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Women's Voice in the Fold of the Present

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1. I thank the Italian Cultural Institute for giving me the opportunity to exchange ideas with you. To exchange experiences is, in my opinion, the best way to give meaning to the word "globalization", that is to say, to use it not as a new word imposed from above, but rather as a new cosmopolitanism which we can build from below. However, I feel both honoured and uncertain in opening this week dedicated to Italian journalism and language. For over ten years in Italy, the media have been at the centre of a violent cultural, political and economic upheaval which is undermining our constitutional democracy. The interpenetration of politics and communication, a feature of all post-modern democracies, in Italy has taken the extreme, pathological form of the *conflict of interests*. This is the juxtaposition of executive power over media power in the person of our Prime Minister, with devastating consequences for the national institutions, for civil liberties and for the language of the public sphere.

How shall I describe this process? I admit that I feel somewhat uneasy. I belong to a generation of the Italian Left which matured in the period which started around 1968 and continued through the 1970s. In those years people talked about the "Italian laboratory" as the most progressive political hotbed in the West, where the mainstream Left and the driving force of the workers' movement, the youth movement and the feminist movement all contributed to expand democracy and to build a public sphere that was broader and richer than mainstream politics and institutions. The choice of working as a journalist, for many of us and definitely for me, was a way of contributing to this building process from a more progressive position than that of traditional party politics. It was a way to be involved in politics outside parties and more freely than in parties, to be part of the circles where public opinion – the precondition of democracy – is formed. The newspaper where I have worked for over twenty years, *il manifesto*, reflects this choice in its history: it is no accident if the group of Communist dissidents which founded it in 1971 chose to start a daily paper rather than a new party, because as early as 1971 they had realised that communication is the most important form of political action.

Thirty years later, the Italian political laboratory is still operating, but it has been turned upside down: Italy, which thirty years ago was the most advanced example of democratic expansion, is now the most advanced example of distortion, deconstitutionalization and degeneration among mature democracies. The public sphere is threatened by a series of dangerous illnesses. There is a crisis of representation. There is a crisis of participation. Politics is reduced to show business. The division of powers is under attack. The cult of the leader and myths about leaders are growing. The media is used to manipulate opinion. Historical revisionism is thriving. This complete turnabout is still, I believe, to be fully explained. How could it happen? And what is left in today's Italy of the Italy of thirty years ago, buried under the official political narrative?

This is not a question for specialists. When faced with the daily news, all men and women with a background like mine tend to think "this can't be happening". We, who were born immediately after World War II, brought up by our families with antifascism as a dominant value, must now listen to our Prime Minister crack jokes about Auschwitz in the Parliament of the European Union, or rehabilitate Mussolini when talking to the British press. We, who are citizens of a state based on the rule of law,

must hear him attack the independence of the judiciary every day. Italian women, the protagonists of a strong, intelligent feminist movement, must hear him – as we did while I was writing this talk – invite Wall Street investors to invest in Italy "where there are so many attractive secretaries". Our reactions are confused, because we always feel that we are on the borderline between tragedy and farce. Maybe we are underrating what is going on. Or maybe – this is my own hypothesis – something within us is resisting being colonized by the language of the powerful and is resisting the idea that what we see on television is "the truth", the only truth, in our country. This something within us belongs to a past history which did happen and a subjectivity which is still coursing through the veins of our society, but which now has no representation on the political scene or voice in the media. Maybe this fact explains the recent success of three very good Italian films: *La meglio gioventú*, directed by Marco Tullio Giordana, which some of you may have seen last night, *The Dreamers* by Bernardo Bertolucci, on some of the events of 1968, and *Buongiorno, notte* by Marco Bellocchio on the kidnapping and murder of the former Prime Minister Aldo Moro. They are three different films, but what they do have in common is the intention to bring back into circulation a subjective narrative of our political past, which is being kept out of the official narrative. The narrative I am going to tell now is also going to be a subjective narrative of some Italian political developments. I have experienced these developments from a position which was both uncomfortable and lucky, since I was at the same time a journalist in a left-wing paper such as *il manifesto*, and a woman belonging to one of the Italian feminisms, the one which developed "the theory and practice of sexual difference".

2. When I lecture at the University of Roma Tre, I am amazed by the number of students enrolled in courses on Media Studies. I wonder why so many of them choose this area of study, and whenever I can I ask them. The answers I get are varied, and often extremely vague. What I think I understand is that the underlying idea is that the system of information and communication is a ready-made world which one can enter after learning its techniques. This world offers appealing role-models, such as the press secretary to a politician, or the successful female journalist who reads the prime-time news on TV. Sometimes women students, or even young women readers of *il manifesto*, ask me for advice on how they can enter this world and have a career in it. I try to dampen their enthusiasm and I always stress three ingredients that they have not thought about: the personal freedom we need to exercise in our work, the ability to cope with very bitter daily conflicts, and a love of language. In short, I make an effort to explain that, although modern journalism is ruled by standardized regulations and rhythms of production, individuals, and the freedom with which they operate, still matter a lot. I also explain that this freedom has a price, namely conflicts, and that all conflicts can be worked through, not because we have the technical know-how about *how* to communicate, but because we know *what* we have to say and want to say.

It may puzzle you that of all the conflicts which I have had to face and which I try to warn my women students about, I am not giving pride of place to the fight against sex discrimination in journalism and, in general, in the media. Although many of my women colleagues do discuss discrimination, I must honestly say that I do not think it relevant to my case. In general, I do not believe discrimination to be an appropriate perspective to interpret either the position of women as *subjects* in the media or the position of women as *object* of the media. On the first topic, women *subjects* in the media, it is true that very few of the many women who have entered my profession make it into top management jobs; but I see this fact not so much as the negative consequence of discrimination, but as a positive consequence of the resistance of women to give up the most creative aspects of their work in favour of competition for power.

The second topic, that of women as objects of the media, is more difficult to interpret. The representation of women in the mass media is at the centre of linguistic and symbolic strategies which are both deliberate and unconscious. If we look at the covers of some weekly magazines which show a female nude every week, and link them to television variety shows full of sexually provocative dancers, or to some recently-hired female newsreaders who read the news seductively sprawled on a settee, the conclusion we jump to is that the exploitation of women's bodies still, or once again, prevails. Similarly, some recent studies on Italian newspapers emphasize that in news reports women are predominantly victims and/or eyewitnesses, rarely experts (and then only on "women's" topics such as the family, relationships, daily life) and hardly ever as political leaders – and therefore the visibility of women in the media still depends on old stereotypes about women, and on the separation between the public and the private spheres. These evaluations take little account of a crucial new element of the situation, namely the fact that nowadays there is a female *public* who reads, looks, judges, rewards and – as other research shows – punishes the papers for the choices they make. This public, which is constantly growing, is a slice of the market which the media cannot disregard, and is also a potential area of promising contradictions. The decisive contradiction, in my opinion, is that between *repetition* and *difference*. On the one hand the media tend to repeatedly present representations of women which are rooted in the collective unconscious or in current social stereotypes; on the other hand women are free to represent themselves in ways that are different from the way these labels, or any other labels, attempt to define and limit them. And this contradiction is, as I will try to explain, a symptom of a wider contradiction between the language of repetition, that restates and duplicates reality and prevails in the media, and the language of difference, which is open to the unexpected, to surprise, and to the transformation of reality.

3. The tendency to repetition operates also in a paper such as *il manifesto*. There, it reinforces not so much the traditional stereotypes of femininity, but rather the model of women's emancipation, namely the notion that in order to break out of their historical condition of "second sex" women need to become the same as men and share their strategies and political practices. This model belongs to both the democratic and the socialist tradition. In opposition to it, in Italy and elsewhere, some feminists developed the theory of sexual difference, based on the critique of the notion of "equal rights" and of its consequence, namely assimilation of women to men. In the Seventies a break had already occurred between feminist practice and the traditional sites of the Left, be they parties, groups or movements. At the beginning of the Eighties, when I started working for my paper, the feminists who developed the theory of sexual difference were, as a consequence of that break, elaborating a new political and theoretical vocabulary. This vocabulary was visibly removed from the traditional vocabulary of the Left, and as a consequence my paper, not unlike other areas of the Left, did not give it any recognition, and in fact tended to reject or dismiss as irrelevant. The problems in getting that vocabulary onto the pages of my paper made it clear to me that the first battle I needed to fight was to make sure that voice was given to women's experience and theories – and therefore, first of all, to my own experience and theories. It was, and is, a mainly linguistic-symbolic struggle, and what was at stake was not so much power as freedom. The outcome of this conflict will determine, in my opinion, not only whether women's experience is visible and articulated, but the overall picture of our times that a paper conveys. In other words: if women's experience is left out of the picture, the overall picture will be skewed. If women's words are censored, everyone's language will be impoverished. I will try to give specific examples of this, starting from some remarks on the transition that took place in Italy in the Nineties.

4. The mainstream media has solved the problem of how to represent this Italian transition in a very simple way. It established a starting point, the investigations of the political and economic scandals known as Tangentopoli; it erased everything that had happened before that point; it labelled "collapse of the First Republic" a complex social and political earthquake which, however, did not at all bring about a "Second Republic"; and it told the rest of the story focusing exclusively on the political system. It must be admitted that Italian journalism is affected by an illness more dangerous than the "conflict of interests", namely, its subordinate position in relation to the political system.

I do not mean that Italian journalism is subordinate to one majority or another, to one government or another: although right now it is being seriously threatened by the fact that the government controls all television stations and a large part of the press, [nevertheless] pluralism in the media still exists, which guarantees a wide range of political positions and the existence of a free opposition press. What I mean is that the subordinate position of the media is something more subtle, which is not imposed from outside: it comes from within, it is an acquiescence to the demands of the discourse of institutional politics and to the language of the powerful.

During the Nineties, the language of the media has visibly narrowed, molding itself on the language of politics. This has become yet another feature of our "teledemocracy", where the central element is no longer politics but communication, where civil society has been replaced by the public of television viewers, where the mediating function of the representatives of the people has been replaced by the deceptive "immediacy" of their television appearances. The result was a huge stage where show business and politics, public debate and entertainment blend into one another, and where journalism imitates and reproduces institutional rituals instead of critiquing them. Language is the first victim of this mirror game between politics and journalism. As stated in one of the texts written by the Milan Women's Bookshop, "the ugliness of the language of politicians and journalists is not only a symptom of the loss of meaning of the term 'politics'; it *is* the tormented substance of this loss, which hangs so threateningly over our heads that we hardly dare talk about it out loud lest it should collapse completely". The second victim is the investigative role of journalism in the fields of politics and society. What collapsed as a consequence of the inquiries into Tangentopoli, as I was saying earlier, was something less than the First Republic, but more than a political system: what collapsed was trust in politics within Italian society, where politics had always had firm roots. This collapse of trust, coming on top of other traumas which have not yet been fully worked through – like the murder of Aldo Moro, which not by accident has been re-examined in Bellocchio's film, or the end of the Italian Communist Party – has produced a feeling which is a blend of mourning, mistrust and apathy. This feeling should have been examined in depth, and was not. The language of journalism cannot tolerate empty spaces and uncertainties, and tends to fill all empty spaces with new certainties. In the case of Italian society, journalism dealt with the difficult situation in which it found itself – suspended between the "old" and the "new" – by investing the change in electoral system (from proportional representation to a mostly "first-past-the-post" system) with far too many positive expectations. It decided that what was "old" had to disappear swiftly without being worked through, and what was "new" needed to be welcomed into media spaces without being unduly questioned. Thus journalism did not sufficiently look into either the traces left by what was ending, or the roots of what was beginning. And to this day we know little, very little, of the economic and social transformations and of the unconscious thought processes which worked below the surface to change the political face of Italy.

In other words: In the "chattering democracy" which [has] reduced politics to a variety show to be watched on television, comfortably and passively sprawled on the lounge-room settee, in the endless political “reality show” set in Parliament and featuring its leaders, which is fed to us by television and pages and pages of newsprint, everything suddenly seemed to become visible and explainable,

transparent and out-in-the-open. But from this "everything" something important is left out, in fact a huge, basic part of social and political experience. What?`

5. Let us move to another aspect. Still in Italy, and in those same years, feminists who developed the theory and practice of sexual difference were producing a completely different interpretation of the crisis of the political system and pointed to another possible outcome. The context and the events were the same, the meaning that was given to them was different. Actually, women had been carrying out radical analyses of politics for a long time. Since the Seventies, when the cracks in the Italian political system were visible but the system itself did not yet seem close to collapse, we had been saying that politics needed to be radically reconceptualized, or would inevitably start to decline. We sensed that traditional forms of politics could not hold up much longer, above all because they no longer reflected the change that had taken place in the relationship between the sexes. We saw that political parties imposed limits on subjectivity instead of giving direction. We were conscious of the aging of a political vocabulary which did not correspond to who we were, and which was growing further and further away from the everyday feelings of women and men. We knew that the strategy of excluding women from citizenship, which was the basis of all modern politics in the West, was by then obsolete. By then all of us were emancipated, had jobs, were first-class citizens – but this "inclusion", far from appeasing us, increased our strong feeling of estrangement from traditional politics, its rituals and its language, all made for men. Therefore what we needed to achieve was not to win a few more seats in Parliament or in the higher echelons of political parties, but to give birth to a different politics. A politics based on subjectivity rather than 'the State', on bonds between women rather than representation, on freely acknowledged women's authority rather than men's power, on desire rather than organization. This politics could not be based on the Word coming from television, imposed from above; it needed to be based on language born of experience, which knows how to interpret changes in reality, and can construct a public space. On language which, as Hannah Arendt put it, "is political by definition, because in it addresses others as partners in a project ".

This is not an abstract view of politics. Thanks to the practice of relationships of mutual recognition between women – a practice which does not need institutional venues or political organizations – feminist politics lives [on] in all the situations in which we have tested it, from schools to universities, from trade unions to my own paper; it creates social bonds, while mainstream politics often destroys them. However, it has not been listened to or given space in the media, except in *il manifesto* and (more sporadically) *L'Unità*, two papers where it managed to get a foot in the door – not without bitter conflicts – because some of their women journalists were directly involved in it. In contrast, the other media continue to misrepresent feminism, by constantly portraying it in terms of the everlasting cliché about women who revolutionized the Italian way of life in the Seventies, but could not move beyond that, because they did not gain power in political parties, or in Parliament or on boards of directors. This blindness of the media did not only make the theory of sexual difference invisible, but actually made it impossible to detect in the Italian political and social crisis some decisive factors which are clearly visible if we talk in terms of sexual difference. These include the deep change which took place in relations between women and men after feminism, its repercussions on men's unconscious, on the way workplaces are organized, on the relation between the public and the private sphere, on the structure of power and authority, and on the very form of political thinking. In the years when, as a reporter, I followed mainstream politics, the skills I had acquired as a feminist helped me to see some details of the picture which others failed to see. For instance, I have come to understand that ever since many of us moved away from mainstream politics, male competition for power has become more blatant, as if men had never managed to work through the trauma of separation from women. I have

come to understand that men's anxious seeking for rules and laws is their response to an unconscious fear of their own aggression. I have come to understand that the feminization of the workplace explains many of the problems inherent in any reform of the job market which does not take it into consideration. I have come to understand that Berlusconi could not have succeeded in colonizing the collective unconscious if the Left had addressed – as it knew how to in the past – its voters' emotions as well as reason. Whenever the media blot out the language of women, they blot out a part of reality, and deprive us of tools which help us understand the present, and open it up to outcomes different from the ones currently prevailing.

6. I gave the example of recent events in Italy because I am familiar with them and because Italy is at the centre of this week of cultural activities. But if I start looking at a wider picture, I find confirmation of what I have been saying. Two years ago, the attack on the Twin Towers was a huge shock for the unconscious of all the inhabitants of our planet, an invasion of our minds by very disturbing elements. This should have led us to start questioning many certainties and many established patterns, and to look at the global world with eyes open to other perspectives. The world media did mobilize to the best of their abilities to cover the event, and did so in the best possible way. Yet shortly afterwards, almost inevitably, even that event and its consequences had narrowed down to arguments about power. The discussion of 9/11 has narrowed down to a discussion of the superpowers of international politics, which has also become militarized. The global world has been re-nationalized. The victims and their families have been, as always happens, reduced to people whose main function is to bear witness, as if their words had to stay within certain bounds, without having any consequence on the Word of the powerful. Once again, we have learned more about the way this trauma is being inconspicuously worked through in the daily life of New Yorkers from films – I am thinking about Spike Lee's *25th Hour* – than from journalists' investigations. And again, the most courageous and relevant analysis of the situation have been produced by women's understanding of the present. They have helped us see the hidden symmetry between enemies facing each other. They have shown us that it is impossible to ever take multicultural pluralism back to over-strict categories of identity. They have shown us the need to foster relationships between people, which is so much more urgent in the very places where men are establishing military borders. They are helping us reflect on the fluid borders between "private" emotions and fears and the politics we really need, and on the immeasurable distance between what military power decides and wins, and what the peace movements sow and generate. After the collapse of the Towers, all of us, women and men, were left literally "speechless", that is to say, the words at our disposal were not adequate to describe what had happened, and why it had, our emotions, and our bewilderment. Personally, I had never written about international politics before then, and I wasn't sure that I could find my bearings. I looked for them, and found them, by accepting the confusion I had plunged into. Instead of hiding this confusion with the help of old certainties or disguising it with the help of words already used, I followed it into the gaps it created and along the paths it opened in my mind, which led me to work on details considered irrelevant by the mainstream media. Once again, I had the evidence that, if women start from their own experiences, they can talk about anything, and can suggest an interpretation of the present and new folds of meaning that cannot be found in mainstream media analyses.

7. In conclusion. These somewhat confused notes are intended to convey three points to you. The first of these is that, in the general climate of our media-based democracies where everything can be seen and said, there is always something left out of the illuminated part of the stage. Often this

something is very relevant, it is a detail which is crucial to an understanding of the whole picture: the present is not as narrow as journalism represents it. Here I have referred to the example of feminism, which is not the only one, but can throw some light on other subjectivities which are silent, or silenced by the language of the media. The language of experience, narration 'starting from oneself', is the language which gave a voice to women and which can give a voice to these other subjectivities. The task for those of us who work in the media is to listen to this language, and allow ourselves to be questioned by it. The second point is that tracking these details, which fall outside the picture, involves exercising our individual freedom, betraying the conventional criteria of our profession and possibly paying a price in terms of our career. However, taking the risk is well-rewarded by the independence we earn, and by the growth of the relationship of trust we establish with our readers – which eventually is the true measure of the extent to which our work is valuable. The third point is that in times as uncertain as ours, whether we look at recent Italian events or at the global planet, everything rests on interpretation, on the meaning we give to change. All we need is one word more or less, and the folds of meaning change. Journalism has the great power to communicate, which it often wastes, using language in a conformist way, to reinforce existing meanings instead of opening them up. There are two different ways of understanding our work. The first is that it is at the service of what is already in place, of established and agreed on meanings, and of those who have the power to impose these meanings on the people without a voice: it clones reality as it is and constructs a world without surprises. The second is that our work is at the service of a plurality of experiences, it strives to prevent these experiences being silenced and to open up the range of meanings to what is unknown, unforeseen, or unfolding. In the first case, our language is deaf and dumb, its sounds sink without trace, our articles pile up in useless stacks of waste paper. In the second case, when our language is in tune with the truth of experience, it sounds like the notes of a well-tuned piano, and that sound inspires others and yet others, like a melody with no end.

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