The *Return of the Real* in Postmillennial Italy: Italian Lacanianism and New Realist Trends

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2017

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I identify a coherent and consistent Italian cultural phenomenon which I call the 'return of the Real'. I claim that this is characterised primarily, but not exclusively, by two aspects: a resurgence of interest by scholars and clinicians in Lacan's teachings (Italian Lacanianism), especially his notion of the 'Real'; and a return of realist trends in the arts, broadly understood, and in the media. I contend that contemporary Italian Lacanianism distinguishes itself from its international counterparts for two reasons: it focuses particularly on Lacan's notion of the Real *qua jouissance*, and it interweaves clinical work, socio-political criticism, and aesthetic theories. Hence, the notion of the Real, as received by contemporary Italian Lacanians, enables us to understand early twenty-first-century Italian realist trends not only in aesthetic terms, but also as an *ethical* undertaking, a form of postmodern (Antonello and Mussgnug, 2009) or, better still, postmillennial *impegno*. I contend that, according to contemporary Italian Lacanianism, the issue at stake in postmillennial realist art is not so much the depiction of reality or its manipulation, but rather the Real of the untamed and pervasive *jouissance* that no longer encounter limits. The Real *qua jouissance* as the leitmotiv of postmillennial Italian artistic production, and a realist aesthetic understood as an ethical undertaking are epitomised in the three case studies closely analysed in my thesis: the documentary *Videocracy - Basta apparire* (Gandini, 2009); the film *Reality* (Garrone, 2012); and the television series *In Treatment* (Costanzo, 2013–2016). In this thesis, I thus address the 'return of the Real' as a broad cultural phenomenon, through the analysis of its theoretical background (i.e. contemporary Italian Lacanianism and the Lacanian notion of the Real), and its emergence in the new realist trends of postmillennial Italy.

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I address what I propose to call the 'return of the Real' [1] in postmillennial Italy. I contend that this 'return of the Real', understood as a broad cultural phenomenon, is characterised primarily, but not exclusively, by two deeply overlapping aspects:

- Italian Lacanianism, understood as a group of Italian Lacanian psychoanalysts (with Massimo Recalcati being chief among them) interested not only in clinical work but also in social, political, and aesthetic criticism, who have gained an unprecedented (as far as Italy is concerned) media visibility (e.g. Sergio Benvenuto, Antonio Di Ciaccia, and Franco Lolli);

- A return to, broadly speaking and with due caution, 'realism' in Italian artistic and media production, understood in the broadest sense possible (literature, cinema, television, painting, etc). This is epitomised by, but certainly not limited to, *Gomorra* (Saviano, 2006; Garrone, 2008; Sollima, Comencini and Cupellini, 2014—present).

These two aspects of the same cultural phenomenon both address, at a theoretical and representational level, respectively, what Lacan calls the 'Real'.

International and Italian Lacanians alike argue (in Lacan's wake) that the collapse of the Symbolic (see Subsection 2.4 of the Introduction and Section 2 of Chapter 2), along with the emergence of what Lacan calls the 'discourse of the capitalist' (see Subsection 2.4 of the Introduction and Section 2 of Chapter 2), has recently promoted an inhibition of the symbolic mechanism of repression and symptom formation. This is what many Lacanians refer to as the 'crisi del simbolico' (Recalcati, 2010a: 112; Lolli, 2012: 30), which in turn results in the emergence of an unsymbolised, and thus untamed, traumatic Real. This collapse has affected postmillennial society at very different levels, from clinical practice,

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[1] I have borrowed this expression from Hal Foster's book *The Return of the Real*, which was published in 1996. Here, Foster analyses some twentieth-century artistic trends (i.e. avant-garde art, pop art, and supperrealist art) using some Lacanian theoretical notions, including that of the Real. He claims that, in the second half of the twentieth century, '[a]cross artistic, theoretical, and popular cultures [...] there is a tendency to redefine experience, individual and historical, in terms of trauma' (Foster, 1996: 168). For this reason, he focuses on the Real *qua* trauma and on the 'turn to the real as evoked through the violated body and/or the traumatic subject' (Foster, 1996: xviii). On the contrary, I will concentrate on the Real *qua jouissance*.

with the emergence of 'new symptoms' (see Subsection 2.4 of the Introduction and Section 2 of Chapter 2), to the arts, with the emergence of new forms of realistic representation, and from political and economic strategies, with neo-liberal capitalism and the precariat, to social bonds, with the extreme individualisation/fragmentation of society. Consequently, this collapse also has an impact on subjectivity in the early twenty-first century, another issue addressed by contemporary Lacanians.

While a return of realist tendencies per se is nothing new in Italy (i.e. verismo, realismo magico, and neorealismo; see Section 2 of Chapter 3), I contend that the novelty of this postmillennial wave is precisely the return of the Real understood in Lacanian terms both as trauma and as *jouissance*. In this thesis, I therefore deal with the notion of the Lacanian Real from a twofold perspective: in terms of its inception by postmillennial Italian Lacanian thinkers and of its (possibly paradoxical) emergence at a representational level in the arts. I argue that Italian Lacanian thinkers adopt and problematise the notion of the Real not only in their clinical work but also, and perhaps most importantly, in their social, political, cultural, and aesthetic criticism and theorisation.

I also argue that it is precisely by addressing the emergence of the untamed Real in postmillennial society that Italian Lacanian psychoanalysts reveal the interdependence of clinical work, socio-political criticism, and aesthetic theories. This is because what characterises contemporary Italian Lacanianism is the ethical commitment to deal with the unregulated excess of the Real. This brings to the fore the postmillennial *impegno* of Italian Lacanians who aim at treating, addressing and framing the disrupting and unrepresentable Real in their clinical work, socio-political criticism, and aesthetic theories, respectively.

In parallel with the emergence of a contemporary Lacanianism focused on the Real, Italy has also witnessed a (re-)emergence of realist tendencies in artistic and media production at all levels, variably called a 'ritorno alla realtà' by critics. This has been noted by numerous scholars, irrespective of their subscription to Lacanianism (i.e. Donnarumma, Policastro and Taviani, 2008; Serkowska, 2011; Antonello, 2012a; Siti, 2013; Donnarumma, 2014; Contarini *et al*., 2016; Di Martino and Verdicchio, 2017).

For this reason, and being co-implicated in the cultural phenomenon which I will call the 'return of the Real', I claim that the theories that Italian Lacanians put forward are the most pertinent for understanding this widespread return of realist tendencies in early twenty-first-century Italian artistic production. I argue that, through the Italian conception of the Lacanian Real, we can understand postmillennial artistic production not only in aesthetic terms, but also as an *ethical* undertaking. Ultimately, I claim that in the Italian return of the Real there can be no aesthetics without ethics and no ethics without aesthetics, a clear incarnation of what Antonello and Mussgnug (2009: 14) call a 'postmodern impegno', that is to say, 'a new form of *engagement*, which treats political art not only as instruction, but above all as a response to public demand, as well as part of a generational shift whose formation has been prepared by a historical and cultural period that is commonly defined as postmodern'.

1. Outline

I will develop this argument through four chapters. In Chapter 1, I will investigate the Lacanian notion of the Real and its connection to the field of aesthetics [2] through an analysis of the main phases of Lacan's teaching and their aesthetic implications. While in the past scholarship in the field of aesthetics has focused mainly on the Imaginary and the Symbolic dimensions (which correspond to Lacan's earlier works), recently it has turned to the Real (which Lacan theorises in his later work). I will then retrieve from Lacan's late phase those notions (i.e. the Thing/the void, and the object *a*) that lay the foundation for a Lacanian aesthetics of the Real.

In Chapter 2, I will consider Recalcati's Lacanian aesthetics, which conceives of artistic practice as an imaginary-symbolic device *through* and *within* which the Real manifests itself and can be dealt with. I will critically analyse Recalcati's three aesthetics of the Real: the aesthetics of the void, which revolves around the notion of the Thing; anamorphic aesthetics, which addresses the Real as object *a*; and the aesthetics of the *sinthome*, which accounts for the

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[2]   In this thesis, I will refer to the field of aesthetics in a broad sense, including literary studies, visual studies, film studies, and so forth.

unsymbolisable and uninterpretable dimension of the Real.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss the manifold cultural phenomenon I call the 'return of the Real' in postmillennial Italy in theoretical terms, accounting for the multifaceted perspectives of Italian scholarship. While non-Lacanian scholars interpret postmillennial realist trends as a *ritorno alla realtà*, Lacanians employ the category of the Real which, I claim, is a more appropriate theoretical tool for analysing the new wave of realism and the socio-cultural context in which it emerges.

In Chapter 4, I will undertake a close reading of three case studies from postmillennial Italy (i.e. *Videocracy - Basta apparire*, *Reality*, and *In Treatment*) to explain the return of the Real in the arts/media. I will also contend that the issue at stake in this new wave of realism is not the 'return to reality' (i.e. the attention devoted to the artistic representation of a given reality), but rather the Real *qua jouissance*, as articulated by Lacan and contemporary (Italian) Lacanianism.

In this thesis, I will therefore identify a coherent and consistent cultural phenomenon that takes place in the early twenty-first century in Italy. I will analyse its theoretical background (i.e. contemporary Italian Lacanianism and the notion of the Real) and its emergence in the 'new' realism of postmillennial Italy. Overall, I will show how *impegno* in postmillennial times means dealing with the (return of the) Real and allowing the non-representable to emerge through representation, adopting a stance that is at once ethical and aesthetic.

Before moving onto the analysis of the Real in Lacan's theory, a premise first needs to be established. If, on the one hand, the return of the Real is present in contemporary arts and media, on the other, as explained briefly above, its theoretical, ethical and aesthetic assumptions are strongly dependent on the work of Italian Lacanians. As such, in the next section I will give a brief overview of the history of the reception of Lacanian thought in Italy and address the centrality of Lacanian theory in the return of the Real in postmillennial Italy.

2. The Reception of Lacanianism in Italy: A Historical Introduction

2.1 The Lacan Effect in Italy Today

On 12 February 2012, *Il Sole 24 ORE*, one of the most influential newspapers in Italy, published a controversial and scathing article about Lacanian psychoanalysis, written by Gilberto Corbellini, an Italian philosopher of science. In this article, entitled 'L'autismo dei lacaniani', Corbellini vehemently criticised Lacanian psychoanalysis for its 'perniciosa influenza', which he deemed to be not only 'culturale' but also 'politica' (2012: 29) in nature, and accused Lacanians of being 'esponenti di una delle sette psicoanalitiche più insidiose', whilst describing Jacques Lacan as a 'discutibile personaggio' (2012: 29). Ultimately, Corbellini reiterated the familiar criticism that psychoanalysis is unscientific.

The publication of this article provoked numerous heated responses on the part of renowned Italian psychoanalysts. Such figures included the two Lacanians Antonio Di Ciaccia and Massimo Recalcati, who engaged in a lively public debate on the pages of Italian newspapers, including *La Repubblica* and *Il manifesto*. This controversy led to the publication of *In difesa della psicoanalisi* in 2013, a book written by four prominent Italian psychoanalysts (Argentieri, Bolognini, Di Ciaccia and Zoja), who each belong to different psychoanalytic schools.

Corbellini's article and the subsequent debate it provoked illustrate, among other prominent events, the popularity of Lacan's theories in Italy today. It seems clear that, if the target of Corbellini's attack on psychoanalysis is Lacanianism[3] in particular, this is because 'il lacanismo rischia di promuovere in Italia, più di altre scuole e filoni, un rilancio in contro-tendenza della psicoanalisi. Nessuno perde tempo ad attaccare con veemenza una corrente irrilevante o al crepuscolo' (Benvenuto and Lucci, 2014: 44). This is also confirmed by the fact that 'il filone ormai consistente di letteratura psicoanalitica lacaniana' has been steadily flourishing in recent years (Dominijanni, 2012: 34), which seems to

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[3]   The term 'Lacanianism' is used by Roudinesco (1990, 1997), Irwin and Motoh (2014), and Murray (2016), whilst 'Lacanism' is used by Benvenuto (1997). For the sake of clarity, and to avoid any confusion, from now on I will employ the first occurrence throughout the thesis.

corroborate Voruz and Wolf's description of Italy as a 'Lacanian country' (2007: XVI).

In contemporary Italy, Lacan's thought is indeed pervasive in numerous fields outside of the clinical domain, such as political theory, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and aesthetics. This application of Lacan's theory to other fields replicates, with a delay of at least a decade, what has occurred in the past on a larger scale in other countries, especially during the 1990s, when Lacanian psychoanalysts or scholars, such as Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek, became public proponents of Lacan's thought as well as 'real intellectual stars' (Benvenuto, 1997: para. 8). The reasonably recent success of Lacanianism in Italy proves that, although 'sophisticated and hermetic', Lacan's theory is 'surprisingly suited […] to popularization' (Benvenuto, 1997: 8), and confirms 'una tentazione sempre presente […] nella cultura italiana' (Vegetti Finzi, 1986: 258), that is to say, the tendency to find fruitful and interdisciplinary connections between different fields of research. As Pesare claims, '[i] recenti lavori editoriali di Recalcati, Fiumanò, Bonazzi e Carmagnola, Ronchi, Moroncini […] costituiscono una ulteriore *prova*, qualora ve ne fosse bisogno, della *usabilità* del pensiero di Jacques Lacan' (2012a: 9).

In utilising Lacan's thought in a range of different fields, while relaunching his legacy, contemporary Italian Lacanianism does not overlook the clinical dimension. Lacanianism in Italy today can indeed provoke and inform public debates, which go beyond the small circles of Lacanian psychoanalysts, yet it remains firmly rooted in clinical work, which always underpins more theoretical considerations, whether they are about politics, philosophy, or aesthetics.

2.2 Lacan's Theory in Italy: the 1960s and 1970s

In order to explain the Italian approach to Lacanianism and subsequently frame the issues of contemporary Italian Lacanianism, I will now outline the history of the reception of Lacan's theory in Italy, tracing it through the different periods in which it developed and evolved. I will divide this history into four broad periods:

- the early period, during the late 1960s and the 1970s, when Lacanianism arrived in Italy and which can be characterised almost exclusively by the

reception of Lacan's theory within the framework of structuralism;

- the 1980s, during which Lacanianism was troubled and negatively dominated by the scandal of Armando Verdiglione, an Italian pupil of Lacan whose criminal actions damaged the reputation of Lacanian psychoanalysis;

- the 1990s, when Lacanianism was still overshadowed by the Verdiglione case in Italy whilst, elsewhere, its reputation was restored with great success and the theory was utilised as a tool for understanding contemporary issues;

- finally, from the 2000s up to the present day, during which Lacanianism has gained a prominent role within Italian culture principally due to its prolific representatives, heralded by Recalcati.

Lacan is renowned for having established a connection between the unconscious and language during the 1950s (Lacan, 1966:[4] 737). The connection to linguistics and structuralism was the source of Lacan's popularity in France and of his reputation as an intellectual in the first place. Even outside of France, Lacan's name was mainly associated with linguistic structuralism as it began to be used in psychoanalytic and intellectual circles. In his first interview released for an Italian audience, Lacan remarks on the crucial role of linguistics in his work, stating that, 'le strutture fondamentali del linguaggio […] sono come le coordinate stesse che mi permettono di cogliere quanto avviene al livello dell'inconscio' (Caruso, 1969: 163).

The relationship between Lacan's thought and structuralism will always remain his distinguishing trademark, but it is particularly notable in the reception of his thought in Italy during the 1960s and 1970s (Ronchi, 2012b: 43). In the 1980s, the association with the so-called linguistic turn is still the main aspect for which his thought is known (Rella, 1980: 88). Thus, Lacan's reception at this stage stresses, in particular, the language-like dimension of the unconscious and is characterised by what Recalcati calls a 'lettura semiotica' of Lacan's *oeuvre* (2009c: 20). Amongst others, the relationship between

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[4]   For this collection of essays by Lacan (2007a), the date of the in-text citation refers to the original publication date of the essay cited.

Lacanianism and linguistic structuralism is underlined and articulated by the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco[5] in his book *La struttura assente*, published for the first time in 1968, in which he claims that: '[i]n Lacan [...] l'ordine simbolico non è costituito dall'uomo [...] ma costituisce l'uomo' (1996: 325).

Italian Lacanianism in its infancy faced rejection or, at the very least, scepticism from psychoanalysts and intellectuals alike (Vegetti Finzi, 1986: 398). Despite these objections, Lacanianism was still able to attract the interest of a few Italian intellectuals during this early stage of its inception in Italy (Roudinesco, 1990: 543).

The 1970s was the decade in which psychoanalysis in Italy reached the peak of its popularity. As psychoanalysis increased in popularity *tout court*, so did the interest in Lacan and his work (Benvenuto, 1997: para. 8). In the wake of the linguistic turn, psychoanalytic literary studies increased in popularity in academic circles during the 1970s, being characterised by a 'strong focus on language and the rhetorical features of texts' (Caldwell and Capello, 2010: 3). This can be seen in the case of the scholars Francesco Orlando and Stefano Agosti, for instance, both of whom were working in the field of French studies (Gianola, 2009).

The incremental visibility of the Italian Lacanian movement is also due to the creation of several Lacanian institutions and associations. However, as Di Ciaccia and Recalcati (2000: 3) remark, '[n]ella storia del lacanismo degli anni settanta, soprattutto in Italia [...] la modalità prevalente della lettura di Lacan', amongst his pupils and followers, was characterised by the tendency to 'fare il verso a Lacan, scimmiottarne lo stile, mantenere l'atmosfera carismatica e ispirata che lo contraddistingueva'. In this respect, Italian Lacanianism was actively promoted by the controversial figure of Verdiglione, who reinforced his leading role in the Lacanian movement in the early 1970s (Recalcati, 2016b: para. 1). Verdiglione's activity contributed to the spread of Lacanianism in Italy and extended its reach beyond tight psychoanalytic circles, establishing and reinforcing links with many other fields, such as sociology, philosophy, and semiotics. Nevertheless, despite its increasing popularity, at the time

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[5]   For a more detailed discussion about Eco and psychoanalysis, see Jonathan (2006; 2010).

Lacanianism was still marginalised in Italy (Roudinesco, 1990: 543). Indeed, at that moment in time, 'Lacanianism in Italy had a weaker impact than in almost [all] other Catholic countries speaking a Romance language' (Benvenuto, 1997: para. 8). This is the reason why Benvenuto defines the 1970s as 'a lost opportunity for Lacanians in Italy to build a real competitive alternative' to the other main psychoanalytic institutions (1997: para. 8).

2.3 Lacan's Theory in Italy: the 1980s and 1990s

During the 1980s, the rise of Lacanianism in Italy was unexpectedly halted by the scandal that struck Verdiglione, who was investigated by the police for a misappropriation of funds in 1985 (Roudinesco, 1990: 546) and sentenced for extorsion in 1986 (Armando, 1997: 437). The verdict led to an extremely heated debate in Italian newspapers and psychoanalysis in its entirety was brought into disrepute with Verdiglione's conviction, fostering an extremely negative perception of clinical practice as potentially abusive and unregulated by the law. Inevitably, this cast suspicion on Lacanian psychoanalysts in particular and, therefore, on Lacan himself (Armando, 1997: 445).

Although the case of Verdiglione plunged the field of Italian Lacanianism into a state of turmoil, it is clear that, by the 1980s, it had already entered a later phase in its reception. As Nobus claims, '[s]ince the 1980s, Lacanian ideas have stealthily yet steadily penetrated the social sciences, the arts and the humanities' (1998: ix). At the time, Italian Lacanianism had already become a cultural trend that had permeated popular culture. However, as demonstrated by Verdiglione's case and by the fragmentation of the Lacanian groups, Italian Lacanianism faced the 'questione della trasmissione' (Fiumanò, 1980: 244) of Lacan's teaching.

According to Recalcati, the reception of Lacan's theory in the 1980s was characterised by a 'lettura debolista' of Lacan's work, which aims to 'far reagire il testo di Lacan in modi sorprendenti contaminandolo, adoperandolo, rendendolo strumento, facendolo utensile' (Recalcati, 2009c: 22). An epitome of this is the special issue of *aut aut*, entitled *A partire da Lacan*, which Pier Aldo Rovatti edited in 1980. The aim of this study was to prevent Lacanianism, on the one hand, from dissolving into a socio-cultural popular phenomenon completely detached from

its clinical aspects and, on the other, from being a sterile repetition of Lacan's ideas by his pupils. Rovatti sets out to develop a perspective that integrates the theoretical and philosophical aspects of Lacan's teaching within its clinical framework (Gramigna, 1980: 3) and to apply Lacanian theory to different disciplines without overlooking its clinical roots.

Between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, Lacanianism became an extremely popular theoretical trend worlwide. It was well-established in universities, particularly in the USA, and extremely successful 'among philosophers, writers, cultured journalists and academics in the humanities' (Benvenuto, 1997: para. 8). Lacan's theories were applied to a wide range of fields, such as cultural studies, film theory, visual studies, the social sciences, and also 'to issues of race, gender, and class' (Feldstein, 1996: XI). This trend can be attributed to those Lacanian scholars who were able to explain Lacan's thought in connection with other disciplines. As Eyers claims, '[i]n the last 20 or so years, the work of various Slovenian philosophers […] has definitively restored Lacan as a subject of philosophical and critical theoretical study' (2012: 8). Žižek in particular has significantly 'extended the audience for Lacanian psychoanalytic theory' (Lechte, 2008: 257).

Despite this wide and popular use of Lacan's theory, the clinical roots of his thought were often overlooked (Gurewich, 2000: XI) and those 'specifically clinical problematics […] began to fade, replaced by a Lacan whose work most urgently proposed a theory of the subject and a theory of Symbolic and Imaginary misidentification that could be of use in the analysis of contemporary ideological formations' (Eyers, 2012: 8). To a large extent, this can be seen in how the representatives of the so-called Slovenian Lacanian School (Hughes and Ror Malone, 2002: 13) make use of Lacan, in the Anglo-American reception of his theory (Evans, 1998: 14; Laclau, 1989: ix) and also in France, where Lacanianism is characterised by a 'secularized reading of Lacan […] detached from any clinical implications' (Roudinesco, 1997: 434).

The enthusiasm for Lacan's theory did not reach Italy during the 1990s, when the influence and prestige of Lacanianism diminished. This can be attributed mainly to the defamation caused by Verdiglione's case. As Benvenuto claims, 'Verdiglione, and Italian analysts in general, have, thus far, been

unsuccessful [...] in "Italianizing" psychoanalysis, in making it enter into the blood and bones of the Italian way of thinking' (1997: para. 8). During this decade, no Italian Lacanians enjoyed a level of success similar to that of Žižek,[6] and the influence of Lacanianism amongst psychoanalysts was extremely limited. As Benvenuto states, referring to the 1990s: '[t]oday Lacanism, ejected from established psychoanalysis, can return through the back door of Gender Studies, Gay Studies, Cultural Studies, etc. It is even possible that Lacanism could return to Italy, not through France [...] but through America' (Benvenuto, 1997: para. 8). In some respect, this is what has happened. In the 1960s and 1970s, Lacan's thought began to spread mainly in Latin countries. Only subsequently, during the 1980s and 1990s, did it then spread to North America (Rabaté 2003: xi). In the 2000s, as Benvenuto rightly supposed, Lacanianism regained its popularity in Italy, also thanks to the positive recognition of American scholars.

Since the 2000s, there has been a Lacanian '*renaissance*' in Italy – to borrow an expression used by Chiesa (2007: 3), Pesare (2012a: 7) and Palombi (2014: 122) – or rather, in Benvenuto's and Lucci's words, a 'ritorno di Lacan in Italia' (2014: 44), which followed its demise during the 1990s. As Palombi puts it:

> Nell'ultimo decennio, in particolare, si è assistito a quella che potremmo chiamare una Lacan *renaissance*: filosofi, studiosi di cinema e di comunicazione, critici d'arte e politologi, hanno riscoperto la riflessione dello psicoanalista per applicarla ai propri specifici campi di studio (2014: 122).

In recent years, Italian Lacanianism has thus regained in prestige and continued to permeate other disciplines, being used as an unavoidable theoretical tool, especially in the humanities (Ronchi, 2011: 12). As Sabbatini (2014: 2) posits: 'Lacan [...] pur muovendo dalla scienza come Freud, interviene decisamente nella cultura. Per quanto oggi possa sembrare ovvio – basta pensare alla diffusione dei libri di Massimo Recalcati e di Slavoj Žižek, entrambi formatisi con Jacques-Alain Miller, filosofo e psicoanalista – si tratta di un fenomeno nuovo e problematico'. In postmillennial Italy, there has thus been a real hope of using Lacan's teaching

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[6] Žižek's popularity is so broad that, according to Belsey, 'Žižek's dazzling cultural criticism is now more widely read than Lacan's more esoteric texts' (2005: 52).

in a fruitful way, in combination with other fields, without neglecting its clinical roots, and the reputation of Lacanianism has now been completely restored whilst also reaching a vast audience.

2.4 The 2000s: the Emphasis on the Real

The Italian reception of Lacanianism during the 1960s and 1970s equated Lacan's theory with the so-called linguistic turn. In the 1980s, it was then troubled by the Verdiglione case, which contributed to its decline. While internationally the 1990s were characterised by dynamic uses[7] of Lacan's thought, Lacanianism in Italy was not particularly influential; it was in fact rather marginal. By contrast, a new wave of Lacanianism has been flourishing since the 2000s, contributing to a *renaissance* of Lacan's theory in Italy heralded by Recalcati.[8] This contemporary Lacanianism is interdisciplinary in nature and characterised by the application of Lacanian theory to the analysis of contemporary society without dismissing or overlooking its clinical roots. In the reception of Lacanianism in Italy, I contend that there has been a shift away from the focus on Lacan's linguistic phase in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s towards an emphasis on the category of the Real. This latter notion is Lacan's original contribution to the field of psychoanalysis (Lacan, 2016: 35), which he developed particularly from the 1960s until his death. Contemporary Italian Lacanianism is indeed particularly influenced by Lacan's later teaching, which focuses on the category of the Real:[9]

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[7] Rabaté claims that, in the context of contemporary Lacanianism, a thorough exegesis of Lacan's concepts is less important than an understanding of their 'dynamic usage in several contexts' (2003: xiv). In addition, he affirms: '[t]he time of simple exegesis has passed' and 'what matters today is how productive [Lacan's notions] are' (Rabaté, 2003: xiv).

[8] Recalcati is the most prominent Italian Lacanian psychoanalyst in Italy today, a public intellectual and prolific author. Like Žižek, he has has undoubtedly extended the audience of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, contributing to Lacan's *renaissance* and to the contemporary reception of Lacan's theory in Italy (Chiesa, 2011; Dominijanni, 2012; Pesare, 2012a). Over the last decade, he has also created Lacanian psychoanalytic clinics and associations (i.e. Jonas Onlus, ALI di psicoanalisi) as well as a school for psychoanalytic training (i.e. IRPA). International attention to his work is constantly increasing as illustrated by recent publications (Chiesa, 2011; Mura, 2015; Di Martino, 2016; Sforza Tarabochia, 2016; Chiesa, Nedoh and Piasentier, 2016; Di Martino and Verdicchio, 2017).

[9] In Chapter 1, I will provide a detailed periodisation of Lacan's teaching, referring to the related debate amongst Lacanians and addressing his tripartite schema of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real.

> Più che il simbolico, per noi la questione decisiva è il reale, e dunque non l'inconscio simbolico, transferale, delle rappresentazioni scoperte da Freud, ma l'inconscio delle tracce di godimento, le tracce del sentire che si producono al di là del senso e della rappresentazione (Bonazzi and Tonazzo, 2015: 160).

In *Attualità di Lacan*, Pagliardini and Ronchi explicitly state the following: '[c]rediamo che il gesto decisivo dell'insegnamento di Lacan sia quello con il quale pone "il primato del reale"' (2014: 12). As Bellavita (2005: 52) affirms:

> Nel silenzio inquietante della pulsione di morte, nel silenzio del Simbolico come linguaggio e come parola, Lacan riconosce che il sistema del linguaggio ha una mancanza, e questa mancanza dimostra che al di là della dialettica tra il registro dell'Immaginario e quello del Simbolico, si assiste all'emersione del Reale.

This is, indeed, 'un lacanismo meno logocentrico per il quale conta piuttosto il reale e ciò che lo convoca (l'oggetto *a* piccolo, la Cosa, il godimento…)' (Benvenuto, 2006: 34-5). Nowadays, '[i] lacaniani più *updated* e pimpanti rileggono il maestro in una chiave sempre più *real-ista*' (Benvenuto, 2006: 35). Consequently, the perspective of current Italian Lacanianism conceives of the unconscious with a focus on the category of the Real, leading to a conception of the subject that is no longer exclusively understood through the lens of the Symbolic and within the framework of the language-like unconscious. According to Terminio: '[i]l soggetto trova una nuova collocazione, non viene più individuato nelle leggi del linguaggio, ma quando queste leggi vacillano' (2009: 21). Contemporary Italian Lacanianism acknowledges the shift that occurred in Lacan's theory from the paradigm of the language-like unconscious towards a Real-like unconscious, focusing on the latter. As Terminio further argues, '[s]e nel primo Lacan il soggetto dell'inconscio è dal lato della catena significante, con il mutare del concetto di inconscio – non solo "strutturato come linguaggio" ma anche come *tuché* del reale – assistiamo a una nuova centratura del soggetto sul piano della pulsione. Il versante pulsionale dell'esperienza prende il nome di *godimento*' (2009: 25). This notion, which is crucial to both Lacan's theory and Italian Lacanian interpretations of contemporary society, is that which 'ci indica l'esperienza soggettiva del "reale"' (Terminio, 2009: 25). As Pagliardini and Ronchi (2014: 14-15) contend,

> Lacan decide [...] di sottomettere la teoria e la pratica psicoanalitica al primato del reale, e tenta di farne un'esperienza del reale, nella quale far parlare il reale, non per bonificarlo, ma per incontrarlo, fino a produrne un'affermazione singolare, l'affermazione singolare del reale di *un* soggetto.

Hence, this Lacanian perspective insists more on the link between the subject and the Real than on the connection with the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

According to contemporary Italian Lacanianism, contemporary society is characterised by a crisis of the Symbolic which has led to a 'supremazia dell'immagine e, più in generale, dell'immaginario' (Lolli, 2012: 35) on one hand, and to 'the emergence of the explosive Real' (Vighi, 2006: 12) on the other. As McGowan and Kunkle affirm, 'more and more, the subject must confront the Real of its existence without the mediation of a clear symbolic structure' (2004: XXVII-I) and there is thus an 'increasing presence of the Real in the experience of the contemporary subject' (2004: XXIII). Contemporary times bear the mark of a 'decline of Oedipus' (Žižek, 1999; Borrelli *et al.*, 2013) and, consequently, the subject is no longer 'integrated into the paternal Law through symbolic castration' (Žižek, 1999: 248). This 'increasing emergence of the Real' (McGowan and Kunkle, 2004: XXIII), which is no longer restrained by symbolic boundaries, takes the form of an unregulated and untamed excess. As Pesare (2012b: 14) puts it,

> [l]a sociologia, la politologia, la mediologia sembrano titubanti e in imbarazzo di fronte alla morbosa logica dell'eccesso che ormai costituisce la dimensione peculiare non solo della politica e del costume ma anche della cronaca, che in qualche modo riflette entrambi. In questo senso mi pare che la lezione di Lacan appaia, a distanza di trent'anni dalla sua morte, ancora più nitida e attuale nel rintracciare la genesi formativa (individuale) di questa dimensione socio-politica dell'eccesso.

McGowan (2016) agrees with this perspective, underlying that those economic, anthropologic or social approaches to this pervasive 'logica dell'eccesso' are insufficient to properly address the ailments of postmillennial society. On the contrary, Italian Lacanianism conceives of Lacanian psychoanalysis as an invaluable tool to deal with the discontent of contemporary society.

Lacan contends that Freud's social theory, according to which human society is built upon the drive renunciation and individual sacrifice for the sake of the greater good, is no longer valid (Lacan in Contri, 1978; Lacan, 2007c). Lacan

maintains that it is the discursive regime of the capitalist[10] that permeates society today, fostering the superegoic injunction to 'enjoy!' and unlimited object consumption. In Lacan's view, social bonds are no longer sustained by the imperative to sacrifice individual enjoyment but are, rather, undermined by a deadly and solitary compulsion to enjoy (Lacan, 1960: 700; Lacan, 1990: 32). While Lacan had previously theorised the existence of only four discourses, in the early 1970s he radically changed his perspective, arguing for a fifth discourse. As Tomšič (2015: 203) argues, '[t]his development is rather surprising, given that the theory of discourses is grounded on a strict order that supports only four formations'. Unsurprisingly, the discourse of the capitalist, which is one of the pivotal Lacanian concepts developed during the 1970s, strongly influences postmillennial Lacanians, especially those involved in socio-political criticism and in a critique of capitalist ideology. This is because by theorising a fifth discourse Lacan fosters the idea of a 'profound change in the discursive paradigm of the contemporary era' (Sforza Tarabochia, 2016: 9) and thus legitimises the idea that we are indeed living in a new era, characterised by a radical psychological change (Recalcati, 2010a). To address the new discoursive regime into which society has precipitated, Lacan refers to the 'transmutation' (2007b: 31) and the 'subversion' (2007b: 32) that invest the contemporary subject. In particular, this mutation involves the subject's relationship with its loss, which is no longer perceived as intrinsically belonging to human nature but as something contingent and curable. Thus, according to Lacan, in the discursive regime of the capitalist every commodity appears as the remedy that can replace the loss, enhancing the transformation of the subject into a mere consumer.

Recalcati refers to the discourse of the capitalist as '[l]a condizione storico-epocale' (2016b: 69) of society today. This is characterised, he argues, by a 'ritorno di un reale trumatico e privo di legge' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 105) that is 'senza precedenti nella storia dell'uomo' (Lolli, 2012: 76). From the perspective

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[10]   Lacan's theory of the four discourses is developed in Seminar XVII. For Lacan (2007b), all human social relations can be reduced to four fundamental discoursive models: the discourse of the Master; the discourse of the University; the discourse of the Analyst; and the discourse of the Hysteric. In Seminar XVIII (Lacan, 2007c) and in the conference paper 'Du discours psychanalytique', delivered in Milan on 12 May 1972 (Contri, 1978: 32-55), Lacan adds a fifth discourse that he denominates the *Discourse of the Capitalist*.

of contemporary Italian Lacanianism, the crisis of the Symbolic and the discourse of the capitalist have implications for clinical work, politics, and aesthetics. It is therefore on the base of these three mutually interdependent axes that contemporary Italian Lacanianism lays the foundation of the analysis of the contemporary subject and society. For instance, in clinical terms, the so-called 'new symptoms'[11] are the psychopathological manifestation of the pervasive excess and untamed Real of *jouissance* that invests the contemporary subject. In socio-political and economic terms, this gives rise to neo-liberal discourse and neo-liberal labour policies, which foster economic crisis and the precariat, whilst promoting the myth of the self-made man. The latter, according to Italian Lacanians, is epitomised by Silvio Berlusconi and so-called Berlusconism (Recalcati, 2010a; Lolli, 2012). Finally, this also affects the field of aesthetics and artistic production.

2.5 Italian Psychoanalytic Aesthetics and the Real

In Italy, the relationship between Lacanian psychoanalysis and aesthetics 'non è stato in passato particolarmente sviluppato' (Bonazzi and Tonazzo, 2015: 7). Arguably, as Benvenuto (1997: para. 3) claims, this is due to the fact that the Italian reception of Lacan's theory is dominated by the 'primacy of the "social dimension"'. This connection has been investigated from the 2000s onwards, particularly through Recalcati's work. However, as Resmini contends, referring to contemporary Italian Lacanian aesthetics, 'its very existence remains to be argued for and demonstrated' inasmuch as it 'has not yet attained the privilege of living within the safe walls of a school, nor is it sustained by any will to secure itself as a system' (Resmini, 2013: 271).

In a seminal article entitled 'The Italian Turn: A Certain Tendency in Contemporary Psychoanalytic Aesthetics', Resmini refers to a 'new and unique

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[11]   This category, as contemporary Italian Lacanianism conceives of it (Recalcati, 2010a; Recalcati, 2011a; Borelli *et al*., 2013), includes different pathologies such as anorexia, bulimia, obesity, panic attacks, drug addiction, and depression. The adjective 'new' does not imply that these pathologies did not exist in the past but refers, rather, to their 'pandemic proliferation' (Mura, 2015: 165) in contemporary society. For a Lacanian discussion of these new-symptoms, see for instance: Goldman-Baldwin, Malone, and Svolos (2011), and Recalcati (2002, 2010a, 2011a).

tendency' (Resmini, 2013: 271) within Italian psychoanalytic aesthetics. This turn, as Resmini contends, was 'born midway between the couch and academia' (Resmini, 2013: 271), is informed by Lacanian theory, and revolves around the category of the Real. One of the primary characteristics of this perspective is the '*return to the centrality of the real in Lacan's teaching*' [original emphasis] (Resmini, 2013: 276). Recalcati is considered as one of the main representatives of this heterogeneous group, which consists of Lacanian scholars and psychoanalysts.[12] No other contemporary Italian Lacanian has contributed to the field of psychoanalytic aesthetics, developing a Lacanian aesthetics that maintains the notion of the Real at its core, as extensively as Recalcati. As he affirms, '[i]l ricorso alla categoria del reale – teorizzata originalmente e variamente da Jacques Lacan – resta un riferimento decisivo in tutto il mio percorso attraverso l'arte' (Recalcati, 2016d: 14). For these reasons, I will consider Recalcati's aesthetic theory as the epitome of contemporary Italian Lacanian aesthetics, which will be the exclusive focus of Chapter 2.

Contemporary Italian Lacanianism conceives of the Lacanian category of the Real as an unavoidable concept for the analysis of contemporary art. This is especially true for those trends related to trauma, the obscene and the abject, and for contemporary works of art which exhibit shocking elements or disruptions of reality and flaunt traumatic experiences (e.g. Orlan, Franco B, and Serrano). The Real is also a useful category for approaching the pervasive presence of shocking images on television or the Internet and thus for investigating the nature of representation in contemporary society. As Marzano (2013: 41) argues:

Ma quando si parla di video di uccisioni, stupri o torture, ci si trova di fronte a varie

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[12]   The members of this group whom Resmini refers to in his article (2013: 271) are: the literary theorist Giovanni Bottiroli (Università di Bergamo); the film and media scholar Andrea Bellavita (Università Cattolica); the scholar of aesthetics Fulvio Carmagnola (Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca); and the philosopher Silvano Petrosino (Università Cattolica). I have called this group heterogeneous since it includes both psychoanalytic practitioners and academics and since they all develop the relationship between Lacanian aesthetics and the category of the Real in different fields of research (i.e. literary theory, film theory, aesthetics, and philosophy). In this respect, Resmini neglects some other Italian Lacanians that should at least be acknowledged since they have also examined, from different perspectives, the issue of the Real in relation to aesthetics: Matteo Bonazzi (Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca); Mario Perniola (Università di Roma 'Tor Vergata'); Rocco Ronchi (Università dell'Aquila); Fabio Vighi (Cardiff University); and Lacanian clinicians such as Sergio Benvenuto, Antonio Di Ciaccia, Franco Lolli, Patrizio Peterlini, Alex Pagliardini, and Nicolò Terminio. I will discuss them further in Chapter 3.

ambiguità. Di che genere di rappresentazione si tratta? Anzi, siamo ancora nell'ambito di una rappresentazione? Esiste ancora una qualche forma di rappresentazione?

As Perniola (2000: 8) aptly contends, 'è proprio il pensiero di Lacan che fornisce la possibilità di formulare la poetica del realismo estremo delle arti oggi'. Indeed, according to Recalcati, 'l'arte […] non sembra più essere il luogo simbolico-immaginario dove si realizza un trattamento possibile del reale, quanto piuttosto un luogo ingombrato da un ritorno del reale stesso' (Recalcati, 2007a: 100). Contemporary Italian Lacanians argue that there is a return *to* or *of* the Real in contemporary society. This 'effect of the Real' (Žižek, 2002) occurs in many different artistic fields, from literature and visual art to documentaries and films. Lacanians from around the world, including Italy, acknowledge that the category of realism is crucial in the analysis of contemporary art and literary works, along with the concepts of the Real and reality.

In particular, Italian Lacanianism considers this phenomenon as a consequence of an excess of the Real due to a weakening of the symbolic network in contemporary societies. In Lolli's words: '[i]l reale, non bonificato dal simbolico, emerge come esperienza esistenziale insopportabile, traumatica, inquietante; un suo eccesso minaccia la soggettività' (2012: 46). To put it bluntly, for contemporary Italian Lacanians, this weakening and crisis of the Symbolic not only causes a modification in the structure of society or in the way human beings interact with each other, but also paves the way for the proliferation and dissemination of brutal images as well as the production of traumatic/extreme art. As Lolli (2012: 128) argues:

> *Real tv, true crime,* feticismo chirurgico, *docufilm, reportage* su morbosità anatomiche, sono le nuove cifre di una forma di spettacolo nel quale il gusto per lo shock, l'ostentazione dell'estremo e il culto dell'eccesso puntano deliberatamente a suscitare nel teleutente una reazione di angoscia capace di incollarlo al televisore.

In this respect, this thesis seeks to develop a link between Lacanian theory, aesthetics, the category of the Real, and subjectivity in postmillennial Italy. As Resmini claims, contemporary Italian Lacanianism 'compels us to think of the role of art today as an *experience of limits*' [original emphasis] (2013: 289). Indeed, in contemporary society, 'il soggetto […] è sempre più esposto alle sorprese del reale, sempre più sprovveduto dinanzi ad esso. Più che mai

traumatizzabile, quindi' (Soler, quoted in Lolli 2012: 129).

2.6 Realist Trends in Postmillennial Italy

In postmillennial Italy, there is a return to Lacan's theory, also referred to as a Lacanian *renaissance*, which is also a return to Lacan's notion of the Real. This return to Lacan/the Lacanian Real in Italy is not, however, an isolated phenomenon that belongs exclusively to the (Lacanian) psychoanalytic world. It partakes, I instead contend, of a broader cultural phenomenon taking place in early twenty-first-century Italy, which I call the 'return of the Real'. Another manifestation of this current phenomenon is the return of realist trends in the arts, which is also recognised by non-Lacanian Italian scholars, who sometimes adopt Lacanian notions.

In the sphere of the arts in early twenty-first-century Italy, whether they are of a cinematic, mediatic, literary or visual nature, one can detect a pervasive 'tensione realistica' (Contarini *et al.*, 2016: 14). Arguably, this is due to 'un nuovo interesse per il "reale"' (Antonello, 2012a: 172) and an 'esigenza di confrontarsi con [esso]' (Antonello, 2012a: 172). This is illustrated, amongst other elements, by 'il successo della cosiddetta "non-fiction" in letteratura e di una nuova vena documentaristica in campo cinematografico' (Antonello, 2012a: 172). Indeed, postmillennial Italian artworks tend to be grounded on contemporary realities with an 'aderenza talvolta quasi cronachistica al reale' (Palumbo Mosca, 2011: 201).

Such artworks depict, for instance: real socio-political events, such as the Italian 'precariato' and the related unfair work conditions, e.g. *Il mondo deve sapere. Romanzo tragicomico di una telefonista precaria* (Murgia, 2006), *Mi chiamo Roberta, ho 40 anni, guadagno 250 euro al mese* (Nove, 2010), and *Tutta la vita davanti* (Virzì, 2008); the job market after the economic crises and the neo-liberal economy, e.g. *Resistere non serve a niente* (Siti, 2012); historical political events, e.g. *Romanzo criminale* (De Cataldo, 2002), and *Buongiorno, notte* (Bellocchio, 2003); the lives of politicians, e.g. *Il caimano* (Moretti, 2006), and *Il divo* (Sorrentino, 2008); facts related to organised crime, e.g. *Gomorra* (Saviano, 2006; Garrone, 2008); real autobiographical events, e.g. *La vita oscena* (Nove,

2010); and immigration issues, e.g. *Terraferma* (Crialese, 2011), to name but a few. These works thus all epitomise the 'ascesa di poetiche realistiche' (Donnarumma, 2014: 145).

This rebirth of realist tendencies has recently led to a resurgence in the popularity of realism in Italian scholarship, as opposed to English-speaking academia,[13] and it has been addressed in many fields of Italian Studies, from literary and film theory to philosophy and psychoanalysis. As noted by Contarini *et al.* (2016: 13-14),

> in questi sedici anni del Duemila la ricca produzione letteraria e l'altrettanto ricca riflessione critica sui "nuovi realismi" attestano un dibattito italiano che si nutre degli apporti di numerosi settori del sapere e della creazione artistica.

This has paved the way for a 'lively and somewhat heated debate among contemporary Italian thinkers' (Di Martino, 2012: 190). Non-Lacanian scholars argue that there has been a 'return of realism' (Perniola, 2000: XII; Serkowska, 2011; Di Martino, 2012: 190), 'new realism' (Ferraris, 2011 and 2012), or a 'contemporary turn towards realism' (Di Martino and Verdicchio, 2017: ix). According to Palumbo Mosca, '[i]l realismo di cui ha parlato molta critica recente è innanzitutto un realismo *tematico-referenziale*' (2011: 200), that is to say, determined by the content of artworks which are often based on real-life events. Indeed, according to Contarini *et al.*, '[i]l "ritorno alla realtà" sembra essere il concetto centrale e il fattore polarizzante sia della creazione letteraria e artistica sia degli studi critici e filosofici degli anni Zero in Italia' (2016: 9). Many scholars have noted a 'ritrovato interesse per la "realtà"' (Antonello, 2012a: 179) in postmillennial Italian artistic production, arguing that there has been a 'ritorno della realtà' (Donnarumma, Policastro and Taviani, 2008) or a 'riapparizione della realtà' (Siti, 2013: 65). Contemporary non-Lacanian Italian scholarship is thus characterised by 'an increased and renewed preoccupation with reality' (Di Martino and Verdicchio, 2017: vii).

On the contrary, Italian Lacanian scholars focus on the notion of the Real

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[13]   Amongst others, Beaumont (2007: 3) contends that in English-speaking academia there is a devaluation of realism since is perceived as 'being without intellectual or aesthetic interest' (Bowlby, 2007: XII).

in their interpretation of postmillennial realist trends and contemporary society. As Perniola apltly claims, 'l'arte odierna […] viene schiacciata sulla *realtà*, prescindendo dallo spessore e dalla complessità del reale' (2000: IX). Contemporary Italian Lacanianism reframes the notion of reality in connection with, while distinguishing it from, the Real, further sparking the debate about the new wave of realism in post-2000 Italy. The notion of the Real as received by Italian Lacanians contributes, I argue, to 'ripensare la categoria del realismo' (Antonello, 2012a: 173).

Therefore, this broad cultural phenomenon of the return of the Real/to reality in Italy is manifold and includes Lacanian scholars, non-Lacanian scholars and even artists (including filmmakers and writers, etc), all of whom partake of this trend and engage in a discussion both about each other and about the trend itself. Nevertheless, it is Lacanians who have the most to say about this return to the Real because they capitalise on the centrality of the category of the Real in Lacan's thought. Indeed, contemporary Italian Lacanianism answers the question of '[q]ual è lo statuto del Reale e che cosa lo differenzia dalla nozione di realtà?' (Recalcati, 2012a: 271). From this perspective, the Lacanian Real does not equal reality, or rather the mundane world made up of tangible objects. Furthermore, 'la psicoanalisi [lacaniana] non crede che il soggetto abbia un contatto diretto con la realtà' (Lolli, 2011: 54): the subject can only have a mediated and filtered approach to reality. In this respect, 'la straordinaria attualità di Lacan sta allora nella possibilità che il suo pensiero e la sua pratica ci offrono ai fini di una ridefinizione non realista del reale' (Pagliardini and Ronchi, 2014: 14).

One question, in particular, will underpin this study: if the Real is the unrepresentable according to Lacan, how can we claim that artists of the return of the Real do in fact represent it? Or, on a more theoretical level, '[c]ome il simbolico e l'immaginario possono accostare il reale? Come il reale – impossibile da rappresentare – può essere ospitato in una forma?' (Recalcati, 2016d: 14). With this in mind, I will now begin my analysis by addressing the notion of the Real in Lacan's thought.

CHAPTER I

The Shock of the Real

1. Introduction

The Real is one of the most slippery and multifaceted conceptual categories of Lacan's theory, which is renowned for being difficult to understand for a variety of reasons. Firstly, this notion 'undergoes many shifts in meaning and usage throughout [Lacan's] work' (Evans, 1996: 162). Indeed, according to Eyers (2012: 159), 'Lacan hesitates to give succinct, stable definitions of his concepts; and this is perhaps true most of all of the Real'. Moreover, there are 'multiple ways in which Lacan conceives [of it], often in a position of inextricable codefinition with other, crucial concepts in his work, and very rarely taking the form of direct unambiguous conceptualization or nomination' (Eyers, 2012: 1). As Lacan (2013b: 80) puts it, '[i]f there is a notion of the real, it is extremely complex and in that sense it is not graspable, not graspable in a way that would constitute a whole'. In addition to this 'semantic indeterminacy' (Principe, 2015: 5), the difficulty of understanding the Lacanian Real lies in how it is conceived: '[p]er Lacan il reale non è una datità empirica, fattuale né un'ineffabilità misterica' (Recalcati, 2001: 109). Simply, the Real is 'inherently nonsubstantial' (Dean, 2002: 26). Another reason for its complexity is the fact that, particularly for the English-speaking world, '[l]ittle of Lacan's work had been translated prior to 2000 [...] and much of it quite badly' (Fink, 2014a: 108). Finally, the Real was developed predominantly in the late phase of Lacan's teaching, which until recently has arguably been the most under-studied phase of his work, overshadowed by other, better-known Lacanian theories (i.e. the mirror stage or the unconscious structured like a language).

From the 1990s, and even more so from the 2000s, the situation has changed to the extent that nowadays Renov's statement that 'the Real remains the most neglected term' (Renov, 2004: 123) of Lacan's theory is no longer accurate. Indeed, an unprecedented interest in this Lacanian concept and a

constantly growing tendency to place an 'emphasis on the Real' (Laclau, 1989: XIII) are now taking place within and beyond Lacanian circles. In recent years, the Real has come to the fore in the reception of Lacan's theory in many countries, such as France (Laclau, 1989: X) and Germany (Jaanus and Stewart, 2004: 3). There is a similar situation in English-speaking academia, where Žižek 'has conducted an inexhaustive interrogation of the Real throughout his works' (Jess-Cooke, 2006: 349).

Therefore, the importance of the Real in Lacan's thought has finally been acknowledged as being, arguably, 'il punto sul quale Lacan ha insistito maggiormente nel corso del suo lavoro' (Pagliardini, 2016: 9). The Real has reached the status of a 'central, determining concept of Lacan's work' (Eyers, 2012: 1) to the point that, as Benvenuto (2015: 100) hyperbolically argues, 'se oggi vale ancora la pena leggere Lacan è proprio perché si pone la questione del reale'. It has become so popular that not only 'contemporary psychoanalysis as a whole bears the mark of [it]' (Voruz and Wolf, 2007: XVI) but it is also 'already entering everyday discourse' (Fink, 2014a: 221), as occurred with many Freudian notions such as the unconscious, the slip of the tongue, and the Oedipus complex.

Even current non-Lacanian scholars employ it as a fruitful concept such as Badiou[14] and in many fields, from philosophy to queer studies and from religious studies to film theory, it is now considered to be one of the most fundamental and effective Lacanian notions. As Pagliardini (2016: 9) promptly remarks:

> Dalla filosofia alla politica, dalla scienza alla clinica, dalle arti alla comunicazione mediatica, ovunque si è diffusa una vera e propria passione per il reale, una dilagante esigenza di dirlo, definirlo, modificarlo, amarlo, bruciarlo, torturarlo, eliminarlo, affermarlo.

A number of essays and books published in the twenty-first century, and whose theoretical framework revolves around the Real, prove engagement with this Lacanian notion to be vibrant and manifold.[15] The Real has also recently gained a

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[14]   In his account of the twentieth century, Badiou recognises the 'passion for the real' as the defining feature of this period, which, he argues, 'from political theory to artistic practice' (Badiou, 2007: 48) has been characterised by an emphasis on the Real, as opposed to everyday social reality and semblance. As Harari (2002: 311) recalls, Badiou's notion of the 'event' is also particularly indebted to the late phase of Lacan's teaching.

[15]   For instance, limiting my references to English-speaking scholarship, in the field of

central role in many fields of aesthetic theory, such as visual studies (Ronen, 2002; Adams, 2003; Iversen, 2007), music (Wilson, 2015), cinema studies and film theory (Vighi, 2006; McGowan, 2007; Renov, 2004: 120-129; Cowie, 2007 and 2011).

The aim of Chapter 1 is to investigate the relationship between Lacan's theory and the field of aesthetics, focusing on the notion of the Real. To this end, I will account for the Lacanian shift of paradigm from the first two periods, concerned mainly with the Imaginary and the Symbolic, to the third period, which focuses mostly on the Real. I will adopt the well-established perspective on Lacan's teaching, according to which the turning point in Lacanian thought arguably occurs in Seminar VII (Miller, 1984), in which Lacan explicitly states that his research is directed towards, and focused on, the category of the Real.[16] This paves the way for a Lacanian aesthetics of the Real. In fact, I will introduce and discuss those Lacanian concepts connected to the Real which prove to be useful tools for aesthetics and around which Lacanian art critics and scholars have developed their considerations on the question of art. This will lead to a discussion of the reception and further elaboration of the Real in Italian contemporary Lacanianism in Chapter 2, in which Massimo Recalcati's aesthetics of the Real will be discussed in light of his Italian case studies (i.e. Giorgio Morandi and Alberto Burri).

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philosophy Zupančič 'attempt[s] to rethink ethics by recognizing and acknowledging the dimension of the Real' (Zupančič, 2000: 4). In his critique of global capitalist ideology and his account of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Žižek notices that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there was a 'violent return' (2002: 10) to the traumatic Real. The usefulness of the Real in cultural studies is extensively explored by Belsey (2005), who proposes the need 'to understand culture in relation to the real' (2005: xii), or rather, 'what we don't know' (2005: xii). As far as feminist theory is concerned, Small (2007) discusses the 'feminist return of the real' (2007: 231) in relation to the category of realism both in feminist criticism and poststructuralist feminism. With regards to queer studies, Dean (2000) 'attempts to develop the category of the real in light of queer theory, in order to generate a new perspective on the manifestation of sexuality [...] in our time' (Dean, 2000: 19); Edelman (2004) relates queerness to the Real and elaborates on the socio-political effects of this perspective. Even religious studies have recently been influenced by the Real: according to Davis, Pound and Crockett (2014), the Real represents the theoretical category which enhances an articulation of the inexpressible and the inaccessible in theology, namely God, and the development of a non-fundamentalist theology; Ensslin (2014) explores the Real against the background of the monotheistic tradition; and Principe (2015) employs the Real to investigate secularisation and messianic phenomena.
[16]   As Lacan (1992: 11) claims in this seminar: 'I [...] will proceed [...] going more deeply into the notion of the real'.

In Section 2, I will consider the origin of the relationship between psychoanalysis and aesthetics, addressing some pioneering works by Freud[17] in which the application of psychoanalytic theories to the field of art was attempted for the first time. In doing so, I will outline the two paradigms of Freudian psychoanalytic aesthetics: the pathographic-deciphering approach and the model of the joke mechanism. The former, which is based on Freud's essays, such as 'Leonardo' (1910) or 'Dostoevsky and Parricide' (1927), focuses on decoding an artwork by means of psychoanalytic theories in order to deduce psychological information about its creator. This controversial approach led some post-Freudians to offer symptomatic readings (Dean, 2002) of artworks, characterised by a 'facile clinicizzazione dell'opera (letteraria o artistica) degradata a livello di sintomo dello stato psichico del suo autore' (Carmagnola, 2012: 239). The latter, based on *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) is focused more on the structure and formal syntax of an artwork, leading to Lacanian structuralist readings of literary works.

Section 3 considers the three Lacanian registers, which constitute the 'guiding terms' (Lacan, 1992: 11) in Lacan's theory: the Imaginary; the Symbolic; and the Real. This section charts the phases of Lacan's teaching in relation to these categories, especially in the light of their aesthetic implications. Indeed, each phase of Lacan's thought influenced and inspired different fields of aesthetics. For instance, film studies were particularly stimulated by the first stage of his work, which revolved around the category of the Imaginary and the theory of the mirror stage (Baudry, 1974-1975; Mulvey, 1975; Metz, 1977), while literary studies accorded a central role to the second stage of Lacan's work, that of the Symbolic, the importance of language, and rhetorical figures (Felman, 1982; Davis 1983; Wright, 1984; Muller and Richardson, 1988). Unsurprisingly, the third and final Lacanian stage, which focuses on the category of the Real, has more frequently been overlooked in the application of Lacan's theory to the arts, as it is clearly less directly applicable either to visual art and cinema, like the Imaginary, or to literature, like the Symbolic. Thus, Lacanian scholars in the field of aesthetics have only recently focused their attention on this last stage of

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[17] For Freud's essays, the date of the in-text citation refers to the original publication date of the essay cited.

Lacan's work.

Section 4 tackles the problematic notion of sublimation. According to Freud, sublimation is a transformative process that deflects sexual impulses into socially useful achievements, including intellectual, political, religious, cultural, and artistic activities. Thus, from a psychoanalytic perspective, sublimation is at the core of every artistic and creative process. This section establishes a comparison between the Freudian and Kleinian perspective on sublimation and the Lacanian one. In so doing, I will discuss how Lacan's notion of sublimation significantly differs from Freud and post-Freudians. In particular, I will argue that Lacan relates sublimation to ethics and aesthetics by means of the notion of the Real. Thus, I will first address the connection between ethics and the Real before moving on to consider the link between aesthetics and the Real. Ultimately, I will examine the two definitions of sublimation provided by Lacan in Seminar VII (1959-60): the first revolves around the concept of the Thing, whilst the second focuses on the notion of the void.

In Section 5, I will lay the foundation for a Lacanian aesthetic of the Real and for addressing Recalcati's three aesthetics of the Real in Chapter 2. On this basis, I will discuss those Lacanian art critics and scholars who have recently investigated the relationship between Lacanian aesthetics and the category of the Real. Though Lacan never developed a systematic or coherent aesthetics (Regnault, 1997; Hernández-Navarro, 2004; Recalcati, 2007a), the Lacanian perspective on art in relation to the Real can be identified through specific seminars and concepts. In particular, I will claim that Seminar VII and Seminar XI are crucial since they revolve around the notions of, respectively, the Thing and the object *a*. Thus, these Lacanian concepts are both discussed in relation to the category of the Real and consequently contextualised within the field of aesthetics.

2. Psychoanalytic Aesthetics: from Freud to Lacan

Broadly speaking, applying psychoanalysis to the study of aesthetics entails analysing and interpreting works of art through and within the framework of psychoanalytic theories. The relationship between psychoanalysis and aesthetics was first investigated by Freud in the fifth chapter of *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), in which he refers to the vicissitudes of both *Oedipus* by Sophocles and *Hamlet* by Shakespeare in order to find a literary confirmation of his theoretical and clinical hypotheses. In his works, Freud also focused more specifically on the different ways in which psychoanalysis could be 'applied' to the arts. These approaches can be reduced to two paradigms: the pathographic-deciphering approach; and the model of the joke mechanism (Glover, 2009).

In the paradigmatic essay 'Leonardo' (1910), Freud tries to reconstruct Leonardo da Vinci's inner life from his paintings, whilst in 'Dostoevsky and Parricide' (1927) he seeks to explain the author's epilepsy and neurotic symptoms by referring to his unresolved Oedipus complex. These two works became cornerstones of psychoanalysis when applied to art. They were the first examples of the pathographic-deciphering approach, which rests on the belief that a work of art reflects the artist's psychology and constitutes the Royal Road to the creator's unconscious. The artwork is thus approached exclusively as a means of deducing psychological information about its creator, who is treated like a patient, or like a puzzle to be solved, at the expenses of its formal features (Ogden and Ogden, 2013: 2).

According to Kris (1952), Gombrich (1987), and Glover (2009), the Freudian theory of the joke is the first movement towards a psychoanalytic aesthetics that differs radically from the model based on the (psycho)biography of the artist. What matters both in witty jokes and in artistic creations is the establishment of a fine balance between the content and the form in which it is shaped. Unlike the pathographic-deciphering approach, Freud's theory of the joke mechanism lays the foundation for a psychoanalytic approach that is more focused on accounting for the formal aspects of a work of art. Indeed, it is centred more on the medium, the structural possibilities and the form of an artwork than on its content and the artist's inner world or childhood experiences.

Influenced by Freud, many other psychoanalysts have continued to conduct research in this field (e.g. Jones, Bonaparte, Abraham, Rank), including Lacan. Freud and Lacan share a great passion for the arts, leading them to become art collectors (Gamwell and Wells, 1989; Lacan, 1992: 113), but neither psychoanalyst develops a coherent aesthetic system, although they both reference a wide range of diverse artworks.

There are, nevertheless, significant differences between them too. Lacan appreciates contemporary art[18] and considers his approach to aesthetics to be more humble and tentative than Freud's (Lacan, 1998a: ix). Lacan is very sceptical about applied psychoanalysis in general, and especially about the pathographic approaches to art, which are, for him, peculiar of a certain flawed Freudianism (Evans, 1996: 13). Lacan considers the psychoanalysis of the artist's approach a 'tricky matter' (1998a: 109) that was 'crazy daring' on Freud's part, while 'in those who follow him, soon becomes imprudence' (1998a: 110). Indeed, Lacan (1958: 630) claims: 'psychoanalysis is applied, strictly speaking, only as a treatment and thus to a subject who speaks and hears'. Lacan's intent when approaching a work of art is 'not so much to interpret [it] as to learn from it' (Fink, 2014a: 86). Lacan's psychoanalytic aesthetics aims at displaying how the structure of the unconscious works, rather than exploring the artist's psychic life as in Freud's pathographic approach. Thus, the Freudian model of the joke mechanism, which pays particular attention to the medium, the structural and formal features of artworks, paved the way for the Lacanian approach to arts (Trimarco, 1974: 89; Recalcati, 2007a: 36).

During his structuralist phase in the 1950s, Lacan 'depsychologizes the unconscious by treating it as linguistic' (Dean, 2000: 7). In this decade, the Lacanian unconscious is conceived of as 'interamente fondato sul linguaggio' (Rella, 1980: 88). Therefore, there is a shift, which also affects the field of psychoanalytic aesthetics, from a Freudian unconscious as the deepest layer of the artist's psyche to the Lacanian unconscious structured like a language, which 'is not at all the romantic unconscious of imaginative creation. It is not the locus

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[18]   Lacan established good relationships with the Surrealists, found a life-long friend in Salvador Dalì, and was deeply influenced by them in his conception of psychosis (Berressem, 1996; Baily, 2009: 20).

of the divinities of night' (Lacan, 1998a: 24).

Nevertheless, as I will discuss in greater depth in the next section, Lacanian theory undergoes several modifications over the years. Indeed, in the late phase of his teaching there is a 'svolta dal simbolico al reale' (Recalcati, 1996: 18), which leads to a conception of the unconscious less in connection with linguistic structures than with the notion of the Real. In opposition to the language-like unconscious, in the Real-like unconscious those linguistic structures that render the unconscious interpretable are overshadowed. What is at stake, then, is its uncanny and non-interpretable dimension, along with its radical otherness (Vighi, 2006: 17).

3. Lacanian Aesthetics in the Light of the Three Registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real

3.1 The Three Phases of Lacan's Teaching

Lacan conducted both research and teaching in the field of psychoanalysis, inspired and motivated by what is now commonly known as the 'return to Freud'. The latter consisted of re-reading Freud's *oeuvre* in relation to several heterogeneous disciplines, from ethnology and biology to philosophy and mathematics. Lacan strongly believed in the urgency of restoring the Freudian legacy by recovering Freud's thought after post-Freudian developments. According to Walsh (1994: 26), '[p]rominent to Lacan's polemical agenda is a direct confrontation with ego psychology, object relation theory, and other conceptions in which the task of psychoanalysis is to adapt the subject to reality'. One of the primary outcomes of Lacan's renowned return to Freud is the theory of the three registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Lacan uses the terms 'registers', 'orders', 'realms', and 'threads' interchangeably. He refers to the three registers as 'guiding terms' or 'terms of reference which I use' (Lacan, 1992: 11). According to Lacan, these 'fundamental categories' (Lacan, 1992: 20) are the basis for understanding the human psyche (Caruso, 1969: 162).

Lacan's theoretical psychoanalytic thought developed constantly over almost five decades, from the 1930s to his death in 1981. Following Jacques-Alain Miller's systematic periodisation of Lacanian thought (1984), Lacan's teaching can be divided into three consecutive stages, 'each lasting for approximately a decade' (Voruz and Wolf, 2007: VIII). Each stage not only marks a step in the Lacanian 'return to Freud', focusing on a specific aspect of Freud's work though not necessarily in accordance with it, but also mirrors a Lacanian register. Therefore, even if this might be seen as a simplified schematisation,[19] it can be argued that the early phase, during the late 1930s and 1940s, emphasises the register of the Imaginary, while the second phase, during the 1950s, focuses on the Symbolic, and the third and final phase, during the 1960s and 1970s, revolves

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[19]   Amongst other, Eyers (2012: 15) claims that 'over-hasty periodizations of Lacan's work reduce its essential complexity'.

around the Real. These phases did not develop in chronological order and, as with any other work-in-progress, there are some inconsistencies in the theory. However, a continuity can be detected throughout these stages (Chiesa, 2007: 5).

As Dean (2000: 36) underlines, 'this splitting of Lacan's work into discrete periods is necessarily artificial'. I will therefore employ it not with the intention of pigeonholing the evolution of an extremely complex thought, but rather because I find this tripartite periodisation of Lacan's teaching particularly useful for highlighting the shift from a prioritisation of the registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic to an establishment of the primacy of the Real and, at the same time, for tracing the different stages of the application of Lacan's theory to aesthetics. I will now analyse the three Lacanian registers since they are the basis of Lacan's theory and crucial for developing a Lacanian aesthetics, whilst considering the three main phases of Lacan's teaching. In doing so, I shall also underline the links between the three registers or phases of Lacanian theory and the field of aesthetics.

3.2 The Imaginary (1930s–1940s)

The first stage of Lacan's return to Freud is characterised by his emphasis on the essays 'On Narcissism: an Introduction' (1914) and 'Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego' (1921). In this early phase, Lacan outlines the field of the Imaginary and develops a theory of the subject as an alienated, imaginary identity. In doing so, Lacan places a particular focus on the Freudian concept of narcissism, and enhances the power of the *Imago*, namely the role of the image in the construction of self-identity. The fundamental principle elucidated at this stage is that the ego is an imaginary construction, created by an alienating identification, which must be differentiated from the so-called subject of the unconscious.[20] Based on the core argument of the mirror stage theory,[21] human

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[20]   According to Lacan, the ego [*moi*] is instituted through the ideal image encountered in the mirror stage and thus the ego belongs to the imaginary dimension. On the contrary, the subject of the unconscious can be reduced neither to the ego nor to its imaginary dimension. This differentiates Lacan drastically from so-called 'ego psychology'.
[21]   The mirror stage theory was first articulated in a paper which was lost, entitled 'The Mirror Stage', officially presented for the first time at the Fourteenth International

beings are born prematurely and need other people to survive, because they do not have complete mastery over their own bodies. Moreover, the body is experienced by the infant as an object in pieces. The baby can only perceive isolated parts of it, being unable to recognise it as a whole.[22] For Lacan, through the medium of a mirror, every human infant goes through the mirror stage between the age of six and eighteen months: the baby identifies her/himself in the image perceived in the surface of the mirror (Lacan, 1949: 75-81). This experience of completeness, replicated without the mirror through siblings and other human beings in general, [23] enables the infant to have a mastery over its own body. Therefore, the body, previously perceived as fragmented, is now regulated or 'reunified' by that very ego, which has in turn arisen as an 'imaginary function' (Lacan, 1948: 86) from an initial lack of bodily unity by means of a process of imaginary construction.

This is, however, a process of both identification and alienation. In effect, the subject is not only captivated by a visual image that will allow it to acquire a progressive mastery of its motor functions, but is also captured and alienated by it. As Leader (2002: 24) notes, 'being pulled into an image […] gives us our bodily unity at the price of a split, a discordancy in our identities'. This happens because, as Sforza Tarabochia underlines, 'we do not identify with ourselves as we are – loosely put – "inside" our bodies, "inside" ourselves. Instead, we identify with an *external* image' (2013: 127). Nonetheless, it is only through alienation that the ego can be born. Thus, it can be said that every human being's entry into the human world occurs at the price of, or thanks to, a fundamental experience of alienation.

Psychoanalytical Association Congress in 1936 at Marienbad and, subsequently, in a paper entitled 'The Mirror Stage as a Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', which was presented at the Sixteenth International Psychoanalytic Congress in 1949 in Zurich. The latter was first published in *Revue française de Psychanalyse*, and was subsequently integrated, in 1966, into the *Écrits* (Lacan, 1949: 75-81).

[22] Referring to this uncanny experience, Recalcati claims that '[i]l bambino già nei suoi primi moti di vita si palesa come un soggetto in balìa del Reale, privo di autonomia, come un'esistenza che dipende totalmente dalla risposta dell'Altro' (Recalcati, 2012a: 24).

[23] According to Lolli (2012: 40), '[l]o stadio dello specchio non deve essere concepito esclusivamente nella sua formulazione "letterale" (un bambino che si guarda allo specchio) ma come un momento costitutivo della soggettività'. Indeed, as Recalcati (2009a: 31) aptly points out: '[n]on è dunque la virtù empirica dello specchio a rendere possibile l'accesso alla propria immagine, ma sono il volto e lo sguardo dell'Altro a presiedere questo movimento di soggettivazione e di riconoscimento'.

Lacan labels the register in which this identification/alienation takes place the 'Imaginary'. Due to the twofold way in which the subject relates to the image, and thus to its '(de)formative function' (Chiesa, 2007: 32), on the one hand, the image makes it impossible for the subject to experience him/herself without mediation. On the other hand, the image allows the subject to reach a level of completeness not previously experienced. Thus, the image both captures and captivates the subject at the same time. In order to take into account both aspects of the image, Lacan uses the term *captation*, which combines the words capture and captivation (Chiesa, 2007: 15), and calls it the 'image's morphogenic action' (Lacan, 1946: 156). This is the process wherein the image irremediably 'traps' and 'shapes' the subject (Lacan, 1946: 156).

The morphogenic power of the Imaginary, which manifests itself through the aforementioned dual nature of the Lacanian *imago*, plays a pivotal role in the Lacanian theory of vision and thus represents a crucial link with the aesthetic field, in particular with visual studies and film theory.[24] As Leader (2002: 25) affirms, '[i]mages mould us, transfix us, captivate us and alienate us'. The active power exerted by the image immediately highlights the difference between mainstream visual aesthetic theories[25] and the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of vision. According to the former, the viewer exerts an indiscriminate power and mastery over the object of his/her vision, which is considered merely as a passive entity to be observed. Based on the latter, it is the object of this relationship that acquires greater importance, up to the point that an image or picture can be conceived of as a 'human-capturing device' (Leader, 2002: 25). Lacan, as will be explored further on in Section 5 and in Chapter 2, investigates and develops the arresting and seductive power of the image especially in his Seminar XI, where he analyses the split between the gaze and the look.

In his initial treatment of the image, however, Lacan focuses mostly on its ability to 'cover' and 'reunify' the fragmented body through the mirror image, which offers the subject a sense of wholeness. Therefore, at this early stage in

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[24] As Rabaté (2003: XV) underlines, 'Lacan's fortune in the English-speaking world was due to literary critics or to writers dealing with visual culture'.

[25] For instance, one could mention the example of the Renaissance notion of perspective or Descartes' philosophical perspective on vision. These theories, merged in the modern optical model, presuppose a rigid dichotomy between the viewing subject and the viewed object. On this topic, see Foster (1988).

Lacan's teaching, the register of the Imaginary is conceived of as a screen, a protection against the disquieting Real, a 'kind of barrier enabling the subject to maintain distance from the real, protecting him or her against its irruption' (Žižek, 1991: 59). However, according to contemporary Italian Lacanianism, the Imaginary is not conceived of only as a protective screen against the Real but also constitutes a possibility of encountering the Real (Recalcati, 2012a: 15-16 note 40). I will address this issue in Chapter 2.

3.3 The Imaginary in Film Theory

Due to the prominent role the Lacanian register of the Imaginary accords to the visual dimension and the field of the image, a number of psychoanalytically-informed approaches to art, especially in cinema studies and film theory, have been influenced by this Lacanian theorisation of the Imaginary.

The 1970s was a particularly fruitful period in which, as Piotrowska (2014: 29) points out, 'one of the original battlegrounds for the emerging psychoanalytical film theory was the issue of the spectator's identification with both the apparatus and the screen in a fiction film'. In this respect, in 1970, Jean-Louis Baudry, one of the pioneers of psychoanalytic film theory, published an essay entitled 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus' (Baudry, 1974-1975: 39-47), which is widely considered as 'the most important early essay to incorporate Lacanian psychoanalysis into film theory' (Homer, 2005: 27). In this seminal article, Baudry focuses on cinematic spectatorship, developing the analogy between screen and mirror and drawing a parallel between the cinematic spectator and Lacan's subject. During the 1970s and 1980s, another point of reference for psychoanalytic film theory informed by Lacan's thought was the work of the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, who emphasises the notion of the gaze, arguing that cinematic representation is dominated by a fundamentally male gaze with the image of woman as its object (Mulvey, 1975).

The landmark book in the field of film theory *Psychoanalysis and Cinema. The Imaginary Signifier*, published by Christian Metz in 1977, epitomises this trend and the ideas of early Lacanian film theorists. Placing the Lacanian mirror

stage theory in the foreground, Metz (1982: 45) draws a parallel between the cinematic screen and the mirror, suggesting that the '[f]ilm is like the mirror. […] In the mirror the child perceives […] its own image'. Metz (1982: 3) conceives of cinema as an imaginary experience, proposing that '[c]inema is a technique of the imaginary', and discusses Lacan's insights into the process of identification in order to develop a theory of spectatorship. Thus, as McGowan (2007: 2) argues, the cinematic experience 'allows spectators to overcome temporarily the sense of lack that we endure simply by existing as subjects in the world. This experience provides a wholly imaginary pleasure, repeating that of the mirror stage'.

Joan Copjec (1994: 15), who has critically engaged with Metz's ideas as well as with early Lacanian film theory, nonetheless considers the analogy between the screen and mirror as 'the central misconception of film theory'. McGowan (2007: 1) takes a similar stance, claiming that: '[w]hen film theorists in the 1970s first looked to Jacques Lacan's thought to further their understanding of cinema, their focus was narrow. Since Lacan himself never theorised about film, film theorists looked to an area of his thought that seemed most easily transferable to the cinematic experience'. For this reason, McGowan and Kunkle (2004: xiii) consider the theories of Baudry and Metz to be responsible for what they call a 'misplaced emphasis' on Lacan's mirror stage in the analysis of the cinematic field.[26] They state that: '[f]ilm theory's understanding of Lacan was largely mistaken. It had the effect of placing an undue importance on the role of the mirror stage – and the category of the Imaginary – in Lacanian theory' (2004: xiii).

This mistaken conception of the Lacanian Imaginary led to other fallacies that render those film theories incomplete. For instance, the cinematic image is mainly seen as playing a structuring and positive role for subjectivity, overlooking the fact that, for Lacan, the image possesses not only a formative but also a deformative function. According to Cowie (2011: 191 note 15), Metz's account fails 'to acknowledge that the mirror stage produces a split subject, not a unified subject. The imaginary engenders the fantasy of unity, not its enactment'.

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[26]   In Seminar II, Lacan (1991: 102) already complains about the overused reference to the mirror stage: 'its use should not be abused. The mirror stage isn't a magic word. It's already a bit dated'.

Along this line, Bellavita (2005: 235) claims that: '[l]o *specchio* lacaniano che Metz adotta per fondare la sua teoria dell'identificazione primaria dello spettatore al film, è uno strumento attraverso il quale il Soggetto giunge alla costruzione del Sé: specchio *positivo*, specchio *giubilatorio* [...], specchio *costruttivo*' [original emphasis]. Strictly related to this, the issue of the spectator's identification constitutes another inadequate appropriation of Lacan's Imaginary as operated by film theory. According to McGowan and Kunkle (2004: xix), '[f]ilm theorists came to see that identification functioned with wide variation from spectator to spectator, a variation that eventually caused the Lacanian theory of identification to lose its coherence and collapse'. The problem of the gaze represents another problematic issue inasmuch as it has been considered mainly as unidirectional: from the spectator/viewing subject towards the cinematic screen/object. As McGowan (2007: 4) puts it: 'early Lacanian film theory identifies the gaze with the misguided look of the spectator'. For Lacan, though, the act of seeing always presupposes the condition of being seen. As Leader (2002: 14) states: 'Lacan had the idea that a psychoanalytic theory of vision should take as its starting point this fact that, before looking, we are looked at, and that our look is caught up in what we can call a dynamic of looks'. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the almost complete elision by early Lacanian film theory of the role played by the Real in Lacan's thought, and the way in which it relates to the Imaginary and vision (McGowan and Kunkle, 2004: xiii). As Vighi (2006: 30) promptly remarks, in these pioneering attempts in the field of psychoanalytic film theory, '*the victim was Lacan himself*, insofar as what was overlooked was the most destabilising feature of his theoretical edifice, namely the Real' [original emphasis]. Ironically, as McGowan and Kunkle underline, 'as film theory was developing a line of Lacanian thought that focused on the Imaginary and the Symbolic in the late 1960s and 1970s, Lacan himself turned toward the Real' (McGowan and Kunkle, 2004: xvii).

In contrast to this, exponents of contemporary Italian Lacanianism, such as Bellavita (2005; 2006) and Recalcati (2007a; 2009a; 2009b; 2012a), reformulate the Lacanian theory of aesthetics by prioritising the category of the Real. In doing so, they retain the importance of both the Imaginary and the Symbolic but only in relation to the order of the Real. I will analyse this in greater

depth in subsequent chapters.

3.4 The Symbolic (1950s)

In the second phase, Lacan focuses on Freudian works that discuss the power of the symbolic production of the unconscious, such as *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), and *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). These works all centre on the analysis of language and establish a connection between words, symbols, and symptoms. As Lacan (1992: 45) states: 'it is obvious that the things of the human world are things in a universe structured by words, that language, symbolic processes, dominate and govern all'. He is therefore extremely interested in studying the 'effects of speech on the subject' (Lacan, 1998a: 126). During this structuralist period, Lacan was deeply influenced by the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson. As Lacan (1998a: 20) notes, linguistics is 'a field that is much more accessible to us today than at the time of Freud'. These readings enabled Lacan to develop the idea of the unconscious being 'structured like a language' (Lacan, 1966: 737). Indeed, according to Lacan (1992: 32),

> [w]e only grasp the unconscious finally when it is explicated, in that part of it which is articulated by passing into words. It is for this reason that we have the right [...] to recognize that the unconscious itself has in the end no other structure than the structure of language'.

As Anna O., one of the most renowned patients in the history of psychoanalysis, aptly points out, psychoanalysis is a 'talking cure' (Gay, 1988: 65). The spoken words are the most important aspect of psychoanalysis inasmuch as they represent the gateway to the patient's unconscious and the only possibility of tackling it. As Lacan claims: 'psychoanalysis has but one medium: the patient's speech' (Lacan, 1953: 248).

The manifestations of the unconscious, as Chiesa states, 'are far from ''irrational'': they can be seen to follow certain regular patterns, which Freud had already considered to be fundamentally *linguistic*' (Chiesa, 2007: 35). The theoretical tools developed by linguistics are thus precious instruments of analysis. The principle according to which the unconscious is structured like a

language is based on those Freudian theories that illustrate the implication of language and linguistic structures within the formations of the unconscious, such as his theory of dreams. According to the latter, dream work involves specific mechanisms, such as condensation [*Verdichtung*], displacement [*Verschiebung*], and symbolism [*Einstellung*], which transform latent thoughts into narrative figurations that constitute the plot of the dream. These operations of the dream work carried out by the unconscious are fundamentally linguistic processes: they combine and assemble latent thoughts and, for this reason, Lacan compares them to metaphors and metonyms.

As in the first stage, in which Lacan develops a notion of the subject as being formed by means of the dual processes of alienation and identification within the field of Imaginary, in the second stage he delineates the origins of human subjective identity through a similar dual process within the field of the Symbolic. Here, the medium of identification/alienation is no longer the mirror image but rather language, consisting of the words, names, linguistic representations, and laws that regulate all these elements. Language offers the subject the possibility of finding an identity, for instance through the words other people direct at us and the way in which they define us. At the same time, however, those very words and definitions do not exhaust the subject and represent a constitutional obstacle for the latter to know and possess his/her own identity completely. Although the mirror image and the Imaginary are still crucial, at this stage they are filtered through the issue of language and integrated within the Symbolic.

According to Lacan, the world of language precedes mankind; in other words, the Symbolic order pre-exists an infant's birth. Parents or caregivers, relatives, social and cultural groups constitute the Symbolic – the order of the Other. Lacan differentiates the expression *le petit autre* from *le grand Autre*. The former is derived from the mirror stage and belongs to the order of the Imaginary. It refers to the 'small other' in the mirror, namely a reflection and projection of the ego, as well as to all other people considered as 'little others' and treated by the subject as suitable 'objects' of projection and identification. The Other with a capital 'O', which belongs to the Symbolic, rather suggests the idea of a radical otherness. This otherness cannot be reduced to the specular relationship

between human beings. The 'Other' is represented and embodied by society, culture, law, institutions, and so on (Bottiroli, 2006: 267). As with the Imaginary, that which shapes and structures every human being is derived from the external world. According to Sforza Tarabochia (2013: 129):

> The subject comes into being as caught up in a constitutionally alienating situation, which is twofold: the subject is alienated in her/his beautiful and immortal mirror image (imaginary alienation) and in that language which cannot express anything completely, not even the subject himself, but which is the only way to exist (symbolic alienation).

Only by experiencing alienation in both the Imaginary and Symbolic registers can the subject gain access to reality. As already stated, this is due to a structural split in subjectivity, hence Lacan's use of the barred S: $ symbolises the subject.

As occurred with the Imaginary in the 1930s and 1940s, during this phase of his teaching, Lacan still considers the Symbolic as being able to completely cover and assimilate the register of the Real. In the 1950s, Lacan claims that '[o]ne can only think of language as network, a net over the entirety of things, over the totality of the real. It inscribes on the plane of the real this other plane, which we here call the plane of the symbolic' (Lacan, 1988: 262). In the subsequent phase, Lacan rethinks the categories of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, focusing on their limits. In this respect, the Real is what limits them and is beyond them. Recalcati contends that 'per l'ultimo Lacan l'ordine simbolico non è un ordine senza falle' (Recalcati, 2007b: 43). In this respect, 'la presa del simbolico sul reale [...] non può essere mai esaustiva, perché c'è sempre un'area di non coincidenza tra il reale e il simbolico' (Recalcati, 2007a: 41).

3.5 The Symbolic in Literary Theory

While the Imaginary has inspired and influenced psychoanalytic film theory in particular, Lacan's theory of the Symbolic has had a greater influence on literary studies, especially literary criticism and psychoanalytic theories of literature. This can be ascribed to Lacan's focus on the function and structure of language during the 1950s, when he used linguistics to make sense of the so-called unconscious formations (i.e. symptoms, slips of the tongue, bungled actions, and

dreams). If the laws that regulate the unconscious and its manifestations are the same as those of language, it follows that literary works are subject to the same rules as the unconscious. Thus, the linguistic/structuralist approach focuses mainly on the text, technique, and structure of written works, being more suitable for the analysis of literature/verbal communication than for visual arts.

Lacan's conception of the language-like unconscious and the Symbolic fostered a shift in the object of psychoanalytic literary criticism from an investigation into the psychology of the writer (i.e. Bonaparte) or the unconscious of literary characters (i.e. Jones) to a study of the literary text itself and the relation between text and reader. When Lacan approaches literary works, such as Poe's *The Purloined Letter* in his Écrits, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Seminar IV (Lacan, 1994), Sophocles' *Antigone* in Seminar VII, or Plato's *Symposium* in Seminar VIII (Lacan, 1997b), and so forth, his intent is not to understandand the psychology of the author or the characters but rather 'to seek new psychoanalytic insights' (Fink, 2014a: 86). Lacan's analysis of literary works aims at displaying how the unconscious as a linguistic system works and how psychoanalysts should interpret the patient's discourse as a literary text (Lacan, 1991: 153).

Lacan's approach to literary texts has inspired 'psychoanalytic literary criticism' (Evans, 1996: 14), the key figures of which are Shoshana Felman (1982), Robert Davis (1983), Elizabeth Wright (1984), John Muller and William Richardson (1982, 1988). In Italy, Stefano Agosti (1987, 2004) is the main representative of this trend. However, the branch of so-called psychoanalytic literary criticism, which claims to be inspired by Lacan, does not always follow Lacan's approach to literary works. For, despite being inspired by Lacanian psychoanlalytic theories, literary critics and theorists are always focused on engaging in a study of the text in question, as well, at times, as the inner intentions of the writer her/himself.

Similarly to those theories developed during the 1970s in the field of film studies, psychoanalytic literary theories that originated from the Lacanian structuralist period during the 1950s also tend to a near-total exclusion of the category of the Real. In the field of psychoanalytic aesthetics inspired by Lacan's theory, there is indeed a 'tendency to gloss over the Real in favour of explications of the Imaginary and the Symbolic' (Walsh, 1994: 26). This might be seen as a

limitation since the late phase of Lacan's teaching, which revolves around the conception of a Real-like unconscious, is almost completely ignored. On the contrary, the aesthetics developed by contemporary Lacanians focuses more on the notion of the Real. As Recalcati (2007a: 209) affirms, 'un'estetica lacaniana [...] non sarebbe imperniata tanto sulle facoltà lirico-retoriche dell'inconscio quanto sull'incontro con il reale, con il limite di ogni rappresentazione'.

3.6 The Real (1960s–1970s)

In the third phase of his return to Freud, Lacan focuses on the Freudian notion of the death drive [*Todestrieb*]. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) is thus the pivotal text for his theoretical speculation at this time. The Lacanian notion of the Real, around which this phase revolves, is indeed a translation in Lacanian terms of Freud's concept of the death drive (Cosenza, 2003: 28). At this stage, the unconscious is not conceived of as being entirely symbolic, namely structured like a language and governed by consistent (linguistic) laws. There is, rather, 'something real in it which escapes the Symbolic' (Chiesa, 2007: 105). As De Kesel underlines, 'there is a difference between the Lacan of the fifties, when it was all about the signifier, and the Lacan of the sixties and seventies where one sees a continually renewed emphasis on the Real' (De Kesel, 2009: 88). In this late phase, Lacan prioritises the register of the Real over the Imaginary and the Symbolic (Smith, 2014: XI), shifting the emphasis from 'analyses of imaginary and symbolic representations, to an engagement with that which resists representation: the Real' (Dean, 2002: 24).

The concept of the Real [*réel*] was introduced into psychoanalytic jargon by Lacan (Lacan, 2016; Eyers, 2012: 8), and was reformulated many times during the five decades of his teaching. Thus, 'it is hardly surprising to see that among contemporary Lacanians, the real is defined in a range of different and often contradictory ways' (Breu, 2009: 189). As Evans (1996: 159) states: '[a]fter appearing in 1936, the term disappears from Lacan's work until the early 1950's'. When this notion reappears in 1953 it is because the Real has been elevated 'to the status of a fundamental category of psychoanalytic theory' (Evans, 1996: 162). It emerges as something that has not been symbolised: it is outside of

language and cannot be assimilated into the Symbolic. As Bottiroli (2002: 11) argues, the Real is 'ciò che resiste all'ordine del senso'. To put it bluntly, the Real is 'defined in its negativity' (Renov, 2004: 124): it can be reduced neither to the Imaginary nor to the Symbolic. According to Lacan, 'the defining characteristic of the real is that one cannot imagine it' (Lacan, 2013b: 76). Furthermore, it is that which 'resists symbolisation absolutely' (Lacan, 1988: 66) and is 'the domain of whatever subsists outside symbolisation' (Lacan, 1954: 324).

Therefore, the Real exceeds the other two Lacanian registers: there is no image which represents the Real, and there is no way it can be symbolised. The Real is not reducible to the semantic dimension of language insofar as it is 'unsymbolisable, unsymbolised, ineffable and unimaginable' (Bailly, 2009: 98) and because 'esso è estraneo al linguaggio e alla dimensione simbolica' (Perniola, 2000: 8). As Recalcati (2001: 60) states: '[i]l reale appare come limite impossibile da valicare per l'immaginario come per il simbolico'. In summary, the Real is 'the impossible' (Lacan, 1998a: 167): it is as impossible to imagine or portray as it is to define or integrate into the symbolic order. As Benvenuto aptly puts it: '[i]l reale è insomma la parte del mondo non simbolizzata, ma nemmeno immaginata' (Benvenuto, 2015: 98).

According to Lacan, the Real differs from the notion of reality. It is important to underline this difference since, as Wright points out, '[i]n the academic discourse, the real often emerges as confused with "reality" – the mundane world' (Wright, 2000: 39). Instead, there is an 'eterogeneità concettuale ed esperienziale tra realtà e reale' (Recalcati, 2012d: 193). From the beginning of his career, Lacan always criticises the naïve conception of reality as the 'objective external world'. For Lacan, instead, reality is a subjective representation which is the product of the articulation of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. From a strictly Lacanian perspective, the status of reality is thus representational: as human beings, we are constantly engaged in the act of representing, retelling, and reconstructing 'our lived realities and our views of the world – in conversation, in writing, or with images' (Bowlby, 2007: XVII). As Breu (2009: 189-190) states:

> What we perceive as reality is largely a by-product of the interaction of the symbolic and the imaginary. The symbolic grants coherence to and effectively mediates what we term reality, but does so only at a price. The imaginary situates the subject within a visual field organized by desire, yet the field of the visual only gains coherence via the

logic of the symbolic.

Lacan (1992: 21), addressing the 'problematic character of that which Freud posits under the term reality', states that '[r]eality is precarious' (Lacan, 1992: 30). Reality can, indeed, be undermined by the irruption of the Real. The Real is at the same time the inherent limit of the imaginary-symbolic reality and what goes beyond those registers. I will discuss this difference between reality and the Real, and its reception in Italian scholarship, further in Chapters 3 and 4.

The Lacanian Real always 'eccede il soggetto' inasmuch as 'non rientra nella forma dell'immagine allo specchio né rientra nel corpo che parla' (Riccardi, 2012: 79). Along these lines, Benvenuto argues that 'ogni soggettività ruota intorno a un Reale che non sarà mai simbolizzato né discorsivizzato' (Benvenuto, 2006: 30). Indeed, the Real 'operates within the life of the subject […] as a remainder, an excess' (Eyers, 2012: 1). From this perspective, as Riccardi argues, '[i]l reale pulsionale non si integra con l'immagine, ma è vissuto come un troppo, un eccesso che non trova posto e proprio per questo suo essere fuori dal simbolico e fuori dall'immaginario è ciò che angoscia il soggetto' (Riccardi, 2012: 79). Therefore, the feeling of anxiety is connected with the notion of the Real. As Lacan puts it, the Real is 'the object of anxiety *par excellence*' [original emphasis] (Lacan, 1991: 164).

In Lacan's teaching, the notion of the Real is ascribed a twofold nature, as it were: that of trauma and enjoyment, or *jouissance*. For Lacan (1998a: 55), the Real presents itself 'in the form of trauma'; it is the traumatic kernel at the core of human subjectivity. Traumatic is all that which 'cannot be integrated into the universe of signification' (Walsh, 1995: 170) but can only be repeated by the subject. As Foster (1996: 132) underlines, 'the real cannot be represented; it can only be repeated, indeed it *must* be repeated'. Hence, the Real is 'understood as a zone outside symbolization from which trauma may erupt as symptom' (Renov, 2004: 124). For this reason, for Lacan the Real 'is essentially a missed encounter' (Lacan, 1998a: 55). In turn, he defines trauma as 'a missed encounter with the real' (Foster, 1996: 132). This aspect has been particularly emphasised by Lacanians in relation to the arts (Forster, 1996; Perniola, 2000; Vighi, 2006).

Jouissance is closely related to Freud's notion of the death drive (Hughes

and Ror Malone, 2002: 29). As Cosenza puts it, *jouissance* is 'da intendersi come soddisfazione autodistruttiva, maligna, spinta libidica irresistibile verso qualcosa che arreca al soggetto una sofferenza che lo fa godere' (Cosenza, 2003: 29). In particular, *jouissance* is the Lacanian way of rethinking the death drive 'clinicamente e antropologicamente' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 23). This paradoxical, and excessive, painful pleasure is, indeed, not only 'the most fundamental problem faced by the analyst in clinical practice' (Evans, 1998: 18); it is also an issue confronted, according to Lacan, by contemporary society. In fact, Lacan (1990: 32) states that nowadays *jouissance* is 'going off the track' and this notion is utilised by Lacan to develop cultural considerations and to address social issues. Thus, the concept of *jouissance* 'is as much a problem for society as it is for the individual' (Evans, 1998: 20) and there is an 'ethical perspective' (Chiesa, 2007: 168) at stake. In Lacan's wake, several (Italian) Lacanians developed social considerations drawing from this notion (Evans, 1998: 19-23). I will develop this more in detail in Chapters 2 and 4.

To fully account for the Real, which is 'something appreciable only through other concepts or notions' (Eyers, 2012: 2), I will now briefly consider the following: the Thing [*das Ding*]; the object *a* [*objet petit a*]; the fantasy; and the *sinthome*. These notions partake of the Real and are its manifestations in different contexts. The Thing is the always-already lost cause of desire which the subject constantly, but in vain, attempts to regain. It is also connected with the idea of a primordial satisfaction but also one of potential danger, and it is non-representational. The notion of the Thing only appears in Lacan's Seminar VII and is replaced, from Seminar XI, by another Lacanian notion, namely that of the *objet petit a* (in which the 'a' stands for *autre* or little other to distinguish it from the Other). The object *a* is the object-cause of 'unattainable since irrecuperable desire' (Levine, 2000: 143). The impossible relation between the subject and the object *a* is structured by the fantasy. *Fantasy* is that which allows the subject to cohere and live his/her everyday life undisturbed. Fantasy originates as a response to the enigmatic and disruptive Real (Principe, 2015: 7). Indeed, that which the subject experiences as reality is at the same time structured and sustained by fantasy (Žižek, 2006: 51 and 57), which functions as a screen against the irruption of the traumatic Real. Consequently, according to Lacan, '[t]he real

supports the phantasy, the phantasy protects from the real' (1998a: 41). Finally, the *sinthome* is a notion developed by Lacan mainly during the 1970s (Dean, 2002: 36). While Lacan moves from a language-like unconscious to a Real-like unconscious, the notion of the symptom undergoes a similar shift: from a linguistic message that conveys a cyphered meaning to an untranslatable excess of *jouissance*, 'a hard kernel of enjoyment that can only be posited in relationship with the traumatic dimension of the Real, remaining beyond analysis and signification' (Vighi, 2006: 10).

3.7 The Real and the Field of Aesthetics

The last phase of Lacan's teaching, and thus the category of the Real, was often neglected or overlooked by those who applied Lacan's theory to aesthetics during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (McGowan and Kunkle, 2004; Vighi, 2006). Quite understandably, this occurred since the Real is per se the not represented and the non-representable, thus placing it at odds with the arts *qua* representation. Indeed, the theories of the mirror stage, as well as of the unconscious structured as a language, are more immediately applicable to the visual and literary arts, inasmuch as their theoretical concepts tackle visual images and linguistic structures more directly than the notion of the Real and those related to it.

From the late 1980s, however, the situation began to change, especially in Anglo-American academia. The category of the Real attracted increasing attention and was fruitfully employed in the field of aesthetics, particularly in visual studies and film theory (Dean, 2000: 19). In the early 1990s, academic journals such as *Screen* in the UK and *October* in the USA also began to employ and foster the use of the notion of Real in the fields of visual studies and film theory. According to Levine (2000: 144), it was

> with the arrival of the fresh Slovenian-Parisian voice of Slavoj Žižek in the pages of *October,* that the predominant focus began to shift more and more away from the Imaginary and Symbolic vicissitudes of the subject's alienations and identifications as exemplified in installations, video, photography, and painting toward a largely new attention to the texts and films of popular culture in their registration of the traumatic irruption into everyday reality of what we stammeringly term the Real.

Adams's opening remarks in a special issue of *October* entitled *Rendering the Real*

sound like the manifesto of Lacanianism, particularly in the Anglo-American world, during the 1990s: 'we have concentrated on Lacanian theory and the concept of the real, seeking to show how the concept can elucidate the space and the effects of certain cultural productions. We have attempted both to elaborate this concept and to put it to work' (Adams, 1991: 3). From then on, Lacanian theory and the notion of the Real began to be employed as a 'powerful tool in political as well as aesthetic analysis' (Levine, 2000: 144) and in the field of cultural studies (Hughes and Ror Malone, 2002: 13), although the clinical dimension was rarely addressed.

Therefore, from the 1990s and even more so from the 2000s, the number of publications about the Lacanian Real started to flourish. Art critics, Lacanian scholars and Lacanian psychoanalysts began to place an increasing emphasis upon the third period of Lacanian teaching, investigating the relationship between aesthetics and the category of the Real and applying the latter to visual and cinematic art forms (Jess-Cooke, 2006: 349). In this respect, it is worth mentioning the following scholars: Foster (1996), Regnault (1997), Wajcman (1998), Žižek (1989a; 2000), Perniola (2000), Dean (2002), Fuery (2003), Adams (2003), Hernández-Navarro (2004, 2006), McGowan and Kunkle (2004), Bellavita (2005, 2006), Vighi (2006), McGowan (2007), Iversen (2007), Cowie (2007, 2011), and Recalcati (2007a, 2009a, 2009b, 2012a, 2016d).

This reception of Lacan's theory focused on the category of the Real and its application to the field of aesthetics emphasises the issue of representing the unrepresentable, of encountering a dimension that would otherwise be traumatic and deadly. Art is, on the one hand, an imaginary and symbolic device to treat the Real and, on the other, offers the viewer the possibility of being involved in an encounter, otherwise traumatic and disruptive, with the Real itself. Art is 'the vehicle through which the Real manifests itself' (McGowan and Kunkle, 2004: xviii). As Recalcati (2007a: 97) aptly puts it,

> lo statuto dell'opera d'arte non usufruisce solo delle leggi del linguaggio […], non manifesta cioè unilateralmente l'omologia con l'idea dell'inconscio strutturato come un linguaggio, ma ci introduce anche alla dimensione traumatica del limite del linguaggio, dell'incontro con il reale come ciò che buca lo schermo simbolico del linguaggio.

This perspective focuses on the limit of the registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic and pushes art 'beyond its representational status, into an uncanny realm where representation itself conflates with the explosive potentialities of the Real' (Vighi, 2006: 12). As Recalcati claims: 'l'opera non ci mostra la realtà, ma è il luogo dove il Reale si manifesta' (Recalcati, 2009b: 199). After all, the Real is 'that which resists symbolization absolutely' (Lacan, 1987: 66). It resists translation, interpretation, and visualisation. The Real defies conceptualisation: any signification is unavoidably inadequate to represent it or signify it. The concept of the Real signals '*il limite della rappresentazione e il limite del rappresentabile*' [original emphasis] (Bellavita, 2005: 68). A Lacanian aesthetics which revolves around the notion of the Real might contribute to a different understanding of the arts, whether visual or literary, which has been 'considered largely since Plato as modes of imitation' (Azari, 2008: 59). From a Lacanian perspective focused on the register of the Real, the aim of art is not to represent the 'real' world or illustrate it as realistically as possible, but rather to present and form an 'index of the Real' (Restuccia, 2003: IX).

In the next section, I will focus on the relationship between the Real and the psychoanalytic concept of sublimation. In Lacanian terms, sublimation is an imaginary-symbolic process that aims at dealing with the Real and that underpins both the field of aesthetics and that of ethics. This paves the way for addressing the dimension of *impegno* characteristic of contemporary Italian Lacanians that I will discuss in Chapters 2 and 3. The notion of the Real and its aesthetical implications will be analysed in greater depth in Section 5, where I will specifically consider its relation with the notion of the Thing, the void, the object *a*, and anamorphosis. This will lead to a discussion of Recalcati's Lacanian aesthetics in Chapter 2, which explores and describes the relationship between art and the very notion of the Real.

4. Lacanian Perspectives on Sublimation

4.1 Sublimation: the Real between Ethics and Aesthetics

According to Freud, sublimation [*Sublimierung*] is a process that consists in diverting and channelling sexual drives towards non-sexual aims.[27] The latter could concern artistic creations but could also be related, more broadly, to intellectual and cultural endeavours, such as scientific research, and social or religious activities. Following Freud, Lacan raises the issue of sublimation in his Seminar VII, entitled *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, where he questions: '[w]hat is this possibility we call sublimation?' (Lacan, 1992: 143). Lacan's contribution to this matter is to place the Real at the core of the process. More specifically, for Lacan, sublimation envolves the Real *qua* the Thing: it is an act that accords an imaginary object the dignity of the real Thing by means of the Symbolic (Lacan, 1992: 112). Lacan (1992: 159) considers his conception of sublimation as being 'situated somewhere between a Freudian ethics and a Freudian aesthetics'. In fact, Lacan aims to 'orientare tanto l'etica della psicoanalisi, quanto la sublimazione come fondamento di una possibile estetica psicoanalitica, a partire dalla centralità del reale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 8). According to Lacan (1992), the two barriers that protect and separate human beings from the Real are the Good, which is central in ethics, and Beauty, which is at the core of aesthetics. This conception of sublimation as an imaginary-symbolic treatment of the Real lays the foundation for developing an aesthetics of the Real (see Section 5 on this Chapter), whilst also paving the way for Recalcati's aesthetics (see Chapter 2) and

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[27] As Freud puts it, sublimation is the 'capacity to exchange its originally sexual aim for another one, which is no longer sexual but which is psychically related to the first aim' (1908a: 187). The plasticity of the drives, their ability to change targets and objects, enables this diversion. As a result, sublimation is often confused with sexual abstinence (Leader, 2002: 53-56; Kaltenbeck, 2003: 105). However, Freud struggles to explain how the sexual drive can be satisfied without reaching its object; he fails to identify the object of this non-sexual satisfaction and struggles to understand the nature of the satisfaction reached through sublimation. Arguably for this reason, Freud destroyed the manuscript on sublimation which should have been included in his essays on metapsychology (Gay, 1988: 372-374). Lacan acknowledges the 'extraordinary difficulty that exists in using the notion of sublimation in practice without giving rise to contradictions' (Lacan, 1992: 111) but nevertheless engages with these difficulties, affirming that the issue of sublimation is 'so problematic for the theorists of analysis, […] yet it is so essential' (Lacan, 1992: 87). Given these issues, it is hardly surprising that Jacques-Alain Miller titled one of the sections of Seminar VII, which he edited, *The Problem of Sublimation* (Lacan, 1992: 87-164).

the ethical aesthetics developed by contemporary Italian Lacanianism (see Chapters 3 and 4).

In the introductory part of Seminar VII, Lacan states that: 'the question of ethics is to be articulated from the point of view of the location of man in relation to the real' (Lacan, 1992: 11). From a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, ethical issues always 'presuppose an encounter beyond the pleasure principle' (Hughes and Ror Malone, 2002: 28) because 'there is no ethical rule which acts as a mediator between our pleasure and its real rule' (Lacan, 1992: 95). Simply put, Lacan attempts 'to rethink ethics by recognizing and acknowledging the dimension of the Real' (Zupančič, 2000: 4). As Lacan (1992: 11) claims,

> [w]ell, as odd as it may seem to that superficial opinion which assumes any inquiry into ethics must concern the field of the ideal, if not of the unreal, I, on the contrary, will proceed instead from the other direction by *going more deeply into the notion of the Real* [emphasis added].

In particular, Lacan seeks to rethink the ethics of psychoanalysis around the notion of the Real in order to release psychoanalytic practice from potentially dangerous '[psycho]analytical ideals' (Lacan, 1992: 8) such as those of love or authenticity. In Recalcati's words: '[l]'interesse maggiore di Lacan nel Seminario VII è quello di emancipare l'etica della psicoanalisi dalla dimensione immaginaria dell'Ideale' (2007a: 8). In particular, '[c]on la svolta del *Seminario VII* Lacan evidenzia la lontananza dell'etica della psicoanalisi da qualunque dottrina morale-valoriale. Se, infatti, la morale tradizionale ha legato l'etica al piano dei valori ideali, la psicoanalisi la vincola al piano del reale' (Di Ciaccia and Recalcati, 2000: 197).

The role of the Real in psychoanalysis is made explicit when Lacan states that '[n]o praxis is more orientated towards that which, at the heart of experience, is the kernel of the Real than psycho-analysis' (Lacan, 1998a: 53). He adds that psychoanalysts are always 'confronted with the real […] [t]hey are forced to submit to it' (Lacan, 2013b: 62). The kernel of an ethics informed by the notion of the Real is not centred on generally and universally valid rules by means of which it is possible to reach a supposed universal happiness, a supreme good or any kind of other ideal. In this sense, the ethics of the Real is an 'ethics of the singular' (De Kesel, 2009: 9). As Chiesa argues, '[t]he ethics of psychoanalysis is

nothing but an ethic of the Real, an ethics of the real desire of the subject who necessarily confronts himself with jouissance' (2007: 168). According to Lacan, ethics in psychoanalysis cannot elude the relationship between the subject and the Real (see Section 4, Chapter 4).

The change in emphasis from the ideal towards the Real does not only involve the field of ethics but also concerns that of aesthetics. According to Recalcati, 'nel Seminario VII [Lacan] sembra trascinare l'opera d'arte verso il reale' (2007a: 34). In Lacan's view, what is at stake in relation to aesthetics is the possibility of an encounter with that which goes beyond the ideal of beauty, namely the Real.[28]

As Lacan (1992: 297) puts it: 'the beautiful has nothing to do with what is called ideal beauty'. Recalcati underlines that, according to Lacan, beauty is closely linked 'non con ciò che addormenta, ma con ciò che risveglia alla visione' (Recalcati, 2007a: 94). Indeed, Lacan considers beauty as a defensive barrier against the Real, arguing that: '[t]he true barrier that holds the subject back in front of the unspeakable field [...] of absolute destruction [...] is properly speaking the aesthetic phenomenon where it is identified with the experience of beauty' (Lacan, 1992: 216-217).

This emphasis on the register of the Real, as something that goes beyond the ideal and has to be treated by means of the Imaginary and Symbolic, is central to the contemporary Italian aesthetics developed on the basis of Lacan's theory. Thus, I will now undertake a detailed discussion of Lacan's definition of sublimation in reference to the arts and artistic creation, focusing on its relation to the Real.

4.2 The Lacanian Formula of Sublimation (I)

In order to articulate his own definition of sublimation, in Seminar VII Lacan primarily considers Freud's work on the issue before then discussing Klein's. Lacan concurs with Freud on the matter of the collective dimension of

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[28]   This Lacanian perspective has important implications, especially considering that beauty, in contemporary aesthetics, is no longer exclusively related to harmony, symmetry, and equilibrium. See: Bois and Krauss (1997), Žižek (2000), Julius (2002), Bodei (2003), Miglietti (2004), Clair (2005), Korsmeyer (2011).

sublimation, while dramatically diverging from him regarding its libidinal nature. Like Freud, Lacan (1992: 107) emphasises the social dimension of sublimation and its 'social recognition': 'the sexual libido finds satisfaction in objects [...] that are socially valorised, objects of which the group approves, insofar as they are objects of public utility' (Lacan, 1992: 94). Nonetheless, Lacan does not believe that the power of sublimation is completely reliant on social consensus. From a Lacanian perspective, sublimation 'is a matter of aim and not strictly speaking of object' (Lacan, 1992: 110). It does not involve a change in object, as believed by Freud, but rather a change in the position of the object in the structure of fantasy. Thus, the crux of sublimation is not the transformation of the sexual object from something forbidden to a socially sanctioned non-sexual substitute, but rather a transformation of the object from its ordinary appearance into an extraordinary manifestation of the Thing (see Section 5.2). As Evans writes: '[t]he sublime quality of an object is thus not due to any intrinsic property of the object itself, but simply an effect of the object's position in the symbolic structure of fantasy. To be more specific, *sublimation relocates an object in the position of the Thing*' [emphasis added] (Evans, 1996: 199).

Lacan then proceeds to examine the point of view of the Kleinian School and to staunchly reject the core of the Kleinian theory of sublimation, which considers sublimation as 'an attempt at symbolic repair of the imaginary lesions that have occurred to the fundamental image of the maternal body' (Lacan, 1992: 106). Nonetheless, Lacan acknowledges that Kleinian theory establishes a correlation between the mythic body of the mother and the Thing (Lacan, 1992: 106) or, as Recalcati states: 'ha il merito di collocare il problema della sublimazione a partire dall'attaccamento del soggetto all'oggetto fondamentale, al più arcaico, alla Cosa materna' (Recalcati, 2007a: 22) (see Section 5 of this chapter). This correlation leads Lacan to articulate a definition of sublimation from the perspective of the Thing (Lacan, 1992: 129).

Indeed, Lacan's first and most renowned explanation of sublimation revolves around the concept of the Thing: 'it raises an object [29] [...] to the dignity

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[29]   From a Lacanian perspective, 'the object is not the Thing' (Lacan, 1992: 112).

of the Thing' (Lacan, 1992: 112).[30] This means that sublimation consists in a transition of the object from its habitual coordinates – the place the objects finds itself in –, to the place of the Thing. In other words, sublimation enables the object to index the Thing (Adams, 2003: xii). As Leader (2002, 62) writes: it 'is the elevation of an object to a new status'.

This first definition of sublimation is well rendered by two examples provided by Lacan: the collection of matchboxes, and the poetry of courtly love. The first example refers to a private anecdote. During the Second World War, Lacan visited the country house of a close friend, the French poet Jacques Prévert, and noticed a special collection of matchboxes. Lacan was particularly impressed by the collection: 'they were all the same and were laid out in an extremely agreeable way that involved each one being so close to the one next to it that the little drawer was slightly displaced' (Lacan, 1992: 114). This story, from Lacan's point of view, epitomises the 'sudden elevation of the matchbox to a dignity that it did not possess before' (Lacan, 1992: 118). The second example provided by Lacan (1992: 128), that of courtly love, is 'an exemplary form, a paradigm, of sublimation'. The object elevated here is woman, who moves from being considered as a mere object of exchange in the Middle Ages, to being seen as a sublime and inaccessible figure, a poetic muse. Courtly love is regarded by Lacan primarily as an artistic, and thus artificial, 'construction' (Lacan, 1992: 151), more than a historical phenomenon. As De Kesel states, 'courtly love was a culture that had not so much to do with the feeling as such as with the stylization and refined form to which it gave rise. [...] Courtly love was an "art", not a feeling' (De Kesel, 2009: 177). This is why Lacan (1992: 131) refers to and considers it as an 'example of sublimation in art'.

4.3 The Lacanian Formula of Sublimation (II)

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[30] In articulating the first formula of sublimation, Lacan paraphrases Marcel Duchamp's definition of ready-made (Leader, 2002: 61; Recalcati, 2007a: 29), according to which it is 'an ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist' (Duchamp quoted in Leader, 2002: 61). Indeed, in Duchamp's ready-mades, ordinary manufactured objects, such as bottle drying racks or porcelain urinals, become pieces of art simply because they have been chosen by the artist and repositioned from their habitual, everyday place into a gallery. The common object undergoes a transformation: not because the intrinsic properties of that object change, but due to this repositioning.

The second Lacanian definition of sublimation revolves mainly around the concept of emptiness: 'in every form of sublimation, emptiness is determinative' (Lacan, 1992: 130). However, Lacan claims that there is a proximity between emptiness and the Thing (Lacan, 1992: 130). Lacan is once again indebted to Klein here, for having drawn attention to the concept of emptiness and argued that the place of the Thing in the process of sublimation is the central void around which the subject is organised. Therefore, in order to further articulate this correlation between the Thing and emptiness in the matter of artistic creations, Lacan refers to the clinical case of Ruth Kjär discussed by Klein.

Ruth Kjär suffered from depression and 'always complained of what she called an empty space inside her, a space she could never fill' (Lacan, 1992: 116). She had never been a painter although she lived in a house whose walls were covered with pictures, produced by her brother-in-law, a talented painter. One day, all of a sudden one of the paintings was sold, leaving an empty space on the wall. She reacted by dealing with the empty space in an interesting way: '[s]o as to fill up that empty space in imitation of her brother-in-law, she tries to paint a painting that is as similar to the others as possible' (Lacan, 1992, 116). After this first creation, she went on to create a series of paintings, in which Klein found a confirmation of her reparative theories.[31] The kernel of this story lies in the generative function that, according to Lacan, emptiness plays in the matter of artistic creation and, more generally, of sublimation. In addition to this, there is also the idea here of 'framing an absence' (Leader, 2002: 75), namely the absence of the Thing. If the Thing is the always-already lost object of mythical pleasure, if every human being has experienced this loss, and if the experience of this loss generates the desire to find it again, or at least to find a substitute for it, art is what provides the possibility not only of symbolising and elaborating this loss

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[31]   The reparative theories involve a psychic process aimed at repairing the damaged internal world of the subject. In Klein's perspective, which is that of object relation theory, the human psyche oscillates between two states: the paranoid-schizoid position, in which an infant projects good and bad internal 'objects' onto its mother's body with the result of splitting the latter into a good and bad person; and the depressive position, in which the infant experiences its mother as a whole person. In this respect, Klein and Kleinians consider the artistic process as a phantasy that aims to repair the damaged love object, which is represented by the subject's mother. For a discussion of Klein and Kleinian School with regards to aesthetics, see Glover (2009).

but also of creating a substitute for the always-already lost object.

To further demonstrate the correlation between emptiness and creation, after referring to this clinical sketch Lacan mentions another paradigmatic image of emptiness: that of the vase. The figure of the pot, which 'creates the void and thereby introduces the possibility of filling it' (Lacan, 1992: 120), 'represents the existence of the emptiness at the centre of the real that is called the Thing' (1992: 121). Likewise, the potter 'creates the vase with his hand around this emptiness, creates it, just like the mythical creator, ex nihilo, starting with a hole' (1992: 121). As Hughes puts it, '[i]n Lacan's reading of Freud, all human creation, from language itself to the most sublime art, is essentially a creation *ex nihilo,* a creation driven and structured and rendered sensibly meaningful by that emptiness at the center of the real called the Thing' (2010: 44).

The notions of the Thing and of emptiness are seminal not only in the Lacanian definition of sublimation, but also for the definitions of art provided by Lacan. In the next section, I will thus account for Lacan's definitions of art, in particular those provided in Seminar VII and XI. These definitions revolve around key terms such as the Thing/emptiness and the object *a*, which partake of the register of the Real. This will pave the way both for the formulation of an aesthetics of the Real drawn from Lacan's theory and for Recalcati's three aesthetics of the Real, which I will discuss in Chapter 2.

5. Lacan's Aesthetics of the Real

5.1 The Foundations of the Lacanian Aesthetics of the Real

The first problem critics face when discussing Lacanian aesthetics is the lack of a systematic aesthetic theory in his *oeuvre* (Regnault, 1997: 22). This is not simply because there is no text by Lacan dedicated exclusively to a theorisation of art (Hernández-Navarro, 2004: 130; Carmagnola, 2015: 170). Rather, it is due, more decisively, to Lacan's reluctance to apply his theories to works of art. This is the reason why, as discussed in Sections 2 and 3 of this chapter, when Lacan approaches a work of art, his main aim is not to reconstruct the artist's unconscious intentions or to uncover the creator's inner world. He is more interested in the artwork itself and, above all, in what psychoanalysis can learn from art, not *vice versa* (Fink, 2014a: 217). In this respect, 'Lacan's inquiry into the nature of aesthetics […] serves to illuminate for his students something from the clinic' (Hughes, 2010: 42).

According to several Lacanian scholars, such as Regnault (1997: 26), Hernández-Navarro (2004: 131 and 2006: 28), Bellavita (2006: 208), and Recalcati (2007a, 2012a), in order to establish a coherent Lacanian aesthetics, which Lacan himself did not construct, one should refer, in particular, to Seminars VII and XI. Indeed, these two seminars pose central questions for the field of aesthetics, such as: 'is the end of art imitation or non-imitation? Does art imitate what it represents?' (Lacan, 1992: 141); 'what is the gaze?' (Lacan, 1998a: 82); and 'what is painting?' (Lacan, 1998a: 100). These seminars help provide an answer, from a Lacanian perspective, to such fundamental aesthetic questions as: What is art? What is a work of art? What is 'the miracle of the picture' (Lacan, 1998a: 114)? In so doing, they also lead to the 'formulazione di una teoria lacaniana dell'arte' (Bellavita, 2005: 72).

Nevertheless, these two seminars address aesthetical issues from different perspectives, producing 'una virtuale scissione tra quelli che prendono come base il contenuto esposto nel seminario VII e quelli che fanno riferimento al seminario XI' (Hernández-Navarro, 2004: 131). While Seminar VII provides a definition of sublimation in relation to the Thing, Seminar XI instead expounds a

theory of vision, based on the notions of the gaze and of the object *a*. Therefore, two perspectives on art, which are not always compatible, may be derived from these two seminars due to the use of different Lacanian concepts, namely the Thing and the object *a* (Hernández-Navarro, 2006: 20 and 131). According to the former, based on the idea of art as the sublimation of the Thing, '[l']arte è una strategia del Simbolico che [...] il soggetto usa per relazionarsi al reale della Cosa. [...] L'arte è una strategia per "circoscrivere" la Cosa, per rendere presente la sua assenza' (Hernández-Navarro, 2004: 132). The latter, on the other hand, is based on the idea that visual art is a trap for the gaze. As Hernández-Navarro puts it, '[u]n quadro è un tentativo di calmare - di colmare - la pulsione scopica, il desiderio di sguardo, d'incontrare lo sguardo. Detiene o fissa, in un punto "visibile", lo sguardo del mondo' (Hernández-Navarro, 2004: 135).

Therefore, despite the fact that both the Thing and the object *a* are understood by several Lacanian scholars as the foundational concepts of a Lacanian aesthetics, 'la loro differenza sembra aver collocato su fronti diversi gli storici e gli psicanalisti' (Hernández-Navarro, 2004: 131). Seminar VII and the notion of the Thing may stand at the core of theorisations by Lacanian psychoanalysts and scholars such as Regnault (1997), Wajcman (1998) and Žižek (2000), whilst Seminar XI and the object *a* have been of greater interest to art historians and critics such as Krauss (1988, 1994) or Foster (1996).

Seminar VII and Seminar XI also constitute the foundation for the formulation of a Lacanian aesthetics of the Real, inasmuch as the Thing and the object *a*, which relate to the field of artistic creation and vision, also partake of the very notion of the Real. According to Lacan, the 'relationship with the Real' (1992: 141) is that which is always 'renewed in art' (Lacan, 1992: 141). In Seminar VII, this relationship is portrayed as an encompassing of the Real of the Thing by the imaginary-symbolic device of art, while in Seminar XI it is an encounter with the Real, embodied by anamorphosis, that art makes possible. In the following two subsections, I will thus analyse the Lacanian concepts of the Thing and the object *a* in relation to the category of the Real and the field of aesthetics. Since these concepts also constitute the theoretical core of Recalcati's aesthetics of the Real, I will discuss them further in Chapter 2.

5.2 The Real in Seminar VII: the Thing

Seminar VII constitutes a radical break in Lacan's thought since in it the Real, by means of the notion of the Thing, [32] 'comes to the fore for the first time in Lacan's teaching' (Voruz and Wolf, 2007: XI). Seminar VII is thus considered as a turning point in Lacan's thought (Chiesa, 2007: 125), as a 'seminario di svolta' (Cosenza, 2003: 27), and a 'svolta epistemologica' (Bellavita, 2005: 68) in his teaching.[33] From Recalcati's perspective, Seminar VII marks a 'passaggio dall'autonomia e dalla superiorità del grande Altro dell'ordine simbolico alla centralità scabrosa ed extrasignificante della grande Cosa del godimento' (Recalcati, 2010a: 102). The Thing is indeed the 'essential axis' (Lacan, 1992: 101) of Seminar VII, although it disappears completely in subsequent seminars.

Lacan does not provide a complete and unambiguous definition of the Thing, but this does not prevent him from using the term operationally (Lacan, 1992: 103). According to Evans' definition, the Thing is 'the object of desire, the lost object which must be continually refound, it is the prehistoric, unforgettable Other, […] the forbidden object of incestuous desire, the mother' (Evans, 1996: 207). The Thing is thus presented by Lacan as a notion with a twofold meaning: the idea of a full satisfaction for the subject but also that of a supreme danger for it.

The close relationship between the Thing and the Real has been noted by many Lacanian scholars, such as Di Ciaccia and Recalcati (2000: 191), Moroncini and Petrillo (2007: 39), Bailly (2009: 136), who all agree that the Thing is a manifestation of the Real. Indeed, like the Real, the Thing cannot be limited to either the imaginary or the symbolic fields. It is the 'beyond-of-the-signified' (Lacan, 1992: 54). As Lacan (1992: 63) states: 'at the level of the *Vorstellungen*

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[32]   Lacan uses the French word *la Chose* and the German word *das Ding* interchangeably to refer to the Thing. The genesis of this concept is rather peculiar: Lacan extrapolated the word from Freud's *The Project for a Scientific Psychology* [Entwurf], written in 1895. He then reread this through Heidegger's essay, 'Das Ding' (1950), in which the German philosopher had taken the term from Lao Tzu's *Tao Tê Ching*.

[33]   Although this perspective is almost unanimously accepted amongst Lacanians, some nonetheless disagree with it. For instance, Eyers conceives of the notion of the Real 'as something immanent to the Symbolic and the Imaginary' (Eyers, 2012: 10) and therefore claims that the concept of the Real should be assumed 'as the conceptual horizon of psychoanalysis as reconceived by Lacan' (2012: 1) precisely from the beginning of Lacan's teaching.

[the representations], the Thing is not nothing, but literally is not. It is characterized by its absence, its strangeness.' According to Bellavita, the Thing 'è la via attraverso la quale il Reale mette in scena, esprime, il suo statuto di eccedenza, e di fratture delle pratiche (Immaginarie o Simbolico-linguistiche) di rappresentazione' (Bellavita, 2005: 68).

Therefore, the Thing cannot be represented as an image. It is, rather, a void in representation that cannot be expressed through language. It is a hole in language itself. This is why Lacan claims that 'this Thing is always represented by emptiness, precisely because it cannot be represented by anything else' (Lacan, 1992: 129). However, as Hughes aptly points out, 'we cannot […] declare that the Thing is itself emptiness or nothing […] since "nothing" is already within the field of meaning from which the Thing is excluded' (Hughes, 2010: 44). Though there is no possible representation for the Thing, human beings' entire representative activity revolves around it. As Lacan (1992: 57) states: '[the Thing is] the strange feature around which the whole movement of the *Vorstellung* [representation] turns' or, in Leader's words, 'a vortex at the centre of the web of representations' (Leader, 2002: 61).

Moreover, the Thing leads to the concept of *jouissance*, which it sustains, being irreducible to the dimension of desire. As Lacan (2007: 724) states: 'desire comes from the Other, and jouissance is located on the side of the Thing'. In this seminar, there is therefore a shift from the big Other to the Thing, or in other words, from the desiring subject of the unconscious structured like a language to the subject of (a Real) enjoyment. The linguistic and rhetorical power of the Symbolic gives way to the category of the Real as *jouissance*, which is irreducible to any meaning. This is why the Thing is also presented as a 'cruel and insistent power' (Lacan, 1992: 163). As Di Ciaccia and Recalcati (2000: 200) posit: '[l]a Cosa manifesta il reale del godimento'.

According to Lacan, the Thing – a 'primordial function' (Lacan, 1992: 62), a 'prehistoric Other' (Lacan, 1992, 71), a 'primordial and primary character' (Lacan, 1992: 137) – represents the lost object of the first, mythical satisfaction, the primordial experience of complete enjoyment, which is, as such, merely a retroactive fantasy. Lacan agrees with Freud in considering the Thing a 'sovereign good' to which every subject aspires, although it is unattainable. Thus,

he equates the Thing with the figure of the mother (Lacan, 1992: 67 and 70).[34] Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to confuse the Thing with the real mother – the person who gives birth to the baby. The Thing arises from the primary affects of the relationship between mother and baby, not from an existing human being. Thus, the Thing is not an empirical object at all, but is, rather, a place. It is a place characterised by its peculiar nature; it is at the centre of the subjective world but 'only in the sense that it is excluded' (Lacan, 1992: 84). It is, to be more precise, an 'excluded interior' (Lacan, 1992: 101). Lacan coined the term *extimité*, which refers to this dual nature: '*das Ding* has to be posited as exterior', 'something strange to me', whilst, at once, 'it is at the heart of me' (Lacan, 1992: 71). For Lacan (1992: 121), this is always an empty space, a void, 'the emptiness at the centre of the real'.

In Seminar VII, Lacan postulates that '[a]ll art is characterized by a certain mode of organization around this emptiness' (Lacan, 1992: 130).[35] In order to exemplify the definition of art as 'a construction around emptiness that designates the place of the Thing' (1992: 140), Lacan gives examples from the sphere of architecture, in particular prehistoric and neoclassical architecture: St Mark's Basilica in Venice; the Olympic Theatre in Vicenza; and the prehistoric cave walls of Altamira (1992: 135, 136, 139). As well as an art form, architecture[36] is 'something organised around emptiness' (Lacan, 1992: 135). According to Leader (2002: 66), the function of art, from a Lacanian perspective, is 'to evoke the empty place of the Thing'. However, this evocation also involves delimiting the power of the Thing. Indeed, Lacan later introduces a variation on the

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[34] Lacan is indebted to the Kleinian theory in making this connection, as the Kleinian school was the first psychoanalytic school to 'situate […] the mythic body of the mother at the central place of das Ding' (Lacan, 1992: 106). However, unlike Klein, for Lacan the Thing is mythical. As Chiesa argues, 'the Thing corresponds to the mythical primordial object that was always-already lost for the subject' (2007: 131) and that the symbolic creates retroactively. The mythical and symbiotic unity with the mother as a source of fullness of *jouissance* never took place.

[35] Apart from that of art, Lacan also provides a definition of religion and science based on their relationship with emptiness: religion 'consists of avoiding' as well as 'respecting' this emptiness (1992: 130); while science is characterised by a disbelief in the existence of emptiness. At the centre of these different modes are, respectively: repression [*Verdrängung*]; displacement [*Verschiebung*]; and foreclosure [*Verwerfung*] (Lacan, 1992: 131). As stated by Regnault (1997: 12), these modes of facing the void also correspond to the clinical structures of hysteria, obsessional neurosis, and paranoia.

[36] For a discussion of architecture from the perspective of Lacanian theory and contemporary theories of subjectivity, see: Hendrix (2006); and Holm (2010).

aforementioned definition of art: 'a work of art always involves encircling the Thing' (Lacan, 1992: 141). In claiming this, Lacan maintains that art does not aim for a mere imitation or sheer reproduction of reality (Lacan, 1992: 141):

> Works of art imitate the objects they represent, but their end is certainly not to represent them. In offering the imitation of an object, they make something different out of that object. Thus they only pretend to imitate. The object is established in a certain relationship to the Thing and is intended to encircle and to render both present and absent.

Here, Lacan describes sublimation, understood as the process of putting the object in the place of the missing Thing, and art's power to establish a relationship with the Real. To exemplify this, Lacan references Cézanne's painting of apples, claiming that the painter does not merely imitate them. In painting apples, Cézanne achieves something other than a mere reproduction of them on the canvas. According to Lacan (1992: 141), the painter is able to establish a 'relationship to the real'. Lacan believes, indeed, that art has the power to establish a relationship with the Real. In this respect, as Ronen claims, 'from a psychoanalytic perspective, all art is equally realistic in the sense that the artist always acts with what Lacan has called the Real' (Ronen, 2002: 90).

Nevertheless, as I will discuss further in Section 3 of Chapter 2, with regards to art and artistic creation, it is important to delimit the power of the Thing. If the Real breaks through without any imaginary or symbolic mediation, the result is pure destruction. In this respect, the Imaginary and the Symbolic serve a defensive function against the irruption of the Real. This defence is not simply a barrier to avoid any contact with the Real. Instead, the Imaginary and the Symbolic could enhance the possibility of framing and experiencing the Real. This is the perspective developed by contemporary Italian Lacanianism, according to which art and psychoanalysis are 'pratiche simboliche che mirano a raggiungere il reale, a incontrarlo, senza però che questo incontro risulti mortifero e catastrofico' (Recalcati, 2007a: 79).

5.3 The Real in Seminar XI: Object *a*, Anamorphosis, and *Tyche*

After Seminar VII, the Thing disappears completely from Lacan's teaching but is

partly replaced by another concept: the object *a* (Hernández-Navarro, 2004: 136). Similarly to the Thing, the object *a* relates to a primordial loss and, at the same time, is conceived of as the cause which leads the subject to regain that which has been always-already lost. As Lacan (1998a: 164) states, the object *a* is the 'cause of desire'. As such, 'l'oggetto pulsionale, l'oggetto *a*, come tale non esiste mai. Esso è sempre la mancanza attorno alla quale la pulsione produce il proprio bordo' (Bonazzi, 2012: 37). According to Lacan (1998a: 180), the object *a* 'circumvent[es] the eternally lacking object'.

More than any other Lacanian notion, the object *a* undergoes several redefinitions throughout Lacan's teaching; thus while in the 1950s he locates it in the realm of the Imaginary, from the 1960s onwards it acquires increasing connotations of the Real (Evans, 1996; Fink, 1997). As Fink underlines, this notion assumes many different names such as 'the other, *agalma,* the golden number, the Freudian Thing, the real, the anomaly, the cause of desire, surplus *jouissance*, the materiality of language, the analyst's desire, logical consistency, the Other's desire, semblance/sham, the lost object' (Fink, 1997: 83).

According to Chiesa, the object *a* is 'a non-specularizable remainder, a void ("hollow") that resides at the frontier between the Imaginary and the Real' (2007: 106). To put it bluntly, the object *a* is that 'little piece of the real […] that the subject has access to' (Homer, 2005: 77), a 'nocciolo di reale' (Recalcati, 1996: 24) that 'remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier' (Lacan, 1998a: 270). In this respect, the object *a* 'links the subject to the real' (Adams, 1991: 3). In visual art, Lacan contends, 'it is always a question of the *objet a*' (Lacan, 1998a: 112) inasmuch as he establishes a connection between the object *a* and the gaze: 'the *object a* may be identical with the gaze' (Lacan, 1998a: 272). Indeed, '[i]n the scopic relation, the object on which depends the phantasy from which the subject is suspended in an essential vacillation is the gaze' (Lacan, 1998a: 83).

Seminar XI begins with the crucial question: '[w]here do we meet this real?' (Lacan, 1998a: 53). Lacan responds by proposing that we meet the Real in repetition, traumatic events, nightmares and in all phenomena related to the death drive. As such, the Real, cut off from the order of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, is mortiferous for the subject inasmuch as it coincides with absolute *jouissance*, that is to say with the untainted death drive. Lacan underlines that the

meeting with the real is 'an essential encounter' (Lacan, 1998a: 53) for psychoanalysis and claims that psychoanalysis is a practice that serves to 'treat the Real by the Symbolic' (Lacan, 1998a: 6). According to Lacan, another practice that, like psychoanalysis, institutes a close proximity with the Real and deals with it is art (Lacan, 1992: 141).

In Seminar XI, the opportunity to encounter the Real within and through the imaginary-symbolic device of an artwork is epitomised by anamorphosis, a distorted image that becomes visible only from a specific point of view or if the viewer uses a special device (Petrella, 2008: 109). Lacan contends that painting is not a matter of depicting reality as it really is (Lacan, 1998a: 91), but rather of allowing something beyond reality to emerge, namely the Real, and enabling the viewer to encounter it. Lacan attributes three functions to anamorphosis: it shows us 'that it is not a question in painting of a realistic reproduction of the things of space' (Lacan, 1998a: 92); that the Real emerges through and within an imaginary-symbolic device of art; and that '[i]t is, in short, an obvious way, no doubt an exceptional one, and one due to some moment of reflection on the part of the painter, of showing us that, as subjects, we are literally called into the picture, and represented here as caught. [...] [i]t reflects our own nothingness, in the figure of the death's head' (Lacan, 1998a: 92). Lacan refers to one of the most renowned examples of anamorphosis in painting in order to elaborate on this idea: that of Holbein's *Ambassadors* (1533).

Holbein's painting depicts two French ambassadors standing up and facing the viewer. It is extremely realistic: the perspective is impeccable, the men are life-sized and the objects, symbols of power and knowledge, are meticulously rendered. The objects include an 'enigmatic form stretched out on the ground' (Lacan, 1992: 135). If the viewer changes point of view, the object is revealed to be a human skull. The image of death suddenly emerges from an ordinary representation and looks at us from Holbein's painting.

In order to explain the encounter with the Real, Lacan contrasts two notions borrowed from Aristotle: *automaton*, or 'the network of signifiers' (Lacan, 1998a: 52); and *tyche*, 'the encounter with the real' (Lacan, 1998a: 52).[37]

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[37]   In Book II of the *Physics*, while addressing the four causes at the foundation of cosmos,

The *automaton* can be paralleled with reality, since it is linked to the constancy and familiarity of the imaginary and symbolic network which constitutes reality, while the *tyche* corresponds to the unexpected irruption of the Real. In Lacan's own words: '[t]he real is beyond the automaton, the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs, by which we see ourselves governed by the pleasure principle. The real is that which always lies behind the automaton' (Lacan, 1998a: 53-54). It can therefore be argued that the Real affects reality in the same way that anamorphosis affects the painted representation: 'è una specialità dell'anamorfosi incidere sulla *stabilità* dell'ordine della rappresentazione' [original emphasis] (Petrella, 2008: 117).

As Recalcati states: 'l'opera d'arte ha il potere di rompere lo schermo della realtà e di fare emergere il reale' (Recalcati, 2009b: 68). However, if the Real emerges through the imaginary-symbolic device of a work of art it is not destructive and it can be encountered without the annihilation of the subject, albeit with a certain degree of disturbance. This is because the Real is contained in and filtered through an imaginary-symbolic artifice: '[s]olo attraverso l'anamorfosi, attraverso un'operazione simbolica, può emergere il reale senza compromettere la tenuta estetica dell'opera' (Recalcati, 2009b: 72). This is the *tychic* power of anamorphosis, and of art in general.

In his theory of vision addressed in Seminar XI, Lacan reverses the role of the viewer and of what is being viewed. The viewer is no longer the person who looks upon the object, but rather the one who is looked upon. Lacan claims that 'things look at me' (1998a: 109), and yet '[i]n this matter of the visible, everything is a trap' (Lacan, 1998a: 93). The Lacanian subject is no longer the first term of the dyad active viewer/passive viewed object; it is, rather, exposed to the gaze of the world. In this respect, Lacan contends that 'any picture is, a trap for the gaze' (Lacan, 1998a: 89). As Hernández-Navarro (2004: 134) claims: 'lo sguardo catturato non è quello del soggetto. Il quadro cattura lo sguardo del mondo. La trappola non è per il soggetto, ma per l'oggetto. E' una trappola tesa dal Simbolico al Reale, per mezzo dell'Immaginario'. From Lacan's perspective, art can provide

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Aristotle refers to *automaton* [αὐτόματον], which he links to accidental occurences (i.e. randomness) in regards to inanimate or non-human beings, and *tyche* [τύχη], that which occurs unpredictably (i.e. chance or luck), which refers to human beings.

an imaginary and symbolic organisation of the Real. Therefore, the core of a Lacanian aesthetics of the Real rests on the the idea that the Real can manifest itself within, but can also be encountered by means of, the imaginary-symbolic device of art. Hence, the registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic do not merely serve a defensive function but also allow for an encounter with the Real. This is the primary theory developed by Recalcati, whose principal definition of art is that: 'l'arte è un trattamento simbolico-immaginario del reale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 3).

In the next chapter, I will explore these issues further, considering Recalcati's three aesthetics of the Real, which revolve around the notions of: the Thing/the void; the object *a*/anamorphosis; and the *sinthome*. He develops the Lacanian stance on aesthetics considering art as a means to encounter the Real, namely an imaginary-symbolic device that, while treating its unbearable *jouissance*, also allows the Real to emerge and be framed. Indeed, according to Recalcati's Lacanian aesthetics, art is an imaginary-symbolic device with the 'funzione di organizzazione e di bordatura del reale' (Recalcati, 2012a: 603).

CHAPTER II

Massimo Recalcati and the Three Lacanian Aesthetics of the Real

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will address the main features of contemporary Italian Lacanian aesthetics. To this end, I will take into account and analyse Recalcati's psychoanalytic aesthetics of the Real as he develops it drawing from Lacan's theory. I will focus mainly on Recalcati since he is the leading figure of contemporary Italian Lacanianism and one of the main promoters of Lacan's *renaissance* in Italy: he is a prolific author and public intellectual whose works epitomise and embody the contemporary reception of Lacan's theory in Italy (Chiesa, 2011; Dominijanni, 2012; Pesare, 2012a). Moreover, Recalcati's works display a strong 'interesse per il reale' and are characterised by a 'primato del reale' (Pagliardini, 2014).[38] For Recalcati, the Real is a 'riferimento decisivo' (Recalcati, 2016d: 14) not simply in the field of aesthetics, but also in that of clinical theory and practice, and is underpinned and supported by an ethical stance.

Recalcati is not the first Lacanian scholar to have attempted to develop a Lacanian aesthetics systematically and consistently. For instance, in the previous chapter I referred to the work of Regnault (1997) and Hernández-Navarro (2004, 2006). However, I claim that one of the original perspectives of Recalcati's aesthetics lies in his binding together all three of the Lacanian registers. Recalcati is one of the few Lacanians who 'retains the importance of the imaginary and the primacy of the symbolic, *but only in relation to and in constant negotiation with*

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[38]   Recalcati's reading of Lacan emphasises the so-called 'late Lacan', particularly his 'svolta dal simbolico al reale' (Recalcati, 1996: 18). As such, Recalcati admittedly follows Miller's periodisation of Lacan's teaching (Recalcati 1996, 2001). In fact, 'it is arguably Miller who has most influentially propagated the notion that Lacan's seminars of the 1970s, in their supposed turn definitively towards the Real, mark a break in his work' (Eyers, 2012: 167 note 21).

the register of the Real' [emphasis added] (Resmini, 2013: 277). This is shown, for instance, by Recalcati's definition of artistic sublimation, according to which: 'nella sublimazione artistica l'oggetto d'arte diventa un oggetto immaginario che si colloca, per via di una elevazione simbolica, nel luogo vuoto del reale della Cosa' (Recalcati, 2007a: 14). This way of understanding the interrelation of the three orders is possible because the Real is not deemed to be intrinsically negative. As Recalcati puts it: '[i]l reale agisce infatti come causa del desiderio' (Recalcati, 2001: 9). There is indeed a positive role for the Real, which is 'generative, not simply constraining' (Dean, 2000: 51) insofar as 'it represents not only a barrier to subjective or symbolic realization, but also the impossibility against which symbolization is constantly being elaborated' (Dean, 2000: 51).

Thus, I will address the link between those Lacanian notions that revolve around the category of the Real discussed in Chapter 1, such as the Thing and the object *a*, and the field of aesthetics, whilst further addressing the non-representational status of the register of the Real. I shall contend that what is at stake in Recalcati's Lacanian aesthetics is indeed the issue of the (im)possible representation of the Real. To this end, I will examine whether it is possible for the Real, conceived of as both non-representable and beyond representation, to appear within a representative framework. The latter is intrinsically related to the narcissistic and specular field of the Imaginary and is the outcome of a symbolic operation. On the contrary, as articulated extensively in Chapter 1, the Real is the breaking point of representation, namely 'l'infigurabile, il non-figurabile, l'irrappresentabile, l'aspeculare' (Recalcati, 2012a: 613). Thus, the main aesthetic challenge, according to this Lacanian perspective, is 'come far sorgere l'infigurabile attraverso la figura' (Recalcati, 2012a: 614), namely how to represent what resists representation.

As Recalcati (2007a: XI) claims: 'un'estetica psicoanalitica [è] innanzi tutto un'*estetica del reale*' [original emphasis]. From Recalcati's standpoint, the Real is that which binds aesthetics and psychoanalysis together, since both art and psychoanalysis are imaginary-symbolic practices which aim to engage with the Real. In Recalcati's words, 'arte e psicoanalisi [...] [sono] pratiche simboliche che mirano a raggiungere il reale, a incontrarlo, senza però che questo incontro risulti mortifero e catastrofico' (Recalcati, 2007a: 79). Indeed, as human beings, we

cannot establish a direct relationship with the Real under normal circumstances in everyday life [39] due to the traumatic aspects of the former (Lacan, 1998a: 55). However, according to Recalcati, art and psychoanalysis are exceptions to this:[40] thanks to their imaginary-symbolic status, they can accommodate the extra-signifying dimension of the Real and enable the subject to encounter it in a non-catastrophic or non-deadly way.

Furthermore, the Real, understood as that which 'tak[es] us beyond the world of interpretable signifiers to that of the uninterpretable, because unsymbolizable' (Dean, 2002: 26), pushes the Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to art beyond hermeneutic/symbolic interpretations. Indeed, it is by focusing on the Real as *jouissance* that Recalcati addresses that dimension of art which resists interpretation as well as symbolisation. As Recalcati contends, '[è] la nozione di godimento [...] che si oppone all'assimilazione della psicoanalisi a una pura ermeneutica, a una teoria dell'interpretazione tra le altre' (Recalcati, 2012a: 422). This aspect differentiates the Lacanian aesthetics from more classical applications of psychoanalytic theories to art, such as those of Freud, Jones, or Bonaparte. Priority is not given to a symbolic reading of the artwork, as if it were a text to decipher, nor is the work reduced to a mere expression of the artist's unconscious.

In a truly Lacanian vein, Recalcati considers aesthetics to be intertwined and closely linked with ethics. The treatment of the 'eccesso informe del reale' (Recalcati, 2012a: 596) operated by aesthetics and psychoanalysis is inherently ethical inasmuch as it deals with *jouissance*, namely the paradoxical pleasure in pain that goes beyond the pleasure principle. This also leads Recalcati to account for the discontent of contemporary society, which appears to be permeated by this 'dimensione [...] dell'eccesso' (Pesare, 2012b: 15), by means of a 'godimento [che] circola come se fosse impazzito, senza binari, sregolato' (Borrelli *et al*.,

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[39]   As addressed in Sections 3 and 5 of Chapter 1, from a Lacanian perspective reality and the Real are opposite terms: reality is conceived of as a protection from the Real and derives from the combination of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, whilst the Real is that which breaks this defensive framework. Thus, De Kesel affirms that 'we never deal with real reality, [and thus] with the Real' (2005: para. 6), at least without being traumatised.
[40]   According to Lacan's theory, there are also other ways of experiencing the Real in a non-traumatic way in everyday life, such as the experience of love/falling in love (Golan, 2006: 31; Vighi, 2009: 140-141; Žižek, 2003a: 116).

2013: 59). According to Recalcati's ethical aesthetics, art is an example of resistance to this 'untamed real' and the 'unmediated *jouissance*' (Resmini, 2013: 289): it is an imaginary and symbolic means of dealing with the Real. According to Recalcati, an artwork allows us to rethink the possibility of a 'convergence between the symbolic nature of form and the real of *jouissance*' (Resmini, 2013: 292). For this reason, Recalcati takes a polemical stance towards some transgressive and excessive trends of contemporary art. Recalcati claims that it is important to 'reagire a questo culto dell'abietto, dell'informe, dell'escrementizio, dell'orrido, dell'ostentazione del reale bruto che caratterizza una tendenza fondamentale dell'arte contemporanea' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 58). I will thus contend that the field of aesthetics, clinical practice, and the socio-political analysis of contemporary society are closely intertwined in Recalcati's work by means of an underlying ethical dimension. [41]

Before examining Recalcati's three aesthetics of the Real in detail, I will set out the foundations of Recalcati's aesthetics in Section 2. More specifically, I will deal with Recalcati's account of the historical/sociological transformations in postmillennial Western society, which he calls 'hypermodern'. [42] Recalcati interprets hypermodern society through the categories, drawn from Lacan, of the collapse of the symbolic order and the domain of the discourse of the capitalist. In his view, it is the hypermodern subject's condition to be without direction since the crisis of ideal references (i.e. politics, religion, and so forth) is brought about by consumerism and purely dissipative enjoyment. Due to these cultural, social and historical changes, Recalcati argues that psychopathological symptoms have also transformed considerably (i.e. new symptoms have arisen) and that there has been a shift from a *clinica del simbolico*, whose paradigm is neurosis as conceived by Freud, to a *clinica del reale*, whose paradigm is psychosis in Lacanian terms. The difference lies in the fact that, as Recalcati puts it, 'nella

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[41] According to Recalcati, 'la dimensione psichica [è] inseparabile dalle trasformazioni sociali' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 51).

[42] Recalcati's theorisation illustrates a 'torsione del post-moderno nell'ipermoderno' (Recalcati, 2012b: 12) insofar as it marks the shift from the 'smarrimento postmoderno' to the 'regime consumistico ipermoderno' (Recalcati, 2016a: 623). For a socio-political analysis of what Recalcati, following Lipovetsky (2005), calls hypermodern society, see for instance: Magatti, Petrosino, and Recalcati (2013b); Recalcati (2013a); Recalcati and Raimo (2013); and Borrelli *et al.* (2013).

nevrosi c'è un ritorno simbolico del reale rimosso attraverso le formazioni dell'inconscio, nelle psicosi c'è un collasso simbolico e un ritorno del reale come tale, senza alcun filtro simbolico' (Recalcati, 2010a: 16). Recalcati claims that the field of aesthetics has also been subject to a similar shift: from an art of the Symbolic to an art of the Real.

I will then discuss Recalcati's three aesthetics of the Real. For Recalcati, artistic practice confronts the Real, that which is unspeakable and beyond representation. The Real is, indeed, the impossible: as impossible to present through images as it is to describe in words. Therefore, it 'surpasses our ability to describe or name it' (Bard-Schwartz, 2014: 12). The Real represents the ultimate frontier, the final barrier that language, interpretations, and even understanding cannot cross. For this reason, Recalcati (2007a: 97-98) insists in claiming that

> lo statuto dell'opera d'arte non usufruisce solo delle leggi del linguaggio, della metafora e della metonimia, non manifesta cioè unilateralmente l'omologia con l'idea dell'inconscio strutturato come un linguaggio, ma ci introduce anche alla dimensione traumatica del limite del linguaggio, dell'incontro con il reale come ciò che buca lo schermo simbolico del linguaggio.

Recalcati believes that artistic practice, like psychoanalysis, deals with the extra signifying dimension of the Real, that which escapes the Imaginary and the Symbolic, but that is nevertheless tackled and framed by means of these registers. In particular, Sections 3, 4, and 5 develop, respectively, the *estetica del vuoto*, the *estetica anamorfica*, and the *estetica del sinthomo*. Recalcati's three aesthetics are informed by the 'passaggio vertiginoso di Lacan verso il reale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 37). As Recalcati puts it: 'non sono […] tre teorie compiute sull'arte. Si tratta piuttosto di tre topiche possibili della creazione artistica che insistono […] a porre l'arte in una relazione determinante con il reale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 36). Recalcati distinguishes between three aesthetics since each of them accounts for a specific aspect of the Real. To be more specific, in Section 3 I will discuss the Real *qua* 'vuoto' and as the Thing, the lost object of the first, mythical satisfaction. In this section, I will also deal with Recalcati's view on the issue of sublimation, since 'la sublimazione è primariamente in rapporto al reale della Cosa e non all'immagine' (Recalcati, 2012a: 576). Finally, I will address the issue of beauty, which Recalcati

perceives, following Lacan's teaching in Seminar VII, not merely as a screen against the Real, but also as necessarily implying the Real. This first aesthetics of the Real involves 'il godimento della Cosa' (Recalcati, 2012a: 603), and art is defined here as the practice which deals with it. What is impossible to represent is in this case the Thing. In Section 4, I will consider the Real *qua* 'resto' as embodied by the object *a*, the leftover of the first mythical satisfaction, which is visually represented by anamorphosis, in particular that of Holbein's *Ambassadors*. In this second aesthetics of the Real, 'il godimento appare [...] localizzato, circoscritto' (Recalcati, 2012a: 603) and the non-representable is here the object *a*. The artistic practice is conceived here specifically as a means to encounter the Real. I will also discuss the (im)possible representation of the subject from a Lacanian perspective. Section 5 will examine the Lacanian Real *qua sinthome*, closely linked to *jouissance*, in order to articulate the notion of Lacanian subjectivity in greater depth and to establish a link between the latter and the category of the Real.

Finally, in Section 6 I will discuss Recalcati's case studies, namely Morandi's and Burri's artworks. Recalcati contends that Morandi and Burri 'mett[ono] in scacco l'idea stessa di un significato (simbolico) trascendente l'opera' (Recalcati, 2007a: 139). For this reason, in the case of Morandi's works, 'le bottiglie non si prestano a nessuna interpretazione simbolica [...] ma insistono come immagini-segni che bucano l'esistenza dell'oggetto evocando il reale irrappresentabile che essa sembra custodire' (Recalcati, 2007a: 139). According to Recalcati, '[n]on è l'immagine che ricopre il reale irrappresentabile [...] ma è l'immagine-segno che indica il reale, che lo evoca come mistero indecifrabile' (Recalcati, 2007a: 142). I will argue that the Real is crucial for developing a psychoanalytic aesthetics which is not based on the pathographic model and which is not geared at a hermeneutic/symbolic interpretation. The aesthetics of the Real, as Recalcati conceives of it, accounts for the dimension beyond realism in the arts and is useful for understanding some extreme trends of contemporary art.

2. The Clinical Grounding of Recalcati's Lacanian Aesthetics and its Socio-political Commitment

2.1 Recalcati's *L'uomo senza inconscio*

Lacan can arguably be considered as 'the psychoanalyst who has most influenced the direction of contemporary social and cultural theory' (Elliott, 2002: 99). It is thus unsurprising that Lacanian theory currently 'seems to be gaining an ever-wider audience' (Fink, 2014a: 228) worldwide. This is particularly evident in contemporary Italy where, especially since the 2000s, Lacanianism has gained a prominent role. The implementation of Lacanian theory within other disciplines, such as sociology and political theory, proves Italian Lacanianism to be lively, vital, and far from being restricted to minor psychoanalytic circles. Indeed, with its theoretical and clinical categories, it plays a crucial role in informing the analysis of contemporary society and public debates in a variety of fields (Recalcati and Raimo, 2013: 10).

In this respect, *L'uomo senza inconscio* (Recalcati, 2010a) undoubtedly represents a milestone in the Italian reception of Lacanianism. It epitomises the Italian popularisation of Lacanian theory and its hybridisation with fields outside of the clinical domain, while remaining rooted in clinical work and categories. In this book, Recalcati adopts a Lacanian framework to analyse contemporary Western capitalist society, and establishes a fruitful connection between Lacanian theory, clinical practice, the social sciences, and political theory. In doing so, Recalcati claims that 'la clinica si riapre alla politica, rivela un suo fondamento politico' (Recalcati and Raimo, 2013: 12). Along these lines, Resmini argues that *L'uomo senza inconscio* is undoubtedly Recalcati's 'most politically inflected work' (2013: 288), in which he 'proietta la sua esperienza psicoanalitica su uno schermo sociale' (Borrelli, 2007: 10). As Raimo points out, it is also due to the political and sociological content of this book that 'la voce [di Recalcati] è [divenuta] centrale nel dibattito politico italiano' (Recalcati and Raimo, 2013: 10).[43]

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[43] As a result, Recalcati wrote numerous articles for Italian newspapers and made multiple

Furthermore, the influence of *L'uomo senza inconscio* on *Censis - 44°*
Rapporto sulla situazione sociale del paese 2010 (De Rita, 2010a) undoubtedly
proves that Lacanian theory has become pervasive and influential in Italy outside
the psychoanalytic domain. Indeed, despite being a sociological and statistical
report that analyses the socio-economic situation of Italy, *Rapporto Censis*
borrows a number of theories and clinical categories from Lacanian jargon. As
Dominijanni argues, '[f]onte evidente ma non dichiarata [è] la letteratura post-
lacaniana […], in particolare il lavoro di Massimo Recalcati' (2010a: 1). Indeed,
the psychoanalytic concepts that typify the socio-economic analysis of
postmillennial Italy, such as 'desiderio' (De Rita, 2010a: 6), 'godimento' (De Rita,
2010a: 7), and 'evaporazione della legge' (De Rita, 2010a: 7), are not simply
borrowed from Lacanian terminology but are drawn directly from Recalcati's
works.[44]

As Recalcati remarks, '[s]e un sociologo come De Rita utilizza un sistema
concettuale direttamente derivato dalla clinica psicoanalitica, dobbiamo
chiederci il perché di questa centralità assunta dalla psicoanalisi come modello
interpretativo del presente' (Recalcati, 2010c: 10). Why and how has
contemporary Italian Lacanianism become such an unavoidable theoretical tool
for reading and understanding contemporary society? According to De Rita, the
answer lies in the fact that 'la razionalità, spesso presunta, delle interpretazioni
economiche e sociologiche non basta più a sostenere un'analisi in profondità del
sistema sociale' (De Rita, 2010c: 10).

In fact, contemporary Italian Lacanianism can account for an 'intreccio fra
psicopatologia individuale e disagio sociale' (De Rita and Recalcati, 2011: 11),
which remains one of the fundamental assumptions of Lacan's teaching. The
postulation that 'the unconscious is the discourse of the Other' (Lacan, 1998a:
131) in fact lies at the heart of Lacan's theory; the notion, that is, that 'the

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appearances on Italian television (Chiesa, 2011: 2 and 5). This has established him as a public
intellectual and as the most prominent representative of Lacanianism in contemporary Italy.

[44]   According to De Rita (2010a: 1), the *Rapporto Censis* employs 'un abbondante utilizzo di
concetti e metafore psicoanalitiche [presi anche dal] volume *L'uomo senza inconscio* dello stesso
Recalcati'. Recalcati supports De Rita's statement, claiming that: '[l]a sregolazione pulsionale e
l'eclissi del desiderio, il dominio del godimento immediato, l'apologia del cinismo e del
narcisismo, l'evaporazione del padre, sono tutti concetti che il lettore del *L'uomo senza inconscio*
può facilmente ritrovare, alla lettera, nel rapporto del Censis' (Recalcati, 2010b: 1).

collective is nothing but the subject of the individual' (Lacan, 1945: 175 note 6).

If Lacanianism is open to applications beyond clinical work, this is also because Lacan reinterprets the Freudian notion of the unconscious 'in terms not of more or less private mental space, but of public discourse, the symbolic domain of language and culture, which is necessarily transindividual yet also historical' (Dean, 2000: 7). Lacan's view of the unconscious as a 'historically determined concept' (Dean, 2000: 8) leads to the conception of it as an entity that undergoes transformations (McGowan, 2004: 197). For this very reason, Recalcati contends that taking the unconscious for granted, considering it as an ahistorical entity immune to cultural and social transformations, is a mistake (Recalcati, 2010a: IX). Therefore, as Recalcati spells out, 'non è mai possibile separare l'individuale dal sociale, il micro dal macro, […] perché l'uno e l'altro […] sono due facce della stessa medaglia' (De Rita and Recalcati, 2011: 11).

2.2 Hypermodernity

Recalcati argues, echoing Pasolini, that a 'mutazione antropologica' (Recalcati, 2010a: 6)[45] has affected contemporary subjects and postmillennial society, which he calls hypermodern.[46] As Recalcati (2010a: XI) puts it:

> L'epoca ipermoderna è l'epoca dell'individualismo atomizzato che s'impone sulla comunità, è l'epoca del culto narcisistico dell'Io e della spinta compulsiva al godimento immediato che stravolgono il circuito sublimatorio della pulsione imponendosi nella forma di un inedito principio di prestazione che situa il godimento stesso come nuovo dovere superegoico.

The hypermodern subject 'appears to be detached from the Other, adrift, deprived of those symbolic and ideal references that are meant to exercise a function of guidance' (Recalcati, 2011c: 33).

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[45] Pasolini uses the expression *mutazione antropologica* in the articles 'Gli Italiani non sono più quelli' and 'Il Potere senza volto', published in the newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* respectively on 10 June 1974 and 24 June 1974, and in an interview published in *Il Mondo* on 11 July 1974. These texts were all later published in the book *Scritti Corsari* (1975).

[46] To the best of my knowledge, Recalcati is the first Italian scholar to have used this notion, which was previously elaborated in France by Virilio and Lipovetsky (Donnarumma, 2014: 104). Indeed, as Donnarumma (2014: 105) points out, in Italy 'di ipermoderno si è parlato e si parla molto poco'.

To explain this epochal mutation and the 'radical shift in social relations' (Sforza Tarabochia, 2016: 8), Recalcati, drawing from Lacan, refers to the discourse of the capitalist, [47] the crisis of the Symbolic, and *jouissance*. The crisis of the Symbolic and the discourse of the capitalist produce a 'smarrimento generalizzato del godimento' (Recalcati, 2016a: 623):[48] the Real as *jouissance* does not encounter any limits or restrictions. Rather, there is an 'esaltazione iperattiva della spinta a godere' (Recalcati, 2012b: 12). As Recalcati further contends, 'oggi il godimento è divenuto una *forma inaudita e paradossale di dovere*. La Legge che orienta il programma ipermoderno della Civiltà eleva sadicamente il godimento a imperativo categorico: *Devi godere!*' [original emphasis] (Recalcati, 2010a: 198). For this reason, Recalcati argues that hypermodern society is dominated by an 'erranza del reale' (Recalcati, 2016b: 222).

Therefore, the Lacanian notion of the Real is at the core of Recalcati's socio-political criticism of postmillennial Italy, according to which the Real as *jouissance* 'si impone nella sua dimensione acefala come pura spinta a godere, come pulsione di morte' (Recalcati, 2010a: 160). In this respect, Recalcati conceives of the discourse of the capitalist as 'la manifestazione ipermoderna più eloquente e più drammatica della pulsione di morte' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 44) and as its 'traduzione sociale più terrificante' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 44). The outcome is the collapse of social bonds and extreme individualisation (Recalcati, 2010a: XIII; Sforza Tarabochia, 2016: 9).

2.3 From *Clinica del Simbolico* to *Clinica del Reale*

In several works (Recalcati 2002, 2006, 2010a, 2011a; Recalcati and Raimo, 2013; Borrelli *et al.*, 2013), Recalcati painstakingly addresses the most common

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[47]   According to Recalcati (2010a: 27), '[i]l discorso del capitalista di Lacan è stato un primo tentativo di decifrare la declinazione ipermoderna del registro del simbolico provando a inquadrare la natura del legame sociale nel nostro tempo. La tesi che si può dedurre dalla riflessione di Lacan è che il discorso del capitalista [...] si manifesta come il *discorso della distruzione di ogni legame,* come il discorso asservito al potere nichilistico della pulsione di morte' [original emphasis].

[48]   Here, Recalcati closely paraphrases Lacan when he states that nowadays '*jouissance* [is] going off the track' (Lacan, 1990: 32).

and widespread psychopathologies in contemporary Western society, which he refers to as new symptoms (i.e. anorexia, bulimia, panic attacks, drug addiction, obesity, and depression). These disorders are so 'tipici della contemporaneità' (Filippelli, Rodriguez and Zancola, 2012: 152) that they are understood by Recalcati as 'il paradigma della nostra Civiltà' (2016b: 47). As Sforza Tarabochia (2016: 8) claims, these new symptoms are Recalcati's 'clinical application' of Lacan's discourse of the capitalist and of the crisis of the Symbolic. Indeed, according to Recalcati, at the core of contemporary pathologies there is 'un certo grado di godimento che attenta alla vita del soggetto' (Recalcati, 2011b: 23). Recalcati does not mean that these pathologies are 'new' because they appear for the first time in hypermodern society but rather because they imply a new clinical framework, no longer based on neurotic symptoms (Recalcati, 2016b: 60). They are new versions of the symptoms investigated by Freud.

Classic Freudian clinical practice finds its axis in neurotic symptoms. According to Freud, a neurotic symptom is a compromise formation caused by an unresolved conflict between repressed and unconscious desires or traumas and is conceived as a coded message, a metaphor, namely 'una sostituzione simbolica di un elemento con un altro elemento' (Riccardi, 2012: 79). In this respect, as Recalcati underlines, 'la clinica delle nevrosi è una clinica eminentemente simbolica' (Borelli *et al.*, 2013: 50): 'il ritorno del rimosso è un *ritorno simbolico del reale*' [original emphasis] (Recalcati, 2010a: 14). Thus, symptoms can be tackled through psychoanalytic treatment and 'translated' by psychoanalytic interpretation, enabling the patient to understand their unconscious meaning.

By contrast, Recalcati argues that new symptoms '*non hanno una struttura linguistico-metaforica*' [emphasis added] (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 50). They are not 'messaggi criptati in attesa di decifrazione' (Recalcati, 2007a: 101), since they are no longer symbolic manifestations of unconscious conflict. The repressed does not reappear to the subject as a symbolic organisation, whether it be a dream, a slip of the tongue, a bungled action or another symptom, as conceived of in classical Freudian terms. Rather, there is an 'irruzione di un reale traumatico' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 105). New symptoms resist psychoanalytic treatment since this rests on interpretation and ultimately on the symbolic power of speech.

Recalcati's theoretical perspective on these new pathologies cannot be

understood if we do not take into account the shift in Lacan's teaching from the conception of a language-like unconscious in the 1950s, when he argued that the 'symptom is itself structured like a language' (Lacan, 1953: 223), to the conception of a Real-like unconscious in the 1960s and 1970s, when Lacan considers a symptom as a kernel of the Real which reists symbolisation. In his later phase, Lacan 'trasforma la psicoanalisi da una pratica storico-dialettica di simbolizzazione progressiva del reale [...] in una pratica del reale che ha al suo centro non tanto una dottrina dell'interpretazione [...] ma una dottrina del godimento, ovvero una dottrina dei limiti dell'interpretazione' (Recalcati, 2007b: 43).

Therefore, according to Recalcati, there is a change from the subject's psychic economy based on Freudian repression to one dominated by *jouissance*. This led Recalcati to identify a radical shift in postmillennial society: from a *clinica del simbolico* to a *clinica del reale* (Recalcati, 2010a: 143-149). This shift involves a movement from a clinical dimension that rests on the neurotic symptom as a metaphorical expression of the unconscious towards the symptom as dissociated from the symbolic dynamics of the unconscious. Following Lacan, Recalcati provocatively and hyperbolically argues that the unconscious understood as a symbolic apparatus is fading away in hypermodern society and that these new pathologies bear witness to this disappearance. [49] For this reason, Recalcati (2016a: 635) contends that: 'l'uomo del discorso del capitalista è un uomo senza inconscio'.

While in the *clinica del simbolico*, the structure of neurosis represents the pivotal axis of psychoanalytic theory, for the *clinica del reale*, Recalcati suggests that the structure of psychosis should be considered as the new clinical paradigm for understanding contemporary psychopathologies, inasmuch as psychosis is characterised by 'un difetto fondamentale immanente al registro del simbolico' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 51). This is perfectly expressed in Lacan's formulation of psychosis in his Seminar III, according to which 'something [that] is not symbolised [...] is going to appear in the *real*' (Lacan, 1997: 81).

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[49]   It is for this reason that Recalcati considers hypermodernity, fundamentally, as a 'tempo ostile all'evento dell'inconscio' (2016a: 629).

Recalcati believes in 'un *fondo psicotico della nuova psicopatologia*' [original emphasis] (2010a: 15) since '[la] clinica delle psicosi [...] è una clinica del godimento senza legge, una clinica del reale' (Recalcati, 2016a: 259). Recalcati (2010a: 15) contends:

> Propongo di utilizzare il riferimento alla psicosi – come Freud aveva utilizzato il riferimento alla nevrosi per diagnosticare il disagio della Civiltà della sua epoca o all'isteria per costruire i fondamenti della clinica – come chiave di lettura al disagio della Civiltà ipermoderna.

Thus, according to Recalcati, the 'psychic and cultural climate' that pervades hypermodernity (Valdré, 2014: 128) is characterised by the 'predominance of the psychotic functioning' (Valdré, 2014: 128). Whilst in the clinical structure of neurosis there is a *symbolic* return of the Real, by means of unconscious compromise formations, in the clinical structure of psychosis a collapse of the Symbolic and a return of the Real takes place. However, this does not in any way imply that neuroses have disappeared, nor that all patients are now psychotic or that Recalcati is establishing an equation between new symptoms and psychoses. Instead, Recalcati simply underlines that the paradigm to understand contemporary pathologies and their functioning shifts from neurosis to psychosis.

2.4 From the Aesthetics of the Symbolic Towards the Aesthetics of the Real

According to contemporary Italian Lacanianism, the historical and cultural changes that influence society and pathologies in hypermodern times are also reflected in artistic productions (Recalcati, 2007a; Mierolo and Rodriguez, 2006; Lolli, 2012). This is not simply because of an overlapping of aesthetic artefacts and commodification in contemporary society, which leads to art object being perceived as mere products to be consumed and artists as traders keen on maximising the profit of their artistic wares (Žižek, 2000: 31). Rather, it is because, as Recalcati contends, '*il reale surclassa il simbolico* proprio su un terreno, quello dell'arte, che per Freud era il luogo elettivo della funzione simbolica della sublimazione' [original emphasis] (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 59). Thus, the progressive 'repudiation of the unconscious' and of its symbolic mechanisms

(Poser, 2008: 129), including sublimation, is predominant nowadays (Valdré, 2014: 112).

Recalcati argues that hypermodernity is characterised by an 'aggressione verso il carattere necessariamente sublimatorio dell'opera d'arte' (2007a: 85) and that the discourse of the capitalist fosters 'la distruzione della sublimazione' (Recalcati, 2016b: 46). The order of the Symbolic and the symbolic dynamics, on which both the unconscious and sublimation rely, are indeed deeply affected. According to Recalcati, some contemporary manifestations of art do not aim to establish a relationship with the Real; they are no longer a symbolic experience to encounter the Real (see Sections 4 and 5, Chapter 1). Rather, they aim to destroy art as an imaginary-symbolic practice (Recalcati, 2007a: 100). As Recalcati puts it, nowadays: '[l]'arte […] non sembra più essere il luogo simbolico-immaginario dove si realizza un trattamento possibile del reale, quanto piuttosto un luogo ingombrato da un *ritorno sregolato del reale stesso*' [emphasis added] (Recalcati, 2007a: 100).

Similarly to the shift from the *clinica del simbolico*, in which symptoms rest on symbolic unconscious mechanisms, to the *clinica del reale*, in which symptoms rest on non-symbolic unconscious mechanisms, a shift from the aesthetics of the Symbolic to the aesthetics of the Real occurs in the contemporary art world. In other words,

> è tutta la nostra società ad accusare un collasso dell'attività simbolizzatrice. Lo si vede, paradigmaticamente, in quelle svariate forme di disagio che hanno sostituito l'isteria, dai disturbi alimentari agli attacchi di panico. Ma lo testimoniano anche alcune espressioni artistiche contemporanee, che propongono l'irruzione del reale sulla scena, senza più alcun ricorso a velature simboliche (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 58).

According to the paradigm of the aesthetic of the Symbolic, 'l'arte tradizionale disponeva di una cornice simbolica efficace, come ad esempio una cornice religiosa' (Senaldi, 2013: 18). On the contrary, nowadays art 'emerge in un mondo dove il simbolico tramonta: i suoi tentativi, anche i più shoccanti, sono allora rivolti evidentemente a "provocare" un contesto, quasi nella speranza che il simbolico ci sia ancora' (Senaldi, 2013: 18-19). In hypermodern art, '[il] reale [è] esibito nella sua schiacciante e insopportabile oscenità' (Carmagnola, 2012: 244). Recalcati contends that '[g]li esempi di performance artistiche contemporanee

[…] esprimono con evidenza netta la tendenza "psicotica" a fare esplodere il simbolico sotto i colpi di un reale erratico' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 58). Therefore, in the paradigm of the aesthetics of the Real, there is a non-symbolised return of the Real. In blunt terms, 'ai tagli simbolici con i quali Fontana costruiva rigorosamente le sue tele, si sostituiscono i tagli reali inflitti dai body artisti ai propri corpi' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 58). [50]

This is particularly explicit in the extreme practice of body art which, Recalcati contends, involves 'un corpo che rifiuta la mediazione del simbolo' (Recalcati, 2007a: 105). Referring to the performances of body-artists such as Schwarzkogler, Acconci, Pane, and Orlan, among others, Recalcati (2007a: 105) denotes a 'confusione psicotica di reale e simbolico' that animates these artistic expressions. This is manifested through an ostentatious display, which aims to shock and provoke anxiety in its audience as well as to capture their gaze.

Recalcati is not alone in noting the psychotic dimension of some contemporary art. [51] For instance, amongst other definitions such as extreme, traumatic, and evil, Perniola employs the term 'psychotic' (2000) to describe some transgressive contemporary artistic trends. Similarly, Žižek (2000: 39) claims that contemporary art is dominated by 'a psychotic collapse of the symbolic space'. In these contexts, the word 'psychotic' is clearly used with reference to the clinical meaning Lacan attributes to it, wherein psychosis is considered as the non-symbolised return of the Real. The assumption shared by these scholars is that the lack of the symbolic function, which belongs specifically to the clinic of psychosis, characterises the artistic trend which, from Recalcati's

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[50]   This resembles the shift from the *clinica del simbolico* to the *clinica del reale*. In the clinical practice of neurosis, the body can be affected by the symptom as an intrinsically symbolic manifestation of the unconscious. This is because, concerning neuroses (e.g. hysteria), the manifestation of what has been repressed involves 'un ritorno simbolico del reale' (Recalcati, 2010a: 14). On the contrary, in the clinical treatment of new symptoms (e.g. anorexia), the body is no longer a space where symptoms might symbolically reappear. Rather, the body is affected by the symptom as a non-symbolic phenomenon: the symptom appears to be irreducible to a symbolic sign or to a cyphered message conveyed through the body (Recalcati, 1997; Recalcati and Zuccardi Merli, 2006).

[51]   It is worth noting that Recalcati's aesthetics does not aim to medicalise or pathologise artists, but rather to read contemporary artistic phenomena through the Lacanian category of the Real. As he affirms: '[i] termini clinici che ho proposto (perversione, psicosi, esibizionismo ecc.) non devono assolutamente essere assunti come diagnosi della personalità degli artisti e di una loro eventuale struttura psicopatologica, ma si riferiscono unicamente al linguaggio artistico in quanto tale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 72).

perspective, involves a 'realizzazione antimetaforica di un *acting out* dell'orrore' (Recalcati, 2007a: 103).[52] As such, according to Recalcati, the Freudian theory of repression is not an effective theoretical tool for understanding contemporary art (Kashel, 2009: 3). Therefore, the clinical structure of psychosis represents a fruitful paradigm, not only for understanding the discontent of society today and for contemporary pathologies, but also, according to Recalcati, for understanding the discontent of some contemporary art.

In the next subsections, I will discuss Recalcati's three aesthetics of the Real, which revolve around the Lacanian notions of the Thing, the object *a*, and the *sinthome*. In particular: in the *estetica del vuoto*, Recalcati contends that the Real has to be framed through an imaginary-symbolic device; in the *estetica anamorfica*, he maintains that art is a priviledged medium for encountering the Real; in the *estetica del sinthomo*, he conceives of the Real as that hard kernel which resists interpretation and symbolisation at the core of every artwork.

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[52]   Nevertheless, it should be noted that '[l]'irruzione del reale non deve essere confusa con l'irruzione del brutto' (Recalcati, 2007a: 94). This has nothing to do with the content or theme of an artwork. Indeed, as Senaldi (2013: 17) points out, 'se intendiamo il Reale come l'infigurabile mostruoso – dalla deformazione espressionista, su fino ai freaks e all'osceno o al disgustoso proprio di una certa arte "sensazionalista" – manchiamo proprio la determinazione lacaniana del reale come "impossibile" (impossibile da integrare nell'ordine simbolico)'.

3. The Aesthetics of the Void

3.1 The Real *qua Vuoto*

In Section 5 of Chapter 1, I acknowledged that Hernández-Navarro (2004, 2006) outlined two main perspectives on Lacanian aesthetics. The first considers art as the elevation of an object to the dignity of the Thing, whilst the second considers it as a trap for the gaze. According to Hernández-Navarro, these perspectives originate from, and revolve around, the Lacanian concepts of the Thing, as articulated in Seminar VII, and of the object *a*, as conceived primarily in Seminar XI. These key terms 'sono visti alla base dell'[idea lacaniana di] arte' (Hernández-Navarro, 2004: 131). In Sections 3 and 4 of this chapter, I shall argue that the Thing and the object *a* also constitute the conceptual foundation of two of the three aesthetics of the Real developed by Recalcati: respectively, the *estetica del vuoto*, and the *estetica anamorfica*. Indeed, Recalcati interprets the category of the Real as a double-sided concept (1996, 2001), which revolves around the notions of the Thing and the object *a*. In relation to the former, Recalcati (1996: 21) conceives of 'il reale come vuoto che si fa causa', whilst in respect to the latter, he regards the Real 'nel suo statuto di resto' (1996: 21). Thus, from Recalcati's perspective '[i]l *vuoto* e il *resto* sono […] i modi lacaniani fondamentali di "dire" il reale' (Recalcati, 2001: 9).[53] Since I will refer exclusively to the aesthetics of the void in this section, my analysis will focus primarily on the category of the Real *qua vuoto*. The concept of the Real *qua resto* will be addressed in Section 4, along with the notion of the object *a*.

The first of Recalcati's aesthetics of the Real centres on the notions of the void and the Thing[54] and refers to the two Lacanian formulae of sublimation.

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[53]   Although these two Lacanian notions belong to the category of the Real, they are not *stricto sensu* the same concept inasmuch as the object *a* is a residual fragment of the Thing. However, the Thing and the object *a* are both 'prodotti di una perdita e si caratterizzano per l'assenza: un vuoto che è, precisamente, l'oggetto causa del desiderio. Entrambi, quindi, sono al di là del significato' (Hernández-Navarro, 2004: 136).

[54]   In Lacanian terms, both the void and the Thing are causes. Recalcati states: '[i]l vuoto di Lacan non è né un vuoto che contiene (non contiene niente) né un vuoto che rivela (non rivela niente) ma piuttosto un vuoto che causa, un vuoto causativo. Un vuoto che si fa causa, che si fa causa del soggetto' (1996: 20). Similarly, concerning the Thing, Recalcati affirms: '[i]l vuoto di das Ding non è un vuoto inerte, un vuoto statico quanto piuttosto un vuoto causativo, un vuoto che

Recalcati follows Lacan's main principles, as debated in Seminar VII, in which he provides a definition of art based on these three terms: the void, also called emptiness, the Thing, and sublimation.[55]

Recalcati contends that the void and the Thing partake of the Lacanian Real and, as such, are irreducible to the registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic (2007a: 40; 2009a: 58-59). As Recalcati puts it, the void is an 'eterogeneità eccentrica a ogni possibile rappresentazione simbolico-immaginaria' (Recalcati, 2007a: 40). Similarly, the Thing 'non è una raffigurazione simbolico-immaginaria, ma è la condizione di ogni possibile rappresentazione simbolico-immaginaria. Le rappresentazioni sono, infatti, rotazioni attorno al vuoto irrappresentabile della Cosa' (Recalcati, 2007a: 42).

Recalcati's perspective on Lacanian aesthetics, supported by other Italian Lacanian scholars (i.e. Di Ciaccia and Recalcati, 2000; Moroncini and Petrillo, 2007), focuses on the issue of representability/non-representability of the Real. Indeed, the Thing constitutes 'la via attraverso la quale il reale mette in scena, esprime, il suo statuto di eccedenza, e di frattura delle pratiche (immaginarie o linguistiche) di rappresentazione' (Bellavita, 2009: 150).[56]

assolve una funzione di causa. Di causa materiale del desiderio' (Recalcati, 1996: 158). This interpretation is aligned with Lacan inasmuch as he describes the intrinsic nature of the Thing as a cause in Seminar VII (1992: 42) not only when he claims that 'it is the *causa pathomenon,* the *cause* of the most fundamental human passion' (1992: 97), but also when he states that the Thing exerts an orientating power over the subject. In Lacan's words: '[it is] the first seat of subjective orientation' (1992: 54).

[55] As discussed in Sections 4 and 5 of Chapter 1, these Lacanian terms are all closely linked and are developed through a rather circular argument (see Section 4 in Chapter 1). Firstly, the notion of the Thing overlaps with the notion of the void due to their partaking of the order of the Real (Lacan, 1992: 121 and 129). Secondly, Lacan provides a definition of artwork based on the notion of the Thing: 'a work of art always involves encircling the Thing' (1992: 141), and a general definition of art based on the notion of the void: '[a]ll art is characterized by a certain mode of organization around this emptiness' (1992: 130). Finally, he includes both the void and the Thing in his two definitions of sublimation as a process in which 'emptiness is determinative' (Lacan, 1992: 130) and that 'raises an object [...] to the dignity of the Thing' (Lacan, 1992: 112).

[56] In this respect, I have two criticisms to make in relation to Recalcati's discussion. The first concerns Recalcati's tendency, on the one hand, to reify Lacanian concepts, or rather to consider them as physical entities, and, on the other, to treat them as somewhat metaphysical or mystical entities. For instance, referring to the Thing, Recalcati uses deliberately powerful expressions and affirms that 'la Cosa è una Potenza oscura', 'tende a rompere gli argini dell'immaginario e del simbolico', 'la Cosa è una presenza, un'incombenza [...] da cui gli esseri umani si devono difendere' (2009b: 23). In doing so, the risk is that the reader will somehow conceive of Lacanian concepts either as concrete objects or as mystical entities that, when combined, create a metaphysical form of Lacanian aesthetics. The second issue relates to the notion of the Real. According to Chiesa (2007), four different kinds of Real can be distinguished in Lacan's theory: the undifferentiated primordial matter 'as it is in itself before the advent of the Symbolic' (2007: 126); the 'Real-of-

Recalcati states that it is crucial to draw a distinction between the void of clinical psychopathologies and the void that Lacan places at the core of every artistic process. For Recalcati, the former is

> il vuoto che troviamo in primo piano in certe rappresentazioni del sintomo contemporaneo. [...] il vuoto che anima i cosiddetti nuovi sintomi (panico, depressione, anoressie, bulimie, tossicomanie) [...] il vuoto come cristallizzazione del godimento [...] il vuoto che il discorso del capitalista alimenta promettendone un'illusoria saturazione, ogni volta astutamente differita (2007a: 68-69).

Thus, the void encountered in clinical practice is essentially 'un pieno di godimento' (Recalcati, 2007a: 69), and, for this very reason, 'un vuoto che non genera nulla, sterile, autoreferenziale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 70).

On the contrary, the void as the cornerstone of Lacan's definition of sublimation, and thus art, entails 'l'assenza della Cosa [...] come condizione di fondo' (2007a: 69). Recalcati (2012a: 296) affirms that 'la Cosa deve essere sempre "velata" dal simbolico, tenuta a distanza, perché non sia distruttiva per il soggetto'. As Valdré (2014: 38) remarks, 'there can be art, creation, and thus sublimation, if you keep at a certain distance from the real Thing'. The risk is indeed that '[l]addove questo argine simbolico non svolge la sua funzione di barriera – come nel caso della psicosi – il soggetto si trova invaso, inghiottito, bruciato dalla Cosa' (Recalcati, 2012a: 296). As Hernández-Navarro (2004: 132) claims, '[q]uando il soggetto si avvicina troppo al godimento di *das Ding*, esso si smonta letteralmente, si de-oggettivizza. La Cosa è la mancanza necessaria che rende coeso il soggetto, che lo sostiene, è il vuoto che sostiene la struttura borromeica del Reale, del Simbolico e dell'Immaginario'.

In particular, 'l'attività artistica [...] è l'attività che sfida l'accostamento più prossimo alla Cosa' (Recalcati, 2009a: 59). This proximity could be dangerous not only for the subject, as he argues from a clinical perspective, but also for the

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the-Symbolic' (2007: 128); the Real-of-Language (2007: 128); and reality, which Lacan differentiates from the category of the Real as such. However, Recalcati does not specify what kind of Real he refers to and this leads to a lack of clarity in his aesthetic theory. Recalcati deals with the Real as 'ciò che, pur appartenendo al campo simbolico, risulta ad esso eccedente' (Recalcati, 2007a: XII), and when he addresses the void, he affirms that: 'il vuoto della Cosa non deve essere pensato come pre-linguistico o come una dimensione originaria dell'essere: esso è innanzitutto un effetto dell'azione del significante sul reale primordiale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 40). We cannot be certain which form of the Real is being discussed. Is it the Real as primordial matter, the Real-of-the-Symbolic, or the Real-of-Language?

aesthetic status of a work of art. If Recalcati's aesthetics and psychoanalytic clinic go hand in hand, and if the presence of the Thing is dangerous for the subject, what happens if the Thing, rather than being veiled, is fully exposed in the aesthetic field?

3.2 (Un)veiling the Thing

Žižek (2000) and Leader (2002)[57] share this Lacanian perspective, according to which the Real of the Thing should always be kept at a distance in artistic creation. For them, the precondition of any artistic creation is the absence of the Thing. Regarding contemporary art, Žižek (2000: 39) argues: 'the very Thing is no longer absent, that is, present as a void, as the background of actual events, but threatens to become *directly* present, to actualize itself in reality, and thus to provoke a psychotic collapse of the symbolic space'. Furthermore, Žižek (1992: 123) locates the transition from modernism to postmodernism in a shift

> from the axis Imaginary-Symbolic to the axis Symbolic-Real: the aim of the modernist 'symptomal reading' is to ferret out the texture of discursive (symbolic) practices whose imaginary effect is the substantial totality, whereas postmodernism focuses on the traumatic Thing which resists symbolization (symbolic practices).

Leader, addressing contemporary manifestations of art, affirms that while 'much earlier art depicted the human body veiled and obscured, more recent art attempts to lift the veil, to show everything, from the genitals to the internal

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[57]   In their aesthetics, both Leader and Žižek emphasise a perspective in which Lacan focuses mainly on beauty as a defence, a veil, or screen, against the power of the Thing and the disruptiveness of the Real. According to Leader, this barrier corresponds to the 'screening function of the visual image' (2002: 127) and is linked with the morphogenic power of the *imago*, which brings us back to the Lacanian mirror stage and the pivotal role that image plays in the construction of self-identity. For Leader, beauty functions 'as a barrier beyond which is the zone of the Thing, the void that can be imagined in one way as death or destruction' (2002: 126). Žižek's reading of Lacan also supports this perspective of beauty as a barrier. He argues that: '[l]a bellezza è una specie di difesa contro il Brutto nella sua esistenza ripulsiva' (2003b: 32). Žižek's perspective emphasises the aforementioned contrast; he claims that '[t]he gap that separates beauty from ugliness is thus the very gap that separates reality from the Real: what constitutes reality is the minimum of idealization the subject needs in order to be able to sustain the horror of the Real' (Žižek, 1997: 66). Nevertheless, Lacan's stance on beauty is more nuanced and Recalcati further articulates this perspective, conceiving of it not exclusively as a screening image but also as a way of alluding to the Real: '[i]l bello non copre il reale ma allude al reale' (Recalcati, 2009a: 30).

organs of the body' (Leader, 2002: 79-80). Recalcati's Italian psychoanalytic aesthetics follows this Lacanian perspective.

One of the theoretical cores of Recalcati's aesthetics of the Real rests on the Lacanian idea of treating, channelling and encountering the Real through the Imaginary and the Symbolic, not to annihilate it, but rather to allow it to manifest itself without its being (too) disruptive. Specifically, as for the aesthetics of the void, the possibility of reaching and mastering the Real is obtained through the combination of, on the one hand, the 'organisation around emptiness' (Lacan, 1992: 130), and, on the other, the 'encircling [of] the Thing' (Lacan, 1992: 141), both of which remain symbolic operations.

However, as anticipated in Section 2 of this chapter, Recalcati contends that, instead of (symbolically) organising the emptiness or encircling the Thing, some contemporary art 'esibisce la Cosa nel suo carattere più maligno e terrificante' (Recalcati, 2007a: 71). In doing so, '[i]l simbolico si confonde integralmente, psicoticamente, con il reale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 72). As Esposito (2014: 64) contends: '[a] lungo inguainata in una rete simbolica, ciò che oggi viene allo scoperto è la Cosa stessa nella sua assoluta nudità'. In addition to this, hypermodernity promotes 'l'illusione che sia possibile un accesso diretto alla Cosa' (Recalcati, 2016b: 46), or in other words, 'raggiungere direttamente il reale della Cosa' (Recalcati, 2016b: 44).

Recalcati refers especially to the artistic practice of body art as the epitome of the psychotic realism that is widespread in contemporary artists (e.g. Orlan, Franko B, and Stelarc).[58] Indeed, body art 'mette in scena il reale della Cosa senza alcuna velatura' (Recalcati, 2007a: 47). According to the essential axis of the aesthetics of the Real, every artistic creation should always contain a symbolic dimension. Indeed, Recalcati's aesthetics is based on the idea that 'l'arte è una circoscrizione significante dell'incandescenza della Cosa' (Recalcati, 2007a: 47). For Recalcati, this is exactly what does not happen in those contemporary artistic trends whose 'realismo psicotico [...] esalta il reale al di là di ogni mediazione simbolica' (Recalcati, 2007a: 47) or where 'la pratica perversa dell'oltraggio nei confronti della bellezza del corpo, la sua riduzione alla carne, all'organo, alla parte

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[58] For a feminist Lacanian perspective on Orlan's artistic work, see Adams (1996: 141-159).

[…] s'inoltra verso la zona incandescente della Cosa' (Recalcati, 2004: 27).

There are similarities between the Lacanian suggestion of veiling the Thing, and some Freudian remarks on the field of art. As for the aesthetic inputs that can be inferred from Freud's work, Recalcati (2009b: 52) speaks about a 'velatura dell'inconscio'. For instance, in Freud's essay 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming', in which he addresses the field of poetic writing, it is argued that: 'the essential *ars poetica* lies in the technique of overcoming the feeling of repulsion in us' (Freud, 1908b: 140). Repulsion is provoked by the scandalous fantasy of the unconscious of the author and this technique tends to 'veil', or to 'screen'. Recalcati, following Lacan, argues that this technique is a symbolic mediation which lies at the core of artistic production. Freud (1908b: 141) divides this symbolic technique into two different methods:

> The writer softens the character of his egoistic daydreams by *altering* and *disguising* it, and he *bribes* us by the purely formal - that is, aesthetic - yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies [emphasis added].

It is now even more explicit how expressions such as altering, disguising, and bribing echo Lacan's comments about the organisation of the void and the encircling of the Thing. According to Recalcati, both Freud and Lacan believe that 'l'opera d'arte esige una velatura dell'inconscio, una mediazione simbolica, […] una capacità di usare il medium del linguaggio, […] una capacità linguistico sublimatoria' (Recalcati, 2009b: 52-53).[59]

3.3 Recalcati's Account on Sublimation

At the heart of Recalcati's aesthetics of the void, there is the Lacanian conception of sublimation as a 'creazione attorno al vuoto' (1996: 219). Recalcati contends that every artistic practice concerns a 'bordatura' (2007a: 47), 'organizzazione' (2007a: 208), or even a 'circoscrizione significante' (2007a: 47) 'del vuoto della Cosa' (2007a: 47). The words *bordatura*, *organizzazione*, and *circoscrizione*

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[59]   In this respect, a comparison between art and reality can be drawn since, as Recalcati affirms, '[l]a realtà è quel quadro simbolico-immaginario che si costituisce sul fondamento di una velatura o, se si preferisce, di una difesa fondamentale della "realtà muta" e "fuori significato" incarnata dalla Cosa' (2007a: 42).

describe the way to approach and handle the Real. According to Recalcati's *estetica del vuoto*, 'l'arte appare come una organizzazione possibile del vuoto irrappresentabile di *das Ding*, dunque come una forma di circoscrizione simbolica del vuoto che eleva un'immagine a indice enigmatico del reale irrappresentabile' (Recalcati, 2012a: 603).

Furthermore, Recalcati agrees with the Lacanian account of sublimation, according to which sublimation is a 'satisfaction of the drive, without repression' (Lacan, 1998a: 165). While repression excludes the Real, this is not the case for sublimation since the latter always entails the Real and is not simply a way to suppress it. Thus, Recalcati does not conceive of sublimation as a kind of defensive mechanism or even an idealisation. In relation to 'il reale pulsionale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 18), sublimation is not a way of eradicating or taming the drive, but is rather 'un modo di fornire una forma sociale e simbolica alla forza (informe) della pulsione' (2012a: 149). This leads to Recalcati's criticism of the interpretations of Bois and Krauss (1997) and of Žižek (1997; 2000; 2003b), which equate sublimation with idealisation or elevation. Žižek's account of sublimation considers artworks that exhibit transgressive or obscene elements as being related to the 'elevation of trashy or excremental objects to the status of art' (Leader, 2002: 76).

This proves once again that, for Recalcati, art remains an imaginary-symbolic practice to treat the Real (Recalcati, 2012a: 580).[60] This means that the aesthetics of the Real represents an opportunity to tackle and confront the impossibility, namely the non-meaning (or at least the resistance to meaning), of the Real without avoiding it, as religion does, or rationalising it, as science does

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[60]   This perspective is controversial and under debate amongst renowned scholars of Lacan. For instance, Badiou agrees with the crucial role of the Symbolic in art and claims that, for both Freud and Lacan, art is always conceived of as an 'act of symbolisation' (2005: 7). Along this line, Perniola is similarly convinced of the intrinsically symbolic dimension of art (2000: 11). However, Perniola does not believe art is a means of accessing the Real. As he argues: '[l]'idea che l'arte possa fornire una via d'accesso al reale e alla cosa è, in termini strettamente lacaniani, insostenibile: infatti l'arte, a suo [di Lacan] avviso, appartiene all'ordine simbolico e non al reale' (2000: 11). I disagree with Perniola here since, as previously discussed, the notions on which Recalcati's Lacanian aesthetics are based partake of the Real (i.e. the void, the Thing, and the object *a*). However, I would also argue that Recalcati's theorisation fails to provide an explanation of how and to what extent the Imaginary and the Symbolic are combined in the Real. How does the imaginary-symbolic artistic apparatus deal with the Real? Is the outcome of this process always the same? Are different levels of the Real present in an artwork? And finally, are the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real always combined in the same way? I will answer these questions in greater detail in Chapter 3.

(see Section 5, Chapter 1). Indeed, Recalcati considers sublimation as a 'modalità etica di abitare l'al di là del principio di piacere' (Recalcati, 1996: 56). This represents, as Resmini argues, the ethical side of Recalcati's aesthetics inasmuch as Recalcati 'think[s] of the role of art as an *experience of limits*, a collision against boundaries, a struggle with "something that resists"' (2013: 289). According to Resmini, from Recalcati's perspective '[t]he artwork becomes then *the testimony of a strictly singular way of holding together the symbolic and the real, Law and jouissance, form and the formless*' [original emphasis] (Resmini, 2013: 292).

In this respect, closely following the teaching of Lacan's Seminar VII, as discussed in Section 4 of Chapter 1, Recalcati conceives of both aesthetics and ethics in relation to the Real (Recalcati, 2012a: 278). From Recalcati's perspective, dealing with the Real is also the meeting point of aesthetics and psychoanalysis: 'la pratica della psicoanalisi condivide con la pratica dell'arte l'essere una pratica eminentemente simbolica che però ha di mira il rapporto con il limite del simbolico, ovvero con il reale come centro esterno al linguaggio' (Recalcati, 2012a: 552).

By contrast, Recalcati contends that sublimation, as a symbolic process, is at risk in hypermodernity, which he conceives of as 'tempo dell'antisublimazione' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 82). In particular, the discourse of the capitalist 'sembra autorizzare a un godimento compulsivo al di là di ogni limite' and 'senza differimento alcuno' (Recalcati, 2016b: 46-47), contrarily to what occurs in sublimation. Following Lacan, Recalcati argues that the object of sublimation fills the empty space of the lost object, taking the place, namely, of the Thing. On the contrary, the discursive regime of the capitalist produces endless objects to be consumed, giving the illusion that they can fill this void. Consequently, the subject becomes 'totalmente dipendente dagli oggetti di godimento che il mercato mette a disposizione' (Recalcati, 2016a: 619). Indeed, the new symptoms revolve around this 'godimento autistico dell'oggetto' (Rodriguez, 2006: 158; Fiumanò, 2012:108). In this situation, 'the sublimation process fails and is replaced by the "order of pleasure". Paradoxically, here, the injunction of the Super-Ego is turned upside down and becomes, "Enjoy!"' (Conrotto, 2014: xv).

4. Anamorphic Aesthetics

4.1 The Real *qua Resto*

According to the aesthetics of the void as developed by Recalcati, who draws mainly from Lacan's Seminar VII, art is conceived of as an imaginary and symbolic practice encircling the void of the Thing, which thus confronts and deals with the *jouissance* of the Thing. Instead, Recalcati's anamorphic aesthetics considers the artwork as an encounter, uncanny yet not deadly, with the Real (Recalcati, 2007a, 2012a; Resmini, 2013). In this case, art deals with 'il reale scabroso dell'oggetto piccolo (a) in cui si localizza il godimento pulsionale, irrapresentabile del soggetto' (Barcella, 2012: 39). As Recalcati puts it: '[s]e l'estetica del vuoto circoscrive, borda, sublima il reale, l'estetica anamorfica lo fa emergere, lo provoca' (Recalcati, 2012a: 613-614). The core of anamorphic aesthetics revolves around the Real as the remainder that no symbolic force can organise completely.

Similarly to the Real *qua vuoto*, the Real *qua resto* 'ha un potere di causazione sul soggetto' (Recalcati, 2001: 9), even if this *resto* 'non [è] la Cosa ma solo un suo frammento residuale' (Recalcati, 2001: 148). What exactly is this *resto*, then, and how does it differ from the Thing? Although Lacan provides several definitions for the object *a*, which I addressed in Section 5 of Chapter 1, Fink (1997: 83) identifies two main conceptions in Lacan's thought which are relevant for this discussion: the object *a* 'as the residue of symbolization'; and 'as a last reminder or remainder of the hypothetical mother-child unity to which the subject clings in fantasy to achieve a sense of wholeness'. These conceptions, apparently divergent, are in fact closely connected, as both relate to the register of the Real.

Lacan conceptualises the primordial Real as a pre-symbolic and pre-linguistic 'sort of smooth, seamless surface or space' (Fink, 1997: 24). This condition changes radically after the advent of the Symbolic, which '*cuts into* the smooth façade of the real, creating divisions, gaps, and distinguishable entities' (Fink, 1997: 24). Lacan (1992: 118) considers this primordial real as 'a real that we do not have yet to limit, the real in its totality, both the real of the subject and the real he has to deal with as an exterior to him'. However, Recalcati insists that

referring to this process in temporal terms is incorrect for two reasons. Firstly, from a Lacanian perspective, the subject never experiences a pre-symbolic or pre-linguistic origin, since he/she comes to life always-already caught up in the symbolic dimension. Secondly, the Real is that which is constantly waiting to be symbolised and, at the same time, never can be (Recalcati, 2001: 109).

In the process of transformation of the Real by the Symbolic, the Lacanian notions of the primordial Real and the Thing overlap: 'the Thing is that which in the real, the primordial real, I will say, suffers from the signifier' (Lacan, 1992: 118). The effect of the symbolic signifier on the Thing produces 'un resto di godimento' (Recalcati, 2001: 81). In this respect, it is possible to establish a connection between the two main definitions of the object *a* put forward by Fink – that of a residue of symbolisation, and that of a reminder/remainder of the mythical mother-baby unity, 'un resto reale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 41). Thus, the primordial Real and the Thing are modified by the Symbolic, which dispossesses them and produces a leftover, remainder, or remnant left behind: the object *a*. This illustrates that the object *a*, despite belonging to the realm of the Real, is not the Thing, as the former is a residual fragment of the latter. The object *a* is 'la presentificazione parziale' of the Thing (Recalcati, 1996: 158). As Recalcati (2001: 74) claims:

> L'oggetto piccolo (a) non è infatti la Cosa ma l'elemento immaginario che la rimpiazza, che ne riscopre l'assenza o, se si preferisce, il resto che la ritrazione della Cosa sedimenta e lascia come frammento residuale della sua propria obliterazione.

Nevertheless, the Thing and the object *a* have two features in common. Lacan associates both with the function of being a 'cause' for the subject, that is to say, the cause of the subject's desire. Moreover, belonging to the Real, they both resist the Imaginary and the Symbolic as they have no images which represent them and cannot be described through words. As Bellavita (2005: 65) aptly puts it: '[l]'oggetto a, nella sua irriducibilità alla dialettica tra Immaginario e Simbolico e il resto della rappresentazione, è ciò che sfugge, ciò che *non* è l'immagine speculare e ciò che *non* è la raffigurazione Simbolica attraverso il linguaggio'. Like the Thing, the object *a* is visually unimaginable and literally indescribable.

4.2 The Geometrical Optics, the Gaze, and the Object *a*

The Lacanian theory of vision subverts the rigid dichotomy between the viewing subject and the viewed object that forms the basis of what Lacan (1998a: 85) calls 'geometrical' or 'flat optics'. According to this dichotomy, the subject exerts an active control over the act of vision. Indeed, the human mind is seen as an anthropomorphic *camera obscura*: the eye, the access to the world 'outside', is the means by which light converges and is filtered onto the retina, where the image of the external object is then formed and represented to the mind. For Lacan, geometrical optics 'non esaurisce il campo della visione' (Bottiroli, 2002: 191). In fact, according to Lacan, the geometrical dimension 'has nothing to do with vision as such' (Lacan, 1998a: 88) insofar as '[w]hat is at issue in geometrical perspective is simply the mapping of space, not sight' (Lacan, 1998a: 86).

The Lacanian theory of vision rests on the idea that before looking, the subject is looked at. Thus, the subject is not the master of his/her own gaze. To explain this, Lacan refers to the split both between 'the eye and the gaze' (Lacan, 1998a: 67) and between 'gaze and vision' (Lacan, 1998a: 78). The gaze precedes vision: 'I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides' (Lacan, 1998a: 72). This is because the Lacanian subject is not identifiable as a pure substance, but rather originates in the field of the Other: '[d]al momento in cui siamo visibili, siamo esposti allo sguardo del mondo. Per il soggetto, guardare è ricevere "in pieno viso tutto il peso del visibile"' (Hernández-Navarro, 2004: 134).

From Recalcati's perspective, this subverts the idea of the subject as an 'artefice della rappresentazione' (Recalcati, 2007a: 57) and is thus a point of departure from a Cartesian view of the subject. As Recalcati writes: '[l]a storia del pensiero filosofico occidentale è la storia della ragione, dell'Io, della coscienza come facoltà rappresentativa. Soggetto e rappresentazione costituiscono un binomio indissolubile. Non c'è schisi: soggetto è rappresentazione' (Recalcati, 2001: 113-114). On the contrary, Lacan breaks with this 'logica rappresentativa' (Recalcati, 2001: 114) insofar as he 'ha disgiunto soggetto e rappresentazione' (Recalcati, 2001: 14). For Lacan, the subject and representation do not coincide. Lacan claims that the gaze belongs first and foremost to the Other and not to the

subject, who is, rather, caught up in it. As Recalcati (2007a: 55) states, this means

> rovesciare il presupposto ontologico della "prospettiva geometrale" che pone il soggetto come padrone della visione e, di conseguenza, il mondo come una sua mera rappresentazione.[61]

Rather than the subject being an image-capturing device, as suggested by geometrical optics, the image is said to be a human-capturing device. Lacan's theory of vision reverses the dialectic of subject/viewer and object/viewed, contrasting 'the Imaginary eye of conscious visual perception and the Symbolic gaze' (Levine, 2008: 69). To exemplify that the place of the subject is 'something other than the place of the geometral point defined by geometrical optics' (Lacan, 1998a: 95), Lacan refers to a biographical anecdote. In his twenties, he went on a boat with a young fisherman. All of a sudden, he saw a sardine can floating on the water, glittering in the sun, at which point the fisherman said to him: '*You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!*' [original emphasis] (Lacan, 1998a: 95). As Recalcati aptly sums up: the 'soggetto è, in questa scena, l'oggetto guardato più che il soggetto che guarda' (Recalcati, 2012a: 609). This is what Lacan (1998a: 106) refers to as the 'scopic field': '[w]hat determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside'.

Lacan situates the scopic drive in the split between 'the subject's seeing eye and the subject's exposure to the other's gaze' (Levine, 2008: 69). Lacan (1998a: 105) clearly affirms that, from the standpoint of vision, the gaze and the object *a* are the same: '[t]*he objet* a *in the field of the visible is the gaze'* [original emphasis]. Within the scopic field, the gaze is, on the one hand, a manifestation of the drive (Lacan, 1998a: 73), inasmuch as it is an 'oggetto pulsionale' (Recalcati, 2012a: 607), and, on the other, 'the object on which the phantasy from which the subject is suspended in an essential vacillation depends' (Lacan, 1998a:

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[61] Hernández-Navarro, developing some of Recalcati's remarks concerning the clinical field of anorexia and bulimia, establishes two trends in contemporary art, which he calls *scopic anorexia* and *scopic bulimia*. These tendencies revolve around the notion of the Real in relation to the visual dimension of art. The first trend consists in 'una strategia di sparizione che mira a occultare l'oggetto. Non vedere nulla. Non voler più vedere alcunché. In altri termini: mostrare "il niente da vedere"' (2004: 143). This leads to the dematerialisation of the object of art (i.e. Morris, Oldenburg, Haacke). The second trend entails 'l'arte del frammento, dell'osceno, dell'eccessivo e dell'estremo, un'arte che violenta, che fa "voltare la testa dall'altra parte"' (2004: 144). According to Hernández-Navarro, the main aim of contemporary art is indeed to capture the gaze of the spectators in order to shock them.

83). As Lacan contends: 'the gaze, *qua objet a*, may come to symbolize this central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration, and in so far as it is an *objet a* reduced, of its nature, to a punctiform, evanescent function, it leaves the subject in ignorance as to what there is beyond the appearance' (Lacan, 1998a: 77). Bluntly put, this means that the gaze *qua* object *a* is thus the leftover remaining from the action of the Symbolic over the Real *qua* Thing. For Lacan, '[t]he objet *a* is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ'. It is, thus, 'a symbol of the lack' (Lacan, 1998a: 103). Indeed, Recalcati points out that '[n]el Seminario XI il godimento appare localizzato, circoscritto strutturalmente attraverso l'operatività della castrazione simbolica che lo distribuisce, frammentandolo, sui bordi degli orifizi del corpo pulsionale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 52).

4.3 Anamorphosis, *Tyche*, and the (Im)possible Representation of the (Real of the) Subject

Recalcati considers Lacan's account on anamorphosis in Seminar XI as the epitome of his conception of art as an encounter with the Real, a Real that appears as an uncanny object that disrupts the representation of the picture and subverts the rigid dichotomy between a viewing subject and a viewed object (see Section 5 of Chapter 1).

As Pagliardini points out, '[l]e deformazioni anamorfiche sono appunto quei fenomeni di disturbo dell'ottica geometrale' (Pagliardini, 2016: 252). For this reason, Lacan takes anamorphosis into account insofar as it 'complements what geometrical researches into perspective allow to escape from vision' (Lacan, 1998a: 87). Anamorphosis shows that the picture is indeed much more than a window that the subject looks at. For Lacan, anamorphosis illustrates that the place of the subject is not simply that of geometric optics. In fact, the anamorphosis in the Holbein's painting 'The Ambassadors' 'dramatizes a visual antagonism or nonreciprocity [...] a radical nonequivalence between two points of view' (Thurston, 2003: 41), namely that of the eye, that is the viewing subject, and that of the gaze. What Holbein makes visible in his painting is the 'triumph of the gaze over the eye' (Lacan, 1998a: 103), that is to say, 'the subject as

annihilated' (Lacan, 1998a: 88). According to Lacan: '[i]n the scopic field, everything is articulated between two terms that act in an antinomic way—on the side of things, there is the gaze, that is to say, things look at me, and yet I see them' (1998a: 109). Therefore, as Lacan (1998a: 106) remarks, 'in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture', 'I am *photographed*'.

As Recalcati claims, 'per l'estetica anamorfica è l'opera stessa che fa sorgere il reale come eccedenza scopica custodita nell'estimità dell'opera stessa' (Recalcati, 2012a: 613). From Recalcati's perspective, the Real is in this case the 'eccedenza rispetto al campo narcisistico dello speculare' (Recalcati, 2012a: 613). In Holbein's painting 'The Ambassadors', it is the anamorphosis that is not reducible to the linear perspective or to the geometrical optics. The anamorphic stain in the picture operates a 'rovesciamento del rapporto soggetto-oggetto: noi soggetti guardanti finiamo con l'essere sub-jecti guardati dalla macchia che fa emergere il reale della nostra esistenza' (Barcella, 2012: 39). The anamorphic skull becomes visible in Holbein's painting only if the viewer looks at the painting from one side. At that moment, the viewer realises that it is looking at him. This is what Recalcati (2007a, 2012a) refers to as the '*tychic* power' of art and because of it, the anamorphic aesthetics is also an 'aesthetics of the *tyche*' (Resmini, 2013: 283). For Recalcati (2012a: 603), 'il motivo centrale dell'estetica anamorfica è infatti quello dell'*opera d'arte come incontro* – attraverso l'organizzazione significante dell'immagine – con il reale irriducibile a ogni principio di organizzazione'. From this aesthetic perspective, 'l'opera d'arte deve, per essere tale, avere la capacità di produrre "incontro col reale"' (Recalcati, 2012a: 605), 'rendere possibile l'incontro col reale' (Recalcati, 2012a: 603).

The anamorphic skull is not an object of reality or a symbol but rather 'l'apparizione imminente del reale della morte che rompe la familiarità della rappresentazione' (Barcella, 2012: 39). As Recalcati (2012a: 616) notes, '[i]n questa lettura del fenomeno anamorfico, realismo e simbolismo sono prospettive che Lacan intende egualmente evitare'. Anamorphosis openly challenges realistic/mimetic art, showing how art can never be 'realistic'. As Lacan (1998a: 92) contends, '[a]namorphosis shows us that it is not a question of painting a realistic reproduction of the things of space'. Recalcati emphasises this Lacanian

stance, according to which what is at stake in art, far from its being a realistic or mimetic representation of the world, is its account of the non-representable, that which cannot be represented or symbolised. From this perspective, '[l]'immagine non è pura rappresentazione della realtà, bensì emergenza di un reale, di un nocciolo duro irriducibile che fa buco nel simbolico' (Barcella, 2012: 159). As repeatedly stated by Lacan in both Seminar VII and Seminar XI, a close representation of reality is not the ultimate aim of art. Even in those mimetic works of art which offer such a realistic portrayal of the object, '[t]he picture does not compete with the appearance' (Lacan, 1998a: 112). To put it bluntly, art 'is not a question of imitation' (Lacan, 1992: 297). As Lacan (1992: 141) states,

> works of art imitate the objects they represent, but their end is certainly not to represent them. In offering the imitation of an object, they make something different out of that object. Thus they only pretend to imitate.

According to Recalcati, art involves the 'rappresentazione dell'impossibile da rappresentare' (Recalcati, 2012a: 611). What is this impossible? From the standpoint of Freudian psychoanalysis, that which is hidden and not representable is the unconscious. Freud was the first to argue that the unconscious is eccentric and cannot be reduced to the order of representation. As Recalcati (2001: 114) writes:

> L'inconscio freudiano è l'irrappresentabile poiché non esiste un rappresentante adeguato dell'inconscio, nel senso che la pulsione non è dello stesso registro della rappresentazione. Esiste, insomma, una sfasatura tra il reale dell'inconscio e l'azione simbolico-immaginaria della rappresentazione.

From the standpoint of Lacanian psychoanalysis, that which can never be completely represented or grasped is the Real, the unsymbolisable and uninterpretable kernel of the unconscious.

In the aesthetics of the void, the unrepresentable was the Thing (Recalcati, 2012a: 603), while in anamorphic aesthetics the unrepresentable is that which constitutes 'il reale dell'oggetto piccolo (a)' (Recalcati, 2012a: 612). According to the aesthetics of the void, what is at stake is the Real *qua* Thing in its non-representable status: 'come godimento pulsionale escluso dal mondo della rappresentazione - *das Ding* in quanto "realtà fuori significato"' (Recalcati, 2012a:

614). In anamorphic aesthetics, it is the Real *qua* object *a*, as 'eccedenza scopica' (Recalcati, 2012a: 613), that is concerned. In terms of the theory of vision, 'la Cosa è l'inaccessibile x intorno alla quale gravita la visione [...] [l]o sguardo, invece, s'identifica con l'*oggetto a*' (Hernández-Navarro, 2004: 135). Hence, Recalcati's anamorphic aesthetics attempts to address 'il problema della raffigurabilità del reale del soggetto' (Recalcati, 2007a: 56). The Real, understood as Thing and as object *a*, acts as a cause for the subject. Recalcati (1996: 19) posits that 'il reale di Lacan è sempre il reale del soggetto'. The aesthetics of the Real is thus an attempt to represent what is not representable, or, as Recalcati puts it, 'dare un volto a questo "qualcosa che resiste"' (Recalcati, 2007: 39), that which intrinsically belongs to the subject. Indeed, the subject revolves around this Real, which 'is condemned to circle without ever being able to hit it' (Fink, 1997: 28). In Lacanian theory, the Real clearly constitutes 'a center of gravity' (Fink, 1997: 28) for the subject. According to Fink (1997: 92):

> The challenge Lacanian psychoanalysis accepts is that of inventing ways in which to hit the real, upset the repetition it engenders, dialectize the isolated Thing, and shake up the fundamental fantasy in which the subject constitutes him or herself in relation to the cause.

Since the Lacanian subject is never fully represented by one signifier alone, or, in Recalcati's words, given its 'statuto extrasignificante' (Recalcati, 2007a: 57), it is actually the subject in itself 'che sfugge - o che resiste - a ogni possibile rappresentazione' (Recalcati, 2007a: 57). 'Impossibile a raffigurarsi' inasmuch as it is the 'eccedenza esclusa dalla presa del significante' (Recalcati, 2007a: 57), 'il soggetto è il luogo della raffigurazione che però non può mai raffigurare se stesso' (Recalcati, 2007a: 57).

5. The Aesthetics of the *Sinthome*

5.1 The Real *qua Sinthome*

In the first aesthetics of the Real, the kernel of the unrepresentable Real is identified by the void/the Thing and, from that perspective, the aim of art is to organise it by means of the registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. In the second aesthetics, the Real is the leftover, anamorphically present within the picture, that the viewer encounters and experiences. In the third aesthetics of the Real, the latter 'si manifesta […] nel suo essere sinthomo del soggetto' (Recalcati, 2012a: 620). Here, Recalcati is claiming that this third aesthetics of the Real is fundamentally 'un'estetica della singolarità' (Recalcati, 2007a: 62). It is the place of the sinthome, the singular, irreproducible way in which a subject deals with its own enjoyment and in which the three registers are interconnected. According to Bonazzi and Tonazzo (2015: 165), the *sinthome* relates to the 'modo singolare di far vivere un godimento in eccesso rendendolo compatibile con la vita stessa'. As discussed in Chapter 1, aesthetic theories drawn from Lacan's teaching and related to the order of the Real mainly centre around the concepts of the Thing and the object *a* (Regnault, 1997; Hernández-Navarro 2004, 2006). However, Recalcati's attempt to outline an organic and systematic Lacanian aesthetics of the Real also involves the notion of the *sinthome.* Thus, this could arguably be considered as one of Recalcati's original contributions to the field of Lacanian aesthetics.

The notion of the *sinthome* in Lacan's thought contrasts to the Freudian symptom since the former is ultimately unanalysable whilst the latter can be analysed as a compromise formation. From the 1950s to the 1970s, Lacan moves from understanding the symptom in Freudian terms, as a message that can be interpreted, which can also be conceived of through the Lacanian categories of the Imaginary and Symbolic, to a notion of a symptom intrinsically implicated with the realm of the Real.[62] As Thurston claims, Lacan arrives at the notion of

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[62]   According to Dean (2002: 28), within the theoretical framework of the *sinthome,* 'the symptom is no longer the result of a metaphorical substitution but rather functions as a sign of the unsubstitutable real'.

the *sinthome* through a movement 'from conceiving of the symptom as a message which can be deciphered by reference to the unconscious "structured like a language", to seeing it as the trace of the particular modality of the subject's *jouissance*' (Thurston, 1996: 191), based on the conception of a Real-like unconscious. According to Žižek (2006: 78), 'sinthoms are a kind of atom of enjoyment, units of signs permeated with enjoyment'.

In the mid-1970s, in Seminar XXIII, entitled *Le Sinthome*, Lacan systematically enucleates the conception of the *sinthome* as something that resists psychoanalytic interpretations, rather than fomenting them. Lacan arrives at the definition of the *sinthome* after decades of clinical practice, during which he noticed the deep connection between the symptom and the structure of subjectivity on the one hand, and patients' tendency to refuse to abandon their symptoms on the other. Lacan contends that the end of psychoanalytic treatment should not entail the removal of the *sinthome* of the subject, which could risk subjective collapse. Rather, it should involve a different combination of desire and enjoyment, a new way for the subject to organise their *jouissance*. This is not only because the *sinthome* is 'what "allows one to live" by providing a unique organisation of *jouissance*' (Evans, 1996: 191), but also because one could argue that the *sinthome* is that which the subject is based on. For this reason, the *sinthome* is also conceived of as the fourth ring of the RSI knot:[63] it prevents the other three from untying, keeping them together in an indissoluble unity that underpins subjectivity. It enables the subject to exist since the subject takes place within the interlocking of the three realms. Thus, if the symptoms should disappear after psychoanalytic treatment, the *sinthome* should remain, albeit having been modified during the psychoanalytic process in a way that enables the subject to experience enjoyment in a non-pathological way. As Thurston puts it, the *sinthome* is a 'kernel of enjoyment immune to the efficacy of the symbolic' (Evans, 1996: 191). Due to the Real of enjoyment, it follows that the *sinthome* resists psychoanalytic interpretation and thus impedes any hermeneutic

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[63]   The RSI knot consists of three rings linked together in such a way that it is not possible to untie one of them without unravelling the other two. Through this image, also referred to as the Borromean knot, Lacan emphasises the radical interdependence and interconnection of the three realms. In the late phase of his teaching, he added the *sinthome* to the RSI knot as a fourth ring. The *sinthome* should not be considered as another order, but rather as the pivotal element that holds the other three registers together.

enterprise whose aim is to recover meaning.

In Seminar XXIII, Lacan refers to James Joyce to explain how the *sinthome* is the foundation of subjectivity. This seminar is more about the use Lacan makes of Joyce's writing than about Joyce himself. Indeed, Lacan is not interested in applying psychoanalysis to Joyce's works or life; rather, he uses his works to develop his psychoanalytic theory. According to Lacan, Joyce's writing is a compensation for the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father that enables him not to fall into a psychosis. For Lacan, Joyce embodies that subject, the artist that was able to embody a singular way to manage his *jouissance* by means of his writing. Joyce's writing constitutes a form of prosthesis that enables him to achieve self-coherence. As Thurston (1996: 192) puts it: 'Joyce managed to avoid psychosis by deploying his art as *suppléance,* as a supplementary cord in the subjective knot'. As Azari claims, when Joyce 'decomposes the paradigmatic and syntagmatic networking of language, he is articulating a new language of his own', which allows him to 'have access to his personal *jouissance*' (Azari, 2008: 154). Such behaviour has been noticed in psychotics 'who produce works of art or at least signifying structures that protect them against the devastating effects of their madness by knotting the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, with the help of a fourth consistency, the *sinthome*, that can be a work of art' (Kaltenbeck, 2003: 117). However, the notion of the *sinthome* is not exclusively referred to with regards to psychosis, and there is a similarity between the *sinthome* and sublimation. Although 'sublimation touches the Real', tackling it, whilst 'the *sinthome* partakes of the Real' (Adams, 2003: xii), since it includes all three Lacanian orders, including the Real, the *sinthome* and sublimation are two similar possibilities for dealing with 'l'eccesso del reale irriducibile al significante' (Recalcati, 2012a: 620). The *sinthome* might thus be considered to be 'as creative, and as redemptive as psychoanalytic therapy' (Azari, 2008: 156).

5.2 Is Art a Symptom or a *Sinthome*?

In articulating his aesthetics, Recalcati (1996: 169-170) asks whether:

> La nozione psicoanalitica di sintomo [...] in Lacan autorizza la possibilità di

un'ermeneutica? Autorizza, in altri termini, la possibilità di una lettura sintomale che implica la manifestazione di un voler-dire – di un secondo testo – nelle assenze, nei vuoti del primo testo? Insomma la nozione di sintomo, così come la pone l'esperienza freudiana riattualizzata da Lacan, rientra o no in una concettualità di ordine ermeneutico?

The answer Recalcati provides is negative. The Real as *sinthome*, which resist symbolisation and interpretation, contrasts hermeneutic interpretations. According to Recalcati, the Lacanian notion of the *sinthome* paves the way for a psychoanalytic aesthetics that understands art as more than merely a symptom and thus represents a key notion in creating a psychoanalytic aesthetics that goes beyond mere hermeneutics. Thurston (1997: 38) agrees with this persective and remarks that by means of the notion of the sinthome, 'Lacan was able to sidestep all of the "psychobiographical" issues which had traditionally gone along with "applications" of psychoanalysis to art'.

Indeed, the deadlock of the psychoanalytic approach to aesthetics, as Dean remarks (2002), lies in its symptomatic reading of every cultural product. Moreover, Adams (2003) questions the conception of art as a symptom, as in the classical Freudian perspective. The comparison between an aesthetic artefact and a compromise formation, as a symptom, might be misleading and certainly involves some risk. As Bottiroli puts it: 'è sbagliato accentuare la somiglianza tra letteratura [as well as art in general], da un lato, sintomo e sogno dall'altro' (2006: 254). Unlike symptoms and dreams, art is not a compromise formation, because 'artistic works are not products of the unconscious' (Soler, 1991: 214). The traditional relationship between psychoanalysis and aesthetics has been largely dominated by the attempt of the former to subordinate the latter. This has led to two main approaches to aesthetic artefacts: either to diagnose the author's psychology, or to decipher the artwork itself. As Thurston (2004) argues, the Lacanian study of Joyce, and thus his remarks on the *sinthome*, can liberate art from a subordinate position and indicate a third way. I contend that this third way is closely connected, from Recalcati's perspective, with the notion of the subject and subjectivity in Lacanian theory.

Similarly to the *sinthome*, a work of art does not imply only an unambiguous meaning that leads to a singular interpretation. Bottiroli agrees with Recalcati's perspective and states that: '[l]'interpretazione è prima di tutto

articolazione' (Bottiroli, 2006: 361), insofar as "[i]l buon interprete dell'opera d'arte non "solleva" e non tenta di separare: egli osserva l'opera, tenta di descrivere il suo modo d'essere' (Bottiroli, 2002: 117). Recalcati contends that the idea of the aesthetic artefact as a mere symbol, awaiting decryption/interpretation, is simply a misconception. Recalcati emphasises this issue, considering psychoanalytic aesthetics not as a hermeneutic practice for interpreting art, but rather as a theory able to bear witness to the value of art in its radical extraneousness to any interpretation.

5.3 The Aesthetics of the *Sinthome* and Subjectivity

According to Recalcati, 'la nozione classica di psicoanalisi applicata all'arte dovrebbe lasciare il posto all'idea lacaniana di una *psicoanalisi implicata all'arte*' (2007a: XII). Thus, there is a shift from psychoanalysis as *applied* to art, to psychoanalysis as *implied* by art. Reversing the classically subordinate role that art plays in relation to psychoanalysis, Recalcati claims that 'sono gli artisti che insegnano alla psicoanalisi qualcosa che concerne il loro oggetto più proprio' (2007a: XII) and not the other way around.

From Freud onwards, psychoanalytic aesthetics has often been accused, both by artists and scholars, of abusing its power. Traditionally, applied psychoanalysis has often been seen as an authoritarian or normative hermeneutic method. As Adams contends, this attitude has frequently been concealed by a 'faux-modest attitude toward art, expressed in the formula, "Art has much to teach psychoanalysis; psychoanalysis has very little to say to art"' (Adams, 2003: xiii). According to Bottiroli (2002: 187), the deadlock between psychoanalysis and art is due to the fact that:

> La psicoanalisi [...] tende a stabilire con i linguaggi-oggetto artistici un legame ambivalente. Per un verso, essa si colloca su un gradino superiore, e da lì, da questa distanza, elabora le proprie interpretazioni. Per un altro verso, la psicoanalisi non riesce a librarsi verso l'alto, non riesce cioè a raggiungere un metalivello: a imporsi sono invece le affinità con l'oggetto, dunque le somiglianze (orizzontali) con il linguaggio letterario o con quello cinematografico.

As Adams (2003: XIII) cleverly argues,

> [p]erhaps it would be truer to say, "Art has much to teach psychoanalysis about art" and "Psychoanalysis has much to teach art about psychoanalysis". The question is not who teaches whom but their mutual capacity to stay together long enough for something to happen.

Traditionally, as discussed in Section 2 of Chapter 1, the aesthetics originating in Freudian theory is inclined to treat artwork as a means of diagnosing the artist who produced it. This is the core of the pathographic approach to art, which 'centres on the experience of the individual artist, and, like a detective, reconstructs his subject's past, discovering possible complexes, repressions, and neuroses' (Glover, 2009: 4). In effect, Freud was more interested in the biographical aspect of the artist than in the work of art itself.

On the contrary, the aesthetics derived from Lacan's teaching, as understood by critics who have usually emphasised his so-called structuralist period, focuses primarily on the artwork itself, to the near-total exclusion of any references to the artist's life. This autonomy-of-the-text model emphasises the independence of the artwork from the artist's biography and sees art as a textual surface to be interpreted. This leads to the idea, which is common and widespread nowadays, that an artwork can be 'read', interpreted, and thus deciphered. Both the pathographic approach and the deciphering approach are simplifications of Freudian and Lacanian thought. Freud's and Lacan's thoughts on art cannot be reduced to the tendencies developed by their followers. However, these two opposing trends of psychoanalytic aesthetics, one directed toward the psychobiography of the artist and the other toward the decoding of the text, represent the two main directions of the relationship between psychoanalysis and aesthetics. Now, to better understand Recalcati's contribution to the Lacanian aesthetics of the Real, it is important to discuss the possibility of a psychoanalytic aesthetics that escapes this deadlock and to avoid such normative approaches to aesthetic artefacts.

Recalcati's aesthetics of the *sinthome* constitutes an attempt to bind psychoanalysis and aesthetics through the Lacanian notion of subjectivity. Indeed, Recalcati aims to rethink the relationship between the artist's biography, the artwork, and psychoanalytic theory. While the artist's biography is included within the framework of psychoanalytic aesthetic analysis, the artwork in its facticity is not overlooked. The case of Joyce, as articulated by Lacan, could

represent a paradigm for Recalcati's psychoanalytic aesthetic, since, as Kaltenbeck states, 'the biography of the Irish poet and his work were inseparable. For Lacan, Joyce's writing functioned as his symptom' (Kaltenbeck, 2003: 16). After all, psychoanalysis is less a theory of psychic functioning than a theory of the subject. Recalcati asks, 'che cos'è il soggetto al di là dell'inganno seduttivo dell'io ideale?' (Recalcati, 2007a: 117). This could be the opening question for developing a psychoanalytic approach to aesthetics that revolves around the notion of subjectivity. Indeed, Recalcati's interest is rooted in understanding how a subject becomes such, and he develops his aesthetics from this standpoint.

For Recalcati, subjectivity is not only the principal matter at stake in his clinical work, but is also one of the main issues in his theoretical work. Recalcati (2012a: 616) also terms this third aesthetics of the Real the 'estetica della singolarità'. From his perspective, 'Jacques Lacan è stato il più grande pensatore del soggetto di tutto il Novecento' (Recalcati, 2012a: XV). It is for this reason that Lacan cannot be fully integrated into the structuralist movement. As Chiesa puts it: 'Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity must be reconsidered as an innovative point of reference - one that was never satisfied with any structuralist or poststructuralist talk of a "death of the subject"' (Chiesa, 2007: 6). According to Recalcati, the subject is the main ethical issue at stake in psychoanalysis, although it is a problematic one. Indeed, the notion of subjectivity, as developed by psychoanalysis, entails a dimension that goes beyond the single individual, a subjectivity that is inconceivable without the Other. For instance, in Freudian psychoanalysis, the influence of the past is critical. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, this is represented by the Other. According to Lacan, the unconscious *is* 'the discourse of the Other' (Lacan, 1998a). As Recalcati remarks, '[c]on Lacan l'essenza del soggetto non può essere disgiunta da ciò che è già avvenuto nell'Altro, perché il soggetto è come tale strutturalmente sottoposto alle sue determinazioni, il suo essere è marcato, intaccato dalle impronte dell'Altro' (Recalcati, 2007a: 115).

Nonetheless, in psychoanalysis, the subject is not necessarily a predetermined or unchangeable entity and subjectivity is never the product of an immutable and deterministic process. The subject is deterministically shaped neither by the past nor by the Other, since, according to Lacan, human beings

always have the ability to subjectivise, and thus modify, what they have received from their past or their Other. Even if the subject is *always* formed by and through its past/Other, it is *not entirely* fashioned by it. As Recalcati puts it: 'il soggetto, che è il prodotto di una serie stratificata di trace mnestiche, di impronte, di marche, di lettere e di iscrizioni, non è d'altra parte mai determinato integralmente da ciò che lo costituisce: è sempre la possibilità di riprendere in modo singolare tutte le determinazioni che lo hanno fatto essere' (Recalcati, 2012: 351). Thus, Lacan affirms that 'the status of the unconscious is ethical' (Lacan, 1998: 34). According to Recalcati, subjectivity involves the ethical category of responsibility: '[i]l soggetto è sempre responsabile, nel senso che tutti gli eventi che lo investono ricevono il loro senso solo attraverso la mediazione soggettiva che retroattivamente li significa' (Recalcati, 2002: 286).

6. Recalcati's Case Studies: Morandi and Burri

6.1 The Aesthetics of the Real and the Pathographic Approach

Following Lacan's teaching, Recalcati's psychoanalytic aesthetics of the Real disputes those pathographic, hermeneutic, and symbolic readings of artworks based on either assumptions about the artist's inner world or on the formal features of the artwork. In his case studies, Recalcati is, for the most part, critical of the pathographic-deciphering approach to art. In adopting the pathographic model, psychoanalysts are inclined to analyse an artwork exclusively for the purpose of unearthing the artist's psychology so that the artwork is considered merely as a product of an artist's complexes, or an instrument with which to map the latter's psychology. Recalcati argues that traditionally applied psychoanalysis adopts a decrypting or deciphering approach to art, according to which artworks are either a thematic apperception test of the author's psychology or puzzles to be solved. In this respect, psychoanalysis is seen as nothing more than an enigma-solver. Recalcati discusses the artworks of Morandi and Burri to exemplify the limitations of these approaches and to contend that the kernel of the Real contained by every artwork consists in the resistance to interpretation and symbolisation.

Indeed, more explicitly and straightforwardly than any other psychoanalytic theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis firmly rejects the tendency to decode or unmask the supposed hidden meaning of every 'text', be it the psychoanalytic text of a patient in the consulting room or the artistic text of a work of art. Recalcati's Lacanian aesthetics of the Real works towards a psychoanalytic aesthetics that, while not disregarding the artist's biography, does not adopt a reductive pathographic approach. As Recalcati (2007a: XII) underlines:

> Allo psicoanalista non deve tanto interessare la relazione causale tra la biografia dell'artista e il contenuto della sua opera, quanto come una pratica simbolica, com'è quella dell'arte e quella della psicoanalisi stessa, possa *raggiungere a isolare il reale* [emphasis added].

I will now consider the contrast between Recalcati's approach and the analysis of

Morandi's paintings offered by Miller, an American psychoanalyst, as well as the psychoanalytic analysis of Burri's works by art historians.

In his analysis, Miller (2011: 109) adopts a pathographic-oriented approach, as is clearly stated from the outset:

> This study of Giorgio Morandi, the great twentieth-century Italian painter, departs from the model of Freud's essay on Leonardo, in which he creates a psychodynamic hypothesis by linking the art with facts and conjecture about the artist's life.

The aim and inspiration behind Miller's study are explicit: he seeks to link Morandi's artworks with events in his life based on Freud's essay on Leonardo, and refers directly to the field of psychobiography (Miller, 2011: 113). The lack of data and information on Morandi, due to his 'monastic life' (Abramovicz, 2005: 22), does not prevent Miller from utilising the paintings as a thematic apperception test of their creator. He writes: 'our knowledge of [Morandi] is so meagre that we have little basis for decoding his intent, conscious or unconscious. However, my sense of his work [...] is that *it directly reflects his inner life*' [emphasis added] (2011: 114). Miller (2011: 117) strongly believes that 'the artist externalizes his inner life onto a canvas, which contains it and reflects it back'. For this reason, Miller considers some fundamental episodes in Morandi's personal life, including his strong desire to become an artist as an adolescent, of which his father disapproved, his close relationship with his mother, who supported him in his artistic career, and the sudden death of his father. Miller provides a number of speculations, conjectures, and Oedipal explanations based on this information.

Arguably, Miller conceives of Morandi's work as a Rorschach test, to paraphrase Adorno.[64] According to Miller, the ordinary objects of Morandi's work, such as bottles, vases, cans, and boxes 'enact an internal drama' (Miller, 2011: 120). Based on Miller's interpretations, Morandi 'assigned roles to his still life objects' (Miller, 2010: 11). Indeed, Miller (2010: 11) believes they represent the people in the artist's inner world and provides some examples:

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[64]   In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno (2002: 9) argues that 'artworks are not the *Thematic Apperception Test* of their makers', and adds that 'psychoanalysis considers artworks to be essentially unconscious projections of those who have produced them, and, [...] [it] forgets the category of form' (Adorno, 2002: 8).

The red metal pitcher, seen looming above the others, could be Morandi's father, the man who opposed his going to art school; and the pearly porcelain vase could be his mother, graceful and glowing, the woman who admired and protected his artistic ambition.

Along the same lines, Leader claims that: '[i]n Morandi's work, we see the same group of bottles and jugs moved around endlessly to create different configurations. Their composition even evokes comparison with a family portrait, as if the jugs and tableware had taken the place of family members arranged carefully to be photographed' (Leader, 2009: 29-30). It is clear, here, how the pathographic approach seems to reduce psychoanalysis to a mere speculation, based on insufficient data, which has nothing to add to the artistic value of an artwork.

Although Recalcati does not overlook Morandi's biography and refers directly to the recurrence of the same objects in Morandi's paintings, he does not infer a direct link between the content of the artwork and the artist's biography, as Miller does. Miller refers to Morandi's repetition of similar objects, such as bottles, vases, and pitchers, mainly to establish that 'Morandi's art illustrates that observing the same objects repeatedly, whether the pitcher and urn that he placed on a table, or the internal objects our patients tell us about, offers an advantage. When almost nothing changes, we more readily pick up subtle shifts' (Miller, 2011: 125). Here, the artwork is used as a mere tool to illustrate psychoanalytic concepts, or to enable the psychoanalyst to operate better: '[i]f our capacity to listen becomes numbed by repetition, picturing the works of Morandi may help restore our alertness to minute, but crucial, changes' (Miller, 2011: 125). On the contrary, Recalcati conceives of this 'insistenza, continuità, ritorno sintomatico' (Recalcati, 2007a: 137) of the same objects painted by Morandi as an essential characteristic of his style, that is to say, Recalcati considers it as Morandi's *sinthome*. According to Recalcati, '[s]e la clinica psicoanalitica individua nella ripetizione del Medesimo una manifestazione della pulsione di morte, la pratica dell'arte sembra operare una trasformazione positiva di questa tendenza, elevando la coazione a ripetere a una cifra stilistica, o meglio, alla cifra dello "stile" in quanto tale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 137). It could be argued that, in Recalcati's view, painting represents for Morandi what writing,

according to Lacan, represents for Joyce. As Recalcati states, 'il sintomo non è semplicemente ciò che ostacola la vita di un essere umano rendendola infelice, ma è anche - e soprattutto - un'invenzione soggettiva [...]. Da questo punto di vista ogni opera umana acquista i caratteri di un sintomo' (Recalcati, 2007a: 137).

If the ordinary, although enigmatic, objects depicted in Morandi's paintings stimulate the fantasy of psychoanalysts, Burri's works, which contain no figurative image at all, do so even more. Instead of preventing wild interpretations, the 'assenza di immagini figurative interpretabili' (Recalcati, 2007a: 73) seems to contribute to their proliferation. This is particularly true of his collection entitled *Combustioni*. Some critics, such as Emilio Villa (1996) and Flavio Caroli (1979), try to establish a parallel between Burri's canvases and injured skin: wounds, abrasions, burns, and stitches on the canvas are likened to the skin of an injured body. As noted by Emilio Villa in his monograph on Burri (1996), critics tend to interpret the work as a metaphor for bleeding pieces of flesh or a wounded body, which Burri, the artist/doctor, medicates. As Villa (1996: 21) writes, Burri's painting activity seems to rest on specific actions: 'ferire e medicare, mutilare e giustapporre, tagliare e ricucire, bruciare e spegnere'. Critics who favour this interpretation, such as Villa and Caroli, often cite Burri's previous career as a doctor or his experience in a prisoner-of-war camp in Texas, during the Second World War, as evidence of this. In contrast, Recalcati (2009b: 194) is very sceptical of the pathographic model. He claims: 'io adotto questo principio: non possiamo interpretare niente della vita delle persone senza conoscerle'. Recalcati adopts the Lacanian principles according to which 'psychoanalysis is applied, strictly speaking, only as a treatment and thus to a subject who speaks and hears' (Lacan, 2007a: 630). For instance, when discussing the interpretations of biographers who have sought to find a link between Burri's tobacco addiction, his sexual relationships, and his *Combustions* collection, Recalcati (2009b: 194) firmly states: 'Ma cosa ci dice tutto questo dell'opera di Burri? Niente'.

6.2 The Aesthetics of the Real and the Hermeneutic/Symbolic Approach

The Lacanian category of the Real provides 'una resistenza alla traduzione'

(Recalcati, 2009a: 140), that is to say, it is irreducible to any hermeneutic/symbolic interpretation. As Eyers puts it: 'the Real must be understood as the central, determining concept of Lacan's work, early and late, without which […] psychoanalysis would risk being reduced to a form of hermeneutics' (2012: 1). Indeed, according to Recalcati (2007a: 132), whilst 'la versione ermeneutica dell'interpretazione promuove una vaporizzazione del reale nel gioco infinito del senso, il procedimento analitico dell'interpretazione compie […] il percorso inverso: dal gioco del senso punta a isolare il reale come non senso'. Similarly, the hermeneutic/symbolic approach to art attempts to retrieve the enigmatic symbols in an artwork and to decode, interpret, and translate them, as previously seen with Morandi's bottles or Burri's combustions. According to Recalcati (2009a: 139),

> [c]ontro questa applicazione simbolista della psicoanalisi all'arte, la nostra prospettiva è piuttosto quella di interrogare, attraverso la psicoanalisi, il testo dell'arte senza però farsi attrarre dall'uso della dottrina psicoanalitica come macchina semantica capace di convertire la trama significante del testo d'arte in un significato e, meno che mai, dalla significazione del fantasma inconscio dell'artista.

Recalcati strongly disagrees with Franco Fornari and his psychoanalytic aesthetics, which is based on a hermeneutic and deciphering approach (Fornari, 1979). Even though his psychoanalytic contribution to understanding aspects of war and violence is noteworthy, and allowed for the consolidation of the Kleinian approach in Italy, Fornari's psychoanalytic theory of art ultimately aims at deciphering and decrypting the text of the artwork, be it literary or visual. Although Fornari (1979: 2) contends that his approach aims to 'ridurre il grado di arbitrarietà dell'interprete, attraverso la prescrizione di specifiche operazioni ermeneutiche', his approach ultimately reduces the artwork to a mere puzzle to be solved or a thematic apperception test to be interpreted. Indeed, Fornari's psychoanalysis of art is particularly informed by that dualistic vision, which is characteristic of a psychic model based on oppositional relations such as surface and depth, the external and internal, and the manifest and hidden. This is explicitly displayed in the terminology Fornari uses in his analysis of works of art, such as: 'mondo interno' and 'mondo esterno'; 'ordine diurno' and 'ordine notturno'; 'referente esterno' and 'referente interno'; and 'struttura superficiale'

and 'struttura profonda' (Fornari, 1979). In Recalcati's words, Fornari's hermeneutic psychoanalysis of art 'consisterebbe nel coniugare l'icona al coinema corrispondente' (Recalcati, 2009a: 139). On the contrary, as Recalcati (2009a: 139) explains,

> il presupposto che anima il nostro approccio all'opera d'arte consiste nel ritenere che l'inconscio non opera affatto alla stregua di una matrice di senso - o, come nel caso di Fornari, di significati elementari sui quali si appoggerebbero i significanti che costituiscono il testo d'arte - che sostiene segretamente il valore fantasmatico dell'opera.

In Recalcati's view, psychoanalysis is less a theory of interpretation than 'una teoria e una pratica dei *limiti dell'interpretazione*' [original emphasis] (Recalcati, 2012d: 195). In this respect, the Real is the Lacanian category which opposes that 'tendenza ermeneuticamente "delirante" della psicoanalisi' (Recalcati, 2012d: 193), which aims to translate every signified into a signifier.[65] In fact, Recalcati contends that: 'tutte le letture simboliste dell'opera d'arte […] finiscono per sdoppiare il testo d'arte in un testo di superficie e in un testo latente che conserverebbe il significato più profondo del testo di superficie' (Recalcati, 2009b: 154). This approach relies on an imaginary opposition between a visible surface, which is the manifest content of the artwork, and a depth, which is constituted by the inner meaning of the artwork. The latter, Recalcati (2009a: 140) contends, is, instead, a 'taglio, frattura, resistenza, impossibilità di riportare punto a punto la trama significante ai suoi significati cosiddetti primari'. Recalcati (2007a: 153) convincingly claims that '[l]'arte non è tanto una esperienza suscettibile di essere decifrata simbolicamente, quanto *l'esperienza di una resistenza in atto nei confronti di ogni decifrazione*, del reale come impossibile da tradurre e da decifrare' [original emphasis].

Moreover, this reductionist approach is based on an erroneous notion of the bi-univocal correspondence between signifiers and signified. This psychoanalytic perspective on art thus assumes that the artwork is a mere

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[65]   In this respect, it is interesting to note that a common reading of the well-known Freudian stance, '[w]here id was, there ego shall be' (Freud, 1933: 80), suggests that 'the unconscious seat of forbidden impulses and irrational fears' should be transformed into a 'rational, realistic, adaptive, thinking and feeling' (Ogden & Ogden, 2013: 23). Consequently, the notion of interpretation, as far as psychoanalysis and psychoanalytically-informed art criticism are concerned, could easily be misunderstood as a mere transformation of something that is encrypted, or under the surface, into something readable, on the surface.

symbol which corresponds to a precise and unambiguous meaning, like an algebraic equation. Along this line, a psychoanalytic aesthetics '[consiste nel] dar conto di questa sovrabbondanza della figurazione, non [nel] ridurre la figurazione al significato. Non [si dovrebbe] pretendere di tradurre l'opera in significati' (Recalcati, 2009b: 151). In my opinion, Miller's equation of Morandi's pitcher with the artist's father and the identification of Burri's burned canvases as the injured skin of a body are both clear examples of this reductive and normative method.

Recalcati (2009b: 150) supports the belief, shared by both Morandi and Burri, that an artwork 'non è traducibile in parole'. Morandi often asserted that 'le immagini [...] sono molto difficilmente esprimibili, o forse non sono esprimibili con le parole'. Likewise, Burri claimed that 'le parole non mi sono d'aiuto quando provo a parlare della mia pittura. Questa è una *irriducibile presenza* che rifiuta di essere tradotta in qualsiasi altra forma di espressione' (quoted in Recalcati, 2009b: 180). Accordingly, from Recalcati's aesthetic perspective, artworks are resistant to the interpretations and meanings ascribed to them. Despite the myriad of words that may be used to interpret or explain the given meaning of an artwork, the latter cannot be encapsulated by them; it remains beyond description. Therefore, a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach that revolves around the notion of the Real should bear witness to the value of art in its radical extraneousness, or, using Burri's words, to its 'irriducibile presenza'.

This irreducible presence of an artwork is what Recalcati calls the *immagine-segno*, which is 'l'immagine che si congiunge con il reale' (Recalcati, 2009b: 147). The *immagine-segno* is neither the surface nor the depth of an artwork, nor a symbol that refers to the artist's personal life. Rather, as Recalcati (2007a: 98) writes, it is an 'unità indissolubile che, sospendendo il principio della rappresentazione, non rinvia ad altro che a se stessa' and which is able to 'registrare e testimoniare qualcosa dell'onda sismica che l'impatto soggettivo con il reale produce' (Recalcati, 2007a: 137-138). Morandi and Burri's artistic output epitomises this idea of the artwork as an irreducible presence. To put it bluntly, Morandi's bottles and Burri's *Combustioni* do not represent, and cannot be reduced to, either mere expressions of the artists' personal lives, or to expedients to explain or illustrate psychoanalytic theories. According to Recalcati, they are

immagini-segno: they cannot be translated, decoded, or interpreted in one simple or exhaustive meaning. In this respect,

> [l]'immagine-segno non unifica, secondo uno schema biunivoco, un significante a un significato, non è assimilabile a una cerniera semantica che consente di risalire, tramite il codice di una lingua, dal significante a un significato determinato, ma si presenta come una sorta di un'unità indissolubile che non rinvia ad altro che a se stessa (Recalcati, 2007a: 98).

As such, Recalcati's aesthetics of the Real aims to 'sganciare l'estetica psicoanalitica dal primato culturale egemone del simbolismo' (Recalcati, 2007a: XI) and insists on the irreducible and untranslatable core of every artwork, which ultimately partakes of the order of the Real.

6.3 Locating the Real in Morandi's and Burri's Artwork

As discussed in Section 5 of Chapter 1, according to Lacan, art establishes a link with the Real, more than with reality. For Lacan, art only pretends to imitate reality, even in the case of mimetic/realistic art, [66] while it in fact always attempts to establish a relationship with the Real (Lacan, 1992: 141). Following Lacan's teaching, Recalcati claims that '[l']arte non riproduce mai la realtà' (2009b: 77), 'non può mai ridursi a mero rispecchiamento della realtà' (2007a: 127). Instead, he claims, it 'stabilisce un rapporto privilegiato con il reale' (2007a: 153). If this is the case, where is the Real exposed in Morandi's and Burri's artwork? Where, in their works, is it tackled or encountered? How can the Real be aesthetically framed or, in other words, conveyed through images or language? And how might we account for art's ability to go beyond the Symbolic whilst continuing to be a symbolic practice?

It is to challenge the common assumption that art merely reproduces reality that Recalcati refers to Morandi's work, which is renowned for its depiction of objects in their bare reality. Recalcati (2007a: 139) claims that '[l']apparizione della sagoma inconfondibile delle celebri bottiglie del pittore Bolognese non riproduce la bottiglia come oggetto comune. This is because

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[66]   According to Ronen (2002: 164), 'realistic art is the art which camouflages the Real and occludes it in the name of reality, yet simultaneously brings it to light most intensely'.

Morandi 'sa fare di un oggetto della quotidianità, le bottiglie, una sagoma pura della Cosa' (Recalcati, 2007a: 69). Following Lacan's definition of sublimation, Recalcati argues that '[l]e bottiglie di Morandi realizzano la stessa elevazione dell'oggetto alla dignità della Cosa' (Recalcati, 2007a: 51). In this respect, 'Morandi non si limita a dipingere le bottiglie, non opera una semplice mimesi dell'oggetto reale. L'oggetto, piuttosto, elevato alla dignità della Cosa, sembra preservare un mistero assoluto, irriducibile al livello immediato della rappresentazione naturalistica' (Recalcati, 2007a: 51). As discussed in regards to the *estetica del vuoto*, 'Morandi utilizza l'oggetto per bordare il vuoto della Cosa, ma proprio in questa bordatura finisce in realtà per evocarlo continuamente come sua matrice invisibile' (Recalcati, 2007a: 51). According to Recalcati, 'il vuoto che circonda le bottiglie morandiane non è, infatti, il vuoto incandescente di *das Ding*, il turbine del godimento, l'irrespirabile, ma un vuoto organizzato tonalmente, un vuoto che custodisce, come il silenzio dell'analista, il limite della rappresentazione' (Recalcati, 2007a: 51). Ultimately, '[l]a figurazione morandiana mantiene questo rapporto essenziale con il non figurabile' (Recalcati, 2007a: 51).

Recalcati also refers to Burri's so-called *arte informale*, which is characterised by its non-figurative content and by an abundant use of poor materials. In so doing, Recalcati (2007a: 95) contends that '[l']opera di Burri [...] non è sul lato dell'Ideale; nondimeno esiste una bellezza intrinseca ai suoi lavori che, pur utilizzando materiali poveri, sudici, privati di ogni valore ideale, sono in grado di elevare un oggetto alla dignità della Cosa'. Moreover, according to Recalcati's anamorphic aesthetics, Burri 'scardina la prospettiva geometrale su cui si regge la pittura rappresentativa, introducendo nel tessuto dell'opera uno spessore materico e una tensione che sembrano invertire la dimensione percettiva della fruizione ordinaria' (Recalcati, 2007a: 62). In this respect, Burri's works, 'mostrano così in atto un'eccentricità reale che abita l'essere dell'opera e che sgancia l'opera stessa da una spazialità immaginaria che si riduce alla bidimensionalità rappresentativa' (Recalcati, 2007a: 62).

Overall, for Recalcati, Morandi and Burri are the epitome of the kind of twentieth-century artistic practice in which the three Lacanian registers are intertwined, as in twentieth-century avant-garde trends such as Expressionism,

Cubism, Surrealism, Dadaism, Futurism, and Informalism (Recalcati, 2007a: 75). According to Recalcati (2007a: 75), 'seppur con soluzioni diverse, non giungono mai a slacciare il polo del reale dalle dimensioni dell'immaginario e del simbolico'. On the contrary, Recalcati contends that contemporary art is characterised by a disjunction of the three orders and resembles his analysis of hypermodern society in which the Real is no longer intertwined with the Imaginary and the Symbolic. According to Recalcati, the 'realismo psicotico' which characterised certain trends of contemporary art attempts to 'liberarsi dalle immagini, di sovvertire ogni criterio linguistico-formale dell'opera, di demolire l'idea stessa della figurazione nel nome di una esibizione ostentata del reale' (Recalcati, 2012a: 613).

In the next chapters, I will further elaborate on the shift from an art of the Symbolic to an art of the Real that, according to contemporary Italian Lacanianism, takes place in postmillennial society. In particular, in Chapter 3 I will address the new realist wave in early twenty-first-century Italy, accounting for its socio-cultural context and the theoretical stance adopted on it by Italian scholarship. I will refer to this broad cultural phenomenon as a 'return of the Real', arguing that it includes contemporary Italian artists, non-Lacanian and Lacanian Italian scholars. In Chapter 4, I will analyse three cinematic and television case studies which epitomise the 'return of the Real' in postmillennial Italy, in terms not only of aesthetic theory but also of artistic production.

CHAPTER III

The Return of the Real in Postmillennial Italy:
Realism, Reality, and the Real

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss, on the one hand, the new wave of realism that emerged in postmillennial Italy, as addressed by Italian non-Lacanian scholars, literary critics, and artists and, on the other, the contemporary Italian Lacanian account of this return of realist trends in the new millennium. I consider these to be two aspects of the same cultural phenomenon, which I call the 'return of the Real' in Italy. Indeed, both scholars in Italian Studies and contemporary Italian Lacanians attempt to understand and contextualise this emergence and diffusion of a realist aesthetics, which characterises all the arts in twenty-first-century Italy, from literature to visual art and cinema. Their approach and focus rest, however, on two different concepts: in order to understand post-2000 realism, scholars in Italian Studies rely on the notion of 'reality', whilst Italian Lacanians employ the category of the Real according to Lacan's teaching.

To begin with, I will address the increasing interest in realism in postmillennial Italian scholarship; this is currently a highly debated academic topic because of the recurrence of realist tendencies and the diffusion of realist aesthetics. In postmillennial Italy, Italian scholars have noticed that 'la realtà torn[a] a imporre la propria supremazia' (Mazzarella, 2011: 7). Recently, not only has an urgent need for a 'contatto immediato col reale' (Serkowska, 2011: XIV) arisen, but there has also been a widespread need to 'interrogare il reale senza stancarsi' (Serkowska, 2011: XV). In twenty-first-century Italy, artists aim to 'cogliere "lembi di realtà"' (Palumbo Mosca, 2009: 308), whilst scholars account for the increased prominence of a 'speciale *pathos* della realtà' (Serkowska, 2011: XXII). I contend that this debate in Italian scholarship relies on a notion of reality understood as objective, knowable, and reproducible, as if it were 'a material substrate which exists in itself, independently of any observer' (Evans, 1996: 163).

Subsequently, I will discuss what, amongst Lacanians, is currently referred to as the 'return of the Real' which affects postmillennial society at all levels, the arts included, and consists in the propagation of an untamed, uncontained *jouissance* promoted by the crisis of the Symbolic and the discourse of the capitalist. As far as Italy is concerned, this 'return of the Real' is acknowledged by contemporary Italian Lacanian scholars in relation to clinical work, society and, especially, aesthetics. Contrarily to the notion of reality, whose fabric in Lacan's terms consists of the Imaginary and Symbolic, the Real is irreducible to the former orders.

The overall aim of Chapter 3 is to argue not only that Lacan's theory provides a better understanding of the socio-cultural shift occurring in twenty-first-century Italy, but also, more specifically, that the notion of the Real is an enhanced and more convincing concept, compared to the category of reality, to understand and frame the post-2000 realist trends in Italy. I shall contend that contemporary Italian Lacanianism offers an invaluable perspective on the debate about these new realist trends in the arts as well as on the academic debate on realism in Italian Studies, precisely because it is part of the phenomenon that it studies. For instance, let us consider Crialese's controversial statement:

> La frase "ritorno alla realtà" mi lascia sempre un po' confuso. Sento dire che vi è un ritorno alla realtà da troppo tempo e non capisco di quale realtà si stia veramente parlando. Non credo si possa parlare del ritorno ad una realtà come quella del neorealismo, in cui non esistevano, o stavano appena per nascere, la televisione, i *reality show*, internet. Non si può tornare a quella realtà, semplicemente perché il contesto storico, sociale e politico, è oggi totalmente differente. La televisione fa un uso della realtà assolutamente perverso; nelle nostre case entrano immagini spacciate come reali, che di reale non hanno niente (Crialese in Donnarumma, Policastro, and Taviani, 2008: 62).

Here, the Italian director manifests his disappointment and perplexity concerning the expression '*ritorno alla realtà*' and acknowledges a radical shift from the realisms of the past, when television, television series, reality shows, and the Internet did not exist. Italian Lacanianism claims that a shift has occurred in contemporary society from a social obligation to reject individual enjoyment to a pervasive command to 'enjoy!' promoted by the discourse of the capitalist. According to Italian Lacanianism, this shift accounts for the radical socio-cultural mutations on which this new wave of realism is based and, at the same time,

offers a psychoanalytic explanation for the phenomenon of the return of realist tendencies in postmillennial Italy. Furthermore, I shall argue that Lacan's account of reality and the Real, especially as received by contemporary Italian Lacanianism, is fruitful to 'ripensare la categoria di realismo' (Antonello, 2012a: 173). The psychoanalytic perspective adopted by contemporary Italian Lacanianism challenges a naïve conception of reality, and consequently of realism, raising questions such as: What kind of bond do human beings have with reality? Does reality coincide with its representation? Does it coincide with mere factual events or objects? And, as Bellavita (2006: 214) questions, 'è possibile/concepibile rappresentare la realtà?'. Is it possible to represent reality if 'reality is never given in its totality' (Žižek, 1994: 57)? Ultimately, is reality, or rather the Lacanian Real, at the core of postmillennial new realism?

This juxtaposition between Italian Studies and Lacanian theory is fostered by some non-Lacanian scholars in Italian Studies who engage, albeit tentatively and indirectly, with Lacan's teaching, Italian Lacanians (i.e. Recalcati), and international Lacanian scholars (i.e. Foster, and Žižek). In addition to this, it is also motivated by contemporary Italian Lacanians' critical engagement with an Italian philosophical trend, the so-called 'new realism' recently advanced by Maurizio Ferraris (2011, 2012). Hence, the chapter will explore the connection between the return to reality as framed by Italian Studies and, through a specific focus on aesthetics, the return of the Real as addressed by Italian Lacanianism.

In order to frame these multifaceted realist trends, which involve artists, academics, and Italian Lacanian psychoanalysts and scholars, I propose using the expression 'return of the Real'. There are several reasons for this wording: first, the focus is on both reality and the Real. The tendency evident in Italian scholarship is that the more the arts become focused on a realist representation of reality, the more scholars strive to study and frame this rebirth of realism. Similarly, Lacan signals a return of the Real in contemporary society, which he ascribes to a crisis of the Symbolic and the emergence of the discourse of the capitalist (Contri, 1978; Lacan, 1990). Secondly, since the realist tradition has always been influential and has cyclically re-emerged in the Italian context, this turn to realism in postmillennial Italy should be regarded as a re-turn. It is thus not a completely original phenomenon but rather the most recent wave of

realism in Italy. Finally, following O'Leary and O'Rawe's suggestion (2011), I do not intend to use this expression as a value or a prescriptive notion but rather as a descriptive term. Far from being exhaustive or definitive, it allows me to address this heterogeneous phenomenon: rather than a clear-cut label it should be understood as an 'operational term', namely an expression that makes it possible to account not only for the widespread debate surrounding realism in Italian scholarship but also for the so-called return of the Real amongst Lacanian scholars, both nationally and internationally.

In doing so, I will inevitably face some issues. For example, the temporal proximity of such a recent and still ongoing phenomenon makes it rather difficult to understand and pigeonhole. Furthermore, the return of the Real is a multifaceted and extremely heterogeneous phenomenon which not only concerns a number of disciplines (i.e. film studies, literary studies, and philosophy) but also involves a variety of media (i.e. cinema, literature, television, and the Internet). Finally, the return of the Real concerns both critics and artists, creating a multi-levelled debate and rendering the discussion extremely complicated. Therefore, in this situation, Lacan's notion of the Real and its reception and use in contemporary Italian Lacanianism enable us to account for the shift in paradigm in postmillennial society and culture and, thus, in artistic currents.

In Section 2, I will focus on realism in the arts, briefly discussing the cyclic recurrence of realist waves in Italy and considering *verismo*, *realismo magico*, and *neorealismo*, the most significant and internationally-acclaimed Italian realist trends. I will then discuss the revival of realism currently taking place in different disciplines in postmillennial Italy, from literature and cinema to philosophy. In doing so, I will account for the noticeable increment in realist manifestations in several artistic disciplines in Italy in the new millennium and, precisely because of this phenomenon, the rekindled interest in realism that has been fostered in Italian scholarship.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of articles, essays, and books on the subject of this return of realism, to the point that, as Donnarumma (2014: 142) sums up: '[l]a questione del realismo è diventata, insomma, capitale: sia nella pratica della scrittura, sia nell'attenzione critica'. Italian scholars have

focused on the attempt to identify and understand this very heterogeneous – and hitherto undefined – phenomenon, arguably and loosely labelled by Italian scholarship as a 'ritorno alla realtà (Donnarumma, Policastro, and Taviani, 2008). While it might not be possible to address every nuance of this complex, multifaceted, and still ongoing scholarly and artistic tendency, I will try to capture the prominent role played by realist trends in postmillennial Italy and to provide a broad overview of the relevant debate within Italian Studies.

In so doing, I will consider those non-Lacanian scholars in Italian Studies, such as Donnarumma (2008a; 2008b; 2014) and Uva (2009), who discuss this new realism with little notion of Lacan's theory. I shall argue that their references to Lacan's teaching are often made in passing, sporadically acknowledged, and mediated through the work of Hal Foster and Slavoj Žižek. Broadly speaking, these Italian Studies scholars usually refer ambiguously and interchangeably to reality and to the Lacanian notion of the Real. On the contrary, allusions provided by writers, especially some of those interviewed in Donnarumma, Policastro, and Taviani (2008), such as Nove and Scurati, are more explicitly engaged with Lacan's thought.

To demonstrate the efficacy of the Lacanian notion of the Real for this debate, I will also address the engagement of contemporary Italian Lacanians with this new wave of realism. In particular, I will account for Recalcati's engagement with the philosophical trend developed by Ferraris, named 'new realism'. The Italian Lacanian perspective will further problematise the conception of reality that seems to be employed by Italian scholarship and which seems to rest on a mere factual conception of that category. Indeed, it seems that nowadays there are just two options, which are also reflected in the realist debate amongst Italian scholars: either reality is regarded as a socio-political and cultural construction, or there is a return to a positivistic/empirical account of reality. In this latter case, reality is considered mainly in its facticity and knowability, as occurs to a large extent in the debate on the 'ritorno alla realtà' and in 'philosophical new realism'. In the former case, on the other hand, reality is conceived of as a mere result of theoretical constructions. In this respect, as Recalcati points out, the Lacanian distinction between reality and the Real might prove enriching for escaping the strict dualism of the debate and for providing a

better understanding of the postmillennial wave of realism in Italy.

In Section 3, I will claim that non-Lacanian scholars in Italian Studies focus particularly on what could be called a de-realisation of reality (Uva, 2009; Ferraris, 2012), while Italian Lacanian scholars concentrate on what has been called a return of the Real (Recalcati, 2010a; Carmagnola and Bonazzi, 2011). In doing so, I will argue that the former consider postmodernity as an era dominated by a de-realised/de-realising reality, ruled by the power of the media and their ability to manipulate it. Indeed, as Donnarumma (2014: 96) puts it:

> Cosa signific[a] davvero avvicinarsi al realismo in un'epoca che proprio la cultura postmoderna ha insegnato essere dominata dalla finzionalizzazione e dalla opacità dei discorsi: che si è scoperta, cioè sottoposta a una costante angoscia di derealizzazione. Cosa vuol dire, insomma, recuperare la tradizione realistica dopo il postmoderno?

According to the interpretation of contemporary society provided by Italian Lacanians, through concepts such as the crisis of the symbolic and the discourse of the capitalist, in hypermodern times the Real comes to the fore not only in terms of traumatic events that disrupt everyday reality but also as an uncontrolled *jouissance*, of which Berlusconism is the epitome. According to contemporary Lacanianism, hypermodernity is indeed dominated by the imperative of enjoyment, which is no longer limited by the Symbolic and is boosted, on the contrary, by the discourse of the capitalist. Ultimately, I will contend that to understand the postmillennial shift in society and to address the new wave of realism, the Lacanian distinction between reality and the Real is crucial.

In Section 4, I will discuss what contemporary Lacanians refer to as a return of the Real in contemporary society, especially in regards to the field of aesthetics. From a Lacanian perspective, art is conceived of as an imaginary and symbolic device to deal with the Real and, at the same time, as a possibility for the viewer to be involved in an encounter, which is not deadly but is certainly disturbing or disruptive, with the Real itself. However, Lacanian scholars and psychoanalysts claim that there is an 'irruption of the Real' in contemporary art (Foster, 1996; Wajcman, 1998; Perniola, 2000; Žižek, 2000). For them, contemporary art is characterised by the breaking of the imaginary screen as well as by a disappearance of symbolic mediation, which both serve as protections

against the Real. I will claim that, according to contemporary Italian Lacanians, these transformations in contemporary art subtend the same transformations that hypermodern society is undergoing. Thus, aesthetics, as the philosophical discipline that deals with the arts, might also be the privileged field to reveal the issues a specific society must face. As Perniola (2015: 317) remarks, '[t]he enigmatic character of Italian society has appeared in all of its complexity more in contemporary aesthetic production than in moral, political, sociological or historical reflection'.

In Section 5, I will focus on contemporary Italian Lacanian aesthetics. Firstly, I will address the issue of how the Real, that which cannot be represented through images or described through words, can nonetheless emerge in an artwork, namely an imaginary-symbolic device. There are different ways in which the Real can be combined with the other registers and this produces a variety of aesthetic outcomes, ranging from mimetic art to body art. Subsequently, I will deal with the conception of the Real as the unconscious of the artwork since, according to contemporary Italian Lacanianism, the Real is the non-interpretable kernel at the core of every artwork. Finally, I will further develop the connection between the aesthetics conceived of by contemporary Italian Lacanianism and by the clinical and ethical field. I will contend that the aesthetics developed by the former can be conceived of as an ethical aesthetics due to its underlying ethical commitment to treat the traumatic and excessive dimension of the Real. Both in artistic practice and in the psychoanalytic clinical approach, contemporary Italian Lacanianism revolves around the issue of how to treat the Real *qua trauma* and *qua jouissance*. Indeed, in hypermodern society, 'questi due principi tendono a vacillare: tanto la funzione limitante del padre, quanto la nostra capacità di simbolizzazione. Siamo sempre meno capaci di trattare il godimento in eccesso' (Bonazzi and Tonazzo, 2015: 160). The crisis of the Symbolic and the domain of the discourse of the capitalist are the causes of hypermodern society. On the one hand, the collapse of the Symbolic fosters a return of the Real and, on the other, the discourse of the capitalist promotes the command to enjoy as the new imperative. As Recalcati (2007b: 117) remarks, 'quando [il simbolico] vacilla, il rischio è sempre quello della emergenza di un reale distruttivo e di uno scatenamento dell'immaginario nella sua confusività

narcisistica'.

2. The Return of the Real in Postmillennial Italy: Artistic Currents, Critical Reception, and Key Issues

2.1 From *verismo* to *neorealismo*: Waves of Realism in Italy

Arguably, the notion of realism 'raises one of the most problematic issues in the history of Western aesthetics' (Marcus, 2010: 246). Realism is indeed a slippery category since it is often referred to in an extremely varied range of contexts, fields, and trends to the extent that it can be affirmed that 'il termine *realismo* assume valenze storicamente e testualmente diverse' (Casadei, 2011: 5). To put it simply, in the arts realism aims at depicting a given reality in an unmediated manner, though a certain medium is nevertheless employed, be it literature, photography, or cinema and, inevitably, an ideological message is conveyed. Hence,

> realism can never be simply codeless in its claimed replication of reality […]. It is always presenting a particular theory of what will count as a picture of reality, and it is always attached, if only by counter-positioning, to rival forms of artistic representation that it is out to replace (Bowlby, 2007: XV).

Every typology of realism bears a strong correlation with the cultural and historical context in which it originates. Thus, as Serkowska (2011: XIV-XV) clarifies, '[t]radizionalmente il realismo è definito come modo di plasmare il materiale di un'opera conformemente alla maniera in cui viene intesa e definita la verità sul reale in una determinata epoca'. Given this correlation between the reality depicted and the message conveyed about that specific reality, it can be argued that ethics and aesthetics are already combined in the very origins of realism.[67] From its inception, realism involves a political aspect and a certain degree of commitment from artists. As Bowlby puts it: '[r]ealism was in the spirit of the democratizing movements of the nineteenth century, bringing into literary

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[67] The term 'realism' originated in France and the first attested use of the word *réalisme* dates back to 1826 (Bowlby, 2007). However, it soon became a widespread notion that was 'hotly debated both in practice and in theory, between painters, novelists, and critics of every kind' (Bowlby, 2007: XII). Due to its manifold nature, realism includes a variety of offshoots and reappeared numerous times, firstly with the movement of French naturalism. Exponents of the latter include the writers Émile Zola and Guy de Maupassant and the painter Gustave Courbet, who aimed at depicting reality without filters and bringing into the representational framework those realities previously excluded from it.

or painterly view common worlds of experience that had previously been aesthetically unseen, disregarded, or out of bounds' (Bowlby, 2007: XIII).

Historically, realism has always been significant in the Italian context: constant recurrences of realist trends regularly come to light in specific artistic currents and different socio-historical contexts. Arguably, since the unification of Italy, every generation has seen the emergence of a new take on realism, which differs from the previous ones due to a variety of factors, such as the specificity of the reality considered, the mode of representing it, and the medium employed. This Italian inclination for realist tendencies can be traced back at least to the latter part of the nineteenth century, when *verismo* was the leading movement in the arts. Subsequently, realism re-emerged in the twentieth century with *realismo magico* and, after World War II, with *neorealismo*. These realist trends appear in specific socio-historical contexts and under exceptional circumstances, such as post-unification Italy, Italy at the turn of the century, and Italy after World War II, which led to an intertwining of political commitment and artistic engagement. There are indeed 'momenti nella storia in cui la realtà è così viva e drammatica da imporsi al di sopra di qualsiasi considerazione' (Garrone, 2016: 13).

Although these are the main Italian realist trends, realism did not disappear in between their occurence. Not only are they the most codified and prominent but they are also, as such, the most influential: their impact remains alive in subsequent years and they do not simply die out in between cycles. In this section, my aim is not to provide an exhaustive scholarly account of all these cyclic returns of realism, which would in any case not be possible in the limited space available. Rather, in briefly mentioning the most important returns of realist tendencies, I shall underline the recurrent nature of realism in Italy and its main characteristics. This will allow me to emphasise the fact that the latest realist trend to emerge in postmillennial Italy is not an entirely original phenomenon. Equally, while it shares some aspects with previous realist waves, it nonetheless differs from them substantially.

Following the model of French naturalism, *verismo* aimed at portraying, in an objective and cross-disciplinary manner, the harsh reality of marginal and neglected Southern Italian communities or the life of exploited lower-class

individuals, such as fishermen, peasants, and miners (Halaand, 2012: 7). Since addressing social injustice and redeeming the underprivileged was pivotal for *verismo*, the issue of social and political commitment immediately comes to the fore. Despite this aim, *verismo* was not a uniform movement since its artists never joined together to form a school with a coherent manifesto. It was, however, an interdisciplinary trend, which involved not only literature but also visual art and music. In literature, some of the most renowned *veristi* writers are from South Italy, especially Sicily, such as Giovanni Verga, Luigi Capuana, and Federico De Roberto. They 'express the realities of a regional, archaic culture in a language appropriate to both characters and author which could be understood by a large and diversified reading public' (Dombroski, 2008: 463). However, *verismo* was not limited to Sicily, and '[i]n contrast to the central and southern narratives, the fiction produced in the north appears much less regional in tone, as it tends to focus on bourgeois or upper-class existence' (Dombroski, 2008: 470). This trend influenced other artistic fields such as music, with opera composers such as Pietro Mascagni, Ruggero Leoncavallo, and Giacomo Puccini, as well as visual art, with the so-called *macchiaioli* painters active in Tuscany, such as Telemaco Signorini and Giovanni Fattori.

In the first half of the twentieth century, realism again emerged in the form of another realist trend, called *realismo magico*. The relationship with reality is still at the core of this realist trend: magical or magic realism consists in a combination of ordinary elements with magical, supernatural, or marvellous features (Bowers, 2004). Similarly to the other Italian realist tendencies, this is not a unified and coded trend defined by a coherent manifesto. In fact, it is rather difficult to classify this heterogeneous phenomenon in terms of characteristics as well as geographical and time limits. Arguably, *realismo magico* in Italy developed from the 1920s/1930s up to the end of World War II although, as occurred with the other realist trends, it can be extended beyond these limits. There are some writers whose work predates this period (i.e. Deledda) and others whose work comes later (i.e. Buzzati and Landolfi). Some writers are labelled at the same time as representatives of *realismo magico* and of neorealism (i.e. Moravia and Calvino) and some artists, like the painter Giorgio De Chirico or the director Federico Fellini, are included in this trend. Like the other realist trends, *realismo*

magico is cross-disciplinary in nature. The literary current includes a variety of heterogeneous authors, who differ in terms of historical context, style, and content (i.e. Aldo Palazzeschi, Antonio Baldini, Nicola Lisi, and Enrico Morovich). Similarly, the pictorial trend developed by Antonio Donghi and Felice Casorati aimed at depicting reality, including its fantastic elements.

After World War II, another wave of realism, possibly the best-known, arose in Italy, namely the literary and cinematic realist trend called *neorealismo* and the pictorial current named *realismo pittorico*. *Neorealism* is not only the Italian realist trend *par excellence*, it is also a key reference for the Italian postmillennial realist wave (Donnarumma, Policastro, and Taviani, 2008; Donnarumma, 2014; Di Martino and Verdicchio, 2017). In this case, too, the socio-historical and cultural context constitutes the framework and impulse for the flourishing of realist tendencies. As Garrone points out: '[è] proprio il trauma della guerra a spingere tutta una generazione ad uscire dal "cerchio magico" e a confrontarsi, spesso in modo drammatico, con la realtà' (Garrone, 2016: 52). Similarly to *verismo* and *realismo magico*, the neorealist trend is difficult to define with a simple and uniform formula; it was interdisciplinary and not unified under a coherent school or programme, despite Zavattini's attempt through his manifesto in 1953. *Neorealism* should not be simply understood as a coded trend since 'more than a *movement*, neorealism was a *moment*' [original emphasis] (Halaand, 2012: 27). As Gatt-Rutter (2008: 535-536) claims:

> The term *neorealismo* was first coined in the 1940s to describe the objectivist and epic perspective of film-makers like Visconti and Rossellini, who had taken their cameras out of the studio and on to the streets and squares and fields of contemporary Italy and resorted largely to non-professional actors, ordinary Italians who more or less acted themselves. Certainly, much neo-realist narrative literature is cast in that filmic mode, but it also draws on earlier models of literary realism.

Like the previous realist trends, it has a strong component of socio-political commitment and engagement with history inasmuch as it 'is inconceivable if detached from the historical exigency and the unprecedented freedom to […] give voice to those whom fascism had displaced and excluded' (Halaand, 2012: 2). Neorealist writers such Ignazio Silone, Carlo Levi, Cesare Pavese, and Elio Vittorini, in Garrone's words, 'si propongono di narrare aspetti della realtà umana e sociale in netto antagonismo sia con la letteratura roboante, acclamata dal

regime, sia con la vena intimistica' (Garrone, 2016: 32). However, Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* has also been labelled as a neorealist book since it portrays '[r]eality in its most awful guise' (Gatt-Rutter, 2008: 547). This, amongst other factors, proves that even in the case of neorealism it is difficult to provide a simple and straightforward definition. The main exponents of neorealism in cinema are Rossellini, Visconti, and De Sica, whilst Renato Guttuso and Aligi Sassu are the main representatives of 'realismo pittorico'. As Bertoni contends, Italian neorealism 'ha dato voce al bisogno di denunciare, demistificare, contraddire le decennali menzogne del fascismo, perché ha cercato di calare nel vivo della ricerca espressiva la coscienza della profonda frattura storica, politica e sociale da cui è nato' (Bertoni, 2007: 292). Bertoni associates neorealism with the category of commitment and ideology: '[i]mpegno, definizione di un nuovo ruolo degli intellettuali, ricerca di un'intesa ampia e paritaria con il pubblico, desiderio di *scoprire* quell'Italia reale che tanto gli scrittori quanto il regime si erano guardati bene dal raccontare' (Bertoni, 2007: 292).[68]

In the following decades, especially from the 1960s, realist discourses and practices lost their prominence, being overshadowed by a 'svolta linguistica di marca postmoderna' (Antonello, 2012b: 155). Indeed, as Antonello acknowledges, 'nell'ultimo secolo si sono succeduti periodi a dominanza "realista", come il trentennio 1930-1960 e altri a dominanza "linguistico-discorsiva" (1960-1990)' (Antonello, 2012b: 155-156). It was at the turn of the century that realism regained prominence in Italian artistic trends and scholarship. According to Contarini *et al.* (2016: 12),

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[68] Some scholars have investigated this connection with ideology and anti-hegemonic discourses with reference to Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. For a Lacanian approach to neorealism see, for instance: Rocchio (1999), Restivo (2002: 3-42), and Vighi (2006: 54-58 and 107-110). Rocchio (1999: 7) considers neorealism as a period with the potential for social transformation and subversion of the *status quo*, which was reflected ideologically in the narrative. Thus, according to Rocchio (1999: 7), 'Lacanian psychoanalysis provides the study of film with the means by which to analyze the ideological functioning of narrative [...]. In this respect, it offers a valuable tool [...] for confronting the hegemonic process'. According to Vighi (2006: 58), 'neorealism was essentially an attempt to translate the encounter with the non-symbolisable Real of war and destruction in cinematic terms'. From Vighi's perspective, the legacy of neorealism and its impact on post-war Italian and world cinema rests on the awareness raised by this artistic movement that 'to look also means to expose oneself to the gaze, to the enigma of the image, to the precariousness of the seen' (Vighi, 2006: 56).

> già dagli anni Novanta [...] sotto lo choc del fenomeno Mani pulite, della fine della Prima Repubblica, del berlusconismo impostosi come fenomeno politico-antropologico specifico del nostro Paese, di pervertimenti sociali (stragi mafiose, criminalità organizzata) e societali (cambiamenti di modi di vita, precarietà e globalizzazione), la questione dei realismi è tornata in forza nelle forme della cultura. Riportando la Storia alla ribalta e facendo dell'Italia un caso particolare nel quadro europeo.

Like the other Italian realist traditions, the postmillennial wave of realism in Italy is characterised by anti-hegemonic discourses and socio-political commitment. It is intrinsically interdisciplinary and cross-artistic in nature and, although it emerged clearly at the turn of the century, its boundaries are relatively unclear and it cannot be reduced to a single school heralded by a shared manifesto. Nevertheless, it involves new media, such as television and the Internet, and Italian scholars discuss it extensively, to the point that it has become a highly debated academic topic and artists themselves take critical opinions into account. I will address these issues in the next subsections.

2.2 Realist Trends in post-2000 Italy, the '*ritorno alla realtà*', and the Debate in non-Lacanian Italian Scholarship

Since the turn of the century, there has been an increasing 'return of realist tendencies and practices' (Nagib and Mello, 2009: XIV). This rebirth of realist tendencies is not limited to Italy but is part of a broader trend in Western capitalistic societies. As Donnarumma (2008a: 7) puts it,

> [i] maggiori romanzi internazionali, numerosi film, la pittura recente ci parlano di un *ritorno alla realtà*, inteso sia come recupero dei modi storici del realismo, passati attraverso la lezione modernista e, talvolta, persino postmoderna, sia come impegno degli intellettuali sui temi della vita civile [emphasis added].

This is precisely what is happening in postmillennial Italy, where '[l]'ascesa di poetiche realistiche segnala una frattura nei confronti degli anni precedenti' (Donnarumma, 2014: 145). This new take on realism, which emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century and is currently occurring in Italy, is thus the latest amongst the realist cyclic returns. Nevertheless, as Donnarumma (2014: 143) points out,

> l'orizzonte è radicalmente mutato: se il neorealismo si muove su un terreno che è ancora integralmente letterario, e che neppure il cinema insidia, ora il realismo è sempre sull'orlo di essere vanificato dalla comunicazione mediatica, televisione in testa, e la letteratura respinta in una condizione marginale.

In Italy, these new realist trends, which are noticeably emerging in many artistic fields, such as literature and cinema, have led scholars to claim that '[r]affigurare con la massima precisione possibile la realtà è ritornato negli ultimi tempi un compito ineludibile per i media più diversi' (Mazzarella, 2011: 7). Arguably, these realist tendencies emphasise a 'richiesta impellente di realtà' (Esposito, 2014: 64) by the contemporary Italian audience and seem to convey the urge that 'la realtà torni a imporre la propria supremazia' (Mazzarella, 2011: 7). Indeed, reality seems to be the crucial point of reference for most postmillennial Italian production, which manifests an 'interesse per l'Italia storica […] o per la realtà contemporanea' (Luperini interviewed by Di Stefano, 2014) and seeks to represent a given reality. Literature, films, and documentaries exhibit constant references to, and recurrences of, themes, characters, and plots which revolve around either: the reality of Italian socio-political events, such as *Romanzo criminale* (De Cataldo, 2002), *Il Caimano* (Moretti, 2006) and *Il Divo* (Sorrentino, 2008); the economic crisis and the so-called *precariato*, for example *Mi chiamo Roberta, ho 40 anni, guadagno 250 euro al mese…* (Nove, 2006), *Il mondo deve sapere. Romanzo tragicomico di una telefonista precaria* (Murgia, 2006); the issue of immigration, such as *Terraferma* (Crialese, 2011), and mafia culture, for example in *Gomorra* (Saviano, 2006; Garrone, 2008); or the prosaic reality of everyday life, in which there is 'uno sguardo capace di dare conto della realtà nella sua bruta materialità' (Uva, 2009: 308). This might be the case, for instance, for *Nuovi paradisi* (Siti, 2006) and *La vita oscena* (Nove, 2010).

However, the book *Gomorra* (Saviano, 2006) is considered as the epitome of the return of realist tendencies in early twenty-first-century Italy and led Italian scholarship to call for a '*ritorno alla realtà*'. In fact, *Gomorra* is a broad 'artistic and political project' (Antonello, 2011: 378) which includes not only the book written by Roberto Saviano (2006) and the film directed by Matteo Garrone (2008), but also the theatrical version by Mario Gelardi (2007) and the television series (2014, 2016). *Gomorra* is seen as 'uno dei manifesti' of this new wave of

realism (Antonello, 2012b: 157) by several Italian scholars, such as Donnarumma, Policastro, and Taviani (2008), Uva (2009), Spinazzola (2010), Serkowska (2011), and Luperini (2014), to name but a few. In particular, according to Antonello (2012a: 172),

> il centro focalizzante e emblematico di questa presunta "rinascita" e di un nuovo interesse per il "reale" è stato in particolar modo il fenomeno *Gomorra*, sia nella sua originaria forma letteraria, con l'acclamatissimo libro di Roberto Saviano (2006), sia nella sua variante cinematografica, con il successo internazionale dell'omonimo film di Matteo Garrone (2008).

Referring in particular to the literary version, Spinazzola agrees with Antonello: '*Gomorra* ha operato un grande rilancio della realisticità nel campo della scrittura prosastica' (2010: 10). To this extent, as Donnarumma puts it, 'anche se la pluralità delle scritture contemporanee è così vasta da rendere del tutto impensabile il poter scegliere un testo che valga per tutti, c'è qui qualcosa di sintomatico' (Donnarumma, 2014: 11). According to Uva, the cinematic version of *Gomorra* typifies a kind of 'cinema che torna a dialogare con la realtà, che con essa si "sporca", immergendosi senza remore nelle sue profondità' (2009: 306). Indeed, as Antonello underlines, 'events […] are explored in a hyper-realistic, raw manner, without further comment or judgment', there are 'crudeness and brutal aspects' (Antonello, 2011: 378), and the reality is represented with a 'radically realistic, almost documentary-like approach' (Antonello, 2011: 382).[69] As these references to Italian scholars demonstrate, the more the Italian postmillennial artistic production focuses on depicting reality, the more Italian scholarship becomes interested in studying this new wave of realism. Moreover, as a further consequence, there is a proliferation of studies on realism.

The special issue of *Allegoria* edited by Donnarumma, Policastro, and Taviani (2008) was one of the first attempts to outline and frame this '*ritorno alla realtà*'.[70] In this special issue, Donnarumma, Policastro and Taviani (2008: 7)

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[69]   As far as the cinematic adaptation of Saviano's book is concerned, Uva (2009: 308) refers to a 'costruito realismo' and Antonello notes the cinematic style of the Dogma 95 movement: 'on-location filming, diegetic music, extensive use of hand-held cameras, no use of special and artificial lightening or optical filters', (Antonello, 2011: 380) as well as the employment of non-professional actors.

[70]   The publication of this special issue generated a heated debate that took place, amongst other places, on the blog *Nazione Indiana* and in the magazine *Specchio*. For a complete critical account of this extremely animated debate, see Ganeri (2011).

'indaga[no] appunto i modi di questo ritorno nella narrativa e nel cinema italiano degli ultimi quindici anni circa', which are characterised by 'rappresentazioni fondate su uno statuto di realtà, e che guardano al tempo e alla società contemporanei' (Palumbo Mosca, 2011: 200-201). This contemporary Italian realist trend has also been referred to as a 'riemersione della Realtà' (Uva, 2009: 307), a 'ritrovato' or 'nuovo interesse per la "realtà"' (Antonello, 2012a: 179 and 172), a 'riapparizione della realtà' (Siti, 2013: 65), and the 'processo di "ritorno alla realtà"' (Contarini *et al.*, 2016: 12).

As Palumbo Mosca writes, 'il "ritorno alla realtà" nasc[e] *non* come movimento strutturato in manifesti o posizioni teoriche condivise' (2009: 308) and is therefore characterised by 'una estrema libertà, sia rispetto alle teorizzazioni […] sia rispetto ai modelli di realismo e neorealismo nazionali' (2009: 308). According to Donnarumma (2008a: 7), 'il fenomeno [ha] un carattere anzitutto (anche se non esclusivamente) generazionale'. Along these lines, Antonello argues that realism is indeed strictly connected with the 'effetti di "ciclo" culturale, legato a contesti generazionali' (Antonello, 2012b: 155), fostering the idea of 'una ripresa di una maggiore tensione realista nell'ultimo ventennio' (Antonello, 2012b: 155-156). In this respect, Palumbo Mosca contends that:

> Il richiamo alla "realtà" denuncia […] innanzi tutto la crisi di una certa idea di letteratura, sviluppatasi a partire dagli anni Sessanta e poi egemone per più di due decenni, che riduce la realtà "al risultato di un processo semiotico, insomma d'una convenzione linguistica"; una letteratura per cui, secondo l'efficace semplificazione di La Capria, "il linguaggio è tutto e la realtà può starsene dove le pare" (Palumbo Mosca, 2011: 200).

Antonello agrees with the argument developed by Donnarumma, Policastro, and Taviani (2008), then, since 'l'indicazione […] su un presunto "ritorno alla realtà" sarebbe in qualche modo corretta' (Antonello, 2012a: 179). Nevertheless, Antonello (2012a: 179) ascribes a 'ritardo diagnostico di qualche lustro' to their argument. In addition to this, Antonello aptly contends that this *ritorno alla realtà* is simply 'presunto' (Antonello, 2012b: 157) insofar as it 'rimane ancora del tutto indeterminat[o] sia in termini storico-evolutivi che epistemologici' (Antonello, 2012a: 179).

Therefore, there is a rebirth of realist trends and, as a consequence, a

'rehabilitation of realism' in Italian scholarship, to borrow the expression from Nagib and Mello (2009: XIV). Academic attention to realism in Italian Studies has been flourishing continuously since the 2000s, especially over the last decade, and is currently highly pronounced. In particular, the relevance of realism has increased in recent years, to the point that it has become an extremely pervasive, although highly debated academic topic addressed in a variety of fields in Italian Studies, from literary studies to film studies and philosophy. As Donnarumma (2014: 96) sums up: 'il realismo mostra oggi la sua vitalità'. It is for this reason that, referring to this cultural and academic phenomenon, several scholars in the field of Italian Studies, regardless of their specific research area, have noted a 'return of realism' (Perniola, 2000: XII; Di Martino, 2012: 190), a 'ritorno al reale e del realismo' (Serkowska, 2011), a 'New Italian Realism' (Spinazzola, 2010; Siti, 2013: 65), a 'New Realism' (Ferraris, 2011, 2012), a 'post-realism' (Marcus, 2010) and even a 'neo-neorealism' (Riva, 2003; Bradshaw, 2008) in postmillennial Italy.

In early twenty-first-century Italian scholarship, there is clearly a 'sense of the pervasive and obstructive investment in realism as a value category' (O'Leary and O'Rawe, 2011: 109). Due to this highly pronounced presence of realism in academic debates, and a constant reference to neorealism that has become 'a timeworn benchmark' (O'Leary and O'Rawe, 2011: 109), some scholars argue that 'we have been talking about it too much, and abusing the term' (O'Leary and O'Rawe, 2011: 127) and suggest that we should 'move beyond such a paradigm' (Marlow-Mann, 2010: 263). In regards to cinema, referring to the use of the term 'post-realism' by O'Rawe (2010), Marlow-Mann points out 'Italian film studies' continuing preoccupation with notions of realism and of the perceived necessity of establishing contemporary Italian cinema's relationship to, or distance from, the traditions of neorealism and the *cinema d'impegno*' (Marlow-Mann, 2010: 263). Indeed, '[t]his insistence on realism as an interpretative paradigm can be problematic: arguably, it risks both devaluing what distinguished neorealism in the first place and obscuring the distinctive characteristics of contemporary Italian films' (Marlow-Mann, 2010: 263). As for literature, Donnarumma (2014: 143) contends that

si sono appiattite le nuove forme di realismo su un'idea deprecativa di neorealismo (o,

più raramente di naturalismo). [...] Se infatti si volesse trovare qualche contatto, occorrerebbe cercarlo, anziché in un neorealismo di scuola archiviato da mezzo secolo, nelle forme sperimentali di mistione di racconto e saggio, di denuncia, di propensione testimoniale e documentaria.

Evidently, a number of unresolved controversies exist in relation to the definition, confines and objects of this realist postmillennial Italian tendency, which render an ultimate categorisation somewhat difficult. According to Antonello: 'è ancora tutto da determinare di quale "realismo" si parli in questo contesto' (Antonello, 2012a: 179). He adds that:

> Non è inoltre ancora chiaro cosa significhi rappresentare la 'realtà' sia dal punto di vista epistemologico sia rispetto ai meccanismi rappresentativi adottati dai generi, visto che da una parte se ne contesta la povertà stilistica o la deriva a moda merceologica (come nel caso del noir o del nuovo giallo contemporaneo), ma dall'altra se ne compitano poi vari casi come esempi di un ritrovato interesse per la 'realtà' (Antonello, 2012a: 179).

As Bertoni remarks, referring to the difficulty of producing a convincing definition of the notion of realism: '[c]redo sia difficile trovare un concetto altrettanto noto e sfuggente, diffuso e frainteso' (Bertoni, 2007: VII). Realism, he continues, is 'una di quelle tipiche cose che riconosciamo automaticamente ma di cui non sapremmo mai fornire una definizione univoca e condivisa' (Bertoni, 2007: VII). This is due to its 'instabilità lessicale' (Bertoni, 2007: 27), which varies amongst disciplines and differs enormously over time. Bertoni further contends that '[i]l fatto è che non c'è accordo – non si dice sulle qualità specifiche – ma nemmeno sulla natura del realismo, sulla categoria concettuale cui appartiene' (Bertoni, 2007: 27). Realism should thus be approached as 'a trans-generic phenomenon that invades other genres', a 'mode' of 'aesthetic articulation adaptable across a range of genres which 'predominates in certain historical and industrial moments and contexts' (O'Rawe, 2008: 184). The indefiniteness of realism and, more particularly, of this new wave conveyed through the postmillennial return to reality in Italy, has led to controversies amongst scholars in Italian Studies. For instance, Cortellessa (2008: 138) polemically affirms:

> È come la crisi finanziaria. Non si può dire che non ce ne fossero indizi, eppure ha preso tutti di sorpresa. Anche in letteratura è successo un po' lo stesso. Era un po' che se ne stava lì in latenza, inibito, ogni tanto qualche timido tentativo di sortita. E poi un giorno eccolo improvvisamente tornato parola d'ordine. Quale? Il caro vecchio *realismo*,

certo. L'industria culturale ha sempre bisogno di formule semplici da ridurre a slogan. E' già pronta la saga: *Il ritorno del realismo. Il realismo colpisce ancora. Il realismo contro tutti.* Invocare il realismo – mai specificando di *quale realismo si tratti*, cioè di quale *livello di realtà* sia chiamato a dar conto – ha fatto sempre gioco alle rivincite del buon senso.

Similarly to other realist trends which have occurred in Italy, this realist trend taking place in the early twenty-first century is difficult to define due to its heterogeneous nature; it does not present a recognisable, uniform set of features, and it is interdisciplinary and cross-artistic. Thus, it seems to be more part of the spirit of the time, which also reflects a new way of relating to reality as well as an epochal change in everyday life, than a united movement with a coherent programme.

Interestingly, Casadei contends that '*realismo* sia una nozione non riducibile al mero ambito linguistico o nominalistico, e che [...] sia essenziale proporre una nozione di realismo che preveda un confronto con le forme della tradizione ma anche con i paradigmi filosofici e scientifici condivisi, in ogni epoca, nell'ambito dell'interpretazione della realtà' (Casadei, 2011: 4-5). This attention to philosophical and scientific paradigms to understand and interpret reality establishes a connection with Lacan's theory and Lacanianism. In fact, as I have shown in the previous chapters, the Lacanian perspective offers a critical account of the notion of reality, namely what we mean by the term 'world' and how we relate to it, and thus also of realism, understood as the representation of reality that overtly declares its intention to depict it as 'it really is'. As Garrone remarks, 'il realismo e la realtà sono due cose diverse. Il realismo è [...] sempre e comunque, in qualsiasi dimensione di tempo e di spazio, un'invenzione poetica e come tale deve essere considerata' (Garrone, 2016: 113). The representation of reality, that is, is always determined by a degree of artistic invention. In this respect, Donnarumma underlines that: '[l]a polemica, che ogni tanto si sente ancora agitare, contro il realismo come forma ingenua o addirittura autoritaria che avrebbe la stolta pretesa di raffigurare il mondo così com'è non ha ragione di essere [...]. Che infatti le forme del realismo siano convenzioni, che inventino codici fra altri, è precisamente ciò da cui, oggi, partiamo' (Donnarumma, 2014: 96).

At the same time, as Casadei points out, '[c]iò che chiamiamo "realtà" [...]

si rivela [...] intrinsecamente costituito di oggettività e di soggettività, e va così a toccare gli ambiti della fantasia e delle ipotesi sul futuro, per certi aspetti non meno "realistiche" dei dati materiali di un fenomeno' (Casadei, 2011: 5). This conception of reality as a mix of objectivity and subjectivity is precisely what is analysed by contemporary Lacanians. According to Lacan's theory, reality does not exist *per se*; rather, it always involves a (subjective) construction which characterises it as fictional. More poignantly, from Lacan's perspective, reality is less the object of a representation than it is representational in itself. In the next subsection, I will discuss the way in which non-Lacanian scholars in Italian Studies refer, or fail to do so, to Lacan's concept of reality and the Real.

2.3 References to Lacanianism by Non-Lacanian Italian Scholars and Artists

The postmillennial debate on the '*ritorno alla realtà*' and realism in Italy can be seen as belonging to the national and international debate that Lacanian scholars are having about the notion of the Real. Before focusing on the latter and on the account provided by Italian Lacanians on these issues in Section 4, it is now worth examining in what ways and to what extent Lacanian theory emerges in the debate by Italian non-Lacanian scholars. Broadly speaking, it can be said that scholars in Italian Studies do not refer explicitly to Lacan and that they do not account for the notion of the Real as opposed to reality. There are, however, some exceptions among scholars in Italian Studies who consider Lacan's theory as a useful theoretical tool to better understand the new wave of realism in postmillennial Italy.

For instance, Gallerani emphasises the importance of Lacanian theory for this debate on reality and realism in Italy scholarship, especially since Lacan's distinction between reality and the Real allows us to better frame and understand the new wave of realism taking place in the twenty-first century. Lacan's Real is 'whatever cannot be integrated into the universe of signification' (Walsh, 1995: 170) and that disrupts and interferes with our everyday reality. In this respect, from Gallerani's perspective, Lacanian theory enables us to 'risalire il corso dell'apparenza – cioè della realtà – per volgersi al reale' (Gallerani, 2008: np). Moreover, Gallerani claims that a Lacanian perspective could provide a

theoretical device to problematise the understanding of Italian realist trends in relation to the socio-political changes in contemporary society. As he puts it: '[m]i sembra […] che quello del Ritorno del Reale […] sia uno degli snodi migliori per scongiurare che il problema che ci siamo sottoposti non si traduca altro che in una tappa obbligata del discorso letterario' (Gallerani, 2008: np). This is especially true given the acknowledgement by several scholars that: '[i] residui dell'illustre pedagogia umanistica risultano sempre più incapaci di decifrare gli eventi che si succedono nel nostro convulso presente' (Mazzarella, 2011: 8). As I shall discuss in Section 3, the 'ritorno alla realtà', the return of realism, and the return to the Real are indeed framed by scholars within a wider shift that occurred at the turn of the century and that involves socio-political and historical events. According to this view, postmodernity, characterised by the virtualisation/derealisation of reality, has now shifted into hypermodernity, which is dominated by the attempt to regain control over reality. In this perspective, the 9/11 terrorist attacks are seen as a massive awakening on a global scale.

Despite Gallerani's valid remarks on the usefulness of Lacan's theory in this field, in the debate on the 'ritorno alla realtà' and post-2000 realism within Italian scholarship, there are, notably, few explicit and extended references to Lacan's conception of reality, the Lacanian notion of the Real, and the distinction between the two. For this reason, these scholars often use the words reality and real somewhat ambiguously or interchangeably, in the lower case, since they consider them merely as synonyms. Moreover, although some Italian scholars do use the word 'real' with a capital 'r', which is possibly a subtle allusion to the Lacanian notion, they do not mention the name of Jacques Lacan often. Therefore, as Serkowska quite rightly remarks: '[r]imane implicita la discussione ispirata a Lacan sulla nostra incapacità di "toccare" il mondo reale e sull'inconoscibilità dello stesso, alla base delle critiche sulla ripresa del concetto di reale e realtà nel dibattito in oggetto' (Serkowska, 2011: XIII note 10).

On the contrary, Italian scholarship frequently refers to Žižek (2002) and Foster (1996), who appear to be the unavoidable references for approaching the debate on the new wave of realism in postmillennial Italy. In fact, Italian scholars usually engage with Žižek's *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002), where the

9/11 terrorist attacks form part of a discussion on the ideology of global liberal capitalism and terrorism in the early twenty-first century. Similarly to Žižek, they consider the terrorist attack on American soil as the 'traumatico spartiacque' (Mazzarella, 2011: 62) or the 'evento-trauma' (Donnarumma, 2014: 63) that sanctions the end of the postmodern era. Moreover, they also claim that this traumatic event at the beginning of the twenty-first century contributed to the postmillennial rebirth of an interest in reality (Serkowska, 2011). Indeed, a traumatic event, as such, forces an abrupt awakening and obliges us to face the Real as the intrinsic limit of our imaginary and symbolic reality. In this respect, Donnarumma, appropriately referring to Lacanian theory, claims that Žižek 'non può far a meno di notare lacanianamente che il Reale, "per via del suo carattere traumatico/eccessivo", è ciò che non possiamo integrare alla nostra realtà' (Donnarumma, 2014: 63).

Furthermore, Italian scholars usually mention Foster's seminal book *The Return of the Real* (1996), in which the art historian engages with Lacan's theory, among others, as part of a discussion of artistic trends from the 1960s to the 1990s, advocating for a 'shift from the idea of reality as an effect of representation to the real experiences as shock or trauma' (Peucker, 2007: 13). For instance, Donnarumma refers to Foster when he claims that:

> Per le arti figurative, Hal Foster data già all'inizio degli anni Novanta una frattura, segnata dalla 'svolta verso il reale' e 'verso il referente', dal presentarsi della 'realtà sotto forma di trauma' e da un ritorno del 'soggetto nella profondità sociale della sua identità' (2011: 16).

Likewise, Uva states that '[l]'avvento del nuovo millennio coincide insomma – prendendo in prestito il titolo di un volume di Hal Foster – con un sostanziale "ritorno del Reale", forse conseguenza della fine del Postmoderno determinata, secondo taluni, dal crollo delle Torri Gemelle' (Uva, 2009: 307). Since references to these international Lacanian scholars are more frequent than references to Lacan, which are mainly second-hand, Gallerani quite rightly affirms that Lacan's thought in Italy 'si meriterebbe [maggiore] considerazione, o piuttosto [maggiore] centralità, anche senza la pur utile mediazione del critico d'arte Hal Foster' (2008: np). I will contend that this is precisely the role of contemporary Italian Lacanians who, distinguishing between reality and the Real and

accounting for the latter, allow us to better frame the debate, also in light of the socio-cultural characteristics of postmillennial society.

To the best of my knowledge, Donnarumma (2008b; 2014), Cortellessa (2008), Gallerani (2008), Casadei (2011), Giglioli (2011), Contarini *et al.*, (2016), and Di Martino and Verdicchio (2017) are the few Italian non-Lacanian scholars in Italian Studies who, as far as the debate on the 'ritorno alla realtà' is concerned, refer directly and arguably more extensively to Lacan's theory. For instance, in his analysis of the return to realist trends in postmillennial Italian literature, Donnarumma explicitly mentions Lacan's Real, demonstrating a sound understating of the concept (Donnarumma, Policastro, and Taviani, 2008; Donnarumma 2014). However, he ambiguously oscillates between recalling 'il Reale come lo intende Lacan' (Donnarumma, 2014: 140) and contending that 'ciò di cui parliamo qui [...] non è quello che Lacan ha definito Reale' (Donnarumma, 2014: 122). Donnarumma (2014: 106) also refers to Recalcati and his analysis of hypermodern society; I will discuss this further in Section 3 of this chapter.

On the contrary, Cortellessa seems to refer to the Lacanian Real in more straightforward terms. In order to provide a more specific definition of the term 'realtà', due to its rather indistinct use in Italian scholarship, to the point that it has become a 'parola equivoca' (Cortellessa, 2008: 139), Cortellessa refers to 'contingenza', 'inatteso', 'inaspettato' (Cortellessa, 2008: 139), which might echo the Lacanian conception of the category of the Real as discussed in Section 3 of Chapter 1. As Cortellessa (2008: 139) puts it, for him the notion of reality:

> Non è ciò che già sappiamo; non è quello che ci hanno raccontato secoli di realismo [...] non ha niente a che fare con ciò che ci ammanniscono industrie culturali e uffici di propaganda. Al contrario è proprio quello che *ancora non sappiamo* [original emphasis].

This quote reveals a reference to the unknown, to that which escapes understanding and is waiting to be put into images and words, that is, into a representational frame. This passage seems to hint at the Lacanian definition of the Real that, primarily, can only be described negatively.

Serkowska (2011: XXIV) affirms that 'Cortellessa dubita si possa parlare di (ritorno al) reale dopo la nozione lacaniana di Reale e insiste sulla frattura tra esperienza e realtà, concludendo che la grande arte non è tale perché rimanda al

mondo, ma perché ambisce sempre a trascendere il presente in favore dell'eternizzazione'. However, Ganeri reproaches Cortellessa for his 'svalutazione pregiudiziale del realismo' (Ganeri, 2011: 59) inasmuch as he differentiates the Real, understood as that which 'ancora non sappiamo' (Cortellessa, 2008: 139), from realism, which is seen as a mere reproduction of a given reality. As Ganeri asserts: 'come si può credere che esso coincida con il proporre ciò che già si sa, quando da sempre fa parte della retorica dei realismi conquistare alla rappresentazione ciò che sino ad allora era irrapresentato?' (Ganeri, 2011: 59).

Casadei openly refers to the 'priorità del Reale rispetto alla realtà, sulla base della ben nota distinzione lacaniana' (Casadei, 2011: 6). This led Casadei to draw a distinction, in a literary work, between 'la rappresentazione di una realtà "standard" oppure un'interpretazione della realtà che tocca l'ambito del Reale' (Casadei, 2011: 7). Similarly, Gallerani recognises how fruitful an engagement with the Lacanian notion of the Real could be for the discussion when he states that:

> [S]e il romanzo dimentica che il Reale è l'Impossibile [...] subentra la piega 'mimetica', supponendo che esista uno stato obiettivo del mondo (una realtà) che sarà sufficiente riportare (sebbene interpretandola, filtrandola o deformandola) mentre il Reale è esattamente ciò che la rappresentazione, il linguaggio, la finzione non accostano che per svelare la linea di una mancanza, l'assenza di quanto li suscita ma di cui non possono rendere conto. È la contraddizione dell'arte, l'oggetto del patto letterario, ma è ormai chiaro che l'indefinibile non è quanto induce al silenzio quanto, piuttosto, ciò che ci costringe al lavoro incessante, infaticabile del pensiero (Gallerani, 2008: np).

Here, Gallerani hints at the core of Lacan's conception of art, which, as I have argued, relates more to the Real than to reality. According to Lacan's teaching in Seminar VII, as discussed in Sections 4 and 5 of Chapter 1, the function of art is not merely representational; that is to say, art should not only provide a realistic mirror for reality but should, rather, involve the Real, as a disquieting and disrupting element. Gallerani follows Lacan's theory strictly, acknowledging that although the Real is beyond language and representation, it is a source and not a limit for the arts for this very reason.

Moreover, Giglioli's account of the realist trends in postmillennial Italy (2011) engages with the Lacanian category of the Real, in relation to contemporary Italian literature and to address the issue of the return of realism.

Giglioli not only accounts for the Lacanian distinction between reality and the Real but also addresses those aspects of the Real related to the obscene and trauma. According to Giglioli (2011: 16-17),

> [a] differenza della realtà, il Reale è ciò che resiste testardamente a ogni tentativo di simbolizzazione. È un buco nell'ordine simbolico, è la «cosa» inevitabilmente perduta, muta, ottusa, liscia, impredicabile. È l'incontro che non si può non mancare, è il luogo in cui il linguaggio, quel linguaggio che struttura la realtà per come possiamo conoscerla, finisce, viene meno, perde i suoi poteri. Il Reale ha la natura dell'evento, non del senso, o meglio dell'evento senza senso, traumatico, in quanto non può essere elaborato, simbolizzato, reso nominabile.

Contarini *et al.* (2016: 11) refer to Giglioli to briefly reiterate Lacan's distinction between reality and the Real, while Di Martino and Verdicchio (2017) refer to Recalcati's stance on the Real, defining the latter as 'the irreducible core of the human psyche' (2017: xii). They also claim that scholars such as Giglioli and Scurati 'have openly defended the theory of a return to reality by way of a return to the Lacanian Real' (2017: xiii).

Surprisingly, the Italian writers Aldo Nove and Antonio Scurati, interviewed for the aforementioned special issue of *Allegoria*, refer directly to Lacan, demonstrating a certain familiarity with Lacanian theory. For instance, Nove argues for the necessity of taking into account the psychoanalytic perspective in the matter of realism. He claims that '[d]opo Freud, dopo lo strutturalismo e dopo Lacan parlare di realismo in buona fede mi sembra impossibile' (Donnarumma and Policastro, 2008: 19). Similarly, Scurati contends that instead of 'un "fantomatico ritorno alla realtà"' Italian scholarship should rather evoke 'un "ritorno del Reale' (in senso lacaniano)"' (Scurati, 2008: 140), implicitly referring here to the aforementioned book by Foster. Scurati defines the Lacanian Real as 'quel nucleo sempre traumatico ed eccessivo che squarcia il velo dell'immaginario lasciandoci tramortiti perché incapaci di integrarlo nella nostra realtà' (Scurati, 2008: 140). From his perspective:

> L'unico ritorno letterario alla realtà che mi sento di abbracciare incondizionatamente è quello di un realismo psicotico, che renda conto della nostra condizione di traumatizzati senza evento traumatico, di violentati senza violenza inflitta personalmente, un realismo che, al tempo stesso, agogni alla realtà ma assuma nel proprio fondo la perdita del rapporto con la realtà. Ossia, un realismo che, ancora una volta, si faccia carico della contraddizione del suo tempo (Scurati, 2008: 140).

In this excerpt, there is a reference to Perniola's notion of 'realismo psicotico' (2000), which I will discuss in greater detail in Section 4. The return of the Real in twenty-first-century Italy shows, according to Scurati, 'lo sguaiato desiderio di realtà di questi anni' (Scurati, 2008: 140), which originates from the postmodern 'smaterializzazione della "vita reale", del suo svanire in uno spettacolo percepito come spettrale' and at the same time 'la passione per la realtà […] tentava lo stratagemma definitivo per evitare un confronto con il Reale' (Scurati, 2008: 140). While I will discuss this further in Section 3, I will now examine the Italian Lacanian perspective on the new wave of realism in post-2000 Italy.

2.4 Contemporary Italian Lacanianism and New Realism in Italian Philosophy

The central problem for non-Lacanian scholars is that they do not account for the category of the Real, and thus cannot distinguish between reality and the Real, which inevitably limits their conception of reality/realism. This prevents them from moving away from a strict dichotomy between reality on the one hand and virtual reality, fake reality and non-reality on the other. This occurs especially when they must deal with the specific reality that is broadcasted on television, the Internet, in reality shows, and so forth. Arguably, this might limit their understanding of the shift that occurred in contemporary society and of the post-2000 return of realist trends. On the contrary, since Lacanians distinguish between reality and the Real, they have more appropriate theoretical tools to analyse the new wave of realism in twenty-first-century Italy.

Although 'il realismo filosofico è categorialmente una cosa piuttosto diversa dal realismo letterario' (Donnarumma, 2014: 2), the category of realism recently regained prominence in the Italian philosophical debate too, when Maurizio Ferraris published his *Manifesto del nuovo realismo* in 2012. This provoked an extremely animated debate amongst Italian philosophers, which was very similar to the one that arose among Italian literary critics on the question of the 'ritorno alla realtà', as a result of the special issue of *Allegoria* (Donnarumma, Policastro, and Taviani, 2008). I will provide a concise account of the debate surrounding the return of realism in Italian philosophy in order to examine the contributions by Italian Lacanian scholars and psychoanalysts who

engaged with it. In particular, Recalcati's Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective proves once again the beneficial contribution of Lacanian theory to debates surrounding realism in postmillennial Italy, whether they are about literature, cinema, or philosophy, insofar as Lacan's concept of the Real challenges the notion of reality, which has been often taken for granted in the debate.

Ferraris' manifesto acknowledges that 'il pendolo del pensiero che nel Novecento inclinava verso l'antirealismo nelle sue varie versioni (ermeneutica, postmodernismo, "svolta linguistica" ecc.), con il tornante del secolo si [è] spostato verso il realismo' (Ferraris, 2012: IX). To some extent, according to Ferraris' stance, such twentieth-century philosophical trends dismissed reality in its facticity and dispelled it as a pure theoretical, social, linguistic, or hermeneutic construction. On the contrary, Ferraris insists on the facticity of reality, arguing that it cannot be ultimately disregarded due to what he calls its 'inemendabilità' (Ferraris, 2011; 2012). Hence, in his manifesto he advocates for the fundamental need to 'misurarsi con la realtà' (Ferraris, 2012: XI).

Recalcati (2012a: 271-272; 2012e) engages directly with the philosophical debate on Ferraris' new realism, providing a Lacanian psychoanalytic account of it and contributing to the book *Bentornata realtà* (De Caro and Ferraris, 2012) with an essay entitled 'Il sonno della realtà e il trauma del reale' (Recalcati, 2012d: 193-206). Recalcati's essay sets out to question the notion of reality as understood by new-realist philosophers, including Ferraris, and also provides an account of reality informed by Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Recalcati acknowledges that the new realism debate 'ha visto schierarsi sostenitori della realtà ('nuovi-realisti') contro la deriva postmoderna dell'ermeneutica' (Recalcati, 2012a: 271). In his intervention, published in De Caro and Ferraris, Recalcati aims to problematise these two polarised perspectives on realism, which are arguably reducible to:

> Da una parte vi sono coloro che sostengono il peso dei fatti contro la tendenza a dissolvere la realtà oggettiva nell'aleatorietà del gioco delle interpretazioni e dall'altra coloro che sostengono […] che non esistono fatti ma solo interpretazioni (Recalcati, 2012a: 271).

In this respect, '[i]s everything really a "discursive construction" […], and if not, how can we speak of an 'outside' without returning to a naïve realism?'

(Sheperdson, 2008: 1). According to Sheperdson, this is 'one of the most important issues in contemporary intellectual life' (Sheperdson, 2008: 1).[71] Recalcati contends that the Lacanian notion of the Real enables us to take a step back from this almost inescapable conundrum of factual reality *versus* its interpretation/representation. Indeed, both these perspectives fail to acknowledge the Lacanian distinction, and the crucial difference, between reality and the Real, and ultimately use 'i due termini come meri sinonimi' (Recalcati, 2012b: 195). This aligns the perspective of Recalcati's and contemporary Italian Lacanianism with the positions of international Lacanian scholars, such as Žižek (1994, 2007) and Zupančič (2014a; 2014b). The Lacanian distinction between reality and the Real rejects not only the conception of reality provided by philosophical realism, which according to Žižek is 'a naive belief that, behind the curtain of representations, there actually exists some full, substantial reality' (1994: 55), but also the hermeneutic conception of it.

For their part, De Caro and Ferraris (2012: IX) define Recalcati's perspective on new realism as one of the 'voci critiche' of the debate as he articulates what they describe as a 'visione antirealistica di matrice lacaniana' (De Caro and Ferraris, 2012: X). As D'Agostini aptly points out, Recalcati deals with the 'questione del realismo in psicoanalisi' (2013: 126, n13) from a strictly Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective which, as Lolli remarks, 'si differenzia da ogni psicologia e da altre forme di psicoanalisi' (Lolli, 2011: 55). The reason for this dissimilarity between Lacanian theory and other kinds of psychoanalytic theories rests on the fact that the former 'non crede che il soggetto abbia un contatto diretto con la realtà' (Lolli, 2011: 54). This is due to the fact that, as Italian Lacanians extensively argue, there is 'un filtro tra il soggetto e il mondo', 'un velo che separa il soggetto dal mondo', and 'un medium che consente al mondo di essere percepibile, sostenibile per il soggetto. Se non ci fosse questo velo – che è il significante – tutti gli eventi della realtà ci arriverebbero come trauma, sotto forma di shock' (Lolli, 2011: 55). As Lolli (2011: 56) further

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[71] I will address this issue in my close reading of *Reality* by Garrone (2012) in Chapter 4, in which I will also briefly discuss *The Truman Show* (Weir, 1998). I will contend that the latter film is influenced by philosophical realism inasmuch as it reiterates the belief that there is a real reality 'out there' and the protagonist spends the entire film looking for and reaching it. On the contrary, I will argue that the film *Reality* does not rest on the binary opposition between reality and non-reality but rather on the Lacanian notions of reality and the Real.

maintains:

> Non esistono, in altri termini, i fatti in sé; ogni evento della realtà viene letto e interpretato in un certo modo da ognuno di noi, in funzione del rapporto che il soggetto ha con il significante (2011: 55). Noi ci rapportiamo al significante, non alla realtà. Noi entriamo sempre in contatto con il significante, con un filtro significante che ci permette la rappresentazione della realtà. […] Tutto ciò che percepiamo della realtà è quanto è stato "lavorato" dal significante.

Contemporary Italian Lacanian scholars dispute the notion that new realism in philosophy does not account for this intrinsic incapacity on the part of human beings to directly engage with reality (Lolli, 2011; Recalcati, 2012a and 2012b; Pagliardini and Ronchi, 2014). As Pagliardini and Ronchi argue, 'siamo minacciati dal ritorno di fiamma di un realismo ingenuo, pre-kantiano, di stampo neo-positivistico, quale è quello propugnato dai filosofi cosiddetti realisti dell'ultima generazione' (2014: 13). Recalcati, Lolli, Pagliardini, and Ronchi completely reject the notion of reality conceived of as an independent and factual entity disconnected from subjectivity. As such, Lacan straightforwardly refers to 'the imbecility of the realist' (Lacan, 1957: 17) and paradoxically affirms that 'there is no such thing as a world' (Lacan, 2013b: 61). On the contrary, '[t]he philosophical realist believes that there is a certain level of the empirical world […] that objectively exists independently of the mental realm' (Ronen, 2002: 4).

Thus, given the crucial question of '[q]ual è lo statuto del Reale e che cosa lo differenzia dalla nozione di realtà?' (Recalcati, 2012a: 271), Recalcati (2012a: 272), closely following Lacan's teaching, contends that,

> [l]a sua [di Lacan] tesi di fondo è che tra realtà e reale vi sia un rapporto di totale eterogeneità. Al punto che si potrebbe dire che dove c'è realtà non c'è reale e viceversa. Tuttavia, tale eterogeneità non esclude che tra questi due campi esista una relazione. La realtà sorge, infatti, come una difesa fondamentale dal Reale. E' il carattere senza senso, scabroso, informe del reale che attiva la difesa della realtà. In questo senso Lacan può affermare che la realtà è il modo umano primario di difendersi nei confronti del Reale.

Therefore, it is now clear that from a Lacanian perspective, '*reality itself can function as an escape from encountering the Real*' [original emphasis] (Žižek, 2007: 222). According to Žižek, the difference between the Lacanian perspective and that of 'naïve realism' relies precisely on the notion of reality as an imaginary-symbolic representation to shield the Real (Žižek, 1989b). Indeed, as Recalcati

claims, '[i]l reale, diversamente dalla realtà, non è una rappresentazione' (Recalcati, 2012d: 201).

Not only, as Fink states, might it be suggested that 'Lacan's distinction between reality and the real allows us to isolate an ideological or ethical difference between certain forms of psychoanalysis and Lacanian psychoanalysis' (Fink, 1997: 25), but the revolutionary concept of the Real introduced by Lacanian psychoanalysis also 'allows for a problematization' of reality itself (Zupančič, 2014a: 163). As Pagliardini and Ronchi (2014: 14) remark, 'la straordinaria attualità di Lacan sta allora nella possibilità che il suo pensiero e la sua pratica ci offrono ai fini di una *ridefinizione non realista del reale*' [emphasis added]. However, Lacan does not advocate for an 'ontological realism, understood unproblematically' (Zupančič, 2014a: 163). As Zupančič states, '[t]he absolutely crucial point of this "psychoanalytic realism" is that the real is not a substance or *being*, but precisely its limit' (Zupančič, 2014b: 28).

In conclusion, new realism in philosophy and the debate on the 'ritorno alla realtà' amongst scholars in Italian Studies do not account for the distinction between reality and the Real (Serkowska, 2011: XIII note 10). Therefore, as Ronen (2002: 4) points out, referring to realism in art, according to a naïve account of reality, 'realism is achieved whenever a work of art successfully configures an object in a way that appears to be unmediated by the mind (of either the author/creator or of the characters within the artistic world)'. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, according to Lacan, the goal of art is not merely to imitate or reproduce reality as it is but rather to aim at the Real, accounting for its otherness and irreducibility to reality (Lacan, 1992: 141).

Before addressing the return of the Real with regards to the field of aesthetics in Sections 4 and 5, I will now examine the epochal shift from postmodernity to hypermodernity since it directly relates to the return of the Real and to the relationship between reality and the Real. I will consider the contextual frame in which, according to scholars in Italian Studies and Italian Lacanians, the '*ritorno alla realtà*' and the return of the Real take place. This will also make it possible to contextualise the postmillennial Italian realist trend in relation to the socio-political changes in contemporary society.

3. The Real(ity) Effect in Postmillennial Italy: from the Postmodern Derealisation of Reality to the Hypermodern Excess of the Real

In the previous subsections, I provided a concise outline of the debates surrounding realism in contemporary Italian scholarship. The aim was to address the increasing pervasiveness of the notion of realism in several fields of Italian Studies due to the reappearance of realist tendencies in postmillennial Italy, epitomised by, but not limited to, *Gomorra*, and the subsequent adaptations for theatre, cinema and television (Antonello, 2012a: 172 and 2012b: 157; Uva, 2009: 306). The catalyst for the so-called 'ritorno alla realtà' and its origin have been much debated in Italian scholarship. For instance, Antonello manifests scepticism over the point of view put forward by Donnarumma, Policastro, and Taviani (2008) according to which the realist return in postmillennial Italy is to be equated with the end of postmodernism (2012a: 172).[72] Along this line, Serkowska (2011: XI) challenges 'la tesi di una rottura netta' and contends, instead, that 'forse è meglio parlare di una complessa continuità/rottura nei confronti della postmodernità'. Indeed, Antonello criticises their clear-cut conception of this return as a straightforward consequence of the shift from postmodernism to the postmillennial era, arguing that:

> Questa posizione critico-teorica insiste su una periodizzazione rigida dello sviluppo storico-culturale per cui alla fecondità estetica e critica dei primi decenni dell'Italia repubblicana, a forte ispirazione marxista, ha fatto seguito il 'declino', la 'crisi' della cultura italiana in generale, 'toccando il fondo' con l'entrata in una fase di 'riflusso', ovvero nella pienezza dell'epoca postmoderna (o berlusconiana), che sembra ora finalmente 'liquidata', soprattutto con l'emergere di un nuovo interesse per la 'realtà' (Antonello, 2012a: 172).

On the contrary, according to Donnarumma, Policastro and Taviani (2008), Ferraris (2012), and Donnarumma (2014), the postmillennial return of realism is a reaction to postmodernism. From their perspective, one of the causes of the

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[72] For Antonello, the phenomenon of *Gomorra* nonetheless signals 'the exhaustion of the post-modern aesthetic dominant in Italy as it was elsewhere in the eighties and nineties' (Antonello, 2011: 380). As I will discuss in this section, many scholars argue that this re-emergence of realism ('recupero del realismo') and the new form of commitment in the arts both relate to the end of the postmodern era. As Antonello (2011: 380) puts it, referring to *Gomorra*, 'book and film have been emphatically celebrated as a "return to reality" and as a call for new forms of social and political engagement'.

return of realism is the shift from the virtualisation/derealisation of reality that took place in postmodernity to the desire to regain control over that same reality and its representations in the postmillennial hypermodern era. Interestingly, this resonates with the stance put forward by contemporary Italian Lacanianism, according to which the postmillennial emergence of the Real, and especially of some of its traumatic, violent, or disrupting aspects, goes hand in hand with the proliferation of the Imaginary. For Italian Lacanian scholars, the crisis of the Symbolic (Recalcati, 2010a; Carmagnola and Bonazzi, 2011; Lolli, 2012), along with the domain of the discourse of the capitalist (Recalcati, 2010a), paved the way for this twofold result faced by contemporary society: on the one hand, a proliferation of the Imaginary which, in the terminology used by scholars in Italian Studies, might resemble a 'derealizzazione postmoderna' (Donnarumma, 2008b: 28), and, on the other, an irruption of the Real. This perspective follows Lacan's stance on psychosis, a psychic structure wherein the perception of the subject's reality is affected, and according to which that which has not been symbolised returns in the order of the Real in the form of a hallucination, which clearly partakes of the order of the Imaginary.

Donnarumma claims that postmodernism is characterised by a 'liquidazione della tradizione realista' (Donnarumma, 2014: 31), arguing that the return of realism is thus linked to the end of postmodernity (Donnarumma, 2014: 95). Similarly, Ferraris (2012: XI) maintains that in his manifesto of the new realism, 'le mie considerazioni traggono origine dalla fine del postmoderno'. Indeed, Ferraris engages with 'un'esplicita polemica contro il postmodernismo' (Donnarumma, 2014: 126 note 54) insofar as '[p]er il *new realism* bisogna ripristinare l'oggettività, la realtà, la verità contro il postmoderno' (Veneziani, 2012). As Ferraris (2012: XI) maintains,

> [l]'esperienza storica dei populismi mediatici, delle guerre post 11 settembre e della recente crisi economica ha portato una pesantissima smentita di quelli che a mio avviso sono i due dogmi del postmoderno: che tutta la realtà sia socialmente costruita e infinitamente manipolabile, e che la verità sia una nozione inutile.

In this quote, Ferraris is arguing that new realism is 'anzitutto la presa d'atto di una svolta' (Ferraris, 2012: XI). In this respect, this marks a radical shift coinciding with the end of the postmodern era: '[c]iò cui si assiste tra fine

Novecento e inizio Duemila [...] è un processo di generale esaurimento del postmoderno' (Donnarumma, 2014: 65). Referring to the early twenty-first century, Donnarumma therefore claims that 'non siamo più nella cultura postmoderna' (Donnarumma, 2014: 24).

According to many theorists of postmodernity, such as Jameson, Lyotard, and Baudrillard, the derealisation of reality is a peculiar characteristic of postmodern society. The postmodern reproduction of reality through many media, such as television and cinema, results in an effect of hyper-reality which paradoxically overshadows reality itself, distancing people from it. Ultimately, reality ends up being replaced by its mediated representation. Therefore, as Esposito (2014: 70) remarks, 'la tendenza postmoderna si rovescia, a un certo punto, in un nuovo realismo'. He further articulates this point, arguing that '[d]a più parti viene detto che, dopo la sbornia irrealistica della stagione postmoderna, il pendolo del pensiero si vada spostando verso un nuovo realismo' (Esposito, 2014: 64). To support his stance, Esposito refers to Badiou's notion of a 'passione per il reale' (Esposito, 2014: 64) and to Baudrillard's idea that 'l'iperrealismo contemporaneo costituisce il prolungamento e insieme il controeffetto di uno stesso processo di derealizzazione' (Esposito, 2014: 64). In fact, Donnarumma (2011: 46) claims that 'l'iperrealismo è il tono che il realismo assume attraversando il postmoderno, per uscirne'. In Ferraris' view (2012), before this epochal shift, which resulted in a return to a new realism, the postmodern derealisation of reality reached its peak around the turn of the century. As Serkowska contends: '[a]lla perdita volontaria dell'esperienza [...] si aggiunge la perdita involontaria che si ha quando aumentano i saperi e le conoscenze mediate, le informazioni acquisite per vie indirette e di conseguenza l'esperienza nel mondo diventa immateriale, virtuale, mediatizzata' (Serkowska. 2011: XIII). According to critics, this postmodern derealisation in Italy corresponds to the role of Berlusconi and his media empire (Riva, 2003). In Berlusconi's Italy, the issue of the manipulation of reality by the media, especially television, came to the fore. For example, introducing Ferraris' philosophical stance on new realism, Harman explains that '[i]n later years, as Italy sank into the mire of Silvio Berlusconi, it seemed to Ferraris that postmodern relativism had reached its logical outcome in right-wing populism' (Harman, 2014: X). Furthermore,

Veneziani remarks that: [l]'effetto politico del postmoderno è per Ferraris il populismo mediatico, in una parola Berlusconi, che sostituisce la realtà col reality e manipola la verità' (2012). In Ferraris' words:

> Il mondo vero certo è diventato una favola, anzi [...] è diventato un reality, ma l'esito è stato il populismo mediatico, un sistema nel quale (purché se ne abbia il potere) si può pretendere di far credere qualsiasi cosa. Nei telegiornali e nei talk show si è assistito al regno del 'Non ci sono fatti, solo interpretazioni' (Ferraris, 2012: 6).

Although this statement could appear to be rather overemphatic, the 'mediatizzazione pervasiva della politica nell'era Berlusconi' (Antonello, 2012a: 177) is indeed a fact that marked the turn of the century and a peculiarity of Italy (Ginsborg, 2005).

For this reason, Ferraris coined the neologism 'realitismo' (2012), stating that: '[i]l realitismo non sta al realismo come il falso, la *fiction*, sta al vero, ma ne prende il posto facendo drammaticamente coincidere finzione e realtà: questo è il punto' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 130). The rigid dichotomy reality/fiction, which originated in the twentieth century, seems insufficient to describe these new phenomena at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As Antonello (2012a: 177) contends,

> [c]ome è possibile infatti rappresentare la 'realtà' quando è essa stessa intrisa di finzione; quando la politica si costruisce attraverso l'apparato spettacolare globale o è filtrata attraverso forme immaginative che rispondono a proiezioni ideologiche variamente connotate, o utopiche o complottistiche? Di che realtà parliamo quando il nostro accesso ad essa non è mai diretto ma sempre distorto dai mass-media e dalla loro intrinseca *embeddedness* — e in maniera emblematica proprio in un paese come l'Italia?

As such, '[c]hi oggi si misura con il realismo, lo fa sempre sull'orlo dell'irrealtà mediatica' (Donnarumma, 2008c: para. 1). To this extent, Mazzarella wonders whether in postmillennial Italy there is a 'mutamento del rapporto tra la realtà e la finzione' (Mazzarella, 2011: 62). The link between postmodernism, derealisation, and media reality with regards to Berlusconi and Italy brings us to the issue of realism as an intrinsic 'political territory' (Beaumont, 2007: 3). As Žižek (2002: 14) claims: 'the ultimate truth of the capitalist utilitarian despiritualised universe is the dematerialisation of "real life" itself, its reversal into a spectral show'.

In contrast to this first dynamic, characterised by the derealisation of reality, and in which the realm of the Imaginary is at the forefront, 'the "postmodern" passion for the semblance ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real' (Žižek, 2002: 9) or, in Esposito's words, an 'eccesso di reale' (Esposito, 2014: 67). Hence, it seems that the turn of the century marks an overlap between de-realised reality and reality disrupted by the uncanny return of the Real. The Real, by means of traumatic events or disturbing images and videos, destructively enters the frame of our everyday reality, which is perceived merely as the product of media representation. In this respect, the Real is conceived of as an awakening from the sleep of reality.[73] However, it is also affected by this very derealisation. In this respect, Žižek aptly remarks that this is 'the fundamental paradox of the 'passion for the Real': it culminates in its apparent opposite, in a *theatrical spectacle*' [original emphasis] (2002: 9), involving a progression, that is, from 'the passion of the Real' (Žižek, 2002: 9) to the '*effect of the Real*' [original emphasis] (Žižek, 2002: 10).[74]

Hence, when commenting on the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Esposito affirms that: 'replicata infinite volte sui teleschermi, quella scena può apparire, allo stesso tempo, come ciò che ci immette nel "deserto del reale" e come un prodotto della televisione' (2014: 69-70). In this case, the 9/11 terrorist attacks appear to be the epitome of this oversaturation of the Imaginary and the irruption of the Real, which are two faces of the same coin, that is to say, the crisis of the Symbolic. In Donnarumma's words: '[i]l crollo delle Torri non si è sottratto a un processo di "de-realizzazione": mentre i newyorkesi sono stati feriti direttamente dal trauma, per il resto del mondo esso è stato tradotto in "immagine", "apparizione spettrale sullo schermo (televisivo)" (Donnarumma, 2014: 64).

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[73]   Along these lines, Recalcati contends that: '[l]'incontro con il reale è sempre l'incontro con uno spigolo duro che ci scuote. E' l'incontro con ciò che ci impedisce di continuare a dormire' (Recalcati, 2012d: 200) and that: 'tutto ciò che ci risveglia dal sonno della realtà è dell'ordine del reale' (Recalcati, 2012d: 201). In this respect, the 9/11 terrorist attacks have been understood by scholars as an awakening of Western society on a global scale: 'si era tanto insistito sulla fine della Storia, sul suicidio della realtà e sulle ludiche fantasmagorie postmoderne, che i due aerei infilati nelle Torri Gemelle hanno avuto l'effetto di una sveglia' (Siti, 2013: 65).

[74]   In his account of the 9/11 attacks, Žižek refers to Karl-Heinz Stockhausen's controversial statement that 'the planes hitting the WTC towers was the ultimate work of art: we can perceive the collapse of the WTC towers as the climactic conclusion of twentieth-century art's "passion for the Real" – the "terrorists" themselves did not do it primarily to provoke real material damage, but *for the spectacular effect of it*' [original emphasis] (Žižek, 2002: 11).

The Real, according to Lacanians, is in any case an awakening: disrupting the familiar frame of our everyday reality, it directly impacts the subject. Referring to the irruption of the Real, Esposito (2014: 68) claims that: '[a]llorché si squarcia il velo che la ricopre – cioè la rete simbolica che aggrega l'esperienza umana nella connessione dei rapporti sociali – il Reale si mostra nel suo aspetto terrificante. Esso è quanto resta della realtà, una volta privata del suo supporto fantasmatico'. It is at this point that, '[s]pogliato del suo significato ulteriore, schiacciato sulla propria immanenza, il reale ci mostra il suo volto mortifero' (Esposito, 2014: 69). Here, Esposito hints at the Lacanian differentiation between reality and the Real. This seems to be the final result after the shift from postmodernity to hypermodernity, as Žižek (2002: 5-6) puts it: 'the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality'. Indeed, the Real is seen 'as opposed to everyday social reality' (Žižek, 2002: 5) and is, indeed, screened by reality itself.

I contend that hypermodernity is another useful term, along with Lacan's Real, to better understand, and more specifically contextualise, the postmillennial realist trends in Italy. Donnarumma (2014) and Recalcati (2010a, 2011b, 2011d) draw the term 'hypermodernity' from Lipovetsky (2005) in order to frame, respectively, the early twenty-first-century realist trends in the arts and the contemporary subject affected by the so-called new symptoms, which I discussed in Section 2.3 of Chapter 2. Thus, the use of this category provides a background which allows us to simultaneously account for the end of postmodernism, the postmillennial realist trends as discussed by Italian scholarship and, from a more Lacanian perspective, the new configuration of the subject in postmillennial Western society.

According to Donnarumma, 'l'ipermodernità è anzitutto la risposta disincantata e critica alle illusioni postmoderne' (2014: 107). Donnarumma emphasises that there is a continuity between postmodernity and hypermodernity, arguing that 'l'ipermodernità non designa la totalità di una nuova era' (2014: 105). From this perspective, Donnarumma claims that hypermodernity 'non segna una frattura netta, violenta e polemica rispetto al postmoderno, come appunto il postmoderno aveva voluto fare con la modernità, ma è uno scivolamento rispetto ad esso' (Donnarumma, 2014: 103). Along the

same lines, Antonello underlines that hypermodernity is a 'termin[e] continuist[a]', similarly to 'tardamodernità' (Antonello, 2012b: 132). According to Donnarumma, in postmillennial society '[l]a logica della modernizzazione sembra affermarsi senza più alcun ostacolo' (Donnarumma, 2014: 104) and thus 'la modernità non è mai finita, e quello a cui assistiamo ora, […] è una sua continuazione esasperata' (Donnarumma, 2014: 103-104).

Similarly, Recalcati underlines a certain continuity between modernity and hypermodernity, which is also why he prefers the use of the term hypermodernity instead of postmodernity to define postmillennial times. As he puts it:

> L'espressione "postmoderno" accentua una differenza per discontinuità, un oltrepassamento dell'orizzonte della modernità, un essere oltre, al di là, *post*, appunto. Al contrario, l'espressione "ipermoderno" allude più che a una rottura o a uno strappo, a una differenza per accentuazione, a una *esasperazione interna* della modernità [original emphasis] (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 11).

Recalcati's use of the term hypermodernity leads us towards the Real, which is conceived of not only as the traumatic awakening from the sleep of our everyday familiar reality, but also as *jouissance*. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Recalcati sees the postmillennial era as being characterised by an 'esaltazione iperattiva della spinta a godere' (Recalcati, 2016a: 623), which does not encounter any limits. This is also reflected in the 'passaggio dallo smarrimento postedipico (o postmoderno) al regime del consumismo ipermoderno' (Recalcati, 2016a: 623). Contemporary Italian Lacanianism insists that the shift from postmodernity to hypermodernity is characterised by a collapse of the Symbolic order and the concurrent rise of the discourse of the capitalist. As a result, the registers of the Imaginary and the Real, *qua* trauma but also jouissance, come to the forefront. In this passage from the derealisation of reality to the excess of the Real, the very relation between the subject and reality is modified. As Recalcati points out, '[l]'esaltazione ipermoderna della libertà segnala come la precarietà che ci circonda non sia solo un prodotto del mercato e dell'economia, ma rifletta anche un'erosione più profonda interna allo stesso ordine simbolico' (Recalcati, 2016a: 625 note 104). In this respect, Lipovetsky's notion of hypermodernity 'fornisce probabilmente la cifra più coerente del discorso del capitalista di Lacan'

(Recalcati, 2016a: 624).

According to Žižek (2002: 12), '[t]here is an intimate connection between the virtualization of reality' and those phenomena which 'attempt to (re)gain a hold on reality, or […] to ground the ego firmly in bodily reality' (Žižek, 2002: 10). In particular, Žižek refers to mental disorders characterised by the action of self-harming; on the one hand, this seems to epitomise the subject's attempt to regain reality and, on the other, it is inscribed within the broader crisis of the Symbolic in contemporary society. In doing so, Žižek wonders: 'if the true opposite of the Real is reality, what if, then, what they are actually escaping from when they cut themselves is not simply the feeling of unreality, of the artificial virtuality of our lifeworld, but the Real itself which explodes in the guise of uncontrolled hallucinations which start to haunt us once we lose our anchoring in reality?' (Žižek, 2002: 20). Whilst underlining the prominence of the register of the Real since the turn of the century, Žižek explicitly links this phenomenon to the collapse of the Symbolic. As he posits: 'cutting must be contrasted with normal tattooed inscriptions on the body, which guarantee the subject's inclusion in the (virtual) symbolic order – the problem with cutters, is the opposite one, namely, the assertion of reality itself' (Žižek, 2002: 10). Recalcati agrees with this perspective, claiming that '[i]l taglio reale interviene infatti, come ci ha insegnato Lacan, laddove fallisce il taglio simbolico' (Recalcati, 2007b: 105). He further remarks, in relation to the art world, that this also happens 'in certe tendenze dell'arte contemporanea dove il taglio non è più, come in Lucio Fontana, taglio della superficie della tela che mostra simbolicamente la consistenza reale dello spazio, ma taglio direttamente, senza mediazioni simboliche, del corpo vivente' (Recalcati, 2007b: 105). For instance, the extreme use of the body without any symbolic mediations for artistic performances is exemplified by Pyotr Pavlensky's 'protest art' (Walker, 2014: para. 3). Pavlensky's highly disturbing recent performances revolve around a direct attack on his own body and include sewing his lips together, entwining barbed wire around his body, nailing his scrotum to Red Square in Moscow, and slicing off his earlobe.

In conclusion, scholars consider postmodernity as an era dominated by a de-realised/de-realising relation with reality, involving the power of the media, the society of the spectacle, virtual reality, and so forth. In Italy, this coincides

with Berlusconi's era and the issue of the media distortion, and thus derealisation, of reality. On the contrary, in hypermodernity, the Real, due to the crisis of the Symbolic and the discourse of the capitalist, comes to the fore not only in terms of traumatic events that disrupt everyday reality but also as an uncontrolled *jouissance*, of which Berlusconism is the epitome. Italian scholarship addresses the issue of realist trends in the twenty-first century as emerging from the shift from the postmodern derealisation of reality to the hypermodern return of the Real. Therefore, Italian thinkers, both in Italian Studies and in Lacanian Studies, register an epochal shift, although some do not consider postmodernism to be over yet. In this shift from postmodernity to hypermodernity, the Lacanian distinction between reality, the familiar framework which sustains the subject, and the Real, which marks and unsettles that very familiar framework of reality, proves useful for understanding the context in which these realist trends emerge. In the next section, I will further elaborate on this Lacanian distinction between reality and the Real and deal with the impact of the Real on the arts, addressing the issue of the return of the Real in the field of aesthetics.

4. The Return of the Lacanian Real

In the postmillennial return of the Real, while the debate in Italian scholarship revolves around the notion of reality, the fabric of which consists of both the Imaginary and the Symbolic according to Lacan's teaching, contemporary Italian Lacanian scholars focus on the notion of the Real, namely that which exceeds the aforementioned Lacanian orders. From a Lacanian perspective, reality and the Real are opposed, since reality is that which prevents the emergence of the Real and protects the subject from it. Yet, the two terms are correlated, insofar as it is within reality, and not outside of it, that the Real can be encountered. As Lacan points out: '[i]n the end, doesn't the feeling of the real reach its high point in the pressing manifestation of an unreal, hallucinatory reality?' (Lacan, 1988: 66-67). From a Lacanian perspective, there is no such thing as an objective reality; reality is not simply what exists 'out there' independently of the observer: '[l]a realtà con cui l'umano ha a che fare, è [...] la realtà per come la "possiamo vedere", non la realtà per come è' (Lolli, 2011: 56). Indeed, reality always depends on the subject's fantasy, which provides a screen against the irruption of the traumatic Real. As Walsh (1995: 171) puts it: 'reality and subjectivity are both organized around a traumatic "kernel of the Real". For the subject, the Lacanian Real represents a complete Otherness, which nonetheless comes from the inside, and that cannot be escaped or fully assimilated by the subject, but must instead be faced.

Although Perniola notes that '[è] sugli aspetti più violenti e più crudi della realtà che si è concentrata l'attenzione degli artisti' (Perniola, 2000: 4), from the contemporary Italian Lacanian perspective it is the notion of the Real, as opposed to reality, that is at stake in a discussion of contemporary art and realism. Indeed, contemporary Italian Lacanian aesthetics highlights a:

> [F]orte rivoluzione rispetto alle teorie estetiche precedenti (in particolare quella idealistiche), che consiste nel porre al centro della riflessione non più il rapporto tra l'arte e la *realtà* (intesa come rappresentazione della realtà), ma tra l'arte e il *Reale* (Bellavita, 2006: 208).

Equally, international and national Lacanian scholars have noted an 'irruption of the Real' in contemporary society that also affects current artistic trends: the

philosopher Mario Perniola (2000: 5) observes that the Real 'irrompe e sconvolge il mondo dell'arte'; the art historian Hal Foster calls this phenomenon a 'return of the Real' (1996) in his seminal book of the same name; Gérard Wajcman entitles a chapter of his book a 'return to the Real' (1998); while Bellavita (2006: 203-204) and Lolli (2012: 46) perceive 'una emersione del reale'. All these expressions refer to the 'Real' in the strict Lacanian sense of the word as discussed in Chapter 1, and thus also refer to its upsetting, traumatic, disturbing nature. This irruption, emergence, or return *of,* or *to* the Real does not refer to artists' intent to reproduce reality as it is normally experienced, or to portray daily life as realistically as possible, like in mimetic art, nineteenth- and twentieth-century realism, neorealism, or even hyperrealism. These expressions refer to artworks and artistic trends which are centred on the uncanny and disruptive aspects of the Real *qua* the things of trauma. These include: the disruption of reality; traumatic experiences; the death drive; the breaking with the order of the Imaginary and the Symbolic; and so on. These Lacanian scholars and art critics note a change in paradigm since, as Recalcati (2007a: 71) argues, according to this kind of art '[l]opera d'arte viene concepita non come operazione simbolica sul trauma del reale, ma come esibizione ostentata del trauma del reale in quanto tale'. The very expression 'irruption of the Real' means, precisely, that the artwork generates a breakdown of the imaginary and symbolic boundaries: both the Imaginary, which is the Lacanian category that frames and sustains a process of identification based on its morphogenic power and that leads to the construction of self-identity, and the Symbolic, which is the order of language and its laws, crumble. It is for this reason that, when used by these Lacanian scholars, the word 'realism' is accompanied by adjectives such as 'traumatic' (Foster, 1996), 'estremo' (Perniola, 2000; Giglioli, 2011), 'psicotico' (Perniola, 2000; Recalcati, 2007a), 'narcisistico' (Recalcati, 2007a), 'maligno' (Recalcati, 2007a), or 'perverso' (Recalcati, 2007a).

Referring to some phenomena of contemporary art practice such as pop-art and superrealism, Foster (1996) was one of the first scholars to introduce the term 'Real' into the debate, in the Lacanian sense, referring to the 'contemporary concern with trauma and abjection' (Foster, 1996: 166). It is for this reason that Italian scholars, as I will discuss in Section 2.2 of this Chapter, often refer to him.

Foster explicitly states that 'the theoretical model [he has] implicated' is related to the Lacanian definition of 'the real in terms of trauma' (Foster, 1996, 132): repetitions, traumatic effects, and shock are indeed crucial elements in his analysis. As Perniola argues: '[l]'incontro col reale genera angoscia e trauma: infatti, dinnanzi al reale, vengono meno tutte le parole e tutte le categorie. Il trauma sembra perciò ad Hal Foster come la nozione più adatta per interpretare l'arte di oggi, la quale sarebbe appunto caratterizzata dalla volontà di porre lo spettatore dinanzi a qualcosa di terrificante e abietto' (Perniola, 2000: 8). This prominence of the traumatic aspects of the Real is due to the fact that '[l]'idea di trauma gode oggi di una fortuna senza precedenti. Risuona ovunque: nella comunicazione corrente, nel linguaggio giornalistico, negli studi umanistici e nelle scienze sociali' (Giglioli, 2011: 7), to the extent that, paradoxically, '[t]rauma è oggi tutto ciò di cui si parla. Da eccesso che non poteva giungere al linguaggio ad accesso privilegiato alla nominazione del mondo' (Giglioli, 2011: 8). Therefore, according to contemporary Italian Lacanianism, Lacan's thought seems to be the unavoidable theoretical tool 'che fornisce la possibilità di formulare la poetica del realismo estremo delle arti oggi' (Perniola, 2000: 8). Hernández-Navarro (2006: 19) agrees with this perspective, claiming that the use of the notion of the Real by these Lacanian scholars and art critics, in particular Foster, made this term an unavoidable concept for the analysis of art in relation to trauma, the obscene, and the abject. In effect, as has been observed by art historians such as Julius (2002), Alfano Miglietti (2004), and Cashell (2009), contemporary artists (e.g. Andrés Serrano, Franko B., Gina Pane, Vito Acconci, Orlan, Ulay and Marina Abramovic, and so on) very frequently stage the obscene and the abject, exhibiting provocative artworks which incorporate blood, urine, excrement, acts of violence and self-mutilation, or disease. These violated and exhibited bodies evoke this turn to the Real (Foster, 1996: xviii). Although they have gained prominence on the art scene, 'l'accento non è più messo sulla bella apparenza delle forme, ma proprio su ciò che minaccia e compromette la sua integrità' (Perniola, 2000: 4).

The claim made by contemporary Italian Lacanian aesthetics is that the emerging Real is thus not treated, channelled, elaborated, and deployed *through* and *within* the orders of the Imaginary and the Symbolic but rather overflows beyond them. From this perspective, the Real is exactly that which emerges

traumatically and creates discomfort in this kind of art, and is no longer represented *through* and *within* the imaginary-symbolic framework of art but is, rather, presented *in spite of* the framework of art.

Foster contends that 'some contemporary work refuses [...] to pacify the gaze, to unite the imaginary and the symbolic against the real' (1996: 140). In this respect, Hernández-Navarro, addressing body art, affirms that '[s]e trata de un arte donde se rompen las fronteras entre la vida y el arte, entre la representación y el mundo real. El dolor más que representado está *presentado*' (Hernández-Navarro, 2006: 132). Indeed, as Foster observes, there is a shift in art '*from reality as an effect of representation, to the real as a thing of trauma*' [original emphasis] (Foster, 1996: 146). In these artistic trends, representation, far from being the vehicle for the mere depiction of reality, is disrupted in its imaginary and symbolic components by the traumatic and violent emergence of the Real.

Lacanian scholars dealing with realism in contemporary art have also used the adjective extreme since it conveys the idea of an excessive and untamed Real, which cannot be fully integrated into the imaginary-symbolic device of art. Giglioli underlines that '[l]'estremo non è un repertorio tematico – per esempio la violenza, il sangue, l'abiezione, attraverso cui può manifestarsi ma in cui non si risolve' (Giglioli, 2011: 14). It is rather, as he argues, 'una tensione verso qualcosa che eccede costitutivamente i limiti della rappresentazione' (Giglioli, 2011: 14). Here, Giglioli therefore hints at the very nature of the Real as being behind and beyond representation. As Perniola underlines: '[i]l realismo estremo di oggi ha proprio questa pretesa: mostrare l'esistente senza nessuna mediazione' (Perniola, 2000: 7). For this reason, Lolli claims that nowadays '[i]l raccapricciante ha reclamato visibilità e preteso un riconoscimento estetico' (Lolli, 2012: 127). Indeed, those aspects of reality previously excluded or banned from the spectator's view are now obtaining prominence in the art world, which seems to revolve precisely around an 'esposizione di visioni insopportabili' (Lolli, 2012: 124). This shows the 'spinta attuale alla esibizione "spudorata" di tutto ciò che è mostrabile' (Lolli, 2012: 124). Once every form of mediation has vanished, the Real manifests itself in all its disturbing and disquieting essence: '[c]orpi aggrediti, attaccati, feriti, corpi sulla cui pelle a volte sono trasferiti i segni dello spettacolo, della visibilità e dell'arte, altri diventano il luogo scelto in cui agire la

propria sofferenza' (Riccardi, 2012: 81).

These aspects lead to the discussion of another pivotal point: the disappearance of symbolic mediation (Hernández-Navarro, 2006: 20), or, in Recalcati's words, 'un collasso del simbolico' (Recalcati, 2007a: 78), as well as the breaking of the imaginary screen as a protection against the Real. As Perniola (2000: 4) writes:

> Abbiamo assistito alla manifestazione e alla diffusione di una sensibilità artistica […] che si è configurata come una vera e propria *irruzione del reale* nel mondo rarefatto e altamente simbolico dell'arte. E' sugli aspetti più violenti e più crudi della realtà che si è concentrata l'attenzione degli artisti: sono innanzitutto i temi della morte e del sesso ad acquistare il massimo rilievo. Non si tratta – come in passato – di una rappresentazione il più veristica possibile di queste realtà, ma di una *esposizione diretta e povera di mediazioni simboliche di eventi* che suscitano sgomento, ripugnanza, se non addirittura ribrezzo e orrore. Le categorie del disgusto e dell'abiezione entrano prepotentemente nella riflessione estetica, la quale si trova costretta ad *abbandonare l'ideale* di una contemplazione pura e disinteressata a favore di un'esperienza perturbante nella quale repulsione e attrazione, paura e desiderio, dolore e piacere, rifiuto e complicità si mescolano e si confondono [emphasis added].

It seems that the main contemporary artistic trend, especially its most extreme manifestations, tends to go beyond not only the register of the Imaginary, the field of the unified and idealised image of the body, but also the order of the Symbolic, where *jouissance* is delimited through the power of speech and the laws of language. As I have discussed in Chapter 1, *jouissance*, which is a paradoxical 'pleasure in pain', evokes an idea of transgression and the rupture of limits. In this respect, the Imaginary and the Symbolic constitute a defence mechanism to restrain *jouissance*, which partakes of the order of the Real. Indeed, the Real is precisely that which cannot be reduced or assimilated, either to the Imaginary or the Symbolic. As Recalcati claims: '[l]a novità che sembra instaurarsi invece nelle tendenze più attuali dell'arte contemporanea consiste in un interesse a senso unico (psicotico e perverso) per il reale che scioglie i legami con l'immaginario e con il simbolico' (Recalcati, 2007a: 76).

According to Perniola, this condition 'non nasce dal rifiuto del reale, ma al contrario da una carenza, da un buco nell'ordine simbolico' (Perniola, 2000: 17). This brings us back to the Lacanian theory of psychoses as developed by Lacan in his Seminar III. According to Lacan, 'what is not symbolized returns in the real' (Lacan, 1997a: 86) or, to be even more precise, 'the object of a *Verwerfung*

[foreclusion] reappear[s] in the real' (Lacan, 1997a: 190). In psychosis, 'the unconscious is present but not functioning' (Lacan, 1997a: 143) and, for this reason, 'the subject finds himself in direct contact with the Real' (Chiesa, 2007: 108), which literally invades it. As I have already discussed in Chapter 2, Recalcati employs psychosis as a paradigm to understand hypermodern society and, subsequently, art. According to Recalcati, psychosis is the 'vertice di osservazione privilegiato delle trasformazioni sociali del nostro tempo' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 59), and thus constitutes 'il punto da cui l'autore parte per formulare la sua ipotesi di un *realismo psicotico* che possa spiegare, nel suo essere un'emersione del Reale nel Simbolico della rappresentazione, alcune peculiari emergenze dell'arte contemporanea' (Bellavita, 2005: 84) and the '*forclusione generalizzata dei testi artistici*' [original emphasis] (Bellavita, 2005: 84)

Since Freud's times, society has undergone major economic, social, and cultural changes that have inevitably influenced the cultural system of art. While in the past these provocative aspects of art were seen as scandalous or even innovative, nowadays 'such shocking excesses are part of the system itself' (Žižek, 2000: 25). If the system of contemporary art relies on provocation for its own sake, this is confronted by the Lacanian aesthetics of the Real. As Bellavita (2006: 214) argues:

> È evidente che se la psicoanalisi di Freud è il prodotto di un'epoca basata sulla repressione (l'epoca vittoriana), la psicoanalisi contemporanea deve fare i conti con un sistema sociale e un sistema visivo basato sulla provocazione e sull'esibizione.

In this respect, contemporary Italian Lacanians are completely aligned with Lacan's perspective, according to which art and its creations, as well as every kind of cultural production, are 'historically situated' (Lacan, 1992: 107).[75]

The cultural, sociological, and historical reasons for these extreme and transgressive productions are located by contemporary Lacanianism in the shift in society from a neurotic to a psychotic-perverse paradigm, fostered by the crisis

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[75] As Lacan (1992: 107) contends: 'all artistic production, including especially that of the fine arts, is historically situated. You don't paint in Picasso's time as you painted in Velazquez's; you don't write a novel in 1930 as you did in Stendhal's time. This is an absolutely essential fact that does not for the time being need to be located under the rubric of the collectivity or the individual – let's place it under the rubric of culture'.

of the Symbolic and the domain of the discourse of the capitalist. In this respect, as argued in Section 2 of Chapter 2, Recalcati observes that these contemporary artistic creations share the centrality of the category of the Real with those manifestations of the unconscious in hypermodern society. This allows us to establish a connection between hypermodern society and hypermodern art. In this framework, according to Recalcati, new symptoms emerge which differ dramatically from the past. This led Recalcati to theorise a shift from a *clinica del simbolico* to a *clinica del reale*. Similarly, he also notes a shift in the arts from what I refer to as the aesthetics of the Symbolic to an aesthetics of the Real. Along these lines, Lolli maintains that since the second half of the twentieth century, increasingly,

> [l]'intera produzione artistico-spettacolare dell'uomo si è, dunque, piegata alla nuova modalità di creazione, effetto della radicale trasformazione socioculturale che ha permesso l'inclusione nel "rappresentabile" di ciò che fino a pochi anni orsono era rimasto ai margini, evocato semplicemente per allusione (Lolli, 2012: 128).

Nowadays, as Giglioli puts it, it seems that 'ciò che a rigore dovrebbe essere temuto come il fuoco (il Reale, e il trauma che inevitabilmente ne deriva) diventi invece oggetto di supremo desiderio' (2011: 22).

In postmillennial Italy, Italian Lacanians, as well as scholars in other disciplines, note that '[i]l successo che, ad esempio, il genere *pulp,* il genere *horror,* il genere porno, o la *real tv* hanno ottenuto risiede, tra le altre ragioni, nel progressivo indebolimento delle facoltà di analisi dello spettatore, "drogato" da dosi sempre più abbondanti di "agenti angoscianti" che traggono la loro potenza dall'esposizione del "brutale" nelle sue varie manifestazioni' (Lolli, 2012: 124). If the crisis of the Symbolic causes a proliferation of the Imaginary that, to some extent, can be seen in the overwhelming presence and domain of virtual reality, reality television, and so on, the return of the Real seems to fulfill the need for something that reawakens the hypermodern subject. In other words, '[i]l realismo estremo ha prodotto una quantità assai rilevante di immagini dotate di fortissimo impatto emozionale' (Perniola, 2000: 13), which, however, 'devono essere continuamente sostituite da altre dotate di maggior forza d'impatto, oppure di caratteristiche capaci di risvegliare l'attenzione' (Perniola, 2000: 14). In contemporary hypermodern society, the art world 'se vuole farsi ascoltare da

un pubblico abituato all'informazione-spettacolo e al *reality*, deve smarcarsi dalla astrattezza, dalle mediazioni e dall'inoffensività tipici della creazione' (Simonetti, 2008: 121). Nonetheless, it should also 'guardarsi dal cadere a sua volta nei meccanismi di estetizzazione e svuotamento del reale promossi su larga scala dalle forme della comunicazione di massa' (Simonetti, 2008: 121-122). From this perspective, the excess of the Real in society nowadays also seems to be due to a

> ricerca di nuovi e più profondi *effetti di realtà*, adeguati a una fase della cultura di massa che stringendo verità e finzione in un nodo inestricabile ha fatto del realismo una cifra stilistica generale, ma al prezzo di rimetterne in discussione i codici e lo statuto. Si tratta in parte di un gesto morale, di opposizione alla falsificazione industriale realizzata dal potere; in parte di una scelta obbligata, frutto di una deriva estetica – una sorta di coazione al realismo che passa sulle teste di tutti gli scrittori, anzi degli artisti in genere (Simonetti, 2008: 121).

In conclusion, at the turn of the century, scholars note an increasing tendency in artistic trends to 'porre gli altri dinanzi a un fatto più reale del reale, che li colpisca per il suo carattere estremo e che abbia perciò il carattere della sfida' (Perniola, 2000: 108). If, in postmodern times, reality was perceived as a mere construction and seen as being de-realised through a variety of different media, those transgressive artistic trends could provide an awakening for the anaesthetised audience. In this respect, contemporary Italian Lacanian aesthetics contends that this shift in the art world underpins a wider and more radical change that affects hypermodern society: namely, the collapse of the Symbolic which goes hand in hand with the domain of the discourse of the capitalist. In the next section, I will explore in which terms, according to contemporary Lacanianism, the Real can emerge through the imaginary-symbolic device constituted by an artwork. I will also discuss the socio-political commitment of Italian Lacanian aesthetics.

5. Contemporary Italian Lacanian Aesthetics and the Real

5.1 The (Im)Possible Representation of the Real

As emphasised in the previous sections, as it is broadly understood, realism primarily involves the portrait of a given reality. On the contrary, as I have discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the issue at the core of the Lacanian aesthetics of the Real consists of whether, paradoxically, it is possible to 'represent the essentially unrepresentable' (Hughes, 2012: 42), that is to say, the Lacanian Real. In other words, the question underpinning the aesthetics of the Real is: how is it possible to include in a representational framework that which is structurally beyond it? This question is clearly paradoxical insofar as the Real is, by definition, that which is beyond both the Imaginary and the Symbolic and thus cannot be captured by means of images and words. In particular, the contradiction lies in the fact that the 'crude real of extra-symbolic' (Chiesa, 2012: 208) can nonetheless manifest itself through the other two Lacanian registers. Therefore, I find it crucial to underline that what is at stake in the Italian Lacanian aesthetics is the 'representation of the unrepresentable', as Chiesa (2012: 208) puts it, instead of 'non-representation *tout-court*' (Chiesa, 2012: 209). For this reason, Recalcati contends that 'l'arte si impegna nell'articolazione dell'inarticolabile e non nel culto mistico dell'inarticolabile in quanto tale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 33).

In order to clarify this conundrum, let me recall that the Real itself 'costituisce indubbiamente un vero e proprio paradosso nel sistema lacaniano' (Ronchi, 2012b: 49). This is because, as argued in the previous chapters, in the first stages of his teaching, Lacan believes that both the Imaginary and the Symbolic can completely 'cover' the Real, and it is in this perspective that he conceives a language-like unconscious. According to Ronchi, '[i]l Lacan che partecipa della svolta linguistica della filosofia occidentale [...] ha [...] affermato, fino alla noia, che non c'è che il linguaggio' (Ronchi, 2012b: 49). Nonetheless, in his later phase Lacan proceeds to develop the idea of a Real-like unconscious, where the Real cannot be completely assimilated either by the Imaginary or by the Symbolic. Therefore, as Ronchi puts it: 'ponendo il reale, si sta anche dicendo che il simbolico non è tutto [...] e che c'è un al di là del linguaggio' (Ronchi, 2012b:

49). That is to say, 'c'è del reale fuori dal simbolico' (Ronchi, 2011: 16) or, to put it simply, 'c'è del Reale *al di là* del linguaggio' (Ronchi, 2011: 16). Indeed, the Real is that which exceeds the other Lacanian registers, that of the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

Nevertheless, this notion of the impossibility of representing that which is beyond representation is only apparent. According to contemporary Italian Lacanianism, as I also remarked in Chapter 2, it is indeed possible to account for the Real by means of the Imaginary and the Symbolic (Bellavita, 2006; Recalcati, 2007a; Resmini, 2013). Recalcati goes even further when he affirms that 'il reale può essere raggiunto *solo* dal simbolico' [emphasis added] (Recalcati, 2007a: 79). As he puts it:

> Il problema del reale come al di là della raffigurazione [...] è posto da Lacan come centrale, ma solo all'interno di una pratica della figurazione. E' l'arte come operazione simbolica che può fare emergere il reale (l'infigurabile, il non-figurabile, l'irrapresentabile, l'aspeculare) (Recalcati, 2012a: 613).

The idea that although 'l'opera d'arte resta simbolica' (Recalcati, 2007a: 34) it can nonetheless allow for an encounter with the Real is not unanimously shared by scholars. For instance, although Perniola considers that 'l'arte [...] appartiene al simbolico e non al reale' (Perniola, 2000: 11), he nonetheless utterly disagrees with the perspective of Italian Lacanian aesthetics, claiming that '[l]'idea che l'arte possa fornire una via d'accesso al reale e alla cosa è, in termini strettamente lacaniani, insostenibile' (Perniola, 2000: 11). In my view, Perniola fails to acknowledge the aforementioned paradox of the Real that can actually be framed through and within an imaginary-symbolic device, like that of art. As Resmini puts it, art 'is that which allows the real to emerge, either as the veiled Thing or the partial object that unsettles the familiar' (Resmini, 2013: 289). Surely, a direct and unmediated access to the Real could be problematic from both a clinical and an aesthetic perspective: it is for this reason that such an attempt to reach the Real and to (re)present it in art is labelled psychotic.

The perspective developed by contemporary Italian Lacanian aesthetics aims at addressing 'come attraverso il simbolico il reale possa affiorare nella sua alterità perturbante' (Recalcati, 2005: 13) or, to put it differently, '[c]ome il Simbolico mostra il suo limite e consente al Reale di emergere' (Bellavita, 2005:

243). Recalcati's three aesthetics of the Real, as discussed in Chapter 2, display three possible ways in which, following Lacan's teaching, the Real might emerge through the imaginary-symbolic device of art: as a veiled Thing, as a remainder, and as a *sinthome*. Moreover, the innovative aspect of Recalcati's work consists in his development of an aesthetics that, despite having the category of the Real at its core, does not neglect the other two orders, and conceives of art based on their mutual combinations (Resmini, 2013). However, in doing so, Recalcati arguably does not spell out this articulation and interconnection between the three Lacanian registers, avoiding an explicit account of how the Real might be combined, and at which level, with the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Contemporary Italian Lacanian aesthetics claims that art establishes a relation with the Real. However, which kind of relationship is this? Are there different levels of possible relations with the Real? I shall now address this issue, taking into account the dialectic between, on the one hand, the Imaginary and the Symbolic and, on the other, the Real-as-formless, namely the pure Real unknotted by the other registers.

According to contemporary Lacanian aesthetics, there are two main relationships with the Real in the matter of aesthetics. On the one hand, the Real can be overwhelmed, absorbed, or even sedated by an excess of the Imaginary or of the Symbolic. On the other hand, the Real could be overwhelming and disrupting due to a lack of the imaginary and the symbolic functions. This pole concerns the Real in its disruptiveness towards the aesthetic dimension of the aesthetic artefact (i.e. body art, extreme art, radical performances, and art involving body modification). In this respect, Recalcati uses the aesthetic categories of the *forma*, which refers to the Imaginary and the Symbolic, and *forza*, which relates to the Real: 'tutto il problema dell'arte in generale […] consiste proprio nel come calibrare costruttivamente la relazione tra la forza e la forma' (Recalcati, 2009a: 62).

According to Recalcati, there is a 'riduzione della rappresentazione a una pura mostrazione autoreferenziale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 121) when the Imaginary takes over the other orders to the point that it 'ricopre il reale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 99). As Carmagnola points out, '[l]'uso immaginario delle immagini si distingue dall'uso simbolico delle stesse: è […] un uso non religioso, non politico'

(Carmagnola, 2006: 29). This often happens in hypermodern capitalistic society where 'l'immagine ridotta a marca' (Recalcati, 2007b: 117) displays the crisis of the Symbolic inasmuch as it has completely lost its symbolic value and been reduced to a mere brand. Recalcati (2007a: 99) affirms that '[l]a proliferazione attuale di questo genere di immagini non risponde affatto a un ritorno spaesante del reale nell'epoca della crisi del simbolico e della sua funzione normativa, ma indica, al contrario, una modalità perversa di negazione dell'alterità del reale, un trattamento *solo immaginario* del reale' [emphasis added]. On the contrary, if the Symbolic overcomes the Real, the work of art might end up being 'a sterile provocation, a self-referential exercise' (Resmini, 2013: 280) as can be seen in some cases of contemporary conceptual art and analytic art.

The Real, although apparently sedated, is present and operative in mimetic art. I would like to recall Lacan's example of Cézanne here, which I discussed in Chapter 1. In Seminar VII, Lacan considers some paintings in which Cézanne offers a realistic portrayal of apples in order to claim that art always involves and allows for an encounter with the Real. This is even more the case, Lacan argues, with realistic art: 'Cézanne cerca di rinunciare allo sguardo pittorico – che idealizza e sublima – sul mondo per farci entrare in un contatto scabro, severo, duro con le cose stesse' (Benvenuto, 2014: 259). According to Lacan, Cézanne's intention is therefore to '*andare verso le cose stesse*' [original emphasis] (Benvenuto, 2014: 259). His aim is not to represent reality as realistically as possible but rather to show something that is beyond it. As Benvenuto (2014: 259) puts it: 'Cézanne ci dirige verso il Reale riflettendo l'artificiosità della rappresentazione del mondo', 'e così ci fa "realizzare" che la natura reale non è quella trasfigurata dalla mimetica artistica' (Benvenuto, 2014: 260). Therefore, 'realistic art is the art which camouflages the Real and occludes it in the name of reality, yet simultaneously brings it to light most intensely' (Ronen, 2002: 164). According to Recalcati, this is also the case with Morandi, as discussed in Section 6 of Chapter 2, who 'non si limita […] a riprodurre l'esistente' (Recalcati, 2007a: 139 note 9).

Another possibility is for the Real to be combined with the Imaginary and the Symbolic, as occurs in another of Lacan's examples, that of the painting *Ambassadors* by Holbein, which I addressed in Chapter 1, Section 5, and in

Chapter 2, Section 4. In that work of art, the anamorphosis unsettles the observer and subverts the imaginary-symbolic representation: the Real is in tension with the other two registers. As Pagliardini (2016: 254) underlines, the skull 'non ha questo potere anamorfico in quanto teschio, dunque in quanto rappresentazione della morte […]. Non ha proprietà anamorfiche per il suo significato, non è la dimensione contenutistica quella che conta'. Along these lines, Ronchi (2001: 243) affirms that '[s]e il teschio fosse dato da Holbein semplicemente come teschio, immediatamente leggibile come tale, esso avrebbe tutt'al più un valore simbolico'. In this case, however, the Real does not dismantle representation as occurs in some contemporary artistic trends. Similarly, according to Recalcati, Morandi's and Burri's artworks display a well-balanced relation between all the three Lacanian registers, as argued in Section 6 of Chapter 2.

The Real can also be unknotted by the other registers, emerging in a disrupting way. Italian Lacanians underline that it is not possible to have an 'accesso diretto e prelinguistico ("originario", "animale", "naturale", "pregenitale", "preedipico", "prediscorsivo", "carnale") al reale' (Recalcati, 2007: 83). Hence, a 'tattica di aggiramento' (Giglioli, 2011: 22) is required in order to represent the Real *qua* unrepresentable. On the contrary, it is the 'realismo psicotico e perverso dell'arte contemporanea' (Recalcati, 2007a: 83) and the 'operazione realista dell'informe' (Recalcati, 2007a: 89) that conceives of the Real as accessible without any imaginary or symbolic mediation. For this reason, concerning the extreme tendencies of contemporary art, Recalcati refers to an 'esaltazione ideologica del prelinguistico e della dimensione psicotica dell'essere' (Recalcati, 2007a: 35). As such, the return of the Real 'non deve essere confusa con l'irruzione del brutto' (Recalcati, 2007a: 94), namely with those excessive, obscene, and disturbing elements that characterise some contemporary forms of art. Indeed, from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, Peterlini (2006: 111) contends that 'non possiamo riconoscere in questo ambito di ricerca artistica alcun movimento di sublimazione fondante l'opera d'arte'. Peterlini agrees with Recalcati's assertion that 'solo l'arte come operazione simbolica può far emergere il reale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 59). Nonetheless, Peterlini (2006: 111) also underlines that 'visto il riconoscimento attribuitovi dalla società, non possiamo nemmeno negare che qualcosa che ha a che vedere con l'arte (e quindi con la sublimazione)

sia in atto'.

In these extreme trends of art, '[l]a riproduzione fedele della realtà non dà scampo e impedisce la possibilità di ridurre il turbamento personale che si prova di fronte all'esibizione dello scempio' (Lolli, 2012: 121) and 'obbliga[no] semplicemente l'involontario spettatore al contatto diretto – non mediato – con la fatticità di un evento' (Lolli, 2012: 121). According to Lolli, every artistic creation should contain 'la presenza [...] di un velo che garantisca la giusta "distanza di sicurezza" tra la "cosa" e il soggetto' (Lolli, 2012: 121) in order to allow the Real to appear in a mediated way. Lolli's perspective follows Lacan's and echoes Recalcati's aesthetics of the void, as discussed in Section 3 of Chapter 2. As Lolli (2012: 121) contends: 'l'atto artistico consiste – dice Lacan – nell'organizzare il vuoto, ovvero, nel servirsi dell'immaginario per organizzare simbolicamente il reale'. Instead, the aim of psychotic realism is to 'mostrare il vuoto e a lasciar liberamente tracimare l'orrore che veicola, senza assillo alcuno per gli effetti che è in grado di determinare' (Lolli, 2012: 121).

Finally, the Real could completely destroy the nature of representation, staging death itself. The Real emerges as something deadly in the case of snuff movies and snuff pornography (Žižek, 2002), but also in those videos in which murder, torture, and rape are displayed. In these cases, 'tra realtà e rappresentazione non c'è più scarto' (Rella, 1980: 90): these are attempts 'to show the real thing rather than a simulation' (Black, 2002b: 65). This most extreme case is not addressed by Italian Lacanian aesthetics as it is not relevant to the Italian artistic panorama.

In conclusion, contemporary Italian Lacanianism claims that the Real, that which escapes visualisation and symbolisation, can nonetheless emerge through artwork, namely an imaginary-symbolic device. I have outlined the different possibilities for this emergence resulting from different combinations of Lacanian registers and their prevalence over the others. In the next subsection, I will argue that the Real is at the core of every artwork and that it constitutes its unconscious, that is to say, its hard and non-interpretable kernel.

5.2 The Real (as the) Unconscious of Art

According to Resmini's seminal article, 'the real as the impossible – the real that *resists* – constitutes the displaced gravitational center around which revolve the different incarnations of an Italian psychoanalytic aesthetics' (Resmini, 2013: 278). Perniola (2000: 15) concurs with this perspective when he notes a proximity between art and that indefinable resistance to the Imaginary and the Symbolic and claims that an artwork 'è affine al reale di cui condivide l'aspra e rocciosa inconvenienza'. According to Perniola (2000: 15):

> Se c'è un nocciolo duro nell'arte, questo non deve essere cercato nel soggetto, nell'artista, nel suo desiderio di esprimersi e di comunicare, ma nell'opera, nella sua radicale estraneità, nella sua irriducibilità a un'unica identità, nel suo carattere essenzialmente enigmatico.

From a contemporary Italian Lacanian perspective, every artwork contains this untranslatable and irreducible kernel that resists all interpretation and cannot be completely assimilated by the Imaginary and the Symbolic. According to Perniola (2000: 15), although every work of art is open to an infinite number of interpretations, 'l'arte […] contiene un nucleo incomunicabile'.

In this respect, as already noted in Section 6 of Chapter 2, Recalcati refers to the 'unconscious of art' as something 'totalmente diverso dall'idea dell'inconscio come serbatoio originario e notturno di significati. L'inconscio si manifesta qui come *resistenza dell'opera alle parole*, come irriducibilità del reale dell'opera al senso' (Recalcati, 2007a: 155). To put it briefly, '[q]uesta resistenza alla traduzione è espressione di una potenza che è, a nostro giudizio, *spia*, *indice*, *emergenza del reale*' (Recalcati, 2009a: 140). Therefore, according to the aesthetics of the Real, '[l]'opera d'arte […] è taglio, frattura, resistenza, impossibilità di riportare punto a punto la trama significante ai suoi cosiddetti significati primari' (Recalcati, 2009a: 140). Contemporary Italian Lacanian aesthetics, especially as developed by Recalcati, highlights 'l'irriducibilità del reale rispetto al senso' (Recalcati, 2007a: 157). In contrast to Fornari and the hermeneutic approach, according to which every signifier is associated with a single signified, Recalcati argues that 'la dimensione inconscia dell'opera consist[e] non tanto nella funzione che articola significante e significato *ma nella sbarra che li separa*' (Recalcati, 2009a: 140).

The aesthetics of the Real describes the unconscious of art as 'non tanto

come uno sprigionamento di forze istintuali o come la sede arcaica di una semantica originaria, quanto come resistenza dell'opera a ogni sua possibile traduzione, come impossibilità di convertire l'irriducibilità della sua presenza in una formazione di senso' (Recalcati, 2007a: 157). Italian Lacanian aesthetics insists that:

> If on the one hand the unconscious appears inextricably entwined with the Symbolic, on the other hand it is also connected with the Real, the inaccessible domain of what resists symbolisation absolutely. This is why it would be misleading to think the unconscious as a latent narrative waiting to be rescued to signification, temporarily occupying the place of what is repressed (Vighi, 2006: 17).

Recalcati establishes a shift from the 'inconscio dell'opera' to the 'inconscio all'opera', claiming that, in the field of psychoanalytic aesthetics, '[l]'inconscio che occorre cogliere al lavoro non è quello dell'autore ma quello che abita l'opera stessa, il suo evento, la sua forza, la sua potenza generativa' (Recalcati, 2009a: 111). Hence, this Italian psychoanalytic aesthetics not only inevitably rejects the romantic and pre-Freudian conception of the unconscious, as the inner place of irrational and instinctual forces, but also challenges the notion of a language-like unconscious, as developed by Lacan during the 1950s. As Recalcati points out: 'l'inconscio strutturato come un linguaggio esaltava il carattere apertamente retorico-linguistico dell'inconscio freudiano' (Recalcati, 2007a: 200). Rather, contemporary Italian Lacanianism focuses on a Real-like unconscious, as Lacan articulates during the 1960s and 1970s, insisting not on its signifying potential but rather on the assumption that it resists symbolisation and interpretation.

This leads to the twofold aesthetic nature of every work of art, as conceived by Recalcati and the other Italian Lacanians. Indeed, according to Resmini, the 'ontology of the artwork that belongs to the Italian turn is to be found in the relationship between the register of the real on the one hand and the symbolic-imaginary mediation of form on the other' (Resmini, 2013: 278). As Recalcati puts it: 'per un verso l'opera è una formazione enigmatica dell'inconscio, dunque mantiene un carattere irriducibile e inarticolabile, una densità che non si può risolvere in un sapere, mentre per l'altro essa appare come un prodotto simbolico, [...] un'unità linguistica e formale articolata' (Recalcati, 2007a: 75). Therefore, the challenge faced by the Italian Lacanian psychoanalysis

of art is to keep both the features of the aesthetic artefact in mind, without overlooking either one or the other. After all, in Recalcati's words, 'questa tensione, che anima ogni opera d'arte, si deve intendere non come semplice opposizione di due regimi di senso rigidamente determinati (da un lato l'inarticolabile, l'Es, dall'altro l'articolabile, l'io) ma come uno scambio continuo, una sovrapposizione, una tensione appunto, *tra* l'uno e l'altro' (Recalcati, 2007a: 75). It is on precisely this mediation between two instances that the political commitment of contemporary Italian Lacanianism rests, as far as aesthetics is concerned. Therefore, before concluding this chapter and moving onto my case studies, I will address this issue in the next subsection.

5.3 Ethical Commitment in Contemporary Italian Lacanian Aesthetics

The psychoanalytic aesthetics developed by contemporary Italian Lacanians is underpinned by an ethical commitment (Resmini, 2013) to tackle those issues that generated hypermodern society, especially the collapse of the Symbolic and the domain of the discourse of the capitalist, which also directly affect hypermodern subjects and their symptoms. For this reason, as argued in Chapter 2 with reference to Recalcati, this Italian Lacanian aesthetics is rooted in the clinical field. The so-called new symptoms mark a shift from the *clinica del simbolico*, which is based on the symbolic mechanism of repression, to the *clinica del reale*, which evidences the inhibition of symbolic unconscious dynamics. This connection between theory and clinical practice, which is a specificity of the contemporary reception of Lacan's theory in Italy, establishes contemporary Italian Lacanianism as loyal to Lacan's own teaching insofar as 'theoretical and practical concerns are constantly interwoven in Lacan's work in such a way as to make them impossible to separate' (Evans, 1998: 14). As argued in Section 5 of Chapter 1, Lacan considers aesthetics mainly in order to address issues in the field of ethics and, ultimately, that of psychoanalytic clinical practice (Hughes, 2010: 42). In particular, this raises the problem of how to deal with the excess of the Real *qua jouissance*. According to contemporary Italian Lacanianism, the notion of the Real is the pivotal connection between the fields of aesthetics, ethics, and clinical practice, as well as with hypermodernity. For this reason, I claim that

the aesthetics developed by contemporary Italian Lacanians might be defined as an ethical aesthetics and that, from an opposite perspective, this is an ethics developed in the aesthetic domain (Carmagnola, 2010: 222).

As discussed in the previous section, contemporary Italian Lacanian aesthetics 'looks at the work of art as the place of an encounter, a convergence between the symbolic nature of form and the real of *jouissance*' (Resmini, 2013: 292). It is through the balance between the Imaginary and the Symbolic on the one hand and the Real on the other that contemporary Italian Lacanianism 'compels us to think of the role of art today as an *experience of limits*' (Resmini, 2013: 289). Recalcati underlines this role of art especially because contemporary society 'rigetta ogni esperienza del limite' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 13). According to contemporary Italian Lacanian aesthetics, art opposes 'the dreadful imperative to attain full, unmediated *jouissance*' (Resmini, 2013: 289), which is so pervasive in hypermodern society. In Resmini's words: '[t]he task of psychoanalytic aesthetics – and, for that matter, of psychoanalysis in general – today is to provide a different understanding of the "beyond the Oedipus", one that rejects both the cynicism of global capitalism and the nostalgia of fundamentalism' (Resmini, 2013: 292). The ethical aesthetics that contemporary Italian Lacanianism develops is therefore strictly related to its critical stance on what they refer to as hypermodernity, which I addressed in Section 2 of Chapter 2 and in Section 3 of Chapter 3.

From Recalcati's Lacanian perspective, the 'culto ipermoderno dell'Io' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 12) is exacerbated nowadays insofar as 'il nostro tempo esaspera […] la nozione di individualità, amplifica […] la riduzione dell'uomo al potere dell'Io' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 11). Donnarumma echoes this stance, stating that 'l'*iper-* è il dover essere della contemporaneità, la sua ossessione prestazionale' (Donnarumma, 2014: 105). It is for this reason that there is a proliferation in postmillennial society of 'iperindividualismo', 'ipernarcisismo', 'iperconsumo', and 'ipercapitalismo' (Donnarumma, 2014: 104). As Recalcati (2010a: XI) puts it:

> Il passaggio dal postmoderno all'ipermoderno […] mette in evidenza come l'emancipazione dai modelli ideali rigidi della modernità non accentui più solo la "gadgetizzazione della vita", il culto frivolo ed effimero del godimento, la fluidità vacua

dei piaceri, ma generi fenomeni di insicurezza e di angoscia diffusa dove è la vulnerabilità del soggetto a essere in primo piano [...] [l]'epoca ipermoderna non è [...] solo l'epoca dell'alleggerimento della vita dai pesi ingombranti degli Ideali, ma è anche l'epoca della vita alla deriva, caotica, spaesata, priva di punti di riferimento, destabilizzata, smarrita, vulnerabile; della vita che si rifugia in identificazioni solide o che si dissipa in legami liquidi con l'oggetto di godimento.

Recalcati hints here at the two main phenomena that characterise hypermodern times, from an Italian Lacanian perspective: the crisis of the Symbolic and the different relation that subjects nowadays establish with *jouissance* due to the pervasiveness of the discourse of the capitalist. These phenomena are both related to the notion of the Real: the crisis of the Symbolic fosters the uncanny return of the Real and the imperative of enjoyment underpins a '*pure, untamed real*' [original emphasis] (Resmini, 2013: 289). Indeed, in hypermodern society 'il soggetto [...] è sempre più esposto alle sorprese del reale, sempre più sprovveduto dinanzi ad esso. Più che mai traumatizzabile' (Soler quoted in Lolli, 2012: 129). As Lolli (2012: 129) affirms:

lo spettatore tramortito e angosciato dall'iperstimolazione dell'orribile è un cittadino indebolito, reso fragile dal turbamento personale che vive, introflesso nella propria preoccupazione di trovare un senso a ciò a cui ha assistito e, per questo, meno attento e critico nei confronti degli avvenimenti che lo circondano.

Here, Lolli articulates the link between hypermodern society and perversion. The 'esposizione alla brutalità ed alla insensatezza dell'esistenza' (Lolli, 2012: 136) that is constantly fostered by hypermodern society, and which seems to be one of the main characteristics of hypermodern art, 'evidenzia il lato perverso del sociale contemporaneo' (Lolli, 2012: 136), which aims at provoking a certain level of anxiety and distress. Lolli (2012: 36-37) wonders:

come si è potuta verificare una trasformazione così radicale del modo in cui gli uomini fanno esperienza di sé e del mondo che li circonda? Come ha potuto imporsi *un tale inedito* – e impensabile, meno di un secolo fa – *modello di rapporto con la realtà*? [emphasis added].

In Chapter 2, when offering a preliminary consideration of the clinical groundings of Recalcati's psychoanalytic aesthetics, I referred to the socio-political dimension of his clinic: in Recalcati's view, hypermodern society is 'characterised by a generalized loosening of our bond with the Other' (Recalcati, 2011c: 33) and

by the discourse of the capitalist. According to contemporary Italian Lacanianism, society today is characterised by the 'sfibramento della "rete" simbolica' (Lolli, 2012: 37), the 'crisi del Simbolico' (Carmagnola, 2006: 196), the 'collasso dell'ordine simbolico' (Recalcati, 2010a: 22), or the 'fine del simbolico' (Carmagnola and Bonazzi, 2011: 49). This collapse has also led to 'la dispersione e la volatilizzazione dei riferimenti simbolici che davano consistenza alle narrazioni politiche, religiose e ideologiche' (Lolli, 2012: 32). Therefore, the hypermodern subject ends up losing any reference and faces alone the command to enjoy deriving from the discourse of the capitalist. As Recalcati puts it: '[n]on è la nostra un'epoca nella quale la funzione normativa dell'ordine simbolico, del grande Altro, declina, si sfilaccia, s'indebolisce, lasciando il soggetto privo di riferimenti ideali costituenti?' (Recalcati, 2010a: 147). Due to the intrinsic 'impossibilità del Simbolico di funzionare correttamente, di totalizzarsi, di autocontenersi' (Carmagnola, 2006: 196), it can be affirmed that 'la crisi del Simbolico è già in qualche modo insita nel suo stesso inizio, infatti il campo della Legge non è mai in grado di forcludere, di ricoprire, di arginare del tutto la presenza del Reale' (Carmagnola, 2006: 196).

The outcome of the crisis of the Symbolic is twofold: on the one hand, there is a proliferation of the Imaginary and, on the other, an irruption of the Real. To quote Recalcati: 'a questo declino [del simbolico] corrisponde una proliferazione dell'immaginario e del reale che appaiono come sciolti dalla funzione di annodamento svolta dall'azione del simbolico' (Recalcati, 2010a: 147). Thus, there is a 'nuovo collegamento tra l'Immaginario e il Reale che deriva dalla crisi (definitiva?) dell'"efficacia simbolica"' (Carmagnola and Bonazzi, 2011: 15). Referring to the proliferation of the Imaginary, Lolli (2012: 43) claims that '[l]a potenza dell'immaginario è un dato inconfutabile del nostro presente' involving an oversaturation of the Imaginary. This tendency has already begun in postmodernity, as Foster (1996: 165) notes: 'for Fredric Jameson the primary symptom of postmodernism is a schizophrenic breakdown in language and temporality that provokes a compensatory investment in the image and the instant'. Lolli (2012: 37) further explains that 'la forza dell'immaginario dipende e coincide con la fiacchezza del simbolico', and thus considers 'lo sviluppo inarrestabile dell'immaginario come l'effetto della crisi del simbolico' (Lolli,

2012: 37). This is the basis of the Italian Lacanian definition of society today as 'l'epoca dell'inconshow' (Lolli, 2012). With this expression, Lolli underlines that, in hypermodern society, the proliferation of the Imaginary goes hand in hand with the tendency to transform our feelings and private lives through spectacular television shows, without any attempt to process or understand them.

The other effect of the crisis of the Symbolic is the emergence of the Real. As Lolli maintains: '[l]a precarietà del simbolico [...] è, peraltro, causa dell'affermazione prepotente – tipica della nostra contemporaneità – del reale. Se le maglie del simbolico si allargano, il reale filtra attraverso di esse imponendosi come elemento perturbante e traumatico' (Lolli, 2012: 46). Contemporary Italian Lacanians insist on the 'altra faccia' of the Real (Carmagnola, 2006: 195), namely that of *jouissance* as opposed to trauma. Italian Lacanianism has emphasised the role of a 'deathly *jouissance*' (Foster, 1996: 165) in contemporary hypermodern society. According to Recalcati, the 'protagonista di questo tempo [è] l'uomo del godimento' (Recalcati, 2010a: XII-XIII). Nowadays, enjoyment 'assume la forma di un imperativo categorico che rifiuta la castrazione: *Devi Godere!*' (Recalcati, 2010a: 13).

To conclude, contemporary Italian Lacanianism combines theory with clinical experience and is motivated by an ethical commitment. There is a constant reference to socio-historical context and the issues of so-called hypermodern society. This also enables Italian Lacanians to better contextualise the new wave of realism which emerges in early twenty-first-century Italy. In addition to this, unlike the majority of scholars in Italian Studies who ground their debates on the notion of reality, as an objective actuality, and realism, as an artificial but credible representation of a given reality, Italian Lacanians rely on the idea that reality itself is already a representation. This has also led to a conception of realism not simply as representational, that is to say in relation to an effective conveyance of reality, but also in correlation with the Lacanian Real. Indeed, contemporary Italian Lacanianism draws a sharp distinction between reality and the Real: the former is a screen of the latter and the latter disrupts the former. From this perspective, what is at stake is ultimately:

> [I]l rapporto tra immaginario e reale e non tra immaginario e realtà. Capire questo

significa eliminare ogni ingenuo e prefilosofico riferimento alla nozione di realtà. La realtà per Lacan appartiene all'ordine dell'immaginario, meglio ancora, la realtà è ciò che il fantasma inscrive al proprio interno attribuendo un senso e un significato alla nostra esperienza (Bonazzi, 2012: 32)

In its approach to the realist trend in postmillennial Italy, contemporary Italian Lacanianism insists on a shift in focus from reality to the Real. The notion of realism informed by Lacan's theory accounts for the socio-historical context, hypermodern subjectivity, and a critical notion of reality.

In the next and final chapter, I will apply the notions developed in Chapter 3 to selected case studies, two of which belong to different cinematic genres and one is a television series: *Videocracy–Basta apparire* (Gandini, 2009); *Reality* (Garrone, 2012); and *In Treatment* (Costanzo, 2013 and 2015-16). I will address the issue of the return of the Real as discussed in this chapter, taking into account the perspective developed both by non-Lacanian and Lacanian Italian scholars. I will also focus on the Lacanian distinction between reality and the Real and address the issues developed by contemporary Italian Lacanianism in the field of aesthetics, such as the (im)possible representation of the Real, the Real *qua jouissance* in hypermodern society, and the emergence of the Real by means of a specific imaginary-symbolic device, be it an artwork or psychoanalysis.

CHAPTER IV

Escaping Reality, Embracing the Real:
Videocracy, *Reality*, and *In Treatment*

1. Introduction

In Chapter 1, I laid the foundation for an aesthetics based on Lacan's so-called late teaching which revolves around notions related to the category of the Real, in particular the Thing/void and the object *a*. This allowed me to deduce from Lacan's theory, drawing also from international and Italian Lacanian scholars, what I refer to as the 'aesthetics of the Real'. In Chapter 2, I developed this issue further, considering Recalcati's aesthetic thought and critically addressing his three aesthetics of the Real. The latter revolve around specific notions related to the Real, namely the Thing/the void, the object a, and the *sinthome*. Recalcati's aesthetic theory is grounded on the clinical field and also moves in the direction of a critique of hypermodern society, since it deals with the possibility of transforming and channelling the Real *qua* untamed *jouissance*. In Chapter 3, I discussed the new realist trends in postmillennial Italy from the perspective of both non-Lacanian Italian scholars and contemporary Italian Lacanianism, outilining what I refer to as the *return of the Real* in early twenty-first-century Italy. I argued that contemporary Italian Lacanian theory, and more particularly its reflection about the notion of the Real, provides an invaluable tool to understand the new wave of realism, which takes place in early twenty-first-century Italian art and is also part of the same cultural phenomenon.

Having reconstructed a rather uniform aesthetic theory in contemporary Italian Lacanian thought and its object of study, in this final chapter I will apply it to a selection of works that can be seen to epitomise the return of the Real in the arts and media. Although Italian Studies scholars who argue for a *ritorno alla realtà* in postmillennial Italy focus prominently on literary and cinematic cases, I will deal only with cinematic and television works, albeit from different genres: *Videocracy–Basta apparire* (Gandini, 2009), a documentary about television during Berlusconi's Italy; *Reality* (Garrone, 2012), a fictional film about a Neapolitan fishmonger who strives to participate in *Big Brother* and suffers from

a psychotic breakdown; and *In Treatment* (Costanzo, 2013 and 2015-16), the Italian remake of the homonymous American television show, based on the Israeli format *Be Tipul* (Levi, 2005-2008), which focuses on the life of a psychotherapist and reproduces psychoanalytic sessions.

I have selected these case studies since they are particularly helpful in bringing to the light those issues, discussed throughout this thesis, which are at the core of contemporary Italian Lacanian aesthetic thought, such as the difference between representing reality and the Real, the Real as *jouissance*, and the possibility for the Real to be framed by means of the imaginary-symbolic device constituted by an artwork. Moreover, in these cinematic/television works, one can identify the *ritorno alla realtà* and the new wave of realism as debated in Italian Studies, the notion of the return (and emergence) of the Real as addressed in contemporary Italian Lacanianism, and the ethical aesthetics developed by Recalcati and other contemporary Italian Lacanians, which is informed by the clinical field and also deals with the discontent characteristic of contemporary society. In particular, contemporary Italian Lacanianism addresses the relationship between aesthetics, postmillennial Italian society, and hypermodern subjectivity. Once again, it is the Lacanian notion of the Real that unites these issues (i.e. aesthetics, Lacan's theory, Italian Studies, hypermodern subjectivity, the socio-political analysis of postmillennial Italy, and so forth). As Vighi points out, '[t]he central place granted to the Lacanian Real is what allows for the connection between psychoanalysis, film and politics' (Vighi, 2006: 11).

Concerning reality and the Real, my analysis will be concentrated not on the way in which the three works depict the specific reality they address, but rather on how the Real emerges through the cinematic representation of that specific reality. Hence, I will not argue for a 'cinema as mirror of the nation', which is what O'Leary and O'Rawe (2011: 110) overtly criticise; rather, I will focus on the capacity of these three works to stage/present the Real within the representational framework of a given reality. Indeed, the Lacanian Real emerges through the depiction, respectively, of the reality of postmillennial Italy, as influenced by Berlusconi's television empire, that of reality television shows such as *Big Brother* and their impact on Italian citizens, and, finally, the intimate and private reality of a psychoanalytic therapy session.

More crucially, focusing on the Lacanian Real and its emergence enables us to better understand the return of the Real in postmillennial Italy. My analysis of these case studies shows that what is at stake in the early twenty-first-century realist wave is not simply a return to reality *per se* and its mimetic representation, but rather a return of the Real and thus its depiction in the epochal shift towards hypermodernity. The Real, especially as addressed by contemporary Italian Lacanianism in aesthetic, clinical, and socio-political issues, allows us to address the crisis of the Symbolic as well as the discourse of the capitalist. Therefore, I shall explore the relation between the representation of reality and the emergence of the Real, as part of an examination of the question of the hypermodern Italian subject and the Real as *jouissance*.

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the hypermodern subject is shaped by the crisis of the Symbolic and the discourse of the capitalist. According to contemporary Italian Lacanianism, the discourse of the capitalist 'è il nome della malattia fondamentale della nostra società' (Recalcati, 2011f: 86), and Recalcati claims that 'l'uomo del discorso del capitalista è un uomo senza inconscio' (Recalcati, 2016a: 635). This means that an untamed and unrestricted *jouissance* is constantly promoted by hypermodern society. In particular, in relation to Italy, there is an equation between the Real as *jouissance* and *berlusconismo* as the hypermodern command to 'enjoy!'. In this respect, the characters documented or portrayed in these works clearly epitomise the hypermodern subject, who strives to obtain enjoyment and struggles to find his/her place in society.

In my analysis, I will employ the theoretical (aesthetic) tools I developed in Chapter 3. However, it must be borne in mind that, as Antonello remarks, 'l'uso della cosiddetta "theory" nell'analisi dei prodotti cinematografici' remains a debated issue and '[u]na questione ancora aperta relativamente ai film studies nel contesto dell'italianistica internazionale' (Antonello, 2013: 246). Indeed, 'l'uso di approcci teorici forti è stato sostanzialmente disertato all'interno sia della critica cinematografica che degli Italian Studies in generale, probabilmente per il livello di "invasività" che questo uso sembra comportare nell'esercizio critico' (Antonello, 2013: 246). In particular, Antonello claims that '[l]o stesso si può dire per l'uso della metodologia e della strumentazione psicanalitica, che pur essendo diventata una vulgata terminologica e concettuale all'interno delle

humanities, non ha mai veramente trovato riscontri critici sistematici' (Antonello, 2013: 246).

My aim is thus to apply the aesthetic of the Real to show that an undeniably imaginary-symbolic device, such as a cinematic work, whether it is a documentary film, a fictional film, or a television series, enables us to witness the emergence of, and to encounter, the Real, understood in Lacanian terms, within it. It has been argued that, according to Freud, psychoanalysis and cinema are incompatible due to the obstacle of the non-representational nature of the unconscious (Heath, 1999) and thus to the 'inescapably plastic dimension of cinema, which relies too much on the assertiveness of images, and is thus ill equipped to render the "invisible presence" of the unconscious' (Vighi, 2006: 34). However, as Vighi aptly points out, Lacan's theory avoids this conundrum of the figurative/non-figurative nature of the unconscious by shifting 'the emphasis on[to] the legibility of the unconscious and on[to] the visibility of the Real' (Vighi, 2006: 34), thereby solving the Freudian conundrum of the non-figurative nature of the unconscious and the figurative (visual) nature of cinema. From a Lacanian perspective, 'the cinematic image is always-already destabilised by its own secret liaison with the Real, since the Real (and this is the Lacanian crux of the matter) not only *sustains*, but also *stains*, what we see' (Vighi, 2006: 31). According to Lacan's theory, that which we see 'is always-already an effect of the invisible Real' (Vighi, 2006: 34). For Vighi, '[a]s a form of thought […] cinema always thinks the Real, since it is inextricably entangled with existence; conversely, reality can only be thought of as an intrinsically cinematic form of appearance' (Vighi, 2014: 317) since 'the fabric of reality is fictional' (Vighi, 2014: 317). For this reason, '[a] radical film theory always begins by acknowledging that filmic images deal with reality rather than with its pale imitation' (Vighi, 2014: 317). Therefore, as Antonello underlines, 'un approccio lacaniano […] è comunque capace di rivelare l'"inconscio politico" del testo, ovverossia la misura in cui un prodotto filmico che si presenta autorialmente come "corretto" dal punto di vista politico e dell'impegno, possa nascondere in realtà vizi ideologici o prospettive conservatrici se guardato attraverso una lente psicanalitica' (Antonello, 2013: 246).

In Section 2, I will discuss the documentary *Videocracy–Basta apparire*

(Gandini, 2009). Due to its proximity with (and use of) reality, the documentary is a particularly 'realist genre' (Antonello and Mussgnug, 2009: 21), whose popularity has increased in recent years. The reality depicted here is that of Berlusconi's television empire and its influence on postmillennial Italy. Therefore, this documentary is an interesting record of the Italian hypermodern subject, trapped, on the one hand, in a society dominated by the hegemony of television and, on the other, subjugated by the discourse of the capitalist. According to contemporary Italian Lacanianism, hypermodern society is characterised by a crisis of the Lacanian register of the Symbolic. This leads to an overflowing of the Imaginary, as the domain of the spectacle, and the return of the Real, as *jouissance* imposed by the discourse of the capitalist. Therefore, I contend that this documentary frames the Real *qua jouissance*, underscoring the unconscious enjoyment of the hypermodern Italian subject. As Carmagnola and Bonazzi claim, 'il "godimento" rappresenta la specifica forma che la pulsione assume nella collusione storicamente nuova tra Immaginario e Reale' (2011: 93). Furthermore, I shall argue that more than a documentary about Italian television in Berlusconi's era, the documentary deals with the hypermodern subject in Italy, which is subjugated by the command 'enjoy!'. As Carmagnola and Bonazzi (2011: 62) put it, '[i]l nuovo legame sociale si produce sulla base dell'annodamento tra il godimento e l'immaginario. Godi, dice l'imperativo superegoico, l'immaginario televisivo ti dirà come...'.

In Section 3, I will analyse *Reality* (Garrone, 2012), a fictional film which deals with the vicissitudes of Luciano, a Neapolitan fishmonger who strives to participate in *Grande Fratello*, the Italian version of the reality show *Big Brother*. The reality addressed by this film is that of a small Neapolitan community unsettled by the casting for *Grande Fratello*. This film shows that cinema is 'a kind of magnifying lens, revealing to us the formal structure of consciousness and the mode of appearance of reality' (Vighi, 2014b: 131). From a Lacanian perspective, reality is an imaginary-symbolic construction which protects the subject from a traumatic encounter with the Real, functioning as a screen. The film *Reality* openly displays the uncanny return of the Real by means of the collapse of everyday reality due to the psychotic breakdown of the protagonist. In doing so, it also depicts the collapse of social bonds due to the crisis of the Symbolic and

the correlated imperative to attain a solipsistic and narcissistic enjoyment, which is extremely pervasive in hypermodern society.

In Section 4, I will discuss the internationally-acclaimed television series *In Treatment*, focusing on its Italian remake (Costanzo, 2013 and 2015-16), which is an example of the representation of a psychoanalytic experience in popular culture. The television series is not an original Italian production but is based on the format developed by the Israeli production *BeTipul* (Levi, 2005-2008), which was subsequently used for the American series *In Treatment* (Garcia, 2008-2010). The plot of the Italian version revolves around Giovanni Mari, a psychoanalyst who lives and practises in Rome, and the patients he treats. *In Treatment* confronts the spectators with the encounter between the subject and the traumatic Real. In this final case study, the Real emerges as that which always-already exceeds our subjectivity, but nevertheless determines it. As Bottiroli claims, 'il non simbolizzabile, l'impossibile (questo è il reale) appartengono intrinsecamente al versante soggettivo, sono (potremmo dire) ciò che il soggetto porta con sé ogni volta che tenta di andare al di là di se stesso. L'al di là del soggetto è, più di ogni altra cosa, il suo inconscio' (Bottiroli, 2002: 102). According to contemporary Italian Lacanianism, this confrontation is made possible by psychoanalysis, an imaginary-symbolic device, which allows for a disquieting, albeit not deadly, encounter with the Real (Lolli, 2004; Recalcati, 2007a). This is due to the fact that in the psychoanalytic room we experience the Real of our own *jouissance* and not the Real *qua* trauma or death.

To sum up, in this chapter I will argue that, more than epitomising the *ritorno alla realtà*, these Italian postmillennial works capture, frame, and locate the return of the Real, which the hypermodern Italian subject must face in terms of *jouissance* and trauma. From a Lacanian standpoint, the Real is impossible to represent, as it is beyond both the Imaginary and the Symbolic, and therefore 'its own nature defies discursive appropriation' (Vighi, 2002: 493). However, 'il reale è ciò che lascia traccia' (Tarizzo, 2007: 99) and, albeit indirectly and through an imaginary-symbolic device like art or psychoanalysis, the Real can emerge, manifest itself and even be recorded despite the 'non-symbolic and constitutionally non-conceptual fixity of the Real's hidden dimension' (Vighi, 2002: 507).

2. *Videocracy*: Framing Reality, Documenting the Real

2.1. Documentary Film, Reality, and the Real

In twenty-first-century Italy, there has been an increasing production of documentaries which have led to the rehabilitation of the genre (Verdicchio, 2011) and, at the same time, recovered it from its marginality as a niche genre (Donnarumma, Policastro, Taviani, 2008). Donnarumma (2008a: 8) aptly notes that 'un'attitudine documentaria, accompagnata dall'interesse per il documentario come forma a sé' has appeared in recent years in Italy. Antonello agrees with this perspective, claiming that one of the prominent features of the new wave of realism in postmillennial Italy, which I refer to as the return of the Real, is indeed '[i]l ritorno a una vena documentaristica' (Antonello, 2012: 187). Of the most popular Italian documentaries produced since the 2000s, it is worth mentioning *Un'ora sola ti vorrei* (Marrazzi, 2002), *Viva Zapatero!* (Guzzanti, 2005), *Improvvisamente l'inverno scorso* (Ragazzi and Hofer, 2008), *Il corpo delle donne* (Cantù, Malfi Chindemi, Zanardo, 2009), *Draquila – L'Italia che trema* (Guzzanti, 2010), *Girlfriend in a coma* (Piras, 2012), and *La trattativa* (Guzzanti, 2014).

As argued in Chapter 3, the return of the Real is characterised by an increasing focus on reality by artists and, consequently, by an increasing interest in the category of realism on the part of critics. Due to this emphasis on reality and its representation, the prominence gained by documentary films in postmillennial Italy is hardly surprising. Indeed, documentary film is possibly the genre which engages most directly with reality, exhibiting a peculiar ability to adhere to it: a documentary aims at accounting for authenticity by means of representing reality as directly as possible. As such, through documentary films, 'we are offered access to *the* world' [original emphasis] (Nichols, 1991: 109).

Therefore, the documentary, as a particular cinematic genre, plays a significant role in the wave of realism in postmillennial Italy, to the extent that Italian scholarship has questioned the reasons for its extensive use. From a socio-economical and historical perspective, Antonello contends that 'a crisi o a cicli

economici particolari, corrispondono relative risposte artistiche e fioriture di genere' (Antonello, 2012a: 187), ascribing this employment of the documentary and its prominence to the 'disponibilità delle nuove tecnologie digitali che hanno sensibilmente ridotto i costi di produzione' (Antonello, 2012a: 187). From a sociological point of view, documentary films seem to fulfill the needs of the audience for a 'bisogno morale di ritorno alla realtà' (Donnarumma, 2008b: 28) and thus for the re-establishment of a connection with everyday reality and its problems by means of the stories of common people. For this reason, as Donnarumma contends, '[l]a vita quotidiana è tornata ad essere lo scenario in cui si misura, in modo problematico e senza garanzie, la ricerca dei valori collettivi e il senso dei destini individuali' (Donnarumma, 2008b: 26). At the same time, the need to contrast the world offered by television, which is perceived as false despite its pervasiveness, also becomes apparent. In this respect, the interest in documentaries is 'un segno chiaro di possibile apertura del pubblico alla ricerca di verità indipendenti da quelle che ci propongono i canali televisivi' (Crialese in Donnarumma, Policastro, and Taviani, 2008: 63). From a more philosophical perspective, Vighi views this documentary trend as the cinematic version of the attempt that underpins several artistic disciplines and media: to frame and reproduce reality. As Vighi writes: 'at the heart of recent approaches to the documentary lies an old question, one that has concerned the whole course of Western rationality from Aristotle to Derrida: that of the representation of reality' (Vighi, 2002: 493).

The aesthetic issue of the representation, and thus documentation, of a given reality is the pivotal point around which my analysis of *Videocracy* revolves: it brings together the reborn interest in reality and realism, as discussed by Italian scholarship, the return of the Real in Lacanian terms, and the ethical issues related to hypermodern society, as addressed by contemporary Italian Lacanians. However, I draw a careful distinction between reality understood as a generic concept, reality as the 'content' of every documentary film that defines this cinematic genre, and the specific reality tackled by each single documentary. Thus, some preliminary questions concerning documentary films are: Can a given reality actually be framed through a documentary? What kind of reality does a documentary film represent? In order to answer these questions, I will consider

Lacanian theory, which deals with the notions of both reality and the Real, and contemporary Italian Lacanianism, which focuses on hypermodern postmillennial society. This approach will enable me to address such questions as: What is the relationship between reality, as represented by documentaries and the Lacanian Real? And, more particularly, how is it possible to document the Real by framing the reality of postmillennial Italy dominated by Berlusconi's television empire?

Before answering these questions in my analysis of *Videocracy*, I will briefly address how documentary films have been approached based on Lacanian theory by some international scholars, such as Renov (2004), Cowie (2011), and Piotrowska (2014). This is a reasonably new perspective since, as Renov (2004: XIII) underlines, 'until rather recently, psychoanalytic theory had rarely if at all been considered in relation to the documentary film'. This could be because, as Piotrowska claims, 'scholars might have felt that it wasn't that exciting to think about documentary, as it was more like a mirroring and recording of reality rather than a true artefact worthy of scholarly interest' (Piotrowska, 2014: 21). Here, Piotrowska hints at the same scepticism that surrounds realism: like those mimetic forms of art, the documentary is seen as a mere reproduction of reality.[76] On the contrary, Lacanian theory enables us to acknowledge the disquieting Real inherent in realistic representation, which is usually overlooked.

Following Lacan, Renov recalls the difference between reality, which is something 'perfectly knowable' (Renov, 2004: 124), and the Real, 'as a zone outside symbolization from which trauma may erupt as symptom' (Renov, 2004: 124) and which upsets everyday reality. Renov's perspective employs the category of the Real in order to explore the subject of death in documentary films about the Holocaust and AIDS, considering the documentary as a work of mourning. From a more theoretical perspective, Cowie underlines the proximity to reality that is intrinsically characteristic of documentary film:

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[76] As Cowie underlines, historically realism has often been 'dismissed by critics who, drawing on the claims of romanticism, saw it as merely reproduction lacking the interpretation and intervention of the artist's subjectivity' (2007: 93). At the same time, in the second half of the nineteenth century, realism as a mimetic artform which makes it possible to reproduce and know the world was also challenged 'by the scientific and factual possibilities of the new media of photography and cinematography that mechanically record reality with an automatic faithfulness that mimics human vision' (Cowie, 2007: 92).

> Documentary, in presenting the sights and sounds of reality, enables reality to 'speak' at the same time as it 'speaks about' reality. It thus realizes the desire that cinematography inaugurated: of knowing reality through its images and sounds, that is – figuratively – of allowing reality to 'speak for itself' (Cowie, 2011: 1).

For her, documentary is thus a 'recorded document' of reality that rests on a 'mechanical reproduction' and establishes an 'indexical relationship to the original' (Cowie, 2007: 89). Cowie emphasises that the documentary embodies the aspiration to reproduce and represent an objective or unmediated reality that can be traced back at least to the nineteenth century, when new media, such as photography and cinema, 'gave rise to the idea of, and desire for, an *unlimited access to reality in unmediated recordings of actuality*' [emphasis added] (Cowie, 2007: 90). [77] Therefore, the documentary 'asserts itself as the genre of the 'objective knowability of the world' (Cowie, 2007: 89).

Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that even if the documentary is apparently an 'objective' medium, it still involves a 'creative treatment of reality' (Cowie, 2011: 19) by means of stylistic choices such as montage editing, camera framing, and so forth. Unavoidably, the camera frames a particular and contingent portion of a given reality and, therefore, is ultimately unable to offer the spectator reality in its pure form. It is precisely '[t]his gap in representation between the reality presented and the reality absent' that 'introduces the real in Lacan's sense of an unrepresentable that is nevertheless apprehended' (Cowie, 2011: 10). In Cowie's view, the Real of the documentary is 'the real of an irreconcilable difference between representation and the before of representation' (Cowie, 2011: 10).

In their approach to documentary film through a Lacanian lens, Renov (2004) and Cowie (2011) privilege the Real *qua* trauma. They focus on the Lacanian Real as the traumatic encounter which is always and essentially missed (Lacan, 1998: 55). In doing so, they deal with notions related to that specific

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[77]   Hence Pier Paolo Pasolini's claim that cinema is the only medium that can deal directly and immediately with reality, or to put it differently, 'the language of cinema is the written language of reality' (Vighi, 2006: 25). According to Vighi, 'Pasolini's semiological theory stands on a very simple, axiomatic belief: that among all other artistic languages, from painting to literature, cinema is the most likely medium to evoke absence of mediation' (2002: 495). On Pasolini and documentary film, see Vighi (2002).

aspect of the Real, for instance: trauma; death; the death drive; and repetition. In particular, Renov's analysis focuses on the 'representation of death in relation to the work of mourning' (Renov, 2004: 123) in documentary films and videos which 'treat the death of a loved one or even the self' (Renov, 2004: 120). Similarly, Cowie focuses on the death drive and traumatic encounters with the Real, working with documentaries about war trauma (Cowie, 2011: 118-134).

In contrast to this, but without dismissing the Real *qua* trauma, my analysis of *Videocracy* will place a particular emphasis on another face of the Lacanian Real, namely that of *jouissance.* As Vighi (2006: 17) argues,

> in the final years of his teaching Lacan abandons his early idea of the linguistic constitution of the unconscious to propose the latter's substantial coincidence with the Real, which in turn is firmly associated with the notion of *jouissance*, the obscure realm of enjoyment.

In Chapters 1 and 3, I argued that for this very reason, the Real, that which is beyond the Imaginary and the Symbolic, lies beyond representation and meaning. Moreover, the Real is, structurally, what is excluded from everyday reality. Or, to put it differently, reality functions for the subject as a fundamental screen against the Real (Recalcati, 2012a: 272). In hypermodern society, which is dominated by the crisis of the Symbolic and the discourse of the capitalist, the subject experiences a loss of symbolic limits and, simultaneously, is exposed to the capitalist injunction to enjoy. As I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the analysis of hypermodern society carried out by contemporary Italian Lacanians emphasises *jouissance*. As Recalcati puts it: 'la circolazione illimitata del godimento […] anima il discorso del capitalista' (Recalcati, 2011: 87). Therefore, 'il Super-Io contemporaneo esige il godimento come obbligo' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 29). In my analysis of *Videocracy*, I draw on the notions developed both by Recalcati, who considers the hypermodern Western subject to be 'senza inconscio' (2010a) and by Lolli, who recently defined postmillennial hypermodern Western society as the 'epoca dell'inconshow' (2012). As Recalcati claims, 'il discorso del capitalista che oggi domina la scena del mondo sembra invece autorizzare a un godimento compulsivo al di là di ogni limite. Ciò che conta è la realizzazione senza differimento alcuno del godimento' (Recalcati, 2016b: 47). In this respect, '[d]i questa nuova attitudine dell'uomo contemporaneo, il

documentario di Erik Gandini, *Videocracy,* offre una rappresentazione impareggiabile' (Lolli, 2012: 100). This theoretical frame advanced by contemporary Italian Lacanians makes it possible to establish which kind of reality is depicted by the documentary in more accurate terms, and to locate the Real emerging within it.

2.2 Documenting the Real (I): *Videocrazia* and *Jouissance*

The Italian documentary film *Videocracy - Basta Apparire*, by Erik Gandini (2009), portrays the 'videocrazia berlusconiana'. That is, it documents postmillennial Italian television, stressing Berlusconi's role in influencing and shaping it, both as an entrepreneur and as a politician. In tracing the historical roots of contemporary Italian television, the documentary 'brings attention to a visual language that has been constricted by the effect of commercial television, consumerism and the heavy emphasis placed on "appearances" as a guiding light in contemporary Italian society' (Verdicchio, 2011: 113). RAI and Mediaset refused to broadcast the trailer of the documentary film, claiming that, respectively, 'si tratta di un messaggio politico, non di un film' (Fusco, 2009: para.2) and that *Videocracy* is an 'attacco alla tv commerciale' (Fusco, 2009: para.2). As Bradshaw aptly notes, *Videocracy* is 'a very different kind of film-making from that of Berlusconi's most famous critic, the satirist Sabina Guzzanti, whose docu-polemics are influenced by Michael Moore' (Bradshaw, 2010: para.1). This is because the audience is directly engaged in witnessing the reality depicted, to the extent that *Videocracy* provokes 'discomfort with its "realistic" image of the country's socio-economic state as it is assuaged by the appearance of well-being, opulence and freedom' (Verdicchio, 2011: 114).

      Videocracy addresses the controversial reality of the world of television, which is populated by show business personalities and several wannabes, whilst at the same time offering a documentation of the impact and effects of this reality on contemporary Italian people, who are shaped and deeply influenced by this world. A crucial question that should now be addressed is: What kind of reality is framed by, and represented in, this documentary? Or, to put it differently: '[i]n quanto documentario [...] che cosa effettivamente *documenta* questo film?

(Manduca, 2009: 35). Is it a documentary on postmillennial Italian television or rather one about a specific social, cultural, and political reality of twenty-first-century Italy, and thus a critique of that very reality? An obvious answer, given the title of the documentary and its controversial reception, could be that *Videocracy* displays the virtual and fake video-reality broadcasted on Berlusconi's Italian television, which is completely dominated by 'the power of the image' (Rigoletto, 2012: 251). However, the documentary also addresses a political stance since it tackles 'the current state of Italian politics' (Rigoletto, 2012: 250-251), dealing with the controversial role of Berlusconi as a politician and 'the implications around [his] double role as PM and owner of Italy's TV empire Mediaset' (Rigoletto, 2012: 250). For this reason, *Videocracy* was labelled as an 'anti-Berlusconi documentar[y]' (Gundle, 2015: 104). From this perspective, *Videocracy*'s aim seems to be to denounce the constant distortion of reality taking place on Italian television and the impact of this on Italian people. Along these lines, Antonello wonders: '[d]i che realtà parliamo quando il nostro accesso ad essa non è mai diretto ma sempre distorto dai mass-media e dalla loro intrinseca *embeddedness* — e in maniera emblematica proprio in un paese come l'Italia?' (Antonello, 2012a: 177).

I contend that, more than just portraying the reality of Berlusconi's postmillennial Italy, *Videocracy* documents the Italian hypermodern subject and, in particular, its relation with what Lacan calls *jouissance*: 'the Real of its obscene *jouissance*, the vertiginous dimension of enjoyment' (Vighi, 2006: 74). To put it bluntly, I claim that while documenting the specific reality of early twenty-first-century Italy dominated by Berlusconi's television ideology, *Videocracy* ultimately documents the Real *qua jouissance*, which inhabits the hypermodern subject and is promoted by the capitalist discourse. In this respect, I follow Cowie's stance according to which the documentary, as a 'factual film – reality represented – with its assertion of the knowability of the world, may also be a document of the "real" in Lacan's sense' (Cowie, 2011: 118). From a Lacanian perspective, *Videocracy* both represents and enacts the crisis of the Symbolic in postmillennial Italy. It depicts the oversaturation of the Imaginary through the 'deriva videocratica' (Manduca, 2009: 35) fostered and embodied, in particular, in television during the Berlusconi era and the emergence of the Real of the

jouissance through stories of and interviews with real characters. As Bradshaw accurately argues, 'Gandini's film is more like a dreamy, mesmeric and highly disturbing psychogeography of 21st-century Italy' (Bradshaw, 2010: para1).

Therefore, *Videocracy* appears to be an exemplary case study to address contemporary Italian Lacanian aesthetics and contemporary Italian Lacanianism. The reason for this lies in its ability to frame the Real *qua jouissance*, while documenting the reality of the postmillennial Berlusconi years, enabling it to tackle an aesthetic and an ethical issue at the same time, like in contemporary Italian Lacanianism. The Real *qua jouissance* emerges indirectly through the representation of the characters portrayed in the documentary and their controversial behaviour: it appears in their obsessions, and in their endeavour to do everything they can to appear on television and to earn some easy money. These are 'personaggi – quasi – inermi, che sembrerebbero deviati o comunque risucchiati senza volontà nel sistema' (Manduca, 2009: 35). For instance, this is evident in the scene shot during the casting for a television programme in the *Mediaset* studios. There is a middle-aged woman who undresses in front of the camera with no hesitation, while the casting director encourages her to do so and ends up laughing at her. This shot causes strong discomfort in the spectators who are obliged to look at her and can do nothing to prevent the casting director's excessive request. Other examples can be found in those scenes with the 'tragic reality show wannabe' (Bradshaw, 2010: para. 3) Riccardo Carnevali, who is desperate to appear on television as a *Big Brother* contestant, or the scenes featuring Lele Mora or Fabrizio Corona, who turns his experience in jail and even his divorce into an opportunity to make money and to appear on television. One might also cite the example of the rich woman in Sardinia who lives in a villa next door to Berlusconi and sells pictures of exclusive parties, or of the group of young women who participate in castings in order to become *veline*.

At the beginning of the documentary, through a voiceover, the director Gandini 'afferma di voler approfondire l'impatto che l'impero comunicativo e televisivo berlusconiano ha avuto sulla società italiana negli ultimi trent'anni' (Manduca, 2009: 35). For this reason, the documentary begins with archival footage, dating back to the late 1970s. The footage is from a television programme that Gandini considers as one of the antecedents of commercial television in

Berlusconi's empire due to its impact on the general public. Nonetheless, the images illustrate that the television programme was dominated by the exhibition and exploitation of the female body. In subsequent years, these trends 'hanno avuto uno sviluppo sociale, culturale e politico le cui conseguenze hanno generato un forte mutamento nel Paese, rendendolo un caso unico al mondo e, per questo, importante da analizzare' (Manduca, 2009: 34). Thus, the register of the Imaginary immediately comes to the forefront as the images from reality television shows and various other programmes are overwhelming and omnipresent in *Videocracy*, just as they are in contemporary society. As Manduca (2009: 35) maintains,

> [i]l film persegue un fine disvelamento di quel fenomeno tutto nostrano di saturazione dell'immaginario collettivo attraverso la TV da parte di un unico soggetto "il Presidente", caratterizzata dall'affermazione e imposizione di modelli iconografici e sociali basati sul successo di immagine.

We should recall now that, in Lacan's theory, 'l'immaginario è il regno dell'illusione, della specularità, del narcisismo. Ad esso manca sia il carattere strutturato e mediato del simbolico, sia l'aspra e impervia traumaticità del reale' (Perniola, 2000: 14). To further account for the relationship between the Lacanian Imaginary and Italian television, Tarizzo (2007) and Lolli (2012) refer to Guy Debord's seminal book *The Society of the Spectacle*, which sets out the argument that reality has been replaced by its spectacular representation (Debord, 1992). However, Tarizzo partially disagrees with Debord's claim that contemporary reality is not completely assimilated by the spectacle because 'se vivessimo davvero nel regno dello "spettacolo integrato", in cui non si può più distinguere la realtà dallo spettacolo, non potremmo più nemmeno *vedere* lo spettacolo' (Tarizzo, 2007: 89). From a strictly Lacanian perspective, Tarizzo is arguing here that there is no such thing as a true reality beyond the world of the spectacle, beyond the Imaginary, or the world of television. That is to say, reality is not erased by the fake world of show business even if nowadays 'tutto comunque tende a trasformarsi in spettacolo' (Tarizzo, 2007: 89). He identifies the applause as 'l'indice di questa trasformazione' (Tarizzo, 2007: 89). As Tarizzo suggests: 'ogni volta che applaudiamo, nelle circostanze più diverse, e in situazioni a dire il vero sempre più impensate, noi creiamo lo spettacolo' (Tarizzo,

2007: 89). Similarly, Lolli (2012: 37) states that:

> L'immaginario di Lacan e lo spettacolare di Debord sono nozioni teoriche in nessun modo sovrapponibili l'una all'altra, profondamente eterogenee tra di loro e inammissibili in un unico contenitore concettuale. Ritengo, tuttavia, che un'idea di fondo le accomuni in maniera inequivocabile: si tratta della convinzione che il progressivo sfibramento della "rete" simbolica […] costituisca l'origine dell'attivazione di quei processi nei quali elementi legati all'immaginario e al reale […] diventano prevalenti.

As discussed in Chapter 3, on the one hand the crisis of the Symbolic in hypermodern society fosters the dual phenomenon of the prominence of the Imaginary, which becomes pervasive and overwhelming and, on the other, it enhances a return of the Real, which might be disruptive (the Real *qua* trauma) or excessive (Real *qua jouissance*). Hence, addressing the Imaginary is also necessary to describe the excess of the Real *qua jouissance* since the two are linked.

Gandini questions, through a voiceover: 'qual è la forza della televisione? Che verrai sempre ricordato' (Gandini, 2009). The factory worker and aspiring television celebrity Riccardo Carnevali, whose dream is to be a contestant on the Italian version of *Big Brother*, answers his own question thus: 'il Big Brother? Eccezionale. Tu vai lì, vivi la tua vita, sei come sei. Vincere magari, no? Ti sistemano la vita. La casa, la macchina. Non hai più problemi' (Gandini, 2009). Riccardo aspires to become a television personality somewhere between Ricky Martin and Bruce Lee: in his performances, he sings whilst practising martial arts. The result is somewhat pathetic since Riccardo does not have the necessary singing ability but what is striking is that he believes desperately in the idea that the world of television provides everything he needs. For Riccardo, the world of television not only provides everything he wants in order to be seen, and hopefully adored as a television personality, but also constitutes a means to something else: money, women, success or, simply, the promise of a life full of enjoyment. As Rigoletto contends, '[t]he interview with Ricky is particularly successful in achieving one of the main objectives of the documentary, to stress the populist nature of Italian television and the illusory nature of the success and happiness it projects to its viewers' (Rigoletto, 2012: 251). This is the dangerous connection between the Imaginary and the Real in hypermodern society: the false

promise of unlimited freedom to enjoy. This is what Lolli (2012: 90) points at when he states that:

> Il sogno di cambiar vita (e la promessa illusoria di poterlo fare in qualunque momento) è il sogno dell'era postmoderna. Un numero significativo di programmi televisivi si fonda su tale possibilità; l'insoddisfazione per la propria esistenza non si risolve mettendola in discussione ma passando ad un'altra. Nuova casa, nuovo lavoro, nuovo corpo, nuovi amici, nuova vita.

This tendency on the part of the hypermodern subject rests on the anti-Lacanian and anti-psychoanalytic ideas promoted by the discourse of the capitalist, according to which the subject should simply change the object of their enjoyment or purchase a new commodity to treat dissatisfaction and provide them with a sense of fulfillment in life. This perspective also fosters the myth of the self-made man/woman and self-realisation so popular in hypermodern times. For, according to Lacan's theory, 'the coming into being of the subject entails becoming *in* the Other' (Sforza Tarabochia, 2013: 125) and it is utterly misleading to believe that it is possible for the subject to give birth to him/herself. The television agent Lele Mora, who is negatively labelled by Recalcati (2011f: 87) as a 'personaggio tipico della nostra epoca', is interviewed on the basis that he is the person who, in Berlusoni's television business, is able to 'trasformare il sogno in realtà' (Gandini, 2009) and to provide 'opportunities for fame and wealth in the Italian TV world' (Rigoletto, 2012: 251). As Recalcati underlines, '[u]n "pensatore" del nostro tempo come Lele Mora ebbe a dire che esiste solo ciò che appare in televisione. Ne consegue che il mondo cosiddetto reale per esistere davvero deve assomigliare a un reality' (Borelli *et al.*, 2013: 130).

Another character portrayed and interviewed in *Videocracy* is Fabrizio Corona, an 'ex-paparazzo-turned-celebrity' (Rigoletto 2012: 251). As Rigoletto puts it, 'Corona emerges as Berlusconi's alter ego, a cynical and money-obsessed individual incarnating the vacuity and moral shallowness of the media world that has made him famous' (Rigoletto, 2012: 251). For this reason, Tarizzo argues that 'nell'epoca dello Spettacolo non ci può essere più esperienza dell'identità' (Tarizzo, 2007: 97). In hypermodern times, there is no space for the split subject addressed by (Lacanian) psychoanalysis, but only for a solid ego and its performativity. As Recalcati claims:

> L'epoca ipermoderna è l'epoca dell'individualismo atomizzato che s'impone sulla comunità, è l'epoca del culto narcisistico dell'Io e della spinta compulsiva al godimento immediato che stravolgono il circuito sublimatorio della pulsione imponendosi nella forma di un inedito principio di prestazione che situa il godimento stesso come nuovo dovere superegoico (2010a: XI). Il tempo ipermoderno è un tempo nel quale la desostanzializzazione del soggetto e il suo affrancamento dalla pesantezza e dalla rigidità degli ideali della tradizione espongono il soggetto stesso a un vuoto insensato, a una "apatia frivola" che paralizza la sua vita emotiva (2010a: XII).

Corona is the epitome of the hypermodern subject: he does not care about social bonds or human relationships; he strives to stage his private life in order to make money out of it; and he is obsessed both by the myth of the self-made man and his image. Similarly to the hypermodern subject, Corona is utterly 'incurante delle conseguenze del proprio atto, impegnato nell'utilizzazione spettacolare del proprio *look,* interessato esclusivamente a ricavare vantaggi economici da qualunque esperienza (compresa quella della detenzione), indifferente alla colpa e alla vergogna' (Lolli, 2012: 101). This is the perverted core of what Lolli defines as the 'epoca dell'inconshow': 'la restaurazione di uno stato di godimento non infettato dal virus della castrazione' (Lolli, 2012: 102). According to Lolli, 'il sociale contemporaneo sostiene e premia identificazioni che disconoscono completamente il lato dell'esistenza che ha a che fare con il ridimensionamento di sé, con i limiti imposti all'io, con la mancanza, con la castrazione' (Lolli, 2012: 101).

The camera follows Corona closely, documenting his everyday life and extremely private moments, such as when he is completely naked in front of a mirror in his bathroom before going to a nightclub as a special guest. Corona's body is young, muscled, tattooed, and apparently strong, invincible, and flawless. Lolli comments on this sequence, stating that: '[s]i tratta di una lunga operazione di toelettatura nel corso della quale Corona si lava, si asciuga, si trucca, si pettina, si profuma, si veste, si intrattiene, in sostanza, in un rapporto di ammirazione estasiata con il proprio corpo e con la propria immagine, curata nel minimo dettaglio prima di offrirsi allo sguardo avido del suo pubblico' (Lolli, 2012: 101). As Recalcati remarks, '[i]l culto del benessere e quello dell'igienismo ipermoderno forniscono solo un maquillage felliniano alla pulsione di morte che abita il cuore inconscio del discorso del capitalista. Tutto si consuma sino al

consumo di tutto, ma senza che niente generi autentica soddisfazione' (Borelli *et al.*, 2013: 72).

2.3 Documenting the Real (II): *Berlusconismo*, the Italian Hypermodern Subject and the Imperative to 'Enjoy!'

The idea that hypermodern society is characterised by 'the increasing proliferation of inducements (and commandments) to enjoy' and that this 'represents a transformation in the social order as drastic as the emergence of modernity' (McGowan, 2004: 1) is a widely accepted idea not only amongst contemporary Italian Lacanians but also amongst contemporary *international* Lacanians, such as Žižek (1989 and 2000), Salecl (2004), and Fink (2014a and 2014b), to name but a few. This alteration in the structure of Western society involves a 'transformation from a society founded on the prohibition of enjoyment (and thus the dissatisfaction of its subjects) to a society that commands enjoyment or *jouissance* (in which there seems to be no requisite dissatisfaction)' (McGowan, 2004: 2). In this respect, '[w]hereas formerly society has required subjects to renounce their private enjoyment in the name of social duty, today the only duty seems to consist in enjoying oneself as much as possible' (McGowan, 2004: 2). According to Recalcati, the crucial (ethical) question embedded in hypermodern Western society is therefore: 'perché rinunciare al godimento, perché rinunciare a godere, perché attribuire un senso alla rinuncia?' (Recalcati, 2011f: 9).

Contemporary Italian and international Lacanianism stress that this command to enjoy is sustained and fostered by the discourse of the capitalist. For instance, according to Recalcati, '[il] godimento è […] cavalcato dal discorso del capitalista che fomenta la sua sregolazione' (Recalcati, 2012d: 13). Pagliardini goes as far as to argue that 'il capitalismo è il primo ordine simbolico capace di mettere le mani addosso al reale e di piegarlo al proprio servizio' (Pagliardini, 2012: 4). Namely, it produces an endless number of commodities to be consumed by the subject, who is turned into a consumer, and thus leads the subject into an infinite state of *jouissance*. Thus,

> [i]l discorso del capitalista lacaniano [...] non esalta affatto il legame come effetto della rinuncia pulsionale, come prodotto del sacrificio o come manifestazione della virtù delle opere, ma è un discorso che *esalta a senso unico la spinta del godimento* [original emphasis] (Recalcati, 2010a: 28).

In fact, the discourse of the capitalist, as Recalcati understands it, 'tende a distruggere ogni forma discorsiva affermando il soggetto come pura spinta al godimento solitario, dunque dissolvendo ogni freno al godimento, anzi, incoraggiando il godimento come nuova forma di comandamento sociale' (Recalcati, 2010a: 28).

Considering Berlusconi not as an Italian entrepreneur and politician but rather as a 'significante e icona' (Carmagnola and Bonazzi, 2011: 58), we should then wonder: '*[d]i quale cosa è il nome Berlusconi?*' [original emphasis] (Carmagnola and Bonazzi, 2011: 57). Recalcati believes *berlusconismo* to be the epitome of the hypermodern command to enjoy. In this respect, 'la figura di Berlusconi fa davvero epoca' (Recalcati, 2010a: 13 note 14) insofar as, by means of his 'esercizio illimitato del godimento' (Recacati, 2010a: 13 note 14), Berlusconi 'incarna il godimento senza limiti' (Recalcati, 2013: 106). Therefore, Berlusconi and *berlusconismo* must be kept distinct: *berlusconismo* is the Italian attitude in hypermodern postmillennial society to adhere to the command to enjoy and to do everything to fulfill it. Berlusconi is the exemplary figure of this new attitude and set of values. As Recalcati (2010a: 13 note 14) contends,

> [i]l carattere epocale di una figura come quella di Silvio Berlusconi non consiste ovviamente nell'azione di governo che ha caratterizzato la sua missione politica, ma nel come la sua persona abbia suggellato paradigmaticamente questa equivalenza ipermoderna tra Legge e godimento. Non solo i suoi cosiddetti comportamenti privati, ma in modo assai più emblematico, la sua stessa azione legislativa (vedi, per esempio, le cosiddette leggi *ad personam),* svelano come il massimo rappresentante della vita dello Stato miri alla realizzazione del proprio godimento situato non come capriccio estemporaneo, ma come di diritto inscritto nella funzione istituzionale che egli ricopre. [...] Non c'è vergogna, senso di colpa, senso del limite appunto, poiché non c'è senso della Legge disgiunto da quello del godimento, perché *il luogo della Legge coincide propriamente con quello del godimento* [original emphasis].

Dominijanni underlines that: '[è] chiaro dall'analisi di Recalcati come il berlusconismo, in linea con «il discorso del capitalista» neoliberista, abbia interpretato questo nodo e vinto questa lotta: sostituendo alla dialettica fra desiderio e legge l'ingiunzione al godimento immediato e al consumo compulsivo dell'oggetto' (Dominijanni, 2010c: 10). What distinguishes the Italian case in this

respect is the fact that contemporary Italian Lacanians conceive of *berlusconismo* as the specific Italian embodiment of the command to enjoy of Western capitalist society. Therefore, more than 'Berlusconi's world of illusion' (Rigoletto, 2012: 251), I contend that it is the Real *qua jouissance* enhanced by the capitalist discourse that is documented in *Videocracy*. In this respect, I agree with Lolli's definition of *Videocracy* as a 'straordinario documento filmico sull'Italia del berlusconismo' (Lolli, 2012: 100). Whilst denouncing Berlusconi's media power and illustrating the illusory world of television by showing people who are willing to do anything for fame, it also frames the command to enjoy that is so pervasive in Western society and, thus, in Italy. This is achieved through the depiction of several people whose lives revolve around the world of television. Considering that this *jouissance* partakes of the register of the Real, it too cannot be straightforwardly depicted through images or words. Rather, it can be appreciated by means of the impact and effects on the subjects. In *Videocracy*, *jouissance* manifests itself as the pervasive attempt to pursue unlimited personal enjoyment, to affirm one's ego at any cost on the television screen, and to turn one's persona into a brand. The spectator is confronted with it in sequences from Italian television programmes, in the auditions in which people will do anything in front of the camera to be selected, in the phenomenon of 'velinismo', amongst Lele Mora's guests, in Corona's statements and behaviour, and so forth.

Berlusconi's presence is characterised by a sort of subtle omnipresence and people's desires and behaviour seem to emanate both from him and from the model that his television imposes. As Manduca (2009: 35) claims:

> Continuamente e insistentemente nel film viene indicata e nominata una presenza che ci viene detto essere all'origine di tutto: "il Presidente". Detto, ribadito e sottolineato, ma non mostrato né *documentato*. Il Presidente è evocato (ma mai chiamato per nome), è la causa.

Gandini's voiceover affirms that: 'nessuno sorride come il presidente. […] il suo sorriso è l'espressione di un vero desiderio di divertirsi. Divertendosi e offrendo divertimento è diventato l'uomo più ricco del paese, il più grande proprietario mediatico e il Presidente'. As for the editing of the documentary, the choice of sequences and how they are assembled, Manduca notes 'la più forte contraddizione del film: agire sulla decostruzione (delle immagini televisive, del

concetto di successo, del 'velinismo', ecc.), ma cercare a tutti i costi la ricostruzione (di una storia, di una precisa strategia, di un senso)' (Manduca, 2009: 35). This is a controversial aspect of this documentary: 'il film non prende mai la direzione dell'inchiesta […], non può spiegare le dinamiche sociali' (Manduca, 2009: 35). It struggles to provide the bigger picture and to investigate the reason for those pervasive phenomena related to the world of television. Because of this, using Berlusconi as a link to all the vignettes sketched in the documentary, *Videocracy* 'si limita a mostrare criticamente e a far emergere dall'accostamento di varie e strane cose le particolarità comunicative del panorama italiano' (Manduca, 2009: 35). Once again, the Lacanian perspective on this documentary enables us to better understand it: the crux of this documentary is not Berlusconi and his television empire, which have shaped and changed Italy and Italians, but rather *Berlusconism*, a typical hypermodern phenomenon. Manduca's criticism does not consider that it is the Real in the form of *jouissance* that holds all the sequences together. It is the hypermodern command to enjoy fostered by the capitalist discourse that is framed, represented, and documented. Indeed, according to Recalcati, '[l]a risposta che il berlusconismo offre è in piena sintonia con il discorso capitalista' (Recalcati, 2010c: 10), inasmuch as

> il nichilismo del *discorso del capitalista* ha demolito il senso stesso della legge. Per questo […] il berlusconismo ha assunto un valore epocale: quello di rappresentare il carattere perverso, anti-istituzionale, narcisistico, dell'affermazione della volontà di godimento come unica forma della legge (Borelli *et al.*, 2013: 92).

Videocracy and the situations represented in it are exemplary of this 'attitudine a subordinare ogni cosa (la verità, i legami sociali, gli affetti più intimi, gli interessi generali di una comunità) al proprio godimento personale, vissuto come un imperativo incoercibile' (Recalcati, 2010c: 10). The Real that emerges in this documentary is 'l'espressione del godimento senza limiti [che] avviene nel luogo della legge, il luogo stesso che dovrebbe porre il limite' (Recalcati, 2013: 106). In fact, Corona affirms that 'se vuoi andare avanti vuoi andare oltre […] devi fare delle cose che non vanno bene' (Gandini, 2009).

Therefore, according to Carmagnola and Bonazzi (2011: 55), Berlusconi fully embodies the hypermodern political leader since '[i]l suo carisma non mette

in presa diretta il simbolico e il reale, ma piuttosto l'immaginario e il reale'. As discussed in the previous subsection, the connection between the Imaginary and the Real underpins *Videocracy* and, more specifically, *Berlusconism*. *Berlusconism* and the imperative to enjoy promoted by the discourse of the capitalist in hypermodern times encourage a '[l]ibertà immaginaria' which consists of the 'libertà del godimento' (Recalcati, 2011: 86). The core of *Berlusconism* does not rest merely on Berlusconi's television's empire or on his ability to manipulate the media to obtain political votes or public approval. As Recalcati maintains,

> [q]uando si dice: "Ma insomma, il consenso c'è perché c'è informazione manipolata. Se gli italiani sapessero la verità, questo consenso verrebbe meno." Questa è una lettura umanistica che non sta in piedi. Che non tocca la vera questione. La vera questione è proprio il consenso (Recalcati and Raimo, 2013: 106).

What is at stake is the capacity of *berlusconismo* to sustain the limitlessness of the discourse of the capitalist to promote unrestricted enjoyment. This is the key (perverted) aspect of Berlusconi's popularity and the essence of *berlusconismo* as understood by contemporary Italian Lacanians. As Carmagnola and Bonazzi (2011: 93) aptly point out, 'la presa della figura di Berlusconi sul cittadino/elettore/consumatore/spettatore non deriva (solo) dall'imponenza dei suoi mezzi di comunicazione ma dal fatto che noi ne condividiamo qualcosa sul piano pulsionale'. That is, Berlusconi might be conceived of as the paradigm of the hypermodern Italian subject which embodies, enacts, and fosters the capitalistic command to enjoy: 'Berlusconi intercetta il nostro fantasma e orienta il nostro desiderio verso l'infinità degli oggetti di godimento' (Carmagnola and Bonazzi, 2011: 62). This is why, following Žižek, Vighi and Feldner (2010: 39) claim that: 'the *implicit* core of ideology is anchored in the Real *qua* non-discursive kernel of *jouissance*'.

This is clearly stated by one of the interviewees in *Videocracy* in reference to Berlusconi: 'lui è così […] lui è naturale […] lui è quello che è' (Gandini, 2009). Therefore, 'è su questo che fa leva il consenso del leader ipermoderno. Il problema è che questo diventa un punto di emulazione collettiva, di identificazione collettiva' (Recalcati and Raimo, 2013: 107). In this respect,

> [i]l vantaggio del discorso di Recalcati […] sta precisamente nel porre al centro una

questione - il rapporto fra desiderio e Legge - che è dell'ordine simbolico, e dunque in primo luogo riguarda parimenti l'individuale, il sociale e il politico, in secondo luogo ci interpella tutti' (Dominijanni, 2010c: 10).

Along these lines, referring to Berlusconi, Žižek contends that 'people […] identify with him as embodying the mythic image of the average Italian: I am one of you, a little bit corrupt, in trouble with the law, in trouble with my wife because I'm attracted to other women' (Žižek, 2009: np). And it is for precisely this reason that Berlusconi 'parades his personal life as if he were taking part in a reality TV show' (Žižek, 2009: np). As Dominijianni (2009: 14) contends:

> Il nocciolo è quello del rapporto fra fiction e realtà. Sappiamo tutte e tutti che la sovrapposizione fra fiction e realtà è il dispositivo su cui il regime berlusconiano si è imposto nell'immaginario prima che nella politica di questo paese.

Furthermore, Dominijianni questions: '[m]a questa sovrapposizione è davvero totale, o totalmente riuscita? Per usare una nota formula di Baudrillard, la tv ha davvero sterminato la realtà?' (Dominijianni, 2009: 14). Here, Dominjianni insists on the fiction/reality dichotomy. Although what she affirms about Berlusconi's era and its manipulation of reality is certainly correct, this might not help us fully grasp the peculiarity of postmillennial Italy and the 'ritorno alla realtà' unless we insist on the Lacanian notion of the Real qua *jouissance*. The latter clarifies that Berlusconism is not simply centred on an alteration of reality by the media. Similarly, the issue in the new wave of realism in early twenty-first-century Italy is less the relation with reality than the link with the Real. As Recalcati aptly underlines, 'non è perché i mezzi di comunicazione non dicano la verità, ma proprio perché la verità si vede, che c'è un consenso diffuso. Perché si vorrebbe essere così' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 106). Indeed, this is the ethical challenge of hypermodern times. As we can see:

> [D]el berlusconismo […] non ci libereremo soltanto in forza di una manovra politica, per la buona ragione che il berlusconismo è precisamente una *eccedenza* dalla sintassi politica tradizionale alla quale non si lascia ridurre né ricondurre. […] Di che cosa sia fatta questa eccedenza, e come trattarla politicamente, è la questione a cui dare risposta (Dominijanni, 2010c: 10).

Therefore, what is truly at stake in Berlusconism is the Real *qua jouissance*. As such, Berlusconism could be considered as the paradigm of hypermodern Italy.

3. *Reality***: Quitting Reality, Discovering the Real**

3.1 The Cinematic Dimension of Reality and the Cinematic Real

In the previous section, I remarked, in Cowie's wake, that documentary films attempt, by definition, to give an account of the world by establishing an indexical proximity with reality itself. This is one of the key aspects of the genre, which accords it a central position within the return of the Real in postmillennial Italy. Similarly, from a Lacanian perspective, fictional films establish some contiguity with reality due to their 'common structural constitution' (Vighi, 2012: 6). According to Lacan's theory, a subject can only experience reality through its fictional and fictionalised fabric insofar as '[l]a realtà si costituisce nella connessione tra il simbolico e l'immaginario, escludendo il reale' (Vegetti Finzi, 1986: 387). Thus, reality is always 'lived and known through imaginary and symbolic representations' (Grosz, 1990: 34). Indeed, in Lacanian terms, reality and fictional films are analogously compounded by visual-imaginary components, the order of the Imaginary, and narrative articulations, the register of the Symbolic. Similarly to everyday reality, films are artistic products of the aforementioned articulation between the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

It could thus be claimed that a fictional film 'hosts the potential to *reveal reality* both as an intimately symbolic construct, and as the traumatic surplus of meaning that accompanies our entrance into the fabric of the world' [emphasis added] (Vighi, 2014: 312). This also means that a minimum level of symbolisation is required for the subject to experience reality, and that a failure in the process of symbolisation might lead to psychosis (Lacan, 1997a: 45). Thus, it follows that cinema and reality imply 'our constitutive alienation in fiction' (Vighi, 2012: 7). The subject always re-creates his/her own reality in order to screen the Real and keep it at a distance. Ultimately, 'reality can only be thought of as an intrinsically cinematic form of appearance' (Vighi, 2012: 8). Therefore, given this fictional fabric of reality, namely its imaginary and symbolic constitution, Vighi claims not only that '*reality itself is inherently cinematic*' but also, seemingly paradoxically, that '*reality imitates cinema*' [original emphasis] (Vighi, 2014: 311).

As already discussed in Chapter 3, for Lacan there is no possibility of a

'spontaneous and direct entry into reality' (Vighi, 2010: 279) for the subject. Along these lines, Lolli remarks that for human beings 'è precluso il contatto diretto con la realtà' (Lolli, 2011: 56). In Lacanian terms, reality cannot be conceived of merely as the objective and external substrate which is independent of the subject. Indeed, Lacan 'rejects any account of human development based on an unproblematic notion of "reality" as an objective and self-evident given' (Evans, 1996: 164). Indeed, Lacanians see reality as 'un quadro con le caratteristiche della costanza e della stabilità che assicura il soggetto nella sua presenza sulla "scena del mondo"' (Recalcati, 2012a: 271). Therefore, reality screens the Real and protects the subject from a traumatic encounter with it. Consequently, when Vighi draws a parallel between reality and cinema, he is underlining that the latter 'reproduces the elementary dynamics concerning the negotiation of sense that are already inbuilt in the way we relate to reality' (Vighi, 2014: 316).

As such, as Recalcati aptly argues, 'l'allucinazione non è tanto sostitutiva ma *costitutiva* della realtà' [original emphasis] (Recalcati, 2012a: 275) or, in Lacan's own words, reality 'is from the beginning hallucinated' (Lacan, 1997a: 98). This means that, from a Lacanian perspective, reality is, to some extent, a hallucination for all human beings. That is, there is no such thing as reality understood as 'the real world out there'. Rather, reality is always the product of an imaginary and symbolic articulation by the subject. Hence, 'as with cinema, reality can be experienced only if confronted as a complex, ambiguous narrative, a jungle of signs which unravels in front of our eyes and demands that we come to terms with it' (Vighi, 2010: 279). From this Lacanian perspective, the process of filmmaking closely resembles the way in which the subject perceives reality; that is to say, it 'is nothing but the distortion it shapes itself into whilst trying to achieve meaning' (Vighi, 2014: 280).

On the contrary, as argued extensively in the previous chapters, Lacan's notion of the Real is 'il limite della rappresentazione, il suo scacco' (Vegetti Finzi, 1986: 387). According to Žižek (2003: 67), the Real is

> that invisible obstacle, that distorting screen, which always "falsifies" our access to external reality, that "bone in the throat" which gives a pathological twist to every symbolisation, that is to say, on account of which every symbolisation misses its object.

As Recalcati further explains, '[i]l reale non è la realtà, il reale è quello che non esiste nella realtà e che interferisce nella percezione della realtà' (Recalcati, 2012a: 275). It follows that the cinematic Real, as opposed to the cinematic dimension of reality, can be conceived of as the trace that interferes with the imaginary-symbolic articulation of a film. In other words, the cinematic Real can be regarded as 'a nucleus of traumatic fantasy that operates at the level of the unconscious [...], as an impenetrable hard core of enjoyment that signals the presence of an unconscious desire' (Vighi, 2006: 18). According to Vighi, this cinematic Real is ultimately the unconscious of a film and 'can only come about as a traumatic encounter with the disavowed core of cinematic representation' (Vighi, 2006: 8), namely, that 'unconscious kernel that a film *qua* symbolic construct necessarily produces' (Vighi, 2014: 316). This is because 'beneath the symbolic order of reality there exists [...] an abyss, in other words that essentially non-symbolic (Real) dimension whose legitimacy cinema has the potential to restore' (Vighi, 2006: 28).

In Chapter 1, I argued that whilst the Lacanian category of the Real was overlooked in film studies during the 1970s and 1980s, the prominent conceptual category was that of the Lacanian order of the Imaginary. Conversely, this trend has changed recently and Lacanian approaches to films 'have meanwhile reinvented themselves on the basis of Lacan's concept of the Real' (Nagib and Mello, 2009: XIX). In turn, this has led to the fact that 'much film today has explicitly taken up an engagement with the Real and its effects. The result is a series of films that enact trauma, *jouissance*, fantasy, and desire in unprecedented ways' (McGowan and Kunkle, 2004: XXIII). Moreover, the focus on the conceptual category of the Lacanian Real has led to the reappearance of Lacanian psychoanalysis in the field of film studies (McGowan and Kunkle 2004: XII). According to this Lacanian approach to film, which places the Real at its core, the psychoanalytic interpretation of film should not aim at applying psychoanalytic notions and theories to the cinematic medium (Vighi, 2014: 311). It should, rather, 'identify ways of reaching the cinematic Real' (Vighi, 2006: 11), namely that which falls outside of the imaginary-symbolic articulation and is thus located in the 'surplus of sense that escapes conscious narrative strategies' (Vighi, 2014:

317). In conclusion, '[a]s a form of thought, then, cinema always thinks the Real, since it is inextricably entangled with existence; conversely, reality can only be thought of as an intrinsically cinematic form of appearance' (Vighi, 2014: 317).

3.2 Reality and Reality Television

The film *Reality* tells the story of Luciano, a Neapolitan fishmonger who, persuaded by his family, auditions for *Grande Fratello*, the Italian *Big Brother*. Luciano's desire to be chosen as a participant in *Grande Fratello* soon becomes a (psychotic) mania. This echoes Riccardo Carnevali's fixation in *Videocracy*, where this young man is obsessed with appearing on Italian television, especially on *Grande Fratello*, in order to become popular and wealthy. From this perspective, *Reality* is clearly a film which 'explores the toxic aspirations of a nation addicted to watching *Big Brother* on television, and the impact of reality television on people's real lives' (Vulliamy, 2013: para. 6). Indeed, as Menarini points out, in Garrone's film, 'è il mondo ricostruito della televisione a esondare nel privato e a increspare [...] il mondo del protagonista' (Menarini, 2012: 32). From this perspective, both *Videocracy* and *Reality* illustrate the predominance of Italian television programmes and, in particular, of *Big Brother*, which in the popular imagination epitomises a life-changing opportunity to enter the glamorous world of television. As Lolli remarks, the world of television reinforces the 'credenza in due realtà diverse e contrastanti: la realtà ordinaria e la realtà spettacolare, il mondo insoddisfacente della quotidianità e il mondo scintillante dello *show*, all'interno del quale l'esistenza acquista una connotazione diversa' (Lolli, 2012: 89).

This fascination with reality television programmes highlights the pervasive postmillennial 'obsession with reality' (Myers, 2009: 244) that characterises contemporary Western society. According to Cowie, '[t]he extraordinary stories of people's real lives and adventures fascinate, whether circulated through picture magazines, television talk shows, or reality programs' (2011: 16). Cowie maintains that '[t]he "selving" that we observe, that is, the observation of a "true" self emerging from the performance, which was the object of direct cinema documentary, is now packaged in the reality game show format

created by *Big Brother*' (Cowie, 2011: 17). As Myers puts it, '[t]elevision has never been so real... and so unreal. The rise of reality is relentless. The boundaries between game show and documentary, reality and artifice, are becoming increasingly blurred' (Myers, 2009: 235). In reality television shows, '[l]a naturalezza della "vita in diretta" è sempre relativizzata dall'artificiosità dell'ambiente recintato, dello sguardo della telecamera, dello spettacolo in corso. Il personaggio sa di avere di fronte un pubblico e di rappresentarsi' (Donnarumma, 2014: 179).

For these reasons, at a first glance, the dualism between reality and reality television, and thus the opposition between the real and the unreal, appears to be at the core of, and explored by, this film. Nevertheless, I consider that a Lacanian analysis of *Reality* should go beyond these strict poles of the real world and the unreal world of television. This dualism is based on a binary opposition, typical of the twentieth century and not particularly appropriate for understanding hypermodern society. In fact, according to Garrone, 'Reality è un film sulla percezione del reale, la storia di un uomo che esce dalla realtà ed entra nel proprio immaginario' (Garrone, 2012: 4). Therefore, from a contemporary Italian Lacanian perspective, the film explores, on the one hand, the hypermodern subject affected by the dissolution of everyday reality and by the emergence of the Real, and, on the other, the depiction of hypermodernity as the *epoca dell'inconshow*, which, Recalcati suggests, involves a progressive disappearance of the unconscious and a rise of the discourse of the capitalist. As Lolli (2012: 89) argues,

> [c]iò che la televisione produce, pertanto, non è *spettacolo* ma il *mondo dello spettacolo*. In questo, si differenzia dal cinema. Il mezzo televisivo, in altre parole, promulga l'esistenza di un mondo che, nella realtà, non esiste, un mondo artificiale creato affinché il cittadino, rassicurato da ciò che vede, possa continuare il suo sonno di consumatore.

Interestingly, Garrone shot *Reality* in 2012, after *Gomorra* (2008) and before *Il racconto dei racconti* (2015). This means that Garrone conceived *Reality*, a film which revolves around questions about the constitution and the perception of reality (i.e. subjective reality, social reality, and reality television), after his international success with *Gomorra*, which is considered as the peak of Garrone's

realism (Russo, 2015), but before *Il racconto dei racconti*, which is, on the contrary, a fantasy film based on Basile's fairy tales. Garrone is certainly interested in exploring reality, such as the harsh reality of the *camorra* or the alienated reality of television programmes, to the extent that his cinema could be described as an enquiry about reality. Indeed, referring to *Gomorra*, Garrone affirms that he 'took his camera to the streets of Scampia not simply to shoot a movie, but with the intent to *document reality*' [emphasis added] (Scala and Rossini, 2013: 5). As for *Reality*, Garrone aims to combine both realistic and fantastical elements. As Vulliamy writes: 'Reality is spiked with fantasy and the grotesque' (Vulliamy, 2013: para. 39). According to Garrone (2012: 4): '[d]urante le riprese ero di continuo alla ricerca di quel sottile equilibrio tra realtà e sogno, ricercando anche da un punto di vista figurativo una dimensione favolistica, una sorta di "realismo magico"'. For this reason, Garrone's realism in this film has been defined as 'altro-realismo', 'oltre-realismo', and 'iper-realismo' (Cortellessa, 2012: para. 5). Indeed, as Russo claims, Garrone proposes a 'realismo problematico, scavato, come per eccesso, da una dimensione derealizzante [...] in cui vengono a tratti toccati i limiti del fiabesco' (Russo, 2015: para. 2). In *Il racconto dei racconti*, which offers a highly realistic depiction of a world inhabited by fantasy creatures, Garrone further explores the connection between reality and fantastic elements and develops upon his cinematic 'realismo magico'.

The opening scene epitomises this combination of realistic and fantastical elements, presenting an airy framing of a countryside landscape that appears at the same time as a realistic and fairytale-like place. In addition to this, a dreamlike soundtrack contrasts with the modern buildings in the landscape, while a fairytale carriage with horses and charioteers can be seen on the road amongst cars and other traffic. From the beginning of the film, the spectator is thus driven to doubt what he/she sees and to question which kind of reality is being represented on the screen. After a while, it becomes evident that the carriage is taking a married couple to their wedding reception in a Neapolitan restaurant. The wedding party seems to be set in a place where reality and the fantastic blend into one another, characterised by Neapolitan stereotypes. The wedding reception is sumptuous and extravagant: there is a red carpet for the wedding couple, dozens of loud guests, and Neapolitan songs. This helps create a sharp

contrast between the genuine Neapolitan atmosphere and the fake atmosphere of television programmes. Indeed, the film falls 'within the very best and most cogent traditions of Italian realism and Neapolitan tragi-comedy' (Vulliamy, 2013: para. 6) due to a 'mescolanza di registri, dal comico al dramma, un frammentarsi di momenti che si rivoltano dalla commedia napoletana al grottesco se non al tragico' (Selvaggi, 2012: 107). Moreover, Garrone alternates between realistic and picturesque locations, such as the Neapolitan square where Luciano's fish shop is located, the shopping centre or the water park, along with images from *Grande Fratello* broadcasted on Italian television. This stylistic choice reinforces the opposition between reality and unreality and further disorients the spectators.

It has been pointed out that Garrone is one of the postmillennial Italian filmmakers inspired or at least to some extent influenced by neorealism: '[r]eflecting on the socio-political disintegration of their country some filmmakers have decided to "plant the camera in the midst of real life" once again and brought the nude reality to the big screen, amongst these there is definitely Matteo Garrone' (Scala and Rossini, 2013: 4-5). Moreover, as Scala and Rossini (2013: 5) argue, 'Garrone follows neorealism also in his choice to employ real people'. In fact, the protagonist Luciano is played by the actor Aniello Arena, who spent several years in prison serving a life sentence (Vulliamy, 2013), but who had had a number of theatrical experiences before taking part in the film. What is more, the characters portrayed in *Reality* belong to the working class. As Donnarumma (2008b: 44-45) puts it:

> L'affermarsi del realismo cui assistiamo […] nasce da un bisogno di storie utili, eticamente spendibili, psicologicamente riappropriabili […]. Il realismo, insomma, potrebbe essere anzitutto l'esca dell'autoriconoscimento e dell'identificazione […] il soddisfacimento dei bisogni di una soggettività debole e frustrata che, vedendo rappresentato il proprio mondo, si sente ammessa al narrabile, al degno d'attenzione, al senso.

3.3 From Reality (Television) to the Real

Luciano's 'odissea psichica' (Grasso, 2013: 177) in the realm of reality begins just before his first encounter with Enzo, a former *Grande Fratello* contestant, during the aforementioned wedding reception. Luciano seems to live a fulfilling life,

satisfied with his job and surrounded by good friends and family members. Luciano's daily routine runs smoothly. Nevertheless, his sense of identity seems to be uncertain and somewhat precarious. At the wedding reception, Luciano wishes to perform the role of an elderly woman to entertain the wedding guests. While Luciano is getting into character in front of a mirror, one of his friends tells him straightforwardly, in Neapolitan dialect: 'Ancora con questa vecchia? Basta, l'hai fatta trentamila volte! Fai qualche altra cosa. Non va più bene. Basta, cambia personaggio!'. Luciano is clearly shocked: he has played that character many times before and does not understand why he must change all of a sudden. Luciano looks at himself in the mirror, visibly lost. This scene reminds us of Vitangelo Moscarda from Pirandello's novel *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, another character that begins to question his self-identity after receiving an abrupt comment from his wife, in this case about his physical appearance, whilst in front of a mirror. [78] All of a sudden, Vitangelo must deal with that new 'immagine strana, nemica' (Pirandello, 1994: 835) of himself. Like Pirandello's character, who is anguished by the uncanny feeling of being '[s]olo con un certo estraneo, che già sentivo oscuramente di non poter più levarmi di torno e ch'ero io stesso' (Pirandello, 1994: 814), in the aforementioned scene, Luciano looks at the split image of himself in the mirror, extremely upset. The image in the mirror is uncanny insofar as Luciano can no longer recognise it.

Nevertheless, according to Donnarumma, in today's society 'tutti recitano se stessi. E' una specie di pirandellismo rovesciato e disinnescato: la verità non si è persa perché ognuno indossa delle maschere, ma poiché tutti indossiamo delle maschere, la verità sta nelle nostre maschere. Il vero si produce dentro l'apparato della simulazione: esiste solo al suo interno' (Donnarumma, 2014: 180). This stance seems unconvincing from a strictly Lacanian perspective, according to which 'to speak of a "true" subject, a "true" self, beyond the masks and beyond alienation, is meaningless' (Sforza Tarabochia, 2013: 129). Indeed, Pirandello's characters are often driven by the challenge of rejoining the image that they or other people have of themselves with their inner being or, in other words, going beyond their mask to inhabit their true self. From a Lacananian perspective, this

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[78] For a Lacanian reading of Pirandello's *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, see Sforza Tarabochia (2013).

is utterly impossible. As Lacan affirms, 'it is not in this dialectic between the surface and that which is beyond that things are suspended' (Lacan, 1998a: 106).

In Chapter 2, I suggested that the Lacanian theory of vision overturns the rigid dichotomy between the viewing subject and the viewed object of vision. Similarly, this uncanny mirror image overturns Luciano's own gaze and looks back at him. As Recalcati aptly puts it, '[l]'immagine che ci guarda non è l'immagine che vela il reale, ma l'immagine che angoscia perché *presentifica il reale* [original emphasis] (Recalcati, 2010a: 119). Indeed, as addressed in Chapter 1, whilst Lacan's presentation of the mirror stage theory in the early phase of his teaching establishes that the field of the Imaginary can cover up the Real by means of the narcissistic coverage of the mirror image, Lacan later considers the Imaginary to be unable to fully fulfill this function. According to Recalcati (2010a: 119),

> [l]'immagine perturbante, anziché consentire la nostra identificazione in una unità ideale, come avveniva nello stadio dello specchio con l'immagine narcisistico-speculare, genera il doppio come automa, figura irriducibile alla simmetria narcisistica, parte di me stesso che sfugge a me stesso, oggetto impossibile da recuperare, spaesante, oggetto che mi divide.

Thus, this aforementioned scene from *Reality* epitomises what Bellavita refers to as the shift '*dall'immagine allo specchio allo specchio infranto del Reale*' [original emphasis] (2005: 238). Finally, Luciano is obliged to dismiss his well-tested character to play a new one, that of the drag queen.

At that moment, Enzo appears very briefly like a proper film star amongst the other guests in the dance hall. Enzo pronounces his short wedding speech that ultimately turns out to be just his motto: 'Non abbandonate mai i vostri sogni! Never give up!'. After this brief appearance, he has to leave the wedding reception in a private helicopter. Since Luciano's daughter wants to take a picture with Enzo, the two follow him and, after obtaining the picture, Luciano watches in great fascination as Enzo flies away. According to Cardella and Van den Bergh (2013: 33), 'Enzo incarna tutto quello che Luciano vorrebbe essere: rappresenta il Grande Fratello, il successo e lo spettacolo in cui Luciano si specchia. E' da questa idolatria che prende spunto la nuova vita di Luciano'. Therefore, Enzo represents Luciano's idealised image. After this episode, Luciano's life continues

as usual.

However, something in Luciano seems to have been broken. This fracture in his self-identity contributes to his obsession with starring in *Big Brother* and eventually triggers what psychiatry and psychoanalysis conceive of as a latent psychosis. At his first audition for the television show, held in a shopping centre, Luciano encounters Enzo again. After the audition, Luciano's desire to be chosen as a contestant for the reality television programme increases. Luciano seems to strive to be seen by the big (br)Other in order to exist. He needs the ubiquitous eye of the big (br)Other so as to avoid the 'unbearable anxiety of perceiving oneself as nonexistent' (Žižek, 2002: 10). Indeed, as Recalcati affirms, '[l]'essere parlante può umanizzare il proprio corpo attraverso lo specchio dell'Altro, il suo sguardo, il suo riconoscimento simbolico. È innanzitutto l'Altro ad attribuire un senso umano al reale bruto della vita biologica' (Recalcati, 2010a: 119). Selvaggi (2012: 108) underlines this perspective, claiming that:

> Ancora una volta Garrone costruisce i suoi film lungo quel 'confine' non definito [...] in cui l'individuo esiste solo nella relazione con gli altri, anche con gli affetti, fino però a confondersi con la relazione malata che un'intera civiltà ha con se stessa.

Indeed, contemporary Italian Lacanianism addresses this crisis of social bonds as well as the isolation and alienation of the hypermodern subject, which is increasingly deprived of symbolic points of reference. In this context, the television world, and particularly reality television programmes such as *Grande Fratello*, could cater to this need to have one's identity acknowledged and to be seen by the big (br)Other. Through the cameras of *Big Brother*, television offers the hypermodern subject the possibility of attaining an identity, as was the case with Enzo, and of being loved and recognised by the big (br)Other, which ultimately compensates for the crisis of Symbolic. As Lolli aptly puts it: '[c]olui che gode in realtà è l'Altro, nel nostro caso, il pubblico, ma forse ancor di più, il "Grande Fratello", colui che sta dietro il pubblico, la macchina dello spettacolo e i suoi imprenditori che da tutto il processo traggono il vero vantaggio' (Lolli, 2012: 104).

Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that Luciano's condition is pathological and not simply the product of hypermodern times, although it might

be considered to embody them. As Lolli underlines, '[l]a deriva psicotica (intesa come creazione di una nuova realtà che rimpiazza in maniera definitiva quella originaria) è, effettivamente, assai rara; più frequentemente, il telespettatore conduce due vite' (Lolli, 2012: 89). However, Luciano's story, as depicted by Garrone in *Reality*, epitomises that which contemporary Italian Lacanians consider as the epochal shift in hypermodernity. As discussed in Sections 2.2 and 2.3 of Chapter 2, the hypermodern subject seems to undergo a shift from a neurotic structure, in which neurotic symptoms are metaphorical expressions of the unconscious, towards a psychotic one, at the core of which the symptom appears to be completely dissociated from the symbolic dynamics of the unconscious. For these reasons, Recalcati defines the hypermodern subject as 'senza inconscio' and Lolli describes contemporary times as the 'epoca dell'inconshow', insisting on the superficial spectacularisation of inner life.

Once Luciano returns to Naples from Rome, after the second round of casting held in Cinecittà, his delusion slowly develops and the unfortunate circumstances trigger his psychosis. At first, he is sure that, sooner or later, he will receive a phone call to confirm his participation in the programme. Thus, to be completely available to star in the show, Luciano sells his fish shop and seeks to invest the money in modernising his house. Later, he starts to develop the delusional belief that he has not been contacted yet because the casting directors are still making their decision. Eventually, he believes that a team from *Big Brother* has gone undercover to watch and secretly follow him around before they decide. In this respect, from a Lacanian perspective,

> we are always followed by a virtual camera (the one that 'projects' us into reality), but more crucially, [...] the gaze of this camera turns us all into actors (whether we want it or not) and corresponds to the traumatic gaze of the unconscious (Vighi, 2014: 311).

In fact, 'as with the language in Lacan, then, so with the gaze: it pre-exists the subject' (Foster, 1996: 138). Indeed, according to Lacan, the subject is 'looked at from all sides' (Lacan, 1998a: 72) and, to some extent, is nothing but a stain on 'the spectacle of the world' (Lacan, 1998a: 75).[79] From this perspective,

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[79] See Chapter 2, Section 4.2, for a more detailed discussion on the notion of the gaze in Lacan's Seminar XI.

> [w]hat is at stake in both cinema and reality is the construction and potential dissolution of a symbolic space, whose existence can only be appreciated if we assume the presence of the Lacanian gaze in our visual field, the indiscernible point of view of a virtual camera that instantly turns us into fictional characters (Vighi, 2010: 279).

Eventually, to impress the constantly watching *Big Brother*, Luciano buys food and drinks for a homeless person and also decides to give away all the furniture in his house in order to help the less fortunate. Luciano's wife tries to stop him, shouting at and violently arguing with him but ultimately there is nothing she can do.

According to Russo, 'in *Reality* la ricerca filmica si [attua] soprattutto nel contrasto con la rappresentazione televisiva del genere *reality*, con la sua falsa trasparenza' (Russo, 2015: para. 8). In effect, 'il principio dello Spettacolo tende a triturare il principio di realtà' (Tarizzo, 2007: 101) inasmuch as 'non più, infatti, sulla *rappresentazione* […] si fonda il sociale contemporaneo ma sulla *presentazione*' (Lolli, 2012: 43). Even when the new edition of *Grande Fratello* is broadcasted, Luciano still hopes to be contacted. He starts spending his days in front of the television, watching the screen, almost hypnotised. One day, he is found in the storage room of his house, which he has converted into a *Big Brother* Diary Room.[80] As Lolli remarks, '[s]tare davanti al televisore per un tempo così prolungato […] [m]odifica, innanzitutto, lo stile delle relazioni. […] L'apparecchio diventa […] il punto di fuga prospettico in ogni tipo di legame, a partire da quello familiare' (Lolli, 2012: 87). Luciano becomes increasingly isolated and his friends and family begin to worry. Indeed,

> [l]a televisione consente […] di entrare in una realtà alternativa a quella 'reale' – senza che questo, tuttavia, implichi la sua negazione. Essa fa esistere due realtà, una al di qua e una al di là dello schermo: delle due, quella virtuale è creata per ripudiare gli aspetti angoscianti di quella reale. Un rapporto intenso con il mezzo televisivo (e con il 'virtuale' in generale) allontana dalla realtà quotidiana, abitua a vivere nel mondo delle rappresentazioni, distoglie dalla vita reale, ma non la nega (Lolli, 2012: 89).

Nevertheless, I contend that a strictly Lacanian analysis of the film *Reality*

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[80] The Diary Room is one of the most renowed features of the *Big Brother* house. It is a small room with a single armchair where housemates can sit and talk confidentially with *Big Brother* about their private thoughts or personal concerns. The room is also used to cast weekly nominations.

goes beyond the mere juxtaposition of reality and unreality. Luciano's vicissitudes embody the shift from modernity/postmodernity to hypermodernity that, according to contemporary Italian Lacanians, occurs in postmillennial Western society. The opposition between reality and fictitious/virtual reality is no longer the issue at stake, and a reading of the film based on this premise would thus be misleading.

According to Žižek, 'Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so' (2002: 11) and despite the fact that '[w]hat happens at the end of this process of virtualization, [...] is that we begin to experience "real reality" itself as a virtual entity' (Žižek, 2002: 11), it is crucial to understand that 'Virtual Reality simply [...] provides reality itself deprived of its substance, of the hard kernel of the Real' (Žižek, 2002: 11). Nevertheless, as Vighi contends,

> the simplistic understanding of virtual reality as the imitation/reproduction of material reality through an artificial medium should be replaced by the much more productive notion that every reality originates in some virtual/Real kernel which needs to be disavowed if reality is to emerge as a symbolically consistent field (Vighi, 2006: 176).

This point is demonstrated by Luciano's psychosis: 'il reale della Cosa si afferma senza schermi protettivi' (Recalcati, 2007a: 78) and disrupts the everyday reality of the subject. According to Recalcati, 'è proprio nella psicosi che il soggetto incontra un reale senza limiti simbolici, un reale senza bordo, distruttivo, non regolato da alcuna castrazione simbolica, un reale maledetto che lo assedia persecutoriamente nel corpo e nei pensieri' (Recalcati, 2007a: 78). The crux of the matter is not simply that reality is virtualised or even de-realised by the media, such as television. As Recalcati puts it, according to Lacan's teaching, '[è] il carattere senza senso, scabroso, informe del reale che attiva la difesa della realtà. In questo senso Lacan può affermare che la realtà è il modo umano primario di difendersi nei confronti del Reale' (Recalcati, 2012a: 272). For this reason, 'l'edificio della realtà è, costitutivamente, soggetto a frantumarsi, a subire delle fratture' (Lucci, 2012: 83). Moreover, Lacanian psychoanalysis 'conceives "reality" as something constituted, "posited" by the subject' (Žižek, 1992: 50). Following Žižek, Vighi claims that 'the reality into which we intervene is always-already the product of our intervention' (Vighi, 2006: 21). The film *Reality* shows

that external reality is not a given object and is not detached from a particular subject. According to Vighi (2006: 20):

> [E]xternal reality is not simply given in advance, irrespective of the psychic apparatus, but rather *it is posited by the subject through the displacement of its own (the subject's) inherent deadlock*. What we regard as the objective world "out there" is inevitably a by-product, a secondary ontology, as it constitutes itself through a kind of evacuation of that immanent and original antagonism situated at the heart of the human psyche – which Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, branded the death-drive [original emphasis].

3.4 The Italian Reversal of *The Truman Show*

Towards the end of the film, Luciano appears to be completely withdrawn from his life and only interested in watching episodes of *Big Brother* alone. Nobody can help him: neither his family, nor his friends, nor the Neapolitan community, nor even the church community where he volunteers. This epitomises the dissolution of bonds in hypermodern society promoted by the discourse of the capitalist. As Recalcati puts it: 'il discorso del capitalista sostiene un legame che è avverso a ogni forma di legame' (Recalcati, 2016a: 635). As a result, '[l]a massa si è sbriciolata e quello che emerge è l'isolamento di ciascuno, stretto al proprio oggetto di godimento' (Borelli *et al.*, 2013: 51); in Luciano's case, this is his television. As Bonazzi claims, '[a]l cuore dell'esperienza contemporanea c'è l'oggetto di godimento' (Bonazzi, 2012: 78), rather than a human relationship. Staring alone at his television screen is the only activity that seems to fulfill Luciano. As Bonazzi contends, '[l]'oggetto gadget inchioda il consumatore al suo godimento autistico' (Bonazzi, 2012: 79). As such, Recalcati claims that 'nel nostro tempo, siamo assediati, incollati, ingozzati, appiccicati agli oggetti del godimento. Il consumo e la morte non sono l'uno in alternativa all'altra' (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 82)

 I contend that the end of the film, especially the final scene, vividly represents the shift from postmodernity to hypermodernity. At the end of the film, Luciano returns to Rome to take part in a religious ceremony. Although he is with a friend, he decides to slip away from him in order to reach Cinecittà and enter the Big Brother house. This is where Luciano's psychic odyssey and the film end. Luciano hesitates slightly in front of the red door of the *Big Brother* studio,

the same door Enzo and all the other contestants walked through to take part in the television programme, watched by millions of people in Italy. The scene resembles the ending of *The Truman Show*, which has been defined as 'il precedente cinematografico concettualmente più diretto' (Cortellessa, 2012: para. 3) of Garrone's *Reality*.

The Truman Show (Weir, 1998) is the story of a man who lives with his wife in Seahaven Island, an idyllic, 1950s-style Californian town. The protagonist, Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey), is a creature-of-habit in his thirties. Truman's daily life consists of going to work at a local insurance company and spending his spare time with his wife and best friend. Although Truman has an interest in travelling, he has never left Seahaven Island as he has panic attacks when he gets close to the sea. After a series of events, he begins to suspect that he is living in a fake reality and gradually discovers that he is the star of the most popular reality television show in the world. The town is, indeed, a huge television studio with thousands of hidden cameras following him everywhere and all the people around him are actors and extras.

The Truman Show is a comment on reality television shows, in which 'the late-capitalist consumerist Californian paradise is, in its very hyperreality, in a way *unreal*' [original emphasis] (Žižek, 2002: 13). However, as soon as Truman discovers that his life is a fiction, that is to say, the most popular television series aired on American television round the clock, he wants to escape it, to enter the real world 'outside'. The film ends with Truman reaching one of the limits of the enormous television set in which he has lived all his life. Truman climbs the stairs, opens a door and disappears. As Vighi (2014: 312) notices,

> Truman literally bumps against the fictional boundary of his gigantic stage; then he finds a little door and joins the 'real world'. Does this passage not reproduce the belief in the proverbial 'authentic reality' beyond the curtain of fictions? A more enlightening ending would have shown us Truman 'falling off' the stage into a bottomless abyss.

The end of *The Truman Show* rests on a very twentieth-century dichotomy: reality/fiction. From a strictly Lacanian perspective, the end is utterly misleading. I have argued that reality is fictional in itself and that there is thus no such thing as a real reality waiting to be revealed or discovered. After all, just before Truman walks out of the studio, Christof, the director of the show, tells him that 'there is

no more truth out there…than in the world I created for you. The same lies. The same deceit' (Weir, 1998).

On the contrary, in Garrone's *Reality*, Luciano desperately wants to enter the fictional world of *Big Brother*. He stands in front of the red door of the reality television studio ecstatically, opens it and walks in. This ending is at the very least paradoxical: 'un uomo ipnotizzato dalla speranza di "evasione" mediatica, finisce con l'escogitare un piano per farsi "imprigionare" dentro la casa di Canale 5' (Menarini, 2012: 32). As opposed to Truman, Luciano longs to be 'inside' the studio of the reality television show and to leave his reality 'outside'. He cannot stop smiling as he looks at the hidden cameras shooting the participants of the programme behind a glass wall. In the final scene, Luciano is in the courtyard of the Big Brother house lying on a sun bed. Ultimately, 'sta dove voleva stare a costo di essere invisibile e probabilmente morto' (Menarini, 2012: 33). Now that Luciano is inside, nobody acknowledges his presence: *Big Brother* is not watching. Contrarily to Truman, Luciano does not believe that his reality is fictitious and therefore does not strive to escape it. Truman belongs to postmodernity whilst Luciano belongs to hypermodernity.

These closing scenes – the one that takes place at the extreme border separating the fictitious space of the gigantic television set from the outside reality and the other set in the internal courtyard of the *Big Brother* house – also epitomise the difference between a conception of reality, and of subjectivity, based on Euclidean geometry, and another based on Lacanian topology. The former rests on a 'schematismo realista che oppone l'interno all'esterno' (Recalcati, 2016d: 219), while the latter accounts for the extimacy of the Real. As Chiesa contends, '[t]opologically speaking, the subject and his representations emerge in relation to what Lacan calls the "*extimité*" of the Thing' (Chiesa, 2007: 134). In this respect, '[e]xtimacy is not the contrary of intimacy. Extimacy says that the intimate is Other' (Miller, 1994: 76). As Recalcati (1996:69) convincingly puts it,

> [c]iò che si trova non è l'identità perduta ma l'impossibilità dell'identità. Non un'identità ma una *extimità*. Una alterità che si scava, senza lasciarsi assorbire dall'identità, proprio dentro l'intimo del soggetto. Un fuori che si manifesta da dentro. Un'intimità, una prossimità che si rivela come un'esteriorità indomabile, straniera, non-inglobabile nell'identità dell'io. Cos'è dunque l'extimità del soggetto se non la

pulsione di morte?

Reality is always fictional and a construction, as is our identity. A Lacanian perspective on *Reality* illustrates that 'we need to perceive not the reality behind the illusion, but the reality in illusion' (Žižek quoted in Vighi, 2014: 280). Indeed, there is no true reality masked or hidden beyond reality television shows. It is not a matter of a '*[t]rue fake'* or '*[r]eality as fake* [come] suggerisce [...] Peter Weir con *The Truman Show*' [original emphasis] (Carmagnola, 2006: 7). Indeed, according to Menarini's review of *Reality*, we should 'evitare i pirandellismi, scartare tutta un'area letteraria vecchiotta e non adatta ad analizzare i nostri tempi' (Menarini, 2012: 32), since nowadays we are 'ben lungi dal confondere realtà e finzione secondo schemi novecenteschi' (Menarini, 2012: 33). Pirandello's perspective cannot account for the new era depicted in Garrone's *Reality*. Indeed, Luciano's strongest desire is not to reach his true self by going beyond the mask, but rather to conform to the mask itself. While Vitangelo Moscarda is horrified by the fictitious element in his appearance and seeks to destroy it (to find nothingness), Luciano embraces absolute appearance. Unlike Truman, Luciano does not believe in a real reality beyond the world of appearances. The paradigm of hypermodern subjectivity under the discourse of the capitalist is psychosis in the traditional psychoanalytic sense. As Recalcati contends,

> [s]iamo in un campo clinico che mostra una nuova versione – ipermoderna – della psicosi, che non è quella studiata da Freud attraverso il presidente Schreber: non è più la grande psicosi delirante che ha come suo tratto distintivo la perdita del senso di realtà, la rottura con la realtà, ma una sorta di "psicosi senza psicosi", come teorizzava André Green, ovvero una psicosi che, anziché prodursi come rottura delirante del rapporto con la realtà, si produce come immedesimazione, senza scarti, del soggetto con l'oggettività della realtà (Borrelli *et al.*, 2013: 56).

In this respect, Lacanian psychoanalysis teaches us that there is no such separation between reality and fiction. According to Recalcati, Lacan's theory underlines 'la funzione di sembiante sociale (dunque di velo) che la nozione di "realtà" assolve nei confronti del reale. La categoria di "realtà" viene, in effetti, evocata strategicamente proprio per *schermare il carattere osceno e senza senso del reale*' (Recalcati, 2010a: 307). Thus, the 'Symbolic representation is the mode

and condition of existence of reality itself, inclusive of its relation to what is unrepresentable' (Vighi, 2014: 317). As Vighi (2014: 317) claims,

> [a] radical film theory always begins by acknowledging that filmic images deal with reality rather than with its pale imitation – not, however, because of their power to transcend the fictional domain, but because the fabric of reality is fictional.

Therefore, 'the radical psychoanalytic thesis [is] that *ordinary reality itself is a medium* – it is the medium, the screen, through which we keep destructive (unconscious) drives at a safe distance' [original emphasis] (Vighi, 2014: 316). In other words, reality is an imaginary-symbolic construction which protects the subject by screening him/her from the traumatic and deadly Real.

4. *In Treatment*: Psychoanalysing Reality, Encountering the Real

4.1 Psychoanalysis, Aesthetics, and the Real

As argued in Chapter 3, the notion of the Real, along with its relationship with human subjectivity, is one of the key notions that distinguishes Lacanian psychoanalysis from other psychoanalytic approaches and one of the crucial aspects of contemporary Italian Lacanianism. As Recalcati suggests: 'il reale di Lacan è sempre il reale del soggetto; è il reale che tocca il soggetto. E lo tocca, potremmo aggiungere, facendogli male' (Recalcati, 1996: 19). Benvenuto argues that the Real is 'un impossibile che sempre accade. E' l'inaccettabilità di ciò che accade. Il Reale è il lato scandaloso – per un soggetto – della realtà' (Benvenuto, 2014: 269). In this respect, the Real is that which subjectivity cannot bear and which it thus tends to exclude and keep at a distance (Benvenuto, 2006: 36). According to Lacan's theory, the subject protects him/herself not only by creating a screen against the Real through reality, a perspective developed particularly by Recalcati, but also by means of phantasy. As a particular mode of *jouissance* for every subject, phantasy creates a filter between the subject him/herself and the Real: 'il fantasma è, infatti, la costante (inconscia) che non varia nel variare delle vicissitudini della vita' (Recalcati, 2012a: 429). The Real is thus inherently related to subjectivity and, as Lacan argues, 'is the mystery of the speaking body, the mystery of the unconscious' (Lacan, 1998b: 131). Despite the seemingly mystical or abstract nature of this assertion, which could generate a deceitful idea of the concept, Lacan is far from considering the Real as an 'ineffabilità misterica' (Recalcati, 2001: 109). On the contrary, he conceives of it as a pivotal and operational category for his clinical practice.

In Seminar XI, Lacan refers to human practices in a generic fashion and states that a praxis is 'a concerted human action, whatever it may be, which places man in a position to treat the real by the symbolic' (Lacan, 1998a: 6). Later on in the same seminar, he claims that '[n]o praxis is more orientated towards that which, at the heart of experience, is the kernel of the real than psycho-analysis' (1998a: 53). According to Žižek, '[f]or Lacan, the Real with which psychoanalysis deals is the Real of the abyss of subjectivity itself' (Žižek, 2007: 216). Lacan

endorses a conception of psychoanalysis as a praxis which aims at treating the Real by means of the Symbolic (Lacan, 1998a). It follows that 'the praxis of psychoanalysis relies on a transformative relation to the Real' (Noys, 2010) which occurs by means of the Symbolic, that is to say, the words exchanged between patient and analyst. As Recalcati claims, 'dove c'è linguaggio, il reale viene umanizzato, trattato simbolicamente, significantizzato' (Recalcati, 2016a: 587). Therefore, as Pagliardini aptly puts it, '[l]a psicoanalisi, la pratica in cui consiste, deve toccare il reale, altrimenti è una farsa' (Pagliardini, 2016: 9).

In Lacan's wake, Recalcati considers both art and psychoanalysis as means to treat the Real through the Symbolic, which offer the possibility of an encounter with the Real that, although not deadly, is traumatic and disquieting. As Recalcati puts it, 'arte e psicoanalisi' are 'pratiche simboliche che mirano a raggiungere il reale, a incontrarlo' (Recalcati, 2007a: 79). Benvenuto also draws a parallel between twentieth-century art and Lacanian psychoanalysis based on their common attempt to use the Symbolic to go beyond the Imaginary and encounter the Real. He argues that, similarly to the twentieth-century art which moved away from a mere realistic and mimetic representation of reality, Lacanian psychoanalysis aims at overstepping the imaginary aspects of the subject to allow him/her to symbolically encounter their own Real. As Benvenuto (2014: 271) explains:

> Lacan ha cercato di trasportare in una pratica etica – la psicoanalisi – una mutazione di paradigma che si è prodotta anche in estetica. Anche per Lacan l'analisi è un superamento degli incantesimi immaginari attraverso il riconoscimento del gioco cieco del simbolico, in modo da poter far accedere il soggetto al Reale.

Based on Lacan's theory, subjectivity differs from the ego and the subject cannot be reduced to it. As such, Lacan fiercely 'opposed the US ego psychology development of Freud's later work' (Sayers, 2007: 81). Lacan's criticism of ego psychology is evident in his account of the ego, which is conceived of as an imaginary construction, fundamentally split and created by a process of identification/alienation. On the contrary, ego psychology focuses more 'on the adaptive, stabilizing aspect of aesthetic experience, which relies on the model of an integrated ego and a clear demarcation between its *conscious* and *unconscious* workings' (Glover, 2009: 15) and thus '[t]he value of art, according to this model,

lies in the degree of adjustment to reality it yields' (Glover, 2009: 15). From this perspective, psychoanalysis seeks to reinforce the ego, whilst the artistic process resembles the functioning of a stable and solid ego, which is responsible for translating unconscious, repressed, or unacceptable thoughts into a structured artwork, which can be socially appreciated for its formal features.

In the wake of Lacan, contemporary Italian Lacanians, especially Recalcati, insist on the similarities between psychoanalysis and art as symbolic practices. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, Recalcati follows Lacan closely in conceiving of the unconscious not simply as a deep layer of the human psyche that the psychoanalytic process must recover, but rather as the outcome of the ongoing analyst-patient relationship, in which patients are constantly confronted with the uncanny experience of the incapacity of their ego to master their own unconscious. Similarly, the artwork is the outcome of an ongoing creative process in which the ego is not only that stabilising, mastering psychic stance conceived by ego psychologists. As Recalcati puts it:

> L'inconscio da produrre è un inconscio più all'avvenire che al passato perché è una forma ancora da inventare, ancora da produrre, ancora da realizzare. In questo la psicoanalisi incrocia il suo percorso con la pratica dell'arte. Come non c'è un'ispirazione che precede il lavoro dell'artista e che contiene l'opera come se fosse già compiuta, perché l'ispirazione può sorgere solo dal lavoro – ed è per questo che ogni artista non può che constatare ogni volta la diversità che separa l'opera realizzata da quella che aveva in mente di realizzare –, ebbene, allo stesso modo in un'analisi l'inconscio non è dato già in partenza, non è la perla custodita dalle difese del soggetto, ma un'occasione da produrre, un sogno da realizzare, un'invenzione, una spinta alla trasformazione (2007c: 71-72).

Here, Recalcati hints once again at how psychoanalysis and art are intertwined from a Lacanian perspective. Indeed, there is a correlation between the process of subjectivation, which psychoanalysis should foster, and sublimation, which is at the core of the artistic process. According to Recalcati:

> L'insistenza di Lacan a proporre la sublimazione non come meccanismo di difesa – seguendo una linea classica percorsa dalla psicoanalisi postfreudiana – ma come una possibilità della pulsione e, dunque, come una possibilità per il soggetto di raggiungere una 'soddisfazione senza rimozione', mostra l'affinità fondamentale tra la problematica della sublimazione (e della pratica dell'arte) e il processo di soggettivazione che si realizza nel corso di una analisi (2012a: 552).

Therefore, Italian contemporary Lacanianism conceives of psychoanalysis/art

not simply as a defence against the unconscious stances established by the ego, but rather as that imaginary-symbolic device to treat the Real by means of which the process of subjectivation can take place. Psychoanalysis and art show that '[a]lthough [the Real] is radically other and therefore traumatic, it emerges from and is glued to symbolisation, that is thought' (Vighi and Feldner, 2010: 39). This is the sole basis for the parallel that Recalcati and other Italian Lacanians (e.g. Lolli, 2004; Terminio, 2009) draw between art and psychoanalysis on the one hand and subjectivation on the other.

Art and psychoanalysis face a similar issue: '[c]ome fare presa sul reale – su ciò che, per definizione, sfugge al simbolico – se lo strumento a disposizione è simbolico?' (Lolli, 2004: 14). The paradox of this question is that a symbolic device, whether it is art or psychoanalysis, can frame, tackle, and give shape to that which does not belong to that register, namely the Real. According to Lolli, '[l]avoro dell'inconscio e lavoro poetico [o artistico] puntano, allora, alla produzione-rivelazione di un sapere che possa dire qualcosa di ciò che sfugge all'ordine simbolico ed al funzionamento immaginario del mondo' (Lolli, 2004: 15). In the psychoanalytic process, 'l'uso del dispositivo simbolico del setting analitico, ad esempio, si rivela capace di produrre una modificazione nell'economia libidica del soggetto; le analisi ci dimostrano che, in qualche modo, il simbolico fa presa sul reale, la parola fa presa sul godimento' (Lolli, 2004: 15). In the same way, in art, 'un effetto si produce sul reale' (Lolli, 2004: 15), even if '[l]'opera d'arte resta simbolica, prodotto di una sublimazione, sebbene il suo compito sia quello di circoscrivere ciò che eccede il simbolico' (Recalcati, 2007a: 34).

From this perspective, Lacanian psychoanalytic interpretation differs radically from an attempt to uncover the allegedly inner truth of a subject (or an artwork). According to Lacan, 'interpretation cannot in any way be conceived in the same way as […] hermeneutics' (Lacan, 1998a: 8). Indeed, '[l]'attività interpretativa consiste appunto nel far uscire il reale dalla sua singolarità irriducibile immettendolo in una processualità' (Perniola, 2000: 12). However, since the processes of understanding and uncovering meaning, as understood by hermeneutics, partake of the order of the Imaginary inasmuch as they attempt to turn radical Otherness and the unfamiliar into something familiar (Fink, 2014a),

they can sometimes represent an obstacle to the psychoanalytic process as a defence on the part of the patient. On the contrary, from a Lacanian perspective, psychoanalytic interpretations should not only provide meanings, which might be to some extent reassuring for the analysand and which, as a form of rationalisation, could also prevent change. Rather, they should push the patient to confront something that is destabilising and still unknown, which is the kernel of his/her Real. In so doing, they should promote the aim of psychoanalytic treatment, which is a radical reconfiguration of the subject's relation with the Real of his/her *jouissance*. As Fink underlines, 'Lacanian-oriented work [...] is not about providing meaning but, rather, about *putting the unspeakable into words*' [original emphasis] (Fink, 2014a: 7).

Since, from a Lacanian perspective, both psychoanalysis and art are imaginary and symbolic devices which confront and deal with the Real, in the next subsections I will examine an Italian television series that portrays a psychoanalytic psychotherapy treatment as my final case study. This series does not, however, stage a Lacanian psychoanalysis.

4.2 Representing the Real(ity) of a Psychoanalytic Treatment (I)

The Italian television series *In Treatment* is an adaptation of the homonymous American television series by HBO aired between 2008 and 2010. This is, in turn, a remake of the Israeli series *BeTipul* (2005-2008) that has been followed by many other adaptations in different languages (Mukherjee, 2014: 235-236).[81] As Bainbridge points out, it is characterised by a 'complex structure of international origin, adaptation, and subsequent international distribution of this television series' (Bainbridge, 2014: 48). It has been argued that the international success and popularity of *In Treatment* sustains the 'commonplace assumption that we are living in a therapy culture' (Bainbridge, 2014: 60) and at the same time 'not

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[81] The Israeli television drama *BeTipul* was originally conceived by Hagai Levi. It has since been followed by a number of adaptations in different countries and languages, the first and most renowned of which is the American version. There have also been adaptations of *In Treatment* in Romania, the Czech Republic, Serbia, Slovenia, the Netherlands, Argentina, Brazil, Portugal, Japan, Croatia, Russia, and Italy (Goisis, 2013). The first Italian season of *In Treatment* was broadcasted from April to May 2013 on Sky Cinema 1 and the second season was aired from November 2015 to January 2016 on Sky Atlantic.

only reflects these aspects of our popular culture but also becomes part of the cycle itself' (Bainbridge, 2014: 60).

According to Bainbridge, this widespread interest in the television series might also be seen as a response to the unfulfilled needs of contemporary society, in which there is often a lack of attention to emotions and psychological issues. From her perspective, *In Treatment* 'may well provide reassurance for viewers by depicting this experience of isolation, disconnectedness, and emotional upheaval as commonplace and normative. It also provides viewers with new perspectives on possibilities for coping' (Bainbridge, 2014: 61). Rather, I would argue that *In Treatment* embodies the widespread morbid interest nowadays in scrutinising other people's private lives or emotions, capitalising on the complementary obsession with exhibiting personal struggles on the screen. This is peculiar to reality television programmes, which fulfill people's morbid desire to intrude into other people's private spheres, to witness other people's feelings laid bare and then ascertain that their emotions conform to theirs.

The Italian version, directed by Saverio Costanzo and which so far consists of two seasons, is extremely faithful to the American series in terms of plot, dialogue, and characters. It revolves around the life of Giovanni Mari (Sergio Castellitto), a psychoanalytic psychotherapist in his fifties who practises in Rome, and the lives of his patients. After many years of psychoanalytic practice, Giovanni is facing some problems with his patients due to issues in his own private life, and in order to better cope with these difficulties he seeks the help of his former supervisor Anna (Licia Maglietta). The Italian adaptation of *In Treatment*, similarly to the Israeli original and the American adaptation, follows a peculiar structure: every season is divided into the same number of weeks, seven in total, and every week is composed of five episodes. Four of the episodes present a psychoanalytic session of one of Mari's patients, and in one Mari meets his own supervisor to discuss his work and private life. Each episode was aired daily at the same time: the episodes with the patients were aired from Monday to Thursday, while the ones with Mari's supervisor were aired every Friday, in order to reproduce 'the regularity of the therapeutic contract and yet simultaneously repackaging it into shorter, more bearable half-hour slots' (Bainbridge, 2014: 52). This special feature makes *In Treatment* a 'serie tv pressoché unica' (Bianchi,

2013: para. 3) that has been well received in Italy too, being praised as an example of '[q]uality television' (Lombardi, 2014: 261).

The specific reality depicted in this series is the psychoanalytic room. As Recalcati notes, the ambitious aim of *In Treatment* is to 'mettere una cinepresa nella stanza dell'analisi, nel luogo più intimo, più privato, più inaccessibile; dove le vite umane si raccontano, si aprono, si rivelano nella loro intimità più scabrosa e bizzarra, dove parlano del loro dolore più sordo, dove si mettono a nudo' (Recalcati, 2013c: para. 1). Indeed, 'there is no experience more intimate than that of analysis, which takes place in private and requires trust, the most complete lack of restraint possible' (Miller, 1994: 76). Therefore, *In Treatment* revolves around the voyeuristic fantasy not only of seeing people's private pain but also of witnessing and listening to what people actually say in the psychoanalytic room, which is usually impossible. As Bianchi underlines, '[l']'impressione è dunque quella di partecipare alla routine dell'analista che ogni giorno accoglie in seduta i propri analizzanti all'orario prefissato' (Bianchi, 2013: para. 3). There is also a second 'voyeuristic opportunity' (Bainbridge, 2014: 56), which is the possibility of participating in the private life of the psychoanalyst and his supervisory relationship: 'a vision of the psychotherapist that it would be impossible to gain through participation in therapy, as a patient, alone' (Bainbridge, 2014: 56).

This television series is characterised by an 'estremo realismo e verosimiglianza' (Goisis, 2013: 165). Mari's patients are represented realistically, with all their weaknesses and troubles. In the first series, the patients depicted are: Sara, a young anaesthetist unable to maintain long-term relationships with men and who eventually falls in love with her psychoanalyst; Dario, a *carabiniere* who has worked as an undercover agent in Germany to counter the Italian mafia and who has been traumatised; Alice, a teenage ballet dancer who, after having an accident with her scooter, requires a psychological assessment; and Pietro and Lea, a couple in crisis and about to divorce. In the second series, the patients depicted are: Irene, a former patient of Mari's, psychoanalysed by him more than twenty years earlier, who decides to restart her psychotherapy; Pietro and Lea, the couple from the first series who are now getting a divorce and their son Mattia, who has been deeply affected by the decision made by his parents and

needs help getting through these difficult times; Guido, a well-known businessman who suffers from panic attacks; and Elisa, a young student of architecture who has recently discovered she is suffering from a terminal disease but who also refuses medical assistance. As Recalcati underlines, psychoanalysis deals with specific subjects: '[n]on la vita in generale, non le sue strutture e le sue proprietà ontologiche universali, sulla quale può riflettere la filosofia, ma la vita nella sua incomparabilità più particolare, nella sua stramba originalità, la vita nel suo nome proprio, nella sua anomalia, nella sua stortura' (Recalcati, 2013c: para. 2). The characters depicted are 'gli italiani del contemporaneo' (Montanari, 2013: para. 4): these are people who are '[i]n cerca perenne di identità, di accettazione, di una collocazione difficile in quanto privi di un Altro alle spalle che abbia loro fornito una solida base' (Montanari, 2013: para. 4).

As Castellitto, the actor who plays the psychoanalyst, affirms: 'credo che il successo della prima stagione di *In Treatment* sia stato quello di essere riusciti a far riconquistare alla parola un primato straordinario' (Castellitto, 2015). Indeed, the television series focuses on the dialogue and silent figure of the psychoanalyst, who listens carefully before making any comments or interpretations. Indeed, according to Recalcati (2013c: para. 4), 'l'offerta dello psicoanalista è innanzitutto l'offerta di un ascolto. Per questo, anche in questa serie televisiva, il ritratto dell'analista è giustamente il ritratto di un uomo silenzioso'. Furthermore, '[l]'esperienza dell'analisi insegna che è proprio l'impatto con il silenzio a svelare il muro del linguaggio, a forzare il soggetto a incontrare il limite della sua parola e, in generale, l'incompatibilità di parola e reale' (Recalcati, 2007a: 142). In this respect, it is the psychoanalyst's silence that 'spalanca la dimensione scabrosa del reale della pulsione e del godimento' (Recalcati, 2007a: 142).

4.3 Representing the Real(ity) of a Psychoanalytic Treatment (II)

The television series *In Treatment* 'examines the classical topics of medical-therapeutic psycho-analysis, as listed by Lacan in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* – the Unconscious, Repetition, Transference, and the Drive' (Mukherjee, 2014: 236). To do so, *In Treatment* is shot mainly indoors in Mari's

consulting room. The latter is reproduced realistically and the effect of reality is also produced by the more or less realistic temporality: each episode lasts around half an hour, whilst a psychoanalytic session usually lasts around fifty minutes. As Recalcati underlines: '[l]'inquadratura fissa, stabile, senza variazioni del setting, della stanza dell'analisi e dei movimenti lenti e ripetitivi del terapeuta, ritrae con una certa efficacia la dimensione silenziosa e operaia del nostro lavoro: aprire e chiudere la porta, accogliere e congedare il paziente, sedersi e ascoltare, fissare l'appuntamento per la seduta successiva' (Recalcati, 2013c: para. 3). However, as Bianchi remarks, 'pare sempre che qualcosa nel mettere in scena quell'esperienza già così straniante e teatrale che è lo studio di un analista rimanga sempre un po' invisibile, anche sul grande schermo' (Bianchi, 2013: para. 2).

This is due not only to the difficulty of communicating a peculiar and extremely personal experience, such as that of an analysis, but also to the 'carattere irrafigurabile del reale – che non può mai essere incluso in nessuna strategia comunicativo-rappresentativa' (Recalcati, 2007a: 200). Indeed, the Lacanian Real 'designa [...] l'essere stesso del soggetto, il nodo che struttura la sua realtà psichica' (Cosenza, 2003: 28) and that which, at the same time, 'è propriamente quello che ci sorprende nel bel mezzo della nostra vita' (Benvenuto, 2015: 99). As some of Mari's patients demonstrate, 'l'incontro con il reale è un incontro mai previsto' (Benvenuto, 2015: 100).

For instance, in the first season, Dario is surprised by his sudden inability to return to his everyday life after undergoing a traumatic experience. He is haunted by the murder he was obliged to commit while working as an undercover agent in Germany. When he visits Mari's consulting room, he struggles to find the words to describe that traumatic experience and to appreciate its impact on his private life. Similarly, Alice, a teenager with suicidal tendencies, struggles to understand her dangerous behaviour, which prevents her from enjoying her love for classical dance and succeeding in it. In the second season, Guido, a powerful and self-confident businessman, is shocked by the unexpected panic attacks that disrupt his life and prevent him from committing himself to his beloved job and his family. The attacks make no sense to him and he cannot understand why he is being affected by them at this moment in his life. Like other so-called new

symptoms, they do not seem to be a cyphered message of the unconscious like classic Freudian symptoms. Instead, they manifest themselves as the pure and meaningless Real disrupting the subject. In this respect, it is important to note that *In Treatment* deals with the same ailments that are at the centre of Italian Lacanianism's investigation into the discontent of contemporary society, such as panic attacks, eating disorders, or addictions.

The only way to grasp the Real is by means of an imaginary-symbolic device. Thus, in the case of the psychoanalytic process, this can be achieved through words and speech. As Lacan states, '[w]e only grasp the unconscious finally when it is explicated, in that part of it which is articulated by passing into words. It is for this reason that we have the right [...] to recognize that the unconscious itself has in the end no other structure than the structure of language' (Lacan, 1992: 32). The way the analyst listens and communicates is peculiar inasmuch as the purpose is not to prescribe advice or guide someone's life: 'l'ascolto dell'analista non assomiglia in nulla [...] a quello di un confessore o di un giudice. Nell'ascolto dell'analista non c'è giudizio morale, non c'è prescrizione di castigo, non c'è valutazione, non c'è misurazione e non c'è nemmeno pretesa di guidare le vite che ad esso rivolgono la loro parola' (Recalcati, 2013c: para. 4). Psychoanalytic practice 'si mantiene impegnata nell'esercizio di dare forma all'informe, di dare forma alla mancanza del significante, di ospitare il singolare del soggetto' (Recalcati, 2007a: 206). In doing so, psychoanalytic practice, which rests on the symbolic dimension of speech, can modify the way the subject enjoys, that is to say, his/her relationship with *jouissance*. As Pagliardini puts it, the aim of Lacanian psychoanalysis is to 'arrivare a decidersi per un altro rapporto con il reale che [il soggetto] patisce' (Pagliardini, 2016: 10).

The Italian television series received some criticisms from Italian psychoanalysts, and not exclusively Lacanians. According to the non-Lacanian psychoanalysts Ferro and Civitarese (2013: para. 3), *In Treatment* is 'una psicoterapia ben spiegata a chi è estraneo al mondo della psicoanalisi, direi una buona psicoterapia del superficiale (del profondo nessuna traccia)'. Ferro and Civitarese (2013: para. 1) further posit that '[d]a subito viene data la chiave di lettura: è il "confronto" che porta al miglioramento. Siamo molto lontani dal

modello psicoanalitico in cui è la trasformazione, la metabolizzazione di emozioni non conosciute a portare verso la "guarigione". Qui ci si confronta rispetto a stati emotivi abbastanza di superficie e usando la ragione si cerca di svelare i punti deboli o oscuri delle affermazioni dell'altro'.

In Lacan's terms, the episodes of *In Treatment* portray an imaginary relationship between two egos, that is, a symmetrical relationship between the analyst and the patient. Bianchi (2013: para. 5) aptly points out the kernel of this issue:

> Il grande assente della serie di Sky è il divano. Sergio Castellitto e i suoi pazienti si guardano negli occhi quando parlano. Ed è proprio questo che fa mancare completamente l'incontro con il vero protagonista della psicoanalisi: l'inconscio. Il "vis-a-vis empatico" non può che cancellare la spigolosità dell'esperienza freudiana.

Why is the presence of the psychoanalytic couch so important for the psychoanalytic process to take place? The answer, from a Lacanian perspective, is that psychoanalysis is not an imaginary relationship based on reciprocity, like a dialogue or a conversation. As Bianchi (2013: para. 8) puts it: '[l]a parola della psicoanalisi […] rompe con la comunicazione intersoggettiva. Ed è per questa ragione che in analisi non si sta seduti l'uno di fronte all'altro. Il paziente […] si sdraia sul divano così che non abbia nessuno di fronte a lui. E parla. […] Senza che nessuno annuisca alle sue parole'. The silence of the psychoanalyst enables the analysand to pay more attention to his/her own words as if a stranger had pronounced them, underlying that psychoanalysis is not about mere empathy or mutual understanding. In psychoanalysis, the patient sees that 'le parole non servono a rappresentare la realtà, ma scavano un buco nella realtà: dicono *strutturalmente* sempre un po' troppo o troppo poco' [original emphasis] (Bianchi, 2013: para. 6).

The psychoanalytic process enables patients to face the difficulty of articulating the unspeakable of their traumas, their pain, and ultimately their own Real. According to Dean, 'Lacanian psychoanalysis offers nobody a cure for subjectivity. Rather, it insists upon a confrontation with the very condition of subjectivity: that the death drive inhabits our being, that death is at the heart of life, and that there is therefore something fundamentally incurable in being human' (Dean, 2000: 133). On the contrary,

In Treatment, imperniato com'è sul dialogo tra analista e paziente nella più tipica dialettica cinematografica di campo-controcampo che fonda la continuità e il successo della comunicazione, non può che nascondere questa dimensione asimmetrica della psicoanalisi. La parola di *In Treatment* è quella che si incarna nel dialogo tra due persone, come tradizionalmente avviene al cinema (Bianchi, 2013: para. 9).

Recalcati agrees with Bianchi, similarly underling that the couch, the pivotal tool of Freudian psychoanalysis, is missing. Therefore, what is portrayed in *In Treatment* is a specular and imaginary relationship between the ego of the analyst and that of the analysand. In this respect, the irreducibility of the Real of the subject's subjectivity/unconscious is disregarded. Giovanni Mari frequently provides articulated explanations for his patients' behaviour, offering them an extensive explanation of his views. In this way however, psychoanalytic interpretations are reduced to mere speculations or, at best, rational explanations. I contend that this representation of psychoanalysis is perfectly in accordance with hypermodern times, characterised as they are by the repudiation of the unconscious and the dismissal of its symbolic dynamics. The practice of psychoanalysis is understood simply as a therapeutic dialogue between two people sitting in front of one another. Hence, the psychoanalytic experience, which enables the patient to deal with the Real and which in its essence consists of the disquieting encounter of one's unconscious, is eluded or at best diluted.

Therefore, Recalcati wonders whether this inclination to transform a specific reality, even the reality of a consulting room where the psychoanalytic process takes place, into a television series is typical of the spectacularisation of our hypermodern times. Recalcati affirms that 'dobbiamo registrare che il dialogo analitico è diventato oggetto di interesse tale (e, dunque, mi chiedo, di addomesticamento?) da produrre un serial televisivo di grande successo' (Recalcati, 2013c: para. 1). Despite this popularisation of psychoanalysis (Mukherjee, 2014), it still represents a resistance to the tendency of hypermodern times, which foster a conception of the human being as a subject without an unconscious that must be rehabilitated, as quickly as possible, into the consumerist cycle and his/her symptom. To put it bluntly, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the latter constitutes a cyphered message sent by one's unconscious,

which needs to be analysed rather than simply removed. In this respect, psychoanalysis stands against both the discourse of the capitalist and its logic, and the crisis of the Symbolic.

This leads us to the ethical issue at the core of contemporary Italian Lacanianism. According to the latter, in hypermodern society, which is dominated by the discourse of the capitalist and the crisis of the Symbolic, the role of psychoanalysis, similarly to that of art, is to bear witness to an imaginary-symbolic practice that treats the Real *qua jouissance*. In my opinion, however, *In Treatment*'s controversial representation of the psychoanalytic relationship, which at times seems to draw more from a counselling paradigm than in-depth psychoanalysis, belongs to hypermodern times. Similarly to the most popular psychotherapies, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, it only draws on psychoanalysis in its psychodinamic components and seems to remain rather superficial. On the contrary, (Lacanian) psychoanalysis contrasts with hypermodernity: it does not work instrumentally and represents a resistance of subjective discountinuity to hypermodernisation. Psychoanalysis is not aimed at the adaptation of the subject to a given reality or to their rehabilitation into the consumerist cycle. However, the television series offers the audience a glimpse of what an encounter with the Real within the psychoanalytic room entails, depicting the patient's relation with their own symptoms and enjoyment, and their interaction with the psychoanalyst and the setting. What is at stake in this encounter is not the Real as a 'form of the trauma' (Lacan, 1998a: 55), but rather as 'the impact with the obstacle' (Lacan, 1998a: 167). For instance, there could be an obstacle in the patient's life that prevents him or her from continuing a romantic relationship (i.e. Sara, Pietro and Lea, Irene), a job, or a simple everyday routine (i.e. Dario, Alice) as usual, and which also affects their way of talking and interacting with Mari in the consulting room. For, far from being a deadly encounter with the Real as trauma or death, what Mari's patients experience is instead the disturbing encounter with the Real of their own *jouissance*.

As Žižek contends, 'trauma is only one of the modalities of the Real' (2003a: 72). *In Treatment* raises the question of the extimacy of the Lacanian Real, that is to say, the fact that '[i]l reale è il centro più intimo del soggetto ma è un centro che, pur essendo il più intimo al soggetto, il soggetto non padroneggia'

(Recalcati, 2001: 196). More explicitly and effectively than the other two case studies, this television series hints at the Real of a specific subject, his/her own *jouissance*. I contended that *Videocracy* displays the excessive *jouissance* of the hypermodern subject in Berlusconi's postmillennial Italy and their subjection to the command to 'enjoy!'. I argued that *Reality* depicts the *jouissance* obtained by the hypermodern subject through a solitary and anonymous relationship with 'oggetti di godimento' (i.e. television), leading to the collapse of social bonds. On the contrary, here I claim that *In Treatment* frames a patient's way of being inhabited, and dealing with, *jouissance* during his/her psychoanalytic treatment. For instance, one could mention how Guido deals with his panic attacks, Dario's, Alice's and Elisa's irrepressible drive to put their lives at risk, or Irene's determination to undermine her own therapy.

In this respect, *In Treatment* represents a significant attempt to display the Real as 'il fulcro stesso della soggettività' (Benvenuto, 2006: 29), or in other words, 'il reale dell'economia libidica del soggetto, il motore della sua economia di soddisfacimento' (Cosenza, 2003: 28). Each episode of the series displays the Real of a particular patient and his/her own way to enjoy. Indeed, as Cosenza contends, 'il reale marca l'impossibile del soggetto, cioè la matrice stessa della sua stoffa più intima' (Cosenza, 2003: 28). According to Lacan, 'il Reale è sempre Reale-per-un-soggetto' (Benvenuto, 2006: 36). Lacan conceives of the Real 'sempre a partire dalla soggettività' (Benvenuto, 2006: 37). In this respect, it is 'la totale estraneità della nostra soggettività: è impensabile, inconoscibile, qualcosa che minaccia radicalmente la nostra soggettività anche se la polarizza' (Benvenuto, 2006: 36).

Furthermore, considering that the Lacanian Real is fundamentally 'impossible' (Lacan, 1998a: 167), as I have examined throughout this thesis and through my case studies, to be framed by images or put into words, it is inevitable that every medium, whether it is visual art, literature, or cinema, struggles to deal with it inasmuch as it is a 'founding negativity' (Renov, 2004: 124). In this respect, Bianchi also doubts whether it would have been possible to portray the Real that emerges in *In Treatment'*s psychoanalytic room differently or more effectively. As he wonders:

> Ma era possibile fare diversamente? Forse per poter far vedere al cinema la spigolosità dell'inconscio non bisogna cercare di rappresentare lo studio dell'analista, ma cercare da qualche altre parte [...]. *In Treatment*, rimane una serie televisiva splendida, girata da un ottimo regista e interpretata da attori eccellenti. Il fatto che si sia misurata con un problema così difficile ma anche ambizioso come la parola psicoanalitica ripaga ampiamente di limiti che forse non erano comunque alla sua portata di poter esser risolti (Bianchi, 2013: para. 9).

Hence, the attempt of this television series not only to recreate for viewers the unique and private experience of a psychoanalytic session but also to deal with 'il rapporto del soggetto col reale' (Recalcati, 2001: 9) should not be disregarded or simply dismissed. In portraying this, *In Treatment* presents the Real as 'eterogeneo al senso' (Recalcati, 2001: 9), irreducible and resistant to psychoanalytic interpretations. According to Lacan, the Real is ultimately 'unassimilable' (Lacan, 1998a: 55).

   This television series deals with the structural barrier that prevents us from signifying the Real *qua jouissance* by means of the Imaginary and the Symbolic: 'il suo statuto [del godimento] è irriducibile sia alla rappresentazione immaginaria sia all'ordine simbolico del linguaggio' (Recalcati, 2004: 4). The persistence of certain disruptive or life-threatening behaviours by Mari's patients, such as Dario, Alice, or Elisa, specifically illustrates this 'insistence of the Real [which] is inscribed in the very impossibility of the symbolic order closing the gap of the Real' (Neil, 2011: 206). This is because 'il limite della rappresentazione simbolica [...] non è altro che quel limite che il linguaggio incontra nella sua operazione di significantizzazione del reale: questa operazione, infatti, non può realizzarsi esaustivamente perché il reale del godimento si sottrae a una messa in forma simbolica esaustiva' (Recalcati, 2010a: 144).

CONCLUSION

As Badiou and Roudinesco (2014: 31) point out, '[t]hirty years after his death, Lacan has never been so alive. All over the world his thought and the language that carries it make possible advances that are not always limited to the domain of psychoanalytic practice. He forged operatory concepts that make possible an analysis of the crisis and of the discontents currently rocking Western civilization'. In my thesis, I have argued that chief amongst these 'operatory concepts' is the notion of the Real, which is Lacan's 'singular contribution' (Eyers, 2012: 8) to the field of psychoanalysis, and which has received increasing attention since the 1990s. Despite Italy's delay (Benvenuto, 2006: 19) in receiving and using this notion, which is developed by Lacan in the late phase of his teaching, from the 2000s Italian Lacanianism began to focus on it to the extent that the Lacanian *renaissance* in Italy revolves especially around the notion of the Real (Pesare, 2012a: 7).

In postmillennial Italy, and in particular by means of Recalcati's work as a public intellectual, the category of the Real has indeed become an 'osservatorio privilegiato' (Pesare, 2012a: 7). This can be seen not only in clinical practice (i.e. the treatment of the so-called new symptoms) but also in the consideration of contemporary issues in Western society – from politics and economics (e.g. neo-liberalism, the precariat), to sociology (e.g. the fragmentation of society, the isolation of individuals) and aesthetics (e.g. the emergence of new forms of realistic representation, the new realist wave in early twenty-first century Italy) – through Lacanian paradigms of interpretation of the aforementioned issues (i.e. the crisis of the Symbolic and the discourse of the capitalist). As such, Ronchi straightforwardly claims that, nowadays, 'il campo lacaniano è il campo del *reale*' (Ronchi, 2012b: 49).

To discuss the reception and use of the notion of the Real in the field of aesthetics as well as in that of the arts and media in postmillennial Italy, in Chapter 1 I outlined the connection between Lacan's theory and the field of aesthetics and laid the foundation for a Lacanian aesthetics of the Real. To this end, I first addressed Lacan's perspective on the application of psychoanalysis to the field of aesthetics, claiming that he considered psychoanalysis to be valid only

in the treatment of patients in the consulting room. For this reason, Lacan mainly referred to literary and visual art as a resource for improving his psychoanalytic practice and was not interested in systematically developing a consistent psychoanalytic aesthetic theory. Secondly, I addressed the change in Lacan's thought throughout his career, focusing especially on the shift from his linguistic phase in the 1950s, which was dominated by the conception of a language-like unconscious, to the conception of a Real-like unconscious developed from the 1960s. This shift from the so-called linguistic turn to what has been referred to as Lacan's later period is indeed pivotal for the development of my argument. I then claimed that whilst during the 1970s and 1980s there was a 'limited recourse to Lacan' (Vighi, 2006: 30) in aesthetic applications of Lacan's theory, which rested mainly on his theorisation about the Imaginary and the Symbolic and was thus characterised by a 'near-total exclusion of the Real' (McGowan and Kunkle, 2004: xiii), from the 1990s a change has taken place and there has been an increasing focus on the latter order. In so doing, I discussed the concept of the Real extensively, arguing that it always entails a 'beyond': it is beyond the Imaginary and the Symbolic, beyond representation, and beyond (hermeneutic) interpretation. I also claimed that the treatment of the Real by means of an imaginary-symbolic device (e.g. art, psychoanalysis) associates aesthetics (or psychoanalysis) with the field of ethics. This paved the way for a discussion of the ethical aesthetics developed by contemporary Italian Lacanians and, in particular, Recalcati. My examination of Lacan's theory in this chapter led me to address two important issues for my overall argument and to reconsider realism and realist practices in postmillennial Italy: the intrinsic difference between 'reality' and the 'Real' (Recalcati, 2012d: 193), and the idea that art, be it literary, visual, or cinematic, is not merely a representation of reality but rather a medium to establish a relation with the Real.

In Chapter 2, in order to address the specificity of contemporary Italian Lacanianism in the matter of aesthetics, I analysed Recalcati's aesthetics in detail. Since Recalcati is the most prominent Italian Lacanian psychoanalyst in Italy today who has, similarly to Žižek, undoubtedly extended the audience of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory (Chiesa, 2011: 2-4), I considered his aesthetic theory as the epitome of contemporary Italian Lacanianism. I contended that, in Lacan's

wake, Recalcati's aesthetics establishes a connection between, on the one hand, clinical theory and practice and, on the other, ethics and social commitment, claiming that this is the specificity of Italian Lacanianism post-2000. Recalcati's claim that there is a crisis of the Symbolic which causes a return of the Real underpins his theorisation about the so-called new symptoms, as well as his aesthetics. Similarly to contemporary symptoms in which symbolic unconscious dynamics disappear, in some contemporary artistic trends one witnesses a vanishing of sublimation, that is, of the symbolic dynamic: it is the Real that comes to the fore. Moreover, I claimed that Recalcati's Lacanian psychoanalytic aesthetic makes it possible to account for an encounter with the extra-signifying dimension of the Real. The Real can indeed be encountered, but only by means of an imaginary-symbolic device, such as that of art. Thus, I also argued for the intrinsically symbolic nature of art. The latter cannot be anything but symbolic, yet it still rests on the real and allows it to emerge, albeit paradoxically. This is the crucial claim made by contemporary Italian Lacanianism: '[i]l reale "al di là" del simbolico […] è il fondamento *non simbolico* del simbolico' (Ronchi, 2011: 17-18). Therefore, as Recalcati contends, 'il reale si manifesta attraverso una operazione che resta simbolica' (Recalcati, 2009b: 52). Hence, contemporary Lacanian Italian aesthetics attempt to reflect on the (im)possibility of the Real, 'the non-meaning of the Real' (Resmini, 2013: 290).

In Chapter 3, I proposed the definition *return of the Real* to frame the postmillennial cultural phenomenon which includes the (re)emergence of realist trends in Italy and its theoretical explanation by Italian scholarship. I employed the word 'return' both because there have already been several recurrent realist waves in Italy since its unification (i.e. *verismo*, *realismo magico*, *neorealismo*), and because non-Lacanian Italian scholars contextualise these recent trends within a 'processo di "ritorno alla realtà"' (Contarini *et al.*, 2016: 12), whilst Italian Lacanian scholars consider it as part of a broader return of the Real in hypermodern society. In this respect, I also contended that the Lacanian notion of the Real is a more suitable concept than that of 'reality' for understanding this early twenty-first-century realist trend. If we focus excessively on the notion of reality, we may fail to account for the context and content of these recent realist trends. They emerge in the context of a crisis of the Symbolic and under the

domain of the discourse of the capitalist, both of which characterise hypermodernity. I do not agree with those scholars, such as Ferraris, who insist on reality in opposition to *realitysm* (i.e. virtual reality, the mass media, the Internet), positing that reality 'si opporrebbe perciò all'immaginario, all'illusorio' (Contarini *et al.*, 2016: 10). In the wake of Lacan's contemporary reception in Italy, '[i]l vero incubo non è il virtuale: è, al contrario, un grumo di reale che non si lascia catturare e sciogliere da nessuna finzione' (Donnarumma, 2014: 89). I argued that this is the Real *qua jouissance*. According to contemporary Italian Lacanianism, the issue at stake in postmillennial society is not so much the depiction of a 'fake' reality or the manipulation of it by means of television, reality shows, virtual reality, the Internet and so forth, but rather the untamed and pervasive *jouissance* that no longer encounters limits or boundaries. I claimed that the Lacanian perspective on realism as developed by contemporary Italian Lacanian scholars serves to problematise 'the assumption that it is possible, through the act of representation […] to provide cognitive as well as imaginative access to a material, historical reality that, though irreducibly mediated by human consciousness, and of course by language, is nonetheless independent of it' (Beaumont, 2007: 3).

In Chapter 4, I examined three case studies – *Videocracy*, *Reality*, and *In Treatment* – to consider the 'return of the Real' not only in terms of theory but also of the arts/media. Through a close reading of these case studies, I analysed their depiction of a specific reality and illustrated how the Real can be framed, tackling the issue of its (im)possible representation. In doing so, I addressed the (aesthetic) question of how it is possible to represent that which escapes images and words, namely, that which is essentially unrepresentable. I argued that the aforementioned case studies stage the Real *qua jouissance*, and allow it to emerge, by documenting or depicting specific realities, such as the reality of Italian culture and society during the Berlusconi era, the world of reality television shows, and the psychoanalytic room. More specifically, I contended that: *Videocracy* displays the excessive *jouissance* of the hypermodern subject within the context of Berlusconi's postmillennial Italy; *Reality* depicts the *jouissance* obtained by the hypermodern subject through solitary and anonymous relationships with 'oggetti di godimento', namely television; and finally, *In Treatment* presents the

way a patient is inhabited, and deals with, *jouissance* during his/her psychoanalytic treatment. In doing so, I also further developed the ethical stance that underpins contemporary Italian Lacanianism, to tackle both aesthetic and contemporary socio-political issues.

The analysis conducted in these four chapters also raises issues that I have not explored here since they go beyond the scope of this thesis. These include, for instance, an investigation into similar postmillennial realist trends in other countries, to establish the similarities with and differences from the Italian trend addressed here. Along these lines, the relation between contemporary Lacanianism developed in other countries and issues related to aesthetics could be addressed in further studies in order to identify the specificity of other Lacanian approaches to the field of art. Finally, it would also be interesting to develop the connections between contemporary Italian Lacanianism and Italian Theory, articulating their reciprocal influence. This relation, especially in reference to biopolitics and the notion of the 'subject', has already been established by a number of scholars, such as Chiesa (2011), Chiesa, Nedoh and Piasentier (2016), and Sforza Tarabochia (2016). These studies draw some similarities between the works of Roberto Esposito, the leading figure of Italian biopolitics, and Recalcati. Thus, the role of contemporary Italian Lacanianism within the broader field of Italian Theory has just started to be investigated by scholars and Italian Lacanians' contributions to the development of Italian Theory, especially in terms of aesthetics and ethics, have just started to be disseminated internationally. This further proves that 'la psicoanalisi lacaniana non aiuta a comprendere il nostro tempo, è il nostro tempo' (Carmagnola and Bonazzi, 2011: 94).

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