narratives, in your opinion?

FD: I think this situation is the product of a convergence of contributing factors: the election of Berlusconi in 1994 gave way to 20 years marked by a gradual de-ideologization of the political arena; 9/11 not only influenced the way we think about homeland security, but also our very confidence in a stable, controllable growth; something similar happened with the economic crisis of 2008, that pulverized the idea – I was taught this over and over in school – that we were to be the architects of our future. All these events produced a seismic change in the way we use words like “progress”, “development” and “change”. It is as if they’re now tainted with a sense of emergency, as if we need to find a solution to an equation that we cannot solve anymore. But this is no equation, and there seem to be no proper “solutions” in sight anyway. It’s no wonder that among young Italians binge drinking and university dropout rates are on the rise. So, yes, maybe we can call 2008 the year future ended.⁷ And if this is the case, writers are the first who can try to rebuild it.

NC: *Un attimo prima* has been published a little less than two years ago. So relatively recently. Nevertheless, Italy has changed a lot since then. The elections held on 4 March 2018⁸ have handed the image of a country deeply divided on questions such as citizenship, safety, civil rights and economic and international policies. Furthermore, new positions related to culture, knowledge and, once again, minorities, have emerged arrogantly, in many cases supported by members of certain political forces – including, of course, the governing parties (Lega and MoVimento 5 Stelle). Nothing too different from when the United States Counsellor to the President, Kellyanne Conway, during an NBC interview on 22 January 2017, coined the phrase “alternative facts” in order to

⁷ Statistics on Italians fears reflect both Deotto’s words and the themes of most recent dystopias. See the “Rapporto Europeo sulla Sicurezza” conducted by Demos & Pi e Fondazione Unipolis, showing that climate change and economic instability are matters of concern to more than half of the Italian citizens (<http://www.demos.it/a01576.php>, accessed on 13.05.2019 and 08.06.2020). It might be pointed out in this connection that many of the most recent Italian novels containing dystopian elements have been written or published after 2008, in a pessimistic climate following the economic crisis. This could explain the increase in Italian fiction of themes such as the collapse of western society and, as in *Un attimo prima*, the absence of money.

⁸ This interview was conducted in spring 2019, when the coalition between Matteo Salvini’s Lega and the MoVimento 5 Stelle was still governing Italy.

equate wrong information from Trump’s administration to those of the media, widely verifiable – an incident that has caused a boom in sales of George Orwell’s *1984*, according to many American media.⁹ More and more frequently, power seems willing to make disengagement and superficiality acceptable, even preferable to deepening. If you had to write *Un attimo prima* again today, would you put in anything different? Do you have any new fears? Do you see any new emergencies?

FD: In 2004 I wrote a novel – which wasn’t published – that envisioned a future in which governments and corporations made all online content accessible for free to grasp control over citizens. Social media did not exist at the time, Google was still in its infancy and the NSA scandal was still to happen. If I could go back, of course, I would change a lot things in that novel. For *Un attimo prima*, however, things went differently. A worry I had when I started writing it, in 2013, was that my projections would turn out to have a short expiration date, and this influenced the preparatory phase, which lasted even longer than I expected. Today, a year and a half after the release, I must say that if I could go back I would not change a single comma, and this despite the fact that some things presented in the book are coming true: I am referring to the hypothesis, advanced by the Italian government, to remove citizenship from immigrants; to the insistence with which government parties push towards the approval of *reddito di cittadinanza* (literally: “citizenship income”) and the debates surrounding its adoption; to the fact that China is experimenting with a social credit system similar to the one presented in the novel; or how recent developments in the field of green architecture and autonomous driving are following directions similar to those explored in the novel. It is not remotely a question of good foretelling, nor luck for that matter, I just made sure to only introduce in the book elements that I knew were already present in our current reality, studying the direction of development that they were taking. A similar discourse applies to my own fears: what is happening is not that much different from what I feared would happen. If anything, what amazes me is how I am reacting to these wayward trends: maybe a few years ago I would have been furious, I would have taken action in first person, beating my chest relentlessly – instead the world is roasting at exponential speed and I hear the singing sirens of resignation. This is what frightens me the most: the proximity of my own disillusionment.

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⁹ See on this point England (2017), Shen (2017), Freytas-Tamura (2017) and Wheeler (2017).

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