

Earthquakes in Italy:

How Natural Disasters Are Interpreted and Remembered

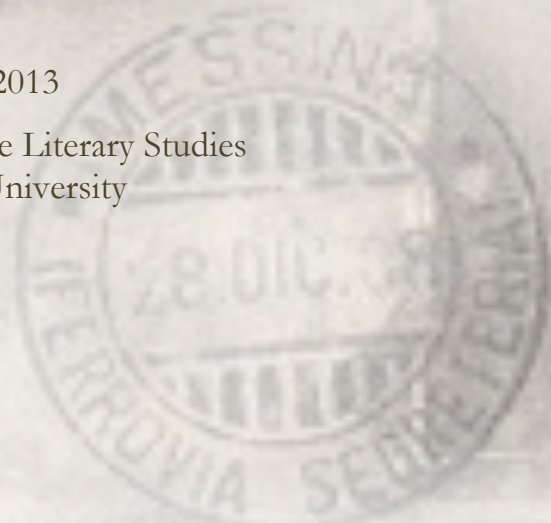
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July 2013

RMA Comparative Literary Studies
Utrecht University



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Messina - Clock from the Destroyed Postal Office That Stopped at the Fatal Hour. N.d. Photograph.
Torrinonews.blogspot.it. 27 Dec. 2008. Web. 8 July 2013.

Table of content

Table of content	3
Preface.....	4
Introduction.....	6
Earthquake, Trauma, Culturalization	9
Interpretation process	11
Narrativization and framing.....	13
Cultural Memory.....	17
Why earthquakes.....	18
Ecocriticism	21
The case of three Italian earthquakes.....	25
Chapter I – Messina 1908: a not forgotten earthquake	28
Historical background	28
Reporting.....	33
Recollection	47
Chapter II – Irpinia and Bologna 1980: a comparison.....	68
Historical background	68
The Irpinia earthquake	69
Reporting: earthquakes 1908-1980	72
The Irpinia earthquake: recollection	84
The Bologna Massacre.....	96
Reporting: Irpinia and Bologna 1980.....	97
The Bologna massacre: recollection	111
Conclusion - From L’Aquila 2009 perspective.....	121
Works Cited	128

Preface

Why I am interested in the impact that natural disasters – and in particular earthquakes – have on communities is easily explained by naming the Italian region I come from. Abruzzo is a green region in the heart of Italy, mostly known abroad for its round and full *Montepulciano* and its breath-taking hiking routes. Nonetheless, in recent years, it has also become associated to the tremendous earthquake that in 2009 caused a great part of its provincial capital, L'Aquila, to rubble. Hence, my fascination with earthquakes began the night of that April 6th, when Abruzzo, besides its wines and mountains, reconfirmed itself as a highly seismic area.

My interest in cultural memory studies, on the contrary, commenced in The Netherlands. I moved to Utrecht three months after the L'Aquila earthquake and in the same city, one year later, I decided to complete my study with a Research Master in Comparative Literature. *Literature and Cultural Memory* taught by Ann Rigney was my first course and – by now I can say it – one of the most inspiring courses I ever had. Earthquakes and cultural memory met in the middle ground that is my mind in another precise moment and place. In one of the last classes of the course, discussing traumatic events, a fellow student gave the example of earthquakes as events, which lacking a human agency, lose, in a sense, their traumatic effect. Amongst strangers such as Cathy Caruth and Margalit Avishai this topic felt closer to me, triggering an impulsive and rather aggressive reaction. What did my colleague know about going to sleep with the fear that your house would crumble down over your head? Did he ever jump out from the bed in the middle of the night mistaking his heartbeat for the initial vibration of a quake? Finally, what about the brand new *Casa dello Studente* that was the first to collapse? If human evil was not at all involved in the quake, what would he make of those people who have profited from cheap construction materials and released an unstable building intended to host students in a extremely seismic area?

Soon after I began documenting myself about the work done on the impact that natural disasters have on the collective memory of communities, discovering how few were the studies on this topic and how often it was liquidated by saying that those kind of disasters do not produce notable cultural works. A tutorial then gave me the possibility of digging more deeply into this hole in current memory studies. Deep enough to understand its nature, but not deep enough to prove that it can be filled. This thesis aims at the latter. Its purpose, therefore, is to shed light on this aspect of the cultural memory of certain communities and investigate how natural disasters have been interpreted and remembered, how this interpretation and memories have shift over time, and, finally, how they differ from man-made disasters in this regard. Yet, time and space are always both opportunities and boundaries. That is why this work will be limited to the analysis of three case studies amongst Italian earthquakes of the last two centuries.

After finishing writing a work that have kept my mind and my life on a leash for a few months, I feel the need of thanking those who have sustained my creative process as well as those who obstinately have tried to escape it. A part of me is included. But above all, I want to thank Ann Rigney, although it seems to me superfluous after having explained the fundamental role that she has had in my student carrier. Still, as my supervisor, I must acknowledge her maieutic skill of believing in me and in my ideas before myself. Finally, particularly supportive as well as positively distractive was Derrick, my boyfriend, to whom I own, amongst a numerous list of other things, the fact of letting me live with my disorganized head in a rather organized house.

Introduction

The relation between men and nature has been a matter of concern and inspiration for literature, music, and the other arts as far as the human species can remember. Moreover, this relation has assumed different characteristics according to different times and places. Man's perception of nature ranged between portrayals of nature as loving mother and as wicked and indifferent stepmother. At one moment, nature appeared under the guise of an Arcadian landscape held together by harmonious energies; at the next moment, it unleashed the apocalyptic scenario of an earthquake or of a volcanic eruption. It was this latter face of nature – the face of natural catastrophes – that the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) wanted man to be more aware of. In particular, in one of his very last poems, “La Ginestra” (1836), the poet famously reminded men of nature's destructive power. A tsunami, a plague, or an earthquake could destroy an entire community and leave for the community itself only little hope of being remembered:

People that a wave / of a deeply moved sea, a breath / of evil aura, an underground collapse / destroys, so that it advances / although with great difficulty only their remembrance.

[Popoli che un'onda/di mar commosso, un fiato/d'aura maligna, un sotterraneo crollo/distrugge sì, che avanza/a gran pena di lor la rimembranza.] (Leopardi 42)

At the same time, Leopardi comes up with the figure of the “*ginestra*”, broom, i.e. a humble but powerfully-scented flower that grows in the most inhospitable environments, such as the arid slopes of the Vesuvius volcano. According to Leopardi, his contemporaries have forgotten the precariousness of the human condition within nature. Instead of living with dignity and opposing together the sole enemy of man, i.e. nature, men are busy fighting each other, proving in this way that they are sons of their century, the 19th century, which is more “*superbo e sciocco*” – arrogant and foolish – than enlightened.

I wonder what Leopardi would think of our modern world, especially of these last decades when the face of catastrophes has become for us a very familiar one. Hurricane Katrina, the earthquakes in Haiti and Sumatra, the nuclear disaster at Fukushima, but also less intense – yet still disastrous for the population – like the earthquakes in L’Aquila and Modena¹: these are only a few of the recent catastrophes which have frightened humans and which seem to remind us once again of the power of nature and of its eternal challenge to man. A frightening chain of natural disasters has revealed man to be more vulnerable in the face of nature the farther he grows apart from it.

Meanwhile, we have also been witnessing an increasing interest in the environment. If Leopardi, but also the Latin poet Virgil or the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth – just to mention a few – were fascinated by the relation of men to their environment, it is in the last fifty years that a more general concern about this relation has risen to the surface. If we have to mention a date, we could say that ever since the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962 a new way of conceiving the world in which men live has begun to emerge in the Anglo-European world (Garrard 1). Carson’s book portrayed for the first time the ecological disaster produced by the use of pesticides on a global level. The massive quantities of DDT (organic pesticide) used in agriculture indeed had been killing billions of insects, but millions of birds whose diet was based on insects also died, leaving behind them a silent spring. After *Silent Spring*, other successful books took up other ecological warnings, ranging from climate change to environment pollution. These “literary” warnings brought to the fore of public consciousness the interaction between humans and their environment, or ecological destruction, thereby creating a wider social and cultural platform for discussion, one which would not be restricted to expert circles. These ecological disasters have obviously different causes and effects than an earthquake or a hurricane. Nevertheless, I believe both kinds of catastrophe force humans to turn toward their environment and reconsider their interaction with it.

¹ The magnitude of L’Aquila and Modena earthquakes was much lower than the earthquake that hit Haiti (2010), Sumatra (2004) and Japan (2011).

It is not easy to define a ‘natural’ disaster since there is often a certain degree of human responsibility hiding behind every natural catastrophe and its impact. A piece of mountain sliding into a basin and generating a wave whose power is able to sweep away entire villages and their inhabitants might be an example of a natural disaster. The sliding in itself is an unpredictable phenomenon of nature and the people, victims of the event, are innocent. Yet, if the basin is artificial and its dam is built ignoring warning from geologists (and from nature itself) and speculating on the economic profit of its construction, can we still consider this event a natural disaster? The Vajont Dam Disaster of 1963 in the north of Italy where 2,000 people lost their lives provides a case in point. Despite the various attempt to interpret this event as natural and to forget about it, UNESCO took it in 2008 as an example of a man-made disaster, i.e. an event whose disastrous impact is a human responsibility.

It seems impossible to imagine a human responsibility for events such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that natural disasters are considered ‘disastrous’ insofar as they are so for man. Let us consider earthquakes. They are physical phenomena that can strike everywhere, both in a desert and in the heart of a metropolis. Usually the first is considered an earthquake and the second an earthquake disaster. According to Jacques Derrida, indeed, “there is no natural violence, an earthquake is not violent, it is only violent insofar as it damages human interests” (qtd. in Bennett, Royle 92). The fact that an earthquake is considered a disaster only when it strikes a city explains why the scale of the disaster is measured in relation to the scale of damages suffered by buildings. Not by chance, the famous and still frequently used Mercalli intensity scale² is based precisely on this relation. And it is in this direction that we can see how human responsibility also fits in the discourses on natural events such as earthquakes. As far as we know man does not cause earthquakes and cannot forecast them.

² The Mercalli intensity scale is a seismic scale used for measuring the intensity of an earthquake without taking into account the actual magnitude of the physical phenomenon but rather its destructive effects on people, human structures and natural environment. The scale has been revisited several times yet maintaining the name of the scientist who first modified it (1884 and 1906), namely the Italian volcanologist Giuseppe Mercalli. Although an extended version of Mercalli intensity scale is still used, the Richter intensity scale has been preferred to it.

Nonetheless, the recent negative sentence issued against a group of Italian seismologists sued for not having alerted the population about the quake that occurred in L'Aquila in 2009, seems to confuse our certainties about the limits of science³. “Nothing is more natural than seismic activity” (Dickie, *Disastro* 4). Yet man can decide where to build and how to build in order to modify the relation between the earthquake and damages it causes. Once this principle is accepted, then, whenever man does not do what he is capable of doing in order to prevent a disaster, in the perpetual challenge between man and his environment, that disaster also becomes his responsibility, for “both before and after an earthquake a whole host of social factors come into play to constitute a ‘disaster’” (Dickie, *Disastro* 4).

Earthquake, Trauma, Culturalization

Any disaster that concerns people, whether natural or not, is a traumatic event for those who are in any kind of way its victims. Traumatic in the sense that earthquakes, for example, do not just bring about the death of people or destroy cities, but leave scars. These scars are not easy to identify since “the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 8). Yet, these scars can be indirectly retraced through the cultural production about the event itself or even about other painful experiences which echo the trauma.

In this research I will remain focused on the human world, yet acknowledging that we are not the only victims. Moreover, I will focus on those natural disasters, which have been amongst the most traumatic for men, i.e. earthquakes. Annually there are 50,000 earthquakes strong enough to be felt without detection instruments, and among them 100 produce damage to man-made structures and impact on human and animal life. In these 100 cases men watch helplessly as their past and their future, made of buildings and memories, crumble down under the power of nature – a power

³ On 22 October 2012 – 3 years after the earthquake that hit the Italian city L'Aquila causing 308 casualties – The Italian court condemn as guilty of manslaughter 7 seismologists for not having communicated the risk of a possible earthquake in that area. The sentence arouses many polemics about the role of science and of human responsibility in preventing disasters.

that comes from the bowels of the same earth they believed gave them a secure shelter. How can man justify such destruction? For a long time the rage of gods was the answer. Earthquakes were tools through which the gods manifested their disappointment in human beings. The revolution of reason in the 18th century proposed an alternative to theodicy and the earthquake came to be regarded as the result of blind chance, of a nature indifferent rather than malign. Nowadays man's relation to nature is changing. Following scientists' warnings and a more general 'ecological' trend, the most advanced politician and manager plays the 'nature card' – proposing, for instance, eco-friendly projects and a more ecological future perspective. And yet, the question of how to make sense of such a disaster still remains.

I will begin by considering earthquakes as traumatic events, which I believe affect the relation between man and nature especially at the present time when men seem to be more sensitive toward this relation. Nevertheless, when an earthquake takes place it is not only individuals who are affected by it, but also the entire community or communities. Considering earthquakes as traumatic events that hit certain communities, I would expect they would emerge in the cultural production of the communities directly affected, but also of the imagined ones (Anderson).

This expectation comes from the fact that a similar cultural receptivity exists in the case of other traumatic events. The human catastrophe of 9/11 and the countless cultural productions that have followed are without doubt one of the most striking examples of this cultural receptivity which we could refer to as the "interpretation process" of an event. But does an earthquake and 9/11 differ? My claim in this research is that natural catastrophes are interpreted like other traumatic events but in their own peculiar way. Whereas a man-made disaster is always considered as a cultural event, a 'natural' disaster needs to be culturalized. Hence if I can write of an interpretation process for a man-made disaster, the term "culturalization" for a natural disaster will emphasise a kind of interpretation that above all has to lead people from a natural to a cultural understanding of the event. A culturalization that might have changed in the last hundred years, especially in view of

the increased number of natural disasters regularly reported by media and of the growing awareness of the fragile relation between humans and their environment.

Interpretation process

The “interpretation process” is a complex network of mediation practices, in which an event is captured soon after its occurrence. Mediation could be too vague a term. In a broad sense – or postmodern one – indeed, everything around us is mediated, for our subjectivity filters everything. Nonetheless, in this research I refer by the term mediation to the more general filter of cultural media. In other words, every event that passes through a cultural medium, such as newspapers, television, cinema, literature, music and so forth, is inevitably affected by mediation, for it always gets interpreted by the medium itself, providing a peculiar perspective from which to look at reality. From this standpoint, the analysis of how an event has been interpreted is fundamental in order to understand its exact historical, political and cultural contexts.

The mediation of an event is never a singular and isolated act. On the contrary, the same event can be mediated repeatedly, in several ways, during different time frames and for diverse purposes. In general, mediation practices consist of processes through which an event is told and reiterated in the form of a recollection at a different point in time. When an event is mediated in order to transmit the fact that it has occurred and to explain it to a contemporary public as part of news, the mediation takes the name of reporting. In contrast, it takes the name of recollection when it is interpreted for memory purposes at a later point in time. In short, we could distinguish between reporting and recollecting an event as different forms of mediation. Both practices use cultural media and various kinds of performances as their tools, and they are ultimately those cultural practices through which a community is able to interpret and remember any kind of event. And yet they are rather dissimilar. Let us have a closer look at both.

The main difference between reporting and recollection is that they appear in two different phases of the interpretation of an event. Reporting is contemporaneous to the event it’s dealing

with, whereas recollection mediates the event when it is already in the past. As a consequence of this time difference, the analysis of the initial interpretations of an event gives the possibility of looking into the historical, political and cultural frame of a certain community in a certain moment, while any analysis carried out on recollected events has the advantage of registering also the diachronic change in its mediation. However, we should also keep in mind that there is not always a clear-cut distinction between these two stages of interpretation, for the difference is based on the remembering mode of recollection. Still, we can never tell when the remembering process exactly begins.

Another consequence is that while the reporting is nurtured above all by eyewitnesses' testimonies, recollection may mediate the event at a time in which eyewitnesses are no longer alive. Therefore, whereas the first phase of the interpretation lives mostly on first-hand information, the second phase is based on previous mediated materials. Another difference regards the employment of different media, technologies and genres.

The way in which people understand an event depends on what news media – such as newspaper articles and television news – report it. Articles, interviews, photo shoots and videos are used to communicate the event in the most objective way. The genres used can be summarized with the term 'nonfiction'. In contrast, the recollection has a wider range of expression. This might be explained adapting a concept of Avishai Margalit and claiming that whereas reporting is knowledge about the present, recollection is a mediation that brings "*knowledge from the past*" (14) but not necessarily "*about*" the past. The main purpose of the reporting is to inform the reader about the event.

Although for both reporting and recollecting hidden agendas might lurk under the choice of the point of view and the relevance given to the facts within an event, the main goal of reporting is always to present a story – which is believed to be true, close to reality and as objective as possible – while recollection is not bound to reality. Memory's aim is not to tell us what happened – also because often the reader already knows it – but rather express what it was like to be there and relive

emotions and connect this to the present: what does it mean for us today? Moreover, remembrance can be expressed in the form of either a fictional or a nonfictional story. The way in which people remember is based on several different media, technologies and genres, from literature to movies, but also from history to memoir, monuments and even to a creative use of the archive. Finally, whereas the process that Hayden White calls “narrativization” of an event is, in the phase of the reporting, still in progress, it could be considered completed in the phase of recollection.

Narrativization and framing

The “narrativization” of a real event is an essential part of the process of its interpretation. This aspect of interpretation consists of translating a real event from the knowing mode to a telling mode. According to White real events do not “display the coherence, integrity, fullness and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (White 27). In other words, reality never presents itself with a clear beginning, a development and an end. Nevertheless, man – or at least people in the western world – feels the need or the “desire” – as White puts it – to grasp reality and make it available to their minds in a coherent form that allows a quick understanding and the possibility of passing it on to other people. To narrativize an event means to translate it into a narrative i.e. to mould it into a story which has a central subject, a beginning, a development and a conclusion.

As a form of mediation, narrativization is everything but neutral and transparent. When you tell a friend what you have done during your holiday or when a journalist writes a news item, the event needs to be reduced, modified and made to fit into a story framework, according to one’s personal idea of the world. The concept of framework is commonly used in social science to indicate those filters or literary tropes used to make sense of reality. Specifically, within news media, according to Jim Kuypers, “framing is a process whereby communicators, consciously or unconsciously, act to construct a point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted by others in a particular manner”. Thus, in order for an event to emerge in the cultural

production of a community, it has to be first of all transformed into a story and made correspond to a specific frame or point of view.

Let us consider a globally-known example, i.e. the 9/11 terrorist attacks, an event which has been narrativized, mediated and re-mediated in order to be remembered. Many people were near the targets of what soon after would be called “terrorist attacks” and everyone was struggling to understand what was going on, if not simply trying to find shelter. In the case of all these people, the event was probably already being mediated in that moment by their personal experience and knowledge, if we believe in the postmodern assumption according to which reality can only be understood subjectively. Nevertheless, beside those, millions of people all over the world experienced the event being mediated while watching it live on television. The images and the running commentary of the television programs contributed to the interpretation and narrativization of the event. Via a cultural medium such as the television the airplanes were recognized as hijacked and turned into kamikaze aircrafts. The piercing of the Twin Towers and the crashing into the Pentagon were called a Terrorist Attack. The entire American population was declared a victim of this attack. The fire fighters became the saviours and angels of the United States. As in many well-known kinds of narrative we have perpetrators (the kamikaze aircrafts), victims (Americans), helpers of the victims (the fire fighters), and violent actions (the Terrorist Attacks). But how do we interpret this story? What is the motive behind all of it? In the days after September 11, all the newspapers displayed the image of the smoking Twin Towers on their front-pages and the same attention was given to the event in various other media, so that through them the narrative of the event began to assume an epic shape. The United States couldn't do anything to avoid the disaster, but surprisingly fast they were sure about the identity of the attacker: the Islamic militant Osama Bin Laden, as head and founder of the terrorist group al-Qaeda. From this perspective, 9/11 became the first signpost in the story of America's War on Terror, marking the eternal struggle of Good against Evil. This was one of the main interpretations of the event, but as I have explained before, an event can generate several different mediations. Thus, beside the main story, the main

interpretation sustained by the American government, other versions of the same story began to take shape and to multiply.

The same goes for the recollection of 9/11 which begun immediately after the first reporting of the event. In the ten years that followed the event, countless narratives, memorials, and performances have been generated, showing a large variety of interpretations and frames for remembering the tragic event. All these different points of view have generated a lively debate about the effect of these kinds of recollection on American communities. What is the meaning that Americans give to the event nowadays? What, and how do they remember? And, in which terms? These are some of the questions which several academics – such as Marita Sturken (*Tourists of History* 2007), and Jim Kuypers (*Bush's War* 2009) – are trying to answer in order to understand how the mediation and recollection of the event have changed or reinforced American national identity and the Americans' vision of the world.

The 9/11 event was just a simple example with the help of which we could recognize the different stages of the interpretation process. My focus remains earthquakes. Even if natural disasters have generally received less attention than disasters caused by humans, they have recently grown into a major concern for newspapers, blogs, literature, movies, and also academic writings. The Hurricane Katrina that destroyed New Orleans in 2005 is a case in point and Sue Robinson is well aware of it. In her article “We Were all There” published in 2009, indeed, Robinson focuses on the various interpretations that national and local press have given of the event and how the tension between them have helped shape its collective memory. This shows that in some way natural disasters have also been culturalized, hence they also come to take part in the cultural memory of a community. At this point, my general questions address the manner in which an earthquake is culturalized, that is, how it is mediated and remembered by communities and how it fits in the on-going multidirectional networks⁴ of memories borrowed and adapted by other groups of people

⁴ According to Michael Rothberg memories do not have boundaries and are not owned by a singular community. On the contrary, memories can travel in time and in space though “borrowing or adaptations” (*Multidirectional Memory* 5) creating in such a way a multidirectional network of recollection.

(Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*), which form the cultural discourse over a longer period of time. In other words, I am concerned with how communities are able to turn an earthquake-disaster into a coherent story to tell and remember; how, ultimately, they make sense of it. How does such a disaster influence the community's identity and vision of their relation with the environment? Moreover, I am also concerned with the ways in which this culturalization process differs from the interpretation that occurs after a man-made disaster like the 9/11. With this research I expect to demonstrate how earthquake disasters, as an example of natural catastrophe, are culturalized in their own particular way.

I expect, for instance, that the process of translating an earthquake disaster - recognized as a traumatic natural event - into a coherent story differs from the narrativization of other traumatic events, for it encounters at least one major obstacle. An earthquake is above all a natural phenomenon and, in order for it to be understood, it must be transferred from a natural to a cultural sphere. Although – as we will see in the pages to come – we should try not to draw a clear line between nature and culture, here I need to distinguish the “humanization” of a natural event from its culturalization. To humanize a natural event – or nature in general – means to impose the semantic categories used for humans upon it, and this is generally possible through the use of literary tropes such as anthropomorphic metaphors. In other words, humanization is a form of culturalization, a common way for people – poetically inclined or not – to register the natural event that they have experienced. For example, we could go back for a moment to the poem of Leopardi, mentioned at the beginning of this introduction. The volcano Vesuvio, where the broom grows, is described already in the first three lines in a human way:

Here on the arid back/ of the formidable mountain/ exterminator Vesuvio.

[Qui su l'arida schiena/ del formidabil monte/ sterminator Vesevo.] (Leopardi 42)

The slopes of the volcano are here referred to as an arid back [“arida schiena”] and the [“formidabil monte”], i.e. the Vesuvio is seen as an exterminator. Nevertheless, it would be sufficient to dig into our daily language to discover many other examples of “humanization”. It is common in Italian, for

instance, to use the word that denotes the human mouth [“bocca”] in order to refer to the crater of the volcano.

Moreover, although theodicy as a form of making sense of evil and suffering has lost much of its consolatory power since the Enlightenment (Olick, “Theodicy”), I expect it – at least in certain communities – to be still a strong component of earthquake disaster narratives. The earthquake as an expression of God brings us back to many passages in the Bible. God’s judgment upon communities and even nations is, indeed, often given in the form of a great shaking of the earth. Notwithstanding scientific explanation, many people still believe the will of God to be behind earthquakes. Not to mention that just as often theodicy mingles with superstitions to result in rather absurd interpretation of the earthquake.

Humanization and theodicy are just a few cultural expedients among those that are going to be displayed in this paper, and both in turn belong to people’s common need to make sense of a disaster, seeking either a way of healing the suffering or an answer able to satisfy human rationality.

Cultural Memory

Although, as I have mentioned before, the boundaries between reporting and recollection are sometimes blurred, the recollection of an event – and in particular a traumatic one like the one I will investigate – is what Cultural Memories Studies is most concerned about. The term cultural memory was used for the first time by Jan Assmann (*Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* 1992) as a specification of the more general term ‘collective memory’, in its turn coined by the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (*La Mémoire collective* 1950). Whereas the term collective memory explored the link between memory and communities, with the term cultural memory, Assmann highlights the link between memory and culture, way in which communities remember even when all the eyewitnesses of the recollected event are no longer alive. In other words, communities maintain memories long after the occurrence of the event “through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance) (J. Assmann,

“Collective Memory” 129), i.e. via the mediation of various cultural media. Because of this, cultural memory can be summarized as the memory of a community obtained through cultural re-mediation. In addition, there is another concept that needs clarification within the context of this discussion. Contrary to what most people believe, namely that memory belongs to the past, the concept of cultural memory – by virtue of its emphasis on a cultural remediation – shows us how the recollection belongs to a shared past which is “collectively constructed and reconstructed in the present rather than resurrected from the past” (Rigney, “Plenitude” 14). That it is to say, memories have as much, if not more, to do with the moment of their recollection than with the past. From this perspective, cultural recollection can be also seen as a tool for shaping communities’ identity. As J. Assmann states, “cultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity” (“Collective Memory” 130), hence their group identity. And yet “preserve” is perhaps not the right verb when talking about memories. The recollection, indeed, is a mediation that agrees much more with the present than with the past, therefore, the actual knowledge, which stands at the basis of identity construction, is not merely preserved by cultural memory but it is above all constructed and reconstructed by it.

Coming back to earthquake catastrophes, we can say that their culturalization processes are also based on mediation and recollection practices. Moreover, we can say that the field of Cultural Memory Studies occupies a privileged position from which to investigate the culturalization of an earthquake keeping an eye on its diachronic metamorphosis.

Why earthquakes

The reason for my interest in earthquakes is to be found within the field of Memory Studies.

Though this field has spent great energy in investigating the interpretation of traumatic human events such as wars, genocides and terroristic attacks, not much attention has been dedicated to the study of natural traumatic events such as natural catastrophes. The case of the earthquake that destroyed Lisbon in 1755 is the big exception which, nevertheless, confirms the general neglect.

The events linked to the Lisbon earthquake have brought about a general agreement on the cultural importance of this natural disaster. Shortly after its occurrence, the earthquake not only became the main subject of tales, but also attracted the attention of many charismatic personalities of that time such as Voltaire, Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Helena Buescu, comparatist and expert on the Lisbon catastrophe, has written several articles on this topic including “Narration and Catastrophe” (2007). In this article Buescu focuses on several eyewitness narratives generated after the quake stressing how they seem to share common features. Specifically, these narratives often register an explicitly declared difficulty on the part of the survivors to translate into words what they had seen. In most cases, this difficulty was overcome by referring to fictional worlds, myth and/or by providing an exhaustive and extremely detailed presentation of the events with the frequent use of a pathetic tone, resembling melodrama (Buescu 96). Yet, Buescu’s analysis is based on the assumption – confirmed throughout the article - that what “occurred in Lisbon in 1755 was much more a cultural event” than a natural one (Buescu 95), and more specifically a traumatic event inscribed into cultural memory. This claim is without doubt an important and truthful one. Nevertheless, here Buescu assumes a clear distinction between natural and cultural events, which implies three possibilities, i.e. that an event is natural, cultural, or natural and cultural at the same time. Hence, a natural disaster is a natural event, but in the case of Lisbon, it is above all also a cultural event. Moreover, Buescu does not refer to the possibility that other natural disasters are also culturally relevant; therefore she indirectly demonstrates how the Lisbon earthquake is rather an exception. Implicitly, her analysis shows that it is not at all common to consider a natural disaster as important culturally as traumatic events caused by man, which are highly mediated and “re-mediated” in the on-going process of creating the cultural memory of a community.

Another important intellectual, the philosopher Susan Neiman, has identified another reason why the Lisbon earthquake has had such an impact on Western culture. In *Evil in Modern Thought* (2002) she claims that the Lisbon earthquake was an exceptional event because it triggered an epochal reflection upon the nature of evil, comparable only to the experience of the Holocaust in the

20th century. Specifically, the proportions of the Lisbon disaster were of such a scale as to push many intellectuals to reconsider the connection between, on the one hand, the pain and the destruction suffered and, on the other hand, the sins Lisbon's population ought to have expiated. In other words, people wondered about the sin that Lisbon had committed in order to deserve such a harsh divine punishment. Since it was impossible to accept that such a disaster could have been related to the wrath of God, people started to believe that the "natural evil" – as Nieman put it – of the natural disaster did not have anything to do with the "moral evil" derived from man's errant behaviour. Hence, it was believed that natural disasters were natural phenomena just like a summer storm or a morning haze.

Nevertheless, if this reflection upon evil is what made the Lisbon earthquake so culturally important, it is also the reason why natural disasters since then have no longer generated much cultural thinking. With natural disasters no longer being interpreted as a manifestation of God's will against man's misbehaviour – i.e. ever since natural evils stopped being regarded as the result of human behaviour – not only do natural evils "no longer have meaning at all" (Nieman 250), but by the same token, natural disasters also become only an "object of attempts at prediction and control, not of interpretation" (Nieman 250).

Nieman's banishment of natural disasters from the cultural sphere is a provocative action. It is provocative because saying that a natural disaster is only an "object of attempts at prediction and control, not of interpretation" (250), amounts to an exclusion of all the books, movies, and various cultural events which have been inspired by natural disasters and which are, ultimately, interpretations/mediations of the event itself. Moreover, it does not take into consideration the fact that even nowadays natural disasters can fall into the equation "disaster + moral evil = culturally interesting event", as soon as one replace the concept of human sin with the more recent one of human responsibility.

Despite these shortcomings, Nieman's claims, considered in association with Buescu's, illustrate the main reasons why I believe that Memory Studies has kept its distance from the

analysis of natural disasters. We could summarize Buescu and Nieman's position by saying that a natural disaster is a natural event, which is culturally relevant insofar as it concerns moral evil. Buescu and Nieman are here taken just as two examples, but their works reveal the difficulty with which the categories of nature and culture are managed, and an excess of anthropocentrism.

As I mention before in this introduction, Memory Studies, and in particular Cultural Memory Studies, are interested in the way communities remember past events and how, on the basis of these memories – constructed and reconstructed in the present – they build their vision of the self and of the world they live in. As a matter of research strategy Cultural Memory Studies gives much attention to human traumatic events and, as a field whose main subject is the shared memory of humans, it is inevitably a human-centred one. Nevertheless, this excess of anthropocentrism is resulting in a general indifference toward the human-environment interaction, which, on the other hand, is proving to be of great importance not only for humans, but also for the future of the natural world. Cultural Memory Studies should exclude neither natural events nor an environmental reading of the construction and reconstruction of memories, for the contribution of such approaches to the understanding and improvement of the relation between man and nature relation is, in my opinion, extremely relevant. Thanks to the influence that cultural memory has on men's identity and world vision, Cultural Memory Studies could play an important role in understanding the way in which men construct their idea of a world. In particular it might shed light on the way in which the dominant idea of a world which is "human centred and therefore endlessly available as a resource for human comfort, wealth and well-being" (Bennett, Royle 148) is constructed, and show how this idea might be questioned so as ultimately to improve our understanding and response to natural disasters.

Ecocriticism

An interdisciplinary approach could help Cultural Memory Studies to overcome its diffidence toward the categories of 'nature' and 'culture' and the risk of an excess of anthropocentrism.

Specifically, a collaboration with Ecocriticism whose pillars are the human-environment interaction and an anti-anthropocentric approach might be a solution. In this research I will be employing an ecocritical point of view on the relation between culture and nature, which has been comprehensively conveyed through books and articles. Ultimately I will use the Ecocritical approach as my tool to make Cultural Memory studies more familiar with the analysis of natural disasters in particular, and with the relation man-nature in general. For this purpose I believe it is crucial to introduce the reader to a clear, although not exhaustive, summary of what Ecocriticism is, but also to a survey of the Ecocritical methods I will make use of.

Ecocriticism is a relatively a new literary critical approach, which recently moved from being “an emergent and marginal field to a fully recognized research area “ (Heise 289). It “does not offer a distinctive methodology of reading” (Bennett, Royle 141), but rather aims to redirect other literary approaches toward environmental concerns: hence, it moves from an anthropocentric approach to an eco-centred one. In other words, Ecocriticism’s novelty consist in taking into account not only human-sized objects, but also “the miniature realm of a blade of grass, an ant, amoeba, or pathogen, and to the mega-scale of the ocean, the mountain, or even the earth itself” (Bennett, Royle 141). After literary approaches have restricted the literary horizon to see just man among men, Ecocriticism wants to relocate man within his environment and as part of it. With my research I aim to open up Cultural Memory Studies to the bigger scale of earthquakes.

Whereas Ecocriticism, in its initial stage, was almost exclusively interested in “Romantic poetry, wildness narrative and nature writing” (Gerrard 4), and was therefore not as revolutionary as it could have been, recently its scope has been enlarged to the analysis of all media, technologies and genres. The relation between literature and the environment is not a new subject. I have previously quoted Leopardi, but it would be sufficient to think about the Eclogues of Virgil to indicate how long this relation has been fascinating the human mind. However, in the last twenty years, Ecocriticism adds a commitment and an ethical perspective on the future to the investigation of this relation. Although ecological problems are a better subject for scientific research, Garrard

points out how cultural analysis could be displayed with the following clever metaphor. Comparing ecological problems to ‘weed’, which is not a kind of plant, but rather “the wrong kind in the wrong place”, Garrard concludes by saying that “eliminating weed is obviously a ‘problem of gardening’, but defining weeds in the first place requires a cultural, not horticultural, analysis” (6). In short, Ecocriticism could show us a different way of looking at the often problematic relation towards nature, based on a better understanding of our environment and of our mistakes. In particular, Ecocriticism has proven extremely sensitive to ecological problems, trying to answer questions such as “why in the world would we destroy the world in which we live? ... What drives that destruction? Why can’t we stop it?” (Bennett, Royle 138). Nevertheless, as Greg Garrard, author of a helpful survey of *Ecocriticism* (2004), states, Ecocriticism has a much wider perspective, “Ecocriticism is essentially about the demarcation between nature and culture, its construction and reconstruction” (179). With this research I hope to add a new point of view on the relation between man and earthquakes.

‘Nature’ and ‘culture’ have always been exceptionally dense and fluid categories. In general, every field of study which develops along the nature-culture demarcation line has either avoided any sort of definition, or has claimed that everything is culture, or, conversely, that everything is nature. In contrast, Ecocriticism – at least in the way Garrard sees it – bases all its research on an on-going negotiation between the two categories. Hence Ecocriticism does not give a fixed definition to any of the two categories. On the contrary, it aims mainly to analyse the interpretation and representation of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ and how this has developed across time. Yet, keeping in mind that “nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse” (Garrard 10) Ecocriticism tries to define a possibly more ethical way of perceiving it.

In his introduction to *Ecocriticism*, Garrard shows us an ecocritical approach based on the diachronic analysis of literary tropes - meaning all literary forms through which people have mediated, or in Garrard’s word “imagin[ed], construct[ed] or present[ed] nature” (7). I will

approach earthquakes in the same way in this research considering the literary tropes through which people have mediated and re-mediated earthquakes.

Nevertheless, my research also differs from existing Ecocriticism studies, which are generally concerned about the impact man has on nature and not the other way around. Yet, an interdisciplinary collaboration between Ecocriticism and Memory Studies is not completely new. The historian Simon Schama provides a case in point.

In his book *Landscape and Memory* (1995) he extends the analysis of the relation between man and nature to the field of memory. According to Schama, “the impact of humanity on the earth’s ecology” has not been necessarily “an unrelieved and predetermined calamity” (Schama 9) and we should not forget that the relation between man and his environment is also much more than that. In particular, Schama believes that culture and nature are so much interrelated that every scenery is made of “as much from strata of memory as from layers of rocks” (Schama 7). With this assumption he manages to gather together a series of extremely fascinating case-studies concerning the relation between memory, identity and woods, water, and rocks, all of which aim to reveal another way of looking at our landscape. Like Schama’s book, my research also relates the field of memory to an Ecocritical approach. Nonetheless, my research differs from Schama’s work – and his general preoccupation with Ecocriticism – because of its subject. The present research will deal with earthquakes as physical phenomena which characterized a given region, but which are at the same time always perceived as isolated and exceptional events; thus, as shocks. Earthquakes – not yet proved to be caused by humans – do not fit into the definition of ecological disaster generally contemplated in Ecocriticism. If there is a will to destroy behind an earthquake, it does not belong to man. Moreover, the earthquake as a shocking natural phenomenon perceived as isolated and exceptional differs from the peaceful and constant relation between man and his landscape taken into consideration by Schama.

The case of three Italian earthquakes

With the aim of investigating the culturalization of earthquakes, overcoming – with an ecocritical perspective – Cultural Memory’s limits, I will be focusing on a macro study case, that of earthquakes in Italy during the last two centuries. Apart from being famous for its food, weather and Mafia⁵, the Italian peninsula is also known as one of the most seismic countries in Europe. The mountain ranges of the Alps and of the Apennines give visible proof of the powerful tectonic activity which characterizes the Italian underground. Italy, indeed, is located right along the tension line of different tectonic plates, which, pushing against one another, not only gave rise to its major mountain ranges (whose contour forms the letter ‘T’ of the alphabet), but have also been responsible for the uncountable earthquakes that have hit the Italian peninsula. It is not by chance that the areas with a higher risk of earthquake are those located along the imaginary T. Nevertheless, there is no region in Italy that has not been hit by an earthquake. Among all the seismic events that have caused a disaster I will be looking in detail into two of the major earthquakes that tragically struck the Italian peninsula, i.e. Messina 1908 and Irpinia 1980⁶ – both sited along the seismic T. In addition, I will use the more recent earthquake disaster that hit L’Aquila in 2009 in order to observe how images, discourses and commemoration strategies of this event – following multidirectional lines – lined up with the images, discourses and commemoration strategies employed in the other earthquakes.

Hence, earthquakes in Italy are part of the country’s physical landscape, just like the sea and the volcanoes. Nevertheless, writing about the memory of the earthquake in Italy means – as for memory in general, as Mario Isnenghi claims in his article “Italian *Luoghi della Memoria*” (2008) – seeing the earthquake against a social, cultural and economical background which is anything but

⁵ In my experience of living abroad these three Italian stereotypes have been the most used by people who wanted to remind me what I left by deciding to live somewhere else.

⁶ I refer to these disasters in the same way in which they are usually remembered, namely by the name of the city or the area where the most victims were registered and by the year of the main ‘shock’.

united and coherent. For this reason, I will treat each earthquake in a separate chapter, which I will organize as follows.

After a historical introduction to each disaster I will focus, as mentioned above, on the culturalization of the event central to each chapter, Messina 1908 and Irpinia 1980 respectively. My approach will be based on the textual, visual and discourse analysis of several cultural media, which emerged at two different stages in the culturalization process, reporting and recollection. The first stage, which coincides with the first mediation, consists of the immediate reporting of and reaction to the events. Consequently, I will be focusing mainly on articles in national news media published within a month from the event in order to identify the framework within which the natural event was reported. Pictures will also be considered. However, images are often very difficult or even impossible to date accurately. Therefore, I will focus on pictures which appeared up to a year after the event. The second stage coincides with the recollection of the event. For this stage I will focus on works of art, and other media of recollection, such as commemoration and academic studies, which were produced after one year from the event. By this time, indeed, the cultural production of memory stopped reporting the event and begun to remember and reflect on it. While this analysis will be repeated for the first two earthquakes, the concluding chapter referring to Irpinia will include a shorter version of this general pattern for it deals with a more recent event.

In the first chapter, the one about the Messina earthquake, I aim to define how this disaster has been culturalized and especially how its interpretation has changed across time. Messina 1908 was the most tragic natural disaster of the 20th century and in particular of the new-born Italy. The event claimed unprecedented attention from both newspapers - local, national and international – and from the most illustrious personalities of the time, from intellectuals to politicians, from religious men to scientists. Moreover its anniversaries did not go unnoticed. In particular, the commemorative event organized in 2008 for the centenary of the tragedy proved that the earthquake still had a cultural relevance. Besides several archival materials – including articles, videos, and

photographs – which were collected for the commemoration, new materials, such as novels, have also been consistently produced.

In the second chapter I will focus on the Irpinia earthquake, which occurred the 23rd of November 1980. Irpinia is a sub-region south of Naples where the ancient people of the Hirpini used to live. Yet nowadays its name is much more linked to the terrible quake that killed 3,000 people and in whose wake thousands of inhabitants were left homeless; an earthquake that proved to be the deadliest catastrophe after the World Wars. Nevertheless, in the same year - 1980 – another major disaster broke the daily routine of the nation. At 10:25 a.m. of the 2nd of August a time-bomb exploded in the station of Bologna which at that time was full of people. What has been called a terrorist bombing killed 85 people, wounded about 200 and put the whole of Italy into panic. In this chapter I will compare the two disasters in order to highlight the differences and similarities between the culturalization of a natural disaster and the interpretation of a cultural one. Still, differences and similarities between the earthquake of 1980 and that of 1908 will also be taken into account.

I will reserve the third and final chapter for observing and reflecting on the cultural connections between earthquakes disasters drawn by the interpretation of L'Aquila 2009.

Chapter I – Messina 1908: a not forgotten earthquake

Historical background

In 1908 Giovanni Giolitti, the undisputed protagonist of the Italian political scene before Benito Mussolini – during the period between the Italian Risorgimento and the advent of Fascism – was leading his third government as prime minister. Guided by his politic strategies – despite the many problems of a new-born nation – Italy had finally managed to cover its debts and to invest in, as well as complete great public projects of national interest such as the nationalization of the railways. What would later be called in France *La Belle Époque* – compared to the horrors of the World Wars – would also appear to the Italian peninsula. 1908 was one of the central years in which the optimism of the new century was constantly confirmed by scientific and technological progress. Despite the heterogeneity of the country, cities like Milan, Turin and Genoa were experiencing a frenetic industrialization, attracting many workers from all over Italy. Art was also flourishing.

The earthquake that struck on 28 December at about 5.20 a.m. literally reduced the city of Messina to rubble, but also Reggio Calabria – on the other side of the Straits – and many other villages. According to the seismologist Giuseppe Mercalli, 98% of Messina was destroyed or no longer usable (Dickie, *Una catastrofe patriottica* 4). What was left alive or standing was washed away by a tsunami, which followed the quake. Fires all over the place completed the colossal work of destruction. The size of the catastrophe exceeded the one that occurred in San Francisco just two years before. Although it was not then possible to make an accurate estimation of the number of people who lost their lives, it is believed nowadays that the number of victims ranged between 80,000 and 100,000 (Dickie, *Una catastrofe patriottica* 6), confirming the event as the deadliest natural catastrophe of the 20th century in Europe. The government even considered the possibility of bombing the city as a solution to the spread of disease and to discourage the repopulation of the

same area. And yet, as Francesco Mercadante asserts, the Messina earthquake did not just cause the death of people and destroy buildings. On 28 December, Messina collapsed three times: concretely, socially and morally. Concretely, for “it [the earthquake] transformed the city into a heap of ruins”, socially, for “it suddenly broke the community bonds” and morally, for “it shocked and altered the consciousness of the survivors, the balances and the basic conditions for living together”

(Mercadante XVII). In the aftermath of the event, several episodes reported by the newspapers showed a population which seemed dragged back in time to a cruel state of nature where *homo homini lupus est*. In a scenario that belonged much more to the realm of death than to that of life, “Man over there, is not the man of our anthropology” [“l’uomo laggiù, non è l’uomo della nostra antropologia”] (Claudio Treves qtd. in *Una catastrofe patriottica* 27).

If Futurism – which was busier celebrating “La Città che Sale”⁷ than a city that collapsed and died (Rosisvalle 148) – felt the catastrophe as an obstacle to their first public appearance (Orban 29), the Italian government could not ignore it. The Messina earthquake brought to light the unresolved issue of the so-called “questione meridionale”, namely the problems or the questions concerning the South or “meridione” of Italy. Notwithstanding its formal national unity, Italy was divided in two, economically and culturally. The North was becoming more and more industrialized, rich, active and advanced, while the South was sinking into degradation, poverty, passivity and illiteracy. Despite several campaigns denouncing the difficult situation of the southern part of the country, the general conditions of the two islands, Sicily and Sardinia, and of the regions from Calabria to Abruzzo did not improve greatly.

The earthquake of Messina was another problem adding to the already existing ones. Yet, this quake was not as silent as the poor people who were still suffering and dying of malaria, nor as discrete as the all-pervasive ignorance and superstition. The quake of 1908 was loud and attracted the attention of the news media as no other events before. In this context, as Francesco Mercadante – author of a rich anthology dedicated to this disaster – claims, the “questione meridionale” “never

⁷ “The City Rises” [“La Città che Sale”] (1910) is a famous painting by the Futurist Umberto Boccioni, who with this work of art wanted to celebrate the new city where man and technologies merge into a single dynamic energy.

spoke with such authority as from the ruins of Messina and Reggio” [“non ha mai parlato tanto autorevolmente, quanto dall’alto delle rovine di Messina e Reggio”] (XII).

Reporters and photographers, and even a few moviemakers, arrived from all over Italy and from abroad to witness the catastrophe. The aftermath of the disaster was described with images and metaphors of a social collapse that sent man back into the cruel state of nature (Dickie, *Una catastrofe patriottica* 26). The Italian government could not look the other way; it could not postpone the emergency. This catastrophe required the best performance of the government in order to prove the legitimacy of its power over all the territory that for only 40 years had been officially Italian (Dickie, *Una catastrofe patriottica* 10). Most independent newspapers brought to light the scandals and accusations directed towards the Italian government concerning both the prevention of the disaster and the help to the population. In particular, the long delay in helping the victims was denounced several times, while, conversely, the first help heroically and generously given by the Russian and English armies, that had their boats around the port of Messina at the time, was stressed. Yet, the financial and military help that the government eventually made available for the areas affected by the quake showed an unknown face of the government. The state participation in the collective solidarity toward Messina and the other cities was a performance as exceptional as it was powerful for the creation of an imagined national community (Dickie, *Una catastrofe patriottica* 11). For this reason, John Dickie – who took the Messina earthquake as an effective example for showing the techniques used by the Italian state to create and reinforce the nationalistic feeling of its community – describes the disaster as a “patriotic disaster” – i.e. a catastrophe which helped Italians shape the idea of belonging to a united country and at the same time a catastrophe whose understanding was possible within patriotic emotions (*Una catastrofe patriottica* 23). In other words, on the one hand, Messina 1908 was an event that infused nationalistic feeling based on collective solidarity and, on the other hand, it was an event that stressed the weakness of the State.

Dickie’s thesis is confirmed in several ways by the evidence presented in his book *A Patriotic Catastrophe*. In particular, he notes how often newspapers reported the disaster using war

metaphors. The areas hit by the quake were designated as being in a state of emergency but also a state of siege. Beside the countless dead bodies aligned everywhere and the buildings completely gutted, the presence of the Italian army and the declaration of martial law suggested that Messina and other towns were war zones. An example reported by Dickie from the national newspaper *Il Mattino* describes the disaster zone as “a vast entrenched camp, a giant Sedan” [“un vasto campo trincerato, una Sedan gigantesca”] (Paolo Scarfoglio qtd. in *Una catastrofe patriottica* 30). Having myself examined the articles of that time, I can easily find confirmation of Dickie’s thesis. Yet, I would like to add how sometimes the metaphor of the war was not sufficient. For instance, on 6 January 1909 the national newspaper *Il Messaggero* published an article by a self-stated old reporter – “vecchio reporter” (Mercadante 62) – who claims that in his long war experiences he had never ever seen a scenario worse than that:

This disaster that is just a sneeze of nature, you see so much destruction as all men together could not do. This passes the limits, it oppresses every thought, it humbles us below the nothingness, below our origin.

[[Q]uesto disastro che la natura ha fatto come uno sternuto, ove si vede tanta distruzione come tutti gli uomini non potrebbero compiere, questo passa i limiti, questo opprime ogni pensiero, questo ci umilia al disotto del nulla, al disotto della nostra origine.] (Mercadante 62)

This ‘old’ journalist wrote before the experiences of the World Wars, and we do not know if he would have written the same afterwards. Yet, his image shows how the disaster was described not as an ‘ordinary’ war of people against people, but rather as an ‘extraordinary’ one, for this time the enemy was the blind powers of nature. In short, the Messina earthquake was – as Dickie claims as well – a war against nature.

At the time of the disaster people thought that Messina 1908 would be remembered forever. This earthquake was indeed exceptional in many ways: for the damages it caused, for the strong intervention of the government that it required and for the attention it got from the news media, in

particular newspapers, which seemed to reveal a collective participation in “the pain of the other” (Sontag). Nevertheless, many are those who nowadays still argue that the Messina earthquake is a forgotten disaster. The arguments in support of this thesis are mainly the shortage of relevant monuments in the city of Messina (Dickie, *Una catastrofe patriottica* 180), the opinion of the inhabitants of Messina themselves, who believe that the city is “without memory”(Dickie, “MESSINA”) and, in general, the lack of great works of arts about it. In this sense, the writer and journalist born in Messina, Vanni Ronsisvalle, talks of the “literary void” [“vuoto letterario”] (152) caused perhaps by the fact that the memory of the disaster was soon replaced by other traumatic memories such as the Titanic shipwreck and the Great War (Ronsisvalle 152).

A glaring paradox seems to be present in all the abovementioned arguments: according to them, Messina 1908 has been forgotten; yet that this claim exists constitutes in itself the inadvertent proof that it has not. There will be always an infinite number of events to remember and we cannot expect communities to recollect them all. For this reason communities need to ‘choose’ that which is worth keeping in the present. Yet, what is forgotten is by no means lost. As in the case of literary texts, in memory study it must be kept in mind the distinction between the “archive” and the “canon”, that is to say, the distinction between memories stored in the back of our mind or neglected in the cultural archive and memories that are active, therefore quickly available, in our minds (A. Assmann 43). Finally, it is important to consider that “the borderline between the archival and the canon’s active memory is permeable in both directions” (A. Assmann 44). In other words, an event that seems momentarily forgotten, can at any time and place be once again available for a community. The memory of the earthquake of Messina fell perhaps out of the canon into the archive, yet it is also thanks to works such as the ones of Dickie and Ronsisvalle that Messina 1908 is now back again in the collective memory of the community of Messina and beyond.

Reporting

Newspaper articles, but also photos and short movies registered in every detail and reported stories concerning the earthquake zone. If this earthquake was a tragedy, the newspapers could well be said to have been its chorus. As Mercadante claims, newspapers, “sons of the new epoch” (IX), saw in the Messina earthquake their chance to open up to different fields and to engage with a wider public. The role of newspapers proved pivotal in conveying the voice of a community that had never before seemed so close to the reader. It is not by chance that newspapers also became “a miraculous awakener of every ready and active impulse of humanity” [“miracoloso suscitatore d’ogni più pronto e attivo slancio di umanità”] (Mercadante X). People, money, goods arrived from all over Europe, from England to Russia, but also from America. Everyone was impressed by the tragic event whose details were daily updated in countless articles for about a month. And everyone could sympathize with the pain of the victims; a pain that echoed from one story of family tragedy to another, stories that were often amplified to create melodrama. The articles in the newspapers could be either stories of eyewitnesses reported by journalists or stories and reflections by the correspondents who rushed to the scene. Several famous Italian and foreign writers were also moved to put pen to paper commenting on the immense calamity, from the Italian poet Giovanni Pascoli to the Italian dramatist and novelist Luigi Pirandello and the Russian author Maxim Gorki.

Besides newspapers, and sometimes within them, photographs mediated the tragic event, but under the unusual form of postcards. Cameras were already well known at the beginning of the twentieth century, but they were not so widespread and still quite expensive. Photos in fact were rare even within newsprints. Postcards, on the contrary, were easy to reproduce, cheaper, and were as effective as photos in helping to explain the tragedy when words seemed insufficient. As a matter of fact, images of squares full of rubble and of corpses lined up along the shore accompanied by a few sentences became one of the most effective media for relaying the catastrophe to friends and family members who were living far from the areas affected by the quake. The First World War

would retrieve this form of communication from the Messina earthquake, which for many aspects has been its Italian rehearsal.

Both articles and photographs embedded the earthquake within a story, which in turn corresponded to a specific frame through which the natural disaster was interpreted and culturalized. Astrid Erll claims that there are different modes of referring to the past (“Cultural Memory Studies” 7). A war, for example, “can be remembered as a mythic event ..., as part of political history ..., as a traumatic experience ... as a part of family history ..., as a focus of bitter contestation ...” (Erll, “Cultural Memory Studies” 7) and so forth. As for our case, interpretations of the event will be illustrated below, each under a different title that refers to the key concept or metaphor used to narrate the disaster. In particular, I will be looking at articles published within a month of the event, and pictures which appeared within one year after the disaster. As for the newspaper articles, the anthology by Francesco Mercadante proved to be a great source. Nonetheless, I will enrich it by consulting the online historical archive of the national newspaper *La Stampa*. With regard to pictures I will focus on those found in several online collections.

Point of Rupture

The seismic event as a point of rupture is one of the most recurrent ways of representing it. The seismic event does not last more than a few seconds, yet it is the cause of a drastic change for the outlook of the city and for the lives of its people. The idea of an event as a point of rupture is most likely linked to the Christian idea of linear time which, taking a critical point into account, draws a distinction between everything that was before and that was after it. In particular, many articles refer to Messina as a dead city, a city therefore that has existed, but that will be no more or no longer as it was before. Even one of the most optimistic writers of the event, Federico de Roberto, who asked people to stop repeating that “Messina, Reggio and all their unfortunate sisters are dead forever” [“Messina, Reggio e tutte le loro sciagurate sorelle sono morte per sempre”] (Mercadante 324) on a page of *Corriere delle Sera* of the 8 December 1909, chose to name the same article “resurrection” [“resurrezione”]. This before-after division often also appears in postcards. In

particular, this effect was obtained by adding a caption as the one in the picture below “Messina after the earthquake of 28 December 1908 – Via Solferino” [“Messina dopo il terremoto del 28 Dicembre 1908 – Via Solferino”] within the image of famous and completely destroyed street (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1 *Messina after the quake on 28 December 1908. Via Solferino. 1909. Postcard. Grifasi - Almanacco Siciliano. Web. 3 Jan. 2013.*

The same effect was also created with images portraying parts of the city as they used to look like with subtitling them, “Messina before the earthquake of 28 December 1908” [“Messina prima del terremoto 28 Dicembre 1908”], as in the picture below.



Fig. 2 Messina before the Quake on 28 December 1908. Via Garibaldi and Porta Real Basso. 1909. Postcard. Grifasi - Almanacco Siciliano. Web. 3 Jan. 2013.

A mysterious plan: theodicy and evil forces

The earthquake was also interpreted as the result of a bigger and more mysterious plan. In the attempt to understand disasters and to justify their suffering, people have often found relief in God. Specifically, the belief in an inscrutable Divine scheme would at least give people the consolation that all their pain has not been without a purpose. However, this form of comfort did not seem to work for the victims of the Messina earthquake, or at least not as well as it had in the past.

According to Daniele Pompejano, author of several contributions to the collective imaginary elicited by the Messina catastrophe, theodicy discourses appeared to have lost their grip on these communities (7). A journalist from the *Giornale d'Italia*, for example, wrote that to give God the responsibility for the catastrophe would have been like swearing: now that the physical causes of earthquakes are known it would be blasphemy “to imagine God meting out such capricious punishment to a great number of people only because they happened to be together in the same place” [“immaginare a Dio una così capricciosa punizione a un'accolta di uomini per il solo fatto di

trovarsi uniti nello stesso luogo”] (qtd. in Pompejano 11). In general, after such a disaster – as the journalist and writer Antonio Fogazzaro reported – even the most religious person would doubt whether God existed at all (Pompejano 10).

The fading power of theodicy mentioned above confirms Jeffrey Olick’s thesis – advanced during a seminar at Utrecht University in 2012 – according to which religious explanation ceased to be an argument to console souls from the Enlightenment on. According to Olick, people in the twentieth century, inheriting an eighteenth century legacy, were no longer content to accept evil as part of God’s plan and began to feel the need to find a reason for suffering which, in turn, would help them to understand how to overcome it. Yet, this does not mean that theodicy disappeared all together from the places of the disaster.

The parody of *Novena a Gesù Bambino*, published by the humoristic journal *Il Telefono* during the 1908 Christmas holiday – on the eve of the disaster – is perhaps the most evident proof of the endurance of such discourses:

O my Holy Child/ True man and true God/ For the sake of your cross/ Let us hear your voices/ You who knows everything, you who are not unknown/ Send to everyone an earthquake.

[O bambinello mio/Vero uomo e vero dio/Per amore della tua croce/Fa sentire la nostra voce/ Tu che sai, che non sei ignoto/ Manda a tutti un terremoto.] (Noto 143)

The parodied novena aimed to attack the fiscal policy of the city of Messina. Yet, the joke macabrely turned out to be a prophecy right on the eve of the disaster. On the night of 28 December 1908 an earthquake struck for real. Soon after the earthquake, the parody of *Novena a Gesù Bambino* quickly took the form of a popular anecdote. The parody came to circulate thanks to a priest known as Don Orione⁸ who printed it on flyers. According to him, the novena was proof of the relation between God and the disaster, and everyone should be made aware of it. In particular,

⁸ Luigi Giovanni Orione was a priest whom activism was extremely helpful for the victims of the Messina earthquake. Pope John Paul II has canonized him in 2004.

he believed that the earthquake was not a coincidence. The quake, with its destructive power, was sent by God in order to punish a city which was showing itself to be more and more anticlerical, witness the novena (Noto 146). Whether or not Don Orione's thesis was believed, this anecdote – which entered the collective knowledge of the community – shows that the use of theodicy discourses was not yet exhausted. Within this frame, nature and in particular earthquakes remained interpreted as instruments of God's messages.

More frequent, though, were anecdotes that blamed evil forces as the first cause of the earthquake. Unhappy coincidences, fuelled by popular wishes to find an explanation for such devastation, were taken as presages of unknown negative energies. Despite the presence of God as seen in the 'holy' aims offered Russian and English navy in the aftermath of the quake (Pompejano 14) and as seen in the figure of the Queen of Italy Elena di Savoia as a Madonna (Pompejano 14), God was not in the earthquake but suffered together with nature of an devilish will. For many people the presages became proof of a possible account for such a destructive natural power. After all, the disaster itself was so unthinkable that everything would have to be taken seriously, also things that would have never been believed before. In short, the absurdity of the catastrophe meant that it could easily be ascribed to an unearthly cause. The journalist Claudio Treves, for instance, reported the oral anecdote of a desperate mother whose innocent child was going to be condemned to prison. According to this anecdote, the mother, having heard the final sentence, yelled to the court in dialect wishing that an "earthquake with eyes" – therefore an earthquake that can see what it destroys – would arrive, kill the scoundrels, and destroy Messina entirely. Only in this way would the mother be avenged:

Bad news! An earthquake with eyes ought to arrive and it ought to kill to you, scoundrels, and entire Messina.

["Mala nova! àvi a véniri un tirrimotu cu ll'occhi e v'àvi a 'mmazzari a vui birbanti e a tutta Messina".] (Mercadante 6)

This anecdote, together with several similar ones, without doubt provoked an uncanny effect, i.e. the fear that something familiar like nature – and in particular the earth – could be possessed by an unknown might, whose devilish effects could be triggered by any small episode, and at any moment. A feeling of uncanniness that – as Sigmund Freud would have said – grew stronger if less time elapsed between the presage and the untoward event, and if more and more anecdotes were collected (Freud 21). The idea of a nature possessed by a terrible power is also revealed in one of the articles by the journalist Giuseppe Antonio Borgese that appeared in *La Stampa* on 20-21 January 1909. In it we read that “nature suffers tormented by convulsive forces and gives birth to death, mud and chaos” [“la natura soffre tormentata da forze convulsive e partorisce la morte, il fango e il caos”] (Noto 162).

The Blind Might of Nature

Alongside the idea of a mysterious power possessing nature, the idea of the earthquake as the product of a blind and indifferent nature also persisted. In this respect, the work of Giacomo Leopardi has without doubt been one of the most frequently used models. Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, for example, concluded his article published on 19-20 January 1909 with a clear, yet implicit, reference to Leopardi’s poem “La Ginestra” (Mercadante 141).

In this explanation too God appears to be completely extraneous. However, now it is nature itself that has transgressed the Divine rules. Nature is entirely responsible for the catastrophe.

The quake that destroyed the human world in thirty seconds is considered to be only a sneeze of nature (Mercadante 62), a sneeze, moreover, that does not even stop the cycles of nature, which continue as if nothing happened. Human time though stopped that night at 5.21 a.m..

As a matter of fact, as reported in the opening of the second paragraph of an article by Federico de Roberto dated 4 January 1909 “[n]ature smiles even all around the funerary shores” [“La natura sorride, anche, tutt’intorno alle funebri rive”] (Mercadante 321). And not only has nature changed its face once again, but, as we read in beginning of the third paragraph of the same article: “spring has come” [“Ed è già primavera!”] (Mercadante 321).

Perhaps nature in Sicily, more than in other places, clearly shows its double face. On the one hand “in the bowels of the mountains, in the earth, under the sea, fire runs, vapours seethe, magnetic currents wind ... ruins are being prepared” [nelle viscere dei monti, dentro la terra, sotto il mare, corre il fuoco, ribollono i vapori, serpeggiano le correnti magnetiche ... si preparano le rovine]; on the other hand, that same earth “is fertile like no other, and the air is fresh and the sun is beautiful, and the fruits are tasty, as in no other place” [“è fertile come nessun altro, e l’aria è dolce, e il sole è splendido, e i frutti sono saporosi, come in nessun altro luogo”] (Mercadante 324). In such a land – notwithstanding the writer Luigi Pirandello who in an article titled “Somewhere Else” [“Altrove”] exhorted the citizens of Reggio and Messina to abandon these seismic places and rebuild their lives somewhere else (Mercadante 317) – there were several people who do not want to desert it and as many who would eventually come back to it.

Federico De Roberto claimed that this is because the voice of the dead hold them (Mercadante 325) and also because “[t]hese places are far too beautiful, the life in it is far too easy, as long as it is not truncated in one go” [“Questi luoghi sono troppo belli, la vita vi è troppo facile, finché non vi è troncata d’un colpo”] (Mercadante 324). In this light, the earthquake seems almost like a price that people of those areas needed to pay for such beauty. Thus, the Messina earthquake is compared to other disasters in the history of Sicily and interpreted as one of these seismic events which are ordinary phenomena of nature in these volcanic areas. People can go away (but where?), as Pirandello suggests, or stay and except natural disaster as a part of the story of the island that – as will be illustrated below – goes back to its foundational myth.

Yet, besides this general acceptance, other people also tried to fight against the most violent side of nature. The war of man against it starts in this way, i.e. in a human attempt to renew the domination over nature time again. At the beginning of the twentieth century, modernity with its science and technologies appeared to be on man’s side in that war. In this respect, it is fascinating to notice that, whereas metaphors representing the destructive power of the quake are often taken from the natural world, technologies are always seen as the rescuer. In the pages of *L’Ora* on 1 January

1909, for example, we read the testimony of “prof. Restori” who describes the quake as a galloping herd of horses and the sound of a train as a the voice of a friend (Mercadante 29).

Nonetheless, mankind – at least with respect to the progress made so far – has not yet discovered a way to govern earthquakes. The struggle with nature resembles in this sense the Greek myth of Sisyphus, i.e. building cities stone by stone and rebuilding them in the same way after their destruction. Even the work of the people who tried to unbury people from the rubble is “a work for Sisyphus” [“un lavoro di Sisifo”] (Mercadante 109).

In general, as Mercadante has highlighted, the blind might of nature was the most frequently used frame of the catastrophe “because it allows those who use it to keep the ideas that he / she has” [“perché consente a chi ne fa uso di tenersi le idee che ha”] (33): the scientist whose science is limited, the fatalist, and the believer whose God is innocent (33).

Recurrence of myth

Carl Gustave Jung and Károly Kerényi believed that ancient man was used to understanding and solving problems in the present by looking back at the past and at myths. Mythology for early man was not only reliable and meaningful in itself, but also, and above all, served to understand the meaning of present events (qtd. in De Martino 233). That is to say, myth was regarded as a necessary frame to approach events, especially those, which were incomprehensible. This was also valid for the Messina earthquake where – as De Roberto claims – “[t]he myth has a deep sense” [Il mito ha un senso profondo] (Mercadante 324).

In order to make sense of that night on December 1908, people enlisted the help of the myths of Morgan le Fay, Ulysses, Charybdis and Scylla, Atlantis, and Colapesce⁹, but also of biblical references to the apocalypse, which I illustrated above with the theodicy discourses. With myth the quake is inserted into a cyclical time that is based on the principle of the eternal return. In the article

⁹ There are several versions of the legend of Colapesce, which most probably originated in the 13th century at the court of Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Italy. The relevant part of this legend for the interpretation of the earthquake concerns a passage of the story in which Colapesce (who is half man and half fish), dives deep into the sea and discovers that the instability of the Sicilian land is due to the fact that of the three columns sustaining the island, one is already broken and another one is being burned by the Volcano Etna.

quoted above, De Roberto provides us with an example of the connection between the quake and myth. According to many legends, people built the cities of Messina and Reggio in places where gods would not dare to venture because two sea monsters, Charybdis and Scylla, inhabit the strait between them. This is well known because of Ulysses who lost his entire equipage there while they were asleep and “the sleep was fatal, at that time as now” [“il sonno fu fatale, allora come ora”] (Mercadante 325-326).

Man-made

Several commentators complained that whereas the earthquake could not perhaps be avoided, the catastrophe could surely have been mitigated. With this interpretation, some people take the responsibility that has been given to God, fate or nature upon society. This is by no means a new discourse. It would be sufficient to think of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s letters about the historic Lisbon earthquake. In a letter from August 1756, indeed, the author of *The Social Contract* claimed, in favour of a naturalistic way of life, that “if the residents of this large city had been more evenly dispersed and less densely housed, the losses would have been fewer or perhaps none at all. Everyone would have fled at the first shock, and would have been seen two days later, twenty leagues away and as happy as if nothing had happened” (Rousseau).

In the aftermath of the Messina earthquake, the bad quality of the buildings was also blamed. For instance, in an article on 26 January in *La Stampa*, Borgese – writing about the future of Messina with a note of pessimism – highlights that the city will eventually be rebuilt with the same “cheap and low quality buildings” [“palazzi a buon mercato”], although many people are fantasizing about the possibility of building the ideal city:

So Messina will rise once again coherent with itself, and will once again find the way to solve its particular problem, which is the one of the cheap buildings. ... One day, in hundred, two hundred, three hundred years, the destructive earthquake will return. Well, what does it matter to Messina? A father dies, and his son gives birth to other creatures, that they will die too.

[Così Messina risorgerà ancora una volta coerente a se stessa, e troverà ancora una volta il modo di risolvere il suo particolare problema, che è quello dei palazzi a buon mercato. ...

Un giorno, fra cento, fra duecento, fra trecent'anni, ritornerà il terremoto sconvolvente.

Ebbene, che importa ai messinesi? muore il padre, ed il figlio mette al mondo altre creature, che moriranno anche esse.] (Borgese)

Yet, Borgese does not blame the government – which at least from this time on will be involved in helping the Italian population with the reconstruction of their cities. Nor does he seem to truly blame people. Notwithstanding his mentioning the inferior quality of the buildings as a cause of the catastrophe, he gives at least two extenuating circumstances. The first regards the nature of people. Individuals and communities' way of life is based on making mistakes, which – in contrast to what might be wished – never reveal anything useful for the following generations (Borgese). The second circumstance is a practical one. Supposing that the government would have enough financial resources to promote the proper reconstruction of Messina in line with the anti-seismic directions of contemporary science, even then – Borgese claims – the population of Messina would not be able to wait all the years needed to rebuild such an ideal city for “who will relocate and provide them with food, meanwhile? How will goods be loaded and unloaded?” [“chi li alloggerà e li nutrirà frattanto? come saranno imbarcate e sbarcate le merci?”] (Borgese).

Destroyer of the social order

Earthquake is seen also as destroyer of the social order, an apocalypse that confuses the world of the dead with that of the living and reduces man to a Hobbesian state of nature. “The vision of the Apocalypse had become a reality before our eyes” [“La visione dell'Apocalisse era diventata una realtà davanti ai nostri occhi”] (qtd. in *Una catastrofe patriottica* 27) – stated the contemporary Italian Minister of Justice. The city of Messina was no longer distinguishable from its cemetery: Messina was “a vast grave” [“una vasta tomba”] (Borgese qtd. in *Una catastrofe patriottica* 107-108). Moreover, a collapsed social structure “assimilate[d] rich to poor, as well as palaces to slums” [“agguaglia i grandi ai piccoli, come agguagliò i palazzi alle catapecchie”] (qtd. in *Una catastrofe*

patriottica 26). Finally, people seemed to have forgotten what it meant to be human. As was noted by Gaetano La Corte Cailler, curator of a museum in Messina and local historian, man was a jackal who “rummaged not to save his fellow man, but to suppress him and seize his money!” [“frugava non per salvare il suo simile, ma per sopprimerlo ed impossessarsi del denaro!”] (qtd. in *Una catastrofe patriottica* 45).

Source of solidarity

Besides the earthquake as destroyer of social laws, the earthquake was also interpreted as an engine of human solidarity. Echoed by newspapers, the 1908 tragedy triggered an emphatic reaction in Italy as well as abroad. Even the State solidarity was considered to be an exceptional performance to the point of becoming a powerful argument for the creation of an imagined national community (Dickie, *Una catastrofe patriottica* 11). In *La Stampa* we read of “[t]he queen was transformed into a charity nun” [La regina convertita in suora di carità] (“I superstiti”) and of the countries on the other side of the Alps where “the divine song of solidarity during troubles rose wide and solemn” [si è elevato, ampio e solenne, il canto divino della solidarietà negli affanni] (“I sovrani”). Particularly outstanding was the contribution of the Russian and English army: “[T]he rough Russian Marines bec[a]me compassionate nurses, and the English Marines calmly defies a terrible death ... in order to save the surviving families” [“I ruvidi Marinai russi si trasformano in pietose infermiere, e quelli inglesi sfidano sereni una morte tremenda per salvare ... le famiglie superstiti”] (“I sovrani”). Their contribution was also celebrated in postcards as the image in following page shows (see fig. 3).

According to Giorgio Boatti the solidarity felt during the reporting phase of the 1908 earthquake brought about a common patriotic feeling within Italian communities, also in Sicily. This, in turn, contributed to bring millions of young Italians to flow and dash into the experience of the Great War:

Convinced by a misunderstood and sterile national pride, nourished by the deaf and unconfessed need to redeem the shame of the uneven comparison with other countries, those young lives

came together, before even being fully grown up, grappling with another <<wasteland >>.

(Boatti 302)

[Convinte da un malinteso e sterile orgoglio nazionale, nutrite dal sordo e inconfessato bisogno di riscattare la vergogna dell'impari confronto con gli altri Paesi, quelle giovani vite si sono ritrovate, ancora prima di maturare completamente, alle prese con un'altra <<terra desolata>>.]



Fig. 3 Russian Marines carry the wounded of the Messina earthquake. 1909. Postcard. *Grifasi - Almanacco Siciliano*. Web. 3 Jan. 2013.

Traumatic sublime

Another frame is offered by the idea of sublime. Immanuel Kant listed earthquakes among those “objects” that people describe with the aesthetic categories of the sublime and that are able to “raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature” (Kant). Nevertheless, as a matter of fact the only things that were identified as sublime in this catastrophe was the help of the Russian navy, the solidarity shown by

the people around the world. Sublime is “the brotherliness created by the grief” [“la fraternità creata dal dolore”] (“Solidarietà umana”) and even the appearance of Queen Elena – contemporary queen of Italy – amongst the survivors, but there is not a trace of the word ‘sublime’ for describing the earthquake. Yet, the idea of the sublime is conveyed through many articles which explicitly declare the difficulty of the survivors in translating the things they have seen into words, which is, in turn, one of the symptoms of traumatic experience. In fact, if, on the one hand, the sublime lets a person discover the immense skill of his own reason, at the same time, on the other hand, it shows him “the incompetence of [his] faculty for adopting a standard proportionate to the aesthetic estimation of the magnitude of its realm” “in front of the immeasurableness of nature” (Kant). Like the eyewitness narratives of the Lisbon earthquake that Buescu claims show the “paradoxical relationship between *seeing* and *saying*” (96), pain and fear of people in Messina was ‘sublimated’ into the impossibility of “describing the horror [they have] seen, that [they were] still seeing” [“descrivere gli orrori che ha visto, gli orrori che vede”] (“Messina all’indomani del disastro”). In the eyewitness narrative of a certain Mr Lamberti reported in an article of *La Stampa* on 8 January we read: “no human pen can ever describe what has happened there, and no one, except those who have seen it, will have an idea” [“nessuna penna umana potrà mai descrivere quanto è successo laggiù; nessuno, che vi abbia assistito, potrà averne un’idea”] (“L’arrivo a Torino”). And if someone tries to say something about what it has been like to be in an earthquake it usually is someone who lost reason for madness (“Il pubblicista Vadalà”).

Summing up, it could be rightly said that the event – paraphrased and widely spread by the modern newspapers and the new technologies available – literally elicited an explosion of truly heterogeneous stories. There were stories that went from a linear time – where a comparison between before and after seemed the only way to refer to what had happened – to a circular time where ancient myths repeated themselves; stories that included or excluded the supernatural – variously called God, evil forces or fate. According to many, the disastrous quake was part of the

atavistic war between nature and mankind; to some it was a case in point for the seismic inadequacy of the buildings. There were stories admiring the deeds of the King and Queen of Italy and stories blaming the incompetence of the government. Finally, there were stories celebrating heroes and other denouncing the regression of rational man to a pure, instinctive animal. In short, by no means was there one only version of the disaster; nonetheless, people unanimously believed that it would be remembered forever. However – as Rigney put it – “the desire to remember [an event] may fail to coincide with [its] ‘memorability’” (“Plenitude” 22). Hence, in the sections that follow I will show if and which of these stories entered into the “canon” of what is actually remembered, and how.

Recollection

I consider the works produced one year after the disaster until recently part of the recollection phase of the 1908 disaster. These works are not included in the immediate reporting because the event is no longer constantly present in news media. That being said: it must be kept in mind that this clear-cut division does not exist in reality and that these phases should rather be conceived as a single dynamic process. Jan Assmann – expanding on Halbwachs’ interpretation of collective memory – also distinguishes two phases: “communicative memory” and “cultural memory”. The main difference between these two lies in the cultural mediation and re-mediation of stories, which is absent in communicative memory, while it is strongly present in the cultural one, allowing stories to be linked to symbols, rituals, places, monuments, objects and works of art, which, in turn, helps these stories to survive after the death of all the eyewitnesses. Assmann’s distinction resembles the distinction between reporting and recollection phase of the Messina earthquake. Nonetheless, I did not use the term “communicative memory” for a reason.

According to Assmann, in the “transition from autobiographical and communicative memory into cultural memory” a structural boundary must be crossed, and that is exactly “the boundary between embodied and mediated forms of memory” (“Communicative” 117), which is

between oral forms of communication and “texts, icons, dances, rituals, and performances of various kinds” (“Communicative” 117). Unlike Assmann, I do not believe that in modern society it is possible to talk of unmediated oral forms of communication. As Rigney suggested – “it makes more sense to take mediated, vicarious recollection as our model for collective memory rather than stick to some ideal form of [unmediated] face-to-face communication” (“Plenitude” 15).

Communicative memory or not, what happened in the first month after the Messina earthquake happened in an unformalized, polymorphous state in the everyday interaction of a community, sustained just by news media and by “affective ties” (J. Assmann, “Communicative” 114) between people which are – according to Assmann – extremely powerful in such moments of intense emotions and solidarity.

As for the term “cultural memory”, it will be interchanged with the term “recollection”, but also “cultural remembrance”, which better denote the working of memory that persistently underlies this phase. The recollection of the Messina earthquake is mostly produced by “specialists” (J. Assmann “Communicative” 114), i.e. poets, bards, teachers and so forth, and its circulation is therefore less “diffuse” (J. Assmann “Communicative” 114) than that of the memories circulating during the reporting phase. Finally it is also highly mediated taking the form of memoirs, poems, short stories, documentaries, but also monuments, academic text and even – as I will show – a stamp.

A short story by the writer Luigi Pirandello, and a memoir by the poet Michele Calàuti are the first examples of the recollection of the Messina earthquake. Both published in 1910, they no longer report the event, but reflect on it while recollecting. Although the two writers, being both Sicilian, share a strong bond with their territory and therefore with the disaster that occurred there, Calàuti is the one who shows the strongest affective ties with memory of the event.

Calàuti was 47 years old when the earthquake struck in his house in Reggio Calabria provoking the death of three of his eight children and of his grandmother. One year later he wrote a short memoir of the disaster, namely *Lacrymae or Memories of an Unburied Man* [*Lacrymae or*

Ricordi di un dissepolto] which clearly frame the memory of the event within an autobiographical traumatic sublime. He, indeed, put on paper what his mind had been reliving over and over again ever since the quake: moments of fear and despair which forever changed his family and life. However, in the last page of his short memoir, the author found a place for remembering and thanking the man who helped him and his family during those terrible moments. He is a man who did not want to reveal his name – for the most valuable and truthful acts of charity, and of magnanimity, are, according to Calàuti, those that are done anonymously. A man whom the author calls “humble and courageous hero, the saviour of my family, the one sent by God” [“eroe umile e coraggioso, il Salvatore della mia famiglia, l’inviato da Dio”] (Calàuti 24). In Calàuti’s work three frames are used to convey the memory of the Messina disaster: the earthquake as a traumatic past, as point of rupture and as a source of acts of solidarity. Since the first publication, this memoir has appeared in multiple editions¹⁰.

A completely different approach to the recollection of the Messina earthquake, is given by Pirandello’s short story, *Professor Earthquake* [*Il professor Terremoto*]. Pirandello – Nobel Prize winner for Literature (1934) – has also contributed to the reporting phase of the Messina catastrophe by supporting the idea of abandoning the earthquake zones. In his short story, he engaged polemically with what the Messina earthquake actually represented for humankind. Like Kant, Pirandello represented the earthquake as an event eliciting the sublime, pushing people beyond their normal limits, but – unlike Kant – he stressed the disillusionment coming afterwards when everything went back to normal. Professor *Terremoto* knows that in those moments of danger the soul sublimates and is pushed to do heroic acts, but the person’s soul does not immediately know that this is only a momentarily illusion. Yet, “he/she will notice it when the soul will fall, like a deflated balloon, into the quagmire of ordinary life” [“se ne accorgerà quando l’anima le ricascherà, come un pallone sgonfiato, nel pantano della vita ordinaria”] (Pirandello).

¹⁰ The edition used here is a recent one edited in 2007 by the journalist Enzo Romeo and claiming to be an accurate reproduction of the author’s book edition in 1915. It includes many letters the author received from several people active in the contemporary cultural life of that time (Romeo 13).

Unlike Calàuti, Pirandello elevated the event above autobiographical facts and reflected on it as one of human failure. The opening scene in which the reader sees lush nature in strong contrast with the ruins of the human world supports this interpretation: “between the lush green forests of orange and lemon groves and the gently blue sea, there is the atrocious view of the first villages in ruins, with the glimpses and the devastated houses” [“tra il verde lussureggiante dei boschi d'aranci e di limoni e il dolce azzurro del mare, la vista atroce dei primi borghi in rovina, gli squarci e lo sconquasso delle case.”]

Although – as John Dickie claims – this short story “tell[s] us much less about earthquakes than it does about Pirandello” (*DISASTRO!* 238), through the story of his main character, i.e. “professor Terremoto”, Pirandello also remembered the heroic deeds elicited by the catastrophe. Yet, with a considerable dose of cynicism, professor *Terremoto* believes that those almost superhuman actions were nothing but a sublime moment that would disappear or soon be turned into a problem of everyday life. Here, indeed, the nihilistic attitude of Pirandello reaches its climax. Professor *Terremoto* tells how after rescuing a family from death his life changed. The young widow he saved fell in love with the hero that professor *Terremoto* proved to be and, as a matter of fact, after the catastrophe, the professor found himself captured in a new life that forced him to renounce all his projects and pay the bills for his new and large family. “That earthquake has passed, and also this one has passed” [“Quel terremoto è passato; anche quest’altro è passato”] – says professor *Terremoto* – but “my life has been left as a perpetual earthquake” [“terremoto perpetuo è rimasta la mia vita”] (Pirandello). In this Pirandello’s short story there is no space for trauma and for mourning. Yet, Pirandello’s version of the Messina earthquake does not escape from framing the event as a source of solidarity and as a point of rupture of people lives, although inflected by the strong cynical personality of the author.

After these two works, appeared within a year after the disaster, not much was produced about the Messina earthquake. This first phase of recollection did not meet the expectations that the immense work of reporting raised in the first month of the event. Moreover, it seems as if the initial

urge to understand led to a silent grief where the memory of the Messina earthquake no longer posed questions, but only seemed to require acceptance as a disaster where nothing and nobody could be blamed. Finally, other traumatic memories such as the Titanic shipwreck and especially the Great War – as Ronsisvalle has pointed out – might have prevailed within the competition for recollection. As Rothberg claimed, “memory competition does exist” (*Multidirectional Memory* 10) and sometimes completely overrides stories. However, this competition is only one part “of the larger dissemination of memory discourses” (Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 11). In fact, the memory of the Messina earthquake was only temporarily forgotten, but never lost. Here, another one of Assmann’s distinctions might be used to understand the void of production that occurred within the recollection of the Messina earthquake: the distinction between “canon” and “archive” (“Communicative” 117). It could indeed be stated that the memory of the Messina disaster remained untouched within the archives, intended both as actual and mental archives, during the two World Wars. However, in the post war period, something started to change: the memories of the Messina disaster began slowly to come back into the canon.

In 1955, the poet Salvatore Quasimodo – also Nobel Prize winner for literature (1959) – brought the reader back to the Messina earthquake in a collection called *Unparalleled Land* [*La terra impareggiabile*] (1955-1958) where he gave us an idea of the author’s feeling of belonging to his land, i.e. Sicily. In particular, “Al padre” was a poem devoted to the author’s father, in which memories of Quasimodo’s childhood were intertwined with the rubble of the city of Messina.

Quasimodo decided to remember his father in what was apparently one of the most meaningful events he experienced together with him. The poet was not in Messina at the moment of the main quake, but he arrived a few days later with his family to help the local population; yet, the earthquake was still there simmering for three days [“/... Il terremoto ribolle/ da tre giorni,.../”] (Quasimodo 203) and the sea was still “poisoned” [“avvelenato”] (Quasimodo 203) by all the debris and dead bodies swallowed by the recent tsunami. Quasimodo – who at the time was only 7 years old – did not question the origin of the earthquake or the reason for it. Nevertheless, the event

represented a point of rupture in his childhood and a lesson for life – “a reflection upon the future life” [“un bilancio di vita futura”] (Quasimodo 203) – learned through his own eyes but also and especially through the example of his father, who showed himself to be a great hero. In those days his usual red hat became “a mitre, a crown with eagle’s wings” [“una mitra, una corona con le ali d’aquila”] (Quasimodo 203). In this poem the earthquake does not emerge as a traumatic memory. This is perhaps also thanks to the author’s father who was able to “steal the fear” [“ci rubò la paura”] (Quasimodo 203) from the child Quasimodo. However, once again the Messina earthquake clearly appears to be framed as a point of rupture and a source of acts of solidarity.

Published in 1962, the anthology produced by the *messinese* Francesco Mercadante is perhaps the most important work of the post war Messina earthquake recollection. The anthology, which for this thesis has also been incredibly useful as a resource for the many articles appearing in the aftermath of the disaster, was encouraged by the 50th anniversary of the earthquake. Subsequently, the anthology was republished in its original form in 2006 and 2010. In this work, something different from the previous works analysed above can be noticed. A different level of culturalization seems to have been reached. Whereas Calàuti, Pirandello and Quasimodo have more or less directly witnessed the catastrophe and have referred to it using mostly personal memories, Mercadante used old materials, such as newspapers articles from archives, to renew the memory of the event.

The use of old material can be considered a form of recycling and a way to bring back to the canon something that was dormant in the archive. Besides, the choice of the image on the front cover (see fig.4) might even be thought of as a landmark picture, indeed even as a *lieu de mémoire*.

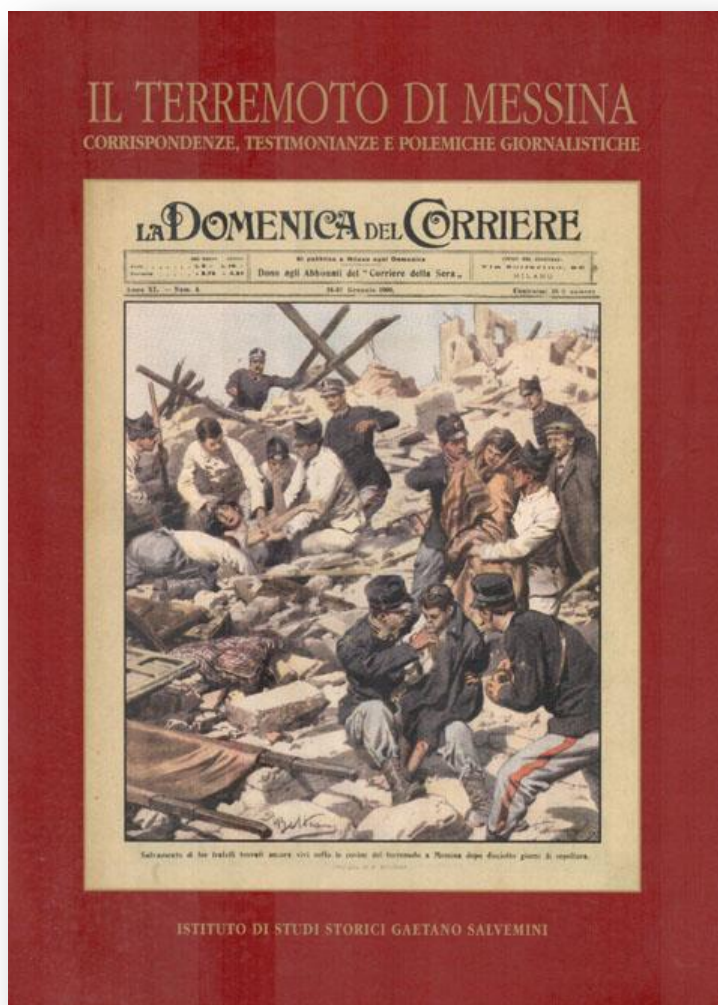


Fig. 4 Mercadante's anthology front cover includes the lithography appeared in *La Domenica del Corriere* on 24-31 January 1909 and which illustrates a rescuing scene. Image. *Istituto Di Studi Storici Gaetano Salvemini*. Istituto Di Studi Storici Gaetano Salvemini, n.d. Web. 4 Jan. 2013.

The coloured image appeared for the first time as the front page on *La Domenica del Corriere* – a weekly historical newspaper famous for its drawings. The picture from 24-31 January 1909 provides – as Pierre Nora would put it – “a maximum amount of meaning in a minimum number of signs” (qtd. in Rigney “Plenitude” 18). The image, indeed, is able to condense and modify several frames used for the Messina earthquake. It represents the chaotic scene of a multiple rescue from the rubble of the quake by Italian policemen (blue uniforms) and most probably Marines (white uniforms). The caption below the illustration describes the image as “the rescuing of three brothers found alive under the ruins of the earthquake in Messina after eighteen days of burial” [“salvamento di tre fratelli trovati ancora vivi sotto le rovine del terremoto a Messina dopo

diciotto giorni di sepoltura”]. In an almost romantic way the picture shows the devastation wrought by nature as well as the power of man, in particular the Italian nation and its officers. It is not difficult, indeed, to find similarities between this picture and “Le Radeau de la Méduse” (1818-19) by Théodore Géricault. Thus, the lithography not only reproduced the frame that interpreted the earthquake as a result of the blind might of nature against man, but stressed the confidence in human resources and solidarity. Nonetheless, by excluding the fundamental role that foreign help played in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the image, above all, shaped the memory of the Messina earthquake as a national disaster, or better yet – as Dickie would later claim – a patriotic disaster.

So far, I have analysed the first 50 years of recollection of the Messina earthquake. Within this period the works produced were often based on autobiographical memory. According to J. Assmann, the autobiographical frame is typical of the communicative memory phase (“Communicative” 117). Furthermore, I noted that only a few frames from the reporting phase seem to have survived. For example, the theodicy frame as well as the idea of the earthquake as destroyer of social order disappeared. This lets us understand at least two things: that the stories within the reporting phase not only interpreted the event, but also gave it a form for remembrance; and that those within the recollection are only a small selection of what emerged during the reporting. Irrevocably, with the anthology of Mercadante, the increasing mediation of the event – in comparison with the reporting phase and the earlier works of recollection – became glaring. In particular, the use of old newspaper articles implied a material recycling, and the lithography in the front cover showed not only a selection of frames, but also their transformation. Finally, the choice of that lithography over others appeared to be part of what Nora described as the process of crystallization of memory of an event into a particular object.

A better way of making sense of this rather fluid process of recollection is provided by Ann Rigney and her “principle of scarcity” (“Plenitude” 16). According to Rigney, the cultural remembrance of an event “evolves from the relatively unorganized exchange of stories among

contemporaries and eyewitnesses to the *increasingly selective* focus on “canonical” sites which work as points of reference across generations” (“The Dynamics” 346) (my emphasis).

The selection is ruled by a principle of scarcity, namely a sort of mnemonic collective strategy meant to overcome the limited human capacity to remember all the data about the event being retrieved. The principle of scarcity affects cultural memory by selecting and recalling events according to a common frame, converging them into what Pierre Nora calls “lieux de mémoire”, remediating memories in different forms, recycling forms of remembrance, and finally, appropriating and transferring memories from and to other communities. Within this process what has been “selected” becomes part of the overt cultural memory of a community, i.e. the canon or working memory, while what has been left out remains latent, i.e. part of the archive. It must be stressed that this process is reversible, that is to say, that what was once considered part of the canon, can drop into the archive and vice versa.

A convincing example of the principle of scarcity working within the memories of the 1908 disaster actually lies in the very name by which the event is remembered: the Messina earthquake. It must be remembered that the quake not only struck the city of Messina. Reggio Calabria, on the other side of the Strait, and many other villages were also destroyed. Nevertheless, although sporadically the event is also called “terremoto di Messina e Reggio” or even more properly “terremoto calabro-siculo” (generally referring to the two regions involved), the quake in 1908 became widely known just as “terremoto di Messina”. A case in point is the choice the commemorative stamp in occasion of the centenary of the quake in 2008 (see. fig. 5). As is visible in the following pictures the stamp reproduces a photo of a completely demolished Messina seen from above (see fig. 6) adding concentric circles in order to give the idea of seismic waves. Still, what is important to notice is that the Strait and the city of Reggio Calabria are in the background and the title for the stamp is “1908 TERREMOTO DI MESSINA”.



Fig. 5 Stamp created for the centenary of the 1908 earthquake shows the city of Messina completely destroyed. 1908. *The Messina Earthquake*. Digital image. *Francobolli-italia.it*. N.p., n.d. Web. 6 Jan. 2013.



Fig. 6 Completely demolished Messina seen from above. N.d. Photograph. *INGV*. INGV, n.d. Web. 6 Jan. 2013.

It would be superfluous to explain here why the choice has sparked protest amongst those who have felt excluded or not equally encompassed in this memory. As Kathrine Hodgkin and Susanne Radstone have claimed, arguing about contested pasts, “[t]here may be agreement as to the

course of events, but not over how the truth of those events may be most fully represented, or what should be the explanatory and narrative context that would make sense of a given episode” (1). As a matter of fact, and for several reasons, such as the prestige of the city before the event or the stronger visual impact of the destruction¹¹, Messina – and not Reggio Calabria – has become the symbol of this tragedy and the way through which people remember and refer to it. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that the memory of the 1908 disaster is a contested one – in this case contested by the citizens of Reggio Calabria – and that could well consider the city of Messina a site of memory where the memory of the earthquake crystalized. In particular, it can be seen as a national *lieu de mémoire*, as suggested by the word “ITALIA” written in capital letters and in bold, in the left corner of the stamp. Moreover, it becomes just as important to stress that the contestation of the memory of the Messina earthquake is often the outcome of a negotiation in which something was chosen for remembering and something else was left out. In the case of the recollections of the 1908 earthquake, the city of Messina won the competition of memories (Rothberg) of the same event. At the same time, it must be underlined that the crystallization of the event in the city of Messina has been the result of a rather long process of selection, recycling and transformation of the past. Thus, the name given to this catastrophe can be interpreted as symptomatic of Rigney’s principle of scarcity.

Following the principle of scarcity, in the next 50 years or so of recollection of the Messina disaster, I would expect to find an increase in selectivity and therefore fewer and even more condensed memories than those found in its first 50 years. Numerous works were produced in the last 50 years about the Messina earthquake, too many to be here analysed¹². Moreover, in the last 10 years the memory of the Messina earthquake has been the main preoccupation of several academics, writers, cultural organizations and so forth, which, in turn, reflected on the production of works on

¹¹ Differently from Messina, in Reggio Calabria “not so great [was] the number of houses turned into true piles of rubble, and not so many [were] those that have lost the wall of the prospectus. The buildings [were] in their majority, although damaged, standing at least in their external walls” [“non così grande è il numero delle case tramutate in veri mucchi di rovine, e nemmeno molte sono quelle che hanno perduto il muro di prospetto. Gli edifici nella loro maggioranza rimangono, benché concussi, in piedi almeno nei loro muri d’ambito... ”] (qtd in Boatti 174).

¹² A quite exhaustive list can be found in the following website: http://www.orient.it/?page_id=388.

this topic. The ease with which materials can be stored and retrieved via Internet is without doubt a primary cause for such a difference relative to the first 50 years of recollection. Nonetheless, I believe that the increased interest in memory, the progress in seismology and risk management in the last decades, the recent discourses on other Italian earthquake disasters and - not the least important - on the project of a bridge across the Strait, must also be taken into account.

Certainly, the main event that seems to have put the Messina earthquake in the spotlight again was the celebration of its centenary in 2008. In this year, indeed, several literary fictions set during the disaster have been published, not to mention the works by John Dickie and the rich collection of academic articles, *Messina 1908 e dintorni*, edited by Giuseppe Campione – both consulted for this thesis. Yet, it would be naïve to believe that the anniversary alone triggered this memory boom. There are several factors working both on a national and international level that have surely influenced this revival. On an international level, the “boom in memory” (17) claimed by Andreas Huyssen can be considered together with the growing relevance of seismology and risk management, and several recent natural disasters strongly emphasised by news media, such as Hurricane Katrina mentioned in the introduction. But what are the reasons for the Messina earthquake revival on a national level?

One reason becomes apparent when taking into consideration the media used for the cultural remembrance of the event. It must be pointed out that fictional stories about the Messina earthquake are generally more common in the last ten years. An explanation might lie in the way literary works compensate for the increasing difficulties in retrieving the ‘actual facts’ and presenting them as ‘true’ so many years after the traumatic event. In relation to the role of literary testimonies within the cultural remembrance of the traumatic memories of the Holocaust and World War II, for instance, Susan Suleiman has claimed that the force of literary works lies in their “awareness of the pitfalls of memory and human error” (135) as well as in their performative character, namely their ability to re-enact the event. By “reworking reality, by putting it in perspective”, as Jorge Semprún put it, fictional narratives are able to convey, even if partially, “the truth of the testimony” (qtd. in

Suleiman 138). However, literary works, especially in view of the skills mentioned above, are also one of the main media through which a counter-memory expresses its strongest voice.

Amongst the fictional narratives published in 2008 there is a memoir, a theatre play – also performed by a theatre company – and two detective novels. The memoir *The Broken Crystal Ware* [*La cristalleria infranta*] by Elena Bristotti recounts the memories of Julia Emma Oates, mother of the author and member of the English community that between the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century lived in Palermo and in Messina. Through this memoir private family memories intersect with the public one, bringing together the event of the earthquake as a point of rupture that brought to an end the presence of that English community together with the cultural and economic activities of Messina. As Bistotti stated in one of her book presentations, her work aimed to commemorate the grandmother and all those who died in that quake and to give to her daughters a trace of their roots (cf. in Bellantoni), namely the international scene of Messina before the 1908 catastrophe which as been barely remembered. The theatre play *Telluric Fragments* [*Frammenti tellurici*] by Domenico Loddo debuts two characters, a man and a woman, who recount what is left after the catastrophe, i.e. fragments. In this text, the memories of the earthquake as a traumatic event are recalled. Traumatic memories that are translated precisely through fragments of that past that follow one another without logic, incapable of unity. Loddo's work is important because it is the only one of the four books mentioned above set in Reggio Calabria. In this way, both Bristotti and Loddo used their literary works to remember a past which has been left out from the main narratives of the 1908 disaster.

However, even more interesting in view of the question concerning the reasons for the Messina earthquake revival are the two detective novels: *Messina 1908* and *The Black Dawn* [*L'alba nera*] by Giuseppe Loteta and Mario Falcone respectively. In both narratives, the earthquake is introduced as a point of rupture in the detective investigations. Together with Andrea Camilleri's work *The Coin of Akragas* [*La moneta di Akragas*] (2010) – which I will analyse later on – and Maria Santini's *The Pascoli's of the Mystery* [*I pascoli del mistero*] (2007), these two

books have framed the Messina earthquake within detective narratives. Why have they chosen this frame?

According to Claudio Milanesi, historical detective novels are the “typical products of the postmodern season” [“prodotti caratteristici della stagione del postmoderno”] (18) in Italy. In particular, during the 80s, the Italian detective novel began to “fill in the historical voids, and explain what seemed inexplicable” [“colmare i vuoti della storia, a spiegare quello che non si può spiegare”] (Milanesi 19). As I will illustrate more extensively in the second chapter, explanations were particularly required in the period between the 60s and 80s when several ‘Italian mysteries’, crimes and terrorist attack could not be elucidated. In this context, detective novels became a tool for reflecting on a contested recent past. However, by serving this purpose, they started to open “glimpses revealing social and cultural events forgotten or removed” [“scorci rivelatori su realtà sociali e culturali dimenticate o rimosse”] (Milanesi 20) and began therefore to be considered as “one of the privileged ways for safeguarding memory” [“una delle modalità privilegiate della salvaguardia della memoria”] (Milanesi 21). The novels mentioned above fit well within this trend in the Italian detective genre. But there is a fundamental difference between the novels analysed in Milanesi’s book and the novels treating the Messina disaster: there is no mystery in the history of the Messina earthquake. Nonetheless, the absence of mystery does not mean that different versions of that event cannot be told. A case in point is the role that the Italian queen plays in *The Black Dawn*. In particular, in Falcone’s novel the queen never left the boat on which she arrived, while earlier newspaper reports celebrated the queen as a mystic figure of charity. In the wake of the success obtained since the 80s, the Italian detective novel became at the beginning of the 21st century a suitable frame also for reading a natural event like the Messina earthquake. The reason for this shift lies on the fact that the 1908 earthquake, although not listed amongst the ‘Italian mysteries’, seems to be progressively recognized as a contested past, as it also emerged in the analysis of the Messina earthquake stamp seen above. This, in turn, shows us the existence of a link created by memory between the political events occurred in the 80s and the Messina earthquake.

Notwithstanding the differences, the memories of these events seem to have influenced each other. As will be better illustrated in the second chapter – this ability of memories to call upon each other, even if in a subtle way as in the case of the Messina earthquake, can be explained by Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectionality. And this multidirectional link between the Messina earthquake and the political crimes in the 80s, together with the recognition of 1908 as contested past, might well be one of the reasons that fostered the Messina earthquake revival in recent times.

Still, a contested past is often symptomatic of a contested present. In 2004 the journalist and writer, Giorgio Boatti, for example, published a reconstruction of the catastrophe in light of its effects on Italian history and population: *The Earth Trembles. Messina 28 December 1908. The Thirty Seconds that Changed Italy, not the Italians* [*La terra trema. Messina 28 Dicembre 1908. I trenta secondi che cambiarono l'Italia, non gli Italiani*]. Following the newspaper reports, Boatti mostly recounts his basic account and interpretation of the catastrophe letting the disaster emerge within a national frame. Yet, in contrast to the lithography illustrated before, he stresses the delay on the part of Italian aid in contrast to the efficiency and solidarity of the Russian navy and, in general, the inefficiency of the army, and consequently also of the government, in facing the emergency and the subsequent reconstruction. From the present perspective, knowing the contested role of the State in the L'Aquila earthquake, in the Belice and Irpinia earthquake – as it will be illustrated in the following chapters – it is easy to see a multidirectional link, although not explicit, between these events and the Messina earthquake. The 1908 disaster, indeed, came out from Boatti's work as the first event of a long series since the unification that have put the Southern part of Italy – in particular Sicily – in the national spotlight and, at the same time, that more than others unveiled the weakness of the Italian state.

The Messina earthquake emerges even clearly as a contested past in light of the strong contrast between Boatti's account of the 1908 disaster and the way in which the event became incorporated into the huge Italian project celebrating the 150th anniversary of the unification. For this event, in 2011, the national television, i.e. RAI (Radio Audizioni Italiane) – controlled by the

government – organized a project for “telling the identity and the transformation of our country beginning with the great adventure of the Italian unification” [“raccontare l’identità e le trasformazioni del nostro Paese a partire dalla grande avventura del Risorgimento”] (“Il progetto”). Less officially put, it can be conceived as an attempt to reinforce Italian feelings of pride and belonging while renovating once again its own power and prestige as a broadcasting organization inside the national frame, especially after running the risk of being partially privatized and having to compete with Silvio Berlusconi’s broadcasting empire. The project includes all kinds of videos, biographies and even quiz, aiming at divulgate a common Italian past. All the materials are accessible via the website – i.e. <http://www.italia150.rai.it> – and, among these, the Messina earthquake in 1908 is listed¹³.

In the video, off-screen voices recount the facts of the earthquake, while photos of that time scroll across the screen. Through the zooming technique, details of these images – for example two men talking to each other – are sometimes foregrounded. In these cases, the narrator– who generally reads out passages of official telegrams or reports – often gives way to an imaginary dialogue between the people in the photo. However, in the course of 10 minutes and 4 seconds – quite long in comparison with videos dedicated to other events – no words are spent on the delay and disorganization of the Italian army, nor is a comment made on the vital help provided by foreign countries. This can be explained by considering that “[m]oments of national humiliation are rarely commemorated or marked in material form” (Winter 62). The inefficiency of the State, especially in view of rather prompt aid on the part of foreign countries would, indeed, not fit well into the narrative of a nation that wants to celebrate its past. Consequently these ‘unsuitable’ elements have been left out from the official version of the past so that they would be forgotten in a manner which resembles Paul Connerton’s “forgetting as humiliated silence” (67). However – as Connerton pointed out – “occasions of humiliation are ... difficult to forget” and “few things are more eloquent than a massive silence” (67). That is to say, in view of the contested past of the Messina

¹³ Also for this other official commemoration Messina is the only name used to refer to this catastrophe.

earthquake, the silence of the RAI commemoration project about the humiliating role played by the Italian government and army actually resulted in a loud request for memory.

Thus, there are at least three reasons for the memory boom of the Messina earthquake. First of all, its recollection being increasingly recognized as contested; secondly, the multidirectional connections between the role of the State in the Messina earthquake and that played in other earthquakes or even with respect to political events such as terrorist attacks and crimes occurred in Italy in the 80s; finally, the attempt by certain national institutions to silence aspects of the memory of the Messina earthquake may have paradoxically triggered the opposite effect.

As I have demonstrated above, there are several reasons for such a renewed interest in the Messina earthquake, besides the fact that cultural remembrance – as Rigney claims – begins “in the absence or pastness of the moment or period being recalled” (“Plenitude” 16). However – as Olick reminds us quoting Milan Kundera – fights against forgetting are often struggle for power (*The Politics* 139). What is at stake in 2008? Perhaps it is the project of the bridge across the Strait with its political and economical consequences on a local as well as on a national level.

The city of Messina appeared suddenly and tragically in the Italian and foreign spotlight in 1908, but as quickly and sadly it disappeared. After the quake, many were dead, others emigrated, the majority perhaps wanted to forget in order to move on. Moreover, the two World Wars helped the city to rapidly replace one black mourning dress with another of the same colour. Finally, the city never succeeded in recovering the prestige lost, or in competing with the exuberant cities of Catania and Palermo. Messina remained a city of passage, one of those cities where you do not stop, so that Messina actually came to denote a strait more than a city. In this context, the project of a bridge across the Strait can be seen as a golden opportunity for the city to claim its identity. And where to start if not on 28 December 1908 where the old Messina died and the new one came into being? Moreover, the bridge across the Strait has been a strongly contested project for it lacks consensus amongst Italians, many of whom believe this project to be useless, extremely expensive and dangerous for the ecosystem of the Strait itself, as well as vulnerable in case of earthquakes like

the one in 1908. Hence, the revival of the memory of the Messina earthquake has much to do with the attempt to catalyse the national attention on the city, and by extension the entire region, but also to the fact that the Messina earthquake can be used as political tool both in local and national discussion about the bridge. Here, it becomes more evident than ever that memories are shaped by the present rather than “resurrected from the past” (Rigney, “Plenitude” 14).

So far, the reasons for the Messina earthquake revival seem being contained within a macro national-political frame. The multidirectionality pinpointed between the 1908 disasters and other catastrophic events in other parts of Italy are mostly based on a political association: a contestation of the role of the State in the Italian catastrophe. Furthermore, what is politically relevant is the project of the Messina Strait thanks to which the memory of the 1908 earthquake came back into the national spotlight. However, there is at least one work that tried to recollect the Messina earthquake outside those national boundaries.

One of the most famous and appreciated contemporary Italian (and Sicilian) writers, Andrea Camilleri, wrote about the Messina earthquake in 2010 in the form of a detective novel. But here the disaster is compared to the Ancient Greek ruins of Agrigento. Camilleri tells us the story of a Greek coin, which seems to have its own ideas or even its own soul for it seems only to appear in particular moments of history and to be found only by a few people. This particular coin was minted during the period in which Akragas (the ancient Agrigento) was defeated and destroyed by the Carthaginians in 406 A.D. Afterwards, the only exemplars left were 38 coins in the hands of the only survivor of the city, the Athenian mercenary Kalebas, who, poisoned by a viper, threw all of them as far as possible just before dying. On 20 December 1909 in the imaginary village of Vigàta in the province of Agrigento, a peasant finds one of these coins and, unaware of its great numismatic value, decides to offer it to the doctor of the village. However, just before getting to know the rest of the story, which develops around the mysterious murder of the peasant, the author dedicates one entire chapter to the Messina earthquake in December 1908, one year before the precious finding.

Why the Messina earthquake? There are two lines of continuity with the previous stories: Messina, like Akragas, has been completely destroyed, and in the Messina earthquake, just as in the defeated Akragas, one of the coins ends up in the hands of those who have helped the two cities, i.e. the Russian navy and the Athenian mercenary. It seems that history repeats itself, despite differences. And the main difference in this case is that Akragas was defeated after “a long siege” [“un lungo assedio”] (Camilleri 23), whereas Messina died in “thirty-two eternal seconds” [“trentadue eterni secondi”] of “natural causes” [“cause naturali”] (Camilleri 23).

The parallel between the ancient Greek city and Messina is reinforced by the use of pictures (see fig. 7 and 8), constituting a clear example of “the intersections between different memorial forms” (Rigney, “Plenitude” 20).



Fig. 7 Image of ancient Greek Ruins in Agrigento included in Camilleri's book. Houël, Jean-Pierre-Laurent. *The Temple of Juno in Agrigento*. 1782-1787. *Voyage Pittoresque Des Isles De Sicile, De Malte Et De Lipari*, Paris, Musée Du Louvre. *La moneta di Akragas*. N.p.: Skira, 2010. IV-V. Print.



Fig. 7 Victims of the Messina earthquake lined up on the marina. *The Messina Earthquake, 28 December 1908*. N.d. Photograph. *La moneta di Akragas*. N.p.: Skira, 2010. X. Print.

In the middle of the book, indeed, black and white photographs of the Messina earthquake follow coloured drawings of old temples. The contrast – as can be seen in the two images reported above – is quite strong. On the one hand, there is a timeworn temple, symbol of a great past now gone. The pastoral landscape suggests a quiet atmosphere. On the other hand, there are the heavily-damaged facades of Messina overlooking the dead lined up on the marina. Despite the differences, both pictures represent the end of something, a city or a period, which – returning in a circular time – also necessarily implied a new beginning.

In such a frame, the Messina earthquake almost becomes a founding myth, which brings within it legendary stories like those of the ‘The Russian Angels’ [Angeli Russi] built on the crucial deeds on the part of the Russian army and which has been also reported by the contemporaries. As mentioned earlier, Russians ships were the first in serving the population of Messina after the quake. To be precise, together with English and Germans ships, they arrived before the Italians ones. Yet – for the principle of scarcity of memory – the deeds of the Russian men remained particularly outstanding in the collective memory of Messina’s citizens. Camilleri did not leave out

the narratives regarding the vital help provided by the Russian navy as, for example, the RAI commemoration project did. However, he also chose to include in his book the lithography of *Domenica del Corriere* that I have illustrated previously with regard to the cover of Mercadante's anthology. It seems that Camilleri tried with this work to reach a compromise within the contested past of his region. By depicting the Messina earthquake as a founding myth in which both national and international characters play important roles, Camilleri was actually able to overcome the national frame and, in doing so, even change the meaning of the lithography. In Camilleri's book, it appears to be less symbolic of a patriotic disaster and more of human solidarity against disasters in all Vichian's occurrences and recurrences of history.

The purpose of this chapter was to show how the Messina earthquake has been culturalized and especially how its interpretation has changed when recollected. The culturalization of a natural disaster, defined as the process that leads people from a natural to a cultural understanding of the event, occurred in both the reporting and recollection of the Messina earthquake. That is to say, from the first attempt to frame the event within a particular narrative until the latest effort to use the memory of the earthquake for political purposes, or – as in the case of Camilleri – to reflect on the example of solidarity that this event represents in history, and not only the national one. Moreover, it has been illustrated that this culturalization, coinciding with practices of interpretation and recollection, is a rather long process in which stories are mediated, remediated, selected according to a principle of scarcity of memory, connected to each other and to other stories in a multidirectional way. Finally, a shift became clear in the last 10 years of this long process of the culturalization of the 1908 disaster. This change was due to factors working on both national and international level. Yet, pivotal for this shift was the recognition of the Messina earthquake as a contested past: contested by the citizens of Reggio Calabria who felt excluded, countered by accounts, such as the one of the Russian angels, ignored in the national remembrance, and disputed within the discourses over the bridge across the Strait.

Chapter II – Irpinia and Bologna 1980: a comparison

Historical background

The 1970s and 80s are commonly remembered as *Years of Lead* [*Anni di Piombo*], the years in which “political messages” were delivered using bullets or bombs, accounting for a *Strategy of Tension* [*Strategia della Tensione*] aiming to influence public opinion through fear and tension. Without going into the political and social situation too deeply, while still providing an idea of how contemporaries experienced this period, it will be sufficient to quote the incipit to a sarcastic and sharp article published by Italo Calvino in *La Repubblica* on 15 March 1980: “[T]here once was a country which was based on illegality” [“C’era un paese che si reggeva sull’illecito”].

1980, in particular, was an exceptionally intense year for Italy. It could be summarized by calling it “the year of disasters”, both natural and man-made. On 27 June, an Italian airplane mysteriously disappeared from the sky above the island of Ustica and with it the lives of 81 people. On 2 August, a time-bomb detonated in an overcrowded waiting room of the Bologna train station causing the death of 85 people. On 23 November, the strongest earthquake of the post-war period struck two southern regions, Campania and Basilicata. The quake would be remembered simply by the name of the historical-geographical region known as Irpinia, located within the territorial domain of Campania. 2,735 people lost their lives in their own homes (Chubb 214).

In this chapter I will systematically compare the interpretation and recollection of two of these disasters, i.e. the Irpinia earthquake and the *Bologna Massacre* [*Strage di Bologna*]. My choice is based on two factors: both events occurred in Italy in 1980 and the bombing, unlike the airplane disaster, has several aspects in common with the earthquake, such as the traumatic experience for their victims of being buried alive under a pile of rubble. Sharing the same political, cultural and historical background and producing similar effects, the Bologna bombing and the

Irpinia earthquake are more suitable for direct comparison. At the same time, moreover, I will hint at differences and similarities between the earthquake of 1980 and that of 1908. In so doing, I aim to illustrate the dissimilarities not only between a natural and a man-made disaster, but also between the readings and memories of two earthquakes set at the beginning and the end of the twentieth century respectively. Frames of interpretation will once again be my investigation's tools and, for clarity purposes, I will try as much as possible to denote them with the same labels I used for the Messina earthquake. As for the previous chapter, I will keep the distinction between the reporting and the cultural remembrance, which again proves itself useful for analysing the diachronically shifting interpretations of these two events. Finally, for the reporting phase my focus will be mainly on two national newspapers, *La Stampa* and *L'Unità*, and in particular on those online archives that cover the period I am investigating. However, I will integrate these sources with others available in the Web. For the recollection phase I will look once again at whatever material has been produced or recycled in order to remember or reflect upon these events at a later point in time.

The Irpinia earthquake

The Irpinia earthquake once again confirmed the lack of organization of the Italian rescue system as well as the condition of Southern Italy as the country's open wound. With a magnitude of 6.8 on the Richter scale (Chubb 214), the quake upset the two southern regions of Campania and Basilicata, and the zone known as Irpinia in particular: one of the most remote and mountainous of the area – corresponding approximately to the province of Avellino (see fig. 9) – and mostly made up of hundreds of poor, medium-small villages.

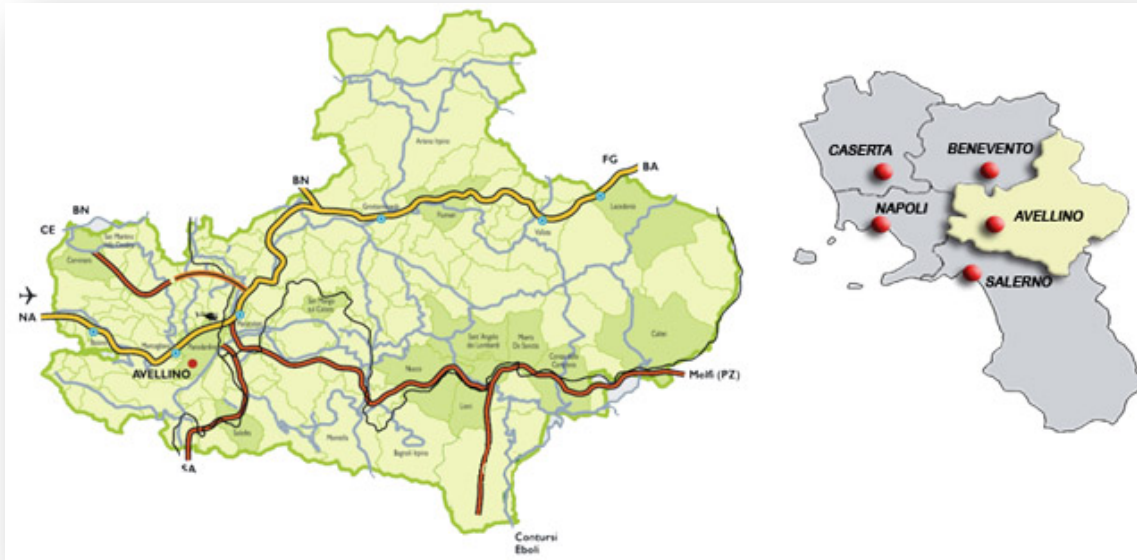


Fig. 8 Irpinia is a area corresponding approximately to the province of Avellino, in Campania region. "Irpinia." Map. *Irpiniaturismo.it*. N.p., n.d. Web. 7 Apr. 2013.

The delayed response on the part of the national rescue teams was partially justified by the truly precarious conditions of the roads leading to these villages often clinging to a mountainside. Yet, with all the improvements that a growing nation could be expected to have achieved, this excuse was not easily accepted. Especially, since journalists were able to arrive before anyone else. Notwithstanding the delay, in this catastrophe – together with many others before it, including the Messina earthquake – solidarity was shown by the entire nation as well as several foreign countries. Yet, a great part of the optimism triggered by all the acts of solidarity soon turned into another reason for complaint when it came to light that large amounts of privately donated goods were completely wasted “because of the absence of any coordination to get the aid to those who needed it the most” (Chubb 216). Mistakes and scandals were related not only to the general organization of the aid in the aftermath of the event, but also to the quality of the buildings whose failure to meet the minimum standard was condemned. A case in point was Sant’Angelo dei Lombardi, where recent buildings and a brand new hospital – financed by the national project *Fund for the South* [*Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*], instituted to improve the economic situation of the South of Italy – “collapsed like decks of cards, resulting in over a hundred deaths” (Chubb 214). Unlike the Messina

earthquake, the responsibility for the Irpinia disaster was attributed entirely to humans, and so the war against nature was transformed into a civil war between Italians: first survivors against politicians, then Northern against Southern people. For the latter conflict, the comparison between the Irpinia catastrophe and two earlier earthquakes was fundamental: the Belice earthquake in 1968 and the Friuli earthquake in 1976, in the South and in the North of Italy respectively. Belice quickly came to be considered the worse Italian example of disaster management while Friuli – although not immune to mistakes – was largely conceived as a quite effective model for transforming a disaster into a success¹⁴.

Although the Irpinia earthquake was an event more similar to the Messina disaster as regards damages and casualties, the two earthquakes mentioned above were the most recent points of comparison in Italian history and therefore those which were most alive in people's memory. The fact that Italy had already experienced analogous disasters a few years earlier must be considered an advantage point with respect to the Messina earthquake: the government should have known what to expect from such a calamity. The experiences of the Friuli and the Belice earthquakes could have been used as models on planning an emergency strategy for the Irpinia earthquake. As for the Messina earthquake, this was the first great tragedy for the new-born Italian state, which was still largely unprepared to cope with such disastrous events. But, as political scientist Judith Chubb, who is particularly interested in Italian society, has argued, the effort made to reconstruct cities and lives after the Irpinia earthquake was based – as a matter of fact – on “the worth of both models” (228), paving the way to “speculative interests, corruption, infiltration by organized crime, and waste of public funds on an unprecedented scale” (228). As a result, the Irpinia disaster managed not only to economically burden Southern Italy – and consequently the entire country – but also to exacerbate the bias of the Northern people towards those of the South. In particular, the first accused the

¹⁴ Mauro Pascolini, expert in human geography, stated that “[the] reconstruction of Friuli has become a positive example of what you can do after a disaster, and in part has been taken as a model of intervention, although subsequent applications as in the case of the Irpinia earthquake did not give the same positive results.” [“La ricostruzione del Friuli terremotato è diventata un esempio in positivo di quello che si può fare dopo una catastrofe e in parte è stata presa a modello di intervento, anche se successive applicazioni come nel caso del terremoto dell’Irpinia non hanno dato gli stessi esiti positivi”] (289).

second of wasting state money, of being lazy and unwilling to collaborate and work honestly to rebuild their cities in a short time, as had been done for the Friuli earthquake. One of the arguments in this clash was the refusal of the people in Irpinia and the other earthquake zones to abandon their villages in order to facilitate the reconstruction, as people had done in the case of the Friuli earthquake. However, Chubb underlines that this refusal has been misinterpreted and was, in fact, not a result of a lack of collaboration on the part of southern peasants, but rather one of the predictable results of imposing a model that worked in Friuli, yet was incompatible with the cultural and economical situation of the South¹⁵.

This misconception was but one amongst many. Yet, with the Irpinia earthquake the real condition of the South of Italy after the World Wars appeared under the gaze of everyone. And if new preconceptions were reinforced, others started to dissolve. In the aftermath of the disaster, several journalists referred to the villages destroyed as lost “presepi”, namely villages whose timeless and peaceful appearance resembled those seen in representations of the nativity scene. This elegiac idea of a Southern-*presepe* was challenged by a critical article (ever since often recalled) published on 5 December 1980 in *Il Mattino* by Leonardo Sciascia, who claimed that these villages had stopped being part of a pastoral world long time before the disaster and that yes, there was a need to rebuild them, but not as *presepi*.

Reporting: earthquakes 1908-1980

One of the main differences between the reports in 1908 and those in 1980 concerns the media in use. Television is undoubtedly one of the greatest innovations of the century and with it came the possibility for a truly large public to experience catastrophes more directly than ever before by including other sense dimensions such as the movements of the rescue teams, the screams of despair of the survivors and the colour of people’s faces covered with concrete powder and blood.

¹⁵ As Judith Chubb pointed out, the refusal of the people, mostly peasants, to abandon their land had quite understandable reasons. Firstly “[n]o one knew exactly where they would be taken; the coastal resort areas were over a hundred kilometres away over tortuous roads ...; and there was no provision for transport between the coastal areas and the home villages” (217). Secondly “[g]iven a long story of an absent and at times hostile state ... there was a deep distrust of the Italian state and its motives” (217).

Newspapers, though, still had an important role in mediating the disaster. The Irpinia as well as the Messina earthquake appeared on the front page of every single daily, national and local, and remained on the first pages for weeks. But this time, several photographs supported the columns. Postcards, which had been so essential for recounting the disaster in 1908, were completely abandoned in 1980. By this time, television, newspapers, and even the radio informed everyone of the tragedy, while the telephone provided people with a faster tool for communicating with relatives and friends. In short, it could be said that the reporting of more recent disasters – and this is true for both natural and man-made ones – entered people’s social life in a much more invasive way than in the past. Yet, notwithstanding the quantity and the quality of the information, reports could still only give a partial view of the event.

Destroyer of the social order

Several journalists arrived in the earthquake zones by helicopter and from this seemingly omniscient perspective they had their first experience of the catastrophe, thus sharing it with the rest of the world. Amongst the journalists was the Italian writer Alberto Moravia, who put pen to paper to publish his experience in an article for the weekly newspaper *L'Espresso* on 7 December 1980. From his vantage point in the helicopter, Moravia saw the natural landscape mingling with the urban one, but this fascinating union became a terrifying vision when he flew over the destroyed villages where houses were “smashed wasp nests” [“nidi di vespe sfondati”] (Moravia). Moreover, from this standpoint, the people buried under those houses were “as invisible as the dead of that cemetery” [“altrettanto invisibili che i morti di quel cimitero”] that the writer saw nearby (Moravia). If the helicopter view was a typical element of the Irpinia catastrophe, the image of a town turned into a cemetery had also occurred in the reports of the Messina earthquake, where it was read within the interpretation of a general upsetting of the social law. Nevertheless, in Moravia’s article, this image is awarded a different connotation than it had back in 1908. In particular, the writer pointed his finger at the builders who “fabricated unknowingly, or better, often knowingly, houses easily convertible into graves” [“hanno fabbricato senza saperlo o meglio spesso sapendolo delle case

facilmente convertibili in tombe”] emphasising, by consequence, human negligence and responsibility rather than condemning the upsetting effect of the fury of nature upon man. In other words, the earthquake was still seen as an apocalypse, but in the sense of a day of reckoning, in which “who stole will be recognized” [“si vede chi ha rubato¹⁶”] or, more generally, “to remind us about what does not work, or is even rotting, in our Country” [“per ricordarci tutto quello che non funziona, o addirittura marcisce, nel nostro Paese”] (“Le due Italie”).

Man-made

At ground level, the mute scenery seen from the helicopter was filled with a chaotic chorus of men “with the coppola” [“con la coppola”¹⁷] and women “wearing black” [“vestite di nero”]. Like the victims of the Messina quake, they complained about their situation as abandoned survivors:

Here nobody helps us, we are abandoned by God and by men; the Germans, coming all the way from Germany, arrived before the Salernitans; bulldozers are being stopped on the roads to let the vehicles of the authorities pass; we need cranes to pull out the people buried alive, instead they send us intensive care units that for now are useless.

[Qui nessuno ci aiuta, siamo abbandonati da Dio e dagli uomini, i Tedeschi, che sono Tedeschi, sono arrivati prima dei Salernitani; sulle strade fermano le ruspe per lasciar passare le macchine delle autorità; ci vogliono delle gru per tirar fuori i sepolti vivi ed invece ci mandano dei centri di rianimazione che per ora non servono a niente].

The feeling of being abandoned not just by God, but also by fellow men, and in particular by fellow countrymen, contrasted with the promptness of foreigners arriving from abroad. Moreover, even when Italian rescue teams finally arrived, they were wrongly equipped and completely

¹⁶ Here Moravia refers to those who illegally saved money on building materials at the expense of the safety of the building itself. In the lines that follow the quote, Moravia gives the reader the example of the hospital in Sant’Angelo dei Lombardi: “[t]he new hospital, opened the other year, collapsed. The sick died, nurses have died, and doctors are dead. And why are they dead? Because someone cheated on the quality of the cement like the dishonest merchant cheats on the weight of the product” [“L’ospedale nuovo, inaugurato l’altre’anno, è crollato, i malati sono morti gli infermieri sono morti, i medici sono morti. E perché sono morti? Perché c’è stato chi ha rubato sul cemento come il negoziante disonesto ruba sul peso.”]

¹⁷ The “*coppola*” is a traditional Sicilian hat used also in other peasant’ regions of Southern Italy.

disorganized. Philosophical questions, such as “why the earthquake? Why the disaster and the broken lives and the endless suffering?” [“[p]erché il terremoto? Perché il disastro e le vite spezzate e l’infinita sofferenza?”] (Boatti 281), so common in the reporting of the Messina earthquake, seem to have been completely forgotten in 1980. This does not mean that people did not question the position of God towards the earthquake. Yet, in general, the age of critique where “humankind sat in judgment over itself” (Olick, *The Politics* 171) was working at full speed, replacing the framing of the disaster in terms of theodicy or a mysterious plan by a framing in terms of human responsibility. Consequently, the questions recalled above were replaced with others such as: why did the Italian rescue units not arrive at the earthquake zone within 48 hours? (Pertini) This is the question that Sandro Pertini, the president of the Italian republic at that time, posed on national television on 27 November 1980, on his return from the disaster zone.

In short, the earthquake was no longer a divine punishment or the result of a mysterious might. Even if anecdotes and presages¹⁸ appeared in the narratives of the Irpinia earthquake as well, they were not given the same attention as in the past. Moreover, myth seemed to have stopped repeating itself. At the same time, even nature appeared to be less accountable for the disaster. There were not many references to the quake as the result of the uneven war of nature against man. On the contrary, many people cast doubt on whether the earthquake itself necessarily has to be catastrophic. In an article published on 25 November 1980 in *L’Unità*, Roberto Cassinis, professor of geophysics at the University of Milan, claimed:

An earthquake of magnitude 6.4 - 6.7 does not necessarily cause a catastrophe. With a comparable level of soil response to the seismic waves and depth of the hypocentre, it is the type of construction together with the density and distribution of the population that

¹⁸ Stefano Ventura, for example, has noticed that many narratives about the earthquake are marked by a meteorological detail, i.e. the warm temperature notwithstanding the time of the year. This detail – Ventura continues – “was associated ... with a harbinger of doom, a ferment of the bowels of the earth that hid something. The force with which the earth trembled at 19:34 on 23 November 1980 turned that harbinger of doom into reality” [“veniva associata ... ad un presagio di sventura, un ribollire delle viscere della terra che nascondevano qualcosa. La forza con cui la terra tremò alle 19 e 34 del 23 novembre 1980 fece sì che quel presagio di sventura si tramutasse in realtà”] (Ventura “Irpinia”).

determines the catastrophic effects of an event. In Italy, sadly, and especially in the South, the rate of catastrophic effects is one of the highest in the world.

[Un terremoto di magnitudo 6.4 - 6.7 non causa necessariamente una catastrofe. A parità di risposta del terreno e profondità del fuoco, il tipo delle costruzioni, la densità e la distribuzione della popolazione determinano il grado di catastroficità dell'evento. In Italia, purtroppo, e soprattutto nell'Italia meridionale, la catastroficità è una delle più elevate del globo.]

More than 200 years after the Lisbon earthquake, history seems to have proven Rousseau right: earthquakes are natural events; catastrophes concern human responsibility. However, within this interpretation, the earthquake is invested with several social and cultural dimensions, especially within the macro national frame.

Source of Solidarity

Countless examples of solidarity acts can be listed for the Irpinia earthquake. And yet, this positive aspect of the Irpinia catastrophe also became instead a source of political criticism and national friction. As mentioned above, Chubb reported the complaints against the waste of the materials donated by the rest of the Italian population and the subsequent accusation, from the Northern communities towards those of the South, of being passive and unwilling to collaborate for the reconstruction of their land. Guido Crainz stressed that solidarity projects were counteracted by “racist” episodes against the South of Italy (104). A few months after the disaster, in *Corriere della Sera*, the journalist Giovanni Russo reported that the earthquake was considered to be only a “problem for southerners” [“faccenda di meridionali”] (qtd. in Crainz 104). Particularly relevant in relation to the comparison that will follow between the Irpinia and the Bologna disasters is what Arnaldo Giuliani reported in *Corriere della Sera*. On 19 April 1981 Giuliani wrote that on the walls of factories of Milan “graffiti against Southerners began to replace those, increasingly faded, of the Red Brigades” [“le scritte contro i <<terrioni>> iniziano a sostituire quelle, sempre più scolorite, delle Brigate Rosse”] (qtd. in Crainz 104). The Red Brigades – as will also be better illustrated later

on – were left-wing extremists held responsible for several terrorist attacks between the 60s and the 80s. The Red Brigades were wrongly accused of the Bologna bombing that had occurred about three months before the Irpinia earthquake. With the fact reported by Giuliani, it becomes clear not only that the solidarity shown by the Northern part of Italy came together with strong criticism towards the Southern communities, but also that the Irpinia earthquake increased the gap between the North and the South of Italy, as much as the Bologna bombing – as we will see – distinguished between the civic society and the terrorists. The role of solidarity in the Irpinia earthquake contrasts with that of the Messina earthquake where a patriotic feeling seemed to emerge precisely based on the solidarity acts following the catastrophe. However – as seen in the previous chapter – the interpretation of the 1908 disaster changed in the last 10 years, going to stress more the inefficient role of the State rather than its role in solidarity.

A national-political problem: a comparison with the Belice earthquake

As I have already mentioned, commentators writing in 1980 compared the Irpinia earthquake with another earthquake, i.e. the one that struck in Belice, in 1968: this disaster created 370 victims and in 1980 it was – and still is – sadly remembered for the ill administration of public money, tainted by corruption and fraud, that left entire communities confronting an unfair choice: leave everything and emigrate or stay and live poorly in shacks. Moreover, contemporary to the reports about the Irpinia disaster, articles about the Belice earthquake – particularly about the minimally improved condition of the survivors 11 years after the event – were issued. During the reporting phase of the Messina earthquake, the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 was also mentioned sometimes; however, the reference was not as insistent as the reference to Belice in the case of the Irpinia disaster. Recent works, such as the one edited by Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers, and Eyal Zandberg (2011), have focused on analysing how memory has had an increasingly important role in shaping the news. In this case, the reference to the Belice earthquake served at least three purposes: commemorating the former disaster, interpreting the recent catastrophe and anticipating future

developments. This triple purpose is clear in Pertini's famous television speech broadcast simultaneously on all national channels on 27 November 1980.

Soon after denouncing the delay in sending help or even the total absence of aid in earthquake zones, the Italian president Pertini remembered the Belice disaster and asked the camera, "where did this money go? Who speculated on the misfortune of Belice?" ["dove è andato a finire questo denaro? Chi è che ha speculato su questa disgrazia del Belice?"], and continued admonishing: "it must not be repeated, for goodness sake, what happened in Belice, because it would be an affront not only to the victims of this earthquake disaster, but an offense that would touch the conscience of all Italians, of the whole nation and my own above all" ["non si ripeta, per carità, quanto è avvenuto nel Belice, perché sarebbe un affronto non solo alle vittime di questo disastro sismico, ma sarebbe un'offesa che toccherebbe la coscienza di tutti gli italiani, della nazione intera e della mia prima di tutto"]. Finally, he concluded his speech by stating that taking care of the living is the best way to commemorate the dead (Pertini). In this speech, the Irpinia earthquake is read as an event proving that the nation learns from its mistakes. Hence, the recent earthquake – within the bigger frame of human responsibility – is justified as a test and, at the same time, provides the earlier catastrophe with a new interpretation, namely the quake as a necessary lesson. If the Irpinia earthquake does not meet this expectation – as it will not – the memory of both past and present disasters will remain as a label of shame on Italian identity.

Pertini's speech recalls what Olick calls the "politics of regret", i.e. a political legitimization principle based on a collective memory, "disgusted with itself", which aims at "learning the lessons of history more than [...] fulfilling its promise or remaining faithful to its legacy" (*The Politics* 122). Yet, Pertini as president of the Italian Republic, did not offer an apology, in the name of the Italian government, for the disaster. On the contrary, he looked into the camera – therefore at his citizens – asking for the perpetrators. Hence, on the one hand, Pertini regretted the memory of the Belice earthquake and wished the present disaster be remembered as a lesson learned; on the other hand, he did not charge the government with responsibility for the disaster, but rather left this

question open for the entire Italian community. A few days after the disaster, the collective memory of the Irpinia earthquake started already to define itself around the question: will it or will it not be another Belice? Will it or not be a point of rupture able to stir the social, political and economic situation of the peninsula?

Point of rupture

Unlike Messina, news about the Irpinia earthquake was not built around the idea of death and resurrection of a single city. Images did not show, as in the 1908 disaster, a city before and after the quake. Firstly, this was due to its not relating to a well-known city, but to several anonymous villages. Secondly, this was because the Irpinia earthquake was interpreted within a broader frame than the Sicilian one. For Messina the point of rupture was in the city itself, whereas for the Irpinia earthquake this frame could not be the same because the villages destroyed by the quake were mostly unknown. If in 1908, Messina died, in 1980 Moravia claimed to have seen “the South of Italy dying” [“morire il Sud”], other commentators declared elegiacally the end of a South imagined as a *presepe* or rather transformed into several “infernal *presepi*” [“presepi infernali”] (Lodato). Having the town of Eboli listed amongst the destroyed places was highly symbolic in this sense. After the very famous novel by Carlo Levi¹⁹, indeed, Eboli had come to signify in the Italian collective memory the beginning of that part of Italy, i.e. the South, where not even God dared to go. The same reference was used in an article published in *L’Unità* on 25 November 1980 by the Italian director Francesco Rosi who asked “did man too stop in Eboli?” [“[a]nche l’uomo si è fermato ad Eboli?”]. Rosi was obviously referring to the incredible delay in sending the help that, even after several days, had not yet managed to reach many of the earthquake zones. The same delay made the Neapolitan edition of the national newspaper *Il Mattino* appeal to the entire nation with its capitalized title “HURRY UP” [“FATE PRESTO”] (see fig.10).

¹⁹ Carlo Levi was an Italian-Jewish artist and author, who became extremely famous after describing his experience of exile in the South of Italy during Fascism. The book and its title *Cristo si è Fermato ad Eboli* (1945) became for Italians an emblematic reference to the still poor condition of that part of Italy during the dictatorship. The book was also adapted to film just one year before the Irpinia disaster, under the direction of Francesco Rosi.

Hence, it could be stated that the Irpinia earthquake was interpreted more as a Southern catastrophe than Messina was. Yet, in both cases the earthquake revealed something about the nation: in 1908 the earthquake proved to be an event that reinforced the feeling of belonging to the same country (while still emphasising the great differences between the North and the South of Italy), whereas in 1980 the disaster was immediately felt as increasing the gap between the two sides of Italy, dividing the nation. Still, at least in the first month after the catastrophe, people hoped that in the near future the earthquake could provide the country with a chance to “reverse the course of events” [“invertire la rotta”] and finally start to fill that gap (“Dopo 30 anni”).

In this more general interpretation, the Irpinia earthquake was interpreted as a *potential* point of rupture for the entire nation. For instance, in an article on 26 November, Enrico Berlinguer – national secretary of the PCI (Italian Communist Party) – stated that the earthquake upset a nation already shaken-up by “the interlacement of the scandals and turbid intrigues of power” [“l’intreccio degli scandali e dei torbidi intrighi di potere”]. For this reason, the disaster might have been able to trigger a point of rupture, “the need for a breakthrough moment that ensures honesty, fairness, authority in the leadership of the country and gives the nation an authoritative political direction able to heal and renew society and state” [“l’esigenza di una svolta che garantisca onestà, correttezza, prestigio nella guida del paese e dia alla nazione una direzione politica autorevole e capace di risanare e rinnovare la società e lo Stato”] within Italian consciousness. A request for radical change was echoed even more strongly by *L’Unità* that stated nothing after the quake “can be as before” [“può essere più come prima”] (my emphasis) (Badual).



Fig.9 Front page of the Italian newspaper *Il Mattino* three days after the Irpinia disaster. Roberto, Ciuni. "FATE PRESTO." *Il Mattino* [Caltagirone Editore] 26 Nov. 1980: 1. *Il Corriere Nazionale*. Editrice Grafic Coop, 11 Nov. 2011. Web. 12 May 2013.

Traumatic sublime

The sublime – in the sense of an inability to translate into words what is in front of one’s eyes – permeated this immense tragedy as well. A failure that was sometimes covered up by little details like in the narrative of a 9 year old child who remembered which subject he was studying when the quake struck (Ventura “Irpinia”), and other times was hidden behind silence. It is not surprising, therefore, to read the words of the president of the Italian Republic, who claimed that “in face of this tragedy the words extinguish[ed] on the lips” [“davanti alla tragedia le parole si spengono sulle labbra”] (“Il presidente”). Photos were particularly powerful in their attempt to convey the incommensurability of the disaster. The following images are amongst those that acquired an iconic status by being recycled over and over within articles and documentaries concerning the Irpinia disaster. The silent despair of a middle-aged woman staring at what remained of her past life (see fig. 11), the bird’s eye photo of village literally erased (see fig. 12) and the image of one of the lifeless bodies extracted from the rubble (see fig. 13) gave just an idea of what might have meant to experience that quake



Fig. 10 Woman Staring at the Ruined Houses.1980. Photograph. *Corriere Del Mezzogiorno*. RCS. Web. 12 June 2013.



Fig. 11 The Village of Laviano Destroyed by the Irpinia Earthquake seen from above. 1980. Photograph. *Protezione Civile*. Dipartimento della Protezione Civile-Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, n.d. Web. 2 June 2013.



Fig. 12 Man carrying a lifeless body extracted from the rubble of the Irpinia Earthquake. 1980. Photograph. *Urbanpost.it*. 22 Nov. 2012. Web. 4 June 2013.

It can be thus concluded that there were at least three main differences between the reporting in 1908 and in 1980. The first and more obvious one is the disappearance of the transcendental frame used to understand the occurrence of the natural event itself. In the reporting of the Irpinia earthquake there was no space for the interpretation of the event as a result of a God's plan, the blind might of nature or the recurrence of a myth. The second difference relates to a clearer distinction between earthquake and catastrophe, seeing man as the ultimately responsible for the catastrophe. Finally, the third variation concerns the fact that the Irpinia earthquake was immediately read within a contested national frame that divided the Northern part of Italy from the Southern one, while the Messina earthquake acquires this meaning only later in the recollection. In its first phase, indeed, the 1908 disaster helped the creation of a national feeling.

The Irpinia earthquake: recollection

The most symbolic and recognizable object from the Irpinia earthquake that survived and changed semantically over time is certainly the capitalized headline “HURRY UP” [“FATE PRESTO”] of the newspaper *Il Mattino* (see fig.10). Although, there were several dramatic images of the Irpinia earthquake circulating, it was a verb in the imperative form paired up with an adverb in capital letters – which is the equivalent of a scream – that persisted in the collective memory: neither a photo of a child amongst the rubble of his house, nor an image of people collaborating in digging out their fellowmen, but only a clear title conveying a desperate yell for help.

The particularity of this title, besides its strong message and form, lies in the fact that it was a local newspaper that first realized the real depth of the emergency, rather than a national institution created for calamity management. Hence, this title worked as a slogan that, on the one hand, summarized the gravity of the disaster and, on the other hand, reinforced the absence of government aid in times of need, as well as the persevering remoteness of Southern Italy. That is to say, it highlighted the role that the government should have played – but did not – in the catastrophe and the existence of a deep national division.

A few years later, in 1984, this title secured its value as an icon thanks to the world-wide famous artist Andy Warhol who decided to collaborate –with many other artists – in the creative project *Terrae Motus* organized by the Neapolitan artist Lucio Amelio. Warhol, as an artist always interested in celebrity and popular events, chose this great-impact headline, reproducing the entire front page of *Il Mattino* in three gigantic versions, with white, black and grey backgrounds respectively (Ciuni 240) (see fig.14).

From Walter Benjamin’s point of view, it might be stated that Warhol’s reproduction continues the work of desacralization of art typical in an age of mechanical reproduction while acquiring a “hidden political significance” (Benjamin 220). However, since the “original” – if it might be so called – already carried a strong political message, it could be assumed that Warhol’s work contributed not only to the fame of the headline but also to strengthening its political meaning.



Fig. 13 Andy Warhol and one of his gigantic versions of the front page of *Il Mattino*. Bonuomo, Michele. 1984. Photograph. Terrae Motus. *L'Unità*. Nuova Iniziativa Editoriale. Web. 3 June 2013.



Fig. 14 Front page of *Il Sole 24 Ore* published on 11 November 2011 and reproducing the famous front page of *Il Mattino* appeared on 26 November 1980. Napolitano, Roberto. "FATE PRESTO." *Il Sole 24 Ore*. Gruppo 24 Ore, 10 Nov. 2011. Web. 4 June 2013.

The story of this headline did not end with Warhol's blow-up. *FATE PRESTO* became Nora's "memory site," a minimum sign condensing "a maximum amount of meaning" (qtd. in Rigney "Plenitude" 18) that referred to the earthquake itself²⁰ as well as to completely different contexts. On 10 November 2011, indeed, another Italian newspaper, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, recycled the same headline, this time not to refer directly to the disaster in 1980, but rather to describe the Italian contemporary political situation, groping around in a fragile financial position (see fig. 15).

It was the time when Silvio Berlusconi was forced to "abdicate", pressed by the Italian debt crisis, to make room for the economist Mario Monti and his team of technocrats. Roberto Napolitano, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper, explained his choice and the similarities between the two events in this article. According to him, a dramatic financial earthquake characterized the contemporary situation (Napolitano). As had been the case after the Irpinia earthquake, Italy, or a part of it, was now on its knees. If entire villages had crumbled down in 1980, the Italians' savings, jobs and national credibility (Napolitano) were destroyed in 2011. On both occasions people cried out aloud for action; an action, in turn, that would perhaps have made a great difference now just as then. Unfortunately, then and now, this slogan did not lead to a happy ending. It did not take long, indeed, to discover that the Irpinia earthquake would not only be another Belice, but also worse than it.

As can already be seen from the example of the front page of *Il Mattino*, the cultural remembrance of the Irpinia earthquake does not differ from the Messina disaster in the sense that both – as will also be evident in this section – are much more linked to the present than to the past and both follow a fluid process based on an increased selection and transformation of the stories originally produced. However, in the Irpinia earthquake the predominance of a human-oriented and political interpretation of the natural catastrophe is undeniably confirmed as the dominant frame in the recollection stage and in the reporting phase.

²⁰ In 2000, for example – 20 years after the disaster – the newspaper headline was used as a title for an anthology of photographs and articles about the Irpinia earthquake. Mario Cresci, Mimmo Jodice. *Fate Presto!: 23 Novembre 1980 : Terremoto in Campania E Basilicata*. (Milano: F. Motta, 2000).

At this point, it is fundamental also to consider the so-called *Irpinia-gate* and the later inquiry *Hands on the Earthquake* [*Mani sul Terremoto*]. Both terms concern the scandals linked to the reconstruction of the earthquake zones that between 1989 and 1991 was the object of investigation by a parliamentary commission led by Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, future head of state. The first term, in particular, refers to a newspaper inquiry carried out by the journalist Indro Montanelli in 1987 in *Il Giornale* that brought to light the discrepancy between the money disbursed by the government and the service rendered to the communities, that was no longer possible to ignore. The second term indicates the parliamentary investigation that followed.

With these investigations the memory of the Irpinia earthquake within a political-national frame was reinforced once more, especially thanks to the multidirectional character of memory that in this case allowed the association between the Irpinia disaster and two well-known political scandals. In fact, besides the obvious political relevance of the scandals that involved several well-known politicians, the names themselves, *Irpinia-gate* and *Mani sul Terremoto*, were coined after or in the wake of other political scandals that had nothing to do with natural disaster: i.e. the American *Watergate* scandal and *Clean Hands* [*Mani Pulite*], the Italian national investigation against political corruption. Moreover, several books²¹ were written about these investigations and about the way the earthquake generally become a source of illegal – or simply amoral – enrichment opportunities both for individuals and criminal organizations, underpinning the relation between this natural event and political corruption, to the point of rendering them almost synonymous in collective memory.

Of course, as Stefano Ventura, an Italian researcher and expert in the history of management and recollection of earthquakes in the post-war period, has suggested, the Irpinia earthquake was not only a scandal, and his analysis of personally collected oral narratives also makes space for other memories of the disaster (Ventura “Terremoto”). Still, his research based on eyewitness

²¹ The analysis of these books would not add anything new to the discourse about the national-political frame, therefore I will confine myself to mention a few of them in this note: Goffredo Locatelli. *Irpinigate*. (Roma: Newton Compton, 1989), Pietro Funaro, *Mani sul terremoto. Campania anni Ottanta, l'altra faccia dell'emergenza*. (Napoli: Spazio Creativo Edizioni, 2012) and Paolo Liguori, *Il terremoto della ricchezza: inchiesta sull'Irpinigate* (Milano: Mursia, 2009).

narratives shows that one of the memories that the small communities involved in the quake share is that of “the controversy on the wastes and the long delays” and “the promises that have been disappointed” [“le polemiche sugli sprechi e i tempi lunghi, le promesse andate deluse”] (Ventura “Terremoto”). Moreover, as Olick has argued, “[C]ollective memory ... is not identical to the memories of a certain percentage of the population but constitutes a social fact in and of itself” (*The Politics* 7). It is therefore concerned with the symbols and words that people use to remember an event as much as with “what symbols and words were available to them in which times and places and hence with how those cultural frameworks are prior to, and thus shape, their intentions” (Olick, *The Politics* 7). Perhaps Ventura’s work will contribute to renewing and enriching the cultural remembrance of Irpinia, but at the moment the Irpinia earthquake, as Montanelli stated, is an event mainly remembered within a national-political frame as an event that transformed not only an entire region, but also an entire ruling class by incrementing its corruption (Montanelli, 325). And whose consequences for the actual political and economic situation of Italy – I would add – make its memory still quite relevant nowadays. A curiosity perhaps, but enlightening nevertheless, is the tax added by the government to the cost of petrol in order to finance the help to the earthquake region and that still today, after 30 years, every Italian pays when filling the tank of their cars (Strada).

In addition to this national-political frame, and besides the more predictable traumatic memories of those who lost everything, beloved people and places, Ventura’s research also highlights the recollection of the “abrupt change of habits and scenarios” and of the “deep contradiction between modernity and inefficiency” [“cambiamento accelerato di abitudini e scenari ... la profonda contraddizione tra modernità e inefficienza”] (Ventura “Terremoto”). Perhaps, *The Last Bride of Palmira* [*L’ultima sposa di Palmira*], a book by Giuseppe Lupo, echoes this particular frame of the Irpinia disaster the best. The book, finalist in 2011 for a well-known Italian literary prize, *Premio Campiello*, recounts the story of an earthquake village which has never been recorded on any geographical map, namely Palmira. As the story goes, before the disaster in 1980, this village was an enchanted place going around in circles of mythological time, an enchanted

atmosphere which reminds us of, for example, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* as well as the magic realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. In this village the reader arrives a few days after the earthquake, together with an anthropologist, *Viviana*, from the north of Italy – but with partially Southern roots – who wants to collect narratives about the disaster zone. Eventually, she ends up registering only the stories of an old woodworker, *Mastro Gerusalemme*, who is determined not to leave his destroyed village and to continue working on some wooden furniture for the last bride of Palmira.

Thus, on the one hand, we have a magic and remote Southern Italy, and on the other hand we have *Viviana* who serves as a link between the world she discovers in Palmira and our world. In this context, the earthquake is characterized by a point of rupture that suddenly blew Palmira's door open to the wind of history. As Mastro Gerusalemme stated, “down here not even the air we breathe will be like before” [“[q]uaggiù nemmeno l'aria che respiriamo assomiglierà a prima”] (Lupo 20). In addition to the references to the Italian president's speech (Lupo 37) and to the earlier earthquakes in Friuli and Belice (Lupo 12, 37), it is not difficult to think of this village as one of those *paesi-presepi* (also the name of the woodworker points the reader in this direction) recounted by journalists in the aftermath of the Irpinia catastrophe. The term “*presepi*” has been an object of controversy between those who believed in the need to move on from this pastoral idea of the South and those who maintained the importance of preserving their heritage. Without doubt, the author – native of the areas where the earthquake struck – is amongst the latter. Indeed, he can be easily associated with the fictional anthropologist: they both have lives in the North of Italy (Giuseppe Lupo is a professor at the Milan Catholic University), but cannot forget their origins and together they try to save at least the memories of these places irreversibly changed by the earthquake.

A similar approach to the Irpinia disaster can also be seen in another highly appreciated book, i.e. *Viaggio nel cratere* (2003) by the writer-*paesologo* Franco Arminio. For this book, Arminio himself invented the word “*paesologo*” meaning literally “expert on villages,” and referring to the job of one who “studies the way in which those particular bodies which are called

villages work” [“studia il funzionamento di quei particolari organismi che si chiamano paesi” (Arminio 13). In particular, he is an expert on the Irpinian villages-*presepi* and his book can be regarded as a travelogue through these villages whose extinction has been accelerated by the earthquake.

Whether or not these villages before the quake were the enchanted *presepi* so nostalgically evoked by Lupo and by Arminio is a minor point. What is certain is the big change that the event caused in the human landscape as well as in the lives of its citizens and the generalized idea that, since that day in November 1980, Irpinia and the other earthquake zones would never again be the same. The considerable amount of money bestowed by the Italian state and by the European Economic Community to the earthquake zones increased the process of industrialization and modernization providing jobs and wealth; at the same time it also provided many greedy people with possibilities to earn easy money through illegal means.

However, there are also books which, while remaining within the frame of the point of rupture, choose to stress – together with the end of the old life – the process of modernization accelerated by the quake. These books, published mostly by small publishing houses within the earthquake zone and therefore often extremely difficult to find, are characterized by the image of a South that – notwithstanding the quake – was able not only to survive but also to become stronger. On this aspect of the literature produced after 1980, an American-Irpinian student, Stephanie A. Longo, wrote her BA thesis and translated and published on an Italian Web page dedicated to the culture and traditions of the South of Italy (www.ilportaledelsud.org).

As I illustrated with reference to the reporting phase, the frame of the point of rupture was a constant way to mediate both the Messina and the Irpinia earthquakes. At the same time, I noticed that in the case of the Irpinia earthquake the division between the period before and after the disaster acquired a wider meaning than in the case of Messina. After more than 30 years, the idea that the Irpinia earthquake put an end to the enchanted and idyllic life of the South of Italy and

introduced an inefficient and corrupted modernity, or simply accelerated the modernization process, has survived strongly.

In addition, the Irpinia earthquake has also been interpreted as a point of rupture that served to reflect upon life on a personal level. In this respect, it is impossible not to quote the art historian and writer Cesare de Seta, who participated in almost all the stages of the culturalization of the Irpinia earthquake. In at least three of his works produced in the 30 years since the 1980 catastrophe, he has focused on this event as a point of rupture. He, indeed, was a protagonist in the reporting phase of the disaster, amongst those supporting the preservation of the Irpinian *presepi* (Mirabella). In 1983, he published *The Reconstruction after the Earthquake* [*Dopo il terremoto, la ricostruzione*], an essay in which he reflected on the way villages and especially their historical centres should have been rebuilt after the quake. However, in 2002 De Seta remembered this event with a novel, *Terremoti*, in which the earthquake is framed as an event that serves as a way to reflect on and make sense of personal events. In this particular case, the earthquake is a point of rupture that helped make sense of love, which is portrayed as nothing less than another kind of quake. In this novel – that ended up among the finalists of another major Italian prize for literature, *Premio Strega* – De Seta does not abandon the idea of the Irpinia earthquake as an event that deeply changed urban landscapes. In fact, Giuseppe Lupo claimed that the novel *Terremoti* had a great influence on his work *L'ultima sposa di Palmira* analysed above (Lupo 171) for they shared the idea of a lost heritage after the quake. Yet, this time De Seta brought the earthquake into a more intimate sphere, although still within the frame of the point of rupture. In particular, the seismic event gives to the main character of *Terremoti* – Andrea – the impulse to think about his life, realizing that his love life has been like an earthquake. Both, indeed, are irreversible events that unsettle one's life, leaving scars when they are over. Like De Seta in *Terremoti*, the writer Fabrizia Ramondino used the Irpinia earthquake in *Earthquake with Mother and Daughter* [*Terremoto con madre e figlia*], a theatre play published and then performed under the well-known director, Mario Martone, in 1994. In this case, the earthquake serves as a background to the relation between a

mother and a daughter captured in a complicated generational clash as well as a metaphor for their lives and relationship.

Summarizing the cultural remembrance of the Irpinia earthquake, two main frames survived the selection process of cultural remembrance, i.e. the earthquake as a political event and as a point of rupture. However, in the works of Cesare de Seta and Fabrizia Ramondino, while remaining still within the frame of the point of rupture, the attention shifted to human relations and how often they develop parallel to natural events. And it is perhaps in this shift that the process of culturalization presented in the introduction to this research can be better recognized. As Dickie claimed, “[n]othing is more natural than seismic activity” (*Disastro* 4), yet, after the analysis of the Irpinia earthquake, it became clear that natural events are inevitably also cultural events. Bearing this in mind, the interpretation of the earthquake in 1980 as a political event is certainly striking, but De Seta and Ramondino also offered a possibility to see the degree to which natural events influence the understanding of our own personal reality.

In the analysis of the Messina recollection, I pointed out that the processes which underlie cultural remembrance tend to accelerate in the proximity of particular events in the same way a satellite is attracted by the gravity of a larger astronomical object, and to accelerate its movement into the orbit of that object. For the Messina earthquake, I identified its centenary in 2008 and the project to build a bridge on the Messina Strait as the main reasons for a renewed interest in this catastrophe in the last 10 years. At the same time, I linked these two factors to the larger frame of the “boom in memory” (Huyssen 17) and the increased attention of media all over the world to natural disasters and disaster management. In the case the Irpinia earthquake recollection, it is more difficult to identify one precise period in which the attention over its memory awakened. An explanation for this difficulty is the fact there was no obvious period in which the memories of the catastrophe were dormant as they were in the case of Messina. In contrast to the latter there was never a void in the production of materials about the catastrophe in Irpinia. Ever since the event, books, cultural projects, documentaries and so forth have been released quite constantly. And yet,

the L'Aquila earthquake in 2009 and the similar political scandal it provoked – linked both to the construction of the houses and the reconstruction of the city – has undoubtedly reignited the memory of Irpinia. A proof of this might be the two report-books about the scandals of *Irpiniagate* and *Mani sul Terremoto* published in 2009 and 2012²², which revitalize once again the link between the quake and the national-political frame. In addition, three documentaries²³ on the Irpinia earthquake were released in 2010, which seems to prove that the memory of L'Aquila earthquake revived its cultural remembrance. The same can be supposed for an audio documentary²⁴, *La Malanotte*, transmitted on a RAI radio channel at the end of 2009, comprising a set of audio files with interviews and testimonies of witnesses and experts related to the Irpinia earthquake and the reconstruction that followed.

The fact that one memory calls upon another can be explained – as mentioned in the first chapter regarding the Messina earthquake – by Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectionality. According to Rothberg, memories do not stand-alone but they always create a network of recollection with other memories; a network that is able to cross boundaries of time and space – and therefore also communities – through “borrowing or adaptations” (*Multidirectional Memory* 5). Such a process was also clear with regard to the association between the Irpinia disaster and the American political scandal Watergate, which gave birth to the term “Irpiniagate”. In the case of the L'Aquila and Irpinia earthquakes, the memories have also found a way not to be in competition with each other, but rather to build a “mutual understanding” (Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 11), serving “as a medium for the creation of new communal and political identities” (Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 11).

²² I am referring to the books of Pietro Funaro, *Mani sul terremoto. Campania anni Ottanta, L'altra faccia dell'emergenza*. (Napoli: Spazio Creativo Edizioni, 2012) and Paolo Liguori, *Il terremoto della ricchezza: inchiesta sull'Irpiniagate* (Milano: Mursia, 2009).

²³ The page of Wikipedia dedicated to the event lists three documentaries released all in 2010. <http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terremoto_dell'Irpinia_del_1980>. Unfortunately it has been impossible to retrieve them from the Web.

²⁴ The audio-documentary, *The Misfortune Night [La malanotte]*, has been sponsored by a RAI project and produced by Marcello Anselmo in 2009. It is now retrievable from the Internet in the RadioRai webpage http://www.radio.rai.it/radio3/terzo_anello/lamalanotte/.

The solidarity relation created between the memories of the two earthquakes becomes even clearer when analysing a monologue about the earthquake in L'Aquila, by the writer and journalist Roberto Saviano²⁵, hosted by the RAI TV program *Vieni via con me* on 29 November 2010. The monologue is now retrievable not only from the RAI official website, but also quite easily from *YouTube* where it has been watched thousands of times²⁶. The popularity of the monologue is partially linked to the wide recognition of Saviano as an influential author and to the public appreciation for the entire TV program. Nonetheless, the public awareness and responsiveness towards the facts of the recent earthquake in L'Aquila must also be taken into account. Saviano's reading of a passage from the book on Irpinia *Viaggio nel cratere* by Franco Arminio²⁷ – mentioned above – made the link between the latter and L'Aquila. This was further supported by Saviano's belief that both events are alike: "it always seems like the same tragedy" ["sembra sempre la stessa tragedia"]. This likeness is sustained, in turn, by the use of the same national-political frame to interpret the events: the Irpinia earthquake as well as L'Aquila's are symbols of building permit violations and of the government's failure to deal with this kind of emergency. Thus, by putting both events on the same level, Saviano was also able to reinforce both memories and show that they could be considered shared, if not at a national level, at least for the two communities involved. After all, as Rothberg claims, "multidirectional memory is often the very grounds on which people construct and act upon visions of justice" (*Multidirectional Memory* 19). Or, if we want to consider the reference to the Irpinia earthquake as an example of Landsberg's prosthetic memory – namely the appropriation by a community of memories belonging to another community as if they exchange prosthetic limbs – it should be recalled that for Landsberg, prosthetic memory "has deeply ethical implications" ("Traumatic Pasts"3) for it is able to "produce empathy and social responsibility as well as political alliances that transcend race, class, and gender" (qtd. in Erll, "Traumatic Pasts"3).

²⁵ Roberto Saviano is author of the bestseller book *Gomorra*, besides being esteemed denouncer of the illegal business involving various criminal organizations, in particular the Camorra.

²⁶ Until today, 9 May 2013, this video has been watched on YouTube 53,081 times.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aY5kh5kTvL4/>.

²⁷ Franco Arminio, *Viaggio nel cratere* (Milano: Sironi, 2003).

Intriguingly enough, notwithstanding all this attention paid to the Irpinia earthquake, there was no mention of the 1980 natural disaster in the public broadcasting channel RAI for the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of Italy. In contrast, the Messina earthquake – as well as the Bologna Massacre – is present. That is a rather serious lapse, either a case of accidental amnesia or a case of voluntarily oblivion. How or why could the deadliest event of the post-war period be ignored? An answer could stem from considering the 30th anniversary commemorations engaging several villages and towns of the earthquake zone, where the participation of several State officials “has not come to a synthesis between the different communities and different actors, but has resulted in a series of ceremonies, divided across different villages, and carried out by the most diverse subjects” [“non ha però trovato un momento di sintesi che mettesse insieme le diverse comunità e i diversi protagonisti, ma si è fatto ricorso a una serie di svariate cerimonie, divise nei vari paesi, con la scelta dei temi più disparati”]. (Ventura “Terremoto”) According to Ventura, one of the reasons for the lack of unity and drive that characterized the collective remembrance of this event is the absence of places that serve as a “catalyst for the memory of the quake” [“catalizzatori della memoria del sisma”] (Ventura “Terremoto”), such as museums, libraries and archives. And yet, as Dolores Hayden has pointed out, a site of memory could simply be, for instance, “a school where people made homeless by a natural disaster found shelter” (qtd. in Winter 65). The presence of museums, libraries and archives would certainly help to nurture the collective memory of a community; nonetheless, I believe that there is a more central reason for the chaotic commemoration of the Irpinia disaster – and perhaps even for the absence of the Irpinia earthquake in the RAI commemoration project mentioned above. Ventura called it “therapeutic oblivion” [“oblio terapeutico”] (Ventura “Terremoto”), i.e. the will of communities and institutions to forget the event in order to move on and not publicly reactivate painful memories. I would call it “prescriptive forgetting” (61), using Paul Connerton’s concept, namely the necessity to forget in order to maintain the status quo, to keep “a minimum level of cohesion to civil society” (62) and not further question “the legitimacy of the state” (62). In fact, I believe that the relevance of Irpinia for

the present – especially in view of that national-political frame within which it has been regarded – is linked to the presence of the same political class that 30 years ago was involved in the scandals following the earthquake. Whether or not memories of the Irpinia earthquake might take on a more prominent as well as coherent form in cultural remembrance, can most likely be seen only – as Ventura too has pointed out – when the present ruling class, the same that has been involved in the reconstruction of the earthquake zone, finally leaves the scene (“Terremoto”).

Since the L’Aquila earthquake in 2009, the Irpinia recollection could not be easily ignored at national level, as the multidirectional associations triggered by the L’Aquila disaster took shape. At the same time, however, its memory seems to have been kept fragmented in order to avoid its further crystallization into the idea of a political disaster. In other words, the memory of the Irpinia earthquake has been commemorated, but only enough to forget it

The Bologna Massacre

The Bologna Massacre is perhaps one of the most contested events in Italian history. Indeed, several versions of the story coexist and this lack of agreement has meant that this event acquired a controversial position within Italian collective memory. What is certain is that at 10.25 A.M. on 2 August 1980, a time-bomb blew up in the waiting room of the Bologna train station killing 85 people and injuring 200 (Tota 283). The official version labels the event a terrorist act within the *strategia della tensione*, attributed to the NAR (Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari), a neo-fascist organization, and in particular to Francesca Mambro and Giusva Fioravanti (Tota 290). Other less official versions – i.e. versions which have not been established by the Italian Court – also coexist, nurturing a sense of mystery that still nowadays attracts much attention, generating large audiences for television programs on the subject, such as the TV series *Blu Notte* and *La Storia Siamo Noi*, which aim to reconstruct aspects of the event deemed unclear in a narrative-documentary form. Research has shown that the memory of this event, together with similar ones in the period between the 60’s and 80’s, was neglected and obstructed in history education (Hajek, “Teaching the History

of Terrorism” 3). Symptomatic of this obstruction is, for instance, a short video extracted from an episode of *La Storia Siamo Noi* mentioned above, which was integrated into the RAI project for the 150th anniversary of Italian unity. This extract has been tailored, cut and adapted to fit into RAI’s specific purposes showing only interviews with victims, exploring therefore only the traumatic memories without a mention of the contested facts. It became obvious that the national past is not the same for everyone, and that people use it in different ways in the present. Our understanding of the past “has strategic, political, and ethical consequences” (Hodgkin, Radstone 1) for the interpretation of the society we live in. The several competing narratives about the event at the Bologna train station which still persist nowadays, notwithstanding the official versions, show us a part of Italy which, while contesting the past, at the same time, casts doubt on power of State and on the contemporary society. In spite of its contested recollection, or perhaps thanks to they, considering that “controversy rather than canonization may be the most important motor in keeping a memory alive” (Rigney, “Divided Pasts” 94), the Bologna massacre – as I will prove later on in this section – received much more attention than the Irpinia earthquake.

Reporting: Irpinia and Bologna 1980

The bomb in Bologna was similar to an earthquake in several respects: the sound that preceded the catastrophe, the trembling of the earth, the building that crumbled down on top of people, the relatively numerous victims. Yet, many other elements were different, as well as the frames available for interpreting and communicating these two events: the time, the space, the target, the question of agency, and finally the way in which all these features were reported by news media.

Every time an earthquake occurs, it always catches its victims unprepared. Nevertheless, earthquakes are phenomena that tend to repeat themselves in certain areas and are often preceded – as well as followed – by other shocks. Not by chance, a journalist from *L’Unità* referred to earthquakes as murderers who always come back to the crime scene (Angeloni). A bomb like the one in Bologna, in contrast, is usually completely unpredictable and unexpected. In spatial terms,

the two disasters also differed. The Irpinia earthquake included 36 towns and an area of 1622.5 square kilometres (Chubb, 214) while the bomb specifically occurred on one side of the Bologna Station. Furthermore, both time and space define the target of a bomb, which is often – as in the case of Bologna – extremely symbolic, whereas for an earthquake time and space help to describe only the fortuity of the event. The agency is perhaps the most obvious difference: on the one hand, there is a man-made disaster and, on the other hand, a natural one. Granted that in the Irpinia catastrophe human responsibility has been considered as a fact, the corruption of planners cannot be equated with a deliberate intention to do harm, as in setting a bomb in a crowded train station. But how were these two catastrophes reported in news media? Which were the frames used to interpret the bombing and how did they differ from those employed for the Irpinia earthquake?

A detailed comparison between such dissimilar disasters would demand a closer analysis than the one required for this chapter. Nevertheless, I will be able to highlight the major frame differences, while including other recurrent elements and keywords into the comparison.

Apocalypse and mystery

On 2 August, the evening edition of *La Stampa* introduced the Bologna bombing asking whether the cause of the disaster was an accident or a bombing [“disgrazia o attentato?”] (“Ore 10,28”). The day after, another national newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, dedicated its front-page to the massacre presenting “two hypothesis: bombing or accident” [[d]ue ipotesi: attentato o sciagura]. At the same time, there was the certainty that what happened in Bologna was an “apocalypse” [“apocalisse”], a massacre “unprecedented in Italy” [“che non ha precedenti in Italia”] (“Scoppio”). In these two openings, an element of continuity and another of change can already be found in comparison with the mediation of the Irpinia earthquake: the idea of the end of the world within a frame of what can be called a mystery. For the Messina earthquake, the figure of the apocalypse was used, referring to the biblical myth as well as stressing the earthquake as a destroyer of the social order. For the Irpinia earthquake, instead, the idea of the apocalypse was used within a political frame to indicate the day of reckoning in which the truth about the construction violations came out. For the Bologna

bombing, apocalypse is merely a figure of speech to describe an unprecedented massacre that increased the urge to find an answer to the question of agency. Therefore, it can be said that the word “apocalypse” has been used for all three events, but that only for the last two it implied human agency. Moreover, only in the last case human agency involved mystery.

Thus, mystery is the main frame that characterized the entire reporting but also – as I will illustrate later on – the cultural remembrance of this tragedy. Hypotheses and questions never answered were present in almost every article and video reportage dedicated to the event. For instance, on the second page of *Stampa Sera* on 5 August, the following could be read: “[t]here is news, no one knows whether mysterious or dramatic, in the investigation of the Bologna massacre” [“C’è un fatto nuovo, non si sa quanto misterioso o clamoroso, nelle indagini per la strage alla stazione di Bologna”] (Benedetti). The news concerned the delayed burial of two of the victims by order of the magistrates involved in the investigation of the massacre. According to the magistrates, these two victims were suspected of having an active role in the tragedy. This hypothesis, nevertheless, was only one of the many that circulated in Bologna at that time (Benedetti).

Man-made

A few days after the explosion, it became clear that it had been caused by a bomb and was therefore a deliberate human act against other people. As the journalist Vittorio Gorresio argued, up to this point, there was still the “hope” that the massacre had been an accident caused by the careless maintenance of the heating system of the Bologna station. Another journalist, Luciano Curino, reported that people refused to believe it had been a terrorist attack. This hypothesis – he continued – would have been “truly monstrous” [“troppo mostruoso”] (Curino). The adjective “monstrous” was used also by another national newspaper, *Il Messaggero*, that still wondered about the nature of the blast: “[M]onstrous attack or accident” [“Mostruoso attentato o disgrazia”] (Bocca). “Dreadful”, “atrocious” [“spaventosa”], [“atroce”] (Scagliarini) and “barbaric” [“barbaro”] (“In tutta Italia”) were other adjectives used to describe the attack, all referring to a semantic field, which has much more to do with inhuman subjects or activities, rather than with human ones. It appears clear that

the scenario of a bomb in Bologna was perceived as extraneous to people “horizon of expectations” (Jauss 12) a concept that describes people’s expectations based on previous knowledge and experiences. This concept was developed in literary theory by Hans Robert Jauss in the 60s, but it can be also applied to the Bologna bombing. In this light, the Bologna bombing was perceived as a counterintuitive element, that is to say, something that was not expected. It might be interesting here to point to a recent study that has shown, with reference to myths and folktale, a link between the memorability of a narrative and the presence in it of a certain amount of counterintuitive elements, or a “minimally counterintuitive (MCI) cognitive template” (Norenzayan, Atran, Faulkner, Schaller 531).

However, what defies expectations is as significant as what is actually perceived as normal, and the reaction to the Bologna disaster shows that a tragedy caused by human negligence was considered normal. Gorresio – in the same article cited above – expressed his perplexity about this generalized preference for an accident above a bombing. In particular, he doubted that the first hypothesis could have been more reassuring than the second (Gorresio). In which case, one could infer that every misfortune caused by human negligence is to be considered normal: it is normal, for example, that train stations “explode because of the carelessness of a worker” [“saltino in aria per la distrazione di un manovale”] or it is normal to live on the edge of a volcano [“vivere sul bordo di un vulcano”] (Gorresio). Gorresio’s latter comparison obviously referred to the possibility of a volcanic eruption, and this – being a natural disaster – inevitably recalls the Irpinia earthquake, which occurred about three months after the bombing. As a consequence of Gorresio’s article, it could be paradoxically stated that, for a great part of public opinion, an earthquake – and its catastrophic effects aggravated by human responsibility – would still be preferable to a terroristic attack; and this, in turn, might be influenced by the fact that human negligence falls within the expectation horizon that Italians have with respect to disasters.

Point of Rupture

Both events – however different – share the frame that I have been calling “point of rupture” so far. For each of the victims, indeed, these disasters were a breaking point in their lives, a moment in which a world, a city or a part of oneself ended and a new one – after a moment of silence – was born again, although inevitably marked. At 10.25 a.m., for Bologna and for many people time stopped, just like the clock of the train station that ever since became an iconic image of this massacre (see fig. 16 and 17). The clock also appeared in the recollection of the Messina earthquake, as it is shown by the postcard that I choose as a front cover of this research. However, it did not acquire an iconic status as the clock mentioned above.



Fig. 15 Image of the Bologna train station after the explosion. In the top of the photo, on the outside of the building remained intact after the explosion, the clock can be seen. *Bologna Massacre*. 1980. Photograph. *L'Unità*. Nuova Iniziativa Editoriale. Web. 4 June 2013.



Fig. 16 The clock of the Bologna train station after the Bologna Massacre. 1980. Photograph. *Il Resto Del Carlino*. Poligrafici Editoriale. Web. 4 June 2013.

War

The Bologna Massacre was widely compared with war episodes. Curino of *La Stampa*, claimed that the ruins and the grief brought about by the bombing were the same as during the war. The station reminded people of the bombardments of the Second World War (Curino) when Bologna, and the Bologna railway system had been targeted. A doctor exclaimed that, though he had not witnessed the war, the wounds seen on the victims made her think that the Bologna bombing was even worse (Formili). It is clear that is the multidirectionality of memory was making these references possible. Allusions to war in general were also seen in the aftermath of the Messina earthquake, when the ruins of the city and the victims were interpreted as the result of a war against nature. However, the war metaphor does not appear in the reports of the Irpinia earthquake. Obviously, it is possible to

find someone who associated the images of the disaster with a war-report (Rapisarda), but this rare comparison could be balanced out by claims such as the one of the Minister of Interior Virginio Rognoni, who clearly stated that the earthquake was not a war and that, therefore, it was impossible to organize any plan for public security (“Il ministro”).

Another element that fostered the association of the Bologna bombing with warfare was the idea of the victims being completely innocent, i.e. objects of an external and arbitrary violence. It was not the first time in Italy that politically motivated violence involved ordinary people; yet, the innocence of the victims was repeatedly stressed. In several articles, indeed, the massacre appeared as a “massacre of innocents” [“strage degli innocenti”] (“In piazza”), an innocence, in turn, reinforced by the presence of “numerous children” [“numerosi bambini”] (Scagliarini) amongst the victims. In contrast, the Irpinia earthquake did not register innocents amongst its victims. In short, the Bologna bombing was perceived as a war caused by a power external to ordinary society and that, in turn, stressed the innocence of its victims. The Irpinia earthquake, conversely, was interpreted as an event caused by an internal and highly abstract power: the State or, more precisely, politicians and other ordinary people whose amoral behaviour and irresponsibility easily mingled and blurred within society. Hence, in the absence of an external and clear responsible power for the catastrophe it was perhaps difficult to talk of wars and of innocents.

Source of solidarity and civic commitment

Another element shared by the Bologna massacre and by the Irpinia earthquake is the solidarity shown by the population. And yet, even for this aspect there are differences. It must be noted that in Bologna, besides its train station, the city remained active. On the contrary, during the Irpinia earthquake entire villages were destroyed together with road connections. This difference is at the basis of two distinct reactions following the two events. In particular, after the Irpinia earthquake a general paralysis was registered, whereas the aid for the bombing in Bologna was “prompt and coordinated” [“tempestivi e coordinati”] (“A Bologna”). To give an example: in Bologna, a public bus was converted into a mortuary where dead bodies, torn to pieces by the blast, were reassembled

and taken away (Curino). Another dissimilarity between the two events concerns the different scale of the disaster. The damages caused by the Irpinia earthquake were undoubtedly more extensive than in the Bologna bombing and that required, therefore, an incomparable number of volunteers and donations, which were obviously more numerous for the earthquake but also harder to handle efficiently and thus more open to criticism. I recall here, for example, the scandals linked to the waste of food and other goods mentioned by Judith Chubb in relation to the Irpinia earthquake.

Besides these differences, the most outstanding one is the interpretation of the Bologna event within the frame of civic responsiveness, i.e. an event that emphasized the commitment of the community to immediately and strongly respond to the attack. *La Stampa* claimed that the population would not be blackmailed by such an attack (Cassi). In the mean time, *L'Unità* underlined the strong popular participation in the centre of several Italian cities (“Forte risposta”). The same national involvement was shown in the funeral of the victims described by a journalist as “solemn” [“solenni”] and full of people from “all over Italy” [“da tutta l'Italia”] (“A Bologna”). There might be several reasons for the presence of this frame in the Bologna bombing and not in the Irpinia earthquake reporting. The main reason – I believe – is linked to the idea of a terrorist attack as an action aiming to destabilize a community and its unity. Hence, the civic responsiveness can be seen as a defensive tool that the community can use to weaken the terrorist act itself. In this light, the bombing can be seen as something that reinforces the sense of community, rather than exposing its fragility. This is even clearer if we consider the American reaction to the 9/11 terrorist attack where a strengthened national feeling became the basis of the grand narratives used by the State (Kansteiner, Weilböck 234), whose appealing effect might even have contributed to the second election of George Bush. The presence of this civic responsiveness frame can also be linked – once again – to the difficulty in identifying those who were responsible for the catastrophe and its aftermath, as well as the degree to which they could be held accountable.

A national-political problem

When analysing the reporting and recollection phases of the Irpinia earthquake, I demonstrated that this natural event was first mediated and then remembered as a political event that helps to exacerbate the national division. A similar national-political frame was used for interpreting and later – as will be shown – remembering the Bologna bombing. Soon after the initial uncertainty about the cause of the blast the Bologna massacre became a political problem, driven by political reasons that required the attention of the entire nation. The active participation of the country in the aftermath of the Bologna bombing was by itself a proof of the immediate interpretation of this catastrophe as a national problem, rather than one concerning solely the city of Bologna or only the Northern part of Italy. This is clearly in contrast to the interpretation of the Irpinia earthquake, which was perceived as a catastrophe of the South. By simply looking at the number of times in which the words “Italy” [“Italia”], “country” [“Paese”] or “national” [“nazionale”] occurred in the front pages headlines and subtitles of *L’Unità* in the first five days after both disasters, this discrepancy becomes obvious. In the case of the Bologna Massacre, at least one of these words appeared in the first five front pages published after the disasters. Following the Irpinia earthquake, the word “Italy” appeared only once, and even in this case its meaning was limited to indicating a certain part of Italy rather than its whole, namely “[t]he poorest part of Italy” [“L’Italia più povera”] (“Migliaia i morti”), the south.

Traumatic sublime

The Bologna massacre was a traumatic event and was framed as such. The following photo of a victim, which appeared in several newspapers, could perhaps best summarize the shock, the impossibility of making sense of what has just happened.

The photo shows a woman who had just been rescued from the rubble created by the blast (see fig. 18). There are other nine people together with her, but only her face stands out. The face is undoubtedly the most expressive part of human beings, and her face is the only part clearly visible in this image: it is located precisely in the centre of the image and it is lit up. That face, together

with the entire photo, attempts to convey the sense of traumatic experience, which makes people speechless.

When I saw this image I was reminded immediately of another one that appeared several times in the reporting of the Irpinia earthquake (see fig 13). In both images, indeed, a person in the centre of the image is being rescued or at least brought to a safer place. Nevertheless, several differences between the two photos can be discerned.



Fig. 17 Visibly Shocked Woman after the Bologna Massacre. 1980. Photograph. *L'Unità*. Nuova Iniziativa Editoriale. Web. 12 June 2013.

For example, it must be noticed that in the Bologna photo the action immortalized conveys urgency. The body positions, slightly leaning forward, of the four men carrying the stretcher suggests that they are surely walking fast. Conversely, in the Irpinia photo, there is no such rush. The man in the centre of the picture is carrying the person alone in his arms, while the one on the right is bringing a ladder and the one in the background – most likely a journalist – stands still, he has a bag with a wire coming out, perhaps trying to record the event. This difference can be explained by first of all highlighting the approximate time when these photos were taken. The first

one was soon after the explosion, and the second a few days after the quake. Secondly, by noticing that the person being rescued in the second photo is probably a dead body rather than a survivor. However, there is another and more important difference between the two photos and it lies in the recognisability of the person depicted. In the first photo we can see the woman's face and her eyes wide open; hence her personal shock after a traumatic experience is collective as well as part of her singular narrative: her version of the Bologna massacre. On the contrary, the person in the second photo could be any man or woman. He or she is an individual without a face whose anonymity transformed him or her into a "mass body of disaster" (Sturken 114), i.e. a body that became collective by absorbing the death and the suffering of all the victims of that earthquake. In this specific case, the person carried in the arms of the rescuer became the mass body of this Southern disaster.

Each of these two photos acquired an iconic status within collective memory. That a few photos become representative of a certain event whereas others are forgotten is part of a complicated selection that, as we have seen so far, characterizes all memory discourses. Marita Sturken, analysing the cultural remembrance of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, provides us with a clear example of this selective process, illustrating how a rather small picture within the front page of a local newspaper dedicated to the disaster has become extremely iconic. The photo represents a fire fighter holding the lifeless body of child. According to Sturken, the child in the photo clearly represented the idea of a disaster against innocents victims as well as the evidence that "public servants, and, by extension, the government" were there to provide people with protection and help (99). And both elements satisfied the contemporary need of a community to heal the trauma by remembering it through the presence of reassuring figures. Still, the image also became symbolic by winning, together with other pictures, the competition of remembrance (particularly with the rival image of the collapsed Oklahoma City Federal Building) (Sturken 99-100), and by being repeatedly recycled and adapted in different media, from newspapers to magazines, from T-

shirts to figurines (Sturken 99) as well as used for different purposes as, for example, creating a connection to 9/11 (Sturken 103).

As for the Irpinia and Bologna disasters, other photos of the event analysed in this thesis, perhaps less symbolic than the one chosen, reconfirm the differences between the individualized trauma of the Bologna bombing and a trauma experienced by a body mass of the Irpinia earthquake (see fig.11 and 19).



Fig. 18 *Crying Woman Soon after the Bologna Bombing*. 1980. Photograph. *News.Panorama*. Mondadori, 2 Aug. 2012. Web. 12 June 2013.

Summing up the comparison between the reporting of the two traumatic events, it can be stated that both the Bologna and Irpinia disasters were mediated as national political events. The Bologna bombing was already political, since it was inscribed in a wider range of massacres characterizing a period of strong political and social tension in the country, often leading to terrorist attacks. Not to mention that the people being put on trial for the bombing belonged to a right-wing extremist group; thus, a definitely politicized human agency. The Irpinia earthquake, instead, was

transformed into a political event in its immediate aftermath. The catastrophe it caused was better justified by pointing the finger at human and in particular political action, rather than at the blind might of nature.

As we have seen before, frames concerning theodicy and myths were not involved in the interpretation of the two events, because human responsibility took over. However, for the Bologna bombing, the frame of mystery might be considered as a modern heir to the theodicy and inscrutability readings, as Stef Aupers has claimed, for in a sense they both share the fascination for obscure facts and explanations. I anticipate that the mystery frame will survive in the recollection.

There was no doubt about the human responsibility for the bombing, while it was quite a surprise to see how emphatically the Irpinia earthquake was described as a man-made disaster. And yet, the way in which this human responsibility was perceived is different. The Bologna massacre was seen as a war where people, external to civic society, have attacked innocents for no reason. In this light, humans were directly responsible for perpetrating violence against the Italian State and society. The event was described as barbaric, monstrous, dreadful and atrocious, in one word inhuman. In contrast, the human responsibility for the Irpinia earthquake was indirect and internal to the civic society meant as the system in which the apparatuses of the State is also included. The negligence of people, the corruption of politicians, and, by extension, of the society and the State, were the responsible agents. In short, it was human, all too human, as Nietzsche would say. Hajek points out a similar distinction, i.e. violence against or by the State, within two interpretations of the Ustica airplane disaster – mentioned at the beginning of the chapter because it also occurred in 1980 – a.k.a. the Ustica Massacre. An airplane flying from Bologna to Palermo suddenly exploded in the sky above the Sicilian Island of Ustica. For a long time the disaster was classified as an accident due to technical malfunctions. However, several facts – that still demanded confirmation – triggered further investigation and in January 2013 it was finally stated that the air-crash “was actually caused by an (unauthorized) military intervention by the USA, which officials of the Italian State had subsequently tried to cover up” (Hajek, “Teaching the History of Terrorism” 5). Hence, in the first

version the State was itself a victim of the event whereas in the second version the State was on the side of the perpetrators. In view of this case, Hajek has stressed how a “selective process of interpretation” present in Italian textbooks, preferred to highlight “forms of political violence directed *against* the Italian State and the nation as a whole, rather than acts of violence, injustice or throwing off tactics performed *by* the State” (emphasis already in the text) (“Teaching the History of Terrorism” 5). This should be considered when observing the differences between the Irpinia earthquake and the Bologna bombing as they persisted in Italian collective memory.

Although both events aroused numerous acts of solidarity, only the Bologna bombing, according to what was mediated by the newspapers, triggered a strong civic response. It appears, therefore, that the Bologna bombing had a rather unifying effect on the Italian community, while the Irpinia – and the late Messina recollection – tended to tear them apart. As Kai Erikson has claimed, natural disasters tend to damage social relations by interrupting people affective ties and disrupting places and certainty about nature and society, which, by consequence, undermines the sense of community of their victims (cf. Caruth, *Trauma* 4).

Finally, the frames of point of rupture and traumatic sublime are common to both events. And yet, as for the point of rupture, the break caused by the quake was much more drastic and widespread than in the case of the Bologna bombing. For the communities affected by the Irpinia earthquake, November 1980 represented an historical interruption.

Regarding the traumatic sublime, the direct will to do harm behind the bombing is of greater impact on our horizon of expectation than the blind might of nature or people’s negligence. Still it cannot be said that for their victims one has been more or less traumatic than the other. Astrid Erll, supported by other academics, limits more or less explicitly the label “traumatic pasts” to events concerning “war and violence”, “historical injustice and the violation of human rights” (“Traumatic Pasts” 1). The examples that she provides, in the article “Traumatic Pasts, Literary Afterlives, and Transcultural Memory” (2011) range from the Holocaust to 9/11, from World War I to the “colonial wars, slavery in the U.S., South African Apartheid, or the Australian ‘stolen generation’” (Erll,

“Traumatic Pasts” 1). This research has shown that the traumatic character of an earthquake cannot be denied either. Besides, there are several recent studies proving post-traumatic stress disorder affects survivors of a natural disaster as well. Instead, the different ways in which this ‘traumaticity’ has been mediated must be retained responsible for influencing the cultural remembrance of these events. In the reporting of the Bologna bombing, indeed, there was a bigger effort in giving a face, a name and a story to its victims in comparison with that of the Irpinia earthquake.

The Bologna massacre: recollection

For the recollection of the Bologna massacre Anna Lisa Tota’s work on this topic will be extremely useful. Her article “A Persistent Past” overlaps almost perfectly with the purpose of this section of my thesis. However, Tota’s analysis only covers the period between 1980 and 2000 and focuses, moreover, on artefacts and manifestations without taking into account, for example, videos, articles and images on the Web and literature, which are both fundamental tools for the transmission of memory across generations, particularly in recent times. For these reasons, I will intertwine her work with other materials and considerations serving as a comparison with the Irpinia earthquake.

Tota recognizes that the collective memory of the Bologna Massacre is a controversial one for there are “diametrically opposed perspectives” (282) competing with each other. Perspectives, in turn, that “have never come together in an institutional or political synthesis able to understand them as whole” (Tota 282) and that contribute to the weakness with which this event has been officially commemorated by national institutions. Andrea Hajek supports this thesis. In one of her articles she has pointed out that a quarter of the students in Bologna held false beliefs about the authors of the massacre in their city. In particular, students pointed the finger at the left-wing terrorist group Red Brigades, “despite the fact that two members of a neo-fascist terrorist group have been sentenced for the Bologna massacre” (Hajek, “Teaching the History of Terrorism” 3). This misinformation can be attributed to the presence of several memories, concerning similar terrorist attacks, competing with each other, as Tota claimed. In particular, it can be attributed to the

fact that in schools “no more than 2% of the volumes that deal with twentieth-century Italian history are dedicated to the period ranging from the 1960s to the 1980s” (Hajek, “Teaching the History of Terrorism” 3).

Nevertheless, the confusion involving the cultural remembrance of the Bologna massacre did not prevent it from crystallizing into a site of memory. And this was possible not so much through museums or state archives, but mainly thanks to journalists and the *Association for the Victims’ Families* created after the event (Hajek, “Teaching the History of Terrorism” 13), which became “real guarantors of that memory” (Tota 292). One of the Bologna sites of memory – pointed out by Tota – is the “[B]us 37 and its driver” (284) in which the solidarity and civic responsiveness of the city to the bombing crystalized. During the reporting, much emphasis was put on civic commitment and, within this frame, the help offered by a bus. After that, the bus became, for many people in Bologna, the symbol of the power of ordinary people and objects to become heroes and tools at the service of the community. This memory has survived so strongly over the past 30 years that it has become necessary to place bus 37 within a museum, so as to offer a concrete object for the memory of the civic responsiveness to the bombing. Moreover, the stories linked to this bus have been reported in a documentary released in 2005 by Roberto Greco, with a title that clearly refers to the bus at issue: *Itrentasette* [Thethirty-seven].

Besides the story of the bus, in two interviews reported by Tota about this late recollection, I also noticed the persistence of the association between the massacre and war. The first person interviewed held a clear memory of the bus as a moving mortuary, as the “kind of thing that happens in wartime” (Tota 284). The second person interviewed claimed that the image of the bus affected him because “it was like being in a war” (Tota 284). Hence, it can be said that the massacre of Bologna survived not only as a moment in which the city of Bologna showed all the solidarity of which it was capable, but it also triggered a multidirectional effect that connected and ‘reinforced’ the memory of the event and that of the World War II bombardments.

The Bologna station too turned into a site of memory. The station itself is in itself a symbol for every city, a waiting place, or even a non-place, where people pass and never stay, a gateway into and out of the city. For this reason as well, the photos of the half ruined Bologna station were more easily recognizable than the photos of earthquakes where things often appeared as an indistinct pile of rubbles. Moreover, several artefacts within this station kept reminding travellers reaching or leaving Bologna of the massacre. In particular, there is its clock, that since the event, has not ceased to indicate the time of the explosion; a gash in the wall “that symbolizes the pain the bomb caused to civil society and the State” (Tota 289); a hole in the floor where the bomb exploded; and several plaques, one of which reports the name of the victims (Tota 289). The clock, obviously, recalls the event as a point of rupture, while the gash and the hole well represent that traumatic sublime for which there are no appropriate words, only silence and a void. Finally, the plaque with the name of all the victims can be linked to the attempt to counteract the tendency, typical of mass disasters, to reduce the singular victims and stories into a united and abstract mass body. Yet, considering all the different versions of this bombing, which are still nowadays competing with each other, these artefacts were also a way to affirm at least one truth, the one of the trauma (Tota 292).

Besides the objects illustrated above, the city of Bologna has been organizing, since the year after the event, annual cultural manifestations, with active participation of the community. On each 2 August, for example, there is a commemorative march that ends at the Bologna train station (Tota 290). Moreover, every year *Under the Sign of Solidarity* takes place: a series of cultural events starting on 6 July and ending on the anniversary of the blast, organized within a part of the Bologna station (Tota 293) and clearly echoing the civic solidarity that framed the first reports of the bombing. Amongst these cultural performances there are often even rock concerts, which are usually not considered appropriate to the commemoration of a sad event, especially when the family of the victims are still highly involved. Nevertheless, as Tota explains, the acceptance of this kind of performance by the fact that the families of the victims have agreed to share their personal

memories with the community, transforming, therefore, the memory of a traumatic event into a political memory where the victims are no longer singular individuals but rather “state victims” (Tota 294-295). However, it should be stated that the Bologna bombing already appeared in the reporting phase as a political event. Still, I can imagine that the transformation of the Bologna bombing from a traumatic event into a political one might have taken place later for the victims’ families. In conclusion, these manifestations have certainly helped to reinforce the memory of the Bologna bombing as a political event against which the community has fortified its unity, and has kept this memory alive even for the younger generation that is no longer familiar with the mourning phase (Tota 295).

It can be stated that this event has been increasingly remembered, especially by the new generations, as a political event of great civic value. In this way, indeed, the artefacts relating to this massacre as well as the public demonstrations related to it have preserved as well as shaped the traumatic memory of the Bologna bombing. Even the frame that mediated the event as a point of rupture has been recalled to underline a renewed civic relation amongst the Bologna citizens. The clock in the Bologna station, for instance, not only stands for the moment of rupture, but also as a new beginning that would see the city of Bologna growing stronger than before (Tota 297). Still, the idea of the Bologna massacre as a traumatic event did not cease to exist, although it became less powerful. The gash in the wall and the crater in the floor of the Bologna station, for example, are still there receiving public attention. Moreover, the powerful photo of the woman illustrated in the reporting phase has been reproduced in several articles and TV programmes and can easily be retrieved from the Web. Among these programmes, I recall here the two episodes dedicated to the Bologna Massacre included into two successful TV documentary series, *Blu Notte* and *La Storia Siamo Noi*, transmitted by the national channel RAI on 31 July 2008 and 29 July 2010 respectively. In both documentaries, the tragedy of the Bologna Station is recounted using several of the symbols and sites of memory mentioned above together with interviews and transcripts of the trial that followed the massacre. The episode at issue in *La Storia Siamo Noi*, for instance, began with the

image of the woman – with whom the authors of the programme managed to have an interview – in order to stress the traumatic memories of the event. For the same purpose, interviews with other survivors of the massacre were collected and enriched by their personal photos of the period just before the blast. Moreover, the clock, the gash in the wall, and the crater in the floor with the plaque listing the names of the victims were also shown. In the episode of *Blu Notte*, besides the memories linked to the traumatic character of the event, the civic responsiveness was stressed as well with images and videos from the archives concerning the rescue action carried out by ordinary people together with bus 37, completed with a zoom on the number. The intersection of different media and the recycling of the archive is a fundamental practise within mediation and they constitute both episodes contributing to the double effect of facilitating the cultural remembrance and of reshaping these memories according to present needs, which is in this case to stress the several mysteries created around the event.

Mystery is one of the main frames in which the Bologna massacre is embedded, especially in the last ten years. Tota, in her article, briefly mentions that the memory of the Bologna bombing was perceived as a fascist massacre. However, it must be acknowledged that this version, although confirmed by the Court and accepted by the *Association of the Victims*, was soon caught up with other competing versions that began to form a mysterious and perhaps more attractive network. That means that, notwithstanding the will of the *Association of the Victims of the Bologna Massacre* to obstruct any version of this story other than the one accepted by the Court (Tota 293), the proliferation of other narratives could not be stopped. It would suffice to consider Jean Baudrillard's example of the bombing in Italy in his famous *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) to understand the degree of proliferation of competing stories of the Bologna bombing, but also of other massacres in Italy during the 70s. Specifically, Baudrillard asked whether “any given bombing in Italy” was “the work of leftist extremists, or extreme-right provocation, or a centrist *mise-en-scène* to dis-credit all extreme terrorists and to shore up its own failing power, or again, ... a police-inspired scenario and a form of blackmail to public security.” Answering this question, he

claimed that “[a]ll of this is simultaneously true, and the search for proof, indeed the objectivity of the facts does not put an end to this vertigo of interpretation” (Baudrillard). The presence of these coexisting interpretations or “counter-memories” has undoubtedly helped keep the memory of the Bologna bombing alive because – as stated before – for cultural remembrance dissension is often more important than consensus (Rigney, “Divided Pasts” 94). The memory of the Messina earthquake, for instance, proved to be reinforced by the dispute of the past as much as by the multidirectionality of memory that connects events to each other.

The mystery frame of the Bologna bombing includes conspiracy theories as well, namely narratives which are characterized by a radical scepticism and “paranoia about the human-made institutions of modern society itself” (Aupers 24). In the case of the Bologna massacre, several stories refer to the probable involvement of the State as the instigator of the disaster. According to Rothberg, this kind of story has emerged in recent decades in combination with trauma narratives as one “of the most powerful logics through which the subjects of postmodern U.S. culture register and reflect on history” (“Dead Letter” 502). And I would add it is not only in the U.S.; Italians have, indeed, shown themselves to be extremely fascinated by these stories, and the TV programme *Blu Notte* is only an example. Numerous works that refer to the Bologna bombing, presenting facts that do not agree with the officialised version of its story have been published. Consider, for example, the case of the extremely well known Italian movie, *Romanzo Criminale* (2005), directed by Michele Placido. The movie, adapted from a novel and afterwards transformed into a successful TV series, recounts the true story of a powerful group of criminals, *Banda della Magliana*, in the Rome of the 1970s. Historically, several crimes were attributed to this group. Amongst many interpretations of the facts, there are also those that consider the *Banda della Magliana* to have been a tool used by the Italian State to carry out shady tasks, including the Bologna Massacre. That is the reason for the scene, towards the end of the movie, which shows the explosion of the bomb in the Bologna station. In this scene, the blast is represented with great special effects. The clock stopped at 10.25 and the bus 37 are present, but the version of the story is different from the official one. For

Romanzo Criminale, the Bologna bombing was executed by the *Banda della Magliana* and ordered by the State. Thus, its memory is reconfirmed as ambiguous or, better, linked to mysterious or conspiracy theory. Moreover, there are at least two books, one by Lorian Macchiavelli published in 1990 and in 2010 and another by Carlo Lucarelli in 2002, recounting the mysteries of the Bologna Massacre using the genre of detective novel.

As illustrated in the first chapter, from the 80s, the detective novel became a privileged genre for recollecting and reflecting on the recent Italian past so dense with controversial events like the Bologna Massacre. This popular genre, however, did not remain exclusively concerned with this historical period and these historical events. The detective novels illustrated in the previous chapter, indeed, could also be considered as attempts to fit earthquake narratives into this typical postmodern frame. Reflecting on the interest in the interpretation of the Irpinia earthquake within the political scandals of the *Irpiniagate* and *Mani sul Terremoto*, it could be argued that all three events made use – especially in the last 10 years – of this frame. Once again the multidirectionality of memory is the key to understand the appropriation of the mystery frame on the part of the late recollection of the 1908 disaster. However, the success of the frame of mystery can be better comprehended if we consider that it seems to have become a modern replacement for the theodicy frame. Aupers, for instance, claimed that at the heart of contemporary conspiracy theories and culture there is the modern tension “between belief and non-belief; the secular and the religious; rationality and enchantment” (29) which in turn transforms these conspiracy frames in a sort of “‘religion for atheists’ or a form of ‘rational enchantment’” (30). Hence, mystery might be an answer to Olick’s investigation about the relief men can find after traumatic events once the consolatory power of theodicy has ended (Olick, “Theodicy”). If this is so, it could also be suggested that the theodicy frame – present in the reporting phase of 1908 catastrophe – did not disappear just by being replaced by the human responsibility frame, but that it also underwent a metamorphosis that adapted it from the divine sphere to the human one. This is so for man-made tragedies, and recently, also for ‘natural’ disasters.

The recollections of the Bologna massacre seen so far, are already quite rich, although not exhaustive. However, for the purpose of this thesis, the monuments, the manifestations, the documentaries, the images and the books mentioned above are enough to afford some conclusions. The main purpose of this chapter was, indeed, to compare the Irpinia earthquake and the Bologna bombing in order to highlight their differences and similarities, and by extension, those existing between the culturalization of a natural disaster and the interpretation of a man-made one. The most visible finding lies in the interpretation of the Irpinia earthquake as a political disaster as much as the Bologna bombing. Still, from the comparison other similarities between the two events emerged. Yet, they all came with differences.

First of all, both events have been mediated as traumatic events. Yet, trauma cannot be the only “central category in addressing the larger memory discourse”, for as Huyssen claims “memory, whether individual or generational, political or public, is always more than only the prison house of the past” (8). That is why it was more interesting to look at the different ways in which these traumatic events have been interpreted and remembered according to present, often political, needs. The photos of the Irpinia earthquake, for example, seemed to have served the idea of a suffering south. In contrast, the photos of the Bologna Massacre aimed to force the viewer to think – as Tota claimed referring to the artefacts in the Bologna Station – “*it could have been me*” (288). It is, indeed, the individualization of the victims that forces people to be in the shoes of the others and, therefore, to empathize with them and their suffering. And as the journalist Paul Bloom recently reminded us in the *New Yorker*, the ability of an event to create empathy is based on the mediation of the event, rather than on the ‘traumaticity’ of an event itself. For instance, a “baby in the well” whose name, personal story and face was publicly shown attracts much more attention than, for example, a war in Africa where thousands children are killed: “the number of victims hardly matters” (Bloom).

Again, a matter of different mediation – hence of political purposes – is what made the solidarity frame, although common to both events, differ. In the Bologna bombing solidarity turned into a civic responsiveness that stressed the unity of the Italian communities against an external enemy. In the Irpinia earthquake the solidarity frame provoked the opposite reaction. The fact that money allocated to the earthquake zones was badly managed was used as an argument against the government as well as a criticism towards the entire Southern part of Italy.

It would not have been possible to think of the 1980 disasters as political catastrophes without considering them under the frame of human responsibility. However, the analysis showed that this frame changed according to people's horizon of expectation. The human responsibility behind the Irpinia tragedy fits into what was considered 'normality' just like the possibility – believed in for a small while – of human negligence as the origin of the disaster at the station of Bologna.

In conclusion, besides the convergences of the 'natural' and man-made disaster illustrated in this chapter and summarized above, neither the 'traumaticity' nor the contrast between man-made evil and natural evil made the culturalization of the Irpinia earthquake unlike the interpretation of the Bologna disaster, but rather their different mediation as linked to dissimilar political strategies, and people expectations. These factors, in turn, might well be the cause for the cultural remembrance of the Bologna Massacre being far more active and organized than the one of the Irpinia earthquake, notwithstanding the obstructionism perpetrated by the State (Hajek, "Teaching the History of Terrorism").

I left at the end the frame of mystery because it provided me with insight not only into the comparison between the Irpinia and the Bologna earthquake, but also into the second comparison that I also carried out in this chapter: that between the 1908 and the 1980 earthquakes. The mystery frame appeared strongly in the interpretation and recollection of the Bologna bombing. However, especially in the last 10 years this mystery frame also seems to have attempted to embed natural disasters which have been progressively politicized: from the Messina recollection to the Irpinia-

gate. If we consider the mystery frame as a new form of consolatory theodicy, a reason for its success in the 80s might be linked to people's need to make sense of man-made disasters. But by being used to frame natural disaster when those started to be considered progressively political, it might be extremely interesting, for further research, to investigate the relation between the becoming political of natural disaster and the mystery frame as a typical consolatory frame of man-made disasters.

Conclusion - From L'Aquila 2009 perspective

The first chapter has shown how the culturalization of a natural event is unfolded, and how – as well other events – the culturalization is linked to the process of interpretation and remediation, eroded by a selection answering to the chronic scarcity of memory, and shaped to meet present needs by past disputes and multidirectionality. Moreover, the diachronic analysis of the interpretation and recollection of the 1908 disaster have highlighted its progressive politicization in the last 10 years.

The second chapter showed how the Irpinia earthquake and the Bologna Bombing have been treated as political events and how the peculiarity of each depends much more on the way they have been mediated and on people's expectations rather than on their 'degree of traumaticity' or on their being originally 'natural' and man-made disasters. Moreover, the frame of mystery seen as a new form of theodicy has brought two distinctive cultural processes to light: on the one hand, the transformation of theodicy itself and, on the other hand, the becoming political of natural disasters.

I want now to conclude this thesis by looking back at it from the perspective of the L'Aquila earthquake, for its memory was the main reason behind this research in the first place. On 6 April 2009, after months of foreshocks, the city of L'Aquila as people knew it no longer existed. An earthquake at 3.32 a.m. led to the collapse of several buildings and the death of 309 people ("L'Aquila"). Here again, as with the Messina and the Irpinia earthquake, to talk of the L'Aquila earthquake is merely a compromise: other villages were also destroyed, but their names and their memory remain in the shadow of a past which is often inevitably contested. In the RAI TV program *Vieni via con me* in 2010, Roberto Saviano talking of L'Aquila, but also recalling Irpinia and other earthquakes in Italian history, claimed that these disasters are all the same, every time the same tragedy. In particular, the role that the government played in these disasters has remained

unchanged. In these 4 years since the L'Aquila earthquake, the expression 'political scandal' is perhaps the most used while recounting the event. Scandalous indeed was – and still is – the failure to reconstruct the historical centre, soul of every city. Several journalists as well as many inhabitants interviewed in various documentaries have described the city of L'Aquila after that 6 April as a ghost city, for its community abandoned it. An article in the newspaper *Il Tempo* on 5 April 2010 described the city as “ghostlike” [“spettrale”] and reported that the clients of the shops reopened after the disaster were mostly foreigners, i.e. “tourists of the disaster” [“turisti del disastro”] (“L'Aquila riparte”). And from a ghost city to the memory of another ghost city takes only a small step. Hajek, who has lately turned her attention to the recent Italian earthquakes, forecasted for L'Aquila the possibility of becoming another post 1908 Messina, based on the description provocatively suggested by John Dickie: a city without memory (“L'Aquila, 4 Anni Dopo”).

Shameful are the so-called *New Towns*, grey buildings erected far away from the original site of the city and deprived of all social spaces that a community needs. Emanuele Sirolli, one of the authors of a collection of essays concerning the L'Aquila earthquake, has claimed that a reconstruction model has been used that “is turning out to be unsuitable for the psychological and social reconstruction of the community of L'Aquila” [“si sta rivelando essere non idoneo per una ricostruzione psicologica e sociale degli aquilani”] (qtd. in Hajek, “L'Aquila, 4 Anni Dopo”). Not to mention the episodes of corruption within the *Protezione Civile* [Civil Protection], i.e. a national institution for disaster management that was welcomed as the ‘saviour’ of the city. Finally, more shocking than scandalous for Italians, was learning from a tapped phone conversation how the former prefect of L'Aquila rejoiced over the earthquake, thinking about how much he could profit from the disaster.

For this event – as well as the others analysed in this research – something, an object, a sentence, an image or a place would be elected to represent the catastrophe. One of the symbols representing the L'Aquila earthquake is the story of *La Casa dello Studente*, a student house. I can

list several reasons for its having become an exemplary story. To begin with, it had been rebuilt in 2000 but was the first building to collapse (“L’Aquila”). The quake put an end to the life and dreams of 8 students (“L’Aquila”), who were not only innocent victims but also embodied the effort and hope blown away by the negligence of those same institutions and that same society that claims to be hungry for their work and to recognize in them the future. *La Casa dello Studente* became iconic because it reflected the contemporary need to denounce a massacre, which was man-made, although it carried the title of natural disaster. The building emerged as a symbol amongst several other buildings because its name appeared everywhere in the reporting phase. But also because, 4 years later, the Italian Court sentenced, on charges of having violated construction regulations, those who have restored the building, demanding that they compensate the relatives of the victims or spend between 2 and a half or 4 years in prison (“L’Aquila”). However, memory dynamics are complex, and all the reasons listed above would still not be sufficient to explain why *La Casa dello Studente* became iconic without considering the “ongoing interaction between cultural processes and social ones, between private and public remembrance, between the top-down official organization of remembrance and the more bottom-up conditions feeding into it” (Rigney, “Divided pasts” 95). Finally, *La Casa dello Studente* would not have been such a strong icon without answering to the principle of scarcity on which cultural memory is based. This is something I have well illustrated throughout this research.

La Casa dello Studente, as a symbol, also illustrates the interpretation of the event: how it has been remembered. i.e. culturalized. Again, thus, an earthquake was interpreted as more a political than a natural event. This thesis has demonstrated that from the Messina earthquake to the Irpinia disaster, people have progressively taken over the responsibility for natural disasters and interpreted them, like man-made disasters, as a political problem. The L’Aquila earthquake confirms this trend. In fact, the earthquake in 2009 can be added to the list of Italian political disasters after Belice 1968 and Irpinia 1980. And, in comparison with the Irpinia earthquake, L’Aquila was even more politicized. For instance, a year after the disaster, at the entrance of the

remains of the student house, a sheet carried the sentence: “[y]ou have taken away our future, do not also take away, with your short process law, justice” [“Ci avete tolto il futuro, non toglieteci con il processo breve anche la giustizia”] (“L’Aquila riparte”). The message addressed the State and referred to the *Short Process* law [*Processo Breve*] proposed in November 2009 by Berlusconi's government. This draft law aimed at the reduction of trial length. However, the parents of the victims of *La Casa dello Studente* considered it an obstacle to the justice they expected through the prosecution of the builders who had restored the student house. The *Processo Breve* was – and still is – highly contested, also in view of the fact that, if approved, it will help Berlusconi get rid of his own problems with the law. The sense conveyed with this message shows how the victims of the earthquake no longer recognize themselves as victims of a natural disaster, but as victims produced by the State.

Another significant object of this political catastrophe is the destroyed government building of L’Aquila (see fig. 20). Its image appears in newspapers, TV shows, blogs, and even on *Wikipedia* where a caption describes it precisely as a symbol of the disaster. As a result of the interpretation of L’Aquila earthquake, this building soon became the object that by its self could represent “a maximum amount of meaning” (qtd. in Rigney “Plenitude” 18).



Fig. 19 L'Aquila's Government Building Destroyed by the Earthquake on 6 April 2009. N.d. Photograph. *INGV*. *INGV*, n.d. Web. 28 June 2018.

What object, indeed, could better embody L'Aquila as a political disaster if not this one? The four classical columns inevitably remind the viewer of the great ancient past of which he/she learned at school. But now these columns sustain only a broken inscription "Palazzo del Governo" on the point of falling down.

Besides the changes in the way the earthquakes have been culturalized in the last 100 years, the horizon of expectation towards natural disasters appears to be changing as well. And this becomes clearer from the perspective of L'Aquila earthquake. Just as Ecocriticism has enlarged the literary horizon in order to relocate human beings within their environment and as part of it, natural disasters seem to drive people to question their beliefs about 'normality' and to reconsider their relation with both society and the environment. In my second chapter, while analysing the reporting phase of the Bologna Massacre, I have illustrated how human negligence fell into people's horizon of expectations, in contrast to the idea of a bomb. And by extension, how people thought it was normal to live on the edge of a volcano, or – as I added – in highly seismic areas, without proper

construction regulations. The highly politicized interpretation of the L'Aquila earthquake and the strong reaction of its community in condemning human negligence and corruption, bring about a reflection on the influence that such disasters have on the identity of a community and on the understanding of their relation to the environment. It is a bottom-up reaction, as Hajek claims: “[i]t will be up to the citizens of L'Aquila to re-establish a new relationship with their land so as to become active agents in a process that can only come from below” [“Starà agli aquilani ristabilire un nuovo rapporto col territorio per divenire agenti attivi in un processo che non può che venire dal basso”] (“L'Aquila, 4 Anni Dopo”).

Yet, the relationship with the land cannot be as before. In this particular historical moment when – as I have stated in the introduction – people seem to be more sensitive in their approach to the environment, this new relationship must take into account the past and reconsider the role that men have within nature; hence, it is a question of identity too. What can be gathered for the present from past natural disasters? What can be done to live in peace with nature without having to look at it in Leopardian terms as wicked and blind or as another alterity to subjugate? In *La Repubblica*, the Italian poet Roberto Roversi, a few months before dying in September 2012, and in the aftermath of another quake that upset the country and in particular his hometown, Bologna, wrote an article that reflected precisely on the relation of Italy to natural disasters. He recalled several earthquakes that he had, more or less indirectly, witnessed during his lifetime and amongst these he mentioned L'Aquila. Importantly, their memory brought him also to consider other events such as the overbuilding along the rivers, and the destruction of land and hills. “From the earth” – he claimed – “we sucked away its respectable soul, without mercy. And when an earthquake occurs, the catastrophe reminds us of its unpredictable power and carries us into dismay” [“Dalla terra abbiamo risucchiato l'anima rispettabile, senza pietà. E quando arriva un terremoto, la catastrofe ci ricorda la forza imprevedibile e ci trascina nello sgomento”] (Roversi). By linking the earthquakes to ecological disasters, it now appears obvious that natural disasters are more than mere objects “of attempts at prediction and control” as Nieman claimed. Instead, they also require cultural

interpretation. The process of culturalization of the more recent natural disasters follows a trend that was just at its beginning during the Irpinia earthquake. A culturalization that no longer dwells on the nature of evil, as was the case with the Lisbon earthquake, but rather on the relation between man and society, the State and its environment. What Roveresi makes of the natural catastrophes that he experienced is a reflection upon the need for a larger vision of the world: “a greater vision that will not crush the weak, the humble, the helpless” [“una visione più grande che non schiaccia i deboli, gli umili, gli indifesi”] (Roversi). What is needed, he continued, “is a vision, wide, of the future. That takes into consideration the past and what has happened. That forces us to finally read it and that means to change it” [“è una visione, larga, del futuro. Che riconosca il passato e quel che è successo. Che ce lo faccia leggere, finalmente, e che lo voglia cambiare”]. In a few words, Roveresi is thinking of the same larger vision embraced by Ecocriticism. It would be interesting for further research to look at other natural disasters, in other countries, to see whether or not they produce the same request for a larger vision of the relation between man and his environment and how this vision is adapted to the reality of different communities.

Yet, Roveresi’s vision is achievable only if each person can count on him/herself as well as on the state (Roversi). That is to say, a cultural shift triggered by the reflection on natural disaster can only be possible in conjunction with a collaborative trustworthy government. It has been demonstrated that earthquakes, just like other traumatic disasters, are open wounds within society, which allows researchers to look better into it. Their representation always hides political and cultural questions. And if with the Irpinia earthquake Italy’s internal division in a Northern and a Southern part became more evident, with L’Aquila another fracture comes to surface: a fracture that divides those who still believe in the government (in this case Berlusconi’s government) and those who no longer trust it.

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