ORDER AND CHAOS. SILVIO BERLUSCONI'S SPEECH ON HIS "DISCESA IN CAMPO" IN RELATION TO *INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION*

DANIELE COMBERIATI

INTRODUCTION

This article will analyse two iconic visual elements from Silvio Berlusconi's first programmatic political speech (1994). Through the reflections of Carolina Martínez-López (2023) and Àngel Quintana (2023), the visual motifs of the office and the family photograph will be highlighted, reflecting on the elements that make this speech both traditional and innovative. To understand this specific dichotomy, certain elements of Berlusconi's speech will be related to a speech by the protagonist Gian Maria Volonté in the film *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* (Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto, Elio Petri, 1970). Berlusconi's ability to resort to visual imagery so different from, and even opposed to, his own, probably lies in one of the main reasons for his political victory in 1994, as Mario Perniola (2011) and Alessandro Bertante (2007), whose theories will be used in this analysis, have excellently seen.

Before delving into the visual analysis of the discourse, a brief historical introduction is necessary, as the Italian context of the first half of the 1990s was extremely complex and constantly evolving. Next, we will analyze the visual motifs of the office and the family's photograph, and then compare them with the aforementioned film scene. Finally, through a comparative analysis with some images from Elio Petri's film, we

will examine the seemingly opposing visual and conceptual elements that Berlusconi manages to incorporate into his narrative, thereby reaching a broader audience, diverse in generations and political orientations.

THE SILVIO BERLUSCONI'S *DISCESA IN CAMPO*

January 26, 1994, marked a crucial date in recent Italian history: Silvio Berlusconi officially announced, in a nine-minute, twenty-five-second televised speech, his "discesa in campo"[1], as he himself described his intention to found a political party (Forza Italia) and run in the elections scheduled for the following April. In the spring of the previous year, a referendum had approved abandoning the proportional electoral system in place since 1948 in favor of a first-past-the-post (FPTP) system.

The opening lines are etched in the collective memory: "Italy is the country I love. Here are my roots, my hopes, my horizons..."[2]. The significance of the ongoing shift is already evident in the speech's presence on television programming: the day before, Berlusconi had personally phoned Paolo Garimberti (Bresolin-Corbi-Feltri, 2014), then director of the news program on the second national channel (Rai2), to ask him to broadcast the full speech during the 8:00 p.m. news, simultaneously with the other two national channels (Rai1 and Rai3). This was a broadcast format reserved exclusively for the President of the Republic's ritual New Year's Eve speech on December 31st or for exceptional events. When Garimberti refused, demanding a summary of approximately two minutes for broadcast, Berlusconi responded with a strategy that would become commonplace in the following years: duplicating public communication in the private sector, to the point of rendering it uncompetitive and ineffective. The speech was broadcast at 6:30 p.m. as a preview on Rete Quattro—the second channel of the Mediaset group owned by Berlusconi—presented by Emilio Fede, director of the TG4 news program and one of the closest advisors to the future prime minister. In this way, the private channel achieved a very high audience, well above usual standards, and paradoxically positioned itself as a "free" and independent source, broadcasting content that public channels sought to censor or limit. It is important not to overlook the issue of the "freedom" of private news channels—although using the term in this instance may seem instrumental, if not entirely inappropriate—as it will be one of the theoretical foundations of the debate.

While the text has been exhaustively analyzed, both linguistically and in terms of content (Deni-Marsciani, 1995; Campus, 2004; Viggen, 2018), examining some visual motifs related to the staging of the speech can help us reflect on what Berlusconi represented for the Italian electorate at that precise historical moment and what kind of references he brought with him. In fact, we must reflect, first and foremost, on the period Italy was experiencing, immersed in one of the deepest political and cultural crises since the Second World War. The political scandal known as *Tangentopoli* ("Clean Hands") had annihilated the ruling class that had governed the country for more than thirty years: due to bribery and illicit party financing, influential politicians from the main parties had been arrested—Renato Pollini of the Communist Party, Maurizio Prada of the Christian Democrats, Mario Chiesa of the Socialist Party—; several industrial businessmen had been investigated or arrested; some of them the best known being Raul Gardini and Gabriele Cagliari, former president of the National Hydrocarbons Agency—committed suicide, while other political figures—Bettino Craxi, former socialist prime minister—fled abroad. This process was particularly rapid and seemed irreversible: Italians began to learn of the exploits of magistrate Antonio Di Pietro and his "Mani Pulite" team

fighting corruption, while television broadcast daily news of new investigations and arrests, with increasingly high-profile names and official statements from prominent political figures that were quickly contradicted the following day, at the start of new arrests (Della Porta, 1992).

But the political and financial scandal was not the only major problem Italy faced in those years: on May 23 and July 19, 1992, judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, prominent members of the anti-mafia group formed in the 1980s and whose most notable achievement was the 1986 trial of the Cosa Nostra criminal organization, were assassinated in mafia-related attacks. Their deaths revealed the weakness of the state apparatus in the fight against the mafia, as well as the likely infiltration of some "Mafiosi" into the structures of the Republic. What made those years even more disturbing was the nature of the mafia attacks: on May 27, 1993, in Florence, near the Uffizi Gallery, a car bomb killed five people and injured forty; just days before Berlusconi's speech, on January 23, 1994, a bomb was about to explode at the Stadio Olimpico in Rome during the football match between Roma and Udinese, which was attended by tens of thousands of people. It would likely have been the biggest massacre in the history of the Italian Republic, but the bomb failed to detonate, theoretically due to a malfunction in the device (Padellaro, 2020).

To these internal tensions must be added the international context, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, which had radically changed Italy's role on the international stage and led to the dissolution or reorganization of many of the historic parties of the First Republic, particularly the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the Christian Democrats. It is in this context that Silvio Berlusconi's official public history begins, with a discourse that would mark a turning point in Italian politics and communication strategy.

SEEDS AND SPORES, ORIGINS AND REWRITINGS

Berlusconi's speech has been reinterpreted and rewritten numerous times in film, some literal, others more imaginative. In his film *The Caiman* (Il Caimano, Nanni Moretti, 2008), Moretti presents four different "Berlusconis": the real Berlusconi with archival footage; scenes interpreted by the actor Elio De Capitani, a well-known Berlusconi impersonator in Milanese cabarets; Michele Placido, who is supposed to be impersonating Berlusconi in the meta-fictional film; and Moretti himself, who impersonates him in the symbolic final scene. The speech is quoted several times in another biographical film, *Loro* (Loro: International Cut, Paolo Sorrentino, 2018). But these are only the most well-known examples, as the discourse is reiterated in other films: in the second episode of *The Bad Copy* (La Brutta Copia, Massimo Ceccherini, 2013), two characters obsessively repeat phrases from the discesa in campo, while in *Nirvana* (1997), Gabriele Salvatores' science fiction film, the president of the company "Cibo Italia" stages an advertising speech very similar to Berlusconi's.

These are just a few examples from a sea of cinematic references, quotations, recreations, and rewritings of this discourse. Moreover, this process of parodic emulation seems inevitable from the very construction of the discourse: an advertising maneuver more than an electoral one, conceived by executives of Publitalia, Berlusconi's advertising agency, who, employing the techniques of cinematic fiction, staged a largely fictional story. Thus, the narrative method that is, "making the public believe" in the quality of the proposed product—was more important than its adherence to reality. It was a visual fiction that, given its impact on the Italian political and cultural landscape, could only generate other narratives, generally critical or parodic.

It is equally useful to consider the visual iconography that Berlusconi's speech offered his audience. While presenting himself as a novelty on the national political scene, the future Italian prime minister emphasized his already established public persona as a media mogul and sportsman, thus projecting a reassuring image. Although his "discesa in campo" speech was, in fact, his first "explicit" political intervention, Berlusconi had already expressed his views on political issues on several occasions, confirming his privileged relationship with the then-secretary of the PSI, Bettino Craxi—in the latter half of the 1980s—, criticizing the Minister of Telecommunications before the 1990 "Mammì Law" granted him the legal right to broadcast nationwide, and endorsing the Rome mayoral candidate Gianfranco Fini—a member of the right-wing Alleanza Nazionale party—in 1993. However, these were always opportune judgments, born of contingent circumstances and linked to his own business activities. But his speech on January 26, 1994, was intended to be something different, a programmatic text with an immediate impact: therefore, both elements linked to political tradition and those of novelty had to be present and recognizable.

While the innovative aspects are entirely questionable in terms of content, the same cannot be said of the form: Berlusconi, at that moment, forever changed Italian political communication, drawing inspiration not only from his own activity as a media entrepreneur, but also from a very specific collective visual imaginary. In this article, I will connect the visual forms of the January 1994 speech with a scene from Elio Petri's film, *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* (Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto, Elio Petri, 1970), starring Gian Maria Volonté. This film is ideologically far removed from the ideas presented in the speech, but perhaps it is precisely by delving into this fracture—a seemingly irreconcilable contradiction—that we can highlight some less obvious, yet crucial, elements of Berlusconi's success and his appeal to Italians. As we have seen, the seeds of this discourse were predictable. However, searching for the root causes can lead to unexpected results.

VISUAL ICONS: THE OFFICE AND THE FAMILY PHOTO

Within a fairly classic visual structure—a politician speaking from a desk while reading from a script—two elements stand out for their novelty in the landscape of Italian political communication at the time: the location where the speech is filmed and recorded, and a detail that appears behind Berlusconi: two family photographs. This detail, though seemingly irrelevant, lends the scene a completely different meaning. Until then, in fact, the locations where politicians filmed their official speeches were not private: the President of the Republic, in his New Year's address to the nation, spoke from the Quirinal Palace, the seat of power that was by no means his property. It was a place with a certain sacredness, even from an iconographic perspective: behind the President of the Republic, one could see the national flag—now accompanied by the European flag—and sometimes a Christmas tree, a perfect synthesis of the complex relationship between secularism and religion in Italian politics. That place, in any case, was not theirs: the following year—or in the more distant future—, another President would record a different speech for December 31, but the tree and the flag would always be there, motionless, reminding us that, although politicians change, the symbols of power never belong to them entirely.

Berlusconi, however, revolutionizes this concept: the setting is his office, as evidenced by the family photo on the bookshelf in the background and the fact that the books appear to have been recently consulted, some hastily arranged and others still open. It is, therefore, an office where the politician worked until shortly before record-

BERLUSCONI'S MESSAGE COMMUNICATES AND IS, AT THE SAME TIME. IT OFFERS CONVENTIONAL THEMATIC CONTENT—FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF DISCOURSE STRUCTURE, IT'S A FAIRLY CLASSIC MESSAGE BY THE STANDARDS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AT THE TIME—BUT AT THE SAME TIME, IT POSSESSES AN INTRINSIC MEANING THAT WOULD PROVE DECISIVE FOR THE CONTINUITY OF HIS PUBLIC CAREER: A DISTANCING FROM TRADITIONAL COLLECTIVE POLITICAL STRUCTURES—WHETHER INSTITUTIONAL, STATE, OR SIMPLY PARTY-BASED—TO MOVE TOWARD AN INDIVIDUALISTIC REPRESENTATION, BASED ON A CULT OF PERSONALITY THAT SEEMINGLY OBSCURES—BUT OBVIOUSLY DOES NOT ERASE—POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

ing his speech, an element perfectly in keeping with the image Berlusconi wants to project: that of an active and tireless entrepreneur who, unlike other politicians, doesn't have time to prepare his speech because his real work lies elsewhere. Panofsky had already pointed out how every object created by humankind is a tool or vehicle of communication (Panofsky, 1982): Berlusconi's message communicates and is, at the same time. It offers conventional thematic content—from the perspective of discourse structure, it's a fairly classic message by the standards of political communication at the time—but at the same time, it possesses an intrinsic meaning that would prove decisive for the continuity of his public career: a distancing from traditional collective political structures—whether institutional, state, or simply party-based—to move toward an individualistic representation, based on a cult of personality that seemingly obscures—but obviously does not erase—political ideology.

The scene in *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* in which Gian Maria Volonté—the character's name is never revealed in the film; he is simply referred to as "the doctor"—a public security official, addresses the press after a murder, presents some similarities and just as many differences with Berlusconi's speech. The context, obviously, is completely different: it is a press conference in which "the doctor" intends to reassure the public, shaken by the gruesome murder of a woman (Augusta Terzi, played by Florinda Bolkan). Volonté's speech is particularly emotive—much more so than Berlusconi's—describing an almost apocalyptic scenario of chaos and violence, which only decisive police action can quell. Of course, the setting for his speech is anything but personal: there's no private office or family photo behind him prioritizing the individual over the collective. However, his delivery—Volonté holds a sheet of paper, which he glances at alternately, constantly balancing reading and improvisation—is strongly reminiscent of the way Berlusconi delivered his speech during his "discesa in campo" (a political inauguration speech). Berlusconi's speech is a political investiture, so the written tone is less emotionally charged, but the constant alternation between reading and improvisation—what in Italian is called "andare a braccio", or "to speak off the cuff"—leads us to the threshold of a new political era. Reading a speech, in fact, means first and foremost writing it, and therefore preparing it in advance. It is assumed that a politician or public figure, especially a member of an institution or party, does not write their speech themselves or, at least, has it reviewed to obtain the approval—or at least a positive opinion—of the institutions to which they belong. Speaking without reading, on the other hand, leaves more room for improvisation and, therefore, in a process toward the individualization of politics, emphasizes the individual's oratory skills, which also become strategically more important than compliance with group directives.

Italian politics of the time was still characterized by a very classical form of political communication (Cosenza, 2012; Mazzoleni, 1998), with some notable exceptions: within the Communist Party, Enrico Berlinguer's communication was particularly innovative thanks to his ability to generate empathy with his listeners; Bettino Craxi, secretary of the Socialist Party, was especially appreciated for his oratorical skills. However, even in their most famous speeches, a type of vertical communication emerges, in which the politician addresses their audience from a hierarchically superior position and in which greater attention is paid to the method of communication. Volonté in *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* and Berlusconi in his "discesa in campo" experience the same fears and anxieties as their listeners. The public security officer's speech is so emotive because he, too, fears the growing violence in Italian cities; Berlusconi is "descending" into politics—thus abandoning a superior and theoretically privileged position—because he fears the direction Italy is taking. They are two people like us, moving among us, but better. Following their logic, we should be grateful and relieved: once again, in Italian history, a strongman will bring order to chaos.

This is, incidentally, a scene that Italian audiences had already begun to see, but one that would be repeated more frequently in "poliziotteschi" films—the Italian version of crime films— which, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, offered a unique perspective on the institutional violence and terrorist groups prevalent in the country at that time (Lupi, 2001; Tentoni-Cozzi, 2010). The police officer who explains and presents his plan to restore order—as if he were a politician—before an audience of journalists is a classic element of Italian police films, borrowed from the American genre, but with some differences: the Italian police officer does not belong to a higher organization that can legitimize or delegitimize him—as might be the case with the FBI—nor is he a private detective fighting against the world. The Italian policeman is an integral member of the state, and the violence he advocates is not only, according to his criteria, necessary to restore order, but also, in the particular historical period the country is experiencing—the "Years of Lead"—the only way to halt the advance of communist terrorism. To achieve this objective, all means are permitted. In this sense, we can see the film *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, 1958) among the models of *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion*: as in Petri's film, in this case too the protagonist is a corrupt policeman who alters reality to make his own actions visible. Petri's policeman goes even further: he presents himself as a defender of the law to restore order, but he himself killed the woman whose murderer he is searching for; he knowingly created chaos to legitimize his own violence, but in doing so he finds himself facing an irresolvable enigma—which the script, in fact, leaves unanswered—because if he truly wanted to respect the law, he would have to arrest himself. It is clear that the character carries a moral dilemma not far removed from what Berlusconi hints at in his speech: "What are we willing to sacrifice for our security? What violence is ethically justified? And which of the two generated the other?" Even Berlusconi, if we think about it carefully, contributed to the chaos in which the country finds itself: he was very close to the party and the politician most targeted by judges for corruption—the PSI and Bettino Craxi—thanks to which he obtained enormous advantages for his companies; he made deals with criminal organizations for contracts and construction projects at a time when the mafia was openly fighting against the State (Ignazi, 2014); he was a recognized and successful public figure of that "first republic" which he now claims to repudiate. Like Gian Maria Volonté, he anticipates journalists' questions with a prefabricated speech in which, from being guilty, he positions himself as a defender of the victims.

It is useful for a moment to consider Berlusconi's office. This space, too, is ultimately an artificial creation, staged as if it were real. Based on the reflections of Àngel Quintana (2023), we observe how the office is, above all, the place where decisions are made, therefore the true seat of power. But, as we have seen, Berlusconi, unlike previous politicians, transfers this to a completely private context, thus giving the impression that power itself is a personal matter for him. Furthermore, it should not be underestimated that the Italian public had already had the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between public and private space and Silvio Berlusconi's activities: in a famous interview broadcast in 1986, in response to a question from journalist Enzo Biagi, Berlusconi replied that he used to work even with a fever, making important decisions in bed and moving his office to his private bedroom. It was a kind of public introduction of the future prime minister, who, after acquiring the AC Milan football club, aspired to become a national icon—it is no coincidence that the interview was broadcast on Canale 5, the channel he owned. Therefore, the overlap between public and private workspaces had already occurred, and in a way, his speech about leaving the country in 1994 underscored this, contributing to the delicate dynamic of novelty and tradition that Berlusconi sought: Italians saw the same businessman as before, ready to merge the public and private spheres; at the same time, however, Berlusconi was speaking from an office, a more appropriate setting than a bedroom for a speech of political commitment, an unmistakable sign of his ability to institutionalize himself without losing his identity.

An additional element contributes to making this space even more personal. I'm referring to the two photographs in his library: the first shows his children from his first marriage (top right), while the second portrays him with his younger children, born from his relationship with Veronica Lario, his wife at the time. The symbolic space occupied by both images is also unique: from right to left, they form a diagonal line with Berlusconi himself in the center, a link between two different families, capable, therefore, of being simultaneously a man of tradition—his children, now adults, who can discover the world without him—and of innovation—his young children, with whom he still plays and accompanies through life. Susan Sontag writes that photography is always an absence or a pseudo-presence (Sontag, 1979: 9): in this case, it is impossible not to notice the absence of his two wives, a Derrida's specter whose disappearance makes his contours even clearer and more evident. The embrace in the photograph on the left—the one showing the children from his second marriage—according to Carolina Martínez-López's reflections (2023), could not only convey a reassuring idea of playful and modern fatherhood, but also accentuate Berlusconi's position in the image. Only he is capable of keeping the two families together—which, in fact, are depicted as divided and at two different stages of life—just as only he can create the synthesis between tradition and innovation that Italy needs.

Berlusconi was not yet a politician in the traditional sense of the term, nor did he have an ideology that precisely defined his position: he was cer-

BERLUSCONI'S OFFICE, TOO, IS ULTIMATELY AN ARTIFICIAL CREATION, STAGED AS IF IT WERE REAL. BASED ON THE REFLECTIONS OF ÀNGEL QUINTANA (2023), WE OBSERVE HOW THE OFFICE IS, ABOVE ALL, THE PLACE WHERE DECISIONS ARE MADE, THEREFORE THE TRUE SEAT OF POWER. BUT, AS WE HAVE SEEN, BERLUSCONI, UNLIKE PREVIOUS POLITICIANS, TRANSFERS THIS TO A COMPLETELY PRIVATE CONTEXT, THUS GIVING THE IMPRESSION THAT POWER ITSELF IS A PERSONAL MATTER FOR HIM

tainly anti-communist and liberal, but his political trajectory, traceable through his friendships and public statements, was rather chaotic before 1994. He maintained a close relationship with Bettino Craxi's PSI, which followed a very specific political line: less public interference in business, programmatic anti-communism, and adherence to the Atlantic Pact and the alliance with the United States. Even before that, his name was already among the members of P2, a right-wing and reactionary Masonic lodge created for anti-communist purposes. As previously reported, in 1993 he expressed his support for the mayoral candidacy of Gianfranco Fini, secretary of the National Alliance, a right-wing party that emerged from the ashes of the Italian Social Movement (MSI), itself born after the dissolution of the National Fascist Party (PNF) in 1946. As can be seen, these are distant, if not downright contradictory, positions, within which it is difficult to find a coherent narrative. Lacking an ideologically recognizable past, Berlusconi turns this deficiency into an advantage: Italians will not vote for him because of what he represents, but because of who he is. Therefore, he prioritizes his private life—his personal office, family photos—to convince the electorate: if trust in politicians is at rock bottom after the *Tangentopoli* scandal, no one could doubt the authenticity of his private affections.

A DIFFERENT PLACE FOR A DIFFERENT NARRATIVE

The image is static, the speech is rehearsed, the camera is motionless, allowing at most a few close-ups to highlight the speaker's face at moments of greatest emphasis. I'm describing the Berlusconi video, but the same words could be used—with a slight difference, given that at one point the camera opts for a wide shot that also shows the "doctor's" colleagues—for the aforementioned scene with Gian Maria Volonté. A rather classic visual device: fixed camera, medium shot, focus on the speaker, attention to detail at the edges of the frame, and close-ups at specific moments. Therefore, we can ask ourselves what the reasons are not only for the success of this video—a success with concrete consequences, since it continues to be widely viewed on YouTube and social media, but also marked the beginning of a then-unexpected electoral victory and Forza Italia's consistent presence in parliament—but also for its undeniable originality. Here, too, we delve into the delicate dynamic of the tension between tradition and innovation conveyed by the staging of the "discesa in campo". This video, ultimately, is classic, or at least recognizable—and therefore familiar—and highlights a moment of rupture, a hinge between the First and Second Republic. As previously noted, Berlusconi's political language has already been analyzed, both in relation to this speech and the evolution of his career. This is certainly not the place to reiterate what has already been written elsewhere; the only elements I wish to emphasize are two: the constant use of the football metaphor, which at that time had not yet entered Italian political discourse with such regularity (Amadori, 2002); and the use of litotes, before concluding the discussion with much more explicit and direct language. Litotes, primarily used to describe political opponents, thus become a kind of false mitigation of their supposed flaws, only to then give way to more colloquial jargon in the conclusion of the speech, further highlighting the negative aspects. In Berlusconi's speech, the "communists" are those who "have never found full citizenship" in democracy, "are not prepared" to govern the country, "have not changed", ultimately transforming, much more explicitly, into propagators of class hatred and social envy. This is a stratagem also employed by Gian Maria Volonté in *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion*: his speech does not, in fact, focus on the murder he has just committed—of which he himself is the perpetrator—but on the role of the alleged perpetrators, the anarchists and members of the stu-

dent movement, who "do not respect the law" and, therefore, must be annihilated "by any means".

Through this familiar and partly innovative approach, Berlusconi creates the conditions for inserting the most delicate piece of his mosaic: the artificial construction of a completely imagined world to be presented as true to the public. Gian Maria Volonté, in his address to the press, had an undeniable advantage over his audience, as he was the only one who knew exactly how events had unfolded. The policeman was in the same position that, according to Hitchcock (Truffaut, Scott, 1966), could create suspense rather than surprise, as highlighted in the famous scene from *The Battle of Algiers* (La battaglia di Algeri, Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966), where an Algerian woman, a member of the FLN, enters a bar frequented by French military personnel with a bomb hidden in her handbag: the audience and the protagonist know the facts, while the rest of the characters on stage do not. The tension of the sequence is built precisely on this disparity of knowledge: while we listen to Volonté reconstruct a completely fabricated version of events, we expect him to be unmasked sooner or later, that a colleague will intuit the truth, or that a journalist will pressure him with uncomfortable questions that lead him to reveal himself.

BERLUSCONI CAN CONSTRUCT AN ALTERNATIVE TIMELINE WITH A CAPTIVATING EASE THAT HIS LISTENERS MIGHT NOT RECOGNIZE AT THE TIME, BUT WHICH WILL SOON BECOME ONE OF HIS MOST EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES: TO EVADE THE FACTS (AND, THEREFORE, THE TRUTH), TO DELVE EXCLUSIVELY INTO THE WORLD OF NARRATIVE. IT IS NOT IMPORTANT THAT POLITICIANS ACTUALLY DO SOMETHING, BUT IT IS CRUCIAL THAT THEY SAY SOMETHING

This state of suspended reality brings us both relief—the protagonist has not been unmasked and the process of identification can continue—and anguish—the truth could come to light sooner or later. This suspense constitutes a narrative mechanism, undoubtedly, but above all a device that can change the context. Berlusconi's task, however, is more delicate: the future prime minister is addressing an audience that, in theory, knows how things have unfolded in Italy in recent years, and the level of knowledge between him and his audience is equal. Under these conditions, it is more difficult to construct a completely fictitious reality, so he first needs to create a familiar environment, in both senses: linked to his family, with the previously analyzed photographs; familiar to the public, with a reassuring stage setting.

From this context, Berlusconi can construct an alternative timeline with a captivating ease that his listeners might not recognize at the time, but which will soon become one of his most effective communication strategies: to evade the facts (and, therefore, the truth), to delve exclusively into the world of narrative. It is not important that politicians actually do something, but it is crucial that they say something. To tell it—and tell it well—the narrator must be credible: Berlusconi, who, unlike the police chief in Petri's film, cannot yet count on the legitimacy of his role—after all, he is not a politician—legitimizes himself through his own private history, "borrowed" and displayed to the public. His character as a man of personal resolve is evident in his economic and business successes, but in his private life, his persona is enriched with family photographs (Susca, 2004: 41-56).

Carlo Ginzburg, citing Warburg, speaks of the Pathosformel as an archetypal image that is repeated, generating emotions (Ginzburg, 2015). In this case, the pathos is essentially composed of personal and private elements, but precisely for that reason, in a moment of despair and distrust of traditional politics, it becomes more credible and convincing. Furthermore, Berlusconi claims

that he has just resigned from top positions in all his companies to enter politics: in a historical period in which leading politicians were accused of bribery and corruption—and, therefore, ultimately, of obtaining illegal benefits at the expense of citizens—he presents himself as the only one willing to lose money for the good of the country.

In this way, he acquires the legitimacy that lends verisimilitude to the historical reconstruction described in his speech, a history that never existed and which, upon closer examination, would appear to be the result of an alternate history narrative. Berlusconi's Italy is a country where communists have governed for decades, although it's perhaps worth remembering that the Italian Communist Party (PCI) has never been part of any government since 1948, the first democratic elections. This is the same Communist Party that, according to the Forza Italia leader, always supported the Soviet Union and aspired to join the Warsaw Pact, while the stance of Italian communist leaders—especially Enrico Berlinguer, but at least since Khrushchev's 1956 speech and particularly since Palmiro Togliatti's death in 1964—was highly critical of the USSR. In reality, since the postwar period, Italy has always been governed by center, center-right, or, more rarely, center-left coalitions, led by the Christian Democrats, who, uniquely in a democratic country, remained in power uninterrupted for 45 years. Berlusconi also speaks of justice and the fight against crime, but at that time he was already under investigation for links to mafia organizations. He addresses the shortcomings of the old political class, but it was precisely thanks to his close ties with this political class that he was able to benefit from laws and special concessions that proved crucial in building his media and financial empire.

Like any well-crafted advertising message, the narrative of the "discesa in campo" would not have the same impact if it focused solely on the alleged misdeeds of the "enemies" and failed to consider the positive aspects that a vote for Forza Italia would bring to Italians. If the party is a product—ideological no longer in the 20th-century sense, but certainly in the contemporary capitalist sense—the audience that listens to it, that might buy into it, must be aware of its advantages (Donofrio, 2015). Using a formulation by Mattioni (2022), Berlusconi seeks to convince Italians that voting for him would return the country to the right present timeline. It is no longer the era of corruption and *Tangentopoli*, of economic crisis and mafia massacres, of communists in power and the absence of freedom, but rather the era of a new course of history, born after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. A new phase of peace and prosperity—the *Pax Americana*—whose fruits only economic liberalism can reap. A new phase that, in fact, is already underway: Berlusconi does not hesitate to speak of progress, innovation, and Western democracies recovering after decades of darkness: it is necessary to vote for him as soon as possible so that Italy, too, can enjoy all the ineffable benefits of neoliberalism.

And it matters little that this *Pax Americana* in January 1994 is no longer, even formally, a peace: from August 2, 1990 to February 28, 1991, we witnessed the Gulf War in Iraq and Kuwait; in the former Yugoslavia an extremely violent civil war is still underway, which has led, among other things, to the siege of Sarajevo since April 5, 1992, and which is still ongoing; A few months later, we would learn of the genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda, part of a conflict that had become extremely violent since at least 1990. These are just a few examples among many, but they serve to demonstrate the absolute artificiality of the chronology described by Berlusconi: an ideal world in which Italy can aspire to a new Italian miracle—an expression inspired by the "economic miracle" of 1958-1963, but also by the sporting "miracle" of the national football team that won the World Cup in 1982—in which the communists who had led the country to economic and moral decline will be definitively defeated, and moder-

nity will finally arrive in Rome as well. A world of peace, prosperity, and opportunities for all—especially for "the weakest", Berlusconi declared in his speech—that is within reach, with only one condition: entrusting the government to Forza Italia and its coalition.

Herein lies perhaps one of the most striking differences between Volonté's discourse to journalists and Berlusconi's to the Italian people: the former, amidst the ideological clash of the 1970s, proposes order and discipline in a chaotic world, assuring the bourgeoisie of its capacity to prevent revolution by any means; if they follow him, security will be guaranteed by the restoration of the status quo. The latter, in a world already partially post-ideological—at least by 20th-century standards—also proposes a *pars construens*: in the battle to see who will manage to appropriate the advantages of the Cold War victors—the United States, but more generally the capitalist world—he simply presents himself as the easiest path to obtaining them. On the other hand, he encounters political adversaries who are trying by all means to rid themselves of a past in which, as we have seen, they were not even entirely convinced, so it is easy for Berlusconi to unmask them and present himself as the true gateway to the future. A future, as he himself emphasizes in his speech, of collaboration and harmony, seemingly free of conflict. This, in his opinion, was the neoliberal utopia, previously unrealized only by contingent circumstances—the Cold War against the Soviets. Now that the war is won, all that remains is to vote for him and enjoy the advantages granted to the victors.

CONCLUSION. 1968 COME TRUE? OR, BETTER SAID: "A" 1968 COME TRUE?

One particularly important question remains: how is it possible that a series of iconic images from a cult film of the Italian left from the 1970s—*Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* is considered a perfect metaphor for institutional violence during the "Years of Lead" (Minuz, 2007: 135)—are reused, even indirectly or unintentionally, in the staging of an ultra-liberal political discourse? Or, better said, to be more concise and use contemporary terminology and definitions: how a politician like Berlusconi can ideologically appropriate radical and alternative cultural demands?

To answer this question, we must discard the image of Berlusconi that had developed during his three governments in office: that of an inefficient and incompetent politician, lacking the respect for the rules that a head of state, regardless of political affiliation, should always possess, and, above all, a kind of comical figure who had become unpresentable. The perception of Berlusconi between 1993 and 1994 was very different: he was not only a businessman who could rely on his economic empire to demonstrate his honesty, but he also represented, for a certain segment of his future electorate and for some of his allies, a possibility for innovation, if not radical reform, in Italian politics. Consider, for example, his chief political advisor, Giuliano Ferrara, who also became Minister for Relations with Parliament in his first government (1994-1995). Ferrara, the son of a former partisan and a left-wing activist who also served as editor of *L'Unità* the official newspaper of the Italian Communist Party (PCI)—had been a prominent leader of the Italian Communist Party, a staunch advocate of a radical workers' ideology—he was responsible for the provincial coordination of FIAT in Turin. In the second half of the 1980s, he shifted towards PSI politics and was the one who advised Berlusconi to enter politics directly, subsequently proving to be decisive, albeit from a less visible position, in all the political developments of Forza Italia. Paolo Liguori, then a prominent television journalist at Berlusconi's station, followed a similar path: Liguori came from the extra-parliamentary left, having played a central role in organizing Lotta Continua. A slightly different trajectory, more

closely linked to the battles for civil rights, was that of Marco Pannella, secretary of the Radical Party, who proposed himself as an ally of Berlusconi in the center-right coalition that won the April 1994 elections —he did not participate because the Radical Party did not surpass the 4% threshold and was left out of Parliament. Pannella, who described himself as further to the left of the Italian Communist Party (Pannella, 2007), now envisioned a role in a political formation that also included La Lega, then a secessionist party, and the right-wing party Alleanza Nazionale.

The aforementioned are just some of the more unexpected names in Berlusconi's orbit during the first half of the 1990s. However, even in three such distinct experiences, we find a common thread: Pannella, Liguori, and Ferrara had all participated in the 1968 demonstrations; they were among the protagonists of that political and cultural era that would radically transform Italy. This fact should give us a reflection: the young people of '68 are now adults in 1994, having lived through diverse experiences, ready to definitively seize power. We could consider their adherence to Berlusconi's legacy simply as one of many examples of political opportunism: they would be neither the first nor the last. And we could even question the sincerity of their past political actions. But that would be like seeing only one side of the coin. The generation of '68 that joined Berlusconi's partym—I take Liguori, Ferrara, and Pannella as paradigmatic examples—indicates above all that Forza Italia can present itself to Italians not only as the reassuring party that will restore order after chaos—as was the case with the character of Volonté in the film—but also as a young and innovative force, ready to bring about a revolution—in this case, a liberal one—that has often been feared. It was Pannella himself who stated this in an interview (Pannella, 2016: 79): the liberal revolution may not have been the one dreamed of in '68, but it was still a revolution, the only possible one. This seems to fit within the Italian version of the famous acronym TINA (There Is No Alternative), uttered by Margaret Thatcher after her victory against the Yorkshire miners, as cited by Mark Fisher (2018). There is no alternative: if there is to be a revolution, it will be Berlusconi's.

THE PERCEPTION OF BERLUSCONI BETWEEN 1993 AND 1994 WAS VERY DIFFERENT: HE WAS NOT ONLY A BUSINESSMAN WHO COULD RELY ON HIS ECONOMIC EMPIRE TO DEMONSTRATE HIS HONESTY, BUT HE ALSO REPRESENTED, FOR A CERTAIN SEGMENT OF HIS FUTURE ELECTORATE AND FOR SOME OF HIS ALLIES, A POSSIBILITY FOR INNOVATION, IF NOT RADICAL REFORM, IN ITALIAN POLITICS

In an essay from a few years ago, significantly titled *Contro il '68* (2007) [*Against '68*], Alessandro Bertante shows how some of the values championed by the 1968 movements were, in reality, perfectly functional for contemporary capitalism: individualism, individual freedom at the expense of collective rights, and moral freedom, which seemed to be a prerequisite for consumer freedom. This provocative book analyzes several paths taken by former activists of the '68 movement who later ended up in Berlusconi's orbit, highlighting not so much their unexpected and exceptional turns, but rather the coherence and obviousness of their evolutions. Meanwhile, in Italy, Pier Paolo Pasolini, one of the most provocative intellectuals of his time, wrote a famous poem: *Il PCI ai giovani!* [The Communist Party to the youth!], following the clashes between students and police at the Valle Giulia architecture faculty on March 1, 1968, in Rome (Bazzocchi, 2017: 33-34). Verses 16-19, in particular, highlight some of the movement's contradictions: "When yesterday at Valle Giulia you/ and

the policemen were throwing blows,/ I symphatized with the policemen!/ Because policemen are sons of the poor"[3]. It would be a mistake to read and interpret Pasolini literally and not grasp the significance, even political, that the provocation had for him, but the truth is that the Italian writer perfectly intuited some of the movement's idiosyncrasies. In his essay *Berlusconi or '68 Made Real* (Berlusconi o il '68 realizzato, 2011), Mario Perniola draws on the provocations of Pasolini and Bertante to create an analytical list of all the ideals of '68 that materialized during the Berlusconi era, transforming Italy not into a freer country more open to civil rights, but simply into a gigantic experiment in the most sinister form of neoliberal consumer capitalism.

Far be it from me to offer a radical critique of '68's contribution to Italian society, which generated far more benefits than problems. The simple access, for the first time in Italian history, of a marginalized social class to secondary and university education was crucial in leading the country to a new perspective, and the struggles for civil and social rights—from divorce to abortion and labor rights—remain ethical and political pillars that we must not forget. It is equally true, on the other hand, that the culture of the 1980s and early 1990s contributed to a focus on the individual at the expense of the collective: here too, we witnessed a translation of Thatcher's thought—according to which society does not exist, only individuals—and, more generally, a media and cultural transformation—Gramsci would have called it super-structural—of capitalism. It is this type of discourse that has proven successful.

Therefore, while it is inaccurate to claim that Berlusconi made '68 a reality—or that he could be perceived as having made it so—the constant presence in his party's ranks of key figures and former activists of '68 invites reflection: some of the demands of '68—those most closely linked to personal fulfillment and, ultimately, the most superficial—lacking political significance, were presented at the beginning of his career as symbols of cultural openness and innovation. Only to later reveal themselves for what they truly were: publicity stunts to attract as many voters as possible and bring a reactionary government to power.

For this reason, his discourse of dissent in the field can even be compared to a pioneering 1970s film like *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion*. Stripped of its context and political meaning, Gian Maria Volonté's speech becomes simply literal, echoing a classic dynamic of Italian history: instead of thinking about movements of collective reflection, in times of crisis we turn to a strong man—today a woman, but the meaning is the same—, delegating the resolution of problems to authority. ■

WHILE IT IS INACCURATE TO CLAIM THAT BERLUSCONI MADE '68 A REALITY—OR THAT HE COULD BE PERCEIVED AS HAVING MADE IT SO—THE CONSTANT PRESENCE IN HIS PARTY'S RANKS OF KEY FIGURES AND FORMER ACTIVISTS OF '68 INVITES REFLECTION: SOME OF THE DEMANDS OF '68—THOSE MOST CLOSELY LINKED TO PERSONAL FULFILLMENT AND, ULTIMATELY, THE MOST SUPERFICIAL—LACKING POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE, WERE PRESENTED AT THE BEGINNING OF HIS CAREER AS SYMBOLS OF CULTURAL OPENNESS AND INNOVATION. ONLY TO LATER REVEAL THEMSELVES FOR WHAT THEY TRULY WERE: PUBLICITY STUNTS TO ATTRACT AS MANY VOTERS AS POSSIBLE AND BRING A REACTIONARY GOVERNMENT TO POWER

NOTES

1 The equivalent in English would be "to take the field" or "to enter in the arena", but I prefer to keep the original Italian "discesa in campo" [literally "descent to the field"], because that way the football metaphor so important to Berlusconi is maintained.

2 "L'Italia è il paese che amo. Qui ho le mie radici, le mie speranze, i miei orizzonti…".

3 "Quando ieri a Valle Giulia avete fatto a botte/ coi poliziotti,/ io simpatizzavo coi poliziotti!/ Perché i poliziotti sono figli di poveri".

REFERENCES

Amadori, A. (2002). *Mi consenta. Metafore, messaggi e simboli. Come Silvio Berlusconi ha conquistato il consenso degli italiani*. Milano: Scheiwiller.

Bazzocchi, M. A. (2017). *Esposizioni. Pasolini, Foucault e l'esercizio della verità*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Bertante, A. (2007). *Contro il '68*. Milano: Agenzia X.

Bresolin, M., Corbi, Maria, Feltri, Mattia (2014). *Quei 9 minuti e 25 secondi*, "La Stampa", 26 gennaio 2014.

Campus, D. (2004). La comunicazione politica di Berlusconi. Percorsi di lettura, *Comunicazione Politica*, 5: 179-186.

Cosenza, G. (2007). *SpotPolitik. Perché la casta non sa comunicare*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.

Della Porta, D. (1992). *Lo scambio occulto. Casi di corruzione in Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Deni, M., Marsciani, F. (1995). Analisi del primo discorso di Berlusconi. Indagine semiotica sul funzionamento discorsivo. En Livolsi, M., Volli, U. (coords.), *La comunicazione politica fra Prima e Seconda Repubblica*. Milano: Franco Angeli, 227-241

Donofrio, A. (2015). La "discesa in campo". Irrupción de Berlusconi en la escena política italiana. *Tiempo Devorado. Revista de Historia Actual*, 1: 22-38.

Ferrero, A. (1970). Indagine su un film al di sotto di ogni sospetto. *Cinema nuovo*, 204: 125.

Fisher, M. (2018). *Realismo capitalista*. Roma: Nero.

Ginzburg, C. (2015). *Paura, reverenza, terrore. Cinque saggi di iconografia politica*. Milano: Adelphi.

Ignazi, P. (2014). *Vent'anni dopo. La parabola del berlusconismo*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Lupi, G. (2001). *Il trucido e lo sbirro*. Roma: Profondo Rosso.

Martínez-López, C. (2023). Se supone que nos estamos diviertiendo: la foto de familia. En Balló, J., Salvadó, A. (coords.), *El poder en escena. Motivos visuales en la esfera pública*. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 316-325.

Mazzoleni, G. (1998). *La comunicazione politica*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Minuz, A. (2007). Cronaca di una stagione annunciata. Note sul cinema politico di Elio Petri. En Uva, C. (coord.). *Schermi di piombo. Il terrorismo nel cinema italiano*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 131-145.

Padellaro, A. (2020). *La strage e il miracolo*. Roma: Paper First.

Pannella, M. (2007). *A sinistra del PCI. Interventi parlamentari 1976-1979*. Milano: Kaos.

Pannella, M. (2016). *Una libertà felice. La mia vita*. Milano: Mondadori.

Panofsky, E. (1982). *Estudios sobre iconología*. Madrid: Alianza.

Perniola, M. (2011). *Berlusconi o il '68 realizzato*. Milano-Udine: Mimesis.

Quintana, À. (2023). Donde se toman las decisiones. El despacho. En Balló, J., Salvadó, A. (coords.), *El poder en escena. Motivos visuales en la esfera pública*. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg: 364-371.

Salvia, M. (2022). *Interregno. Iconografie del XXI secolo*. Roma: Nero.

Sontag, S. (1979). *On Photography*. New York: Penguin.

Susca, V. (2014). Phénoménologie de Silvio Berlusconi, *Sociétés*, 84: 41-56.

Tentori, A., Cozzi, A. (2010). *Italia a mano armata. Libro del cinema poliziesco italiano*. Roma: Profondo Rosso.

Truffaut, F., Scott, H. (1966). *Hitchcock/Truffaut*. Paris: Laffont.

Viggen, M. (2018). La retorica politica contemporanea: analisi dei discorsi di Berlusconi e Stoltenberg. *Oslo Studies in Languages*, 10: 91-117.

ORDER AND CHAOS. SILVIO BERLUSCONI'S SPEECH ON HIS "DISCESA IN CAMPO" IN RELATION TO *INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION*

Abstract

January 26, 1994, Silvio Berlusconi announced his entry into politics with a speech on one of his private networks. This speech marks a clear turning point in Italian political communication, shifting from 20th-century ideology (the politician as spokesperson for a party or, in any case, for an ideology or community) to contemporary individualism, as evidenced by the family photos that appear behind him and the private office where the scene unfolds. The article compares Berlusconi's speech to one given by the actor Gian Maria Volonté in the film *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* (1970). Beyond the similarities and differences, what is striking is Berlusconi's ability to appropriate ideologically opposed communicative and visual elements, rewrite them, and create (and narrate) a completely fabricated reality to convince citizens to vote for him.

Key words

Silvio Berlusconi; Elio Petri; Political Communication; Neoliberalism; Family Photographs.

Author

Daniele Comberiati is associated professor in Italian Studies at the University Paul-Valéry de Montpellier. His research focuses on migration literature, science fiction, Italian post-colonialism, and graphic novels. En 2010, he published *Scrivere nella lingua dell'altro. La letteratura degli immigrati in Italia (1989-2007)*. With Simone Brion, he co-wrote *Italian Science Fiction: the Other in Literature and Film* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) and *Ideologia e rappresentazione. Percorsi attraverso la fantascienza italiana* (Mimesis, 2020). In 2019, he published *Un autre monde est-il possibile? Science fiction et bande dessinée en Italie, de l'enlèvement d'Aldo Moro jusqu'à aujourd'hui (1978-2018)* (Quodlibet). In 2019, he published *La fantascienza contro il boom economico? Quattro narrazioni distopiche degli anni Sessanta (Aldani, Buzzati, De Rossignoli, Scerbanenco)*, finalist for the "Italia" Prize.

Article reference

Comberiati, D. (2026). Order and Chaos. Silvio Berlusconi's Speech on his "discesa in campo" in relation to *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion*. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 41, 15-30. https://doi.org/10.63700/1372

ORDEN Y CAOS. EL DISCURSO DE SILVIO BERLUSCONI SOBRE SU "DISCESA IN CAMPO" EN RELACIÓN CON *INVESTIGACIÓN SOBRE UN CIUDADANO LIBRE DE TODA SOSPECHA*

Resumen

El 26 de enero de 1994, Silvio Berlusconi anunció su *discesa in campo* política con un discurso transmitido por una de sus redes privadas. Este discurso marca una clara línea divisoria en la comunicación política italiana, pasando de la ideología del siglo XX (el político como portavoz de un partido o, en cualquier caso, de una ideología o comunidad) al individualismo contemporáneo, como lo demuestran las fotos familiares que aparecen detrás de él y el despacho privado donde se desarrolla la escena. En el artículo, se compara el discurso de Berlusconi con uno de Gian Maria Volonté en la película *Investigación sobre un ciudadano libre de toda sospecha* (1970). Más allá de las similitudes y diferencias, lo sorprendente es la capacidad de Berlusconi para apropiarse de elementos comunicativos y visuales ideológicamente opuestos, reescribirlos y crear (y narrar) una realidad completamente inventada para convencer a los ciudadanos de que voten por él.

Palabras clave

Silvio Berlusconi; Elio Petri; comunicación política; neoliberalismo; fotos familiares.

Autor

Daniele Comberiati es profesor agregado de italiano a la Universidad Paul-Valéry de Montpellier. Su investigación se centra en la literatura de la migración, la ciencia-ficción, el pos-colonialismo italiano y la novela gráfica. En 2010, publicó el ensayo *Scrivere nella lingua dell'altro. La letteratura degli immigrati in Italia (1989-2007)*. Junto con Simone Brioni, coescribió *Italian Science Fiction: the Other in Literature and Film* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) y *Ideologia e rappresentazione. Percorsi attraverso la fantascienza italiana* (Mimesis, 2020). En 2019, publicó *Un autre monde est-il possibile? Science fiction et bande dessinée en Italie, de l'enlèvement d'Aldo Moro jusqu'à aujourd'hui (1978-2018)* (Quodlibet). En 2023, publicó el ensayo *La fantascienza contro il boom economico? Quattro narrazioni distopiche degli anni Sessanta (Aldani, Buzzati, De Rossignoli, Scerbanenco)*, que fue finalista del Premio Italia.

Referencia de este artículo

Comberiati, D. (2026). Orden y caos. El discurso de Silvio Berlusconi sobre su "discesa in campo" en relación con *Investigación sobre un ciudadano libre de toda sospecha*. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 41, 15-30. https://doi.org/10.63700/1372

recibido/received: 20.11.2025 | *aceptado/accepted:* 10.12.2025

Edita / Published by

Licencia / License

ISSN 1885-3730 (print) /2340-6992 (digital) **DL** V-5340-2003 **WEB** www.revistaatalante.com **MAIL** info@revistaatalante.com