Colloquium

COMPOSITE IDENTITIES

Percorsi tra cinema, teatro, letteratura, musica, scienze sociali e politiche

A cura di Anna Maria Chierici e Fulvio Orsitto

I saggi contenuti nel presente volume sono stati sottoposti
a valutazioni accademiche esterne che ne hanno confermato la validità scientifica.
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In copertina:
Marsha Steinberg, *Open Space* (olio su tela, cm 225 × 170), 1975.

Desideriamo ringraziare tutti i partecipanti alla conferenza internazionale *Composite Identities* da noi organizzata nel 2020, ed esprimere la nostra gratitudine nei confronti di Vanessa Meyers e dell'Office of Global Services della Georgetown University per aver sostenuto quel progetto e la realizzazione di questa pubblicazione. Un ringraziamento speciale va inoltre alla pittrice Marsha Steinberg per averci concesso l'uso del suo dipinto *Open Space* per la copertina del presente volume.

Sommario

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SEZIONE 3
Percorsi di scienze sociali e politiche

Reconstructing Identity at the End of the World in Gianni Miraglia's *Muori Milano, muori!* and Francesca Genti's *La febbre*

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1. Introduction: crises of existence and being

The present essay focuses on two novels as case studies for a discussion about how the apocalyptic paradigm emerges in contemporary Italian fiction as a site to articulate and challenge strategies of identity formation at the personal and social level in response to the difficulties posed by today's failing economic and socio-political structures. Apocalyptic fiction – which has become one of the most pervasive cultural models of our time in literature and film – can serve as a framework for critical investigation into the present when it responds to fundamental epistemological assumptions regarding the human experience. In his book-length study titled *A Sense of Apocalypse*, Marcin Mazurek states:

> A powerful signifier, apocalypse remains double-coded: it denotes violent decomposition of the old and at the same time reveals the emergence of the new. The concept's inherent incompleteness, coupled with its narrative potential, implicitly problematizes the legitimacy of any fundamental structures and, as a result, locates apocalypse in the context of transitional narratives, highlighting its inevitable presence at all moments of paradigmatic change. (Mazurek 2014, p. 10)

It is precisely the radical gesture of dissolving the most fundamental structures that justifies the applicability of the apocalyptic model as an operational metaphor.

Within these transitional narratives, many of the material and social constructs involved in identity formation are destroyed, overturned, or radically altered in the aftermath of societal breakdown. The characters of the apocalyptic works discussed in this paper are situated by their authors in a world bereft of the structures on which personal and social selfhood were once built. Thus, as the characters face the challenge of renegotiating stable social relations between the self, the other, and the world at large, it is critical for them to re-establish a sense of being and belonging in an unknown and uncertain socio-political landscape. This process of identity re-construction is inextricably bound up with behavioral strategies and powerfully motivates the characters' choices as they develop the ability to adjust, adapt, and survive in these stories.

There has been little critical interest in questions of identity formation in apocalyptic narratives, perhaps because in the vast majority of works in the genre, characters reinforce rather than contest their own identity and the ways in which it is constructed[1]. Lorenzo Ditommaso has recently discussed how «the primary social function of apocalyptic speculation is to maintain, reinforce, and validate group identity, typically in the face of threats, internal or external» (Ditommaso 2020, p. 318). However, in the works I discuss here, the apocalyptic context is actually designed to initiate processes that question identity formation as it must be restructured in an apocalyptic world where ordinary conditions have collapsed. Thus, just as when works of apocalyptic fiction critically address society's most fundamental structures, when characters instead are transformed by challenging their own worldviews, conceptions, and ideas that make up their own identity construction along with the social structures on which those views are founded, apocalyptic narratives become sites for critical inquiry into the discourse of identity formation. The present article will focus on the few works of Italian fiction since the 2007-2008 global financial crash that critically investigate processes of identity formation: namely Gianni Miraglia's *Muori Milano, muori!* and Francesca Genti's *La febbre*, both published in 2011[2].

2. AFTER THE CRASH: SELFHOOD AND SELFLESSNESS

Miraglia's novel follows the 47-year-old protagonist-narrator, Andrea, during a period of thirty days leading up to the Milan Expo of 2015. The global financial crash is presented in the text as a transformational event which disrupts normal life, throwing the main character into a world characterized by mass unemployment, social chaos, and violent protests. The presence of homeless communities in and around the city complicates the preparations for the

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[1] See Longo 2010; Arpaia 2016; Ammaniti 2017.
[2] Miraglia 2011; Genti 2011.

global spotlight of the Expo, as do the effects of climate change in the form of an oppressive heat wave succeeded by torrential rainfall.

Andrea, who had been climbing the corporate ladder as a successful copywriter for a marketing firm, fully embraced the material comforts and the entitlement of status that accompanied his role as an accomplished white-collar worker. After having lost his job in the layoffs that followed the crash, he looks for a way to support his lifestyle, finding instead an inadequate and precarious gig economy. In the novel – a text that resembles a sort of diary of the thirty-day countdown leading up to the opening day of the Expo –, the disillusioned protagonist recounts his difficulty in adapting to his new reality – «una quotidianità sparita e senza un dopo, come se mancassero le istruzioni per i casi d'emergenza» (Miraglia 2011, p. 13) – and his ultimately unsuccessful attempt to re-enter the workforce in the midst of fiscal austerity and economic contraction. Andrea quickly loses hope of reintegrating himself into the productive chain of the economy and therefore of society at large, finding himself being pushed further and further towards the city's marginalized communities.

The process of *denouement* of Andrea's status, position, and social identity is marked by the progressive shedding of almost all of the physical objects that supported the standards of living which the protagonist had taken for granted. First his water and electricity are turned off, then he is forced to abandon his car, and ultimately he is evicted from the apartment he had shared with his wife until their separation several months earlier. In this continuous process of deprivation in which the material and the symbolic are inextricably entangled, Andrea attempts to recalibrate and stabilize his conception of selfhood and renegotiate the various facets of his personal and social identity that had been shaped in and by a very different context.

Before the crisis, Andrea's own positionality was built exclusively on his socio-economic reality. Without this self-identification of status tied to his job, earning potential, and career prospects, he suddenly finds himself grappling with feelings of alienation, betrayal, and disorientation. The character's only means of negotiating his identity are no longer valid, thus rendering his life without direction and meaning. In fact, he no longer knows how to be(have) in this new position of social and economic subalternity.

> Dal licenziamento non ho più cercato nessuno della mia specie. Quelli con cui mi vedevo ogni tanto non li ho proprio più chiamati e neanche loro si sono fatti vivi. […] Avevo un'occupazione basata sulla vanità e allora metti in preventivo la fine improvvisa, ognuno deve fare i conti con cosa rimane di sé. (Miraglia 2011, p. 16)

Implicit in this depiction is a critique of the social impositions and pressures present in the workplace which push individuals to avoid negotiations and to repress forms of authentic expression for fear of professional repercussions. The increasingly porous distinction between work and non-work time,

together with increasing job precarity, leaves less and less room for the culti-
vation of processes of identity formation and the establishment of meaningful
relationships based on those processes, thus pushing us to associate our being
in this world increasingly with our fictive workplace persona[3]. With the loss
of his job and his social connections, Andrea seems to recognize the need for
selfhood, for identification, for a sense of valued being and belonging.

From the outset, the novel sets up the question of how politics establish
the operational frame in which the character attempts to design his own trajec-
tory. The post-crash society is characterized by tensions and civil unrest that
are staged through instances of socio-political conflict in the form of public
protests that are determined by economic stagnation and political fractures.
In the novel, such political fragmentation is described as the consequence of
Silvio Berlusconi's death which left a void that contending political factions
and social groups struggle with one another to fill.

> Ci sono dimostrazioni ogni due giorni, il ritmo di un paese che non esce dalla
> crisi, nonostante l'illusione del rilancio mai avvenuto ad opera delle nuove for-
> me di energia e tutte le stronzate dette in questi anni. […] Sfilano, onde che pe-
> rò non travolgono, sono gli oppressi del sistema a cui hanno dato l'assenso e ora
> che gira male vorrebbero iscriversi al club vincente. […] E chi stava ai piani alti
> ha mantenuto egemonie e potere, alimentando mitologie sul sangue dei morti
> ammazzati nella guerra civile e dei grandi lavoratori artefici della ricostruzione,
> un passato corretto in cui perpetrare ricchezza e corruzione. […] i manifestanti
> più importanti, cassaintegrati delle acciaierie di cui si parla da mesi. […] Suole
> d'acciaio, i fanti di Hitler questa volta hanno ragione, applausi e morale catodi-
> ca, tutti hanno leccato il culo agli operai, dai politici agli industriali, dai dittatori
> ai preti. (Miraglia 2011, pp. 14-17)

The situation predictably spirals into factional violence as blame for having
supported Berlusconi is hurled at the various groups of *operai*, «colpevoli
di aver creduto al milione di posti di lavoro, ai soldi che ti ripulivano dalla
dignitosa miseria, perché anche loro si sono venduti ai culi e alle tette» (Mira-
glia 2011, p. 27). In the ensuing chaos of Molotov cocktails and tear gas, the
dispersing protesters turn their attention to the symbols of the establishment.
Andrea himself gets caught up in the kicking in of bank windows (badly hurt-
ing his ankle in the process) even though he refuses to identify politically or
socially with any of the groups of protesters, seeing himself, rather, as their
socio-economic adversary.

> Loro hanno sempre incolpato gli ambiziosi come me, incapaci di sacrificarsi per
> gli altri. […] Ogni volta devo sforzarmi per adeguarmi al dolore altrui e sentir-
> mi anch'io parte del corpo sociale. […] Non puoi sentirti affine a quelli che un
> giorno potresti licenziare, tanto meno t'iscrivi a un sindacato. Aspiravo a essere
> benaccetto nelle stanze che contano […]. (Miraglia 2011, pp. 16-17)

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[3] Cfr. Martineau 2017; Ogle 2019.

By inventing Berlusconi's death, the author engages in an analysis of Italian politics that reaches back as far as the post-war years. The author, in fact, calls in the figure of Berlusconi as a sort of fault line that framed the battleground on which the opposing camps were left to contend. In the absence of this framework, the author imagines the need to create new enemies and divisions, and thus the political scene reverts to traditional patterns and identifications of political otherness that have long been obsolete in the political cartography of the neoliberal age.

Able to see through the socio-cultural assets of such dated tribalism, Andrea rejects associations with political identities, whose struggles will only come to be leveraged by the next Berlusconi. The protagonist cannot abide by positions which are not substantiated by evidence, complexity, and inclusive perspectives. He therefore rejects the possibility to identify with ready-made ideas and agendas that would only reproduce the factionalized political identity of the nation within himself: «Io invece dovrei sfilare da solo. Appartengo alla metà del paese che ha creduto a un futuro che si confonde col presente, alla ricchezza di una posizione costruita lavorando sempre più e senza orari» (Miraglia 2011, p. 17). He sees himself simply as having been forsaken by the entire system, and in this he is not alone. From this perspective, the apparently monumental ideological and political struggles of the generation of Andrea's grandparents seem like little more than a distraction while the interests of the many are betrayed regardless of political outcomes.

The interlacing of social and political structures in the shaping of individual identity that emerges throughout Andrea's speculations as he attempts to attune to changed material conditions results in a critique of individualism itself as the supporting structure of neoliberal Italy. From this perspective, Andrea's transformational story speaks to Miraglia's overt critique of a certain kind of individualism as embodied in the figure of Berlusconi himself, as the author affirms: «Berlusconi è un'impronta antropologica, è dentro di noi come l'unità di misura dell'individualismo e della sfacciataggine. […] Il mostro non è tra noi, siamo noi» (De Santis 2011).

After losing his job, Andrea becomes increasingly aware of the need to find a way of being in the world in the absence of a sense of identification. His interest shifts away from work and socio-economic concerns toward the search for meaningful engagements, even as he adjusts to homelessness, a journey that concludes with a sort of cathartic suicide. In his often-silent encounters with the 'other' in the marginalized spaces of the city – «extracomunitari, extraumanità, extra gelo, anche tanti italiani dal decoro andato» (Miraglia 2011, p. 53) – Andrea begins to develop a sense of his own otherness that emerges within the contours of what can be defined as an 'ethics of care'. Originally a site for critique and debate in feminist theory, 'care' has been proposed in the work of theorists such as Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, and more recently Maria Puig de la Bellacasa[4].

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[4] See in particular Gilligan 1982; Noddings, 2013 and Puig de la Bellacasa 2017.

As a moral theory, the 'ethics of care' emphasizes relationships and dependencies as depositories of moral significance. From this point of view, 'care ethics' seeks to identify and nourish relationships. In contrast with traditional approaches to self-realization as an individual enterprise, a positive role is now being attributed to promoting the well-being of care-givers and care-receivers in networks of social relations. In *Muori Milano, muori!*, the main character develops a growing capacity not just for acts of selflessness but for acts of physically intimate and emotional care for others. For example, he provides menial care for his friend's elderly and bed-ridden mother with surprising tenderness and companionship to a woman with a disability in a homeless encampment. It is to this woman that in the end Andrea gives the last remaining material symbol associated with his previous identity: his Bancomat card and PIN number which he had carefully been guarding in his transition to life on the streets as if it were a sort of talisman, the last physical remnant of his former identity.

Unable to renegotiate a stable form of social self-identification, Andrea gestures at the end of the novel towards the more than human world in an extreme act of 'care', allowing himself to be buried alive in the mud during a final deluge on the eve of the Expo's opening: «Da me nascerà altra vita, diventerò la vita attorno. […] Chiudo gli occhi, ora sto meglio» (Miraglia 2011, p. 184). By devising a new reality in which the character's daily life is stripped of the elements that had guaranteed the establishment and maintenance of a stable (yet unquestioned) identity, the author investigates the possibilities of developing new forms of identity which are not based on socio-economic relations. He thereby invites not only a reconsideration of the structures and hierarchies that support contemporary society and its value system but also their compatibility with living a meaningful life.

3. The naked self

An analogous concern for exploring identity formation, which also concludes with the suicide of the main character, can be found in Francesca Genti's *La febbre*. Set in a more distant and less recognizable future, the post-apocalyptic cityscape of (ostensibly) Milan in which the story unfolds is the result of the interruption of the regular cycle of night and day: «Il cielo un giorno si è ribellato. Il sole si è incastrato sopra la linea dell'orizzonte. Sono anni che viviamo in un perenne tramonto» (Genti 2011, p. 8). The disruption of physical laws, which consequently led to food instability and war, apparently coincides with the establishment of an authoritarian socio-political order whose details are never fully described by the protagonist-narrator, *il Poeta dei Graffiti*. The main character and his two companions, who identify themselves as rebels, wander this hallucinating reality, characterized by ecological breakdown, genetically engineered hybrid animals, transgenic plants, and a collaps-

ing cityscape partly submerged by a steadily advancing sea of tar. With a sort of detached indifference, the three rebels nevertheless refuse to comply with the totalitarian regime to which almost everyone else has chosen to conform.

Although set within the contours of a more phantasmagorical scenario, Genti's *La febbre*, like Miraglia's novel, investigates processes of identity in relation to a critique of the cultural shifts that underpin the politics of the neoliberal order. Before life was disrupted by the change in the Earth's physics, the main character had secured celebrity status for himself. First, he becomes a global cultural icon of the art world by covering the city's subway stops with his *neograffittismo concettuale* – shocking graffiti about religious topics. Then in a second moment he reaches the heights of celebrity status with the invention of a new art form, body animal art, which involves the substitution of his human body parts with those of animals.

> Nel corso della mia carriera mi sono spinto oltre i limiti immaginabili, trasformandomi in un Frankenstein all'ennesima potenza, in un terribile zoo ambulante. Vedendo come stanno le cose adesso, ho trasformato il mio corpo in un oracolo. Sono diventato un mostro. È stato un successo planetario. (Genti 2011, p. 11)

As the reader learns about the parameters of this dystopian world set towards the end of the 21st century, the protagonist expresses his revulsion for those who have conformed. Although it is never made clear to what kind of agreement they have subscribed, the *conniventi* are described as a group with limited freedom of movement who perform work for the regime according to certain rules in exchange for access to a comfortable dwelling and to the food supply. The Cathedral, which stands alone in the center of the city and serves as the headquarters of the regime, remains the only building that survived the earthquake and the ensuing war(s) intact: «Una volta centro pulsante della vita religiosa, ora si è trasformata in un enorme centro commerciale, opulento, meraviglioso, pieno di qualsiasi cosa» (Genti 2011, p. 29). Its walls are entirely covered by advertisements and its once stained-glass windows have been replaced with flashing, neon lights. In this dystopic perversion of the spiritual dimension, the fetish of shopping embodies what Zygmunt Bauman calls capitalist consumerism's «fully eschatological dimension» (Bauman 2017, p. 42). In what was once the city's most important religious structure there are now five floors of shopping while the subterranean levels of the Cathedral are not coincidentally dedicated to the imprisonment and torture of the rebels whose only crime seems to be that they are non-consumers and therefore dangerous elements that must be removed from the social body.

Even before the change in the social order, the *Poeta* spent his life physically transforming himself into an animal in an attempt to gain social status and fame. The author uses this transformation to stress how, by developing strategies to operate within a society he ultimately rejects, the character had to undergo dynamics of compromise that reshaped him into a monstrous version of himself. Before his bodily mutilation, the wealthy society that sought him

out repulsed him even while he seemed to superficially revel in the material comforts that accompanied his success. In his grand re-introduction to these same elite circles of *decrepiti oligarchi* years later after his physical transformation, his goal is to repulse by presenting himself as a mirror-image of themselves. Such a manipulation of his performance through the animalizing of the body allowed him continued access to acceptance and status on which his self-identification was founded, but it was also somehow reflected in his perception of their animal-like behavior and their own grotesque transformation that their infinite resources allowed.

> Mi avevano conosciuto da ragazzino, portato a cena, a letto, in vacanza. Avevano cercato di sedurmi con quello che avevano a disposizione: soldi, corpi, palazzi. Mi avevano disgustato. Ora tornavo per disgustarli io, anche se conoscendoli sarebbe stato molto difficile, forse impossibile. […] mi concentravo sul suono delle voci: latrati, pigolii, squittii, gorgheggi, ragli, grugniti. Le loro voci mi sembrava non avessero niente di umano. […] Non erano molto diversi da me, anche loro si erano trasformati molto, nella speranza di conservare quello che in passato avevano avuto in abbondanza: la bellezza. (Genti 2011, pp. 15-16)

The artistic trajectory of the *Poeta* – first as a graffiti artist and then with the complete transformation of his body – is indelibly tied to his performance and, more importantly, his physiognomy. The alignment of his outward appearance with his inner self allows him to overcome his unwillingness to be part of a world that made him feel unwanted and alienated. He fully identifies with his animal appearance, which is reinforced through the responses to his physical self by others; the Poet's audience is horrified as well as inescapably attracted to the Poet's sublime disfigurement. While seeing the human world as non-human, he negotiates a level of belonging with the attempt to shock people not only as an artist but in his role as rebel. He uses his monstrous and imposing physical presence, in fact, as a defense mechanism to protect himself and his companions from the authorities who are hunting them. This anthroposcopic identification is internalized and becomes an integral part of the Poet's selfhood. The protagonist, in fact, is aware of being prone to behaviors that the reader might situate within the animal realm, particularly in his visceral abandon to the basic functions of life, eating and sexual activity, thereby fully identifying with an otherness that allows him to behave according to his negotiated understanding of the human world and how it performs.

Studies on identity formation have emphasized the role of interactions with others in the development of the self and a sense of identity. Moreover, as Christopher Bondy reminds us, «the process of bracketing one's identity is based on a continued assessment of the social field in which one is embedded» (Bondy 2015, p. 4). In Genti's *La febbre*, the author shapes the *Poeta* as an emblematic figure emphasizing how, throughout the interactional performances of social life, the self is negotiated, adjusted, displayed and also interiorized by the individual, whose performances are directed not only towards others but

also toward the self. The Poet's transformed physiognomy points towards the degeneration of the process of «bracketing one's identity» as the assessment of the social context and the desire to rise to fame cause the Poet to develop a composite animal body that starts shaping his thoughts and actions. In coming to fully identify with his manipulated body, the Poet ultimately finds a new identity negotiated through his interactions and performances, with his animal appearance, his brutishness, and his freakish, monster-like selfhood: «Sono diventato finalmente me stesso, trasformandomi in un altro: il Poeta dei Graffiti, l'uomo bestia, lo zoo ambulante» (Genti 2011, pp. 165-166). It is in this period of full identification with his physical self in the novel that the Poet appears most comfortable *being* in the world: he has relationships with close friends – his fellow rebels – who he protects and with whom he shares common ground, and he reflectively thinks about his personal and professional trajectory.

This stable balance that has been achieved by the protagonist as a way of being in the world, however, falls apart in the final chapters of the novel. The competing instincts and emotions lead to a destabilization of his self-understanding in the face of the imminent end of civilization. This destabilization manifests itself in a febrile act of destruction against his companions. It begins with the Poet's feelings of attraction for Valentina, an apparent *connivente*, who he had once saved from the police. In what can be described as a surreal setting in a place called *gli Orti*, he meets her again during a final, orgy-like party outside of the city that quickly devolves into violence, at which point the Poet eats Valentina in an unrestrained sexual act the protagonist defines as «cannibalism». He then 'saves' his companions by setting the wooded area on fire, leaving them to die (if they are still alive) as he sets out to return to the city. On his solitary journey, the Poet reflects upon his actions as he tries to revert back to his human persona through memory, recalling an episode from his adolescence when he was unable to reconcile his performance with the expectations of those around him: «Volevo uscire da me. Non essere più io. Cominciai a spogliarmi: giacca, camicia, canottiera, scarpe, pantaloni, calze, mutande, fino a che rimasi completamente nudo, sotto la pioggia chirurgica e salvifica» (Genti 2011, p. 165).

As he moves toward the sea of tar, the Poet experiences a similar desire to despoil himself of those material objects that manifest the negotiation of his identity. As an adolescent it was his outward appearance, namely his clothes, but now he sheds his various animal bodyparts in a sort of return to a naked, human self-identification. He first removes his monkey tail and one of his horns, then he loses the scales from one of his legs, the claws from his feet, his second horn. He breaks off both of his elephant tusks, and finally, partially submerged in the sea of tar, he loses his first and most beloved transplanted bodypart – *l'artiglio di rapace*. The de-individualized addition of parts does not so much activate the idea of the hybrid as much as it is a disarticulated collection of tools which adds to the performative potential of the body as a site of negotiation between society and personhood.

Adesso è uguale. […] Ho voglia di spogliarmi come allora. […] Mentre mi disfaccio dei pezzi del mio corpo non sento dolore, solo liberazione. Come sotto quel temporale. […] Ora che anche l'ultimo orpello a cui mi aggrappavo è andato perduto, ora che non sono più niente, solo un uomo, sono esausto. Mi fermo qui. E lascio fare al mare. (Genti 2011, pp. 165-169)

The novel, in fact, ends in this moment of separation between the Poet's negotiated identity – as manifested in his hybrid body – and the naked self, stripped of all the concessions he made in order to gain status. When confronted with a collapsing society and with the dissolution of satisfying the desires of others in order to rise to the top, the Poet seems to reconcile with his true self. Thus, in Genti's *La febbre*, the fact that the main character's identity is affected by the continuous assessments of events and contexts in relation to the expectations of others is presented in its potential for loss and degeneration in the context of neo-liberalism as this negotiation comes to be paired with the stress on individualism and individual success.

4. The end of identity, or identities of the end

The bleak endings of these works demonstrate a manipulation of the more traditional apocalyptic model that provides a somewhat hopeful vision for the future, often by salvaging and even reaffirming the same social, political, and economic structures – and therefore processes of identity formation – that brought humankind to the brink of extinction in the first place. Instead, the characters' suicide in the two novels examined here seems to indicate either that the reconstruction of a stable social identity would be impossible without the parameters of late capitalism or that such an identity configures as an extreme refusal to participate in a social body based on injustice and socio-economic hierarchies.

 Scholarship on Italian apocalyptic fiction has largely focused on the period of the 1970s-80s, years in which Italian society underwent radical transformations in the wake of mass urbanization, social unrest, and economic fear following decades of reconstruction and economic growth[5]. The above instances from more recent apocalyptic works similarly target what Bruno Pischedda calls «l'edificio borghese» (Pischedda 2004, p. 10), specifically in the historical context of the financial crisis of 2007-2008 which brought about, according to data published in 2017[6], a significant and negative change of public opinion in Italy regarding faith in the economy, in globalization, and in feelings of socio-economic inclusion. Even if it has very often been co-opted by the entertainment industry to reaffirm the exceptionalism of the capitalist model

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[5] Cfr. Pischedda 2004.
[6] Cfr. Risso, Pessato 2017.

typically by repurposing the values that structure today's society, scholars such as Robson, Berger, and Mazurek recognize the radical critique of the status quo that can be embedded in apocalyptic narratives because they «emphasize that no social reform can cure the world's diseases. Every structure of the old world is infected, and only an absolute, purifying cataclysm can make possible an utterly new, perfected world» (Berger 1999, p. 40).

The two instances of Italian fiction discussed here, in fact, target the systems and values of the present as they pervade and substantiate processes of identification and personhood. That questions regarding these processes of identity formation play an important role in these dystopian novels speaks not only to the importance of identity construction but also to the ethical issues that surround personal and social identifications. The apocalyptic paradigm, which allows the authors to push ontological boundaries through imagination, opens up the question on how challenging established hierarchies along with the value systems that support them can be sites for the investigation of new forms of ethics that can reshape our conception of identity construction and the processes upon which it is built.

Both novels put forward stories of identity (de)construction. In *Muori Milano, muori!* the protagonist comes to lose the parameters on which his sense of self was constructed just to find a new way of living which focuses on community and relations rather than on nuclear family and the values of the Italian middle class. In *La febbre*, the question of identity and self is presented in an even more pressing way, as the negotiations that make the *Poeta*'s success possible – as an artist in a pre-apocalyptic world and as a lone rebel in a post-apocalyptic scenario – effectively reshape his body in a way that leaves no way back. Once the Poet finally renounces his attempt to succeed and survive, he can ultimately return to being himself. While Genti's vision leaves little room for hope to establish one's own self within capitalist society without compromising beliefs, Miraglia shows that alternative communities exist where one might be able to engage in processes of identity formation that do not lead to either personal failure or resigned conformism.

It is in this sense that I suggest considering the novels as examples of how the apocalyptic model can be adapted to question processes of identity formation and the parameters that inform them. Both novels openly contest neoliberal societies and their stress on success and achievement, and they visualize ways of undoing the characteristics that the protagonists were forced to embrace in that context. By moving away from the expectations of the final return to order that characterizes most apocalyptic narratives today, the termination of the protagonist's self that characterizes both stories pushes forward the need to reconsider the meaning of their lives as described in the novel. Ultimately, both models point towards the possibility to find a counter-model to capitalist individualism in terms of the search for a new set of values and objectives on which to negotiate identity and selfhood in more positive and constructive ways.