

Introduction

Revisioning / Revisiting Naples in the New Millennium

Naples and the surrounding region were explored intensively throughout the twentieth century in both literary and journalistic contexts, continuing a fascination with the city of Parthenope that has endured for many centuries. The representation of Naples and Campania has changed, however, and Pliny's idyllic depiction of a *Campania felix* has been replaced by a vision of Naples as a "paradiso abitato da diavoli." This judgment, which was expressed in the sixteenth century by the Dantean commentator Bernardino Daniello, was repeated so regularly by later writers that Benedetto Croce sought to defend his adoptive city from an insult that weighed heavily on it.¹ He identified the conflicting feelings often experienced by visitors: their initial attraction to the city's sites, climate, and food tends to give way to a sense of disappointment when they come into contact with local residents.

These opposing sentiments of attraction and repulsion were also a feature of accounts from European travelers whose Grand Tour ended in the Parthenopean city. An enthusiastic initial arrival was followed by disillusion with its social realities. Stendhal wrote with a certain bitterness that in Naples "mille piccole cose ti ricordano che vivi fra barbari,"² while Madame De Staël offered a depiction of the Neapolitan populace as almost primitive: "A Napoli c'è una grotta sotto terra, dove migliaia di *Lazzaroni* trascorrono l'esistenza, uscendone solo a mezzogiorno per vedere il sole, e passando il resto della giornata a dormire, mentre le loro donne filano."³ Metternich, who was known for his hostility toward Italians, was even more damning, describing Neapolitans as "un popolo semibarbaro, di un'ignoranza assoluta, di una superstizione sconfinata, ardente e passionale come lo sono gli africani, un popolo che non sa né leggere né scrivere e la cui ultima parola è il pugnale."⁴ Ruskin was perhaps the most moderate among these writers in his account of his disappointment in the city: "Non sono del tutto certo che Napoli non mi abbia deluso. Mi pare che in questa città vi sia qualcosa di tetro o forse, con più esattezza, di meno gaio di quel che mi fossi figurato."⁵

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the image of Naples in Italy and in Europe was of a city beset by criminal elements and plagued by gangs of thieves.¹ In this vision, the local youth, the uneducated

INTRODUCTION

scugnizzi encouraged by their own families into lives of begging and petty crime, inevitably fell in with the local *camorra*, moving quickly up through its ranks. Naples has retained its negative associations throughout the twentieth century and beyond. In such a context, the only choice left to youth is to “run away,” as De Filippo cried with his *fuitevenne!*

Along with the degradation of its citizens, writers, artists, and directors have represented the disfigurement of the city and its environment. The beautiful landscape of Naples and its gulf, portrayed on postcards of the 1800s, has been violently altered by illegal construction. The scent of lemons and street food has been displaced by acrid smoke from the *terra dei fuochi* (the illegal dumping-ground for toxic waste known as the “triangle of death”). Artistic representations of the city speak to its changing horizons, physical responses to the sensations it evokes, the reliability of memory in this context, and fear for the future. As a result, the works that center on Naples are united by an acknowledgement of the complexity of the task of depicting its urban life and its social realities.

Against the backdrop of the challenges facing those who seek to portray the city in art, literature, and film, in the twenty-first century there has been renewed attention to Naples. Decades after the works of Michele Prisco (*La provincia addormentata*, 1949), Anna Maria Ortese (*Il mare non bagna Napoli*, 1953), Raffaele La Capria (*Ferito a morte*, 1961), and Luigi Compagnone (*Mater Camorra*, 1987), which foreground critiques of the political and social paralysis that has delayed Naples and Campania’s economic progress in comparison with other regions of Italy, scholars have recently returned to consider Naples through Roberto Saviano’s *Gomorrah* and Elena Ferrante’s novels. While some scholars have questioned the literary qualities of these novels, it is important to recognize that both Ferrante and Saviano employ narrative strategies that have a wide popular appeal. These successes were further boosted by Matteo Garrone’s movie (2007) and the TV series *Gomorrah* (2014 – 2021) and *L’amica geniale* (2018). In striking contrast, more traditional novels as Anna Maria Orsini’s *Francesca e Nunziata* (2009), received hardly any critical attention and a limited response from the general public. This is perhaps due to the fact that the book’s almost century-long representation of Naples and its surroundings gives very little space to criminality, disillusion, and sense of

alienation. To the contrary, in the novel's text Naples and its landscape seem to regain the beauty that beguiled travelers on the nineteenth-century Grand Tour. It is therefore evident, that contemporary investigations of Naples and its liminal spaces as a complex, contradictory urban environment capture the imagination of both scholars and the reading public.

In this special issue, contributors explore contemporary representations of Naples and its surroundings across different fields – literature, art, architecture, film – in response to the following questions: Is Naples still considered a peripheral city in Italy? Has the city definitely lost its “armonia,” as Raffaele La Capria stated in his collection of essays *L'armonia perduta* (1986)? How do contemporary authors depict the urban landscape and everyday life? Is the city's space only physical or also imaginary? How do characters interact with this landscape? The articles also focus on current topics in cultural studies: human interaction with urban environments, the ecocritical approach to representing cities and landscapes, the return to the real, and regional tensions in a larger national political context. This volume is distinctive in the range and diversity of its contributions which consider the city from different disciplinary perspectives. This heterogeneous approach reflects the character of a city that is constantly evolving and defies monolithic representations. The contributions engage with various archetypes of “napoletanità” to question their origins, reliability, and reach.

This issue opens with Saverio Carillo's study of twentieth-century texts in the context of the transformation of Naples into a contemporary city–region. Carillo provides an account of Naples's cultural landscape from the time of post-war *Ricostruzione* to its current dual identity as both an urban center and a city–region, through a discussion of the anthropic modification of the geographical context, which is dominated by the looming presence of Vesuvius. Naples was the first Italian city to create a railway system, enabling us to consider the urban center in terms of a partnership with communities outside the city. The city–region is best understood in the instances when it has embraced its larger territories and broader environmental concerns in opposition to industrial projects that have often failed. The city-region works best when it pays attention to its diverse localities and to the wisdom of its inhabitants who over the centuries have developed a close relationship with the environment. Carillo argues that Naples, as a city–region, is able to restore its character and qualities and render them relevant on a global stage when it draws

INTRODUCTION

upon its own resources. This potential has meaning for a variety of initiatives and can be realized when the city listens to the voices captured in literature and invests in recovering local connections and relationships, as well as possibly integrating new ones, in order to project Naples as an Italian identity on a global stage.

Continuing the discussion of the Naples as an urban center, Francesca Basile introduces murals, street art, installations, and other forms of visual performance that have been created in Naples over the past thirty years. These forms of art are in dialogue with the cults formed by the city's marginalized underclasses: the photographs and souls in purgatory contained in sacred shrines in city streets; reliquaries of saints; Christian icons; the socialization of mourning. In particular, artists such as Ernest Pignon-Ernest, cyop&kaf, Gian Maria Tosatti, Jorit Agoch, Leticia Mandragora, and Mario Casti actualize religious language, reaching the semantic spheres of the afterlife, the grotesque, redemption, and precarity. These relations between different imaginings of Naples, representations of the afterlife, and a larger devotional culture draw on the debate surrounding the prejudice of the influence of clichés concerning Neapolitan folklore in the visual and performance arts in the post-World War II period.

Maria Carolina Campone demonstrates how animated movies reflect twentieth-century discussions about Naples that emphasize the enduring nature of stereotypes as well as the fierce resilience that characterizes the city. The “napoletanità” that writers and intellectuals have foregrounded, even for its negative characteristics, is revealed to be the only obstacle to the postmodern “liquid life” which is reflected in a “minor” genre. Despite its many contradictions and problems, Naples appears to embody resilience as defined by the ability to transform a difficult and destabilizing event into an opportunity for personal growth and a chance to reinvent the past in order to exploit valid lessons from it. The world of fantastic literature, seen through the lens of cultural studies, follows an imaginary journey that encompasses exoticism and orientalism, the novel and theater, to produce an urban imaginary that is difficult to contain and becomes the locus of *fascinum*. As a result, “napoletanità” is synonymous with an Italian identity, justifying Pasolini's faith in a population he judged to be “irripetibile, irriducibile e incorruttibile,” like characters in animated films. In a Neapolitan context, cartoons are indicative of how the move to become universal does not imply creating or exporting uniform products, but rather centers on the ability to develop

relationships with other places and cultures through the type of cross-pollination that the city has always welcomed, while all along maintaining its own identity.

Barbara Martelli's and Nicola Di Nino's articles turn to literary sources and Naples's criminal world. Martelli presents *Pericle il nero* (1993) by Giuseppe Ferrandino, the story of a member of the Camorra who frees himself from the tentacles of the organization while exposing and condemning its fundamental principles. Although Ferrandino authored another *noir* set in Naples, *Il rispetto (ovvero Pino Pentecoste contro i guappi)* (1999), and both novels have been widely translated, neither text has appeared in English. *Pericle il Nero* more recently enjoyed success as a result of Stefano Mordini's 2016 film based on the novel. Both the film and the novel are lewd and entertaining *noirs* that counteract the glorification of violence and abuse of power that form the current mainstay of the genre because of their popularity and subsequent economic success, as in the case of *Gomorra – La serie* or *Suburra*. Grotesque imagery and irony serve to ridicule the conventions of the gangster or noir genres in linguistic, stylistic, and ideological sense. *Pericle's* adventures revolve around the themes of homophobic virility and physical and psychological violence as he carries out his main assignment: sodomizing anyone who crosses his boss. *Pericle il nero* is thus an account that challenges assumptions about gender and genre through its protagonist's body, and in particular his somewhat independent phallus, which succeeds in subverting the system of power from the inside. Rather than being a *Bildungsroman* or story of liberation, enlightenment, and assumption of responsibility, the novel asks readers to give less credence to the body that is omnipresent on our screens and mistreated, eroticized, martyred, denuded, and commercialized, and to transform this body into an instrument of revolution against the sociocultural codes of a system that would make us complicit in structural violence.

Nicola Di Nino analyzes the role played by organized crime in shaping society, culture, economy, and political life in Naples and beyond, as presented in Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra*, Matteo Garrone's movie, and the later TV series. The marginal role of women, who passively adhere to directions received from their husbands, the Camorra's fascination with youth, and the complete absence of the State, Church, and of any social and cultural organizations that should promote change, place Naples in a sort of unreal dimension with its own dynamics and rules.

INTRODUCTION

Di Nino addresses the disparities in the presentation and documentation of reality by Garrone and by the directors of the TV series, and discusses how we witness a shift from a straightforward depiction of the real offered by Garrone (a sort of “Neo-neorealism”) to a TV sequel that treated the Camorra almost compliantly (in contrast to *Il camorrista* – Giuseppe Tornatore, 1986 – where the difference between good and evil was clear and the condemnation of crime was explicit), and has had a significant and mostly negative influence on many young Neapolitans.

The volume is complemented by two studies/readings of the works of Mariastella Eisenberg and Sebastiano Vassalli. Ida Caiazza explores the symbolic narrative value afforded to the “porous” (Walter Benjamin) Parthenopean space in Mariastella Eisenberg’s (1944–) novels, *Il tempo fa il suo mestiere* (2016) and *Il prete ebreo* (2018). The novels are inspired by the autobiography of the Rosenberg family, which had Jewish-Romanian origins before dispersing between Italy and Israel. Specific places in Naples function as psychological indicators for the characters and as catalysts for the progression of the narrative through binary systems: open/closed; light/dark. In an emotional rather than spatial context, this symbolism reveals that, in the lives of the Rosenberg family, any negative consequences due to their refusal to open up to others is offset by a bright “porosity.” This “porosity” originates in a Neapolitan space, yet its positive effects reach Israel, where the destinies of the Rosenbergs come into contact and reassemble.

Meriel Tulante explores connections between female mystics, theoretical notions of heterodoxy, and Bernini’s sculpture in Sebastiano Vassalli’s (1941-2015) *Io, Partenope* (2015). Recounting the rich fabric of life in seventeenth-century Naples, in this novel Vassalli returned to the century that was at the heart of his best-selling and critically acclaimed novel *La chimera* (1990). Tulante considers the representation of Naples in *Io, Partenope* as well as the enduring myth of Parthenope embodied in its protagonist. In this period, Naples was under Spanish rule and therefore somewhat – but not entirely – independent from Rome and the Vatican. In an elaboration of a historical episode, the authoritarian and intolerant Church intervenes in the life of Giulia di Marco, a lay Franciscan tertiary known as “Suor Partenope,” to destroy the sect she founded in Naples whose practices were based on direct communication with God and the experience of a physical religious ecstasy. Vassalli probes the disruptive force represented by women in the Counter-reformation church, captured through the female *jouissance* of Bernini’s Saint Teresa of Ávila. This

DI NINO — TULANTE

tension is mirrored on a national, political stage between the orthodoxy of Rome as the seat of power of the Catholic church and the more permissive, heterodox Naples.

The common themes addressed by the different contributions in this issue point to enduring questions relating to Naples as an urban center as well as revealing perceptions that change and develop over time. The articles collected here highlight, among other motifs: the heterogeneity of Naples; its (re)interpretation of religious faith; the tenacity of its visual culture; the importance of an understanding of place that is in constant flux; the negotiations of received understandings of “napoletanità”; and the creativity at the heart of the urban experience. The collection of articles in this special issue presents a range of perspectives on Naples that aims to enlighten approaches to the city and to offer possibilities for the study of other regions and how they are imagined.

Nicola Di Nino
Meriel Tulante

UNIVERSITAT AUTÒNOMA DE BARCELONA
THOMAS JEFFERSON UNIVERSITY

WORKS CITED

¹ De Blasio, Abele. *La mala vita a Napoli: ricerche di sociologia criminale*, Napoli: Priore, 1905

² Stendhal. *Roma, Napoli e Firenze nel 1817*. Bruno Maffi e Bruno Pincherle (traduzione italiana). Milano: Bompiani, 1977: 78.

³ Staël, Madame de. *Corinna o l'Italia*. Anna Eleanor Signorini (a cura di). Milano: Mondadori, 2006: 290.

⁴ *Mémoires, documents et écrits divers laissés par le prince de Metternich*, 8 voll., Richard von Metternich (a cura di). Paris, 1881-1908, vol. III, p. 360.

⁵ Ruskin, John. *Viaggi in Italia. 1840-1845*. Attilio Brilli (a cura di). Firenze: Passigli, 1985: 68.