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Chapter Four

Say Something Left-wing! The Language of Postmodern Politics

An historical act can only be performed by ‘collective man’, and this presupposes the attainment of a ‘cultural-social’ unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world, operating in transitory bursts (in emotional ways) or permanently (where the intellectual base is so well rooted, assimilated and experienced that it becomes passion). Since this is the way things happen, great importance is assumed by the general question of language, that is, the question of collectively attaining a single cultural ‘climate’.

— Antonio Gramsci (1992: 349)

Politics in postmodernity is recognised to be constructed in language; politics is language.

— John R. Gibbins & Bo Reimer (1999: 113)

D’Alema, react, say something, react, say something, answer, say something left-wing, say something even not left-wing, something civilised!

— Nanni Moretti, April

It is obvious that Moretti’s is a political cinema. His only films in which politics is not overtly discussed are, to date, Bianca and The Son’s Room. Practically all of his filmic incarnations make openly political (and polemical) comments, and many of them are or have been politically active. Televised images of real-life Italian politicians and political events are shown and commented on in April, the documentary La cosa is made up of filmed debates between grassroots members of PCI on the change of name of the party proposed by its then leader Achille Occhetto after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In L’unico paese al mondo 9, a section of a collective film that he also produced, Moretti denounces as anomalous the candidature of Silvio Berlusconi, owner of a media empire, in the general election of 1994. Moretti also engaged in active politics in his youth, taking part in extra-parliamentary groups; recently, he has taken a public position against the second Berlusconi government and has become, perhaps unintentionally, a recognised leader of the popular movement of dissent against it. The way in which this new phase of political activism has begun has interesting points of contact with the way in which Moretti presents himself as a politician on screen.

A humble successful politician

On Saturday 2 February 2002, at the end of a political rally in Piazza Navona, Rome, Moretti unexpectedly took the podium and accused the leaders of Ulivo (the centre-left coalition), who had just delivered their speeches, of being bureaucrats incapable of self-criticism and of talking ‘to the head, the heart and soul of the people’. He praised the speech of Professor Pardi, almost a newcomer, and defined him ‘the new leader of Ulivo’, and accused the left of underestimating the impact of Emilio Fede, a Berlusconi-supporter and head of the news for one of Berlusconi’s television channels, ReteQuattro. He blamed Berlusconi for winning votes through his television channels, and Ulivo for allowing him to win the election with a timid political campaign.
One of the two political leaders directly accused by the film-maker, Francesco Rutelli (former Mayor of Rome, current leader of Ulivo and losing challenger to Berlusconi in the 2001 general election), defined Moretti’s speech as ‘an artist’s cry’, and commented: ‘It is always useful that an intellectual talks and says what he thinks. Obviously it cannot be taken for granted that an intellectual is also a good politician, and it is not compulsory to follow him’ (Rosso 2002: 2). With this declaration, given immediately after Moretti’s speech, Rutelli apparently attempted to lessen Moretti’s criticism, suggesting that the film-maker is only an artist, an intellectual and, as such, his opinions are not as consequential as those of a professional politician. Several other public figures also pointed to the fact that Moretti is a man of cinema, in some cases with a disparaging intention, as is clear from the words of the former President of the Republic Francesco Cossiga, who defined Moretti as ‘un guito che si è montato la testa’ – a stroller-artist who has become big-headed (‘Rutelli a Moretti: Polemiche distruttive’, 2002).

Immediately after his short accusatory speech, Moretti himself declared to a journalist for the Italian newspaper la Repubblica: ‘I am not a politician, I do not know how to do politics’ (De Gregorio 2002: 3). In the same interview, Moretti referred instead to the leaders of Ulivo as ‘professional politicians’, but also advocated his own right, as an elector of those politicians, to criticise them. This attitude is fully consistent with the portrayal of himself that Moretti realises through his films, as a humble, unimportant, ordinary person, as opposed to an outstanding artist, an influential intellectual, or a successful politician. Although politics always played an important role in his life and in his films, Moretti portrays himself as an impotent and failed politician particularly in Aprili and in Palombella rosa. In Aprili we are shown the numerous political letters that Moretti wrote in his life, but never sent to their addressees, such as communist youth organisations, a leftist weekly magazine, L’Espresso,7 and the old Italian Communist Party (PCI). Eventually the film-maker takes these letters to Hyde Park Corner in London, a place where every Sunday various evangelists and eccentrics share their ideas with impromptu audiences. He throws the letters away when giving a speech about the models of Italian socialism. The very context in which Moretti’s speech is delivered undermines the seriousness of the ideas discussed. Moreover, to add to the impression that his political discourse cannot be treated seriously, he juxtaposes it with the sermons of some typical Hyde Park preachers, who utter absurdities about the imminent coming of Jesus and similar issues.

In Palombella rosa Moretti plays a Communist MP who, after giving a momentous speech on TV during the general election campaign, suffers a loss of memory. People keep coming up to him to congratulate him on the courage and audacity of his speech, of which he cannot remember one word. Intriguingly, after his real-life speech in Piazza Navona, Moretti confessed to a journalist that he could not remember anything of what he had just said and asked her to repeat his speech to him: ‘Sorry, I am a bit agitated. I am not used to it, I don’t even fully realise what has happened … did I talk a lot? … And what did I say exactly?’ (De Gregorio 2002: 3). One even wonders whether Moretti truly suffered a loss of memory, or whether he staged it, as part of the constant game of reflections between his protagonist and his off-screen personas.

Despite Moretti’s humility, and despite the suggestion that, as he is not a politician, his political opinions should not be taken seriously, the film-maker’s public outcry triggered a great upheaval and an animated debate in the left, and dominated the front pages of most Italian daily newspapers for the three following days, as well as the news programmes of both the public and private broadcasting services. La Repubblica conducted a survey amongst the readers of its on-line version, asking them whether Moretti was ‘right or wrong’, and collected 95 per cent of replies in agreement with Moretti’s opinion (Cf. ‘Il sondaggio. Ulivo, il caso Moretti’, 2002). A debate via email was opened and, according to la Repubblica, hundreds of messages were received (Caporale 2002). In the following months, Moretti continued to attract the attention of the media, by participating in public meetings and demonstrations against the government. The impact of Moretti’s speech in Piazza Navona can be measured by the decision of a group of leaders of the DS (merger of the ex-Communist Party PDS with various left-wing forces that took shape in 1998), announced on 7 April 2002, to form a new branch within the coalition in order to bring together all the new democratic forces that emerged in Italian society after Moretti’s speech. Significantly, this branch was called Aprili, after the title of Moretti’s film.

Moretti’s outcry, in other words, was a political speech, which had serious political consequences and also raised noteworthy agreement amongst the public who were present and among the wider electorate of the left. Regardless of the film-maker’s frequent assertions, both in real life
and in his films, of being a non-politician or a failed politician, with his speech Moretti did politics. Moreover, Moretti’s cinematic discourse is, we suggest, incisively and radically political. In this chapter, we concentrate on his cinema rather than on his off-screen activism, and we will study his three most political films to date: *Palombella rossa*, *La cosa* and *Aprile*. Before doing so, it is useful to explain that we will consider ‘politics’ as a discourse and as an open field ‘where forces and relations, in the economy, in society, in culture, have to be actively worked on to produce particular forms of power, forms of domination’ (Hall 1988: 169). We will site our analysis within the crisis of party politics in general and of the left in particular that constitutes the framework within which Moretti’s political discourse is inscribed.

**Postmodern politics and the crisis of the left**

As Stuart Hall has recalled, the revolutionary events of 1968 marked the beginning of a new era, in which being radical no longer simply meant identifying with radical party politics but, conversely, being ‘radically against all parties, party lines and party bureaucracies’ (Hall 1988: 181). In the last thirty years, a period that roughly equates with what in this chapter we will refer to as the postmodern era, politics in general (radical and moderate) was marked by a widespread loss of faith in parties and in traditional macropolitics, a feeling also associated with a loss of faith in the capability of democracy to solve social problems. In the post-ideological polity, politics has ceased to be governed by the great, all-encompassing visions that belonged to modernity. The crisis undergone by socialism in the last twenty years—a crisis that escalated during the 1980s and exploded at the end of the decade with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union—has deeply changed the political panorama of both Europe and the Western world at large. The most evident effects of this process (as well as of other processes such as the development of disorganised capitalism and the diffusion of the postmodern condition) are the crises of traditional, all-encompassing ideologies; the widespread loss of interest in conventional political discourse; the growth of micropolitics, that is of movements, small parties and coalitions founded on and devoted to single socio-political issues; the increased centrality of questions that were only tangential to modernist politics, such as gender, sexuality, ecology, and the quality of life; the rise of ‘identity politics’, with the result that ‘group identity (rather than class interest) has become the chief medium of political mobilisation’ (Good & Velody 1998: 8); an increased tension between the global and the local; and the return of an ethnic component in politics. Such a situation is widely deemed to be very unstable and unpredictable, both by those who judge it in a positive manner and by those who read it in negative or even apocalyptic terms. Against this backdrop of crisis of the old and of change, we wish to look at the specific crisis of left-wing politics.

In his *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, Hall put forward a number of explanations for the lack of effectiveness and success of the British Labour Party and of European left-wing parties in general from the mid-1970s onward. Although published in 1988, Hall’s insights are, in our opinion, still valid today, and in fact his book continues to be widely read. Today, at the time of writing, New Labour is in government in Britain, though Tony Blair’s politics are, according to many, largely right-wing (at least according to conventional and certainly fading criteria of distinction between the right and the left), while Italy has a centre-right government led by Silvio Berlusconi. More generally, Western left-wing parties, despite some sporadic local successes, are still far from recovering from the fall of Communism and are struggling to find new ways forward. One of these hypothesis of change is, for instance, sociologist Anthony Giddens’ ‘third way’ between socialism and neo-liberalism (Giddens 1998), which inspired a series of conventions of Prime Ministers and Heads of State of the left that have been taking place since the late 1990s in Washington, Florence, Berlin, Stockholm and London. The fact that Giddens’ ideas, which are criticised by many commentators for being too right-wing, are supported and implemented by Tony Blair in Britain seems to us to confirm the difficulty for the left of finding a way out of the crisis without betraying the project of socialism.

Hall adopts a Gramscian vision—which we espouse—of politics as ‘production’, as an open discourse whose outcome depends on the relationship between forces that are active at any particular moment. In this contingent conception, which Hall derives from his reading of Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, politics is not ‘an arena which simply reflects already unified collective political identities, already constituted forms of struggle’ (Hall 1988: 169), it is rather an open field, in which success depends on the ability to produce, to forge, to impose a certain discourse: ‘Gramsci understands that politics is a much expanded field; that, especially in societies of our
kind, the sites on which power is constituted will be enormously varied. We are living through the proliferation of the sites of power and antagonism in modern society' (1988: 168).

According to Hall’s analysis, the problem of left-wing parties (at the end of the 1980s for Hall, and even today in our opinion) is their lack of a new historical project (which on the contrary the right has), as well as their failure to see the contradictory nature of human beings and of social identities, and to understand politics as production, rather than as a given.

[The left] does not see that it is possible to connect with the ordinary feelings and experiences which people have in their everyday lives, and yet to articulate them progressively to a more advanced, modern form of social consciousness. It is not actively looking for and working upon the enormous diversity of social forces in our society. It does not see that it is in the very nature of modern capitalist civilisation to proliferate the centres of power, and thus to draw more and more areas of life into social antagonism. It does not recognise that the identities which people carry in their heads – their subjectivities, their cultural life, their sexual life, their family life and their ethnic identities, are always incomplete and have become massively politicised. (Hall 1988: 171)

European left-wing parties, including the Italian PDS (Democratic Party of the Left – the moderate component of the former PCI), are still dominated by a bureaucratic conception of politics and thus fail to see how the experience of micropolitics is today deepening the populace’s participation in democratic life. Their suspicious attitude towards social movements and popular protests not instigated and organised by the parties themselves is a signal of the gap between the leaders and the people, a gap that was already castigated by Gramsci himself. This gap is deepened by a lack of understanding of the contingency of the political field, and of the importance of political speech for the establishment and strengthening of a political hegemony. As Hall admonishes, and as world events have taught us, socialism is not an inevitable outcome of history, and the ‘socialist man’ – intended as a compact and stable set of needs, desires and values – no longer exists, if he ever did. Political beliefs do not straightforwardly follow from one’s belonging to a certain social class – particularly in a world in which the traditional criteria for class division are changing or even, as some would have it, disappearing. Thus, socialist ideas will prevail if the socialist discourse is convincing, if it offers new and useful ways of articulating needs, protests and frustrations.

Whereas the left at this historical conjuncture seems unable to understand the socio-economic and political field, the right has been and continues to be very successful at doing so. Hall’s analysis of Thatcherism is a very useful paradigm for a critique of the Berlusconi phenomenon in Italy. The project of both leaders is in fact rooted in the rejection of the welfare state, on the presupposition that this has corrupted both the state and the people: ‘Thatcherism’s project was to transform the state in order to restructure society; to decentralise, to displace the whole post-war formation; to reverse the political culture which had formed the basis of the political settlement – the historic compromise between labour and capital – which had been in place from 1945 onwards’ (1988: 163). According to Hall, Thatcher transformed the people’s thinking, their ‘common sense’, which had been constructed around the notion that the market would never again be used as sole criterion to measure the needs of society, and that the welfare state was here to stay. Thatcher dismantled that project and substituted it with something else, the uneven development of capitalist modernisation, and while doing so she replaced the word equality with the word freedom. According to Hall, Thatcher, and we would suggest Berlusconi too, have understood that you have to struggle to implant the notion of the market; and that, if you talk about it well enough, effectively and persuasively enough, you can touch people’s understanding of how they live and work, and make a new kind of sense about what’s wrong with society and what to do about it’ (1988: 188).

By doing so, they have gone deep ‘into the heartland of traditional labour support: skilled workers; working women; young people’ (ibid.).

The task was even easier for Berlusconi than it was for Thatcher. The first Berlusconi government (1994) came at the height of a long phase of widespread and deep popular disillusionment with party politics and ‘particracy’, a phase concluded by the judicial inquiry into political corruption that wiped away the parties that had dominated the scene for forty years: the Christian Democrats and the Socialists. During the general election campaign of March 1994, it was easy to demonstrate that the old parties were synonymous with particracy, and that the participacy was synonymous with corruption. In spite of the fact that he had flourished in that political system, Berlusconi described himself as ‘politically innocent’ and proposed...
his own economic success as a new paradigm of development for the country: ‘Berlusconi’s message of economic liberalism – tax cuts, privatisation, and a million new jobs in the medium term ... had an electrifying appeal, tapping the mood of many people who felt excluded from and alienated by the old political elite’ (Bufacchi & Burgess 2001: 170). The conjugation of politics and market in contemporary Italy is embodied by Berlusconi’s project to transform the country into a firm that must be fit to compete on the scene of global capitalism. The right has managed to impose its new vocabulary and has thus conquered hegemony, while the left is struggling to come out of old metaphors but has not yet been able to replace them with new, effective ones.

In this chapter, we will suggest that Moretti has identified the same topics here discussed as the reasons for the crisis of the left, and has incisively pointed to them in his films. In the course of his oeuvre he has constructed a character somewhere between fiction and autobiography who proudly declares his individuality and his distrust of party politics, but who also believes that socialism is still very much needed in Italy and in the world at large. In Aprile he accuses the leaders of the left of a lack of charisma and of an attachment to old-style bureaucracy. In Palombella rossa he calls for the opening up of the party to the people and for a total change in its purpose and structure. In La cosa he shows the discontent and frustration of the grassroots resulting from their disconnection from the party, and points to the growing socio-political discourses that the left should get hold of and organise in a new socialist programme: sustainable development, pacifism and participatory democracy. In Aprile he adds to these the liberal themes of antifascism, of the defence of free press and speech, as well as of the independence of the judiciary. Overall, he shows the importance of language in political struggle and offers new metaphorical reredictions of the moderate left-wing community. Before conducting a critique of his political discourse, we pause to examine how a political discourse can be and has been articulated through the medium of film.

The discourse on/of political cinema: realism and authority

There are two viable contrasting approaches to considering the relationship between politics and cinema: according to the first, all films are necessarily and unavoidably political in that, intentionally or unintentionally, they either embrace or contradict a given vision of the world. The second position, in contrast, defines as political only a limited number of films that directly present and support a precise political stance and/or expose and condemn a certain ideology.

The first approach stems from the debate on cinema and ideology raised in the aftermath of the revolutionary events of 1968 by the French journals Cinéthique and Cahiers du cinéma, a debate which owed much to post-Marxist theorists such as Kracauer, Brecht, Benjamin, Lukács, Adorno, Horkeimer, Althusser and Foucault, and which continued in the following years, involving many contributions in different journals, including La Nouvelle Critique, Screen and Afterimage.\(^3\) The idea that all films are political is spelled out in some of the most important contributions, and with extreme clarity in Jean-Louis Baudry’s and in Jean-Louis Comolli’s articles on the apparatus which uncovers the ideological foundation of the functioning of the cinema as a machine for the production of meaning (cf. Baudry 1978; Comolli & Narboni 1976). The same perspective was also embraced with polemical vigour by feminist film theory, and served as a basis from which to deconstruct the functioning of patriarchal cinema (cf. Johnston 1973; Mulvey 1975).

The logical passage from this all-embracing approach to the second, more restricted methodology is summarised by Mike Wayne as follows: ‘All films are political, but films are not all political in the same way’ (Wayne 2001: 1). The practice of film criticism necessitates instruments to isolate and analyse a set of texts that are intentionally political. The question that arises, then, is in what different ways can films be political?

One of the ways in which the adjective ‘political’ has been used is to define and distinguish between two wide-ranging categories of films, those of overt propaganda and state support – both left-wing and right-wing, famous examples of which are, respectively, Soviet montage and Nazi cinema – and those of criticism and condemnation of the status quo, an example of which is Italian Neorealism. Whereas the films belonging to the first group are generally fully supported by a totalitarian state, the second category is at the opposition, and therefore often countered through censorship, negative press and lack of funding.

Very frequently, and also in the present day, the term ‘political’ has been specifically used as a synonym of ‘Marxist’ and ‘revolutionary’. In his recent book on Political Film, for instance, Wayne proposes to include in
this category only texts that ‘address unequal access to and distribution of material and cultural resources, and the hierarchies of legitimacy and status accorded to those differentials’ (2001: 1). The author identifies political cinema with Third Cinema, a cinema of social and cultural commitment and emancipation, and defines this in relation to and in contrast with the other two prevailing categories of films, First Cinema (dominant, mainstream) and Second Cinema (art, authorial). Expressions such as Third Cinema, revolutionary cinema, counter cinema, deconstructive film and guerrilla film-making emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in parallel with the theoretical debate on film and ideology, and have been used by critics with reference to different cinematic practices, including experimental film-making, the avant-garde, women’s cinema, Third World cinema, art-house cinema and even mainstream cinema. In all cases, critics referred to a revolutionary filmic theory and practice which tended to deconstruct mainstream cinema both in aesthetic and political terms.

In Marxist terms, the most significant and thorny question which arises in any discussion on political cinema is that of realism, because of its conflicting abilities to convey a progressive ideological stance or at least to denounce a certain social condition (see Marx’s praise of Balzac), and to create a narcotic dominant dramatic form (see Brecht’s criticism of mass-produced culture). Obviously, the question of realism is problematic not only in terms of Marxist theory, but more in general as a philosophical issue. The Marxist view on realism in art has changed over the years – it suffices to remember how, in the post-revolutionary Soviet cinema of the 1920s, visual experimentalism was preferred over traditional, compromised forms of film-making (a position also embraced by such anti-bourgeois and Marx-influenced avant-garde movements such as Dada and Surrealism), whereas in the 1930s Stalin’s dogma of socialist realism put an end to experimentation, while being yet another form of anti-realism. Realism as an instrument of resistance and social criticism gained particular importance through Italian Neorealism and, thanks to this movement’s influence, in the post-war era Marxists ‘favoured an aesthetic of progressive realism, which stood against the superficiality of entertainment and allowed for social criticism’ (Kleinhans 1998: 108), and thus praised such auteurs as Luchino Visconti, Jean Renoir, Stanley Kubrick and Orson Welles.

Under the influence of Althusser and Foucault, the question of realism in film radically changed perspective. From a Western/white/male Marxist perspective, cinema is ‘the product of the ideology of the economic system that produces it and sells it’ (Comolli & Narboni 1976: 12) and, as a product of the capitalist economic system, bourgeois cinema is interested in ‘hiding the productive work that is the origin of surplus value’ (Leblanc quoted in Casert 1999: 187). From a Third World perspective, cinema is imperialistic and so far ‘films only dealt with effect, never with cause; it was cinema of the mystification or anti-historicism. It was surplus value cinema’ (Solanas & Getino 1976: 44). For feminist theorists, both mainstream and art-house cinemas are the product of patriarchal society, and tend to place women outside history through their realism: ‘The law of verisimilitude (that which determines the impression of realism) in the cinema is precisely responsible for the repression of the image of woman and the celebration of her non-existence’ (Johnston 1976: 211).

Consequently, cinema was deemed to be revolutionary, both by First and Third World Marxists, as well as by feminist theorists, when it resisted the illusionary cinema of bourgeois/imperialist/patriarchal realism, when it made manifest its own processes of fabrication, when it was self-aware and metacinematic. This approach was not devoid of problems. As Kleinhans writes:

The biggest change came in a shift in the left’s analysis of commercial entertainment cinema as Hollywood film was reinterpreted as fundamentally realist. Thus a normative realism, understood as identical with Hollywood’s practice of illusionism, was seen as producing a coherent imaginary subject position … In contrast, a self-reflexive modernism and avant-garde practices can be read as themselves producing a dispersal of meaning and deconstructing the subject position, thus calling into question both illusionism and the dominant ideology. As a result, some interpreted an extreme formalism as sufficient to establish a work as politically radical, irrespective of content … The problems of this type of analysis derived from two false assumptions: that ideology directly reflects class identity, and that the film was the sole source of meaning. (Kleinhans 1998: 110–11)

In other words, the whole history of the theorising on counter cinema resulted in an unsatisfactory critical practice that, for instance, led to consider as anti-bourgeois such diverse authors as Jean-Luc Godard and Douglas Sirk. This flawed perspective was finally to be corrected in more
recent times by contesting the identification of anti-realistic with avantgarde, and of avant-garde with progressive, as Teresa De Lauretis did in her analysis of Michael Snow’s *Presents* (De Lauretis 1984); as well as by placing films within their stylistic and socio-economic contexts and by examining them ‘as produced by an interaction between a text and a spectator who was not understood as an ahistorical “subject”, but as a historical person with social attributes of gender, race, class, age, nationality and so on’ (Kleinhaus 1998: 111). Attention began to be placed on the fact that films are not made in an economic vacuum and that the position of cinema with respect to the dominant ideology is conditioned by its cost – a characteristic that distinguishes it from other arts. The possibility of expressing radical and oppositional views through film must be thus analysed with reference to both economic and technical contexts. The introduction of lightweight cameras in the late 1950s and of video in the 1990s, for instance, partly modified the director’s constrained situation; in specific cases, authors of counter cinema also found alternative ways of producing and of distributing films in order to circumvent censorship. Films are the product of their time and society (as much, as Marx would say, as ideology is the product of its time and society), and the perception of their political quality, as well as of their realism, unavoidably changes. Film movements that in their time broke with established conventions and were deemed as revolutionary have today lost some (or all) of their power of impact and appear almost mainstream to contemporary viewers. A clear example is Neorealism – a movement that at the time was considered to be shockingly realistic and was censored by the Italian Christian Democrat government for being explicitly Communist and subversive, but today is perceived as generically left-wing and pervaded by Christian humanism. It is worth recalling Kristin Thompson’s analysis of *Bicycle Thieves*’ production of the impression of reality, which for the author is constructed through an alternation of narrative and stylistic conventions and infringements of the same, and through the use of a ‘balanced, rational, humanist’ ideology (Thompson 1998: 204). Indeed, we agree with the by now prevalent belief that ‘realism is an effect created by the artwork through the use of conventional devices’ (1998: 197), and we take on Thompson’s argument that ‘[realism] has the ability to be radical and defamiliarising if the main artistic styles of the time are highly abstract and have become automatised … Realisms, then, come and go in the same sorts of cycles that characterise the history of other styles. After a period of defamiliarisation,

the traits originally perceived as realistic will become automatised by repetition, and other, less realistic traits will take their places. Eventually other devices will be justified in quite a different way as relating to reality, and a new sort of realism will appear, with its own defamiliarising abilities’ (1998: 198–9).

The recognition that all representations are symbolic, and thus there are no realist representations as such, as well as the critical shift in focus from the text to the socio-economic and stylistic contexts and to reception was somehow anticipated in 1971 by a contribution of Jean Patrick Lebel. Convinced that the ideology of the film is not intrinsic, and that, therefore, breaking the impression of reality is not enough to be revolutionary, Lebel suggested that a film’s ideological position depended on the way directors use their material, on their ability to exploit the medium, and on the reactions that they generate in the public, ‘along with the possibility, therefore, of affecting the orientation and attitudes of public opinion, as well as the possibility of changing the social meaning of cinema itself’ (Casetti 1999: 193). This suggestion seems very appropriate to introduce a second issue of paramount importance when discussing political cinema: authority. Since, as we have highlighted in this condensed history of Marxist criticism of film, the perception of what is realist and reactionary, as well as what is revolutionary and oppositional, changes over time, the question arises how a given view gains authority in a particular socio-economic, historical conjuncture, and/or for particular audiences. Political cinema (or perhaps simply ‘the cinema’) is not just about producing or, conversely, effacing an effect of reality – two alternative practices depending on the perception of realism as, respectively, a constructive and beneficial reflection of a given social reality, or an illusionary representation that silences difference and masks oppression. Political cinema is also about telling the truth, or, in a relativistic, poststructuralist perspective, about constructing a discourse, either through realism or its effacement, which is believed to be truthful and correct, at least by part of the audience. This question is of course problematic: in times of postmodern scepticism towards authority, of acknowledgement of the lack of fixed, objective viewpoints from which to assess discourses, the double task of the left-wing political film is harder than ever – on the one hand it has to demolish authority, on the other, in order to do this in a credible way, it has to construct the conditions of its own authority.
Both the questions of realism and of authority are of great relevance to Moretti’s cinema. His films mostly break with realism, intended as the current mainstream style of representation, and distance the spectator from the customary experience of identification with the characters and the fictional world constructed on screen not only by mainstream cinema, but also by much European art-house film. Nevertheless, though Moretti’s political position is clearly left-wing and oppositional, his cinema is not traditionally Marxist, and it does not meet Wayne’s criterion of being devoted to addressing unequal access to and distribution of material and cultural resources. Moretti’s left-wing position is best described as moderate, postmodern and post-dogmatic. Rather than making a militant cinema in classical Marxist terms – something that is far from impossible in postmodern times, as the cinema of Ken Loach testifies – from his very first films Moretti has reflected on the crisis of modern politics and the passage to postmodern politics. We will claim that, while not offering clear-cut answers and dogmatic solutions, Moretti is attempting a re-description of a community in crisis – the Italian and, more generally, the Western European moderate left.

Moretti’s cinema as counter cinema

Moretti’s first films are parodies of the life, beliefs and anxieties of the left-wing middle-class youth in Rome. As a critic has recently written about Io sono un autarchico, “Culturally and ideologically, Michele’s ironic disenchantment with the way things are struck a nerve with Italian audiences. A year before the protest movements of 1977 shook up Italian society, Moretti was already nailing the banality behind fashionable slogans and satirising his generation’s self-involvement” (Young 2002a: 57–8). The criticism of the confused commitment of the youth of the Italian middle-class appears in the Super-8 short La sconfitta, in which the young protagonist, Luciano, is full of doubts regarding his militancy in the extra-parliamentary left; in Io sono un autarchico, with parody of radical experimental theatre; and in Ecce Bombo, where a group of confused male friends engages in self-analysis meetings, attends (deserted) rock festivals and visits a commune organised on Stalinist lines. The left-wing bourgeois Italian youth was already presented in these films as confused and in crisis – something that perhaps depended less on them than on ideological shortcomings of the political organisations they referred to.

Moretti’s criticism of the Italian left concentrates on the political positions taken by the parties that compose it, on the language used by their leaders, but also on the choices of specific followers. For instance, Giulio, the priest in La messe è finita, in his youth took part in extra-parliamentary activities and contributed to a radical newspaper, but when he finds out that one of his old friends is in jail for terrorist activities he completely dissents with him – an attitude that is also reconfirmed by Moretti’s role as producer and protagonist of Mimmo Calopresti’s La seconda volta (1995), in which he plays a university lecturer who in the 1970s became the target of a terrorist group’s bullet in Turin. When meeting his aggressor for the ‘second time’ twenty years later, he seeks explanations from her but still finds it impossible to understand her choices. Whereas in La sconfitta Moretti teased the absurd dream of the Italian left-wing youth of living the phase ‘before the revolution’, in Bianca he addresses the effects of the free-thinking politics of the 1970s on the Italian schools, one of which is depicted in this film as a farcically radical place in which teachers are given in-work counselling, and information is deemed more important than education. In Palombella rossa, as we will see more in depth below, Moretti addresses the crisis of the left-wing electorate when confronted with the inconsistency of the PCI and its inability to offer adequate responses to the changes in society during the 1980s. In Aprile the left is accused of not having charismatic leaders, sufficient strength and a valid programme to oppose media magnate Silvio Berlusconi’s political ascent. The lack of an original programme is indicated as a persistent fault of the Italian left, as seen in the Hyde Park Corner episode, in which Nanni reads a letter that he wrote (but did not send) to the extra parliamentary left in the early 1970s, in which he accused Italian Communism of following the model of the Soviet Union first, and then of Maoist China, instead of looking for a different, original Italian route. Left-wing politicians in Aprile are also blamed for being disconnected from the people and for lacking human qualities, as they failed to come to Brindisi after the accidental sinking of a boat of refugees from Albania. The Brindisi episode, which for Nanni is ‘a symptom of the political and human absence of the left’, reminds us of Hall’s critique of British Labour during the Thatcher era – according to the author, instead of providing solutions to social problems, such as the closure of mines, Labour leaders preferred to rid themselves of them by way of being absent or silent (Hall 1988: 196–210).
The accusations of the left are counterbalanced by Moretti’s evident pride at belonging to the Italian moderate Communist tradition, as can be seen in various episodes, among which are Michele’s statements in Palombella rossa that capitalism has not resolved its own contradictions, and that PCI has many ideas for the easing of people’s suffering and unhappiness (even if Michele’s desperate tone of voice shows his lack of faith in the Party’s ability to execute them); or even the episode in Dear Diary in which Nanni distances himself from the characters of the fictitious Italian film who are self critical of their past political activism – “You shouted horrible things, the things I shouted were right and today I am a splendid 40 year old!”. Furthermore, criticism of the right is, although more sparse, certainly more intense than that of the left. Particularly strong are Moretti’s criticisms of Berlusconi, of the ex-Fascist party Alleanza Nazionale and of Umberto Bossi’s dissident ambitions that can be found in Dear Diary, in Moretti’s episode of the collective film L’unico paese al mondo, and in Aprile.

Given this strong polemical attitude, it is tempting to describe Moretti in terms of counter cinema. His beginnings, for instance, were polemical and outside the industry, as we have explored in the Introduction. Secondly, Moretti’s films present many of the formal characteristics widely ascribed to counter cinema. With the exception of The Son’s Room and, less so, of La messa è finita, which their author has defined as his ‘most realistic’ works to date (cf. Young 2002a: 60), Moretti’s films break with the illusionary realism of both mainstream and art-house production. This break is achieved by means of a strong meta-cinematic attitude. Characters at times speak directly into the lens, commenting on films, the Italian cinematic industry, film-makers and film critics. One of the most surprising (and amusing) anti-realistic and meta-cinematic moments occurs in Io sono un autarchico, when Michele phones his father asking him for the ‘usual check’, and then tells a friend that this phone call will prevent spectators from wondering how Michele maintains himself and his apartment without a job.

Realism is also challenged and broken in other ways: for instance, through an uncommon use of the camera, which up to La messa è finita is almost fixed, with long shots and virtually no montage. Furthermore, the ontological status of the image (the question whether it belongs to reality or dream) is sometimes difficult to establish, as happens extensively in Sogni d’oro, as well as more sparingly in other films. Examples are the final sequence of La messa è finita, with the couples dancing in the church at the end of the last mass celebrated by Don Giulio in Rome; and that of Palombella rossa, in which Michele and his daughter emerge from a car accident and climb over a hill along with other characters (including Michele as a child), towards a paper pulp sun. Often, the moments of unreality are linked to (or highlighted by) the use of Italian pop songs, because the source of the song seems to be extra-diegetic, but then the characters begin to sing or dance to the music, thus creating a dream-like atmosphere.

Unrealism is also constructed through a very unusual use of space. In many of Moretti’s films the image has no objective referent; screen space seems to exist independently of the objective world. As a review of Ecce Bambino has noticed, for instance, Moretti’s ‘is a film that uses wonderfully the off-screen space to indicate the end of the social for saturation and implosion: it is a film à la Baudrillard’ (Fargier quoted in De Bernardinis 2001: 54). The image, in other words, does not refer to anything other than itself, as if the off-screen space, the social, no longer existed. An example of Moretti’s unusual attitude towards on-screen and off-screen space occurs in Sogni d’oro, when a bar in which Michele is playing pinball is invaded by actors who are playing a scene of Gigio Cimino’s musical, thus challenging the diegetic status of the bar. Similar effects are achieved throughout Palombella rossa: ‘what is particularly modern in Palombella rossa is the idea that the other scenes are all there, available, interwoven around this swimming pool which alone represents the depth from which things of the past re-emerge’ (Dancy 1995: 184–5). Time as well as space is a category that Moretti uses in an unrealistic manner: ‘time in Moretti is pure abstraction, because everything comes out of the head of the character, and everything returns to it’ (Toubiana quoted in Villa 1999: 60). In Palombella rossa, for instance, ‘it is not possible to trace a stringent temporal progression, the actions set around the swimming pool are consumed in a radical a-temporality, where every single moment becomes dilated, syncopated, and repeated’ (Villa 1999: 60).

Finally, the effect of reality is broken by the strong impression that each of Moretti’s films is not an independent work of fiction, but constitutes a chapter of a wider autobiographical discourse – an effect achieved by the reappearance of the same biographical details and personality traits in all the films’ protagonists, and reinforced by analogies with Moretti’s real-life persona. Also, the use of non-actors (some of whom play themselves in their roles of family members and friends of real-life Nanni) simultaneously strengthens the autobiographical effect and the
impression of unreality. Realism is also effaced by the fragmentary nature of
the narrative, which becomes even an anti-narrative in the ‘diary films’,

Dear Diary and April.

In the light of the critique of the theorisation on counter cinema, which
we illustrated in the previous section of this chapter, we do not wish to
straightforwardly associate these stylistic qualities of Moretti’s cinema with
political progressiveness. As De Lauretis has shown, counter cinema can also
be reactionary, so that the analysis of the political stance in Moretti’s films
must go beyond considerations on their anti-realism – not only because it
can as easily be argued that they are realistic as that they are anti-realistic.
For instance, both the autobiographical element and the many references to
society and to real-life events and people can be seen as creating, as well as
effacing, an effect of reality. Furthermore, in spite of the many similarities,
it is necessary to distinguish Moretti’s production from that of most of the
authors whom he has more than once indicated as his mentors: Carmelo
Bene, the Taviani brothers, Bellochio, Pasolini, Ferreri, Bertolucci and
the French nouvelle vague. Moretti’s cinema not only is anti-dogmatic, but
also post-dogmatic, utterly and radically postmodern. Our investigation
will therefore distance itself from the ‘classical’ analysis of counter cinema
and its stylistic trappings, and will instead concentrate on the discourse of
postmodern politics as conveyed by Moretti’s films.

Moretti as a liberal ironist

We believe that Moretti is best described as a ‘liberal ironist’, an expression
and conception that we borrow from Richard Rorty (1989) – liberal,
because in his films he incessantly advocates the liberal cause, by attracting
attention to the suffering of individuals in our society; ironist, because he
constantly addresses and highlights the contingency of language, community
and conscience. Rorty’s theories are particularly useful when discussing
Moretti’s cinema because of their emphasis on language – and we will show
how precisely language is presented by Moretti as being at the core of the
problem of contemporary politics.

A liberal ironist is described by Rorty as a person who believes that we
are nothing but one more among Nature’s experiments, and that there is
no standpoint outside the particular historically conditioned and temporary
vocabulary we are presently using. Ironists are ‘never quite able to take
themselves seriously because [they are] always aware that the terms in which
they describe themselves are subject to change’ (Rorty 1989: 73–4). Liberals
are ‘people for whom (to use Judith Shklar’s definition) “cruelty is the worst
thing they do”’ (1989: 74), who take ‘the morally relevant definition of a
person … to be “something that can be humiliated”, and whose “sense
of human solidarity is based on a sense of common danger, not on a
common possession or a shared power”’ (1989: 91). Liberal ironists combine
“commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment”
(1989: 61). They engage in a constant activity of redescription; but whereas
ironist theorists ‘want a way of seeing their past which is incommensurable
with all the ways in which the past has described itself … ironist novelists
are content with mere difference. Private autonomy can be gained by
 redescribing one’s past in a way which had not occurred to the past’ (1989:
101).

Moretti’s similarity with Rorty’s liberal ironist is significant. Firstly,
he appears to be convinced of the contingency of language, and thus of
conscience and community. His stubborn, annoyed insistence that ‘words
are important’ and his dread of commonplaces, unjustified use of foreign
terms and corruptions of the language testifies to his understanding of
the importance of language itself, and that to use certain words (a certain
language game, as Wittgenstein would put it) implies that one thinks in
a certain way, because there is no thought outside language. As Michele
meaningfully exclaims in Palombella Rossa: ‘He who speaks badly, thinks
badly, and lives badly.’ Furthermore, this emphasis on language is political,
because it attracts attention to the fact that language is a tool of power. By
replacing some words with others in political discourse, or by redefining
the meaning of words, it is possible to shape political reality, and also to gain
hegemony. Conversely, by using clichés, outdated words and expressions,
one can lose hegemony.

As a liberal ironist, Moretti does not believe in a fixed standpoint from
which to assess the world, and that the truth is ‘out there’. In political terms,
this translates into his refusal to identify with the Communist doctrine and
to take out party membership. Although he participated in the activities
of extra-parliamentary groups in the 1970s, even then he did not supinely
accept the party line, and did not embrace extreme positions – as is clear
from his criticism of terrorism. More and more so in the course of the
years, Moretti has come to identify with the mainstream, moderate left,
but his position is utterly polemical and anti-dogmatic. Notwithstanding his criticism and lack of compliance, or perhaps because of this, Moretti has ended up being a most reliable supporter of the liberal cause with which a certain section of the left identifies:

In these politically confused times, Moretti has remained an un-
wavering, even maddeningly obstinate moral beacon for the Italian left in films that bring together his political convictions and personal outrage with a searingly honest crusade against personal suffering, loneliness, and the impossibility of communicating through clichés. (Young 2002a: 61)

As this critic rightly suggested, in his films Moretti reveals his outrage for the suffering of the individual, caused by the cruelty of others (it is enough to pick out, from the many such examples, Don Giulio’s mother in La mostra è finita, who commits suicide after her husband left her for a much younger woman), as well as his sense of human solidarity as based on ‘a sense of common danger’ (as in the sudden loss of a child in The Son’s Room). The fact that Moretti often plays unpleasant characters, who are aggressive, cruel and disrespectful of the feelings of others, confirms that he prefers to criticise in himself what he also disapproves of in others, that he does not put himself on a pulpit and dispense a truth inaccessible to others.

Moretti’s progressive creation of an autobiographic opus testifies to his constant activity of redefinition of himself and of the people (family, friends, people he met in his life, members of his community) who in their turn described him, a characteristic he shares with Rorty’s ironist novelist. This activity of redefinition results in self-creation, which is also the creation of a new cinematic language, a concept that an Italian critic has synthesised as follows: ‘Nanni Moretti is the heir to Federico Fellini ... the only one able to reinvent, the only director in the world who makes cinema without cinema, who is totally self-sufficient, who proposes himself as original and who, precisely for these reasons, must necessarily and immodestly be (remain) author of himself’ (Fittante 1998: 4). As we have already claimed in the course of this book, the frequent accusations of immodesty are counterbalanced by the opposite consideration, that Moretti’s choice of autobiography, of being the ‘author of himself’, testifies to his self-irony, as these quotes suggest: ‘From the beginning, I treated myself and my world not only with affection, but also with irony and distance. I made fun of myself, my generation, and the audience, something the left would never do’ (quoted in Young 2002a: 51); ‘Autobiography, if this is how we want to call it, interests me as cruelty towards myself’ (quoted in Martini 1989: 66).

A further aspect that characterises Moretti as a liberal ironist is his attitude towards authority, which we have identified as one of the thorniest issues that left-wing political cinema must confront, particularly in postmodern times. Moretti’s films dismantle authority by redescribing it in ironical terms; but the problem for the liberal ironist (and for the postmodern political filmmaker) is, to borrow Rorty’s words, ‘how to debunk the ambitions of the powerful without sharing them’ (1989: 103). In his discussion of Proust – an author whose work coincides with autobiographical redescriptions – Rorty maintains that the writer was able to ‘rid himself of the fear that there was an antecedent truth about himself, a real essence which others might have detected’, and that he ‘was able to do so without claiming to know a truth which was hidden from the authority figures of his earlier years’ (ibid.). Moretti’s constant effort to redescribe himself, as opposed to concealing his own portrait, results in a similar denial of knowing a truth about himself. Furthermore, by undermining himself as a successful politician, an outstanding intellectual and an important film-maker, thus by denying to know a truth hidden from others, Moretti debunks authority without sharing it. We will see in the next section how Moretti articulates this discourse in his three most overtly political films. Before doing so, it is necessary to attract attention to the fact that, as Proust ‘had become as much of an authority on the people whom he knew as his younger self had feared they might be an authority on him’ (Rorty 1989: 102). Moretti has also become, perhaps unwillingly, a figure of authority in the panorama of Italian cinema, as well as an intellectual whose opinions are sought by the media. Moretti’s visibility in Italian society is usually ascribed to the provocative quality of his films, to the unambiguous opinions he expresses on-screen on films, people and events, opinions that call the spectator to make an equally clear choice – either with Moretti, or against him. We believe that his ability to raise debate is rather due to the modernity of his cinema, as well as to the incisiveness of his political discourse. Moretti’s films produce new metaphors – new vocabularies to talk about our society – both in terms of cinematic language and of speech at large.
We must invent a new language: Palombella rossa, La cosa and Aprilé

Whereas in other films by Moretti politics as a subject matter surfaces intermittently in the narrative, in Palombella rossa, La cosa and Aprilé it gains special relevance and takes centre stage – although in Aprilé the private experience of paternity receives equal attention. The first two films discuss the crisis of the Italian Communist Party following the fall of Communism in the Eastern European bloc, one using fiction (if this can be called fiction) and one using documentary. Aprilé, adopting the form of the diary, looks at two general elections in Italy (the first in 1994 won by the centre-right coalition led by media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, the second in 1996 won by the centre-left coalition, Ulivo) as well as at other events, such as Umberto Bossi’s declaration of independence of the northern region self-baptised as Padania (1996), and the landing of a boat full of Albanian refugees in Brindisi, Puglia (Spring 1997). In Aprilé the PCI has disappeared and has been replaced by two parties, the moderate Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) and the radical Rifondazione Comunista.

In Palombella rossa and in Aprilé Moretti – first as Michele Apicella, then as himself (or as Nanni, as we will call him in order to distinguish the filmmaker from his filmic alter ego) – tests himself with active politics; in La cosa he films active politics done by ordinary members of the party. We will argue that in each of these films doing politics in post-ideological Italy is seen as a process of inventing a new vocabulary, which is an activity of redescription, and a notion akin to Gramsci’s ‘fundamentally contingent, fundamentally open-ended’ conception of politics as production (Hall 1998: 169).

Because Moretti is an ironist film-maker, this activity of redescription does not only affect the ideological field, but also the artistic sphere – thus, while he suggests that we search for a new political language, Moretti invents a new cinematic language. The two are deeply connected, as is clear from the following passage from an interview with Moretti about Palombella rossa: ‘It is in the water that I want to say all these things [about Communism and capitalism], tiring myself out, to show the difficulty of starting from zero and the necessity to make cinema in a different manner, outside the established canons and practice’ (Moretti quoted in De Bernardinis 2001: 8). Furthermore, in Palombella rossa and Aprilé, by redescribing himself with pitiless self-irony, Moretti represents himself as a failed politician and as a not-outstanding intellectual, thereby denying that he knows a truth hidden from the figures of authority he criticises. In this manner, Moretti debunks authority without sharing it; nevertheless, we will argue that, by inventing a new cinematic language, Moretti himself paradoxically becomes an authority. Finally, by historicising Italian Communism, Moretti shows to be a liberal ironist, convinced of the contingency of language and community.

Palombella rossa was released in 1989, a year which was the apex of a long difficult phase for Italian as well as European Communism. ‘The 1980s proved a very difficult decade for the [Communist Party], as it did for the European left as a whole. The rapid changes that were taking place in society were undermining the left’s traditional electorate and bringing into question many of its old ideological certainties’ (Ginsborg 2001: 157). In 1982, after the imposition of martial law in Poland, the leader of PCI, Enrico Berlinguer, publicly criticised the Soviet model of socialism, a break that for many came too late, but that placed PCI at the vanguard of Western European Communist parties. Unfortunately, although ‘Berlinguer believed passionately that the Italian Communists were different … this difference was not translated into a convincing programme of socialist transformation’ (2001: 159). After the sudden death of Berlinguer, Alessandro Natta became the leader from 1984 to 1988, a period during which ‘the PCI failed to respond with sufficient alacrity or intellectual rigour. In whole areas of modern life – the family, consumption, the new service sector – the party had nothing much to say. After losing electoral ground for nearly a decade, its militants were getting increasingly desperate’ (ibid.). This incapability of PCI to respond to the changes in society and to relate to people reflects the generalised crisis that the European left experienced in and after the 1980s.

The morning after giving a momentous speech during a political debate on television, Communist MP Michele Apicella has a car accident, as a consequence of which he suffers from amnesia. It is the eve of a general election, and Michele, who is also a sportsman, goes to Acireale, in Sicily, with his water polo team to play the last match of the league. The whole film takes place in and around the swimming pool, during a surreal, never-ending match, where various characters talk to Michele and seek his opinion – a union man; two enraged electors; a catholic; an old comrade from his years in the extra-parliamentary left; another old acquaintance, a Fascist; and a badly informed journalist who interviews him. Slowly, fragments of memories painfully re-emerge: Michele recollects events of his life and reconstructs his own identity. This process amounts for Michele to a true
redescription, since he recounts stories from his past to himself and looks with different eyes at his deeds (as with the problematic memory of the Fascist schoolmate, who was forced by other students to walk with a sign around his neck saying ‘I’m a Fascist, spit on me’). The fact that Michele redescibes and reinavents himself coincides with a redescription and reinvention of the same Moretti, an idea that finds confirmation in the following statement by the film-maker, in which he begins by talking of his character and ends up discussing himself:

My character suffers from amnesia, because, rightly so, he wants to be different from that with which people identify him. Regardless of the memories or presents that all the characters offer me, it is as if they had seen all my previous films: as if they demanded that my character remained always the same, identical to my previous films. And I, Moretti-Michele, instead, try to make a different film. For instance in the scene of the Fascist in school with the sign around his neck: my character, Michele, exclaims: ‘What a horrible scene!’, like a director when he wants to cut a certain sequence from his film.

(Moretti quoted in De Bernardinis 2001: 7)

All reviewers have highlighted how Michele’s amnesia is a metaphor for the crisis of identity in the PCI generated by the long process that led to the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe. This theme is very strong in the film – what does it mean to be a Communist in Italy today, now that Communism appears to have been defeated by capitalism and has been proved to be conducive to antidemocratic, totalitarian societies? As the referee of the match suggests, ‘You are a party to remake, you have disappeared, you float mid-air … you lack identity, you have at least three souls. Who are you? You are a useless party. Innocuous.’ Thus, the PCI at the end of the 1990s is seen not only as lacking identity, but also as innocuous, having lost the ideological aim of the revolution. While full of doubts, Michele does not resign himself to this description of the party; he admits that Italian Communists are confused, in crisis, but he is not ‘one of those who believes that people are well, that the Communist party no longer has a raison d’être, that capitalism is a society that has proved to be able to solve its own contradictions’.

Michele, as Moretti has stated in an interview, is surrounded by words: ‘Around my character, who suffers because he is alone, there’s nothing other than words, rivers of words’ (Moretti quoted in De Bernardinis 2001: 7). Prompted by all the characters who want him to speak, to talk to them, Michele also attempts verbal redescriptions of himself, of the Communist party and of the last decade of Italian history. All the interest surrounding him was caused by his televised speech, defined by one character as a speech of ‘great courage’, a ‘very modern gesture’, but the audacity and novelty of his discourse now escape Michele and all his verbalisations are inconsequential and weak utterances, repetitions of specks of concepts said and heard thousands of times: ‘Our project to transform society…’; ‘What has happened in this decade is an extraordinary process of transformation of our society, which is in part a consequence of the growth of the left. The dominant forces of Italian and international capitalism have imposed…’; ‘The catholic question is one with that of the centre. We must work to conquer the centre.’ It is the argument with the journalist, who in her article has put in his mouth her superficial phrases full of commonplace expressions and clichés, which triggers Michele’s reaction against meaningless expressions and prompts him to change his own discourse. Firstly, Michele rebels against dead metaphors and clichés that fail to describe effectively our reality: ‘Negative trend. I never said it, I never thought it, I do not speak like that!’, secondly, he plans resistance: ‘We must remain insensitive. We must be indifferent to today’s words’: thirdly, he claims that his speech is different and that he has adopted a specific vocabulary: ‘I am not one of those free, unrestrained people. Outside all groupings, who talk freely – I am prejudiced’; finally, he realises the importance of finding a new vocabulary: ‘We must invent a new language. To invent a new language, we must invent a new life.’ It is only after this realisation that Michele can remember his momentous speech of the previous day: pressed by the insinuating questions of the journalists, Michele started to sing E ti vengo a cercare, a song by an intellectual, idiosyncratic Italian pop artist, Franco Battiato: ‘This century which is ending / full of parasites with no dignity / urges me to be better / with more willpower.’

The verses of this song do not propose a novel, revolutionary description of society; rather, they express a generic dissatisfaction with the present and a desire for change. This song, thus, cannot be seen as an example of the ‘new language’ that will allow us to lead a ‘new life’. Nevertheless, Moretti uses it as an indication of the necessity of finding such a language, one that – as he said in his real-life discourse in Piazza Navona – is able to speak to the head,
the heart and the soul of the people'. Moretti, in fact, shows us how this song elicits a collective reaction from the public, which is otherwise indifferent to traditional political discourse — a growing phenomenon in most Western societies, including Italy. This is apparent when the scene moves from the memory of the speech in the TV studio, where Michele has begun to sing, to the present in the swimming pool, where all the public joins him in singing. In two other occasions in this film Moretti suggests that popular culture is better able to speak to the people than conventional political discourse: when the public in the swimming pool sings in chorus Bruce Springsteen’s *I’m on Fire*, and when it follows with extreme participation the last sequences of *Doctor Zhivago*.

Michele’s realisation of the necessity of forging a new language does not dispel his doubts nor answers all his questions — he remains a lonely, suffering character, who makes mistakes (as in the failed penalty in the dying seconds of the match) and feels frustrated (as testified by the accident that he causes while driving back to Rome). We will argue that, although Michele stops at the realisation of the necessity to create a new, more effective vocabulary, one better able to speak to the people, Moretti does more and offers to the Italian moderate Communist community concrete new ways of describing itself. He does so by creating new metaphors — a speciality of Moretti, who through the years has put in Michele’s mouth a series of expressions so powerful that they have immediately been adopted by Italian popular and political speech. We refer to phrases such as ‘No, il dibattito no!’ (No, not the debate! — *lo sono un autarchico*), which teased the left for having made discussion and self-analysis a sine qua non of the 1970s; and ‘Continuiamo così, faciamoci del male’ (*Let’s continue like this, let’s harm ourselves! — Bianca*), which has been used in all contexts, and has also specifically served as a metaphor of the lack of assertiveness of the Italian left.

Both phrases continue to be used extraordinarily often in Italian political and mediatic discourses. In *Palombella rosa*, Moretti coined an expression that beautifully captures the problem of identity of the left in Italy and Western Europe in the late 1990s, as well as the frustrated desire of the PCI to govern the country: ‘Siamo uguali, ma siamo diversi!’ (*We are the same, but we are different!*). This phrase, which Michele repeats countless times with increasing despair, achieving a very comic effect, shows the inherent contradiction of a party that regards itself simultaneously as a parliamentary group and as a revolutionary force, that wants to be accepted as an official, moderate component of the democratic life of the country, but also maintain its specific history (be faithful to its past ideals, as Michele says in the film). Furthermore, the slogan ‘We are the same, but we are different!’ reflects the greatest challenge that left-wing European parties must face today — to engage with a vast number of diverse interests, movements and discourses, some of which are not political in the classical sense of the word, but which are nevertheless unified by their liberalism and anti-capitalism, and redefine (redescribe) them as socialist. As we have already argued above, the Italian as well as all mainstream left-wing parties in Europe not only are currently not engaging with these new movements and voices, but do not even show an understanding of the challenge, hence the continuous crisis of the left.

As a reaction to the crumbling of the Soviet bloc, and in order to be finally fully accepted as a legitimate political alternative, the PCI had to undergo a momentous transformation. On 12 November 1989, two days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Achille Occhetto, the new leader of the PCI, announced that the party would change name; the expression *la cosa*, ‘the thing’, was generally adopted as a sobriquet for the nameless party.
Occhetto’s contentions proposal had at least one positive effect, that of bringing the grassroots members back to the cells to take part in a discussion that released repressed rage, discontent and confusion, but also passion and enthusiasm. Moretti decided to film these discussions, and the result is *La cosa*, a traditional documentary of montage, devoid of voice-over or captions (bar those indicating where the images were filmed: in Sicily, Genoa, Bologna, Naples, Turin, Milan, Tuscany and Rome). The concerns expressed by the comrades in *La cosa* are diverse, but some elements recur – for instance, the sense of crisis and confusion; the accusation that the party has lost contact with the masses; the reflection on the historical failure of socialism; and the admission of knowledge of and thus co-responsibility for the suffering of people under Communist regimes. A lucid comrade in the Milanese cell summarises the crisis of European socialism: given that the utopia of the revolution and the idea that all men are equal are gone, and that it has become clear that values such as sustainable development, pacifism and democracy are not ‘made in Communism’, what does it mean to be a Communist today?

Ideologically, *La cosa* is fully consistent with and a continuation of *Palombella rossa*, the emphasis being on the problem of redescribing 70 years of the political life of a community that identified with ideals now severely challenged, if not fading. By leaving the entire screen-time to the comrades’ words, language is shown by Moretti to be the hub of the problem – to refound the party means to redescribe it and historicise it. Moretti’s film is a powerful indication of the necessity of doing this, of inventing a new vocabulary and, as a consequence, a new life for the community of people that once identified with the Communist utopia.

Depicting his alter ego Michele Apicella in *Palombella rossa* as an aphasic, amnesiac politician, who is verbally and physically attacked from all sides, and as a failed sportsman, Moretti derides his own political ambitions and denies himself authority. Similarly, in *Aprile* Moretti describes himself as an aphasic, impotent politician and film-maker. After the general election of 28 March 1994, won by the centre-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi, Nanni is invited by a French journalist to make a documentary about Italy: ‘Your country must begin again to reflect on itself.’ Nanni knows that it is important to make such documentary, but he clearly has no desire to and unsuccessfully tries to convince himself to shoot it. In the meantime, he resumes without conviction an old project, a musical on a Trotskyist pastryc

...cook set in 1950s Italy (but then stops because ‘I do not know if I am able to make a musical, I am not sure if I feel like it’), and films much more willingly his partner’s pregnancy and the birth of his first child, Pietro. Two years after Berlusconi’s victory another general election takes place: also on this occasion, Nanni is recalcitrant and his documentary about Italy does not seem to progress. Every time he sets out to film something, he demonstrates: ‘Yes, but I am a little ashamed, I do not feel like it at all, but I must do it, but I do not feel like it,’ and again: ‘I do not feel much like shooting today. Today I will do nice takes, important ones, yes, even if I am a little ashamed. I should find the way to shoot without being seen. Anyway, I am in good shape today’ (as if he were still Michele Apicella, the water polo player). When he interviews Corrado Staiano, an intellectual who refused to run for the second time with PDS, he complains instead: ‘I am not in good shape today,’ again using a sport metaphor. When he interviews Albanian refugees just landed in Brindisi he simply moans: ‘I am not able!’ This impotency comes across as lack of clarity, or even as utter confusion, as can be seen in the humorous episode in which he describes his intentions to his collaborators on the minivan: ‘With this documentary I want to say what I think, without though provoking the right-wing spectators, because it really does not interest me, but without trying to convince them. I do not want to convince anybody, but even without pampering the left-wing spectators, but I want to say what I think, and how can one say what he thinks in a documentary? And, above all, what do I think?’

Nanni’s unwillingness to make a documentary about Italy, and his claim to not know what he thinks, is consistent with his position as a liberal ironist. His reluctance, accompanied by an often expressed feeling of shame, testifies to Moretti’s awareness of the contradiction inherent in left-wing political cinema: to discredit authority while constructing a discourse that is believed to be true, and that, thus, becomes itself an authority. Moretti wants to make a documentary about Italy, but would like to ‘find the way of shooting without being seen’ – a rather surprising statement for a film-maker who only films himself. He is ashamed of going public, of invoking for himself the authority that he debunked in others, of claiming to know a truth that is hidden to others. Not surprisingly, Nanni seems much more at ease when filming his private life, and he is almost unable to stop videoing his son. Furthermore, the choice of using the form of the diary for his documentary can be seen as his desire to avoid going public, to remain in the
dominion of private autobiography, in order to keep away from the mistakes he reproaches in others.

As Moretti himself noticed, this contradiction is even greater since the documentary is made in the end, and successfully so:

Paradoxically, it may be that the meaning of the film is the opposite of what the letter expresses. Undoubtedly, the outcome of the film is different from what I apparently say in the film. The result is that, with my insecurities, my manias — the cappuccinos, the latte macchiato — my escapes from the locations of the documentary, I pretended to distance myself from my topic. In reality, instead, I recounted to the spectators some years of this country, in my own way, and above all I expressed my feelings on this country in the course of time. (Moretti quoted in De Bernardinis 2001: 16)

The success of Moretti’s film in political terms can be once again measured by its ability to produce discourse — not only in the sense of the debates it provoked after its screening at the Venice Film Festival and its theatrical release, but also because it offered a new linguistic expression that immediately entered the popular and political speech in Italy. Watching Berlusconi accusing the Italian magistrates of being politicised on Porta a Porta, a popular evening programme on the state television channel RAI1 devoted to current political and social issues, Nanni invokes the reaction of Massimo D’Alema, then leader of PDS, who sits speechless in the studio and does not object to Berlusconi’s criticism of the judges: ‘D’Alema, react, say something, react, say something, answer, say something left-wing, say something even not left-wing, something civilised!’ The phrase caught on and, as D’Alema himself admitted, ‘stuck’ to the politician. Even more importantly, ‘Say something left-wing!’ has become a truly new metaphor that continues to circulate in political discourse. Recently, the newspaper la Repubblica has included it in a small dictionary of the new phrases, terms and slogans that have characterised the last decades (Somaschini 2002: 28).

The power of this phrase to be a new metaphor for theredux of political issues can be measured by its longevity — introduced in 1998, it is still very frequently used today, for instance in the debate on the crisis of the left in Italy raised by Moretti’s speech in Piazza Navona, but also by the growth of protest movements on themes such as the reforms of the justice system, the education system, labour law and immigration law sought by the second Berlusconi government. The fecundity of Moretti’s metaphor is due to its ability to offer a novel redescription of a community that is in crisis because of its inability to continue to describe itself using an out-of-date vocabulary. If a community is formed, as Rorty suggests, by ‘speakers of a common language’ (Rorty 1989: 59), what happens when the old metaphors (expressions such as ‘revolutionary’, ‘anti-capitalist’, ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, ‘anti private ownership’, etc.) are no longer able to describe the community?

Moretti’s work is politically incisive precisely because it offers to the moderate and liberal left-wing community new ways of describing itself. Being left-wing in Italy today means, Moretti suggests, to be indignant in the face of anti-democratic attacks on the independence of the magistrates like the one led by Berlusconi, of delirious attempts to dismember the Republic, such as the one carried out by Umberto Bossi’s Northern League, but also in the face of the absence of the leaders of the left from the beach of Brindisi; it means not to be ‘one of those who believe that people are well, that capitalism is a society that has proved to be able to solve its own contradictions’; it means to be prepared to retell and redescribe the history of one’s own community with cruel irony; it means to demystify ideology and authority in all its forms, including one’s own; it means to be able to react, to say something, it does not matter if it is left-wing, something civilised is enough. In short, it means a great number of different discourses that the left is failing to seize and organise into the new socialist project.

This redescription of the ex-Communists, or better of the moderate left-wing community, is in part problematic; for instance, some of its elements — the will to defend basic bourgeois freedoms, such as free press and speech — do not exclusively belong to the left. Nevertheless, we will claim that it is a very fitting description, which reflects both the crisis of the left in the last decades and the strengthening patterns of postmodern left-wing activism. The Italian and European left-wing are today characterised by a loss of ideology, by a rejection of dogmatism, an atomisation of activism and an individualisation of the political engagement, whose origin can be traced as far back as the aftermath of 1968. This individualism in political commitment is today more and more often counterbalanced by a shifting participation in group activism coinciding with specific campaigns — an activism that often claims to be non-ideological, as well as a replacement
for party politics, which is widely perceived as failed and unsatisfactory. In the particular situation of contemporary Italy, in which more and more alarmed voices denounce a series of violations of basic rights and freedoms, it is not surprising that, when asking the leader of PDS to speak up against Berlusconi, Moretti straightforwardly identifies ‘left-wing’ with ‘civilised’.

Moretti’s political discourse is thus simple (it is a post-dogmatic liberal discourse that begins with self-criticism and that puts anti-Fascism at its heart), but is also incisive, all the more so because Moretti does not put himself forward as a figure of authority – he knows of course that he has become an authority, but he is ashamed of it. This shame translates into a firm severity – with himself, with others, and with cinema – a severity that Federica Villa has recognised in Moretti’s films in the form of an activity of ‘subtraction’ (cf. Villa 1999). This severity induces Moretti to a relentless, cruel (and, in this case, extremely sophisticated) redescription of himself, of his community, and of society at large. It also urges him to make films that lie outside the canon and the established practice, without cinematographic referents (and thus utterly autarchic), because, to borrow Villa’s words, ‘Nanni Moretti is an obsessively rigorous film-maker, who is ashamed, and we hope he will continue to be, to make films like everybody else’ (Villa 1999: 66).

APPENDIX: FILMOGRAPHY

La sconfitta (1973)
Directed by: Nanni Moretti
Writing Credits: Nanni Moretti
Produced by: Nanni Moretti
Runtime: 26 min. (Super-8, colour)
Cast: Nanni Moretti (Luciano), Luca Codignola (the leader), Guido Ambrosino, Franco Moretti, Maurizio Flores d’Arcais, Sergio Tiepolo, Emanuele Gerratana, Luigi Moretti, Paola Sposini.

Synopsis: La sconfitta addresses the political doubts and anxieties of Luciano, a young militant in the extra-parliamentary left. Images of Luciano’s private life alternate with those of a protest rally against theAndreotti government, while we listen to excerpts of popular TV and radio programmes, such as quiz shows and sports news. The short ends with the protagonist who addresses the audience from behind the camera, but his words are not audible. Some sequences from La sconfitta are inserted as flashbacks in Palombella Rossa.

Paté de bourgeois (1973)