

Chopsticks and Class Consciousness

Zerocalcare, Michela Murgia, Paolo Virzì, and the Generational (Di)Visions of Italy's Precariat

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Abstract

Mobilizing the perspective of a Millennial author of comic books (Zerocalcare), a Gen-Xer author (Murgia) and the Boomer filmmaker who adapted her debut book into a film (Virzì), this essay invites to look at the poetics of precarity in 21st century Italian culture through the lens of generational divides. Its main argument is that one of the most generative (and nefarious) shifts of paradigms produced by precarization was an unprecedented overlapping of class and generation. Its main focus is on Murgia's 2006 book *Il mondo deve sapere*, and on the rhetorical and ideological shifts with which its 2008 adaptation, *Tutta la vita davanti*, subverted and appropriated its first-hand take on precarity. Articulated from the position of a Millennial Italian who was trained as a literary historian in the late years of Berlusconi's hegemony, the essay concludes on an episode from Murgia's 2015 novel *Chirù*. It interprets its symbolism and power dynamics as a comment on the generational struggle produced by the emergence of precarity in the economic and poetic dimension of Italian art.

Keywords

Michela Murgia; Paolo Virzì; Zerocalcare; Adaptation; Precarity

Résumé

À partir d'un auteur « millennial » de bande dessinée (Zerocalcare), d'un écrivain de la « génération X » (Murgia) et d'un réalisateur « boomer » qui a adapté son premier livre en film (Virzì), cet article invite à envisager la poétique de la précarité dans la culture italienne du XXI^e siècle à travers le filtre générationnel. Son argument est que le principal (et le plus néfaste) effet de la précarisation a été une superposition de classes et de générations totalement nouveau. L'article se concentre principalement sur le livre de Murgia *Il mondo deve sapere* (2006) et sur les changements rhétoriques et idéologiques de son adaptation de 2008, *Tutta la vita davanti*, dans laquelle a été subvertie l'expérience première de la précarité. Prenant le point de vue d'un Italien « millennial » formé comme historien de la littérature dans les dernières années de l'ère Berlusconi, cet article

se termine sur un épisode du roman de Murgia *Chirù* (2015). Il interprète son symbolisme et sa dynamique comme un commentaire sur la lutte entre les générations suscitée par l'émergence de la précarité dans l'économie et la poétique de l'art italien.

Mots-clés

Michela Murgia; Paolo Virzì; Zerocalcare; Adaptation; Precarité

The old generation of intellectuals has failed, but it has had a youth [...].
Today's young generation does not even have this period of brilliant promise:
they were grey-haired even as youngsters.
(Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*, 1929-1930)

Generational Divides (or, Why You Cannot Call Yourselves Precarians)

A young man is tutoring a teenage boy. Both Millennials, they were clearly born on the two chronological bookends that define their generation. The boy, whose slender ogre-like features allude to the iconography of a popular Japanese fighting video-game of the 1980s, wrongly assumes that his tutor is a *trentenne*, a thirty year old man. He is, indeed, twenty-eight and, at a different time in history, the boy's slight imprecision would have been acceptable. However, a man of that age cannot be called *trentenne*, in 2012 Italy. As the tutor explains, echoing a famous line from Nanni Moretti's *Palombella rossa*,¹ words are never neutral, always contextual, and being thirty is not merely a question of age anymore. The term "*trentenne*," he solemnly explains, "refers to a family of large mammals, characterized by maturity, independence, and stability, which went extinct decades ago, more or less when the *pacchetto Treu* entered into force" in Italian labor legislation (Zerocalcare 2013, 95).² A memory from a remote past follows this definition: as a child, while admiring "majestic" thirty year old people in the wild, the tutor used to dream of becoming, one day, like them. Unbeknownst to him, a malevolent deity, in the shape of an evil android-wizard from the *Ghostbusters* animated series, was heaping maledictions upon such naive aspirations: "You will never become like that! And you will never retire! And, if everything goes as we hope, by the time you are forty you will still be sharing an off-campus room with a student from Calabria!" (Zerocalcare 2013, 95)³

This surreal scene opens *Perché non possiamo dirci trentenni* (Why We Cannot Call Ourselves Trentenni, a parody on the title of a 1942 essay by philosopher Benedetto Croce), one of the most popular stories from Michele Rech's early collection of autobiographical comic strips *Ogni maledetto lunedì su due* (2013). Crowned "the last living intellectual" on the cover of leftist magazine *L'Espresso* (Damilano), and celebrated as the subject of an unprecedentedly crowded and critically praised retrospective at the National Museum of Twenty-First Century Art in Rome (Ferracci), Rech, under the battle-name Zerocalcare, is one of Italy's most acclaimed authors of comics and graphic novels ever. Bard of the Roman ghetto of Rebibbia, hilarious visual-narrator of complex political struggles in the periphery of public opinion (from the siege of Kobanî, in Syrian Kurdistan,⁴ to police brutality against the anti-capitalist protesters of Genoa's 2001 G8 summit), throughout the past decade Rech/Calcare has been casting a humorously clearheaded anthropological gaze on his own generation, whose collective destiny is cuttingly summarized at the end of *Perché non possiamo dirci trentenni*: "These days, there's nothing but adolescence, post-adolescence, and then a mass grave. That of *trentenni* is an obsolete category on which we cling out of nostalgia, just as that of permanent employment" (Zerocalcare 2013, 97).⁵ In Zerocalcare's work, suspended between observational humor, omnivorous

¹ In the 1989 comedy, the director stars as a Communist member of parliament who loses his memory and identity after an accident. In the most famous scene of the film he shouts "*Le parole sono importanti.*"

² "'trentenne' si riferisce ad una famiglia di grossi mammiferi con caratteristiche di maturità, emancipazione e stabilità estinta da decenni, più o meno con l'entrata in vigore del pacchetto Treu sul lavoro."

³ "'Guarda Calcare! Com'è maestoso!' 'Un giorno anche io sarò così' 'Invece no, non sarai mai così! E manco piglierai la pensione! E se tutto va come speriamo, a quarant'anni starai ancora in doppia con un fuorisede calabrese!'"

⁴ Published in *Internazionale* in 2015 and then collected in a 2016 volume, Rech's first-hand reportage from the Syria-Turkey border was translated into English: Zerocalcare. 2017. *Kobane Calling*. Translated by Jamie Richards. St. Louis: The Lion Forge.

⁵ "Adesso c'è l'adolescenza, la postadolescenza e la fossa comune. I trentenni sono una categoria superata, a cui ci si attacca per nostalgia, come il posto fisso."

references to highbrow and lowbrow culture, and lyrical abstractions of the zeitgeist of postmodern Mediterranean Europe, older Millennials are castaways in an open sea with no harbors, clinging on the flotsam and jetsam of a shipwrecked idea of personal fulfillment, community, and welfare. They live, in a complete melancholic awareness, the prophecies on late capitalism that Pier Paolo Pasolini's Roman characters, less than half a century before, could only experience as puzzling malaises, inexplicable fevers, and alarming messages from the heavens.⁶

The historical turning point, the conflagration mentioned, almost as an afterthought, by Zerocalcare as the chronotope for the extinction of old fashioned *trentenni*, the so called *pacchetto Treu*, was a series of labor laws that, for the first time, introduced temporary employment in Italy (see Viviani).⁷ Proposed by Tiziano Treu, minister of labor in the first ever government led by a former member of the Italian Communist Party, this system of regulations disrupted, in the passage between the late 1990s and the beginning of the millennium, a culture of labor rooted in unionism, social stability, and widespread, inalienable entitlements. After all, the first article of its Constitution defines Italy as a “democratic Republic founded on labour,”⁸ (5) and that “labour” had been envisioned, for decades, as a permanent position, gained at a young age and, in most cases, loyally maintained until retirement by the members of a relatively homogenous working and middle class, characterized by low mobility and reliable saving plans. Arguably, life-long employment contracts were the socio-economic cornerstone of the humbly wealthy Italian society that, during the so called ‘boom’ (or *miracolo economico*, see Cederna) perceived itself as uniquely ambivalent in between the two opposing cultural imperialisms of the cold war: a Catholic but Socialist, lazy but innovative, conformist but scandalous knot of contradictory aspirations, self-representations, and ideologies that formed the iconic national mythology spread by Federico Fellini's and Michelangelo Antonioni's 1960s films, Alberto Moravia's and Natalia Ginzburg's late novels, Milo Manara's and Andrea Pazienza's comics, Mario Schifano's and Giosetta Fioroni's Pop Art, and so on.

Zerocalcare's palimpsests of manga and anime characters, American syndicated series and revamped animated classics from Disney's postwar catalog, would belong, elsewhere in the West, to the imagery of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In their Italianized, imported versions, however, these foreign cultural mythemes recall the age of Silvio Berlusconi's hegemony (1992-2012)⁹: the age in which adulthood went extinct in Italy after the end of widespread permanent contracts—but not of permanent employment itself, which suddenly became the homogenizing generational privilege of older Italians.¹⁰ Through its leader's private TV channels, his malls, his publishing venues, and his own inimitable life, post-stability Berlusconi culture shaped the imagination of those who, like Zerocalcare (and myself)¹¹, grew up in the

⁶ I am referring to the sickness that affects the young co-protagonist in *Mamma Roma* (1962) and the figure of the messenger in *Teorema* (1968).

⁷ Zerocalcare's mythologization of the *pacchetto Treu* works as a sort of search for the origins of a legislative and social shift of paradigm that continued for many years. Two of the most culturally impactful episodes of this ongoing shift were the *legge Biagi* in 2003, which introduced more sophisticated forms of precarious employment, and the *Jobs Act* in 2016, which introduced the concept of “*tutele crescenti*.” Marco Biagi, who signed the 2003 law, was killed by the *Nuove Brigate Rosse* terrorist organization. For a panorama on the affective and anthropological consequences of the changes in the job market in Italy after '97, see Molè (2012, 371-396). For an accessible coeval historical and economic retrospective, see Servidori. For an analysis of the impact of the *Jobs Act* see Cirillo, Fana, and Guarascio. Zerocalcare's isolation of the *pacchetto Treu* as a unique turning point confirms, I believe, the development of the mythology of precarization as a specific generational trauma in Berlusconi Italy.

⁸ “L'Italia è una repubblica democratica

⁹ The bibliography on Berlusconi's Italy is vast. A recent impactful contribution that positions Berlusconi in the wider and ongoing historical phenomenon of democratic leaders employing a “totalitarian playbook” is Ben-Ghiat's trade book *Strongmen*. For an investigative profile of Berlusconi's political trajectory see Lane 2004. Mazzoleni's article (2011, 36-38), which generated significant backlash in Italy, offers a colorful cultural synthesis of the imagery of Berlusconi culture. On Berlusconi's Italy, see Shin and Agnew. *fondata sul lavoro.*”

¹⁰ Marta Fana, who worked scientifically on the recent history of labor legislation in Italy and its impact on the national economy, wrote about this socio-economic fracture in Fana and Fana 2019.

aftermath of highly mythologized shifts of paradigm such as the introduction of the *pacchetto Treu* in 1997. Rather than experiencing such dramatic changes as traumas, they (we) envisioned them as a destiny, a cursed horoscope. One that, as Zerocalcare's strips show, was familiar enough to inspire the serious levity of satire, revealing the dark side of amicable cartoon heroes from the 'post-Treu' era.

As they (we) became the primary target of nascent marketing strategies that expanded well beyond traditional advertising, Italian Millennials were natives and witnesses of the sudden dichotomy that separated older parents and grandparents (with their steady incomes, pensions, and savings, union memberships, real estate, and recurrent mid-life crises) from an aging mass of reluctant post-adolescents unable to leave home, get a mortgage, or start a family—eternal youngsters elsewhere known as Generation X.¹² The lexical network revolving around the concept of 'precarity' that was generated by the new short-term contracts introduced by the *pacchetto Treu* and subsequent Italian labor laws (*precarietà*, *precarizzazione*, *preariato*, etc.) started dominating information media and artifacts of popular culture well before Zerocalcare's peers entered the workforce, and it had already morphed, by then, into the semantics of a more abstract, all-encompassing existential sentiment. Older Millennials wrote poetry books about precariousness that hardly mention labor at all (such as Greta Rosso's *Cronache precarie*) or that narrate job insecurity through the clarifying lens of sour irony (like Francesco Targhetta's novel in verses *Perciò veniamo bene nelle fotografie*). In sardonic ballads like *Velleità* and *Fare i camerieri*, indie songwriters such as Niccolò Contessa, known as I Cani, and Vasco Brondi, known as Le Luci della Centrale Elettrica, derided the idea that even prestigious or glamorous jobs, stripped as they are of the material advantages that they once entailed, could grant any real solace to those who brag about having them in 21st century Italy. That of precarity, rather than a worrisome threat, became a condition. And as such it was recently materialized in the aimless and repetitive work of construction demanded by the totem-like toys of Alice Ronchi's interactive sculpture *Indoor Flora* (2016), or visualized in the never ending, resigned wait of Patrizio Di Massimo's canvas *Self Portrait as a Ghost* (2017).

In the next two sections of this essay, I will focus on a different, earlier narration and representation of precarity: the one put forward by the generations whose mature work preceded (and directly reacted to) the paradigm shift framed in Zerocalcare's strip. My aim is to show that, before it became an omnipresent existential condition in Italy's self-representation, precarity informed, for a brief spell in the early 2000s, an impactful and coherent cultural poetics predicated on autobiographical trauma, urgency, and disbelief. Unlike Zerocalcare's comic alter-ego a decade later, Italy's Gen-X intellectuals fully expected to have become bona fide *trentenni* in those years, and recounted the supposedly sudden precarization of their generation not as an immersive inescapable state or inherited doom, but rather as a personal and collective contingent shock. That shock turned into a narrative trend that entered the editorial market and then was quickly appropriated by older storytellers based in various media. These Boomers, who had all, by then, decidedly passed the

¹¹ I will return on this point in the conclusion, but I should already state that my perspective, as the author of this essay, is not to claim an impartial academic approach to the topic. My position as an Italian Millennial who experienced precarity informs, within a Cultural Studies framework, my take on the problem. My goal is to propose an alternative (and, I must admit, rather accusatory) critical reading of a phenomenon that, in most authoritative readings (especially those oriented towards a descriptive/historicizing approach), is presented as pacifically intergenerational. I believe that my explicit conflictual positionality and case-based narrative (the attention to a specific historical/ideological profile of Murgia between Rech and Virzi in particular, on which other critical readers may disagree) do not make my article less scientific, but rather more intellectually honest. I should also clarify that, in this essay, I am using generational categories such as "Boomers" and "Gen-Xers" without expecting them to produce a reliable sociological paradigm. I rely on these widely popular terms, connected to relatively arbitrary chronological spans (1980-1996 for Millennials, 1965-1980 for Gen-Xers, 1945-1965 for Boomers), because they help distinguish between what I believe were (and are) different approaches to the narration of the precariat. The main merit of using this language is that I believe that the so-called Generation X loosely coincides, in Italy, with a self-aware whole social class produced by shifts in labor legislation.

¹² In Italy, this generation took various names ("*generazione 1000 euro*," "*bamboccioni*," "*generazione precaria*," "*TQ- Trenta Quarantenni*") dictated by the cultural, political, and literary debate around the precarian condition.

symbolic threshold of their thirtieth birthday, did not experience the effects of mass precarity as a biographical and generational trauma (like Gen-Xers) or a given paradigm to navigate (like Millennials). In fact, they largely misunderstood the poetics/politics of precarity initiated by younger intellectuals, and materially exploited it. This way, besides diluting the political potential of their narratives, they doubled down on the infantilization and psychological wounds endured by Gen-X precarians, whose first-hand experiences were ironically capitalized on and fetishized.

In order to propose this reading of a complex intergenerational economics of sentiments and conflict of poetics, I will use one particularly revealing case: that of a seminal novel of ‘precarian literature’ by a Gen-Xer author, Michela Murgia, and of its cinematic adaptation by a Boomer filmmaker, Paolo Virzì. This is by no means an isolated case. Other intellectuals of the same generation who, like Virzì, entered the discourse on precarity at the same time from the vantage point of a marxist background did so, I believe, in a similarly well intended vampiric or benevolently simplistic way.¹³ My intention is not to provide a moral judgement of this phenomenon, but rather to set a demarcation—indeed, as I said, to reveal a conflict. Or rather to confirm what journalist Benedetto Vecchi, who directed the cultural pages of Italy’s oldest surviving openly Marxist newspaper, *Il Manifesto*, in the early 2000s, wrote in praise of Murgia’s debut book: “in order for us to really know the reality of the precariat, it is them, the precarians, who must narrate it” (Vecchi 2006).¹⁴

The Origin Story of a Literary Icon: Michela Murgia’s *Il mondo deve sapere*

As I write these lines, in 2021, Michela Murgia is among the most credible and beloved political commentators, social media influencers, and literary celebrities in Italy. Her name, face, and voice are familiar to any Italian who is interested in books, feminism, and the cultural analysis of national politics. Murgia co-writes and narrates the most downloaded podcast in Italy, *Morgana*, and her timely anti-fascist treatise *Istruzioni per diventare fascisti* (2018) has been instantly translated throughout Europe and beyond, including an American edition for Penguin Random House. She recently succeeded Roberto Saviano as the author of the prestigious column “L’Antitaliano,” started by Giorgio Bocca in 1981 for the magazine *L’Espresso*. After hosting one of the most popular soft-news shows on Italian radio, *Tg Zero*, she is coordinating the social media communication of the major national newspaper *la Repubblica*. When, because of the Covid-19 emergency, the 2020 opera premiere of La Scala, the most prominent and exclusive social event in the country, was turned into a simulcast TV transmission with no live audience (a disruption unseen since World War II bombings over Milan), Murgia was asked to host that televised show, and to address its massive spectatorship with a speech on art and society (Murgia “Prima della Scala”). During that speech, she commented upon the benevolent light that opera has always cast on subaltern subjects, such as women and servants. In particular, mentioning Puccini’s *La Bohème* and its proverbial depiction of starving poets and singers, she highlighted the precarity of artists’ lives (“*il precariato degli artisti*”), a recurring historical trope made dramatically urgent by the policies adopted during the pandemic.

¹²I am thinking for instance of films like *L’intrepido* (2013), directed and co-written by Gianni Amelio, or novels like Massimo Lolli’s *Il lunedì arriva sempre di domenica pomeriggio* (2009). In any event, it is impossible to use generational demarcations with absolute determinism, and it is interesting to consider also the case of older Gen-Xers. Poet and novelist Aldo Nove for instance, who matured his postmodernist poetics in the context of Italy’s late radical neo-avant-garde, entered the trend of precarian literature with a singular nonfiction book that documents the stories of fifteen younger Italian precarians. Its very title, *Mi chiamo Roberta, ho 40 anni, guadagno 250 euro al mese*, appropriates the voice of one of these workers in the first person. Presented by Einaudi as a book of stories about “*Persone vere, mai raccontate però*” (real people whose stories nobody tells), this 2006 “docudrama” was clearly marketed as a revelation, a cone of light shed on an otherwise unknown corner of Italy’s social reality. While this operation may be read as one of intergenerational and interclass solidarity, I believe that it took the shape of a well intended appropriation.

¹³“per conoscere davvero la realtà del precariato devono essere loro, i precari, a raccontarla” Vecchi’s review, which came out in *il manifesto*, represented the first reaction to *Il mondo deve sapere* in a national newspaper.

Home-bound viewers, listening to Murgia's appeal to find a creative solution to the ongoing 'lockdown' of theaters, galleries, and auditoriums and to salvage the livelihoods of entertainment professionals, probably ascribed such a sensitivity for the material dimension of artistic labor to her personal history as a working-class woman from colonial Sardinia, whose success as a writer and public intellectual is famously rooted in a close familiarity with limited means. In 2019, Matteo Salvini, the leader of the largest post-Berlusconi right-wing party in Italy (then the vice prime minister, as well as minister of internal affairs) had accused Murgia of being an out of touch snob, and she had responded by publishing her résumé (see *Michela Murgia e la sinossi del curriculum*), listing the many unglamorous gigs, jobs, and humble positions (from door-to-door saleswoman to night porter) that she has held, since she was fourteen, in order to pay for her vocational studies, a Bachelor in Religion, and, eventually, to sustain the beginnings of her writing career. In addition, hints of a poor and down to earth background clearly emerge from all of the bestselling novels that followed that streak of temporary jobs, including *Accabadora* (2009), a tragic fable of magical realism that was translated into more than thirty languages and received the most prestigious Italian literary prizes. Most bi-bibliographical summaries tend to make Murgia's life as a storyteller start from that quintessentially Sardinian novel, which brought her national and international recognition. Many spectators of the La Scala event must have thought of *Accabadora's* loosely autobiographical protagonist (a Sardinian seamstress of the early 20th century who migrates to Turin to serve as a maid) when Murgia eloquently spoke of "*il precariato degli artisti*" at La Scala. However, Murgia's personal history with precarity goes beyond résumés and fiction. Indeed, precarity is at the core of her largely neglected origin story as a literary icon, which took place a few years before the global success of *Accabadora* and defined her political and creative trajectory.

Murgia's very first book, titled *Il mondo deve sapere* (The World Must Know), was among the earliest and most successful titles of the so called *letteratura precaria*¹⁵: the literature of precarity that defined the generational poetics that I described above. A long-seller title recently republished by Einaudi, the prestigious Turinese literary press that printed most of her works since *Accabadora*¹⁶, *Il mondo deve sapere* now blends in Murgia's series of popular non-fiction books devoted to the timely but timeless treatment of hot political issues of the immediate present—the latest of which, *Stai zitta* (2021), deals with misogynist language and patriarchal rhetoric and debuted at the top of the national best-seller list. However, in 2005, Murgia wrote *Il mondo deve sapere* from a position of absolute subalternity and literal anonymity, well before acquiring any political platform or literary audience. In fact, she did not expect to publish it as a book, and she was not even planning to pursue a writing career while working on it. Besides Murgia's own recollections during book presentations and literary festivals, the micro-history of this debut has never been clearly unpacked. Let me illustrate it from the beginning, in the light of its contribution to the understanding and representation of precarity among Gen-X Italian intellectuals.¹⁷

Born in 1972, Murgia was twenty when the so called First Republic collapsed and the hegemonic political forces of postwar Italy either dissolved, like the *Democrazia Cristiana*, or fundamentally abjured their identity, like the *Partito Comunista Italiano*. She was twenty-five when the *pacchetto Treu* became law. Coming from the margins of rural Sardinia, she gained a credible professional profile in the province of

¹⁵ The bibliography on this phenomenon, its characteristics and periodization, is rich—the present volume proves the persisting vitality of the problem. For an early general discussion see Voza. For a multidisciplinary approach to precarity that includes its literary expressions see Contarini and Marsi 2015.

¹⁶ Including a slightly older title, the literary guide to Sardinia *Viaggio in Sardegna* (2008), which was commissioned after Einaudi editor Paola Gallo attended a reading of the first draft of *Accabadora* at the literary festival Pordenonelegge.

¹⁷ When not specified otherwise, information about Murgia's life before the publication of *Il mondo deve sapere* has been gathered through my interviews and correspondence with her, by attending several of her book presentations since 2006 (in Rome, Turin, Cagliari, Gavoi, Oristano, Nuoro, Pisa, Milan, Berlin, and Venice), and by following her personal website michelamurgia.com (now closed, but partly accessible through the "waybackmachine" tool at archive.org) and social media profiles and channels. Any mistake or misinterpretation is solely my responsibility.

Oristano through the various experiences listed in her 2019 public résumé. A regional leader in the Christian leftist circles of the *Azione Cattolica* association, she developed a post-colonial consciousness and independentist orientation as her land became the theatre of some of Silvio Berlusconi's most visible personal and political exhibitions of power. When, in 2002, the fatal age of expected maturity and stability arrived for her, it found Murgia in a position that corresponded quite fully to Zerocalcare's definition of what a traditional Italian *trentenne* used to look like. After teaching religious studies in Sardinian public schools for six years—a career that she loved, but had to abandon because of a conflict with the local archdioceses over the fact that she assigned Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ* as a reading to her students (see Murgia 2012, I-XII)—Murgia had landed, at the age of twenty-eight, a permanent contract at a thermal power station. At thirty, her status in the company was solid. However, as she reached a position of larger responsibility, Murgia found out that her employer was disposing of the station's waste in public waters, against all the environmental rules of the area. At thirty-two, she decided to testify against the company in order to stop its illegal polluting practices.

This choice of civil and ecological integrity immediately jeopardized Murgia's stability exactly as the effects of the *pacchetto Treu* were changing the face of Italy's job market. The legal dispute allowed her employer to terminate her permanent contract. While she was able to immediately find another one by winning a public competition thanks to her skills as a web designer, developed as an amateur by playing online RPG games, the new job paid less than minimum wage (a paradox that, just a few years before, would have not been possible under Italy's former labor regulations). In addition, within the small community of her provincial area, former colleagues and supervisors blamed Murgia for the investigation that disrupted the activity of the power station, causing them legal trouble and, in many cases, loss of income. Worried about threats to her life and dissatisfied with her insufficient new salary, Murgia sought seasonal employment far away from Sardinia. For a year, she worked on the border between Italy and Switzerland, in a mountain resort so remote that it remains entirely inaccessible during winter. When she returned home, she could not find any job; partly because of her enduring local fame as a troublemaker, part because of the ongoing rapid deterioration of work conditions in Italy.

Il mondo deve sapere was born as a reaction to the anxiety and disbelief of this pivotal passage in Murgia's life. When she realized that the only position that she could get near Cabras, her home village in the Sinis peninsula, was as a call center representative, she decided to take it as a sort of research challenge: an opportunity to explore what looked like an alien ship that landed just outside her doorstep. The job consisted of convincing local housewives to purchase an American vacuum cleaner, and paid 230 euros a month (before taxes). The only way to turn it into a livelihood, on top of persuading supervisors to renew one's contract every few weeks, was to buy into a bizarre system of goals, rituals, and sacrifices clearly inspired, as she ended up describing them, by either a tribal cult or a pyramid scheme. Murgia entered this totalitarian work environment, based on neocolonial Anglo-American corporate strategies, more as a mesmerized spy than a reluctant victim. Having experienced the traditional dynamics of stable labor, she joined the uncanny office routines of the call center (with its collective chants, mandatory enthusiasms, paternalistic attempts at indoctrination, and unusual, creative psychological tortures) with the intention of studying, understanding, and ultimately exposing them. She did so by keeping an anonymous journal on the Italian blogging platform *Splinder*.

Part ethnography, part surreal comedy, part personal essay, and part political *j'accuse*, this public blog chronicled Murgia's experience through hilarious Brechtian estrangement. It revealed to many readers (especially unaware Boomers) the dramatic impact that recent labor laws had had not only on the material lives and expectations of young Italians, but also on their psyche, on their image of themselves. As Murgia immediately noticed and eviscerated through her analysis of power dynamics in the call center (which

became, in those years, a crucial space of investigation for storytellers)¹⁸, the very structure of the new, ‘flexible’ jobs introduced by deregulating contracts was essentially designed to bully people. Generally familiar with Marxism and with a rich national catalog of popular social satire about the alienation of both blue collar and white collar labor environments (from Mario Pogliotti’s monologues to Paolo Villaggio’s Fantozzi films), readers of Murgia’s blog were incredulous.¹⁹ They were also numerous, and the blog quickly became a sensation. Rather than denouncing an anomaly or a crime, like she had before, Murgia was revealing the new normal, and she was doing so through a remarkably entertaining literary voice. Her style caught the eye of two Gen-X editors, Giacomo Papi and Massimo Coppola, who in 2004 had started an anti-capitalist press called ISBN Edizioni.

Even with a legal disclaimer and the word “*romanzo*” (novel) in the subtitle, publishing the blog as a book meant, for Murgia, to reveal her identity and expose herself to retaliation from her employer (an international conglomerate) and her colleagues. The prospect, in sum, was to relive the very trauma that had led her to the humiliating position that she was exorcising through anonymous literary venting. However, Papi and Coppola’s political approach to publishing convinced her to trust ISBN, and she was rewarded with legal protection and immediate national attention. Not as a martyr of the new labor policies though, but rather as the lucid literary voice of a new class that coincided, for the first time in modern Italian society, with a generation.

Her text, as witty and lucid as it is sophisticatedly honest, could not be read as a mere document: as the “*diario*” (journal) of a precarian call center operator, as its back cover presented it. Part of its success was due to the stark contrast between the extraordinary skills exhibited by Murgia in the book itself (and in the many presentations, articles, and public speeches that followed its publication) and the grotesque squalor of the situation that generated it. The nascent precarian class/generation was not composed of untalented, lazy, or still immature post-adolescents in training. On the contrary, precarity was obliterating the potential of fully formed *trentenni* and, by betraying their life expectations and depriving them of their sense of individual and collective self, was abolishing the nation’s ability to imagine its own future, make long-term plans, and contemplating even the most modest of stabilities as the expected outcome of a responsible youth. This tragic political vein in the witty satirical tone of the text was noticed by reviewers (including Vecchi), and made explicit in the author’s afterword to the 2010 ISBN re-edition. In it, Murgia interpreted what critics had considered a flaw in the text (its lack of a positive or at least hopeful ending and, indeed, of a clear conclusion) as a formal expression of a shared psycho-social dread: “a metaphor of the existential tragedy of my generation.”²⁰

Not OK, Boomer: *Tutta la vita davanti* as Adaptation and Exploitation

Il mondo deve sapere has no narrative arc, no plot. Its episodes and recollections, seamlessly interwoven like in an excellent stand-up routine, are directly narrated to a fictitious interlocutor, giving readers the impression of receiving a series of confidential phone calls from a brilliant and sarcastic friend. In its ending, the book (and the experience that it recounts) is described as a long drink of water that did not respond to any thirst, one of those required before an ultrasound. Once full to the brim, the author/narrator simply leaves the call center (in real life, Murgia worked there for six weeks before getting noticed by ISBN and closing the blog)

¹⁸ In addition to the products derived from Murgia’s text, one could cite Ascanio Celestini’s film and monologue *Parole Sante* (2007), or Zelda Zeta’s *Voice Center*. On this topos, see Chirumbolo (2013, 371-386).

¹⁹ While the blog was closed when the book came out, it is still possible to access some of its comments using the “WayBackMachine” tool on web.archive.org and looking for ilmondodevesapere.splinder.com

²⁰ “Una metafora del dramma esistenziale della mia generazione.”

and dismisses her audience. No resolution is offered, no maturation or realization. The book rejected the traditional novel form that would later define Murgia, through stories such as *Accabadora* and *Chirù*, as an international voice of the so called Sardinian *nouvelle vague* (see Fofi; and Angioni) and of Italy's hypermodern return to realistic narrative.²¹ In part, it did so because of its medium of origin, the blog: Giacomo Papi's editorial work on the original posts was minimal, and the only substantial part added, in the passage from web to print, was the coda that I just described. However, considering Murgia's later work, it is hard not to read the structure of *Il mondo deve sapere* as a deliberate choice. The trauma that Murgia analyzed and exhibited in that book was not an opportunity for growth, a temporary diversion from an otherwise straight life path, or a challenge to overcome. It was not even just a tragic dead end. Her narration, indebted to the accumulative forms of observational comedy, confession, and reportage, was not meant to offer an apologue or a chance to walk, for a brief spell, in the shoes of either a new everyman or a unique figure in the immediate present. Murgia did not pretend that her first-hand experience had a cathartic meaning. In fact, as I mentioned, she insisted on the opposite.

The book's longevity on the editorial market proves that it was not a mere timely snapshot. However, its unclassifiable genre between fiction and nonfiction, confession and pamphlet, keeps it out of the field of literary narrative. That genre, adopted in the first person by other authors of the same generation,²² should be read as a statement, a formal comment upon the book's content: the only way, for a *trentenne* interrupted, to regain agency over her destiny without buying into neo-capitalist myths of individual distinction or neo-leftist paradigms of lamentation and self-martyrdom. No one is saved at the end of *Il mondo deve sapere*, not even Murgia herself. What attracted the ISBN editors was the blog itself, not a potentially more developed, more plot-oriented version of it. They bought and distributed Murgia's style, her ability to politically entertain without sublimating her experience into fiction. Another Gen-X editor, Paola Gallo, soon fought to bring Murgia in her list at Einaudi: not to write more about precarity, nor to find other hot topics to observe and satirize, but rather to become a traditional narrator. She was successful and, as I mentioned, Murgia became a diamond tip in the Einaudi catalog, quickly rising to international literary fame and experiencing the rare accomplishment of being highly praised by critics while enjoying a large popular acclaim. However, in between her initial success as a precarian writer and her subsequent affirmation as a novelist, the many adaptations of *Il mondo deve sapere* into different media showed how distorted and paternalistic the gaze of older generations could be on precarity, and inflicted a second trauma to Murgia—one that resurfaced in more recent literary narrations.

One of the most interesting trans-codifications of *Il mondo deve sapere* was David Emmer's theatrical adaptation of the same name (2008). Through actress Teresa Saponangelo's strongly physical performance and an estranging barren scenography, Emmer captured the surrealism of the book, at once comedic and terrifying. While passages of Murgia's prose were repeated verbatim in it, the dramaturgy strongly altered the cast of characters and the tone of the book, making its premise less about analysis and more about suffering. The "*preariato degli artisti*" that Murgia would mention twelve years later at La Scala was an implicit, autobiographical protagonist of the play. In the same year, a completely different adaptation came out in cinemas under the title *Tutta la vita davanti* (Your Whole Life Ahead of You). This work, directed by Paolo Virzì, directly involved Murgia as a consultant but, as I will argue to conclude this essay, subverted her message.

²¹ I am adopting here the terminology established by Donnarumma 2014.

²² Either in a more bookish, literary fashion, like in Mario Desiati's *Vita precaria e amore eterno*, or by dialing up the fluid, militant forms of the nascent digital communication in projects like Incorvaia's and Rimassa's blog-book *Generazione mille euro*. Both volumes were published in 2006.

The film presented itself as Marxist commentary: its promotional poster depicts the cast as a tableau vivant of Pellizza Da Volpedo's emblematic painting *The Fourth Estate* (1899-1901), a highly recognizable socialist icon in Italy. Virzi, a Tuscan working-class intellectual, was famous for the social content of his mostly lighthearted films, as well as for his leftist views. The result of his work on *Il mondo deve sapere* is a beautifully shot, well-acted, and entertaining film that was generally appreciated by critics and moviegoers in Italy. Emotionally intense and tightly narrated, *Tutta la vita davanti* received numerous prizes and was among the most visible cultural products of the rise of precarity in Italy's social landscape. However, despite its evident sympathy for precarians and its conflation of them with the proletarians of classical Marxist narrations and depictions of society, the film ultimately exploited the generational trauma of Italian Gen-Xers and deprived them of their agency. I am going to propose three points to corroborate this analysis.

The first is the treatment of Murgia's plot (or absence thereof).²³ The medium certainly demanded a more traditional arc in order not to turn the film into a documentary. However, *Tutta la vita davanti* simplified Murgia's generational experience into a personal drama with a sour but ultimately happy ending (involving an absurd payment for the publication of an academic paper on 'Heidegger and phone sales' in an Anglophone journal of philosophy). Virzi's protagonist, Marta, is an alien in the call center not because of her lucidity and subversive motives, like Murgia's Camilla, but because of her education. The central tension of the film is between Marta's angelic virtue and the vulgarity of less privileged colleagues, who appear to tragically belong in the hell of precarity—to ultimately (and here is the point) deserve their condition. In the end, Marta proves to be not just more lucky, but inherently better than her peers, and the film tends towards a rags-to-riches Dickensian paternalism. In the last scene, the young daughter of Marta's roommate, Lara, declares that she will study Philosophy like her when she is older, turning the protagonist into a model. The screenplay defuses the political argument of the book (precarity abolished class divides for an entire generation, nobody is going to be a *trentenne* anymore) and converts it into a traditional path of self-determination on the background of an outdated form of Marxist awareness (if not, indeed, a form of neo-classism based on the ultimately neo-capitalist values of culture and ambition). Rather than denouncing, like Murgia's book did, the internal divisions that make the precarian class "dangerous" and struggling to develop its consciousness, the film reinforced such intra-generational boundaries.²⁴

The second is the formal transcoding of the book. The film mines Murgia's reconstruction of the work environment of the call center but superimposes a strong narrative voice over it. Such a voice is quite literal: the screenplay includes an omnipresent extra-diegetic narrator, voiced by actress Laura Morante (a cinematic icon that, in the same decade, often played the role of mature, dissatisfied Italian Boomers experiencing mid-life crises). Morante's superbly acted narration oscillates between an identification with the young protagonist and an infantilizing chronicle of her misfortunes. Her role seems to be that of orienting the viewer towards sentiments of pity, affection, and complicity for Marta—who, it should be noted, is not a Gen-Xer, but a Millennial: a 23 year old woman whose whole life, as the title underlines, is ahead of her. The dread of broken social promises and generational doom experienced by older Italians, suddenly immersed in the alien reality of precarity, is silenced in the film.

The third is Virzi's relationship with Murgia herself as an author and a subaltern. Their encounter offers an excellent parable to describe the rapport between Boomer and Gen-X intellectuals over the theme of precarity. Virzi contacted Murgia personally in order to express his interest for her book, and invited her to join him in Rome while he adapted it for the screen. He offered her a short-term contract to work at his production house, Motorino Amaranto. *Tutta la vita davanti* was the first film of his entirely produced

²³ Originally planned as a direct adaptation of the book, with Murgia co-writing the screenplay, the film came out as a story 'inspired by' the book, written in collaboration with Murgia.

²⁴ On the "danger" of the precariat and its lack of homogeneity see Standing 2011.

independently. Murgia moved to Rome, renting a room in a building owned by Virzi's production house. She worked on a TV show developed by Motorino Amaranto and, along with screenwriter Francesco Bruni, on the adaptation of her own book with Virzi. As emerged from later interviews, Virzi saw Murgia (then thirty six) as a "witty girl" ("*una ragazza sveglia*") who offered valuable information on the world of exploiting labor; however, he considered his film to be entirely original: inspired by *Il mondo deve sapere* rather than an adaptation of it, and ultimately "better" than it ("*qualcosa di meglio*").²⁵ The rhetoric of inspiration was also adopted in the biographical notes of all of Murgia's later books, which always mention the fact that her debut book inspired Virzi's film. However, considering the two previous points, I believe it is safe to say that Virzi's process of adaptation consisted of a form of intergenerational cannibalism of Murgia's authorship, of her personal experience, and ultimately of her agency on her own story. A hint from Murgia's later novel, *Chirù*, allows us to formulate a hypothesis on the dynamics of power that informed her relationship with Virzi.

Chirù is the story of an intergenerational, pedagogical love, platonically modeled on Pasolini's and Lorca's modern elaborations on the Greco-Roman paradigm of pederasty. It tells the story of a middle-aged actress who guides a teenager violinist towards adulthood, queering the concepts of family, filiation, and apprenticeship. In the fourth chapter (27-32), the protagonist recalls a pivotal moment in her professional life: director Saro Antonelli noticed her, by chance, as she sold kitchenware in a local TV ad, and called her to arrange an audition in Rome that launched her career. I believe that the autobiographical allusion is rather overt, and the episode that follows is emblematic.

Murgia's protagonist, Eleonora, recounts the dinner that followed the audition, which was a success. The director invited her and other actors to a sushi restaurant, and immediately noticed that she could not use chopsticks. Surprised and amused, he called her a "*meravigliosa contadinella naïve*" (a wonderful naive peasant) and paternalistically derided her in front of everyone. He then tried to teach her, declaring that it was easy and that he had learned it immediately. At her second failed attempt, he quickly lost interest, and everyone else at the table resumed their conversation, leaving the newcomer at the margins. This episode of benevolent violence taught Murgia's protagonist a crucial lesson on the intersectionality of age, class, and gender in the balance of power between aspiring and established intellectuals: being on the same side of an issue does not mean being equal. Chopsticks gave her an instant insight into class consciousness, one that she, as a Gen-X motherly figure, would transmit to her Millennial protégé Chirù—and to Murgia's readers.

Coda: Chopsticks and Class Consciousness

Murgia chose the exotic glamor of Japanese food in early twenty-first century Rome to represent the divide between her protagonist and Saro Antonelli: two figures separated by power through age rather than education, occupation, or social background. The generational triangle that I tried to delineate throughout this essay is complete, in *Chirù*, when the protagonist organizes one of her lessons to her younger protégé around food, converting the snobbish abuse that she endured when she started her career into loving patience towards her adopted Millennial son and paramour. Rather than putting him on the spot and testing him, she exercises a form of pedagogical matnagne and teaches him how to perform in an expensive restaurant. While Antonelli dismissed social "virginites" (like not knowing how to use chopsticks) as an expression of embarrassing provincial naiveté, Eleonora knows that a younger working-class artist born in post-stability Italy does not need to be a "peasant" to be unfamiliar with high end dining.

The three characters that form this allegorical triangle (Antonelli, Eleonora, and Chirù) have similar goals,

²⁵ All quotations come from Accardo and Acerbo (2010, 199).

origins, and talents, but they are divided by their generational awareness. Food is of course a meaningful metaphor to represent such a divide, and hunger (“fame”) is a recurring trope in Murgia’s explanation of what unites Eleonora and Chirù, making them different from older artists who cannot empathize with the unprecedented struggles of “*il precariato degli artisti*.” However, just like in *Il mondo deve sapere*, there is no real catharsis in *Chirù*. The Millennial violinist, in the end, employs what he learned from the Gen-X actress to gain success by seducing a Boomer producer, not too different from Antonelli. Eleonora empowered him to combine his disenchantment with what she learned through personal struggle, realizing that she has ultimately been alone all along. Like Camilla in *Il mondo deve sapere*, she has no opportunity to escape an existential dread that extends to her whole generation: an interruption that older mentors cannot fully understand and that younger mentees coldly contemplate as part of their given landscape.

The solitude of Italian Gen-Xer narrators in front of the rise of the precariat is what I tried to underscore with the present analysis of Murgia’s case between Virzi’s adaptation of her novel and Zerocalcare’s more current re-mythologization of her topic. While it invites to be suspicious of the appropriation of precarian narratives by older generations who did not experience the socio-political impact of precarization, this essay is not intended as a judgment of a generation. Nor does it try to claim positivistic chronological terms to evaluate the validity of specific voices around an issue. It simply proposes to adopt generational divides as a revealing filter to read the narratives and representations of precarity. It was written from the perspective of an Italian Millennial who was trained as a literary historian in the age of the precarization of Italy’s cultural landscape, and it focuses on a case study that, I believe, can serve as a paradigm.

As I discussed, the storytelling syntax, the casting, and the re-structured plot of Virzi’s film turned the matter of Murgia’s book into a simpler and ultimately classist coming-of-age tale on the backdrop of socio-political changes that imply a way out, at least for deserving individuals. The narrative metaphors around food in *Chirù* offer a possible interpretation of this benevolent but paternalistic approach to the precarian condition, one that insists on the generational uniqueness of such a condition. Murgia’s case helps to intersect class consciousness and generational awareness in the analysis of how precarity has been represented in Italy. It also invites us to consider the inherent political value of formal, editorial, and storytelling choices dictated by a first-person experience of socio-political realities as they become narratives.

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