

“Finally I Found My Prince Charming, Oh I Love You”

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...or 'The Italian Mating Game', just to paraphrase an excellent ethnography of inner street youth in Philadelphia¹. This story started in my home town, Eboli, when last summer I visited my parents. It is a medium-size town not far from Naples, unjustly infamous because of Carlo Levi's ethnography². There, I found hundreds of 'love' graffiti, hearts, strong declarations of affection, and 'love' poems: they adorn or vandalize the walls of the nearby streets (I did not make much of an effort to find them, I have to admit). I published a significant selection in my photoblog, but still only a small part of the portfolio. I strongly recommend to visit [these pages](#) and the relative comments as they are - in my opinion - extremely significant. More than any words, I shall say. I need, however, to add some other notes as there is also a need to dig all around them in a

1 by E. Anderson (2000): beautiful book but somehow bold, as something was missing there, perhaps a more visual based approach would have added more to it

2 'Christ Stopped at Eboli' which in fact has not much to do with this place

foucauldian way, in order to put these pictures in the context they deserve. I have been taking pictures of graffiti for the past three years, but nothing has ever struck me so much: to the extent I decided to tell these stories in order to try to make more visible young sexual subjectivities, their positions in 'the sexual spaces of the community' (C. Philo, 2005), and make personal affection a public problem. For the purpose of this paper, I will use those pictures as a form of knowledge production or ,even better, as a gateway for discussing power relations within a situated context. In a Foucauldian fashion I will treat a discourse on sexuality as a 'dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priest and laity, and administration and a population'³. I will cunningly use sexuality as an instrument for discursive practise: however, a practise that has been unveiled by photographic exploration.

- Often these inscriptions on the wall in the southern province in Italy are simple and direct, there is no aesthetic concern, nor artistic aim: they represent almost primordial needs to communicate affection, naive declarations of eternal love: WE are a couple, WE are in love (and this message is often repeated over and again all around). They are 'just' an expression of belonging and a claim to territory, a bold, plain, direct message, in this case a possession of a companion or a presumption of love. However, they are not less revealing...In this part of Italy, the legal act of the 'Publications', usually one year before the actual wedding, are an occasion to render public with invitations and parties the happy event to come;
- sometimes, declarations of Love/Hate are made on large canvases, in busy roads to get as much attention as possible. However, I argue, this is less to do with the attempt to reach a wider audience than with the chance to impress the beloved one. In fact, these kinds of messages seem to have as recipient a specific person or group of peers and they probably address the need to impress him or her as object of worthy attentions. In fact, the vast majority of these writing appears in the back streets, around schools and pizzerias, in other words the hang-out corners or the arenas and have specific recipients (we must not forget that, in that context, 'going for a walk' is a major activity which involves both adults and kids, last but not least

3 M. Foucault, 'The History of Sexuality', Vol 1, 1998:103

because of a more favourable climate);

- the recurrence in frequency of these messages of (eternal) love, which often take the shape of a poem, is simply overwhelming: they beat by large any other subject, such as football or 'political' belonging, which used to be more in vogue when I was a kid there;
- increasingly, and with my surprise, girls are out in the street in early hours (I imagine), with cans and paint to declare love, affection, and desire. It is relatively easy to recognise the gender of the 'mating gamer' as the Italian first names are strictly gendered. On the other hand, there was a particular writing that really struck me, probably a professional thing as I work for the New Deal for Lone Parents in London: "Marina is pregnant". In a small town of southern Italy teenagers pregnancy is very much a shameful event, and when attempts of recovery, usually from older brothers or dads, fail (which means no wedding is going ahead) then the 'bad fact' (malaffare) is kept as quiet as possible. Here, notifying the news is probably a matter of revenge, maybe from a previous lover (but this is a speculation).

I did not manage to interview any of these kids, but I think I can interpret their tagging or translate their revealing poems. The latter clearly uncover a division in the achievement of different goals according to the gender of the writer: girls are the dreamers of a stable, long lasting relationship, such as:

"Finally I found my Prince Charming! Oh, I love you".

Boys, on the other hand, being brought up in their special cocoon since early age, seem more inclined to persevere an erotic dream of frustrated longing:

"And I get uncovered in my bed at night time while dreaming a different world made of hypnotic melodies. I love you Mary".

This might sound funny, but it is tragic. What the many adults I spoke to labelled as 'vandalism' is, in my opinion, an expression of profound malaise of these kids, with their repressed needs and sexual desires put up on the wall. These are determined or constrained within the family, the schools, and the 'decent' social values that inform their very daily lives,

as power in the forms of institutions and symbolic ordeals reaches 'into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies, inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives' ⁴. The cultural symbols that they bring with them since early age talk opposite languages that inform the 'game': for the boys is the 'macho' element to be predominant, while the girls cultivate the dream of 'having a boyfriend, a fiancé or a husband and the fairy tale prospect of living happily ever after with one's children in a nice house in a decent neighbourhood, nurtured by daily watching of television soap operas and popular love songs' (E.Anderson, 2000:151). What for me seems to appear from this discourse is that the celebrated country of Love, Desire and Emotion is turned inside-out into a landscape of sexual repression and constrained libido, where seminal fluids literally leak through the private walls of the bedrooms of these kids' private homes and manage to slip through the vigilant nets of their families' boundaries, in order to enter the public visual sphere: they thus splash over the walls, and finally become a public issue, re inscribing the urban landscape. What is left of that romantic imaginary of the love songs is perhaps 'only' a folkloric tale well embedded in the 'macho' culture, which, among other things, differentiates and separates boys from girls since early age ⁵.

This is probably nothing new, however what seems to be crucial here it is the fact that 'machismo', especially among middle class youth, is gone out of fashion, it is more hidden than before, but it remains ever present in practice (again Castaneda's studies in Mexico are exemplar). The locations where these pictures were taken, in fact, are geographically central (in these towns the centre with the square or the high street counts a lot), and have been chosen around schools highly perceived as middle class choices. In other words, these pictures might even tell us something about the class disposition of these young lovers. I understand that a more serious research needs also the collection of other kind of data (e.g. interview and qualitative evaluation), but it is also arguable that pictures can open some reflections onto fields difficult to reach, as well as entail a more holistic impression of the arguments exposed. Moreover, we know from other researches that kids and teens tend to

4 Foucault, 'Power/Knowledge' 1980:39 (web readings)

5 'The machist type is never misogynist. Between the two there is an important difference. The macho will often say: "I am not machilist. I love women!", and it is true. He loves anything that is feminine, as long as it stays where it belongs, that is with the women. However, they do not tolerate anything 'feminine' in the men: that's why 'machismo' and homophobia go often well together' (Marina Castaneda 'From Machismo to Equality', 2002) (web resources)

hang out and play around their immediate neighbourhood, hardly moving too far, especially if there are at stake territorial claims (either of turf or love). If we maintain, as I believe, that these kids are mostly from a middle class background, then we might want consider the 'leakage' on the walls as a response to a highly controlled environment, in which notions of 'decency' and claims to 'chastity' are almost equal. If we maintain with Foucault that, with the rise of the middle classes in the Eighteen century,

'Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule' (M. Foucault, 1978:3) ,

then we need to account of a system of control, regulation, and repression (bio-politics) of children's sexuality, which cannot possibly lead to procreation (even if we can argue that the female teenager body is in fact highly fertile). That is, *a pedagogization of children's sexual drive* would have been put in place, maintained, and justified by 'parents, families, educators, doctors, and eventually psychologists' (cit:104). This argument recalls Skeggs' s idea that 'morality is absolutely central: it informs the perspective taken, the inscriptions made, and the value attributed' (B. Skeggs, 2004:23). To make sense of this discourse, though, we need to take into account the generational gap, too: what it has been described as a class in its own right, juxtaposed to the dominant class of the adults (Oldman, in Qvortrup, 1994) , which complicates the scheme further. In this framework, I believe that the denominator of class in traditional sense is crucially intertwined with the generational element (age group). In the latter context, more than the former, we can claim that 'it is the ability of energy to leak beyond its inscribed containment that makes a class struggle. The refusal to accept inscription and be bound by its value is a significant act in challenging the dominant symbolic order' (Skeggs, cited:13). In my representation, it is the young middle class kids (often girls) that challenge the strict values of decency and sexual constraints they have found all around them, from family to institutions, for the simple fact that they are youth in the first instance: 'indeed, it is the relation between the production of subjectivity and social regulation that is of central importance to the production of sexuality today' (Walkerdine et alia, 2001:209). In their graffiti there is scarce room for mainstream practises that make the middle class subject since childhood as the rational and autonomous subject, with a strong and bounded ego, to

whom is given the illusion of choice and own power. This process is particularly at odds with the pressures on the fecund female body, and the inscription of middle-class girls as bourgeois subjects can create incompatible positions, 'and that incompatibility must be lived by the girl herself as a psychic struggle from which she never escapes' (cited:187). On another level, and at the same time, these kids (normally and significantly addressed by working-class peers "dad's children", *figli di papa'*, which essentially means that they have the emotional support and the money they need from their fathers, seen as traditional central authority of the family), participate in specific parties with rather selective friends and hang out in particular places, in which the dynamics of class formation are played up continuously: by showing off trendy positional goods, by discussing university choices, by pretending modesty and self-control, they soon display all the elements of class inscription and symbolic distinction.

Throughout the paper there is also a sense in which young people's sexuality plays a huge role in determining the level of anxieties and hence the response of the adults to it: childhood in the Western world, more in general, has been given the attributes of being at the same time *asexual, sexual, and sexualized*. But this brief excursus on children's and young people's (for our purpose the terms are really synonyms) sexuality cannot be complete without making reference to the debate surrounding the danger of the Internet and the television, as the media become more pervasive and enter almost undisturbed the domestic realm. In a media saturated culture, in which the image is predominant, state and family are at odd at attempting to control the once perceived secure boundaries of the private home, so to keep up with the moral imposition of sexual purity. Moreover, children are more and more competent and skilled in the use of new technologies, becoming prime consumers in the markets of media derivatives, which also create conflicts on different scales for the capitalist order.

In this dynamic and yet situated framework, there is no much room to accommodate rhetoric of agency, visions of 'plastic sexuality', presumptions of 'democratization of the private sphere fully compatible with democracy in the public sphere' (A. Giddens , 1992: 3 and 184). Nor there is possible space, in this context, for agents free to choose lifestyle choices in the 'emergence of pure relationship, not only in the area of sexuality, but also in those of parent-

child relations, [within] an ethical framework for a democratic personal order' (ibidem). What I have tried to describe, in fact, is the daily struggle and the stubborn exercise of resistance played out by these kids on the walls of a provincial town of southern Italy against different manifestations of power (family, schools, public morality, etc). These are embedded in a complex matrix of social identifiers, within the interlocking fields of gender, age, and class⁶. The subjects of my research/representation are not the bold, rational, and self-determined agents of such literature, they are instead also 'irrational, anxious, and defended' (Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody, 2001:84). There are in fact powerful unconscious motivations at play here, which are made manifest on the public wall and 'profoundly influence and are intertwined with more conscious processes; not only individual and social ones, but also the very structures of collective human life - material and ideological institutions such as the state, education, the family and work; the organization of biological processes such as motherhood; the lived experiences of class, race, femininity' (ibidem). What I hope to have achieved is also a representation of class that is 'at once profoundly social and profoundly emotional, and lived in its specificity in particular cultural and geographical locations' (cited: 53), as well as give some hints of 'the complex psychosocial processes through which young women live the contradictions of the discursive positions' (cited:187).

We have also taken into consideration the possibility that it is not just sound or smell that permeates the domestic walls and get its way into the public: in my opinion, these pictures communicate the sense in which *the private becomes inscribed onto the public* via the writings on the wall. More in general, we can suggest that the public visual sphere is often an extension of the private space of the home. It is not to say that the public and the private, the space of the imaginary and the experienced, the normative and the subjunctive are parallel worlds which eventually meet in the third space of the graffiti. The simplicity of this dualism is even more evident in a paper by Boris Ewenstein (2005), who eventually gets to the paradoxical conclusion that opposite and distinct worlds exist side by side until the piece has been drawn: 'Below the paint lies the cosmos of a rational and disciplined society, while from above the paint, extending outward from its two-dimensionality, rises the diegesis of the

⁶ Race and sexual orientations are kept as a given as no other data have been collected about.

graffiti writer. The piece becomes a permeable membrane that allows both worlds to flow into each other'. I have suggested instead the possibility that the representation is the expression of a malaise which starts at home or in the schools, shows anxieties and fantasies which seriously challenge any notion of 'reality', and entails a whole set of conflicts and negotiations which start on the quotidian, for instance about the 'time to go home', or around the 'hanging about with whom', or even what programme should be watched on telly. On the other hand, though, I believe that the public visual sphere of that town has been changed to a degree that the world of the adults, their institutions, and the communities have to come to terms with this increasing pressure, at least in terms of their condemnation: what struck me since I began thinking about this paper were both the extraordinary number of the inscriptions (a quantitative concern?) and the elementary vernacularity of the message. Therefore, I started asking what was going on, what kind of motivation might have pushed so many young people to paint their messages over the walls, and what kind of thoughts adults had about it.

By revisiting places of my own childhood, on the other hand, a certain biographical tune has been finely played, in which a sense of self-reflexivity (or, better, I shall use a less fashionable term of 'class consciousness') becomes an important part of the research process in an attempt of making visible the power of the researcher/photographer to interpret, represent and produce knowledge: in this research context, for sure, there is no room for claims of objectivity. Therefore, I prefer to try to make the perspectives taken as much clear as possible, without taking over the actual representation. And surely, these places maintained an aura for me, a certain presence seemed to be there thanks to those very inscriptions on the walls, which they are surrounded with. Even if comparisons of landscapes and young people's behaviours between *then* and *now* are almost impossible (due to the fast paced changes of cities and of many other structural elements that invested the new generations, as well as the problematic reliability of mnemonic processes), still there has been a search for the 'known', digging in my own memories and experiences, although most of the findings happened to come about as surprise or revelations. As Susan Sontag wrote about Benjamin's way of looking at his past:

[past] evokes events for the reactions to the events, places for the emotions one has

deposited in the places, other people for the encounter with oneself, feelings and behaviour for intimations of future passions and failures contained in them' (1979:12)

In other terms, in the process of taking pictures my own identity has been put in question and worked throughout it: my experience, reported in the pictures I showed, has been dialectical (in benjaminian terms of the *now-time*), in the way that these concealed presences of young lovers actualized feelings, of desire as well as of anger, of envy and aversion, about attitudes, behaviours, emotional responses and class inscription that could not be understood at the time, and with which now I started to come to terms with, thanks to the possibility of using a newly accrued cultural capital (a full display of a 'psychic landscape of social class' I think has been deployed (Diane Reay, 2005; 39; 911).

In conclusion, I suggest with Mike Keith (2005) that the inscriptions and the surfaces, the normative city and the memories, are incessantly iterative, complementing and re-enforcing, often in an inconsistent manner, a sense of identity of a place. Or with Cohen:

'the relation between real and the imaginary is not fixed, but tactically determined. By the same token the imaginary is not a distorted reflection of the real, nor the real is simply a site for a projection of fantasy. We are always dealing with a process of *double inscription* whose articulations vary according to a range of social circumstances' (1999:11, italics in the original)

But also you might want to appreciate the fact that every graffito comes about in a specific context: most of the writings in the southern province of Italy appear to be about couples, declaration of love, and erasure of other couples or potential rivals' statements. Here, the battle for the turf, for the block or for the postcode, seems to fade into disputes of other kinds, other 'territories'. Every wall tells a different story and open up a different discourse... I have never seen anything like it in England, especially in London, have you? More precisely, every city or, even better, every surface provides a different context or frame for the bodies, it represents 'one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality, the condition and milieu in which corporeality is socially, sexually and discursively produced, [and crucially provides] the site for the body's cultural saturation, its takeover and

transformation by images, representational systems, the mass media and the arts - the place where the body is representationally reexplored, transformed, contested, reinscribed: the question is to examine how different cities, different socio-cultural environments actively produce the bodies of their inhabitants' (E. Grosz, 1995: 104-109).

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